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**ITALIAN RESISTANCE LITERATURE: PRESENCE OF
TRAUMA IN NON-TRAUMA FICTION**

**An Analysis of the Narrative Techniques in the Works of Italo Calvino,
Cesare Pavese and Beppe Fenoglio**

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A mio padre.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	1
Introduction	7
Chapter 1. Searching for Trauma	12
Chapter 2. Italo Calvino – <i>Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno</i>	22
Chapter 3. Cesare Pavese – <i>La luna e i falò</i>	39
Chapter 4. Beppe Fenoglio – <i>Una questione privata</i>	58
Conclusions	77
Bibliography	83

ABSTRACT

This thesis positions itself within the discourse about the representation of trauma in literature. The historical period central to the novels analysed is that of the Italian Resistance: the two-year period (1943-1945) during which the *partigiani* fought against the Nazi-Fascist regime. The hypothesis from which this research starts is that a traumatic historical event like the Italian Resistance – or Civil War, as the historian Claudio Pavone called it – must have left traces of trauma in the literary production of the period and, especially, in the works of those authors who experienced it directly.

The three Italian authors considered in this study – Italo Calvino, Cesare Pavese and Beppe Fenoglio – all participated in the Resistance as partisans or political activists. Their novels are not considered trauma novels; they are part, instead, of the Italian literary branch known as *letteratura partigiana*, which has the Italian Civil War as a central theme. Nevertheless, this study aims at discovering what can be called ‘literary symptoms’ of trauma in these non-trauma novels, and at showing the literary approaches and techniques used by these novels’ authors in their representation of such a traumatising historical period as the Italian Resistance. The question leading this research is, therefore, twofold: which literary symptoms of trauma can be read between the lines in the non-trauma novels of Italo Calvino, Cesare Pavese and Beppe Fenoglio; and how do these authors deal with the representation of such a traumatic historical period as the Italian Resistance?

Surprisingly enough, literary criticism, which has always shown great interest towards these novels – especially in Italy – appear not to have considered them within the framework of Trauma Studies. This analysis, conducted within the theoretical framework of Trauma Studies and the methodological approaches of close reading and narratology, uncovers several symptoms of trauma in the novels indicating the traumatic aftermath of the historical period considered. As for the authors’ representation of such a period, the narratological analysis of the novels’ structure reveals that the

three authors used different literary techniques to achieve the same goal: detachment from their personal feelings and experiences of the Italian Resistance.

These findings, albeit limited to only three Italian novels, demonstrate the possible presence of trauma in texts which have never been considered as being part of trauma literature. In addition, the detachment the three Italian authors seem to have needed in their representation of the Italian Resistance, gives a clearer idea of how traumatising this historical period must have been.

Introduction

According to Allen Greenberger, ‘The relationship between literature and history is clearly an intimate one’ (Greenberger vii). The influence of history in shaping literature is undeniable; it can be safely stated that every significant historical period or event has been represented in some kind of literary work, be it a realistic account or a work of fiction. For its part, literature can help to improve the understanding of history. Moreover, literature is also the ideal medium to share some amongst the most traumatising periods and events in history which, as Dori Laub writes, need ‘to be *told*, to be *transmitted*, to be *heard*’ (Laub 69).

The three novels analysed in this thesis are part of a group of texts which in Italy are called *letteratura partigiana* (partigiano’s literature). Their narratives are centred on the two-year period – from September 1943 to April 1945 – which saw part of Italy engaged in the Civil War between the representatives of the so-called Italian Social Republic and the *partigiani*, the forces of the Italian Resistance (Gentile 64). In order to understand the situation in Italy at the time, but above all the psychological turmoil aroused by the events which led to the birth of the Resistance, a brief overview of the historical context seems due.

After Mussolini’s dismissal on the 25th of July 1943, ordered by king Vittorio Emanuele III, the political situation in Italy did not undergo a significant change: the war against the Allied Forces was still on and, on the 12th of August 1943, the newspaper *L’Unità* titled its front page with the headline: “*Ma la musica é sempre la stessa*”¹, and exhorted the Italian population to call, united, for the end of the war (Pavone 14). The first change in the political situation arrived with the armistice of the 8th of September 1943, with which Italy surrendered to the Allied Forces. The armistice, however, did not mean peace. The day after the announcement of the settlement, the king and his family, together

¹ But the music is still the same.

(Translations are mine unless otherwise noted)

with the leader who succeeded Mussolini – Marshal Pietro Badoglio - and part of the military staff, fled Rome to find refuge in the South of Italy. King Vittorio Emanuele III was afraid of being captured because, since the dismissal of Mussolini, interpreted as Italy's defection, the Germans were on the move to occupy the Northern part of the country (Rochat 33). The sense of betrayal and dismay felt by the soldiers abandoned by their officers, and by all Italians deserted by every authority, made them an easy pray for the Germans. It was with the armistice and the consequent disorientation of the Italian army, incapable of hindering the German troops, that the first groups of what would soon become an organized Resistance was born (Gentile 54).

As Claudio Pavone writes in his book *A Civil War*, that was the moment when Italians 'were called upon to make choices that many of them had never for one moment believed that their lives would ever require of them' (Pavone 30). The choice, between Fascism and resistance, became even more urgent when, after the liberation of Mussolini by the Nazis in the raid called *Operazione Quercia* – in German *Unternehmen Eiche* – the *Duce* returned to Italy and established the Social Republic, also known as *Repubblica di Salò*: de facto, a Republic controlled by Germany. The *Resistenza* – as in Italy is called this two-year conflict – or the Civil War as Claudio Pavone defines it, was fought between those who remained loyal to the Fascist ideology and identity, and those who decided to fight against it. The choice, of course, was not an easy one; the majority of the Italian soldiers, not differently from the rest of the population, was victim of a trauma which left most of them in a state of apathic resignation and acceptance of whichever destiny was to come (De Felice 73). Those who chose to join the Resistance knew that they were signing up for a life of hiding in the mountains and in the woods, sacrifice, and constant danger of being caught and imprisoned or executed by the Fascists and the Germans.

This thesis situates itself in the discourse about the representation of trauma in literature and focuses on the literary production born from the necessity of sharing the traumatising and haunting memories of the Second World War, and in particular those of the Italian Resistance period. The

theoretical framework in which the analysis of the texts will be conducted is that of Trauma Studies, with special attention for the representation of trauma in literature. As it will be treated more extensively in the first chapter, the theories authored by scholars such as Cathy Caruth, Jeffrey Alexander, Michelle Balaev and Roland Granofsky, amongst others, provide the fundamental tools to recognise and interpret those signs, or even more suitable in this context ‘literary symptoms’ of trauma this research aims at discovering in the three novels under scrutiny. Other tools for the analysis of the novels are provided by the methodological approaches of close reading and narratology. As it will be discussed in the next chapter, a close reading of the texts will help to uncover symptoms of trauma that might be hidden between the lines of the three novels, while a narratological approach will provide the conceptual basis to analyse the structure of the novels and shed light on the literary techniques and devices used by the authors to write about the undoubtedly traumatising historical period of the Italian Resistance.

The hypothesis at the base of this research is that a traumatic historical period, as the Italian Civil War must have been, might have influenced the writing of those authors who experienced it in the first person, even though their literary production is not considered as literature of trauma. Thus, the aim of this thesis is to find an answer to the following research question: which ‘literary symptoms’ of trauma can be read between the lines in the non-trauma novels of Italo Calvino, Cesare Pavese and Beppe Fenoglio, and how do these authors deal with the representation of such a traumatic historical period as the Italian Resistance?

The authors analysed in the thesis – namely Italo Calvino, Cesare Pavese, and Beppe Fenoglio – were, albeit to different degrees, all involved in the Resistance movement against the Fascist regime, and they all paid for their decision with imprisonment and temporary exile. The three novels chosen from the authors’ oeuvres for analysis, are particularly significant within the literary production about the Italian Civil War in that they are representatives of the authors’ different degrees of participation in the Resistance, their literary maturity, and their importance in Italian literature.

The authors of *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* and *Una questione privata* – Italo Calvino and Beppe Fenoglio, respectively – both actively participated in the Italian Resistance as *partigiani*, which is to say, they fought as partisans against the Nazi-Fascist regime. Cesare Pavese, the author of *La luna e i falò*, instead, contributed to the partisans' cause as an intellectual rather than a fighter. The different ways these authors took part in the war against the regime might have influenced their perception of the war and, consequently, their way of representing it. As for their literary maturity, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* is Calvino's first novel, considered by some critics rather immature. Pavese's and Fenoglio's, instead, are both authors' last works, written at the peak of their literary maturity. The time of publication of the novels is also significant: Calvino's book was written and published almost immediately after the end of the Second World War (1946/1947); Pavese's a few years later (1949); and Fenoglio's in 1963, many years after the end of the war. These differences might also have influenced the representation of the Resistance period, due to the length of time between the experience of the event and the moment of writing. Finally, all of these novels are considered, in Italy, literary milestones. Calvino's novel led the way through the path of *letteratura partigiana*; Pavese's enriched the Resistance literature with symbolism; and Fenoglio's novel is, as Calvino wrote, the novel on the Resistance that an entire generation of writers dreamt of writing (Calvino xxiii).

The literary production known in Italy as *letteratura partigiana* has always attracted the attention of academics. One of the main discourses in which criticism has engaged is the political stance of these kind of publications. Davide Tabor, for example, focuses on the mythologization of the Italian Resistance by some authors in contraposition to others – Calvino, Pavese and Fenoglio, for example – who created a literary canon which would not try to edulcorating it (Tabor 10). Another debated aspect is the literary movement this kind of literature belongs to: *neorealismo*. Also in this case, however, the debate is embedded in a political discourse; as Carlo Bo writes, the prominent theme of *neorealismo* 'era un contenuto ben circoscritto dentro un determinato periodo di storia, fra la guerra e la resistenza. Ne consegue che la fisionomia del neorealismo [...] è per molti aspetti una fisionomia

politica' (Bo 407).² Surprisingly, this kind of literature, stemming out of such a traumatic period as the Italian Resistance seems not to have been analysed in the light of Trauma Study. Also considering the literary criticism authored about each novel analysed in this thesis – as the following chapters will show – little has been written about these novels in relation to trauma.

Apart from the obvious goal of filling this gap in literary criticism, however, this thesis can also help in opening a window onto one of the most significant events of Italian history. As stated at the beginning of this introduction: while history influences the writing of literature; literature, for its part, helps the understanding of history. Surely, that between history and literature, is not a new kind of interdisciplinarity in the humanities; quite an old one in fact, but one which offers countless opportunity of study and equally countless (hi)stories for researchers to choose from. Hopefully, the findings of this research will contribute to a better understanding of the Italian (hi)story of the Resistance.

As for structure, the thesis is organised into five chapters. The first chapter is dedicated to the theoretical framework and the methods used for the analysis of the novels. The following three chapters each deal with the analysis of one novel – in a chronological order of publication: Italo Calvino, Cesare Pavese, Beppe Fenoglio. The fifth and last chapter of the thesis is reserved for the conclusions.

² The content was well limited within a specific historical period, between the war and the Resistance. It follows that the physiognomy of *neorealismo* [...] is, in many ways, a political physiognomy.

CHAPTER 1

Searching for trauma

*Tu vuo' ch'io rinovelli
 disperato dolor che 'l cor mi preme
 già pur pensando, pria ch'io ne favelli.*

– Dante, “Inferno”, *Divina Commedia*. (Canto xxxiii)³

As it appears from the historical background discussed in the introduction, in the days following the announcement of the armistice, the Italian population was in a state which could be described as a textbook case of cultural trauma according to Piotr Sztompka's definition:

The cultural traumas generated by major social changes, and triggered by traumatizing conditions and situations interpreted as threatening, unjust, and improper, are expressed as complex social moods, characterized by a number of collective emotions, orientations, and attitudes. [...] there is a general climate of anxiety, insecurity, and uncertainty, [...] a prevailing syndrome of distrust, both toward people and institutions [...] a disorientation concerning collective identity. [...] there is widespread apathy, passivism, and helplessness. (Sztompka 165)

This, however, was the general mood of the Italian population. As for the *partigiani*, many of their testimonies recall the guerrilla period as one of the best of their lives. Italo Calvino himself, commenting on Ada Gobetti's *Diario partigiano*, declared: ‘My God, what fun you had!’ (Pavone 36), while some of the participants in the Resistance even affirmed: ‘We were serene. Indeed, we were actually happy, because we knew that we were doing something very important [...] That time

³ You want me to renew a grief / so desperate that just the thought of it, / much less the telling, grips my heart with pain. (Translated by Mark Musa)

was fantastic, a wonderful period. I have never lived such a fine life since then. There were sufferings all right, but what an experience!’ (Pavone 37).

Such a positive mood can be differently interpreted: as Lee Settle does, with that ‘adrenal heightening caused by fatigue and an atavistic sense of danger that made the senses expand and extend’ (Lee Settle 112); alternatively, it can find an explanation in what Pior Sztompka calls “Rebellion”, one of the four ways to adapt to anomie: an ‘effort aimed at the total transformation of culture in order to replace the traumatic condition with a completely new cultural setup’ (Sztompka 168). In short, the idea of fighting to build a free and better society might have helped the *partigiani* to overcome the traumatic experience of the fight itself. The reason for this particular mood is to be found in a balanced mix of the two previous explanations; based on these ideas, however, it is reasonable to think that, even if not expressed outright, trauma was present in the minds and psyches of those who fought as *partigiani* and survived the war. In this case, it would also be logical to assume that such a trauma, even though mitigated by youth, adrenaline, and sense of purpose, would to some degree influence a large part of the literary production of the period, especially the production of those authors who lived through and experienced the war and the antifascist activism as protagonists. In fact, it is quite difficult to imagine that literature in general could completely ignore a significant historical event such as the Resistance, an event involving not just people as individuals, but an entire population. As Jeffrey C. Alexander and Elizabeth Butler Breese write in *Narrating Trauma: On the Impact of Collective Suffering*:

Individual victims react to traumatic injury with repression and denial, gaining relief when these psychological defenses are overcome, bringing pain into consciousness so they are able to mourn. For collectivities, it is different. Rather than denial, repression, and working through, it is a matter of symbolic construction and framing, of creating a narrative and moving along from there. (Alexander and Butler Breese xii)

According to Ronald Granofsky, ‘What distinguishes the trauma novel from other novels is the exploration through the agency of literary symbolism of the individual experience of collective trauma’; in addition, he ‘reserve[s] the term “trauma novel” for those contemporary novels which deal symbolically with a collective disaster’ and ‘the more general term “literature of trauma” for works of any genre and any period which deal centrally with trauma’ (Granofsky 5). The novels analysed in this thesis, however, are not considered “trauma novels” nor are they categorized under the label of “literature of trauma”. The genre they belong to is known in Italy as *letteratura partigiana*, or *letteratura della Resistenza* (partigiano’s literature or Resistance literature). This literature comprises the literary production about the period of the Resistance and usually has the Resistance and the Civil War as its central theme. The kind of publications vary from memoirs, war chronicles, diaries and novels; while the writing styles of the authors and the themes addressed in their publications are those of *neorealismo*, a literary movement which gained a foothold in the 1930s and kept influencing most of the Italian artistic production of the post-Second World War period (Asor Rosa).

Neorealismo was a movement – or better: a trend – which evolved from Realism and from the typically Italian literary current of *Verismo* initiated by Giovanni Verga and Luigi Capuana approximately between 1875 and the early 1900s. The new movement retained some characteristics of Realism, such as, for example, the use of dialect, but showed a shift of focus from the external reality to the inner world of the characters, often distraught by doubts and existential crisis caused by the impact of the traumatizing historical event of the war. As it appears, the literary movement itself assumes the presence of some kind of trauma in the disturbed psychology of its characters and, possibly, of the authors as well. In fact, as Carlo Bo writes in his article ‘*non era compito da poco, riassumere dentro di sé la lezione traumatica della guerra*’ (Bo 407).⁴

⁴ It was no small task to abridge within oneself the traumatic lesson of the war.

The change of focus from the objectivity and universality of Realism to individuality and the inner world of the characters, united to an entirely Italian trait for which Realism is ‘rarely disjoined from imagination’ (Chiaromonte 432), gave birth to a movement characterised, as Alberto Asor Rosa puts it, by a ‘*nocciolo di verità e fantasia, congiunte insieme*’⁵ (Asor Rosa). It is exactly between truth and fantasy, History – with a capital ‘H’ – and personal stories, that the three novels analysed in this thesis find their place. Italo Calvino, Cesare Pavese and Beppe Fenoglio are amongst the most important and well known authors of the Italian *Novecento* literature; their works have been studied and analysed by many scholars under the lens of different theories, and they have been quoted and criticised in the context of several literary and historical debates. Surprisingly, these novels have barely been analysed in the framework of Trauma Studies, possibly due to the fact that they do not have trauma as a central theme. Nevertheless, while it is a fact that these novels are not ‘trauma novels’, it is also true that the three main characters of the stories, (Pin, Anguilla, and Milton) – and some of the secondary characters as well — show a complicated and sometimes perturbed psychology. It has already been observed that the literary movement of *Neorealism* implies the presence of characters showing some kind of trauma in their personalities and behaviour; one can assume, therefore, that the troubled minds depicted in the three novels under scrutiny in this thesis are the result of the traumatic historical period they live in. In this light, it is also reasonable to assume that hints of the traumatic events experienced by the authors of the novels themselves can be found, between the lines, in their writing. Of course, to be able to recognise such hints, it is essential to understand what trauma is and how it can be depicted through narrative.

According to Cathy Caruth ‘in its general definition, trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flash-backs, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena’ (Caruth 91). Caruth’s reflections, mostly based on Freud’s psychoanalysis, underline the tight connection between

⁵ A core of truth and fantasy joined together.

repetition and understanding. Trauma implies the inability of the traumatised subject to understand the trauma at the moment of its happening; it is only later, with the involuntary and often unconscious re-enactment of the event, that trauma becomes more comprehensible (Caruth 4). ‘Comprehension’ and ‘understanding’ are key words in trauma theories as well as in psychoanalysis; understanding the event which caused the trauma is one of the most important steps towards its resolution. The repetition of the event, however, is not the only path which can lead to understanding. Trauma, especially in the case of collective trauma, has to become a sort of narrative to be communicated to others: ‘the history of trauma, in its inherent belatedness, can only take place through the listening of another’ (Caruth 11), writes Caruth in the introduction of *Trauma: Exploration in Memory*.

What precedes the act of listening is, of course, the act of representing, but representation of trauma poses a significant issue. Trauma, Caruth states, ‘can be experienced in at least two ways: as a memory that one cannot integrate into one’s own experience, and as a catastrophic knowledge that one cannot communicate to others’ (Caruth 256). How can one represent something that cannot be fully comprehended? A possible answer arrives from Kali Tal in her book *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*: ‘Literature of trauma is written from the need to tell and retell the story of the traumatic experience, to make it “real” both to the victim and to the community. Such writing serves both as validation and cathartic vehicle for the traumatized author’ (Tal 21). In his preface to the 1964 edition of *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, Italo Calvino also expresses a clear idea of this need:

L’esplosione letteraria di quegli anni in Italia fu, prima che un fatto d’arte, un fatto fisiologico, esistenziale, collettivo. [...] L’essere usciti da un’esperienza – guerra, guerra civile – che non aveva risparmiato nessuno, stabiliva un’immediatezza di comunicazione tra lo scrittore e il suo pubblico: si era faccia a faccia, alla pari, carichi di storie da

*raccontare, ognuno aveva avuto la sua, ognuno aveva vissuto vite irregolari drammatiche avventurose, ci si strappava la parola di bocca. (Calvino vi)*⁶

Calvino's use of words such as 'physiological' and 'existential' clearly reflect that necessity of communicating which is typical of many witnesses of traumatic experiences; in Cathy Caruth's words: 'There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to *tell* and thus to come to *know* one's story' (Caruth 63). The same impulse is also clearly conveyed by other testimonies: for example, that of a Holocaust survivor quoted by Shoshana Felman:

After I was liberated [...] a Russian doctor examined me and said, "Under normal circumstances you would not have survived [...] It's just a medical miracle that you survived." But I told you, I really wanted to live, I said to myself, "I want to live one day after Hitler, one day after the end of the war [...] And we are here to tell you the story."
(Felman 47)

Literature is, of course, one of the media which can successfully satisfy this need to 'tell one's story' and give voice to trauma. The role of literature as a means of representation is certainly relevant in the field of Trauma Studies; in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Cathy Caruth underlines the success of representation of the 'fictional story [which] explores the possibility of faithful history in the very indirectness of this telling' (Caruth 27). This idea of the usefulness of fiction in the representation of trauma is shared by Ronald Granofsky in *The Trauma Novel: Contemporary Symbolic Depictions of Collective Disaster*; 'literary symbolism', he writes, 'allows for a "safe" confrontation with a traumatic experience' (Granofsky 7). It is possible to argue, of course, that not all fiction aims at shielding readers from the harshness of their narratives; nevertheless, the role of literature and fiction in building a cultural and collective memory out of

⁶ Italy's literary explosion in those years was less an artistic event than a physiological, existential, collective event. [...] Having emerged from an experience, a war and a civil war, that had spared no one, made communication between the writer and his audience immediate. We were face to face, equals, filled with stories to tell; each had his own; each had lived an irregular, dramatic, adventurous life: we snatched the words from each other's mouths.

certain historical events, and in showing the meaning behind those events, is beyond any doubt. In fact, as it is stated in the introduction of *Narrating Trauma: On the Impact of Collective Suffering*, ‘meanings do not come out of thin air. Webs of signification are spun by culture creators’ (Alexander and Breese xxii).

It is a bond, that between trauma and memory, which cannot be ignored; literature has also a significant position in the representation of memories and their conversion in cultural and collective ones. In the introduction to *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*, Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney write:

the very concept of *cultural* memory is itself premised on the idea that memory can only become collective as part of a continuous process whereby memories are shared with the help of symbolic artefacts that mediate between individuals and, in the process, create communality across both space and time. (Erll and Rigney 1)

It goes without saying that this striving for certain memories to become collective is even more important when the recollections focus on historical periods characterised by life-changing or traumatic experiences. In addition, the relation between experience and its representation is made even closer by the witnesses’ feeling of bearing a sort of social responsibility; in Vita Fortunati’s words: ‘*lo studio delle narrative che rappresentano eventi traumatici serve non solo a elaborare un pensiero critico sul passato, ma anche a ribadire nel presente la responsabilità etica del narrare/rappresentare nei confronti dell’ordine sociale*’⁷ (Fortunati 17). As it appears, the role of media – in this case literature – in shaping a collective memory is twofold: on the one hand, it serves the purpose of improving the reader’s understanding of the past (Erll and Rigney 3); on the other, it satisfies the writer’s sense of responsibility towards society, as well as his/her need to cope with the traumatic experience (Savage Brosman).

⁷ The study of narratives which represent traumatic events serves not only to construct a critical opinion on the past, but also to reiterate today’s ethical responsibility of narrating/representing it towards the social order.

This need of sharing a traumatic experience can, of course, be satisfied through the narrative of trauma by writing directly of the trauma experienced. A book such as *Se questo é un uomo* (*If This Is a Man*) by Primo Levi, for example, is a clear and direct depiction of the trauma suffered by the author during the period of his incarceration in the Auschwitz concentration camp. There are, however, narratives in which trauma is not so evident, and it must be searched, for instance, in the use of language, in the construction of the plot, or in the setting. This is the case, in fact, of Italo Calvino's, Cesare Pavese's and Beppe Fenoglio's novels analysed in this study. In these cases, narratology is an approach which can provide the tools for such a research. The theory of narrative – namely Narratology – was born in the 1960s with the idea of creating a sort of universal 'code' to decipher every kind of narrative (Cuddy-Keane16). Today, Narratology is a method which 'encompasses any systematic study of the processes by which narratives make sense, or through which readers make sense of narrative' (Cuddy-Keane 16). Such an approach finds its use in many of the fields of Social Science, from Sociology to History, as well as in any other disciplines where storytelling is fundamental (McAlpine 34). As for literature, a narratological approach to the study of novels can provide new levels of awareness in the readers, leading to a better understanding of what is behind the text and what the author is trying to communicate.

Assuming that a traumatic historical period – as the Italian Resistance must have been – leaves traces of trauma behind and that it can influence the literary production of those who experienced it in the first person, it is reasonable to believe that Calvino's, Pavese's and Fenoglio's novels will display literary symptoms of that trauma and will show how these authors' writing techniques and narrative styles have been influenced and shaped by their experiences of the war. In order to find these symptoms of trauma and this influence on the authors' narratives, two methodological approaches will be applied to the analysis of the texts. The first approach will consist of a close reading of the novels. The analysis of the books at a textual level will be useful to recognise literary symptoms of trauma in the use of certain words and in the way characters and settings are depicted.

A close reading approach will also help to discern metaphors and symbolic images indicating the traumatic aftermath of the war. The second approach will consist of an analysis of the novels at a narratological level. The use of narratology as a method of analysis will help to understand the narrative structure of the novels and to shed light on the literary techniques and tools used by the authors to represent, not only their fictional stories, but above all, the historical period which is central to those stories: the Italian Resistance.

Familiarization with some of the concepts in the study of narrative poses the basis for a fruitful literary research in that it helps to recognise and interpret the different authorial choices in the novels. A fundamental concept, for example, is that of *focalization*, defined by Mieke Bal's as 'the relation between the vision and what is seen, perceived' (Bal 133). In other words, *focalization* has to do with point of view, perception and subjectivity. What is called *focalizer*, in fact, is the agent – *actor* in Bal's definition (Bal 5) – whose eyes function as a window through which the reader looks at the story. Focalization, through one single character or through different focalizers, is a useful tool for the author to assist the reader through the story and show him/her different perspectives, feelings and meanings. Likewise, the way the story is told can vary; the different kinds of narrator also add to the way a novel is built and can indicate the author's intentions in constructing his *fabula* – the series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors (Bal 5). For example, an *external omniscient narrator* can provide insights in many or all of the characters' thoughts and feelings. A *character-bound narrator*, instead, being part of the fabula himself, is limited to his/her own inner world. The choice of a particular kind of narrator, and the different ways its characteristics can be nuanced – for instance, limiting its omniscience to only certain characters like Calvino does in his novel – are ways of giving the novel unique characteristics and, sometimes, guiding the reader's interpretation.

In Calvino's, Pavese's and Fenoglio's novels, the atmosphere, the focalization on certain characters, as well as the use of certain motifs and metaphors, can all be used to convey the memories

and the feelings connected to such a tragic historical period. As Christian Roesler writes: ‘In general, one can say that there is always a variety of possible stories that can be told about a certain experience and the storyteller always had to make a choice of one of these story formats when he creates his narrative’ (Roesler 576). The following chapters of this thesis will dive into the narrative of Calvino’s, Pavese’s, and Fenoglio’s novels trying to find literary symptoms and the influence of trauma in the narrative mechanisms, techniques, styles, words and choices of these authors.

CHAPTER 2

Italo Calvino – *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*

L'astuzia di Calvino, scoiattolo della penna, è stata questa, di arrampicarsi sulle piante, più per gioco che per paura, e osservare la vita partigiana come una favola di bosco.

– Cesare Pavese, “Postfazione”, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*.⁸

This chapter is dedicated to Italo Calvino's first novel, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, in which Calvino tells the hard, and at times brutal, story of the Resistance through the eyes of the ten-year-old protagonist, Pin, managing to convey the harshness of the facts in the atmosphere of a fairy tale. While it would be incorrect to identify Calvino with Pin, it would be safe to say that Pin's way of looking at the world is quite similar to Calvino's, and Calvino – that ‘squirrel of the pen’ Pavese referred to in the quote above – never lost this way of looking at life and at the world in his entire literary career. The use of such a young focalizer is functional to Calvino's purpose of giving an account of the Italian Resistance by keeping such traumatising event at a safe distance. Through Pin's gaze, Calvino can show the reality of the world surrounding his character but, at the same time, he can filter such brutal and traumatising reality through eyes which are still full of fantasies and dreams.

Pin, the protagonist of *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, is a ten-year-old boy, an orphan raised by his prostitute sister. The setting is that of the Ligurian hills and mountains, and of the little street called *Carrugio Lungo* which can still be found today in the historical centre of San Remo. Pin has no friends of his own age; he is a vulgar, vicious, and mischievous child and the other boys, let alone their parents, do not like him. He spends his time between the cobbler shop, where he works as an

⁸ The shrewdness of Calvino, squirrel of the pen, was this, to climb plants, more for fun than for fear, and observe the partisan life as a woodland fairy tale.

apprentice – when the owner of the shop is not in jail – and the tavern where the adults of the town offer him glasses of wine and ask him to sing for them. The relationship between Pin and these people is a peculiar one: Pin considers them his friends but at the same time he despises them and does not miss an opportunity to insult and make fun of them. Likewise, the people of the village insult Pin because of his sister, who counts Germans soldiers amongst her clients, and treat Pin as an annoying child or as an entertainment, according to their daily mood.

One night, they push him to steal the gun of the German sailor Frick, who is spending the night with Pin's sister. Even though scared, the boy steals the gun, a P38, and rushes back to the tavern to receive the approval he craves for. The adults, however, seem to have forgotten about the entire gun affair and the boy, disappointed and on the verge of tears, runs out of the tavern to hide the gun in a secret place in the woods: the place where spiders build their nests. Later, Pin is arrested for stealing the gun and in jail he meets Lupo Rosso, a young partisan who helps him to break out of prison. After their escape, however, they are separated, and Pin finds himself alone.

Pin's next encounter is with Cugino, another partisan who brings Pin along with him up to the mountains where a group of *partigiani* is quartered. It is a contingent specifically created to accommodate those partisans who, because of their previous criminal records or unreliable attitude, cannot fit into other contingents. Here, Pin meets many different types of antifascists of doubtful heroism, characterised by the most common human flaws. The commander, Il Dritto, for example, refuses to fight and prefers to stay behind with the wife of the cook, Giglia, to have sex with her. When Pin starts to joke about and hint at this adulterous relationship in front of the other partisans, Il Dritto beats him up so brutally that the boy runs away, finding himself alone once more.

He goes back to recover his P38, to find that someone stole it; he is sure it was Pelle, one of the partisans who left the contingent, betrayed them all, and joined the Black Brigades. Desperate and lonely, Pin returns to his sister where he finds out that she has his gun: a young soldier of the Black Brigades gave it to her. Pin takes his P38 and seeks refuge in his secret place in the woods; there, he

meets Cugino once again. Even though the scene is not explicit in the novel, it is clear that Cugino has gone to the village to kill Pin's sister because of her spying for the Germans. The novel ends with the idyllic image of Pin and Cugino walking away, hand in hand, on a path lighted by fireflies.

As the first novel written by such a multifaceted author as Italo Calvino, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, has always attracted much attention. Literary critics have focused on various aspects of the novel. Some of them, like Davide Tabor, elaborated on the way the novel is part of the heated debate about the Italian memory of the Resistance, between those who wanted to uncritically glorify the Resistance, and those who just wanted to forget the entire Civil War period (Tabor 9). Other critics concentrated on the hint of fantastic and fairy tale style which was already evident in Calvino's writing at this early stage. Stefano Pignataro, for instance, writes:

Il Sentiero è popolato, come in una fiaba calviniana da personaggi che racchiudono nella loro tipicità eroismi e miserie. Anche i nomi dei partigiani, Lupo Rosso, Labbra di Bue, Cigno, richiamano a un mondo fantastico in cui il protagonista viene assorto. (Pignataro)⁹

On the same subject, according to Massimo Lollini:

Nel caso di Calvino il ricorso alla fiaba si inserisce nel periodo delle radicali trasformazioni culturali introdotte dalla conclusione della seconda guerra mondiale, dalla crisi del fascismo e dalle grandi aspettative di rinnovamento introdotte dalla Resistenza. (Lollini 288)¹⁰

The connection between fairy tale and war in this last quote, brings another connection to mind: that between war and trauma. Surprisingly enough, however, there seems to be little literary criticism written about *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* in relation to trauma. A reference to the traumatic experience of war can be found, or better: extrapolated, in the writing of the just quoted Massimo

⁹ The *Path* is populated, as in a Calvinian fairy tale, by characters who typically show heroism and misery. Even the names of the partisans, Red Wolf, Ox Lips, Swan, recall a fantastic world which absorbs the protagonist.

¹⁰ In Calvino's case, the use of fairy tale is part of the period of radical cultural changes introduced with the end of the Second World War, the crisis of Fascism and the great hopes of renewal brought about by the Resistance.

Lollini when he paraphrases Calvino's words: *'La spinta a scrivere è sempre legata alla mancanza di qualcosa che si vorrebbe conoscere e possedere ma che sfugge continuamente perchè si scontra con i limiti costitutivi della scrittura'* (Lollini 289).¹¹ There is something in this sentence which reminds of Kali Tal's words: 'testimony is never adequate, [...] it can never bridge the gap between language and experience' (Tal 2).

It can be argued, however, that it is precisely through the use of language and other narrative mechanisms that traces of trauma can be hidden between the lines of a novel. In the case of Calvino's *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, a narratological analysis of the text might reveal some hints of that traumatic experience of the war which, even though not necessary traumatizing the author himself, has probably contributed to the shaping of his style. According to Norman Friedman:

The choice of a point of view in the writing of fiction [...] has a probable range of functions it can perform within its limits. The question of effectiveness, therefore, is one of the suitability of a given technique for the achievement of certain kinds of effects, for each kind of story requires the establishment of a particular kind of an illusion to sustain it. (Friedman 1180)

Calvino's chosen point of view, or focalizer to use Mieke Bal's term, is that of a ten-year-old boy. This particular choice is explained by Calvino himself in his preface to the 1964 edition of the novel:

Credo che ogni volta che si è stati testimoni o attori d'un'epoca storica ci si sente presi da una responsabilità speciale... A me, questa responsabilità finiva per farmi sentire il tema come troppo impegnativo e solenne per le mie forze. E allora, proprio per non lasciarmi mettere in soggezione dal tema, decisi che l'avrei affrontato non di petto ma di scorcio. Tutto doveva essere visto dagli occhi d'un bambino [...] Inventai una storia che restasse

¹¹ The drive to write is always connected to the lack of what one would like to know and possess, but which keeps escaping because it collides with the constitutive limits of language.

in margine alla guerra partigiana, ai suoi eroismi e sacrifici, ma nello stesso tempo ne rendesse il colore, l'aspro sapore, il ritmo... (Calvino xii)¹²

Calvino's choice of a child as the main focalizer of his novel, thus, is his way of taking distance from the painful event of the war and of looking at it not directly, but so to speak 'out of the corner of his eye'. The gaze of a child who does not completely understand the world of adults around him provides the author with the possibility of looking at such a tragical event like the Civil War from a perspective which is not influenced by the adult's awareness. In other words, what Calvino describes in his novel, through Pin's eyes, is indeed the Italian Resistance, but filtered through the innocence and the ignorance of a child who does not really understand the gravity and the traumatising potential of what he is witnessing. At the same time, Pin's gaze is also a way to turn the real world into a fairy tale by virtue of that imagination and playfulness which are typical of childhood. Precisely these childish characteristics – innocence, ignorance and fantasy – are the tools Calvino uses to look at the Civil War with a detachment which allows him to overcome his own memories and feelings. Calvino's need of taking a distance from the event of the war in order to be able to write about it is further explained in another passage from the same preface in which he expresses his difficulties in keeping his own personal feelings out of the text:

Per mesi, dopo la fine della guerra, avevo provato a raccontare l'esperienza partigiana in prima persona, o con un protagonista simile a me. [...] mi muovevo a disagio; non riuscivo mai a smorzare del tutto le vibrazioni sentimentali e moralistiche; [...] Quando cominciai a scrivere storie in cui non entravo io, tutto prese a funzionare [...] Cominciai a capire che un racconto, quanto più era oggettivo e anonimo, tanto più era mio. [...] E il senso storico,

¹² I think that every time one has witnessed or has been an actor in a historical period, one feels burdened by a special responsibility... To me, this responsibility gave the feeling that the theme was too demanding and solemn for my powers. Thus, precisely to avoid being intimidated by the theme, I decided to face it not head on, but in passing. Everything must have been seen through the eyes of a child [...] I made up a story which would remain at the edge of the partisan war, of its heroisms and sacrifices, but of which, at the same time, would convey the colour, the biting taste, the pace...

la morale, il sentimento, erano presenti proprio perchè li lasciavo impliciti, nascosti.

(Calvino xx)¹³

As it appears, this need for objectivity and anonymity is a way for Calvino of not letting his own sentiments interfere with his tale; a statement which underlines the power of such feelings as well as their intrusiveness. Yet, these feelings are not absent from the story, their presence is made even more obvious by their being shadowed rather than shouted out; a concept somehow confirmed by Cathy Caruth's opinion (already mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis) about the faithfulness of fictional stories in trauma representation precisely due to their indirectness (Caruth 27).

According to Mieke Bal, however, 'Storytelling is inevitably slanted or subjective in nature, and to deny this constitutes a dubious political act, for it means denying narrative responsibility' (Bal 132). Calvino's strive for objectivity, seen in this light, seems pointless. The objectivity he speaks about in his preface is just an attempt at hiding his own presence in the tale; nevertheless, his presence is recognizable in the choices he makes as an author. The author's authority, for instance, can be found in the type of narrator he chose for this novel: omniscient and anonymous, but not completely so. In *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, the narrator's omniscience is reserved only for some characters. One example is, even though just for a few lines, the German sailor, Frick. The usefulness of displaying this character's feelings in the novel lies in the opportunity for the author to show the humanity of a German soldier.

Quel giorno il marinaio tedesco veniva su di cattivo umore. Amburgo, il suo paese, era mangiato dalle bombe ogni giorno, e lui aspettava notizie ogni giorno di sua moglie, dei suoi bambini. Aveva un temperamento affettivo, il tedesco, un temperamento da meridionale trapiantato in un uomo del mare del Nord. S'era riempito la casa di figlioli, e

¹³ After the end of the war, I tried for months to tell the partisan's experience as a protagonist, or with a protagonist who would resemble me [...] It felt awkward; I could never completely stop my sentimental and moralistic impulses [...] when I started writing stories in which I was not present, everything started functioning [...] I began to realise that the more objective and anonymous the story was, the more mine it was. [...] And historical sense, morality, sentiment were there precisely because I kept them implicit, hidden.

adesso, spinto lontano dalla guerra, cercava di smaltire la sua carica di calore umano affezionandosi a prostitute dei paesi occupati. (Calvino 7)¹⁴

These few lines, which convey all we know about Frick's emotions, serve a double purpose: on the one hand, they make the reader understand that the novel is not centred on the evilness of the Germans; on the other, they show how the war affects everyone involved in it, regardless which side they are on. Frick is a German soldier who fights against the partisans – that is against Calvino himself; nevertheless, for Calvino it seems important to depict, even in a very few words, this character as a human being not dissimilar from the protagonist or the other characters in the novel. Frick is nothing more than another victim of the war, and his worries and his fears are not different from the ones of the partisans, nor probably from those of the author himself.

As for the narrator's anonymity, in one particular instance it becomes, to say the least, doubtful. Chapter XI is a chapter in which the ideology and the opinions of the author clearly shine through the words and the feeling expressed by the character Kim, the commissar of the partisan brigade. Moreover, the overlapping of the author's/narrator's ideas and his character's ideas is underlined by the shift from the third person to the first person narration spoken directly by Kim. In other words, the narrator gives way to the character through whom the author can express his own thoughts. A confirmation of such an interpretation comes from the author himself. In fact, Calvino called this particular chapter of the novel '*quasi una prefazione inserita in mezzo al romanzo*' (Calvino x).¹⁵ In this special 'inner preface', the author is free to express his ideas and doubts about the Resistance and what will come after the end of the war, about the reasons why men fight, and about men's nature itself. '*L'uomo porta con sé le sue paure bambine per tutta la vita*', Kim reflects, '*Arrivare a non*

¹⁴ That day the German sailor was in a bad temper. Hamburg, his town, was being destroyed by bombs every day, and every day he waited for news of his wife and children. He had a sentimental disposition, this German had, a disposition typical of a southern man transplanted in the body of a man from the North Sea. He had filled his home with children, and now, brought far away by the war, he was trying to drain his affective charge by attaching himself to prostitutes in the occupied countries.

¹⁵ Almost a preface inserted in the middle of the novel.

aver più paura, questa è la meta ultima dell'uomo' (Calvino 107).¹⁶ To overcome fear, the intrinsic fears of childhood or those caused by traumatic events, is one of the reasons people fight: *'Perchè combattono allora? [...] È l'offesa della loro vita, il buio della loro strada, il sudicio delle loro case, le parole oscene imparate fin da bambini, la fatica di dover essere cattivi'* (Calvino 105).¹⁷ In Kim's – and Calvino's – reflections, this reason is true for everyone, for the partisans as well as for the Germans, and it does not spare even a child such as Pin, who very clearly shows his fears and his *furore* (wrath): *'Quel bambino del distaccamento del Dritto, come si chiama? Pin? Con quello stuggimento di rabbia nel viso lentigginoso, anche quando ride...'* (Calvino 108).¹⁸

Pin, the protagonist and the main focalizer in the novel, is the most important character of whom the reader comes to know thoughts and feelings. Omniscient narration and focalization, in the case of Pin, help the reader to better understand this ambiguous character and to put his unusual behaviour and thoughts in the right perspective. The way Pin is depicted since the beginning of the novel clearly states his unfamiliarity with the world of other ten-year-old boys. Calvino writes that *'Pin é un ragazzo che non sa giocare'* (Calvino 21);¹⁹ in fact, he is not able to engage with the other children of the town – nor really, for that matter, with the adults. Many of the words used by Calvino in relation to Pin contribute to creating a character who, despite his young age, has an aura of evilness and mischievousness. In her article *Mostruosi e incomprensibili come gli uomini. La Resistenza della persona in Calvino e Fenoglio*, Caterina Mongiat Farina writes: *'nel Sentiero, il linguaggio analogico animale ha la funzione di segnalare il degrado fisico, e la violenza e cattiveria che pervadono la vita di Pin e dei partigiani'* (Mongiat Farina 421).²⁰ The violence hovering above the entire story, in fact, is evident in some of the actions in the novel. One example is the cruel joke the commander of the

¹⁶ Man carries his childhood fears for his entire life. Not to be afraid anymore, that's man's final goal.

¹⁷ Why do they fight then? [...] It comes from the indignity of their lives, the darkness of their street, the filth of their homes, the obscenities they have learned since childhood, the effort of being obliged to be mean.

¹⁸ That little boy in Dritto's contingent, what's his name? Pin? With his freckly face tortured by rage, even when he is laughing...

¹⁹ Pin is a boy who doesn't know how to play.

²⁰ In *The Path*, the animal analogic language has the function of signalling the physical neglect, and the violence and evilness which pervade Pin's and the partisans' lives.

partisan contingent plays upon Pin: he tells him that there is a surprise for him in the woods, but what Pin finds is a dead body.

*Pin cammina solo per il buio, con una paura che gli entra nelle ossa come l'umido della nebbia. [...] Si ferma a tempo: tra poco ci metteva un piede sopra! [...] un corpo umano già gonfio a schiena nell'erba. [...] Pin con i capelli ritti e il cuore in gola corre lontano per i prati. (Calvino 79)*²¹

Moreover, in the light of Mongiat Farina's quote, certain words used by the author in relation to Pin seem to assume a deeper meaning. Pin's bed, for example, is referred to as *cuccia* (Calvino 13), dog basket in English, and also the ways Pin is nicknamed by many of the adults in his town are related to the animal world; for example, names such as *macacco* (Calvino 4) – ape – or *brutto muso* (Calvino 19) a literary translation of which would be 'ugly snout' instead of the more common figurative translation 'ugly face'. The association with the animal world and the brutalization of men it indicates, however, is not limited to single words or nicknames. More than once animals and men are united in equally negative judgments by the protagonist: '*Pin è cattivo con le bestie: sono esseri mostruosi e incomprensibili come gli uomini*', or '*i ragni [...] sono esseri schifosi come gli uomini*' (Calvino 22-23).²² Pin's negative view of people in these sentences adds to the image of a protagonist who feels separated from the society he lives in, and who '*deve muoversi nella notte solo e attraverso l'odio dei grandi*' (Calvino 15).²³ Pin's image of the adults is biased by his inability to understand them. He is an orphan who lacks those parental figures who should have introduced him to the world of adults by means of education and examples. In addition, adults, in the historical period during which Pin grows up, seem to be too busy – and worried – to spare some sympathy or patience towards a child like him. Thus, Pin grows up by himself, trying to interpret people's behaviour without

²¹ Pin walks alone in the darkness, fear gripping his bones like the humid mist. [...] He comes to a halt just in time: he was almost stepping on it! [...] a human body, already swollen and with its back in the grass. [...] Pin runs away through the fields, with his hair straight on end and his heart in his mouth.

²² Pin is cruel to animals: they are as monstrous and incomprehensible as men.

Spiders [...] are disgusting beings like men.

²³ Has to move at night, alone and through the hate of the grownups.

understanding it and behaving accordingly with his mistaken interpretations. In short, the figure of Pin, rather than a Peter Pan sort of character who does not want to grow up, is a character to whom the chance of growing up is denied.

From the beginning of the novel, Pin stands out as an unlikeable character; his behaviour is equally unkind towards children, grownups and animals, and he seems to enjoy torturing them with his cruel and humiliating jokes or with violence. Both the omniscient narrator and the focalization of the novel, however, uncover Pin's thoughts and feelings transforming him from a wicked to a pathetic character worthy of the reader's pity. Pin is a lonely child, an orphan raised by a sister who does not care about him, a boy whose behaviour is often dictated by the necessity of '*smaltire la nebbia di solitudine che gli si condensa nel petto*' (Calvino 9).²⁴ Apart from the loneliness, another recurrent feeling related to Pin is anger; an anger often not immediately explicable and expressed in the evilness of his jokes and in a sort of self-destructing behaviour: '*Ora Pin entrerà nell'osteria fumosa e viola, e dirà cose oscene, impropri mai uditi a quegli uomini fino a farli imbestialire e a farsi battere*' (Calvino 9).²⁵ As Laurie Vickroy writes: 'Victims may respond to trauma in an unsympathetic environment by adapting as best they can with survival characteristics' (Vickroy 132) one of which is anger. The kind of anger often expressed by Pin and that, according to Maria Root, is 'both a fighting and protective response to environmental threat. When threatened one may retort or express anger by shouting, name calling, threats, and physical striking out' (Root 249).

During an interview for the magazine "Il paradosso", Calvino remembered: '*Il primo ricordo della mia vita è un socialista bastonato dagli squadristi [...] Ma far discendere dalla prima immagine infantile tutto quello che si vedrà e sentirà nella vita, è una tentazione letteraria*' (Barengi and Falcetto xxix).²⁶ A temptation Calvino might have indulged to in his first novel: Pin's character and

²⁴ Get rid of the cloud of loneliness which concentrate in his chest.

²⁵ Now Pin will enter the smoky and violet air of the tavern, and he will speak obscenities, never heard offences to those men till making them fly into a rage and beat him up.

²⁶ The first memory of my life is that of a socialist beaten up by the *squadristi* [...] Anyway, to trace down to the first image of childhood everything we see and hear during our life, is a literary temptation.

behaviour might be the consequence of the traumas he experienced as an orphan, growing up in a not always friendly environment, and as a witness of the Civil War. For instance, Pin's inurement to the idea of killing is another hint to the overwhelming brutality of the world around him. There is violence even in the quiet acceptance of violence:

– *Io vado ad ammazzare la gente, la notte. Hai paura?*

– *Io no, sei un assassino?*

– *Ecco: neanche i bambini hanno più paura di chi ammazza la gente. Non sono un assassino ma ammazzo lo stesso.*

– *Vai ad ammazzare un uomo, adesso?*

– *No. Ritorno.* (Calvino 52)²⁷

As it appears, the violence and trauma brought about by the war can be read between the lines of Pin's life, in his relationship with people, in his rage, and in his hardened endurance of violence, but it can also be found in his way of escaping such a brutal reality. Despite his loneliness and sadness, Pin is still a child; he often loses himself in dreams of acceptance in which the other children and the adults of his town love and appreciate him. His dreams are full of words such as 'marvelous', 'magic', 'enchanted', and 'wonder', words which are spread throughout the novel, especially in the saddest and more traumatising situations. In fact, in critical circumstances, the most natural instinct of childhood, daydreaming, comes to Pin's aid. When he is arrested for having stolen the gun of the German sailor, for example, he dreams of someone who would come and save him (Calvino 26). Another example: when the commander of the partisans, *il Dritto*, orders Pin to bury the little hawk killed by the cook of the contingent, he dreams of

buttare il falchetto nella grande aria della vallata e vederlo aprire le ali, e alzarsi a volo, fare un giro sulla sua testa e poi partire verso un punto lontano. E lui, come nei racconti

²⁷ "I go to kill people at night. Are you scared?" "No, I'm not. Are you a murderer?"

"There, even children are not scared any more of who kills people. No, I'm not a murderer, but I kill people anyway." "Are you going to kill a man now?" "No. I'm on my way back."

delle fate, andargli dietro, camminando per monti e per pianure, fino a un paese incantato in cui tutti siano buoni. (Calvino 123)²⁸

In a certain way, it reminds of the strategy of escaping the harshness of the Resistance period used by Calvino himself: looking at it not directly but through the magical lens of a child who still dreams of fairy tales. Pin's way of dealing with the loneliness and harshness of his life, in fact, is precisely that of distancing himself from it and to search for reassurance in his own fantasies. It must be noted, however, that Pin – like Calvino who is able to write a sort of fairy tale while always keeping in mind the real history – is always aware of the reality of the world around him, even when he is lost in his fantasies. When Lupo Rosso leaves him alone in the woods, for example, Pin resorts to fairy stories to comfort himself, but when confronted with reality, he is perfectly able to recognise it:

Se Pin lascerà una scia di noccioli di ciliegia Lupo Rosso riuscirà a trovarlo, dovunque sia! Basta lasciar cadere un nocciolo ogni venti passi. Ecco: girato quel muretto, Pin mangerà una ciliegia, poi un'altra da quel vecchio frantoio, un'altra passato l'albero di nespolo: così via fino ad arrivare al sentiero delle tane di ragno. Ma ancora non ha raggiunto il fossato che già le ciliege sono finite: Pin capisce allora che Lupo Rosso non lo ritroverà mai più. (Calvino 50)²⁹

In the entire novel, Pin fantasises. He dreams of inventing beautiful games, of being welcomed among the partisans as an equal, but above all, he dreams of meeting that one person who will be his true friend and whom he will trust enough to show him his favourite and secret place in the woods: the path to the nests of spiders.

²⁸ To toss the hawk into the great space above the valley and see it opening its wings, rising in flight, circling above his head and then setting off towards a distant point. And him, like in a fairy tale, would follow it, walking over mountains and across plains until an enchanted village in which everyone would be good.

²⁹ If Pin will leave behind a trail of cherry pits Lupo Rosso will find him, wherever he will be! He just has to drop a cherry pit every twenty steps. There: around that wall, Pin will eat a cherry, then another one in front of that old olive press, another one after the medlar tree: and so on until he reaches the path of the spider's nests. But even before he reaches the ditch the cherries are finished: Pin realises that Lupo Rosso will never find him again.

The place where spiders build their nests is one of the settings which contribute to the atmosphere of Calvino's novel. Mountains, hills, woods and fields are part of the Italian Resistance literature's repertoire of backgrounds, and the bond linking the partisans to their regions and landscapes lies in the familiarity of these places in which the Civil War was fought. Calvino expresses this bond in his already mentioned preface to the 1964 edition of the novel:

Avevo un paesaggio. Ma per poterlo rappresentare occorreva che esso diventasse secondario rispetto a qualcos'altro: a delle persone, a delle storie. La Resistenza rappresentò la fusione tra paesaggio e persone. Il romanzo che altrimenti mai sarei riuscito a scrivere, è qui. Lo scenario quotidiano di tutta la mia vita era diventato interamente straordinario e romanzesco: una storia sola si dipanava dai bui archivolti della Città vecchia fin su ai boschi; era l'inseguirsi e il nascondersi d'uomini armati.
(Calvino ix)³⁰

An analysis of the landscapes, which are represented in *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* as places where peace and fear coexist in a carefully balanced mix, can disclose evidence of the traumatising experience of the war. The settings, seen through the eyes of the young protagonist, show their fairy tale nature, but at the same time they always reveal a dark and frightening side. The image of the sea, which at first is a bright and colourful scenery, vast and quiet, becomes a sparkling 'sword' at night (Calvino 44-49). The world and the sky defined 'clean' in one instance (Calvino 87) can still provoke feelings of inexplicable fear in another: '*È un giorno azzurro come gli altri, che fa paura vederlo così azzurro, un giorno con canti d'uccelli, che fa paura sentirli cantare*' (Calvino 117).³¹ Also, the beauty of the fields around the partisans' camp is darkened by the awareness of all the dead bodies buried

³⁰ I had a landscape. But to be able to describe it, it had to become the background of something else: people, stories. The Resistance represented a fusion between landscape and people. The novel I would have never been able to write otherwise is here. The daily scenery of my entire life had become extraordinary and novel-like: one single story developed from the dark arches of the Old City up to the woods; it was the chasing and the hiding of armed men.

³¹ The day, like other days, is so blue that it is almost scary, a day so full of birds singing that it is frightening to hear them.

there: *‘tutti i morti, con gli occhi pieni di terra, i morti nemici e i morti compagni’* (Calvino 123).³² Even Pin’s secret path to the nests of spiders can hardly hide its dark side. On the one hand, it is an oasis of peace where Pin can find refuge every time he runs away from the loneliness and sadness of his life, or from the violence of the world around him. On the other hand, it is a sinister place full of animals which he considers as filthy and incomprehensible as men. Apparently, there is not one single setting in the novel which is not polluted by fear or by violence.

Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno, as Calvino himself explained in the 1964 edition of the novel, was written with the intention of creating a certain distance between himself and the historical reality he had witnessed as partisan. Calvino’s way of dealing with the representation of the Italian Civil War is that of using the tool of focalization to look at it through the eyes of a child. The outcome is a novel which keeps the violence and the traumatic events of the war in the background, while bringing to the foreground the adventures of a protagonist who, because of his young age, lack of experience, and despite the harshness of his life, can still dream of wonderful games and fairy stories.

The literary symptoms of trauma which can be read between the lines of Calvino’s novel are shadowed by Pin’s fantasies. In fact, if Pin can think of inventing beautiful games with a real gun, the reader cannot forget what a gun’s real purpose is; and it is likewise improbable that the reader would feel sorry, as Pin does, to escape a prison where he had been brutally beaten only because, in his craving for affection and for a place to call home, *‘Pin si affeziona presto agli ambienti’* (Calvino 40).³³ Calvino’s protagonist looks at the world with the eyes of a child: what is mysterious or ‘normal’ for Pin who *‘non sa bene la differenza tra quando c’è la guerra e quando non c’è’* (Calvino 90),³⁴ is blatant or abnormal to the reader. It is precisely the difference between these perceptions of reality that makes it possible to recognise symptoms of trauma in the novel. What Pin does not recognise as signals of a traumatic and violent reality, are for the reader clear indicators which stand out between

³² All the dead bodies, with their eyes full of dirt, dead enemies and dead comrades.

³³ Pin gets easily attached to places.

³⁴ Pin does not know the difference between when there is the war and when there is no war.

the lines of the text. What Pin accepts as a normal part of his life, like violence or fear, shine through the pages of the novel as symptoms of a terrible and traumatising reality. Fear, especially, is a sort of read thread which seems to link together all the other literary symptoms of trauma.

Fears and worries dominate men's life, feelings made common to everyone through the device of having them expressed by a German, an enemy. There is fear in the continuous references to dead bodies, weapons, bombs and battles; there is fear in the omnipresent, rather disturbing atmosphere of the various settings; and there is fear in Pin. Pin's adventures in the novel are like a journey through the incomprehensible world of adults and the brutal reality of history. He is always in search of people with whom and places where to be happy, but he is always chased away by fear, rage or violence. Yet, Pin keeps dreaming. Calvino says, through his character Kim that '*la vita degli uomini è piena di miracoli. Abbiamo ancora la testa piena di miracoli e di magie*' (Calvino 107),³⁵ and that is the way to overcome trauma and fears.

The final lines of *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* are considered ambiguous by different critics. Federica Pedriali, for example, considers the closure of the novel no closure at all (Pedriali 67), nor does she read any hopeful message in it: 'the novel would tempt the reader to believe in a positive ending that is simply not there' (Pedriali 66). Undoubtedly, the final image of Calvino's novel cannot be considered a closure. The war does not end, Pin does not find a family or the affection and the childhood he is looking for, and him and Cugino are just walking in the woods towards...what? On the other hand, Giovanni Falaschi sees, in the figure of Cugino, an image of salvation:

*l'uomo-fanciullo apparentemente destinato a fare da tramite fra il mondo di Pin e quello degli adulti, fra favola e realtà. [...] egli è l'eroe che distrugge l'orrore, allontanando il vicino e proiettandolo a distanza. Con Cugino, Calvino avvicina se stesso al mondo degli adulti mantenendo il cuore e la fantasia di Pin. (Falaschi 390)*³⁶

³⁵ Men's life is full of miracles. We still have our heads full of miracles and magic.

³⁶ The adult-child apparently destined to establish a link between the world of Pin and that of the adults, between fairy tale and reality. [...] he is the hero who destroys the horror, distancing what is close and projecting it at a distance. With Cousin, Calvino moves himself close to the world of adults retaining Pin's heart and fantasy.

The secret is to look at history from a distance as Calvino does writing his first and most challenging novel (Calvino xxiv). Only in this light, it is possible to read the end of the novel as a message of hope.

– *Te la ricordi, tu, tua mamma?* – *Chiede Pin.*

– *Si, é morta che io avevo quindici anni,* – *dice il Cugino.*

– *Era brava?*

– *Si, - fa il Cugino, – era brava.*

– *Anche la mia era brava,* – *dice Pin.*

– *C'è pieno di lucciole,* – *dice il Cugino.*

– *A vederle da vicino, le lucciole,* – *dice Pin, – sono bestie schifose anche loro, rossicce.*

– *Si, – dice il Cugino, – ma viste così sono belle.*

*E continuano a camminare, l'omone e il bambino, nella notte, in mezzo alle lucciole, tenendosi per mano. (Calvino 147)*³⁷

Distance can help to put things in the right perspective and collocate them in the right background: fireflies are ugly up close, but beautiful from a distance. In the same way, Calvino seems to hint, the Resistance period was a terrible ordeal, a traumatic experience – there is no denying the trauma, the harshness and the violence of such a historical period – but when considered in the right historical perspective, it was worth it. Then, there is the child's point of view, able to discover wonder and magic even where it is extremely difficult to find them. These are the keys to read *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* as a journey through horrors, but towards hope: distance and a child's heart and fantasy.

This is Calvino's way to handle – and represent – such a terrible and traumatic journey as the Italian Civil War: by keeping it in the background and let the fairy tale come to the front. Only then,

³⁷ “Can you remember your mother?” asks Pin. “Yes, she died when I was fifteen,” says Cousin. “Was she nice?” “Yes,” says Cousin, “she was nice.” “Mine was nice too,” says Pin. “There are a lot of fireflies,” says Cousin. “If you look at them closely, the fireflies,” says Pin, “they’re disgusting creatures too, reddish.” “Yes,” says Cousin, “but if you look at them like this, they are beautiful.” And they keep walking into the night, the big man and the child, holding hands, amid the fireflies.

those fireflies become an image of hope and of a better future. Then, Calvino can write, albeit in different words, what Dante wrote at the end of his terrible journey through the *Inferno*: ‘*e quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle.*’³⁸

³⁸ And thence we came forth to see again the stars.

CHAPTER 3

Cesare Pavese – *La luna e i falò*

Ogni romanzo di Pavese ruota intorno a un tema nascosto, a una cosa non detta che è la vera cosa che egli vuol dire e che si può dire solo tacendola.

– Italo Calvino, “Antologia critica”, *La luna e i falò*.³⁹

This chapter analyses the last novel written by Cesare Pavese, *La luna e i falò*, his most complete and mature text which represents a sort of summa of all the themes Pavese developed in his entire literary career. Amongst these themes, the one relevant for this thesis is that of the Italian Resistance which in this novel, even though not central, constantly lingers over the narration as a terrible and at the same time wonderful force which, while helping to liberate Italy from the Fascist regime, left lasting and haunting scars in the landscape as well as in the memories.

La luna e i falò is set in Santo Stefano Belbo, Piedmont, a little town in the area called Langhe – about 85 kilometres from Turin – where the Pavese family used to spend their holidays and where Cesare Pavese was born. The semi-autobiographical character of the novel, however, is not limited to the geographical area of its setting; the distance between author and characters, in this narrative, is shorter than in other texts in Pavese’s production. One example is the character Nuto, the literary transposition of one of Pavese’s most important friends and possibly his only real confidant, Pinolo Scaglione, who, like the fictional character, was a carpenter living just outside Santo Stefano Belbo (Lajolo 19). Nuto, however, is not the only character linking fiction and reality together: behind the words spoken by other figures in the *dramatis personae* of the novel – like the protagonist Anguilla

³⁹ Each novel written by Pavese revolves around a hidden theme, one unsaid thing which is the true thing he wants to say and that can be said only by concealing it.

or the young boy Cinto – it is sometimes possible to get a glimpse of Pavese himself. Plainly, to erase the distance between real life and fiction would be a mistake. Nevertheless, in *La luna e i falò* there are numerous elements described in the fabula, as well as its general atmosphere, evoking, albeit in their literary transposition, historical happenings and events that left strong impressions on the author's mind, already sensitive, prone to depression and fascinated by the idea of death. It can be useful, therefore, to draw attention to parts and moments of the author's life which could shed light on the way history might have influenced his narrative.

The general ambiance of violence hovering over the novel – evident in certain characters as a reaction to their miserable living conditions – for instance, is a clear consequence of the past Fascist dictatorship and of war, but it also brings to mind specific events witnessed by the author himself, such as that of the 17th of December 1922 in Turin, known as *l'eccidio di Torino* (Turin's massacre). A traumatic experience in Pavese's life which, according to his friend and biographer Davide Lajolo, '*lasciò sui suoi giovani anni un gran velo nero*' (Lajolo 36).⁴⁰ Since the years of his youth, Pavese is described as lonely and almost asocial, a child who preferred books and solitary walks to the company of his own peers. Later, he was an adolescent and an adult whose troubled relationship with women and life in general exacerbated his depression and loneliness. During his years of high school, history was also contributing to the worsening of his mood and to his disquieting attraction towards suicide:

È il tempo in cui la catena dei suicidi si allarga per tutta la città. I suicidi sono lo strascico che porta con sé quel dopoguerra tormentato. Come una pazzia collettiva che spinge uomini e donne a superare le angosce togliendosi la vita col veleno o con un colpo di revolver. Gli spari della guerra si trascinano dietro altri spari, i morti altri morti. (Lajolo 76)⁴¹

⁴⁰ It drew a large black veil on his youth.

⁴¹ It is the time in which the chain of suicides spread all over the city. Suicides are the aftermath of that tormented post-war period. Like a collective madness which drives men and women to overcome their anguishes by killing themselves with poison or a revolver shot. The shots of the war drag more shots, the deaths more deaths.

Among these suicides, was the one of Pavese's school friends, a trauma which marked young Cesare's life; he was only eighteen when, after knowing about this event, he wrote in a letter to another friend, Mario Sturani, of his first failed attempt to kill himself (Lajolo 76).

The years of high school, however, were also years of intellectual development. It was a period of extraordinary importance for Pavese in that he was a pupil of a significant figure of the Italian antifascist scene: Augusto Monti. Monti was the Italian and Latin teacher at the high school *Massimo D'Azeglio*, but his importance in the development of Pavese, and of many other of his students, went beyond his Italian and Latin lessons:

Dalle sue lezioni gli allievi uscivano tutti “odiatori di tiranni”, in condizioni di discernere il giusto dall’ingiusto e di risalire alle cause mentre ne constatavano gli effetti. Monti insegnava soprattutto a prendere di petto la vita, a dire la propria opinione a viso aperto senza accettare né compromessi né viltà. (Lajolo 41)⁴²

Despite Monti's teaching, Pavese kept himself at a distance from the politics of the country; remarkable for their absence in his poetry at that time, in fact, are references to the Italian political situation. Yet, during his years of university, he was called, like everyone else in Italy, to make a choice: Fascism or Resistance. Pavese was apparently not interested in politics, at least not in actively joining the Resistance. He chose to remain at the margins of the Civil War and to use against the regime the only weapon he thought he possessed: culture (Lajolo 79). His later work as translator and essayist, for example, contributed to spreading new and revolutionary ideas especially from American novelists. He explained the importance of those translations himself in an article for the newspaper *L'Unità* of the 3rd of August 1947: ‘*Per molta gente l’incontro con Glad well [sic], Steinbeck,*

⁴² All students came out from his lessons like “tyrants heaters”, able to discern what was just from what was unjust and to understand causes while recognising the effects. Monti taught above all to face life head on, to express openly one's opinion without accepting compromises nor cowardice.

Saroyan, e persino col vecchio Lewis, aperse il primo spiraglio di libertà, il primo sospetto che non tutto della cultura nel mondo finisse con i fasci' (Lajolo 120).⁴³

After his graduation, Pavese was not allowed to work as a teacher in the public school because he refused to become a member of the Fascist party and worked as substitute teacher in many different cities. Later, in 1933, another student of Augusto Monti, Giulio Einaudi, founded a small publishing house, Einaudi, which became the centre of a group of intellectuals, amongst whom Pavese, in open contrast with the regime (Lajolo 133). Because of its manifested anti-fascist policy, the publishing house was under strict Fascist surveillance; many of the intellectuals and the collaborators were arrested, included Pavese, who was condemned to three years of *confino*⁴⁴ in Brancaleone Calabro, Calabria. At the end of his temporary exile in Calabria, he resumed his job at Einaudi and was assigned to the Roman branch of the publishing house. When he finally returned to Turin, it was the beginning of September 1943 and Italy had just surrendered to the Allied Forces. While many of his friends were already hiding in the mountains, ready to fight, Pavese decided to reach and stay with his sister in the little town Serralunga, not too far from Santo Stefano Belbo. He regretted this decision for the rest of his life: *'Pavese s'è dunque trovato solo nel momento più tremendo, tagliato fuori dagli amici cospiratori [...]* In Pavese al coraggio morale non aveva mai corrisposto eguale coraggio fisico. Gli spari, le armi, il sangue lo terrorizzavano' (Lajolo 215).⁴⁵ After the liberation, counting the number of friends fallen in battle or executed, his remorse became even deeper; he reacted by completely immersing himself into political activities, almost as an apology for his previous weakness. It was a period of hard work for Einaudi and for the newspaper *L'Unità*, where he met and befriended the young enthusiastic author and *ex-partigiano* Italo Calvino (Lajolo 230).

⁴³ For many people, getting to know Caldwell, Steinbeck, Saroyan, and even old Lewis, opened the first glimmer of freedom, the first doubt that not everything about culture in the world had to end with Fascism.

⁴⁴ It was a penalty restrictive of personal freedom consisting in the obligation to reside in a secluded and distant place frequently used against dissidents during the Italian Fascist regime.

⁴⁵ Pavese, therefore, found himself alone in the worst period, isolated from his conspirator friends [...] Pavese's physical bravery never equalled his moral courage. Gun shots, weapons and blood terrified him.

A few years later, after a long absence, he started to regularly visit his native town. He was preparing to write his last prose, *La luna e i falò*, an almost autobiographical novel which had to be the crowning and the end of his literary career. He wrote the novel in three months; he said to his old friend Pinolo Scaglione: ‘*Devo scriverlo subito, ho fretta*’ (Lajolo 253).⁴⁶ The reason for such a hurry was probably the decision to end his life, as Lajolo writes: ‘*Per questo ha voluto che l’ultimo suo libro fosse il libro di Santo Stefano. Là è nato, là è tornato a dare l’addio prima di andare a morire*’ (Lajolo 257).⁴⁷ Pavese killed himself taking several sleeping pills in a hotel room in Turin; one handwritten line on the first page of one of his books read: ‘*Perdono a tutti e a tutti chiedo perdono. Va bene? Non fate troppi pettegolezzi*’ (Lajolo 266).⁴⁸

La luna e i falò starts after the end of the Italian Resistance period. The sequence of events constructing the fabula are comprised in a time space of one summer, the time the forty-year-old protagonist, Anguilla, spends, after many years of absence, in the town where he grew up: Santo Stefano Belbo. The place of birth and the parents of the protagonist, as well as his real name, are unknown; he is an orphan adopted by a family of peasants who were the tenant farmers of the farmstead called Gaminella. Adopting a child in those times was somehow convenient; in fact, the orphanage used to pay a monthly allowance to the adoptive families until the children grew up, and by that time the boys were able to work the land with the other adults, while the girls could make themselves useful as servants at home. His adoptive mother dies young while his adoptive father, poorer and poorer, is obliged to abandon the farm and to send Anguilla to work in another farmstead: La Mora. This is a farm of a different social status whose owner, Sor Matteo, belongs to the wealthy bourgeoisie and has an elegant wife and three daughters: Silvia, Irene and Santina, the youngest.

When he is twenty years old, Anguilla moves to Genoa for the obligatory military service where he starts to attend illegal meetings against the Fascist regime, but when most of the participants are

⁴⁶ I must write it immediately, I’m in a hurry.

⁴⁷ That is why he wanted his last book to be the book of Santo Stefano. There he was born, there he went back to say goodbye before going to die.

⁴⁸ I forgive everyone and to everyone I ask for forgiveness. Is it ok? Don’t gossip too much.

arrested, he manages to flee Genoa as a deckhand on a ship which was leaving for America. During his years there, he keeps travelling and working and manages to accumulate a reasonable fortune. After twenty years, he decides to go back to Santo Stefano. His return, however, is not as joyful as he had imagined: the places of his childhood look the same but, in fact, they have been radically changed by history. New families are now living in the farms; that of Valino, for example, where Anguilla meets Cinto, Valino's crippled son. Anguilla spends much time with Cinto, becoming a sort of father figure to the child, especially when Cinto remains the only survivor of his family after Valino, in a moment of mad desperation, kills everyone else, sets fire to the farm and hangs himself.

The real travel through memories, however, is mediated by another character, Nuto – the literary transposition of Pavese's old friend Pinolo Scaglione – a carpenter and an ex-partisan. Together, Anguilla and Nuto visit the farms and the countryside of Anguilla's youth, and of every place they visit, Anguilla wants to know what happened there during the years of his absence. He especially wants to be informed about what happened to the people he used to know. Nuto, almost like a sort of repository of the town's historical memory, explains everything that happened to things and people. There is just one subject he seems reluctant to touch: the destiny occurred to the family who lived in the farm La Mora, where Anguilla used to work. The protagonist asks his guide to tell him about the three girls who lived there, but it is only in the last chapters of the novel that Nuto finally obliges. The oldest girl, Irene, sweet tempered and as elegant as her mother, ended up in a tragic and violent marriage. The second, Silvia, passionate and wild, was used and abandoned by many men until she died after an abortion. The story of Santina, the youngest girl, is the most tragic, the most difficult for Nuto to recall and the story with which the novel closes. Santina became a Fascist's spy and as such was executed by the partisans and her body set on fire.

La luna e i falò is considered by many critics the peak of Pavese's literary maturity. There are, in fact, several articles analysing this novel as the *summa* of Pavese's literary career. As such this novel has been read from many different angles. Critics have studied the novel in the light of the

author's life and read it as the grand finale of Pavese's oeuvre and his most accomplished work. It is the case of Harry Davis who, however, prefers to concentrate on the text rather than the author, and analyses 'the voice structure of the novel – chiefly its lyrical but also its dramatic components' (Davis 82). On the same subject is the article written by Gian Luigi Beccaria who explains that in *La luna e i falò*

l'esame del lessico mette in rilievo l'intento di assimilare gli elementi dialettali all'italiano generale o all'italiano letterario, per far sì che la parola prenda, quand'è possibile, una nuova linfa, un nuovo rinforzo dal basso. [...] Pavese aveva cominciato come poeta, e finisce di nuovo da poeta. (Beccaria 62)⁴⁹

Antonio Viselli, instead, focuses on the theme of the return, drawing comparisons between the protagonist, Anguilla, and famous travellers such as Dante's Ulysses (Canto XXVI), Homer's Odysseus and Joyce's version of Ulysses, Leopold Bloom (Viselli 404). The quest for identity and the idea of memory as knowledge are, on the other hand, the topics of Derek Duncan's article in which he problematises the use of a first-person narrator in the novel, as well as the absence of a name for the protagonist-narrator (Duncan 592). As it appears, Pavese's is a novel which presents many facets to be considered for analysis. However, as in the case of Calvino's novel, there is precious little criticism which studies *La luna e i falò* in relation to trauma – with the exception of Peter Lešnik, whose focus is on the general 'unprocessed memory of the country's [Italy] fascist legacy and of the unresolved civil war' (Lešnik 1) – yet one of the themes of the novel is the Civil War and its consequences, both on land and people.

It can be safely stated, however, that *La luna e i falò* is not a novel which focuses entirely on the Civil War. Rather, it seems that the war and its aftermath are the foundations on which the novel is built. As with Calvino's *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, the events of the Resistance constitute the

⁴⁹ The analysis of the lexicon highlights the intention of absorbing dialect elements into the common or the literary Italian language, so that words can acquire new nourishment, a new strength from the bottom. [...] Pavese started as a poet, and again, he ends as a poet.

background. Differently from Calvino's novel, however, this background in Pavese's work is not the actual reality in which the events of the novel unfold; it is something of the past which the protagonist must discover with his journey through memory. Also in this case, a narratological analysis can help to discover, between the lines of Pavese's text, those hints of trauma which are so easy to imagine to be a natural part of the consequences of war and which might have influenced Pavese's writing.

An interesting starting point for the analysis is the narrator, which, in this novel, is the protagonist himself, Anguilla. According to Norman Friedman, the protagonist-narrator is an effective solution 'if the problem is one of tracing the growth of a personality as it reacts to experience' (Friedman 1181). The case of *La luna e i falò*'s protagonist, however, is slightly different in that Anguilla has already gone through his personal process of growth; the twenty years spent in America have taught him much about life and the world as well as about himself, with the sole exception of his real origins. The usefulness of a character-bound narrator, in this case, seems to rest more in the creation of a certain suspense produced by the unearthing of events and memories about places and people recounted by Nuto, and in the reaction of the protagonist to the information he gradually acquires. Anguilla's growth, in other words, is backwards. It is directed towards the knowledge of the past and the necessity to deal with it more than towards the development of a personality and future manhood.

In addition, apart from being the character-bound narrator, Anguilla is the only focalizer in the novel; the changes caused by time and history are seen, therefore, through his exclusive and subjective eyes and are filtered by his own personal feelings. The distance imposed by this kind of focalization between the reader and all the other characters in the novel enables the author to relate the events of the fabula – those happening in the present but especially those occurred in the past – with a detachment which helps the reader, and possibly the author himself, to fully comprehend such events, their meanings and their effects. As it was the case with Calvino and the strategies he used to look at the Resistance period 'out of the corner of his eyes', Pavese chose to look at it from the safe distance of memory and through the eyes of Anguilla who, even though interested and emotionally attached

to the place he came back to visit, is still an external observer and a recipient for the memories of others.

In fact, Anguilla is the ideal focalizer in the novel because his long absence and his attachment to the places of his youth make him a perfect listener to the memories of events concerning those places. As an orphan, and as someone who has travelled the world for twenty years, Anguilla's interest towards the people with and the land where he grew up is linked to his need of finding an identity or, at least, a place from where to belong. This is the reason why childhood memories are so important to Anguilla, and why every change in the landscape he knew so well is felt as shocking and even depressing:

L'altr'anno, quando tornai la prima volta in paese, venni quasi di nascosto a rivedere i noccioli. La collina di Gaminella, un versante lungo e ininterrotto di vigne e di rive, un pendio così insensibile che alzando la testa non se ne vede la cima – e in cima, chi sa dove, ci sono altre vigne, altri boschi, altri sentieri [...] Ma intorno gli alberi e la terra erano cambiati; la macchia dei noccioli sparita [...] non mi ero aspettato di non trovare più i noccioli. Voleva dire che era tutto finito. (Pavese 5)⁵⁰

Anguilla's feelings of despair at the absence of the trees of his childhood can be seen as a sign of his refusal to accept the inevitable changes time and history – and especially such a historical event as a war – inflict on places and people. Like Calvino's protagonist Pin, who finds refuge from the harshness of his life in childish fantasies and games, Pavese's main character finds comfort in those things which seem to be exactly as they were at the time of his youth. Differently from Pin, however, Anguilla is not a child and he is perfectly aware that his need for an unchanged and unchangeable

⁵⁰ Last year, the first time I came back to the village, I went almost stealthily to look at the hazels again. The hill at Gaminella was a long slope covered as far as the eye could see with vineyards and terraces, a slant so gradual that if you looked up you could not see the top – and on the top, somewhere, there are other vineyards and other woods and paths [...] but round about it the face of the land and the trees were changed; the clump of hazels had disappeared [...] I had not expected not to find the hazels any more. That was the end of everything. (Louise Sinclair's translation; Pavese, *The Moon and the Bonfire* 7)

reality finds less justification in the world of adults, ‘*Potevo spiegare a qualcuno che quel che cercavo era soltanto di vedere qualcosa che avevo già visto?*’ (Pavese 49).⁵¹

Anguilla’s need is at the core of one of the themes explored by Pavese in his literary discourse, that of the myth of the past. Still, it also brings to mind what Judith Herman writes about traumatic events and their power to overwhelm the ordinary human adaptation to life (Herman 33). The changes Anguilla discovers in his journey, even though not necessarily macroscopic, are powerful enough to have altered – for the worst – both life and behaviour of the people in Santo Stefano. It must be pointed out that Anguilla is not the traumatised actor of the novel. The usefulness of his feelings to the economy of the narrative lies in their contribution to the idea that the changes he discovers in his journey through memories are not altogether positive and, therefore, in the creation of the general melancholic atmosphere of the novel.

Anguilla’s desire to find the places of his childhood unchanged even after twenty years of absence also links with the theme of the attachment to the land, which is one of the common themes in the Italian Resistance Literature. All the authors who wrote Resistance novels, in fact, set their narratives in precise and recognisable Italian regions and landscapes which, as Calvino writes in his preface to *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, are jealously cherished (Calvino ix). The importance of places in the Resistance novels, however, does not end with simple localism; such an attachment can reveal a deeper meaning. As Michelle Balaev writes about the representation of trauma in novels, the place

becomes central [...] because the physical place of suffering and remembrance of loss becomes an identifiable source for the author to explicate the multiple meanings of the event. The physical landscape is a referent for the individual’s sense of self or identity, and writers often centralize the natural world when the protagonist confronts a traumatic memory in order to demonstrate the internal struggle of the self and the various workings

⁵¹ Could I explain to anyone that what I sought was only to see something I had seen before?

of the mind as the individual attempts to understand, incorporate, and explain the traumatic event. (Balaev 161)

Pavese's novel is no exception. Moreover, Anguilla's attachment to the region underlines not only the protagonist's issue with identity and belonging, but due to Anguilla's descriptions of the landscapes, it is also preserved that 'primacy of place in the representations of trauma [which] anchors the individual experience within a larger cultural context, and, in fact, organizes the memory and meaning of trauma' (Balaev 150). Anguilla's return to the places of his youth, therefore, is more than a search for identity, it is also – and above all – a journey through the historical memory of the place and an exploration of the scars history has inflicted on it.

It goes without saying that a tragic history like the Civil War must have left scars not only on the landscape but especially on the people who lived through it. During his visit to Santo Stefano, Anguilla meets some of the characters populating the novel whose life and behaviour are clearly affected by the war and its aftermaths. One example is Valino, the new tenant of the farmstead Gaminella. He is a poor man – the owner of the farm takes half of what Valino produces according to the agreement of sharecropping – who vents his frustration on his family:

in quella casa succedevano cose nere: Nuto mi disse che dalla piana del Belbo si sentivano le donne urlare quando il Valino si toglieva la cinghia e le frustava come bestie, e frustava anche Cinto – non era il vino, non ne avevano tanto, era la miseria, la rabbia di quella vita senza sfogo. (Pavese 50)⁵²

Valino's brutality is part of the general atmosphere of violence, fear and misery caused by the war hanging over the narrative. Fear is palpable in the words of Nuto about the *partigiani*:

I partigiani sono stati dappertutto, - disse. – Gli hanno dato la caccia come alle bestie. Ne sono morti dappertutto, un giorno sentivi sparare sul ponte, il giorno dopo erano di là da

⁵² There were terrible goings on in that house. Nuto told me you could hear the women shrieking from the valley of the Belbo when Valino took off his belt and beat them like beasts, and he thrashed Cinto too – it wasn't the wine, they didn't have as much as that, it was the utter misery and his rage at his life which never gave him a break.

Bormida. E mai che chiudessero un occhio tranquilli, che una tana fosse sicura...Dappertutto le spie... (Pavese 67)⁵³

Likewise, violence shines through Valino's indifference towards it:

allora parlammo della guerra e dei morti. [...] Chi sa quanti, dissi, ce n'erano ancora sepolti nei boschi.

Il Valino mi guardò con la faccia scura – gli occhi torbidi, duri. – Ce n'è, – disse, – ce n'è. Basta aver tempo di cercarli. – Non mise disgusto nella voce, né pietà. Sembrava parlasse di andare a funghi, o a fascine. (Pavese 34)⁵⁴

The same sort of indifference is also shared by Valino's son Cinto who, like Pin in Calvino's novel, seems to accept the violence in his life as something normal. He does not complain about being cursed at by his aunt or beaten up by his father (Pavese 79), nor is he particularly moved by the sight of death: '*Nella riva l'altr'anno c'era un morto, - disse Cinto. Mi fermai, chiesi che morto. – Un tedesco, – mi disse. – Che l'avevano sepolto i partigiani in Gaminella. Era tutto scorticato...*' (Pavese 32).⁵⁵

It is through the focalization of the protagonist-narrator, Anguilla, that the reader can clearly see the abnormality of such normalization of violence. Anguilla, who returns to the places of his infancy to find out that everything is different and that life, which was already difficult when he was a child, is now even harder and haunted by the traumatising events of the war.

Anguilla's return to Santo Stefano is also the fundamental link between the different time levels structuring the novel. In *La luna e i falò*, Anguilla moves through space, but also through time. When he goes to visit a place, he describes its current appearance but also the memories of his own past as

⁵³ "The partisans were everywhere," he said. "They hunted them down like wild beasts. They died everywhere. One day I would hear shots at the bridge and the next day they were beyond the Bormida. And they never closed an eye in peace and no hide-out was safe...there were spies everywhere..."

⁵⁴ Then we spoke about the war and those who had died. [...] "Who knows," I said, "how many of them are still buried in the woods?" Valino looked at me, his face dark, his eyes clouded and hard. "There are some there," he said, "there are some. All you need is the time to look for them." There was no disgust in his voice or pity. It was as if he were speaking about going to look for mushrooms or firewood.

⁵⁵ "There was a dead man in the gully last year," said Cinto. I stopped and asked what dead man. "A German," he said, "that the partisans had buried in Gaminella. All the skin had come off."

well as the memories of the time interval between his past and the present – the time he spent in America. Therefore, in the novel, it is possible to recognise four different time levels: the subjective memory of Anguilla's past, the likewise subjective time he spent in America, and the objective time levels of present and history. Despite Pavese's ability at maintaining these time levels united and flowing in his narrative, it is the opinion of the critic Geno Pampaloni that, especially in the second part of the book – starting from chapter xix – the style of the novel, which focuses more on the recovery of memories, seems fragmented.⁵⁶ In this regard, it is useful to point out what Mieke Bal writes in her book *Narratology*:

Memory is an act of “vision” of the past, but as an act, it is situated in the present of the memory. It is often a narrative act: loose elements come to cohere into a story, so that they can be remembered and eventually told. But as is well known, memories are unreliable – in relation to the fabula – and when put into words, they are rhetorically overworked so that they can connect to an audience [...] Hence, the story the person remembers is not identical to the one she experienced. This discrepancy becomes dramatic and indeed incapacitating in the case of trauma. Traumatic events disrupt the capacity to comprehend and experience them at the time of their occurrence. As a result, the traumatized person cannot remember them; instead, they recur in bits and pieces. (Bal 145)

Jumps between bits of present and pieces of memories, in fact, characterise the final part of Pavese's novel, in which the most traumatising memories of the Civil War period are remembered by Nuto, the character who more than any other shows symptoms of trauma. He is the second most important character in the novel and Anguilla's guide in his journey through memories and discoveries. With Nuto's help, Anguilla comes to know the events which have caused those changes in the land and people he mourns so much. Nuto's vision of reality and his feelings about Anguilla's wish of immutability underline the difference between the two characters: '*Nuto diceva che avevo*

⁵⁶ Note in Pavese, Cesare. *La luna e i falò*. Einaudi, 1996. p. 94.

torto, che dovevo ribellarmi che su quelle colline si facesse ancora una vita bestiale, inumana, che la guerra non fosse servita a niente, che tutto fosse come prima, salvo i morti' (Pavese 49).⁵⁷ Of course, the difference is based on the different ways the two friends lived through the period of the Italian Civil War: Nuto as an eyewitness, Anguilla as the listener to Nuto's account. Unlike Anguilla, in fact, Nuto experienced the Resistance period in the first person even though it is never clearly stated that he took part in the actual fight: *'si è fatto tutti qualcosa. Troppo poco...ma c'era pericolo che una spia mandasse a bruciarti la casa'* (Pavese 23),⁵⁸ he answers when Anguilla asks him if he was in the woods with the other partisans. It is clear, however, that he contributed to the Resistance, at the very least by giving shelter and help to injured fighters and by working as a partisan relay but, above all, he is the one who witnessed all the events of the period and can relate them to Anguilla.

Cathy Caruth writes that 'the history of trauma, in its inherent belatedness, can only take place through the listening of another' (Caruth 11); in this case, Nuto appears to be not only the repository of the historical memory of Santo Stefano, but also the traumatised actor who, through Anguilla as an ideal listener, can give shape to the history of trauma of the Italian Resistance. Nuto is the character in the novel who clearly shows how traumatising the Civil War had been. At the same time, his behaviour and his words reveal a balanced character driven by a strong sense of justice: *'Perchè ci dev'essere chi non ha nome né casa? Non siamo tutti uomini?'* (Pavese 11).⁵⁹ Likewise, his vision of the war displays a deep sense of purpose directed towards what he thinks is right:

Nuto che aveva visto tanti paesi e sapeva le miserie di tutti qui intorno, Nuto non avrebbe mai chiesto se quella guerra era servita a qualcosa. Bisognava farla, era stato un destino

⁵⁷ Nuto told me I was wrong and that I shouldn't put up with it, for on these hillsides people still live like beasts and not like human beings and the war hadn't done any good and everything was just like it had been before, except for the dead.

⁵⁸ "Everyone did something – it wasn't enough, but there was always the danger that a spy would send them to burn down your house."

⁵⁹ Why should there be people who have no name or home? Aren't we all human beings?

*così. Nuto l'ha molto quest'idea che una cosa che deve succedere interessa a tutti quanti, che il mondo è mal fatto e bisogna rifarlo. (Pavese 35)*⁶⁰

Notwithstanding Nuto's opinion on the rightfulness of the fight against the Fascist regime, the scars that war left on him are evident. Since the beginning of the novel, it is clear that there are some subjects the narration of which Nuto prefers to procrastinate: *'Un giorno o l'altro ti racconto delle cose di qui [...] Sentivo che faceva fatica. [...] Aspettai che si facesse coraggio e si levasse quel peso. Ho sempre visto che la gente, a lasciarle tempo, vuota il sacco'* (Pavese 21).⁶¹ Apart from enhancing suspense in the narrative by hinting at stories to be told, Anguilla's words, and especially the use of such terms as *fatica* (difficulty), *coraggio* (courage) and *peso* (burden), reflect a clear image of someone who is haunted by ghosts which are hard to face. In Trauma Studies the idea of trauma as 'unspeakable' is a much debated and criticised discourse. As James Berger writes:

A theory of trauma will intersect with other critical vocabularies which problematize representation and attempt to define its limits [...] Trauma theory is another such discourse of the unrepresentable, of the event or object that destabilizes language and demands a vocabulary and syntax in some sense incommensurable with what went before. (Berger 573)

In a work of fiction, however, references to someone's difficulty at externalising experiences can serve the purpose to convey the idea of how deeply traumatising certain events can be: *'chi ha rischiato la pelle davvero, non ha voglia di parlarne'* (Pavese 60),⁶² says Nuto speaking about the partisans.

⁶⁰ Nuto who had seen so many villages and knew the poverty of all these round about, Nuto would never have asked what use the war had been. We had to fight it, that was our fate. Nuto has got this idea on the brain, that something which has got to happen is everybody's business, and the world is a botched job and needs remaking.

⁶¹ Some day I'll tell you about what happened here [...] I could see he spoke with difficulty. [...] I waited for him to pluck up his courage and get rid of what was on his mind. I've always found that people tell you everything, if you give them time.

⁶² The people who have really risked their skins don't want to talk about it.

Nuto's worst traumatising experience – the execution of Santina – is only explained at the end of the novel. Already before this explanation, however, it is possible to recognise, in Nuto's words and behaviour, signs anticipating a tragic conclusion. When Cinto, in an obvious state of shock, runs to Anguilla and Nuto for help after his father burned the farm and committed suicide, Nuto behaves quite brutally towards the child:

Nuto lo prese per le spalle e lo alzò su come un capretto.

– Ha ammazzato Rosina e la nonna?

Cinto tremava e non poteva parlare.

– Le ha ammazzate? – e lo scrollò.

– Lascialo stare, - dissi a Nuto, - è mezzo morto.[...]

Nuto senza parlare, diede uno strattone al braccio di Cinto, che incespìcò. (Pavese 131)⁶³

In the whole novel, Nuto is depicted as a kind and gentle man. However, his reaction to the sight of the fire and especially to the smell of the burning bodies inside the farm are explanation enough for his unrestrained behaviour: '*Nuto, fermo al livello dell'aia, storse la faccia e si portò i pugni sulle tempie. Quest'odore, - borbottò, - quest'odore*' (Pavese 132).⁶⁴ Nuto's actions show all the symptoms of a victim of trauma; a trauma which finds its explanation only at the end of the novel, when he finally reports his memory of Santina's execution to Anguilla: '*io so come l'hanno ammazzata. C'ero anch'io*' (Pavese 155).⁶⁵

⁶³ Nuto took him by the shoulders and lifted him up the way you lift a young goat. "Has he killed Rosina and your grandmother?" Cinto trembled and couldn't answer. "Has he killed them?" and Nuto shook him. "Let him alone," I said to Nuto. "He's half-dead". [...] Without saying a word, Nuto jerked Cinto's arm and the boy stumbled.

⁶⁴ Nuto halted at the level of the threshing-floor and made a grimace, raising his clenched hands to his forehead. "That smell", he muttered. "That smell".

⁶⁵ I know how they killed Santa, I was there myself.

The execution of Santina and the fire which burned her body are the last images of the novel, images of violence which fully justify Nuto's trauma and his reaction to the smell of the burning bodies of Cinto's aunt and grandmother in the fire of Gamilella:

La condussero fuori. Lei sulla porta si voltò, mi guardò e fece una smorfia come i bambini...Ma fuori cercò di scappare. Sentimmo un urlo, sentimmo correre, e una scarica di mitra che non finiva più. [...]

Una donna come lei non si poteva coprirla di terra e lasciarla così. Faceva ancora gola a troppi. Ci pensò Baracca. Fece tagliare tanto sarmento nella vigna e la coprimmo fin che bastò. Poi ci versammo la benzina e demmo fuoco. A mezzogiorno era tutta cenere. L'altr'anno c'era ancora il segno, come il letto di un falò. (Pavese 161)⁶⁶

A well-known characteristic of Pavese's writing is his use of symbolism; symbol meant as an image deeply rooted in reality and endowed with enough objectivity to restrain the writer's authority (Premuda 226). Symbols in *La luna e i falò*, however, can also help to find literary symptoms of trauma in the novel and possibly contribute to a better understanding of how and in what measure such a historical period as the Italian Resistance might have influenced the author's narrative. One example is the image of Santina at the time of her execution. Nuto describes her as '*vestita di bianco*' (Pavese 161),⁶⁷ almost like a victim ready for a sacrifice. Even her name, *Santa*, the Italian word for saint, contributes to the creation of an image which, in its whole, is the iconic symbol of martyrdom. Despite her faults and her being a spy, Santa is the embodiment of one of the too many victims of a violent and traumatising history.

⁶⁶ They took her outside. She turned round at the door and looked at me and made a face just like a child. But, once outside, she tried to run away. We heard a cry and someone running and a burst of tommy-gun fire which seemed endless. [...] You can't cover a woman like her with earth and leave her like that. There were still too many men who wanted her. Baracca saw to that. He made us cut a lot of twigs in the vineyard and we piled them on top of her until we had enough. Then we poured petrol on the pile and set fire to it. By midday, everything was burnt to ashes. Last year the mark was still there, like the bed of a bonfire.

⁶⁷ She was dressed in white.

The strongest symbolic images in Pavese's novel, however, are those related to the natural world and the peasant's tradition: the moon and the bonfires. The moon is the image of tranquillity, the guide of the regular and indisputable rhythms of nature, and especially – following the poetic tradition of the 18th century Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi – the silent witness of human affairs and of the unfolding of history. It is the bonfire, however, that in the novel assumes an alternative and more disquieting image. The bonfire is seen, in the peasant's tradition, as the naturalistic fire, harmonious and propitiatory; to light a bonfire next to a cultivated land was considered healthy for the land, 'it awakens the earth', Nuto explains to Anguilla (Pavese 46). There are, however, other images of fire in the novel which recall the idea of a stake rather than that of the bonfire; images, therefore, of a violence which is typically human. One is the fire burning Valino's farm, Gaminella, the other is the fire burning Santina's body. No longer bonfires, but stakes, the transformation of which is caused by the horrors and the violence of history.

La luna e i falò, the summa of Pavese's literary career, is a complex novel which holds many different cores of meaning and themes. As the quote at the beginning of this chapter states, however, a characteristic of Pavese's writing is to conceal meanings and themes within his novels which are other from the explicit ones. One of these, shining through the lines in *La luna e i falò*, is the Italian Resistance period and the trauma it left behind. The worst consequences of war, in fact, are all in this book: the economic misery, the ignorance, and especially the violence hovering nearly over every chapter of the novel. It is a kind of violence which can almost be seen as a way of life, accepted with resignation by those who no longer have the willingness, the strength or the awareness to fight it, or even just to recognise it as something unnatural. Acceptance of and endurance to violence, as is the case with most of the characters in Calvino's novel, are hints at the brutality of the world depicted in the novel. Violence is evident even in the natural setting of the story; the charming landscapes described by Anguilla, in fact, are often disturbed by the resurfacing of dead bodies which, like ghosts, come back to remind people of the terrible events happened on those beautiful hills.

Of these terrible events, the most important witness in the novel is Nuto, the repository of memories and of trauma. It is the trauma caused by the violent death of Santina which makes Nuto unable to behold the sight of the fire burning the Gaminella farm and the smell of it. The same trauma which affects his willingness to tell Anguilla about the destiny of the family of La Mora, and which, especially, makes him reluctant to speak about Santina's death. As Riccardo Antonangeli writes in fact, '*il discorso della memoria cui danno vita Nuto e Anguilla è continuamente minacciato dal silenzio che il trauma della morte di Santina continua a imporre a chi ne è stato testimone*' (Antonangeli).⁶⁸

On the other hand, Anguilla's traumas – if there are any – are not evident in the narration and are not connected to the Civil War which tore Santo Stefano and its inhabitants apart. Nevertheless, something of the author's own regrets can be read in Anguilla's story: in his escape to America – like Pavese's escape to his sister when the Resistance started – as well as in his eagerly asking Nuto what happened to the land of his youth, like Pavese did going back to Santo Stefano to speak with his own 'Nuto', Pinolo Scaglione, before writing his last novel. Like Pavese himself, Anguilla is an external observer of history and, as such, he is the ideal literary tool for Pavese to use in order to provide the distance which is necessary to go through and to deal with the representation of a traumatic event like the Civil War must have been, even for someone like Cesare Pavese, who did not actively participate in it.

The gap between fiction and reality, in *La luna e i falò*, is drastically reduced. The memories depicted in the novel and those which are part of the real historical memory of the country might be slightly different, but the scars of the war are there, deep and traumatising, both in fiction and reality. Anguilla's journey through memories moves along, in parallel, with Pavese's one, both accompanied by their own 'Nuto', both following their own guide, their own Virgil in a land ravaged by war.

⁶⁸ The discourse of memory started by Nuto and Anguilla is continually threatened by the silence that the trauma of Santina's death continues to impose on who has witnessed it.

CHAPTER 4

Beppe Fenoglio - *Una questione privata*

Il libro che la nostra generazione voleva fare, adesso c'è, e il nostro lavoro ha un coronamento e un senso, e solo ora, grazie a Fenoglio, possiamo dire che una stagione è compiuta, solo ora siamo certi che è veramente esistita: la stagione che va dal Sentiero dei nidi di ragno a Una questione privata.

– Italo Calvino, “Prefazione”, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*.⁶⁹

The focus of this chapter is on *Una questione privata*, the last novel written by Beppe Fenoglio and published a few months after his premature death. In this novel, Fenoglio gives what is considered the best account of the Italian Resistance period by setting the story of a desperate love in the middle of the *guerriglia partigiana*. In the novel, the protagonist's frantic search for the truth about the girl he loves interweaves with the harshness of the partisans' life and the crude narration of the war which shows, between the lines, those literary symptoms of trauma such a historical period inevitably carries.

Like his friend Italo Calvino, Fenoglio fought as a partisan, participated in battles and experienced imprisonment; unlike Calvino, however, after the liberation he did not immediately find a clear and stable place within the Italian literary scene, nor was he ever able to set aside the theme of the Resistance and turn his interests towards different subjects. His entire literary production – short stories as well as novels – is about the Italian Resistance. According to Cathy Caruth, ‘since the testimony cannot be simply relayed, repeated, or reported by another without thereby losing its function as a testimony, the burden of the witness – in spite of his or her alignment with other

⁶⁹ The book our generation wanted to write, is now here, and our work has a coronation and a meaning, and only now, thanks to Fenoglio, we can say that a season is completed, only now we can be sure that it has really existed: the period going from the *Sentiero dei nidi di ragno* to *Una questione privata*.

witnesses – is a radically unique, noninterchangeable, and solitary burden’ (Caruth 15). Fenoglio’s wish of ‘*esaurire la materia partigiana una volta per tutte, affrancandosi dal proprio dovere di testimone*’ (Pedullà ix)⁷⁰ seems to indicate how heavily the burden of witnessing and the responsibility to tell the traumatising story of the Italian Civil War was felt by the Piedmontese author.

At the end of the war, Fenoglio did not engage in political activities as Italo Calvino and Cesare Pavese did; on the contrary, his return to civilian life was quite difficult. In his article *Le scelte di Fenoglio*, Luca Bufano writes about the ‘*forte disagio vissuto da Fenoglio durante il suo difficile reinserimento nella vita civile: una sorta di sindrome del reduce*’ (Bufano xiii)⁷¹ which brought him to abandon his university studies and isolate himself. He was completely uninvolved and detached from everything and everyone around him; the only activity he was committed to was writing (Pedullà liii). Fenoglio’s literary career was entirely devoted to writing a novel which would recreate on the page the terrible and crucial events he had been part of during the Italian Civil War (Pedullà ix). His wish of ‘being done’ with the Resistance, however, was never fulfilled, possibly because of his early death, but also because, as Gabriele Pedullà writes:

ogni volta che Fenoglio crede di avere per le mani la storia definitiva, la matrice ideale di tutte le avventure partigiane con cui finalmente chiudere questo capitolo della sua carriera letteraria, gliene si presenta un’altra, ancora più irrinunciabile di tutte quelle che ha scritto sino a questo momento, e pretende di essere raccontata. (Pedullà x)⁷²

It was only with his last work, even though he did not see it published, that he finally reached his goal. *Una questione privata* is a novel which moves away from the classical style of partisan memoirs; it is a novel which follows the Aristotelian principles according to which the events in the story take over the protagonist (Pedullà xiii). In the same way, the Resistance is only represented in function of

⁷⁰ Be done with the partisan’s theme once and for all, liberating himself from his duty as witness.

⁷¹ The strong feeling of malaise felt by Fenoglio during his difficult re-integration in a civilian life: a sort of survivor syndrome.

⁷² Every time Fenoglio thinks he has the final story in his hands, the ideal matrix of all partisan’s adventures with which this chapter of his literary career can finally end, he finds another one, more essential than all the stories he has written until now, and it demands to be told.

the novel's plot. By adopting such a narrative, Fenoglio managed, at least apparently, to lift the burden of history and look at the Resistance, like Calvino did, *di scorcio* (in passing), from the corner of his eye (Pedullà xv). Nevertheless, perhaps because of the sort of obligation felt by the author to give testimony of the historical events he witnessed, *Una questione privata* remains a novel in which the Italian Resistance is a prominent theme. Fenoglio himself, in a letter to the editor Livio Garzanti, wrote: '*mi saltò in mente una nuova storia, individuale, un intreccio romantico, non già sullo sfondo della guerra civile in Italia, ma nel fitto di detta guerra.*'⁷³

Una questione privata opens *in medias res* with the protagonist, Milton, looking at a solitary villa on the top of a hill. The period is that of the last months of the Second World War and the peak of the Italian Civil War; Milton and his comrade Ivan – both *partigiani* – are patrolling the little town of Alba, Piedmont. The villa Milton is looking at is the place where Fulvia, the girl he is in love with, moved to from Turin at the beginning of the Second World War and that she left when the Resistance period started. While his comrade Ivan is becoming more and more nervous for fear of being caught by a Fascist patrol, Milton keeps staring at the villa, lost in memories. He remembers how he was introduced to Fulvia by their common friend Giorgio Clerici and how he immediately fell in love with her, how he started writing letters and translating his and her favourite English authors for her, but never had the courage to openly declare his feelings.

A sudden noise of footsteps brings him back to the present. It is the caretaker of the house, an old lady who, in addition to her housekeeper's duties, received instructions from Fulvia's parents to keep an eye on the girl in their absence. During his conversation with her, Milton discovers that the previous summer, when he had already left for the mandatory military service, Fulvia and Giorgio spent much time together. The keeper hints at the secrecy of some of their meetings and, even though not sure about their level of intimacy, she gives voice to her worries about these rendezvous. The

⁷³ A new story dawned on me, individual, a romantic plot, not *on the background* of the Italian Civil War, but *in the middle* of it. (Letter to Garzanti, March 8, 1960)

suspicious of the old lady throw Milton in a state of jealousy and desperation which he can only hope to relieve by discovering the truth about Fulvia and Giorgio, and Giorgio is the only one who can tell him what really happened between Fulvia and himself.

It is the beginning of Milton's frantic search for Giorgio, who is also a partisan but not in Milton's brigade, a solitary journey through the merciless nature of the hills in the area of Langhe. Milton's search, however, does not end when he reaches the place where Giorgio's comrades are quartering; there, he discovers that his friend has been captured by a group of Fascists. Milton, torn between friendship and his need to know what happened between Giorgio and the girl he loves, realises that the only way to save his friend's life, and free himself from his own obsessive jealousy, is to arrange a prisoner's exchange with the Fascists. Milton, however, moving from one camp to another, learns that the partisans have no prisoners to trade. In his desperation, he decides that his only hope is to capture someone himself to exchange for his friend. He gets his chance when an old farmer tells him about a Fascist sergeant, Alarico Rozzoni, who visits a woman just outside the village of Canelli every day. Milton succeeds in his ambush, but when the prisoner tries to escape, he is forced to kill him. The last hope to save Giorgio and to know the truth about his love dies with the death of the sergeant.

Obsessed by his thoughts about Fulvia, Milton goes back to the villa with the intention of interrogating the housekeeper more in depth. Instead, he finds himself in the middle of a Fascist thorough search of the area. The last pages of the novel depict Milton's desperate run to escape certain death which ends when he enters a forest so dense that it seems to close around him like walls. The novel closes with the image of Milton collapsing on the ground about one meter into the forest. Dead? Safe? The novel does not say.

The end of the novel and the destiny of the protagonist have been topics of debate since the time of its publication. Two opposite opinions, for example, are expressed by Gabriele Pedullà in *La strada più lunga: sulle tracce di Beppe Fenoglio*, and Laura Paolino in her article *Per Milton redivivo*. The

first interprets the last lines of the novel as the unmistakable death of the protagonist (Pedullà 146), while the other prefers to read, between the lines, signs of salvation (Paolino 319). A different opinion is expressed, instead, by Orietta Innocenti who, even though inclined in favour of Paolino's point of view, is convinced that the primary focus of the novel is not on Milton's death or survival but on the idea and the values of the Resistance: '*quello che la narrazione ci consegna sul limitare ultimo del romanzo non è, insomma, un "morto vivente", ma di nuovo un partigiano*' (Innocenti 443).⁷⁴

The representation of the Italian Resistance is another discourse on which critics have focused with contrasting opinions. If, especially at the time of the publication of the book, many critics were lamenting a tendency in Fenoglio's novel to turn the historical memory of the Resistance into fiction (Pedullà xxix), today the majority of critics agree with Giovanni Pietro Vitali who says that '*i partigiani descritti nelle sue [Fenoglio's] opere si allontanano del mito avvicinandosi alla realtà*' (Vitali 100).⁷⁵ Other aspects of the novel which have always attracted much attention are its genesis and the style in which it is written. Scholars such as Maria Corti and Orsetta Innocenti, in their articles – respectively *Trittico per Fenoglio* and *Per l'edizione dei "Frammenti di romanzo" di Beppe Fenoglio* – have focused on the reconstruction of the chronology of the author's oeuvre and the reordering of the different versions of *Una questione privata* which were found after his death. On Fenoglio style of writing is dedicated, instead, Giovanni Bàrberi Squarotti's "*Ci sarà sempre un racconto che vorrò fare ancora*". *Storia, forme e significati della narrativa di Beppe Fenoglio*, in which he points out the high degree of experimentation Fenoglio used in his literary career and in his last novel (Bàrberi Squarotti 585).

Other aspects of the novel which aroused the interest of many critics are the depiction of nature and Fenoglio's attachment to the geographic region in which the novel is set, the area of Langhe. It is the case of Anna Cellinese, who writes: '*La costante presenza delle Langhe nella narrativa e nella*

⁷⁴ What the narrative gives us back at the end of the novel, therefore, is not a 'living dead', but once again a partisan

⁷⁵ The partisans depicted in his [Fenoglio's] works move away from the myth drawing nearer to reality.

vita di Beppe Fenoglio non rappresenta un fondale scenografico alle vicende autobiografiche e letterarie, ma ne è parte integrante' (Cellinese 41).⁷⁶ Other themes such as death, love and war are analysed in the essay *Beppe Fenoglio e la morte imminente* written by Alberto Casadei.

Despite the numerous studies on Fenoglio's *Una questione privata*, however, the novel does not appear to have been analysed under the lens of Trauma Studies. There are, of course, references to the terrible experience of war –Pietro Frassica, in his article *Aspetti della narrativa italiana postbellica*, draws a comparison between the works of Fenoglio and Primo Levi (Frassica 369) – but an analysis which considers trauma as a theme is still missing. Yet, *Una questione privata* is a novel where literary symptoms of trauma can be found in the general atmosphere, in the language as well as in the account of some events connected to the Resistance period. A narratological analysis of the novel can help unearthing them.

Starting an analysis with the novel's narrator is a sensible choice. In this novel, however, the narrator does not show any particularity; in fact, Fenoglio opted for a classical external narrator. Surely, as Mieke Bal writes 'the identity of the narrator, the degree to which and the manner in which that identity is indicated in the text, and the choices that are implied lend the text its specific character' (Bal 12), but in the case of *Una questione privata* it is the focalization which shows a more precise authorial intent. As it is the case with Calvino's novel, the focalization in *Una questione privata* remains almost exclusively with the protagonist. Only in two cases Milton is not the focalizer: in the third chapter, where the focalization shifts to Milton's comrade Ivan, and in the twelve chapter, in which the focalizer is a Fascist lieutenant. As for this twelfth chapter of the novel, since its importance is not limited to the focalization, it will be analysed more in depth later. The first change of focalization, instead, makes clear its usefulness in that it is the way the author chose to let the reader get acquainted with his main character and with his state of mind after visiting Fulvia's old house.

⁷⁶ The constant presence of the *Langhe* in Beppe Fenoglio's narrative and life does not represent a scenographic backdrop for his autobiographic and literary events, on the contrary, it is an integral part of them.

Once they reach the camp, Ivan has time to think about the ‘*stranissimo, pazzesco comportamento di Milton*’;⁷⁷ his reflections reveal how upset his comrade was: ‘*Ma che gli è preso? È uscito come un razzo da quella villa e come un razzo ha fatto tutta la strada. [...] Ma che gli è preso? Io dico che è impazzito o quasi. Eppure è sempre stato un ragazzo a posto, più che a posto, persino freddo*’ (Fenoglio 20).⁷⁸ It has already been noticed that *Una questione privata* is structured with an almost cinematographic approach – a succession of shoots alternating between few long shoots and many close ups on Milton, his sufferings and his soliloquies (Marchese 105). The shift of focalization on a character other than the protagonist has precisely the function of providing one of those long shoots which help the reader to look at the scene from a distance and from a different point of view offering, precisely by virtue of a detachment from Milton’s thoughts and feelings, a clearer understanding of the events. Moreover – and more closely related to the subject of this thesis – the point of view of a character not distracted, like Milton, by desperation and obsession is useful to transmit the idea of what the partisans’ life was like:

*Uno direbbe subito che c’entra una ragazza [...] Sí, è proprio il tempo e il posto di perder la testa per una ragazza. Un partigiano serio come Milton. Le ragazze! Oggi! [...] Comunque è sicuro che era una cosa della vita di prima, e tornare su queste cose fa più male che bene. Con la vita e il mestiere che facciamo si va in crisi come niente. Le cose di prima a dopo, a dopo! (Fenoglio 21)*⁷⁹

Fenoglio’s choice of changing the focalization in his novel only twice, of course, is not casual. In the first shift, the disclosure of Ivan’s thoughts is useful to show, not only Milton’s, but the general state of mind of the partisans and the enormous difference between their life before the Civil War and

⁷⁷ Milton’s weird, reckless behaviour.

⁷⁸ What happened to him? He came out of that villa like a missile and like a missile he walked all the way. [...] What happened to him? I think he went mad or almost so. Yet, he has always been a steady boy, more than steady, even distant.

⁷⁹ One would immediately say that it has to do with a girl [...] Right, it is really the place and the time to lose the head for a girl. A serious partisan like Milton. Girls! Nowadays! [...] However, it is sure that it was something about his previous life, and go back and think about those things does more harm than good. With the life and the job we have, we go into crisis really easily. Things of before are for later, later!

their life during it. The Resistance is seen like the watershed between two periods, that of ‘normality’ and that of a life in which uncertainty and constant danger make it foolish, even dangerous, to dwell upon something as mundane as love and feelings. It is one of the first hints to the dramatic historical period the partisans lived through, which contributes to creating the general atmosphere of the novel. In addition, the external point of view and the broader vision provided by Ivan as a focalizer point out Milton’s isolation and loneliness; conditions which are further characteristics of the novel’s atmosphere and of Milton’s state of mind: *‘il suo occhio fu magnetizzato da un grande albero solitario [...] la solitudine di quell’albero sarà uno scherzo in confronto alla mia’* (Fenoglio 25).⁸⁰

Loneliness, fear and danger can be recognised throughout the entire novel: terms such as *lugubre* (gloomy), *pericoloso* (dangerous) and *sinistro* (evil), as well as a general feeling of foreboding can be found in each and every chapter. Even inanimate objects seem to spring to life to become threatening: it is the case, for example, of Fulvia’s old house where Milton enters to enhance his own memories. *‘Non le sembra di entrare in una tomba?’* the old housekeeper asks Milton leading the way inside the house where Milton himself notices how *‘il parquet scricchiolava anormalmente, con un crepitio astioso, maligno’* (Fenoglio 11).⁸¹ Similar funereal images are also used in the description of villages and landscapes: *‘La linea di case prospicienti il torrente pareva la facciata di un cimitero’* (Fenoglio 79).⁸² Even the depiction of Fenoglio’s beloved hills in the area of Langhe acquires a sinister atmosphere:

Per le colline mai aveva provato tanta nausea, mai le aveva viste così sinistre e fangose come ora, tra gli squarci della nebbia. Le aveva sempre pensate, le colline, come il

⁸⁰ His eyes were attracted by a big solitary tree [...] its solitude will be a joke compared to mine.

⁸¹ Don’t you feel like you are entering into a tomb?

The parquet creaked abnormally, with a malicious, threatening crackle.

⁸² The line of houses facing the stream looked like the façade of a cemetery.

naturale teatro del suo amore [...] e gli era invece toccato di farci l'ultima cosa immaginabile, la guerra. (Fenoglio 27)⁸³

The hills and the woods of the Langhe, where Fenoglio fought during the Resistance together with his comrades, assume a significance which goes beyond the simple necessity of a setting for the novel. In her essay *Trend in Literary Trauma Theory*, Michelle Balaev points out that ‘the term *place* refers to a physical environment inhabited, viewed, or imagined by a person who attaches and derives meaning from it. [...] trauma novel explores the effects of suffering on the individual and community in terms of the character’s relation to place’ (Balaev 159). In fact, every single element of the landscape, as Anna Cellinese writes, ‘*ha un valore semantico intrinseco e diventa emblema di una condizione esistenziale di violenza, di miseria e di morte*’, a world ‘*su cui si abbatte la violenza cieca e brutale della guerra civile con i suoi strascichi inevitabili*’ (Cellinese 41).⁸⁴ Violence, fear and sense of danger constantly shine through the description of landscapes and places in Fenoglio’s novel; nature itself contributes to the ominous ambience of the novel and to the defining of Milton’s relation to the place in which he moves. Trees are dripping their load of rain on the partisans ‘*quasi con malizia, con acredine*’ (Fenoglio 60),⁸⁵ while the night, as black as pitch, ‘*dava l’illusione ottica di tante voragini che continuamente si formassero*’ (Fenoglio 37).⁸⁶ Also the almost omnipresent mist adds to the gloomy atmosphere of the setting, transforming trees’ branches in drowning people’s arms (Fenoglio 31) and buildings into ghosts (Fenoglio 102), while mud is a constant companion of Milton’s journey. In the entire novel, Milton engages in a strenuous fight against mud. A recurrent

⁸³ He had never felt so much aversion for the hills, he had never seen them so menacing and muddy like today, between the gashes in the mist. He always thought about those hills as the obvious background of his [...] instead, on those hills he ended up doing the last thing imaginable, war.

⁸⁴ It has an intrinsic semantic value, and it becomes emblematic of an existential condition of violence, misery and death.

A world on which it fell the blind and brutal violence of the Civil War with its inevitable aftermaths.

⁸⁵ Almost with malice, acrimoniously.

⁸⁶ It gave the optical illusion of many ravines opening continuously.

image in the novel is the protagonist attempting to get rid of the dirt covering his entire body, until the end when he accepts his defeat declaring ‘*sono fatto di fango, dentro e fuori*’ (Fenoglio 124).⁸⁷

As it appears, Milton’s relation to the Langhe and to nature is characterised by a sort of war – a different one from that against the Fascists – a fight against a fog so dense that it gives the feeling of collision and contusions (Fenoglio 33), against raindrops hitting him like bullets (Fenoglio 124), trees closing on him like walls (Fenoglio 128), and above all, against mud on which he constantly slips, and which makes his steps heavier. It is a fight, in short, against nature itself which is almost personified as Caterina Mongiat Farina writes in her article “*Mostruosi e incomprensibili come gli uomini*”. *La Resistenza della persona in Calvino e Fenoglio*:

Gli alberi acquistano volontà e sentimenti umani [...] Ma è l'intera natura a essere contemporaneamente sofferente e minacciosa, dotata di volontà, sentimenti, e di un corpo che si nutre, soffoca, si piaga e decompone. [...] Sembra che Fenoglio descriva un unico ecosistema di esseri umani, animali, piante, clima, al cui interno gli effetti di ogni evento si ripercuotono ovunque. (Mongiat Farina 428)⁸⁸

No less than the partisans, nature is suffering the consequences of the Civil War, and its reaction is of defending itself. It is a battle, however, which leaves scars and anguish on nature as well as humans, like the wounds Milton’s boots open in the mud (Fenoglio 52), the trees rustling ‘*disperatamente*’ (desperately) (Fenoglio 102), or ‘*i campi e la vegetazione [which] stavano sfatti e proni, come violentati dalla pioggia*’ (Fenoglio 123).⁸⁹

United by the sufferings caused by the Civil War, nature and men in *Una questione privata* reduce the gap separating their realms. With a disquieting simplicity, Fenoglio’s writing points out the animal essence within human beings: ‘*Le molte analogie e metafore animali descrivono una*

⁸⁷ I am made of mud, on the outside and within.

⁸⁸ The trees acquire human will and feelings [...] The whole nature is, at the same time, suffering and threatening, endowed with will, feelings, and with a body which eats, suffocates, ulcerates and decomposes. [...] It seems that Fenoglio depicts one single ecosystem of human beings, animals, plants, climate, inside which every event’s effect are felt everywhere.

⁸⁹ The fields and all the vegetation [which] were ruined and prone, as if they had been raped by the rain.

umanità tanto sofferente quanto crudele, senza distinzione politica’ (Mongiat Farina 426).⁹⁰ The association with the animal world, like in Calvino’s novel, shows the degree of brutalization reached by men – partisans and Fascist alike – in such a period as the Resistance which seems to bring, together with sufferings and traumas, a sort of estrangement of those involved in it from human society. One example are the partisans affected by scabies who:

bestemmiano e gemono e si fregano contro i muri come gli orsi. [...] Ti presentano dei pezzi di legno e di ferro perchè li gratti con quelli, Le unghiate non le sentono più. Cinque minuti fa Diego a momenti mi strozza. Mi diede un pettine di ferro perchè lo grattassi con quello, io naturalmente mi rifiutai e Diego mi è saltato al collo. (Fenoglio 60)⁹¹

Brutality and cruelty reached by men are made even more evident through some well-chosen dialogues between Milton and characters who are not partisans and suffer the war rather than fight it: it is the case, for example, of the old lady who gives Milton shelter and food:

Parlo dei miei due figli – rispose, accentuando il sorriso, – che mi son morti di tifo nel trentadue. Uno di ventuno e l’altro di vent’anni. Tanto che mi disperai, tanto che impazzii, che mi volevano ricoverare anche quelli che mi volevano veramente bene. Ma adesso sono contenta. Adesso, passato il dolore col tempo, sono contenta e tanto tranquilla. Oh come stanno bene i miei poveri figli, come stanno bene sottoterra, al riparo degli uomini... (Fenoglio 68)⁹²

It is the war which transforms men into creatures to be feared, but also into suffering and hunted animals. Like Milton, who is described several times with animal analogies: he is showed ‘*sul terreno*

⁹⁰ The many animal analogies and metaphors depict a humanity as suffering as cruel, without political distinction,

⁹¹ They curse and groan and rub themselves against the walls like bears. They give you pieces of wood or iron so you can scratch them with it. They don’t feel the nails anymore. Five minutes ago, Diego almost strangled me. He gave me an iron comb to be scratched with, I refused of course, and Diego jumped on my throat.

⁹² I am speaking about my two sons – she answered, broadening her smile – who died because of typhus in 1932. One was twenty-one, the other twenty years old. I was so desperate; I went so mad that even those who really loved me wanted to hospitalize me. But now I am happy. Now, after time has eased the pain, I am happy and really calm. Oh, how fine are my poor two sons, how fine are they six feet under, protected from men...

come un serpente trafitto' (Fenoglio 78),⁹³ or as a bird trying to escape the hunters' shots (Fenoglio 127). In the last chapter, finally, Milton reaches an almost complete metamorphosis: *'Irruppe Milton, come un cavallo, gli occhi tutti bianchi, la bocca spalancata e schiumosa, a ogni batter di piede saettava fango dai fianchi'* (Fenoglio 128).⁹⁴ In the frantic run for survival with which the novel closes, Milton's humanity steps aside and allows nature to take control. Whether nature, at the end of the novel, brings Milton to his end or to salvation is still a debated issue; surely, however, the classic, idyllic image of a benign nature in *Una questione privata* is completely overturned: nature in this novel seems to be, not only another enemy to be fought, but also a constant presence to be feared.

One consequence of this kind of atmosphere is the characters' attitude towards death; there is a sort of resignation, in almost all of the partisans, to the idea of being killed which, in a way, matches the endured attitude towards violence shown by Pin in Calvino's and Cinto in Pavese's novel. It is again a sign of the terrible historical period the characters of Fenoglio's novel live in, where violence, fear and death are part of what has become 'normal'. *'Noi non dormiamo tutti in un posto. Così se ci sorprendono ne massacrano solo una parte'* (Fenoglio 102)⁹⁵ says one of the partisans, and the reason for such a harsh life of fear and danger is explained quite clearly by Milton himself: *'Questa guerra non la si può fare che così. E poi non siamo noi che comandiamo a lei, ma è lei che comanda a noi'* (Fenoglio 67).⁹⁶ The presence of death in *Una questione privata* is pervasive. Every chapter, almost every line of the novel contains hints to the possibility of a death which is bound to come sooner than later. It is a presence the partisans cannot forget even for one single moment. Even Milton, obsessed as he is with his *'questione privata'* (private matter), is always aware of the precariousness of life in the historical period he is living: *'un'epoca in cui i ragazzi come lui erano chiamati più a morire che a vivere'* (Fenoglio 26).⁹⁷ The reality and the closeness of death is constantly acknowledged in almost

⁹³ Like a snake pierced on the ground.

⁹⁴ Milton burst into the street, like a horse, his eyes white, his foamy mouth wide open, shooting mud from his hips at every step.

⁹⁵ We don't sleep all in one place. This way, if they catch us, they will massacre only some of us.

⁹⁶ This war can be fought only in this way. Anyway, we don't rule over it, it is the war that rules over us.

⁹⁷ A period in which boys like himself were called to die more than to live.

every dialog of the novel; Milton's eagerness to know the truth about Giorgio's relationship with Fulvia is increased by the awareness of his possible imminent end: *'la verità. [...] Dovrà dirmelo, da moribondo a moribondo'* (Fenoglio 26).⁹⁸

During such a historical period which, as the saying goes, 'brings out the worst in people', it is not surprising to meet with some amongst the lowest of men's instincts: propensity towards revenge, lack of mercy and lust for violence and blood can be seen as a reaction to the terrible experience of war the characters of the novel are going through. It must be noticed, however, that evidence of the best side of humankind are not completely absent. There are different figures of old ladies and peasants, in fact, ready to help the partisans with food and shelter. There is mercy, for example, in the voice of one of these ladies asking a partisan to be clement towards a Fascist prisoner (Fenoglio 66). Milton himself, after having killed the Fascist sergeant, seems to reason with his own sense of guilt: *'Quel sergente non lo disturbava, si era ucciso da sé, lui non c'entrava, del resto non l'aveva nemmeno visto in faccia. [...] quel disgraziato...! chissà se già l'hanno trovato, o è ancora lassù solo al buio, nel marcio. Ma perchè, perchè?'* (Fenoglio 108).⁹⁹

In direct contrast to these images of human pity, are the descriptions of some events of the Resistance which Fenoglio's effort towards simplicity and realism make almost unbearable for their harshness and crudity, and which are clear examples of the brutalization of people during war. An image symbolising such a violent and brutal reality is that of blood which appears twice in the novel, and which in both cases is connected to the theme of revenge. The first image is that of a partisan showing how he wants to 'wash himself' in the blood of the Fascists:

Guardate, – diceva, – guardate tutti quel che farò se ammazzano Giorgio. [...] mi voglio lavar le mani nel suo sangue. Così –. E si curvava sull'immaginario catino e immergeva le mani e poi se le strofinava con una cura e una morbidità spaventevoli. [...] in ultimo

⁹⁸ The truth. [...] He must tell me about it, from moribund to moribund.

⁹⁹ That sergeant did not bother him, he killed himself, Milton had nothing to do with it, after all, he did not even see his face. [...] that poor wretch...! Who knows if someone already found him, or he is still up there alone, in the dark, in the dirt. Why, why?

scoppiò in un urlo altissimo: – Voglio il loro sangue! Voglio entrare nel loro sangue fino alle ascelleeeee! (Fenoglio 50)¹⁰⁰

The same image returns later in the book when an old farmer tells Milton how, when the war will be over, the partisan should kill every single Fascist they can find:

Io sono uno che mette le lacrime quando il macellaio viene a comprarmi gli agnelli. Eppure, io sono quel medesimo che ti dice: tutti, fino all'ultimo, li dovete ammazzare. [...] Chi quel giorno non sarà sporco di sangue fino alle ascelle, non venitemi a dire che è un buon patriota. (Fenoglio 81)¹⁰¹

These two examples are pictures loaded with the symbolism of blood and rituals. In the novel, however, there are other scenes, closer to a realistic account of the Resistance, which carry the same kind of feelings: revenge and violence, but also, and often at the same time, fear, pity and regret. It is the case of a war scene in Milton's memory:

Ne contarono diciotto stesi, ognuno impiombato per due. Prima della pesa la strada è selciata e fa discesa, lì il sangue ruscellava come vino e pezzi di cervello vi galleggiavano sopra. [...] Milton si era trovato solo, senza saper come, ma improvvisamente e del tutto solo, a parte i cadaveri dei soldati. In quel mezzo silenzio e in quel deserto completo tremò. (Fenoglio 70)¹⁰²

It is also the case of the twelfth and penultimate chapter of the novel, which shows the execution of two young partisan relays in the Fascist's barracks.

¹⁰⁰ "Look", he said, "look, everyone, what I will do if they kill Giorgio. [...] I want to wash my hands in their blood. Like this". And he bent over an imaginary basin, he dipped his hands and then he rubbed them with a frightening care and softness [...] at last he burst into a high scream: "I want their blood! I want to immerse into their blood up to my armpits.

¹⁰¹ I am one of those who cry when the butcher comes to by their lambs. Still, I am also the same one who tells you: you must kill every one of them, until the last one, you must kill them. [...] That day, don't come to tell me that who won't be soaked in blood up to his armpits is a good patriot.

¹⁰² They counted eighteen people on the ground, each shoot with bullets enough for two. Just before the weigh station the street is cobbled, and it goes downhill, there the blood ran like wine and pieces of brain floated in it. [...] Milton found himself alone, without knowing how, suddenly completely alone, apart from the dead bodies of the soldiers. In that half silence and in that complete desert, he shuddered.

As has been already stated, the twelfth chapter of *Una questione privata* is particularly significant. First and foremost, this chapter gives a realistic account of what was a recurrent event during the Civil War; executions – with or without trial and on both sides of the fighting forces – are a historical fact. At a narratological level, Fenoglio's depiction of this episode induces an Aristotelian catharsis which brings the reader to a better understanding of the trauma of war. In his book *Trauma: A Social Theory*, Jeffrey Alexander writes:

catharsis clarifies feeling and emotion by forcing the audience to identify with the story's characters, compelling them to experience their suffering with them [...] We seek catharsis because our identification with the tragic narrative compels us to experience dark and sinister forces that are also inside of ourselves, not only inside others.' (Alexander 61)

Identification with the characters, their feelings and their sufferings, opens the way to an easier understanding of the kind of traumatic experience they – and presumably the author of the novel himself – went through.

It is not too difficult, in fact, to recognise literary symptoms of trauma in this chapter. The pity showed by the Fascist lieutenant, for example, underlines the cruelty of the act his soldiers and himself are about to perform: *‘questi due sono ragazzini, questi due erano potaordini, ragazzini che credevano di giocare... [...] Il tenente restò fermo un attimo solo, poi si riportò in fretta verso il centro del cortile. Ma anche lì non si sentì di rimanere, quasi che la rffica potesse uccidere anche lui attraverso il muro* (Fenoglio 121).¹⁰³ Merciless and thirst for revenge are also present, providing one more hint to the brutality of warfare: *‘Il sergente Alarico Rozzoni [...] È rimasto ucciso per una baldracca, – aveva detto il comandante. – Non lo compiangio, però lo vendico. E lo vendico immediatamente, sulle persone nemiche che ho a disposizione’* (Fenoglio 117).¹⁰⁴ There is also, in

¹⁰³ “These two are kids, these two were just messengers, kids who thoughts they were playing... [...] The lieutenant stood still just one second, then he went back to the middle of the yard. Even there, however, he did not like to stop, almost as if the gunshots could kill him as well through the wall.

¹⁰⁴ The sergeant Alarico Rozzoni [...] “He has been killed because of a prostitute”, said the commander, “I don’t feel sorry for him, but I revenge him. And I revenge him immediately, on whoever enemy I have at my disposal.

the words of one of the two young partisans, incredulity for the destiny he is facing; he is, in Jeffrey Alexander's words, 'in the grip of forces larger than [him]self – impersonal, even inhuman forces that often are not only beyond control but, during the tragic action itself, beyond comprehension' (Alexander 60):

Perchè mi ammazzate? – Due lacrime gli erano spuntate agli angoli degli occhi e, senza scrollarsi, stavano crescendo smisuratamente. – Io ho solo quattordici anni. Voi lo sapete che io ho solamente quattordici anni, e ne dovete tener conto. [...] Io non ho fatto niente di male. E non ho nemmeno visto a far del male. Facevo la staffetta e basta. [...] No. Io ho solo quattordici anni. E voglio veder mia madre. O mamma. No, è troppo grossa....
(Fenoglio 119)¹⁰⁵

Moreover, there is the claim of equality amongst human beings in front of death: '*Ma, e noi? Noi soldati del Duce nasciamo forse dalle pietre o dalle piante?*' (Fenoglio 121),¹⁰⁶ which complicates the overall vision of the Italian Resistance and the ethical issues connected with it. In fact, as Jeffrey Alexander points out: 'It is not only the fact of identification, however, but also its complexity that makes the experience of trauma as tragedy so central to the assumption of moral responsibility, for we identify not only with the victims but with the perpetrators as well' (Alexander 61).

Apart from the content, what makes this chapter peculiar in Fenoglio's novel is the abrupt shift of focalization which starts and ends with the chapter giving the impression of something disjointed from the rest of the book. It must be said, however, that at the plot level such disconnection is only apparent – in fact, the reason why the two young partisans, Ricco and Bellini, are being executed is to avenge the death of the Fascist sergeant killed by Milton. As for the focalization, instead, the break between this chapter and the rest of the book is remarkable and its usefulness to the economy of the

¹⁰⁵ "Why are you going to kill me?" Two tears appeared at the corners of his eyes, he did not shake them off and they were growing disproportionately. "I am only fourteen. You know I am only fourteen, and you must take that into account. [...] I never did anything bad. I never even saw anybody doing something bad. I was just a relay. [...] No. I am only fourteen. And I want to see my mum. Oh mum. No, this is too big..."

¹⁰⁶ What about us? Are we soldiers of the Duce perhaps born from stones or plants?

novel seems to be twofold. On the one hand, it is a shift of perspective which shows how war and traumas are seen and felt from the opposite side of the fighting forces. As in the case of Calvino's German sailor Frick, such a perspective reveals the humanity of the Fascists, equalising the sufferings of the partisans and those of the soldiers of the Duce, who indeed, as one of them says in the novel, 'are not born from stones' (Fenoglio 121). In warfare, everyone is a victim and nobody is exempt from responsibility, like Milton himself who, albeit indirectly, is the cause of the two young partisans' death.

On the other hand, this chapter has the function of focusing on history rather than on the imaginary love story of the plot. Fenoglio, like Calvino, uses the expedient of shifting the focalization away from the protagonist in order to fully set his story in the middle of Civil War, but also, and perhaps especially, to prevent his fictional story from shading the greater History. As Gabriele Pedullà writes in the introduction to Fenoglio's novel, '*senza nulla togliere alla giustezza della lotta partigiana, Fenoglio ci tiene a ribadire che rimane sempre qualcosa di scandaloso nella morte di due adolescenti come Riccio e Bellini, che nessuna giustificazione a priori o posteriori (nessuna filosofia della storia) potrà mai cancellare o attenuare*' (Pedullà xxxvi).¹⁰⁷

Una questione privata is a novel which depicts the Italian Resistance with stark realism; Fenoglio's lucid gaze helped him to write a novel in which the war is showed like it was: sometimes characterised by pity and solidarity, but much more often by violence, cruelty and traumas. In such a novel, therefore, is not difficult to recognise, between the lines, evidence of how much the traumatic experience of the Italian Civil War influenced the author's writing. Sense of fear and foreboding shine through every page of the novel, constantly reminding the reader that, despite its romantic plot, the book is there to testify to one of the most terrible periods of Italian history. Men's violence and cruelty in Fenoglio – differently from Calvino and Pavese – are shown with a merciless realism that seems

¹⁰⁷ Without diminishing the righteousness of the partisan's fight, Fenoglio wants to reiterate that there is always something shocking in the death of two adolescents like Riccio and Bellini, that no defence, *a priori* or *posteriori* (no philosophy of history) will ever delete or lessen.

to indicate almost a sort of photographic memory from which the author had just to choose the right pictures to describe brutal scenes and terrible events. Likewise, the landscape in which the plot of the novel unfolds is disturbing; dense with threatening images of a nature which has nothing of the life-giving and nurturing Mother Nature of the past. On the contrary, it is as cruel and violent as men and equally traumatised and traumatising. Symptoms of trauma can also be found in the ubiquitous presence of death which, in this novel, does not show itself – like in the two novels analysed previously – by means of dead bodies resurfacing above the ground. It is, instead, a sort of *memento mori*, even more threatening in its ominous lingering; something indefinite and yet always there, lurking around every corner, ready to strike.

Whether death strikes Milton at the end of the novel is a question that remains unanswered. Milton's search for truth and Fenoglio's account of the Italian Resistance, both end without a closure. According to Dominik LaCapra, reconstructing traumatic historical events 'involves not only the processing of information but also affect, empathy, and questions of value. [...] it involves a critical and self-critical component that resists closure' (LaCapra 35). Fenoglio's writing undoubtedly shows such a critical approach towards the representation of the Italian Civil War; a war in which – as it comes out especially from the twelfth chapter of the novel – '*ciascuno occupa a turno il ruolo del fucilato e del fucilatore, della vittima e del carnefice*' (Pedullà xxxii).¹⁰⁸ In fact, as Pedullà writes, '*Per Fenoglio non si tratta di rinunciare alle armi e alla lotta, mettendo a tacere le mille buone ragioni della Resistenza, quanto piuttosto di riconoscersi disponibili ad assumere fino in fondo le conseguenze dei propri atti*' (Pedullà xxxv).¹⁰⁹

This sense of responsibility, which possibly prevents Fenoglio from finding a suitable end for his novel, also contributes to the way he approaches the representation of the Resistance. Fenoglio's masterpiece is a balanced mix of a truthful account of the Italian Civil War, imposed by his sense of

¹⁰⁸ Everyone occupies, in turn, the position of the executed and of the executer, of the victim and of the executioner.

¹⁰⁹ To Fenoglio it is not a matter of renouncing to fight, silencing the thousand good reasons of the Resistance, it is, rather a matter of being open to thoroughly accept the consequences of one's own actions.

responsibility towards the historical truth, and a fictional story which is essential to detach himself from the harshness of his own memories. Fenoglio's way of dealing with the representation of the Italian Resistance, in fact, is not too dissimilar to Calvino's and Pavese's. Like the other two authors, Fenoglio uses a fictional story – in his case, the story of a desperate love – as a mean of distancing himself from his own experience of the Italian Civil War. At the same time, however, *Una questione privata* differs from *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* and *La luna e i falò* as, in his novel, Fenoglio looks at history with a gaze not filtered by youth, fantasises or memories, but with eyes able to see the horrors of the war around them with absolute clarity. Milton's obsession and jealousy, while making him neglect his duties as a partisan, do not blind him to the events he witnesses, nor do they make him deaf to the stories he listens to. The Civil War, in this novel, is real and present, with all the sufferings and traumas it carries. It seems that Fenoglio does look at the Italian Resistance 'out of the corner of his eye' like Calvino did in his novel, yet what he sees has the sharp outlines of reality. This is the reason why the Italian Resistance bursts out of the pages of *Una questione privata*, as Calvino wrote '*proprio com'era, di dentro e di fuori, vera come mai era stata scritta, serbata per tanti anni limpidamente dalla memoria fedele, e con tutti i valori morali, tanto più forti quanto più impliciti, e la commozione, e la furia.* (Calvino xxiii).¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Just like it was, from the outside and from the inside, real like it has never been written, vividly preserved for many years in a faithful memory, with all the moral values, stronger because implied, and the emotion, and the fury.

Conclusions

Starting from the assumption that history contributes to the shaping of literature, this thesis aimed at demonstrating how the trauma associated to the historical period of the Italian Civil War might have influenced the writing of three Italian authors - namely Italo Calvino, Cesare Pavese and Beppe Fenoglio – whose novels deal with the representation of the Italian Resistance. The analysis of the novels chosen from these authors' oeuvres, therefore, was conducted with the idea that between the lines of their texts it would have been possible to read symptoms of the trauma such a historical period as the Italian Resistance must have left behind.

It ought to be clarified, however, that despite the literary symptoms of trauma which the analysis of the novels revealed, the aim of this thesis is not to establish if and to what degree the three authors have been themselves affected by the traumatising historical period they lived through. The goal of this research is to confirm the presence of symptoms indicating how traumatising the historical period depicted in their novels had been, and to draw conclusions on the way these authors dealt with the representation of such a period.

As for the first part of the research question in the thesis – which literary symptoms of trauma can be read between the lines of Calvino's, Pavese's and Fenoglio's novels? – an analysis of the texts brought to light symptoms indicating the aftermath of the traumatising event of war. Between the lines of each of the three novels, it is possible to recognise, for example, an analogous atmosphere dominated by fear and violence. Likewise, there are similarities in the general disquieting ambiance of the natural settings of the novels and in the presence of death.

The violence characterising the novels – Calvino's and Pavese's in particular – as Cathy Caruth writes, is a sign of 'the reality of the destructive force that the violence of history imposes on the human psyche' (Caruth 63). The violent behaviour of the characters in the novels, especially that of the adults directed towards children, as in the case of Pin in Calvino's novel and Cinto in Pavese's,

is a clear reaction to the kind of life these characters lead. Even though Pavese's novel is set a few years after the end of the war, Cinto's life is still affected by its aftermaths. In fact, it is the economic misery caused by war that makes Valino vent his frustration on his family and that drives him to his last desperate act of beating to death his mother and sister-in-law, burning the farm and hanging himself.

Similarly, it is the presence of war which makes the environment in which Pin grows up unfriendly: the adults Pin wishes to befriend are too busy with their worries about *partigiani* and Fascists to spare time or sympathy for a child. Pin is constantly brutalised, not only by enemies – during his short permanence in jail – but also by those who should protect and take care of him. Notwithstanding the uselessness of conducting a psychological analysis of a fictional character, it is undeniable that Pin's unusual behaviour – lead by fear, anger and violence – cannot be explain but by recognising it as a sign of the traumatic historical events Calvino puts him through.

The violence in Fenoglio's novel is of a different kind, and more directly connected with warfare. There are scenes of violence in the memories of the partisans who participated to battles, or in the images of blood evoked in the outbursts of those who are calling for revenge. However, it is a kind of violence that, even though disquieting and undoubtedly traumatising, is foreseeable in a Civil War period. Nonetheless, this predictability does not limit the fear that war and violence inspire; in fact, *Una questione privata*, on par with Calvino's and Pavese's novel, is also permeated by an intense sense of fear and foreboding.

Fear and sense of danger lingering over the novels remind of what Kai Erikson writes about traumatised people: 'once persons who have been visited by trauma begin to look around them, evidence that the world is a place of unremitting danger seems to appear everywhere' (Erikson 195). In the three texts, this feeling of fear is mostly conveyed through the depiction of the settings. The natural beauty of hills and woods, in which the three stories unfold, is always tainted with frightening images of resurfacing dead bodies or, in the case of Fenoglio's novel, with the violence and brutality

of nature itself. Even though in different degrees, landscapes in the three texts provide literary symptoms of trauma. In Calvino's novel, for example, the natural setting of the story, looked at through the eyes of the young protagonist, shows the eerie atmosphere typical of fairy tales, where beautiful and menacing images are carefully mixed. Instead, in Pavese's *La luna e i falò*, landscapes are depicted with the bitter-sweet melancholia of memories. In both novels, however, these impressions abruptly turn into terror at the sudden appearance of death; the dead bodies that earth refuses to host are recurring reminders of traumatising historical happenings. Differently, in Fenoglio's novel, nature is a threatening and dangerous entity *per se*, while death is a constant ominous, though mostly invisible, presence relentlessly reminding the characters of the unendurable historical reality around them.

Symptoms of trauma are also traceable in the personalities and the behaviours of the novels' main characters. Pin's behaviour is clearly driven by his fears, loneliness and little understanding of the world around him. He does not know a reality different from the violent and traumatic one in which he moves. After all, he does not even know the difference between warfare and peace (Calvino 90), and to be lonely, angry and afraid is part of Pin's 'normality'. Pavese's protagonist, Anguilla, even though not showing any kind of trauma himself, is the sympathetic listener of the traumatic stories of someone else: Nuto. Nuto's importance in *La luna e i falò* is equal to that of the main character in that he is the witness of history and the repository of the town's historical memory. Moreover, he is the character who plainly shows his trauma and the main cause of it: the partisan's execution of Santina, guilty of being a spy for the Fascist. As for Milton in Fenoglio's novel, one sign of the traumatic effects of the Civil War can be found in his constant acknowledgment and acceptance of his inevitable and forthcoming death.

The second part of the research question leading the analysis of the novels – how do the authors deal, in their novels, with the representation of such a traumatic historical period as the Italian Resistance? – finds its answer in one word: distance. The necessity of distancing himself from his

own narrative has been clearly explained by Italo Calvino, in his preface to *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, as a way of detaching himself from the social responsibility as a witness of the Civil War and from the intrusiveness of his own feelings (Calvino xii-xix). It is the same ‘acknowledgement on the part of the writer of his own distance from the experience he describes’ (Craps 96) Stef Craps recognises in his analysis of Caryl Phillips’ *Higher Ground* about the Holocaust. It is a distance that the three authors considered in this thesis take, although in different ways, from their novel’s main subject. An analysis of the texts at a narratological level helped to shed light on the literary devices used by the authors to write about the Italian Resistance from a safe distance.

Italo Calvino’s literary tool of choice is focalization. The protagonist of *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, Pin, is nearly the sole focalizer in the novel, and it is through the eyes of this ten-year-old child that Calvino manages to mitigate – to some degrees – the harsh reality of the Civil War and distance himself from it. Pin’s inexperience of the world and his inability to comprehend the ways of the adults give him a gaze which can still marvel at everything he witnesses. Even things and events that frighten him, like the sounds of battles or the sight of dead bodies, still attract him, like frightening stories always attract children. Pin’s gaze, full of wander and imagination, is the ‘magical’ lens Calvino uses to turn a piece of history into a sort of fairy tale; it is a fairy tale for adults, however, through the pages of which the brutality of the Italian Civil War clearly shows.

Like Calvino, Cesare Pavese chooses to rely on focalization to distance himself from history; to this tool, however, he adds the filter provided by memory. Pavese’s protagonist, Anguilla, is, at the same time the narrator and the only focalizer of the novel. Like Pavese himself, Anguilla did not participate to the Resistance and, once back in the town where he grew up, he acquires the function of external observer of the events and ideal listener of other’s memories and traumas. Anguilla’s distance from the emotions involved in such an experience as the Civil War create the safe distance for Pavese to control his narrative; as Susan Brison writes: ‘one can control certain aspects of the

narrative and that control [...] leads to greater control over the memories themselves, making them less intrusive' (Brison 47).

As for Fenoglio, his way of distancing himself from his own experience of the Italian Resistance lays in the choice of the plot. Fenoglio decides to set a love story in the middle of the Italian Civil War, apparently with the intention of redirecting the reader's attention from the real history to the fictional one. It is what Kate McLoughin calls 'non-writing', a literary trick that 'functions analogously to military diversion tactics: attention is diverted away from the main action, but with the inevitable result that the true target eventually becomes clear. [...] a literary means of intentional avoidance.' (McLoughin 139). In *Una questione privata*, Fenoglio also shows a conscious use of focalization. Differently from Calvino and Pavese, however, Fenoglio uses this literary tool, not to gain more distance from a traumatising reality, but to tear the veil of fiction and offer the reader a glimpse of that reality.

According to Ronald Granofsky, 'it is difficult to conceive of a novel [...] without a central conflict and only a little less difficult to imagine such a conflict not embodying an experience that we might vaguely conceive of as "traumatic"' (Granofsky 2). The analysis of these novels seems to agree with Granofsky opinion showing that trauma can also be found in texts never considered as trauma novels. In the light of Granofsky's opinion, an analysis of the three non-trauma novels considered in this thesis – all set in a historical period that is surely more than vaguely conceivable as traumatic – within the theoretical framework of Trauma Studies assumes a significance that goes beyond the filling of a gap in literary criticism. The combined study of history, literature and trauma offers the opportunity to shed light, not only on the writing style and authorial decisions of three of the most important writers of the Italian literature of the *Novecento*, but also to better the understanding of the historical period these authors lived in through the analysis of their way of dealing with its representation.

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