

CESARE PAVESE AND THE AMERICAN NOVEL

1. Any discussion of the Italian contemporary scene while it will inevitably attempt to understand Italian politics and development since the fall of the régime in European terms cannot escape some analysis of the impact of American intervention and the various effects resulting from this; likewise in the discussion of the contemporary literary scene — and in particular of the novel — the critic is not only considering a given field of publications; he is also considering an inter-cultural contact between two major groups with their heredity and their emotional attitudes. Such a survey would have to include writers of the stature of Alberto Moravia, Elio Vittorini, Carlo Emilio Gadda, Vitaliano Brancati, and Cesare Pavese; and it is Pavese's novels and stories and criticism that I wish to comment upon here. Indeed, apart from the intrinsic worth of his stories, he is of especial importance because he illustrates the stylistic and ideological effects of contact with the American corpus of literature; to which he went for its 'regionalism' and for what Italo Calvino¹ has called «rinnovamento linguistico nella prosa italiana».

2. It goes without saying that 'influence' in literary history is a disputed battlefield; because the critic tends to interpret with a fixed set of values which are not always made clear and because finding the source of any given trend is not necessarily a contribution to a more sensitive understanding of its realisation in a given work. However, perhaps the sociological differentiation between technical and emotive 'borrowing' is not unhelpful here; in that such research in another field of social development is also concerned with contacts between groups. Certainly, in Pavese's case, there seems at first glance to be this distinction between what he learned from Whitman, Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson and Gertrude Stein technically and the 'emotive' borrowing that took place in such

¹ In the preface to *La letteratura americana e altri saggi* (1955), a posthumous collection of Pavese's articles and essays.

assimilation. Further, as we should expect theoretically, technical borrowing is easily made but emotive influence meets with resistance; emotive attitudes change at a much slower rate than intellectual attitudes. In brief, assimilation is highly complex.

3. But, bearing this point in mind, let us quote Pavese's own words on this problem, in an unpublished article²:

Hanno detto di me che imitavo i narratori americani, Caldwell, Steinbeck, Faulkner, e il sottinteso era che tradivo la società italiana. Si sapeva che avevo tradotto qualcuno di quei libri. Ne avevo anche tradotti, a dire il vero, di altro genere, e anzi un critico una volta si dolse che invece di farmi influire da Joyce o dalla Stein avessi accolto il rozzo magistero dei primi. Dunque, ho fatto una scelta. Dunque ho provato simpatia. Dunque c'era in me qualcosa che mi faceva cercare gli americani, e non soltanto una supina accettazione. (Di passaggio, l'americano che per il suo «tempo», per il ritmo del narrare mi gravò sulle spalle davvero, nessuno al tempo di *Paesi tuoi*³ lo seppe dire: era Cain).

This excerpt is of great interest, as it indicates that Pavese was fully aware of his debt; but it is not the whole truth for in a sense it omits — and even distorts — the real nature of the influence we wish to consider. What I shall suggest is that Pavese was much, if not more, influenced by the 'psychological novel' (the phrase is Dr. Leon Edel's) as by the more apparently realistic and extroverted American writers.

4. We are in fact considering not only Pavese's stories but a whole movement in European thought since about 1930; and although I admit that Pavese found support for 'regionalism' and a «rinnovamento linguistico nella prosa italiana» in American writers, the real point at issue lies elsewhere; as can be summarily seen by referring to certain key-words — hard kernels of thought — in his crit-

² *Op. cit.*, p. 217.

³ *Paesi tuoi* (1941) was Pavese's first published novel; it was written in 1939, however, and subsequent to *Carcere*, written in 1938-39, and published in *Prima che il gullu cantii* (1949). The link with Pavese's first publication — the poems of *Lavorare stanca* composed between 1931-35 — is provided by the stories contained in *Notte di Festa* (posthumously published in 1953). As far as chronology is concerned Pavese's major output is contained within the decade 1941-1950: *La Spiaggia* (1942), *Feria d'agosto* (1946), *Il Compagno* (1947), *Dialoghi con Leucò* (1947), *La Bella Estate* (1949) and *La luna e i falò* (1950).

icism: they form a trinity — *realtà*, *ritmo* and *mito*. He himself described his progress as from «parola e sensazioni» — in *Lavorare stanca* — through «naturalismo», «poesia in prosa» and «consapevolezza dei miti» towards what he describes as «realtà simbolica»; this final formulation finding expression in *La luna e i falò* (written in 1949 and published in 1950). The search for reality (or better the search for an understanding of its philosophical definition) is without question related to his reading of Sherwood Anderson, Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis and others and to his early interest in Walt Whitman on whose poetry and writings he prepared his thesis in 1930. But it would be wrong to assume that the borrowing of technique necessarily means an identity of purpose; for Pavese was essentially a poet, even if his verse is not perhaps of memorable quality; and his poetic sense of «ritmo» was somewhat at odds with the writers he praised; for the «ritmo» inherent in post-Whitman novelists was biassed, in general, towards the common flow of speech and not towards an over-all conception of form.

However, and we shall consider this in detail subsequently, it was in Melville — and in particular in *Moby Dick* where reality, rhythm and myth combine — that Pavese sought and found some reflection of his own intuitive grasp of the nature of story-writing; and thus was able to clarify this intuition into some intellectual system of the world as it is.

5. That there was conflict between the aims — and the major unexpressed premisses as Wendell Holmes called them — of such writers as Sherwood Anderson, Dreiser, Hemingway and his own aims will be made more apparent if we quote from a radio interview Pavese delivered in 1950⁴:

Quando Pavese comincia un racconto, una favola, un libro, non gli accade mai di avere in mente un ambiente socialmente determinato, un personaggio o dei personaggi, una tesi. Quello che ha in mente è quasi sempre soltanto un ritmo indistinto, un gioco di eventi che, più che altro, sono sensazioni e atmosfere. Il suo compito sta nell'afferrare e costruire questi eventi secondo un ritmo intellettuale che li trasformi in simboli di una data realtà. Ciò gli riesce, beninteso, secondo il grado

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 294. Pavese is talking of himself in the third person.

di concretezza, sensoriale, dialogica, umana, che porta nella sua elaborazione. Nasce di qua il fatto, non mai abbastanza notato, che Pavese non si cura di « creare dei personaggi ». I personaggi sono per lui un mezzo, non un fine. I personaggi gli servono semplicemente a costruire delle favole intellettuali il cui tema è il ritmo di ciò che accade: lo stupore come di mosca chiusa sotto un bicchiere, in *Carcere*, la trasfigurazione angosciosa della campagna e della vita quotidiana nella *Casa in collina*, la ricerca paradossale di che cosa siano campagna, civiltà cittadina, vita elegante e vizio nel *Diavolo sulle colline*, la memoria dell'infanzia e del mondo in *La luna e i falò*. I personaggi in questi racconti sono del tutto sommari, sono nomi e tipi, non altro: stanno sullo stesso piano di un albero, di una casa, di un temporale o di un'incursione aerea.

This statement is both a frank self-analysis and a misleading one; although it points towards an inescapable subjection of personal — ity to pattern that is apparently nearer Greek tragedy — and the mask — than to the writers he quotes in the previous passage. Indeed, in *I Dialoghi con Leucò* (1947) — which are in fact dialogues between mythical and classical figures on the nature of destiny and man's history — he attempts the resurrection of the myth that he here outlines; and in a certain sense this work is the most rewarding and the most satisfying of his books. But his stories suffer precisely because although « ritmo » is attained (particularly in *La Spiaggia* and *Il Diavolo sulle colline*) personality is devalued; for as Pavese conceived history there is little escape for the individual out of a closed cycle of natural events. In *Il Mestiere di vivere*⁵ Pavese writes under March 11, 1949:

Non analizzare, ma *rappresentare*. Ma in un modo tutto vivo secondo un'implicita analisi. Dare un'altra realtà, su cui potrebbe nascere nuova analisi, nuove norme, nuove ideologie. È facile *enunciare* nuova analisi, nuove norme, ecc. Difficile è *farle nascere* da un ritmo, un piglio di realtà coerente e complesso.

As we see we must accept Pavese's attitude of subservience to « ritmo » if we are to have sympathetic understanding; but there

⁵ This is the title given to Pavese's Diaries (1935-1950); and they contain much interesting and important comment on his writing and his personal life. They were published posthumously in 1955. In this quotation the italics are his.

is, I think, a fundamental dichotomy in his analytical thinking (or rather Pavese was uncertain how to combine intuitive insight with a materialistic philosophy). At one and the same time he wishes to «rappresentare» and to give form to the myth which in its turn depends for self-revelation upon intuitive insight (that is, upon the «moment»); and it is to be remembered that in Pavese's use of the word «mito» character becomes seen in its extended progress from birth to death; that is, as predetermined. The real point at issue is not the artist's intuition but the precise form this predetermination takes; and it is of course evident at once that we are concerned with those philosophical points which have occupied the thought of J. P. Sartre, Camus and other writers of the French School who have a dual parenthood in Kierkegaard and Karl Marx.

6. However, Pavese does not essentially belong to that tradition; although he adopted some of their vocabulary. His intuition is profoundly poetic; and not unrelated to the general pessimism and melancholy in Leopardi, for instance. What is relevant in our context is that Pavese's intuitive insights are common to European thought; and indeed in another field his trilogy of «realità», «mito» and «ritmo» might usefully and profitably be compared with C. G. Jung's theory of the collective unconscious and the 'archetypes'; for Pavese's spiritual and emotional struggle is not unlike the prevalent mystical pursuit which Jung's writings have underlined in that creative *rapport* between conscious mind and the «anima» — as indeed Pavese's treatment of his women might suggest. Amongst modern writers of the novel it is perhaps Virginia Woolf in *The Waves* (1931) who most adequately and successfully achieves poetical form (ritmo) with the subjugation of her characters to the general pattern; and amongst American writers Pavese is undoubtedly nearer to Faulkner at a certain stage of his development (in *As I lay dying* (1930), in particular). What we may conclude — and this of course refers to the subject of technical and emotive 'borrowing' and their inter-relation — is that Pavese preferred to think in a vocabulary that was not altogether adapted to his intuition; as the following passage in his article on Whitman brings out:

E, in fondo, dopo la consueta e sempre assurda esposizione della vera natura democratica delle *Leaves*, ecco ritorna, a concludere, l'idea che il libro non è l'espressione di un mondo fantastico, non una galleria di staccate figure (i quadretti), ma una Persona, una emotività, che si muove nel mondo reale: «Le *Leaves of Grass* sono state in verità (non ripeterò mai abbastanza) principalmente l'affiorare della mia personalità, emotiva e altrimenti — un tentativo da capo a fondo di tramandare una Persona, un essere umano (me stesso, nella seconda metà del secolo diciannovesimo, in America) liberamente, picnamente e sinceramente». La quale idea, anche fuori della sua applicazione critica all'opera di Walt Whitman, ha una singolare importanza storica, perché con essa fu la prima volta che in America si formulò il problema che nel '900 ogni artista degli Stati ha ricominciato a proporsi. Comunque espresso, il problema ha questo di sempreverde, che, mentre un artista europeo, un antico, sosterrà che il segreto dell'arte è di costruire un mondo più o meno fantastico, di negare la realtà per sostituirla con un'altra magari più significativa, un americano delle generazioni recenti vi dirà che la sua aspirazione è tutta di giungere alla natura vera delle cose con occhi vergini, di arrivare a quell'«ultimate grip of reality» che solo è degno di esser conosciuto⁶.

The point which most clearly arises from this — and the whole passage needs careful thought — is that Pavese saw in American writing something which was more 'real' (or at the least nearer reality) than what he found in European writing; and we are forced to examine his particular use of the word. Yet his novels (especially *La Spiaggia* (1942) which he called «una franca ricerca di stile» while dismissing it presumably because it did not treat of social conscience) do not fit into either category fully; if anything, in as far as form and sentiment are concerned — adopting his definition of European art — he is strictly European; he is nearer to what Dr.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 147. The quotation from Whitman comes from vol. III of the Centenary Edition, New York, p. 65. The phrase «ultimate grip of reality» is from Sherwood Anderson's *Dark Laughter*. In his article on Sherwood Anderson in the same book he considers Anderson in the light of his contribution to a national literature together with his parallel «scoperta delle regioni»: comparing him with Alfieri and a similar movement — although this point could be disputed — through D'Azeglio, Abba, and Calandra in Piemonte. He continues: «... non abbiamo mai avuto quell'uomo e quell'opera che, oltre ad essere carissimi a noi, raggiungessero davvero quell'universalità e quella freschezza che si fanno comprendere a tutti gli uomini e non soltanto ai conterranei. Questo è il nostro bisogno non ancora soddisfatto».

Leon Edel has called 'the psychological novel' (preferring such a label to the cliché 'stream of consciousness') than he would perhaps have liked to admit. But he has approached it from a different angle; burdened as it were with a Marxist philosophy.

7. Pavese's conception of the « mito » is poetic; indeed, he can only be understood, I suggest, if we keep this fact firmly before us. He conceives the myth — even if he offers no escape beyond — as contained by the self; for he says in an article published in *Cultura e realtà*⁷:

Ma può darsi un mito, cioè un simbolo, totalmente individuale? Senza dubbio, e il problema è soltanto com'esso si configuri nell'arte narrativa.

But he also conceives of it as collective, as a subsequent passage of the same article illustrates⁸:

La ricchezza mitica — individuale e collettiva — del narrare veristico è ormai retaggio di tutti i contemporanei, perché al mito della scienza non si sfugge, se non accettando la fede o in un dinamismo magico o nell'arbitrio divino (ma anche dell'atto divino gran parte è diventato cosmo, cioè sistema meccanicistico). Molta parte della narrativa passata — di epoche cioè o magiche o divine — verteva già sull'osservazione realistica di causa e effetto, ma in essa accadeva che, risalendo le ragioni ultime chiaramente alle « virtù » delle cose o al cenno divino, la tensione gioiosa e illuminante del mito si esprimesse in simboli stilistici più facilmente riconoscibili come tali, più immediatamente mitologici secondo il senso vulgato del termine. Dobbiamo imparare a conoscere, per quel che sono, queste mutevoli schiume, e soprattutto tener presente che quanto più si risale nel tempo tanto più è difficile scorgere sotto i lineamenti dei grandi simboli collettivi le individuali mitologie dei creatori.

It must be admitted that, although the general sense is fairly clear, there seems to be some confusion over the difference between symbol and myth; and especially between the relationship between the individual's creation of his 'mythology' and the collective unconscious. We can agree, however, that Pavese attempted to project his mythology into the novel; the characters in this sense are subserv-

⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 335.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 337.

ient to the self that knows or apprehends them; and this is essentially a similar objective to that marked out by James Joyce and Proust. Unlike Joyce or Proust, however, Pavese chose to put his major accent upon the conflict between irreversible, brute history and man's destiny; where destiny is understood as that moment when character is eternalised. For this aspect of the world was his viewpoint on reality. The psychological novel, while not foreign to such a philosophy (Joyce certainly included such a viewpoint in his writing — a viewpoint he derived from Vico as did Pavese perhaps) has tended to exalt the knowing, subjective self; and accordingly and necessarily views the landscape in terms of personality — not types — and Time as a condition of this knowledge. We recall Pavese's words: «I personaggi in questi racconti sono del tutto sommari, sono nomi e tipi, non altro; stanno sullo stesso piano di un albero, di una casa, di un temporale o di un'incursione aerea». It is in this respect that Pavese somewhat differs from the writers we have mentioned; he is not willing to admit — except in the mystical moment which rides over blind fate — that his characters have a foot outside history. Yet the points of similarity are not negligible. The discussion is certainly complicated by Pavese's vocabulary; he limits 'reality' to what is better described either as the world as known in community or as the outer, common and impersonal aspect of the psyche. (And he incidentally underrates the subjectivity of the modern American novel).

8. But because except in *La luna e i falò* the knowing, apprehending self is not brought to the foreground we too are apt to underrate the subjectivity of Pavese's artistic method; in that final novel he admits this function. In writing of Cinto — who represents the 'innocent' state of the mind before it has understood the nature of its environment through estrangement (in this case, by the first-person's sojourn in America) he says:

Il fatto è che Cinto — come me da ragazzo — queste cose non le sapeva, e nessuno nel paese le sapeva, se non forse qualcuno che se n'era andato⁹.

⁹ *La luna e i falò*, p. 55.

And the novel indeed is constructed in three planes of consciousness: (i) Time present evolving through the life of Cinto, the boy befriended by the first-person, and in a sense repeating Time past in a state of innocence, (ii) Time past being reconstructed in the lives of sor Matteo and his three daughters, Irene, Silvia and the little Santina — Time past as experience — and (iii) Time present as a common history in the group with its encapsulated memory that is individual to those who apprehend it and thus imperfectly known. The sense of brute history is presented with power; in the closed destinies of the three daughters (who are somewhat like Lear's avenging daughters except that Santa — the Cordelia — does not bring forgiveness). This is admirably and memorably brought home in the final paragraph which recounts the death of Santina (who siding first with the régime and then with the partisans is finally tried by the latter and shot as a spy):

Io più che Nuto vedevo Baracca, quest'altro morto impiccato. Guardai il muro rotto, nero, della cascina, guardai in giro, e gli chiesi se Santa era sepolta lì.

— Non c'è caso che un giorno la trovino? hanno trovato quei due...

Nuto s'era seduto sul muretto e mi guardò col suo occhio testardo. Scosse il capo. — No, Santa no, — disse, — non la trovano. 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 tutto cenere. L'altr'anno c'era ancora il segno come il letto di un falò¹⁰.

The story-teller has finally found out the truth regarding her death; she has become as it were part of the earth's cycle; and this has been skilfully adumbrated in Time present by Cinto's father burning his hut (economic reasons are suggested) and then committing suicide (and suicide is a common theme as is also the burning of the house which first occurs in *Paesi tuoi*). Structurally the inter-
polation of past and present chapter by chapter is not perhaps convincing; but at the least we are fully aware that it is the knowing self

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 175.

which apprehends this tragic destiny in others; as a form of self-knowledge.

9. Pavese's debt to Herman Melville need not be stressed but an unpublished article entitled *La poetica del destino* written in 1950 enlarges on the theme¹¹:

Il poeta, com'è giusto, aspira all'immobilità naturale e sacrale, al silenzio, alla morte; a fare delle passioni umane dei miti polivalenti, eterni, intangibili. E continuamente la resistenza del mezzo, la realtà, lo frustra. Di qui la poetica del destino.

Che cos'è questo destino? Che anche i gesti, le parole, la vita umana siano veduti come simbolo, come mito, significa che si configurano come esistenti fuori del tempo e insieme ogni volta scoperti come unici, come per la prima volta rivelati. Una vita appare destino quando inaspettatamente si rivela esemplare e fissata da sempre. Dal groviglio del banale-imprevisto esce una figura essenziale-risaputa.

But to reach such a formulation Pavese had to traverse much social doctrine attached to the word 'realtà' it would seem; for to put it the other way round not only did his borrowing from the American novel in a technical form — in support of his desire to find a regional and everyday presentation of a story's dialogue (in which he became masterly) — somewhat obscure the emotive roots to this assimilation; it also prevented him from finding earlier in his work something which would contain the connexion he intuited between myth and the religious moment. For essentially, as Joyce demonstrates, the myth is moral. And morality in its turn posits the personality of the «personaggio»; the moment in fact at which the «personaggio» as Pavese partially admits in realising the myth also *overcomes* it outside time. He writes¹²:

Quest'ispirazione affonda le radici nel passato più remoto dell'individuo e traduce la quintessenza della sua scoperta della cosa. A volte, attraverso gli schemi ch'egli s'illude di riesumare, trapela in brevi immagini marginali, quasi casuali; più sovente s'incarna in situazioni as-

¹¹ *La letteratura americana e altri saggi*, p. 342.

¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 304. The original is in *Feria d'agosto*. The question here is whether such overcoming of the myth «fuori del tempo» does not imply a radical criticism of nature as a closed system, etc.

sorbenti, poderose e monotone, che qualunque sia il tema della favola scoppiano sempre uguali a se stesse e ne danno il senso vero. Di esse il creatore non saprebbe dir altro se non che sono il suo mito, il suo evento unico, che ogni volta ha un carattere di rivelazione inaudita come per il credente una festa rituale. Dentro di sé le contempla, quando giunge a vederle, come si contemplarono un tempo i dolori di Dioniso o la trasfigurazione di Cristo. Esse sono misteri, nel senso religioso più genuino.

Hai descritto così quella che Baudelaire chiama *l'extase*....

And indirectly this passage is echoed by an entry in the Diaries which is of outstanding importance — and not only in regard to Pavese — where under January 26, 1938 he enters:

Idiota e lurido Kant — se dio non c'è tutto è permesso. Basta con la morale. Solo la carità è rispettabile. Cristo e Dostoevsky, tutto il resto sono balle.

La morale è il mondo dell'astuzia. Solo la carità fa per te. Ma *carità* è un eufemismo per dire *annientamento*¹³.

10. But before trying to place this entry in the Diaries into some relation with his novels — and it is a key to his religious attitude and in a sense to his political opinions — we must consider more precisely the 'borrowing' he assimilated. Stylistically there is evidence of constant progress from *Pacei tuoi* (1941) onwards — this particular short novel is a rather arid attempt to depict violence in an agricultural setting — into the more delicate and sensitive writing we find in the later work; the final paragraphs quoted above from *La luna e i falò* (1950) illustrate this. Certainly there is a general adoption of the conventions of the American short story; and his article on Sherwood Anderson in *La Letteratura Americana* (an article which was published in April, 1931) confirms that he held this writer in high esteem. Moreover, from the first the general outline is clear; the stories are set in peasant environments with a 'regional' atmosphere (and it is rarely that he prefers cities or towns: the exceptions are two stories in *La Bella Estate* and *Il Compagno*). The prevailing sense — and this is stated in the stories collected in *Notte di festa* — is one of intimate knowledge of and sympathy with earth and agri-

¹³ *Il Mestiere di vivere*, 1938: gennaio 26.

cultural life. This is not unallied to what one can best term the rightness — the cruel but life-giving sanity — of the peasant world of crops and harvest and death and seasonal change; which reaches its fullest expression in *La luna e i falò*.

In Anderson, moreover, Pavese found full recognition of the importance of telling a tale; yet — to return to an earlier theme — it was Melville who provided him with the symbolic expression of those forces he himself intuited as behind the apparent world. Melville in his great masterpiece *Moby Dick* succeeded in integrating « realtà », « mito » and « ritmo » into a meaningful, extensive structure; but he did so — and this is the point — because his language has the ambiguity of Biblical reference; reference that is to a moral order which presupposes destiny in terms beyond 'man'. This was obviously denied Pavese; his language had its root in common speech. But Melville also contributed another factor — it is an obvious point — in his understanding of man's loneliness before events; a conception of loneliness that is likewise tied to a Puritan heritage. Pavese's Diaries are incidentally a tragic personal record of this isolation in his day to day living. But Pavese assumes that this loneliness can only be resolved in society (and one should bear in mind the relation this bears to his intuition of the moment, of *l'estase*); and this is undoubtedly putting the accent where Melville would have put it elsewhere. Pavese's premisses are in fact the Catholic premisses of social order and integration. Pavese writes in another context (using the current existentialist vocabulary): « ...per noi il compito è scoprire, celebrare l'uomo di là della solitudine, di là da tutte le solitudini dell'orgoglio e del senso »¹⁴.

Indeed, as we know, technical borrowing can only become effective when it coincide with emotional intention; for style goes hand in hand with matter (in one sense, it *is* matter). Pavese's articles on Sinclair Lewis, Anderson, Edgar Lee Masters — who has a similar conception of character 'eternalised' — Dos Passos, Dreiser, Faulkner, Gertrude Stein and Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* indicate how carefully he read and studied their writings; and this

¹⁴ *Letteratura americana*, p. 218.

was further enlarged by his practice as a translator (of *Moby Dick*, of Gertrude Stein's *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* amongst other books). But the American novel — in as far as one can generalise — could not with the exception of *Moby Dick* provide him with that philosophical system which would give him an outward expression to his intuition; and stories such as *Il Diavolo sulle colline*, *Fra donne sole* and *La luna e i falò* are moving away from that earlier search for the « ultimate grip of reality » into a more subtle analysis of the nature of the world (a movement which is suggested by *La Spiaggia* to which we shall recur later for its conception of the 'feminine'). Pavese writes regarding this period of translation and reading of American authors:

Alla fine di un periodo intenso di traduzioni — Anderson, Joyce, Dos Passos, Faulkner, Gertrude Stein — io sapevo esattamente quali erano i moduli e le movenze letterarie che non mi sono consentiti, che mi restano esterni, che mi lasciano freddo. Come sempre quando ci si mescola e avvezza a gente molto esotica e impensata, mi ritrovavo alla fine più isolato, più scontroso, ma anche più *furbo*, nel vecchio senso piemontese del termine¹⁵.

Certainly they enabled him to clarify his intuition; he learned his trade thereby. But at the same time — and indeed because of this contact — there was a transition into discovering and celebrating man (to use his own words) in terms which were more subjective and less strictly attached to the outward, known world as the predominant polarity; although this was only a partial transition, for Pavese held in some sense to his original intuition of reality. As Italo Calvino points out in his preface to the Diaries: *il fare* is fundamental to Pavese's thought. But his interpretation of action (and of non-action) — a central and dominant European debate as the novels of Sartre, Camus and Malraux will show — had moved its position considerably. The more mature and considered attitude is expressed in *Feria d'agosto* (1946) and *I Dialoghi con Leucò* (1947) where Pavese attempts some definition of the nature of innocence and its growth into symbol and myth into the larger concept of a mythology

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 293.

which comprises destiny and natural law as opposing forces. It will be seen that although this movement in position is not altogether foreign to American writing — and perhaps philosophical bias cuts right across cultural barriers and boundaries — it is certainly not principally derived from Sherwood Anderson, Dreiser or Hemingway; indeed, if one wished to examine it more closely the affinity is rather with Joyce and Faulkner and, to a limited extent, with Gertrude Stein.

II. Gertrude Stein provides a suitable example of the transition. Pavese in his article — or essay — on Sherwood Anderson writes:

Ed un'altra ragione per cui a Sherwood Anderson piace, o almeno interessa, J. Joyce e il joycianesimo e l'opera, *insopportabile a noi* della signora Gertrude Stein, è che in quell'abbondanza e libertà e gioia — viziose negli europei — delle parole per se stanti, o quasi, l'americano, il *middlewestern*, trova il sostituto dei secoli di tradizione che gli mancano a dare il sapore al suo linguaggio, a dare la *terrestrità* alla materia vivente dei suoi racconti, ...¹⁶.

But from finding her work «insopportabile» as we have underlined, he proceeds to the introduction of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1938) and *Three Lives* (1940) to an Italian public in his translations; and in the preface to the second book — and I suggest that Gertrude Stein's style and dialogue influenced him considerably; particularly in her ability to transform commonplace dialogue into poetic phrases without on the one hand losing the rhythm of speech or on the other becoming tedious as with Hemingway — he admits that:

Le *Tre esistenze* sono senza dubbio una capolavoro di stile, una di quelle opere esemplari con cui s'inizia la vita creativa di chi farà dell'espressione il problema aperto e talvolta la monomania di tutta l'esistenza¹⁷.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 42.

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 173. One might also note that Gertrude Stein's flat presentation of character derives from a viewpoint which is not dissimilar to Pavese's attitude.

And he continues subsequently to evaluate her in terms which immediately bring to mind his previous statement in 1933 regarding the difference between the American and the European tradition:

Ma qualunque sia il senso del suo sviluppo successivo — e specialmente dell'opera più ambiziosa, *La formazione degli americani*, — a noi pare che Gertrude Stein abbia dato con *Tre esistenze* un primo esempio perfetto di quella che sarà ricerca costante della narrativa americana del nuovo secolo: un mondo fantastico che sia la realtà stessa, colta nel suo farsi espressivo¹⁸.

12. But while we should grant this movement — this greater subtlety in the understanding of reality — we must not underemphasise what may well prove to be a related problem, if not the emotive pattern behind it (and here we can no longer talk in terms of cultural interchange): Pavese's constant and indeed tragic concern to reach some deeper understanding of the 'feminine'. In the Diaries for March 25, 1950 we read:

Non ci si uccide per amore di una donna. Ci si uccide perché un amore, qualunque amore, ci rivela nella nostra nudità, miseria, incertezza, nulla.

These words of course are the obverse side as it were to his intuitive equation of *carità* with *annientamento*; an equation which in as far as art is the subject under discussion implies that in order to move the psyche must relinquish what it has achieved (or can still achieve at a given level) to achieve a higher realisation. Indeed, in Pavese's stories we find a fascinating comment upon this (and a comment which partially negates his aim not to « create dei personaggi » — for even if many of his characters remain puppets, and this is undeniably so, the general pattern takes life from this inner pursuit which is so closely involved with personality itself as the revelation of something which transcends the 'type').

This theme is first touched upon at any length in *Paesi tuoi* (1941); where the story-teller and Talino are the two aspects of male

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 175.

desire — in their relationships with Gisella. Pavese has put into this tale many of the elements of his future work: the almost sadistic sense of violence towards the woman (which is an aspect of suicide) and the inability to find any contact with her, any resolution. Thus Talino finally turns on Gisella and wounds her. The theme recurs in *Il Diavolo sulle colline* (written in 1948); in *Tra donne sole* (1949) where Rosetta is the underlying thread of the story — and she eventually and the second-time successfully commits suicide — which is an analysis of innocence in corruption; and in *La luna e i falò* where the three daughters support the movement till it reaches its climax in Santina's death. It may not be irrelevant to quote a passage from *Tra donne sole*:

— Io non ci credo a questa storia dei bambini. — le dissi. — Gli uomini non sono bambini. Crescono anche da soli.

Di nuovo Rosetta ebbe un'uscita che non m'aspettavo. — Sporcano, — disse. — Sporcano come i bambini.

— Come, sporcano?

— Quello che toccano. Sporcano noi, sporcano il letto, il lavoro che fanno, le parole che usano...¹⁹.

And this aspect of what might be termed the virginity of the female — for to the poet she is also a mythological entity — is put with a more balanced accent in *La Spiaggia*; a story which in my opinion is an excellent, balanced and most sensitive work of art. Clelia is the water nymph of the story (and the tale is recounted by the third person who observes her and her husband Doro: Pavese is incidentally always or nearly always — except in *Il Compagno* — the outsider; the man to whom action or participation in the world's movement seems denied) and in a general sense it is study in the basic nature of male and female; where Doro is identified with the countryside. But the following quotation goes to the central theme immediately:

L'amico Guido diceva sempre che quello sciaguattio era il vizio di Clelia, il suo segreto, la sua infedeltà a tutti noi. — Non mi pare, —

¹⁹ *La Bella Estate*, pp. 314-315.

disse Clelia, — lo ascolto nuda e stesa al sole, e chi vuole ci vede. — Chi lo sa, — disse Guido. — Chi sa che discorsi che una donna come voi si fa fare dalla maretta. Immagino quello che vi dite prima, quando siete abbracciati²⁰.

The tale ends with Clelia's pregnancy. The achievement — which Pavese dismissed because the story lacks social conscience one supposes — is in the integral combination of « mito », « ritmo » and « realtà » as he wished; but the central characters move outside mere puppetry. They are distinctly persons.

A further development occurs in that brilliant story *Il diavolo sulle colline* (1948) which is as he rightly defines it « la ricerca paradossale di che cosa siano campagna, civiltà cittadina, vita elegante e vizio », but again he distorts the real emphasis of his achievement which is the evocation of youth at that transition from late adolescence into full masculinity. He noted, incidentally, that an acquaintance had pointed this out to him as he records in the Diaries (December 29, 1949): « R. ti ha detto che in te sente il giovane — « fai paura per questo... ». The brilliance of the story — it lacks perhaps the « mythical » purity of *La Spiaggia* — is its technical accomplishment; for the young men (Pieretto, Oreste and the *racconteur*) are interlinked into the lives of Poli and his wife Gabriella — and Poli is put into perspective against the violence of his relationship with Rosalba who has shot at him and subsequently dies. But apart from the rather superficial treatment of Poli's addiction to drugs — and the background of sophisticated decadence — what remains is not vice or « vita elegante » but the countryside and youth and the death-burdened seasons; the trembling sense of youth feeling and moving into the landscape. And this sensual landscape (as in *Casa in collina* and *Carcere* and *La luna e i falò*) becomes the living if mechanical movement of events themselves.

The story however is structurally effective because it is maintained at a much higher emotional tone than his other stories; and because Pavese has allowed himself a much more complex nexus of relationships and suspense in the working out of the tale (the

²⁰ *La Spiaggia*, p. 48.

characters of Poli and his wife and Oreste's relationship to the wife is balanced against the less mature world of the young men when by themselves; and thus — and this is not true of the other stories in *La Bella Estate* — the perspective is no longer panoramic but is as it were three-dimensional: the « personaggi » have obtained reality in their knowledge of one another). But a longer quotation is called for in order to show at length the stylistic form and the delicacy of dialogue:

In quell'estate andavo in Po, un'ora o due, al mattino. Mi piaceva sudare al remo e poi cacciarmi nell'acqua fredda, ancora buia, che entra negli occhi e li lava. Andavo quasi sempre solo, perché Pieretto a quell'ora dormiva. Se veniva anche lui, mi governava la barca quando io nuotavo. Si risaliva a forza di remo la corrente sotto i ponti, lungo le rive murate, e si sbucava tra gli argini e le piante, sotto il fianco della collina. La collina sovrastante era bella al ritorno, fumando la prima pipa, e per quanto fosse giugno, a quell'ora la velava ancora un'umidità, un fiato fresco di radici. Fu sulle tavole di quella barca che presi gusto all'aria aperta e capii che il piacere dell'acqua e della terra continua di là dall'infanzia, di là da un orto e da un frutteto. Tutta la vita, pensavo in quei mattini, è come un gioco sotto il sole.

Ma non giocavano i sabbiatori che, nell'acqua fino alle cosce, issavano ansando vangate di melma e le rovesciavano nel barcone. Dopo un'ora, due ore, questo scendeva ricolmo, a pelo d'acqua, e l'uomo, magro e annerito, con un panciotto sul torso nudo, governava lentamente col palo. Scaricava la sua sabbia in città, mentre studiavo, discorrevvo, mi riposavo, quelli scendevano e risalivano, scaricavano, saltavano in acqua, cuocevano al sole. Ci pensavo specialmente verso sera, quando cominciava la nostra vita notturna, e quelli rientravano in casa, nelle baracche sul fiume, nei quarti piani popolari, e si buttavano a dormire. O all'osteria si scolavano un bicchiere. Certo, anche loro vedevano il sole e la collina.

Le volte che sudavo sull'acqua, mi restava poi per tutto il giorno il sangue fresco, rinvigorito dall'urto col fiume. Era come se il sole e il peso vivo della corrente mi avessero intriso di una loro virtù, una forza cieca, gioiosa e sorniona, come quella di un tronco o di una bestia dei boschi. Anche Pieretto, quando veniva con me, si godeva la mattinata. Scendendo a Torino sul filo della corrente, gli occhi lavati dal sole e dai tuffi, asciugavamo distesi, e le rive, la collina, le ville, le chiazze d'alberi lontani, s'incidevano nell'aria.

— Uno che facesse tutti i giorni questa vita, — diceva Pieretto, — diventerebbe un animale.

— Basta guardare i sabbiatori...

— Quelli no, — disse lui, — quelli lavorano soltanto. Un animale di salute e di forza... E di egoismo, — aggiunse subito, — di quel dolce egoismo di chi ingrassa.

— Non è una colpa, — brontolai.

— Chi ti accusa? Nessuno ha colpa di esser nato. La colpa è degli altri, sempre degli altri. Noi si va in barca e si fuma la pipa.

— Non siamo abbastanza animali.

Pieretto rideva. — Chi sa cos'è un vero animale, — disse, — un pesce, un merlo, una Incertola... Magari uno scoiattolo... C'è chi dice che dentro a ogni bestia c'è un'anima... un'anima in pena. Questo sarebbe il purgatorio...

— Non c'è niente che sappia di morte — continuò — più del sole, della gran luce, della natura esuberante. Tu fiuti l'aria e senti il bosco, e ti accorgi che piante e bestie se ne infischiano di te. Tutto vive e si macera in se stesso. La natura è la morte...²¹.

Superficial reading might point to similarity with Anderson and Hemingway; but the prevailing and informing tone of ambivalent and contemplative awareness is very different for Pavese essentially puts his accent upon the distance between knower and known world where, as he says, «la natura è la morte...».

13. While any serious study of Pavese's novels will have first to consider the books rather than the life of the man (concentrating, as I have suggested, upon the trilogy of terms he adopted) the life as it is given to us in the Diaries is of some importance. We have mentioned the theme of the 'feminine' — repeated in *Il diavolo sulle colline* in the figure of Gabriella whose intimate character the young men cannot understand — and this is indirectly commented upon from a mythological angle in *I Dialoghi con Leucò* «la cosa meno infelice ch'io abbia messo sulla carta». (Leopardi's *Operette Morali* would seem to be one source; and not only in form perhaps). It becomes increasingly clear that Pavese saw novel writing as one of the means by which he might liberate — or find

²¹ *La Bella Estate*, pp. 120-121. These paragraphs partially illustrate Pavese's attitude to 'nature' and the 'self'; but it is far from easy to construct a general picture of his premisses although certain of the polarities are clear; between nature and self, between nature as a closed system and the myth, etc.

concrete externalisation — for those intuitive insights he was evolving and extending; and it is relevant to see this against his inner conflict in his personal sphere. The words in the Diaries which come to mind (apart from that revealing equation of charity with «annientamento») are those he wrote before committing suicide on August 27, 1950: «Non parole. Un gesto. Non scriverò più». It is a difficult and unpleasant task to offer more than a brief comment on this entry; but at this least the entry should be cited.

For — and this requires much greater amplification — the weight of his work cannot be tested in an American vocabulary which would distort the premisses; rather is one forced to the conclusion that — psychological reasons apart, and they too are indices of a society's *malaise* to which the artist is subject — Pavese was principally concerned with a problem that is culturally European and of this century; although he approached it from a viewpoint which is different from that of its other exponents. It is the problem (which he eventually confronted as a dead-end) of the attainment of reality through action; where, as the entry in the Diaries shows, words lose their feeling; their potency as symbols; and consequently action in any form becomes the only means of exciting 'feeling' into sensibility. It is the existentialist debate to which we look; to the tortured characters that Sartre and Camus have outlined. The words preceding this final entry are: «Tutto questo fa schifo». But Pavese was further and more delicately involved in his 'dark night' (the psychological attainment of action at a more personal level) which is implied in his intuitive — if one does not admit the word mystical — analysis of childhood and *l'estase*.

In order to justly appreciate both his attainment as a writer and his defects we have to place Pavese not only as a novelist but, in a limited sense, as a social critic; and it is here that *I Dialoghi con Leucò* have essentially achieved such criticism. But it is criticism, let us remember, based upon poetic insight. The novel in fact is not a vehicle which easily contains the intuitive «moment»; and as we have already implied Pavese's formulation of 'ritmo' is

much nearer to Joyce and Proust than to the American tradition at large. In the *Dialoghi* he achieved what he set out to achieve, for the dialogue form allowed him to fully expand his thought without the trappings of an « ambiente socialmente determinato »:

Dioniso. — I mortali raccontano le storie col sangue.

Demetra. — E ti pare che questo sia degno di noi? Ti sei pur chiesto che cosa saremmo senza di loro, sai che un giorno potranno staccarsi di noi dèi. Vedi dunque che il sangue, questo sangue meschino, t'importa.

Dioniso. — Ma che vuoi che gli diamo? Qualunque cosa ne faranno sempre sangue.

Demetra. — C'è un solo modo, e tu lo sai.

Dioniso. — Di'.

Demetra. — Dare un senso a quel loro morire.

Dioniso. — Come dici?

Demetra. — Insegnargli la vita beata.

Dioniso. — Ma è un tentare il destino, Dèo. Sono mortali²².

But as Pavese continues once mortals have attained immortality (it is implied through the Christian sacrifice) they will negatively see in bread and wine « carne e sangue » not to placate death but to gain the « eterno che li aspetta ». The flow of blood does not cease.

14. However, the question of whether mystical insight can have any systematic meaning except as revealed religion takes us well beyond the boundaries of this comment on Pavese's stories: but it is certainly one of the main centres of dispute. Pavese pertinently quoted twice the lines from *Lear* which, as he noted, Melville had underlined in his copy of the play:

man must endure
his going hence e'en as his coming hither.
Ripeness is all²³.

La luna e i falò because it accepts to some extent the Proustian standpoint allowed Pavese finally to place *both* tragedy and the individual moment within the same structure; and although aesthet-

²² *Dialoghi con Leucò*, p. 190.

²³ The quotations will be found on pp. 187 and 360 of *Letteratura americana*.

ically it has not an appropriate form it does manage to deepen the reader's appreciation into an integral experience of these two polarities; and this is the novel's achievement. Time — undoubtedly the major concern of European novelists since Proust — is given its due importance and consequently the presentation of the « creation of characters » as such regains value. The quotation from *Lear* is of course the full expression of this intuition which seems so divided in its personal and collective aspects as Pavese knew.

In as far as such a brief comment can reach any final conclusion — and I have indicated here and there where my remarks need expansion — the main emphasis in his relationship to American literature and in his development as a story-writer of distinction and sensibility can be put in his own words²⁴ — in an excerpt from an article published posthumously:

Ma adesso che ci rendiamo conto della contemporanea molteplicità della cultura, con ciò stesso possiamo dissociare la nostra vita spirituale della decadenza della singola cultura toccataci. Il semplice fatto che ne possiamo mettere a confronto e far parlare almeno due — l'americana e la romantico-europea — chiarisce che siamo relativamente liberi di fronte a entrambe e che insomma stiamo lavorando a costruirne una comprensiva, più complessa, di cui le due in questione non saranno che componenti provinciali²⁵.

While it is doubtful whether this optimism is either justifiable or commendable, Pavese without question found some liberation for his intuition in his contact with American novelists and poets; and

²⁴ A more leisurely survey would have to consider the general influence of American literature on such contemporary writers as Moravia, Vittorini and others — and Pavese owed a debt to Vittorini — together with a more detailed analysis of the parallel influence from (i) the group of existentialist writers in France and (ii) the Joyce-Proust 'psychological novel' with its transformation of novel writing in its attitude towards the conception of 'self' and 'time'. These influences in their turn can only be properly understood if they are placed against the current discussion of Marxist and post-Kierkegaardian philosophy; for without this orientation both sides of the picture lose their focus. There is the further problem that for the critic it is easier to discuss writers with intellectual systems or pseudo-systems; while artists of similar stature or of greater importance may not offer such a foothold for analysis. In a different field this is exemplified by the critical attention given to Pablo Picasso and the comparative neglect of Braque.

²⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 262-263.

although as we have suggested this 'borrowing' was a complex one — technical rather than emotive, for his philosophical premisses are profoundly European in our opinion — it certainly shaped the general form, structure and dialogue of his stories; the critical vocabulary he adopted indeed tends to hide rather than reveal his intentions. Yet finally this estrangement from his own culture enabled him to find that self-knowledge which is the condition of analysis of the world as known; thus it is that the *racconteur* in *La luna e i falò* after his sojourn in the States can say:

Il fatto è che Cinto — come me da ragazzo — queste cose non le sapeva, e nessuno nel paese le sapeva, se non forse qualcuno che se ne era andato.

RICHARD H. CHASE