



P E N G U I N



C L A S S I C S

CESARE PAVESE

THE MOON AND THE BONFIRES

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CESARE PAVESE was born in 1908 in Santo Stefano Belbo, a village in the hills of Piedmont, about 80 km south-east of Turin. Most of his life would be spent divided between the village, where his grandparents had lived, and Turin, where his family had their home. A friend of the anti-Fascist intellectuals Leone Ginzburg and Giulio Einaudi, he became part of the group that built up what is still one of Italy's most prestigious publishers, Giulio Einaudi Editore. Initially he worked as a translator (of Melville, Joyce and Faulkner), then as an editor, at the same time publishing his own poetry and then a string of successful novels, most notably *The House on the Hill* and *The Moon and the Bonfires*. Never actively anti-Fascist himself, he was nevertheless sent into internal exile in Calabria for eight months in 1935, for having aided other subversives. Shy of celebrity, never a crowd-pleaser, uneasy with women and tormented by his failure to participate in the War, Pavese became known as the most candid and uncompromising of Italy's novelists, developing a style that was at once cryptic, lyrical, reflective and dramatic. He killed himself in 1950, shortly after receiving Italy's most prestigious literary prize, the Strega.

TIM PARKS grew up in London, studied at Cambridge and Harvard and moved to Italy in 1981. He presently lives in Milan. Well known for his non-fiction writings on Italy – *Italian Neighbours*, *An Italian Education*, *Italian Life* – and his novels – *Europa* (shortlisted for the Booker Prize), *Destiny*, *In Extremis* – he has translated a number of Italian writers, in particular Niccolò Machiavelli, Giacomo Leopardi, Alberto Moravia, Italo Calvino, Antonio Tabucchi and Roberto Calasso. He has twice been awarded the John Florio Prize for Translation from the Italian.

CESARE PAVESE

The Moon and the Bonfires

Translated with an Introduction by

TIM PARKS

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Timeline

- 1908 9 September:** Cesare Pavese is born in Santo Stefano Belbo, in Piedmont, 80 km from Turin. The family is made up of his father, Eugenio, a court official in Turin, his mother, Consolina, and his sister, Maria, born in 1902. Between Maria's birth and Cesare's, two brothers and a sister were born and died. Because of his mother's poor health, Cesare is sent to a wet nurse in a nearby village. The family actually resides in Turin, but spends their summers in Santo Stefano Belbo, the father's birthplace.
- 1914 2 January:** Cesare's father dies of a brain tumour. In autumn Maria falls ill with typhus and the family stays the winter and through to the next summer in Santo Stefano. This is the only entire year Pavese spends in the village, which gives the setting for *The Moon and the Bonfires*. During this time he meets his lifelong friend Pinolo Scaglione, son of the local carpenter, described as Nuto in the novel. For the next few years Pinolo would live with the Pavese family in Turin so he could attend school in the city.
- 1916** Cesare's mother sells the property in Santo Stefano and moves the family to Reagle, just outside Turin.
- 1922** The March on Rome and the beginning of the Fascist regime.
- 1923** Pavese attends the famous D'Azeglio Liceo Classico (high school) where his Italian teacher is the celebrated anti-Fascist Augusto Monti; Monti was to be an important influence on many children of the Turin intelligentsia.

- 1925 Pavese waits for hours in the rain for a meeting with a cabaret dancer who doesn't keep their date; as a result he develops pleurisy and misses three months of school.
- 1926 Pavese's classmate Elico Baraldi commits suicide. Pavese also contemplates killing himself. He develops a vocation for literature and starts to write poetry. In the autumn he enrolls at the University of Turin and studies English and American literature, particularly Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis and Walt Whitman. He becomes friends with anti-Fascist intellectuals Leone Ginzburg (later husband of Natalia Ginzburg) and Giulio Einaudi (whose father would be the second president of Italy after the war).
- 1930 Pavese takes his degree with a thesis on Walt Whitman but is refused a university job. His mother dies and Cesare moves to live with his sister in an apartment in central Turin. He will live there with very few intervals until his death. The same year he takes up a post teaching English and translates Sinclair Lewis, Nobel Prizewinner that year, for the publisher Bemporad.
He begins a relationship with Tina Pizzardo, an active anti-Fascist agitator.
- 1931 Translates Melville's *Moby-Dick* for the publisher Frassinelli.
- 1933 In order to get a teaching post he becomes a member of the Fascist Party, but later blames his sister for having put pressure on him to do this. Translates Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.
Giulio Einaudi starts his publishing house and makes Leone Ginzburg director.
- 1934 Leone Ginzburg is arrested for anti-Fascist activity. Pavese starts to work for Einaudi in his place. He also replaces Ginzburg for a year as editor of the avant-garde magazine *Cultura*.
- 1935 Pavese allows Tina Pizzardo to receive letters from an anti-Fascist conspirator at the address where he lives with his sister. During a police raid, these letters are discovered and Pavese is briefly imprisoned, then sentenced to three

years' internal exile in Brancaleone Calabro on the southern tip of Calabria. He arrives in Calabria on 3 August.

In Calabria he begins a diary that he keeps to the end of his life, mainly concerned with aesthetic and moral issues.

When Tina does not write to him in his place of exile, he petitions the Fascist authorities for clemency, explaining that the letters were not meant for him.

1936 While Pavese is in Calabria his first volume of poetry, *Lavorare stanca* (*Work's Tiring*), is published in Turin.

Pavese writes directly to Mussolini, protesting that he has never been involved in anti-Fascist activity. Granted clemency, he returns to Turin on 19 March. On his arrival he is told that Tina is engaged to be married to someone else. Pavese suffers a breakdown.

1937 Pavese resumes his intense work of translation, translating authors such as Don Passos, Steinbeck, Dickens, Daniel Defoe and Gertrude Stein. He also writes his own poems and short stories.

1938 Giulio Einaudi appoints Pavese to a permanent position in his publishing house. His responsibilities include guaranteeing the translation of 2,000 pages a year.

1939 Pavese writes his first novel, *Il carcere* (*Prison*), which would be published ten years later, and the novel *Paesi tuoi* (*The Harvesters*), published in 1941.

1940 Pavese proposes marriage to Fernanda Pivano, an ex-pupil of his and a future translator and critic of American literature. She declines the offer, but they remain close. He writes *La bella estate* (*The Beautiful Summer*) which would be published in 1949.

10 June: Italy enters the Second World War.

1941 Pavese completes the novel *La spiaggia* (*The Beach*), published in 1942. The publication of *Paesi tuoi* brings Pavese his first major literary acclaim.

1943 Giulio Einaudi sends Pavese to Rome where he receives his call-up card ordering him to join the army. However, owing to his serious asthma he is sent to a military hospital on the outskirts of Turin; six months later he is relieved of military duties.

8 *September*: Italy surrenders to the Allies. The German army invades Italy from the north, occupying Turin. The Einaudi publishing house is placed under Fascist control.

Pavese retreats to the village of Serralunga di Crea where his sister is living.

December: to escape a German round-up of men of military age, Pavese asks for refuge at a monastery in the nearby village of Trevisio, where he teaches in exchange for food and board until the end of the war.

1944 4 *April*: Pavese's friend Leone Ginzburg dies in a Fascist prison in Rome. Pavese will not find out until after the war.

1945 *April*: Pavese returns to Turin and becomes editorial director of Einaudi Editore. Discovering that many of his friends have died in the anti-Fascist struggle, he enrolls in the Communist Party, writes for the Communist paper *L'Unità* and speaks of a sense of guilt over his non-participation in the partisan cause.

July: Pavese again proposes marriage to Fernanda Pivano, who again declines.

August: Pavese goes to work for Einaudi in Rome where he meets Italo Calvino, who eventually joins him at the publishers.

1946 Pavese writes *Dialoghi con Leucò (Dialogues with Leucò)*, a philosophical and creative work interpreting human experience through Greek mythology.

1947 Pavese returns to Turin where, between November and the following February, he writes *La casa in collina (The House on the Hill)*.

1948 Pavese writes *Il diavolo sulle colline (The Devil in the Hills)*.

1949 *March–May*: Pavese writes *Tra donne sole (Among Women Only)*.

September–November: Pavese writes *La luna e i falò (The Moon and the Bonfires)*.

1950 Pavese falls in love with American actress Constance Dowling and dedicates his new novel to her. In April *La luna e i falò* is published.

June: Pavese is awarded the Strega, Italy's foremost literary award, for *La bella estate*.

July: Following the failure of his relationship with Constance Dowling, Pavese has a brief relationship with seventeen-year-old Romilda Bollati, the daughter of a work colleague.

26 August: Pavese kills himself with an overdose of barbiturates in a room of the Hotel Roma near Turin railway station.

Introduction

‘It’s like I’m going crazy,’ Pavese wrote to a friend on 17 July 1949, ‘because I’ve had a great intuition – a wondrous vision almost (cowsheds of course, and sweat, peasants, copper sulphate and manure, etc.); on it I plan to build a modest *Divine Comedy*.’

Two months later, on 18 September, the author began to write, and by 9 November the masterpiece was done. Since Pavese was editorial director of his own publisher, Einaudi, it’s hardly surprising that publication was equally rapid; *The Moon and the Bonfires* was in the bookshops in April 1950. ‘It’s the real thing . . .’ he wrote to a friend, ‘the book I’ve had in me longest and that I most enjoyed writing. So much so that I won’t be writing anything else for a while, or maybe ever. It’s not smart to tempt the gods too often.’

Perhaps this ominous reflection came too late. The following August, after a tumultuous summer in which he was awarded Italy’s most prestigious literary prize, the Strega (for a previous novel), then rejected first by the woman he loved, then by her sister, and finally by the seventeen-year-old daughter of a colleague, Pavese retired to a hotel room in his home town, Turin, and killed himself with an overdose of barbiturates. He was forty-one. ‘Not too much gossip, please,’ his death note concluded.

It is a disquieting story, and what needs to be said from the outset is that for any reader Pavese is a challenge. Opening his novels, we are quickly seduced, but the enchantment is never an easy one. Reading, we are gripped; but reflecting on what we have read, troubled. Certainly, many readers will be deeply troubled by the closing and clinching pages of *The Moon and*

the Bonfires. One would have to go to the Thomas Hardy of *Jude the Obscure*, or, in Italian literature, to Verga or Leopardi, to find such a profound but vivid pessimism.

Readers are not alone in experiencing this mix of attraction and uneasiness when encountering Pavese. The author's friends, acquaintances and colleagues also found it difficult to establish a stable position in relation to him, while he himself found it even more difficult to hold a steady course in relation to them. He spoke and wrote frequently of being at once deeply drawn to life and at the same time disgusted by it. He sought lovers and friends and intense situations, then invariably withdrew from them. He strove for recognition as a writer but feared that to achieve it would mean he had compromised his principles. 'Don't talk about my literary successes,' he wrote to an admirer after winning the Strega. 'These things make one ashamed for the stream of gossip they dredge up, the stench they reveal in our professional world.' In short, Pavese doesn't come to us for praise, or even approval, and it's precisely as he tries to put a damper on our enthusiasm that we feel more powerfully attracted to him.

Since *The Moon and the Bonfires* has an obvious autobiographical anchoring – in many ways it is about the need to be anchored in a place and a community – some comment on Pavese's life is necessary. He was born in September 1908 in the village of Santo Stefano Belbo, in the hills of Piedmont, an area called Le Langhe. This was where his father, Eugenio, came from and where the family spent the hot summer months, but ordinary life was 80 km away in Turin, where Eugenio was a clerk in the city court. Cesare was the baby of a family that had suffered much. Of the four children born before him, only his sister, Maria, six years his elder, had survived. At Cesare's birth his mother was too ill to look after him and he had to be sent to a wet nurse in another village. Then, when he was five, his father died of a brain tumour, and in the same year Maria contracted typhus (as does one of the girls in *The Moon and the Bonfires*). Coping with these dramas alone, his mother imposed a rigid, almost hostile, discipline. All Pavese's writing would betray an anxiety that he would never satisfy the expectations

of the adults around him; he seemed condemned to longing for an unattainable maturity. His father's death, for example, continued to haunt him, as though his having been too young to be involved, too fragile – his mother judged – to attend the funeral, somehow excluded him from the life that mattered. This sense of exclusion, insignificance and inadequacy would be a constant obsession. Meantime the long war of attrition with his austere mother was mediated by the accommodating Maria, in whose home, after her marriage, Cesare would spend most of his life, but living there quite separately, as his friend Natalia Ginzburg would later observe, shut up in his room, 'like a boy, or a stranger'.

The year of his father's death and sister's near-fatal illness was the one year the family spent entirely in the country, Cesare starting school that autumn in the village of Santo Stefano. Here he met Pinolo Scaglione, son of a local carpenter, who was to become his lifelong friend. Returning to Turin after Maria had recovered, the family took Pinolo to live with them so he could attend school in the city. Yet Pinolo was eight years older than Cesare, reinforcing the boy's impression of being a junior figure around people more experienced than himself. With no more disguise than a change of name (to Nuto), Pinolo plays a key role in *The Moon and the Bonfires* where the narrator and author alter ego admires and envies him for his practicality, his generous humanitarian socialism, his knowing how to play a musical instrument and his success with the girls. Yet for all this apparent solidity, the story as it unfolds will reveal Nuto's weaknesses and limitations, to the point that at the end he is almost a pathetic figure. A central irony of Pavese's novels is that his main characters yearn for adulthood and competence, only to discover that life itself is beyond all taming or controlling, and the world they wished to become part of is desperately unattractive.

Spending the school year in the city and summers in the country, the young Pavese began to attribute mutually exclusive values to the two territories. Turin was the domain of modern, sophisticated intellectuality, an environment in which he quickly found he could compete; he was book smart. Santo Stefano

Belbo, on the other hand, was the place of timeless sensuality and uncompromising, irrational physical reality. His writing would be packed with the torrid intensity of the Langhe summers, its hills and vineyards, washed-out greens and browns, sultry suns and violent storms, but always seen from the position of an outsider, someone never fully admitted to the local community and its mysteries. The desire, frequently expressed in his poetry, that the two worlds be reconciled or somehow superimposed tends to break down under the conviction that he is condemned to making an impossible choice between the different ways of life they represent. 'I am made up of many parts that do not blend,' he would tell his friend and biographer, Davide Lajolo.

In *The Moon and the Bonfires*, the narrator and protagonist, nicknamed Eel, has made a life for himself in business, first in America, now in Genoa. Yet after twenty years away, following the War, he is magnetically drawn back to Santo Stefano, where he grew up, not so much out of nostalgia, but from a need to heal some fatal split in his identity and bring his two selves together. However, the more he rediscovers the timeless world of the Langhe, where the seasons turn while history appears to stand still, the more frightening and disturbing it becomes. City life is child's play in comparison. 'My stories,' Pavese would remark, 'are about a contemplative figure watching events that are beyond him.'

During adolescence, Pavese's yearning for maturity understandably focused on the desire to have a girlfriend. From the beginning, an unhappy pattern of behaviour was established. Cesare would invariably fall in love with the kind of brash, glamorous girl unlikely to be interested in a shy, diffident intellectual. In his last year at high school he made a date with a cabaret singer and waited for her from 6 p.m. until midnight. She didn't show. It was raining hard. Pavese was off school sick for three months, then threw himself into his studies and writing to overcome the disappointment. The poems he began to produce in this period describe a deeply conflicted attitude to sex, where women are infinitely desirable, necessary even, as soil is necessary to a plant, one cannot become a man without a woman, but