

A black and white photograph of a bonfire. The fire is in the foreground, with bright flames and glowing embers. In the background, several people are visible, their forms silhouetted against the light of the fire. The overall atmosphere is dark and dramatic.

**THE MOON AND
THE BONFIRES**
CESARE PAVESE

TRANSLATED BY
R. W. FLINT

INTRODUCTION BY
MARK RUDMAN

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS
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THE MOON AND THE BONFIRES

CESARE PAVESE (1908–1950) was born on his family's vacation farm in the country outside of Turin in northern Italy. He graduated from the University of Turin, where he wrote a thesis on Walt Whitman, beginning a continuing engagement with English-language literature that was to lead to his influential translations of *Moby-Dick*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Three Lives*, and *Moll Flanders*, among other works. Briefly exiled by the Fascist regime to Calabria in 1935, Pavese returned to Turin to work for the new publishing house of Giulio Einaudi, where he eventually became the editorial director. In 1936 he published a book of poems, *Lavorare stanca* (*Hard Labor*), and then turned to writing novels and short stories. Pavese won the Strega Prize for fiction, Italy's most prestigious award, for *The Moon and the Bonfires* in 1950. Later the same year, after a brief affair with an American actress, he committed suicide. Pavese's posthumous publications include his celebrated diaries, essays on American literature, and a second collection of poems, entitled *Verrà la morte e avrà i tuoi occhi* (*Death Will Come and Will Have Your Eyes*). *The Selected Works of Cesare Pavese*, including the novels *The Beach*, *The House on the Hill*, *Among Women Only*, and *The Devil in the Hills*, is also published by NYRB Classics.

MARK RUDMAN is the author of seven books of poetry and three books of prose. His poetic trilogy *The Millennium Hotel*, *Provoked in Venice*, and *Rider* received the National Book Critics Circle Award. *The Couple* is his most recent collection of poems.

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INTRODUCTION

Each one of Pavese's novels revolves around a hidden theme, something unsaid which is the real thing he wants to say and which can be expressed only by not mentioning it.

—ITALO CALVINO

1.

Cesare Pavese's *The Moon and the Bonfires* may be the most American novel ever written in a foreign language.

Pavese, one of the finest Italian writers of the twentieth century, was born in 1908 in Santo Stefano Belbo in the Langhe hills of Lower Piedmont, which is the setting of this novel. No one has better conveyed the pleasures of walking in the hills, alone, or with a dog, or a friend, or a lover. Raised in Turin, he spent his vacations on his parents' farm.

When Pavese was six, his father died from an incurable brain tumor. His mother, who had lost three children, assumed a harsh authoritarian role. His father's absence and his mother's coldness made him withdraw. The curious thing about Pavese, with his intense sense of inner solitude, is that he never became a recluse:

In the days when Italian prose was "an extended conversation with itself" and poetry was "a suffered silence," I was conversing, in both poetry and prose, with peasants, working men and women, sand-diggers, prostitutes, convicts, and kids. I say this with no idea of

boasting. I liked those people then, I like them now.
They were like me.

But he was often unreachable in the presence of his friends and the people who loved him, as his friend Natalia Ginzburg attests:

Sometimes, during the evening, he would come in search of us; then he just sat, pale, with his scarf about his neck, twisting strands of hair around his fingers or crumpling a piece of paper; throughout the whole evening he would not say a single word, or answer any of our questions. Suddenly, at last, he would snatch up his overcoat and leave.

What Pavese and the narrator of *The Moon and the Bonfires* have in common is a sense of exclusion, a sense of internal exile that finds its counterpoint in physical exile: in the 1930s Pavese was briefly exiled to Calabria for anti-Fascist activities; in the book the narrator goes into self-imposed exile to America to escape the Fascists who are hot on his heels.

Pavese discovered his affinity with America and American literature at the University of Turin, where he wrote a thesis on Walt Whitman. For most of his adult life he worked for the Turin publisher Einaudi as an editor and translator, bringing established classics like *Moll Flanders* and *David Copperfield* into Italian. His masterful translation of *Moby-Dick* became his touchstone, and he found his niche as the preeminent Italian translator of American literature.

The contemporary authors Pavese translated—Gertrude Stein, Sherwood Anderson, and John Dos Passos—helped him to throw out the apparatus of the naturalistic novel (with its reliance on furniture and cause and effect), and to develop a style of his own that was both plainspoken and lyrical. He became an Americanist, a student of idioms and slang. I noticed

a connection between the barn-burning section of *The Moon and the Bonfires* and William Faulkner's *The Hamlet* before I discovered that this was the final novel that Pavese translated; Faulkner's backwater know-nothings and operators are an American counterpoint to the have-nots of the impoverished, rural Italian setting in *Moon*.

There is a disquieting European postwar ambiance to *Moon* that is reminiscent of another key work written in 1949: *Waiting for Godot*. American readers not familiar with Pavese's fiction are probably acquainted with the Pavesian mood through Antonioni's films, such as *Il Grido* and *L'Avventura*. Curiously, one of Antonioni's best (and least-shown films), *Le Amiche*, was adapted from Pavese's penultimate novel, known in English as *Among Women Only*.

During his short life, Pavese produced a diverse body of work and distinguished himself brilliantly in many genres: poetry (*Hard Labor*), fiction (short stories, novellas, and novels), dialogues (*Dialogues with Leucò*), and the diary (*The Burning Brand*, published posthumously). For every book he wrote—even the diary—he had a program, a defined intention. He was always the visionary realist. "A true revelation," he claims in his foreword to *Dialogues with Leucò*, "can only emerge from stubborn concentration on a single problem. I have nothing in common with experimentalists, adventurers, with those who travel in strange regions. The surest, and the quickest, way for us to arouse the sense of wonder is to stare, unafraid, at a single object." He was never an aficionado of spontaneity and appeared to exhaust every genre he undertook. There is something inherently dark about a writer going to the end of an idea; because the end of that idea is usually death. This sense of exhausting a form is nowhere more evident than in *The Moon and the Bonfires*.

Knowing that Pavese committed suicide by an overdose of sleeping pills in August of 1950, four months after the novel was published, interferes with our ability to read both this

and his other books simply as works of literature. It's hard not to keep an eye peeled and an ear to the ground for signs that predict his demise. There was a systematic quality to his self-destruction. He was as lucid about his passion for suicide as he was about the strategy he devised for every book. He wasn't addicted to any substance; he was addicted to love. Neil Young captures this malaise in a few lines: "I fell in love with the actress / She was playing a part that I could understand"; and these lyrics are like an epitaph to Pavese's doomed love affair with the blond American film actress Constance Dowling, which sent him into his final deadly tailspin. He sought to control his own future at every turn and ultimately his destiny. It's said that he was always playing at, if not threatening, suicide, like someone who keeps a revolver with one bullet in the chamber on his desk to remind himself that he can end it at any time. Playing—even deadly playfulness—demands letting go of the past and the future and attending fully to the present. I think he knew he couldn't keep from killing himself much longer when he began *The Moon and the Bonfires* and that this knowledge helped him exorcise his fear of failure and allowed him to write with the abandon of one who has nothing to lose. And *Moon*, with its awesome transformations of American sources, its barn burnings, soccer games, horse races, and distinctive eccentrics, is Pavese's most demonically playful book.

2.

Pavese's poetics of exclusion reached a culmination in *The Moon and the Bonfires*. The novel takes place after the Second World War, when the narrator returns from America, where he has made a fortune, to Santo Stefano Belbo, the village where he grew up, in a quest to reunite himself with the landscape of his childhood and peasant roots. A foundling, a bastard, who owes his existence to a family that took him in

out of desperation for a government stipend, he is like a displaced person who has little reason to be sentimental about his past. And yet he registers horror at the loss of familiar landmarks: houses burned down, the hills leveled, the rows of hazel cut, the rye fields gone, the pine tree by the gate at the Mora cut down by the nefarious efficiency expert Nicoletto because "beggars used to stand in its shadows and beg . . . He wasn't satisfied with eating up half the property. He didn't even want a poor man to stop in its shade." Sentence after sentence registers absence: what was no longer is. Presence exists mainly in memory. The only absolute is sadness.

The plot of *The Moon and the Bonfires* turns on a devastating sequence: a brutal murder/suicide and the burning of the barn where the narrator lived as a child. This incident ignites early memories. When Padrino, his adoptive father, sold his farm, the narrator, who was thirteen, went to live and work at the Mora, a larger farm across the river. There he met another farmhand, Nuto, whom he came to idolize, and Irene, Silvia, and Santina, the beautiful daughters of his master, Sor Matteo.

The foundling is a kind of minus man. He does not receive a salary for his labor, only his board; his room is among the animals in the barn. He has no status; he doesn't even merit a name. But his childhood nickname, "Eel" (given to him affectionately by Sor Matteo's wife, Emilia), gives us a sense of his fertility, toughness, resilience, and ability to home from far away. As in Eugenio Montale's poem "The Eel," written at the same time as *Moon*, the image of the eel signifies a fusion of matter and spirit and embodies what is necessary to survive in a dark time: to remain a "green soul seeking / life where there's nothing but stinging / drought, desolation" (translation by William Arrowsmith).

In any case, what first strikes the reader of *The Moon and the Bonfires* is not the narrator but his old friend Nuto, who is now regarded as an exemplary figure. Nuto is full of re-

solve: "Nuto is Nuto, and knows better than I do what is right." For a while, he dominates the book oppressively. He is the introvert's nightmare. The first time I tried to read *Moon* years ago, I threw it down midway because I couldn't bear to have the narrator defer to him one more time. I found him migrainously rigid, stolid, retrograde, cowardly, bullying. Nuto is one of those people whom everybody likes, or so you're told when you move to a small town. If your house is burning down he'll come with a bucket. He plays the clarinet in the local band. He knows how things are done. If you're having a problem with your well or a more delicate decision, ask Nuto. He'll set you straight. You exchange waves at soccer games. It's a sign—he accepts you.

Nuto, a partisan during the war, now the village Marxist, retains a luster of heroism. He can know his own mind because he has never questioned the basic tenets of his existence and has always been rooted in a place. The narrator idealizes his stolidity: "Something has also happened to the one who never moved, a destiny—that idea of his that things must be understood, made better, that the world is badly made and it's in everyone's interest to change it."

There is an artful mendacity in the presentation of Nuto. He is a false center, a conjurer's trick, a marker to throw you off the path. As *The Moon and the Bonfires* proceeds, Nuto is increasingly exposed, his limitations defined. He is enormously tight-lipped; the narrator finds it difficult to pry the truth out of him, but it becomes evident that his reticence is a defense that enables him to go on. His moral stance turns out to be far less convincing or exhilarating than the electric personality of Santina—the problematic heroine. And though he may take up a lot of space, he is not as vivid, or rounded, to use E. M. Forster's term, as some of the more minor characters.

Nuto was modeled on Pavese's friend Pino Scaglione, whom Pavese had known all his life, had kept in touch with, and used as his regional informant for the book. He is a

demonstration of a universal principle, a familiar pattern, of what I call the “everything-nothing syndrome”—the human tendency to project one’s fantasy of wholeness onto others. And what’s annoying is not Nuto but the *I*’s idealization of him. The narrator’s relentless search for the truth about his past leads not to a solution to his deracinated condition, but to an old crime: the brutal murder of Santina, the youngest daughter of Sor Matteo, by the partisans toward the end of the war. The crime of this ostensibly positive hero was one of omission: Nuto’s attitude about women’s roles tragically overrode the exigencies of the moment—never mind that Santina fought all night with the partisans in the hills, yelling to the Fascists that she knew every one of them and that they didn’t scare her! Or that she put herself at risk to save Nuto’s life several times. Judgment was not Santina’s strong point; everyone knew she needed guidance. Had he offered it, she might have become a hero.

Nuto has his roots in the nineteenth century; the narrator has his roots in the twenty-first. Nuto may be an exemplary character, but the example he sets is the wrong one. And maybe that’s why he’s so exasperating—exasperating enough to cause several of Pavese’s most astute critics, including R. W. Flint, to have doubts about this novel, celebrated though it is. Critics for whom Pavese often can do no wrong have been quick to find flaws in *The Moon and the Bonfires*. I don’t agree with their caviling, but even if they were right, what could be more fitting than if *Moon* were the founding, the unwanted child, among Pavese’s mature works?

3.

What makes Pavese particularly wonderful is that the difficulty of his work has nothing to do with any stylistic idiosyncrasy. Although a few of the events take place in the present (the barn burning, the discovery of the corpses on

the hillside), the main action of the book comes from the narrator's drawing out of Nuto the terrible details of what happened to Santina.

Pavese, self-described man alone, *l'uomo solo*, was always on the outside looking out. The *I* is like one of Ovid's hunters spying on women when they're literally letting their hair down. Pavese is the most shocking of erotic writers. His erotic touches are telescoped, precise, evocative, like Thomas Wyatt's description of his mistress "with naked foote, stalking in my chamber." When the narrator falls into a reverie over Sor Matteo's older daughters, Silvia and Irene, Pavese doesn't give you naked breasts and sex, but glances, glimpses that take you out of yourself to a place where desire and fear are wonderfully and horribly mingled:

I didn't say anything, and sometimes on summer days, sitting by the Belbo, I thought about Silvia. Irene was so blond that I didn't dare think about her. But one day, when Irene had come to let Santina play in the sand and no one else was there, I watched them run and stop by the water. I was hiding behind an alder bush. Santina shouted and pointed to something on the opposite bank. And then Irene put down her book, bent over, took off her shoes and stockings, and, blond as she was with her white legs, lifted her skirt up to her knees and waded in.

What is remarkable here is not only the charged, delicate eroticism of the description, but also the way that Pavese gives us, in a phrase, and with extraordinary tenderness and sensitivity, Santina's willfulness. What is that something on the opposite bank if not a foreshadowing of Santina's desire to know what's on the other side? The magnetic girl is like a blond Holly Golightly who gets in over her head in the tense political situation during the war. She grows up to be a knock-

out who thrives on men's attention. Sex is her *métier*. It's not in her nature to register that acts have repercussions—there's danger in being a courier, a go-between. The narrator gradually elicits from Nuto that she felt confined at the Mora, disgusted with her uncle Nicoletto, and escaped to Canelli ("the world") where she becomes a schoolteacher, "but being the kind of girl she was . . . found work at Fascist headquarters. . . ." It's her chance to live the high life, ride in open cars with the wind in her hair, and dine in the villas of the rich. "What drove her," Italo Calvino wrote in his essay "Pavese and Human Sacrifice," "was an obscure desire to surrender herself to the abyss of war." But in wartime Italy nothing is neutral, everyone must be hunted down.

The sudden reversal at the end, when Nuto at last reveals that Baracca, the local leader of the partisans, suspected Santina of being a spy, and ordered her execution, is shocking and should cause the reader to cry out, like the chorus of a Greek tragedy. We are the victims of false clues and a deceptively desultory style. We are thrown abruptly into a world of intrigue—forced to confront an atavistic, primitive, irremediable reality—and we aren't prepared for anything so intense. Pavese was steeped in folklore, with a special interest in the Aztecs, and the burning of Santina's body, which leaves a scar on the hillside like the bed of a bonfire, is like a ritual sacrifice. The reason she is burned rather than buried after her execution is unspeakably horrible: she cast such a spell over men while alive that too many would want to possess her; someone would dig up her body if she were merely covered with dirt.

4.

Pavese's *I* is the *not-I*. This *not-I* persisted until there was nothing left. *The Moon and the Bonfires* is a book about a man who is utterly trapped in the past—a past that never

held any interest or possibility for him. He gets away, spending twenty years in America, but can't stay away; he comes back, hoping to find someone who will give him a template for a viable existence in his native land. He's a fluid personage—the bastard has few boundaries—capable of interacting with people no matter where they stand in the world, even if their footing is less solid than his own. Eel is the only one who can identify with the plight of the lame boy Cinto, who was orphaned when his father set fire to the barn. The narrator thinks the past holds a secret that will unlock the mystery of his identity. He acts like he's trying to put together the pieces of a puzzle. "I've always noticed that if you give them enough time people will come clean," he says of Nuto. In the end he is led almost inexorably to witness the scar of a terrible primal scene.

Pavese found a style he could live with by pretending to himself that he was an American writer. In this way he introduced a new vernacular pitch into his native language. *The Moon and the Bonfires* is spare and exquisitely lyrical by turns—especially when the narrator moves backward in time:

But how often I'd seen the noisy carts go by, crammed full of women and boys on their way to the fair, to the merry-go-rounds of Castiglione, Cossano, Campetto, everywhere, and I was staying behind with Giulia and Angiolina under the hazel trees or the fig tree or by the side of the bridge, those long summer evenings, looking always at the same vineyards and sky. And then at night you could hear them coming home along the road, singing, laughing, shouting to each other across the Belbo. On evenings like that, a light, a bonfire seen on a distant hill, would make me cry out and roll on the ground because I was poor, because I was a boy, because I was nothing. I was almost happy when a thunder-

storm, a real summer disaster, blew up and drenched their party. But now, just thinking about them, I was missing those times and wanting them back.

The narrator is both afflicted with nostalgia for, and suspicious of, a life shorn of the burden of self-consciousness.

In Pavese's seamless narrative, every sentence stands in isolation from the one that precedes it and the one that will follow. The pause between each sentence is weighted. He comes as close as possible, without disjointedness, to having each sentence be a seminal and terminal act:

It was cold, a dry, dusty cold, and the country was empty. Country was saying too much. As far as you could see, a gray stretch of thorny sand and little mounds that weren't hills, and the power line. . . .

There was time to study every stone in the gravel along the tracks, every tie, the down of a dry thistle, the fat stems of two cacti in the hollow below the road.

The resistance to flow is what gives Pavese's determinedly stark prose its acute impact. The book is studded with arresting images: young men "told stories as big as houses"; "walking the streets you see papers in people's hands as black with headlines as a thunderstorm."

The lyrical passages in *Moon* that engage nature take place when the *I* is alone, as if alone on stage, soliloquizing. (Pavese claimed that Shakespeare was an even greater influence on his work than *Moby-Dick*.) These bursts of pure poetry are mournful and elegiac. The foundling, who left the village out of a "rage at being nobody . . . to come home after everyone had given me up for dead," notices everything. He is empathetic where others are contemptuous, but there is always something separating him from the world he sees so clearly. The narrator's quest to connect with his origins is futile. "It

looked like a destiny. Several times I wondered why, out of so many people once alive, only Nuto and I should be left, why exactly us." If the foundling is not at home in either the city or the country, he can contemplate sheer existence:

Before returning to Oakland that night I went to smoke a cigarette on the grass of the empty embankment, far from the road and the cars. There was no moon but an ocean of stars, as many as the voices of the tree-frogs and crickets. That night, even if Nora had let herself be tumbled on the grass, it wouldn't have satisfied me. The tree frogs wouldn't have stopped their screeching and the cars wouldn't have slowed in their race down the hill and America wouldn't have ended in that highway, in those cities sparkling along the coast. . . . Bacon and eggs, good pay, oranges as big as watermelons, these were nothing, were like those crickets and tree frogs. Was it worth it to have come? Where could I go now? Throw myself off the breakwater?

The prolonged *frisson* the American reader experiences while reading Pavese's work derives from encountering exotic, unfamiliar landscapes, characters, and situations in a downbeat, colloquial style that is eerily familiar. His impersonations of such hard-boiled American writers as Ernest Hemingway, Raymond Chandler, and James M. Cain are matched here by R. W. Flint's relaxed but precise impersonation of Pavese's impersonations. The dialogue between cultures, and the reluctant eloquence of Flint's English as it details the dry, hilly landscapes of Northern Italy and Northern California, make the book deepen upon each reading:

Well, it was a big country, there was some of it for everyone. There were women, there was land, there was money. But nobody had enough, nobody stopped

no matter how much he had, and the fields, even the vineyards, looked like public gardens, fake flower beds like those at railway stations, or else wilderness, burned-over land, mountains of slag. It wasn't a country where you could resign yourself, rest your head and say to others: "For better or worse, you know me. For better or worse, let me live." That was the frightening part. Even among themselves they didn't know each other; you crossed those mountains and saw at every turn in the road that no one had ever stopped there, no one had ever touched them with his hands. So they beat up drunks, threw them in jail, left them for dead. And it wasn't only liquor that made them ugly, it was also bad-tempered women. A day would come when just to touch something, to make himself known, a man would strangle a woman, shoot her in her sleep, crack her head open with a monkey wrench.

All of Pavese's writing, notably *Hard Labor* and *The Devil in the Hills*, is a taut conversation between the city and the country. Pavese never went to America and his rendition of the West in *The Moon and the Bonfires* is a somewhat fantastical, yet believable, concoction derived in large part from movies and the books he translated. The bleak California desert we encounter here seems a deliberate pastiche of his American sources, but Pavese's desultory style creates a delectable tension: the more low-key the tone, the greater the capacity to shock. The master stroke is that the emptiness and unreality of the American scenes correspond to Eel's displaced psyche—almost a projection of his lack of identity, his permanently displaced *I*.

The tone of *The Moon and the Bonfires* is both epic and intimate. The truths are uncovered as the story is told; Pavese's narrative form antedates the psychological novel and looks beyond it; he is more interested in action than introspection.

And his connection to ancient and archaic energies gives his quiet, dry, uninflected style its power to shake us to the root. In *The Moon and the Bonfires* as in *Hard Labor*, Pavese is the poet of the disenfranchised, whom Malcolm Lowry called “those who have nobody them with.” Yet this chronicle of violence and loss has a purity of art, an objectivity, that turns our attention to something beyond the human predicament. The images of moon and bonfire bring to mind the pattern of the seasons, repetition, and ritual, but the novel is symbolic only on the surface. It is permeated by a desire for a conflagration that will wipe the slate clean “for people to begin again.” Pavese didn’t write in deference to any preexisting concept as to what constituted a poem or a novel. The moon and the bonfires, the seasons, the animals, the laborers: what he deferred to was the world.

—MARK RUDMAN