

Classic Poetry Series

Cesare Pavese
- poems -

Publication Date:

2012

Publisher:

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Cesare Pavese(9 September 1908 – 27 August 1950)

Cesare Pavese was an Italian poet, novelist, literary critic and translator; he is widely considered among the major authors of the 20th century in his home country.

Early life and education

Cesare Pavese was born in Santo Stefano Belbo, in the province of Cuneo. It was the village where his father was born and where the family returned for the summer holidays each year. He started infant classes in San Stefano Belbo, but the rest of his education was in schools in Turin. His most important teacher at the time was Augusto Monti, writer and educator, whose writing style was devoid of all rhetoric.

As a young man of letters, Pavese had a particular interest in English-language literature, graduating from the University of Turin with a thesis on the poetry of ["...](#)

Arrest and conviction; the war in Italy

Pavese moved in antifascist circles. In 1935 he was arrested and convicted for having letters from a political prisoner. After a few months in prison he was sent into "confino", internal exile in Southern Italy, the commonly used sentence for those guilty of lesser political crimes. (Carlo Levi and Leone Ginzburg, also from Turin, were similarly sent into confino.) A year later Pavese returned to Turin, where he worked for the left-wing publisher Giulio Einaudi as editor and translator. Natalia Ginzburg also worked there.

Pavese was living in Rome when he was called up into the fascist army, but because of his asthma he spent six months in a military hospital. When he returned to Turin, German troops occupied the streets and most of his friends had left to fight as partisans. Pavese fled to the hills around Serralunga di Crea, near Casale took no part in the armed struggle taking place in that area. During the years in Turin, he was the mentor of the young writer and translator Fernanda Pivano, his former student at the Liceo D'e gave her the American edition of Spoon River Anthology, which came out in Pivano's Italian translation in 1943.

After the war

After the war Pavese joined the Italian Communist Party and worked on the party's newspaper, L'Unità. The bulk of his work was published during this time. Toward the end of his life, he would frequently visit Le Langhe, the area where he was born, where he found great solace. Depression, the failure of a brief love affair with the actress Constance Dowling, to whom his last novel was dedicated, and political disillusionment led him to his suicide by an overdose of barbiturates in 1950. That year he had won the Strega Prize for *La Bella Estate*, comprising three novellas: 'La tenda', written in 1940, 'Il diavolo sulle colline'(1948) and 'Tra donne sole' (1949).

Leslie Fiedler wrote of Pavese's death "...for the Italians, his death has come to have a weight like that of Hart Crane for us, a meaning that penetrates back into his own work and functions as a symbol in the literature of an age." The circumstances of his suicide, which took place in a hotel room, mimic the last scene of *Tra Donne Sole* (Among Women Only), his penultimate book. His last book was 'La Luna e i Falò', published in Italy in 1950 and translated into English as *The Moon and the Bonfires* by Louise Sinclair in 1952.

He was an atheist.

Work themes

The typical protagonist in the works of Pavese is a loner, through choice or through circumstances. His relationships with men and women tend to be temporary and superficial. He may wish to have more solidarity with other people, but he often ends up betraying his ideals and friends; for example in *The Prison*, the political exile in a village in Southern Italy receives a note from another political confinato living nearby, who suggests a meeting. The protagonist rejects a show of solidarity and refuses to meet him. The title of the collection of the two novellas is *Before the Cock Crows*, a reference to Peter's betrayal of Christ before his death.

The Langhe, the area where he spent his summer holidays as a boy, had a great hold on Pavese. It is a land of rolling hills covered in vineyards. It is an area where he felt literally at home, but he recognised the harsh and brutal lives that poor peasants had making a living from the land. Bitter struggles took place between Germans and partisans in this area. The land became part of Pavese's personal mythology.

In *The Moon and the Bonfires*, the protagonist tells a story of drinking beer in a bar in America. A man comes in whom he recognizes as being from the valleys of Le Langhe by his way of walking and his outlook. He speaks to him in dialect

suggesting a bottle of their local wine would be better than the beer. After some years in America, the protagonist returns to his home village. He explores Le Langhe with a friend who had remained in the area. He finds out that so many of his contemporaries have died in sad circumstances, some as partisans shot by the Germans, while a notable local beauty had been executed by partisans as a fascist spy.

Affairs

Dawn on the black hill, and up on the roof
cats drowsing. Last night, there was a boy
who fell off this roof, breaking his back.
The wind ruffles the cool leaves of the trees.
The red clouds above are warm and move slowly.
A stray dog appears in the alley below, sniffing
the boy on the cobblestones, and a raw wail
rises up among chimneys: someone's unhappy.

The crickets were singing all night, and the stars
were blown out by the wind. In dawn's glow,
even the eyes of the cats in love were extinguished,
the cats the boy watched. The female is crying,
no toms are around and nothing can soothe her:
not the tops of the trees, not the red clouds.
She cries to the wide sky, as if it were still night.

The boy was spying on cats making love.
The stray dog sniffs the boy's body and growls;
he got here at dawn, fleeing the glow
that crept down the far hill. Swimming the river
that drenched him as dew drenches fields,
he was finally caught by the light. The bitches
were still howling.

The river runs smoothly,
skimmed by birds that drop from red clouds,
elated to find their river deserted.

Cesare Pavese

Ancestors

Stunned by the world, I reached an age
when I threw punches at air and cried to myself.
Listening to the speech of women and men,
not knowing how to respond, it's not fun.
But this too has passed: I'm not alone anymore,
and if I still don't know how to respond,
I don't need to. Finding myself, I found company.

I learned that before I was born I had lived
in men who were steady and firm, lords of themselves,
and none could respond and all remained calm.
Two brothers-in-law opened a store--our family's
first break. The outsider was serious,
scheming, ruthless, and mean--a woman.
The other one, ours, read novels at work,
which made people talk. When customers came,
they'd hear him say, in one or two words,
that no, there's no sugar, Epsom salts no,
we're all out of that. Later it happened
that this one lent a hand to the other, who'd gone broke.

Thinking of these folks makes me feel stronger
than looking in mirrors and sticking my chest out
or shaping my mouth into a humorless smile.
One of my grandfathers, ages ago,
was being cheated by one of his farmhands,
so he worked the vineyards himself, in the summer,
to make sure it was done right. That's how
I've always lived too, always maintaining
a steady demeanor, and paying in cash.

And women don't count in this family.
I mean that our women stay home
and bring us into the world and say nothing
and count for nothing and we don't remember them.
Each of them adds something new to our blood,
but they kill themselves off in the process, while we,
renewed by them, are the ones to endure.
We're full of vices and horrors and whims--

Cesare Pavese

Black Earth Red Earth

Black earth red earth,
you come from the sea,
from the arid green,
where there are ancient
words and bloody toil
and geranium among rocks—
you don't know how much you bring
of toil and words from the sea,
you're rich like a memory,
like the barren countryside,
you hard and sweetest word,
ancient because of the blood
gathered in the eyes;
young, like a fruit
that is a memory and a season—
your breath rests
under the sky of August,
the olives of your look
sweeten the sea,
and you live and live again
without amazement, certain
like the earth, dark
like the earth, a grinder
of seasons and dreams
that reveals itself under the moon
to be so old, just like
the hands of your mother,
the bowl of the brazier.

Cesare Pavese

Death Will Come With Your Eyes

Death will come with your eyes—
this death that accompanies us
from morning till night, sleepless,
deaf, like an old regret
or a stupid vice. Your eyes
will be a useless word,
a muted cry, a silence.
As you see them each morning
when alone you lean over
the mirror. O cherished hope,
that day we too shall know
that you are life and nothing.

For everyone death has a look.
Death will come with your eyes.
It will be like terminating a vice,
as seen in the mirror
a dead face re-emerging,
like listening to closed lips.
We'll go down the abyss in silence.

Cesare Pavese

End Of Fantasy

This body won't start again. Touching his eye sockets
one feels a heap of earth is more alive,
that the earth, even at dawn, does not keep itself so quiet.
But a corpse is the remains of too many awakenings.

We only have this power: to start
each day of life—before the earth,
under a silent sky—waiting for an awakening.
One is amazed by so much drudgery at dawn;
through awakening within awakening a job is done.
But we live only to shudder
at the labor ahead and to awaken the earth one time.
It happens at times. Then it quiets down along with us.

If touching that face the hand would not shake—
if the live hand would feel alive touching it—
if it's true that that cold is only the cold
of the earth, frozen at dawn,
perhaps it'd be an awakening, and things that keep quiet
under the dawn, would speak up again. But my hand
trembles, and of all things resembles a hand
that doesn't move.

At other times waking up at dawn
was a dry pain, a tear of light,
even a deliverance. The stingy word
of the earth was cheerful, for a brief moment,
and to die was to go back there again. Now, the waiting body
is what remains of too many awakenings and doesn't return to the earth.
They don't even say it, the hardened lips.

Cesare Pavese

Habits

On the asphalt of the avenue the moon makes
a quiet lake and my friend remembers other times.
A spontaneous encounter used to be enough for him
and he was no longer alone. Looking at the moon,
he breathed in the night. But the freshest scent
was of a woman encountered, the brief adventure
on unsure steps. The quiet room
and a fleeting desire to live there forever
filled his heart. Then, under the moon,
he returned with long strides, dazed and satisfied.

At that time he was his own great companion.
He woke in the morning and jumped from bed
finding his own body and his old thoughts.
He liked to go out under the rain
or the sun, he enjoyed watching the streets,
and talking to people spontaneously. He believed
he could always change his metier
up to the last day, each new morning.
After great exertions he sat smoking.
His greatest pleasure was to be alone.

My friend has aged and now wants a house
that he could cherish, and leave at night,
and stop on the avenue to look at the moon,
but find on his return a subdued woman,
a quiet woman, patiently waiting.
My friend has aged and is no longer content with himself.
The passersby are always the same; the rain
and the sun, the same; and morning's a desert.
To exert is no longer worth it. And going out under the moon,
when no one's waiting for him, is no longer worth it.

Cesare Pavese

In The Morning You Always Come Back

Dawn's faint breath
breathes with your mouth
at the ends of empty streets.
Gray light your eyes,
sweet drops of dawn
on dark hills.
Your steps and breath
like the wind of dawn
smother houses.
The city shudders,
Stones exhale—
you are life, an awakening.

Star lost
in the light of dawn,
trill of the breeze,
warmth, breath—
the night is done.

You are light and morning.

Cesare Pavese

Street Song

Why be ashamed? When one has done time,
if they let one out, it's because like everybody else
who belongs to the streets, one has been in prison.

From morning till evening we wander the avenues
whether it's raining or a beautiful sun's showing its face.
It's a joy to meet on the avenues people who talk
and talking among ourselves, bump into girls.
It's a joy to wait and whistle at girls from doorways,
hug them on the streets and take them to movies
and smoking in secret, lean on their beautiful knees.
It's a joy to talk and finger them laughing,
and at night in bed, feeling flung on one's neck
their two arms pulling you down, thinking of morning
when one is released from prison in the fresh sunlight.

From morning till evening wandering drunk
and watching laughing passersby enjoying everybody
—even ugly people—just to feel themselves on the streets.
From morning till evening singing drunkenly
and meeting drunkards and starting discussions
that last a long time and make us thirsty.
All these characters who go talking among themselves,
we want them with us at night, down in the trough,
and to hound them with our guitar
that skips drunkenly and cannot stay confined
but throws the doors wide open to echo in the air—
outside water or stars may rain down. It doesn't matter
if on the avenues at this hour no beautiful girls are strolling:
among us is one who laughs to himself
because he has also been released from prison tonight,
and with him, raising a ruckus and singing, we'll make it to morning.

Cesare Pavese

The Cats Will Know

Again the rain will fall
on the sweet pavements,
a light rain
like a breath or a footstep.
Again the breeze and the dawn
will blossom lightly
beneath your footstep
as you reenter.
Among flowers and sills
the cats will know it.

There will be other days.
There will be other voices.
You will smile alone.
The cats will know it.
You will hear antique words,
tired and empty words
like the disused costumes
from yesterday's festivals.

You too will make gestures.
You will respond with words—
face of Spring,
you too will make gestures.

The cats will know it,
face of Spring;
and the light rain,
the hyacinth-color dawn,
that tears the heart of one
who no longer longs for you,
they are the sad smile
you smile alone.
There will be other days,
other voices and awakenings.
We will suffer at dawn,
face of Spring.

Two

Man and woman watch each other lying in bed:
their two bodies stretched out wide and exhausted.
the man is still, only the woman takes long breaths
that quiver her ribs. The legs distended
are bony and knotted in the man's. The whispers
from the sun-covered street are foisted on them.

The air hangs impalpable in the heavy shadow
and freezes the drops of living sweat
on the lips. The gazes from the adjoining heads
are identical, but they no longer find each other's bodies
as when they first embraced. They nearly touch.

The woman's lips move a little, but do not speak.
The breathing that swells the ribs stops
at the longest gaze from the man. The woman
turns her face close to the man's, lips to lips.
But the man's gaze does not change in the shadow.

Heavy and still weigh the eyes within eyes
at the warmth of the breath that revives the sweat,
desolate. The woman does not move her body,
supple and alive. The lips of the man come close
but the still gaze does not change in the shadow.

Cesare Pavese

You Have A Face Of Carved Stone

You have a face of carved stone,
blood of hardened earth,
you came from the sea.
All is gathered and scrutinized
and rejected by you
like the sea. In your heart
there's silence and words
ingested. You're darkness.
For you, dawn is silence.

You're like the voices
of the earth—the splash
of a pail in a well,
the song of the fire,
the thud of an apple,
resigned words
and thumps on thresholds,
the cry of a boy—things
that never go away.
You're not mute. You're darkness.

You're the closed cellar,
of beaten earth,
where once entered
a barefoot boy
will always remember.
You're the dark room
he'll always remember,
like the antique courtyard
where the dawn revealed itself.

Cesare Pavese