



Turin & Pavese

By

Mary Woodward

Mary Woodward finds the connection between place and poetry astonishing, as in Turin's streets and squares she hears echoes of the poet, Cesare Pavese.

*All is the same
time has gone by -
some day you came
some day you'll die*

Last Blues Cesare Pavese

I've never met anybody who's been to Turin, though I meet plenty of people who have never heard of it. 'Where's that?' they say. Even Italians look blank. Or disapproving. Why go there? Northern, industrial. Why not Florence, Rome, Siena if you're going to bother to go to Italy at all in winter.

I persuade myself with the prospect of shimmering Alps encircling a shadowy, elegant city of Baroque streets. City of book shops, and Vivaldi manuscripts, and Camparis at seven o'clock on the way home. Pavese and Primo Levi's city, the home Levi walked back to from Auschwitz. I buy two maps, one laminated to withstand the rain I guess will be falling on the colonnaded street corners, and a real O.S. map, vast, on thin white paper, as easy to fold as dealing with the canvas on a yacht in the wind.

In the evenings before going, I spend hours looking at the neighbouring valleys and hills with a magnifying glass, scrutinising the city, giving names to streets and piazzas. The clocks go back. My life becomes two thirds night and one third the steel half-light of November days. This is a good time, the year's eleventh hour, to visit a city which is reputed to be magic, one of a white (or black, depending on who you read) magic triangle with London and San Francisco, Prague & Lyons.

My brain concocts an atmosphere of its own for this unmet place, Roman military nerve centre, the eyrie of the Dukes of Savoy, the place where Italy itself was plotted and planned in the great coffee houses. I imagine Pavese, heir to all this, sitting in the Cafés Elena, and Torino, and San Carlo, and Flora. 'Turin...City of fantasy...city of decorum...city of passion...city of irony,' he says in his diaries.

As the plane eases into its long sweep down over the autumn slopes of the Alps, I start to feel I am cheating, that I have taken a shortcut instead of what should have been a test of my determination, that I should have walked and struggled to reach here. That's what people did, isn't it, for millennia? Everybody once, not just Levi. Walked through these valleys, or rode horses. Stayed at small *pensiones* and set off for the next day's cold journeying. It is not meant to be this easy. But when I arrive I am absorbed into the evening rush hour crowds as if being welcomed. It is warm. The trees which line every street and square are copper and sepia as if it were still September.



Turin

That first night I go to the opera, an English company doing *Billy Budd*. The Via Roma is lit across from column to column for Christmas; further along a Jenny Holzer poem is moving in ten-foot-high white letters up and over the Palazzo Madama in the Piazza Castello. Time is short, just enough to get into my black dress, a half hour to eat pizza, and drink prosecco, in the cafe next to the Teatro Regio. The opera house is like a shoot in Italian Vogue, dark red walls and carpets, a cloud of glass chandeliers and sweeping low aero-curved staircases; Carlo Mollino's risen from the ashes of World War Two theatre, Mollino the mysterious magic-obsessed Torinese architect who flew Spitfires and designed a racing car which won at Le Mans. All the fur-coated women dangle Hermes or Chanel handbags. I already know the Hermes shop in the Via Roma is the only one in the world to use plain carrier bags - a benchmark of Torinese discretion. You can be rich here, but only with simplicity a la Carla Bruni. Anything else would be bad manners.

Afterwards in the Cafe Mokita I have a negroni so fragrant with orange peel that the vermouth and campari and gin fade to innocence in the hefty crystal tumbler. Hungover, I wake the next morning to a cold sunny civic utopia of eighteenth-century streets. I try to read *La Stampa*, which I've bought at the newsstand by the triumphal arch at the end of the Piazza San Carlo, over macchiato and brioches in a small, darkly-panelled room in the Torino. I bite into a fat dome of pastry, into thickly sweet preserve of some kind. I cannot identify it. Not apricot, not fig. Almost pure honey. My hangover recedes.

The chessboard precision of the grid of central streets is still undisturbed by traffic. To the western end of each long Baroque vista the Alps rise up, peaks just touched with snow, cinematic, hallucinatory, while to the east the city drops back down towards the river Po. Now and then, as people start to crowd the streets on their way to offices, galleries and cafés, I half see a dark-eyed man in a sand-coloured raincoat, walking fast away from me, an almost-smoked cigarette held between the fingers of his left hand. He is working on another poem for his poems about the workers of Turin, the people he had grown up with in the Langhe Hills, now workers in factories - Pavese knows only too well their sense of loss -

**On the street no one
Ever reveals the pain that gnaws at their life**

Poetics

Then, in the shadows of the porticoes, he is gone.

Each evening before falling asleep I read the poems; of course they make more sense here. From the flats behind the hotel, through the silver grey five o'clocks of all the mornings, comes a burst of an Italian song, of that passionate, heroic kind which shows an unlikely connection between opera and rock, at a volume which can only be described as majestic. It wakes me every time, and I lie there wondering if I really want a pee or not. The fact I am even thinking this makes me put on my raincoat to pad down the broad hallway to the bathroom.

The hotel is the fourth floor of a seventeenth-century town palazzo and the graciousness of its dimensions gives the dawns a still seriousness undermined only by the bubbling sound from the huge fish tank in the foyer. When I come in and out during the day I greet the big goldfish living there with a finger touch on his glass; he pushes his orange O-mouth towards it and circles his pretty pleated fins with excitement or anger or curiosity. I remember, Pavese says Turin can be a prison.

Brilliant sun, icy azure air, the cinnamon gilded trees in the town squares... the dry whisper of leaves shifts backwards and forwards under my feet. Down by the great silent river the boat sheds are locked up (Pavese loved rowing on this stretch of river), the tennis courts empty, the hills opposite streaked with tawny shadows. Everywhere dark yellow, snub-nosed trams thrum like cats as they corner or speed up. I wander from bookshop to cafés to bookshop. In the Café Elena I sit in the window, watching these trams pass up and down the Piazza Vittorio Veneto; Pavese must have done exactly this on autumn mornings, the kind of morning he describes in 'Indian Summer':

**The piazzas and streets
give off the same scent of warm sun
as these trees. You can go back to your town.
But Turin is the most beautiful of all towns.**

Maybe here he met Constance Dowling, the Hollywood starlet who finally broke his heart – looked up from his espresso one day and there she was, proof that the war was over, that a new world of movies and sandals and dark red nail varnish had arrived. But his relationships with women were always doomed, crippled as he was by a cold childhood and the misogyny of his time and place.

I am worrying, as I knew I would, about why Pavese killed himself. I think again how I, and the rest of us, have been cheated. Done out of maybe another twenty or thirty years of poems and novels. Why do writers think they only belong to themselves? I want him to walk in, sit down and explain himself. The last poems are sad, yes, and haunting but not truly despairing. Failed love affairs are grist to the mill to a poet, surely, less of a death sentence than a happy marriage. But he'd probably just shrug. He would drink his coffee, of course, fast at the bar like all the locals, and then swing out into the piazza, raincoat almost catching in the doors. I can see him. I have a face and a voice for the poems. But it still doesn't add up to an explanation.



Cesare Pavese

One afternoon I catch a 35 from the Porta Nuova to look at the Lingotto, the 1914 Fiat plant converted into a mall and gallery. Before that I walk through the great train station and read the destination boards: Venice, Milan, Genoa, and the suburban train which sets off six times a day up into the mountains, up towards the snow and the skiing and the pines. I'd like to do that, just catch a train up into the Alps. Leave everything behind and disappear up there for the cut of the air and the light-headedness of being higher, and looking down on the city and its lights.

At the Lingotto I walk round the shops. I pace up and down the mile long boardwalk and try to imagine this place in its heyday as a factory in the twenties, producing millions of little cars which were to drive out all the horses, and fill the mountain valleys with their chugging engine noise and the smell of petrol; I imagine the men working here, dark men from the south with a different accent, or boys who'd grown up on farms round here but wanted a modern job, who'd abandoned the little fields and the vineyards for Fiat's wages. The young men who walk the streets of Pavese's *Lavorare Stanca*. A factory the size of an ocean liner, its workers on their way to another future.

On the Eastern side of the building the huge windows are filled with a frieze of Alpine peaks. I glance quickly... I think for a second what strange 1950's wallpaper, and then my mind clicks: no, it's real. It's real. Real Alps. The sun is brushing the peaks with a glow which can only be described with the clichés of cosmetics advertising: blush, peach, rose, nude. Snow which is like warm skin. I buy a copy of Pavese's *Il Mestiere de Vivere* in Italian, a beautiful Einaudi edition with a Francesco Menzio painting on the cover. I buy a bottle of mineral water in one of the little takeaway shops at the west end, and sit down near a children's area. There are lots of wooden toys...horses and tiny ladders and chairs...but no children. Though it's calm and silent my head starts to ache. I take a couple of Nurofen.

That evening I eat at the Café Kipling in the Piazza Bodoni. Earlier there had been music coming out of the open window of the Conservatorio Verdi - a trumpet, joyful and acclamatory. November - and yet warm enough for all the windows to be open. I wander back to the hotel though the tree-crowded squares of quiet eighteenth-century apartment blocks. The sky is black-ultramarine with a perfect half moon stitched

lightly to it. A clear sky, the moon but no stars. Not one. I cannot work out how that could be.

In the square leading to the Piazza Cavour two ten-foot-high jets of water dance upwards. It is very, very cold without being frosty. Like the surface of another planet, one further from the sun. Pavese would have walked home fast on nights like this, wearing his leather jacket and his white evening scarf, slightly drunk sometimes though I imagine he could knock back Vermouth and gin, whatever, you name it, without ill effect. He would have become quieter as he drank, just quieter and even more thoughtful until he pushed back his chair, said goodnight, and headed off through these exquisite and silent piazzas. And then once home, the door shut, his jacket thrown on the back of a chair, he wrote.

On the last day I walk miles from the market in the north of the city down to the Gallery of Contemporary Art. I pass the Fontana Angelica, boarded up to be cleaned. The guidebook says this is a magic fountain, indeed the gateway itself to infinity. I am relieved it is inaccessible. Maybe another time. I pass beyond the Fontana down the Corso Re Umberto, the road where Primo Levi lived all his life apart from when he was a prisoner. I would like to look for his apartment block but I'm not sure how long it will take me to reach the gallery, and I have to be back by five. In the broad streets down here there are unused tram lines everywhere, an iron archaeology of the twentieth century. This must look just as it did when Levi walked along it when he returned from Auschwitz, the desired and longed for, most beloved road, the road home.

I have learnt to watch my step as I run across the cobbles, not to catch my foot in the gaps around the unused rails, which trace ghost runs for trams full of young men in pinstripe double-breasted suits, and their girls in print cotton frocks and turban headscarves and straw wedge platform shoes, these great corners where there is no traffic passing now, nothing now but the drifting leaves.



Piazza San Carlo

Back on the pavement, under the colonnade there's the air of an imperial thoroughfare where the Corso Vittorio Emanuele runs up from the Porta Nuova, the momentary appearance of nineteenth-century Italy, of urban space and monuments and unachieved majestic ambition. There are mahogany and gilt cafes, and chocolate shops of gold-lettered opulence. I walk faster. The bustle of the centre fades behind me. The gallery is on the south side of this great street, and is of much more recent date, disconcertingly like the Hayward. I am led to it by neon letters six feet high along the edge of the roof which declare 'All art was contemporary once.' Yes, in English. At the steps up to the doors there is a big, light brown cat waving his tail and being stroked by visitors. I hurry up so I can meet him too, but when I am almost close enough he has disappeared under the steps and away.

**Tra fiori e davanzali
I gatti lo sapranno**

The Cats will Know

The first and only *gatto* I have spotted in Pavese's city of all-knowing poetic cats and he has gone. Entry to the gallery itself is almost as elusive. The staff don't speak English. I cause consternation by trying to go in without checking in my bag. Eventually, bagless, I am let loose in the empty spaces.

I have come here to look for work by the Turin Six, painters working between the wars. I like them, these landscapes and summer afternoons and interiors, lying about a calm and peace which did not exist. There is a small painting of three windows opening inwards. Hills in the distance. Empty chairs. No people. Jessie Boswell.

Born Leeds 1881-1943. How on earth did Jessie Boswell get here from Leeds, why has she fetched up here with the Turin Six? And did she ever sit in the Flora or the Elena or the San Carlo with Pavese? The gallery does not believe in overdoing information. Only the paintings speak for their makers' lives and they're not saying a lot. More opinionated siblings may well be gathering dust in the basement. And while these were being painted Pavese was exiled in Brancaleone, watching the summers of Fascism pass, bored and longing to be back in Turin.

I walk back toward the Porta Nuova to check the times of buses for the airport - unmissable, these buses - bright blue in a world of yellow public transport. One is at the stop. The last suitcases are stowed in the side and then it pulls out, signals and turns with an air of finality back down the opposite carriageway away from the heart of the city towards the airport. The sight lowers my spirits. I do not want to leave.

I cross over to the Piazza Carlo Felice and walk up through the porticoes towards the Saturday clamour of the Via Roma. The stately dark wood and gold entrance of the Hotel Roma is open on my left. These are the doors Pavese entered... it must have been hot, a late August day in 1950. Easy to imagine how both brilliant and dusty Turin is in the summer, the stone everywhere broiling with the heat. I have more questions. Why did he choose this hotel? The most central? The most anonymous? Or the shrine of particular memories, memories he wanted to wrap round him as the barbiturates took effect? He never left that evening, lighting a cigarette, as he must have done on other days maybe after a long afternoon in a darkened bedroom. With a lucky woman who knew his voice and the way he talked and what he worried about. 'Don't gossip too much,' he says in his final note. Some hope. We have gossiped about him ever since.

I feel again that irrational fury about losing a poet too young. There's a long list of them. But with Pavese it's worse than the others. More intimate, for it is also his personal glamour, his watchful, clever, distanced temperament, his difficult presence which fascinate me. And what would he have had to say about Europe in the following decades, Pavese, the poet of workers and struggle and the cruelty of the emerging modern world, who as a boy playing football in the suburbs heard the

gunfire of the Turin massacre of trade unionists in 1927. It would have been worth reading.

On the last morning it is still nerve-cleansing Alpine weather. I am laden with bags of hazelnut amaretti and porcini bought from a market smallholder who has a trestle table laden with open sacks, smelling of black earth and bark. As the plane takes off and then banks up over the mountains, the sky to the West is crimson-scarlet like the walls of the Teatro Regio. A horizon like an opera. The city falls back away from us into its safe place overshadowed by the peaks. 'Turin, my favourite subject,' Pavese says in his diary for February 1936, Pavese who never left it voluntarily, for whom it was home and workplace and theatre. Now I have seen it I am closer to those poems I love. Poems can belong to a city, are the voice of its streets and squares. Sometimes you just have to get up and go there. The connection between place and poetry is astonishing. Of course, poems can exist elsewhere but they can use their own energy more fully in their own place.

All the winter through I come back to a quiet, empty house. His raincoat is on the back of the door, and there's the smell of a dark tobacco in the solitude of the evening air. I open his poems, the streets outside are no longer the known streets of home, but Turin, after the battles of WW2 have fallen silent, and the troops have gone, and the prisoners of war have been repatriated; a city where the cafés once again have enough cake and little satin-ribbon-tied bags of hazelnut chocolates to stack on the glass counters; a city where they are just starting to feel optimistic enough about the future to think of rebuilding the opera house.

Disaffections: Complete Poems 1930-1950 Cesare Pavese Carcanet 2004
This Business of Living Diaries 1935-1950 Cesare Pavese Transaction 2009

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She has written for *The Guardian* newspaper (she won their fashion writing competition in 2003) and pieces for literary magazines (*The North*, *Agenda*, *Tears in the Fence* etc) and has published short fiction in anthologies and been shortlisted for short story competitions including the Asham Award and Fish.

“I made a visit to Turin a few years ago to see the place which had been the home of two writers I love, Pavese and Primo Levi. I was not disappointed – it is a wonderful city - and wrote this piece to try to keep a sense of it alive for myself. I hope it will also act as encouragement for others to read Pavese's wonderful poetry. I am not a travel writer but, as some people say, places speak and I found Turin to be highly conversational...full of wisdom and thoughtfulness.”