



ON FENOGLIO'S *LA PAGA DEL SABATO* THE PARTISAN AS A VETERAN

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In questo articolo si esplorano tre prospettive critiche su *La Paga del Sabato* di Beppe Fenoglio al fine di comprendere il trattamento narrativo che l'autore fa della materia resistenziale. Attraverso la lettura attenta di specifici passaggi del testo, e prendendo in considerazione le critiche mosse all'autore dal curatore de "I Gettoni" Elio Vittorini (nonché la risposta a tali critiche da parte di Fenoglio), se ne esplorano gli stilemi cinematografici, il modello letterario offerto dalla traduzione del racconto breve *Soldier's Home* di Ernest Hemingway e il rifiuto della commemorazione ufficiale della Resistenza. Da tale analisi emerge un autoritratto del partigiano "imperfetto" – un reduce che non ha portato a compimento l'esperienza bellica fino alle estreme conseguenze. Il protagonista Ettore, vittima di stress post-traumatico, è incapace di reinserirsi nella società civile in seguito all'esperienza vissuta in guerra. Ettore e il suo compagno partigiano Palmò non ricevono l'onore di una valorosa morte in battaglia, non riuscendo a entrare nella dimensione del partigiano "perfetto" come definito da Saccone. Ne emergono dunque come figure originali nella letteratura della Resistenza, ovvero come reduci-partigiani.

In this article I explore three aspects of Beppe Fenoglio's *La Paga del Sabato* that are crucial for the understanding of the author's immediate post-war treatment of the Resistenza. Through a close reading of selected passages and taking into consideration the early criticism posed by the editor of "I Gettoni" Elio Vittorini (and Fenoglio's response to it), I investigate the cinematic writing style of the novel, the literary model offered by the Italian translation of Hemingway's short story *Soldier's Home*, and the author's rejection of the official memorialization of the Resistance. I argue that in this text Fenoglio draws a self-representing portrayal of the "imperfect" partisan – a survivor who has not fulfilled the experience of war. The main character Ettore, suffering from PTSD, is incapable of reintegrating into civilian society after the existential rift of wartime. He and his fellow partisan Palmò are not given the honor of a valorous death in battle, and therefore never enter the realm of what Saccone called the "perfect" partisan, rather emerging as unique literary examples of partisan-veteran figures.

Written at the end of the 1940s, rather soon after the author's militancy in the Resistance, *La Paga del Sabato* did not find immediate editorial success. After initial positive feedback from Italo Calvino and Natalia Ginzburg, Fenoglio saw his novel rejected by Elio Vittorini, who chose not to include it in his edited series "I Gettoni," devoted to the circulation of emerging Italian writers. Nonetheless, two short stories were extracted from the novel, *Ettore Va al Lavoro* and *Nove Lune*, and included in the collection of short stories *I Ventitre Giorni della Città di Alba*, published for I Gettoni in 1952. The novel would only be published in its entirety by Einaudi posthumously, in 1969, six years after Fenoglio's death. Edited by Maria Corti, the 1969 version contained a note summarizing the history of the text, based on the correspondence between the author, Calvino, and Vittorini. Despite having already been adapted for a television drama in three episodes in 1977, only in more recent years the novel received more widespread popular recognition.¹

¹ In an opinion piece on the newspaper «La Repubblica», Alessandro Baricco characterized *La Paga del Sabato* as "Il libro perfetto," stating that "La verità è che all'inizio degli anni cinquanta Fenoglio faceva, con naturalezza, il tipo di letteratura che, trent'anni dopo sarebbe diventata la nuova letteratura italiana." ALESSANDRO BARICCO, *Una certa idea di mondo: La paga del sabato di Beppe Fenoglio*, «La Repubblica», 4 novembre 2012.

In *La Paga del Sabato* Fenoglio tells the story of Ettore, a former partisan, or rather a war veteran who struggles to readapt to everyday civilian life. Instead of taking a job at the local chocolate factory, as his parents would want him to, he spends his days loitering around his small town (easily recognizable as Fenoglio's hometown, Alba) and his nights committing criminal actions with two other former partisans, Bianco and Palmo, at the expenses of former fascist supporters. When his girlfriend Vanda finds out she is pregnant, and he is forced to commit to marrying her, Ettore abandons his life as a petty criminal and starts a small transportation business. However, he never achieves his ambition of making enough money to build his own gas station - at the end of the novel Ettore dies a violent death on the job when his friend Palmo accidentally runs him over with one of his trucks.

Analyzing the novel, scholars have pointed out that it displays autobiographical elements.² Indeed, in an interview released in 1952 to the local newspaper *Corriere Albese* Fenoglio referred to the one year span between the end of the war and late 1946, the period in which the novel is set, as “un lungo anno di crisi”; a personal, existential crisis, that Fenoglio poured into his first attempt at crafting a fictional character, mirroring his individualistic and rebellious understanding of the months spent in the Resistenza against Fascism on the Langhe hills.³ Already in their first correspondence, Calvino writes to Fenoglio:

Non ultimo merito è quello di documento della storia di una generazione; l'aver parlato per la prima volta con rigorosa chiarezza del problema morale di tanti giovani ex-partigiani.⁴

A novel on former partisans' struggle to re-adapt to civilian life was indeed a novelty; Fenoglio (a former partisan himself) relied on foreign literary models that not only influenced his crafting of veteran characters, but also his writing style.

I STYLISTIC AND THEMATIC CINEMATICITY

In the epistolary exchange with Calvino regarding the possible publication of Fenoglio's novel, Vittorini is quick to notice and criticize the cinematic style of the Piedmontese writer, which had nonetheless already been pointed out by Calvino himself in his correspondence with Fenoglio, and in recommending the book to Vittorini.⁵ For the Sicilian editor, this will be the decisive element in choosing not to publish the novel.

² PIERO NEGRI SCAGLIONE, *Questioni Private - Vita Incompiuta di Beppe Fenoglio*, Torino, Einaudi, 2006, pp. 133-141.

³ VITTORIO RIOLFO, *Beppe Fenoglio e gli uomini al muro*, «Corriere Albese», 12 giugno 1952.

⁴ BEPPE FENOGLIO, *Lettere 1940-1962*, LUCA BUFANO (ed.), Torino, Einaudi, 2002, p. 24.

⁵ The full exchange between Fenoglio, Calvino, and Vittorini has been analyzed in detail by several scholars. See: LUCA BUFANO, *Beppe Fenoglio e il racconto breve*, Ravenna, Longo, 1999, pp. 106-110. Also: ALESSANDRO TAMBURINI, *L'Uomo al Muro*, Ancona, ItalicPequod, 2016, pp. 17-25.

L'ultima parte del Fenoglio mi persuade meno. Diventa film sempre di più, e non sa più essere altro che film [...] Se non ci fossero i primi capitoli, e soprattutto il rapporto teso fra madre e figlio, direi di non farne niente.⁶

The filmic quality of Fenoglio's novel constitutes a limiting factor for Vittorini. However, in his evaluation he does not explain what is specifically cinematic about the novel, nor why such cinematicity constitutes a limitation.

Interpreting Vittorini's negative judgement, Tamburini points at the extensive dialogic sequences in the novel, as they often obscure the diegesis.⁷ Other critics, such as Cooke, instead highlight how the style adopted by Fenoglio can be read as deliberate choice to employ cinema-like descriptions of specific sequences, as they would be experienced from the protagonist's point of view. For Cooke this analysis opens new possible interpretations of the novel:

In other words the matrix, the framework within which Ettore's decisions are made as well as his perceptions of the outside world, contain cinematic elements. The cinema structures the nature of his understanding of the world.⁸

Following Cooke's analysis, the cinematicity of *La Paga del Sabato* emerges as a crucial element to understand Ettore's detachment from reality, a consequence of his war-induced posttraumatic stress disorder. Positioning the reader within a protagonist-driven cinematic point of view, Fenoglio points at his character's self-identification with movie heroes. Traumatized by the violence of war, estranged by his return to civilian life, incapable of readjusting to social habits, and in search of a form of continuity that would allow him to normalize the identity he formed beyond the margins of normal social experience,⁹ Ettore looks to the most accessible form of narrative, American cinema, as a source of heroic male figures with whom to identify and through whom he can interpret his own existence.

When analyzing the cinematicity of the novel, one cannot however ignore the literary models that were available to Fenoglio. An avid reader of American and English literature, the Albese writer had access to novels by authors belonging to the American Lost Generation, such as John Steinbeck,¹⁰ Ernest

⁶ BEPPE FENOGLIO, *Lettere 1940-1962*, cit., p. 24.

⁷ ALESSANDRO TAMBURINI, *L'Uomo al Muro*, cit., p. 31.

⁸ PHILIP COOKE, *Rereading La Paga del Sabato: Fenoglio, Cinema, and History*, in «Homage to Pavese and Fenoglio: Notebook of the Italian Cultural Institute of Edinburgh», X (2000/2001), p. 42.

⁹ Ettore is portrayed as a casebook definition of war veteran. Several analogous cases are analyzed in: ERIC LEED, *No Man's Land - Combat and Identity in World War I*, Cambridge, University Press, 1979, pp. 1-38.

¹⁰ A detailed analysis of Fenoglio's readings in: VERONICA PESCE, *Fra le letture di Beppe Fenoglio*, in «Italianistica», 43, 2 (2014), pp. 27-34. Regarding the affinities between *La Paga del Sabato* and Steinbeck: IDA DURETTO, *La Paga del Sabato tra Hemingway e Steinbeck: un finale atipico*, in «Italianistica», 43, 2 (2014), pp. 133-137.

Hemingway,¹¹ and William Faulkner,¹² whose first novel *Soldier's Pay* (the story of the troublesome return of a wounded WWI aviator to his hometown in Georgia), translated as *La Paga del Soldato* in Italian, might have worked as a model for the title of Fenoglio's novel. These American novels of the 1930s and 1940s, as Magny writes, "aim to show rather than to say, and are therefore related to cinema even when not in the least influenced by it."¹³ Magny points at two specific characteristics of American fiction that link it to cinema: ellipsis and impersonality. While the former allows for a methodic selectivity of information, the latter shifts the focus from the individual to the collective. Both these narrative devices are present in *La Paga del Sabato* and can help us understand Fenoglio's use of the observer's visual field and its inherent cinematicity.

The first chapter of the novel opens with a description:

Sulla tavola della cucina c'era una bottiglietta di linimento che suo padre si dava ogni sera tornando su dalla bottega, un piatto sporco d'olio, la scodella del sale... Ettore passò a guardare sua madre.¹⁴

With the literary equivalent of a tracking shot the narrator moves in on the objects on the dinner table: starting from the bottle of lotion, which hints at the male provider figure that – as will eventually be revealed – Ettore himself is expected to take on, every element is shown in an impersonal way, with pointed references to a male subject which has not yet been introduced. The ellipsis represents a sudden break, shifting from an impersonal list of objects that could probably be continued, to Ettore's subjective point of view. When the name of the protagonist is revealed, he has not yet been showed; after the ellipsis, the reader continues exploring the narrative space from his point of view, which now focuses on the mother. In this instance, the ellipsis omits a portion of the descriptive sequence, allowing the reader to fill in the gaps while moving on to the focus of the scene.

In the fourth chapter, the most action-driven in the novel, Ettore, Palmo, and Bianco carry out an armed robbery at the house of an old man who supported the Fascist regime during the war. The first part of the chapter is narrated from a homodiegetic perspective, as Ettore recounts the events leading to the robbery in first person. This technique allows the author to provide a more detailed portrait of the protagonist's thought mechanisms and perceptions:

Mi ero messo il cappello di mio padre, se dilatavo le narici potevo sentire l'odore della testa di mio padre, ma non ero abituato a portarlo. Così me lo toglievo e me lo rimettevo e me l'aggiustavo in testa ad ogni

¹¹ FRANCESCO DE NICOLA, *Hemingway e Fenoglio. La questione privata del dopoguerra*, in «Misure critiche», VI, 19 (1976), pp. 65-75.

¹² NICOLE SIRI, *Fenoglio e Faulkner: alcuni riscontri intertestuali*, in «Italianistica», 43, 2 (2014), pp. 139-43.

¹³ CLAUDE-EDMONDE MAGNY, *The Age of the American Novel; the film aesthetic of fiction between the two wars*, 1948, English translation ELEANOR HOCHMAN, Ungar, 1972, p. 48.

¹⁴ BEPPE FENOGLIO, *La Paga del Sabato* (1969), in: *Tutti i Romanzi*, GABRIELE PEDULLA (ed.), Torino, Einaudi, 2015, p. 5.

momento. Avevo perso anche l'abitudine a portar la pistola, mi dava un po' di fastidio, era una pistola grossa, che dal fondo della tasca interna della giacca arrivava a toccarmi sotto l'ascella.¹⁵

The interior monologue reveals Ettore's fragility, pointing at both his sense of inadequacy towards the paternal figure, and his tormented relationship with the war experience. Within the structure of the novel, this temporary first-person narration adds a layer of complexity to the main character's psychological construction, but also provides an alternative to the omniscient narrator. Varying the narrative position in relation to the subject enables Fenoglio, in a fashion similar to cinema, to provide a multifaceted representation of the experiences his characters go through. When describing the physical appearance of the old victim of the robbery, Ettore focuses on his eyes:

Nella faccia somigliava a un rospo ma c'è di sicuro dei rospi più belli di lui, ma erano soprattutto gli occhi che... gli occhi, sotto gli archi sopraccigliari che erano due montagnole di carne, sembravano sempre lì per sgusciar fuori come due bilie.¹⁶

The ellipsis suspends Ettore's descriptive train of thought, indicating a pause but also an implied – and perhaps voluntary – omission. While the description continues with graphic details about the impression the eyes make on Ettore, the reader is left with a lingering curiosity to fill the gap.

A second first-person point of view is adopted in the closure of the eight chapter, recounted from Palmò's point of view, as he and Ettore discuss the latter's plans to open a gas station with the revenues from his transportation business. Palmò, who served as the bottom of Ettore's bullying and mockery throughout the first part of the novel, here offers a counterpoint to the protagonist's attempt to finally overcome the post-war psychological struggle, and adapt to civilian life:

Io non lo facevo soltanto per i soldi, io volevo che si ricominciasse a vivere alla vecchia squadra, che Ettore si mettesse a fare il capo al posto di Bianco, anche se come capo io non davo un'unghia di Bianco per tutto Ettore [...] E io mi sentii per la terza volta come mi ero già sentito quando era finita la guerra e come quando Bianco era dovuto andare in sanatorio.¹⁷

Palmò's interior monologue reveals that, like Ettore, he too has been struggling with re-adapting to civilian life; however, differently from the protagonist, he wants to continue carrying out criminal activities and keep the former partisan group alive. Moreover, the reader learns that Ettore's status in the eyes of Palmò is much below that of former commander Bianco. Through this first-person narration, the author once again attempts to

¹⁵ BEPPE FENOGLIO, *La Paga del Sabato*, cit., p. 38.

¹⁶ Ivi, p. 43.

¹⁷ Ivi, pp. 96-98.

achieve a multifaceted, if not impersonal, representation of the world lived by his characters.

Offering multiple first-person perspectives and switching between what in cinema would be achieved through various camera shots, Fenoglio seeks to provide psychological depth to his characters, while also attempting to depersonalize the narrative by showing it from multiple perspectives.

However, Cooke is undoubtedly right when arguing that the cinematic component in the novel is not exclusively stylistic but also thematic. When refusing to take a job at the chocolate factory, Ettore thinks to himself:

Io avrò un destino diverso dal vostro, non dico più bello o più brutto, ma diverso. Voi fate con naturalezza dei sacrifici che per me sono enormi, insopportabili, e io so fare a sangue freddo delle cose che a solo pensarle a voi farebbero drizzare i capelli in testa. Impossibile che io sia dei vostri.¹⁸

Ettore sees the everyday life of factory workers as something he could never endure, given the borderline experiences he went through as a partisan fighter. His refusal to enter the regularity of employment leads him to spend most of his time with other former partisans, who are similarly struggling to re-adapt to civilian life. However, his perception of the group, and his role within it, immediately appear to be mediated through filmic references that do not pertain to his lived experience as a partisan:

In quel momento a Ettore il cervello gli si afflosciò dolcemente, il petto gli si slargò e lui disse con voce lenta, col bicchiere in mano, come un attore: - L'amore dell'uomo per la donna cresce e diminuisce come fa la luna, ma l'amore dell'uomo per l'uomo, del fratello per il fratello, è fermo come le stelle ed eterno come la parola di Dio. - Era la prefazione di una pellicola americana che Ettore aveva visto in quei giorni e gli era rimasta impressa tanto che la sapeva a memoria.¹⁹

Ettore's behavior is shaped after American movies, as he performs a heroic and detached masculinity reminiscent of archetypal Hollywood larger-than-life characters. His quote is from the 1939 American adventure movie *Beau Geste* starring Gary Cooper, the story of three English brothers joining the French Foreign Legion.²⁰ The encounters between him, Palmò, and Bianco seem to be directly taken from those Hollywood movies that feed Ettore's imagination. Interestingly, one of them (John Ford's *My Darling Clementine*, released in Italy with the title *Sfida Infernale*) is directly mentioned in the text:

Ettore disse: - Cosa c'è al cinema? - *Sfida Infernale*. - Che roba è? - Far West. Ho visto i cartelloni. - Allora vado a vedere questa sfida

¹⁸ Ivi, p. 24.

¹⁹ Ivi, pp. 26-27.

²⁰ Tamburini notes that when the novel first gets published in 1969, it is accompanied by the headline "La storia di un Humphrey Bogart di provincia." ALESSANDRO TAMBURINI, *L'Uomo al Muro*, cit., p. 33.

infernale, - disse Ettore [...] Il film gli piacque come non si aspettava e così non durò fatica a stare a vederlo due volte, doveva fare le sei.²¹

Cooke argues that these passages are revealing of how Ettore is pushed to pursue a criminal life by his fascination with unrealistic cinematic models, and that just like Johnny in *Il Partigiano Johnny* mediates his war experience through literary texts, Ettore approaches his post-war life through the mediation of cinema.²² Indeed Ettore's performance of masculinity in the bandit group appears excessive and out of tune, and the reason behind his need to perform such actions is expressed at the end of the episode, as he tells Bianco:

Sai, Bianco? Questa è la unica cosa seria che ho fatto con te che mi abbia ricordato i partigiani.²³

What remains of the Resistenza in Ettore's memory is the violence of their operations, and only by reproducing that same violence he is partially able to reconstruct a unified self, finding a space for existence in the community of former combatants; his criminal actions function for him as a prosthetic extension of war in time of peace. As an estranged veteran in search of a form of continuity with his war experience, Ettore takes on, and performs according to, pre-made (anti)heroic violent figures portrayed in American movies.

Based on this analysis, Vittorini's accusation of excessive cinematicity speaks to two separate features of the novel: one more stylistic, writerly, and concerned with literary models, and one more thematic, ironic, and related to the main character's self-fashioning. It is especially the first feature that has pointed critics towards Fenoglio's own readings to investigate possible influences. As Bigazzi noticed, point of view perspectives had already been adopted in nineteenth century realist novels (Bigazzi specifically mentions Verga), but the literary model that more than any other influenced Fenoglio is to be found in the aforementioned American Lost Generation writers.²⁴

2 HEMINGWAY AND THE MODEL OF A LITERARY VETERAN

When Calvino communicates to him that the publication of the novel has been definitively denied, but also that Vittorini is still interested in publishing his short stories, Fenoglio's reaction is optimistic:

Dispiace anche a me sacrificare il mio romanzo ma, specie se guardo al futuro, non posso non condividere la tesi del direttore de "I Gettoni". *La Paga del Sabato* è il frutto, piuttosto difettoso anche se magari interessante, di una mia cotta neoverista che ho ormai superata.²⁵

²¹ BEPPE FENOGLIO, *La Paga del Sabato*, cit., pp. 33-34.

²² PHILIP COOKE, *Rereading La Paga del Sabato: Fenoglio, Cinema, and History*, cit., p. 42.

²³ BEPPE FENOGLIO, *La Paga del Sabato*, cit., p. 70.

²⁴ ROBERTO BIGAZZI, *Fenoglio: personaggi e narratori*, Roma, Salerno, 2011, pp. 73-82.

²⁵ BEPPE FENOGLIO, *Lettere 1940-1962*, cit., pp. 35-36.

The definition of “neoverista” has generated numerous interpretations among scholars; for example, Innocenti associates it with the cinematographic style identified by Vittorini, and with the general neorealist tendency that was predominant among Italian writers at the time. For Innocenti, these elements hint at the influence that Ernest Hemingway’s dialogic writing style had on a whole generation of Italian authors.²⁶

In 1941 Elio Vittorini edited *Americana*, a collection of American short stories in two volumes, translated into Italian by eminent figures such as Eugenio Montale, Alberto Moravia, Cesare Pavese, Carlo Linati, Guido Piovene, and Vittorini himself. In the second volume, in the section *Storia Contemporanea*, the editor included a short story by Ernest Hemingway, *Soldier’s Home*, translated by Linati as *Il ritorno del soldato Krebs*.²⁷ The protagonist, Harold Krebs, is a young veteran returning to Oklahoma after having fought in World War I in France. His parents and sister, whom he lives with, are unable to understand his struggle to re-adapt to civilian life and treat him as they did before he left the war. Critics have noticed affinities between Harold Krebs and Ettore; Fenoglio’s fascination with the American writer brought him to transpose entire scenes from his story, such as the altercation between the veteran and his mother, and the consequent scene in which the veteran leaves the house to go watch a sport match (baseball for Krebs, pelota for Ettore).²⁸

Introducing his works in *Americana*, Vittorini writes about Hemingway:

Sbaglia anche lui, alle volte [...] dà spiegazioni naturaliste di un atteggiamento, e non giunge al simbolo. Ma allora il difetto è di calcolo, in lui; di prospettiva.²⁹

Vittorini’s literary poetics reject those forms of writing that cannot transcend themselves towards a superior “truth.” He accuses Hemingway of subjugating human beings to natural forces, rather than attempting to produce symbols that establish a shared horizon of humanity.³⁰ Harold Krebs’ experience, in Vittorini’s view, does not become paradigmatic or universal. Hemingway functioned as a thematic and stylistic model for several Italian writers who lived the experience of the Resistance and recognized themselves in his

²⁶ ORSETTA INNOCENTI, *Tra Lavoro e Romance – A proposito della Paga del Sabato*, in *Beppe Fenoglio – Scrittura e Resistenza*, FERRONI, GAETA, and PEDULLÀ (eds.), Roma, Fahrenheit 451, 2006, pp. 63-84.

²⁷ ERNEST HEMINGWAY, *Soldier’s Home*, 1925, Italian translation CARLO LINATI, *Il Ritorno del Soldato Krebs*, in *Americana – Raccolta di Narratori, Vol. II*, ELIO VITTORINI (ed.), Milano, Bompiani, 1941, pp. 793-801.

²⁸ ROBERTO BIGAZZI, *Fenoglio: personaggi e narratori*, cit., p. 30.

²⁹ ELIO VITTORINI, *Introduzione*, in *Americana – Raccolta di Narratori, Vol. II*, Milano, Bompiani, 1941, p. 744.

³⁰ Vittorini’s criticism is nuanced, as he also recognizes several qualities to Hemingway’s writings: “In ogni pagina di Hemingway noi troviamo accettato come un fatto già vecchio dell’uomo che le vie della purezza sono simili a quelle della corruzione, e che la purezza è feroce, e che ogni velleità di ferocia è una velleità di purezza.” *Ibid.*

works on the Great War and Spanish Civil War.³¹ Talking about his infatuation with “neoverismo,” Fenoglio inserts his work in this neorealist tradition of postwar writing. If the translation of Hemingway’s short story was a model for Fenoglio’s first novel, it can be assumed that the Italian author was likely aware of the criticism that Vittorini would have made of his work. Moreover, if his admission of guilt should be taken at face value, and not as an attempt to please the editor of “I Gettoni,”³² Fenoglio would be reducing Ettore to an instinctive and will-less individual, subjected to external forces over which he has no control.

Of course, the accusation of “neoverismo” also pertains to language and writing style – Fenoglio employs several vernacularisms, and an omniscient third-person narrator, detached and objective. But there is more than these traditionally realist features in *La Paga del Sabato*; the first-person point of views in chapter IV (Ettore on his first robbery) and VIII (Palmo on the protagonist’s final decision to abandon the criminal life) are essential in understanding how veterans reproduce warlike structures in postwar life situations, seeking for a continuity of identity. Ettore’s internal reflections during the first robbery are exemplary in showing how every action he performs, and every element in his sight, reconnect to the crucial and not yet overcome experience of war, and are manifestations of his own “survivor guilt”:

Il vecchio si era tolto gli occhiali e Bianco aveva subito cominciato a parlare, ma io non gli facevo nessuna attenzione, io non avevo attenzione che per la faccia del vecchio ora che gli occhiali l’avevano completamente denudata, niente mi aveva mai incatenato di più gli occhi, dopo i cadaveri della guerra [...] Ma poi tornai a guardare la faccia del vecchio che quella sera doveva darci un milione, per noi, per le nostre donne, per i nostri divertimenti, perché potessimo continuare a vivere visto che non eravamo morti in guerra.³³

These subjective points of views inform the reader about Ettore and Palmo’s internal struggle in re-adapting to civilian life. Their subjectivities are stated and maintained through these first-person expatiations, which go against the naturalist paradigm ascribable to a “neoverista” style.

Even though Hemingway functioned as a literary model for many other postwar Italian writers, the uniqueness of Fenoglio’s case is perhaps due to how he replicates and adapts a figure, that of the war-veteran, which had already been vastly explored in American literature, but had not yet been transposed to Italian Resistance partisans. In fact, *La Paga del Sabato* was the first work of fiction on a former partisan set in post-war times (popular Resistance novels such as Calvino’s *Il Sentiero dei Nidi di Ragno*, or Vittorini’s *Uomini e No* relied on their fictional account of war times). Modeling the Italian veteran after an American model, Fenoglio distances himself from a political representation of the Resistance and its aftermath, aiming to make Ettore a universal, archetypal veteran.

³¹ ITALO CALVINO, *Romanzi e Racconti – Vol. I*, BARENGHI E FALCETTO (eds.), Milano, Mondadori, 1991, p. 1195.

³² A reflection on the authenticity of Fenoglio’s back down in: ALESSANDRO TAMBURINI, *L’Uomo al Muro*, cit., pp. 25-27.

³³ BEPPE FENOGLIO, *La Paga del Sabato*, cit., p. 43.

After April 25th, 1945, reflections on the Italian Resistance immediately became prerogative of bipartisan political discourses which adopted a rhetoric of parallelisms with the Risorgimento. The military aspect of the Resistance was set aside, in order to emphasize the different political implications of an antifascist reaction which started from the people and would become the base for the foundation of the Italian Republic.³⁴ From his first short stories to his masterpieces *Una Questione Privata* and *Il Partigiano Johnny*, Fenoglio distances himself from this hegemonic understanding of the Resistance; he focuses on the individual experience of the partisan as a soldier, for whom war is not a means to an end, but an identity-shaping, existential experience. After his experience as a partisan, Fenoglio himself went through a period of struggle, from the end of the war until 1946.³⁵ The text is partially autobiographical, as several features of the author are attributed to Ettore (smoking habit, troubled relationship with his mother), and it is not hard to recognize Alba and its surroundings as the settings of the novel. Therefore, the text can be understood as the first of many attempts on the part of the author to re-shape and narrate his personal experience. Hemingway's Harold Krebs is a fundamental model for Fenoglio; differently from later alter-egos of the author, Ettore is the product of an encounter between a WWII partisan experience and a WWI veteran narrative. Even though he has fought on the Langhe hills against Fascist militias, Ettore does not perceive himself as a defender of local territory, tied to the soil or the autochthonous population; even though his war involved his community, as it took place in the same locations where his family lives, he speaks about it as something distant and removed from everyone else's experience. Krebs returns to Kansas after having fought in France and finds a community that has seen war from afar and is not ready to re-accommodate him. Hemingway describes his isolation from the social sphere through a third person omniscient point of view. In Linati's translation:

A quel tempo che Krebs tornò alla sua città nel Kansas, le grandi accoglienze che si solevano fare ai soldati reduci dalla guerra, erano finite. Egli era tornato troppo tardi. Tutti gli uomini della città ch'erano andati in guerra erano già stati laboriosamente acclamati al loro ritorno. Era stata una specie di frenesia. Ma ora incominciava la reazione. La gente pareva pensare che Krebs era stato uno sciocco a non esser ritornato in tempo della guerra, e ritornare dopo qualche anno che la guerra era finita.

La sua città aveva uditi già troppi racconti di atrocità per provare qualche desiderio di rabbrivire ancora. Allora Krebs trovò che se voleva esser ascoltato doveva raccontar delle fandonie, ma anche quando ne ebbe raccontate un paio, si sentì talmente disgustato, sentì un tale disgusto verso la guerra e il discorrer di guerra.³⁶

³⁴ PHILIP COOKE, *The Legacy of the Italian Resistance*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 9-37.

³⁵ PIERO NEGRI SCAGLIONE, *Questioni Private - Vita Incompiuta di Beppe Fenoglio*, cit., pp. 114-123.

³⁶ ERNEST HEMINGWAY, *Soldier's Home*, 1925, Italian translation CARLO LINATI, *Il Ritorno del Soldato Krebs*, cit., p. 793.

Krebs' struggle is related to his belated return to a community that has already moved on from a war that has not happened on home soil, and has not left any tangible sign; additionally, the veteran cannot share his experience with others, as no one is there to listen to him. He is ultimately alienated from everyone else around him because he is the only carrier of the burden of war who has not been celebrated as a hero. The narrator says that those soldiers who returned at the end of the war had been greeted by the community, but Krebs got back when the frenzy had already vanished. On the other hand, Ettore has fought on the hills around Alba, and his family and fellow citizens have also suffered war and the German occupation on their own skin. Nonetheless, he perceives the same detachment and alienation that Krebs has experienced; Fenoglio reports Ettore's internal monologues, marking his subjective perception of alienation:

Caro mio, - diceva a tutti insieme e a nessuno in particolare, - tu hai la tua esperienza ed io ho la mia. Tu potresti insegnarmi a fare le spedizioni, ma anch'io potrei insegnarti qualcosa. Ciascuno secondo la propria esperienza. Io ho imparato le armi, a spaventare la gente con un'occhiata, a star duro come una spranga davanti alla gente giù in ginocchio e con le mani giunte. Ciascuno secondo la propria esperienza.³⁷

Ettore perceives his own involvement in the war as an individual task, a unique experience that cannot be shared or understood by anyone else; he cherishes his own uniqueness and distinguishes himself from others on the base of his being a veteran. Fenoglio turns the alienation of the veteran into an individualist claim, expressing rather the need to reinstate his distinctiveness, than the impossibility to explain and share the burden of war. While Harold Krebs has the necessity to narrate more than he experienced on the battlefield, to make himself valuable in the eyes of the community, Ettore does not recall episodes of war if not with other fellow partisans or in interior monologues; and while Krebs craves (and fails to obtain) recognition and re-integration, Ettore is determined to remark his exceptional status.

The model of WWI veterans allowed Fenoglio to offer a countertrend representation of partisans after the end of the Resistance, devoid of ideological affiliations and against all forms of political mythologization. *La Paga del Sabato* in fact presents a subjective war experience, preserving the protagonist's rebellious disposition while simultaneously refusing a politicized narrative, and rejecting the process of mythologization that the historical Resistance endured after April 1945 (one can think of Renata Vigano's coeval *L'Agnese va a Morire* as examples of this preponderant literary tendency).

3 A REJECTION OF MEMORIALIZATION?

Italian historian Claudio Pavone writes that the end of the Resistance saw the reappearance of the conflict, which the process of militarization had sought to resolve, between the revolutionary spirit that any movement of rebellion instills in its participants, and the requirements of an institutionalization that was felt to be untrustworthy. For Pavone, the "revolutionary

³⁷ BEPPE FENOGLIO, *La Paga del Sabato*, cit., pp. 24-25.

spirit” was inherently political, entailing class war;³⁸ in Fenoglio’s case however, the revolutionary spirit was rather existential, a partisan die-hard attitude that could not be expressed in political terms.

In chapter VIII Ettore and his fellow partisans-veterans Palmò and Bianco attend a commemorative ceremony for the battle of Valdivilla (which took place on February 24th, 1945 and was also included by Fenoglio in the first draft of *Il Partigiano Johnny*).³⁹ This episode is the central turning point of the novel: Ettore has just agreed to marry his girlfriend Vanda, after having discovered that she is pregnant, and has therefore decided to leave the criminal group in order not to endanger their relationship. While in the first seven chapters he had been trying to recuperate and perpetuate a soldierly persona by recreating a comradely social dimension with his fellow partisans Palmò and Bianco, he now chooses to take on a breadwinning role and abandon the bandit life he has been leading so far. In Valdivilla, the unveiling of a memorial stone celebrating those partisans who died in battle is accompanied by the speech of a representative of the Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale. Ettore thinks to himself:

Va bene che io non credo mai niente di quello che dicono questi uomini qui in queste circostanze qui, ma non voglio nemmeno correre il rischio di ascoltarlo. C’è solo più un discorso che voglio ascoltare, e questo discorso me lo faccio io, c’è solo una lezione che voglio tenere a mente, e mi odio se penso che l’avevo già imparata bene e poi col tempo me la sono dimenticata. Non finire sottoterra. Per nessun motivo. Non finire sottoterra. Né in galera.⁴⁰

Such explicit rejection of the traditional rhetoric of memorialization embodied by the representative of the Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale is symptomatic of Ettore’s unwillingness to institutionalize his own suffering. For him, war remains a personal matter, and he is the only one who can speak about it, and who can learn from it; indeed, Ettore does not allow the process of public memorialization to reconcile his spirit of continuous rebellion with a myth that would re-insert it into a political narrative.

At the same time, Ettore had initially sought and achieved a re-conciliation between the individual’s spirit of rebellion and a community sharing his same military horizon, through the militarized comprehension of his own Resistance experience. Perceiving himself as member of a community of former combatants, Ettore had found a way to insert himself in a narrative that guaranteed a continuity with his war experience. As previously discussed, by re-enacting war violence in criminal actions with his gang of fellow partisans, Ettore reconciled his rebellious spirit with a homogenizing dimension of comradeship. However, once this dimension of continuity (which functioned as a prosthetic extension of the violence of war) ceases to exist, he is thrown back into the impossibility of expressing his spirit of rebellion within a community that shares his same background.

³⁸ CLAUDIO PAVONE, *Una Guerra Civile*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1991, pp. 585-592.

³⁹ BEPPE FENOGLIO, *Il Partigiano Johnny* (1968), in: *Tutti i Romanzi*, GABRIELE PEDULLA (ed.), Torino, Einaudi, 2015, pp. 504-518.

⁴⁰ BEPPE FENOGLIO, *La Paga del Sabato*, cit., p. 86

Moreover, in Valdivilla Ettore acts disdainful of Palmo and Bianco's personal memorialization, seeing in their enthusiastic and emotional remembrances a "barbaro sentimento," a celebration of death without a purpose, constructed through a repeated re-telling of war episodes that in the end dissolves the unicity of one's experience by making it a mere de-personalized and shared account. In fact, Ettore is not one for caring about others' experiences:

Se proprio si sforzava, poteva vedere sul ciglio d'una qualunque di quelle tante colline alzarsi e camminare un uomo in una strana divisa e con un'arma sottobraccio, gli rassomigliava perfettamente, ma in definitiva era un altro, e Ettore non era per interessarsi troppo a un altro.⁴¹

What Fenoglio depicts in this passage is the emblematic portrayal of the partisan on the hills, evoked by Palmo, Bianco, and especially by the representative of the Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale, as much as by writers, film makers, and political representatives in the second half of the 1940s – an archetypal portrait representing every partisan, and in which every former partisan is asked to recognize themselves. But Ettore, a partisan, is aware that, no matter how much that portrayal resembles him, it will never be him; it remains a farfetched figure created by assembling all the stories surrounding the Resistenza, and it will never truly represent the spirit of a partisan's own individual involvement. Ettore's refusal of the memorialization of the Resistenza is engendered by his awareness of the risks related to blurring the line between myth and reality. He sees it in the empty words of the Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale representative, who commemorates all dead partisans, and he sees it in Palmo and Bianco, with their "barbaro sentimento" that he interprets as a desire to fulfill their partisan experience through death in their protruded post-war missions. Ettore has now chosen to abandon this path, since Vanda's pregnancy has given him a different purpose, and a reason to abandon the dangerous path of criminal life. The lesson he has learned, from the Resistance and the post-war period, seems to be indeed "Non finire sottoterra. Per nessun motivo."⁴²

In order to maintain his individuality, Ettore must avert external appropriations of his experience. Only by refusing all forms of collective memorialization can he re-affirm his uniqueness and maintain the existential sense of his own war. However, refusing a posthumous political narrative, the partisan veteran must come to terms with the absurd dimension of his war experience, and of his post-war acts of rebellion. The absurdity of war is bound with its inherent relation to death, which is at the same time what constitutes its myth – the complete fulfillment of a war experience implies the physical annihilation of the combatant. Ettore's sudden death takes place outside the war, and therefore eludes the kind of honorability that would grant him access to the realm of timeless heroism, a realm inhabited instead by Fenoglio's most famous partisans, Milton and Johnny.

⁴¹ Ivi, p. 84.

⁴² Ivi, p. 86.

L'esperienza partigiana, infatti, sempre di nuovo in Fenoglio si configura come un modo di vita eccezionale, vale a dire autentica, diversa, non banale motivata dalla necessità del riacquisto di una "normale dimensione umana": un modo di vivere che si determina genericamente come un "dire no": una rivolta, dunque; ma una rivolta, o una resistenza, che si rivela a un certo punto senza futuro, o - ch'è lo stesso - non ha altro futuro che se stessa. Donde l'impossibile sogno del partigiano perfetto: partigiano *in aeternum, forever*.⁴³

Saccone's definition of Fenoglio's perfect partisan experience as the one which is futureless, or rather can only fulfill itself by never reaching beyond its end, denotes it as not just exceptional, but inescapably tied to death. The partisan is either bound to die in the war, hence realizing the dream of perfect partisanship, or to survive the war, therefore making the partisan experience incomplete, imperfect.

In the last scene, while working at his own new small delivery business, Ettore is run over by his company truck; behind the wheel is Palmo, former partisan who also belonged to Ettore's criminal gang and worked for him in the delivery business. Ettore's death seems inescapable, as his aspirations to find a new life and a new identity fail – the partisan veteran must ultimately die to fulfill his destiny.

Girò la testa e vide il suo camion entrare nello scalo, vide attraverso il parabrezza la bocca di Palmo larga in un sorriso come a dirgli guarda come guido bene [...] Fu urtato nella schiena, i suoi occhi stupefatti furono pieni del colore rosso del vagone, sentì il suo torace crosciare come una cesta di vimini schiacciata. Il cassone del camion lo rotolò lungo il vagone, adesso era fermo e leggeva con occhi sbarrati la scritta MERCI P.V. sul muro del magazzino dirimpetto, e le gambe gli erano alte da terra e fredde come se si fossero cambiate di carne in pietra.⁴⁴

In the conclusive moment, Fenoglio combines Palmo, Ettore's last connection with the Resistance experience, and the company truck, symbol of his failed attempt to move on and leave the veteran struggle behind. Throughout the whole novel Ettore has been torn between remembering and re-enacting his past as a partisan, and the desire to move beyond the veteran impasse by performing his social male role as a breadwinning father and husband. At the end of the novel, the truck driven by Palmo crushes him against a wall, as the inescapable past and the elusive future converge on Ettore's only real present, his physical presence. In the moment of death, his legs feel as if they turned from flesh to stone, a parallel with the ritual of memorialization attended by Ettore in Valdivilla, where the bodies of the dead partisans were symbolized by the memorial stone that celebrated them; however, Ettore's petrification is only perceived by his dying self, and will not coincide with eternal memorialization. As Vanda reaches the scene of the crime, Palmo reports his last, unheroic words:

⁴³ EDUARDO SACCONI, *Il Partigiano Imperfetto*, in «MLN», 101 (1986), pp. 1-50.

⁴⁴ BEPPE FENOGLIO, *La Paga del Sabato*, cit., p. 107.

Ha ancora detto «Sei un cretino, Palmo, mi tocca morire per un cretino come te» [...] E Palmo fuggì lontano da lei, per non rimanere a vederle fare tutto quello che doveva fare adesso che il suo uomo era completamente morto.⁴⁵

By ending the novel with the words «completamente morto», Fenoglio suggests that, as a partisan veteran, Ettore had started dying a long time before his actual death. Ettore's last bit of life has been nothing but an appendix of his war; his unheroic last words stand as proofs that he died for and because of Palmo, his very last, trivial connection with the war.

In Fenoglio's most well-known works, the partisan fulfills his role by going towards his death in battle; in *Una Questione Privata* as in *Il Partigiano Johnny*, the protagonists accept their destiny, and the condition in which they are thrown, until the ultimate consequence. Milton and Johnny go towards their deaths at the hands of Fascist militias, a conclusion to their rebel trajectories that allows them to enter the timeless realm of heroes. Unlike his Homeric namesake, by surviving the war the veteran Ettore remains suspended between the world of the living and the world of the dead. The atemporal time of war turns into a three-folded time dimension, past-present-future, in which the veteran is ultimately tangled by the impossibility to leap into the future. He cannot be a father and a husband, for even after the end of the war he is still primarily defined by his war experience; his attempt to emancipate himself from the archetypal warrior paradigm and accept a new beginning, which would terminate the continuity of the war-postwar experience, is inevitably destined to failure.

In his book *La Strada Più Lunga*, Gabriele Pedullà asserts that the impossibility to rebuild a normal existence is one of the major themes in Fenoglio's works, in *La Paga del Sabato* as in *Una Questione Privata*. Pedullà writes that an autobiographical drama is at play in these texts, that of a war-survivor trying to appease his sense of guilt by immolating his fictional alter-egos as substitute sacrifices.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, it should not be forgotten that both *Una Questione Privata* and the tentative manuscript of *Il Partigiano Johnny* (in which the main protagonists, Milton and Johnny, die before the war is over) date more than a decade after the end of the war, while *La Paga del Sabato* is a more urgent reaction, having been written in the years immediately following 1945. The urgency of expressing his post-war distress results in Fenoglio's representation of a partisan that is first and foremost a survivor, a veteran.

In fact, *La Paga del Sabato* is the only long narrative in which Fenoglio makes his alter-ego die not during, but after the end of the war. Ettore embodies the partisan-veteran, who has not been given the chance to fulfill his war experience by becoming the timeless hero of a mythologized Resistance, and who at the same time cannot find a space in which he can re-adapt to post-war civilian life. While Johnny and Milton embody the "perfect" partisan, whose life is enclosed in the timespan of the war and whose death anticipate its end, Ettore, who survived the end of the war and can no longer transcend his reality to become the timeless hero that his individualistic attitude

⁴⁵ BEPPE FENOGLIO, *La Paga del Sabato*, cit., p. 109.

⁴⁶ GABRIELE PEDULLÀ, *La Strada Più Lunga – Sulle Tracce di Beppe Fenoglio*, Roma, Donzelli, 2001, pp. 149-150.

calls him to be, remains the “imperfect” partisan, whose trauma is not accounted for in the public memorialization of the Resistance.

The absurdity of war is transformed for Ettore into the absurdity of existence: a burden that he cannot bear, and one which ends up physically crushing him, in a non-heroic death that, unlike Milton’s and Johnny’s, cannot be willed or lived for.

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Fenoglio; partisan; veteran; La Paga del Sabato.



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COME CITARE QUESTO ARTICOLO

DANIELE BIFFANTI, *On Fenoglio's La paga del sabato. The Partisan as Veteran*, in «Ticontre. Teoria Testo Traduzione», 19 (2023)



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