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Archetypes Geared for War

Conversations with Leucò by Cesare Pavese

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ὃ δὲ Λεῦκον Ὀδυσσέος ἐσθλὸν ἑταῖρον βεβλήκει βουβῶνα
(and in the groin he smote Leukos, Ulysses' faithful comrade)
Homer, *Iliad*, IV 491-492

È necessario che ciascuno scenda una volta nel suo inferno
(At some stage everyone must descend into one's own hell)
Cesare Pavese, *Conversations with Leucò*

Per gli antichi l'Occidente – si pensi all'*Odissea* – era il paese dei morti
(For the ancients the West – think of the *Odyssey* – was the land of the dead)
Cesare Pavese, *Conversations with Leucò*

Abstract

In Cesare Pavese' work, war is inevitable. Men are ineluctably doomed to clash and fight, some to end victoriously, most, however, to succumb. It was, in fact, in war-stricken Italy that Pavese first conceived his *Dialoghi con Leucò* (*Conversations with Leucò*). His first Dialogue, *Le streghe* (*The Witches*), was already finished by December 13, 1945, barely three months after the end of the war. Plausibly inspired by his reading of Lucian's *Dialogues*, Leopardi's *Operette morali* (*Moral Essays*) and Hemingway's *The First Forty-Nine Stories*, this was the book that Pavese left on the bedside table of his hotel room in Turin in 1950 in which he committed suicide after several earlier attempts. The *Conversations* deal with the meaning of destiny and investigate the horrors of violence and war. This article provides a critical analysis of several *Conversations* to emphasize their significance for Pavese's work and untimely end.

Keywords: Cesare Pavese; *Conversations with Leucò*; myth; World War II.

Cesare Pavese (Santo Stefano Belbo, 1908 - Torino, 1950) was a writer who had graduated discussing a thesis on Walt Whitman. He was a cultural mediator who had translated into Italian *Moby Dick*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Moll Flanders* and *David Copperfield*[1], but also the *Theogony* by Hesiod. He was an intellectual who had stood up to Mussolini's brand of Fascism only to find himself incarcerated in 1935-36 then confined to a small town in southern Italy[2]. For Pavese, war was inevitable. Men are ineluctably doomed to clash and fight, some to end victoriously, most, however, to succumb. Post-war Italy, a country still essentially based on an impoverished agriculture and a desperate, acritical faith in immanent Christian truths, a nation that had initially thrown its lot in with Hitler's Germany only to find itself yearning to throw off the Nazi yoke and reinvent itself as a free, first-world nation, produced several great literary works in the Forties and early Fifties re-evoking those harsh war years. The neo-realism movement numbered authors such as Morante (*History: A Novel*), Fenoglio (*Alba*, *Partisan Johnny*), Calvino (*The Path to the Nest of Spiders*) and, of course, Levi (*If This Is a Man*). Pavese, however, reacted differently. To cope with the heavy aftermath, he turned to and drew from Greek mythology (Grimaldi 2023, 15, 25-26). It was here that he conceived his *Dialoghi con Leucò* (*Conversations with Leucò*)[3], the first of which, *Le streghe* (*The Witches*), had already been finished by December 13, 1945, barely three months after the end of the war[4]. Plausibly inspired by his reading of Lucian's *Dialogues*, Leopardi's *Operette morali* (*Moral Essays*) and Hemingway's *The First Forty-Nine Stories*[5], the *Dialoghi* was the book that Pavese was to leave on the bedside table of his hotel room in Turin in 1950 in which he would succumb himself, taking his own life after several earlier attempts. This particular copy bore a variation of the note written by Majakowski in 1930 before his own suicide:

[1] For an overview of Pavese the translator of Anglo-American literature "to be emulated inasmuch as it is not weighed down by tradition", cf. Lanzillotta 2022, 71-78, in partic. 73.

[2] Brancaleone Calabro, near Reggio Calabria (Calabria).

[3] For a brief anthropological understanding of Italy at the time in light of Pavese' works and, in particular, the backdrop to the 'crude truths' told in *La luna e i falò* (*The Moon and Bonfires*), cf. *ibid*., 11-14, 58-61. For the cold reception of the *Dialoghi* in neo-realist Italy, where Italo Calvino is the redeeming exception, cf. Lanzillotta 2022, 163.

[4] For an interesting earlier composition only days after the end of World War II, September 13-15, 1945, cf. *ibid*., 164.

[5] For Pavese's indebtedness here, cf. *ibid*.

> Perdono tutti e a tutti chiedo perdono. Va bene? Non fate troppi pettegolezzi.
> (I forgive everyone and wish in turn to be forgiven. Alright? Don't gossip too much.)[6]

Possibly his most important book, perhaps even, as that tragic hotel scene suggests, his 'calling card for posterity'[7], through the twenty-seven short exchanges constituting the *Dialoghi con Leucò* published in 1947 Pavese guides us back to his special blend of myth and archetype[8]. The name Leucò is certainly an abbreviation for the milk-white nymph, Leucotea, who converses in the *Dialoghi* not only with *the* witch *par excellence* of classical antiquity, Circes, but also with Ariadne abandoned by Theseus, king of Athens[9]. As such, the name thus alludes naturally enough to Pavese's would-be lover of the time, one Bianca Garufi (*bianco*, in Italian, meaning of course 'white'), but also to certain other feminine characters in Pavese's oeuvre, perhaps even the great white whale itself, Moby Dick[10]. In both an etymological and acoustic sense, however, as the opening citation above suggests, the name may also allude to Leukos, the somewhat naive companion seduced by the multi-faceted wit and wiles of Ulysses, his military leader who convinces him to come to the shores of Asia Minor to be one of the first to be slain in the ill-fated war between Greeks and Trojans.

The objective of this short foray into Pavese's devastated world is to deconstruct the text of the *Dialoghi* and thus tease out his narrative strategy as he condenses and weaves the language of war into his brief exchanges. As the reader shall see, in the scarred landscape continuously evoked, allusion and metaphor surely come into play but so too, as already stated, does the fathomless depth of etymology and myth. The archetypes geared for war in pre-classical Greece, Pavese seems to be saying, still determine our lives today.

The archetype opening the selection is Ulysses. It is about him that Circes and Leucotea speak in the *Le streghe* where, among other

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[6] *Ibid.*, 220.

[7] For a comprehensive overview of his life and works, see *ibid*. For a detailed discussion of the *Dialoghi con Leucò* and its role as "biglietto da visita presso i posteri", see *ibid.*, 163-174, 220.

[8] For a bibliography on Pavese's more abstract thoughts on myth, symbolism, archetypes and destiny in a neo-Jungian paradigm (namely the collective unconscious guiding individual actions), see *ibid.*, 13-15.

[9] Cf. *La vigna* (*The Vineyard*).

[10] Cf. Lanzillotta 2022, 165.

things, they explain the issue of the book's title, formerly *Uomini e dèi* (*Men and Gods*), now eponymously *Dialoghi con Leucò*. The name of the nymph Leucotea is abbreviated to both *Leucò*, with or without the term of affection "cara" (dear) or the diminutive of affection in *-ina*, *Leucina*, still meaning 'my dear Leucotea'. It is also here that we learn that it is precisely through Circes, the "antica dea mediterranea scaduta di rango" (the ancient, declassed Mediterranean goddess), a goddess nonetheless who is eternal, above human fate (supposedly) above human longing, that Pavese makes his own voice and opinions heard. It is she who, in some other-worldly atmosphere, discusses the nature of men who, not knowing any better, naturally call these two female characters 'witches'.

As rarefied and bewitching as the dialogue may be, however, between Oedipus and Tiresias in *I ciechi* (*The Blind Ones*), the arrival of Ulysses, the very archetype of human astuteness for both good and bad, had nevertheless been prophetised. Circes, therefore, had always known that one day she would be outdone, indeed, undone, by this man who was "né maiale né dio" (neither pig nor god). It is also through Ulysses that Pavese, in his guise as Circes, denounces the very folly of man. On the one hand all the *nostos* purportedly wants to do is to go home, to return to his palace in Ithaca, his dog Argo, his son Telemachus, his wife Penelope. On the other, however, no sooner does Circes meet him than he, "ridicolo e bravo" (ridiculous and war-like), jumps to reach for his sword[11]. The use of "bravo" here is rather telling inasmuch as in modern Italian the adjective normally means 'good', 'able', 'well-trained', 'accomplished', etc. Here, instead, Pavese uses it in its etymological sense of 'barbarous', 'savage', 'vicious', 'war-like'. Indeed, ineluctably geared and poised for battle, Ulysses is, to all intents and purposes, the archetypal man haplessly yearning to challenge his own fate while intuiting all along that it is already written. 'What a magnificent pig, what a wolf he would have made!', Circes rebuttals, a mere man who is secretly attracted to Death[12]. And in a chess match diegetically improving on Homer while paving the way for Ingmar Bergman's iconic *The Seventh Seal* a full decade later, a challenging game that Pavese has Ulysses teach the witch to play, Circes delightfully and somewhat tautologically admits that she

[11] "[...] lui aveva fatto un balzo e messo mano alla spada [...]. Lui dimenava quella spada – ridicolo e bravo come solo un uomo sa essere".

[12] "Tu non sai quanto la morte li attiri. Morire è sì un destino per loro, una ripetizione, una cosa saputa, ma s'illudono che cambi qualcosa".

too had failed to foresee what she had already in fact foreseen [13]. That is to say, Ulysses, though the best of men, continually fails to recognise and comprehend the smile of the immortals. Devastatingly, the only trace of immortality he actually possesses is the "ricordo che porta e il ricordo che lascia" (the memory he brings and the memory he leaves behind).

Memory, therefore, the specific topic of *Le Muse* (*The Muses*) [14], an entire *Dialogo* between Hesiod and Mnemosyne, the goddess presiding over memory since the days before time, before the gods, is also at the heart of this Conversation in which the declassed Circes (alias Pavese) implicitly realises that her memory is defective, that she can actually be wrong. She is envious and berates herself, however, not for failing to transform Ulysses into a beast or a god, as we might have otherwise imagined, but for not having turned herself into a human. In this line of subliminal thought, she is apparently confounded by the fact that Ulysses gives names to beings other than humans, to both the "bestia che mangia, che monta, e non ha memoria" (the beast that eats and mounts, that possesses no memory) and 'the immortals'. As part of the game of love making, she accepts being called many things, from single syllables and animal-like cries to the names of other goddesses, for gods, like beasts, do not need names or memory. A dog left some twenty years earlier back in Ithaca, she claims, even it were somehow still alive now, would certainly not remember its master if ever Ulysses did return. And yet it is precisely here that she is wrong. Names are indeed given and memory does exist, even in animals, even among the immortals. Not only does Argos, Ulysses' old dog, remember his master, despite the twenty-year period of absence, despite its old age and notwithstanding his master's clever disguise [15], but so too does the emotion evoked at recognising Ulysses bring on its death precisely because the dog had never forgotten its deep-seated love for its master. Likewise Circes. After a year of love making the memory of Ulysses lingers on in her bed. And the memory of this man, now navigating the seas towards a destiny of adventures, heroic deeds, war and death, the man who gave words to things, is her undoing.

Just as Ulysses the archetype suggests, warring, the great deed, is, as Pavese continually recalls, at the very heart of man's most elemental nature. It is this warring nature that has separated him from the unity

13 "Quello che mai prevedo è appunto di aver preveduto".

14 *Le Muse*. Mnemosyne is the goddess presiding over Memory and the mother, almost the collective essence, of the nine Muses.

15 Cf. Hom. *Od.* XVII 290-327.

of the Cosmos, from the possibility of mixing, blending with that same Cosmos. Such a flawed nature has also created 'destiny', 'limit'. Against an anti-Aristophanesque backdrop and, therefore, in a decidedly pro-Socratic and pro-sophist paradigm, Ixion, in his dialogue with Nefele, the Cloud [16], becomes separate and estranged from the divine immanent in life. Like Ulysses, Ixion too chooses to continue playing his war games by 'throwing large rocks' and 'breaking the enemy's back' [17]. In other words, Ixion proceeds to march into the fray towards his own death, which will ultimately become an eternal non-life as a shade in some non-place. Nefele will remain with him for as long as possible, but this new limit is written. Destiny is sealed.

Destiny is indeed sealed for men, even if they are the progeny of the lesser gods, as is Ixion, even if they are the progeny of the very king of those gods, the mighty Zeus himself, as is Sarpedon. It is, in fact, through the dialogue between Sarpedon and his maternal uncle, Hippolochus, that Pavese alludes to that genetic flaw in man as a species. This flaw, in the ancient and medieval worlds alike, drives men, all men, to war. Sometimes war is called, as in the case of Troy, a reparatory *bellum justum* allegedly meant to restore an abducted wife to her rightful husband while annihilating another civilisation and taking over its cities and maritime trade routes. Sometimes it is a reparatory medieval crusade supposedly meant to 'liberate' lands illegitimately occupied centuries beforehand by 'infidels' but in so doing found new kingdoms for the self-acclaimed 'liberators' [18]. This flaw, Pavese implicitly concludes, refers less to a clash of cultures and value systems than to the genetic willingness to provoke and enter into that very clash. It dwells so intimately in our blood that we as men are doomed to repeat over and over again ancient models of action, to clash and enter into armed conflict as a matter of destiny. As Mnemosyne explains to Hesiod in *Le Muse*, it is indeed a genetically-geared, mechanical reenactment of divine models – "ripete un modello divino". Genetic memory, in other words, dictates

[16] Cf. *Dialoghi con Leucò*, *La nube* (*The Cloud*). The implicit anti-model would seem to be the satirical comedy by Aristophanes, *The Clouds*, in Greek, Νεφέλαι, the same name given to the second interlocutor in the Pavesian dialogue, Nefele.

[17] "Questi nuovi padroni posson forse impedirmi di scagliare un macigno per gioco? o di scendere nella pianura e spezzare la schiena a un nemico? Saranno loro più terribili della stanchezza e della morte?".

[18] *La Chimera*: "Volentieri i giovani greci andavano a illustrarsi e morire in Oriente. Qui la loro virtuosa baldanza navigava in un mare di favolose atrocità cui non tutti seppero tener testa. Inutile far nomi. Del resto le Crociate furono molte più di sette".

atrocious courses of action driving men time and time again into the folly of war[19].

It is true that there was an age in which the gods walked the earth and committed atrocious acts themselves to men in their prime. Back then Bellerophon was in his element. Priding himself in both his strong arms and Pegasus, his winged horse, he was elated at the prospect of being able to slay yet another Chimaera. Yet destiny is cruel. With no more chimaeras left to vanquish and the gods irritated by his unlimited, unbridled arrogance, Bellerophon is thrown from Pegasus' back and now, chronically injured, grows old and weak, destined to wander amid the scars of war left in the landscape – "un cadavere, un odio, una pozza di sangue" (a corpse, hatred, a pool of blood)[20]. Slaying once a source of life, feeding that old genetic flaw had kept him young and vigorous. Now it is the cause of Bellerophon's sense of forlornness and lack of self-worth. He is undone.

We reach this conclusion through the dialogue between Sarpedon and Hippolochus only to realise, however, that Pavese has contaminated two distinct Homeric story lines regarding the latter. Greek myth recounts the tales of at least two different heroes by the same name. However, Hippolochus, no matter his initial life circumstances, has the same destiny encoded in the etymology of his very name:

ἵππος (*híppos*, 'horse') + λόχος (*lókhos*, 'ambush')

Contamination, after all, in a veritable kaleidoscope of possible backdrops and variations, as Kerényi[21] and Calasso (1993) so adroitly point

[19] Cf. *Le Muse*: "Non capisci che l'uomo, ogni uomo, nasce in quella palude di sangue? e che il sacro e il divino accompagnano anche voi, dentro il letto, sul campo, davanti alla fiamma? Ogni gesto che fate ripete un modello divino. Giorno e notte, non avete un istante, nemmeno il più futile, che non sgorghi dal silenzio delle origini".

[20] *Ibid*.: Sarpedonte "Dalla grotta ora sgorga un torrente come fosse il suo sangue. La storia della madre impietrata, fatta rupe che piange, perché piacque a una dea di ucciderle i figli a uno a uno, a frecciate? E la storia di Aracne, che per l'odio di Atena inorridì e divenne ragno? Sono cose che accaddero. Gli dèi le hanno fatte". Ippòloco "E sta bene. Che importa? Non serve pensarci. Di quei destini non rimane nulla". Sarpedonte "Rimane il torrente, la rupe, l'orrore. Rimangono i sogni. Bellerofonte non può fare un passo senza urtare un cadavere, un odio, una pozza di sangue, dei tempi che tutto accadeva e non erano sogni. Il suo braccio a quel tempo pesava nel mondo e uccideva".

[21] By this famous Hungarian classical philologist, see for example his *Essays on a Science of Mythology* (written together with Carl G. Jung), 1969; *The Gods of the Greeks*, 1980; *The Heroes of the Greeks*, 1959; *Prometheus: Archetypal Image of Human Existence* (written together with Ralph Manheim), 1963.

out, is one of the very hallmarks of mythology. In Pavese's contaminating revisitation of the specific myth, justified and comprehensible in light of the above-mentioned flaw common to all men, Hippolochus would seem to be the son of Antimachus and, therefore, brother to Pisander in whose company he is destined to be captured by Agamemnon and atrociously put to death [22]. For Pavese, however, he is also, or he also represents, another Hippolochus, brother to Laodomia and, therefore, maternal uncle to Sarpedon, son of Zeus. This latter Hippolochus is also the son of the Bellerophon mentioned above, the slayer of the chimaera [23]. In turn, as Sarpedon illustrates, the two of them, Sarpedon and Hippolochus, have the one 'father', that is, they are classically presented as 'sons of Bellerophon'. Presumably drawing on the generic Latin idea of *nepotes* [24] conveying the concept not only of 'nephews' or 'grandsons', but as 'descendants', what really brings them together despite that generation of difference is that in their DNA they have both inherited the flaw that now torments their once vigorous common forebear. In such a state of affairs, in order to survive as a man, paradoxically it is far better to end one's life. Pavese, who would later commit suicide himself, seems to suggest here that in order to remain human, the last chimaera left to be slain is indeed oneself. In the *Dialogo Le cavalle* (*The Mares*) that takes place between Hermes, the messenger between gods and men, and Chiron the centaur, the famous instructor of both Aesculapius and Achilles in the art of war and medicine, Pavese has this exceptionally learned half-man half-beast exclaim: "Cosa sono i mortali se non ombre anzitempo?" (What are mortal men if not shades before their time?). In another *Dialogo*, *La madre* (*The Mother*), Hermes himself will in turn tell Meleager, the fierce slayer of the Calydonian boar doomed to die when his embers grow cold but also to continue being pointlessly aggressive in the afterlife, that "voi vivete mezzo riarsi. [...] Tutti, quando sapete, conducete una vita di morti" (you men live half burnt [...] when you learn something you lead your lives as if you were dead). Similarly Diana, the goddess of hunt, after saving Virbius (= etymologically 'twice a man') from his old self when his name was still Hippolytus (= etymologically 'dragged by a horse'), asks him: 'What is it in your blood, o

[22] Hom. *Il*. XI 122-149.

[23] *Ibid*. VI 196-211.

[24] *La Chimera*: Sarpedonte "Tu credi, Ippòloco? Credi che basti averla uccisa? Nostro padre – lo posso chiamare così – dovrebbe saperlo".

mortals, that drives you to kill?'[25]. 'Life and destiny'[26] is the only answer. And does not Cratos (Power), in the *Dialogo Gli uomini* (*Men*) define humans as "Miserabili cose che dovranno morire, più miserabili dei vermi o delle foglie dell'altr'anno che son morti ignorandolo" (Miserable things that will have to die, more miserable than worms or last year's leaves that perished without realising it)? Through Sarpedon Pavese anticipates his startling conclusion by somewhat cryptically playing with the etymology of the very concept of 'suicide' ('to kill oneself'): "Se vuoi vivere, smetti di vivere… […] Nessuno si uccide. La morte è destino. Non si può che augurarsela" (If you wish to continue living, stop living… […] No one actually kills oneself. Death is destiny. One can only wish it upon oneself)[27]. "Non sapevo di volere la morte" (I didn't know that I was really searching for death), Virbius admits in *Il lago* (*The Lake*) now realising that he as Hippolytus had actually died and was now living an afterlife himself in the land of the dead in the West, in other words, Italy.

Even Love inevitably kills him who would love. Moving on from the *Dialogo* between the blind Tiresias and the blinded Oedipus, in which the former tells the latter of preferring to make love, when a man, with men, and, when a woman, with other women[28], now in *Il fiore* (*The flower*) the amorous idyll lasting six days takes place between Hyacinth, an unassuming lad besotted by Apollo, and the radiant god of love

[25] According to Graeco-Roman myth, Hippolytus, brought back from death by Aesculapius and allowed to live a second life in Italy, was given the name Virbius. On such a myth, cf. Hyginus, *Fab.* 251, 3: *Hippolytus Thesei filius voluntate Dianae, qui postea Virbius est appellatus*. According to Virgil (*Aen*. VII 761-783), however, after exile from Athens, Hippolytus moved to Italy where he married Aricia and had a son by the name of Virbius. For the *Conversation*, cf. *Il lago*: Diana "I mortali finiscono sempre per chiedere questo. Ma che avete nel sangue?". Virbio "Tu chiedi a me che cosa è il sangue?". Diana "C'è un divino sapore nel sangue versato. Quante volte ti ho visto rovesciare il capriolo o la lupa, e tagliargli la gola e tuffarci le mani. Mi piacevi per questo. Ma l'altro sangue, il sangue vostro, quel che vi gonfia le vene e accende gli occhi, non lo conosco così bene. So che è per voi vita e destino".

[26] *Ibid*.: "So che è per voi vita e destino".

[27] *La Chimera*: Sarpedonte "[Bellerophon is speaking] 'Ragazzo, s'io avessi i tuoi anni, mi sarei già buttato a mare'. Ma non minaccia anima viva. 'Ragazzo' mi ha detto, 'tu sei giusto e pietoso, smetti di vivere'". […] Sarpedonte "Se vuoi vivere, smetti di vivere…". Ippòloco "E perché non si uccide, lui che sa queste cose?". Sarpedonte "Nessuno si uccide. La morte è destino. Non si può che augurarsela, Ippòloco".

[28] *I ciechi*: Tiresia "[…] seppi ogni cosa del sesso: giunsi al punto che uomo cercavo gli uomini e donna le donne" ([…] I knew everything about sex: I got to the point at which as a man I sought out other men and as a woman other women).

poetry[29]. The interlocutors in *Il fiore*, Eros and Thanatos, Pavese explicitly admits, follow in the footsteps of Italy's greatest Romantic poet, Leopardi, in the dialogue between Love and Death while sharing their thoughts rather laconically on the demise of Hyacinth, struck dead by a discus (the Latin term for a frisbee) that Apollo had launched towards him[30]. Luck, however, was against the two mythological lovers. The discus skims over the hard ground. Hyacinth runs towards it to retrieve it but the discus rebounds hitting the boy square in the face. The fact that the boy in Pavese's version is "abbagliato" (blinded by the sun)[31], a metaphor not only for his totalising love for Apollo but also for the concomitant false sense of invincibility[32], only exacerbates this same death. The dialogue in *Il fiore*, consequently, takes on a decidedly hypocritical hue. Love itself as Eros quizzes Death, Thanatos, about the episode

[29] Here Pavese, presumably through Leopardi as his vector, chooses the number six as it is, in the Petrarchan tradition, at the very basis of the myth of Daphne and Apollo as Petrarch had developed it in his love for Laura and to which Pavese himself alludes in the same Dialogue: Tanatos "Dov'è passato un immortale, sempre spuntano di questi fiori. Ma le altre volte, almeno, c'era una fuga, un pretesto, un'offesa. Riluttavano al dio, o commettevano empietà. Così accadde di Dafne, di Elino, di Atteone. Iacinto invece non fu che un ragazzo. Visse i suoi giorni venerando il suo signore. Giocò con lui come gioca il fanciullo. Era scosso e stupito. Tu, Eros, lo sai" (Where an immortal has passed by these flowers always come up. The other times, however, there had been a chase, a pretext, an offence. They would not give in to the god or they committed impiety. This is what happened to Daphne, Helenus, Acteon. Hyacinth, on the other hand, was but a boy. He lived out his days worshipping his lord. He played with him like a little boy. He was upset and in awe. You, Eros, you know).

[30] The subtitle for the Dialogue reads as follows: "Che a questo fatto dolce-atroce, il quale non riesce a disgustarci di un dio primaverile come Apolline il Chiaro, assistessero i leopardiani Eros e Tànatos, è di solare evidenza" (That Leopardi's Eros and Thanatos witnessed this sweet and yet atrocious fact, which fails to disgust us in a god linked to the Spring such as Apollo the radiant one, is as clear as the light of day). Pavese refers here to the Dialogue *Amore e Morte* (*Love and Death*) that Leopardi inserted in his *Ciclo di Aspasia* (*Aspasia Cycle*, 1834), Aspasia being the code name of classical origin for Fanny Targioni Tozzetti, the Romantic poet's would-be lover.

[31] Tanatos "Lo lanciò [*scil.* Apollo] in alto nel senso del sole, e Iacinto levò gli occhi e le mani, e l'attese abbagliato. Gli piombò sulla fronte. Perché questo, Eros? Tu certo lo sai" ([Apollo] threw it high into the sky towards the sun. Hyacinth looked up and held out his hands. He waited for it blinded by the sun. It struck him on the forehead. Why this, Eros? Surely you know why).

[32] Eros "A Iacinto pareva di potere ogni cosa" (Hyacinth believed he could do anything). Tanatos "Ho conosciuto altri mortali. E più esperti, più saggi, più forti che Iacinto. Tutti distrusse questa smania di potere ogni cosa" (I have known other mortals, more experienced, wiser and stronger than Hyacinth. This deranged conviction that they could achieve anything destroyed them all).

while deviously bemoaning Apollo's apparent nonchalance and inability to weep (quite the opposite in Ovid's version [33]) when all along it had been him, Eros himself, to invite Thanatos to arrive on the scene. Eros had fooled the boy into thinking that he could love the very god of Love and Beauty himself. Eros was the undoing of the boy destined to become yet another bloodied corpse in a whole line of bloodied corpses of men, monsters and gods, all dying in their own blood since the dawn of time [34].

Together with the question of destiny and the genetically-transmitted predisposition for killing, for entering into conflict and war, the *Dialoghi* written by Pavese directly after World War II pose a series of further questions to which no easy answer is provided. What should we make, for instance, of the likes of the beautiful boy Endymion who, though put to sleep forever by the Moon with his eyes wide open, still yearns to go roaming around the countryside spilling blood [35]? How should we interpret the epilogue to Sappho's plight who commits suicide by plunging into the eastern Mediterranean and yet lives on, as it were, giving rise to plaintive song about it? Should we then delve into possible parallels with Pavese himself, who seems to identify with her as well, and his own plight and/or, via extension, with Italy as an ethnic group and nation? If so, how are we then to reconcile Sappho's suicide with Pavese's conclusion to her story startlingly foreshadowed right at the beginning? The Aegean, after all, is defined as a sea so 'full of sperm and tears' that no wonder the goddess of beauty, Aphrodite, together with Phaedra, Andromaca, Cassandra, Medea and a veritable host of others, had sprung from the froth of those very waves [36]. In the same light, should we then interpret 'the descendant of Tindar' not as Helen but as Lady Death, the great goddess dwelling within her, the One with no name, the One greater than Helen who, 'worthy of this sea, smiled at no one, lied

33 Cf. Ovid *Met*. X 162-219.

34 Eros: "Dai tempi del caos non si è visto che sangue. Sangue d'uomini, di mostri e di dèi. Si comincia e si muore nel sangue" (Since the times of Chaos nothing has been seen but blood. Blood of men, monsters and gods. One begins and one dies in blood).

35 *La belva* (*The Beast*): "Noi siamo convinti che gli amori di Artemide con Endimione non furono cosa carnale. Ciò beninteso non esclude – tutt'altro – che il meno energico dei due anelasse a sparger sangue".

36 *Schiuma d'onda* (*Sea Foam*): "Questo mare è pieno d'isole e sulla più orientale di tutte, Cipro, scese Afrodite nata dalle onde. Mare che vide molti amori e grosse sventure. È necessario fare i nomi di Ariadne, Fedra, Andromaca, Elle, Scilla, Io, Cassandra, Medea? Tutte lo traversarono, e più d'una ci rimase. Vien da pensare che sia tutto intriso di sperma e di lacrime". Specifically on Medea, cf. the *Dialogo* between Jason and Melita, *Gli Argonauti* (*The Argonauts*).

to no one, and yet disseminated destruction and massacre everywhere she went'[37]?

For sure the world Pavese evokes through his haunting *Dialoghi con Leucò* is constantly awash with blood and death. When even mothers, whether these be Medea or Althaea, willingly kill their own children for vengeance or self-appeasement only to wander the Mediterranean dumbstruck and mad, there is little space for anything else. 'Why did our mothers kill us?', Meleager wonders in the rarefied nothingness that is his afterlife. Hermes, the messenger god momentarily sitting with him, answers that the wiser question to ask would be why mothers willingly conceive in the first place[38].

Is it through the mother, therefore, that the flaw in mankind, the genetically-triggered urge to disseminate destruction and death, to enter into combat, to declare that most folly of actions, war, is transmitted? Does this explain Patroclus's illogical defiance in the intimate Conversation, *I due* (*The Two of Them*), to descend into battle against the Trojans donning Achilles' armour? Together with his deep love for his companion, does this also explain the ineluctable epilogue to that exchange in terms of Achilles' own wrath and folly, the reiterated, unnecessary desecration of Hector's body beneath the walls of Troy and later on the beach in the Greek camp? Does it explain, furthermore, why we as men are so frantically and willingly bent on killing our own brothers, our own blood? With such a flaw encoded in his DNA, though somewhat generous and courageous in freeing Prometheus from the cliff face, did not Hercules also slay the monsters that had been the Titans, his own brothers, therefore, inasmuch as he and Prometheus were both products of that Titanic age when intelligent life forms roamed the earth in monstrously deformed bodies in a time before Time[39]?

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[37] *Schiuma d'onda*: Britomarti "Ma la Tindaride, tu hai detto, uscì illesa". Saffo "Seminando l'incendio e la strage. Non sorrise a nessuno. Non mentì con nessuno. Ah, fu degna del mare".

[38] *La madre*: Meleagro "Ma allora perché ci hanno ucciso?". Ermete "Chiedi perché vi han fatto, Meleagro".

[39] *La rupe* (*The Cliff*): "Nella storia del mondo l'èra detta titanica fu popolata di uomini, di mostri, e di dèi non ancora organizzati in Olimpo. Qualcuno anzi pensa che non ci fossero che mostri – vale a dire intelligenze chiuse in un corpo deforme e bestiale. Di qui il sospetto che molti degli uccisori di mostri – Eracle in testa – versassero sangue fraterno". For the adjective 'monstruous' as a key term in Pavese's deconstruct of Greek myth referring specifically to the Titanic age in which men, animals, gods and plants continuously morphed into and with each other, cf. Lanzillotta 2022, 166-167.

Is this genetically-triggered urge, moreover, interlocked with what the ancients called 'destiny'? Destiny is, as Pavese's Oedipus admits to the stranger he meets by chance on the road after having lost his kingdom in Thebes, his family, his former life, his sight, not only what the Oracle in Delphi may reveal to those who would seek its counsel[40]. It is not even what the half-goddess half sea-nympth, Calypso, seeks to tell Ulysses in *L'isola* (*The Island*)[41]. Inasmuch as it is part of one's DNA well before one is even born[42], the unnamed pilgrim in *La strada* (*The Road*) then adds in his exchange with Oedipus that "anche il tuo desiderio di scampare al destino, è destino esso stesso" (even your desire to escape your own destiny is destiny itself), even this hard-wired into one's blood[43]. It is not Delphi that can reveal this great truth. It is what the Sphinx tells you at the crossroads that truly matters[44].

Destiny is also stronger than mortal love. It was not by some error, whim or even by a lover's impatience but by design, by destiny, that just before returning from Hades, just before stepping into the light, Orpheus had turned. He had turned, however, not by an urge to see his beloved Eurydice, but precisely to send her back to the realm of the dead[45]. He had learned that his real love, in both his past and his future, was for his own song, for that glimmer of light, for his own life alone, without his former wife[46]. Destiny, as Orpheus explains furthermore

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[40] In 1935 Pavese had translated *Oedipus rex* by Sophocles from ancient Greek into Italian.

[41] *L'isola*: Odisseo "Non sono immortale". Calipso "Lo sarai, se mi ascolti. Che cos'è vita eterna se non questo accettare l'istante che viene e l'istante che va? L'ebbrezza, il piacere, la morte non hanno altro scopo. Cos'è stato finora il tuo errare inquieto?". Odisseo "Se lo sapessi avrei già smesso. Ma tu dimentichi qualcosa". Calipso "Dimmi". Odisseo "Quello che cerco l'ho nel cuore, come te".

[42] *La strada*: "Che cosa è ancora Edipo, che cosa siamo tutti quanti, se fin la voglia più segreta del tuo sangue è già esistita prima ancora che nascessi e tutto quanto era già detto?".

[43] *Ibid*.: Mendicante "Un giorno non c'eravamo, Edipo. Dunque anche le voglie del cuore, anche il sangue, anche i risvegli sono usciti dal nulla. Sto per dire che anche il tuo desiderio di scampare al destino, è destino esso stesso. Non siamo noi che abbiamo fatto il nostro sangue. Tant'è saperlo e viver franchi, secondo l'oracolo". For the more general meaning of Oedipus as an archetype in Pavese's 'poetics of destiny', cf. Lanzillotta 2022, 15, 29-33.

[44] *Ibid*.: Mendicante "Tu dimentichi almeno un discorso di quelli che hai fatto". Edipo "Quale, amico?". Mendicante "Quello al crocicchio della Sfinge".

[45] *L'inconsolabile* (*The Unconsolable One*): Orfeo "Che c'entra il destino. Il mio destino non tradisce. Ridicolo che dopo quel viaggio, dopo aver visto in faccia il nulla, io mi voltassi per errore o per capriccio".

[46] *Ibid*.: "Il mio destino non tradisce. Ho cercato me stesso. Non si cerca che questo".

to his fellow Thracian, is also somehow stronger than love, deeper than blood. It is intimately entwined with one's inner-most being, nothing to do with family no matter how they may think otherwise [47]. Destiny, the disenchanted semi-barbarian concludes, deeply embedded in one's being, is even beyond the reach of the gods [48]. Going down into Hades had taught him this, had opened his eyes to this, and Eurydice consequently meant nothing to him anymore [49].

Perhaps this absence of connection at our most intimate, characteristic level with others, even with one's family, is what brought Pavese to follow the *Dialogo* between Baccha and Orpheus with the tale of Lykaon, king of Arcadia. More intimately akin to wolves than his fellow man and family, his very name (*nomen omen*) etymologically suggesting the Greek word for wolf, λύκος (*lykos*), Lykaon did not hesitate to test the mighty Zeus by killing his own son to serve him as a succulent meal. Zeus, more human in his moral fibre than these would-be humans, is so disgusted and enraged by the heinous act that he turns his host into his namesake, a wolf.

A striking metamorphosis to be sure but was it really so transformative? Pavese invites us to think not. The king's name is indeed etymologically linked to 'wolf', but so too did the hunters in the *Dialogo* recognise in the first place that it had been their dogs to sniff Lykaon out, wolf-like not only in his grim appearance but also in his essence, smell and very heart [50]. Besides, does not the second hunter, somewhat more humane in conduct than the first, then add that there are days in which the difference between the men they are and the ways of the wolves they hunt, howling at the moon by night and at the throats of other men by day, is rather slight indeed [51]? And even the more callous first hunter has

[47] Cf. *Ibid*.: "Crede perfino che il suo sangue scorra alle volte in vene altrui".

[48] *Ibid*.: Bacca "E che vuol dire che un destino non tradisce?". Orfeo "Vuol dire che è dentro di te, cosa tua; più profondo del sangue, di là da ogni ebbrezza. Nessun dio può toccarlo".

[49] *Ibid*.: "La stagione che avevo cercato era là in quel barlume. Non m'importò nulla di lei che mi seguiva. Il mio passato fu il chiarore, fu il canto e il mattino. E mi voltai".

[50] *L'uomo-lupo* (*The Man-Wolf*): Primo cacciatore "Sono i cani che ce l'hanno stanato. [...] Morì mordendo il giavellotto come fosse la gola di un cane. Aveva il cuore della bestia oltre che il pelo".

[51] *Ibid*.: Primo cacciatore "Si racconta di lui che cuoceva i suoi simili". Secondo cacciatore "Conosco uomini che han fatto molto meno, e sono lupi – non gli manca che l'urlo e rintanarsi nei boschi. Sei così certo di te stesso da non sentirti qualche volta Licaone come lui? Tutti noialtri abbiamo giorni che, se un dio ci toccasse, urleremmo e saremmo alla gola di chi ci resiste. Che cos'è che ci salva se non che al risveglio ci ritroviamo queste mani e questa bocca e questa voce? Ma lui non ebbe scappatoie [...]".

to admit that the Arcadian woods are teeming with men and women similarly turned by the gods into all sorts of other beings, such as bushes, birds and wolves [52]. Callisto too, turned into a bear, had once roamed there, the second hunter adds, slaughtered by her unknowing human son with no pity whatsoever from the gods above [53].

After all, what is destiny, this same second hunter offers, if not the essence, the basic traits contained in one's blood? The gods do not really change one into anything at all, he claims. The gods merely nail you, freeze you, as it were, in a state you have already reached on your own [54]. Consequently, we might conclude, all the instances of metamorphosis recounted by Ovid, Hyginus and other mythographers would seem to represent just as many cases of humans, real humans, secretly, intimately, naturally identifying with rocks, sea water, cypress trees, flowers or wild beasts. In the case of the two hunters, representatives of all men, that inner state, the "lupo che è in noi tutti" (the wolf within us all) is indeed wolf-like and not only to be understood in the *homo homini lupus* paradigm theorised by many, from Statius through Erasmus to Owen and Hobbes. Here, as men in society, the hunters seek, and often do not manage, to hold that inner wolf at bay [55]. Classical metamorphosis would thus seem to bring out phenotypically what one already is in the genome.

In such a bio-anthropological deconstruction of myth [56], Pavese states in *L'ospite* (*The Foreign Guest*) that when Hercules visits Celaenae,

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[52] *Ibid*.: Primo cacciatore "Invece questi luoghi sono pieni di uomini e donne toccati dal dio – chi divenne cespuglio, chi uccello, chi lupo [...]".

[53] *Ibid*.: Secondo cacciatore "C'è l'antica Callisto sepolta sul colle. Chi sa più il suo delitto? I signori del cielo l'hanno molto punita. Di una donna – era bella, si dice – fare un'orsa che rugge e che lacrima, che nella notte per paura vuol tornare nelle case. Ecco una belva che non ebbe pace. Venne il figlio e l'uccise di lancia, e gli dèi non si mossero". Callisto, the daughter or granddaughter of Lykaon, punished by Hera or Artemis via metamorphosis into a bear after Zeus, disguised as Artemis to whom Callisto was devoted, had lain with her leaving her pregnant with Arcas destined to become king of the region that took his name, Arcadia.

[54] *Ibid*.: Secondo cacciatore "Non conosci la strada del sangue. Gli dèi non ti aggiungono né tolgono nulla. Solamente, d'un tocco leggero, t'inchiodano dove sei giunto. Quel che prima era voglia, era scelta, ti si scopre destino. Questo vuol dire, farsi lupo. Ma resti quello che è fuggito dalle case, resti l'antico Licaone".

[55] *Ibid*.: Primo cacciatore "Amico, e credi che gl'importi di marcire sottoterra come un uomo, lui che l'ultima cosa che ha visto eran uomini in caccia?". Secondo cacciatore "C'è una pace di là dalla morte. Una sorte comune. Importa ai vivi, importa al lupo che è in noi tutti".

[56] For a specifically anthropological deconstruction of his last novel to come out while he was alive, *La luna e i falò* (1950), see Grimaldi 2023.

Phrygia (modern-day west central Turkey), he finds a more primitive phase of civilisation compared to pre-Hellenic Greece in both the conception and role of the divine and the laws of hospitality[57]. In classical Greece, guests are thought to be sent by the gods and so must be honoured accordingly. In Celaenae, however, quite to the contrary, guests become blood and bone fertiliser for Phrygian crops. Hercules naturally triumphs over the king of the region, Lityerses, and does not end up fattening the harvest himself but in so doing he corroborates our understanding of the *fil rouge* running through all of Pavese's *Dialoghi*: at the very first opportunity, in keeping with one's most intimate, unfettered inclinations, one will endeavour to kill and make foul use of the first man to come along, whoever he may be. Besides, as Pavese states in both his introduction to the next *Dialogo*, *I fuochi* (*The Bonfires*), and later on in the *Dialogo* between the Dioskouroi, *In famiglia* (*In the Family*), even among the most sophisticated of Greeks, in an earlier phase of civilisation, much, therefore, like the Phrygians themselves in the age of Hercules, many had gladly sacrificed their wayward guests and banqueted on the flesh of their own kin[58].

In conclusion we can say for sure that the *fil rouge* running through the *Dialoghi* is not in the least encouraging. To the contrary, the *Dialogo* under the title *Il diluvio* (*The Flood*) actually forebodes our just punishment as an entire species. Pavese had lived through the horrors of Fascism, Neo-Nazism, the allied bombings on Turin, colleagues denouncing other colleagues to the authorities, his tormented love affair with Bianca Garufi, his own attempts at taking his own life, 'the last chimaera', and so on. For a man as tried as he was, the idea of the inevitability of conflict, of prevarication, of the dog-eat-dog or *homo homini lupus* paradigm within a country torn apart by war, even within one's family, even between brothers, all hard-wired at some intimate, genetic level, must have seemed all too plausible, all too real. Theseus, the founder of Athens, in *Il lago*, unabashedly declares, furthermore, that "Quel che si uccide si diventa" (one becomes what one kills)[59]. Does this also mean that for Pavese killing (metaphorically or otherwise) Germans, fascists,

[57] The success and significance of Dionysus in other works by Pavese are to be understood in this very light. On this point, cf. Lanzillotta 2022, 16-29.

[58] *I fuochi*: "Anche i Greci praticarono sacrifici umani. Ogni civiltà contadina ha fatto questo. E tutte le civiltà sono state contadine". *In famiglia*: Castore "Lascia stare gli dèi. È una famiglia [*scil*. the Atrides] che in passato si mangiavano tra loro. Cominciando da Tantalo che ha imbandito il figliolo…".

[59] *Il lago*: Teseo "Anche questo può darsi. Quel che si uccide si diventa".

communists, his lover, a wild boar or wolves made the killer just the same as the victim? Pavese's own suicide, killing the last chimaera, is the poignant epilogue to this chain of gruesome thoughts and conclusions.

In a neo-Freudian and neo-Jungian light Pavese does, however, attempt to provide some glimmer of hope. Notwithstanding the emphasis in the critical literature on Dionysus and Oedipus as the main archetypes presiding over his *Dialoghi*, particularly striking in our current reading of the work is Pavese's revisitation of the myth of Orpheus, *L'inconsolabile* (*The Unconsolable One*). "È necessario che ciascuno scenda una volta nel suo inferno" (At some stage everyone must descend into one's own hell), Orpheus declares. Pavese had certainly done so throughout the war and would continue to do so in the years to come, through the composition of the *Dialoghi con Leucò* right up to that hotel room in Turin in 1950. And yet it is precisely here, in following Orpheus' lead, by descending into one's own hell that self-knowledge becomes a possibility. In the case of the Thracian singing his poetry in Hades, song has an effect on the listener. Did not the music from Orpheus' lyre, though in the very bowels of the Underworld, move the mighty Hades himself, make him stir and prick up his ears like a mortal to listen [60]? And did not this other-worldly king, by listening to Orpheus' song, then 'see himself'? Song, then, can engender knowledge, self-knowledge, in those who listen. Song, however, can also have a similar effect on the singer. It is true that by descending to his own hell Orpheus had realised that 'Eurydice meant nothing to him anymore' [61]. It was precisely there, however, at the depths of his own hell that he, 'who was nearly lost, sang and in singing, in understanding, found himself' [62]. What if, for their author too, the *Dialoghi con Leucò* were not meant to be understood at all as dialogues, but as song?

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[60] *L'inconsolabile*: Orfeo "Ho visto le ombre irrigidirsi e guardar vuoto, i lamenti cessare, Persefòne nascondersi il volto, lo stesso tenebroso-impassibile, Ade, protendersi come un mortale e ascoltare. Ho capito che i morti non sono più nulla. [...] Fu un vero passato soltanto nel canto. L'Ade vide se stesso soltanto ascoltandomi".

[61] *Ibid*.: "La stagione che avevo cercato era là in quel barlume. Non m'importò nulla di lei che mi seguiva. Il mio passato fu il chiarore, fu il canto e il mattino. E mi voltai".

[62] *Ibid*.: Orfeo "Ero quasi perduto, e cantavo. Comprendendo ho trovato me stesso".

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