

Literature and Resistance: Dimensions of Commitment in
the Writings of Beppe Fenoglio and the Italian Neorealists

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Ian Seed, B.A. (Hons), M.A.

Abstract of thesis

November 2012

Literature and Resistance: Dimensions of Commitment in the Writings of Beppe Fenoglio and the Italian Neorealists

This thesis investigates the different layers of commitment in the writings of Beppe Fenoglio and the Italian neorealists. This involves a reassessment of the neorealist literature of the 1940s and early 1950s, which I argue is far more varied, exploratory and experimental than is generally given credit for. I contend that Fenoglio's writing has a much closer relationship to neorealism than many critics believe. However, it is also the case to say that no partisan author is as critical of the Resistance as Beppe Fenoglio was. What then is the nature of his commitment? Through an examination of Fenoglio's Resistance writings, together with an appraisal of the historical and cultural context in which they were created, I show that Fenoglio's work is driven by a profound moral realism which continually searches for new ways to confront the traumatic nature of civil war and its aftermath. The focus of this examination is on the following works: *Appunti partigiani*; the Resistance short stories contained in *I ventitre giorni della città di Alba*; *Il partigiano Johnny* (taken as a whole to include *Primavera di bellezza* and *Ur partigiano Johnny*); *Una questione privata*; and in conclusion one of Fenoglio's last short stories 'Ciao, Old Lion'. Drawing on existential models, I make the case that it is Fenoglio who uniquely out of the neorealist writers explores what it means to be individually 'authentic' in times of momentous historical happenings while contemporaneously subverting the possibility of 'authenticity', thus leading to a fiction which is 'true', and which is more genuinely 'authentic'. I show that there is no necessary contradiction between the 'existential' and 'historical' interpretations of Fenoglio's work, which have dominated the debate between critics for the last four decades. Indeed, I argue that the two critical approaches should be married in order to enrich our understanding of Fenoglio's complex vision of the Resistance and the significance of his achievement.

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Abbreviations of Works Cited

AP	<i>Appunti partigiani</i>
M	<i>La malora</i>
PB	<i>Primavera di bellezza</i>
PB1	<i>Primavera di bellezza, Draft One</i>
PJ	<i>Il partigiano Johnny</i>
PJ1	<i>Il partigiano Johnny, Draft One</i>
QP	<i>Una questione privata</i>
PS	<i>La paga del sabato</i>
Ur-PJ	<i>Ur partigiano Johnny</i>
VGA	<i>I ventitre giorni della città di Alba</i>

Note on Editions Used

For most of my research into Fenoglio's works, I have referred to the individual volumes published by Einaudi (see the Bibliography at the end of this thesis for more information). For *Il partigiano Johnny*, I have referred to the edition edited by Dante Isella, and published by Einaudi in 1994. For those parts of Draft One of *Il partigiano Johnny* which are not included in the 1994 volume of *Il partigiano Johnny*, I have referred to *Romanzi e racconti*, edited by Dante Isella, and published by Einaudi in 2001. For the *Diario*, for some appendices to *Il partigiano Johnny*, for *Ur partigiano Johnny*, and for Draft One of *Primavera di bellezza*, I have referred to the *Opere*, edited by Maria Corti, and published by Einaudi in 1978. This use of a mixture of different editions of these texts is unusual, but has allowed me both to follow the full story of Johnny as originally conceived by Fenoglio, and at the same time to take advantage of those texts which are more stylistically and linguistically developed. It is close to the solution which Roberto Bigazzi has recommended in his new book on Fenoglio, and is one which respects 'insieme l'arco narrativo originario e le ultime versioni d'autore' (Bigazzi 2011, 131). In Chapter 3 of this thesis, I explore the issue of the different versions of *Il partigiano Johnny* in more detail.

Introduction

La Resistenza fece credere possibile una letteratura come epica carica di un'energia che fosse insieme razionale e virtuale, sociale ed esistenziale, collettiva e autobiografica. – Italo Calvino

The main focus of this thesis is the Resistance writings of Beppe Fenoglio, with an emphasis on the following works: *Appunti partigiani*; the short stories contained in *I ventitre giorni della città di Alba*; *Il partigiano Johnny* (taken as a whole to include *Primavera di bellezza* and *Ur partigiano Johnny*); *Una questione privata*; and in conclusion one of Fenoglio's last short stories 'Ciao, Old Lion'. In order to gain a proper understanding of these works and the possibilities they offer, the thesis will engage with the historical reality of the Italian Resistance and the broad cultural phenomenon of neorealism. In relating Fenoglio's oeuvre to these vital contexts, however, I intend to show not only how his writing illuminates the complexities, moral and otherwise, of the Resistance experience, but also how it can lead us to a more nuanced and multidimensional understanding of neorealism itself.

The Historical Background

To begin with, it is worth reminding ourselves of the historical events of 1943-45, which made an indelible impression on a generation of people who came of age during those events, and without which it is highly probable that the writer Beppe Fenoglio would be an unknown today.

In the summer of 1943, Italy was a country in ruins and facing imminent defeat at the hands of the Allies. The Fascist government under the leadership of Mussolini was close

to collapse after two decades in power and a series of brutal expansionist wars, starting with the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 and ending with the humiliation of Italian forces in Africa and disastrous Italian campaign in Russia. The historical events of July 1943 are well known: the Allied invasion of Sicily on July 10; the first Allied bombardment of Rome on the 19th; the arrest of Mussolini on the 25th under orders of the king; and the taking over of government by Marshal Badoglio. There then followed the chaotic period known as *I quarantacinque giorni*. The government remained a military dictatorship, which had no qualms about the brutal repression of strikes and protests, Italy was still at war with the Allies, and the bombing of Italian cities continued. Nevertheless, many political prisoners were released and there was hope in the air for those who were anti-Fascist and those who had grown disillusioned with Fascism. Ada Gobetti, in her *Diario partigiano*, describes this feeling in the following way:

Un'eccitazione, una festa continua, questo sí: sin dal primo momento, il mattino del 26 luglio, quando avevo udito la notizia per radio [...] gradatamente, confusamente [...] e avevo avuto una reazione di riso quasi isterico; e poi, il ritorno precipitoso a Torino; e la casa piena di gente; e tutti gli amici che si potevano ormai vedere liberamente; e quelli che, giorno per giorno, tornavano dal confine, dall'esilio, dal carcere. (Gobetti 1996, 17)

On September 3, in a secret Armistice, Badoglio surrendered unconditionally to the Allies. On September 8, the Armistice was announced on Italian radio. This led to a period of what Paul Ginsborg has described as 'total decomposition' (1990, 13). Prior to this, in August, the Germans in anticipation had been pouring troops into Italy. For them, the Armistice was a piece of cowardly treachery on the part of their Italian allies, and their contemptuous treatment of Italian ex-soldiers and civilians would quickly escalate to

what Fenoglio termed 'impensabili atrocità' (PJ, 168). The Italian Armed Forces were left without any clear instructions, except to react to eventual attacks from whatever quarter. Beppe Fenoglio, who at the time was a trainee officer stationed in Rome, describes the situation from the point of view of an ordinary Italian soldier:

Hanno tutti perduto la testa, gliel'hanno fatta perdere a furia di ordini e controordini. Opporsi ai tedeschi, non resistere, uccidere i tedeschi, non aprire il fuoco sui tedeschi, non cedere le armi, auto disarmarsi. Siamo impazziti tutti. (PB, 113)

On September 9, German forces occupied the main cities and disarmed the Italian soldiers. It was a humiliating experience for thousands of abandoned soldiers who were taken prisoner by the Germans. There was a brief resistance in Rome, but within four days the Italian army had melted away. The majority got rid of their uniforms and fled. In *Primavera di bellezza*, Fenoglio describes his protagonist Johnny haggling with a boy for some civilian clothes so that he can avoid arrest by the Germans. The reality of a world war, which for some had been something distant, something that could even be ignored, was now brought home to everyone. As Santo Peli puts it: 'La guerra feroce, appiccata anni prima in luoghi fantastici (l'Etiopia, l'Albania, la Grecia, le immense steppe russe), ha ormai intaccato il suolo nazionale, fin nelle valli alpine, nei borghi sonnacchianti di provincia' (Peli 2006, 3). This was something recognised by Fenoglio's father, Amilcare, who had fought in the First World War, and who in response to the surprise expressed over Allied bombing of a bridge in their quiet home town of Alba, told his daughter Marisa: 'Bisognava saperlo che una guerra mondiale non dimentica niente a nessuno, che sulla scrupolosissima carta geografica di un generale di stato maggiore è segnalato tutto, anche il puntino infinitesimale di Alba!' (M. Fenoglio 1995, 62)

And yet it is in this story of the deepest humiliation of a country, whose government only three years before had imagined it would be carving up Europe with its German allies, that another story – a classic narrative of redemption – begins. For it was many of these same ‘deserting’ soldiers who would later form the first partisan units of what would become ‘la Resistenza’.

On September 9, after the king had fled Rome, Badoglio and his colleagues formed the *Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale* (CLN), and called upon the Italian people to join them in the fight against the Nazis. On September 12, Mussolini was freed by German forces and asked by Hitler to set up a reconstructed Fascist government. In reality this was of course a puppet government, with Mussolini as a figurehead. It had its headquarters at the small resort of Salò, on the shore of Lake Garda. By the middle of September 1943, Italy was divided in two. South of Naples were the Allies and the Italian king. To the north were the Germans, soon to be supported by the Fascists. The soldiers who had fled were faced with three choices: to respond to calls to report for duty to the newly-formed authorities of *La Repubblica di Salò*; to try to go into hiding for the duration of the rest of the war (a possibility that Fenoglio’s protagonist Johnny would spend the autumn agonising over); or to join the still small and unorganised bands that were starting to form in the hills, with no idea of what the future would bring.

It was during the autumn of 1943 that the Resistance came into being. The partisans did not only comprise deserting soldiers. Quazza in his seminal work *Resistenza e storia d’Italia: problemi e ipotesi di ricerca*, first published in 1976, divides the Italian anti-Fascism of 1943 into three main strands. The first was traditional organised anti-Fascism, consisting of people who belonged to political parties which had been declared illegal in Italy, and who had been imprisoned or exiled as a result. This was the anti-Fascism ‘dei

pochissimi coraggiosi o eroici combattenti della generazione anziana e di quella “di mezzo”, dei processati, confinati, carcerati o esuli’ (Quazza 1978, 115). Three leftwing organisations, the Action, Communist and Socialist Parties would provide around 80-85 per cent of partisans (Behan 2010, 3), with the Communist formations, known as the Garibaldi Brigades, or ‘*i rossi*’, forming more than 70% of the partisans. The second main strand consisted of young Italians who had been brought up under Fascism and who had been indifferent to politics, but who were now faced with a stark choice: to join the Resistance, or to join the Fascists, or to try to go into hiding. This was what Quazza called ‘l’anti-fascismo “spontaneo”, l’antifascismo “esistenziale” ’ (1978, 115-16). The third strand was made up of those who had been convinced Fascists, but now believed it was better to abandon a lost cause. (I shall return to the different reasons for joining the Resistance in the next section.)

It is worth reminding ourselves at this point that no one knew what was going to happen, what hardships and dangers would be faced, and what the eventual outcome of the war would be. Few could have foreseen just how bloody, protracted and complicated the next 18 months would be. Indeed, during the partisan struggle, an estimated 35,000 died from an active membership of around 100,000, a far higher rate than would occur in regular warfare (Ginsborg 1990, 70). By the end of 1943, there were according to some estimates about 9,000 partisans (ibid., 16). Santo Peli (2006), drawing on an array of sources, puts the number of partisans at 3,800 by the end of 1943, 9,000 by the spring of 1944 (when the Resistance began to be taken more seriously by the Nazis), 50,000 in June 1944, 80-100,000 in September (by which time whole swathes of the Italian north were under the control of the partisans), with this number being drastically reduced to 20-30,000 after the Nazi-Fascist *rastrellamenti* of November and December of 1944.

Numbers rose again to 80,000 in March 1945, and to 130,000 on the eve of liberation in April. Tom Behan reminds us that when calculating numbers we also need to bear in mind not only the partisans who carried arms, but also those people (another ten to fifteen for each arm-bearing partisan) who were ‘needed to obtain finance and weaponry, provide food, clothes, medicine, messages, and so on’ (2009, 3).¹

As we shall see in the course of this thesis, Fenoglio would be concerned with examining how the changing fortunes of the Resistance and how its politics played out in the experience of ordinary partisans and civilians in the Langhe near his home town of Alba.

The Moral Dimension of the Resistance

Not only authors, but many ordinary members of the Resistance, later emphasised the ‘existential’ and even the deeply ‘religious’ element of ‘*la scelta*’ taken in those days following the events of 8 September. To join the Resistance required a leap of faith, a belief in the possibility of redemption both for oneself and for one’s country. Piero Calamandrei expressed this in a speech in 1954, putting emphasis not only on the historical circumstances of the time, but also on the internal struggle with the ‘oppressor within’ and spoke of a ‘fede laica’: ‘Vittoria contro noi stessi: aver ritrovato dentro noi stessi la dignità dell’uomo. Questo fu il significato morale della Resistenza’ (2011, 12). For Calamandrei the Resistance began ‘spontaneously’ and was ‘qualcosa di più dell’ideologia di un partito: qualcosa di più profondo, di più universale, di più penetrante nei cuori’ (ibid., 17). A similar view is expressed by the philosopher and ex-partisan Sergio Cotta who states that ‘il nome di resistenza nel suo significato etico essenziale [è]

il rifiuto del male e la scelta del bene' (1994, 31). The partisan and writer Luigi Meneghello wrote that there was 'la sensazione di essere coinvolti in una crisi veramente radicale, non solo politica, ma quasi metafisica [...]. Sentivamo la guerra come crisi ultima, la prova, che avrebbe gettato una luce cruda non solo sul fenomeno del fascismo, ma sulla mente umana, e dunque su tutto il resto, l'educazione, la natura, la società' (Meneghello 1999, 100). We shall see in the course of this thesis that for the neorealists, this 'moral' dimension was *the* essential component when it came to making *aesthetic* and *political* choices in literature and other art forms, and that this applies equally to the 'apolitical' and anti-Communist Fenoglio. It is a mistake, however, as I hope to prove, to interpret this moral dimension in some grossly simplistic sense, as many critics have.

This view of the Resistance as a movement expressing universal human aspirations and moral striving has also helped to sustain support for the 'memory' and for the 'values' of the Resistance, and arguably has helped defend the democracy of Italy itself at moments when it has seemed genuinely under threat. This has been documented by Tom Behan in *The Italian Resistance: Fascists, Guerillas and the Allies* (2009), and investigated in great detail by Philip Cooke in *The Legacy of the Italian Resistance* (2011). For example, the struggle and values of the Resistance were evoked in 1960 during the crisis provoked by the 'Tambroni affair', when the Christian Democrats formed an alliance with the neo-Fascist MSI. As Bocca rightly claims: 'La Resistenza rappresenta la legittimità della repubblica democratica, il prezzo del biglietto per il viaggio di ritorno alla democrazia' (1978, 87). Nevertheless, calling upon the 'values' of the Resistance for political purposes has often led to a sentimentalisation of it, for example in Roberto Battaglia's 1953 *Storia della Resistenza*, commissioned by Calvino, which sees the Resistance very much from a Communist viewpoint. If we gloss over the violent nature of the Resistance, and if we

ignore its many complexities, there is a very real danger, as Cooke points out, that the ‘detractors’ from the Resistance – those revisionist historians and others who would argue that no one side was any better or worse than the other or that the death of a Fascist soldier is as equally to be mourned in national commemorations as those of a partisan – will be successful in their desire to alter the national ‘memory’ of the period 1943-45. Only by recognising and continuing to explore the historical complexities of the Italian Resistance can we come to understand its genuine achievements. I shall argue in my thesis that much of the literature that sprang out of the experience of the Resistance can help us navigate these complexities, and is not simply an expression of a ‘Resistance ideology’.

As I have pointed out in the previous section, initial organisers of the partisan bands were often people who had been involved in the anti-Fascist struggle for some years, and who had spent time in prison or in exile. However, the reasons for ‘*la scelta*’ to join or to support the partisans could vary greatly. For some it was the witnessing of atrocities carried out by Nazi troops. Pietro Chiodi, a partisan and Fenoglio’s philosophy teacher, in a diary entry of 12 September spoke of ‘un’atmosfera di sospensione e di terrore’ and describes how ‘quattro soldati vengono fucilati e sotterrati nel letamaio. In lunghe file e scortati dalle SS i prigionieri vengono portati alla stazione e stipati nei carri bestiame. Uno non ce la fa piú a camminare e invoca pietà. Viene abbattuto con una raffica nella schiena’ (Chiodi 2002a, 16). Another reason for joining the Resistance that is not often mentioned is the impact of the war in Russia, where Italian soldiers had witnessed at first hand the way in which Russian prisoners of war and Russian Jews were treated. They had also realised that they were held in contempt by their German Allies because they were so ill-equipped. It was here, too, that soldiers first came across so-called partisans. The

neorealist writer Nuto Revelli, a soldier in the Italian army in Russia, who would later join the Resistance movement, described a column of Russian partisan prisoners being led along the streets: ‘Camminavano a testa alta, sapevano dove andavano. Non eravamo che straccioni con arie e pretese da signori. Guardai quei partigiani con grande ammirazione. Mi sentii umiliato’ (Revelli 1993, 28). For many, however, joining the partisans was a merely a matter of expediency, for example to avoid being sent to work in Germany or simply in order to be able to eat. For others, it was the idea of the adventure which appealed. Quite often it was simply a matter of ‘chance’ rather than ‘choice’. Whether a person ended up fighting for Mussolini’s RSI troops or for the partisans could easily depend on personal and geographical circumstances and the people they met and knew, rather than any newly-acquired or deeply held convictions. As Claudio Pavone states, the decision to join one side or another ‘poteva essere [...] un incontro casuale con la persona giusta o con la persona sbagliata’ (2006, 33). This is a point explored by Giose Rimanelli in his autobiographical novel *Tiro al piccione* (1953), which shows the Resistance from ‘the wrong side’. The relationship between ‘chance’ and ‘choice’ – the possibilities of moral responsibility and commitment when human beings are at the mercy of events beyond their control – is one of the most important themes of Fenoglio’s work, and one which, as I shall argue throughout this thesis, makes him a ‘moral realist’ (a term I shall return to later in this introduction).

In the autumn of 1943, intellectuals also now had to decide what role they were going to play. The vast majority of them, in the words of Peli, had until now ‘chinato il capo, quando non aderito intimamente, alla retorica, all’estetica, alle legge razziali, ai sogni imperiali, insomma al progetto politico, culturale e pedagogico fascista’ (2006, 5). Peli speaks of the ‘decisive’ part these people played in organising the Resistance and

politically educating ‘una massa di ragazzi completamente digiuni non solo di nozioni e di abitudine alla politica, ma anche forgiati dalla scuola fascista, dalla fabbrica e dall’esercito’ (ibid., 4). Indeed, the role of ‘political educator’ is assigned to intellectuals in Calvino’s *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* and Viganò’s *L’Agnese va a morire*. However, as I shall show in this thesis, in the work of writers like Caproni, Pavese, Vittorini and Fenoglio the role of the intellectual is far more problematic. There was the question, for example, of whether one decided to hide away somewhere to continue one’s intellectual pursuits instead of risking one’s life in the unknown where an intellectual might not be much use in a situation which required combat and physical survival skills rather than Latin and grammar. In the generation that had come of age as writers during the 1930s, such as Vittorini, there was also the problem of coming to terms with one’s own ambiguous political past.

Nevertheless, in spite of the complex circumstances that might lead one to join the Resistance, and in spite of the different kinds of war that were being fought (‘civil’, ‘class’ and ‘patriotic’, according to Pavone), many protagonists perceived the deeply moral element of *la scelta*. The partisan was distinguishable from the drafted soldier in that he or she had indeed made the choice to risk their own life and the life of their family in order to take part in armed struggle. Fenoglio reportedly saw himself as a soldier of Cromwell ‘con la Bibbia nello zaino e il fucile a tracolla’ (Chiodi 2002b, 198). It was not just a struggle to free Italy from Fascism, but also one for a vision of a completely different Italian society where the old hierarchies and structures would be swept away, even if the political interpretations of this vision varied greatly and the way it would work in practice was not clear.

The Neorealists

As the war drew to a close in 1945, those writers, and would-be writers like Fenoglio, who had supported or participated in the Resistance (and in some cases those who hadn't) faced again a moment of 'choice', which can be interpreted in an 'existential' sense as well as a historical one. As Pedullà states: 'Potremmo chiederci a questo punto se esiste un rapporto specifico tra la chiamata alla letteratura e la chiamata alla Resistenza' (2005, XXV). If during the Resistance aesthetic questions of art and literature were something to be cast aside as an irrelevance to the armed struggle (as Fenoglio makes clear in *Il partigiano Johnny*), then they returned with a vengeance in the spring of 1945. Now a host of questions and issues sprang up with moral, political and aesthetic urgency. I shall examine these in more detail in Chapter 1, but for the moment we can summarise them as follows: can one create a literature which in some way upholds the 'values' of the Resistance and which will help to build a different society without compromising the 'values' of 'art'? What is the relationship between politics and art? What lessons can present and future generations learn from literature about the importance of the Resistance and of never allowing Fascism to return? How does one create a 'valid' literature out of one's own experience, an experience lived 'sulla propria pelle'? What is the relationship between 'facts' and 'words', and between 'experience' and 'narrative'? How can one relate the experience of war without falsifying it? What kind of language should be used? How can one avoid the kind of rhetoric associated with Fascism? Can one tell an 'honest' story without betraying the suffering and 'ultimate sacrifice' made in the cause of freedom? In terms of loyalty, what does a writer owe to his fallen comrades

and what does he or she owe to the living? Does one need the concept of 'literature' at all? Since the events of war are themselves so dramatic, can't they simply be transmitted in straightforward document and memoir? Are there ways in which 'the truth' of the experience of war can be better explored and communicated in fiction rather than memoir?

Neorealist writers did not have the answers to these questions, and they did not seek any fixed or final solutions, at least in the period from 1945 to 1948, during the phase of what Calvino called 'l'esplosione letteraria' (1987b [1964], 7). Rather, these questions served as a starting point for an investigation through the practice of literature and through the heated debate which took place in literary and cultural journals. The same investigation was of course being carried out in cinema: what Christopher Wagstaff says of films such as Rossellini's *Paisà* can be equally applied to neorealist literature: 'nothing is "given" at the outset in a neorealist film: values have to be explored. The *function* of cinema became enquiry. Directors and scriptwriters knew instinctively that this prohibited closure in their narratives [...] Neorealist films ask, rather than confirm; they wonder, rather than reassure' (Wagstaff 2000, 40). Indeed, close working relationships were forged between writers and film makers, for example between Pratolini and Rossellini.

We can view the choice to create a literature out of the experience of war and the Resistance as the logical consequence of *la scelta* to participate in the Resistance. Both choices sprang from the same sense of moral conviction, the same hope and vision of a better society (even if this vision was to be bitterly argued about in political and practical terms), and the same refusal to conform to the prevailing standards of a society which was seen as being rotten to the core. They were choices which, as well as specific to the historical circumstances of Italy, can be compared with other mass struggles for freedom

against destructive and corrupt regimes. Orsetta Innocenti in her 2001 study of Fenoglio suggests that the choice to join the Resistance can in fact do no other than create a deeply moral narrative for those who live through it:

La scelta resistenziale si configura infatti per i suoi stessi protagonisti come un momento di esplicita avventura etica, fino a delineare le coordinate di quello che vorrei qui definire come *romance* etico. L'esistenza partigiana si propone cioè come un orizzonte del tutto alternativo a quello conformista della vita presente, e come tale assume – nelle sue traduzioni letterarie – esplicite connotazioni romanzesche. È in questa prospettiva che mi sembra possibile parlare appunto di moralità del *romance*. (Innocenti 2001, 129)

It is a narrative which its participants will draw upon to try to make sense not only of the experience of the Resistance itself, but also of the later disappointment of life after the war when many of the hoped-for changes did not take place.

I shall conduct an investigation into what neorealist literature might be in Chapter 1. At this point however it is useful to state in anticipation that, as I have hinted above, it is often a literature which is far more exploratory and questioning than is generally allowed for. The prefix 'neo' – which as we shall see came about by accident rather than through some considered choice – is perhaps partly responsible for the confusion around misconceptions of the neorealist phenomenon, as if it were a throwback to a form of nineteenth-century realism, such as naturalism or *verismo*.² A more revealing term, I believe, which would reflect the aims and spirit of post-war Italian writing would be 'moral realism', a term I shall return to throughout the course of this thesis. Why is this term a more appropriate label?

In the crudest sense, the 'neorealists' are 'realist' in that they believe that there is a physical reality out there which words navigate and seek to understand. Language is a

way to engage with this reality, to ‘re-present’ it, and to influence this reality (for example, to persuade people to engage with democracy and not to allow the return of Fascism). This is not to say for a moment, however, that those neorealists who considered such questions – above all Calvino, Pavese and Vittorini – believed that words are *the same thing as* reality (a logical impossibility, of course) or that words do not also create their own reality for the listener or reader perhaps beyond that intended by the author. Even the *memorialisti* are modest about claims to tell the truth except that which comes from their own experience as they see and perceive it. They do not claim to tell an ‘objective’ truth in some kind of absolute sense. For example, Roberto Battaglia in his preface to his 1945 memoir *Un uomo, un partigiano* states that, although he wishes to be in some sense measured and objective (dispassionate) in his account, he can only write about the Resistance from the point of view of his own experience ‘attraverso ciò che io stesso ho visto o fatto, ossia commettere l’immodestia di parlare in prima persona’ (2004, 19). In many ways the neorealists are thoroughly modernist: the reality they seek to ‘re-present’ can at times be as fragmented as it is cohesive, without the tools of a cause-and-effect plot in which characters develop to find eventual fulfillment. What distinguishes the neorealists is not, as is so often believed, some strait-jacket aesthetic, but the experience of Fascism and World War II, which led them to the conviction that intellectuals, artists and writers could no longer ignore the society and world in which they lived. It was their moral duty to no longer stand aside but to engage with that reality. As I shall explain in Chapter 1, this does not mean that there is no connection between this commitment and that of 1930s realism. Clearly this is not the case. Even towards the end of the 1920s there had already been calls for Italian narrative to come out of its ivory tower and to return to an engagement with contemporary reality. For example, G. Titta

Rosa, in an article entitled 'Invito al romanzo', published in *Corriere Padano* 16 February 1928, asked for writers to 'sentire la vita contemporanea nel modo piú intimo e impegnativo' and 'con un'alta e in ogni modo esauriente idea morale' (cited in Farinelli 1980, 220). A. Bocelli's article, 'Aspetti della letteratura d'oggi. Realismo', published in *Corriere Padano* 26 April, 1934, makes a plea for literature to return to social, rather than autobiographical aspects of life, for the 'restaurazione, di contro all'esasperato soggettivismo o egocentrismo, d'un senso concreto della collettività, della società, per cui l'artista riconosce e celebra nella propria umanità l'umanità di tutti' (cited in Farinelli 1980, 221).³

However, as I shall show, what distinguishes the engagement of neorealist literature is the experience of war and the Resistance. This engagement could, and did, take many different aesthetic forms. It raised all kinds of problematic questions, of a political as well as an aesthetic nature, which I shall examine in Chapter 1. The neorealists, at least for a time, were determined to debate these questions and to explore them in their work. It is this determination to engage with, and, in the sense I have outlined above, to be 'true' to reality, which allows us to use the term 'moral realism' as a way of understanding 'neorealism'. By 'moral realism' I am not referring to the philosophical belief that there exist moral truths independently of our opinions about them, but rather I am foregrounding the moral element that is present in neorealism. The aesthetic choices made by the neorealists after the war were above all moral ones.

Beppe Fenoglio and Neorealism

Beppe Fenoglio (1922-1963) has often been separated from neorealist writing. It has been claimed that Fenoglio, although most of his work is connected to the subject matter of the Resistance, expresses different concerns from those of the neorealists. Much has been made of his supposed 'anti-ideological' stance and of the fact that in his works he appears to express violently anti-Communist views (unlike the neorealist writers, who were nearly all members of the Italian Communist Party after the war). His harsh and grotesque portraits of the partisans have led some critics to claim that Fenoglio has no moral or political concerns. For example, the renowned scholar Luperini states that Fenoglio is unique in that he 'certainly' does not share with the neorealists 'i miti ideologici e le esigenze morali [...] Il suo "impegno" è di tutt'altra natura' (1981, 679-82). Much emphasis has been placed on the fact that Fenoglio spent his short life in relative isolation from editors and other writers, in the provincial Piedmontese town of Alba and its surroundings. Unlike Calvino, Pavese, Vittorini and others, Fenoglio did not work for a famous publishing house, but instead as a clerk for a small wine-export company. After the liberation of Italy in April 1945, he never returned to Turin University to complete his degree in *Lettere*, but instead worked privately on his writing and on his translations of English literature. Unlike the writers of his day, he did not publish essays expressing his critical views. He was not involved in any of the heated debates which took place in post-war journals, such as Vittorini's *Il Politecnico*, concerning the relationship between literature and politics, and the form new literature should take. In contrast to Calvino, who was eighteen months younger than Fenoglio, and whose many short stories about the Resistance were already being published in newspapers from the end of 1945 onwards,

Fenoglio did not publish anything until 1949: the short story 'Il trucco', which appeared under the pseudonym Giovanni Federico Biamonti. By the time Fenoglio published his first book, a collection of short stories, *I ventitre giorni della città di Alba* in 1952, the major neorealist works about the Resistance had already appeared some years before, for example: *Uomini e no* by Vittorini in 1945, *Pane duro* by Silvio Micheli in 1946, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* by Calvino in 1947, *La casa in collina* by Pavese in 1949, and that neorealist 'classic' *L'Agnese va a morire* by Renata Viganò in the same year.⁴ After *I ventitre giorni della città di Alba*, Fenoglio only published two more books in his lifetime: the novella *La malora* in 1954, whose subject is not the Resistance but peasant life in the Langhe, and *Primavera di bellezza* in 1959, whose main theme is the days leading up to the crisis of September 1943 rather than the experience of the Resistance which followed. The bulk of Fenoglio's work was not published until after his death in 1963, most importantly the novel *Una questione privata* (1963), the short stories of *Un giorno di fuoco* (1963), *Il partigiano Johnny* (1968), *La paga del sabato* (1969), the *Opere* (1978), edited by Maria Corti, and *Appunti partigiani* (1994).⁵ For many critics of Fenoglio, it is a logical step to go from the 'scrittore isolato' to the 'narratore unico'. Above all, because of Fenoglio's 'linguistic experimentation', mainly in *Il partigiano Johnny*, Fenoglio's writing has been contrasted with the supposedly monochrome tones of the neorealists in their search for 'authenticity'. For example, Roberto Galaverni in his article, 'Lontano da tutto: la nascita di Johnny il partigiano' (the title speaks volumes), claims that Fenoglio's epic 'aveva molto poco a che fare con quanto si era visto e si stava vedendo fino a quel momento nella nostra letteratura [...] *Il partigiano Johnny* rappresenta infatti un allontanamento che è difficile immaginare più deciso verso un altrove non soltanto stilistico e letterario' (2006, 88). The historical and biographical

context out of which Fenoglio's work grew has on the whole been neglected in favour of an 'ahistorical' approach which places emphasis on Fenoglio's extraordinary use of language, and which sees the Resistance as being for Fenoglio merely a vehicle for expressing a more 'universal' struggle, or for exploring individual 'existential' concerns rather than political ones. *Il partigiano Johnny*, especially, is perceived as a work which is somehow completely separate from neorealist literature of the 1940s and 50s.

It might be useful at this point to differentiate between older and younger generations of writers who went through the experience of war and the Resistance. Asor Rosa usefully distinguishes between 'quegli scrittori, che arrivano allo scoppio della guerra grosso modo trentenni e quelli che ci arrivano ancora intorno ai vent'anni. [...] È la seconda generazione [...] che fa l'esperienza diretta della guerra. La prima per motivi anagrafici o altro, guarda piú da lontano' (1997, 96). For the generation who came of age during the war – writers such as Calvino, Fenoglio, Oreste del Buono and Silvio Micheli – the need to link literature to their own experience of war and the Resistance meant that 'le opzioni neorealistiche in campo linguistico e formale non sono imposte ma nascono da un'esigenza autentica di adeguamento ai nuovi moduli espressivi ormai diffuse persino tra la gente comune' (ibid., 99). Fenoglio's 'experimentation', then, if we are to agree with Asor Rosa, is as well as being highly individual, also typically neorealist, in that like the neorealists, he was searching for forms and for a language which in some sense would be adequate to the tremendous task of representing the experience and trauma of war. Fenoglio, as we shall see, was fully aware that this was a life-time challenge and not something that could be resolved by simply 'stating the facts'.

The themes Fenoglio explores within the context of the Resistance (if we can accept for a moment that it was not merely a 'metaphor' for some higher struggle), are very much

those of other Resistance writers. For example, he, like them, examines the role of the intellectual, the meaning of commitment when faced with the terrible reality of war, the development of the partisan psyche, the effect of war on a combatant's humanity, the problems of 'necessary' and 'unnecessary' violence which inevitably arise, the role of 'morality' in partisan justice and warfare, the contrast between Resistance ideals and the 'reality on the ground', the apolitical attitudes of the partisans and their often appalling behaviour, and perhaps above all what the Resistance meant for the life of post-war Italy. Like other neorealists, Fenoglio is committed to an exploration of the reality of war and its aftermath, and to navigating the moral implications of this reality. Like them, he is a moral realist.

However, I will also argue that as a moral realist Fenoglio goes much further than his contemporaries. He is, more than any of them, aware of 'absurdity', of the fact that lives were lost in a series of futile battles with other Italians for a few rain-soaked hills which would change hands time and again throughout the course of the war – a war whose outcome would be decided by the superior technology of the Allies, not the often (though by no means always) ineffectual efforts of the Resistance. To make matters worse, the partisans in Fenoglio's books were not necessarily any better morally as individuals than their Fascist counterparts when it came to the way they conducted themselves. Many of them were certainly no more politically aware than their Fascist counterparts, but had joined the Resistance because of chance circumstances or for reasons of expediency. This is also true, of course, of the partisans in Calvino's *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*. Fenoglio, however, unlike the Calvino of the 1940s and early 1950s, has no faith in the redemptive quality of Communism and history. For Fenoglio, the efforts of the partisans were absurd because in the end most of them would be condemned to a mediocre life after the war, a

life to which they could not adapt, in a society where many of the old Fascist power structures remained intact. Given this kind of absurdity, Fenoglio through his fiction asks: what is the moral value of the Resistance itself? Was fighting for the Resistance the right thing to do? What can the Resistance mean for those living in a post-war world, both those who have experienced the war and those who were born later and can think only about girls, bars and music on the juke-box? These are the questions Fenoglio tackles, and to which he refuses ready-made answers, sentimental commemoration, or the projection of false hopes onto a future life (either in this world or the next).

Yet although Fenoglio's realism is rooted in history and the world in which he lived, I will argue that it does *also* represent a kind of quest for a 'celestial city', for an 'absolute reality'. In the end, it is not *only* the Resistance or even Fenoglio's experience of the Resistance which is important, but the whole moral climate that the situation of war and its aftermath created, and beyond that, what this might mean in a world where, as Nietzsche reminds us, 'God is dead'. However, to claim that Fenoglio's work is not really concerned with the Resistance at all, would be, as Philip Cooke (2000) has made very clear, to do Fenoglio a disservice.

Over the last forty years, the majority of critics, such as Gian Luigi Beccaria (1984), Franco Petroni (1991), Maria Grazia di Paolo (1988), Elisabetta Soletti (1987), and more recently⁶ Dante Isella (2001 [1992]) and Gabriele Pedullà (2001), have interpreted Fenoglio's work in a 'meta-historical' fashion, focusing on its 'symbolism,' its 'linguistic experimentation' or its supposed 'existential' emphasis on individual struggle and choice. Indeed, it is claimed that Fenoglio's work is not really about the Resistance at all. For example, Beccaria, speaking of Fenoglio's 'grande stile' claims that the places Fenoglio describes have their 'real' meaning 'nella trasformazione simbolica' (1984, 82), and

indeed that ‘Il partigiano di Fenoglio combatte, ma non per la Resistenza storica. [...] La Resistenza non è il tema del suo intenzionale romanzo epico’ (ibid., 114-15). Others – the minority – such as Roberto Bigazzi (1983, 2011), Philip Cooke (2000) and Orsetta Innocenti (2001, 2003a), have instead placed emphasis on an approach in which Fenoglio’s work is read very much in the historical context of the Italian Resistance and its aftermath. Only Edoardo Saccone (1988) takes a position which touches on both sides of the argument, although he rejects Bigazzi’s notion that Fenoglio’s *Il partigiano Johnny* can be read as a kind of *Bildungsroman* for a generation of Italians who found themselves coming of age in a critical moment of world history, and comes down in the end in favour of a more existentialist view of Johnny as someone in a continual state of ‘oscillazione’ between commitment and non-commitment.

My thesis will seek to marry these two critical approaches to Fenoglio, which at present are working in opposition to each other. I shall seek to demonstrate how such a marriage is necessary for a fuller, more enriched reading of Fenoglio’s work. However, I shall also strongly argue that Fenoglio is above all a writer of fiction. This allows him to ask questions without necessarily trying to teach us the ‘morally right’ thing to do. As Thomas Hardy argued, literature offers felt ‘impressions of the moment’ rather than offering ‘the Whence and Wherefore of things ... as a consistent philosophy’ (Hardy, cited in Halliwell 2001, 2). According to Bigazzi (2011) and Innocenti (2001, 2003a), Fenoglio’s moral *impegno* means that his work also has the didactic purpose of teaching the superiority of the ‘collective’ narrative over the private or individual one. While recognising and making use of many of their valuable insights, I will argue that while Fenoglio is certainly convinced of the moral superiority of the collective *impegno*, he is also very much concerned with the investigation and testing of how this *impegno* plays

out against the reality of the experience of the Resistance itself and against the conflicting desires that make us human. I shall argue that what Fenoglio in the end offers us, as a writer of fiction (however much based on his own autobiography), is not a claim to factual or even moral truth in its more prescriptive sense. What he does offer us is the truth of fiction, in the ‘belief that fictional constructions give access to truths beyond themselves’ (Beddow 1982, 286).

Literature is useful here because, as Robert Gordon says, ‘it is complex and shifting and able to encompass the many levels at which choice and action are formed and carried through in lived lives’ (2001, 20). And as Wayne Booth (2001) suggests, whereas philosophy may seem remote and unrealistic in its creation of systems which work perfectly with their own internal logic but crumble when they touch the everyday, literature is more elastic; it can change and adapt and make space for inconsistencies. It allows for the fact that we have to live in the face of deep ambiguity. It recognises and makes a claim about the importance of making choices in a specific historical context. Literature is embedded, both in a timebound and in a ‘timeless’ sense, in the world we live in. Timebound, for example, in the way that a naturalist writer may represent, or perhaps more truly ‘reimagine’, the plight of miners in late nineteenth-century France; timeless in that by doing so the writer is examining the plight of all those who in whatever age are trapped in a life of poverty and toil. Fiction, by testing the particular against the universal, acts as a way of gauging and exposing any kind of claim to universal truths. A narrative is just one of many possible worlds. Yet ‘this relativity does not entail futility’ (Rorty 2005, 99). Rather, it helps us to engage with reality from different points of view.

Throughout the chapters of this thesis, I shall take issue with other critical literature as and when it becomes relevant to my argument. My essential critical position, however, is that realism is not some 'fixed' phenomenon, sometimes assumed in literary theory. Lyotard, for example, claims that realism's 'only definition is that it intends to avoid the question of reality implicated in that of art and always stands somewhere between academicism and kitsch' (2001, 332). This kind of attack is, as Rachel Bowlby so aptly states, 'to ignore the multiplicity of realisms in realism's own primary time (as well as before or since)' (2010, XV). It also makes all kinds of false assumptions about the beliefs that so-called 'realists' have about 'reality', as if they were convinced that language were a glass pane onto the outside world. Any 'realist' writer will know, from the sheer effort of trying to write a convincing story, that words cannot 'replicate' reality, that all kinds of tricks are required to create the so-called 'reality effect'. Without the awareness of the gap between 'life' and 'art', no writer would be able to tell a story.

Realism, as Auerbach, echoing Brecht, pointed out sixty five years ago, changes with the times. 'Modern realism' has 'developed in increasingly rich forms in keeping with the constantly changing and expanding reality of modern life' (Auerbach 1968, 554). In this kind of realism, 'we are dealing with attempts to fathom a more genuine, a deeper and indeed a more real reality' (ibid., 540). If we go along with Auerbach, then realism should not be reduced to a kind of 'common sense', but rather should be acknowledged in all its richness in the way that Levine defines it, existing 'as a process, responsive to the changing nature of reality as the culture understood it and evoking with each question another question to be questioned' (cited in Beaumont 2010, 7). The realism of the twentieth century is not the 'opposite' of modernism. Rather, the two are inextricably bound up with each other.

Even the opposition between ‘realism’ and more linguistically-oriented literary theories, such as those of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism, can be a falsified one, where two straw men are set one against the other for the purposes of academic debate. Looking at the work of Barthes, Stephen Heath suggests that the emphasis on language should not be misinterpreted as a detachment ‘from any connection with an external reality’, nor should it ‘make reality linguistic in some simple – and ludicrous – sense’ (Heath 1986, 113). Realism in literature is not simply a question of content but also a continual battle for, and search for, the most suitable forms. It is not ‘a property of reality nor of any given literary form’ (ibid., 120), but a question of a continual dialectic between the reality created by language and the experienced reality of the world. As Barthes himself said in 1971: ‘Le formalisme auquel je pense ne consiste pas à “oublier”, à “négliger”, à “réduire” le contenu (“l’homme”), mais seulement à ne pas s’arrêter au seuil du contenu [...] le contenu est précisément ce qui intéresse le formalisme’ (cited in Heath 1986, 117-18).

The dialectic between form and content, between language and the world, is something that Calvino suggested the neorealists were well aware of and continually grappled with in their work: ‘sapevamo fin troppo bene che quel che contava era la musica e non il libretto, mai si videro formalisti così accaniti come quei contenutisti che eravamo’ (Calvino 1987b [1964], 9). Not only the neorealist novels of more famous writers like Calvino and Vittorini, but also those of less well-known writers, such as Rimaneli, are in many ways thoroughly modernist, even if these modernist elements are not always (for example in the case of Vittorini) successfully integrated. Just as T.S. Eliot suggested that there was no such thing as ‘free verse’, only ‘good verse’ and ‘bad verse’, perhaps we should be distinguishing between ‘good realism’ and ‘bad realism’, or at least between

that realism which ‘defamiliarises’, which disturbs and challenges us to see reality in a new way, and that realism which instead seeks ultimately, after a few adventures, only to soothe and reassure us that in the end all is well with the world and as it should be. However, it is not my aim in this thesis to re-fight the old battles between ‘modernism’ / ‘postmodernism’ and ‘realism’. I merely wish to point out by way of introduction that the dichotomy between the two can be a false one, and that, to paraphrase Vittorini, there are as many realisms as there are realists. Fenoglio himself is a different kind of realist at different times in his writing life, and as I shall show, can operate at different levels of reality in the same work.

In Chapter 1 of this thesis, I analyse in more depth the historical and cultural context of neorealism, and offer a reappraisal of neorealist literature, arguing that, although constituting a highly problematic and mixed body of work, even now it has not been properly recognised for its exploratory nature, experimental character and diverse achievements. A proper understanding of neorealism and its relationship to the Italian Resistance is, I shall argue, essential for an understanding of the work of Beppe Fenoglio. As examples, I shall look at novels by Calvino and Vittorini, at the short story ‘Il labirinto’ (1946) by Giorgio Caproni and at the memoir *Un uomo, un partigiano* (1945) by Roberto Battaglia, as well as referring to other neorealist works.

In Chapter 2, following an investigation of Fenoglio’s childhood and youth, I examine his commitment to coming to terms with the experience of the Resistance as a civil war in his early writings of the 1940s and early 1950s. In this chapter, I focus mainly on *Appunti partigiani* and the Resistance short stories in *I ventitre giorni della città di Alba*. I argue that Fenoglio is asking us to look honestly at the meaning of the Resistance, at the effects

it had on those who were caught up in it, including civilians, and at the moral implications that arise from this. However, I also argue that, in an existential sense, he is looking at the interplay between the forces of history and the individual human beings caught up in them.

Chapter 3 investigates, and seeks to marry, the historical and existential dimensions of Fenoglio's commitment in *Il partigiano Johnny* – a commitment both to the cause of the Resistance and to exploring it authentically as a writer. I argue that Fenoglio in *Il partigiano Johnny* is clearly committed to showing the reality of the historical experience of the Resistance in contrast to some of the sentimental or over-politicised books that were being published in the 1950s. However, I also explore Fenoglio's 'existential' commitment in more depth, and examine ways in which Fenoglio interrogates the possibilities and meaning of 'authentic' choice 'in situation'. I am indebted here to Eduardo Saccone (1988), who makes some brief yet perceptive connections between *Il partigiano Johnny* and the work of Heidegger (without in any way claiming that Fenoglio is deliberately trying to illustrate Heidegger's philosophy in his writing). I hope to draw these connections out further to show how our reading of Fenoglio can be enriched by examining ways in which he 'tests' the existentialist emphasis on individual freedom against historical 'reality'. In considering this 'testing' of reality through fiction, I shall investigate ways in which *Il partigiano Johnny* can be considered as a twentieth-century *Bildungsroman*.

In Chapter 4, I examine the great inner journey that Johnny makes, drawing on comparisons with John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The journey of Johnny will be contrasted to that of Milton in Fenoglio's last novel *Una questione privata*. Since these two characters are versions of Fenoglio himself, I shall also consider the journey that

Fenoglio the author makes when writing about them. I argue that Fenoglio's commitment in the 1950s assumes the nature of a great 'moral quest', in which his interrogation of the Resistance comes to represent a search for the meaning of individual and collective struggle in a world without God and without any reward for the 'ultimate sacrifice' a world in which the Resistance comes to assume, in a Lacanian sense, all the qualities of 'the Real'. Again I return to the point that he shared this quest with his contemporaries, but that none was as possessed by 'the search', or as committed to it, as he was.

Notes:

¹ I shall return to the history of the Resistance as it becomes relevant during the course of this thesis. There is no space here to do justice to the complexities of the Resistance and its legacy. Throughout my thesis, I rely on the following: Behan (2009), Bocca (1978), Cooke (2011), Cotta (1994), Ginsborg (1990, 8-120), Pavone (2006), Peli (2006), and Quazza (1978).

² We need to remember here, too, that nineteenth-century realism was a far richer phenomenon than is sometimes recognised in the debate around the inception of modernism. On the complexities of realism, see, for example, Bowlby (2010, XIV-XXI), Morris (2003), and Tallis (1998).

³ On the connectons between 1930s realism and post-war neorealism, see also Ghiat (2001).

⁴ For a comprehensive account of neorealist publications, see Falcetto (1992).

⁵ For details of Fenoglio's life and of his works in relation to their historical and cultural context, see Bigazzi (2011), De Nicola (1989), and Negri Scaglione (2006).

⁶ For an account of post-1989 criticism of Fenoglio's work, see Rondini (2003).

Chapter 1

Neorealist Literature: an Overview and Reappraisal

Tutti gli scrittori, di qualsiasi personale convinzione politica, han compreso che non potevano più scrivere, neppure più esistere come uomini pensanti o militanti senza afferrare il senso o, per lo meno, i dati di quel che avviene sotto i loro occhi. – Franco Antonicelli (1951)

Nel dopoguerra ci fu un momento in cui sembrava che nessuno potesse “non dirsi neorealista”; oggi invece si fa fatica a trovare qualcuno che sia disposto ad ammettere di aver preso il neorealismo sul serio. – Gian Carlo Ferretti (1968)

In a letter dated 8 November 1951, Calvino introduced the writing of the unknown Beppe Fenoglio to Vittorini. In this letter, Calvino firmly places Fenoglio within the neorealist mode of writing, and yet at the same time emphasises his view that Fenoglio is a very different kind of author, without saying in what way he is different. Attaching a copy of Fenoglio’s unpublished short novel, *La paga del sabato*, Calvino states:

L’argomento era molto difficile da trattare: ex partigiani che diventano banditi; e lui spiega molto coi fatti, con una moralità implicita [...] Insomma, spero che ti piaccia e che vada bene per la tua collana, perché – benché possa essere considerato un ‘neorealista’ di stretta osservanza – non rifà il verso a nessuno e dice delle cose nuove. (Calvino in Fenoglio 2002, 24)

Fenoglio’s relationship with neorealism has indeed been troubled from the outset. Ever since the early 1950s, critics have argued heatedly over the extent to which Fenoglio can be defined as a neorealist, the precise nature of his *impegno* to the cause of the Resistance and to its ‘values’, and even whether he was really concerned with the Resistance at all rather than with more ‘universal’ struggles and truths. Usually in these arguments, as I have pointed out in the Introduction to this thesis, the complexities of neorealism are ignored and it becomes a kind of homogenous group against which Fenoglio’s ‘merits’

and ethos can be conveniently highlighted and debated. There are also those who seek to place Fenoglio at a distance from neorealism, ignoring the historical and cultural context in which Fenoglio was writing.

I propose therefore in this first chapter to investigate the character of neorealist literature, its origins and legacy, and its changing fortunes in the hands of the critics. In conclusion, I shall provide a brief re-evaluation of neorealism. This in turn should help enrich our understanding of the complex *impegno* of Fenoglio, which will be explored in the chapters that follow.

1.1. Origins, Definitions and Characteristics of Neorealism

It is impossible to apply a strict definition to ‘neorealism’, especially when we seek to do so with regard to literature as opposed to cinema, art or architecture. Encyclopaedias of literature can be both all-encompassing and yet paradoxically restrictive and dismissive of neorealism. For example, Ferroni’s 1991 four-volume *Storia della letteratura italiana* covers a wide range of writers in a section entitled ‘Nel tempo del neorealismo’. At the same time, however, Ferroni (drawing on the 1970s work of Maria Corti) restricts neorealism to a ‘linguaggio che vuole avvicinarsi il piú possibile al movimento della realtà’ (1991, 385), accuses it of taking refuge in ‘un uso troppo circostanziato dei dialetti’ (ibid., 386), and states that in its representation of reality, neorealism ‘tende a suggerire un modello di umanità “positiva”, ad idealizzare i gesti e le azioni dei personaggi popolari [...], distinguendo in modo moralistico, non problematico, il bene dal male, i buoni dai cattivi’ (ibid., 386-87). He goes on to say that for the vast majority of writers he is going to discuss, above all ‘quelli piú importanti, come Vittorini, Pavese,

Fenoglio, il neorealismo costituisce solo uno sfondo' (ibid., 387). Ferroni does not, however, name any writers that fall within his strict definition of neorealism. Another example of an approach towards neorealism which is all-inclusive and yet also dismissive is the chapter written by John Gatt-Rutter for the *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature*. Drawing on Calvino, he states that neorealism 'was part of the atmosphere of the time' and refers to the work of a wide range of writers. Yet he also states that 'the attempted fusion of *scrittori* with *popolo* [...] rarely if at all comes off on the page' (2004, 535) and that neorealism uses a 'backward-looking model of realism' (ibid., 536).¹

The situation is not helped by the fact that neorealism was never a 'school'; there was no neorealist manifesto or centre which established principles and gave directions. '“Il Neorealismo” non fu una scuola,' Calvino writes in his 1964 Preface to *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, first published in 1947, but rather 'un insieme di voci' (1987b, 9). When neorealism was at its most creative and prolific from 1945 to 1948 – Manacorda called this stage the 'primitive' form of neorealism (1974, 39) – there was little usage of the term itself, and almost no argument at this time about the merits or otherwise of 'neorealism'. The debate tended to come from within a limited circle, and was principally concerned with the problems posed by the notion of a 'committed' literature and of how one could best create a literature to reflect the reality of war and its aftermath. The first book which opened a wider debate and first discussed neorealism as a phenomenon was Carlo Bo's *Inchiesta sul neorealismo*, which appeared in 1951. The book took the form of a series of interviews with writers, film directors and critics.² Many of the interviews were highly negative about neorealism, and show the degree of disenchantment on the part of writers and intellectuals with the way culture and politics had developed in Italy since 1948.

How then do we define a neorealist? Vittorini in his 1951 interview with Carlo Bo said that there were as many neorealists as there were writers, and that to describe a writer as ‘neorealist’ was not to say anything ‘essential’ about that writer (Vittorini 1970, 356). I shall argue, however, that although it is impossible to create any kind of final definition – and indeed that it is a mistake to do so since there is so much variety in terms of vision and style – there are nonetheless a number of essential characteristics that are shared by a number of writers in a certain period that we can define as neorealist.

As I have suggested in my Introduction, perhaps one simple, yet rarely noted reason for confusion around the term ‘neorealism’ – not only in the popular imagination but also in the minds of academics – is the prefix ‘neo’. Neorealism becomes confused with some kind of naïve throwback to pre-modernist narrative. Rather, the ‘neo’ signifies a desire on the part of the arts, including literature, for a renewed commitment to engaging with the reality of contemporary society, after a period in which for the most part this reality had been ignored. As Paolo Baldan has pointed out, ‘il prefisso “neo” non indica di per sé una stanca e datata ripresa di un modulo narrativo [...] ma designa una nuova intenzionalità, diremmo di tipo social-progressista, di cui si carica il compito dello scrittore’ (Baldan 1995, 8). In other words, neorealist literature is a ‘committed’ literature. As we shall see, this is the most distinguishing characteristic of neorealism. Nevertheless, the term ‘committed literature’ can itself take on very different meanings and connotations, a point I shall explore in more detail in Chapter 2. In this chapter, I shall argue that the most important aspect of this commitment is its relationship to the Resistance. By Resistance, I do not simply refer to the active ‘politically aware’ partisan planting bombs in Milan or fighting in the hills, but to a broader struggle to defeat Fascism and the language of

Fascism, and to build a better society for the future in which the terrible lessons of the recent past have been learnt.

For some writers and critics, for example Luperini (2002), neorealism covers a period stretching from 1929, when Moravia published *Gli indifferenti*, through to the ‘social realism’ of the 1960s. Certainly, 1945 was not the ‘year zero’ politically or culturally that some had hoped for. Of course, there are, as we shall see, connections to the literature of the 1930s. In any case, it would be absurd to expect neorealist writers to have created a literature out of a vacuum. Before exploring these connections, it will be useful to take a step back and to look at where ‘neorealismo’ comes from and the influences that shaped it.

1.1.1 Origin of the Term ‘Neorealismo’

The first appearance of the term *neorealismo* dates back to a serialised essay, *Letteratura russa a volo d’uccello* by Umberto Barbaro, published in *Italia letteraria* in 1931. The essay, referring to literary trends in the Soviet Union, speaks of a ‘neorealismo che pur rifacendosi alla letteratura dell’Ottocento, non può dirsi un vero e proprio ritorno ma invece ha caratteri di novità, se non di avanguardia, con qualche analogia col neorealismo tedesco di Döblin in letteratura e di Dix in pittura piú che con quello del nostro Moravia e col “realismo magico” del nostro Bontempelli’ (cited in Falcetto 1992, 28).

Neorealism is a rendering in Italian of the German *Neue Sachlichkeit*. This was a term used in 1920s Germany to refer to an art which was a reaction against the tendencies of Expressionism to ignore ‘external reality’ and to focus on the ‘subjective’ interior life. *Neue Sachlichkeit* in response sought to portray the harsh social reality of Germany after

World War I. Apart from one or two brief mentions, the term *neorealismo* disappears until 1942 when it resurfaces in relation to the film *Ossessione* directed by Luchino Visconti. In an interview in *Rinascita*, April 1965, Visconti stated:

Il termine *neorealismo* nacque con *Ossessione*. Fu quando da Ferrara mandai a Roma i primi pezzi del film al mio montatore, che è Mario Serandei. Dopo alcuni giorni egli mi scrisse esprimendo la sua approvazione per quelle scene. E aggiungeva: “Non so come potrei definire questo tipo di cinema se non con l’appellativo di *neorealistic*”. (Cited in Sozzi 1980, 15)

The label *neorealismo* was used in relation to a number of films from 1942 to 1952, and from 1943 was applied to literature, though only with frequency from 1950. There is no clear evidence that the post-World War I German *Neue Sachlichkeit* influenced post-World War II Italian neorealism. However, Lucia Re points out thematic and stylistic similarities between the two in her book *Calvino and the Age of Neorealism: Fables of Estrangement* (1990). Both have as their subject the social reality of a specific time in history. They both reject ‘subjectivist’ art forms as thoroughly inadequate responses to the extreme experience of a world war and its aftermath. Hermeticism and lyrical symbolism dominated Italian literature of the 1920s and 30s (even if they were certainly not the only modes of literary representation), and were regarded as escapist and elitist. Both *Neue Sachlichkeit* and neorealism use ‘popular’ modes of structure and expression, favouring an attempt at a simple, clear language over ambiguous self-referentiality. As we shall see, however, in practice neorealist work could also express many ‘subjective’ aspects which did not necessarily sit comfortably with attempted depictions of historical reality, such as the passages in italics in Vittorini’s *Uomini e no*. Indeed, apart from the desire to use language to ‘engage’ with society beyond an intellectual elite, the fact is that

there was an enormous variation in the types of language used. Fenoglio was not unique among the neorealists in having a highly individual style. As Calvino (1987b) pointed out, the neorealists were nothing if not great stylists. Beyond language, however, the debate in the 1930s and 1940s among left-wing European émigré intellectuals over the political role of realist art has much in common with the debate that bitterly divided the Italian cultural left a few years later: for example, the debate between Bertolt Brecht and the Communist critic Georg Lukács can be compared to Vittorini's attempt to defend the political independence of literature against the arguments of Palmiro Togliatti, the Lukács-influenced head of the PCI.³

1.1.2 Literary and 'Non-Literary' Influences on Neorealism

As I have indicated, neorealism was not a 'school' with a set of aesthetic principles. Nor, of course, was it formed out of nothing. However much some writers would have liked to dissociate themselves for political reasons from the 1930s – especially those of an older generation –, there were clearly important cultural links. Speaking of writers such as Pratolini and Vittorini, who had come of age during the 1930s, David Forgács states that 'without wishing to minimise the importance for many of these intellectuals of the subjective break they made with the past – their own past and the collective past of Fascist Italy – [...] there was not really a wholesale reorientation of high culture during the key political transition period 1943-8' (1996, 59). Even the younger generation of writers – those who came of age during the war, such as Calvino and Fenoglio – had clear cultural links to the 1930s, a point acknowledged by Calvino himself. After all, a small

number of writers emerged under Fascism from the end of the 1920s, whose work could be classified as 'realist' as opposed to the 'subjectivist' works of the Hermetics and others. Here we can name: Moravia's *Gli indifferenti* (1929), Silone's *Fontamara* (1930), Alvaro's *Gente in Aspromonte* (1930), Bernari's *Tre Operai* (1934), Bilenchi's *Il capofabbrica* (1935), Vittorini's *Conversazione in Sicilia* (1939), Pavese's *Paesi tuoi* (1941), and also Pavese's book of poems *Lavorare stanca* (1936). Although diverse, and several with clear 'subjectivist' elements, these writers of the 1930s all possessed a sense of discontent with the society in which they lived. However, apart from Silone, this discontent was not specifically anti-Fascist. Indeed, Bilenchi, Pratolini and Vittorini all regarded themselves as Fascists during the early 1930s and saw Fascism as a revolutionary force. Only perhaps with Mussolini's support for Franco in 1936 did the true reactionary nature of Fascism begin to be revealed. Even so, this did not translate into any kind of political action until 1943, the year of the Italian Armistice.

Writing of the influences on the younger 'neorealists' of the 1940s, Calvino referred to 'una specie di triangolo' (1987b, 10). For Calvino, the three principal points of reference for his generation were Verga's *I Malavoglia* (1881), Vittorini's *Conversazione in Sicilia* (1941), which was first published in instalments from 1938 to 1939 under the title *Nome e lagrime*, and Pavese's *Paesi tuoi* (1941). The Italian *verismo* of the late nineteenth century (and by implication French naturalism), with its usage of a 'popular' language and viewpoint, has, as Calvino indicates, a clear link to neorealism. Fenoglio in a letter of 1951 also acknowledged the influence of *verismo*, speaking of 'una mia cotta neoverista' (2002, 35) in relation to his *La paga del sabato*. Nevertheless, as the other two titles named by Calvino imply, the influences are far wider than the Italian tradition of *verismo*. Above all, these titles point towards the much wider sea of modern American literature

translated into Italian by Pavese and Vittorini, including the more 'popular' kind such as *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934) by James Cain. In an article of February 1946, Pavese cited the Cain book as an important starting point for his first published novel, *Paesi Tuoi* (1941): 'Di passaggio, l'americano che per il suo "tempo", per il ritmo del narrare mi gravò sulle spalle davvero, nessuno al tempo di *Paesi tuoi* lo seppe dire: era Cain' (Pavese 1982, 223). (Cain's book was also, of course, turned into the neorealist film *Ossessione* by Visconti in 1943.) Pavese translated, among others, the fiction of Sinclair Lewis, Dos Passos, Gertrude Stein and Steinbeck, while Vittorini – with the help of a friend who knew English better than he did – translated Faulkner, Steinbeck, Saroyan, Caldwell and John Fante. Vittorini was also an admirer of Hemingway (an admiration which was reciprocated). An anthology, *Americana*, was published in 1942. For these writers, America represented freedom, and even with all its problems, an opportunity for change and renewal. In 'Ritorno all'uomo', an article first published in *L'Unità*, 20 May 1946, Pavese wrote:

Ma pochi libri italiani ci riuscí di leggere nelle giornate chiassose dell'era fascista, in quella assurda vita disoccupata e contratta che ci toccò condurre allora [...] Nei nostri sforzi per comprendere e per vivere ci sorressero voci straniere: ciascuno di noi frequentò e amò d'amore la letteratura di un popolo, di una società lontana, e ne parlò, ne tradusse, se ne fece una patria ideale. (Pavese 1982, 197)

Besides the sense of freedom, American literature also offered much in the way of style.⁴

Pavese took the way American authors used slang and imitated it in his use of Italian to reflect Piedmontese dialect. The influence of American literature gives Pavese's *Paesi tuoi* its terse quality and crudeness, while Vittorini, like Hemingway, used insistent repetition, creating a kind of literary music in his books. It is through Pavese's *Paesi tuoi*

and Vittorini's *Conversazione in Sicilia* and through their translations that American literature showed the younger generation of Italian writers the new possibilities for Italian literature. As Calvino declared, Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, was 'il primo libro in cui ci riconoscemmo; fu di lì che cominciammo a trasformare in motivi narrativi e frasi quello che avevamo visto sentito e vissuto' (1987b, 17). Much has been made of Fenoglio taking his inspiration from English literature, rather than American, as a way of distinguishing him from his contemporaries. However, as with the neorealists, the influence of American literature and cinema was also of great importance to Fenoglio. For example, the influence of Hemingway's work is clear in Fenoglio's short stories and the novel *La paga del sabato*, as critics such as Falaschi (1976) and Innocenti (2006) have shown. Like Pavese, Fenoglio translated American poetry, such as that of Edgar Lee Masters and the modernist Robert Creeley.

Neorealism is also, contrary to what one might expect, saturated in modernist influences. It does not exist 'in opposition' to modernism. Later in this chapter I shall take two famous 'neorealist' novels and explore some of those 'modernist' elements. The point I wish to stress once again is that neorealism was informed by a wide variety of literary and cultural influences and was not a school with a manifesto of poetics or simply a desire to return to a mode of nineteenth-century narrative.

Beyond the 'literary' there was also the influence of the 'non-literary' writings of the partisan press. During the period of the Resistance, partisan groups published an astonishingly high number of broadsheets. Laura Conti in her bibliography *La Resistenza in Italia, 25 luglio 1943-25 aprile 1945* lists almost 5000 publications (Conti, 1961). They were published whenever they could be, or, as some of their headlines stated, 'regolarmente irregolare' or 'quando e dove può' (cited in Falaschi 1976, 7). They were

either printed or typed with carbon copies, or even handwritten. They rarely numbered more than a couple of pages. Typical titles included *Patria e fede*, *Patrioti*, *Il partigiano* and *La vallata*. Their main purpose was to mount a counterpropaganda campaign and to solicit help for the Resistance. As well as direct appeals, a variety of short narrative texts were also published. The texts, often anonymous, tended to relate the exploits of partisans or commemorated partisans who had lost their lives. The line between documentation and fiction is often blurred. What was produced can be seen as a kind of ‘docufiction’ or ‘truth-bound fiction’ (Re 1990, 88), which seeks ‘to contribute to the success of the struggle by fostering a collective sense of solidarity and identity among its readers’ (ibid., 76). Maria Corti, who did much to open the debate on neorealism in the 1970s, expresses the link between these short texts and the post-war neorealist literature in the following way: neorealist prose ‘ha a parer nostro le sue radici, se non rami e foglie, nel movimento collettivo della Resistenza: *qui cronologicamente nasce la prima scrittura “neorealistica”*’ (1978, 40; italics in text). For example, the desire to be ‘true’ to experience, the attempt to use a language that could be understood by anyone, and the implicit belief that one’s own personal story was also the story of everyman, were characteristics shared by neorealist texts that began to appear after the war.

1.1.3 Characteristics of Neorealist Literature

I have emphasised the point that neorealism was not a ‘school’ or even a ‘movement’. I have also suggested that neorealism was informed by a range of influences and found its expression in a variety of forms and styles. There are no ‘pure’ neorealist texts and there is no author who is purely neorealist.

But if there are no ‘pure’ neorealist texts, did such a phenomenon as ‘neorealism’ ever really exist? I would argue that it did in that for a time – roughly from the mid-1940s to the mid-1950s, and most intensely and fervently from 1945 to 1948 – a number of authors, writing in a variety of modes (memoir, short story, novel⁵) shared important characteristics which created a new aesthetic and shaped a new kind of literature for Italy.

Before looking at these characteristics, we need perhaps to remind ourselves at this point that very few were left untouched in Italy by the experience of World War II. From September 1943 to May 1945, a world war and a brutal civil war were played out on Italy’s soil. During the Resistance, intellectuals, teachers and professionals found themselves fighting alongside factory workers. Women too had played an important, though often unrecognised part. Although political ideologies could be sharply divisive, each member of the Resistance shared the common goal of overthrowing Fascism. After the liberation of Italy, there was a great desire to talk and to share stories. By telling one’s own story, one was telling the story of everyman, since it belonged to a collective experience. Calvino captured this in the following way:

L’essere usciti da un’esperienza – guerra, guerra civile – che non aveva risparmiato nessuno, stabiliva un’immediatezza di comunicazione tra lo scrittore e il suo pubblico: si era faccia a faccia, alla pari, carichi di storie da raccontare, ognuno aveva avuto la sua, ognuno aveva vissuto vite irregolari drammatiche avventurose, ci si strappava la parola di bocca. La rinata libertà di parlare fu per la gente al principio smania di raccontare: nei treni che riprendevano a funzionare, gremiti di persone e pacchi di farina e bidoni d’olio, ogni passeggero raccontava agli sconosciuti le vicissitudini che gli erano occorse ... (Calvino 1987b, 7-8)

This does of course raise certain questions, such as: if you had fought on the ‘wrong side’, or if you had not fought at all, would you really have felt so ‘free’ to discuss your experiences openly? Even if you had fought on the ‘right’ side, would you have been able

to discuss the darker sides of the Resistance, for example the infighting that took place between Communist and non-Communist brigades, the amoral and apolitical nature of many individual partisans, and the acts of casual brutality carried out by Resistance members? As we shall see in the course of this thesis, it was perhaps only Fenoglio who was able to explore these aspects of the Resistance in a convincing manner, and yet remain committed to its cause. Nevertheless, it was this feeling of finally being 'free' to tell one's story which led to the birth of a unique literature in Italy's history. What then were the characteristics that 'neorealist' texts had in common?

First, there was the impact of the war, the Resistance, the prison camps and the aftermath of war. This was the 'subject matter' of neorealism in the sense that both the literature and the cinema can be seen as an attempt to 'make sense' out of 'senseless' events.⁶ As Milanini puts it: 'Gli eventi tragici della guerra, le sofferenze inflitte a milioni di persone nei campi di concentramento e di sterminio, superavano le consuete possibilità di calcolo morale, ponendo in mora ogni teoria; occorreva dunque procedere per tentativi, dare vita a un'immagine di cultura in cui si ricomponessero i diversi aspetti del conoscere e del fare' (1980, 10). In a world where 'cause' and 'effect' seem no longer to have any logical connection, one cannot produce narratives which are simply full of action, and where all its different threads lead eventually to the kind of satisfactory resolution we often associate with story-telling. In a 2010 article, Alberto Hernández-Lemus, drawing on the work of Deleuze, suggests that in films such as De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* (1948) and Rossellini's *Germania, anno zero* (1947), the protagonists, bewildered by the collapsed world around them, are paralysed by indecision and move in a series of 'slow, real-time images of an observed observer's observations pointing to no decidable action' (Hernández-Lemus 2010, 136). It is true that filmmakers were in some sense trying to

‘represent’ the real world, both a psychological and social world, but the important point is that there was ‘no organic closure’ since ‘for these artists and thinkers reality’s most precious element was taken to be its ambiguity [...] in which things and interpreters are never given but always engaged in an ongoing conversation’ (ibid.). The same surely is true of works such as Pavese’s *La casa in collina* and Vittorini’s *Uomini e no* with their often searching, hesitant qualities and their lack of narrative closure. Fenoglio’s partisans, too, can be paralysed with indecision, or act in a senseless manner, or be reduced to crying helplessly like children. Even in Renata Viganò’s ‘classic neorealist’ novel *L’Agnese va a morire*, there is often a sense of bewilderment and trauma in the face of an inhuman universe which seems to entrap protagonists with its meaningless and terrible cruelty, its immovable ‘otherness’: one only has to think, for example, of the Dantesque scene of the partisans trapped in the frozen marshes.⁷

The navigation through narrative – but beyond ‘the integrity and causality of plot’ (Hernández-Lemus 2010, 135) – of the reality of war and its aftermath implies by its very nature a desire for a different, for a ‘better’ reality. Thus, neorealism is also above all a ‘committed’ literature, a literature of *impegno*. It is worth noting the fact that Sartre’s ideas were debated in Vittorini’s influential journal *Il Politecnico*, which ran from September 1945 to December 1947.⁸ Sartre’s notion of commitment stressed the importance of communication between the writer and the reader and opposed the ‘solipsism’ of ‘bourgeois’ art forms and also formulaic art. At the same time, Sartre published a translation of Vittorini’s first editorial in *Les Temps modernes*, in which Vittorini called for the creation of a new European culture. However, what the ‘communication’ between writer and reader meant in practice was problematic. The whole idea of *impegno* led to a troubled relationship with the political left, especially

those who hoped that neorealism would follow the tenets of 'socialist realism', with which neorealism has often been confused. Many of the writers who had recently fought for their freedom from Fascism were not about to surrender this freedom to the Communist party, even though many of them were themselves Communists. A heated debate took place between Vittorini and Togliatti, the leader of the Italian Communist Party. Calvino in his 1964 *Preface* recalled the situation:

Cominciava appena allora il tentativo d'una 'direzione politica' dell'attività letteraria: si chiedeva allo scrittore di creare 'l'eroe positivo', di dare immagini normative, pedagogiche, di condotta sociale, di milizia rivoluzionaria. [...] il pericolo che alla nuova letteratura fosse assegnata una funzione celebrativa e didascalica era nell'aria: quando scrissi questo libro l'avevo appena avvertito, e già stavo a pelo ritto, a unghie sfoderate contro l'incombere di una nuova retorica. (Calvino 1987, 15)

During this period, then, literature and politics were inseparable. Indeed I shall argue that it is mainly because of this relationship that neorealism came under so much attack, both from the left and from the right, and not principally for aesthetic reasons. Fenoglio's work too has been both criticised and singled out for praise for political reasons: criticised by the left because of its harsh portraits of the Resistance and its anti-Communist sentiments, and praised (especially since 1989) for its supposedly 'anti-ideological' stance. I shall argue in this thesis that although it is true that Fenoglio, unlike other neorealist writers, was never a member of the Communist Party, it is inaccurate to say that he did not in some profound sense share the 'commitment' of the neorealists.

This commitment was never a straightforwardly political one. It was above all a moral imperative, which translated into an aesthetic one: a neorealist writer had to tell the truth, however ugly, to be authentic. This was one of the most important reasons for the

publication of numerous memoirs and diaries after the war, a point I shall return to later in this chapter. Yet fiction, too, had to be 'true' in some sense to 'reality' and prove its worth as document as well as literature. As Zancan writes, both genres start and end at the same point, even if their trajectories are different: 'dal vero si parte e al vero si torna (la scelta è di *engagement*)' (1990, 53). However, as I have indicated, this did not necessarily mean that neorealists believed there was only one way of 'telling the truth' or of reflecting reality. Indeed, there was much lively debate around the best ways of doing so. For example, the journals *Società* and *Il Politecnico* reflected on the relationship between chronicle and fiction. Piazzesi writing in *Società* in 1946 came down on the side of ordinary people telling their own stories rather than relying on professional writers or journalists:

Sono i testimoni a narrare e, in genere, con la massima schiettezza, perché, istintivamente, ciascuno di loro comprende che la nuda elencazione dei fatti, in simili casi, contiene già un implicito giudizio contro i responsabili: e si possono raccogliere, così, descrizioni immediate ed efficacissime, di gran lunga superiori, credo, a quello che ci hanno dato finora operatori e giornalisti. (Cited in Zancan 1990, 65)

However, other writers stressed the independence of art from chronicle and document. Pavese, writing in *Rinascita* in 1946 stated that with the desire to 'bear witness' it was all too easy to forget that 'il compito, il lavoro, è un altro, quello appunto di sondare ed esprimere la realtà attraverso la fantasia intelligente' (1982, 218). Fenoglio, although he did not take part in these debates or publish any work at the time, was also in 1946 struggling with the best way of relating fiction and fact in his *Appunti partigiani* (which I shall return to in Chapter 2).

Perhaps one aspect that all neorealist writers did agree on was the imperative to use language to combat the bloated rhetoric of Fascism, which had led not only to deception of the Italian people but also to a kind of mass self-deception where Italians believed they could participate in a world war and emerge victorious and untouched. Writers had the duty to make known 'le cose come stanno, anche le meno gradevoli' (Sozzi 1980, 25). Fenoglio can be seen as working very much out of this neorealist imperative to paint an honest picture, even if he went much further than other writers in his harsh portraits of the Resistance. Only by being true to the most terrible aspects of the experience of war and Fascism, could social and political progress be made. In order to communicate this experience to people beyond one's immediate intellectual circle, there was a 'ricerca di un nuovo linguaggio che sia antiletterario e antiaulico, un linguaggio d'uso, un parlato quotidiano con apporti regionali e dialettali' (ibid., 28). This is, of course, problematic, especially in the case of a country with a range of different dialects. It has also led to the accusation, most famously by Asor Rosa (1965), that intellectual writers were 'talking down' to readers they had no real connection with (a point I shall return to). Certainly, the attempt in some cases to create 'popular' protagonists who told their story in the first person (in a kind of imitation, perhaps, of the *memorialisti*) could lead to very mixed results, for example with Pavese's *Il compagno* (1947). Nevertheless, the emphasis on a simple, direct language could in other cases not only be highly compelling – especially perhaps in the case of the *memorialisti* such as Levi Cavaglione with his *Guerriglia nei Castelli Romani* (1946) – but also attain a 'defamiliarisation' effect, a different sense of 'reality' when told from the point of view of a child (or other outsider) in works such as Calvino's *Sentiero* (a work I shall return to later in more detail). At the same time, the incorporation of dialect and local expressions – which Fenoglio himself made great use of

– could lend a strong regional flavour to stories and, alongside an emphasis on local ‘gritty reality’, help Italians see their own regions through different eyes. For example, as Calvino pointed out, Pavese brought alive the streets, bars, factories and brothels of Turin in direct contrast to the popular picture of a city of salons frequented only by the upper echelons of society. At the same time, when writers put an emphasis on their own immediate geographical areas – Pavese on Turin, Vittorini on Milan, Calvino on the hills of Liguria, Fenoglio on the Langhe, Jovine on the life of the south – there is also the sense of the different regions coming together in a united attempt to overcome the legacy of Fascism.

As we shall see in the course of this chapter, contradictions and tensions would seem to be inherent in the very intentions of neorealist literature: ‘art’ versus ‘committed’ literature, chronicle versus fiction, memory versus myth, document versus literary style, an ‘accessible’ language versus linguistic experimentation. These tensions would provide ammunition for the increasingly fierce criticism of neorealism from 1949 onwards. Most of the criticism of neorealism has been aimed at the novels. The fact is that neorealist literature was not by any means confined to the novel. Indeed, in the years 1945-48, the majority of the literature concerned with the events of recent history took the form not of the novel, but of memoirs and short stories. I shall now explore these genres in the next section.

1.2 Neorealist Genres

1.2.1 Memoirs and Documents

An enormous number of diaries and memoirs were published from 1945 to 1948. These were often published by small, independent presses or by the ANPI (*Associazione Nazionale Partigiani d'Italia*), who were working in circumstances where there were paper shortages, lack of funds and only minimal means of circulation. Besides longer memoirs and diaries, there were also numerous short factual accounts or 'cronache' published in post-War Journals such as *Il Politecnico*, *Rinascita* and *Società*. Lucia Re goes so far as to describe this body of documentary memoirs as 'perhaps the most striking of all neorealist modes' (2003, 119). The memoirs came from people of all walks of life, many of them written by non-professional writers who disclaimed any literary intention. As well as 'partisan' memoirs, there were also accounts of other wartime experiences, such as that of the concentration camps – most famously, Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* (1947) – or of working as slave labour in Germany, for example Oreste del Buono's underrated *Racconto d'inverno* (1945). In their prefaces, the writers often declare their intentions to respect 'the truth', their commitment to being 'authentic'. Pietro Chiodi states that his 1946 memoir *Banditi* has value in so much as it is 'un documentario storico nel senso che personaggi, fatti, emozioni, sono effettivamente stati' (2002a, V). Luciano Bolis in his memoir of being tortured, *Il mio granello di sabbia*, first published in 1946, declares:

Questa cronaca di una vicenda capitatami a Genova negli ultimi tempi della dominazione nazifascista [...] non ha pretese letterarie né intendimenti di apologia o di polemica [...] L'unico pregio di questa storia è dunque l'assoluta autenticità

di quanto vi si narra; e tale autenticità ho osservato proprio per l'urgenza di verità che mi ha indotto a documentare in parole un'esperienza che poteva sembrare inenarrabile, a me che non faccio di mestiere lo scrittore. (Bolis 1995, 39)

The memoirs are written to 'bear witness'. Luigi Meneghello in an afterword to his 'romanzo' *I piccolo maestri*, which he worked on for several years before publishing it in 1964, explained how important being 'faithful' to the truth had been to him (albeit with an ironic undertone⁹, since he knew how difficult this was) :

Il vecchio editore lo chiamò un 'romanzo', il secondo anche, e io ho niente in contrario [...]. Ma ciò che mi premeva era di dare un resoconto veritiero dei casi miei e dei compagni negli anni dal '43 al '45: veritiero non all'incirca e all'ingrosso, ma strettamente e nei dettagli [...]. Mi ero imposto di tener fede a *tutto* [...]. (Meneghello 1999, 229; italics in original)

As I have already mentioned, one important reason for this was the desire to reclaim the language of truth, to demystify the rhetoric used by the Fascists. It was in this sense a 'rediscovery of reality' (Falcetto 1992, 133). There are of course issues with the notion of language truthfully reflecting 'real' experience. Fenoglio's *Il partigiano Johnny*, with its linguistic richness, its narrative techniques, and its use of what Cooke (2000) calls 'fictive autobiography', can be seen in part as a critical response to what might be considered the excessive simplicity of the memoirs (a point I shall return to in Chapter 3). Many memoirs, however, do not shrink from exploring the existential and moral complexities involved.

A good example of this is Roberto Battaglia's *Un uomo, un partigiano* (1945). In his preface, Battaglia declares his intention to avoid what he sees as the tendency of the Italians to make 'heroes' out of the partisans, and instead to describe them 'nei loro meriti e nei loro difetti' (2004, 20). He wishes to 'chiarire a se stesso e agli altri in qual modo le

sofferenze della guerra lo hanno trasformato o migliorato' (ibid.). This was clearly a response to much of the propaganda that the Resistance had used during the war to win people over to its side. In an interview given to *Radio Roma* on 22 March 1945, Battaglia had already declared that 'mi sembra che la propaganda si preoccupi piuttosto che di comprendere e far comprendere, ancora troppo d'esaltare e di trasportare i partigiani in un clima d'astratto eroismo' (2004, 8). In *I piccoli maestri*, first published in 1964, Meneghello would echo this desire to represent the experience of the Resistance 'in chiave anti-retorica e anti-eroica' since only in this way 'si può rendere piena giustizia agli aspetti più originali e più interessanti di ciò che è accaduto in quegli anni' (1999, 228).

Battaglia begins his memoir with a clinical analysis of his own case as a typical 'apolitical' intellectual who had toed the Fascist line because it was convenient to do so, not because anyone had forced him to. Under Fascism his life is 'abbastanza tranquilla e felice' (2004, 22). War when it comes is felt as a kind of 'imposizione dall'esterno' (ibid.), and makes him concentrate all the more on his studies of baroque art. It is only when he is touched personally by news of the death of a friend in Yugoslavia that he begins to question his whole mode of existence. What horrifies Battaglia above all is the sense that his friend, like many others, had been all too willing to sacrifice his own life and to cause great suffering to his own family, simply because he did not bother to question a reality created by a collective way of thinking and did not even begin to ask if he possessed any kind of possibility of individual choice in the face of this reality. Battaglia speaks of the willingness to die in the cause of Fascism as 'una rinunzia quasi ascetica alla possibilità di scegliersi liberamente la propria sorte' (ibid., 24). He feels compelled by his friend's death and the disastrous progress of the war to consider what

choices he himself might be able to make. In an existential, quasi-religious sense he feels 'guilty', but with this sense of guilt also comes 'la possibilità d'un riscatto o d'una rinascita' (ibid., 25). Nevertheless, he has no idea how to act, how to make real this sense of 'rebirth' in the situation in which he finds himself. The same is true, as we shall see, in the case of Fenoglio's Johnny. And as with Johnny, it is only with the events of the summer and autumn of 1943 that Battaglia will come to realise what he has to do: 'era la prima decisione che la società richiedeva da me, la prima volta che mi metteva con le spalle al muro' (ibid., 28). After this moment of 'conversion', one might expect that the story is one of unquestioned devotion to the cause of the Resistance. Much has been made of the disillusionment with the Resistance expressed by Fenoglio in his stories and the sense of alienation felt by the ex-student Johnny from his fellow partisans. This sense of disillusionment is contrasted by critics with the more positive portraits written by other Resistance writers. Yet in his memoir Roberto Battaglia too, after an initial period of euphoria, grows for a time increasingly disenchanted with the partisans, and at times considers – like Fenoglio's Johnny – abandoning the Resistance. He emphasises those elements of 'chance' and 'expediency' that have led many people to join the Resistance:

Quegli operai, quei contadini o quegli studenti dichiarano d'aver preso le armi, perchè sollecitati da circostanze esterne, per spirito di difesa o di necessità economica o di vendetta, di non essere, insomma, stati i primi a decidere liberamente per proprio conto, ma d'esservi stati spinti dagli stessi avvenimenti. (Battaglia 2004, 126)

As with Fenoglio, the enemy viewed from close up often becomes human and vulnerable.

The deaths of Germans do not lead to a sense of triumph, but only a feeling of pity:

Avevo visto i primi morti tedeschi in una silenziosa giornata, distesi in un atteggiamento rigido e grottesco [...] uccisi con le armi da me forniti ai partigiani, e il primo sentimento era stato non d'odio, ma di stupore e pietà per la loro giovinezza. (Battaglia 2004, 43)

Only later after months of participating in the struggle will there come a deeper bonding with his fellow partisans and a commitment to armed struggle to overcome Fascism. *Un uomo, un partigiano* continues to explore the meaning of the Resistance up to its last chapter, which is an examination of the summary justice that was carried out on those civilians who had in some way 'betrayed' the partisans, for example by giving a piece of information about partisan movements to the Germans in exchange for some paltry material privilege. As we shall see in the next chapter, Fenoglio, too, would examine the complexities of partisan justice in such stories as 'Il Vecchio Blister' and in a profoundly questioning way in the underrated *Appunti partigiani*. Battaglia says that while as commander and judge he has to act in one way, as a 'human being' he realises he himself with a change of circumstances could easily be in the position of the person who is being executed:

Chi giudica, esita allora perchè non è di un giudice umano indagare le intenzioni, ma di un uomo dubitare. [...] Posso fucilarli perchè privi di questa coscienza che manca a quasi tutti gli italiani, lasciare orfani i figli perchè il padre era uno dei tanti che ha visto nella vita pubblica un semplice campo per i propri interessi [...]? Muoiono con gli occhi chiusi (anch'io potevo essere uno di loro) senza comprendere – in ciò sono sinceri – che cosa significhi 'tradimento'. (Battaglia 2004, 173-74)

Battaglia is no pacifist, but in this 1945 memoir, he is anxious to portray and to reflect on the moral complexities of the Resistance, and the effect these have on combatants and affected civilians. He is committed to 'telling the truth', but not in any 'absolute' sense.

Telling the truth means exploring uncertainties and ambiguities as much as it does giving a 'personal account' of what happened. As with the scenes of death painted in the novels of Fenoglio, Pavese and Vittorini, the situation does not allow a simple division into good on the one side and evil on the other. This is in direct contrast with Battaglia's hagiographic and much better-known *Storia della Resistenza Italiana*, first published in 1953, which, as Philip Cooke stresses 'is heavily biased in favour of the Italian Communist Party' (2000, 99).¹⁰

Although the *memorialisti* stress the 'authenticity' of their accounts, and the fact that they were not in any sense professional writers, Maria Corti (1978), Lucia Re (1990) and others have pointed out that many of the memoirs have distinctive literary qualities and that the line between fact and fiction is often blurred. A good example of this is Pietro Chiodi's diary *Banditi* (1946). Although superficially this diary appears to be the straightforward document that Chiodi claims it to be in his preface, like any good storyteller Chiodi uses significant details to reveal his characters, to move his story forward, to incorporate a little humour into tragic situations, and to communicate the horror of a situation without rhetoric or sentimentality. His use of detail can be seen, for example, in the way he describes the place where eight of his fellow-partisans were executed:

Questo era l'ultimo limbo di terra italiana che loro avevano visto. Si vedeva il caseggiato della stazioncina, dietro alcuni alberi e, lontano lontano, la collina. Dirimpetto su una piccola costruzione una scritta: 'Cessi'. (Chiodi 2002a, 152)

It would be difficult for a lesser writer not to lapse into pathos or rhetoric in such a situation. Instead, Chiodi uses the kind of detail which, in the words of Jorge Semprun, is

‘le sel du récit’ (Semprun 1994, 19). Other examples of ‘storytelling’ in memoirs are Luciano Bolis’ *Il mio granello di sabbia* (1946), which reads at times like a horror story worthy of Poe, and Pino Levi Cavaglione’s *Guerriglia nei Castelli romani* (1946). Cesare Pavese in a review published in *La Nuova Europa* described the latter as having ‘un sicuro istinto narrativo’ which led Levi Cavaglione to use the diary as the only possible form ‘in cui, a così poca distanza dai fatti, è possibile rievocare senza errori di prospettiva o sbavature la tremenda esperienza della guerriglia: il diario, l’annotazione quotidiana’ (1982, 242).

The ‘autobiographical’ form of writing is no longer ‘subliterary’, but a literary ‘genre’ in its own right. Indeed, declaring a book to be simply ‘telling the truth’ or ‘stating the facts’ can almost be seen as a rhetorical device for attracting the attention of the reader and getting closer to the reader, as well as a declaration of sincere intent.

The blurring of the line between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ can be seen not only in the *memorialisti* but also in novelists, such as Pratolini and Vittorini who, apart from basing their work on real historical events, use a documentary style to create a ‘reality effect’ in parts of novels such as *Cronache di poveri amanti* and *Uomini e no* (a point I shall return to later). A clear example of the mixing of memoir with novel is Renata Viganò’s *L’Agnese va a morire*. In an article entitled *La storia di Agnese non è una fantasia*, first published in *L’Unità*, 17 November 1949, Viganò explains that Agnese is a real character she met during the partisan struggle, in which Viganò and her husband took part: ‘In quel clima abbiamo vissuto diciannove mesi e poi l’ho creato – ho tentato di creare – nel mio libro. Tutto esiste: azioni ed uomini, orizzonti e paesi, colori e temperature. Tutto come è detto’ (Viganò 1994, 245). Yet there are clear fictional elements, even at a basic level. For example, ‘Agnese’ is a fictional name for a real person; Viganò admits that she has

changed 'il fisico del comandante e l'ho reso piccolo e grigio mentre era robusto e bruno' and has 'inventato nomi di battaglia e posposto i fatti e alterato le età'. The reason for this 'fu per aver moto più libero nell'acqua corrente del racconto' (ibid., 245–46). The link between history, autobiography and fiction is just as compelling in the work of Beppe Fenoglio, and like Viganò he is happy to invent details to make the story work better, to make it more believable, to make the reader relive the experience of war. As Lejeune has pointed out, 'all the methods that autobiography uses to convince us of the authenticity of its narrative can be imitated by the novel' (1989, 13), and, of course, an autobiography uses the tools of fiction so that 'life continues to resemble Balzac' (ibid., 71). The relationship in neorealism between fact, document, chronicle on the one hand and fiction on the other, was, then, problematic, but also a fruitful one.

1.2.2 Short Stories

The number of Resistance stories which appeared in the years immediately following the War far exceeds the number of novels. Short stories flourished in a way that had never happened before in Italian history. These stories often appeared in newspapers, journals or in small pamphlets attached to newspapers, the most important of these being the Communist *L'Unità*, which published 120 stories in just over three years. In some cases, stories were later gathered in collections by individual authors, for example Calvino's *Ultimo viene il corvo* (1949). Fenoglio's first published book *I ventitre giorni della città di Alba* (1952), was also a collection of short stories. One reason for the preponderance of short stories as opposed to longer work was, as mentioned previously, the lack of an infrastructure, paper shortages and so on. However, as Falaschi (1976) reminds us, there

was a more important issue involved in writing a novel at that time about the Resistance: the desire to 'tell the truth' was regarded by some as incompatible with the traditional formulas of a novel and with the narrative distance required. If the experience of war was a traumatic and often senseless one, which gave the lie to any idea of a 'plot' with cause and effect, then short stories – by capturing only a 'fragment' of that experience – could be seen in some way as more 'truthful'. One can also add that if the greater story of the War and the Resistance is already known by a readership, then it is unnecessary to tell that story over again in an epic novel: what is needed instead is to delve deeper into parts of it in a way that does not create any false sense of unity of experience over an extended period of time. The same is true also of some neorealist films. For example, Rossellini's *Paisà* (1946) relates a series of episodes – made up of individual stories within a series of historical stories, from the Allied invasion of Sicily to the partisan warfare in the marshes of the Veneto – which to someone who is not familiar with the background story behind them may seem curiously unrelated.

Falaschi (1976) and Corti (1978) – drawing on the extensive research of Conti (1961) – have shown the links between short stories published after the war and those published in partisan pamphlets and broadsheets, for example: the emphasis on the heroic sacrifice of Resistance fighters, the necessity of being ruthless with a monstrous enemy one has a duty to kill, the precise references to places and events that the writer assumes the reader will know, an attempt at a language that will be understood by everyman, and a close relationship between language and dialect. Critics have been dismissive of what is seen as the rhetorical tone and sentimentality of many of these short stories, with the exception of course of those stories written by authors such as Calvino. Lucia Re, for example, contrasts the forward-looking quality of the partisan chroniclers who 'write from within

the struggle itself' with many of the short story writers who 'look back on the Resistance as a tale that is already over, having reached its triumphant conclusion with the Liberation' (1990, 81). In order to defend the Resistance against its detractors, the short stories create a kind of mythology in which the Resistance is held up as something sacred, as part of man's historical destiny. However, an anthology of Resistance short stories, compiled by Gabriele Pedullà and published in 2005 (50 years on from the end of World War II), contains many stories from the 1940s which are exploratory rather than in any sense 'triumphalist' or touting the virtues of the Resistance. A good example of this is the work by the poet Giorgio Caproni, whose stories appeared in newspapers and journals in the 1940s but have never been gathered together in a single volume. As Pedullà states, 'Quando si pensa agli scrittori della Resistenza il nome di Giorgio Caproni (1912-90) non è mai tra i primi che vengono in mente' (2005, 29). Nevertheless, from 8 September 1943 until April 1945, Caproni was an active member of the Resistance in the Val di Trebbia, near Genoa, and published five short stories in left-wing or ex-partisan journals after the war (Pedullà 2005, 335). As with much neorealist fiction, including that of Fenoglio, 'si tratta di testi brevi, a metà strada tra il frammento autobiografico e la narrazione di finzione, e senza che sia possibile optare con sicurezza per l'uno o per l'altra' (ibid., 30). The narrator is often baffled and dazed by the new reality of the situation in which he finds himself, in which nothing appears certain, and in which all previous points of reference no longer seem to apply.

The story 'Il labirinto' was first published in *Aretusa* in January 1946. It begins with four partisans who are trudging through the snow of the mountains. They are on the run from a German patrol. The narrator is Pietra, one of the partisans. He is following behind the others in order to try to cover up their tracks. It is a well-nigh impossible task.

Although he has only forty-five minutes left before one of the other partisans takes his place, it seems as if the hands on his watch have not moved each time he looks at them. We have a sense of time having stopped in this deserted snowy landscape. This sense of the suspension of time, as if by living the life of a Resistance fighter one has entered an altogether different reality, completely separate from that of pre-war life, is one that a decade later Fenoglio would explore to great effect in *Il partigiano Johnny* and *Una questione privata* (a point I shall return to in Chapters 3 and 4).

In 'Il labirinto', two of the partisans are Italians, while one is Russian and another is Polish. (It is worth reminding ourselves here that many partisans in Italy were indeed foreigners who had escaped from Italian prisoner-of-war camps during the events of 1943 or who had fled to Italy from other parts of Europe.) The two Italians, far from being 'heroic' figures, are compared unfavourably to their Eastern European counterparts. They suffer more from the cold, are less 'hardy', and more 'afraid'. The latter is a point which is made much of by the Russian Gregorio, who tells the two Italians: 'Però vi si vedono tremare le labbra di paura, non è mica il gelo' (Caproni 2005, 34). It is the Russian who makes the decisions and who does not hesitate to confer with 'Ivan' in 'incomprensibili frasi polacche' (ibid.), so that it seems as if the Italians are powerless in a war which is taking place supposedly for the liberation of their own country. The narrator, Pietra, as an intellectual, far from being the kind of political guide to be found in Viganò's *L'Agnese va a morire* or Calvino's *Sentiero*, is the most helpless of all four (rather like the student protagonists of Fenoglio's stories). As Gregorio reminds Pietra, his studies are useless in this situation; they have indeed rendered him stupid. Instead of taking any kind of commanding role, Pietra knows he must 'lean' on others who do not know 'Latin'. In a way that is reminiscent of Fenoglio's student protagonist 'Raoul' (see Chapter 2),

Caproni's *Pietra* suffers from feelings of intense alienation from his companions, as well as a deep sense of his own inadequacy, and yearns for the world he has left behind. The narrator's voice is as much that of an outsider as a participant, thus intensifying the strangeness of the events he describes, and creating a heightened sense of reality. As readers, we are made to experience a sense of bewilderment alongside that of the protagonists.

In the new reality of this landscape, nothing is certain, but everything is terrifying. Near the beginning of the story, when a sound of 'great doors' being 'slammed' is heard, they wonder if it is the sound of mortars being fired. If so, does this mean the Germans have turned their attention away from the small group of partisans? It is something they hardly dare to hope for. When Gregorio through his binoculars spots a black mark in the distance he wonders if it is the branches moving, an animal, someone from a patrol, or perhaps even a girl. The binoculars are passed around, but no one can decide what the 'black mark' is. Eventually, they discover that the mark is indeed a girl. She approaches, saying she has come to warn them that they must not go anywhere near the house they were heading for because it is swarming with Germans. Again, no one can be sure what the 'truth' is. Although Gregorio is convinced she is a spy, the others believe her, in part perhaps simply because they want to, but also because they are still mistakenly using pre-war points of reference in which a young, beautiful and pure-looking girl could never be a 'spy': 'Forse era vergine (una vergine alta e bionda), e aveva tanta dolcezza di miele nei capelli e sulle labbra. Una diciottenne bionda e grande: una perla giovane per i nostri sensi e per il nostro cuore' (Caproni 2005, 42). This could also be read as an argument that old poetic models are no longer valid ones for reflecting the harsh reality of war. Even when later the girl inadvertently betrays herself to the narrator by claiming that she

is 'the teacher's sister' (the narrator knows that the teacher almost certainly has no sister), he shuts her remark out of his mind. Rather than thinking of the real possibility of death that this girl brings, he dreams of another girl from his past life that he is reminded of. Pietra's desire to return to the narrative of the past and to shut out the narrative of the present has disastrous results. In the end, the girl's treachery leads to the death of two partisans. Here, we cannot help thinking of Milton, the protagonist of *Una questione privata*, who also is obsessed with a girl from the past, who shuts out the fact that as a partisan he has entered a new, terrible narrative which he has to live or die by, and whose actions will lead directly to the deaths of two boys.

When the spy in Caproni's story is caught, a very real moral dilemma is sharply brought into focus. What should be done with her? There are those among the civilians and partisans who want to see her tortured and raped. The narrator, still unable to come to terms with what has happened, is only filled with pity for her. 'La ragazza camminava tra noi, docile, sulla neve' (Caproni 2005, 52). She has no idea where the partisans are taking her and seems unable to comprehend her own guilt: she had only been doing what she was told to do. As readers, we are made to feel compassion for her, in part because of the brutal behaviour of some of the partisans. Bell, a partisan commander, insists on a 'proper' trial, however makeshift it must be: otherwise the partisans will be no 'different' from 'them', the enemy. He tells the girl that she is only a 'minor' who has been 'poisoned' by her environment, that it is 'un peccato ucciderti' (ibid., 55). The word 'peccato' here also implies a wider guilt which extends to all those involved in the war. In a different situation – where there is no war – they could, says Bell, 'rehabilitate' her, but in the reality they live in they have no choice but to execute her. The narrator, Pietra, is struck by the strangeness of this 'court', held outside in the snow. Its supposed 'legality'

only reinforces the sense of lack of any points of certainty which are meaningful. Again, with the description of the girl's death we are made to feel pity for her, not any kind of triumphant sense of justice having been done. And yet, at the very end of the story, as with Fenoglio's explorations of partisan justice, we are also made to feel that in some sense no other action could have been taken. What the story does, as do the best of the Resistance stories and memoirs of the 1940s, and as Fenoglio does in his work of both the 1940s and 1950s, is to navigate the ambiguities of the new 'reality' and moral dilemmas posed by the experience of war.

1.2.3 Novels

Writing in 1964, Calvino said that the great challenge for him and his generation was how to capture the 'reality' of the Resistance in literature, and even more so in a 'novel': 'creare una "letteratura della Resistenza" era ancora un problema aperto, scrivere "il romanzo della Resistenza" si poneva come un imperativo' (1987b, 13). He concluded that only 'il più solitario di tutti' (ibid., 24), Beppe Fenoglio, was able to write the novel that his generation had 'dreamed' of writing: *Una questione privata*. Here was the Resistance 'proprio com'era, di dentro e di fuori, vera come mai era stata scritta' (ibid.). Yet, during the neorealist 'explosion' of 1945-48, there were not as many neorealist novels as one might imagine. As I have pointed out, their number is outweighed by the number of memoirs, short stories and films that appeared in the same period. Nevertheless, it was the novels which provoked most of the harsh criticism of neorealism that began to appear from the beginning of the 1950s, culminating in Asor Rosa's stinging attacks and

accusations of ‘sentimentality’ and ‘populism’ in 1965. I have already outlined some of the diverse influences that informed neorealist literature. We can briefly explore now how these and other influences play out in two famous novels of this early period of neorealism: Vittorini’s *Uomini e no* (1945) and Calvino’s *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (1947).

Uomini e no was written mainly during 1944 when Vittorini was in hiding, and published in Milan in June 1945 just after the Liberation. Because of its topicality as well as its accessibility as a narrative (its simple language reaching out to everyman), it proved immensely popular and was reprinted in October 1945. Calvino recalls seeing it in the shop windows: ‘a due mesi appena della Liberazione nelle vetrine dei librai c’era già *Uomini e no* di Vittorini, con dentro la nostra primordiale dialettica di morte e di felicità’ (1987b, 13). It was this novel which in a sense launched Vittorini as ‘il caposcuola’ of neorealism, although arguably he was never happy with this label. In what ways, then, is *Uomini e no* a ‘neorealist’ novel?

First, the subject matter which the book is confronting: the Resistance. Here, the partisan fight is represented by the actions of the GAP (*Gruppo di Azione Patriottica*) in the city of Milan, who used urban guerrilla tactics not that dissimilar to those of some modern terrorist organisations. The individual struggle of the main protagonist, *Enne 2* (a Resistance code name), against Fascism is seen to represent the collective struggle of the Italian people. As with other neorealist writers, this collective reality is rooted not only in a particular historical time, but is also emphasised by a strong evocation of place: in this case, Milan’s streets, squares and apartment blocks. The story may be a novel, but it represents an exploration of real events that are taking place almost as it is being written. Through the evocation of one particular city, there is a sense that every Italian region and

city has its role to play not only in the physical battles of the Resistance, but in the political battles that will take place afterwards to construct a new Italian society. The descriptions of the combat scenes often seek an objective, factual tone, reminiscent of partisan bulletins, while the suicide of *Enne 2* at the end of the novel has strong echoes of the deaths of partisans in other partisan stories: an individual has suffered and died for the collective good. Those who read the book have a moral and political duty to make sure that the sacrifice was not in vain. It is this moral imperative which, even if interpreted in an unsentimental and more questioning way, would figure as one of the key drives behind Fenoglio's work. And as with Fenoglio, beyond the immediate historical context, there is also a sense of a greater drama being carried out between good and evil, between the forces of liberation and the forces of oppression, between 'men' and 'not-men'. There are often strong biblical tones in which external elements stand for something else, for example where the deserted city becomes a symbol for the devastation wreaked by war and the isolation of individual human beings. Like other neorealist authors, Vittorini can lay claim to the 'authenticity' of his book in that he is to all appearances writing from his own experience.

However, the situation is more multi-layered than this. For a start, Vittorini was actually in hiding from the authorities during the street gun battles and 'terrorist activities' he describes so convincingly.¹¹ His main contribution to the Resistance was his work on the editing and writing of clandestine bulletins. Indeed, the real autobiographical element lies in the story of his frustrations in his relationship with a woman who was married to another partisan, a point I shall return to in a moment. One of the strengths of the book is its discussion of the nature of 'good' and 'evil'. Vittorini refuses to identify evil purely with Fascism; instead, he makes it clear that evil is created by humans

themselves; Fascism is just one manifestation of this, but it could equally take the form of a different political ideology:

Diciamo oggi: è il fascismo. Anzi: il nazifascismo. Ma che cosa significa che sia il fascismo? Vorrei vederlo fuori dell'uomo, il fascismo. Che cosa sarebbe? Che cosa farebbe? Potrebbe fare quello che fa se non fosse nell'uomo di poterlo fare? Vorrei vedere Hitler e i tedeschi suoi se quello che fanno non fosse nell'uomo di poterlo fare. Vorrei vederli a cercar di farlo. Togliere loro l'umana possibilità di farlo e poi dire loro: Avanti, fate. Che cosa farebbero? Un corno, dice mia nonna. (Vittorini 1990, 180-81)

In spite of the 'accessible' language, *Uomini e no* is not by any means a straightforward narrative, but is in many respects experimental and modernist. The most obvious element of this is the insertion of entire sections in italics. These sections veer in an entirely different direction from the partisan struggle. They do not relate external events, but rather enter the psyche of the protagonist: his memories, his doubts over his ability to contribute to the partisan effort and his feeling of worthlessness engendered by his unsuccessful relationship with Berta. Unlike Fenoglio, however, Vittorini seems unable to integrate the subjective 'private' life of his protagonist with the historical collective narrative he is relating. In these sections, Vittorini the novelist frequently addresses his protagonist directly. He asks him searching questions, and gently but persistently mocks him. He asks about his own relationship as 'author' with the character he is writing about, wondering, it seems, if he has the 'narrative distance' we would expect of a novelist or whether he, the author, is not in fact that character, and all narrative distance between them is only a false one:

Io a volte non so, quando quest'uomo è solo – chiuso al buio in una stanza, steso su un letto, uomo al mondo lui solo – io quasi non so s'io non sono, invece del suo scrittore, lui stesso. (Vittorini 1990, 83)

The whole emphasis on *Enne 2*'s interior life is not something we would normally associate with neorealism. Rather, the sections in italics are even 'surrealist' in their strange leaps through time. One obscure section has the SS guard dogs talking to one another, as if they themselves were the embodiment of evil. Even in the sections with a regular font, where the focus is on 'external' reality, the quality of the prose can be highly lyrical. Words and symbols recur over and over again, which has a kind of hypnotic effect on the reader, though at times the effect can be rather artificial and stilted. Vittorini, like Pavese, was a stylist, and, from the way the book is written, seems keen to make a 'literature' out of the partisan struggle, not solely to 'document' it or to use it as a springboard for moral and political exhortation.

Clearly, Vittorini meant *Uomini e no* to be a literature of commitment. The book is, no doubt about it, a lauding of the partisan struggle and a call to create a new kind of Italy, and Vittorini himself was a Communist at the time. In the first two editions, he stated in an added note that 'ogni merito, per questo libro, è di me come comunista' (cited in Bonsaver 2000, 106). Yet Vittorini, like Pavese, had huge issues with the idea of committing himself personally to any kind of violent action, and had doubts as to what his specific role as an intellectual should be when it came to armed struggle. In a chapter in italics which was discarded in the revised edition in 1949, Vittorini stated his problem clearly:

Enne 2 è un intellettuale. Egli avrebbe potuto lottare senza mai disperazione se avesse continuato a lottare da intellettuale. Perché ha voluto cambiare genere di

lotta? Perché ha lasciato la penna e preso in mano la pistola? (Vittorini, cited in Bonsaver 2000, 107)

The questioning of the use of violence is highlighted in the scene in the last few pages, where the *operaio* (to whom the intellectual *Enne 2* has handed the responsibility to carry on the armed struggle) enters a bar with the express purpose of killing a German in cold blood, but is unable to do so because of the German's sad, human aspect which is all too similar to his own:

Sedeva, le gambe larghe, la schiena appoggiata alla spalliera della sedia, la testa un po' indietro, la faccia triste, persa, una faccia stanca da operaio.

Dio di Dio! O non aveva conquistato? Non era in terra conquistata? Che cosa aveva da essere così triste, un tedesco che aveva conquistato?

[...] Aveva gli occhi più in basso, come umiliato. Un momento si osservò le mani; da una parte, dall'altra, entrambe, insieme, e fu un gesto lungo come ne fanno solo gli operai. (Vittorini 1990, 217-18)

As when we view an enemy soldier from close up in Fenoglio's stories, we are made to realise that we are in reality talking about killing a fellow human being, and not simply destroying a dangerous machine. However, the problem with *Uomini e no* is that it is difficult to distinguish reflections on the nature of good and evil, and on what is morally permissible in the struggle against Fascism, from the self-pitying reflections on an unrequited relationship with a married woman and on the protagonist's own incapacity as an intellectual to make a worthwhile contribution to the Resistance. The private problems of *Enne 2* come across as insignificant rather than conveying a picture of a 'real' character. In contrast, the temptations of Fenoglio's Johnny and Milton to retreat into subjectivity and into 'private affairs' are more convincing because one senses that their creator Fenoglio is in a far more fundamental sense determined to explore their

relationship with, and the way they play against, a commitment to the cause of the Resistance, a commitment which must be continually renewed. It is as if Vittorini is writing two different novels. Near the end, it is not clear whether *Enne 2*'s decision to stay in his room and fight rather than flee Milan, is a sacrifice for the Resistance or a suicide because of his own private unhappiness, or both. *Uomini e no*, then, is by no means a 'straightforwardly neorealist' narrative, but rather a mixture of many different elements, which unfortunately do not sit well together.

Vittorini, born in 1908, belonged of course to that generation which had come of age under Fascism. Indeed, until the advent of the Second World War, he had been an active supporter of Fascism, seeing it as a revolutionary force for change, and is even reported to have considered joining the Fascist forces fighting on Franco's side in the Spanish Civil War. It could be argued, as Asor Rosa does (1997, 96), that for many of this generation the Resistance could never be a fundamental, life-changing event in the same way that it was for writers of the younger generation, such as Calvino (born 1923) or Fenoglio (born 1922), because they were never able to free themselves from their Fascist inheritance. Calvino himself in various articles and interviews throughout his life makes clear how important the experience of the Resistance was to him, for example here in an interview of 1960:

Intanto era venuta l'occupazione tedesca, e secondo un sentimento che nutrivo fin dall'adolescenza, combattei con i partigiani, nelle Brigate Garibaldi. La guerra partigiana si svolgeva negli stessi boschi che mio padre m'aveva fatto conoscere fin da ragazzo; approfondii la mia immedesimazione in quel paesaggio, e vi ebbi la prima scoperta del lancinante mondo umano. (Cited in Milanini 1997, 173)

Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno, first published in 1947, was Calvino's effort to write the Resistance novel of the hills which would match Vittorini's novel of the city. According to Calvino, 'l'esperienza fondamentale' of the Resistance demanded a new literature. He had begun writing short stories at the age of 17 in the spring of 1941, and continued writing until he joined the Communist partisans in the Maritime Alps in the spring of 1944. As with Fenoglio, Calvino's initial choice to join the Communists was made for practical rather than for ideological reasons, though unlike Fenoglio he became committed to the Communist cause after the Liberation of Italy. By 1946 he was contributing both articles and short fiction on a regular basis to *l'Unità*. Much of the material for his early fiction was the same as that used for *Il sentiero*: the Resistance, the Ligurian landscape with its hills and pine forests, the world of the underclass of San Remo, and the commitment to the Communist cause. As with Fenoglio, many specific episodes from the short stories would be returned to in his novel. Calvino was not happy with the majority of his earliest Resistance stories because of what he saw as their overly-personal autobiographical elements, their sometimes hagiographic descriptions of partisans, and their overstated conclusions. He soon learnt that 'by eliminating or submerging ideological elements, his short stories functioned more successfully and acquired "lightness" ' (McLaughlin 1998, 5). His short stories also developed the fablelike qualities, for which he would later become so famous. For example, the short story 'Ultimo viene il corvo', written in 1947 just a few weeks before he began his novel, and which, like *Il sentiero*, looks at the Resistance from a boy's perspective, is 'densely packed with metaphors and allusions that clearly suggests something straight out of Kafka' (Weiss 1993, 24).¹²

It would be true to say that Calvino's short stories do not portray the partisans in the same grotesque light that *Il sentiero* does. For example, the 'ragazzotto montanaro, con la faccia a mela' (Calvino 2006b, 15) of 'Ultimo viene il corvo' is skilled with a rifle in an almost magical way and is not the same kind of damaged character as the twelve-year-old Pin of the novel is. One of the purposes of the novel, in which 'nessuno è eroe, nessuno ha coscienza di classe', was to defend the independence of literature from a strict political direction from the left (Calvino, 1987b [1964], 15). However, Calvino also made very clear that he wanted to defend the partisan movement against its detractors on the right, those who had already started to attack the Resistance only months after the Liberation. His political position was far less ambiguous than that of Vittorini. He was an active campaigner for the Communist Party in 1947, and spent time in the Soviet Union in the early 1950s as correspondent for *L'Unità*. As evidenced by his many articles of the 1940s, Calvino's theories of literature cannot be separated from his politics. The rejection of aristocratic literature, of false optimism, of sentimentality, his desire to tell the truth in fiction, can, in contrast to Fenoglio, be directly related to his position as a Communist. As Falaschi states, 'è evidente che in Calvino le proposizioni di poetica sono strettamente congiunte con quelle politiche' (1976, 102). Calvino himself insisted in 1946 that in the new novel which the age demanded, the writer should study mankind in an objective, scientific manner from a Marxist perspective: 'S'ha da studiare i sentimenti veri degli uomini, studiarli con la spietatezza dello scienziato ed insieme con la solidarietà del compagno' (cited in Falaschi 1976, 103). The voice of an individual protagonist will be one of a chorus, representative of the collective if the writer is committed politically. The importance of Communist ideology to Calvino is shown in his inclusion of the controversial ninth chapter in *Il sentiero*, where the message of the book is made clear:

the partisans – whatever their ignorance, apolitical nature or dubious morality – are superior to their Fascist opponents because they are ‘instruments’ of history:

C'è che noi, nella storia, siamo dalla parte del riscatto, loro dall'altra. Da noi, niente va perduto, nessun gesto, nessuno sparo, pur uguale al loro, m'intendi? [...] tutto servirà se non a liberare noi a liberare i nostri figli, a costruire un'umanità senza più rabbia, serena, in cui si possa non essere cattivi. L'altra è la parte dei gesti perduti, degli inutili furori, perduti e inutili anche se vincessero, perchè non fanno storia, non servono a liberare. (Calvino 1987b, 151)

Pavese, Vittorini and others advised Calvino against the inclusion of this chapter on aesthetic grounds, but Calvino insisted on including it, as he himself stressed later in his 1964 preface to *Il sentiero*, for ideological reasons: ‘Per soddisfare la necessità dell’innesto ideologico, io ricorsi all’espedito di concentrare le riflessioni teoriche in un capitolo che si distacca dal tono degli altri’ (1987b, 11). The ‘neorealist commitment’, then, to carry on the Resistance struggle for a better world is conducted through literature. What is also clearly neorealist is Calvino’s commitment to the ‘truth’ of the Resistance experience. It is a commitment which, as I have mentioned above, excludes the notion of the positive hero or any kind of false optimism. In this, he has much in common with Fenoglio, even if Fenoglio does not share Calvino’s faith either in Communism or in history. Fenoglio also creates scenes, especially in *Il partigiano Johnny*, where ideology and politics are argued over, for example the relationship of Communism to the cause and methods of the Resistance. Fenoglio, however, as we shall see, comes to very different conclusions.

For the Calvino of the 1940s, art is political in nature, and yet the artist must preserve his integrity. To a certain degree, Calvino’s theoretical position can even be compared to that of Lukács, who distinguished between good and bad socialist realism. Good socialist

realism will honestly examine ‘insoluble conflicts’ that can exist ‘even in the socialist society’ (Lukács 1971, 121). ‘Writers must be allowed to find their own point of contact with day-to-day politics, and be allowed to work out, as did Mayakowsky and Petöfi, suitable means of dealing with it’ (ibid., 120). Bad socialist realism tries to brush over problems and conflicts in order to make a political point. The result is a literature that is unrealistic with falsely optimistic endings that no one can believe in, a ‘false revolutionary romanticism’ (ibid., 121). If, however, literature has taken up ‘the immensely important task’ of exploring ‘the antagonistic character of social contradictions’ (ibid., 120), then there may be ‘a justified historical optimism – which can prove immensely fruitful’ (ibid., 121).

Yet a commitment to the ‘truth’ does not mean, for Calvino, any more than it does for Fenoglio, a relating of the ‘facts’ or some kind of documentary chronicle of his experiences as a partisan. He defended the author’s right to ‘invent’ and impose his own reality on events. Calvino began, like so many other partisan writers, including Fenoglio, by trying to convey the reality of his experiences in autobiographical mode. However, he felt that his own story was too partial, too ordinary in comparison with the Resistance on a wider scale. His own reality was inferior to the reality of the many:

Per mesi, dopo la fine della guerra, avevo provato a raccontare l’esperienza partigiana in prima persona, o con un protagonista simile a me. Scrisi qualche racconto che pubblicai, altri che buttai nel cestino; mi muovevo a disagio; non riuscivo mai a smorzare del tutto le vibrazioni sentimentali e moralistiche; veniva fuori sempre qualche stonatura; la mia storia personale mi pareva umile, meschina; ero pieno di complessi, d’inibizioni di fronte a tutto quel che più mi stava a cuore. (Calvino 1987b, 20-21)

He was also aware of the difficulty of writing an autobiographical account when as a narrator he would be looking back at the self of youth, a time when most people's identity is still in a process of rapid change. In Calvino's case, the changes were accelerated by his traumatic experiences:

Sono stati mesi che hanno contato come anni e se riuscissi davvero a ricordarmi com'ero mese per mese dovrei dare tanti ritratti di me completamente diversi: un giovane è duttile e in mesi di forte tensione procede a sbalzi: nelle reazioni emotive, negli atteggiamenti, nelle idee. (Calvino 1985, cited in Milanini 1997, 173-74)

Fenoglio, in his own hard-won battles to write 'truthfully' about the experience of the Resistance, came to believe that it was only possible to do so with the perspective of time, where he could, to use a metaphor employed by Cooke (2000) and Bigazzi (2011), look back through his own 'binoculars' as an author while at the same time recreating the reality of the Resistance for his readers through the 'eyes' of the partisan Johnny. Instead, for Calvino, the only way forward was to write the stories of others, or conglomerations of others, who had shared his experience of the Resistance. In this way, besides avoiding the problem of a changing identity, he could implicitly capture the historical, moral and human sense of the partisan struggle without having to directly state it (and thus lose its human reality) in the way that a factual account might attempt to:

Quando cominciai a scrivere storie in cui non entravo io, tutto prese a funzionare: il linguaggio, il ritmo, il taglio erano esatti, funzionali; piú lo facevo oggettivo, anonimo, piú il racconto mi dava soddisfazione, e non solo a me, ma anche quando lo facevo leggere alla gente...

[...] Ogni storia si muoveva con perfetta sicurezza in un mondo che conoscevo cosí bene: era questa la *mia* esperienza moltiplicata per le esperienze degli altri. E il senso storico, la morale, il sentimento, erano presenti proprio perchè li lasciavo impliciti, nascosti. (Calvino 1987b, 21)

The story, like that of other neorealist works, is told in the present tense and in simple, accessible language. There is much use of slang and dialogue, not only to support the strong sense of place evoked by his descriptions of the streets of San Remo and the hills of Liguria, but to convince the reader of the truthfulness of the narrative. This is not merely some literary work, but is a true portrait of ordinary people caught up in the momentous events of history. The truthfulness of the story is intended to be made more convincing because it is mainly told from the point of view of Pin, a 12-year old boy (though always with a clear narrative distance on the part of the author): Pin is an outsider; he does not have any propagandistic axe to grind. As Calvino himself has pointed out, Pin also embodies the author's own naïve student self at the time. From this perspective at least, he is not dissimilar to the hapless student of Caproni's short story 'Il labirinto', or to the protagonist of Fenoglio's short story, 'Gli inizi del partigiano Raoul', which I shall look at in the next chapter.

However, as with the work of Vittorini, alongside the 'realist' narrative, there are other important elements. Calvino named Robert Louis Stevenson as one of the most important influences on his novel. This is perhaps an odd literary ancestor for a neorealist to cite. Indeed, *Il sentiero*, like Calvino's early short stories, has a fablelike tone, which Pavese spotted early on. There are scenes which are reminiscent of Kafka, even of surrealism, for example, the blackly-comic scene where the traitor Pelle returns to his flat (Calvino 1987a, 178).

The symbol of the child could be seen as a typical neorealist representation of innocence and hope in a world where evil has been prevalent. The ending to *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* has generally been seen as positive, a kind of fairy tale ending which

expresses an almost religious faith in the Resistance, when the ‘good’ partisan, Cousin, leads the 12-year old Pin by the hand into the night. However, Lucia Re (1990) has pointed out the symbolic and deeply ambiguous nature of the ending (as well as other parts of the book). We do not know whether Cousin has murdered Pin’s prostitute sister, the only maternal figure in Pin’s life. But given the misogynistic nature of Cousin and the shots Pin hears, it seems likely that he has. In this case, the reappearance of Cousin is ‘the fulfilment not only of Pin’s dreams but also of his nightmares’ (Re 1990, 311). The darkly symbolic and ambiguous aspects of *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (one could start by just thinking about the title) mean this novel has dimensions we do not normally associate with neorealism.

I would argue that this novel, like Vittorini’s, is only partially convincing. The main issue is the disconnection between the ‘political’ chapter and the grotesque, often clownish behaviour of the partisans. Indeed, the clownish element is at times so strong as to make the story and its protagonists ‘unreal’ rather than highlighting reality through an effect of ‘defamiliarisation’. Calvino in this early novel all too often patronises his characters to the point where we perhaps do not care very deeply what happens to them. Lucia Re has claimed that Calvino is a better Resistance writer than Fenoglio because he is more aware of the role of political ideology (1990, 65). However, the notion expressed in the novel by the Communist commander Kim that history will ultimately justify all the failings of the partisans is unconvincing not only because history did not turn out the way Calvino thought it would, but also because we are never persuaded in the first place of the reality of the partisan experience. *Il sentiero* is far less likely to be a book we would read to find out what it was like to live through the Resistance than even the highly ideological *L’Agnese va a morire* by Renata Viganò.

I have conducted this analysis of two ‘classic’ neorealist novels in order to show that they were not the ‘monochrome’ texts that one might expect from some of the criticisms made of neorealism that I shall be exploring in the next section. They share the subject-matter and the commitment of other neorealist works, but this has not in any way dictated a strict aesthetic apart from one which seeks to express and explore the commitment of the authors. Instead, they use a variety of narrative techniques, including many of those of modernism, in an attempt to navigate the often uncomfortable realities of the Resistance. To be sure, as I have indicated, the attempts are only partially successful. Perhaps, as Calvino himself would later point out, more historical distance, the kind that Fenoglio achieves in his 1950s work, would be needed to write the novel that the Resistance deserved.

1.3 Neorealism and Its Critics

It is difficult to put a precise date on the end of the first phase of neorealism, when it was still as Calvino put it ‘prima che un fatto d’arte, un fatto fisiologico’ (1987b, 7). 1948, however, was a critical year. Politically, it was disastrous for the left, with the defeat of the Communist Party by the Christian Democrats. This was in strong contrast to 1946 when the Communist Party was becoming the most important party in both Italy and France. The result of this was a sense of disillusionment. Corti states that ‘nel 1948 prende avvio l’involuzione politica italiana con le conseguenti delusioni degli intellettuali e il declino della narrativa fiduciosamente impegnata’ (1978, 27). Pratolini said that ‘Neorealismo significa quel tempo lontano, 1945-47’ (1980, 243). The deluge of memoirs underwent ‘quasi un’eclisse’ (Corti 1978, 27) after 1947, and the Resistance short stories

stopped appearing in *L'Unità* in 1949. According to Manacorda, 'Intorno al '50 la spinta migliore e più genuina del neorealismo è ormai in via di esaurimento' (1974, 44). The previous arguments between Vittorini and the Communist Party around the relationship of art and politics can be seen as an antecedent to the bitter recriminations that would start to mount after 1948. It can be said that the debates prior to that year took place 'from the inside', among neorealist writers themselves, though the word 'neorealism' itself was little used, while after 1948, the debate came 'from outside': neorealism became a phenomenon to be discussed and criticised.

From 1949, the neorealist novel starts to become either more formulaic or else self-doubting and pessimistic about the Resistance. An example of the first is Renata Viganò's *L'Agnese va a morire*, which already shows socialist realist tendencies with its distinction between those who guide and those who need to be guided. 'A cominciare dal '48 prendono forza le istanze staliniste nella politica culturale della sinistra' (Falaschi 1977, 69). An example of the second type of novel is Pavese's *La casa in collina*. The protagonist of *La casa in collina*, Corrado, is highly critical of the Italian people in that they allowed the Fascists to rule them until they were forced to do otherwise. The deaths of Fascists are not easily justified: 'Guardare certi morti è umiliante. Non sono più faccenda altrui [...] Per questo ogni guerra è una guerra civile: ogni caduto somiglia a chi resta, e gliene chiede ragione' (Pavese 1990a, 122). This is even more pessimistic than Caproni's short story 'Il labirinto' that I have discussed above: Pavese (who of course unlike Caproni chose not to become a partisan) is asking whether the Resistance itself could be justified, not simply investigating the use of violence in particular circumstances.

In July 1949, three years before the publication of Fenoglio's first book, the first retrospective look at Resistance literature was undertaken by Calvino in an article published in *Il movimento di liberazione in Italia*. Calvino stated that the Resistance novel everyone had hoped for had not been written, because writers such as Vittorini had in reality been more interested in their own position as intellectuals in relationship to the Resistance; they had never been concerned with the Resistance itself:

Gli scrittori [...] che all'esperienza della Resistenza si sono ispirati, non ci hanno dato altro [...] che il documento della loro posizione d'intellettuali singoli di fronte alla lotta, cioè opere in cui la Resistenza non è mai la protagonista, ma solo il termine di un'antitesi. (Calvino 1980a, 91)

Calvino contrasts Resistance novels with memoirs, diaries and documents, which are 'in gran parte d'indiscutibile valore morale e di una capacità naturale d'emozione' (ibid., 92-93).

Niccolò Gallo, writing in *Società* in 1950, expresses disappointment with the results of post-war writing. According to Gallo, 1945 was not the decisive break with the past, either in historical or in artistic terms, that had been hoped for by so many, and which writers aspired to. Their efforts amounted only to 'uno sforzo di natura intellettualistica, effettuato in terminini letterari: un processo di sostituzione di schemi a schemi precedenti, più che una ricerca espressiva nuova' (Gallo 1980, 99-100). In 1950-51, Carlo Bo conducted a series of radio interviews with writers, film directors, critics and others, which were gathered in *Un'inchiesta sul neorealismo*. Bo in his introduction is already worried that neorealism has become a formulaic art, and speaks of a need to overcome 'il conformismo' which consists of a 'supina obbedienza alla realtà' (Bo, cited in Falaschi

1977, 114). The writers interviewed are on the whole critical of neorealism or deny that such a phenomenon exists. Vittorini famously states that there are as many neorealisms as there are neorealists; Vigorelli dismisses neorealism as a ‘scuola [...] sono i vari Micheli; Calvino, eccetera, che confezionano pseudocronistorie italiane, metà scritte all’americana e metà alla sovietica’ (cited in Falaschi 1977, 121). Gadda claims that neorealism does not allow for ‘le meravigliose ambiguità di ogni umana cognizione’ (ibid., 123). Angelo Del Boca, himself regarded as a neorealist, declares that neorealism does not belong to the period after the War, that ‘almeno da una ventina di anni si fa da noi del “provincialismo”, della narrativa cruda e drammatica, in sostanza del neorealismo’ (ibid., 123-24).

What these criticisms fail to take into account is that the writers of the 1940s themselves never claimed to be a ‘school’. In this strict sense, ‘neorealism’ does not exist. As we saw earlier, what defines the neorealist writers is instead their commitment to coming to terms with the experience of war and its aftermath, to engaging with the reality of the historical situation in which they found themselves, and to thereby contributing to building a better society for the future. But this was a starting point for a ‘committed’ aesthetic, not a final theory of ‘realism’. Within this commitment, there was, as I have made clear, a great deal of stylistic difference between individual writers, who are dismissed too easily as a homogenous mass. Of course there was no ‘clean break’ from the past. Neorealism could not come into being from a cultural vacuum, and, as I have pointed out, there are indeed obvious links with the literature of the 1930s. Nevertheless, what distinguishes the writing of the 1940s is the urgent sense of *impegno* brought about by the experience of war and the Resistance.

In 1955, Pratolini published his novel, *Metello*, which covered the historical period from 1875 to 1902, and had as its protagonist the *operaio* Metello Salani, who becomes the leader of a political struggle for the rights of workers. This novel famously brought the whole question of neorealism into sharp debate. The critic Carlo Salinari stated that with Jovine's *Terre del sacramento*, Pratolini's *Metello* was 'l'altro punto avanzato della nostra narrativa realistica contemporanea. [...] E rappresenta anche il romanzo in cui spariscono definitivamente alcuni miti del decantismo: l'ossessione del sesso, la esaltazione del primitivo, il richiamo della campagna, il mito della infanzia, il gusto del torbido e dello sporco, la seduzione del misticismo' (Salinari n.d., 47). *Metello* however was attacked strongly in other quarters. Carlo Muscetta linked *Metello* to the problems he believed neorealism was facing in his 1955 article, '*Metello e la crisi del neorealismo*'. Muscetta, an admirer of Pratolini's earlier *Cronache*, declared that *Metello* was the result of the author's confused ideology and ill-informed nostalgia. His obsession with sex was there just as much as it had been before, but was no longer an integral part of the narrative: 'il mondo naturalistico del sesso ha la prevalenza sul mondo storico-ideale del socialismo' (Muscetta 1976, 137).

Towards the end of the 1950s there seemed to be a concerted attack on neorealism in its entirety without real regard for individual writers. Cassola, who himself had serious reservations about much post-war literature, stated in a 1958 essay: 'La narrativa del dopoguerra è sotto accusa; c'è addirittura chi è pervenuto a una condanna in blocco' (cited in Falaschi 1977, 143). Pasolini famously responded in 1960 with his poem 'In morte del realismo', which accused writers of betraying those who had died for the Resistance (Pasolini 1975, 283-89). Not only was neorealism criticised from an ideological standpoint, but within a purely literary context. Writers who would later form

the avant-garde *Gruppo 63* with its emphasis on language, accused neorealism of not being realist at all, but rather, sentimental, rhetorical and, in literary terms, reactionary. This kind of criticism needs, of course, to be seen in the context of the whole debate that was starting to take place about the possibilities and limitations of 'realism', and about the nature of narrative itself. What it ignores, once again, is the variety of modernist techniques used by the neorealists and also the point that the neorealists themselves eschewed many of the techniques of traditional narrative because these techniques could not take into account the fragmented reality of war.

Yet by the mid 1960s, neorealism was something that most writers did not wish in any way to be associated with. Critics were already analysing the historical reasons for the 'failures' of neorealism. Fenoglio, who had not published his first book until 1952, and who did not really become a major force to be reckoned with until the posthumous publication of *Il partigiano Johnny* in 1968, is never mentioned. The arguments of the 1960s critics can be summed up as follows:

1. There was no real break culturally between the years preceding and those following 1945. The most prominent proponent of this view was the Marxist critic, Asor Rosa, who in the 1960s was closely associated with the radically-Communist politics of *Operaismo*. In his book, *Scrittori e popolo*, first published in 1965, he states: 'La letteratura della Resistenza non arriva a nessuna scoperta letterariamente ed ideologicamente sorprendente, proprio perchè in realtà essa si limita ad operare su scoperte che erano già state tutte compiute' (1976, 194). Asor Rosa criticises neorealist writers for being caught up in powerful yet contradictory ideologies.

Fundamentally, he claims, they are bourgeois intellectuals who cannot even begin to understand the importance of the historical 'class struggle'. Instead they have an absurdly sentimental view of 'il popolo': 'l'intellettuale va verso il popolo, ma *il più delle volte, prima ancora di raggiungerlo concretamente e seriamente lo trasforma in mito, in immagine rovesciata di sé*' (1976, 161; italics in text). Vittorini (singled out for a particularly stinging attack), Pratolini, Calvino, Pavese and others all come under relentless fire for the degree to which they deceive themselves regarding their attempts to get closer to ordinary people. Because of their self-deception, according to Asor Rosa, these writers prevented Italian culture from taking any genuinely progressive steps: 'e non ci si è accorti che, in nome del popolo e delle sue eterne benemerienze, si perdeva per sempre l'occasione di creare una seria, consapevolmente, critica "letteratura del mondo contemporaneo", così come esso è, con i suoi drammi e le sue lacerazioni, le sue angosce e le sue sotterranee potenzialità liberatrici' (ibid., 280). Asor Rosa links his critique of Resistance writers to his criticism of the Resistance itself as a movement that sought in the end only to create an inclusive democracy rather than to forward the class struggle to eliminate capitalism.

2. The neorealists did not do enough to make the most of initial gains won by the best writers, such as Vittorini, Pavese and Calvino, who initially tried to establish an 'authentic' literature, but who in the end never managed to break free from nineteenth-century models, and so were unable to find new ways to express the realities of 1945. This is a view put forward by G. C. Ferretti in his book, *La letteratura del rifiuto* (1968). For Ferretti, the debate over whether 1945 was a true break or not is irrelevant. There *was* a break, but 'nella troppo facile euforia

dell'immediato dopoguerra' (1968, 13) writers failed to take proper advantage of it. They were too caught up in the Italian tradition of 'aristocratic' and 'decadent' literature.

3. For Petronio, the problems with language were never resolved. In his article 'Del neorealismo e di varie altre cose', published in the journal *Problemi* in 1970 (and reproduced in abbreviated form in Falaschi 1977, 180-89), Petronio claimed that the neorealist writers, influenced by American literature, tried to use the Italian language in a way that borrowed from the American use of slang, short sentences and repetition of simple words and phrases. However, the attempt failed because the Italian language was simply not part of the everyday and intimate lives of most Italians, who on the whole used dialect.
4. Writers such as Vittorini and Pratolini were unable to be truly critical because they had lost the capacity to be critical under Fascism, where genuinely radical criticism was not allowed. Their so-called 'realism' ended by being a form of rhetorical evasion. This was a view held by Manacorda writing in 1967:

La oggettiva proibizione censoria da un lato, e dall'altro, forse ancora piú grave, la difficoltà o la disabitudine a documentarsi, a interpretare il documento alla luce di un'ideologia critica a disposizione e a trascriverlo in immagini esplicite spinsero di frequente i neorealisti verso soluzioni che somigliavano piuttosto ad evasioni, o quanto meno li spinsero a muoversi sul piano di un continuo compromesso tra documento e poesia. (Manacorda 1974, 29-30)

5. Manacorda laments the fact that the neorealists had no 'school' or clear ideology, no sense of unity. Because of this they were unable to defend themselves from attack. Salinari adds that they were not even aware of this weakness: 'La cosa strana è che la maggioranza degli scrittori (che pure in un modo o nell'altro avevano partecipato al movimento neorealistico) non hanno avuto coscienza di tale loro debolezza ideologica' (Salinari n.d., 184).

6. Many critics point to the innate conservatism of Italian society and the hostility this generated toward neorealism and the Resistance. After a brief period of creative exploration after 1945, the old political and cultural forces reclaimed power:

Quella che si credeva rivoluzione si rivelò presto restaurazione; nelle strutture ancora deboli del giovane Stato repubblicano le vecchie caste e i vecchi gruppi di potere – anche quelli culturali – ripresero coraggio e forza [...] In queste condizioni, il neorealismo doveva isterilire e dissolversi [...] l'impulso è stato prima fermato, poi sconfessato e negato: nei suoi presupposti di politica e di poetica, nei suoi risultati d'arte. (Petronio, cited in Falaschi 1977, 187– 88)

7. The writers themselves abandoned neorealism, for example Calvino and Cassola. As I have mentioned above, the move away from neorealism was attacked by Pasolini (1975, 283-89), who accused writers of forgetting the 'sangue partigiana'. Fenoglio, of course, was the one writer who could not be accused of forgetting the Resistance.

The disappointment with neorealist literature, as can be seen, is inextricably linked with the shattered hopes for a new Italy after 1945. Most of these criticisms, it seems to me, are unable to separate the literature from left-wing ideology. They forget that neorealist

narrative, although a committed literature, was not necessarily meant to directly express a political ideology. Asor Rosa himself admits that his criticisms are made from a political rather than a literary standpoint: 'Il nostro punto di vista è politico, e politico fondamentale è il senso del nostro discorso letterario' (1976, 6). The crude harnessing of literature for strictly political purposes is something that, as I have shown, Vittorini and Calvino and others resisted from the start, making clear their view that art had to convey its own reality. This is not to deny for a moment that there is inevitably an uneasy tension here between the claims of 'art' on the one hand and a 'committed' literature on the other. Above all, however, these criticisms take no account of the neorealist memoirs, or of the short stories, or of the close relationship that existed between 'fact' and 'fiction' in the common search for the 'truth' of experience.

Nevertheless, the impression created by the harsh criticisms of neorealism is one that is still highly prevalent today. Critics of individual authors such as Calvino, Pavese and Vittorini are often keen to show that they were not 'neorealist', pointing for example to the symbolism of Pavese, but forgetting that the works of almost any neorealist author we can think of, even someone as politically orientated as Renata Viganò, contain strong elements of symbolism (one only has to think of the biblical qualities of some of Viganò's descriptions). In spite of some important re-evaluations of neorealism by scholars such as Falaschi (1977), Corti (1978), Falcetto (1992) and most recently Bigazzi in his book on Fenoglio (2011), it is still the general perception that after 1955 neorealism ceased to have much relevance. This is the view taken, for example, by Candela in *Neorealismo: problemi e crisi* (2003). Pedullà in his introduction to the important anthology *Racconti della Resistenza* (2005) dismisses neorealism as:

una letteratura scialba e fortemente ideologizzata, tutta pugno al vento e bandiere rosse, scarpe rotte eppur si deve andar: una letteratura cioè pericolosamente vicina alla propaganda politica, interamente asservita alla battaglia ideologica e comunque disposta a sacrificare tutto (ricchezza del vocabolario, sfumature psicologiche e stilistiche, necessità espressive) all'esigenza primaria di comunicare un messaggio chiaro in modo che fosse comprensibile a tutti. (Pedullà 2005, VII)

However, Pedullà fails to provide any concrete examples of this. What he has done – like so many critics of the 1950s and 1960s – is once again to set up neorealism as a convenient target to take aim at. Pedullà goes on to list some of the important characteristics of 'Resistance literature': the evocation of place; the exploration of the role of the intellectual in armed struggle; the commitment to the 'truth' of the experience of the Resistance: the 'impegno di portare testimonianza' (2005, XXII); the political commitment in the case of some, and in a more general sense a profound moral commitment: 'la lotta al nazifascismo coincide con la convinzione di aver compreso una volta per tutte il senso di marcia della storia e di essere messi in cammino sulla buona strada' (ibid., XVII). But what Pedullà is describing here *is* neorealism, which as I have tried to show in this chapter is to be distinguished from 'realism', not because of some straitjacket aesthetic, but because of its connections to the Resistance and to the experience of war. As Bigazzi rightly claims: 'la Resistenza è un punto di partenza e un aspetto fondamentale del neorealismo' (Bigazzi 2002, 50). From this 'punto di partenza' a wide range of individual voices emerged with very different styles but all faced with similar issues around creating a literature which was 'true' to their experience and to their *impegno* to continuing the Resistance through culture.

It is certainly true that after the initial 'explosion' from 1945 to 1948, and the pessimism of the late 1940s, there were a number of novels in the neorealist mode in

which literature's investigation of the Resistance turned instead into a kind of more formulaic fiction, for example Cassola's *Fausto e Anna* (1952), a love story with the Resistance as its background. However, it was during the 1950s and 1960s that other authors emerged who, while rooted in neorealism, took it further through genuine experimentation with language and with narrative, who were committed to examining the complexities of their time and who deliberately fought against any kind of sentimentalisation of the Resistance. Beppe Fenoglio is the most notable example of this. A number of women authors, for example, Natalia Ginzburg, could also be considered as experimentalists, who saw events from the perspective of female characters. As Robert Gordon points out, her autobiography *Lessico familiare* (1963) is able to marry the historical events of war and anti-Fascist activities with 'a private act of memory' by 'pinpointing the key role played by language at the border of private and public spheres' (Gordon 2005, 118). At the same time, an engaged literature was emerging which dealt convincingly and unsentimentally with other aspects of the war, such as Mario Rigoni Stern's novel *Il sergente nella neve* (1953), which was based on Stern's own experiences of the disastrous Italian campaign in Russia. Vittorini in his presentation of the book for the Einaudi 'gettoni' series stated that 'si ricava un'impressione piú di carattere estetico che sentimentale o polemico' (cited in Falchetto 1990, 135). My point is that while critics were attacking neorealism in the 1950s and analysing the reasons for its failures in the 1960s, writers closely linked to neorealism were creating realist yet innovative works.

A combination of a desire to be 'true' to the reality of the Second World War and its aftermath, while at the same time questioning and exploring that 'reality', was also continued by lesser-known neorealist authors, such as the *memorialista* Nuto Revelli. Revelli in his book *Il disperso di Marburg*, written in the late 1980s and early 1990s (fifty

years after his diary account of being a soldier in Russia and forty years after his account of his experiences of the Resistance), seeks through interviews to create a picture of an enemy soldier who had been killed by partisans, although the soldier himself had, according to local people, always acted with kindness. In doing so, Revelli starts to question his own memories: ‘Ciò che accendeva il mio interesse era il gioco della memoria, il contrasto tra la *mia* verità e la verità degli *altri*’ (Revelli 1994, 15)¹³. He comes to accept that ‘the truth’ will never be fully understood, that it may remain nothing more than an accumulation of fragments, whose meaning may only gradually emerge.

Yet this questioning of ‘the truth’ was of course, even if this is still not generally recognised, already taking place in neorealist literature of the 1940s. Apart from the better-known examples of Calvino, Fenoglio and Pavese (and also Vittorini, even if less convincing from today’s perspective), there are numerous examples of ‘minor’ writers such as Giose Rimanelli, who in his autobiographical novel, *Tiro al piccione* (not published until 1953, but begun in 1945 and completed in 1949) tells the story of the Resistance from the other side, that of the Fascist *brigate nere*, of which Rimanelli was a member. The book is a plea for reconciliation, made in the full acknowledgement that terrible atrocities have been committed which should not be forgotten.

Although one can easily criticise the claim made by many *memorialisti*, few of whom were professional writers, that relating ‘the facts’ was a guarantee of ‘authenticity’, Calvino, Fenoglio, Pavese and Vittorini were certainly aware of the problems of trying to reflect ‘reality’ through language. For example, in a 1941 entry in his posthumously published diary, *Il mestiere di vivere*, Pavese wrote: ‘Il narrare non è un fatto di realismo psicologico né naturalistico, ma di un disegno autonomo di eventi, creati secondo uno stile che è la realtà di chi racconta, unico personaggio insostituibile’ (Pavese 1990b, 229).

Indeed, rather than describe reality, the writer constructs and discovers it in the very act of creation. In an entry of March 1942, Pavese notes the words of Alain (Émile Chartier): ‘La ligne du dessin n’est pas point l’imitation des lignes de l’objet, mais plutôt la trace d’un geste qui saisit et exprime la forme’ (ibid., 237). Vittorini frequently echoes this sentiment, for example, in a note added to an article of 1933: ‘Realismo, in arte, è solo scoperta di una “nuova” realtà o uso di un “nuovo” suggerimento della realtà’ (1970, 56).

The neorealists have also been accused of taking a superficial and narrow view of ‘historical reality’, of not conducting any kind of proper analysis of historical cause and effect. For example, Maria Corti states that ‘in qualsiasi realtà socio-politica e culturale c’è sempre molto di piú che nell’esperienza fattane da chi la vive; questo di piú [...] è spesso sfuggito agli scrittori neorealisti’ (1978, 36). Lukács, also, was critical of the emphasis in modern war literature on the author’s own experience: ‘war can only be understood in its totality if the writer has a perspective which enables him to understand the forces that lead to war’ (1971, 101). Realist literature should ‘mirror the totality of war’ (ibid.). Meneghello admits in his afterword to *I piccoli maestri* that ‘il disegno generale degli eventi non si vede sempre bene dall’interno’, but states that ‘d’altra parte se il materiale di cui altri si serve per fare quel disegno dall’esterno non è assolutamente autentico, il disegno non conta nulla’ (1999, 228-29). The majority of neorealists, in any case, were far too close to recent events to attempt any kind of ‘objective’ analysis. Sartre, writing in 1946, stated his belief that the modern experience of war made this kind of analysis impossible:

[...] dès 1940, nous étions au centre d’un cyclone [...]. Dans le monde stable du roman français d’avant-guerre, l’auteur, placé en un point *gamma* qui figurait le repos absolu, disposait de repères fixes pour déterminer les mouvements de ses

personnages. Mais nous, embarqués sur un système en pleine évolution, nous ne pouvons connaître que des mouvements relatifs; au lieu que nos prédécesseurs croyaient se tenir en dehors de l'histoire et s'étaient élevés d'un coup d'aile à des cimes d'où ils jugeaient le coup en vérité, les circonstances nous avaient replongés dans notre temps: comment donc eussions-nous pu le voir d'ensemble, puisque nous étions dedans? (Sartre 1972, 270-71)

This surely is a typically modernist point of view, where truth has become something no longer fixed and stable, where a version of it can only be told through the eyes of one character (Stevenson 1992, 20), since any claim to authorial omniscience will be seen as literary fraudulence. Indeed, neorealism, as I have pointed out earlier in this chapter in my comments on Vittorini's *Uomini e no* and Calvino's *Il sentiero*, can be said to contain as many modernist as 'realist' elements, and is a much more complex phenomenon than is generally allowed for.

The fact that reality is seen from the point of view of a single focaliser does *not* mean that its problematic nature cannot be examined, as Lukács would claim. Neorealist literature, at its best, with its emphasis on what Lucia Re calls 'docufiction', creates a bridge between history, memory and imagination. In his book *Italy's Divided Memory* (2010), John Foot points out that the relationship between history and memory is a much closer one than is often believed:

History is usually seen as scientific, somehow based on the truth, rigorous and a good alternative to memory. Memory, on the other hand, is bracketed as unreliable, far from the truth, a kind of flimsy superstructure. Yet [...] twentieth century history cannot be written, or understood, without reference to memory. Often memory is the only way to grasp the lived experience of people, and their relationship with the past. Moreover, history itself is also unstable, flimsy and unreliable, and often highly politicised. (Foot 2010, 5).

The most searching memoirs and fiction of the 1940s, 50s and 60s can be seen as a guard against a sentimentalisation of the Resistance on the one hand, and against those historical revisionists who would argue that both sides were morally equatable on the other. They allow us to keep asking questions about the past in order to try to understand the present. As Cooke points out with reference to the memoirs and to Fenoglio's 'fictive autobiography' *Il partigiano Johnny*, they are 'not invalid because they fail to present us with a painstakingly detailed account. They offer us something different, something far more complex and nuanced' (2000, 99).

Yet neorealist literature is not only important for its historical significance. It can convey the significance of a conversion to a greater truth, and the life-changing commitment that this conversion entails. This conversion is especially well-documented by the *memorialisti*. It is this notion of commitment to a greater truth, among many other complex aspects of the Resistance, that Fenoglio spent his short life interrogating.

Notes:

¹ For a more perceptive, albeit sometimes hagiographic, discussion of neorealism, see the chapter 'Neorealist Narrative: Experience and Experiment' by Lucia Re in *The Cambridge Companion to the Italian Novel* (2003, 104-24), edited by P. Bondanella and A. Ciccarelli.

² Many of these interviews have been reproduced in abbreviated form in *Realtà e retorica: la letteratura del neorealismo* (1977), edited by G. Falaschi, and in *Neorealismo: poetiche e polemiche* (1980), edited by C. Milanini.

³ For a fuller discussion of these debates, see, for example, Falcetto (1992, 88-103) and Re (1990, 8-114).

⁴ Much has been written of the influence of American literature and cinema on the Italian literature of the 1930s and 40s. See for example: Calvino (1987b), Falcetto (1992), Pavese (1982,), and Re (1990).

⁵ Neorealist literature also took the form of poetry, although this has been generally regarded as the least convincing of neorealist modes. See Walter Siti (1980) for an extensive analysis of neorealist poetry.

⁶ There are of course neorealist novels which do not have the 1943-45 Resistance or the experience of war as their subject matter. Nevertheless, such novels are usually still focussed on the struggle against Fascism. For example, Pratolini's *Cronache di poveri amanti* (1947), although set in the 1920s, is very much concerned with the perverse way in which people will behave under Fascism, while the protagonist Maciste is the embodiment of the physically-powerful, charismatic, yet uneducated Resistance fighter.

⁷ For an interesting discussion of the different dimensions of *L'Agnese va a morire*, see Genevois (1985).

⁸ See Re (1990, 53).

⁹ Meneghello is often 'sincere' and yet ironic at the same time, as if one part of him were expressing genuine commitment and another part suspended in a kind of continual skepticism (not unlike the Fenoglio of *Il partigiano Johnny*).

¹⁰ For a fuller discussion of how Battaglia's *Storia della Resistenza italiana* fitted in with the politics of the 1950s, see Cooke (2000, 98-101; 2011, 53-57).

¹¹ For a comprehensive and insightful biography of Vittorini, see Bonsaver (2000).

¹² For a more detailed discussion of Calvino's early short stories, see Falaschi (1976, 96-151), McLaughlin (1998, 1-18), and Weiss (1993, 19-29).

¹³ For an insightful discussion of Revelli's work, see Stewart (2008).

Chapter 2

Resistance versus Civil War: Neorealism and Commitment in Fenoglio's Early Writings

Non contiamoci balle [...]. Tu te la senti di morire per l'idea? Io no. E poi che idea? Se ti cerchi dentro, tu te la trovi l'idea? Io no. E nemmeno tu. – Beppe Fenoglio, from 'Un altro muro'.

In this chapter, I shall focus on the meaning of 'commitment' in Beppe Fenoglio's early writing: his *Appunti partigiani*, written in 1946, but not published until 1994; and his short stories of the Resistance, written in the late 1940s and published alongside stories of life in the Langhe in the collection *I ventitre giorni della città di Alba* (1952). I shall also look briefly at his first novel, *La paga del sabato*, which charts the disillusionment of post-war life for partisans, probably written in the late 1940s, but only published posthumously in 1969; and his novella *La malora* (1954). Before doing so, I shall first outline the early years of Fenoglio's life, from 1922 to 1944 (the rest of his life will be considered as it becomes relevant to my examination of his work), and also set the context of Fenoglio's commitment as a writer within the notion of a 'committed literature'.

2.1 Fenoglio's Early Years: the Making of a Partisan¹

Beppe Fenoglio was born on 1 March 1922 in the small city of Alba in Piedmont, the first child of a butcher, Amilcare Fenoglio (who had worked his way up from being a *garzone* or butcher's boy) and a domestic servant, Margherita. Amilcare, born 1882, was politically a moderate socialist, and in a region that was under the tight control of the

Catholic Church, an anti-clerical secularist. Margherita, born 1896, was a devout believer who had prayed to God to help her decide if Amilcare was the right man for her to marry. In his short story, 'Ma il mio amore è Paco', using the narrating-I of Paco, Fenoglio describes this mixture and the effect it had on him as a child:

Mia madre veniva dal piú clericale dei paesi dell'Oltretanaro, da una gente che aveva per bandiera proprio quello che i Fenoglio secondo lei, si mettevano facilmente sotto i piedi: il timor di Dio e l'onor del mondo. [...] Quanto a me, debbo dire che quella miscela di sangue [...] mi faceva già da allora battaglia nelle vene, e se rispettavo altamente i miei parenti materni, i paterni li amavo con passione. (1988, 25-26)

It was a passionate mixture that would continue to affect Fenoglio as an adult, revealing itself above all in what could be termed the atheistically religious *Il partigiano Johnny* (a point I shall return to in Chapters 3 and 4).

The city of Alba itself had remained unchanged for centuries.² It served as the commercial and trading centre for the surrounding Langhe hills. There was no large industry, no *classe operaia*. For that reason there were no strikes, no social or political protests, not even in the restless years 1919-20, following the end of World War I and leading to the rise of Fascism and Mussolini. It was only with great reluctance that the city would finally be made to accept the rule of Fascism in 1925. (Three years prior to this a mixed-party alliance had refused to give up the town hall to Fascists when it had been forcefully occupied by militias.) Like other small neighbouring cities in Piedmont, it remained at heart anti-Fascist because it had traditional, conservative values rather than because of any left-wing ideology. In any case, the 1920s gave rise to a period of economic growth for Italy, which saw Alba and the Fenoglio family prosper. They were able to buy a car and to pay for a butcher's boy and someone who could look after Beppe

and his younger brother Walter. The newfound prosperity gave Beppe educational opportunities he would not previously have had. He was regarded by his teachers as a brilliant pupil in elementary school (1928-32). His mother Margherita, perhaps seeing this as an opportunity for Beppe to rise beyond his immediate social class, was persuaded to allow him to sit the entrance exam for the Ginnasio G. Govone (1932-37). It was here that he would develop what would turn out to be a lifelong passion for English literature under the tutorship of Maria Lucia Marchiaro, a passion which would be such a great influence on his work. From here, Beppe went on to the Liceo Classico Govone (1937-40). Here he would meet two teachers who would prove crucial later in forming his anti-Fascist stance, and who would appear respectively as representatives of Communist and Existentialist ideology near the beginning of *Il partigiano Johnny*: Leonardo Cocito and Pietro Chiodi. Yet Fenoglio would never adopt a pro-Communist stance, remaining a political conservative until the late 1940s, when he would move to the centre-left (see p. 189 of this thesis). At school, Beppe, although appreciated for his scholastic and sporting abilities, was seen as a somewhat reserved and socially-awkward individual, in part because of the stammer which would overwhelm him in moments of nervousness or strongly felt emotion. Already at a young age, he was writing stories and translating literature. According to a friend, Carlo Prandi³, at the age of 12 Beppe wrote stories about Robin Hood, a figure he would refer to in *Il partigiano Johnny*. He also declared that one day he would be a famous writer. We can already see then, in the boy Beppe, a fascination with literature and language. He would no doubt have become a writer of some kind even without his experience of the Resistance. It was during his time at the Liceo Classico that Beppe fell in love with Benedetta Ferrero, a girl who, as the daughter of a notary, belonged to a higher social class. He would later dedicate his novel

Primavera di bellezza to her, and she would serve as the basis for ‘Fulvia’, the absent, yet driving protagonist of his last novel *Una questione privata*. (These are two works I shall be examining in Chapters 3 and 4.)

By the 1930s, Alba, albeit without any enthusiasm, had adapted to Fascism. Even the new bishop gave the Roman salute at Fascist parades. Any rebellion was mild and took place in private. In the case of the Fenoglios, they were, in the words of Negri Scaglione, ‘a modo loro, antifascisti o, meglio, non fascisti’ (2006, 39). Amilcare despised the figure of Mussolini and would never join the National Fascist Party, while Margherita continued to frequent Jewish friends after the racial laws were passed in 1938.

From 1940 to 1943, Beppe attended the *Facoltà di Lettere*, Turin University. His results here were not as good as they had been at school, and indeed after the war (unlike his brother Walter) he never completed his degree. Beppe could not come to terms with the cold, impersonal atmosphere of the university or with having to wear a black shirt at exams. His stutter at times grew so bad that he was unable to respond to oral exams and had to write down his answers. Fenoglio himself would later say in an early draft of *Primavera di bellezza* with reference to his own experience that he had loved the *liceo* so much that it had made him hate university. He quoted Carlyle: ‘the true university of our days is a collection of books’ (PB1, 1272). In March 1943 Fenoglio enrolled as a trainee officer in the *Regio Esercito*. It may be difficult from today’s perspective to understand how the anti-Fascist Fenoglio could join the Italian Royal Army, a point I shall return to in more detail later when I come to consider the *Bildungsroman* aspect of *Primavera di bellezza* and *Il partigiano Johnny*. It is sufficient to note at this point that many in Italy still hoped that it was possible to distinguish ‘fra fascismo e monarchia’ and to separate ‘il destino della patria da quello di Mussolini’ (Negri Scaglione 2006, 49).

After all, only five months later in July 1943, the king would have Mussolini placed under arrest. We also need to remember that Fenoglio was conservative, pro-monarchist and patriotic about Italy. In any event, Fenoglio's decision to become a trainee officer meant that he was in army barracks in Rome on 8 September, 1943, the day of the Armistice. When German troops occupied Rome, Fenoglio, like most of his fellow soldiers, went through the humiliating and disorientating experience of being abandoned by high command and left with no clear instructions, a reality brought home to us in his novel *Primavera di bellezza*. After finding some civilian clothes, like this novel's protagonist, Fenoglio made his way back home by train, not without considerable risk of being caught and arrested by German troops. More than a decade later, in the mid-1950s, he would describe his homecoming and the surprise of his parents in *Il partigiano Johnny*.

By January 1944, Beppe Fenoglio had joined a Communist *Garibaldi* brigade and was soon to have his first experience of combat in a civil war. In March, he participated in the disastrous battle over the village of Carrù, when the partisans were overrun by Fascists. Fenoglio was lucky to escape with his life. Unlike his protagonist Johnny, however, Fenoglio did not then join the *Badogliani* brigade, but instead returned to his parents' home, where he spent the best part of six months. Indeed it was not until September 1944 that Fenoglio sought out the *Badogliani*, known as the 'azzurri', who were politically conservative and loosely of a monarchist persuasion, under the command of Pietro Balbo (the character 'Nord' in *Il partigiano Johnny*). Again, it may be difficult to understand how any Resistance fighter could be a supporter of the king and of the government of Marshal Badoglio, which had abandoned Rome at its hour of need, had disastrously issued no clear orders to the Italian army, and which had fled to Brindisi. However, as

Sergio Cotta points out, the very fact that there was still a monarchy ‘incoraggiava tutti coloro che vedevano nella monarchia, al di là delle persone, il simbolo tradizionale dello stato risorgimentale e dell’unità italiana, mai come in quel momento tanto minacciata’ (1994, 167). One might also ask why Fenoglio at this point decided to renew his commitment to the Resistance after his disastrous initial experiences. Certainly from all accounts he and his brother Walter continually discussed what their next move should be, but chose a ‘wait-and-see’ attitude, the kind of attitude that Fenoglio is so critical of in *Il partigiano Johnny*. According to Fenoglio’s biographer, Piero Negri Scaglione, ‘tutto cambia’ in July 1944 with the shooting of two teenage partisans in Alba (and here one cannot but think of the shooting of the two boys in *Una questione privata*), whose corpses were left lying where they had been shot as a lesson to the town. ‘Li vedono tutti, anche i fratelli Fenoglio’ (2006, 72). This was the kind of atrocity that made many decide it was better to fight and die than to live and tolerate such a situation, as Chiodi, Fenoglio’s philosophy teacher, makes clear in his own partisan memoir, *Banditi*. However, even this was not enough for the Fenoglio brothers to decide to rejoin the partisans, although they were by this time beginning to make contact with them. Meanwhile, the summer of 1944 was also a time of busy partisan activity – the partisans were no longer simply ‘*ribelli*’ on the run, but were becoming organised guerrilla bands. The fighting between the partisans and the Fascists grew increasingly fierce in and around Alba. Because of an informer, the whole Fenoglio family was arrested on 22 September. As Marisa Fenoglio, Beppe’s younger sister, relates in her memoir:

... nel cortile della caserma ci avevano fatti schierare in due file parallele, separate le donne e i bambini dagli uomini [...] Il colonnello Languasco in persona ci

passava in rassegna [...] ‘Siete ostaggi in attesa di esecuzione!’ urlava con la bocca schiumosa. (1995, 68-69)

When the women and children were released, Beppe and his brother Walter sat in a cell for several days contemplating the very real possibility that they would be shot (an experience that Fenoglio would make use of in his short story ‘Un altro muro’, which I shall be discussing later in this chapter). Thanks to the intervention of the Bishop of Alba, however, they were released in exchange for Fascist prisoners. It was, it seems, this experience of imprisonment that finally made up the minds of the Fenoglio brothers. In the words of Marisa Fenoglio: ‘Da allora i miei fratelli presero definitivamente la via delle colline’ (1995, 73).

They could not have picked a worse time to do so. After some significant partisan victories throughout the spring and summer of 1944, and after the hard-won liberation of Florence in early August, there had been an expectation amongst both Resistance fighters and the civilian population that the war would all be over by the winter. However, the Allies, after having made good progress, were now blocked at the so-called *Linea Gotica*, a fortified line running 320 kilometres from Pesaro on the Adriatic to Massa Carrara on the western side of Italy, where the Germans mounted a ferocious defence. At the same time, the Fascists reacted to their defeats with the construction of the *brigate nere*, who were well-armed and supported by the Germans.⁴ By November 1944, after three months of extensive bombardments and fierce fighting, the Allies had still not broken through. On 13 November, Field Marshal Alexander, the British commander of the Allied Forces in Italy, issued a proclamation by radio ordering the partisans to return home for the winter, and to wait until the spring for further orders. Most of the partisans, of course,

were not in a position to 'return home', where they would be exposed to Fascist roundups. It was more a question of finding somewhere to hide and survive. The *brigata nera*, taking heart from Alexander's proclamation, increased the ferocity of their attacks on the partisans, many of whom would lose their lives. It was the winter of 1944-5 that would test the real depth of Fenoglio's commitment to the cause of the Resistance. It was this experience above all to which he would return again and again in his stories of the Resistance. Here began his lifelong endeavour to create a uniquely committed and authentic literature.⁵

2.2 Notions of a Committed Literature

In Chapter 1, I examined the commitment of neorealist writers to the cause of the Resistance and to building a better society for the future. This in turn entailed their commitment as authors to being 'authentic' in the sense of being 'true' in words to their experience of the Resistance. I also argued that much of this writing is also 'authentic' in the way it tries to explore and understand the meaning of the Resistance; it is not simply a declamation intended to teach readers about the values of the Resistance and to remind them of the sacrifice of those who participated.

Before going onto my investigation of Fenoglio's early Resistance work in the next section, I would here like to outline his relationship with neorealism and the notion of a committed literature, a relationship that I shall be examining throughout the rest of this thesis. Fenoglio's writing, although closely related to the works of other Resistance authors, sits in an uneasy relationship with them. In what ways does he occupy the same

territory as they do, and in what ways does he forge his own highly individual expression of commitment?

The term 'committed literature' has become a familiar one in the history of literature, yet its meaning, like that of 'realism', has different connotations according to the context in which it is used. For example, with socialist realism the success of a committed work of fiction might be measured by the way it is able to express the so-called 'historical realities' of the struggle to overthrow capitalism. For Lukács a 'socialist ideology' enables a writer through 'great realist works of art' (1971, 103) to 'give a more comprehensive and deeper account of man as a human being than any traditional ideology' (ibid., 115). Other Marxist critics, such as Adorno, would argue that committed writers need to challenge social imagination through a provocative and engaged use of form. For Adorno, it is only with new, innovative art which breaks 'the social contract with reality' that 'hairs start to bristle [...]. It is not the office of art to spotlight alternatives, but to resist by its form alone the course of the world, which permanently puts a pistol to men's heads' (1978, 303-04). He contrasts the work of Beckett with the 'childish' nature of Lukács' socialist realism. 'Conformist consciousness' will always prefer forms which are easily comprehensible, while 'the true form of objectivity can only be presented in truly radically subjective form' (Adorno 1999, 250).

When examining the notion of a committed literature we need to consider what it meant for those writers who regarded themselves as exponents of commitment in their work. In the context of neorealism at the end of the Second World War, we can apply Sartre's notion of commitment as he expressed it in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, a work which was originally published in serialised form in *Les Temps modernes* in 1946, and whose notions of engagement were debated in Vittorini's *Il Politecnico*⁶. Sartre, like

Calvino, Pavese, Vittorini and others, believed that after the experience of war, of the Resistance and of the concentration camps, the serious writer found himself in a position where he had no choice but to engage with 'historical reality':

A ces lecteurs sans loisirs, occupés sans relâche par un unique souci, un unique sujet pouvait convenir: c'était de leur guerre, de leur mort que nous avions à écrire. Brutalement réintégrés dans l'histoire, nous étions acculés à faire une littérature de l'historicité. (Sartre 1972, 260)

Sartre held that this experience had taught writers to take 'evil' (le Mal) seriously 'en un temps où la torture était un fait quotidien' (ibid., 262). In the face of this evil, writers must make an ethical choice: 'nous estimons que l'écrivain doit s'engager tout entier dans ses ouvrages, et non pas comme une passivité abjecte, en mettant avant ses vices, ses malheurs et ses faiblesses, mais comme une volonté résolue et comme un choix' (ibid., 44).

The view that writers could no longer distance themselves from the world they shared with other human beings, and that the new literature must embody a political, social and ethical *engagement*, can be found in many of Calvino's essays, most famously in *Il midollo del leone*, first presented at a conference in Florence in 1955: 'Noi crediamo che l'impegno politico, il parteggiare, il comprometersi sia, ancor più che dovere, necessità naturale dello scrittore d'oggi [...]. Non è la nostra un'epoca che si possa comprendere stando *au dessus de la mêlée* ma al contrario la si comprende quanto più la si vive, quanto più ci si situa sulla linea del fuoco' (1980b, 12). Vittorini in an essay of September 1945 asks for the arts in general to overturn 'la vecchia cultura' and to help 'eliminare lo sfruttamento e la schiavitù, e a vincere il bisogno' (1970, 210). The defeat of Fascism and the liberation of Italy was seen as an opportunity to build a new society based on freedom

and justice, however imprecisely defined these concepts may have been. For many writers of the Resistance, including Calvino, Pavese, and Vittorini, this meant becoming members of the Italian Communist party. Calvino, especially, was a highly active member until the mid-1950s. However, as we have seen, the idea of a committed literature turned out to be highly problematic, with some writers, such as Viganò, wanting to follow the line from Soviet Russia, and others, such as Vittorini, however ambiguously, arguing that although closely related, literature and politics each had a separate role to play.⁷

Where does Fenoglio – who is well-known for his ‘anti-ideological’ stance and yet unlike other authors never abandoned the theme of the Resistance – sit in this context? In what sense can his work be considered a committed literature given the desecrating nature of his descriptions of the Resistance?

In considering these questions, we need, as I have pointed out in Chapter 1, to avoid playing Fenoglio off against the archetypal ‘straw man’ of neorealism. In reality, as Falchetto (1992, 116) has suggested, there were no ‘pure’ neorealist writers, with the possible exceptions of Renata Viganò and Silvio Micheli (and even in the case of these two, there are other dimensions besides those of neorealism). It also needs to be borne in mind, as I have made clear in Chapter 1, that there was never a ‘school’ of neorealism. Rather there was a group of loosely associated writers who for a certain period of time, most noticeably from 1945 to 1948, shared a desire to relate the truth of their wartime experiences and who were in some sense, however problematic, dedicated to creating a literature of ‘*impegno*’. It is also important to remind ourselves of the differences between the ‘*memorialisti*’ – such as Battaglia, Chiodi, Levi Cavaglione and Revelli – and the *fiction* writers of the Resistance – for example, Cassola, Calvino, Pavese, Viganò and

Vittorini. At the risk of oversimplification, we can say that whereas for the former, the Resistance and the author's personal experience of it constitute the main subject of the writing, for the latter the Resistance serves as a background for a dramatic story, or as a vehicle to express a political ideology, or as a way to explore other issues such as the meaning of armed conflict and the role of the intellectual in wartime. Fenoglio occupies the territories of both the *memorialisti* and the fiction writers: his main subject is the Resistance and he draws on his own experience time and time again to create fictive autobiography, yet he is also concerned to explore wider issues posed by the Resistance, such as the nature of right and wrong, the effect on behaviour caused by 'extreme' circumstances, and the ability and limitations of language when it comes to making a reader 'relive' the experience of war.

No one is as harsh in his portrait of the Resistance as Fenoglio was, so much so that his books have been seen by the left as a betrayal of the cause of the Resistance, and have even been used by right-wing revisionist historians to highlight the 'civil war' rather than the 'war of liberation' which took place between 1943 and 1945 (Cooke 2011, 162). However, I shall show that precisely because of his deepy critical stance vis-à-vis the Resistance, Fenoglio was more deeply committed than any other neorealist writer both to the cause of the Resistance and to the authentic recreation of it in literature.

2.3 *Appunti partigiani*

In an interview published in *Il Giorno* in January 1960, Fenoglio announced his intention to stop writing about the Resistance: ‘Sto scrivendo un romanzo che sarà il seguito di *Primavera di bellezza* e che comprenderà i due anni tragici del ’44 e del ’45. E poi basta con i partigiani’ (cited in Pedullà 2001, 8). However, as Pedullà has suggested, Fenoglio ‘non è riuscito a sottrarsi al suo demone’ (ibid.). He was like a criminal who would always have to keep returning to the scene of the crime. Even during the time of the Resistance, Fenoglio is reported to have kept some kind of diary (now lost) in which he was constantly scribbling away. It is thought that the first extant Resistance writings we have of Fenoglio, *Appunti partigiani*, written in 1946 but not published until 1994, were based on these early notes. The story covers the short period from 2 November 1944, just after Alba is retaken by the Fascists after the ‘ventitre giorni’ of partisan occupation, and comes to a stop suddenly in mid-sentence on 23 December after a Fascist *rastrellamento*, which ends with the humiliating defeat and dispersal of the partisans. Interestingly, many of the characters, stories and events described in the *Appunti partigiani* are the same ones we find in *Il partigiano Johnny* and other later work. Fenoglio returns to the same material, indeed the same events, over and over again, as if he is still trying to make sense of what happened. The no-holds-barred ‘honesty’ for which Fenoglio is famous, the concern to communicate the ‘reality’ of the Resistance is already present in these earliest writings, for example in the way he describes the casual brutality of the partisans. The comically grotesque element is also there. For example, on page 60 in the *Appunti* we are treated to a description of the partisans being shot at by Fascists while they are suffering

from food poisoning after a huge meal in a trattoria. In a scene which has echoes of Gadda's *Giornale di guerra e di prigionia* (Gadda 1992, 447), one of the partisans explains that he has to defecate straightaway: 'Piccàrd dice che non ne può piú, deve andar di corpo. Cosmo dice che faccia veloce, e Piccàrd parte alzandosi i calzonì' (AP, 60). However, as Casadei (2000) has indicated, there is no 'tragic' element in *Appunti partigiani*. The *Appunti* reflect in many respects the form and tone of the numerous partisan diaries and memoirs that were published just after the war: the 'hero' of the book has the same name as its author, 'Beppe', as if to confirm that this is fact, not fiction; the story is told in the first person in a mixture of the present and past tense; the language is simple and immediate, as if, like a Resistance diary or memoir, it does not wish to have 'literary pretensions'; the emphasis is firmly on 'lived' experience; the dedication at the beginning shows the desire on the part of the author to pay tribute to the Resistance – 'A tutti i partigiani d'Italia, morti e vivi'. The word 'partigiani' has been substituted for the crossed-out word 'caduti', as if Fenoglio wished to avoid too much patriotic rhetoric with regards to the sacrifice made by partisans. In spite of some of the brutal incidents described, there is an impression of exuberance (which only occurs again in brief moments in the later work of Fenoglio, for example in the love-making with 'Dea', in *Ur partigiano Johnny*), a sense of relief and joy at having survived. In Casadei's words: 'Negli *Appunti*, il protagonista sente di essere il sopravvissuto [...] colui che, dopo la lotta, resta vincitore e detentore di ogni potere sulla morte. Il suo racconto è quello di chi può raccontare con gioia' (2000, 70). In this feeling of relief at 'getting through' the experience, Fenoglio has much in common with memoir writers of the time such as Battaglia, Bolis, Chiodi, and Levi Cavaglione. The 'tragic knowledge' which came with the full subsequent disillusionment of the 1950s, which in some sense rendered the

sufferings of the Resistance ‘absurd’, will not fully appear in Fenoglio’s Resistance writing until *Il partigiano Johnny* (even if, as I shall show in Chapter 3, there is always a tension between the tragic and the comic in Fenoglio’s work.)

Nevertheless, it is also possible to exaggerate the points in common that the *Appunti* have with neorealist *memorialisti*. Fenoglio, as we shall come to see, was well aware of the limitations of language itself and therefore of the so-called *memorialistica* with its avowed aim of being ‘true’ to the experience of the Resistance. This may have been the main reason, as Cooke and others suggest (I shall argue shortly that there may have been another important reason), that Fenoglio, as far as we know, never attempted to publish the *Appunti*. Yet this early work goes beyond the more documentary style of someone like Nuto Revelli. It is a work which is already markedly ‘literary’ and makes use of poetic ‘symbols’ such as ‘il vento’, with its echoes of *Wuthering Heights* (a book which Fenoglio was passionate about all his life).

Appunti partigiani has perhaps been passed over too quickly by critics of Fenoglio. While the *Appunti*, written over columns of loose butcher account papers, were rightly regarded as an important find when first discovered in the 1990s, they have been regarded mainly as a mere precedent for the short stories and novels that were to come. As Luca Bufano has pointed out, at this stage the young Fenoglio has plenty to say – the issue is that he has not yet found a satisfactory form to say it in: ‘Manca la tecnica’ (Bufano 1999, 61). Philip Cooke suggests that Fenoglio ‘experienced trouble with his choice of tenses’ (2000, 31). In 1997, shortly after *Appunti partigiani* was published, Maria Antonietta Grignani dedicated half a dozen pages to an analysis of its ‘neorealist’ characteristics, and pointed out also that the narrator, Beppe, already emerges as a distinct ‘character’ (Grignani 1997, 19-26). However, the *Appunti partigiani* are nearly always glossed over

as a prelude to a discussion of the classical Fenoglian canon. This is the case, for example, in Robert Bigazzi's important new book (2011), where they only merit a brief discussion among other early 'esperimenti narrativi e teatrali'.

Yet there are interesting indications, albeit made in passing, that perhaps we need to spend a little more time over *Appunti partigiani*. Fenoglio's younger sister, Marisa, said that 'la prima grande sorpresa' was 'la riscoperta di Beppe giovane [...]. Il figlio, il fratello così come lo avevo conosciuto io' (M. Fenoglio 1998, 39). Lalla Romano described the book as an example of what a 'poem' should be (Romano 1998, 35). There are questions we can ask here: what does *Appunti partigiani* tell us about the ways in which Fenoglio perceives and seeks to recreate the 'reality' of his experience of the Resistance? How does 'Beppe', the narrator-protagonist relate to this reality? What other realities are there for 'Beppe', and also for Fenoglio, in terms of a 'sentimental' or 'poetic' reality? How do these latter realities affect the way the protagonist and author view the harsh experience of war? How is the young, relatively inexperienced author already able to create a complex moral realism? While we are looking at these questions, we also need to consider how the possible answers presage and yet differ from the 'reality' created by later work, especially that of *Il partigiano Johnny*.

The partisans of the *Appunti* are not so different in many ways from the partisans of the short stories and novels which were to come. Even at this early stage in the writer's career (this is 1946, when numerous 'hagiographic' memoirs and diaries were being published, and one year before Calvino's more satirical *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*), Fenoglio's eye for the absurd and grotesque aspects of the Resistance was as keen and sardonic as it would ever be. It is worth listing a few of these aspects to give ourselves a flavour of the book: the partisans are generally unkempt and filthy; they spend a lot of time doing

nothing ('La mattina, usciamo a spasso, tre disoccupati', 67); their weapons are out-of-date and often don't work at the crucial moment; their vehicles are clapped-out and useless; the commanders do not seem to have any kind of coherent military plan and are outwitted and beaten by the more efficient Fascist brigades on almost every occasion; the Allies are portrayed as distant and indifferent to their plight ('Vengon sù o vanno giù questi Alleati delle balle', 58); relationships with the civilian population are mixed and change according to the varying fortunes of the partisans; there is a comic and seemingly pointless rivalry (a little like that between supporters of opposing football clubs) between the politically-mixed *azzurri* and the Communist *rossi*, a rivalry which threatens on more than one occasion to spill over into armed combat; the partisans, like those of Calvino's later *Sentiero*, are generally apolitical, and many seem to have no clear motive for having joined the Resistance; indeed, they seem to be more interested in showing off and picking up girls than in fighting Fascists – there is also intense rivalry for the attention of girls, not only between the *azzurri* and *rossi*, but between individual partisans (as well as being objects of desire, however, women are also portrayed as bearing arms and taking an active part in the Resistance, for example in the guarding of prisoners – a clear sign of Fenoglio's desire to paint a picture which is historically accurate, when often male commanders, afraid that the Resistance would not be taken seriously by the civilian population, preferred to hide the contribution made by women⁸); there is much casual and needless violence on the part of the partisans – they beat up Fascist prisoners for the pleasure of it, squabble over who will have the privilege of killing a prisoner, talk gleefully about the manner in which prisoners die terrified, and are happy to beat up and kill their own for misdemeanors such as theft. Given these aspects of the Resistance that Fenoglio as early as 1946 was bringing alive in his writing, we can surmise that one

reason that he may not have tried to publish the *Appunti* was because he believed the Italians would not be ready for such truths in the climate of the time. After all, another writer, Rimanelli, was unable to publish *Tiro al piccione*, his harsh portrait of a civil war, until 1953, even though it was written in the 1940s. Certainly, Fenoglio's truths about the nature of this civil war would be highlighted in an even more powerful form in the short stories (where we do not have the sentimental 'Beppe' to charm and distract us) which he would publish a few years later. However, the short stories are not obviously autobiographical to the same extent that the *Appunti* are. Fenoglio may have felt that to have published the *Appunti* would have been a betrayal of his dead companions as well as of those who were still alive. We know that Fenoglio may have had similar misgivings about *Il partigiano Johnny* ten years later, and that this *may* have been one of the reasons why he in the end never submitted the bulk of that book to his editor (Negri Scaglione 2006, 214). Fenoglio, after all, was writing about real individuals that had either been killed by the Fascists or with whom he might still have to come face-to-face at some point.

The grotesque and satirical elements are there, then, from the outset. Episodes in the book would be revisited, in some cases many times over, in Fenoglio's later work – as if Fenoglio were still 'trying to get it right' up until the end of his life. Yet also already present is the very strong moral dimension which, when combined with Fenoglio's 'no-punches-pulled' description, creates a realism which distinguishes him so clearly from other Resistance writers. This moral dimension is never stated; we are never preached to either by Fenoglio or by the narrator/protagonist Beppe. Rather, through use of concrete and sensory detail, we are shown events which make us ask the questions ourselves. Even at this early stage of his writing career, Fenoglio is able, through the details he selects, to

describe violence in a way that seems real, and yet which never comes across as gratuitous or as pornographic (unlike Rimanelli, for example, in *Il tiro al piccione*, or even the more experienced writer Vittorini, who, when describing the corpses laid out in the streets and squares of Milan or the torture of prisoners in *Uomini e no*, almost seems at times to be taking pleasure in his own power to shock through description). In order to illustrate my point, I shall look at a couple of Fenoglio's descriptions in detail.

First, the summary execution of a spy. On a 'day of executions' (earlier a Fascist prisoner has been shot), the presumed spy, a teacher 'con la faccia di cenere' is brought into the main square of the village under partisan guard. Immediately his 'human' side is hinted at – without ever being stated – by the description of running school children who follow the partisans because they want to see 'cosa gli fanno al maestro' (AP, 39). Quickly a mob gathers, indifferent to what the children might think of their behaviour. And here the ironic eye of Fenoglio goes to work, made all the more acute by the fact that we already know how changeable the civilian population can be with their sympathies, however genuine their hatred of 'spies':

Fin dal primo momento la gente esce di cervello, gli uomini e più le donne. Grida al bastardo, al traditore che metteva la sua istruzione a scrivere belle lunghe lettere agli assassini S. Marco, alla carogna che fa schifo anche al Dio della pietà, che ora il porco lo portano al macello, e bravi partigiani che finalmente fate il vostro dovere. (AP, 39)

Here we need to bear in mind that this desire for a *resa dei conti* was still very much a force to be reckoned with in the days and months immediately following the official end of the war in Italy. It is estimated that between 10,000 and 12,000 Fascists were killed during and after the final Resistance insurrection in April 1945.⁹ During the next two

years the violence continued, albeit on a far lesser scale, and was especially acute in Reggio Emilia.¹⁰ Fenoglio is not the only author to reveal the hypocritical cruelty and baser instincts which ordinary people could show in their desire for revenge. For example, an old woman in Giorgio Caproni's short story 'Il labirinto', which I have discussed in Chapter 1, describes in lurid terms the kind of punishment that she believes should be meted out to the young woman who has betrayed the partisans: 'Dovreste portarla nuda lassù, a scudisciate come Gesù Cristo. Io la stenderei prima nuda sulla neve e la farei pascolare dalle mani di tutti i Tartari: ammazzarla soltanto è poco' (2005, 52). But with Fenoglio, it is also the tragi-comic aspect of such incidents which is emphasised, for example when the teacher is put up against a newly-plastered outside wall and the owner comes running out to tell the partisans to shoot the teacher somewhere else – the owner doesn't want his plaster to have bullet holes in it. (The partisans ignore this request.)

Even though we can assume at this point that the teacher is indeed guilty of being a spy, our pity is aroused for him by the violence of the mob and the questions put to them by Moretto, the partisan commander. The latter appears almost as a Pontius Pilate figure addressing the crowd, letting them decide upon the judgment and yet at the same time whipping them up into a fury:

Moretto: - Popolo di Rocchetta, è questo il maestro?

La gente urla che è ben quello, e la stessa giostra di bastardo, traditore, carogna, porco e in piú figlio di troia milanese.

Moretto: - È o non è una spia?

E la gente col collo gonfio: - Sì che è una spia, Cristo che lo è! (AP, 40)

One of the crowd, in biblical fashion, casts a stone at the teacher. The irrational nature of the mob's violence, expressed in such phrases as 'in piú figlio di troia milanese' (as if the fact of the teacher being Milanese were a valid reason as much as any other for killing him) creates a victim out of the spy. Moretto raises and lowers his 'Sten' gun to excite them further before casually letting loose a burst of fire.

When the teacher's body collapses in 'un mucchio nero' – and here, one cannot help thinking of the pathos of Renata Viganò's later description of Agnese, whose corpse would be left in 'un mucchio di stracci neri sulla neve' (Viganò 1994, 239) – it is he, the Fascist spy, who appears the victim. And it is only after he is dead that the crowd finally falls silent, trembling 'come un bosco sotto il vento' (AP, 40). Yet Fenoglio is still not finished with showing us the human consequences of this summary execution. The silence is broken by the cry of a woman who appears in a torn dress, and who, despite the attempts of one or two partisans to hold her back, breaks through the crowd and hurls herself on the corpse (we are not quite sure for a moment why or what will happen next): 'e lo bacia e gli parla, e non vede che il parroco le si è inginocchiato accanto, nella polvere [...] la donna striscia sempre sul morto, gli netta il viso dalla polvere, gli passa una mano dietro la nuca per raccogliergli i capelli' (AP, 40). By showing us the grief felt by the teacher's wife (again, Fenoglio does not tell us that she felt grief, but illustrates it in a way that makes us feel her grief with her), the author brings home to us that nothing in the war between Nazi-Fascism and the Resistance, and by implication any war, is as straightforward as it might appear to be from more hagiographic accounts of the Resistance. What we are fighting for may be right, but there are always terrible human consequences. Those who are on the 'right' side may behave just as appallingly as those who are on the 'wrong' side.

I know of no other Resistance writer who is prepared to reveal the nature and effect of ‘acts of justice’ in this manner. As I have outlined in Chapter 1, Roberto Battaglia meditates on the rights and ambiguities of partisan justice in *Un uomo, un partigiano* (1945), but he does not show us in depth what it was like to live through. Even the reflections of the mature Pavese in *La casa in collina* (1949) seem almost sentimental in comparison to the narrative of Fenoglio. Besides, Pavese’s considerations were made in the bitterness of postwar disillusionment, when it was clear that the Resistance had not brought about the changes hoped for; other writers, too, *by that time*, were asking whether the blood spilt in the civil war was in any sense ‘worth’ it. Fenoglio’s questioning is distinguished by the fact that it springs right out of the Resistance itself.

In this particular issue of the execution of spies, Fenoglio is more humane towards ‘the enemy’ than he was to be in *Il partigiano Johnny*. Here the killing of a spy by Johnny will be merciless, and because of the deaths that the spy has caused, including that of a young, handsome partisan, we as readers are made to take pleasure in the spy’s death. This is consistent with much of the tone of *Il partigiano Johnny*, where killing in cold blood seems justified if someone has deliberately caused the death of others. Indeed, as we shall come to see, this is seen as part of the education of Johnny in the reality of war. One only has to think of the killing without warning of the unarmed chief of the *carabinieri* by *il Biondo*. When Johnny initially protests, the other partisans react angrily, accusing him of being a snob: ‘Che sei saltato su a fare? A fare il gentiluomo. Più siete intelligenti di natura e meno capite’ (PJ, 87). Johnny quickly sees the point and agrees when *il Biondo* explains to him that the *carabinieri* have killed a partisan on a previous occasion. There is no reflection here on the human cost of this, as there might have been in *Appunti partigiani*. Beppe is not the ‘absolute’ partisan that Johnny hopes to become (partly, as

we shall see later, to ‘overcome the temptation’ of his own subjective doubts around his participation in the Resistance).

An important description of partisan violence is also that of the execution of two partisans, Jack and Blister, who have committed robbery. This was an episode that Fenoglio would return to in his story ‘Il Vecchio Blister’. However, in the *Appunti*, there is more emphasis on the sadness of the two deaths, and there is an implicit reproach for the casually brutal way in which the execution is carried out. We are left with vivid images of Blister being shot and of the partially buried corpse of Jack:

Blister s'è messo a ridere fortissimo e Set lo fa morire che ride e noi Blister ce lo ricorderemo sempre così [...]

Jack non aveva sopra che un velo di terra, gli spuntavano due terzi delle scarpe, divaricate. E a nessuno venne piú in mente di tornare a migliorargli la sepoltura. (AP, 56)

Again, Fenoglio is not condemning the execution of the partisans, although he does point out the needlessly ugly way in which it is conducted. However, as with the execution of the spy, he challenges us as readers to consider the effects such an event has on the behaviour, thoughts and feelings of human beings.

All these events are seen through the eyes of Beppe, narrator/protagonist. Although this does, as I have indicated earlier, create some technical problems with tenses, it nevertheless creates more of a sense of intimacy with the reader than exists in the short stories which were to come. This intimacy makes for an altogether more personal reality. We are invited to live through events *with* Beppe, which makes us feel more involved with the events that take place. The personality of Beppe creates its own interpretation of the experience of the Resistance, which in turn creates its own ‘reality effect’.

What kind of character, then, is Beppe? In some ways, he is an earlier version of Johnny: he is a young student, romantic and idealistic, more interested in ‘literature and lovemaking’ (PB, 138) than in war; companionship is also of vital importance, not only that of the brothers Cervellino and Piccàrd (who will later be transformed into Pierre and Ettore in *Il partigiano Johnny*), but also that of the German Shepherd dog (‘cagna di sette anni che se t’ama la comandi con gli occhi [...] la rivedrò, al piú presto, e mi farò leccare’, 7); he is better-mannered, better-educated and cleaner than the other partisans (one reason why he is popular with girls and more respected by some civilians); importantly, he is also more ‘puritan’, more moral than other partisans – for example, he refuses to take part in the beating up of a prisoner (much to the astonishment of other partisans), he does not get drunk and he turns down an offer of going to a brothel. This strong moral element makes him an outsider, and in some sense more trustworthy as a narrator of historical reality. We see Beppe as someone with integrity, who will not, as a narrator of the Resistance, seek to pull the wool over our eyes – he is not a storyteller with a hidden ‘political agenda’.

Yet this morality does not carry with it the sense of tragedy created by *Il partigiano Johnny*. One thing that is bound to strike us as unique to *Appunti partigiani* is the sense that in some way Beppe is *enjoying* the life of a partisan. This is revealed, for example, in the sense of sexual freedom that he enjoys (something which seems to have been ignored by critics). In no other book of Fenoglio’s is so much made of this particular aspect of the Resistance. On the contrary, in *Il partigiano Johnny* sex will be primarily seen as a ‘temptation’ away from the mission of the partisan. It is true, as Beppe makes clear on the first page of the *Appunti*, that he has left behind a girl he loves in Alba (although she does not seem to reciprocate his love). However, Beppe is not obsessed with the girl in Alba in

the same way that Milton is tragically obsessed with Fulvia in Fenoglio's last novel *Una questione privata*. Certainly, the thought of the girl does not stop Beppe flirting with, and making love to, other girls: 'mi metto a guarder solo le gambe di Anna Maria, gliele voglio studiare a memoria' (AP, 29). When Anna Maria asks him if there is another girl in his life, he pretends that there isn't: 'Non le dico che sí c'è, ma ora mi pare un pò lontana e per la prima volta sento il bisogno di tradirla [...] Anna Maria va a essere importante per me, almeno per il tempo che sono partigiano' (AP, 29-31). Later he will make love to another girl, Claudia, a fellow partisan: 'Poi mi fa posto nel letto, e così vedo che sotto la coperta lei giace sulla nuda rete metallica [...] Mi dice che sono il primo partigiano in mutande che non la faceva ridere e che dopo il fatto non le fa schifo' (AP, 74). What is implied in this last quotation is, of course, the sexual promiscuity that was enjoyed by many among the partisans. Indeed, the partisans in the *Appunti*, as I mentioned earlier, seem more interested in girls than in fighting Fascists. It also has to be said that many girls, much to the consternation of their mothers, are equally interested in the partisans, in a manner not unlike that of Peppa's love for a bandit in Verga's *L'amante di Gramigna*.

In spite of all the violent and sad events, there is an atmosphere of *allegria* throughout the *Appunti* that is not present in the same way any other work by Fenoglio.¹¹ One thinks almost of a group of undergraduate students or perhaps more accurately of the Tales of Robin Hood and his Merry Men, which Fenoglio had written about at the age of 12. This sense of *allegria* – the playful element – around the life of the Resistance is also spoken of by *memorialisti* such as Roberto Battaglia or Pino Levi Cavaglione (without of course all the sex), is strongly present in Meneghello's later *I piccolo maestri*, and is also something which is pointed out by the ex-partisan Claudio Pavone in his history of the

Resistance. As Calvino exclaimed on reading Ada Gobetti's *Diario partigiano*: 'Dio mio, quanto vi siete divertiti!' (Calvino, cited in Pavone 2006, 28). Although *Appunti partigiani* was written in 1946, there is already a sense of nostalgia for the life the author had led as a partisan. There is even a sense of nostalgia for nostalgia – the writer Fenoglio nostalgic for the life of the partisan narrator Beppe nostalgic for the girl he has left behind in Alba.

Fenoglio in the *Appunti* is as uncompromising in his portrait of – and his commitment to – the historical reality of the Resistance as he would be in all his work. And yet, because of Beppe, there is also a literary and 'poetic' reality which is not so much superimposed on historical events as merged with them. Indeed, this merging of the two realities is clear from the outset. *Appunti partigiani* opens with the words of Beppe's mother telling him, as he sets off to rejoin the partisans after the loss of Alba: 'Tòrnaci. Se te la senti, tòrnaci. Ma sappi che ogni volta passeranno con camion e mitraglie e cani per quelle colline dove tu sarai, io mi sentiró morire. Ora vai.' (AP, 3) The young man setting off on a dangerous quest (in this case to join the Resistance) because of an evil event (Fascism) and saying good-bye to a loved one, as well as relating the 'facts' of Fenoglio's own experience, also of course corresponds to an archetypal reality going back to ancient narratives. It is the archetypal case of 'The Quest', where as Booker states, the 'event or summons provides the "Call" which will lead the hero or heroine out of their initial state into a series of adventures or experiences which, to a greater or lesser extent, will transform their lives' (2004, 17).

The *Appunti partigiani* already sparkle with poeticisms on the first page, expressed in a tone which is conversational and gently ironic. Beppe is sentimental yet is also inviting the reader to smile wryly with him. There is no 'moon', the protagonist-narrator muses –

which is of course a moon for lovers as well as one to light a partisan's way to the hills – but perhaps it will emerge. It seems as if the hills to his right are 'travelling with' him. They are hills which look down on the small city he has just left, the city where a girl lives, 'di cui sono, saró sempre innamorato' (AP, 3). The thought of the girl also makes him think of his own death and the effect this might have on her. Yet it is a sentimental, literary version of death. His main concern is that if he is killed, it will make her realise that she loves him and as a result must come searching for him 'per le colline [...] tra amici e nemici, ululando come una lupa' (ibid.).

This mixture of historical and literary realities we will find a decade later in *Il partigiano Johnny*. Yet although the latter has strong echoes of *Appunti partigiani*, the reality it creates is very different. In *Il partigiano Johnny* there is also a scene, one which is often cited, of Johnny setting off to join the partisans in the hills, those hills which come to represent an altogether 'other' space from that of the city. Here, however, we have a sense not so much of the charming, self-deprecatory and 'innamorato' Beppe, as of the destiny of an entire generation of Italians incarnated in the person of Johnny: 'si sentí investito – nor death itself would have been divestiture – in nome dell'autentico popolo d'Italia, ad opporsi in ogni modo al fascismo, a giudicare ed eseguire, a decidere militarmente e civilmente' (PJ, 52). Although this famous quotation (which I shall return to in Chapter 3) is dosed with a strong injection of irony (one only has to think of Johnny's subsequent disappointment on meeting his first partisans, but then Fenoglio, as we shall see, is a writer who operates at different levels), the whole focus is on a young Italian man who must become worthy of history. Even if Johnny dies, his commitment will have been justified in that he has answered history's 'authentic call'. It is, as I shall argue in detail in Chapter 3, an 'existential' commitment, as well as a collective one, with

its implication that ‘freedom’ is always the right thing to fight for, and, if required, to die for. There is no mention of any girl left behind here. It is not Johnny’s love life which is important, but his decision to join the Resistance.

While the writer Fenoglio of the *Appunti* is almost inseparable from the narrator ‘Beppe’, the Fenoglio of *Il partigiano Johnny* is looking back at events through the ‘binoculars’ of the bitter 1950s, as Bigazzi and Cooke have demonstrated. It is only when we come to the (almost forgotten) last part of *Il partigiano Johnny*, written in English and known as *Ur partigiano Johnny*, that author and protagonist again seem to merge at certain points and become as close as Fenoglio was to ‘Beppe’, this time united by a sense of the bitter disappointment of postwar life (a point I shall return to in Chapter 3).

2.4 *I ventitre giorni della città di Alba*

There is already a marked difference in tone from the *Appunti* in the short stories that Fenoglio began to write in the late 1940s and to publish from 1949 onwards in magazines, beginning with ‘Il trucco’, the story of two partisans who quarrel over who will have the pleasure of shooting a prisoner. This change of tone has something in common with the increasingly pessimistic mood of other writers of the Resistance that I have mentioned in Chapter 1 – for example, Pavese in *La casa in collina* (1949) or Cassola in *Fausto e Anna* (published in 1952, but written in the late 40s) – who had become disenchanted with life in post-war Italy, especially following the Italian election results of 1948 when the Christian Democratic Party were overwhelmingly returned to power. By this time Fenoglio’s political views had moved to the centre-left because of his disillusionment

with post-war life and his experience of the everyday world of work. After being a partisan, Fenoglio, like many other ex-combatants, had found it difficult to adapt to life as a civilian when he returned to his parents' home in 1945. He abandoned his university studies and instead of finding a job spent his days writing, translating English literature, and smoking. This was the cause of many fierce quarrels between Beppe and his mother, given the financially precarious situation in which the Fenoglios found themselves after the war.¹² It was only in May 1947 that, on the strength of his English, Fenoglio finally found a job as a clerk for Marengo, a local wine export company, a position which fortunately left him some time for writing.

Six short stories of the Resistance together with six short stories based on peasant and working-class society of the Langhe (this second group of stories also has several links to the war, for example its peacetime consequences) were published by Einaudi in 1952 under the title *I ventitre giorni della città di Alba*. However, this was not in the format that Fenoglio had originally intended. Initially, in 1949, he had left a collection of seven short stories with Einaudi on the theme of the Resistance with the title *Racconti della guerra civile*. Vittorini, who was editor at Einaudi, did not like the title. For one thing, the Italian market was by this stage already saturated with books about the Resistance – Fenoglio had arrived a little late. For another, it was not common then to speak so openly of a 'guerra civile'. Those on the left, at least, preferred to think of it as a 'war of liberation' in which the Italian Resistance had played an important part. We already have a clue, then, in the original title about what Fenoglio is attempting to do. As Bigazzi states: 'riferire la materia alla "guerra civile" invece che alla Resistenza, significa scartare la vita consueta del genere (tesa a celebrare i valori) per insistere sull'asprezza della lotta, tanto più tale perchè appunto civile o fratricida (e infatti gli avversari sono qui i

repubblichini, non i tedeschi' (Bigazzi 1983, 15). However, this point has been exaggerated by Fenoglio critics, perhaps in an attempt to distinguish Fenoglio from other partisan writers. In reality, Fenoglio was not the only one to highlight the phenomenon of civil war. Pavese in *La casa in collina* does so, while Roberto Battaglia, in his 1945 memoir *Un uomo, un partigiano*, explores those aspects of partisan combat and justice which are made all the more complex and traumatic precisely because of the nature of civil war. For Battaglia, killing in cold blood (as opposed to killing in self-defence) is 'l'aspetto più cupo della lotta che, inevitabilmente, per il suo stesso carattere, precipita a un certo momento in *guerra civile*' (2004, 165; italics mine). While for Battaglia the treatment of German prisoners is seen as relatively straightforward – those who have committed crimes against the local population are condemned to death, while those who have fought as regular soldiers 'se possibile verranno rispettati come prigionieri di guerra' (ibid., 169) –, the real problem was how to deal with Italian Fascists or those who had aided them. The partisans and their enemies not only spoke the same language, but had close connections in all kinds of other ways:

Parlare la stessa lingua significava avere continue informazioni l'uno dell'altro, esserci continuamente di fronte. Tutta una fitta rete di legami univa i partigiani a questo nemico; chi portava le armi nella banda conosceva personalmente chi nel paese collaborava in un modo o nell'altro alla repubblica sociale. (Battaglia 2004, 169)

As Battaglia makes clear, each side saw the other as 'the traitor'. Even the more ideologically-committed, more easily identifiable 'neorealist' author Renata Viganò of *L'Agnese va a morire*, writes of Italians betraying Italians. Here, too, there are those Italians who are on the side of the Germans, who regard the Resistance and its supporters

as ‘traitors’, and who blame the partisans for German reprisals. As an Italian woman says to Agnese, ‘Non bisogna dimenticare che noi li abbiamo traditi [...] Non farebbero niente se i ribelli li lasciassero in pace’ (Viganò 1994, 236).

Nevertheless, Fenoglio’s initial decision to use the term ‘guerra civile’ in the actual title of the book of stories does obviously signal his intention to put an unusual emphasis on this aspect of the Resistance. It shows a desire to be ‘truthful’ to the experience of the Resistance, and not to paint any kind of idealised picture of it. There is also the point that perhaps Fenoglio in his initial title uses the word ‘Racconti’ to imply the possibility of a more impersonal, ‘objective’ voice than a partisan ‘memoir’ would have possessed. The desire to put an emphasis on a more objective account is shown by Fenoglio’s late decision to remove the story ‘Nella valle di San Benedetto’, a brilliant study of the effect of fear on the individual psyche, but which, unlike the other Resistance stories in the book, is told in the first person and gives prominence to ‘subjective’ inner life over external events. If the subject of *Il partigiano Johnny* will later be both the Resistance and Johnny (who as well as being a version of Fenoglio himself is also representative of a generation of young intellectuals), the subject of these early stories is simply the Resistance, or the ‘civil war’, itself – with the partial exception of ‘Gli inizi del partigiano Raoul’, which I shall come to shortly.

What is most striking about the stories is the combination of historical realism with the highlighting of the often absurd nature of the Resistance and the grotesque behaviour of the partisans. The absurd aspects of the Resistance, the deliberate irony – Elisabetta Soletti speaks of a ‘controcanto ironico’ (1987, 24) – are made clear from the first sentence of the title story, ‘I ventitre giorni della città di Alba’: ‘Alba la presero in duemila il 10 ottobre e la persero in duecento il 2 novembre dell’anno 1944. [...] Fu la

piú selvaggia parata della storia moderna: solamente di divise ce n'era per cento carnevali' (VGA, 7-8). At the same time, the precise historical reference makes clear that Fenoglio is speaking of events that actually took place very recently. Even the description of the 'uniforms' is a historically accurate depiction of the way partisans actually dressed at this time, before they would later be supplied with a number of British uniforms. Also accurate, and also symptomatic of Fenoglio's desire to be truthful in a way that was unusual for his time, even if it meant casting the partisans in a negative light, is his description of the female partisans, who insist on joining the parade through the streets of Alba against the express wishes of the partisan commander.

In spite of the sacrifices made by female partisans, who not only cooked and sewed for the partisans (like Viganò's *Agnese*) but also took part in combat operations – recent estimates suggest that around 10% of combatants were women (Behan 2009, 171) –, they were in fact given very little recognition either during or after the war. Indeed, they were frequently not allowed to take part in Victory Parades because their male counterparts were worried, with good reason, that the civilian population would regard these women as prostitutes, which in turn would detract from the Resistance being seen as something serious. It is this point which Fenoglio clearly alludes to:

Cogli uomini sfilarono le partigiane, in abiti maschili, e qui qualcuno tra la gente cominciò a mormorare: – Ahi, povera Italia! – perchè queste ragazze avevano delle facce e un'andatura che i cittadini presero tutti a strizzar l'occhio. I comandanti, che su questo punto non si facevano illusioni, alla vigilia della calata avevano dato l'ordine che le partigiane restassero assolutamente sulle colline, ma quelle li avevano mandati a farsi fottere e s'erano scaraventate in città. VGA, 9)

The stories in the book *I ventitre giorni della città di Alba* go on to paint a picture of partisans who are frequently amoral, needlessly brutal, and who seem to have little

awareness of the value of what they are supposedly fighting for. It was this which led many reviewers on the left to attack Fenoglio for being 'anti-Resistance', and to accuse him of lending fodder to ex-Fascists and to those who wished to convey a picture of the partisans as a bunch of opportunistic criminals. Close friends and fellow ex-partisans, such as Chiodi, were shocked by the book. It is worth remembering at this point that during the late 1940s and early 1950s many ex-partisans were being imprisoned and tried for supposed 'crimes', such as stealing, carried out during the Resistance struggle. The arrests and trials were often conducted by those who had been supporters of Fascism or who at the very least thought only in terms of 'legal justice' without taking into account the circumstances in which partisans had often found themselves when they needed to take certain actions simply in order to survive. Fenoglio's portrait of the Resistance would hardly seem to help the cause of ex-partisans.

If one were to take for example the short story 'Il trucco', it may indeed have seemed that Fenoglio's commitment was not to the Resistance but to those who saw the partisans as representing the worst possible elements of Italian society. In this story, two partisans, Giulio and Napoleone, quarrel over who will have the pleasure of shooting a captured Fascist. In the midst of the quarrel, Napoleone makes a clumsy pass at the *staffetta* sitting next to him in the car: 'La staffetta capiva che i due discutevano su chi doveva fucilare il prigioniero. Napoleone gli premeva la coscia contro la coscia, ne sentiva il forte calore attraverso la stoffa' (VGA, 46). In the end they are both cheated out of the pleasure of shooting the prisoner by another partisan. The only pleasure left to them now is to find out how the prisoner behaved before he was shot, for example that he urinated:

Giulio indicò la fossa col piede e domandò: - Di', com'è morto questo qui?

- Prima si è pisciato addosso. Ho visto proprio io farsi una macchia scura sulla brachetta e allargarsi.

Giulio si aggiustò l'arma sulla spalla e si ritirò d'un passo dal ciglio dal rittano. – Be', se si è pisciato addosso son contento [...] Ti ricordi invece, Napo, quel tedesco che abbiamo preso a Scaletta e che poi hai fucilato tu? Dio che roba! (VGA, 50-51)

Calvino also of course highlights the grotesque, lowlife aspects of the partisans in his 1947 novel *Il sentiero*. However, we might say that Calvino 'gets away with it' because much of the book in any case reads like a fable (one does not get a real sense of what it was like to be a partisan) and because he makes clear his commitment to the cause of Communism and the ultimate 'historic' rightness of the Resistance.

If Fenoglio was so severe in his portrait of the partisans in his first published book, can it in any way be regarded as 'committed' literature in the context of postwar Italy and neorealism? Vittorini, in spite of his doubts and his frequent editorial interference, recognised the 'moral' quality of the work, declaring on the original cover that Fenoglio 'sa cogliere piú ancora che un paesaggio naturale, un paesaggio morale' (Vittorini, cited in Bigazzi 2011, 54). But what does this mean? To answer this question, it might help us at this point to turn to another story in the collection, 'Un altro muro'.

This story follows the fate of two partisans, Max, a *Badogliano*, and Lancia, a *Garibaldino* (Communist), who are being held prisoner by the Fascists and who will almost certainly be executed. The story is told, in the third person, from Max's point of view. As with much of Fenoglio's work, there is a strong autobiographical element here. As I have outlined in Chapter 1, Fenoglio and his brother Walter were arrested and held prisoner in the spring of 1944 because they had not signed up to join the Fascist units. Execution was a real possibility. According to Walter, they both decided that if they were

executed, then they would spit ‘in faccia a chi li condurrà al muro’ (Negri Scaglione 2006, 74). In the end Fenoglio and his brother were released, thanks to the intervention of a local bishop. Even the physical description in ‘Un altro muro’ of Max’s skinniness corresponds to that of the real-life partisan Fenoglio: ‘era diventato magro da far senso a se stesso, per la fame patita in quei due mesi di neve sulle colline’ (VGA, 90). Since most Resistance narratives of the 1940s and 1950s were based on autobiographical experience, critics of the time indeed assumed that the point of view of Max was that of Fenoglio. Reviews in the Communist press were scathing with regard to the ‘qualunquismo’ of Max and of the Badoglio protagonists in the other stories collected in *I ventitre giorni della città di Alba*. For example, in a review published in *L’Unità* in October 1952, Davide Lajolo spoke of a story that ‘played’ with the idea of seeing events from ‘the other side’: ‘pubblicare e diffondere questo tipo di letteratura significa non soltanto falsare la realtà, significa sovvertire i valori umani e distruggere quel senso di dirittura e onestà morale di cui la tradizione letteraria può farsi vanto’ (cited in Negri Scaglione 2006, 166). It was assumed that Fenoglio was painting his own ‘subjective’ reality, that of someone who seemed to regret ever having been a member of the Resistance and who cared little how he discounted and even denigrated the sacrifices made by his comrades.

I shall return to this historical aspect in a moment. However, as with all of Fenoglio’s work, we need to remember that there is also a powerful literary and existential reality (a point I shall explore more fully in Chapter 3). Franco Petroni points out that the ‘extreme circumstances’ of the times were responsible for a good number of narratives – for example Sartre’s short story ‘Le Mur’ – which give expression to an archetype: ‘quello della discesa agli inferi come prova iniziatica, attraverso la quale si scopre il senso (o il non senso) della vita’ (1991, 35). In this kind of situation, where one is faced with torture

and with one's own imminent death at the hands of a sadistic 'other', any kind of religious or political belief may drop suddenly away: 'la vita e la morte appaiono nella loro nudità, e l'unico linguaggio che può parlare di esse è quello del corpo, con i suoi incontrollabili tremori e con le sue secrezioni sgradevoli' (ibid., 36). One is faced with the 'absurdity' of one's own death, which may well come in a way we do not expect and which interrupts our life's project in a manner that renders us totally impotent. As readers, we need to be aware of this powerful existential core of Fenoglio's story, and not only to think of it as somehow being the autobiography of Fenoglio or that of an apolitical partisan.

Petroni goes on less convincingly to speak of 'l'archetipo in funzione allegorica' (1991, 40). As Roberto Bigazzi (2011) indicates, we do not need to step outside the historical circumstances of the time and into 'allegory' to understand that the point of view of the Badoglio Max is not that of Fenoglio. For it is not Fenoglio speaking when Max cries out that he does not want to die for a mere 'idea', that if he were to be set free he would stay away from the partisans for the rest of his life, and who damns his partisan comrades who got him into this mess in the first place: 'Maledetti sopra tutti i miei amici! Io sono entrato nei partigiani perchè c'erano già loro! Maledetti tutti!' (VGA, 91). Indeed, according to Bigazzi, Fenoglio is actually signalling his approval not of Max, but of the Communist, more-experienced Lancia, who has a much clearer sense of the reality that they find themselves in. Lancia, who plays the role of guide, points out several aspects of this reality to Max throughout the course of the story: he suggests that Max has a chance, as an ('apolitical') *Badogliano*, of being exchanged for a Fascist prisoner; he counterbalances this by saying that their deaths also depend on the capricious sadism of the Fascist Major, who plays poker each evening to decide which prisoner will be taken

out to be shot; Lancia knows that Max is trembling from fear rather than cold; he calms Max when they hear footsteps coming down the corridor, pointing out that it is the hour when food is brought, not the hour to be tortured or shot; he realises, unlike Max, that the partisans will not attempt to rescue them, indeed that the partisans will not even be thinking about them any more than a healthy person thinks about sick people in a hospital – it is something which happens to ‘others’; Lancia warns Max not to shout or make a fuss – the Fascists will only use this to tease him sadistically; when Max, finding for a moment his courage (albeit untested), tells Lancia that they should make one last gesture of defiance before being shot (as Fenoglio had decided with his brother when *they* were held prisoner), Lancia replies that neither of them can possibly know how each will behave ‘when the moment comes’, and that it doesn’t really matter anyway. Max, in contrast to Lancia, is dominated by the terror of death, and alternates between impossible hope and extreme despair.

According to Bigazzi, this story is evidently a condemnation of the thinking patterns of Max: ‘la negatività della fantasia è in proporzione alle colpe del personaggio’ (2011, 66-67). Here, as in Fenoglio’s other stories of the Resistance, ‘la sua ironia connota gli errori’ (ibid., 68) of those partisans like Max who talk too much, live in a world of fantasy, and who veer from one extreme emotion to another. To be sure, Fenoglio is showing us the self-deception of people when faced with almost certain torture and death. However, I do not believe that Fenoglio is judging them in the way that Bigazzi implies. Rather, Fenoglio is simply exploring ways in which people would think and behave in such situations (and in which most of *us* would behave – whatever *our* self-illusions). Although Max is of course deceiving himself in different ways (and we as readers know this along with Fenoglio), our sympathies are with Max from the beginning because of

the way Fenoglio takes us inside Max's head and body. We are made to relive Max's most intimate thoughts, hopes and terrors – from his horror at his own thinness (reminiscent of Winston Smith's horror at his own appalling physical state, in Orwell's *1984*) to his uncontrollable urinating when he is put against a wall to be shot. Max, naturally, looks back over his short life and tries to work out what has been most important to him (who, apart perhaps from someone with the most intense religious or political conviction, would not feel impelled to do so?). He reflects on the way his mother will feel when she hears of his death; on his love for the girl, whose body he once believed 'era sua tra i milioni di corpi di ragazze che ballano sulla faccia della terra' (VGA, 102); on the fact that he himself had shown mercy when he captured a Fascist. He feels despair and anger at the 'absurd' and tragi-comic fact that he was captured because he 'got lost in the mist', not because he surrendered, that his death depends upon the sadistic whims of a Fascist, and that no one, least of all 'God' will save him: 'È spaventoso che degli uomini abbiano una simile potenza, una simile potenza dovrebbe essere soltanto di Dio. Ma Dio non c'è' (VGA, 101). Against this sense of impotence in the face of events over which he has no control, he fantasises over the possibility of some kind of last-minute defiance (in the manner of Camus' Mersault in *L'Étranger*) or of running away and jumping into the river (like Hemingway's disillusioned hero in *A Farewell to Arms*). Yet when it does come to the point of being taken along the street to a place of execution, he is paralysed, as nearly all of us would be, with terror: 'ma non poteva, non poteva fare un passo fuori della cadenza del drappello' (VGA, 111). There is an almost comic realisation that the partisans will not, like the cavalry in some movie, jump out of nowhere and come to his rescue. As readers, we feel all this with Max – we do not judge him as being guilty of not having a sense of reality, historical or otherwise,

as having ‘negative fantasies’, or as having what Bigazzi calls a ‘comportamento deprecabile’ (2011, 68). The picture Fenoglio paints is made ‘real’ to us as readers because of the small sensory details he draws our attention to and the way he uses language to make comparisons, for example the extraordinarily vivid and terrifying: ‘Sarò nella neve come una mosca nel miele, mi ammazzano infallantemente’ (VGA, 111). As a writer of fiction (or at the very least ‘fictive autobiography’ as Cooke would have it), Fenoglio *shows* us what it might be like to live through an ‘extreme experience’. He does not condemn Max, even if he sees (as we do), the ‘errors’ that Max, all too humanly, falls into. Fenoglio provokes us, as in all of his work, to imagine how *we* might behave and think in such situations.

The ending to the story is suitably ironic. When Lancia has been shot, Max, after undergoing a mock execution, is at the last moment ‘reprieved’. He has been exchanged for a Fascist prisoner. The exchange had already been agreed the evening before, but a Fascist official informs Max that the mock execution took place to ‘teach him a lesson’. Max does not reply, but looks at ‘l’erba spuntare gialla tra la neve sul fianco dell’acquedotto’ (VGA, 113). This ending to the story is rich, like much of Fenoglio’s work, with challenging ambiguity. Will Max abandon the Resistance, as he had sworn he would in his prison cell, or will he rejoin the partisans, as the real-life Fenoglio did? Is the image at the end one of despair? The grass which comes through is, as Petroni (1992) points out, ‘yellow’. Or is it one of hope? The grass *is* coming through, after all, and the snow is next to flowing water. The signs of the beginning of spring are on their way.

And here it is important to remember that this is the spring of 1945, when the partisans, with Allied support, will finally defeat Nazi-Fascism. The nearness of victory shows us not only the ‘absurdity’, but also the tragedy of Lancia’s death, and by

implication the deaths of thousands of other partisans. Fenoglio, albeit in a subtle way unmatched by any other Resistance writer, is reminding us, that however grotesque the behaviour of individual partisans could be, a great sacrifice has indeed been made that we future generations must honour. The reality created by Fenoglio's short stories is both historical and existential, and above all a deeply moral one in the way it raises questions without attempting to offer answers.

This ability to show the human frailty of partisans, to enlist our sympathies while at the same time not condoning certain kinds of behaviour, is brought out clearly in 'Il Vecchio Blister', the story of a partisan in his forties who has been tried for stealing gold from a house which he mistakenly believed belonged to Fascists. Blister presents his case that he did this only because he was drunk. He argues that until now he has never done anything wrong, and that he has proved to be courageous, loyal and capable of providing moral support to younger partisans. When the message arrives from the partisan command that Blister has been sentenced to be shot as a thief, he cannot believe that his companions will really carry out the execution. As he is led away, he holds onto the belief that it is all a joke to teach him a lesson. The story ends with the image of Blister running forward towards the weapon which will kill him: 'Corse avanti colle mani protese come a tappar la bocca dell'arma di Set e così i primi colpi gli bucarono le mani' (VGA, 90). As Elisabetta Soletti points out (1987, 24-25), certain factors make the reader sympathetic to Blister. His age renders him more vulnerable, making the fact that he is beaten up by a group of young men seem crueller; his Falstaffian verbosity is comic and thus wins our affection; his reminders to the partisans of all the actions and trials that he has shared with them make it seem less likely that he will really be executed for a relatively minor offence; his sincere belief right up to the end that he will not be shot by his old

companions makes his dying all the more poignant to the reader. Yet Fenoglio does not imply that it was necessarily wrong to execute Blister. Instead, we are left to explore the complexities of the story for ourselves.

However, this is not to claim that Fenoglio does not also condemn when the need arises: he does so clearly in 'Il trucco', the story that we looked at earlier of the two partisans who squabble over who should have the pleasure of shooting the Fascist prisoner. What this shows is not a condemnation of the Resistance itself however, but rather a commitment to 'telling the truth' of the Resistance, to be prepared to examine its worst sides. It can be seen as a refusal to accept the more sentimental face of the Resistance that the Communist Party sought at the time to present in its claim to be the inheritors of the Resistance. There are, of course, issues raised by the idea of a person having a double role as both participant and witness. Ex-partisans will be likely to portray the Resistance and their own role in a positive light, ignoring those aspects of the Resistance which are less attractive, whatever their declared intentions. In any situation, those who have committed terrible deeds, albeit through force of circumstance, will probably have little desire to 'bear testimony'.¹³ On the whole, in the 1940s and early 1950s we hear about the Resistance from those who see themselves as being on the right side and who do not see themselves as having carried out appalling acts of violence. (There are one or two exceptions to this, such as Rimaneli's autobiographical novel, *Tiro al piccione*.) Writers will also want to portray the Resistance in a positive light for reasons of loyalty. From this standpoint, to portray the Resistance in a harsh manner could be seen as a betrayal of one's own comrades and the sacrifice they have made. Fenoglio, in contrast to this, is perhaps claiming as Edgar does in *King Lear* that 'the worst is not so long we can say this is the worst' (Shakespeare, 2012, 4.1.27-28).

Although problematic, in a sense Fenoglio as an ex-partisan has the right to do this, just as the writer Semprun, as an ex-inmate, arguably had the right to highlight the absurd aspects of life in a concentration camp in his *L'Écriture ou la vie* (1994).

When death occurs in Fenoglio's stories, it is made all the more real and at the same time poignant, because its utter finality is brought home to us through the power of Fenoglio's descriptions. Death in these stories does not come across as a noble and heroic sacrifice in the cause of the Resistance. Rather, it emphasises the fact that the partisans seem to be at the mercy of events beyond their control, and that death will come when least expected. Death is something that turns them into objects. This is most evident in the short story 'L'andata', where five partisans returning to their outfit with a Fascist prisoner are surprised by Fascist cavalry. The leader of the partisan group, Negus, stupidly shoots the prisoner in the back when he tries to flee. The shot gives away their position to the cavalry. Two of the partisans are killed almost immediately. Negus tries to escape by climbing on his hands and knees up the slippery side of a hill. He hears the sound of his two remaining companions being shot below. When he looks down, he feels that he is nothing more than a kind of target for the Fascists, who are lined up and taking careful aim at him. In contrast to the deaths of the girl spy and of the partisans in Caproni's 'Il labirinto', where there is a sense, however subtle, of a spirit leaving the body – 'un tepore che si dileguava senza che nessuna forza al mondo potesse ormai trattenerlo' (Caproni 2005, 56) –, when a bullet kills Negus, his body rolls down the slope as an inert object, entirely at the mercy now of physical forces: 'A una gobba del terreno non si fermò, ma si girò di traverso. Prese l'avvio e rotolò al fondo e l'ufficiale dovette correre da un lato per trovarsi a riceverlo sulla punta degli stivali' (VGA, 44). As Falaschi has pointed out, Fenoglio does not 'sublimate' death in these stories. Rather, death is 'la

conclusione di una vicenda nella quale gli avvenimenti trascorrono in modo tale da distruggere l'individuo come entità materiale dotata di vitalità' (1976, 164-65). The physicality and sheer randomness of death is something that will be very much emphasised and traumatically felt by Johnny (a point I shall be returning to in the next chapter).

The story 'Gli inizi del partigiano Raoul' is unique in this collection in that, like *Il partigiano Johnny*, it is not only a portrait of the often shocking reality of partisan life, but also a story of how this reality forms the beginnings of a Resistance education for a naïve and idealistic student, Sergio P., bringing into play the accompanying emotions of intense fear and loneliness that the student feels. It is a story that critics have often dismissed as inferior to Fenoglio's other work. For example, Saccone claims that it is merely 'un raccontino neo-realistico, il cui interesse non va, tutto sommato, oltre l'illustrazione e il documento storico' (1988, 179). It is true that within the space of a few pages, Fenoglio is able through 'slice-of-life' snapshots of a single day and night to show us different historical aspects of the Resistance. Yet from the beginning, the partisans also come across as larger than life. It is as if Sergio P. has entered a grotesquely dreamlike world, an altogether different kind of reality, where nothing is what he had expected when he had left his mother that morning and set out for the Langhe hills to join the Resistance. The first partisan Sergio comes across carries a grenade in his back pocket, like an 'enorme bubbone' on his buttocks, and has hair down to his shoulders like someone from the 1600s (VGA, 54). The partisan, who is supposed to be manning a check-point, carries out only the most cursory check of Sergio's credentials, being far more interested in seeing if Sergio has any tobacco to give him and in watching a girl who is walking up the road with 'occhi desiderosi'. He tells Sergio where the commander can be found, ignoring

the fact that Sergio could be someone who has been sent by the Fascists. When Sergio, after going through three doors, all of them unlocked and unguarded, enters the 'office' of the commander, he finds him fastening his trouser buttons. There is also a girl there lying on a table and pulling her skirt back down. The commander, Marco, like the guard at the check-point, seems completely uninterested in finding out more about Sergio, or why he has only decided to join the Resistance at this late and inauspicious time (late autumn 1944 after the partisans have occupied and lost Alba). He only tells Sergio to consider himself 'bell'e arruolato' (ibid., 56), adding that he approves of the battle name 'Raoul' that Sergio has chosen for himself, and informing him casually that it is just as well he has a gun on him since they would not have a weapon to give him. Shortly afterwards, Raoul (as he is now referred to in the story) is tricked out of his pistol by another partisan, but is too timid to protest. When Raoul enters the barn where the partisans gather for their lunch he is casually mocked as a 'leccaculo' because he clicks his heels like a soldier to salute the commander. He watches with horror as the partisans squabble like children over scraps of bread while they wait for their meal. When the *staffetta* Jole goes outside, another partisan announces that he is going to follow her and watch her urinating.

Fenoglio has often been singled out for his attacks on Communism and on the behaviour of the Communist *Garibaldini*. But the partisans in 'Gli inizi del partigiano Raoul' are 'monarchist' *Badogliani*. It becomes clear from the conversation over cheap, foul-smelling cigarettes after lunch that many of them are members of this particular brigade simply through chance, not because of political conviction. As one 'Communist' among them declares:

Io sono nei badogliani perchè quando son venuto in collina son cascato in mezzo a dei badogliani. Se cascavo in mezzo agli anarchici o ai partigiani del Cristo che so io, facevo il partigiano con loro. (VGA, 62-63)

This statement is followed by an attack on the king, who according to the Communist is a coward and deserves with his ‘puttaniere’ son to be shot as soon as the war is over. An argument breaks out, which threatens to spill over into a fight. Raoul can only watch in silence because ‘aveva paura, tutta la gente nello stanzone gli faceva una grande, precisa paura’ (ibid., 64). In just a few pages, through the eyes of Raoul, we are presented with the reality of the Resistance that we have already seen in *Appunti partigiani* and that we will see again in *Il partigiano Johnny*: the irresponsibility and military incompetence of the partisans, their childish and grotesque behaviour, the squalid conditions they live in, their lack of interest in actually taking concrete action themselves to defeat Fascism, and the political infighting between the ‘blues’ and the ‘reds’. Sergio, as ‘Raoul’, has entered an altogether different narrative from the one of his life as a civilian until now, a traumatic and seemingly senseless narrative. Raoul’s shock and fear are not dissimilar to that felt by Johnny when he first joins the Resistance, as we shall see in the next chapter. Raoul is so frightened that he abruptly walks out of the barn and flees the village. He realises that all his ‘studies’, everything he has been proud of until that point, are now useless: ‘A cosa mi serve aver studiato? Qui per resistere bisogna diventare una bestia’ (ibid., 65). He longs to return to the safety of life with his mother. He is tempted by the idea of deserting already, of trying to return to a narrative of his life where all his reference points are familiar and make sense to him. In his mind, he goes back to the conversation he had with his mother when she had used various arguments to try to dissuade him from leaving: it is not the right moment (‘Lo dice anche Radio Londra’, 66);

he will break his mother's heart if he is killed; as a student he is not suited to the life of a fighter; and besides he should wait until the weather is right to go up into the hills. In some respects, these presage the arguments that the miller will put forward to Johnny to persuade him to abandon the Resistance in the winter of 1944-45. They serve as temptations to dissuade the partisan from his true mission. Thinking of this scene with his mother, Raoul realises that it is still possible to return to her and escape from this 'orribile avventura nella quale s'era cacciato da solo' (ibid., 68). However, when the church bells ring at six o'clock, he interprets this as a call that he should pull himself out of his solitude and rejoin the other partisans. This kind of struggle between two narratives, for example, that of pre-war civilian life and that of life in the Resistance, or between life in the Resistance and the struggle of adapting to post-war life, or between the narrative of the solitary individual and that of the community, or between that of commitment and that of subjective retreat, is one that will be played out continually in Fenoglio's novels. In this short story, after a terrible night in which Raoul is put on guard duty, and in which he has an appalling nightmare about being trapped and killed by Fascists, the ending points towards Raoul starting to bond with his fellow partisans, just as Johnny will bond with his comrades after his first experience of killing a Fascist in combat. The title of the story, however, indicates that this is only an 'initiation' experience, that a much more difficult struggle and test of *impegno* is still to come with the winter of 1944-45.

In terms of commitment to the cause of the Resistance itself, however, at no point in the collection of short stories is there any sense of a eulogy for its achievements, which might serve as a kind of counterbalance to Fenoglio's condemnation of individual behaviour. Yet in an unusually assertive letter to Calvino in May 1952, Fenoglio did pay tribute to the cause of the Resistance and to the heroism of individual participants, when

he asked if a copy of a letter written by partisan Dario Scaglione a few minutes before Scaglione's execution at the hands of Fascists, could be included in *Lettere di condannati a morte della Resistenza*, a book which made clear that many of those who died, of whatever political ideology or religious persuasion, were united by the belief that they were dying for an 'idea' of a better Italy. The contrast with Max in 'Un altro muro' – when he asks 'Tu te la senti di morire per l'idea? Io no. E poi che idea? Se ti cerchi dentro, tu te la trovi l'idea? Io no. E nemmeno tu.' (VGA, 105) – could not be starker.

Fenoglio as a writer had still not truly explored all the contradictory aspects of the Resistance, the fact that it could be both heroic and absurd at the same time. For this a much longer, more wide-ranging work would be needed. Indeed, at this stage Fenoglio himself still doubted his abilities to write something lengthier than a short story (something he had in common with Kafka), a point he made clear in a letter to Vittorini in June 1953: 'Molto probabilmente non possiedo ancora, se mai lo possiederò, il fondo del romanziere. Non conosco ancora le 4 marce, per esprimermi con termine automobilistico' (Fenoglio 2002, 62). The most that Fenoglio can do at this point in terms of being authentic as an author of the Resistance is to explore its complexities and worst sides without pulling any punches. The marriage of the absurd with the heroic will only come about with his uncompleted novel *Il partigiano Johnny*. Only then would he come to realise a fuller vision of the Resistance and what it meant to him as an ex-partisan.

2.5 *La paga del sabato*

If the stories in *I ventitre giorni* can be seen as an attempt to come to terms with the worst realities of partisan life seen from within the Resistance itself, then *La paga del sabato*, in all likelihood written towards the end of the 1940s, but only published posthumously as a novel in 1969, can be viewed as Fenoglio's first attempt to look back at the Resistance from the point of view of disillusionment with post-war life. Unlike the short stories, *La paga del sabato* focuses not only on the Resistance as an event, but also, in existential fashion, on a 'character' in a given situation, in this case the struggle of an ex-partisan, Ettore, to adapt to civilian life after the war. It is one of the few books of post-war Italian literature which attempt to do so. In many respects, *La paga del sabato* is modelled on Hemingway's *Soldier's Home* and Faulkner's *Soldiers' Pay* (Innocenti 2006, 63-84). It is also clearly based on Fenoglio's own experiences. Ettore, as Fenoglio did, lives at home with his mother and father. Fierce arguments develop because Ettore is unwilling to find a job and is not bringing in any money to the family home. He eventually agrees to take up a job as an *impiegato* that his father has found for him in a nearby factory. However, when Ettore arrives at the factory gates, he feels himself to be utterly alienated from the workers who are entering and feels that he cannot ever bring himself to lead such an existence. Hiding behind a urinal and observing them, he thinks, in typical existentialist 'outsider' fashion:

Io non sarò mai dei vostri, qualunque altra cosa debba fare, mai dei vostri. Siamo troppo diversi, le donne che amano me non possono amare voi e viceversa. 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. (PS, 31-32)

Instead, Ettore with a group of other ex-partisans embarks on a life of crime (unlike Fenoglio, who of course *did* accept a job as an *impiegato*, a job which he held for the rest of his life). Ettore is also alienated from those who would pay sentimental tribute to the Resistance, those who would eulogise it falsely. He attends a memorial ceremony at Valdivilla, as someone who participated in the battle there which led to the death of many of his friends. When a representative of the *Comitato di Liberazione* gives a speech, he reflects bitterly that the only lesson that he has learnt is that he must survive and look after himself:

Va bene che io non credo 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. (PS, 111)

Valdivilla is a place which returns many times in Fenoglio's Resistance writings (most famously in *Il partigiano Johnny*) in the manner of a trauma which he is attempting to come to terms with. Again, we must distinguish between Fenoglio and Ettore. As I have mentioned previously, in 1952 Fenoglio expressed a strong desire for a letter written by his comrade, Dario Scaglione, who had been killed at Valdivilla, to be included in future editions of the book *Lettere di condannati a morte della Resistenza italiana*, a book which paid tribute to the fallen of the Resistance. In 1945, Fenoglio had also expressed a very different view of Valdivilla than that which he puts into the mouth of Ettore. In the same exercise books in which he had translated *The Wind in the Willows* immediately after the war, Fenoglio wrote a petition in poignant language asking for a street of the city of Alba to be dedicated to fellow partisan 'Dario Scaglione, detto Tarzan [...] L'hanno

fucilato a Valdivilla, in una bella giornata di tardo febbraio, nel mezzo di una solitaria strada di collina [...] Quel rettangolo di metallo – Corso Dario Scaglione (Tarzan) – sarà come tanti altri un monumento alla libertà il cui possesso c'è costato lui e tanti altri come lui [...] leggeremo le parole [...] che sono la gloria della vita : valore, fratellanza, fedeltà alla bandiera' (Fenoglio 2002, 194-96). The emphasis in this petition is on the demand that the sacrifice of Resistance combatants be recognised by the wider Italian public. This is the same kind of plea that was made by the *memorialisti*, being given as one important reason for writing and publishing their accounts. This petition of Fenoglio's was, however, never published nor, as far as we know, read out loud by Fenoglio at any occasion. It is as if he quickly recognised the inadequacy of the model set by the *memorialisti* (at least for him as a writer), not only in aesthetic terms, but also in the way the consequences of 'la guerra civile' and the bitterness of its aftermath could be dealt with in an account which appealed simply to the 'nobler' sentiments of the Italians. In *La paga del sabato*, it could be said that Fenoglio is attempting to deal 'realistically' with the impact of this aftermath on those who had fought in the Resistance, yet as with the stories that he was writing at around the same time, he is unable to integrate the sense of waste and disillusionment with a recognition of the heroic. *La paga del sabato* is 'hopeless' in a way that the future *Il partigiano Johnny* is not. Ettore's only aim is to make some money quickly through crime, buy a small petrol station, and then earn enough money to be able to support himself and Wanda, the girl he has got pregnant. In the end, this dream is never realised: Ettore is killed by a lorry in an absurd accident. Aesthetically, from a 'tragic' perspective, this accident is not successful, since not only, as Vittorini pointed out, is there nothing in the book which precedes it or leads up to it (unlike Johnny's death in Draft 2 of *Il partigiano Johnny*), but also because the 'education' of Ettore is never

allowed to be ‘completed’. It is like a *Bildungsroman* which has been cut off several chapters before the end. *La paga del sabato* is never able to affirm the ‘authentic’ value of the Resistance, as I believe *Il partigiano Johnny* does. It is as if Fenoglio has swung from the celebratory feel of the *Appunti partigiani* (in the sense of having survived and lived to tell the tale) to the bitterness of postwar life without having taken properly into account the tragic nature of the Resistance. Only by a full exploration of the journey of a generation would he be able to write a book which encompassed all the contradictory aspects of the life of a partisan.

2.6 La malora

After the publication of *I ventitre giorni della città di Alba*, and having given up on *La paga del sabato*, Fenoglio mostly abandoned the theme of the Resistance in his writing until the mid-1950s. This may have been mainly motivated by the advice of Vittorini, who recommended he try writing something substantial on another subject. We may also surmise that Fenoglio, psychologically and as a writer, had not yet found an authentic way of sublimating the trauma of the Resistance (a point I shall return to in Chapter 3). His early ‘killing off’ of Ettore, and later – prematurely – of Johnny in *Primavera di bellezza*, could be seen as an expression of Fenoglio’s own dissatisfaction with his representation of the Resistance, as well as due to lack of encouragement from his editors. Fenoglio’s next book to be published was *La malora* in 1954. Although the subject of the book is not the Resistance, in some respects it reflects similar concerns. Looking briefly at this novella will help us to create a bridge between his early and mid-1950s Resistance writing.

La malora shows clearly the influence of Verga, and is set some time around the beginning of the twentieth century. The voice of the narrator, Agostino, the son of peasants in the Langhe hills, also has something in common with the voices of popular protagonists of neorealist fiction of the 1940s and 50s, for example Natalia Ginzburg's *È stato così* (1947) and Moravia's *Racconti romani* (1954).

La malora begins when, at the age of 17, Agostino is sold as a servant to the *mezzadro* Tobia Rabino. Here he is given back-breaking work both on the land and in the house. One important theme of the book is Agostino's attempt to find his own humanity – one might say his 'authentic self' – in a situation in which it is almost impossible to do so. Like Fenoglio's partisans, the protagonists of *La malora* realise they are very much at the mercy of powers greater than themselves. As Agostino puts it, 'Eravamo alla mercè della piú piccola disgrazia' (M, 41) and 'neanche la morte di mio padre valeva a cambiarmi il destino' (M, 3). It is a world that God has abandoned: when Agostino's mother returns after four days on a pilgrimage to the sanctuary of *Madonna del Deserto* to pray for alleviation from the family's desperate economic plight, Agostino tells us that 'Dio non fu mai con noi' (M, 7). The only way out for many is suicide, a theme which appears throughout the book, and which will be brought closer to Agostino personally when he stumbles across the body of Costantino, a peasant who has hanged himself in the woods.

The *padrone*, Tobia, treats Agostino purely as someone to be exploited for economic purposes. When Agostino first arrives at the house, Tobia comes out to greet him, but 'nel salutarmi mi tastava spalle e braccia per sentire se in quella settimana i miei non m'avevano lasciato deperire apposta' (M, 11). Any attempts Agostino dares to make at friendship with the sons of the *padrone* are contemptuously rebuffed. It is a world of hierarchy, from which there is no escape. Tobia commands his family and those who

work for him, and uses a fierce violence towards his wife and sons whenever he feels it necessary to bring them into line. However, Agostino is shocked to see this same Tobia and other *mezzadri* humiliated by their employer in Alba: ‘A me mi mancò il fiato, guardai per traverso a Tobia e gli vidi la testa sul petto e le mascelle muoversi come se si masticasse la lingua. Vidi anche gli altri mezzadri, che non erano stati toccati, stavano anche loro a testa bassa’ (M, 19).

Agostino is someone who has glimpses of something resembling freedom from this kind of hierarchy and from being ‘solo una bestia da soma con lo svantaggio della parola’ (M, 49). However, the rare opportunities that come his way only serve in the end to lead to fresh disappointments. For example, he is unable to get himself noticed by Tobia’s employer as someone who would be worth a superior job; he refuses the offer of Mario Bernasca, a servant from another house, of running away and trying his luck with casual work, both because he is afraid of the material risks this would entail and because he feels he would be betraying his dead father by doing so; and though his proposal of marriage to a servant girl, Fede – with whom he has developed a friendship that can only be pursued in secret, through subtle and hidden signs – is accepted, the next day she disappears, having been removed from the family by her parents to be married to a relatively wealthy peasant.

After three years, Agostino returns to help his widowed mother look after the small piece of land they own when his older brother abandons it. The ending of the story is both hopeful and pessimistic at the same time. On the one hand, Agostino is now free of any *padrone* (as it was Ettore’s ambition to be in *La paga del sabato*), and promises himself that he will always be so: ‘feci giuramento di non lamentarmi mai anche se dovevo restarci fino a morto e sotterrato e viverci sempre solo a pane e a cipolla, purché senza piú

di un padrone' (M, 83). On the other hand, he seems to be condemned to a solitary existence without a wife, and has no more prospect of ever emerging from centuries-old poverty than his ancestors had.

Philip Cooke reminds us that the prevalence of death in *La malora* and Fenoglio's other Langhe stories, is not, as Soletti and some critics of the 'metahistorical' school have claimed, evidence of Fenoglio's 'universal preoccupations' with the human condition, but rather reflects 'the kind of life that most of the peasants endured in the Langhe' (Cooke 2000, 5). Like *Il partigiano Johnny*, *La Malora* is very much concerned with historical reality, although in the former of course, Fenoglio has experienced the events he is describing and is much closer to his protagonist Johnny. Without denying the historical dimension, I would argue, however, that in both works there is *also* an existentialist exploration of the kinds of choices human beings may still be able to make even when they are trapped in seemingly inescapable circumstances. Agostino never stops seeking a way to live in a manner which is authentically human. Like Johnny, he refuses to accept a life in which the days are spent 'senza metterci un'oncia di cuore' (M, 42). In the next chapter, we shall see how the historical and existentialist approaches to Fenoglio's *Il partigiano Johnny* can be made to work together.

Notes:

¹ For this brief account of the early years of Beppe Fenoglio, I am indebted to De Nicola (1989), M. Fenoglio (1995) and above all to Negri Scaglione (2006).

² See De Nicola (1989, 19-21) and Negri Scaglione (2006, 14-16).

³ See Negri Scaglione (2006, 33).

⁴ See Bocca (1978), Ginsborg (1990, 29-70), Negri Scaglione (2006, 65-106) and Peli (2006).

⁵ I shall return to Fenoglio's biography as it becomes relevant to the literature I am discussing.

⁶ See Re (1990, 53).

⁷ 'Io non voglio dire che politica e cultura siano perfettamente distinte (...). Ma certo sono due attività, non un'attività sola; e quando l'una di esse è ridotta (per ragioni interne o esterne) a non avere il dinamismo suo proprio, e a svolgersi, a divenire, nel senso dell'altra, sul terreno dell'altra, come sussidiaria e componente dell'altra, non si può non dire che lascia un vuoto nella storia [...] La cultura politicizzata [...] non ha nessun apporto qualitativo da dare.' (Vittorini 1970 [1947], 297-98).

⁸ See, for example, Behan (2009, 161-74).

⁹ See Peli (2006, 175).

¹⁰ See Cooke (2011, 15-18).

¹¹ It is true that *allegria* is also present at times in *Il partigiano Johnny*, due in part to Fenoglio's linguistic playfulness, but it is tinged with the irony of the more distant author looking back from the bitter vantage point of the 1950s.

¹² Fenoglio's sister Marisa remembers: 'La passione di scrivere in mio fratello era legata inscindibilmente al vizio delle sigarette. Le due cose insieme erano più che sufficienti a far dire a mia madre che Beppe conduceva vita dissoluta. Fumare costava, era un vizio esecrabile e quantificabile [...] scoppiavano tra loro le liti più devastanti, quelle che avvelenano la casa per dei giorni.' (M. Fenoglio 1995, 121)

¹³ For a fuller discussion of the term 'bearing testimony', and for its implications with reference to Primo Levi and Holocaust literature, see Gordon (2001, 1-12).

Chapter 3

Historical and Existential Dimensions of Commitment: // *partigiano Johnny* as a Modern *Bildungsroman*

Prendiamo il più disciplinato esercito del mondo: l'inglese od il tedesco, a tua scelta. Infiggigli un 8 settembre e spargialo sulle montagne. Ebbene, essi non si dimostrerebbero migliori di noi. – Possiamo dunque gridare sempre Viva Noi! – Sempre, Pierre, fino alla fine della storia umana. Se penso, se mi figuro d'aver perso quest'occasione, per paura, per comodità o per qualunque altro motivo, mi vengono i brividi. – Beppe Fenoglio, from *Il partigiano Johnny*.

Je suis donc fondé à dire que le sentiment de l'absurdité ne naît pas du simple examen d'un fait ou d'une impression mais qu'il jaillit de la comparaison entre un état de fait et une certaine réalité, entre une action et le monde qui la dépasse. – Albert Camus

The essence of tragedy is thus an actual and objective conflict between freedom in the subject on the one hand, and necessity on the other. – Friedrich Schelling

In a letter to Calvino of 15 October 1962, five months before he died, Fenoglio, knowing of the seriousness of his illness, wrote: 'Pazienza, bisogna essere disponibili' (Fenoglio 2002, 181). 'Disponibili', of course, has echoes of the Sartrean notion of 'disponibilité', which in turn corresponds to the earlier Heideggerian notion of 'being free for' – of responding in an 'authentic' fashion to a 'situation' into which one finds oneself 'thrown'. When Fenoglio was forced to 'choose' between evading the Resistance or joining, it was again a question of being 'disponibili', of making an 'authentic' choice. As Fenoglio's friend and philosophy teacher Pietro Chiodi wrote:

Nel primo caso [Fenoglio] sarebbe diventato un velleitario, un 'letterato' e avrebbe dato alla sua formazione così eccentrica il significato di un'evasione provinciale; ma nel secondo caso avrebbe dovuto assumere sopra di sé il destino di una tensione terribile tra ciò che voleva essere e ciò che non poteva non fare, di ciò che doveva assumere necessariamente. (Chiodi 2002b, 201)

In other words, without the events of the Second World War and the experience of the Italian Resistance, Fenoglio would have been a very different kind of writer. Fenoglio's choice to join the Resistance, and to play his own part in history, however insignificant and infinitesimal that part was in the overall struggle to defeat Nazi-Fascism, was fundamental in that it not only determined the kind of experience Fenoglio had of the war, but, much more importantly from our point of view, his eventual vocation as a writer: 'Da questo scontro tra una vocazione alla gentilezza e alla poesia, e la brutalità della situazione [...] prende "forma" e direzione l'impegno artistico di Fenoglio' (Chiodi 2002b, 201). This question of 'authenticity' was, as I have explained in the Introduction to this thesis and in Chapter 1, not one faced by Fenoglio alone, but by an entire generation of intellectuals, artists, film-makers and writers. The questions in September 1943 were: what choice do I make in the face of the terrible reality of war and the possibility of civil war? Do I join the Resistance, do I respond to the calls from the Salò Republic to enrol in Mussolini's Fascist troops, or do I try to ignore the events around me and dedicate myself to artistic and intellectual pursuits? Is there any point in joining the Resistance since it will probably make little or no difference to the outcome of the war? If I do join, what role should I have? Should I bear arms? Of what use can I be when I have no aptitude for, and experience of, armed combat and a hideously tough physical life? But with the liberation of Italy in May 1945 and with the hope for a better future, the question now was: what choice do I make as a writer (film-maker and so on) now that I have survived this experience of war? What is the 'meaning' of 'literature' or 'art' in this post-war world? What aims, responsibilities and limits do literature and art now have?

As I have pointed out in the Introduction to this thesis, some critics have separated Fenoglio from other neorealist writers with the argument that his commitment was not

one to the cause of the Resistance and that he was only using the subject of the Resistance as a symbol for something more universal, such as humankind's greater struggle for freedom. For example, De Nicola, speaking of *Il partigiano Johnny*, states that 'la Resistenza non è in realtà il tema di fondo, bensì il pretesto storico di affrontare un altro tema' (1989, 115). And Maria Grazia Di Paolo claims that 'la Resistenza non fu che un punto di partenza, o per meglio dire un mezzo di cui servirsi per trasmettere dei valori più universali' (1988, 18-19). In part, this is because of Fenoglio's harsh criticisms of the Resistance in his early work. Above all, the 'meta-historical' view of Fenoglio's work springs from a critical obsession with the 'innovative' and 'experimental' usage of language in *Il partigiano Johnny*. Indeed, the introduction to the so-called 'collected' works of Fenoglio, edited by Dante Isella (2001), is entitled 'La lingua del "Partigiano Johnny"', and focuses entirely on the linguistic aspects of Fenoglio's work (I shall return to these aspects later in this chapter). The majority of critics still ignore the historical reality revealed by Fenoglio's early work, and the fact that *Il partigiano Johnny* represents the story of an entire generation. It is a story which is closely linked to that traced by *memorialisti* such as Pietro Chiodi and Roberto Battaglia.

Other critics, however, such as Philip Cooke (2000) and Orsetta Innocenti (2001), have been able to refocus the argument on the historical aspects of Fenoglio's work. Yet Cooke and Innocenti make a similar error to critics of the 'meta-historical' school – they are dismissive of any possible 'existentialist' interpretation of Fenoglio's work. Roberto Bigazzi in his new book *Fenoglio* (2011) laments this four-decade divide between critics over the nature of Fenoglio's writings: between those who have put almost total emphasis on creating a picture of a writer who uses language as a means to explore and express an archetypal 'existential' struggle and who is a long way from any kind of 'impegno realista

e storico' (2011, 9); and those other critics, the minority, who emphasise Fenoglio's commitment as a writer to giving voice to the experience of the historical 'reality' of the Resistance, and who, in the case of Cooke, see Fenoglio's linguistic experimentation as a 'language for history' (Cooke 2000, 73-95).

Bigazzi briefly, but very usefully, suggests that it might be possible for a dialogue to develop between the two sides: 'non si vede perché non ci possa essere un nesso dialettico tra storia e metastoria' (2011, 9). In this chapter, I shall demonstrate ways in which the existentialist and historical approaches to *Il partigiano Johnny* can be 'married', and will show that Fenoglio throughout his work is in fact testing one against the other. He is examining the possibility of individual and collective 'choice' when set against historical circumstances, or in philosophical terms, he is testing the possibility of 'free will' against a deterministic view of history. It is the testing of one against the other which forms the education of Johnny, and which makes of *Il partigiano Johnny* a *Bildungsroman*.

Before briefly discussing the concept of a *Bildungsroman* in the next section and what it might mean in the case of *Il partigiano Johnny*, I would like to deal with the arguments of Philip Cooke and Orsetta Innocenti against the existentialist interpretations of Fenoglio's work. Cooke (2000) gives three reasons why he believes any such interpretation to be erroneous. First, we have no evidence that Fenoglio had any 'extensive' knowledge of existentialist philosophy. Second, Fenoglio's *Il partigiano Johnny* is, if anything, more of a 'critique' of existentialist philosophy than an endorsement of it: Fenoglio, after all, is dismissive of Chiodi's philosophical speech at the beginning of the book; besides, his characters are at the mercy of greater events, and so do not in any sense embody existentialist philosophy, which according to Cooke, 'as is

well known [...] posits the idea that man is a self-creating being able to carve out the paths of his own existence independent of Nature and History' (2000, 105-106). Third, *Il partigiano Johnny* has a 'cyclical notion of time', while existentialism 'deals with the present and future in concrete terms' (ibid., 206).

Against this, I would argue that even if it is almost certain that Fenoglio had no extensive knowledge of the details of Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927) or of Sartre's *L'Être et le néant* (1943), this does not mean that he was not familiar with existentialist philosophy as revealed in the fiction of writers such as Camus and Sartre, whose works were popular in Italy in the 1950s. Besides, as Cooke himself admits, Fenoglio met with Chiodi on a regular basis after the war. Chiodi had been Fenoglio's philosophy teacher, was an expert on Heidegger and indeed made the first translation of *Being and Time* into Italian in 1953. Cooke's second point that existentialism claims that man can forge his own destiny independently of 'Nature and History' is surely a misreading, or at the very least, an oversimplification of what is after all a highly complex and sometimes contradictory philosophy. It would be truer to say that existentialism explores the tension between the possibility of choice for individual human beings and the historical circumstances in which they find themselves. As Heidegger states, 'Dasein is something that has been thrown; it has been brought into its "there", but *not* of its own accord' (2010, 329). Dasein 'remains the plaything of circumstances and events' (ibid., 433) but can be 'resolute' and make 'authentic' choices 'in accordance with the demands of some possible Situation or other' (ibid., 443). For Sartre too, any freedom is always 'in situation'. It also needs to be borne in mind that Sartre's *L'Être et le néant* was written under Nazi occupation and can in one sense be read as a direct response to historical circumstances in which the individual as a 'free being' was under the gravest threat. In

the words of Safranski, ‘within a web of subtleties, it develops an entire philosophy of anti-totalitarianism [...] Sartre’s philosophy tries to give man back his dignity by making him discover his freedom [...] What matters is to say no to whatever negates one’ (1998, 348). Existentialist literature, for example Sartre’s play *Les Mains sales* (1948), is generally more pessimistic than the philosophical texts in this regard. As Geoffrey Brereton points out, ‘the “heroes” of existentialist fiction and drama realise the necessity for them [of decisions and consciously willed acts] and are not satisfied with drifting meaninglessly, but they are nearly always shown failing to exercise their wills effectively’ (Brereton 1963, 18). And Sartre in *L’Être et le néant* emphasises, in a way that would have resonated with Fenoglio, the absurd and ‘meaningless’ aspects of death:

On a souvent dit que nous étions dans la situation d’un condamné, parmi des condamnés, qui ignore le jour de son exécution, mais qui voit exécuter chaque jour ses compagnons de geôle. Ce n’est pas tout à fait exact: il faudrait plutôt nous comparer à un condamné à mort qui se prépare bravement au dernier supplice, qui met tous ses soins à faire belle figure sur l’échafaud et qui, entre temps, est enlevé par une épidémie de grippe espagnole. (Sartre 1963, 617)

In a similar way, Fenoglio’s characters are frequently not killed in battle, but in absurd accidents. Even if, as Cooke points out, Johnny is dismissive of Chiodi’s speech at the beginning of *Il partigiano Johnny*, this does not mean that Johnny is against existentialist philosophy, but simply that the time was ripe for action rather than philosophising. After all, he is also later dismissive of the idea of writing: ‘La penna l’ho lasciata a casa e non ci penso a sintassi e grammatica. Per tutto il tempo che starò qui non intendo stringere in mano che un fucile’ (PJ, 70). As far as Cooke’s third point is concerned, it is true that *Il partigiano Johnny* is cyclical in the sense that it is based on seasons and also in the sense that Johnny returns over and over again to feelings of separateness from the partisans and

to a sense of disillusionment. Indeed, on occasion Johnny has the sensation that time has stopped altogether (a point I shall return to in Chapter 4). Nevertheless, *Il partigiano Johnny* is also a book which moves forward in time and ever closer to an eventual Allied victory. It is a book which, in existentialist mode, ‘projects’ itself into the future, for example post-war disenchantment and questions of whether the suffering of the Resistance was in any sense justifiable.

Orsetta Innocenti also seems to regard the historical and existential interpretations of Fenoglio’s work as mutually exclusive. She criticises Gabriele Pedullà’s 2001 study of *Una questione privata*, because of his ‘insistenze sulla natura esclusivamente individuale dell’impegno resistenziale’ at the expense of ‘la complessiva visione di Fenoglio di un’etica civile e dell’impegno [...] La *vexata quaestio* sulla sorte di Milton si risolve così in un’interpretazione esistenziale’ (Innocenti 2003a, 441-42). Here I would like to suggest that one kind of commitment necessarily entails the other: they are not mutually exclusive. There is a collective commitment, made up of individual commitments based ultimately on individual choices (as far as an individual has any choice at all in any given situation).

However, I shall also argue that Fenoglio’s work is, paradoxically, ‘anti-existentialist’. Where Fenoglio differs from existentialist literature, and from most of the neorealists, is in his satirical and grotesquely comic portrayals of partisans’ appearances and behaviour. In this respect, Fenoglio reinforces the reality of experience against any heroic concept of the Resistance or of the results of ‘authentic’ choice. To borrow the words of the philosopher Simon Critchley from another context, Fenoglio’s humour ‘recalls us to the modesty and limitedness of the human condition, a limitedness that calls not for tragic-heroic affirmation but comic *acknowledgement*, not Promethean authenticity but

laughable inauthenticity' (2007, 82). Indeed, I shall argue that it is the tension between the tragic and the comic, the authentic and inauthentic, the committed and the ironic, that makes Fenoglio so believable today where many of his contemporaries are less convincing. For Critchley, it is only humour or 'comic acknowledgement' which can recognise and accept inauthenticity. In a paradoxical sense, humour, unlike tragedy, is genuinely tragic 'because it perpetually forestalls the possibility of authenticity' (2007, 79). Through humour we come to accept and even celebrate our limitedness and finitude as human beings. We shall see how this plays out in *Il partigiano Johnny* in section 3.4.2 below, and I shall return to the notions of 'comic acknowledgement' and 'inauthenticity' in section 3.6.

3.1 The Concept of a Modern Bildungsroman

It was the early nineteenth-century critic Karl Morgenstern who first spoke of the concept of a *Bildungsroman*. He declared that 'a work will be called a *Bildungsroman* first and primarily because of its content, because it depicts the hero's *Bildung* as it begins and proceeds to a certain level of perfection, but also secondarily because, precisely by means of this depiction, it promotes the *Bildung* of the reader to a greater extent than any other type of novel' (Morgenstern, cited in Berman 2004, 77). The *Bildungsroman* charts a hero's progress through time, in which youthful idealism slowly but surely matures to take into account the reality of the world until the hero arrives at the point where he can discover his authentic purpose in life. It could be said that the *Bildungsroman* is ultimately a search for meaning. In nineteenth-century terms, this would assume that

society itself was a meaningful entity, to which the individual could relate his or her own life and its purposes. The second part of Morgenstern's statement carries the assumption that the *Bildungsroman* is not just about one's own experience, but is concerned with an aesthetic representation that the reader will learn and benefit from. It is as much about a social as it is about a personal education. As Berman writes: 'Through the genuine encounter with authentic art, internal life is deepened and enriched which, paradoxically, also allows the individual to share in the objective life of the community' (2004, 77-78)

However, in a modern world where the idea of being able to find a meaningful narrative for a life is brought into question, not only by the 'death of God', but also by the experience of war and socio-political upheaval, the whole concept of the credibility of a *Bildungsroman* is cast into doubt. The structure of the *Bildungsroman* 'challenges its modern exponents to find convincing ways of connecting inward experience with social and political realities' (Robertson 2004, 47). Any modern *Bildungsroman*, if it is to be genuinely meaningful (as opposed to acting as an escapist soporific), will question the feasibility of progress for a hero in a fractured world. Here, 'meaning is the result not of a fulfilled teleology, but rather [...] of the total rejection of such a solution' (Moretti 1987, 6). The challenge for Fenoglio to create a meaningful narrative out of the Resistance was made more acute because he was living in a country which had a divided memory over the role of the Resistance, and in which the reality that he had experienced was denied or exploited for political or sentimental reasons.

In *Il partigiano Johnny*, the whole notion of progress (and by implication, the forward movement of time) is challenged over and over again when Johnny tries to make the narrative of his life as a partisan – in which he sees his companions die, is constantly under the threat of death himself, kills not only in combat but in cold blood, and in which

he finds little use for his intellectual skills or literary talents – connect in any meaningful way either with his previous life as an idealistic would-be writer or with a future post-war life in Italy which, as we gather from the last part of *Il partigiano Johnny*, will be an intolerable one because of its mediocrity and because of its refusal to countenance any genuine Resistance narrative. As Fenoglio from the vantage point of the 1950s charts Johnny's education through the years from 1940 to 1945, the writing itself acts also as an education for the author: he discovers the authentic meaning of the Resistance *as he writes*, and at the same time he searches for the meaning of his own commitment both as a partisan and as a writer. *Il partigiano Johnny* is, in effect, a *Bildungsroman* for the twentieth century, as I shall demonstrate in more detail below.

3.2. The Different Versions of *Il partigiano Johnny*

Before going any further, we need to understand at this point exactly what can be regarded as constituting *Il partigiano Johnny*. The issue is famously by no means a simple one. The two books which are considered to be Fenoglio's greatest works, *Il partigiano Johnny* and *Una questione privata*, were not published until after Fenoglio's death. Neither of them was completed by Fenoglio. *Il partigiano Johnny* – not a title chosen by Fenoglio – poses special problems. The first mention we have of the book is in a letter of 21 January 1957 to Calvino: 'Sto effettivamente lavorando a nuovo libro. Un romanzo proprio non è, ma certo è un libro grosso [...] Il libro abbraccia il quinquennio 1940-45' (Fenoglio 2002, 82). Fenoglio's plan was to publish the book in two volumes. However, only the first part was ever published – and in a severely edited form, with the title *Primavera di Bellezza* in 1960. The last three chapters of *Primavera di bellezza* bear

all the hallmarks of a typically hagiographic account of the Resistance, and must count as Fenoglio's greatest artistic failure. These last chapters deal with Johnny's brief experience of the Resistance before he is killed in a skirmish with German forces. They were written between the end of 1958 and the beginning of 1959 as a way to make the book acceptable for publication. Livio Garzanti, the publisher, who had only seen the first part, had asked Fenoglio to redraft the novel so that it could be published in one volume only. Fenoglio, who was anxious that the book would never be published at all, agreed. In one fell swoop, Fenoglio discarded all the work he had already written and which makes up the bulk of what was published in 1968 as *Il partigiano Johnny*.

Fenoglio had previously outlined the second part that he was working on in a letter of 12 September 1958 to Garzanti:

prima esperienza partigiana di Johnny in una formazione comunista – passaggio di Johnny alle formazioni badogliane –
le grandi speranze dell'estate 1944 e la conquista della Città -
disfatta partigiana nella Città e rotta sulle colline –
Incontrastato dominio delle forze nazifasciste e sbandamento totale dei partigiani – (messaggio del generale Alexander).
Il tragico inverno 1944-45
rimbandamento dei partigiani e ripresa di contatto bellico coi fascisti.
alla vigilia dell'arrivo della missione inglese, per la quale Johnny è designato ufficiale di collegamento, Johnny cade nello scontro di Valdivilla (tardo febbraio 1945) – Valdivilla è l'ultima sconfitta partigiana, l'ultima vittoria fascista.
(Fenoglio 2002, 95)

This outline in effect corresponds to the version edited by Lorenzo Mondo and published posthumously in 1968, and also with the version edited by Dante Isella and first published in 1992. Lorenzo Mondo, who chose the title 'Il partigiano Johnny', controversially mixed together chapters from two different drafts of the book in order to create a coherent

narrative, sometimes choosing the earlier draft of a chapter over a later draft. Isella decided instead to always use the later draft of a chapter, where available, and when it did not create some problem with the flow of the narrative: ‘In ossequio all’ottimo principio dell’ultima volontà dell’autore, abbiamo privilegiato la seconda redazione [...] Abbiamo invece seguito la prima redazione per tutta la parte iniziale, dove la sua testimonianza è unica o solo saltuariamente accompagnata dall’altra’ (Isella 2001, XII). The end result is the same as the Lorenzo Mondo edition in terms of the overall arc of the story which Fenoglio had outlined in the letter quoted above. However, the situation is further complicated by an earlier draft of *Primavera di bellezza* (which was initially intended by Fenoglio as the first part of *Il partigiano Johnny*), the existence of the earlier draft of the last chapters of *Il partigiano Johnny*, in which Johnny does not die as he does in the second draft, and a text written entirely in English, known as *Ur partigiano Johnny* and first published in 1978 under the editorial auspices of Maria Corti. This last text, which is all that remains of what was almost certainly an entire original draft in English¹, describes its protagonist Johnny, like Fenoglio, as being very much alive after the battle of Valdivilla and working as a coordinator between the partisans and the Allied mission in the spring of 1945. We do not know how Fenoglio would have completed his great novel had he lived longer or indeed whether he *would* have completed it. In a letter of 10 March 1959, Fenoglio announced his intention to abandon ‘tutto il campo “resistenziale” ’ (2002, 104). It has been pointed out that this may have been mainly because of his troubled relationship with editors and his isolation as a writer. I would suggest that another reason may be that Fenoglio felt unable to resolve the issue of the trauma he still felt as a result of his experience of the Resistance: in killing his protagonists – Ettore, Johnny and, later, Milton (though we can never be sure if Milton *is* killed) – he is in a

sense succumbing to the temptation to kill off or avoid any further interrogations about the meaning of the Resistance that he, Fenoglio, still needed to undertake, as if it were too much for him to deal with the legacy of the complexities and difficulties of the experience of civil war. Fenoglio's ambivalent feelings are reflected in his double killing-off of Johnny – first at the end of *Primavera di bellezza*, only to be reborn in *Il partigiano Johnny*, and then at the end of the second draft of the latter, only to be reborn once again in *Ur partigiano Johnny*. The decision to kill Johnny (twice) was taken *after* he had completed in draft form a full epic from 1940 to 1945. This may also be indicative of the dissatisfaction Fenoglio felt with himself and his ability to recreate the experience of the Resistance through literature.

However, we also know that Fenoglio was quite capable of changing his decisions. Because of this, we can never refer to any definitive text. We shall always be working with 'imperfect' material. In one sense, this does not matter. As Saccone (1988) has pointed out, for Fenoglio the Resistance remains something 'imperfect', the exploration of which can never be completed or transformed into a 'final' narrative. One will always remain caught out by history, and any perspective on the Resistance will change with time, just as much for those who have experienced it as for those who have not. However, to read the most complete, or the least incomplete, version of Fenoglio's untitled novel, and to understand both its full historical significance and its exploration of individual existential choice, we need to read it from the beginning of the first draft (not published until 1978) of *Primavera di bellezza* – which starts with Johnny as a high school student in 1940 – all the way through to the end of *Ur partigiano Johnny* (also not published until 1978), where Johnny takes part in a battle of Allied-partisan forces with Nazi-Fascist troops in April 1945. Only by doing so, can we follow the 'education' of one

young man and of the generation of Italians he belonged to. At the same time, by *also* referring to the most advanced drafts of Fenoglio's work, we can respect his stylistic choices.

Inexplicably, neither *Ur partigiano Johnny* nor the earlier draft of *Primavera di bellezza* have been included in the supposedly complete collection of Fenoglio's works edited by Dante Isella and published as *Romanzi e racconti* (1992, 2001). They are now hidden away in the out-of-print *Opere*, edited by Maria Corti in 1978. Roberto Bigazzi is unique among the critics in his stress upon the importance of a comprehensive examination of this 'complete cycle' in order to show the ways in which *Il partigiano Johnny* works as a *Bildungsroman*. While Bigazzi's emphasis is on the historical aspects of the education of Johnny, I shall seek to wed this to an existential approach, in the hope of enriching our reading of Fenoglio still further.

3.3 The Historical Context of the 1950s

During the 1970s, it was believed by Maria Corti and others that *Il partigiano Johnny* had been written immediately in the 'heat of the moment' after the war, and that it had been used as raw material for Fenoglio to create his far more polished short stories. Apart from the fact that Fenoglio's sophisticated use of language, however 'imperfect', makes it extremely unlikely that a young, inexperienced writer could have written such a text, it has now been proved beyond doubt by Saccone (1988) and others that *Il partigiano Johnny* was written in the mid-to-late 1950s. This is important to remember when trying to understand the political and cultural context that Fenoglio was responding to when he wrote *Il partigiano Johnny*. It is precisely because this context has been largely ignored

by the critics that Fenoglio's commitment to the Resistance as a historical event has been so neglected in favour of the various interpretations and readings of what Saccone has called a 'lingua impossibile'.

During the 1950s, there was, and continues to be to this day (Cooke 2011), a struggle for the meaning and memory of the Resistance among those who wished to either claim it as their own for political purposes or to denigrate it for an opposite political agenda. The Communist Party, frustrated by not being elected to power, tended to stress a sentimental, idealised version of the Resistance. They laid claim to being the true inheritors and bearers of the 'values' of the Resistance. After all, around 70% of the partisans had belonged to Communist brigades. The problem was that the Communist Party preferred to ignore the complexities of the Resistance, its violent and bloody nature. Among those who supported the Resistance from a wider political spectrum, there were disagreements from the late 1940s onwards as to who should carry forward the 'memory' of the Resistance. This was shown, for example, by the breaking up of the ANPI (*Associazione Nazionale Partigiani d'Italia*). Two splinter groups separated themselves from the ANPI: in 1948 one group formed the FIVL (*Federazione Italiana Volontari della Libertà*), made up of Christian Democrats, Liberals, and 'autonomous' ex-partisans; in 1949, the other formed the FIAP (*Federazione Italiana delle Associazioni Partigiane*) against any monopolisation by the Communists.² This was the beginning of the struggle over the 'legacy' of the Resistance, which would be fought over during the 1950s and beyond, when the various political factions became more and more polarised by the wider impact of the Cold War.

The first complete study of the Resistance, Roberto Battaglia's *Storia della Resistenza italiana* (1953), was commissioned by Calvino (a member of the Communist Party until

1955). It is a book which lacks altogether the searching qualities of Battaglia's earlier 1945 memoir, which I have written about in Chapter 1. Instead, Battaglia wrote the history very much from the sentimentalised point of view of the Communist Party. Given Fenoglio's clear anti-Communist positioning in *Il partigiano Johnny*, and given his harsh descriptions of partisan behaviour in contrast to Battaglia's hagiographic portraits, it can be argued that the Fenoglio of the 1950s is trying to paint a more 'authentic' picture of the Resistance, and not to allow it to be distorted for political reasons. From this standpoint, Fenoglio is setting the record straight, writing from his own experience in what Cooke (2000) terms 'fictive autobiography', and yet also with the benefit of hindsight brought about by the vantage point of 1950s Italy.

Nevertheless, it would seem fair to claim that Fenoglio can *also* be read at more than the historical level. As Negri Scaglione writes, Fenoglio's work examines 'uomini posti di fronte alla violenza della vita, di individui in fuga della morte, di esseri umani in balia di forze impossibili da dominare' (2006, 130). These are universal themes. In this sense *Il partigiano Johnny* can be read as a kind of modern tragedy; a genre in which, as Terry Eagleton understands it, 'much turns on the fact that we are not wholly masters of our own destiny' (2004, 187). It is a tragedy in which there is no easy division between good and evil, in which the collective is meaningless without the highly contradictory feelings and actions of the personal, and in which no victory turns out the way one hoped it would. In a different sense, as I have indicated above, *Il partigiano Johnny* is also a *Bildungsroman*, an education in reality and a quest for self-fulfilment.

3.4 Il partigiano Johnny as *Bildungsroman*

3.4.1 La scelta

It has been claimed by some critics, for example Elisabetta Soletti and Gian Luigi Beccaria, that Johnny as a character never develops, that he is highly moral and deeply anti-Fascist from start to finish: ‘Johnny non muta, non evolve nel corso del romanzo’ (Soletti 1987, 112); ‘Johnny non ha incertezze, ripiegamenti su di sé, pentimenti, cali di sicurezza’ (Beccaria 1984, 113). Saccone claims that *Il partigiano Johnny* represents ‘un’oscillazione’ between ‘faith’ and ‘distrust’ rather than any unfolding of realisation. Johnny is anti-Fascist from the beginning and there are no key moments where ‘reality’ is revealed. Speaking of the day of the Armistice, 8 September 1943, and its effect on Johnny, Saccone writes, ‘Mi sembra tuttavia difficile considerarlo un evento decisivo, conducente a una presa di coscienza. Di questa veramente Johnny non ha bisogno’ (Saccone 1988, 164)³. The important point I would argue, however, is not that Johnny in any sense goes from being Fascist to anti-Fascist, but that – like many other intellectuals of his generation – he goes from having no idea as to what he can do in the face of Fascism and the chaotic events immediately following the Armistice, to becoming aware of the Resistance and the possibility of becoming a partisan. This is what changes him. It is the choice he makes to join the Resistance, and the subsequent experiences that result from this choice, which act as an education, leading eventually to an absolute and yet absurd commitment.

Il partigiano Johnny is a *Bildungsroman* in the sense that Johnny, as a representative of his generation, comes to understand the importance of the Resistance for Italy and the sacrifice and commitment it requires. It serves, in the words of Bigazzi, as a ‘chiarificazione ideologica’. This much he has in common with the neorealists and with *memorialisti* such as Chiodi in *Banditi* and Battaglia in his early memoir *Un uomo, un partigiano*. However, beyond the ‘chiarificazione ideologica’, the story of Johnny is also one of an education in the terrible reality of civil war. This inevitably leads to disenchantment and a questioning of the meaning and value of the Resistance. Yet this disenchantment and questioning lead in turn to a profounder commitment, which in a manner unmatched by any other Italian writer takes into account the tragic and tragicomic nature of a war fought mainly between Italians and their co-patriots. The reality of civil war brings home to Johnny the inescapable probability of death. In the face of this, Johnny, as a solitary individual, has to confront the existential meaning of his own choices: are they ‘authentic’ in the sense intended by Heidegger – in other words, are his choices made with the full awareness of his own mortality rather than under the pressure of conforming to the expectations of others?

In the first pages of the first draft of *Primavera di bellezza* (or the first part of *Il partigiano Johnny* as Fenoglio originally conceived it), the young high school student Johnny, like many sensitive adolescents, is preoccupied, in existential fashion, with the meaning of his own life and what he must do if he is to avoid at the age of thirty being judged ‘un fallimento’. His companion Elda puts it to him that even if he follows his passion and succeeds in becoming a teacher of English language and literature, he will still be a failure ‘perché sei fatto a quel certo modo’ (PB1, 1273). What he must do to

avoid being a failure is to become a writer of literature. It is this which will give his life purpose and meaning.

This conversation is followed shortly afterwards by a satirical portrait of a Fascist squad, 'la primaria e piú lurida bandiera del fascismo nella sua città' who sarcastically calls Johnny 'l'inglesino' (ibid., 1274). Johnny's dreams of an authentic life as a creator as well as a lover of literature are being put to the test by the sordid historical reality in which he finds himself. As readers, we are made to ask: can this fracture between subjective and objective – or between private and public – reality be overcome? If so, how? It is a question which will recur time and time again right up until the final part of *Il partigiano Johnny*.

As a student, Johnny not only feels alienated from Fascism, but also from 'la classe operaia'. One *operaio* tells him: 'non ti offendere. Ma io non vi digerisco, nessuno di noi operai vi può digerire, con tutte le vostre arie' (ibid., 1263) A little later he is told, 'Il tuo difetto, Johnny, è la troppa grammatica' (ibid., 1265) – something that he will be reminded of many times over as a partisan. With his feelings of separateness as an intellectual, he has something in common with the protagonist of Caproni's story 'Il labirinto', and with the characters in Pavese's *La casa in collina* and Vittorini's *Uomini e no*. He will be forced many times by circumstances to ask the same questions as they do about the role of the intellectual in times of military conflict.

The question of the meaning of his life is brought sharply home to Johnny when war is declared by Mussolini on France and Italy. He is faced with the possibility of being called up. For the first time, war becomes a reality to Johnny, the literary-minded student and would-be writer:

[...] era stato davanti a una pagina bianca senza riuscire a stendervi una sola parola. Poi, per salvar la giornata, era ripiegato sul tradurre, ma aveva tradotto poco e male, quasi piangendo per quella sterilità [...] Pensava che presto sarebbe partito soldato ed ogni giorno, ogni momento della sua vita sotto le armi avrebbe acerbamente rimpianto anche una sola di quelle tante ore di libertà che adesso non sapeva fecondare. Poteva benissimo morire come Italo Morra per una bomba aerea, o cadere sul fronte russo come Bosca, e non avrebbe lasciato niente di sé, nemmeno un racconto. (PB1, 1318-19)

If this happens, if death comes in this way before Johnny has achieved his 'life's project' what will his life have meant? Sartre gives a similar example in *L'Être et le néant*, of a young man who wishes to be a great writer but who dies after having written only one mediocre book. In this case, according to Sartre, the young man's expectation 'perd toute espèce de signification' (1963, 623) and 'tombe d'un coup dans l'absurde' (ibid., 624). What, then, will give Johnny his sense of meaning? As the story of Johnny moves forward, we see that it will come from being 'disponibile', from accepting the historical circumstances into which – to use Heidegger's term – Johnny finds himself 'thrown', and from responding in the most authentic way *possible*. From the beginning of the first draft of *Primavera di bellezza*, Johnny is aware of 'history'. In a conversation, he points out that he was born 'nello stesso anno e mese in cui marciarono su Roma, e sento di disprezzarli dalla nascita' (PB1, 1262). The implication here is that somehow his 'destiny' is bound up with that of Fascism. However, at this point he has no idea in what way, and besides it only interferes with his dreams of becoming a writer. The disgust with Fascism and the war does not yet translate into any thought of political or military resistance. In this, Johnny is representative of his generation. The choice that he will eventually make will be an imposed choice, one that is forced on him, as it was on many others, by the events of September 1943.

Giaime Pintor (1919-43) is seen by many as a notable example representing a generation of intellectuals who until the 1940s paid little interest in politics. Pintor documented his reasons for joining the Resistance in his famous last letter of 28 November 1943, addressed to his brother. It is worth quoting at some length, because it mirrors in many respects the path taken by Johnny as well as the author Fenoglio. For Pintor, the Resistance is:

la conclusione naturale di quest'ultima avventura, ma soprattutto il punto d'arrivo di un'esperienza che coinvolge tutta la nostra giovinezza.

In realtà la guerra, ultima fase del fascismo trionfante, ha agito su di noi più profondamente di quanto risulti a prima vista. La guerra ha distolto materialmente gli uomini dalle loro abitudini, li ha costretti a prendere atto con le mani e con gli occhi dei pericoli che minacciano i presupposti di ogni vita individuale, li ha persuasi che non c'è possibilità di salvezza nella neutralità e nell'isolamento. Nei più deboli questa violenza ha agito come una rottura degli schemi esteriori in cui vivevano [...]. Senza la guerra io sarei rimasto un intellettuale con interessi prevalentemente letterari: avrei discusso i problemi dell'ordine politico, ma soprattutto avrei cercato nella storia dell'uomo solo le ragioni di un profondo interesse, e l'incontro con una ragazza o un impulso qualunque alla fantasia avrebbero contato per me più di ogni partito o dottrina. Altri amici, meglio disposti a sentire immediatamente il fatto politico, si erano dedicati da anni alla lotta contro il fascismo. Pur sentendomi sempre più vicino a loro, non so se mi sarei deciso a impegnarmi totalmente su quella strada: c'era in me un fondo troppo forte di gusti individuali, d'indifferenza e di spirito critico per sacrificare tutto questo a una fede collettiva. Soltanto la guerra ha risolto la situazione, travolgendo certi ostacoli, sgombrando il terreno da molti comodi ripari e mettendomi brutalmente a contatto con un mondo inconciliabile. (Pintor 1977, 186)

As Deleuze writes: 'We search for truth only when we are supposed to do so in terms of a concrete situation, when we undergo a kind of violence which impels us to such a search' (1973, 15-16).

What Fenoglio does is trace this arc of development through all its detail. Long before any conception of what an alternative choice might mean, Johnny must live in a state of

limbo as a trainee officer in the Italian Royal Army, anticipating not resistance to Fascism, but rather future combat against the race he so admires – the English. From the beginning, Johnny loathes the life of the barracks. He is filled with a sense of the absurdity of the military exercises, a feeling reinforced by the pomposity of the trainers and his awareness that Italy is losing the war against the Allies. There is little sense of comradeship with his fellow recruits. His sole relief is in his own sensations provided by a connection to the physical world in moments of isolation. He clings onto these moments as the only kind of reality he can have any faith in. Here, for example, finding himself alone during a military exercise, he treasures the feeling of bark against his skin, the sound of the river, and contrasts these with the ‘sogno morboso’ of the Italian army:

Dietro, gli spari echeggiavano sempre piú fiocchi, voci umane non gli arrivarono piú [...]. Nel silenzio che seguí, Johnny si concentrò tutto nell’acqua: era sorella dell’acqua del fiume che lo aveva allevato, quella dei suoi solitari bagni mattutini, dove e quando la millimetrata immersione gli procurava una pungente lunga voluttà [...] dovette appoggiarsi al tronco di un pioppo; sentí la scorza tenera e tiepida, non udí la tromba lontana suonare il cessate del fuoco. Questa del fiume era la realtà, il sogno morboso era l’esercito italiano. (PB, 32-33)

The sense of ‘non-reality’ can be seen as the beginning of Johnny’s rebellion against Fascism, though it is not translated into any clear thoughts of the wider historical context, apart from some barrack-room speculation about what will be the outcome of the war. Of course, the trainee officers did not have the benefit of hindsight that the 1950s and 1960s readers of Fenoglio will have had, knowing just how ‘unreal’ the Italian army had become in 1943 in terms of the contrast between Fascist military rhetoric and the historical reality of its imminent defeat. Johnny’s sense of isolation, disorientation and meaninglessness is augmented as training progresses and they are moved from ‘Moana’

(Ceva) to Rome. Here they are much closer to the possibility of real military action against the Allies. There is a nightmarish feeling of being trapped with no way out, and ‘una sensazione di convulsa assurdit  che nei capitoli successivi si incrementa invece di scemare man mano che il protagonista si muove da una parte all’altra – caserme, campo aperto, viali e vicoli di Roma – alla ricerca di porte che aprono sensi e spazi alternativi’ (Mu iz Mu iz 2006, 28).

The situation culminates in the Armistice on 8 September 1943, and its aftermath. Johnny is left as numbed and confused as the rest of the conscripted soldiers, holed up in their barracks in a situation of utter squalor:

Lo scompiglio e la sporcizia erano al colmo, i pavimenti coperti da un urinoso strato di uniformi gettate. [...] Salirono in camerata e ne fronteggiarono il mareggiante disordine. Poi, senza cercare il suo, Johnny piomb  su un pagliericcio, intrecciando le braccia in modo da tamponarsi occhi ed orecchi. Quando si risvegli , o rinvenne, era solo. [...] Si rialz , pieno di miseria, senza pi  spazio per la paura, cos  pesante da sfondare il pavimento. And  alla finestra interna, senza scopo. (PB, 112-14)

Once Johnny has recovered enough, his only thought is of his own survival. His first step is to haggle with a boy for some civilian clothes. As soon as he has the clothes, he is filled with a sense of anger and self-pity because he feels he has been unworthy of the historical events unfolding:

[...] e Johnny rimase con un groppo in gola, di insolubile furore e di molle piet  per se stesso: i giorni dell’armistizio, gli era stato assicurato, avevano visto la pi  grande manifestazione di solidariet  nazionale nella storia d’Italia, ma a lui era toccato mercanteggiare e minacciare. (PB, 123)

Given the chaos that followed the Armistice with the Allies, there is evidently a good dose of Fenoglioian irony here. What is perhaps more important to observe is that Fenoglio

is concerned to show the effects of historical events on individual behaviour and feelings. Johnny's sense of humiliation at the lack of any kind of resistance against the Germans is not only his, but that of thousands of other Italians. The effect of the German occupation, the shame that it induced among both Italian soldiers and the civilian population, has been amply documented by Claudio Pavone (2006). However, in another sense, the events of September 1943 did demonstrate 'solidarietà nazionale nella storia d'Italia'. Although it was often a case of 'every man for himself', it should be noted that those Italian soldiers who managed to escape the Germans were not necessarily regarded as deserters and indeed received much help from civilian families, who hid them or provided them with clothes. As Pavone states: 'Ciò che caratterizza la catastrofe dell'8 settembre è che nessuno, ufficiale o soldato, travestendosi da borghese, pensò che stava disertando; nè a nessuno è poi venuto in mente che quella fuga in massa fosse da denunciare come una diserzione' (2006, 16). After all, many of these 'deserters', like Johnny, would end up becoming early members of the Resistance.

Of course, in the days immediately following the Armistice, most deserting soldiers sought only to return home to their families. Johnny's aim, too, is to return home alive to Alba, and to hide away with his books for the duration of the rest of the war: 'Literature and lovemaking will make me forget the whole affair' (PB, 138). It is only after a hazardous journey north by train, where he is more than once almost caught by German troops, that through a chance meeting with a truck of soldiers who have deserted and become '*ribelli*', he finally decides to join the Resistance. However, as I have outlined previously, it is at this point that *Primavera di bellezza* in its published form ceases to bear any resemblance to historical reality and instead becomes another hagiographic account of Resistance sacrifice, with Johnny being killed almost immediately in a

skirmish with German troops. The episode is supposed to take place in September 1943, but at that time, as De Nicola (1989) has pointed out, there were still no partisan bands in the area of Piedmont that Fenoglio is talking about. The death of Johnny is also unconvincing dramatically – it comes too suddenly, and the pace of the last three chapters is far too fast in comparison to that of the preceding chapters. It is as if Fenoglio is in a rush to get the book over and done with, and does not wish to face the true complexities of the decision to become a partisan and its consequent traumatic experiences. It is true, as I have said before, that Garzanti asked Fenoglio to redraft his novel so that it could be published in one volume, but surely Fenoglio did not have to do so by cutting most of the story out. Like the earlier and unpublished *La paga del sabato*, Fenoglio's *Primavera di bellezza* is a *Bildungsroman* which has been cut drastically short. To continue in realistic fashion with the story of Johnny and his generation we need to move to the part of the story which was not published until 1968 as *Il partigiano Johnny*, and which corresponds more to Fenoglio's original intentions.

In the story in which Johnny instead of being killed arrives safely in Alba, he is persuaded by his parents to hide in a house in the hills (and perhaps this is a reference to Pavese's Corrado choosing to hide rather than to participate in the Resistance). Here Johnny tries to occupy himself with translating English poetry and with making love to a girl. Yet he remains restless. In a fragment of an earlier draft of Chapter 2 of *Il partigiano Johnny* (to be found in an appendix of the 1978 *Opere*), Johnny, angry that he cannot find satisfaction in 'literature and lovemaking', curses the situation which is causing this dissatisfaction: 'Johnny era furioso contro i fascisti ed i partigiani, sí anche contro i partigiani, insidiavano da due parti il suo sudato indispensabile Eden' (Fenoglio 1978b, 1250). The months of indecisiveness have not only made Johnny restless, but kept him in

a kind of state of 'non-reality'. Attempts to immerse himself in English literature have left him nauseous, almost in a Sartrean sense of having lost all points of meaningful reference: 'So mornings were diseased and nightmared. Il paesaggio ora lo nauseava, scontato il gusto del ritrovamento della terra natale e vitale. La letteratura lo nauseava' (PJ, 6-7). Later, after burying his pistol, Johnny feels 'il cervello sickening nell'immaginare il tempo che ci sarebbe rimasta sepolta' (ibid., 39). It is only when Johnny later decides to join the Resistance that he will regain a sense of reality, of his own sense of 'concretezza di uomo' (ibid., 49).

At this point in time, he knows that he will not be able to escape the war, but has no plan or it seems any thought or even knowledge of the first formations of partisan units. It is not until Johnny's chance meeting at the beginning of October with his ex-teachers Chiodi and Cocito – both the real-life high school teachers of the young Fenoglio – that the possibilities of the Resistance are talked about and the word 'partigiano' used for the first time. (This scene is key to understanding Fenoglio's ideological position and his sense of commitment. It is one that I shall return to shortly.) Yet in spite of further discussions and several occasions where the war impinges on Johnny's attempts to escape from it, Johnny is still indecisive. It is only in December 1943, three months after his escape from Rome, and only when circumstances make him realise that he must choose in one way or another, that he finally makes up his mind. Johnny stumbles across a crowd of mainly young men on their way to the headquarters of the *carabinieri* to free a dozen or so fathers arrested the evening before because their sons have not presented themselves to the Fascist authorities. The prisoners are freed, and the *carabinieri* are turned into a laughing stock. But Johnny has been spotted in the crowd, and he and his parents are now

on the wanted list. It is only at this point that Johnny prepares to flee into the hills to join the partisans, while his parents go into hiding.

Johnny's 'choice', as I have stated previously, is imposed upon him. Although he had been by disposition pro-British, anti-Fascist – 'Italy at her falsest, Britain at her truest' Johnny the high school student had stated when war was declared in 1940 (PB, 138) – he had had no thought of any kind of political or armed resistance. This brings us to the proposition of Franco Fortini, echoed by many others, that 'Non fui io ad impegnarmi nella politica, ma la guerra che mi impegnò' (cited in Falcetto 1992, 66).

So far the 'imposed choice' of Johnny has much in common with the choice as described by the *memorialisti* of the Resistance. The difference is that Fenoglio takes us there. He shows us what it was to live through what was both an individual (existential) and collective (historical) crisis, which pushed people into making a decision in one way or another (even if this decision was simply to hide away and not participate). However, there is another important element developed throughout *Il partigiano Johnny*, which is that of a kind of 'absolute' choice. By this, I mean that Johnny's choice is one which will be tested over and over again by events which make the deaths and sufferings of the Resistance 'absurd'. Absurd in the sense that they will make no difference to the final outcome of war, absurd in that the aftermath of the war will prove to be a disillusionment, and absurd in that many aspects of the Resistance Johnny will find repugnant at a human and moral level. It is a choice which must be affirmed 'absolutely' over and over again, without recourse to any metaphysical power or to any political ideology, and in the face of a 'relative' common-sense wisdom which acts on many occasions as a temptation for him to abandon the cause of the Resistance.

The refusal of any particular quasi-religious or political ideology to support Johnny's choice can be inferred from two scenes: the first a chance meeting with his old philosophy teacher, Chiodi; the second where he meets up with Chiodi again, but this time also with his old literature teacher, the Communist Cocito, along with some other ex-students in a position similar to Johnny's. It is clear that these scenes were not put into the book because they actually happened. De Nicola (1989, 104) has shown the extreme unlikelihood of these meetings taking place: neither Cocito nor Chiodi were in Alba at that time. Rather, they serve the purpose of introducing Johnny to the concept of 'partisan' and its relationship to the idea of ideological struggle for a radically new Italy. The 1950s writer Fenoglio is perhaps also here continuing a dual argument with those among the Communists who claimed the Resistance as their own and with those who were in danger of 'over-spiritualising' the Resistance, such as Calamandrei. As I have outlined in my Introduction, Calamandrei put great emphasis on the moral and quasi-religious aspects of the Resistance. He was highly successful at drawing together the different elements of those who were now defending the Resistance against its detractors on the right. In the words of Cooke, 'The language and rhetorical strategies that Calamandrei employed were part of a set of shared codes that his audience both expected and anticipated. There was, in other words, a common language, a kind of Resistance *koiné*, which circulated at the time. And Calamandrei was, without a doubt, the master practitioner of it' (2011, 42). However, Calamandrei's great emphasis on the heroic behaviour of the partisans and the great sacrifice that had been made, while unifying people around the moral legacy of the Resistance, also glossed over those violent and terrifying aspects which Fenoglio was determined to explore.

In the first meeting between Chiodi and Johnny, Chiodi tells Johnny that he intends to spend some time reading Kierkegaard. Johnny questions Chiodi as to whether reading Kierkegaard is the right thing to do given the urgency of the situation they find themselves in. Chiodi sighs ‘nella ineluttabilità della prestazione professionale’ (PJ, 22) and goes on to give a rather pompous reply. Fenoglio leaves us to imagine Johnny’s response. As Pedullà points out, ‘Chiodi è inserito nel romanzo soltanto per poter essere subito dimenticato da Johnny’ (2001, 146). At the second meeting, the meaning of the new word ‘partigiano’ and its relationship to Communism are discussed. Chiodi talks about the possibility of all the young men being rounded up and forced into the Fascist ranks. Cocito ‘nella sua fiera ma grattante voce di liceo’ replies that it is enough to stand up to the Fascists to defeat them, but to do so ‘alle spalle [...] perché non si deve affrontare il fascista viso aperto, egli non lo merita, egli deve essere attaccato con le medesime precauzioni che un uomo deve prendere con un animale’ (PJ, 23). An ex-student replies that ‘Questo è quel che oggi si chiama partigiano’ (ibid.). The introduction of the word has the effect of making everyone consider it as if it had an almost religious significance: ‘tutti erano intenti, ognuno per suo conto, a pesare nella sua aerea sospensione quella nuova parola, nuova nell’acquisizione italiana, così tremenda e splendida nell’aria dorata’ (ibid.). But Cocito goes on to say that the only effective partisan is a Communist, because a Communist will make any sacrifices necessary for victory. He puts forward a number of hypothetical questions to Johnny, such as whether he would be prepared to sacrifice innocent people eating in a restaurant or to use his sister to attract a German into a trap. In each case, Johnny replies that he would not or gives no answer. Cocito accuses him of being ‘soltanto’ a ‘Robin Hood’: ‘Johnny, mi permetto di pronosticare che sarai uno splendido Robin Hood. Ma come Robin Hood sarai

infinitamente meno utile, meno serio, meno meritevole, e bada bene, meno bello, dell'ultimo partigiano comunista' (ibid., 25). The meeting is disbanded soon afterwards because of the real possibility of being interrupted and captured, as if Fenoglio wishes to make clear that the most important thing at that time was action rather than discussions about politics. As well as presenting a statement of his anti-Communist stance, however, Fenoglio is also exploring genuine questions of morality and justice which he as a partisan, and which the Resistance as a historical movement, would be faced with, for example in what circumstances it is right to allow for the deaths of civilians. Again, we can remind ourselves here of the fact that many people during and after the war blamed the partisans for German reprisals on the Italian population. Innocent civilians could also be caught up in partisan attacks, for example when bombs were planted on trams. Johnny's parents represent a typical point of view when they blame the partisans for the first atrocities committed by the Germans (PJ, 40-41).

Fenoglio the author is not offering an answer one way or another. Rather, once again he is putting forward the issues, asking us not to turn away from the moral complexities of the Resistance, but to examine them without sentimentality. These are the issues that Johnny and his fellow partisans will have to confront, and that the Italian people will have to deal with after the war. Unlike the author Fenoglio, Johnny is of course as yet unaware of the consequences of the commitment he will soon make.

Once Johnny has made 'the choice', there is an initial sense of no-going-back combined with a feeling that this decision is both the right one and the only one possible. As Johnny heads for the hills, this sense of no-return has all the air of a religious conversion, indeed almost a triumphalist feel:

Partí verso le somme colline, la terra ancestrale che l'avrebbe aiutato nel suo immoto possibile, nel vortice del vento nero, sentendo com'è grande un uomo quando è nella sua normale dimensione umana. E nel momento in cui partí si sentí investito – nor death itself would have been divestiture – in nome dell'autentico popolo d'Italia, ad opporsi in ogni modo al fascismo, a giudicare ed eseguire, a decidere militarmente e civilmente. Era inebriante tanta somma di potere, ma infinitamente piú inebriante la coscienza dell'uso legittimo che ne avrebbe fatto. (PJ, 52)

This is a famous passage which has many times been quoted to show the depth not only of Johnny's commitment to the cause of the Resistance, but also that of an entire generation. For example, the political historian and ex-partisan commander, Guido Quazza, cites this passage as a representation of 'il senso e il valore dell'esperienza resistenziale sotto l'aspetto umano' in 'una guerra di popolo, di una democrazia di base impegnata in una lotta mortale' (1978, 250). Philip Cooke (2000) points out that rather this passage of Fenoglio's is deeply ironic, given the fact that this sentiment is expressed before the literary-minded Johnny has been tested in any way, and given Johnny's subsequent disillusionment with the partisans and with many other aspects of the Resistance. It can be read in one sense as a kind of parody of the quasi-religious interpretation of the Resistance put forward by people like Calamandrei. However, I should also like to argue that the picture of Johnny departing for the hills is both ironic *and* an expression of an 'absolute' commitment that will be tested over and over again. I would contend that it is the tension between this absolute commitment to being a partisan and the disillusionment with the reality of war, a tension resulting in a deep sense of absurdity, that makes *Il partigiano Johnny* a convincing story for modern times. It is also an expression of commitment on the part of the author to keep exploring the significance of the Resistance. Here I would like to return to the existential aspect of *Il partigiano Johnny*.

3.4.2 Authenticity / Inauthenticity and the Tragi-Comic

It is only in the encounter with the possibility of becoming a partisan that Johnny is able to make an 'authentic choice'. The Resistance here corresponds to what the philosopher Alain Badiou in his *Ethics* calls the 'evental' – an event which becomes an ethical experience, which demands 'fidelity', and 'which compels us to decide a *new* way of being' (2001, 41). The kind of events which challenge us to 'the ethic of a truth' might be the Resurrection of Christ, the French Revolution, or the witnessing of a famine or natural disaster. Badiou's notion of the 'event' is very close to Sartre's notion of concrete 'situations'. However, although the ethical demand is rooted in the particular, it is not reducible to that situation. For example, I may in response to human rights abuse in a certain country write a letter or sign a petition set up by Amnesty International. However, by doing so I am also making a *universal* claim about the need to protect human rights. Johnny, by joining the Italian Resistance, is fighting against Fascism and Nazism in a particular area of the Langhe region. By doing so, he is also making a claim about the importance of fighting against authoritarian regimes for the cause of freedom, however flawed that freedom may be. It is important to note that the event will only work as an ethical challenge if there is something in the responding 'some-one' (which for Badiou may be a group as well as an individual) which already desires it. Badiou's notion of the 'event', as well as being close to Sartre's 'situation', corresponds to some extent to Heidegger's earlier concept of the 'call' of conscience, which 'summons Dasein's Self from its lostness in the "they" ' (2010, 275). In this manner, the self is brought to an

authentic 'Being-towards-death': 'When one has an understanding of Being-towards-death – towards death as one's *ownmost* possibility – one's potentiality-for-Being becomes authentic and wholly transparent. The call of conscience passes over in its appeal all Dasein's "worldly" prestige and potentialities' (ibid., 354). Johnny's decision to head for the hills and join the Resistance is the opposite of a utilitarian one. In the terminology of Badiou, he has been 'seized' by the 'event'. It will lead to suffering, profound disillusionment and death. Johnny will be 'tempted' more than once into abandoning the Resistance and going into hiding – above all by the miller who lists a series of very good reasons for doing so (which I shall return to later in the chapter), concluding: '“La tua parte l’hai fatta e la tua coscienza è senz’altro a posto’ (PJ, 459). It is in these sets of circumstances that Johnny must follow the advice of Lacan quoted by Badiou: 'do not give up on your desire' (Badiou 2001, 41). In Heideggerian terms, Johnny must continue to resist the distracting and soothing voices of the 'they'.

In the real world of the Resistance, however, Johnny's initial idealism is shattered as soon as he comes across his first flesh-and-blood partisans. The irony expressed is comical, almost clownlike: 'Johnny entrò finalmente nei partigiani, quasi pestando i calli al perplesso e insoddisfatto siciliano [...] Il cuore di Johnny decadde, si squagliava [...]. Ma che s’aspettava che fossero i partigiani? Questi, gli arcangeli?' (PJ, 56-57) On his first night lying awake beside his sleeping companions in a requisitioned church, he feels both fear and regret for the commitment he has made. He is aware that he has lost the freedom of before when he still had not taken a decision. The choice he has made has taken his life's project in a certain direction: 'Fino a stamane, o meglio a ieri, si trovava in una posizione fluida, rimediabile da ogni mortale impatto [...], ma ora era patentato e bollato, se catturato non avrebbe più avuto la minima chance ed il minimo diritto alla

discussione' (ibid., 62). And if he is caught, he will be shot together with 'questa gente', who in their appearance and behaviour are the very opposite of 'archangels'. One partisan explains to him that none of them ever keeps watch during the night without falling asleep or abandoning his post: 'I ragazzi qui non montano la guardia, incoscienti fottuti. Vanno al turno e dopo dieci minuti tornano a dormire o vanno altrove e così nessuno fa sentinella effettiva' (ibid., 63).

Too much emphasis, however, has been put on Johnny's separateness from other partisans, on his 'snobbishness,' as if this was something peculiar to him and to his author. Saccone even speaks of 'narcisismo' and 'esibizionismo' (1988, 183). Johnny as an intellectual, as someone with a strong moral sense, does of course in many ways feel alienated from his companions. However, there is a strong historical element to this. As I have pointed out in the Introduction to my thesis and in Chapter 1, many students and intellectuals were indeed unsure of the contribution they could make when 'Latin' was not much use in times where physical survival and combat skills were needed. Other writers could express the same horror at the lack of real commitment among some that they found on first joining the partisans, which could lead them on more than one occasion to consider abandoning the Resistance and returning, if possible, to their family. This was the reaction expressed by Roberto Battaglia in his 1945 memoir. Johnny's famous 'oscillazione' was not so untypical, but was rather part of a re-examination of his commitment as he came to understand the full consequences of his decision and as events changed on a wider scale which would affect the whole of the Resistance, for example the blocking of the Allies at the Gothic Line in September 1944 and the accompanying realisation that the war would not be over as soon as everyone had thought. Events such as these caused many partisans to question their own participation in the Resistance, and

to then either ‘desert’ or to renew their commitment at a profounder level. In the end, as ‘undrafted’ soldiers, each had to make his or her own individual choice.

What differentiates Fenoglio is the harshness of his portrait of the partisans. At the same time he is still able to win our empathy for the heroic cause of the Resistance, and throughout we have a feeling of the ‘reality’ of the events he describes. How does Fenoglio achieve this? As defenders of realism⁴ point out, one of the important roles of fiction is to test ‘universal truths’ against the particular. An ‘existentialist novel’ will test the philosophical axioms of existentialism against the concrete situations in which fictional characters find themselves. A classic example is of course Camus’ *L’Étranger*. As Steven Earnshaw suggests (2006, 121), this novel is more complex and contradictory than any philosophy it may be trying to illustrate. If fiction is to be ‘true to life’, and therefore believable, then it must take into account the paradoxes and ambiguities we all live through.

An existentialist piece of fiction, then, is bound in part to be anti-existentialist. To this extent, Cooke is right when he claims that *Il partigiano Johnny* is an anti-existentialist novel. Johnny lives out all the absurdities and contradictions of life as a partisan. Although it is a heroic tragedy for our times (Casadei 2000, 61-87), and in this sense reflects the tragic-heroic paradigm of a philosopher such as Heidegger, it is also anti-tragic, or at least tragi-comic, and through its examination of particular situations questions the whole notion of the possibility of ‘authenticity’. *Il partigiano Johnny* is a book which – suspended in the balance between ‘yes’ and ‘no’, between ‘faith’ and ‘mistrust’ – subverts itself. Fenoglio conducts this subversion through his examination of the way human beings behave, based on his own experience and observation. Johnny is not Fenoglio (even if he resembles him closely), but Fenoglio uses Johnny’s eyes to show

us the world of the Resistance. Fenoglio does so in a way that is seen as desecrating, but which also frequently invites us to identify and empathise with the partisans as flawed human beings, or at the very least to question any sense of self-righteousness we may have about how we ourselves might behave in such situations.

A good example of this kind of portrayal of the place where heroism meets ‘reality’ is the relating of the after-effects of Johnny’s first experience of an ambush. The episode begins during a period of inaction when Johnny is still with the Communist brigade. Together with three companions, he has been charged with the seemingly innocuous mission of going to a nearby village to collect a new supply of tobacco which has just arrived. As Johnny walks along lost in his own thoughts, he considers in an abstract, literary way (much at this point like the Beppe of *Appunti partigiani*) the possibility of dying, and decides – in the abstract – that perhaps this is better than leading a ‘boring’ life as a student: ‘Tutto questo finirà, ed io dovrò rimettermi da capo col greco, e non potrò mai fare a meno del greco per tutta la vita... – La cosa era orribilmente noiosa, da sentirne fin d’ora la nausea della lontana fatica. Forse era meglio morire nei partigiani’ (PJ, 102). The sentiment comes across as hopelessly naïve. The childishness of Johnny’s thoughts is matched by the behaviour of his companions, who cannot resist trying out a new automatic weapon even though they know it will disturb and frighten the inhabitants of the nearby village. (‘Che ce ne frega di loro?’ asks one of the partisans.)

The Fascist ambush, when it comes, is completely unexpected. ‘Tito’ drops down dead; ‘Geo’, ‘come ipnotizzato’ and in an instinctive act of surrender, marches straight in the direction of the wall where the firing has come from. Johnny fires blindly, then rolls back down the hill crashing into the wounded ‘Fred’ so that they both go tumbling until they reach a ledge, from which they throw themselves into a stream. After a while, they

believe that they are probably not being followed and make their way up the stream. Fred at first is too traumatised to talk, and Johnny is terrified that they might still be found and killed. Indeed, they soon see Fascists up on the hill. A farcical series of events follows, worthy of Laurel and Hardy. Fred is about to scream in terror and Johnny pushes him under the water to stop him. ‘Poi Fred si sdraiò tutto nell’acqua, ma il suo grosso sedere emergeva per fetta, isolare, cospicuo e buffo’ (PJ, 106). When they eventually realise they are safe, Johnny wants to smile at Fred, ‘ma niente piú di se stesso gli obbediva’. Fred weeps ‘liberamente’. Looking at Fred, Johnny finally realises that whatever his past ambitions (to be a writer for example) he is now an ordinary partisan, just like Fred: ‘Johnny gli vedeva [...] il corpo violentato dallo spasimo e dal terrore, infinitamente piú miserabile e lurido del vestito. Ed egli era come Fred, identico’ (ibid., 107). When they are able, they set off for a farmhouse. Waiting outside is a family. In this vividly-described scene, Fenoglio again draws our attention to the childish nature of the partisans in a way that moves us both to tears and smiles at the same time. It is worth quoting at some length:

Fred cominciò: - Hanno ammazzato il nostro compagno [...] Il nostro compagno Tito è morto. Tito è morto -. E come quelli chiedevano dove e come, allora anche Johnny ci si mise, e disse l’imboscata, e con un gesto infantile, proprio dei bambini richiesti di una adulta spiegazione, tendeva la mano verso la lontana, obnubilantesi piana al di là del truce ridge, e là i contadini indirizzavano lo sguardo [...] Nulla era visibile. (PJ, 108)

Johnny at this point is far from his earlier abstract dream of dying as a partisan: ‘Il suo cervello balbutiva: – I’ll get out of this all. I can’t abide it. I won’t never again go through this all. I’ve had really too much of this all’ (ibid.). The use of English here perhaps shows Fenoglio’s desire to emphasise the inexperienced Johnny’s literary-minded

interpretation of reality. Even after being shot at, Johnny is still seeing events through his reading of English literature. (I shall be discussing Fenoglio's use of English and the language of *Il partigiano Johnny* in section 3.5.) As if to reinforce the absurdity of the situation, Fenoglio ends the scene on a farcical note, when Johnny sees that Fred 'aveva un calzone dietro sforbiciato da una pallottola, e la lacerazione mostrava a nudo le sue mutande di spessa lana, d'un incredibile color vinaccia' (ibid.).

I have described this series of scenes at some length because I believe that they encapsulate the tension that Fenoglio captures so brilliantly between the 'authentic' and 'inauthentic', between the tragic and the comic, between the ideal and the real. In other words, whatever noble Heideggerian aim we may have to face honestly the possibility of our own death (authenticity) and to understand the choices we can make in the light of this, we will nearly always be seen in practice to be comically incapable of doing so (inauthenticity). I shall return to a more detailed discussion of these ideas in the last section of this chapter; for the moment, I wish to point out that Fenoglio in comparison to the attitudes of existentialist philosophy is both more pessimistic and yet also more tolerant and understanding of human frailty. The concept is expressed neatly by two partisans in Fenoglio's uncompleted novel, *L'imboscata*:

- Siamo una cosa tragicomica, - rispose Oscar. – Sai che significa tragicomica?
- Mezza da ridere e mezza da piangere. (Fenoglio 1992a, 91)

Scenes such as these express the kind of 'dualism' that Wilson Knight alludes to in his essay on Shakespeare's *King Lear*. It is a 'peculiar dualism' which 'wrenches and splits the mind by a sight of incongruities', 'displays in turn realities absurd, hideous, pitiful' and cries 'in vain to be resolved either by tragedy or comedy' (2011, 322).

Il partigiano Johnny can be described as a *Bildungsroman* in the way it charts Johnny's discovery of tragi-comic reality, and the way that in the end he is able to absorb this reality and thus arrive ever nearer to a stage of what we might call 'authentic authenticity' (as opposed to inauthentic, heroic 'authenticity'). This absorption and, so to speak, overcoming of reality is made evident as the story progresses. Here again, however, it is also very much a historical reality. It is a reality which changes as the war progresses and which will affect key relationships in the collective life of the partisans. To demonstrate Fenoglio's commitment to this reality, I will briefly examine his charting of three of these changing relationships as seen through the eyes of Johnny: the relationship with the peasants, the relationship with the Allies, and the relationship between partisan brigades of different political persuasions.

3.4.3 The Commitment to Historical Reality

In accounts of the Resistance we often read of the good relations between partisans and local peasants, of how the peasants sheltered fleeing Allied prisoners, fed them and provided them with information about Fascist movements. Roberto Battaglia, for example, in his memoir *Un uomo, un partigiano*, which we have examined in Chapter 1, can at times paint a rather idealised picture of peasant hospitality and willingness to share food, putting this down to their innate disposition:

Il contadino italiano, sempre avido e gretto nei propri interessi economici, è anche dovunque ospitale e generoso verso il viandante: chiuso nella sua casa e attaccato al suo campo, ha un senso di naturale pietà verso chi deve compiere un lungo

cammino e gli offre un bicchiere di vino o un pezzo di pane, sollecitato in questo suo gesto istintivo da quelle tradizioni secolari, di cui egli, piú d'ogni altro è permeato. (Battaglia 2004, 30-31)

However, the situation was in reality a much more complex one, and it is this complexity which is reflected in *Il partigiano Johnny*. How peasants or civilians treated partisans depended perhaps more on the progress of the war and on which side seemed to be the local power as much as any kind of collective or individual disposition. We should not forget that anyone caught helping the partisans faced execution or at the very least the destruction of their property. Johnny's initial education in the reality of the relationship between the partisans and the peasants is an unpleasant one. He witnesses a partisan assaulting an old man who questions the value of 'il buono' that the partisans have offered him in exchange for a young calf. Johnny himself feels sorry for the old man: 'Geo fu addosso al vecchio, presolo per la sciarpa di seta. Gli incombeva addosso come la carestia sopra la fetida, laida crassità [...]. Johnny, che aveva oscillato un attimo fra lo sdegno per quella immediata brutalità ed il disgusto per la calcolata, laida avarizia del vecchio, sentí pena per la solitudine estrema del vecchio.' (PJ, 73-74) Here Johnny, before his first experience of combat – which would come 'nello stile piú squallido, meno poetico e meno incoraggiante (ibid., 83) –, is already being given a glimpse of the brutalities that war leads to, and is witnessing also the breakdown of social order: a young man beating up a weaker old man. Fenoglio, in his use of vocabulary, evidently signals his disapproval of this kind of behaviour. Nevertheless, he is also signaling to us the reader, that this is the authentic reality of the Resistance, and that this reality forms a necessary part of Johnny's education.

When the partisans seemed to be the victorious side, for example during their short occupation of Alba during October 1944, civilians and peasants seemed all too eager to be helpful. During the summer and early autumn, whole swathes of the Italian North were under the control of the partisans and formed what were known as ‘partisan republics’, the most famous of which were Carnia in the north-east, with 150,000 inhabitants, Montefiorino in the central Appenines, with 50,000 inhabitants, and Ossola in the extreme north with 70,000. Many believed that the war would be over before the onset of winter. As a character in one of Fenoglio’s later short stories observes with a mixture of nostalgia and irony: ‘Erano mesi meravigliosi. Avevamo, si può dire, un impero’ (Fenoglio 2007, 149). It is in this context – as well as because she is missing her own sons – that the *padrona* of a farm offers Johnny a bed to sleep in for the night rather than see him sleep in the barn. After the partisans have lost Alba (the larger partisan republics would also quickly be retaken by Nazi-Fascist troops) and it becomes clear that, with the Allies blocked at the Gothic Line just above Florence, the war will not be over so quickly, the treatment of partisans changes. Fenoglio states this clearly, in case anyone might be in doubt, in the banal, matter-of-fact language that he uses when wishing to stress the historical accuracy of what he is saying:

Tutta la gente stava cambiando, gradualmente, dappertutto. La disfatta partigiana in città aveva influito anche su loro, sulla loro speranza di una fine della guerra ragionevolmente vicina. Per mesi e mesi avevano dato ed aiutato e rischiato, unicamente in cambio di assicurazioni di un progresso verso la vittoria [...] Per mesi avevano dato e aiutato sorridendo, ridendo e facendo un mondo di fiduciose domande, ora dovevano cominciare a dare in silenzio, poi quasi sullenly, infine in muta e poi non più muta protesta. (PJ, 315)

The partisans are refused food, even when they have not eaten for two or three days. If they are given food, it is often only in exchange for money, or with great reluctance, and with the fear that the donors will be punished afterwards by the Fascists. As one peasant tells Johnny, before reluctantly offering to ‘throw’ a piece of bread to him: ‘i fascisti potrebbero tornare a controllare. E noi siamo stanchi di vedervi ammazzare, stanchi di essere chiamati ad assistere, le nostre donne gravide sfrasano tutte. Vattene lontano, per carità’ (ibid., 391). There are numerous examples of this kind of attitude in *Il partigiano Johnny*. It is clear, too, that Fenoglio has some sympathy with it. His main concern seems to be to paint an honest picture of the relationship between the Resistance and the peasant world. There could also, as Fenoglio shows, be a great deal of warmth between the peasants and the partisans. Certainly the peasants were of vital importance in helping partisans survive, a point that is reinforced by the philosopher and ex-partisan Sergio Cotta: ‘Chi ha vissuto l’esperienza partigiana sa bene che essa non sarebbe stata possibile senza l’aiuto costante della popolazione, soprattutto contadina [...] Solo chi non ha vissuto quell’esperienza può mettere in dubbio la realtà di quell’aiuto’ (1994, 26). The dependence of the partisans on the peasants became especially acute after 13 November 1944, when Field Marshal Alexander, the British commander of the Allied Forces in Italy, issued his proclamation by radio ordering the partisans to return home for the winter, and to wait until the spring for further orders. As Fenoglio put it, ‘Per tutto il tempo il comando alleato avrebbe agito come non fossero più esistiti partigiani’ (PJ, 398). The winter of 1944-45 saw many members of the Resistance lose their lives. It is this situation which is lived out at a micro-historical level by Johnny and his fellow partisans, Ettore and Pierre. When Ettore becomes seriously ill with a fever, the *padrona* wishes to throw him out of her barn because she is terrified that he will be discovered by Fascists.

She offers him a blanket to take with him into the woods. It is only Johnny's intervention which stops this from happening, when he offers to try and find some medicine in the village. However, when Johnny is away, Ettore is discovered and taken prisoner by Fascist soldiers, while the *padrona* is arrested and her house emptied of everything. Fenoglio is able to show us the practical and emotional consequences for individual human beings of decisions made by those in power at an international level. As a peasant sharing his memories with Nuto Revelli declared: 'Ho letto Pavese e Fenoglio, anche quella è storia, storia nostra' (Revelli 1977, 327).

The relationship of the Allies to the Resistance is also one which Fenoglio wishes to paint in an authentic manner, in the sense of wishing to be 'true' to history. In spite of the partisans' hopes and expectations, the Allies give them very little help. Johnny's companion, Ettore, describes the Allies as passing over them, 'senza occhio né pensiero per i poveri partigiani, per andare ad evacuare la loro panciata di bombe chissà dove' (PJ, 325). On one occasion, when an Allied aeroplane finally does approach them, the partisans rush forward to greet it, thinking they are going to be dropped a supply of arms. Instead, they are greeted with a burst of machine gun fire: 'Era certamente un aereo alleato, e gli uomini giù si sbracciavano a salutarlo. L'aereo si tuffò e mitragliò agli uomini e al mezzo con catastrofica repentinità' (ibid., 288). It is well-known now of course that the Allies distrusted the Resistance, especially its Communist elements, and were worried that if it grew too large and powerful there was a danger of a wide-scale civil war erupting with the Communists gaining power. The British were especially wary because of the civil war that had just started in Greece. Therefore, for most of the duration of the war in Italy, the Allies gave little help in the way of arms, money or food. The result was that the partisans simply did not possess the fire power or supplies to be an

effective military force for any length of time (hence the collapse of the partisan republics once the Nazi-Fascist troops turned their attention to them), although they could be highly successful in carrying out guerrilla attacks and terrorist campaigns. Substantial assistance was only given to the Resistance after its delegation from the CLNAI (*Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale Alta Italia*) went to Rome in November 1944 to seek recognition and help from the Allies. In return for assistance, the CLNAI promised that at the moment of liberation, they would obey unquestioningly the Allied Commander in Chief and surrender to the Allied Military Government ‘all authority and powers of local government previously assumed’ (cited in Ginsborg 1990, 57). As a result of this agreement, by the spring of 1945, the Resistance numbered around 100,000 members, excluding last-minute joiners, and had a huge stock of weapons. But as soon as the war in northern Italy was over, the Resistance was disbanded and their weapons handed over to the Allies. The bitterness felt by many ex-members and the difficulty they had in adapting to life after the war would be explored in some novels, most noticeably Cassola’s *La ragazza di Bube* (1960) and Fenoglio’s *La paga del sabato*. In the words of Pavone, ‘vi fu infatti la smobilitazione non solo dei partigiani in armi, ma di tutta la società resistenziale’ (2006, 590).

The whole arc of the relationship with the Allies – from disappointment with the lack of help and the slow progress of the Allies up the Italian peninsula, through to the excitement at the prospect of fighting alongside the Allies in the spring of 1945, and finally to the bitter disillusionment when they come to know the Allies and their attitudes to the Resistance at close quarters – is traced at a micro level in *Il partigiano Johnny*. Other writers of the Resistance, such as Viganò, have also been critical of the Allies, their contempt for the partisans, and their indiscriminate use of bombing. The difference in the

case of Fenoglio is that it forms part of his critical stance towards other aspects of the Resistance. Viganò, of course, blames the Allies for much of the suffering inflicted on the Resistance, while, for obvious political reasons, she paints a much more positive picture of the partisans themselves and of the Soviets. With Fenoglio there is also the fact that as someone who, like Johnny, had worshipped the culture and literature of the English as an ideal alternative, the disappointment takes on a highly personal tone. This is a point I shall return to later.

The historical role of politics and ideology in the Resistance is especially important for Fenoglio given the situation of the 1950s that I have outlined previously. Yet unlike the neorealists, Fenoglio was never a member of the Communist party, and was not even vaguely Marxist in the sense that Vittorini was. Fenoglio himself was distrustful of any kind of politics. In the 1940s he tended to hold conservative views and was a monarchist. After Mussolini had been asked to resign by the king on 25 July 1943, Fenoglio, then training as an officer cadet in Rome, sent a postcard to his father, saying: ‘A mio padre, vecchio alpino, viva il re!’ (cited in De Nicola 1989, 31). After the war, like the majority of his fellow inhabitants of the city of Alba, Fenoglio voted for retaining the monarchy and voted in favour of the Christian Democratic Party. However, by the early 1950s, as a result of his experiences of work as an *impiegato* and of seeing how ex-partisans had been treated, he had moved to the left. In June 1953, he wrote in a letter to Vittorini that he had voted for the Socialist Democratic Party (P.S.D.I.), but that he was not ‘convinced’ by them (Fenoglio 2002, 62). Fenoglio, fundamentally, was distrustful of politics. The young Johnny mirrors the conservative Fenoglio. In this, he was perhaps typical of the majority of Resistance fighters in Piedmont, where Monarchist sympathies tended to dominate, unlike areas such as Tuscany or Emilia Romagna, which had far more sympathy with left-

wing politics. In the Langhe, the Communists had to make much more of an effort to inculcate in the partisans an awareness of the political nature of the struggle than was the case in other regions⁵. Fenoglio's concern, on the whole, is not to discuss politics itself, but to examine its effects on the Resistance at a human level, for example the rivalries between the *rossi* and the *azzurri* over more serious matters such as control of territory and the acquisition of arms, and over more humorous matters such as the attention of girls.

Tensions between the two could erupt into violence, as is shown in a scene where after crossing a river to escape the Fascists, Johnny (who by this time is fighting for the *Badogliani*) and his companions are apprehended by Communist partisans who tell them that their commanding officer wishes to interrogate them. The implication is that they are deserters. Johnny's reaction is to insult them and then to beat one of them up. He is beside himself with fury:

Gli diede lo sten nel solar plexus [...] Lo picchiava con lucida cecità, esattissimamente sugli occhi e sulla bocca. Mai si era sentito così furioso e distruttivo, così necessitante dell'odio e del sangue [...] Gli arrivavano lontanissime le voci di Pierre e di Ettore, dicentigli che bastava, l'avrebbe ammazzato con pochi pugni ancora, ora bastava davvero. Ma Johnny colpiva ancora [...] (PJ, 382)

Throughout *Il partigiano Johnny*, Fenoglio makes it clear that he cannot abide Communism, which he saw as another threat to freedom, as much from the point of view of 1950s Cold War Europe as from the experience of the Resistance itself. Indeed, I would argue that Fenoglio is sometimes less than convincing when he expresses anti-Communist views through the mouth of Johnny, because one can feel that he is simply putting across his own (the author's views) and forgetting to see things as the young

Johnny would have. When Johnny flees into the hills to join the partisans, the first group that he stumbles across are Communists (this was also true for Fenoglio). Johnny is dismayed when he finds this out, but decides he has little choice other than to stay with them (at that time he does not know of the whereabouts of any other group). He justifies the situation to himself with the fact that they are fighting the same enemy: ‘Erano comunisti, ecco che erano: ma erano partigiani, e questo doveva bastargli. – Commies, Red Star...but so far as they fight Fascists’ (PJ, 57). Johnny discovers that many other people in the group are not really Communists, but, like him, are apolitical. As the partisan Tito puts it, when questioned by Johnny: ‘Io sono soltanto contro i fascisti. Sono nella Stella Rossa perché la formazione che ho incocciata era rossa [...]. Ma a cose finite, se sarò vivo, vengano a dirmi che sono comunista!’ (ibid., 62). When their Marxist leader, Némega, finds out that Johnny is a student of literature and can speak English, he asks Johnny to use his literary and linguistic skills to write for a Communist journal. Johnny’s reaction is immediate: ‘Io non farò nulla di simile [...] Io sono qui per i fascisti, unicamente. Tutto il resto è cosa di dopo. [...] Really, I’m in the wrong sector of the right side’ (ibid., 70-71). It is in this last scene that I find Johnny’s reaction to be unconvincing. As someone who has only just joined the partisans and who has had no experience of combat, he seems to be far too sure of himself in his response to the partisan leader in comparison to his still hesitant approach to his new partisan companions. The description of Némega’s facial expressions too obviously expresses Fenoglio’s (rather than Johnny’s) dislike of him. Communism is compared to a kind of blindly fanatical Christianity, which as Fenoglio has already made clear through the mouth of Johnny in *Primavera di bellezza*, is also something which disgusts him: ‘È uno schifo, ti ripeto. Tutto ciò che è connesso al culto obbligatorio è uno schifo’ (PB, 20).⁶

The point, however, that Fenoglio is making against those on the left who would claim otherwise is that one could still fight and die for an idea of freedom and justice without needing a political ideology. In this he can be seen as being more in line with the spirit of the popular *Lettere dei condannati a morte della Resistenza italiana*, published in 1952, with its emphasis on giving memory to a unity beyond political affiliations. The difference is that Fenoglio as a novelist takes us through all the gritty and contradictory experience behind this.

One can look at many other aspects of *Il Partigiano Johnny*, too, for example the military tactics of the Resistance, issues of partisan justice, or even, though to a lesser extent, the role of women – ‘combatterono, fuggirono per la loro vita, conobbero strazi e orrori e terrori sopportandoli quanto gli uomini’ (PJ, 160) – to show that Fenoglio’s ‘desire in *Il partigiano Johnny* is not to transcend his times, but to reflect the colours of historical reality’ (Cooke 2000, 10). It is this reality which acts as an education, a *Bildungsroman* for Johnny and those of his generation. Nevertheless, it is within the context of this collective reality that he must make his own individual choice. It is a reality which challenges Johnny to examine his commitment to the Resistance on each occasion that he undergoes some kind of crisis. In this sense it is also a personal and existential reality that he must come to terms with.

3.4.4 The Testing of Johnny's Commitment

The testing of Johnny's commitment comes on each occasion when Johnny's own idealism, moral courage and physical endurance must be confronted with reality, and this will have been the same for other partisans, too, even if Johnny has his own individual and eccentric idealism, which makes him all the more credible as a flesh-and-blood human being. From the beginning of the first draft of *Primavera di bellezza*, when Johnny is a high school student, he is searching for an ideal, for something 'other', for an altogether different space in which he can find authentic fulfilment in contrast to what he sees as the appalling reality of Fascist Italy. The possibility of the 'other' is represented by 'England' and 'all things English'. Yet the young Johnny is aware that it is his own representation of the English rather than the English themselves which is important to him. He tells a friend: 'io non baratterei l'Italia con nessun altro paese al mondo, sia pure l'Inghilterra. Ma tu dovresti comprendere facilmente la mia posizione: l'anglofilia, l'anglomania se vuoi, come espressione del mio desiderio, della mia esigenza di un'Italia diversa, migliore' (PB1, 1278). At this stage, of course, the young Johnny cannot be said to 'know' 'the English'. He has never met any of them. His idea of England comes through his reading of English literature and history. Also, he has no idea of how a better Italy might be possible. Indeed, the most likely outcome he sees for himself and his friend is the most absurd death possible – dying in an attempt to kill those he most admires: 'creperemo tu ed io [...] Pensa all'esilarante tragedia: crepare per la causa fascista, distrutti nell'adempimento dell'ordine di distruggere gli uomini che la pensano come noi' (ibid.).

By the autumn of 1943, the ideal other will also be represented by the partisans. As I have mentioned before, when Johnny hears the word 'partigiano' for the first time, it immediately has connotations of a kind of perfect absolute, which Johnny and his friends see as offering an altogether different kind of possibility. It is with the hope of becoming a member of this elect community of partisans that Johnny sets off 'verso le somme colline' and into the romanticised 'vento urlante ed ubriacante' (PJ, 52). However, from the moment he sets eyes on the partisans, we have an idea that it is a civil war that Johnny will have to live through. When by late afternoon, he stumbles across a group of men who 'swarmed about [...] uniformati ed armati', he knows that 'questi erano i partigiani' (ibid., 54). He is not fooled by their grey-green uniforms into mistaking them for Fascist troops. And yet the fact that Fenoglio brings in 'il grigioverde fascista', which these men are wearing, and that he describes one 'in completo grigioverde, miserabile quindi come un soldato del Regio Esercito' (ibid.), highlights the fact that this group of partisans is made up of soldiers who have deserted and that they are to all appearance very similar to those whom they are going to kill and be killed by.

Johnny on his first nights and days with the partisans will be horrified at the squalor of their lives and at their lack of conscience when it comes to keeping night watch. He will discover that he has joined a Communist brigade, that the Communists are all too willing to exploit death for the purposes of political propaganda, but that the vast majority of ordinary partisans have very little political awareness. His first experience of combat, as I have outlined previously, will be a tragi-comic affair. He will kill for the first time and discover both the excitement and fear that a battle can produce. He will also be witness to a killing in cold blood, and will indeed eventually kill a spy in cold blood himself. The military weakness and incompetence of the partisans will also quickly become apparent.

Instead of using hit-and-run guerrilla tactics, they try to hold their positions until they are overwhelmed by the superior forces of German or German-backed Fascist troops.

Death will frequently come in a manner which is senseless, for example through a stupid accident such as crashing a car because of reckless driving. Even heroic deaths are futile, for example that of *Il Biondo* after the defeat and dispersal of the Communist partisans, or of Johnny himself at the battle of Valdivilla in Draft 2. Fenoglio's depiction of death as something 'absurd' and 'futile' can be contrasted directly with the portrait of the 'meaningfulness' of partisan deaths painted by Calamandrei in *Uomini e città della Resistenza*, first published in 1955. In Calamandrei's account, however eloquent and inspiring it may be, death becomes the *raison d'être* of the Resistance: it is because of the brave manner in which many partisans died that we should remember and honour the legacy and values of the Resistance. However, in Fenoglio's complex vision the suffering and deaths of Resistance members are not enough to distinguish them from the deaths of those who fought on the other side. Certainly, we should not be creating a kind of secular religion from them. As the historian Sergio Luzzatto states, 'Il fatto è che il criterio della "bella morte" non poteva bastare a distinguere moralmente i caduti per il duce dai caduti per la libertà. Misurare le cose al metro del coraggio davanti al nemico, o al metro dell'intensità di una fede, non aiutava a sceverare le ragioni dai torti, i valori dai disvalori' (2005, LX). Indeed, it could be argued that by commemorating the dead, one is in fact forgetting them because what we are commemorating is a sentimental version of war and death. We are forgetting the realities of war and also the bitter compromises that many ex-combatants had to make after war in order to survive. As Luzzatto also points out, it is dictatorships and neo-Fascists that are most in need of the 'religion of death', while genuine anti-Fascists have the 'faticoso privilegio di dover ricercare nella vita le

proprie ragioni di esistenza' (ibid., LXV). Fenoglio, then, can be seen to be anti-Fascist at a much deeper level in his continual interrogation of the Resistance and in his demand that we do not gloss over its terrible realities.

After the death of *Il Biondo*, Johnny abandons the Communist *rossi* and decides to try his luck with the 'autonomous' *Badogliani* or *azzurri*. Here, politically, he is more at home:

Quanto all'etichetta politica, i capi badogliani erano vagamente liberali e decisamente conservatori, ma la loro professione politica, bisogna riconoscere era nulla, sfiorava pericolosamente il limbo agnostico, in taluni di essi si risolveva nel puro e semplice esprit de bataille. L'antifascismo però, più che mai considerato, oltre tutto, come una armata, potente rivendicazione del gusto della misura contro il tragico carnevale fascista, era integrale, assoluto, indubitabile. (PJ, 158-9)

Yet, even in this new environment, 'Johnny naturalmente era un altro uccello in questo stormo' (ibid.). The image of a lone bird is one that returns later on in the book, when the nature of Johnny's commitment is examined in the light of the fact that he is by nature a solitary individual, who is often critical of the behaviour of his fellow partisans, for example: their recklessness, their self-deception, their disrespect for the property of civilians ('Ma quelli che dormono sul fienile hanno liberamente orinato sul foraggio, per pura pigrizia e incompetenza', 286), and their treatment of the 'liberated' city of Alba as a kind of first-class holiday camp ('si trattava di viaggi-premio: shopping, caffè, cinema e postribolo', 259). Johnny is critical, too, of the partisan commander Nord (although this criticism is mixed with admiration) for his decision in the first place to occupy Alba out of false hope and out of vanity, and for the importance that Nord attaches to the regal impressiveness of his entrance into the city, an entrance for which he has had a special uniform made: 'Arrivò il ventoso fruscio dell'automobile di Nord. Essa e gli occupanti erano pronti per l'ingresso trionfale. Due autisti, già in atteggiamento di gala, e sul sedile

posteriore solitario Nord, inguainato in una breath-taking tuta di gomma nera con cerniere abbaglianti' (ibid., 245).

Johnny's disillusionment will reach its peak after Field Marshal Alexander's proclamation at the end of November 1944. It is during this period that Johnny has some of his severest doubts, and considers abandoning the Resistance. They are doubts which are sometimes expressed in English, as if to reinforce the sense of his longing to return to his prewar literary self: 'Enough, enough, I don't want to be shot at any longer, I don't want to have to fly for life once more. [...] I'll hide in any house, in a cellar, I'll have myself maintained, I'll dress in civvy, I'll bury my sten' (ibid., 390). A miller puts to Johnny all the practical, common sense reasons why he should indeed go into hiding:

- Stanno facendovi cascare come passeri dal ramo. E tu, Johnny, sei l'ultimo su questi nostri rami, non è vero? Tu stesso ammetti d'aver avuto fortuna sino ad oggi, ma la fortuna si consuma [...] Perchè dunque stare ancora in giro, in divisa e con le armi, digiunando e battendo i denti? [...] La tua parte l'hai fatta e la tua coscienza è senz'altro a posto. Dunque smetti tutto [...] un ragazzo come te avrà certamente parenti e amici che lo nascondano. [...] Gli alleati sono fermi in Toscana, con la neve al ginocchio, e questa situazione permette ai fascisti di farvi cascar tutti come passeri dal ramo, come ho detto prima. [...] gli Alleati [...] vinceranno senza voi [...] voi partigiani siete di gran lunga la parte meno importante in tutto il gioco [...]. E allora perchè crepare in attesa di una vittoria che verrà lo stesso, senza e all'infuori di voi. (PJ, 459-60)

Johnny does not answer these arguments directly but instead replies: 'Mi sono impegnato a dir di no fino in fondo, e questa sarebbe una maniera di dir sí. [...] Io sono il passero che non cascherà mai' (ibid., 460). This can be interpreted as Johnny saying no both to the common-sense arguments of the miller and also to Fascism. By saying no, he is affirming what in another passage he calls 'i vitali e solenni attributi della libertà' (ibid., 448). It is, finally, a choice in favour of authenticity, of being worthy – however

ambiguously and problematically – of great historical events as opposed to the mediocre choice, determined by good sense, of hiding away and preserving one’s own skin.

3.4.5. The Meaning of Absolute Commitment

The confrontation with death that I have talked about earlier forces Johnny to consider the possibility of his own death and what this death, which would be absurd, would mean for his own life. Heidegger stresses the fact (perhaps banal, but not one we think about) that we usually learn about death through the deaths of others. He goes on interestingly to claim that this learning is nearly always a superficial one, that we are denied or miss the opportunity to come to understand the importance of death and are not allowed to experience an ‘anxiety’ which would enrich our sense of our own lives: ‘for the most part Dasein covers up its ownmost Being-towards-death, *fleeing in the face* of it [...] The “they” gives its approval, and aggravates the *temptation* to cover up from oneself one’s ownmost Being-towards-death’ (Heidegger 2010, 295-97; italics in the original).

The partisans like anyone in the front line of war no longer have the luxury that we usually have in the modern western world of being able to ‘flee in the face’ of death. Johnny, as a witness to the deaths of others – which nearly always come ‘out of the blue’ and in circumstances over which the victims have no control – asks himself when his own time to die will come. The longer the war goes on, the more likely it seems that he too will be killed. It is this above all which makes him question his commitment to the Resistance and ask himself what significance his life will have had if he is killed. Johnny gains no satisfaction from the death of a Fascist, for this only brings closer to home the

fact of his own mortality. If he kills, it only increases the likelihood that he will be killed in turn. He is especially anxious about the possibility of his own death when the final victory is near:

All here are mad [...] for now they exclude every thought of their own death, simply because we are drawing nearer and nearer to the end. But I cannot acanton the thought of my death [...] I think of it more and more, for the end and its whereabouts will have the grander number of dead. (Ur-PJ, 75)

As Saccone points out, with reference to Heidegger, this thought goes beyond a merely personal fear of one's own death: 'questa non è paura, semmai angoscia dinanzi alla rivelazione dell'assurdità di tutto' (1988, 192).

Nevertheless, Johnny in each case is able to use this anxiety to make an 'absolute' commitment to the Resistance. In the philosophical terminology of Badiou, Johnny, ultimately, becomes 'disinterested in a radical sense' and 'indifferent' to his own 'perpetuation' (Badiou 2001, 49). He comes to a point where, in an existential manner, he can project himself into a future, which 'render[s] empty all considerations of renunciation' (ibid., 53). Indeed, it might be claimed that by dying for the Resistance – as Johnny does at the end of the second draft – he has led a more authentic life than he would have, had he lived to find a kind of 'death in life' in the disillusioned mediocrity of post-war Italy. We have to remember that Fenoglio was writing from the point of view of the 1950s, at which time he was making his living as a clerk in a wine-export company, living at home with his mother and father, and having continuous troubles with editors who failed to comprehend what he was attempting to achieve in his writing. But given this 'betrayal' of the Resistance, given the fact that in spite of all the suffering and killing,

the Allies would have been victorious without (as Johnny sees it) the Resistance's paltry defence of a few hills⁷, given the sentimental version of events that would later find sanction in later histories, we must ask: would Johnny's death have been worth it? Sartre would answer in the affirmative. Even though I, as an individual, cannot control the historical situation in which I find myself, even 'if one assumes the gratuity and the contingency of one's point of view [...] I am within "the course of the world" and I contribute to its happening' (Sartre 2000, 316). Sartre gives the example of a pacifist who does everything possible so that a war can be avoided. When war breaks out, this does not mean that the pacifist changes his point of view concerning it, even if his protest against the war results in his own death. Rather, he should use the experience of war as 'an opportunity for unveiling the world' (ibid.). What is important, according to Sartre, is that one responds 'in good faith' (for Heidegger 'authentically') to the situation in which one finds oneself. Whatever choice one makes in a particular situation will lead to other choices, which in turn will lead to another set of choices, and so on. If Johnny had chosen to hide rather than to join the Resistance, then his life might have been very different. This point is brought home in Draft 1 of *Il partigiano* when – during the short time that the partisans are able to occupy Alba – Johnny bumps into an old acquaintance, Alessandro, on the street. Fenoglio, looking through Johnny's eyes, claims 'L'imboscamento, la seclusione l'avevano invecchiato e inviziosato [...] Gli strinse la mano con una clutch feroce e subito smorto e la sua voce era segata, isterica' (PJ1, 1654). Alessandro does not like the partisans, but dislikes the Fascists even more and asserts 'non mi piaceranno mai' (PJ1, 1655). In a sense, Alessandro represents the diminished condition that Johnny would have found himself in had he chosen to hide, since Johnny before joining the Resistance had expressed similar sentiments to those of Alessandro.

Now that Johnny has joined the Resistance, Alessandro puts endless questions to him about what life is like as a partisan, how well-armed they are, what kind of relationship they have with the Communists. Johnny responds coolly, 'Nel tuo nascondiglio devi aver letto e pensato un bel po' ' (ibid.). Johnny is not going to give Alessandro any advice since it is clear that Alessandro has already made up his mind to remain in hiding. Some comparison can be made here between Johnny's answer and Sartre's famous refusal to advise a young man on whether he should join the Free French and escape to England or stay in France to help his invalid mother (Sartre 1966). In both cases, the asker has already made his 'choice', though one perhaps feels more sympathy for the young French man!

It is a choice that Johnny must make again and again each time he is a witness to death and each time his ideals crash against reality. In Heideggerian terms, 'Dasein only discovers itself as it grasps reality' (Steiner 1978, 84). This is made most evident during the winter of 1944-45. After losing several of his companions, and in spite of great physical hardship, Johnny can affirm his commitment:

E Johnny entrò nel ghiaccio e nella tenebra, nella mainstream del vento. L'acciaio delle armi gli ustionava le mani, il vento lo spingeva da dietro con una mano inintermittente, sprezzante e defenestrante, i piedi danzavano pericolosamente sul ghiaccio affilato. Ma egli amò tutto quello, notte e vento, buio e ghiaccio, e la lontananza e la meschinità della sua destinazione, perchè tutti erano i vitali e solenni attributi della libertà. (P.J., 448)

This has echoes of Heidegger's claim that 'along with the sober anxiety which brings us face to face with our individualised potentiality-for-Being [and therefore ceasing to be], there goes an unshakeable joy in this possibility' (2010, 358). But for Fenoglio, reality is never that simple. On the same page, he punctures this heroism with a description of

Johnny the next morning waking up under a pile of hay and imagining that he is being looked after by a beautiful blond nurse in a Swiss sanatorium. In true modernist fashion, Johnny (and Fenoglio with him) remains doubtful, suspended, and human. All this makes for a believable moral realism, where the 'truths' of philosophy are tested against the truth of fiction, which as Richard Rorty has pointed out, is 'time-bound' and 'embedded in a web of contingencies' (2005, 107).

Even after the winter is over and the partisan units regroup with new weapons, goods and money supplied by the Allies, Johnny has to face new absurdities. These are revealed in the neglected *Ur partigiano Johnny*, written almost entirely in English. It is above all *Ur partigiano Johnny* which shows a mature Johnny, one who has the Allied victory clearly in sight and yet who also faces the possibility of his own death before this victory is finally accomplished.

Ur partigiano Johnny begins in the spring of 1945 with Johnny – instead of being killed at the battle of Valdivilla, as he is at the end of the second draft – returning to Mango. Here the survivors of the battle feel 'now the tremendous tiredness of the day and an absolute surfeit of fighting and peril' (Ur-PJ, 3-5). Johnny is told by North, the commander, that the way they fought has been 'admired' by the English Mission. Immediately, Johnny is overwhelmed with excitement at meeting the men he has idealised since being a high school student. In spite of the Allies' slow progress up the Italian peninsula and their indiscriminate bombing, Johnny still has an idealised Other which he projects onto the English. We can imagine Fenoglio the author smiling to himself ironically as he continues the story: 'Johnny's heart stopped beating at these last two words and he cast eyes to the opposite hills [...] thinking THEY were somewhere up there' (ibid., 5). The reference to the 'hills' is strongly reminiscent of Fenoglio's earlier

references to 'le colline' in the first part of *Il partigiano Johnny*. They continue to represent new possibilities, new spaces, and a reaffirmation of Johnny's commitment to the Resistance. When Johnny is informed that he is to be taken to meet the English Mission, a fellow partisan enviously tells Johnny '[you are] going to the job you were born for' (ibid., 5). Upon first seeing 'il capitano Boxhall' and 'il tenente Whitaker', Johnny yearns 'to be one of them, *to be them*, and the khakhi the very colour he was born in and for' (ibid., 7).

Johnny soon learns that his admiration for them is not reciprocated by *their* attitude towards the Italians. At a supper attended by both British soldiers and Italian partisans, a drunken Whitaker wonders out loud of a *staffetta* what the possibilities are that he will have sex with her. When Boxhall tells him to be quiet for fear of offending the Italians, Whitaker declares openly: 'Oh, I go through these whole black bastards. They're too much depending on us, aren't they? [...] I say again I'll go through all these black bastards' (ibid., 17-19). It is the kind of bitter disillusionment which has been documented by other writers as well as Fenoglio. For example, Cristoforo Mosconi Negri in his memoir *Linea Gotica* speaks of how the partisans found in the British army 'un muro di indifferenza, di ostilità, di rancore e di disprezzo' (2006, 69), and is dismayed when he finds that the British use the Italian flag as a cover for their latrines.

Johnny also learns that there is no love lost between the British and the Americans. Whitaker refers to them as 'coglioni motorizzati' (ibid., 21) in Johnny's translation of the term 'motorised cullions' (though perhaps 'bollocks on wheels', as Cooke has suggested, is the best translation back into English). When Johnny is later asked by a fellow partisan if he feels 'in' his 'center' with the British, Johnny replies, 'if all Englishmen are like these, you'll see me weeping like a child' (ibid., 23). He discovers, also, that the main

preoccupation of some of the British is to survive to the end of the war; they have lost their commitment to defeating the Nazis and Fascists since victory will be theirs anyway. This is the kind of 'common sense' morality, the voice of the 'they' that Johnny so much despises. Even if he too is preoccupied with this own death and is aware that his own actions will make no measurable difference to the Allied effort, he struggles to remain committed to the Resistance.

Soon he finds himself wishing the British 'had never come and he remained the partisan he superiorly felt himself in the lone, desperate winter' (ibid., 79-80). He does however develop a friendship with 'Keany', a literary-minded Englishman, the only Englishman that Johnny really has anything in common with. Keany points out that although the British are on the 'winning side', the war will end in their loss of power and in the rise of American power. In this sense, the British will have been 'defeated', while the Italian partisans who survive will return to a mediocre existence in civilian life.

For Bigazzi, *Il partigiano Johnny* is a *Bildungsroman* in that Johnny comes to realise that he really belongs among the partisans, among his own kind. According to Bigazzi, Fenoglio, like the *veristi* of the nineteenth century, develops a kind of fidelity to the cause of 'i perdenti', the fighters of the Resistance who will never be rewarded for their sacrifice. However, I believe the truth to be more complex, and perhaps a little more hopeful than that. Yes, Johnny does see the partisans in a more favourable light after his experiences with both the British and Americans, and feels, temporarily, that this is where he belongs more than with the Allied army. However, towards the end of the book, after he has spent some time among the Italians again, Johnny in contradictory fashion 'felt himself alone' and finds that 'a longing mastered him, for Englishmen, and English company, english chat and english laughter' (ibid., 341). Saccone rightly emphasises that

Johnny continually oscillates between feelings of separateness and belonging. Each time, however, I would contend that this oscillation leads to a renewed commitment.

I believe the key to understanding more of the nature of Johnny's 'absolute' commitment, the 'journey' he has made, and how this can be seen in existentialist terms, can be found towards the end of the book. Here Johnny's disillusionment reaches a crisis. Standing near a church, feeling depressed after witnessing an argument between Communists and *Badogliani*, he is terrified both of the coming victory, and its possible consequences, and of his own possible death before that. His thoughts are worth quoting at length to bring the point home and to convey the powerful atmosphere of the last chapter (that we have) of *Ur partigiano Johnny*:

He thought constantly [...] of the end drawing nigh (he addirittura refused listening to radios just not to listen to that flood of positive news), of the general assault to the cities, to TURIN, the last fightings in the stifled streets, the fallings on the pavés and the trolleys-rail, the insidies of the snipers from the scalding roofs precipitous on the boulevards... the racing noise of the searchers and the searched-out, their different cries [...] the silence of the executors and of the executed. (Ur-PJ, 331)

In a scene reminiscent of Camus' *L'Étranger*, a priest appears. But unlike Camus' priest who comes offering comfort to Meursault before his execution, the priest who materialises in front of Johnny is 'looking at him askant and with no sympathy' (Ur-PJ, 331). Johnny is grateful for this. He wants to be alone 'in the persistent flood' of his own thought. Again with echoes of Camus, it is at this point that a kind of 'awakening' comes to Johnny: an acceptance of his own limitations together with a deep sense that it has all been worth it whatever the outcome at the end. It is a reaffirmation of the authenticity of his original decision to join the Resistance, to respond to 'the call' of the 'event', even

after his 18-month experience of its reality. The voice at first seems to be not his, but ‘another voice within him’:

Then, don’t worry about the end, for you have no remedy against it. You will go into it, as you have ever gone into all from the beginning [...] You’ve a fearful look, if you could see yourself, for a boy of your age and in this blessed season [...] Oh, yes, thought Johnny, beaming [...] inwardly, it is precious to have been in it, since long, since the beginning. If I were not in it now, now I think I’d...kill myself, out of shame, out of my cretinery in not sharing it... (Ur-PJ, 333)

The voice then comes from within, but is also a response to history, a case of being ‘disponibili’ in the full knowledge and experience of ‘anxiety’ of one’s own death. Heidegger would have described it as ‘Dasein’s calling itself’, which, according to Heidegger, can be the only genuine call to authenticity, but which must also be in response to the historical situation in which Dasein finds itself. Johnny here experiences a Heideggerian moment of ‘resoluteness’: ‘When resolute, Dasein has brought itself back from falling, and has done so precisely in order to be authentically “there” in the “moment of *vision*” as regards the Situation which has been disclosed’ (Heidegger 2010, 376; italics in text).

Any possible pomposity however is punctured shortly afterwards by the comment of Marino, another partisan, who tells Johnny ironically that he has ‘the true countenance of the exiled one’ (Ur-PJ, 335). Indeed, as I have made clear, it is Fenoglio’s gift throughout *Il partigiano Johnny* to be able to move directly from the tragic (‘authentic’) to the comic (‘inauthentic’), and thus to create a greater, a more authentic ‘authenticity’.

The final affirmation comes at ‘the end’ of the book (the ‘end’ as long as no new text is discovered – we can never be sure what Fenoglio would have done), where the partisans

fighting alongside the Allies, are able in an ambush to defeat a combined force of Italian and German soldiers:

They were all putting coups, raging and methodical at the very verge of the ditch-lid, at the lilliput patches of wermacht-green popping up and down. Johnny felt a grand rush behind him [...] and from there raffling sharp and diagonal to the output of the ditch. The short raffles caused explosive-jets of gravel... a white handkerchief, stone-weighted, flew shortly in the middle-air and crashed in the road. (Ur-PJ, 365).

I find this last image of a ‘white handkerchief, stone-weighted’ a poignant and evocative one. It represents in a single, haiku-like image the defeat of Fascism and Nazism in which the partisans can finally feel, fighting alongside the British, that they have accomplished what they set out to do, having now contributed themselves, in some measurable manner, to the outcome they have so much desired. It is true that disillusion will follow in the ‘hollowness of victory’, but as Johnny had said when he first joined the Resistance: ‘Io sono qui per i fascisti [...] Tutto il resto è cosa di dopo’ (PJ, 70).

3.5 Fenoglio’s Use of Language as Commitment to Authenticity

As we have seen in Chapter 1, for the neorealists, there was a commitment to the idea of ‘bearing witness’, which necessarily involved a blurring of the line between autobiographical and fictional work, between document and literature. This meant being ‘authentic’, or being ‘true to’ the perceived reality of the experience of war. However, as I have also pointed out, writers such as Calvino, Pavese and Vittorini made clear that

unless art and imagination were applied, a straightforward or ‘true’ account of what happened would remain unconvincing.

As Cooke (2000) and others have suggested, the Fenoglio of the mid-1950s was well aware of problems with representing the experience of the Resistance in writing. Even in the *Appunti partigiani* of 1946, Fenoglio already shows dissatisfaction with a ‘documentary’ style. Although he frequently uses short, paratactic sentences and tells his story in the present tense, like diarists such as Nuto Revelli, he never simply lets ‘the facts speak for themselves’, but, as I have shown in Chapter 2, from the beginning uses certain details to create a ‘reality effect’.

Fenoglio famously never developed a set of poetics or wrote any critical essays. However, if we look at his fiction, the Fenoglio of the 1950s seems to be tackling the issue of capturing the ‘reality’ not only of the Resistance, but of the larger experience of war in a book. In *Ur partigiano Johnny*, the now-veteran partisan Johnny is asked by Marino, a younger partisan, if the idea of writing about their experience is a surprising one. Johnny replies that he knows ‘dozens’ of people taking down notes, ‘voyaging with a block just like yours in their knapsacks’ (Ur-PJ, 243). He is dismissive of the literature that will come out of it, implying that the distance of time is necessary for the creation of ‘the book of books on us’ (ibid.). In what seems like a reference to the numerous partisan memoirs of the 1940s, he writes:

As soon as the war ends, there will be no other concern for them than editors.

- And... who will emport the laurel? Who will have written the book of books on us?

Johnny sighed: - Nobody of you, nobody of us. The book of books on us will be written by a man is yet unborn [...]. (Ur-PJ, 243)

A similar scene is referred to in an uncompleted short story, probably written by Fenoglio in the last year of his life. In this story, it is as if an older Fenoglio is speaking to himself as he was in 1944-45:

Sapevo che il mio compagno Jerry scriveva della guerra. Troppe volte l'avevo addocchiato intento a scrivere, freneticamente, seduto ai piedi d'un albero o appoggiato a un muricciolo: talvolta scriveva fino a buio, orientandosi verso l'ultima luce solare. (Fenoglio 2007, 146)

The narrator approaches Jerry and in the ensuing conversation paraphrases Walt Whitman to reveal his belief that the reality of the experience of war can never be captured in literature:

Mi sentii toccato e per un minuto aspirai dalla Craven A.

- Sai, - dissi poi, - che ha scritto Walt Whitman della guerra? Lui si riferiva alla guerra di Secessione, ma naturalmente vale per tutte le guerre.

La curiosità ardeva nel suo viso quasi scancellato dal buio.

- *War can't be put into a book*, - citai in inglese.

- Questo è vero, verissimo, - disse con una sorte di disperazione. Me ne sto accorgendo. È come svuotare il mare con un secchiellino. (Fenoglio 2007, 147-48)

We can see then that there is a substantial difference between those who believed that testimony could be a way of conveying the reality of the Resistance, and the view of Fenoglio, who after struggling with the issue himself for years in his own writing, believed the task to be beyond any writer's capability. Yet it was precisely this challenge that Fenoglio took up. It is as if his highly original use of language (which I shall be discussing shortly) in *Il partigiano Johnny* is an attempt to close the gap between meaning and reality, but in the knowledge that this is impossible. One way Fenoglio

sought to achieve this was by continually working and reworking his material. His attitude to writing was summed up in a response to a 1960 questionnaire, for a series of articles entitled *Ritratti su misura di scrittori italiani* published in the journal *Sodalizio del libro*:

Scrivo per un'infinità di motivi. Per vocazione, anche per continuare un rapporto che un avvenimento e le convenzioni della vita hanno reso altrimenti impossibile [...] anche per restituirmi sensazioni passate; per un'infinità di ragioni, insomma. Non certo per divertimento. Ci faccio una fatica nera. La più facile delle mie pagine esce spensierata da una decina di penosi rifacimenti. Scrivo with a deep distrust and a deeper faith. (Fenoglio 2001, LVIII)

Fenoglio, then, has a 'deep distrust' of the possibilities of literature, yet has an even 'deeper faith' in the importance of trying to fulfil these possibilities. The rich and innovative quality of the language of *Il partigiano Johnny* is apparent from the beginning. Fenoglio wants to show us what it was like, not simply to chronicle what happened. He will frequently change the facts in order to reach the 'truth of fiction'. Fenoglio himself is reported to have said as much in 1952 to his close friend and fellow former partisan, Piero Ghiacci (who becomes the 'Pierre' of *Il partigiano Johnny*):

Beppe mi disse che era assai impegnato, e si tormentava perché la narrazione doveva avvincere il lettore tanto da portarlo a vivere nell'episodio. In particolare ci teneva che la fuga attraverso le maglie del rastrellamento (quello del novembre/dicembre 1944) gli facesse provare l'angoscia della sopravvivenza. 'Ci metto anche qualche collina in più, ma devo ottenere l'effetto incalzante e senza respiro del rastrellamento.' (Ghiacci, cited in Negri Scaglione 2000, 34)

Maria Corti has emphasised the autobiographical nature of Fenoglio's work, especially *Ur partigiano Johnny* which has 'un carattere di diario squisitamente autobiografico in quanto età del personaggio, date varie, vicende anche minute sono in effetti età, date e

vicende personali di Fenoglio' (Corti 1978, 56). However, the autobiographical element has been exaggerated, and as we now know, *Il partigiano Johnny* was not written just after the war as Corti and others believed. Fenoglio was quite ready to sacrifice factual truth for greater dramatic effect. For example, his protagonist Johnny sets off by himself for the hills in search of a partisan group to join. In reality, as I have outlined at the beginning of Chapter 2, Beppe Fenoglio set off with his brother Walter. The fictional Johnny abandons the *Stella Rossa* brigade to join the *Badogliani*, while the real Beppe Fenoglio after the defeat of the *Stella Rossa* by the Fascists at Carrù, 3 March 1944, returned home with his brother to his parents' house, not joining the *Badogliani* until September that same year. So that while many of Fenoglio's novels and short stories are based on his own experience and contain many autobiographical elements, they are certainly not autobiographies in the generally understood sense of the word. It might be more accurate to apply Philip Cooke's term 'fictive autobiography' to works such as *Primavera di bellezza* and *Il partigiano Johnny*, where Fenoglio is able to use the third person to tell the story both from the more detached view of the author, Fenoglio, and from the more subjective view of Johnny, the protagonist. Bigazzi and Cooke have already conducted an extensive analysis of the relationship between the 'eyes' of Johnny and the 'binoculars' of Fenoglio, and so I shall only illustrate my point with one example, that of a description of the fear that comes after his first experience of battle (though not his first experience of being shot at and seeing his comrades killed by Fascists), a fear shared with his fellow partisans and which creates a bond with them:

Posò il moschetto e si sedette su un tratto libero del muretto, altissimo. La stanchezza l'aggređì, subdola e dolce, e poi una rigidità. Poi nella sua spina dorsale si spiralò, lunga e lenta, l'onda della paura della battaglia ripensata. Anche

agli altri doveva succedere lo stesso, perché tutti erano un po' chini, e assorti, come a seguire quella stessa onda nella loro spina dorsale. Una battaglia è una cosa terribile, dopo ti fa dire, come a certe puerpere primipare: mai più, non mai più. Un'esperienza terribile, bastante, da non potersi ripetere, e ti dà insieme l'umiliante persuasione di aver già fatto troppo, tutta la tua parte con una battaglia. Eppure Johnny sapeva che sarebbe rimasto, a fare tutte le battaglie destinate. (PJ, 100)

In the first sentence – ‘Posò il moschetto e si sedette su un tratto libero del muretto altissimo’ – it is the author speaking, looking at Johnny from somewhere nearby. In the second sentence – ‘La stanchezza l’aggređí, subdola e dolce, e poi una rigidità’ – it is still the author speaking, as if remembering, but we are also made to feel the sudden shock of tiredness and stiffness from Johnny’s point of view. We then move, as it were, behind Johnny’s eyes and observe the others who are bent over in the same way that Johnny is. In the following sentence, in a moment of intimacy with the reader, it is as if we are addressed by Johnny himself explaining his feelings and sensations to us: ‘Una battaglia è una cosa terribile, dopo ti fa dire...’ Here, Johnny seems to be talking both to other partisans who have undergone similar experiences and also to those in the community who have been affected by such events and perhaps listened to partisan accounts. More distant readers, perhaps in another country and in another time, will have the illusion while they read that they too are personally involved in the story that is being told. This manner of using indirect speech, where a character seems to address the reader and appears to be representing a collective voice as well as his or her own individual voice was common to many neorealists and had been used as an important narrative technique by Verga. It helped to promote the idea that the protagonist of a book was relating a true experience that had been shared by an entire community. The intention was to avoid rhetoric or the patronising tone of an intellectual talking down to less-educated people,

and to instead ‘adottare uno sguardo dal basso sui fatti descritti, vicino al livello di consapevolezza dei personaggi’ (Falcetto 1992, 171-72). For example, in *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, Calvino in telling his story frequently adopts a tone and language which not only see events from the boy Pin’s point of view, but which also attempt to represent the view of a community, as in this brief portrait of a partisan: ‘Il Dritto è un giovane magro, figlio di meridionali emigrati, con un sorriso malato e palpebre abbassate dalle lunghe ciglia. Di professione fa il cameriere; bel mestiere perchè si vive vicino ai ricchi e una stagione si lavoro e l’altra si riposa’ (Calvino 1987a, 107). In the case of *Il partigiano Johnny*, however, we are immediately afterwards back with the more ironic and distant author: ‘Eppure Johnny sapeva che sarebbe rimasto...’ In this sense, Fenoglio fulfils Korhonen’s criteria for fiction’s capacity to create ‘both an illusion of presence but also a critical distance from its objects [...] needed especially in cases where the event is too close, too sublime, or too horrible to be told in accordance with traditional methods’ (Korhonen 2006, 17).

As we have seen, one of the principal tools that Fenoglio employs throughout his work, but with a heightened effect in *Il partigiano Johnny*, is the use of metaphors and similes to startle us into experiencing the Resistance with the partisans.⁸ For example, describing German soldiers climbing the sides of a hill, he compares them to ‘uno sciame di formiche verdi montanti un dissanguato legume’ (PJ, 137). We have then, the unusual image of a swarm of ‘green’ ants climbing a bloodless vegetable, as if they are destroying the Langhe hills themselves, and thereby any kind of safe haven for the partisans. The effect of images such as these is often heightened by the unexpected use of English words. In the example given just now, Johnny discovers on a more careful inspection of the German soldiers that they are in fact Fascists in German uniforms: ‘Vestivano divise

tedesche nuove di zecca, ma dainty ed arrangiate come non succedeva di vedere ai tedeschi indosso' (ibid., 136). The use of an English word here in an Italian sentence highlights the irony of the word 'dainty'. It makes a reader of the Italian text pause, smile for a moment. It heightens the sense of amazement which the reader is made to feel with Johnny, who as an ardent reader of English literature will be thinking in literary English as well as in Italian. Finally, it provokes us into considering the differences not only in appearance but also in character between the Germans and Italians. This brings us to the controversial question of language in *Il partigiano Johnny*.

In his answer to a 1960 questionnaire, Fenoglio made the revelation that his novel *Primavera di bellezza*, which as I have made clear can be read as the first part of *Il partigiano Johnny*, 'venne concepito e steso in lingua inglese. Il testo quale lo conoscono i lettori italiani è quindi una mera traduzione' (Fenoglio, cited in Lagorio 1972, 3).⁹ However, Fenoglio not only made great use of English. As Beccaria (1984), Isella (2001), Montermini (2003) and others have shown in great detail, Fenoglio also employs French, Latin and Piedmontese, to create 'una lingua non grammaticalizzata, duttile, scomponibile e ricomponibile [...] malleabile a proprio talento [...] sfruttando, al limite estremo, le possibilità implicite nell'italiano' (Isella 2001, XVIII-XIX).

Near the beginning of *Il partigiano Johnny*, in the meeting with Chiodi and Cocito, although not specifically stated, a sense is given that with the Resistance a new situation has been born, which will require a new kind of language beyond the greyness of standardised Italian, with the new word 'partigiano'. Saccone has even suggested that 'tutto il libro si potrebbe leggere anche come una ricerca di questo senso' (1988, 179). The use of different languages can be seen partially as a way to differentiate the exceptional qualities of the Resistance from the rest of the Italian experience. Fenoglio is

reported to have said to his friend Eugenio Corsini in 1955: ‘Devo rivolgermi alla letteratura inglese, oppure a quella francese, perché in Italia non abbiamo mai avuto una guerra civile, o una rivoluzione. E dunque non sappiamo come raccontarla, non abbiamo modelli a cui riferirci’ (Negri Scaglione 2006, 189). Above all, the use of English, as pointed out by Innocenti (2001), Pietralunga (1987) and others, can be seen as a moral choice. If the Italian language has been corrupted by its associations with Fascism, then English with its associations for Fenoglio with a Puritan morality can be seen as a way of reclaiming the integrity and moral value of literature (a point I shall return to in the next chapter).

There is also perhaps another reason for Fenoglio’s use of different languages. Fenoglio grew up in his family speaking a form of Piedmontese dialect. He learnt Italian at school, and later French and English. As is well-known, the young student Fenoglio read English literature extensively in the original. By using a mixture of languages, Fenoglio is perhaps attempting to represent the way in which the unworldly and literary Johnny perceived his experiences first as a conscripted soldier and later as a partisan (see Cooke 2000, 73-85). In this sense, Fenoglio is committed to telling his own particular truth of the Resistance.

Yet the frequent insertion of words and phrases from other languages represents only one aspect of Fenoglio’s innovation. For example, Fenoglio also changes English words into Italian words; uses the sentence structures of English or dialect to twist the syntax of Italian sentences; alters the normally understood sense of Italian nouns by using them in a new context; changes nouns into verbs, and intransitive verbs into transitive verbs; uses new compound adjectives; and, most famously of all, creates neologisms through the invention of prefixes and the altering of participles, to match, for example, the ‘un’ and

'ing' of English. Yet he is able to do all this without interrupting the involvement of the reader in his narrative. Indeed it is precisely this innovative usage of language which creates a sense of heightened, intensified experience. It is not a language which has the obviously self-conscious qualities of some modernist work, in the sense that it wants to draw attention to itself, or even of Vittorini with his repetitions of words and phrases in *Uomini e no*. However experimental the language can become, we as readers always feel grounded in historical reality. This is partly because of Fenoglio's references in *Il partigiano Johnny* to precise historical dates and events – for example, the reference to 8 September on the first page. However, it is also due to the use of a contrasting banal, 'naturalistic' language in dialogue, for example where Johnny's father exhorts Johnny to 'stay put' until the danger is past: 'Sì, ma prometti, a me e a tua madre, che non ti muoverai piú di qui. Se vuoi farti una sgambata, hai la tua collina, in un'ora intelligente' (PJ, 14). Indeed, perhaps it is true to say that Fenoglio uses different types of language in *Il partigiano Johnny* to differentiate between different types of reality. For example, to emphasise the historical unimportance of the partisans' efforts, Fenoglio uses an ironically grandiose language to describe the Allied aircraft flying overhead:

grosse argenteo formazioni di liberators diretti [...] sull'Austria o sulla Germania del Sud: veleggiavano grandiosamente, da galeoni, lasciandosi dietro sul non scalfito turchino dense, corpose, non labili scie di prezioso bianco dietro le quali i partigiani boccaperti esalavano l'anima. Poi ripiombavano gli occhi alla terra, guardando perplessi e depressi quel lillipuziano mondo che essi dovevano difendere, a finale obiettivo di quella guerra mondiale.' (PJ, 187)

In *Il partigiano Johnny*, Fenoglio is not simply using language to reflect reality, and also to show the experience of that reality through Johnny's literary eyes, but using it in a way which creates its own reality. Orsetta Innocenti warns us that we need to be cautious

about the kind of emphasis that critics such as Beccaria and Isella have put on Fenoglio's innovations, when it is clear that we are dealing with an unfinished work. Otherwise, we will make misguided comparisons between *Il partigiano* and some major experimental works of the twentieth century, and thus finish with the 'paradosso di utilizzare come base per la definizione del linguaggio di Fenoglio proprio l'opera abbandonata a uno stadio di elaborazione ancora non definitivo; un'impostazione critica che ha portato ad alimentare il mito di un Fenoglio gaddiano (se non addirittura joyciano), attivo sperimentatore delle estreme possibilità retoriche di un consapevole bilinguismo' (2001, 9). Nevertheless, although Fenoglio does not seem to wish to draw attention to language for its own sake in a modernist sense, there is always present what might be termed an aesthetic delight in the possibilities and energies of different kinds of language. Fenoglio's love of language is evidenced by the fact that after the war, instead of writing immediately about his experiences, as many other partisans did, or trying to find a job (in spite of intense pressure from his parents, as we have seen), he chose to spend much of his time translating excerpts from works of English literature, much of it theatre: Shakespeare, Synge, Shaw and Marlowe. He translated abundantly and 'freneticamente' (Negri Scaglione 2006, 117). He also translated the whole of *The Wind in the Willows*, not an easy task given the complex nature of some of Kenneth Grahame's descriptions. In the translation, not only does Fenoglio use words from dialect, for example 'tondi' for 'piatti', but is already, as Negri Scaglione states, beginning to 'elaborare una lingua, a crearla: sul calco dell'inglese, si inventa strutture nuove, giunti sintattici che caratterizzeranno il suo stile' (ibid., 119). Examples of this type of inventiveness given by Negri Scaglione are 'automobile togliente il respiro', 'il dormiente nel sonno Rospo', 'indugiante stria di luce'. This type of invention anticipates phrases in *Il partigiano*

Johnny, such as ‘la fissa visione della terra *sfacentosi* nell’umido buio’, ‘tiratori partigiani, *giocanti* alla guerra coi tedeschi’, ‘s’accostò agli slavi, *facenti* clan a sé’ (italics mine). It seems clear that Fenoglio has not only an ‘absolute’ commitment to the Resistance, but also to making a unique and authentic literature out of it. This commitment means that experimentation with language is also an essential part of Fenoglio’s work. Perhaps it is more useful here to think not so much of Joyce or Gadda, but rather the type of experimentation with language that poets such as Shakespeare and Gerard Manley Hopkins engaged in. Although it is a ‘poetic’ experimentation that may deform language, it is not simply a modernist attempt to subvert, or play with, expectations of traditional narrative, but rather springs from a poet’s desire to create a heightened sense of reality through the images and sounds created by words. Fenoglio learnt a great deal about the possibilities of language through his translations of English poetry as well as prose, above all perhaps with his notable translations of Hopkins, another author famous for his neologisms. In a rare and previously unpublished paper given to a small meeting of friends at Alba in 1950, Fenoglio noted Hopkins’ ‘assalto di immagini, questa marea di similitudini dirette’ in which ‘si contiene si inalvea perfettamente in un verso turgido e stringato al tempo stesso, assolutamente inimitabile e non riconducibile ad altri esempi, un verso che alla piena delle immagini risponde con una quantità folle, ebbra, di allitterazioni ed assonanze’ (Fenoglio 2000, 264). The possibilities of language were ones that Fenoglio never stopped exploring in order to search for the most authentic way of representing the experience of the Resistance in fiction. It is this unceasing search, which continued long after many other writers had forsaken the Resistance, which makes of Fenoglio’s work a uniquely committed literature.

3.6 The Resistance and Writing as 'Ethical Demands'

In this concluding section, I would like to briefly explore Fenoglio's frequent portrayal of the Resistance in a tragi-comic light in relation to the notion of an 'ethical demand'. This will help us to understand one important reason Fenoglio may have kept returning to the Resistance in his writing. I shall then look at Fenoglio's 'inner journey' as a writer in the next chapter.

The philosopher Simon Critchley usefully draws on Levinas' notion of the ethical demand felt as a 'trauma', on Lacan for ways in which this can be sublimated through tragedy, and on Freud for sublimation through 'humour'. For Levinas, 'the ethical demand is a traumatic demand, it is something that comes from outside the subject, from a heteronomous source, which leaves its imprint within the subject' (Critchley 2007, 61). Since this demand comes from something 'other', it is something that 'I' as a subject will never understand. It becomes a responsibility which I shall never be able to fulfil, however 'committed' I am (in the Sartrean sense) or 'faithful to the event' (in the sense proposed by Badiou). The question then arises: how can I as a subject in some way 'cope' with this demand in order not be condemned to a lifetime of guilt in the face of what Levinas calls my 'infinite responsibility'?¹⁰

At this point, Critchley, drawing once more on Lacan, turns to the notion of sublimation for 'aesthetic reparation' (2007, 9). For Lacan, artistic activity is the one way in which we can grasp the meaning of our own finitude and not be overwhelmed by 'reality' or by what Heidegger names 'facticity'. In the sublimation of art, we are given a relationship with the ethical demand which allows us to explore it without being crushed

by it. Lacan is of course borrowing from Nietzsche's idea that art saves us from truth, that art 'can turn these thoughts of repulsion at the horror and absurdity of existence into ideas compatible with life' (Nietzsche 2003, 40).

However, Critchley finds the tragic paradigm to be an inadequate one: it 'distorts the picture of human finitude by making the subject too *heroic*' (2007, 77). He argues instead for a notion of what he terms '*originary inauthenticity* at the core of subjective experience which opens in relation to the facticity of an ethical demand that I cannot fully comprehend and to which I am not adequate' (ibid., 78; italics in original). Because the ethical demand is, according to Levinas, unfulfillable, any action on my part will never be able to meet it. As a result of this, Critchley argues, 'any foaming wave of authenticity slips away into a deeper undertow of inauthenticity' (ibid.). It is only humour or 'comic acknowledgement' which can recognise and accept this inauthenticity, and help us to bear the weight of the ethical demand.

This brings us back to Fenoglio. Earlier I described the tragic and yet farcical scenes of a Fascist ambush and its aftermath. Johnny the partisan makes an 'authentic' choice to fight for the cause of the Resistance, but the ethical demand of the Resistance becomes unbearable and ultimately incomprehensible through its terrible reality. It can lead in extreme situations as much into 'inauthenticity' as 'authenticity'. Fenoglio, in his 'comic acknowledgement' of the partisans' human limitations, as much as in his depiction of the tragic, is able to sublimate trauma and make it bearable for us. At the same time, he is perhaps able to make it bearable for himself as he looks back and relives his experiences. And yet, the Resistance as an ethical demand was an 'infinite' one to which Fenoglio the writer had to keep returning until the end of his life. It is the journey shaped by this continual return that we shall now examine in the final chapter of this thesis.

Notes:

¹ For a discussion of Fenoglio's drafting process, alongside an analysis of other aspects of *Il partigiano Johnny*, see Saccone (1988, 53-96, 148-200).

² See Cooke (2011, 23-25).

³ Saccone believes that *Il partigiano Johnny* can only be regarded as a *Bildungsroman* in an allegorical sense: Johnny gradually comes to recognize his own separateness from others, 'con la conseguente accettazione del suo destino, della sua diversità senza illusioni [...]. Di "formazione" e di "educazione" si potrà parlare, secondo me, solo in questo senso. Un senso, mi pare, piuttosto che di progressione realistica, di progressione allegorica.' (1988, 96)

⁴ See, for example: Bowlby (2010), Morris (2003) and Tallis (1998).

⁵ See Cooke (2000, 114-16).

⁶ Saccone points out that there is also some envy on the part of Johnny towards the Communists' sense of conviction, just as an agnostic might envy the faith of Christians (1988, 177).

⁷ Fenoglio, looking through the eyes of Johnny, is not unique here. Meneghello writes of 'la nostra piccola guerra' (1999, 167). Calvino in his short story 'Paura sul sentiero', first published in 1946, describes how 'la guerra si rigirava allo stretto in quelle valli, come un cane che vuol mordersi la coda; i partigiani gomito a gomito coi bersaglieri e i militi; se gli uni salivano a monte gli altri scendevano a valle, poi gli uni a valle e gli altri a monte' (2006a, 10).

⁸ For an extensive discussion of Fenoglio's use of metaphor in *Il partigiano Johnny*, see Canepa (1991).

⁹ Interestingly, Meneghello revealed that he too wrote 'una prima versione organica dei *Piccoli maestri* in inglese' (1999, 230) at the beginning of the 1950s, and that he kept revising his work before he felt that it was ready for publication in its final Italian version in 1964.

¹⁰ For an illuminating discussion of Levinas' work, see Davis (1996).

Chapter 4

The Inner Journey: *Il partigiano Johnny* and *Una questione privata*

At its source, then, the *Bildungsroman* derives from the Christian narrative of the journey of the soul towards salvation. – Russell A. Berman

Il Padreterno ognuno se lo immagina come può. E il mio non assomiglia a quello dei preti. – Beppe Fenoglio

Whenever we stumble in literary works across a desire which starkly isolates a protagonist; renders him or her strange to themselves; expresses an ineluctable inner need; manifests an adamant refusal to compromise; invests itself in an object more precious than life itself; maroons a character between life and death, and finally bears him or her inexorably to the grave, we can be reasonably sure that we are in the presence of the Real. – Terry Eagleton

In the last two chapters, I have examined Fenoglio's historical and 'existential' commitment, and suggested that his work can in some sense teach us about 'ethics' and the ways in which we might be called upon to live our own lives, even if we have grown up in very different circumstances from those of Fenoglio or the protagonists of his stories. Even readers living in relatively prosperous circumstances in peacetime might be challenged by his work and indeed that of the neorealists to act as if their lives matter, with 'the notion that human events and actions are consequential, and therefore can and do make a difference historically and politically' (Re 2003, 107). In this final chapter, I shall examine Fenoglio's 'moral realism' as it is revealed in consistent and yet different ways through his two greatest novels *Il partigiano Johnny* and *Una questione privata*. It is a realism which is both rooted in history and yet also represents a quest for a 'celestial city', for an 'absolute reality'. In the end, it is not simply the Resistance or even Fenoglio's experience of the Resistance which is important, but the whole moral climate that the situation of war and its aftermath created, and beyond that, what this might mean

in a world where ‘God is dead’. *Il partigiano Johnny* and *Una questione privata*, as well as exploring the empirical realities of the experience of being a Resistance fighter, can also be read as a profound search for ‘the Real’, in the sense that Lacan would define it, and which I shall illustrate throughout the course of this chapter. Appreciating the dialectic between ‘reality’ and ‘the Real’ is one way to build that bridge between the historical and so-called ‘metahistorical’ (or ‘existential’) interpretations of Fenoglio’s work and to enrich our understanding of it. Again, I would reiterate the point here that although Fenoglio’s intended subject is certainly the historical Resistance (and not a deliberate illustration of philosophy, for example, or an allegory representing a universal life struggle with the forces of Fate), this does not mean that his work cannot *also* be read at a symbolic level. Stories are no more static than events, and our interpretation of them will change according to our human needs and to the circumstances in which we live.

4.1 *Il partigiano Johnny: the Search for the Celestial City*

Fenoglio’s short stories of the Resistance are concerned to interrogate the meaning of the Resistance, and to ask why it has not been able to change anything. We are presented with a reality and challenged to ask questions ourselves. Yet we are not taken on a great ‘moral quest’. It is only with *Il partigiano Johnny* that we as readers will make this journey with the protagonist Johnny and with the author Fenoglio. By reliving the experience of the Resistance through ‘the eyes’ of Johnny, Fenoglio is asking, not only for himself but for his generation, whether the war waged by the Italian Resistance really was the ‘right’

project to undertake. As we have seen in the last chapter, Fenoglio explores this question not only through his own memory, but also through the kind of ‘objectivity’ – the ‘binoculars’ – that only fiction will allow. The use of fiction permits Fenoglio to create a structure which interrogates the Resistance at its roots, enabling him to mix ‘facts’ with invented happenings in order to interrogate and explore reality in a way that ‘straightforward’ memoir might not be able to.

Like the incomplete *Appunti*, the structure of *Il partigiano Johnny* conforms in some important respects to that of the quest as defined by Booker, where ‘stories naturally shape themselves’ around ‘the pull of the hero towards some distant, all-important goal’ (2004, 83). Booker breaks down the shape of the story into various stages: from ‘The Call’, in which the hero is forced by circumstances into realising that things have gone unbearably wrong with the world and that only by making a dangerous and difficult journey can the world be ‘put right’; to ‘The Journey’, where the hero and his companions must face a series of increasingly complex and dangerous difficulties, such as monsters to defeat and temptations to be resisted; and finally through to ‘The Goal’, in which the ‘life-transforming treasure’ is won and kept forever.

Where Fenoglio’s epic differs from this model is of course towards the end of *Il partigiano Johnny*. Life in Italy, and in particular Fenoglio’s own life, was not ‘transformed’ at the end of the war in the way in which he, along with many, would have wished for. Indeed, it is as if Fenoglio, in a manner that is thoroughly modernist, is disappointed with ‘life’ itself because it cannot possibly conform any longer to a ‘grand narrative’. Given that this ‘grand narrative’ is no longer credible (unless it be some kind of fraud), *Il partigiano Johnny* – with its ‘pessimism’ and irony, its inconclusiveness, its linguistic innovation – undertakes a pilgrimage which, while based on an archetypal

structure, must also twist and distort this structure to reflect the reality of twentieth century warfare and politics. Nevertheless, it *is* very much a pilgrimage.

It is no coincidence that Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) is mentioned right at the beginning of *Il partigiano Johnny* and later quoted from (PJ, 365). Fenoglio, as has been well documented, and as he makes clear himself in *Il partigiano Johnny*, was fascinated from a very young age by seventeenth-century England and its Reformation, and by the creation of 'a new type of Englishman, invested with earnestness and a sense of mission' (Pietralunga 1987, 128). His philosophy teacher, friend and fellow partisan, Pietro Chiodi, states that Fenoglio 'viveva in questo mondo, fantasticamente ma fermamente rivissuto, per cercarvi la propria "formazione", in una lontananza metafisica dallo squallido fascismo provinciale che lo circondava. Più volte mi disse che da adolescente aveva spesso sognato di essere un soldato dell'esercito di Cromwell, "con la Bibbia nello zaino e il fucile a tracolla"' (Chiodi 2002b, 198). Fenoglio, although an atheist, was in a profound sense a 'religious' man seeking an alternative and rigorous code of ethics to live by. According to Pietralunga (drawing on the work of Davide Lajolo), 'there arose in Fenoglio the conviction that religion must become neither tabu nor the Tables of the Law' (1987, 127). The Catholic Church is seen in Fenoglio's works as corrupted by its associations with Fascism. For example, Johnny is told by one of his early 'guides', the partisan Tito, that the priests are not angered by Fascism but by the fact 'che il potere sia passato a noi' (PJ, 61). Here the 'a noi' perhaps refers not only to the passing of power from the church to the Communists and the Communist partisans (Tito is not in any case a 'believer' in the Communist cause), but from God to humankind. As Johnny replies to Tito, when asked if religion is 'important' to him: 'Diciamo che mi importa assai di più dei rapporti fra uomo e uomo' (ibid.). It is interesting to note that

Fenoglio was as consistent here in his life as he was in the books he wrote. He is reported by his younger sister Marisa to have said when asked why he refused to kneel on religious occasions that ‘Il Padreterno ognuno se lo immagina come può. E il mio non assomiglia a quello dei preti’ (cited in M. Fenoglio 1996, 41). Despite opposition, he would insist on being married in a civil ceremony – a courageous decision, given that in the Alba of 1960 this kind of ceremony was almost unheard of. As Negri Scaglione puts it, ‘La città è sempre stata organizzata intorno alla Chiesa [...] nessuno si è mai sposato in Comune’ (2006, 229). Fenoglio’s fascination with seventeenth-century England is also evidenced by the fact that he chose to translate almost the whole of Charles Firth’s biography of Cromwell, as well as key passages from Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Johnny’s continual wrestling with his own conscience has strong parallels with that of Christian, the protagonist of Bunyan’s work. Firth’s observations on Bunyan, which Fenoglio translated, state that ‘his conversion had been followed by a time of depression and mental conflict which lasted for many years. Other Puritans passed through the same struggle’ (Firth, cited in Pietralunga 1987, 129). We have then not only a comparison between Johnny and Christian, but also between Fenoglio and Bunyan, since both were torn between dreaming and action, between doubt and faith. In the case of Fenoglio, his doubts were about the ultimate value of the Resistance, a subject he felt compelled to examine time and time again. *Il partigiano Johnny* is his most ambitious attempt to explore, and perhaps to overcome, these doubts. At this point, it will enrich our understanding of Johnny’s moral quest if we can look at some of the parallels between Johnny and Christian more closely.

At the beginning of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, we see Christian (through the eyes of a narrator who ‘dreams a dream’) ‘clothed with rags, standing in a certain place, with his

face from his own house, a book in his hand, and a great burden upon his back [...] saying 'What shall I do?' (Bunyan 2008, 11) In the first pages of *Il partigiano*, we find Johnny in a similar position. He has returned home in borrowed, ill-fitting clothes after the political and military meltdown of September 8, 1943. Changing these clothes for his 'migliore abito borghese' (PJ, 5), Johnny goes into hiding in a small villa in the hills from which he can still see his home city, but from which he can also travel further into the hills. He has his books, among them *The Pilgrim's Progress*, from which he has 'nervosamente letto' (ibid., 6). On the second page of *Il partigiano Johnny*, we are introduced to a range of biblical and poetic images, which will recur again and again, as they do in Bunyan's work: the rain, the river, 'the stillness of night', the hills, the mist. (This is not to claim for a moment that Fenoglio did not also draw from a wide range of literature for these kinds of images, for example Dante, Romantic poetry, *Wuthering Heights* and *The Wind in the Willows*, as well as, of course, the very landscape around him.) The deeper reality of these elements, their 'truthfulness' one is inclined to say, is contrasted with what we might call the 'superficial reality' of his hiding place, the *villetta* which is 'stupida e pretenziosa', and the city below 'sotto un sole guasto', with its cathedral and its barracks 'entrambe due monumenti insensati' (ibid., 6). There is then, in Johnny, already a feeling of revulsion at different aspects of Italian society in September 1943: the civil (house and city), the military (barracks) and official religion (cathedral) – all those age-old points of reference which have made sense until now.

While Johnny hides away, many Italians, even at this point, are trying to pretend that nothing has happened – they seem almost unaware that a civil war is about to take place, and that they will soon feel the effects of its unimaginable brutality. Throughout the opening chapters, there is an atmosphere 'dell'attesa, dell'apertura, del protendersi'

(Canepa 1991, 125). The world has gone horribly wrong, but can and should Johnny do anything about it?

Johnny's parents do not understand why he is so uneasy. They tell him to stay in hiding, to watch out for himself: 'Mangia e dormi, dormi e mangia, e nessun cattivo pensiero', his mother tells him (PJ, 6). He is urged by his father to think too of his family: 'Se non vuoi pensare a te, pensa a noi, a tua madre: she agonized these last few days' (ibid., 8). But Johnny, as he hears news of what is happening – for example, the rescue of Mussolini, the formation of a Fascist government, the atrocities committed by the Nazis at Cefalonia – becomes more and more 'sickened'. What is also of fundamental importance here is not just the events themselves, but the manner in which his father tells him of them, in a voice which is 'opaca, irrimediabilmente *anarrativa*' (ibid., 7; italics mine). The events make *no sense* because there is no story into which they fit which is meaningful for Johnny. But while his father does not seem aware of this lack of meaning, for Johnny it is fundamental: the events demand an overarching narrative. Johnny must at all costs find out what this narrative is, and what role he is to play in it. The problem is that as yet he doesn't know where to begin.

This sense of bewilderment and being 'troubled' is typical of the beginning of many quest stories and of many tales of the journey towards God. The lack of understanding of one's immediate family and friends plays a fundamental part in this. In the case of Bunyan's Christian, it is his wife and children who seek to comfort him. Christian attempts to explain to them the cause of his burden. His reasons, although of course set in a different place and time, are strongly reminiscent of Johnny's:

Oh my dear wife, said he, And you the children of my bowels, I your dear friend am in my self undone, by reason of a burden that lieth hard upon me: moreover I am for certain informed, that this our city will be burned with fire from heaven, in which fearful overthrow, both my self, with thee my wife, and you my sweet babes, shall miserably come to ruin; except (the which I yet see not) some way of escape can be found, whereby we may be delivered. (Bunyan 2008, 11)

As well as the temptation to hide away, read literature and stay protected by family, Johnny faces the temptation of sex – no longer seen, as in the *Appunti* ten years earlier, as one of the more joyous aspects of partisan life. In spite of the lyricism of a post-coital moment with a girl – ‘Ed ella disclosed like a rose’ (PJ, 17) – , Johnny (and here Fenoglio may be making an ironic reference to Vittorini’s *Uomini e no*), does not feel that he is ‘a man’. Besides, as if to remind them that a war is on, Allied planes arrive to bomb the bridge over the river they are lying beside: this is all part of ‘the Call’ to lead Johnny away on his quest.

Yet before doing so, Johnny must also become aware, at least at an intellectual level, of the moral issues that he will be faced with if he joins the partisans. This awareness is brought to him by a conversation he has in a bar with his ex-teachers, Cocito and Chiodi, and with his fellow ex-companions from the *liceo*. As we have seen in Chapter 3, Cocito, the Communist, puts to him a series of questions, such as: would he be prepared to kill someone knowing that there may well be a reprisal against innocent people? Johnny does not give any clear answer to Cocito’s questions. At this stage, he does not have the experience to really know what he would do. However, they serve as a prelude to the reality that he will be faced with as a partisan, including the need to make the ‘political choice’ – even if this ‘choice’ is shown by Fenoglio to depend more upon chance than to be informed by decision – to join either the Communist *rossi* or the liberal *azzurri*.

This prelude to the real challenges that Johnny will face are also another temptation for him to abandon his quest. Johnny's journey after all – unlike that of Christian – is not an allegorical one, but very much grounded in historical circumstances. Real people will die, little more than pieces on a chessboard, whose fate is decided by others far away. As Cocito points out to a student who protests that he is talking about 'extreme situations', war is 'solo fatta di casi estremi' (PJ, 24). Indeed, Fenoglio throughout the book makes many references to well-known historical events to make sure that we stay grounded in *this* reality, as well as the more literary one created by his use of language and narrative structure. For while the literary mindset and 'atheistic' idealism of Johnny are a vital source of inspiration for him, it is an idealism that must also come to terms with an uncompromising and sometimes incomprehensible 'other' reality. Perhaps, however, this is not so far from *The Pilgrim's Progress*, after all: Christian, too, must face all kinds of terrible difficulties which will test the strength and depth of 'the Call' he has heard. And Bunyan's classic also, of course, sprang from momentous historical events.

After this series of temptations – family, security, intellectual pursuits, sex, clear signs of the difficulties he will face – Johnny after much indecision sets out on his quest. But what is it that he is looking for? He is, as the author Fenoglio was, a young man without any real political awareness – typical in this of a generation who had grown up under Fascism. A clue to the answer is given in the first pages, when Johnny in hiding reflects on the fact, strange to him, that he cannot concentrate on his books:

Sognavi d'esser solo e disengagé, in una camera pressapoco come questa, aperto alla vista del fiume e della collina, e tradurre a piacimento un qualsiasi classico inglese –. Ora esistevano tutte queste premesse e possibilità, le armi e gli uomini collettivi lontani, oltre le colline, oltre il fiume, nelle grandi città fantomatiche, nelle immense pianure nebulose e abbrividenti. (PJ, 15)

There is an overwhelming sense here of a young man in search of a community. Once again there are echoes of Christian's search for the 'Celestial City'. As *Primavera di bellezza* had made clear, this community would not be found in Johnny's fellow trainee officers in the Italian Royal Army. Johnny, after his arrival home, had hoped that he would find it in English poets and dramatists. Yet he cannot help thinking of his more immediate contemporaries – those men in their partisan bands 'oltre le colline, oltre il fiume' (PJ, 15), who indeed, through Fenoglio's use of language here, cannot help but assume a greater 'poetic' reality than the world of the books he has in front of him. It is this 'community of the elect' that he must seek, even if it will take him some time to come to this decision.

After a disturbance at the local cinema, where Johnny believes he is going to be arrested by Fascists and considers jumping from a balcony rather than let himself be caught (it turns out to be a false alarm), Johnny decides that he will no longer return to the city: 'Non sarebbe piú sceso in città, pensava salendo alla collina nella notte violetta, se lascerò quella collina sarà soltanto per salire su una piú alta, nell'arcangelico regno dei partigiani' (PJ, 27). According to some critics, this is a moment of profound realisation for Johnny. For example, Canepa states that the reference to 'archangels' serves as a contrast to the senseless reality in which he finds himself. 'Già fino da questo momento, la realtà partigiana – nella sua apertura arcangelica – appare un'esperienza di acquisizione del senso' (1991, 126). Others, such as Cooke and Bigazzi, would argue that Fenoglio is being ironic here, given that Johnny will soon discover the terrible reality of partisan life. However, as I sought to show in Chapter 3, Fenoglio is a writer who can operate at different levels at the same time. This is part of what can make him so convincing. Yes,

Fenoglio is ironic here about Johnny's expectations of the partisans, but there may also be a deeper irony at work. The exploration of the contrast between 'ideals' and 'reality', or between 'dreams' on the one hand and mediocrity and brutality on the other, and what this means for the way we should live, is one of the most important aspects of *Il partigiano Johnny*. It is one of the threads that bind the different pieces of the story together. The deeper irony here lies not in Johnny's expectations of the Resistance, but in his expectation that by joining the partisans he will be able to play his part in a grand narrative which will give his life a meaning. Here, Fenoglio is also asking what kind of literature is possible in the modern world, and contrasting this with the literature of a pre-twentieth century world where Paradise was still believed to be possible if one was prepared to suffer enough to reach it. This is made explicit in *Ur partigiano Johnny*, where the voices of Fenoglio and Johnny are at times almost inseparable: Johnny has now lived through the experience of the Resistance, lost many of his companions, and the terrible compromises of post-war life in Italy have already begun. Unlike Bunyan's Christian, Johnny knows by this time that there will be no paradise to reach. What kind of sense, then, can Fenoglio's or any narrative possibly have? One answer is that literature can provide a sense of consolation for loss of power. As the British soldier Keaney says to Johnny – thinking of the British decline in the face of the United States –

Had I at least a centesim of Milton's genius, and I would work a deathless thing of poetry, to console me of the loss of power... As you surely know, something alike has happened to your Dante. What is the Comedy but the raging attempt to erase the loss of power? The German emperor had failed him, King Charles returned home on Milton's back, and now we are working for U.S.A up and us down. (Ur -PJ, 51)

And yet, of course, Dante, Milton and Bunyan had God to believe in. Neither Johnny nor Fenoglio (nor Max in 'Un altro muro') have this possibility. 'God is dead', and yet a 'religious' longing for an overarching narrative which will give sense to the world remains. The protagonist Johnny needs a story in which his struggle and suffering will have a meaning, even if the author Fenoglio tragically knows, and ironically acknowledges, that ultimately this is no longer possible. This need is expressed in references to a supreme metaphysic recurring throughout the book (and not simply because it shows an ironic contrast with the grotesque squalor and violence of partisan life). These references – along with the renewed commitment that I have spoken of in Chapter 3 – appear at moments of crisis, for example after the defeat of the *Garibaldini* and the death of *il Biondo*, one of the few partisans admired by Johnny:

Johnny si sentiva come può sentirsi un prete cattolico in borghese od un militare in borghese: le armi razionalmente celate sotto il vestito, il segno era sempre su lui: partigiano in aeternum. (PJ, 144)

Johnny's condition, then, is differentiated from that of civilians or 'unbelievers', those who have not yet found a narrative to give their lives meaning or at least in which to search for a meaning, those who are still concerned, like many of the characters whom Bunyan's Christian will meet, only with survival, or worse, profiteering. Unlike Johnny they have not heard 'the Call', and indeed the mere idea terrifies them.

Era terribilmente diverso da tutta la gente che batteva la grande strada di cresta: rada, sullen, aggricciata gente che batteva la collina per bisogni e passioni supremi: il dèmon della borsa nera, la mendicizia ricerca di legna da ardere, o la chiamata del prete per una estrema unzione. I più, i pigri, stavano a vista e distanza della strada, immobili e tesi sui noti campi, così diffidenti da non abbandonarsi a rispondere a un richiamo, a un fischio dalla strada. (PJ, 144)

Johnny is separate here almost as much as the pilgrim Dante, who can look but who must then pass by the inhabitants of Hell.¹ And yet again, as well as Johnny's bitterly ironic view of the 'unbelievers', there is a deeper irony here in that Johnny will later depend on such people to feed him and keep him alive. It is precisely this sense of multi-layered irony which lends such a credible quality to Fenoglio's work, and which can make it so much richer than that of other Resistance writers.

Once Johnny finally responds to the Call, there is an initial feeling not only of relief, but of dreamlike euphoria (typical of Quest stories) as he leaves a note for his parents and sets off for the hills. Because of the drama of the first chapters – played out in the opposition of his parents, in the external events which bring home the importance of the historical moment and in Johnny's own existential dilemmas (should I dedicate myself to literature or take part in war?) – we as readers feel the momentousness of the occasion, which goes far beyond that which we feel when Beppe says good-bye to his mother in the *Appunti partigiani*. We expect nothing less now than an epic journey, which is what we will be given. Johnny, in true Quest style, will fight with 'monsters' in the form of Fascists, monsters who become far more powerful as the story progresses through the winter of 1944-45, and he will be faced with numerous temptations to abandon his mission. The temptations may come in the form of seemingly sensible arguments, most famously that of the miller, who, as we have seen in Chapter 3, points out the military uselessness of the Resistance and paints the more sensible – as well as more comfortable – alternative of going into hiding and being looked after by people who care for him. These temptations have much in common with those pragmatic persuasions Mr. Worldly Wiseman heaps on Christian when he urges him to cease searching for the Celestial City

and to go to a village ‘named Morality’, where ‘houses now stand empty [...] provision there is cheap and good, and that which will make thy life the more happy is, to be sure thou shalt live by honest neighbours, in credit and good fashion’ (Bunyan 2008, 23).

But the hardest monster to fight, the most seemingly insurmountable difficulty is, as I have already indicated, the conflict between Johnny’s ideals and the physical reality he finds himself in. As Maria Grazia Di Paolo puts it: ‘La condizione umana lo avvince soprattutto per quella realtà amara drammatica che l’uomo è costretto ad accettare al posto delle sue speranze e dei suoi sogni grandiosi’ (1998, 15-16). We have already seen in Chapter 3 how disillusioned Johnny is when he has his first real contact with the partisans and later with members of the Allied Forces. This clash of imagined ideals with reality – which is not necessarily simply individual but is communal in that it is felt by other partisans too – comes into play with Fenoglio’s portraits of Germans and Fascists. As Bodo Guthmuller (2006, 19-28) and others have observed, Germans make very few appearances in Fenoglio’s books (the main emphasis is on the civil war between Italians and their co-patriots), and when they have a role to play as individuals, they do not correspond to the supposedly classic neorealist portrayal of Germans as men ‘col cuore fatto di pietra, col cervello pieno di comandi, pronti come sempre a seviziare, a massacrare, a uccidere’ (Viganò 1994, 168). For example, the partisans who crash by mistake into a German jeep, once they have recovered from their surprise, are able to capture the ‘superhuman’ German soldiers fairly easily. The captured German soldiers have a very human concern for the welfare of their commanding officer who has been injured in the accident and is in some pain. The relationship between the partisans and the Germans is given a poignant touch of warmth when *il Biondo* offers the German major a swig of cognac to ease his pain. One only has to think, too, of the captured giant of a

German soldier in Fenoglio's short story 'Golia', who quickly wins the hearts of his captors. He is left in relative freedom to work for the partisans as a general odd-jobs man, and described as 'proprio come uno dei nostri' and 'una pasta frolla, non sembra nemmeno un soldato tedesco' (Fenoglio 1988, 127).

In contrast, critics make much of Fenoglio's implacable hatred of Fascists, citing, alongside the atrocities committed by Fascist soldiers in his stories, the following entry in his briefly-kept 1954 *Diario*: 'I fascisti. Ginzburg agonizzante ha detto: "Guai a noi se non sappiamo far altro che odiarli!" Ma ancora oggi io in verità non so fare altro' (Fenoglio 1978a, 207). However, it might be truer to say that Fenoglio hated Fascism rather than Fascists as individual human beings. Although as a military unit the Fascists are almost always better-organised, better-equipped and more ruthless, when Johnny comes into close quarters with them as individuals they are frequently portrayed as insignificant and helpless. The first Fascist prisoner that Johnny sees has a face which is 'così pulcinellescamente arrendevole e furbesco, così tremolante' (PJ, 67). Another Fascist prisoner who is made to share a lorry with captured Germans is 'intorno ai cinquant'anni' and, anticipating his own execution and summary burial, 'per tutto il viaggio non sollevò gli occhi dal pianale, dalla terrosa accolta degli scarponi partigiani' (ibid., 119). When Johnny has the chance to kill an unaware Fascist guard on the outskirts of Alba, he realises that the guard is just a young man like himself, whom Johnny cannot bring himself to shoot because of an 'interdizione sentimentale' (ibid., 155). A Fascist soldier that Johnny later captures to exchange for his friend Ettore, immediately collapses onto the ground, breaks into tears and begs for mercy (ibid., 422-23). One is reminded of George Orwell's first encounter with an individual Fascist soldier in his memoir of the Spanish Civil War, *Homage to Catalonia*: 'I could see him clearly. He was bareheaded

and seemed to have nothing on him except a blanket which he was clutching round his shoulders. If I had fired I could have blown him to pieces' (Orwell 1986, 69). Indeed this awareness of the 'reality' of Fascists as individual human beings is something that Fenoglio's Johnny has to guard against in moments of combat: 'I fascisti ora erano più vicini [...] Questa constatata vicinanza dava a Johnny un repellente senso di intimità, da risolversi soltanto con l'aperto fuoco' (PJ, 95). The challenged idealism, then, of Johnny, includes not only the partisans as 'arcangeli', but also, as necessary counterparts, the Fascists in their role as 'monsters'.

The 'reality' that Johnny confronts is also, as Canepa (1991) suggests, 'wholly other'. It is merciless and implacable, and cannot be altered by Johnny. It is the terrible, grotesque and absurd nature of the warfare that he and others of his generation find themselves in. It is the sheer inalterability of natural (and archetypal) elements which the partisans are at the mercy of, such as rain, wind, snow, or the mist which will make Johnny cry all the tears he has held back when, like every pilgrim, he gets lost:

Allora pianse: tutto il pianto che aveva dentro per mille tragedie sgorgava ora per questa inezia dello sviamento, pianse sfrenatamente e amaramente, coi piedi immoti sul suolo inaiutante [...]. Poi volse le spalle al declivio e risalì incontro al sentiero perduto. (PJ, 410)

The reality Johnny must face is threaded through with the 'absolute' qualities of Hell. The critic Rachel Falconer lists some of the characteristics of Hell that can be found in contemporary secular literature, such as being lost in mist and forest, a sense of being alienated from others, extremes of temperature, and so on, which of course all apply to *Il partigiano Johnny*. Drawing on Bakhtin's notion of a 'chronotope', Falconer suggests also that one of the main features of Hell is a distortion of time or a 'mythic arrest of

time' (2007, 42-43). In the case of *Il partigiano*, the loss of a sense of time is experienced by Johnny at moments of passage between one stage of his journey and another, or at moments of crisis. For example, when he sets off for Alba after the terrible defeat of the *rossi*, the day is 'timeless per la mancanza di gradazione solare; [...] come se il sole non avesse brillato mai sulla terra' (PJ, 144). The loss of time is later symbolised by the fact that Johnny's watch has stopped working, this same watch that he remembers had marked the hours for him as a high school student. He remembers how, as a deserting soldier in the days following the Armistice of September 1943, he had consulted this same watch while waiting on a street in Rome for a boy to bring him some ill-fitting civilian clothes (ibid., 463). As he remembers, he realises that notions of 'past' and 'present' are 'totalmente, parimenti incredibili' (ibid.).

The most terrible 'other' and 'timeless' reality which cannot be altered is that of death. For Fenoglio, as I have shown in Chapters 2 and 3, death is utterly final, bestows no dignity, and does not distinguish between partisan and Fascist. Death is the most important factor in making Johnny realise that, however much he may at times long to do otherwise, he cannot return to his previous life or to being his previous 'self'. His killing of a spy in 'cold blood' is a crucial rite of passage in this respect: 'Non aveva mai ucciso un uomo a quel modo e ora doveva seppellirlo, altra cosa che non aveva mai fatto' (PJ, 467). Bigazzi (2011, 162-63) describes this killing of a spy as a kind of recompense for Johnny for all his suffering and time spent in solitude in the winter of 1944-45, as a sign that he is now a fully-fledged and committed Resistance fighter, unlike some of his companions who have opted for an easier time of it. Spies, after all, represent the worst form of evil for the Resistance. As a peasant describes them, 'le spie sono fra noi gente cristiana come tanti demòni' (PJ, 404). Bigazzi's claim is certainly true, yet it perhaps

does not consider enough the sense of tragedy involved here in Johnny's killing of a man 'guardandolo in faccia' and whose corpse will have to be buried and hidden in a place 'che non la scopriranno nemmeno gli angeli' (PJ, 467). Indeed, there is a sense of Johnny having also killed a part of himself, in the ambiguity of the phrase: 'E Johnny si rivolse a vegliare quel suo proprio cadavere' (ibid.). The 'E' at the beginning of the sentence only serves to add to the sense of biblical momentousness of the occasion.

In the face of this inalterable otherness, Johnny throughout the book is confronted with the strongest temptation of all: that of retreating into his own subjectivity, of hiding away somewhere and dedicating himself to a world he *can* control – that of the literary world, of his own translations and writing. For example, after the death of Tito, who had become his close companion and first real guide among the partisans, Johnny visits Tito's grave in 'un giro letterario' (PJ, 115). He dreams of 'facendo amore al suo piú, sentendo musica [...] in un bel salotto, in una dolce-amara atmosfera di comfort, tutto e tutti intorno a lui nel loro keenest endeavour to civility' (ibid.). Later, he will long for 'la compagnia dei morti, dei catturati' (ibid., 440). It is a temptation that he must ultimately face and overcome (though he never fully does) alone, without his companions. As Bunyan reminds us: 'A man may have company when he sets out for heaven, and yet go thither there alone' (2008, 30).

Johnny will face his worst crisis in this respect in the winter of 1944-45, when his two companions have gone – one in hiding, the other captured by the Fascists – and he is half-starving, and begging food and temporary hospitality from people who are terrified of the consequences of giving any help to a partisan. As I have pointed out in Chapter 3, it is during this period of solitude that he will make his 'existential' commitment not only to the Resistance, but to the narrative of the quest he has embarked upon. Yet this is no story

with a happy ending, where the hero can finally defeat the monsters in a seemingly impossible struggle in order to return home with his treasure. When the snow is melting and the partisans gather together to plan an offensive with the Allies, which will bring them the longed-for victory together, Johnny, coming out of his solitude, feels more alienated from the other partisans than ever, even from his old companion Pierre, who has had a much easier winter in hiding:

- Rieccoci insieme, e per sempre, - disse Pierre con una leggera esitazione. Johnny ne era lieto, lietissimo, ma sentiva che quella marea di gioia lasciava scoperto ed asciutto un cantuccio del suo essere, lavorato in incancellabile, inalluvionabile intattità, dalla solitudine dell'inverno. (PJ1, 1707)

The commander Nord in a speech jokes that the next winter they will all be in dressing gown and slippers in a warm house. 'Pensate che tragedia, che comica!' he says (PJ, 469). While the partisans laugh 'altamente e strainedly', Johnny feels the gap between him and his companions grow, as if the vows he has made to himself in suffering and solitude have been for nothing. 'Johnny non si trovava piú' [...] lui solo fra tutti non marciava piú come prima' (ibid., 471-72). It is with this realisation that Johnny, against the orders of Nord – who wants him to report to the Allied Mission – joins in a useless attack on a Fascist column, as if the violent sensations of battle will restore to him his sense of worthiness and purpose.

It is in the version of *Il partigiano Johnny* as we have it published in the 1992 edition, edited by Dante Isella, and in the earlier 1968 version, edited by Lorenzo Mondo, that Johnny is killed in this insignificant and absurd skirmish. It is possible that Fenoglio may have had Johnny killed off in this way (in Draft 2) because he foresaw – with good reason – that his editors would have preferred this ending. It would fit into the neorealist

narrative of Resistance sacrifice. Yet we can also surmise that it was a way of avoiding the continuation of a narrative which could never really *have* an ending. This conclusion to *Il partigiano Johnny* represents, in a sense, the succumbing to another temptation – but this time, not for Johnny but for his creator Fenoglio – to end the narrative in a certainty beyond doubt, with the illusion of meaning still possible. The question the storyteller Fenoglio faced was: does Johnny die ‘tragically’, or does he continue to exist, as Saccone would have it (1988, 195), in a kind of ‘death in life’?

In Draft 1, Johnny survives the skirmish and goes on to become a liaison officer with the Allies. This draft continues into *Ur partigiano Johnny* where the narrative cannot be finished because Fenoglio’s voice is no longer distinguishable from Johnny’s. For the pilgrimage that Johnny is making in much of *Ur partigiano Johnny* is that of the 1950s man Fenoglio: that of navigating the bitter mediocrity of post-war life. By killing off Johnny in Draft 2, Fenoglio is perhaps avoiding the fact that the grand narrative that he – and a generation of Italians – had committed their lives to was no longer credible. War is a hell from which there is no return. Neither Johnny nor Fenoglio can be guided through and out again as Dante was by Virgil.

Calvino at least felt able to claim in 1947 in *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* that however grotesque and reprehensible the behaviour of the partisans could be, history would ultimately justify the cause of the Resistance, seen as a vital step towards a Communist society. Fenoglio not only could not make any such claim writing from the vantage point of the 1950s, but even in the 1940s would never have wished to do so.

And yet Fenoglio had to keep seeking. Although he himself would not have defined it in this way, we can surmise that the search for a meaning to the Resistance – whose legacy had not lived up to the expectations of so many – assumed for Fenoglio the

absolute quality of ‘the Real’, that which Terry Eagleton, drawing on the work of Lacan, describes as that ‘desire’ which ‘rebukes our investments in common-or-garden reality, sternly reminding us that our true home is with infinity. It is not, as it is for the Christian faith, an infinity we might finally attain; it is rather [...] the infinity of the process of seeking it out [...] the secular version of eternal life’ (Eagleton 2009, 181). It is that which has both a traumatic and transformative effect beyond any empirical reality. The search for ‘the Real’ will move away from the Resistance, while still remaining thoroughly embedded in the experience of the Resistance itself, in Fenoglio’s last novel, *Una questione privata*.

4.2 Private Questions and the Real: Una questione privata

In a letter of March 1959, Fenoglio wrote to his editor Livio Garzanti of his decision to sacrifice Johnny and instead to create a new character: ‘il personaggio del partigiano Milton, che è un’altra faccia, piú dura, del sentimentale e dello snob Johnny. Il nuovo libro [...] si concentrerà in un unico episodio, fissato nella estate del 1944, nel quale io cercherò di far confluire tutti gli elementi e gli aspetti della guerra civile’ (Fenoglio 2002, 104). The draft of this uncompleted novel was first published as *Frammenti di romanzo* in the *Opere* of 1978, edited by Maria Corti. It was reissued as a separate book in 1992, with the new title *L’imboscata*, edited by Dante Isella. Written in a simple, stripped-down style, with a preponderance of dialogue, it has something of the cinematic quality of *La paga del sabato*. The main protagonist, in the words of Orsetta Innocenti, ‘presenta dei

tratti esplicitamente anti-biografici [...] “Sullo sfondo” si muove la vicenda di Milton, partigiano duro e senza scrupoli, che trova la sua personale ragione di adesione alla Resistenza nella caccia solitaria e spietata ai fascisti’ (Innocenti 2003b, 57). Fenoglio worked on the novel for about a year, only to abandon it. Although with its swift action this book is certainly a ‘good read’, Milton is perhaps too much of a cardboard character – with his unquestioning desire for bloody revenge for the death of his father – to be satisfying either to the author or to his readers in terms of seeking a deeper understanding of the meaning of the Resistance.

In March 1960, Fenoglio wrote to Garzanti yet again of a different Resistance novel he wanted to write and informing him of his decision to abandon the book he had been working on for a year. The letter is worth quoting from at length since it reveals so much about Fenoglio – his perfectionism and his desire to investigate a more complex reality than that presented by a ‘primitive’ historical fiction of the ‘guerra civile’:

Avevo già scritto 22 capitoli dei 30 previsti dall’impianto del romanzo e sarei stato in grado di consegnarLe il manoscritto ‘tra non molti giorni’ come Lei scrive. Si trattava di una storia sul tipo *Primavera di Bellezza*, concedente cioè larga parte di sé alla pura rievocazione storica, sia pure ad alto livello. D’improvviso ho mutato idea e linea. Mi saltò in mente una nuova storia, individuale, un intreccio romantico, non già *sullo sfondo* della guerra ma *nel fitto* di detta guerra. [...] Mi appassiona infinitamente di più della storia primitiva ed è per questo che non ho fatto troppo sacrificio a cestinare i 22 capitoli già scritti. (Fenoglio 2002, 133; italics in original)

The protagonist of this new novel, to be published posthumously in 1963 as *Una questione privata*, retained the name of Milton, but could not be more contrasting in terms of character. As Pedullà states, where ‘Fenoglio era sembrato imboccare sino alle estreme conseguenze la strada del distanziamento narrativo, *Una questione privata* ristabilisce

istantaneamente quei legami di parentela e complicità con il protagonista' (2001, 10-11).

The description of the new Milton at the beginning of the book is clearly a self-portrait:

era un brutto: alto, scarno, curvo di spalle [...] A ventidue anni, già aveva ai lati della bocca due forti pieghe amare, e la fronte profondamente incisa per l'abitudine di stare quasi di continuo aggrottato [...] All'attivo aveva solamente gli occhi, tristi e ironici, duri e ansiosi, che la ragazza meno favorevole avrebbe giudicato più che notevoli. (QP, 4).

Like the Fenoglio of 1943, Milton is a student and infatuated with English literature. Fenoglio's initial suggestion for the title '*Lontano dietro le nuvole* o, se vogliamo, addirittura in inglese, *Far behind the clouds*' (Fenoglio, 2002, 134), with its quotation from the song 'Over the Rainbow', is already indicative of a very different kind of book, of a return on the part of the author to 'literature and lovemaking' (PB, 138).

Some critics have seen *Una questione privata* as the first sign that Fenoglio was starting to move away from the Resistance as his main subject matter. According to Falaschi, *Una questione privata* is 'un'indiscutibile svolta nella narrativa di Fenoglio' and with this book, 'si può considerare chiusa la stagione più autentica della letteratura partigiana' (1976, 179). For De Nicola: *Una questione privata* 'è occasione per affermare la spinta positiva determinata dall'amore, e tale da subordinare ad essa anche quell'impegno militare tra i partigiani' (1989, 161). De Nicola interestingly suggests that *Una questione privata* 'rappresenta [...] il romanzo del superamento del trauma della partecipazione all'Resistenza' (ibid.). There might appear to be some truth in this point. After all, Fenoglio had said in an interview of 1960, 'e poi basta con i partigiani' (Pedullà 2001, 6). March 1960, the month in which Fenoglio wrote to Garzanti to announce his abandonment of one novel and his intention to write an altogether different one (*Una*

questione privata), is also the month in which he got married. One year later he was to become a father. Fenoglio's concerns were perhaps after all shifting away from the Resistance. By all accounts, he was a devoted and adoring father to his daughter up until the time of his death.² One might surmise that by writing about the Resistance so extensively he *had* overcome the trauma of his experience. However, again this seems to me to be seductively simplistic, too much of a happy ending to be true, and too symptomatic of the desire on the part of some critics to separate Fenoglio from the cause of the Resistance. De Nicola goes on to assert that in *Una questione privata* there is an absence of 'la generale e sottolineata attenzione alla violenza (tanto frequente nei racconti)' (1989, 161). But this is patently not true. If anything, the violence in *Una questione privata* seems accentuated by its contrast with Milton's romantic idealism. The Resistance remains a traumatic experience to be dealt with.

For Bigazzi, Fenoglio is trying to show the folly and disastrous consequences of giving too much attention to personal issues in a time of historical conflict. After all, the actions which Milton takes to satisfy his private obsession with Fulvia lead to a number of deaths, including those of two boys. Innocenti explores Bigazzi's path to its logical conclusion, proposing that the 'scelta etica e insieme collettiva della lotta resistenziale' is 'contrapposta alla digressione edonistica e sicuramente individuale della visita alla villa di Fulvia' (2001, 129). This is surely much closer to the truth, and as I hope to show, *Una questione privata* can be read in this sense as an Aristotelian tragedy where the hero brings about the downfall of himself and those close to him through a tragic flaw, which combined with external circumstances, leads to a choice which will have fatal consequences. However, I would argue that Fenoglio as a writer of fiction is not simply taking the moral stance of condemning the selfish behaviour of an individual in a time of

war. Rather, he is exploring the tensions between private and collective interests, between the personal and the historical, and is asking a series of ‘what ifs’. As Saccone reminds us, with any text of Fenoglio we can only come to ‘una conclusione, non *la* conclusione [...] Non si può, né si deve ovviamente usar violenza a testi che non solo non si presentano come definitivi, ma che nella loro totalità [...] testimoniano di un continuo, ostinato interrogarsi’ (1988, 197). I would venture that by returning to a protagonist who so closely resembles himself, and by bringing into a story of war the possible consequences of his own obsessions with ‘literature and lovemaking’, Fenoglio is investigating the way flesh-and-blood individual human beings will behave when faced with the absurdity of war. A person will not always make the right decision in a world where it is difficult to know what kind of choice is really available, where as Milton says of war, ‘non siamo noi che comandiamo a lei, ma è lei che comanda a noi’ (QP, 79).

Yet Milton, like Johnny, is also a ‘hero’ if we take this word in Lacan’s sense of one who does not give up on his desire (Lacan 1992, 321). This is what distinguishes the hero from the ‘ordinary’ human being, who surrenders desire in order to survive and be successful in a more ‘conventional’ sense. As Terry Eagleton observes, this is not meant to be interpreted in the popular New Age sense of ‘following the heart’, ‘doing what you feel’ and so on. Rather, not giving up on one’s desire means ‘to maintain, Heidegger-like, a constant relation to death, confronting the lack of being that one is. It means [...] that death is what makes one’s life real’ (Eagleton 2003, 233).

Fenoglio’s ‘alter-egos’ Johnny and the Milton of *Una questione privata* are heroes in that they refuse to give up on their desire, whatever the consequences. Without the Resistance, they are no longer heroes, and their lives have no meaning or narrative. As Pedullà observes of Milton (and the same can be said of Johnny), he exists ‘soltanto nella

missione [...] È nato, letteralmente, il giorno in cui si è unito ai partigiani sulle colline: nato a una vita nuova' (2001, 14). The same is true of Fenoglio, who all his life tried to break away from writing about the Resistance, yet was compelled always to return 'sul luogo del crimine' (ibid., 8).

Yet in *Una questione privata* what becomes ultimately 'Real' is shifted to an impossible quest for a girl, Fulvia (or at least for the knowledge of whether or not she has had a relationship with his childhood friend and fellow partisan Giorgio Clerici), who never actually appears in the story except in Milton's memory. She exists only as a terrible kind of absence. In the end, in his absurd pursuit of the 'Real,' Milton will himself betray the 'reality' of the Resistance with appalling consequences for himself and for his companions. If *Il partigiano Johnny* is a moral quest with tragic dimensions, then *Una questione privata* conforms more strictly to the classic pattern of a tragedy, where 'the Call' is in fact one that Milton should not have listened to. When Johnny hears 'the Call' to join the Resistance, we feel as readers that he is ultimately right to answer it, whatever the results. With Milton, we know that he is in fact mistaking a 'temptation' for 'the Call', and we know also that nothing can be done about it – Milton, because he is a hero with the 'tragic flaw' of his own personal history, has no choice. As we shall see, by misinterpreting a 'temptation' as 'the Call,' Milton is deceiving himself that he can return to being a 'self' in which he still has his illusions intact, where some kind of 'absolute truth' (if not about God, then about human love) is still possible. Bufano rightly claims that for Milton 'giungere alla verità non significa scoprire se Fulvia ha avuto o meno una relazione con Giorgio Clerici. Quel che Milton cerca è una verità assoluta, inafferrabile come il Graal e l'intelligenza del creato' (Bufano 2000, 77). Just as Kafka's K. can never reach the Castle, so Milton can never find out if Fulvia has betrayed him – to do so would

result in a kind of death, for the seeker would realise that the ‘object of his desire’ does not contain the transformative truth he has always hoped for.

From the beginning, Milton, like K., does not heed the warnings of those who point out to him the dangerous foolishness of his quest. These voices are superficially similar to, and yet of course very different from, those pragmatic voices who had sought to lure Johnny away from the Resistance. The first warning of danger comes from his companion Ivan. Milton, passing the villa where he has spent much time with Fulvia, succumbs to the temptation of ‘looking back’. In spite of his companion’s warnings, Milton cannot resist going into the grounds of the villa, while Ivan, also put at risk by these actions, waits outside to keep an eye out for Fascist patrols.

Arriving at the door, Milton addresses Fulvia in his mind, telling her – and convincing himself – that in spite of all he has been through he himself hasn’t changed, that some core remains just as it was: ‘Sono scappato e ho inseguito. Mi sono sentito vivo come mai e mi sono visto morto. Ho riso e ho pianto. Ho ucciso un uomo, a caldo. Ne ho visti uccidere, a freddo, moltissimi. Ma io sono sempre lo stesso’ (QP, 9). It is worthwhile for us at this point to contrast Milton’s sudden succumbing to his desire for the past with the commitment that Johnny is able to make when he returns to his home town of Alba for no real reason other than to see for his own personal curiosity whether or not it has been occupied by the Fascists. The pilgrim Johnny is at this stage in search of a new community of like-minded souls after his deep disappointment with the *Garibaldini*: ‘Dove rimangono, che fanno quelli che mi somigliano?’ (PJ, 115). As he approaches Alba, he already feels (in Dantesque fashion) his exile from the town where he has spent most of his life: ‘Johnny riuscì sulla strada, tetra e wind-beaten [...] allora Johnny colse, tra una sella, il primo glimpse della sua città. E risentì orribilmente il suo esilio’ (ibid.,

146). The outskirts of the city are deserted. It has all the appearance of a ghost town – just as the inside of the villa will appear to Milton. However, Johnny, unlike Milton, is aware that he cannot now return to a pre-war self: ‘I’ve stood, and fired, and killed’ (ibid., 144). The first people Johnny meets – a woman with a child – reinforce this sense of separateness from his past. He is a partisan, and as such is treated with a mixture of contempt and fear. The eyes of the woman ‘wrap’ him ‘in uno sguardo di universale deprecazione’ (ibid., 147). A little later when he comes across the industrialist ‘B.’, the father of an ex-school and army companion, the stare of the man ‘correva, con ripugnanza, su tutta la superficie vestita di Johnny’ (ibid., 149). Although B. regards the Fascists and the partisans in equal measure as ‘la perdizione d’Italia’, he invites Johnny back to his house. Here B’s daughter and some of her friends are listening to music in a scene which is reminiscent of the memories that Milton will have as he steps into the villa. These women are siren-like figures, who together with the warmth of the house and the softness of the armchair Johnny sits on, act as a kind of temptation to lull Johnny into a false sense of security, giving the illusion that he can abandon the Resistance (his ‘Real’ cause) and wipe out the traumatic experience he has been through. But Johnny realises (unlike Milton) that it is too late: ‘non c’era più nessun possibile rapporto tra quella gente e se stesso, il suo breve ed enorme passato’ (ibid., 152). He would rather be ‘un solitario fuorilegge’ (ibid.). Even if Johnny’s motives are not clear to himself, he has made his choice. A little later – in tones reminiscent of Dante’s *Purgatorio* – Johnny is climbing a hill which starts gently but which will grow much steeper as he comes nearer to the new group of partisans he wishes to join. Interestingly, a contrast is quickly brought in between the female partisans he meets in the new group and by implication the women – the sirens – he has left behind. These female partisans, as well as ‘lavorando sodo’ (ibid.,

159) – cleaning, washing, typing – take part in combat, and die alongside their male comrades. The men ‘salute them militarily’ (ibid., 160) just as they would a man.

Johnny, then, at least for a time, is quickly absorbed back into the concrete realities of partisan life. In contrast, Milton, as soon as he enters the grounds of the villa, is overcome with memories which he cannot shake off. It is as if he has literally gone back in time, so much so that when he meets the old woman who acts a caretaker, he is surprised and dismayed ‘dal vederla tanto invecchiata. Il corpo le si era fatto piú tozzo e la faccia piú smunta e tutti i suoi capelli erano bianchi’ (QP, 10). The same is even true of the cherry tree, ‘imbruttito e invecchiato’ (ibid., 7). In some respects, the old woman corresponds to the archetypal witch figure in disguise, for example the wolf dressed as a kindly old grandmother in *Little Red Riding Hood* or the woman who invites Hansel and Gretel into her house of gingerbread. As Booker would put it, she acts as ‘the “dark feminine” power which can hold back the hero of the story from his true purpose’ (2004, 248). For it is she who transmits to Milton the ‘knowledge’ that before the 8 September, Fulvia *may* have had a relationship with Milton’s best friend and fellow partisan Giorgio Clerici. Although the old woman claims that she was simply keeping a watchful eye over the well-being of Fulvia, there is something positively malignant in her description of how she used to listen behind the door: ‘Io origliavo, non ho nessuna vergogna a dirlo, origliavo per dovere. Ma c’era sempre un silenzio, quasi non ci fossero. E io non stavo per niente tranquilla. Ma non dica queste cose al suo amico, mi raccomando. Si misero a far tardi, ogni volta piú tardi’ (QP, 18). It is the ambiguity of the old woman’s descriptions that deters Milton from his ‘true quest’ – defeating the ‘monster’ of Fascism – and that set him off on an altogether different quest in which he is blind to the appalling consequences. Yet the old woman can by no means be blamed entirely for this. The hero’s ‘fatal flaw’ is

already evident when Milton insists on entering the grounds of the villa, against the wishes of Ivan, and then on entering the house itself, seemingly against the wishes of the old caretaker, who is equally dismissive of both partisans and Fascists – ‘voi ragazzi avete messo su questa vostra guerra’ (ibid., 10). When Milton enters the sitting-room where Fulvia had tried in vain to teach him to dance, we have a first intimation that we are, as Lacan would have it, in the presence of ‘the Real’. For Milton, this room ‘era il piú luminoso posto al mondo, [...] lí per lui c’era vita o resurrezione’ (ibid., 13). It is as if the younger Milton, the one who has not yet been affected profoundly by the experience of civil war, could somehow be restored. Yet the Poe-like description of the room, which seems like a ‘tomb’ to the old woman and where the ‘federe bianche delle poltrone e del divano baluginavano spettralmente’, already give us the sense of something which is dead and which can never be ‘resurrected’. Milton is blind to this – his own memories bring the room alive again. When Ivan comes to tell him that they must leave now, he asks for just another two minutes.

Milton has only one aim now: to find out what happened between Giorgio and Fulvia. To Ivan and the other partisans, the normally ‘serious’ and ‘persino freddo’ Milton (perhaps a ‘persona’ that Milton must adopt in order to overcome his own literary and romantic nature and to function properly as a partisan) seems like someone who has gone mad. This is hardly the best time, as they put it, ‘di perder la testa per una ragazza’ (QP, 24). Yet Milton is ‘implacabile e cieco’ (ibid., 25). The fact is that as Milton himself declares: ‘Il fatto è che piú niente m’importa. Di colpo, piú niente. La guerra, la libertà, i compagni, i nemici. Solo piú quella verità.’ (ibid., 28) His desire to know is more important than life itself. He feels that he cannot die without knowing the truth, even while retaining his awareness that he is living ‘in un’epoca in cui i ragazzi come lui erano

chiamati piú a morire che a vivere' (ibid., 30). In reality, he wishes desperately to find out that, despite all the evidence to the contrary, Fulvia has not in fact had an affair with Giorgio. If this is true, then perhaps – however impossible and absurd we as readers know this to be – he can return to being the self who existed before the experience of war.

The ambiguously 'dark feminine' figure returns later in the book when Milton is attempting to single-handedly capture a Fascist soldier to exchange for Giorgio, who has been taken prisoner – any will do, but Milton has to venture alone into hostile territory. Milton certainly wants to save his best friend, but his overriding obsession is to discover 'the truth' about Fulvia (unlike the similar attempt to capture a Fascist soldier in *Il partigiano Johnny* where the motive is purely to save a companion). Milton meets an old woman near a field, who feeds him and gives him information about a Fascist sergeant who every day visits a young woman. Again, in a sign that Milton is longing to go back in time and to return to an uncorrupted, innocent narrative, he looks at the old woman 'secca, oleosa, sdentata, puzzolente' and seeks 'disperatamente di rivedere la giovane, la ragazza che era stata' (QP, 78-79). The old woman claims that she is giving Milton this information about the sergeant because she herself has grandsons who are in the *Stella Rossa* brigade. (Curiously, she is subtly contemptuous of Milton's *Badogliani* – those partisans 'travestiti da inglesi'.) But she has her own malicious agenda. The young woman, she claims, is 'una porca' who has had to abort three times because of her sexual promiscuity, and who has poisoned the relationship between the old woman's own daughter and son-in-law. The impatient Milton presses her for the information he needs to enable him to capture the sergeant. This is a move which will result in the sergeant's death at the hands of Milton and the execution of two teenage boys who have been running errands for the partisans (these two boys are the best the Fascists can get their

hands on to take revenge for the death of their comrade). Here not only the futility of Milton's action is shown, but also the cruel absurdity of the war that is being fought.

After he has killed the sergeant, Milton, still blind to everything, decides to return to the old woman in the villa who has set him off on the quest in the first place in order to find out more from her about Fulvia and Giorgio. Milton realises that it is useless to return to the villa, but believes that he has no choice: 'Non c'è nulla da chiarire, da approfondire, da salvare' but 'Ci vado, ci vado ugualmente' (QP, 150). By doing so, he has in a sense already abandoned his life before he loses it to the Fascists. In longing for his pre-war 'self', he is also showing a desire for the absoluteness of the 'peace' of death. When the Fascists catch sight of him and shoot at him, he wishes only that death will come quickly. As Milton in the final scene flees from the Fascist bullets, it is as if he is leaving the earth before the bullets reach him: 'Correva, e gli spari e gli urli scemavano, annegavano in un immenso, invalicabile stagno fra lui e i nemici. Correva ancora, ma senza contatto con la terra, corpo, movimenti, respiro, fatica vanificati (ibid., 154). If *Il partigiano Johnny* embodies an unending historical and existential quest for the ultimate meaning of the Resistance and for a fitting narrative to match the story of an individual and a generation, then *Una questione privata* works as a tragedy whose hero has been deflected from his true quest by an illusion which has assumed the life-and-death value of 'the Real'. Assuming that Milton is killed when he falls into the 'wall' of trees, then it is certainly not the hagiographic death of some neorealist accounts or of the protagonist of Fenoglio's *Primavera di bellezza*. Rather it is a death that is not only useless, but is also 'immoral' in that it has been brought about through sheer selfish folly. However, the question of whether Milton is killed or survives at the end of *Una questione privata* has sparked some fierce debate among critics. For example, Pedullà surmises that we can

assume Milton is killed because, among other things, 'tutta la descrizione della sua corsa non ha fatto che preparare e rendere inevitabile tale conclusione' (2001, 125). On the other hand, Bigazzi (2011, 208-16) argues that the fact that Milton before heading for the woods turns and runs into the village because he needs to see people and 'd'esser visto, per convincersi che era vivo' (QP, 154) signals a realisation on the part of Milton that he has committed a terrible folly and needs to return to the collective *impegno* of the Resistance. According to this interpretation, if Milton does not die, then however disastrous his experiences may have been, they have served as an 'education'. However, in terms of a convincing drama this would not work so well, since Milton's realisation would seem to come from nowhere almost at the last moment. In any case, whether or not Milton dies is not that important when it comes to the 'education' of the reader (which as we have seen in Chapter 3 is also an important part of any *Bildungsroman*), who from the beginning is made aware of the folly of Milton's actions and of the misguided heroism of Milton's 'private' quest at the expense of the collective *impegno*. I would argue that it is precisely the ambiguity and lack of clear resolution of the last few pages that make *Una questione privata* all the more 'realistic' and 'true to life' than some clear declaration of moral intention on the part of the author. Fenoglio, as ever, challenges us to work out the issues for ourselves. As a writer of fiction, he is not setting himself up as judge and jury. Rather, he presents a series of 'what ifs'? What would happen if a young student caught up in the traumatic experience of a civil war should suddenly become obsessed with finding out something about his individual past, however trivial and 'private' it might seem to anyone looking at the situation from the outside? The thoughts and actions that destroy Milton (who in the descriptions in *Una questione privata* resembles his creator physically, emotionally and intellectually) could just as easily have destroyed the young

student Fenoglio, or indeed any young student with deeply romantic and literary inclinations.

However, while *Una questione privata* has many of the hallmarks of an Aristotelian tragedy, we must remember that Fenoglio as the author never for a moment abandons his attempts to make us relive the historical reality of the Resistance. He shows us what it was like right down to the sweet taste of lard between thick slices of bread after a day's march on an empty stomach. When *Una questione privata* was published in 1963, two months after Fenoglio's death, Calvino acclaimed it as *the* novel of the Resistance that everyone of his generation had wanted to write (1987b, 24). Arguably, it was perhaps only Fenoglio among the Resistance writers who could thread together different realities – historical, existential, poetic – in a way that makes for a convincing moral realism for that generation.

Throughout his writing life, Fenoglio created what was essentially a modernist pilgrimage, where a grand and meaningful narrative is both sought and despaired of at the same time. Yet in spite of, and perhaps because of this despair, the Resistance assumes the absolute quality of 'the Real' – that which one must strive for, absurdly and at the cost of one's own life in more than just a physical sense. Taking part in, and subsequently writing about, the Resistance, represents the only possibility for leading an 'authentic' life, for staying 'true'. *Una questione privata* shows the possible consequences of the loss of this faith.

Notes:

¹ Meneghello, although with more bitter humour in this particular case, also writes of a sense of religious righteousness that he and his companions felt as partisans, and their difference from those who simply tried to carry on with normal life in the city: 'In fondo al cuore mi pareva detestare la società [...], la bestiale convivenza degli uomini civili, schifosi parassiti gli uni degli altri [...]. Peccatori, puttani, sodomiti, fatevi i vostri accoppiamenti bestiali [...]. Andate alla vostre messe ultime, ficcatevi nel sedere le candele devote! (1999, 204-05)

² See, for example, Negri Scaglione (2006).

Conclusion

E poi è risaputo che ogni giudizio storico, anche di eventi che paion lontani nel tempo, è sempre un giudizio sul presente e, insieme, una interrogazione indirizzata all'avvenire. Cercare che cosa fu la Resistenza, vuol dire indagare dentro di noi che cosa è rimasto vivo della Resistenza nelle nostre coscienze. – Piero Calamandrei

Although Nazi-Fascism was defeated in Italy in 1945, with the estimated loss of over 30,000 partisan lives, it is fair to say that ‘the leadership and rank and file of fascism emerged largely unscathed’ (Behan 2009, 138), including those who had committed, or given sanction to, acts such as torture and rape. The covering up of Fascist war crimes was in many cases supported by the Allies, who feared otherwise the emergence of a governing Communist Party in Italy. While most ex-Fascists kept a low profile and tried to return to a ‘normal’ life, there were some who sought as early as January 1946 to re-organise themselves into a political group. By December 1946, ‘neo-Fascism’ was already emerging openly with the foundation of the MSI (*Movimento Sociale Italiano*), a group which would dominate far-right politics for the next 50 years.

In the 1948 elections, when the Communist Party was heavily defeated, the MSI was able to win 500,000 votes and to gain six MPs and one senator. Nevertheless, the MSI remained politically out in the cold until the mid-1950s. By this time, the ruling DC Party (*Democrazia Cristiana*) had lost an absolute majority in Parliament and was now beginning to discuss drawing on the support of the MSI to pass legislation and to keep out Communism. The situation came to a head in 1960 when the Christian Democrat Fernando Tambroni, an ex-Fascist militia officer, became Prime Minister thanks to MSI votes. The MSI, emboldened by their new political acceptance, made the provocative decision to hold their annual conference in Genova, a city well-known for its important

role in the Italian Resistance. Mass protest demonstrations against the MSI were held by ex-partisans and trade unions. A speech by ex-partisan and future Italian President Sandro Pertini referred to the need never to forget the 'blood-soaked' sacrifice of the Resistance. Demonstrations exploded into violence and five men died when police fired into the crowd. As a result, the MSI conference was called off and Tambroni was forced to resign.

Because of these events, the Resistance again came into focus in the early 1960s, along with the battle over who were the rightful heirs to the memory of the Resistance, and over the significance of the Resistance for modern Italy. Fenoglio, as a writer, continued to search for an understanding of the Resistance from the point of view of life in a new Italy, one in the middle of a consumerist economic boom, yet still haunted by her legacy of a civil war.

By the summer of 1962, Fenoglio was already beginning to feel the effects of what would eventually be diagnosed as lung cancer. However, even in the remaining months up until his death on 18 February 1963, he would keep writing about the Resistance. One short story of 1962, first published without a title in the 1978 *Opere*, but later given the title 'Ciao Old Lion' in the 1992 edition of Fenoglio's *Romanzi e racconti*, returns once again to the Battle of Valdivilla, in which Fenoglio had participated and in which some of his companions had lost their lives. The question Fenoglio explores here is: what can such an event, what can the deaths of those who took part, possibly mean in an Italy where the older generation of ex-Fascists have been reintegrated into Italian society, where an apolitical younger generation's main concern seems to be listening to the 'twist' and to having a good time, and where ex-partisans have made an endless series of compromises first to survive and then to fit into a fast-changing world with an entirely different set of values?

The story begins with two ex-partisans, 'Nick' and 'Jimmy', meeting in a bar. As the author somewhat ironically observes: 'A quasi vent'anni di distanza si chiamavano ancora col nome di battaglia' (Fenoglio 2001, 1378). Jimmy, whose real name is Guido Clerico, has by this time become a successful lawyer, and is recognised as such by the young barmen (they are certainly not interested in his past as a partisan). While Jimmy and Nick talk over insignificant memories of dances and girls after the war, the two youths load the juke box with sexually suggestive songs, in which 'il sesso veniva contrabbandato per sentimento' (ibid., 1379-80). Jimmy comments that he and Nick have 'done things' that these youths could never dream of. However, Jimmy now has a wife, two daughters, a car, and owns two apartments, one in the city and one by the sea. Nick, on the other hand, has not married and seems never to have been able to settle down after his experiences of war. The two men are meeting in anticipation of a commemoration ceremony at Valdivilla. While Jimmy is planning to travel there by car, Nick declares that the only way to reach Valdivilla is on foot, as he would have done as a partisan, even though it is 18 kilometres away and a steep climb: 'Questi giri si fanno a piedi o non si fanno. A piedi, Jimmy, come allora' (ibid., 1381). The disillusionment of the two men can be seen in their attitude towards Italian politics. In a possible reference to the Tambroni affair, Jimmy asks 'Hai visto, Nick, che i fascisti rialzano la testa?' (ibid., 1383). However, apart from voting for centre-left politicians, they ignore politics as an irrelevance to their lives. After Jimmy has left, Nick reflects that the 'only good thing' that remains to them is the fact that they call each other by their battle-names. Nevertheless, Nick sees himself, just as he believes Jimmy sees him, as 'sicurissimamente [...] un fallimento' (ibid., 1384). Fenoglio does not spell out in what way Nick, who in many respects mirrors the author (for example, his hunched shoulders, his knowledge of

English, his job as a clerk in an export company, his avoidance of involvement in politics), is a 'failure'. The implications, however, are clear. He is typical of a generation that in the end failed to create a 'year zero' for Italy, leaving the old power structures in place. But besides this, as an individual, like many other ex-partisans, Nick has failed to settle down into post-war life or to engage, politically or otherwise, in the society of the new Italy. Instead, he is stuck in the losses of the past. Like Ettore of *La paga del sabato*, Nick has not been able to find an alternative narrative to that of being a partisan. Yet Jimmy, who by conventional standards is to all appearances a success, has failed in that he has not been 'authentic', has not remained true to his partisan past, preferring instead to be admired for his position and acquired wealth. Jimmy has forgotten the sacrifices made by his comrades and has wiped out the Resistance narrative from his life. He has succumbed, in 'bad faith', to the expectations of others. The only authentic choice for both men would be to continue questioning the significance of the Resistance in the changing times of the present, which is what of course the 'partisan author' Fenoglio is doing, long after most of his neorealist contemporaries have given up on the project. The Resistance movement may have 'failed' historically and politically, but these two have surely also failed, 'existentially', as human beings.

For Fenoglio, the man and author, it was never enough to have simply 'joined' the Resistance. It is a choice which must be confirmed over and over again. This may involve a courageous degree of non-conformity, perhaps even with regard to the attitudes and expectations of one's own comrades. Mario Bonfantini in his 1959 memoir *Un salto nel buio* documents his own individual commitment which involves a highly risky 'leap into the dark'. Bonfantini has a similar attitude to Fenoglio's towards any political ideology such as Communism, since 'tutti i dogmi [...] a lasciar troppa corda, a dargli troppa

autorità anche nel viver civili, diventano fatalmente tirannici e inumani' (2005, 123). Ultimately, any human being may well remain alone with his most important choices. The memoir begins with Bonfantini looking at the faces of his fellow captured partisans on their bunks in a prison, some of whom have been tortured. The next day they are all due to be sent to a German labour camp. Bonfantini already feels estranged from his comrades, and even 'oppressed' by their presence (ibid., 12-13), in that he can sense that they are already resigned to their fate, whereas he is determined that in one way or another he will escape before he arrives in Germany. The next day when they are put onto a bus, and only guarded by three Germans, one of whom is driving, and another of whom has his machine gun slung over his shoulder with 'una fiducia nella viltà fisica e nella sottomissione di "questi italiani" che mi irritava non poco' (ibid., 38), Bonfantini is able to persuade some of his companions that at the right moment they will be in a good position to overpower the guards and escape. However, when the moment comes, no one acts. It is as if they are frozen by the belief that any kind of escape is by now impossible. When they are later transferred to a goods train, Bonfantini attempts to shake them out of their resignation with the argument, reminiscent of Roberto Battaglia's reflections on the nature of choice in *Un uomo, un partigiano*, that they must respond as human beings to the situation they find themselves in and not allow themselves to be turned into an 'anonymous mass'. Before being put onto the train, 'contavamo come individui [...] Ma ora, dal momento che siamo saliti su questo treno, siamo diventati una massa anonima, carne di lavoro e nient'altro, che conta solo come numero' (ibid., 71). But by now his companions have lost all sense of reality, swinging from blind despair to the absurd hope that they may be freed by some kind of miraculous intervention such as an Allied bombardment. In the end, Bonfantini is left completely alone with his decision. However

frightened he, too, feels, he must 'throw himself' from the fast-moving train, make his 'leap in the dark' alone: 'Uno, due, tre. E m'abbandonai' (ibid., 83).

Fenoglio's characters, like Bonfantini's companions, can also lose their commitment to freedom and to their own humanity. As with the captured partisans described by Bonfantini, this loss of commitment, accompanied by a loss of sense of reality and awareness of any genuine choice, may come about principally through a kind of uncontrollable fear: one only has to think of Max in 'Un altro muro' (see Chapter 2 of this thesis). However, the loss of commitment in Fenoglio's characters may come about for other reasons, too, such as the desire for an easy life, in which one is seen as being successful in the eyes of others ('Jimmy'). Alternatively, the commitment may turn into a false, sentimental one which refuses to take into account the present reality in which one finds oneself ('Nick'). The consequences of this and the struggle to maintain an 'authentic' commitment are continually examined by Fenoglio the author. In 1962, he remains 'true' to the cause of the Resistance. It is a commitment which continues to take into account all the complexities of postwar life. It is one which rejects any sentimental commemoration of the past or its exploitation for political reasons. It refuses to resign itself either to a forgetting of the past (because it cannot be made to fit into the present), or to a bitterness that no new narrative can be created.

We now live in an era of instant communication where acts of war and terrorism take place before our eyes on screens, in an age where, as Baudrillard puts it 'the real is no longer real' (1996, 175). When we see grainy images of tortured hostages or old footage of concentration camps, however shocking, the 'reality' of what it was like to live through this experience is not brought home to us, a point Semprun (1994) makes convincingly in

L'Écriture ou la vie. It is a world where a horror film can seem more 'real', make us feel more frightened, than a documentary about atrocities committed in a civil war or the effects of global warming. According to Fredric Jameson, the 'one major theme' of postmodern society is 'the disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions' (1992, 179). Perhaps literature, however, has a place here, in creating a new 'realism', one which has learnt the lessons of modernism, one which can restore our sense of history. Through a fiction which is 'not fraudulent', we can regain our sense of 'the real', because a 'truthful' fiction can help us to make sense out of terrible events and their impact on individual human beings. As Casadei puts it: 'La letteratura, e in specie il romanzo, può ridare un senso (non solo volontaristico o utopico) alla storia, risarcendo [...] e ricostituendo dietro l'eccesso di immagini virtuali una percezione autentica' (2001, 25). Or to return to Semprun: 'la vérité essentielle de l'expérience, n'est pas transmissible... Ou plutôt, elle ne l'est que par l'écriture littéraire' (1994, 167).

Like the best of his neorealist contemporaries, Fenoglio does not attempt any naïve 'mirroring' of reality, does not seek the kind of formulaic closure of those stories where good always triumphs in the end over evil, and does not make any claims to omniscience. Fenoglio's realism is not of the kind which acts, in the words of Lyotard, as a 'medicine for the anxiety and depression' that we feel (1993, 7). Nor does Fenoglio attempt an escape into an avant-garde, self-referential and ahistorical reality. Rather, whatever his innovations, he remains a bearer of a traditional sense of 'shared reality' in a historical context.

In a post-1989 world where the demarcation lines between Communism and capitalism, west and east are either unclear or have collapsed completely, Fenoglio's refusal to adopt a political ideology make him more credible as a writer of the Resistance than others such as Viganò (who was attempting a kind of socialist realism), Vittorini (whose intellectual protagonist in *Uomini e no* passes on responsibility for the Resistance struggle to an *operaio*) and even the Calvino of the 1940s who brought a chapter into his novel *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* expressly to explain Communist ideology and its relationship to the Resistance. This is not to claim for a moment, as I have made clear throughout the course of this thesis, that Fenoglio was not committed to the cause of the Resistance. Indeed, as Falaschi rightly states, Fenoglio 'è l'unico scrittore che rimane fedele al tema partigiano fino alla morte' (1976, 5). While Fenoglio was still excluded from the neorealist canon in the 1950s, ironically this left him free to keep exploring the Resistance when Calvino, Vittorini and others had long abandoned it. The fact that Fenoglio is not preaching to us or offering us easy moral and political answers means that we are far more likely to wish to engage with his work. As 'post-theory' critics of the 'new aestheticism' remind us, a text is far more likely to 'last' if it does not have a specifically propagandistic purpose, but instead challenges us to enter into a discussion with it (Joughin and Malpas 2003, 8). Fenoglio's *opere* – from *Appunti partigiani* through the short stories of *I ventitre giorni della città di Alba* to his two great novels *Il partigiano Johnny* and *Una questione privata* – form a profound and challenging moral realism. It is a realism which continues to invite questions and to provoke us into considering the meaning of extraordinary events in history and their effect on our individual lives.

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Note:

- * The *Opere*, edited by Maria Corti, and published in 1978, contain not only the vast bulk of Fenoglio's work, but also different drafts of the same work, much of which was left uncompleted by Fenoglio. *Ur partigiano Johnny* and the first draft of *Primavera di bellezza* can only be found here. *Romanzi e racconti*, edited by Dante Isella, was published in 1992 and updated in 2001 to include *Appunti partigiani* (first published separately in 1994). Inexplicably, however, Isella has chosen to exclude both *Ur partigiano Johnny* and *La paga del sabato* from the *Romanzi e racconti*. What is needed now, of course, is a new edition of Fenoglio's collected works.