

The House on the Hill

Cesare Pavese

THE HOUSE ON THE HILL

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Intermediate English

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Cesare Pavese and his Work

Cesare Pavese (Santo Stefano Belbo, province of Cuneo, 1908 – Turin, 1950) was a novelist, poet, translator and essayist. He started primary school in Santo Stefano Belbo and continued his education in Turin, where he graduated in 'Letters' with a thesis on the poetry of Walt Whitman, having a particular interest in English literature. He has translated American and British authors.

Although apolitical, he moved in anti-fascist circles and was arrested in 1935. He spent a few months in prison and then a year in internal exile in a Calabrian village.

Because of his asthma, he avoided being drafted into the army and took refuge in the hills near Casale Monferrato. On his return to Turin, he worked as an editor and translator for the publisher Luigi Einaudi.

He won the Strega Prize in 1950, but depression, romantic disappointments and political disillusionment led him to commit suicide that same year by overdosing on barbiturates.

His prose was a flat, restrained realism, and his themes focused on the friction between the individual and society, the tension between men and women, the country and the city, love and solitude, war.

Some of his masterpieces include *The Beach* (1942), *Dialogues with Leucò* (1947), *The House on the Hill* (1948), *The Beautiful Summer* (1949), *The Moon and the Bonfires* (1950).

I – The Nights on the Hill

Every evening during the Second World War I left my city, Turin, to spend the night on a hill near a country house, where I had rented some rooms. There lived the owner with her forty-year-old daughter, Elvira, and their dog, Belbo, that waited for me on the path and accompanied me to the house. I talked to them about the war, and sometimes I ate with them, although I was not reluctant to eat alone. I could reflect on what was happening without getting bogged down¹ in superficialities.

One evening in June 1943, instead of taking the usual route to the nearby hill, I was attracted by a group of people shouting on the opposite side of the hill, where I had never ventured before. I was intrigued by the fact that, in the menacing² darkness above the mute city, some people were passing the time singing and laughing. Belbo howled at the voices. I held his collar and kept him quiet so that I could hear better. There were some clear voices among the drunken ones, even a woman. I decided to take Belbo in the direction of the voices.

As I passed the crest of the second hill, I heard the alarm. The songs were over in the valley. Belbo came to a courtyard and jumped at people coming out of a house. I followed him. They knew the dog. They greeted me without asking who I was. The group moved in the darkness, talking about Turin, the war, destroyed houses; there were also children. They began to sing quietly again and gathered around a table with

¹ To get bogged down: to be involved in something.

² Menacing: threatening, suggesting the presence of danger.

a flask and some glasses. It was an inn and all of them, mostly relatives, were from Turin. The owner, an old man, poured me some wine; an old woman was worried about the forthcoming winter, and a young man reassured her that the war would be over by then. The young ones were the most impertinent of the group. A woman's voice asked me: 'What about you? Are you going for a walk?' The voice was not unknown to me, but I could not tell whose it was. I replied jokingly that I was looking for truffles with the dog. She asked me if people ate truffles where I taught. I was surprised: 'Who told you that I'm a teacher?'

'People are aware,' was her reply. Trying to scan her face in the darkness of the night, I went on to ask if she lived there or in Turin. She said Turin.

'You don't want to devour me, do you?' she continued. At that moment we heard the all-clear. Immediately there was a commotion; she had not lost her composure among the people when I whispered to her: 'You are Cate'. She said no word.

I had to get up because everyone was going home. I wanted to pay for the wine, but the innkeeper would not accept it. I said goodbye, shook hands with one of them, Fonso, and called Belbo to go home.

It was the middle of the night. Elvira was waiting for me on the steps. She simply said that she had been worried and then kept quiet. I ate and thought about how many years had passed since I had met Cate. It was like opening an old, forgotten wardrobe, and I thought not only of Cate, but also of the man I used to be, and what we had in common.

Eight years earlier, Cate and I used to go for walks or to the cinema. I remember her taking my arm and hiding her broken nails. That year I rented a room in

Nice Street, gave my first lessons and often ate at the dairy. My parents sent me some money to help me. I remembered my school friends: Gallo, who was later killed by a bomb in Sardinia, and Martini, who married the cashier. Gallo and I went dancing and walked on the hills. Once Gallo and I went on a boat trip and he invited Cate on board. Later it happened that Cate and I went alone on the boat. We pulled the boat ashore and remained in the meadow. Cate sat down and allowed herself to be cuddled³. Other times I would hug her on the grass. One evening Cate came to my house to smoke a cigarette and we ended up making love in bed, which was more comfortable than the meadow. But that was the only night she visited me. She told me she had learnt to type so she could work in a big shop. I thought of our affair more as a sex story than a love story, which probably and painfully disappointed her expectations. One evening I asked her to come to my house, but she preferred to go for a walk. I insisted and in the end she left. I had not seen her since that night.

Now I thought of Cate as I walked back up the hill. There was another night alert, planes were bombing the city, the Turin valley was in flames. The next morning, Turin was devastated: the streets were full of bombed-out holes, fires were still burning, the trams were out of order because of damaged electrical wires. Fortunately, the school was safe. The school usher, Domenico, welcomed me. There were no students present. I spent the morning sorting out the class

³ Cuddled: hold close in one's arms as a way of showing love or affection.

register in preparation for the upcoming evaluation period.

The images of the war's devastation stayed with me; I thought of the women who had laid out the bodies, washed and dressed them. Other people had died that night. I thought of the people who had stayed in the city, who had no way to escape. Then I thought of the people on the hill, the liberating songs of the young people, the meeting with Cate. Finally, I thought of my relief at being able to get away from the alarms every night, at being able to feel at home in my room, at being able to relax in my own safe bed. I wondered if I could smile at my recklessness⁴!

The phone started ringing: the headmaster, Mr Fellini, teachers, parents of the students were calling for information. I reassured them that the school was safe, although there was no school that morning. After school, I wandered around the city: gutted⁵ houses smoking, wallpaper, tapestries, upholstery dangling⁶ in the sun. Soldiers were pulling bodies out of the rubble⁷; people said they could not help others because the war was already considered lost. I went into a pub. I heard people saying that a church and its cemetery in Rome had been bombed; there was no peace for the dead either!

I went out. Some porters were removing lamps and armchairs from a prestigious building. They were piling up furniture, tables, mirrors and suitcases in the sun. I thought of the well-furnished palace of Anna Maria, with whom I had an affair for three years before

⁴ Recklessness: lack of regard for danger.

⁵ Gutted (of a building): badly damaged, destroyed.

⁶ To dangle: to hang loosely.

⁷ Rubble: waste or rough fragments of stone, brick, concrete.

the war. We often went out together. She held me in the palm of her hand; I wanted to marry her. She was capricious. As time went by, she began to tell me that she did not understand me, and gradually she became mysterious. I was devastated when she left me; I wanted to kill myself. My friend Gallo calmed me down by saying: 'Silly talk, it can happen to anyone.' Then I was awarded a teaching post. These were my thoughts as I stood in front of the gutted building.

At the beginning of the war, the attacks on Turin were not as severe and widespread as in the third and fourth year of war. The wealthy had gone to the countryside, to their cottages in the mountains or on the lake, where they lived as usual. It was left to the servants, ushers and porters to look after the palaces and, in case of fire, to save the contents.

That evening, after having dinner in the house on the hill, I talked in the orchard⁸ with Elvira, her mother and a fifteen-year-old girl, Egle, who lived in the neighbouring country house. They said the school had to close because it was a crime to keep students in the city. I shifted the focus⁹ to teachers, ushers, tram drivers, barmen: should they have stayed in the city?

In the distance someone was singing again. I decided to say goodbye to Egle and the two women and go to the group. Belbo came with me. I walked the moonlight, completely plunged¹⁰ into nature; Turin, the shelters, the alarms now seemed like distant things, even fantasies. I arrived in the courtyard of the inn; songs came from behind the house. A little boy saw me. I asked him: 'Is anyone there?' He looked at me

⁸ Orchard: a piece of enclosed land planted with fruit trees.

⁹ To shift the focus: to draw attention.

¹⁰ Plunged: immersed.

hesitantly. He was a pale boy, dressed in a sailor's suit. I had not noticed him on my first evening at the inn. He approached the door and called in: 'Mum'. Cate came out with a bowl of peels. She threw them away and sent the little boy, Dino, into the house with the bowl.

She said to me: 'Why don't you join the others?'

'Is that your son?' I asked her.

She looked at me speechlessly.

'Are you married?' I continued, breaking the silence.

'What does it matter to you?' she replied, half-heartedly and coldly.

'He's a nice, well-groomed¹¹ boy,' I said.

'I take him to school in Turin. We'll be back before nightfall,' she replied.

I could see her clearly in the moonlight. She wore a short country skirt and spoke confidently; it seemed to me that yesterday we had walked arm in arm.

'Don't you sing?' she said with a hard smile and a gesture with her head. 'Have you come to hear us sing? Why don't you go back to your pub?'

'Silly,' I told her boldly, 'you still think our time is past!' I watched her sensual mouth, now more stable and robust than in our past.

The little boy went out of the yard, when Belbo started to bark. 'Come here, Belbo,' I said.

'Cate, you won't believe this, but this dog is my only companion.'

'He's not yours,' she objected.

'I don't know anything about your life, tell me something, please... Are you aware that Gallo died in Sardinia?' Cate was not aware. I told her Gallo's fate;

¹¹ Well-groomed: having a neat and pleasant appearance.