

POLITICS AND POWER IN GIOVANNI COMISSO'S *GIORNI DI GUERRA* AND PIER VITTORIO TONDELLI'S *PAO PAO*

WILHELM SNYMAN
(University of Cape Town)

Sommario

Attraverso i romanzi Pao Pao di Pier Vittorio Tondelli e Giorni di guerra di Giovanni Comisso il saggio intende innanzitutto discutere i cambiamenti – avvenuti nel corso di questo secolo – nella relazione fra l'individuo e la sua società. In secondo luogo, si analizza il cambiamento di atteggiamento nei confronti delle strutture di potere nella società, e, in particolare, nel contesto militare.

Spurious as a comparison of two such disparate novels may appear, a comparison of these two novels, the first, *Giorni di guerra*, published in 1930 and *Pao Pao* in 1982, does provide an insight into changing and changed attitudes to the question of power and politics in Italian literature.

For a start, both novels deal with a military situation and inevitably form part of a literary genre which could, for the purposes of the discussion, be called the “military novel”.

In this regard one needs only remind oneself of the Erich Maria Remarque novels, notably *Im Westen nichts neues* (*All quiet on the Western Front*) or Heinrich Böll's *Wo warst du Adam* (*Where were you, Adam*), Mario Rigoni Stern's *Il sergente nella neve*, to mention but a few significant novels that elevated the war novel to a level one may call, however cautiously, of literary respectability.

Tondelli and Comisso's novels, under discussion here, are autobiographical, a tendency common to many novels of the genre for obvious reasons. Both novels trace the individual's way of coming to terms with his own powerlessness. What makes the war or the military

novel compelling for our purposes is that inasmuch as these novels are representations of war and the military, they reflect the most crass, relentless and devastating manifestations of political power at work.

As war is traditionally imbued with a multitude of real and presumed meaning, the war novel or the military novel peels away the layers of mendacity used to justify the war exercise, and its implicit brutality. The military, a by-product of nation states, is an expression, a representation in the context we are dealing with, of two very different Italies. Comisso's Italy is a relatively new Italy, an Italy trying to prove itself, in the context of the First World War, among the great powers of Europe, whereas Tondelli's is an Italy disenchanted with itself.

Let's accept that armed forces have – since the days of Frederick the Great and Napoleon – been imbued with the notion of patriotism, not limited by loyalties to a king or a nobleman alone. Loyalty to the *idea* of a nation was required and inculcated into the populace. The context for Comisso's novel is the long and arduous and elaborate process Italy went through after unification with the various Minghetti, Depretis, Crispi and Giolitti governments, Adowa, Libya and *trasformismo* – this while still trying to keep up a semblance of unity. The secularisation of education and the constant battle against the Church had as their ultimate aim the creation of a stable and united Italy, determined to survive the rigours of nation-building, industrialisation, land reforms and the constant haemorrhaging effect of emigration. By the time the First World War came, it is arguable whether Italy was, in fact, enough of a nation to embark on a venture of such magnitude. The military, thus, becomes the institutionalisation of the nation's political spirit.

The military can also be seen as a measure of a given nation's strength, of its ability to wage war – an ability which relies on the social and political cohesion existing in a particular country at a given time. The more united politically and socially a nation is, the more prepared it is to be able to fight a war successfully. Where social and political cohesion is lacking, force, propaganda and fear are often the instruments used to create at least the appearance of cohesion and unity.

Let us say that these factors are premises, become the non-literary context which informs a novel which uses the military situation as its source of inspiration, as its context. In both Tondelli and Comisso

military life, whether in war or peace-time, is used as a catalyst for saying something about the individual.

In Comisso war, or the military situation, provides an author with a situation in which he can observe the individual living life with an intensity absent in peace time circumstances.

Both novels represent an awareness of the nation-state and the power it exerts on the individual, all be the approach to these questions predictably and radically different.

Comisso's novel tends towards the anecdotal. But, within Comisso's anecdotal style a myriad of references and insights into the Italy of his time are made, and into the individual's response to his helplessness in the face of power, of the abuse of power.

Giovanni Comisso's novel tells of his initial period in the First World War, the capture of Gorizia and the disaster of Caporetto in October 1917. He speaks of the incompetence and cruelty of senior officers and the happenstance which characterised a war fought to gain Italy prestige and territory. While his novel doesn't condone the war in which 600 000 Italians were killed, and 300 000 were taken prisoner at Caporetto alone, he does not overtly question the power structures which led Italy – without parliamentary approval, into the war. Comisso is obliquely critical of some of his commanders, and especially in regard to the disaster at Caporetto in the wake of which in October 1917, 217 generals and 255 colonels were dismissed by Italy's commander-in-chief of the armed forces, Cadorna.

Comisso shows an awareness of the make-up of the armed forces of the new Italy, and in fact most of the new officers, after 1 600 were killed on the front, were Southerners, not to mention the proportion of Southerners serving as infantry in a war the purpose of which was at best vague (Martin: 188).

Northerners, often because of the technical training, tended to be employed further away from the front. One might have expected a more acerbic attitude towards war and the state on Comisso's part when one considers that an estimated 4 000 death sentences were passed for desertion, after 55 000 trials had taken place. "Only" 750 executions were in fact carried out, all of this between the spring of 1917 and the beginning of 1918. Cadorna implemented a ruling that officers were duty-bound to shoot their own deserting men. Decimation was supposed

to keep up morale, but had the opposite effect. The First World War was also the first war Italy fought as a united country and hence inspired – or had the potential to inspire – a new-found patriotism and Comisso's novel reflects this dilemma.

Giorni di guerra wants to be a novel that inspires a pride in Italy, but at the same time does not know how to deal with the obvious erosion the war brings about of the very ideal of a powerful and united Italy.

What is evident in Comisso's novel is the alternation of alienation and camaraderie on the part of the narrator.

Camaraderie can be seen as one of the attractions of military life, or indeed the submersion of the individual into a greater enterprise – the nation-state endowed arbitrarily with purpose, a purpose sanctioned by the King and supported by his ministers, a purpose sanctioned and legitimised by the powers that be and buttressed by the mythology surrounding the *Risorgimento*.

Comisso describes his uncle, a retired colonel in Florence, whom he greets before leaving for the front. The uncle is too old to fight in the war and Comisso captures the scene as follows:

Si lagnava per l'ingratitudine toccata a quelli che avevano sacrificato il miglior tempo della loro vita per la grandezza della patria: "Noi," diceva "appena finite le guerre ci siamo trovati con un pugno di mosche, pensioni misere, appena guardati in faccia, mentre gli altri erano rimasti a casa, avevano pensato a farsi ottime posizioni sociali sfruttando la situazione che noi avevamo creato con il nostro sangue". (27-28)

This extract at the beginning of the novel as the young Comisso sets out for war, sets the scene for the underlying scepticism towards war and the reasons for which it was fought that underscores the narrative.

He explores the incidence of mutiny and desertion and the fact that both these offences carried with them the death penalty, impossible to implement after Caporetto. Comisso describes death in a poetic, strangely distant way, as if to leave the horror of the war more to the imagination than overwriting it with endless graphic descriptions. He says for example:

I miei compagni trovarono i loro compaesani e uno un suo amico. Si abbracciarono e si baciavano piangendo e li accompagnarono portando il loro fucile. Andavano a Plava, per passare l'Isonzo. La colonna terminò. Sulla strada rimasero le orme delle loro scarpe. Incuranti della pioggia ritornammo tristi e scontenti... (44)

Throughout the novel, Comisso makes reference to the regional origins of his various officers and soldiers that cross his lonely path. There's always "un maggiore romano", a "capitano napoletano" – a telling indication of the relative novelty of Italian unification, of a regionalism that has submitted itself to the higher ideals enshrined in the Italian state.

Comisso's scepticism is not overt, it is subtle to the point of self-censorship. His novel is implicitly anti-war, but for him, seemingly, the human tragedy that he witnesses and of which he forms a part is a personal challenge to his capacity to survive, to his capacity to remain a sensitive human being in spite of what he experiences. So for example he laments the fate of some volunteers:

Qualcuno reggeva una grande bandiera tricolore. I volontari erano smaniosi di combattere e sicuri di conquistare le trincee del Podgora. E partivano ed andavano a raggiungere il loro posto in trincea e forse subito il giorno dopo erano già uccisi, schiacciati assieme alla spada brunita, alla camicia rossa alle medagliette e ai distintivi. Ogni giorno il numero dei morti cresceva, la mitraglia aveva tolto ogni fronda ai castagni del Podgora. (50-1)

But, paradoxically, underlying Comisso's narrative is the conviction of the war as a necessary evil. Comisso is patriotic – he believes in the new Italy: Italy is something new, worthy of being defended. He recounts an incident when a rainbow over Gorizia seemed to reflect the Italian national colours. He recounts the event without a sense of irony and without bitterness when he says:

Un giorno si scatenò un temporale sopra Gorizia, noi eravamo in pieno sole e a un certo momento contro lo sfondo cupo delle nubi apparve l'arcobaleno che pareva composto dei colori italiani. Il capitano da sotto alla pergola stava a guardare, mi avvicinai per portargli la posta e gli indicai quel bianco, rosso, verde del cielo come un segno che la città presto sarebbe stata nostra. (56-7)

There's not the bitterness of a Wilfred Owen or an Erich Maria Remarque or an Ungaretti. The incidents of war are often interspersed with idyllic descriptions of the countryside, of the changing of seasons, of nature being all enduring, of the joy of picking cherries and of forming friendships.

The only measure of his distance from the events around him is when he expresses his joy at being able to be alone. He doesn't seem to take a firm position either way, other than describing the horrors of the war and the effects thereof on himself and his comrades. The ease with which he alternates the horrors of war with a blithe sensuality can be confounding. Speaking of an old school friend he says:

Era stato di servizio sul Sabotino, aveva visto i morti accatastati fuori delle trincee, arsi dai lanciafiamme e parlava poco. Gli altri speravano di potere approfittare del corso per rivedere le donne delle quali avevano dimenticato l'odore. (80)

In the same paragraph we have flame throwers mentioned with the delights of a brothel, but then as Giuseppe Petronio points out Comisso was typical of writers who also wrote for *Solaria*, a *solariano* who wrote prose, who put himself at the centre and who along with other *solari* "tendevano a dire se stessi" (900).

Typically the writer relies on memory in which character development is less important than are ambiances and states of mind. While this is not a fault in itself, it sets Comisso apart. In so doing it

appears that he determines his limits, the scope of his narrative, the extent to which he wants to confront the world.

It is this style that he chooses to use when responding to the power and politics of his time as expressed in war. The stylistic consideration seems more important than the exploration of the scope of tragedy which surrounds him. The most bitter invective one finds betrays a regional prejudice on his part, not against the Austrian enemies, not against those who put him under arms, but against a Neapolitan whom he accuses of having stolen a blanket:

“Ma no signor tenente, voi vi ingannate,” mi diceva con accento napoletano e l’odio crescevaEcco dove sono i nemici, mi dicevo. Altro che gli austriaci. La guerra mi pareva stupida e ridicola. (144)

This hardly comes across as a response that indicates the tragedy of the human condition in a time of war, but then Comisso’s usefulness lies elsewhere.

His narrative style provides us with an eyewitness account of, and a response to war and the Italy of his time, no less and, alas, no more. His is a cosy narrative that gets heated again when he describes his dislike for the *arditi*, but it’s not a narrative that attempts to dislodge the pillars of society, of middle-class acceptability, of the power structures of his day.

However, a novel which shares much with Comisso’s *Giorni di guerra*, but which does set out to undermine the “pillars of society” is Pier Vittorio Tondelli’s *Pao Pao*. Tondelli’s novel shares the following aspects with Comisso’s: while not being a war novel, it is a novel set within a military situation; it is autobiographical, the author likewise being the protagonist; Tondelli also describes people and places; he reveals an attitude to the nation-state and what it stands for; like Comisso, the military experience acts as a catalyst to reveal a greater self-awareness on the part of the author. In both novels the individual describes suffering, but through suffering develops a greater capacity or freedom – the individual undergoes a change through the military experience.

Also, the differences between the two novels highlight some salient points about each writer’s work: Comisso isn’t anti-establishment, he

accepts military authority even though he undermines it, avoids it when he can; Comisso becomes a more integrated member of the military, he believes in it, inasmuch as he believes in Italy, despite his obvious regional prejudice and his ill-concealed aversion to some of his countrymen.

Fifty-two years later with Tondelli, the situation is of course markedly different. The war situation is replaced by the *naja* (military service) and *najoni*, and the war being fought is a very different one. It's not a war of Italians against Austrians. It's not a war to survive, where the possibility of death is ever present. Tondelli's war is a much more "luxurious" one. Survival is a given, *scontata*. It is the quality of life that the struggle is about. Tondelli's novel reflects the *benessere* of 80s Italy, an Italy in which the victory over Fascism, or the struggle for national unity were not experienced first-hand.

Pao Pao is a novel that also reflects the indulgence that material well-being had fostered; his is a generation that *expects* material well-being and for whom human rights is also a given, not something for which the protagonist had to fight. Human rights are seen as a given in his modern Western context in which the rehabilitation of post-war Italy is assumed. Tondelli says, for example:

Faccio i conti con me stesso, potrei essere a lavorare, in carcere, in colonia o a scuola, è la stessa storia, esattamente identica, che c'è di diverso fra un capitano e un capufficio, un professore e un maresciallo? Nulla. Sempre nell'istituzione, sempre gente a controllarti, sempre dover rendere conto, non sono mai stato libero e non lo sarò mai, il mondo mi può cadere addosso fra un momento e allora che vado fantasticando? (13)

None of these assumptions and attitudes are evident in Comisso's work. Comisso doesn't express the same need for individual liberty. Rather he sees liberty of the individual as being more allied to that of his country. While Comisso's novel reflects a normal human response to war, it lacks political commitment. Yet, this is not to say that Tondelli's novel is awash with political commitment, either.

Whereas in Comisso the novel is a series of war-time vignettes, Tondelli's is a series of love-escapades, arising from the military context, pursued with varying degrees of sincerity.

The war Tondelli fights is a personal one, it is one fought for recognition of the love that he feels he can give, a war fought to legitimise his love, his homosexuality.

Comisso's war is a war fought for Italy. Comisso's war legitimises his existence and the sacrifices he makes. Tondelli's war has a personal function with the military situation in which he fights his war being a *seccatura*. It is a war in which he feels himself the victim of an insensitive and uncaring world.

His war is implicitly against accepted norms of heterosexuality and the like, but significantly it is also a war against a gay subculture which by its very nature accentuates his sense of alienation, his sense of not-belonging. That is the war in which Tondelli is also a participant, in the same way that Comisso is a participant in a conventional war. Tondelli consciously compromises himself with the military authorities, he plays their game and derives benefit from it while despising it virulently.

While Comisso finds solace in observing the simple way of life of peasants in Venezia Giulia, it is a life he can understand and which echoes his own. He contrasts that with the ominous presence of war which, of course, threatens to destroy the idyll. Moments of peace are sought through contemplation of nature in all its bounty. In Tondelli, the solace is found in drugs and the *frisson* of sex and even in briefly requited love and misplaced "crushes".

In both novels there are constant references to being hospitalised or getting or not getting one's longed-for leave. When Comisso goes to hospital it's for anti-lice treatment. There are cholera epidemics over and above the constant stream of war wounded. Hospitalisation for Tondelli usually is required to recover from a *sbornia*, from overindulgence. Both Comisso and Tondelli use their leave to find relief from the military environment, obviously, but for Tondelli leave means a continuation for the desperate search for love, drugs or intrigues with his friends in the night spots of Rome.

Both writers refer to the regionalism of Italy. Both have an obvious Northern prejudice. But, despite this prejudice Comisso more readily

reconciles himself to a charm that the regional dialects and origins give Italy, as a nation.

In Tondelli, the perception of the regions are seen thus:

[...] Insomma nel giro di due minuti dal timido silenzio iniziale scaturisce tutta la babele dell'Italia rustica e regionale, ognuno raccolto fra quelli della sua terra cosicché salta fuori un casino poliglotta, una sarabanda del dialetto e del falsetto, tutta una kermesse del vocio nazional-popolare da dare brividi. (15)

What one is also dealing with and as will be evident by this stage is the greater level of self-awareness evident in Tondelli's novel, when compared to Comisso's. Of course it would be tempting to say that Tondelli's novel reflects a greater level of individual emancipation, a more conscious striving for freedom of the individual, bearing in mind the thin line that divides freedom and alienation, the freedom of loneliness that modern society bestows on us.

It seems glib to assert that what Comisso was struggling for on a national level by fighting in the First World War, Tondelli struggles to find on an individual level and yet the comparison of the two novels, neither of them particularly commendable from a literary aesthetic or philosophical point of view, does provide one with a barometer of a changing and changed Italy: an Italy of different mores, yet as Cesare Segre would say they both have the same "situational reference" (84) – the military – and are accessible in terms of the idiom of the army, even though Tondelli's text is much more lively, slang-ridden and scathing.

Both novels are also written about and by people at the same stage of their lives and reflect much of the same preoccupation with sex.

It is telling also that the image of Italy that Tondelli evokes is also a vision of a very tired and worn-out Italy, sentiments unthinkable in Comisso. Tondelli says, speaking of Italy in the wake of the Bologna bomb blast:

Io dico ...non me ne frego un cazzo se dovessero arrivare i brigatisti o i terroristi, che volete che faccia?...tanto funziona una minchia di niente... figuriamoci io che

salvo l'onore della Patria dopo che ne han fatto di tutti i colori per sbaraccarla giù. (80)

While hardly being a systematic critique *alla* Pasolini of the ills of Italy, this extract from Tondelli's text does reflect maturity in terms of national experience. The attitude is not young and idealistic. Tondelli's idealism is nurtured in the personal, not the public domain. There's a hardened cynic talking here, a cynicism that is the product of a profound *disinganno* vis à vis his country and the power structures that have turned the ideals that Comisso had into rubble. This extract represents, one could say, the end product of the idealism, at the end of the 20th century, of the long sought after and fought for ideal of a united Italy.

Comisso's novel is at the beginning of the would-be learning curve of national self-knowledge. Tondelli's novel is the end product of Fascism, neo-realist idealism, economic miracles, corruption, the Mafia, materialism – the list is endless, in short all the ills that have beset Italy and other industrial and post-industrial societies. What Tondelli describes is a universal *disinganno* which isn't all that peculiarly Italian, only the setting is Italian.

In the midst of all the disillusionment Tondelli is determined not to be disillusioned in love. He recognises that inevitably the individual bears responsibility for his own happiness and is at the mercy of fortune in this search which occurs in a world which has long since ceased to make any sense.

By contrast, Comisso's world still makes sense to him, the categories are relatively clear. He says as the end of the war approaches:

Noi si riconquistava il Veneto con i piemontesi, come al tempo del mio vecchio zio, ciò mi affermava nella vita e senza frenare le lagrime ripresi a correre con i miei soldati per raggiungere il Piave. (65)

This kind of statement, this kind of sentiment seems naïve to us now, and probably would be laughable to Tondelli and the Italy which he portrays. The closest affinity between the two writers in philosophical terms is found in the sentiment expressed by Comisso when he says:

Alcuni soldati della mia compagnia, quelli che più avevano lavorato, stanchi e feriti leggeri, non potendo seguirla nella marcia avanti, erano scesi a Crespano. Neri, come di fumo, sporchi, stracciati, con fasciature spicciative alle mani o alla testa, sfiniti nel volto, ma accesi di sangue alle labbra e di vita negli occhi, cercai imprimerli nella memoria, perché ormai ero certo che aspetti simili non sarebbe stato possibile rivedere più. Pareva avessero impegnato tutta la loro forza per fare all'amore o per una corsa accanita e sorridevano pesantemente come non sapessero essi stessi cosa avessero fatto e perché. (73)

The freedom Comisso attains, besides the self-knowledge that he acquires through his wartime experiences, is the freedom after a war has come to an end. Comisso doesn't long for more, nor does he get any more than what he asks for. The freedom of an *Italia irredenta* moves him to tears, and that freedom and the idealism of it binds him to his fellow human beings, his comrades. He realises himself within that context, having to a large measure accepted literally the powers that be.

Tondelli's freedom is paradoxical – he states that freedom doesn't exist outside of himself. For him it's something internal, and is determined by the search for meaning, in his case a love relationship. He expects nothing from the powers that be. To our eyes his freedom may be greater than that of Comisso's, a possibility of freedom that the modern world tolerates, but so too is the alienation that he experiences greater than that revealed in Comisso's novel. And, Tondelli's novel isn't even written in a time of conventional war. Rather it is written at a time when the individual is at war with the world around him. As Tondelli himself says:

[...] le occasioni della vita sono infinite e le loro armonie si schiudono ogni tanto a dar sollievo a questo nostro pauroso vagare per sentieri che non conosciamo. (85)

Bibliography

- | | | |
|----------------|------|--|
| Baron, A. | 1979 | <i>From the city, from the plough.</i> Frogmore, St Albans, Hertfordshire. |
| Böll, H. | 1957 | <i>Wo warst du Adam</i> Paul List Verlag, Munich. |
| — | 1957 | <i>Wanderer kommst du nach Spa...</i> , Paul List Verlag, Munich. |
| Braun, O. | 1921 | <i>Aus nachgelassenen Schriften eines fruehvolendeten</i> , Hermann Klemm, Berlin. |
| Clark, M. | 1982 | <i>Modern Italy 1871-1982</i> , Longman, London. |
| Comisso, G. | 1980 | <i>Giorni di guerra</i> , Mondadori, Milano. |
| Ford Madox, F. | 1915 | <i>The good soldier</i> , Bodley Head, London. |
| Hirschfeld, G. | 1995 | <i>Besiegt und befreit</i> , Bleicher Verlag, Gerlichen. |
| Malaparte, C. | 1960 | <i>Kaputt</i> , Vallecchi, Firenze. |
| — | 1978 | <i>La pelle</i> , Mondadori, Milano. |
| Petronio, G. | 1980 | <i>L'attività letteraria in Italia</i> , Palumbo, Palermo. |
| Remarque, E.M. | 1975 | <i>Drei Kameraden</i> , Ullstein Verlag, Berlin. |
| — | 1975 | <i>Im Westen nichts neues</i> , Ullstein Verlag, Berlin. |
| Segre, C. | 1985 | <i>Avviamento al testo letterario</i> , Mondadori, Milano. |
| Stern, M.R. | 1978 | <i>Il sergente nella neve</i> , Einaudi, |

Torino.

Tondelli, P.V.	1982	<i>Pao Pao</i> , Feltrinelli, Milano.
—	1989	<i>Altri libertini</i> , Feltrinelli, Milano.
—	1991	<i>Camere separate</i> , Bompiani, Milano.