

PIEDMONT AND TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE

It is impossible to separate the work of the great Twentieth century Piedmontese writers from their environment. An environment that is not only physical, but also literary, made up of collective memories as revealed in the works of Pavese, Gozzano and Fenoglio.

The **literary twentieth century in Piedmont** began in Crepuscular mood with **Guido Gozzano**, who succeeded in conveying the educated society of the **Canavese** in his stories of local middle class life. After him, **Cesare Pavese** and **Beppe Fenoglio** tried to depict **Turin** and the **Langhe hills** as a universal reality, that could be understood by "everyone and not only the locals".

Gozzano and the Canavese hills

Guido Gozzano (1883-1916) described the tranquil middle class world of the **Canavese** and **Turin** with irony and without exaggeration.

The poet studied in **Turin** and his works mention all the most famous landmarks, like **Palazzo Madama** ("a pleasant place to sit and think, protected from the rain, the sun and other people's curiosity. Under its vast shape, strolling from the Mediaeval entrance hall to the 18th century arcade, you can wait for a lady – mother, sister, friend, lover – and the half hour delay, which every woman claims the right to, is less serious than elsewhere", from *L'altare del passato*), or the **Baratti & Milano Café**.

But Gozzano also spent a great deal of time in the **Canavese** of "Signorina Felicita": "Not real (and beautiful) like an enamel / in square sections the Canavese appeared: / **Ivrea** with its towers, the hills of **Montalto**, / the straight Serra, the trees, the churches; / and my dream of peace spread / from that luminous, high refuge" (*La Signorina Felicita*).

This is the Canavese of the villas, like "**Il Meleto**" in **Aglié Canavese**, where Gozzano often stayed. The villa has been beautifully restored in the style of the time and can now be visited; it contains some interesting items.

Pavese and the Langhe hills

Santo Stefano Belbo – where Barolo and Nebbiolo, two of the best Italian wines, are produced – stands surrounded by vineyards, hazelnut woods and small villages.

This is the birthplace of **Cesare Pavese** (1908-1950) who studied in the **Turin** of Gobetti and Gramsci, but never stopped thinking about his home, and returned there regularly ("My town is four huts and a sea of mud (...) one day I went home to see the hills again", from *Feria d'agosto*).

Pavese debuted with a collection of poems entitled *Lavorare Stanca* (1936), in which he began to propose a form of poetry linked to concrete facts: he captured the forgotten corners of the countryside of the **Langhe** and of the city of **Turin**, the home of a marginal humanity.

Pavese then turned his attention to narrative. His novels and short stories are dominated by the theme of solitude and the search for a lost childhood: the Langhe always represent a place to return to ("A town means knowing you are not alone, knowing that in the people and in the land there is something that is yours, which is there waiting for you even if you leave", from *La Luna e i falò*) but it is also a "silent protagonist" of his novels. These include *La casa in collina*, *La luna e i falò*, *Feria d'Agosto* and *Paesi tuoi*, in which the places that Pavese loved are described in detail: **Canelli**, **Cassinasco**, **La Morra**, the "Madonna delle nevi" of

Moncucco and, above all, the countryside, “halfway land” between the mountains and the sea.

Today visitors to Santo Stefano Belbo can see the **house where Pavese was born**, now a museum dedicated to the writer, containing photographs, his works translated into various languages, university theses on the author, a picture gallery and a collection of items and tools from rural life.

Fenoglio and the Langhe hills

In the work of **Beppe Fenoglio** (1922-1963) there is the constant presence of one landscape, the physical and anthropological geography of the **Langhe**.

Two constant themes emerge from his stories: life in the country (*La Malora*) and the Partisan war (*I ventitrè giorni della città di Alba* and *Il partigiano Johnny*), which he fought in for two years.

In the latter novel, the elements of the landscape intertwine continuously with human events and the Langhe are transformed into a special observatory of country life. The true condition of the partisan is revealed in the way the protagonist wonders ceaselessly in the area between the country villages of **Castino, San Bovo** and **San Donato di Mango**.

"But Johnny loved the river, which had brought him up, with the hills. The hills rose up all around, surrounding him, increasingly misty in the Autumn, in a musical vortex of leisurely flavours. The hills rose up along the river plain and above the town, shining unhealthily under a sick sun" (*Il Partigiano Johnny*): this is how Fenoglio saw **Alba**; like a town that was one with the hills and the river, a microcosm which he never abandoned in his life or his work. For much of his life, he lived in **Piazza Rossetti**, a few metres from the **Cathedral**.

"...at every turn I expected to see Alba lying there before my eyes like a sheet of coloured paper (...) when we wanted to talk about towns, people who had never seen one and wanted to imagine one, tried to imagine Alba" (*La malora*).