

Cesare Pavese the Americanist translator: A Chronology of the Myth

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Abstract: Cesare Pavese (1908-1950) is celebrated as a major figure in contemporary English-into-Italian (literary) translation, and as the one who introduced twentieth-century American authors into Italy. However, although he translated between 1931 and his death, in 1950, he only did so regularly between 1931 and 1942. This essay sets out to propose a more objective chronological positioning of Pavese's translating work within the cultural phenomenon known as *americanismo*. It does so by reviewing, firstly, Italian 'Americanism' as it was ignited, spread and promoted by successive generations of translators, who brought contemporary American literature into Italy. It then moves on to evaluate Pavese's role in this cultural episode and, finally, proposes a re-positioning of his undisputed relevance in it. According to this chronological analysis of his translating activity, then, what emerges is that Pavese's part in the Americanist phenomenon was as pivotal as it was limited in time and scope. Therefore, while he cannot possibly be ignored when studying *l'americanismo*, neither can he be considered the sole figure behind its beginning and, especially, its end, as has been suggested by some critics.

Keywords: Cesare Pavese, traduzione, Translation Studies, americanismo, myth, Einaudi

1. *Cesare Pavese's translations: all of them*

Cesare Pavese (1908-1950) is celebrated as a major figure in contemporary English-into-Italian (literary) translation, and as the one who introduced Twentieth-century American authors into Italy¹. However, his work as a translator took place over nineteen years, i.e. between 1931 and 1950 – when he tragically took his own life –, but he only translated regularly and continuously between 1931 and 1942. Indeed, all of his American translations were completed in this eleven-year period. Not only, the complete set of Pavese's translations (Table 1) amounts to 20 books², mostly fiction but

¹ This work is partially inspired to the original thesis: Kim Grego, 'Cesare Pavese traduttore: fra mito e realtà' (University of Bologna, 2001).

² To these, Mesiano (2007, pp. 64-65) adds the translations of Walt Whitman's poems *The Wallabout Martyrs* (published 1945), *A Passage to India* (incomplete) (published 2005), and diary *Specimen Days* (excerpts; published 1948). Two Walt Disney **Error! Bookmark not defined.** *Micky Mouse* comic books are only attributed to Pavese as their possible translator (*ibid.*, 2007, p. 61). Since these translations (not their publication) are not dated or attributed precisely (*A Passage to India*

also essays, of which only 11 were authored by Americans, while the rest were by British writers, with the occasional translation from ancient Greek of authors such as Homer and Hesiod.

Table 1. Cesare Pavese's translations. It includes the works that Pavese translated from Greek and those posthumously published. It also differentiates between those from American (in grey) and from British English.

<u>Year of transl.</u>	<u>Author</u>	<u>Italian title</u>	<u>Original title</u>	<u>Original language</u>	<u>Year of publication of original</u>
1931	Lewis, Sinclair	<i>Il nostro signor Wrenn</i>	<i>Our Mr Wrenn</i>	English, American	1914
1932	Melville, Hermann	<i>Moby Dick</i>	<i>Moby Dick</i>	English, American	1851
1932	Anderson, Sherwood	<i>Riso nero</i>	<i>Dark Laughter</i>	English, American	1925
1933	Joyce, James	<i>Dedalus</i>	<i>The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man</i>	English, British	1914-15 (instalments)
1934	Dos Passos, John	<i>Il 42° parallelo</i>	<i>The 42nd Parallel</i>	English, American	1930
1937	Dos Passos, John	<i>Un mucchio di quattrini</i>	<i>The Big Money</i>	English, American	1936
1938	Steinbeck, John	<i>Uomini e topi</i>	<i>Of Mice And Men</i>	English, American	1937
1938	Defoe, Daniel	<i>Fortune e sfortune della famosa Moll Flanders</i>	<i>Moll Flanders</i>	English, British	1722
1938	Stein, Gertrude	<i>Autobiografia di Alice Toklas</i>	<i>Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas</i>	English, American	1933
1939	Dawson, Christopher	<i>La formazione della unit� europea dal secolo V all'XI</i>	<i>The Making of Europe</i>	English, British	1932
1939		<i>David Copperfield</i>	<i>David Copperfield</i>	English, British	1849-50 (a puntate)
1940	Melville, Hermann	<i>Benito Cereno</i>	<i>Benito Cereno</i>	English, American	1856

is reported by Mark Pietralunga, 2005, p. 115, to have been preparatory work for Pavese's thesis, from the years 1925-1930), they have been considered not fully pertinent to the arguments about the translating activity of Pavese as presented in this work.

<u>Year of transl.</u>	<u>Author</u>	<u>Italian title</u>	<u>Original title</u>	<u>Original language</u>	<u>Year of publication of original</u>
1940	Stein, Gertrude	<i>Tre esistenze</i>	<i>Three Lives</i>	English, American	1909
1940	Trevelyan, George	<i>La rivoluzione inglese del 1688-89</i>	<i>The English Revolution 1688-89</i>	English, British	1938
1941	Morley, Christopher	<i>Il cavallo di Troia</i>	<i>The Trojan Horse</i>	English, American	1937
1942	Faulkner, William	<i>Il borgo</i>	<i>The Hamlet</i>	English, American	1940
1947	Henriques, Robert	<i>Capitano Smith</i>	<i>Captain Smith and Company</i>	English, British	1943
1950	Toynbee, Arnold	<i>La civiltà nella storia</i> (compendio di D. Somervell, trad. in collaborazione con C. De Bosis)	<i>A Study of History</i> (abridgment by D. Somervell)	English, British	1947
1981 ³	Hesiod / Homer	<i>La teogonia di Esiodo e tre inni omerici</i>		Greek, classic	VIII-VII sec. a.C.
1997 ⁴	Shelley, Percy Bysshe	<i>Prometo slegato</i>	<i>Prometheus Unbound</i>	English, British	1820

Is the myth of Pavese ‘the Americanist’ translator, then, actually justified, and/or is it still viable? This paper reviews and investigates the unquestionable role and relevance of Pavese as a translator, without in any way diminishing its linguistic, literary, and cultural significance, but hopefully proposing a more objective chronological positioning of it within the cultural phenomenon known as *americanismo*.

2. The Italian ‘golden age’ of American translations

Pavese, together with Elio Vittorini, Eugenio Montale, Alberto Moravia, and Giaime Pintor, to name but a few, contributed to the great translating activity that took place in Italy starting from

³ Posthumously published.

⁴ Posthumously published.

the 1930s and which revolved around above all one theme: America.⁵ This, indeed, was the period associated to the so-called Italian ‘Americanism’. A phenomenon now well identified and widely described, it refers to the penetration of American culture into Europe in general and Italy in particular, through the works of American novelists from the first decades of the Twentieth century. Dominique Fernandez, in his influential essay on the American myth as spread in Italy through translations (see Fernandez, 1969), places it between 1930-1950.⁶ In doing so, Fernandez seems to hold Pavese responsible for starting the myth of overseas literature in his country, and to have the phenomenon’s end coincide, emblematically, with Pavese’s death. Fernandez’s view, laid out at the end of the 1960s, has continued to exert its influence to this day, e.g. in the words of Marina Guglielmi who, in the 1990s, were still based on the great French scholar’s definition of “ventennio americano” and even proposed a debatable Pavese’s “poetics of translation” (Guglielmi, 1995, p. 301, 310). In Maria Walford-Dellù’s 2002 review of literary criticism of Pavese from the 1940s to the 2000s (Walford-Dellù, 2015), there also emerges a similar, uninterrupted trend, well into the new century. Clearly, there were several other events that contributed to the rise and fall of the Americanist myth of those decades. Some reflections on such dates will be proposed later on. For the moment, suffice it to observe that, while it is perhaps inaccurate to have the Americanist phenomenon coincide exactly with Pavese’s translating activity, for sure those experiences were closely connected.

Who else, then, was involved in the making of the myth? Some names were mentioned before but, to name the main protagonists of the Americanist myth, both in the US and in Italy, it is enough to look at the contents page of a single book: *Americana* (Vittorini, 1941). Its title alone is a manifesto:

⁵ For historical, cultural and literary reasons, the nouns “America”, “Americanism”, the adjectives “American” and “Americanist”, etc. will be used here as synonyms of “United States of America”, “USA” and “US”, although the latter will be preferred when referring to the country as a political entity.

⁶ Although several other scholars have written about Pavese’s translations, it is believed that Fernandez’s work contributed to establish a chronology seldom contested ever since. For this reason, this work focuses on it as a milestone in the criticism of Pavese the translator, as fundamental as – it is suggested – open to chronological clarifications.

without any specifications whatsoever, for the first time someone intended to introduce America and its literature to Italians in a comprehensive and ‘neutral’ way, dropping any adjectives and prejudices that may be attached to them. That person was Elio Vittorini, and we shall later see that, in fact, his intended objectivity (if ever such objectivity really existed in his intentions) quickly evaporated, as the young editor’s enthusiasm for the ‘new world literature’ could hardly be contained:

Even when imagining a history of American literature the first word that comes to mind, and stops in front of us, and stops us, is earth itself. [...] So it is America that we say. We say it, and we see on the atlas the immensity of populated colors, the plains, the mountains, the sublime snows on the mountains and, high up north, the sea ice, and miles and miles of coasts facing two oceans with two great names, the Atlantic, the Pacific, and in all this the ancient god, the desert, and the waterways, the iron railways, the asphalt roads, the houses, the houses, the houses (Vittorini, 1941, p. 2).

The table of contents of *Americana* features some of the main American writers, from Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgard A. Poe, to Mark Twain and Herman Melville, to the contemporaries of Vittorini and Pavese themselves, preferably represented by short stories and novellas, but also by excerpts from novels. No less rich is the list of translators: symbolically placed at the beginning of the book, next to that of the authors – thus the editor acknowledged the translating profession to which he also belonged – it includes Carlo Linati, Guido Piovene, Eugenio Montale, Alberto Moravia, Cesare Pavese, and Vittorini himself⁷. This list certainly does not report all the Americanist translators who were active at the time,⁸ but it does feature some of the most significant among them. This, not only because they translated, but also because they were – or were to become

⁷ Billiani (2007, pp 209) also mentions, in her review of foreign literature and culture imported into Italy between 1903 and 1943, “Praz, Soldati, e moltissimi traduttori rimasti praticamente sconosciuti”, as well as “una schiera di valenti traduttori, che erano a loro volta scrittori, intellettuali o docenti universitari: Alvaro, Banfi, Bo, Camerino, Cecchi, Izzo, Lo Gatto, Montale, Moravia, Pavese, Pintor, Praz, Savinio e Zavattini” (*ibid.*, p. 210).

⁸ Ferme (2002: 221) mentions, in passing, the other non-literati “sconosciuti traduttori prezzolati” who contributed to importing high and low American fiction into Italy in those years, among whom “due sconosciuti come Gastone Rossi e Attilio [*sic*; Alfredo?] Pitta” (*ibid.*: 55), who had manual jobs and translated part-time, for money.

– accomplished authors of their own. *Americana* was first published in 1941: Linati already was an established writer, Americanist and translator; Montale had published his second major collection of poems with Einaudi (see Montale, 1939) and was well known among the Florentine intellectual circle revolving around the literary magazine *Solaria*; but Moravia, Vittorini and Pavese, who were almost the same age, were just beginning to be known to the public. Of the three, Moravia had been the first to achieve some literary success, with his 1929 novel *Gli indifferenti*, but Vittorini and Pavese respectively published, in that very 1941, their most important work (*Conversazione in Sicilia*)⁹ and very first novel (*Paesi tuoi*).¹⁰ They were therefore young writers, at the beginning of their careers yet not completely unknown to the public, and already branded as opposers of the fascist regime.¹¹ Above all, they were enthusiastic about their American colleagues. These favourable circumstances all contributed to the creation of the myth of American literature in Italy, which arose precisely in connection with and around the time of the publication the first edition of Vittorini's *Americana* – the one that was seized by censors for its editor's excessively enthusiastic preface. Finally, another actor in the creation of “the so-called ‘myth of America’, passionately promoted by the work of people like Pavese e Vittorini” (Esposito, 2018, p. 61) was “[l]’esigenza di affermarsi di nuovi editori come Bompiani, alla ricerca di voci nuove e di una contemporaneità che ad altri sembrava sconsigliabile sia per l’incertezza della reazione del pubblico, sia per i problemi di censura che poneva necessariamente un uso – anche linguistico – più spregiudicato del nostro” (*ibid.*).

⁹ Vittorini's *Il garofano rosso* had already been published in *Solaria* in instalments in 1936, but *Conversazione in Sicilia*, first released in *Letteratura* in 1938-1939 and then republished twice as a volume in 1941, was the novel that made him successful.

¹⁰ *Paesi tuoi* (1941) was the first novel published by Pavese. Previously, he had published the poetry collection *Lavorare stanca*, in 1936.

¹¹ Pavese was deported to the South of Italy in 1935-1936. Around the same time, Vittorini had been expelled from the Fascist Party for his views on the Spanish Civil War.

Since 1941, the Americanism of those years has been widely studied from the multiple angles from which this cultural phenomenon may be seen. Some have emphasized the American literary influence on the language, genre, and structure of the European novel¹². Others have linked it with the myth of those Italians who emigrated to the United States¹³. Others still have chosen a political approach to the problem, investigating the reasons why Marxist intellectuals nurtured a contradictory passion for capitalist and individualist America. Lastly, there have been those who have underlined the editorial importance of the phenomenon: the control exercised by the fascist censorship greatly influenced the choices of publishers, who were subject to the regime's rules restricting the publication of foreign works, many of which, such as American novels, were considered potentially subversive¹⁴. Those who have examined Cesare Pavese's activity as an Americanist have done so from one or more of these perspectives. Here, a more philological and translation-based approach shall be adopted, in order to describe the conditions that favoured the rise of Americanism, and to establish its chronological limits and define the role that Pavese played in it.

3. Once upon a time in America – Italian style

It would be interesting to compare what was happening in both Italy and America in 1930-1950, but it would be of little use to this work's purpose, since the Americanism of that period was an all-Italian phenomenon. It is not as though US novels, in those years, were only translated into Italian, of course; they were successfully turned into French, for instance, as Sapiro, 2016, illustrates

¹² See Carducci, 1973 and Cartasegna, 1952, pp. 429-434.

¹³ "The beginning of the new century saw new narrative experiments on the theme of emigration to America. They are mostly aimed at ideally combining, between Italy and its overseas double, American experiences with the (Italian) national literary scene, already compromised, as seen, by not a few poetic exercises, both cultured and popular, increasingly manneristic and ready to lead to the deplorable cliché of nostalgic self-pity" (Franzina, 1996, p. 127, author's translation).

¹⁴ Nonetheless, the translation rate remained high (about 10 percent of all the titles printed every year) until 1938, despite the Fascist press campaigns, as mentioned by Ragone, 1999, p. 161, note 13).

through Faulkner's case. What made *Italian Americanism* unique was, perhaps obviously but worth stressing, the socio-historical setting in which it was planted and developed. By means of example, like France, Italy had seen people emigrate to the United States and it got involved in World War II; unlike France, Italy had its own specific relationship with American emigration, due to the high numbers involved (while "France contributed only a modest number", cf. Haines, 2000, p. 77) and specificities such as its infamous mafia connections; besides, it sided on the losing side during the war: all this resulted in the unique value and understanding of the American myth among the Italian readers of the period. Dunnett, 2015, discusses the limits and boundaries of the definition of *americanismo* (she even provides an enjoyable lexicographic review of the related terms, from *americanismo* to *americanata* (*ibid.*: 42), and how it hardly manages to well represent such a complex, articulated experience. Like all myths, it was fuelled by the anxieties and desires of people completely extraneous to it, people who only indirectly knew what they held in such a high regard and who, consequently, ended up offering a distorted version of the original. It would rather be more appropriate to focus on the *idea* that the Italian intellectuals had of America at the time, since that idea was what Pavese and Vittorini had in mind when they 'discovered' their own America, and because the one they created, no matter the opinion of those who either exalted or censored their work, was an altogether *different* idea.

To begin with, Italians had, in those years, a generally cursory view of the United States. Three sources of information may be identified as those that mainly influenced the public's view of America at the time. The first is a popular source: the stories told by and about Italian emigrants. As is it sadly known, even and especially in popular culture, migrations from Italy to the Americas were massive during the Giolitti governments¹⁵, reaching a peak in 1913, and continued throughout the first half of the twentieth century. They mainly involved Southern Italians (but not only), forced to leave *en masse* by their stagnant rural economy and by the government's indifference to it. Those

¹⁵ Giovanni Giolitti served as President of Italy's Council of Ministers, on and off, between 1892 and 1921.

who had emigrated at the end or at the beginning of the century had already started to improve their conditions, and began to return to Italy in 1920-1930. If they decided to remain in their new countries, they would send back money and tales of fabulous and rapid fortunes, of unlimited resources, of great opportunities for success (cf. Dunnett, 2015, p 43, on the proverbial 'zio d'America'). Thus, although the legendary fortunes were actually relatively modest, a myth in its own right was created which, because it spread among uneducated and desperately poor peasants, grew out of all proportion, fed by accounts from both sides of the Atlantic. The second source was represented by the Italians' historical knowledge of America, nourished as much by the press of the time, as by the legacies of ancient travel literature. These were replenished with all the Eurocentric prejudices which, since Christopher Columbus's times, did not begin to fade until the end of the World War II, when the economic supremacy of the United States imposed its culture on the rest of the world. Hence, the news that appeared in the newspapers, about Henry Ford as well as jazz, on the crack of 1929 as on Sacco and Vanzetti, got blended, in the imaginary of the more educated readers, with their memories of Chateaubriand's *Atala*, Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, to the most recent *American Classics* by D.H. Lawrence. And yet Italy, only recently turned into one independent country despite its North-South economic and cultural divide, and still not speaking a single national language, seemed in those years more committed to solving its enormous internal problems than to looking abroad with curiosity or for inspiration. Only major international events that had inevitable repercussions on the country did reach the entire population: among those, the two World Wars that marked the twentieth century. The first close encounters with Americans indeed only occurred during World War I, followed by the Spanish Civil War, which saw the involvement of numerous Italians on either side. For the general public, however, America remained very distant, much more approachable through books than for real, and thus lending itself to the development of myths and mirages. Lastly, among those who contributed to making America known, were those whom Fernandez refers to as the "first generation of Americanists", or the "older Americanists in the [translating] trade" (Fernandez, 1969, p. 112, 16): Carlo Linati, Mario Praz and Emilio Cecchi. These are systematically compared by Fernandez to

Pavese and Vittorini (whom he labels the second generation of Americanist translators) as the opponents of the myth, only interested in American writers for the sole purpose of demoting and looking down on them from their own august Italianness. Actually, it is widely acknowledged that the first to import contemporary American narrative into Italy were precisely the three writers from the 'old generation'. Not only, since they were **no obscure authors that only translated for money** or to have their names published, they were bound to have nurtured at least some genuine interest in the Americans whose works they translated. To name but some names, Cecchi translated, among others, William Faulkner, William Saroyan, T.S. Eliot; Linati: Henry James, O. Henry and Ezra Pound; Praz: T.S. Eliot and Henry Miller. However, an interest toward American authors, although very limited, had existed for a long time. Agostino Lombardo identifies Enrico Nencioni's *Saggi critici di letteratura inglese*, published in the second half of the nineteenth century, as the first Italian critique of American literature:

[...] the critic's interest in American literature started precisely with Nencioni (just as he was the one to start or at least consolidate the critical interest in English literature). Between 1867 and 1896 this greatly refined and cultivated scholar, of whom Carducci was a friend and an admirer, indeed wrote somewhat regularly, for *Nuova Antologia*, essays and reports about English and American literature (Lombardo, 1961, pp. 13-14; author's translation).

Lombardo also reports that Giosuè Carducci, Giovanni Pascoli (influenced, he states, by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and E. A. Poe) and Gabriele D'Annunzio (who for sure admired Walt Whitman) were the very first Italian intellectuals to express an interest in the literature coming from across the Atlantic – thus, long before Pavese and Vittorini, but also years ahead of Cecchi, Linati and Praz. Not only, apart from the latter three, there were other *letterati* who were curious about things American, whether concerning the country itself or its literature. Two such people were Giuseppe Prezzolini and Giovanni Papini.

Prezzolini spread, in his many essays about America, a very critical view of the country, although not necessarily a negative one. In fact, he sometimes forced himself to provide the Italian

public with an objective view of it. In a paper titled “Tre pregiudizi italiani”, he tried to deconstruct some stereotypes usually associated with US people:

The second prejudice [out of the three reported in the title] is that Americans are so ignorant that everything is good for them: the fake painting, the silly speech, the singer without a voice, the professor without a doctrine, watered-down wine and nobles who do not even feature in the Heraldic List (Prezzolini, 1958b, p. 31; author’s translation).

Elsewhere in Prezzolini’s work, nonetheless, there are echoes of the Europeans’ traditional prejudices against America, although he was no occasional visitor to the US, having lived there for over forty years, from 1925 to 1968, while also lecturing at Columbia University, New York:

The average American is ignorant of many things, and that is, in general, of everything that does not directly concern the profession he exercises: the average American is more ignorant, always speaking in general, than the average European, although in his own profession he is very often more competent, accurate and specialized (Prezzolini, 1958a, p. 45).

Of particular interest is a note by Prezzolini about the constant rivalry between the old and the new world, the latter calling the former *barbari*, a key-term, together with *feroce* and *furioso*, of the Italian Americanism: “Having escaped from Europe, to avoid the pressure of history, the average American would not want more history to be made in other countries, and is inclined to consider his own ignorance and disinterest in foreign policy as a sign of political superiority and of moral elevation. - Those poor barbarians from Europe!” (Prezzolini, 1958a, p. 46; author’s translation). All these adjectives were greatly exploited by its supporters to depict, on the contrary, the *positive* aspects that they saw in the American spirit, as opposed to Europe. In this light should Vittorini’s famous words “He understood what the *strength* for man was in America, he understood the *ferocity*” (Vittorini, 1941, p. 4; emphasis added) be read. Pavese himself, though less prone to his Sicilian colleague’s ‘fury’, wrote in that period:

Towards 1930, when fascism was beginning to be “the hope of the world”, so it happened that some young Italians discovered America in his books, a pensive and *barbaric* America, happy and *quarrelsome*, *dissolute*, *fruitful*, *burdened* with all the past of the world, and at the same time young, innocent. [...] The taste of scandal and easy heresy that enveloped the new books and their themes, the *revolutionary fury* and sincerity that even the most foolish felt *throbbing* in those translated pages proved irresistible to an audience not yet completely dumbed by conformity and the academia (Pavese, 1951b, p. 193; emphasis added, author’s translation).

Giovanni Papini, too, was attracted to the ‘barbarianism’ of American literature. In particular, he admired Walt Whitman, who was neither a novelist nor a contemporary of his, but a nineteenth century poet that nonetheless embodied all the aspects of America that early twentieth-century Italian authors liked the most. Whitman (later the subject of Pavese’s graduate thesis) even became an iconic author for the Italian Futurists, for his celebration of the forces of nature, of spontaneity, of impulse, of individualism, of freedom and for his search for the absolute:

I celebrate myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
[...]
I know I am august,
I do not trouble my spirit to vindicate itself or be understood,
I see that the elementary laws never apologize,
I reckon I behave no prouder than the level I plant my
house by after all.
[...]
Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch, or am touched from [...] (Whitman, 1855, pp. 13-56).

As early as 1908 and already seduced by the *Übermensch*, Papini the Futurist wrote:

From *Leaves of Grass*, a small Nietzschean chrestomathy can easily be extracted, in which even the prophet of Zarathustra's favorite would be found. [...] And not only does he feel, even before Nietzsche, this sense of the virtue of the earth, but also the expectation of a superior race of men (Papini, 1908, p. 704; author’s translation).

This very essay also contains more enlightened passages, in which the author briefly drops his *neo-scapigliata* attitude and concentrates on Whitman’s literature *per se*. He especially focuses on the spiritual approach of Whitman, who celebrates himself as a human being and, as such, as a sample of nature’s creative force, warning that:

[...] anyone who took this self-worship as decisive proof of Whitman's individualism would be wrong. He worships the self because he worships the whole and sees the whole reflected in himself and feels himself intimately blended in with the whole (Papini, 1908, p. 700).

Papini thus seems to really grasp the substance of Whitman’s message, giving away, from behind his clownish Futurist mask, his great critical sensitivity. Not much differently from Pavese¹⁶,

¹⁶ “All of Walt Whitman's great pages [...] share only one design: the strong, thoughtful, "receptive" man, who passes through the phenomena of the world and absorbs them all, enraptured by their simplicity, normality, reality, and to these

he indeed states that “Walt Whitman’s personalism is therefore a garment, a peel of his cosmic love for all things. He aspires, like all great souls, to the whole and to infinity, but he does not want to reach it through general and abstract words” (Papini, 1908, p. 701, author’s translation).

In the end, Papini gives up to his rebellious impulses and finishes his paper with a very Futurist invitation, which he himself would follow for many years:

We must go out, get out of the city and feel and love all things directly, the most delicate and the dirtiest, and express our love without regard for anyone, without sweet little words, without metric expedients, without too much respect for holy traditions, honest conventions and stupid rules of high society. We need to become a bit *barbarian* again - maybe a bit *boorish* - if we want to rediscover Poetry (Papini, 1908, p. 711).

This further connotation of the adjective *barbari* (*beceri*, or boorish) supports the conclusion that the liveliness, the freedom and the energy of a ‘new’ nature and a ‘new’ culture were what mostly struck the Italian intellectuals of the first half of the twentieth century about America. In such innocence they discerned a wild aspect, a sort of primitivism that they either rejected (as did the refined art critic Emilio Cecchi) or felt attracted to (Papini, Vittorini, Pavese), either way hoping that such a ‘fury’ may prove itself an innovative force for Italian literature, which they perceived as ancient as it was depleted.

In sum, the intellectuals’ literary yearnings were integrated by the lower classes’ Eldorado vision of America and the hybrid idea that the middle class had of it, more often than not fascinated by the superficial aspects of the country told by the newspapers: jazz, the cinema, the skyscrapers, the continuous output of cars from the tireless assembly lines¹⁷. The second generation of Americanist

he responds with an attachment, a perennial ecstasy, born of man's fantastic identification with humans and things” (Pavese, 1951c, p. 141; author’s translation).

¹⁷ “The experience made [...] begins to interact, in the early years of the century, with new forms of communication and entertainment that overlap with the more purely literary or dramaturgical ones in shaping the image of emigration and of the emigrant” (Franzina, *Dall’Arcadia in America*, 118, my translation).

translators, who include ‘Our Mr Pavese’¹⁸, with their choice of authors, contributed to debunk some of these myths (William Faulkner and John Dos Passos tell us that in America too one can suffer), while creating others (Sherwood Anderson, John Steinbeck and Ernest Hemingway reply that in America one may suffer, but one can always pursue one’s freedom). Their main achievement remains, however, that of making American literature available to the Italian public, thus starting the first *mass* literary, cultural, and translating phenomenon of twentieth-century Italy.

4. A chronology of the myth

Earlier on, reference was made to Fernandez’s work on the Italian Americanist myth and the role that Pavese and Vittorini had in it. Clearly much more has been written about Cesare Pavese as an author in his own right than as a(n Americanist) translator. Among the studies published about the latter aspect, Fernandez’s is one of the most specific, and is frequently cited by those dealing with Pavese’s translating activity. The French critic indeed attributes Pavese great importance; he in fact *entirely* identifies the rise and fall of the American myth with Pavese’s translating career. In line, among others, with Ferme, 2002, thus not fully agreeing with the chronological limits (“ormai [...] anacronistiche” *ibid.*, p. 86) that Fernandez proposes, it is suggested here that the very concepts of ‘Americanism’ and ‘American myth’ ought to be redefined, in order to correctly place Pavese the translator within them.

According to Fernandez,

The myth proper does not begin until November 1930, with Pavese's essay on Sinclair Lewis. It is correct to have the myth start from this date, just as it is correct to have it end twenty years later, in 1950, with the death of Pavese, because there is no doubt that Pavese's personality had a decisive effect on the birth, life, orientation, content of the myth (Franzina, 1996, pp. 11-12, author’s translation).

The first clarification to be made here is the definition of *mito americano*. With this term, Fernandez indicates the enthusiasm for contemporary American literature shown by Italian authors between 1930 and 1950, fuelled by the high number of American novels translated in that twenty

¹⁸ *Our Mr. Wrenn* by Sinclair Lewis was the first American novel translated by Pavese in 1931 (*Il nostro signor Wrenn. Storia di un gentiluomo romantico*, Firenze, Bemporad).

years, to which Pavese and Vittorini first and significantly contributed. In fact, *mito americano* is a very generic term, commonly used in connection with heterogeneous concepts, persons, and events. These go from the hopes for fabulous fortunes nurtured by the Italians emigrated to America, to the manufacturing of the first Ford automobiles, to the New Deal that allowed the US economy to rise again, to John F. Kennedy, Marilyn Monroe, Coca Cola, Levi's jeans and much more. Whether real or the result of the fascination exerted on Europe by America, the new continent has been producing all sorts of myths, which continue to rise and fall according to trends and fashions. Based on Fernandez's definition, though, the term *mito americano* shall only refer to the 1930-1950 period, during which American literary works were assiduously translated and the American culture was spread in Italy. The term *americanismo*¹⁹, on the other hand, interchangeably used by critics to refer to the same concept, shall indicate a more general interest in America, especially of a *literary* kind. Redefined as such, it appears that there was more than just one *americanismo*: Nencioni's *americanismo* was one, Cecchi's was another and Pavese's yet another. Not only, *l'americanismo* in general survived *il mito americano*, since the love of Italians for American literature may have decreased after 1950, but certainly did not altogether cease; it rather changed into the umpteenth form of Americanism.

Moving from this distinction, the beginning of the Twentieth-century Americanism may still be set in the period between 1920-1930, when some partial knowledge of America, filtered through old literary myths (Chateaubriand) and new social and cultural myths (emigrants' fortunes), already existed. From the strict perspective of literary criticism, instead, the Italians' interest in America did possibly emerge with Nencioni and boomed with the first generation of translators and Americanists from the early twentieth century: Cecchi, Linati, and Praz. As regards the 'American myth' proper, i.e. the time of the young Italian intellectuals' exaltation for their American contemporaries Faulkner, Anderson, Lewis, Saroyan, Lee Masters, Dos Passos, Fitzgerald and for a certain America that they

¹⁹ The term *mitoamericanismo* has also been proposed by Pietropaoli, 1988-1990, p. 555.

described, it may be seen to have started, following Fernandez, in 1930, with Pavese's essay on Sinclair Lewis.²⁰ This study undoubtedly contributed to the foundation of the *mito americano*, this time not based on a social phenomenon, such as emigration, but on a purely literary interest.

Concerning Pavese's specific role, it is worth recalling that 1930 only represented the moment when his own Americanism first became public, as he began writing in *La Cultura*: his love for British and American literature, as is well known, dated back to his secondary-school days. Nor did his translating only begin in 1931: Sinclair Lewis's *Our Mr Wrenn* was the first translation that he published, but Pavese had enjoyed translating on his own from ancient Greek, German, and English since he was a student at the Massimo D'Azeglio *liceo*, first, and, then, at university. Attilio Dughera, who researched the young Pavese's work, notes that

the manuscripts from his youth are truly surprising, for their large number of different literary genres: short stories, critical essays written "in freedom", annotations of various types, translations from German and English [...] (Dughera, 1992, p. 9; author's translation).

Still on his translations from ancient Greek, Dughera details Pavese's habit of using English terms when he found them more suitable than Italian ones to render the Greek originals.²¹ This naïve method, as well as showing Pavese already knew English when quite young, also proves his concern about the faithful rendering of a text. Thus Pavese, like many other students, learnt to translate as he studied his classics. Differently from others, though, the art or 'trade' (*mestiere*) of translating did not remain for him a mere scholastic exercise but changed into a real passion, also thanks to his encounter with English. This language would enable him to access not only Shakespeare (whom he would

²⁰ About twenty pages, published in *La Cultura* in 1930. See Pavese, 1951e, p. 5.

²¹ "To preserve the unity of the Greek word, Pavese resorts to the aid of other languages, such as Latin [...]. But also English, a language familiar to the writer, often appears with this purpose, although almost always in the same forms (*someway, anyway, somewhere, anywhere* ...). Pavese feels that in this way he translates more faithfully, since with these foreign words he can produce an exact, almost visible transcription" (Dughera, 1992, pp. 33-34; author's translation).

always consider a classic, just like Greek and Latin authors), but also the contemporary American writers, whose social protest and lively language and style could not but appeal strongly to his young spirit, still imbued with Romanticism yet already looking for novel suggestions. Therefore, what is proposed here is that Pavese's columns in *La Cultura* and his first published translations are not to be considered the *beginning* of his interest in America but only his formal public emergence as a translator and a writer.²²

Coming to the end of the myth, a preliminary consideration is necessary. Eighteen translations were published during Pavese's lifetime: 14 novels, an autobiography and three historical essays, distributed between 1931 and 1950.²³ This timespan should actually be reduced to the 11 years comprised between 1931 and 1942, since this was Pavese's actual 'age of translations', in which he published *16 out of 18* – practically all – of them. For this reason, Fernandez's belief that the American myth in Italy coincided and ended with Pavese's literary (and real) life in 1950 appears little defensible. The moments cannot coincide, as Pavese's Americanism was over by 1942 – well before his death in 1950, or even 1947, when he last translated a novel, and which should be considered a tardy epilogue to his translating experience. Apart from Pavese's death, the other reasons that Fernandez gives for setting the end of the American myth in 1950 are on the contrary quite understandable. Among them, he mentions for example the Vittorini-Togliatti polemic in the magazine *Il Politecnico* (1945-1947), the Italian Communist Party joining the political minority in 1948, the Korean War and the US taking sides against the USSR and China in 1950. All of these events contributed to start a crisis in the cultural sensitivity of Italians, and to change their attitude towards America. Once again, though, only one of the American myths ended around 1950: the first

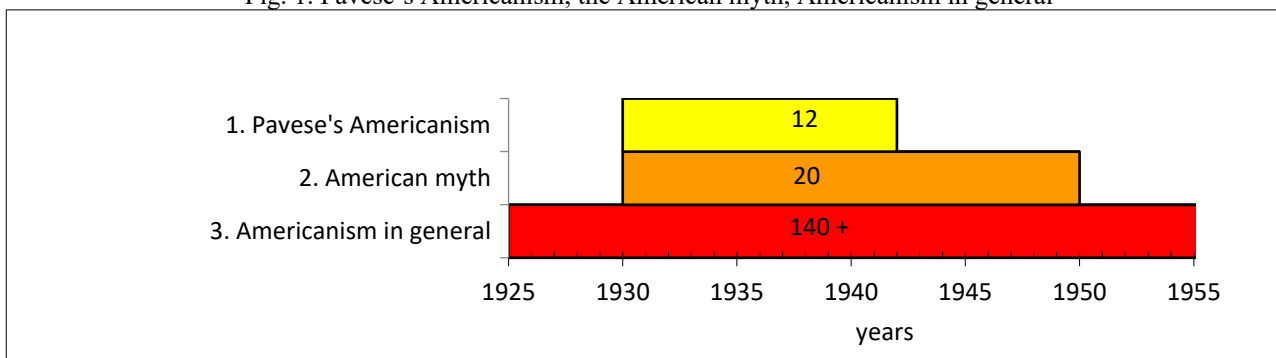
²² 'Writer', here, is to be understood as 'essayist', since his first collection of poems, *Lavorare stanca*, would be published in 1936, and his first novel, *Paesi tuoi*, as late as 1941.

²³ To these, the following posthumous translations should be added: Hesiod, Homer, *La teogonia di Esiodo e tre inni omerici*, trans. Cesare Pavese, ed. by Attilio Dughera (Torino: Einaudi, 1981) and Percy. B. Shelley, *Prometeo slegato*, trans. Cesare Pavese, in "Collezione di Poesia", ed. by Mark Pietralunga (Torino: Einaudi, 1997). See Table 1.

literary myth risen in the 1930s around Anderson, Faulkner, Lee Masters, Fitzgerald, and so no. Since then, the ‘American dream’ in Italy has had its ups and downs, connected with the US’s political positions as a world leader: the Cold War, the Vietnam War, the Iraqi Wars, the 9/11 attacks, and the Barack Obama presidency are only some of the events that alternatively made the American myth rise and fall in the post-war era.

In other words, whereas Pavese’s individual Americanism ought to be distinguished from the American myth (itself, in turn, a complex phenomenon), they both need to be placed within the more general literary Americanism. Three different experiences thus occurred between 1930 and 1950, as illustrated in Fig. 1.

Fig. 1. Pavese’s Americanism, the American myth, Americanism in general



The figure compares the chronology of three different though connected phenomena: Pavese’s Americanism, the American myth, and Americanism in general.

1) The author Pavese used his 1930-1942 Americanist period to forge his own writing (cf., e.g. Esposito, 2018), inspired by the innovations in the contemporary American authors he read and translated. It seems appropriate to identify 1942 as the end of this period of his, because neither the translations nor the essays published after that year were significant either quantitatively or qualitatively, at least from an Americanist viewpoint. Between 1942 and 1950, Pavese only translated

two works²⁴, both by British authors: a novel by the then emerging young writer Robert Henriques (1947) and a long essay by the historian Arnold Toynbee (1950)²⁵. As regards his essays, in that period he mostly wrote about British authors such as Joseph Conrad and Robert L. Stevenson, while those about America were much less passionate than those he wrote in the 1930s and, in some cases, they even sounded apologetic of (though by no means rejecting it) his juvenile enthusiasm²⁶. Finally, his statement

[*Selezione* is] smoke-and-mirrors for “Americanistic” propaganda. Its subject indeed alternates between the pedantic exaltation of ever new facets of the “American dream” and the condemnation of ever new inequities of the socialist world (Pavese, 1951a/2014, no page, author’s translation).

possibly marks the end of his romance with the American myth and his turn towards the Communist ideals. The last significant episode in Pavese’s translating age should therefore be considered his 1942 translation of William Faulkner’s *The Hamlet*, after which he would turn to his more mature interests: novel-writing and publishing.

2) The beginning of the ‘American myth’ in Italy can also be set in 1930. However, since Pavese was not the only intellectual who fed it, establishing its end in 1942 does not seem completely

²⁴ Three, if one considers Pavese’s version of Hesiod’s *Theogony* and three Homeric hymns, which nevertheless have not been considered here, since they were a) translated from ancient Greek and not from English and b) not originally conceived for publication (they first appeared in 1981). See Table 1.

²⁵ Often underestimated or even ignored (even a critic of Fernandez’s Pavesian Americanist myth such as Vece, 2002, cf. earlier on, who identifies the peak of Pavese’s American interest in Anderson’s and Melville’s novels, would, perhaps with a hint of naivete, dismiss Pavese’s incursion into the complexities of Joyce’s *Portrait* as a “breve interruzione per dedicarsi a *Ritratto dell’artista da giovane* di James Joyce nel 1933” (*ibid.* 136), the fondness of and relevance for Pavese of the British authors he translated ought to be the subject of a major work of its own.

²⁶ “Italy was estranged, barbaric, calcified – it had to be shaken, decongested and re-exposed to all the spring winds blowing in from Europe and the world. It is no surprise that this act of conquering texts could not be done by bureaucrats or literary laborers, but it took youthful enthusiasm and involvement” (Pavese, 1951d, p. 245; author’s translation).

accurate, as that was when Pavese *only* ceased to be interested in it. The success and spread of the literature from across the Atlantic in fact continued well after that year, at least – as Fernandez maintains – until 1950. Elio Vittorini, Eugenio Montale, Alberto Rossi, but also Fernanda Pivano, Gabriele Baldini, Agostino Lombardo, Glauco Cambon – whom Fernandez laconically brands “the third generation, that of historians and professors”, “scholastic, in spirit and in style” (Fernandez, 1969, p. 112, 111; author’s translation) – were still or already or would soon be at work. They and several other Americanists picked up the previous generations’ work from where they had left it and created an ideal (or a real, in the case of Pivano, a close friend and partner of Pavese’s) connection with the era of the early Americanist enthusiasm and the more mature and better-informed cultural exchange that emerged after the Second World War. Fernandez’s reasons, listed above, for choosing the year 1950 all seem valid: it is their order of importance that perhaps needs changing. What he perceives as the main cause of the end of the American myth (Pavese’s death) was possibly not so decisive as some political events of the period: the mentioned anti-American cultural turn of the Italian Communist Party (1945-1947) and Vittorini’s break with it, the Italian Communist Party becoming a minority party in 1948, the war that split Korea at the thirty-eighth parallel, the US novel opposition to the USSR and China. These, much more than the death of what was after all a single translator (no matter how relevant his role in the creation of the myth) probably influenced the public’s change of attitude towards American culture. The coincidence of Pavese’s death in 1950 with the waning of the American myth therefore seems accidental, for at least two different reasons. Firstly, American culture had at that time become independent of Pavese’s single-handed work, and enjoyed the support of many other translators, intellectuals, and readers. Secondly, the political climate full of suspicion that would soon give rise to the Cold War had already started to affect the Italian pre-war enthusiasm for legendary America. Rather than the Eldorado of the early Italian migrants, it now appeared as a military power way too strong for both its enemies and allies alike. The synchronous disappearance of Pavese and of the American myth he had ‘fathered’ ought to be seen as a mere – though a highly symbolic – coincidence: the myth he had forged had long since left

his translating workshop and become independent of him; similarly, it ended without his being responsible for it.

3) Finally, Americanism as a general concept, meant as the study of American literature, had started in Italy long before 1930, with earlier translators and critics, and continued, with later translators and critics, well after 1942 or 1950. Both Pavese's Americanism and the twenty-year 'American myth' should be placed within this wider phenomenon. Thus, maintaining that 'Americanism' began and ended with Pavese and Vittorini is only acceptable if it means the spread of certain American writers, arbitrarily chosen according to the tastes of just two Americanists, and not even experts at that but merely enthusiastic 'amateurs'. Such clarifications seem necessary in order to both downsize the linguistic relevance of their translations, often and inaccurately considered always impeccable, but to similarly keep celebrating, after seventy years, the extraordinary and undiminished cultural value of their Americanist activism. After World War II, the Italian publishing industry, also encouraged by their successful cultural operation, significantly invested in translations, and the Italian public could eventually get a better, wider idea of American fiction.²⁷ Additionally, there also started to emerge and flourish a great number of academic studies on American literature – for the first time seen as a subject in its own right and not as a mere 'branch' of its British counterpart. Since then, America has been successful with both popular and academic publishers.

Perspectives closer to the one proposed here, i.e. a re-positioning and a re-shaping of the role of Pavese's translations within the Italian *americanismo*, have started to emerge as prevalent (perhaps expectedly and anyway long due²⁸) over the first couple of decades of this century – see, e.g. Pino Fasano's view that "that America is not real [Pavese's] contemporary America" but "an existential

²⁷ An outstanding example is that of the great publisher Arnoldo Mondadori who, in 1945, "having recovered the large presses that had ended up beyond the Iron Curtain, and having obtained a big loan from the Americans to rebuild the plant, [...] began the recovery by printing millions of copies a month of magazines and paperbacks for foreign clients, from «Selezione del Reader's Digest» to «Collins» and «Albatros»" (Ragone, 1999, p. 174; author's translation).

²⁸ See Rimanelli, 2019.

not [... a] literary model,” so that “America is the search for lost Italy” (Fasano, 2008, p. 297, 306). Also recently, Roberto Ludovico has confirmed that Pavese’s *americanismo*, just like publisher Franco Antonicelli’s, might rather have been a sort of “ideal Europeism” (Ludovico, 2011, p. 319). What is undisputable is that the blend of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture that is taken for granted these days could not have been possible, in Italy, without the enthusiastic and reckless ‘American decade’ of Pavese, Vittorini & co. – with the caveat that this legendary decade was Pavese’s own wording from as late as 1946 (Pavese, 1951d, p. 247) and, as such, might as well be a myth (un)consciously evoked by an intellectual whose literal statements should always be weighed against his masterful skill and love for myth creation.

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