
Italo Calvino: Battles, Bullets, Bombs and Bloodshed

Joanna Stephens
Trinity College, Dublin

Introduction

Calvino's partisan experiences during the Second World War provided the martial subject matter for most of his early neorealist fiction of the immediate post-war period - the novel *Il sentiero ai nidi di ragno* [*The Path to the Nest of Spiders*] (1947) and the short stories collected in *Ultimo viene il corvo* [*Adam, One Afternoon and other stories*] (1949) portray the horrors of combat, capture and incarceration. My first interest in this article is to look at the later editions and prefaces of these two texts in order to show how Calvino's excisions and comments reveal his uneasiness when describing the violence of war. I will go on to discuss how Calvino resolved his problem of depicting carnage and brutality and his continuing need to commemorate his partisan activity in the fantastical battle scenes of his subsequent 1950s trilogy *I nostri antenati* [*Our ancestors*]. These far-fetched fictions reveal the author attempting to negotiate the pain, panic and gore of military encounters through a distorting historical and comic lens. Much of Calvino's work includes aggression, often replacing the theme and experience of war with violence in the name of political commitment. However, the explosions of Calvino's early military engagement in the civil war are a topic that lead him to readdress the event in a different form in mature work. Thus, after a short glimpse at the appearance of aggression in Calvino's realistic stories and moral fables of the 1950s, I will consider lastly how the formal treatment of war has evolved in Calvino's writing in an autobiographical account from the 1970s.

Neorealism

As a young writer of the late 1940s, Calvino was blasted into the dominant formal trend of neorealism, a return to an expression of concrete reality as a literary reaction to the rhetoric of fascism which led to a 'postwar identification of an aesthetics of the concrete with antifascist ideology'.¹ In the preface to his first novel *Il sentiero ai nidi di ragno*, Calvino characterises neorealism as a literature of war, a literary explosion. Distancing himself from the received concept of neorealism as an ideologically driven school, movement or aesthetic event, he calls it a physiological, existential fact reflecting the collective voice of a generation which had experienced war and civil war from 1938-1945. The need to bear witness to the events of this period, as well as a euphoric sense of victory at the conclusion of the most important battle, the end of fascism, created a unique climate: 'Many things were born out of that climate and so was the vitality of my first short stories and my first novel'.² This novel, *Il sentiero ai nidi di ragno*, and the collection of short stories *Ultimo viene il corvo*, arose from Calvino's political commitment to the Italian Communist party which he had joined in 1945, but more particularly, they are a testimony to his personal experience as a member of the anti-fascist Garibaldi brigade in the Piedmontese Resistance. However, alongside the energy that bore neorealism there was a literary imperative to write the definitive Resistance novel, one that weighed heavily on the young writer as too grave and solemn a responsibility for a 23 year-old.

While he did use Hemingway, a respectable anti-fascist writer, as a literary model of form and commitment (what begins as a review on the occasion of Hemingway's Nobel prize victory in 1954 becomes an apotheosis when he recalls 'C'è stato un tempo in cui per me ... Hemingway era un dio'),³ Calvino's response to the cultural mandate was to tackle the narration of his experience of war not head-on, in the neo-veristic, documentary tone of some contemporary accounts, but obliquely through the eyes of a child who joins other, dissolute, members of a renegade partisan battalion in *Il sentiero ai nidi di ragno*. Theirs is a story that, due to the nature of its unheroic protagonists, would stay 'on the outer edges of the partisan war, of its heroism and sacrifices, but that at the same time would convey its colour, sharp taste and rhythm...'⁴

Thus in the novel the central protagonist Pin, a young urchin, joins the 'distaccamento di Dritto', a philandering coward who leads a division of partisan losers. Adult experiences, sex, violence, drunkenness and cursing, as well as the evident discomforts of guerilla warfare such as the constant diet of chestnuts and sleeplessness, are seen through the lens of Pin's naïve wonderment and fascination. A further irony attendant on this skewed, fairy-tale depiction of conflict is that the lonely, orphaned Pin is indifferent to which side of the conflict he belongs to, delighting in the fascist regalia whose terrifying skull emblem he considers a far more effective uniform than the gay tricolour stars of his side. Even the central problem of all wars, hatred born of political disagreement or racial and religious intolerance, is simplified into child's play like a game of British Bulldog. All Pin seeks in the confusion of the civil war is the opportunity to live amongst the grown-ups like one of them, 'joined to them by that barrier of hate that separates them from the men on the other side.'⁵

When the gunfire of the climactic battle in the text does commence, it is told only in the sounds that reach Pin's ears: 'at that moment there is a loud clap and it fills the valley; gun shots, volleys, muffled bangs made louder by the echo, a horrible crashing din tears the air apart [...] Machine guns, ta-pum, hand grenades, mortar blasts.'⁶ Using the auditory focus of his naïve protagonist, Calvino reduces the battle to a series of explosive sounds. Pin himself possesses a gun that he has stolen and buried in the spiders' nest of the title, but this instrument of death is treated only as a plaything. His inexperience of weapons and the assault on his ears are therefore conflated to make Pin's experience of battle seem an imaginary one and Calvino thus manages to convey the terrifying visual images of war - German troops advancing, the flash of gunfire and dead bodies - but from the safe remove of a child's aural fantasy rather than through a naked description.

Il sentiero employs other blurring strategies in its account of war. When Calvino's novel began to enjoy a measure of literary success, he began to regret the fact that he had transformed comrades, with whom he had shared meagre rations and risked death, into 'masks screwed into eternal grimaces, grotesque puppets [...] only afterwards to feel a remorse which stayed with me for years.'⁷ In *Il sentiero's* neorealist tale there are examples where painful, military happenings are deliberately distorted. Those points

where a deliberate piece of distortion occurs are to be found precisely when portraits are made to seem grotesque, in order to conceal and assuage the pained memory of the experience of the war. When we come to look at the trilogy, we will see how the problem is overcome by transforming brutal events from gruesome into comic ones.

Immediately following his first novel Calvino published the anthology of stories *Ultimo viene il corvo* in 1949. Joanne Cannon is unfair when she says of the text that 'The issues for which the partisan war was fought are conspicuously absent ... from every page' since there is a Resistance setting to several stories in the collection.⁸ What we must note is that three in particular, all written in 1945, were excised from two reeditions of the anthology until 1976. These are 'La stessa cosa del sangue', ['The same as blood'] 'Angoscia in caserma' ['Fear in the barracks'] and one which we shall briefly consider, 'Attesa della morte in un albergo' ['Waiting for death in a hotel']. 'Attesa della morte in un albergo' provides some examples of the sort of prose Calvino, in a retrospective decision, preferred to chop and describes imprisoned resisters awaiting uncertain death warrants. Not incarcerated during his service in the Garibaldi partisan division, Calvino wrote the story immediately following liberation.⁹ 'Attesa della morte' records with naked honesty various aspects of camp incarceration; the stench of urine leaked through fear and confinement; homosexuality in the form of intimate tenderness and abusive guards; the intense prison evocation of wives and lovers. Calvino documents the close agonised rapport of cellmates Diego and Michele, who share their pain like bread, and the anguish of waiting with the terror of death close by.

The same tension and fear is described in all three of the stories which Calvino was unwilling to publish after 1949. Many years later, after reinstating them in the 1976 reissue of *Ultimo viene il corvo*, Calvino argues in a note to the new edition that he had previously excluded them because they told the story of the Resistance through traumatic descriptions contrasting with the more mannered style of stories in later collections. Further examples of Calvino's auto-suppression have been brought to our attention by the philological work of Giovanni Falaschi and Bruno Falcetto in the notes to the first volume of *Romanzi e racconti*. As well as a tasteful airbrushing of some scenes of a gratuitously sexual or scabrous nature and physical details of characters who had been drawn too clearly

from life, in later editions of both *Il sentiero* and *Ultimo viene il corvo* Calvino omits acute or vivid descriptions of emotional or brutal wartime events. For example, *Il sentiero* loses Pin's vision of a dawn execution and in 'Andata al comando' ['Going to HQ'] from *Ultimo viene il corvo*, which narrates the marching of a fascist spy to a forest glade for execution, the pistol shot or 'colpo di grazia' of the 1945 version is omitted. Similarly in the titular story of the anthology 'Ultimo viene il corvo' ['The crow comes last'] where a sharp-shooting boy's game culminates in picking off a German soldier by aiming at the eagle embroidered onto the breast of his jacket, there is a passage where the child dispassionately checks to see whether the bullet performed its task and looks for yet another live, moving target, this time a cricket. The passage is cut from the final version of the tale and a portentous wheeling crow replaces the missing section with heavy eschatological symbolism.

While human cruelty and pain are implied rather than detailed in the final, corrected versions of Calvino's Resistance writing, what is notably retained are battles, bullets, bombs and bloodshed. The topos of war and fighting with its ballistic tools and sanguine aftermath continue to exert a grip on Calvino's plots in various transfigurations thereafter. For example, his next fictional attempt after the war stories, *I giovani del Po* [*The young people of the Po*] was a socialist realist novel, begun in 1951 but consigned to a drawer and never published in book form. Although Calvino seeks to address post-war issues and to inhabit the world of Nino, an idealistic young factory worker in Turin, the tale of bleak industrial life, political engagement and class-crossed love is, compared to his war writings, grey, dull and unconvincing. Calvino renders *I giovani del Po*, his well-intentioned novel of engagement, quite risible by studding a short period of Nino's otherwise conformist working life with a rapid series of adventurous incidents including a fencing duel and a fight over posting socialist bills with bourgeois students who are thinly disguised fascists. Peripheral to this strained tale is another incident which clearly transforms a military memory of weaponry into a tool of aquaculture. Nino learns in a letter from his friend who lives on the Ligurian coast that a fisherman friend has had his hand blown off in an explosion at sea. This blast already has a precursor in *Ultimo viene il corvo* when a real wartime bomb is used to supply a fish bonanza in 'Chi ha messo la mina nel mare?', ('Who

put the mine in the sea?') but even more closely it presages *Il visconte dimezzato* and the Turkish cannon ball which splices Medardo di Terralba into two independent halves. Calvino dashed off *Il visconte* after stifling his imagination to achieve the sombre realism of *I giovani del Po*. So a formal sea-change was announced by the fantastic trilogy *I nostri antenati* beginning with *Il visconte dimezzato*, [*The Cloven Viscount*] and followed by *Il barone rampante* [*The Baron in the Trees*] and *Il cavaliere inesistente* [*The Non-existent Knight*]. Calvino received criticism for apparently abandoning the literary engagement to which his previous work in fiction had appeared so committed.¹⁰ However, what will become clear from the following scrutiny of the trilogy is that, rather than affording Calvino a diversion from the pressures of being a committed writer, *I nostri antenati* actually provided him with an opportunity to return to writing about his uneradicable, haunting and recent experiences of war.

After the war - the 1950s

First of all, he could abandon the present for the past. The historical trilogy avoids over-used structures when describing what befell his own modern generation at war. But the usual expressionist satire had been done to death: better to have a war from bygone days' but also, and more importantly, he could use the palliative device of fantastic comedy to replace the real atrocities combat had revealed to him.¹¹ John Woodhouse in his *Reappraisal of the trilogy*, *I nostri antenati* argues that Calvino chooses two medieval religious conflicts in order to debunk the idea of war in general.¹² In fact, the battle between Christians and Turks on the Bohemian battlefield in *Il visconte dimezzato* is historically located in the seventeenth century, while the war in *Il cavaliere inesistente* is a ninth century war waged by Charlemagne against the Moors. Nor does Calvino neglect to take into account the Napoleonic wars in *Il barone rampante*.

The several hostile engagements in the trilogy are worth enumerating: *Il visconte* contains one battle, a cavalry charge where the viscount Medardo is cloven by a cannonball and much destruction is wrought throughout the tale by the sword of Medardo's bad half, Il Gramo. *Il cavaliere inesistente* has one cavalry charge and a routing episode where

the knights of the Holy Grail attack the villages of Kurwalden, in a fashion very similar to a fascist round-up. In *Il barone rampante* the cavalry charges of Marengo, Austerlitz and Waterloo occur 'hors-texte' while Cosimo, the main protagonist, leads a group of Austrian soldiers into an ambush highly reminiscent of a partisan snare and follows this successful coup with several other acts of sabotage on behalf of the Republican army. There is also a background skirmish during his unexpected interview with Tolstoy's fictional Prince Andrej whose cossacks return bearing the bloody, severed heads of three drunken hussars lately returned from the northern campaigns. In all three texts eager young men, Medardo, Rambaldo, Torrismondo and Cosimo, forge and battle their way through an animated historical period like the paladins of Ariosto's famous romances. Cosimo di Rondò of *Il barone rampante* shares the experience of the Napoleonic wars with Fabrice del Dongo, protagonist of a novel Calvino called 'the best novel in the world', Stendhal's *La Chartreuse de Parme*. The adolescent Fabrice's adventure on the bloody plains of Waterloo occurring in Chapter III of *La Chartreuse* is an indelible episode which Calvino rereads frequently. The appeal of these scenes is the mix of the pomp of battle with the vivid and honest painting of death dealt by war; in a homage to the novel Calvino wonders whether it was belonging to a generation which went to war which made him a reader of *La Chartreuse* for life.¹³

The effective depiction of war is difficult for Calvino who continues in the 1950s to feel a pressing need to portray the events he, as a partisan fighter, had witnessed. In Stendhal, he believes he has found a model for writing about martial events honestly: 'Unwittingly, right from the start what happened to me was that, while I used as my models novelists of passionate and rational participation in History, from Stendhal to Hemingway and Malraux, I found my attitude toward them [...] was the same as Ariosto's towards epic poems of chivalry: Ariosto who can only look at anything through irony and fantastic deformation.'¹⁴ Stendhal's accounts of war can be twisted and parodied to ease their consumption but his vision of the battlefield is also a vital starting point for Calvino's narrative perspective throughout the trilogy. Stendhal's use of a young protagonist shows the sensitive awareness that only a naïve perspective, eyes which are seeing the belligerent world for the first time, can convey.

We find the same gaze in Calvino's work in *Il sentiero*'s Pin and again in the naïve narrators of *I nostri antenati*, the Viscount's nephew, the Baron's younger brother and Suor Teodora in *Il cavaliere inesistente* who, knowing nothing of battles, reconstructs them, like Pin, from the sounds of clanging and clattering she hears from the convent kitchen beneath her cell, thus transforming her domestic experience into terrible blows and clashes.

Calvino uses comic or ingenuous transfigurations of bloody scenes to anaesthetise the emotional response of the reader, particularly in *I nostri antenati*, where war is an almost constant backdrop. Indeed, death associated with adventure or misadventure, as well as a result of war or persecution, fills the three tales. Guido Bonsaver notes that death runs riot in the pages of the trilogy and also argues for the fantastic form as a painless way of representing human suffering.¹⁵ The humour employed to diffuse the tension of grisly war scenes actually creates wholly unreal circumstances. For example, in *Il visconte* the cadavers on the Bohemian battlefield are revived through makeshift surgery so that they are stuffed with more string than blood, an example of unhampered 'fantasia'. This comic inconsequentiality gives rise in Calvino to such figures as a thinking suit of armour in *Il cavaliere inesistente* and in *Il visconte dimezzato* to a man whose independent halves and duelling natures can be reunited simply by stitching them back together. Thus the gory results of battle can simply be reversed or rectified as if they were of no consequence at all. Voltaire's *Candide* is a text Calvino admired for its elastic super fast characters who defy death - Pangloss at the stake, Candide a flaying, the Baron Thunder-ten-tronck a sword through the gizzard. Calvino seems particularly in awe of the scenes of sexual violence and brutality recounted by Cunégonde and 'la vieille', perhaps because his own work does not inflict on women - even comically - rapes, tortures or the particularly degrading fate of having one buttock devoured by starving Turkish soldiers! It does seem that Calvino's fantasy writing borrows from a particularly French tradition of comic violence where death or dismemberment is evaded or repaired by an incredible expedient which implies nothing miraculous nor divine, the clearest example in Calvino being Medardo's scission by a cannon ball and subsequent experiences as a man of two halves. The tradition can be traced from the Roman de Renart and Rabelais

(in whose *Pantagruel* Panurge survives a roasting in the flames of hell) through Voltaire to Queneau.

Briefly it is worth mentioning Calvino's experiment with a different literary structure which looks at Cold War Italy in an indirect critical light - his 'apologhi'. These are fables which function, like Voltaire's 'contes', around a thesis or concept which satirises a contemporary target in the form of a story or parable. A clarification of the role and function of the 'apologo' is found in the introduction by Esther Calvino to *Prima che tu dica pronto*, [*Numbers in the Dark*] quoting here from Calvino's early papers. A note of 1943 describes how, 'The apologo is born in times of oppression. When men can't give a clear form to their thoughts, they express them through fables.' Referring to his own fables as 'raccontini' in this mode, Calvino says they match 'a series of political and social experiences of a young man during the agony of fascism.'¹⁶

In fact, Calvino's best known satirical pieces are from the 1950s; *La gran bonaccia delle antille* [*The Great Dead Calm in the West Indies*] is the best known, an allegory of the stalemate between the Communists and the Christian Democrats as two ships caught in the doldrums of the West Indies. Others are *La tribù con gli occhi al cielo* [*The tribe that looked at the sky*], *Dialogo sul satellite* [*Dialogue about the satellite*], *Monologo notturno d'un nobile scozzese* [*Soliloquy by night of a noble Scot*] and *Una bella giornata di marzo* [*One fine March day*] which were all written in the period 1957-58, immediately after *Il barone rampante*.¹⁷ In these 'apologhi' contemporary instances of oppression or domination, such as the U.S.S.R.'s encroachments in Hungary, its strangle-hold over the hardliners of the Italian Communist Party are alluded to very clearly. The relatively small collection of Calvino's 'apologhi' does not outnumber his exercises with the more loosely allegorical fable. However, the size and breadth of the trilogy implies his preference for this genre as opposed to a traditional satirical genre. A less prescriptive form, as the trilogy shows, allows more oblique criticisms of persecution, brutality and war. We should also consider briefly how another significant exercise in his prose fiction of the 1950s contributes to our understanding of Calvino's war writing. *La speculazione edilizia* [*A plunge into real estate*] of 1956-1957 is a realist novel set in a professional bourgeois environment and yet it contains an extraordinary proliferation of fight

scenes. I believe these minor instances of aggression, little more than punch-ups, can be seen as a vestige of the athletic adventures of Calvino's neorealist and historical heroes who always had the battle field, not the salon, as their arena.¹⁸

Calvino's War- 'Ricordo di una battaglia'

The consequences of war are not evident in Calvino's fiction of the 1960s where he turns his attention to the temporally infinite, non-human topic of cosmogony in *Le cosmicomiche* [*Cosmicomics*]. However, the ten years following his 1985 death have yielded a crop of publications. In particular, there has been the appearance of a thorough bibliographical apparatus in the now complete Mondadori edition of his work, which includes fiction and other prose, criticism, research and a biographical compendium. These texts help to challenge any assumption that the issue of war should have ceased to concern him, the further removed in time he became from it.

One piece above all provides a very telling insight into the memories and forms which have always coloured Calvino's expression of war scenes. Originally published in *La strada di San Giovanni* [*The Road to San Giovanni*], it is an autobiographical account of Calvino's participation in the Resistance, entitled 'Ricordo di una battaglia' ['Memory of a battle'].¹⁹ One of a series of 'esercizi di memoria' undertaken between 1962 and 1977, the piece was begun in 1974. The battle in question occurred in March of 1945 and the account marks the passage of nearly thirty years. An interview of 1973 with Ferdinando Camon refers to the Spring of 1945 and the same conditions which the account details - fleas, a ruinous diet of chestnuts which leads to carbuncles and feet torn to shreds.

In fact, the passage has more to do with the 'memoria' than with the 'battaglia', using an extraordinary number of traditional topoi for memory. These clichés of dark wells, the grey clouds and caverns of the brain, loose nets, huge obstacular rocks, deep valleys and beds of sand are hard to associate with a writer whose every new work has been characterised by its originality. What is retrieved of the lived partisan experience has little to do with the flashing scimitars, rows of lances and clouds of dust of the trilogy. Calvino specifies that he has no 'visual memories because there were neither moon nor stars that night'.²⁰ Initially the

memories which return are all tactile and physical - the partisan is stumbling down unseen inclines, there are wet rocks to slip on, the acid taste of the indigestible chestnuts weighs on his stomach, the precariously balanced load of the machine gun munitions box is strapped on and saws into his shoulders. The journey towards the Piedmontese town of Baiardo is all told through the memory of how Calvino's feet trod that night, up to the moment where the squadron is commanded to remove their shoes to aid their stealthy approach. For years after he could summon up the memory through the relief of this moment;²¹ but slipping off the hardened boots is countered by the equally acute physical memory of the pain that follows. The feel of the land beneath his feet turns into the prickles of chestnut shells and wild thistles, the hesitant tread of stockinged feet on each thorn or shard is interrupted by stopping to remove the offending impediment from the soles of his feet and woollen socks.

Calvino says that he thought that conjuring this memory would suffice to unravel all the others of that day but discovers that there are unforeseen tears in the fabric of his 'ricordanza'. With no temporal or spatial dimension to recall, he tries a different sense: 'To follow my train of thought I would have to go back to it through my ears: that special silence found in the morning in open countryside full of men who are keeping quiet while rumbles and shots fill the sky [...] Then more shots, all sorts of cracks and volleys of gunfire, an undecipherable tangle of noise'.²² If we compare the auditory memory of 'Ricordo di una battaglia' with the sounds filtered through the mind of Pin in *Il sentiero ai nidi di ragno* we find identical language. Shots, volleys, bangs and muffled sounds alone recount a battle whose sights and strategies remain unimparted. We recall also Suor Teodora translating the crashing of kitchen ware into the clangour of warfare. Calvino is afraid. His fear, however, is neither a remembered or renewed fear of the ensuing battle at Baiardo. He is afraid of the shape he is giving to its document. Just as he regretted the distortion of events and characters of his war in the novel *Il sentiero*, he is now concerned not to give the past the wrong resonances. Furthermore, he is anxious that not all traces of his wartime style, and by association his youthful writing, should be erased. Calvino wonders whether he is destroying or salvaging, whether he can ever tell it as it really was, and yet, manages to seem less like a Pirandellian relativist than an inexperienced autobiographer. He

informs us finally that all he has written makes him realise that he can scarcely remember anything of that morning, concluding that he is left only with 'a sense of everything appearing and disappearing'.²³ As readers of Calvino we are by now aware that his wartime recollections are constantly appearing, are often concealed and that, if they disappear it seems more a matter of design than 'lapsus'.

Conclusion

We have seen a variety of Calvino's preoccupations with the formal problem of bearing testimony to the experience of war and several solutions such as rigorous editing, comic distortion, historical and ideological displacement, the ingenuous perspective and political satire. By the time we reach the car-witness account of a battle, the new and insecure apparatus of autobiography is in practice yet, despite all his protestations about wanting to tell the truth about events, his problem is not one of authenticity but still one of form. In 1960 Calvino had already noted, 'I've always found it difficult to write about my memories of the partisan war in the first person. I could do it in other sorts of narrative voice that would all be equally true to the facts'.²⁴

The fluid, labile border between remembering, recreating and creating - 'everything appearing and disappearing' - with which Calvino leaves us in 'Ricordo di una battaglia', encapsulates his central problem. In *Il sentiero* Calvino had already faced the issue of representing his memory and collective memory but realised, as Lucia Re writes, that within a text, 'the historical referent [is only] the locus of an interpretative act and forever eludes exact reproduction within the text itself'.²⁵ How do you retain the integrity of an emotional and political event when it returns to you in slippery and ephemeral flashes of memory? How do you distinguish between the subjective persona of the recollector and the protagonist of the recollection? How do you salvage while not destroying? It is clear that Calvino answers the problem of both war stories and his own war story in the structure rather than the content of his writing; writing which manages best to contain that truth, those facts and everyone's memories, in a deliberately altered, deliberately fictional form.

NOTES

* All references to Calvino's works are taken from the following editions:

Romanzi e racconti vol. I (Milan, Mondadori, 1991) [RR I], *Romanzi e racconti vol. II* (Milan, Mondadori, 1992) [RR II], *Romanzi e racconti vol. III* (Milan, Mondadori, 1994) [RR III], *Saggi vols. I and II* (Milan, Mondadori, 1995). English editions of works cited are *The Path to the Nest of Spiders*, London, 1956, *Our Ancestors*, (*The Cloven Viscount*, *The Baron in the Trees*, *The Non-Existent Knight*), London, 1980, *Difficult Loves*, *Smog*, *A Plunge into Real Estate*, London, 1983, *Adam*, *One Afternoon and other stories*, London: Collins, 1957, *Cosmicomics*, New York, 1968, *Numbers in the Dark and Other Stories*, London, 1995, *The Road to San Giovanni*, London, 1993. All translations into English are my own.

¹ Ruth Ben-Ghiatt, 'Fascism, Writing and Memory: The Realist Aesthetic in Italy, 1930-1950', *Journal of Modern History*, (1995) 3/6767, n.3, 627-665, p. 662. As Ben-Ghiatt also remarks, the association of neorealism with the Resistance, and therefore the Liberation of Italy, imbued its texts with both left-wing and moral significance. Her article revises the critical commonplace of realism as a post-war, left-wing trend in twentieth-century Italy.

² 'Molte cose nacquero da quel clima, e anche il piglio dei miei primi racconti e del primo romanzo (1964 Preface to *Il sentiero ai nidi di ragno*, RRI, p. 1185). In her study of this novel, *Calvino and the Age of Neorealism: Fables of Estrangement* (California, Stanford University Press, 1990), Lucia Re both challenges the notion of neorealist fiction as documentary reportage and investigates Calvino's narrative practice of shifting levels in his attempt to defamiliarise the accepted conventions of neorealism.

³ 'There was once a time when for me ... Hemingway was a God' *Saggi I*, p. 1312.

⁴ 'in margine alla guerra partigiana, ai suoi eroismi e sacrifici, ma nello stesso tempo ne rendesse il colore, l'aspro sapore, il ritmo...', RR I, p. 1191.

⁵ 'legato a loro da quella barriera d'odio che li separa dagli altri uomini', RR I, p. 32.

⁶ 'in quel momento scoppia un tuono e riempie la valle: spari, raffiche, colpi sordi ingranditi dall'eco: la battaglia! [...] Fragori orribili squarciano l'aria [...] Mitraglia, ta- pum, bombe a mano, colpi di mortaio', RRI, p. 123.

⁷ 'maschere contratte da perpetue smorfie, machiette grottesche [...] per poi provarne un rimorso che mi tene dietro per anni', RR I, pp. 1193-94.

⁸ JoAnne Cannon, *Italo Calvino: Writer and Critic* (Ravenna, Longo, 1981), p. 21.

⁹ The influence of Sartre's collection *Le Mur* is evident in *Ultimo viene il corvo*. Sartre, a non-participant in the Spanish Civil War, published *Le Mur* in 1939 and was held in a prison camp at Trier in 1940. It is likely that Calvino composed his three stories on the similar theme when he read Sartre's anthology in translation, reviewing it in 1946 for 'L'Unità'.

¹⁰ 'Calvino è stato in grado di entrare fra i primi in rottura col clima fittizio e pesante del nostro realismo postbellico', was the reproach of Renato Barilli in his 1959 review of *I racconti* now in, Renato Barilli, *La barriera del naturalismo*, (Milan, Mursia, 1980), p. 244.

¹¹ 'La storia di un soldato, in una guerra moderna? Ma la solita satira espressionista era fritta e rifritta: meglio una guerra dei tempi andati', RR I, p. 1210.

¹² John Woodhouse, *Reappraisal of the trilogy, I nostri antenati* (Hull, Willerby, 1968).

¹³ *Saggi* I, p. 960.

¹⁴ 'Senza volerlo, mi accadde fin dagli inizi, mentre mi ponevo come maestri i romanzieri dell'appassionata e razionale partecipazione attiva alla Storia, da Stendhal a Hemingway e a Malraux, di trovarmi verso di loro nell'atteggiamento [...] in cui Ariosto si trovava verso i poemi cavallereschi: Ariosto che può vedere tutto soltanto attraverso l'ironia e la deformazione fantastica', *Saggi* I, p. 74.

¹⁵ Bonsaver sees an aversion to describing pain in Calvino which fantasy writing allays: 'Se quindi ipotizziamo una certa avversione di Calvino verso la rappresentazione diretta, naturalistica della sofferenza umana, dobbiamo riconoscere che il fantastico si offre come il genere ideale per spostare tale argomento su un piano narrativo più innocuo e indolore'

Guido Bonsaver, *Il mondo scritto: forme e ideologia nella narrativa di Italo Calvino*, (Turin, Tirrenia, 1995), p. 253.

¹⁶ I. Calvino, *Prima che tu dica pronto* (Mondadori, Milan, 1993), p. 8. This text and *Romanzi e racconti* vol. III and *Prima che tu dica pronto* both contain examples of these previously unanthologised 'raccontini' and 'apologhi'. Bruno Falcetto's notes to the 'Raccontini giovanili' in RR III, pp. 1299-316, amply discuss the events and sources of very early stories.

¹⁷ In his notes to the recent anthology of these and other 'Racconti e apologhi sparsi' Mario Barenghi writes that these five texts 'pongono perplesse interrogazioni sull'attualità storico-politica in una forma che oscilla fra la narrazione, l'apologo, il dialogo filosofico' (RR III, p. 1225), also noting in their form Calvino's abiding taste for the historical parody and spatio-temporal distortion of *Il barone rampante*.

¹⁸ A contemporary essay reveals Calvino's difficulty in portraying a realistic image of people meeting, talking and disagreeing, a task 'even more difficult, I think, than telling the story of a battle', [più difficile ancora, io credo, che il racconto di una battaglia], *Saggi* I, p. 785.

¹⁹ RR III, pp.50-58.

²⁰ 'non ho ricordi visivi perché era una notte senza luna né stelle', RR III, p. 51.

²¹ 'Per anni mi sono detto: non adesso, più tardi, quando vorrò ricordare, mi basterà richiamare alla mente il sollievo a slacciarsi i scarponi', RR III, p. 53-54.

²² 'Per seguire il mio filo dovrei ripercorrere tutto attraverso l'udito: il silenzio speciale di un mattino in campagna pieno d'uomini che stanno in silenzio, rombi, spari che riempiono il cielo [...] Poi spari, tutti i tipi di scoppio e di raffiche, un groviglio sonoro impossibile da decifrare', RR III, p. 55.

²³ 'il senso di tutto che appare e scompare', RR III, p. 58.

²⁴ 'Mi è sempre stato difficile raccontare in prima persona i miei ricordi di guerra partigiana. Potrei farlo secondo varie chiavi narrative egualmente veritiere', 'Il Paradosso', cit. RR III, p. 1205.

²⁵ Lucia Re, *Calvino and the Age of Neorealism*, p. 172.