

Cesare Pavese. *The Selected Works of Cesare Pavese*. Trans. and introd. R.W. Flint. New York Review Books, 2001. 424 pp. Paper: \$16.95

In four first-person novels Pavese renders with formidable talent extreme isolation, where people group only out of obscure necessity. As one character observes, "Having money means you can isolate yourself." Everyone is removed from the world, whether or not it be wartime or post-WWII Italy. Refuge is sought in cellars, tombs, cloisters, sheltered bathing spots. Jobs and studies mean little, women somewhat more. The primary haven for the three male narrators is the natural world, the repository of beauty, fecundity, and responsibility - husbandry carries a dual meaning in "The Devil in the Hills"—which unites with a nostalgia for boyhood to create a modern form of pantheism. Operating from that complex base Pavese attacks the industrial world's cities, bombs, and killings, scorns the idea of God—surviving the war, says the narrator of "The House on the Hill" after an epiphany that is only like grace, is "all chance, a game"—and, slyly, Italian fascism's destructive love for earlier, more glorious times. Significantly, the female narrator of "Among Women Only" has less time for nature and is nervous about her past. Nevertheless, her constant fearfulness is present, in subdued form, on the sands of "The Beach," as men jostle for position with other men and with women. Pavese's sentences look languid but the prose hides and reveals motivations and connections. "There's nothing to take away from life, it's already zero," remarks a female character in a typically aphoristic fashion. Clearly Pavese's intelligent, probing narratives, which possess their own brand of humor, brought forward in a clear, smooth translation, add more to an understanding of life and of peculiar kinds of solitude and ennui.