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Slow

Piedmont's Stories of Landscapes, Resistance, and Liberation

If you travel up and down these hills, in the subtle astronomical zone when summer ends and autumn suddenly begins, you can see why fog is something you can smell and taste in these grapes. It is not by chance that one of Piedmont's finest wines is called Nebbiolo, a wine coming from a literally "foggy" grape. Rising from the ground and flowing over the Tanaro River, the fog bends with the water, slowly caressing the marls and their ancestral sediment. These chemical encounters will be transferred into the ground of the neighboring hills, and then into your glass—a large one, because the wine, just like you, must breathe. Like you, it is alive.

Visiting this area two and a half centuries ago, an illustrious traveler from overseas named Thomas Jefferson tasted Nebbiolo and tried to reproduce it at Monticello, his Italian corner of another Piedmont, the Virginia region. The experiment succeeded a couple of centuries later: Chemical encounters, indeed, often take time. And it took me long time, too, almost a decade, to understand that I had to write about this place, where we moved in 2001 after years of intellectual and existential pilgrimage. It took me time, because meeting the mind of place is a difficult process of becoming-together. And this process is slow.

It is a mild January day as I write these pages. While I do so, my thought travels back and forth between the places that surround Savigliano, the small town where we live. Cuneo, Alba, Bra, Barolo, La Morra, Barbaresco, Monforte, Neive, Fossano, Saluzzo—they are the core of my Piedmont. Only some fifty or sixty kilometers further north there is Turin, and it is

so different from here that you feel as if you are on another planet. Indeed, Turin is flat, solid, squared. It is the austere palaces of Italy's first national capital city and Fiat's historic car factories, now flourishing elsewhere. Turin is at once regal, proletarian, and post-industrial. Around Cuneo, the main town of my province, you encounter instead agricultural fields, warehouses, terracotta arcades, and hills; these hills are musical and muscular, sweet and challenging. They are discreet and stubborn, and full of surprises: Just scratching at the superficial layers, frozen in the clay and sandstone of Sant'Agata fossil marl, you discover shells. Some thirty million years ago, in fact, these hills were the bed of a huge gulf that would slowly become the Mediterranean Sea. And from that gulf, encircled by the young Alps and pressured from below by the African plate, the Langhe (from the Latin word for "tongues") emerged in the Pliocene. Their calm wave-like rhythm echoes this faraway time, in which other liquid presences were preparing the smells now breathing in your glass.¹

But the surprises from the underground do not stop at the geo-chemical level. Just a few decades ago, digging deep in these unquiet clods, you could have found weapons left from the Second World War. Like shells and fossils, guns, bullets, and grenades have mingled their radical stories with the roots of hazel trees and vines.

All these presences, old as the earth or younger, like the people living and fighting on these hills, still voice this eloquent place. So, be prepared, Reader. Because theirs are the stories—radical bodily stories of landscape, resistance, and liberation—that our final chapter is slowly going to explore.

Slow violence and landscapes of resistance

In 2014 World Heritage acquired its fiftieth site—the "Vineyard Landscape of Piedmont: Langhe-Roero and Monferrato." The reason for this addition, as explained on the UNESCO webpage, is the "outstanding universal value" of this cultural landscape. Indeed, these vineyards, with their "panoramas of carefully cultivated hillsides [...], hilltop villages, castles, Romanesque churches, farms, [...] cellars and storehouses," reflect "a long and *slow*" co-evolution of soil, plants, art, and productive practices, thus evoking a

“profound and ancient expertise in the relationship between man [*sic*] and his environment.”²

To anyone who knows and loves these places, reading this description is exceptionally gratifying. One line, however, captures my attention, besides the (Freudian?) reference to “*man* and *his* environment,” to which we shall return. This line is the one about the “long and slow” evolutionary dynamics through which this place has become what the UNESCO experts describe as a universal treasure. One witnesses here, they write, “a slowly developed association” between soils, grape varieties, and winemaking methods. Clearly, in this region the “outstanding value” of the landscape is due to the use human communities have made of it over the centuries, slowly turning it into a new form of natural beauty: a natural-cultural beauty. This glorious alliance flourishes in a setting where hills, vineyards, and hazel groves, along with “a multitude of harmonious built elements,” are direct expression of work—farming and agriculture—which is hard, sometimes violent: Work, one could say without hyperbole, of mutual subjugation of humans and land.

These thoughts insistently return to my mind whenever I observe the Langhe’s scenery from the hilltop of La Morra, a small village with 2,700 residents whose Latin name indicated a sheep enclosure. On this hilltop, something in particular stimulates my thinking, inviting me to go “behind the landscape,” as Andrea Zanzotto would say. Indeed, on a spectacular terrace overlooking the most prestigious production sites of Nebbiolo and Barolo wines and visited every year by thousands of tourists, there is a bronze statue dedicated *To the Vinedresser*. The key element about this impressive figure, created in 1972 by a sculptor called Antonio Munciguerra, is the complete absence of peasant rhetoric. The Vinedresser—a shirtless scrawny man, bent on his knees—is not at home in any Arcadia. His head turned to one side, the man looks as crooked as the vine on which he leans and on to which he seems to be grafted. As for the countless Unknown Soldiers, the Vinedresser’s face does not convey distinct signs of personality. Even though the grapes he grows might be worth his desperate labor, he seems to be, as an individual, a shadow, defeated. But the really stirring part to me is the human ontology of this composition: An uncanny pre-social hybrid, this man appears to be half-beast and half-slave. His quasi-hallucinated gaze expresses pain, alienation, a state of war with history and with the land.

Antonio Munciguerra, *Al Vignaiolo*. La Morra (2015). Courtesy of Serenella Iovino.

War, history, and the land, like the Vinedresser and the Unknown Soldier, are not put together by chance here. In fact, these now calm and placid places have repeatedly been sites of struggles, of bloodshed, and of resistance. People and territory were conjoined in this warfare. During the Resistance to the Nazi-Fascist occupation in 1943–5, this very landscape physically merged with war; it “did not just surround partisans but penetrated their bodies, leaving profound marks” (Armiero 2011: 162). As Marco Armiero explains in his book *A Rugged Nation: Mountains and the Making of Modern Italy*, “the merging between landscape and rebels was a physiological exchange between nature and bodies, a sort of spiritual hybridisation,” something that included a sense of identity, mutual belonging, and a “practical knowledge of the territory” (Armiero 2011: 167).

The neighboring Alps were the partisans’ ideal quarters in those two interminable years. But when cold weather, exposure to the elements and—more basically—hunger were too hard to stand, the rebels had no choice but to come down to the hills. The Langhe became therefore a ground for both battle and survival: As we read in famous Resistance novels, such as Cesare Pavese’s *La casa in collina* (*The House on the Hill*, 1949), food and shelter were easier to find here than in the cities. Life was apparently safer than in Turin, which was often a target of the Allies’ bombings and a site of direct conflict with Mussolini’s filo-Nazi Republican troops. Still, these countryside territories were important cores of rebellion and grassroots agitation. Here, tillage and farming went hand in hand with partisan guerrilla strategies. These events and elemental bonds are expressed by landscape and people, which still carry today the signs of that time.

Literature also contributed significantly to conveying these narratives, and the works of Cesare Pavese (1908–50) and Beppe Fenoglio (1922–63), both natives of the Langhe, are eminent examples of it. With their famous novels, translated into many languages, Pavese and Fenoglio have rendered the imagery of these places into an anti-idealistic, often idiosyncratic national epopee. Devoid of any populist allusion or complaisance, their Piedmont is a corporeal and expressive setting of both Resistance and the peasant world, here constantly intermingled with one another. Pavese and Fenoglio’s visions of this complex density of elements and events are so powerful that in their stories “the meticulously observed realities of the here-and-now” are often elevated

“to an absolute and timeless mythic level” (Gatt-Rutter 2007: 540). And still, their “myths” are so deeply embedded in these places that the narrative imagination they convey is also always a concrete, physical, and carnal one.

A particularly relevant example of this is Pavese’s novel *La luna e i falò* (*The Moon and the Bonfires*, 1950). Depicted against the background of partisan rebellion, the idealization of the protagonist’s original homeland clashes here more and more patently with the archaic violence of the rural dimension, whose embodiments powerfully materialize in abused human bodies, nonhuman animals, and land. The novel culminates with the final extermination of a peasant family by the father and master. While definitively sealing the antipastoral severity of this world, this “mythically” tragic ending leaves the cognitive dissonance of nostalgia painfully open.

An even deeper interlacement of the rural setting with the fierceness of war and of Nazi-Fascist reprisals can be found in Fenoglio. In his frequently autobiographic novels, the Langhe becomes the real material-narrative site of partisan struggles, a battlefield where blood flew along with revolutionary discourses and aspirations to freedom.³ Even today, anyone who visits Alba and the surrounding villages finds a trace of the events described by Fenoglio. They are written not only on memorial plaques, but also on the old brick walls, which still carry hints of bullets; or on the hills and tufa caves that, disguised among the Barbera and Nebbiolo vineyards, still harbor the partisans’ hiding places.

Pavese and Fenoglio’s novels are a necessary point of entry if you want to delve into the intimate geography of the civil war that took place in northern Italy between Mussolini’s Republican brigades and the antifascist partisans after the Armistice.⁴ But, since the Resistance and Liberation at which we are looking in this book are wider ecological, political, and cultural concepts, we will take here a lateral path. The violence inscribed in these territories, in fact, is not merely the ostentatious historic and “mythic” violence of war, but also the mundane and whispered *pre-historic* violence in which everyday war and land are mingled—the slow, vegetal violence of patriarchal hierarchies, the violence of destitution and of seclusion from historical processes.⁵ This violence is not only the violence of soldiers, but also that of vinedressers and peasants. Because, as La Morra’s Vinedresser statue vibrantly exposes, the fierce interpenetration of landscape and bodies was also a “peacetime”

phenomenon in the large area surrounding Cuneo, and this was perfectly legible on the faces and bodies of the Cuneese peasants, themselves sculpted, hardened, and dried up by their radical merging with the land's hardships and with the dynamics of a forced development. This very violence is the object of Nuto Revelli's narrative and documentary work, of his memoirs and monumental oral history archive, both entirely concentrated on this area and its people. By taking this very area and people as texts, he has contributed to revealing the unheeded narrative threads scripted in the flesh of their landscapes.

A friend of Primo Levi's, Nuto Revelli (1919–2004) is one of the most rigorous witnesses and powerful writers of post-Second World War Italy. As another prominent author and comrade of his, Mario Rigoni Stern, has observed, "witnessing was felt by Nuto as a duty [...] [His] writing is so clear, precise, dramatic, that the only thing it asks you is to be read" (in Raffaelli 2004: n.p.).⁶ Indeed, his language is a "naked, essential Italian, suspicious of any sophistication, the only one capable of leaving behind a centuries-old rhetoric, the jargon of academics and gravestones" (Raffaelli 2004: n.p.). Even so, his stature has yet to be fully appreciated by the national (and international) public. One reason for this might be a reductive interpretation of his work, too narrowly circumscribed by the Cuneese "local" dimension. But, far from being complacent regarding any form of localism, this local outlook is indeed his major strength. Revelli himself is aware of this, when, by introducing the first volume of his peasant archive, he writes: "The story of the poor countryside around Cuneo is not a marginal episode [...]. It is the story of half-Italy, of the North as well as of the South" (Revelli 1997 [1977]: viii). The reason why this is important on a wider scale, he insists, is that "[a] society that abandons enclaves of poverty and depression to their fate, that suffocates minority groups, is a sick society" (Revelli 1997 [1977]: viii).

The consciousness of being part of the world he attempts to recount and to cognize becomes thus an existential *and narrative* responsibility for him; it turns into, Emmanuel Levinas would say, an essential form of "proximity," of "difference which is non-indifference" (Levinas 1981: 139). From this very standpoint, the building of an expressive dimension for this "vernacular landscape"—a landscape "shaped by the affective, historically textured maps that communities have devised over generations, [...] maps alive to significant

ecological and surface geological features,” which are “integral to the socio-environmental dynamics of [a] community” (Nixon 2011: 17)—allows him to address one of the key questions about all the stories connecting time, environment, and violence. Like Rob Nixon, in fact, Revelli also asks who really counts as a witness, when experiences are transmitted by people “whose witnessing authority is culturally discounted” (Nixon 2011: 16). The way Revelli responds to this issue is a strategic one: He speaks in the first person, and, with the mediation of an *apparatus* (a magnetic recorder), the people he materially includes in his narrative archives can speak in the first person, too. The documentary framework, coupled with a profound moral comprehension of the witnesses’ world and with the fact that Revelli himself is a witness, adds authority to the whole edifice, thus transcending both the “local” level and the individual singularities.

A constant interlacement of voices, including—but not privileging—his own, Revelli’s works are a perfect instance, for ecocritics, of what Karen Barad advocates as an entanglement of ontology, ethics, and epistemology. As Barad says,

We are responsible for the world of which we are part, not because it is an arbitrary construction of our choosing, but because reality is sedimented out of particular practices that we have a role in shaping and through which we are shaped. (Barad 2007: 390)

And so, instead of a cold (and unattainable) objectivity, Revelli’s presence responsibly “sediments” together with the world he observes. Their mutual congealing, their intra-action, is the transformation of this “local” into a site and repository of universal categories. It is via this conceptual transition that Revelli is able to see “India” or the “third world” in the Cuneese Alps, allowing us to cognize the practices of resistance and liberation transpiring from this story.⁷

But who was Nuto Revelli? Born in Cuneo, where he spent his entire life running a hardware store, Revelli fought as an officer in the Second World War. He would forever carry the scars of this conflict literally inscribed on his face. After the fall of Fascism in the summer of 1943, however, he became a rebel, a partisan chief. The experience of war and of surviving the terrifying Russian campaign (where some 85,000 Italian soldiers lost their lives) triggered in

him the necessity of better understanding the real social and cultural situation behind the hallucinatory rhetoric of Fascist Italy. In fact, the carnage of war in Russia was also a peasant massacre, and on both sides: A massacre of Russian peasants, seen as “the enemy” in the vast and glacial USSR, and of Italian peasants, enrolled as soldiers in the Fascists’ suicidal legions. Almost naturally, Revelli’s process of understanding turned into storytelling. As he said to the students of Turin University in 1999 while receiving an honorary degree in education, “To tell and to remember: this was the imperative I carried into my heart from that sorrowful event” (Revelli 2004: n.p.).⁸ His individual experience, however, is only a starting point, a first-person observatory that allows him to take full liability for what he sees and tells. And what he sees and tells, during and after the Resistance, are the voiceless presences that war first, and then industrial society, had wiped out from the proscenium of history.

This encompassed of course the soldiers that perished on the front, “the peasants in uniform, who had been sent to die for nothing” (Revelli 2004: n.p.). To these people, Revelli devoted books that have become classics of our post-war narrative, such as *La guerra dei poveri* (*The War of the Poor*, 1962) and *L’ultimo fronte* (*The Last Front*, 1971), works whose common denominator was the search for a posthumous restitution to the “realm of day” of all these human stories lost in the darkness.⁹ But Revelli’s gaze was going deeper. His “narrative justice” implied indeed a radical stance that embraced all the “defeated,” the “friends” as well as the “foes.” An example of this attitude comes from one of his last works, *Il disperso di Marburg* (*The Missing Soldier from Marburg*, 1994), “an extraordinarily subtle and moving piece of detective work that crosses a number of genres by combining fiction with a historical and moral enquiry” (Cooke 2011: 166). The book is an account of Revelli’s decade-long attempt to give an identity to the dead body of a young German officer, called by the people “*il tedesco buono*” (“the good-hearted German”). Murdered by the partisans in 1944 and abandoned to rot on a small river island, the soldier is “a ghost who wants to have a name” (Rossanda 1994: vii). Indeed, as Rossana Rossanda has insightfully pointed out, “it is not only by burying it, that one gives rest to a lifeless body, but by pronouncing its name” (Rossanda 1994: vi). Revelli knew it, and it was also thanks to his unremitting research that the soldier’s name, Rudolf Knaut, could be pronounced and his story told.

What really haunted Revelli, however, was the idea that the restless anonymity of one is the potential anonymity of an entire invisible world. It was this awareness that, in the decades prior to *Il disperso di Marburg*, had moved him to devote the same rigor and passion to a project which can be considered his masterpiece: The creation of an extensive archive of oral histories that would finally give names, faces, and voices to the crowd of the “defeated” of his land. These were the peasants, women, former soldiers, and emigrants of the Cuneo area, all living in this large territory comprising hills, mountains, and plain, which was being dramatically transformed by industrial development and other socio-environmental metamorphoses. Revelli recognized in them the silent throng of nameless and marginal figures, many of whom had been sent to slaughter “for nothing” during the war, and that were now disappearing from the limelight of history without having previously emerged from the dark. In this poor multitude, exploited and forgotten, Revelli identified those who had paid the highest price for building our national “democratic freedoms.”

The “world of the defeated”—defeated by history, by the metanarrative monopoly of industrial “progress”—was one that had been “othered” and marginalized. And, paradoxically, this marginalization was both a fact and a legacy. As Rob Nixon put it with clarity, “the poor face the double challenge of invisibility and amnesia: numerically, they may constitute the majority, but they remain on the margins in terms of visibility and official memory” (Nixon 2011: 65). Their first re-integration therefore had to be, Revelli unquestionably indicated, a narrative and an ethical one:

Statistical data [...] are a “history” written by “the others” [...]. I want instead to give voice to those who have been forever marginalized, the deaf-mute, those who have survived the great genocide, and I want them to speak, as they would do in a true democracy. The world of the defeated is the one that gives me hope, charging me with a young rage, pushing me to fight against today’s wrongful society. (Revelli 1997: xxvi)

This narrative redemption materialized in Revelli’s *Il mondo dei vinti* (*The World of the Defeated*, 1977) and *L’anello forte* (*The Strong Link*, 1985), two unparalleled books in the horizon of Italian contemporary culture. Like a great painting, these collections at once shed light on a world of rural poverty and migrations, on the wounds and memories of Resistance and war, and on

women's vital role in these families. The visual association with *The Fourth Estate* (1901), the iconic masterpiece by the Piedmontese painter Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo, is here almost inescapable.

In years of patient work, helped by "intermediaries" who introduced him into these shy family circles, Revelli collected several hundreds of testimonies: 270 for the first volume, and 260 for the second. Equipped with a Japanese recorder, he taped and then carefully transcribed the interviews, respecting the speakers' patois inflections, their narrative rhythms, and even their repetitions: Themes returned, but eventually every single plot was unique. Although his stance in these pages is perceivable and clear, Revelli kept his position carefully separated from that of the single speakers. His method was based "on a rigorous distinction of voices" (Portelli 1997: 134). His words are audible in long and accurate introductions, which are actually stories in themselves; but then, the sequence of the informants' chronicles gives "meaning to the shadows of the individual lives" (Portelli 1997: 134). In the first choral collection, the stories selected for publication are eighty five, mostly told by men; in the second, they are one hundred and eight, and are all relayed by women.¹⁰

In these two books Revelli accounted not only for the "anthropological" disappearance of peasants, the abandonment of mountainous regions, and the industrial terato-mutation of large portions of the Cuneese countryside, polluted and environmentally degraded. He also accounted for the host of pain and violence that characterized the peasant world itself. He looked at this world with sympathy and with a strong sense of social justice, but never with uncritical acquiescence. His standpoint was stated clearly:

I did not mythicize the old peasant society. I knew that the ancient time of fireflies and chickadees was happy only in the pages written by the "others," the men of letters, the "learned" ones. My witnesses [...] did not talk to me about fireflies and chickadees, but about the hunger for bread, about the misery of a time. (Revelli 1998 [1985]: xviii–xix)

As these words lucidly indicate, the major target of Revelli's criticism was the artificial idyll of "fireflies and chickadees," the deceptive pastoralism of tourists who love "to spend the weekend in the countryside," stopping their perception at the picturesque level (Revelli 1997 [1977]: xxvi). Besides mystifying the reality of the rural world, this "mythic nostalgia" obscures individuals and

issues of environmental justice, overshadowing “stark contrasts in social, political [...] and [...] ecological terms” (Sullivan 2015: 115). In the world voiced by Revelli, instead, “[t]he peasant was a mere object, and he knew he was” (Revelli 1997: xxii). A vision of the pastoral as “an ideologically compromised form because of its deployment [...] in service of class and imperial or metropolitan interests” (Phillips 2003: 16) is thus reinforced and substantiated via the hundreds of personal testimonies collected by Revelli. It is in their stories that a *literature of liberation*, one condensing the struggles of living beings against the dangerous mystifications of oppressive metanarratives, concretely materializes.

The stories that Revelli liberates in his two fundamental books are, indeed, stories of need and deep poverty. These are stories of slow, patriarchal violence, in which the land and the peasants’ bodies are interlaced with the fierceness of war first, and then with the costs of industrial development. Revelli displays a world typically populated by gender hierarchies, by social exclusion, marginalization of disabled people. Indeed, in more than one testimony the frequent malformations and heritable genetic damages as a result of penury, malnutrition and even incest appear as a physical refutation of the Fascist rhetoric about the healthiness and strength of “our peasant race.”¹¹ Here Revelli’s account significantly resonates with a crudely realistic description of rural Piedmont made by Italo Calvino in his novel *The Watcher* (1963):

It was a hidden Italy, [...] the reverse of the Italy that flaunts itself in the sun, that walks the streets, that demands, produces, consumes; this was the secret of families and of villages, it was also [...] rural poverty with its debased blood, its incestuous coupling in the darkness of the stables... (Calvino 1971: 17–18).

Articulated in the materiality of its bodily texts, Revelli’s peasant world ushers thus into a “dark pastoral” (Sullivan 2014a, 2015), a mode which, delivering “self-reflection and productive tensions [...], invokes the power of inevitable idyllic urges and lunges into artifice” (Sullivan 2014a: p. 88).

Another often obscured aspect, in this introverted rural world, was the individuals’ emotional life. The choice to dedicate a second volume explicitly to the stories of peasant women is therefore subversively revelatory of a comprehensive liberation stance, which includes all those who—by “nature” or by society—are considered weak subjects. By recording the first

testimonies Revelli had noticed that, even in those families where women were key figures (hence “The Strong Link”), the narratives were mostly male-centered, often suppressing or silencing crucial spots of family life such as affection, love, female exploitation and self-representation, the sphere of sex and motherhood. “Women were teaching me—he remarked—that the war of the poor never ends” (Revelli 1998: xvii). Embodied in “hyper-separated and hierarchical gender oppositions” (Garrard 2004: 54), the patriarchal logic was thus dominating even in the common struggle against poverty and hardships. This is, after all, the same implicit logic behind the reference to “*man* and *his* environment” whose productive relationship has created, according to the UNESCO experts, the “outstanding universal value” of these places.¹²

After voicing the “mute” people of this “defeated” world, Revelli’s aim became therefore “to give a voice to the [...] peasant woman, so that she might finally *write* her story” (Revelli 1998: xix, emphasis in the original). The fact that “*write*” is here italicized is not a minor detail: This emphasis explicitly signals the passage from being relegated to the oral dimension, to a level of knowledge transmission that eventually becomes historical. The history that these women had to write was a story of toil, of domestic abuses perpetrated by their parents and brothers, and of repeated childbirths, often as a result of their husbands’ assaults. Maternity indeed was also an ambiguous subject. Whereas for the men to have many children was a reason for pride, for the peasant women this came at an enormous price; moreover, these children were often seasonally “rented” as cowherds if boys, or sent to France as maids or violet harvesters if girls. Through all these practices, the women and children’s bodies were thus often “dispossessed,” as Antonella Tarpino has observed (Tarpino 2013: vii). But this was also a world “dense with metaphysics” (Tarpino 2013: vii), a dimension suspended between faith, poverty, and superstition, inhabited by witches (here called “*masche*”), natural healers, and girls who traded their hair braids for fabric. Not rarely, in this world, was the women’s marginalization intertwined with the ideological pressure of religious authorities.

A decisive chapter in this hidden “war of the poor” was the stories of the numerous girls “imported” from the depressed southern regions, chiefly Calabria. Especially from the 1970s, local girls were becoming reluctant to

constrain themselves to such an existence of hard labor and meager reward. Therefore, as Revelli unexpectedly discovered, southern girls were convinced by matchmakers to come to Cuneo's large countryside and marry the peasant bachelors. In this "meeting between two different but symmetric poverties" (Bonansea 1988: 69), women paid with their own bodies and emotions both "for secular injustices and for the modern wrongs caused by short-sighted economic policies" (Bonansea 1988: 68). But, by embedding their "bone lands" into the new one, they also became a "strong link" that unified two opposite and equally marginal corners of Italy.¹³ All these elements, as Corrado Stajano wrote, make of *The Strong Link* a huge "peasant *Spoon River*," a "figuration of Italian society in which the most excluded among the excluded—women—have a voice, a gigantic family tree [...] which must be taken into account by whoever will write the history of unified Italy" (Stajano 1985: xx).

The peasant world, seen beyond pastoral idealisms, was thus a world of slow violence in a sense that expands Rob Nixon's view: The intergenerational, interspecies and gendered violence of patriarchal hierarchies, which had lasted for centuries, if not millennia. It was a "structural" oppression rooted in the necessity of unmovable orders, in the combination of abuse and lack—both technological and social—of emancipation, in the naturalization of forms of family enslavement and in archaic systems of labor exploitation. And slow violence was the one that "dispossessed," modified, and bent the peasant bodies, themselves yoked by groundwork up to the point of disappearing, as individuals, in the body of the land.

But slow violence in the "defeated" world revealed itself also in the blurred contact zone between the rural and the industrial dimension. With deep socio-ecological awareness, in fact, Revelli raised the question of environmental disruption, a question through which landscapes' and bodies' joint immersion "within power structures that have real material effects" clearly appeared (Alaimo 2010: 86). Revelli's criticism, again, was not driven by naive ideological biases. As he wrote,

I did not detest the new industrial society. I was scared by the industry that had won hands down. The Bormida River, more polluted than a sewer, to me looked like the symbol of the winners. The yellow ground, saddened by herbicides, looked like the symbol of the defeated. My obsession was that one had to strike

a balance between agriculture and industry, before it was too late. Before that the only one to survive was the army of crows. (Revelli 1998: xviii–xix)

This passage is extremely important. In many respects, industry could have been (and sometimes was) a form of liberation for the poor peasants. The clash between the industrial and rural world, however, took place as the factory was re-introducing hierarchies and exploitation, with which came a novel and much stronger ecological risk, as in the case of the Bormida River or of the uranium mines on Mount Bisalta, near Cuneo. In particular in these mines, held by Montecatini (a company which will participate in Porto Marghera's Montedison), many workers "died soon, died badly, with their lungs petrified. And the living, the survivors, are all ill with silicosis" (Revelli, 1997: xxxvii). Along the course of the Gesso river, at the Bisalta's foothills, the "cement quarries continue to eat the mountains, and they even change the valley's topography" (Revelli 1997: lxix). In all respects, the agriculture in this area had become "subaltern to the factory"—it was an "agriculture of the worker-farmer" (Revelli 1998: xix).

By reflecting on the different levels and forms of material subordination, however, Revelli was pinning down two crucial points. The first was the misery of the peasant world—a misery challenging any possible idealization. The second was the misery of the industrial one, which had simply superimposed itself on the former, without emancipating it first, without liberating it. Both miseries were clearly written on the land's body: "The 'regime chronicles' exalt the 'happy marriage between industry and the poor country' [...]. But the truth is under our eyes; *the landscape is the one that speaks*" (Revelli 1997: xxvii–viii, emphasis added). And so, in the grey zone where this ill-fated "marriage" was materializing, the landscape along with all its living manifestations revealed "the typically obscured processes of dehumanization [...] that constitute the slow, structural [...] violence of capitalism" (Wald 2014: n.p.). The violence that we find at work here is exactly the kind of violence that Priscilla Wald has called "vegetal violence": a "violence that works slowly and structurally, the long term impact of which is registered in changes" in the corporeal and textual geographies of territories and people (Wald 2014: n.p.). This violence is disseminated as a language and as a system of signs in these grounds and bodies. Directly emanating from them, Revelli's narrative

ethics combines therefore the sensorial immediacy of elemental agencies with a claim for social and *historical* justice. Rivers, too, speak for all this:

In the Bormida Valley the river [...] is a snake of disgusting sludge that poisons the environment. The Bormida's fog is kneaded with poison, it rises upward, and where fog arrives, plague also arrives. The blackmail imposed by masters is pitiless [...]: Do you want your children in the factory? Then enjoy the poison.

The Vermenagna stream flew in a plastic bed, the whitish water transported silica to the plain, it plastified ditches and canals, it cluttered the aquifer faults, mortified the humus, withered the fields. Thirty, forty kilometers away from the sites of the extractive industries, water was still milky, polluted. [...] Here is the balance of powers. Poisons [...] are the result of the society that counts; the shy protests of the peasant world are the litanies of the society that dies. (Revelli 1997: xxix)

The story of the Bormida Valley deserves closer attention. Located at the border between Liguria and Piedmont, its wounded river and ecosystem are another major chapter of the Italian industrial metanarrative. The pollution came here from the Azienda Coloranti Nazionali e Affini (ACNA), a factory of coloring substances that stayed active in the small town of Cengio over more than a century. Forcefully decommissioned by the left-wing Minister for the Environment Edo Ronchi in 1999, during its long "life" ACNA "provided the Ligurian people with jobs and the Piedmontese with toxic pollution" (Pergolizzi 2012: 133). Initially, the industrial unit, established under another name in 1882, produced explosive materials, including the chemical weapons used in Libya, Abyssinia, and Eritrea by the Fascist troops in Mussolini's colonial wars.¹⁴ Then, the Cengio plant started manufacturing nitric acid and other persistent organic compounds, mostly derived from benzene.¹⁵ Acquired in 1966 by Montedison (the same corporation controlling Porto Marghera's Petrolchimico), ACNA's production came to encompass betaoxynaphthoic (BON) acid, potassium salt, and phthalocyanines.

In 120 years of industrial activity, 374 lethal chemical compounds were spread from Cengio to the surrounding areas, contaminating agricultural land, aqueducts, wells, and the whole Bormida watershed. As Antonio Pergolizzi reports in his book *Toxic Italy*, in Cengio's subsoil "some two million cubic meters of hazardous waste, toxic pollutants and fouled ground" have been detected (Pergolizzi 2012: 133). Like Marghera's industrial peninsulas, the

hills arisen little by little in the plant's environs are also entirely made of waste. But the awareness about the disaster was an early phenomenon in this area: already in 1909 the aquifers of three municipalities were irretrievably poisoned, and their use had been prohibited by the authorities. The situation of ecological ruin had become chronic already in the 1930s, but all the trials, initiated from 1938 to 1982 with the aim of stopping production and protecting the health of people and land, resulted in total defeats for the citizens of Bormida.¹⁶ When, in the early years of the economic boom, Beppe Fenoglio put the river in the background of one of the tales included in his collection *Un giorno di fuoco* (*A Day of Fire*, 1963), Bormida's biocide was already a fact:

Have you ever seen Bormida? Its water has the hue of clotted blood, because it carries away the waste of Cengio's factories, and not a blade of grass grows on its banks anymore. Such a foul and poisoned water that it freezes your marrow, especially if you see it under the moonlight (Fenoglio 1988: 10–11).

Until 1982 toxic pollutants were discarded directly in the river and in the neighboring areas. After that, however, many loopholes to dodge legal restraints were found. One of these was the unlawful disposal of industrial waste. Investigations have revealed that tons of toxic sludge coming from the ACNA factory have been illicitly discarded in Naples's dumping sites for years, as a result of the complicity game between industrial managers and ecomafia clans (cf. Pergolizzi 2012: 134). *Tout se tient*, in our porous landscapes of pollution and slow violence.

But apparently there is good news: The latest reports suggest that the Bormida Valley's reclamation works, started in 1999, have now been completed.¹⁷ Whether this unexpected happy ending is accurate and not a governmental or journalistic amplification, this whole story should be a warning against the way the "reckless short-termism" (Nixon 2011: 22) of both politics and industrial procedures collides with the subterranean pace of their systematic violence.¹⁸ The fact that the Bormida river is once again "alive" and "suitable for fishing," as the newspapers say, does not erase the thousand cases of human and nonhuman illness and death that a century of environmental injustice has generously distributed in this area.¹⁹ Because, if all this happened, it was also due to the inertia of national authorities and to

a legislative system that for too long has failed to adequately punish environmental crimes as such. But this is something to which we shall return.

Shedding light on the dynamics of violence that crisscross and surround the peasant world is essential to understand the real material narrative scripted in the beauty of this landscape. If every landscape is a storied territory which is both “a geographical terrain and a terrain of consciousness,” a compound fabric entailing “a place and the ideas that have developed about how to live in that place” (Berg and Dasmann 1977: 36), then it would be impossible to appreciate the “outstanding universal value” of UNESCO’s Vineyard Landscape of Piedmont apart from its tangible bodily stories. In an unprecedented way, Revelli has contributed to undrape this unknown Arcadia in its most concrete expressions, revealing the dark sides of this world, its suffocated meanings, and also its intrinsic vitality, so often smothered by the self-celebrating rhetoric of industrial development. But the gist of Revelli’s contribution lies in the universality of his “local” pictures. Interlacing dynamics of poverty, emigration, and industry, the stories he collected are always already trans-local and trans-corporeal, thus outstripping the mere “situatedness” of their narrators.

This discourse allows me to underline another vital point, namely the importance of including the “world of the defeated” in the constellation of slow violence. Being subjected to both the aggressions of industry and the ferocity of patriarchal relations, the “defeated” go through a “slow violence” that is at once individual, environmental, and “structural.” It is a violence which encompasses this world from within and from without: From within, with its interlaced forms of oppression and hyper-separation, with its archaic and antipastoral “war of the poor”; from without, with the reckless attacks carried out by industrial development, which is itself a “progress” without liberation, a state of expanded hierarchies subjugating both humans and land.

By giving voice to the “mute and deaf” people and framing their testimonies in an historical narrative, Revelli’s account of these entangled forms of violence becomes instrumental to a real project of liberation, also actively responding to the “representational challenges” raised by Nixon’s notion (Nixon 2011: 10). The function of storytelling in this challenge is, indeed, crucial for letting “the unapparent appear, making it accessible by humanizing drawn-out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses” (Nixon 2011:

15). With the verbal and bodily narratives coming from his witnesses and from himself, Revelli has exposed the often-unapparent disturbing side of the peasant world, showing that Arcadia is a myth through which the capitalist system builds and reinforces its false consciousness, thus enacting its own metanarrative of self-redemption. But what emerges from this picture is also that the internal oppression of the peasant world is the element that made it vulnerable to the violence of an ecologically abstract and self-legitimizing development. Revelli's "dark pastoral" was therefore a way to denounce a historico-anthropological suppression, as Italo Calvino, by reviewing *Il mondo dei vinti*, lucidly observed:

All nostalgia about such a world cannot be but a mystification [...]; this, however, does not exclude the bitterness for the fact that, instead of a possible transformation [of this world] into an agricultural society worth this name, we behold [its] bare dissolution into nothing. (Calvino 1977)

By offering a dispassionate portrayal of this world, however, Revelli has also created the conditions for reappraising peasant cultures and knowledges. This reconsideration is both ethical and historical. It is not a simplistic form of sympathy, but the effort to establish social justice as a critical discourse mediated by the self-awareness of these marginalized individuals and groups. Here another valuable insight comes from Priscilla Wald's notion of vegetal violence. One of the aspects of this violence, Wald maintains, is its switching capacity, namely its power to break previous balances: "Once visible, vegetal violence, can inspire the vegetal (in its other meaning, embryonic) violence of a response; this counter-violence begins its slow transformative process." Revelli's works entail and facilitate this "transformative process" in the form of an evolution that "is more radically propelled by social than by biological change" and which replaces "the crisis of survival with the social justice question of how we want to live" (Wald 2014: n.p.).

The "counter-violence" of this evolutionary shift is liberated in the very moment the "defeated" acquire a narrative dimension of their own. It is from this self-appropriation that the voiceless peasants consciously enter an historical dimension, initiating a material path toward emancipation. This is what Hubert Zapf, in his theory of cultural ecology, has identified as the "a re-integrative inter-discourse" brought up by literature. According to this

view, literary narratives have the capacity to represent deficits, conflicts, and unevenness “within dominant systems of [...] power” (Zapf 2006: 62). Through this capacity, they perform a compensative and balancing function, orienting the evolutionary dynamics of cultural discourse toward the reintegration of “what is marginalized, neglected, repressed or excluded” (Zapf 2006: 56). In my own view, this capacity belongs not only to literature, but to narratives in general.²⁰

In our case, the mirror of narrative and self-reflection is the way in which the peasant world can face its own host of violence, as well as its historical fragility to a top-down-imposed development. It is via this mirror that the peasant world’s “neglected biophilic energies can find a symbolic space of expression and of (re-)integration” (Zapf 2010: 138). The self-awareness implied by this narrative articulation is thus a redemption for the world of the “defeated.” It is this very awareness that enabled a re-appropriation of the beauty and enormous natural-cultural potentialities of these territories. And so, if Piedmont’s hills of Langhe-Roero and Monferrato are now the fiftieth UNESCO World Heritage Site, this is also thanks to a counter-narrative originating from Revelli’s geographies of resistance. What this counter-narrative teaches us is that no landscape is immune from violence, and that what we often take for granted is the result of a slow and difficult process of distillation.

It takes time for oppressive forces to sediment, in the storied landscape of territories and bodies. Dormant like the Pliocene shells in the Tanaro marls, these forces are still here, and are co-essential with the beauty of this place. They also are, if not a heritage for the world, a lesson for us. But, just as the vinedressers’ pain morphs into the elegance of a Nebbiolo glass, a moment also arrives in which dark pastorals become filtered of their violence. It is then that, slow but vigorous, they can turn into leverage for liberation.

Land and liberation: Slow food

One of the first things to capture your eye when you visit Bra, a neat baroque town whose original settlements date back to the Neolithic age, is the recurring figurine of a snail, an elegant red little snail, which is the symbol of

whatever is locally grown, healthy, sustainable, tied to traditional knowledges, and—beyond any reasonable doubt—good to eat. Since 1986, the year of Slow Food's inception in the incubatory form of "Arcigola," a left-wing recreational association based on food culture, this red snail stands for a movement/philosophy that, disproving the sluggishness of its icon, has rapidly become a worldwide phenomenon, with a network of around 100,000 members and 2,000 "food communities" engaged in small-scale and ecologically aware food production.²¹

Established in Bra by Carlo Petrini and a group of socially and culturally committed people who happened to be also food and wine connoisseurs, Slow Food has as its primary ambition to counter the dissemination of the "fast food" lifestyle and to prevent the decline of local gastronomic traditions as forms of cultural biodiversity. From its small headquarters in Bra's ancient Via della MendicITÀ Istruita, this "grassroots organization" is active today "in over 150 countries" and brings together "millions of people passionate about good, clean and fair food."²² Its members and affiliates include "chefs, youth, activists, farmers, fishers, experts and academics," people and communities that share knowledges and support local realities, with the common goal to put the "good, clean, and fair" philosophy of Slow Food into practice. And this practice is both cultural and ecological, as testified by the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity, the Slow Food Presidia, the Terra Madre Network and biennial World Meeting, and the University of Gastronomic Sciences, opened in Pollenzo, near Bra, in 2004. Not a small trail, for a little red snail.

This networking effort, however, is something more than the result of a particularly successful communication strategy. Slow Food mirrors a conceptual, and ethico-historical, elaboration that reaches the world in many ways and that, as Jane Bennett has also observed, might "reform the public that once coalesced under the banner of 'environmentalism'" (Bennett 2010: 50). Indeed, as we read in the English edition of Petrini's manifesto-book *Slow Food: Le ragioni del gusto* (*Slow Food: The Case for Taste*), the Slow Food "recipe" purports to "wed pleasure to awareness and responsibility, study and knowledge, and to offer opportunities for development even to poor and depressed regions through a new model of agriculture" (Petrini 2003: xvii–xviii).

Published in Italy in 2001, *Slow Food: Le ragioni del gusto* summarizes almost two decades of collective explorations, campaigns, tests, and tastings made by these “democratic and antifascist gluttons” (Petrini 2003: 11) in the field of what would become a new discipline: eco-gastronomy. The spirit of the movement could not be clearer: An activist philosophy rooted in the belief that food is not just part of our bodily existence, but also a way to connect our body with other bodies, whether via the food chain, crop growing, politics, or the shared pleasures of conviviality. Petrini calls the pursuit of these principles “a gastronomy for liberation”: “liberation from [...] unevenness, oppressions, violence perpetrated on environment and people, the scandal of hunger and malnutrition” (Petrini 2013a: 7).

As the international and indigenous Slow Food communities increasingly attest, there are no borders for this liberation. Its core values constitute a political ecology platform that expands worldwide and starts directly from the soil, from agriculture. If “eating is an agricultural act,” as Petrini, quoting Wendell Berry, concurs (Petrini 2013b [2005]: 63; Berry 1990: 146), then it is also undeniable that “in most of the primary choices we make in our every-day lives we are implicated in the fate of agriculture” (Major 2011: 1). But the “fate of agriculture” is also the fate of regional or indigenous communities, forms of natural-cultural knowledge, and endangered living species and environments, both on a local and on a planetary scale. All these realities are constantly threatened by the unsustainable speed of “the present paradigm of extractive farming,” as Barbara Kingsolver calls it (Kingsolver 2007: 169). In response to all that, the core of this Piedmontese philosophy/movement is its pace, which is purposefully *slow* as a reaction to the accelerated tempo imposed by global capitalism on one of our basic living functions—eating—and on the interlaced systems of exploitation on which this function depends when it is industrially controlled.

Along with being an ecological approach, respectful of the rhythm of seasons and agricultural production, the “slow” of Slow Food is thus an affirmative ethical-political claim: It is the claim for food justice, which means justice for the people that eat the food, justice for the communities that produce it, justice for the land that sustains the production, and justice for the biosphere that enables these processes and eventually absorbs their effects. In Petrini’s words, this is “the assumption of responsibility for the future;

the salvation of a heritage of memory, biodiversity, and creative capacity; and the affirmation of a pleasure principle” (Petrini 2003: xix) as an alternative to violence and exploitation in their various forms. Said otherwise, an eco-gastronomy for liberation.

The commitment to contrasting the superpower of global agro-industry and acting in favor of the rights and creativity of the world’s food communities, the defense of environmental beauty, the cultivation of landscape as well as of land, the joys of conviviality and measure, the respect for human and nonhuman subjects involved in the production process: all this is part of the attempt made by a group of “antifascist gluttons” to couple taste for good food with ecological and cultural values. But the detail that often escapes the international “slow-foodies” (Pollan 2006: 260), especially those who are most concentrated on the “gratifying” side of the message, is that Petrini’s eco-gastronomy is in principle a comprehensive message of liberation. And this message of liberation has a specific *terroir* of ideas and historical experiences. One of the coordinates of such *terroir* is the socio-political landscape of Resistance of the Cuneo area, famously Italy’s “most partisan” province. The frequent usage of a “partisan” vocabulary, whose keyword is precisely “liberation,” testifies to this.²³ But equally necessary to understand Slow Food is its radical tie to the peasant world of this region, a world entirely populated by Revelli’s “defeated” and their dense bodily stories. Going over his first eco-gastronomical steps at the end of the 1970s, Petrini himself was explicit about his alliance of visions with Revelli:

It was during that period that I met Nuto Revelli, who had just written his great work, [...] *The World of the Defeated* [...]. [His] method, and [...] sensibility, immediately won me over, especially as during those years my visits to the [...] Langhe often brought me into contact with the people who were the object of his research. [...] After all, these were my people [...]. (Petrini 2013b: 472–3)

And here again:

it was all thanks to the inspiration that Revelli gave me through his incredible work: those words conveyed all the life, the gastronomy, the economy, the culture, the social life of those times—hard times, when the people, amid great privations, were active subjects who contributed to the transformation of the land. (Petrini 2013b: 475)

The “subjects” that Petrini describes as “[his] people” include La Morra’s Vinedresser and all the marginal women and men that have converted this land from a territory of “great privations” to a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Creating a dynamical continuity with those efforts, Slow Food’s actions have also considerably contributed to this transformation. But without Revelli’s work this big shift would be simply unthinkable. His witnessing is in fact the major source of collective self-awareness for these “subjects”; it was their narrative empowerment. As Petrini noted, linking together Revelli’s method and the Terra Madre indigenous communities, “When [...] I saw [...] the participants and heard their stories, I became even more convinced that the mission of cataloguing was vitally important and that it should be implemented [...] in the first place by the communities themselves” (Petrini 2013b [2005]: 476).

Integrating “vernacular” epistemologies and ecologies in the form of a “slow knowledge” (Petrini 2013b [2005]: 411 *et passim*), Slow Food has become an integral part of the material and political counter-narrative of the “defeated” world. Far from being a folkloristic limbo, this “slow knowledge” is a cognitive reserve of biocultural practices accumulated over time, in spite of all hierarchies of power, ethnicity, age, or gender. Slow Food’s discourse thus turns “subaltern” ideas and voices into tangible expressions of a “subaltern cosmopolitanism”: an emancipatory strategy whose cornerstone is an “ecology of knowledges” and whose “claims and criteria of social inclusion reach beyond the horizon of global capitalism” (de Sousa Santos 2007: 63). The Terra Madre Network is the very expression of this subaltern cosmopolitanism. Its biennial World Meeting, in particular, provides a forum for cross-cultural encounters for farmers, food community members, activists, and social ecologists from all parts of the globe. Periodically, on the occasion of the meeting, peasants and small producers, mostly from “southern” countries and in many cases women, come to Turin, where they live with local families and residents that voluntarily host them for the sake of exchanging knowledges outside the circuit of corporate globalism.²⁴

To read Slow Food “eco-gastronomical liberation” against Revelli’s stories is helpful to clarify that an ecologically desirable society does not mean a return to an old-style peasant Eden. This Eden, indeed, has never really existed; it was so, as Revelli said, only in the tales of the “others.” But the realization

of this fact does not exclude the coming into being of a “democratic and antifascist” vision of food production that tries to reconcile people and the land based on a more gentle scale of values and rhythms. Slow Food advocates for this “liberated” relationship with the land and with our bodily needs: A relationship that ought to be more culturally strong, ethically humane, and ecologically aware. This worldwide group of enlightened epicures invites us to share, to enjoy the pleasure of healthy encounters with people and land, to set the conditions to extend this pleasure and health to other beings, and to do it over time.

Of course, there are critical points in the Slow Food project, and the first one is the frequent accusation of elitism, implied by its economic practicality, and partly also by the fact that, especially in western countries, being a “slow-foodie” has become a status among the better-off strata of society. Apparently, there might be some truth in this: This “slow revolution” has not penetrated the market, and hence the prices of “good, clean, and fair” foods are not affordable on a mass scale. This view is also reinforced by the recent expansion of costly shopping centers for Italian food in Italy and abroad, where many products protected by Slow Food are marketed. On closer examination, however, this charge, rather than providing real criticism to Slow Food’s *values*, risks being instrumental in preserving the financial status quo. In fact, the very goal of contrasting food monopolies and “extractive agriculture”—both significantly more discriminatory and expensive for societies and planet than “eating locally”—is precisely an idea of food justice.²⁵ The principle is not that of having expensive food branded as “good food” but that of returning (or finally giving) dignity to farmers and agricultural communities, appreciating their traditional knowledges and attributing intrinsic value to historic agricultural landscapes. As Robert Gottlieb and Anupama Joshi note, Slow Food’s ethics ensure that “the benefits of eating locally and sustainably are shared by all who participate, from the farm to the producer and the laborer to the community” (Gottlieb and Joshi 2010: 186). This justice is not aimed at privileging the interests of big food corporations, but at protecting people and places as natural-cultural collectives. If Slow Food remains, as it ought to be, faithful to these principles, without becoming a façade-philosophy for elite retailers and practitioners, then it really will be the key movement for practices of food justice and ecological liberation.

On the other hand, vegans and “meatless eaters” (such as I am) might be not completely happy with the Slow Food omnivorous menu. And I concur with Jane Bennett that this discourse of liberation could be fortified if Slow Food “broadened its focus beyond the activities of humans,” instead of implicitly perpetuating “the idea that nonhuman materiality is essentially passive stuff” (Bennett 2010: 51). The coherent pursuit of this liberation, like any other, requires in fact a more-than-human compass. This is yet another open front on which we—witnesses ourselves to many defeated worlds—are all called to take a stance.

What is however undeniable is that, even if still somehow perfectible, the “slow revolution” that timidly started here thanks to Revelli, Petrini, and “their” people and communities is not only a claim for “local” rebirth or more sustainable forms of *jouissance*. In unfastening the bonds of patriarchal ties and territorial aggression, this “revolution” is also a slow but resolute liberation of messages, meanings, and dynamic identities through which local landscapes become cosmopolitan territories of resistance. It is in these new slow, concrete, and anti-idealistic landscapes that the vinedressers and peasants of all the invisible Souths can finally retrieve their names.

A (slow) epilogue

Nebbiolo and its nobler descendants, Barolo and Barbaresco, are austere wines. Unadorned, they send you a message of density and slowness. A message of severity, of how long it takes for these clayey sods to diffract in dozens of fragrances—here sour cherry, there dried plum; again, pomegranate, and berries; and then, in sequence, woods, oak and clay, chocolate, tobacco, meat, and blood ... It takes time to taste these wines, to learn them. Most of all, however, it takes them time to become what, by way of natural and of cultural processes, they can be. Winemakers know that. They know when to harvest the grapes (and Nebbiolo grapes are harvested slowly, late in the season); they know how to delicately crush them, how to leave them in the maceration process, how to press them, and blend them, and let the wine age ... Winemakers know that the chemical encounters that will happen as soon as the wine starts to breathe in our glasses depend on

Anthrophyllite asbestos, scanning electron microscope picture. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

a slow and patient labor of combinations. They know all that. And after all everybody, regardless on his or her wine expertise or taste, will agree: The good slow aging of wine belongs to our collective imagination from time immemorial.

The image you're seeing is an asbestos fiber under the microscope. It's so hedgy and fragmented. It will take it time to settle in your lungs. The time of asbestos is even slower than wine's time: It can last twenty, thirty years. But, once there, through a weird sequence of intra-actions, a form of cancer may develop, which will make your days run faster than ever. Until a point when, all of a sudden, they'll stop.

It was in 1898 that for the first time the scientific community expressed concerns about the potential health-impairing effects of asbestos fibers. These concerns were confirmed in the 1930s.²⁶ The time of science might be slow: Scientific discoveries need time to be tested, to be acknowledged, and recorded. But the time of industry, commerce, and politics—so fast indeed when it comes to produce, consume, and campaign—can be even slower, when regulations and restrictions are concerned. Politics, industry, and commerce know how to be slow, even motionless, when it comes to restricting privileges or banning particularly profitable productions, and Marghera's story is a good example of such sloth. And here is another one: In Italy, in fact, the processing and manufacturing of asbestos was prohibited only in 1992, but this material is still purchased and variously used. This information takes me by surprise in these mild January days of 2015, as a newspaper advises me that, as recently as 2012, Italy imported from India about 1,040 tons of asbestos.²⁷ Despite 1992's ban, as Piero Bevilacqua remarked in 2006, "the large-scale decontamination operation started years ago is still not completed. At least fifty dangerous industrial sites still need to be cleaned up" (Bevilacqua 2010: 23).²⁸ One of these sites is in Casale Monferrato. It lies near here, at the border of the new UNESCO World Heritage Site, whose complete name, we want to remember, is *Langhe-Roero and Monferrato*. Situated not far from the Monferrato Barbera winehills, the Eternit factory has disseminated asbestos fibers in the environment for decades. In Canale, asbestos was everywhere—in roofs, houses, storage places, in factories, in the air, and finally in the lungs of the population. It has been for many years in Piedmont's tribunal courts, too, as shown by two criminal trials, started in Turin in 1993, and continued over the last decade. A sentence pronounced in 2012 recognized the offense for 3,000 victims.

But here comes the update. In November 2014, due to the same disastrous mix of inertia and legislative deficit that we have witnessed in the Bormida Valley, Eternit's executives, including its owner and CEO, one Swiss philanthropist called Stephan Schmidheiny, were acquitted from the accusation of environmental disaster. This shocking sentence, which has humiliated an entire community and appalled the majority of the people in this country, is another emergence of slow violence. Here, too, a still inadequate legal framework decreed a statute of limitations for a crime whose perpetrators

had been actually found guilty. Regardless of the fact that pleural mesothelioma has a latency period of twenty to thirty years, the court sentenced that the crime ended in the very moment the factory was closed, in 1986. It does not make any difference that hundreds of people have died from this type of cancer since 1986, and that the mortality peak is expected in 2020.²⁹ The court had no choice but to apply the existing law. Like other episodes, the story of asbestos “carries a grim warning: *many technological inventions only reveal their harmful potential over time and may eventually have disastrous effects on human health*” (Bevilacqua 2010: 23, emphasis added). This is slow violence. And, in spite of epidemiological rationality, the population’s protests and eloquent material evidence, there was no room for crimes of slow violence in Italy’s legislation, in November 2014.

The reason why I add this story here is that I have thought that I could not conclude my Piedmontese slow narratives without it. Not in order to spoil the taste of Nebbiolo in your glass, however. Quite the opposite. If it is true, as Remo Bodei has written, that we are tangled in a “bio-convergence between organic and inorganic, the natural and the artificial” (Bodei 2009: 80), then this bio-convergence is a point where all experiences come together, from beauty and pleasure to the irresponsible practices of contamination. To read all these slow emergences together, in mutual diffraction, is not only a way to establish the importance of time as an aesthetic and ethical measure, in environmental discourse. More than this, it is a modest proposal to turn this “slow vision” into a cure for the shortcomings of legislation in the face of environmental crimes. It is an invitation to legislators to reflect on cases of contamination, pollution and thwarted ecological health with a glass of slowly aged wine in their hands. Diffracting these cases through that glass they might see that the chemical processes that took place in barrels and bottles, and now breathe again in their wine, are not so different from the ones through which asbestos and other hazardous substances poison bodies and ecosystems. We cannot appreciate the former and disregard the latter. Wine breathes, and so do humans—and they do it much better without asbestos in their lungs. The slow revolution we need can thus be a form of liberation only if it includes these chemical processes of trans-substantiation in the same discourse of trans-corporeal interlacements, ecological justice and legal protection. This is what our Piedmontese bodily stories of resistance are teaching us.

But, although slowly, something seems to be changing over the course of these very days. In May 2015, just a few weeks before the manuscript of this book was completed, the first comprehensive law against environmental crimes was approved almost unanimously by the Italian Parliament.³⁰ To pass this law, it had taken nearly two decades of democratic struggles, whose protagonists were associations of citizens contesting “legal” industrial pollution and ecomafia, from the far North to the deep South of the country, from Porto Marghera to Naples, Sicily, and all the “bone lands” suffering from slow violence. Like all things political, this law is not perfect. But still, it is a first important step toward a more accurate—and just—way of reading the wounds and stories of resistance inscribed in the bodies of this country.

We do not know how all these stories will end. But we know that the rhythm with which they want to be read is a slow pace, one made of entwined bodies and landscapes, of collectives and narratives, of desires, and of fears. When we drink a glass of Nebbiolo we shall think of the bends of the Tanaro river, of its walls of clay, the shells sailing in Sant’Agata marls. We shall be remindful of the struggles, cares, and bodies sedimented together in that wine glass. The pace of the natural-cultural world is a slow pace—it is the pace of suffering creative people and their democratic battles, the pace of the ground, of wine aging in oak barrels, of the asbestos in workers’ lung cells. But this is also the pace of the conceptual revolutions that allow us to see all this together. It is the pace of a sea-change, seen with our feet on the ground of these hills: A seabed that now is high, and breathes with the wine.

Notes

- 1 For a survey about the Langhe’s geology in relation to wine, see Panzieri 2014: 2–3.
- 2 <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1390/> (accessed January 16, 2015). Emphasis added.
- 3 The most representative among Fenoglio’s novels, also translated into English, are *I ventitré giorni della città di Alba* (*The Twenty-three Days of the City of Alba*, 1952), *Una questione privata* (*A Private Affair*, posthumous, 1963), and *Il partigiano Johnny* (*Johnny the Partisan*, posthumous, 1968).

- 4 On the concept of civil war applied to the Italian Resistance, see in particular Pavone 1991.
- 5 I owe the notion of “vegetal violence” to Priscilla Wald, to whom my gratitude goes for sharing her unpublished manuscripts with me.
- 6 *Il testimone* (*The Witness*, 2014) is also the title of a posthumous book including a collection of interviews of his and reviews about his work. On Revelli’s work, see Cinelli 2011.
- 7 Cf. Revelli 1997: vxvii and xlii; Revelli, quoted in Cordero 2014: ix.
- 8 The text of Revelli’s *lectio magistralis* is available on many websites and in the archives of the Nuto Revelli Foundation. On Revelli as a partisan chief, see Verri and Monaco 2013.
- 9 I cannot fail to mention here the other works Revelli devoted to the war: *La strada del davai* (*The way of davai*, 1966), where “*davai*” eloquently means “go ahead” in Russian, and *Mai tardi* (*Never too late*, 1967), where the “never too late” of the title refers to the Nazis’ physical elimination. Also very important is *Il prete giusto* (*The Righteous Priest*, 1998), in which Revelli, usually very polemical against the official Church, retraced the history of Raimondo Viale, a priest who contributed to save hundreds of Jews from the Holocaust in the Cuneo area. In spite of having been acknowledged by Israel as a “Righteous among the Nations,” Viale was consistently boycotted by the ecclesiastic authorities of his time.
- 10 In 2013, under the title *Il popolo che manca* (*The Missing People*), Antonella Tarpino has collected and creatively rearranged a selection from these two monumental works.
- 11 “The rhetoric says that our ‘peasant race’ have forever been healthy, extremely sturdy. But the fragile, the malnourished and the wrecked ones were thousands! Due to the fairly widespread incest, the venereal diseases imported from France, the percentage of the crazy and mentally deranged people was higher that one might believe” (Revelli 1997: lxxxv).
- 12 <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1390/> (accessed January 16, 2015.) Emphasis added.
- 13 Revelli’s attention to this insertion from the “bone land” was probably also due to the “precious suggestions from Manlio Rossi Doria,” whom he acknowledged in his Introduction (Revelli 1998: xi).
- 14 See Del Boca, 2007. As Gianluca Di Feo writes, “few know about the quantity of chemical weapons packed in [the ACNA’s] warehouses. The damnation of the most unscrupulous chemical supply-chain was that, in order to replete Mussolini’s arsenals with extraordinary devices, they did not hesitate to compromise the Peninsula’s soils and waters” (Di Feo 2009: 49).

- 15 Even today, although it appears among the signatories, Italy is still one of the few countries not to have ratified the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (2004). See <http://chm.pops.int/Countries/StatusofRatifications/PartiesandSignatories/tabid/252/Default.aspx> (accessed June 8, 2015). I thank Greg Garrard for calling my attention to this point.
- 16 On the environmental history of ACNA, see Poggio 1996.
- 17 See Arami and Scola 2015.
- 18 As Rob Nixon writes: "Natural agency can indeed take unexpected, sometimes heartening forms, but we should be alert to the way corporate colossi and government can hijack that logic to grant themselves advance or retrospective absolution. Crucially [...] the time frames of damage assessment and potential recovery are wildly out of sync—the deep-time thinking that celebrates natural healing is strategically disastrous if it provides political cover for reckless short-termism" (Nixon 2011: 22).
- 19 Data about this contamination are available in Poggio 1996.
- 20 The theoretical framework of this discourse is provided by the notion of "narrative ethics," which I have developed in previous essays (see Iovino 2009, 2012a).
- 21 These figures are available on the website of Slow Food International at <http://www.slowfood.com/international/153/our-network> (accessed January 20, 2015).
- 22 <http://www.slowfood.com/international/153/our-network>. (accessed January 20, 2015).
- 23 To quote just one example, one of Petrini's recent books, *Cibo e libertà* (*Food and Freedom*, 2013), bears as a subtitle *Stories of Liberation Gastronomy*.
- 24 See <http://www.terramadre.info/en/> (accessed June 9, 2015).
- 25 Illuminating on this point is Adamson, 2009.
- 26 See, among other, Castleman 2004; Craighead and Gibbs 2008; McCulloch and Tweeddale 2008; and Gaino 2010.
- 27 See Peggio 2015.
- 28 Bevilacqua's essay quoted here firstly appeared in Italian in 2006. See Bevilacqua 2006.
- 29 A very good source of information is the website of the association of the relatives of asbestos victims, AFEVA (Associazione Familiari Vittime Amianto): www.afeva.it
- 30 After a long debate and many changes to the original draft, the Law 1345-B "Crimes against the Environment" was approved by the Chamber of the Deputies on February 26, 2014 and definitively ratified by the Senate on May 19, 2015. See <http://www.senato.it/leg/17/BGT/Schede/Ddliter/44045.htm> (accessed May 26, 2015).