Visions of Innocence and Resistance

In the year 1947, Calvino began to work on his first novel, *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*. Calvino then submitted his novel to a literary contest sponsored by Mondadori publishing firm, but did not get any prize. In 1947, Calvino was awarded the *Premio Riccione*, for this work. Again, in the year 1968, the novel, *The Path to the Spiders' Nests* won the prestigious *Viareggio* prize for literary works. The verdict was controversial, being hung upon the vote of one judge. Calvino won, but he refused the prize on grounds, that as J. R. Woodhouse put it, "its acceptance simply helped shore up an outmoded institution, the literary prize" (*Fantasy Alienation* 399). Critics like Martin M. McLaughlin consider that the 1947 *Premio Riccione* prize was not a sufficient compensation for his loss of *Mondadori* competition, so much so that Calvino preserved silence over these prizes, in the subsequent years. McLaughlin even considers that this is one of the reasons for the continuous reworking and editing of his first novel, as he himself considered the text least satisfactory (*Words and Silence*...
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Although this novel did not get placed in the 1947 Mondadori competition, it was then that the famous and influential writer, Cesare Pavese, recommended this novel to the Turin publisher, Giulio Einaudi, who accepted this work. This episode not only marked Calvino’s lifelong friendship with Pavese, but also placed him in the Einaudi publishing firm, for the rest of his life as an editor. The staff at Einaudi included novelists like Elio Vittorini, Cesare Pavese, and Natalia Ginzburg— all leaders in Italy’s intellectual vanguard. It was a period in his life marked with many special events. After joining the Einaudi publishers, Calvino began to write prolifically both for Einaudi and for *La Unità*, the newspaper of the Italian Communist party. The general literary atmosphere of Italy that pervaded in the post-war period was one which was deeply committed to politics. Calvino’s town, Turin, an industrial capital, became the focal point of these literary/political activities. At this time, Calvino joined the Communist party, and reported on the Fiat Company for the party’s daily newspaper, *La Unità*. Lucia Re states that in that period, the most important realization that Calvino observed in himself is the realization that he is not that good a journalist or a
professional politician (155). This factor later turned positive for him, and helped him to dedicate more and more of his time to literary activities.

In the year 1964, Calvino wrote a preface to his first novel, *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*, which is autobiographical, and Calvino identifies himself with the character Kim, the commander of the brigade. This autobiographical introduction is written in the third person, which gives it an air of objective self-appraisal and detachment. Adding a rather lengthy preface suggests a possible simultaneity of the acts of writing and criticizing. In this introduction, Calvino also assesses his affiliation with the school of Neorealism. He says: "Many things grew out of that climate including the tone of my earliest short stories and of my first novel" (*The Path to the Spiders' Nests* 7-8). This introduction to the novel by Calvino himself, sheds light on many of the narrational and linguistic aspects of the novel. Calvino states:

The fact of having emerged from an experience – a war, a civil war – which had spared no one, established an immediacy of communication between the writer and his public: we were face to
face, on equal terms, bursting with stories to tell; everyone had experienced their own drama, had lived a chaotic, exciting, adventurous existence; we took the words from each other's mouths. The rebirth of freedom of speech manifested itself first and foremost in a craving to tell stories. (The Path to the Spiders' Nests 8)

Calvino hints that the artistic call in this novel is diminutive compared to the pragmatic urgency that grows from an existential and collective need. He confesses: "The Path to the Spiders' Nests was born of this sense of total alienation, half suffered by me as a genuine torment, half imagined and vaunted" (The Path to the Spiders' Nests 26). There is also another reason that Joseph Francese identifies as a stimulus for Calvino to write this novel, a reason that seems to echo Calvino's words. He says that Calvino, through writing this novel, had allowed himself to assert his own individuality, to placate his fear of "not existing" (The Engaged Intellectual 174). So, it stands to reason to assume that one of the reasons why Calvino focused mainly on portraying the sufferings and compromises that individuals made during and after the Second World War is this type of alienation he suffered at that time, and his attempt to overcome it through expressing himself, and giving vent to the steam of creative energy boiling within him.
Further, as Joseph Francese points out, it is the war that caused him not only to write, but to "adopt a style against his will," which later defined him as a writer (The Refashioning of Calvino 129). The term, 'a style against his will,' becomes more coherent, when it is read together with the observation of Pavase, quoted by JoAnn Cannon in her article; she refers to Pavase's observation that the first novel of Calvino stands out from the other novels of the neorealistic period, primarily with its clear fantastic quality in which the novel is swathed (Cannon, 1985, 3). The novel, in no way, gives a message; rather, it just responds to fascism. In a review article on Kathryn Hume's book, Calvino's Fictions: Cogito and Cosmos, Lucia Re comments that the works of Calvino, up to the publication of Cosmicomics, can be viewed as unsuccessful attempts to put his own cosmos into place, and to set up the oppositional structure, which will be the governing principle of his work after Cosmicomics (194). The fabulous undertone of this novel later gives the much needed impetus to his later work, Our Ancestors, a trilogy. This theme is further discussed in detail in the later parts of this chapter.
The term ‘Resistance fighter,’ as it appears in the novel, not only denotes a sense specific to the novel, but also signifies a meaning in the broader context of the war period. These ‘fighters’ resist the Fascist invasions of land, culture, politics, and language: in the novel, they resist only the Fascist invasions of land, but Calvino, the writer, resists the cultural invasions of Fascists. Kim—the character—defends the proletarian views, which ultimately become a resistance to the Fascist brand of harmonizing politics. John Gutt-Rutter explains the reason for resisting Fascism: “Fascism is resisted, then, not as a typical and inevitable resort of capitalism in crisis, but as a sporadic tyranny, an outcrop of irrationalism in an otherwise rational political universe” (Calvino Ludens 320). Calvino makes use of resistance at the level of language, to subvert one of the desired Fascist projections of linguistic unification of the diverse Italian regional dialects; in him, one finds a conscious effort being made to capture the varied linguistic landscapes of Italy. Karen De Leon-Jones, in her article, “Language and Identity in Calvino’s Il Sentiero Dei Nidi Di Rago,” comments on this linguistic feature of Calvino’s writings:
Italo Calvino composed his first novel, *Il Sentiero Dei Nidi Di Ragno* (1947), of voices that faithfully reproduce the varied dialect forms of Italian, regional terms, cadences, rhythms and idiomatic phrasings to create an audio portrait of each character. By (re)constructing the voice, Calvino (re)produces its content (personal, social and political) to the extent that discourse essentially replaces action and plot through the narrative content of the dialogue (360).

Calvino was always against all types of political propaganda, as he felt that it would divert natural energies into vicious unnatural activities. As J. R. Woodhouse points out, Calvino felt that the fascist propaganda conditioned and cultivated in the young such adolescent illusions that perpetuate fanatically nationalist tendencies (406).

Another important narrative strategy of Calvino is to tell the tale through the child protagonist. Of course, this technique is not exclusively attributed to Calvino at the time of Neorealism, but to the larger neorealist literary narrative tradition. Markey observes that throughout the early narrative
corpus of Calvino, "the child would be a dominant image in neorealistic literature (and films), as well as in early Calvino" (31). The child image in neorealistic narration signifies the innocence unpolluted by the miseries of the war and poverty. This must be the first reason that Calvino selected Pin as his protagonist to show how a ravaging war of this scale that razed the Italian provinces to ground, could also mar the innocence of a child. The war spares no one. The masking of narrative is made possible by using a child protagonist. Calvino effectively undermines the heroic vision of war by employing a child hero. It is also curious to note that Calvino does not provide us with the physical appearance of Pin; rather, Pin only exists in printed, black and white pages. It is as if the printed pages give life to Pin, which sounds very much similar to what Calvino says, "What determines the book is the writing, the material that's actually on the page" (Italo Calvino the Art of Fiction 67). But as Joseph Francese states, in 1964, Calvino repeatedly stressed his remorse for having transfigured his comrades-in-arms into literary characters (The Engaged Intellectual 174). Yet, what exudes as peculiar to him from the text is his music, which will be dealt with later in this chapter. But, Pin without
physical description does assume different roles in the novel. He appears as an urchin, singer and entertainer, assistant to a cobbler and a brother to a prostitute. These different dimensions of Pin are united in his songs, which are rendered in accordance with the people, or for the occasions. Through the eyes of a child, reality gets transformed into discovery, everything turns into mystery and game, and he is only an 'observer.'

Although Pin has lost the innocence of childhood, he is not matured enough to partake in adult games. Moreover, it can well be stated that he is naïve in matters related to politics. Franco Ricci states, his characters are often non-participating observers of history, beginning with the 'non-adult' Pin and ending with the 'non-man' Palomar (85). Reality, narrated through the eyes of Pin, turns out to be a fairytale. Annalisa Sacca, in the article "Towards a European Millennium: The Legacy of Italo Calvino," corroborates this with the example of the pistol that Pin steals from the German officer. She states:

The story is narrated with the flavor of a tale, where the protagonist Pin steals and hides a pistol that becomes a kind of talisman, his magic wand in a
magic place that is the path of the nests of the spiders. In his vicissitudes, he comes in contact with the world of the adults, which he does not understand, cannot judge, but in which he witnesses tragedies, sufferings, and love. (1570)

There is also another facet to the employment of a child hero in the works of Calvino. As Markey again observes, the stories in *Adam, One Afternoon* have many stories with child protagonists, giving us a glimpse of 'Calvino's brand of neorealism,' and also an early trace of the characters that would follow in his later works and are all like, "a naïve misfit who loquaciously spins Huck Finn yearns for the reader's amusement or who, like the misanthropic Pin in *Path*, suspiciously withdraws to a world of private fantasies"(31).

It was due to these peculiarities that are specifically related to language, narration and plot settings, which were the hallmarks of Neorealism, that Calvino soon became a part of the influential Italian literary circle. The specific use of Italian dialects attracted the attention of prominent Italian writers like Vittorini and Pavese. Calvino's association with both these writers proved to be productive in the sense that it fostered the
literary career of Calvino (Markey 36). These writers introduced Calvino to the famous editorial house Einanudi, which then was known for its partisan and left-wing political activism. It was Einanudi that published Calvino’s first novel, *The Path to the Spiders’ Nests*. It is then no wonder that Calvino dedicated his first work to Pavese. The theme of the early short stories and first novel of Calvino, was not his choice, in the sense that Calvino was simply giving expression to the collective “intellectual consciousness” against “Fascism, German occupation, the Resistance, and the unsettling aftermath of a long war, and an even longer despotic regime,” which “were the devils of the day” (Olkin 143).

*The Path to the Spiders’ Nests* deals with the experiences of the Resistance movement and the introduction of a boy named Pin thrown suddenly from his childish pranks into the wider aspects of the mature world. Although the novel occasionally drifts into a fable like narrative, and sometimes even overlooks the ambivalence of Pin towards the central cause of Resistance, critics hailed this novel as one of the important milestones of Italian Partisan narratives (Markey 36).
It should also be noted that although the Neorealist movement in fiction and film share a lot of structural similarities, these two mediums were united in their trenchant attack against the nefarious Fascist imagination and the surreptitious implementation of its ideological and political credo. The medium of film influenced the people at large without social distinctions of literacy while the other medium, fiction, selectively targeted the literati and conveniently avoided the greater number of marginalized people who were denied access to formal education.

The ‘nests’ in the title of the novel are the nests of the spiders that Pin finds in his wanderings. Pin reveals his secret finding of the nest only to Cugino, the one who proved to be his true friend, towards the end of the novel. It is interesting to note that the tiny tunnels and labyrinths of the nest are revealed only to the one Pin trusts (very much like Calvino himself) who, in his later works, reveals the secret of his narration only to the trusted readers. The novel, *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*, narrates one of the decisive moments of Italian history— the period of World War II. This novel can also be viewed as a reflection of the experiences of young Calvino as a partisan Communist fighter.

Calvino uses the child protagonist, Pin, to explore fascism. Pin lives in the slums of a war-torn Ligurian town with his sister Rina, a young prostitute. Their mother is dead, and
their father has long abandoned them. Pin works as an apprentice to a cobbler, and frequents the local tavern. He is only thirteen years of age, without a friend of his own age. He tries to get acceptance into the adult world. He steals and gets free drinks from the customers at the tavern, whom he entertains with bawdy songs and jokes. The novel opens in a local tavern with a discussion on whether or not to form a partisan resistance group against fascism. Pin, who has been sidelined in the discussion, suddenly claims to have the ability to steal a pistol from a German S.S officer who visits his sister regularly. The members of the group dismiss his claim and challenge him to do the same, saying that until and unless he gets a gun, they cannot give him admittance into the group. Silently, their challenge works as a critical point on which Pin should prove his bravery in order to be at equal terms with the adults. When the next time the German S.S officer comes to visit his sister, Pin hides himself in the room and steals the P38 pistol. Pin does this act of stealing to prove himself as able and equivalent to that of an adult. It is interesting to quote Calvino himself: “Pin’s inferiority as a child in the face of the grownups’ incomprehensible world corresponds to my own, in the same
situation, as a bourgeois youth” (*The Path to the Spiders’ Nests xx). But the people at the tavern by this time have already forgotten about their words to Pin. Or rather, it could be safely assumed that they did not consider the claims of Pin seriously, and had put the challenge just to silence him. The German officer soon realizes that his pistol is stolen, and in the search, they track down Rina’s home and then Pin. The holster, which Pin keeps after hiding the gun, becomes the cue for the S.S officers to nail him. Pin hides the P38 pistol in a riverside spiders nest. Later, the pistol becomes one of the narrative forces of the novel, and the spiders nest symbolically renders a mysterious power and energy to Pin. The narrator says: “Pin decides that he will keep the pistol himself and not give it to anyone or tell anyone that he has it. He’ll just hint that he possesses a terrible power, and everyone will obey him” (*The Path to the Spiders’ Nests 51). As Franco Ricci states, the shooting of a rifle is an attempt to possess an object (*Difficult Games 29). The “object” that Pin tries to possess is only an entrance and acceptance into the adult world. But he remains as an outcast from the “genuine manhood” (Ricci 51).

Pin is soon caught, beaten and jailed in an S.S prison,
where one of the turning points of the novel occurs. Pin meets there an older partisan boy named Lupo Rosso, also known as Red Wolf. Red Wolf plots an ingenious plan to escape from the prison, in which Pin becomes an accomplice. Pin then becomes an ardent admirer of Red Wolf. Joanna Stephens opines that Pin’s admiration for Red Wolf comes mainly from the latter’s “habit of reiterating formulaic political phrases” (86). After escaping from the prison, Red Wolf does not entrust Pin with any responsibility; rather, he sets him free to select his own way. As Red Wolf goes to organize the Resistance fighters, Pin is left alone in the street in the middle of the night. He soon meets a man with a pistol, whom we later understand as the legendary Cousin, one of the partisans camped in the Liguarian mountains. Cousin, who is a member of the partisan brigade, takes him to the Ligurian mountains, where a unit of the Partisans is encamped. Pin soon joins the infamous band of mountain partisans, headed by Dritto (ex-waiter) in the Liguarian mountains. This partisan detachment is made up of all the rejects from the other units. They include military deserters, psychopaths, and the like. The partisan headquarters and the brigadier Kim do not trust this unit, so
much so that they are not entrusted with any of the major combats. Although Pin does not carry any weapon, he becomes a part of this unit, working as the cook’s helper. The leader of the brigade, Dritto proves himself to be a coward and ineffectual, and at times, he himself does not know the reason why they fight against the enemy. Dritto feigns ill when their unit is ordered to fight, and he remains back in the mountain. Soon, he goes to bed with the wife of their cook.

One night, while flirting with Giglia, the wife of the cook, Dritto absentmindedly sets the cabin of the partisans’ on fire, destroying their ammunition and supplies. It is amusing to note that it is Mancino, the cook, who is the only worldly and practical man in a band of revolutionaries, who tries for a radical transformation of the society. Mancino has a pet falcon, Beheuf, which is named after the early revolutionary. When Kim orders everyone in the camp to go for an attack against the Fascists, many in their camp consider the falcon as a bad omen, and it is symbolically strangled. Later, Dritto, while dallying with the cook’s wife, accidentally sets fire to their hideout. He is then caught by the Party commissars and led off to execution. Their group of fighters is drawn exclusively from
the lower strata of the society. Later, it is known that the reason for such a band which only consists of social outcasts is an experiment by the commander of the brigade, Kim. Although Pin remained aloof in the camp and displayed detachment, he experienced a sense of belongingness among them. As the band did not want any harm to happen to Pin, they did not take him with them, when Kim ordered them to go to the vanguard positions.

The partisans go into deep vanguard, and when the time comes for them to clear out of the mountains, they again leave Pin behind. When he gets left behind, he decides to retrieve the pistol from the spider’s nests. But, he returns to the spider’s nest to find it is no longer there. Pin then remembers that he had revealed his secret to Pelle, one of the former resistance fighters, who unfortunately decided to bond with Fascists. Pin was disheartened to see the pistol stolen from the spider’s nest. Later, Pin sees the same pistol with his sister Rina. She confesses that one of her customers, Pelle, gave that pistol to her. Pin takes the pistol from her and leaves home partly due to the fact that when Pin returned, his sister had become a Fascist informer.
After this incident, Pin again finds himself alone, first rejected by the Partisans, then by his own sister. Another characteristic feature of Pin is also revealed in this scene: he gives the P38 pistol to his cousin Cugino, so he could execute a traitor. The traitor is his own sister, who, by the end of the novel, becomes S.S informer. This shows an unusual mixture of innocence and brutality in Pin. But, it also reveals Pin's staunch support for the tenets that he believes right. As already stated, Pin was mystified by the adult world of sex and power. He looks upon the P38 pistol as a symbol of terrible power. The feeling of alienation, both from the adults and from fellow urchins, makes him an introvert to some extent, so much so that he seldom expresses his thoughts. Towards the end of the novel, Pin becomes distraught and runs into his cousin Cugino, who first introduced Pin into the Resistance movement. This marks the conclusion of the novel, where Pin is thrown again into the streets, but meets his cousin, Cugino, who protects him; they walk hand in hand towards a bright future, hoping that nature would heal the horrors of war. Franco Ricci considers this novel as narrating a “paradise lost whose season
of hope is doomed to evanescence" (*Introversion and Effacement* 334).

It is interesting to note the analysis of Albert Sbragia about women characters in the works of Calvino. In the article, "Italo Calvino's Ordering of Chaos," he gives an original analysis of the nature of Calvino's chaotic narration. The author says that Calvino had always been intrigued by an inclination to create chaos or desire in his narratives. Sbragia states:

This is not to say that Calvino does not experience the attraction of disorder. Several of the later *Cosmicomics*, such as "I meteoriti" and "Tempesta solare" (not translated into English), and "Crystals" (*In t zero*), eroticize chaos in the form of enticing, elusive, and powerful women. In each of these stories, chaos and women are associated with the Other, both object of desire yet threat to the ideal of order, not unlike the female characters Giglia and Pin's sister, "the Dark Girl of the Long Alley," in
Calvino's early neorealist novel The Path to the Nest of Spiders' Nests (293)\(^1\).

This analysis of Sbragia is crucial. Rina, Pin's sister indeed behaves out of order thus creating chaos, by spying for the Germans. Pin's sister, an 'enchantress' —one of the enchantresses who surface in the works of Calvino— is a prostitute and a symbol of desire to the Germans. It shows a continuity of the narrative motif of an 'enchantress' which surfaced in his later narratives from his earlier works. The only difference is that in the later works, the motives of chaos and desires get more clearly narrated, compared to the blurred portrayals of these destructive motifs in his earlier works.

Again, the tenuous traces of narrative style burgeoning in the earlier phase of Calvino, can be examined with his first work, The Path to the Spiders' Nests. The clear shift in narration that happened immediately after the neorealistic period is not the result of an automatic evolution, but the outcome of a conscious decision. Calvino did not limit himself

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to the neorealistic traditions of narration; rather, he transformed the narration into what is to be marked as the characteristic feature of his second phase of narrative career, the 'Fantastic Phase.' Eugenio Bolongaro looks into this shift, in his article which analyses the adaptation of Calvino's novel *Marcovaldo* into film. Bolongaro states that after the success of his first novel, *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*, Calvino struggled to develop a more mature personal voice within a cultural landscape still dominated by Neorealism. The stories written in the particular period of the 1940s reflect the writer's experimentations with a wide range of themes and intonations. Although the Resistance experience continued to serve as an important subject, there happened a clear shift of focus from the pre- and post-war realities (Eugenio Bolongaro 5).

Bolongaro observes that the shift in Calvino is "from tragedy, to comedy, to idyll, to farce, not only from story to story but often within a single story, clearly looking for a palette of colours, which he can make his own" (5).

The novel is arranged in an episodic way, so that Calvino analyses events through varied coloured glasses of idealism. The eminent view is the one expressed by the commander of the
brigade, Kim. He upholds the proletarian views of revolution, saying that “partisan warfare is as exact and precise as a machine; he has taken the revolutionary impulse matured in factories up into the mountains . . .” (The Path to the Spiders' Nests 132). These views not only reflect the general tone of the Resistance movement, but also that of Calvino. These efforts of Calvino to infuse/integrate the political and artistic necessities had provoked controversies during that period itself. As John Ahern states, in 1947, Calvino was advised to omit Chapter XI from the novel (Out of Montale's Cavern 3). The picture becomes clearer, when it is also considered that this novel was for long considered as a propagandist novel by many critics. To cap it all, many years after the publication of this novel, Calvino himself wrote an introduction to the novel. In it, he says:

To satisfy this need for the ideological component, I adopted the expedient of concentrating all the theoretical considerations into a chapter which is different in tone from the others, Chapter IX, the one containing the reflections of the commissar Kim, which almost constitutes a preface inserted in the middle of the novel. (xii)
This blatant admission of Calvino that a whole chapter is included to explain the ideological positions or the nature of ‘committed literature,’ does not mar the aesthetic quality of the novel. On the contrary, it gets mingled with the resistance background of the novel. Despite having discourses of an ideological nature at certain moments, the real strength of the novel comes not from it, but as Alan Tinkler rightly analyzed it, from “Calvino’s acceptance of the constraints of rendering an aesthetic work” (66). These ‘constraints’ become an important factor in the later works of Calvino, especially those associated with the Oulipo theory of literature. This observation is important as it shows an earlier trace of Calvino’s love for containing his narratives into self-imposed rules and regulations. JoAnn Cannon, one of the erudite critics of Calvino, in her article, “Literature as Combinatory Game: Italo Calvino’s The Castle of Crossed Destinies,” hinted at this experimental practice of Calvino from the very beginning of his writing. She comments: “Since the publication of his first, ‘neo-realist’ novel, The Path to the Nest of Spiders (1947), Calvino has experimented, in his highly original and fantastic manner, with a variety of literary models” (83).
I. T. Olken hints at one of the structuring principles of Calvino that has been uniformly followed in many of his works. The outer narrative structure is often paralleled by a similar inner structure. Olken puts:

The internal symmetrical schemata that parallel those Calvino imposes on every external story frame are striking with regard to the "processional" as ritual (with religious or civic motivation, or as part of a personal quest). The formula in the early stories most often involves paired figures or concepts: the child Pin, who follows the path to the spiders' nesting place, as the adults later do. (*Spira Mirabilis* 166-167)

This opinion clearly evinces some of the difficulties of Pin to understand the adult world of war and sex. The external world of Fascists and war was never fully comprehensible to Pin. He always finds himself lonely, so much so that he tried to create an inner parallel world for himself, in which the spiders' nests gave him the much needed reassurance. What counts here more is the ability of Pin to travel freely and seamlessly through both these domains. It is relevant here to quote what
Rosetta Di Pace-Jordan says about the Calvino's preference for the combinatory aspects of the novel. She says: "[...] the combinatory aspects of the signs in space are tied to his belief that the eye can lead to the juncture between that which has already been perceived and that which has not yet entered our consciousness" (470). Pin could have been able to find a parallel between the path that leads to the spiders' nests and the physical terrain of the Ligurian mountain. Both constantly branch out into many ways. The constant travel through the physical terrain (the advancement of the Resistance fighters through Ligurian mountain) and the imaginative terrain (Pin's imaginative travels to the spiders' nests) gives the flexibility to Calvino to give us an aerial perspective of both the geographic and the imaginative locations. This aerial perspective, otherwise known as omniscient point of view, allows the author to travel freely from the external to the internal worlds of Pin. The only time in the novel when this omniscient, present tense narration breaks, is in Chapter IX, where the commander of the brigade, Kim, expresses his proletarian views.

Chapter IX is different from the other chapters of the novel in the sense that it exhibits the tenets of neorealistic and
proletarian ideologies. This chapter is important, and shows Calvino’s propagandist writing in a conspicuous manner. In the eighth chapter, Mancino, the cook exclaims: “you don’t understand anything!” [...] ‘Imperialism is caused by over-production!’ ”(*The Path to the Spiders’ Nests* 126). Mancino is dismissed as an extremist by Kim, in the ninth chapter. Kim states: “Or if it does it will be born twisted, the product of rage and humiliation, like that cook’s extremism” (*The Path to the Spiders’ Nests* 140). The reason for this subversive view is later made clear by John Gatt-Rutter. He analyses this situation and states:

In this, Calvino is writing propaganda: he is supporting the anti-revolutionary policy followed by the Italian Communist Party under Togliatti’s leadership, and under the terms of the Yalta understanding between Stalin and his Western allies. (*Calvino Ludens* 319-320)

It is a chapter in distinction, and does not have any apparent connection with the ensuing chapters. It serves to express Calvino’s ideological views. But Tinkler considers that this disjunction “emphasizes the dominance of aestheticism
over didacticism"(66). But the intrusion of ideological elements does not overshadow the wonderful prose that captures the spirit of Neorealism of the Resistance period. It, in fact, happens the other way round, that the prose overshadows the ideological overtones. Franco Ricci views the ideological elements of this chapter in another way. He states:

These partisans are not real men, but narrative spaces through which ideology passes. Their actions are a futile attempt at discovering and preserving the self from dissolution. For this reason these war stories, unlike many postwar stories, do not deal with heroic acts, or conquering heroes. They are instead intimate moments of private choice. Even in these early tales, Calvino is exploring realms of the unknown, delving for motivation and meaning. (35)

The partisans are not real, but only spaces, and war is only a background to narrate these stories. Calvino, in his 1964 preface to the novel, *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*, states that he “had used the war as an alibi, in both the original and figurative meaning of the word” (*The Path to the Spiders' Nests* xxi). In a closer analysis, the novel also presents us with a
diametrically opposite view of the world. This happens, when Pin’s boyhood imagination comes face to face with real world experiences. One example is that of Pin meeting a boy stricken with tuberculosis, in the German prison. The boy spits blood, and Pin develops an admiration for him:

And he spits out a reddish froth on to the ground. Pin looks at him with interest; he has always had a strange admiration for anyone who manages to spit blood, and always liked to see someone with tuberculosis spitting. (62)

Calvino’s child hero, in a way, serves as an agent to narrate events with objective realism. Pin, being a child, his views are not tainted by the rust of ideologies, which normally blinds the vision of an adult. This narration through child-observation renders The Path to the Spiders’ Nests one of the best in the category of neorealist fiction. Although Chapter IX emphasizes proletarian ideologies, Calvino does not idealize the partisans. This becomes starkly evident with the analysis of why Pin was banded with the Ligurian partisans. Pin joins with the Ligurian partisans, neither out of any conviction nor of any ‘call’ to fight against the evil forces, but for the simple
reason to escape from the prison. This is a type of opportunism that surfaces several times in the novel.

Pelle, one of the partisans to whom Pin reveals his secret of the terrible weapon hidden in the spiders’ nets, also proves to be an opportunist, when he betrays the resistant fighters and joins the Fascist forces. In another incident, the commander of the brigade, Dritto, when the partisans go to the vanguard positions to fight, goes to bed with the wife of the cook. And, for Pin, he was not moved to join the partisans (as already stated) out of any ideological or moral choice or conviction, but he was groping for an escape route from his basic dissatisfaction with his wretched life, and tries to prove his mettle to secure acceptance into the adult world. These incidents show that the partisans that Calvino recorded are also ordinary humans with flesh and blood, who are susceptible to power, lust and cowardice.

Calvino breaks the continuity of the traditional narrative ethos by attributing many a negative quality to the child hero. Traditionally child heroes are endowed with innocence, but that innocence is stripped off from Pin to show the moral decadence of the society that created a child like Pin. Historically, the use of a child hero, like that of Kim or Jim who fight for the social-political-economical inequality, exudes positive redeeming qualities in the text. Beno Weiss points out
that in selecting Pin as his hero, Calvino purposely eschewed the traditional pattern of the contemporary Italian writers. He further states that Pin does not possess any of the admirable qualities, and is too young to fully comprehend the reality of the situation during the 1943–45 oppression. (*Understanding Italo Calvino* 13). In fact, Pin is well qualified with the nature of an anti-hero. In the novel, the narrator states that Pin does not “know the difference between when there’s war and when there isn’t” (*The Path to the Spiders’ Nests* 87).

John Gatt-Rutter puts it in a different way. He states: “The boy protagonist, Pin, knows everything—that men fornicate and kill—but understands nothing” (*Writers and Politics in Modern Italy* 47). Here, Calvino presents Pin living in the margins of society, in the company of thieves, and a sister who is a prostitute. This depiction of characters in a negative light, is something in which Calvino invests meaning. Calvino, in the preface to this novel, states that he “found a poetic meaning only in ‘negativity’ ” (xi). Despite having all these ‘negative’ traces, the choice of making an illiterate as the hero of the novel solves many of the problems. First, as Pin is presented as an illiterate, the problem of linguistic compatibility
does not arise. Second, the use of Pin as the hero absolves Calvino from having a thorough retrospective knowledge of the Resistance. Pin helps Calvino represent events as events, without being coloured by the ideological or political transfiguration that the events might suffer, if it had been narrated through an adult focalizer.

Although the Chapter IX stands out in the novel by virtue of its political nuances, the overall tone of the depiction as a serious partisan led movement is undermined, if the overall structure of the novel is considered.

The juxtaposing of the worldly and the fantastical tones starts from the very title of the novel. The title serves many purposes. Firstly, it refers to the ‘terrific weapon,’ the P38, which Pin always imaginatively fell back upon for support in dangerous situations. Secondly, the path indicates an escape route for Pin to escape from his miserable and outcast life. The idea of the ‘path’ as an agent of change, is elucidated by Beno Weiss (12). Further, it turns out that the path is not linear, but a circular one. This becomes clear, when Pin and his cousin Cugino come to visit the spider’s path, by the end of the novel. In this sense, the inherent symbolization of the path as an
agent of transition or movement happens in between the first and the last visit of Pin to these nests. In other words, it shows the changes that Pin has undergone throughout the period of his adolescent life.

The spider weaving its nests implies, as Beno Weiss points out, the fostering of life (12). Then, the path which leads to the spiders nests, which implies fostering of life, signifies a path that leads to a new life for Pin, in a war-torn country; here, everything is built, destroyed and rebuilt, very much like the spider spins its nest. In a broader sense, this continuous rebuilding indicates an untiring spirit, which gives a sense of redemption both for Pin and for Italy. The nests then become a symbol of power and authority for Pin. He states:

A real pistol. A real pistol. Pin tries to excite himself with the thought. Someone who has a real pistol can do anything, he's like a grown up. He can threaten to kill men and women and do whatever he likes with them. (14–15)

In so far as the nest of the spider signifies a sense of redemption, his cousin Cugino also undertakes such a similar
role. His cousin is a loner who has taken the responsibility of executing the traitors, spies and collaborators in the war period. This act of clearing the unwanted elements of society gives hope to Pin. It is because of these shared feelings that Cugino escapes the sharp sadistic ill-will of Pin. Pin with his scathing tongue spares no one. He “hurt[s] them without any pity” (131).

The Fabulous Undertones of the Novel

The narration of the story through a child hero breaks the realistic rendering of events and colours them with the fantasy of Pin. In addition to this, some other key places and objects also destabilize the realistic tone of the novel. Beno Weiss observes that the weapon (the stolen P38 pistol) and its hiding place (the spiders’ nests) have all the qualities of a rite of passage practiced in primitive societies (13). The narrator states: “There, beyond the bamboos, begins the path of the spider’ nests, the magic place which only Pin knows. There he can weave strange spells, become a king, a god” (178). But the hiding of the weapon in the nest of a spider can be viewed as defiling the purity of nature by putting an extraneous object, a lethal weapon into it. Towards the end of the novel, Pin
reassures himself again, when he learns that Pelle, the only person to whom he confided about the place he had hidden the pistol, is shot dead:

The pistol must be buried under the spiders' nests, thinks Pin; it's still mine, Pelle didn't know the place, no one knows that magic place but me. This reassures him greatly. Whatever happens, there are still the spiders' nests and the buried pistol. (The Path to the Spiders' Nests 167)

Further, it can also be observed that the stealing of the pistol as a secret event, and the spiders nest as its sacred hiding place, work to attenuate the realistic background of the Fascists and the war into a fabulous and enchanted one. This is one of the repeated themes of Calvino. Ricci states: "In Calvino's stories the object is always transformed in a romantic act of personal knowing and discovery" (Difficult Games 28). The spider's nest is exactly like this to Pin. Calvino's obsession with the magical and the fabulous aspects of narration later added momentum to his work of collecting the scattered fairy tales of Italy into one collection titled, Italian Folktales. In the introduction of Italian Folktales, Calvino states: "Taken all
together they offer, in their often repeated and constantly varying examinations of human vicissitudes, a general explanation of life preserved in the slow ripening of rustic consciences" (xviii). This statement hints that there is little difference between reality and fantasy, or the stance that could mean 'fables are real.' This could be interpreted as Calvino's narrative progression towards the next phase of his writing, which consists of the novel *Our Ancestors*, a trilogy of fabulous plots. The relationship between the spiders' nests and the real world is presented towards the end of the novel, thus stripping off the fabulous facet of the nests. The cousin and Pin go to see the spiders' nests which were ravaged by Pelle who took the pistol from there. The Cousin says:

'Don't you see how much harm has been done to them already?'

'Say, Cousin, d'you think they'll remake their nests?'

'Yes, I think so, if we leave them in peace.' (182)

The vulnerability of the spiders' nest is exposed when Pelle, the Fascist, ravaged the spiders' nest. It also shows that the most ingenious methods of adaptation of the spider which
protects itself through its nests with trapdoors cannot provide it protection from the onslaught of humans. Thus, it symbolically reflects the condition of Italy itself. Calvino himself once explained the reason why the narration shuttles between the two poles of reality and fantasy. In his interview with William Weaver, Calvino states:

When I write a book which is all invention, I feel a longing for writing that deals directly with daily life, my activities and my thoughts. At that moment the book I would like to be writing is the one that I am not. On the other hand, when I am writing something very autobiographical, tied to the particularities of everyday life, then my longing goes in the opposite direction. (Italo Calvino the Art of Fiction 78)

Lucia Re considers this novel a study of memory. This does not mean memory as an accurate retention of the past. The element of memory becomes important in the desire to recover the origin. This desire invariably arises from the attempt to recreate the past in the present. But, in memory, the past never turns out exactly as it was, but comes out in
fragmentary, elusive and sometimes incomprehensible ways. Lucia Re states that when an author tries to recover the past, “The conflicting memory-traces of past events are reworked, rewritten, and rearranged in a way that endows them with an order and a meaning and identifies them as narrative functions” (Calvino and the Age of Neorealism 171). It is in these unfilled spaces presented by the holes of memory that the element of fantasy creeps into the novel – a juxtaposition of reality and fantasy, memory and its lapses.

**Language and Pin**

Language plays an important role in *The Path to the Spiders’ Nests*. The nature, scope and the tone of the language change throughout the novel in accordance with the varied roles that Pin takes up. The tone and impact of the language that Pin uses in the initial parts of the novel changes significantly from the language that he uses towards the middle and final parts of the novel. The specialties of the language used in the novel are thoroughly analyzed by Karen De Leon-Jones in her article, “Language and Identity in *Il Sentiero Dei*
“Nidi Di Rago”\textsuperscript{2}. In the initial stages of the novel, Pin entertains the men at the local tavern with the bawdy songs. This pattern slowly changes the middle phase of the novel and again changes at the end of the novel. In the first phase he sings:

\begin{verbatim}
And I touched her hair -
And she said not there
Go down where there's nicer hair:
Darling, if you love me,
Touch me lower down...
\end{verbatim} 

(The Path to the Spiders' Nests 35)

The bawdy songs, as he thought, will draw the attention of the adults to him, which naturally will make them consider him as one among them. So, these bawdy songs are his stratagem to get admitted into the adult world. Sometimes, instead of songs, Pin also uses his sarcastic quips to counter the arguments. This is one of the ways that he found to defend himself against the world at large. When Pin was caught on the charge of stealing the P38 pistol, he was compelled to join the Black Brigade (the Fascist wing to hunt down the Resistance

\textsuperscript{2} see the pages 361-367 of this article for a detailed analysis of the language and narration of the novel The Path to the Spiders' Nests
fighters) by Michel. Pin did not like Micheal and quips. Micheal asks Pin:

'Why d'you think you'll be left quiet in prison? You'll be taken off for interrogation all the time, and beaten till you're bruised all over. D'you like being beaten?'

'You, on the other hand, should go to hell.'

'I'll send you to hell.'

And Pin retorts:

'And I you, your father and your grandfather too,'

*(The Path to the Spiders' Nests 60)*

Later, Pin was tempted temporarily to join the Fascist people, not because of ideological affinity, but because of the rhythmical tone of music of the Fascist wing of Black Brigade slogan. The song is full of obscenities, and these people sing it in public. Pin states:

There is a song of the Black Brigade which goes: *And they call us the scamps of Mussolini*... followed by various obscenities. The Black Brigade can sing
obscene songs in the streets because they are 'the scamps of Mussolini'; that's wonderful, thinks Pin.

(The Path to the Spiders' Nests 61)

The important factor in all the quips and songs of Pin is that his skills are attuned to pointedly address the concerned situation or the person. He never misses the target. In fact, playing with language is very much a part of Calvino's style. In an essay titled "Dialects," which forms a part of his posthumous work, Hermit in Paris, he elaborates on how he used language in his earliest works to reflect 'authenticity.' He states:

When I began to write seriously, I was obsessed with the idea that my Italian should be calqued on dialect, because as I sensed the fake quality of the language used by the majority of writers, the only guarantee of authenticity which I thought I could achieve was this closeness to the spoken usage of the people. This approach can be detected in my earliest books, whereas it becomes rare subsequently. (Hermit in Paris 182)
In the partisan camp, the members often request him to sing, but he does not comply with their requests, and retorts that he does not like to be given orders. He was particularly annoyed by the oft repeated requests of Giglia, the wife of the cook. Pin did not sing, and then Dritto intervenes and threatens to send him on guard duty if he does not obey. Pin selects a fitting song that reflects Dritto’s treatment of other members of the brigade. He sings,

‘Tis a Moorish captain with all his slaves, with all his slaves,

‘Tis a Moorish captain with all his slaves (The Path to the Spiders’ Nests 115).

Although Pin is little, and does not understand much the games of adults, he keenly observes what people do in the camp. Everybody intently listens to the song Pin sings, but Pin is observing what Giglia and Dritto are doing. He understands that there is something illicit between them, and marks this in his mind to give a fitting reply to Giglia, next time when she asks him to sing. Pin indirectly presents the illicit relationship of Giglia and Dritto to the group of resistance fighters, who
assembled there to make fun of Mancino, the cook—the husband of Giglia. The conversation goes like this: Pin says,

‘It'll be able to go anywhere, except in woods... expect where there are branches ... where there are branches...’

‘Woods ... Ha, ha, ha ... Branches,’ laughs Mancino.
‘Why though...?’

‘It would get stuck ... your detachment would ... get stuck by your cuckold’s horns!’ (172)

The whole company of brigade laughs out wild, and the cook goes mum. Giglia, who fails to capture what Pin really conveyed, again pesters him to sing, laughingly. About Giglia, Pin thinks: “you wait, [...] you won’t be laughing long”(170). Pin takes this as a chance and sings his song. It is ingenious how Pin debunks the relationship between Giglia and Dritto with this song.

‘Oili, Oila,’ ‘The husband goes to war, oilier oilor, and leaves his wife at home, oilim oilom!”

[...]
'Olier, oiler, the wife and the commander, oili oiloo, what will he do?'

[...]

Oili oilo, to the bushes off they go, oili oilogs, like a pair of dogs!' (173-74)

This is the last song that Pin sings in the novel, and Pin thinks that Giglia will never ask him to sing another song. She turns pale on hearing the song as if it sapped off her vital energy. Dritto, on hearing this, tries to retort by singing back, “Oili, Oilore, you’re the brother of a whore!” (173), but Pin has proved his point to everyone assembled there.

Pin has always been fascinated with mysterious words and remote places. He depends on the imagined power that these places or words might give him. The spiders’ nest is always presented with having mysterious power. From the beginning of the novel, Pin was fascinated with the names of organizations like, Gap, Sim, and Sten3. Pin thinks, “Sten; another mysterious word; Sten, Gap, Sim, how can anyone ever remember them all? [...] now he can show off too” (76). Pin uses

3 These names indicate the various organizations at different levels against the Fascists.
these words at various instances to show off as he is fascinated with these words. It is curious to note how Calvino too shares this fascination for repeating some of the words in his novels. One of the important translators of Calvino, William Weaver, states this in an interview with Calvino for the journal, *Paris Review.* Weaver states:

Calvino's English was more theoretical than idiomatic. He also had a way of falling in love with foreign words. With the *Mr. Palomar* translation he developed a crush on the word *feedback.* He kept inserting it in the text, and I kept tactfully removing it. I couldn't make it clear to him that, like *charisma* and *input* and *bottom line,* *feedback,* however beautiful it may sound to the Italian ear, was not appropriate in an English-language literary work.

(61)

Calvino was very much conscious of the language in general and its social functions. Arturo Tosi, in his book *Language and Society in a Changing Italy,* details the argument between Pier Paolo Pasolini and Italo Calvino over the changing
use of Italian language that happened in the post-war years⁴. The crux of his argument is that in the post-war period, a new type of language had emerged, that was a mix of traditional Italian and English. Arturo Tosi summarizes the argument of Calvino:

[Calvino] convincingly argued that the so-called new Italian was not a common idiom, nor could it be described as ‘technological’. It was rather a linguistic deterioration, and was misunderstood by people like Pasolini, who was liable to mistake complexity for precision: an endemic Italian tendency to complicate language and make it more abstract and obscure (12-13).

Calvino always aimed at linguistic precision in his works. Calvino never trusted words, so much so that he kept on changing words after words to express a particular idea. It is worth quoting what Calvino has to say about his own way of writing.

⁴ For a detailed account of the debate between Calvino and Pasolini, see the pages, 97-100 of the book *Language and Society in a Changing Italy*. In the second part of this book titled “Special Languages: Tradition and Innovations”, Tosi gives a detailed picture of how Italian language has undergone tremendous changes especially after the war period.
I write by hand, making many, many corrections. I would say I cross out more than I write. I have to hunt for words when I speak, and I have the same difficulty when writing. Then I make a number of additions, interpolations, which I write in a very tiny hand. There comes a moment when I myself can't read my handwriting, so I use a magnifying glass to figure out what I've written. I have two different handwritings. One is large, with fairly big letters: The Os and As have a big hole in the center. This is the hand I use when I'm copying or when I'm rather sure of what I'm writing. My other hand corresponds to a less confident mental state and is very small: the Os are like dots. This is very hard to decipher, even for me.

My pages are always covered with canceling lines and revisions. There was a time when I made a number of handwritten drafts. Now, after the first draft, written by hand and completely scrawled over, I start typing it out, deciphering as I go. When I finally reread the typescript, I discover an entirely
different text, which I often revise further. Then I make more corrections. On each page I try first to make my corrections with a typewriter; I then correct some more by hand. Often the page becomes so unreadable that I type it over a second time (Italo Calvino, The Art of Fiction 65-66).

These words from Calvino himself show the pain of creation and revisions that he exerts on his own art. He always tried to achieve perfection, by emulating writers like Stevenson and Kipling. The major literary influences on Calvino were the figures like Stevenson, Kipling etc. Calvino says, “Certain writers I read as a boy, like Stevenson, have remained models of style for me, of lightness, narrative impetus and energy. The authors of my childhood reading, like Kipling and Stevenson, remain my models” (Italo Calvino, The Art of Fiction 74). It is not coincidental that many an aspect of The Path to the Spiders' Nests reminds us of the familiar narrative strategies of these writers. The beginning of the novel, The Path to the Spiders' Nests, is reminiscent of Stevenson's Treasure Island, where Pin, like Jim Hawks, tries to get admittance into the adult world. Further, as Beno Weiss finds out, the choice of the
monosyllabic names like Pin and Kim in *The Path to the Spiders' Nests* is followed by other famous literary names like Pip, Kim, Jim, Tom, Tim, Huck, Joe, Nick, which are found in the English and American fiction (13). Lucia Re reaffirms this reasoning by stating:

> For Pin, his "friends" Red Wolf, [...] Pelle, [...] and even Cousin exist together in an undifferentiated, fabulous temporal dimension, along with Tarzan, Little Red Riding Hood, Hansel and Gretel, and the characters of the anecdotes, folktales, and adventure stories that he has heard in the alleys of the old city. (*Calvino and the Age of Neorealism* 179)

This does not imply that his whole corpus of literary writing is emulation. But on the other hand, on the thematic level, some close parallels between these writers do happen. It occurs on the fantastical level. The imaginary world of the children coloured by fantasy, runs common in these writers. What is particular to Calvino is the transfiguration of ordinary incidents onto a fantastical level. He elevates the mundane incidents to the realms of fantasy. He is candid enough to admit that the ordinary experiences that are tied to himself are
transformed into the fantastical realm (Italo Calvino, *the Art of Fiction* 78).

The (un)conscious transformation of reality to fantasy is more confusing, when analyzing a supposedly realist/neorealist text like *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*. The whole meaning of Neorealism is lost, when the written letters trespass into the fantastical territory. Rather, Calvino was trying to infuse fantastical elements into the early narratives. This view is substantiated by Dani Cavallaro, when he comments on the novel, *The Path to the Spiders’ Nests*. He says:

The writer himself was dissatisfied with this early piece, regretting its failure to reflect adequately his experimental vision. In fact, even in this context, Calvino was already playing with narrative elements alien to the realist ethos, and thus tentatively reaching toward the fantastic. (7)

The treatment of women in this novel deserves special attention, as the two women of this novel become fantastical imaginations of both friends (partisans) and enemies (Germans). These two women characters —Rina, Pin’s sister
and otherwise known as the Dark Girl of the Long Alley, and Giglia, the wife of the cook at the partisan camp— are portrayed in a negative light and as epitomes of immorality. The cousin Cugino even goes to the extent of declaring that the women started the war. In a way, these women characters pose a threat to the order of the civil society. Rina, the prostitute, becomes a Nazi informer towards the end of the novel, thus undermining the concerted onslaught of the partisans against the Nazis. Giglia, the wife of the cook at the partisan camp in the Liguarian mountains, goes to bed with the commander of the group, Dritto, thus making him unavailable to the troop of resistant fighters going to the vanguard position to fight with the enemy. It then becomes clear that these ladies appear as objects of desire and the causes of destruction to some extent. Albert Sbragia states that in the works of Calvino, "[...] chaos and women are associated with the Other, both object of desire yet threat to the ideal of order, not unlike the female characters Giglia and Pin’s Sister [...]"5(293).

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Pin's desire to kill the step-mother is symbolically revealed through a song which speaks of an ungrateful evil step-mother who was killed upon the return of her son from the war. He sings:

Forgive me, son, for speaking ill of you, for speaking bad of you,

Forgive me, son, for speaking ill of you.

He drew out his sword and cut off her head, cut off her head,

He drew out his sword and cut off her head. (116-117)

It later becomes clear that Pin favours all the cheating women to be executed. As already stated, Pin is not vested with the qualities of a positive hero. It has been pointed out by Karen De Leon-Jones that the killing of the evil stepmother is acceptable from the point of view of a fable or myth, but the psychological and emotional tension leading to the same are complex to analyze (367). The execution of Rina, who stands as a surrogate mother to Pin, by Cugino, might not be an accidental inclusion into the plot, when it is learnt that Calvino attentively read and studied the theories of Freud and Jung.
Calvino says: “I read Freud because I find him an excellent writer . . . a writer of police thrillers that can be followed with great passion. I also read Jung, who’s interested in things of great interest to a writer, such as symbols and myths” (Paris Review 65).

Pin and Cugino share a mutual hatred for women. Pin hates his sister Rina who works as a prostitute and later becomes a Nazi spy. Pin, who often becomes a mute spectator to his sister’s trysts, later contributes his share of information for the execution of his sister, by confiding to Cugino how to reach her. This happens towards the end of the novel, and bears a significant psychological importance. Pin’s sister, who stands as mother to him in the absence of their mother, fails to deliver that role and motherly succour in the time of need. Whenever Pin needed motherly attention, his sister was working as a prostitute who spied for the Fascists. It could be these reasons that prompted Pin to turn in his sister for execution. Rina the prostitute, gets executed very much like the mother in the song that Pin sings. Pin gets this idea of execution from the outside world of proletarians and Resistance fighters, when he hears how Red wolf and his team shot the
Fascist Pelle. Until he left home, he never even thought of executing her. The sound of the gun that Cugino shot to execute Rina serves as a narrative shock. I. T. Olken states:

[the] defense against mortality, once they have gone beyond the boundaries of their familiar world, becomes a fragile one, as is Pin's defense against the strange realities he encounters in his ever expanding and furious world. The child/death image of these early stories relates dramatically both to the threat of danger and violence to which they invariably refer, regardless of their surface subject matter, and to an ageless, repetitive pattern. (*Spira Mirabilis* 151)

Cugino hates women because of the infidelity of his wife. Like Pin, he also transfers his hate for his wife towards all women because of her immorality. Cugino believes that it is the war which corrupted his wife and society. He even states that it is the women who even caused the war. He says "Women, women
I tell you, they’re behind everything. Mussolini got the idea of the war from the Petacci sisters”(93).6

In fact, in a closer analysis, some of the principal male characters turn out to be misogynists to the core, or bear a negative imprint of women in memory. Pelle, who was one of the members of Red Brigade, later joined the Black Shirts—the Fascist wing—shows a violent obsession for both women and weapon. Lupo Rosso, otherwise known as Red Wolf, with whom Pin escapes from prison, abstains from sex, during the war. Cugino, on the other hand, blames women as the root cause for the starting of the war. The hatred for one is then transferred onto women as a whole class.

The novel narrates two opposite streams of world in it: one, the romantic Ligurian mountains, which fosters the fantastical imaginations of Pin, and the other, the earthly and grim reality of war. From the very start of the novel, this Ligurian landscape sets the tone of the novel. Calvino even comments in the introduction of the novel: “My landscape was something jealously mine” (viii). These two streams of reality of

6 Claretta Petacci was Mussolini’s mistress. She was captured by the partisans and shot on 28 April 1945
war and fantasy of the Pin's imaginations alter in the narration. He cannot take part in the war; the one thing he can do is to play with the pistol and the spider's nests.

The novel is written as a series of episodes that never explode into a powerful climax. In some chapters, the narrative force is debilitated by the insertion of political ideologies. The novel is narrated in the present tense, and filled with repetitions. The repetition clearly evinces the outlook of a child through whose eyes everything is narrated.

In the preface to this novel, Calvino acknowledges the importance of this first novel. He states:

Your first book already defines you, while you are really far from being defined. And this definition is something you may then carry with you for the rest of your life, trying to confirm it or extend or correct or deny it; but you can never eliminate it. (xxiii)