A Song of Death and Ongoing Joy: *O bella ciao*[*/] [9,800 words]

In memoriam of my teacher friends Fredric Jameson and Umberto Eco

0. Introduction

canta y no llores*: sing [your woes] so you don't cry*
old Mexian mariachi song *Cielito lindo*

0.1. In these last horrible years of deadly epidemics, say from Covid-19 through wars on three continents to Trumpism, I've come to rely on much music for consolation and stimulus. This has made me reach for a fuller understanding of the Italian and international popular song about a partisan in armed resistance and his tomb, *O bella ciao*. Globally hated and hindered by rulers, it has been translated and performed with enthusiastic handclapping from Europe throughout Latin America and much of Asia, though choirs sing it in Africa too. This song remains -- after the tabooing of the "red" *International* and *Bandiera rossa* – a most fortunate alliance of personal death yet undying memory of beauty, a triumphant exception of lasting comfort and wise beauty wedded to sociopolitical dissent. This can be best evaluated by an essay more in Montaigne's than in the academic style, so that I don't feel I must, as for Wikipedia, buttress every factual affirmation or speculation by citing a source.

I shall talk here about the text and its meanings and horizons, but please do find a full variant with music, say from Gaber to Bregović, or in combative Spanish by Manu Chao, and if you wish it in English for the age of Trump, I recommend the 2018 version directed by Marc Ribot and sung by Tom Waits. Without drawing on the music and the indispensable handclapping, of equal power to words, mine must remain an inadequate discussion, yet I hope useful knowledge may arise even from such a partial approach.

0.2. First I must confess that I've never worked in the field of popular orality and artefacts. Reading its criticism now, I've noted as one of this field's central facts – as different from writings – that its texts are not presupposed but must be found and posed. This entails that the finding itself often becomes (as in the case of *O bella*) not only the main method but the main thematic puzzle in many such studies: how, when, and where a certain version of text was identified by contact with person X, whose memory may years or decades later be faulty or even warped by self-interest… For this essay, I must foreground the fact that all the historical data found, often on internet, are disputable and less than monolithic. I can only affirm that I conscientiously weighed the probabilities of the findings used -- for the alternative was not to write.

Here is *O bella*'s most probable and usually sung text, as a working version for this essay (handclapping occurs in every "O bella…" line). As in any folksong that goes from mouth to mouth in changing circumstances, there are textual variants. A characteristic one is the first word which oscillates between *Stamattina* (On this morning) and *Una mattina* (On a morning):

Stamattina mi son alzato
O bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao ciao ciao

Una mattina mi son alzato
E ho trovato l'invasor.

O partigiano portami via
O bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao ciao ciao
O partigiano portami via
Chè mi sento di morir.

E se io muoio da partigiano
O bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao ciao ciao
E se io muoio da partigiano
Tu mi devi seppellir.

Seppellire lassù in montagna
O bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao ciao ciao
Seppellire lassù in montagna
Sotto l'ombra di un bel fior.

E le genti che passeranno
O bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao ciao ciao
E le genti che passeranno
Ti diranno che bel fior

E questo è il fiore del partigiano
O bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao ciao ciao
E questo è il fiore del partigiano
Morto per la libertà.

The structure of each stanza is fixed: A first line (*a*) is followed by the refrain (*ritornello*) O bella ciao (*b*) in surging repetitions, then the third line repeats the first one, with the fourth line (*c*) carrying the story forward. The rhyme scheme is thus in all stanzas an *abac* sequence, rendered easy to remember both by repeating every first line as the third one and by making the refrain an identical crosslink in all stanzas. It's a most successful negotiation and melding between the need for storytelling and the need for sympathetic collaboration of the singing audience. Its time-horizons unify the performers and audience with the past, the present, and the future: we are not in the past but we are not out of it, we are in a present which looks to a future. As dangerous as it may be, this future still holds the succor of a hope that the exemplary ending of "the partisan who died for the sake of freedom" will be relevant for the audience. The first-person narrator of the beginning meets in it a salvational agent, the *partigiano*, whom he addresses as a comrade: *Tu mi devi sepellir* (Thou must bury me), and a final collective narrator.

Here's my unpoetic translation for this essay, abbreviating the original structure into an *abc* one, and numbering the stanzas for further reference; I have omitted to translate stanza 4 above (And the people who pass by … Will say to you What a beautiful flower) as unnecessary for the narrative line. On how to translate *ciao,* which may mean either hello or goodbye, see 2.3:

1. One morning I got up,/ O beauty hello hello hello,/ And I found the invader here.

2. O partisan take me away, / O beauty hello hello hello,/ For I feel I'm gonna

die.

<u>3.</u> And if I die, as a partisan,/ O beauty hello hello hello,/ You shall have to bury me.

<u>4.</u> Bury me up there in the mountain,/ O beauty hello hello hello,/ In the shadow of a beautiful flower.

<u>5.</u> And this is the flower of the partisan fighter,/ O beauty hello hello hello,/ Dead for freedom's sake.

My overriding intent is to begin analysing the rich semantics of this little jewel, but given the muddle and quarrels about its genesis, I'll start with that; for brevity and pleasure I'll refer to it as *O bella*. To anticipate, the ***<u>text</u>*** crystallised as a look at armed rebellion and resistance against the Nazi occupation of Italy in World War 2. As opposed to songs such as *Bandiera rossa* (*The Red Flag*) or *Fischia il vento* (tune taken from the Soviet song *Katyusha*) -- it was never claimed or used by any communist or socialist party, nor is there evidence that it was sung in full by any partisan brigade; it was first published in 1953 in the periodical *La Lapa* as text and notes of a five-stanza version (cf. Bermani passim and Giacomini 81-86). The Italian popularity of *O bella* surely persisted in small and marginalised groups, but its mass use came about in rallies of youth from several continents for peace from 1947 on (see section 1.2) and then from the anxiety sparking the young generation revolts in the 1960s, because it movingly conveyed an antifascist struggle against an extreme threat to freedom: in the unlovely but efficacious Italian term, it's against *nazifascismo*. Internationally, it was often adopted by rebellious protesters of many stripes up to the present.

The source of the sprightly ***<u>music</u>*** is almost as knotty as the text genesis discussed below, but its tune stems from the *klezmer* music of Ashkenazi Jews, so named since the 16th Century. These Yiddish-speaking, very adaptable musician groups, varying from six to one player, used one or more string plus wind instruments, mainly violin and flute, and performed at feasts and Jewish weddings in the South of the old Russian Empire, also in the neighbouring Austrian Empire and later Romania (in straitened circumstances, such as the improvised US record or the paddy-fields of Italy, the music was provided simply by an accordion). The strongly rhythmic melody seems to have originated on the Northwest shores of the Black Sea centering on the cosmopolitan port of Odessa.[1/] It was used for the Yiddish popular song "Dus zekele koilen" (The Little Coal-bag: how to find some coal so as not to freeze) and recorded in 1919 by Mishka Ziganoff, an Odessa gypsy klezmer musician emigrated to New York, and available only in two records of 1921 and 1922 (see in *Works Used*). The popular tune in question syncretically melded many influences from Greece to Russia; judging by this use by a gypsy player, it might have been adapted also for non-Jewish entertainments. For the first 14 syllables the tune of the klezmer song is identical to *O bella*, but there is no handclapping in (it seems to come from the 19th-Century popular song *Bevanda sonnifera*, see below; the first documented use of handclapping was in 1964 at the Spoleto performance).

By geographic logic, the tune might have come to Italy by way of itinerant musicians, probably gypsy, so that Giorgio Bocca ascribed it to a Dalmatian song (cited in Morrone).

I greatly hope somebody will be found to investigate how the music of *O bella* interacts with the words.

<u>1, Text Genesis</u>

> Quel che mi piace è che un libro accenda un gran numero di significati e allegorie polisense, ma pur sempre su un univoco filo principale.
>
> *I like it when a book lights up many polysense meanings and allegories, but still following a univocal principal thread.*
>
> Italo Calvino, about his *Barone rampante* (The Baron in the Trees, 1957)

1.1. Development in Italy

The *text*'s first clear ancestor is an Italian complaint song (probably not the most ancient one, at any rate there seems to have been a similar group of songs in France from the 15th Century on) of the *mondine* or *mondariso*, the female rice weeders from the poorest social classes. They came from distant provinces to the paddy-fields of Piemonte from April to July in 40-day shifts and spent their days, from dawn to dusk, with bare feet in water, backs bent, and no pause, not only weeding but also transplanting the young rice shoots. The atrocious working conditions, excessive hours, and very low wages led to ongoing dissatisfaction, at times in the early 20th century to rebellions and riots, a famous 1909 strike as well as resistance to Fascist authorities. Their songs lamented and protested these cruel conditions (cf. Jona). It isn't clear what their song repertory was, but one of them used or adapted the narrative ballad *Fior di tomba* (Flower on Tomb), published in the collection of 363 such poems – and a few of their scores -- in the famous edition of *Canti popolari del Piemonte* by Costantino Nigra in 1888, a pioneering collection often reedited (and as of 2009 supplied also with auditive material). Nigra distinguishes two versions of *Fior*, both dealing with love and death: in the Piemonte one, the girl singer's beau is condemned to death and she demands a burial with him and a flower on the tomb, so that passing people will say "dead is the *bella* Rosina and she died for love"; and the Veneto one which begins "Stamattina mi sono alzata" ("This morning I got up," with the feminine ending; see Bermani 39-40).[2/] These two deathly allusions that *O bella* took from *Fior* significantly bracket the song's narration at beginning and end as well as introduce the overriding presence of death. Nigra noted: "The flower that has to sprout on the tomb of the *bella*, dead for love's sake, is the theme of the perhaps most frequently sung piece in all Italy" (cited in De Bernardi).

A second mid-19th Century ancestor for a song refrain with handclapping seems to be *La bevanda sonnifera* (The Sleep-inducing Drink) also collected by Nigra, sung by a girl going to the fountain and being tempted by a cavalier, with many variants in Northern Italy and a rather different Venetian-Trentino variant called *La mia nona l'è vecchierella* (My Grandma Is Pretty Old). All of them contain a refrain with the rhythm "PAUSE ciao, PAUSE ciao, PAUSE ciao, ciao, ciao" with handclapping on *ciao* -- originating in nursery rhymes to facilitate hand coordination in children by using criss-cross clapping, As Pestelli notes (32-37), this "scanning incitement" is also found in many Italian political and sports' chantings with the same triple rhythm, for example *treMAte treMAte le STREghe SON torNAte* (the capitals indicate tonal stress; tremble tremble the witches are back, feminist slogan from the 1970s).

No doubt, the very long line of popular songs about love, death, and protest is in the final *O bella* song on a partisan's struggle against "the invader" raised from a personal erotic formulation of the death-and-beauty problem to a collective political one. This is already the case in the reuse of *Fior di tomba* by Italian soldiers within the 1915-18 World War group of popular songs execrating the terrible frontline conditions and unceasing mass killings. One very impressive variant of *O bella* sung after the terrible rout and carnage of Caporetto in 1917 is:

Una mattina mi son svegliato

O bella ciao, bella ciao, ciao, ciao
Una mattina mi son svegliato
E sono andato disertor.

[Translation of lines 1+4: One morning I woke up/ and I became a deserter.]

In earlier texts by Bermani there's indication that "a World War tune" with the *O bella* music was sung in the rice fields around 1923, and he also assessed that the text and melody of *O bella* we know today was probably influenced by the soldiers' version. Pestelli adds that "more than half of the partisan songs' repertory" were modelled on World War 1 songs. Just like the female rice-paddies, the male trenches "were a true laboratory of popular songs … [and] a huge reservoir of devices and modules for what followed" (Pestelli 70-72).

Here is the most probable variant of the *mondine* song from the 1920s, though it was certainly sung much earlier in some similar form. I take it from Diana Garvin's impressive article (I've slightly altered her English translation; I don't know whether the last, hopeful stanza is recorded before 1945 or indeed 1964):

Alla mattina, appena alzata
(*coro*) O bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao, ciao, ciao
alla mattina appena alzata
in risaia mi tocca andar.

E tra gli insetti e le zanzare
(*coro*) O bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao, ciao, ciao
un duro lavoro mi tocca a far.

O mamma mia! o che tormento!
(*coro*) O bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao, ciao, ciao
È così ogni doman!

Il caposquadra col suo bastone
(*coro*) O bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao, ciao, ciao
e noi curve a lavorar.

Ma verrà un giorno che tutte quante lavoreremo in libertà!
(*coro e voce principale, insieme*) Ma verrà un giorno che tutte quante lavoreremo in libertà!

In the morning just awakened
(chorus) Oh hello beautiful, hello beautiful, hello beautiful, hello, hello,
In the morning just awakened
To the rice fields I must go.

Among the insects and the mosquitoes/ (chorus) Oh hello beautiful, hello beautiful, hello beautiful, hello, hello,/ A hard labour I must do./

Oh mamma mia! Oh what a torment!/ (chorus) Oh hello beautiful, hello beautiful, hello beautiful, hello, hello,/ And every morning this goes on.

The overseer with his rod/ (chorus) Oh hello beautiful, hello beautiful, hello beautiful, hello, hello,/ And us bent over working away./

But a day will come when all of us will work in liberty!

(chorus and lead, together) But a day will come when all of us will work in liberty!

The final elaboration of the *O bella* text is attributed by Bermani's research (pp. 43-53) to the partisan Brigade Maiella, formed in the Abruzzi region in December 1943 by the anti-monarchist and vaguely socialist lawyer Ettore Troilo from local refugees fleeing German destruction of all settlements near their "Gustav Line," and possibly incorporating also liberated British and Yugoslav prisoners. Brigade Maiella, never dominated by any particular political party (the name comes from a nearby mountain) was certainly one of the -- if not *the* -- least ideological military units of the Resistenza; it was a partisan formation, but it fought in 1944-45 on the Apennine mountains as part of the British 8th Army operations, all the way to the plains of Emilia (see the fat volume by Patricelli). They used the rice weeders' song known to the local women[3/] and slightly modified it by inserting the German invader. The date of this reuse is not certain: in Bermani's meandering argument, he gives a shorter text used after June 1944, still addressed to the singer's lady love (52-53). However, there are confirmed instances that groups associated with the Garibaldi brigade in the Marche region also sang a version of *O bella* in March 1944 (Giacomini 48-52), and nearby partisans also included escaped Soviet prisoners as well as a few Ethiopians and Somalis (Petracci passim). The "Maiellans," having entered Marche after the German retreat, sang in August 1944 an early version of *O bella* (Giacomini 75-78, with text). What seems clear is that a final version of *O bella* was compiled by some "Maiellans" in or near Bologna after its liberation (on April 21, 1945), in the spirit of the Italian Resistance; the brigade self-dissolved on May 1, 1945. The song was then not particularly prominent in Italy until the 1960s, though after its first 1953 presentation in the mentioned *La Lapa* there were five more between 1955 and 1960 in song-book anthologies by communist and socialist party publishers (cf. Morrone). In an equally tucked away mode it was also published in the booklet *81 canti della montagna (*81 Songs from the Mountain) in Rome 1954, lacking the final stanza. However, it continued to be sung and appreciated by some groups of youth.

The song re-emerged into Italian public attention at the prestigious *Festival dei due mondi* (the price for a box seat could be over 200 Euro in 2025 equivalent), a yearly Italo-American "high" music gathering at Spoleto, which included in the afternoon of June 21, 1964, and then for eight days more, a presentation of Italian popular song organised by leading ethnomusicologist Roberto Leydi and musical-theatre director Filippo Crivelli. The whole presentation, in which the prominent poet and essayist Franco Fortini had collaborated. was called "O bella ciao." It featured eight singers -- seven of them female -- plus a group with a guitar player, and its program began by singing what was then (imperfectly) known of both the *mondine* version and the final "Maiella" version. Together with a featured soldier song from World War 1, denounced by a present officer to the police for "vilification of our armed forces," this occasioned a huge scandal among the festival's mainly elite public, "one hyperbejewelled lady screeching at Giovanna Daffini [the singer of *O bella* versions], >I don't go to theatre to hear my maidservant sing!<" (Bermani 39). A lengthy newspaper debate flared up, but nobody could really touch an "Italo-American" enterprise; today this performance is acknowledged as an epochal breakthrough for Italian folk music.

1.2. Global Spreading through WFDY

It is very little known – though briefly mentioned in Bermani and in the in-depth Giacomini survey -- that the yearly festivals of The World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY) were for 15 years or so the mainspring of *O bella*'s popularity outside Italy. The WFDY was, at the height of the Cold War, a large international organisation, staunchly following those interests of USSR foreign policy that insisted on peace and friendship between the world young people, which found wide resonance also in sections of non-communist youth.[4/] Its central event

became the yearly World Festival of Youth and Students, a series of massive political and cultural celebrations lasting ca. 2 weeks, held in the "Warsaw Pact" nations in Europe because banned in the West; the one in 1950 was estimated by US intelligence to have had around 10,000 participants from 70 countries, while at the one in 1951 2,000 were from Italy, including Italo Calvino as a correspondent for *l'Unità* daily (Kotek chap. 4). Generously funded, these festivals were at the time the only place where young people from the "North Atlantic" area could meet committed but also fun-loving young people from, say, Latin America, Vietnam, the Arab world or struggling against apartheid in South Africa. Many later famous youngsters participated in WFDY festivals, including Angela Davis, Yuri Gagarin, Yasser Arafat, Fidel Castro, Nelson Mandela, Jan Myrdal – and Enrico Berlinguer.

Berlinguer arrived to the WFDY's first 1947 Prague festival as secretary of the Italian Communist Youth Federation with a very large group of young associates who sang *O bella* at mass meetings, lasting in that year four weeks, with huge success; Berlinguer became chairman of WFDY for the period of 1950-52. Under such favourable sun, this song was under WFDY sponsorship translated into and published in Spanish, German, French, a number of Slavic, and I don't know how many other languages. The WFDY meetings and their national fallouts, also the song's innate qualities, were the real carrier of the worldwide enthusiasm for *O bella ciao* before the Italian and then other music producers rediscovered it about 1964.

2. Semantic Meanings and a Glimpse of the Horizon

When the bodies of singer and sung-to
Are co-sensible, there is no need
To ask after an author.
Ryan Ruby, *Context Collapse*

2.1. On Method

2.11. Let me repeat that analysing the language -- in a poem composed and mostly sung with instrumental and handclapping "lines" of emotional involvement -- is only one element, even though indispensable and important, for understanding *O bella*.

Second, on the wider context for such exegesis: any fictional artefact presents, as the great narratologist Iurii Lotman formulated it, "a particular model of the universe" -- or of some microworld, a significant stand-in for a universe. All the presuppositions and conventions that make a text meaningful are supplied by extra-textual bonds "between the set of elements fixed in the text and the set of elements from which any given element in the text is selected" (Lotman 50). Further, since all fictional writings or texts need internal coherence and outgoing correspondence or reference, in order to understand it the reader or listener "[must take] the addressor and addressee into consideration" (idem 55). Mikhail Bakhtin and Paulo Freire phrased this in terms of dialogical polyphony (many voices) vs. monophony (a single voice). Monophony is at its clearest in mass culture from above as illustrations and repetitions of authorial ideology and ruling commonsense, say in a religious song, a stock newspaper article, TV reports or media obfuscations, all of them blocking understanding. Even clearer is Umberto Eco's division into open and closed texts, which to my mind converges with similar horizons in the libertarian Marxism of Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, and Fredric Jameson. For the semantic polyphony and openness of *O bella* we need an intelligible horizon and flexibly responsive positions.

What is a text's ***horizon****?* It is its goal of desire, into which the textual possibilities and values are subsumed. To understand all of these, the users necessarily intervene with their semantic presuppositions from everyday social life into the text's positions. The rules of the

song's miniworld are interpretations by historically determined human groups, and they provide a cultural logic of events: for example, this song is not understandable -- except as nonsensical affront to be obliterated -- by an invading colonialising army and its local henchmen. Texts circulating in a culture form a presuppositional network usually divided into conventional genres, so that a Homeric epic is, right down to Tasso, focussed on upper-class heroes and heroines, and if a plebeian dares to interfere he is ridiculed and beaten, as Thersites in the *Iliad* and even in Shakespeare's looser *Troilus and Cressida*.

An example from *O bella*: the simple phrase "And if I die as a partisan" opens up more than one time scheme. The text's spacetime is a clearly threatened and threatening landscape of mountain dissidents that we historically know had come from the cities and smaller settlements. "If" is a conjunction for conditional clauses that may or may not come about. Thus, first, **it**'s possible (or even probable) I may die in the notoriously less well armed and less numerous partisans opposed to a superior, hyper-organised and hyper-technologised, invader, and it's also possible I may not die; but second, "as a partisan" stands as an undisputed identification indispensable for reaching the end, "for freedom's sake." The reference to putting one's life on the line in deadly struggle for freedom invokes and emotionally consecrates a global tradition, albeit nowadays frequently met by worldly scorn or invisibility.

An important way to understand the logic of events is to determine the central *opposition or confrontation* between the main narrative agents. In the case of *O bella* that's tricky, for its text is not written in the naturalistic-illusion-of-reality key but for a brief and boldly generalising song. On the one side is what I call the young man's voice at the beginning and the collective voice at the end (see on voices Leith and Myerson, and on narratology Bal), and their solidarity in confronting and opposing a death-bringing enemy. The appearance of this antagonist, "the invader," though mentioned most briefly, sets the world awry and sparks the whole narration as an indignant, intolerant, and triumphant reaction. It is a most economic and pregnant justification of this miniworld.

The intention of a solidary dovetailing of the two libertarian voices, the particular and the general one, is to turn their threatened world -- and the world of the singers and/or listeners -- from demonic to redemptive. The text's roots are in the Italian Resistance 1943-45 but it's applicable to any antifascist resistance against unbearable oppression of a people. I shall return in 2.3. to the weight of this allegorical or parabolical aspect, which allows bold abbreviations and jumps in what I'd call the synthetic narrative spacetime of *O bella*.

2.12. I think about and listen to this song often because its simple Italian words and syntagms hide a richness that movingly sustains the user: there is a considerable array of meanings to be found in it. I shall approach its narrative structure by discussing the intricate interweaving of its stanzas as moods and events that flow in time and build up a meaning. Italian popular songs before copyright laws were often shaped by quotation, borrowing, parody, reworking, aggregation, and/or contamination with other current songs, and this is true in spades for *O bella*: theirs is a modular structure whose units can be added, deleted or modified. However, I firmly hold that when this song is sung or listened to, it has a *unified effect*: it's perceived as one solid sense-making unit (in spite of all the subtleties in it, to which I shall come). This is its Aristotelian *causa finalis*, a retrospective but all-informing cause and pull -- explicitly clearest in the glue of the refrain "o bella ciao" that holds it together. Its text has miraculously melded potentially alien or contradictory elements into the unified effect. Otherwise it wouldn't have survived the taboos and persecutions unleashed against it by many governments and polices of the world (such as the *mondine*'s "overseer with his rod") for almost 200 years.

Historically, this text is a collage of plebeian sorrows and joys in those years, similar across the whole globe, from the hand-to-mouth klezmer musicians and the popular songs of North Italy's women up to an offbeat partisan brigade in April 1945, where its shape was more

or less achieved. Furthermore, the plebeian or oppressed, yet fun-loving and combative, *mondine* from rice-paddies, by whose feet eels glide and they give birth at the limits of the paddy; the poor itinerant Yiddish and gypsy musicians that wander from Odessa to Italy and USA (just like the hundreds of thousands today); and the impoverished peasants of the Abruzzi high mountain region of Maiella who, together with some intellectuals in its commanding cadre, live and fight the World War nazifascist horror on the Apennines for 17 months as a partisan unit – all of them sing out of it.

The omnipresent refrain line *O bella ciao* is here central, in its clash of the meeting and parting meanings; it's in fact an abolition of linear time, akin to a way out from our bittersweet class societies and their history, a pure eroticised utopia overcoming oppressive antiutopia.

2.2. On the Agential System, with Spacetimes

The first major, but potentially indicative, puzzle of this song is: who are its ***narrative agents***, identified here as the speaking voices, and how do they relate to each other? At first glance, there is a narrator in the first three or four stanzas who is shocked by the foreign invader and joins the partisans or guerrillas in "the mountain"; he is clearly identified as male in the gendered ending of Italian past participles in *-o* (*alzato* etc.). In the final stanza, after the evocation of the partisan narrator's death, a not further specified "authorial narrative voice" speaks the upshot. If this were all, we'd have here a fairly big incoherence -- which has also political implications: and in fact, several recordings simply omit the final stanza, which then tilts the song towards a tragic individualism reinforced by a refusal of politics.

But the audience perceptions of a unified meaning in the song requires a better explanation. Diana Garvin found already in the ancestral protest song of the *mondine*, as usual for at least one wing of popular songs,"an impressionistic, nonlinear temporal framework to highlight the emotionally salient moments…. Time telescopes…" (2). The text's narration is not conventionally linear, it's full of ellipses that each listener must fill in.

To begin with, is the narrator or voice the same in the first four stanzas? Yes and no. A linear chronology might be constructed from his induction into the partisans in stanza 2 to his envisaging of death and burial in the shadow of the flower. But I'd argue we are here – as in most popular songs before TV — ***not*** in an individualist psychology of, say, the great 19th-Century romantic poetry and then novels of the Manzoni-Dickens-Balzac-Tolstoy type. Rather, this "realistic" verisimilitude mingles often with what I'll call an allegorical verisimilitude, to which I come in the next subsection.

Stanzas 3 and 4 deal with the original voice's death. Though at the beginning a live partisan greeted the *bella*, here he speaks about and as it were from the grave; the stance has changed. The whole song culminates in the flower on the grave. It's not only a realistic small flower, as might be inferred from stanza 4, for at the end it has grown into a metonymy for protective and reborn nature throwing a conciliatory shadow over the grave. Numinous nature validates continuity and closure: the flower's looming large may be a sign of Nature's or Fate's approval and ingathering of the partisan. Roberto Leydi, an expert in the resurrection of songs, sees in this one "a mediated resurrection: the protagonist survives in the memory of those seeing the flower on his tomb" (cited in Pestelli 52). The ending also uses the very ancient *topos* of a message from the grave, an epitaph (in olden times an inscription) that imparts to the passers-by the reasons of the dead person, which is in stanza 5 used as a final chord, the political moral to be drawn from this story: "died for freedom's sake." I find it moving.

The text thus intertwines a ***linear discourse with one narrator*** with a ***near-choral multiplicity of voices***, a polyphonic and "directly signifying discourse" (as Bakhtin insisted

about his favourite novelist). It would be possible – but to my mind impoverishing -- to somewhat tweak it into a "realistic" mode: a young man is narrating the first three stanzas. In 1 he wakes up to the horrid fact of enemy invasion, in 2 he is with the partisans and possibly wounded to death, in 3 he dictates his last will, possibly to a beloved woman; this first part might therefore function as a sympathising introduction. But in the concluding two stanzas this narrator is absent and the narration concentrates on his tomb, so stanza 4 might then have to be spoken by his ghost, while the concluding stanza gives pride of place to a collective or choral voice in which beauty and freedom meld beyond the grave. Derrida would call it a hauntology – but one allied to pleasure and finally happiness.

2.3. On the *Bella* and Allegorical Verisimilitude

The empirical fact that *O bella* evokes a unified meaning in the integral five-stanza version requires an explanation that mingles an individualistic with an allegorical verisimilitude, where seemingly disparate vehicles converge, even if with gaps and hesitations, toward a common tenor. I use the term "allegorical" here in the root Greek sense of *allos egoreuo*, roughly: "I talk differently, or I publicly announce in another way" (my Ancient Greek dictionary implies that the verb stems from debates in the Athenian democratic assembly, *agora*). Today this covers various ways of narratively transferring meaning from a manifest to a latent but strongly evoked field of semantic meaning -- as also in the shorter allegorical forms of riddle, proverb, fable, and most clearly in parable. *O bella* is, of course, not a Medieval allegory with its complex layering but a modern form, which may perhaps bear a belated remembrance of a folk Baroque of processions and songs once omnipresent in Italy.

The strongest argument for a non-individualistic reading is, together with the typification of narrative agents and space, the role of the *bella* in the song, so important that it has rightly been used as title. It culminates in the role of the beautiful flower. Let us remember that in the ancestral *Fior di tomba*, the *bella Rosina* or *Rosetta* who must die of unrequited love is herself a flower, since both her names translate as "little rose." Such clichéd but immensely popular allegories were no doubt present in many romanticising songs about death for love, easily refunctioned in the long Risorgimento of 19th century into death for the Nation, if not for Delacroix's Liberty on the barricades -- both envisaged as majestic women. In *O bella* that constellation is used but reversed: the flower is not an agent but an emblem of transcending death by the same beauty insistently invoked in the recurring handclapping refrain.

Who is then finally the beauty (*bella* as noun) to whom the famous pressing refrain is addressed, as greeting and invocation? *O bella* denotes literally "O thou beauty" and rises from the immediacy of personal and universally shareable erotic language to a general overarching level for the poem. It draws on the rich and long Italian tradition of songs to one's beloved, imaginatively present but always yearned for, sung by suitor to maiden. The present absence of the beloved as highest value may be the central tension of the whole story. She is a single but not an individual entity; she is no single woman nor even Woman in general; she is the Beauty evoked by *bella* (beautiful) as adjective: a lofty human quality of appreciating and enjoying life and human relationships within nature -- here the mountain scene and refuge of partisan struggle – defined by stark opposition to the enemy.

With its use of *ciao* as hello and the later appearance of *un bel fior* (a pretty flower) as culminating narrative image, the poem's greeting refrain affirms that we are approaching and invoking the *bella* because we may exhilaratingly live with and for it. Further, many voices have taught us that beauty is finally also indispensable for truth: they include Keats's conclusion of his supreme achievement, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, also modern physics, and brief but intense moments of liberatory antifascist politics of the 20th Century

(one of them happened to me as a boy upon hearing another partisan song in a Yugoslav 1943 outdoor assembly, and I've described it as best I could in my *Memoirs*).

One might at first glance say that, in comparison to the early folk songs of death for erotic love such as *Fior di tomba*, the reuse here has swapped the focalising element of love for the kindred high values of beauty and truth. Yet I doubt this: somehow, subterraneously and ambiguously, love returns in the omnipresent refrain and its corporeal exuberance. We should remember that in the long European tradition beginning with ancient Greece, the aristocratic ruling class spurned love songs as dangerous because they included yearning, ambition, and discontent, whereas the secret Orphic cult and the Athenian tragedians prized it for the same qualities; this is recycled when the sober bourgeoisie rejected dissolute Romanticism for very kindred reasons. Further, "the underground" was a Europe-wide synonym for antifascist resistance fighters, and in *O bella* it emerges as the insistence on burial (*seppelir*). This song's rich references to death and tomb also suggest and foreground that beauty as truth can be durably and collectively felt and enjoyed only in the independence of political freedom (and today we have to add economic survival). If we're bereft of it, as the singers here, then it may get necessary and unavoidable that one rebels and dies for it. Life is only worth living, rather than penuriously enduring, if one strives for beauty and for truth as its intimate comrade. Death is in this song, from the second stanza on, the horizon of the single partisan resister/warrior, allegorically standing also for many; however, the meaning of one's death is delicately but definitely transmogrified by the appearance of the flower into present memory and solidarity.

The polyphonic meanings of *bella* meld with and reinforce the polyphony of storytelling in the song *Bella ciao*: the refrain is justly also the title. Echoes of the polytheist or atheist lesson of human solidarity between us single persons, as well of the Christian rewriting of the saviour's death and yet triumph, contribute to the final fusion of nature, political resistance, and loveliness. This goes Keats one better, toward Shelley: beauty is not only truth but also freedom. And it is, as Stendhal concluded. the promise of happiness.

The "linear" young-hero beginning can't thus explain the whole flow of the text: I propose as our key for reading a polyphonic texture of kindred and converging voices rather than a monophonic and linear one that favours individualistic empathising. This polyphony could embrace and subsume passages in an individual voice or voices.

All of *O bella*'s *spacetimes* are also in part allegorising, with two levels of meaning. No doubt the poem's vehicle -- foreign invasion, appearance of resistance fighters against it, often in the mountains, and death/entombment of one of them – is strictly realistic. However, linear and evenly flowing time is evaded beyond commonsense realism, while of the spaces the mountain is in a way a metonymy for partisan struggle; the important final flower, which casts such a large shadow that the dead partisan (and better, the audience) may find a spectral relief and safety in it, ascends from *Fior di tomba* realism to the weighty suggestion of an overarching consolation in beauty.

2.4. Some Rich Ambiguities

An interpretive *crux* (plural *cruces*) denotes in semantics an important but ambiguous passage that either makes no sense as found in a text, so that it must be emended, or simply presents a knotty problem for understanding: It's metaphorically a "cross," a difficulty that torments one. In a popular song cruces aren't usually found; yet a masterpiece is defined by polysemous richness, in which case they can't be excluded either. I find perhaps five cruces in *O bella,* allowing in each case for hesitation between two significantly different meanings. However, I don't think that in them emendations or rejections would be a proper

procedure. As I've suggested, in *O bella* – already subjected to many textual mini-variants -- a univocal, so to say dogmatically fixed eternal meaning is to be doubted in favour of an "open" (polyphonous or polysemic) approach.

A possible self-criticism: how can my rejection of a univocal fixed meaning fit into my choices of meaning/s? Walter Benjamin believed between the World Wars -- an age which now looks more hopeful than our present bloody dead end -- that a critic cannot fail to represent his own age in the asynchronous object of his consideration. I honour this activism but believe that today we must supplement it with a second step, which sees our own preferences and stances no less (if differently) dependent on alienating History than those of our object's age. Is thus the interpretation I propose here a final presentation of *O bella ciao*? Certainly not -- insofar as I know my Part 2 on semantic meaning is in fact a first presentation. Is it a version of my song-object or is it a rewrite into which one legitimately puts new meanings? I agree with Benjamin that no thoroughgoing critical attempts can escape an element of rewriting. However, this is a matter of history. If it goes as I think it should, a rewrite may become so to speak absorbed by its object, while at the same time making it appear as something we didn't see before: it's now a version! If history goes against my hopes, mine will remain a rewrite, with a secondarily debatable number of more or less felicitous mini-interpretations. Further the witness deposeth not.

Here are the *cruces:*

- *Ciao*: Pronounced as "chào" with a very soft *ch,* it's by far the most frequent and cumulative word in the whole text, usually given additional weight by handclapping. It's used for people you address with thou, either youngsters or friends and even colleagues or comrades. However, *ciao* is used *both at meeting and at parting* with a good friend, it has a connotation of nearness but then also of possible separation. Of the two most popular uses of *ciao* in other hits, Domenico Modugno's *Ciao ciao bambina* (1959) and Luigi Tenco's *Ciao amore ciao* (1967), the first stresses meeting and the second parting. *Ciao* is rich: Bermani (60) cites a 1930s' folk singer in the paddy-fields who saw in *mia bella ciao* (goodbye my beauty) an element of mockery or ribbing, addressed by the seasonal boyfriends to the girls who will at season end be leaving. In *O bella* too, the possible or actual death of a fighter is not minimised, he remains the original voice and a typical partisan, but the song ends in a delicate suggestion of life's renewal in beauty, and I've argued that truth and freedom are close kin to it. Since I can't do "hello/goodbye," I've opted to put for *ciao* a to my mind richer "hello."

The second most frequent lexeme of the song is *bella…*

- Stanza 2: *O partigiano portami via* is to be translated as "O partisan, take me away" or "carry me off." The verbal form is somewhat strange, it's strongly shifted from the usual "take me with you" (*portami con te/se*) or "let me join you." The use of "carry me off" would be proper in case of, say, the frequent simulation of a forced marriage by kidnapping the bride, not in case of a soldier (though particular examples don't prove much, I've online found that stanza 2 is sometimes sung by a female voice). The insidious question then arises: does the speaking voice of a young man imply he's hesitating or not? The text as a whole testifies that he isn't, but the verb torments me. Perhaps it could be defended as marking the disorientation after the shock of enemy invasion and the overriding need both to evade and finally to counteract it? The early popular songs' stress on individual love is absorbed into a love – and duty – to homeland and freedom.

- Stanza 2: *Chè mi sento di morir* may mean "I'm feeling I may die" or (as a prominent Italianist friend insisted to me) *sono pronto a morir,* "I'm prepared to die." In this branching the first meaning implies a horizon of "I fear" and the second of "I'm resigned." The richly figurative use of the pronominal particle *si*, both intimate and hyperbolic, creates a most

pleasing arc in time back to high poetic uses of *morirsi* in Tasso and Dante (see www.treccani.it/vocabolario/morire/)

- Stanza 3: *E se io muoio* i\s a conditional phrase that by itself neither affirms nor rejects the partisan's death. Of the two opposed horizons the immediate one may be formulated as "I'm not dead" but the song's following insistence on the action of burying (the repeated infinitive *seppellir*) and the final epiphany of the sense-making flower on the tomb mandate also a looming horizon of "I shall die," as argued earlier.

- The refrain or *ritornello,* in all stanzas a second line with handclapping: whose voice is saying this? There's no way to link it to the putative young partisan's voice in the other lines (which is also lacking in the final stanza, clearly implying a "collective authorial" voice drawing a conclusion after the partisan's death). Is this chorus line a semantic mini-corpus autonomous from the rest of the song, as refrains often are (though autonomous clearly cannot mean "without any convergence with")? It's autonomous, I believe, yet intimately interwoven with the whole song in most sung performances that single the refrain out by vigorous handclapping.

In sum, I see this text as a cubist structuring within a narrative form which is not only properly jagged but also capable of using semantic ambiguity as richness of meanings. One should not exaggerate the presence of polysemy into ascribing lack of clarity to the whole: the final stanzas and the authorial voice clearly induce an overall horizon of fighting participation and comfort in beauty and memory.

3. Towards Making Sense of *O bella*'s Vision Today

Whether life means anything or not, joy is real.
K.S. Robinson, *The Ministry of the Future*

3.1. As all deep experiences of beauty and especially those linked with music, listening to *O bella ciao* remains in good part a pleasurable mystery. It's not a "Mystery Bouffe" as in Vladimir Mayakovsky (1918) and then Dario Fo (1969), at times of confident satire, yet it's also a mystery that ends on the whole well – so that it would have been in the Middle Ages called, say by Dante, a Comedy. I would call it a "Mystery Joyous."

For, in many performances or records, this sung narrative ballad builds up a strong meaning joyously shared with the audience. It can be a solace and a succour at a time of our tsunamis of breakdown and distress. It's a song that fuses the activist praise of struggle with the realist probability of individual failure -- its first voice and narrative agent probably dies in the story, paying with his life: historically, the various groups within the Italian *Resistenza* 1943-45 suffered about 50,000 dead by combat, Fascist executions, and imprisonment with torture. They were overwhelmingly youngsters, and this song is young. It affirms the horizon of collective and beautiful freedom and *joie de vivre* being fought for, outlasting in some way individual death. It claims universal applause for its final word: *libertà*. It's thus an authentic expression of the tragically joyous way of the *Resistenza*.

It's certain that *O bella* never was the official song of any single Italian or other party (cf. De Bernardi) nor does it call for an armed insurrection in the time of its performance: in a nutshell, this is not a marching song. However, its erotic hymn to freedom reports a situation where a decisive segment of the people has identified a looming "invader" and an overwhelming need to eject him (the invaders are always male) as this threatens both the people's naked existence/s and their central values for living. It started out in the cauldron of female plebeian creativity, among popular songs of unrequited love or flirting

and then evolved in the paddy-fields near Vercelli among rice-weeders and itinerant women singers. A male element was introduced by peasant soldiers' songs of senseless death in the First World War, and then decisively by the final reshaping in the dawn of victory for the partisan brigades. Its disparate elements could flow together because they all led to an extreme and risky meeting of Love and Death -- as in much "high" art and literature, but with a plebeian slant.

O bella's beauty and joy to my mind may culminate in a kind of pride shared by addressor and addressee (I owe this to an observation of Barbara Maffei). Alas, the chthonic forces at work in joy and pride don't translate well into a notional explanation. I don't know how to analyse these two wilful and most important emotions, for which at their best I claim a cognitive status. I can only say that it's a sense of personal well-being which demands to be interpersonal, externalised and shared. The act of performing and sharing this song has also the function of actualising right here and now the meaning being built up -- that is, letting the historical moment narrated, its values and conclusions, emerge into the audience's spacetime as memento and encouragement. Its propositions and emotions provide an interlude, a healing island amid the stormy ocean of our personal and collective wounds and lesions.

3.2. Finally, *O bella*'s libertarian yet very general horizon might exemplify Fredric Jameson wry phrase in *The Seeds of Time* that prognostications, in an age where God and Communism have been eradicated from mass view, are "a telling of the future with an imperfect deck." The unique place of *O bella* is in my judgment due to a complex and specific horizon that I'd identify as one of an insurgent and brotherly/sisterly democracy not too far from Gramsci's sense of "national popular"– which seems for today's commonsense a contradiction but wasn't such in any antifascist enterprise. For the nonce, this song features a defiant uprising from below. Its proud vitality and catchiness while evoking rebellion and death (an osteomancy, the art of telling the bones as they fall) reminds us that the protean forces of Supreme Value are never really dead. Here we are after all, and despite all the mass murders we are still hallowing life!

One of this song's strengths is that it's general enough to be very widely shared but precise enough to be a warning against increasing misuse. Being an allegorical transfer, the text's tenor can be applied to all oppressive violence, spanning on one end protests for civic freedom against a State apparatus, as in Istanbul's Gazi Park 2013 and in the Iranian women's 2022 protests against the compulsory hijab and the killing of a Kurdish woman by police, and on the other hand defiant mourning, as at the 1984 death of Enrico Berlinguer (this might be called poetic justice) and at the funeral of the *Charlie Hebdo* victims in Paris 2015; ending for now at the end of 2025 in the music teacher Rola Daloul and her class of girls singing it in Gaza in Italian... In sum, *O bella* is a voice raised against State and Group terrorism, those twin anti-flowers of evil for our epoch. It can, of course, also be badly misused, especially when the tune is used with a sectarian translation.

To die under bombs or drones or tanks in imperialist wars of recolonisation, as today in Gaza, Ukraine, and Africa, and a bit more slowly in all the places of miserable work and anxious survival in other swelling cities and emptying countrysides, is the denial and destruction of a huge number of individual lives, but also of beauty, truth, joy, and freedom. What threatens us today is demonic anti-creation and anti-democracy. It can only be fought with new species of creation and democracy as our redeeming value. The *O bella ciao* song is a great ancestor in and creative vector towards this fight.

Notes

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literature, and Daniela Marcheschi who were in at the beginning; to Patricia McManus, who debated all stages and suggested new formulations; and to Lazar Atanasković, Michele Baschieri, Sanja Lovrenčić, Barbara Maffei, Giorgio Mariani, Douglas Porpora, Michael Stöppler, and Victor Wallis, for comments on various versions. Diana Garvin kindly sent me a copy of her article. None of them are to blame where I went wrong.

All unreferenced translations from Italian are by DS.

I sorrowfully report that my feudal overlord Microsoft 11 failed me once more, so that during data gathering some of my files were irretrievably mangled, including the one of notes on Berlinguer and the WFDY, reproduced here to the best of my memory.

1/ Odessa was the major grain (etc.) export port of the Russian Empire, where inputs from Russian, Jewish, and Greek sources – though in in its streets and coffeehouses Tartaric, Polish, Italian, German, and French languages were also frequent -- melded in a popular and cosmopolitan cauldron of bursting vitality, from gangsterism to commerce, crafts, and top literary achievements. Yiddish was spoken from the 1860s and up to World War 2 by a third of the city population which eventually surpassed 400,000, Odessa became a centre of lay Yiddish literature and theatre. Paradoxically, this golden age was best remembered and mythicised by major early Soviet writers Isaac Babel, the duo Ilya Il'f and Evgeniy Petrov, Valentin Kataev, and Eduard Bagritsky. However, Odessa also became a centre of State-fostered pogroms, especially after the 1880s, so that major emigrations ensued, mainly to the USA and Ottoman Palestine; a classical account of the 1905 one is by Trotsky, chapter 12 (www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1907/1905/1905.pdf).

2/ The data for this paragraph and much of Section 1 are mainly from the booklet about *O bella* by Cesare Bermani (also from Garvin and the other Italian books cited). Alas for me, its ca. 60 small pages deal only with the history of various endeavours to find sung texts and versions somehow relating to O *bella:* necessarily, these are accounts who and when found or interpreted, or even made up, this or that piece of the puzzle – complicated by political and personal claims and controversies. Thus, while responsibility of this article remains entirely mine, no account of its genesis would have been possible without Bermani's research about alternative popular voices from Italy.

3/ Bermani (pp. 58-71 and 87) reports a long and involved story about a certain Rinaldo Salvadori, who was a *carabiniere* (paramilitary policeman) in the 1930s and had a French-Italian girlfriend who worked with and sang for the *mondine*. He claims he composed for her in 1934-35 a song about the paddy fields with words by a friend, that had the verses "Una mattina mi son alzato," "E tante genti che passeranno," as well as one final "Bella ciao" choral passage, and that it was a big hit with the *mondine*. Then in 1940 he claims to have coauthored for her another version nearer to O *Bella ciao*, of which a different (not his) version, sung by soldiers, was already present. The evidence for this is unclear and would have to be checked when the Archivio Bermani (see https://archiviobermani.it) files become available.

4/ I learned as a young Titoist that one shouldn't have illusions about the cruel policy aims of any quasi-empire, and I had none by 1948 when I entered university in Zagreb; two years later a drunken renegade colleague told me that he had then supplied my name to the KGB black book of "anti-Soviet" Yugoslavs to be dealt with after Russian occupation, presumably by hanging them at the nearest lamppost. At the time, the Yugoslav Union of Students had been kicked out of WFDY as imperialist agents. The YUS thus joined the "Western" student international organisation, known as Cosec, as its decorative Left wing, and I was the YUS spokesman at the 1954 annual meeting. This essay wishes to understand clearly and evaluate

fairly a song whatever its uses, and to my mind they were until the 1990s generally laudable.

If I may be allowed a bit of Yugo-nostalgia: *O bella* was also sung in 2013 at the funeral of Jovanka Budisavljević Broz, Tito's widow and a Partizan officer, in the faithful Spanish version of Manu Chao. Conversely, there seems to have been no Serbian version before a movie in 2023.

The "Berlinguer Enrico" items at the Fondazione Gramsci and the Fondazione Modigliani for 1949-53 are not downloadable. I tried but failed, in the few months I had, to find a specific source in his published writings for his role in furthering *O bella* according to hints and clues available on internet; I hope research could be done on this soon.

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See also Bermani up.

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