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The Contemporary Italian Novel in Translation: Paolo Cognetti’s *The Eight Mountains*

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the novel *The Eight Mountains* by Italian author Paolo Cognetti. It offers an analysis of how Cognetti, a self-taught student of American literature, has reproduced and adapted American tropes into the Italian setting of his novel. This research aims to demonstrate that Cognetti has performed an act of cultural translation and that, by introducing themes of American literature into his own national context, he has Italianized them and given them a new meaning which differs from their original one. This analysis compares Cognetti’s novel with the literary works of American authors including Henry Thoreau, Mark Twain, and Jack Kerouac and shows the way in which *The Eight Mountains* has reinterpreted themes they present. The dissertation also examines how the English translation of the text has reintroduced Cognetti’s novel to the culture that helped produce it. It further argues that, despite the international success of the novel, its mild reception in the English speaking world is attributable to the impossibility of the English language to translate key words of the novel and the lack of interest that English speaking people have for literatures written in foreign languages.
Dedication

To a wonderful woman who, twenty years ago, was lulling her little boy to sleep, reading her favorite books to him and teaching him the beauty and power of stories. I would not study literature if it weren’t for you. Grazie mà.

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Introduction

I first heard about Paolo Cognetti in February 2018. After reading his 2016 novel, *Le Otto Montagne* (*The Eight Mountains*), I decided to investigate his background. I did some research and was fascinated by the fact that, besides his love for the mountains, Cognetti had also a strong passion for the United States of America and its literature. I was surprised by the connections between him, an Italian author who had taught himself American literature after graduating from high school, and me, an Italian student majoring in English language and literature. This is why I decided to write my dissertation about Cognetti and explore the ways in which he reinterprets and adapts tropes of American literature in *The Eight Mountains*, the novel with which Cognetti won the prestigious Strega Prize in 2017 and reached success in Italy and abroad.

The aim of this dissertation is to show how Cognetti successfully reinterprets tropes of American literature and transports them into the new Italian setting of his work of fiction. By using these American narratives in a different national context and writing his novel not in English but in Italian, Cognetti charges them with a different meaning from their original one. My dissertation will particularly focus on how Cognetti gives an Italian identity to the American theme of male-bonding and on how he takes inspiration from American narratives about the relationship between man and nature to write his own novel. Besides referring to *The Eight Mountains*, I will also demonstrate my point by quoting essays by Cognetti and extracts from his personal online blog. I was also very lucky to have an e-mail exchange with him and I will use
his answers throughout this dissertation and attach the complete e-mail conversation, both in Italian and in its English translation, as appendix.

The first chapter of this dissertation focuses on the first element of American literature that Cognetti has reinterpreted in his novel: the male-bonding trope. The latter is at the core of many American works of fiction of the nineteenth and twentieth century. *The Eight Mountains*, too, revolves around the deep friendship of its two main characters: Pietro and Bruno. In this thesis, I compare the way Cognetti explores the theme of male-bonding with the way Mark Twain and Jack Kerouac portray it. Cognetti takes inspiration from Twain and Kerouac in the way he constructs the relationship between his two characters. He reinterprets the American narrative in which there are significant differences between the two friends, as for example the social class to which they belong and their personality, and how these differences are what fuel their relationship and attract the two friends to each other. However, Cognetti distances himself from Twain and Kerouac, and the American model of the male-bonding trope in general, in the way that the relationship between Pietro and Bruno develops. Indeed, while both in Twain and Kerouac the friendship between the two characters evolves through a physical journey, the relationship between Pietro and Bruno in *The Eight Mountains* grows only in one place: the Italian Alps. The Alps also constitute an important part of Bruno’s identity, who is a *montanaro*, an Italian concept untranslatable in English that designates a person who was born and raised in the mountains. The chapter ends with a discussion of the other important relationship in Pietro’s life, the one he has with his own father, and the significant way in which this relationship shapes his male identity.

The second chapter analyzes how the male identity of the characters in *The Eight Mountains* is also connected to the way they interact with the natural world. Indeed, nature is at
the core of Cognetti’s novel and, also in this case, the author constructs the relationship between his characters and the natural world by reinterpreting patterns of American narratives he has read. He takes inspiration both from Thoreau’s *Walden* and from *Into the Wild*, the book and homonym movie about the real story of Christopher McCandless. Through a Marxist analysis of *The Eight Mountains*, I demonstrate how Cognetti re-elaborates the American idea, provided both from Thoreau and McCandless’s own life, that nature is a place in which man can seek refuge from an industrial society with which he does not agree. At the same time, though, I also show how Cognetti does not present the nature of his novel as a threatening wilderness to be subjugated or conquered, as it is often portrayed in American literature, but as a place of which man has always been a part. Indeed, since Italy is a much smaller country than the United States, and it has always been inhabited for the most part, the Italian people have a different perception of the natural world, which differs from the unexplored wilderness of Alaska, but it is a place framed by humans. This perception is reflected in the way that Cognetti writes about the reality of Grana, the small mountain village in which his story is set.

The third and last chapter of this dissertation discusses the role of Cognetti as a cultural translator. By adapting the trope of male-bonding and by reinterpreting the American idea that nature has the potential of being a place in which man can seek refuge from society, Cognetti bridges foreign themes into his own national literature. In this chapter, I demonstrate how using these tropes is a way for Cognetti to offer his Italian readers a new narrative on the natural world which fuses American themes with the Italian traditional relationship with nature. In the last part of the chapter, I examine the reasons behind Cognetti’s lack of success in the English speaking countries, which are attributable both to the inability of the English language to translate some
important concepts of the novel, such as the aforementioned word *montanaro*, and the English language speakers’ lack of interest for literatures in other languages.
1. The Importance of Male Bonding and Male Relationships in 
Paolo Cognetti’s *The Eight Mountains*

*The Eight Mountains* by Paolo Cognetti is a novel that is all about the character and formation of male identity – and about the important role fathers have in this scenario. The very core of the male identity of the two main characters, Pietro and Bruno, is constructed not only by their relationship with one another, but by their relationships with their fathers. Male-bonding is a common trope in American literature, of which Paolo Cognetti is a voracious reader. Paolo Cognetti is Italian and went to Italian public schools, but manifested a great interest for American literature ever since he was an adolescent. As he writes in his blog, “[when I was sixteen,] I liked American writers for their simple language and for the life that overflowed from their books” (“A Pesca nelle Pozze Più Profonde”). This interest for American literature is what explains the vast presence of foreign elements in Cognetti’s novel. “For a reader like me,” Cognetti argues in his essay *New York È Una Finestra Senza Tende (New York is a Window Without Curtains)*, “… the firmament is a sky constellated by empty bottles (Poe, Melville, London, Faulkner, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Kerouac, Yates, Capote, Cheever, Carver, Bukowski … )” (89). While referencing these artists' problems with alcohol (a problem which, Cognetti hints, seems to be a thread connecting many American writers), Cognetti explicitly lists them as some of his literary idols; and his passion for them is reflected in the American tropes he explores in his novels.

As Cognetti affirms in his essay about writing and literature, *A Pesca nelle Pozze Più Profonde (Fishing in the Deepest Ponds)*, “all we do when we are writing is taking the work of
those who came before us and adding a small piece” (97). This is what he does in The Eight Mountains. Many of the American authors he read, like Jack Kerouac and Mark Twain, wrote about male-bonding in their novels. My choice of using these two specific writers for comparison is not arbitrary. In the email-exchange I had with Paolo Cognetti, we discussed both Twain (Cognetti mentioned to me how, in his novel, he rewrote the story of Tom and Huck, as I will explain later) and Kerouac himself. “I love Kerouac … but I don’t like how he writes,” Cognetti told me in his e-mail, “… but he perfectly brought into focus the distinction between a life lived and a life written, embodied by two friends. Dean Moriarty/ Neal Cassady is the man who lives, Sal Paradise/Jack Kerouac the one who writes.” This polarity between two friends is also one of the main themes of Cognetti’s The Eight Mountains.

Cognetti reinterprets this American narrative of male friendship, adding an Italian character to it. Indeed, while in Twain’s The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, and in Kerouac’s On the Road, both the two main characters and their bond evolve through a physical journey, in The Eight Mountains the friendship between Pietro and Bruno develops in only one place: the Alps. This feature is key in distinguishing Pietro and Bruno from the other famous couples of friends in American literature because the mountain, as a concept, is a crucial part of their Italian identity in a way that it could never be so in an English speaking context. In my email exchange with Cognetti, he himself wrote to me that, “English does not have the vocabulary to talk about mountains and many key words of the novel were impossible to translate (for example ‘montanaro’, which defines a man who was born and raised in the mountains, does not exist in English … ). Thus, The Eight Mountains, while being a novel that transcends national borders for the themes it explores, it is also a literary work that adapts the American trope of male-
bonding in an Italian setting by tying the friendship of its main characters not to the idea of a physical journey but to the Alps and to the “montanaro” identity of one of the two protagonists.

Historical Overview

Many American works of fiction of the 19th and 20th century focus on the relationship between two male friends. Even though the narrative of male friendship is not originally American and traces back to classical literature, as for example the friendship between Achilles and Patroclus in *The Iliad*, American literature has made of male bonding one of its most distinguishing themes. The reasons why it is such a predominant theme in American literature are of sociological nature. As David Greven illustrates, “nineteenth-century America was extremely homosocial, homotactile, and homoemotional. In other words, most American males looked to other males for intense emotional bonding as well as for social activity and physical touch” (100). Thus, the importance that male bonds had in a man’s everyday life, explains why many American authors explored, and tried to define, these bonds in their writings.

Starting from the 19th century, the theme of male bonding became a prevalent feature of American literature. Commenting on its importance in American literature, Michael S. Allen argues that, “male bonding is such a powerful part of American culture, because it was powerfully reinforced, if not constructed on its own, by American writers … it can be argued that the definition of ‘what it means to be male’ is one of the dominant themes in the traditional canon of American literature” (26-27). Among the many examples of American classics that present two male characters linked by a deep relationship are indeed the works of fiction by Mark Twain in the nineteenth century and Jack Kerouac in the twentieth century. Twain and Kerouac’s literary works present two male protagonists who are extremely different in their
characterization (with one being more educated and the other more wild and carefree), like Tom and Huck in Twain’s *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and Sal and Dean in Kerouac’s *On the Road*. In both novels, the two friends are reciprocally attracted to each other on the basis of this difference. Cognetti replicates this pattern in portraying the friendship between Pietro and Bruno in his *The Eight Mountains* and makes it Italian: one of the main differences between his protagonists is indeed the fact that Bruno is a montanaro, a concept that, as seen, does not exist in the English language.

**Male Bonding in *The Eight Mountains***

Cognetti writes his novel as a hymn to the significance of male bonds. Like in Twain and Kerouac’s literary works, the most powerful relationships presented in *The Eight Mountains* too are among males: the friendship between Pietro’s father and Pietro’s uncle which is then mirrored by the relationship between Pietro and Bruno, which lies at the center of the novel. Indeed, *The Eight Mountains* focuses on the growth and development of the deep bond between Pietro and Bruno. The story is a first-person narrative, so readers follow through Pietro’s eyes the growing importance that Bruno acquires in his life. In the course of the narration, Pietro reports how he is able to mature and to shape his identity through the influence that Bruno has on him. The two characters grow together, but their friendship only develops in the Alps, and Pietro and Bruno never see each other in a different location. Pietro moves to different cities and travels much during the novel, but it is never something that he shares with Bruno, differently from Sal and Dean in *On the Road* whose whole relationship is based on the adventures they have together while traveling cross-country. Bruno and Pietro’s friendship, from the moment they are children
The meeting between the two boys has a strong emotional impact on Pietro since he is a child not used to having friends. Robyn McCallum claims that, “concepts of personal identity and selfhood are formed in dialogue with society, with language, and with other people,” and this is what starts happening also in Pietro’s case (3). He starts changing after having entered in contact with Bruno. The fact that Pietro was a lonely child indicates how he had little chance of reflecting on his personality as something in dialogue with others. The situation changes when Bruno enters his life. Indeed, this friendship affects Pietro so much that he admits that he is even influenced by Bruno. “I had started talking like him,” he says, “we hadn’t seen each other in fifteen days, and we felt like old friends” (The Eight Mountains 46). Bruno becomes for Pietro an opening into a new reality: he shows him the possibility of friendship as opposed to living a solitary life and he becomes key in shaping the kind of man Pietro will grow to be.

The first way in which Cognetti reinterprets the trope explored by Twain and Kerouac is in the fact that Pietro’s love for Bruno, like Tom’s for Huck and Sal’s for Dean, arises from their significant differences in personality and fuels his desire to be more like him. In On the Road,
Sal, the protagonist of the novel, describes his friend Dean saying, “in spite of our difference in character, he reminded me of some long-lost brother … all my other friends were ‘intellectuals’ … but Dean’s intelligence was every bit as formal and shining and complete, without the tedious intellectualness” (Kerouac 11). Sal looks at Dean with admiration because he is original and different both from himself and his other friends. Similarly, in *The Eight Mountains*, Cognetti shows from the beginning of his novel how Bruno possesses qualities that Pietro does not have and envies in his friend. Cognetti first hints at these differences when Pietro describes his adventures with Bruno that leads him to enter into dangerous sites while “hunting for treasure” (*The Eight Mountains* 63). He knows the danger of what he is doing and that he is breaking his mother’s trust, and this leads him to admit: “I longed to be like Bruno, to have the courage to rebel openly and to accept any punishment that might follow, with my head held high. Instead I disobeyed furtively, and was ashamed of what I had got away with” (*The Eight Mountains* 64). Pietro admires in Bruno the boldness he does not see in himself. In fact, it is this very difference that attracts him so much to the other. Bruno’s courage and audacity are positive traits that Pietro would like to have; Cognetti depicts Pietro as a child who lacks self-confidence and looks for confirmation that comes from Bruno’s friendship. Furthermore, Pietro enjoys spending time with Bruno because he has finally found somebody who can fulfill his desire for adventures.

In this, Pietro and Bruno resemble Mark Twain’s fictional characters. As Geoffrey L. Greif observes:

> Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn may be the prototype for childhood friends. Yet they were quite different in both their family connections, their interest in girls, and in their willingness to form relationships with others, with Tom being the more socially connected of the two. Somehow, they were drawn together, not just
because they lived in the same town, but by a penchant for adventure sprinkled with a healthy dose of antiauthoritarianism. (41)

The same applies to Pietro and Bruno in Cognetti’s novel. Both children find in each other a companion with whom they can share the summer, first, and a part of their future later whenever Pietro goes back to Grana. Like Huck and Tom, also Pietro and Bruno are children who come from two very different backgrounds and have different personalities, but the desire for adventure bonds them together. Pietro starts having a person his age that can understand him better than his parents and with whom he can fulfill his thirst for adventures. After having been out with Bruno, Pietro comments that “[my mom] would give me a melancholy look, as if she were losing me” (The Eight Mountains 65). The passage shows how Bruno is crucial in Pietro’s growing process as this friendship represents for the two characters one of the first steps of saying goodbye to childhood and entering teenage years, a time of one’s life in which one is more eager to spend time with one’s friends than with one’s parents.

Cognetti further links the friendship between Pietro and Bruno to the one of Tom and Huck showing how it develops between two children of different social backgrounds, which is also what stimulates the reciprocal interest the two characters have for one another. Pietro is a Milanese boy from a middle-class family, whereas Bruno represents a very different face of Italy, the one of a child from a rural family who only gets a minimum education. In our email exchange, Cognetti confirmed the similarity between his characters and Twain’s, and wrote me that, “Tom and Huck are a middle-class child, who studies, goes to church, is well-dressed and filled with fantasies, and a wild child, who’s illiterate, free, doomed. I think this is the real literary trope. And I rewrote it with the story of Pietro and Bruno.” Indeed, while Pietro is a city boy who has a family that looks after him, Bruno is a child who will spend his whole life in the
mountains and that will not complete his studies. Yet, in Pietro’s eyes, Bruno is extraordinary. “There was nothing ‘average’ about Bruno,” Pietro thinks in admiration (The Eight Mountains 67). Bruno shows Pietro the positive simplicity that a life in the wilderness can offer as opposed to the frenzy of living in the city. Pietro thinks, “Bruno would have hated Milan, and Milan would have ruined Bruno, just like when his aunt washed and dressed him up and sent him around to us to conjugate verbs” (The Eight Mountains 72). Bruno would lose what distinguishes him and makes him stand out were he to lead a city life, as his uniqueness arises from the very fact that he has not been “ruined” by the consequences of living in the city. This echoes what Huck tells his friend in The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, “no, Tom, I won’t be rich, and I won’t live in them cussed smothery houses. I like the woods, and the river, and hogsheads, and I’ll stick to ’em, too” (155). Bruno’s view of the world is very similar to Huck’s and he, too, prefers the simplicity of the natural world to the hecticness of living in the city because it is in this simplicity that they both feel they can truly be themselves. Bruno himself admits, as a grown up, that the only time he visited Milan, he “[didn’t think] much [of it]. Too many people” (The Eight Mountains 234).

Cognetti uses this trope of two friends whose bond is fueled by their reciprocal differences, but adds an Italian character to it by tying this difference between his two characters to a physical place, the Alps, which are both what defines Bruno’s identity as a montanaro and the place in which his bond with Pietro grows over time. Indeed, differently from Pietro, the fact that Bruno comes from – and has always lived in – the Alps, makes him a “child of nature”, and this is what is so fascinating about him in Pietro’s eyes and therefore contributes to the developing of their relationship; Bruno is indeed a montanaro, something Pietro is not. According to H. N. Fairchild, a “child of nature” is “a free and wild being who draws directly
from nature virtues which raise doubts as to the value of civilization” (qtd. in Moore 188). Bruno does indeed reject the comforts of civilization, and what comes with it, so much that, even after work, he scorns the idea of going to relax at the bar, the typical action of a person accustomed to the comforts of the city and who enjoys social life, and goes for a walk instead; “the woods are better [than bars],” Bruno affirms (*The Eight Mountains* 118). Bruno refuses the comforts of modern life, which are a symbol of civilization, up in the mountain because they seem unnatural to him. For example, Pietro reports how “Bruno persisted obstinately in milking the cows by hand … [because] this was the only method properly suited to these delicate creatures” (*The Eight Mountains* 192). Bruno disdains the idea of having more advanced milking machines as this would not respect the cows and, therefore, the natural world; this reflects how close Bruno feels to nature and his contempt for the progress of the modern world, which he refuses to be a part of in the mountains.

Bruno’s identity as a *montanaro* has an impact also on Pietro. “[I was born] to be a man of the mountains,” Bruno affirms with pride (*The Eight Mountains* 165). He scorns the idea of “look[ing] down, to where the money was and the work,” and prefers to look up, “to where [according to his relatives] there was nothing but weeds and ruins” (*The Eight Mountains* 166). Cognetti creates a character that is conscious of his identity as a *montanaro* and who willingly decides to retain it even if this implies being without any money as opposed to living in the city that would provide him with more financial security. Bruno’s personality also affects Pietro; indeed, after spending some time with Bruno in the mountains, Pietro starts being influenced by him and says that, “like Bruno, I soon became unaccustomed to hurry and civilization: I reluctantly went down to the village once a week … I felt better when I was back on the path [to go up]” (*The Eight Mountains* 163). Civilization is not only to be found in a big city like Milan.
or Turin, but Bruno, and Pietro too when he is with him, scorns every place in which it can be found, even the small village of Grana, and enjoy the simple pleasures that the mountains can offer instead.

While both Twain and Kerouac present the idea that a physical escape from society is the key to freedom (and is also what fuels the friendship between the two male characters), in Cognetti this idea of freedom is linked not to the road but to the very authenticity that a life in the mountains grants. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck, a teenage boy protagonist of the story, escapes from the small Mississippi town he lives in with Jim, an African American slave. Huck says that, “I was powerful glad to get away from the feuds, and so was Jim to get away from the swamp. We said there warn't no home like a raft, after all. Other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don't. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft” (Twain 90). The relationship between Huck and Jim develops especially because of the fact that they are both seeking freedom, and this can be only attained by running away. Banta argues that, “[Huck’s] is, therefore, the classic American dilemma … it is the general human dilemma, complicated further by the terms of the democratic dream, of how to attain the bliss of total freedom (only to be had outside society) when everything pulls a man into society” (88). Huck and Jim only feel at ease when they are on a raft, which becomes the symbol of their escape from a society that wants to enslave them, in Jim’s case in the literal sense of the term, and to which they refuse to adhere. Not only is there an age difference between the two, with Jim being much older than Huck, but Jim is also a black slave while Huck is a white adolescent. Yet traveling together unifies the two characters notwithstanding their many divergences and contributes to the deepening of their love for each other.
Similarly, also Kerouac’s characters refuse to conform to society and try to break free from it by embarking on multiple journeys together. The novel begins with Sal saying that, “with the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road” (Kerouac 3). Before this moment, Sal had experienced the “feeling that everything was dead,” and thus Dean represents to him the possibility of recovery and a new life (3). Yet it is not just Dean’s presence that gives Sal a new prospect of life, but being on the road with him. Indeed, Sal and Dean tie the meaning of their lives to being on the road together, “our battered suitcases were piled on the sidewalk again,” Sal affirms, “we had longer ways to go. But no matter, the road is life” (Kerouac 211). The two men share multiple adventures while traveling from city to city; they visit different places in their never-ending journey of exploration, while the friendships that unites them increases to the point that Dean clearly becomes the most important person in Sal’s life. Kerouac underlines this importance by concluding his novel having Sal thinking about his friend, “so in America when the sun goes down … I think of Dean Moriarty” (Kerouac 310). The fact that “Dean Moriarty” are the last two words of the novel shows how Sal’s attachment to his friend has grown after sharing with him a part of his life on the road. In Kerouac too, like in Twain, the journey is fundamental in shaping the bond between the two friends.

Conversely, while in Cognetti, too, the two protagonists do not want to submit to the demands of society either, there is no physical escape that Pietro and Bruno share, their *ubi consistam* is not the road but the mountains. Pietro says “perhaps [Bruno and I] really could have stayed up there forever, without anyone even noticing” (*The Eight Mountains* 164). The mountains become the place in which the two friends can avoid daily-life problems, but rather enjoy each other’s company and give each other comfort when in need. “Bruno did not like to talk about practical problems with me,” Pietro claims, “he never talked to me about debts, bills,
taxes, mortgage rates. He preferred to talk about his dreams” (*The Eight Mountains* 194). The friendship that links Bruno and Pietro is for the most part detached from the issues that one experiences in adulthood. There is a sense of escape that the Alps provide to the two friends that is similar to the one that running away gives both Huck and Jim on the raft and Sal and Dean in their interminable car rides. Even though Bruno never leaves Grana, and therefore does not escape in the literal sense of the term, being with Pietro provides him with this feeling of evasion from reality, as it can be seen by the fact that Bruno likes to discuss his dreams with his friend and not his practical problems. When Bruno’s relationship with Lara, his girlfriend and mother of his daughter, ends and he declares himself bankrupt, Pietro is in Nepal and after finding out about it, he calls Bruno. The latter tells him, “I don’t want to see anyone; you know how it is. I’ll spend some time in the mountains,” to which Pietro replies, “would you like me to come over?” and the answer is affirmative. (*The Eight Mountains* 227). This passage summarizes the relationship between the two friends, which is based not on traveling or moving from a place to another, but on being there for each other when needed in the only place that can offer solace to them and in which their friendship was born and developed: the mountains.

Even though Pietro and Bruno’s bond only develops in the mountains, their friendship reaches its highest point when Pietro is able to acknowledge that there are responsibilities that Bruno cannot ignore and that his refusal to enter civilization and leave his native soil also leads to damages in his life. Pietro’s love for his friend manifests itself also in realizing what Bruno’s flaws are and loving him nonetheless. As an adult, Pietro does not just romanticize the state of nature in which his friend lives, but points out that, “*some* should think twice before bringing children into the world” (*The Eight Mountains* 235). Bruno’s stubborn decision to not leave the mountains implies not taking care of his daughter, a choice Pietro deeply condemns. According
to George Dardess, “to have responsibility for your friend means not only providing him with companionship … it means also – and painfully – maintaining a sense of how your friend sees himself apart from the way you see him” (205). Pietro does not let himself be influenced by Bruno’s view of life. Yet he never gives up on Bruno, even if he does not agree with his choices. As an adult, Pietro finds himself unable to accept the way Bruno is dealing with his responsibilities, especially his duties as a father, but he stays with him. The depth of their bond far exceeds even the different views on life that the two friends have.

As Pietro celebrates Bruno for his authenticity intrinsic in his being a montanaro, so is Bruno attracted to Pietro for his intellectual curiosity. When they are still children, Bruno has access to books through Pietro’s family. “My mother would get him to read aloud from my books … and would leave them with him after the lesson,” Pietro tells, specifying how, even though Bruno does not like studying grammar, “he liked reading novels” (*The Eight Mountains* 66). The world of reading is then opened up to Bruno by Pietro’s mother – she introduces the “child of nature” to literature just as Bruno introduces Pietro to the value of the natural world. As an adult, Bruno is still enjoying the pleasure of reading that had been sparkled in him by Pietro’s mother when he was a child, as Pietro reports, “from all the schooling that my mother had given him, Bruno had retained a passion for novels about the sea” (*The Eight Mountains* 143). At the same time, what – maybe also on an unconscious level – interests Bruno is Pietro’s yearning to travel and discover, something which he has always refused to do and that contrasts with his personality. Cognetti juxtaposes Bruno’s decision to never leave the place in which he was born with Pietro’s intense desire to travel the world. Pietro lives in different cities, and is able to feel at ease both in nature and in a city like Turin, with which he falls in love; “my relationship with the city [lasted]. Between its ancient rivers and in its arcade cafes I’d felt immediately at home”
The ability to feel at home in an industrial city like Turin is something that Bruno would have never had. Bruno admits his admiration when he tells Pietro that “it must be great to leave like that” (*The Eight Mountains* 168). This observation shows how Bruno himself has the unconscious desire to be able to leave his native soil to explore other realities. Yet he decides not to do it, as opposed to Pietro who has lived in different places and traveled much. When Pietro invites Bruno to join him on his trips, he replies that, “no, it’s not for me. You’re the one who comes and goes. I’m the one who stays put” (*The Eight Mountains* 168).

The strength of Pietro and Bruno’s bond lies in the way the two friends complete each other. Pietro does not expect to change Bruno, and Bruno is content with the life he has even though he looks at Pietro’s life with admiration. In a sense, even the “child of nature” of the novel is not completely free, as he feels chained, or chains himself, to the mountains and willingly refuses to leave them; “in [Bruno’s] mind there was no possibility of alternative lives,” Pietro comments on his friend (*The Eight Mountains* 242). Conversely, when Pietro feels trapped in a situation, he takes agency and moves or goes far away. Pietro is characterized by a curiosity that prompts him to travel and discover, as when he goes to Nepal and reports that, “[the Italian mountaineers with whom I was] were impatient to leave behind the villages … Not me. I walked between porters so that I could ask them about anything that I did not understand” (*The Eight Mountains* 186). Differently from Bruno, not only does Pietro move a lot, but he is eager to learn about other realities. However, Bruno and Pietro’s reciprocal differences are also what attract the two friends so much to one another. Pietro and Bruno’s bond is so intense that, after Bruno passes away, Pietro asks himself, “who was it that had known him on this earth except me? … [and] what was left now that one of us was no longer there?” (*The Eight Mountains* 255). Bruno had willingly isolated himself from the rest of the world and had had very few contacts with
other human beings. He lived a life trying to be self-sufficient without relying on other people and pushing them away. Yet he had decided to open his heart up to Pietro, and vice versa, since Pietro too had no meaningful friendships except the one with Bruno. The two men had a unique bond that far exceeded the relationships they had with the other people around them and, when Bruno dies, Pietro realizes he was the only one to have truly known him.

**Father-Son Relationship in *The Eight Mountains***

The male-bonding story is itself a subgenre of the bildungsroman, the coming-of-age story. There is no precise age at stake usually, but generally male-bonding novels are about young men who are at a particular formative juncture and are either rejecting or reconciling with parental norms and the morality of the father. The same happens in Cognetti’s novel in which Pietro first rejects the morality of his father to then come to understand his father’s emotional depth after his father dies. Giovanni is the father at the center of the narration and he is the other significant male relationship, besides Bruno, that shapes Pietro’s identity. In concordance with previous research, John Nash claims that, “it is commonly agreed in the psychological literature, both psychoanalytic and otherwise, that the boy’s pattern for himself in the male role is obtained from his identification with the father” (281). Pietro does end up identifying with his father, but he also comes to empathize with him after the latter passes away. Also in this case, Cognetti adapts an old literary trope, as the father-son conflict traces back to the Bible and classical mythology, but sets it in the same context in which the friendship between Pietro and Bruno develops: the mountains. The latter play an important role in the novel, as Cognetti attaches a specific meaning to them: they are not just a physical place but what unites Pietro to Giovanni and vice versa. Father and son love the mountains and this shared love and the experiences they
both had there are what helps Pietro, when he is an adult and Giovanni is dead, to finally understand his father.

From the very beginning of the novel, Cognetti shows how the mountains are important in mediating the relationship between Pietro and Giovanni. The first sentence of the novel, “my father had his own way of going into the mountains,” indicates the relevant role that both the narrator’s father and the mountains will have in the story and how the two are intertwined (The Eight Mountains 1). Cognetti’s novel deals, as the title itself indicates, with mountains, but they are also the place in which the human relationships between the characters grow, develop, change. It is actually Pietro’s father who kindles this love for the mountains in his son, thus being the agent setting in motion all of the events in the novel since, as seen, also Pietro’s friendship with Bruno revolves around the mountains. Pietro describes how there “I would find [my father] to be cheerful and talkative, the complete opposite of the father I was used to in the city” (The Eight Mountains 10). In the eyes of Pietro when still a child, the mountains have such a positive effect on his father that he feels they get him closer to his parent than when they are in Milan. Giovanni enthusiastically describes climbing to his son, and Pietro thinks, “I needed to see it, this world that filled him with such joy” (The Eight Mountains 11). The mountains, therefore, also become the place in which the son can create a connection to his own father by understanding the reasons why he appreciates them and eventually loving them the way his father does.

However, climbing and following the paths in the mountains also require physical strength and agility and this leads Pietro, when he is still a child, to be jealous of Bruno’s masculine traits that links him to his own father, traits which he feels he does not possess. Pietro
tries to suppress his fears and insecurities of not being enough for his father figure because of this lack. Pietro reports that:

I would sometimes watch [Bruno] with my father to try to gauge the nature of the understanding that there was between them, and I would feel that Bruno would have made a good son for him – perhaps not a better one than I was, but in a certain sense a more suitable one. Bruno was full of questions for him that he would ask naturally, without hesitation. He had the confidence that allowed him to get close to my father, and the physical strength to follow him anywhere. I would think these things but then try to suppress them, as if they were something of which I should be ashamed. (The Eight Mountains 67)

Pietro feels ashamed of his thoughts because they imply he is questioning his father’s love for him on the basis of his own masculinity. It means that he is thinking that since he is not physically strong he is undeserving of his father’s love, whereas his friend Bruno is and therefore he might be a better son for Giovanni. As already discussed, Pietro admires Bruno’s self-confidence and wishes he too were more similar to him. However, Pietro also extols these traits in Bruno because he feels they are what gets him close to his father in a way that he is unable to do; he is jealous of his friend. “I still had in my eyes the image I had seen of them there, so close and triumphant, like father and son,” Pietro reflects in a passage earlier in the novel (The Eight Mountains 58). Pietro feels inferior to Bruno for the fact that he cannot establish a deep relationship with his father the same way that Bruno could if he were his son because he lacks typical characteristics usually associated with masculinity, such as physical strength, that Bruno possesses and that give him confidence while hiking and following arduous paths. For instance, the three of them are once on a glacier and when Bruno jumps the crevasse immediately after
Giovanni, Pietro reports that, “my father was slapping [Bruno] on the back, congratulating him on the jump he had executed. Not I, I would never be able to get across” (The Eight Mountains 57). In a sense, Pietro feels as if his masculinity is questioned by the fact that he unconsciously believes he cannot get close to his father figure if he does not have the same vigor and vitality he recognizes in both his father and Bruno. However, Pietro tries to suppress these thoughts as he realizes that they imply questioning his relationship with his father and, as seen also in the previous section, transforms them into an admiration for what makes Bruno stand out.

When Pietro is an adolescent, finding the strength to “kill” his father, by contrasting his father’s authority, is for him the moment in which he takes agency and reaches self-determination for the first time. Not being a small child anymore, Pietro comes to realize that his family life is smothering him and “[he] had begun to feel an urgent need to escape” (The Eight Mountains 82). Pietro thus refuses to go camping with his father and admits “I could not have dealt him a harder blow … for me it was a liberation” (The Eight Mountains 83). This scene symbolically represents the moment in which Pietro, as a son, kills his father by disappointing him and reclaims control over his life. As Leon Waldoff points out, “in most literary father-son conflicts … though fathers may begin the hostility … the essential burden of the conflict falls inevitably on the son” (qtd. in Isaacs 200). Similarly, in Cognetti’s novel, Pietro feels often as if it is his father’s fault if he is unable to connect with him on a deep level. He projects his own incapability of building a relationship with his father onto his father himself. For example, they are once hiking and since Pietro cannot keep up with his father and Bruno’s pace, he reports that, “whenever I stopped to get my breath … my father … would turn around to look at me annoyed” (The Eight Mountains 55). Moments like this make Pietro feel like as if he were uncapable of pleasing his father. The “burden of the conflict” to which Waldoff refers is the ultimate act of
killing the father figure and reaching a state of independence as a man. Even though Pietro does not murder his father in the literal sense of the term, his action sets him free from what Waldoff calls “paternal tyranny” (qtd. in Isaacs 200). Indeed, Pietro reports that “[my father’s] character demanded that all of our lives should revolve around his” (The Eight Mountains 167). Thus, Pietro takes agency and decides to become in control of his own life and not to be dependent on his father anymore. His refusal to go camping with his father becomes a symbol of his liberation and entrance into manhood, a state of his life in which his father’s authority over him diminishes.

Pietro is unable to overcome the conflict with his father when he is alive and only comes to identify with him after the latter passes away. Before his death, Giovanni and Pietro experience a stage of incommunicability in which they fail to understand one another’s needs and concerns. Pietro explains this situation admitting that:

A couple of years previously I had given [my father] one last great disappointment by abandoning my university studies: I had always excelled at maths, and he had always foreseen for me a future similar to his own. My father told me that I was throwing my life away; I replied that he had thrown his away before me. We didn’t speak for an entire year after that … It was better for both of us that I should invent a life different from his in some other place - and once that distance was established, neither of us was inclined to close it. (The Eight Mountains 104)

The problem of incommunicability arises from both parts. Giovanni projects onto Pietro his own desires and hopes, but his ambition to see his son leading a life similar to the one he had prevents him from understanding how Pietro has desires of his own. Similarly, as a son, Pietro desires to model himself in order to become a different person from the one his father was; he understands
that in order to develop as a man he needs to find his own path. Hunt asserts that, “the conflict with the father must simply be recognized and accepted … and that acknowledgment may partially heal and give one the recognition of the order of one’s suffering, which in turn may allow one partially to recognize a kinship” (73). The same happens in Pietro’s case, who comes to accept the conflict he and his father had when he was alive and is able to see an affinity between his father and himself after the latter dies. Indeed, after his father’s death, Pietro starts to meditate on “his [father’s] loneliness,” and how “he had died in his car without leaving a single friend to mourn his absence” (*The Eight Mountains* 134). Similarly, Lara, one of Pietro’s ex-girlfriends, tells him, “I didn’t think that you had friends … I thought that you ran a mile as soon as you caught sight of one” (*The Eight Mountains* 182). Lara’s claim links Pietro not only to Giovanni but also to Bruno since the latter too had very few contacts with other people. Self-isolation is one of the central themes of the novel and Pietro, Bruno, and Giovanni’s lives all show the danger of this isolation; shutting other people out and refusing to enter in contact with others make the three characters suffer greatly. They prevent Giovanni from creating a meaningful relationship with his son, Pietro from enjoying his father’s company before he dies, and Bruno from leaving the mountains in order to be there for his daughter. Yet it is in the moment in which Pietro realizes that these same flaws he once condemned in his father, such as the tendency to push people away, are also distinguishing traits of himself that a sort of peace is regained.

The mountains further connect Pietro and Giovanni because they are the place in which their respective friends die; Pietro is only able to fully understand the tragic depth of his father’s personality after having experienced the loss of Bruno. Pietro learns from his mother than when Giovanni was a young adult he was a close friend of her brother, Piero. One day, “[Piero and
Giovanni decided to head … for a fork of the Sassolungo, and found themselves crossing a slope in the afternoon sun” (The Eight Mountains 149). While they were there, a catastrophe that no one was expecting happened: the snow suddenly buried Piero and killed him. This event so traumatized Giovanni that he never directly told it to his son. After hearing the story, Pietro comes to realize that, “I knew once and for all that I had two fathers: the first had been the stranger with whom I had lived for twenty years, and then burnt my bridges with for another ten; the second was my father as he was in the mountains … the man who walked behind me on the paths” (The Eight Mountains 153). Cognetti draws additional parallels between Pietro and Giovanni by showing how they both lose a friend for a similar reason and this creates an emotional connection between son and father, even after the latter is dead. The only way in which Pietro can fully understand his father is to experience the same loss he experienced in the past. As his father had had a close friend whom he lost, so does Pietro change his perception of life after Bruno dies. This tragic event leads him to reflect on the similarity between his father and himself:

from my father I had learnt, long after I had stopped following him along the paths, that in certain lives there are mountains to which we may never return. That in lives like his and mine you cannot go back to the mountain that is in the centre of all the rest, and at the beginning of your own story. And that wandering around the eight mountain is all that remains for those who, like us, on the first and highest have lost a friend. (The Eight Mountains 256)

The loss of Bruno enables Pietro to retrospectively see his father in an empathetic way. Bruno’s death is what closes the circle of the novel and what makes the child able to understand the sufferings of the father at last.
Bruno also becomes a father and he replicates with his daughter the same family patterns he experienced when he was a young boy by imitating his father’s behavior; in his case, the mountains represent a threat to fatherhood as his excessive attachment to them prevents him from fulfilling his role as father towards his daughter. As a child, Bruno has an absent father and the few times they are together he feels like “it always seems like I irritate him” (The Eight Mountains 54). Bruno is to his father nothing but a property. “He had come to reclaim what was his,” is how Pietro describes the moment in which Bruno’s father attacks Giovanni and tells him he will not allow his own son to go to live in Milan with them (The Eight Mountains 79).

Bruno’s father’s decision to not send his son to the city indicates how he perpetuates ideas of patriarchy in which he is the head everyone has to obey without ever taking into consideration his child’s opinion. Even though, as seen, Bruno would probably have not been happy in town, as it would have deprived him of the qualities that make him stand out, his father’s prohibition does not even contemplate the possibility of giving his son a choice. This lack of attention from his father figure comes to shape Bruno as he grows up to the point that his patterns of behavior as a man imitates the ones of his parent. Silke-Maria Weineck explains how “every father has once been a son; for this reason alone his self-image will be contaminated by the remnants of his earlier, filial perspective” (105). This is what happens in Bruno’s case, as a son who has been neglected by his father he is unable to avoid replicating the same patterns with his daughter. Indeed, as Pietro reflects on the nature of his friend, “above all [Bruno] was his father’s son: just like him he would disappear from the life of his child, and that was it” (The Eight Mountains 239). Even though Bruno is a kind-hearted person, the fact that he did not receive love from his parent prevents him from fulfilling the father’s role as he does not have a model to imitate. “I know how to milk a cow, how to make cheese, to cut down a tree,” Bruno tells Pietro, “… but
who teaches you to be a father? Not my own father, that’s for sure” (The Eight Mountains 222). Bruno finds himself unable to break free from the family dynamics he experienced as a child and he turns out to be an absent father, as his own father was, before he prematurely dies.

In a novel like The Eight Mountains, in which one of the main themes is male identity and the construction of it, fathers play an important role. The two main characters, Pietro and Bruno, have respectively a solitary father and an absent one and they end up, in some way, replicating their patterns of behavior once they grow up. In the novel, the relationships of the characters with their fathers are all mediated by the mountains. The mountains are the place that connect Giovanni to Pietro: not only do they share a similar love for them, but they are the place in which they both lost their closest friend. Even before the tragic ending of the story, in which Pietro comes to realize and empathize with the burden and sufferings his father was carrying inside himself, Giovanni is the undisputed father who is at the center of the narration and plays an important role for both Pietro and Bruno. He becomes a substitutive father for Bruno, too, when the latter has problems with his own parent, as Pietro’s mother tells her son, “dad helped him a lot … Bruno fell out with his own father … I think he didn’t even see him for years. So if he needed any advice he would come here” (The Eight Mountains 136). But Giovanni is also the agent who (re)connects Pietro and Bruno themselves and he does this in the mountains. After his death, Giovanni leaves a house in the mountains to his son, and asks Bruno to build it. This is what reunites the two friends after many years in which they had not talked. Pietro describes the situation saying, “perhaps Bruno and I were actually living inside my father’s dream. We had found each other again in a pause in our lives” (The Eight Mountains 162). The merit of this reconciliation is Giovanni’s; not only is he important in the construction of Pietro’s identity as
his father, but he is also the one who gives new meaning and life to his son’s friendship with Bruno.
2. Nature Writing in *The Eight Mountains*

As seen in the introduction of the previous chapter, Paolo Cognetti owes much to the literary tradition of the United States. Not only does he reinterpret themes of American literature in his novel, but he explicitly admits the impact American literary works had on his own life. One of the American narratives that most significantly inspired Cognetti is the true story of Cristopher McCandless; a story that would change Cognetti’s own way of looking at the world and heavily influence his future writings as well. McCandless was an American young man who, after graduating from college in 1990, decided to donate his personal savings to Oxfam and “[invent] a new life for himself, taking up residence at the ragged margin of our society, wandering across North America in search of a raw, transcendent experience” (Krakauer, Author’s Note). Unfortunately, his adventure does not have a happy ending: after journeying cross-country, McCandless reached Alaska where he eventually died of starvation and his corpse was only found four months later, in September 1992. Commenting on the enormous influence of McCandless’s life and death on the American collective imagination, Jon Krakauer, an American journalist who reported on this story in the *Outside* magazine, and later wrote a book about it, *Into the Wild*, asserts that, “it generated more mail than any other article in the magazine’s history” (Author’s Note). The 2007 film adaptation of McCandless’s biography, *Into the Wild*, directed by Sean Penn, is what deeply moved Cognetti and led him to change his own life-style. In our email exchange, Cognetti told me that, “I watched *Into the Wild* on the day of my 30th birthday, I was very sad and found myself at a dead-end in my life. I cried for the whole movie, for the way in which I recognized myself in [McCandless], and three months afterwards I
was living in a mountain lodge that I started to look for immediately after leaving the cinema.” McCandless’s story did not just have an impact on Cognetti’s personal life, but also on the themes he explores in his *The Eight Mountains*, such as the relationship between the individual and nature.

In his novel, Cognetti reinterprets the American narrative that nature can offer an escape to those who do not want to comply with the society in which they live. The most illustrious American author who wrote about seeking refuge in nature is the nineteenth century philosopher and intellectual Henry David Thoreau who, in his book *Walden*, presents his reflections about two years of his life in which he withdrew from society and lived in the woods. Thoreau is the “central figure in the field [of nature writing],” and he is also very important to Cognetti (Finch qtd. in Ryden 53). Indeed, on his blog, Cognetti describes *Walden* as “the book of one of his teachers, without whom [he] would not be where he is, and would not do what he does, and so he maybe would not be himself anymore but another person” (“Il Ragazzo e il Lago”). Therefore, not only there would not be a novel to analyze in this dissertation had Cognetti not read *Walden*, but he probably would have not even become a writer. This declaration of love and admiration for Thoreau, who is the first modern American nature writer, echoes in *The Eight Mountains*, too, that is a book that belongs to the nature writing genre for its way of describing the mountains, which are not just the setting of the story, but its very core.

In *The Eight Mountains*, Cognetti merges this American idea of nature as an escape from society, which both Thoreau and McCandless present, with an Italian concept of nature itself, which differs greatly from the American one. In Italian culture, nature is not the dangerous wilderness of the American collective imagination, and of literary representations, but a place of cohabitation; a place framed by humans. Indeed, while Americans perceive nature as fascinating
but also wild and mighty due to its vastness, Italians live in a much smaller country and, since they have always inhabited it in its entirety, they see nature as less intimidating but as something of which they too are part. For example, even the majestic Dolomites, which UNESCO has listed as a World Heritage Site, are the repository of human culture since not only they are inhabited but there are also “about 30,000 inhabitants … [who still speak and write] the Ladin language” (“Cultural Heritage of the Dolomites”). The presence of the Ladin language shows how the Dolomites are, therefore, a place which is also extremely important from a cultural point of view since they have a population that speaks a minority language. While man’s relationship with nature in Italy is of co-existence, with man living inside of nature and not perceiving it as a threat, John Raskin asserts that in America, “writers can’t help but hear [the] call [of the wild] and walk on the wild side, too … the wilderness—as friend, foe, rough beast, and sacred place—has long provided American writers with a sense of place and distinguished them from their English literary cousins” (198). It is fair to say that this has also distinguished them from Italian writers who, as I will further show later, do not have the same views of the dangers and excitements of nature as the Americans do but rather feel a sense of communion with nature. Cognetti too on his blog argues that, “compared to Alaska, the mountain I lived in is not a wild place, but a forsaken civilization” (“Il Ragazzo Selvatico”). The idea that in Italy nature also shows the remains of human civilization appears in The Eight Mountains too; the characters seek refuge in the natural world like Thoreau and McCandless did but while living in a place that is indeed a “forsaken civilization”, which was once inhabited by a discrete amount of people, and not a threatening wilderness.

The characters in The Eight Mountains feel a sense of nostalgia for this pre-industrial civilization and believe that the mountains can provide them with an alternative to the society of
their time and seek refuge there. Like Thoreau and especially McCandless, the characters in Cognetti’s novel, too, abhor the chains and the rules that ensnare them, or would ensnare them, in Bruno’s case, in the city. However, while in both *Walden* and the real story of McCandless there is a departure from the human community in cities – Thoreau withdraws to the woods and Cristopher runs away and journeys cross-country – this does not happen in Cognetti. In *The Eight Mountains*, Giovanni, Pietro, and Bruno all idealize the mountains as a potential substitute for the capitalist society of the contemporary city but they do not escape: Giovanni and Pietro never fully leave the city behind and Bruno simply does not run away because, as seen in the previous chapter, he is a *montanaro*: he was born and raised in the mountains, so for him they are not a refuge from a place he is running away from, but where he has always lived. However, Bruno, too, genuinely chooses to stay in the mountains and refuses to become a worker in the city. Nonetheless, like McCandless’s tragic ending in *Into the Wild*, *The Eight Mountains* shows how the idealism of seeking in nature an alternative to capitalist society ultimately fails: Bruno, like McCandless, dies crushed by the natural world which he had idealized.

**The Harmony Between Man and Nature in Italian Literature: Giuseppe Ungaretti and Eugenio Montale**

Since no piece of literature exists in a vacuum, I believe that *The Eight Mountains*, while being a novel that shares many features with American literary works, inevitably possesses traits that link it to the contemporary Italian canon. Indeed, even though Cognetti is profoundly fascinated by American literature, he is an Italian writer who writes in the Italian language. I thus believe it is also important to mention two of the most famous Italian poets of the twentieth century who explored the relationship between man and nature in their writings: Giuseppe
Ungaretti and 1975 Nobel laureate for literature Eugenio Montale. Also in this case, my choice of these two specific poets is not arbitrary. Ungaretti and Montale were both important intellectuals, not only in the Italian cultural panorama, but in the whole Continent; “Allen Tate observ[es] that as a result of the work of poets such as Ungaretti and Montale, the poetic center of continental Europe … shifted from France to Italy” (qtd. in Rebay 552). In their poems, both Ungaretti and Montale show what I have already mentioned before: an idea of nature that is different from the American wilderness: a nature of which mankind is a part and with which feels in communion.

Ungaretti was a soldier who fought in the trenches in World War I and, in his “I Fiumi” [My Rivers], he reveals how being in harmony with the natural world, which in his poem is represented by four rivers dear to him, can make him recuperate a sense of connection with the cosmos after the terrible experiences of the war. Ungaretti writes, “Questo è l’Isonzo / e qui meglio / mi sono riconosciuto / una docile fibra / dell’universo / il mio supplizio / è quando / non mi credo / in armonia / ma quelle occulte / mani / che m’intridono / mi regalano / la rara / felicità [This is the Isonzo / and here I have / best known myself to be / an obedient nerve / of the universe / My torture is / not to believe myself / in harmony / But those hidden / hands that knead me / give to me / the rarest / happiness]” (40). By being in the water, the poet reconnects to the whole universe and feels a part of it. He recognizes he is a component of the cosmos by entering the river Isonzo, which gives him a special feeling of joy even during the brutality of the war years. In his perception, the natural world is not a foe for humans to defeat or conquer, but it is rather something with which mankind is intimate and in communion: the river re-establishes in Ungaretti a sense of wholeness with the entire universe.
Montale, in his “I Limoni” [The Lemon Trees], describes the epiphanic moment of seeing some lemon-trees, which create in him, like the rivers in Ungaretti’s poem, a sense of harmony with the natural world. Montale writes that, in “the orchards, among trunks / of lemon trees,” he listens to the “murmur of friendly / boughs / … that fills the senses with this odor / inseparable from the earth / … here even to us poor falls our share of riches, / and it is the scent of the lemon-trees” (3). Being in nature brings peace to the poet, he calls the boughs “friendly”, and establishes a personal relationship with the natural world, a world that embraces everyone independently of their social status. Montale ends his poem by showing how, even when he returns to the city, a glimpse of the lemon-trees can bring back all the positive feelings he once experienced in nature, “but the illusion wanes and time returns us / to our clamorous cities where the blue appears / only in patches … / when one day through a half-shut gate, / among the leafage of a court / the yellows of the lemon blaze / and the heart’s ice melts / and songs / pour into the breast / from golden trumpets of solarity” (5). The harmony with the natural world, which could have been dismissed as a mere illusion on returning to the hectic city-life, proves to be something that still touches the heart of the person who once experienced this sense of communion with nature even when s/he is no longer there but in the city.

*The Eight Mountains: Idealizing Nature and Rejecting The City*

*The Eight Mountains* is a novel mostly set in the Italian Alps and in which nature occupies a primary place. There are scenes described in the city, as for instance when Pietro recalls his childhood in Milan, but the majority of the events of the narration happen in the mountains. Randall Roorda defines nature writing as “that branch of literature human’s estate which deals particularly with what is not human” (1). In Cognetti, the human and the non-human
constantly interact: the non-human, i.e. the natural world, provides the human, i.e. the characters of the novel, with the possibility of escaping from the life in the city. Giovanni, Pietro, and Bruno all have a special relationship with the mountains. However, this relationship varies greatly in the three characters and each one of them represents a different way of interacting with nature. The three of them all think the mountains can potentially be an alternative to capitalist society, and share with Thoreau and Cristopher McCandless the view that nature can indeed be the place in which one can withdraw from society. However, the way in which Giovanni, Pietro, and Bruno approach the natural world are contrasting. Giovanni, who is thirty one years older than his son and was born in 1942, thus before the end of the war, has a more practical relationship with nature. He has an exhausting job in the city and sees in the mountains a place of escape, yet his attitude once he is there shows how he wants to seize and conquer the natural world. Conversely, Pietro and Bruno do not exploit nature, but while Bruno actually belongs to the reality of Grana and is a montanaro, Pietro tries to appropriate a reality that is not his, since he is not a montanaro, and mediates his relationship with the mountains with the literature he reads. Pietro and Bruno are not from the same class and while Pietro fantasizes about staying in the mountains without a cognition of what living there all year long would actually imply, Bruno is conscious that he would be part of the exploited class of people if he moved to the city and tries to hold on to the possibility of staying in the mountains forever, until his dream is crushed by nature in which he was seeking refuge.

Giovanni is a college educated middle-class worker, a chemist, who feels exasperation for the life in which he is trapped and tries to find in nature an alternative in which he can enjoy the happiness he does not have in the city. Cognetti writes that, “[Giovanni] worked as a chemist in a factory … constantly subject to strike action and sackings, and whatever had taken place in
there, he would return home in the evening full of anger … he continued not to sleep at night, to wear earplugs and take pills for his headaches, to explode in violent fits of rage” (*The Eight Mountains* 5). Peter Fleming argues that, “[people] work, not because [they] want to or like it, but because it has become a way of life with little alternative or way out … Work has become a virtual portmanteau that weighs upon [people’s] shoulders, its negative energy swallowing everything around [them] like some perfidious black hole” (22). This is exactly what happens in Giovanni’s case. He is not satisfied with the job he has and has a lot of anger inside himself for the stress he accumulates because of it. His job at the factory affects his health and his son describes him as an unhappy person. However, Giovanni becomes a different man when he is in the mountains; there, he is “cheerful and talkative” (10). Pietro himself describes the hectic city-life of the eighties and draws a contrast between “down below, where we lived, were factories in turmoil, overcrowded social housing, riots in the piazza … : up there, the snow” (7). Cognetti presents through Pietro’s eyes the two worlds in direct opposition: one is infected by the effects of an excessive industrialization and alienated labor, whereas the other retains a sense of purity symbolized by the snow, “the peaks were white, the sky a rare blue, the sensation as of a miracle” (7). This passage echoes the idea that Montale presents in his “The Lemon Trees”: having a glimpse of nature in the city can reconnect one with the natural world itself. However, this sense of harmony is hard to find in the city: even though Giovanni is middle-class and has a college degree, he still feels exploited at the factory and works for many hours a day; he is trapped in a cycle of never-ending repetition with no way out. His job at the factory drains his energies and crushes his soul. “Some nights my father could stand it no longer,” Pietro reports, “he would get out of bed and fling open the window as if he wanted to inveigh against the city”
(3). City-life exhausts and irritates Giovanni and he is happy only when he leaves Milan behind and is in nature.

The mountains offer Giovanni a better reality than the one that his social class gives him access to in the industrial city of Milan. After Giovanni’s death, Pietro is hiking by himself one of the mountain peaks and finds a notebook in which his father once wrote, “it would be wonderful to just say up here all together, without having to see anyone any more, without having to go back down the valley” (162). The desire to stay forever up in the mountains was of course impossible for Giovanni to fulfill because otherwise he would have lost his job. While Giovanni might find another job, he cannot envisage his life in another way: though he does not have the financial constraints of an operative, he feels trapped and desires to escape from the industrialized society, while, at the same time being an active part of it. Therefore, there is no real escape from the “valley”. Giovanni can only spend in the mountains the days of vacation he has, and, as he writes on the collective diary of a mountain hut, “[I] don’t much feel like going back to the city, but I’ll take with me the memory of these days as the most beautiful refuge” (75). As an adult, Pietro too comes to the realization that, “I knew once and for all that I had two fathers: the first had been the stranger with whom I had lived for twenty years in the city … the second was my father as he was in the mountains … the man who walked behind me on paths, the lover of glaciers” (The Eight Mountains 153). Living in the city had made Giovanni a “stranger” to his own son, a man alienated in his labor who felt stressed and anxious about a job that was consuming him. An alternative to this lifestyle was to go live in the mountains without ever going back to Milan, but this was pure idealism unattainable in real life. The description Cognetti makes of Giovanni echoes Thoreau’s claim that “the laboring man … has no time to be anything but a machine,” which is exactly what Giovanni is when he is in the city (3).
Acknowledging this uneasy truth is precisely what makes Giovanni so nervous all the time, whereas in the mountains he is a different person who is not as peevish as when he is in Milan, but a man in love with the glaciers and the nature that surrounds him.

However, even though he has feelings of appreciation towards it, Giovanni’s relationship with the natural world is of domination; as he himself is crushed by the industrial mechanisms, he then tries to conquer nature since it is the only place in which he can be in control. Pietro affirms that, “my father had his own way of going to the mountains: scarcely inclined to meditation, full of obstinacy and arrogance” (*The Eight Mountains* 1). Giovanni’s attitude in the mountains matches Paul Thomas’ claim that, “[in Cohen’s view,] nature is … not an externalization of man but his antagonist, to be conquered, subjugated, and controlled” (486). Even though Giovanni sincerely cherishes the value of nature, and therefore does not see it as his “antagonist”, but is for example in “high spirits” while being in an “Alpine refuge with [his] son,” he still approaches the natural world as a conqueror and not with the same humble respect of Pietro and Bruno, as I will show later (*The Eight Mountains* 76). Giovanni is uncapable of fully appreciating his time in the mountains but sees his walks and hikes there more as a challenge than as something to enjoy. Pietro says that, “[my father gave me] rules to follow … one, establish a pace and keep to it without stopping; two, no talking; three, when faced with a fork in the way, always choose the uphill route … for at least an hour he would not countenance a break; not to get our breath back, or to drink, or to look at anything … the woods were of no interest to him” (*The Eight Mountains* 37). This passage demonstrates how Giovanni fails in being one with nature but rather wants to exploit it; his attitude prevents him from benefiting from the pleasures that a walk in the mountains could give him, but he sees his hikes as an act of
domination, his last goal is only to get to the top by always choosing the hardest route without enjoying the other perks that nature has to offer.

Bruno has a very different approach to the mountains; he does not have the desire to exploit nature since he is a part of the natural world – a world that, as stated before, differs greatly from the American wilderness in that it is a place in which human physical infrastructures and nature have for centuries been merged. Bruno comes from a lower social class than Pietro and his parents, and he is in a position of subordination towards them as they are one of his own family’s sources of income. Indeed, Pietro’s family rents an house which belongs to Bruno’s aunt. After Giovanni and Bruno’s father argue because the latter refuses to send his son to live in Milan and punches Giovanni in the face, Bruno’s aunt pays a visit to Pietro’s family because she is worried “above all by the prospect of losing such faithful tenants” (*The Eight Mountains* 79). Grana is a very small village – Pietro reports that “fourteen people were living in Grana, in 1984, but in the past there had been as many as one hundred,” – and so the sources of income are limited (31). Bruno is a part of this reality of this small mountain village in which “there were more [abandoned buildings] than we could have wished for: old stables, old haylofts and granaries, and old shop with its dust-covered, empty shelves,” and even “the school in Grana was being used now only to rear the fat” (31). The fact that even Bruno’s school is in disuse further shows the class difference between the two children: Pietro is a student in the city, whereas Bruno has limited access to education since his own origins limit the possibilities he has. Since Bruno has always lived in Grana, he is knowledgeable about all these buildings, and shows them to Pietro just as he shows him the natural world, such as “the river [that] passes through the shadow cast by the little wooden bridge,” because for him, like all
Montanari, nature and human infrastructures are not two separate entities but two realities fused together (23).

Even though the world of the mountain is disappearing, Bruno does not want to escape from the natural world in which he was born and raised. Rather, by deciding to stay there, Bruno refuses to become an oppressed worker in the city, whereas Cristopher McCandless’ act of protest against the capitalist society in which he lives consists of the opposite choice: he leaves the place in which he was born to seek refuge in the wilderness. In May 1992, McCandless, after having reached Alaska, writes on his journal, referring to himself in the third person, that:

> Two years he walks the Earth. No phone, no pool, no pets, no cigarettes. Ultimate freedom. An extremist. An aesthetic voyager whose home is the road. Escaped from Atlanta. Thou shalt not return, 'cause "the West is the best." And now after two rambling years comes the final and greatest adventure. The climactic battle to kill the false being within and victoriously conclude the spiritual revolution. Ten days and nights of freight trains and hitchhiking bring him to the great white north. No longer to be poisoned by civilization he flees, and walks alone upon the land to become lost in the wild. (Krakauer 163)

In this journal entry, the young man shows how, to him, being in Alaska represents the possibility of leaving behind “civilization” which was having a poisonous effect on him. Indeed, as Hanssen asserts, “McCandless … [finds] solace in the natural world, away from the hegemony of American materialism” (193). Being in the wild represents for him definitive departure from all the constraints of society. Once again, Cognetti’s novel, differently from most American narratives, does not present the idea of a journey – like the one connected to male bonding in the first chapter of this dissertation – since Bruno’s idea of liberty, though similar to McCandless’s
in refusing to be under the “poison[ous]” effects of civilization, consists of not moving away. McCandless’s journey takes him far away, and he could always potentially go home if he wanted to, whereas Bruno has the option of making the opposite choice: leaving his own home to move to the industrial city – something he refuses to do.

While McCandless writes that “[his] home is the road,” Bruno makes a conscious decision of staying in Grana even though this implies less economic certainties that if he were living in the city. He and his girlfriend Lara decide to live in the mountains permanently and maintain themselves by breeding cows and making cheese. “A house, a stable and a storeroom … [Bruno] was the master of the place now,” Pietro affirms describing the condition of his friend (The Eight Mountains 190-191). There in Grana, Bruno can be his own master, instead of being an underpaid worker alienated in the products of his labor in the city. Being in the Alps is Bruno’s way of fighting alienation: he can connect to his own work in an intimate way that would not happen if he were working in a cheese factory in the city. Bruno’s life aspiration seems similar to the way Thoreau lived while he was in Walden, who writes that, “[while I stayed in Walden, I] earned my living by the labor of my hands only” (1). Describing the daily work of his friend, Pietro reports that “it would take [Bruno] about five minutes to obtain as many litres of milk from each [cow] … there were no Saturdays or Sundays on the farm … yet he loved this ritual and would not see it done by anyone else” (The Eight Mountains 192). Lara, too, presents her boyfriend as “[a man] who never wants to come down from the mountain … [and] who has spent all that he has in order to stay up there and make cheese” (The Eight Mountains 200). This is for Bruno the realization of his dream; since he does not have an education, Bruno’s only option if he moved to the city would be to join the social class that is exploited daily in factories, whereas in the mountains, even though it does not profit much, he
can have a job he truly enjoys doing. Bruno’s refusal to comply with society is so determinate that Lara tells Pietro that, “[if they had sold everything and looked for jobs,] Bruno would have been quickly taken on at a building site or dairy processing unit … [but he] did not want to know about it” (*The Eight Mountains* 242). Doing these jobs, Bruno would have a higher pay but, instead of being in control, he would only be a part of the bigger machine, whereas by breeding the cows and making cheese he is autonomous and lives a daily communion with the natural world similar to the one expressed by Ungaretti and Montale in their poems. Bruno makes the opposite choice to his father who left Grana every spring to go abroad “wherever he could find a building site in need of workers” (29). Bruno, too, has this option but never contemplates it as a possibility; he despises this idea and stays in the natural world that is so dear to him.

The character of Bruno shares with Christopher McCandless the refusal to embrace capitalist ideologies; however, the reality of Grana, for the very fact that it is a village and not the wilderness of Alaska, still retains economic patterns of capitalist societies. Indeed, even though Alaska too is an inhabited State, Krakauer reports that where McCandless lived, “[he] was cut off from the rest of the world. He spent nearly four months in the bush all told, and during that period he didn’t encounter another living soul” (165). By refusing to go to a place inhabited by other people, McCandless also rejected any economic transactions and lived in a wild area in which, even though “he had always been ambivalent about killing animals,” he had to hunt to get food (Krakauer 166). Conversely, in *The Eight Mountains*, Cognetti writes how there are still fourteen people who live in the village of Grana. Even though these people live in a small mountain reality and not in the industrial city such as Pietro’s family, they cannot escape from money and monetary transactions. For example, when Bruno and Pietro are children, besides the rent that Pietro’s family pays to Bruno’s aunt, Cognetti reveals other sources of income of
Bruno’s family. Giovanni starts with Bruno’s uncle a “discussion about the economics of small Alpine farmsteads,” and asks him about “[his] work … how many head of cattle, how many litres of milk a day, what the yield was like regarding the production of cheese” (*The Eight Mountains* 48). As Amiya Kumar Bagchi points out, “under capitalism … all goods [come] to be commodified and most assets [become] object of sale and purchase” (5). Selling their own goods is exactly what Bruno’s family does: they sell what they produce in order to make money to sustain themselves. Even though there are people, like Bruno’s father, who decide to look for job opportunities abroad, those who stay are not cut off from society as McCandless, but participate in the economy by trading their products and earning a living from it. Therefore, Bruno is fighting capitalism by trying to live by a traditional economy.

However, like in all natural realities, capitalism has a double effect on the mountains: on the one side, it favors the circulation of money there, but on the other it is also responsible for the ecological destruction of natural areas. While the above paragraph shows how money circulates in the summer for the people who live in Grana all year long, Cognetti hints how – in the novel like in the real world – the real enrichment of the mountains happen in the winter. However, this enrichment comes at a high price: Cognetti gives Giovanni’s point of view that the people who go to the mountains in the winter months have no respect for the natural world, “he despised them because they arrived in herds and left behind nothing but ruins … thousands of people from the cities invaded the Alpine valleys, got into queues at those stations and hurtled down our paths” (59). Giovanni condemns the lack of consideration that these winter tourists have for the mountains; they are all people who want to go skiing but show no respect for nature. As an adult, Pietro thinks, “I imagined from above the lines of cars, the overflowing car parks, the establishments working to full capacity without a break” (*The Eight Mountains* 252). All these
factors, such as a lot of people arriving and many establishments working nonstop, match what Jameson calls “the ecological destruction perpetuated by capitalism” (qtd. in Biro 8). A great number of people from the cities want to have a quick escape from their lives and go to the mountains: they bring money there but they also favor the ecological destruction caused by ski resorts. This destruction is more evident in the summer, when no one is around anymore and, the few who are, like Pietro’s family, reports, “we would come across the pylon of a chairlift, or the remains of a caterpillar track stuck on a threadbare piste, or what was left of a disused cable station at altitude, a rusted wheel on a block of cement in the middle of scree” (The Eight Mountains 59).

Bruno’s ideal of being economically self-sufficient by having his own farming business in the mountains fails; however, even when his dream vanishes, Bruno still makes the conscious choice of not leaving his native soil and, like McCandless, he dies alone in nature. After Pietro returns from Nepal, he comments on the situation of his friend’s farm and says that, “the place changed from being a happy farmstead to being a business that was in the red … the money came and went, leaving [Bruno and Lara] with nothing to spare, and making no inroad on their debt with the bank” (The Eight Mountains 218). Bruno’s hopes of being able to work and make money in the place in which he was born proves to be unsuccessful. Not even in his beloved mountain reality can he escape from the oppression of capitalist society, and, burdened by dept, Bruno “declared himself bankrupt, shut down the agricultural business and … Lara went to live with her parents with the child” (225). Like McCandless, Bruno then decides to leave human society behind and goes to live in the house “up at Barma,” which he and Pietro had built in the past (227). However, the novel shows the impossibility of fully cutting oneself off from society and the risks connected to the idea of trying to impose oneself in nature. Although Bruno,
differently from Giovanni, has no desire to dominate the natural world, he still challenges nature by deciding to live by himself in the high part of the mountains during an impervious winter when the only logical choice would be not to stay there. Pietro, alarmed by the situation, suggests his friend leave Barma and go back to Grana, “you should come down with me,” to which Bruno replies, “you mustn’t worry about me. This mountain has never done me any harm” (The Eight Mountains 252). Even when given the option to leave, Bruno still stubbornly decides not to do it. Despite the fact that Bruno has seen how he cannot have a job in his mountains, he refuses to accept that he has to leave. At the end of the novel, Pietro reports that, “it turned out that in … 2004 the Western Alps had the heaviest snow for half a century … I could hardly begin to imagine what eight metres of snow would look like in the high mountains. It was enough to bury the woods. So much more than what was needed to bury a house” (The Eight Mountains 253). By hearing this news, Pietro is already aware of his friend’s death. Bruno had decided to remain up in the mountain even though it was dangerous. He could have gone to Grana, or down in the valley, but finds his death in nature where “they would find [him] with the firs thaw. He would turn up in some gorge in the middle of summer” (254).

Pietro’s relationship with nature is a conciliation of Giovanni’s and Bruno’s and, of the three men, he is the one who has the most intellectual connection with the natural world because of his interest in reading. Indeed, from the very beginning of the novel, Cognetti shows how Pietro’s relationship with nature is mediated by the literature he reads rather than by his father. “I was reading adventure stories at the time, and it was Mark Twain who had induced in me a love of rivers,” Pietro explains while narrating the first time he and his family went to Grana (The Eight Mountains 15). Twain’s words ignite in the young boy a love for the natural world and prompts him to its discovery. Already as a child, Pietro was a voracious reader and Cognetti
reveals that the books Pietro had with him in the house in Grana were by “Stevenson, Verne, Twain, Jack London,” all authors who explored the relationship between the individual and nature in their writings (66). Thoreau calls books “the treasured wealth of the world,” and they are a treasure indeed to the young boy who learns from them about the natural world (69). When, as an adult, Pietro lives part of the year in his house in the mountains, he leads a similar life to the one described by Thoreau in his Walden. Differently from McCandless, both Thoreau and Pietro live only in partial isolation and do not refuse the company of other people. Thoreau writes that, “I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society” (94). Similarly, Pietro affirms that, “during the week I lived alone, reading, writing, cutting wood and wandering around the old paths … but on Saturdays during the summer there was always someone who would seek me out there … and that shared isolation from the world … made us all brothers for a night” (The Eight Mountains 177). Like the American philosopher, Pietro dedicates part of his time also to intellectual activities: he does work, but he also reads, writes, and meditates. However, he also enjoys spending time with those who come to visit him up in the mountain and does not seclude himself.

However, Pietro, differently from Bruno, is not a montanaro, so he idealizes the mountains as a potential place of escape from society without having a concrete notion, which Bruno has when he tries to start his business there, of how to do this. Indeed, even though Bruno’s plan ultimately fails, Bruno does try to create a suitable situation for him to work and stay in the mountains without having to move to the city, whereas Pietro gets his ideas from his readings but lacks the practical knowledge necessary to put them into practice. Pietro reports that:
with [some] friends … we were reading Murray Bookchin and dreaming, or pretending to dream, of turning one of the abandoned villages into an ecological community where we could experiment with our ideas about society … only [in the mountains] would we be left in peace … how would we manage for food? What would we do about electricity? … a little money would still be necessary: how would we earn it? … it was this utopian game that we would play of an evening, at weekends. (179)

Pietro, too, sees in nature the potential for an alternative life to the one that the contemporary industrial city has to offer. He romanticizes the natural world as a place in which no one will bother him and the friends with whom he is dreaming to build this ecological community. However, the fact that Pietro’s ideas would be hard to carry out further uncovers his differences with Bruno, who is not a man from the city tired of his routine trying to invent a new life for himself, but a person who really is from the mountains and therefore has more concrete plans. Indeed, Pietro affirms that,

Bruno, who was actually in the process of building his ideal village, amused himself by demolishing ours. He would say: without cement the houses would not stay up … and I’d like to see you try to cut wood without petrol for a chainsaw … and he would say: it’s only you townies who use the word *nature*. And it’s an abstract to you as the word itself. We say *wood, meadow, river, rock*, things that we can actually … [use]. (179)

Bruno exposes how people from the city, including Pietro, are far from the natural world. They like to play this game in which they imagine themselves capable of building an ecological community in which they would not need products that hurt the environment and would
eventually be self-sufficient, but then have no concrete notion on the world they want to inhabit. Once more, Bruno displays his identity as a *montanaro*, as a person who is knowledgeable about the mountain area in which he was born, differently from the “townies”.

Nonetheless, although Pietro is from the city, of the three main characters he is the one who understands that he can have a positive relationship with nature without secluding himself the way Bruno does, or desiring to conquer it as his father. Pietro is the one who is most similar to Ungaretti and Montale: like the two Italian poets, being in the natural world is for Pietro a way to reconnect to the universe. He finds in the mountains an harmonious connection with the cosmos:

> the lake was a nocturnal sky in motion; the wind was pushing flurries of small waves from one side to another, and as it changed direction it extinguished and rekindled along its lines of force the gleams of the stars reflected in the black water. I stood still, watching these patterns. It seemed to me to recall the life of the mountain before mankind. I did not disturb it; I was a welcome guest. I realized that in this company I would never be alone. (197)

Pietro is able to enter in a sense of companionship with nature and, by seeing its small wonders, he feels accepted by it. He differs from his father in that he is capable of appreciating the beauties of nature; he feels as if the natural world is embracing him and he is therefore “a welcome guest”. This passage echoes what Ungaretti writes in his poem when he affirms that he recognizes himself as “an obedient nerve / of the universe”. Pietro does never fully leave behind society, but is able to find in nature a place in which he can recuperate a sense of harmonious connection with the cosmos.
In *The Eight Mountains*, Cognetti reinterprets the American narrative that nature can be a refuge for those who want to escape from society. Being inspired by Thoreau and the true story of Cristopher McCandless, Cognetti wrote a novel in which his main characters, too, prize solitude and manifest contempt for their contemporary society. However, *The Eight Mountains* also shows how hoping to find in nature an alternative to capitalist society is a mere illusion. The three main characters of the novel, Giovanni, Bruno, and Pietro all despise city-life and, in their own way, idealize living in nature. Yet Giovanni can never move to the mountains because of his job and the stress he accumulates because of it when he is in Milan prevents him from fully benefiting from the pleasures of the natural world when he is in the mountains. Bruno tries to hold on to his identity as a *montaro* and starts a business in the Alps but he goes bankrupt and his refusal to move somewhere else ultimately leads to his death. Conversely, although Pietro too fantasizes about living permanently in the mountains, which turns out to be an unrealizable dream, he is able to love the natural world in a way that his father could not and does not isolate himself the way Bruno does, thus finding in nature his own positive dimension.
3. Translating Cultures: *The Eight Mountains* as a Case Study

In the previous two chapters of this dissertation, I tried to demonstrate how Cognetti transports themes that belong to the American literary tradition into Italian culture. Cognetti writes a novel that is set in the Italian Alps in his native language, while reinterpreting patterns of American literature, such as the tropes of male-bonding and nature writing. By doing so, Cognetti creates a culturally hybrid work, a cultural translation. As Michael Emmerich notes, “translation comes from the Latin word *translatus*, the past participle of *transferre*, which might be translated as ‘carried across’ … translation is often described as a ‘bridge’ between languages, cultures, nations” (49). Cognetti does not translate American works of fiction from English into Italian, but he does perform a cultural translation: indeed, in *The Eight Mountains*, he bridges American themes into Italian culture. Being a voracious reader of American texts, he introduces and adapts American tropes into an Italian narrative. I used the word “hybrid” earlier because Cognetti’s novel fuses American narratives with typical Italian characteristics and concepts, such as the already mentioned notion *montanaro*, discussed in chapter one. While this cultural translation granted Cognetti success in Italy and in many foreign countries, it did not sell well in the United States, the cultural context that produced these tropes. Cognetti’s novel did not thrive in the English speaking countries because, even though *The Eight Mountains* is a text that reinterprets American narratives, Cognetti emphasized their Italian meaning and used a specific language related to the mountains that was hard to translate into English.
Cognetti as a Cultural Translator

Cognetti is a cultural translator because he writes a novel set in Italy and in Italian that revolves around the concept of male-bonding, which is emblematic of American literature. Indeed, there are no notable Italian literary works that present the theme of male-bonding the same way that, for example, Twain and Kerouac do. The word “male-bonding” itself has no Italian equivalent. As an Italian native speaker, I wrapped my head around this concept trying to think of a term in Italian that could fully encompass what the English word designates and I could not find any. This already shows how the friendship between Pietro and Bruno, which would immediately be associated to the concept of male-bonding by an Anglo-American reader, is not perceived in the same way by an Italian one. This does not mean that educated Italian readers are not aware of the predominance of this theme in American literature or fail to link it to other famous literary couples of male friends. Indeed, because of American cultural hegemony even people who live outside of the United States are used to Anglo-American narratives. However, the Italian language lacks a word to define the idea of male-bonding itself. Therefore, in this sense, what Cognetti performs is an act of cultural translation because he takes an already existing concept in the literary tradition of another country and he “translates” it – just as one would do when translating a text from a language to another – by adapting it to the new setting of the Italian Alps by tying it to Bruno’s identity as a montanaro.

As seen in chapter 2, another cultural translation that Cognetti puts into practice revolves around the idea of how his characters interact with the natural world. Cognetti uses the American concept of nature as a place in which one withdraws and recovers a sense of his manhood. This idea differs from the notion of communing with nature in Italian literature – as for example the one that appears in Ungaretti and Montale’s works, as seen in the previous chapter. The two
Italian poets present nature as a place with which they can have an harmonious relationship and in which they can reconnect with the Universe, but they show no desire to seize or control the natural world. Cognetti fuses the American and Italian model and takes inspiration from the numerous examples in American literature of nature as a place in which man can seek refuge from civilization. Indeed, in *The Eight Mountains*, he reinterprets the American narrative of nature as a place which man can retreat and that is important in shaping man’s masculinity.

Commenting on the relationship between nature and its relation to male identity in American culture, Michael S. Kimmel argues that, “ever since the first few decades of the nineteenth century, [American] men have been running away – off to the frontier, the mountains, the forests, the high seas, the battlegrounds, outer space – to retrieve what they feel they’ve lost … their identity, their manhood” (116). Civilization performs an emasculating function on American men who can find again their masculinity in the brutal and dominating relationship with nature. While Pietro and Bruno, the main characters of Cognetti’s novel, do not have the desire to conquer the natural world, they, too, perceive nature as a place that is strongly connected to their male identity. They see nature as a place of meditation and peace, but also as a place that test their physical strength. In a novel like *The Eight Mountains* where male bonds are the prevalent relationships, nature becomes a mostly male-oriented space, where characters test and reassert their masculinity, which is how American authors have usually presented it in their literary works.

Both male-bonding and the relationship between man and nature are predominant themes of American literature and, by writing a novel that revolves around them, Cognetti is both endorsing them and Italianizing them. While he shows his appreciation for the American literary canon and the tropes it explores, in *The Eight Mountains*, Cognetti does not just passively copy
what he has read in American literature but brands it with an Italian identity. As seen in the previous chapters, not only does Cognetti deal with themes about Italian identities, such as Bruno’s origins as a *montanaro*, but he also uses the American theme of man’s retreat into nature to enter a national discussion concerning preserving the environment.

As *The Guardian* journalist Tobias Jones points out, “[Cognetti’s novel has] also become a bestseller because Italy is undergoing something of an identity crisis. Most people complain that the country is in terminal economic decline and that modernity isn’t all it was cracked up to be [so] there’s a growing back-to-the-land movement.” Cognetti thus uses these American tropes to explore how his own country might consider nature as a place in which the Italian people can find valuable alternatives to the reality of industrial cities that were affected by the economic crisis. Even though Cognetti’s novel shares many similarities with previous American works of fiction, and explores similar themes, it possesses a very profound Italian identity for the reality it presents. Indeed, the Italian people sometimes perceive the economic crisis as something coming from the outside – e.g. the United States and the European Monetary Union – that has refueled a nationalist nostalgia for traditional Italian economic systems which are more connected to the land and small businesses than the post-capitalistic models. As Vera Zamagni points out, “the 2008 global financial crisis hit Italy harder than the 1929 crisis, an exception among advanced nations. The reasons are easily found: smaller firms were not equipped to face such a major fall in demand, especially in the domestic market” (50). Therefore, Cognetti uses these American tropes to explore this shared sense of nostalgia for what could potentially be an happier reality (e.g. life in a small village such as Grana) as opposed to living in the industrial city of Milan, which was crushed by the economic crisis.
The Americanization of Culture in the 21st Century

In Italy, Cognetti’s novel was a literary success widely acclaimed by critics and readers; according to news magazine Panorama, The Eight Mountains was the third most sold book in 2017 (Santoni). I hope to have successfully shown in this dissertation how Cognetti’s novel reinterprets many patterns of American literature due to this author’s love and interest for American culture and how The Eight Mountains possesses traits that makes it stand out from other Italian novels. Indeed, The Eight Mountains offers Italian readers a new, fresh perspective allowing them to express their experience of living in a post-capitalist economy bringing it together with the Italian traditional relationship with nature. Commenting on the importance of literature as a tool of evasion, Tim Parks argues that:

There appears to be a tension … between evasion and realism in fiction, between the desire to read seriously about real things – to feel that one is not wasting time but engaging intelligently with the world – and simultaneously the desire to escape the confines of one’s immediate community … for Europeans, one way to satisfy both desires is to read novels translated from English. These works tend to talk about a culture that is to them far away but relevant because of the dominance of Anglo-Saxon and specifically American culture worldwide. (68)

The Eight Mountains is then a story that has a lot of potential for Italian readers. It is a novel deeply rooted in a culture with which most Italian people are familiar: Pietro’s family is originally from rural Veneto and then, like many other families in the twentieth century, they move to the industrial city of Milan to look for job opportunities, etc. Furthermore, the novel contains themes of American literature that Italians know because of the exposure they have had to American narratives due to American cultural hegemony. Therefore, The Eight Mountains
offers to its Italian readers a sense of escape from the daily life like an Anglo-American novel would. At the same time, though, while the themes it explores are not amongst the most common in Italian literature, Italian readers can also empathize with the characters of the novel and recognize similar patterns with their own lives. Indeed, *The Eight Mountains* is a work of fiction that reflects characteristics that are typical of Italy because Italian economy and politics are deeply influenced by the United States, just like their culture.

The unique mixture of American themes with Italian elements explains the success of Cognetti’s novel in Italy, but also its success outside of Italy. Adam Freudenheim, the publisher of Pushkin Press, notes that, “there are some books whose success is very local … but the best fiction almost always travels well” (qtd. in Cooke). This was the case of *The Eight Mountains* which, as Cognetti wrote me in our email exchange, was translated into 39 languages. Among the languages into which *The Eight Mountains* was translated, which include Dutch, Spanish, French, and Russian, there are many which are extra-European, as for example Arabic and Japanese. The power of Cognetti’s novel, which is what led it to be translated into so many foreign languages, lies in its presenting themes with which a global readership can empathize – such as the relationship between man and nature – without necessarily having a thorough knowledge of Italian society. At the same time, though, the fact that *The Eight Mountains* is set in an area that is not typical of collectively imagined Italian landscapes in literature, which is dominated by the major cities, the rolling Tuscan hills, Sicily, and the Mediterranean south, offers an outlandish and novel setting to the story for non-Italian readers. These Italian elements stimulate foreign readers’ curiosity; not living in Italy, they gain a sense of escape from their daily lives from the novel. At the same time, though, while the local element of *The Eight Mountains*, such as the detailed descriptions of the reality of a small village in the Alps, might be
exotic for a non-Italian person, the American themes in Cognetti’s novel are recognizable and easy to grasp by a vast majority of readers. As Sheldon Pollock argues, “the homogenization of culture today … seems without precedent in human history;” a homogenization which Pollock then proceeds to define as “[a] new universalizing order of culture power (call it globalization … or Americanization)” (591, 592). Therefore, since world culture has conformed to the American canon, because of its elements drawn from the American tradition and adapted to the Italian setting, the potential of The Eight Mountains, and one of the factors that contributed to its success in so many countries, lies in presenting these American narratives in a new, exciting context that is exotic for foreign readers.

The English Translation of The Eight Mountains

An Anglo-American reader approaches The Eight Mountains in a different way from an Italian one. The latter can read the novel in its original language, and is probably familiar with its narratives, but does not have the same level of knowledge of these themes as an American educated reader does. For example, an American has probably read The Adventures of Tom Sawyer in middle/high school and can recognize the similar patterns in Cognetti’s novel in a way that the average Italian probably cannot. Nevertheless, the originality of seeing these tropes being explored in an Italian setting is exactly what is so fascinating for an Italian reader, whereas the text loses some of its allure in its English translation. This does not happen because the translation is poorly done but because some concepts in the novel, such as the aforementioned notion of being a montanaro, are impossible to render in English and, therefore, part of the magic that Cognetti tries to evoke vanishes.
However, translation is an important process because it gives more people the possibility of reading the literary work and, in Cognetti’s case, it granted access to the text, in languages as diverse as Icelandic and Korean, to hundreds of thousands of people who do not speak Italian as their first language. Indeed, as Jason Grunebaum points out, “translation is about enlarging the conversation of literature” (161). Thanks to Simon Carnell and Erica Segre, *Le Otto Montagne* was translated into English as *The Eight Mountains*. In a sense, because the text was written by an author who is fascinated by American literature and inspired by the themes it explores, the English translation was the most important. It had a fundamental role both because of the predominance of the English language, and because it reintroduced the novel to the culture that produced the tropes it explores. However, the text did not sell particularly well in English speaking countries. The fact that English cannot translate important notions connected to the specific reality of the Italian Alps determined this lack of success in the United States and Great Britain. Indeed, these notions play a vital role in the storyworld of *The Eight Mountains*. The very reason that Cognetti Italianized American tropes and attached a new meaning to them which depended on the different national context and language used prevented the text to sell as well as it did in other places in the English speaking world. Indeed, Anglo-American readers have access to a great quantity of texts written in their native language that explores these tropes and, differently from readers from other countries, they were not as interested in seeing these themes, which were originally American, being reworked in a different context.

Another problem with the English translation of *The Eight Mountains* is that English is a language that lacks specific vocabulary related to the mountains which is crucial for a complete understanding of the novel. Providing a translation that could fully encompass the same meaning that Cognetti’s fictional work has in Italian was challenging. In chapter 1, I already discussed
how there is no English word that translates the concept of “montanaro.” It is a concept which is translated into English as “mountain man” and “mountaineer” but neither truly corresponds to its original meaning. Indeed, as Gunilla Anderman argues, “many social and cultural concepts … remain unknown outside national borders and, as a result, lack lexical designation in other languages” (6). Since the idea of being a “montanaro” is a crucial part of the novel, the fact that an adequate English translation does not exist – because it is a cultural concept that it is hard to grasp in places that do not share Italy’s same mountain culture – prevents English speaking readers from fully comprehending the ideas behind Bruno’s complex identity. Besides the already examined example of “montanaro”, Cognetti also wrote me that, “many key words of the novel were impossible to translate … [another example of a word untranslatable into English] is the word “alpeggio”, a stable and a grazing land used at high altitudes only during the summer.” “Alpeggio” was not translated into English but was italicized and kept in its original version also in Carnell and Segre’s translation (e.g. 30, 34).

Cognetti himself disapproved of the English translation of his text. He explained to me that, “I could only check two translations: the English and the French one, and I can tell you that the latter made me really happy (French, like Italian, possesses a vast vocabulary connected to the mountains), the former mostly disappointed me. The English translation of the novel impoverishes and drains it.” While Cognetti’s personal taste when it comes to how his novel was translated into foreign languages is not an objective indicator of the quality of the translation itself, the fact that he is both fluent in English and knowledgeable about mountains validates his opinion. Since Cognetti is an expert of the mountain, his is a critical comment on the translation itself. “As a European writer and as most of my work is set in the Alps, the translations I admire the most are the French and the German one,” Cognetti further wrote to me, “there I find readers
who can understand my story.” Therefore, while one does not need to be Italian to fully grasp the meaning behind Cognetti’s work, it seems that is important to have a vocabulary that it is generated by the experience of life in the mountains: English was unable to express everything that Cognetti wanted to say in his novel since it is a language distant from the culture of mountain places such as the Alps.

Of course, quality and success do not always go together and the fact that the English translation of *The Eight Mountains* did not sell well is by no means an indication of its value. “To give you some numbers,” Cognetti told me, “*The Eight Mountains* sold 350,000 copies in Italy, 200,000 in The Netherlands, and less than 10,000 in the United States and in the United Kingdom.” Even if these data seem discouraging, history offers a lot of examples of novels that received very little attention when they were first published in translation in the United States. The lack of interest that the English language native speakers have for fiction in translation was revealed worldwide in 2014 when French author Patrick Modiano won the Nobel prize for literature. Even though he was extremely popular in his home country, “[his] three books published in the United States — two novels and a children’s book — before the Nobel had collectively sold fewer than 8,000 copies” (Bilefsky and Breeden). This illustrious example shows how even a talented author, who won the most prestigious literary prize in the world, was unknown among the American people.

However, even though *The Eight Mountains* did not sell much in the United States and United Kingdom, its reception in the English speaking context was fairly positive. Among the many English reviews online, *The Guardian* journalist Ben East affirms that, “Cognetti captures the elation and melancholy that comes with reaching a spectacular summit, only to realise the minuscule part we play in the panorama of life.” Similarly, Sarah Gilmartin writes for *The Irish
*Times* that “[The Eight Mountains is] a beautifully crafted piece of writing.” Furthermore, *The New York Times* journalist John Gall compares Cognetti to the successful English author Helen Macdonald and writes that, “Cognetti’s mix of patient observation and sharp insight into the natural world recalls the mastery of [her] “H Is for Hawk.” As these reviews show, the novel was quite appreciated. Its lack of success with the public does not entirely depend on the impossibility of English to translate some key concepts of the novel, but also on the reluctancy of Anglo-American readers to read fiction in translation.

Indeed, translated fiction in general is not well received neither in the United States nor in the United Kingdom. Paula Erizanu affirms that, “when you examine what is translated into English, only 1.5% of all books published in the UK are translations.” The situation is slightly better in the United States but the numbers are still extremely low when compared to non-English speaking countries. As Françoise Massardier-Kenney points out, “translation studies scholars lament the lack of translations from other languages into American English – in 2005, only 3.54% of new fiction titles published in the United States were translations, as opposed to 42.7% for France” (28). As these data show, the problem does not only lie with *The Eight Mountains* specifically, but with foreign fiction that gets translated into English. As a matter of fact, Cognetti sold many more copies in a small country like the Netherlands than in a country with an immense population like the United States. James Tennant gives a plausible explanation of this arguing that “[there is] a certain complacency coming from the fact that our language happens to be, for the time being, the global lingua franca … We have so much literature in English – from India, South Africa and so on – that we have the false impression that we have the world in English” (qtd. in Erizanu). This lack of interest for literature in translation, which consequently leads to few sales, arises from the power of the English language itself. Since
English is the official language of many different countries, much more literature is produced in English than in other minor languages such as Italian. Therefore, when literary products which are written in foreign languages are translated into English and published in the United States and United Kingdom, they do not receive as much attention as in other countries whose languages are not spoken in so many places
Conclusions

This dissertation has examined the way in which the contemporary Italian author Paolo Cognetti has successfully adapted themes of American literature to the Italian setting of his novel, *The Eight Mountains*. I have mainly focused my research on two American narratives that Cognetti reworks in his novel: the trope of male-bonding and the relationship between man and the natural world presented in American works of fiction. Cognetti has performed an act of cultural translation by transporting these themes into a new cultural setting, and using a different language to explore them. Although this dissertation has only focused on the work of a single non-American author reinterpreting foreign narratives in his own native language, it has shown how this process attaches new meaning to these American tropes. This variation of meaning depends on the different national context in which they are used, which in Paolo Cognetti’s case is not the American wilderness but the Italian Alps.

As this dissertation has shown, Cognetti owes much to the American literary tradition. In *The Eight Mountains*, he re-elaborates the American novels he has read, loved, and assimilated. Writing this novel, Cognetti merges his two identities: his Italian identity as a lover of the Alps and his American identity, which he has acquired by living in New York City and by reading a great quantity of American literature. The final product is the result of an act of cultural translation which, I argue in the third chapter of this thesis, was extremely successful in Italy because of the way it reinterprets foreign tropes and incorporates them with traditional Italian characteristics.
Conversely, *The Eight Mountains* did not sell well in the Anglophone world because of the existence of linguistic and cultural barriers. As I have argued, the English language did not allow for the effective translation of words relating to the mountain setting which is at the core of the novel, and English speaking readers are not as interested in fiction in translation as they are in fiction written in their own language. Nonetheless, I argue that it is exactly because of the mixture of American themes and Italian narratives that *The Eight Mountains* was translated into 39 languages, including extra-European languages such as Japanese and Arabic, and was successful beyond its national boundaries: because this experience of sharing American themes is common to many countries beyond Italy.

Further research on the topic might include a more detailed analysis on the reasons behind the success of foreign works of fiction in the Anglophone world. It might explore more in-depth what are the reasons behind the interest, or lack thereof, of the English language speakers for literatures written in other languages and examine the differences between foreign novels that reach success and those that do not and what differentiates them.
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Appendix A

Email Exchange with Paolo Cognetti (for its English translation, see Appendix B)

From me to Paolo Cognetti:

22/01/19

Salve,

Sono Giorgio Millesimi, il nipote di Ines. Le scrivo perché, come forse ricorderà, mia zia l'aveva contattata per dirle che avrei scritto la mia tesi di laurea su di lei.

Mi presento brevemente: mi chiamo Giorgio, ho 21 anni e sto attualmente frequentando l'ultimo semestre di università alla John Cabot University di Roma. Essendo un laureando in English Literature italiano, avevo intenzione di scrivere la mia tesi su un argomento che potesse collegarmi alla letteratura italiana e lei mi è sembrato un ottimo esempio.

Il suo amore per la letteratura americana e il fatto che lei abbia ottenuto tutto questo successo all'estero, e soprattutto nei paesi anglofoni, mi ha interessato sin da subito perché unisce il suo essere italiano alla cultura anglo-americana di cui anch'io sono un appassionato.

Volevo iniziare con il complimentarmi per il suo romanzo Le Otto Montagne. Ne sono rimasto davvero colpito e affascinato, mi è piaciuta molto la storia e ho trovato il suo modo di narrare avvincente sin dalla prima pagina.

Le scrivo perché vorrei porle qualche domanda.

1) C'è un romanzo della letteratura americana che l'ha interessato maggiormente e da cui ha tratto
iscrizione nello scrivere o che le ha particolarmente cambiato la vita? So che per lettori voraci, come lei sicuramente sarà, queste sono domande scomode, perché scegliere è sempre difficile, però mi interessava sapere se ci fosse un romanzo statunitense che l'avesse particolarmente colpito o stimolato alla scrittura.

2) Il tema del male-bonding, la profonda amicizia tra due personaggi di sesso maschile, è uno dei topoi cardine della letteratura statunitense, mentre è decisamente meno presente in quella italiana. Questa amicizia così sincera e profonda la si ritrova in Tom Sawyer e Huckleberry Finn, in vari personaggi di Jack London, in molti dei romanzi di Hemingway, etc. Sopra a tutti troneggia il mio esempio preferito: quello di Sal e Dean in On the Road. Le menzio quest'ultimo perché, oltre a essere una delle letture che mi ha maggiormente cambiato la vita, si concentra anche sul rapporto tra padri e figli, un altro tema del suo romanzo. Il manoscritto originale di Kerouac si apre con la morte del padre dell'autore e si conclude con la menzione del padre di Dean Moriarty, un padre che viene cercato per tutto il corso della storia dai due amici senza essere mai trovato. On the Road è un libro di padri assenti che però vengono agognati nel corso della narrazione. Pensa che il romanzo di Kerouac abbia esercitato, seppur in piccola parte, un'influenza su di lei negli anni della formazione personale/creativa? Inoltre, oltre ad essersi ispirato alla sua esperienza di vita privata, lei ha modellato l'amicizia tra Pietro e Bruno su qualche esempio letterario che l'aveva particolarmente colpita? Anche nel caso la risposta sia no, pensa che questa amicizia così genuina e forte tra i suoi due personaggi abbia punti di contatto con le grandi coppie di amici della letteratura americana?

3) Un genere letterario molto famoso negli Stati Uniti è quello del nature writing, di cui Henry
Thoreau è considerato il fondatore. Anche se sotto forma di romanzo, il suo *Le Otto Montagne* esplora in profondità l'importanza della natura. Ci sono scritti anglo-americani appartenenti a questo genere da cui lei si è sentito particularly toccato e di cui consiglierebbe la lettura? Pensa che *Le Otto Montagne* possa essere considerato appartenente al genere del *nature writing*?

4) Il seguente articolo, [https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/may/19/the-next-elena-ferrante-the-best-european-fiction-coming-your-way](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/may/19/the-next-elena-ferrante-the-best-european-fiction-coming-your-way), afferma che: "Cognetti’s life story has added to the appeal of the book. At 30, weary of city life and moved by *Into the Wild* – the true story of an American hiker who disappeared into the Alaskan wilderness – he left Milan and went to live as a hermit more than 6,000ft above sea level."

Il motivo per cui lei ha lasciato Milano è stato veramente perché ispirato da *Into the Wild*? Se sì, quanto pensa che la sua personale storia di vita abbia accresciuto la sua fama e quella dei suoi romanzi?

5) Nel fare ricerca, mi sono imbattuto nella affermazione di Emily Apfer, che scrive che "global artists, video makers and writers consciously or unconsciously aim at a form of Anglo-American translatability." Lei ritiene che, nello scrivere *Le Otto Montagne*, aveva già contemplato la possibilità di essere tradotto in lingua inglese e aveva quindi già in mente un'ipotetica Anglo-American readership che avrebbe letto il suo libro? Cosa pensa che l'abbia portata ad ottenere questo successo nel contesto anglofono?

6) Perché ha scelto di approfondire i suoi studi da autodidatta sulla letteratura americana e non su quella italiana? Cosa della letteratura americana trova affascinante e la intriga?

Chiudo con questa domanda perché anch'io ho scelto di studiare lettere anglo-americane perché
le trovo di più ampio respiro rispetto alla nostra letteratura nazionale (seppur molto bella!) e volevo sentire cosa lei ne pensasse.

Spero le mie domande siano chiare. Le sue risposte mi sarebbero davvero di grande aiuto, ma capirò se non dovesse avere tempo. Chiaramente quando la tesi sarà finita le invierò una copia.

La ringrazio per la sua disponibilità,
Cordiali saluti,

Giorgio

From Paolo Cognetti to me:

23/01/19

Ciao Giorgio,

ti ringrazio per aver pensato a me per la tua tesi. Provo a risponderti nella maniera migliore. Se non sono abbastanza chiaro o se hai altre domande, mi trovi sempre qui.

Intanto una precisazione: “il fatto che lei abbia ottenuto tutto questo successo all'estero, e soprattutto nei paesi anglofoni” non è corretto. Il libro è stato tradotto in 39 lingue ed è uscito in molti più paesi, è andato benissimo in Italia e in Olanda, molto bene in Francia, Germania, Spagna, bene in tanti altri posti, ma direi abbastanza male in Uk e Usa. I paesi anglofoni sono difficilissimi per la letteratura non anglofona e infatti mi hanno praticamente ignorato. Per darti
dei numeri: “Le otto montagne” hanno venduto 350.000 copie in Italia, 200.000 in Olanda, meno di 10.000 negli Stati Uniti e nel Regno Unito. E pensa che gli olandesi sono poco più di 17 milioni di persone!

1) C’è un romanzo della letteratura americana che l’ha interessato maggiormente e da cui ha tratto ispirazione nello scrivere o che le ha particolarmente cambiato la vita? So che per lettori voraci, come lei sicuramente sarà, queste sono domande scomode, perché scegliere è sempre difficile, però mi interessava sapere se ci fosse un romanzo statunitense che l’avesse particolarmente colpito o stimolato alla scrittura.

È vero, la lista è lunga. Io poi per anni ho letto quasi solo letteratura americana, e buona parte della mia biblioteca è composta da quegli autori. I più importanti per me sono stati Hemingway, Salinger e Carver. Ma anche Grace Paley e Alice Munro. In questi nomi si riflette il mio amore per la forma del racconto breve.

2) Il tema del male-bonding, la profonda amicizia tra due personaggi di sesso maschile, è uno dei topoi cardine della letteratura statunitense, mentre è decisamente meno presente in quella italiana. Questa amicizia così sincera e profonda la si ritrova in Tom Sawyer e Huckleberry Finn, in vari personaggi di Jack London, in molti dei romanzi di Hemingway, etc. Sopra a tutti troneggia il mio esempio preferito: quello di Sal e Dean in On the Road. Le menzionate quest’ultimo perché, oltre a essere una delle letture che mi ha maggiormente cambiato la vita, si concentra anche sul rapporto tra padri e figli, un altro tema del suo romanzo. Il
manoscritto originale di Kerouac si apre con la morte del padre dell'autore e si conclude con la menzione del padre di Dean Moriarty, un padre che viene cercato per tutto il corso della storia dai due amici senza essere mai trovato. *On the Road* è un libro di padri assenti che però vengono agognati nel corso della narrazione. Pensa che il romanzo di Kerouac abbia esercitato, seppur in piccola parte, un'influenza su di lei negli anni della formazione personale/creativa?

Inoltre, oltre ad essersi ispirato alla sua esperienza di vita privata, lei ha modellato l'amicizia tra Pietro e Bruno su qualche esempio letterario che l'aveva particolarmente colpita? Anche nel caso la risposta sia no, pensa che questa amicizia così genuina e forte tra i suoi due personaggi abbia punti di contatto con le grandi coppie di amici della letteratura americana?

Voglio bene a Kerouac ma non è il mio esempio preferito perché non lo stimo come scrittore, non mi piace come scrive. Però, per tornare al topos: lui ha messo perfettamente a fuoco quello che riguarda la vita vissuta e la vita scritta, incarnate da due amici. Dean Moriarty/Neal Cassady è l'uomo che vive, Sal Paradise/Jack Kerouac quello che scrive. Da parte degli scrittori, c'è sempre stata una grande invidia verso gli uomini d’azione! (facendo collegamenti a caso mi viene in mente una frase di Calvino: “la vita si vive o si scrive”, sembra un lamento dello scrittore che non riesce a vivere davvero ma solo a riprodurre la vita nelle sue pagine). Anche Tom e Huck sono un ragazzino borghese, che ha studiato, va in chiesa, è ben vestito e pieno di fantasie, e un ragazzino selvaggio, analfabeta, libero, condannato. Credo sia questo il vero topos. E io l’ho riscritto con la storia di Pietro e Bruno.

Per quanto mi riguarda, la più gran coppia di amici che io ricordi nella letteratura americana è quella composta da Jack Twist ed Enis Del Mar, i due protagonisti di “Gente del Wyoming” di

3) Un genere letterario molto famoso negli Stati Uniti è quello del *nature writing*, di cui Henry Thoreau è considerato il fondatore. Anche se sotto forma di romanzo, il suo *Le Otto Montagne* esplora in profondità l'importanza della natura. Ci sono scritti anglo-americani appartenenti a questo genere da cui lei si è sentito particolarmente toccato e di cui consiglierebbe la lettura?

Pensa che *Le Otto Montagne* possa essere considerato appartenente al genere del *nature writing*?

Sì, lo spero. Ho proprio voluto inserirmi in quel filone. È un romanzo abbastanza breve (200 pagine), eppure è pienissimo di descrizioni della montagna perché sentivo che quelle descrizioni non sarebbero state solo uno sfondo, ma la sostanza stessa della storia. In un certo senso, è una storia che si muove attraverso le descrizioni. Thoreau è molto importante per me, insieme a Hemingway (anche in lui c'è un sacco di “nature writing”), il Krakauer di “Into the Wild”, e come ho detto Annie Proulx e Alice Munro.

4) Il seguente articolo, [https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/may/19/the-next-elena-ferrante-the-best-european-fiction-coming-your-way](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/may/19/the-next-elena-ferrante-the-best-european-fiction-coming-your-way), afferma che: "Cognetti’s life story has added to the appeal of the book. At 30, weary of city life and moved by *Into the Wild* – the true story of an American hiker who disappeared into the Alaskan wilderness – he left Milan and went to live as a hermit more than 6,000ft above sea level."

Il motivo per cui lei ha lasciato Milano è stato veramente perché ispirato da *Into the Wild?* Se sì,
quanto pensa che la sua personale storia di vita abbia accrementato la sua fama e quella dei suoi romanzi?

I motivi sono stati diversi ma è vero che l’incontro con “Into the Wild” è stato decisivo per me. A volte agli scrittori viene chiesto se le storie possono davvero cambiare la vita: sì, io sono una di quelle persone a cui l’hanno cambiata. Ho visto “Into the Wild” il giorno del mio 30esimo compleanno, ero molto triste, ero finito in un binario morto della mia vita. Ho pianto per tutto il film, per quanto mi riconoscevo in quel ragazzo, e tre mesi dopo vivevo in una baita di montagna che avevo cominciato a cercare appena uscito dal cinema. Fa ridere? Posso capirlo, ma lassù ho passato gli ultimi dieci anni della mia vita e dal quel posto è nato il mio successo di scrittore, anzi non parlerei di successo, direi la mia realizzazione. Che la mia storia abbia incrementato la mia fama è una questione vecchia, comprensibile, fastidiosa, di cui non è molto utile parlare. Per quanti scrittori è stato così?

5) Nel fare ricerca, mi sono imbattuto nella affermazione di Emily Apfer, che scrive che "global artists, video makers and writers consciously or unconsciously aim at a form of Anglo-American translatability." Lei ritiene che, nello scrivere Le Otto Montagne, aveva già contemplato la possibilità di essere tradotto in lingua inglese e aveva quindi già in mente un'ipotetica Anglo-American readership che avrebbe letto il suo libro? Cosa pensa che l'abbia portata ad ottenere questo successo nel contesto anglofono?
Ah ah! Mi viene da ridere. Ti ripeto intanto che non ho avuto nessun successo nel mercato anglofono. Secondo, la traduzione in inglese è stata la più difficile di tutte: l’inglese non possiede il lessico della montagna e molte parole chiave del romanzo erano impossibili da tradurre (per esempio “montanaro”, ovvero un uomo nato e cresciuto in montagna, in inglese non c’è. E così “alpeggio”, una stalla e un pascolo in alta quota usati solo durante l’estate, altro termine intraducibile in inglese). Io di traduzioni potevo controllarne solo due: quella inglese e quella francese, e posso dirti che la seconda mi ha dato moltissime soddisfazioni (il francese, come l’italiano, possiede un ricchissimo lessico della montagna), la prima quasi solo delusioni. La traduzione inglese del romanzo lo impoverisce e lo avvilisce. Per cui non concludo affatto con quell’affermazione di Emily Apfer, che mi sembra già di per sé americano-centrica. Da scrittore europeo e da scrittore delle Alpi le mie traduzioni di riferimento sono quella francese e quella tedesca, li trovo i lettori che possono capire la mia storia. La traduzione inglese è un po’ esotica, certo importante in senso simbolico, non in senso pratico. Se ci pensi la traduzione cinese riguarda molta più gente, e la traduzione araba è diffusa in molti più paesi. Il fatto di avere il libro tradotto in così tante lingue implica anche che nessun lettore è costretto a leggerlo in inglese: probabilmente lo trova nella sua lingua. Insomma nel mio caso la traduzione inglese ha pochissima importanza, visto com’è andata ne avrei fatto volentieri a meno.

6) Perché ha scelto di approfondire i suoi studi da autodidatta sulla letteratura americana e non su quella italiana? Cosa della letteratura americana trova affascinante e la intriga?

Chiudo con questa domanda perché anch’io ho scelto di studiare lettere anglo-americane perché le trovo di più ampio respiro rispetto alla nostra letteratura nazionale (seppur molto bella!) e volevo sentire cosa lei ne pensasse.
Mi ero innamorato di qualcosa che altri scrittori italiani prima di me, per esempio Pavese, Fenoglio, Bianciardi, avevano scoperto nella letteratura americana. Cioè che fosse piena di vita. La letteratura americana del Novecento ribaltava la nostra idea (venuta da secoli o millenni di storia) dello scrittore intellettuale, dello scrittore chiuso in casa e ingobbito sulle sue carte, e inventava la figura dello scrittore-avventuriero, Melville il baleniere, London il cercatore d’oro, Hemingway il soldato e cacciatore, Carver o Bukowski gli ubriaconi, Kerouac il vagabondo e così via. La letteratura americana risuonava di vita. Oggi non è più vero, si è imborghesita come la nostra, la vita dobbiamo andare a cercarla altrove. Ma per la mia formazione è stato così, lì a vent’anni ho respirato una grande aria di libertà. Sono diventato un lettore e poi uno scrittore perché nella letteratura, prima che in altri luoghi, ho trovato la mia libertà.

Va bene?

Non ti formalizzare troppo. Un abbraccio va benissimo.

Paolo
Appendix B

From me to Paolo Cognetti:

22/01/19

Hello,

My name is Giorgio Millesimi, I am Ines’ nephew. I am writing to you because, as you may remember, my aunt had contacted you to tell you that I would have liked to write my dissertation about you.

I will briefly introduce myself: my name is Giorgio, I am 21 years old and I am currently completing my last semester at John Cabot University in Rome. Since I am an Italian student majoring in English literature, I was planning on writing my dissertation on a topic that could link me to Italian literature and you are a great example.

I was immediately fascinated by your love for American literature and by the fact that you reached this immense success abroad, especially in the English speaking countries, because it links your “Italianness” to Anglo-American culture, about which I am passionate.

I wanted to start my email by congratulating you on your novel *The Eight Mountains*. I was really touched by it, I truly liked the story and I found your way of narrating compelling from the first page.

I am writing to you because I would like to ask you a few questions.

1) Is there a particular American novel that interested you and inspired you to write or that particularly changed your life? I know that for all voracious readers, as you surely are, questions like this are uncomfortable because choosing is always hard, but I wanted to know if there was an American novel that had particularly touched you or stimulated you to write.
2) The theme of male-bonding, the deep friendship between two male characters, is one of the major tropes of American literature, whereas it is not as important in Italian literature. We find this deep and sincere friendship in *Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn*, in various characters in Jack London’s stories, in many novels by Hemingway, etc.

My personal favorite example is the one of Sal and Dean in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*. I am mentioning this novel to you because, besides being one of the stories that changed my life the most, it focuses on the father-son relationship, another theme of your own novel. Kerouac’s original draft starts with his own father’s death and ends alluding to Dean Moriarty’s father, a father that the two friends look for throughout the whole novel but never find. *On the Road* is a book about missing fathers whom are sought after by their children. Do you think that Kerouac’s novel, even if in a small part, influenced you in the years of your personal and creative development?

Furthermore, besides taking inspiration from your own personal life, did you model the friendship between Pietro and Bruno on some literary examples that particularly touched you? Even if the answer is negative, do you think that this friendship between your characters, which is so genuine and strong, shares some points of contacts with the great couples of friends of American literature?

3) Nature writing is a literary genre that is very popular in the United States and Henry Thoreau is considered its founder. Even if *The Eight Mountains* is a novel and not an essay, it explores the importance of nature in-depth. Are there some Anglo-American writers of this genre who particularly touched you and whom you would recommend reading? Do you think that *The Eight Mountains* can be considered a part of the nature writing genre?
4) The following article, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/may/19/the-next-elena-ferrante-the-best-european-fiction-coming-your-way, claims that, "Cognetti’s life story has added to the appeal of the book. At 30, weary of city life and moved by Into the Wild – the true story of an American hiker who disappeared into the Alaskan wilderness – he left Milan and went to live as a hermit more than 6,000ft above sea level."

Did you really leave Milan because you had been inspired by Into the Wild? If yes, to what extent do you think that your own personal life story increased your fame and the one of your novels?

5) While researching, I read the following statement by Emily Apfer, who writes that, “global artists, video makers and writers consciously or unconsciously aim at a form of Anglo-American translatability.” Do you think that, while writing The Eight Mountains, you were already contemplating the possibility of being translated into English and you were thus already thinking of an hypothetical Anglo-American readership that would have read your novel? What do you think was the factor that brought you to reach this success in the English speaking context?

6) Why did you choose to study American literature and not Italian literature? What did you find particularly intriguing and fascinating about American literature?

I want this to be my last question because I, too, chose to study Anglo-American literature because I think it is more variegated compared to our own national literature (which is still very beautiful!) and I wanted to know what you thought about it.
I hope that my questions are clear. Your answers would truly help me, but I will understand if you won’t have time to answer me. Clearly, I will send you a copy of my thesis as soon as I submit it.

Thank you for your time,

Best regards,

Giorgio

From Paolo Cognetti to me:

23/01/19

Hello Giorgio,

Thank you for thinking about me for your thesis. I will try to answer you in the best way I can. If I am not clear enough, or if you have other questions, feel free to contact me again.

I want to start by specifying that when you write: “you reached this immense success abroad, especially in the English speaking countries” it is not true. My book was translated into 39 languages and was published in even more countries, it was very successful in Italy and in the Netherlands, and successful in France, Germany, Spain and in many other countries but I would say it did not have a positive reception in the UK and USA. The English speaking countries are places in which it is difficult for fiction that is not written in English to reach success, and they practically ignored me. To give you some numbers: The Eight Mountains sold 350.000 copies in
Italy, 200.000 in The Netherlands, and less than 10.000 in the United States and in the United Kingdom. And think that the Dutch are slightly more than 17 million people!

1) It is true, the list is long. For years I mostly only read American literature and most of my library contains American authors. The most important to me were Hemingway, Salinger, and Carver. But also Grace Paley and Alice Munro. My love for short stories reflects itself in these names.

2) I love Kerouac but he is not my favorite example because I don’t esteem him as a writer, I don’t like how he writes. However, speaking of the trope: he perfectly brought into focus the distinction between a life lived and a life written, embodied by two friends. Dean Moriarty/ Neal Cassady is the man who lives, Sal Paradise/Jack Kerouac the one who writes. Writers have always been very jealous of men of action! (this makes me think of a quote by Calvino: “you either live life or write about it”, it seems the lament of a writer who cannot truly live but can only reproduce life in his pages.) Even Tom and Huck are a middle-class child, who studies, goes to church, is well-dressed and filled with fantasies, and a wild child, who’s illiterate, free, doomed. I think this is the real literary trope. And I rewrote it with the story of Pietro and Bruno.

Personally, I think that the greatest couple of friends in American literature are Jack Twist and Enis Del Mar, the two protagonists of Brokeback Mountain by Annie Proulx (a 30 page short story which was then made famous by its movie adaptation Brokeback Mountain by Ang Lee). Pietro and Bruno owe a lot to them.
3) Yes, I hope so. I wanted to be a part of that genre. It is a short novel (200 pages), yet it is full of descriptions of the mountains because I felt that those descriptions would have not just been the background but the very core of the story. In a sense, it is a story that moves through descriptions. Thoreau is very important to me, together with Hemingway (in him, too, there’s a lot of “nature writing”), the Kraukauer of “Into the Wild” and, as I said, Annie Proulx and Alice Munro.

4) There were different reasons, but it is true that my first approach to *Into the Wild* was crucial for me. Sometimes writers are asked if stories can truly change lives: yes; I am one of those people whose life was changed. I watched *Into the Wild* on the day of my 30th birthday, I was very sad and found myself at a dead-end in my life. I cried for the whole movie, for the way in which I recognized myself in [McCandless], and three months afterwards I was living in a mountain lodge that I started to look for immediately after leaving the cinema. Isn’t it funny? I can understand, but I spent the last ten years of my life up there and from that place my success as a writer was born, or more specifically what I would call my fulfillment. The fact that my story might have increased my fame is an old matter, understandable, annoying, and it is not very useful to talk about it. To how many writers did the same thing happen?

5) Ha ha! You make me laugh. As I said, I was not successful in the English speaking market. Also, the English translation was the most difficult of all: English does not have the vocabulary to talk about mountains and many key words of the novel were impossible to translate (for example “montanaro”, which defines a man who was born and raised in the mountains, does not
exist in English. Another word that does not exist in English is the word “alpeggio”, a stable and a grazing land used at high altitudes only during the summer). I could only check two translations: the English and the French one, and I can tell you that the latter made me really happy (French, like Italian, possesses a vast vocabulary connected to the mountains), the former mostly disappointed me. The English translation of the novel impoverishes and drains it. Therefore, I strongly disagree with Emily Apfer’s claim, which seems like an Americentric view. As a European writer and as most of my work is set in the Alps, the translations I admire the most are the French and the German one, there I find readers who can understand my story. The English translation is slightly exotic, it is important from a symbolic point of view, but not a practical one. If you think about it, the Chinese translation involves many more people, and you can find the Arabic translation in many more countries. The fact that the book was translated into so many languages also implies that no reader is forced to read it in English: s/he will probably also find it in his/her own language. In my case the English translation has very little importance, considering how it was received, I would have happily done without it.

6) I had fallen in love with something that also other Italian writers before me, for example Pavese, Fenoglio, Bianciardi, had discovered in American literature. The fact that it was full of life. The American literature of the twentieth century turned our idea of life on its head (an idea which was hundreds or thousands years old) of the intellectual writer, barricaded inside his house and curved in on his books, and invented the figure of the adventurous writer, Melville the whaler, London the gold-seeker, Hemingway the soldier and hunter, Carver or Bukowski the drunkard, Kerouac the tramp and so on. American literature was full of life. Today this is not true anymore, it gentrified like ours, we should look for life elsewhere. But for my education it
was that way, I was twenty years old and found in it the freedom I was looking for. I became a
reader, and then a writer, because in literature I found my freedom before than anywhere else.

Is my answer ok?

Best,

Paolo