

Escaping the World and Returning to the ‘Province’ in Claudio Piersanti’s Fiction

Claudio Piersanti is an established contemporary Italian writer who has published six novels and two collections of short stories since the early 1980s. These include some texts which were very successful both in Italy and abroad, in particular the novel *Luisa e il silenzio* (*Luisa and the Silence*, 1997), translated into several European languages, and his latest novel *Il ritorno a casa di Enrico Metz* (Enrico Metz’s return home, 2006).¹ Despite his success with the public, his work has been widely reviewed but rarely analyzed in depth. This is perhaps due to the writer’s preference for isolation and the avoidance of literary trends, which allows him better to explore the anxieties of the contemporary individual. This attitude is voiced in his fiction through the key themes of displacement, isolation, disenchantment, mediocrity, failure and nostalgia for the province. This essay seeks to redress the relative silence on Piersanti’s work by exploring his poetics and in particular the role of the ‘margins’, the ‘province’ and the meaning of ‘mediocrity’ in his fiction. With this aim in mind, while taking the whole body of his work into account, the focus of this chapter will particularly be the texts that most directly address these themes: his first and most acclaimed collection of short stories *L’amore degli adulti* (Adults’ Love),² his later and less well known collection *Comandò il padre* (So the Father Ordered, 2003) and his most recent novel *Il ritorno a casa di Enrico Metz*.

1 *Luisa and the Silence*, trans. by George Hochfield (Evanston, IL: Northern University Press, 2002). Other work by Piersanti translated into English include ‘Little Alberta in Flight’, in Ann and Michael Caesar, eds, *The Quality of Light: Modern Italian Short Stories* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1993).

2 *L’amore degli adulti* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1989), contains five new short stories.

Before looking at Piersanti's poetics and fiction, it is necessary to define the notion of 'margins' and 'province' that can most fruitfully be applied to his work. 'Province' is normally seen as synonymous with marginal, minor, peripheral – both spatially and culturally. Similarly, the margin implies a juxtaposition to an assumed centre, not simply in terms of spatial relationships, but also of cultural values. In Rob Shields's words, 'marginal places [...] have been placed on the periphery of cultural systems of space in which places are ranked in relation to each other'.³ These terms imply a clear-cut dichotomy between centre and margin/province that has recently been under review in critical debates that question the hierarchical nature of the relationship between centre and periphery. Similarly, contemporary geographical agglomerations challenge the centre/margins divide, the main example in Italy being the 'polycentric urban system' of the 'via Emilia', where each town merges with the next, along one of the main transport routes of the Po valley.⁴ In Italian the adjective 'provincial' is often used pejoratively with associations of backwardness and insularity. A long tradition of Italian fiction has exposed this – from Cesare Zavattini, to Goffredo Parise and Silvio D'Arzo – while proposing the province as the most revealing locus of (Italian) identity. Recent literary criticism has shed light on some of these authors, too often labelled provincial, or minor, following Ezio Raimondi's suggestion that the stronger the geographical identity of a place, the stronger the links with what is outside that place.⁵ Drawing on greater spatial and environmental awareness, a number of studies since the 1990s have focused on regional literature, seeking to highlight a link between regional/national space and literary production.⁶ Among others, a

3 Rob Shields, *Places on the Margin. Alternative Geographies of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 3.

4 See Eugenio Turri, *La megalopoli padana* (Venice: Marsilio, 2000).

5 '[P]iù il luogo è forte nella sua piccola integrità geografica, più si attivano i rapporti con ciò che è fuori da quel luogo'. Ezio Raimondi, 'Parole di congedo', in Mario Saccetti, ed., *Carducci e la letteratura italiana* (Padua: Antenore, 1988), 319–24, p. 321. All translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated, M.S.

6 See, among others, Paolo Mauri, *Nord. Scrittori in Piemonte, Lombardia e Liguria* (Turin: Einaudi, 2000); Giorgio Bertone, *Letteratura e paesaggio: liguri e no: Montale*,

significant case is the writer and critic Guido Conti, who has set out to revive regional (Emilian) traditions in nostalgic fiction set in a rural Po valley, by rediscovering literary masters (like Zavattini) and through his editorial work for the journal *Palazzo Sanvitale*,⁷ which is devoted to revaluing the province as a privileged place from which to see the world.⁸

Alongside this more traditional Italian approach to the margins, the province, recent international cultural debates have mostly preferred the terms global and local, rather than margins/province and centre, to refer to this bipolar tension, even coining the term 'glocal' to indicate the fusion of apparently opposite dimensions.⁹ In so doing they have sought to revalue the so-called margins or minorities, challenging a hegemonic approach that tends to favour the dominant voice at the expense of minoritarian ones. Moving away from an exclusively literary notion of the margins/province and towards a more encompassing socio-political notion of region, these approaches have variously considered concurrent shifts towards globalisation and localisation, focusing on displacement and diaspora as common denominators of contemporary societies, that is, shifting the focus from

Caproni, Calvino, Ortese, Biamonti, Primo Levi, Yehoshua (Lecce: Manni, 2001); Carl Levy, ed., *Italian Regionalism. History, Identity and Politics* (Oxford: Berg, 1996); Bart van den Bossche et al., eds, *Italia e Europa: dalla cultura nazionale all'interculturalismo* (Florence: Cesati, 2006).

- 7 In his words in the editorial of the first issue, which is dedicated to Cesare Zavattini and the theme of Europe and the province, Conti claims: 'with this journal we want to start reflecting seriously, in our world of "cultural complexity", on key themes, moving from the reality of communal towns and "province" that have built our country, culturally and politically. We want to start from the province to be in Europe'. ('Con questa rivista vogliamo proporre un nostro percorso e cominciare a riflettere, seriamente, nel mondo della "complessità culturale", su temi forti, partendo da una realtà, quella delle città comunali e della "provincia", che hanno costruito culturalmente e politicamente il nostro paese. Vogliamo partire dalla provincia per essere in Europa.') Guido Conti, 'Editoriale', *Palazzo Sanvitale* 1 (1999), p. 9.
- 8 See Conti, 'Dal diario di lavoro di uno scrittore di provincia', in Conti, ed., *Dire scrivere pubblicare leggere valutare. Le condizioni del narrare oggi. Antologia dei nuovi narratori italiani* (Rimini: Guaraldi, 1997), 21–34, pp. 32–3.
- 9 See, among others, Mike Featherstone, *Undoing Culture: Globalization, Postmodernism and Identity* (London: Sage, 1995).

one centre to many fluid peripheries. This broader debate allows us to move beyond narrow dichotomies and strictly national and literary frameworks and to take into account wider cultural parameters and influences, as advocated in many recent publications. These include, within the field of Italian studies, the collection of essays edited by Clarissa Clò on *Spaesamenti padani*, a special issue of *Il lettore di provincia* (2005), and the 2006 issue of *Annali d'italianistica* edited by Norma Bouchard on *Negotiating Italian Identities*.

Seen in this light, the work of Claudio Piersanti strikingly combines a traditional narrative of the province – following the example of masters such as Romano Bilenchi, D'Arzo and Parise – with a postmodern sense of displacement and disenchantment which has its roots in the swift and profound cultural changes that have taken place in postwar Italy, and especially during period of generational disillusionment in the 1970s. Like many contemporary writers of his generation (from Marco Lodoli to Erri De Luca), Piersanti is interested in depicting the failure of the 'last' political generation and particularly the mediocrity and disenchantment of the contemporary individual, who has chosen non-commitment and the margin, preferring to retire to the province in a nostalgic attempt to retrieve an impossible past. Piersanti's fiction, like the writing of many of his contemporaries, is informed by his autobiographical experience, which is deeply marked by geographical and cultural displacement. Born in 1954 in Canzano, a small village near the *Gran Sasso*, in Abruzzo, Piersanti soon moved with his family to the nearby region of Le Marche, then went to University in Bologna, where he lived for some time. He recently moved to Rome, due to his involvement in film scriptwriting since the mid- 1990s. Although this kind of uprooting is common to many of his contemporaries, Piersanti sees himself as a 'placeless' person, unable to feel at home anywhere, and turns his condition into a myth following a key topos of much twentieth-century literature. A similar condition defines the protagonists of all his novels who lament the impossibility of belonging to any one place. Piersanti's sense of displacement results firstly from the radical and sudden change from rural to industrial society in postwar Italy, that he witnessed as a child of the deeply rural region of Abruzzo. The second displacement is generational: Piersanti reached maturity in the 1970s, while studying in Bologna and

taking part in the '77 Student Movement, perhaps the last brief shared dream of social revolt and student power. In interview Piersanti recalls his ambiguous relationship to the Movement: although he was in charge of maintaining order, which he enjoyed as a political game, he avoided becoming too involved in the revolt, conscious of the impossibility of changing the social set-up. In his words, 'In Bologna I was responsible for maintaining order, but I didn't belong to the party Lotta Continua. [...] I never thought we could change the world, not even for five minutes, not even in the hottest moment of revolt in '77'.¹⁰ In another interview the writer underlines his divided interests between politics and literature: 'Of that year [1977] I can only remember a long immersion in Proust. During the day I attended the assemblies, in the evening and at night I delved into the *Recherche*. In general all those years were a real literary "binge".¹¹ Despite professing a certain distance from the Movement, this experience must have had a deep impact on Piersanti, and resulted in his abandoning politics altogether and deciding for non-commitment and refusal, as Stefano Tani suggests.¹² The same detached and disenchanted stance is maintained in his fiction – he started writing immediately after his political disengagement in the late 1970s/ early 1980s – as emerges in the tone of his writing and in themes of displacement, isolation, mediocrity, failure and return to the province.

Given his experience of the '77 Student Movement in Bologna, it is no surprise that Piersanti's two early novels, written immediately after the events, deal with generational themes, such as the search for identity,

10 'A Bologna ero responsabile del servizio d'ordine ma non ero di Lotta Continua. [...] Non ero un grande sognatore. Io non ho mai pensato che avremmo cambiato il mondo, neanche per cinque minuti, neanche in pieno '77, assolutamente'. Marina Spunta, 'Intervista a Claudio Piersanti', *The Italianist*, 29 (2009), 156–72.

11 'Di quell'anno dico soltanto che coincide con una lunga immersione proustiana. Di giorno andavo alle assemblee, di sera e di notte sprofondavo nella *Recherche*. In generale una vera sbornia letteraria, tutti quegli anni'. Spunta, 'Conversazione con Claudio Piersanti', in Id., *Claudio Piersanti* (Florence: Cadmo, forthcoming).

12 'Ha deciso per il non impegno, per il rifiuto', Stefano Tani, *Il romanzo di ritorno* (Milan: Mursia, 1990), p. 235.

particularly through enforced displacement and hiding, while also hinting at a climate of political terror. In the first, *Casa di nessuno* (Nobody's Home, 1981),¹³ the young, unnamed protagonist feels he does not belong anywhere, neither in his flat in an anonymous city, where he spends time looking out of the window and fantasising, feeling like a prisoner in his own house, nor in his parents' house in the province, where he returns every time he undergoes an emotional crisis, only to end up feeling even more estranged, like a ghost. Living off small thefts he is often forced to be on the run, travelling or hiding in cheap hotels in order not to evade the police (a situation that indirectly reflects the author's own experience in '77). His sense of displacement is so acute that he even claims to be leaving in order to enjoy the feeling of coming back, thus highlighting a clear sense of alienation towards his space and himself: 'I left only to enjoy the feeling of coming back, any return among all the possible ones, not that of failure, but that devoid of desire, of confusion, of wanting that sticks to everything'.¹⁴ In the second, more complex novel, *Charles*, first published in 1986, Piersanti weaves together different plots and characters around the key theme of displacement. On the one hand the protagonist, Giorgio, left his native Abruzzo to study ophthalmology in the US and to pursue a successful career in Paris – a unique example of a character abandoning Italy to live abroad – on the other hand his younger brother Piero, who remained in Italy, becomes involved with terrorism out of boredom and ends up in hiding after bombing some US helicopters. By seeking refuge with his brother, Piero forces Giorgio to revisit his past and return to his parents' home in Abruzzo, a place that retains a strong nostalgic presence in Giorgio's memory throughout the novel. This emerges clearly in his assertion of belonging to his clan in the first edition of the novel: 'The truth remains that *this* is my clan, even if I had been born in Zurich'.¹⁵

13 Piersanti, *Casa di nessuno* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1981).

14 'Sono partito solamente per rendermi piacevole un qualsiasi ritorno, uno fra i tanti possibili, non quello della sconfitta, ma quello svuotato dai desideri, dall'ingorgo, dalla voglia che si appiccica a tutto'. *Casa di nessuno*, pp. 119–20.

15 'Sta di fatto che la mia stirpe è questa e non un'altra, anche se fossi nato a Zurigo'. *Charles* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1986), p. 50.

The common denominator of the first two novels is the characters' constant wandering – due both to political and professional reasons. This concern also distinguishes Piersanti's later fiction, although the author soon abandons the political/terrorist theme in order to focus on personal, professional and relational displacement and dissatisfaction. The condition of displacement has been frequently depicted in Italian fiction since the 1980s, particularly by a generation of writers who came of age in this period and was born out of the generational disillusionment of the late 1970s: writers such as Lodoli, De Luca and Veronesi, and the Bolognese writers closer to Piersanti, including Palandri and Tondelli, and before them Celati, who all contributed with their fiction to creating the myth of nomadism. Pier Vittorio Tondelli, in particular, originally merged the regional topos of aimlessly travelling along the *via Emilia* with the generational desire to leave the province for a socially more advanced Northern Europe, in particular Northern Germany or the UK. In their continuous displacement his characters seek a different relationship with the exterior and the other, trying to retrieve a sense of community, or, according to Maffesoli, a different relationship towards the other and the world, one that is less aggressive, more affectionate.¹⁶ While sharing this sense of displacement, Piersanti soon detaches himself from the generational myth of travelling that imbues much of Palandri's and Tondelli's work, preferring to remain closer to the province and to its nostalgic memory, and electing disillusionment, stillness, silence and void – rather than constant travelling – to convey his non belonging to a place. As Maffesoli suggests, paradoxically it is this very sense of spatial non belonging that could convey a possible realisation of the self.¹⁷ Though deeply displaced, most of Piersanti's characters choose a new place of belonging rather than continuous wandering. This manifests itself most clearly in their obsessive attachment to their

16 'Un diverso rapporto nei confronti dell'altro e del mondo, meno aggressivo, più affettuoso'. Michel Maffesoli, *Del nomadismo. Per una sociologia dell'erranza*, trans. by Andrea Toscani and Romina Vitali (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2000), p. 44.

17 '[N]on appartenenza ad un luogo' come 'possibile realizzazione di sé'. Ibid., p. 44. On literary geography in Emilia Romagna see also Davide Papotti, *Geografie della scrittura. Paesaggi letterari del medio Po* (Pavia: La Goliardica Pavese, 1996).

house, which often becomes an extension of their self, or in their choosing to live in a provincial location. This condition can be linked to Pier Aldo Rovatti's notion of 'abitare la distanza' ('inhabiting distance'), a formulation that expresses the instability of the contemporary subject and their unresolved tension involved in the attempt to inhabit any particular place.¹⁸ Viewed in this light Piersanti's fiction can be seen as an attempt to inhabit displacement, that is to recognise, indeed celebrate, the current condition of non-belonging of the subject, and yet, at the same time, to lament the disappearance of a 'home' that is no more than a past memory.

Drawing on his own life experience and following an established Italian literary tradition, in his later works Piersanti chooses to narrate the province more directly: both villages with a recent rural past – in particular in Abruzzo and Le Marche where he was born and lived for some time, and towns and small cities that maintain a provincial character in Le Marche or Emilia Romagna, such as Bologna, where he lived in the 1970s and 1980s. As the author himself reveals, most of his fictional settings stem from his experience of living in a place: 'it could seem of little importance, but all my books belong to the towns and cities where I have lived.'¹⁹ In the preface to the second edition of *L'amore degli adulti* he underlines the strong link between these stories and the place where he wrote them: 'nearly all of these short stories were written in Bologna, near San Felice gate. When the landscape becomes hilly, the setting is Le Marche or Southern Romagna.'²⁰ However, although he has recently moved to Rome, this city does not feature in his fiction. This is perhaps because the capital lacks the provincial atmosphere that the author favours for his fictional settings. Asked during the interview about the role of the province in his fiction, Piersanti dismissed it in a few words, underlining its ubiquity: 'On the

18 Pier Aldo Rovatti, *Abitare la distanza* (Bologna: Feltrinelli, 1994), p. 25.

19 'Può sembrare secondario ma i miei libri appartengono anche alle città in cui ho vissuto'. Giuliana Olivero and Camilla Valletti, 'Una fantasia molto concreta, domande a Claudio Piersanti', *L'Indice dei Libri del Mese*, XX, n. 6, 2003, p. 30.

20 'quasi tutti i racconti sono stati scritti a Bologna, a due passi da porta San Felice. Quando spuntano delle colline il paesaggio diventa quello delle Marche e della bassa Romagna'. Piersanti, Preface to 2nd edition of *L'amore degli adulti*, 1998.

province it's easy to answer: we have nothing but province [in Italy].'²¹ Yet, in an interview on *Il ritorno a casa di Enrico Metz* the writer stresses the role of the province in highlighting the 'true' Italian character, in line with the views of many Italian artists and critics, from Federico Fellini to the late photographer Luigi Ghirri. In Piersanti's words:²²

The province is the essence of our worst character. It's simply easier to see our defects in the province. Yet it is necessary to ask ourselves: a province of which centre? Italy is all provincial. Personally, as a stateless person I have no place to return to, no city nor landscape belongs to me. For this reason I was attracted by the theme of a man returning to a place to which he was deeply bound (that could be Bologna, but also Modena, or Ferrara).²³

Although contemporary Italy could still be said to be mostly provincial, defined as it is by stronger local/regional affiliations than national ones, it is also true that Piersanti chooses to narrate this Italy following a long fictional, cinematic and photographic tradition. In the twentieth-century this includes many of Piersanti's favourite writers, such as Federigo Tozzi, Romano Bilenchi, Goffredo Parise, Silvio D'Arzo and Natalia Ginzburg, and also directors such as Fellini, or photographers like Ghirri, who renewed contemporary Italian photography by moving from his region, Emilia Romagna. Piersanti chooses the above writers and artists as 'models' for

21 'Sulla provincia è facile rispondere: non abbiamo altro che provincia.' Spunta, 'Conversazione con Claudio Piersanti'.

22 In one of his many essays, taking as his point of departure Fellini's *Vitelloni*, Ghirri suggests how the province from microcosm becomes macrocosm, merging village and universe. Luigi Ghirri, 'Introduzione', in *Paesaggio: immagine e realtà* (Milan: Electa, 1981), p. 278.

23 'La provincia è il condensato del nostro peggio. È semplicemente più facile vedere i nostri difetti. In fondo è giusto chiedersi: ma "provincia" di quale "centro"? L'Italia è tutta provinciale. Personalmente, essendo una sorta di apolide sin dalla nascita, non ho un luogo a cui tornare, non c'è una città o un paesaggio che mi appartengano. Per questo mi ha attirato il tema del ritorno di un uomo legato visceralmente a un luogo (che potrebbe essere Bologna, ma anche Modena, Ferrara...)' Linnio Accorroni, 'Distaccarsi dalla vita e averne una seconda. Intervista a Claudio Piersanti', *Stilos*, 13 February 2006, p. 4.

their ability to turn a provincial microcosm into a universal landscape, for their stylistic clarity and minimalism, for the psychological accuracy of their character analysis, and for the power of their landscape descriptions. Because of these preferences Piersanti is often inscribed within the Italian literary tradition of the province. According to Marco Belpoliti, Piersanti belongs to a 'narrative line that goes from Tozzi to Bilenchi';²⁴ for Paolo Di Stefano he is inscribed within a deeply Italian, very elegant tradition that follows the example of Bilenchi.²⁵ Besides D'Arzo,²⁶ Tozzi and Parise, on whom Piersanti has also written critical essays, his acknowledged 'maestro' is Romano Bilenchi, another great narrator of the province, who became a friend until his death in 1989.²⁷ Like Bilenchi, Piersanti focuses on solitary, displaced male protagonists, at once disenchanted and nostalgic, who take refuge from an evil world by isolating themselves at home or in nature, as well as in the past. Piersanti follows Bilenchi's example in his accurate descriptions of landscapes and interiors, focussing on small objects and the protagonist's perception of them. By inscribing himself in this often neglected tradition, despite refusing to be labelled provincial, Piersanti continues to narrate the province as the best mirror for his characters' anxieties. His province, however, is not immediately recognizable for the writer avoids explicit reference to space and time, leaving his settings extremely

24 'Linea narrativa molto italiana che va da Tozzi a Bilenchi'. Marco Belpoliti, 'Avanguardia fuori sede', *L'Espresso*, 6 April 2006, p. 139.

25 'Dentro una tradizione profondamente italiana, molto elegante, di ascendenza bilenchiana, che mette insieme una forte essenzialità con le grandi metafore che ci restituiscono il simulacro della vita.' Paolo Di Stefano, 'De Luca e Tondelli falsi miti d'impegno', *Il Corriere della Sera*, 21 September 2005, p. 39.

26 Piersanti, 'Silvio D'Arzo l'ignoto del XX secolo', *La Rivista dei Libri*, IV, n. 7–8, July–August 1994, 17–18, p. 18. In this essay Piersanti calls attention to the work of D'Arzo and challenges his common definition as 'provincial'.

27 Piersanti's debt to Bilenchi (that includes sharing many of his favourite writers, from Catherine of Siena to Chekhov) is acknowledged in various interviews and especially in his article: 'Bilenchi e il romanzo di una vita', *La Rivista dei Libri*, VIII, n. 7–8, July–August 1998, pp. 42–4. See also my interview, Spunta, 'Conversazione con Claudio Piersanti', and Fulvio Panzeri, *Senza rete. Conversazioni sulla "nuova" narrativa italiana* (Ancona: PeQuod, 1999), p. 70.

vague, often unrecognizable, in order to increase the sense of displacement experienced by both characters and readers. Any references are in fact always minimal, such as 'a small town in central Italy on the Adriatic', or 'a small village in the hills'.²⁸

The province, where most of Piersanti's stories are set, is as marginal as his characters who are all undistinguished and disillusioned middle-aged men, who share a sense of failure – be it personal, professional, or relational. A recurrent theme in all his fiction, this sense of failure emerges most strikingly in his first collection of stories, *L'amore degli adulti*. As the title suggests, the collection focuses on love, in particular adult love, and depicts it as a mostly negative, doomed, isolating experience, distinguished by lack of communication, disillusionment and even hatred. Whether in their initial or final stages, nearly all the love relationships narrated are doomed to failure, due to the (male) protagonists' mediocrity and incapacity to communicate with the other. In a recent interview the author confirms that his characters are all failures, inept, unable to live.²⁹ This choice reflects the sickness Piersanti detects in contemporary Italian society ('I cannot see many happy people around me'),³⁰ a country with the highest level of antidepressant use in Europe and where mediocre but well-connected people advance in society, instead of the more deserving. The theme of failure also reflects Piersanti's nihilism, which tends to detract value from existence, focusing on resignation and non-being.³¹

28 'Un paesino dell'Adriatico centrale', *L'amore degli adulti*, p. 18; 'un paese tra le colline', *Ibid.*, p. 48.

29 See interview with Grazia Casagrande, 'Dal romanzo al fumetto al film', *Il caffè letterario*, 9 April 1999, <<http://www.wuz.it/archivio/cafeletterario.it/interviste/piersanti.html>>. Accessed 8 October 2008.

30 'Non vedo tanta gente felice attorno a me'. Spunta, 'Intervista a Claudio Piersanti'.

31 On this see Philippe Forrest, 'Il romanzo, il niente', *Il caffè illustrato*, n. 34, January–February 2007, trans. Stefano Gallerani, 58–61, p. 58, and Giuseppe Cantarano, *Immagini del nulla. La filosofia italiana contemporanea* (Milan: Mondadori, 1998), p. 3. In depicting a society that is essentially sick, mediocre, disaffected, Piersanti follows a long-established Italian literary tradition that goes from Svevo to Pirandello and Bilenchi. Among his contemporaries he could be compared to writers such as Gianni Celati, Daniele Benati and Ermanno Cavazzoni, who ironically take failure

While some of Piersanti's characters experience brief successes professionally (like Giorgio in *Charles*), in relational terms they mostly fail for they do not invest much in their relationships, but rather focus on themselves. Most of them have experienced a failed relationship or marriage in the past – Giorgio, Metz the protagonist of 'L'amore degli adulti', and also the only woman protagonist, Luisa, in the eponymous novel – or they are in a relationship that collapses in the course of the narrative, as for example the protagonist of *Casa di nessuno*, and of the stories 'La piccola Alberta in volo', 'Due ragazze russe' (Two Russian Girls) and 'Il redattore' (The Editor). Most worryingly these characters are personal failures because of their negative attitude to life, their preference for isolation, their refusal to communicate, and even their chauvinistic approach to women. This is the case in 'La piccola Alberta in volo' which opens the collection. The unnamed protagonist, a solitary man, bored with his life, is unable to relate to his guests – Margherita, a former lover, and her young daughter Alberta – and locks himself in his room, insensitive even to the affection of the young girl, who appears more mature than he is. Similarly, the title story of the collection, 'L'amore degli adulti', which is set in 'a small town on the Adriatic coast', narrates the falling in love of another unnamed man with a woman, Elena, also unhappily married. The joy of their encounter is dampened by the man's nostalgic, pessimistic and disenchanted attitude which is best summarised by his concluding remark: 'Adults' love is complicated and heavy; better not trust it'.³² 'Due ragazze russe' and 'Il redattore' deal respectively with cheating on one's wife and with a man's obsession for a woman. Although allegedly 'adult', these characters are unable to relate to others, nor to take a definite stance, preferring an in-between state (such as continuous travelling) to firm commitment, as in the story 'Due ragazze russe', which is set somewhere between an unnamed provincial town and Rome. Another powerful example of isolation is narrated in 'Il muro

in the eyes of the world as a goal for their characters, using it as a critique of what they term as 'commercial literature'.

32 'L'amore degli adulti, mi dissi, è complicato e pesante, meglio non fidarsene', *L'amore degli adulti*, p. 27.

verde' (The Green Wall), where two male neighbours keep up a relationship based on mutual respect for each other's privacy, by occasionally exchanging a few words through the honeysuckle that divides their gardens. This story is also set in the province, where the protagonist chooses to move, for city life depresses him ('I lived for nine years on the hills, next to a town where I worked. I came from the province and city life depressed me: when you are fifty it is harder to accept change').³³ Reminiscent of Bilenchì's fiction, this story depicts silence as a means of distant bonding between the two neighbours, while showing Piersanti's penchant for the unsaid, the implied. Another story of silence and unexpressed feelings is 'I due figli di Zelinda' (Zelinda's Two Children),³⁴ which powerfully conveys provincial life by focussing on the secret of the old Zelinda, who has spent all her life hiding her two disabled children. The story brilliantly depicts the backward atmosphere of the province through silence and ellipsis, in Piersanti's understated narrative. Celati, highlighting Piersanti's 'refusal' of the world, praises his style: 'There is always a restrained half tone with which Claudio Piersanti tells his stories'.³⁵ Elsewhere Celati compared the stories to oysters, suggesting that 'if forced to tell us something, these stories would evaporate', and suggesting that 'in every story there is always something that tends to hide, to go unnoticed, or, at most, to be said in a laconic sentence'.³⁶

33 'Ho vissuto per nove anni in collina, a due passi dalla città dove mi ero trasferito per lavoro. Venivo dalla provincia e la vita di città mi deprimeva: a cinquant'anni i cambiamenti si accettano malvolentieri'. *L'amore degli adulti*, p. 30.

34 The story was first written in 1980 and published in the journal *Linea d'ombra* (n. 1, 1983), then republished in Celati's edited collection *Narratori delle riserve* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1992).

35 'C'è sempre un mezzo tono, restio e pudico, con cui Claudio Piersanti racconta le sue storie' (Ibid., p. 244).

36 'A volerle forzare a disvelarci qualcosa, queste storie svaporerrebbero'; 'in ogni racconto c'è qualcosa che tende a nascondersi, a passare inosservato, e al massimo ad enunciarsi con una frase laconica'. Reported on the back cover blurb of the 2006 edition, together with Tondelli's remark that 'silence and pauses are the real strength of these short stories ('i silenzi e le pause sono la vera forza di questi racconti').

Piersanti's province is a locus where many characters live unhappily or which they leave but keep alive in their memory until they return to it, whether for short periods, like the protagonists of his first two novels, or some characters in *Comandò il padre*, or for good, as in the case of Enrico Metz. In these latter texts, to which I now turn, the return inevitably clashes with the characters' distorted memory of the place, that is with the impossibility of resurrecting the past, which leads the characters to different outcomes.³⁷ *Comandò il padre* is a collection of four short stories published in 2003 – with the support of friends of the author – by PeQuod, a small publisher in Ancona.³⁸ As critics like Severini and Panzeri have pointed out, the collection revolves around the themes of conflicting familial bonds, death and returning home, particularly in the opening story, 'Cinghiali' (Wild Boars) and in the title story 'Comandò il padre', on which I will focus. By far the longest of the four stories, 'Cinghiali' narrates the return to the province of two siblings, Roberto and Stefania, after their parents' death, with the aim of selling their family house in the country. The narrative is focussed on Roberto and his ambiguous, love-hate relationship with the house, the past and his sister, whom he despises, typically for Piersanti's characters, for her middle-class conformism, that is for being married, having a career, and children, while he prides himself on being a solitary anti-conformist. The story is set in hot, rural Tuscany, a milieu that reveals clear signs of the passing of time and the impossibility of returning to the past, as the region is presently 'invaded' by tourists who buy and renovate old farm houses. Like a nemesis, this invasion is

37 A similar nostalgic stance is shared by the author who in various interviews fondly recalls his memories of a rural Abruzzo in the 50s and 60s: 'in my adolescence, until the mid 60s, I remember, when I used to return to my village of origin, I would still see country people walking barefoot and without running water'; 'nella mia adolescenza, fino a metà degli anni Sessanta, ricordo che quando tornavo nel mio paese natale in Abruzzo trovavo ancora i contadini che andavano scalzi e non avevano l'acqua in casa.' Fulvio Toffoli, 'Claudio Piersanti: "Meglio i timidi dei potenti"', *Il Piccolo*, 9 September 2006.

38 The stories were written between 1989 and 1998 (like those of *L'amore degli adulti*) and published in various journals. On this see Olivero and Valletti, 2003.

counteracted by the spreading of wild boars that come closer and closer to the village, eating everything they find, that is metaphorically reclaiming the land to the wilderness. This external threat is paralleled by the fear that Roberto feels inside the house which is oppressed by an atmosphere of death ('he had to admit it: the deserted house and the countryside frightened him').³⁹ He overcomes his fear one night by going hunting and shooting a wild boar, and then by sleeping with a young woman. Having 'reasserted' his virility and authority, once his sister arrives to the house he pretends to be critically ill in order to convince her to sell the house, after she had voiced her intention to keep it in memory of their parents. Despite the rather negative tone of this story, which transpires from Roberto's highly individualistic character, there emerges still a sense of nostalgia for a rural place and a lost sense of community. A feeble sense of belonging to a family, and to some traditions, also strikes in the title story, 'Comandò il padre',⁴⁰ which tells of the car journey of two brothers from an unknown Northern city to the Southern village from which they emigrated, in order to bury their father according to his testament, which vengefully stipulates he should be buried after the death of his worst enemy. Despite the protagonist's refusal to take vengeance and his progressive outlook on life, during the long journey he learns to appreciate the strength of family bonds: 'in one thing my brother was right: we were a family. I tell my closest friends that I have lived as a stranger in my own family, but in fact this is not true. Perhaps it can never be true'.⁴¹

The theme of returning home to the province is particularly central in Piersanti's latest novel, *Il ritorno a casa di Enrico Metz* (henceforth abbreviated to *Metz*), as the title indicates. Inspired by the tragic story of Raul Gardini, the Gardini-Ferruzzi magnate who committed suicide after a

39 'Doveva ammetterlo: la casa deserta e la campagna gli facevano paura'. *Comandò il padre*, p. 27.

40 The story first appeared in Celati's series *Narratori delle riserve* in *Il manifesto* (24 September 1989).

41 'In una cosa mio fratello aveva ragione, eravamo in famiglia. Agli amici più intimi dico che ho vissuto come un estraneo, nella mia famiglia, ma in fondo non è vero. Forse non può mai essere vero'. *Comandò il padre*, p. 62.

major industrial crash, the novel has been quite successful and won numerous literary prizes in 2006. The story revolves around a middle-aged man, Enrico Metz, who goes back to live in his parents' house in an unidentified provincial town, after a successful career as a lawyer in Milan is terminated by the collapse of his firm, which leads his boss, Marani, to commit suicide. By paying homage to Raul Gardini, Piersanti expresses his admiration for great, enlightened individuals who stand out from the mediocre mass of Italian society.⁴² As the writer suggests, the novel is firstly about power,⁴³ and traces Metz's spiritual trajectory from his fascination and involvement with power to his refusal of power and his voluntary retirement to a secluded life, to the margins. Unlike many of Piersanti's characters, who only experience mediocrity, Metz has a successful past which he renounces, preferring to escape the world, once his illusion of an enlightened power are dashed by his boss's failure. This trajectory from success to failure in the eyes of the world, that is, from the centre to the margins, clearly highlights the disillusionment of the protagonist, and of the author, with regard to contemporary Italian society which is portrayed as essentially negative.⁴⁴ This movement is counteracted by Metz's search for serenity in the province, by seeking to divest himself of all aspiration. His retirement to the uneventful life of the province, however, is not accompanied by a credible psychological change as he remains rather cynical, egocentric and somewhat chauvinistic, mirroring the prototype of Piersanti's male characters.

42 'Ho voluto rendere omaggio alla memoria di Raul Gardini, nel personaggio del capo di Metz, il finanziere Marani. Gardini, nel bene e nel male, è stato una figura straordinaria nell'appiattimento generale del nostro panorama industriale. Lui e Adriano Olivetti hanno cercato di spezzare l'invadenza di un sistema politico che tutto controlla e nel quale l'iniziativa individuale non è né prevista né gradita. In Italia domina una forma di consociativismo parastatale, non puoi aprire neanche una piccolissima impresa se non fai parte di una cordata', Toffoli, 2006.

43 'Il primo tema che Metz ha portato con sé è quello del potere. Per la prima volta nelle mie pagine appare un uomo che ha avuto un notevole potere.' Piersanti, 'Addio al potere, in cerca della bellezza', *Gazzettino*, 4 August 2006, p. 1.

44 In Piersanti's words the novel is a 'sort of 'neurobiology of everyday life' of the Italian society since Bribesville to-date'; 'una sorta di "neurobiologia della vita quotidiana" della società italiana dagli anni da Tangentopoli ad oggi'. Maria Paola Porcelli, 'Il borghese cerca una via d'uscita', *La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno*, 17 June 2006, p. 9.

Like power, the theme of returning to the province is equally central to the novel, which opens with Metz's initial euphoria about going back to his home town, after living thirty-two years in Milan, despite worrying about having to start afresh. As in many of Piersanti's texts, the setting is vague – we only know that the town an hour or two from Milan – and this vagueness is symptomatic of the void into which Metz suddenly plunges. Metz's big change is to renounce city life for small, everyday life, for a sense of void and nothingness, that is magnified by living in the margins, as the narrator suggests earlier on in the novel ('In a way, nothingness occupied exactly the centre of his thoughts and attracted him like a great back hole').⁴⁵ After a busy career, Metz enjoys his new found freedom by wandering aimlessly in his small town, with no time pressures, just enjoying life through simple pleasures, such as watching the sunset or smelling roasted chestnuts.⁴⁶ This sense of relatedness even gives him the brief illusion of belonging to this place – a new experience for one of Piersanti's characters – which stems from the provincial, out-of-time nature of the town.⁴⁷ This sense of frozen immobility is underlined by the circularity of the narrative that

45 'In un certo senso il nulla occupava esattamente il centro dei suoi pensieri e lo attirava come un grande buco nero', *Metz*, p. 47.

46 'He wandered for a couple of hours in the public gardens where he grew up, then crossed the avenue and quickly arrived at the centre. The sky was increasingly cloudy and the air smelt of roasted chestnuts. [...] Without wearing a dark suit and a tie he felt unrecognizable. [...] A new life was starting for Mr. Enrico Metz, without uniform and unending appointments. He wasn't in charge anymore; he was free at last'. 'Bighellonò un paio d'ore nei giardini pubblici che l'avevano visto crescere, poi attraversò i viali e arrivò rapidamente in centro. Il cielo si stava annuvolando e l'aria sapeva di castagne arrostiti. [...] Senza cravatta e senza abito scuro si sentiva irriconoscibile. [...] Iniziava una nuova vita, per il signor Enrico Metz, senza divisa e senza impegni asfissianti. Non era più capo, era finalmente libero'. *Metz*, pp. 10–11.

47 'He felt again part of a pleasant town, not too small nor too big, an ancient and busy town in Northern Italy that was open to change and new fashions, but in fact lazy and incapable of real change. [...] Its inhabitants, though adapting every year externally to feel they were keeping abreast with trends, were still crossing the town squares with the leisurely pride of their ancestors'. 'Si sentiva di nuovo parte di una città gradevole, né troppo piccola, né troppo grande, un'antica e operosa città del Nord aperta ai mutamenti e alle mode ma in fondo pigra e incapace di cambiare davvero. [...] i suoi concittadini, pur mutando ogni anno esteriormente per sentirsi

starts and ends in winter, echoing many of Bilenchi's time settings. After an initial illusion of 'coming home', Metz soon detaches himself from this environment, acknowledging the inevitable and drastic change even in this provincial town and in the life of its inhabitants who now fail to recognise him ('and now that he had returned he felt at home, although the town wasn't the same any more. [...] Nobody recognised him').⁴⁸ Wandering around in town, Metz soon voices his lack of interest in its inhabitants. He feels, rather, a sense of nostalgia for its inanimate space, for everything that remains after the people have left, such as buildings and nature: 'He hadn't come back for his once esteemed fellow citizens, although he was really enjoying looking at them, but for the old city walls, the smell of the air, the strong oak beams that supported the market arcade, for the grey and pink skies that he always remembered as infinite, wider than any other skies'.⁴⁹ Despite his affection for inanimate objects, as soon as he returns to his parents' house he renovates it, having first bought his sister's share (a situation that reverses the protagonist's indifference towards the family home in the story 'Cinghiali').

sempre alla moda, attraversavano ancora le piazze del centro con la fiera lentezza dei loro antenati'. *Metz*, p. 11.

- 48 'E adesso che era tornato si sentiva a casa anche se la città non era più la stessa. [...] Nessuno lo riconosceva'. *Metz*, p. 12. As the author suggests in interview with Ennio Mansueto, going back is always an illusion, for we can never go back to the same place we have left: 'an apparent contradiction. In reality returning to a town/city after many years is like retuning to a non-place. There remain the stones, the archaeology of memory, but time has changed everything'. Ennio Mansueto, "In un paese consociativo l'individuo è spacciato". Intervista a Claudio Piersanti', *Il corriere del Mezzogiorno*, 11 June 2006. Elsewhere, Piersanti claims to have written this novel in order to feel the illusion of going back: 'The sense of returning, for example, is completely foreign to me. There is no place to which I could go back. This is why I wrote *Metz*, in order to feel the sense of returning home. Like every placeless person I envy those who have a place to return to, those who belong to a language, a dialect'. Spunta, 'Conversazione con Claudio Piersanti'.

- 49 'Non era tornato per i suoi pur stimabili concittadini di una volta, anche se guardarli lo divertiva moltissimo, ma per le mura antiche, per l'odore dell'aria, per le possenti travi di quercia che sorreggevano il portico del mercato, per i cieli grigi e rosa che ricordava sempre infiniti, più vasti di tutti gli altri cieli conosciuti'. *Metz*, p. 14.

Returning to the province and giving up his career, Metz can detach himself from life and look at it with a critical eye, seeing all its defects, but at the same time finding new hope and a reason for living. In the author's words, in conversation with Viale, 'in the province we can see all our defects as if *in vitro*; they are clear and visible to anyone; but we are not devoid of hope'.⁵⁰ In the province Metz abandons his hectic life and embraces a new life style, a contemplative rather than active life, based on slow walks in the countryside and brief talks to his elderly neighbour, Diodato, who replaces his boss as his new 'model'. Metz moves from his fascination with power to admiration for this simple old man who spends his last days tending his garden. Following his example, and mirroring the author's interest in mysticism, Metz tries to turn himself into a mediocre, simple character and learn a philosophy of acceptance from everyday life. Metz's psychological change however strikes the reader as little implausible and this reflects the author's lack of belief in the possibility of change. A number of critics have criticised this as superficial, and far too elegiac. According to Filippo La Porta, 'just when he tries to humanise him, Piersanti paradoxically shows us Metz's limit: his inadequacy, his inability to establish a relationship with the other'.⁵¹ La Porta even coins the noun 'metzismo', to indicate a preference for retiring from life, but only when it is too late, a feature that he detects in many Italian magnates. Even harsher is Angelo Guglielmi's criticism that rightly points out how Metz's humanity is limited to the privileges he receives,⁵² in particular from the women who seem to revolve around him simply in order to please him. Although entertaining a number of relations, like many of Piersanti's characters Metz is essentially isolated,

50 'nella provincia si guardano in vitro tutti i nostri difetti, che sono chiari, incisi, visibili a tutti, ma non ci priva della speranza.' Antonella Viale, 'Il premio Alassio a Piersanti per il romanzo su Raul Gardini', *Il Secolo XIX*, 3 September 2006, p. 22.

51 'Proprio mentre cerca di umanizzarlo, [Piersanti] ce ne mostra paradossalmente il limite: una spaesata inadeguatezza, l'incapacità di stabilire una relazione con l'altro'. Filippo La Porta, 'Il romanzo di Piersanti e il "metzismo" dei dirigenti italiani', *Il riformista*, 26 January 2006, p. 6.

52 Angelo Guglielmi, 'Personaggio in cerca di immedesimazione', *L'Unità*, 22 August 2006, p. 22.

egocentric, disenchanted and melancholic. The author's skill however lies in depicting this character's stance, in between success and retirement, through a detached, neutral tone, based on silence and ellipsis, and in describing a vague non-place that voices the character's and author's nostalgia for belonging to one place and of an unattainable sense of serenity that escapes all his characters.

Piersanti's fiction offers an interesting example of the poetics of the margins, the province, and an image of mediocrity in contemporary Italy. Like many of his contemporaries, who experienced political disillusionment in the 70s, in his texts Piersanti voices his disillusionment with Italian society and politics and with the isolation and frustration of the contemporary individual, split between their dream of power and their actual mediocrity, or the mediocre position they are forced into by society. By narrating the province Piersanti follows an established European and Italian literary tradition, from Proust and Kafka, to Bilenchi, D'Arzo and Parise, while at the same time voicing a postmodern sense of displacement and non-belonging. Piersanti's literary preferences often lie with authors who position themselves outside the canon or who are labelled as 'marginal', such as Emil Cioran and Alain-Fournier, or Chekhov. Similarly, his Italian literary masters include postwar narrators of the province, starting with Bilenchi, who in his fiction celebrated withdrawal and isolation from other people, and empathy with nature. As the author reveals in interview with Pegoraro, the main themes of his fiction are 'provinciality, failure, mediocrity – as a habit of life'.⁵³ Despite their dreams, all of his characters accept their own mediocrity, in fact paradoxically, they embrace it as their way of conforming and possibly being free to lead their own life, while refusing a strong commitment to society and politics. Despite an awareness of the impossibility of returning home, Piersanti's characters strive to return to their parents' home. This inevitably results in disillusionment for it clashes with their memory. In order to inhabit their sense of displacement, most

53 'Il provinciale, il fallimento e la mediocrità – intesa come l'abitudine alla vita'. Paola Pegoraro, 'Quattro chiacchiere con... Claudio Piersanti: pratica e mistica dell'abbandono', *Lettere*, 628, June–July 2006.

characters isolate themselves in their house, which acts both as a haven and as a prison. From this position, particularly from a window, they are free to look at the world outside with a detachment and also to create their own fantasy world. This functions as a powerful metaphor for the detached and 'aristocratic' position of the author that Piersanti advocates, as he compares himself in interview to a mystic or visionary, that is to someone who can remove himself from the crowd in order to achieve a clearer vision of life. Similarly, his reiterated preference for the province can be linked to a sense of generational loss, and seen as a kind of sublimation, through denial, of the myth of power and individualism that lies hidden in his fiction. Exploring these issues, Piersanti's fiction combines the modernist myth of strong individuality with the sense of fragmentation and displacement of postmodernity, creating powerful metaphors for contemporary mediocrity.