

BOOK REVIEWS

## **Le guerre di Mario Rigoni Stern. Trauma, racconto, guarigione**

**by Gianluca Cinelli, Perugia, Morlacchi Editore, 2022, 252 pp.,  
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Tucked away in a footnote on page 21 of Gianluca Cinelli's recent work, *Le guerre di Mario Rigoni Stern*, is a quote from Frodo Baggins in *The Lord of the Rings*: 'There is no real going back. Though I may come to the Shire, it will not be the same; for I shall not be the same. I am wounded with knife, sting, and tooth, and a long burden. Where shall I find rest?' Frodo's words are an unexpected discovery in this context, capturing both the core of Cinelli's subject matter and the eruditeness with which he handles it. In this delightful volume, Cinelli offers a substantive and interdisciplinary analysis of Mario Rigoni Stern's *oeuvre*, tracing the 'epic of the human body' (p. 48) from the stress of battle to post traumatic stress, as the soldier – and civilians – walk the *via della guarigione della guerra* (p. 75), which to many a reader would evoke the *via crucis*. The influence of Northrop Frye on Cinelli's reading of Rigoni Stern is explicit throughout and provides a fruitful lens for his analysis, and potential avenues for yet further exploration of Rigoni Stern's writing.

*Le guerre di Mario Rigoni Stern: Trauma, racconto, guarigione* is a study of seven of Rigoni Stern's works published between 1953 and 2004. Mario Rigoni Stern (1921–2008) was a veteran of the short-lived Italian campaign against France (1940) and the catastrophic campaigns in Greece (1940–1) and Russia (1941–3). Following Badoglio's armistice with the Allies in September 1943, Rigoni Stern was captured and imprisoned first by the Germans, for some 20 months, and then – after escaping the Germans – by the British. He, thus, had first-hand experience of the trauma of multiple aspects of the Second World War in Europe. The scope of his writing, however, extends beyond the autobiographical to explore the impact of the two world wars on soldiers and civilians alike. As any reader of his work will have noticed, Rigoni Stern's writing captures and conveys the interplay of humanity, war, and nature from the perspective of someone who lived, hunted, and climbed in these mountains all his life. His is the writing of a man who seeks to live in harmony with the natural habitat that surrounds him. This aspect of Rigoni Stern's life and works is explored thoughtfully and thoroughly by Cinelli so that new and brighter light is shed on the literary dynamic between Rigoni Stern, his experiences, and his understanding of the immediate and lasting impact of war on his community and environment.

Cinelli's book begins with an introduction which first offers an overview of how the experience of Italian veterans, and POWs specifically, has tended to be understood and reported from the First World War until the present. This is followed by a study of the

cathartic effects of writing generally, and in relation to Rigoni Stern. Emphasised from the outset is the importance of the traumatised being heard if they are to heal. Here Cinelli lays out, too, the role of ethics, nature, and metaphorical archetypes in Rigoni Stern's writing and catharsis. Cinelli states explicitly in his introduction that the focus of this book is not so much on a biographical reconstruction of trauma and healing, but on how the trauma of war and healing from it 'transmute' into a literary form (p. 28).

He structures the book accordingly, dividing it into two parts: *I traumi della guerra* and *Le vie della guarigione*. The first part consists of four chapters, arranged thematically and broadly in chronological order. Chapter 1, 'La memoria del corpo: *il sergente nella neve* (1953)' focuses on Rigoni Stern's first publication. The next three chapters consider the development of three separate themes – namely the long shadow of war, the trauma of the POW, and war from the perspective of civilians – over multiple publications, whether separated by a few years or a few decades. In each of these chapters, Cinelli draws on literary, philosophical, psychological, and psychotherapeutic sources to furnish a rich analysis of Rigoni Stern's literary craftsmanship and the evolution in his narration of trauma and post trauma.

The second part of the book consists of three chapters which lean heavily on Northrop Frye's magisterial work, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957) to analyse Rigoni Stern's work through the lens of ethics (Chapter 5), nature (Chapter 6), and literary archetypes (Chapter 7). Cinelli's analysis honours Rigoni Stern's original empathy and concern for the dignity of humanity, and the interdependence of humanity and nature, particularly in the destruction of war. In these chapters, Cinelli expands and develops ideas introduced in the first part of the book in light of Frye's framework for literary criticism. Rather than being repetitive, this approach takes the reader deeper into Rigoni Stern's consideration of the symbiotic relationship between humanity, nature, and war. Cinelli's engagement with Frye is both stimulating and intriguing. While Frye is explicit in stating that 'Western literature has been more influenced by the Bible than by any other book' (p. 14), Cinelli makes no mention of this reality, even in his discussion of archetypes and tropes such as death and rebirth, the destructive and life-giving qualities of water, and *nostos*, all rich with biblical resonances. Instead, Cinelli sees Rigoni Stern as '*il più "orientale" e "buddista" dei nostri scrittori di guerra*' (p. 189). The biblical and Christian influences that permeate the Italian social imaginary suggest that there might be scope for future study of Rigoni Stern's work within such a framework.<sup>1</sup>

Cinelli concludes his work with a brief chapter entitled '*Ritornare, Ricostruire*' which draws together how he has demonstrated that Rigoni Stern's literary narrative offers a possible mode of return and reconstruction in the aftermath of war (p. 230). As he has recognised in Rigoni Stern's work, Cinelli, too, has brought the useful and the beautiful together in this study of human experience (p. 231).

## Note

1. See for example, Warner, K. 2011. 'Franciscan Environmental Ethics: Imagining Creation as a Community of Care'. *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 31 (1): 143–60.