Essays on the Peripheries

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PASOLINI, BALESTRINI, ARTAUD
On the night of November 1, 1975, Pier Paolo Pasolini\(^1\) was brutally murdered on the beach at Ostia, near Rome. The next day his body was found. Controversy surrounding his death persists to this day. What is indisputable is that Pasolini’s death concluded a life spent engaged with the forces that he determined were transforming Italian society for the worse.

Pasolini’s early poems, mostly written during his stay in Casarsa, a town in the Italian region of Friuli, retain an air of hopefulness despite the anguish of his emerging sense of his own difference. His homosexuality is at once an ecstatic emotional experience and, at this time in his life, an unrealizable dream, a curse. The exchange of feeling between men is “a sterile energy … that refuses to give in to life / and is a ceaseless reminder of death.” In his silence, he detests “these dreams / where sin dons the mask of innocence.” The language of his silence is religious and defiant. He is “possessed with hatred for the City of God.” God stands for any kind of repressive authority. In opposition to the Catholic world, he invokes a more ancient and sensual paganism: “I am the virgin youth humiliated by Pan / the milk and blood of Apollo on my face.”

Life in Casarsa profoundly affected the young Pasolini. He found there an image of social perfection in the natural world

\(^1\) All the following translations of Pasolini’s poems are my own.
uncontaminated by industry, in the rhythm of the dialect spoken at home and in the peasant life, innocent and pure. His sympathies are not with the adult world, but rather with the “young men wrestling in the courtyard below. They are violent yet pure as the rays of the sun / that tans their backs.” These are the men whose lives he would dramatize on the screen in his first film, Acattone (1961). During his time in Casarsa, Pasolini’s feelings would form a link: “Casarsa = life = happiness = Susanna [his mother] = the Friulian dialect of the peasantry” and the opposite: “urbanism = hypocrisy = moralism = Carlo Alberto [his father] = the standard Italian of the educated bourgeoisie.” Pasolini writes, “It was my mother who showed me how poetry can be really written, not just studied at school.” Pasolini’s mother was a source of acceptance and encouragement throughout his life. In contrast, his father had worked for the fascists under Mussolini. Disillusioned after the war, he began to drink and was abusive in the household. Nevertheless, he did follow the events in his son’s life, collecting news clippings whenever there was mention of him.

Italy was in a state of transition after the war and the spirit of the resistance was still felt by intellectuals. There was a sense of solidarity among the class with which Pasolini identified throughout his life, the sub-proletariat. Six months before the fall of Mussolini, Pasolini argued that European youth were still connected to a humanist and democratic tradition that predated the fascist regime. To speak of literature as distinct from life at this time seems now a kind of hermeticism, but, in fact, it was a way of resisting and refusing to support the fascist regime. The hermeticism of these early poems is political. Pasolini joined the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI, Italian Communist Party) in 1945. Almost immediately problems arose regarding Pasolini’s complex views of party doctrine. From 1947 to 1949 he had a teaching post near Casarsa. During this time, he was expelled from the Communist Party due to accusations of indecent public behavior and corruption of youth. In 1964, he would write,
An atheistic philosophy is not the only possible philosophy of Marxism—especially since it is true that the Marxist base among workers was always, in its majority, believers, and also at the higher reaches [of the PCI] there have been many Catholic Marxists.

His relation to the Communist Party was complicated throughout his life by both his homosexuality and his unorthodox Christianity. He viewed the death of his brother Guido, a partisan who was killed by his own comrade, as a symbol for the call to action. In 1970 he would write, “I think there can be no Communist who would disapprove of the actions of the partisan Guido Pasolini” and that what is important above all is a “critical lucidity which destroys words and conventions and goes to the bottom of things, inside their secret and inalienable truth.” The intellectuals of Pasolini’s generation believed that their work was a kind of labor that was socially useful and not simply diversion or entertainment. Despite Pasolini’s battle for equal rights and against the evils of party discipline, he was often considered too spiritual to be a reliable comrade. His complex recasting of the secular and the sacred in politics seemed contradictory or at best paradoxical. In this respect, the word bestemmia takes on an added significance for Pasolini. It has the dual meaning of “curse” and “blasphemy.” For Pasolini, the State was inseparable from the Church, and both came under attack. His “virgin joy” is a “sacrilege.”

In 1950 Pasolini was forced to leave Friuli because of a scandal concerning his homosexuality. It was the first of many. The world he found on the outskirts of Rome was like a new universe. He saw the pagan world of the borgate, outcasts who seemed to live according to their own natural laws in opposition to the arbitrary doctrines of the State. Their world preserved an archaic tradition. To Pasolini, this was the source of their mystery and their attraction. They were atavistic and mythical. He was Medea, a foreigner in his own land, one whose beliefs were no longer valid in a world devoid of the sacred and heroic quality of myth. In Rome, Pasolini was inspired to write two nov-
els, *The Ragazzi* (1955) and *A Violent Life* (1959). The success of these novels would mark the beginning of many accusations of obscenity, defamation of religion and indecency that would continue throughout his life, resulting in thirty-three appearances before the court. In these works, Pasolini showed people as they really are, with their own actions and speaking their own dialect. He was concerned with reality, turning his back on the decadent aestheticism of his early work. He exposed a vision that was contrary to the progressive ideals of the revolutionary or of the State. No one wanted to believe that this other world existed.

As Europe’s infrastructure was rebuilt with American aid, the Christian Democrats began to dominate the polls in Italy. The Left fought a losing battle as the country moved towards a more conservative outlook. In the face of this, Pasolini argued that the intellectual must turn inward, become introspective, even diaristic. The intensely personal becomes a route to the political. The majority was in favor of a version of Christian Democracy that promised a rejuvenated and healthy Italy after the war. Pasolini, like Rainer Werner Fassbinder, did not believe the wounds of Fascism were healed. He held up a mirror to society, but the masses turned him away. Very quickly Italy began to change and there was a return of the repressed. He speaks of the “feigned vivacity of the bourgeoisie / masking the age-old fear / of the honest poor.” The people are changing, adopting consumerist and bourgeois values in favor of a more modern, European sensibility. He writes, “these politicians are blind and hungry animals … this nation crumbles under the weight of a progressive optimism.” At this time Pasolini was struggling to enter the political arena, using as his means language and the private awareness of his difference. He writes, “I am Orpheus, Oedipus, Medea, Narcissus. The mythical landscape is real.” His is a world outside time and space, pre-historical, a world with the epic quality of myth. There is growing unrest between Pasolini and the Italian Communist Party. He writes “you who swear allegiance to the red flag / must realize your theories in action /
because the Other exists.” But at the end of the fifties Pasolini begins to sense that “the red flag will be an empty sign.”

In 1958 to 1959 he writes a series of poems called “Humiliating and Offensive Epigrams.” Here, as in the diaristic poems of the early fifties, Pasolini analyzes his position with regard to the State:

TO MYSELF

This guilty world consumes its own shit
to fill its bulging gut. It despises
our of sheer sadistic glee.
I’m the guiltiest though I haven’t sinned.

My heart’s a burnt stone.

He writes, “Don’t hustle yourself / they’ll never forgive us our passion / neither you nor I / will ever be off the hook,” and later, “Nothing … escapes the disciplined eye of the Catholic police.” For Pasolini, the “dogma of religion / is a false subtext to the inner life.” He is engaged in “eroticizing the dead Latin / of a useless pontiff.” In “To Prince Barberini,” he writes,

You’ve been a coward your whole life.
Now you rise to the occasion, proud, defiant, with a new campaign.
But you’re just a rotten corpse,
unsure of yourself as always.

By the end of the fifties, Pasolini’s work had decisively shifted from the personal to the political.

During the sixties Pasolini also began to work in another medium, film. His poetry of the fifties was an engaged poetry, but he felt unable to reach a larger audience. The filmic image would replicate the “real” in a way that language could not. He makes Accatone (1961). The popularity of his films from this first through Oedipus Rex (1967), Theorem (1968), Medea (1969), the
Trilogy of Life — Decameron (1971), The Canterbury Tales (1972), Arabian Nights (1974) — and Salò (1975) insured his visibility and allowed him to project his vision to the Italian people, unimpeded by the limits of language. The films were met with outrage, litigation, fury, misunderstanding, and disgust. This all seemed to fuel the fire of his growing anger at a world that had demolished the mythic, pagan roots of Christianity. His ideas clashed both with believers and unbelievers, the Church and the Communists. Pasolini writes,

The atheism of a militant Communist is the essence of religion compared to the cynicism of a capitalist: in the first, one can always find those moments of idealism, of desperation, of psychological violence, of conscious will, of faith — which are elements, even degraded, of religion — in the second one finds only Mammon.

Pasolini was not a believer, yet he held that all things were sacred. This was bound to confuse the critics who were seeking any chance to devalue his way of thinking.

He gives a portrait of the capitalist in his poem “Ballads of Violence,” written in 1963. It is also a characterization of the typical bourgeois sensibility. In an earlier poem, he wrote of a split in his own personality between himself and the “barbarian” that resides within him,

He imitates my mania for analysis
so I look ridiculous when I call his move.
He crushes my attempts to reveal him.

He grins at this naïve passion.

About my sincerity
he makes an obscene joke.

I can’t get away from him.
I’m followed in the street.
I feel him in my bed at night.
I can’t rid myself of this stench of death.

This is the anxiety and neurosis of the bourgeoisie. In the “Ballads of Violence” he is a weak man, a dwarf, a mediocrity, a failure, abnormal, a servant, decadent, immoral though mild mannered, a pig, poor. And yet the weak man will kill in the name of God, a man who considers himself a failure will try to even the score, a servant will obey the words of his fascist master, after all a game is just a game. In the last poem of the sequence Pasolini reveals that he is speaking of the capitalist. No one is innocent, not the weak or the poor or the abnormal (read: homosexual). The poem traces the movement from the personal to the political. In this poem, Pasolini is speaking of the return of certain repressive, fascist attitudes and behaviors and of the unavoidable complicity of the people. In the opening shots of Theorem, we understand that a factory is given over to the people. Pasolini asks if this is not really an attempt to turn the workers into the bourgeoisie. Doctrinaire Marxism is insufficient to explain the present time. The innocence and simplicity of the poor is devalued. Even in 1963, in this poem, one can see the beginning of ideas that would come to horrifying fruition in Salò.

This same year Pasolini visited the Holy Land in search of locations for his film The Gospel According to St. Matthew. At this time Israel and Jordan were at war. He visited Galilee, Jordan, Damascus, Bethlehem, and Jerusalem. Pasolini writes that the Holy Land was “a practical disappointment. But corresponding with this, … an aesthetic revelation.” He discovered only a few hours after his arrival at Tel Aviv “reforestation works, modern agriculture, light industry.” Israel was becoming too modern to serve as an authentic site for his film. According to Pasolini the effects of industry directly impacted the people. He wrote, “I realized it was all no use.” Instead he filmed in those parts of Italy where he believed, and by 1964 he was still right in doing so, that a “Southern peasant … is still living in a magical culture where miracles arereal like the culture in which Matthew wrote.” The
product of his visit was a sequence of poems entitled “Israel” (1964). Here, he voices his disappointment:

The city
where they live is blind …
Why do they act
Like the children of bourgeois Aryans, and of the great and stupid descendants
of the West? Why this unpoetical state? Perhaps they do not think
they will die here?

He is writing here of Israel, but these words could apply to what he saw happening in Italy. The corruption by industry of a mythical/sacred site and its people is a central concern in the poems of the sixties and seventies. He writes,

We find ourselves at the start of what will probably be the ugliest epoch in the history of man: the epoch of industrial alienation. … When the classical world is exhausted, when all the peasants and all the craftsman have died, when industry has made the cycle of production unstoppable, then will our history be over.

With Salò finished, Pasolini turned to other projected works. One of these, Bestemmia (Blasphemy) was an unfinished work from 1967. It was part screenplay and part narrative poem. I’ve included selections to illustrate the cinematic nature of his writing at this time. One can envision the poem as a film with dialogue:

There occurs a great silence.
The companions of Blasphemy collect around him in a circle
next to a fire that illuminates the twilight.
They ask him about life.
Then Blasphemy/Pasolini speaks,

Many of you, before the light is extinguished,  
will deny my words and therefore  
life will be on your side.

During the late sixties, as Pasolini became more politically engaged and gained greater visibility in the public eye because of his films, he also withdrew into himself more and felt increasingly alienated from the world around him. He imagines this dialogue between Pasolini and Blasphemy:

“He [God] is a curse upon my life.”  
“And why does he curse you?”  
“Because I wish to be blessed by a man.”  
“And what is the fate of a man who desires to be blessed by men and not God.”  
“The will to die”  
“No, by the hand of a man.”

Here, Pasolini is attacking the Church which he believed was no longer an independent religious organization but was indistinguishable from the State, serving the same interests and ignoring the people.

Pasolini wrote that the “crisis of the sixties” produced “the neo-capitalist siren on the one hand” and the end of the revolution on the other. As a result, there was a “void, the terrible existential void.” He witnessed Italy undergo a monumental change in the interests of a progressive “democracy” that valued a consumerist culture over an archaic culture that relied on a tradition of the sacred and of myth. He believed the people of the borgate, who embodied these values, were on the verge of extinction. He saw that the terrifying result was that “novelty” took precedence over the “authentic.” The bosses are these “severe men, in double-breasted suits, elegant, who take off and land in airplanes … sit at grandiose desks like thrones … these
men with faces of dogs or of saints.” And those who are “hum-
ble men dressed in rags or in clothes mass produced … who
pass hour after hour at jobs without hope … these men, with
faces equal to those of the dead without features or light save for
that of life … are the slaves.” For Pasolini, all this would soon
change dramatically as the distinction between boss and slave
was blurred. He witnessed the destruction of an entire class. He
writes that

for a young person today, the situation presents itself alto-
gether differently: for him it is much more difficult to look at
the bourgeoisie objectively, through the viewpoint of another
class. Because the bourgeoisie is triumphant, is making bour-
geois out of the workers on the one hand, out of the peasants
and ex-colonialists on the other. In effect, through neo-cap-
titalism, the bourgeoisie is becoming the human condition.

Italian society had become a pigsty. But he would write in 1974
that “the current destruction of values does not imply an im-
mediate substitution with other values, with their good and bad
sides, with the necessary improvement of living standards that
they would bring together with a real cultural progress … and
here is the great and tragic danger.” He compares the industrial-
ization of the past ten years in Italy with the industrialization
in Germany in the thirties. He writes, “It was in these conditions
that consumerism opened the path, after the recession of the
1920s, to Nazism.”

While shooting La Ricotta (1963), Pasolini met the young
man who would become his intimate companion for many
years, marking his longest relationship. Giovanni “Ninetto”
Davoli was born on October 11, 1948 in San Pietro a Maida,
Calabria. He was fourteen when he met Pasolini. Pasolini had
just turned forty. Pasolini wrote, “Everything about him has a
magical air … an endless reserve of happiness.” Soon Ninetto
became part of Pasolini’s entourage and started appearing in his
films. He was first cast in The Gospel According to St. Matthew
and appeared in many other films, culminating with Arabian
Nights in 1974. He has said of his relationship to Pasolini, “In me, he found the naturalness of the world he knew growing up.” This was the world that Pasolini saw devastated and ultimately obliterated by the changes that Italy was undergoing in the sixties.

During the filming of the “Canterbury Tales,” Ninetto told Pasolini that on his return to Rome he intended to marry. Pasolini writes, “I am insane with grief. Ninetto is finished. After almost nine years, there is no more Ninetto. I have lost the meaning of my life. Everything has collapsed around me.” In January 1973, Ninetto married. He promised Pasolini that nothing fundamental would change as a result of his marriage. But Pasolini was inconsolable.

The series of poems that I have simply called “Ninetto,” begun on August 20, 1971, chart the series of emotional upheavals Pasolini underwent during the time leading up to and after the wedding. He writes that Ninetto “is tired of our relationship. It has lost / all sense of novelty for him. The duty of a new life / distracts him.” He writes of Ninetto’s fiancée, “She blamed you for your innocent abandonments … She wants everything. / She is desperate and without hope, / without compassion.” In another poem, he accuses Ninetto, “This love / does not glorify you. / …You love her only if she weeps and is humiliated. / You don’t know how to maintain her / nor do you really want to.” His anger turns to regret: “But you, so happy, you / the very image of happiness, now / that you are gone from my life.” Finally his anger subsides, and he writes on February 1, 1973, “But seeing that you have retained a little love for me / exclusively, this means everything.” Pasolini’s relationship with Ninetto had changed into something else. Desire had given way to affection and loyalty. Pasolini cast him as Aziz in the Arabian Nights a character he described as “joy, happiness, a living ballet.” Ninetto’s first son was named Pier Paolo.

For Pasolini the men he once loved were victims of what he called an “anthropological genocide.” Their faces, their manner of speaking, their bodies had come to disgust him. He wrote, “Mass culture is ‘psychoanalysis in reverse’ because instead of
curing authoritarian personalities, it helps spawn them.” In a speech made in 1974, Pasolini writes,

> How does this substitution of values take place? Today this is happening surreptitiously, through a sort of secret persuasion. While during Marx’s times it happened through explicit and open violence, colonial conquests and violent impositions, today it happens in subtler, more artful and complex ways, and the process is technically much more mature and profound.

In 1969 Pasolini would write, “Nothing is possible anymore. The spirit / of the antibody has exhaled all of you / and the antiseptic power of those in authority has won.” The Resistance “has come to nothing” and “they are all for violence now.”

On November 1, 1975 Pasolini gave his last interview. The next day he was found dead. During the interview Pasolini speaks of Italy after the war, of the feeling among many that it was possible to change the course of history, to ensure that Italy was free of fascist tendencies. Once there was the “evil master” with “pockets full of dollars” and there was the “emaciated widow … asking for justice.” The problem was then posed in terms of the class struggle. Does he miss that world? Pasolini again:

> No! I miss the poor and genuine people who fought to abolish that master [Fascism] without turning into him. Since they were excluded from everything, nobody had managed to colonize them. I’m scared of these slaves in revolt because they behave exactly like their plunderers, desiring everything and wanting everything at any price. … I listen to the politicians — all the politicians — with all their little presumptions and I turn into a madman as they prove they do not know which country they are talking about, they are as far away as the moon. And together with them are the men of letters, the sociologists and the experts in any kind of field.
The denunciation was total. Italy had completely transformed and Pasolini’s warnings were ignored. In the late sixties up until his death, those in power preferred to maintain the image of a slightly mad, homosexual provocateur, a corruptor of minors, whose ideology was inconsistent and not to be trusted. It was these kinds of accusations, patently ignorant and false, that kept Pasolini at the forefront of intellectual debates in Italy for more than two decades. He believed that “a liberty without confrontation [was] a mythical liberty, it [was] the liberty of bourgeois liberalism, in the end a pretext.” Salò marks the end of the old Pasolini. It is a farewell to life as he represented it in the Trilogy of Life (1971–74). It is a film about the modern world. He writes, “the collapse of the present implies the collapse of the past. Life is a heap of insignificant and ironical ruins.”

Salò is, in one sense, a film about complicity. The line between victim and assassin is unclear. The victims are not those men and women of Accatone for whom a viewer could feel sympathetic. The world had changed. The victims in Salò are in large part bourgeois students or fashion models. Pasolini writes, “If I made them likeable victims who cried and tore at the heart then everyone would leave the movie house after five minutes. Besides, I don’t do that because I don’t believe it.” We are disturbed not so much because we feel a sympathetic connection to the victims but because of the extreme violence of those in power. Pasolini suggests that we, the viewers, are witnessing a mirror image of our own regressive tendencies. We the viewers are complicit with the enemy. In January 1973 Pasolini began writing for the newspaper, Corriere della Sera. The articles were collected in two volumes, Pirate Writings (1975) and the posthumous Lutheran Letters (1976). In the latter he demands that the Christian Democrats be put on trial. Their crimes are

- contempt for the citizens
- manipulation of public funds
- deals with oil firms
- with industrialists, with bankers,
- complicity with the Mafia
treason in the interests of a foreign power
collaboration with the CIA
illegal use of organizations like SID\(^2\)
responsibility for the massacres in Milan, Brescia and Bologna \(^2\)
(because they have been unable to find the culprits)
the destruction of the Italian countryside
the anthropological degradation of the Italians
(the responsibility all the graver for being unconscious)
responsibility for the frightful conditions in schools, hospitals and public institutions,
responsibility for the abandonment of the countryside
responsibility for the explosion of mass culture
of stupid TV programs …\(^4\)

On November 2, 1975 Pasolini’s body was found. On the previous day Pasolini wrote, “… maybe I have already said too much … maybe I’m wrong after all, but I keep on thinking that we are all in danger.” This collection of poems is the testament of a man who lived with uncommon vitality and risk. The poems ask that we take nothing for granted, not the words that govern our daily interactions with each other, nor the official language of those in power. In our recent times we have witnessed the destruction of the World Trade Center buildings on 9/11, the wars in the Middle East, the increasing sense that there is a wealthy class in league with corporate interests that maintains a false reality based on advertising and marketing for profit, Reaganomics, NAFTA, the Bush years, the housing crisis, the extinction of a viable middle class, the destruction of a base of production and the turn towards a service economy, the increasing debt of the country and of ourselves, recession, unemployment, gov-

\(^2\) SID is the name of an Italian Intelligence Agency active from 1965–77.
\(^3\) In May 1974 several people were killed during a demonstration in Brescia against neo-fascist violence. In December 1969 an explosion shook central Milan provoking controversy since the responsibility for the attacks fell equally on the Left and the far Right.
ernment bailouts, Iran-Contra, Saddam Hussein, the tea party, the failure of education … It is the kind of world that Pasolini foresaw and warned us about. In this sense, Pasolini was writing for the future.

Works Cited
