

BLOOD LINES: THE INFLUENCE OF PASOLINI ON MY POETRY AND THE WRITING OF *THE FLOWER OF YOUTH*

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Though I was born in Italy, and literally dreamed of becoming a poet, I knew very little of Italian poetry. Not only did I grow up in English Canada, in the city of Toronto, I specialized in English language and literature in my university studies. In a dream I had as a young woman, Ezra Pound showed me a golden lyre and along with it an illuminated poem in ancient script I read but was unable to recall when I woke up, though I tried desperately to do so. This dream of Pound as a guide for my poetry is interesting as he has a connection with Italy and Italian culture if a notorious one in terms of Fascist politics and the second world war. A few years ago I found a video recording on the internet in which Pasolini reads to Pound from an Italian translation of Pound's "Canto LXXXI". It's exciting to watch the video of these two masters of the art of poetry, to see how they: «gathered from the air a live tradition» (81).

Pasolini, the poet, has influenced my work dramatically in that he was the first Italian influence on my poetry. I remember vividly my first encounter as a young poet with his poetry, the moving effect of reading the poem, "Apennine". It was the late seventies; my first book, *Tree of August*, had been published in 1976. It seemed that my dream of a life in poetry was coming true when I found a hard cover edition of L.R. Lind's anthology: *Twentieth Century Italian Poetry*, in a bargain bin of books. Although faded the price sticker of \$2.98 is still on it! I opened the pages of the anthology at random and began reading: «*Teatro di dossi, ebbri, calcinati*». The anthology was a dual language edition and the English translation of Pasolini's poem was an elegant one by William Weaver: «Theater of hilltops, drunken, lime-sown». I remember the sudden illumination I felt reading the poem, as if I had been travelling through a dark tunnel and suddenly emerged into brilliant sunlight where the landscape was a kind of revelation, the mountainous fields were luminous. I remember trying

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to emulate the rhythms, imagery, and syntax I found in those lines of poetry that felt like blood lines to me.

Many years later, in what became another century, a biography that a friend gave to me as a gift, *Pasolini Requiem* by Barth David Schwartz, reignited by interest in Pasolini. Schwartz begins the biography by narrating in minute detail Pasolini's last day, and the mystery of his murder. The story is riveting. As I read more about Pasolini and turned to research his beginnings as a poet, I found that there was another and different kind of mystery about his life that seemed unexplored by scholars and poets: the question of what made this multi-talented, university educated man choose to begin his creative career writing poetry in friulian language.

If anything poetry is language embodied, the language of the body. It was during World War II, sequestered in Casarsa, his mother's *paese*, that he found that language and wrote his first book of poems, *La meglio gioventù*. Interesting how in Italian the word for village, *paese*, is also the word for country. He found in that village his homeland, his art, and his desire.

I describe the writing of the book *The Flower of Youth*, my book of poetry about this seminal period in Pasolini's life and work, in an epilogue to the book, reproduced below:

I. Prologue: The Flower and the Book

When, in the spring of 2004, I visited Pasolini's *grave* in Casarsa, he whispered a few lines of verse to me. Although I poorly transcribed them as I cannot write in Italian and my ear filtered the words through the *abruzzese* dialect, my first language, I have corrected the errors in spelling and grammar with the help of Anna Foschi.

Clearly no miracle occurred; clearly what I heard was totally imagined, but imagined through poetry. That is the way the muse spoke to me on that day.

Home again in Canada I woke up one morning dreaming of the pink house.

The pink house was his mother's ancestral home; it was bombed out during the war and had to be rebuilt; he never lived in it again. But the region, Friuli, its dialect, the war, his homosexuality, formed the historical and personal vortex that shaped his identity, his political ideas, and all his creative work. I imagined I would write a novel based on what I had read in biographies and histories about Pasolini and those war years. But when I read the original source about his life, his own memoir of the period, what emerged was not a war story, but a coming-of-age one, a kind of gay '*Sorrows of Young Werther*'. It really surprised me how little the war figures in the narrative; the big war, World War II, is marginalized by the virtual war inside him between the moral imperatives established by church, community, and family and his sexual desire for boys. The coming-of-age story is a coming into difference. The bombings formed a mere backdrop to his tortured struggles with his sexuality.

II. Impure Acts

The poems in this section, which make up the core of this book, are based on that memoir of his youth and the war years, *Atti impuri*, published in 1982, nearly a decade after his death. It was published in conjunction with the autobiographical novel or novella based on this period of his life, *Amado mio*, whose protagonist is an allegorically named self, Desiderio. The same material was used, the same experiences as in the memoir, but through thinly disguised third person narration.

My poems, this book, form a kind of novel in verse based on the experiences and feelings that Pasolini describes in the memoir. I do not judge him, he judges himself; when he is not rationalizing he sees his desire as sin, himself as the devil. When I first approached this story, this material, I imagined writing a novel perhaps from the point of view of his female friend at the time, Pina. But the sense of time I kept encountering in the memoir was that of poetry, not prose. The narrative seemed concentrated in the sense of the moment, circling around and around a few spots in time without the sense of progression characteristic of the novel; a lyrical sense of time: compressed, recurring, suspended, essential, eternity in an hour.

III. After Pasolini

The book that launched Pier Paolo Pasolini as a writer was *La meglio gioventù*. *The Flower of Youth* (usually translated into English as *The Best of Youth*.) His first book was a volume of verse written in dialect, self-published in 1942. That he should choose to begin his writing career by publishing poetry, in a time of war, in a minority tongue, poems about peasant life, might seem an anomalous beginning for such a polemical writer, a writer who spent his entire life at the centre of political thought and culture in Italy. That he should continue to work on these poems throughout his life speaks to their centrality to his poetic project. Published in 1975, the year of his death, *La nuova gioventù*, *The New Youth*, is comprised of those original poems written in dialect during the war and the many permutations on them that he called the second form of *La meglio gioventù*.

These were the first and last poems that Pasolini wrote, pastoral poems written when his region was occupied by the Germans, and Mussolini, then a puppet leader, had been set up in Salò. His younger brother, Guido, took up arms and fought with the resistance while Pier Paolo took up the pen; along with his mother he set up a school to teach boys too young to go to war and began to write poetry in dialect. To write poems in dialect in a country where the ministry of culture outlawed the use of dialects was a form of resistance in itself.

*But what can music do
Against the weapons of soldiers?*

In Virgil's *Eclogues* the iron age of war intrudes on the idyllic life of singing shepherds; that is the convention of the pastoral. This seemed an apt epigraph for my book. My translation of the lines is assisted by David Ferry's.

Although I have only encountered references to Pasolini having read Wordsworth, Blake seemed to me the poet with the closest parallel to what he does with his dif-

ferent versions of the Casarsa poems. However, Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* are separated by one year in his writing life while Pasolini's encompass the whole of it. Although I translated many poems from *La meglio gioventù* for myself as a preparation to write this book, translation being, I believe, the closest a writer can come to another writer, only my translations of his "The Day of My Death" are included here. I close my book with that poem in which Pasolini envisions his death, the first version written during the war years, the permutation on it published in the year of his death; my permutation on them is based on the reported circumstances of his actual death in Rome on All Saints' Day, November 1, 1975.

That was the thinking behind the composition of my book of poetry about Pasolini. Those first poems of Pasolini, that first book, was never forgotten. Although I translated many of those poems and the permutations thereof as a preparation to write my book, it was apprentice work and I only included the translations of "The Day of My Death." They are reproduced below with the date of their composition on the left side of the page by the title:

'44-49 **The Day of My Death**

In some city, Trieste or Udine,
 on an avenue of lindens,
 in the spring, when leaves
 burst into colour
 I'll fall
 under a sun that blazes
 yellow and high
 and I will close my eyes
 leaving the sky to its splendour.

Under a linden, warm with green,
 I will fall into the darkness
 of my death that squanders
 the lindens, the sun.
 Beautiful boys
 flying out from school,
 curls at their temples.
 will be running in that light
 I have only just lost.

I will be young still,
 in a pastel shirt
 and with soft hair spilling
 into the bitter dirt.
 I will be warm still

and a boy running on the warm
asphalt of the avenue
will lay a hand
on the crystal of my lap.

'74 **The Day of My Death**

*...if the seed of grain, fallen on the earth, does not die, it remains alone, but if
it dies it gives great fruit.*

(John, 12.24 cited by Dostoevsky)

In some city, Trieste or Udine,
 on an avenue of lindens,
when leaves change colour...
he lived
with the vigor of a young man,
 in the midst of things
and he gave, to the few
men he knew, everything.

Then, for the love of those boys
 with curls at their foreheads
boys like him until just before
 the stars overhead
altered their light –
he would have liked to give his life
for all the world of strangers,
himself, a stranger, a little saint,
a solitary seed lost in the sand.

But instead he wrote
sacred poetry
believing that way
 his heart would flourish.
Days went by
in a labour that used
 up the grace in his heart:
the seed did not perish,
and he remained alone.

It did not take a grand leap to then write my own permutation on Pasolini's vision of his death, one informed by what he himself could not have known,

what he did not envisage, the actual circumstances of his death, as reported and documented, in Ostia on All Saints' Day, November 1, 1975. The following is the text of my poem about his death:

The Day of His Death, November 1 1975

...if the seed of grain, fallen on the earth, does not die, it remains alone, but if it dies it gives great fruit.

John, 12.24

In some city, not after all
 Trieste or Udine, but in Rome,
 though not on its streets of ancient stone
 but on the margins, in shanty-town –
 not in spring, on some avenue of flowering
 yellow linden, but golden in autumn,
 with the first cold rain, with the leaves he falls
 the sun well past its gloaming
 in the no light of night alone.

For the love of boys, or for the love of one lost
 boy with curls darkening his brow,
 a beautiful boy, a frog prince, he would give his last
 lira for the love of this or any stranger
 to whom he owes nothing, or all, a bit of money, a hot
 meal, an embrace with no backward
 looking goodbye. In blue jeans, his shirt now blood-
 soaked, his body cooling, his body cooler
 than the sand under his shoes, sand

warm when he was still warm moments
 before and forever
 closed his eyes under blinking stars,
 a man not yet old, a man not
 a saint, but with a saint's
 love for strangers, lying face up in the dirt,
 on a feast day, on All Saints' at last
 a seed squandered no longer
 beaten on the beaten ground of Ostia.

Currently I am working on a new collection of poetry that I'm calling *Bicycle Thieves*; in that project I continue to look for and find lines of connection with modern Italian culture, particularly poetry and film. Pasolini was a master in both

these arts and so he will always be of major interest. A section of the project called "After" includes work that transposes and transports poetry from Twentieth Century Italy into my present time and place, 21st Century Canada. This may seem transgressive and postmodern but I think it is really part of an ancient tradition, akin to Catullus's renderings of Sappho's poetry in his Lesbia poems.

The poem that follows is a work in progress, a draft based on one of Pasolini's Roman poems:

On the Way to the Village Steam Baths
(after Pasolini's "Verso le terme di Caracalla")

They're heading for the steam baths in the Village,
guys on bicycles,
mountain bikes or Bixis, with their boyish
goodness and their boyish badness
hiding, or flaunting, they're indifferent
to what's in the warmth at the crotch of their jeans,
secret... hard-ons.
Long haired or buzz cut, sporting bright tee-shirts,
they flare in the night, in a merry-go-
roundabout, they razzle-dazzle the dark
these fabulous knights of the night...

They're heading for the steam baths in the Village.
That one's riding high, as if at home
on the steppes of Russia, on the goat trails in Mexico,
on the hog farms of St. Cubert, of St. Martin
in the muck smelling of shit and Lenten ashes,
tuque pulled down to the eyeline.
He left the farm at sixteen
and now he's a joker
with a sin city smile, though he still tastes
of pork and beans and maple syrup...

That one too is heading for the Village steam baths
he's a breadwinner who's been laid off
at Bombardier, his body creaks,
the joints rub bone on bone, his body's
a scrap metal heap moving as if remotely
controlled. He's dressed in torn jeans
but not the designer kind. He lights up a fag
end, that's all that's left of his beginnings,
sputtering now like an ember in an urn.
He can't die if he's never been born.

They won't die if they've never been born
on the way to the Village steam baths...

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