

NAKED IN THE METROPOLIS: PASOLINI'S PROPHETIC POETRY IN CANADA

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Abstract

The text follows the intellectual journey back to Italy from Canada that led the author to read and later translate Pasolini's mature, prophetic poetry, including the uncanny poem that contains a vision of the present-day flood of migrants crossing by boat from Africa. Reference is made to important interviews conducted on Pasolini in Toronto in the 80s and 90s, with Alberto Moravia, Franco Fortini, Nico Naldini, Francesco Leonetti, Giuseppe Zigaina, and with Marco Tullio Giordana – some of which are still unpublished.

Il testo segue l'itinerario intellettuale attraverso un viaggio di ritorno: dal Canada all'Italia, che ha portato l'autore alla lettura e poi alla traduzione della poesia matura e profetica di Pasolini, tra cui la poesia che contiene una visione epocale sconcertante dell'attuale flusso di profughi provenienti via mare dall'Africa. Sono citate, inoltre, importanti interviste su P. P. Pasolini rivolte ad Alberto Maravia, Franco Fortini, Nico Naldini, Francesco Leonetti, Giuseppe Zigaina e Marco Tullio Giordana effettuate a Toronto, negli anni '80 e '90 – alcune delle quali tuttora inedite.

To the memory of Gianfranco Contini

Spring 1975

I had just completed my comprehensives, the exams required for my M.A. in Comparative Literature, when to the dismay of the external examiner – the one unconvinced member of the examining committee – I was awarded an Italian External Affairs bursary to study in Italy.

All summer long I heard nothing more. Near the end of August I visited the Embassy in Ottawa. The Italian cultural attaché was not expected back for several weeks. He was on his holidays, and «no one else knew about my case». September

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came and went. So I determined to prod him by phone now every day till the on-again, off-again promised stipend and airfare were confirmed in mid-November.

The very next day I gave up my extended summer job as an immigration officer. In 1975, Canada, like many other Western countries, was flooded with refugee applications from Vietnamese boat-people.

I drove downtown to Laurier Avenue. There I walked through a congenial unanimity of portable panels loosely configured in a maze – the offices of the Citizenship and Immigration department. With a red marker I wrote the word URGENT across the large stack of files that fastidious bureaucrats up the ladder kept casting back down to the lower rungs. I stepped out of the maze into the bureau of Mr. Coletta, my affable supervisor, set down the files neatly on his desk with regrets, and two days later, on November 21, I landed at the airport in Fiumicino. I was unaware that just three weeks earlier Pasolini had been found on a beach nearby, bloody and half-naked, run over by his own car.

The dark carnelian shock-image photographed on the sand in Ostia – like the dried blood of saints and martyrs I became accustomed to seeing encased behind glass in old churches in Palermo, Rome, Milan, Turin, and a myriad of other towns up and down the Apennines – has grown with the passing years like a vivid reminder of how different – without literature – life might have been. Indeed, vast frozen lagoons of ignorance remained with me in my chosen field. The only comfort at that time came from the fact that I was writing poems. One or two of these, published in the undergraduate newspaper, may have even endured.

The fact is that I spent most of my time at university repairing the damage that had resulted from a violent uprooting at age 12. Mine was the post-war southern European mass migration of the underprivileged. I was no longer young enough to integrate fully in a new culture, and certainly not old enough to have matured sufficiently in my first. I was now reading anything and everything, to learn the language that might help unlearn my dependence on vulgar expletives that had taken over the function of the comma, the semicolon, the dash in my everyday speech.

There had been courses mostly in Old and Middle English and in Early Italian as an undergraduate. It was toward the end of my undergraduate degree and the start of my M.A., however, that I grew feverish for modern poetry: a visiting professor from the University of Essex introduced Eugenio Montale in a graduate course. And while I could barely discern him at first, to mitigate the mysterious, stirring voice I began to replace the Italian of the poetry with what I intuited to be equivalents in the new language, English. Neither of the two languages, to be sure, was my mother tongue.

A torment is on this side of the steep wall.
If you set forth you will stumble,
perhaps, upon the phantom which will save you... (Montale 13)

Through what was a rudimentary, albeit precise process of transformation I had stumbled on a technique that allowed me to peer if ever so slightly into the subliminal layer of Montale's verses, and uncover with awe the inarticulate wonder that hid there:

See, in these silences in which things
abandon all restraint and seem on the verge
of betraying their most intimate secret,
at times we expect
to discover a fault of Nature,
the dead spot of the world, the mesh that does not hold,
the thread to unravel which can finally place us
in the midst of a truth. ("I limoni". *Ibid.*: 20)

I sought to disentangle all of the first edition of Montale's *Ossi di Seppia* in that simple way.

That year I even grew audacious enough to think of writing to Gianfranco Contini, whose slim book of essays on Montale's poetry, *Una lunga fedeltà* (1974), I found fresh in my university library. When through the auspices of the Italian Government grant – so hard fought for, so hard won – I met Contini at the Scuola Normale in Pisa, he handed me back my translations on which Edith Farnsworth, who several years earlier had published *Provisional Conclusions* (Montale 1970), which I had read, and was then living in Florence, had commented.

But Contini did not stop there. He had read the poems I'd enclosed in my letter to him. Now as I ran behind him after class, as I did every week, trying to keep up on foot as he rushed the two kilometres to catch his train to Florence, I distinctly heard him murmur in his muffled, rapid speech that he had thought well of them too. How could I ever express enough gratitude for the confidence his excited urging bestowed on me then, and all the years since?

Spring 1976

Contini, as well, I soon learned in a far away place, had been in 1942 the first to review a collection of poems by Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Poesie a Casarsa* (1942). These poems, which Pasolini published at age 20 at his own expense, Contini praised for the poet's precocious language-strategy. Pasolini had written this

small collection in the Friulan language of his mother's region. For this reason Contini had to publish his review in Switzerland. Publication in Italy was not sanctioned by the regime for fear, as Pasolini later ironized, that the dialect would prove the existence of uncouth peasants in Italy and embarrass the regime ("Al lettore nuovo": 5-14).

There were, of course, very few allusions made to contemporary literature in Contini's Romance Philology seminar, where we devoted our time, rather, to the writings of Nicholas Cusanus. The Normale, I discovered, was also a mathematician's Eden. I befriended a number of *normalisti* of diverse interests with whom I often spent the evening at the Caffè dell'Ussero, reputed to have been frequented by luminaries. The 19th century poet Giacomo Leopardi was one, as was Ezra Pound, who wrote here some of his *Pisan Cantos* in a much later and very different era.

Students and professors often gathered here after dinner to sip on liquors and espresso, or wines of rare vintage, for those who could afford them. There was not much entertainment in Pisa other than a repertory cinema where *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* was shown at Easter, the odd classical or contemporary recital performance at the Verdi Theatre, and there was this café.

In our group was a perfectly taut mathematical genius, Maria, a Sicilian raised in Rome, who completed a doctoral degree at Purdue University a year or two later; there was a lanky post-doctoral Dante scholar, Matthew, from Texas; and there was Alex from Liverpool and James from Sheffield, both fond of Renaissance art, Italian literature and *The Cutty Wren*:

Oh where are you going, said Milder to Moulder;
 Oh we may not tell you, said Festel to Fose.
 We're off to the woods, said John the Red Nose;
 We're off to the woods, said John the Red Nose...

...they predictably sang to happily cap a late night at the café.

It was where many of us were spending the evening of May 6, 1976. Someone must have been talking about prose styles, or about the arithmetic of curved space, or we may have been discussing a recording of the *Commedia* we had become fond of listening to before dinner, a series of LPs Alex had unearthed in the Normale's music room. (We alternated it on the turntable with Bob Dylan and the Rolling Stones). Or perhaps we were making light of how our American mate still missed his hamburgers in spite of the sumptuous meals we were served nightly in our posh cafeteria. Without warning, the chandelier swayed forward above our heads, and then back – as it had done in this same Tuscan town for Galileo when he made his observations on the motion of pendulums.

Silence fell on the room while the chandelier-lights danced. Then a remarkable thing occurred. Moved by some animal instinct, the whole café poured out onto

the Lungarno. But instead of moving away to a safe distance from the swaying *palazzi*, the desperate herd darted down darkened cobblestone alleys towards Santa Maria, reaching Piazza dei Cavalieri, then across to the Torre della Fame – the Tower of Famine where Count Ugolino is imprisoned and left to starve together with his children in Canto XXXIII of the *Inferno* – before one last street brought us to Campo dei Miracoli.

When we got there, the Field of Miracles was still intact, its leaning tower still leaning. Some people laughed nervously. We did not know how far the peninsula had shifted under our feet, and what devastation had befallen elsewhere.

By morning the epicentre was known to have been much further north. I woke up very early from a series of murderous dreams. I packed my black leather day-bag and left for the Central Station, past perplexed student colleagues who just then were heading to the communal showers.

I kept to myself the uncontrollable impulse, inexplicable even to me, to get to the zone of the earthquake at any cost. It was something I couldn't shake off, but which I understood only later, once I changed trains in Padova for Gemona del Friuli.

An extraordinary sense of *déjà vu* came upon me in Padova, such as I never expected. This was a train from another world. The locomotive with its country people sitting on wooden benches was a war vintage locomotive, the very same as my father had described boarding in Padova in 1943 after he, with a younger brother and an older uncle in tow, evaded the Nazi guards who had brought them out of Albania in another train destined for a camp in Germany.

When that train pulled into Padova, Allied planes were bombing the station. Under that fiery rain, the German guards jumped from the railcar to save themselves. They left behind their captives who themselves jumped out and scattered.

All my life my father had told me in great detail of his escape from those German guards under the Allied bombs, and of the train he jumped onto afterwards to evade any pursuing Gestapo agents. On the train moving into Friuli's hinterland, as mine was now, they noticed a rotund woman with a younger quick-witted girl by the rear corner sitting on a bundle of American shirts and shorts. The two women were distributing these scant garments to uniformed passengers as a change of clothing to disguise them from their recent service, turning them all quickly into civilians.

Those two resourceful women would soon recognize them and give them instructions where to get off, and where to go to introduce themselves to partisans in the mountains—which is how my father was saved from sure death in Friuli before I was born.

When I arrived in Gemona that evening, a film crew had arrived from the Swiss Red Cross that needed a driver. I volunteered, and roamed the devastated region in their truck for several days. Every night, after the drive back from Trieste, which had the closest airport from where film could be sent to Geneva, we returned to our quarters in Udine. We filmed in places like Osoppo, Trasaghis and other more isolated districts where we sometimes were the first outsiders to arrive!

«Where is the Italian army?» called out a peasant in an isolated hamlet far from Osoppo who had come out of a cellar waving a bottle of wine. He wanted to share it with us, though it was still morning, to thank us for having come to ask after his losses. The night before, he said, the German army had helped dig out a relative from a crumbled house nearby.

«Why aren't they here already?» he continued. He was shocked, as I was, as we all were shocked, in fact, to see German soldiers maneuver bulldozers in these villages, helping to rescue victims where just a generation earlier their fathers had murdered and pillaged and instigated the villagers into a fratricidal war that contributed to turning millions of Italian peasants into outbound migrants. (Such a waste! of humanity as of ourselves.)

The Italian army never made it up those isolated hills for the several days that I was still in Friuli, as its riot squads were busy monitoring anti-government demonstrators in Florence that spring, and clearly were unconcerned for other life-threatening national emergencies...

Gli anni di piombo, years of lead, they call the violence-wracked 1970s in Italy. I could still remember my dreams really well then. And though I was already old enough to think myself a man, the ritual of sex and death had not yet occurred to me. So I would drop off our filmographer Claudio, sometimes with the others, sometimes alone, to trawl the muggy sidewalks of Udine for the girls working the Piazza della Libertà. I would return to the hotel for a nap before returning to pick them up. Mostly I dreamed of Cusanus's dialogues, the shapes of creation – Man, the living, breathing self-portrait God had painted in his own image. But not always. Once in my sleep I drove to the other side of the Tagliamento in that dreary rain that follows all earthquakes and turns the whole landscape into a quagmire. Until all you want is to drown in your own tears and escape anywhere when it's over, forever changed.

In a few days, which felt more like the passing of several lifetimes, I was back in Padova. Waiting my turn in a barbershop for a much-needed haircut, I explored a pile of ruffled magazines and books; among them was a book entitled *Ali dagli occhi azzurri* (1965). The poem from which the book drew its title began:

*Era nel mondo un figlio
e un giorno andò in Calabria
era estate, ed erano
vuote le casupole, nuove, a pandizucchero,
da fiabe color
della fame. Vuote.*

*Come porcili senza porci, nel centro di orti senza insalata. Di campi
senza terra, di greti senza acqua. Coltivate dalla luna, le campagne.
Le spighe cresciute per bocche di scheletri. Il vento dallo Jonio
scuoteva paglia nera
come nei sogni profetici ("Profezia": 488-493).*

It was uncanny, discovering this poem here:

There came into the world a son
and one day he went to Calabria:
it was summer and the new
hovels which resembled
sugarbread hives were
empty. As in fairy-tales the colour
of hunger. Empty.

Like pigsties with no pigs, in the middle of gardens with no vegetables,
of fields without earth, alongside dry banks. Tilled by the moon, the
fields. The weeds had grown through mouths of skeletons. The Ionian wind
beat the blackened hay
as in prophetic dreams... (Trans. Mazza: 93-98).

The barber seemed to know where each Allied bomb had landed in '43 and '44. He was elated to learn my father's story as a displaced refugee among the partisans in Friuli and insisted I take the fateful book from his shop.

At Feltrinelli, still in Padova, I picked up a second book, where I saw Pasolini's acknowledgement of Contini's review. Both books were central to the English translation of Pasolini that I later undertook.

Spring 1985 - Spring 2015

By now I was commuting from Toronto to teach at Queen's University, in Kingston, a town that had been Canada's first capital, and where Canada's first Prime Minister, John A. Macdonald, was buried; but also where several of Canada's largest prisons were, together with a military college and one of the largest aluminum manufacturers in the world, and yet with so much evident deprivation and poverty among its diverse population that it wasn't long after

the publication of *The Bones of Cuttlefish* (1983), my translation of *Ossi di Seppia* (1972), before I was being pulled away by Pasolini's outsider's perspective from Montale's cohesive poetry, which had contributed so much towards making my language more cogent.

That spring, as the courses I was teaching and my contract with Queen's University were coming to an end, I conspired with my friend the book artist Hugh Walter Barclay to mark the 10th anniversary of Pasolini's death with a hand-printed commemorative book. We chose my translation of the poem "Il primo paradiso, Odetta...": "The First Paradise, Odetta..." (1985).

The presentation took place under the auspices of the Italian Cultural Institute of Toronto, with the collaboration of other artists, Luciano Ceschia, a sculptor from Friuli, and Emrys H. Evans of the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library of the University of Toronto. Canadian poet Eli Mandel also took part in the presentation. I invited him specially. We had met in Sicily the previous year, and in the English Cemetery in Rome we had visited the graves of Shelley, Gramsci and Keats.

I continued reading Pasolini. My personal selection of his poems came out in 1991 and won the Columbia University Italo Calvino translation prize for the best translation from Italian to English for that year. The successful launch of my commemorative art-book with Hugh Walter Barclay had been followed by a number of cultural events that brought to Toronto many of Pasolini's friends, collaborators and intellectual rivals whom I was fortunately able to interview. Alberto Moravia discussed with me how he distinguishes Pasolini's reluctance to accept the anthropological and cultural transformation of Italy into a modern society from his own thought that Italian society was not evolved enough. Franco Fortini told me that Pasolini's historical contribution to the discourse had been overtaken by his contemporaries – a controversial assessment by a major thinker of the Left. Nico Naldini, Pasolini's cousin who knew him from childhood, drew for me an extremely informed three-dimensional socio-psychological portrait, foregrounding Pasolini's great strength but also his inherent weaknesses. I interviewed Francesco Leonetti, who makes a highly symbolic appearance in "Poem in Form of a Rose", one of Pasolini's most suggestive and enlightened poems on the poetics of his *œuvre*, which I also translated ("Poem in Form of a Rose": 51-59). Giuseppe Zigaina with conviction insists on reading Pasolini's work as well as every gesture of Pasolini's life as an artwork created by the poet, including Pasolini's gruesome death; Zigaina deciphers his murder as a public spectacle that Pasolini planned and executed as a final mythological act of self-sacrifice. Later, moreover, I spoke with Marco Tullio Giordana, who discussed the Italian court system in the context of his film on Pasolini's unsolved murder. He believes that the botched investigation is proof of the need for reform of the

judiciary in Italy, which has yet to come to pass. The *Moravia* has been published; a publication with the rest of these forthright interviews all conducted in Toronto, outside of Italy, therefore, would make a valuable contribution to the appreciation of Pasolini in Italy and in the English-speaking world, both.

Lately I have been rereading the poem "Prophecy", a central piece of my selection *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Poetry*. I had planned to publish this book with the more fitting title *Ali Blue-Eyes and Other Prophecies*, but regretfully this choice of title was rejected by Pasolini's heirs on the grounds that Pasolini had not used it himself.

In this poem, Pasolini informs us that he is telling the story of Ali Blue-Eyes as it was told him by Jean-Paul Sartre. Increasingly I read it as a foretelling of the events of the past quarter-century, the wars and acts of violence, now followed by desperate mass migrations in coffin-boats from Africa across the sea to Sicily.

And the light of the sentiment
of Africa, that suddenly sweeps
across the Calabrias, be it a sign
without meaning, relevant
in future times!

[...]

Ali Blue-Eyes
one of many sons of sons,
will plow forth from Algiers
on ships with sails and oars.
There will be with him thousands,
like their fathers, tiny-bodied men
with eyes of wretched dogs

on boats launched in the Kingdoms of Hunger. With them will be the children,
and bread and cheese wrapped in the yellow foil of Easter Monday. With them
will be the grandmothers and the donkeys, aboard the triremes stolen from
the colonial ports.

They will land at Crotone or at Palmi,
by the millions, clad in Asian
rags and American shirts.
At once the Calabrians will say
as though from one brigand to another:
"Here are our ancient brothers,
their children, and the bread and cheese!"
From Crotone or Palmi they will
sail on to Naples, and thence

to Barcelona, Salonika and Marseille,
 the City of the Underworld.
 Souls and angels, mice and lice,
 carrying the seed of Ancient History (“Prophecy”: 96).

Who would dismiss the oracular poet’s presentiments, premonitions and prophecies today, when the only hope of the disinherited, the wretched of the earth, the disadvantaged and persecuted may be an unprecedented counter-attack of apocalyptic proportions against blind, one-sided dominance?

[...] abandoning the honesty
 of peasant religions,
 forgetting the honour
 of the underworld,
 betraying the candor
 of barbarian peoples,
 behind their Alis

of the Blue Eyes – they will emerge from the underground to kill – they will surface from the bottom of the sea to attack – they will swoop down from the sky to steal – and before arriving in Paris
 to teach the joy of living,
 before arriving in London
 to teach how to be free,
 before arriving in New York,
 to teach how to be brothers
 – they will destroy Rome
 and upon its ruins
 they will sow the seed
 of Ancient History... (“Prophecy”: 98).

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