

THE MEETING OF TWO POETS: JACK HIRSCHMAN AND PIER PAOLO PASOLINI

Daniela Ciani Forza*

Abstract

The following text is composed of a brief introduction to Pier Paolo Pasolini's reception in the American West Coast, San Francisco in particular – where two among the most prestigious American poets, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Jack Hirschman, were so significantly attracted by his writings to translate some of them into English. There follows an interview with Jack Hirschman, who also dedicated some important original texts to the memory of the Italian poet.

L'incontro di due poeti: Jack Hirschman e Pier Paolo Pasolini

Il testo consiste di una breve introduzione alla recezione di Pier Paolo Pasolini nella West Coast americana, in particolare a San Francisco, dove la sua opera interessò due fra i più prestigiosi poeti contemporanei, ed entrambi traduttori di significativi scritti pasoliniani: Lawrence Ferlinghetti e Jack Hirschman. Segue un'intervista-dibattito con Jack Hirschman, autore fra l'altro di importanti testi dedicati al poeta italiano.

The years pass over you,
And so I, with the shadow of the acacia tree,
With the sunflower, on this quiet day.
("Ode to a flower in Casarsa": 56)¹.

Introduction

Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-1975) has certainly been one of the Italian intellectuals of the last century who most interestingly challenged the ordinary codes of art

* Università Ca' Foscari Venezia.

¹ The lines are the closing ones of "Ode to a Flower in Casarsa" as it appears in *Danger - A Pasolini Anthology*. The original "Ode a un fiore, Casarsa", was first published in *Poesie a Casarsa (1941-1943)*, which contained Pasolini's early poems, written both in Italian and in Furlan. On the relevance of the collection within the poet's artistic *corpus*: see: Bazzocchi 68-72. The poem is also published by Chiarcossi, Siti 1935.

Oltreoceano. Pier Paolo Pasolini nelle Americhe, a cura di Alessandra Ferraro e Silvana Serafin, 10 (2015).

and artistic commitment, extending the relevance of his poetic demeanour from the local to the worldly – geographic, existential and linguistic. No revolutionary instances determined his choices; the real Pasolinian revolution lays on the denunciation of mystifying announcements – religious, ideological, intellectual, artistic. His writings, as much as his films, exposed the ambiguities of the raising Italian bourgeoisie of the post-war decades: the time of both economic progress and ideologic laxity, of banal moralism and politics of mere conveniences. He believed in Gramsci's project to contribute to social improvement, but refused the Italian Communist Party dogmatism, as much as he rejected the conformism of the vetero-right-minded protagonists of much of the ruling class – political and economic. His narrations embraced the poetics of a *pietas* including those that history neglected, fearless to succumb to the injuries of antagonist thinkers, be they left- or right-winged.

Pier Paolo Pasolini found in the American West Coast a special reception, and I do believe it's not by chance – or by simple advertising motivations, after the fame gained by his films – that City Lights Publishing House decided to insert Pasolini among the international poets it contributed to reveal for the American audience. Lawrence Ferlinghetti himself, together with Francesca Valente, translated the *Roman Poems* in 1986, while Jack Hirschman is the editor of *In Danger - A Pasolini Anthology*, a collection of writings including prose, poetry, literary essays, interviews, which offer an acute presentation of Pasolini's intellectual figure.

Jack Hirschman is a long-time admirer of Pier Paolo Pasolini, whom he praises for his 'passion, provocation and profecy' – PPP: the initials these qualities share with those of the name of the poet, as he maintains. Not only – Hirschman, just like Pasolini, elaborates his poetry from a visionary invective against the injustices of politics, and he, too, can be at the same time moving when dealing with memories.

Hirschman, San Francisco Poet Laureate in 2006, belongs to the generation of *poètes engagés* who in the second half of the 20th century represented a new wave of reaction against the conformism of most academic literature – as far as form and contents are concerned. His verse follows the rhythm of the perception of the subject treated, combining imagination with factuality, politics with pathos, rage with elegy – incessantly dedicated to the cause of the losers.

New Yorker, from the Bronx where he was born in 1933, he moved to California in 1961, where he taught English at UCLA till 1966, when he got fired for encouraging students to burn their draft card in sign of a protest against the Vietnam War. He chose to remain in California, living in Venice from 1967 to 1970 and starting a collaboration with David Meltzer², who

² David Meltzer, also from New York, was a key figure of the San Francisco Renaissance. A poet, musician, Cabalist scholar, he is the author, among many other publications of the

published his first translations. From 1972 to 1980 Hirschman lived in North Beach, San Francisco, soon becoming an integral part of the city's intellectual scene. He continued to write and to translate contemporary poetry from different languages, there including Russian, which he had started studying. In 1980 he joined the Communist Labor Party, implementing his political and intellectual contribution to the cause of the proletariat. During the eighties he was the director of *Compage*, an international journal dedicated to the translation into English of poets from all over the world and of American poets into foreign languages, stressing as ever before his commitment to the diffusion of poetry and of its social import. It was from 1972 that Hirschman has started working on his major *œuvre*: *The Arcanes*.

The work, which is intended as the dialectic exposure of the spiritual significance of personal and political occurrences, has found unique acceptance in Italy, where indeed his relationship with the country dates back to the fifties when his poem "A Correspondence of Americans", was first published by the review *Botteghe Oscure* in 1958³. Many other visits and contacts followed, there included the bilingual publication of *Yossyph Shyryn* by the Sicilian poet Santo Calì, with his translation (1980). In 1992 Hirschman started a collaboration with Multimedia Edizioni of Salerno, with the publication of *Soglia Infinita*. 2000 was the year of the first publication in Italy of *The Arcanes*, edited by Raffaella Marzano and Sergio Iagulli, also containing "The Pasolini Arcane" of 1995. In 2006, the same year when the city of San Francisco honoured him with the recognition of "Poet Laureate", Multimedia Edizioni published the entire corpus of his *Arcanes* which also included "The Days of the Dead Arcane", written in 2005 on the thirtieth anniversary of Pasolin's assassination. The year 2014 saw the publication of *28 Arcani*, and a new collection of the *Arcanes*, written between 2007 and 2014, is now being edited. In 2007 he was awarded the Alfonso Gatto Prize (international section) in Salerno. Many and constant are his visits to Italy and his contributions to intellectual meetings both in the country or associated with Italian poets and intellectuals abroad.

On the occasion of this issue of *Oltreoceano*, commemorating the fortieth anniversary of Pier Paolo Pasolin's death and, more than that perhaps, celebrating

epic poem on the Beat Generation titled *Beat Thing*, which Hirschman declared to be the «most important lyri-political work to date... written by a poet who, in terms of the rhythms and verbal inventiveness and the naming of figures of popular culture, is without equal anywhere». Quoted from: <http://www.eventbrite.com/e/meltzer-rogers-a-couple-of-poets-tickets-13801010193>

³ In 1963 a collection by the title of this poem was published by Bloomington with an introduction by Karl Shapiro.

the everlasting presence of his poetic stature in the world, we could not do without the contribution of the poet who profoundly praised him from 'oltreoceano' – on the other side of the ocean – and so passionately contributed to the appreciation of his thought and art.

My special thanks to Jack for accepting my request of the interview which follows, once again offering us the sensibility and the sincerity of his spirit.

An interview with Jack Hirschman

DCF: The world of culture was deprived of Pier Paolo Pasolini's contribution forty years ago; so much has changed in the meantime and the weapons he used against spiritual decadence seem to have disappeared in a vacuum of indifference. Your poetry and your critical work are an exception: ever since you encountered his voice your endeavor has been that of promoting «a deeper understanding of his ideas, and of their importance», as you stated in the introduction to *In Danger*, the anthology of Pasolini's selected writings you edited in 2010 (7). What is, in your opinion, the heritage we should treasure of his art and of his beliefs?

JH: *When it comes to Pasolini, I've used, as you know, an acronymic PPP = Passion, Provocation and Prophecy = Pier Paolo Pasolini. A recent interview I made with Justin Desmangles carries that title, and it's a title that speaks to Pasolini's heritage, whose components I measure all great poems by. He was a passionate poet – that's a given. He was a provocative poet, in the sense that he wished every poem he wrote would stir and even enflame the senses because he was a love poet rooted in a rage against the fascisms that destroyed love or twisted it so that human beings could make love without love being made – a contradiction that tormented him all his life because it referred not only to homosexual life but to hetero-sexual life as well. And it was connected to what is perhaps his most important legacy, that he foresaw the age of consumerism as creating a fascism and a decadent hedonism that would become the normality of the future – where what I WANT imprisons one by imprisoning the freedom that's the consciousness of WHAT IS NECESSARY – and he accurately prophesied therefore the age we now live in.*

DCF: Unlike other places where Pasolini's fame has essentially been linked to his stature as film master, his poetic and narrative talents seem to have found much earlier and more profound acknowledgement among the San Francisco community of writers and readers⁴. Would you say that this is due to the city's

⁴ This is not to say that Pasolini's creativity as film director went unacknowledged in the Bay Area. One example is the greatly successful retrospective of his films, which took place

long-lasting tradition of that same disaffiliation from ideological and political restrictions Pasolini strove for, or to that same existential investigation into the dialectics between politics and culture, characterizing the city's intellectual community?

JH: *Please, let's not go overboard on PPP in San Francisco. It's true that Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Francesca Valente put together the City Lights edition of Pasolini's Roman Poems, in 1986, which went into a second edition a few years ago, and I published In Danger, a book of some of his finest political poems. But the two Arcanes I've written of him came out of my own experiences in Italy itself, and in fact, when I read "The Days of the Dead Arcane" two weeks ago at the annual North Beach Festival, two poets also reading at that Festival attacked Pier Paolo as a pedophile and a pederast – in other words, attacked him the way the bourgeois attack a great poet and sensibility, and make no mistake, please, Pasolini's mind makes the likes of such poets, and even poets like Allen Ginsberg look woefully small.*

DCF: I understand, but I nevertheless feel somehow uncomfortable at the realization that the city, which for decades has represented «a heaven of tolerance», as Kenneth Tynan defined it some time ago (7)⁵, has itself fallen

in San Francisco, at the "Castro" and "Roxie" theatres, on September 14th and 15th, 2013. Sponsored by Luce Cinecittà and Fondo Pier Paolo Pasolini/Cineteca di Bologna, in association with Colpa Cinema and the Italian Cultural Institute of San Francisco, where a discussion, music and poetry night followed on the 17th, the exhibition was warmly welcomed both by the press and by the numerous public attending it.

⁵ San Francisco's fame as a most lively city, intellectually avant-garde and detached from the strict market laws ruling over the art production in the East Coast, has been widely recognized over the years. Kenneth Rexroth wrote: «Although San Francisco is as supersaturated as New York, it is easy to escape into any desired degree of wilderness [...]. The social base of the city is made up of longshoremen, other categories with a high degree of mobility – independent and skeptical. Life is far less competitive than in most American cities. [...] Most of San Francisco poets are literally members of the working class [...]. It is self-evident that this will produce a literature considerably different from what is done on a job parsing the seven types of ambiguity to seminars of born idlers. It also makes a political difference [...] many young San Francisco writers were not 'proletarian writers', but actual proletarians» (159-162). From the fifties on San Francisco has not only attracted numerous poets and artists from all over the U.S., and from New York in particular – let's think of most of the Beats – but critics, too, were attracted by the Western city's liveliness. When *The New York Times* sent Richard Eberhart to San Francisco to report on the poetry scene which had attracted attention for its novelty, he wrote: «Poetry has become a tangible force, moving and unifying its auditors, releasing the energy of the audience through spoken, even shouted, verse in a way at present unique in this region. [...] It is certain that there is a new vital group consciousness now among young poets in the Bay

into the constrictions of intellectual hypocrisy, as you denounce. It was perhaps to be expected, given the current generalized tendency of non-commitment – or perhaps even the excessive publicity given to the city’s liberal atmosphere, which may have opened it up to erratic behaviour. But City Lights is still there, and Ferlinghetti’s and Valente’s and your own testimony of Pasolini’s poetic meaning found special recognition there – so I feel and value, for, too naïvely perhaps, I still think of San Francisco, and of its intellectual milieu as of a traditionally lenient city, a reference point for certain dialectics.

But let’s get back to Pasolini: the radical and the poet – the sophisticated and the anti-bourgeois – the local and the cosmopolitan – the delicate and the perturbing – the outcast and the engaged – the ideologue and the heretic...: what fascinates you most of his multifaceted personality? Did his verse extend your own vision of the import of poetry on people’s life?

JH: *Pasolini was busted out of the Italian Communist Party in his 20s because of a homosexual incident. He could have gone the way of many gays, ie., left all politics or split the country to live in that comfortable/uncomfortable limbo that many exiles experience. In fact, Pasolini remained a communist to his dying breath. Headlines I’ve seen announced him as the son of Stalin and Togliatti. He was able – through his sheer creative energies and dialectically brilliant mind – to serve the communist movement by being, for all those people who were NOT in a communist party but believed themselves communist in thought and feeling nonetheless, a voice for those who wore their red star in their hearts though not on their lapels. I who joined the Communist Labor Party in 1980 recognized him as a comrade early on and, as I think I’ve said, I regard the final pages of his poem, “The Beautiful Banners” as among the most lyrically majestic and beautiful poems in any language since the end of WW2. He captures in it the moment of the fusion of revolutionary affirmation and the harmony of nature in such a way that the root and essence not simply of dialectical thought but of dialectical feeling are rendered not merely as anthemic of the decade of the Forties, but as a futural foundation against the alienations that were to come, and are still coming. So yes, that poem is one of the reasons why, at the end of my own “The Days of the Dead Arcane”, I speak in the raging voice of Pasolini against «Bushit, Bushit, Obomber...»; that*

Area. However unpublished they may be, many of these young poets have a numerous and enthusiastic audience. [...] They have in some cases a larger audience than more cautiously presented poets in the East» (n.p.). One other relevant aspect of the cultural life in San Francisco was Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s opening of the City Lights Pocket Bookstore in 1953, specialized in underground literature, followed by the start of the Publishing House, by the same name, which launched new poets and translations from poets not yet introduced to the American audience, like Pablo Neruda, Antonin Artaud, René Char, Vladimir Mayakovsky and many others.

is, because his voice, to my way of thinking, exists in all its righteous splendor at this very time in the chaos and morass of consumeristic capitalism at its most degrading depth.

DCF: “The Pasolini Arcane” (*The Arcanes* 344-353): you wrote this long piece as a homage to the poet, who was ‘brutally murdered’ on the Day of the Dead in 1975, in the ‘gloomy outskirts’ of Rome, by (perhaps) a ‘band of outcasts’ – the progeny of that same urban proletariat he had defended against the ambiguities of fetishistic social canons. Rage seems to burst from the first lines of crude cynicism – of a ruthless description of the poet’s violated body –, followed by sections leading to visions of other ‘nowhere sites’ strangled by alienation, to finally conclude the invective with moving lines, reconciling the harshness of fate with the serenity of amicable empathy: «Wake up, I’m sleeping at your shoulder, wearing/ my best pyjamas, being with you. Don’t go, stay,/ *stai*...» (352). No matter how hardened by the inequity of factuality, poetry indeed «becomes of use» as existential power – winning over «road[s]strewn with vanity» (351), to again quote from “The Pasolini Arcane”. In this, your own poetry seems to share the same conative function we perceive in Pasolini’s writings.

JH: *You honor me by suggesting Pasolini and I share the same conative function. Of course, we do, but so do all truly socially and politically engaged poets. In the Arcane you refer to I wanted to write a portrait of the poet and man, including his 1967 and 1969 trips to New York City, which is my own native city. In writing it, I was not only engaging Pasolini’s image but friends of my own in my youth and adolescence. And indeed I was able to include a bit of suggested homoeroticism, though I’m not gay, because what’s important in this Arcane is manifesting Pier Paolo in all of his many-sided complexities.*

DCF: As already mentioned, in your 2010 interview with Justin Desmangles⁶, you refer to Pasolini as PPP, the acronym for Pier Paolo Pasolini, but also for ‘passion, provocation and profecy’, the components, i.e., of great poetry; could we also think of one other P: that for Poetics – for *ars poetica* – or the capacity to mold history-conscience-poetry beyond and above ideology?

JH: *I spoke of the PPP in my first response, but here I would add that your notion of an ars poetica— with a fourth P – going beyond ideology is something I can’t agree with. An ideology is a body of doctrines and assertions related to a political movement. These days – and I mean these treacherously double-talking capitalist days – being against ideology is ultimately a way to keep communist*

⁶ I hereby thank Jack Hirschman for having let me read the interview just before publication.

motion from happening. Pasolini was a great poet. If I leave it at all, well, okay, let's have a drink to Pier Paolo and be satisfied. But if Pasolini was a great poet BECAUSE he revealed the fascism that we now experience, corporate-state-wise, then his greatness does not go "beyond or above" ideology. These days, that's a capi-fascist trick.

DCF: I certainly agree with you in principle. All great art is nourished by ideas/ideals, which then take form, but hardly ever does great art submit itself to restrictions, or impediments to one's inner freedom. At his best, Pasolini, like all great poets, elevated his art to the perception of an ideal commitment to human respect – which for him was represented by Gramsci's ideals – not the mere ideological use of them which the Italian Communist Party (PCI) wanted to impose on him. Indeed when the PCI in 1949 expelled him on account of his homosexuality – camouflaged with the accusation of intellectual deviation towards bourgeois and decadent literature⁷ – he openly denounced the party's policy of moral and political ambiguity. «Non mi meraviglio della diabolica perfidia democristiana: mi meraviglio della vostra disumanità: capisci bene che parlare di deviazione ideologica è una cretineria.» he wrote in a letter to Ferdinando Mautino of the PCI Federation of Udine (*Pasolini: cronaca...*: 46). Rules and regulations may interpret an ideology, but they are not always adequate to the freedom the poet should treasure and extend to his/her readers – there including also the faults and random efforts that at times to correspond to such ambition.

The question seems particularly thorny when referring to Pasolini's relation to Ezra Pound. As we read in *La vita di Pasolini* by Enzo Siciliano, Pasolini was quite reluctant at first to recognize the American poet's literary stature. Still young and quite dramatically absorbed in his radical views when he met Siciliano in 1956, Pasolini would discard Pound as «razzista, fascista eccetera» (Siciliano 469), unable as he still was to sacrifice his political ideas on the altar of poetry. But then, some ten years later – it was 1967 – Pound and Pasolini met for an interview, which was then broadcast on the Italian national TV⁸. You have reported the text in your *In Danger - A Pasolini Anthology* and I am

⁷ On the deceptive motivations leading the PCI to expel the poet, see Naldini 134. The author reports a press release of *L'Unità*, the official newspaper of the Party, in which Pasolini is said to have been expelled from the PCI, because of the intellectual deviationism that the reading of bourgeois and decadent writers (among whom was André Gide) had led him to.

⁸ The interview took place on October 26th 1967 in Venice, and was broadcast in 1968. Part of it can be followed on youtube.

sure you agree that what is absolutely clear from their conversation is that the two poets came to a deep recognition of each other's greatness against all norms: both impatient of literary etiquettes, faithful to the mission of posing the poet against *usura* – of the arts and of human dignity – trying to recapture the value of a 'tale of the tribe' – both having somehow exposed their own lives and themselves to a universal fate of tragedy and having overcome it through poetic epiphany.

JH: *Excuse me but Pound was not a great poet. A fascist cannot be a great poet. I was opposed to publishing the interview in In Danger but the publisher, City Lights, wanted to re-publish it from an issue of the City Lights Review issued some years before, and that was out of my hands. I think Pier Paolo still detested Pound, that anti-semitic pig (don't forget that Pasolini adored and learned a great deal from his grandmother, the mother of Susanna Colussi, who was a jewess!), and at the same time liked his poetry. Of course, PPP was against usury, but as a communist is against capitalism, the driving force behind usury. Pound wrote against usury but embraced the system that championed it. It should be understood that I am fundamentally talking about language here. For example, I've been influenced by the thought of Martin Heidegger, who was a cowardly Nazi during the war. Influenced to the point that I've translated all of his poems, published in three chapbooks. The reason? Because Heidegger seems to imply that the answer to his most fundamental question – What is the truth of Being? – is: Poetry. Now Heidegger may have in conversation or even, as recently expressed in a "black book" of notes, anti-semitic opinions. But what Pound did on his radio broadcasts shit on language itself, and to this day when I think of his broadcasts and remember that, say, the Finzi Contini were being rounded up while he was broadcasting (and as a filmmaker Pasolini must certainly have been aware of that synchronous blight), I continue to become enraged.*

DCF: Yes, I agree with you that Pound committed a great mistake in pronouncing those speeches – that his 'error' consisted in believing Mussolini capable of recapturing the tradition of Italian original cultures – but I also believe that Pound did not fully realize that Fascism was (and still widely is) a mental disposition praising ignorance – its ideology going much further than its public declarations. I think Pasolini realized Pound's 'error' – the 'many errors' indeed which Pound himself declared of his life, as from "Canto CXVI" –, but nevertheless admired the intensity by which the American poet sought a new language for a new civilization.

One other challenging aspect of Pasolini's verse is his incredible mastering of the language – of the significance of language. His first collected poems (*Poesie a Casarsa*) were written in *Furlan*, the language spoken in the Italian

north-eastern region of Friuli. But his choice was not a simple matter of regional pride – of, say, the need to give the deserved dignity to an idiom which had been limited to a merely oral transmission. The publication of *Poesie a Casarsa* marks the poet's urgency to repossess an identity, which the linguistic choice of *Furlan* would confirm as the expression of the ethical world to which he felt he belonged. You visited Casarsa, you perceived the *ethos* of the small provincial town, all absorbed in the nuances of daily life and relationships; but more than that you seem to share the spirit of those verses – exactly as they sound – in that 'far-away' idiom. In referring to them you give the impression not only of appreciating the refinement of their expressivity, but it seems clear that you seize the complexity of their language, combined as it is with the history of an archaic world, set at the margins of the Italian peninsula, inhabited by peasants and workers – a world which is changing, and which Pasolini seems to recapture by fixing its 'original' (and mostly oral) idiom on the written page. Your notes about these poems have the quality of a 'dialogue' between English and *Furlan* – between two distant poetic visions and expressive means – a translation of poetic significance/substance. Have you also tried to translate some?

JH: *I didn't translate Pasolini's Furlan poems. Lucia Gazzino did, and remarkably well. I did go to Casarsa, yes, and in fact had a terrific talk with Gigion, the owner of the caffè across the street from the Pasolini home, where Pier Paolo wrote his first poems. He remembered Pasolini well and, though in his '80s, still sang publically at local weddings, communions, etc. About Furlan, it's indeed a language unto itself, though influenced by incursions by other peoples throughout the centuries. The important thing to note is that the Furlan of Poesie a Casarsa was frowned upon by Mussolini's regime, and so right at the very outset of his life as a poet, Pasolini was aganisting fascism.*

DCF: On the other hand his subsequent poetic achievements in Italian, are again an elaboration of form deriving from the intersection between autobiographical fragments and literary accomplishment – between intellectual assertions and sentiments, I would even dare to add between a certain Italian lyrical tradition and the innovative experiments of the Moderns. What would your comment be?

JH: *Pasolini was first and foremost a poet. He was grounded, that is, in language, whether Furlan or Italian. And when he made films, he spoke of film as language and, in fact, developed a particularly Pasolini-esque manner of "writing" his films with a camera, notwithstanding screenplay notes. Naturally, he knew the avant-garde literary and art movements in other countries and was probably moved by them. He loved "The Living Theater" in New York and spoke of Allen Ginsberg as a fraternal key to the door of collectivity vis-à-vis poetry*

readings, apparently because Pasolini believed that there was a lack of such cultural collectivity in Italy.

DCF: From *Furlan*, to Italian, to Romanesque: Pasolini seems to adhere to a perfect representation of the Italian world of the age – the peasants of Friuli, the growing, invasive bourgeoisie of the whole country, the underworld of marginalized Roman youth –, but nevertheless his art maintains a metaphysical dimension, extending its import from the local and the provincial to much broader horizons of human awareness.

JH: *That's because, from whatever sources, he developed a linguistic sophistication that could engage any plane of class in Italy. He was intently open to life, as most poets are but as some few poets especially are. But I don't think it's a metaphysical dimension that his art maintains. Pasolini was too down-to-earth to be metaphysical. He was a teacher, a working stiff for Cinecittà, a filmmaker, a painter, a novelist and playwright, and it was all rooted in poetry – the language of Being, and not in a metaphysical sense.*

DCF: How did you proceed in the selection of the texts to be translated for your anthology, *In Danger*? Apart from some poetry your choice basically fell on some critical essays – both literary and ideological – and the two interviews with Ezra Pound and with Furio Colombo. Is it that you value his prose, even the most polemical one, on the same level as his poetry – sharing that same spirit characterizing his intellectual, aesthetic and moral disposition?

JH: *I wanted to present Pasolini as a poet engaged in the social and political dimensions. Wanted to close the book with the Interview with Furio Colombo as it occurred only hours before Pasolini was murdered. I let a lot of prose in, including essays that revealed some of his literary myopia too (ie., he didn't recognize the greatness of Pablo Neruda, and saw Charles Olson as simply a half a Pound, among other blindsights), but the real exclusion – and that only because of space and money – is the lack of Pasolini's intellectual and dialectical essays. That is another book. When I said that next to him American poets are intellectual midgets, I wasn't exaggerating. Pasolini is a great revolutionary intellectual.*

DCF: What about his novels? No less than his poetry they are paradigmatic of Pasolini's existential condition *vis-à-vis* the disillusionment with a society at the mercy of consumerism – ideological as much as material – miserable within and without its conventions – from *Ragazzi di vita* (1955), to “Teorema” (1968), one of the most sophisticated, in my opinion, quickly adapted in the equally sophisticated film of the same name.

JH: *Pasolini's novels are also linguistically exciting; that's been my take on them: that it's there, in Ragazzi di Vita and "Teorema" that – the stories notwithstanding – the level of slang and street jargon is brilliantly sophisticated. And of course, one always sees in these novels – in the light of his filmmaking – the proximity between the page and the movie screen.*

DCF: One last comment on his films – just as poetic as his writings and just as provocative. Would you say that Pasolini finally dedicated his search to a different artistic medium, drawn by a sense of alienation from and disaffection for the prevailing taste for 'communicative' rather than 'expressive' linguistic forms, as he said in his *Empirismo eretico*? (26)

JH: *It could be what you suggest, but please remember that he wrote poetry to the end of his life. As he was also writing a column for Corriere della Sera, it could be that the filmmaking and journalistic language superseded his linguistic dimension; but somehow I always feel that Pier Paolo forever sought for that space – an hour or two – wherein he could exercise his poetic art, which was the basis of all the other genres he practiced.*

Jack Hirschman
June 24, 2015

Conclusion

The matter debated is that of the reason for poetry – for its independence and for its commitment – for the realization of an idiom and for the capacity to fix it within the flow of history. But it is also that of the idiosyncrasies of the artist and of his/her struggles to come to terms with the wor[ld]. Both Pasolini and Hirschman believe art to be a means to combat decadence in this our age of devastating consumerism, and both foresee the peril of disastrous consequences for civilization.

Pasolini expressed the force of his choices throughout his own life – always, 'as it has been', conducted on the verge of digression both from stern political discipline and from social etiquette. He believed in the dignity of the outcasts, the poor and the feeble, and stayed by their side, facing the unpredictabilities of human existence. His art reflects his style in life: a constant research to discover those deliberately hidden aspects of the 'condition of being' – his heroes are the peasants of Friuli, as well as the Roman youths from the *borgate*, his language is that of the remote region of northern Italy as well as the jargon of the suburbs of Rome, his themes are

those of the existential suffering of the derelicts of society as well as the mendacities of the ruling upper-class.

Elegance and sophisticated treatment of the worst violence distanced him from the clichés of the bourgeois criticism he received: prudishly – and nonetheless in a subtly vulgar fashion – accusing the writer of obscenity, or, even worse, of despising the poor, by attributing to them a rough and base language, as if this and only this were their communicative capacity, as the Communist Senator Mario Montagnana wrote in the PCI monthly *Rinascita* in 1960, with reference to the publication of *Una vita violenta*.

The coherence of Pasolini's intellectual conduct and his strenuous effort to translate it into literary images of refined aesthetic property is certainly at the basis of Jack Hirschman's interest in the poet who in the fifties and sixties had become the emblem of controversy within Italian *intelligencija*. In offering here his personal interpretation of Pasolini's import within contemporary letters, Hirschman in particular stresses the artist's pursuit of social justice. Although admiring his greatness as a writer, he cannot agree with Pasolini's literary choices and defines his comments on such poets as Pablo Neruda and Charles Olson mere «literary myopia»⁹. He cannot conceive of Pasolini's «making friends» with Ezra Pound, recognizing the «vastness» (“Pier Paolo interviews”: 26, 29) of his poetry and its possible reduction to smaller significant units, as Pasolini said in the 1967 interview with Pound. But then we cannot forget that Pasolini, although faithful to his ideals of communist propositions, never subjected his behavior to dogmatism, and in the case of Pound, despite his assertions of bleak Fascism, he wanted to recognize the power of his poetry, and of the man who admitted his failures in trying to reassert Cosmos – right in the midst of much ambiguity, on the borderline between true proletarian values and a *crescendo* of bourgeois ambitions. On the other hand we must not forget that Pound, like other American expatriates, maintained a close relationship with the traditions of Europe, which made their poetic issues more familiar – no matter whether appreciated or not – than those of other American poets, and vice-versa for European writers concerning their appreciation of authors and audiences from the other shores of the Atlantic.

⁹ Hirschman indeed seems so bewildered at certain particular instances of Pasolini's literary opinions that he stresses his firm reprehension with almost exactly the same emphatic words, whenever the issue is brought up. Going through the previously mentioned interview with Justin Desmangles, we, in fact, read: «[...] he was terribly myopic about certain things, literarily, I mean, he didn't think Pablo Neruda was a great poet. [...] He did not understand fully how important Charles Olson was to the American language. He just saw him as an imitator of Pound, which wasn't true» and in the Introduction to *In Danger*, he once again does not hesitate to define him «myopic, or “off the wall”, to then proceed, though, by admiring his «uniquely provocative and prophetic modernity» (8).

Pasolini, like many other Italian intellectuals of the time, cultivated himself within the French literary *koiné* of the early 20th century and that of the Hermeticism of the '30's. His literary sensibility, therefore, was deeply rooted in this distinct background of European meaning, testifying to the artists' anxiety to forge poetical qualities and political intents into a 'single' voice of innovative purpose. And although it maintained the ambition of exposing itself to an international audience of common ideals, it perhaps lacked a sufficiently broad view of the suggestive voices coming from other continents – unless, as in most sad cases, they were considered exotic. Pablo Neruda, no doubt one of the greatest writers, was in the late sixties publicized as one of the first voices from Latin America to be brought to the attention of those bourgeois revolutionary students Pasolini disapproved of. This may justify his judgment. On the other hand Charles Olson, too, was difficult to appreciate: he belonged to a world so deeply rooted in a context which was still far removed from a non-specifically Americanist interest. His poetics belong to that sphere which Hirschman quite rightly refers to as «American language» (“Interview with J. Desmangles”: n.p.), while, indeed the concept of an ‘American language’ as autochthonous from English was not commonly perceived outside academic linguistic disquisitions on this side of the Ocean. Pound was here, he treated our history and art – he had become a problematic figure, both with regard to his writings and to his incautious political interferences – and obviously aroused curious interest.

But what would have happened to Pasolini's writings if the renown of his films had not crossed international frontiers and his name had not sky-rocked to the highest spheres of popularity?

Well, it is not surprising that the fame of his writings found equally justified acclaim in San Francisco in the first place, and this owing not only to two excellent poets – Jack Hirschman and Lawrence Ferlinghetti – but also to their unique devotion to the diffusion of foreign poetry in the United States, to the art of translation and, last, but not least, to their profound association with Italy and its culture – thus restoring literature to its fundamental ‘use’: that of reciprocal dialogue and constructive confrontation.

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