NAOMI GREENE

Pier Paolo Pasolini

Cinema as Heresy

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PIER PAOLO PASOLINI

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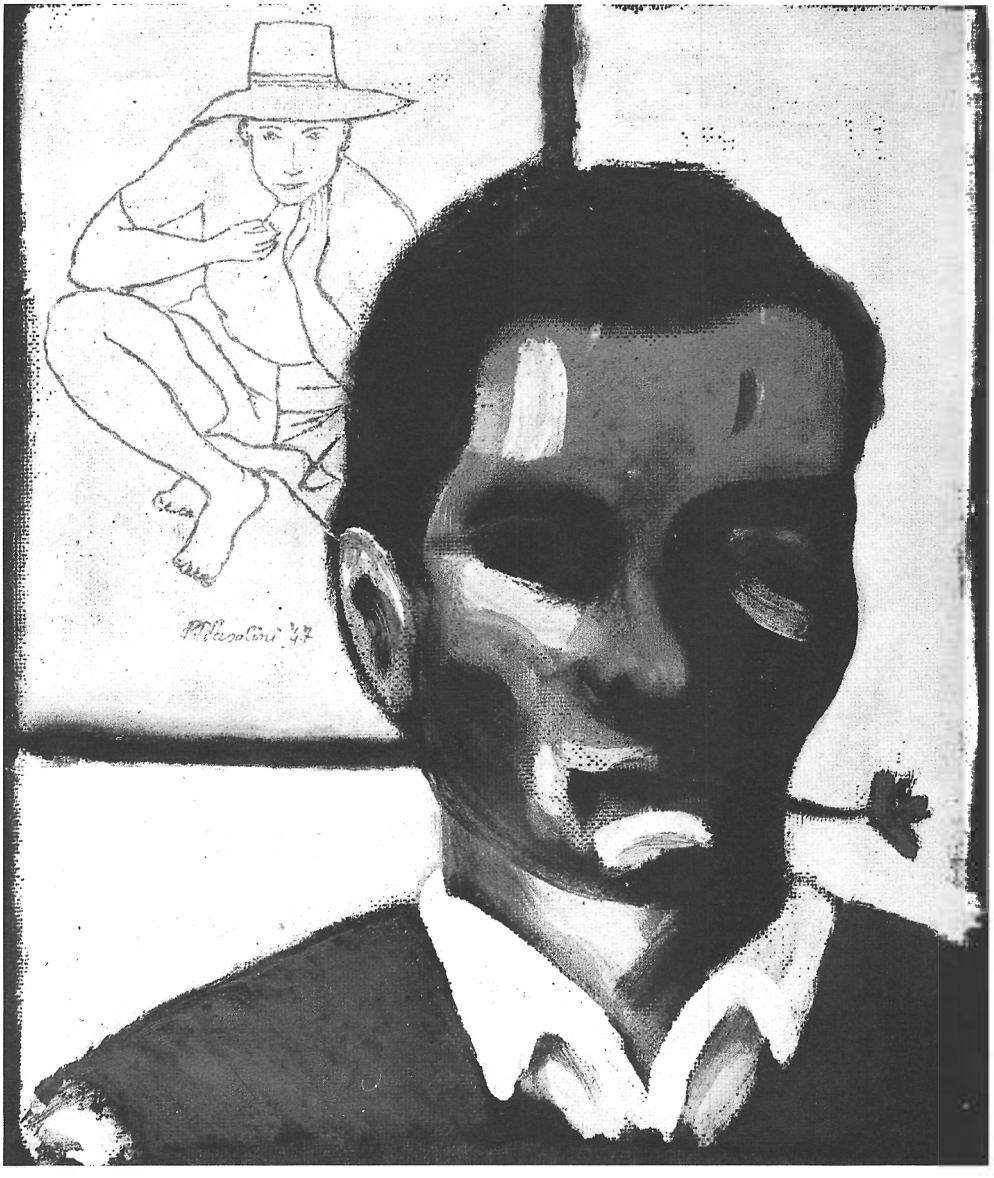

PIER PAOLO PASOLINI

CINEMA AS HERESY

Naomi Greene

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The real Marxist must not be a good Marxist. His function is to put orthodoxy and codified certainties into crisis. His duty is to break the rules.

—*Pier Paolo Pasolini (1975)*

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PIER PAOLO PASOLINI

I

Under the Sign of Rimbaud

but I,
  from poetry's skies,
    plunge into communism
because
  without it
    I feel no love.
      —Vladimir Mayakovsky (1925)

IN THE SUMMER of 1987 I found myself on a train headed for Casarsa delle Delizie, a small Italian town in the region of Friuli, northeast of Venice. Since the town of Casarsa is intimately associated with the late writer and director Pier Paolo Pasolini, the trip represented a cultural pilgrimage for me. My interest in Pasolini had been sparked years earlier on a rainy afternoon in Paris—a city where he was always much admired—when a friend persuaded me to see one of his films. This led to a stay in Rome in the early 1970s—a time when Pasolini was probably the most polemical figure in Italian cultural and political life.

The route from Rome to Casarsa was one that, in reverse, marked important stages of Pasolini's career. After a literary debut as a poet in Casarsa, he settled in Rome. There he achieved fame: first as a poet, novelist, and essayist, then as a filmmaker, and, finally, as a highly controversial political commentator. In November 1975 a brutal assassination—apparently at the hands of a young male prostitute—ended the life of a man who, by the time of his death, was generally recognized not only as a great *poète maudit* but one of the most important intellectuals of postwar Europe, occupying a position in Italy comparable, perhaps, to that of Sartre in France.

In the small cemetery of Casarsa, Pasolini lies buried near his adored mother and many of her relatives since it was she, a gentle schoolteacher of modest rural stock, who came from the region of Friuli. His father, on the other hand, was of minor nobility from Ravenna. After exhausting his patrimony (with some dispatch), Pasolini *père* went into the military. Living on his father's meager salary meant that Pasolini, who was born in 1922 (the year Mussolini came to power), experienced a "petit-bourgeois" childhood, marked by what he called "dignified poverty."

His parents' differing social origins presaged other differences—temperamental and ideological—that would divide them and, much later, would be reflected in Pasolini's persistently binary view of the world. Theirs was not a happy marriage: one of Pasolini's cousins, Nico Naldini, suggests that Pasolini's mother, Susanna, bestowed upon her young son, Pier Paolo, all the love she refused his father.[1] Pasolini himself confessed to feeling an "antagonistic, dramatic tension" between his father and himself from childhood on. His mother's gentleness contrasted with what Pasolini deemed his father's "violent" and "possessive" nature. And while she did not question the social order, she was anti-Fascist, unlike her authoritarian husband, who embraced Mussolini's regime from the beginning. Speaking of the parental arguments that deeply marked his youth, Pasolini noted that his whole life was "influenced by the scenes my father made with my mother. These scenes awakened in me the desire to die. . . . He reproached her with having her head in the clouds. The simple truth is that he was a Fascist, she was not. Being in the clouds meant, for him, being anti-conformist, in disagreement with the laws of the State, with the ideas of those in power."[2]

Memories of childhood would always haunt Pasolini. When he was nearly fifty, he remarked to a friend, the writer Dacia Maraini: "Until the time I was thirty I longed for my childhood and I narcissistically relived it. . . . Because it was the most heroic period of my life. I longed for it desperately."[3] Although this "heroic period" was seen in a different light as he grew older, Pasolini always found it easier to express his great love for his mother (with whom he lived all his life) than his deeply ambivalent and disturbing emotions concerning his father. An avid reader of Freud, he never ceased to probe the implications of his relationship to his parents. As he noted in the course of a long series of interviews with Jean Duflot, a French journalist:

> I almost regret that you're not a psychoanalyst because . . . I'm very curious about this method of investigation, and I have read enough to question the possibility of speaking about my relations with my parents in terms that are simply poetic or even in a way which is purely anecdotal. . . . I will say simply that I experienced a great love for my mother. Her physical "presence," her way of being, of speaking, her tact and gentleness governed my childhood. For a long time I thought that my entire emotional and erotic life was exclusively determined by this excessive passion which I even perceived as a monstrous form of love. Now, quite recently, I have discovered that my sentimental rela-

[1] Pasolini, *Lettere: 1940–1954*, ed. Nico Naldini (Turin: Einaudi, 1986), p. xviii.
[2] Cited by Dacia Maraini in *E tu, chi eri?* (Milan: Bompiani, 1973), pp. 267–268.
[3] Ibid., p. 269.

> tions with my father have also had their importance and one which is far from negligible. It is not only a question of rivalry and hatred.[4]

Pasolini's "monstrous" love for his mother meant that her idealism—her belief in "heroism, in charity, in piety, in generosity"—shaped his most fundamental attitudes.[5] Absorbing her beliefs in an almost "pathological way," he was especially influenced by her respect for "authority"—a respect that would impel both his conformism and, perhaps, his need to rebel. Speaking of himself in the third person, years later, he declared:

> He sought the Authority *feared* by his mother
> not the Authority exerted by his father—a fascist. . . .
>
> Therefore: his conformism—let us repeat, of *maternal and not paternal origin*—stopped him, for longer than is normal, from understanding what liberty and rebellion were,
> Because liberty and rebellion were his bread.[6]

At the heart of this deeply ambivalent nexus of conformism and rebellion lay his homosexuality. In his eyes the cast his sexuality would assume was apparent even in earliest childhood. An entry in a diary Pasolini kept in his mid-twenties describes the violence of his reactions when, as a three-year old, he was attracted by the knees of some young boys at play. Even as these lines suggest the nature of his first sexual stirrings, they also reveal the fascination that words would always hold for him—in this case, *teta veleta*, which, as he later learned, suggested the Greek word for sex, *tetis*.

> Now I know that it was an intensely sensual feeling. If I re-experience it I feel precisely in my insides the melting, sadness, and violence of desire. It was the sense of the unobtainable, of the carnal—a sense for which no name had yet been invented. I invented it then and it was "teta veleta." Just seeing the legs bent in the throes of the game I said to myself that I felt "teta veleta," something which was like a tickling, a seduction, a humiliation.[7]

The hint of "humiliation" that comes at the end of this passage becomes the focus of a diary entry describing a second experience which occurred two years later (when he was five) at the sight of a gruesome film poster of a man being mauled by a tiger. Recalling this scene in later years, he

[4] Cited by Jean Duflot in *Entretiens avec Pier Paolo Pasolini* (Paris: Belfond, 1970), pp. 11–12.

[5] Cited by Maraini, *E tu, chi eri?* p. 262.

[6] Pasolini, "Coccodrillo," in *Il sogno del centauro* (Rome: Riuniti, 1983), p. 176. In addition to "Coccodrillo," this volume contains the Italian translation of Duflot's *Entretiens avec Pier Paolo Pasolini*, followed by additional interviews conducted in 1975.

[7] Pasolini, *Lettere*, p. xvi.

observed that this, his first experience with the cinema, had an "erotic-sexual" cast.

> The young adventurer seemed to be still alive and conscious of having been half-eaten by the splendid tiger. He lay with his head down, almost in the position of a woman, defenseless, nude. Meanwhile the animal was ferociously swallowing him. . . . I was seized by a feeling similar to that which I had experienced seeing the young boys playing at Belluno two years earlier, but it was more murky and insistent. I felt a shiver within me like a kind of surrender. Meanwhile I began to wish that I myself were the explorer being devoured alive by the beast.[8]

The sensitivity and introspection revealed in these passages led Pasolini—almost inevitably—to poetry, and at a tender age. When he was seven, a few days after his mother gave him a poem expressing her love for him, he composed *his* first verses containing—significantly—highly literary words such as "nightingale" and "verdure." At fourteen, as he told Dacia Maraini, he "read *Macbeth*, discovered secondhand bookstores and stopped believing in God"[9]; the following year, his view of the world changed after reading the French poet Arthur Rimbaud. Entranced, certainly, by Rimbaud's adolescent genius, Pasolini was also drawn to Rimbaud's youthful passion and rebellion, his scandalous and doomed love affair with the married poet Paul Verlaine, and, finally, his romantic flight from Europe into the dark heart of Africa. Pasolini's discovery of the great *poète maudit*, says his cousin Nico, was both a "literary and a political baptism that in one blow fractured [Pasolini's] academic and provincial culture, his Fascist conformism, and placed into crisis even the social identity of the adolescent poet."[10] In 1941, at university in Bologna—where he wrote a literary thesis on the poet Pascoli—he and a number of friends tried to start a literary magazine called *Eredi*. They saw themselves as the heirs, or the "eredi," of the Italian modernist tradition represented by writers such as Ungaretti and Montale. Wartime restrictions on paper doomed the project; the following year (1942), however, he contributed to a new review, *Il Setaccio*. Although officially sponsored by University Fascist Youth, *Il Setaccio* attempted to attract young intellectuals by offering them relative freedom to express personal views. Foreshadowing his later rejection of all orthodoxy, Pasolini soon took advantage of this freedom. After attending two great assemblies of Fascist youth—one in Florence, the other in Weimar—he wrote an article for *Il Setaccio* in which he contrasted Nazi propaganda with the great traditions of European culture.

[8] Ibid., p. xx.
[9] Cited by Maraini, *E tu, chi eri?* p. 266.
[10] Pasolini, *Lettere*, p. xxvii.

By 1943 the war had reached Bologna. Along with his mother and younger brother, Guido, Pasolini left the city and took refuge in Friuli—a region he knew and loved from boyhood summers spent in and around Casarsa. The rural landscape became the scene of his erotic initiation. Diary entries reveal the intensity of his first passion for a peasant lad, Bruno, whom he saw as "violent" and "coarse." The discovery that boys were not merely "angels without sex," the fierceness of his desire, forced him to see himself and the world in a new—and disquieting—way. Noting that his loss of "innocence" seemed a "betrayal" of his more "sensitive" and "generous" nature, he confided to his diary that even the natural world had taken on a different cast for him—one that was highly physical, insistent, and "impure." Diary entries in which he describes erotic longings hint at a deeply religious sensibility perturbed and distraught by passion: "In a mystical nakedness," he confesses, "the terror-creating nakedness of the soul, perhaps I can find some way of justifying myself: I *had to* sin, that is to follow the road of the Christian in reverse. It is known that a convert normally has one obstacle to overcome: the state of sin. I had . . . to go from an innocence that was imposed to one that was willed."[11]

Pasolini's personal drama played itself out against the background of the war. Casarsa itself, as an important railroad depot, was subject to Allied bombings and scenes of intense fighting. "The war stinks of shit," wrote Pasolini to a friend in March 1944, "everything stinks of shit, it makes you sick to your stomach to think that these men [the Nazis] shit here. I would like to spit on this stupid earth that keeps sending forth green grasses, and yellow and blue flowers, and buds on the alder trees. . . . Everything stinks of shooting and boots."[12] Young men were subject to being seized by the Fascists and forcibly conscripted into the army. To escape these roundups, in 1944 Pasolini left Casarsa for the nearby hamlet of Versuta, where a plaque in the church square now bears one of his early poems. In this tiny village, Pasolini—revealing the pedagogical bent that informs his essays and articles—managed to establish a little school for children who, because of the war, could no longer travel in safety to their normal schools. The previous year, along with some friends, he had launched a similar school in Casarsa. His hours in the classroom were a source of deep joy. "I believe," he remarked in his diary, "that I never gave of myself with such dedication as I did to these students . . . during the lessons of Italian and history."[13]

Only a few months before peace was announced, the war took its terrible toll of the Pasolini family. In the summer of 1944, Pier Paolo's be-

[11] Ibid., p. lxx.
[12] Ibid., pp. 190–191.
[13] Ibid., p. lxxiii.

loved younger brother, Guido, had left home—with a "revolver hidden in a book of poems"—to join the Resistance. Little more than six months later, in February 1945, Guido died in an atrocious, absurd combat between conflicting partisan groups, apparently killed in cold blood by Yugoslav (and even Italian) partisans who were struggling to annex Friuli to Tito's Communist Yugoslavia. A grief-stricken Pasolini may have felt partly responsible for his brother's death: he had suggested to Guido which partisan group to join. Twenty years later he was to write:

> I still cry, every time that I think
> about my brother Guido,
> a partisan killed by other partisans, Communists
> (he was in the Partito d'Azione, but upon my advice
> he joined the Resistance as a Communist),
> at the accursed mountains of a frontier.[14]

Soon afterward his father, who had left for the African theater in 1941, only to spend much of the war in an English prisoner-of-war camp in Kenya, returned home. He was broken by defeat, drink, and now the death of his son. Bored and embittered, he would pass long hours in a local café, drinking constantly. His alcoholism and drink-induced crises created an unbearably tense atmosphere at home. "I work a great deal," Pasolini wrote to a friend in 1948, "to maintain a state (between erotic and mystical) of joy and to avoid thinking of the future. My father's 'paranoid syndrome' [thus diagnosed by one psychiatrist] makes our family life an inferno; it is a problem without solution. Believe me, there are no words to express certain situations that are created at home during my father's moments of crisis."[15]

At the end of the war, Pasolini chose to remain in Friuli. He was understandably disturbed about his father, but relatively content with his friends and with the life he was carving out for himself. The little schools he had started gave way to a salaried teaching post when he received his degree. To him, Friuli seemed a "bit like an ideal country, almost outside space and time, a kind of sentimental and poetic Provence for me who was writing poetry like Rimbaud, Verlaine, or Lorca."[16] He had, in fact, continued to write throughout the war; his first collection of poems, *Poesie a Casarsa* (originally intended for the ill-fated review *Eredi*), was published in 1942 and, to Pasolini's surprise and delight, elicited praise from a famous man of letters, Gianfranco Contini.

Significantly, Pasolini's first collection was not written in standard Ital-

[14] Pasolini, "Io, poeta delle Ceneri," *Nuovi Argomenti* No. 67–68 (July–December 1980), p. 3.

[15] Pasolini, *Lettere*, p. 338.

[16] Pasolini, *Le belle bandiere* (Rome: Riuniti, 1977), p. 136.

ian, but in the Friulian dialect spoken mainly by peasants. (The bourgeois Pasolini household spoke a Venetian dialect which his cousin has described as "dry and impoverished" in comparison with Friulian.) Pasolini's choice of Friulian was important for a variety of reasons. On a personal level, it revealed his attachment to the region with its age-old way of life, its rural and mystical Christianity. In his cousin's eyes, Pasolini's "intimacy with the peasant world" was also imbued with nostalgia "for a language that, before the influx of Venetian, had sprung forth from antic lyrical sources, and for religious liturgies full of feelings of charity."[17] Years later Pasolini would analyze his attraction to the language and world of the Friulian peasants as the first manifestation of a lifelong nostalgia for past civilizations which, as he aged and the nostalgia grew more acute, became increasingly more remote in time and place. As with Friulian, this nostalgia always contained linguistic and ideological components: the longing he felt for dialects and past civilizations was the reverse side of the linguistic and cultural crisis he experienced in his own civilization. Observing that perhaps only an outsider, one who was "marginal and not too Friulian," could be fully aware of what the conscious or literary use of dialect implied, he wrote:

> The "return," that essential vocation of dialect . . . should come about for complex reasons . . . both internal and external, and take place from one language (Italian) to another (Friulian) that has become the object of a mournful nostalgia which is sensual in origin (in all the breadth and depth of the term); but [this return] also coincides with the nostalgia of one who lives—and knows it—in a civilization that has reached a linguistic crisis, the desolation and violence of a Rimbaudian "je ne sais plus parler."[18]

Pasolini's attraction to Friulian also reflected what proved to be a lifelong interest in philology and linguistics. In 1945, in fact, he helped found an organization devoted to the study of the Friulian language, the Academiuta di Lenga Furlana. But as the above quote suggests, literary sensibilities—in particular, his love of symbolist poets and especially Rimbaud—were probably even more important. The choice of a dialect quite distinct from Italian, where the language itself compelled attention, automatically meant embracing the "absolute" language of poetry. Viewing his decision to write in dialect as "the height of hermeticism, of obscurity, of the refusal to communicate," he observed that he had learned Friulian as

[17] Nico Naldini, *Nei campi dei Friuli: La giovanezza di Pasolini* (Milan: Pesce d'Oro, 1984), pp. 24–25.

[18] Pasolini, *Passione e ideologia* (Milan: Garzanti, 1977), pp. 132–133. Originally published in 1960.

> a mystic act of love, a kind of *félibrisme*, like the Provençal poets. The first poems I wrote in Friulian were when I was about seventeen. . . . As you know, at that time hermeticism was in vogue in Italy, which was a kind of provincial current of symbolism; Mallarmé was the principal influence and symbolism was widely taken up in Italy. . . .
>
> The central idea of hermetic poetry was the idea of the language of poetry as an absolute language.[19]

Foreshadowing the intimate link between politics and culture that would become one of the defining characteristics of all his work, the literary/linguistic choice of Friulian had political and social ramifications. Pasolini's embrace of dialect represented a defiance of Fascism, which scorned marginal regions and dialects, seeing in them "a form of real life it wanted to conceal." To the Fascist mentality, culture itself was suspect. Speaking of the way his literary sensibility both shaped and reflected his growing political awareness, Pasolini told one interviewer:

> I followed the only two paths that could take me to anti-Fascism: that of hermeticism . . . and decadentism, that is, essentially [the path] of good taste . . . and, secondly, the path which led me into contact with the humble and Christian way of life of the peasants in my mother's region, a way of life expressing a mentality totally different from the style of Fascism.[20]

The political awareness implicit in Pasolini's choice of Friulian also had a pronounced Freudian cast. In what he deemed a "bold gesture," one undoubtedly infused with complex and ambivalent emotions, Pasolini dedicated *Poesie a Casarsa* to his father. As a Fascist with a "racist" contempt for "anything that came from the margins of the country," the latter might well have been hurt by his son's use of dialect. Referring to the poem and its dedication nearly a quarter century later, Pasolini wrote:

> It's the sign of our hatred, the indisputable sign,
> the sign that could not mislead a scientific inquiry,
> *–that could not mislead it–*
> this book dedicated to him
> was written in Friulian dialect!
> The dialect of my mother!
> The dialect of a small
> world, that he had to scorn,
> –or else accept with a father's patience.[21]

[19] Cited by Oswald Stack in *Pasolini on Pasolini* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1969), pp. 15–16.

[20] Cited by Ferdinando Camon in *Il mestiere di scrittore* (Milan: Garzanti, 1973), p. 95.

[21] Pasolini, "Io, poeta delle Ceneri," p. 4.

But his father, it appears, did not take *Poesie a Casarsa* as a "sign of hatred." Quite the contrary. Pasolini's diary reveals that the book was greeted not only by paternal "patience" but even paternal pride: "Despite the absurdity of the language used, it was dedicated to him, and this consoled him, made him rejoice."[22]

Other consequences, both personal and political, stemmed from the choice of Friulian: using the dialect spoken by the peasants, Pasolini gradually came closer to them and to the very real problems of their difficult existence. His realization that everything about their life distinguished it from his own ("their psychology, their education, their mentality, their soul, their sexuality were all different"[23]) heightened his class consciousness, his acute awareness of his own bourgeois core. Before long his depiction of peasant life assumed a populist cast, a "sentimental and vaguely Socialist halo of a Romantic Christian sort."[24] As this "Socialist halo" began to interact with his linguistic fascination, the decadent or hermetic aspect of his poems lessened even as their earlier Christianity gave way to more "concrete sociological forms." Gradually the use of dialect became less an aesthetic device and more a political and social one. Although he turned to Friulian as a "special language for poetry," his contact with dialect inevitably

> had an effect. . . . It was through Friulian that I came to understand some of the real world of the peasantry. Of course, at first I understood it imperfectly in an aesthetic way. . . . Yet once I'd taken this step I couldn't stop and so I started using dialect not as a hermetic-aestheticist device but more and more as an objective and realist element: this reached its culmination in my novels, where Roman dialect is used in a way which is the exact opposite of how I used Friulian at the beginning.[25]

Moved by his attachment to Friuli as well as a growing social awareness, Pasolini before long joined a group devoted to Friulian autonomy. Around the same time he also began attending meetings of a local Communist group; in 1948 he officially joined the Communist party and was named secretary of the Communist Section of San Giovanni, a town close to Casarsa. The fact that the Communists did not support the aims of the Friulian group did not seem to disturb him. As if foreshadowing the many conflicts he would have with the party, Pasolini remained committed to both the ideal of regional autonomy and to Communist aims. Nor was this the only issue in dispute. Hinting at what would become a firmly held and lifelong conviction, in 1948 he made a speech in which he questioned

[22] Pasolini, *Lettere*, p. xl.
[23] Cited by Stack, *Pasolini*, p. 26.
[24] Cited by Camon, *Il mestiere di scrittore*, p. 95.
[25] Cited by Stack, *Pasolini*, pp. 16–17.

the party's tendency to judge literature solely in political and ideological terms. "There is a tendency to the right and a tendency to the left even in literature," he declared, "and for reasons that are purely literary. But those who are on the left in literature are not always to the left in politics, etc.: there is therefore a double play of relations between political and literary avant-gardism."[26]

Around the time that Pasolini joined the party, the left-wing groups of a nearby town, San Vito al Tagliamento, organized a demonstration to protest the failure of tenant farmers and unemployed workers to receive aid and jobs promised them as compensation for damages suffered during the war. Dramatically taking to the streets, many of the younger protesters besieged a large estate owned by absentee landlords. These scenes of stark class confrontation, of day laborers, or *braccianti*, pitted against big landlords, so moved Pasolini that he later wove a novel around them: *Il sogno di una cosa* (1962). "Never so much as at that moment," comments his cousin Nico, "did the idea of a peasant revolution seem such a realizable dream."[27] Much later, in a column written for a Communist periodical, Pasolini would describe this peasant protest as a "crucial moment" in his life, a moment that confirmed him in his belief that ideology stems not from pure reason but from lived experience. "The direct experience of the problems of others," he was to observe, "radically transformed my own problems: for this reason I feel that at the root of the communism of a bourgeois there is always an ethical, in some sense, an evangelical, impulse."[28]

As the decisive elections of 1948 approached, Pasolini and his comrades were swept up in a wave of political activity: debates, meetings, and newspaper articles became the order of the day. Even the bitter defeat suffered by the Left at the polls did not lessen their political fervor. Dismayed by Pasolini's politics, some old friends fell away; new ones took their place. Pasolini began to read theoretical texts: parts of *Das Kapital* and, more importantly, works by Antonio Gramsci, a founder of the Italian Communist party. Noting that he found Marx "distant" for various reasons, Pasolini remarked that "Gramsci's ideas coincided with mine; they won me over immediately, and he had a fundamental role in my formation."[29]

It was, in fact, Pasolini's growing activism that triggered the first and, perhaps, the most traumatic of the many "scandals" he would endure. Like all those to come, this first drama sprang from a mix of sex and

[26] Pasolini, "Un intervento rimandato," in *Dialogo con Pasolini: Scritti 1957–1984* (Rome: Rinascita, 1985), p. 109.

[27] Pasolini, *Lettere*, p. civ.

[28] Pasolini, *Le belle bandiere*, p. 136.

[29] Cited by Stack, *Pasolini*, p. 23.

politics. A number of Catholics who, naturally, supported the Christian Democrats and may have hoped that Pasolini would prove a friend rather than a Communist adversary viewed his political activities with hostility. As a respected teacher and intellectual who wrote articles for the local papers, Pasolini was highly visible and hence threatening. Well aware of their hatred, in March 1949 Pasolini wrote to a very close woman friend, Silvana Mauri, that the "priests of the area . . . slander me from the altars." But, he continued, "for me believing in Communism is a great thing."[30] He held fast to his idealism even after an important prelate warned him that he would be ruined if he did not cease his political activities. This threat was made good in the fall of 1949. On September 30, during a local rural festival, Pasolini disappeared into the bushes with three young lads; on October 22 he stood accused of "corrupting minors and obscene acts in public."

In recounting the incident, Nico Naldini says simply that "a masturbation" took place that night. This fairly commonplace act apparently led first to an anonymous letter and then to a police report that Pasolini's political enemies were quick to escalate into legal charges. Although acquitted of the corruption charge, Pasolini *was* convicted of obscene acts. Two years later—in a pattern that would recur in all his trials—he was declared innocent; the appeals court reversed the conviction for insufficient evidence. But by then the damage had been done. Forbidden to teach in the state schools, he lost his livelihood; in a second, and perhaps even more devastating blow, he was also expelled from the Communist party.

In retrospect, the Communists emerge from this incident scarcely less tainted than the Christian Democrats. Given the climate of the cold war, the Communists' reluctance to defend a known homosexual is understandable. But the tone of the expulsion, which was published in the Communist paper *L'Unità*, hints at something more. Imbued with the moralism and intolerance that would always pursue Pasolini, the journal stated:

> The facts which have provoked a serious disciplinary measure against the poet Pasolini give us the opportunity to once again denounce the deleterious influence of certain ideological and philosophical currents [represented] by Gide, Sartre, and other decadent poets and men of letters who try to seem progressive but who, in reality, take on the most harmful aspects of bourgeois degeneration.[31]

Stricken by the political excommunication, Pasolini responded with a moving letter to Ferdinando Mautino, author of the expulsion decree.

[30] Pasolini, *Lettere*, pp. 353–354.

[31] Ibid., p. cix.

After reminding Mautino that the scandal had been engineered by their common political enemies, Pasolini continued in a more personal vein, declaring his outrage, his anguish, and his continuing political faith:

> Yesterday morning my mother almost went crazy, my father is in an indescribable state—I heard him crying and moaning all night long. I'm without work, that is, reduced to begging. Simply because *I am a Communist.* While I'm not astonished by the diabolical perfidy of the Christian Democrats, I am astonished by your inhumanity. You must understand that any talk of ideological deviation is idiotic. In spite of you, I remain and shall remain a Communist, in the most authentic meaning of the word. . . . Until yesterday, I was sustained by the thought of having sacrificed my life and my career to an ideal; now there is nothing to sustain me. In my place, someone else would have committed suicide; unfortunately, I must live for my mother. . . . For this I have betrayed my class and what you people call my bourgeois education; now those betrayed have revenged themselves in the most ruthless and frightful way. And I remain alone with the mortal grief of my father and mother.[32]

What little sympathy Pasolini received came not from his former political allies but from the townspeople of Casarsa. But this could do little to alleviate the despair he experienced in the weeks following the scandal. Deeming himself a "Rimbaud without genius," the young poet wrote to a friend, "My future is not even black; it does not exist."[33] Despondency and isolation made him cling to his writing—to what he called the "prison of [his] vocation"—with ever greater singleness of purpose and fury. Without a means of support, tortured by the idea of taking money from his alcoholic father, Pasolini finally made a move that was to prove momentous for his life, his work, and the world of Italian culture. Writing to his good friend Silvana Mauri that he sought even the "humblest" job somewhere ("they tell me that I will not die of hunger"), he joined his mother in abandoning his father and, on January 28, 1950, left Casarsa for the home of one of his uncles in Rome. Years later he would describe that fateful period:

> With the end of the war began the most tragic period of my life . . . my brother's death and my mother's superhuman grief; my father's return from prison—an ill veteran, poisoned by the defeat of Fascism . . . destroyed, ferocious, a powerless tyrant, crazed by bad wine, more and more in love with my mother who had never loved him very much and who was now wrapped up in her own grief. And to all this was added the problem of my life and flesh. As in a novel, in the winter of '49 . . . I fled with my mother to Rome.[34]

[32] Ibid., pp. 368–369.
[33] Ibid., p. 375.
[34] Pasolini, "Al lettore nuovo" in *Poesie* (Milan: Garzanti, 1970), p. 9.

The Rome they fled to was still the city depicted in neorealist films—a city of work shortages, hunger, poverty. Life was so difficult initially that Pasolini later remarked: "For two years I was a desperate person out of work, like those who wind up killing themselves."[35] To his great humiliation, his mother accepted work as a live-in governess. "We arrived in Rome," he wrote years later,

> helped by my gentle uncle,
> who gave me a little of his blood:
> I lived as one condemned to death
> always "with that thought" dragging me down
> — dishonor, lack of work, misery.
> My mother was reduced for a while to being a maid.
> And I'll never recover from this pain.
> Because I'm a petit-bourgeois.[36]

Finding work seemed at first almost impossible: a despairing Pasolini beseeched friends for any possible leads or contacts, put himself on the list of film extras at the studios of Cinecittà, did some proofreading. Money was so scarce that he was compelled to sell cherished books. His father's arrival in Rome did nothing to alleviate the situation: "My father is always there, alone in the poor little kitchen, elbows on the table, face in his hands, immobile, mean, grieving; he fills up the space of the tiny room with the huge size of dead bodies."[37] But through it all he continued writing furiously; paradoxically, the first journalistic pieces the young Communist managed to place were in right-wing and Catholic papers.

Very slowly life started to improve. Nearly two years after his flight from Casarsa, he finally obtained a teaching post in a private school. Although he received a miserable wage and was forced to spend nearly four hours a day commuting by bus, his mother was able to stop working. He also obtained his first literary contract—one commissioning an anthology of poetry in dialect. The result, his massive *Poesia dialettale del Novecento*, received an enthusiastic welcome in 1953, and a second anthology, devoted to popular Italian poetry, was published two years later. In 1953 he also published a volume of verse in Friulian as well as a short story, "Ragazzi di vita," that would later become a chapter in his first novel. Gradually, too, he made literary acquaintances, such as Ungaretti and Gadda, and friends; he became especially close to the novelists Elsa Morante and Alberto Moravia. He was friendly, too, with the writer Attilio Bertolucci, father of Bernardo the filmmaker. For a time he lived in the

[35] Cited by Luciano de Giusti in his *I film di Pier Paolo Pasolini* (Rome: Gremese, 1983), p. 28.

[36] Pasolini, "Io, poeta delle Ceneri," p. 7.

[37] Pasolini, *Lettere*, p. cxxi.