

Pasolini and the “Power of Consumption”*

Maurizio Borghi

*Based on current experience of the human race
we can see that no material or economic “leap”
compensates for the losses incurred by the people’s spirit.
Alexandr Solzhenitsyn***

Political economy is, at least in one of its immediate and intuitive definitions, the science of the *production and consumption* of goods. In light of this knowledge, *everything*, every element of the natural world (earth, animals, trees) as well as the man-made world (cities, houses, tools, food), must appear first and foremost within the dimension of the produced being and/or of the consumed being, which also includes the dimension of the producible and/or consumable being. And, naturally, the human being, first and foremost, must be understood as a producer *and* consumer. Consequently, the whole of mankind, or rather what, with an unusual but phenomenologically apt expression, we may term as “human coalescence”, will be included within the production and consumption of goods (tangible and intangible, as they say). Thus, that particular and in-itself unique human coalescence which—now to use a term that is scandalously obsolete and mostly banished from modern technical language—constitutes the *people*, will in turn be determined, in its fundamental structures (relations, habits, religion, character, language, ...), by the needs imposed by the production and the consumption of goods.

These altogether obvious and commonplace observations on the status of economic science allow us to focus on three circumstances that will constitute the point of departure for this reflection. The first is as follows: if economic knowledge means any entity (world, earth, man) in light of the produced (or producible) being and the consumed (or consumable) being, this knowledge must in some way pre-understand the meaning of each being as produced/producible and/or consumed/consumable. But this pre-understanding, this polarization of the totality of

* This text is a translation and adaptation from M. Borghi “Pasolini e il carattere nazionale del potere dei consumi”, in I. De Gennaro, S. Kazmierski, R. Lüfter and R. Simon *Wirtliche Ökonomie: Philosophische und dichterische Quellen*, Zweiter Teilband (Verlag Traugott Bautz: Nordhausen 2016), 151.

** *The Russian Question at the End of the Twentieth Century* (1995).

being within the production-consumption binary, is not in its turn an effect or a product of the “economic gaze”. Economic knowledge presupposes the gaze but, precisely for this reason, cannot be its creator. We may illustrate the point with an image: economic knowledge is not the master of this gaze any more than a ship is mistress of the wind that fills its sails. The aforesaid polarization—which for simplicity’s sake we shall call the “production-consumption circuit”—is not the result or the product of economic science, but its (the science’s) condition of possibility. This circuit must have another origin.

The second circumstance, which can begin to shed a little light on that origin, is that the production-consumption circuit is essentially (and not accidentally) mediated by technology. Not only is each being pre-understood in this circuit; but each being must be *increasingly* consumed and *ever better* produced. The production-consumption circuit is accompanied by an injunction to increase, a “more” or plus, which in the technical language of the economy (now become the language *tout court*) assumes names such as “growth”, “development”, “innovation”, “optimization”, and so on.

The third circumstance is that the production-consumption circuit, under the banner of technological increase, requires the homogenization of the peoples to whom this circuit applies. Of course, political economy has always recognized the importance of the national aspect of the production-consumption cycle: suffice it to recall the title of Adam Smith’s foundational text, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. But, for economic science, “nations” are merely countable units when computing an increase or decrease in wealth; they are critical masses of producers and consumers which must be organized with a view toward increasing wealth (of consumable goods), and then toward growth and development. In this context, the traits that distinguish a people—language, religion, body—become, within the economic calculation, particular factors that influence (impede or, more rarely, favour) development and growth, those universal instances to which *all* “nations” must respond.

This third circumstance which, by incorporating the previous two within itself and thus articulating what we may define as the *unthought* of economic science, is the subject of reflection in the works of Pier Paolo Pasolini.

As one reads in history books, between the 1950s and 1960s Italy experienced the shift from a largely agrarian and preindustrial to a “developed” economy. Thus, Italy has become an industrial

country; that is, a full producer and consumer of goods. But it has become so in a relatively short period of time if compared with other “industrial powers”. It has become so, we could say, “overnight” and almost “without being aware”, as if this transformation took place in the order of things that naturally “happen” to nations and peoples.¹ Indeed, although many have investigated this transformation according to the whole spectrum of knowledge and fields of learning, few have actually “become aware of” the transformation—by this I mean: few have turned their attention to *thinking* about this phenomenon. Only one—Pier Paolo Pasolini, to be precise—has put into writing this thinking realization.

Pasolini’s thought is a primary and still largely unexplored resource for the elaboration of a new mode of thinking economics. His writings represent a unique opportunity to ponder the *unthought of* in today’s economics and, perhaps, to sow the seeds for a new understanding of human dwelling in the era of total industrialization—and this despite the fact that explicit references to the economy are rare, indeed almost absent in Pasolini’s works. We find a faint trace in a letter written to Gianni Scalia on 3 October 1975. In it Pasolini writes: “Your idea of ‘translating’ my journalistic writing into political economic terms seems wonderful to me and should be done immediately”.²

We do not know where this trace would have led him if, a mere month after writing that letter, the brutal ambush at Lido di Ostia had not brought a premature end to his life. In the reflections that follow I will try *not* to translate the writings of Pasolini in economic terms, but rather to translate the issue of ‘economy’ into Pasolinian diagnoses of the present times. Indeed, Pasolini’s thought, from a purely formal point of view, presents itself as diagnostic thought. Regarding this aspect, we must pay attention to a clarification that he himself has written about the nature of his own assertions, anticipating a theme—the unification of the Italian language under the sign of technical-communicative efficiency—which, as we shall later see, constitutes the very heart of Pasolini’s diagnosis of the present:

I reached the apodictic and impartial conclusion that “Italian was born as a national language”, just as a diagnostician is impartial in announcing the presence of disease [...] (just as a diagnostician discovers disease through a series of aberrations or dysfunctions). [...] The final enunciation is therefore only

¹ See the short video “Pasolini, Sabaudia e la ‘civiltà dei consumi’”, available on YouTube <https://youtu.be/e6ki-pieW2o>.

² Pier Paolo Pasolini *Letters. 1955-1975*, curated by Nico Naldini, Einaudi, Torino 1988, p. 748.

apparently impartial and objective: the journey I made to reach it clearly shows, to those who do not read with distraction or “academic resentment”, that my choices and my tastes are those of a doctor who loves good health, and who considers good health to be that enjoyed by the patient in his normal life, prior to disease or to the symptoms of disease.³

The alleged apodictic character of Pasolinian arguments has its roots solely in the diagnostic nature of the analysis that precedes them, a diagnostic nature that is justified in turn by the discovery of a “disease”, of which the elements identified in the analysis are the symptoms. He is not speaking, therefore, as it might appear to the distracted or “academically resentful” eye, of statements arising from an avulsed will of “objectivity”, or, alternatively, from an inclination to follow his own personal “tastes” or, put differently, his own “personal research”—products, ultimately, of the notorious “Pasolinian sensitivity” toward themes of the archaic pre-capitalist and pre-industrial tradition.⁴ In truth, to continue with the image suggested by the quotation cited above, the only “taste”, the only “sensitivity” that can rightly be claimed is unconditional love for “good health”, i.e. for the state that precedes the appearance of the “disease” and its symptoms. The truth of Pasolini’s seemingly apodictic allegations can therefore be weighed only by starting here, i.e. starting from the fundamental difference between “good health” and “disease”. This difference is not, as such, in any way “objectively demonstrable”. It is an original realization, without which—as Pasolini himself experienced throughout his whole existence—every attempt at clarification is destined to meet with complete and stubborn misunderstanding.

* * *

In what, therefore, does it consist and from where does it originate, the “disease” that afflicts our present time? At the core of Pasolini’s diagnosis is what he on several occasions calls the “new Power”, the “power of consumption”, or even more simply, using a term of Marxist origin which came into vogue in the 1960s, “consumerism”. His discourse focuses on the *specifically Italian* character of consumerism, and is part of a more comprehensive diagnosis of the present time in the epoch in which rises and is imposed a “new relationship”, instituted by technology, “between

³ Pier Paolo Pasolini, *empiricism heretic*, Garzanti, Milan 1972 (hereafter: EE), p. 43.

⁴ All themes that recur in the critical literature “on” Pasolini.

production and consumption”.⁵ As Pasolini clarifies in one of the many responses to his “critics” (on this occasion his friend and fellow novelist, Alberto Moravia), the reference to everyday reality in Italy is an integral part of his diagnosis. Detached from this reference, the diagnosis itself would result in an empty exercise of unthinking resentment: “Moravia, in rebuking my naive indignation against consumerism, continually confuses consumerism in general with Italian consumerism”⁶—although this misunderstanding does not prevent him from concluding with affectionate irony: “If Moravia fantastically attributes to me a theological hatred against consumerism in general, as a serial phenomenon of capitalism (an attribution that, I repeat, is unjust, because my theological hatred is directed solely and completely against *Italian consumerism*, [...]) and then he makes me worthy of the title of ‘Preraphaelite’—well, this is already something”.⁷

In what consists this “new Power”, and what are the specifically Italian traits that characterize it? Pasolini himself, recognizing its profound enigmaticity, admits to not knowing how to find an immediate answer to this question:

I write “Power” with an uppercase P [...] only because I sincerely do not know in what this Power consists and in whom it is represented. I know simply that it exists. I no longer recognize it in the Vatican, nor in the powerful Christian Democrats, nor in the Armed Forces. Nor do I recognize it any longer in big industry [...].⁸

Yet this “new Power, still without a face”, which cannot be identified with any of the empirical manifestations thereof (here typically Italian) against which arise the many forms of “*anti-*”, one can recognize some characteristics that are polarized around the “mania, extreme we might say, to fully implement its ‘development’: to produce and consume.”⁹ The new Power manifests certain characteristics but is not identified with any of them. It *is*, it is in force—but it cannot “be found” in literally any place. In fact, “every part” is already within its sphere of action, and from there it is

⁵ Pier Paolo Pasolini, “La prima vera rivoluzione di destra” (*Il Tempo*, 17 July 1973), in *Scritti corsari*, in *Saggi sulla politica e sulla società*, edited by Walter Siti and Silvia De Laude, Meridiani Mondadori, Milan 1999 (hereafter: SPS), p. 285.

⁶ “Le mie proposte su scuola e Tv” (*Corriere della Sera*, 29 October 1975), in *Scritti corsari*, SPS, pp. 695-6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 698-9.

⁸ “Il vero fascismo e quindi il vero antifascismo” (*Corriere della Sera*, 24 June 1974), in *Scritti corsari*, SPS, pp. 313-4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 314.

already determined. To the extent in which it pervades the whole, it is totalitarian, indeed it is the “new and most repressive totalitarianism ever seen”.¹⁰

But what is Power, how can it be defined? We may select among Pasolini’s texts an answer which he gave to this specific question during an interview conducted the day before his assassination:

Power is an educational system that divides us into the subjugated and the subjugators. But be careful. It is one and the same educational system that shapes us all, from the so-called ruling classes down to the poor. That is why everyone wants the same things and behaves in the same way.¹¹

First and foremost, power is not, as we are commonly made to think, that by which “someone” or “something” (a man, a social class, etc.) subjugates—i.e. subdues, enslaves—someone or something else. Power is not an attribute or a property of an individual or a class of individuals. Rather, it is that which underlies the same subdivision between the subjugated and the subjugators, it is the element by virtue of which is acceptable, in the first instance, a “reality” in which *some* are subjugated and *others* are subjugators. In other words: power is the imposition of a *yoke*, by effect of which all beings—not only humans—are divided into “subjugated” and “subjugators”. Power is the original yoke that makes being appear as “subjugated” and “subjugators”, and in this way it divides them, placing one in opposition to the other. However, this means that, within the action sphere of power, there can be no free relations, since the constitutive *parity* between beings, and in the first instance the original parity between human beings, is banned *ab origine*. Without parity, the conditions that make possible a human coalescence are corrupt to the very roots. Thus, one understands how the yoke imposed by power is by nature transversal; namely, it is imposed on the entire universe of beings that constitute a humanly habitable world, without distinguishing between “superior” and “inferior”. Indeed, those which power lets appear as “subjugators” are no less under the yoke of power than are the “subjugated”. Where power is in force, every original hierarchy is broken apart, making space for a single binary logic of subjugating opposition. As such, power is therefore the devastation of human coalescence. This is why, where there exist only relations of power, a constitutive relationship between human being becomes purely and simply impossible.

¹⁰ “Limitatezza della storia e immensità del mondo contadino” (*Paese Sera*, 8 July 1974), in *Scritti corsari*, SPS, p. 322.

¹¹ “Siamo tutti in pericolo” (*Tuttolibri*, 8 November 1975. Interview with Furio Colombo), SPS, p. 1725.

This element—Power with an uppercase P—, as Pasolini explains, is (lets itself appear as) an “educational system”. What does he mean by this expression? Surely not scholastic institutions as such; that is, “school”. Of course, in Pasolini’s diagnosis, a critical element is identified precisely in (Italian) “compulsory schooling”, which, in one of his famous articles, he proposes even to abolish.¹² But the scholastic institution is a problem precisely because, as we shall see later, it invisibly implements the “educational system” in which consists the new Power. Education, here, is defined in the sense of drilling, fostering, training. In particular: training to *comply with the power’s will*. And what does Power want? This above all: that *everyone wants the same things*—or, better still, that everyone *wants* the same things.

The word “want” here denotes a constitutive phenomenon of the new Power. Power is in fact, in itself, a training toward the unconditional will, which finds, at least so far, its most effective realization in the will to possess consumer goods. In this sense, so-called “consumerism” is a necessary consequence of the domination of power relations and, again in this sense, it constitutes, in Pasolini’s words, a “new fascism”, or more precisely a “techno-fascism”,¹³ namely a new (more efficient) unconditional dictatorship of the “will”. In this way, through the silent imposition of “educational models” that—as explained below—consist, in their turn, in behavioural (alinguistic) models which *everyone*, from the so-called ruling classes to the poor, must assimilate by means of servile imitation, power exerts its “function”. With no further recourse to the archaic means of police repression (as in the “traditional” fascism), the new Power pursues, effectively and undisturbed, its single aim: “the brutally totalitarian reorganization and homogenization of the world”.¹⁴

The two terms that appear in the above sentence—“homogenization” and “(re-)organization”—define the entire space of Power’s play, its totalitarian vocation. Therefore, we must now attempt a clarification of the phenomena which such key words of the Pasolinian diagnosis indicate.

Homogenization is the trait that descends directly from the educational system in which Power consists, in accordance with which everybody must want “the same things” and behave “in the same way”. The two institutions that implement more efficiently (at least at the time in which

¹² See “Due modeste proposte per eliminare la criminalità in Italia” (*Corriere della Sera*, 18 October 1975) and “Le mie proposte su scuola e TV” (*Corriere della Sera*, 29 October 1975), in *Lettere luterane*, SPS, p. 687-99.

¹³ “[Speech at the Radical Party convention], in *Lettere luterane*, SPS, p. 712.

¹⁴ “Il vero fascismo e quindi il vero antifascismo”, *cit.*, SPS, p. 318.

Pasolini wrote) the trait of homogenization are compulsory schooling and television. The medium of the masses, television, represents the exemplary situation in which *only* power relations can exist. The characteristic trait of television as a *mass medium* is the fact that each word spoken “through the screen” contains, *ipso facto*, the traits of imposition and of command:

Television emanates something terrifying from within itself. Something worse than terror that, in centuries past, only the idea of the Inquisition’s special tribunals could have imparted. There is, in the depths of the so-called “telly”, something quite similar to the spirit of the Inquisition: a clear, radical *division*, a hatchet strike, between those who can pass and those who cannot pass.¹⁵

In its instantaneous, immediate, compliance to the guiding-trait of Power (the division, the scission between “that which can” and “that which cannot”—in the first instance, the linguistic division between words that can and cannot be “used”),¹⁶ television assumes a menacing glow and takes on “its horrendous, charismatic value, its intolerable officiality.”¹⁷ But this trait is all the more terrible because it acts directly on language, corrupting it at the root. We will later see, once we have clarified the other traits of Pasolini’s diagnosis, the significance of this alteration of the Italian language under the blows of the power of consumption and the peculiar role which the mass media assumes in this task. For the time being let us confine ourselves to observing that, for Pasolini, the definition of “mass media” has an absolutely precise meaning: “mass” does not relate to the high number of people who can be reached by this “means of communication”, nor the supposed intrinsic quality of such an agglomeration (so-called “mass culture”). “Mass” is the form of human agglomeration in which human beings are called to present the same characteristics of mediocrity and ordinariness, in such a way that they are already predisposed to being countably organized. Unlike the “crowd”, the mass does not fall under the perception of the senses; its salient trait is its being “unrepresentable other than in statistics or in expense sheets”, and its consequent obeisance of “reactive median rules, identified by abstraction”. Insofar as it is predisposed to the

¹⁵ “Contro la televisione” (unedited), in *Saggi sparsi*, SPS, p. 131. Italics mine.

¹⁶ “If, in the language of television, it is in practice possible to use all words, in reality a high percentage of the words of a given language is excluded: therefore, the particularism of television’s sublanguage consists in its sectarian selectivity” (“Nuovi questioni linguistiche”, EE, p. 16).

¹⁷ “Le mie proposte su scuola e TV”, *cit.*, p. 698.

countable organization of power, the mass is the type of humanity on which power “can (always) count”.¹⁸

Homogenization, exemplified by the operation of the mass media, joins here with the second fundamental trait of the new Power: “organization”. To organize means to give an organic and functional order to power; to arrange and structure all elements so that the objectives may be achieved in an effective manner. The word has a fundamental meaning in Pasolini’s diagnosis. It appears in the title of his 1971 collection of poems, *Trasumanar e organizzar* (“transhumanize and organize”) and in the central verses of “Poesia della tradizione” (“poem of tradition”), which opens with the exclamation “Oh unfortunate generation!”, then repeated at the beginning of each stanza:

...

poor generation, Calvinist like at the origins of the bourgeoisie
boyishly pragmatic, childishly active
you sought salvation in organization
(which cannot but produce further organization)
and you’ve spent the days of your youth
speaking the language of bureaucratic democracy
never escaping the repetition of formulas,
for the meaning of “organize” cannot be put into words,
but into formulas, yes,
you’ll find yourself wielding paternal authority at the mercy of the unspeakable
power that wanted you opposing the power,
Oh unfortunate generation!

...

An in-depth reading and interpretation of this important poem cannot be accomplished here; therefore, let us confine ourselves to a brief analysis of these central verses. To understand Pasolini’s reference, it is necessary to start with the title of the collection, the enigmatic *Trasumanar e organizzar*. As he himself explains in the interview *Il sogno del centauro* (“the dream of the centaur”), the expression refers to the fact that “the other face of ‘transhumanization’ [...], or

¹⁸ “Da ‘il caos’ sul *Tempo*”, in *Dialoghi con i lettori*, SPS, p. 1255.

¹⁹ Pier Paolo Pasolini, “La poesia della tradizione” (*Trasumanar e organizzar*), in *Tutte le poesie*, vol. II, edited by Walter Siti, Meridiani Mondadori, Milano, 2003, p. 140.

of the spiritual ascent, is precisely organization²⁰. The word *trasumanar* (“transhumanize”) is taken from Dante; it appears in the first canto of the *Paradiso* where the poet prepares to ascend to the third heaven:

Trasumanar significar per verba
non si poria; però l’esempio basti
a cui esperienza grazia serba.

[Transhumanizing could not be expressed
by words; let this case, therefore, him suffice,
for whom Grace holds experience in reserve.]²¹

The canonical interpretation of this passage (to which Pasolini implicitly refers in the verses cited above) is more or less the following: “to transhumanize”—to leave behind human nature and ascend to the sphere of the divine—does not let itself be defined in words, but can only be shown through example to those for whom divine grace has this experience in store. We can attempt to go a step further and assume that here Dante is recalling a fundamental trait of human thought, namely the fact that the trespassing of mere contingency occurs by way of *understanding*, by appealing to a hidden part of human nature (“grace”), and may not be obtained by means of *demonstration* (“in words”). But the phenomenon that enthralled Pasolini, to the point that he uses it in the title of his collection (his first book of poems after years of forced sterility from writing verse—in this work posthumously published with the title *Quasi un testamento* [“almost a testament”], in which he notes “I haven’t written any poems for two or three years,” he explains: “Poetry requires a society (an ideal recipient) capable of dialogue with the poor poet. In Italy this society doesn’t exist”)²²—the phenomenon, as we were saying, is that the other face of transhumanization is precisely *organization*. “In the case of Saint Paul”, continues Pasolini in the interview, “the other face of holiness, of the rapture to the ‘third heaven’, is the organization of the Church”²³. But what about in *our* case—i.e. in the case of the “unfortunate generation” of the age of the new Power? The organization of salvation consisted in “bureaucratic democracy” and in the

²⁰ *Il sogno del centauro. Incontri con Jean DufLOT*, SPS, p. 1462.

²¹ *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, transl. Courtney Langdon, Vol. 3 *Paradiso* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1921).

²² “[Quasi un testamento]” (*Gente*, 17 November 1975), SPS, p. 856.

²³ *Il sogno del centauro, cit.*, SPS, p. 1462.

language of transhumanization by means of “formulas”. Similar to transhumanization, organization—as its “other face”—does not let its “meaning be expressed in words”, but can only be shown through example to those who have *already* understood its meaning. But while it replicates the constituting traits of transhumanization, organization reverses its meaning. Words are replaced by “formulas”; the function of the example is performed by “models” that must be imitated and applied without mediation—and this according to the guiding-trait of “efficiency”.²⁴ Once again, it is mass media that assumes this crucial function of the new Power:

The type of man or woman that counts, that is modern, that should be imitated and realized, *is not described or decanted: it is represented!* The language of television is by its nature a physical-mimetic language, the language of behaviour. It is thus made completely from scratch, without mediation, in physical-mimetic language and in the language of real behaviour.²⁵

Organization, as the stereotyped copy of transhumanization (or, with an image that could make sense until a few years ago, as its “photographic negative”), assumes the a-linguistic trait of the latter, while creating a degenerate version. Where transhumanization speaks through the grace of understanding, organization “speaks” instead through performances, and through formulas and models to slavishly imitate. Power, of which organization is the most relevant and ostentatious manifestation, is in this precise sense “unspeakable”—and nevertheless perfectly *formulatable* and *representable*. Where organization has no other source outside of the unspeakable power, it “cannot but produce further organization”. As an instrument of transhumanization, of the trespassing of contingency *through* understanding, it becomes an end in itself, which poses its own objectives to be achieved and its own models to imitate, only to assign new objectives and new models once the previous objectives have been achieved and the previous models fully assimilated. Within the sphere of organization, some human beings are appointed to be “for” power and others “against” power. In this way, organization ensures that anti-power still remains firmly in the power of power.

The “unfortunate generation” to which the poem is addressed is that which, first, found itself having to respond to this injunction, and which has responded by “choosing” to occupy the

²⁴ “Ampliamento del ‘bozzetto’ sulla rivoluzione antropologica in Italia” (*Il Mondo*, 11 July 1974, interview edited by Guido Vergani), in *Scritti corsari*, SPS, p. 328.

²⁵ *Ibid.* Italics mine.

position of anti-power. (It is to this generation that Pasolini addressed his famous invective in the aftermath of the so-called “battle of Valle Giulia” between students and the police on 1 March 1968, in what he himself defines as the “ugly verses” of the poem *Il PCI ai giovani!* [“the Italian Communist Party to the young people!”], among which read:

Stop thinking about your rights,
stop asking for power.
The redeemed bourgeois must renounce all his rights,
and banish from his soul, once and for all,
the idea of power.)²⁶

The “generational” trait of this configuration of power, as a new Power or the power of consumption, is not merely incidental. Organization, with its objectives to be achieved and models to assimilate, sets children against parents in ways that were unheard of in previous generations. The “estrangement between the two of us”—writes Pasolini, addressing the youth *Gennariello*, imaginary recipient of the homonymous “little pedagogical treatise”—“is not the same thing that, for centuries and millennia, has divided parents from children”²⁷. Pasolini devoted many pages to the elucidation of this constitutive trait of the new Power, by virtue of which “children are ripped from their resemblance to their parents”²⁸. In the text *I giovani infelici* (“unhappy youth”), which functions as a preface to the *Lettere luterane* (“Lutheran letters”), Pasolini considers one of the dominant themes of Greek tragedy: that children are predestined to pay for the sins of their fathers.²⁹ This, for us, is an incomprehensible motif, which we gladly chalk up to the “values” of an archaic and primitive world to which we do not belong. Instead, Pasolini warns that this theme underlies a profound truth, which our own age places right before our eyes in all its tragic clarity. To the question whether it is “right” that children are punished for the sins of their fathers, Pasolini replies without hesitation:

²⁶ “Il PCI ai giovani! (Appunti in versi per una poesia in prosa seguiti da una ‘Apologia’”, in EE, p. 161.

²⁷ “Gennariello” in *Lutheran Letters*, SPS, p. 577.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 579. In *Affabulazione* one reads: “But don’t you know that the greatest joy of / parents is to see themselves within their children?” (Pier Paolo Pasolini *Teatro*, edited by Walter Siti and Silvia De Laude, Meridiani Mondadori, Milan 2000).

²⁹ It is worth remembering that Pasolini never ceased to grapple with Greek tragedy, as a translator and playwright (*Orestide*, *Antigone*) and as a screenwriter (*Edipo Re*, 1967 and *Medea*, 1969).

Yes, it is right. The modern reader has in fact lived through an experience that finally and tragically makes clear the statement—which seemed so blindly irrational and cruel—of the democratic chorus of ancient Athens: that children must pay for the sins of their fathers. Indeed, the children who are not freed of the sins of the fathers are unhappy: and there is no more decisive and unforgivable sign of guilt than unhappiness.³⁰

The sin of the fathers whose children belong to the “unfortunate generation” (the so-called “60s generation”) is not simply that they allowed fascism to triumph. Their sin is not identified with fascism, and in fact it falls in equal measure on the children of fascist parents as on those of antifascist parents. Indeed, these children are indistinguishable; their bodies carry the same marks, they speak the same “language”, they interpret the same “models”: “in a square full of young people, one can no longer distinguish, merely by looks, a worker from a student, a fascist from an anti-fascist”.³¹ The true sin of the fathers, which falls upon their children, consists rather in the “acceptance—all the more guilty because unconscious—of degrading violence and of the true, immense genocides of the new fascism”.³² This acceptance takes place in the name of an even more sinful, though unconscious, idea that such genocides—that is, the systematic destruction and suppression of “values” not essential to the self-empowerment of the production-consumption circuit (the term “genocide” is taken from Marx’s and Engel’s *Manifesto*)³³—are justified as “the lesser evil” with respect to the “greater evil of the world”, i.e. “poverty”.³⁴ Precisely in the blind acceptance of this unattainable and therefore in itself *nihilistic* calculation, lies the sin of the fathers which falls upon the children of the unfortunate generation.

One can observe how this unatoned sin continues to weigh so heavily on the next and successive generations. The estrangement and opposition between parents and children therefore concern not only the generation of Pasolini’s “children”, those whom he addressed and who experienced first hand the epochal transition from the world of the peasant and labourer to a consumer society (the so-called “60s generation”). Such opposition, produced for the first time in this extreme form with the advent of consumer society, continues—inexplicably—to generate itself within every generation, so that *today* children stand once again in opposition to their

³⁰ “Gennariello”, *cit.*, SPS, p. 545.

³¹ “Il vero fascismo e quindi il vero antifascismo”, *cit.*, SPS, p. 316.

³² “Gennariello”, *cit.*, SPS, p. 547.

³³ See “Il genocidio” (*Rinascita*, 27 September 1974), in *Scritti corsari*; SPS pp. 511-17.

³⁴ “Gennariello”, *cit.*, SPS, p. 547.

fathers, according to the law of Power which admits no relationship beyond that of the subjugated and the subjugator.

What has changed between these generations, that of the fathers and of the children? What condemns the children to bear the mark of their fathers' unatoned sins, and therefore dooms them to unhappiness? What has changed, what has shifted "radically in its totality", writes Pasolini, is the very meaning of "things": that set of references that, with their "pedagogical language", make a "boy corporeally what he is and what he will be for the rest of his life".³⁵ What changes is not, however, the "language of things"; that is, the way in which these references teach imperceptibly how to be in the world: it is precisely *the things themselves* that change in a radical way. And if it is true that, for our common sense informed by the historical gaze, "things always change"; if it is true that—as Pasolini says to his Gennariello—"o munno cagna" ("the world changes"); it is then equally true that "every thousand years or so the end of the world happens."³⁶ What is happening now is, precisely, "the end of the world"—not just the end of *a* world:

We are no longer facing, as we all know by now, "new times", but rather a new age in human history: that human history whose deadlines are millennial. It was impossible for Italians to react any worse to such a historical trauma.³⁷

If so, it means that the estrangement between generations is of an entirely different order with respect to that which "for centuries and millennia has divided fathers from sons".³⁸ Never before has a generation had to dwell in the world void. Never before has thought had to find a home in the devastation of the world.

* * *

We thus arrive at the heart of the Pasolinian diagnosis, and therefore—as mentioned at the beginning—at the specifically national character of imposing the power of consumption as a totalitarian organization and homogenization of the world. We may identify three constitutive phenomena which the diagnosis clarifies, i.e. three traits of the same reality that is indeed the

³⁵ Ibid., p. 576.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ "L'articolo delle lucciole" (*Corriere della Sera*, 1 February 1975), in *Scritti corsari*, SPS, pp. 407-8.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 577

particular, and in-itself unique, world void which the new Power has established in a country like Italy.

The first characteristic trait is that which Pasolini, with a carefully chosen term, defines as *abjuration*—the “enormous phenomenon of abjuration”³⁹ which took place in post-fascist Italy. Of what is he speaking? The traditional despotic power, fascism, demanded obedience and adherence to its own “values”, but limited itself to requiring, so to speak, a formal adherence. It imposed an external uniformity, for example through the use of uniforms and slogans, with all the apparatus of inane rhetoric, boosterism and bigoted codification which characterized it. It satisfied itself, in other words, with regimenting and standardizing; it did not attempt to homogenize. In particular, such standardization had no effect on the popular body, which in fact remained essentially intact through the twenty years of fascism. The new Power, on the other hand, does not confine itself to imposing its own “values”, but demands that all previous values are expressly repudiated and abjured:

No fascist centralization has managed to do what the centralization of consumer society has done. Fascism offered a reactionary and monumental model that nevertheless remained a dead letter. The various cultural particulars (peasants, subproletariats, laborers) continued imperturbably to conform to their ancient models: repression was limited to obtaining their adherence in words. Today, on the contrary, adherence to the models imposed by the Centre is total and unconditional. True cultural models are denied. Abjuration is complete. It can therefore be affirmed that the “tolerance” of the hedonistic ideology willed by the new power is the worst example of repression in human history.⁴⁰

The power of consumption demands the full and unconditional abjuration of that which, in light of the yoke it has instituted, appear—must appear—as “ancient values”. The peasant world gives way to the urban-industrial order. The multiplicity of local parlances (“minor” languages and dialects) dissolves in favour of the homogeneous use of standard language, established by the mass media. Everyday objects are becoming more and more mass produced according to standards of efficiency, convenience, and practicality. In short, “pluralist archaism” recedes in favour of “industrial levelling”.⁴¹ This set of anthropologically and sociologically recordable facts conceals a

³⁹ “Il coito, l’aborto, la falsa tolleranza del potere, il conformismo dei progressisti” (*Corriere della Sera*, 19 January 1975), in *Scritti corsari*, SPS, p. 373

⁴⁰ “Acculturazione e acculturazione” (*Corriere della Sera*, 9 December 1973), in *Scritti corsari*, SPS, p. 290.

⁴¹ “L’articolo delle lucciole”, *cit.*, SPS, p. 407.

circumstance that has a tragic quality. This suppression of the so-called “values of the pre-industrial world” at the hand of the power of consumption implies a peculiar—albeit largely inadvertent—*brutality*. In what sense? The peasant world hinges economically on the concept of necessary goods; it is a world in which the production of goods is geared toward sustenance, toward the satisfaction of basic needs. Borrowing an expression from the writer Felice Chilanti, Pasolini calls this space-time *the age of bread*.⁴² Consumer society, on the other hand, requires that consumption does not stop at the moment in which basic needs are met. The “consumer” is precisely that form of individual whose impulse for consumption does not stop with the satisfaction of needs; the consumer impulse must be unstoppable and, in order to ensure this, it is not enough merely to direct the impulse toward so-called superfluous goods, and toward goods that are ever more superfluous; it is necessary to break off at its very root the original nexus, implicitly established and maintained in the peasant world, between consumption and need. In this sense, consumer society is not satisfied with seeing “peasant values” outdone and put aside like clothing gone out of style: it requires that these values be explicitly *abjured*.

In recent years there has occurred, in anthropological terms, a massive phenomenon of abjuration: the Italian people, along with poverty, no longer even want to remember their “real” tolerance: they no longer want to remember the phenomena that have best characterized their entire history. A history which the new power wants gone forever.⁴³

Therefore, the new Power, the power of consumption, is not satisfied with an adherence “in words”, as required by “classic” fascism and totalitarian powers. Adherence to the models imposed by the Centre must be total and unconditional, in the sense that it is not limited to the expectation of human being as consumer, but demands that any other ideology outside of consumption now be deemed inconceivable. It calls for an adherence “in deeds”, namely a *total and unconditional* militancy: “an erasure of the past, with its ‘fathers’, its religions, its ideologies and its ways of life”.⁴⁴ Only because they are abjured can these old values, on occasion, come back in vogue, like vintage clothing styles, thus bearing the humiliating imprint of the stigma of abjuration. At the same time, the new Power enlists a great throng of intellectuals—in the ranks of the established

⁴² “Limitatezza della storia e immensità del mondo contadino”, *cit.*, SPS, p. 321.

⁴³ “Il coito, l’aborto, la falsa tolleranza del potere, il conformismo dei progressisti”, *cit.*, SPS, p. 373.

⁴⁴ “La prima, vera rivoluzione di destra” (*Il Tempo*, 15 July 1973), in *Scritti corsari*, SPS, pp. 284-5.

power as well as in the ranks of the “anti-power”—with the task of checking that abjuration is carried out conscientiously in art, literature and science, as well as in every corner of public and private life.

The term “abjuration” has another interesting occurrence in Pasolini’s lexicon. It refers to Pasolini’s own existence as a poet and author, and it is used in the classical sense of disregarding and therefore retracting a principle at the foundation of his own works. In this sense he speaks of “abjuration of the *Trilogy of life*”,⁴⁵ referring to the triptych composed of three films, directed by Pasolini between 1971 and 1974, on the theme of “the corporeality of the people”: *The Decameron*, *The Canterbury Tales*, and *The Arabian Nights*.⁴⁶ Why abjure these works? Pasolini eventually abjures his own *Trilogy* because its very principle has been rendered null and void by the power of consumption. The abjuration of his own work is a consequence of the abjuration, imposed by the power of consumption, of the reality which the trilogy was meant to celebrate. Which reality is this? It is that of “the body”, or more precisely “the corporeality of the people”, understood as the primordial configuration of the physical reality of human beings, the earliest form of their terrestrial existence in a world. Before the power of consumption’s unstoppable flow in post-war Italy, “the last bastion of reality seemed to be the ‘innocent’ bodies with the archaic, dark, vital violence of their sexual organs.”⁴⁷ The body seemed able to resist the totalitarian drive toward homogenization:

Just a few years ago (when I was working on *The Decameron* and subsequent *Trilogy of Life*) the people were still almost fully in possession of their own physical reality and of the cultural model by which it is configured.⁴⁸

In reference to *The Decameron*, Pasolini said in an interview: “The body: here is a land not yet colonized by power”.⁴⁹ Within these bodies, and in particular the “bodies of the lower classes”,⁵⁰ seemed to survive the reality that would shortly collapse under the blows of the power of consumption. In this sense, “the degenerating present has been counterbalanced both by the

⁴⁵ “Abiura della *Trilogia della vita*” (*Corriere della Sera*, 9 November 1975), *Lettere luterane*, SPS, pp. 599-603.

⁴⁶ See Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Per il cinema*, edited by Walter Siti and Franco Zabagli, Meridiani Mondadori, Milan 2001.

⁴⁷ “Abiura della *Trilogia della vita*”, *cit.*, SPS, p. 600.

⁴⁸ “Tetis” (in *Erotismo, eversione, merce*, Bologna 1973), SPS, p. 261.

⁴⁹ “[Interview with Tommaso Anzoino]”, in T. Anzoino, *Pasolini*, “Il Castoro”, Firenze 1970, SPS, p. 1659.

⁵⁰ “Tetis”, *cit.*, SPS, p. 261.

objective survival of the past and, consequently, by the possibility of its reinvocation”.⁵¹ Now, however, “everything is turned on its head”,⁵² and the physical reality which the *Trilogy of Life* could still reinvocate and celebrate has been annihilated. Reality leaves in its place a void, a world void *and* an earth (corporeal) void. But this implies, for Pasolini, the *impossibility* of its reinvocation—and the consequent inevitable abjuration of his own work:

Today the degeneration of bodies and sex organs has assumed a retroactive quality. If those which *then* were one thing have been able *now* to become another thing, it means that they were already potentially so: thus, their way of being *even then* has been devalued by the present. [...] The collapse of the present also implies the collapse of the past.⁵³

The “reality” to which the *Trilogy* intended to give voice has changed direction and—here is the crucial point—retro-acts on the past, thus changing its own meaning. In the overwhelming measure of the present, the past cannot be *reevoked*. Thought and art can no longer rely on reevocation and memory to carry out their task. They must find a new principle. “The abjuration is complete”.⁵⁴

The fulfilment of the abjuration coincides with another, even more fundamental and constitutive phenomenon of the era of the new Power. Pasolini describes this phenomenon as the transformation of the Italian language from “expressive” to “communicative”, a transformation that culminates with the transition to “the new type of communicativeness”; that is, “technological communicativeness”.⁵⁵ At the basis of this phenomenon is the abjuration of the mother tongue, dialect, which is “like a mother’s breast at which we all have suckled and on which we now spit (the abjuration!)”.⁵⁶ The language of the “pluralist archaism”, now denied in favour of technical homogenization, was largely constituted by a multiplicity of dialects equipped with a “marvellous linguistic vitality”,⁵⁷ capable, that is, of continuous regeneration by virtue of its own inventive force. But as we have previously seen, the new Power, characterized by technological hegemony, allows for no other meaning than that (expressionless and therefore *unspeakable*, or—as we shall shortly

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 264.

⁵² “Abiura della *Trilogia della vita*”, *cit.*, SPS, p. 600.

⁵³ Ibid., 601.

⁵⁴ “Acculturazione e acculturazione”, *cit.*, SPS, p. 290.

⁵⁵ EE, p. 18.

⁵⁶ “Ignazio Buttitta ‘Io faccio il poeta’”, *Scritti corsari*, SPS, p. 562.

⁵⁷ “Il genocidio”, *cit.*, SPS, p. 514.

see—literally aphasic) of mere functionality. The organization of production and consumption requires that the entire meaning be grasped solely within the function/malfunction binary; that is, that the meaning of all that it is be understandable only as either functional or malfunctional to the production-consumption circuit. The language that has the task of articulating this meaning can only be a functional and communicative language, in deference to the totalitarian ambition of the power of consumption. “Why,” asks Pasolini, “in a world [...] at the limits of technocratic development, should there be other languages, or moments of linguistic diversity, beyond that of production and consumption?”⁵⁸

Pasolini treats the phenomenon described here in his 1964 essay, “Nuove questioni linguistiche” (“new linguistic questions”)⁵⁹—which, in spite of its modest title, is crucial for the Pasolinian diagnosis of the present. The premise of Pasolini’s reflection on the Italian language is that, while historically the unification of language under the banner of communicative efficiency is a “process” that occurs in every western country on the path to industrialization, in Italy this unification assumed particular characteristics that distinguish the fate of the Italian language from those of other “developed” nations. As he explains in a response to the criticisms raised by his essay (regarding which Pasolini qualified that “it is not [...] part of the old linguistic *querelle* on the Italian language”):⁶⁰

that which for other nations was a centuries-long experience [...] for Italy will probably be an experience undergone start to finish in a few years or decades: through the very act in which Italian begins to become “communicative” in the sense of classical linguistic descriptions (France, England, etc.), following in the footsteps of the entire capitalist world, it shifts to the new type of “communicativeness”, that of technological technocracies.⁶¹

In France and England, linguistic unification passed through the emergence of the instrumental languages of bureaucracy and commerce, respectively. By the time that technocracies got the upper hand, the national languages of these countries (French, English) were already, so to speak, consecrated as “communicative”. Pasolini’s thesis is that Italian, when it arises as the national language, is *already born* as “a language of total industrialization”, informed by the “homogenizing

⁵⁸ EE, p. 39.

⁵⁹ In EE, pp. 5-25.

⁶⁰ EE, p. 52.

⁶¹ EE, p. 36.

principle of technology”.⁶² The instrumentality that characterises the new communicative language then assumes within Italian the character of a “*brutal* instrumentality”,⁶³ in which both “civil and philosophical communicativeness” (so-called “high” language, or refined Italian) as well as “the human and poetic expressiveness” that characterizes the popular coalescence (so-called “low” language, i.e. dialects) are replaced by a purely “signalling” language, by the “communication of men who are no longer men”.⁶⁴

But beware: this neo-language born fully functional and communicative, in which “no word will have a meaning beyond that which is functional within the framework of necessity”,⁶⁵ is not simply one language among the many which, historically, join the other “linguistic registers” and stratify themselves within those registers. What is in question here is not simply the deterioration of Italian language under the influence of technical or foreign terms at the root of the phenomenon—observable daily, which so irritates the ear attuned to the beauty of language—by which, for example (as Pietro Citati observes in a response to Pasolini’s essay), the “old, dear, irreplaceable *sì* [yes] is supplanted by the horrendous *esatto* [exactly]”, so that Italy is fast becoming, within the chorus of western technocracies, “the Beautiful Country where the *esatto* is heard”.⁶⁶ What strikes Pasolini is not the phenomenon in itself—the unpleasant abuse of terms with a technical origin, or even the “monstrous” effect created by the implementation of the technical principle of communicative efficiency within the element of the traditional humanistic lexicon—but rather that of which this phenomenon is the symptom. It is, in fact, the symptom of an invisible mutation in the language itself, by virtue of which Italian becomes a national language under the guidance of technology.

Along the axis of this unification of the Italian language under the banner of technological communicativeness, there emerges another unique trait, which Pasolini calls *aphasia*. The term has a precise meaning: people from the working class, deprived of the richly expressive language with which they articulated their own existence, and left only with signalling communication, lose—literally—their use of words:

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ EE, p. 16. Italics mine.

⁶⁴ EE, p. 51.

⁶⁵ EE, pp. 36-37.

⁶⁶ EE, pp. 40-1. The reference is to Dante’s famous verse in which Italy is evoked as “[il] bel paese là dove ‘l *sì* suona” [the fair country where the *sì* is heard] (*Inferno* XXXIII, vv. 79-80).

In Rome, for example, they no longer have the ability to invent, they have fallen into a sort of aphasic neurosis; either they speak a fake language that knows no difficulties or resistance, as if everything were easy to discuss—they express themselves as if in a printed book—or we find actual aphasia in the clinical sense of word, where they are incapable of inventing real metaphors and linguistic movements, they mutter, thrash around, or sneer without actually being able to say anything.⁶⁷

The generation trained to obey the power of consumption loses their mother tongue in order to adhere to the codes of physical-mimetic language, often imposed as such by the mass medium of television. Physical-mimetic language—expressed without any mediations in the body, which is reduced to a substrate of the “model” to imitate, by wearing one’s hair in a certain way, for example⁶⁸—is the other face of the technological-communicative language of unconditional efficiency.

The phenomenon which Pasolini has diagnosed provides a clearer representation of the nature of that mass medium, television, of which we have previously noted the traits of congruity to the yoke imposed by power (the instantaneous scissure which it creates between what *can* and what *cannot* pass) and, above all, of the non-verbal representation of models to imitate. This last trait can now be understood with greater precision in its connection with the aphasia of the people of the working class. The term aphasia, which television presupposes and promotes, does not simply refer to the idea that the recipient of the televised message, the famous “telly-viewer”, should stay quiet in order—as they say—to receive “passively” the televised message. Aphasia instead refers to the fact that the televised language is *ab imis* devoid of words, even when—and precisely when—it makes actual “use” of words: it is in fact a purely physical-mimetic code that can only be “mimicked from scratch”. This mimetic reception of signalling televised language is not, in its turn, a product or an effect of television, but is one of its prerequisites. Only a technologized language could “invent” something like television.

We can observe how the television of Pasolini’s time period belongs to a stage of “development” in which it is still necessary to have a “Centre” in order to establish models (language, behavioural, etc.) to imitate. In the next stage, this need is superseded by the models’ own capacity to self-produce and self-replicate. So-called interactive media (the internet) may in fact correspond to a phase of the new Power in which the mimetic reception of behavioural language (or signalling

⁶⁷ “Il genocidio”, *cit.*, SPS, p. 514.

⁶⁸ See “Il ‘discorso’ dei capelli” (*Corriere della Sera*, 7 January 1973), in *Scritti corsari*, SPS, pp. 271-277.

language) replaces the proliferation of models capable of replicating independently such language by drawing directly from the “source”: that is to say, from the original yoke in which the power consists. One form of aphasia is replaced by another more powerful and pervasive form.

* * *

Pasolini’s diagnostic thought has allowed us to discern and shed light on certain constitutive traits of the Italian character of the power of consumption: abjuration, the loss of popular corporeality, the emergence of technological-communicative neo-language, aphasia. In particular, it has allowed us to understand the meaning and the origin of these traits as manifestations of an epochal transformation, in which the whole of mankind’s habitable space-time is determined by the yoke of Power. We have also understood that the thought of this epochal transformation cannot sustain itself in a re-evocation, whether nostalgic or not, of the “past” and its “values”—whatever form this re-evocation might assume. Pasolini is absolutely clear on this point; in his “little pedagogical treatise” he writes:

You will slowly come to understand in the course of these lessons, dear Gennariello, that in spite of appearances these speeches of mine are by no means praises of the past (which anyway I never really liked, even when it was the present).⁶⁹

How should we think, therefore, about the phenomena which this epochal crisis places before our eyes? And prior to that, what would be the appropriate *tone* of this thought? It is Pasolini once again who provides an indication. He does so in a rather unassuming text among the corpus of his essays—a text that, unlike many others, never aroused strong reactions in the intellectual circles of his time and that, indeed, has passed almost unnoticed within those circles. It is a *piece d’occasion*, written as a review of a book of prose of the Italian poet Sandro Penna. The book is titled *Un po’ di febbre* (“a little fever”). But the terms “review” and especially “book” are inadequate and misleading with respect to what is at stake here. Pasolini writes: “It is difficult to speak of *Un po’ di febbre* as a book ... It is beyond literature, being something else entirely, I repeat, than a book (or only a book).”⁷⁰ The Dictionary of Italian Language by Niccolò Tommaseo defines fever as a “condition of the animal machine declining more or less from its normal state in the fulfilment of some or many

⁶⁹ “Gennariello”, *cit.*, SPS, p. 580.

⁷⁰ “Sandro Penna: *Un po’ di febbre*” (*Il tempo*, 10 June 1973), in *Scritti corsari*, SPS, p. 424.

functions". Indeed: "A little fever" is the slight attenuation of "vital functions", the inapparent but decisive detachment from the dimension of the "animal machine" which is, at the same time, the promise of a new, healthier way of living. "A little fever" is a weakening of the impact of the "function" which, at the same time, creates an exhilaration and even a delirium, free from the impact of contingency. It is a temporary deregulation of the "normal state of being" which causes to await and anticipate death. We can hazard a hypothesis which we will not attempt to demonstrate: "a little fever" is the tone of poetic thought suited to the radical de-potentialization of power; the tone of overcoming the anthropological shape dictated by the new Power. Perhaps Sandro Penna—whom Pasolini described as "the greatest Italian poet"⁷¹, and "our greatest living poet"⁷² (where "living" now means for us: dwelling in the epoch of the fulfilment of the new Power)—perhaps Penna, within the limits which he "imposed on himself with the purest emotional rigour",⁷³ already constitutes an execution of the tone suitable to overcoming the original yoke in which the power consists—the gentle but firm "no" to the injunction of power. We still do not know anything of this tone. In particular, we do not know what might comprise a thought of human coalescence, and therefore of the economy, within the sphere of grace which it intones.

We conclude these reflections with the complete text of Pasolini's essay dedicated to *Un po' di febbre*, interspersed with brief observations in the form of notes for a future thought.

* * *

What a wonderful country was Italy during and immediately after the fascist period! [The term "wonderful" is repeated seven times in this essay. What is meant by "wonderful country"? "Country" (Italian: *paese*; Latin: *pagensis*) comes from the root **pag*, "to bind, to make solid" (see the term "compaginate"). Italy is just such a place: a well-compaginated bond of beings—cities, villages, rivers, mountains—*wonderfully* disposed to human habitation, and it is so precisely "during and immediately after the fascist period", right in the middle of the rampage of power *in the form of* manifest despotic repression, right in the middle of the rise of an element that is hostile to human coalescence. Here, perhaps, lies the "wonder" of this sighting.] Life was as we had known it in childhood, and for twenty or thirty years nothing

⁷¹ "[Quasi un testamento]", *cit.*, SPS, p. 855.

⁷² "Io e Boccaccio" (*L'Espresso*, 22 November 1970. Interview with Dario Bellezza), SPS, p. 1647, and "Sandro Penna: *Un po' di febbre*", *cit.*, SPS, p. 425.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

changed: I am not talking about its values—a word too high and ideological for what I want to say in simple terms—but appearances seemed endowed with the gift of eternity: we could passionately believe in rebellion or in the revolution, knowing that the wonderful thing that is the form of life would not change. We could feel ourselves the heroes of change and novelty, given courage and strength by the certainty that the cities and men, in their deep and beautiful appearance, would never change: only their economic and cultural conditions would rightly improve, which are nothing compared to the pre-existing truth that regulates, wonderfully unchanging, the gestures, looks, and attitudes of the body of a man or boy. [The country is disposed to habitation in virtue of the immutability of the “form of life”, which in turn constitutes a “wonderful thing”: that is, a principle generating “appearances” capable of re-generating continuously. The form of life is the “truth” that pre-exists any contingency, the principle compared to which all the priorities on which human preoccupations focus (rightly so) “are nothing”. It is the most hidden and most precious principle, and therefore most worthy of being thought—both in the aspect of thinking interrogation and in poetic and artistic creation]. Through cities ending in deep countryside ran wide boulevards, surrounded by houses, small villas or high-rise apartment buildings in “dear, terrible colours”: just beyond the last stop on the tram or bus line began the expanse of wheat fields, the canals bordered by rows of poplars or elders, the useless, wonderful thickets of acacia and blackberry. Villages still had their form intact, either on green plateaus, or on the peaks of ancient hills, or here and there along small rivers. The people wore rough and shabby clothing (no matter that their trousers were patched, so long as they were clean and ironed); boys were kept separate from adults, feeling almost a sense of shame for their flagrant nascent virility, though so full of modesty and dignity, with their loose-fitting, deep-pocketed trousers; and the boys, obeying the tacit rule to be seen and not heard, kept silently to the side, but in their silence there was an intensity and a humble desire for life (they wanted nothing other than to take the place of their fathers, and waited with patience), such a sparkle in their eyes, such purity in their whole being, such grace in their sensuality, that they ended up constructing a world within the world, for those who had the eyes to see it. [The wonderfully immutable form of life generates a world and a “world within the world”, which await, in order to take their full shape, the thinking awareness of someone—a thinker, a poet, an artist—who knows how to see them and, having done so, to celebrate them in works and in words. The wonderful country reigns *not* as a collection of resources for the organization of economy and culture (including, therefore, “artistic and literary production”), but as a pure promise of thought and poetry.] It is true that women were unjustly kept apart from life, and not only when they were young. But they were kept apart, unjustly, the women, like the boys and the poor. It was their grace and their humble will to adhere to an ancient and righteous ideal which allowed them to re-enter the world as protagonists. What else were they waiting for, those boys who were a bit rough, but honest and kind, if not for the

moment when they could love a woman? Their wait lasted all through their adolescence—despite some occasional exceptions, which were wonderful sins—but they knew how to wait with manly patience, and when their moment came, they were mature, and they became young lovers or spouses with all the bright force of a lengthy chastity, fulfilled by faithful friendships with their companions. [The wonderfully immutable—i.e. integral—form of life generates coalescence. In turn, coalescence awaits men and women, young and old, able to sustain and temper it in the form of friendship, love, family, etc. according to the times and means.]

Through those cities with intact form and precise boundaries with the countryside, they wandered in groups, on foot or by tram: nothing awaited them, and they were prepared, and made pure by it. Their natural sensuality, which remained miraculously healthy despite repression, meant that they were simply ready for every adventure, without losing even a little of their rectitude and their innocence. Even the thieves and criminals had a wonderful quality: they were never vulgar. It was as if they were struck by an inspiration to break the law, and they accepted their destiny as outlaws, knowing, with carelessness or with an old-fashioned sense of guilt, that they were in the wrong against a society of which they knew directly only the good, the honesty of their fathers and mothers: power, with its evil that would have justified them, was so codified and remote that it had no real weight in their lives. The criminals in power—both in Rome and in the municipalities of the major rural provinces—played no part in their lives. The past that determined their life (which was certainly not their idiotic archaeological past) determined nothing more than their fatal figure as criminals destined to hold power in the old, poor villages. [In this world and this coalescence reign beings and men well configured within their borders. Good and evil are plainly cleared in their difference and mutual co-belonging. Even power is powerless with respect to this reality—it cannot make a dent in the compactness of their intact form of life; it cannot de-compagnate the wonderful country. It remains “outside of life” and outside of its miraculous immutable regeneration.]

Now that everything is foul and pervaded by a monstrous sense of sin—and ugly, pale, neurotic boys have broken the isolation to which the jealousy of the fathers had condemned them, erupting stupid, presumptuous and sneering into the world they’ve taken over, and forcing adults into silence or adulation—a scandalous regret is born; a regret for the Fascist Italy destroyed by the war. [The tears of the world devastated by the new Power let a regret be generated, which is “scandalous” in the way in which it contravenes the tacit rule willed by nihilistic calculation, by which such devastation must necessarily appear as “the lesser evil”].

Sandro Penna’s book, *Un po’ di febbre*, recalls this Italy. The trauma is great. We cannot help but be shocked. While reading these pages we are seized by an emotion that leaves us shaken. It also gives rise to a certain desire to leave this world, with those memories. It is not a change of epoch which we are witnessing,

but a tragedy. What upsets us is not the difficulty of adapting to a new era, but an irremediable pain similar to that which mothers feel upon watching their children emigrate and knowing that they will never see them again. The reality casts an intolerable glance of victory over us: the verdict is that the world we loved has been taken from us forever. [The emotion generated by the memory of the wonderful country shakes us. The pain is “irremediable” because it is in a form never experienced before, whose meaning we fail to understand and for which we do not yet know the remedy.] In Penna’s book, that world still appears in all its stability and eternity, when it was “the” world, and nothing would ever have led us to suspect that it would change. Penna lived it avidly and totally. He understood that it was wonderful. Nothing distracts him from that marvellous adventure that repeats itself every day: wake up, go out, catch a tram, stroll around where the people live, crowded and noisy in the town squares, dispersed and busy at their daily jobs in the distant suburbs near the countryside; or with the sun that protects everything with its silent light; or under a sublime impalpable spring rain; or with the gentle breeze, exalting the falling darkness of a slow evening; and finally meet—this apparition never fails—a boy who is immediately beloved for his heart’s innocent disposition, for his habit of obedience and non-servile respect, for his freedom due to grace: for his rectitude.

It seems that Penna could never be betrayed in his hopes for these encounters, which gave everyday existence, already so exalting, the miraculous joy of revelation, or of repetition.

In the pages of these short stories is contained the whole reality of that form of life in which joy, promised and obtained, has turned into an obsessive form. So much so that it is difficult to speak of *Un po’ di febbre* as a book: it is a piece of time lost and refound. It is something material. A very delicate material made of city places with asphalt and grass, humble whitewashed homes, interiors with modest furniture, the bodies of boys in their baggy clothes, their eyes glowing with purity and innocent complicity. And how sublime is Penna’s complete and total disinterest for anything that happened outside of this existence among the people. Nothing was more anti-fascist than Penna’s exaltation of Italy under fascism, seen as a place of indescribable beauty and goodness. Penna ignored the stupidity and ferocity of fascism: he did not even consider its existence. A worse insult he could not—innocently—have invented against it. Penna is quite cruel: he has no mercy for what is not minimally invested with the grace of reality, let alone what is outside or contrary to that grace. His condemnation—unspoken—is absolute, implacable, without appeal. [Nothing was more anti-fascist—under fascism, but even more so under the “new techno-fascism”—than living *in the grace of fever* and its mild and unassuming “no” to power.]

In the narrowness of its motives and problems, in the minimal space allowed, this book is in reality filled with an immense feeling, overflowing with life. Its joy is so great as to be painful. This boundless pain is barely contained as a premonition of losing that joy. This limitless feeling allows us to glimpse in this

poet—who (perhaps along with Bertolucci) is truly the greatest living Italian poet—another poet which he was not: a poet beyond the limits that he imposed on himself with a moving and pure rigor. A poet who can lose his delicious and desperate humour, lacerate the limits of the form, expand into the cosmos, rave (see pp. 88, 89, and 90). The reader must forgive me if my discourse is such that I do not enter more critically into the merits of the book by performing a literary analysis. It is beyond literature, being something else entirely, I repeat, than a book (or only a book). It is not that I want to argue against literature. Indeed, I consider it a great invention and a great occupation for man. And Penna, in turn, is a great man of letters. But I prefer to leave my report in suspense over the emotion that this book has given me by the simple means of an almost obvious poetics (adjectives in the place of nouns, some inversions, the exclusion of prosaic words, utilized, only in a few instances, due to the sudden need for realism or expressionism): it leaves the reader completely overwhelmed in a passion of tears, although it is never sentimental, not even once.