

PASOLINI'S WORKER-POET: A COMPOSITE GENEALOGY*

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Poet, novelist, and director Pier Paolo Pasolini was frequently critical of the Italian Communist Party's failures to innovate in the face of accelerated industrialization and new structures of power. Briefly a member of the PCI after the Second World War, Pasolini was ousted in 1949 after being charged with corrupting minors and indecent public exposure. He maintained an affiliation with the party until his death, however, choosing to refer to himself as a 'compagno di strada' of the PCI.¹ Beyond official party membership, and despite his declared love of Gramsci and Marx, the task of categorizing Pasolini's politics remains a challenge.² Thanks in part to his dogmatic rhetoric and recourse to eclectic and anachronistic sources and historical figures, he is often described as a 'heterodox' Marxist.³ He was also, as this paper attempts to demonstrate, a highly idiosyncratic one.

Most readers will be familiar with Pasolini's thesis of anthropological mutation, the idea that neocapitalism, particularly its consumerist ideology, was altering humans in Italy and elsewhere by exterminating older peasant societies and eroding class differences to create new, standardized bourgeois masses.⁴ Perhaps because of his emphasis on, and affection for, the subproletariat and whatever he deemed archaic, though, we do not often think of Pasolini in conjunction with notions of modern, industrial labour. Indeed, barring *Accattone* (1961) and *Teorema* (1968), the theme of work would not seem to be among Pasolini's concerns as either poet, critic, or filmmaker. Given the centrality of labour to Marxist theory, and the fact that the working class made up over forty percent of the Italian working population in the 1960s and 1970s, would this omission not constitute something of a paradox in Pasolini's politics of representation?

In 1964, an Italian factory worker asked more or less the same question in an unsigned letter sent to *Dialoghi con Pasolini*, the column which Pasolini kept off and

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¹ Pier Paolo Pasolini, 'Il sogno del centauro. Incontri con Jean Dufлот [1969–1975]', in *Saggi sulla politica e sulla società*, ed. by Walter Siti and Silvia De Laude (Milan: Mondadori, 1999), p. 1477 [henceforth *SPS*].

² For an in-depth discussion of Pasolini's political thought, see Giorgio Galli, *Pasolini comunista dissidente: attualità di un pensiero politico* (Milan: Kaos, 2010).

³ The designation is widespread in Pasolini criticism; see, for example, Ara H. Merjian, "'Howls from the Left': Pier Paolo Pasolini, Allen Ginsberg, and the Legacies of Beat America", in *Pier Paolo Pasolini, Framed and Unframed: A Thinker for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Luca Peretti and Karen T. Raizen (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), p. 45.

⁴ Pasolini elaborates his theory of anthropological mutation from the mid-1960s on, but it finds its clearest formulation in the writings from 1973–1975 collected in *Scritti corsari*; see *SPS*, pp. 265–535.

on in *Vie nuove*, the Communist Party weekly, between 1960 and 1965.⁵ After nine years of unsteady work in a mechanical plant, the 27-year-old factory worker had recently taken a job as a deliveryman for a chemical products company. Working there, he realized that very few people knew what a job in industry looked like. He suggested that Pasolini should make a film about the life of the Italian working class that would give the public insight into workers' anxieties and struggles. Pasolini responded to this letter—one of dozens of similar letters he claims to have received from blue-collar workers over the years asking him to 'express' their world on either the screen or the page—with his vision of what he calls the 'worker-poet' (*poeta-operaio* [*SPS*, p. 1036]). He defines this worker-poet as someone who lives the experience of industrial labour actively and 'antiteticamente' (*SPS*, p. 1036), resisting its drudgery and alienation in order to reclaim his humanity. In this note I will lay out Pasolini's vision of the worker-poet and assess its composite, if undeclared, genealogy in the thought of other authors.

In his response to the worker's letter, published on 10 December 1964, and in a short follow-up note, Pasolini links factory work to the question of freedom.⁶ Like other letters in the *Dialoghi* column, in which Pasolini was supposed to act as an intermediary between the Communist Party and the people, the letter serves mainly to convey Pasolini's own opinions rather than the party's, ultimately reflecting, as Robert Gordon puts it, 'the evolution of [his] deepening crisis of subjectivity'.⁷ As a committed intellectual, Pasolini's personal crisis in the early 1960s was also a political one: it corresponded to his growing sense that Marxist politics, and therefore his own, had failed to interpret and keep up with dramatic historical change. Midway through the letter, Pasolini refers to this rupture in terms of a 'svolta tecnologica e tecnocratica' (*SPS*, p. 1035). In this 'svolta', he argues, the factory, once a 'momento particolare e esemplare della vita moderna', has become the 'modulo fondamentale e [...] unico *di tutta la vita*' (*SPS*, p. 1035). In the new post-rupture era, the factory's 'mostruosa sfera di pura strumentalità o comunicazione' (*SPS*, p. 1035) has been universalized to other, non-industrial domains. Toward the end of the letter, Pasolini argues that expressivity, or humankind's capacity for self-expression, must assert itself as a form of freedom, a mode of resistance against the instrumentalization of human beings imposed by the factory paradigm. The worker-poet would be the embodiment of this expressive freedom, a whimsical but living antidote to the nefarious trajectory of modernity. He names 'Charlot'—British actor and director Charlie Chaplin in the film *Modern Times* (1932)—as the paragon of the worker-poet: not a worker at all, but an actor who plays a worker and botches his job.

In what comes across as a tone-deaf *non sequitur*, Pasolini cites Chaplin's film at the very start of his response to the worker's request that he portray working-class reality: '*Tempi moderni* di Chaplin è un film assoluto, che ha detto sul lavoro in fabbrica qualcosa che si pone come insuperabile, nella fantasia' (*SPS*, p. 1034). He writes that it acts on the viewer's imagination the way a dream does, or an experience of *déjà vu*:

⁵ Pasolini, 'Espressività contro strumentalità', in *SPS*, pp. 1033–36.

⁶ Pasolini, 'Un problema per tutti', in *SPS*, pp. 1036–37.

⁷ Robert S. C. Gordon, *Pasolini: Forms of Subjectivity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), p. 48.

Ti è mai successo di fare un sogno, che poi riconosci continuamente nella realtà, come una realtà spiegata fuori da se stessa, che si ripete, misteriosamente, imbevendo del suo senso gli oggetti, le persone? Il film di Charlot è come un sogno fatto sulla realtà della fabbrica, e ogni volta che cade sotto gli occhi (gli occhi di un estraneo come me) una fabbrica, essa è come riassunta e prefigurata da quel sogno [...]. L'ossessione di gesti che si ripetono—l'occhio del padrone (tecnicizzato) che osserva—l'indifferenza cretina e sublime della macchina—sono tutti i particolari reali che hanno riferimento con un misterioso sogno profetico già fatto.

(*SPS*, p. 1034)

Pasolini's description of Chaplin's film as a 'critica onirica' (*SPS*, p. 1034) that anticipates the factory evokes the idea of prefiguration, the notion that a dream or an image or person, a figure, can in some way foreshadow a later one in another text or in lived reality, or that one historical period can anticipate another. A central concept in philology and related disciplines, figural interpretation developed out of the medieval belief that the Old Testament and its prophecies in some way prefigure or foreshadow the events of the New Testament.⁸ Here, in what is likely a synthesis of Carl Jung's theory of the unconscious, which Jung understood as a generator of future reality via symbolic combinations truer and more realistic than those produced by the conscious mind, and Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, which argues that prefiguration is the central paradigm by which texts relate to one another across time, Pasolini suggests that Chaplin's film, as a dreamlike representation of the factory, has been fulfilled in reality, to which it relates as a sort of primal archetype.⁹

In his letter, Pasolini emphasizes *Modern Times*'s timelessness: though nearly thirty years old, he finds it does not feel dated as a critique of the factory. In this respect, he echoes Roland Barthes's assertion in *Mythologies* (1957) that Chaplin's film transcends its moment as a work of critique.¹⁰ Barthes focuses his reading on the worker, whose lack of political awareness he considers key to the film's success. For Barthes, Chaplin's pre-political protagonist, ignorant of 'his total alienation at the hands of his masters (the employers and the police)', forces audiences to see their own blindness, pushing them towards class consciousness.¹¹ Chaplin's comedic worker, a stand in for the everyman, profoundly human amidst the inhuman machines, elicits self-recognition. As such, the worker's 'anarchy [...] represents the most efficient form of revolution in the realm of art'.¹²

⁸ Auerbach's definition of figural interpretation remains the most canonical; see Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 73. For a discussion of Auerbach's influence on Pasolini's thought, see Silvia De Laude, 'Pasolini lettore di *Mimesis*', in *Mimesis: L'eredità di Erich Auerbach*, ed. by Ivano Paccagnella and Elisa Gregori (Padua: Esedra, 2009), pp. 467–82; and Emanuela Patti, *Pasolini After Dante: The 'Divine Mimesis' and the Politics of Representation*, Italian Perspectives, 35 (Cambridge: Legenda, 2016).

⁹ See Carl Jung, 'General Aspects of Dream Psychology', in *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, trans. by R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1975), pp. 306–64.

¹⁰ For the Pasolini-Barthes connection, see, among other contributions, H. Joubert-Laurencin, 'Pasolini-Barthes: engagement et suspension de sens', *Studi pasoliniani*, 1 (2007), 55–67.

¹¹ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers (New York: Noonday Press, 1972), p. 38.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 39.

While Pasolini agrees with Barthes that Chaplin's worker is a figure with profound political significance, unlike Barthes, he abandons the familiar vocabulary of class struggle to interrogate *Modern Times* as a motor for thinking through the possibilities and limits of representation, and therefore of resistance. He homes in on the film's uncanny ability to exhaust the possibilities of representing the factory. Whereas Christ can be painted in many ways, if you have seen Chaplin's factory, you have seen them all, he concludes. The factory itself is monovalent, a place of sameness. But what is a poet to do in the face of such sameness? Unable to represent the factory 'in mille modi diversi e soggettivi, continuamente nuovi, reinventati' (*SPS*, p. 1035), the poet is impotent. And if, as Pasolini argues, the factory is the paradigm of the modern, does this mean that 'c'è qualcosa nella vita moderna che non è più poetizzabile? O che è solo poetizzabile una volta per tutte' (*SPS*, p. 1035)?

Pasolini's assertion that the factory confounds the intrinsically plural mechanism of representation is of course hyperbolic. Films such as Elio Petri's *La classe operaia va in paradiso* (1971) and Jean-Luc Godard's *Tout va bien* (1972), which do great representative justice to the conditions and effects of factory labour, prove him wrong. But, like Barthes, Pasolini reads Chaplin's film and the reality it is meant to convey as a mythologist. The factory myth that Chaplin's film so perfectly exposes is really 'a form of communication, a "language", a system of second-order meaning'.¹³ Chaplin's genius is to reveal what is unnatural about the naturalized world of the factory, and thus of the modern, through his movements as protagonist. Yet for Pasolini, unlike Barthes, the strength of Chaplin's performance is not limited to the demystifying light it sheds on the condition of the worker. Chaplin defies the order of intelligibility and value imposed by the factory, resisting its 'sfera di pura strumentalità o comunicazione' by embodying its antithesis, namely 'espressività' (*SPS*, p. 1035). Pasolini reiterated this observation a few months later in his article 'Intervento sul discorso libero indiretto', in which he claimed that Charlot in *Modern Times* creates 'una demitizzazione-modello dell'*homo technologicus* [...] contrapponendosi ad esso nell'unico modo che pare possibile: ossia in qualità di superstite di un'umanità pre-industriale'.¹⁴ By the force of this juxtaposition, Pasolini argues, Charlot renders visible 'l'inespressività del mondo della tecnica'.¹⁵ In Pasolini's letter to the worker, it is likewise this ability of Charlot to preserve his singular and jarring expressivity that makes him the ideal role model for the worker-poet:

Questo uomo 'espressivo' che si contrappone al mondo 'comunicativo' o meglio 'funzionale' della tecnica, dovrebbe in definitiva essere il poeta. Si dovrebbe insomma pensare a dei poeti-operai (conio questa definizione su quella ormai nota di preti-operai). Soltanto vivendo compiutamente la vita di un operaio in una fabbrica è possibile entrarvi dentro fino in fondo, ma non per viverla passivamente o disperatamente (come succede a te), ma per viverla antitetivamente. Cioè per opporvi la libertà dell'uomo in quanto 'espressivo' e non 'strumentale'.

¹³ Jonathan Culler, *Barthes: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 25.

¹⁴ Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Saggi sulla letteratura e sull'arte*, ed. by Walter Siti and Silvia De Laude, 2 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1999), I, p. 1373.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1373.

(SPS, pp. 1035–36)

Here, Pasolini uses 'strumentale' to refer to the organizing principle of thought and action that determines the status of the human, first within the factory, and later, as a *desideratum* and result of the technological turn, across advanced industrial society. His usage reflects the influence of critical theorist Herbert Marcuse, who elaborated his theory of technological society's transformation of subjectivity according to its terms of 'pure instrumentality' in the postwar period and most thoroughly in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964). Marcuse believed that the growing mechanization of labour and corresponding increase in productivity spelled growing unfreedom, when unfreedom is defined 'in the sense of man's subjection to his productive apparatus'.¹⁶ Marcuse held a dim view of the improvements in quality of life and labour conditions made possible by automation. He cautioned that contemporary workers resembled slaves more than ever before, since they existed primarily 'as instruments, as things'—in other words, as means rather than ends, cogs in the machine of capital.¹⁷ Pasolini's identification of the worker-poet as someone who can consciously choose an alternative to instrumentality while still labouring reflects Marcuse's 'Great Refusal', his affirmative belief that the system had to be refused in order to be broken with, which meant that real alternatives, creative modes of living and doing otherwise, had to be put into practice.¹⁸ By recuperating expressivity in a project of freedom, Pasolini does the work of theorizing and putting forward what Marcuse would call a 'true' value as opposed to the 'false' value of instrumentality.¹⁹ Pasolini derived expressivity, literally the quality of being expressive, from the 'stylistic' criticism of Austrian philologist Leo Spitzer, who developed the idea of expressivity as a variable yet isolable quality in every writer's use of language.²⁰ In stylistic criticism, expressivity assumes that instances of linguistic usage, especially breaks from standard usage, reflect an underlying pre-expressive psychological state unique to individuals. Here we see Pasolini give expressivity an added valence by extending it to his reading of the movements and gestures of a living person in a silent film, meaning that expressivity can be interpreted in the language of the body, and therefore in reality.

When he identifies the worker-poet as the exemplar of embodied expressivity, Pasolini makes an overt nod to the Europe-wide phenomenon of the worker-priest movement, which first emerged in France in the early 1940s. Representing an innovation in Church tradition, the term worker-priest specifically designated a 'priest who did not live in a presbytery or monastery, was freed from parochial work by his

¹⁶ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 35.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁰ Pasolini expressed open admiration for Spitzer's work in his criticism. See, for example, 'Il metodo critico di Leo Spitzer offre analisi nuove', in *SPS*, pp. 1556–59. Spitzer returns to expressivity, implicitly or explicitly, over the course of his career. Pasolini would likely have been most familiar with the essays contained in Leo Spitzer, *Critica stilistica e storia del linguaggio*, ed. and trans. by Alfredo Schiaffini (Bari: Laterza, 1954) and Leo Spitzer, *Marcel Proust e altri saggi di letteratura francese moderna*, ed. and trans. by Pietro Citati (Turin: Einaudi, 1959).

bishop, lived only by his full-time labour in a factory or other place of work, and was indistinguishable in appearance from an ordinary workman'.²¹ The vocation, as the hyphen suggests, was hybrid and not contradictory: the priest was fully embedded in his place of labour and saw his work as a living embodiment of Christ's message. While Pasolini rightly insists that he has coined the term 'worker-poet' on the basis of the worker-priest, I argue that we should also trace this figure to the thought of Simone Weil, whose ideas circulated from the early 1950s in the Italian context thanks to the translations of Pasolini's friend-*cum*-adversary Franco Fortini.²² Weil—whose interest in work spans her short but prolific career as a philosopher—came to believe, like Marcuse, that modern factory work was dehumanizing. Several other aspects of Pasolini's notion of the worker-poet likewise suggest Weil's influence: the worker-poet's direct involvement in factory life and the belief in the synthesis or complementarity of poetry and labour.

In the *Dialoghi* sketch, Pasolini insists that only someone who lives 'compiutamente la vita di un operaio in una fabbrica' can resist its instrumentality (*SPS*, p. 1036). This is a belief Pasolini shares with the young Weil, who worked in a series of factories from December 1934 until August the following year, convinced that only firsthand experience of factory work could remedy socialist thinkers' failures to understand the working class. In the short note that follows his letter, 'Un problema per tutti', Pasolini seems to have Weil in mind when he admits that he will not become the worker-poet he calls for, since to do so 'richiederebbe da me una tale vocazione da buttar per aria tutta la mia vita passata e presente: un vero e proprio atto di asceti' (*SPS*, p. 1036). Weil lived just such an ascetic life and discovered what the jaded and more self-protective Pasolini had intuited: that full-time factory work entails a tremendous renunciation of intellectual vocation. In her letters and journal from the period, Weil describes how her work in the factory crushed her by depriving her of her capacity to think. When she does have the energy to think, on Sundays, she writes of it as a sort of rebellion. She also—and here Pasolini's debt would be more explicitly confirmed—wholeheartedly recommends Chaplin's *Modern Times* to her correspondents for the same reason Pasolini recommends it to the worker: 'If you pass through Paris be sure not to miss Charlot's latest film. Here is finally someone who has expressed some of what I experienced!'²³

Throughout her writings, Weil parses her experience of the factory using the language of slavery. She distinguishes factory work from other types of manual labour, arguing that, physically and psychically, factory work turns workers into slaves by wearing them down to the point of passive submission. She was an especially staunch critic of Taylorism, which led to the widespread implementation of repetitive piecework that demanded workers' undivided (if low-grade), almost bestial attention.

²¹ Gregor Siefer, *The Church and Industrial Society: A Survey of the Worker-Priest Movement and Its Implications for the Christian Mission*, trans. by Isabel and Florence McHugh (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1964), p. 4.

²² Domenico Canciani, 'La filosofia e l'industriale. Adriano Olivetti e Simone Weil', in *Pensare il presente con Simone Weil*, ed. by Fabio Amigoni and Fulvio Cesare Manara (Cantalupa: Effatà, 2017), pp. 187–212 (p. 201).

²³ Simone Weil, *La condizione operaia*, trans. by Franco Fortini (Milan: SE, 1994), p. 163.

Nonetheless, Weil also considered work a necessary feature of the human condition, and one, moreover, that could be part of a mystical attainment of grace. As a condition perceived in metaphysical terms, 'Slavery is work without any light from eternity, without poetry, without religion'.²⁴ In the interval between the slave and the free worker, then, is poetry: 'Workers need poetry more than bread. They need that their life should be a poem. They need some light from eternity'.²⁵

For Weil, as for Pasolini, there are no work-free utopias, only work *and* poetry, which is the same as saying that humans must always labour, while also craving something that verges on the ineffable. Whatever you want to call this something—whimsy, poetry, joy, light—, in the economy of grace and refusal that Pasolini sketches for his reader, it is via their own expressivity that the worker-poet reclaims their share of it and maybe, if just for a moment, throws a wrench into the machine.

²⁴ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. by Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 181.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 180.