



THE DIVINE MIMESIS

Pin Paolo Rosolini

Pier Paolo Pasolini

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The Divine Mimesis

Translated
and with an introduction by

Thomas E. Peterson



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Table of Contents

<i>“The Divine Mimesis, Text & Context”</i>	0
Introduction by Thomas E. Peterson	
The Divine Mimesis	
PREFACE	2
<i>The first 2 Cantos of the “Divine Mimesis”</i>	
CANTO I	6
CANTO II	22
Notes and fragments for CANTO III	32
Notes and fragments for CANTO IV	36
Notes and fragments for CANTO VII	52
Note № 1	62
Note № 2	64
For an “Editor’s Note”	66
Three more notes for CANTO VII	70
<i>Faded Iconography</i> (for a “Photographic Poem”)	74
A Short Marginal Addendum	100

Introduction

The Divine Mimesis, Text and Context

The *Divine Mimesis* was published shortly after Pasolini's death in 1975, though the author had finalized it & sent it to the publisher some months earlier. A short and complex, allegorical narrative based on the opening cantos of Dante's *Inferno*, this work can be read as a resume of Pasolini's literary, linguistic, & political concerns at a decisive stage in his life when his cinema career was underway, his major poetic works were behind him, & his pessimism regarding contemporary society was increasing. The short narrative is at once experimental and theoretical, personal and poetic, and demands of the reader a familiarity with Dante's *Commedia*, as well as knowledge of Pasolini's life and work. Though it is in prose, *The Divine Mimesis* should be considered as one of Pasolini's poetic works.

Pasolini's earliest poetry, written both in Italian and Friulian dialect during and after World War II, is absorbed in the rural and archaic romance tradition of southern Europe, a tendency the poet compared to

the 19th-century Félibrige movement in Provence. The roots of Pasolini's civic poetry are apparent in the Italian poems of the same period — collected in *L'usignolo della Chiesa Cattolica* (The Nightingale of the Catholic Church) — in particular the *poemetti* (or odes) “L'Italia” (Italy) and “La scoperta di Marx” (“The Discovery of Marx”). After moving to Rome in 1950, the *res publica* becomes the dominant concern in his verse, as linguistic, literary, and social history are seen to be interwoven & interdependent, much in the way foreseen by Antonio Gramsci, the Marxist thinker honored in “The Ashes of Gramsci,” the title poem of Pasolini's esteemed collection, *Le ceneri di Gramsci* (hereafter *Ceneri*).

The eleven poems of *Ceneri*, written between 1951 & 1956, reflect Pasolini's attempts to manifest a politically committed and humanistic vision of Italy in transition, suspended between the rural ethos of the past & the new era of rapid industrialization. Here the poet expresses his hopes for national renewal and reinvigoration in a manner consonant with the legacy of the Italian Resistance and antifascism generally. In many respects, *Ceneri* emerges from the same social and literary matrix as the essays of *Passione e ideologia* (Passion and Ideology), Pasolini's classic volume of literary criticism. The book begins with the two “panoramic studies” — “La poesia dialettale del Novecento” (1952) & “La poesia popolare italiana” (1955) — which first appeared as introductions to anthologies of dialect poetry. Pasolini notes how the

persistent bilingualism of Italy (as seen in the contrast between literary Italian and dialect, as between written & oral codes) and the persistent “bi-stylism” of its literature (as seen in the presence of high and low registers pertaining to different literary genres and readerships), is changing, as the zones where dialect proliferated are brought under the linguistic influence of the national culture and media.¹

After *Generi*, Pasolini writes *La religione del mio tempo* (The Religion of My Time, hereafter *Religione*), another volume of civic poetry in which he attempts to bridge the gap between Italy’s written and spoken languages while assessing the institutional problems afflicting Italian society. In the longest poem of *Religione*, “La Ricchezza” (“Wealth”), he posits that in order to preserve its true wealth — its cultural patrimony — Italy must abandon the materialistic substitutes that have undermined it, as promoted by the interconnected power structures of Church and State.

Following *Religione*, Pasolini begins directing films, partly in order to reach a larger audience than was possible with poetry. It is not then surprising that in his next book of poems, *Poesia in forma di rosa* (Poetry in the Shape of a Rose, hereafter *Rosa*), he adopts a more emphatic & polemical style to respond to the social reality of contemporary Italy and the Third World. In a more desperate voice than previously, Pasolini announces in *Rosa* that the hopes of the Italian Resistance to form a

more egalitarian society have failed and that the Italian Communist Party (assumed by many to be the major political organ for change) has coalesced into another form of “catholicism.” To Pasolini, the Italian power structure had morphed into a new form of fascism that continued to create and punish scapegoats for the placation of the masses. In his reading of the longest poem of *Rosa*, “Una disperata vitalità” (“A Desperate Vitality”), Roland Barthes identifies a poetics of the “Neutral”² in which Pasolini resists the binaristic paradigm of ideological discourse: “There is a vitality of the Neutral: the Neutral plays on the razor’s edge: in the will-to-live but outside of the will-to-possess.”³ In this poetics of the Neutral, the author is said to “oscillate” between ethical judgment and the suspension of judgment, often in situations of great tension, so as to allow for “all the themes of the possible to resonate in a vast & long exposition.”⁴ Thus, Pasolini is seen to express a pure will-to-live & a hatred of death, phrased as an active protestation: “The desire for the Neutral continually stages a paradox: as an object, the Neutral means suspension of violence; as a desire, it means violence.”⁵

One sees a similar dynamic at play in “Progetto di Opere Future” (“Plan of Future Works”), the 306 line *poemetto* in Dantean tercets in which Pasolini announces his intent to write a work modeled on Dante’s *Commedia*.⁶ This will in fact present the ground plan for the book that lies before us, *The Divine Mimesis*. As he

projects this imitation of Dante's text, Pasolini makes references to Dante's reflections on language in a manner that presumes possible comparisons to his own linguistic situation:

nell'epoca in cui l'italiano sta per finire
perduto da anglosassone o da russo,
torno, nudo, appunto, e pazzo, al verde aprile,

al verde aprile, dell'idioma illustre
(che mai fu, mai fu!), alto-italiano...

[...]

[...] nelle mie ricerche per «BESTEMMIA,»
o «LA DIVINA MIMESIS» — e, ah mistica
filologia! (LP 520)⁷

(in the epoch when Italian is about to end
losing out to Anglo-Saxon or Russian
I return, naked and crazy, to green April,

to the green April of the illustrious tongue
(which never was, never was!), high Italian...

[...]

[...] in my research for "BLASPHEMY,"
or "THE DIVINE MIMESIS" — and, oh
mystical philology!)

Dante conceived of the “illustrious vernacular” as the language that would have been suitable for the enlightened nobility he hoped would emerge under a restored Empire.⁸ To Pasolini, the illustrious vernacular never existed due to the failure of the political project.⁹ With respect to the current “non-national” Italian language, Pasolini argues that it is being replaced by a “national” language in which communicativity is maximized and expressivity is diminished.

Dante’s focus in *De vulgari eloquentia* was on poetry written in Italian dialects, those languages unified emblematically by the use of “sì” (to say “yes”) in contrast to the languages of “oui” (French) and “oc” (Provençal); the designation is found in the invective against Pisa in the lowest circle of Hell:

Ahi, Pisa, vituperio delle genti
 del bel paese là dove ’l sì suona
 (*Inf.* xxxiii, 79–80)

(Ah Pisa! Foul disgrace of the people
 In that fair land where sì is spoken —)¹⁰

This usage is the subtext for Pasolini’s reference to Italy in “Progetto” as “the fair land where the No / sounds,” a country whose language is morphing into a sterile code of pure communication:

perchè in ogni parola scritta nel Bel Paese dove il No
 suona, c'era opposto allo stile quel Sema
 imposseduto, la lingua di un popolo
 che doveva ancora essere classe, problema
 saputo e risolto solo in sogno. (LP 523)

(for in every word written in the fair land where the No
 sounds, there was opposed to style that
 Seme not possessed, the language of a people
 that was yet to become a class, a problem
 known and resolved only in a dream.)

Pasolini argues that before the modern era literary style and mastery benefitted from the linguistic unconscious, which rose up from “the language of a people / which was yet to become a class,” but that in the culture of consumerism the felicitous interaction of the high literary language and the patchwork of dialects is no longer possible, that the bilingualism & bi-stylism of the past are being supplanted by a lingua franca of standardized, technologized linguistic forms.

There is something utopian and highly improbable about *The Divine Mimesis* as described in “Progetto,” as it would aim contemporaneously to “mythically” capture a language that is disappearing, to be a rewrite of the *Inferno* that represents modern society under a Dantean organization of the sins, & to document the author’s life,

especially the period beginning with the Resistance and leading up to *Le ceneri di Gramsci*.

“Progetto” continues with a typology of the sins envisioned in a modern Hell populated by a number of literati listed by name (a practice not followed in *The Divine Mimesis*). By way of contrast, Pasolini then apostrophizes a number of illustrious minds of the 19th & 20th century, each of whom is identified with a single obsession or idea. The list of intellectuals represents for Pasolini a classical, and largely Jewish, European culture that virtually disappeared in the post-World War II diaspora:

Oh Marx — tutto è oro — oh Freud — tutto
è amore — oh Proust — tutto è memoria
oh Einstein — tutto è fine — oh Charlot — tutto

è uomo — oh Kafka — tutto è terrore
oh popolazione dei miei fratelli —
oh patria — oh ciò che rassicura l'identità

oh pace che consente il selvaggio dolore —
oh marchio dell'infanzia! Oh destino d'oro
costruito sull'eros e sulla morte, come

una distrazione (LP 528)

(Oh Marx — all is gold — oh Freud — all
is love — oh Proust — all is memory —
oh Einstein — all is finality — oh Chaplin — all
is man — oh Kafka — all is terror —
oh population of my brethren —
oh my country — oh that which reassures identity —
oh wild grief which makes peace possible —
oh stigma of infancy! Oh destiny of gold
built on eros and on death, like
a distraction)

Italy is seen to have largely existed outside of that culture. Only newly and partially industrialized, it had succumbed after World War I to a fascist dictatorship and become an ally of Hitler's Germany, an accomplice to the Holocaust. This barbaric legacy is seen to carry over in the current "neocapitalist" period, when the Italian state is involved in the radical suppression of the values of the peasantry and working class, and the denial of the "sacred," by which Pasolini meant the archaic values of preindustrial culture. This, then, is the context in which Pasolini composes *The Divine Mimesis* between 1963 and 1965 (with "For an 'Editor's Note" written in "1966 or 1967" and a final "Addendum" added in 1975).

The Divine Mimesis

Preface

The Divine Mimesis: I publish these pages today as a “document,” but also to spite my “enemies”: in fact, offering them another reason to despise me, I offer them another reason to go to Hell.

Faded Iconography: these pages want to have the logic, better than of an illustration, of a (rather, very *legible*) “visual poetry.”

[1975]

The first 2 Cantos
of the “Divine Mimesis”

Canto I

Around my forties¹ I realized I was in a very dark moment in my life. No matter what I did in the “Forest” of reality of 1963 (the year I had reached, absurdly unaware of that exclusion from the life of others that is the repetition of one’s own), there was a sense of darkness. I wouldn’t say nausea, or anguish: even, in that darkness, to tell the truth, there was something terribly luminous: the light of the old truth, if you will, before which there is nothing further to say.

Darkness equals light. The light of that morning in April (or May, I don’t remember well: months in this “Forest” pass by without reason and even without name), when I arrived (the reader should not be shocked) in front of the Cinema Splendid (or was it Splendor? or Emerald? I know for certain that it was once called Plinius: and it was one of those marvelous times — it

1. This, & subsequent notes, were never written.

was clear — when the months were true, long months, and in my every act — whether arbitrary, puerile, or guilty — I was experiencing a form of life *for the purpose of expressing it*). A light men know well, in spring, when the first — the most joyous, the dearest — of their sons and daughters come out in light sweaters, without jackets; as along the new Via Aurelia there pass by — their noses lowered like mice attracted by stupendous distant odors — the Fiat Seicentos of the bourgeois families of Rome, headed to the first picnics on the meadows, toward the farmyards ringed by cane fences and wisteria, out toward the foggy, bespeckled Appenine...

A happy and evil light: there between the two entry doors to the cinema, having just turned my car off a long avenue that the Aurelia narrows into — Viale Gregory the Seventh, I think — between a show of gas fumes in the sun and the little covered market, in the distance, with its little green stalls — down there something red, very red, a little altar of roses, like those prepared by the faithful hands of old women, in the dispossessed towns of Umbria, Friuli, or Abruzzi, old as their old women had been old, willfully repeating themselves through the centuries. A clumsy altar, but festive in its way, with a wreath of red roses I wouldn't know how to describe: and as I approached, among those red roses I noticed the portrait, doubly funereal, for the man had died two days before, of a hero of theirs, a hero of ours.

The superficial look of his eyes, under the bald forehead (a full baldness of adolescent sweetness leavened by the goodness of life). The light was there, illuminating the roses and the portrait, and flags around them, perhaps, bundled up, in the humblest popular solemnity (the work of the wives of the enlisted men of the Fort Boccea regiment? or of the enlisted men themselves, drivers or masons, with their big hands intimidated but inspired in that work of roses?).

All that in the entryway of this Cinema Splendid: sparkling, in the evening, now impoverished by the light, by this light. Miserable doors of glass and metal: and here the thousandth, the billionth anguish of the heart, the tenderness, the languor, the weeping. The very evidence of the misery of this place had the power to torment me.

And they were there, waiting for me, with an old senator, with a new candidate for the Chamber: dark and black, like peasants who come to the city for business, and meet together in a city square, which grows dark, with their solemnity, in that dazzling emptiness that the imminent summer is preparing between the apartment buildings and back streets. And the greetings, the shaking of hands, the looks of argument and agreement.

And now here were gathered, in the aisles of the orchestra pit, which wrung the heart, in that morning light (the light of shops, terraces, avenues, not of the

cinema) in that auditorium with the splendid name — and which was the splendid meeting place in their corner of the district, in the long series of nights in which, without a flag, life marches on.

Meanwhile all of them, all of us, were gladdened by the fact that, after a rally of the governing party, eighteen new boys had signed up, as members of our party: that gladness like that of having drinks together, an allusion to the coming true, fatally, of certain facts whose occurrence we had hoped for and followed together, and now greeted together as a success: and that success wrung my heart.

The circle was turned inward toward its own center, it excluded the world.

(Which was there, outside, as the half open window on the ceiling of the Splendid demonstrated with shining clarity: a silken blue, from the Appenines, with the air of the sea.)

The stage of the 1940s; the flags of the 1940s; the microphone of the 1940s: all rocking on the old wood, from a warehouse, nailed down with four blows of the hammer, and covered with poor red cloth. Which wrung the heart!

Darkness on darkness. I was there, in front of the workers: all dressed up, the fathers in dark, the sons in their light little vests — of the pomegranate red, the canary yellow, the gilded orange, which were fashionable that year — : there was the face of the toothless one,

assigned to certainties as is a typhus patient to his sick bed; the humorous note that faith renders daily: his post is in the center of the pit, and his chair seems the highest of them all. When he claps his hands, with his toothless mouth opening in a traditional smile, it is the sign that he *must* clap his hands: and happily. The circle is turned toward that center it has full of certainty: the world is outside, radiant and indifferent. And the heart is rent.

I am here, therefore: to count as the *only* given good of the world in which historically I test the fact of living — the existence of these workers (which wrings the heart).

Ah, I don't know how to say, very well, when it began: perhaps it has been going on forever. Who can indicate the moment when reason begins to sleep, or better, to desire its own end? Who can determine the circumstances in which it begins to depart, or return to where reason was not, abandoning the road he had believed to be right for so many years, out of passion, ingenuousness, *conformism*?

But as I arrived, in that dream of mine outside reason — of brief duration, and so definitive for the rest of my existence (or at least so I imagine) — at the foot of a "Mountain," at the base of that horrible "Valley" — which had so filled my heart with terror for life, & for poetry — I looked up, & saw, there at the top, a light, a light (that of the old sun reborn) which blinded me:

like that "old truth," about which there is nothing more to say. But the fact of finding it again fills one with joy, even if it carries with it, just that, really, the end of everything.

In the fatal light of that old truth, I was slightly calmed by anguish: that had been the only real feeling during the whole period of darkness, to which my road, *the right one!*, had fatally carried me.

Like a castaway, who comes out of the sea, & clings to an unknown land, I turned back, toward all that is darkness, devastated, shapeless: the fatality of one's own being, one's own birthmarks, the fear of change, dread of the world: which no one ever was able to escape, carrying off to safety his own totality.

I rested a little, didn't think, didn't live, didn't write: like a sick man: then I started up again (it's the old story). Up the deserted slope, where I could truly say I was alone.

Alone, conquered by my enemies, a tiresome survivor to my friends, a stranger to myself, I plodded along to that absurd new road, pulling myself up the slope like a homeless child, a missing soldier.

But just then, after a few steps on my solitary & desultory climb, there it was, emerging from the usual recesses of my soul (which desperately continued to ponder, in order to defend itself, to survive — turning back!), there it was, the agile & unscrupulous beast, changing

Faded Iconography
(for a “Photographic Poem”)

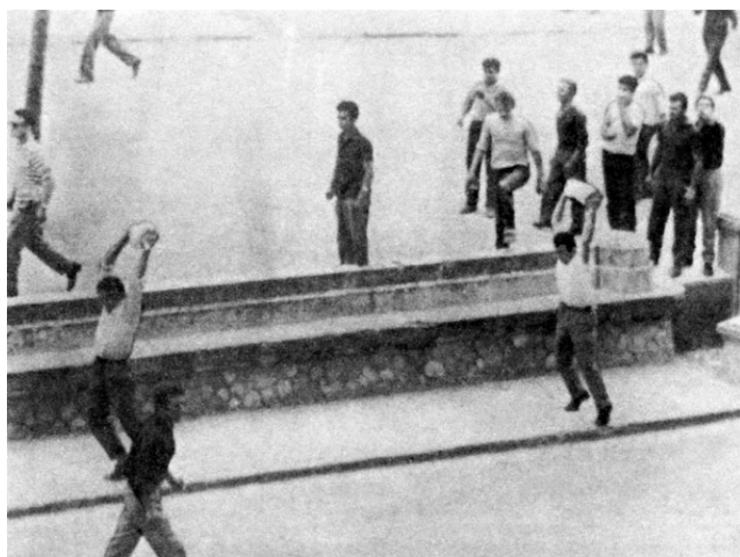


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ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Thomas E. Peterson is Professor of Italian at the University of Georgia (USA). His research focuses on the lyric & epic poetry of the Italian tradition, 20th century Italian poetry and narrative, and the philosophy of education. His books include *The Paraphrase of an Imaginary Dialogue* (1994), *Alberto Moravia* (1996), *The Ethical Muse of Franco Fortini* (1997), *The Rose in Contemporary Italian Poetry* (2000), *The Revolt of the Scribe in Modern Italian Literature* (2010), and *Pasolini: Civic Poet of Modernity* (2011).

Written between 1963 & 1967, *The Divine Mimesis*, Pasolini's imitation of the early cantos of the *Inferno*, offers a searing critique of Italian society and the intelligentsia of the 1960s. It is also a self-critique by the author of *The Ashes of Gramsci* (1957) who saw the civic world evoked by that book fading absolutely from view. By the mid-1960s, Pasolini theorized, the Italian language had sacrificed its connotative expressiveness for the sake of a denuded technological language of pure communication. In this context, he projects a 'rewrite' of Dante's *Commedia* in which two historical embodiments of Pasolini himself occupy the roles of the pilgrim and guide in their underworld journey.

Densely layered with poetic & philological allusions, and illuminated by a parallel text of photographs that juxtapose the world of the Italian literati to the simple reality of rural Italian life, this narrative was curtailed by Pasolini several years before he sent it to his publisher in 1975, a few months prior to his murder. Yet, many of Pasolini's projects took the provisional form of "Notes toward..." an eventual work, such as *Sopralluoghi in Palestina* (Location Scouting in Palestine), *Appunti per una Oresteide africana* (Notes for an African Oresteia), and *Appunti per un film sull'India* (Notes for a Film on India). *The Divine Mimesis* has a kinship to these filmic works as Pasolini himself ruled it 'complete' though still in a partial form.

Written at a turning point in his life when he was wrestling with his poetic 'demons,' the true center of gravity of Pasolini's Dantean project is the potential of poetry to teach and probe, ethically and aesthetically, in reality. "I wanted to make something seething & magmatic," Pasolini declared, "even if in prose."

In this first English translation of Pasolini's *La divina mimesis*, Italianist Thomas E. Peterson offers historical, linguistic, and cultural analyses that aim to expand the discourse about an enigmatic author considered by many to be the greatest Italian poet after Montale. Published by Contra Mundum Press one year in advance of the 40th anniversary of Pasolini's death.



In the history of twentieth-century poetry, there is no other poet besides Pasolini who has more tenaciously interrogated his own 'I,' more persistently contemplated it, admired it, examined it, analyzed it & dissected it in order then to show its suffering entrails to the world, as they beg for understanding, affection, and pity.

— Giorgio Bàrberi Squarotti

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