Pasolini, *Gramsci’s Ashes* (1957)

Translated from the Italian by Michelle Cliff

I

It’s not like May, this impure air
that darkens the foreign garden
already dark, then blinds it with light
with blinding clarity… this sky
of foam, above the pale yellow eaves
that in enormous semicircles veil
the bends of the Tiber, the deep blue
mountains of Latium… Spilling a mortal
peace, estranged from our destinies,
between the ancient walls, autumnal
May. In this the grey of the world,
the end of the decade in which appears
among ruins the profound, ingenuous
effort to restore life over;
the silence, rotten and barren…

You were young, in that May when the error
was still life, in that Italian May
when at least passion was joined to life,
how much less baffled and impurely sound
than our fathers: not father, but simply
brother - already with your skinny hand, you
were outlining the ideal that illuminates
(but not for us: you, dead, and us
equally dead, with you, in this humid
garden) this silence. Can’t you
see it? - you who rest in this alien
place, again confined. Weariness
of nobility surrounds you. And, faded,
the solitary peal of the anvil reaches you
from the factories of Testaccio, lulled
in the evening: amid the shacks of the poor,
unadorned heaps of tin cans, old iron, where
singing, dissipated, an apprentice is ending
his day’s work, at the end of the rainfall.

II
Between the two worlds, the respite, in which we are not.
Choices, surrenders… we have no other sound
by now but this garden of the wretched
and noble in which, headstrong, the trick
that deadens life remains in death.
In the circles of sarcophagi we do not
reveal the fate of the survivor,
of secular people, secular inscriptions
on these grey stones, low,
grand. Again passions
unbridled, free from scandal, burn
the bones of millionaires from mightier nations; buzzing, almost decomposing, the ironies of princes, of pederasts, their bodies strewn in urns incinerated, and unchaste. Death’s silence bears witness to a civilised silence of men who remain men, of a weariness that in the weariness of the Park changes imperceptibly: and the city indifferent, confines him at its centre by hovels and by churches, their pitiless mercy, their lost splendour. The earth, fertile with nettles and vegetables, brings forth these meagre cypresses, this black damp that stains the walls around the ashen, zigzag boxtree, that the evening calm extinguishes into unadorned tendrils of seaweed… this sparse grass scentless, where one sinks into the sweet violet the atmosphere, with a shiver of mint, or decomposed hay, then quiet, foreshadows the daylight gloom, exhausted apprehensions of the night. Harsh climate, sweet history, between these walls is a soil under which
oozes another layer; this damp which

calls to mind another damp; and they echo

- intimate with latitudes

and horizons, where English forests crown

lakes lost in the sky, among meadows

as green as phosphorescent billiard tables or

like emeralds: ‘And O ye Fountains…’ - the pious

invocations…

III

A red rag, like those the partisans

furled around their throats

and, nearby the urn, in the waxen soil

differently red, two geraniums.

Here you lie, exiled, with cruel Protestant

neatness, listed among the foreign

dead: Gramsci’s ashes… Between hope

and my ancient distrust, I draw near you, happening

by chance on this meagre greenhouse, in the presence

of your grave, in the presence of your spirit, afoot,

down here among the free. (Or is it something

else, perhaps more ecstatic

and even more humble, the enraptured symbiosis

of the adolescent, of sex and death…)

And, of this country which would not let you rest,

I feel this an injustice: your mental strain
- here among the silences of the dead - what
reason - our troubled destiny

You would have been inscribing your final
pages in the days of your assassination.

Here are the seeds - I testify -
still undispersed by the ancient rule,
these dead men chained to ownership
that over centuries submerges their shame
and their grandeur: at the same time, obsessed -
the striking of anvils, stifled,
quietly grieving - of the lowly
quarter - attesting to its end.

And here I am… a poor man, dressed
in clothes the poor ogle in store windows
of coarse splendour, that have faded,
in the filth of more lost streets,
of streetcar benches, from which my day
is removed: more and more rarely
I have these days off from the torment
of deciding to live; and if it should happen I
love the world, it’s not with a violent
and ingenuous sensual love
like I had, a confused adolescent, a season
I hated; if in it I hurt the bourgeois
affliction of my bourgeois self: and now, the world
- with you - cleft, that part which had the power
doesn’t it seem now an object of bitterness,
almost mystical contempt?
Yet without your rigour, I exist
not because I choose to. I live in the non-will
of postwar decline: loving
the world I hate - in its distress
contemptuous and lost - in a dark scandal
of consciousness…

IV
The shame of contradicting myself, of being
with you and against you; with you in my heart,
in truth, against you in my dark inmost feelings;
traitor to my fatherland
-in thought, in a shadow of action -
I know that I am bound to it, in the heat
of instinct, of aesthetic passion
attracted by a proletarian life -
prior to you - it’s for me a religion;
this is happiness, not the millennial
struggle: man’s nature, not his
conscious mind; it’s the primal strength
of man, that has been lost in actions,
that offers this drunken nostalgia,
and poetic light: beyond that
I don’t know what to say, would it be
a just, but not pure abstracted
love, not grieving sympathy…
As poor as the poor, I attach myself
like them to humble expectations
like them, I fight each day
to stay alive. But even in my desolated state,
in my disinherited condition -
I own: the most glorified of all
bourgeois possessions:
But while I own history,
it owns me; it illumines me
But what use is such a light.
V
I’m not talking about the individual,
phenomenon of sensual, sentimental fervour…
he has other vices; his destiny, his fate
go by another name…
But in him are scrambled common
innate vices - and also
objective sin! They are not immune -
those internal and external acts that
bring him to life - to any of
the religions that exist in the real world,
mortgaging death, established
to cheat the light, bringing to light the deception.

His mortal remains are fated
to be interred in Verano; it’s catholic,
his struggle with them: Jesuitical
are the manias with which he regulates his heart;
and even deeper: his consciousness obtains
Biblical tricks… and ironic liberal
zealousness… and a coarse splendour, among the dislikes
of a provincial dandy, of a provincial
well-being… Even to the basest details
in which Authority and Anarchy vanish
into the vulgar deep… well protected
by unclean virtue and by drunken sin,
defending an obsessive naïveté
and with what consciousness! The I lives: I
alive, evading life, within the breast
the sense of a life that would be a
grieving, violent oblivion… Ah, as I realise,
speechless, drenched in the whispers
of the wind, here where Rome is silent
among the weary, confused cypresses,
near you, the spirit whose graffito resounds
Shelley… How I understand the whirlpool
of feeling, the whim (greek, in the patrician’s
heart, northern summer visitor)
that swallowed him in the dark
azure of the Tyrrhenian Sea, the sensual
joy of adventure, aesthetic
and childish: meanwhile Italy, face-down
as if within the belly of a giant
cicada; opening wide white coastlines,
strewn across Latium veiled throngs of pine,
queer, faded yellowish glades
of garden rocket, where a young
peasant of the Roman campagna sleeps
amid rags, his penis erect, goethian dream.
In the Maremma dark, marvelous sewers
of spiked grasses, a clear impression
of the hazelnut tree, along footpaths the herdsman
fills to overflowing with his youth - unaware.
Blindly fragrant in the sharp curves
of the Versilian coastline, on
the entangled, blind sea, the bright stuccoes,
delicate marquetry of its pascual
countryside, quite human, it unfolds
darkening on the Cinquale
unravelling underneath the burning Apuan Alps,
glassy blue against rose… landslides,
overturned rocks, as if panicked
by a fragrance, on the Riviera, soft,
steep, where the sun wrestles the breeze
to offer utmost sweetness to the oils
of the sea… And all around the buzz of happiness
the boundless percussion, drumming
of sex and light: so accustomed
is Italy to this, she doesn’t even tremble, as if
dead within her life: fervently they shout
from hundreds of seaports, the name
of their comrade, the young men, wet with sweat,
faces tanned, brown, among the people
of the Riviera, near kitchen-gardens of thistles
on foul little beaches…
Will you ask of me, dead man, unadorned,
that I abandon this hopeless
passion to be in the world?
VI
I’ll take my leave of him. I leave you in the evening
that however sad, is almost sweet, falling on
us, living creatures, with its waxen light
that sets the quarter in twilight.
And stirs it up. Makes it larger, emptier
in close, and, at a great distance, rekindles it
a raving life, that of the hoarse
rolling racket of the tram, of human clamour,
dialects, creating a faintly heard
and positive harmony. And you feel like those faraway creatures that in life shout, laugh in those vehicles of theirs, those wretched apartment blocks, where the false and expansive gift of existence is consumed - that life is nought but a shiver; corporeal, collective presence; you feel the absence of any true religion; not living, but surviving - perhaps more joyous than living - like a nation of animals, within its mysterious orgasm - there would be no other longing than that for daily action, work: a humble ardour which lends a sense of festivity to humble corruption. How much more empty - in this void of history, in this humming pause in which existence holds its tongue - is each ideal, clearly better is the immense, bronzed voluptuousness, almost Alexandrian, which illuminates and impurely ignites all, when here in the world, something tumbles down, and the world drags itself along, in the twilight, coming home to empty market-places, to disheartened factories… Already the lamps are lit, spangling
Via Zabaglia, Via Franklin, all of
Testaccio, stripped between its great
foul mount, the lengths of the Tiber, the black
back-drop beyond the river, that Monteverde
amasses or diminishes unseen in the heavens.
Diadems of light lose themselves,
dazzling, with a chill of sadness
almost sea-like… Suppertime is almost here;
the quarter’s scarce buses glitter,
with bunches of workers at their ticket windows.
And groups of soldiers vanish, languidly,
toward the mount - which at the centre of
rotten excavations, dry heaps of filth -
streetwalkers are concealed in shadow
waiting, enraged, on the aphrodisiac
filth: and, not far away, among illegal
shacks clinging to the mountain, in
palaces, their own worlds, boys light
as paper play in the breezes,
no longer chill, but springlike; burning
with the recklessness of youth, on a
Roman evening in May, dark adolescents
whistle along the pavements, in the evening’s
festivity; and the rolling shutters
of garages roar, and crash, joyously;
the darkness has surrendered the night serene,
and in the midst of the plane trees in Piazza Testaccio
the wind falling, quivering with unexpected disaster
is sweet enough, although grazing one’s hair
and the porous stones of Macello, there one becomes
drenched with decomposed blood, everywhere
the waste and stench of poverty is stirred up.
It’s a cacophony, this life, and those lost
in it, lose it cloudlessly, if their hearts
are filled with it: enjoying themselves,
behold the wretched, the evening: powerful
in them, defenceless before them, the myth
is reborn… But I, with my aware heart,
which is alive only in history,
can I ever again act with a pure love,
if I know that our history is ended?