In general, this volume presents an overview of De Filippo’s work that is eminently readable, informative, and insightful, and at times, even passionate.

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One of Pasolini’s least known or studied facets has been brought to light recently with the publication of Van Watson’s study of this “heretical” writer’s dramatic works. Van Watson furnishes North American readers with the first book-length account of Pasolini’s theatre in English, designed as an introduction to this largely neglected aspect of Pasolini’s artistic production. Indeed, in North America, Pasolini’s fame rests almost entirely upon his filmmaking, while his poetic, narrative, theoretical and dramatic output remains largely ignored. Recent English translations of some of this material will help to remedy the situation. Yet Pasolini’s plays remain, as far as I know, untranslated, and thus largely unproduced on this side of the Atlantic. And as Van Watson shows, this neglect is only slightly worse than that found in Italy, where there appears to be, not surprisingly, a certain amount of resistance to the possibility of staging Pasolini’s plays. This resistance, he shows, results not only from the subject matter and language of Pasolini’s theatre, but also from his very demanding and perhaps confusing “postmodern” instructions for the staging of works such as his own.

Van Watson’s account of Pasolini’s theoretical attitudes towards theatrical production is based upon the writer’s “Manifesto for a New Theatre” first published in 1968. In this essay Pasolini describes his antagonism toward traditional theatrical conventions, which function in such a manner as to produce a passively satisfied spectator, one whose capacities for critical thinking and active interpretation have been perniciously voided. Van Watson describes traditional Italian theatre, with its cult of directorial genius, its privileging of *matatore*—virtuoso actors who use a role solely as a means to display their marvelous abilities as actors—and its function of serving only as a bourgeois “social rite” for its spectators.

Van Watson describes how Pasolini contests such an “evasive” theatre (of “chatter”), and seeks to displace it with his own brand of engaged theatre which, as Pasolini wrote, would present “an exchange of ideas, a literary and political struggle in the most democratic . . . manner possible” (33). Moreover, such a theatre would not form itself as a “theatrical rite,” as Pasolini describes the avant-garde practices of Artaud, the Living Theatre and Grotowski, types of theatre held to be “self-absorbed,” and “engaged only with the art of the theatre itself” (29). Furthermore, rather than being completely at odds with one another, Pasolini viewed both the traditional bourgeois theatre and avant-garde performance as complicit in contributing to the “disappearance of the word from the Italian stage”; and Van Watson sets out to describe how all of Pasolini’s plays (*Calderòn, Affabulation, Pylades, Pigsty, Orgy, and Beast of Style*) present a theatre which was engaged and availed itself of both the beauty and the communicative potential of the word” (29).
The three opening chapters provide the theoretical preface for the author's subsequent analyses of the individual plays. The first chapter supplies a brief biographical sketch, ordered according to a "psychoanalytic perspective." It was Pasolini's view that only with a person's death does his or her life achieve its ultimate meaning: death, as a form of narrative closure, provides the key by which to articulate retrospectively the "truth" and the message of that person's storia. It is thus only appropriate that Van Watson begins his discussion with an account of Pasolini's "notorious" assassination in 1975, at the hands of Pino Pelosi, apparently, though theories of conspiracy circulate, and justified accusations against the type of character assassination carried out by the organs of popular culture, après coup, still echo. One is disappointed, however, with the explanation of his death as a "result of a homosexual tryst," and the implied logic, as well as with Van Watson's sympathy with Alberto Moravia's highly problematic and completely unsatisfactory assessment of this horrendous murder (Moravia: "Pier Paolo died as one can die falling in front of a tram: in an accident like any other. Every day there are thousands of homosexual encounters in Italy: Pier Paolo died in one of these" [17]). One wonders when Moravia will cease to have the last word on Pasolini's death.

Van Watson's psychoanalytic biography sketches the oedipal triangle between Pasolini and his parents, presenting Pasolini's obsessive adoration of his mother and aggression toward his fascist father. It is this oedipal drama which Van Watson will use as the key to "unlock" Pasolini's works, to show how it serves as the structuring paradigm for nearly all of Pasolini's theatre, if not his entire opera. Van Watson describes in Lacanian terms the "symbiotic mother-infant relationship" posited between Pasolini and his mother as a time of "wholeness" and integrity. The oedipal moment, what Lacan accounts for with his own parable of the mirror stage, witnesses what Van Watson characterizes as a "fall" from this state of "wholeness." Ever after, the alienated subject is compelled to repeat, tragically, his desire for that "original" state of being.

In Van Watson's view, Pasolini's work will thus be characterized by an obsessive desire for return, by a nostalgia for what was "lost." Moreover, his homosexuality is described as a narcissistic desire for re-integration with his pre-lapsarian self, a time when the "I" was not an other (to play off Rimbaud). Blocking this desire for "restoration" are those individuals, moralities, ideologies, and institutions that come to be identified with the father (in Van Watson's text, Pasolini's actual fascist father). Drawing on the Sophoclean oedipal narrative, these blocking agents are identified by Van Watson, throughout the book, as "Laius figures" that oppress the protagonists of Pasolini's plays, protagonists who are usually characterized as potential Edipus figures, potential since their transgressions of the law are, Van Watson often asserts, always already fruitless. Van Watson suggests that after the "ineffectual" and "insincere" struggles of '68, Pasolini's pessimism hardened concerning any revolutionary potential in his society—the famous example of Pasolini's condemnation of the students and "defense" of the carabinieri as the actual "sons of the proletariat" is supplied as proof of Pasolini's defeatism concerning any form of rebellion. Such rebellion is repeatedly characterized as the "intestinal struggles" of a class with a guilty conscience; and this leads to Van Watson's assertion that the rebellion of potential "Edipus figures" against "Laius figures" in modern society is 1) a matter of "fashion" and 2) something which serves to provide "inadvertent support to the bourgeois establishment it purports to attack, even furthering the growth of this establishment.
The Œdipal threat has been neutralized by the Laius power figures of the modern bourgeoisie. The potential Œdipus figures, the youth, are actually performing the Laius role, although perhaps unknowingly so" (13).

Such a damning presentation of Pasolini’s pessimism of the intellect nearly eclipses the optimism of his will, to recall Gramsci’s famous words. The passion and insistence of Pasolini’s own political practice as artist and writer, and the insights that he often affords into altered ways of conceiving cultural-political strategies, almost fail to make sense in light of Van Watson’s characterization of the complicity inherent in Western forms of dissent and resistance. One would expect political nihilism and artistic and intellectual paralysis (which, by the way, such a characterization of recent history which is making the rounds these days in both Italy and North America, threatens to produce in an entire generation of potentially critical intellectuals who, according to the logic of the argument, are led to consider any form of dissent as irresponsible); happily, Pasolini’s own cultural production seems to exemplify a slightly different approach to history and engagement, his pessimism notwithstanding.

Van Watson turns from this outlining of the political context from which emerged Pasolini’s theatre, and from his psychoanalytic biography, to devote a chapter to a very brief historical description of contemporary Italian theatre, discussing the scarcity of Italian drama in translation, the “literary” (as opposed to the “dramatic”) nature of Italian theatre, the acting and directing styles peculiar to the Italian stage; and Van Watson here identifies what traditional theatrical conventions Pasolini’s “Theatre of the Word” will seek to displace. Chapter 3 concerns itself with a theoretical account of Pasolini’s theatre based on his own “Manifesto for a New Theatre,” and there he describes the type of engaged, anti-bourgeois theatre he presumes Pasolini’s work to represent, and the intellectually invigorating, de-passifying operation that his audiences undergo.

Van Watson subsequently devotes a chapter-length account to each of Pasolini’s six plays. The Pirandellian and Brechtian aspects of Calderon are described, that is, how Pasolini’s theatre calls attention to its own means of production and possibilities of interpretation, and Van Watson likens the play to Velazquez’ Las Meninas in a quite interesting and convincing manner. Unfortunately, this analysis gives way to a rather strange psychoanalytical discussion of the play in which Jung, Freud and Lacan all sound something like Jung, and seem to join in the nostalgic celebration of the original, pre-fallen and unalienated self, which in Pasolini, I would suggest, remained always already mythical and constructed retroactively—although this is lost in Van Watson’s quasi-religious account (complete with a discussion of the “universal Jungian unconscious”: Lacan exits, certainly, stage left). Indeed, in each play, Van Watson isolates the Laius figure responsible for the alienation of the Œdipus figure, and he outlines how the play apparently demonstrates the inability of the sons to overthrow the fathers, how ultimately, by extension, “every challenge to the bourgeois is insincere” (54). This is perhaps not exactly the conclusion Pasolini was after.

In discussing Affabulation, Van Watson notes that: “In the modern bourgeois universe of Pasolini’s play the original Dionysian rite of kings is perverted into the death of the prince, as the role of the king and prince are reversed” (60). In this reversal, Pasolini asserts, sons are made to pay for the sins of the fathers, and in Calderon, Pigsty and Pylades, “the death of the prince is assumed as given” (ibid). In an interesting twist, worthy of even more elaboration on Van Watson’s part, the Son in Affabulation is seen eventually to refuse to respect the “Œdipus-Laius polemic,”
a refusal of a logic of conflict that would eventually find him as yet another "Laius figure."

*Pylades* is read as a play whose tragedy is its “inability to be tragic,” given the perversion (or we might say, père-version) of this rite of kings (80). Van Watson also demonstrates how this play is an allegory of contemporary Italian politics and culture.

*Pigsty* is described as a play which stages the degeneration of language, or performs what Van Watson calls the purification of the word: “Pasolini attempts to liberate [the word] of reference to anything other than itself. Words become themselves the signed, and as they do so, they cease to be signifiers” (82–83). The play is thus a reaction to the “social alienation of the word” (83) and Van Watson suggests that “words are presented as dissociated from their primal meanings because man is dissociated from his primal self. Both deteriorate into form without content” (ibid). This is a rather confusing formulation given Van Watson’s ostensible dependence upon post-Saussurean and Lacanian theories of signification and subjectivity, theories which themselves exist to contradict the type of essentialist logic inherent in his reading. Unfortunately, this problem is not limited to the interpretation of this one play alone.

Indeed, in the course of his interpretation of *Orgy*, Van Watson suggests that “Pasolini desairs ... of the restoration of an original self and an original universe” (90), and furthermore: “Dramatic action may ... be viewed as an artificial construct, not unlike the bourgeois universe, which is fallen from the primal reality of which it is only a shadow” (ibid). Thus here, as often elsewhere, an essentialist logic underpins his approach to the text. This is offset, however, by the attention given to Pasolini’s “fragmentary corps morcelé aesthetic sensibility” as well as that given to the sense of “posthumous time” which marks this play.

*Beast of Style* is the last play analysed by Van Watson. He highlights the “open” and “metaliterary” aspects of a work in which both the protagonist, Jan, and Pasolini himself appear to present the creative process itself as the “message” of their art: “Style for Jan is no longer a matter of decoration, or accompaniment or method; it becomes the very substance and content of his work” (106).

Van Watson devotes a very interesting and helpful chapter (10) to a descriptive overview of the various stagings of Pasolini’s play in Italy (listed in appendix), as well as of the diverse production styles (of Ronconi, Gassman, Pressburger, Cherif and Misseroli) and he describes how, with few exceptions, these productions often tend to betray the spirit of Pasolini’s own instructions for the production of his theatre (this is the case especially, and not surprisingly, with Gassmann). Van Watson also surveys some of the attitudes of the press toward individual productions.

In the final chapter Van Watson provides a “sociopolitical” discussion of Pasolini’s Theatre of the Word as a postmodern text, following—in its polemical nature—the works of Alfieri and D’Annunzio (D’Annunzio’s fascism notwithstanding). The analogy with Alfieri is compelling insofar as both “attempted to reinterpret the ancient Greek rite of kings in a way that reflected the societies in which they lived and the conceptions of God and universe upon which these societies based themselves. Both of them created a polemical, even politically agitational, theatre” (125). Pasolini’s theatre is located within the materialistic fervor of Italy’s post-war economic boom, when neocapitalist consumer society appeared to neutralize all forms of revolutionary energy in the people, in Pasolini’s words, “by evolving a context of hedonistic ideology, false tolerance and ... the false realization of civil rights” (127). Van Watson
quite convincingly asserts that the metalinguistic characteristics of Pasolini's plays call attention to the very process of signification, thus politicizing it. Drawing from Eco, Lacan and Sanguineti, he suggests that "the choice of the signifier can change the very nature of the signified" (128).

Extending this Lacanian notion into a political context, [Sanguineti] asserted that linguistic structures carry with them a tacitly assumed ideology which is projected upon the world in order to make it comprehensible. In fact Sanguineti called language "reality-as-ideology-would-have-it." By changing language, the writer changes reality. Revolution thus becomes possible at a metalinguistic level. Pasolini adopts just such a metalinguistic method in his theatre as he attempts to effect social and political change. (128)

Such an attitude, here presented in one of the most compelling moments of the book, leads to Pasolini's "contraventional," structurally subversive theatre, whose prime example would be Calderón. Van Watson asserts that Pasolini's metatheatre was postmodern avant la lettre insofar as it is an "open" work (borrowing Eco's phrase), characterized by pastiche (what Pasolini calls stylistic contamination). Van Watson's discussion concludes with a rather reductive and simplistic analysis of American society ("long a proponent of capitalism" [131]) whose consumer culture and "yuppie phenomenon" combine to render Pasolini's theatre nearly irrelevant for American mass-culture audiences. As Pasolini himself noted:

The "Theatre of the Word" . . . is totally opposed to mass-culture which is terrorist, repressive, stereotyped, un-human . . . certainly anti-democratic. Theatre . . . can never be a "mass-medium": because theatre is not reproducible, only repeatable. (33)

In conclusion, Van Watson's analyses of Pasolini's work often suffer from an obsessive, essentialist argument concerning the central problem of the "fallen" subject's drive for reintegration within an original plenitude or totality, an argument in which the mythical function of the "original," as it is found in Pasolini, its existence as a retroactive and recuperative subjective construct, tends to be lost. One might say that the book tends to become a symptom of the very crises that it describes. Furthermore, the crisis of "identity" is often reduced to that of Pasolini himself, and the analyses verge on author criticism with a poststructuralist twist. And although the texts often lend themselves to such a reading, and Pasolini's comments on his own texts would often support it, interpretation along predominantly autobiographical lines tends to limit other interpretive possibilities found in these same texts—which themselves force us to examine the ethics of our readings, academic or otherwise.

Nevertheless, one is gratified to see attention being drawn to this largely unstudied aspect of Pasolini's work, and Van Watson's book will certainly be successful in generating ulterior debates and renewed dialogue concerning Pasolini's work and the social and ideological crises in which he was, and we are, engaged. The polemical and confictual nature of such debates is guaranteed, one hopes, by the very nature of Pasolini's texts themselves, which "invigorate" us, in many ways, by "contaminating" us.

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