NEO-CAPITALISM, ACEDIA AND NON-STYLE IN PIER PAOLO PASOLINI'S PETROLIO

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Summary: In his final novel, Petrolio, Pier Paolo Pasolini offers a dismal portrait of neo-capitalist Italy. Focusing on a programmatic referencing of sloth or acedia, this article explores a series of parallels between the symptomatology of the sin and what Pasolini saw as the unreality of consumerist culture. Conferring a central importance on Pasolini's declared intent to compose his final novel in a type of "non-style," the article posits a stylistic implementation of the symptoms of acedia in Petrolio as part of a reconfiguration of intellectual engagement. This reconfigured engagement with neo-capitalist Italy is based on the provocative negation of the conventional author figure as purveyor of style and the related attempt to insert the living voice within the confines of literary artifice.

The fervor of Pier Paolo Pasolini's denunciation of the advent of Italian neo-capitalism is well known. Equating the advance of consumerism with an insidious fascism of false tolerance, he identified a loss of reality that would ultimately eradicate his beloved sub-proletariat. This article will consider the importance granted to the sin of sloth or acedia1 in Petrolio and argue for a connection between the complex symptomatology of the sin and the ills of neo-capitalist Italy as diagnosed by Pasolini. In addition, the article will address the author's stated intention to compose his final novel in a style that he describes as "piano, oggettivo, grigio" (Petrolio, 3). This refusal of literariness or style is coupled with Pasolini's insistence on his own voice within the text when, in a letter to Alberto Moravia reproduced in the 1992 publication of Petrolio, he maintains that he speaks directly to the reader as himself, in "carne e ossa" (Petrolio, 544). In so describing the aesthetic of his novel, Pasolini suggests a reconfiguration of authorial function that is based on a repudiation of the codified figure of the author as producer of style. Moreover, in embracing the nationalized Italian of post-Economic Boom Italy, he brings to a close his novelistic

1 Though modern Italian renders sloth as accidia, the Latin form acedia will be used throughout the article as this term better renders the density of the sin as theorized in the texts of early and medieval Christian writers.

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engagement with the world of dialect in order to embrace a citational irony. This article will consider this aesthetic shift as indicative of a programmatic attempt to propose an intellectual engagement that refuses the authorial role of stylistic technician. Instead, Pasolini seeks to insert the living intellectual within the confines of literary artifice and, by extension, within the unreality of neo-capitalism.

_Petrolio_ revolves around Carlo Valletti, a young Turinese engineer who, in May of 1960 at the height of Italy’s Economic Boom, is divided into two by a pair of otherworldly figures, Polis and Tetis. The novel opens as Carlo observes his own body as it falls unconscious to the ground. He then witnesses the arrival of two figures, “scendendo probabilmente dal cielo – o forse dalle profondità della terra” (Petrolio, 13), who proceed to argue over ownership of the body. Polis, of angelic appearance, claims custody of Carlo as his is the body of a good and obedient man (Petrolio, 13). Tetis, of infernal appearance, argues that the “Peso” or weight that Carlo carries within means that the body falls under his domain. The angel-demons agree that a compromise is the only solution. Tetis inserts a knife into Carlo’s stomach and, from the aperture which he subsequently heals, extracts a fetus that immediately grows into a replica of the adult Carlo. The names of these unearthly visitors constitute an evident allusion to public life and sexuality. Polis, of course, refers to an organized city-state community of ancient Greece while Tetis or Tethys was one of the original twelve Titans, sea-deity and mother to the gods. Appropriately then, the first Carlo, or Carlo di Polis, devotes himself to the pursuit of social power in the ranks of the Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi, the state-controlled petrochemical concern of questionable business practices and political connections. On the other hand, the second Carlo, Carlo di Tetis, consecrates himself to the pursuit of sexual pleasure, a habit he indulges under all conceivable circumstances and with all manner of individuals.

Turning to what will be the central concept of this article, _acedia_ or sloth, we note that Polis and Tetis are explicitly identified in the text as the “demoni meridiani” (Petrolio, 18). This diabolical entity is referenced directly in the ninetieth Psalm:

He that dwelleth in the aid of the most High, shall abide under the protection of the God of Jacob. He shall say to the Lord: Thou art my protector, and my refuge: my God, in him will I trust. For he hath delivered me from the snare of the hunters: and from the sharp word. He will overshadow thee with his shoulders: and under his wings thou shalt trust. His truth shall compass thee with a shield: thou shalt not be afraid of the terror of the night. Of the arrow that flieth in the day, of the business that
walketh about in the dark: of invasion, or of the noonday devil.²

As determined by a number of early and medieval Christian theolo-
gians, the “noonday devil” explicitly denotes the sin of acedia, one of the
greatest threats to the contemplative mind of the religious scholar. In
his study of the concept of ennui, Reinhard Kuhn identifies Evagrius Ponticus
as the author of one of the earliest lists of Christian capital sins. Of the eight
vices named by Evagrius, acedia is accorded the most thorough analysis and
is referred to as the “noonday demon” or the “daemon qui etiam meridianus
vocatur” (Kuhn, 43). In Stanzas, Giorgio Agamben cites John Cassian who,
in book 10 of his De institutis coenobiorum, connects acedia with the noon-
day devil of the ninetieth psalm. Cassian describes an agitation that assails
the contemplative mind of the monk at midday, the sixth hour of the day:
“The monk is made most restless at about the sixth hour...Therefore not a
few elders have judged this to be the noonday demon that is mentioned in
the ninetieth psalm.”³ In his Scala Paradisi, John Climacus makes a similar
claim insisting that “sloth visits the monks around noon.”⁴

Acedia or sloth is not, as the modern understanding of the offense
might have us believe, a disproportionate but essentially innocuous love of
leisure. Kuhn connects acedia with ennui and analyses the explosion of
interest in the condition subsequent to the advent of Christianity.

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² Ps 90: 2-6, Douay-Rheims Catholic Bible. In alternative Catholic translations
such as the New American Bible, we find that Psalm 90 is labeled Psalm 91, a
discrepancy that results from the divergent numerations in the Hebrew or
Masoretic and Greek or Septuagint manuscripts. A difference more significant
for the purposes of this article is that, in the New American Bible, the noonday
demon is rendered as “the plague that ravages at noon” (New American Bible 91:
6). Pasolini cites the Latin of the Douay-Rheims translation as follows: “Non
timebis a timore nocturno; a sagitta volante in die, a negotio perambulante in
tenebris, ab incursu et daemonio meridiano” (Petrolio, 18).

³ “Maxime circa horam sextum monachum inquietans...Denique nonnulli
senum hunc esse pronuntiant meridianum daemonen, qui in psalmo nongesimo
nuncupatur,” cited in Agamben, 8. Aquinas provides a more complete citation
of the passage: “maxime aedcia circa horam sextam monachum inquietat, ut
quaedam febris ingenua tempore praestituto, ardentissimos aeternum accensionum
suarum solitis ac statuis horis animae inferens aegrotanti” (The monk is trou-
bled with sloth chiefly about the sixth hour: it is like an intermittent fever, and
inflicts the soul of the one it lays low with burning fires at regular and fixed
intervals), Summa theologiae II-II: 35, 1.

⁴ “Acedia vero monachos circa meridiem,” cited in Agamben, 8.
Associating the condition with a variety of concepts including *siccitas* or “dryness of the soul” and *desidia*, a “complete paralysis of the will,” Kuhn asserts that *acedia* became the principal term used to designate a mental state characterized by a “disgust concerning anything to do with the spiritual” (Kuhn, 39-40). At a mundane level, the spiritual crisis of midday is indeed prompted by the hunger of the religious contemplative at this hour of great heat. However, a more significant factor is the “starkness of the shadowless world” of noontime (Kuhn, 43). This starkness lends a melancholy to the crisis of the contemplative. Accordingly, Gregory, in his list of the seven sins, fuses *acedia* and *tristitia* under the second term (Moralia, XXXI). Though restoring the name *acedia*, Aquinas, like Gregory, considers the sin as a type of sadness or “*species tristitiae*” (Summa theologica II-II: 35,1): “Sloth is a kind of sadness, whereby a man becomes sluggish in spiritual exercises because they weary the body” (Summa theologica I: 63, 2). The spiritual nature of the weariness that takes hold of the sinner is associated with a series of specific behaviors. In *Moralia* XXXI, Pope Gregory I identifies six symptoms of sloth as follows: malice (*malitia*), resentment (*rancor*), pusillanimity (*pusillanimitas*), desperation (*deseratio*), torpor with regard to rules (*torpor circa praecepta*), and wandering of the mind (*evagatio mentis*). Aquinas later concurs with this number and cites Gregory’s list: “Now Gregory (Moral. XXXI) assigns six daughters to sloth, viz. ‘malice, spite, faint-heartedness, despair, sluggishness in regard to the commandments, wandering of the mind after unlawful things’ (Summa theologica II-II:35, 4).”

Reinhard Kuhn establishes the extensive influence wielded by the concept of *acedia* on a broad and varied range of literary figures as he traces the evolution of the idea subsequent to the Middle Ages. He includes Petrarch’s secularization of the monastic category (Kuhn, 68-77) as well as what he views as the fusion of monastic *acedia* and the tradition of the humors in Shakespearian metaphysical melancholy (Kuhn, 97). He traces the further evolution of secularized *acedia* through the radical pessimism of such thinkers as Leopardi and Schopenhauer and, moving into the era of high capitalism, he analyses the celebrated ennui of French poets such as Baudelaire and Verlaine (Kuhn, 279-329). Concerning the twentieth cen-

5 *Acedia vero est quaedam tristitia, qua homo redditur tardus ad spirituales actus propter corporalem laborem,* Summa theologica I: 63, 2.

fury, he states that ennui is no longer one among other concepts, but rather becomes the “persistent obsession” (Kuhn, 331) in the work of many authors amongst whom he names Beckett, Valéry and Mann.

While Kuhn’s analysis of acedia indicates the conceptual elasticity of the term, what is of particular significance to this article is the philosophical application of the monastic category to analyses of capitalist society. A cursory glance at the philosophical tradition of the twentieth century reveals the debt owed to acedia and its secular variants, ennui and boredom, by Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger. In his Theses on the Philosophy of History, Walter Benjamin accentuates the melancholic qualities of acedia and associates this sadness with the stance of the historian who, in attempting to resuscitate a past era, employs a process of empathy “whose origin is the indolence of the heart, acedia, which despairs of grasping and holding the genuine historical images as it flares up briefly” (Benjamin, 1969, 256). This attitude reflects Benjamin’s inclination toward immobilizing history with a philosophical position that Adorno described as “Medusan” (Adorno, 233). It is in light of this same Medusan acedia that Benjamin’s work on the idleness of Baudelaire’s flaneur acquires such significance. Described as a figure “unwilling to forego the life of a gentleman of leisure,” the flaneur’s meandering idleness comes to constitute, in the work of Benjamin, a “protest against the division of labour which makes people into specialists” and against the “industriousness” of his capitalist era (Benjamin, 1973, 54). In discussing the banality of modern human existence or Dasein (“being-there”), Heidegger too evokes acedia. Giorgio Agamben discerns strong resonances between the evagatio mentis of acedia and a falling into what Heidegger saw as an inauthentic existence of Dasein, between curiositas, one of the four traits of evagatio mentis, and a desire for the constantly new as befits an existence of distraction (Agamben, 5).

The concept of acedia seems readily applicable to discussions of capitalist modernity, as evidenced both by Kuhn’s claim for its dominance in twentieth century literature and by Benjamin’s and Heidegger’s use of the term or its variants. In the case of Pasolini’s work, references to a multifac-

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7 Agamben also considers Baudelaire’s focus on laziness or idleness (paresse) in the light of his discussion of acedia. He views idleness as the “emblem that artists oppose to the capitalist ethic of productivity and usefulness” (Agamben, 9, 7n). Furthermore, Agamben writes of Baudelaire’s transformation of the work of art into an absolute commodity “whose value [...] consists in its uselessness and whose use in its intangibility.” This absolute commodification becomes the “most radical abolition of the commodity” (Agamben, 42).
eted *accidia* or *acedia* appear only subsequent to the advent of Italian neo-capitalism. We do find a reference to the “*accidia radicale della [sua] anima*” in “Le belle bandiere,” a poem included in *Poesia in forma di rosa* (1964). However, this reference to the radical sloth of his own soul seems to resonate with a more superficial equation of the sin with laziness as it constitutes a moment of self-castigation in which he mourns his inability to maintain friendships.\(^8\) It seems unlikely, then, that this earlier reference to *acedia* encompasses the density of meaning evident later. Concerning, then, Pasolini’s use of a more multifaceted concept of *acedia*, it should be stated that direct reference to early theological writings on the complex psychology of the sin are not present in *Petrolio* or elsewhere in Pasolini’s work. However, his citation of Psalm 90 (*Petrolio*, 18) indicates that the conceptual density of such theological writings is precisely what Pasolini had in mind. Moreover, Pasolini’s familiarity with the Christian tradition and the complexity of his relationship with Catholicism allows us to argue that his notion of the sin far exceeded the modern equation of sloth with laziness. In fact, it is clear that he understood *acedia* as a restless dissatisfaction that reflected a fall from a once immediate physicality of natural desire into an apathetic and quietly desperate lethargy. This is borne out most evidently in his “*Abiura dalla Trilogia della vita*,” published in June of 1975. Here Pasolini justifies disavowing his cinematic *Trilogy of Life* (*Decameron*, 1971; *I racconti di Canterbury*, 1972; *Il fiore delle mille e una notte*, 1974) with reference to the sin of sloth. He maintains that, in post-Economic Boom Italy, false tolerance and corporeal degradation had traumatized the sexual lives of Italians to such an extent that “ciò che nelle fantasie sessuali era dolore e gioia, è divenuto suicida delusione, informe accidia” (*Lettere luterane*, 72).

In *Petrolio*, Pasolini directly cites the sin, both with its modern spelling and its Latin form, as the figures of Tetis and Polis stop for an appetitif in a local piazza. They not only make the hair of the nearby students stand on end, but produce a similarly unsettling effect on the barman who, “venuto umilmente la mattina da Prima Porta, e non quindi [...] incompetente di accidia, o acedia [...] sentì bagnarsi la fronte di sudore agghiacciato” (*Petrolio*, 18). Moreover, as he illustrates the sublimity of the noonday

\(^8\) “Di colpo i miei amici poeti/che condividono con me il brutto biancore/di questi Anni Sessanta/ uomini e donne, appena un po’ più anziani/o più giovani — sono là, nel sole.
Non ho saputo avere la grazia/per tenermeli stretti — nell’ombra di una vita/che si svolge troppo attaccata/all’acedia radicale della mia anima” (*Bestemmmie*, 720).
appearance of the demonic, Pasolini cites, as does Agamben in his exposition of the evolution of *acedia* (Agamben, 8), Giacomo Leopardi’s 1815 essay, *Saggio sopra gli errori popolari degli antichi*. In addition, I would also suggest that *acedia* provides an interpretative key for Pasolini’s first neo-capitalist film and novel, *Teorema* (1968). The sin may provide a key to unlocking the significance of the strange visitor of *Teorema* as well as the family members’ reactions as it can be no coincidence that the bells that ring throughout the novel are the “campane di mezzogiorno” (*Teorema*, 9, 12, 15, 136, 192).

Pasolini’s citation of *accidia* or *acedia* in *Petrolio* indicates a programmatic paralleling of neo-capitalist reality with an interpretation of the sin that clearly stretches far beyond a superficial equation of sloth with laziness. Specifically identifying neo-capitalism as the setting for his novel (*Petrolio*, 10), Pasolini writes in *Petrolio* of Carlo’s dream-vision of a Dantean journey through the circles of a consumerist Hell. At the heart of this new society lies the young heterosexual couple whose function is that of commanding admiration for an “assoluta autosufficienza e totale mancanza di ogni interesse per ciò che non riguardi il loro [...] rapporto” (*Petrolio*, 360). This attitude is embodied in the permanent embrace (*Petrolio*, 361) of Il Merda, the long-haired young traveler of Carlo’s vision, and his girlfriend Cinzia, “una ragazza qualsiasi, coi blue-jeans, un sedere grosso e una camicetta comprata alla Standa” (*Petrolio*, 325). Together the couple journeys through the various circles of hell. They pass through a series of “gironi” that, in contrasting post-Economic Boom society with an earlier version of social reality, provide consumerist society with models to emulate. These models include ugliness, respectability, bourgeois dignity, conformity, tolerance, and free love. Il Merda then progresses to the second part of consumerist Hell where the “gironi” become “bolge” or ditches. The “bolge” contrast a scene of a past reality with a twofold vision of neo-capitalism. This doubleness suggests the effects of consumerism on the middle class youth on one side and the working class on the other. Here, in the first bolgia, the innocent physical smells of sweat and dust that characterized the sub-proletarian past are contrasted with the stink of a “sporcizia più antica e repellente” (*Petrolio*, 368). It is “un odore indefinibile: un odore di gas, mescolato a cipolle, tabacco rimasticato, vomito” (*Petrolio*, 368). The second “bolgia” contrasts the innocence and honor of the “antichi delinquenti” (*Petrolio*, 369) with the “Matta Bestialità” (*Petrolio*, 371) of the new criminality. The third compares the bygone human dignity and happiness of a group of young Communists with the prosaic qualities of modern normality. The fourth bolgia contrasts a poetically linguis-
tic past with a modern aphasia. Here a “lingua nazionale” has taken hold and even those who continue to speak dialect speak a “dialetto grigio e puramente informativo, rimodellato sulla lingua” (Petrolio, 379). This is a dialect that, having lost its original expressivity, “non fa pena ma orrore” (Petrolio, 379). The journey ends at this stage when Il Merda falls, in a citation of Dante’s infernal journey (Inf. V, 142), “come corpo morto cade” (Petrolio, 380).

This portrait of neo-capitalist Italy suggests a preliminary series of parallels with the specific symptoms of the sin as outlined above. For Pasolini, neo-capitalism is characterized, above all, by the degree of unreality which it imposes on the lives of its citizens. He describes the anthropological crisis of the close of the 1960s as precisely the period in which the “irrealtà della sottocultura dei ‘mass media’” began to triumph (Lettere luterane, 72). This transition to the unreality spawned by the universalization of bourgeois values led him to famously diagnose an Italian genocide that consisted of a destruction of values that led “anche senza carneficine e fucilazioni di massa, alla soppressione di larghe zone della società stessa” (Scritti corsari, 226). The homogenization of Italian society and the obliteration of the epic or mythic proletarian reality created a frantic desperation reminiscent of the desperatio of acedia. The “ambiguous [...] love-hate for good” of malitia, the rancor, or the “revolt of the bad conscience against those who exhort it to good” (Agamben, 4) marked a society characterized by an increasing aggression. The cowardice of pusillanimitas resonates with the spiritual bankruptcy and apathy of a smug society that had, as Pasolini insisted, lost all that was sacred and mythic. And, finally, the torpor and the evagatio mentis are evident in the anesthetized Italian masses that frantically pursue their own enslavement to a consumerist culture industry. Moreover, in the face of this frantic hedonism, we discern a strong parallel with Dante’s description of acedia as an example of love “che corre al ben con ordine corrotto” (Purg. XVII, 126).

Closer examination of the neo-capitalist young people who inhabit Il Merda’s Hell allows us to further this cursory series of parallels. Il Merda’s own posture of smug self-sufficiency is “piena di odio contro tutto e tutti benché non [disgiunto] da un’ansia [(ben nascosta)]” (Petrolio, 331). This anxiety ridden hatred toward everyone and everything is coupled with a self-satisfied separateness that recalls the ambivalent malice described by Agamben. Il Merda and his kind, Pasolini suggests here and in his essays of this period, deeply suffer the loss of reality spawned by neo-capitalism. Like the slothful trapped in the love-hate relationship with the good, these young men and women reveal their painful loss in an aggressive hatred.
These attitudes are reiterated in the first circle when Pasolini describes young people so in thrall to the model of Ugliness and Repulsiveness that their devotion is manifested in violence against minorities. Again, their self-satisfaction is coupled with aggression, this time a “torva luce di rancore, rabbia, furia” (Petrolio, 335). This rancor takes as its target those who do not submit to the authority of the new models of appearance. These victims are targeted because, by their example, they expose the total acquiescence of those made repulsive by the new hairstyles described. Reinforcing his aforementioned denunciation of a loss of reality, Pasolini underlines the monstrous quotational quality of the hairstyles worn. The varied styles cite former eras and even great men or women of the past, amongst whom Pasolini notes Christ and Cavour. Those born with curly hair are the most unfortunate as their loss of reality extends to the corruption of nature. They are forced to “deform[are] completamente la loro natura” (Petrolio, 335) in order to conform to the trends. This enslavement to fashionable hairstyles is matched in the subsequent girone with an equivalent surrender to changes in clothing. These changes are aimed exclusively at erasing sartorial class divisions and establishing instead an interclass identity (Petrolio, 338). Here Pasolini anticipates Agamben’s reference to the “bad conscience” (Agamben, 4) when he identifies the rage of the “cattiva coscienza” (338) that derives from the feigned beatitude of total adherence to models of clothing.

The pusillanimity associated with acedia takes the form of a timidity built on a sense of bourgeois dignity. The young men no longer behave as though virility were a question of “malandrinismo” and “orgoglio del proprio cazzo” (Petrolio, 344). Instead virility has become a way of dressing “da figli di papa” (Petrolio, 344). It is a “certa timidezza e riservatezza straordinariamente legata alla maggiore forza muscolare” (Petrolio, 345) and is built on the belief that everyone and everything is to be feared (Petrolio, 346). These young men, subject to a conformism that, Pasolini underlines, spawned the German SS, manifest such a “delicatezza intellettuale e femminile” (Petrolio, 362) that their older poor and violent brothers “se li sarebbero tutti inculati dal primo all’ultimo, o gli avrebbero dato fuoco” (Petrolio, 363). Moreover, the desperation of acedia is revealed in Petrolio in the enduring neurosis of these young men and women (Petrolio, 340). Disoriented and sick, the young people of this new civilization behave like animals that “girano e rigirano su se stessi come impazziti perché conservano ancora l’avidità pur avendone perso le ragioni” (Petrolio, 340).

The torpor of acedia makes its appearance with Il Merda himself who is described as having a somnolent gaze (Petrolio, 331). It is equally evident
in the distracted hedonism of a social order constructed on what Pasolini deems an insidious principle of false tolerance. Having been granted increasing sexual liberties as a result of a morally lenient social and cultural order, these young people emulate the models of free love, bourgeois life and hedonism. However, their behavior constitutes a somnolent and automatic imitation rather than stemming from a radically militant demand for increased liberalism. Thus, their free love and hedonism become a mindless priapism in which all sexual mystery and eroticism are lost. Tight clothing and short skirts reveal the intimate shapes of genitalia in an indecent and pitiful exhibitionism that is nothing more than a lethargic emulation of the modern mentality (*Petrolio*, 349-351). Crucial to the maintenance of the torpor are the mechanisms of repetitive acquisition of consumerism itself, mechanisms that might be paralleled with the final symptom of *acedia*, namely, the *evagatio mentis*. Subject to an American-style materialism (*Petrolio*, 354), the young people are called upon to obey the capricious cycling of fashion, a cycling that resonates easily with a slothful state of distraction. This distraction coupled with the ubiquitous consumerist injunction to enjoy completes the parallels between *acedia* and the cultural reality of what Pasolini refers to as the “nuova civiltà” (*Petrolio*, 354).

Turning from the thematic development of *acedia* and the resonances with neo-capitalist Italy, this article would suggest a further parallel between the symptomatology of the sin and the stylistic choices in *Petrolio*. Beginning in the mid 1960s what is conspicuous in Pasolini’s prose production is a marked shift away from what might be termed the mimetic lyricism of his earlier writing and a movement toward an overtly thematized metaliterary meditation on the nature of literature and, in particular, narrative form, itself.9 Moreover, this formal self-awareness is matched with a departure from the dialectal experimentalism that characterized his earlier novelistic production. Instead, Pasolini turned to the nationalized Italian whose birth he had announced disdainfully in 1964 with the following words: “Perciò, in qualche modo, con qualche titubanza, e non

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9 This is not to say that Pasolini’s pre-1960s poetic remains devoid of formal sophistication and literary self-awareness, far from it. Pasolini himself situated his narrative works of the 1950s in a literary genealogy that passed from Verga through Joyce and Gadda (*Saggi sulla politica e sulla società*, 919-920). Moreover, he unequivocally differentiated the experimentalism of his plurilingualistic pastiche of “naturalismo espressionistico” (*Empirismo eretico*, 40), from the “superficiale documentarismo” (*Saggi sulla politica e sulla società*, 920) that many had attributed to his inclusion of lengthy passages of Roman dialect.
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senza emozione, mi sento autorizzato ad annunciare, che è nato l’italiano come lingua nazionale” (Empirismo retico, 20). This altered linguistic reality is well-documented in Pasolini’s journalistic and essayistic work. In the consumerist Italy he described, all social classes employed this instrumental nationalized language of the technocratic north. The dialects had been dealt a fatal blow and the children of parents who once spoke dialect were no longer in a position to communicate in this medium. In a 1974 debate with Italo Calvino who had disparagingly accused him of mourning an “Italietta,” Pasolini declared that the descendants of the “borgatari” who peopled his Roman novels would now be obliged to consult the glossary “come un buon borghese del Nord” (Scritti corsari, 54). What is more, Pasolini was forced to acknowledge that the preservation and defense of dialect had become a strategy of a traditionalist political right, a “Destra sublime” (Saggi sulla letteratura, 2831).

Petrolio marks the culmination of this linguistic trend and reflects to the full the formal and linguistic shift in Pasolini’s aesthetic. Encompassing a multiplicity of non-dialectal linguistic modes and registers, the novel is characterized by a stylistic impartiality or neutrality that Franco Fortini, in his 1992 review of Petrolio for Il Sole — 24 Ore, termed Pasolini’s need for a non-style (Fortini, 239). Maria Antonietta Grignani subsequently categorized the language of the novel as “scientifico-comunicativo più che espressivo” (A partire da Petrolio, 137). Pasolini provides direct evidence for Grignani’s discussion of a stylistic collapse (139) as he prefaces his novel with the declared intent of embracing a “stile piano, oggettivo, grigio” (3). This distance from literariness is reinforced by the author’s stated determination to speak directly to the reader not in his capacity as codified authorial voice, but rather as himself, as a “carne e ossa” presence in the text (544).

Yet these stated ambitions to transparency do not translate into an uncomplicated and coherent novel.10 In his preface, Pasolini states his

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10 It must of course be borne in mind that Petrolio was left unfinished as a result of the author’s death in 1975. Concerning speculation about a final form of the novel, there remains some level of disagreement amongst scholars working on Petrolio. Benedetti insists that Petrolio, in its published form, coincides with the project the author had in mind (Benedetti, 1998, 159). In her essay “Questione di stile?” published in A partire da Petrolio, Grignani argues that the novel “prevedeva una frammentarietà eretta a sistema costruttivo del libro” (137) and claims that Pasolini understood that Petrolio would ultimately take the form of that which we now read (140). Other critics such as David Ward maintain that Pasolini would never have permitted the publication of the text in its 1992 form (Ward, 89).
ambition to present his novel under the guise of a critical edition of an unedited text, of which four or five manuscripts survive. Some of these manuscripts will match, while others will not. The critical edition, he explains, will encompass other material such as oral accounts, letters to and by the author, as well as illustrations drawn by the author whose identity remains a “problema filologico irrisolto” (Petrolio, 3). In addition, the “vaste lacune” in the text are to be filled with an “enorme quantitativo di documenti storici” (Petrolio, 3) composed of journalistic texts, interviews and cinematographic documentaries, which will be analyzed from a philological, stylistic and attributional perspective. In its entirety, the novel is to be characterized by an essentially fragmentary nature to the extent that, as far as certain complete narrative portions are concerned, it will be impossible to establish “se si tratta di fatti reali, di sogni o di congetture fatte da qualche personaggio” (Petrolio, 4). Concerning narrative structure, Petrolio recoils from the linearity of a text written “a schidionata,” like the meat speared and cooked on a skewer (Petrolio, 97). Instead, the novel is composed “a brulichio” as it strives to attain the churning and amorphous configuration of a teeming mass (Petrolio, 97). This, Pasolini acknowledges, will leave the reader somewhat disoriented (Petrolio, 97). In addressing his intention to include sections in a Kavafian literary neo-Greek, he explains that these “pagine stampate ma illeggibili vogliono proclamare in modo estremo” his determination to create “a form” that consists very simply of “qualcosa di scritto” (Petrolio, 155). Moreover, this premeditated illegibility should be considered symbolic for the rest of the text (Petrolio, 155). In fact, Pasolini states, his project would be better served by the invention of an alphabet of ideographs or hieroglyphs but, referring to Henri Michaux’s patient undertaking of such a project, he explains that his own cultural background and character would prevent him from embarking on such an extreme and ultimately boring task. He has, instead, employed in his “costruzione autosufficiente e inutile, dei materiali apparentemente significativi” (Petrolio, 155).

How might we explain this transformation of Pasolini’s poetic? Why would he renounce the expressivity of the dialects to embrace a style he describes as intentionally grey, objective and flat? Why would an author who, in the same period of time, wrote journalistic texts of great clarity write a novel that, structurally speaking, is, at best, disorienting and, at worst, illegible? What justifies Pasolini’s apparent attack on the culturally codified construct of the author figure as purveyor of style? And, finally, how does Pasolini reconcile this transformed aesthetic with his demonstrated impulse to engage passionately with his political and social reality?
In attempting to answer these questions we might return to the ambiguous core of acedia and, more specifically, to what Agamben describes as one of the most surprising aspects of medieval psychology. If, as Gregory and Aquinas underline, acedia implies a sorrow with respect to the spiritual well-being of man, then the slothful man is not afflicted by an evil as such, but is plagued by his impotent contemplation of the divine good. In establishing an opposition not between sloth and sollicitudo or diligence, but rather between sloth and gaudium or joy (Summa theologiae II-II: 35, 2), Aquinas underlines the paradoxical qualities of the sin. Described as a “perversion of the will” that “simultaneously desires and bars the path to his or her own desire” (Agamben 6), acedia is a withdrawal from the divine good or “recessus a bono divino” (Aquinas, De Malo, 11,1). As such, the sin suggests the simultaneous presence and absence of the desired object or state. In withdrawing from the good, acedia, as impotent desire, affirms and remains anchored to the presence of that which is desired. However, this desired object is, at the same time, revealed to be unattainable or absent. In this way, the sin of acedia comes to constitute “a mortal illness containing in itself the possibility of its own cure” (Agamben, 7). Similarly, Petrolio hovers self-consciously between the new cultural configuration of neo-capitalism and the now absent mythical proletarian reality. Pasolini stages an ironic back-and-forth between the absence of his authorial style and the nationalized language of neo-capitalist unreality. As he attempts to transform acedia into a potential cure, however, he delimits the scope of his ironic detachment by inserting his living “flesh and blood” presence within this unreal language of instrumentality. In so doing, he forges an engagement, as will be discussed, based on the absence of the codified author figure possessed of a recognizable literary style in order to call attention to the artifice of literary practice and, by extension, the cultural configuration of neo-capitalism.

Turning first to the question of style, we note immediately that, with Petrolio, Pasolini retreats from what he saw as the innate expressivity of the dialect as all literariness, or, simply, literary style, acquires a discernible awkwardness. There emerges, in Petrolio, an almost total exclusion of direct speech, a situation in which all reference to the dialect of his beloved Roman proletariat, the mainstay of his earlier novels, acquires what Grignani refers to as an “attitudine citazionale,” (A partire da Petrolio, 147). References are now prefaced with a “this is what they would have said,” as in the case of the description of II Merda’s triangular head. Here the author explains that once his friends would have said to him “‘Pe’ facce un giro attorno, un pidocchio ce metterebbe n’anno’: ma ora non si usano più
espressioni simili” (Petrolio, 324-325).

In terms of Pasolini’s relationship with the expressive excesses of his former aesthetic self, we find that he repeatedly evokes his absent lyricism. He refers to the “diligenza” and “semplicità di forma” (Petrolio, 253) employed in his description of Carlo I’s dream-vision of a garden peopled with various gods and allegorical figures. However, when broaching the final sleeping figure of Salvatore Dulcimascolo, an ideal of proletarian man whom he describes as an “eslege,” Pasolini writes the following: “dovrei, se mai, impegnare la mia volontà di stile” (Petrolio, 253). In reading about Dulcimascolo, we are treated to absolute or totalizing terms. Dulcimascolo enfolds in his sleeping lap a “purezza” and “inviolabilità” as if his penis “fosse piú vicino alla grazia creatrice o comunque piú uguale e prossimo al modello inaugurale di ogni altro” (Petrolio, 260). And again: this is a “sessualità naturale,” a perfect repetition, “di un meccanismo senza la possibili- bilità di errore” (Petrolio, 260). However, we also discover that at no point does Pasolini’s aforementioned “volontà di stile” return in the form of his dialectal expressionism. Similarly, during the episode of the “pratone della Casilina” when Carlo II places himself in the sexual service of a group of at least twenty young men, Pasolini’s lyricism is tempered by a request for indulgence from the reader. Transported by the approaching sexual miracle, the author allows himself a poetic description of a sky that shows “qualche nuvola spennellata appena nel suo indaco profondo” and a moon, “in mezzo a quel cielo, che da rossa stava diventando di una luce fresca e purissima, con accanto, altrettanto luminosa la fedele piccola stella del crepuscolo” (Petrolio, 201-202). Having described the details of the celestial bodies, he is moved to the poetic claim that the entire cosmos is there “in quel pratone, in quel cielo, in quegli orizzonti urbani appena visibili e in quell’inebriante odore di erba estiva” (Petrolio, 202), a claim immediately followed by a request that the reader not laugh at the cosmic reference but rather allow himself or herself to be transported “senza opporre troppa resistenza” (Petrolio, 202). This citational attitude, both with respect to dialect and lyricism, allows the author to perform a self-conscious “recessus” from his distinctive style, his former artistic good, as it were. In this manner, like the divine good, literariness is paradoxically underlined by virtue of its absence and remains in the text as a type of spectrally present indication of how things once were.

As well as evoking his former aesthetic, Pasolini’s citational “non-style” also introduces a satiric dimension to his novel.11 The citational satire of

11 This satirical dimension echoes the Menippean satire and is wholly appropriate in a text identified by Pasolini as a modern Satyricon (Petrolio, 3).
Petrolio targets a postmodern reality structured itself on citation by self-consciously echoing the essential inauthenticity of the clothing, hairstyling and behavioral habits of neo-capitalism. But, in addition, Petrolio seems to satirize formally the specific symptomatology of acedia that it denounces in neo-capitalist Italy. Indeed the structural proliferation of the novel suggests a formal resonance with consumerist cycles. To this end, a parallel with the final symptoms of acedia might be proposed. The final two “daughters of acedia” are identified as torpor with regard to rules (torpor circa praecepta), and wandering of the mind (evagatio mentis). Providing further detail, Agamben explains that evagatio mentis reveals itself in four traits; namely, a verbositas (proliferation of meaningless words), a curiositas (insatiable desire to know), an instabilitas loci vel propositi (instability of purpose), and an importunitas mentis (inability to structure one’s thought) (Agamben, 5). In describing Petrolio to Moravia, Pasolini indicates a programmatic literary torpor circa praecepta as he announces his rejection of “quella convenzionalità che è in fondo giuoco” (Petrolio, 545). Furthermore, the constant thematic and stylistic digressions of the novel suggest a deliberate evagatio mentis and verbositas. Curiositas appears as an excess of factual information and disconnected detail. Instabilitas loci vel propositi takes the form of the aforementioned non-linear or swarming narrative. And, finally, importunitas mentis emerges as narrative proliferation.

Of central significance to the tonality of this citational and satirical mode of composition is the strategic emergence of irony in Petrolio. Announcing his debt to the novelistic tradition of irony, Pasolini acknowledges that Petrolio is replete with digressions “alla Sterne” (Petrolio, 117; 88). Again, in appunto 19a, he describes a Venetian literary man who, on strolling through the stalls at Porta Portese, discovers a suitcase filled with books amongst which features prominently the novelistic tradition of irony exemplified by Cervantes, Swift, Dostoyevsky, Joyce and, once again, Sterne. It is most surprising to find the detachment associated with the oblique attitude of the ironic mode in the work of an author whose earnest passion had always led him to address matters head on. In fact, in an earlier work, La Divina mimesis, Pasolini describes a former incarnation of  

12 Aquinas provides a development of these terms in Summa theologica, 11:11, 35, 4.
13 La Divina Mimesis, composed in the mid 1960s, constitutes in many valuable ways a dramatization of Pasolini’s stylistic conversion. The fiction of the unfinished text revolves around a Dantean journey undertaken in the context of the social and cultural changes prompted by the economic miracle and during which the poet/protagonist is lead by an earlier version of himself, namely, the poet/novelist Pasolini of the 1950s.
himself as a “campione della serietà, della passione” (Divina mimesis, 18). Moreover, he marvels at his atypical use of the rhetorical figure of litotes, a central figure of irony. This occurs when the Pasolini of the 1950s explains that, in dealing with the beast that impeded Pasolini-pilgrim’s progress up the Dantean hill, “non c’è da scherzare molto” (Divina mimesis, 17). Pasolini-poet suspects that this affectation was acquired by his former incarnation’s contact with fellow intellectuals. Moreover, he argues that this rhetorical trope suggests a deep-seated bourgeois attitude and the implicit fear of directly speaking the truth: “paura di dire la verità nella sublimità dell’espressione frontale, il bisogno di porgerla di nascosto, con negligenza, parlando d’altro” (Divina mimesis, 18). It is this unforgiving characterization of irony as a deplorable bourgeois tool of mystification that lends a “serietà mortale, quasi plumbea, da adolescente” (La Porta, 75), and a proselytizing earnestness to much of Pasolini’s writing.

How, then, might we reconcile these two positions with respect to irony? Pasolini, in embracing irony, seems to abandon the passionate solemnity of his earlier self in order to adopt a tone that associates his voice with neo-capitalist pusillanimity. His acceptance of an oblique mode of expression seems to lend a timidity to his passion and parallels his voice with the irony that prevails both in II Merda’s physical demeanor and in the language of the young men and women who people the Hell vision (Petrolio, 366). However, Pasolini’s convoluted irony is re-appropriated as it becomes part of the project of reconfiguring intellectual engagement. Differentiating Pasolini’s irony from that of an ironic tradition, Filippo La Porta counters Luigi Baldacci’s claim that Petrolio manifests an affinity with Gadda’s satiric humor by defying the reader to find a single page of the novel that might generate laughter (Porta, 74). In effect, the goal of the ironic distance of his citational attitude and his Sternian digressions concerning the style or content of his project is absolutely not the introduction of levity. Rather, Pasolini’s irony is that of someone who continues to despise the ironic mode, but employs it in order to separate his authorial self from the living “flesh and blood” intellectual as part of a reconfiguration of intellectual engagement. Here Pasolini echoes the paradoxical dynamic of acedia as he stylistically embraces the symptomatology of the sin, or the unreality of neo-capitalism, in order to exploit the aforementioned curative dimension of the sin highlighted by Agamben.

Petrolio becomes a novel intent on destroying novelistic convention so that Pasolini can distance his living self from the literary game that he “non [ha] voglia più di giuocare” (Petrolio, 545). Thus, in his letter to Moravia, Pasolini describes a styleless novel that will block the emergence of the
traditional narrator who disappears as a textual presence, "per lasciar posto a una figura convenzionale che è l'unica che possa avere un vero rapporto con il lettore" (Petrolio, 544). The objective of this maneuver is that of shattering the naturalist "meravigliosa illusione di una storia che si svolge per conto proprio" (Petrolio, 545) and, in turn, eradicating the conventional author figure as purveyor of form and style. The ideological seed of this stance is evident in an interview originally published in Cinema e film during the winter of 1966-1967. Here, Pasolini explicitly contests the value attributed to artistic style by suggesting that stylistic analysis is little more than a means by which the artist is relegated to the role of an aesthetic technician or stylistic workhorse:

È molto spiacevole, sapete, per un autore, sentirsì sempre considerare come una 'bestia da stile'. E che tutto, per quel che lo riguarda, venga ridotto a pedina per comprendere la sua carriera stilistica. Ciò è disumano. È vero che, studiando un autore, bisognerebbe cercarne pure un'unità! Tuttavia ciò non va fatto in modo elementare, e con l'aria compiaciuta e ammiccante con cui un impiegato di banca dice male o bene di un suo collega: con l'aria cioè di chi abbia competenza di una 'cosa' e riconduca tutto – nelle chiacchiere della cerchia – a quella cosa la cui competenza gli dà autorità e dunque diritto di appartenere alla cerchia. Anzi, ve lo dico in faccia: mi offende molto che tutto quello che faccio e dico venga ricondotto a spiegare il mio stile. È un modo di esorcizzarmi, e forse di darmi dello stupido: uno stupido nella vita, che è magari bravo nel suo lavoro. E quindi anche un modo per escludermi e di mettermi a tacere (Empirismo eretico, 228).

In Petrolio, Pasolini pushes these concerns to their formal and logical limit. In order to counter the exorcism effect of codified style and genre, he uses Sternian digression and citational distance not to temper his passion, but rather to refuse the role of stylistic technician. Pasolini intervenes, as he tells Moravia, "come scrivo a te questa lettera" (Petrolio, 544) and as such he establishes a distance between his ironic tone and the pusillanimity of neo-capitalist irony. Because the voice that repeatedly interrupts the narrative seeks to be the undisguised and real presence of Pasolini as living subject, he ensures that he is inseparable from his own text. As such, the risk of being marginalized as conventional stylistic workhorse is minimized, if not avoided.

This calculated confusion between the conventional narrator and the living author is advanced thematically in a novel described by Fortini as the "vera relazione' di un viaggio autobiografico" (Fortini, 239). Pasolini chooses his father's name, Carlo, for his protagonist, but clearly states that
no comparison can be made between the two (Petrolio, 29). Rather, Pasolini himself and his protagonist share biographical details. He describes Carlo-protagonist as “un uomo diviso e (come dice Lukács) problematico” who is the same age as the author (Petrolio, 29-30). Carlo grew up in a provincial city (Ravenna as opposed to Pasolini’s Bologna) in a petit-bourgeois household (Petrolio, 30-31). Pasolini also expressed his intention to include in Petrolio nude photos of himself taken by Dino Pedriali. Finally, Carlo’s splitting reflects the act of writing itself. This is clarified by the internal narrator of the “Storia di mille e un personaggio” who describes his creative process in the following manner: “mi presi e mi smembrai. [...] Dopo essermi ricostruito, mi smembrai. Dovevo essere tutti, non due” (Petrolio, 417). This strategic insertion of his living self into the supposed artifice of his novel forges a very particular type of engagement that seeks to combat unreality, both literary and social, with the unwieldy presence of the real.

In her 1998 publication, Pasolini contro Calvino, Carla Benedetti has provided clarification of Pasolini’s position within his work. She describes the final Pasolini as a performance artist, intrinsically bound to the presentation of his work (Benedetti, 1998, 139). Moreover, she considers the author’s presence in the text as a refusal of an exclusively aesthetic sphere of art, and argues that the idea of poetry as a form of real action is the guiding concept behind the author’s final production (Benedetti, 1998, 139). Arguing that his performative attitude acts as an explosive that he places within the sphere of the poetic (Benedetti, 1998, 143-144), she suggests that Pasolini’s program, like that of the Dadaists, is that of the fight of art against its own institutionalization (Benedetti, 1998, 172). Despite apparent resonances with contemporary poststructuralist theories of literature, Pasolini’s continued adherence to the imperatives of his Gramscian principles ensures an unbreakable connection between art and the reality in which he moves and breathes (Benedetti, 1998, 139). Thus, Benedetti hails Pasolini’s work as an “impure literature” (Benedetti, 1995, 9-13), a literature founded upon a principle of “contamination” with reality. Pasolini himself had discussed his own work in terms of a contamination and Benedetti cites an interview published in 1994 in Bianco e Nero, n.6, where the author unequivocally reaffirms this position: “il segno sotto cui lavoro sempre è la contaminazione.” Further clarifying this issue, Benedetti addresses Giuseppe Zigaina’s conviction that the mature Pasolini no longer

14 In fact, Rebecca West describes Petrolio as an eminently “writerly” novel (A partire da Petrolio, 43).
intended a type of gaddian contamination of languages, but, "una contaminazione totale" that does not exclude from the mixture of languages, the presence of his physical life and his political action (Zigaina, 21).

Benedetti's characterization of Pasolini as performance artist is provocative and useful when considering the complex status of his authorial position within *Petrolio*. With Pasolini as performance artist, the novel itself becomes a stage on which to perform the erasure of his authorial persona as culturally codified purveyor of style in order to finally posit the validity of an intellectual engagement based on the voice, stripped of style, of a real living subject. In other words, to simply "urlare [...] di ribrezzo e condanna" (*Lettere luterane*, 29) as he wrote in March of 1975 to the imaginary Gennariello, though noble, is not sufficient. Rather, in the social "irrealtà" (*Lettere luterane*, 72) of neo-capitalism, he must, in writing, explode the generic conventions of the novel in order to establish a space of reality within the confines of literary artifice.

The result is an impossibly convoluted novel. The tension stemming from the opposition between the stylistic neutrality of a self-abnegating author figure who insists on the particularity of his own "flesh and bone" presence, transforms Pasolini's final novel into the "preambolo di un testamento" (*Petrolio*, 545). *Petrolio* itself becomes, in a sense, the tomb that envelops the structure of absent presence and present absence introduced by the core dynamic of *acedia*, as the stylistically neutral novel memorializes its own absent expressivity while simultaneously condemning the present society that triggered that absence. Furthermore, the authorial death for which this novel is to serve as testament is the consequence of a project of literary martyrdom by which Pasolini-author willfully erases himself, much as the internal narrator of the "Storia di mille e un personaggio" seeks to die in his own creation: "[morire] nella mia creazione: morire, come in effetti si muore, di parto: morire, come in effetti si muore, eiaculando nel ventre materno" (*Petrolio*, 419). This Pasolinian death of the author is starkly different then from the authorial death inaugurated by Barthes in 1968. Instead of positing the unity of the text in the mind of an active reader, Pasolini creates a willfully distorted and dispersive work of art that, as it advances, seeks to erase the possibility of literary writing and, in turn, of its own existence as conventional novel. *Petrolio* inhabits a shifting space between past and present, expressivity and neutrality, irony and solemnity, and, most crucially, reality and unreality. In an incessant oscillation between the terms of each dichotomy, Pasolini insists that, in the unreality of a diseased neo-capitalism, intellectual engagement must become a type of sabotage. Tallying with a period in which he characterized his journalistic contributions as the acts of a pirate, a Lutheran or one
who counters authority with chaos,\(^{15}\) Pasolini ends his career as novelist by sowing piratical disorder at the heart of a novel that can only be described as chaotically mutant.

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**Works Cited**


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\(^{15}\) I refer to “Il caos,” the column Pasolini contributed, from 1968 to 1970, to *Tempo illustrato*, as well as to *Scritti corsari* (1975) and *Lettere luterane* (1975), Pasolini’s collected contributions to *Corriere della sera, Tempo illustrato* and other papers and journals, written, in the case of *Scritti corsari* from 1973 to 1975 and, in the case of *Lettere luterane*, in 1975.