



PAOLO DESOGUS

# LAMENTATION AND LAY SYMBOLISM IN DE MARTINO AND PASOLINI

**ABSTRACT:** This essay examines the complex intellectual relationship between Ernesto De Martino and Pier Paolo Pasolini, focusing on their shared yet divergent engagement with folk poetry, lamentation, and secular symbolism. Despite their common affiliation with Marxism and Gramscian thought, Pasolini and De Martino developed distinct methodologies: De Martino's "progressive folklore" emphasized the political and existential dimensions of popular culture, while Pasolini interrogated the aesthetic and ideological layers of folk expressions, stressing their subordination to hegemonic forms. The study explores how Pasolini, through works like *Canzoniere italiano* and *Le ceneri di Gramsci*, critically reworks De Martino's historicism by emphasizing irreducible residues of human experience, mourning, and contradiction within history. It also highlights Pasolini's secular reinterpretation of symbolic forms—such as the red flag—in poetry and cinema, contrasting it with De Martino's anthropological framework. Ultimately, the essay uncovers a paradoxical affinity between the two thinkers: a shared concern for the existential crises of subaltern communities, and a mutual, though differently articulated, resistance to the abstraction and rationalization of human experience.

**KEYWORDS:** Progressive folklore, Historicism, Secular symbolism, Mourning and lamentation, Gramsci.

## Folk poetry

Despite their shared interest in folk poetry, affiliation with Gramsci, and alignment with the Marxist left, De Martino and Pasolini did not enjoy a close relationship.<sup>1</sup> As I have discussed in previous studies, their interactions were often fraught, stemming from divergent views on history, differing approaches to political engagement, and perhaps mutual distrust.<sup>2</sup> Pasolini's stance toward De Martino oscillated between competition and attentiveness, marked by both conflict and openness. While De Martino showed

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<sup>1</sup> The relationship between Pasolini and De Martino has been the subject of an extensive bibliography. See, in particular, Didi-Huberman 2009, De Laude 2021, Picconi 2014, Sobrero 2015, Tinelli 2018, Tricomi 2011, Verbaro 2021. On the relationship between De Martino and *Nuovi Argomenti*, see Severino 2003b.

<sup>2</sup> The present text can be read as an ideal continuation of Desogus 2022a and 2022b.

minimal interest in Pasolini, the reverse was not true. Pasolini engaged deeply with De Martino's work, drawing significant insights through his unique perspective. Although Pasolini cannot be considered a disciple of De Martino, the Neapolitan anthropologist undeniably served as a major source of inspiration for him.

In my previous essays, I proposed that De Martino may have rekindled Pasolini's interest in Gramsci around 1953. This occurred after Pasolini's estrangement from Marxism after his expulsion from the Friulian Italian Communist Party in November 1949, while serving as cell secretary for the Casarsa della Delizia faction of San Giovanni. Pasolini was among the attendees of the Centro etnologico italiano (Italian Ethnological Center), founded by De Martino in Rome in 1953. This center aimed at broadening discussions on popular culture and ethnology by including non-specialist intellectuals aligned with Gramsci's *Quaderni dal carcere*.<sup>3</sup> Notably, in 1950, the institute supported the publication of the fifth of six volumes edited by Felice Platone and supervised by Palmiro Togliatti, titled *Letteratura e vita nazionale* (*Literature and National Life*). This volume featured significant excerpts from Notebook 27 on folklore. These writings were crucial for studies on popular culture, which during that time underwent a revitalization closely intertwined with political struggles.

It is important to note that 1953 marked a crucial year for Italian folklore studies and anthropology. A growing interest in exploring the lives and worldviews of communities relegated to the "margins of history"<sup>4</sup> was not confined to Rome, where the Centro Etnologico Italiano was based, but spread throughout Italy. This period saw the rise of a sustained focus on the Mezzogiorno, accompanied by the first ethnographic expeditions, such as De Martino's fieldwork in Lucania during the fall of the previous year.

The post-war years were a particularly dynamic period for the study of subaltern realities, as these investigations frequently transcended specialist debates to engage a broader public. It is not surprising, then, that in 1953 both Pasolini and De Martino contributed to a publication like *Radiocorriere*<sup>5</sup> with a series of pieces dedicated to the Mezzogiorno and folk poetry. These contributions were intended to accompany radio broadcasts on similar themes, although, to my knowledge, only De Martino's segments aired between 1953 and 1954.<sup>6</sup>

This same year also saw the founding of two journals that served as platforms for the intersecting intellectual activities of De Martino and Pasolini: *La Lapa*, established by

<sup>3</sup> Pasolini's presence at the meetings of the Centro Etnologico Italiano is attested by Tullio Seppilli (1994, 17). See also the letter to Gianfranco D'Aronco dated August 31, 1953 (Pasolini 2022, 795).

<sup>4</sup> I borrowed the expression from Gramsci and the title of notebook 25 on the subaltern classes (Gramsci 1975, 2277).

<sup>5</sup> The article published by Pasolini in the *Radiocorriere*, not included in the Meridiani works, is of particular importance because it is the first in which Gramsci's name appears (Pasolini 1953, 12). A previous mention in the introduction to *Poesia dialettale del Novecento* appeared within a citation from Muscetta (Pasolini 1952, 735).

<sup>6</sup> The broadcasts have been transcribed and published in De Martino 2002.

Eugenio Cirese (father of Alberto Mario), and *Nuovi Argomenti*, which in its second issue featured an article on De Martino's Lucania expedition titled *Note di viaggio* (*Travel Notes*). Pasolini drew heavily on this article for his *Canzoniere italiano* (*Italian Songbook*), an anthology of Italian folk poetry published in 1955 by Guanda.

Regarding the genesis of Pasolini's *Canzoniere italiano*, a lesser-known detail sheds light on his approach to folklore studies. Between March and April 1953, De Martino developed a proposal for an anthology of folk poetry, which was discussed by Giulio Einaudi and his editorial team at his publishing house. Documents preserved in the Einaudi archives reveal that Paolo Boringhieri reported De Martino's desire to collaborate with Alberto Mario Cirese and Pier Paolo Pasolini, whose previous anthology on dialect poetry, published in 1952, he was familiar with.<sup>7</sup>

These documents reveal that De Martino was familiar with and valued Pasolini's contributions as a literary scholar, even though he never explicitly referenced them in his own work. He considered Pasolini an asset to a project aligned with the research agenda of the Italian Ethnological Center. Since the other proposed collaborator was the young Alberto Mario Cirese—another towering figure in 20th-century Italian anthropology—the project seemed to have promising foundations.

However, the initiative faltered due to difficulties with Einaudi (Desogus 2022a) and possibly the emerging conflict between De Martino and Cirese (Straniero 1976). Within a few months, the idea of a folk poetry anthology was definitively abandoned. Pasolini, meanwhile, continued his work on folk songs and, after securing a new contract with Guanda, decided to pursue his folklore research independently.

The reasons for this failed collaboration lie primarily in the shift in De Martino's intellectual orientation in 1955, when he moved away from the perspective of "progressive folklore." Firstly, his approach combined political engagement and folklore studies under Gramsci's influence. As De Martino wrote in his inaugural essay for *Nuovi Argomenti*, he was particularly intrigued by the "dramatic tension—between scientific interest and ethical-political interest, between history to contemplate and history to live and create" (De Martino 1953, 70; my translation).

Secondly, the breakdown of the collaboration likely stemmed from Pasolini's decision to continue his research on folk poetry independently of De Martino. I have been unable to uncover much about their personal relationship beyond what can be gleaned from the archival record. It is possible that they interacted outside the Centro Etnologico Italiano, perhaps facilitated by Elsa Morante and Alberto Moravia.<sup>8</sup> However, it cannot be ruled out that personality clashes also played a role, particularly regarding the difficulty of conceding leadership of the project to the other. Pasolini already

<sup>7</sup> The discussion regarding the possibility of publishing an anthology of popular songs is reported by Munari 2013, 37. See also Boringhieri 2010, 306.

<sup>8</sup> The acquaintance between De Martino and Elsa Morante from the late 1950s is documented by Fofi 1996, 181.

experienced significant frustration in 1952 while co-editing the dialectal anthology *Poesia dialettale del Novecento* (*Anthology of 20th-Century Dialect Poetry*) with Mario dell'Arco. It is therefore plausible that he was now reluctant to undertake another collaborative project—especially with someone as intellectually overbearing personality as De Martino.<sup>9</sup>

### De Martino's "Progressive folklore"

Pasolini's decision to continue his work independently likely stemmed from a fundamentally different relationship with the literary text and with folklore studies, reflecting two distinct—if not opposing—historical and political points of view. De Martino approached folk poetry primarily through a socio-anthropological lens, often emphasizing the existential dimension in relation to the material conditions of life, with the aim of uncovering the political and oppositional potential inherent in folk songs. This perspective is aptly encapsulated in the term "progressive folklore".<sup>10</sup>

For his part, Pasolini was equally committed to a politically engaged perspective, and his work *Canzoniere italiano* provided an opportunity to renew this commitment. However, his focus was on assessing the degree of expressive autonomy in folk poetry through an analysis of its linguistic and stylistic innovations. In the introduction to the *Canzoniere italiano*, Pasolini argued that folk poetry was deeply dependent on versification models derived from high culture, often reproducing these models in an ossified and conservative manner. On a literary level, folk poetry appeared parasitic and subordinate to the poetry of hegemonic groups. This subordination, in turn, reflected a sociopolitical dynamic, rendering folk poetry largely devoid of progressive impetus (Pasolini 1955c, 886-888).

This claim is reinforced by a statistical observation. Contrary to De Martino's view, the proportion of folk poetry containing overtly political or oppositional elements was minor and not representative of the vast corpus collected by scholars and later compiled for the *Canzoniere italiano*. Instead, epic-lyric poetry predominated in northern Italy (with the exception of Friuli), while lyric poetry was more prevalent in the Mezzogiorno.<sup>11</sup> This does not negate the fact that these texts, as Gramsci suggested, serve as documents that reflect the "worldview and way of life" of the popular classes. However, in contrast to Gramsci, Pasolini insisted that the artistic dimension could not be

<sup>9</sup> In a letter to Giacinto Spagnoletti from March 1952, referring to dell'Arco, Pasolini writes: "Now that I am working on the anthology with him, I see who he is, I see that he lacks the slightest dignity: to the point of allowing his name to be included in a book that was entirely and completely (even in the manual sense) made by me" (Pasolini 2022, 692; my translation).

<sup>10</sup> On "Progressive folklore," see De Martino, 1951a, 1951b, 1951c, 1951d, 1951e, 1952a, 1952b, 1953a, 1953b, and 1953c. An important text about the crisis of this notion is also De Martino 1954b.

<sup>11</sup> On this point, Pasolini reconnects with the studies of Costantino Nigra (Pasolini 1955c, 868).

overlooked, particularly since the ways in which folk poets absorbed and reinterpreted high cultural traditions offered crucial insights into their social reality (Pasolini 1955c, 888).<sup>12</sup>

Pasolini's method, which integrated the stylistics of Contini, Devoto, and Spitzer with an interrogation of ideological traits, regarded the social and the artistic as inseparably intertwined. In this framework, the artistic dimension became coextensive with the political.<sup>13</sup> From this approach, Pasolini drew a striking conclusion: within the "dialectic of history," the words of the oppressed constituted what he called an "unhappy antithesis" (Pasolini 1955c, 893). Articulated under the influence of dominant expressive forms, this antithesis lacked the capacity to overturn power dynamics and assert itself as a hegemonic force. Consequently, contrary to De Martino's claims, Pasolini saw nothing genuinely progressive in folk poetry. While such poetry bore human testimony, expressing existential precarity, emotions, and intimate longings rooted in socially specific lives, it did not, in Pasolini's view, serve as a historical-political catalyst for progressive change. For him, folk songs born on the "margins of history" were unable to ignite a transformative movement.

### "What is historicism?"

The failed publication of the folk anthology for the Einaudi publishing house marked the definitive end of the collaboration between De Martino and Pasolini. However, their shared connections with Alberto Moravia, Elsa Morante, and other figures suggest that their relationship did not completely cease, leaving behind only faint traces. One such trace is their meeting in 1959 during the Crotona Prize, organized by the city's communist administration under the influence of Mario Alicata, who in 1955 succeeded Salinari as head of the cultural commission. The competition, centred on Southern Italy, awarded Pasolini for *Una vita violenta* (*A Violent Life*) in the fiction category and De Martino for *Sud e magia* (*The South and Magic*) in the essay's category. Little evidence remains of their encounter on that occasion, apart from a photograph capturing them at opposite ends of a crowded, elongated table. This image perhaps best encapsulates their relationship—anchored in the shared cultural sphere of the left yet separated by ideological distances that rendered dialogue challenging.

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<sup>12</sup> According to Gramsci, "what distinguishes popular song, within the framework of a nation and its culture, is not its artistic element or its historical origin, but its way of conceiving the world and life, in contrast with official society; here, and only here, should one look for the "collectivity" of popular song and of the people themselves" (Gramsci 1996, 399-400).

<sup>13</sup> This concept recurs in the introduction to *Canzoniere italiano* (Pasolini 1955c) and in numerous writings, including Pasolini 1956. Gian Luca Picconi has referred to it as "a social ontology of style" in Pasolini's research (Picconi 2022).

Pasolini, however, never ceased to engage with the work of the Neapolitan ethnologist. This is evident in the gradual incorporation of De Martino's ideas and reflections into Pasolini's writings. To fully grasp the rationale behind Pasolini's interest, one must return to the period of greatest tension between the two authors, particularly their collaboration with *Nuovi Argomenti*, which at the time was still edited by Carocci and Moravia (Pasolini did not join the editorial team until 1960).<sup>14</sup>

At the end of 1955, De Martino published two articles in *Nuovi Argomenti*: *Historical Considerations on the Lucanian Funeral Lament* and *Religious Consciousness and Historical Consciousness*, which appeared in issues 12 and 14, respectively. These writings laid out a vision of history sharply contrasting with Pasolini's perspective, challenging his concept of a stratified historical process that preserves the remnants of the past within its unfolding.

As the title suggests, the first article focused on funeral lamentation, a research topic that, after initial explorations, culminated in the 1958 publication of *Morte e pianto rituale* (*Death and Ritual Lamentation*). It is a highly significant piece that Pasolini was familiar with, even critiquing it as an example of a "Marxism devoid of clarity" (1955b, 598). The second article, published a few months later, serves as a kind of retrospective written in the margins of a conference on the history of religions held in Rome that April. While it surveys the state of the field, it also seeks to outline a direction for De Martino's research, addressing not only specialists but also intellectuals from other disciplines responsive to the discussions emerging in *Nuovi Argomenti*.

Noteworthy in these writings are De Martino's reflections on historicism, which he defines as follows: "What is historicism? It is a worldview founded on the critical conviction that reality resolves itself entirely into history and that human historical reality, in its individual manifestations, is entirely the work of humanity and is fully knowable by human thought without residues" (De Martino 1955b, 89; my translation).

This reflection reveals the many influences—from Vico to Croce—that De Martino synthesized in his integration of Gramsci's ideas. However, the philosophical-theoretical assertion that historicism entails the resolution of reality into history "without residues" is particularly striking. In practice, De Martino's thought was neither absolute nor unequivocal, though it is plausible that this definition was crafted to defend his work against accusations of irrationalism both from Crocean circles and his political peers.<sup>15</sup>

Even more striking is Pasolini's radically different stance, articulated in the introduction to his *Canzoniere italiano*, a portion of which was previewed in issue 12 of *Nuovi Argomenti*. Here, Pasolini underscores the dialectical defeat of folk poetry through his notion of the "unhappy antithesis", which he interprets as a residual element—

<sup>14</sup> On the relationship between De Martino and *Nuovi Argomenti*, see Severino 2003b, 312-327.

<sup>15</sup> The most famous and discussed is that of the secretary of the Communist Party, Palmiro Togliatti (1952, 198). On the relationship between De Martino and the PCI, see Severino 2003a, 527-552.

something that persists without resolution in history and must therefore be studied by combining historicist and stylistic analysis.

It is difficult to determine whether De Martino's critique of residual elements was a direct response to Pasolini or a broader rejection of non-historicist approaches gaining traction in *Nuovi Argomenti*, including Pasolini's own contributions. It is worth noting that the topic of the "residues" had already been explored by Pasolini's former professor of moral philosophy, Felice Battaglia. His reflections on the "residues" were central to *Il valore della storia* (*The Value of History*) particularly in his reinterpretation of dialectics in relation to the irrational, understood as an irreducible element of becoming that enables history itself: "If all certainty becomes truth, if everything in the synthesis—or rather, in the act of synthesis—flows back into the rational and becomes spirit, why should there be any need for further acts, for new syntheses?" (Battaglia 1948, 149; my translation).

Ultimately, De Martino's decision to publish in *Nuovi Argomenti* rather than in an academic or specialized journal on religious studies suggests a strategic intent to counter non-historicist proposals that were beginning to appear, including those proposed by Pasolini. This hypothesis of an underlying intellectual rivalry finds further support in Pasolini's publication of *Ceneri di Gramsci* (*The Ashes of Gramsci*) in *Nuovi Argomenti* later that year. Here, he reaffirms his embrace of "residual" elements and the vital irreducible to dialectics, as expressed in the verses about "the dark of my gut" and "aesthetic passion" (Pasolini 2014, 175-176).

These divergences become even clearer in the introduction to the *Canzoniere italiano*, published in the summer of 1955. The key point worth exploring is Pasolini's repeated critique of De Martino's "Marxism devoid of clarity". Here is the full passage:

We refer to Marxist ideology, which, however, regarding the issue of folk poetry, is still at a potential stage or (within the party press) an intentional one. Even in some recent essays by De Martino (which we will have the opportunity to examine in more specific contexts), Marxism—lacking clarity yet also devoid of ideological simplism—roots itself in Crocean historicism, enriched by somewhat extraneous interests, such as Freudian influences, which constitute, nonetheless, the necessary emotional substrate of a researcher who is not merely technical. (Pasolini 1955c, 879; my translation)

These words undoubtedly carry a trace of perfidy, echoing the long-standing accusations of irrationalism levelled at De Martino following the publication of *Mondo magico*. Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored that they originate from an intellectual who, in reality, has consciously cultivated theoretical syncretism in a manner neither serene nor clear-cut, with openings toward the domain of the irrational, frequently in direct conflict with the Marxist perspective.

It is perhaps possible, then, to propose a second interpretation: alongside the critique of De Martino, there is a paradoxical attempt to mirror his intellectual work. This is not unprecedented. Such an attitude can often be recognized in Pasolini's relationships with those figures with whom he clashed but from whom he later drew themes and issues to

integrate into his own reflection—albeit modified or reshaped according to his poetic and intellectual vision. A similar dynamic, for instance, characterizes his relationship with Franco Fortini and would emerge in the 1960s with figures such as Christian Metz and even Umberto Eco.

Terms such as “clarity” and “lucidity,” which appear in the *Canzoniere*, belong to the same semantic family revolving around the lexeme “light” found in *The Ashes of Gramsci* (Pasolini 2014, 175) and other poems in the same collection, such as Picasso. The essential difference in these verses is that the opposition is constructed with the lexemes “dark” and “gut,” whereas in the *Canzoniere* the contrast is established with “complexity.” Reformulating the terms of the opposition, it could be argued that “clarity” or “light” signifies the ability to synthesize and abstract: in the *Canzoniere*, for example, Croce is praised for his acumen in constructing a comprehensive poetic framework for folk poetry within a precise historical articulation of the phenomenon. Complexity, on the other hand, relates to the capacity to engage with concrete realities, to immerse oneself in contradictions, and to discern their significance, renouncing reductionism and oversimplification.

In light of the cited passage, particular attention should be paid to the second part of the commentary: De Martino lacks clarity, but he is also free of “ideological simplism.” This phrasing, through a litotes, places his studies within the domain of complexity. There may also be an additional element at play. According to Picconi, the absence of simplism also constitutes a distancing from Croce (shared by Pasolini)<sup>16</sup>, who distinguishes folk poetry from cultivated poetry based on its simplicity of tone and, by extension, its connection to the “semplici”, that in Italian means also “humble people”<sup>17</sup>. Therefore, De Martino is exempt from the attitude that Pasolini, at the time, criticized in Marxists like Salinari and, concurrently, in the editors of *Ragionamenti* for fostering political abstraction (Scotti 2004).

Alongside a primary interpretation of Pasolini's polemic with De Martino, a secondary reading emerges: one of paradoxical openness and affinity. The ethnologist's lack of clarity mirrors the same interrogation that Pasolini directs toward the recesses of the human, the “dark gut,” and the contradictions between life and history. De Martino, too, albeit from a predominantly historicist perspective, ventures toward the edges of human reason, approaching those thresholds where it risks losing itself, producing that “crisis of presence” that lies at the core of much of his work.

Despite the clashes and distancing, a common ground can be recognized: the shared terrain of the human, interrogated in the instant of its dissolution. This is also the moment when the original contradiction between the individual and nature reveals its

<sup>16</sup> “It expresses movements of the soul that do not have behind them, as immediate precedents, great struggles of thought and passion; it depicts simple feelings in corresponding simple forms” (Croce 1929, 324; my translation).

<sup>17</sup> These considerations are contained in an unpublished article by Gian Luca Picconi.



sharpest edges. After all, no process of spiritualization, no dialectic, can eliminate death, pain, hunger—just as it cannot erase eros, joy, or passion.

## The Cry of the Excavator

During the 1950s, Pasolini's problematic engagement with De Martino's work largely remained unacknowledged, partly due to the intensely polemical tone surrounding it. This is evident in one of the major texts included in *The Ashes of Gramsci*, *The Cry of the Excavator*, which revisits themes of lamentation and mourning through a perspective that, for now, can be tentatively described as “secular.” However, in Pasolini, this secularism takes on a unique meaning, aiming less at contributing to the secularization of cultural institutions and more at identifying expressive forms capable of bearing the existential traumas of individuals.

De Martino began exploring the theme of funeral lamentation in 1954, publishing an initial article in *Società*, which he later revisited in two essays for *Nuovi Argomenti*. Though still in a nascent form, these essays outlined the trajectory of his studies. They do not yet include explicit references to the themes of the “crisis of presence” or the “ethos of transcendence.” Thus, they lack the philosophical depth found in his later writings, which eventually shaped the framework for his seminal work *Death and Ritual Lamentation*. Nevertheless, in *Historical Considerations on the Lucanian Funeral Lament* (*Considerazioni storiche sul lamento funebre lucano*), De Martino describes lamentation as an “ancient pagan institution rooted in primitive civilizations” (De Martino 1955a, 5), comprising techniques that enable the processing of grief within a magical-religious framework.

It is difficult to believe Pasolini was unaware of this text—not only because it appeared in the same issue of *Nuovi Argomenti* as his first contribution, but also due to two corroborating factors. The first pertains to De Martino's references to the lamentation for Rocco Scotellaro, a poet and politician whose untimely death at the age of thirty had a profound impact on Pasolini. The second is De Martino's attention, in this article, to both archaic societies and contemporary forms of lamentation, examining examples from working-class contexts and, more broadly, among the oppressed. This latter focus is of particular interest here.

Scotellaro's death and the description of his funeral offered De Martino an opportunity to reflect on how the working classes in modern society cope with profound existential crises. He considered the political and cultural consequences of the decline of religious function, even among those on the margins of history. In these pages, De Martino adopts a critical stance toward secularization, emphasizing the void created by the loss of religiosity and the instruments that once integrated individual lives within a framework of meaning in the face of death, illness, and hunger. He thus advocates for the subaltern classes, in their struggle for a new civilization, to develop their own secular

forms of processing existential crises within a framework of civic communion capable of resisting the precarity inherent in human existence.

The same concept of mourning, viewed within the transition of civilization toward a post-religious reality oriented toward progress, is central to *The Cry of the Excavator*. In this poem, too, mourning expresses the need for mediation and the processing of loss—not of a single individual but of an entire world rendered unsustainable in a society moving toward industrial and cultural modernization. The excavator's weeping represents a secular lamentation for those who painfully partake in the destruction of something within themselves in order to change and progress: “*What cries is whatever changes, even / for the better.*” (Pasolini 2014, 217).

Modernity, even the kind favoured by Pasolini, transforms humanity, elevates it, emancipates it from the realm of basic needs, and brings it into history. At the same time, it severs humanity's ties with the world by spiritualizing the vital dimension and embedding it in a rational process. As the subaltern classes strive to build a new communist civilization by transforming unconsciousness into consciousness and spontaneity into history, they risk losing what grounds them in the givenness of existence: the unreflective habits, and the impulses that transcend reason.

From this emerges a key distortion of the principle of lamentation. In De Martino's analysis of southern Italy and his observations of contemporary working classes, lamentation fulfills a dialectical function, addressing existential dramas within a historicist framework that integrates and resolves residual elements into a social and collective order. In contrast, Pasolini reasserts the idea of the “unhappy antithesis.” This tragic-political dialectic stubbornly preserves what consciousness risks discarding. As one of the most famous passages states, it is not only the excavator that weeps:

What cries is all that ends  
and begins again. What used to be  
a stretch of grass, an open expanse,  
and is now a courtyard white as snow  
enclosed within walls of resentment.<sup>18</sup>

Here, Pasolini is still far from articulating the opposition between “development” (*sviluppo*) and “progress” (*progresso*) that will emerge in his *Scritti corsari*, framed within the Gramscian terms of “passive revolution.” However, traces of this conception of history can already be detected, later revisited in his engagement with Benjamin and expressed in the verses of *Poesia in forma di rosa* (*Poem in the Shape of a Rose*) (Picconi 2012). Even more compelling, however, is the narrative device that seeks to humanize the machine, embedding it within a symbolic ritual that reveals the drama of becoming—the dialectic of history.

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<sup>18</sup> “Piange ciò che ha // fine e ricomincia. Ciò che era/ area erbosa, aperto spiazzo, e si fa/ cortile, bianco come cera, // chiuso in un decoro ch'è rancore” (Pasolini 1957, 848).

There may also be a Virgilian reference here, which highlights not only the sorrow inherent in things but also their grace, as they participate in the human experience: *Sunt lacrimae rerum* (*Aeneid*, I, v. 462).<sup>19</sup> Pasolini's poetry draws inert objects into the sphere of history, conflict, and reason, which are transformed into compassion—a light cast on existential wounds and nostalgia for the past. This nostalgia carries a plea not to lose the meaning of these things, not to relinquish their hidden value, their survival in a time hostile to the world's enchantment. A little further on in *The Cry of the Excavator*, Pasolini writes:

What cries is whatever changes, even  
for the better. The light of the future  
never stops wounding us, not even  
for an instant: it's right here, burning  
in our every daily gesture,  
tormenting even the confidence  
that gives us life, the passion of Gobetti  
for these workers as they hoist,  
in this street on the other front of humanity,  
their red tatter of hope.<sup>20</sup>

Strong differences persist between De Martino and Pasolini, which undoubtedly shaped their intellectual dialogue. Nevertheless, by tracing the trajectory of their respective work and contributions, one can identify elements that are far from secondary or negligible. In Pasolini, mourning does not fully resolve loss within the process of dialectical becoming. Instead, it highlights the connection between the forward movement of time and what is lost, thus emphasizing the contradiction between life and history, between the living, biological, organic dimension and its transcendence within cultural processes.

## Lay Symbolism

In addition to the theme of lamentation, *The Cry of the Excavator* explores another De Martino-inspired issue: secular symbolism. Pasolini addresses this theme through various figures and political images, including the “red rag of hope” hung by workers at the construction site. Pasolini's poetry contains many references to the red flag. In *Una polemica in versi* (*A Polemic in Verse*), its significance seems to evoke something rhetorical and propagandistic—a critique aimed at the editors of *Il Contemporaneo* prior to their

<sup>19</sup> Among Pasolini's projects was also the one to translate the *Aeneid*. See also Todini 1997.

<sup>20</sup> “Piange ciò che muta, anche/ per farsi migliore. La luce/ del futuro non cessa un solo istante// di ferirci: è qui, che brucia/ in ogni nostro atto quotidiano,/ angoscia anche nella fiducia// che ci dà vita, nell'impeto gobettiano/ verso questi operai, che muti innalzano,/ nel rione dell'altro fronte umano,// il loro rosso straccio di speranza” (Pasolini 1957, 849).

reconciliation: “*Blinded by action, you served / the people not in their hearts / but in their flag, forgetting / that every institution must bleed / so that it does not return to myth*” (Pasolini 1957, 854)<sup>21</sup>. This is a pointed denunciation of the abstractions of ideology and its degradation into myth, understood here as an instrument of domination, a preordained framework imposed upon reality. By contrast, the red flag holds a real and emancipatory meaning if it is alive—if it can “bleed,” that is, if it can embody the sufferings of oppression and the drama of the workers.

Later, in the same poem, Pasolini presents the image of an “old man” who claims the workers’ flag as his own. In a moment of deep emotion, the elderly laborer “*shakes/ the flag sacred to him against time*” and joins the “*joyful, desperate*” song of his comrades, only to step aside when the singing ends, as if completing a ritual that has restored a sense of belonging and made the world recognizable once again.

This image carries both religious and profoundly human overtones: the sense of an existence transcending itself to become a collective body, a living and unified mass, an *ethos* that remains tied to primary needs, the rough texture of existence, and the given realities of biological life. The references to his “*white head*,” “*shaking legs*,” and “*hoarse voice*” signify frailty and old age, yet they also evoke the past persisting in the present—a past that revives the struggles and oppressions endured, without which it risks becoming rubble, a heap of mutilated and forgotten remnants.

The theme of secular symbolism, closely interwoven with political reflection, reemerges in *The Religion of My Time*, particularly in the verses *Alla bandiera rossa* (*To the Red Flag*):

For those who know only your color, red flag,  
you must truly exist, so that they might exist:  
those once covered in scabs are now covered in wounds,  
the laborer becomes a beggar,  
the Neapolitan turns Calabrian, the Calabrian African,  
the illiterate a buffalo or a dog.

Those who barely knew your color, red flag,  
are on the verge of knowing you no more, not even with their senses:  
you, who already boast so many bourgeois and working-class glories,  
become a rag once more, and let the poorest wave you high.  
(Pasolini 1961, 1049; my translation)<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> “Avete, accecati dal fare, servito/ il popolo non nel suo cuore/ ma nella sua bandiera: dimentichi/ che deve in ogni istituzione/ sanguinare, perché non torni mito”.

<sup>22</sup> “Per chi conosce solo il tuo colore, bandiera rossa,/ tu devi realmente esistere, perché lui esista:/ chi era coperto di croste è coperto di piaghe,/ il bracciante diventa mendicante,/ il napoletano calabrese, il calabrese africano,/ l'analfabeta una bufala o un cane./ Chi conosceva appena il tuo colore, bandiera

This composition repeats the same process: the red flag exists and gives existence to those who raise it only if it embodies the consciousness of the oppressed—particularly the most downtrodden. It extends beyond the human to touch what is most humble—the primal, naked reality that precedes reason. Its symbolic function is activated only insofar when it evokes the experience of the world in its original state, in its condition as a “rag,” as something given that precedes politics while simultaneously making it possible. The same “bourgeois and workers’ glories” of the great revolutions possess meaning only if reconnected to the dispersed masses who made them possible—those who can still imbue them with vitality through their grounded sense of reality and their way of living and perceiving the world.

Another example can be found in the film *Uccellacci e uccellini* (*The Hawks and the Sparrows*, 1966), during one of the final scenes, where Totò and Ninetto encounter the funeral procession of Palmiro Togliatti, the ancient communist leader who led PCI in the struggle against fascism. These images, which Pasolini draws from a documentary by Francesco Maselli, evoke both the lamentation and the secular mourning of the communist people. Their significance is simultaneously evocative and polemical. On the one hand, they highlight the mythic-ritual function of funerary commemoration; on the other, they show that even within a Marxist and materialist party, not everything can be reduced to the immanence of history or the relations of production.

With this scene, Pasolini does not propose an irrational interpretation of how the communist masses respond to the death of their political leader. Rather, he offers a vision of a phenomenon with religious overtones, one that uses the occasion of mourning an opportunity to reconsider the contradiction between biological life and history within the framework of a shared destiny among the working classes. In this way, Pasolini aligns himself more closely with De Martino, perhaps due in part to his direct engagement with the writings collected in 1962 under the title *Furore, simbolo, valore* (*Fury, Symbol, Value*). At the end of the third section of this work, De Martino reflects on the collective cultural forms within socialist societies and evokes “the birth of a new symbolism, reconcilable with an achieved humanistic consciousness and with an ever more intimately lived ‘sense of history’” (De Martino 2013, 212).<sup>23</sup> History, therefore, is not simply the reconstruction of human events: it is existence embedded in the popular spirit, which, in Pasolini’s film, retains its material essence—its unity of faces, bodies, and gestures, all expressions of grace and humanity.

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rossa,/ sta per non conoscerti più, neanche coi sensi:/ tu che già vanti tante glorie borghesi e operaie,/ ridiventa straccio, e il più povero ti sventoli”.

<sup>23</sup>A few lines earlier, De Martino also writes: “In general, cultural symbolism is a vibrant, unitary order of representation and operational possibilities, through which the call to a memorable event of foundation and authentication is periodically renewed, and a future horizon is periodically anticipated, a perspective of the fulfilment of individual and collective tasks organically linked to the inaugural origins” (De Martino 2013, 212; my translation).

The archival footage Pasolini incorporates is entirely devoid of propagandistic intent. The scene of Togliatti's funeral demonstrates how the mourning event is integrated into the historical becoming. In turn, this intersects, albeit briefly, with the journey of the two protagonists, Totò and Ninetto, representatives of the subproletariat. Here, as elsewhere, Pasolini's symbolism takes the form of an album of figures of contradiction, capable of articulating a connection with primary needs. This is a confrontation between existence and an ethos that seeks not to separate humanity from nature but to renew their bond.

Once again, Pasolini presents a tragic antithesis, one that could be described in Giacomo Leopardi's terms: an expression of resistance that engages the individual in their spiritual, biological, and moral dimensions. Though secular in form, the funeral depicted in *The Hawks and the Sparrows* conveys a form of rationality that could be qualified as "expanded," seeking to encompass humanity in its totality, in the composite unity of spirit and nature. This "expansion" should not be interpreted as reactionary or akin to certain forms of past romanticism. On the contrary, it avoids barbarism or a mystical and untamed irrationalism. This form of symbolism conveys a political and civic aspiration to restore the integrity of forces and recover a more holistic vision of humanity. This renewed whole stands in opposition to the dangerously fragmented construct shaped by the abstractions of narrow, calculative reason.

This invites further reflection. Although conceived in a polemical context, the concept articulated by Pasolini also finds resonance in De Martino's work. It appears paradoxical, one of the many reversals characterizing the relationship between the two authors. In 1965, already gravely ill, De Martino engaged in a conversation with Cesare Cases, later published posthumously in *Quaderni Piacentini*. There, he revisited the theme of secular symbolism and the persistent human condition, perpetually subjected to fissures that cannot be managed by an ordering reason—not even by the communist reason he politically supported. As he observed: "Even in a society entirely based on reason, even in a socialist society, crises and dramas will persist—and heaven forbid it were otherwise, for such a society would be unbearably dull" (Cases 1965, 7; our translation). Faced with the threat of a bureaucratized, alienated life stripped of the symbolic dimension required to address the "crisis of presence," De Martino confessed to feeling rejection, even "horror".

This is the same horror expressed in the scream of the excavator: it is not far-fetched to recognize in the "red rag" and the poetic labour of humanizing the machine—transforming its metallic screech into a weeping lament—a form of secular symbolic resolution, a resistance to neocapitalist nihilism, and an effort to restore collective relationships among free and equal individuals. In this weeping lies a rediscovery of life's value amidst historical and material toil, the very struggle to which both De Martino and Pasolini dedicated crucial pages of their work.

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