

Derek Mahon's Homage to Pasolini

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Derek Mahon's poem *Roman Script* was published in a numbered edition by The Gallery Press in 1999¹. His first idea for it dates back to the autumn of 1998, which he spent in Rome, his base for visits to Naples, Pompeii and Sorrento, which feature in *Ghosts* (1881), written in the hotel where Ibsen wrote his play of the same name. The *Collected Poems* (1999) include other poems connected with Italian culture, such as *High Water*, about Venice, as well as a series of translations and adaptations drawn from sources ranging as widely as Michelangelo's sonnets and Ariosto, to Umberto Saba and Pier Paolo Pasolini. Mahon translated the opening passage of Pasolini's *Gramsci's Ashes* (1957)², as a sort of prelude to the themes of *Roman Script*. The elegy is set in the non-Catholic cemetery (generally called the Protestant Cemetery), in the Testaccio district. The small urn containing Gramsci's ashes stands not far from the tombstones of Keats and Shelley. Mahon shares Pasolini's yearning for «the ideal society which might come to birth / in silence, a society not for us» (*CP* 272). Rome is shown in her sublime decadence as a polluted metropolis, where the ruins of Empire survive alongside the desolation of the post-industrial period. If Pasolini's *Gramsci's Ashes* is Mahon's lament for the founder of the Italian Communist Party, his *Roman Script*³ might well be called *Pasolini's Ashes*, since it commemorates the brilliant Italian writer and film director so brutally murdered in 1975, against the backdrop of Rome. It is like a compressed, modern version of *Adonais* (1821), the elegy Shelley wrote after the death of Keats.

Roman Script is composed of eleven eight-line stanzas of four couplets each (as opposed to the 55 Spenserian stanzas of Shelley's *Adonais*), followed by a rewriting of a Metastasio sonnet. Actually the ten-line stanza *Ghosts*, which in the Penguin *Selected Poems* is placed immediately before *Roman Script*, is also very closely connected to it. In the first place, it too is a kind of elegy, Mahon's tribute to his parents – both dead by 1998 – and their losing fight against limited means and the cultural mediocrity of Belfast. Singing *Come back to Sorrento* was a poor substitute for foreign travel, more or less on the level of *Killarney*, where «memory ever fondly dwells».

Remembering how Pompeii and Treblinka epitomised two kinds of suffering in *A Disused Shed*, as a result of natural disaster and of human evil, the

reader expects another contrast to the Pompeiian disaster after the mention of Pompeii. But the tomb-room rhyme (ll. 4, 10), by evoking Shakespeare's frequent womb-tomb theme, leads in another direction. For excavation has not only brought innocent-looking little Pompeiian houses to light; it has also 'exposed' frescoes so lascivious that they immediately suggest the dissolute way of life of Captain Alving, in Ibsen's *Ghosts*. The horror here is that Alving did not scruple to transmit a horrible hereditary disease to his son Oswald. Such lack of scruple reappears in the dissipated figures of church and state in *Roman Script*.

Although, as I have said, Mahon has compressed *Roman Script* to a fifth of the length of *Adonais*, he has kept the Romantic rebel's essential message: the luminous worth of poets «gathered to the kings of thought / who waged contention with their time's decay» in opposition to the «ages, empires and religions / [that] lie buried in the ravage they have wrought» and «[...] borrow not / Glory from those who made the world their prey» (*Adonais*, stanza XLVIII). As to the rewriting of Metastasio, it might be describing Keats's imagination and 'fever of creation'; certainly it is his devotion to truth, as expressed in the last line of the *Ode to a Grecian Urn* (1819) that is reflected in the final Metastasio line: «May we find peace in the substance of the true».

Stanza VIII develops the theme of illusion. The Regina Coeli gaol is compared to «virtuality» (l. 5). This leads to the metaphor of Rome as «a film-set, Cinecittà, a cinema city» (l. 6), an immense set where everything can be shown «for our delight» (l. 8). The counterpoint to this 'virtual' Rome is that of the suburban proletariat (st. IX-XI), the 'other' Rome which Pasolini knew and described at first hand. While Pasolini saw the consumerist empire of the Sixties as a fate worse than misery, Mahon recognised that this new form of poverty was still rife in the Ireland of the Nineties, after neo-capitalism took over⁴. Hence he was particularly sensitive to those rejected by society, Pasolini himself «the poet of poverty» (*CP* 275-76) foremost among them. This essay will show how Mahon expressed in verse what the American prose-writer Gore Vidal prophesied in Federico Fellini's film *Rome* (1972):

Rome is the city of illusions; it is no accident that the Church, government and the cinema industry are concentrated here, all of them producing illusions. The world is growing ever nearer to the end. What more peaceful place than this city, which has died and been reborn many times, to await the end from pollution and overpopulation? It is the ideal place to see whether everything ends here or not⁵.

1

A Day on the Gianicolo

It is fitting that the first shot of Rome in *Roman Script* is taken from the Gianicolo, for it was here, above the Trastevere district, as well as in Villa Au-

relia and Villa Pamphili, that Garibaldi's men fought to the death in the cause of Rome as a Republic (1849). The first impressions of the city are auditive, since the shutters are still closed. Through them come the crowing of cockerels and the hum of early traffic: «cock-crow and engine-hum / wake us at first light on the Janiculum / and we open the shutters to extravagant mists» (CP 273). Then, when «we open the shutters» (st. I, l. 3) comes a Turner-like view through the mist. Against the dark green of «parasol» (not «umbrella!») pines a blaze of yellow and purple fruit and flowers stands out. Among them is a jonquil, surely virtual in «an autumn sun» or (st. IV, l. 3, «...November light»), a hint of Shelley's presence in this poem («If winter comes, can spring be far behind?», last line of the *Ode to the West Wind*, 1820). Together with the «glistening drop» they create a «Respighi moment» (st. I, l. 7), a combination of Respighi's own *Le fontane di Roma* (1916) and his master Debussy's *Jardins sous la pluie* (1903). To the uninitiated such compositions are examples of artists imitating nature. The idea of «life mimicking art» (st. I, l. 7) goes behind this *cliché* to see the artist not so much as creator as finder of patterns in nature that are already art⁶.

Mahon's taste in art is not limited to 'refined' composers like Respighi. «[A]s when the fiddles provoke line-dancing rain»⁷ (st. I, l. 8) introduces a more popular atmosphere, which might refer to the musical comedy *Singing in the Rain* (1952), in which the actor and co-director Gene Kelly dances the tip-tap in the rain. In the same film Kelly and the Irish-American Donald O'Connor improvise a scene as violinists, at the same time dancing in line to the rhythm of *Fit as a Fiddle*. This American musical-comedy was made at a time of transition from silent movies to the introduction of sound, when mimicry was the basis of film-acting.

While the first stanza of *Roman Script* gives us an outside view by day, the following one moves to a sunny interior. It might be a room in a large villa transformed into a boarding-house, which might still have «baroque frescoes» (st. II, l. 2), but also provides a 'space' for Mahon's imagination to fill with:

[...] Byronic masquerade or Goldoni farce,
vapours and swordsmanship, the cape and fan,
the amorous bad-boy and the glamorous nun,
boudoir philosophy, night music on balconies,
the gondola section nodding as in a sea breeze (CP 273).

The «Byronic masquerade» (st. II, l. 4) recalls Byron's life as a libertine in Rome and Venice («the gondola section», st. II, l. 8), while stanza VI refers to Mozart's masterpiece *Don Giovanni* (1787). Goldoni's brilliant farce is in the tradition of the *commedia dell'arte*, while the «glamorous nun» evokes some of Fellini's films with the starched veils of the nuns like white swallows' tails⁸. «[B]oudoir philosophy» is an allusion to Sade's *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* (1795), which had a deep influence on Pasolini. Here Mahon seems

to be setting the scene for the entrance of the Italian artist, defined by the critic Gian Carlo Ferretti as «the cursed bard, the ‘scandalous’ writer and the rebel-victim of ‘being different’, the civilized poet and the poet-Narcissus, the aesthete and the intellectual as a public figure»⁹.

Stanza III passes from the ‘scenic interior’ of the Gianicolo to deal with the cultural bonds that link the Catholics of Ulster to Rome:

exiles have died here in your haunted palaces
 where our princes [...]
 dreamed up elaborate schemes of restoration (*CP* 273).

«Our princes» were the Irish rebels Hugh O’Neill¹⁰ and his son, from County Tyrone, besides Ruair O’Donnell and his brother Cathbarr, of the County Tyrconnell (Donegal). After the defeat of Kinsale (1601), in which Lord Mountjoy, representative of the Crown, forced the princes of Gaelic Ulster to make an act of submission, they fled into voluntary exile in Rome, where they were granted the protection of Pope Paul V. Meanwhile the English Crown planned the so-called Plantation of Ulster (1608-1610), that is the expropriation of the four counties of Tyrone, Donegal, Armagh and Derry for the benefit of the English and Scottish settlers faithful to the Queen. During their exile O’Neill and O’Donnell never ceased to hope for the re-conquest of Gaelic Ulster and make «elaborate schemes of restoration» (*CP* 273) but they never managed to turn this dream into reality. After their death they were buried with their families in the church of San Pietro in Montorio, situated on the Gianicolo. Their homesickness is expressed in «the squeal of a lone bagpipe / torn from the wild and windy western ocean...»¹¹ (echoes of Shelley’s *West Wind* again), while their world seems more remote than «Pompeiiian times» (st. III, l. 7), which is to say after complete destruction.

This brings us back to earth and the everyday routine of the poet’s day, even when travelling abroad. His new writing has to be typed up before he can allow himself a short sleep before going out in the evening. The second waking («when you ... come alive», st. IV, l. 2) is more meditative, almost like a small child observing every detail anew, the flies, the moths; the smell of camphor (that does not get rid of them); the sound of wood-worms making the old furniture creak («listen to the ... furniture», st. IV, l. 5) and a neighbour practising the piano; the fading of the light («watch», st. IV, l. 7), in which the tall poplars become no more than «smoke-stains» (st. IV, l. 8) against the yellowish stone of the buildings opposite. All this is grist to the poet’s mill, giving him access to the secret life of objects such as we find in the phenomenology of Edmund Hüsserl, whose motto «Zu den Sachen selbst!» influenced the French existentialists in the Thirties. The time Mahon spent in Paris, when he imbibed Camus, de Beauvoir and Sartre, probably lies at the root of his interest in things as phenomena.

Meanwhile the «ochreous travertine» (st. IV, l. 8) of the buildings opposite spurs the poet to plunge into the life outside his room, as evening falls.

2

Heights and Depths in the History of Rome

The inversion «Now out you go» instead of a descriptive «You go out» (st. V, l. 1) introduces a brisk new rhythm, as from the Gianicolo he goes down to the Trastevere district passing 'among' the *botteghe oscure*, the still numerous windowless workshops of the craftsmen of Trastevere, where the narrow streets create a sense of community (until after dinner, when they are invaded by tourists). Curiously there is no mention anywhere of *via delle Botteghe oscure* (well «over the bridge», st. V, l. 3, between Largo Argentina and Piazza Venezia), where Gramsci's Communist Party had its head-quarters for many years. At the time of Mahon's stay in Rome it was occupied by the DS party founded in 1998, following the PDS, founded in 1991. The suspicion arises that Mahon felt Gramsci's party was better represented by the old workshops «over the Tiber» than by these new groups.

Once really «over the bridge» (Ponte Sisto?) he probably passes the *Circo Massimo* where chariot races were held in Roman times, perhaps imagining it as a modern race-track for Fiat (not Ferrari) and Maserati cars, or perhaps considering that undisciplined traffic turned the whole of Rome into one gigantic race-track. He then takes a great leap to the «floodlit naiad and triton» (st. V, l. 5) of the Fontana del Tritone in Piazza Barberini (another Respighi moment) and so to Via Veneto and Harry's Bar, venue of the «beautiful and the damned» (st. V, l. 6), a reference to Francis Scott Fitzgerald's novel (1922) about the American rotten-rich society of the post-First World War years. In contemporary terms this translates into Fellini's famous film *La dolce vita* (1960), with «sexy dives ... as in the movie of our lives» (st. V, ll. 7-8). In the film the glamorous Anita Ekberg is wading rather than diving in the Fontana di Trevi and the scene is uninhibited, not disreputable as in the normal definition of 'dives', but the general effect is the same. Fellini's aim was to break away from the neo-realism of Vittorio De Sica and cultivate illusion, as he explained in an interview of 1971: «'True' cinema? I'm in favour of lies. Lying is the soul of show business, and I love the show business. Fiction is alright as a more perceptive truth of apparent everyday reality»¹².

With a big jolt stanza VI takes us to another category of the «damned»:

Here they are, Nero, Julia, Diocletian
and the grim popes of a later dispensation
at ease in bath-house and in Colosseum
or raping young ones in the venial gym (*CP* 274).

Nero ordered the first persecution of the Christians in 64 AD, including the beheading of St. Paul and the crucifixion of St. Peter; Diocletian was the Roman Emperor of the East responsible for the great persecution of 303-304 AD. Giulia Domna, inserted between the two, was called the «woman philosopher» in virtue of her foresight and magnanimity. She represents «the beautiful»¹³ in contrast with the two «damned» (st. V, l. 6). She was the wife of Settimio Severo and mother of Caracalla, becoming part of the Severi dynasty which was of Afro-Syriac origin and especially open to oriental influence. Both under her rule and under that of her daughter Giulia Mammea, Christians were widely tolerated in the Roman Empire. It is as if, by introducing this enlightened Empress, Mahon is wishing for a future 'era of women' to bring harmony back to history.

In any case the emphasis is on decadence, which survives down the ages «at least» (st. VI, l. 6) until (Byron's) Don Juan / Don Giovanni's precipitous fall to Hell. The implied moral being, as Romans III, 23 puts it; the wages of sin is death. Shrewd popes luxuriating in bath-houses may have been a novelty to Mahon's Irish readers, though their «raping young ones in the venial gym» (st. VI, l. 4) would have come as no surprise to them¹⁴.

In stanza VII the Vatican's Sistine Chapel, back across the Tiber, follows close on the Forum, reminding us of Gore Vidal's opinion cited above that everything in Rome, Church and State not least, manufactures illusions. Mahon mentions the forum without comment, speaking explicitly of ruins only in connection with the 'other' Rome in stanza X. The Eighteenth Century cult of ruins brought great fame to Giovanni Piranesi, whose *Views of Rome* were single prints made between 1748 and 1778. Mahon may have thought of his eerie, labyrinthine etchings of *Prisons* (1849) as a kind of flash forward to the Regina Coeli gaol in the following stanza. We can imagine however that his view of ruins coincided more nearly with that of François Volney, author of *Ruines ou Méditations sur la révolutions des empires* (1791).

The Sistine Chapel is mentioned for its «comic strip» (st. VII, l. 3), which Haughton (p. 322) takes for granted as referring to the panels of the Creation that Michelangelo painted on the ceiling of the chapel. In the strict definition of comic-strip as «a sequence of pictures telling a story» this is the only alternative. The term «violent» corresponds to the *terribilità* that the art historians use about Michelangelo. «[C]omic-strip» seems a little disrespectful. This may be because Mahon is revolted by the idea of Pope Julius II forcing Michelangelo to paint that great space, in those conditions, against his will. Or it may just be a matter of taste. Some people are constitutionally averse to baroque, and Mahon's liking for Paolo Uccello's *The Hunt by Night* (1470 ca.) or Pieter De Hooch's *The Courtyard in Delft* (1658) gives the impression that Mahon is one of these. Although «comic-strip» is hyphenated and in the singular, a doubt does arise that Mahon

meant 'comic stripping' as he was also thinking about the enormous, single fresco of *The Last Judgement* (1537-41), on the end wall of the chapel, which has caused such hilarity over the centuries because of the breeches-no breeches controversy. In 1998 he would have seen all the Michelangelo frescoes cleaned and restored. Which means that he would have been reminded of the controversy that followed the decision, made in 1564 after the Council of Trent¹⁵, to cover the 'indecent' nakedness of the crowds of figures in the *Judgement*. Shelley for one, said frankly that he could not see why a round tin object should be more decent than a cylindrical object made of marble. Before the cleaning, «strip» would only have been applicable in the plural, *strips* of drapery covering the offending nakedness. After it, «strip» could refer to the removal of these coverings, even more comical than the previous procedure, because only the later ones were removed, not those attributable to Michelangelo's assistant and friend Volterra, considered of artistic value. The breeches faction had not accepted defeat.

Mahon's 'detachment' from Michelangelo's «violent comic strip» contrasts with his positive response to the «soft marble thighs» (st. VII, l. 4) of Bernini's *Rape of Persephone* (1621) in the Galleria Borghese, on the opposite side of the Tiber from the Vatican. This is an acute observation of how the smoothness of marble can make it appear soft, and the way Pluto's fingers press into the flesh accentuates this. It reveals spontaneous receptiveness to the myth of the life-giving Persephone/Proserpine who, after being raped by the god Pluto/Hades was allowed to return from the underworld every spring and summer, so the crops should not fail.

The exhortation to «seize real presence, the art-historical sublime» (st. VII, ll. 4-5) is addressed to the photographer-tourist, already told to «snap out of his art fatigue» (st. VII, l. 1, emphasis added) and virtualize the actual body of St. Cecilia, patroness of Church Music, or the grave of Keats (the name of the classical god Endymion, whom Keats wrote a long poem about, transferred to the poet himself). The term «real presence» probably refers to George Steiner's 1989 volume *Real Presences*. It is not easy to understand how Mahon feels about photography and the cinema. On the one hand, he agreed to collaborate with John Minihan in the production of *An Unweaving of Rainbows: Portraits of Irish Writers* (1998), which is a splendid series of photographs. On the other, he seems to be saying that the sophisticated Nikon camera blinds (in an owl-blink, the reaction of the bird of darkness to light) the photographer, too anxious to appropriate all the finest works of art history; his «lightening storm» (st. VII, l. 7) desecrates St. Cecilia's body and Keats's grave; violates the work of art as Pluto/Hades raped Persephone/Proserpine. This impression is confirmed in stanza VIII, where the camera probes mercilessly into the tough reality of the Regina Coeli gaol. The wretched prisoners (the «wretched of the earth», st. VII, l. 3, is probably a reference to 1961 *Les damnés de la terre* by the Caribbean psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon) are instructed to

entertain visitors (like gladiators in the Colosseum) «for our delight» (st. VIII, l. 8), as if they were on a film-set in Cinecittà, «where life is a waking dream» (st. VIII, l. 9), as Keats said in his *Ode to a Nightingale* (1819).

Comunque, as Mahon says in Italian, a sort of «be that as it may», the inmates of Regina Coeli have not all been wretched criminals. The (many) ‘others’, political prisoners, antifascists, included Gramsci, who died in 1937. Remembering, perhaps, Pavese’s *Death Will Come and It Will Have Your Eyes* (1951), Mahon says death came to Gramsci «... with the eyes of a new age / a glib post-war cynicism re-styled as image» (st. IX, ll. 7-8). Such «glib», post-World War One «cynicism» was typical of the Futurists and similar groups (Imagists?) and characterized the political rhetoric of the fascist regime. This vacuity of language is indicative of the moral poverty in the society of the «lost years» (st. IX, l. 4) between the two World Wars, when *commodities* were already rated above people («hats, shoes, a glove» above women themselves) and nullified Gramsci’s dream of «a society based on hope and truth» (*CP* edit. «faith»). Before his death he spent nine years in various prisons and places of internment, including the small island of Ustica, where he inevitably observed the «morning sea» (st. IX, l. 3). In prison he chose solitary confinement («solitude», st. IX, l. 3) so as to be undisturbed in his thinking (the books and the newspapers he was allowed were quite inadequate) and writing (in the company of the little plants he tended in pots on the window-sill of his cell). Naturally, Gramsci suffered from political loneliness after the growth of fascism and the decline of the worker’s movement, which involved disagreement with the leaders of the PCDI.

3

The ‘other’ Rome and ‘Pasolini’s ashes’

Akin to Gramsci in his dream of a society based on hope and truth was Pasolini, the «poet of poverty» (st. X, l. 1), champion of the ‘other’ Rome, the drop-outs, the «refuse of mankind»¹⁶. Mahon thinks of them together. There is no break even in the punctuation «the poet of internment» (st. IX, l. 3), «and the poet of poverty» (st. X, l. 1), even though they are assigned to different stanzas. Pasolini’s experience as «irremediably different», the «gut heretic» of «absolute individualism»¹⁷ spelled his life-sentence to marginalization, since neither the critics nor the majority of the intellectuals of his time (Moravia was among the few exceptions) understood how profound his thought was. In the *Lettere Luterane* (1976) Pasolini says: «I do not believe in this history or in this progress, that things go forward *comunque*. Very often both individuals and societies regress or get worse. In this case the transformation *must not* be accepted»¹⁸.

The false progress Pasolini is speaking of is the ‘cultural genocide’ he witnessed in Rome between 1961 and 1975, when the materialism implicit in consumerism made the suburban working class turn middle-class. The

Lettere luterane tell us how deeply the Pasolini «who dreamed» (like Gramsci) «in youth / of a society based on *hope* and *truth*» (SP 149; «faith» CP 275, emphasis added) felt cheated politically. When Mahon changed «faith» (as in the «faith, hope and charity» of St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians), he was completing a thread of thought that runs all through these wry verses (see *The Cloud Ceiling* SP 166, st. VI, l. 2); «the verse hard wired» goes from stanza I, l. 7 («life mimicking art») to stanza IX, l. 2 («hope and truth»), through «deceived by art» (st. XII, l. 5) to the «substance of the true» (st. XII, l. 14).

Critics like Barth David Schwartz have spoken of the Christian roots of Pasolini's Marxism as follows: «In the Italian equivalent of the “untouchables” Pasolini found not only erotic communion, intellectual stimulus and human nature still intact but also the rejected (souls) chosen by Christ. In the *Lumpenproletariat* of Rome Pasolini found an extraordinary convergence of marxism and the Christianity which he knew he had inherited from his mother»¹⁹.

Pasolini's feeling of being let down by politics when his Gramscian dream was shattered is expressed elegantly and with vehemence in the *Scritti corsari* (1975), in which he speaks of a form of inter-class hedonism of consumer-power (283). He sees the consumerist empire as «an agonizing historical *déjà-vu*, since it recalls the industrial boom of the early post-First World War years, which were followed by the recession of the Twenties and then by the Nazi *regime*» (287). He fears the sameness of the young people in the *borgate* «in their clothes, their shoes, their hair-styles and way of smiling, behaving and imitating every gesture they see in the advertisements for the products of big industry» (283). While Mahon uses the term «commodity» about the materialism of the post-First World War, Pasolini foresaw what Sidney Lumet brought out in his film *Fifth Power* (1976).

In 1955 Pasolini, 'the poet of poverty', moved to Rome with his mother after creating a sexual scandal in his native Friuli. At first they lived near Ponte Mammolo, near the Rebibbia gaol. In *Una premessa in versi* and elsewhere Pasolini describes the misery of those first years in Rome:

*la mia figura economica, benché instabile e folle,
era in quel momento, per molti aspetti,
simile a quella della gente tra cui abitavo:
in questo eravamo proprio fratelli, o almeno pari.
Perciò, credo, ho molto potuto capirlo*²⁰.

That 'other' Rome that Pasolini loved aesthetically and sensually is not the one that had turned middle-class in the Sixties, but the immense plebeian metropolis of the post-Second World War years. What he calls «la città farlocca» is a world of tower blocks, rubbish dumps, a noisy circus in the distance, drugs and prostitution, hopelessly on the margins of a cunning (artful) society which Mahon describes as follow:

starlight and tower blocks on waste ground,
 peripheral rubbish dumps beyond the noise
 of a circus, where sedated girls and boys
 put out for a few bob on some building site
 in the cloudy imperium of ancient night
 and in the ruins, amid disconsolate lives
on the edge of the artful city, a myth survives (CP 276, emphasis added).

The Rome Mahon is describing here was growing fast after recovery from the Second World War. After reading about it in Pasolini's *Una vita violenta*, Pietro Nenni said: «I felt ashamed that I, a member of Parliament for 15 years, have politically ignored the *borgate*, their people and their misery»²¹. It is the city of Fanon's «wretched of the earth» where, to quote Pasolini's *Sex, the Consolation of Misery*, «nei rifiuti del mondo nasce un nuovo mondo» (CP 276). Mahon quotes this line of Pasolini's twice in *Roman Script*, first in the epigraph in Italian and then in his English translation of it in stanza XI («in the refuse...», CP 276). For those who insist on the Christian basis of Pasolini's Marxism, the baby Jesus, for whom there was «no room at the inn» (Luke 2,7) represents the rejected of this world, who will renew it. Actually the manger of Bethlehem was more humble than squalid, like the rubbish dumps etc. (Luke 13,30) – the «last shall be first and the first shall be last» – might be more pertinent to Pasolini's youthful ideals and belief in the class struggle. Even more than these, stanza XI of *Roman Script* brings to mind lines about the world's renewal by that other poet whose corpse showed up on the beach at Lerici. In the final chorus of his *Hellas* (1822) Shelley wrote:

The world's great age begins anew,
 The golden years return,
 The earth doth like a snake renew
 Her winter weeds outworn:
 Heaven smiles, and faiths and empires gleam,
 Like wrecks of a dissolving dream.

Both in Pasolini's and in Mahon's poems the idea of those *rejected* by society is closely connected with the *refuse* that submerges and cannibalizes our cities. To understand the ideology of Mahon the «deep ecologist»²², his description of the suburbs of Rome, which Pasolini qualified as «the Third World», needs to be emphasized. Even the tower blocks are built on waste (infertile) ground. The youths of the suburbs, the prostitutes and the drug-addicts, all those that middle-class society rejects and hides away because they are «impure»²³, are relegated to the «rubbish dumps» or «some building site». For a moment it is uncertain if «in the ruins» means in the city centre (the Circo Massimo, once very ill-famed), but the edge or margin of the

artful (probably meaning cunning here) city reappears at once. Then comes the startling announcement: among all this squalor, a myth – the myth of Pasolini himself – survives.

Since he was killed at Ostia, the *true* direction he indicated has been lost. Once more the insistence is on the true/truth, recalling the analogy with Keats and once more imagery is presented as substituting real life, as part of the de-personalised sum of economic jargon («production values, packaged history» – Orwell! – «the genocidal corporate imperative») or else becoming: «[...] bright garbage ... / best seen at morning rush-hour in driving rain» (st. XII, ll. 5-6). It is only since the death of Pasolini, Mahon points out, that orders given by the big industrial firms («corporate imperative») have been widely recognized as *genocidal*. Irish people have been directly affected, since leaks from the old Windscale nuclear power station (now renamed Sellafield and honoured with a museum exalting the development of nuclear power, opened triumphantly by Margaret Thatcher) seeped into the Irish Sea and across to Ireland. Shell's record, not only in West Africa, is horrendous. In India the catastrophe of the American factory in Bhopal has caused mass deaths and prolonged mortal disease. In Italy corporate management refused to recognize the lethal effects of asbestos for decades. Though the high death toll in some areas is not immediately obvious, the global count is the equivalent of many genocides. And it is common knowledge that the people of the South American rainforests are being wiped out by the timber industry and land speculators.

In some ways Mahon's ecologist ideas²⁴ recall the proto-green Pasolini who was introduced by his friend Giorgio Bassani to the Italia Nostra association for the protection of Italy's artistic and cultural heritage. The disconsolate lives that haunt the ruins and rubbish dumps of *Roman Script* also recall the 'wasted lives' of Zigmunt Bauman, the British philosopher of Polish-Jewish origins. In his documentary *Pasolini e la forma della città* (1976), Paolo Brunatto portrays the Pasolini who lamented the disappearance of glowworms ('luciole', which in Italian may also refer to prostitutes) as a result of the use of weed-killers. He is seen as a melancholy man contemplating the architectural horrors perpetrated in the art-city Orte as he climbs a mountain of refuse. Piles of rubbish also appear along the road trodden by Totò, Ninetto Davoli and the crowd in *Uccellacci e uccellini* (1966), while in *Accattone* (1961) the hero falls in love with a woman who collects glass bottles for re-cycling for a miserable few lire a day. In 2006 Mimmo Calopresti shot the documentary film *Appunti per un romanzo sull'immondizia*, based on an unfinished script in which Pasolini meant to deal with the dustmen's strike in 1970. In *Che cosa sono le nuvole?* (1967-68), the third episode of *Capriccio all'italiana*, the dustman Modugno throws two marionettes that have been lynched by the public onto a rubbish dump, where they discover that the world is paradise²⁴:

Otello [Davoli] – Iiiiih, che so' quelle?

Jago [Totò] – Sono... sono... le nuvole...

Otello – E che so' le nuvole?

Jago – Boh!

Otello – Quanto so' belle! Quanto so' belle!

Jago (ormai tutto in comica estasi) – Oh, *straziante, meravigliosa bellezza del creato!*

Le nuvole passano veloci nel gran cielo azzurro²⁵.

4

Postscript?

At first sight Mahon's 're-write' of a Metastasio's sonnet looks like an appendix to *Roman Script*. On further consideration it is clear that he included it as stanza XII advisedly, as an integral part of the poem. There are several layers of art and meaning attached to this sonnet. First of all the name. Enamoured, like Keats, of the Greeks, Pietro Trapassi used the pseudonym Metastasio. His sonnet was based on his reaction to his own libretto for *Olimpiade* (1733), which ends with the separation of two dear friends. When he saw it performed he wept «at evils of my own design» (st. XII, l. 4). He laughs at himself for being so deceived by his own inventions, making it clear that he prefers genuine emotions that spring from real life.

As Mahon read Metastasio's sonnet, Mahon may have felt that his own 'rage' at the death of Pasolini, whom he could never have met personally, was too much a matter of the imagination. Ten years later he returned to write of this 'myth' in *Pasolini*, a section of the poem *Quaderno*, published in the collection *Life on Earth* (2008). Here he relates Pasolini's last hours in more detail, almost as they were reported in the newspapers:

PASOLINI

Cruising for wild *ragazzi* out of season,
he sat late at Giordano's and drove down
in his Alfa Romeo to the seaplane basin
where, knifed and mangled in the sand and ash,
a wreck but recognizable, he lives on
as a bronze bird-shape shining amid the trash (20).

But surely, too, as Mahon read Metastasio's sonnet and decided to include it in *Roman Script*, he must have been struck by the many details that add up to a portrait of Keats. «That's Keats», he must have thought as, after «I invent dreams and stories ... dreams and romances» came «all my hopes and fears are fictions ...» and «I live in a ... fever of creation»; «the whole course of my life has been imagination», «the fancy cannot *cheat* so well / As it is famed to do, deceiving elf» (corresponding to Metastasio / Mahon's «when

not deceived by art») as well as «... a dream ... we wake» fusing into «waking dream» of the *Ode to a Nightingale*; and finally «... peace in the substance of the true» (*CP* 276-77), which is like a re-write of «Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty, – that is all / Ye know on earth and all ye need to know». And so, to the ashes of Gramsci and Pasolini *Roman Script* adds the ashes of Shelley, author of *Adonais*, cremated by his friends on the shore of Lerici.

Endnotes

¹In the same year *Roman Script* was included in the *Collected Poems*, which will be referred to hereafter as *CP*. I wish to thank Donatella Badin, Melita Cataldi, Fedora Giordano, Franco Marengo, Franco Prono and Claudio Sensi for their helpful suggestions concerning this essay. I am also grateful to my old friend Mary McCann who provided insightful hints for the interpretation of Mahon's poems. I should also like to dedicate this essay to the memory of Guido Zingari (professor of the Philosophy of Language at the Tor Vergata University) who died on 6 April 2009 in the earthquake which struck the Abruzzi region. I am indebted to him for his sensitive study on *Ontologia del rifiuto. Pasolini e i rifiuti dell'umanità in una società impura*, Le Nubi, Roma 2006.

²Recently included in *Adaptations* (2006), as well as in the *Faber Book of 20th Century Italian Poetry*, ed. by Jamie McKendrick.

³The critic Hugh Haughton emphasizes the fact that «the word "script" can refer to a type of font, a literary text, or film script» (H. Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, Oxford UP, Oxford 2007, p. 321).

⁴See D. Mahon, *L'ultimo re del fuoco. Poesie scelte*, a cura di R. Bertoni e G. Pillonca, Trauben, Torino 2000, p. 23.

⁵«Roma è la città delle illusioni, non a caso qui c'è la Chiesa, il governo, il cinema, tutte cose che producono illusione ... Sempre più il mondo si avvicina alla fine. Quale posto migliore di questa città, che tante volte è morta e tante rinata, quale posto più tranquillo per aspettare la fine da inquinamento e sovrappopolazione? È il posto ideale per vedere se tutto finisce o no». Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Italian are mine with the help of Mrs. Mary McCann.

⁶See Pierre Boulez, *Alea*, in Id., *Note di apprendistato*, trad. it di L. Bonino Savarino, Einaudi, Torino 1968, pp. 40-53.

⁷This line could also be read as a reference to the collection *Rain Dance* by John Hewitt (1978) and in particular to his 1968 political poem *For a Moment of Darkness over the Nation*, though the first stanza of *Roman Script* is light and sunny.

⁸Similar iconography characterizes *Otto e mezzo* (1963), as well as the «review of ecclesiastical fashion» in *Rome* (1972).

⁹G.C. Ferretti, *Pasolini: l'universo orrendo*, Editori Riuniti, Roma 1976, p. 120.

¹⁰For further reading, consult Robert Kee, *Ireland: A History*, Abacus, London 2003, pp. 35-50. The expression may also refer to the Stuarts, who plotted the restoration of their family to the throne of England in Rome.

¹¹Mahon's native Belfast was the only Irish city to be involved in the Industrial Revolution. It was in the great Harland & Wolff shipyards that the Titanic was built in 1912.

¹²F. Fellini in A. Licata *et al.*, *La città e il cinema*, Edizioni Dedalo, Bari 1985, p. 70.

¹³Beauty of the meaning of the Greek *kalokagathia*.

¹⁴Child-abuse among the clergy was common knowledge in Ireland at least since Joyce's *Dubliners* (*The Sisters*). It was also known that the practice was considered 'venial' by Church authorities and therefore covered up rather than expiated. Recent pronouncements by Pope Benedict XVI have completely reversed this attitude. The Protestant American Henry Adams

painted an equally damning picture of Rome in the first half of the 19th century: «The Rome I saw [...] was the most violent vice in the world [...]. Our emotions were immoral because no-one, priest or statesman, was honestly able to read in the ruins of Rome a lesson other than this», quoted in S. Negro, *Roma non basta una vita*, Neri Pozza, Venezia 1962, p. 253.

¹⁵ It was a friend and collaborator of Michelangelo called Daniele da Volterra who began covering this nakedness with the famous «breeches».

¹⁶ G. Zingari, *Ontologia del rifiuto. Pasolini e i rifiuti dell'umanità in una società impura*, cit.

¹⁷ G.C. Ferretti, *Pasolini: l'universo orrendo*, cit., p. 76.

¹⁸ «[Io] non credo in questa storia e in questo progresso. Non è vero che comunque si vada avanti. Assai spesso sia l'individuo che le società regrediscono o peggiorano. In tal caso la trasformazione non deve essere accettata», P.P. Pasolini, *Lettere luterane*, Einaudi, Torino 1976, p. 27.

¹⁹ B.D. Schwartz, *Pasolini requiem* (ed. orig. 1992), trad. it. a cura di Paolo Barlera, Marsilio, Venezia 1995, p. 364.

²⁰ P.P. Pasolini, *Una premessa in versi*, in L. Betti, M. Gulinucci (a cura di), *Pier Paolo Pasolini. Le regole di un'illusione. I film, il cinema*, Associazione "Fondo Pier Paolo Pasolini", Roma 1991, p. 13, emphasis added.

²¹ Nenni in V. Roidi, *Roma com'è*, Newton Compton, Roma 1987, p. 30.

²² See G. Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, Routledge, London 2004, pp. 20-23.

²³ Cfr. G. Zingari, *Ontologia del rifiuto*, cit.

²⁴ Mahon strikes another note in his 'green' poems, for example, the *haiku*-like in the 'Bashō in Kinsale' sequence: «Desert island books: / Homer and Rachel Carson, / Durable hardbacks» (D. Mahon, *Harbour Lights*, The Gallery Press, Loughcrew 2005, p. 47). «Desert island books» is a reference to the BBC radio programme *Desert Island Discs*, in which celebrities are asked to say which two books they would take with them to a desert island. Mahon speaks of his own preferences for Homer (following Joyce) and Rachel Carson, forerunner of radical environmentalists, with works such as his *Life on Earth* (2008). Mahon also recognizes his debt both to William Golding and to James Lovelock, in his *Homage to Gaia* (2000).

²⁵ Scene XII. *The Outskirts of Rome. Looking East. Day*. «The garbage lorry approaches, outlined against the sky, hugging the roadside. All around the sky, the sky! It's all the city! The other world, the world under the sun! Actually everything is filthy, abandoned, wretched. Tower-blocks in the distance, a few shacks, sagging wires, neglected vegetable gardens. . . . All the dead things the lorry is piled with roll down the slope like a brightly coloured landslide. Othello and Iago's bodies too . . . Othello's eyes shine with ardent curiosity, irrepressible joy. Iago's eyes too gaze ecstatically at that spectacle of the sky and the world that he had never seen before.

Otello [Davoli] – Iiiiih, what are those?

Jago [Totò] – They are... they are... the clouds...

Otello – And what are the clouds?

Jago – Who knows?

Otello – How beautiful they are! How beautiful they are!

Jago (in comic ecstasy) – Oh, *the agonizing, wonderful beauty of the world!*

The clouds cross swiftly across the great blue sky».

P.P. Pasolini, *Capriccio all'italiana*, in L. Betti, M. Gulinucci (eds.), cit., pp. 147-148.

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