

# I Am A Force From The Past

## *More Modern than All The Moderns...*

Sky Gilbert In Conversation With Antonino Mazza

### **Interview**

SKY: *I guess what I wanted to ask you is...do you mind if I have one of your cigarettes?*

ANTONINO: No, not at all...

SKY: *Does the lighter work?*

ANTONINO: No...try this one.

SKY: *I'm an artist and a fan of Pasolini's. I don't know anything about you. What is your background?*

ANTONINO: I'm a poet and I have translated some Italian poets into English. Montale first, and now Pasolini. I came late to Pasolini's poetry. I had read *Le ceneri di Gramsci* in the mid 70's and left it there. But then in the early 80's, I read his mature poetry and it became almost imperative that I get to know more of his work and that the English reader should have access to a wide selection of his poetry as well.

SKY: *I'm coming at this poetry as a fan of Pasolini's movies and for me right off, his work is more accessible in the films. I read Enzo Siciliano's introduction to Pasolini's poetry; he talks about things like people going into hysterics when The Ashes Of Gramsci was published (it was that scandalous) and about Pasolini's writing in Friulan dialect. Well, can we get all that in translation?*

ANTONINO: The reason why Friulan as a literary effort was scandalous in the period of the war, when Pasolini first wrote in it, is that fascist Italy was above all an experiment in homogenization, it was a period during which expressions of cultural divergence were not tolerated, therefore, censored or worse. Pasolini's book of poems *Poesie a Casarsa (Poems in Casarsa)*, however slim a volume, introduced poems in a dialect, apparently proscribed by the mere fact that they were not written in the language of the great Italian literary canon.

*Like...D'Annunzio?*

ANTONINO: And Dante, and Petrarch and so on, the great literary heritage of Italy which the Italian fascist establishment identified with. Pasolini published his book in 1942.

SKY:: *Right in the middle of the war...*

ANTONINO: Yes, and it's a book by a young man, twenty-years-old, perhaps resorting to an alternate language, as a way of escaping the stifling effects of the nationalist discourse which of course was extolled in standard Italian.

SKY:: *Is there also something revolutionary happening in terms of, let's say, metre? The language goes from conversational to highly-metaphorical very quickly.*

ANTONINO: Let's first say that Pasolini did not set out to revolutionize the language of Italy. He simply opted to express his sentiments in a language that was distinct, that was certainly uncontaminated by the pervasive nationalist rhetoric (one doesn't begin with such big plans). He discovered only after the publication of his book that the introduction of this other world had wider implications than even he knew.

O: *What other world?*

ANTONINO: The world as expressed through the rich imagery of an indigenous language, capable of articulating original, profound emotions outside the spectrum of the iconography of the nationalist project.

O: *Of the real people...*

ANTONINO: The real emotions of real people that use the idiom that is born with them in their own geography in their home. Let me give you an sample. The book opens with this three-verse simple dedication -

*Fontàne d'àghe dal mè paîs.*

*A no è àghe pi frès-cie che tal mè paîs.*

*Fontàne di rùstic amôr.*

(Water fountain of my village. There is no water as fresh as in my village. Fountain of rustic love.) When the book came out, *Primato*, a widely-distributed Rome-based literary magazine of the time, refused to publish Gianfranco Contini's review of it on the grounds that the poems were in dialect. The experience of having had the spiritual language of his origins censored became a reference throughout Pasolin's artistic career.

*O: How radical is Pasolini's work in terms of the language itself? Does it seem colloquial in Italian, is it a strange mixture, what?*

ANTONINO: His language is syntactically complex from very early on, it also spans the gamut of poetic expression, from terza rima, to free verse in his later work, to eventually tapping into, what he calls, the magma of volcanic impotence in his mature poetry. Needless to say, his terza rima was not Dantean, but impure, contaminated, with half rhymes, etc. In resorting to his ancestral tongue to express the emotions that he finds there he also expresses the ontology of a peasant world. His early poetry is revolutionary in this sense. Imbued with ideas of progress the Italian language had become rhetorical; for Pasolini, therefore, his dialect represented a form of spiritual freedom. In going back

to his roots to express those sentiments he also managed to import images from the Catalan tradition thus enriching his dialect even as it represented a minor culture, a marginal anthropology.

SKY: *Pasolini was obsessed with antagonism towards the bourgeoisie. He was from the bourgeoisie?*

ANTONINO: Indeed. Not only was he from the bourgeois, his ancestry had been close to the Catholic Church as well. His great-grandfather had been an Ambassador of the Vatican. In that tradition his father was a fascist career soldier. Pasolini rebelled against his Paternity. He was naturally drawn closer to his mother's culture who was of peasant stock.

SKY: *Now we're at the heart of things; something which is important to me as a gay man. In Siciliano's five-page introduction, there is a parenthetical remark about Pasolini's homosexuality. It's unbelievable. I think Siciliano mentions it one other time maybe in the introduction. But it's again parenthetical and he uses "homosexual" not "gay". When I saw Pasolini's Teorema, for instance, it changed my life. The reviews, however, said it was a film about the bourgeoisie. I saw it as a film about gay sexuality and sexuality in general. You see, I think Siciliano is suggesting that Pasolini was gay BECAUSE he was a Marxist. It's almost treated as a symptom of his being anti-bourgeois, whereas I see it as the other way around; because he was a gay man all these other things occurred. Of course it's possible to be a fascist or conservative and a gay*

*person but the fact is that he was, every day, constantly having sex with peasants; and as you said his ideology came from his personal life. The images in his work are indisputably gay.*

ANTONINO: It is to be pointed out that by the time we learn about him in Toronto and abroad through his films, Pasolini was already at the peak of his artistic maturity, though still growing; and it is possible to establish this by reading his poems especially. The poetry is what best can give us an inkling of his broad poetic and existential experience, of his being in touch with certain everyday realities and, in a way, the poems provide the blue print of his vision as an artist as it was later developed even in his films, and in his later writings. In his poems he had developed a poetics for which the film medium provided the larger canvas.

SKY: *Do you feel he was trapped and needed a larger medium than poetry?*

ANTONINO: It was not a trap he was in so much as by the age of forty he felt he had exhausted the medium of poetry; that is, he felt he was no longer being read. Since his twenties he had published four major poetry collections, a major piece of literary criticism on Italian writers, a major anthology of Italian dialect poetry, two novels based on the Roman youths. So, given his extensive production, and the experimentalism that ensued in the early sixties the intelligentsia in Italy thought they knew what he was about. He had to explode onto another form. Form is an intrinsic part of the act of creation, not something that comes before or after the creation. Form is also a way of achieving voice.

So every time you want to re-enter the discourse, you may need to write a novel if you've been writing poetry, or you have to make a film, as he did later, and so on.

SKY: *What you're saying makes such good sense. I don't think I would have ever heard of Pasolini if he hadn't made films; writing as he did in Italian, or in dialect, or about Italian politics.*

ANTONINO: Well he was implicated in politics very early on. In Friuli, in the period 1943-44 his younger brother who was in the resistance was killed by the Communists. An opposing group. Later, as a member of the Communist party, given the nature of the explosive political environment following Italy's defeat, he was exposed as a homosexual even as he himself was becoming aware of being one.

SKY: *Because Communists are notoriously conservative in their sexual politics...*

ANTONINO: Indeed. And the consequences were major in his life. He lost his teaching job, and as a social outcast he had to run away from his village of Casarsa to Rome, which he did one night with his mother in 1949. He wasn't a person any longer welcomed in the party, though just a couple of years earlier, because of his brilliance and dedication to the cultural life in the region, he had been sent to the USSR as a representative of the Communist Italian youth, and so on; by being himself, having broken the moralistic pretenses of the party he became a social and political pariah.

SKY: *Pasolini was out as a gay artist. If Pasolini talked about peasants he was going to talk about a peasant he fucked last night, or a peasant who fucked him - and that is unapologetically there. That must have been tremendously revolutionary. It's kind of veiled; it could be interpreted as a Whitmanesque romanticization of the proletariat - it kinda gets by on that, but on other levels it's quite clear. Would you say it became clearer once he was brought out of the closet?*

A: Pasolini didn't have to come out. He had never been a closet gay. In fact more than *revolutionary* his work must have been tremendously disconcerting even for those who were most well-intentioned - Yes. I think that once he went to Rome he couldn't help but deal with it more directly, just for mere survival. Pasolini's is a very interesting case in this way. He discovered who he was through other's reactions to what he was. He did not think that being homosexual was something terrible that had happened to him. When others did find out he tried to convince them that it was nothing to be ashamed of. It's a truly revealing characteristic of his. His cousin, Nico Naldini, told me that when the Communist party had him charged for homosexual acts, and consequently his mother found out he was gay, his consoling words to her were that since André Gide, who had recently won the Nobel prize for literature, was gay, what was the problem? He was naive about the political and social implications that arose from his being gay. He was astounded by the cultural reaction all around him. He couldn't believe what was happening to the society he extolled and celebrated, it was like a huge tragic disappointment.

SKY: *That is what makes his work so incredibly beautiful. There is an absolute naivete', and I don't mean that the work isn't sexual, I mean the lack of guilt, if one wants to say flaunting it - it's just totally honest about what his experience is in that sense.*

ANTONINO: Yes.

SKY: *The homoeroticism of his films is breathtaking. No matter how many times he had naked women or heterosexual situations he was clearly obsessed with Ninetto Davoli, his lover for many years; his body, his face, his energy and that incredible refreshing peasant sexual vitality.*

ANTONINO: Well, he was successful in representing it not only on the screen and in his novels but in his poetry as well. And that is one of his great achievements formally also.

O: *Critics of the Greek poet Cavafy write about his works in terms of politics but ignore that his poems are Odes to boys. Do you feel Pasolini was getting short shrift at all in the way he was dealt as an artist?*

ANTONINO: Well this should be looked at in the context of Euro-Americo-centrism. This is the type of great artist whose work those in power - I'm talking about institutional power ...

SKY: *... the literary establishment ...*

ANTONINO: - as well, yes - will try to marginalize. It's very evident: there were huge critical battles after his murder as to the value of his work, and which continue today. But the more we read him, the more we realize that all the topics he dealt with are the most central to the 20th-century's struggle to better the human condition. The "West" appears irreconcilably contradictory to a vivid and lucid poet like Pasolini, because Western democracies are in many ways still today insensitive to the realities of those who don't fit in. More and more, anyone who is alert to the truth, about the societies we live in, about their diverse inhabitants, can't but find his/her way back to what Pasolini was saying 25 years ago. And Pasolini remains relevant because the culture of the day is always attempting to sweep our society's complex issues it would rather not deal with under the carpet.

*O: I wanted to talk about Salò. I just discovered it in the corner store. I felt it made me move ahead leaps and bounds as an artist. Siciliano's introduction mentions the boys in Salò dancing in the castle as a triumph over fascism. But to me the movie is more complex than that. Coming at it as someone who is into sadomasochism, and noting that Alberto Moravia mentions that Pasolini was a masochist, the movie has reverberations on a fascist level and an S & M level. In a way it seems a non-judgmental view of fascism. It's a hard film to come to terms with; I couldn't watch parts of it. It seems to be looking at the violence in the human condition and saying; it's there. I can't help seeing it not only in relation to Italian politics but as a statement about sex and violence, and how*

*a society may try to ignore the relationship between the two; but Pasolini looked at it right up front.*

ANTONINO: You touch it right there. *Salò* is not a film that creates polarities. Pasolini was obsessed with truth versus the shadowy games that our society plays behind the closed doors of the heart and the mind. He did the same in other movies. He pulled out one volume of the encyclopedia of Western civilization and even beyond at a time, albeit *The Gospel According To Saint. Matthew*, or *The Decameron*, or *The Canterbury Tales and Medea* and *Thousand and one night* even, and each time made it live again, not as it was invested with that sense of civility and high culture by the keepers of our civilizations, but by interpreting a truer sense of the society and those individual protagonists of those stories; we can thus see how these works are taken away from us and put on the shelf where they are safe; and that's why watching his movies is such a terrifyingly refreshing thing.

*SKY: In the Victorian-Aids-centred culture that I think we're moving into it's terribly important to have a real we/they, to see the white, middle-class as clean, disease free people, and the others as violence-, sex-, and disease-ridden. In Salò it's clearly the ruling class that is totally obsessed with defecation and sexual torture.*

ANTONINO: The dominant class is very attentive in keeping the public space discrete from the private. A lot of our civilization's collective energy is spent expressly for this purpose. But Pasolini is obsessed with human energy - and what is frightening about the

film is that behind those closed doors there reigns the animal energy of the two-legged human beast. One of the most important things which an initiate can miss in reading important works from abroad – as too often even contemporary classics seem to be published in North-America almost haphazardly – are those trajectories of how an author's *oeuvre* can be more than the sum of its parts. For the greater appreciation of an artist's work there arises the need at times to identify for the reader some of the strategies by which an *oeuvre* successfully probes a given inequitable cultural model, a given human condition, a given state of a civilization. For a greater appreciation of Pasolini's works it is important to know his prevalent poetic strategy; this is what I try to foreground in this poetry collection of his poems in English translation

*SKY: What will it be called?*

*A: Ali Blue-Eyes And Other Prophecies*, which should come out soon from Exile Editions, if Pasolini's heirs don't delay permission. The book foregrounds the advent of his prophetic poetics as a strategy to undermine our culture's obsession with history. We live in a world which looks to the past to explain the present and to project the future. Pasolini went back to archaic models, thought about man before culture, before history; in fact the collection includes an essay by Pasolini on history.

*SKY: It happens at the end of Teorema - at the end, when the businessman removes his clothes and there's a scream, a strange return to something beyond history, something*

*beyond recorded history, pagan. When one looks at Medea - the shocking image where they rip someone apart...a pagan ritual...*

ANTONINO: His *Medea* is a fascinating film. Consider that Medea as a foreigner living in Greece has no rights of citizenship. Pasolini too was from somewhere other than Rome, as we all are in our modern cities, and so identified strongly with foreignness, as we can also. There is a tremendous, beautiful poem, from 1962 that encapsulates his sense of his illegitimacy in history:

June 10, 1962

*I am a force from the past.  
Only in tradition is my love.  
I come from the ruins, from the churches,  
from the altar-pieces, from the villages  
lost among the Apennines or the Pre-Alps  
where our brothers lived.  
I wander through Tuscolana<sup>1</sup> like a madman,  
along the Appian Way like a stray dog.  
Or I watch the sunsets, the mornings  
over Rome, over the Ciociaria, over the world,  
like the first events of Post-History,  
which I witness, by virtue of the privilege of a registry  
official, from the extreme edge of some buried  
age. Monstrous is he who is born  
of a dead woman's entrails.*

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<sup>1</sup> *Tuscolana, Appian Way*: The poorest, subproletarian quarters of Rome. *Ciociaria*: Region to the south-west of Rome.

*And I, an adult fetus, move about  
more modern than all the moderns  
in search of brothers that are no more.*

This oxymoron, this characteristic discovery of a time before ancestry, this sense of being a force from the past more modern than all the moderns, provides us with another key to reading Pasolini, the Picasso key if you want, which reveals a contiguous world where the legitimate historical world is not as important a referent as is the general consensus.

*SKY: I'm fascinated by Pasolini's death. What astounds me is that people always wonder how this man could write critiques of Italian culture and then go out and spend hours getting laid every night? How could he do that? That to them is an extreme contradiction. It seems that what you are saying is that the two are absolutely and utterly linked organically. But do you have any theories, because I think one of the reasons there have been arguments over the murder - I mean Alberto Moravia makes it very personal - is that Pasolini was into masochism and took it too far. That's of course the way people treat people who are into sexual extremes: the victim deserved it. But because Pasolini's work is repressed I'm irritated that when he dies people said, well he was just a fag and he hung around street people so of course he was killed. But his female friend...*

ANTONINO:...Laura Betti...

*SKY: ...has gone on this crusade about his murder, theorizing it was a right-wing plot to extinguish him.*

ANTONINO: In fact his case was reopened twelve years after his murder. What is interesting is the unsolved contradictions. The constant contradictions that come up over and over again. Had anyone else been murdered there would have been at least a full-scale investigation...

*SKY: If Moravia for instance, someone part of the establishment...*

ANTONINO:...it wouldn't have been "case closed we've found the guy." And there certainly was evidence, there were other foot prints on the sand, other elements, they found a ring that did not belong to neither the victim nor the killer, that Pelosi, the murderer, recognized and so on.

*O: You talked about Pasolini taking these old stories and breathing new life into them after they had been whitewashed by the establishment. Now what happened to The Gospel Of Saint Matthew and the Catholic church? Didn't they ban it or...*

A: They gave it a prize.

*O: At first...*

ANTONINO: Yes, at first, then they figured that Pasolini's interpretation was too personal, his mother played Mary; that the Gospel of Christ verbatim, in its natural form,

as spoken by Christ, in Mathew, was not the Roman Churches doctrine, and they didn't appreciate that; and so on...

*SKY: I felt that way about Teorema, that it was a radical Christian view. The son of god as a sexual force, and I understood in Teorema and The Gospel why people would follow this Christ. There was a kind of sexual, violent, passionate energy we don't usually associate with Christ.*

ANTONINO: The entire spoken text in *The Gospel According To St Matthew* has the feel of the Gospel verbatim as delivered by Christ in the New Testament. In a manner of speaking, the film is not telling you the story of Mohammed, it is Mohammed speaking directly to (his flock) you. This imaginative leap does away with the mediated interpretations of the sacred *word*. The audience is allowed to peer through behind the interpreters' dogma, to the energy of the sacred source itself. Going pagan in this fashion given the place the Catholic Church held in society in the early 60's was a radical event with far-reaching consequences for the Church. Those were very conservative times.

*SKY: You know, I always debated in my head whether film is better at the creation of the fantastical or the real. I know that film does special effects so well, but I feel that what film does is make you believe fantastical effects are real. In terms of Pasolini, what you get from them is an incredible sense of reality.*

ANTONINO: And physicality. Thus, a living real presence. This is why his camera stares in those eyes and in those faces. In his films, he succeeded in representing and capturing ancient emotions that seem to belong to prehistoric times with believable accuracy. We're left with the awesome sense of knowing an ancient, prehistoric, human ancestor, not from the point of view of an evolved species, but as his similar. In his poetry, he vividly represents the restless prehistoric emotions of a contemporary and ancient third world that will prophetically ensue. This is why Pasolini will forever be alive. We ought to read his poetry.

Toronto, 1992