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CLASSICAL AND CHRISTIAN MYTH IN THE CINEMA OF PASOLINI

Kostas Myrsiades

Although Pier Paolo Pasolini is not rewriting history in such mythic films as *Oedipus Rex*, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, and *Medea*, he is at least permitting a playback of legend and myth—the common assumptions of history as understood at the grass-roots level—with a view to exposing the interpenetration of past and present. Pasolini demonstrates in these films not that any golden age must act as a standard to which the present must adhere, but, rather, that all time is one and that the common man's condition is a universal problem. He builds these films on the bed-rock reality of the common environment, the every-day, to strip people of their illusions and to remind them that intellectualism is an enemy.

While post-industrial urban man has intellectualized his myths so that they no longer hold any reality for him, the peasants of Pasolini's Italy, in many ways still untouched by the twentieth century, look upon these myths as a part of their everyday existence. For the common man, the suffering of Oedipus is a real suffering which he too has experienced under similar circumstances; ancient and modern man are linked by the still-primitive mythicism of the people, as Pasolini indicates in discussing the Catholicism of his first film, *Accattone*:

It still retains the pre-bourgeois, pre-industrial and therefore mythical features which are typical only of the people—in fact the final sign of the Cross is done wrong; perhaps you didn't notice this, but instead of touching their left shoulder and then the right, they do the right shoulder first and then the left, just like the children who cross themselves while the funeral is going past, who make the same mistake: the sign they make is not even a Christian sign, it's just vaguely religious and protective, but it isn't Catholic in the orthodox—and therefore bourgeois—sense of the word.¹

Struggling in a chaotic, existential universe, the peasant finds order in a natural state close to the earth that gave birth to his myths, those myths defined by Pasolini as “this idea of time, on which man bases not only his life—his thrift, foresight, respectability, morality, etc. etc.—but his art as well.”²

Oedipus in Pasolini's version of *Oedipus Rex* is a hero with whom the common man can identify, a man beyond pretense and convention, a primitive who, struggling with reason, shines naked under the scorching desert sun. Taking from Sophocles only the most elemental aspects of his hero,

Pasolini dwells on Oedipus murdering his father (as in *Medea* he dwells on the heroine's murder of her brother and later her children) and concentrates in a long sequence on a recurring dream which drives Oedipus to Delphi, making visual the irrationality of a man possessed by a persistent image. Contrasting Oedipus' fear of losing contact with those around him, with those inner drives that force him onward to his destiny, Pasolini presents us with the picture of a man who, like modern man, is alienated from his surroundings, passing through a world of which he no longer feels a part. The script of the film explains:

He sees mothers and fathers holding their little ones by the hand, or nursing them in their arms. He sees an invalid, his eyes gleaming in his jaundiced face, go by in a litter. He sees the idle rich of his own generation, walking with girls at their sides, laughing happily. He sees toddlers still lost in infancy, playing frenziedly, forgetfully, immersed in a life irredeemably lost for Oedipus.³

Similarly, the climactic revenge sequence of the third reel of *Medea*—treating the reconciliation of Jason and Medea, the giving of gifts to the newly betrothed, her fiery death, and the bathing and sacrifice of Medea's sons—can be seen as a ritual ceremony distancing man in a Brechtian way from his history. The first version of the revenge sequence (which is mirror-imaged in a corrective re-play of the event) is presented as a premonition; the incidents, preserved in form, are without inner substance, the way in which the mythic past is conventionally viewed. But myth, Pasolini makes clear in the second version, exists not merely as an imagining, not merely as a symbol or codified history, but as present reality; it not only serves a symbolic function, but must also be understood as a living, actual thing. In the combined view—the two versions run consecutively—the filmmaker makes clear by contrast that the past, reflected through thousands of years of thought must be seen as a happening whose essence is immediately real and present if it is to reach our deepest recesses of feeling. Pasolini's evocation of Medea's world, his exploration of Oedipus' life, and his portrait of an urgent Christ in *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, instructing, healing, and condemning as he moves among the people claiming his divinity and struggling to understand those impulses which drive him to his destruction, reveal the same preoccupation for authentic experience. Reaching for the metaphysical, Pasolini is exploring universal man's cry of pain and bewilderment before the mystery of life; his heroes speak for the experience of the common man alienated from his own history.

The identification of man's mythical ancestors with the contemporary common man is in Pasolini's world a natural identification; not only does the common man in all periods view time as continuous and uninterrupted, but the common man of Sophocles' time is essentially no different from the worker in present-day Italy, if sameness is measured not in material goods or external appearance, but in feelings, emotions, desires, the struggle of

daily living. For this reason, Pasolini quite comfortably has Oedipus born into a lower middle class family, sometime in the 1930's in Sacile, Italy. Beginning in present time, the film thus establishes a relationship between the ancient myth and Pasolini's own childhood and, by extension, the psychological relationship between Oedipus and all men who as children have rivaled their fathers for their mother's affections.

Classical and Christian myth, according to Pasolini, is a means by which the artist can move freely up and down the ladder of time and experience and thereby surpass or transcend local moments in time. Myth thus represents both the past (in its historical guise) and a tool of liberation from that past (as corrected by present understanding), as Pasolini suggests in commenting on *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*:

I did not want to reconstruct the life of Christ as it really was. I wanted to do the story of Christ plus two thousand years of Christian translation, because it is the two thousand years of Christian history which have mythicized this biography, which would otherwise be an almost insignificant biography as such.⁴

Further, in its super-historical role, myth, like death, is a complete entity, a circle, encompassing the incomplete circles of our as yet unfinished lives. "Myth," says Pasolini,

is a product, so to speak, of human history; but then having become a myth it has become absolute, it is no longer typical of this or that period of history, it's typical, let's say of all history. Perhaps I was wrong to say it is a-historic, it is meta-historical.⁵

Thus in understanding and expressing the flow of history, which is as yet unfinished in each present period of time, Pasolini turns to the dead for his models, for death provides the means of symmetry. The completed life of the dead hero, is set next to the uncompleted but similar life of the contemporary man, to give us a statement about the universal aspect of man's condition in universal time. Death, as Pasolini says of Oedipus, "has sanctified a perfect and by now unalterable version of what he once was. Death is the necessary condition to make a story from his life. As much as to 'compile' a film of his life."⁶ Death is further a maxim of epic and myth because it is complete and thus removed from present ongoing time. In this it is a proven objective entity which can be held up as a model to be used for placing our own misunderstood, chaotic actions in some perspective. Death, myth, the past thus become for Pasolini synonymous weapons in the arsenal of meta-history in their attempt to express the universal essence and the basic synchronic parallelism (simultaneity) of individual and diachronically (linear, progressive) isolated moments in time.

But if the essence of myth supersedes the accidents of the temporal world of physical actuality, as Pasolini makes clear through the Centaur in the prologue to his *Medea*, it derives from it at the same time:

But for ancient man all myths and rituals are real experiences and also part of his daily physical existence. For him reality is an entity so perfect that the emotion he experiences in the stillness of a summer sky is equal to the most profound inner experience of modern man.⁷

One can comment on the actual by way of the mythic, or on the past by means of the present, but the two cannot be made separate; for while they can be viewed temporally as consecutive moments in time, in their essential dimension they are universalized transformations of individual events. Each new generation re-interiorizes the past, in a sense recreating it, in a larger overall symmetry of time, just as does the protagonist of *Oedipus Rex* who, returning blind and defeated to the present from that mythic past which witnessed his blindness and defeat, sits in a field near a factory in some northern Italian city and begins to play his flute:

This time the melody derives from a song of popular revolt, from the partisan struggles. Through the mysterious mood it evokes, this seems to give its own meaning to all the surrounding elements: to the workers going by, to the passing traffic, to the group of common people waiting at the bus-stops in the distance.⁸

In this view of myth exemplified in Pasolini's mythic films, the primitive and instinctual come to be associated with the irrational. But the filmmaker's struggle is not against reason, which he identifies with being realistic; instead, he finds in the world of myth a "use of reason which is far different from our own; life there is very realistic for only those who are mythical are realistic and only those who are realistic are mythical."⁹

Not reason but intellectualism is the enemy of the common man of Pasolini's world, for intellectualism seeks to efface the reality of life and to raise it to the status of symbol. Jason realizes this is *Medea* when after returning with the golden fleece to reclaim his kingdom from his uncle, the king, the uncle refuses to relinquish power. Jason replies:

I understand. Keep your fleece, eternal symbol of power. At least I discovered that the world is far wider than your kingdom. And if you want to know the truth, I think this goatskin, outside its own land no longer has any meaning.¹⁰

Symbols, used by civilized culture to enslave the primitive mind, take on value only within a limited context in which common conventions prevail. Outside its own world, the symbolic value of the goatskin is lost, for it requires roots in the soil of primitive culture to have meaning. Outside its own land, the goatskin is like *Medea*, who recognizes with her flight from her homeland that "reality is no longer what it was."¹¹ Trying to escape her own myth, *Medea* finds she has lost her reality and thereby her mythic dimension. The premonition expressed in the ancient folk song of her homeland has been fulfilled: it had spoken of the sun turning black with the coming of Jason, the man from the sea, and indeed *Medea* now finds that looking at the sun, father of her fathers, she no longer recognizes it.

Jason is led to a similar loss of reality by his mentor, the Centaur, who, with the hero's arrival in Corinth, appears to him in two guises, that of the old Centaur—half bearded man, half horse—and that of the new Centaur—a beardless man. Confused by the doubling of the Centaur, Jason begins to lose his own sense of identity and his certainty in his mentor. The Centaur explains that Jason, too, has experienced a split between his past and present: “You have known two Centaurs, a sacred one when you were a boy, a desecrated one when you became a man. What was sacred is preserved beside the new desecrated form. And here we are, one beside the other.”¹²

The struggle within us, according to Pasolini, is between necessity and intellectualizing, the old and the new. Medea in her primitive aspect has been enslaved by Jason's civilized race; in *Oedipus Rex*, the conflict is interiorized between the king's mythic instincts and the intellectualizing that ensnares him. Warned by Tiresias and the oracle of Delphi, he, too, tries to escape his own myth. Oedipus is Medea and Jason in one, both exploiter (intellectualizer) and victim (enslaved emotion); where Medea, a Dionysian agent, destroys the Apollonian Jason, Oedipus' id overwhelms and crushes his superego.

The struggle between intellect and instinct takes on one final dimension in Pasolini's world, for he sees in myth a means to exert social pressure. Oedipus and Jason both hold power and, as a result, exploit the less fortunate people of Thebes and Medea's ritual world. Despicable as it is, this exploitation, according to Pasolini, is a necessary catalyst to revolution (which is itself no more than the return to the most elemental instinct in man—his need to survive). Submission to symbols and figureheads, to goat-skins and kings, means turning away from the literalness of existence, despising one's own roots, and accepting the false values of an oppressor class, state, or idea. Rejecting manipulation of the masses, Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* brings the common man back to his own control over biblical events and to a view of Christ as revolutionary, while a projected untitled film sees Saint Paul as a Pharisee and reactionary who stood for Parisian collaborators of the Nazi occupation; his last film of the 1944 fascist republic of Salo again leaves recent history open to “some ulterior modes of interpretation or of extension.”¹³

In Pasolini's mythic films, then, the social content of present-day man is seen not as an isolated phenomenon but informed by man's whole historical context. For just as the present is the form of the past, so, conversely, is the past the material of the present. Thus, when Oedipus, blind and broken, leaves Thebes, he walks through a field on the outskirts of a modern-day industrial town. Born in present time, having suffered and lived in past time, he returns, finally, to end his life in present time. The cycle is now complete, a cycle invoking the present in the past and then, moving round full circle, returning the past to its present. In Pasolini's mythic films it is through this dialectic of mythic past counter-poised against and yet infused

with time-present that the oneness of time is revealed, that oneness which makes real and comprehensible the eternal nature of the condition of man. Myth, finally, is in Pasolini's mythic films a means of liberation, for it permits us to travel freely through time and thus transcend temporal moments of merely local interest; it permits us to liberate ourselves from the weight of the past and to begin to see history not as a model but as a tool of present needs.

NOTES

- 1 Oswald Stack, interviewer, *Pasolini on Pasolini* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), pp. 47-48.
- 2 Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Why That of Oedipus is a Story" in Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Oedipus Rex*, trans. by John Mathews (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), p. 7.
- 3 Pasolini, *Oedipus Rex*, p. 45.
- 4 Stack, p. 83.
- 5 Stack, p. 127.
- 6 Pasolini, "Why That of Oedipus is a Story," p. 7.
- 7 Quotes from Pasolini's film *Medea* are taken from the 16mm English subtitled print released by New Line Cinema.
- 8 Pasolini, *Oedipus Rex*, p. 103.
- 9 *Medea*
- 10 *Medea*
- 11 *Medea*
- 12 *Medea*
- 13 Gideon Bachmann, "The 200 Days of Salo," *Film Comment* 12 (March-April 1976), 41.