
Pocketbook and Sauerkraut

I.

I did not know I was a member of the working class until I no longer was. In the dense Italian neighborhood in South Philadelphia where I grew up, there were no class distinctions because we were all one socio-economic group. The men with skilled trades made out a little better than those like my father whose lack of training qualified them at best for low level general maintenance jobs. The skilled workers might own a bigger TV set or have a taller fir tree in their parlors at Christmas, and the only boy who owned a football was the son of a workingman employed in the mysterious and relatively new field called electronics, clean work, the only kind of work we saw advertised on TV in General Electric commercials. Progress is our most important product, it said. The sense of that slogan meant nothing to me as a child, but the tune the words made, the canter of the pentameter, held in my mind as a beautiful pattern.

One street down, across 21st Street, on the next block of Watkins, lived the only people spoken of as a different, inferior class. The black working people and their children rarely crossed over into our neighborhood. Though physically closer to us than any other group, in language they were demonized and made the most remote and adversarial. Ethnic and racial tags made up our richest vocabulary. As tribes often have many names for the most critical presence in their communal life—twenty words for snow or river or salmon—we all had words to fix and set apart *the others*. The black boys who sometimes crossed over in gangs and jumped us would chant the names: Guinea, Boone, Greaser, Whitey, Wop. And we had names for them: Spook, Rubberhead, Jigaboo, *Mul'*. Where did "Boone" come from? What dialect turned *melanzana*, "eggplant," into *mulagnam'*, shortened to *mul'* and pronounced "mool"? I loved the loose, slippery textures of those words as much as I clenched inside with fear and disgust to hear them used. But I also sensed that to reject the language of the tribe was to risk rejecting its identity and reality in the world. Reject the words and you were in some way acting to kill off your own people, casting yourself into an exile of prideful superiority. There grew in me a child's conviction that language was a locked box in which were stored the most irrational, alienating, and violent voices. The most puzzling thing of all was the discrepancy between the censoring otherness words attached to our working-class black neighbors and the reality my eye

took in. Our block was clean but colorless and drab, without ornament: redbrick rowhouses, granite front steps, and a single large sycamore. One block down, however, they had planters in front of their houses, more trees, too, and windowboxes that splashed the distant air with wonderful colors. On our block, I hardly ever saw fresh flowers indoors or out. For signs of joy, for Nature, I looked across the 21st Street divide to that *other* place.

Among my people an awareness of ethnic separateness was more important than socio-economic or political identity. Non-Italians were *americani*, except blacks and Jews. They weren't Americans, either. From the man who worked at G.E. we would hear about black co-workers, whom he spoke of with respect and good will; he was also the only man in the neighborhood to go out on strike. Most of the other men feared a strike because they had too much at risk and tended to be suspicious anyway of anyone outside the family-neighborhood orbit. The G.E. father, however, drew mysterious power from the group, from the mass of workers acting as one entity, one will. The refusal to work, walking off the job, was so out of keeping with the mentality of my neighborhood that to my young mind it seemed at once heroic and insane.

We know ourselves in part by the misrepresentations others make of us. Many years after I'd left Philadelphia, someone I knew pretty well but to whom I'd said little about my early years assumed I grew up in an Italian culture rich with peasant traditions, Verdi on the phonograph, flowers everywhere, Old Master reproductions on the wall, tomatoes ripening in the back yard. In my house there were no flowers, no opera (no phonograph, for that matter), and no images except for devotional bric-a-brac and seething black and white images on TV. There is no peasantry in my background, only village laborers and tradesmen (and, a few generations back, a priest who left his property holdings to the prostitute who bore his children, a professional gambler, and a bigamist who became a boom-to-bust coffee plantation tycoon somewhere in South America). Another friend assumed I came from an anarco-syndicalist background, as if all immigrant industrial laborers were political kin to Sacco and Vanzetti. There was, in fact, never a mention of working classes in my house or neighborhood. There was mostly talk about us Italians and all the *americani*. Until I went to college, where I was taught that there has been no determinant class system in America comparable to those in European nations like Italy, which had historical distinctions among peasant, landowner, subproletariat, proletariat, petit bourgeois, and aristocrat, I had hardly ever met anyone who spoke differently from me, and though I did not know it then, I understood in time that one purpose of American education was to detach me, or enable me to detach myself, from what I was finally learning to call "the working class" into which I was born.

My class awareness, such as it was, came packed in words and speech. I still repeat to myself the rhyme we learned as kids:

I made you look, you dirty crook,
I stole your mother's pocketbook.
I turned it in, I turned it out,
I turned it into sauerkraut.

The lines live in the same zone and continuity of my consciousness as passages from Dante, the Sermon on the Mount, “To Autumn,” “My Last Duchess,” “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower,” Edgar’s speeches in *King Lear* and Antony’s “Sometime we see a cloud that’s dragonish.” Its words constitute a *mysterium sanctum* where meaning lies in wait for initiates, and where language bleeds together conversation, doggerel, and formal elegance into one way of speech. But you can study, make sacrifice, burn incense, and still not be enlightened, for meaning is also sometimes a surprising gift, a sentence whose rhythms spring like a trap and catch you. At that sanctuary Nimrod is the spectral custodian, always there to break sense into incoherence. But it was, is, my true place. Outside, vendors sold hoagies and pizzasteaks and lemonade. L-e-m-o-n-a-d-e had all the sweetness of sound I expected of the thing. Except that it wasn’t really lemonade. Only in my teens did I learn that what we called lemonade was really lemon water ice. Lemonade was, for Americans, a drink! I was set straight by a high school pal, a lawyer’s son. I made you look, you dirty crook. My real learning was about the executive power of language to reveal, enchant, disguise, and transgress. Who knows what “education” was being buzzed around my head by the sisters in grade school and the priests in high school? Turning someone’s mother’s pocketbook into sauerkraut was a power as outlandish and severe in its illusion as Harpo’s power at the stringboard. Fantastical and sleight-of-hand, words in patterns had a lightness and buoyant canniness that my culture of labor either had no time for or disdained outright. What my culture did give me was a sense—a tactile, mineral sense—of language as the embodiment of contingency. And I think I also absorbed from my culture other qualities that have served me as a poet, a tenacity and a stupefied willfulness to make words answerable to the densities of consciousness.

But language, of course, was not so nicely patterned or cut to satisfying forms. That’s not how I experienced it. It was swampy, crazily shadowed, and pied with unintelligible matter. Its flashes and zigzags and curls pulled me in. One of my uncles, answering the door when I knocked (I was twelve), said: “So what can I sue you for?” Why would he want to sue me? How had he become my enemy? Was he joking? Why joke about suing me and taking away everything I owned? My own uncle! *Sue you for*: force you, sure, or use your four—O Sue, for you! I have never shed that instinct for and anxiety about the incipient babble in sentences. It has made me an unstable and easily confused reader of poetry and a writer of poems whose lines feel as if they are breaking down as soon as they come into a pattern of sense. The anxiety leaked very naturally into my speech as well, so that even now if I’m not attentive it will turn into a slur or mumble, and I am terrified to speak *ex tempore*. The boys in my high school came from different neighborhoods, from Two Street, Grays Ferry, and Ninth and Carpenter, but nearly all came from backgrounds like my own. In college—St. Joseph’s, a Jesuit school—I met boys from other backgrounds and places. Some had accents, from the South or Massachusetts or New York, but their speech didn’t have the edginess and abrasive candor that sounded so clearly in the tones of Philadelphia working-class boys like myself. I was at ease, and could play the fiction of not speaking with an accent, only when I acted in plays. Otherwise, my bad nerves, uncertainty, and Nimrod anxiety made me too intense. I read with gusto Yeats’s re-

marks in his *Autobiographies* about mastering the rhetorical arts and overcoming shyness. But my culture was massively different from his own, and I had no ambitions as a committee man; I only wanted to break words and my own speech clear of their roughly shaped origins in my culture.

It did no good anyway. I was reading my Yeats while working long summer hours loading crates with windshields, wheels, doors, and hoods at a Ford Motor Company shipping depot, or else working swing shift at the circuit-breaker factory where by day my mother (widowed several years before) worked on an assembly line. I read Yeats's approval of Axel's remark: "Live! Our servants will do that for us." A society or class that uses servants was, to my nineteen-year-old mind, candyland. To be at ease to do "the real work" of reading and writing! It was foolishness, but I've never quite given up that illusion, though I haven't given in to it, either. Sauerkraut and lemonade. Sour lemons aid the Krauts. For you, Sue, I sure can do. Then one night I met a Yeatsian lady, a Main Line sort of Yeatsian lady. After college I worked a succession of menial jobs for a few years. One summer I worked the parking lot at a bandshell in Fairmount Park. One evening, a middle-aged couple in a luxury car ignored my directions and parked in what I soon learned was their favorite (and therefore privileged) spot under a tree. "You remember where we like to park," he said, "and we'll remember you." Confused because tips and unearned privileges had small meaning to me from my previous work experience, I tried to cover my nerves with what I thought were amiable remarks about that evening's Debussy program. The lady, elegantly silent till then, turned to her husband: "What is this person saying? Can *you* understand him?" I quit the job that night. I was twenty-two and about to leave Philadelphia for good. I knew that Yeats was thinking metaphorically, as was Villiers, but only in part. With their aristocratic ambitions, cult of symbolist disembodiment, and enthrallment to residual forms of nobility wherever they might be found, both poets were writing fact. I could not shake off so suddenly what I was reading and absorbing with such hunger—Yeats seemed the poet who could conquer any tone, speak intensely and formally as one person to another, bring over philosophy into the feeling life of poetry, and his Irishness made him seem archaically foreign—but I did know very soon that I did not want servants doing my living for me, in metaphor or in fact, and that I did not want servants of any kind.

2.

In the early 1970s, a few years after my encounter with the Yeatsian concert-goer, I went to live in Italy, where my education in class distinctions continued. It was a tense time. The *contestazione* of 1968 and the years following seemed to have politicized nearly every relation in society, from office to schoolroom to kitchen. The Christian Democratic Party remained the majority party in the coalition government, but for some years the Communist Party under Enrico Berlinguer's leadership had been pursuing its *compromesso storico*, the historic compromise which would lead to the Communist Party's sharing in the coalition. Berlinguer's "Communism with a human face" was building its power base not only among the working class but also among the

managerial and professional classes. Bologna, where I lived for two years, was a specimen in the experiment. The scene of student and political violence in the 1960s, it was under Communist leadership in the 1970s and becoming the best administered, most congenial and stable local government on the Peninsula.

Several of my friends and clients (I survived mainly on private lessons and commercial translation work) were businessmen, professors, and doctors, who voted Communist or Socialist. I lived in a crumbling sixteenth-century building that housed working-class families and tradespeople. The aged lady who lived on the top floor shared a miniscule apartment—there was no central heating in our building—with her nephew; together they operated a produce stand at the local outdoor market. My middle-class friends discussed politics with great seriousness. They fervently supported the struggle of the working class, and they all had servants to clean their houses and prepare their meals. When I said that it seemed a contradiction for Socialists and Communists to keep servants, they readily agreed, for they suffered the contradiction of class privilege versus class affiliation. It confused me at first to realize that they exercised political passion out of ideological conviction and sympathy, not out of material necessity or inherited grievance. They had grown up among the *petite-bourgeoisie*. In the evening, I would come home from political conversations in spacious, well-furnished apartments and have to help the vegetable monger carry bags up four flights of stairs to her two-room garret.

In my own way, I was myself a sort of specimen, a true child of the working class, glazed with an American ingenuousness that Italians spotted at once, who also practiced the kind of speculative curiosity and taste for abstraction that they recognized as intellectualism. I was also trying to make my way as a poet, translator, and literary journalist, which placed me closer to the professional and culture-elite classes than to the working class. I did not fit the picture Italians had of the American social system, where class lines were so liquid and dissolved so frequently under the pressure of “opportunity” that the children of cement-finishers and pipefitters could become lawyers, surgeons, even accountants. (My college’s strongest and best endowed program was in Food Marketing.) My literary ambitions, however, brought respect from my successful friends and from my upstairs neighbor. I had read somewhere in Pound that in Europe there was no shame attached to a writer who is poor. My situation caused me both to see and, in a small way, experience the tense contradictions and guilt that existed within and among the social classes in Italy. My own youthful experience seemed wondrously simple by contrast. During the years I spent in Bologna, a few of the families I was friendly with realized they could no longer live the contradiction, so they released their servants.

One night a few of us went to the premiere of Pasolini’s film, *The Canterbury Tales*. “We better see it right away,” they said. “It’s sure to be confiscated as soon as it opens.” When we left the theater, the *carabinieri* were waiting in their cars and closed the movie that night. Pasolini had a certain claim on Bologna, for he had gone to high school and university there, though he hailed from the Friuli region and lived most of his adult life in Rome. In the early 1970s he was at the peak of his international fame as a film-maker, and for many years he had been a controversial, provocative

figure in Italian culture and politics. Pasolini came to fame as a poet in the late 1950s with *The Ashes of Gramsci* (*Le ceneri di Gramsci*), and its long title poem is a crucial document in postwar Italian literature. Antonio Gramsci, co-founder of the Italian Communist Party, was tried and imprisoned for many years under the Fascist regime. During his imprisonment he kept voluminous notebooks which became seminal theoretical writings on which to base a peculiarly Italian Communism rooted in local needs and a locally evolved economy. During his imprisonment he also instructed fellow prisoners (some of them hard-core criminals) in literature and history. Though a child of the petite bourgeoisie—his father was a civil administrator of some kind in Sardinia—Gramsci was preoccupied with the struggles of the new industrial working classes and their place in a new Communist society.

In the poem, Pasolini visits Gramsci's grave in Rome's Protestant Cemetery, where Shelley and other foreigners, mostly English, are buried. The grounds and gardens are carefully tended, and to Pasolini the place seems an image of patrician privilege. But beyond the cemetery lies the Testaccio quarter, a rough working-class slum, a *borgata*. Pasolini, child of a career military man and a schoolteacher, positions himself between the refined appointments of the burial grounds and the sordid workshops of the Testaccio, between the historical imagination of Gramsci (Italian hero buried among foreigners, man of prose, strategist for the reorganization of industrial society) and the speculative imagination of Shelley (English patrician in self-imposed exile, man of poetry, visionary of revolutionized consciousness). Pasolini positions himself in the middle, isolated by his own uncertainty, "Between hope / and my old distrust," between the hope for freedom of appetite sounded out by the din of Testaccio and his old distrust of his petty bourgeois origins. Gramsci is a model of rigor in rejecting the allure of materialist culture and the exploitive relation to working-class people that capitalist culture is built on. But Pasolini, powerfully attracted sexually and ideologically to the *borgata*, also values material comforts, the remnants of the "bourgeois evils / [that] wounded my bourgeois self." (In later years, young men of the Roman *borgate* recognized the cruising Pasolini by the luxury cars he drove.) He knows that Gramsci, like so many of the foreigners buried around him, succeeded by force of will, self-discipline, and intensity of purpose, and that the workers of Testaccio survive by smarts and sweat, always a step away from chaos, tossed by momentary passions. But as a poet and intellectual living "in the non-will / of the dead postwar years," Pasolini occupies his own disconsolate, ineffectual dead zone.

To make poetry is to transform passion into a symbol world, bringing over the quick of the senses into annals of lore and image-hoarding. The intellectuality of poetry does not return a poet to the source, to the fevers of Testaccio. We take ourselves out of life in order to speak more passionately of life. Pasolini knows that his clothes, though threadbare from use, are the kind working-class people covet. He loves their vulgar taste for glamorous shopwindows with their "crude splendours" even while his own tastes force him into an ironic regard. (When he cruised the *borgate* he often changed down from his normal workaday attire to tight polyester blouses and ankle boots.) He loves the workers' hunger for life's passions in part because he has had to school himself in the formalist reflective delay so crucial to

poetry. His poem is a cry of horror at his own helplessness in the middle, that despised place, between Testaccio and the lovely gardens of death.

Pasolini never really left that middle zone, the place of contradiction. Soon after the major critical successes of *The Ashes of Gramsci* and his two novels, *A Violent Life* and *The Ragazzi*, he became an increasingly controversial film-maker and cultural critic for major newspapers. With success came material rewards. I recognize Pasolini as the sort of artist whose political consciousness was fed by his desire to migrate to a class to which he would never in fact choose to belong. Born into the working class, he would have howled to set himself free of its system of censure and malediction. His febrile loyalties to the subproletariat of the *borgata* were conditioned by the fact that he was free to visit that life, not obliged to live it. His sexual privilege was his freedom to pick up and enjoy boys among whom he was not destined to live. But he was also an artist unafraid to suffer his contradictions and live out their consequences in public. In 1968, Pasolini published in a newspaper a poem in which he sided with the policemen then battling students during the 1968 turmoil. The police, he argued, were the children of the working class, with very limited opportunities in life. The students were, like himself, the children of the middle class and spoiled by the entitlements an unjust hierarchical society seeks to preserve and protect. The truly revolutionary gesture, the authentic Gramscian gesture, was to support the police in their conflict against the preservers of class privilege. Pasolini in effect claimed his own Marxist pedigree as justification for supporting the actions of the traditional law enforcement arm of the State.

The unmentioned presence in Pasolini's poem is Keats, also buried in the Protestant Cemetery. Yeats described him as the son of a stable keeper and too much enchanted by sensuous delight. But Keats was also, perhaps most of all, the poet of the senses' disclosures. The life of forms in poetry was for him one of pure possibility and consequently a fit medium for sensuous anticipation and surprise. He may have lacked philosophy and the refinements of aristocratic intellectualism, which figures in Yeats's account of him as a boy with his nose pressed to a sweetshop window. He certainly showed his hungers, and he did not agonize over his class origins as did Pasolini, Shelley, and Yeats, for whom the passionate life was always to be found elsewhere, in the *borgata*, in a classless society, in the rooms of great houses. Middle-class contradictions are no anxiety for an artist born among the working classes. The great anxiety is to separate oneself from those origins, escaping their violent censures and intolerance for the life of the imagination. Keats's career, like D. H. Lawrence's, was a pursuit of the sensuous immediacy and hauntedness of the flesh that Pasolini anguishes over in "The Ashes of Gramsci." For Pasolini, as for so many artists of the middle class, passion becomes "problematical." (For some it becomes a high-toned dilemma; one sees poems today with ludicrous titles like "The Mind-Body Problem," "The Problem With My Heart," and "The Problem of Passion.") Artists born to the working class face their own temptations, one of which is to reduce memory and experience to mere local color or cult object. There will probably always be a sentimental market for blue collar verities, alley cat wisdom and tenement transcendentalisms. Just as there are markets for exotic otherness, ethnic enchantments, and "subculture" oppor-

tunisms. I often remind myself not to let my work be dyed too richly or flamboyantly with Mercutio's red impetuosity—the flash of anger and impatience and want is so familiar to me. I've learned that contrariness may be the most enduring habit passed on by my working-class culture, and that its formal consequence is a barely sustained coherence of passion and idea.

3.

In my twenties, I read poetry to deepen my understanding of craft and broaden my sense of the dimensions of its mystery and ambition. The call to poetry resonated in the prose writers I was reading, Randolph Bourne, Paul Nizan, the Sartre of *The Words* and *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, Nietzsche, Ortega, and John Jay Chapman. In them I found the particular value, expressed mostly in political or moral terms, that I was pursuing in poetry: the sensuous shapeliness of form governing and measuring ungovernable passion. I felt words to be in a constant semi-solid state, however fixed and articulated their etymologies. They were not vehicles for stating passion, they were themselves the rapid uneven pulse and texture of passion. But somewhere along the way I also became persuaded, I don't know how, that the objects of the world cannot be owned by figures of consciousness. That is probably my deepest political conviction. I believe that there is in the things of the world an essential stilled singularity that cannot be expropriated even by the mastering forms of the imagination. The enchantments of representation are not true magic. Poetry does not transform the world, it embodies the particular acts and feelings of being in the world. If my ambition thrives on anything, it thrives on the way the things of the world resist words and wordiness. I love and struggle with that remoteness. The only contemporary I know who can own pieces of the world in figures of consciousness is James Merrill. (He owns pieces of the other world, too, in *The Changing Light at Sandover*.) Apart from his prodigious and well-schooled gifts as a craftsman, Merrill also has a power peculiar to the social, economic, and cultural privilege of his origins. The power and will to transform the things of the world into figures is driven by his own hunger to take and taste, as if he were the rich child who, shut away in hermetic rooms filled with images and books under the watchful eye of his nanny, had never done the rude Keatsian thing and pressed his nose to a sweetshop window.

I must have experienced poetry from the beginning—though I recollect it as a feeling only—as an attempt to fuse and discriminate at the same time, in one sentence; to blend into words the unsorted particulars of experience, and to make words not report the conflict but enact it. The figures of consciousness played out in a poem were for me not decorative or idly pleasurable but rhetorical, litigious, Mercutial, sometimes disablingly or obscurely so. (I sometimes think that working-class Roman Catholics feel the nerves of Puritanism more immediately and practically than any Protestant New Englander.) That impatience has carried over into my critical judgments. I don't like poetry with slyly built-in mechanisms of self-justification (Frost is our American master: equivocal wisdom born of equivocal humility), and I dislike the sentimentality of all-purpose sorrowing. I'm impatient with anyone who would

define me or my work in terms of my origins. Intellectual discourse these days is full of talk about hegemonic structures or principles, and one of these is class. Begin with the determinant factor of class, the argument runs, and all other qualities and structures will follow from that. No poet can afford to think that way because it is the technique of a mind that fears the messy particulars of embodiment and believes temperament to be an accident of language rather than a part of its genetic structure.

Though class is not determinant, it is certainly formative. When I ran my pocket-book-sauerkraut rhyme through my head or hummed “Better Buy Bird’s Eye” until its sense melted into those rhapsodic swells which Poe believed to be poetry’s purest music, when I pored over the tiny reproductions of paintings in our Picture Study books in grade school or read through encyclopedia articles and poems by Poe and Millay and Lindsay at the free library, they were not a richness beyond my poverty (we were not poor, we simply had no money, and there were no books in our house) or a promise of transport beyond my means. They were enchanting forms, mysterious shapes, which had a density of ordered feeling of which life itself seemed a rough sketch or study. My own day to day life felt like constant bad weather inside my head, of anger and sullenness, laughter and melancholy, with no placid middle zones, just as there seemed to be no middle temperaments among the boys I played with, who were either predatory, coarse, manipulative, and crazy, or else quiet, nervous, anxious to please, and in jeopardy. In time, the poetry I aspired to write would be one without middle zones, without a sustained discursive middle range or plain presentational balance. I knew I did not want to sound like Tennyson, sonorous, dignified, and responsible. Browning was closer to what I wanted, capable of the most exquisite lyric effects but also twitchy and volatile and impatient. I am touched by Henry James’s description of Browning reading his poems aloud in a way that suggested he hated them, biting and twisting the words, anxious, unsatisfied, inflamed by their very existence. And I still feel an opaque sympathy with the character of Lippo Lippi, a sympathy grounded in my class origins, which sharpened my sense of the otherness of the things of the world and somehow encouraged that sense to become a formal desire. Lippi makes a string of pictures of the world because it is so apart from him and he knows he could be engulfed in the oblivion of that otherness.

People in my neighborhood were scrupulously honest with one another and with local storekeepers, but the men felt little guilt pinching things from their workplace. My first writing materials—it sounds grandiose to call them that—were hot goods. Like many children, I scribbled away at stories and plays. The miserable wage my father earned at Temple University Hospital was offset by the availability of small items from a friend of his in Supplies. Most of my father’s co-workers took advantage, too, and like him most had gone to work straight out of grade school or after a year or two of high school. Bolts of colored twine, paper clips, staples, greas Pencils, lead pencils, index cards, scratch pads and legal pads and letter files—portable things easily smuggled home but, in a household like ours, almost completely useless. Paper clips to attach what to what? We had no “documents,” kept no records, wrote and received no letters, never made shopping lists. The stationery was a strange “bonus,” a little windfall that brought no real benefit because it answered no real need. Except mine,

which was secret. I now had materials. I still do. To go with the gleaming Ticonderoga pencils, my father sneaked home a crank sharpener, now attached to one of my bookcases, and a hyena-shaped Swingline stapler that I still use. A few years ago, long after his death, on a visit home, I rooted through some boxes in the cellar and found remnants of my childhood stash, and I've put them to use, the lacquered yellow pencils asleep in their slipboxes, the legal pads warped and browned at the edges, and the greasepencils with their beautiful sharp pullstring coils. A fair amount of what I've written all these years has been done on hot stuff, stolen materials that were, in the conscience of my people, worker's compensation.