Pier Paolo Pasolini

The Street Kids

Ragazzi di vita

Presented by: Pietro Turinetti

Ragazzi di vita is the first novel by Pier Paolo Pasolini, and it constitutes a radical novelty in Italian literary history. Published in the post-war period, when Italy was trying to find a new stability and prosperity after the traumas of the war, the novel caused great uproar due to its explicit treatment of sexuality and homosexuality, and its general lack of moral content. However, Pasolini intended to pose a deeper question with this book: what becomes of the lowest classes in a neo-capitalist, industrial world? What forms of life will they adopt once tradition is completely overruled by this new regime?

The novel follows the daily life of a group of boys, who live in the misery of Rome's periphery. The novel maintains a choral perspective, encompassing the stories of many ragazzi di vita. Pasolini recounts their adventures and their tragedies: the book develops through episodes in which the boys look for some cheap entertainment, or for money that are often consumed within the day itself. It overarches the period from the endo of the Second World War, when German soldiers were still occupying Rome, to the mid-1950s and the beginning of consumerism. In this context, Riccetto emerges as the protagonist: he is introduced as a 12-year-old boy, and by the end of the book has become a young man, on the verge of being absorbed by the petit-bourgeois world. They all live in the peripheries, the so called borgate, where they survive through petty theft and precarious jobs.

The book is, on a literal level, the realistic representation of everyday life in a certain social context. The choice of representing this is already politically meaningful, as it disrupts hegemonic narratives about the country's state, by showing the poorest. On a symbolic level, however, it can be read as a history of Italy itself. While the boys' first adventures take place in a city full of German soldiers, the last ones take place in a completely different context. After the war, Italy was ruled by the Christian Democratic Party, which played a decisive role in the country's adhesion to the American sphere of influence. This led to great economic and material development, allowing many to climb up the social ladder. Pasolini, however, was interested in showing what was being lost in the process: the spontaneity and vivacity of the boys is slowly forced into more acceptable social behaviours, which ultimately result in hypocrisy.

This book was scandalous on three levels. First, it constitutes a true stylistic experiment: Pasolini chose to depict a harsh social reality using its own language. The novel incorporates elements of Roman dialect, not only in the dialogue, but also in the narrative sections themselves. Considering language's importance in shaping an experience of the world, Pasolini chose to represent the subproletariat linguistically above all. Key to this process is the use of indirect free speech, which, connecting Pasolini with Verga's Verism, constitutes an important stylistic mark of realism. This operation also made the omniscient, third-person narrator feel closer to the characters, almost empathic towards them.

Second, the book was widely regarded as immoral. Pasolini was not afraid to treat the sexual behaviour of his characters with the same bluntness and directness the proletariat protagonists would have had according to him. Riccetto and his friends often look for girls to spend the night with and in one chapter engage in homosexual intercourse with a male prostitute. In a deeply Catholic post-war Italy, which was still trying to rebuild itself on the basis of solid traditional values, this was perceived as an outrage to public decency, and Pasolini was brought to trial for obscenity and pornographic content.

Pasolini's provocations in *Ragazzi di vita* can be justified as a denunciation of the misery suffered by the poorer classes, and as the representation of a different subculture from the hegemonic one. Although bourgeois values do not exist for them, the protagonists Riccetto, Alduccio, and Begalone all seem to have a natural compassion: in the first chapter, Riccetto sees a swallow drowning in the waters while bathing in the Tiber. He promptly jumps in, and, with his own life at stake, manages to save the bird. This selfless act, the manifestation of a naturally good spirit, still uncorrupted by consumerism and individualism, is reversed in the final chapter. Several years later, Riccetto has become a young professional, with a wife; although closer to capitalist standards of life, he sees his cousin, Genesio, drowning in the river and does not help him. The protagonist remains where he is, and runs away from the shore before anyone can see him. The goodness the boy once had, and the sense of community that linked him to the others, is progressively destroyed by their conformation to mass society, and by the persistent poverty and squalor they live in. The cultural substratum that existed in the subproletariat is cancelled by the advent of consumerism, which confronts these boys with a choice: they must either conform, or be crushed by a system that is ready to deprive them of freedom.

In conclusion, *Ragazzi di vita* is a highly critical representation of post-war Italy, which takes on the damage a ruthlessly capitalistic society causes to the subproletariat classes, which had previously been characterized in Pasolini's portrayal by a certain degree of innocence. The adventures of Riccetto and the others become a symbol of Italy's history, as the country, led by the Democratic Christian party, strove for economic development that destroyed cultural diversity. Because of this, it must be regarded as one of the politically most important texts to emerge from 20th-century Italian literature: its subversive realism, its faithful reconstruction of the Roman dialect, and its treatment of the changes that shook Italy after the Second World War make it a key novel for the country.

LANGUAGE: Italian/Italiano

This title was not censored before publishing