
Fellini's Satyricon

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Source: *Diacritics*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Autumn, 1971), pp. 51-54

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/464560>

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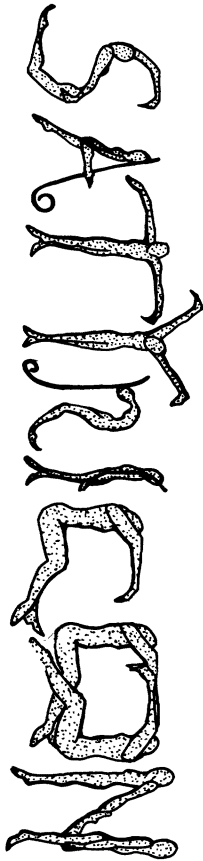
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FELLINI'S



David I. Grossvogel

In the form that has come down to us, *The Satyricon* of Petronius opens *in medias res*, its hero inveighing against verbal excess: this results from the fragmentation of the work, its expurgations and its subsequent reordering by scribes and epitomators. But the accident of the opening as we now have it does not appear to distort the intent of the author: what follows will be frequently a commentary on, and an instance of, language—the many forms of a linguistic construct, words fashioning creatures of words that will in turn proclaim (or fail to proclaim), and demonstrate the limits of language. It is not unlikely that *The Satyricon* was, at the very first, a verbal game played by Petronius within his circle—a means of giving literary substance to licentiousness in the society of a licentious and literate emperor, by turning an oral recounting of the foibles of mankind into an exercise in voyeurism as well as

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one of literary criticism. If we accept, following Tacitus, that the author was Petronius Arbitrator, his very cognomen suggests the critical function.

For J. P. Sullivan (*The Satyricon of Petronius: A Literary Study*, Bloomington: Indiana UP), 1968, Petronius is a refined literary traditionalist writing according to a literary convention—the Menippean satire. But even if the Menippean satire of the classical age was not simply the mixture of genres it had become by the time of Boethius, it was still a form sufficiently loose to allow Petronius to pay more attention to his digressions than to the continuity of his story. And these digressions generally invite the intrusion of literature: literary asides by the author, discussions of literature by the characters, discrete literary insertions such as pastiches and parody, diverse kinds of poetry, and so on; P. B. Corbett (*Petronius*, New York: Twayne, 1970) itemizes five distinct genres represented in the work: the satyr play, mime, satura, romance and folk tale. Throughout, there is Petronius' own criticism (in whatever mouth) of current Latin verse and, overall, his fine ear that makes the banquet with Trimalchio a memorable transcript of colloquial Latin—the oral record not preserved in such magnificent and extensive form by the other arbiters of the classical period.

The protagonists are men whose occupation is with words. Encolpius is a wandering scholar, as are his fellows, amongst whom is Ascyltos, his companion during the first part of the work. In a parody of the divine wrath that pursues the epic or tragic hero (and in particular, that of Poseidon against Odysseus), Encolpius is launched on his odyssey for having offended Priapus (having reduced the ceremonies of the self-appointed priestess Quartilla to mere words?). When we meet him, in the extant fragments, he has become a student of Agamemnon, the disreputable head of a school of rhetoric in a coastal town, an unspecified *Graeca urbs* sufficient to draw the shafts of Petronius against Asiatic and Hellenistic oratory. From this school, the students spill out into the low-life alleyways, the market places and the brothels of the city. The curse of Priapus has turned Encolpius into a homosexual trying to protect his protégé Giton against the lust of Ascyltos. This by-play, the demonstration of how the principals live by their wits and the return of Quartilla, the priapic priestess pursuing Encolpius, provide the actors with their picaresque trajectory until the invitation to Trimalchio's banquet which takes up a full third of the book as we have it.

Trimalchio's reason for inviting Agamemnon and his students to the banquet is to provide it with a literary flavor, to add to the lavish entertainment that includes acrobats and mimes, a miniature hunt, an unending profusion of exotic foods and dishes whose main virtue is to look other than what they are. The literary talk provided by the rhetoricians is supposed to be only a small part of the show. But these literary guests will be reduced to silence, completely upstaged by their host (as will be all the other performers, including the cook); the inexhaustibly loquacious Trimalchio improvises, quotes, parodies, versifies, narrates, recalls, fabulizes abundantly enough to have given his creator credit for "a good memory or an extensive library" (Sullivan, p. 192).

After this word-flooded banquet has died out

at last, the hero returns to the back streets of the city and meets Eumolpus who will replace, in the narrative, the redundant Ascylos: the beggar poet is substituted for the student of rhetoric. Eumolpus is of the same literary breed as Trimalchio: he too is inexhaustible and sounds like those whom Petronius does not like—and in particular, Lucan, the “modernist” whom the conservative arbiter disparages.

In search of new settings for the contrivance of further adventures, the sea now beckons the author and his characters; the scene changes abruptly. Still visited by the wrath of diverse gods, the heroes are shipwrecked and arrive at Croton, the land of fortune hunters. Here, Eumolpus devises a scheme of words that will bring them means: Eumolpus will speak the role of an old, rich man close to death, on whom the Crotonians will lavish gifts in the hope of figuring in his will. Eumolpus’ “play” (*mimus* in the text) is successful, while Encolpius (who attempts to counter the curse of Priapus through acts that are less abstract) meets with repeated failure. As dubious success may at last be his, our fragmented narrative comes to an inconclusive end.

The work of Petronius is called a satire; but who is being satirized? Those who demonstrate the foibles also speak the lesson. The author himself is heard twice, but he confines his asides to literary comments. And literature engulfs the others: there is hardly an upstanding character in the book, yet any one of them may assert, at any given moment, his literary acumen and his articulateness—and it is ultimately only at the level of literature that the author allows himself to pass judgment. At all other levels, the fact that this humanity is also composed of pederasts, boors, braggarts interests Petronius primarily for what he sees and hears: the sketch fascinates him more than its moral lesson. Where the Nasidienus of Horace suggests a frame of reference that denigrates the character, Trimalchio becomes a comic force that sweeps aside moral considerations. There is in fact a sympathy born of observation and interest that keeps Petronius too close to his creatures to allow the distance in which the moral lesson develops. His is no more than a description of the lower classes of Roman society: if he shows the hems of better people dragging in the scum of the times, he is presenting an accurate picture of his society while restating the *nostalgie de la boue* that gave his own caste its perverse ambivalence. But that nostalgia seldom becomes an affront. And if there is fun, it derives mainly from “the application of a refined, literary and stylistically sophisticated narrative to the disreputable low-life adventures and sexual escapades of a number of unprincipled and worthless characters” (Sullivan, p. 215). The adjectives, however, are Sullivan’s—not Petronius’.

It was not surprising that Fellini would sooner or later base a scenario on Petronius, however dissimilar their media: they had far greater sympathies in common—and first among these, a sense of kinship with their characters. Fellini expressed this sympathy most directly through his interest in those whose profession forces them to play a conscious role. His motion pictures had always turned sooner or later into a stage—there was always a moment

when the character became an actor. From the very first (*Luci del varieta*, 1950) Fellini demonstrated his affection for performers, especially those whose performance is too flawed to provide sufficient insulation from human frailty. A part of Fellini’s mythology explains that love: according to the account he gave a Belgian periodical, he is supposed to have found brief haven in a traveling circus from the rigors of the religious school where he was forced to spend a part of his youth. The story is emblematic: reminiscence of that escapade appear in most of his films prior to the *Satyricon*. Fellini discovered the vulnerable world of people who, in the less humane and professional world of adults, make a profession of play and remain hybrids who are not quite children (though some of the magical and sad world of the child is still theirs) and never quite professionals. (The Church, in its excommunicating days, may have put actors beyond its pale because they usurped a divine privilege in creating human figures. Certainly society concurred in accepting only for its entertainment those whose profession was a social aberration that made their work *play*. Even after capitalism had turned its entertainers into demi-gods, they remained aberrant: they may have become sacred in a moneyed society, but—as Cocteau correctly surmised—they were still monsters.)

Fellini’s dramatic world is the antithesis of Diderot’s who wanted his characters to be pre-defined by their professional roles: Fellini will not depict “professions.” His people exist outside the workaday structure of society. (And, as noted, lest the actor’s skill achieve the abstraction of professional excellence, it remains defective: Fellini moves his sympathetic camera from the pathetic traveling company of *Luci del varieta* to the even less successful troupers of *La strada* in 1954, and they appear in some form in every movie since.)

If a dream of professional transcendency should tempt those who are not simply second-rate actors, the histrionic flaw is still likely to corrupt the attempt: in *Lo sceicco bianco* (1952), the hero is unable to disentangle his life from the comic-strip world of his profession and turns both into sad buffooneries. When Fellini’s people are not imperfect actors, clowns or acrobats, they are the idle rich whose very existence is a flawed performance which may be briefly and pathetically illuminated by a more elaborate attempt to escape into the vestments and gestures of a conscious role. Those efforts (as in *I vitelloni*, 1953, or *La dolce vita*, 1959) veer away from their joyful intent, turn to self-parody and end in sadness. Or again, the histrionic need may inform the marginal world of the not-quite professionals who require a histrionic ritual to give their lives a semblance of dignity: the professional pride of petty crooks (*Il bidone*, 1955) and sidewalk prostitutes (*Le notti di Cabiria*, 1956) is invested in their ability to assume a role. These many attempts are seldom sufficient to achieve their purpose, except for a limited public whose sympathy is due to its own remoteness from the conventional social structures—intellectuals (*8½* or *Juliet of the Spirits*), madmen (*il matto* in *La strada*, or again, at times, Juliet herself), and an occasional child.

Because his world is so often a stage whose

ritual takes place at night, when the shadows or the artificial light help conceal the imperfections of the performance, Fellini's dawns are usually tragic. When daylight comes, the pathetic inadequacy of the mask, of the make-up, is painfully evident and reveals the disparity between the marginal existence of the performer and the role through which he attempted to transcend that existence. At such moments, Fellini's camera recedes from an object that has become alien or aberrant in the light of dawn to a vista of infinite barrenness that expresses "how weary, stale, flat and unprofitable seem all the uses of this world." It is in such moments that the protagonist may come upon the sea, that promise of an otherness and renewal.

Until the *Satyricon*, Fellini spoke with nostalgia. His images were a longing—attempts at various kinds of escape (into the illusion of the performer's world, a childhood dream, the nostalgia of failure). These reminiscences were not ideas; they were objects or people (as are, for example, the fleshly women of his movies that renew a moment of his circus escape: "I caught sight of a fat girl with beautiful plump bare legs who was sewing spangles on a tutu"). As in Robbe-Grillet, such figures were devoid of symbolism—they were *objets-trouvés* (even when planned by the script and not simply fortuitous encounters like the airborne Christ or the marine monster in *La dolce vita*). They were instances of a human evidence, or an obsessional memory, scrutinized with the intensity of desire (reminiscent of the intensity with which Bergman questions his own characters in the moment of their dying). There was never sufficient distance in Fellini for him to judge his people or to derive a moral lesson. His world was, like that of Proust or Petronius, informed only by his sympathetic curiosity. He imposed on that world at most an occasional false front, repeating in that imposition the gesture of his characters. There is a well-known picture of Fellini: it would be a formal portrait if it were not for the fact that he is wearing the false nose of a clown. The portrait is emblematic: the disguise represents for Fellini what it represents for his creatures—the possibility of escaping into fantasy when everyday objects and people have failed to respond to questioning, however sympathetic or intent that questioning may be.

There was a whole world of marginal and familiar figures waiting for Fellini in the pages of Petronius—the clowns, the whores, the old peasant faces, the sacred monsters. Quartilla might have been the American movie goddess in *La dolce vita*; Trimalchio's mimes and acrobats had already appeared in the night club scene of that same movie or in *La strada*; no professional slickness had ever redeemed the prostitutes hustling by the side of any of Fellini's roads. But Fellini needed an image to give flesh to the dimension of the Latin words: in the text of Petronius, even such literally garish figures as Trimalchio and Fortunata derived more of their color from their speech than from their dress. And in the quest for those images, something happened to what would have seemed to be an easy and natural translation.

In an interview he gave to the *New York Times* (October 13, 1968), Fellini said that he made

the *Satyricon* in order to explore a pre-Christian psychology "before the invention of the conscience, of guilt. [. . .] To see what people were like 2,000 years before Catholicism." The temptation was not new: 8½ was to have been called *Babylon 2000 A.D.*—the exploration of Babylon, now or then, seems to keep Fellini fascinated. But in the process of going back to a pre-Christian era (though Petronius wrote *The Satyricon* at the earliest in 61 A.D.), the absence of Christianity appears especially as a loss of love in Fellini: for the first time he created a picture made largely of caricatures from whom he had withdrawn his sympathy.

Whereas previous masks and make-up were always of the character's own making and remained sufficiently ineffectual to measure the disparity between the character's humanity and his dream, the masks in Fellini's *Satyricon* generally hide nothing—they are the totality of the crowds that surge through this disjointed picaresque of hallucinated visions. The excess of words that created the characters of Petronius is represented through an excess of make-up. The aberration derived from the abuse of words becomes, in Fellini, bodily aberration; linguistic monsters turn into monsters pure and simple. In fact, the motion picture contrives an anti-language to further encapsulate these creatures within their physical appearance: what is first heard is "a strange, incomprehensible language, which sounds like Serbo-Croat or German to our ears: instead it is Latin, a Latin corrupted by decadence, garbled, disjointed, a mixture of dialects" (The screen "Treatment," in *Fellini's Satyricon*, New York: Ballantine, 1970). Latin remains as a counterpoint or as a deliberate sound mask imposed on the speech of the principals. And the huge monsters that words no longer create contrive a weird, psychedelic fresco (in the original account of how Fellini first envisaged the movie, Dario Zanelli talks of it as a "psychedelic reportage"; Fellini is supposed to have had a prior, personal experience with hallucinogens—all this is omitted from the English translation); Fellini saw his film as a "wholly contemplatory film, like a dream [. . .] a continuous breaking of the internal, visual rhythms"—the fragmentary nature of the original being the only way in which modern man can now apprehend Petronius' work (just as the Parthenon's beauty must be for us that of the broken column and the sky-flooded temple).

Fellini's *Satyricon* is not conceived through sympathetic questioning: it evolves as a distancing nightmare. Fellini has frequently referred to his remoteness from the movie: "it's just one long suicide. [. . .] To keep myself estranged from the characters, to look at them with a detached eye is for me extremely difficult. [. . .] On the other hand, if *Satyricon* has a *raison d'être*, it's here, under the sign of estrangement." So he allowed the images to grow beyond human limits: not only are the actors, acro-

¹As are of course the sacred monsters: typically, the most famous of the Milesian tales—the Matron of Ephesus—is removed, in the motion picture, from the verbal Eumolpius; it was to have been given originally to Quartilla, but eventually it became simply the visual tale spoken by an indifferent male prostitute.

bats, mimes, freaks of the original given more prominence,' they in fact contaminate the very texture of the picture. According to Zanelli, Fellini "began collecting a whole series of faces, from workers at the Testaccio abattoirs to general hands around Cinecittà, from Anticoli peasants to gypsies camped along the Tiburtina." Bernadino Zapponi writes, "'Ugly mugs,' 'sweet old maids,' 'monsters': these and others are the captions on big envelopes crammed with photos. Faces are Fellini's obsession: in nightmare moments they people the dark around him." What he was seeking was "a series of masks which [. . .] seem to have breathed another air, eaten other foods, swallowed poisons" (Zanelli, p. 5). It is thus that "Encolpius finds himself surrounded by a ring of horrible masks" ("Treatment"). Only ugliness and corruption are sufficiently monumental to sustain this vision; the literary analysis of the original is replaced by the inhuman scrutiny of the camera eye: at the end of the Trimalchio episode, "Rouge and make-up

start running off sweaty faces."

Alongside these ugly exaggerations, the principals, who were to have been informed with a pre-Christian "ghetto violence," emerge as strangely angelic, asexual figures from the frieze of which they are a part—which frieze, like the book itself, was to have crumbled into the disjointed fragments of an incoherent mosaic. They became instead the innocent figures stripped by a Fellini dawn of nighttime illusions, compelling their maker to alter the final scene. They stand clear of the garish masks together with some other young people (among whom a Black) and lose their humanity through excessive contrast: they become symbols. In moving away from the corruption of visual excess, they signify rebirth—a notion which the alien object frequently discovered at day-break by Fellini's camera strengthens through phallic suggestion. For once in a Fellini movie, it will be necessary for characters who have been reduced to symbols to test the promise of the sea.

ARBITRARY SATYRICON

PETRONIUS & FELLINI

Erich Segal

It can be argued that a work of art should be analyzed merely on its own terms. But the very title *Fellini Satyricon* is a call to *Quellenforschung* as much as if *The Comedy of Errors* had been named *Shakespeare Menaechmi*. And yet the critical vocabulary lacks a term which could specify Fellini's relation to Petronius. The film-maker has a curious and ambivalent approach not only to the Roman original, but to the original Romans.

The art of translation-adaptation has a spectrum of infinite colors. In most cases, the second artist emphasizes those aspects of the original which suit his particular genius: Plautus adds song and burlesque to Menander; Molière adds farce and love-intrigue to Terence; Brecht adds Marxism to everything. In every instance, there is the tacit assumption that the second artist understands the material he is translating or transmuting. Even if he does make a radical change, it is conscious and deliberate. Molière's *Dom Juan* stays a *libertin*, where Tirso's *Burlador de Sevilla* becomes a repentant Catholic, but both versions still interpret the same myth. Both writers begin with the same *Ur-Don Juan* plot.

The case of Fellini is unique, however. Critical analysis prevents our crediting his principle of

translation: "[It is] a total reinvention I am making of the *Satyricon*, the fragments of which are only an excuse to unleash the imagination to construct an unknown world."¹

Perhaps "reinvention" would be an acceptable term if the director had composed a fantasia on a theme by Petronius, but the real problem is revealed in the second part of his statement: was he really treating a world "unknown"? He might perhaps reject Tacitus' picture of Neronian Rome, but to discredit the fictive world of Petronius is to deny its existence if not its art.

The thirty-five thousand words of Petronius' *Satyricon* represent two extant "books" of long chapters from what was a huge comic picaresque novel composed around 60-65 AD. Its narrator, Encolpius, is on a quest—not for the Golden Fleece, and surely not *Romanam condere gentem*, for he is generally anti-heroic and specifically anti-Aeneas. Encolpius seeks to regain his sexual powers (in fact, his name puns on "groin"). For some reason, he has been cursed by Priapus (*gravis ira Priapi*) and must wander land and sea (*per terras, per canis Nereos aequor*) until the curse be removed. The world is more specifically the Bay of Naples—significantly perhaps,

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¹Eileen Lanouette Hughes. *On the Set of Fellini Satyricon*. New York: Morrow, 1971 (p. 89).