XII

The Social Ambience of Petronius' *Satyricon* and *Fellini Satyricon*

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EDITOR'S NOTE: J. P. Sullivan died in 1993. Except for some minor changes and emendations and a few additions in the notes, his essay appears here essentially as it did in 1991. Among the numerous publications on Fellini, the following may be of particular interest to readers (most of them have appeared since Sullivan's essay was written; page numbers refer to *Fellini Satyricon*): Bernard F. Dick, "Adaptation as Archaeology: *Fellini Satyricon* (1969) from the 'Novel' by Petronius," in *Modern European Filmmakers and the Art of Adaptation*, ed. Andrew Horton and Joan Magretta (New York: Crossroads, 1981), 145–167; rpt. in *Perspectives on Federico Fellini*, ed. Peter Bondanella and Cristina Degli-Esposti (New York: Hall, 1993), 130–138; Bondanella, *The Eternal City: Roman Images in the Modern World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 238–245, and *The Cinema of Federico Fellini* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 237–261, with additional references; John Baxter, *Fellini* (1993; rpt. New York: St. Martin's, 1994), 237–253; Fabrizio Borin and Carla Mele, *Federico Fellini*, tr. Charles Nopar and Sue Jones (Rome: Gremese, 1999), 100–106; Maria Wyke, *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 188–192. *Federico Fellini*, ed. Lietta Tornabuoni, tr. Andrew Ellis, Carol Rathman, and David Stanton (New York: Rizzoli, 1995), is lavishly illustrated. Axel Sütterlin, *Petronius Arbiter und Federico Fellini: Ein strukturanalytischer Vergleich* (Frankfurt a. M.: Lang, 1996), is a detailed comparison of novel and film, but see my review in *Petronian Society Newsletter*, 27.1–2 (1997), 8–9. *Fellini: A Director's Notebook* (1970), directed by Fellini and written by him and Bernardino Zapponi, is a poetic "documentary" on Fellini just before *Fellini Satyricon*, which combines the Roman past with the present. *Ciao Federico* (1972) is a film essay directed by Gideon Bachmann on the making of *Fellini Satyricon*. Both are available on video.

Fellini Satyricon (1970) has proved something of a puzzle to some critics, whose reaction to the film can hardly be construed as favorable. Classical scholars have been particularly troubled by its syncopation of events, its drastic redistribution of incidents among the characters, and, above all, its non-Petronian sources.[1] Perhaps a reevaluation of these sources will throw more light on the film. I shall argue that Fellini, faced with the battered torso of this ancient novel, with only a tenth or twentieth of it still extant, felt justified as a director and creative translator to supplement the fragmentary narrative with incidents and details from more or less contemporary literary and historical works.[2]

1. The following reviews of and articles on Fellini's film by classicists are particularly noteworthy: Gilbert Highet, "Whose *Satyricon*—Petronius's or Fellini's?" *Horizon*, 12 no. 4 (1970), 42–47, rpt. in *The Classical Papers of Gilbert Highet*, ed. Robert J. Ball (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 339–348; Barry Baldwin and Gerald Sandy, reviews in *Petronian Society Newsletter*, 1 no. 2 (1970), 2–3 and 3; William R. Nethercut, "Fellini and the Colosseum: Philosophy, Morality and the *Satyricon* (1970)," *The Classical Bulletin*, 47 (1971), 53–59. In addition see Alberto Moravia, "Dreaming Up Petronius," tr. Raymond Rosenthal, *The New York Review of Books* (March 26, 1970), 40–42, rpt. in *Federico Fellini: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Peter Bondanella (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 161–168; Charles Samuels, "Puppets: From Z to *Zabriskie Point*," *The American Scholar*, 39 (1970), 678–691; John Simon, "*Fellini Satyricon*," in *Movies into Film* (New York: Dial Press, 1971), 211–219. Those interested in the making of the film may consult Eileen Lanouette Hughes, *On the Set of FELLINI SATYRICON: A Behind-the-Scenes Diary* (New York: Morrow, 1971). The published text of the film is in *Fellini Satyricon*, ed. Dario Zanelli (Bologna: Cappelli, 1969); English translation, as *Fellini's Satyricon*, by Eugene Walter and John Matthews (New York: Ballantine, 1970).

2. It should be remembered that Fellini had philological advisers for the film: Luca Canali of the University of Pisa, a Marxist, and the scriptwriter Bernardino Zapponi, who together called on the expertise of Ettore Paratore, the author of a long and inconclusive commentary on Petronius (*Il Satyricon di Petronio*, 2 vols. [Florence: Le Monnier, 1933]). Not that these would prove any block for Fellini's imagination in his film *Roma* (1972), when he exercised it on the subject of Nero's Rome, which he seems to have seen as the substrate underlying the Eternal City in the twentieth century. [EDITOR'S NOTE: See *Conversations with Fellini*, ed. Costanzo Costantini, tr. Sohrab Sorooshian (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 74–75: "That my film might be thought to have little in common with Petronius, I consider more a compliment than an indictment. . . . My intention was to make a film outside of time, an atemporal film, but it was impossible for me not to see that the world described by Petronius bore a remarkable similarity to the one in which

This is not to say that Fellini wished, even creatively, to "adapt" the *Satyricon* as though it were a defective film script based on a historical novel. As he himself insisted: "I've tried first of all to eliminate what is generally called history. . . . Thus the atmosphere [of the film] is not historical but that of a dream world."[3] But even dreams have a certain logic and usually a consistent tone, often of fear, passivity, pleasure, or some other emotional state. And so the supplementary material is naturally drawn from congenial sources. The atmosphere may be sometimes exotic, but it is never, in any pictorial way, modern. The *Satyricon*, in any case, was an "open" work to begin with, that is to say a work consisting of scarcely related episodes, and it has been further opened by the massive textual losses in the manuscript tradition. This provided even more of a stimulus to Fellini's inventive ingenuity, which turned for inspiration to the scanty remains of Roman painting and sculpture, as was noticed by Alberto Moravia. It is highly appropriate that the last glimpse the audience has of the film's antiheroes, Encolpius and Giton, is in a freeze-framed faded fresco of Pompeian colors.[4]

What were these external, non-Petronian materials that Fellini used to flesh out the fragmentary narrative?[5] The basic plot of Petronius consists of the picaresque adventures of the antihero Encolpius and his young and fickle boyfriend Giton. An early offense against the sexual divinity

we live, me included. Petronius's characters are prey to the same devouring existential anxieties as people today. Trimalchio made me think of Onassis: a gloomy, immobile Onassis with the stony glare of a mummy. The other characters reminded me of hippies. It may be that I have also projected my personal fantasies into the film, but why not? Am I not the film's creator?"]

3. Quoted from Edward Murray, *Fellini the Artist*, 2nd ed. (New York: Ungar, 1985), 179. Murray's overall evaluation of the film is negative: "Both artistically and humanistically . . . Fellini's single out-and-out failure" (189). [EDITOR'S NOTE: See Fellini as quoted in *Federico Fellini: Comments on Film*, ed. Giovanni Grazzini; tr. Joseph Henry (Fresno: California State University, Fresno, 1988), 172–173: "a great dream galaxy sunken in the darkness and now rising up to us amid glowing bursts of light. . . . The ancient world, I told myself, never existed, but no doubt we dreamed it. My job [making the film] will be to eliminate the borderline between dream and imagination; to invent everything and then to objectify the fantasy; to get some distance from it in order to explore it as something all of a piece and unknowable."]

4. [EDITOR'S NOTE: See Fellini as quoted in Charlotte Chandler, *I, Fellini* (New York: Random House, 1995), 171–172: "It [Petronius' novel] has come down to us in fragments. . . . I was even more fascinated by what wasn't there than by what was there. Stimulated by the fragments, my imagination could roam. . . . I was like an archaeologist piecing together fragments of ancient vases, trying to guess what the missing parts looked like. Rome itself is an ancient broken vase, constantly being mended to hold it together, but retaining hints of its original secrets."]

5. Most of these, but not all, were spotted by Highet, "Whose *Satyricon?*"

Priapus, reinforced by subsequent unwitting offenses, causes the god to hound him in various ways, just as Poseidon hounded Odysseus in the *Odyssey* and Juno persecuted Aeneas in the *Aeneid*. The *Satyricon* is in this sense a parody of the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*, but it is also a parody of contemporary Greek love-romances. Encolpius' misadventures—temple violation, condemnation to the amphitheater, burglary and murder, and the flight from various avengers—are compounded by his troubles with temporary companions, who try to take Giton away from him. These are Tryphaena the courtesan, Ascyltus, his burly and untrustworthy companion for a while, and the devious and deviant poet Eumolpus. In Croton, living out a dangerous confidence trick, he adds to his troubles by taking up, as a pretended slave, with the arrogant Circe, a Roman Lady Chatterley, who expects the inferior men she prefers to perform well.[6] She is highly indignant when Priapus' anger induces in Encolpius a chronic impotence with her. Onto the fantastic narrative thread, already replete with suicide attempts, elaborate banquets, cannibalism, violence, and trickery, Petronius could hang literary digressions relating to contemporary writers, which Fellini had naturally to forgo, substituting instead the extraneous literary and historical material which he in turn felt was *ben trovato*. So he draws upon Juvenal's third satire for the decrepit state of his Roman tenements (*Satires* 3.193–196). He borrows medieval material about Virgil the magician for the obscene and fiery fate of the witch Oenothea, possibly adding here an indecent motif from Martial.[7] Encolpius in the novel had at some time been a gladiator; this is elaborated by Fellini into the gladiatorial mime in which Encolpius playing the part of Theseus has to fight a gladiator made up as the Minotaur in a labyrinth and then, after winning Princess Ariadne, has to take her in full sight of a large audience. His predictable failure and her impatient anger hark back to Encolpius' failure with Circe in the *Satyricon*, but the scene as a whole depends on similar episodes in the second extant Roman novel, written about a century later than the *Satyricon*, Apuleius' *Golden Ass*. Here the antihero, Lucius, has a number of tricks played on him during a festival in honor of the god of mirth. For instance, he is tricked into puncturing three wineskins filled with blood under the impression that he is killing some robbers. He is hauled off to a mock court, held in a theater, to stand

6. For an analysis of the character type in Latin literature see my "Lady Chatterley in Rome," *Pacific Coast Philology*, 15 (1980), 53–62.

7. Cf. *Epigrams* 3.93. On the medieval background of this episode in the film see Domenico Comparetti, *Vergil in the Middle Ages*, tr. E. F. M. Benecke, 2nd ed. (1908; rpt. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 325–336, and, for a more detailed account, John Webster Spargo, *Virgil the Necromancer: Studies in Virgilian Legends* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934; rpt. 1979), 136–206.

trial for his life and is threatened with ghastly tortures before the farce is finally exposed to the great amusement of the assembled townsfolk (2.31–3.11). This and Lucius' forced copulation later (10.34), while he is in ass's shape, with a condemned female criminal in the arena, presumably inspired the grotesque "public performances" that Fellini took delight in presenting in his film, most notably in the sexual encounters of Encolpius with Ariadne and then with Oenothea. This aspect of ancient entertainment Fellini could easily have found documented in Jérôme Carcopino's *Daily Life in Ancient Rome*, one of the works he read in preparation for making the film.[8] Martial reports the executions and mutilation on stage in mythological and historical playlets, and nude spectacles by prostitutes were part of the spring rituals of the Floralia in Rome. This would have appealed to Fellini's almost obsessive preoccupation with circuses (*La Strada* [1954]), stage performances of an unorthodox kind (*Ginger and Fred* [1986]), indeed with exhibitionism in general (*8½* [1963]), and is not incompatible with his delight in masks. All of this surfaces in the tragic-comic mime scenes and the appearances of Vernacchio, the buffoonish actor who turns up early in *Fellini Satyricon*.

The haunting sequences of the suicides of the handsome upper-class couple in their ornate villa are based on the deaths of Thrasea Paetus, the Stoic opponent of Nero, and his wife.[9] Their significance in the film is not only to provide a link with the imperial world of the novel, but again to provide a play within a play—this time a tragedy, which will be quickly converted to comedy when the trio of antiheroes arrives. At first impressed and awed by the mournful spectacle, they are soon engaged in a sexual romp with the young Oriental slave girl they find there. The mood is finally broken by the burning of the body of the master of the villa. Short though the whole sequence is, it provides a good example of how swiftly Fellini, with his eye for detail and coloring, generates a convincing atmosphere or, more generally, ambience in quite brief scenes.[10]

8. According to Murray, *Fellini the Artist*, 178. Jérôme Carcopino, *La vie quotidienne à Rome à l'apogée de l'empire* (Paris: Hachette, 1939); in English: *Daily Life in Ancient Rome: The People and the City at the Height of the Empire*, tr. Emily Overend Lorimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940; rpt. 1992). An Italian translation appeared in 1941.

9. See, for example, Martial, *Epigrams* 1.13; Tacitus, *Annals* 16.33–35; and Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 3.16.6.

10. [EDITOR'S NOTE: Fellini on this episode: "Petronius himself appears in *Satyricon*. He is the wealthy freedman who commits suicide with his wife after he has freed his slaves"; quoted from Chandler, *I, Fellini*, 173. There is, then, a direct parallel between Petronius and Fellini: "What wasn't there [in the text] appealed to me most because it created the opportunity for me to fill it in using my imagination, and I could actually become a part of the story" (Chandler, 172).]

One episode, which has particularly puzzled critics, is the kidnapping by the trio of a frail albino bisexual, who is worshiped as the living god Hermaphroditus but who dies of thirst and exhaustion in the desert during his abduction. I suggest that this is based on a pseudo-Petronian poem sometimes printed along with the *Satyricon*.[11] This late piece describes the strange debate in heaven over the birth and death of Hermaphroditus: Should he die by drowning, stabbing, or crucifixion? In the poem he climbs a tree by a river, transfixes himself with his own sword, and his head falls into the river, with his body hanging from the tree.

There is also a possible allusion in the scene depicting the marriage of Lichas and Encolpius to the transvestite emperor Elagabalus, who reigned from A.D. 218 to 222. Born Varius Avitus, the young ruler took his name from the sun god of Emesa, Elah-Gabal, whose hereditary priest he was and whose religion he spent his short life promoting. Reaching Rome in 219, he built two enormous temples for the Oriental deity and celebrated his midsummer festival with outlandish and obscene ceremonies.[12] He and his powerful mother, Julia Soaemias, were eventually murdered by the Praetorians.

For some of the scenes involving Lichas and his "marriage" to the humiliated Encolpius, Fellini has apparently drawn not just on the *Satyricon* but also on certain anecdotes about Nero's mock marriages to his freedmen Doryphorus and Pythagoras, pruriently detailed by the imperial biographer Suetonius and also by the historian Tacitus. Again, these additions are appropriate to the Neronian setting in which the *Satyricon* itself was written.[13]

One could say more about the possible sources, but the fundamental question to be asked is: Why does Fellini allow himself these liberties? Fellini, I suggest, is using the creative translator's method of "equivalences." What cannot come across to the modern audience—for example, the literary and very topical digressions on Neronian literature with their parodies of Seneca and Lucan[14]—Fellini jettisons and substitutes often silent episodes, such as an emperor surrounded and assassinated by sol-

11. For example, in the edition of Maurice Rat (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 1938); numbered as fragment LVII in my translation: *Petronius: The Satyricon and Seneca: The Apocolocyntosis*, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 179.

12. Herodian, *History of the Empire* 5.8; Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 79.33 and 80.3–17.

13. Suetonius, *Nero* 29, and Tacitus, *Annals* 15.37, describe Nero's marriages. On the background of Petronius' *Satyricon* and the audience for which it was intended see my *Literature and Politics in the Age of Nero* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), 19–73 and 153–179.

14. See the chapter on criticism and parody in my *The Satyricon of Petronius: A Literary Study* (London: Faber, 1968), 158–213.

diers, a monstrous effigy of an emperor's head dragged through the streets (based on the death of Vitellius in A.D. 69), or a new Caesar, dignified and soldierly, marching on Rome. For the literary dimension, impossible to convey on the screen, Fellini has substituted a political dimension. This may be interpreted as the representation of the martial, highly masculine Rome which the director is undercutting or marginalizing through the sexual mysticism of other, more amplified and indeed grosser, scenes in the film. Fellini has always believed that pagan Rome has certain analogies with our modern world, not least that represented by his own films *La Dolce Vita* (1960) and *Roma*. But for him Rome as an ideal, admittedly pagan ideal, was distorted by Mussolini's fascism, which emphasized its military and organizational virtues. It was also distorted by the moralistic views of Christianity, which rejected as vice what the pagans regarded as happiness and contentment. Fellini's view of ancient and modern Rome is simultaneously pagan and pessimistic, but he is not above parodying the more optimistic alternatives. So the hermaphroditic divinity, who works miracles and is worshiped by peasants, may even be considered a parody of the infant Jesus in his manger, and Fellini has heightened the cannibalistic scene around the dead Eumolpus toward the end of the *Satyricon* by "elevating" the solemn reading of Eumolpus' will and the instructions for this cannibalism into a grotesque Last Supper. The Fellini aficionado may be reminded of the enormous flying statue of Christ that opens *La Dolce Vita*.

Where Fellini is astonishingly true to his model is, however, in the atmosphere he engenders in his film. Although more graphic and, of course, visual, than his original, he succeeds in expressing its spirit in a number of ways. A few things may be said about Petronius and his audience of which Fellini must have been aware. Here is part of Tacitus' description of Petronius' way of living (*Annals* 16.18):

> Gaius Petronius spent his days sleeping and his nights working and enjoying himself. Industry is the usual foundation of success, but with him it was idleness. Unlike most people who throw away their money in dissipation, he was not regarded as an extravagant sensualist but as one who made luxury a fine art. Yet as proconsul in Bithynia, and later as consul, he showed himself a vigorous and capable administrator. His subsequent return to his old habits, whether this was real or apparent, led to his admission to the small circle of Nero's intimates as his Arbiter of Elegance. In the end Nero's jaded appetite regarded nothing as enjoyable or refined unless Petronius had given his sanction to it.

Seneca, Petronius' philosophical opposite and his political rival at court, was familiar with this type of personality and in the *Epistles* severely attacked such an unnatural lifestyle. Such people were "night-owls"; he says of them:

> they pervert the activities of day and night, and they don't open their eyes, heavy from yesterday's hangover, before night begins to fall. How can they know how to live who don't know when to live? Do they fear death when they've buried themselves alive? (122.3)

Seneca argues that this depravity of avoiding the day and living at night is part of the viciousness that delights in being completely at odds with nature. It is the aim of luxuriousness to delight in perversity and in departing as far as possible from the correct way of behaving, in fact to do its opposite. Seneca points to the perverse taste for roses and lilies in winter, to transvestite affectations, and to the cultivation of gardens on rooftops (122.8).

He might also have mentioned other perversities of some of his contemporaries, not least Nero's habit of slumming—wandering from his palace in disguise late at night through disreputable parts of Rome, breaking into shops, and playing malicious jokes on whomever he encountered. This is recorded with appropriate distaste by Suetonius; other emperors and at least one Ptolemy shared this taste, and it is presumably a symptom of *nostalgie de la boue*, that longing for degradation not uncommon in ages when material luxury and artistic sophistication seem to breed a certain decadence and a keen desire for thrills to tickle jaded palates. One thinks of the 1890s in England and France, the period of Joris-Karl Huysmans' *À Rebours* (1884)—*Against Nature* is the title of the English translation—and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), but one could equally well think of the society portrayed by Fellini himself in *La Dolce Vita*.

The *Satyricon* has to be put in the same class as such works—indeed, Huysmans specifically mentions it as one of the works his hero dotes on. Here is the Duc Des Esseintes in his library:

> The author he really loved . . . was Petronius. Petronius was a shrewd observer, a delicate analyst, a marvellous painter; dispassionately, with an entire lack of prejudice or animosity, he described the everyday life of Rome, recording the manners and morals of his time in the lively little chapters of the *Satyricon*.
>
> Noting what he saw as he saw it, he set forth the day-to-day existence of the common people, with all its minor events, its bestial incidents, its obscene antics.
>
> Here we have the Inspector of Lodgings coming to ask for the names of any travellers who have recently arrived; there, a brothel where men circle round naked women standing beside placards giving their price, while through half-open doors couples can be seen disporting themselves in the bedrooms.
>
> Elsewhere, in villas full of insolent luxury where wealth and ostentation run riot, as also in the mean inns described throughout the book, with

their unmade trestle beds swarming with fleas, the society of the day has its fling—depraved ruffians, like Ascyltus and Eumolpus, out for what they can get; unnatural old men with their gowns tucked up and their cheeks plastered with white lead and acacia rouge; catamites of sixteen, plump and curly-headed; women having hysterics; legacy-hunters offering their boys and girls to gratify the lusts of rich testators, all these and more scurry across the pages of the *Satyricon*, squabbling in the streets, fingering one another in the baths, beating one another up like characters in a pantomime.

There are lightning sketches of all these people, sprawled round a table, exchanging the vapid pleasantries of drunken revellers, trotting out mawkish maxims and stupid saws, their heads turned towards Trimalchio, who sits picking his teeth, offers the company chamberpots, discourses on the state of his bowels, farts to prove his point, and begs his guests to make themselves at home.

This realistic novel, this slice cut from Roman life in the raw, with no thought, whatever people may say, of reforming or satirizing society—this story fascinated Des Esseintes; and in its subtle style, acute observation, and solid construction he could see a curious similarity, a strange analogy with the few modern French novels he could stomach.[15]

This quotation, with only few changes, could very well stand as a description of Fellini's film. *Nostalgie de la boue*, the fascination that rags hold for riches, the urge to wallow in the gutter or stoop to conquer, whether in the male desire for prostitutes or ladies' predilections for slaves, is patently mirrored in both versions of the *Satyricon*.

In Petronius, many of the scenes take place at night. The rites of Priapus are nocturnal; Encolpius' crime must be expiated by an all-night vigil in Priapus' honor; banquets go on through the night; Trimalchio's friend Habinnas in particular wants to turn night into day, and so the all-night feasting is prolonged by a second bath; only cock-crow breaks up the party, sending Encolpius, Ascyltus, and Giton wandering through the last shades of night without a torch. The ghost stories of Trimalchio and his guests about witches and werewolves all take place in the night. It is in darkest night on board ship that Encolpius, Giton, and Eumolpus plan their escape from their pursuers and so shave their heads by the light of the moon. This atmosphere of darkness, torches, and obscure, dingy dwellings and bathhouses Fellini successfully evokes in the opening scenes of the film.

This psychological complex accounts for much more than the physical atmosphere of both novel and film. It extends also to the social planes on

15. Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*, tr. Robert Baldick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959; rpt. 1973), 42–43. Huysmans had borrowed the description of Petronius' work from some edition of Adolf Ebert, *Allgemeine Geschichte der Literatur des Mittelalters im Abendlande* (3 vols.; first published 1874).

which they operate. Again we are presented only with characters and scenes drawn from the seamier side of Roman society. One particularly interesting character is Circe, the rich and beautiful lady who falls in love at the sight of the pretended slave Encolpius. She above all expresses *nostalgie de la boue* in her desire for sexual degradation. Here is her maid's description of her to Encolpius:

"You say you're just a poor slave, but you're only exciting her desire to boiling point. Some women get heated up over the absolute dregs and can't feel any passion unless they see slaves or bare-legged messengers. The arena sets some of them on heat, or a mule-driver covered with dust, or actors displayed on the stage. My mistress is one of this type. She jumps across the first fourteen seats from the orchestra and looks for something to love among the lowest of the low."

I said in a voice full of sweetness: "Tell me, are you the one who is in love with me?"

The maid laughed heartily at such an unlikely notion.

"I wouldn't make you so pleased with yourself. I have never yet gone to bed with a slave, and heaven forbid I should ever see a lover of mine crucified. That's for ladies who kiss the whip-marks. Even though I'm a servant, I've never sat anywhere except in the lap of knights."

I couldn't help some surprise at such contrasting sexual desires. I thought it very strange that the maid should cultivate the superior outlook of a lady and the lady the low taste of a maid.[16]

But the theme of sexual degradation has been struck earlier in the tale of the virtuous widow of Ephesus, who had vowed to remain faithful to her deceased husband till her own death but falls for a common soldier and saves him by putting her husband's body up on the cross which the soldier had been guarding (*Satyricon* 111–112).

The incidental references in the Feast of Trimalchio to mistresses who have affairs with their slaves are not to be omitted from this general picture. This perversion of the natural order of things among the upper-class ladies is paralleled by the pathetic attempts to rise on the social scale by Trimalchio and many of his friends, who hope that through the ostentatious use of their newly acquired money they can ape their betters in taste, luxury, and extravagance. The inspection of the vulgarity of the circle, on Petronius' part, is *de haut en bas*, and Fellini's fascination with his Trimalchio is quite unlike the amused and objective coolness which the Roman author brings to his satire, just as Fellini's fondness for grotesques and cripples goes beyond the cooler observation of Petronius. Examples of Fellini's eye for the bizarre and the eccentric are especially frequent in his

16. *Satyricon* 126.5–11; quoted from my translation, 142.

Satyricon, but viewers will remember also how pervasive that element is in *La Dolce Vita*, most notably in the monstrous goggle-eyed fish dragged up from the depths near the end of the film, and the troupe of midgets in *Ginger and Fred*.[17] Nevertheless there are wizened and oversexed old ladies, gross male prostitutes, and a lecherous old bisexual poet in Petronius' *Satyricon* as well, and the hero himself, after all, is for much of the narrative a hopeless sexual cripple, a facet of the story that Fellini finally confronts directly in the brief scene depicting Encolpius' fiasco with Princess Ariadne.

The social ambience, then, of Petronius' *Satyricon* is not too unlike that presented, at least in the first half of the film, in *Fellini Satyricon*, if we allow for the greater vividness and shocking detail that the modern visual medium permits and encourages. We go on an intellectual slumming tour in Petronius' company as well as in Fellini's. To observe the lower classes and the criminal elements of Roman society and to have portrayed even upper-class ladies who sink to that level excited a frisson in the highly class-conscious Roman society or, among the respectable members of the senatorial caste, a strong repugnance. Fellini's audience is wider; the differing reactions to his film are worth recalling.[18]

Granted the resemblances and differences between the Roman novel and its cinematic version by Fellini, is there a critical view expressed in Fellini's recreation of that world?

There is a school of thought represented in different nuances which tries to discern in Petronius, a man at home if not enthroned in Nero's court, an elevated and subtle satirist.[19] This critical theory is partly based on T. S. Eliot's use, as an epigraph for *The Waste Land* (1922), of the pathetic story of the Sibyl in the Bottle as told by Trimalchio. When asked by little boys what she wanted, she cried out in Greek: "I want to die" (*Satyricon* 48.8).

Helen Bacon elaborated this into a theory about the *Satyricon* as a prototype of *The Waste Land*.[20] She stressed Trimalchio's obsession with death, the use of food for everything except its proper purpose, money and materialism as the only shared values of the Roman society Petronius depicts, the lack of love, and the world of famine in which luxury tries to tease the satiated senses into the appearance of life. For her, the Sibyl symbolizes Petronius' own Waste Land, except that to Petronius the Sibyl does not seem to suggest the possibility of rebirth when longed-for death is achieved. Against this William Arrowsmith has argued:

> Miss Bacon sees . . . that the *Satyricon* is not a symptom of a corrupt society, but a penetrating *description* of it, remarkably like Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*. . . . But when she forces the whole book to yield that Christian, almost Manichaean, desolation of Eliot's *Waste Land*, she goes . . . deeply wrong. And when, in order to support this view, she denies that the *Satyricon* is basically comedy, and that the characters are not alive, I think she is violating her text, its plain comic ambitions and its extraordinary liveliness. . . . Miss Bacon tends to assume either that comedy and moral seriousness are incompatible, or that deep gaiety and the description of cultural decay are incompatible. . . . Petronius sets his charming rascals and rogues in sharp contrast to society's greater immoralism, hypocrisy and vulgarity.

Arrowsmith points instead to a hope of which Petronius, even in the midst of so much degradation and death, never loses sight:

> If society has organized itself around the satiety that brings death, man's hope is to rediscover the old pagan landscape, the radiance here and now, in which everything had *numen* [divine presence], and nobody needed eternal life because life itself was good and had god in it. . . . Petronius is . . . the last great witness to the pagan sense of life, and the last classical author in whom we can feel the firmness of moral control that underlies the Greek tragedians. . . . Petronius is squarely in the Latin moralist and satirical tradition—and the greatest moralist of them all.[21]

Arrowsmith's interpretation still presents Petronius as ultimately a great moralist, although now he is a pagan moralist, satirizing the excesses he sees in Roman society with its emphasis on luxury as a way of escaping death.

How would such an analysis apply to Fellini, particularly when we take into account not only *Fellini Satyricon* but also *La Dolce Vita* and *Roma*, all of which have much in common? Certainly Fellini has a satirical eye and an eye for the grotesque, particularly in his casting for minor roles, and a willingness to exaggerate by emphasis as well. This, incidentally, he can do very effectively with his selection of vivid, sometimes scaring,

17. For further instances see Murray, *Fellini the Artist*, 130 and passim. He also documents the many grotesque minor characters whom Fellini parades in most of his work.

18. For example, that by Simon, *"Fellini Satyricon."*

19. Thus Highet, "Petronius the Moralist," *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 72 (1941), 176–194; rpt. in *Classical Papers*, 191–209; William A. Arrowsmith, "Luxury and Death in the *Satyricon*," *Arion*, 5 (1966), 304–331; Froma I. Zeitlin, "*Romanus Petronius*: A Study of the *Troiae Halosis* and the *Bellum Civile*," *Latomus*, 30 (1971), 56–82. Contrast these views with that argued in my "Petronius: Artist or Moralist?" *Arion*, 6 (1967), 71–88.

20. Helen H. Bacon, "The Sibyl in the Bottle," *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, 34 (1958), 262–276.

21. The quotations are from Arrowsmith, "Luxury and Death in the *Satyricon*," 325–327 and 329–330.

images; for instance, the handless arm spouting blood that is shown early in *Fellini Satyricon*. But what are his positives?

I suggest that he has, in common with Petronius, an amused tolerance and acceptance of life as it is lived, a willingness to face his perceived reality and an impatience with false solutions, such as Mussolini's fascism. So, like Petronius, he has more of an artist's than a moralist's eye, although some social comment is often implicit in his choice of themes.

We have here, then, two contrasting views of Petronius, and the analogies for Fellini are obvious. There is Petronius the complex moralist as described by Arrowsmith and others, and there is Petronius as seen by, for example, the Duc Des Esseintes in Huysmans' novel. In the latter the comedy of life is seen as irresistible: After a while there is nothing you can do but laugh. To illustrate this point, there are several scenes which Fellini found worth adapting to illustrate this ancient theater of the absurd. References in Petronius to mimic laughter, to the world as a stage, to role-playing and disguises are frequent enough. Fellini plays up this farcical element by introducing his "underground" theater in the film's opening scene and by inventing a new character, the absurd actor Vernacchio, who farts musically, quaffs a beaker of urine, and then cuts off the arm of the pretended Muzio Scevola with a great axe.[22]

Is there a solution to this critical conflict in which Huysmans, Arrowsmith, and Fellini all seem involved? T. S. Eliot, in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), alluded to the phenomenon whereby each new classic rearranged the order of all its predecessors in the great *musée imaginaire* that is Western literature. This in a way was an early and striking statement of the principle nowadays called intertextuality: Every literary work has roots and connections that cannot be ignored, however hard we try to treat it as a self-subsistent work of art. Its history is part of its essence—for us, part of its *lisibilité*. And, to go even further, the reinterpretations become part of the reading we give it, either through reaction to or sympathy with earlier readings. This is particularly the case with the Latin and Greek classics; our heads are already full of interpretation, conscious or not, because of what we have had to do just to read them. So no text is sacred.

Interpretations then become preliminary, not unnecessary, of course, to what we nowadays call deconstruction of the work and of the author.

22. The motif of Mucius Scaevola, the Roman hero who defied the besieging Etruscan king Porsenna by burning his right hand in a blazing fire, is actually taken from Martial, *Epigrams* 1.21. The story appears in Livy, *From the Foundation of the City* 2.12. If the connection seems somewhat recherché, consider that in *Ginger and Fred* the hero claims that his high-school Latin teacher compared his rhyming aphorisms to Martial's epigrams.

Fellini, in a manner of speaking, "deconstructs" Petronius' *Satyricon* and, particularly in the very last shot of his film, lays out the characters in a frozen immobility which transcends the age in which it was written and renders null and void the motives that other critics have attributed to the author. This ending is a clue to one plausible interpretation of *Fellini Satyricon*. The restless cinematographic images of the sometimes inferior actors that have led us such a bewildering dance through the film—and the dance, not the dancers, is at issue here—are pinned to a fragmentary mural and so are taken out of time. The random confusion of life, reflected in one way in the fragmentary state of Petronius' own text, is now given a timeless quality. The characters' story becomes history, as it were, not in a conventional sense, which Fellini has rejected anyway, but as a slice of the past held up for aesthetic rather than inquiring contemplation.

To end with a truism: The Greek and Latin classics discussed here all have to be reinvented in every age and for every new audience. Fellini's version of the fragmentary *Satyricon* is a worthy part of that continuing endeavor, and critics' complaints about the lack of fidelity to the often uncertain text are beside the point. The text itself has many meanings; to suggest that only one view is the right one is itself to distort that text. Fellini's interpretation, or rather presentation, of Petronius now becomes part of the *Satyricon*'s "literary history" and of its meaning for the modern reader.

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Contents