

Italian Film
in the Light of
Neorealism

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6 Fellini's *La strada*: Transcending neorealism

THROUGHOUT THE 1950s, the term crisis appears with some frequency in writings on neorealism. Whether it is De Santis denying the dire prophecies of the *crisioli*, or Aristarco attributing the crisis of the cinema to the crisis of Italian society at large, the consensus seems to be that neorealism is undergoing radical changes whose effects will drastically alter its chances for survival.¹ The use of the term is significant, not only for what it tells us about the heightened emotionalism of the debate on neorealism, but also for the dramatic analogy itself, which suggests that the course of neorealism will be like the plot of a conventional play with its own rising action, turning point, and denouement. Those who proclaim the crisis of neorealism base their reading on the first half of the "play" and probably have some guesses as to how the drama will be resolved. It is ironic that a movement hostile to the conventions of dramatic plotting should become a character in its own theater of comic redemption or tragic demise, as if to compensate for the absence of drama in neorealist narrative structure.

Aristarco actually has two scenarios for the fate of post-war Italian cinema—one whose crisis yields happy results and one whose fortunes suffer a tragic downfall. The hero of the first scenario is Visconti, whose *Senso* (1954) signals his maturation of neorealism into realism, of chronicle into his-

tory, of *naturalismo zoliano* into *realismo balzaciano*, while the villain of the second is Fellini, whose *La strada* reverts to prewar attitudes of individualism, mysticism, and the quest for pure style.² For Aristarco, realism must provide a political-economic analysis of contemporary social structures so that man can use his reason to "dominate and modify his world, to solve problems within himself and outside himself."³ Fellini's refusal to consider the historical forces that shape the social order and his mystical abdication of control over human destiny makes him a traitor to the neorealist cause and an agent of its possible demise.

The formidable opponents of this theoretical position are André Bazin and, of course, Fellini himself. Both argue against the crisis approach to neorealism in the 1950s, seeing not a turning point in its fortunes, but an essential continuity between the neorealist classics of the 1940s and the aesthetic of Fellini's early films.⁴ What both Fellini and Bazin object to is the Marxist critics' appropriation of neorealism for their own ideological purposes, making of it a "neo-socialist-realism" obedient to their highly partisan needs.⁵ "Certain people still think neorealism is fit to show only certain kinds of reality," Fellini remarks, "and they insist that this is social reality. It is a program, to show only certain aspects of life."⁶ The "certain people" are Aristarco, Chiarini, and the other contributors to *Cinema nuovo*, a Marxist film journal of the

²For his celebration of realism in Visconti, see Guido Aristarco, "Esperienza culturale ed esperienza originale in Luchino Visconti," introduction to the screenplay of *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*, ed. G. Aristarco and G. Caraceni (Bologna: Cappelli, 1960), esp. pp. 20-21. For his denunciation of *La strada*, see his essay "Aristarco Answers Fellini," pp. 60-66. Lizzani has a similar overview of the two directions taken by Italian cinema of the Fifties. See *Il cinema italiano*, p. 197.

³See "Aristarco Answers Fellini," p. 64.

⁴One need not be an anticommunist to posit a continuity between Fellini's Fifties films and neorealism. See the comments of French Marxist critic Georges Sadoul cited in Lizzani, *Il cinema italiano*, p. 201.

⁵See André Bazin, "La strada" in *Federico Fellini*, ed. Bondanella, p. 57.

⁶See "The Road Beyond Neorealism," p. 380.

¹De Santis contradicts the *crisioli* in "È in crisi il neorealismo," in Lizzani, *Storia*, pp. 345ff. Aristarco's crisis diagnosis appears in "Guido Aristarco Answers Fellini" in *Federico Fellini: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Bondanella, p. 65. Carlo Lizzani speaks of "crisis of language" and attributes its causes to the "crisis of story" and to the "crisis of character." See *Il cinema italiano*, p. 199.

Fifties, which had set itself up as the sole trustee of the neo-realists' truth. Both Fellini and Bazin trace this critical bias to the historical onset of neorealism when an exclusive concern for social problems was indeed appropriate to Italy's postwar condition. "Italy has had the luck, like Russia around 1925," writes Bazin, "to find herself in a situation in which a certain cinematographic genius began to spring forth and this genius was moving in the direction of social progress and the liberation of men."⁷ It is natural, he continues, that the guardians of this trend would want to preserve its political progressivism by doctrinaire means, even after the initial impetus for the movement had died away. Fellini is less generous. "Later, the leftist press capitalized on this inadvertent one-sidedness by saying that the only valid thing to do in films is to show what happens around you."⁸ He then issues a twofold attack on the Marxist interpretation: first in its exclusive privileging of social reality and second in its misplaced emphasis on subject matter as the sole standard of neorealist truth. Instead, neorealism should embrace "not just social reality, but spiritual reality, metaphysical reality, all that there is within man. . . . In a certain sense, everything is realistic. I see no dividing line between imagination and reality."⁹ Bazin gives the apt label of "neorealism of the person" to this holistic approach, which considers the problematics of human existence apart from its sociopolitical determinants and unbound to the particulars of historical context.¹⁰ In fact, one of the many meanings of the road image in *La strada* might well be Fellini's journey from the classical neorealism of the 1940s to a new version of it, whether we call it "neorealism of the person" as Bazin does, or "phenomenological realism" after Amedée Ayfre.¹¹ Fellini's point of

⁷ See Bazin in *Federico Fellini*, ed. Bondanella, p. 56.

⁸ See "The Road Beyond Neorealism," p. 380.

⁹ In *Fellini on Fellini*, trans. Isabel Quigley (New York: Dell, 1976), p. 152.

¹⁰ See *Federico Fellini*, ed. Bondanella, p. 57.

¹¹ Ayfre's proposed analogy between phenomenology and neorealism holds considerable promise for Fellini criticism. On his theory of phenomenolog-

departure for this journey is indeed the strictly construed neorealism of the Marxists—that form which "was mistaken for social realism. When people saw a badly made shack, they mistook it for neorealism. When they saw two tramps, they said 'neorealism.'"¹² Indeed, the shack and the tramps are there in *La strada*—not only is Zampànò's moto-trailer a moving hovel, but Gelsomina's numerous family lives in a dilapidated hut whose roof repairs will be funded by the 10,000 lire earned from her sale to Zampànò. Her mother and younger sisters are in rags and Gelsomina herself is barefoot as Zampànò later gloats when he tells the circus manager, "I taught her everything; I gave her shoes." Poverty is the very impetus for the action—it is what forces Gelsomina's mother to sell her into virtual slavery as she had her older daughter Rosa, who died in Zampànò's service, "Remember Zampànò who took Rosa?" the mother asks Gelsomina. "We don't know where she's buried." The fatal consequences of employment with Zampànò show how drastic the mother's decision is and how desperate her situation must be to release another daughter to the same possible death. With such a beginning, the film could become an essay on the devastations of poverty which condemns its victims to cycles of bondage and death and prevents their ever escaping the margins of society. "The road" of Gelsomina never takes her to a better condition of material independence or social integration and she remains bereft of any of those things that would enable her to survive in the physical world. *La strada* indeed meets the conditions for a thesis film on poverty and social injustice, but it never remains that, leaving behind the conventional neorealist point of departure on its road to a far different poetic.

On the literal level, the road signifies the life of itinerant

ical realism, see "Néo-réalisme et phénoménologie," *Cahiers du cinéma* 3 (November 1952), 6–18 and "Du premier au second néo-réalisme," *Études cinématographiques* 32–35 (Summer 1964), 55–72.

¹² See the interview with Fellini in Samuels, *Encountering Directors*, p. 126.

entertainers that Zampànò and Gelsomina lead in their journey through the country. During the course of their travels they meet another wandering performer, Il Matto, who has several scuffles with Zampànò and is finally bludgeoned to death by the strongman in a roadside brawl. Gelsomina's trail psyche breaks under the burden of this experience and Zampànò abandons her along the way, only to learn years later that she was taken ill in a coastal town where she died an anonymous death.

That this is not a standard neorealist journey, such as the one in *Paisan*, or *The Path of Hope*, is proved by the total absence of concrete spatial and temporal markers to root the story in history. Only once are we given a geographic reference, and that is to Rome, though we remain in the anonymous suburbs of the city and never see any of its landmarks. Mention is made of one monument, San Paolo Fuori Le Mura (St. Paul Outside the Walls), whose very name makes it peripheral to the city, in keeping with the marginal status of the narrative action and its characters. With regard to time, the ESSO sign in the background of the first campsite suggests that this is a postwar setting, as does the redheaded prostitute's admiring question, "Is it American?" when presented with the spectacle of Zampànò's moto-trailer and scene of their imminent lovemaking. These minimal spatiotemporal allusions are hardly essential to the plot and their removal would occasion absolutely no modifications of the story, which is as deracinated as its very characters. Edouard de Laurot points out that Zampànò's refusal to specify his origins—the answers Gelsomina's question, "Where do you come from?" and with the noncommittal, "From my part of the country" and "Where were you born?" with "In my father's house"—reveals as much his rootlessness as his conversational perversity.¹³ Unbound in time and space, Fellini's story thus announces its departure from neorealist historicity and its

¹³ See Edouard de Laurot, "La strada: A Poem on Sainly Folly," *Film Culture* 2 (1956), 12.

preference for an ahistorical rendering of the human condition.

Nor do Gelsomina and Zampànò trace the kind of journey through society that Antonio and Bruno do in *Bicycle Thief* where Italy's major institutions—her law enforcement agencies, Church, and trade unions—are all systematically examined and found wanting. Wary of arguments for the social determinants of humanity's plight, Fellini deliberately precludes any such misinterpretations of his inquiry by avoiding the city altogether and routing his journey through small towns, suburbs, and the countryside.¹⁴ A social institution that does come under his scrutiny, however, is the Church, but he chooses one of the least institutionalized aspects of it, that of the nuns who change convents every two years in a renunciation of the very propertied interests which typify the secular world. Fellini's glimpse of the monastic vocation serves less as a social commentary on the Church than as an analogue to the totality of Gelsomina's own selfless commitment—an analogy that the nun makes explicit when she observes, "You follow your bridegroom, I follow mine." If Fellini criticizes the institutionalized Church at all, it is in the scene of the religious procession where he scrupulously shows us the cardboard back as well as the front of the holy images, suggesting that the ecclesiastical world is as guilty of showmanship and illusionism as is Il Matto who, in the very next scene, has his own apotheosis on the high wire connecting the church façade to the tavern across the street.

Another social institution that receives passing attention is the family unit in the wedding scene, though this, like the convert, serves less as an object of social criticism than as a comment on Gelsomina's marginality. The sacrament of marriage, the opportunities for childbearing, the consolations of the extended family and community life are all denied Gelsomina as she remains literally on the periphery of

¹⁴ On the marginal settings of *La strada*, see *ibid.*, p. 13.

this festive space, dancing alone to the beat of Zampànò's drum. Later that evening, when Zampànò performs his own postnuptial exertions, Gelsomina will not even be his consort, for he has found a partner and benefactress in the wedding feast cook who has survived two husbands and has their wardrobes to bestow on willing surrogates.

But beside these passing and somewhat oblique commentaries on the Church and the family, *La strada* remains a film indifferent to the social and historical concerns of orthodox neorealism. On the other hand, a characteristic that *La strada* shares with its neorealist ancestors is a mistrust for conventional dramatic form. Like *Bicycle Thief*, the film has an episodic structure in which each event constitutes a self-sufficient unit, joining others in sequence to create a cumulative, rather than a linear, sense of meaning.¹⁵ There is no cause-and-effect linkage of events, and actions are governed neither by the laws of psychological verisimilitude nor by those of poetic justice. For example, the logic of the emotions would dictate that Gelsomina leave Zampànò for a life in the circus or a partnership with Il Matto. Surely these represent far more attractive alternatives than the precarious independence she chooses when she actually does run away from Zampànò earlier in the film. The fact that she would escape once, under such poor conditions, and would refuse to later on when the alternatives would be so much more appealing, runs counter to our sense of plausibility. Nor does any concept of poetic justice rule the action, for such a principle would dictate that events punish Zampànò in accordance with the hints furnished by the narration. Legal apprehension for murder is indeed a possibility, since Zampànò's earlier scuffle with Il Matto and his consequent night in jail had put him on record as an enemy of the victim and one who would not stop at violence to express his antipathies. When Zampànò reassures Gelsomina "no one's looking for us," he gives

¹⁵ See *ibid.*, p. 12.

voice to his own fears of police detection and raises our audience expectations accordingly. During the final staging of his chain-breaking act, we expect the tired, aging, and broken Zampànò to burst an artery or lose his sight as he had so fatefully warned in his opening performance. "If a vein bursts, I'll spit blood. A man in Milan went blind during this act. When one loses his sight, it's finished." In a figurative sense, of course, Zampànò never had any sight to begin with, blind as he was to anything beyond his immediate sensory experience of the world. It is during the fifth and final repetition of his act, as he is learning the true meaning of his loss of Gelsomina, that he gains a vision he never possessed, in an ironic reversal of his preperformance prophecies. Thus Fellini's rejection of conventional poetic justice is in the service of Zampànò's climatic self-illumination. Should external events impose their justice on him, he would never arrive at the state of awareness and remorse that the final scene on the beach affords. Bazin is right when he observes that "events do not 'happen' in Fellini's world; they 'befall' its inhabitants, that is to say, they occur as an effect of 'vertical' gravity, not in conformity to the laws of 'horizontal' causality. Thus the Fellinian character does not evolve; he ripens."¹⁶

Though the distrust of conventional dramatic structure aligns Fellini with his neorealist ancestors, what he chooses as an alternative only redoubles him from this heritage. Unlike Rossellini, who takes the historical record as his point of departure in *Open City* and *Paisan*, or De Sica who uses the *piccola cronaca* or one-line newspaper item as his impetus in *Bicycle Thief*, Fellini turns to the modes of folk drama and mime to provide the model for his film. The most obvious borrowing is from the commedia dell'arte tradition as the costumes and stylized role-playing immediately reveal. Il Matto belongs to the Arlecchino family with his motley costume, his wit, refinement, and acrobatic skill. Zampànò, in-

¹⁶ See Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, 2:84-85.

stead, is a descendant of Pulcinella in his churlishness and his utter lack of grace. Whenever they come in contact with one another, these two cannot help but perform their commedia dell'arte routines, enacting in their offstage lives the very roles they play in the circus tent or the makeshift arena of the roadside show. "I have nothing against him," Il Matto tells Gelsomina, "but when I see him, I can't resist teasing him," and Zampànò cannot resist retaliating with all the considerable brute force at his disposal. A degraded form of the commedia dell'arte is the clown act that follows Zampànò's chain-breaking exercise in the road show. "She's afraid of my *ciuffe*," gloats Zampànò. "You say *facile* [rifle], not *ciuffe*, ignoramus," answers Gelsomina to the delighted applause of the audience. "Where are the ducks?" asks Zampànò, undaunted. When Gelsomina quacks, and Zampànò pretends to shoot at her, the rifle backfires in a prophecy of how his violence and insensitivity will some day rebound to himself, just as the earlier skit showed how Gelsomina would emerge with the greater understanding and insight of the two, despite her seemingly limited mental capacities. Thus the commedia dell'arte acts serve as *in pace* versions of the film at large, not in its material unfolding, but in the figurative significance of its action.

That the commedia dell'arte description is relevant not only to the roadshow skits and to the circus acts, but to the film as a whole, is suggested by the fidelity of all three characters to their theatrical personas, for Zampànò is always the heavy-handed brute, Gelsomina is always the educable naïf, and Il Matto is always the mocking Ariel, offstage as well as on. Not only do all three remain "in character," they practically remain in costume, wearing toned-down versions of their theatrical garb throughout the film, as if their stage personas were simply heightened expressions of their unmasked selves.

Another folk analogue for the poetics of *La strada* is the medieval morality play, which explains the emblematic nature of the three main characters. The two male leads repre-

sent the polar extremes of the human condition, with Zampànò enacting the claims of the flesh and Il Matto impersonating his disembodied, ethereal opposite. When the other characters chide Zampànò, be it in anger or in jest ("The circus needs more animals," Il Matto tells him; or "You're a beast, you don't think," says Gelsomina), they make explicit his subhuman leanings. Indeed, Zampànò lives on an exclusively physical level, satisfying the primary appetites of food, sex, and sleep with little regard for the niceties of civilized society. Gelsomina's attempts to engage him in conversation are met either by grunts, monosyllables, or imperatives to silence, while the natural delicacy of her expressions of affection occasion Zampànò's mockery or indifference. The frequency with which Fellini shows the strongman either drunk or asleep reinforces our sense of this character's mental torpor, while his chain-breaking act constitutes the perfect expression of his bondage to the flesh and to the material limits of his condition. Though he succeeds in breaking out of the chains each time, the act provides no sense of release, for we know that Zampànò will have to don them again, that he will never escape the imprisonment of the flesh to which they metaphorically point.

As if his tightrope act were not enough to qualify Il Matto as a man of airy lightness in contrast to Zampànò's earth-bound bulk, he also wears wings in an ambiguous costume whose stripes make him appear half angel, half bee. While Zampànò's sluggish intellect leaves him humorless and dull, Il Matto's mind is agile, able to make the connections prerequisite to wit. Musically, the two men are also opposed, as Il Matto plays the tinest of violins and Zampànò blasts away on the trombone or beats on the drums. Il Matto's lightness finds its most poignant expression in his very fragility—a fragility that is expressed in his twice uttered prophecy of an early death.

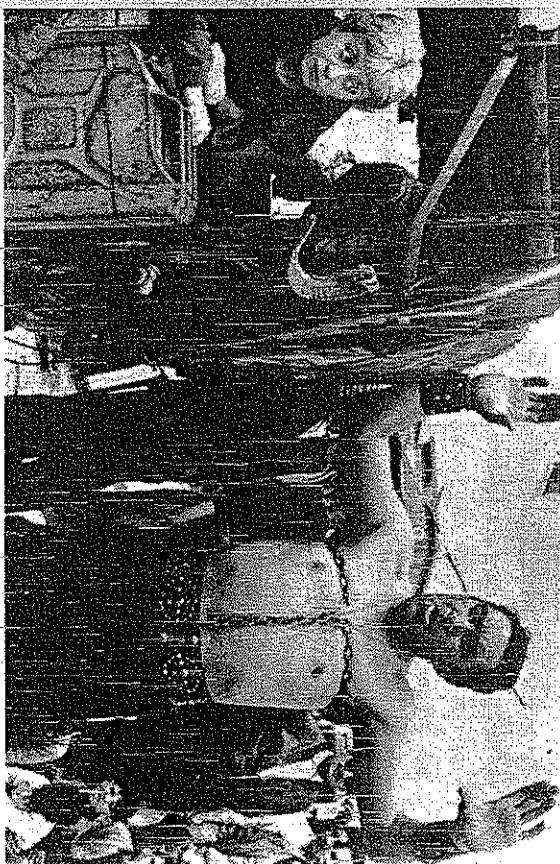
It is within the polarities embodied by Zampànò and Il Matto that Gelsomina makes her journey from ignorance to

full understanding and love.¹⁷ At the start of the journey, Gelsomina's understanding is little better than Zamparò's. She is an unawakened, unthinking creature who operates on an instinctual level and is relegated, as Zamparò will be later on, to the animal realm. When Gelsomina's mother apologizes to Zamparò that her daughter "is a bit strange" the strongman answers reassuringly, "Don't worry, I can even teach dogs." As if to prove his mastery of animal subjects, he literally whips Gelsomina into obedience when she falters on her opening lines, "Zamparò has arrived."

But Gelsomina soon leaves Zamparò behind as she grows in understanding and love while he remains unchanged by the experiences of the road. If the film were to document her education alone, then it would indeed be a linear road directed toward a transcendent goal, but since it also tells the story of Zamparò's stasis, its trajectory is hindered by repetitions and returns. To account for the different dynamics of Gelsomina's and Zamparò's journeys, we may view their itinerary as a spiral in which they constantly cover the same ground, in accordance with Zamparò's repetition compulsion, but do so on a higher level of understanding, in accordance with Gelsomina's burgeoning awareness. Thus Zamparò's serial seductions teach him nothing about the transience of such physical consolations, nor the hurt they bring Gelsomina, who is only one in the list of his five bed partners throughout the story. She, on the other hand, progresses from the naive incomprehension of Zamparò's infidelity with La Rossa, the redheaded prostitute, to jealous hurt at his fling with the wedding-feast cook, to a mature acceptance of him, promiscuity notwithstanding, by the midpoint of the film.

The most obvious measure of Zamparò's stasis and Gelsomina's change is the chain-breaking act which is performed five times in symmetrical positions throughout the

¹⁷ As a variant of this reading, Suzanne Budgen sees Gelsomina's journey as a coming of age. See her *Fellini* (London: British Film Institute, 1966), p. 11.



6. Somewhat awed and bewildered, Gelsomina (Giulietta Masina) watches as Zamparò (Anthony Quinn) demonstrates his pectoral prowess.

film. Twice near the beginning, twice toward the end, once at the midpoint of *La strada*, the act makes explicit Gelsomina's shifting relationship to the strongman, who remains himself unchanged, except for some grey hair at the temples and a certain vocal apathy in the last performance. Gelsomina, instead, has a radically different role to play during each act. Starting out as a star-struck spectator of the show, she becomes the leading lady by the second performance. Il Matto's intrusion into the world of Gelsomina and Zampànò is marked by his heckling of the third chain-breaking act when he interrupts with, "Zampànò, you're wanted on the phone." Though we do not see Gelsomina's part in this performance, we do see her in the very next scene rehearsing with Il Matto in an assertion of her new role as an independent artiste. Incapable of performing at all after the murder, Gelsomina's participation in the fourth act is limited to whimpering and repeating, "Il Matto is sick." Of course, the fifth act shows Zampànò alone, bereft of the partner whose loss he has just now begun to mourn. There will be no more chain-breakings and no more stasis now that Zampànò has finally grasped what Gelsomina had so painfully acquired on her long road to knowledge and love.

Zampànò's and Gelsomina's are not the only journeys in the film. Though we see very little of him, since he serves primarily as a foil for Zampànò and a catalyst for Gelsomina, Il Matto travels his own, tragically brief itinerary to self-knowledge and then to extinction. The purveyor of the gospel of usefulness, Il Matto suggests that he too would like to be of use, though he disguises that plea in denials which constantly defeat his purpose. "Do they want me?" he asks Gelsomina as the circus prepares to leave Rome. "Who needs them, anyway," he shrugs with a protective pride that would preclude his going to Colombaioni, the proprietor, to ask for reinstatement. When Il Matto offers Gelsomina the option of going off with him, her tacit refusal prompts him to add, "I don't need anyone," with a bravado that rings as false as

Zampànò's own drunken declaration of independence in the penultimate scene of the film. We sense, however, that Il Matto is fully aware of the hollowness of his claims to self-sufficiency and that Gelsomina's generosity and warmth have only fanned the flame of his own interpersonal need. The illumination he brings to Gelsomina must be self-illumination of the most painful kind, for Il Matto is powerless to end the terrible isolation of his own gypsy lot.

It is his interview with Gelsomina that marks both the turning point in her itinerary and the thematic center of the film. Il Matto's lesson to Gelsomina provides a kind of Archimedean point outside the narration which tells us retroactively how to construe the first half of the story and prepares us for an accurate interpretation of its ending. His teaching is, among other things, a lesson in reading, not only the literal language of Gelsomina's story, but the language of Fellini's journey beyond neorealism.

IL MATTO: Everything in the world is good for something. Take . . . this stone, for example.

GELSOMINA: Which one?

IL MATTO: Uh, this one—it doesn't matter which.

Even this little stone has a purpose.

GELSOMINA: What's it good for?

IL MATTO: I don't know what it's good for, this pebble, but it certainly has its use! If it were useless, then everything else would be useless—even the stars.

This teaching has the force of revelation for Gelsomina who learns through it that the human mind has infinite range, that it can move from the tiniest pebble to contemplate the vastness of the heavens, and that thought need not be earth-bound or imprisoned by immediate material things. Until now, she has been like a pre-rational child, limited to the concrete data of the senses, unable to perform any mental operation that would exceed the specifics of her experience. When Il

Matto says, "Take this stone, for example," she must know exactly "which one?" and when he says it has a purpose, she must ask exactly, "What's it good for?" Il Matto frees Gelsomina's mind in the only way possible, for she is incapable of theorizing, but given a concrete example of a truth, can infer its abstract meaning. To be sure, she cannot remain on the level of theory for long, needing always to anchor herself in empirical experience, clutching hold of the pebble as a palpable reminder of the cosmic truth she has just learned. When Zampànò asks her why she came to fetch him from jail rather than leave with the circus, it is enough for Gelsomina to squeeze the pebble in mute affirmation of its meaning. Il Matto is the very embodiment of the mental agility he accords Gelsomina, for his figurative language bears constant witness to his own associational powers. "You look like an artichoke," "Zampànò barks like a dog," "he beats you like a donkey"—all these similes punctuate the very speech in which Il Matto teaches Gelsomina to think abstractly, to transcend the limits of the material world.

Zampànò, however, is unreceptive to the revelation that Gelsomina tries to share with him at the seaside pause in their journey. "Once I dreamt of going home; now, my house is with you," she confides. "Good discovery," Zampànò answers, "considering the hunger you suffered." "You're a beast," she replies, "You don't think." Gelsomina's disappointment could almost be a vernacular paraphrase of St. Augustine's attack on the bestiality of literal-mindedness.¹⁸

For Zampànò has interpreted her metaphor in the most literal possible way, reducing her spiritual meaning to its material constituents of walls, roof, and hearth. He is incapable of rising above his carnal understanding to entertain any higher possible meanings—for Zampànò, a pebble is simply a pebble with no transcendent referent and no cosmic connections. It is his literal-mindedness and his materialism, as much

¹⁸See St. Augustine, "De doctrina christiana," in *Corpus christianorum*, 32 ed. Joseph Martin (Tournai: Brepols, 1962), 3-5-9, p. 83.

as his physical bulk, which reduces Zampànò to bestiality, denying him access to those higher mental faculties that are proper to man and raise him above his brute inferiors. In another instance of his reductionism, Zampànò misinterprets the true cause of Gelsomina's mental collapse. "What's wrong, no one's looking for us," he reassures her after Il Matto's murder, ascribing her imbalance to the most practical of causes—fear of legal retribution. Not even guilt, let alone any higher human response to untimely and violent death, seem to occur to Zampànò as possible causes of Gelsomina's malaise.

It takes a five-year separation, Gelsomina's own death, and eventually her return to him by song to convert Zampànò to the truth of her teachings. In the final scene on the beach, Zampànò finally looks up at the stars to complete his own itinerary from pure physicality to spiritual understanding, and perhaps even to grace. He has definitively burst the chains of his fleshly confinement in a belated sharing of Gelsomina's illumination. The sea, site of this conversion, has been Gelsomina's element throughout the film and here Zampànò indeed comes home, in accordance with her own metaphor for spiritual in-dwelling.¹⁹

At first glance, this ending might well support the critical charges of cheap mysticism that have been leveled at Fellini's work, but careful study of *La strada* reveals the wrongheadedness of such accusations.²⁰ Doubtless, the film argues that this is neither the only world nor necessarily the best world for human occupancy, but it never lapses into the *contemptus mundi* of the ascetic nor the retreat from human involvements of the emotionally vanquished. The film pursues a quest for transcendent meaning which then redounds to the concrete thing itself in a vindication of the dignity of this life.

¹⁹See Budgen, *Fellini*, p. 10.

²⁰On the pejorative uses to which critics have subjected the term "mysticism" with regard to Fellini's work, see Anstasio, "Artstarco Answers Fellini," p. 65; and Lizzani, *Il cinema italiano*, pp. 192, 203.

Gelsomina's delight in the natural world is normative—her tomato garden or her examination of the roadside bugs all serve to dramatize the overlooked beauties of creation. Though the film lacks historical rootedness, it is nonetheless very physically rooted in the landscapes and roadscapes of its path through the country. The pebble of the parable becomes the stone which gives weight and mass to so many of the buildings in the film, from the barn where Gelsomina and Zampànò sleep after the wedding, to the convent, to the roadside ruins where Zampànò abandons Gelsomina in the glare of the winter sun. Even the most ethereal of characters, Il Matto, asserts his corporality in his tightrope act when he eats a plate of spaghetti in midair.

With the parable of the pebble, Fellini charts his road beyond neorealism. His filmmaking will not confine itself to the material conditions of life in a given time or place, according to the orthodox neorealist canon, but will transcend such limits to embrace "metaphysical reality, spiritual reality—all that there is in man." In a tribute to his wife Giulietta Masina that is reminiscent of Dante's promise to Beatrice at the end of *La vita nuova*, Fellini makes the actress his guide to the new territory not yet explored in postwar Italian cinema. "She has taken me over a certain threshold, through a certain gate, and made me penetrate into a landscape, into a territory that I have not yet described thoroughly and completely, but that I hope very much, if fancy leads me to it again, to be able to translate into images."²¹ In *La strada*, Gelsomina performs precisely this function, leading us into another order of being beyond the normal range of human perception—an order that may be labeled the supernatural, the transcendent, the occult, or simply the unknown. Fellini offers no prior interpretation of this other dimension, he simply posits its existence and its importance for our experience of the sensible world. Thus the film is full of

²¹ Quoted in Budgen, *Fellini*, p. 95.

"breakthrough" moments which offer intimations of a realm beyond: Gelsomina's wondrous encounter with Osva, her witch's incantation over the campfire, the strange pantomime during Zampànò's drunken stupor when she imitates a tree or listens to a post. But Fellini keeps us balancing on the threshold while only Gelsomina is able to cross over, so that the mystery is affirmed but never "intruded upon."²² Had Gelsomina gone off with Il Matto, we would have learned too much about that enchanted landscape to maintain a sense of its privacy and magic, but instead we remain, like Zampànò, on this side of the mystery. When he learns of Gelsomina's last years from the young girl who has been singing her song, the *mise-en-scène* situates Zampànò behind a fence, separated from the source of this sad revelation as he had been separated all along from the connectedness and synthetic force of Gelsomina's life.²³

This passage from the empirical world into an implied beyond occasions a corresponding narrative transformation of considerable critical interest. The film bears witness to the making of a legend as Gelsomina's story passes into the realm of folklore for the villagers of the town where she died. Though unable to tell them her story when they found her ill on the beach, Gelsomina did play her song and this took the place of name and biography in identifying her for the town. The survival of the song after her death makes Gelsomina a kind of *spiritus loci*, exerting a tutelary power over her adoptive landscape. For Zampànò, and for us, who know the part of the story that the villagers do not, her passage into the realm of legend is the proper fulfillment of a life replete with "breakthrough" moments and preternatural gifts.

It is here that the constant allusions to Rosa reveal their logic, for they are not only indications of Gelsomina's jealousy,

²² Budgen says this of Fellini's treatment of Gelsomina, but it extends to the entire mystery of which she is a part. See *ibid.*, p. 9.

²³ See Edward Murray, "La strada," in *Federico Fellini*, ed. Bondanella, p. 52.

ousy about Zamparò's prior attachments, but also a measure of the difference between a story which remains story (or implied story) and one which achieves the status of legend. Gelsomina asks Zamparò repeatedly about her older sister—did Rosa work like her, did Zamparò make love with Rosa, did Rosa know Il Matto—suggesting both Gelsomina's desire to surpass her sister in Zamparò's affections and perhaps, too, her fear of replicating her predecessor's fate. Indeed, their careers are sadly alike—both are sold into bondage to the same man as work partners and mistresses, both die a mysterious death, and both are buried in unknown graves. Both share the symbolism of their flower names with the implicit confinement to the natural cycles of flourishing and withering into a traceless death. Rosa's name is most suggestive of this natural transience with its metaphorical link to the philosophy of *carpe diem* and its affirmation of the finality of physical demise. Like her sister, Gelsomina withers and dies, but unlike Rosa, she passes into a realm of permanence in keeping with their surname, Costanzo (the masculine of constancy).

Though song is the means by which Gelsomina transcends her mortality, the film does not degenerate into a glorification of Art as the key to immortal life. Such a message would be not only self-congratulatory on Fellini's part, but would limit the mystery and allure of that other order to which his film so insistently points. Instead, this mystery must remain inviolate and unspoiled by any explanatory recourse to Franciscan pietism, pagan animism, or pantheism.²⁴ That Fellini's universe of meaning could be truly "open from above," that his itinerary from the pebble to the stars might continue indefinitely, occasions great critical discomfort and quests for theoretical closure. Of all the proposed "isms," the most appropriate, because the least binding, is Amédée Ayfre's phe-

²⁴ See Laurot, "La strada," p. 14.

nomenological realism, which keeps the mystery intact without reducing it to cheap mysticism.

In its declaration of freedom from neorealist constraints of subject matter and ideology, *La strada* cleared the way for other forays into areas previously considered "taboo" for serious cinematic treatment. Fellini's leap from the pebble to the stars allowed other directors to overstep neorealist boundaries in less risky ways, so that Visconti could venture into the historical past in *Senso* and Antonioni could venture into the literary province of middle-class psychology in *Le amiche*. As far as Fellini's own itinerary is concerned, *La strada* might be seen as the distant prelude to 8½ with its abolition of any "hierarchy of realms" through a paratactic ordering of dream, fantasy, memory, and actuality.²⁵ Neorealism, for Fellini, has not been so much abandoned as subsumed in a vision that takes in the stars but does not forget the pebbles that line the way in this world.²⁶

²⁵ See J. P. Telotte, "8½ and the Evolution of a Neorealist Narrative," *Film Criticism* 3 (Winter 1979), 75.

²⁶ Georges Sadoul concurs, "Far from betraying neorealism, Fellini enriched it by guiding it along a new path." *Dictionary of Films*, trans. Peter Morris (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1972), p. 358.

