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Fellini and Jungism:(1) Encounter With Federico Fellini

Summary:

This chapter, taken from Aldo Carotenuto's book *Jung e la cultura italiana* (Jung and Italian Culture), reproduces a conversation with Federico Fellini, in which Fellini describes his introduction to Jungian thought and to some of Jung's writings, but above all his strange encounter with Ernst Bernhard, the founder of analytical psychology in Italy, and the productive relationship which was subsequently created between the two of them.

(...) Fellini described to me his visit to Jung's Tower in Bollingen. Situated on a lakefront, that tower—apropos of which Fellini had already read the chapter dedicated to it in Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*—impressed him as being gigantic, and yet something which might have been constructed by a child, something modeled in clay. That air of a humble dwelling, but also in a sense a miniature theater, along with the fact that Jung had applied himself with the humility of an old actor, one who recites the roles of ancient Caucasian shepherds, according to a simple and mysterious ritual, aroused in Fellini a sentiment almost of reverence. Everything there was very congenial to him, also because—along with the attempt to reproduce something of antiquity, medieval, there was also that touch of the theatrical.

Fellini and his friends were received by the youngest of Jung's grandsons. The boy, who had seen Fellini's films and held him in particular esteem, led them to a small room which, they were told, was not usually shown to anyone since, as the boy admitted frankly, the thing embarrassed him considerably. They went up a stone staircase and opened a small door. The impression was initially one of total darkness. Then Fellini dimly perceived a very small space with two tiny Gothic windows of thick alabaster and walls painted by Jung himself—the mandala and a study of various myths. Then there was a collection of small objects, statues, an incredible bric-à-brac, and in a corner the robe of a magician (an initiate or guru). The young man explained to them how his grandfather had spent hours and hours there. While this place, so saturated with significance, left Fellini's friends perplexed, it inspired in him an impression of intimacy, somewhat akin to having discovered a secret vice, which in his eyes rendered Jung more human and thus greater; closer and at the same time more mysterious. In fact, it exuded that humanity essential to ancient rituals which have no need of an elaborate production, and there was also something of the Bantu witch doctor. If a scientist, a philosopher, a thinker, of Jung's caliber, had accepted the conditioning and limits of a ritual which—at least in our eyes—is somewhat ridiculous, then obviously he would have had his own reasons and have truly progressed beyond what usually passes for dignified behavior. This revelation of Jung as more human and at the same time more mysterious aroused in Fellini a joyful respect.

Fellini never met Jung personally. In fact, until he met Bernhard he knew little or nothing of psychoanalysis. It was Bernhard who introduced Fellini to the writings of Jung. Of course, Fellini had not read everything, also because some of Jung's writings are technically initiatory; for example, he did not finish *Psychology and Alchemy*, but he read *Psychology and Religion*, *The Ego and the Unconscious*, *Psychological Types*,

Answer to Job, and above all Memories, Dreams, Reflections. Needless to say, meeting Bernhard was an extremely important event in the life of Fellini. The atmosphere of their encounter was a strange and exceptional one—which was only to be expected in an encounter of this type. Fellini was suffering from a malaise which he could only vaguely define; existential as it were, but with effects going slightly beyond neurosis. That encounter occurred in 1960-61—that is, after the filming of *La Dolce Vita*. He had experienced similar phenomena also as a boy, except that then he had considered the thing to be quite normal—and, basically, perhaps it was. Fellini believed that such experiences are common to everyone, but that they are forgotten, suppressed by the intellectual barrier of defense which is created. He, however, remembered. Following various periods of nervous tension, or perhaps simply because it was inevitable, at around 33 or 34 years of age, Fellini again began to experience strange phenomena, things that had no connection to daily normality. This condition was intensified by his new, somewhat magical interest in a certain type of literature. In fact, Fellini's plunging with a greedy curiosity into the reading of rare texts on initiates, prophets and conjurers only stimulated a tendency, an openness, a particular capacity for contact which he naturally possessed. Also, his profession, which involved operating in the sphere of the imagination, must have exalted that predisposition to hallucinatory experiences, that sliding into a sort of twilight zone, where sensitivity becomes perception tinged with alarm. In one sense, he was tempted to let himself go, to proceed; however, he sensed the danger involved, and he was afraid. Without that sensation of terror when confronted with these phenomena—fascinating but completely mysterious—the experience would perhaps have gone even further. Instead, he was restrained by an uncontrolled fear.

One day, when subsequent to these experiences he felt himself waver—on the one hand tempted, and on the other alarmed him—he received a visit from a colleague with whom he usually had only rare contact. He had not seen the man for some time, in fact since he had attempted unsuccessfully to obtain the means to finish a film which had come to a standstill due to lack of funds. He imagined that he might still nurture some resentment towards him for that failure. Instead, however, he had come to tell Fellini that he had in the end succeeded in finishing his documentary—in any case, this was apparently the reason—and also to express his thanks for what Fellini had tried to do. Then, he suddenly said: “Do you know Dr. Bernhard?” Fellini said that he didn't. And the colleague: “He is an extraordinary man. A psychoanalyst. I am extremely grateful to him. The other day, we were talking about you and *La Strada*. Why don't you phone him?”

Now, all this was absolutely coincidental; he could know nothing of what Fellini was going through. When he left the telephone number, Fellini accepted it out of politeness. However, he had not the slightest intention of using it, also because he had already had an experience with an analysis which had not been exactly a pleasant one. It had been during the filming of *La Strada*. He had fallen into a anxious, neurotic state to the extent that at one point, he felt as though he were being dragged under water. First there was the sun, light, friends, joy, work, then suddenly, everything changed. But before he realized that he had fallen into an abyss and that there would be some drastic changes if he did not succeed in finding some remedy, one or two months passed. During that time, the film itself also contributed to bringing back to mind episodes, remorse and anxiety. Consequently, his wife, seeing him so mysteriously troubled, perpetually on the verge of tears, suffering from insomnia, and having heard from a friend of a foreign, Freudian psychoanalyst, arranged a meeting.

The analyst came, listened, and then said that he was very busy, which did not strike Fellini as exactly encouraging, at least from a therapeutic point of view, all the more so since Fellini really was desperate. However, an appointment was made for the following month which—as his condition, although intermittent and less acute, nevertheless continued—he decided to keep. Fellini was struck by the narrowness of the analyst's studio and when, after asking him to lie down on the couch, the analyst asked him: “How are you. Tell me, how are you?”, Fellini, believing that the question was in reference to the contingent situation, answered “Slightly hemmed in, a bit suffocating... the office is so small.” The analyst gave a start and blurted out: “What do you mean small?” Fellini had never imagined that someone who claimed to treat, to cure, could be so over-sensitive. Something else which struck him was the fact that immediately after the three quarters of an hour had passed, even in the middle of a discourse, the analyst announced that the session was over. Later on he explained how this was absolutely necessary in order to prevent the patient's

forming a filial relationship which would be subsequently difficult to undo—which was true, but there are many ways to do the same thing. Above all, the things the analyst said were not his own, and Fellini had the impression of rigidity, a schema, a reference to preordained things. In the end, it seemed to him that the analyst was drawing upon useless old saws, and after the third session he stopped going.

Then, gradually, through his work and other private matters, that obscure thing, that sensation of sliding into a distressing dimension, seemed to become attenuated. However, the impression of something unsolved, something of which he understood nothing, remained. Thus we come, seven or eight years later, to the visit from the colleague who left him the telephone number of Bernhard, which Fellini did not immediately use. However, as Fellini was in the habit of carrying around scraps of paper with various notations in his pocket, one day he came across that particular one with a telephone number and nothing else. Thinking that it could be the telephone number of a woman he had met, he phoned, somewhat cautiously, unsure of who might answer. At the other end of the line, a calm, male voice:

“Hello.”

Fellini: “Is Maria there?”

“No, I’m sorry, there is no Maria here”. The man had a German accent.

Fellini: “Excuse me, but who am I speaking to?”

“Professor Bernhard”.

“Oh, Professor, excuse me... it’s Fellini.”

“Oh, yes. It’s a pleasure. What can I do for you?”

There was a short silence. Then in order to overcome his embarrassment, Fellini, hurriedly: “I have to talk to you”, which was in fact not true. It was simply that he did not know how to cut short a telephone call made with completely different intentions.

But he went. A man with the air of an oriental master opened the door. Everything about the house pleased Fellini; the long corridor which reminded him of the labyrinths in the fun-fair, the peaceful air which permeated the studio. The place, it seemed, breathed spirituality. They sat down, opposite each other. Bernhard smiled:

“Tell me.”

And Fellini: “I have nothing to say. I have the feeling that I am with someone who inspires in me a sensation of great peace.”

Then, Bernhard: “Do you know what I do? Who I am?”

“Yes, a psychoanalyst.”

Then he spoke of La Strada. At the end, Fellini asked if he could come back, and Bernhard: “Yes, whenever you wish.”

Then, for some time, he did not telephone, also because in fact he was undecided and unwilling to once more attempt to deal with the old problem of his anxiety. One day, however, not so much due to neurotic discomfort as the desire to see Bernhard, Fellini did phone. Bernhard recognized his voice immediately and gave him an appointment for the next half hour. From then on, they saw each other regularly, every week, without fail. When Fellini spoke of para-psychological phenomena, Bernhard listened with great interest, then said smiling: “You understand that we must consider all this from a psychological point of view”—thus disappointing Fellini slightly, who instead preferred seeing the thing in a magical light. Nevertheless, Fellini gradually became convinced that Bernhard was truly the right person, the friend, the master he needed.

Thus, a relationship of friendship and total trust was formed, to the extent that one could say that 8 1/2 and Giulietta degli spiriti were created in the wake of this encounter; that is, not as narrative necessity, so much as an existential and ideological one. Or, in any case, although the themes for these films were already formed in Fellini’s mind, the encounter with Bernhard and the reading of Jung’s writings shed light on an aspect of which he was previously unaware. Fellini considered his relationship with Bernhard and the

introduction to Jung's works true nourishment—assuming of course that the artistic type can have a reference point other than his own unconscious. Fellini recognized that Bernhard and Jung helped him to find something which is also a defense and a control. The artist is saved by his own self-therapy because, in reality, the fact that one liberates oneself from encountered or evoked phantasms constitutes a continuous self-analysis.

According to Fellini, Jung is the psychoanalyst most loved and most nurturing for the artistic type, because he is a sort of guide, at the most dangerous crossroads, who protects without suffocating, precisely due to his conceptual construction which does not constrict, but broadens. Jung does not say what you must do, he tells you what you “can” do. He indicates the way, he does not accompany you to the established final goal, because there are no goals, but instead he encourages you to continue on, which in itself is already a heroic commitment. Consequently, in certain spheres, he is less popular, less understood and meets with more resistance justified by his apparent mysticism, by his apparently irrational aspects. Even today, despite the fact that his personages, figures, ideas, thought, become indispensable to survival, he is looked upon with suspicion and people speak above all of Freud. Freud is more protective, in the sense that he makes reference is to a kind of general code, adapted to all.

But, returning to our encounter; Fellini recalled a dream he had—shortly before Bernhard's death—in which in fact Bernhard died. In the dream, when he knocked at the door of his beloved master to present his condolences, a youth of a mournful, languid aspect opened the door and led Fellini down the familiar corridor. They entered the studio where Bernhard was lying on the floor, dead, wrapped up like a mummy. The dream continued with the vision of the cadaver disappearing and Fellini's having the impression of his wrists being tightly clutched by the hands of Bernhard. The sensation was that this presence signified that Bernhard was not really dead, that although invisible he continued to make his presence felt. Fellini woke up disturbed and was undecided whether or not to describe the dream to Bernhard. He phoned to hear how he was and went to the studio shortly afterwards. Once there, perhaps impulsively, he described the dream. Bernhard was not disturbed; however, he became very serious and made no comment.

Time passed, Fellini once more took up his film activity, and the two even went out to dinner together once or twice. Fellini was filming *Giulietta degli spiriti* and wanted Bernhard to see it; he mentioned this to Bernhard who accepted with pleasure.

One day, while working on the film, there was a phone call from a friend who informed him of the death of Bernhard. He broke off his work and rushed to Bernhard's home. The person who opened the door was the youth of the dream. When he saw him he experienced a powerful emotion. The youth led him down the corridor and then discreetly retired, leaving Fellini alone with Bernhard's body. Fellini thought that he was about to experience the second part of the dream and was vaguely alarmed, to the extent that he childishly asked Bernhard to remain still and not take him by the wrists.

Subsequently, Bernhard appeared again in his dreams, but always in a pleasant, waggish way, a surprising presence. Doubtless, their relationship remained one of the most important elements in Fellini's life. Bernhard was like a father to him, in the true sense of the word, without changing anything—leaving intact Fellini's protracted adolescence, his playful sense—which allowed him to become detached, to see himself, without rejecting anything. And this is a great and miraculous thing. We have the impression that Fellini conserved a reassuring memory of Bernhard, the impression of having glimpsed another dimension, as it were. The dimension of an extraordinary man, one who although a scientist himself, referred to that other great Swiss magician with reverence.

Certainly, Bernhard was truly fond of Fellini. He was amused and very curious about his activity, and he respected him. He was also very attentive as regards the particular perceptive capacity of Fellini. And in fact, they met during that period that Fellini acquired certain friends, including the two persons with whom he succeeded in creating an all enveloping, mediumistic situation. Fellini could recount truly surprising things, but he preferred to be taken at his word, without having to go into unnecessary detail.

Regularly, he described to Bernhard the things that happened, and he had to admit that Bernhard understood immediately that it was all authentic, all the more so since the persons who intervened knew nothing either of Fellini or the others involved. Bernhard wanted Fellini to write the description of those sessions, in which there was something of that vaguely moralistic aspect with which Catholicism re-acquired through mediums is often imbued, but also revealing aspects of a surprising lucidity and the impression of another presence, inside us and beyond. The things that were said, information, dates, episodes, belonged to the objective presence of a thought that was not and could not have been theirs. Then, that contact with certain persons and certain rituals, which however had nothing of the funereal or sinister, aroused Fellini's old capacity for extrasensory perception. This occurred in a less aggressive way than in the past, because meanwhile there had been the intervention of analytical psychology which had in some way corrected the angle. Fellini spoke of this with Bernhard, who encouraged him to remain unafraid: "When you feel these transparencies which are created in reality, remain firm, calm." It was one of those times when Bernhard said much more than he might have in his strictly analytical role.

Fellini's impression of him was of someone extremely knowledgeable, who had experienced peculiar things and who spoke only when absolutely necessary. In fact, Bernhard gave him suggestions which quickly proved very effective—all this, calmly, with a smile. How can the significance Bernhard had for Fellini be expressed? Perhaps in the words of Fellini himself: "My relationship with him resulted in a kind of fecundation which although it has continued after his death, that death did however represent an interruption, because he was the master, the person waiting for me at certain points of arrival, at certain laps. Now, his memory accompanies me, but it is still a loss. Yes, I can only say that, it is a loss".

Translated from the Italian by Joan Tambureno

Notes:

1 This text is the result of a pleasant conversation between Aldo Carotenuto and Federico Fellini which took place in August of 1976. It is a translation from Aldo Carotenuto's, *Jung e la cultura italiana* (Rome: Astrolabio-Ubaldini, 1977).