

# Holding Hands with a Bicycle Thief

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*Mark West's original essay delineates the complicated manner in which De Sica's film Bicycle Thieves on the one hand draws its audience into an empathic connection with Ricci, the victimized father, while on the other hand holds that same audience at a distance from this monumentally fault-burdened protagonist. En route, West suggestively draws our attention to several submerged metaphors in the film which lend the story a significant historical resonance and urgency.*

A wheel is the sublime paradox;  
one part of it is always going forward  
and the other part always going back.

G.K. CHESTERTON

*Ladri di biciclette / Bicycle Thieves* (1948) is born in a dark pool of sound, a brief musical introduction that begins with a simple footfall figure, a phantom on a solitary flute, which is then answered by a softly soaring variation in dry luminous brass: a surprise of sound that calls up a world of forms and movement and feelings, sounding the face of an empty black screen. These two musical strands step forward in turn and then transpire into a magnificent tutti passage in the strings: a tough heroic air that turns the exhilarating sadness of the first two motifs into a transcendental wheel of suffering, and thus prefigures, with a kind of mineral clarity, the entire emotional movement of the film.

The deeply affecting sound of these three variations on a three-note descending motif opens out from the darkness like an invisible character, moving and mounting a set of steps unnoticed by a troupe of men;

and then, as if the music were being conducted back down the steps by an official's waving hands, it begins to fade, quenched over by a rising human yammer, and soon falls silent at the official's feet as he shouts the name 'Ricci.' These stepping themes reappear throughout the film operatically, like shadow characters in a Greek chorus. They take our hand and seem to walk us out to an old stage where human desire and enchantment are felt to shy away in a new joyless light, an inhospitable cityscape that resembles the deep-focus canvases of Giorgio de Chirico, but for the faint vibration of fantastic blood, of Rossini and Verdi and Puccini.

The first image that we see in *Bicycle Thieves* is a near-empty bus. It sweeps dryly down a road and across the brightening screen, turns round in a square, and stops near a group of modern buildings. Bright bands of film credits cover the screen like a succession of commercial advertisements, obscuring the movements of an excited group of men who have been waiting near the bus stop. Leaning forward in my chair, I feel a slight trepidation that I am falling behind the unfolding of the film, even though it is scarcely in stride; as if I were watching an old newsreel in which the important historic events must be discovered side by side with the quotidian; in which there is no apparent emphasis or direction to lead the eye to what is important. The men disregard the bus when it stops, but pursue, with mounting anticipation, one of the passengers, a well-dressed official who leads them up a set of steps and into one of the buildings, only to come back out and down again immediately. He has left his hat indoors and now holds some folded papers. He calls down the steps 'Ricci ... Ricci ...,' and then with some irritation, 'Is Ricci here?' But there is no reply until a man at the bottom of the steps breaks away and runs across the square to fetch Ricci, who is reclining in a daydream at the foot of a small public fountain, paddling his hand in a broken stream of spilled water. It is the strangest image in the film, and one that may easily escape our attention. It is an incongruous and playfully absurd activity for a grown man who is supposed to be looking for work and competing for scarce jobs with an eager crowd of unemployed men; but as we see in the opening sequences of *Bicycle Thieves*, Antonio Ricci is frankly apart from others, distant and unconnected to ordinary human striving; though not quite aloof, he is distracted and vulnerable, self-absorbed, somehow brittle, and remote from the world. But suddenly awakened to the sound of his name being called, Antonio lifts his head from its heavy reflection on the face of the pool, and is

suddenly up and on his way, freeing himself from the deeps, and, with damp patting palms, a dust as fine as pollen.

This opening sequence sets out the film's intrinsic pattern of pursuit, in a context of institutionalized dependency, and the resulting cycle of pride and humiliation that moves the story along. The unemployed men trail behind the official like a band of obedient children. They compete roughly against each other for jobs and are degraded by the process whether or not they succeed. The society in which they live is a highly bureaucratic world. Queues of desperate and tired people are depicted in a municipal hock shop, a police station, a church, and a seer's parlour. And echoing above all the clamour is the government official's impossible promise to 'try to take care of everyone,' as Flaubert described it, by means of a new bureaucratic order, staffed by a well-meaning 'priestly tyranny' (Flaubert, 20). De Sica's view of institutions anticipates and shares comic similarities with some of Buñuel's spoofs on city life, especially those involving police stations, where the type of bitter comedy that is associated with the early stages of scrambling alienation can also be traced in later, more dehumanized films such as *Alphaville* (1965).

In contrast to this modern collective we have Ricci, who is separate from his community. We may find Antonio's childlike dreaminess rather attractive at first, but his helplessness and deceptions soon become loathesome. It is convenient to disregard that Ricci succeeds in obtaining a job only after telling a lie about the bicycle, thereby founding his own good fortune on the deception of his employer, as well as all the other better-qualified men. So why do we care for him? He will soon do everything a film character need do to dispel our affection, such as bully his wife and child, and persecute an old man and a boy thief, seemingly out of sheer helplessness, yet we are ever-tempted to make excuses for him, excited as he is by the relentless and nerve-breaking pressure of poverty. Indeed, a conviction grows in us during the film that Antonio acts against his own knowledge of right and wrong, against his own inherent goodness, and does so out of an admirable meekness or lack of assurance, an uncertainty and vulnerability, and in circumstances of such peculiar provocation that we become sympathetic and protective, despite his deplorable failings. Our strong feeling of empathy for him turns over and over in the film together with revulsion at his mistreatment of others; and we may come to feel in ourselves an unpleasant tension of inner division disrupt the balance of our judgment of his behaviour, while mirroring Antonio's own

painful movement between extremes. In addition to our bond of sympathy and self-division, our affection for Antonio may also stem from the enchantment of sublime poetry, of a human hand at play, dreaming back and forth in public water, and lifting bright innocent music into a dry hot place.

Maria Ricci, like her husband Antonio, is also first seen at a public fountain, though, unlike Antonio, she is working among other women in a small communal area surrounded by barbed wire that recalls images of the recent war. After Antonio tells Maria that he needs a bicycle in order to qualify for the job he has already accepted, he hurries away in premature defeat and forgets to help her until she hesitates on a stone incline, awkwardly trying to balance two heavy pails of water. This sequence illustrates how Antonio's self-absorption is tied to his helpless dependency, and his charming boyishness. The image of the two pails held in skilful balance by Maria harmonically echoes the symmetrical circles of the bicycle itself and provides a contrast with the pail of water that Antonio clumsily handles later during his own brief spell of work. The image of Maria *working* with water also rubs against the image of Antonio *playing* with water, and evokes a suggestion of the sea echoing in the pails and within the banks of her own name, Maria (*mare* 'sea'). In telling Maria about his new job Antonio succinctly summarizes the results of his deceptions, complaining that 'I've got a job, but I can't take it.' Yet he has already accepted the official's offer on the strength of his false assurance that he owns a bicycle. Antonio's temper soon bursts at the foot of their apartment staircase, and he howls melodramatically, 'Oh, why was I ever born?' Maria, however, faces up to the problem with a nicely regulated fury; she pulls Antonio and the sheets from the bed with determination and a grand flourish of hidden resourcefulness as she decides to sacrifice the linen, part of her dowry, to get their bicycle out of hock. At the municipal pawnshop she and Antonio negotiate very gamely with a compassionate official and obtain a little more money than was originally offered, but like Antonio earlier, Maria lies about the sheets, saying 'they are linen' before correcting herself, 'linen and cotton.' During this sequence it becomes evident – as we see another official climb like a tightrope artist in a circus, hoisting the Riccis' bag of hocked sheets to the top of an extremely high set of shelves, surrounded by countless other packages – that the whole country seems to have hocked great masses of household goods. The Ricci family's two-year spell without a paying job appears to be a widespread condition. Italy's high level of

unemployment gives a special significance to the prospect of financial security after such a long time, but it must also be included in our estimate of what the consequences of continued unemployment would be for the Ricci family. Looking in from a vantage point of relative comfort today, the Ricci household appears to have managed reasonably well for two years with Maria working in the home, Antonio out of work, and Bruno employed pumping gas; and though they suffer hardships, it seems a little melodramatic of Antonio to behave as if they were all about to starve to death, an outcome the film shows to be absurd. If we compare the living standards at the boy thief's dwelling place, a filthy, congested one-room apartment that sleeps four next to the stove, we can see perhaps that the Riccis are considerably better off and more secure than Antonio imagines. In some respects we may begin to feel that the new job is somehow too important, or important to Antonio for all the wrong reasons. Accordingly, the theft of his bicycle introduces an important dramatic catalyst which serves to dissolve Antonio's fantasies of self-worth and contaminate him with a killing sense of failure and life's injustice. From his initial position of doomed gaiety, Antonio seems to fall into a kind of blind trance, and like a figure in Kafka, he becomes obsessed with the pursuit of things that are lost and unobtainable. I am attempting to convey here my own uncertain view that the inflated importance of regaining the bicycle is a kind of inner reflection, projected from the depths of Antonio's psyche, of an indeterminable fragment splintered off from the rest of his being, and striving to become conscious. In this sense the bicycle becomes *everything* to Antonio, though it is *nothing* in itself.

The third member of the Ricci family whom we now meet is Bruno, Antonio and Maria's five-year-old son. We discover him early in the morning working in the darkness of his bedroom, like a dream. Bruno's hands reach up high above his head and spin the front wheel of his father's bicycle, polishing the rim as it turns in the shadows; and with his circling rag he seems to dispel the very darkness that surrounds him. Then Antonio enters Bruno's bedroom, letting in light from the next room. We can see Bruno's beautiful head more clearly now, held among the lovely shadows like a floating crescent of light that illuminates the morning gloom, framed in the circle of a turning wheel and scintillating there at the centre of the radiating spokes, like a sublime and sacred image. Bruno has already dressed himself in the dark and has almost finished cleaning and inspecting his father's bicycle, long before Antonio has even finished dressing. Bruno knows the

minute particularities of the bicycle and he cares for it just as a father might care for his son, insisting on its protection and well-being above everything else. He responds to the bicycle with that special fascination for the logic and structure of machines that is divinely childlike. The bicycle has a Fides frame, apparently from the Latin *fides* ('trust,' 'confidence,' 'reliance,' 'credence,' 'belief,' 'faith'); and we notice how this important initial image of the bicycle, suspended as it is from the apartment ceiling and floating like a set of balances in the beautiful morning light, conveys the way in which the frame holds all the other parts and forces of the bicycle in harmony; how it joins the two wheels that always work in concert with each other, like father and son, each acting congruently with the other: now a generative driving force, and now a steering and directing intelligence. After the bicycle is stolen, we begin to realize that Antonio will never find it again, though he may almost find its frame, and that the real crime, is not that it is stolen, for there is no deep violence in this, but that the minute particularities of its unity and history, so beloved by Bruno, are permanently destroyed when the thieves disassemble it and then graft these parts to other stolen bicycles.

When Antonio comes into Bruno's room, Bruno scolds his father for not complaining to the municipal official at the hock shop who dented one of the pedals while it was in his care. Antonio reacts by telling Bruno to 'keep quiet.' He speaks softly to Bruno, and he laughs lightly at Bruno's seriousness in a gentle attempt to cool Bruno off while not disturbing his sleeping baby brother. But despite the understanding that Antonio shows for Bruno in this exchange he does not seem to register Bruno's deep concern for the bicycle, for right and wrong, and with justice. Bruno openly criticizes his father's obliviousness, but he does not become aggressively intolerant of these typical evasions; and if we sense that these disagreements have become routine between father and son, the film also shows us some of the ways that a child may be father to the man. It is one of the most remarkable things in *Bicycle Thieves*, the way that Bruno continues to express love and affection for his father even though Antonio seldom looks out for Bruno, once the chase has begun, and shows little natural affection except when he is moved by guilt, self-interest, or the demands of an unavoidable responsibility.

In the previous scene Signora Santona, the local seer, implored the heavens to 'give me the light, my Lord ...' This prayer seems to be answered when Bruno opens his bedroom window and lets in a

stream of morning light that reveals his baby brother folded away out of sight. Later, as he is about to leave the apartment with his father, Bruno characteristically remembers to close the bedroom shutters out of consideration for his brother's well-being. There are many such occasions in the film where Bruno covers for his father's irresponsibility. The pressure of these inversions accumulates imperceptibly as Bruno's selfless concern for his father seems to be trying in some way to redeem or compensate for Antonio's egotistical despair. The stereotypes of father and son are always in motion, exchanging places and turning into each other. Bruno's innocent love for his father seems to make Antonio more aware of his own childish helplessness, just as Antonio's despair seems to reach out to Bruno and deepen his understanding and maturity, like Blake's contrary states of the soul, innocence and experience. Later in the film the crazy chase after the old man seems to echo this theme once again, this time in a distorted variation on the tradition of respect that is owed to one's elders. Here, anger and violence move up freely from Bruno and Antonio in a disagreeable spectacle of righteous disregard for justice until the old man, who may or may not be involved in the bicycle theft, demands a little 'respect.' Antonio and Bruno are becoming vigilantes, attempting to obtain justice for themselves through force alone, and it is tragic and repugnant to witness how their futile pursuit of a thief results only in further crime and self-abasement.

The film works like a fable and shows how dwelling too much on the pursuit of what has been lost is more likely to foster a cycle of further and more serious losses than restore happiness. This theme is very pronounced at the scene of the near-drowning of a child at the bridge. Antonio is incapable of telling his son about the intense terror that he felt at the possibility of Bruno's accidental death, and neither can he hold on to his momentary sense of responsibility towards his son. There are many occasions for death, and near-accidents are so frequent in the course of the film that we soon come to feel that Bruno has been mortally doomed by his father's selfishness and neglect, though it likely will not be a death by water, but, rather, a grizzly collision with one of the film's numerous wheels. And although Antonio has threatened earlier to throw himself in the river out of despair at the possibility of losing his job, the words are all bluff and exaggeration, as we see at the bridge where he avoids all contact with the river, not even lifting a finger to save the drowning boy whom he fears is his son. Indeed, there is something egregious and profoundly ignoble in the way that

Antonio stands back from the crisis, merely sweating and making faces, while others nearby give what help they can. Then, satisfied that the victim is not Bruno, Antonio flees from the scene as the slippery flesh of the nearly drowned boy is placed in the dust.

Much of the meaning in *Bicycle Thieves* unfolds and builds like music in the space between Bruno's open face, as it is so often fixed on his father, and Antonio's closed face, a face shut down in defeat or illuminated with fantasy, but fixed, for all his self-absorption with loss and gain, on the world outside, an oblivious city that is being choked with the poster images of fake happiness, and with a peculiar serpentine stream of bicycles that constantly weaves through the streets and passageways. Bruno is always set to look at things with large deep watery eyes that give everything back. He reaches out to things while Antonio's narrow eyes seem always to take things into themselves, grasping, forever looking for things. The film shows how Antonio first loses his marvellous, fragile, human face, and how Bruno gives a variation of it back to him; how Antonio's face is slowly overtaken by the hard mechanical mask of Fascism, full of damaged pride and a desire for authority over others, and how it is finally reclaimed into a more resilient, softer humanity, through collapse and humility, through tears and his gradual transformation into a compulsive thief. *Bicycle Thieves* seems to show that a one-sided preoccupation with redressing loss only results in greater loss, and that loss itself is the greatest and most difficult truth to incorporate into living.

To understand the dangerous instability of Antonio's character we must consider the self-perpetuating cycle of his passivity and aggression. He is intimidated by officials of all kinds, typically leaving Maria to carry out most of the negotiations with officials and clerks; and he is subservient towards his new supervisor at the Poster Office, who, predictably, treats him with official disdain. Antonio hopes to succeed in his new position by adopting a good-natured servility which he mistakenly thinks will be appreciated by those in power. But this submissive foil also calls up in him an inflated complementary feeling of pride that leads to an intolerant aggressiveness; and so, Antonio tends to become more violent and desperate as his wishes are repeatedly thwarted. We have probably all noticed that Antonio is rather too delighted to be wearing a uniform and cap, and how odd it is that Maria accompanies him on his first visit to work and waits for him outside in the street, rather like a mother reassuring an insecure child on the first day of school. On their trip home from Antonio's place of



work Maria asks to stop briefly to visit a 'working woman.' Now that it is Antonio's turn to wait for Maria while she visits with Santona, we learn that he is prone to meddling and making officious pronouncements. First he intrudes an uninvited opinion with breezy authority concerning a game being disputed by some young children playing in the street. Next, his curiosity is aroused when a few women arrive and ask him if Santona, 'the one who sees,' lives in the house. Then, having waited only a few moments, Antonio abandons his bicycle to the care of children he does not know, and intrudes on Maria's privacy. As soon as he discovers that she is giving money to a seer, he hustles her out of the apartment, pushing her down the hall ignominiously while criticizing her for being a 'silly fool' and wasting money on 'superstition.' If Antonio does exhibit characteristics of Fascism during his steady decline in the film, it is worth noting that he is also the quintessential embodiment of the very qualities that Fascism most despises. Antonio appears to be threatened by Maria's visit to Santona, and he insists to Maria rather absurdly that *he* found the job, after all, and not Santona. It is a scene that provides another dimension to his catalogue of failings, in the form of a disturbing intolerance concerning the irrational, intuitive side of Maria's character, and it appears to stem from Antonio's self-deluding wounded pride and one-sidedness. It is as if Antonio were crying out to the Fates to turn his wheel, which in the meantime he has charged to the safety of an unknown group of children.

If we examine Antonio's job in the context of postwar Italy, a number of interesting themes immediately present themselves. On the surface, his employment appears to consist of a simple process whereby the traditional images of Italy are to be replaced by a cast of insurgent trolls, transported directly from the victor's stable in Hollywood. Looked at in simplified political terms, Antonio is employed in a national switch from the macho images of power and force of will, typical of Fascist Italy, to an intoxicating siren image of romantic allure, seduction, and submission, characteristic of democratic America. The poster with which Antonio begins his training is a still photograph of Rita Hayworth taken from the 1946 movie *Gilda*. It is a profound choice on the part of De Sica, for it combines everything that is cheap and trashy in Hollywood's depiction of erotic life, with intimations from classical mythology of the most beautiful and profound mysteries. In every respect it is an exquisite image for Antonio to be fumbling with as his bicycle is stolen by a young boy wearing a German cap. The con-

figuration of the coiled torso and head of Gilda broadly resembles such well-known images of transformation as Gianlorenzo Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne* and perhaps even the more famous *Venus de Milo*. And these similarities also serve to conflate modern and classical ideals of female beauty, in particular, the classical ideal of poetic balance between body and soul, a beautiful, tragic vision of life, and its echo in the modern ideal of beauty as depicted in *Gilda*, primarily sexual, and with a pronounced pornographic objective of arousing a strong desire for violent possession. Part of Gilda's strange allure is probably the result of Rita Hayworth's curiously androgynous, muscular frame and style of dancing, combined with her sultry 'tough-guy' talk and wild female energy of transformation; but her deeper attraction, in the light of her captivity by two immoral men who nevertheless expect an ideal purity from women, is almost certainly her defiant quest for freedom.

This new imported imagery is also indicative of the new way of living that has been brought into being by the demands of a changed political and economic reality. This includes a wider network of commercial advertisements intended to stimulate desire and discontent, and to ensure that happiness and fulfilment are always available on the next horizon. But these new images carry their own punishments, and like Antonio we may be most vulnerable to ruin when we are closest to success. For in this new world we are inclined to spend too much time in pursuit of an idealized future, a realm of possibility, an ugly world of excited appetites forever frustrated and denied their fulfilment. And in time we may become preoccupied with unattainable ends and lose all enjoyment of our daily means.

Antonio's bicycle is valuable to him only because it promises to replace his feelings of despair and futility with a sense of purpose and meaning; for Bruno, however, the bicycle is an occasion for a delightful intimacy with the physical world, and an end in itself. Antonio appears to suffer from a kind of nightmare displacement with respect to his pursuit of his bicycle, for it comes to mean more to him than the safety of his own son. The restaurant scene is a particularly good example of how a commercial world of appetite and consumption actually fosters unhappiness. In this scene Antonio treats Bruno to a special lunch in an attempt to buy back his son's friendship after Bruno, echoing his father's own way of speaking to people, had blamed his father for letting the old man escape from the church, and was slapped hard on the face by Antonio. While

Antonio's manipulative treat is by no means admirable in itself, it becomes, in the absence of an apology, plainly despicable when Antonio cynically tries to trick Bruno into drinking wine so that he may use this transgression later to blackmail Bruno into not telling Maria that Antonio had struck him on the face. Even as their meal is served, we see how Antonio's envy steals away his present pleasure as he becomes preoccupied with the splendid table occupied by a wealthy family across the room. Antonio's strong hands now become grotesquely genteel and tentative in this elevated setting, moving above his mozzarella like two polite spiders until he can stand it no longer and pushes his food away in habitual defeat and disappointment, preferring now to calculate his earnings that might-have-been only if. Antonio's inability to enjoy present pleasures is contrasted here with Bruno's great delight in his food. Like his father, Bruno is not sure how to eat his food in a fancy restaurant, and so he looks around to see how others are doing it; but he persists in his own charming way, as usual, genuinely connected to the things around him, as here in a comic tug-of-war with the elastic mozzarella, his pleasure as bright as ever. Antonio, however, interrupts Bruno and gives him the job of completing his calculations, bewildered as usual by his own responsibilities. True, Antonio has other problems in mind in addition to estimating his buying power, and we must pity the way that he loses the simple pleasure of eating the food that he cannot easily afford, paralysed, it would seem, by an imaginary world of inflated payslips and extravagant menus, and spiced by his feelings of shame and bitter disappointment over losing his bicycle. And then, with his income finally calculated by Bruno, Antonio becomes so dejected that he can only muster a short sour breath in hollow homage to a banal piece of commercial brainwashing, concluding his meal, without irony, by sighing, 'What more could you want?' But despite Antonio's persistent egotism, De Sica forces us to struggle between our divided views of Antonio; while we hope that he will find his bicycle without further suffering, on the other hand we also feel that he must come to his senses, wake up and accept the injustice of the world, and value his present life despite everything.

It appears to be the self-divided, two-piece sectional poster of Rita Hayworth, then, that creates the setting for the catastrophic rupture in Antonio's life. As I have already suggested, these posters were deliberately designed to bully the public into a state of continuous desire by

exciting *envy*, as the root meaning suggests, through 'vision' and 'the eye.' The poster image of Hayworth appears to offer and withdraw, simultaneously, the possibility of physical touch. Her right arm is raised above her head with the hand folded out of view behind her back, while her left arm is shaped in a v with her hand in view. The image discourages the mutuality of touch while exciting the detached examination of the roving eye is to be preferred. Hayworth was of course a notorious screen siren; even her last name presses this erotic point, joining the playful connotations of fertility and freedom implicit in 'hay' with a more dubious rate of exchange suggested by the notion of 'worth.' Playing the role of Gilda, Hayworth's erotic power seems to combine brilliantly the suggestion of dynamic opposites – 'gild,' from Old English *gyldan*, and 'geld,' from Old Norse *gilda* – thus giving the poster an additional circle of sexual turbulence, while forming a partnership with the underworld power of the bicycle thieves, who in turn make use of her agency of fascination in order to cover their crime of theft. But it is later in the film, during Antonio's humiliating pursuit of the old man, that another mythological aspect of the poster is revealed. The old man carries two cans labelled 'Circe.' These two cans, which originally contained the temptation of red fruits, now release into the heat of the film a faint scent that leads us to consider the poster image of Gilda as an incarnation of the mythological figure of Circe. The cans also connect us again to the sea by way of Maria and her two pails of water, and also to Ulysses' famous comrades of decline, again by way of the sea and Antonio's naval-looking hat that needs to have the band tightened and sewn (in order to restrain his tendency to inflation?). The negative aspects of the poster image of Gilda appear to oversee the theft of Antonio's bicycle, and more importantly, the broader formula of theft that relies on 'envy,' the insatiable human characteristic, aroused here by the qualities of a

Homeric 'witch' able to transform men into sacrificial swine: a mythic picture of the transition from human to porcine sacrifices during the Hellenic period. Circe's isle of Aeaea was a funerary shrine. Its name meant 'Wailing.' Circe herself was the death-bird *Kirkos*, falcon. From the same root came the Latin *circus*, originally an enclosure for funerary games.

As the circle, or *cirque*, Circe was identical with Omphale of Lydia with her cosmic spinning wheel: a fate-spinner, weaver of the destinies of men. Homer called her Circe of the Braided Tresses, hinting that, like Oriental

goddesses, she manipulated forces of creation and destruction by the knots and braids in her hair. She ruled all the stars that determined men's fates. Pliny said Circe was a goddess who 'commanded all the lights of heaven.' (Walker, 168-9)

The poster image of Gilda is a still photograph taken from the fabulous sequence near the end of the film in which Gilda dresses herself in the darkness of her past and then invites the audience to step down into a sty of its own lust and help her to take the dark clothes off. In this strange Bacchanalian rite Gilda deliberately transforms herself until she becomes identical with her lover's jealous distortions of her real character, and in a startling paradox he becomes ashamed of *himself*. The dance begins as a deliberate sacrificial offering to the erotic appetites of the male audience in the gambling club, but it precipitates a sudden awareness of mutual 'guilt' that harmonizes with the music of the film's title, *Gilda*, and calls up in the hearts of the two men who are both in love with her a mock-profound sense of decency and forgiveness. This violent force of transformation and subsequent liberation is made possible by a kind of public confession or acting out by Gilda of her *guilt*, and it foreshadows Antonio's own enactment of guilt, that I consider to be so important for a proper understanding of the dark inner music and obsessional structure of *Bicycle Thieves*.

One wonders, incidentally, whether many Italians were aware in 1946 of the grizzly humour that was expressed in painting Hollywood 'bombshells,' such as Rita Hayworth, on the noses of Allied bombers during World War II, invoking among ghouls and swine the morbid hilarity of an obscene pun.

During the training session in which Antonio learns how to mount the *Gilda* posters correctly, his instructor kicks out of the way a couple of children who are making music and begging for money in the streets. Before they disappear it may strike us that their childish music and distractions were an important kind of warning, intended to wake the men and distract them from their ignoble work. These children recall the odd file of children at the beginning of the movie, marching behind a Pied Piper figure who is carrying a shepherd's crook and leading them breezily up a stone face in the opposite direction to Maria and Antonio, with their pails of water.

As Antonio awkwardly assembles the two sections of the Hayworth poster, her image seems to decay and then coalesce by turns, like an

apparition, or ripples moving across the surface of a pool. This moment is like an invocation of morbid enchantment, and Antonio's watery brushwork seems, by way of a mysterious magic, to release or in some way give birth to an evil double of himself, taking the form of a young thief with a baby face and a German cap. Gilda's face becomes grotesquely wrinkled by the water and glue intended to fix it before the public eye, and while Antonio blindly continues to pat over the gargoyle face, straining to remove the action of too much water, the band of thieves weaves around him, working elegantly and in close concert, and then suddenly the boy steals Antonio's bicycle. Each thief plays a small part in a larger program of transformation which includes disassembling the stolen bicycles and combining the alien parts into new configurations. This procedure of reversing the bicycles' history of production echoes the theme of inversion that is central to the movie, and the mixing together of disparate parts also suggests a number of mythological cycles, including Circe and Orpheus. Working together in this pseudo-industrial style the bicycle thieves act less like criminals and more like members of a community of like-minded industrial workers. In any case it is made quite clear that the community of thieves sticks together and exhibits greater loyalty than the better-off communities that we observed earlier during the boisterous competition for work.

The theft of Antonio's bicycle creates a sudden dizzying loss of purpose. As he makes his way home after his disastrous initiation into the world of work, Antonio immediately begins to transgress minor social norms; for example, he jumps a bus queue. This rather insignificant example of Antonio's repeated incivility and selfishness is nevertheless a sign of his own overriding sense of special status and his disregard for other people who quite clearly have their own struggles to bear. But like many other social exchanges that occur during Antonio's long pursuit of the boy thief, De Sica uses this moment to test Antonio's reactions under strain. When Antonio finally meets up with Bruno, he lies once again, saying that the bicycle is broken. But this evasion is nothing compared to the irresponsible way he then pushes Bruno into their apartment and flees from Maria before she has had time to ask him what has happened. Instead of sitting down with his family and talking things over, Antonio seeks help from Biacco, an old friend who is found rehearsing a comic theatre piece for the music hall, in noisy competition with a fevered political meeting warming up in the same area: 'play' and 'work' entwined in conflict once again. By

this point Antonio is already in deep despair, and his grip on himself is beginning to soften like a slow tire leak. He is losing his faint contact with the world around him, most dangerously so with Bruno. It is quite probable that Maria would have been able to solve the problem of replacing the stolen bicycle if Antonio had confided in her, and she would surely have rejected the insane risk and futility of pursuing professional thieves. There are numerous reasons why Antonio prefers to seek the help of his male friends, however ridiculous or ineffective they may be, for it appears that when Antonio lost his bicycle, he also lost face, lost his pride, his place in the world and his family, and we never see Maria again.

During Antonio's long pursuit of the thief we are exposed to a larger community shaped by social injustice, poverty, and crime. The chase scene takes us through a curious church from which the religious images have been removed to a storage room, and, apparently turning over a new social leaf, has become a barbershop and soup kitchen, a layover for the poor, seeming to care more for the brass tacks of this world than the more traditional spiritual preoccupations with the world to come. Indeed, it appears that this particular church has turned itself into a place where wealthy patrons and privileged providers may prance in the company of suffering and sorrows which they themselves may be partly responsible for, directly or indirectly, because of their social positions, wealth, and power. The activities in the church seem to call out for comparison with Santona's parlour where her patrons are depicted as if in church, surrounded by religious images, ritual, and pronouncements. Santona lives at Via Paglia, near the boy thief, and despite the associations that can be derived from the root meaning of *paglia*, 'straw' things, or false things, Santona nevertheless manages to minister to the spiritual needs of her patrons, nicely complementing the sexual imagery provided earlier by Hay(worth). She dispenses advice on the basis of what is self-evident, often in the form of undiluted insult, as in the case of the young man whose female partner wishes to leave him. Santona tells him 'you are ugly,' and explains that he should 'sow his seed in another field.' She speaks metaphorically but nobody ever seems to understand her agricultural imagery. And yet, in defiance of our likely prejudice in the matter of her credibility, Santona, whose name is a kind of musical sonata, seems to get things right, and her advice, though simple and cynical, may well be worth the currency of the day.

The next community that we observe is a group of prostitutes taking their breakfast. After a chase around the brothel, which briefly involves Bruno, Antonio pursues the boy thief to his sordid dwelling. It is here, in this new community, that any privileged ideals concerning the clear separation between good and evil, and the causes of each, must take due consideration of the self-evident cycle of poverty and crime. In the sublimely inspired climax to the street fight between Antonio and the boy thief, De Sica illuminates this cyclical pattern by brilliantly showing how the boy who 'snatched' Antonio's bicycle is now suddenly 'seized' again by his own birthright, his epilepsy (Greek *epilepsia* from *epilambanein* 'to seize'), in a pathetic and fatalistic echo of the root meaning of the name for the disease and the unforgiving net of his social circumstances. In an unexpected conclusion to this terrible scene, and providing an elegant variation on the theme of pails and water, the dusty, humiliating violence of the aptly named Via Panico is snuffed by yet another pail of water, this one tossed at Antonio by an evil clown in a high window, just to 'cool him off.'

The poetry in *Bicycle Thieves* is simply enchanting, and the cinematic technique is profoundly artful. I had read about neorealism and discussed with colleagues the many theories that have grown up around this film and others from the same period; now I wonder if early neorealism was, just as Bazin suggested (Bazin, 47–60), more than anything else, simply an aesthetic and moral rationalization of Italy's grotesque wartime aggrandizement through the spectacle of Fascist ideology, dressed up in a dogma that was absurdly distorted by masculine pre-occupations with will and power, with symmetry and force, with technology, and above all, with order and certainty. The whole problem with Fascism, as Jacob Bronowski has argued so movingly, was the arrogance and inhumanity of its dogma. The tragic paradox in this political and cultural philosophy was that the Fascists were absolutely certain about extremely complex human matters at exactly the same time that the most brilliant scientists of the day were saying what art has always known, that knowledge is cumulative, stroke on stroke, and is never complete:

We are aware that ... pictures do not so much fix the face as explore it; that the artist is tracing the detail almost as if by touch; and that each line that is added strengthens the picture but never makes it final. We accept that as the method of the artist.



But what physics has now done is to show that that is the only method to knowledge. There is no absolute knowledge. And those who claim it, whether they are scientists or dogmatists, open the door to tragedy. All information is imperfect. We have to treat it with humility. That is the human condition; and that is what quantum physics says. I mean that literally. (Bronowski, 353)

Our concepts of reality must be tempered and conditional, since in Bronowski's view 'human knowledge is personal and responsible, an unending adventure at the edge of uncertainty' (Bronowski, 367). The philosopher of science Karl R. Popper argued this same view throughout his career, insisting again and again that objective facts do not exist and that '*all* our knowledge grows *only* through the correcting of our mistakes' (Popper, ix). If these views are correct, then the growth and safety of civilization will depend on humility and the ability to acknowledge error.

The directness and special poignancy of neorealism unfold from the convolutions of a delightful paradox. When the neorealist method succeeds best, it is a style that reveals the plainest truths, as well as the deepest mysteries of reality and experience, *as if* unadorned and untransmuted by mind. But unstructured, shapeless films such as these, if they exist at all, would be comparatively meaningless in themselves. It may be an inevitable, though perhaps inadvertent, achievement of the neorealist film-making that it teaches us that reality, and nothing but reality, as the phrase goes, is just not enough. These passing simplifications may shelter some broader implications for certain aspects of traditional neorealist theory.

One of the most systematic and deeply affecting cinematic techniques used in *Bicycle Thieves* is the relentless pursuit of Antonio by the camera's persistent eye, a chase that mirrors Antonio's own search for his bicycle. Antonio's gradual accumulation of humiliation becomes almost unbearable even before his final metamorphosis into the thief that he has been chasing all along. The camera never seems to hesitate to show us all of Antonio's human frailty and pain, and this method of exposure amounts to a form of artistic persecution in itself. Antonio's search for his lost bicycle seems to point to some kind of truth about our destructive habit of trying to put everything right, an insistence on order and justice that can become a form of self-righteous madness. This frantic search for a stolen bicycle also parallels the director's

implicit search for truth, and his choice of neorealism as the method to achieve this objective. In De Sica's own definition of neorealism, he concedes truth to the art of poetry, mystery, and uncertainty:

Most films today are made in a realistic style, but they are actually opposed to neorealism, to that revolution in cinematic language which we started and which they think to follow. Because neorealism is not shooting films in authentic locales; it is not reality. It is reality filtered through poetry, reality transfigured. It is not Zola, not naturalism, verism, things which are ugly.

(De Sica, 31 above)

So let us continue to delight in the poetry, in the infinitely pleasing details of *Bicycle Thieves*, such as the clown-figure, Biacco, who collects garbage and directs music-hall sketches, whose very name seems to enfold the ghost of a *bicicletta*, and who tells us a kind of secret to ponder, that the stolen bicycle is probably at Piazza Vittorio. And the lovely way that Santona's address at Via Paglia connects her to Rita Hayworth and the poster from *Gilda*. But the crowning image of poetry and transfiguration in the film must surely be the way that the movie poster becomes a kind of hub that harmonizes the two wheels of the film camera (or projector), connected as they are by a clicking ladder of film, with the two clicking wheels of Antonio's bicycle, connected as they too are by the film-frames of his ladder.

And for all its deceptive simplicity, *Bicycle Thieves* keeps asking a rather daunting question: what exactly is Antonio really looking for? Signora Santona has an answer, and it is a pretty one: 'I can only tell you what I can see ... Listen ... either you will find it immediately or you will never find it.'

The Wheel humbles itself  
To be exalted ...

CHESTERTON

Antonio finally accepts that his bicycle is truly lost forever only after he has caught up with the boy thief. But even this realization does not free him from his obsessive mission. The finale of the film opens with Antonio in a state of intense anxiety and closes with tremendous physical violence. He stands at a crossroad bewildered by a dilemma. Before him is a soccer stadium from which a succession of collective

cheers forms a monstrous swell of exuberant barbarous sound, like a sea of approbation smoking above a vanquished enemy. Antonio then switches his nervous gaze from the stadium to a mass of bicycles parked nearby in a long serpentine band. Then he looks across the street and we see, in effect, a mysterious double of Ricci himself, in the form of a solitary bicycle leaning against a wall. The atmosphere of this sequence darkens as a strange new tension is created by the contrast between the ecstasy of the noisy fans, separated from their bicycles, and Antonio's avid gaze. The setting of the soccer game may seem at first to be entirely alien to the rest of the film, but it actually provides a kind of musical field of reference in which two important metamorphoses take place. First, the wavelike cheering of the soccer fans suddenly modulates from an ugly inhuman sound, while the game is in play, into the final, sublimely beautiful sound at the end of the film, immediately before the music of the closing credits, as the soccer fans make their way home on foot: the sound of individual voices rising and falling within a large frame of street sounds, no longer the collective noise of uniformity, but a liberated sound of lovely, crackling, *delicate*, individual voices, full of life and beauty, and mounting like a musical vapour, gently fading up in the dusty evening light. The second transformation takes the restrictions that the game of soccer imposes on the players' use of their hands, and answers these with the closing image of the film: Antonio and Bruno walking hand in hand, dissolving into darkness.

When a file of racing bicycles speeds past Antonio, sounding like the clicking rattle of a serpent, he makes up his mind to steal the solitary bicycle; a crime like most crimes, stemming from a prior injustice. Antonio instructs Bruno, 'his conscience,' to go home, and unaware that Bruno has missed the bus, Antonio walks into a lonely de Chirico-like space and seems to turn into a cold distant shadow. It is here that one may feel drawn almost irresistibly into full sympathy with Antonio's fall, like Narcissus, into an image of himself, for:

one *almost* participates in the crime, and the trivial details become obsessively important. It has besides a secondary impact, by which, as one feels it, one discovers that one has been permanently involved in the nature of the crime: one has somehow contributed to the clarification of the true residual nature of crime in general through having contributed to the enactment of this crime in particular. It is the feeling of this impact that leads us to say our

powers of attention have been exhausted. But there is a third and gradual impact, which comes not only at the end but almost from the beginning to the end, creating in us new and inexhaustible powers of attention. This is the impact of what Dostoevski meant by punishment. The three impacts are united by the art of the novelist, and they are felt simultaneously. It is only that we are not aware at the time of the triple significance, and must, when it does transpire, rebuild it analytically. Thus we may come to estimate what it is that we know, what it is that has been clarified in the history of Raskolnikov which we had known all along in ourselves without being aware of it: we estimate our own guilt. (Blackmur, 311)

Now, having come to the end of his chase, Antonio rides a stolen bicycle away from Bruno and into the centre of the film's final circle of catastrophe. He is chased by a number of soccer fans and soon brought to ground while Bruno watches helplessly from a distance. A trolley bus passes close by, briefly interrupting the men in their wild attack on Antonio. They push him forward, striking him and casting mockery and scorn on him like mad foam through their bared teeth. In this pandemonium Bruno calls out to his father, 'Papa,' 'Papa,' but the wrathful chorus of men hears no distraction and continues to drown Antonio in a wicked wreath of insult: 'thief,' 'swine,' 'criminal,' 'bastard,' 'faceless scoundrel,' 'bugger,' and 'crook.' Terrified and sobbing, Bruno reaches up into the mob in an attempt to catch hold of his father, as if to keep Antonio from sinking forever under the weight of their balling fury. Once again, it is the contrapuntal music that sounds between Antonio's stone-still face, now showing immense new dignity as he is whipped by the tongue of the mob, and Bruno's boiling face, as he mops his bewildered eyes with a circling rag and cries out to his father, that is so deeply affecting and profound. Antonio faces the shattering violence of the mob with a terrible stillness, a heroic defiance that recalls the general composition and sublime dignity that rests on the face of Christ as depicted in the later version of Titian's *Christ Crowned with Thorns* (Munich). During this transfiguration it is as if Antonio's progressive decline into authoritarian, fascist behaviour, finally *turns*, and begins to redeem itself as a faint echo of Bruno's face as we first saw him at the centre of the bicycle wheel. The meaning of Bruno's face, next to the wheel, and surrounded by darkness, is now more clear: for together, the face and the wheel suggest how human frailty and failing may be integrated and transmuted into a transcendent new form of resilient wholeness, like the delicate radiance of slen-

der individual spokes bound to a central hub, which, after all, is the exact opposite of the reiterative image suggested by the root meaning of *Fascism*, Latin *fusces* 'authoritative rods tied together by a band or cord.'

The owner of the bicycle slaps Antonio's face hard, jarring him into a new kind of wakefulness, and then De Sica sets Antonio free. The owner looks down into Bruno's face, and then up at Antonio; he sees the child's fear and the violence of his confusion, and then sees everything that passes between father and son; he answers the tears on Bruno's face with an act of forgiveness that is one of the finest moments in all of cinema.

Antonio then walks slowly into a large meandering crowd, and it is strange and wonderful how the people all around him are so alive to themselves and yet completely oblivious to him. This sense of anonymity and the strange consolation in the distracted eye of the world, together with the excruciating shame that is choking Antonio, draw us to the centre of his isolation just as we realize he is about to leave us.

The closing sequence sweeps us along with the shadows of Antonio and Bruno as they slowly disappear into the dark texture of the film, creating the impression that they are coursing down into a funnel of spiralling sound, helplessly. The appearance of the city is now softened by a sudden switch to a shallow camera focus that establishes balance and harmony across the frame. This change in photographic method replaces the technique used earlier in the film, predominantly one of deep focus which created a de Chirico landscape in which people were isolated and dominated by the authority of urban structures filled with a stillness and emptiness, resulting from this technique's absolute separation of light and shadow. As Bruno hands his father's hat back to him in a humble gesture of respect, the movement of Bruno's hand seems to call back magically the transcendent sound of the film's opening phantom tutti; and as the music sweeps off the tips of Bruno's fingers, we notice that this new variation has shed the melancholy of its previous descending pattern. It sounds like a mysterious herald now, singing like foam upon a seashore, salted with a luminous shower of crackling human voices as it falls back into the face of darkness.

Each stop during Antonio's pursuit of the thief has felt like a station of the cross. The last sequences in the film release Antonio from his spinning field of obsession, through shame and suffering.

And now a blessed fairy tale begins. A bus bleats mechanically over

a ravelling crowd, then bumps Antonio's senseless shoulder. Slowly now, Antonio and Bruno are being absorbed by a strolling mass, soccer fans that hold together, in the poetry of play, the turning wheels of triumph and defeat. We feel the camera's persistent pursuit, as if it were still obsessed with an insatiable envy of reality itself. But suddenly the camera halts, falls behind, and begins to *listen*, as Antonio and Bruno slowly disappear into the soft, gently flowing stream of passers-by; and as the screen begins to turn pale and then darkens, we may imagine the force of faith on the face of a child; we may try to breathe over our own bursting tears, as Bruno takes his father's hand and then stumbles; and as the hard face breaks, we may feel dizzy to witness the most exalted human act, holy above all others: the way that we fall, as we reach up; the way that we touch, as we fill with shame; and the way that we love, face to face, held tight as now, by the new-found frame of their hands.

When Bruno sees himself reflected back in his father's tears, and feels the strength of his father's trust; when he takes hold of his father and stumbles, the camera too is now confident in belief and lets them dissolve, like all sound, forever echoing a return to silence. Antonio's high-held head floats first above the crowd, then sinks slowly into its softly flowing folds as the city comes up in gentle focus, balancing the landscape and its people.

And now *we* reach into darkness. We can almost touch the two figures before they disappear. We see into the shadowing gloom with their own watery eyes, and as this miracle of transfiguration enfolds us in its special creed of enchantment, we hear and see now that the clicking swarms of bicycles have all but vanished.

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