

## XII.—Petronius the Moralist

GILBERT HIGHET

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

This paper argues that the themes and the moral intention of Petronius are those of a true satirist, working within the tradition of earlier and contemporary satire, and criticizing the world from the point of view of Epicurean morality. His purpose in writing the *Satirica* is shown to be identical with that which governed the most famous and characteristic actions of his life.

Petronius is usually thought to be the wickedest of ancient authors. The Milesian tales and the shameful books of Elephantis have, fortunately, perished; Martial and Strato are dirty rather than evil; and Apuleius' hero leaves his bestial life behind, to end as Isis' bedesman in the odour of sanctity. But the *Satirica*<sup>1</sup> have always been the abomination of moralists and the admiration of the carnally-minded. Many a historian has condemned them as vicious, or wondered at their Dionysian freedom from moral standards.<sup>2</sup> For Sienkiewicz, Petronius typified the Cyrenaic aristocracy of the decaying pagan world. For Nietzsche, he was "one of the few really healthy men." He is a difficult man to estimate; but he is not considered a moralist.

Then again, it is not clear what form his book really had. Heinze<sup>3</sup> proposed that it was a parody of Greek love-romance; and Klebs<sup>4</sup> that it was a parody of an epic of wandering like the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*. These explanations may well be partially true, but they are inadequate: for a parody on the scale of the *Satirica* would be intolerably tedious, and there are numerous large episodes in it which cannot be interpreted as parodies or part of a parodic scheme. At most, it may have had a mock-heroic skeleton and occasional mock-heroic incidents, like *Tom Jones*; but it was evidently something much bigger than parody. Bürger<sup>5</sup> suggested

<sup>1</sup> The title in the best MSS is *Satiricon* or the like—evidently the genitive plural of the Graeco-Latin word *Satirica* or *Satyrice* (a hybrid like the heroes themselves). It is surely impossible to treat this as a neuter singular, and to speak of "the *Satiricōn*."

<sup>2</sup> "It would be as ridiculous to apply moral standards to this (Petronius' sexual) impulse as to a storm or a cyclone" (Kiefer, *Sexual Life in Ancient Rome* [London, 1935] 249).

<sup>3</sup> *H* 34 (1899) 494–519.

<sup>4</sup> *Ph* 47 (1889) 623–635.

<sup>5</sup> *H* 27 (1892) 345–358.

that it was one of the Milesian tales at which the Parthian general Surena pretended to be so shocked; and Perry<sup>6</sup> that it was a comic or picaresque romance like the Lucianic *Onos*. But who ever heard of Milesian tales or comic romances full of literary criticism and serious heroic poetry?<sup>7</sup> Rohde,<sup>8</sup> Lommatzsch,<sup>9</sup> Collignon,<sup>10</sup> and others held that this strange mixture of prose and verse, narrative and disquisition, had at least the form appropriate to a Menippean satire. But it cannot be a satire, if Petronius is not a moralist.

Conversely, if Petronius *is* a moralist, his work is a satire. It is not always recognised that in ancient literature the genres were very rigidly defined, and that within each genre the style, the type of subject, the models to be imitated, even the vocabulary were prescribed by tradition. The genre which an author chose depended on his intention. *A priori*, it is excessively improbable that Petronius invented a brand-new genre or created a perfectly unique blend out of two or three existing types. What he really did cannot be estimated until we recover much more of his work. But there are enough fragments to allow us to define his intention in writing the book. If their purpose can be shown to be identical with that of other satirists, then we may define the *Satirica* as satire. It is his reputation for wickedness which has made so many readers reluctant to admit that the book really is a satire.<sup>11</sup>

## I

The purpose of satire, as conceived by the Romans, was to correct or chastise social, aesthetic, and moral anomalies by ridicule and reproof. (Those satirists who discuss their function seldom say it includes aesthetic criticism, but they acknowledge it in practice: cf. Horace *Satires* 1.4 and 1.10, Persius *Satires* 1.) This being so, how far is Petronius a true satirist?

<sup>6</sup> *CPh* 20 (1925) 31-49.

<sup>7</sup> Kroll, *Studien zum Verständnis der römischen Literatur* 224, says that it is based on a very old form of narrative which varied between prose and verse; he is following Immisch, *NJA* 47 (1921) 409-421. Yet most of the verse in our fragments is not narrative but parodic or critical.

<sup>8</sup> *Der Griechische Roman*<sup>2</sup> 267.

<sup>9</sup> Bursian, *JAW* 139 (1909) 219ff.

<sup>10</sup> *Etude sur Pétrone* 20.

<sup>11</sup> "Die Mischung von Poesie und Prosa . . . erinnert uns an die menippische Satire Varros, auf die noch andere Züge hinweisen. Nur von *moralischer Tendenz*, die das oberste Ziel der menippischen Satire ist, kann keine Rede sein," says Mr. Hosius, and goes on, following Rosenblüth, to compare it to the mimes (Schanz-Hosius, *Gesch. d. röm. Lit.* § 395). "La morale ou plutôt l'immoralité de Pétrone," says Collignon 61.

That part of his book which is extant is largely concerned with *social criticism*. The dinner of Trimalchio is a monumental exposé of the revolting and ludicrous aspects of bad manners. It is a development of Horace's satire on the parvenu host (*Satires* 2.8),<sup>12</sup> which treats vulgarity as "a monster of such hideous mien, as, to be hated, needs but to be seen." The narrator scarcely ever says that Trimalchio behaved atrociously, and only now and then mentions his own disgust. But everything that Trimalchio does is meant to be wrong, and to horrify people of taste. Some of the grossest blunders in history and criticism have been made by simple souls who believed that Trimalchio was a typical well-to-do Roman at home. In Becker's *Gallus*, for example, the entire banquet-scene is modelled on Trimalchio's, even to the boar gutted at table, and gushing forth strings of sausage-intestines: which is as if some future antiquarian were to base his description of upper-class American home-life upon the habits of Diamond Jim Brady.<sup>13</sup> Mr. Jérôme Carcopino's recent book (translated under the title *Daily Life in Ancient Rome*) often cites the glaring vulgarities of Trimalchio as instances of typical, though possibly excessive, Roman luxury.<sup>14</sup> Such are the dangers incurred by the author who satirizes through direct description, without drawing the moral and underlining the lesson at the end of every paragraph. From Trimalchio's first appearance, playing handball with a constant supply of fresh

<sup>12</sup> This is amply proved by Révay in his excellent paper, "Horaz und Petron," *CPh* 17 (1922) 202-212, and Shero in "The Cena in Roman Literature," *CPh* 18 (1923) 134ff. Kroll's hasty and wholly arbitrary remark in *RE s.v.* "Petronius" 1204 that Trimalchio's dinner is, "trotz Shero, nicht von Horaz' cenae beeinflusst," carries no conviction and is demonstrably false.

<sup>13</sup> Brady was accustomed to start dinner with three dozen oysters and a quart of orange-juice; he gave his mistress a gold-plated bicycle whose wheels were adorned with diamonds and rubies; he himself had a dozen or so bicycles with gold-plated frames and silver-plated spokes, and a different set of gigantic jewelled studs, tie-pin, cuff-links, etc., for every day in the month. See Parker Morell, *Diamond Jim* (New York, 1934).

<sup>14</sup> The most typical pages are 34, 68, 69, and 272 of the English translation (by E. O. Lorimer, ed. H. T. Rowell, New Haven, 1940). On p. 147, Mr. Carcopino says (apparently referring to the time of Trajan!) "Petronius' romance . . . represents Trimalchio as 'a highly fashionable person' (*lautissimus homo*)"—a distorted allusion to the *slave's* remark in 26.9. On p. 69 he says: "One gathers that there were at least four hundred of Trimalchio's slaves"—although one day's gazette of Trimalchio's estate recorded the birth of seventy slave-children (53.2). The same savant informs us (p. 271) that belching at table was good manners in Rome. He supports this remarkable assertion by quoting Cic. *Fam.* 9.22.5, Juv. 3.107, and Plin. *Paneg.* 49, which prove the exact opposite.

balls, and treating the masseurs to champagne,<sup>15</sup> to his final display of bad taste, reading his own will to his guests and staging his own funeral at a dinner party, everything he does is not simply eccentric or extravagant, but wildly and appallingly wrong. Even the few details whose wrongness we cannot quite see (such as the colours of the costumes, 27.1, 28.8, etc.) are, we may be perfectly sure, wrong too.<sup>16</sup> Petronius describes wrong conduct without comment, assuming that his readers will apprehend it, laugh at it, and despise it. The care and detail with which he does so implies that he and his readers possessed very elaborate standards of conversation and behaviour, and that Trimalchio is being devastatingly criticized for transgressing or ignoring them.<sup>17</sup> Criticism of this sort is unquestionably satire. It is none the less satire because Petronius leaves his readers to draw their own conclusions.<sup>18</sup>

There is one passage of social criticism where the moral is actually drawn. Our fragments begin with a very sensible attack on the excesses of contemporary rhetorical education, which says all that Seneca senior had said, and all that Tacitus was to say, but with more force and wit than either. This tirade (1-5) is spoken partly by the disreputable narrator Encolpius, and partly by Agamemnon, a ridiculous old pedant. Similarly, one of the most pointed sermons in Horace (*Satires* 2.7) is delivered by his slave, much to the poet's discomfort and exasperation, and another (*Satires* 2.3) is repeated by an ardent but silly convert to Stoicism. Plato chose to relate the ecstatic speeches of *The Symposium* through Socrates' most eccentric pupil, the "crazy" Apollodorus. It is scarcely possible to doubt that the speeches of Agamemnon and Encolpius have a serious protreptic purpose. Petronius gives

<sup>15</sup> Petronius (28.3) says: tres interim iatraliptae in conspectu eius Falernum potabant, et cum plurimum rixantes effunderent, Trimalchio hoc suum propinasse dicebat. Mr. Carcopino (262) interprets this as "three masseurs . . . quarrelling for the honour of grooming him," (s'étant disputé l'honneur de son pansage).

<sup>16</sup> One point not noticed by Révay is the quarrel at table (*Sat.* 57-8). Such quarrels are merely comical in Horace (*Sat.* 1.5.51-70) and detestable in Juvenal 5.26-29. Petronius expands his quarrel to enormous length, with long and ridiculous streams of abuse from the freedman, met with contemptuous silence and laughter from the *scholastici*.

<sup>17</sup> "Petron in der Figur des Trimalchio die moralische Tendenz der Diatribe zur Geltung gebracht hat," says Révay (*CPh* 17 [1922] 206).

<sup>18</sup> Occasional remarks like *putidissimam eius iactationem* (73.2), the laughter of the narrator and his friends, and the ultimate flight of the three *tam plane quam ex incendio* (78.8, cf. Hor. *Sat.* 2.8.93f.) are enough to make the satiric purpose of the episode clear, without interfering with the general technique, which is narrative and descriptive rather than openly critical.

them to funny characters because satire is *σπουδογέλοιον*, and its essence is *ridentem dicere uerum*, "telling the truth in a joke." Here also, then, Petronius is writing satire; and he even alludes to the traditional founder of the genus by inserting what Agamemnon calls a *shedium Lucilianae humilitatis* (4.5).<sup>19</sup>

Education, however, takes up less space in the book than *aesthetics*. Few authors in the whole history of literature have used language as sensitively as Petronius. The subtle and Joycean accuracy with which he recorded the speech of everyday life is all the more amazing in the Graeco-Roman world, where literature usually strove to be aristocratic, and dignified, and (particularly in his era) loftier than reality. The same clever mind which remembered and reproduced the vulgarians' *fericulus* and *exopinissent* and *burdubasta*, and which could exactly imitate the sentence-structure of the Greekling and the Levantine,<sup>20</sup> was offended by the bad taste of the young poets of the day, and undertook to correct them. In the very same period, Persius (*Satires* 1.93f.) was using parody to criticise the silky and affected epics of his contemporaries, and Seneca was parodying himself in the *Apocolocyntosis*. Petronius, working on a bigger scale, went further, and offered a deliberate challenge to contemporary epic poets. It is not a parody, but a serious demonstration of the way to produce good poetry within the limits of the epic genre. Many of the criticisms in the prefatory speech are quite general (as Collignon has shown) but the subject of the poem and the special emphasis laid on the introduction of the gods into historical epic are both aimed at Lucan, the wonder boy of Nero's court.<sup>21</sup> I will not say that all Petronius' talent

<sup>19</sup> On the phrase and the poem, see Collignon, *Etude sur Pétrone* 228f.

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, M. Hadas, "Oriental Elements in Petronius," *AJPh* 50 (1929) 378-385; A. Marbach, *Wortbildung, Wortwahl, und Wortbedeutung als Mittel der Charakterzeichnung bei Petron* (Giessen, 1931); and A. Saloni, *Die Griechen und das Griechische in Petrons Cena Trimalchionis* (Helsinki, 1927).

<sup>21</sup> See Collignon, *Etude sur Pétrone* 149f. *Ecce belli civilis ingens opus quisquis attigerit, nisi plenus litteris, sub onere labetur. non enim res gestae uersibus comprehendendae sunt, quod longe melius historici faciunt, sed per ambages deorumque ministeria et fabulosum sententiarum tormentum praecipitandus est liber spiritus: so says Eumolpus (118.6f.); and even nisi plenus litteris may well be a criticism of the hurried and often superficial poetry of Lucan, who thought he had rivalled the rich and thoughtful plenty of Vergil. Even that short speech by Eumolpus contains two phrases of incomparable taste and elegance: he calls Vergil *Romanus Vergilius* (which Tennyson borrowed for the first words of his commemorative ode) and he speaks of Horace's *curiosa felicitas*—a paradox which we might apply to Petronius himself. Oddly enough, the witch's boast in *Sat.* 134.12 looks like rivalry or parody of Lucan's famous description of Thessalian witchcraft in *Bell. Ciu.* 6.461f.*

went into writing the poem, or that it is wholly successful; but it is serious and competent—although once again it is put into the mouth of a ridiculous character. It is declaimed by Eumolpus, who had previously been stoned for his bad verses (90.1). To attack false taste, and to produce either a parody of it, or work of a quality calculated to correct it, is the mark of a serious critic. To do so through Eumolpus is to be a satirist.<sup>22</sup>

Manners, education, aesthetics: in these three fields Petronius has a serious intention to correct or to chastise, although there is always something comic about the way he does it. But, in addition, there is at least one *moral* theme which he handles in the tradition of satire.

Towards the end of the extant fragments, Encolpius and his companions are staying in Croton, which, they are told (116.6), has only one interest. It is a Magic Mountain full of legacy-hunters and rich "prospects": *aut captantur aut captant . . . tamquam in pestilentia campos, in quibus nihil aliud est nisi cadauera quae lacerantur, aut corui qui lacerant*. The abject morality of the legacy-hunters is demonstrated by two incidents. Eumolpus poses as an heirless millionaire, and a woman legacy-hunter attempts to extract an inheritance from him by handing over her pretty daughter and her son to his guardianship. She knows perfectly well what will happen to them, for when she was young she had exchanged her own youth and beauty for legacies: *multas saepe hereditates officio aetatis extorserat* (140). Eumolpus treats the girl in a particularly disgusting and slavish way, although his acts are described as if they were uproariously funny, *ingenti risu*.

And then Eumolpus induces a group of resident legacy-sharks to believe he is leaving them all his vast wealth. But the inheritance has one condition: they must cut up and publicly eat the body of the deceased.<sup>23</sup> If we could only recover a fragment telling us how they solved this problem, and how Eumolpus' party escaped! As it is, the legatees are left in the agonizing but ludicrous dilemma,

<sup>22</sup> Note that Eumolpus introduces himself with a tirade (83–4) on the enmity of the rich towards culture, and an argument (88) on the decadence of art caused by wealth: both were favourite topics of Juvenal.

<sup>23</sup> For once, someone out-hyperbolizes Juvenal: see *Sat.* 12.98f. But Juvenal takes up the theme in *Sat.* 15: Petron. 141.9f. = Juv. 15.87f. Note especially *exemplis = exemplum*; *carnes = carne*; *Saguntini = Zacynthos*; *Numantia = Vascones*.

and every reader knows that, rather than relinquish the cash, they will eat the corpse: *operi modo oculos, et finge te non humana uiscera sed centies sestertium comesse*, says one of them to the other.

Now, both of these episodes are shocking,<sup>24</sup> and both are treated as humorous; but still, they are both satiric. As the dinner of Trimalchio is to Horace *Satires* 2.8, so is this account of life and death among the legacy-hunters to Horace *Satires* 2.5. In each case, Petronius takes over the themes from Horace, and exaggerates them to the point of Rabelaisian farce. For instance, the tapestry falls onto the dining-table in Horace 2.8.54, and an acrobat falls onto the host in Petronius 54; the legatee has to carry the oil-smeared corpse of an old lady in Horace 2.5.84, and the legatees have to eat the corpse of an old man in Petronius 141. Horace's Tiresias advises Ulysses to hand over his wife to the old gentleman for whose inheritance he hopes:

scortator erit: caue te roget: ultro  
Penelopam facilis potiori trade;

and says that she will be very glad to co-operate. In Petronius, a mother hands over her children, and they co-operate too. In both Horace and Petronius, these notions are meant to be ridiculous and shocking; but they are moral criticism, and they prove that Petronius was a satirist.

## II

What has kept many readers from acknowledging that fact is, mainly, the conduct of the narrator and his friends: their sexual licence, and their apparent lack of any moral scruples whatever. The author never says that they are wicked men, and they seldom if ever behave as if they felt they were wicked. The *Satirica* have therefore been called "a realistic novel of manners" which describes without passing judgment; or a romance of roguery, where we are only meant to admire the tricks and rascalities of the chief characters; or a Menippean satire with the spirit of the mime—that is, concentrated on humour and obscenity rather than morality. But before any of these descriptions can be accepted, it must be proved that this work, with the shape of a Menippean

<sup>24</sup> It is significant that today we are more shocked by fornication than by cannibalism.

satire<sup>25</sup> and so much of the critical purpose of satire, lacks the all-pervading moral purpose of satire.

In the first place, the book is certainly a tale of roguery, so far as its plot is important. But we are not intended to admire the rogues. We are rarely told of their successes. We are constantly told of their failures and their dangers and their fears. Encolpius is not simply a wandering Don Juan with a list like that which Leporello recites to Donna Elvira. He and his companions are worse—as their very names (compared with the aristocratic Don Juan and the deliberately neutral Lucius and Gil Blas and Tom Jones) demonstrate. They are outlaws, and unhappy outlaws at that: “Dii deaeque, quam male est extra legem uiuentibus! quidquid meruerunt, semper exspectant!” cries the narrator once (125). And his crimes have been remarkably atrocious and varied: theft (12), sacrilege (114.5), adultery (106.2), and murder (81.3). He has been a gladiator, which was the lowest pit of degradation (Juvenal 8.199f.; 11.1–20) and escaped by a trick (9.8, 81.3). He often complains how miserable he and his friends are, and their life is a perpetual escape. Of course it is interesting and amusing to read, but it is at the same time vile and shocking. And it was intended to be both. No audience, *ancient or modern*, could approve of theft, murder, and outlawry; no audience could do anything but disapprove of them, unless they were presented as attractive, successful, and rewarding ways of life. To show their repulsiveness, to describe their constant danger and guilt, without ceasing to be interesting, is to be a moralist and a satirist.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> E.g.: fantastic autobiographical narrative of adventure, Varro's *Eumenides*, *Sesculixes*, *Sexagessis*, and *Περίπλους*, to say nothing of Lucian's *Icaromenippus*; verse in narrative sections, Varro *passim*; verse parodying serious poetry, Seneca, *Apoc.* 2, 7, 12; serious verse-interludes, Seneca, *Apoc.* 4; intermixture of colloquial speeches, Seneca, *Apoc.* 6 and 8, Varro, *Modius*, and cf. Collignon, *Étude sur Pétrone* 309f.; etc. I have said little of the common theory that the book is a novel of erotic adventure. This seems to me partly exaggerated and probably false. (1) There is apparently no single motive ruling the whole plot, and certainly the wrath of Priapus does not govern even those episodes which we have. See E. Thomas, *Pétrone*<sup>3</sup> 65–66, note. The leading motive is the excitement of fear and disgust, not that of lust. (2) The girlish morality and silly melodrama of Heliodorus and the other novelists are leagues removed from even the mildest passions and tempests of Petronius. (3) The thematic resemblances to love-romance, which are undeniable, are far less important than the passages of satire. (4) In general, I find it easier to believe that the plot of the *Satirica* was inspired by the real adventures of Nero and his court (as the *Apocolocyntosis* and the *μύρων ἐπανάστασις* were inspired by Claudius' own character and destiny) than that it was based on the vapid or vulgar tales of the novelists.

<sup>26</sup> There are numerous good modern examples: Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, his *Roxana*, and Fielding's *Jonathan Wild the Great*.



The erotic adventures of the three chief rascals are extremely complicated, and are narrated with great detail and gusto. No one who has read Horace *Sat.* 1.2 will expect a Roman satirist to advocate or represent a high standard of sexual morality; but Petronius seems to go much further than Horace or similar writers. And yet, what we chiefly notice about all the liaisons in the *Satirica* is that they are painful or ridiculous. Few better ways of condemning lewdness could be devised than to show the miserable collapse of physical love. Ovid (*Amores* 3.7) had treated impotence with the polish and subjectivity characteristic of elegy. Petronius takes the same theme and (very much as he does with Horatian themes elsewhere) makes it extravagant and farcical: the lovers are surrounded by flowers like Zeus and Hera (*Iliad* 14.347f. = *Satirica* 127.9), but they cannot achieve their purpose, and the affair degenerates into a record of repulsive superstitions and abject thrashings. It is perfectly obvious that the spells and propitiations to which Encolpius is subjected in 134–8 are described in such a way as to make him ridiculous, as ridiculous as Trimalchio was with his astrology (30.4, 35, 39, 76.10f.) and his belief in witchcraft (61f.). The same applies to the adventure with Quartilla, herself a monster, presiding over monstrous practices; and even to the long liaison with Giton, full of random jealousies and futile passions.

This attitude can best be illustrated by a parallel. There is a long passage in Lucretius,<sup>27</sup> where the poet advises his reader not to give way to love, because it causes trouble, and therefore, from the Epicurean point of view, is wrong. He enumerates, first, the worry and extravagance to which even the successful lover is subject, and then the tortures of unsuccessful love. In a remarkable tirade which is so accurate in observation, so ironic in humour, and so colloquial and particular in language, that it is much closer to satire than to any graver form of didactic poetry, he lists the pet names by which lovers excuse and embellish their sweethearts' defects, and points out that even the most charming girl can be ridiculous or repulsive at times. The moral of it all is that it is unsafe to fall in love, and that love brings much more pain than pleasure. That is genuine Epicurean doctrine, to which Lucretius has added Roman concreteness, and, I believe, a good deal of personal feeling. The relevant Epicurean passage is Diogenes Laertius *Vita Epicuri* 118:

<sup>27</sup> Lucr. 4.1058–1191.

- (c) *somnia quae mentes ludunt uolitantibus umbris  
non delubra deum nec ab aethere numina mittunt,  
sed sibi quisque facit. nam cum prostrata sopore  
urguet membra quies et mens sine pondere ludit,  
quidquid luce fuit, tenebris agit. oppida bello  
qui quatit et flammis miserandas eruit urbes,*

sin is death. What he does say throughout is that the wages of folly is contempt and ridicule and discomfort. That is the attitude which best suits the character of Petronius himself, in whom *ἀταραξία* (coldly described by Tacitus as *ignavia*) dominated, but who was not unconscious of duty nor incapable of action when it was truly necessary: proconsul tamen Bithyniae et mox consul uigentem se ac parem negotiis ostendit, adds Tacitus with obvious respect.<sup>29</sup> Such a man was not an immoral man: his morality was Epicurean, and his book is a moral work.

### III

The main objection to this thesis is that the book contains no open moralizing on these topics. As Mr. Perry says,<sup>30</sup> "Petronius shows no evidence of moral seriousness. Everything is presented from a purely objective point of view, . . . without any trace of the author's approval or disapproval." That is true, although only to a limited extent, for an author who writes of a murderer in flight is certainly not full of admiration for him. But it is possible to prove that this attitude does contain moral seriousness, by pointing to other instances of the same method in the work of acknowledged satirists, by explaining it further from the *Satirica*, and finally by exemplifying it from Petronius' own life.

tela uidet uersasque acies et funera regum  
atque exundantes profuso sanguine campos.  
qui causas orare solent, legesque forumque  
et pauidi cernunt inclusum chorte tribunal. . . .

eripit undis  
aut premit euersam periturus nauita puppem.

(*Anth. Lat.* 651, fragm. 30 Buecheler; cf. *Sat.* 128.6)

et quo quisque fere studio deuinctus adhaeret . . .  
in somnis eadem plerumque uidemur obire:  
causidici causas agere et componere leges,  
induperatores pugnare ac proelia obire,  
nautae contractum cum uentis degere duellum. . . .  
reges expugnant, capiuntur, proelia miscent,  
tollunt clamorem, quasi si iugulentur, ibidem.

(*Lucr.* 4.962f.)

The general Epicurean principles applicable to the *Satirica* can be found in Epicurus *ad Menoec.* 132: Οὐ γὰρ πότοι καὶ κῶμοι συνέροντες, οὐδ' ἀπολαύσεις παίδων καὶ γυναικῶν, οὐδ' ἰχθύων καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ὅσα φέρει πολυτελὴς τράπεζα, τὸν ἥδὺν γεννᾷ βίον. And see also *Sent.* 144.17: ὁ δίκαιος ἀταρακτότατος, ὁ δ' ἄδικος πλείστης ταραχῆς γέμων, κτλ.

<sup>29</sup> *Ann.* 16.18.3.

<sup>30</sup> *CPh* 20 (1925) 34f.

In one of Juvenal's most disgusting and most moral poems (*Satire* 9) he addresses a professional pervert. He asks, with a semblance of contemptuous sympathy, why Naevolus looks so miserable. Naevolus replies that his occupation's gone. He lists his complaints against his former patron, groans with dismay over his uncertain future, and pathetically expounds the miseries of his vocation. Juvenal reassures him with blasting irony:

Ne trepida, numquam pathicus tibi derit amicus  
stantibus et saluis his collibus!

But throughout the entire poem, Juvenal never once condemns him, or draws the moral which every reader feels to be implied. He makes him condemn himself, simply and solely by exposing his own viciousness and his own despicable state.

Similarly, the fragment of Ennius' satires quoted by Donatus on Terence's *Phormio* 339 comes from a boastful speech by another disreputable character: a parasite, who explains the glories of his own profession in such a way as to convict himself of greed, vulgarity, and ingratitude. Both these poems are of course witty and amusing—otherwise they would have been unreadable; but their entire effect is produced by suppressing the author's moral approval or disapproval and making the guilty person expose himself.

Again, it is obvious that Petronius follows this plan throughout the dinner-scene. The author and his narrator rarely express open disapproval of Trimalchio's atrocious manners. At most, a phrase like *hominem tam putidum* (54.1) slips out here and there, and is more than balanced by the ironical respect with which Trimalchio is usually described: *laudatus propter elegantias* (34.5), *gratias agimus liberalitati indulgentiaeque eius* (47.7), *tam elegantes strophas* (60.1) are phrases especially piquant coming from the *elegantiae arbiter*. Meanwhile, Trimalchio convicts himself by every action, by every word.

Another parallel comes from Petronius' own life. When he was falsely accused by Tigellinus, he killed himself with an Epicurean leisureliness and nonchalance, *ut quamquam coacta mors fortuitae similis esset*.<sup>31</sup> Tacitus goes on to say that he did not follow the usual practice of men dying by imperial decree, and insert flattery of Nero and Tigellinus in his will. Instead of that, he wrote

<sup>31</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 16.19.4.

out a detailed description of the emperor's vices, giving the names of his accomplices, male and female,<sup>32</sup> and detailing each novel kind of perversion. He sent this to Nero, under seal. When Nero got it, he was furious, and exiled a lady called Silia for betraying his evil secrets. Now, it has actually been proposed that what Petronius wrote in his last hours and sent to Nero was the *Satirica*, and that Trimalchio is Nero. That is so ridiculous that it needs no refutation; and yet it is a distorted image of the truth. Petronius' method in delivering this attack was exactly the same as that which he employed in writing the *Satirica*. We are not told that he wrote a denunciation of Nero's perversions. What he wrote was a description of them—done, we cannot doubt, with the same amused and ironical care as he used in describing the social and grammatical blunders of the freedmen and the disreputable adventures of the Graeculi. That was for Petronius the equivalent of a denunciation as bitter as Savonarola's addresses to Florence, and Isaiah's to the kings of Judah. And it was taken by Nero to be a condemnation. Tigellinus, even if ordered to kill himself, would have been perfectly incapable of writing such a letter. He was a bad man. But Petronius—although, as a true Epicurean, he identified morality with ease of life and good taste—was a moralist.

## IV

Yet why should an Epicurean trouble himself so far as to write a gigantic Menippean satire, full of moving accidents by flood and field, of hairbreadth escapes and distressful intrigues, of elaborate chastisements of errors in taste, subtle imitations of vulgar speech, and detailed descriptions of atrocious debaucheries? Surely it would be more natural and philosophical for him to plunge into deep leisure, passively experiencing (like Des Esseintes in Huysmans' *A Rebours*) rather than actively observing, recording, and creating? Can he have had a serious purpose which prompted him to write the *Satirica*, and to make them more than mere diversions, more than a series of funny and exciting adventures?

The answer to this fundamental problem lies in the definition of satire. It is *σπουδογέλοιον*, joking in earnest. If satire were merely laughter for laughter's sake, it would be mime or epigram. If it were merely serious truth-telling, it would be didactic poetry;

<sup>32</sup> *sub nominibus exoletorum feminarumque* means "classifying his several vicious acts under the names of his accomplices": see Furneaux *ad loc.*

and would then belong to a nobler and less populous genus. Its charm is that it joins the remotest poles, and unites the forces of wisdom on the one hand and laughter on the other.<sup>33</sup> The proportion of these two motives need not be constant, throughout the genus or even in any one author. For instance, in the work of Horace there are several satires which are almost pure sermonizing, with little that is funny in them apart from the comical examples, the light play of wit, and the oddity of the speaker.<sup>34</sup> There are others which turn almost entirely on their humour, and contain hardly any serious criticism or observation.<sup>35</sup> Most of the *Apocolocyntosis*, which is not far from contemporary with the *Satirica*, is farcical exaggeration: themes are brought in for a moment's amusement, and discarded at once;<sup>36</sup> the conclusion is such a ridiculous gag that it has often misled editors into expecting a different one or supposing a lacuna; while the only two serious passages<sup>37</sup> are easily overlooked in the torrent of epigrams and parodies which surrounds them. Nevertheless, the satire is built upon two foundations, not one: serious criticism and wild farce.

These, in combination, are the motives of satire, and both of them dominate the *Satirica*. What proportion they bore to each other in the entire work we cannot tell. Meanwhile, nearly half of what we have is not farcical and mime-like adventure, nor romantic intrigue, but satirical observation and criticism; and it is merely begging the question to say with Mr. Perry that the *Cena* is an "elaborate side-show."<sup>38</sup> Therefore, it ought to be possible to account for the presence of both motives in the book and in its author, if we are to understand them properly.

# V

There was a fashion in Nero's court of going slumming in disguise.<sup>39</sup> Nero, dressed as a slave, visited brothels, saloons, and

<sup>33</sup> "False be every truth which hath not had laughter along with it"—Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* 3.56.23.

<sup>34</sup> Hor. *Sat.* 1.1, 2.3, 2.7.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 1.7, 1.8, and especially 1.5, which is actually less satiric than the journeyings of Encolpius.

<sup>36</sup> E.g., the authority of Livius Geminus quoted in 1-2, dropped in 9.2; Augurinus and Baba (3.4), not mentioned again, even in 13; etc.

<sup>37</sup> These are the eulogy of Nero, 4.1-2, and the condemnation of Claudius, 10.1-11.5.

<sup>38</sup> *CPh* 20 (1925) 31.

<sup>39</sup> Tacitus, *Ann.* 13.25, says it began in 56, when Nero was nineteen; cf. also Suet. *Nero* 26, D.C. 61.8.1.

mean streets. His companions robbed shops and insulted passers-by, until the young emperor himself got into a fight and was thrashed. After that, the fun was out of these escapades, for he had to take a bodyguard with him. The caliphs of the Arabian empire did the same—the name of Haroun-ar-Raschid has become proverbial for such adventures<sup>40</sup>—and later monarchs have had similar affectations. The interest that Nero and his courtiers derived from these excursions was obviously that of seeing how the canaille lived, and of subjecting themselves to their excitements, without having to bear their exigencies—poverty, prison, infamy, and the like. Petronius, who slept all day and devoted the night to business and pleasure,<sup>41</sup> was certainly a leader in these slumming trips; and the *Satirica* are, in part, a gigantic imaginative record and expansion of them. It is scarcely necessary to say that Eumolpus is not Nero and Encolpius is not Petronius, any more than Tannhäuser is Ludwig II of Bavaria.<sup>42</sup> But the life of the *Satirica* is exactly the *kind* of life into which Nero and Petronius plunged, to see for themselves how the other half of the world lived.

Indeed, the narrative portions of the *Satirica* have a much closer correspondence with Nero's adventures than with any hitherto-discovered novel or romance of ancient times. Tacitus begins by saying: *itineris urbis et lupanaria et deuerticula . . . pererrabat*. The *Satirica* are full of wandering: *nec uiam diligenter tenebam nec quod stabulum esset sciebam. itaque quocumque ieram, eodem*

<sup>40</sup> My colleague Professor Hadas was good enough to remind me of Haroun, and to add a reference to the Memoirs of the twelfth-century Arab writer Usamah ibn Munqidh (tr. P. Hitti, New York, 1927). Such also were the young nobles who haunted the London streets in disguise, behaving like thieves and savages—the Mohocks, the Tityre Tus, and so forth; see Milton, *Paradise Lost* 1.497f.; compare of course Juvenal 3 *ad fin.*

<sup>41</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 16.18.1.

<sup>42</sup> If we are to find any real people in the *Satirica* at all, perhaps Petronius' enemy Tigellinus has something in common with Trimalchio. See his life in schol. Juv. 1.155, and compare it with Trimalchio's autobiography in *Sat.* 75f. (1) Tigellinus was the favourite of two of Caligula's kinsmen and intrigued with their wives too = *ad delicias ipsimi annos XIV fui . . . et ipsimae satis faciebam*. (2) He came back to Rome when he inherited a large legacy = *accepi patrimonium laticladium*. (3) He bought ranches in Apulia and Calabria: cf. *quod si contigerit fundos Apuliae iungere, satis uiuus peruenero*. (4) He bred horses for the circus = *uenalicia coemo iumenta*. Of course the Asiatic millionaire is not a direct portrait of the vicious Agrigentine, but it is possible that Petronius would insert just enough allusions to Tigellinus' own nature and history to amuse other members of the court. When Juvenal speaks of the dangers of writing satire, he chooses as his example the danger of satirizing Tigellinus, 1.155.

reuertebat, donec et cursu fatigatus et sudore madens accedo aniculum quandam . . . et "rogo," inquam, "mater, numquid scis ubi ego habitem?" (6.3). So also 79.1. As for the *lupanaria*, when Encolpius asked the old woman to direct him to his inn, she took him into a dark alley, et "hic" inquit "debes habitare" . . . tarde, immo iam sero intellexi me in fornicem esse deductum. Then there is an elaborate scene in one of the *deuerticula* (which Suetonius more bluntly calls *popinae*) in 92-99, full of detail, even down to the bedbugs. An odd coincidence is that Juvenal describes an important nobleman of Nero's court as slumming in the saloons of Ostia (8.171f.):

mitte Ostia, Caesar,  
mitte, sed in magna legatum quaere popina:  
inuenies aliquo cum percussore iacentem,  
permixtum nautis et furibus et fugitiuis,  
inter carnifices et fabros sandapilarum  
et resupinati cessantia tympana galli;  
aequa ibi libertas, communia pocula, lectus  
non alius cuiquam, nec mensa remotior ulli.

Tacitus then proceeds: ueste seruili in dissimulationem sui compositus. The Encolpius gang disguise themselves on board ship in the same way, or even worse (103.3): capita cum superciliis denu-danda tonsori praeuimus. impleuit Eumolpus frontes utriusque ingentibus litteris, et notum fugitiuorum epigramma per totam faciem liberali manu duxit. Next, Tacitus says, Nero's companions used to rob shops, and Suetonius adds that the stolen goods were auctioned off in the palace. This is reminiscent of the stolen cloak, which Encolpius & Co. try to sell in the half-darkness towards evening, and which they exchange for a shirt lined with gold pieces (12.1f.). Finally, even the details of the fights mentioned by Suetonius and Tacitus reappear in Petronius. Suetonius says: saepe in eiusmodi rixis *oculorum et uitae* periculum adiit (Nero 26.2). Compare *Satirica* 95.8: interim coctores insulariique mulcant exclusum, et alius uero extis stridentibus plenum *in oculos* eius intentat; and the half-serious battle on the ship (108): illis pro ultione, nobis *pro uita* pugnantibus. Our fragments contain nothing like the scandalous attacks Nero made on ladies and gentlemen going home late; but we can be pretty sure that the lost portions of the *Satirica* did. Encolpius had even committed murder. Note that no ordinary decent people appear. Nero and his friends were not interested in respectable characters unless as butts. The decent



middle class, and the virtuous provincials who entered the senate thirteen years later with the Flavian régime,<sup>43</sup> did not come within their purview. That is not to say that they sought out only monsters of vice. Trimalchio's dinner is primarily amusing, not because of the immorality of the host and guests, but because of their bad manners and false culture. But in one way or another, everyone Nero and his friends met was the opposite of their own elegant, safe, and sheltered life, and of the ideals to which they paid at least lip-service.

Much of the *Satirica*, then, is an exciting and comical evocation of the kind of slumming-trip that Nero and his court loved. The frame into which these adventures were fitted has been broken, and we can scarcely guess what it may have been: only that it was a tale of wandering through the Greek cities of the western Mediterranean. Certainly the existing fragments seem to be deliberately casual, and (like the adventures of Apuleius' hero) to be governed more by fear than by lust, by fortune than by Priapus.<sup>44</sup> However, it is the author's motive with which we are concerned. The adventures were evidently written to be amusing, as Nero's nocturnal excursions had been. That alone is a sufficient reason for Petronius to have composed the enormous book—which was no doubt read (like the *Apocolocyntosis*) to the gayest and most select circle of his friends at "Nero's midnights." His aim was not realism, and he was not a photographer. One of his motives was laughter and excitement. But he had another.

## VI

The *Satirica*, as we have seen above, is much more than mere fun. It contains social, aesthetic, and moral criticism, and it is satire. One motive of satire is laughter, and the other is truth-telling. Not truth-telling without a moral purpose, like Eugène Atget's documentary photographs of Paris or a meteorological report; but truth which teaches, the satiric truth which Horace<sup>45</sup> says he learnt from his father:

ut fugerem exemplis uitiorum quaeque notando.

<sup>43</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 3.55.

<sup>44</sup> E. Thomas, *Pétrone*<sup>3</sup> 65–66, note, says "D'ailleurs, la tentative même de ramener le roman à une action une et suivie partout est pour moi malheureuse et contraire à l'allure et à l'esprit du Satiricon."

<sup>45</sup> *Sat.* 1.4.105.

All these contemptible characters—from the narrator, with his revolting name, dangerous past, and dubious future, to the Levantine ex-slave and the perverted lady of pleasure—are not merely photographed. As we read their words and watch their actions, we are conscious that they are governed by a careful choice, a selective principle which is in itself an implied criticism of them. They nearly all suffer—not tragically but ludicrously. They all expose themselves to contempt or ridicule. We are not meant to sympathize with them, nor to regard them dispassionately. We are meant to laugh at them and criticize them. They are in trouble, but it is their own fault.

And that is why an Epicurean would take the trouble to write about them. They are lessons in the foolish activity which is opposite to the wise man's *ἀραξία* and is therefore wrong. Diogenes Laertius, in the summary of Epicurus' moral principles which is part of his biography of the master,<sup>46</sup> says that one of them is this: "the wise man will enjoy someone else's troubles for the sake of moral correction" (*ἐπιχαρήσεσθαι τινι ἐπὶ τῷ διορθώματι*). And Lucretius, in the most important place in his poem next to the prelude to the whole work,<sup>47</sup> states the same maxim in deathless poetry:

Suaue, mari magno turbantibus aequore uentis,  
e terra magnum alterius spectare laborem:  
non quia uexari quemquamst iucunda uoluptas,  
sed quibus ipse malis careas quia cernere suaue est.  
suaue etiam belli certamina magna tueri  
per campos instructa, tua sine parte pericli.  
sed nil dulcius est bene quam munita tenere  
edita doctrina sapientum templa serena,  
*despicere unde queas alios, passimque uidere*  
*errare atque uiam palantis quaerere uitae. . . .*  
o miseras hominum mentes, o pectora caeca!

For the Epicurean, it is valuable to record the follies of one's fellow-men in order to feel superior to them, and perhaps to correct them. There could be no more precise statement of the principle which we recognize as underlying the amused superiority of Petronius to all his characters, the contemptuous exactness with which he not only

<sup>46</sup> D.L. 10.1.121.

<sup>47</sup> Lucr. 2.1f. Cf. Nietzsche's fine description of Petronius: "Wohllollender Hohn, echter Epikureismus" (*Werke* 14.176).

records the blunders and perversions of Encolpius' acquaintances, but makes Encolpius narrate his own follies, his own agonies, and his own frustrations. It is all done in the same spirit as that with which the Epicurean poet lists the nicknames of lovers for their unworthy darlings, and describes the servants giggling at the stench surrounding their mistress while the lover pines and sighs outside. Petronius was quite evidently a thorough Epicurean—although he also had much of the Roman gentleman's devotion to duty, as far as it was possible under the Empire. That is why, when writing the *Satirica*, he included so little express moralizing and criticism, and so much derisive description of human folly. I have already pointed out that this coheres with the last action of his life—sending Nero a description of his vices, without comment. It also, and even more convincingly, coheres with his characteristic wit, as described (not without a grudging respect) by Tacitus.<sup>48</sup> Dicta factaque eius, he says, quanto solutiora et quandam sui neglegentiam praeferentia, tanto gratius in speciem simplicitatis accipiebantur. His jokes and his escapades were assumed to be ingenuous betrayal of his own feelings, whereas really they were a calculated and stylized affectation of Epicurean *laissez-faire*.

And his suicide was as carefully arranged as that of any Stoic: its very nonchalance was meant to be significant. He did not emit any memorable last words, or listen to readings from great philosophers. He made his secretaries read him light poems and cheerful verses, and he talked to his friends on subjects which were not serious—not designed to win him a reputation for Stoic endurance and single-mindedness.<sup>49</sup> And yet, his suicide was planned with the same artful carelessness as his character. His life, his death, and his book were masterpieces of that Epicurean superiority and pride in which something of the old Roman courage still survived.

<sup>48</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 16.18.2.

<sup>49</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 16.19. Notice the significant difference between Petronius' suicide and the pompous Stoic suicides of Cato, Seneca (*Ann.* 15.63), and Thræsea (*Ann.* 16.35): porrectis utriusque brachii uenis, postquam cruorem effudit, humum super spargens . . . "Libamus" inquit "Ioui Liberatori! specta, iuuenis!" Cf. Epicur. *ad Menoec.* 126: ὁ δὲ σοφὸς οὔτε παραιτεῖται τὸ ζῆν οὔτε φοβεῖται τὸ μὴ ζῆν. . . ὥσπερ δὲ στίον οὐ τὸ πλεῖον πάντως ἀλλὰ τὸ ἥδιστον αἰρεῖται, οὕτω καὶ χρόνον οὐ τὸν μήκιστον ἀλλὰ τὸν ἥδιστον καρπίζεται. And so Lucr. 3.935f.:

nam si grata fuit tibi uita anteacta priorque . . .  
cur non ut plenus uitae conuiua recedis,  
aequo animoque capis securam, stulte, quietem?