The Satyricon of Petronius

Genre, Wandering and Style
CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEFINITION OF THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE SATYRICON OF PETRONIUS AND MENIPPEAN SATIRE

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To Justus Lipsius falls the merit of having been the first humanist and, in the opinion of Relihan and Branham, the first critic to give the expression *Satyra Menippea* a generic status, in a 1581 work subtitled: *Somnium. Lusus in nostri aeui criticos*.¹ Among the first and known defenders of the inclusion of the *Satyricon* in the genre of Menippean satire were Isaac Casaubon, *De Satyrica Graecorum Poesi et Romanorum Satirica* (1605), and John Dryden in “Discourse concerning the Original and Progress of Satire,” which prefaced his translation of Juvenal (1693).² These critics’ point of view collided with the many that sought to fit the Petronian work into a novelesque genre of Greek origin. This conflict allows us to say that the first attempts to explicitly configure the genre of Menippean satire occurred around the time of the polemic that surrounded

² Cf. Dryden (1926) 66: “Which is also manifest from antiquity, by those authors who are acknowledged to have written Var- ronian satires, in imitation of his; of whom the chief is Petronius Arbiter, whose satire, they say, is now printed in Holland, wholly recovered, and made complete: when ’tis made public, it will easily be seen by any one sentence, whether it be supposititious, or genuine.”
the first attempts to generically define the *Satyricon* of Petronius.

For the commentators of the 17th and 18th centuries, the satire in verse consisted in the praise of a particular virtue and the criticism of its complementary vice. For this reason, it is not at all strange that, in *Diui Claudii Apocolocyntosis*, by Seneca, or in the *Caesares*, by Julianus, what has most caught the attention of these critics has been the punishment of the emperors, even in the beyond, for crimes committed during life. Following Seneca and Julian, 18th century Menippean practice adapts, in Weinbrot’s words, “Roman formal verse satire’s insistence on overt norms, however limited they might be.”

Due to this, to a more than probable lack of knowledge of the works of Bion of Borysthenes and of Menippus of Gadara and to a quite limited knowledge of the *Saturae Menippeae* of Varro, it is not surprising that there is a preference among authors of the 17th and 18th centuries for the moderation and elegance of conservative aristocrats, like Varro and Seneca, who, in addition to having revealed a liking for philosophy, proposed solutions and positive rules, to the detriment of impudence, derision and an over-indulgent life stuffed with the vices of the Greek authors, Bion and

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4 *Weinbrot* (2005) 6 and 23-4: “Over several centuries and cultures some kinds of Menippean satire adapted a key structural and more device of Roman and later French and British formal verse satire. Those forms include the praise of virtue opposed to the vice attacked, while still preserving Menippean resistance to a dangerous false orthodoxy.”
Menippus. As to Petronius, a large part of the critics of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century believed that the \textit{Satyricon} criticized the vices of Nero and of his court, without praising the contrary virtues.

Among the modern theorists that have pondered Menippean satire, we can count Northrop Frye, who, in his \textit{Anatomy of Criticism}, of 1957, distinguishes four types of fiction: \textit{novel}, \textit{confession}, \textit{anatomy} and \textit{romance}.\textsuperscript{5} Admitting the fact that the different forms of fiction are found to be mixed\textsuperscript{6}, and defining the first two and the last types referred to, Frye proceeds to the configuration of the \textit{anatomy}, commonly known as Menippean or Varronian satire. Considered to be a form in prose, it must have begun with the progressive inclusion, in texts in verse, of passages in prose, while the poetry itself became increasingly sporadic.\textsuperscript{7} Centered not so much on types, but rather on the attitudes of the characters, \textit{anatomy} portrays abstract ideas and theories, and, in a stylized way, characters which are no more than “mouthpieces of the ideas they represent.”\textsuperscript{8} Though \textit{anatomy} can deal with a great variety of subjects, some of the most recurring have to do with disturbances, mental obsessions and social vices such as philosophical pretension and pedantry. The \textit{anatomy} expands intellectual fantasy, and the result consists in not only a structure whose violent dislocations alter the normal narrative

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{5} Frye (1957) 303ss.\textsuperscript{6} Frye (1957) 305.\textsuperscript{7} Frye (1957) 309.\textsuperscript{8} Frye (1957) 309.}
logic, but also in the exaggerated humor of caricature. In addition to being synonymous with *mythos*, the term “satire” may designate a structural principle or an attitude. As far as attitude is concerned, it combines fantasy with morality, while, as a form, it can exclusively reflect the fantastic (for example, in fairy tales), or exclusively reflect morality. “The purely moral type is a serious vision of society as a single intellectual pattern, in other words a Utopia.” The most abbreviated form of Menippean satire is usually that of a dialogue or colloquy that, without being necessarily satirical, can be wholly entertaining or moral, and have as its scenario a *cena* or a *symposium*.

Regarding the authors that interest us, Frye admits the possibility that it was Varro who would have associated the exhibition of erudition with the Menippean satire. He situates Petronius in the footsteps of the *uir Romanorum eruditissimus* and considers that the *Arbiter* used a “loosejointed narrative,” that, in spite of being commonly confused with the romance, does not, as the romance does, center on the heroes, but on the free play of intellectual fantasy and in the humoristic observation that leads to caricature. In the end, Frye considers the *Cena Trimalchionis* as an example of the abbreviated form of Menippean satire.

The *spoudogeloion* according to Bakhtin, was intimately related with the carnival and characterized by an amusing relativism, by the contemporaneity

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9 Frye (1957) 310.
10 Frye (1957) 310.