The Satyricon of Petronius

Genre, Wandering and Style
TWO CLOSED UNIVERSES IN THE SATYRICON OF PETRONIUS: THE CENA TRIMALCHIONIS AND THE CITY OF CROTON

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1. THE CENA TRIMALCHIONIS

Petronius’ novel is traversed structurally by the theme of the journey. The relationship between the heroes and the world that surrounds them develops via a system of wandering, marked by constant searches and endless escapes. However, this movement, that gives the journey of Encolpius and his companions an erratic and aleatory character, does not impede the anti-heroes from coming into contact with systems that are cohesive, intrinsically coherent and structured; systems that, in spite of being configured like a stage on which the characters can act, will not change the erratic configuration of the anti-heroes’ journey, nor will they be modified by the actions of Encolpius, Giton, Ascytlos and Eumolpos. This is because these universes are configured as closed universes.

The creation of closed universes is not, by any means, a Petronian novelty. The literature of adventure is prolific in the creation of universes of this kind, or rather, of locations with an intrinsic and autonomous

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1 A part of the study which is presented here uses conclusions arrived at in earlier works: Teixeira (2005) and (2007).
structure, or rather structures which are separable from the central world of the narrative and that, whether by the fascination that they exert upon the traveler, or through the power that they have to subjugate him, normally end up being systems of imprisonment.

This independent structure does not imply, however, the lack of a natural interaction with anterior and posterior episodes. In truth, and because these universes occur predominantly within a system of the journey, it is enough to recognize the existence of a syntagmatic axis, which is constituted by a group of successive episodes, to accept that these episodes are, if not interdependent, at least related. In the case of the Satyricon of Petronius, the first example of a closed universe, which the fragmentary nature of the text leaves open to consideration, is constituted by the Cena Trimalchionis. This type of categorization is based, essentially, on two factors: firstly, it constitutes a social, physical and psychological macrospace with self-determining values of signification within the context of the novel; secondly, it takes shape as a system capable of interrupting the universe of the novel, a universe that is dominated by the constant shifting of the anti-heroes from one place to another.

The emergence of this universe becomes evident with the relationships suggested by the parodic foundation underlying the novel. A variety of studies have pointed to the relation of the Cena to a system of death, a fact that immediately links this episode to a catabasis. Then there is the fact that the episode of the cortege,
which brings the characters to Trimalchio’s house, is similar to a funeral procession,² and that the ekphrasis represented in the atrium of the freedman’s house is decorated with the typical icons of a “(…) mausoleum, a house of the dead.”³ All of this reinforces the idea that Trimalchio’s banquet represents “un parcours initiatique qui conduit d’abord dans le royaume des morts (…)”.⁴

Affinities with the universe of the catabasis become evident when compared to the episode of the descent into the underworld in the Aeneid.⁵ In effect, if the catabasis, conceived by Virgil, combines elements of a religious nature (that express theories relative to post-mortem life and to the organization of the underworld), of a philosophical nature (above all from Orphism and Pythagoreanism) and of an historical nature (present in the prophecies of Anchises), we can see the same conceptual matrix in the Petronian episode. First there is the philosophical level based, though only

² Gagliardi (1994) 286, observes that “Perché questo strano corteo (…) adombra (…) la facies d’un piccolo corteo funebre, nel quale Trimalchione sembra aver l’aria del defunto accompagnato all’estrema dimora. Il testo offre appigli sufficienti in tal senso. Non solo per l’architettura del brano, disposta in movenze idonee a raggiungere quest’effetto complessivo; ma ancora per taluni particolari che danno la sensazione di riflettere momenti tipici del rito funebre (quali il cospargere di profumi il corpo del morto o l’avvolgerlo in un manto) (…)”


⁴ Martin (1988) 244.

⁵ Courtney (1987), 409, adopts the position that the Cena was not inspired by Virgil, but in “(…) Plato, whose Symposium contributed so much to the structure of the cena (…..). This time, however not from the Symposium, but from the Protagoras.”