

# The New Criterion

## Books

February 2001

### Out of Neronian chaos

by [Donald Lyons](#)

A review of *Satyricon* by Petronius, translated by Sarah Ruden.

The *Satyricon* is the *Ulysses* of Roman literature. It is a comic novel intoxicated with language, with the power of verbal craft. As Joyce deploys *Hamlet*, so Petronius uses the *Aeneid*—the master text of the literature telling a high tale that is both imitated and parodied by the later text. And, in addition, behind both the *Satyricon* and *Ulysses* lies the *Odyssey* of Homer, the breezy and sublime tale of wandering that informs all Western literature.

The *Satyricon* is a product of the age of Nero (*regnavit* A.D. 54–68). Its author, most probably, was an aristocrat who, Tacitus tells us, returned from a vigorous proconsulate in Bithynia to Nero's court, where he held the unofficial title of “*elegantiae arbiter*.” The *Satyricon*—produced by 66, when Petronius committed suicide—recounts the misadventures around the Mediterranean of one Encolpius. These seem the product of the anger of Priapus against him (an echo of Odysseus's victimization by Poseidon). All that survives, it appears, are chunks of books 14, 15, and 16, where Encolpius and his boy friend, Giton, are in pleasure resorts in south Italy; his adventures may have begun in Marseilles and taken him through Rome.

Sex and poetry are the leitmotifs of the *Satyricon*. There occur in our text two set pieces that allow Petronius's genius room to wander. First, the dinner party thrown by the nouveau riche freedman Trimalchio. At it, the culture of the Greco-Roman world is hurriedly and confusedly appropriated by the eager, greedy showmanship of the flamboyant Trimalchio. In this episode (modern parallels spring quickly to mind), Petronius's targets range all the way up to Seneca, Nero's rich tutor, a stoic philosopher and a playwright. Seneca was also the author of a comic satire, the *Apocolocyntosis* (“The Pumpkinification of the Emperor Claudius”), which is the other zany, rich work of comedy that the mad, hectic, laughing, lethal court of Nero produced. Secondly in the *Satyricon*, there is Petronius's creation of the epic poetry and the poetic criticism of the old fraud Eumolpus who offers a view and a sample (at some length) of Neronian poetry—the target here is Lucan—in a way still not understood. John Sullivan, for example, says that Eumolpus “gives us a very good idea of Petronius's views on literature.” Does he? Or does he rather give us a very good idea of Eumolpus's views? At any rate, the tones and flavors of Petronian comedy—from soup to nuts, from gourmandise to sex—are endlessly enjoyable.

Translations of Petronius have reflected the culture's apprehension of the work. For a long while, Petronius was sold, so to speak, in pink bindings and under the counter, like something in *The Big Sleep*. The *Satyricon* was seen and enjoyed as antique porn. A version published in 1902 in Paris was attributed, incorrectly but fittingly, to Oscar Wilde. Such was the company Petronius was thought fit for.

Then came modernism. Petronius was quoted by T. S. Eliot, admired by Joyce, and read by everybody. “Trimalchio in West Egg” was the author’s first title for *The Great Gatsby*. A bit later, Petronius entered academe, whence there emerged in the fulness of time such translations as those of William Arrowsmith (1959) and John Sullivan (1965). These fine scholars faced the facts (mostly) calmly about Petronius—the ribaldry, the homosexuality, the savagery, the cool nastiness. With Joyce behind them, they produced good academic versions, with many a debate about how much vulgarity, and whether English or American, to allow into the text. Petronius had to go through this process to reach the average reader.

In translating the lengthy samples of poetry in the *Satyricon*, the translators of the postwar era had recourse to the idioms of the key modernist epic poet, Ezra Pound. Thus, the Sullivan version of Eumolpus’s epic poem includes the lines:

A vile vortex, a gaping whirlpool  
The people drowning.

With *Usura*

Merderery in the absolute rottenness.

Does Sullivan consider Pound as big a fraud as Petronius doubtless does Eumolpus? Somehow I doubt it. Arrowsmith and Sullivan are merely using Pound to get a lively, modern idiom into their text.

Nowadays Petronius is a staple of academe, threatening indeed to shove aside the Roman culture he mocked. He would have been amused. One example is Petronius seen as offering a key to the “ancient Greek and Roman world.” Such are the words of Sarah Ruden, a poet, essayist, and classicist who has translated Petronius and followed the translation with ten separate commentaries. Relying on her recent translating predecessors, her excellent knowledge of Latin, her lively feel for contemporary slang and rhythm, and her infectious love of the work, she gives us the full *Satyricon*; she shows us a man making a comic masterpiece out of Neronian chaos. For the poetry, she uses not a Poundian sampler but just a more or less traditional English idiom, witty or sober as Petronius/Eumolpus demands. Here is her version of the passage cited above:

But the whole glory, the whole majesty of

Rome.

Extravagance and debt as well, two monsters,  
Pitilessly swallowed the common man down.

This is infinitely preferable to the *Canto* stunts of yesterday. In general, Ruden’s smart, funny English is quite adequate to giving a Petronius for today.

Her essays, and the explanatory notes at the bottom of each page of the text, try often to broaden what she has observed in the *Satyricon* to Roman and contemporary society. We are, after all, in

2001, and the enterprise reeks of its time as the use of Pound exuded the smell of the postwar years. Thus, we are told that the behavior of a youth in Petronius “is in fact startlingly close in personality to child victims of sexual abuse as observed clinically in twentieth-century America” and that “everything seems to work against women” in antiquity. Such observations speak of Oprah—Ruden’s Pound. But they’re limited to the essays—and then only to some of them. Her book as a whole, breathing knowledge and affection, is a delight.

Donald Lyons

[more from this author](#)

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 19 February 2001, on page 71

Copyright © 2009 The New Criterion | [www.newcriterion.com](http://www.newcriterion.com)

<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/Out-of-Neronian-chaos-2260>