Homer, Daedalus, and the Petronian Narrative

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The composition of the *Satyricon* presents a number of structural peculiarities. Broadly, it is a collection of isolated episodes organized around the errant *picaro* Encolpius, narrating from some point in the future. This form is unique in Roman literature; as Abbott remarks, the *Satyricon* "is without a legally recognized ancestor, and has no direct descendant."[1] Equally surprising is the absence of an overarching narrative thread throughout the extant pieces: apart from the wrath of Priapus, which only surfaces in conjunction with Encolpius' sexual calamities, there is virtually no motivating force to give the *Satyricon* coherence. If we accept the possibility of a six-to nine-hundred-page original,[2] the challenge of narrative unity is even more apparent. Sandy remarks that it "appears to lack a unifying plot" and even calls it "amorphous and flexible enough to contain almost anything that strikes his fancy."[3] But though abstract, Petronius' shaping of the extant narrative is precise and artful. The *Satyricon* has traditionally been read as a satire of Homer's *Odyssey*: in addition to borrowing subject matter from Homer, Petronius appropriates Homeric narrative devices in order to bring unity to his own mock epic. Due to Petronius' skilful use of Homeric structural features (and some which are the

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[1] 257.
[2] The figure is Abbott's, ibid.
[3] 476.

author's inventions), the *Satyricon* emerges remarkably coherent. Against Sandy's view that a "fault seems to lie in his fundamental conception of the work,"[4] I affirm that a careful analysis of Petronius' formal technique reveals the *Satyricon*'s harmonious shape and the studied handiwork of a master artificer.

One narrative device of which Petronius makes frequent and effective use is the story within a story. Encolpius interrupts his first-person account for Niceros' tale about the werewolf, Trimalchio's about the witches, Eumolpus' stories about the Pergamene boy and the matron of Ephesus and his poems *De Bello Civili* and the *Halosis Troiae*. Though this technique long predates Greek literature (the Egyptian *Westcar Papyrus*, which contains the oldest extant "framing-tales", dates from around 2000 B.C.[5]), Petronius' treatment of interpolated narratives closely resembles Homer's. Neither author throws the digressions in carelessly: they are methodically introduced with the traditional conventions surrounding framed narratives.

Of all the situations in classical literature where interpolated storytelling occurs, "the dinner-party is probably the most common setting, doubtless owing in part to the convivial occasion at Alcinous' palace."[6] Here Odysseus recounts at table his marvelous adventures since leaving Troy. Trimalchio's dinner party occasions similar stories from Niceros and the *ipsimus*. Framed narratives in the *Odyssey* are "for the most part portions

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[4] Ibid.
[5] Hinckley, 69–70.
[6] Sandy, 471.

of the personal history of the tellers";[7] accordingly, Trimalchio and Niceros tell of their own life experience. At both Trimalchio's and Alcinous' dinner parties, one character is prompted to tell a story which inspires *another* character (the prompter of the first story) to offer a related story in response: in this way "plausible motivation is provided for two interpolated narratives."[8] Odysseus himself requests Demodocus the bard to tell of Troy:

> But come now, shift your ground. Sing of the wooden horse
> Epeus built with Athena's help, the cunning trap that
> good Odysseus brought one day to the heights of Troy….[9]

The story moves Odysseus to tears, and Alcinous urges him to launch into his own, much longer history. Trimalchio, in the same vein, exhorts Niceros to tell his tired werewolf tale ("Do tell us of that experience of yours, and you'll see my face light up"[10]); upon its completion Trimalchio, perhaps to dispel any skepticism of preternatural phenomena (*oportet credatis*[11]), tells his own story about witches. In both cases the convivial setting allows a minor character (Demodocus, Niceros) to provoke a framed narrative from a major one. The freedmen's stories also reflect Odysseus' "long series of adventures in fairy-land"[12] by their fantastical content. Sandy observes that "it was customary to relate miraculous tales, *varia miracula*, at dinner, *super*

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[7] Hinckley, 75.
[8] Sandy, 469.
[9] Fagles' translation, 8.552-5.
[10] §61. All translations of Petronius are Walsh's.
[11] §63.
[12] Hinckley, 75.

cenam."[13] The stories of werewolves and witches at Trimalchio's
dinner party, like Odysseus' run-ins with Cyclopes, giants, and
other fantastic creatures, are conventional and appropriate
dinner conversation.

A very common feature in such situations is the narrator's
earnest or feigned reluctance to get on with his story. In the
middle of his captivating account, Odysseus abruptly threatens to
abandon it and go to bed:

> But the whole cortege I could never tally, never name,
> not all the daughters and wives of great men I saw there.
> Long before that, the godsent night would ebb away.
> But the time has come for sleep, either with friends
> aboard your swift ship or here in your own house.
> My passage home will rest with the gods and you.[14]

Needless to say the rapt Phaeacians—"his story holding them
spellbound down the shadowed halls"[15]—immediately entreat him to
continue. Suspense is heightened when the conclusion of the
retelling of his travels is suddenly thrown into question. This
is, of course, deliberate. "There is no question that the
threatened abortive ending is Homer's way of rekindling interest,
which might be flagging after two and one-half books of
interpolated narrative."[16] Niceros likewise receives the floor
with a certain pretended reluctance, in order to whet his
listeners' curiosity: "…I'm afraid these schoolmen are going to
scoff at me."[17] But Niceros, eager (*delectatus*, even) to tell
what is presumably the only tale in his repertory needs no

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[13] 475.
[14] Fagles, 11.372-7.
[15] Ibid., 11.379.
[16] Sandy, 468.
[17] §61.

beseeching from his fellow-diners. Right away he begins with enthusiasm.

The sheer number of these independently entertaining yarns has no doubt contributed to the belief in "a certain failure on Petronius' part…to sustain an over-all plausibility and consistency."[18] But despite their diversity, most of the interpolations directly pertain to the main narrative. Niceros' and Trimalchio's spooky stories are common examples of stories told over dinner to entertain. Eumolpus' account of the Pergamene boy is offered to hearten Encolpius against Giton's boyish coquetry, and the tale of the matron of Ephesus addresses Tryphaena by commenting on the fickleness of women. These sub-narratives also provide delightful characterizations of the speakers. The freedmen demonstrate their poor Latin and their superstition, while Eumolpus' poems (and Encolpius' criticisms of them) establish his habit of effusive versifying. Sandy is reluctant to accept the relevance of Eumolpus' two long poems on the civil war and the fall of Troy, calling them "self-indulgent expressions of Petronius' literary convictions."[19] But Encolpius' acerbic response to the poems[20] makes the view that these poems represent Petronius' own earnest attempts thrust into the *Satyricon*'s texture near untenable: the *De Bello Civili* "is not

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[18] Beck, 43.

[19] 476.

[20] Eumopus' poetry is consistently followed by a scathing comment from Encolpius, e.g. "I suspect that he would have liked to spout further lines even more witless than these" (§110); "…once Eumolpus had poured out his monstrous deluge of words" (124). He even refers to the versifying as a "disease" (*isto morbo*, §90).

a demonstration of how Petronius thought such a poem should be written; it is how Eumolpus thinks it should be written."[21] It is difficult to maintain that Petronius has put his own aesthetic theories into the mouth of one of his characters, because it so enriches the rest of the narrative that we hear these words specifically from Eumolpus. Whatever the style and subject matter, a certain bulk of verse was necessary for the characterization of Eumolpus as a garrulous poetaster, to whom Encolpius could rightly address the accusation, "you've spouted poetry more often than talked like a human being."[22] His logorrhea even catalyzes the brawl in §93, not only illuminating his character but even advancing the action of the main narrative.

The digression into artwork is another sort of interpolation—but rather than a literary interlude, the author offers a description of a painting or some other visual representation. The subject matter of the painting or sculpture described can pertain to an issue in the main narrative. Petronius makes use of this technique with Encolpius and Eumolpus in the art gallery. The story is interrupted while Encolpius gives his criticism of three paintings: "there was one picture in which an eagle aloft was bearing away the lad from Mt. Ida; in another, the fair-skinned Hylas was trying to fend off a persistent Naiad; a third depicted Apollo cursing his sprung

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[21] Walsh (1970), 49-50.
[22] §90.

blossom."[23] The subject of each painting is a god or hero's sexual pet (Jupiter's Ganymede, Hercules' Hylas, Apollo's Hyacinth). The digression, then, is a logical one, since the art-gallery scene closely follows Encolpius' pining over the loss of his own catamite: "appropriately to the context, Encolpius as he mourns the loss of Giton surveys a sequence of homosexual motifs."[24] We may even imagine that Encolpius has looked to the paintings in order to distract himself from his present misery; the recurrence of pederasty even in the paintings he sought for relief shows Encolpius unable to draw his thoughts from the boy. "As I stood surrounded by these portrayals of lovers' expressions, in a spirit of desolation I cried out: 'So even the gods are pricked by love.'"[25] The critique of the paintings is thus highly relevant to the main narrative and complements it. Expression of main themes through the vehicle of a digression into the visual arts has Homeric precedent as well. The best example is Hephaestus' fashioning of Achilles' armor in *Iliad* XVIII. Here the poet breaks with the main story for a detailed description of Achilles' shield. ("On it he wrought in all their beauty two cities of mortal men,"[26] etc.) Among the many scenes inlaid on the ornate shield is a depiction of the aftermath to a murder: "two men were disputing over the blood-price / for a man who had been killed".[27] This is perfectly thematic, since the

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[23] §83.
[24] Walsh (1999), 184 n.
[25] §83.
[26] 18.490 ff., Lattimore's translation.
[27] 18.498-9, ibid.

main story recently focused on Achilles' grief over the death of Patroclus and his own desire to exact revenge. Just as the shield depicts an unresolved scene (the dead man has not yet been avenged, and his *wergild* not agreed upon), so Patroclus' unavenged death becomes a source of dramatic tension in the *Iliad* until its resolution with the killing of Hector. The blood-feud theme and ensuing conflict in the main narrative are reflected in Hephaestus' artwork.

With the roots of Homer's poetry planted in oral tradition, structural devices remain in his poems which must originally have been meant as mnemonic aids to the bard: namely, the use of repetition is fundamental to the structure of the poems.[28] "The most common feature in the Homeric poems is repetition. Not only are essential ideas often expressed by identical words or phrases, but similar scenes are usually depicted with the same details and patterns."[29] Homeric *formulae*—short, frequently recurring phrases that save the poet from metrical recombination of common terms—were not necessary in the chiefly prose *Satyricon*. But the recurrence of similar scenes ("type-scenes") in different circumstances is a key organizational feature in both Homer and Petronius. For an example of such a resemblance in Homer, Louden sketches the parallelism of Odysseus' arrival on Skheria to his eventual return to Ithaka:

> Odysseus comes alone to each island, disoriented, uncertain of his whereabouts. He proceeds to the palace, his identity

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[28] *OCCC*, s. v. "Homer."
[29] Lowenstam, 1.

> unknown, receiving an uncertain reception, but slowly acquiring some status, and comes into friction with a band of abusive young men (the Phaiakian athletes, the suitors), led by Euryalos/Eurymakhos. Odysseus perseveres, receiving the blessing of a powerful female figure (Arete, Penelope), and attains what he desires, access to the next phase of his homecoming—the band of young men having been destroyed.[30]

Though the scenes take place at different times and with different characters on different islands, and the dramatic tension is greater when he returns to Ithaka, the two scenes are nearly identical. This same parallelism occurs in Petronius—between, for example, Encolpius' encounter with Agamemnon in the school of rhetoric (§§1-5) and that with Eumolpus in the art gallery (§§83-90). In both cases, Encolpius encounters a bothersome pedant in a center of refined culture. Waxing pretentious, Encolpius broaches the topic of the recent decline in cultural standards (of rhetoric, painting). They lament the decadence of modern times, and Encolpius' companion finally chalks it up to selfish vice (ambition, lust for money) and ends the scene by bursting into unsolicited verse (*carmine effingam*, *conabor opus versibus pandere*). These two scenes resemble each other so closely that we expect Eumolpus' behavior to resemble Agamemnon's even before we get to know him. We have seen Agamemnon denounce those who "scheme to gain admission / to dinners of intemperate hosts"[31] only to sit at Trimalchio's dinner party that very night; we might justly suppose that Eumolpus will display a similar hypocrisy, as indeed he does. In

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[30] 1-2.
[31] §5.

the art gallery he attacks libidinousness and *pecuniae cupiditas*;[32] later, he sodomizes a young girl under the pretext of tutoring her and assumes a false identity in order to swindle the legacy-hunters out of money.

In another recurring type-scene, Encolpius becomes jealous of a rival for Giton's love; Giton neglects him, Encolpius broods, and finally Giton returns in contrition. This scene occurs with Ascyltos, Eumolpus, and Tryphaena playing the rival, each case making use of remarkably similar language. In all three scenes the narrator assumes a wounded, self-pitying tone: "…he fell asleep in this stolen embrace, giving no thought to my just rights";[33] "without questioning the reason for my anger, he at once left the room";[34] "Giton did not think it worth his while to raise his glass casually in my direction."[35] With Ascyltos and Eumolpus he threatens suicide: "The sentence imposed on me would have led me to do violence to myself";[36] "In my prison I decided to hang myself and end my life."[37] In two cases Encolpius prepares to take revenge on the rival;[38] comically, both attempts are thwarted by the soldier who deprives him of his sword in an obvious jab at his impotence. Encolpius' jealousy over Giton is a theme to which Petronius keeps returning with very similar

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[32] §88.
[33] §79.
[34] §94.
[35] §113.
[36] §80.
[37] §94.
[38] §82, §94.

treatment. The employment of "variations on a theme" is very much a Homeric device, as Lowenstam explains:

> …like a master musician, Homer composes a great many variations on the theme of nature and authority. This style of composition lends an appearance of ornateness and multiplicity: it seems that there are many unrelated strands, which in fact are artfully bound.[39]

Petronius effects this "binding" with his strongest theme and greatest narrative achieve-ment: the labyrinth motif. Labyrinthine references are frequent: at Trimalchio's dinner party, Encolpius and Ascyltos find themselves *novi generis labyrintho inclusi*;[40] when they do manage to escape, Giton leads them back by following the chalk lines he made on the way there: here "Giton…plays the *prudens* Ariadne,"[41] leading Encolpius as Theseus. Oenothea the hag is compared to Hecale,[42] further extending the comparison of Encolpius to Theseus, and Trimalchio even has a slave called Daedalus. The most common motives in the *Satyricon* are entrapment, disorientation, and lack of progress: to strengthen the effect, Petronius has created a literary labyrinth. This accounts for the unusual narrative structure, the lack of a unifying plot, the frequent use of repetitive scenes, and the general confusion of the pieces. There is no temporal progression or plot development from one episode to the next, because the shape of the *Satyricon* is not *linear*: instead the narrative is a series of adventures that (like a labyrinth)

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[39] Lowenstam, 139-40.
[40] §73.
[41] Panayotakis, 111.
[42] §135.

radiates outward from a central point. Tied up by Quartilla, stuck at Trimalchio's infernal party, or locked into his room by Eumolpus, Encolpius continually finds himself trapped (*inclusus*); the hemming in of the narrator by separate narratives creates a formal illusion of confinement. Finally, the repetition of more or less identical scenarios gives a sense of motion without progress: none of the characters' travels or experiences brings any illumination to the themes explored. Encolpius' jealousy returns numerous times, but is never *developed*: his anger does not escalate with repeated offenses (he is as angry the first time as the third), nor does he mature over the course of the text and come to view the same situation with new insight. A heavy sense of *déjà vu* dominates the narrative form of the *Satyricon*. As Encolpius remarks, "whichever direction I took brought me back to the same place."[43] In her excellent study, Penelope Reed Doob sketches the following properties of a labyrinth:

> Darkness and noise, concomitants of chaos, recur in later labyrinths. So too with some of the maze's functions: as a tomb (later associations will be with death or with hell); as an elaborate memorial to sponsor or builder; as a place of worship or judgment; as a place requiring a guide; as a fitting habitat for monsters, whether painted (as in Pliny) or real (as in Herodotus); as an image of deceptiveness; and as a building intricately designed to protect from intruders what lies within.[44]

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[43] §6.
[44] 25.

Each of these features superabounds in the *Satyricon*. Darkness (*obscuritas temporis*,[45] *spississimam noctem*[46]) and noise (*clamor sublatus est ingens*[47]) accompany most of the episodes. The funeral scene transforms Trimalchio's dining room into a tomb, and the beast guarding the exit renders it even more hellish. There is a richly detailed description of Trimalchio's sepulchral monument. The labyrinth as sacred ground surfaces in Quartilla's Priapic temple (which Encolpius has presumably profaned), and the theme of judgment and punishment is seen in Lichas' mock courtroom aboard ship. Giton, as Ariadne, takes the role of guide and leads Encolpius and Ascyltos *errantes* through Trimalchio's portico, and again back to their lodging by his chalk marks. Both a painted and a living monster lurk *chez* Trimalchio, where deception is personified in the cook who shapes fish out of pork: Daedalus. And when Encolpius is not busy trying to break *out* of somewhere, he is busy breaking *into* some fortified place where he is not welcome: Quartilla's shrine, Lycurgus' house, or Lychas' ship.

A fundamental feature of a labyrinth is its double nature: to the wanderer caught in its windings, it is disorienting and chaotic; but from an outsider's privileged aerial perspective (as in a diagram) its astonishing order and artistry emerge.[48] On Encolpius' level, the *Satyricon* is a disordered blur, filled (*satur*) with confusion, duplicity and the incessant and frantic

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[45] §12.
[46] §79.
[47] §40.
[48] Doob, 1–11.

struggle to escape. But the ingenious shaping of the narrative is apparent to the reader looking down from above on Encolpius' mishaps: the frequent interpolations disorient the wandering reader by constantly supplying new and unrecognizable material; Petronius' artful use of Homeric type-scenes creates unity of subject matter and the sense of repetition, so that the narrative (like a maze) "prescribes a constant doubling back."[49] I think nothing is so applicable to the *Satyricon* as Doob's characterization of the labyrinth as "simultaneously a great and complex work of art and a frightening and confusing place of interminable wandering."[50] The key to the narrative form of the *Satyricon* is its labyrinthine dual nature: like a literary Daedalus, Petronius fashioned a novel whose apparently disjointed episodes conceal a masterful narrative plan.

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[49] Ibid., 1.
[50] 18.

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