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What to do with Eumolpus: An Alternative Pedagogical Model

Roman Satire engages the subject of pedagogy in a duplicitous manner: it at once ridicules the “teacher” and presents itself as an alternative pedagogical model: “ut pueris olim dant crustula blandi / doctores, elementa velint ut discere prima” (Horace *Satires* I.1). The Satires of Juvenal and Persius represent the teacher as a model of impecunious endeavor (Juvenal 7) and pederasty (Persius 5), two topoi that inform the characterization of Eumolpus the poetaster in Petronius’s *Satyricon*. At various points in the narrative, Eumolpus represents himself as a Stoic philosopher (88), a declamatory poet (89-90, 92 *et passim*), a pedagogue and guardian (94), and an Epicurean (104). In each of these situations, his self-characterization is employed to gain access to sexual intercourse with a young male. In this way, Eumolpus becomes the embodiment of satire, a hodge-podge mixture of literary and philosophical paradigms employing itself both to ridicule itself and to present an alternative pedagogical model.

Treatments of the *Satyricon* since Zeitlin’s “Petronius as Paradox: Anarchy and Artistic Integration” (*TAPA* 102, 1971) have highlighted Petronius’s deconstructive poetics. Eumolpus as philosophical pedagogue would seem to present several successful interpretive models to his students, but his readings of situations and paintings are always disenfranchised by subjective contamination, ignorance, hypocrisy and phantasia (Elsner *PCPhS* 1993, 39). It is for these reasons that Eumolpus has been seen as complicit in the inward collapse and final paralysis of meaning in the *Satyricon*.

Nonetheless, deconstructive interpretations of the *Satyricon* have tended neither to contextualize Eumolpus’s seemingly farcical ecphrases within ancient visual technology nor to recognize inherent correlations between Eumolpus’s lessons in hermeneutics and perception (*sentire*). Ecphrases of visual media provide us with a useful model for the hermeneutics of literary riddles, which were employed regularly in satires, mime, and Menippean satire. They also attest to Stoicism’s continued focus on “relations between sense perception, cognition and understanding, and the possible criteria for the accuracy and authority of perceptions and knowledge” (Goldhill 1994, 208). By contextualizing the *Satyricon* within ancient visual hermeneutics, we may approach the ecphrasis of Eumolpus at the picture gallery (88) with a fresh critical perspective. Once we reappropriate Eumolpus’s discursive method, we are compelled to consider the possibility of allegorization in the *Satyricon*. This allegorization refocalizes the reader’s hermeneutic strategies and establishes for the *Satyricon* a logic of interpretation.