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Crowds and Petronius: Analyzing a Narrative Device in the *Satyricon*

This paper is part of an attempt to discover clues to the underlying structure of Petronius' narrative, more specifically an analysis of the crowd as a narrative device deliberately employed by Petronius in a variety of important contexts and often in ways illuminated by comparison with the types of crowds and crowd behavior described in Elias Canetti's *Mass und Macht*. My thesis is that Petronius repeatedly employs crowds -and what Canetti describes as "Crowd Symbols"- as a way of mediating between the ongoing action of the narrative and the theoretical discourses embedded within it. This analysis is important for understanding how the surviving text is constructed in such a way that what are essentially disparate elements (poetry, rhetoric, criticism, satire, farce) seem to constitute an artistic whole, and it also provides a means of extrapolation, by which we are able to offer new postulates about the overall structure of the narrative while re-evaluating certain previous claims, for example the arguments that the *Satyricon* is a *jeu d'esprit* (Walsh 1970) or even an extended narrative mime (Panayotakis 1995).

The *Satyricon* is literally studded with crowds. Ascyltos and Encolpius are besieged by a mob of merchants in the forum and barely escape these *advocati nocturni* before finding themselves at the mercy of a crowd making up the retinue of Quartilla; there are crowds in the baths, one admiring Ascyltos while another derides Eumolpus; there is a host of drunken lodgers in the inn and an angry crowd that bursts in with Ascyltos; there are large contingents of sailors and passengers aboard Lichas' ship. These and others punctuate the farcical and often violent scenes that contribute to Encolpius' isolation, his and our feeling that he is merely a spectator in his own life, a sense that is vital to Petronius' construction of what Conte characterizes as the "mythomaniac narrator" (1996, 5).

At the same time, these crowds perform useful mechanical functions within the narrative, allowing the action to shift location or separating one character off from another. But a deeper significance is shared by four crowds: the horde of *scholastici* in attendance at the rhetorician's school (*ingens scholasticorum turba*, 6.1), the throng that attacks Eumolpus with stones in the picture-gallery (90.1), the sudden squall that overtakes Lichas' ship (114.1), and the horde of fortune-hunters the protagonists' encounter in Croton (*in turbam heredipetarum*, 124.2). In each instance these crowds not only perform the abovementioned functions but also mediate between the dramatically robust, linear action that drives the story and the embedded, non-linear elements that carry both the narrator and the reader beyond the action.

The mob that throws stones at Eumolpus in the picture-gallery is not only throwing rocks at Eumolpus, who is merely the spokesman for poems of Petronius, but it is also throwing rocks at us, the readers, who have, by continuing to read, allowed ourselves to step outside the immediacy of the action. We follow Eumolpus and Encolpius' discussion of art with interest. We read with fascination and amusement Eumolpus' account of his Pergamene adventure. And we participate in the recitation of poetry. Most intriguingly, at one point Encolpius takes over from the mob, stuffing rocks in his pockets and

threatening to use them, despite the fact that he himself made no attempt to interrupt Eumolpus, either during his theorizing on the decline of poetry or during the recitation of his own, while admitting to the contrary that he was greatly impressed. In fact, we the readers have been equally complicit and our willingness to join a liberating crowd, carrying with it all the brute force of pure narrative action, is indicative of a kind of dichotomy within the *Satyricon* that mirrors opposites inherent in Petronius as a writer and in his sympathetic readers.

This veering between polarities contributes to what some have characterized as the "anarchic" nature of Petronius' work, which "sees only a disorderly world" (Zeitlin 1971, 676). In fact, a careful analysis of the use of crowds as a facet of Petronius' narrative structure reveals that the disorderliness of Petronius' work is largely illusory and that the *Satyricon's* ability to sustain our interest depends upon a rhythmic cycle that alternates between pure action, often comical, and embedded elements that tend to be philosophical.