

The Poetics of Genre: Bakhtin, Menippus, Petronius

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“The *Satyricon* of Petronius is good proof that Menippean satire can expand into a huge picture, offering a realistic reflection of the socially varied and heteroglot world of contemporary life.”

M. M. Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for a Study of the Novel,” trans. C. Emerson (1941)

My purpose in this essay is to explore why Bakhtin felt justified in making the assertion (cited as my epigraph), an assertion which is arguably false, but which nevertheless has a lot of truth in it. Bakhtin’s account of the emergence of fiction in antiquity is developed under three principal rubrics: 1) discourse in the novel; 2) the representation of space-time or chronotopes in fiction; and 3) a history of minor genres related to the novel that focuses on the catalyzing effects of Menippean satire. The first two categories frame attempts to isolate aspects of form specific to ancient fiction, which will allow us to distinguish its dominant types. The final rubric poses the riddle of generic origins: what is the relationship of prose fiction to the complex of genres from which it emerges? While Bakhtin’s conception of Menippean satire is not as ahistorical as it sometimes seems when taken out of the context of his three pronged account, it is sweeping and idiosyncratic. My investigation will begin by offering a critical overview of Bakhtin’s characterization of Menippean traditions (and the realm of the seriocomic) in the light of contemporary accounts of the genre with the aim of specifying those features that make it a crucial episode in the prehistory of novelistic discourse. I will then ask what light Bakhtin’s account of *Menippea* and the emergence of fiction (i.e., the novel) sheds on his model of literary history as a dialogue of genres.¹

¹ For the Bakhtinian conception of genre as utterance, see Branham in Branham 2002.

Bakhtin on the Seriocomic

A literary genre, by its very nature, reflects the most stable, ‘eternal’ tendencies in literature’s development. Always preserved in a genre are undying elements of the *archaic*. True, these archaic elements are preserved in it only thanks to their constant *renewal*, which is to say, their contemporization. A genre is always the same and yet not the same, always old and new simultaneously. Genre is reborn and renewed at every new stage in the development of literature and in every individual work of a given genre. This constitutes the life of the genre.

M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems in Dostoyevsky’s Poetics*,
trans C. Emerson (1963)

Menippean satire is the subset of a much wider category Bakhtin chose to call the *spoudogeloion*² or seriocomic. Historically this term refers specifically to Cynic practices and Menippus in particular and, while it is true that the Cynics had no monopoly on the concept, Bakhtin’s expansion of it is a bold reconception of the entire field of postclassical literature which gives the seriocomic a dynamic role in the emergence of the last genres to appear in antiquity — those of prose fiction. Just as it is necessary to historicize Bakhtin’s generalizations about genre, it is no less useful to read Bakhtin himself historically — that is, to understand how his thinking developed over time and how particular theoretical constructs served his own projects.³ He was not writing an encyclopedia article.

² Much that is written on the *spoudogeloion* (or seriocomic) is misleading. The word occurs only twice in the extant literature but the concept, probably Cynic in origin, is far more important than its rarity as a word might imply. For the meaning of the word, see Branham 1989, 26–7, 227n.31. For the concept as it applies to Lucian’s practice, see Branham 1989, Chap. 1, “The Rhetoric of Laughter.” Bakhtin’s construction of the concept as an overarching attribute of Socratic dialogue, Menippean satire and other genres rooted in carnival is original. For Crates and Diogenes as seriocomic philosophers, see Long 1996 and Branham 1996 in Branham and Goulet-Cazé 1996.

³ For an excellent example of how to read Bakhtin historically in both directions, i.e., to historicize his own work as well as its claims, see A.T. Edwards’s “Historicizing the Popular Grotesque: Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World* and Attic Old Comedy” in Branham 2001. As Edwards points out, Bakhtin’s treatment of carnival or the popular grotesque varies somewhat in *Problems in Dostoyevsky’s Poetics*, *Rabelais and His World* and the discussion of *Rabelais* in the essay on chronotopes: “The notion of the grotesque appears only informally in “Chronotope” and without reference to the social and political ramifications of its anti-authoritarianism and popular roots except in the limited context

The epigraph at the beginning of this section is taken from the revised version of the first book Bakhtin chose to publish under his own name, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Art* (1929). Because the 1963 edition, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, became in Caryl Emerson's words, a study of "Dostoyevky's place in the history of novelness",⁴ the chapter on genre was rewritten to include a discussion of Menippean satire and related traditions. Hence, while it represents Bakhtin's mature thought on the subject — it is the last time he wrote about it — the aim of bringing together his original study of Dostoyevsky's novels with his wide ranging work of the intervening decades on "carnivalized literature" risks compression and over-simplification. Nevertheless, he clearly thought the risk worth taking: "In our opinion the problem of carnivalized literature is one of the very important problems in historical poetics, and in particular of the poetics of genre" (107).

The first example of such literature in history is "the realm of the serio-comical" (107).⁵ What defines the literature of this category for Bakhtin is not, as we might expect, a particular aesthetic structure or function, or its roots in Cynic parody, but that it was influenced — directly or indirectly — "by one or another variant of carnivalistic folklore" (107). While Bakhtin claimed a "huge role" for "folklore and popular comic sources for the novel"⁶ in essays written in 1940–41, his roughly contemporary work on Rabelais (defended as a dissertation in 1946) has clearly led him to attribute greater importance than ever before to "carnival" as a persistent pattern of culture expressed in a range of postclassical genres that prepare the ground for the novel. At first glance, this claim seems obviously ahistorical since many of the genres so categorized — mime, bucolic poetry, Socratic dia-

of Rabelais' own opposition to the medieval order. While the locus of the town square and the theme of the carnival in its influence upon literature are central in *Dostoyevsky*, the approach here is again quite different from *Rabelais*. The specific concept of the grotesque is absent, as is the focus upon its political and social role. Yet all three books do deal in detail with the same literary style or genre, even if from a different perspective in each case." (Edwards 2001, n.2).

⁴ Bakhtin 1984a: "The 1929 book was a monograph on Dostoyevsky's novel: the 1963 book was more a study of Dostoyevky's place in the history of novelness" (275).

⁵ For why Bakhtin marginalizes Aristophanes — by identifying carnivalized literature with the serio-comic rather than Attic Old Comedy — see Edwards 2001.

⁶ Bakhtin 1981: "Epic and Novel" (35); cf. "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse." In these essays Bakhtin treats laughter (e.g., popular comic traditions, parody and travesty) and polyglossia as the agents of change leading from genres based on myth to comic prose fiction. The Saturnalia is only mentioned in passing (58).

logue — cannot be shown to have any direct link to specific festive occasions. Yet our only extant Menippean satire in Latin — Seneca’s *Apocolocyntosis* — may well have been written for the first Saturnalia of Nero’s reign (in 54 BC).⁷ Be that as it may, it is clear that the value of Bakhtin’s synthesis is as much heuristic as it is historical.⁸ It illuminates broad patterns and tendencies in order to provide a genealogy — not for the novel in general — but for one particular type of novel, the carnivalesque line that allegedly leads to Dostoyevsky. Bakhtin is offering only one of several genealogies that could be constructed for the novel as a genre as he makes clear: “Speaking somewhat too simplistically and schematically, one could say that the novelistic genre has three fundamental roots: the *epic*, the *rhetorical*, and the *carnivalistic* It is in the realm of the seriocomical that one must seek the starting points of development for the diverse varieties of the third, that is the carnivalistic, line of the novel ...” (109).

Epic and Novel: A Digression

A basic antithesis structures all Bakhtin’s thinking about literary history and that is the opposition between the classical and the non-classical.⁹ The former is exemplified by oral epic, the latter by the novel. Since his conception of Menippean traditions, or of carnivalized literature more generally, is an attempt to mediate between these two more fundamental categories and to account for the literary and cultural practices that make possible the emergence of the non-classical from the classical, we need to specify the several senses in which Bakhtin conceived this fundamental dichotomy before we can assess the function of *Menippea* in his thinking.

In fact, Bakhtin could be accused of maintaining two contradictory positions: 1) that epic is the generic opposite of the novel: and 2) that the novel is a species of epic, which supplants it as the major form of narrative by gradually usurping its functions. The first position is forcefully advocated in his classic essay, “Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for a Study of the

⁷ See Eden 1984, 12.

⁸ Bakhtin 1984a acknowledges that carnival—one of his focal concepts—is “a peculiar sort of heuristic principle” (166).

⁹ For a remarkable critique of Bakhtin’s use of the categories classical and non-classical, see Nagy 2001.

Novel” (1941),¹⁰ where Bakhtin defines the novel as a genre by contrasting it systematically with epic. Underlying a whole series of aesthetic and ideological oppositions are two fundamental points about the representation of time and discourse in each genre: 1) the novelist represents events on the same plane of time and value as that of his contemporaries, whereas the epic singer privileges and elevates the past with reference to the present of his audience;¹¹ similarly, epic song cultivates a unity of style fostered by the conventions of oral poetry, while the novelist, thanks to the technology of writing, can engage many different universes of discourse in a single text. Thus the novel, in contrast to epic, privileges the present and heteroglossia (or marked intertextuality).

Yet in the passage just cited (from *Problems in Dostoyevsky’s Poetics*), Bakhtin clearly says that epic, like rhetoric and the carnivalesque, is the root rather than the generic opposite of at least one type of novel. Similarly, in an essay on the *Bildungsroman*¹² (written in 1936–8), he refers in passing to “the large epic including the novel” and “the novel (and the large epic in general)” implying that they belong to the same category.¹³ But that is because Bakhtin is singling out in this particular context an important attribute shared by the two major forms of narrative, namely, that both aspire to “reflect the *entire* world and *all* of life” and do so not by summation of all its parts but by “condensation” or substitution (43). Similarly, the acknowledgement in (*Problems in Dostoyevsky’s Poetics*) that some types of novel have their roots in epic, i.e., that they share important attributes with the oldest form of narrative, does not actually contradict Bakhtin’s analysis in “Epic and Novel” or other essays. For example, novels of “the first stylistic line, which begins with Greek romance (analyzed in “Discourse in the Novel” [1934–5]),¹⁴ share the tendency of epic to avoid *heteroglossia* in favor of a unitary literary style, even though their temporal orientation — “discourse of a contemporary about a contemporary addressed to contemporaries”¹⁵ — is as distinctly novelistic as it is alien to epic.¹⁶ In other words,

¹⁰ Bakhtin 1981, 3–40.

¹¹ For this formulation, see Nagy 2001.

¹² “The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism: Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel” in Bakhtin 1986b, 10–59.

¹³ Bakhtin 1986b, 43, 45.

¹⁴ Bakhtin 1981, 366–415.

¹⁵ This formulation from “Epic and Novel” (Bakhtin 1981, 13–14) is at the heart of the matter for Bakhtin. This same formulation would apply to Plato’s dialogues, which

the contrast between epic and the novel (in “Epic and Novel”) is used to highlight what is typical of each genre and is not absolute. As Bakhtin says in “Discourse in the Novel”: “it goes without saying that we continually advance as typical the extreme to which poetic genres aspire.”¹⁷

Similarly, Bakhtin’s three attempts to construct typologies of the novel¹⁸ acknowledge the fact that there are significantly different kinds of prose fiction. Some kinds, such as Greek romance (e.g., Chariton or Heliodorus) may resemble epic both in the avoidance of *heteroglossia* and the quasi heroic stature of the main characters, just as the relation of the genre to rhetoric is evident in characters that speechify. In fact, the relevance of both epic and rhetoric to ancient fiction is obvious. What is far from obvious — and peculiar to Bakhtin — is the importance he attributes to such minor genres as Menippean satire gathered under the heading of the carnivalesque (or serio-comic).

Bakhtin considers important forerunners of the novel; presumably Bakhtin does not take historiography into account because it is nonfiction, even though Thucydides, for example, exemplifies his idea of contemporaneity.

¹⁶ Chariton may appear to be an exception to this generalization as it applies to ancient fiction but by tying his story to a famous event in Athenian history he makes it continuous — in a way heroic myth is not — with his Greek audience’s present and, therefore, unepic if not exactly contemporaneous. Longus is arguably the exception; the temporal setting of *Daphnis and Chloe* is deliberately mystified to set its charmed world apart making it like the mythical past of epic. Indeed, the narrator claims the status of myth for his story (Longus 2.27). The setting of the other romances is generically contemporary (i.e., not mythical) constructed from Greek cultural traditions however idealized: see Scarcella 1996, 221–76.

¹⁷ Bakhtin 1981, 287 n.12.

¹⁸ Bakhtin analyzes the history of the genre using three distinct criteria: 1) the representation of discourse, “Discourse in the Novel” (1934–5); 2) the representation of time-space (or chronotopes) “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel” (1937–8); 3) how the image of the hero is constructed, “The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism” (1936–8). As Todorov observes “The search for a system” seems to decrease over time and Bakhtin does not cross-reference his typologies, although they overlap both in outline and in details: “Bakhtin’s work does not consist in the establishment of genres but ... in their submission to analysis” — whether in terms of discourse, time, or character. “Bakhtin’s practice thus confirms his attachment to ‘analytical history’ and beyond, to his conception of literary studies as part of history” (1984, 92–3).

Bakhtin and Menippus

With these caveats in mind let us briefly consider Bakhtin's claims about the seriocomic. First, the seriocomic category as a whole is said to share three "external generic features" as "a result of the transforming influence of a carnival sense of the world" (108): 1) a new relationship to time — a contemporary point of view is foregrounded; 2) a new relationship to the classical genres based on myth ("the literary image is almost completely liberated from legend" [108]); (3) a new relationship to the word as the material of literature resulting in a complex, variegated text that accentuates *heteroglossia* (or intertextuality). The first two points reflect Bakhtin's theory of the temporal model of the non-classical (vs. classical or myth based genres) and the third his view of discourse in the novel (vs. epic). But why is the concept of carnival needed to explain these differences — as opposed, for example, to the effects of writing and the rise of literacy?¹⁹ Be that as it may, Bakhtin singles out two genres as having "definitive significance" for understanding "the development of the novel" (109) and "dialogic" prose: Socratic dialogue and Menippean satire. We will focus our analysis on the latter.

Bakhtin's very brief history of Menippean satire, offered as background to his analysis, is largely conventional except for the fact that his conception of the genre is more inclusive extending to kindred genres that he sees as linked to the tradition of Socratic dialogue. While he predictably traces the "definitive form" from Lucian (second century A.D.) through Seneca the Younger (first century A.D.), and Varro (116–27 B.C.) back to Menippus²⁰ the Cynic (third century B.C.) — who survives only in fragments — he would also include earlier philosophical writers (e.g., Heraclides Ponticus [fourth century B.C.] and Bion [ca. 335–245 B.C.]) as well as novelists of the Roman empire, Petronius (first century A.D.) and Apuleius (ca. A.D. 125–170), and such late antique authors as Boethius — all of whom a narrower conception of the genre might exclude. While this lumping together of such varied texts under the sign of Menippus goes back to the Renaissance

¹⁹ Bakhtin is clearly aware of the significance of writing for the emergence of the novel: "Of all the major genres only the novel is younger than writing and the book: it alone is organically receptive to new forms of mute perception, that is, to reading" ("Epic and Novel": Bakhtin 1981, 3).

²⁰ The best history of the genre is Relihan 1993. For Menippus, see Relihan 1993, 39–48; cf. Branham 1989, 14–28 on Lucian's Menippus.

when the idea of the genre first coalesced, it risks blurring some important distinctions, as we shall see.

It is important to remember that neither what we call fiction (i.e., romances or novels) such as the narratives of Apuleius or Petronius nor Menippean satires such as those of Seneca or Lucian had an established nomenclature or stable generic identity in antiquity. As Joel Relihan has argued, Menippean satire does not actually emerge as a generic term until 1581 in the works of Justus Lipsius.²¹ In antiquity it is used not to designate a genre but as the title of a single collection — Varro’s *Saturae Menippeae*. The Latin word for satire, *satura* (feminine of *satur*, “full”) is generally thought to derive from the phrase *lanx satura*, a platter of many different kinds of first-fruits offered to the gods in ancient times (Diomedes, *GLK* 1.485). The salient idea here is one of miscellaneous mixtures, although the main tradition of Roman verse satire (that runs from Lucilius [ca. 167/8 – 102 B.C.] through Horace [65 – 8 B.C.] to Persius [A.D. 34 – 62] and Juvenal [ca. A.D. 67 – 127]) is consistently written in hexameters, the meter of epic. Varro is clearly diverging from this tradition, taking the idea of the genre in a new direction, mixing things Roman and Greek, high and low in both verse and prose in the motley manner of Menippus.²² Varro’s title, in which the indigenously Roman tradition of *saturae* is modified by the name of a Greek philosopher famous for his seriocomic mockery, is surely meant as a comic oxymoron. Seneca does not call his *Apocolocyntosis* — whose comically complex title is reminiscent of Varro²³ — a Menippean satire and one manuscript tradition refers to it simply as a *satura* (*Ludus de Morte Claudii per saturam*).

Lucian associates himself more closely with Menippus through impersonation (in the *Menippus* and *Icaromenippus*) but also claims other literary ancestors (e.g., in the *Bis Accusatus*) such as Old Comedy, Platonic dialogue and Cynic literature more generally. His generic affiliations are complex and always constructed with the ends of a particular work in mind. The generic signals sent by Petronius are certainly no less complex but, despite his extensive and inventive use of verse in a prose narrative, an ancient reader of the *Satyrica* would most likely not have called his fiction a “Menippean satire”

²¹ Relihan 1993, 12

²² Varro’s polymetry may also recall the medley of meters in the *saturae* of Ennius (239 – 169 B. C.), which survive only in fragments.

²³ See Relihan 1993, 87–8 and Eden 1984, 3–4.

but simply a *fabula* (“story”), as does Macrobius (*Comm.* 1.2.8). While the Latin word *satira* (“satire”) is unrelated to the Greek word “satyr” that appears in Petronius’ title, *Satyrica* (neuter plural of the adjective “satyric”), the two were often conflated in antiquity (e.g., Diomedes *ibid.*) creating still more possibilities for generic confusion. The point is that the classification of prose fiction in antiquity — whether “satires,” “romances,” or “novels” — was much looser than that of the older genres of verse. We cannot, therefore, set Bakhtin’s construction of Menippean satire aside by citing ancient genre theory or terminology. We have created the traditions of “Menippean satire” and the “ancient novel” in retrospect.

Hence, it is not surprising that the question of whether the apparently anomalous *Satyrica* should be assimilated to the tradition of Menippean satire has been a pre-occupation of classical scholarship at least since the Renaissance and the important work of Pierre Pithou, editor of Petronius.²⁴ In a lucid and skeptical treatment of the question G. B. Conte begins by acknowledging Bakhtin’s “immense authority”²⁵ on the subject but then strangely decides not to examine his account. But the interesting question really isn’t one of generic identity — is it A or B? A cursory familiarity with the texts in question is sufficient to show that there are fundamental generic differences between a picaresque novel like the *Satyrica*²⁶ and the extant Menippean satires of Lucian or Seneca. The problem that the poetics of genre should anatomize is rather the relation among genres — what characteristics and functions do they share and why? How do they differ in means and ends? In short, how does a systematic comparison of the rhetoric of genres serve to define their dominant aesthetic and ideological tendencies? As Tynjanov has taught us, “it is only in the context of changing generic paradigms that a single genre’s function can be grasped.”²⁷

An excellent place to focus such an analysis is the list of fourteen characteristics that Bakhtin uses to itemize his inclusive conception of the genre.

²⁴ Like Bakhtin Pithou favored a capacious conception of the genre including Varro, Petronius, Lucian, Apuleius and Rabelais: see Kirk 1980, 113–14.

²⁵ Conte 1996, 144.

²⁶ In “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel” (1937–8) Bakhtin argues that in its representation of time “the Satyricon is closer [than Apuleius] to the European type of picaresque novel”: Bakhtin 1981, 129. For discussion, see Branham, “A Truer Story of the Novel?” in Branham 2001.

²⁷ As paraphrased by Fowler 1982, 235; see Tynjanov 1978, 66–81: “On Literary Evolution”.

First, I will analyze the logic of the categories that underpins the list as a whole before interrogating Bakhtin's anatomy on an empirical level asking how each characteristic does or does not apply to the relevant texts of Lucian, Seneca and Petronius. Then (in a concluding section) I will briefly sketch my own view of the relationship of Petronius to the major genres of contemporary prose fiction — Menippean satire and Greek romance — that constitute the changing generic paradigms of the first century A.D.

Bakhtin devotes a paragraph to examining each of the basic characteristics of the genre as he conceives it.²⁸ For brevity and ease of discussion, I will note below only the central idea of each characteristic and his key examples.

1. The centrality of the comic (e.g., the carnivalesque).
2. Extraordinary freedom of plot and invention “not fettered by any demands for an external verisimilitude to life.”
3. Extraordinary situations for testing ideas (e.g., the sale of Diogenes in Lucian's *Philosophers for Sale!*; Lucian's *On the Death of Peregrinus*; the adventures of Apuleius' Lucius in *The Golden Ass*).
4. The organic combination of *slum naturalism* with the philosophic, symbolic and fantastic: “slum naturalism could develop to its broadest and fullest extent only in the *Menippea* of Petronius and Apuleius, *Menippea* expanded into novels.”
5. “Everywhere one meets the stripped-down *pro et contra* of life's ultimate questions.” (e.g., Lucian's *Philosophers for Sale!*; *Menippus*).
6. The three planed construction — earth, Olympus, underworld (e.g., Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis*; Lucian's *Dialogues of the Dead*).
7. Experimental perspectives that produce “a radical change in the scale of the observed phenomena of life.” (e.g., Lucian's *Icaromenippus* 19, where Menippus peers down from the moon and sees men as ants scampering around their tiny polities.)
8. Moral-psychological experimentation incompatible with “the epic and tragic wholeness of a person and his fate: the possibilities of another person and another life are revealed in him, he loses his finalized quality and ceases to mean only one thing; he ceases to coincide with himself” (e.g., Varro's *Bimarcus*).
9. The combination of scandalous and eccentric speech and behavior that “destroy the epic and tragic wholeness of the world [and] make a breach

²⁸ Bakhtin 1984a, 114–19.

in the stable, normal (“seemly”) course of human affairs and events” (e.g., the comic assemblies of the gods in Lucian’s *Zeus the Tragic Actor* or Seneca’s *Apocolocyntosis*; the scenes in the town square, the inn, and the bath in Petronius).

10. Sharp contrasts, oxymoronic combinations, misalliances of all sorts (e.g., the emperor who becomes a slave in Seneca’s *Apocolocyntosis*).
11. Social utopia (e. g., journey to an unknown land).
12. Inserted genres of all kinds (e.g., the mixing of prose and parodic verse).
13. Multi-styled and multi-toned, a new relationship to the word.
14. Topicality — overt and hidden polemics (e.g., “the satires of Lucian, taken as a group, are an entire encyclopedia of his times”; parodies in Petronius; Varro).

First, Bakhtin’s decision to refer to his list as characteristics of *Menippea* rather than of Menippean satire per se seems to acknowledge a shift in his focus, namely, that he is characterizing a complex generic grouping — a subset of what he calls the seriocomic, which has absorbed such kindred genres as the symposium, diatribe and soliloquy (119) — not a single genre. What they all share, he says, is “the external and *internal dialogicality* of their approach to human life and thought” (120). But, at first glance, his catalogue of ingredients looks like a laundry list of *topoi*, themes and structures found in a variety of texts and traditions. What, then, is the logic at work?

The one thing that all the characteristics share is a relation — not to Menippus — but to carnival, Bakhtin’s theory of the origin and nature of the comic, which I will discuss last. Moreover, all the attributes fall under one of the three “external generic features” of the seriocomic that we have already noted (108) and are meant to specify how they appear concretely in *Menippea*. Thus points 1–11 and 14 illustrate i) the new temporal positioning of the author in relation to his characters and audience resulting in ii) the substitution of experience and free invention for myth, which can be treated freely and Cynically; points 12 and 13 illustrate the third generic feature: a new relationship to the word as the material of literature making possible a heterogeneous, distinctly non-classical style. In other words, all fourteen attributes result from “the intersection of two categories, present intertextuality and temporal continuity”²⁹ of author, character and audience — Bakhtin’s conception of the non-classical.

²⁹ Todorov 1984, 90.

Todorov's criticism of Bakhtin's tendency to substitute general properties of discourse for the definition of genres that can be historically located may apply to the underlying logic of the catalogue. It could also be objected that, while the fourteen characteristics are themselves sufficiently specific, Bakhtin has cast his net so wide that no text actually has all these elements and their collocation produces a spurious unity for his category. But Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* comes very close to embodying the whole list and its explicit treatment of carnival themes (i.e., the new king replacing the old lord of misrule [*Saturnalicius princeps*]) makes it the best example of Bakhtin's conception.³⁰ Yet it is hard to find moral or psychological experimentation (point 8) in a caricature like Claudius. Lucian's Menippus pieces also exhibit most of these characteristics, but the idea of a social utopia (point 11), the use of slum naturalism (point 4) — not to mention moral-psychological experimentation (point 8) — are missing. Of course even in the case of historically circumscribed genres like Athenian tragedy no single example of the genre has to exhibit all its defining attributes for the genre to cohere.

Instead of seeing the catalogue as the specification of an ancient genre or generic grouping, it may be more useful to consider it as Bakhtin's attempt to itemize the ancient ingredients of the carnivalesque tradition of prose, which crisscrosses traditional generic boundaries. Indeed, "carnivalization constantly assisted in the destruction of all barriers between genres, between self-enclosed systems of thought, between various styles" (134) making it an anti-genre³¹ or generic solvent rather than a genre in the conventional sense. Certainly, not the least of Bakhtin's accomplishments was to call attention to the underestimated significance of such marginal genres as Menippean satire for the genesis of the novel. Yet it is Petronius — arguably the best example of carnivalesque fiction in antiquity — not Lucian or Seneca who most clearly resists fitting into Bakhtin's scheme and actually contradicts it on some important points: his realism, for example, while only one of his styles, shows an acute concern with verisimilitude extending to the representation of class and regional dialects as such (i.e., the speech of the freedmen at

³⁰ Nauta 1987 misses this crucial point: see Bakhtin 1984a, 124–5.

³¹ For this concept, see Fowler 1982, 174–75: "...much is gained by extending the idea of counter-statement beyond the limits of a single genre. We may think of certain new genres or 'antigenres' as antitheses to existing genres. Their repertoires are in contrast throughout... From this point of view, early picaresque [e.g., Petronius] is itself an anti-genre to romance [e.g., Greek romance]."

Trimalchio's party) for the first time in European literature (contradicting point 2). Ultimate questions do seem to lurk in the text concerning, e.g., the teachings of Epicurus and the validity of magic, but they do not resemble the impossible questions of *Menippea* that are more reminiscent of the fantastic quests of Aristophanic heroes³² (cf. point 5). There is no social utopia in Petronius comparable to Seneca's ideal of the virtuous emperor (cf. point 11). The three planed construction taken over from myth is certainly a basic feature of the classic examples of *Menippea* but it is at most echoed metaphorically in Petronius (e.g., in the implicit comparison of Trimalchio's villa to the underworld). The remaining characteristics — inserted genres (point 12), the heterogeneous style (point 13), oxymoronic combinations (point 10), scandalous speech and behavior (point 9), moral-psychological experimentation (point 8), experimental perspectives (point 7), extraordinary situations for testing ideas (point 3) — do point to significant features of Petronius but his use of these elements often seems idiosyncratic rather than representative of *Menippea*.

This is perhaps clearest in the case of the one element all *Menippea* share — a distinctive comic style. Yet the variety and complexity of Petronius' humor, although often carnivalesque in precisely Bakhtin's sense — that is, uniting existential opposites such as feasting and funerals (e.g., Trimalchio) or redemptive love and crucifixion (e.g., the widow of Ephesus) — seems categorically different from the mythological burlesque and abstract play with literary frames and conventions characteristic of *Menippea*, again precisely because of the novelist's quasi realistic presentation. Bakhtin sees all these texts as animated by a certain sense of humor that he calls "serio-comic" — "a realm whose very name already sounds ambivalent" (132) — but not only are there many kinds of ambivalent humor or serio-comic texts — consider, for example, Diderot, Sterne, Rabelais, Lucian, Petronius — but the classic *Menippea* are also tendentiously witty, e.g., the satire on Claudius in the *Apocolocyntosis* and the satire on the wisdom of philosophers in Lucian's *Menippus*. In short, the attempt to assimilate Petronius to *Menippea* — even when it is as broadly conceived as it is by Bakhtin — calls our attention to what distinguishes him from the category as effectively as it does to constitutive similarities — the most notable being the extensive use of parodic verse in a prose narrative (point 13). But here again the narratives of *Menippea* — for example, those of Lucian or Seneca — are, unlike Petro-

³² See Branham 1989, 14–22.

Petronius, not realistic but ludic fantasies based on myth. Hence the effect of having characters erupt into verse is not the same. But as Mary Douglas argues paraphrasing Quine “sameness is not a quality that can be recognized in things themselves — it is conferred upon elements within a coherent scheme.”³³

What lends coherence to Bakhtin’s scheme is its focal concept: the idea of carnival itself. Bakhtin’s understanding of the social origins and cognitive nature of carnival laughter is profound and is at the very center of his work and what makes it valuable.³⁴ The motive of Bakhtin’s theory of carnival laughter is nothing less than to explain how it originates — it emerges, he argues, from ancient pre-Christian rituals and festive occasions³⁵ and persists in analogous forms until modernity — and what it expresses. Carnival for Bakhtin is our paradigmatic experience of the comic: it is a means of perception made possible by the suspension of some social hierarchies and the inversion of others;³⁶ most significantly, those of master and slave and the correlative concepts of work and play, the serious and the non-serious.³⁷ But

³³ Douglas 1986, 59, where she cites Quine 1961 and Goodman 1972 to support her case. See also her “Rightness of Categories” in Douglas 1999, 284–309.

³⁴ For bibliography on carnival in antiquity, see Döpp 1993; Versnel 1993, chaps. 2–3; Edwards 2001.

³⁵ Cf. Burkert, “Kronia-Feste und ihr altorientalischer Hintergrund”, Döpp 1993, 11–31; Lesky 1963, 234: “Our researches have now led us to the Greek carnival — a word which can justly be used if we trace all these customs back to their original source” (cited by Edwards 2001, n.1). This is precisely the sense in which Bakhtin uses the word. (Cf. also Reckford 1987, 441–61.)

³⁶ “The laws, prohibitions and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life are suspended during carnival: what is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety and etiquette connected with it — that is everything resulting from socio-historical inequality or any other form of inequality among people (including age)”: Bakhtin 1984a, 122–3. During the *Saturnalia*, “schools were closed, physical exercises were suspended ... courts did not convene ... there was an *iustitium* ... it was forbidden to declare war. Roman citizens put off their togas and covered their — normally bare — heads with the *pilleus*, the felt cap of the freedman. There were exuberant gorgings and even more excessive drinking bouts Anarchy was pushed so far as to allow gambling and dice playing, which was prohibited in everyday life The intellectual elite used to spend the holiday in learned improvisations and table talk, as exemplified in Macrobius’ *Saturnalia* The most remarkable and characteristic trait of the *Saturnalia* was the temporary suspension of the social distinctions between master and servant” (Versnel 1993, 147–9 supplies the references).

³⁷ Temporary kings, festive abundance and the inversion of the hierarchies associated with wealth and poverty, work and play, freedom and slavery are central to Lucian’s comic pres-

such inversions and suspensions are themselves made possible only by the temporary abundance of the festive occasion. As Douglas and Bakhtin have taught us, altering the social controls of cognition changes what can be known and expressed, at least temporarily — and thereby changes the nature of the word³⁸ releasing the comic potential that ordinary social logic and the constraints of official culture occlude.

A good way to understand the concept of carnival, therefore, is by analogy with the function of joking in traditional societies. The violation of the countless rules both tacit and explicit that govern our behavior, beginning with our use of language, is basic to any form of humor. That is why Douglas argues that the form of the joke “rarely lies in the utterance alone” and can, therefore, only be understood with reference to “the total social situation.”³⁹ In her classic study of jokes and joking, “The Social Control of Cognition: Some Factors in Joke Perception”, she argues that “the peculiar expressive character of the joke stands in contrast to ritual as such.”⁴⁰ For if we consider the joke “as a symbol of social, physical or mental experience”, we are already treating it as a kind of rite. But what kind? As a spontaneous symbol, she says, a joke “expresses something that is happening but that is

entation of the customs of the Kronia in his *Saturnalia*. Of the Attic Kronia and Roman *Saturnalia* Versnel writes: “two aspects are combined here, on the one hand, the reversal of roles, and on the other, elation caused by the collective abundance of food and drink summarized by Macrobius *Saturnalia* 1.7.26: *tota servis licentia permittitur*”: Versnel 1993, 115. While Bakhtin’s account acknowledges the importance of both these aspects, the defining image of carnival for him is emblematic of time’s passing: the crowning and subsequent dethroning of the carnival king. Cf. Versnel 1993, n.234, p.206: “It is not by chance that Saturnalian festivals generally require a king, prince or princess He/she embodies the playful arbitrariness and is the personification of happiness.”

³⁸ Bakhtin notes in particular “the outspoken carnivalistic word”, “carnivalistic blasphemies”, “carnivalistic obscenities”, “carnivalistic parodies” of sacred texts and other forms of profanation. He also writes of “the latent sides of human nature” revealing and expressing themselves in the “free and familiar” atmosphere of carnival: Bakhtin 1984a, 123. The literary significance of the Saturnalia in the Roman cultural calendar has been underestimated: see V. d’Agostino 1969; Citroni 1989.

³⁹ M. Douglas “The Social Control of Cognition: Some Factors in Joke Perception” *Man* 3.3 (1968) 363. (Reprinted as “Jokes” in Douglas 1999. For a critique of her theory, see Mulkay 1988). Douglas’ work is important precisely because she focuses on how and why jokes work, i.e., what makes them funny. In Douglas 1999 she re-affirms her analysis: “By the main argument I take my stand: a joke is not funny unless the context permits it to be recognized, and the funniest jokes project the situation of the laughers. The funniness consists in the license to comment irreverently on the current situation” (194).

⁴⁰ Douglas 1968, 368–9.

all.” It stands in contrast, therefore, to the standardized rite or ritual which expresses what ought to happen and thus, unlike spontaneous joking, is “not morally neutral”. Douglas spells out the opposition between joking and ritual as follows:

A joke has in common with a rite that both connect widely differing concepts. But the kind of connection of pattern A with pattern B in a rite is such that A and B support each other in a unified system. The rite imposes order and harmony, while the joke disorganizes. From the physical to the personal, to the social, to the cosmic, great rituals create unity in experience. They assert hierarchy and order. In doing so, they affirm the value of the symbolic patterning of the universe. Each level of patterning is validated and enriched by association with the rest. But jokes have the opposite effect. They connect widely differing fields, but the connection destroys hierarchy and order. They do not affirm the dominant values, but denigrate and devalue. Essentially a joke is an anti-rite The message of a standard rite is that the ordained patterns of social life are inescapable. The message of a joke is that they are escapable ... for a joke implies that anything is possible.⁴¹

As joking is to ritual, so is carnival to society as it normally functions and “carnivalized literature” (e.g., Menippean satire) to the older classical genres grounded in myth and sanctioned by tradition. What is not possible, or even conceivable, in classical texts such as Vergil’s *Aeneid* or Lucan’s *Civil War* — e.g., the mocking and degradation of dead emperors, the comic discontinuities of verse and prose styles — become possible in carnivalized literature. The inescapable patterns inherited from the classical past — both aesthetic and ideological — become escapable in the non-classical (or carnivalesque) present. The category of *Mennipea* can mediate between the classical and the non-classical precisely because it has one foot in each camp: its manifest dependence on the inherited structures of myth link it to the classical, while its temporal model, i.e., its contemporaneity, that enables the carnivalesque use of these structures makes it a prototypical expression of the non-classical.

One problem with carnival as an explanatory concept is that it seems to break down the crucial distinction between art and experience, literature and

⁴¹ Douglas 1968, 369–70, 373.

life, the representation and the represented. But that may be precisely what is so attractive about Bakhtin's theorizing.⁴² Because he understands that the social basis of cognition is rooted in the nature of language itself,⁴³ he sees literature as a form of collective representation rather than private expression and thereby restores literature to the center of human experience. That has led many to see carnival as at bottom a political idea but that over-simplifies Bakhtin's thinking.⁴⁴ The value he attaches to "carnival" and its literary evocations is primarily cognitive and aesthetic. It is a way of seeing the world, one available only under certain circumstances, but one of those circumstances is literature, at least, carnivalesque literature and above all, the

⁴² It is important to remember that unlike many exegetes of carnival Bakhtin stresses that its language is one of "concrete sensuous" acts and gestures that cannot be successfully abstracted from the event or translated into "a language of abstract concepts." It is only because the "language of artistic images" has something in common with the "concretely sensuous nature" of carnival that some of its characteristic features can be transposed "into the language of literature" (Bakhtin 1983a, 122). Despite Bakhtin's distinctions, many studies of "carnival" attempt to abstract a stable meaning from the event and identify its political ideology as rebellious or conservative. After surveying the abundant literature Versnel attempts to combine the prevailing views in a single interpretation: "As a matter of fact, both aspects, the 'rebellious' and the 'cohesive', are often found side by side in different expressions of one ritual feast. The dissociative [i.e., rebellious] one is acted out in the theatrical *conflict of role-reversal*, the integrating and status quo preserving one is manifest ... in the *collective* and *egalitarian* experience of the festival as an image of abundance: Versnel 1993, 117. While he also notes the view that "we have something to learn through being disorderly" (117), he underplays the cognitive and experimental dimensions of the festival that are magnified when transposed to literature. Versnel suggests that "ritual is more direct than literary representation" (127), but is that true when the rituals are reconstructed from fragmentary ancient literary evidence? For Bakhtin, in any event, the ritual roots of the carnivalesque are less important than the literature it produced, see *inf.*

⁴³ See Voloshinov 1973. Part II.

⁴⁴ As a potent if unstable cultural force the "popular grotesque" or carnivalesque traditions can of course be appropriated for political purposes, as Seneca does in his savage satirizing of Claudius in the *Apoc.* and as Aristophanes does in his comedies (See Edwards 2001). I agree with Edwards' formulation of the political dimension of carnival: "The popular grotesque is inherently political but implicitly so. The unrepressed laughter of the grotesque, its mocking and ridicule, undermine the seriousness and authority of the official world. This tradition, however, is purely negative. While it can infect the high and serious with meanness and vulgarity, it cannot mount a sustained critique or propose an alternative." Cf. "... while the grotesque as the expression of popular laughter is in Bakhtin's view profoundly political, it is incapable, due to its very reliance upon laughter, of articulating a positive and specific political view. The grotesque's attack upon the powerful is generic; beyond that it does not choose sides. The negative voice of laughter can espouse a position of its own only at the risk of becoming its opposite — seriousness."

novels it produces. Reading is a form of experience and, for Bakhtin, an opportunity for dialogic contact.⁴⁵

As Bakhtin argues in “From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse” (1940): “what is important here is not the ritual roots of this laughter, but rather the literature it produced ... The literary and artistic consciousness of the Romans could not imagine a serious form without its comic equivalent. The serious straightforward form was perceived as only a fragment, only half of a whole; the fullness of the whole was achieved only upon adding the comic *contre-partie* of this form. Everything serious had to have and, indeed, did have its comic double. As in the Saturnalia the clown was the double of the ruler and the slave the double of the master, so such comic doubles were created in all forms of culture and literature.”⁴⁶ Seneca’s *Apocolocyntosis* exemplifies this formulation; it is the “comic double” of Claudius’ deification parodying both his funeral and the *laudatio funebris* that Seneca wrote for Nero to read (*Apocolocyntosis* 12).⁴⁷ The source of the ambivalent humor that Bakhtin sees as so characteristic of *Menippea* is this parodic contestation, or comic doubling, of the genres of high seriousness in both verse and prose whether political, religious, philosophical or heroic. Indeed, Petronius can be usefully read as the comic double of the high culture dominant at the court of Nero⁴⁸ and the whole classical tradition as it was then received and practiced.⁴⁹ The result of such literary and cultural practices is the serio-comic word whose purpose, Bakhtin argues, is “to provide the corrective of laughter and criticism to all existing straightforward genres, languages, styles, voices; to force men to experience beneath these categories a different and contradictory reality that is otherwise not captured in them. Such laughter paved the way for the impiety of novelistic form.”⁵⁰

In short, it is the serio-comic ambivalence of the dialogic word, originating in carnival and first finding expression in *Menippea*,⁵¹ that makes the

⁴⁵ See Bakhtin’s remarks on the “catharsis that finalizes Dostoyevsky’s novels” and “the *purifying sense* of ambivalent laughter” (Bakhtin 1984a, 166).

⁴⁶ Bakhtin 1981, 58.

⁴⁷ Cf. Weinreich: “Eine Komödie hat er nicht geschrieben, die *Apocolocyntosis* aber ist gleichsam ein Satyrspiel nach einer Praetexta”. Cited by Relihan 1993, 247.

⁴⁸ Most conspicuously, the heroic verse of Seneca and Lucan, the philosophical prose of Seneca, and the “Trojan follies” of Nero.

⁴⁹ Cf. Connors 1998: “Petronius takes on the ambitiously circular task of rejecting everything that is not what he is producing ...” (148).

⁵⁰ From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse”: Bakhtin 1981, 59.

⁵¹ See note 2.

impious truth-telling of the novel possible by freeing it from the constraints of the classical genres and giving it a medium suited to the representation of its intrinsically comic, contradictory subject — characters who do not coincide with themselves: writing of the novelistic hero Bakhtin argues: “An individual cannot be completely incarnated into the flesh of existing socio-historical categories ... there is no form in which he could exhaust himself down to the last word, like the tragic or epic hero There always remains an unrealized surplus of humanness All existing clothes are always too tight, and thus comical, on a man.”⁵² If this description calls any character in classical literature to mind, it is Trimalchio — comically straining against the sociohistorical category of the freedman, a status as inescapable as death.⁵³ Yet like any “universal-symbol system”,⁵⁴ as Bakhtin calls carnival (and its seriocomic expressions), in less skillful hands it always risks flattening out the differences between texts reducing them all to a single pattern, however heterogeneous, contradictory and revealing.

So far I have been trying to make sense of Bakhtin’s account of Menippean satire and the novel in the light of the extant texts and scholarship. Now I would like to critique and supplement his account. One problem with Bakhtin’s story is that it attempts to derive like from like: where does the carnivalesque novel come from? From older carnivalesque traditions and, ultimately, from carnival, which is, so to speak, the thing itself. But this way of describing the history of the novel does not do justice to how unexpected

⁵² “Epic and Novel”: Bakhtin 1981, 37.

⁵³ Bodel 1999, 44–7.

⁵⁴ My focus here is the structure and function of “carnival” in Bakhtin’s thinking — not its potential meaning in any time or place from antiquity to early modern Europe (see notes 42 and 44). Bakhtin is fully aware that even though carnival, as he himself conceives it, is a “universal-symbol system” (Bakhtin 1984a, 129), its inflection in particular texts and contexts will vary greatly; e.g., the results of his analyses of Dostoyevsky and Rabelais are remarkably different, yet both make extensive use of the ideas of carnival and the carnivalesque. The significance of Bakhtin’s characterization of his concept of carnival as a “heuristic principle” — not a reified transhistorical meaning — has not been fully appreciated (Bakhtin 1984a, 166). When Stallybrass and White in their influential adaptation of Bakhtin underscore “the banal —but often ignored truth that the politics of carnival cannot be resolved outside of a close historical examination” (16), they are simply following Bakhtin’s lead: “As a form [of syncretic pageantry of a ritual sort, carnival] is very complex and varied giving rise, on a general carnivalistic base, to diverse variants and nuances depending upon the epoch, the people, the individual festivity” (Bakhtin 1984a, 122).

Petronius is and how significantly he differs from the Menippean satires and prose fiction that are the usual *comparanda*. Yet if we did not have the *Satyrica*, we would not believe it was possible. For Bakhtin the answer to the question “what conditions made a text like the *Satyrica* possible?” is the existence of carnival and carnivalized literature. As we have seen, despite its evident circularity, this genealogy has considerable explanatory power. But why then does Petronius seem so surprising and so unlike any other work from classical antiquity?

The problem with Bakhtin’s account is not that it is dialogical but that it is not dialogical enough. In attempting to account for the anomalous category of the novel — a genre that finds no place in traditional poetics going back to Aristotle — he creates another anomalous category — the carnivalesque — which shares certain salient features with the *explanandum*, the novel. But this attempt to derive like from like obscures the way the novel comes into its own, above all, by engaging in dialogue what is different from itself, by parodying such popular forms as heroic romance or the pre-eminently canonical genre of epic — the dominant forms of narrative in antiquity (other than historiography). By contrast Bakhtin can bring the most influential form of ancient prose fiction, Greek romance, into his account only by finding something carnivalesque in it,⁵⁵ thereby minimizing the very differences which are in fact most striking and relevant. For it is these defining aesthetic differences — not the incidental similarities — that create the possibility of dialogic tension between Petronius’ discourse and the forms of narrative that constituted the changing generic paradigms of his day.

With this in mind let us revisit the problem of the novel’s genre. It may seem odd that virtually the only type of literature widely read today — prose fiction — should pose a problem of genre in a classical context. What could be easier to place generically or more accessible to contemporary readers than a work of prose fiction? What, *is* the problem?

First, any reader of the *Satyrica* will notice that it is unlike most contemporary fiction in containing many passages of verse in various meters, some of them going on for pages. For while genres persist over very long periods

⁵⁵ “Thus elements of the *Menippea* can be detected in the Greek novels. Certain images and episodes from the *Ephesian Tales* of Xenophon of Ephesus, for example, have the distinct scent of *Menippea* about them. The dregs of society are represented in the spirit of slum naturalism: prisons, slaves, thieves, fishermen and so forth” (Bakhtin 1984a, 121).

of time, indeed for centuries, they are also subject to a continual process of changes, as is the cultural context of their production and reception. Any given example of a genre is formally determined by a wide range of culturally specific engagements as well as by its ruling generic design. The practice of Athenian tragedy, for example, differs significantly from that of Elizabethan or modern forms of tragedy, but they have enough features in common for us to feel justified in grouping them together generically as ‘tragedy’. Knowledge of the cultural context in which particular examples of a genre developed allows us to decipher conventions peculiar to them, and thus learn how to read them. Every genre of literature is in this sense also a form of experience for readers — “a specific form of thinking, a way of visualizing the world” not otherwise available.⁵⁶ To locate any work within a given genre as it existed in a specific cultural context creates certain expectations and, hence, frames for interpreting what we read.

The problem posed by the genre of the *Satyricon* is complicated by the fact that it is the earliest extant work of prose fiction in Latin: we cannot compare Petronius’ practice with that of his Roman predecessors to see how he shaped the genre for his own aesthetic purposes. Further, most ancient genres had long traditions behind them that served to define their constituent elements — their matter, manner, means, and specific effects. While writers were, or course, always free to innovate, the traditional conception of the genres determined the parameters within which experimentation could be recognized as such. None of this applies to prose fiction (as it does to classical verse genres), since, as we have seen, it lacked an authoritative canon or acknowledged set of aesthetic norms — except for those implicit in popular but uncanonical examples of the genre. As the last major literary tradition to emerge in antiquity, prose fiction never received the critical attention or cultural prestige of the older classical kinds such as epic, lyric and drama.

Indeed, the singularity of the *Satyricon* may seem to be at odds with the very idea of genre as a set of repeatable rules and convention; but, in fact, genre yields the only means of grasping that singularity and specifying its distinguishing features within the context of ancient literary culture. While Petronius may have written the first full scale novel in Latin, there would of course have been many kinds of narrative already familiar to him and his audience: the mythological narratives found in classical epic, lyric and dramatic poetry in both Greek and Latin; popular prose genres in written form

⁵⁶ Morson and Emerson 1990, 306.

such as Greek romance, romanticized history and travel literature; popular dramatic genres such as New Comedy and the Mime in both Greek and Latin; and oral genres of many kinds including fables, jokes, ghost stories, apothegms and the other ingredients of folklore. And then there are works and traditions that seem to straddle or confound the dichotomy of oral versus written genres⁵⁷ such as *The Life of Aesop*, a collection of jokes and comic vignettes about the legendary dwarfish, ugly, and mute but clever slave, Aesop; or the Milesian tales, a tradition of bawdy tales like the French fabliaux (referred to by Apuleius in the prologue to *The Golden Ass*) that do not survive outside of their appearance in the Roman novel. What distinguishes the *Satyrica* is not just that it responds to such a remarkable range of narrative forms (including even non-narrative genres of lyric poetry) but that it reshapes and combines them as only a novel can — by bringing them into a dialogue mediated by a narrating consciousness. What results is something without attested classical precedent.⁵⁸

Latin literature as a whole can usefully be considered as an extended response to the literary culture of Greece, which dominated classical civilization from beginning to end. While it is obviously beyond the scope of this essay to delineate the relationship of Petronius to all varieties of Greek and Latin literature to which he responds, his approach to two genres in particular can serve to exemplify his working methods. At this point many accounts of Petronius will, like Bakhtin, confidently assert his defining relationship to one of two genres, both Greek in origin, namely, Menippean satire and romance. While both traditions are of central importance to Petronius, to suggest that his work somehow bears the same relationship to these genres as, for example, Senecan tragedy does to Hellenistic or Republican tragedy, or the satires of Persius do to those of Horace, is to misconstrue the nature of the novel as a genre. Yet, strangely, given his understanding of the dialogic nature of the word, Bakhtin's Menippean genealogy is open to the same criticism.

Like Menippean satire romance is not an ancient generic term but both genres are ancient and well documented. Moreover, Menippean satire is often identified simply as a form that mixes verse and prose — as if this

⁵⁷ For this fundamental distinction, see Ong 1982.

⁵⁸ For an interesting attempt to locate the origins of classical fiction in the pre-classical narrative forms of Egypt and the Near East, see Anderson 1984. It is the genre of the novel, not the individual plot motifs, that is without classical precedent.

feature alone could define a genre or could not be found in some form in other genres as different as Platonic dialogue or Greek romance! But the idea of mixtures and misalliances of all kinds is generically significant, as Bakhtin's analysis emphasizes, and the impropriety by classical standards of embedding characters who speak verse in a prose narrative exemplifies this tendency.⁵⁹ As we have seen, the earliest extant example of Menippean satire is the *Apocolocyntosis*, an exuberant parody of the deification of the emperor Claudius attributed to Petronius' contemporary Seneca. A glance at this work reveals the central ingredients of the genre: a fantastic journey from this world to that to myth that progresses by multiple forms of parody and mythological burlesque as told by a ridiculous narrator intent on answering some question that defies mortal knowledge. In Seneca the question is: 'what happened in heaven when the emperor Claudius, deified after death, arrived hoping to join the ranks of the immortals?' (Everyone knows what happened on earth, comments the narrator, since no one forgets his own good luck! [*Apoc.* 5]) The *Apocolocyntosis* therefore resembles not a novel, but the extant Greek examples of Menippean satire, the Menippus narratives of Lucian (second century A.D.), in which the quest of the Cynic hero, Menippus, makes mythological parody a vehicle for satirizing humanity in general, and philosophers in particular, in the course of attempting to answer a single urgent but overwhelming question — 'What is the best kind of life for human beings?'

If all this sounds distinctly odd, then we have managed to convey an accurate idea of this genre. As a current historian of the Menippean tradition has argued: 'Menippean satire is abnormal in all of its aspects. It is an anti-genre; insofar as it is a satire it is ultimately a satire on literature itself and all its pretensions to meaning.'⁶⁰ This sounds, in turn, suspiciously postmodern, and that may explain why Menippean satire has received so much attention in recent decades after being all but forgotten for generations.

It is highly significant that apart from Menippean satire, the most important literary tradition for Petronius, namely, romance, comes from the opposite end of the literary spectrum. It is precisely this opposition that Bakhtin's

⁵⁹ While the use of verse is probably the most demonstrably 'Menippean' feature of the *Satyrica*, it is important to note that the extent and originality of the verse in Petronius transcends its more limited use — as comic quotation and parody — in Menippean satire. We should think of Petronius as 'novelizing' the more circumscribed genre of Menippean satire rather than as working within its generic constraints. See also note 49.

⁶⁰ Relihan 1993, 28.

genealogy fails to take into account.⁶¹ Menippean satire is a self-consciously written form, the product of a learned, chirographic culture, and as such it is a literary composite completely alien to the older oral traditions of mythical narrative that it appropriates for parody and satire. It is accordingly radically mixed in form, critical in intent, and satirically estranging in its effects. Its means and ends are thus deeply expressive of the literate, writerly culture that gave rise to it. This fact is most obvious when we consider the demands it makes on its audience's knowledge of previous literature and philosophy, without which much of its humor and, hence, its *raison d'être* is lost. Its sophisticated and irreverent play with inherited literary forms contrasts sharply with the conservative stance toward the classical canon assumed by romance, just as its *recherché* subject matter contrasts with the more popular themes of romance.

Greek romance emerges in the works of Chariton of Aphrodisias (first century B.C./A.D.?) and Xenophon of Ephesus (second century B.C.?) as an idealizing and sentimental form of narrative that recounts in excited tones the love, separation and reunion of two beautiful young heterosexual Greeks, who embody much of what their culture admired. The separation — effected by pirates, storms, gods and rivals — delays the predictable dénouement, thereby creating much of the narrative's appeal, its suspense (what will happen?) and its mystery (why did it happen?).⁶² The delay puts the heroine and the hero under stress and thus generates the “sentiment”, that is, ‘the representations of feeling, anxieties and moral choices’ that provide the real source of interest and value in ‘sentimental romance’.⁶³ Thus, as David Lodge observes, structurally the love story consists of the delayed fulfillment of desire — of the heroine's desire for the man she wants and of the reader's

⁶¹ In two earlier essays, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel” (1937–8) and “Discourse in the Novel” (1934–5) Bakhtin acknowledges and analyzes categorical (or generic) differences between Greek and Roman fiction — in their representation of time and of speech — that are ignored in Chapter 4 of the book on Dostoyevsky, revised in the early 60's (i.e., 1984a). Here his emphasis is on the novelistic force of Menippean satire and related minor genres in both Greek and Latin rather than on stages of development (from Greek to Latin examples).

⁶² See Lodge 1990, Chapter 8.

⁶³ See Lodge, 117.

desire for the answers to the questions raised by narrative suspense and mystery.⁶⁴

The general shape of the plot, its use of a unified literary language, its quasi heroic characters and its wish-fulfilling ending that affirms society's future through marriage all align Greek romance with the Odyssean narrative paradigm,⁶⁵ which it translates into the contemporary prosaic world of its Hellenistic and Roman audiences. While Menippean satire appeals to our intellect and aims to demystify the great traditions of myth and philosophy while exposing the world's hocus pocus — such as deification of emperors among other idols of the tribe — the ends of romance are just the opposite: to engage our imaginative sympathies as fully as possible in the improbably romantic adventures of star-crossed lovers — the perennial ingredients of popular fiction from Chariton to the Harlequin romances. In other words, if Menippean satire is a seriocomic critique of the inherited myths of classical culture, ancient romance is its generic antitype — a new myth, that of *eros* in the cosmopolitan Greek world that surrounded the ancient Mediterranean in the wake of Alexander's conquests and the Greek diaspora.⁶⁶ The radically differing aesthetics of the two genres may imply corresponding differences in the audiences addressed by each, although such distinctions cannot be easily made within the elite world of classical literary culture.⁶⁷

While it has often been noted that Petronius is funnier than the other ancient writers of prose fiction, it is not often recognized how central the

⁶⁴ See Lodge, 118. While Lodge's characterization of eighteenth-century fiction forcefully recalls classical romance, a recent study of Greek romance (Konstan 1994) reveals basic generic differences in the representation of love and desire.

⁶⁵ For important differences from the Odyssean paradigm, see Konstan 1994, 70–5.

⁶⁶ Konstan argues persuasively that Greek romance is distinguished 'as a genre from all other amatory literature in the classical world' and from the emerging modern novel by 'a pattern of symmetrical or reciprocal love, in which the attraction is both mutual and between social equals' (7), which provides the underlying structure and *raison d'être* of the genre. This is the new myth of *eros* invented in its literary form by the authors of Greek romance. As Konstan shows, it differs fundamentally from the prevailing conceptions of *eros* as represented in other genres or as seen in social practice. For the idea of ancient Greek romance as a form of post-classical myth, see Reardon 1971, 309–405.

⁶⁷ See Harris 1989, Chapter 7. Harris argues plausibly that no ancient genre sought a mass audience; yet some genres were undoubtedly more 'popular' — more accessible, more widely read — than others: 'We should rather see the romances as the light reading of a limited public possessing a real degree of education' (228). What makes them 'light reading' is exactly what makes them 'popular' and hence 'likely to attract a readership among the educated bourgeoisie', as Bowie puts it (1994, 440). Cf. Stephens' discussion (1994).

humor is to his novelistic aesthetic.⁶⁸ The sophisticated humor and ironic tone of Petronius' narrative have their origin in his novelistic fusion of two genres that differ radically in form, tone, style, characteristic effects and, perhaps, even in the audiences addressed. Out of this hybridization, cross-breeding, or fusion of genres emerged what can fairly be called the first novel.⁶⁹ These metaphors for literary invention are not meant to suggest a homogenous blending, of simple combination of known ingredients — like a vinaigrette salad dressing — but something so paradoxical and strange as to be suspect — like 'cold fusion'. Menippean satire is of crucial importance precisely because it is formally disruptive and intrusive, a satiric solvent that acts as a catalyst for generic mixture and mutation but in this case within a fictional narrative framework that originates in romance. Inside this framework the Menippean mode of writing permits movement up and down the literary scales (high and low, oral and literary, verse and prose) and between genres and forms of speech that would either not appear in literary discourse at all (e.g., the freedmen's speeches [37 ff.] or the report on Trimalchio's holdings [53]⁷⁰) or not in contiguity with one another (e.g., Eumolpus' epic recital follows a scene of scatological comedy [117–18]).

Of course Petronius draws on a great variety of discourses, including works we no longer have, and he responds to different genres in fundamentally different ways depending on their place in (and outside of) the canon and their function in his narrative.⁷¹ The traditions of Menippean satire and Greek romance should be conceived as important sub-texts, as two of a series of shifting generic frames of reference, not as 'sources' for the *Satyrical*. It is of course what Petronius does with them that makes his work so obviously different from either. If romance remains his most conspicuous model it is because it is the only kind of prose fiction — as opposed to traditional storytelling — that he would have known. While recent papyrological discoveries suggest that Greek fiction may have been more varied than was

⁶⁸ Notable exceptions are Plaza 2000 and 2001.

⁶⁹ Compare the characterization of *Don Quixote* (by M. Bell, 'How Primordial is Narrative', *Narrative in Culture: The Uses of Story-telling in the Sciences, Philosophy, and Literature*, ed. C. Nash [London]) as uniting 'two powerful, internally coherent, and yet incommensurable traditions: the exemplary idealism of chivalric romances and the incipient realism of the picaresque' (180); (cited by Konstan 1994, 73).

⁷⁰ References to the text of Petronius are to chapters.

⁷¹ Slater 1990.

once thought,⁷² the tradition that runs from Chariton to Heliodorus (third to fourth century A.D.) makes it clear that the dominant strain was idealizing and sentimental and is in general much closer to what is suggested by the generic term ‘romance’ than by the more modern English term ‘novel’. This distinction is a complicated one that does not hinge only on subject matter — such as the heroine-centered plot of romance — but also on the parodic manner in which the novel reflects the values, premises, and conventions of romance. The relationship of Fielding to Richardson, or of Cervantes to chivalric romance, provides a useful model for understanding Petronius’ relationship to Greek romance. Just as reading Richardson will enhance our appreciation of the comedy of *Joseph Andrews*, so Petronius’ many forms of parody will be far more accessible to those who have also read Chariton and the Greek romances.⁷³

This account of the genre of the *Satyrice* might be taken to suggest that the novel is a strictly literary phenomenon that bears little relation to the historical context of its origins. But this, once again, would be to misconstrue the dialogic nature of the novel as a form of discourse and, hence, its relationship to the institution of literature — the inherited modes of writing, speaking, and thinking. But that is another story.⁷⁴

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⁷² For a lucid account, see Relihan, Appendix A.

⁷³ Not to mention Seneca’s tragedies or Lucan’s *Civil War*.

⁷⁴ This article is based on my introduction to *Petronius Satyrice* (Branham and Kinney 1996), where it was not possible to go into depth on Bakhtin. I want to thank Maria Plaza for reading and commenting on it.

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