

Roman Fever: Petronius' *Satyricon* and Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar*

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“Here’s a book,” said he, taking one from his bosom, ‘written with great elegance and spirit, and though the subject may give offense to some narrow-minded people, the author will always be held in esteem by any person of wit and learning.’ So saying he put into my hands Petronius Arbiter.”

Tobias Smollet, *The Adventures of Roderick Random*

The first time Gore Vidal read Petronius, “an electrical current was switched on” (*Palimpsest* 245).¹ He proudly proclaims: “my origins are in Petronius and Apuleius, two writers no American journalist has ever read” (*Views from a Window* 173; cf. *United States* 27, 112, 150, 307, 567). In *The Judgment of Paris*, Vidal makes fun of “the pornographer’s solemnity without which no puritan can satisfy his guilty appetite for vicarious sex”; in that respect, Vidal is “closer to Petronius” (v–vi). Adding Juvenal, he establishes a “chain of literary genealogy”: Petronius, Juvenal, Apuleius – then Shakespeare ... (*Views* 188; cf. *Myra Breckinridge* 27). Finally, he acknowledges his debt to Suetonius (*Views* 138; cf. *United States* 523–528, 567, 1207), complaining that he “was being denied, at least in class, Suetonius, Juvenal, Tacitus – and

¹ References to primary literature (both classical and modern) are given by titles. As regards *The City and the Pillar*, references are to the revised edition (1965), abbreviated as *City* in the text and as *CP* in parenthetical documentation; references to the original (1948) indicate as *CP1948*. Passages from Petronius’ *Cena* are quoted according to the edition of Smith (1982); further passages from the *Satyricon* are quoted according to the edition of Müller (1961); translations are taken from Arrowsmith (1959). The Latin text for Juvenal follows Braund (1996), and the translation is to Green (1998). The Latin text for Suetonius is Rolfe (1997–1998), the translation Grant (1989). For Apuleius, the Latin text and translation (interleaved) are Hanson (1989).

Livy” (*Palimpsest* 62).² Vidal’s biographer proposes that the Roman satirists “seemed models for some synthesis of his own that would capture in modern terms the tradition in fiction that brought together humor, satire, and high intellectual seriousness about society, culture, and the human condition.”³ Why does Vidal feel so enchanted by Petronius? Let us now embark on a sexual carnival and cultural cruise, but as Petronius’ protagonist and narrator Encolpius realizes, “Shipwreck is everywhere” (*ubique naufragium est; Sat.* 115,16). In an egregious example of literary shipwreck, J. Aldridge opines that *The City and the Pillar* is “a thoroughly amoral book – not *immoral* in the conventional sense, because it deals with homosexuality, but amoral in the purely ethical sense, because there is no vitality or significance in the view of life which has gone into it.”⁴ Well, this approach (or reproach) used to be applied to Petronius as well, but he too has a clear message.⁵ In both *City* (and other texts by Vidal) and the *Satyricon*, everything is shipwrecked: love and sex, reality, men and women, the military, direction, life, the body, religion, education, the self. Once again, the literature of the Early Empire amazes by its modernity. Petronius, still neglected by non-classicist literary

² Vidal also pays indirect tribute to Petronius by praising F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (originally entitled *Trimalchio at West Egg*) as a “unique book” (*Views* 187). For a bibliography on Fitzgerald and Petronius, see Endres 2003. Kaplan (1999) traces Vidal’s encounters with classical literature: Plutarch’s *Lives* (90), Plato’s *Republic* (157), the *Symposium* (199, 326–330), Petronius (303, 336, 407), Virgil (329), Apuleius (336), and Suetonius (491). Stimpson (1992) compares Petronius and *Myra Breckinridge* and *Myron*. Dick (1974) offers some brief insights (160–167). Clarke (1972), despite a promising title, draws no Petronian parallels. Tatum (1992) discusses Vidal’s Latin legacy. On Vidal’s trips to Rome, see Kaplan 1999, 94–96 and 261–263. Note also Vidal’s visit to Delphi: “The temple had, millennia before, been dedicated to the sunlight Gore himself worshipped. But it was also the place of dark, sibylline mysteries. As he stood on the spot where Greek mythology said the world began and where the ancient oracle at Delphi had forecast the future, he felt more strongly than ever the inseparability of past and present, and he felt that the visionary connections he could make through his imagination and artistry were as thrillingly close as he or anyone could ever hope to come to bringing them together,” in Kaplan 1999, 506; cf. *Palimpsest* 386.

³ Kaplan 1999, 336; cf. Vidal’s “Satire in the 1950s,” in *United States* 26–30.

⁴ Aldridge 1951, 178.

⁵ On Petronius’ moral message, see Arrowsmith 1966; Bacon 1958; Highet 1941; Wright 1976; Zeitlin 1971b. In *Live from Golgotha*, Saint Timothy pokes fun at Petronius’ detractors: “the most elegant man in the Roman empire ... also wrote dirty books that have been banned, despite my protest, in our diocese where no one reads anything anyway” (145); cf. Rose 1966.

scholars, adds an important source and key to post World-War-II American literature and culture.



“Jimmie was both homoerotic and heteroerotic. I suppose I am curious about the balance between the two in his nature. But then when one lover goes into shock at the news of his death and another mourns him to the end of his life, we have moved far beyond sex or eroticism and on to the wider shores of love, and shipwreck.”

Gore Vidal in *Palimpsest*

“I still dream of the youths that I knew when I myself was young – I had a yacht, was restless, needed a constant shift of scene as long as the scene included gray limestone and bright painted temples to nonexistent yet cheerful deities, and, always, the blue-green sea into which, years ago, a boy dove from the wharf at Croton so that he could swim to me aboard my ship, but since he broke his head on a rock beneath the blue-green sea, the dive was not into my arms but into all eternity.”

“Petronius” in *Live from Golgotha*

Maybe the most striking and penetrating feature of the *Satyricon* is its world of heightened reality, of extravagant boastfulness, of sexual superlatives. Petronius’ title may refer to either Latin *satura* (satire) or Greek σατυρικόν ([an account] of lecherous or lascivious happenings), and the two are in no way mutually exclusive;⁶ moreover, a *satyrion* or aphrodisiac enchants the characters throughout. In Petronius’ world, people achieve thanks to, not their heads, but their “heads,” or because of their tools, not their talents, or due to their genitals, not their genius (*tanto magis expedit inguina quam ingenia fricare*; *Sat.* 92,12). Sex is what keeps the characters going (*hanc tam praecipitem divisionem libido faciebat*; 10,7). Delayed gratification is no gratification at all; everything is instant, immediate, immense. Encolpius, the protagonist, remembers that in his youth he was as sexual as Achilles was powerful (129,1); his potent sexuality may be inferred from his name “The Crotch” or “McGroin.” The captain Lichas (whose name connotes oral sex)

⁶ See Coffey 1976, 178–203. An alternative (possibly preferred) spelling of Petronius’ title is *Satyrice*, but I retain *Satyricon*, which Vidal uses.

recognizes Encolpius by the size of his penis (*continuo ad inguina mea ad-movit officiosam manum et 'salve' inquit 'Encolpi'*; 105,9). The old lecher and con man Eumolpus needs *both* hands to handle Encolpius' penis (*utraque manu deorum beneficia tractat*; 140,13). Encolpius' friend Ascyltos, too, who like everybody else is *libidinosus*, seems to have been in great demand, which squares nicely with his name "Mr. Takeit." His member is so long that he needs three days to finish his "work" (*o iuvenem laboriosum: puto illum pridie incipere, postero die finire*). We find him in brothels and baths where crowds are applauding the immensity of his manhood; he seems to have a body attached to a penis rather than the other way round (*habebat enim inguinum pondus tam grande, ut ipsum hominem laciniam fascini crederes*; 92,9). Their boyfriend Giton is a *puer*, about sixteen, and *crispus, mollis, formosus* (97,2); he is extremely beautiful and arouses the lust of almost everybody, a sex-toy, the object of wet dreams of men and women alike.⁷

In Vidal's *Live from Golgotha*, Saint Timothy shows the reader right away, on the first page, that he has "the largest dick in our part of Asia Minor," and Saint Peter is called "The Rock" because of "the absolute thickness of his head" (*Golgotha* 3–4 – or is he named after Petronius' Petraitites?); the whole book revels in an "abundance of gratuitous sexual romping, much of it centred around Saint Paul, who is portrayed as a giggling, tap-dancing homosexual paedophile."⁸ In *Duluth*, Vidal's postmodern novel, the policewoman Darlene gasps: "slowly, Big John's manhood asserts itself ... rising toward the pantry ceiling ... more than all man ... something altogether else" (*Duluth* 51). Less graphically, *City* features sexually eager sailors: "they talked incessantly of conquests, boasting in order to impress other men who boasted" (*CP* 125). The shipmate Collins is so popular that women "roll dice" over him (36). A Marine "was had five times last Sunday" (160). Jim Willard, the novel's protagonist, arouses admiration: "Aren't you the one,

⁷ On (love and) sex in the *Satyricon*, see also Sullivan 1968, 232–253; Konstan 1994, 113–125; Hallett 2003; McGlathery 1998; Richardson 1984; Gill 1973; Fisher 1976; Schmeling 1971; Dupont 1977, 153–184; Obermayer 1998, 154–161 and 313–330; Rimell 2002, 159–175; Slater 1990, 38–49; McMahon 1998, 92–97, 192–215, and *passim*. Cf. the Turkish baths in *The City and the Pillar* 164; the conspicuously named Baths of Nero in *The Judgment of Paris* 55–64; the New Star Baths in *Live from Golgotha*; Vidal's visits to the Everard Baths (*Palimpsest* 101); Juvenal's Ninth Satire; Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* 8,29; and Williams 1999, 86–91.

⁸ Neilson 1995, 80.

though! How do you do it? Or should I say, *what* do you have?" (174; Vidal's emphasis). Bob Ford, Jim's friend and lover, still receives letters "from girls all over the world" (192). Ronald Shaw, the actor, has it all: "all the girls everywhere [are] mad for him" (60). Ken, a fellow soldier of Jim's, is "oversexed" and "couldn't stop thinking about women" (128). Moreover, like the *Satyricon*'s tableau of dildos, flagellation, voyeurism, exhibitionism, sadism, rape, vegetables as sex toys, intimated bestiality (*Sat.* 43,8), front doors and back doors, sex in *City* occurs in all varieties: twosomes throughout, but also a threesome (*CP* 52) or a foursome (129), with men or mules (22). Sex it is, or is it?

Love and sex are shipwrecked. F. Zeitlin, in her aptly titled article "Petronius as Paradox: Anarchy and Artistic Integrity," classifies the sexual relationships in the *Satyricon* as a "'dance pattern' which teases us with the possibility of a meaningful pattern but which is then denied."⁹ *City* features dysfunctional relationships, a Petronian model of Bob's poignant view of Sally (before they get married): "Prick-teaser, like all the rest. Leads you on so you think, *now* I can lay her and then, just as you get all hot, *she* gets scared"; he is "tired of going out with *nice* girls" (*CP* 22 and 27; Vidal's emphases). In Chapter 2, when Jim is searching for Bob, "he could not make him out in the mob of boys"; he turns round, expecting Bob, but it is "someone else" (11); likewise, his letter to Bob is returned, "addressee unknown" (32); in New York he looks for Bob at the Seamen's Bureau, but "there was no record of a Bob Ford" (33); he learns that Bob has traveled to the West Coast and follows him: "But the trail ended in San Francisco" (33–34); at one point, Jim thinks he has found Bob in a bar, "but when he approached, heart beating fast, the figure turned toward him and showed a stranger's face" (34); in a dream he tries to reach Bob, "who retreated when he tried to touch him" (135); they communicate athletically, even militaristically, not verbally: "The hitting of a white ball back and forth across a net was at least a form of communication and better than silence or even one of Bob's monologues" (13). Estelle, the whore, cannot fathom why Jim is lonely: "You got everything and still you're sitting here all by yourself, getting drunk. I wish I *was* you. I wish I was young and nice-looking. I wish ..." (8; Vidal's ellipsis and emphasis).

⁹ Zeitlin 1971b, 653. On homosexuality in Vidal, see also Behrendt 2002.

A plump woman on Jim's ship, who is "endlessly inventive in her lust" and led on by Jim, fails to seduce him (37–39). Collins features a tattoo, "which pledged him forever to Anna, a girl belonging to the dim past" (35). He asks a waitress what she has got: "The waitress handed him a menu. 'That's what I got,' she said flatly and walked away. 'Stuck-up bitch'" (44). Shaw is hopeless at love, too: "they all think I must be terribly happy, which they resent and which isn't so. Funny, isn't it? I've had all the things I ever wanted and I'm not ... well, it's an awful feeling not having anybody to be close to" (69; Vidal's ellipsis). The novelist Paul Sullivan is even worse, notoriously unhappy and masochistic: "Paul had many affairs. Some for physical relief, some as the result of boredom, a few for love or what he thought was love. These all ended badly; he never knew exactly why" (90–91). Devoted to Aristophanes' "desire and pursuit of the whole," Maria Verlaine, Jim and Paul's friend, quixotically moves "from affair to affair, drawn to the sensitive, the delicate, the impossible" (103). Another histrionic evocation of doomed love is Tristan and Isolde (99). German saga comes in handy as well, "If there was some silver Nordic mystery, she wanted to partake of it" (104), as does Greek mythology in "Maria's hymns to Aphrodite" (172). The more solemn the model, the greater the erotic abyss: Maria's "imagination could transform the most ordinary of men into dream-lovers, if the occasion were right But in time imagination flagged. Reality intruded, and the affair would end" (103–104). In a bar in New York, Jim observes "an old man [who] was trying to make a sailor who in turn was trying to make a soldier" (184). *City* exploits "sad old men, eager but unattractive, who tried first one boy, then another; inured to rebuff, they searched always for that exceptional type which liked old men, or money" (200). All characters are onanistic, failing to achieve meaningful gratification.

The sexual manifestation of erotic shipwreck is impotence. There seems to be only one crime in Petronius: sexual abstinence. Encolpius laments the burial of his one body part as powerful as Achilles (*funerata est illa pars corporis qua quondam Achilles eram*; *Sat.* 129,1). His mistress Circe confirms his opinion (*medius [fidius] iam peristi*; 129,6). Despite sexual enticement, he becomes colder than a winter in Gaul (*frigidior hieme Gallica*; 19,3), feels his private parts chilled with a thousand deaths (*inguina mea mille iam mortibus frigida*; 20,2), and is frosted worse than cold winters (*frigidior rigente bruma / confugerat in viscera mille operta rugis*; 132,8). In a materialistic culture, he is worthless because he cannot "sell" himself any-

more (*neque puero neque puellae bona sua vendere potest*; 134,8).¹⁰ He even addresses his member and its escape to the underworld (*hoc de te merui, ut me in caelo positum ad inferos traheres?*; 132,10). The beginning of the Story of the Widow of Ephesus would be another example of sex and death. In *City*, Jim painfully wonders “why he had failed so completely in what he had wanted to do” with his date Anne: “At the moment when what should have happened was about to happen, the image of Bob had come between him and the girl, rendering the act obscene and impossible” (CP 53); like Encolpius, he cannot “destroy the glacial fear in his stomach” (CP1948 80). With Maria, as well, nothing happened: “Jim failed. He could not perform the act. He was inadequate” (CP 110). Love equals degradation and decay: “[Jim] kissed the Death Goddess” (109). Maria herself admits: “I’ve failed, like everyone else” (114). At the end of Jim, Paul, and Maria’s trip to South America, “Each was now secure in his own failure” (113). In the original, Paul contemplates reasons for his “failure” and watches “the inevitable collapse of the power to love,” and Jim quickly conflates Mr. Right and Mr. Right Now: “He fell in love with a few [men] but, since most of them were just passing through town or were married, nothing ever came of these one-night stands” (CP1948 134, 277).¹¹

Now, true love could have provided Encolpius and Giton (the sexual “neighbor”)¹² and Jim and Bob with one straw to grasp at in this crazy world,

¹⁰ And of course it is Mercury/Hermes, the god of commerce and thievery, that helps him reestablish his virile power; now he can sell himself again.

¹¹ Myra Breckinridge cannot excite her student Rusty either: “... all to no avail” (*Myra* 147; Vidal’s ellipsis). *Myra* is “no book for the seeker of sexual thrills or for the sexual dropout who frequents girly movies. While the novel is replete with the entire gamut of sexual activity, no character achieves genuine sexual satisfaction. No character grows, develops, or comes close to realizing potentials or possibilities,” Wilhelm and Wilhelm 1969, 590–591.

¹² Encolpius praises Giton as *verecundissimus* (*Sat.* 25,3), *mitissimus*, and as speaker of *moderationis verecundiaeque verba, quae formam eius egregie decebant* (93,4). Their intimacy seems to be longstanding and powerful: *vetustissimam consuetudinem ... in sanguinis pignus* (80,6). Encolpius enjoys Giton’s proximity: *toto pectore adstrinxi* (91,9). A poem celebrates a night of bliss: *qualis nox fuit illa, di deaeque, / quam mollis torus. haesimus calentes / et transfudimus hinc et hinc labellis / errantes animas. valete, curae / mortales. ego sic perire coepi* (79,8). To Encolpius, Circe praises their relationship highly: *eum sine quo non potes vivere, ex cuius osculo pendes, quem sic tu amas* (127,4). Encolpius even thinks of true love: *si vere Encolpion dilexisti, da oscula* (114,9). Also, Encolpius’ tribute to Ascyrtos, *carissimum sibi commilitonem fortunaeque etiam similitudine parem* (80,8), and Ascyrtos’ acknowledgment of a mutual obligation, *sic dividere cum fratre nolito* (11,4), would hint at a genuinely meaningful relationship if it did not

but erotic shipwreck is everywhere. Maybe the most shocking irony is how *City* smugly perverts all the established medical, religious, amatory, dietary, social, epistemological, ethical ... discourses for emotional well-being: “Since they [Jim and Paul] did not understand one another, each was able to sustain an illusion about the other, which was the usual beginning of love, if not truth” (*CP* 96). The recipes are even more flagrant in the early version. Shaw offers a strange remedy: “I think that just to keep healthy one should have a lot of them [one-night stands], different ones, anonymous ones. I always feel so purged and chaste after an affair with someone I’ll never see again” (*CP1948* 232). Jim hopelessly reveals: “I usually have four or five a week [tricks] and none of it means anything, but afterwards I feel so peaceful and clean ... you know what I mean” (253; Vidal’s ellipsis). Maria uneasily confesses: “It’s hard to say what being unhappy is. I was not ill. I had all the food I wanted. I had friends. I was happy, of course” (248). Sullivan perversely suggests: “I expect if you loved a department store dummy and felt complete with it you’d be happy, you’d be doing right, fulfilling your nature” (273). A pregnant sentence sums it all up: “It was easier to have sex with a man than to acquire a friend” (*CP* 166). Encolpius laments the same fate:

Friendship lasts while there’s profit in the name.
The dice are fickle; fortune spins about.
But oh, my smiling friends of better days,
where was your love, when my luck ran out?

nomen amicitiae sic, quatenus expedit, haeret; / calculus in tabula mobile ducit opus. / cum fortuna manet, vultum servatis, amici; / cum cecidit, turpi vertitis ora fuga, Sat. 80,9; cf. 38,13

However funny the freedman and vulgar host Trimalchio’s saying that nobody loves him more than his dog (*nemo in domo mea me plus amat*; 64,8), it is a shocking metaphor of the death of the heart. And shipwreck continues.

occur amidst a merciless flogging with a leather thong. Finally, an episode on Lichas’ ship approximates the idea of two lovers dying for each other. When confronted with a life-threatening storm, Giton and Encolpius make plans to be buried together and bind themselves together with a belt (114,8ff.). But of course, they had no other choice: they would have died no matter what – and why not get some emotional “mileage” out of it?

Reality is shipwrecked. Nothing turns out the way one expects. Pretense, theatricality, and camp accent Petronius' modernity: "Encolpius and his companions are constantly placed in situations where the deceit and the aridity of modern life are shown up."¹³ In this context it is interesting to note that Petronius' famous portrait by Tacitus (*nam illi dies per somnum, nox officiis et oblectamentis vitae transigebatur ...; Annales* 16,18), who together with the Elder Pliny and Plutarch is our only biographical evidence from the classical period, depicts Petronius not as a debauchee, but as a *poseur* of vice (*vitiorum imitatione*). Encolpius contemplates suicide and tries to hang himself, when Giton proclaims that he will die with him ('*erras' inquit 'Encolpi, si putas contingere posse ut ante moriaris,' Sat.* 94,10; cf. Vidal's *Two Sisters* 165–166). He grabs a razor, dramatically moves it to slash his throat, and falls to the ground, drop-dead. Encolpius quickly picks up the blade and prepares to pass away alongside him, when he notes that it was a blunt one for practicing. It was a staged death, a *mimica mors* (94,15). This is a brilliant example of camp, "a sensibility that converts the serious into the frivolous."¹⁴ The world in the *Satyricon* is a Shakespearean stage:

The comic actors strut the stage, bow and grin.
The cast: old Moneybags, Father and Son.
The farce ends, the smiles come off, revealing
the true face below, the bestial, leering one.

*grex agit in scaena mimum: pater ille vocatur, / filius hic, nomen divitis
ille tenet. / mox ubi ridendas inclusit pagina partes, / vera redit facies,
assimulata perit; 80,9*

V. Rudich explains: "Almost every major personage in the novel, in one way or the other, is not what he or she pretends to be."¹⁵

In *City*, illusion is paramount. People play and pose, act and agitate, fake and fabricate. Jim finds out a terrible truth: "Obviously the world was not what it seemed. Anything might be true of anybody" (*CP* 175). A crucial

¹³ Cameron 1970, 425.

¹⁴ See Wooten 1984.

¹⁵ Rudich 1997, 190. On theatricality in Petronius, see also Rosati 1999; Sandy 1974; Jones 1991; Elsner 1993; Conte 1996, 73–103; Walsh 1970, 24–27; Rankin 1969; Slater 1990, 27–37 *passim*; Wooten 1976; Panayotakis 1995; Dupont 1977, 91–119; Rimell 2002, 32–48, 98–112, and 140–158.

part of the novel is set in Hollywood, the capital of illusion, where things are always covered up (61). With the plump woman on the ship, Jim plays “the desired role” and gives “a performance” (37–38). At their date, Emily, Anne, Collins, and Jim all establish false ages (48). Anne wants to become an actress, sounds like one, sobs like one, and poses like one (48–53). The Garden Hotel features a manager who affects a British accent, statues which pretend to hold up the ceiling, a desk which simulates mahogany, clerks who stage a welcome, and an artificial jungle (56–57). Shaw, the actor, metamorphoses himself from George Cohen to George M. Cohan to Ronald Shaw (61), always wears a mask (69), and likes to “deceive his audience” (65). Maria, Paul, and Jim perform “a play for an audience that could never know or appreciate the quality of the performance” (108). In a bar, the patrons are “acting out their various rituals of courtship,” which makes for an interesting “menagerie” (93; cf. 163). Closeted homosexuals wear a “stylized mask” (163). Jim plays a “masquerade” to conceal his sexual orientation (188–189). At gay parties, straight women “make stage love and avoid boredom, if not despair” (63). Imperceptive bystanders are unaware of the “comedy” of gay pick-ups (184, 199). In the 1948 edition, Jim hates Anne because her strange look is “a sudden opening in a mask”; in a bar, the patrons “enact pantomimes”; when Maria faces Jim with some unpleasant facts, he is afraid: “she had started to push back a veil, started to unmask him”; Paul needs “the drama of pain”; at the end, Jim lies about being a pilot: “It made him feel good to invent a new personality for himself, a different role to play; he stood outside himself now” (*CP1948* 80, 138, 155, 270, 310). *City* is a brilliant example of the theatricalization of life, of the city as a stage (a development that would reach its climax with the election of a movie star as president of the United States – “our first Acting President” as Vidal delightfully exclaimed).¹⁶

¹⁶ Moreover, camp (see Harvey 1998, 307–310; Kaplan 1999, 80) is conveyed through italicization, literally skewing the text: “Luckily, nowadays everybody’s *gay*, if you know what I mean ... *literally* everybody! So different when I was a girl. Why, just a few days ago a friend of mine ... well, I wouldn’t go so far as to say a *friend*, actually I think he’s rather *sinister*, but anyway” (*CP* 160–161). Vidal’s ellipses further disrupt signifier and signified. A reference to the king of camp, Oscar Wilde, “The dread disease that dare not tell its name” (153), stresses a literal obscenity, what must remain unspeakable. Sir Roger Beaston (note the name), a man with yellow hair, is “the perfect *camp!*” (175; Vidal’s emphasis). Jim, finally, is accused of being “a regular little *camp*” (*CP1948* 265; Vidal’s emphasis).

In all these cases, theatricality secures power. Petronius' "philosopher" Eumolpus (etymologically the "sweet singer"), who is, as P. George points out, the perfectly perverted epitome of Catullus' dictum "that a poet's life must be chaste, though his verses need not be,"¹⁷ relates a seductive story. The story of the Pergamene Boy is an account of Greek *paidēra*, the *usus formosorum* (*Sat.* 85,2). Eumolpus hypocritically pretends to abhor obscenity (*tam vehementer excandui, tam severa tristitia violari aures meas obsceno sermone nolui*) so that the boy's mother soon took Eumolpus for one *ex philosophis*. Later (119,24–27) he, a self-confessed lecherous pederast, will be singing tirades against his own sexual vices. Also, Encolpius, to whom Eumolpus is telling the story, thinks that the story is hilarious, which it is, but he fails to note the imminent dangers for his own relationship because the story anticipates Eumolpus' encounter and seduction with Giton (*laudo Ganymedem*; 92,3). Furthermore, the particularly manipulative Giton blatantly lies to Encolpius. He admits that earlier he chose to go off with Ascylytos because he was stronger than Encolpius and that he was afraid of being beaten up (91), but later he swears that *nullam vim factam* (133,2). Of course, Ascylytos did not have to use any violence; Giton more than willingly submitted to his sexual approaches. In this particular episode, Giton was drawing on the ambiguity of *vis*, which means that the phrase may also be translated as simply "nothing happened." Giton makes his partner jealous only to be desired by him even more intensely; by being admired he will obtain virtually everything (*postquam se amari sensit, supercilium altius sustulit*; 91,7). Encolpius, when he is mad at Giton after he had abandoned him, calls him a *mulier secutuleia*, a fortunate word here, since Giton is a clear follower or opportunist, always siding with the stronger party (81,3–6). Giton is a crook: "The spurious emotions and false drama demanded of the declaimer in the rhetorical schools have in him become indistinguishable from genuine emotions and real drama."¹⁸ Last but not least, the *ménage-à-trois* secures a dinner invitation by posing as *scholastici* (10,6).

In *City*, theatrical sexuality guarantees similar appearances. For Jim, erotic theatricality results in economic advancement: he moves in with Shaw to save money (*CP* 79); as a matter of fact, like Trimalchio as *puer delicatus* (*Sat.* 75,11; cf. 81,4) or the eager Pergamene *pais* (85–87), Jim gets rich by being a kept boy, for sexual services rendered. Jim's successor Peter, pre-

¹⁷ George 1966, 348.

¹⁸ George 1966, 341.

tending to like men, uses Shaw to promote himself professionally: he shacks up with a famous actor only to outdo him in the movies (*CP* 153; cf. 181). Like Eumolpus pretending to be gouty for purposes of legacy hunting at the end of the *Satyricon*, Jim cheats his doctors in order to get out of the army: “He continued to limp in a most distinguished way” (152). The truck driver who “enjoyed being had but pretended that he was really interested in women and money” (159; cf. 164) has a full dance card. Moreover, in Hollywood’s hierarchy of money, “each man was treated with the deference his salary called for” (80). According to Trimalchio, *assem habeas, assem valeas* (*Sat.* 77,6; cf. 34,7) – or, as they say in L.A. nowadays, you are what you drive. Like Trimalchio’s rise from “a ‘shack’ (*casula*) to a ‘shrine’ (*templum*),”¹⁹ the nobody of the slums of Baltimore becomes the rich and famous Ronald Shaw of Hollywood (*CP* 61).

Moreover, theatricality secures secrecy. Many episodes in the *Satyricon* involve scenes of concealment, suspicious behavior, voyeurism, and pretence, and often take place after dark (like Petronius’ predilection for “working” at night). For example, in the episode on Lichas’ ship, Encolpius and Giton pretend to look like Ethiopian slaves by blackening their skins, shaving their heads and eyebrows, and putting on wigs to avoid detection (*mimicis artibus*; *Sat.* 106,1).²⁰ The stolen cloak at the beginning underlines performance as fraud as well (12–15), or Giton’s ruse to hide, like Ulysses in the *Odyssey*, under a mattress/ram draws attention to theatricality in order to vitiate exposure (97–98). Sex too is hushed up behind closed doors (e.g., the bolted entrance to the tomb in the Story of the Widow of Ephesus). Petronius

¹⁹ Schlant 1991, 53

²⁰ Juvenal starts off his Second Satire with an equation of pederasty with cant: “I hear high moral discourse / from raging queens who affect ancestral peasant virtues” (*quotiens aliquid de moribus audent / qui Curios simulant et Bacchanalia vivunt*). Philosophers are hypocritical because they conceal their passivity behind the mask of masculinity. They display skin that teems with hair but whose depilated buttocks are as smooth as baby-skin (2,11–15); moreover, they have anal warts, something they got from having (too much) passive anal intercourse. Romans should not trust the *Socraticos cinaedos* and stay away from *tristibus obscenis* (1–10). Creticus wears *multicia*, a transparent toga (66) – to plead in court. Two of Juvenal’s favorite issues reappear: homosexuality (a man’s genitals and buttocks can be seen through the cloth) coupled with effeminacy (female prostitutes wear these garments in 11,188) and hypocrisy (Creticus pretends to have no secrets, hence his see-through toga, but shortly he will be prosecuting adulteresses, meanwhile never considering his own outrageousness). Juvenal both condemns hypocrisy and realizes that it pays: *donant arcana cylindros* (2,61). See also Nappa 1998; Walters 1998a and 1998b; Freudenburg 2001, 248–258; Gold 1998; Hopman 2003.

refuses to tell us everything: “par rapport à l’union sexuelle, il y a un ‘avant’, il y a un ‘après’ mais pas de ‘pendant’.”²¹ In *City*, Shaw, a mere commodity, goes to straight nightclubs with women in order to satisfy his boss, “a nervous businessman whose nightmare was that scandal might end the career of his hottest property” (*CP* 72). At a camp party, we find a lot of “famous” but surreptitious men: “painters, writers, composers, athletes, even a member of Congress” (157), all there by stealth. Homosexuals can be identified “by their tight, self-conscious manner, particularly when they moved, neck and shoulders rigid” (59–60). Or, Jim and Shaw are “worshipped as a dazzling couple ... behind the stucco walls of the house” (67); they fear nothing, “at least behind the high stucco walls of Shaw’s estate” (72; cf. 62). There are rumors about “a certain European king who had taken a new boy who was supposed to be extraordinarily handsome and charming, even if he *had* begun his career hustling in Miami” (175; Vidal’s emphasis).²² And the hustling continues.

Gender is shipwrecked. Clothes and color, perfume and piquancy, jewels and jeers, attire and allure, cosmetics and consumption dramatically blur gender lines in both the *Satyricon* and *City*. Trimalchio’s clothes are bright and loud. Notably the clashing colors green and red dominate his apparel – feminine clothes, for his wife Fortunata wears these colors, too (*galbino succincta cingillo*; *Sat.* 67,4). Moreover, he, the *lautissimus homo* (26,9),

²¹ Fisher 1976, 6.

²² Conversation is shipwrecked, too. In both the *Satyricon* and *City*, people flatter and fake, chat and cheat, proclaim and pretend. Titbits of information, anecdotes, digressions, gossip ... significantly promulgate theatricality: “Bob’s stories varied with each telling” (*CP* 14); “I heard Sally say once ...” (19); “I’ve been hearing stories ...” (21); “Mystery was clearly the order of the day” (21); “there were rumors about other actors ...” (62); “he found himself fascinated by the stories they told of their affairs with one another” (66); “It’s the talk of the circuit how ...” (68); “beautifully dressed people who drank heavily and talked incessantly of their sex life ...” (72); “the secret Hollywood where, so it was said, nearly all the leading men were homosexual ...” (72); “all homosexuals talked continually of love” (83); “He was quite cruel to one boy, I’m told” (88); “I hear a lot of strange stories about him ...” (123); “they talked incessantly of conquests, boasting in order to impress other men who boasted” (125); “soft young men who knew a thousand unpleasant stories about famous people” (132); “Boasting to a friend is one of life’s few certain pleasures” (167); “We spend all our time prying, even though there’s never anything very interesting going on” (190–191); “What’s the gossip?” (94). Speaking of gossip, when Vidal paid an extortionate woman to have an abortion for a child he possibly fathered, a cruel joke circulated: “A faggot doctor-abortionist had a Christmas tree, and on it was a foetus and he said that’s Gore Vidal’s child,” in Kaplan 1999, 365.

wears bedroom slippers in public. He is stretched out on *cervicalia minutissima* (32,1), which, in Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*, provide a comfortable but dainty seating arrangement for women: "small but quite numerous, the kind that refined women use to support their chins and necks" (*quis maxillas et cervices delicatae mulieres suffulcire consuerunt*; Apul. *Met.* 10,20). In addition, a fringe adorns his napkin, and, again, everything he wears is purple, a color that further *pretends* to senatorial dignity. One of the most entertaining scenes in the *Satyricon* is when Trimalchio orders a servant to be flogged for having bound up his arm with white rather than scarlet bandages (*alba potius quam conchyliata involverat lana*; *Sat.* 54,4), an effeminate color together with *galbinus* (cf. Martial 1,96,6–7). In Juvenal's Second Satire, Creticus' hair is long and curly and held together in a *reticulum auratum* (2,96), a golden hairnet in which, in Petronius, the woman Fortunata's hair is caught up (*Sat.* 67,6). Moreover, the color of his clothes (*galbinus*) again recalls Trimalchio's and his wife's dresses. Last but not least, the "priests" in *The Golden Ass* carry the Syrian Goddess in procession. Their garments are strikingly similar to Trimalchio's fashion:

Next day they put on varicoloured garments and beautified themselves hideously by daubing clay pigment on their faces and outlining their eyes with greasepaint. Then they set out, wearing turbans and saffron-colored robes and vestments of linen and silk. Some had white tunics decorated with purple lance-shaped designs flowing in every direction, gathered up into a girdle, and on their feet they wore yellow shoes.

Die sequenti variis coloribus indusiati et deformiter quisque formati, facie caenoso pigmento delita et oculis obunctis graphice prodeunt, mitellis et crocotis et carbasinis et bombycinis iniecti, quidam tunicas albas, in modum lanciolarum quoquoversum fluente purpura depictas, cingulo subligati, pedes luteis induti calceis; Apul. *Met.* 8,27²³

So far for clothes and color. How about perfume, jewels, and cosmetics?

²³ J. Lindsay, in his translation, adds an interesting footnote to this episode that shows "how acutely ... Apuleius was aware of the social decay of the Empire under the fine show. In a sense the odyssey of the ass is a journey into the causes of that decay, with the growth of brigandage and of misery in the countryside," in Apuleius 1960, 184 note 1.

Trimalchio dips his hands in perfume (*Trimalchio intravit et deterosa fronte unguento manus lavit; Sat. 47,1*). Slaves at the *Cena* anoint the guests' feet with perfume (70,8), which is, as we read in Pliny the Elder (*NH 13,22*), a practice that Otho introduced to Nero. Juvenal's hypocrites *spirant opobalsama* (2,41). Real Roman men, though, have no need for perfume (*Inde in omnem vitam unguento abstinemus, quoniam optimus odor in corpore est nullus; Seneca, Ep. 108,16*). On his tombstone (*Sat. 71*), Trimalchio wants to be immortalized wearing five gold rings. He seems to be too effete to wear five heavy rings while alive, just like Juvenal's Crispinus (*nec sufferre queat maioris pondera gemmae; 1,29*), and what is even more important, the gold rings *pretend* to equestrian status. The maid Chrysis informs us that Encolpius puts on make-up, which only heightens his effeminacy and intensifies his dainty gait (*Sat. 126,2*); he has long curls, which are associated with youth and feminine beauty (18). Ascyltos accuses Encolpius that he could not, like a Roman *vir*, dominate women (9,10). Juvenal's Second Satire shows a similar picture. S. H. Braund and J. D. Cloud suggest that the Second Satire "is planned as a progressive stripping away of veils,"²⁴ a particularly fortunate image, since it is usually women who wear veils. Juvenal, literally apocalyptic, wants to unmask men behaving like women. Hispo, for example, has surrendered his social power by submitting to penetration (*Hispo subit iuvenes; 2,50*), the ultimate failure of Roman *honos* and *virtus*. R. Taylor stresses Hispo's confusion: "The intentionally ambiguous meaning of the verb *subeo*, which can also mean 'to enter' or 'to assault' on the one hand, or 'to submit to' on the other, suggests that Hispo's two illnesses are the compounded results of the active and passive roles."²⁵ In summary, in the *Satyricon* perversion is everywhere: "the mincing gait, effeminate, the girl-men, their hair curried to silk, and the clothes, so many and so strange, to mew our manhood up" (*omnibus ergo / scorta placent fractique enervi corpore gressus / et laxi crines et tot nova nomina vestis, / quaeque virum quaerunt; Sat. 119,24–27*).²⁶

The boundaries of masculinity in *City* are equally blurry and constantly questioned, transgressed, and reinvented (and they are even more fragile in

²⁴ Braund and Cloud 1981, 207.

²⁵ Taylor 1997, 354.

²⁶ There are fascinating studies of Roman gender (deviance): Williams 1999, 125–224; Walters 1997; Parker 1997; MacMullen 1982; Alston 1998; Taylor 1997; Richlin 1993; Griffin 1976; Colin 1955; Gleason 1995; Stevenson 1995; Clarke 1998; Edwards 1993, 63–97; Obermayer 1998, 145–189; Meyer-Zwiffelhofer 1995, 64–108 and 134–180.

Myra Breckinridge, *Myron*, *Two Sisters*, *Golgotha*, *The Smithsonian Institution*, and *Duluth*): passivity, cross-dressing (CP 7), bisexuality (e.g., “In Leaper’s world all men were whores and all whores were bisexual”; 69), “beards” (72 – “fag hags” nowadays), a female “Major” (“Gray hair cut like a man’s and dressed in a skirted suit with a somber tie”; 95), a lesbian who looks like the “Apollo Belvedere” (96), a “quiet, thoughtful girl” who grows “masculine and aggressive” (147), a “butch Marine” who “was had five times last Sunday and still went to Mass” (160), “queens” (164), “Amazons” (172), a Hindu prince who looks like Theda Bara (175), or a gay actor marrying a lesbian actress (181–182). The Trimalchian host Rolly wears makeup (175), toned down from the lipstick on his “thick, rather moist lips” in the original edition (CP1948 266; cf. *Golgotha* 146). His first party outfit is modeled on Petronius: “he wore a scarlet blazer with a crest. As he moved, breasts jiggled beneath a pale yellow silk shirt. The handshake was predictably damp” (CP 158); Vidal adds “an emerald and ruby ring” (160). At the second party, Rolly features “a light gray suit pulled in tightly at the waist, a mauve shirt gorgeously monogrammed, and a sea green crepe de chine ascot at his rosy throat”; to top it off, he smells “of violets” (174). Maria admits that Rolly is “harmless,” but looking at him is “like seeing oneself in a distorted mirror” (176), a “caricature of all the worst traits in women” (CP1948 268). A pseudo-intellectual discussion puts *City*’s gender trouble in perspective: “The words *fairy* and *pansy* were considered to be in bad taste. They preferred to say that a man was *gay*, while someone quite effeminate was a *queen*” (CP 164). Shaw wonders: “If a man likes men, he wants a man, and if he likes women, he wants a woman, so who wants a freak who’s neither?” (70). And even in Vidal’s “Roman” novel *Julian*, Libanius observes that “nearly all the men now use depilatories, which makes it difficult to tell them from women ...” (*Julian* 4; Vidal’s ellipsis). Julian proclaims: “You don’t want an emperor who wears a woman’s jewels” (257); he also dislikes the “lascivious touch of silk” (173) and is particularly abhorred by eunuchs (318–324). Finally, at one point Julian thinks a Persian ambassador has entered his palace: “I nearly got to my feet, so awed was I by the spectacle: gold rings, jeweled brooch, curled hair” – he turns out to be only his barber (313).

Men are shipwrecked. How about women? The *Satyricon* features a “complete absence of any favourable reference to women.”²⁷ Petronius’

²⁷ Sullivan 1968, 124; cf. Juvenal’s Sixth Satire.

women lack all the characteristics of *l'éternel féminin*: “douceur, soumission, pureté, besoin de protection, qualités de femme d'intérieur.”²⁸ The first woman we encounter in the novel (as we have it) is a pimp (*Sat.* 7). In violation of the stereotype of the vital young man as the seducer, it is old women and women in general who are particularly voluptuous: “no woman was so chaste or faithful that she couldn't be seduced; sooner or later she would fall head over heels in love with a stranger” (*nullamque esse feminam tam pudicam, quae non peregrina libidine usque ad furorem averteretur*; 110,7). The healer Quartilla is a *mulier libidinosa* (113,7; cf. *tot annorum secreta, quae vix mille homines noverunt*, 17,9; *Iunonem meam iratam habeam, si umquam me meminerim virginem fuisse*, 25,4). The passenger Tryphaena, whose name suggests luxury, hedonism, and cosmopolitanism, travels the world in search of pleasure (*omnium feminarum formosissima, quae voluptatis causa huc atque illuc vectatur*; 101,5). The freedman Seleucus depicts women as flighty and voracious (*milvinum genus*; 42,7). Although Pannychis is a seven-year old girl, she is already sexually active – even all night long, as her name connotes. In Juvenal, on the other hand, men spin and weave (2,54–57), just two more examples of socio-erotic transgression (remember the sepulchral motto *domum servavit, lanam fecit*; note also that their needle or spindle is *praegnans*).

In *City*, Sally, Bob's future wife, is a “dark aggressive girl who had been after Bob all year” (*CP* 14; cf. 149). Jim's sister Carrie paints her face, which makes her look “whorish” (16). Women “roll dice” over a sailor (36). A woman on Jim's ship is “endlessly inventive in her lust” (37). Anne puts the moves on Jim (49–52). The girls in New Orleans look at tourists “impudently” and hint at “‘the good time’ to come” (92). In the barracks, a “heavy-breasted woman” decorates the walls (122). In L.A. “all the chicks want a good time ... and no talk about marrying or any of that shit” (183–184). In the military, the officers complain that “all women [are] unfaithful” (124). A famous actress and tennis student of Jim's “swear[s] obscenely whenever she made a bad shot” (59). Some women are “a kind of relief, rather like aspirin” (172). Moreover, as I have presented, men are wearing makeup while women are less concerned with their appearances. Circe, for example, likes trash: slaves, gladiators, mule drivers, or footmen (*Sat.* 126,1–11). One can easily perceive her modernity in taste: prisoners, soldiers, truck drivers, or construction workers are the staples of pornography nowadays. Possibly

²⁸ Fisher 1976, 11.

Circe does not even shave her armpits and thus perspires malodorous smells. In a Petronian scene, Jim is likewise turned off by Anne because “all he could think of was the flecks of dandruff in her hair” (*CP* 49). How about men *in the military*?

The military is shipwrecked. In antiquity, the Theban Sacred Band was the outstanding example of heroic loyalty. In the *Aeneid*, Virgil sings the fate of arms and men, the staples of Rome’s greatness. Juvenal’s Otho seems a good military commander: he gives orders to his troops, arms himself in a mighty armor, and courageously rides into battle – but not before making sure that his armor looks impeccable (*ille tenet speculum, pathici gestamen Othonis, / Actoris Aurunci spoliū, quo ille se videbat / armatum, cum iam tolli vexilla iuberet*; 2,99–101). This is a fascinating picture: a commander giving himself commands and watching his own effeminacy in a mirror. The world is going topsy-turvy. The bread that others eat, Otho applies to his face as a moisturizer for his delicate skin and to prevent the growth of a beard, *the* symbol of male power, hence his rivalry of two other beauty-queens of antiquity: Cleopatra and Semiramis. Petronius’ Trimalchio (Otho was a confidant of Nero, during whose reign the *Satyricon* was composed) did just the opposite in his youth: he put lamp-oil on his face to make his beard sprout (*Sat.* 75,10), which is another role-reversal. Trimalchio, at that time his master’s *puer delicatus*, wants to appear masculine, while *pueri delicati* were cherished for their very softness and smoothness. Otho is a *pathicus* (*Juv.* 2,99), just one of the many Latin terms for passive homosexuals and also the worst invective that can be leveled at a Roman *vir* (compare also Otho to Petronius’ *cinaedi* at *Sat.* 21,2 and 23,5).

Juvenal’s Gracchus, a *retiarius* or “net-gliadiator” (2,143ff.), contracted a homosexual marriage as a bride, brought a dowry, and reclined in his husband’s lap (2,117ff.). His noble birth and solemn name only heighten his depravity; he arrays himself for his fight in a tunic, an image that suggests a strip-show rather than a bloody battle, and true, Gracchus disgraces himself by fleeing the arena. Encolpius is a former gliadiator (*gliadiator obscene*; *Sat.* 9,8), but as G. Hight points out, “gliadiator,” rather than evoking virility and virtue, means “the lowest pit of degradation,”²⁹ even “prostitution,” just as Gracchus’ behavior “presents the most public humiliation imaginable for a Roman aristocrat: defeat in the arena under the gaze of the assembled Roman

²⁹ Hight 1941, 183; see also Barton 1993, 11–81; Kyle 1998, 79–90.

populace,”³⁰ and thus prostitution in a non-sexual sense. In a funny encounter, Encolpius is stopped by a real soldier because of his *phaecasiae* that form a sharp contrast to army boots (82,3). Although white shoes are, of course, self-explanatory, there is someone else in the *Satyricon* wearing white shoes: Fortunata (67,4), a woman. Finally, a Roman knight is *infamis* and keenly interested in Ascyrtos’ large *inguina*, and later in Croton, Eumolpus’ entourage swears a solemn oath like *legitimi gladiatores*, but it is again a theatrical scheme, this time for legacy-hunting (*mimum componere*, 117,5; cf. 95,8).

In *City*, military personnel consists of “theatrical sergeants, soft young men who knew a thousand unpleasant stories about famous people” (*CP* 132). Sergeant Kervinski wears “a large diamond ring on his little finger” and talks “quickly, blushing often” (121). Off base, there are always “alert-looking soldiers” (120; cf. 127), but hardly alert for the enemy. Some servicemen are “conscripts in Rolloson’s army,” an army of camp (158). Rolly’s party is attended by a “butch Marine” who “was had five times last Sunday and still went to Mass” (160). Homosexuals are referred to as a “legion” throughout, as if they had any combative value. Rolly supports “at least a platoon of soldiers, sailors and marines in New York” (*CP1948* 233). Vidal makes clear that in present-day America, “The fact that all the so-called he-man occupations (warriors, sailors, athletes) are heavily populated by homosexualists is simply denied, even though anyone who has served in an army knows otherwise” (*Views* 166). At the same time, in accordance with Petronius’ antagonistic language to describe sex (e.g., *pugnare, extorquere, caedere, invadere, miles, arma, iniuria, praeda* ...),³¹ domestic and erotic scenes in *City* are militarized. Breakfast at the Willards, for example, is “war”; Jim’s brother is a “skilled domestic warrior, master of artillery”; the verbs “to strike” and “to charge” allude to combat; a “domestic banner” is raised (*CP* 16–17). A whore makes Jim feel “Alarm She menaced him with reality. She must be destroyed” (9). Maria arouses fury in Jim: “Obscurely, he wanted to hurt her, to throw her on a bed and take her violently against her will”; he is ready for “battle,” feels “betrayed,” and “curses” her (103, 173). The “sexual woman” in Maria “had been bruised and routed” (*CP1948* 221). A young corporal makes Jim feel desire; therefore, he mentally “rapes” him (*CP* 126). A slighted Jim wants to “wound” his successor

³⁰ Braund 1996, 169.

³¹ See also Adams 1982, 145–159.

and contemplates “murder” with a superior in the military (134–135). Jim cruises a bar “like a general surveying the terrain of battle” (165–166). Sally’s courtship of Bob is a “battle” (150). When Jim and Bob make love, they are literally clashing: “Now they were complete, each became the other, as their bodies collided with a primal violence, like to like, metal to magnet, half to half and the whole restored” (29). At the end, Jim’s rape of Bob recalls agony: “pushed,” “struck,” “drew back,” “blow,” “menacingly.” Shaw, having “conquered all the world,” is a “prisoner of fame” (141). All the “military” in Petronius, Juvenal, and Vidal accomplishes is cause trouble at home. Where is all this going, one wonders?

Direction is shipwrecked. Petronius’ characters encounter and represent the chaos, meaninglessness, transitoriness, evanescence, and flux of life. The characters always get lost, search but never find, are trapped in a Daedalean labyrinth, run in circles, feel quixotically bewitched by magic, fall prey to sudden changes of mood, live in a world governed by Fortune, see “death” lurking everywhere, tread on broken glass, cry for help with nobody around to hear them, and experience laughter for no obvious reason – all heightened by the fragmentary state of the text.³² *City* offers a polyglot, with Jim “traipsing around the world” (*CP* 189): Virginia, New York, Panama, San Francisco, Alaska, Seattle, L.A., New Orleans, Mexico, Guatemala, New York, Maryland, Georgia, Colorado, California, New York, Virginia, New York. What is left to see after so much roaming around? “After all, there’s just so much world to see” (191). The characters wonder what is in store for them: “Endless drifting, promiscuity, defeat?” (85). Drift is everywhere: “Jim and I just drift” (99); “drifting more and more” (104); “Jim drifted from group to group” (169), is used to being “transient” (56), enjoys “living without purpose” (96), and “wants to wander all over” (144). Bob wants “to travel and to hell around” (26). For Paul, traveling the world is like being an alcoholic (178). Maria holds a “temporary visa” in her world and enjoys being “a tourist” (104; cf. 165). Drifting is a quintessentially modern theme for Vidal: “It includes lack of any sense of identity I think that there’s a great sense in modern life of people simply not knowing who they are and drifting from point to point not only geographically but also psychologically” (*Views* 195). But there is no way out. Although Jim knows his life is “aimless,” he “could not have been more content” (*CP* 96). Rolly proposes the same maxim: “I mean, after all, really, isn’t live and let live the best policy?” (160). They all

³² See also Zeitlin 1971b, 652–666; Hubbard 1986; Schmelting 1996, map F.

do not worry about tomorrow, just like Petronius' characters. F. Zeitlin says it best:

That Petronius should create a character who is a delinquent, an outsider, a marginal man, who belongs in no social milieu, who has no past or future, no destination or purpose beyond passing pleasures and the will to survive, whose personality is unstable, whose relationships are insecure, and who should have learned by experience that the world is roguish, unpredictable, and ultimately without any coherent design, marks the first step taken in literature towards the vision of our modern desacralized world and the image of the radically alienated man who is familiar to us from the pages of modern fiction.³³

The "city" – so prominent in Vidal's title – dehumanizes man and melts away his or her individuality: "where did all those people come from? Where were they all hurrying to?" (*CP* 33), Jim wonders about New York. It is a city of "indifferent millions" (163). Or look at Vidal's first names: Jim, Bob, Sally, Anne, Emily, Maria, Paul, George, Ronnie ... all meaningless, all anonymous, all lifeless. Jim admits that he goes home with people and sometimes does not even know their names, and "Sometimes we never say more than a few words" (168). What kind of life is that?

Life is shipwrecked. Time is running out in the *Satyricon*. Two poems urge *memento mori*: "Nothing but bones, that's what we are. / Death hustles us humans away. Today we're here and tomorrow we're not, / so live and drink while you may!" (*Sat.* 34,10); "We think we're awful smart, we think we're awful wise, / but when we're least expecting, comes the big surprise. / Lady Luck's in heaven and we're her little toys, / so break out the wine and fill your glasses, boys!" (55,3). Counting balls that drop to the ground, as Trimalchio enjoys, is probably the ultimate in aimlessness (27,3). Trimalchio famously and ominously evokes the Sibyl: "I once saw the Sibyl of Cumae in person. She was hanging in a bottle, and when the boys asked her, 'Sibyl, what do you want?' she said, 'I want to die'" (48,8). The fact that this is an allusion that Trimalchio gets right emphasizes its urgency. Then, after one reminder of death after another, Trimalchio finally exhorts his guests to pre-

³³ Zeitlin 1971b, 683.

tend that he is dead (78,5).³⁴ Like Trimalchio, the actor Shaw stages his own memorial service: “His death took place before his eyes, beautifully lit and photographed, with Brahms playing on the sound track. Then there was a slow dissolve to the funeral cortege as it moved through Beverly Hills, escorted by weeping girls carrying autograph books” (CP 139). He is “bored and restless” and “morbidly aware of time passing, and of the fact that his hair was quite gray beneath the dye and that his stomach was bad, and life was ending even though he was hardly forty” (140). Rolly has already selected “the nicest crypt at the Church of St. Agnes in Detroit” (162). Maria longs to escape from “a world that had come to bore her” (101); more explicitly, in the original edition, she

gave herself up to her senses, to men and dances and theaters and restaurants, to music and the ballet. By constant change and kaleidoscopic beauty she was able to think about herself less tragically She sat at her dressing table and looked helplessly at the bottles of perfume and cosmetics. She touched her face with her hand; she was, for an instant, disembodied, touching a mask, discovering with her fingertips the secret behind the mask yet there was no secret, only a mask to cover her disappointment and to hide her unfulfillment. (CPI948 222)

Behind a mask, there is a void, a body without fizz, a head without a brain, a sphinx without a secret, a perfume without fragrance, a Shakespearean painting of a sorrow, a face without a heart, and a Petronian dummy made of straw: no heart, no guts, no nothing (*non cor habebat, non intestina, non quicquam*; *Sat.* 63,8).

Petronius’ characters do not seize the day; they double it in their *taedium vitae* (*de una die duas facere*; *Sat.* 72,4). In *City*, the characters pursue “the desire to move in splendor through the lives of others, to live forever grandly, and not to die” (CP 59). Or, in *Duluth*, the wealthy heir Clive laments: “I wanted a life of splendor. Rare fabrics. Exciting people. Devastating denouements. So what do I get?” (*Duluth* 97), nothing but *ennui*. Like the bored and pretentious Trimalchio, he is “into tactile things. Rare fabrics. Jewels. Semiprecious stones. Jasper. Moonstone. Onyx” (154). All these

³⁴ See also Arrowsmith 1966; Bodell 1994; Herzog 1989; Schlant 1991; Bacon 1958; Slater 1990, 50–86 and 114–133; Döpp 1991; Toohy 1997; Rimell 2002, 181–202; Connors 1994.

characters, though separated by millennia, live in a society “choking itself on luxury and satiety. The overeating at Trimalchio’s banquet, the fascination with exotic foods presented in strange ways, Trimalchio’s obsession with death, the unusual sexual practices throughout the novel can all be seen as a reaction against boredom on the part of the men and women who live in an affluent and permissive society.”³⁵ Sullivan agonizingly contemplates “the wreck of his life, the shattered promise” (*CP1948* 221). Jim is afraid of death and wonders about the afterlife in an existentialist reflection: “What *did* happen? The idea of nothing frightened him, and death was probably nothing: no earth, no people, no light, no time, no *thing*” (*CP* 155; Vidal’s emphases). Just like Trimalchio (*Sat.* 34,8), he imagines himself as a skeleton (immediately followed by a vision of a real skeleton: X rays). W. Arrowsmith underlines Petronius’ moral and relevance to contemporary society:

Like *hybris*, *luxuria* affects a man so that he eventually loses his sense of his specific function, his *virtus* or *aretē*. He surpasses himself, luxuriating into other things and forms. It is for this reason that the *Satyricon* is so full of luxuriant falseness, pretenses, fakes, metamorphoses. Forms of life are jumbled incongruously, transformed, degenerated.³⁶

Fear of death shipwrecks the body. Petronius emphasizes culinary reminders of death, a literal *tempus edax*: *la grande bouffe*, bloatedness, constipation, nausea, satiety, intoxication, gas. Stylistically, the *Satyricon* thus parodies Roman *gravitas* and *severitas* in favor of *levitas* and *licentia*: “The realism of satire had its association with the seamier side of life, the low sexual elements which were studiously avoided in the more elevated literary forms of epic and tragedy.”³⁷ Or, as P. G. Walsh observes, “it is the canons of *pietas* and *virtus*, *dignitas* and *pudicitia* which the amoral hero subverts.”³⁸ Trimalchio’s feast “becomes an exhaustive mapping of the world,” with dishes from the entire orb that bear the signs of the zodiac, but, as G. B. Conte infers, “geography has become gastronomy”; it is “a life completely subordinated to the needs of the body, a life in which food becomes a Protagorean

³⁵ Wooten 1984, 136.

³⁶ Arrowsmith 1966, 317.

³⁷ Sullivan 1968, 100.

³⁸ Walsh 1970, 79.

‘measure of all things’.³⁹ In an existentialist and hedonistic pun, being and eating coalesce in the *Satyricon* (*dum licet esse bene*; *Sat.* 34,10). An intimate look at *City* reveals a similar obsession with defecating, farting, getting drunk, stuffing, smelly armpits, bad breath: there is peeing (*CP* 6, 114), belching (44, 142), bad breath (51, 75), pimples (58), tight sphincters (74), hangovers (75), stalled blood circulation (78), diarrhea (113), feces (118), gas (142), sexually transmitted diseases (185), body odor (201). What is “warm and pleasant inside his stomach” (206) is Jim’s diarrhea and nausea, a violation of his corporeal dignity through a loss of anal and dietary integrity. He is drunk and wants to be “drunker, without memory, or fear” (6). Once again, in both the *Satyricon* and *City*, there is “sensuality without joy, satiety without fulfillment, degradation without grief or horror.”⁴⁰

Speaking of food, Vidal further explores Petronius’ conflation of sex and eating.⁴¹ Quartilla, for example, finds Giton delicious, who will make a nice dessert for her: “Tomorrow ... this will make a fine antipasto for my lechery” (*haec* inquit *belle cras in promulside libidinis nostrae militabit; hodie enim post asellum [both “fish” and the potent “ass”] diaria non sumo*; *Sat.* 24,7); an *embasicoetas* (24,1) is both an obscene drinking vessel and a one-night stand. The Priapean cake (60,4–7) is a sexual travesty: “the spray of saffron juice, hitting the faces of the guests, is intended to stand for ejaculation.”⁴² Trimalchio’s zodiac dish features a myriad of sexual innuendo (35). In the Story of the Widow of Ephesus, food and sex coalesce, too (111,10–112).⁴³ “What a dish,” Vidal’s Petronius says to Saint Timothy (*Golgotha* 155), ready to “eat” him; “cooking with virgin oil” is an edible and amorous metaphor throughout; saffron is sprayed as well (89); and a ladle is abused (155–162). Darlene in *Duluth* is always in search of a “piece of okra” and a “pair of prunes” and cherishes “avocado pears”; her most fabulous sex encounter is in the pantry (*Duluth* 49–53, 57–60). In *City*, sex is “... absolutely *yummy*” (*CP* 161; Vidal’s emphasis and ellipsis); Jim and the sailor Collins are “hungry” – but not for food (36, 43); a spaghetti restaurant is the place where “the girls are” (43; cf. 127). Myra recommends that her therapist abstain from loaded sundaes (double chocolate burnt-almond pista-

³⁹ Conte 1996, 122–123; cf. Dupont 1977, 121–151.

⁴⁰ Bacon 1958, 267.

⁴¹ On the culinary significance of the term *satura*, see also Winkler 2001, xv–xvi.

⁴² Rudich 1997, 208.

⁴³ See also Adams 1982, 138–145.

chio) and instead achieve the oral gratification “a cock might have provided, with far fewer calories” (*Myra* 193); fortunately for Myra, one of her students is not “all potatoes and no meat” (145; cf. also 91).⁴⁴ In *The Smithsonian Institution*, an Indian woman, amongst “a hymn to meat,” seduces the edible protagonist, “Prime veal,” and particularly enjoys his “mountain oysters” (*Smithsonian* 16–23); later a sexy meal is ingested: “meat loaf with mashed yellow turnips and creamed pearl onions” (99); at the end, “Veal” graduates to “mature beef” (247). People are so satiated that they need to sex food, or they are so sexed that they need to eat the body. Interestingly, Vidal admits that in his sex life he has tried “everything”: “Not small children. Not animals. The vegetable kingdom, however, once had great fascination for me” (*Views* 25).⁴⁵ Nothing is sacred any more.

Religion is shipwrecked. Traditionally, religion has provided man with continuity, with the bread/body and wine/blood of all eternity. Not so in the *Satyricon* and *City*. Most of the characters in Petronius lack a sense of evil.⁴⁶ Who, then, are the representatives of religion? Quartilla is a priestess – of Priapus (whose wrath moves the plot forward). According to A. Richlin’s *The Garden of Priapus*, the ithyphallic Priapus penetrates his victims – to punish them for their trespasses – orally, vaginally, anally.⁴⁷ Unlike the penetrated Christ on the cross, Priapus does the penetrating himself. Blasphemously, Quartilla, the lecher, declares that she lives in a “land so infested with divinity that one might meet a god more easily than a man” (*Sat.* 17,5). A freedman wonders: “Who observes the fast days any more, who cares a

⁴⁴ One anonymous reader of *Ancient Narrative* noted in his report that Gareth Schmeling is in possession of a letter from Vidal in Rome, dated 10 Dec. 1968, in which Vidal comments: “*Myra* does ... reflect my first century taste.”

⁴⁵ There is another interesting modern parallel. The night of the premiere of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the Marquess of Queensberry intended to throw a phallic bouquet of carrots, cucumbers, and turnips at Oscar Wilde, probably to “punish” him for his homosexual affair with the Marquess’ son Bosie. The symbolism of the vegetables is evident; they represent anal penetration. Of course, the Marquess knew nothing about literature (let alone classical literature) and could not care less about it, but the phallic shape of these vegetables seems to have had a timeless metaphorical power.

⁴⁶ There is one exception. After Lichas’ ship disintegrates, fishermen on the shore set out to net some booty, but when they see survivors, they come to their rescue: *mutaverunt crudelitatem in auxilium* (*Sat.* 114,14). However, since these fishermen play no role in the main plot, maybe not too much significance should be attached to their human goodness.

⁴⁷ Richlin 1992, 58. See also Conte 1996, 93–103; Fehling 1988; Obermayer 1998, 190–213; *Myra Breckinridge* 149.

rap for Jupiter? One and all, bold as brass, [women] sit there pretending to pray, but cocking their eyes on the chances and counting up their cash” (44,17). In Encolpius’ encounter of sexual prowess and paralysis with Circe, religious rites are perverted and sex is literally sacrificed (127–131); she will induct Encolpius into her temple if he renounces sex with Giton – only to savor Encolpius herself. The same is true for Oenothea, the *wine* goddess. She promises a strange remission and absolution of Encolpius’ “sin”: “All I require is that you agree to spend one night here in bed with me, and if I don’t make you stand up stiffer than a bull’s horn, my name is not Oenothea” (134,10–11); transgressing all sexual, let alone religious, boundaries, Oenothea inserts a dildo into his anus and restores him to his former powers – thank god (*dii maiores sunt qui me restituerunt in integrum*; 140,12), while just a line earlier, Encolpius could not enter a willing boy because of the gods (*numen inimicum*, 140,11; cf. 140,13). Encolpius brutally slaughters a sacred goose; to make up for his sacrilege, Oenothea turns the goose into a delectable meal (137,12). Sodomy is a “sacred” rite: *pigi-ciaca sacra* (140,6 – from *πυγίζειν*, “to butt-fuck”).⁴⁸ Last but not least, Encolpius and Giton make love that renders the gods jealous (*votis usque ad invidiam felicibus*; 11,2).

In Juvenal, Creticus joins priests to celebrate the Bona Dea rites. To adorn themselves for the festivities, the priests put on ribbons (*redimicula*) and cover their necks with necklaces (*monilia*). One initiate puts on make-up and applies mascara to his eye-brows (2,93–95). Everything is being carried out *more sinistro* (2,87) rather than *more maiorum* and stages what S. M. Braund wonderfully calls a “travesty by transvestites.”⁴⁹ In Plato’s *Symposium*, the male guests prefer to drink among men only; in order to enjoy a homoerotic atmosphere, they quickly dismiss the flute-girl in fairly derogatory terms: “let her play for herself or, if she prefers, for the women in the house” (*Symp.* 176e). Pretending to be like the symposiasts in Plato, the priests also dismiss the flute-girl. [*N*]ullo gemit hic tibicina cornu (2,90), they scream, *clamatur*. If we ignore the meter, Juvenal could also have written *clamant*, but the passive voice nicely squares with the priests’ passivity and effeminacy (note also the feminine gender of *Baptae*; 2,92). One initiate drinks wine from a *vitreo priapo* (95), simulating oral sex with ejaculation of semen in his mouth. Earlier the observer Laronia alleged that homosexuals

⁴⁸ See also Henderson 1991, 201–202.

⁴⁹ Braund 1996, 146.

eat *colyphia* (53), which is again ambiguous, for this cut of pork may suggest Greek κολύφιον, “penis.” In Petronius, the Priapean cake, on the surface “sacred” and “religious,” is a sexual travesty. In Juvenal’s Ninth Satire (lines 22ff.), finally, we read that the shrine of Ganymede was a pick-up place for homosexuals rather than a religious temple.

In Vidal’s *Golgotha*, the temples to Venus have been similarly defiled: “it’s just sex, sex, sex, morning noon and night” (*Golgotha* 42); there is also the “Temple of Diana with the two thousand boobs” (51).⁵⁰ In *Duluth*, the mayor, recalling Samuel Pepys, likes church, where “he joins in the hymns, lustily” (*Duluth* 71); the police in this city abide by a slightly modified Biblical rule: “An eye for an eye. A cock for a cunt” (112). Myra, like Quartilla, equates sex with sacredness: “Oh, it was a holy moment! I was one with the Bacchae, with all the priestesses of the dark bloody cults, with the great goddess herself for whom Attis unmanned himself” (*Myra* 150); she teasingly muses about Hollywood: “No pilgrim to Lourdes can experience what I know I shall experience once I have stepped into that magic world which has occupied all my waking thoughts” (10; cf. 32, 128). In *Kalki*, a Vishnu god attracts physically: “I was picking up a sort of strange vibration from him. It could have been religious. But I suspect that it was only ... only! sexual” (*Kalki* 64; Vidal’s ellipsis); Hinduism is a religion that depicts “as god human genitalia,” and in twelfth-century Christianity, “God the father was the penis, the son was the scrotum, the holy ghost was the ejaculation” (74–75). Several scenes in *City* recall Petronius’ irreverence. Before they break up, Jim and Shaw have a “last supper,” with Jim “in the role of Judas”; during the conversation, Shaw, “crown of thorns resting heavily on his brow,” tries “walking on water”; defiantly, he turns “the other cheek”; miraculously, he rises “from the dead” (*CP* 86–88). Jim and Sullivan frequent bars one by one, “like the stations of the Cross” (92). A “catechism” is a trivial verbal exchange – even a pick-up scene (205). Jim’s mother has assumed “the melting look of the conscious martyr” and like Joan of Arc “was always hearing funny noises” (15). The greatest humiliation occurs when Bob unsuccessfully appeals to “Jesus” for mercy before he is raped (203; most of these references are not in *CP1948*).

In his preface, Vidal sets a religious tone for *City* by relating the story of St. Augustine’s theft of pears and wondering: “The fact is that all of us have stolen pears; the mystery is why so few of us rate halos” (*CP* xi). Clearly,

⁵⁰ See also Fletcher and Feros 2000.

this is an ironic and rather irreverent question. The scattered appearances of Roman Catholicism in the novel similarly trivialize faith at the expense of camp, sacrifice ritual to depth, profane earnestness:

I needed Faith [...] the Catholic Church is *so* lovely, with that *cozy* grandeur that I adore. One feels so *safe* with the rituals and everything and those robes! Well, there just isn't *anything* to compare with them. They have *really* the most beautiful ceremonies in the world [...] the Holy Father came riding in on a golden throne wearing the triple tiara and the most beautiful white robes you've ever seen and the cardinals all in red and the incense and the beautiful marble and gold statues ... absolutely *yummy!* [...] I do hope I'll go to Heaven after doing so many good works on earth. I think sin is *terribly* fearsome, don't you? It's practically impossible not to sin a little, but I think it's the *big* sins that are the ones that can't be forgiven [...] I have such hopes for the afterlife. I see it as a riot of color! And all the angels will look like Marines. (161–162)

The camp here is conveyed through italicization, literally skewing the text and challenging religion's imaginative adequacy. Vidal's ellipses further disrupt *logos* and *Logos*. Here Jesus' Biblical invitation to "eat" his body literalizes as sex and drinking his blood results in alcoholism and ejaculation. A "butch Marine" is hardly angelic: "He was had five times last Sunday and still went to Mass" (160). Catholicism is a refuge of homoeroticism:

Catholicism in particular is famous for giving countless gay and proto-gay children the shock of the possibility of adults who don't marry, of men in dresses, of passionate theatre, of introspective investment, of lives filled with what could, ideally without diminution, be called the work of the fetish And presiding over all are the images of Jesus images of the unclothed or unclothable male body, often in extremis and/or in ecstasy, prescriptively meant to be gazed at and adored.⁵¹

⁵¹ Sedgwick 1990, 140. In *The Judgment of Paris*, Vidal features another Catholic icon, St. Sebastian: "a tapestry depicted Sebastian receiving, with a certain smugness, the arrows of his fate" (192; cf. 196, 198 twice). Very often, portraits of Sebastian show a figure who seems to be experiencing "unalloyed bliss, despite, or because of, all the 'arrows' sticking into him," Knox 1994, 80. During the reign of Diocletian, Sebastian came to the rescue of Christian soldiers (for which the emperor ordered him to be executed in 287), thereby confessing his Christianity. This is his "coming out" story. It probably inspired

Like Dorian Gray, the Catholic Paul makes a diabolical pact: “God failed him, and he turned to Hell. He studied a book on witchcraft, celebrated a Black Mass, tried to sell his soul to the devil” (*CP* 89). Catholicism in *City* is literally catholic. Can we learn anything from all this perversion?

Education is shipwrecked. Trimalchio pretends to a sophisticated knowledge of classical literature, but examples of astrological, mythological, historical, philosophical, literary ... ignorance are abundant (especially the ironic *oportet etiam inter cenandum philologiam nosse*; *Sat.* 39,3). Similarly, Juvenal’s Stoic “philosophers” display busts of Greek sages, thus linking themselves to a great tradition (2,4–7), but each one is utterly *indoctus*. The dinner party as a microcosm of the *Satyricon* features “all the resentment, all the deceit, all the confusion, all the conflicts of pretension and vulgarity, art and self-indulgence, critical taste and extravagant display, hedonism and morbidity, pragmatism and cynicism.”⁵² The teacher Agamemnon laments: “we don’t educate our children at school; we stultify them and then send them out into the world half-baked. And why? Because we keep them utterly ignorant of real life” (*Sat.* 1,3; cf. 58,13–14, 88, 118, and *passim*). Rhetoric is literally farted on (117,13). In Croton, “literature and the arts go utterly unhonored; eloquence there has no prestige; and those who live the good and simple life find no admirers” (116,6).⁵³

In *City*, the actor Shaw proudly proclaims: “I’ve read all the classics – Walter Scott, Dumas, Margaret Mitchell, all that crowd, and *they* were popular ...” (*CP* 88; Vidal’s ellipsis and emphasis). Are these the *classics* of literature? True to his profession, Shaw is mixing up classicism with popularity; moreover, he knows these authors because Hollywood has appropriated or vulgarized them. In a strong echo of Petronius’ official title, someone with literary pretensions contends that the masses are the “true arbiters” of taste (*CP1948* 256). Petronius, too, criticizes “the popular narrative which banalizes the great literary models by reducing them to melodra-

Shakespeare in *Twelfth Night*, when, after Sebastian is saved from a shipwreck by Antonio, Antonio declares his love for him: “And to his image, which methought did promise / Most venerable worth, did I devotion” (*Twelfth Night* III, iv).

⁵² Hubbard 1986, 194.

⁵³ On literary criticism and parody in Petronius, see also Sullivan 1968, 158–213; Palmeri 1990, 19–38; Conte 1996, 37–72; Walsh 1970, 32–52; Cameron 1970; George 1966; Zeitlin 1971a; Slater 1990, 137–212; Richlin 1992, 190–195; Connors 1998; Rimell 2002, 60–97 and 113–139.

matic schemes.”⁵⁴ Hollywood is the great leveler, the final repository of the liberal arts. Cy, the movie director, wonders: “Where else in the world can a guy with no brain and no talent get to be rich and famous”? Stupidity and vulgarity are in fact crucial, because “if they ever educated one of you dopes it’d be the end of the American Dream” (*CP* 74). What matters in entertainment is brawn, not brain; cash, not class: “Not that critics mean a thing. When they pan my pictures I make money, and when they praise them we lose it” (180). Too, it is noteworthy that Shaw’s list of “classics” is a change from the original edition, “Scott, Cooper, Dickens” (*CP1948* 130), underlining the instability and slippage of the “classics” themselves. Shaw further bases his vision of homosexuality on Homer: “like those two ancient Greeks – you know the ones, Achilles and so-and-so – who were such famous lovers” (*CP* 67). He cannot even remember the name of Achilles’ lover? Rolly, like Trimalchio, professes vain learning: “Let them eat cake and all that sort of thing” (160). Does he realize that he may have his head chopped off for this comment? Like Petronius’ characters, he provides “platitudinous comments on absurd situations.”⁵⁵ Or, as G. B. Conte notes: “It is as though trivial affairs could acquire grandeur and importance purely by being experienced as theater: as though by giving theatrical voice to experience one could actually make sense of the indifference of reality.”⁵⁶ At Rolly’s camp party, “the flower of New York publishing got drunk together” (*CP* 169).⁵⁷ A “poet” in the novel does not write a single word of poetry (171). In perhaps the most Petronian scene in *City*, education has been literally dragged into the gutter. While cleaning a fouled-up latrine with a professor, “Jim learned a good deal about American history and the tyranny of democratic armies” (118), a reminiscence of Vidal’s army days: “I compose sonnets in the latrine.”⁵⁸

A professor at the University of Michigan raves against educational standards:

⁵⁴ Conte 1996, 45.

⁵⁵ George 1966, 343.

⁵⁶ Conte 1996, 5.

⁵⁷ Furthermore, like Trimalchio, Rolly is *nouveau riche*: his money comes from the emerging automobile empire (*CP* 162). Similarly, Mr. Kirkland, the manager of the Garden Hotel, wears a “large diamond ring,” which is “an outward and visible sign of sudden rise and of unfamiliar affluence” (56).

⁵⁸ In Kaplan 1999, 164.

The smattering of culture they get at college merely makes them intolerant of art and bored with history. I think we've overeducated everybody ... overeducated and yet not really educated them at all. The schools will have to be changed. The old theory was to make a man of culture, a person aware of the arts and the humanities. But now people are forced to be specialists. Fewer of them want to be men of culture and knowledge. So why educate them? (*CP1948* 178; Vidal's ellipsis)

Sure enough, one aspiring writer produces such garbage: "I think the future will see not only surrealism but words in books that merely exist for the sake of their intrinsic worth rather than for some preconceived hackneyed notion as to the meaning of words" (258). He, or Vidal, is showing remarkable foresight here, is he not? Such a culture has actually materialized in *Duluth*: "Only a culture gone terribly wrong could produce so much terrible art,"⁵⁹ or, as the novel stresses at the outset: "every society gets the Duluth that it deserves" (*Duluth* 3). One authoress is, literally, illiterate. Another one's claim to fame is the Wurlitzer Prize for Creative Journalism – "an octopus in a plastic cube" (27) – and her selection as annual Processor of Choice (140; cf. 15–16). Several "great figures in life and literature" are held up as dubious "domestic" ideals: Gargantua, JFK, Beowulf, Julius Caesar (55). Conversely, like Petronius' vulgar freedmen, three unskilled and uneducated illegal aliens from Mexico engage in a discussion of Secular Humanism, Aquinas, Augustine, and, to top it all, Thomism (91). Unfortunately, adult bookstores are losing money, "as no one can read anymore" (195). A candidate for mayor is asked whether he would reopen, in one vein, "the libraries and massage parlors" (44). Cultural pretentiousness manifests itself in an outrageous rime: French *bon ton* rimes with a Chinese soup (12). A novel in the novel is set in Regency Hyatt England. This is how *Duluth* ends:

Duluth! ... love it or loathe it, you can never leave it or lose it because no matter how blunt with insectivorous time your mandibles become those myriad eggs that you cannot help but lay cannot help but hatch new vermiform and myriapodal generations, forever lively in *this* present tense where you – all of you – are now at large, even though, simultaneously, you are elsewhere, too, rooted in that centripetal darkness

⁵⁹ Baker and Gibson 1997, 176; see also Fletcher 1986.

where all this was, and where all this will be, once the bright inflorescence that is (214; Vidal's emphasis)

From Petronius to post-structuralism (*après* post-structuralism in *Duluth*) or, as Myra has it, "post-Gutenberg and pre-Apocalypse" (*Myra* 30). We need to be careful about stuffing our students' heads with educational fodder: "don't let your good average dim-witted American ever have an idea: it would crack his skull" (*CP1948* 178).

Let us look at some other Petronian "purple patches." Deliciously, Myra has read Petronius: her students are "like the local oranges, all bright appearance and no taste" (*Myra* 41).⁶⁰ Similarly, in his essay "Rabbit's Own Burrow" (1996), Vidal notes the glitzification and sugarcoating of reading: "A decade ago, thanks to the success of America's chain bookstores with their outlets in a thousand glittering malls, most 'serious' fiction was replaced by mass-baked sugary dough – I mean books – whose huge physical presence is known, aptly to the trade, as 'dumps'" (*Last Empire* 87). In *Myron*, a character proudly dedicates his time to reading "all of the world's great literature. All of it that I can read in two weeks of course" (*Myron* 350). Small wonder, he slightly mixes up literature and letters: Holkien and Tesse, Vonchon and Pynegutt (386). In *Golgotha*, nonsensically, "simile still is slow to come whilst metaphor coalesces unbidden, since all is metaphor" (*Golgotha* 71). *Two Sisters* features a "waste land of twentieth century art" (*Two Sisters* 4); typically, to add to mimetic confusion, the *Satyricon* mentioned in the novel is Fellini's, not Petronius' (12, 250); little surprise, "literature ... has no relevance to the young who were brought up on television and movies" (41); American authors try to be "not good but great; and so are neither" (93). A Quartillian or Oenothean passage occurs in *Kalki*: "As entropy increases, energy hemorrhages. Language is affected. Words become mere incantation. When that happens, the end is near, and the cold" (*Kalki* 128); Noam Chomsky, the master of linguistics, cannot express himself in simple words: "Perhaps he knew too much about them to want to put them to work" (49).⁶¹ Clearly, Vidal "lampoons much of contemporary writing, in which hackneyed phrases and faltering stabs at variety in diction are intended to mask pedestrian thinking."⁶²

⁶⁰ See also Boyette 1971.

⁶¹ See also Berryman 1980.

⁶² Baker and Gibson 1997, 163.

The decline of learning is of utmost concern to Vidal, and a glance at *Palimpsest*, *Screening History*, *The Golden Age*, *Views from a Window*, *Two Sisters*, *Duluth*, *The Last Empire*, and *United States* reveals its urgency,⁶³ but one Petronian passage stands out: “there’s a whole line of writing that I dislike ... windy, bombastic, imprecise, self-indulgent, self-loving. I cannot bear [all those] infinitely windy writers who use words without knowing what they mean, who are continually inflating themselves with air so that they’ll be larger than they are”; as a result, “everything is bloated and running down” (*Views* 202, 216; cf. *Sat.* 1–5). The inspiration is once again Roman. Juvenal, in his First Satire, emphasizes “the derivative, artificial, cliché-ridden nature of contemporary literature.”⁶⁴ Petronius, too, condemns “the practice of *declamationes* which cheapens the noble tradition of forensic oratory and produces only empty academic inventions.”⁶⁵ Petronius’ translator helpfully explains the degeneration of rhetoric or education due to “an age whose hypocrisy of political power made power of language improbable” (Arrowsmith 1959, 166). Many teachers nowadays find inflated speech and awful writing in the classroom, in scholarly books, on TV, at annual conventions, or in presidential addresses. Certainly, the Early Empire lives on.

Finally, the self is shipwrecked. To aggravate all these shipwrecks, Encolpius the protagonist, as R. Beck explains, is gullible, naive, chaotic, scatter-brained, and falls prey to many illusions; as narrator, however, Encolpius is genuinely perceptive.⁶⁶ J. P. Sullivan stresses his dilemma: Encolpius is “alternately romantic and cynical, brave and timorous, malevolent and cringing, jealous and rational, sophisticated and naïve.”⁶⁷ The same disillusion and delusion applies to Jim: “Himself paralyzed by romantic illusions, he is surprisingly perceptive about the illusions of others.”⁶⁸ In his preface, Vidal points out that he intended in Jim to demonstrate “the romantic fallacy”: “From too much looking back, he was destroyed, ... trying to re-create an idyll that never truly existed except in his own imagination” (*CP* xvi). He compares Jim to the protagonist of Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*: “I

⁶³ On Vidal’s essays, see also Pritchard 1992; Boyers 1992; Pickering 1992; Kiernan 1982, 110–117; Freedman 1998.

⁶⁴ In Green’s translation (1998), 123.

⁶⁵ Conte 1996, 45.

⁶⁶ Beck 1973 and 1975; cf. Zeitlin 1971b, 666–676.

⁶⁷ Sullivan 1968, 119.

⁶⁸ Summers 1992, 66.

deliberately made Jim Willard a Hans Castorp type: what else could someone so young be, set loose in the world – the City – that was itself the center of interest?” (xv). Once again, here Jim continues the tradition of Petronius’ rogues set loose in the *graeca urbs* (*Sat.* 81,3) and a journey characterized by wishful thinking. For example, when Bob does not reply to his letters, Jim thinks the reason is “Bob was not much of a letter writer,” but later we learn that he was in constant correspondence with his girlfriend (*CP* 32, 149). When Jim finds out that Bob is married, he is shocked: “Not once had it occurred to Jim that Bob could ever in any way be different from the way he had been that day beside the river”; he reassures himself, “and because he wanted to believe that nothing had changed, nothing changed, in his mind” (179). He cheats himself with wishful thinking: “Jim wondered if Bob had ever been attracted to men ... it seemed unlikely, which meant that their experience was unique. And that meant Bob had made love with him not out of a lust for the male but from affection” (192). Jim mocks himself: “one day Bob would appear and they would continue what was begun that day beside the river” (132); he thinks “he could one day recapture his past simply by going home” (168); he hopes “Bob would return to him, as easily, as naturally as he had gone with him the first time” (196). G. B. Conte shows Petronius’ purpose, which can easily be extended to Vidal: “instead of living his real present existence, [Encolpius] prefers to deceive himself and live the past of his sanctified models. The irony of the hidden author consists entirely in his apparent condescension towards his protagonist. He lets him promote himself to a great mythical figure, but only in order to frustrate at once his pretenses and illusions.”⁶⁹



“It was an age of miracles, it was an age of art, it was an age of excess, and it was an age of satire.”

F. Scott Fitzgerald, “Echoes of the Jazz-Age”

“It was when curiosity about Gatsby was at its highest that the lights in his house failed to go on one Saturday night – and, as obscurely as it had begun, his career as Trimalchio was over.”

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

⁶⁹ Conte 1996, 85.

Petronius and Juvenal were keen observers (of the decline) of their societies and searched out for its reasons (*causam desidiae praesentis*; *Sat.* 88,1). P. Green, Juvenal's translator, writes: "Juvenal is a writer for his age. He has (in spite of his personal preoccupations) the universal eye for unchanging human corruption He crystallizes for us all the faults and weaknesses we have watched gaining strength at Rome through the centuries."⁷⁰ The *Satyricon* is a "classic example of a text which indulges lavishly and self-consciously in all the crimes of which it accuses its age."⁷¹ Petronius' characters, in a modern term, "openly" engage in homosexual activity and show no self-consciousness about it. Juvenal's opinion is in marked contrast. He derides sexually passive *cives Romani*, whom he views as fearfully effeminate, but praises homosexuals who admit their sexual inversion, because it was ordained by fate and thus forgivable *and* because it put them in a special category, eunuchs (2,15–19). Yet how can the one exist without the other, the reader is tempted to ask? *Concordia* once accounted for Rome's glory, but now *magna inter molles concordia* (2,47); therefore, Juvenal wants to go beyond the boundaries of a corrupt Rome. But shipwreck is everywhere. At the beginning, he wants to go north; at the end, he wants to go east: "the narrator's desire to flee from Rome is countered by Rome's conquest of the world: there are no refuges left."⁷²

Did Juvenal know Petronius' work? The time-span that separates the *Satyricon* and the Second Satire is approximately fifty years, maybe even less. The similarities in these authors may suggest a possible Petronian influence, but they also point in another direction. To classicists, a few decades is a short time-span. Between Nero's and Domitian's reigns, the sexual landscape may not have changed. Actually, the sexual landscape between two millennia, between the reigns of Nero and, say, Bill Clinton, may not have changed much. Especially in the *Satyricon*, is there a single relationship that did not fail, that was not instigated for sexual gratification, that did not end prematurely, that was not described in military language, that did not genuinely alienate the reader? Moreover, A. Richlin has challenged Foucault's idea of (homo)sexuality as a construct. She argues that what we call a "homosexual" nowadays was in Rome a "male penetrated by choice" (the *ci-*

⁷⁰ Green 1998, lxvii.

⁷¹ Elsner 1993, 42.

⁷² Green 1998, 130 note 8. On Juvenal's *Nachleben* and legacy on English literature, see Long 1996; Winkler 2001; Braund and Raschke 2002; Rosen and Baines 2002.

naedus or *mollis*), characterized by a “social identity and social burden,” and at home in a subculture surrounded by “homophobia.” She proposes: “On the level of the stereotype, certain attributes and styles recur throughout the period as characterizing the *mollis* man: lisping speech; putting the hand on the hip, or, more commonly, scratching the head with one finger; use of makeup; depilation; and wearing certain colors, especially light green and sky blue.”⁷³ Duly modified (e.g., for “lisping speech” read “affected speech”), these stereotypes are still apposite – possibly to homophobes and homosexuals alike. Especially Juvenal’s equation of homosexual activity as a *contagio* (2,78) is strikingly modern in the times of AIDS. Could Vidal have perceived this sexual similarity and explored in his gay fiction?

J. Tatum powerfully brings out Vidal’s classical legacy:

He brings an authentic Roman view to bear on the American scene, one developed over a lifetime of writing and thinking, not something cooked up at short order; in the process, he reveals with great clarity what our once exemplary republic has actually become ... there emerges an accurate image of imperial America that puts to shame the kind of distorted, partial uses of the past that have appeared with more and more frequency in this country, exposing them for the shallow stratagems they really are.⁷⁴

Vidal is keenly aware of historic continuity and the presence of ancient literature in our time. His early essay “The Twelve Caesars” (1952) is an excited response to the Graves translation of Suetonius. One emperor is the Queen of Bythia, and every woman’s husband and every man’s wife (*omnium mulierum virum et omnium virorum mulierem*; *Julius Caesar* 49, 52). One emperor made the hair on his legs *mollior* (*Augustus* 68). One emperor has *spintriae* perform and copulate before him (including the future Emperor Vitellius; *Vitellius* 24); he “devised little nooks of lechery in the woods and glades of the island [Capri], and had boys and girls dressed up as Pans and nymphs prostituting themselves in front of caverns or grottoes”; he has young boys and babies suck his penis and nipples, and seduces altar-boys (*Tiberius* 43–44). One emperor was *stupratum*, bathes in perfumed water and drinks pearls (like Cleopatra), gilds bread and meat, wears silk, dresses

⁷³ Richlin 1993, 542.

⁷⁴ Tatum 1992, 220; see now also Altman 2005.

up as Venus, and shows a predilection for both army boots and women's shoes (*Gaius Caligula* 36–37, 52). One emperor married the castrated Sporus and was married to Doryphorus; during his wedding-night he imitated the shrieks of a girl being deflowered (*voces quoque et heulatus vim patientium virginum imitatus*); disguised as an animal he “attacked” the *inguina* of men and women alike; and he pithily proclaimed that “nobody could remain chaste or pure in any part of his body” (*Nero* 28–29).⁷⁵ One emperor lusts after “mature and very sturdy men” (*Galba* 21). One immaculately depilated emperor wears a toupee to conceal his baldness, applies moist bread to his face, and is “as fastidious about appearances as a woman” (*Otho* 12). One emperor wears a *toga Graecanica* and *corona aurea* (*Domitian* 4). What Vidal realizes is that these emperors, despite their vanished empire, are alive and well: “Suetonius, in holding up a mirror to those Caesars of diverting legend, reflects not only them but ourselves: half-tamed creatures, whose great moral task is to hold in balance the angel and the monster within – for we are both, and to ignore this duality is to invite disaster” (*United States* 528). Vidal also provided the script for Tinto Brass' movie *Caligula* (1979), and even in his most recent book, *Inventing a Nation* (2003), Vidal continues his fascination with the Roman emperors.⁷⁶

H. McElroy, in his article on Petronian pseudepigraphy and imitation, analyzes a book, composed by “Petronius” and published in 1966: *New York Unexpurgated: An Amoral Guide for the Jaded, Tired, Evil, Non-Conforming, Corrupt, Condemned and the Curious – Humans and Other-*

⁷⁵ Cf. *Golgotha* 158–162 and *Julian* 101; Crum 1952.

⁷⁶ One day after I read Suetonius' chapter on Tiberius, I turned to *The New York Times*. An article on the front-page captured my attention: “Political ‘Party’ Goes So Far, Even San Francisco is Aghast.” The article is about the political consultant Jack Davis' 50th birthday. The invitation reads: “Celebrate a Half Century of Hedonism,” “Yes, it's 50 Big Ones for Jack Davis ...!,” “Food! Live Music! Debauchery!,” “8pm 'til you Drop!” Then follows a description of the party (attended by all the local celebrities, including the mayor). Here are some excerpts: “Then the ‘entertainment’ got under way: dancers from a local strip club, male and female, gyrated in the smoke of a fog machine. A topless mustachioed woman clad in parts of a cowboy outfit wandered merrily through the crowd. Inflatable plastic penises bobbed here and there. Yet, almost since the sadomasochistic finale (something about a dominatrix with a razor blade and a whisky bottle urinating on the prostrate body of a satanic priest), San Franciscans have been asking all kinds of new questions about what is appropriate private behavior for their public officials,” Golden 1997. San Francisco or a Julio-Claudian court?

wise – to *Underground Manhattan*.⁷⁷ Twenty years earlier, *The City and the Pillar* pays a much more sophisticated, much more subtle, much more moral, much more intense tribute to Petronius. Imagine that Juvenal is alive and traveling through the United States: *aspice quid faciant commercia!* He realizes he has nowhere to go: *Nullam fidem habeo*. It is indeed “a society grown too complex to understand” (CP 158). In *Two Sisters*, Vidal approvingly quotes the apothegm of “our country’s first serious novelist,” Nathaniel Hawthorne: “The United States are fit for many purposes but not to live in.’ To which the country’s last novelist can only add ‘amen’” (*Two Sisters* 181).⁷⁸

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⁷⁷ McElroy 2001, 361. One could now add a book authored by Eurydice: *Satyricon USA: A Journey Across the New Sexual Frontier* (1999).

⁷⁸ Thanks to two anonymous readers of *Ancient Narrative*, to the participants at the 25th Biennial Conference of the Classical Association of South Africa at the University of Stellenbosch in July 2003, to Cecil Wooten (who kindled my excitement for Petronius), and to Gore Vidal himself (whose live feedback is such luxury for a classicist). The research for this project was facilitated by a fellowship from Western’s Faculty Scholarship Council at Western Kentucky University.

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