FROM PETRONIUS TO PETROLIO: 
SATYRICON AS A MODEL-EXPERIMENTAL NOVEL

Massimo Fusillo

In an author’s note written in spring 1973, Pier Paolo Pasolini introduced his unfinished novel, *Petrolio*, as follows:

*Petrolio* as a whole (from the second draft) should be read as a critical edition of an unpublished text (considered as a monumental work, a modern-day *Satyricon*). Four or five manuscripts of this text, both consistent and inconsistent—some reporting facts while others not—survive. The reconstruction is thus based on a comparison of the various manuscripts preserved (of which, e.g., two apocrypha with bizarre, grotesque, naive, stylised variants). It is also drawn from other materials such as letters by the author (whose identity is still under debate from a philological point of view), letters from the author’s friends who know of the manuscript (diverging one from the other), oral transcripts as reported in newspapers, other miscellany, songs, etc. There are also illustrations of the book (probably the work of the author himself). These illustrations are of great help in reconstructing the missing scenes and passages. Their description should be accurate, and the literary reconstruction will be complemented by a figurative, critical reconstruction, as the book’s graphics are done at a very high, albeit manneristic, level. Moreover, to fill in the numerous gaps in the book and for the reader’s information, an enormous quantity of historical documents that have some bearing on the book (related to politics and, in particular, to the history of ENI) will be used. These documents include: newspaper articles cited in their entirety (magazine reports, e.g., from *L’Espresso*), recordings of interviews with important figures or other witnesses, rare cinematic documents (here, there will be a critical reconstruction similar to the figurative and literary one, which is not only philological but also stylistic and determinative, e.g., “Who is the director of such and such a documentary?”), etc.). Therefore, on the basis of these documents the author of the critical edition will summarise, using a flat, objective and drab style, long excerpts of general history, so that the fragments of the reconstructed work are bound to one another. Such fragments will be arranged in paragraphs by the editor. At times such fragments correspond to entire original chapters (i.e., whose text is almost identical in all of the manuscripts, with the exception of the apocrypha, which continue to present bizarre variants). The fragmentary nature of the entire book renders some of the ‘narrative chunks’ perfect *per se*, even though it cannot be understood, for exam-
ple, if these are real facts, dreams or conjectures offered by some character.1

Therefore, it was the author’s intention for the novel to have an unfinished character by simulating a continuous reconstruction undertaken by the editor-narrator “using a flat, objective and drab style”, thus creating a sort of philological metanovel. As is well known, Pasolini was murdered two years after writing this note. By a tragic paradox, a planned incompleteness was to become an actual incompleteness. The novel we read, published posthumously (twenty years after his death in a critical edition), brings together fragments, handwritten and typed notes, as well as finished and drafted excerpts in some six hundred pages out of the approximately two thousand planned by the author. Petrolio, however, is an intrinsically unending work, which rejects any structure or literary convention: perhaps it could not have ended other than with the author’s death. Moreover, Pasolini had already conceived another work based on the technique of incompleteness, The Divine Mimesis, as the posthumous critical edition of the text of an author bludgeoned to death in Palermo.

An important intertextual signal (these abound throughout the novel) can be found between brackets: namely, Petrolio should emerge “as a monumental work, a modern-day Satyricon”. This was a reference to an ancient text, of which only fragments have survived, whose elusive plot we have continuously to reconstruct in its entirety, and whose author has been the subject of some controversy. The parallels are not limited to the surface form of the texts, which are composed of the extracts of a (great) lost work. As has often happened throughout the history of modern prose, Satyricon serves as the paradigm for any experimental open form which defies normal literary taxonomy and is based on the relentless contamination of languages.

Let us now examine the common points between Petronius and Petrolio. First, the narration is characterised by picaresque progression, or “swarming”, as defined by Pasolini himself citing an essay by Shklovsky on Sterne (another frequently evoked paradigmatic figure).2 Hence, there is a continuous succession of episodes in free association, often produced by the chronotope of casual encounters, beyond the typical organic and centripetal structure of the ancient

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1 See Pier Paolo Pasolini, Petrolio, in Pasolini (1998) 1161-2 (Engl. transl.).
2 See Pasolini (1998) App. 22a, implicitly quoting Shklovsky’s Theory of the prose; the work on Sterne is quoted in App. 6 sexies and App. 20.