

Bracht Branham, R. 2019. *Inventing the Novel: Bakhtin and Petronius Face to Face*. Classics in Theory. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2019. Pp. xv + 225. ISBN 978-0-19-884126-5. £56.99.

Bracht Branham's recent book places the ancient Roman writer Petronius and the twentieth-century Russian critic and theorist Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin 'face to face' and explores the roles of both in the invention and interpretation of the novel, ancient and modern. Despite their chronological and geographical distance, Petronius and Bakhtin have much in common: both were fearless thinkers and innovators and, if the versions of their histories that have come down to us are correct, both defied dangerous totalitarian regimes and murderous tyrants, and in addition, did so with laughter. Yet both achieved this degree of defiance at great personal cost. If our identification of the writer of the *Satyrica* with the historical figure whose seemingly insouciant suicide Tacitus describes in detail is correct, Petronius paid the ultimate price, but not before cocking a satisfying snoot at Nero's hypocrisy (*Annals* 16.18-19, quoted in translation 'after A.J. Church and W.J. Brodribb' by Branham on p. 8).¹ Bakhtin narrowly avoided death during the Stalinist years, a fate that befell many of his friends and compatriots in the Bakhtin Circle. While he lived to an old age, the Russian thinker endured years of abject poverty and obscurity, as well as protracted physical suffering, before his surprising rediscovery by Russian students late in life (p. 6). Yet Bakhtin continued to write throughout the worst years of Stalin's Soviet Union, as Branham points out (p. 2). Miraculously, both writers' works have survived, albeit against the odds (p. 7). *Inventing the Novel* is Branham's imaginative and for the most part successful attempt to place both these writers in dialogue.

Ironically, Petronius' *Satyrica*, the earliest version of the ancient novel to survive, is not written in Greek but in Latin, and is likely a parody of prior serious versions of narrative prose fiction. While he fails to focus specifically on Petronius at any length in his extant writings, Bakhtin himself was fascinated by the 'other face' of the serious genres of the ancient world, being famously interested in the laughter-filled parodic forms of literature which,

¹ Church, A.J. and Brodribb, W.J. (ed. and tr.) 1876. *Annals of Tacitus Translated into English with Notes and Maps*, pp. 326-327. London. Branham has modernised and altered aspects of this translation, but it is still cogent and accurate. It would have been preferable, however, to quote the whole text in Latin and then to provide an English translation.

he claimed, were created often on a popular level as a mocking counter-image of formal literature and culture. Branham uses the image of the double-faced Roman god Janus to explore Bakhtin's simultaneously backward- and forward-looking position in the history of literature and culture (p. 15). Classically educated, but possibly for the most part an autodidact (pp. 17-18), Bakhtin was interested not only in the ancient world and in ancient literature, but in their influence and continuity in the modern novel.

Most of the first part of this book introduces Bakhtin to the modern reader. Despite Bakhtin's increasing fame in scholarly circles since the late 1970s, and particularly the early 1980s when the first English translations of his major writings appeared, it is surprising how many people – some of them professional Classicists – can still claim not to have heard of him (see Branham's treatment of this issue on pp. 12-13). Branham ably fills the gap, and reviews the majority of Bakhtin's theoretical works, virtually all of which have a bearing on the novel. While Bakhtin presents an unusually cohesive philosophical approach throughout his career, and while most of his major theories are compatible with each other, Branham does address and, to my mind, explains satisfactorily, a few anomalies from the informal notebooks recovered from the thinker's early career (see for example p. 24). We also find out a few more interesting bits of biographical information that may surprise even the most ardent Bakhtinian. For example, I was intrigued but also a little disappointed to discover that Bakhtin famously used up the only copy of his work on the *Bildungsroman* to roll his own cigarettes during World War II because he was unaware that the publishing house containing the only other copy had been bombed into oblivion (p. 5). One would like to imagine, not unreasonably, that Bakhtin probably would still have used the manuscript as substitute for the hard-to-come-by cigarette papers had he known this. This literal but destructive 'pleasure of the text' (referenced in the 1990s movie *Smoke*) is something Petronius, whoever he was, would surely have understood.

In the latter part of the book Branham turns to a Bakhtinian analysis of Petronius' novel. For the most part this is thought-provoking and satisfactory. At the start of his exercise in placing Bakhtin and Petronius 'face to face', Branham stresses that 'the most important thing that the Russian and the Roman share is that the former developed a theory of the novel's ancient origins that the latter's work exemplifies' (p. 11). In other words, Branham's argument is that Bakhtin's theories are the key to unlocking Petronius' *Satyrical*, and that, at the same time, this extraordinary work is in itself, albeit retrospectively, the culmination and confirmation of Bakhtin's thinking. Branham argues very convincingly for this reading of the *Satyrical*, and for

recognizing Petronius' achievement as the first surviving 'modern' novel. But, at the same time, I, for one, am left wondering about all the ancient works which did not survive, and which are, unfortunately, most of what antiquity wrote. Branham does give Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* a nod, but what about Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*? What about all the other authors we are missing? It is pointless to argue from silence, but all the same, it is clear that there are many missing links, and not all of these are novels (I will address one of the not-so-'missing' links later). To get his two chosen writers, modern and ancient, 'face to face' and in dialogue, Branham ultimately short-changes both Petronius and Bakhtin. He overemphasizes the significance of Petronius, and at the same time oversimplifies Bakhtin, whose view of the ancient world and its plethora of generic forms was far more varied and pluralistic.

Bakhtin, in fact, recognized many ancient varieties of literature as containing the origins of the modern novel, but he cautions that these sources did not always combine to present themselves as a novel in antiquity. Bakhtin's point is that the roots of the polyphonic modern novel are plural. In his initial 1929 version of the text we know as *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin had gone so far as to credit Dostoevsky, his main focus at that point, with the creation of the polyphonic novel as a completely new kind of work. However, in the 1963 reworking of this text, which eventually appeared in English translation in 1984 as *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin revised this position, and saw the Dostoevskian polyphonic novel in its wider generic and historical perspective.² Bakhtin recognized a variety of lowly, dialogic and comic forms from antiquity as harbingers of the modern novel, particularly those which could broadly be termed 'serio-comical'. In addition to Menippean satire, which Branham understandably emphasizes (see Chapter 3, 'The Poetics of Genre: Bakhtin/Menippus/Petronius', pp. 81-104), and the Platonic dialogue, which Bakhtin glorified as a paradigm of polyphony, he also recognized Roman verse satire – mentioning in particular Lucilius and Horace – as being among the serio-comical ancestors of the polyphonic novel (Bakhtin tr. Emerson 1984:110-14). Bakhtin comments that 'these genres are all akin to one another in the external and internal dialogicality of their approach to human life and human thought' (Bakhtin tr. Emerson 1984:119-20). Bakhtin recognized many types of literature as multi-styled, multi-toned and exhibiting multi-voicedness – they are the precursors of the novel, the type of literature, which Branham observes, springs

² Bakhtin, M.M. (ed. and tr. C. Emerson) 1984. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Theory and History of Literature Vol. 8. Manchester.

to full expression in Petronius; however, the multi-voicedness is not limited to Petronius' *Satyrice*.

Likewise, in his essay *Discourse and the Novel*, which he wrote originally between 1934 and 1935, but which was published by Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson as part of a collection of four essays entitled *The Dialogic Imagination* in 1981,³ Bakhtin developed the idea of *heteroglossia* in the modern novel and traced its origins to ancient literature. However, Bakhtin was quick to observe that the ancient forebears of *heteroglossia* did not always take the form of a novel: 'The embryonic beginnings of authentic double-voiced and double-languaged prose did not in ancient times always achieve the status of a novel, as a definite compositional and thematic structure. For the most part novelistic prose flourished in other generic formats: in realistic novellas, in satires, in some biographical and autobiographical forms, in certain purely rhetorical genres ... in historical, and, finally, in epistolary genres' (Bakhtin, tr. Emerson and Holquist 1981:371).

In the final sections of his analysis, Branham looks at the presentation of Encolpius, Petronius' 'hyperliterary narrator' (p. 152). Branham observes that Encolpius' voice is 'objectified' in a Bakhtinian sense, and that the hapless narrator is 'a character verging on caricature' (pp. 155-56). Encolpius is satirized as overly educated, a 'mythomaniac' (p. 155), and severely underperforming and unsuccessful in the sexual sphere. Encolpius' addressing of the 'frowning Catos' (see p. 160), whom he views as attacking him, has many literary precedents, including Callimachus, Catullus, and Horace. Encolpius' amusing address to his impotent phallus, demanding 'in mock forensic prose that his phallus provide a legal defense of itself' (p. 162) is also very similar to the adulterer and *exclusus amator* Villius who holds a conversation with his own penis (the *mutto* or 'prick') at Horace *Satires* 1.2.64-72. Here the *mutto* is more convincing than his owner in his arguments that a high-class adulteress is unnecessary when passions need release. Horace's own satiric persona is another model for Encolpius. As I have argued elsewhere (Sharland 2005, 2010),⁴ Horace's *Satires* are one of the missing links in our understanding of the proto-carnavalesque in Latin literature: the Saturnalian settings of *Satires* 2.3 and 2.7 in Horace's second Book are a case in point, as they coin-

³ Bakhtin, M.M. (ed. M. Holquist, tr. C. Emerson, and M. Holquist) 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Austin.

⁴ Sharland, S. 2005. 'Saturnalian satire: proto-carnavalesque reversals and inversions in Horace, *Satire* 2.7' *Aclass* 48:103-20; Sharland, S. 2010. *Horace in Dialogue: Bakhtinian Readings in the Satires*. Bern.

cide with other reversals and inversions both literal and literary. The self-mockery of Horace's speaker and persona is very much a precursor to Petronius' Encolpius. On the whole though, Branham's book is an inspiring read, prodding Classical scholars and others to look, like Janus, both to the past and the future.

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