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Threading the Labyrinth: Fatalism and Moral Clarity in Three Late Antique Stories

“Almost one in four people with broadband internet admit signing up in order to download pornography, according to a survey published today.”
– This is London, 12 August 2004

“But it is only those who are capable of discrimination and of feelings against things who can be custodians of culture.”
– Richard Weaver, Visions of Order

A sensitive soul’s resistance to moral and civic corruption—his decision not to participate in the flouting of decorum and the degradation of bodies—is often entwined with his intellectual resistance to the perennial sophistic apology which excuses such corruption. That apology typically assumes the form of a dogmatic determinism that denies freedom of will so as to exculpate the wicked from the guilt of their deeds.

We see such attempts at spurious exoneration in the therapeutic claim that, for example, obnoxious behaviors like alcoholism or drug addiction are afflictions of the organism, “diseases,” rather than failures of character. We see it also in the sociological tenet that crime is a consequence of “root causes” such as poverty or “oppressive social structures.” Thus, a well-known movie actor blames his philandering on his “sex-addiction,” as though no personal agency could be discerned in his transgressions. Thus, a school board rejects an abstinence-based sex education curriculum with the argument that chastity defies nature and is therefore unrealistic. Twenty years ago first lady Nancy Reagan withstood a torrent of public abuse for her suggestion that schools teach children to “just say no” to temptations.

Since everyone has vices and yet most people have overcome the worst of their viciousness, one must labor mightily not to see in these explanations mere excuses for irredentism and indulgence. These explanations nevertheless have a wide currency. The politics of the recently completed century, for example, depended on a massive yielding to the assertion of revolutionary inexorability. Radical restructuring of society comes upon us inevitably, the vanguard always argues. We observe how the false axiom of inexorability ties in with the denial of freedom and with the exculpation of odious and even criminal acts. If a man

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were merely helping the inevitable along or acting as a cog in the universal machine, then who could blame him for our misdeeds? If the upheaval of law and usage were, moreover, to liberate us from annoying limitation into illimitable pleasure, why would we oppose its momentum? As Lenin said with bloody insouciance, to make an omelet you have to break eggs.

Determinism—or fatalism, to give the theory its other, hoarier name—is hardly a modern innovation. It appears to ripen with a certain stage of civilization and to emerge in tandem with a loosening of moral strictures and a decline of customs and forms. Whether we call it determinism or fatalism, the same sophistic teaching also seems to be related to the scale of the civic environment: it belongs not to the eras of the city-state or of feudalism or of national monarchies, but to the ages of empire, of cosmopolitanism, and of the universal bureaucratization of life.

As we moderns invoke biological and sociological mechanisms to absolve people of their sins, either of omission or commission, so the ancients invoked Heimarmene or Fortuna, implacable, superhuman agencies that play with human beings, as gamblers play with dice. Fate explains wealth or poverty, success or failure, as an accident, which might have fallen out otherwise; it simultaneously dulls pity for the unfortunate and suggests that industriousness never really deserves the fruits of its labor. What real virtue, then, can attach to the putatively virtuous? Why imitate frugality, chastity, or prudence? Fatalism would persuade the subject that to moralize about behaviors or conditions is to protest uselessly against forces beyond our control.

Like all hypocrisy, fatalism pays sneaky tribute to that which it aims to avoid or suspend. It utters, as it were, a perpetual cry of “I can’t help myself,” as though to confess a secret cognizance of its own abdicating wretchedness. In acknowledging and denying morality at the same time, the doctrine of individual will-less-ness blurs moral clarity—conveniently, for the transgressor. But it likewise disorients those in its gray aura who would seek the middle way and who would be best served in their quest by a Pellucid, rather than by a foggy, description of good and evil. The doctrine of individual will-less-ness abets the libido by dissimulating rhetorically the actual presence of any effective, morally responsible volition. To live in a social situation dominated by one or more of the varieties of fatalism is therefore to live as if in a labyrinth. One might think of the protagonist in a Saul Bellow or a Walker Percy or a Tom Wolfe novel, who, responding to his awareness of rectitude, must nevertheless navigate the pornographic environment of modern (sub)urban existence, with the sirens of libertinism crooning on all corners.

As it happens, Bellow and Percy and Wolfe have ancient forerunners. In what follows, I would like to examine three Late Antique stories that comment as trenchantly on our own contemporary existence as they do on the Imperial, Greco-Roman, and pagan worlds of their own centuries. The three stories are Satyricon (First Century) by the Epicurean Petronius Arbiter; The Golden Ass (Second Century) by the Platonist Lucius Apuleius; and Confessions (Fifth Century) by the Christian Saint Augustine of Hippo. We will discover, among other things, that the explicitly Christian civilization, against which modernity characteristically defines itself, emerged, in part, as a response to ancient fatalism: and that every one of the moral snares that trap modern people, from Mammon-worship and ego-inflation to satyriasis and nymphomania, has its counterpart in the teeming, avacious, flesh-obsessed Mediterranean world of the Imperial centuries. Those remote centuries
begin to look a good deal like our own moment. Might it be that we, too, must thread the labyrinth?

II

In the first of the extant episodes of Petronius’ *Satyricon*, called “Puteoli” after the Greek-speaking South Italian city in which the author sets the action, the novel’s protagonist Encolpius is trying to find his way home. The *nostos*, or homecoming, structures many an ancient tale, Homer having established its pedigree as a plot-device *par excellence* in that great poem of civilization, *The Odyssey*. Yet Odysseus actually has a home—and a wife and a son—to which he can return. Encolpius does not. Petronius draws on the Homeric motif while sharply distinguishing his own main character from Homer’s eponymous and admirable hero.

A drifter, a con man, a fornicator, a cynic of the purest water, Encolpius connives with his companions from town to town, always eyeing the local scene, cleverly commenting, artfully dodging, and worse. After delivering a diatribe to his fellow swindler Agamemnon which keenly sums up the decline (as Petronius sees it) of rhetoric and of education, Encolpius would like to find his lodgings; unfortunately all the tenements in the low-rent district where he rooms look the same to him, and the circumstance forces him to ask a stranger, an old woman, whether she recognizes him and can point the way to his dwelling. Offering personally to lead him, she says, “This is where you must be staying.” Encolpius, who serves as Petronius’ first-person narrator, records: “I was just telling her I did not recognize the place, when I caught sight of some naked old prostitutes and some customers prowling up and down in the middle of them. Slowly, in fact too late, I realized I had been taken to a brothel.” Encolpius runs into his roommate Ascyltus, who explains that he also “couldn’t find where I’d left our lodgings,” whereupon “a respectable-looking gentleman offered to show me the way.” This guide, leading him through “various pitch-dark turnings,” as Ascyltus says, “brought me to this place.” Elsewhere in the novel, Petronius has his characters make weary references to the famous Labyrinth of Minos and to the Cyclops’ Cave, as outstanding metaphors for their existence. Encolpius, losing his way in the rambling mansion of the billionaire-freedman Trimalchio, calls it in irritation “this modern labyrinth.” When Encolpius embarks on a ship in flight from his creditors only to discover that he has chosen his creditors’ own ship, his companion in crime Eumolpus invokes Polyphemus’ dreadful lair as the poetic figure representative of their dire straits.

While inconvenient to the two ne’er-do-wells, their inadvertent rendezvous in the Puteoli whorehouse testifies metaphorically, and with comedic aplomb, to their actual condition. While clear-sighted regarding others and quick to see a fault, neither Encolpius nor Ascyltus, both inventively plaintive, sees himself transparently. Like others in *Satyricon*, Encolpius tends to ascribe his unhappiness not to its origin in his own lasciviousness or envy, but rather to a malign power external to his will which compels him into misadventure. “Fate,” he says in the episode of the hastily planned sea-voyage, “has utterly defeated me at last.” When one of his schemes prospers, he classifies the event as “a marvelous stroke of luck,” saying “anyone would have envied [him his] luck.” When life goes badly, he curses “cruel luck.”

A sorceress consoles Encolpius with the astrological thought that “he was born under an evil star.” It is also by the benevolent whimsy of the stars that the astrology-obsessed Trimalchio explains his extraor-
dinary ascent from slavery to riches; but according to one of his dinner-guests, “they say he stole a hobgoblin’s cap and found its treasure.” Both accounts elide Trimalchio’s talent for bookkeeping and his sense for business, the actual sources of his super-prosperity. Perhaps, in the case of the guest, it is because his host’s success provokes envy, and perhaps, in the case of the host, because a desirable magical status adheres to the perception of being blessed by omnipotent Fortune. The elision amounts either way to mendacity because the rhetorical figure dissimulates the plain truth.

Telling of the “loneliness and humiliation” that caught up with him in his escapades, Encolpius transcribes his lamenting response at the time in these words: “Why couldn’t that earthquake have swallowed me up? Or the sea, such a menace even to innocent people? Did I escape the law, did I outwit the arena, and did I kill my host, only to end up, despite my claims to being a daring criminal, just lying here, a beggar and an exile, abandoned in a lodging-house in a Greek town?” This too is mendacious, and so is the associated formula: “One should not rely a great deal on one’s plans as fate has a way of her own.”

By contrast, in cases other than his own, Encolpius always penetrates swiftly to the ethical cause antecedent to the existential misery. In the critique of rhetoric and of education mentioned earlier, Encolpius observes that pandering to students will create cohorts of self-satisfied ignoramuses who will degrade the professions that they enter. “Once the rules go,” he says, “eloquence loses vigor and voice,” an observation convergent with the one made by Longinus in his treatise On the Sublime, written within a hundred years of Satyricon and likewise addressed to the faults and flaws of life on an imperial scale. Since rhetoric lies at the heart of ancient education, its degradation bodes ill for social conditions generally; Petronius, who officiated in Nero’s court as the “Arbiter of Elegance,” equips his protagonist intellectually to know what he is talking about with respect to others.

Yet Encolpius can occasionally glimpse, although only obscurely, the real mechanism behind his own unhappiness, as well as that of others. Hearing a story about Ascyltus, with whom he has fallen out, he remarks his alternating “amusement at [his] rival’s misfortune” and “annoyance at his success.” Resentment pervades the ever-nocturnal mise-en-scène in Satyricon. So also do lechery, avarice, and all forms of appetite indulged by those who see in the rule of moderation an intolerable scandal. For Petronius, appetite and resentment are indeed the same things as the mythical labyrinth, which steers one willy-nilly only after he enters it voluntarily.

Insofar as the characters of Satyricon find themselves thwarted in their progress by a bewildering path, they have stupidly built that baffling maze for themselves. We see this diagnosis in one of the major unifying strands of the itinerant story, when Encolpius falls under the supposed wrath of the god Priapus after profaning the sacred rites by spying on them. The Homeric parallel is the Wrath of Poseidon against Odysseus, but Odysseus never peeps through a keyhole. The Priapus cult belongs to the pornographic milieu of Petronius’ novel because it takes the form, preliminarily, of a sex-cult purely and simply. Originally, however, Priapus functioned in the role of a god of measure and of limitation. Petronius knows this; he exploits the deity for an ingenious double meaning.

Toward the point where the existing text of Satyricon breaks off, Circe, a priestess in the Priapic rites, tries to help Encolpius shed the god’s curse, which takes the form of a nagging but condign fiasco. An element in Encolpius’ willful debauchery has been
his obsessive liaison with the adolescent male prostitute Giton; indeed, squabbles over Giton have serially alienated Encolpius from his (equally debauched) fellow scoundrels. In the precinct of Priapus in Croton, in an atmosphere that differs in its spiritual quality from that of all the novel’s foregoing episodes, Circe tells Encolpius, who has adopted the ritual name of Polyaenias: “If you wish to get better, send Giton away. You will get your strength back, I can tell you.”

The fragmentary condition of Satyricon inhibits any too-certain proclamation as to its meaning. Petronius, an Epicurean and a materialist, believes in no gods. He does, it is clear, believe in measure. The Croton episode of the tale strongly suggests, especially in its ritualistic ambiance, that the fatalism by which Encolpius has in effect excused and justified the behaviors that have led to his existential impasse cannot withstand critical scrutiny. Fatalism merely justifies the moral flaccidity exemplified in the lack of a physical response; it supplies the pretence that consequences have no cause. Circe’s words—and she appears to hold out to Encolpius the prospect of a marriage of some type—imply that where libido has gotten the miscreant into his troubles, a regimen of stricter behavior conscientiously adopted will salvage him from them.

III

As the currency of Epicureanism in the Roman Empire waned after the First Century, two related cultural-religious movements waxed. I refer to Platonism—or, as historians of ideas call it in its Late Antique form, Neoplatonism—and to the so-called mystery or salvation cults. In the second of its two aspects in Satyricon, the Priapus cult functions as a salvation cult, offering to the convert an exit from the unpleasant brothel-labyrinth of a degraded social scene.

In addition to his talent as a storyteller, Lucius Apuleius taught the Platonic doctrine and worked as a civil adjudicator in his North African hometown of Madaura; he also held sacerdotal office in one of the most prominent of the Second Century mysteries, those associated with the cult of Venus-Isis. The Golden Ass: Or the Metamorphoses is an allegory of salvation by means of spiritual trial and mystic hazing under the redeeming grace of the Great Goddess. The tale rollicks along comically and shares many satirical traits with its Petronian precursor. Apuleius depicts a world poisoned by its vices and redoubled in its morbidity by a pervasive exculpatory invocation of Fate, the rabble commonly nominating this power for the commanding deity of a grab-as-can existence. People throng the arenas to see the spectacle of gladiatorial combat; they crowd the brothels; they cheat, betray, and murder one another; and they insouciantly debase the traditional forms that betoken an older, healthier, non-disgruntled world.

Apuleius’ protagonist, a younger version of his author and bearing his author’s given name of Lucius, might be any randomly selected twenty-something male recently graduated from a contemporary state university. I meet many Lucii every semester; I once was one myself. Exercising the privileges that go with an affluent origin, Lucius has journeyed from Corinth, his home, to remote Hypata in Thessaly, a region of Greece renowned for witchcraft, theriomorphism, and other mantic shenanigans. Sorcery in The Golden Ass, like rhetoric in Satyricon where we meet many a honey-tongued seducer, is a means of manipulating the human scene for despotically libido-driven purposes. Lucius admits to a “curiosity” about magic; he speaks of the “delirium of impatience” under whose
impetus he positively longs “to take a running leap into the abyss” of occult instruction.\(^5\) The Golden Ass tells its story retrospectively, so that these descriptions take on a confessional significance.

No sooner has Lucius arrived at his host Milo’s establishment in Hypata than he violates hospitality by starting a sexual affair with the scullery maid Photis, a willing object of his advances. Photis divulges that her employer’s wife, Pamphile, is a *capo di tutti capi* of witches in the region, renowned and feared. Under Photis’ urging, Lucius spies on the midnight transformation of Pamphile into an owl, but when he attempts the same trick, Photis has confused which magical ointment of her mistress is which; the calamitous upshot sees the head-long experimenter changed not into a wise owl, but into a braying ass. It is the “abyss” indeed! Impelled by his “curiosity,” for which another word is *libido*, Lucius begins his yearlong tribulation under the blows of sadistic masters and amidst the terrors of a lawless world.

Lucius not only suffers personally in consequence of his declension of spirit; he must also bear witness close at hand to the follies of others. Impressed into service as a pack animal by a gang of robbers and taken to their mountain lair, Lucius learns, for example, of the bloody calamities that undo these criminals as they swagger about in their depredations. Thus, the leader of the criminal band, Lamachus, gets his hand nailed to a door while attempting to pick the lock; his friends cut off the hand in order to facilitate their captain’s escape; but he, fearing that the loss has unfitted him for his thieving ways, falls on his sword in despair.

Lucius learns also of the ubiquity of that deadly trinity consisting of lascivious desire, sexual betrayal, and cold-blooded murder—by those whose lust bends ever to novel objects—of old, now encumbering partners in oath and life. A newlywed stepmother simmers in lubricity for her eldest stepson; when he rebuffs her, she murders the lad’s younger brother and falsely accuses the one who rightly spurned her.

Lucius learns at last of a universal hunger for cruel entertainments. He encounters the Festival of Laughter in Hypata, which deludes an innocent into thinking that the magistrates shall torture and kill him for a crime he never committed; he encounters the many pornographic-sacrificial displays put on in the hippodromes by wealthy bigmen who hope thereby to curry favor among the plebes and so pave the way to political power. Before Venus-Isis extends her mercy, Lucius foresees having to couple in the arena with a condemned prostitute-murderer, whereupon both will become live meat for a sportive-punitive unleashing of ravenous beasts. Only the crime section of a modern tabloid newspaper might rival Apuleius’ long catalogue of malfeasances for its combination of banality with wickedness and baroque outrage with empirical plausibility. The story’s schemers, such as the incestuous-adulterous stepmother, favor poison.

And everyone, including Lucius, blames the painful consequences of his own deeds, or of his own perverse quirks, on Fate. Lucius would derive his catastrophic metamorphosis not from his rash dabbling in Pamphile’s dangerous pharmacy, but from the “perverse malignity of my Fortune.” He would derive the items of his subsequent penitential itinerary from “Fortune...totally blind,” “Cruel Fortune,” and “the disastrous rage of Fortune.” Yet in many of the calamities that he observes, he can also descry at work not a fickle deity, but rather such entirely human phenomena as “the baleful glance of envy,” “cruel envy,” and “curiosity” as the “undoing” of the impetuous agent.

At the heart of The Golden Ass, we find the inset story of Cupid and Psyche, nar-
rated by the robbers’ witch-like housekeeper to the young kidnap-victim Charite, snatched away on the eve of her wedding, who awaits ransoming from the evildoers. The plight of Psyche, whose name means “soul” in Greek, parallels that of both Lucius and Charite, the difference lying in Charite’s innocence. Against mother Venus’ wishes, Cupid falls in love with Psyche, marries her, and brings her to his airy palace; she will live a paradisiacal life provided she obey but one injunction—never to look at her husband, who visits her exclusively at night, when darkness hides his identity.

Psyche has two sisters who equate her absence with death but seethe with covetousness when they learn her new status. “If you should hear their lamentations,” says Cupid, “do not answer or even look that way, or you will bring about heavy grief for me and for yourself sheer destruction.” Admitted against advice to her home, the sisters work on the girl’s guilelessness to incite her against her husband and to violate the promise of her marriage. They succeed. Breaking the oath casts Psyche down and she must undergo an ordeal until, proving her virtue, Venus herself salvages the girl and countenances her son’s wedded bliss.

The sisters perish, I happily report; they account themselves in wickedness as the worst in *The Golden Ass*. The pronouncement that Apuleius makes about them—his uniting of his story’s major metaphors in description of them—implies something startling about his view of the world. After their visit with Psyche, “the worthy sisters on their return home were now inflamed by the poison of envy.” Looking for a formula to justify their jealousy, one sister says to the other: “You see the blindness, the cruelty and injustice of Fortune...content, it would seem, that sisters of the same parents should fare so differently.” By the associative property, these sentences reveal that the much invoked Fate or Fortune of the novel’s characters *does not exist*; or rather that it exists not as an omnipotent divinity but simply as a projection of the *envy*, a form of *libido* and thus a type of *poison*, that impels into disaster those who give way measurelessly to their own rabid drives.

Such a reading of *The Golden Ass* finds itself in contest with the usual one, ably represented by Luther H. Martin’s chapter on Apuleius in his useful study, *Hellenistic Religions* (1987). For Martin, Apuleius’ story exemplifies the Late Antique conviction that the sub-lunar world is indeed governed by “the capricious rule of Tyche/Fortuna” and therefore constitutes an actual labyrinth through which hapless humanity is doomed to wander: “Buffeted by the caprice of Fortune, the quest of the dubious hero...is haphazard.” On the contrary, Apuleius appears to call this conviction into question. His explanation of misfortune is anthropological rather than demonic; in the end Apuleius deposes Fate in favor of free will and predictable moral consequence.

**IV**

Saint Augustine, who knew Apuleius’ work and admired it, grappled with the same moral phenomena as the Second Century Neoplatonist in formulating the Biblical theology that he bequeathed to medieval Christendom. Augustine’s *Confessions* resembles both *Satyricon* and *The Golden Ass* in any number of ways, for it is, like both of them, a first-person narrative of embittered wandering and of spiritual, if not material, suffering; and it tells a story of conversion that turns on a decisive rejection of fatalism.

In his adolescence and early manhood, Augustine yielded to the appetites, much as do Petronius’ or Apuleius’ main characters. He frequented the brothels of Thagaste
and of Carthage, where he found his first professional employment as a teacher of rhetoric. He experimented with religion, investing no little faith in astrology and associating himself for ten years with Manichaeism. Astrology is the fatalistic science par excellence, while Manichaeism was a popular theology of the time that articulated a doctrine to make of existence the opposite of what the Jewish and Christian view makes of it: a wretched condition of meaninglessness to which an evil sub-deity has condemned human beings rather than a benevolent Creation over which God puts humanity in stewardship. Augustine liked theatricals and gladiatorial games as much as he liked brothel crawling, but during the long transformation of his character, he came to see that in their ubiquity, pornographic display and blood sport were at once symptoms of an old morality in calamitous deliquescence and the sources of many a personal tragedy, including in all likelihood his own.

If envy were one toxic assault on happiness—as it is in Satyricon and The Golden Ass—then mimesis, or, as the guidance counselors say, peer pressure, could be another. Aristotle averred in his Poetics that human beings are the most mimetic, or imitative, of animals. In Confessions, Augustine tells the tale of his friend in spiritual exploration Alypius, who had gradually and painfully weaned himself from addiction to the sanguinary spectacle of the arena. One day in Milan, however, Alypius met up accidentally with unreformed old companions on their way to the hippodrome; they cajoled him to accompany them. Alypius closed his eyes so as not to see the coup de grace, but he could not stop his ears. "When one of the combatants fell in the fight, a mighty cry from the whole audience stirred him so strongly that, overcome by curiosity and still prepared (as he thought) to despise and rise superior to it no matter what it was, he opened his eyes and was struck with a deeper wound in his soul than the victim he desired to see had been struck in his body."

It must be noted that Augustine does not excuse Alypius’ lapse on the notion that Alypius could not help himself. Alypius might have known better than to yield to his “curiosity,” and he might have taken heed not to overestimate his resistance to imitative Schadenfreude. Lucius, in The Golden Ass, knew better than to dabble with substances he did not understand, but he dabbled with them anyway. Encolpius, in Satyricon, knew better than to spy on rites in a private temple, where his eye had no business in lingering, but he spied on them anyway. A deliberate perversity always lies at the inception of our lapse from righteousness and thus at the inception of our misery.

Augustine’s was a struggle, particularly, with Manichaeism, one of the tenets of which asserted that, for the elect, sin is impossible because, while the body might stoop to pollute itself, the spirit remained perfect. For the Manichaean elect, all things were possible. Matter being evil, the body sinned through an intrinsic proneness. "I can’t help myself,” the body might say under this doctrine, thereby exculpating the spirit. Manichaeism is thus particularly a dogma of determinism; but it incorporated fatal-
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ism, too, by its investment in astrology. Augustine rehearses the long train of syllogisms by which he rejected Manichaean determinism in Confessions, Book VII. Here I will jump to his conclusion: as “whatsoever is, is good,” it follows that “evil, then, the origin of which I had been seeking, has no substance at all; for if it were a substance, it would be good.” In stating that evil is not a substance, Augustine wipes away every excuse that invokes either luck or inexorability to explain an individual’s condition. The individual, possessing free will, is himself responsible for his lapses, his transgression, and his unhappiness.

V

Of how much in our own world do these Late Antique authors remind us? Marxism and sociobiology, the dominant ideologies of the post-Christian era, are alike denials of free will and declarations of personal non-responsibility; so is every contemporary declaration that transgressors are really helpless victims because obnoxious influences act upon them as tyrannizing substances.

I have no wish to be seen as a bluenose. But I must say that much of what is characteristically contemporary discomfits me: in my classroom, even the co-ed with a dainty cross hanging in her décolletage are likely to sport a tattoo on her lower back; even the men have pierced their bodies with various ornaments—gestures of mimetic conformism. Rhetoric is certainly in alarming decay. All students seem to speak in the “f— patois,” identified under that name by Tom Wolfe in his newest novel. The movies that pack my students into the cinemas on the weekend are special-effects reproductions of the worst of gladiatorial spectacle. No one dies, but the appetite assuaged is the same one formerly fed on split bodies in the coliseums of old. As for that electronic prodigy the Internet, it is the digital equivalent of Satyricon’s speakeasy night-scene: all roads seem to lead to the virtual equivalent of the bordello.

In our Late Modern (and Democratic Imperial?) world, we need Petronius, Apuleius, and the good old Bishop of Hippo—badly. We need them now to lead us out of our contemporary labyrinth. We need them to remind us that it is always a big fat lie whenever we petulantly shout, “I can’t help myself.”

2. In fact, Trimalchio is married to a woman whose fortuitous name is: Fortuna.
3. The “host” to whom Encolpius refers here is not Trimalchio, but another.
4. The scurrilous character of much of Satyricon’s action has led to a widespread misinterpretation: Petronius’ tale is not a pornographic novel; it is a novel about, and critical of, a pornographic world.