

Henderson, W.J. (tr.) 2024. *Die Satyricon van Petronius*. Gansbaai: Naledi Publishers. Pp. 156 pages. ISBN 978-1-0672342-6-3. ZAR325.00.

This work is a translation from Latin into Afrikaans of the first-century CE satirical picaresque novel, ascribed to T. Petronius ('Arbiter'), a courtier of the Emperor Nero. This 'Petronius' is fairly certainly identified as the consular T. Petronius Niger. After falling out of favour with the more than eccentric emperor, Petronius, as narrated by Tacitus (*Ann.* 16.17-20), took his own life in a spectacular manner, slitting his wrists and by turns binding them and relaxing the bond over the course of a few days until his resultant and inevitable death from loss of blood appeared 'natural'.

Henderson, well known for his skill in rendering Greek poetry into Afrikaans, (ranging from lyric through elegiac and iambic to pastoral and back to epigram, which shares a metrical pattern with elegy) has here ventured into an entirely different genre. Petronius' *Satyricon* is Menippean in appearance, alternating prose with short verse episodes. Only parts of the novel have survived, and of these only sections 26 to 78 (termed by Henderson *hoofstukke*, 'chapters') are well known, both as the basis for a modern Italian cinematic epic (Federico Fellini's *Satyricon*, 1969) and for their publication as a 'complete' comic reader for students, M.G. Balme's *The Millionaire's Dinner Party* (Oxford, 1973). This particular section is relatively less bawdy than many other passages in the rest of the work and it was for years prescribed for study in the second year Latin course at Stellenbosch University, where this reviewer taught for many years. She is also obliged to admit that this was the only part of Petronius' work that she had ever read in Latin before undertaking this review. Henderson's translation of the whole work gave her a new picture of the novel in its entirety and she only then really understood what had been involved at the time when a former colleague, Professor Suretha Bruwer, who had prescribed as background reading other passages from the English-language Penguin translation by J.P. Sullivan (Harmondsworth, 1965-77), had told her that a scandalised male sophomore had entreated her, Bruwer, 'never, ever again' to prescribe 'such filth' for her students to read.

Afrikaans-speaking readers are therefore warned that Henderson has not been reticent in his translation of all the 'seamier' passages in the work. Yet his carefully rendered versions of Petronius' narrative contain no bawdy, or even vulgar, Afrikaans words: the bawdiness lies in the

situations in which the narrator finds himself and in his and his companions' consequent actions.

In the introductory section to *The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation* (2000: 3-10), a comprehensive work discussing translations of a variety of European classics, the editor, Peter France, gives a short discussion of the clash of theories about the art of translation as represented by the opposing ideas of Eugene Nida and Henri Meschonnic. Translations may be typified as all lying within a broad range of approaches: fidelity to the source-language leading to a certain 'strangeness' in a text (Meschonnic), *versus* reader-friendliness, that is, closeness to the idiom of the target-language (Nida). Henderson seems here to have sought a compromise between the two approaches. He explains in a concise introductory discussion (pp. 9-12) that Petronius' narrator Encolpius has an 'elegant' (*verfynde*) vocabulary, but that his Latin diverges from the standard in various ways. Such divergence seems to have led to various parts of Henderson's Afrikaans translation appearing a little too formal, even 'old-fashioned,' an indication of the translator's attempts to convey the somewhat odd 'Latin' (as in *excellente* for *excellens*) or even 'quasi-Greek' vocabulary (*topanta*, 'die hele lot', that is, 'the whole caboodle', or *saplutus*, 'skatryk', veering towards 'stinking rich'). The translator even cites two Petronian words of uncertain provenance, 'agaga' and 'cusuc', which he translates, respectively, as 'koppelaar' (pimp) and 'pondok' (shack).

Henderson's introduction offers various examples of such linguistic oddities, with section references, which enabled the reviewer to judge where a particular instance lies on the postulated Meschennoc—Nida spectrum. Occasional grammatical slips of the original are pointed out here, but translated straightforwardly and somewhat literally. 'Vinus (for vinum) mihi in cerebrum abiit', (literally, 'the wine went away to the brain of mine') becomes in Afrikaans 'die wyn het na my kop gegaan', a perfectly acceptable expression. Throughout, the translation offers pleasurable, if sometimes a little shocking, reading.

In addition to Henderson's concise introduction, the book provides a single 'Aanhangsel' (appendix) showing a reconstruction of Trimalchio's 'tafelplan' (seating arrangements, p. 154). The facing page carries an explanatory exposition of the traditional layout of a Roman dining room, and the translator's conjectural placement of each participant in the inane dinner-table conversation so humorously lampooned by Petronius. At this point the reviewer is very tempted to wander off into irrelevant comparison of Trimalchio's braggadocio to that of a certain modern head of state ... But that would be inappropriate. Rather allow her to wander off briefly into Henderson's target language: 'Lesers, aan watter moderne

staatsman se groothedswaan herinner Trimalchio se grootpraterij vir julle hier?

However, the reviewer must not descend into an analysis of the Roman consular's amusing narrative instead of keeping to a weighing of the translator's art, together with admiration of Henderson's bravery in venturing to shock the more conservative elements of the Afrikaans reading public with his translation.

Readers who are able to read Afrikaans are in for a rare treat; that is, if their stomachs are strong enough to stand the somewhat raunchy humour of Petronius' witty contribution to the widened generic spectrum of Latin literature.

Jo-Marie Claassen
Stellenbosch University