"How does it happen that the university library contains so many early editions of the *Satyricon* of Petronius?"

This was the question raised by the clerk in the Rare Books Room of the Hillman Library as she brought out from the vault copies of the *Satyricon* published in 1565, 1575, 1585, and 1587. The researcher upon whose table she carefully deposited the brown-paged volumes explained that the present holdings in Hillman constitute only a fraction of the *Satyricon* materials once assembled at the University of Pittsburgh and that during the 1920s and the 1930s the institution had been a world-renowned center of Petronian research.

The guiding spirit of this research was Evan Taylor Sage, who became a member of the Department of Latin in 1913 and served as head from 1919 until his untimely death in 1936. Seeking a manuscript of the Roman poet Tibullus during a visit to the Vatican Library, he was mistakenly brought a manuscript containing the *Satyricon* — a happy mistake — for as he leafed through the folios, Sage's alert eyes noted the presence of conditions which provoked the curiosity of the textual researcher that he was. He became so engrossed in those conditions and others which he subsequently unearthed that the writings of Tibullus, of Virgil, of Livy — on all of whom he had published works — became secondary to his concern with the composition of Petronius. It was a concern which soon involved his colleagues and graduate students so thoroughly that it became a preoccupying interest of theirs too.

Petronius is usually identified with an individual described in the *Annals* of the Roman historian Tacitus (book 16, chapters 17-20). A man of demonstrated ability and efficiency as a government administrator, he chose to adopt a life of conspicuous hedonism: he came to possess a wide reputation not as a debauchee, but as a person *erudito luxu* (“of polished good-living”). He caught the attention of Nero, becoming the arbiter elegantiae of the emperor, the judge of what was proper and in good taste. Arousing the jealousy and the ill-will of Nero's associate Tigellinus, Petronius was accused falsely of complicity in a conspiracy against the emperor. Knowing full well the

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consequences of such an accusation, he prepared for death without delay. But what a suicide he staged! He called together a group of close friends, not for a discussion of the vicissitudes of life or of the immortality of the soul, but for the singing of lighthearted songs and easy-going verses (levia carmina et faciles versus). Also, he alternately cut open and bound up his veins as the entertainment waned and waxed. As a final measure, he drew up a catalogue of the scurrilous escapades of Nero to which he was privy and sent it to the emperor under his personal seal (taking care to destroy his signet ring so that it might not be used to involve other innocent victims liable to loss of favor of Nero or any of the tyrant’s circle).

Some have sought to associate the Satyricon with this deathbed account of Nero’s depravities. The association, however, is not accepted widely. For one thing, the work in its present state is too lengthy to have been composed under such circumstances. Moreover, there is evidence that what is extant forms only a small part of a much more extensive piece of writing. The content, in addition, is more comprehensive than a list of scurrilous escapades. The Satyricon has been described as the first picaresque novel, a description not without some accuracy, as it recounts the adventures of three vagabonds boasting no visible source of livelihood. (One of the original trio is later replaced by a poet whose compensation for his literary effusions is usually a stoning, or at the least a hooting by his listeners.) The lengthiest portion of the extant composition depicts the dinner party of the former slave Trimalchio (the Cena Trimalchionis), to which the three rascallions have somehow gained an invitation. Interspersed in the main narrative are many shorter tales, such as that of the Widow of Ephesus, said to have been translated into more than fifty languages but known to many of the present day as the core of Christopher Fry’s play A Phoenix Too Frequent. The work is mainly in prose, but a number of pieces of poetry break in here and there. Two longer pieces of this kind are recited by the poet member of the later trio; one recounts the fall of Troy, the other the civil war between Caesar and Pompey in the first century B.C.

Sage’s primary interest was directed to the textual transmission of the Satyricon. This is a matter beset with problems because the work suffered dissolution very early. In part the dissolution was a predictable result of the length and the diffuseness of the composition. Also exerting an influence was the deliberate extraction of episodes for individual presentation, episodes like the Cena Trimalchionis, the
Widow of Ephesus tale, and the civil war poem. The Cena Trimalchionis, in fact, did not appear in manuscripts and editions until the seventeenth century, when, as a result of the fortuitous discovery of a manuscript containing it, the selection was restored to the main body of the narrative. Not without some effect on the textual difficulties was the frankness of the Satyricon. Although it pales by comparison with writings of the present day, its concern with the erotic evoked disapproval from many critics of the Middle Ages, some of the Renaissance, and even a few in later times.

Sage and his coworkers directed their attention to the textual intricacies, securing photostatic copies of manuscripts containing the Satyricon (with the assistance of the American Council of Learned Societies) and having the university library on the lookout for acquisition of editions of the work. The earliest known manuscript is dated in the ninth century, and the first edition was issued in the final quarter of the fifteenth century. The systematic study of the text is relatively recent, owing a great deal to the activities of Franz Buecheler in Germany and Charles Beck in the United States. Sage built upon those activities, bringing new evidence to light and demonstrating the existence of relationships previously not recognized. At the time of his death, he was engaged in preparing an authoritative record of the textual transmission of the Satyricon. Although each of his coworkers was a specialist in some particular aspect of the record, none of them possessed the comprehensive outlook and the complete knowledge that he had acquired over the years; hence, upon his death, the project lost an irreplaceable guiding force.

As a teacher, Sage was without a peer. Quiet, unassuming, unspectacular, he derived his effectiveness from the careful organization of the material in each course he taught and from the thoughtful direction of his students into fruitful areas of investigation. He once described his role as that of a military strategist — a strategist who provided his associates with an overall briefing, oversaw their performance of a number of diverse responsibilities, and directed the synchronization of their individual tasks into a meaningful whole. (His use of a military analogy was not fortuitous, for he had been a commissioned officer in World War I.) This method, which was so successful in the classroom, proved detrimental upon Sage’s death: the project to publish the definitive history of the Satyricon text faltered because it lost the direction which he alone could provide.

The Satyricon is a rich piece of writing. Like its author, who sub-
merged genuine talent and thorough efficiency beneath a studied pose of urbanity and pleasure-seeking, it conceals concern with a number of scholarly issues under the guise of a lightly flowing and loosely connected narrative. It is, first, the lengthiest and most complete representative of the satura form surviving, the only literary form which the Romans did not take over from Greek literature and which they prided themselves on originating. Also, a literary credo is implicit in the style in which it is written and is given explicit expression by characters speaking at more than one point. The conservatism of the credo reflects that of Petronius toward political and social conditions of his times. The description of the dinner hosted by the ex-slave Trimalchio and attended in the main by others of his fellow freedmen provides insight into the effects of slavery on life in the late republic and the early empire of Rome. Nowhere else, not even in the large number of surviving inscriptions (memorial, dedicatory, official), is there so concentrated a mass of evidence illuminating colloquial Latin — Latin as it was spoken in contrast to the Latin employed in literary compositions.

To the scholarly investigation of these issues, the Pittsburgh workers devoted intensive and unremitting research. The fruits of their efforts were apparent in a number of ways. A host of dissertations, both doctoral and master's, were written at the University of Pittsburgh on Petronian topics — a larger amount of writing on Petronius and the *Satyricon* than has ever been produced anywhere else. The writers in many cases, it is worthy of note, did not regard their activities as merely a means to an end, the acquisition of a higher degree; many of them continued their research and writing. Sage, his colleagues, and graduate students presented papers at meetings of learned societies and published articles in classical periodicals. (One meeting of the American Philological Association had on its program no fewer than six papers by members of the Pittsburgh group.) Sage himself in 1929 edited the first collegiate text of the *Satyricon*, complete with notes guiding a translator and illumination on a number of relevant details. The completeness of the work, as well as the uniqueness of it, is evident in the fact that a second edition of the book has recently been issued. This is significant in a day when publishers of textbooks are reducing the number of their offerings, because of straitened budgets, especially textbooks in Greek and Latin, which — sad to say! — no longer attract a large number of college students.

Despite the decline in the reading and study of classical selections
in the original, there has been a rise in the reading of such selections in English translation during recent years. Among the selections so distinguished is the *Satyricon*. Two translations, issued in paperback, have attracted a large group of readers. Interest in the composition is reflected in this fact as it is in the filming by Fellini of a motion picture based on the work (a motion picture that has been described as containing more of Fellini than of Petronius). During the 1920s and 1930s, however, the center of Petronian interest was located in Pittsburgh. The role of the city as such a center was universally recognized. Just as universities in the Middle Ages attracted students because of the presence of an outstanding teacher or because of specialization in an area of learning, Sage and the University of Pittsburgh drew those interested in the study of the *Satyricon*. Questions concerning the work and its author came from all parts of the world. One eminent scholar, on visiting the center of activity in Room 206, Alumni Hall, was aware of the double import of his words when he remarked, "Petronius lives in Pittsburgh!"