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NOTE

This contribution is part of a larger dialogue of three articles and one responding piece that form the current issue of *JOLCEL*. The other contributions are “Avatars of Latin Schooling. Recycling Memories of Latin Classes in Western Poetry: Five Paradigmatic Cases” by Anders Cullhed (pp. 17-33) and “Competition, Narrative and Literary *Copia* in the Works of Boncompagno da Signa and Guido Faba” by Jonathan M. Newman (pp. 35-54). The response piece is “Letters, Poems, and Prose Fictions in Cosmopolitan Latinity” by Roland Greene (pp. 82-86).

The Morosophistic Discourse of Ancient Prose Fiction

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores a set of connections between philosophy and prose fiction. It combines a somewhat Foucauldian outlook on the question of genealogical filiation with a Bakhtinian interest in polyphony and heteroglossia. This is an overview of the various possibilities for the emplotment of the story of knowledge. The structural details of these plots inform the quality of the knowledge that eventuates from them. In coarse terms, I am asking what it means to insist upon the novelistic qualities of Plato while simultaneously thinking about the Platonic qualities of novels. This highly selective survey starts with classical Athens, touches upon Plutarch and Lucian, and then lingers with narrative prose fiction more specifically by examining the texts of Chariton, Achilles Tatius, Heliodorus, Apuleius, and Petronius.

Introduction: Emplotting Knowledge

The subject of this journal is “Latin Cosmopolitanism and European Literatures.” And this issue takes as its topic the schools. I will explore the perhaps overly broad topic of Greek education and Latin literary production. That is, I am not going to write about Latin literature as if it were a prologue to European literature. Instead I am going to examine a dialectic of cosmopolitanism and literary production within the Roman period. In order to do so we will need to think about the cultural antecedents that were ultimately recast within the Roman era. But by my own conclusion I do hope to connect up with the main currents of the issue. We will first travel a little further upstream in order to explore various moments where the waters of erudition and wisdom mingled in the Greco-Roman tradition.

The appropriation of Latin schooling by later centuries recapitulates founding aspects of Roman prose fiction’s emergence as a vernacular literature in its own right. Roman prose fiction is a learned-and-stupid literature that will inspire still further vernacular literatures.

And as is clear from the other pieces in this issue, these are literatures that likewise arise out of a self-conscious engagement with a bookish past. And, significantly, the moment of literary emergence for ancient prose fiction is marked by various impieties and reversals of foundational gestures. Chief among them is a refusal of discourse to confine itself to the search for enlightenment as per the dictates of the philosophers. Indeed, wisdom and erudition can find themselves demoted from ends, and they can become mere means. And, as means, they are wont to do no more than menial service relative to some ‘higher’ literary purpose. This aesthetic orientation of itself represents a transgression of the evaluative schema that reserved the sublime for philosophy alone.¹ Indeed laughter, absurdity, and ridicule emerge as forces that can demolish the old figures of sublimity in the name of replacing them with novel(istic) possibilities.

We can trace some notable contours of this process by attending to the dramaturgy of knowledge within the prose traditions of Greece and Rome. Given our own training, we are apt to associate learning with the textbook and its flat expository style. This mode delivers up a series of facts, illustrations, and proofs. The classical period was abundantly supplied with flat expository textbooks, but the textbook by no means furnishes the only mode of presentation.² We can also find texts that give a plot to their story of learning. Instead of a textual object that itself (re)produces knowledge-as-object, we see characters who embody an acquired knowledge that they disseminate to others. That is, learning is extremely subject-oriented in such a text: the human process is every bit as important as the product. And the product itself is less ‘knowledge’ in the abstract than the concrete emergence of ‘one who knows’. We see characters who acquire or modify their own understanding in the course of a drama of learning.³ And, naturally, the reader is an invisible supplementary character within this drama. The net effect is a textual apparatus that fuses learning and literary production, and it does so in a programmatic fashion.

These dramas of erudition have their specific plots. Here plot means, effectively, the ostensible subject of the conversation, whether the topic is the nature of the soul or the best means of household management. Dialogism in such a scheme indicates, in effect, the process that subjects undergo when they engage in learned dialogue and so subject themselves to self-transformation at the level of their thinking. What a narratologist might call a plot arc a Greek would describe via a set of metaphors derived from travel. Furthermore the shape of the plot of one of these texts is convergent with their epistemological status. Discussions either find a path to a solution or they do not: there is either a *poros* or we end in *aporia*. ‘Method’ is itself a word derived from the vocabulary of movement along a road.⁴

Implicit in the formal question of these dialogic journeys towards knowledge are a host of expectations. In addition to the question of finding a path, we will observe a preoccupation

¹ See the sixth chapter of James I. Porter, *The Sublime in Antiquity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), where the philosophers’ sublime is explored. Porter explores the tension within antiquity between ‘the grand style’ qua style and the broader variety of ways of conceptualizing ‘the lofty’.

² Even the most formal, dry version of the ancient curriculum has difficulty staying clear of implicit provocations to fiction. One thinks especially of the instructions regarding invention and narration or of the practice of declamation: here one is being taught story-telling. On the relationship between declamation and the novelistic imagination see Danielle van Mal-Maeder, *La fiction des déclamations* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

³ On the dramaturgy of antiquarian knowledge see Erik Gunderson, *Nox Philologiae: Aulus Gellius and the Fantasy of the Roman Library* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009).

⁴ *Poros*: v. *πóρος*, “means of passing (a river)” or “(more generally) pathway, way.” *Aporia*: v. *ἀπορία*, “(of places) difficulty of passing,” “(of things) difficulty, straits,” “(of persons) being at a loss, embarrassment, perplexity.” *Method*: v. *μέθοδος* (= *μετά* + *ὁδός*), “mode of prosecuting an inquiry, method, system.” A *ὁδός* is “a way, road.”

with the overcoming of limitations, the dissolution of difference, efforts towards convergence and coherence. Here we can shift our metaphors to another favorite ancient register: the theory of music. The polyphonous initial presentation and the variegated cast of characters frequently gives way to a higher order synthesis that finds concord among the varied voices. Whether or not all of these features are always present is somewhat beside the point, the real issue is that I have just described a situation that is convergent with modern sensibilities about literary production. And, of course, this ancient species of literary production is keen to ensure that synthesis at the level of discursive form converges at the level of knowledge as such.⁵ What Aristotle says of the ideal drama works well for the ideal philosophical dialogue: recognition and reversal converge and they do so at a moment of crisis for the character who has just encountered a species of enlightenment.

What I describe as a typical set of features is by no means an inevitable set of features. Complications abound. Instead of concordant polyphony throughout the flow of a work we can detect as well contrapuntal elements. Some characters resist the movement of the plot and are never fully integrated into the final synthesis. Cacophonous interruptions are even conceivable, but these are seldom the last notes to sound and are instead a sort of overture to a still more elaborate bit of literary and conceptual orchestration.⁶ Let us take designate this as the Form of Dialogue, or, perhaps more usefully, its Ideal Type.⁷

I wish to fill in this initial sketch of learning and the literary. And then I want to transition to the set of complications that arise when new literary configurations confront the old traditions of erudite discourse. Here our challenge will be to avoid the reflex that reduces the literary rejoinder to a mere parody or a mere failure, that is, to see in non-philosophical discourse something that is either inconsequential or beneath notice. If Plato is said to have abandoned literary production in the name of philosophy, why might people who were fully apprised of the legacy of Greek dialogue make the converse move and turn away from philosophy and towards literature? The intellectually lazy answer is to say that their own insipidity drove them to it.

To anticipate the conclusion of this piece, let us imagine that people who made this choice were enticed by the possibility of productively recasting those earlier traditions. In particular I suspect that the old framework no longer seemed adequate to an evolved *episteme*.⁸

⁵ Unless you are a Derridean for whom synthesis always fails. The deconstructive subtext of my argument can be unpacked as follows. Begin with notions of structure and presence. Then emphasize the self-presence of speech and the complicitly consonant structure of the book-of-speech. Next set these notions against an affirmative act of non-centering. What ensues is a Nietzschean poetics in contradistinction to a Platonic one. See Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play," in *Writing and Difference*, ed. Jacques Derrida and Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 292; the longer version takes us into "Plato's Pharmacy," where one should read especially the section on "Play," see Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination* (London: Athlone, 1981), 63–171.

⁶ See, for example, Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic*. The unsatisfactory debate with Socrates in Book 1 is in fact the way we set the agenda for the rest of the *Republic*. See In Ha Jang, "Socrates' Refutation of Thrasymachus," *History of Political Thought* 18 (1997): 206.

⁷ On the ideal type as a heuristic device, see Max Weber, *Max Weber on the Methodology of the Social Sciences* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1949), 89–93.

⁸ The word *episteme* signals a Foucauldian debt. At issue is the perceived adequacy of one set of intellectual tools within a new discursive formation. Even if the word itself remains the same, the structure that subtends 'knowledge' in, say, democratic Athens, need not be the same as that which undergirds 'knowledge' in the vast, heterogeneous Roman empire. See Michel Foucault, "The Confession of the Flesh," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 196–198; each of those items offers an encapsulation of key elements of Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and *The Order of Things*. Compare to Michel Foucault, "On the Archaeology of the Sciences: Response to the Epistemology Circle," in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault*,

In particular the 'subject of knowledge' can no longer be assumed to be a Greek man raised within a very specific and historically fragile set of circumstances. And, accordingly, novelistic discourse spoke both to the contemporaneous moment as well as to a future of knowledge.⁹ And hence the neological title of this essay: the discourse of ancient prose is morosophistic in as much as it leverages a productive species of 'stupidity' relative to the cleverness of the wise. It offers a rejoinder to the discourse of wisdom that implicitly indicts prose on a charge of sophistry. What had been a philosophical story of the all is replaced by a formal critique of 'allness'. Bakhtinian polyglossia intrudes into the monologic domain of hegemonic discourse and insists that something important got left out of the discussion.¹⁰

While I will focus on philosophical dialogue, I am perhaps less interested in philosophy *per se* than I am in the social space occupied by philosophy in particular and educated society in general.¹¹ This is the realm of the good and the beautiful, an exclusive and exclusionary domain that fetishizes elite male citizens while eliding and deprecating the voices of persons who are not members of this privileged set. Accordingly I am not offering Plato as a specific antecedent of the texts I will speak of subsequently. Rather than seeing the later authors as reacting to an earlier one, I want to think about questions of how prose can effect a centering operation around which a whole discursive world can and will form.¹² That is the first part of the paper. The later segments all concern themselves with various reactions to the possibility or desirability of striving for such a center.

Communicating Wisdom over Drinks: Plato's *Symposium*

Plato's *Symposium* is obsessed with the question of remembering and recording speech.¹³ In fact, the dialogue as a whole is preoccupied with the nexus between *eros* and speech: what discourse of love is the most love-like? Which lovely words really get to the nature of love

1954-1984, ed. James Faubion, vol. 2 (New York: The New Press, 1998), 297-333.

- ⁹ Throughout I will use the terms 'novel' and 'novelistic' even though this involves a notorious question of anachronism. See, for example, Niklas Holzberg, *The Ancient Novel: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 26. 'Prose fiction' is the more accurate designation of the domain. But even that label is not especially satisfying. One could settle instead for the following: this is a discussion of elements of how a certain collection of texts work and, by implication, how texts that are proximate to them might also work.
- ¹⁰ It is difficult to do a strict, orthodox Bakhtinian reading —whatever that might be...— of the ancient material, even when it is the very material that Bakhtin himself discusses. See Robert Bracht Branham, "The Poetics of Genre: Bakhtin, Menippus, Petronius," in *The Bakhtin Circle and Ancient Narrative*, ed. Robert Bracht Branham (Groningen: Groningen University Library, 2005), Branham offers a collection of revisions and qualifications. For example, Branham shows how 'Menippean' is perhaps less useful than 'carnavalesque' when thinking about Bakhtin, even though Bakhtin uses both terms. Yet this latter term itself needs further explication and complication. I too would prefer to attend to the chief issues rather than to litigate the details: certain key Bakhtinian themes and features remain exceptionally useful as points of orientation and inspiration.
- ¹¹ It is hard to find a time where one might tidily separate education and literature. For example, the poems of the archaic poet Hesiod are frequently described as wisdom literature. But our story can begin with Plato.
- ¹² Plato is not the *Ursprung* of what comes later. Instead the *Entstehung* of prose discourse can be described as marked by the tokens of a Platonic *Herkunft*. Which is to say that my argument is much more 'genealogical' than 'historical'. See Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, ed. James Faubion, vol. 2 (New York: The New Press, 1998), 369-91.
- ¹³ The dialogue is in fact not really a dialogue: it is the story of a dialogue told by one man who has been asked to recall what he remembers of a party by another man who has heard about it but who was not there. Plato's *Phaedrus* is even more explicitly concerned about questions of speech and memory.

itself?¹⁴ Various gentlemen give various accounts of love that are consonant with their own delimited horizon of expectations: the pretty boy talks about how pretty love is; the doctor makes love into a question of medical harmony, and so forth. But the discussion is not merely about love, many of these men are erotically interested in someone else at the table. And so all of the speeches are also themselves a sort of bid for love and affection.

Even Socrates' own position could be read by a cynic as a mere self-description. In recounting what he heard from Diotima Socrates makes love into an in-between thing, a means of approaching the beautiful and eternal. Once one understands the in-between art of bringing forth (true) beauty, the story of metaphysical ascent towards the Form of the Beautiful can ensue.¹⁵ But, as the speech of Alcibiades makes clear, Socrates himself offers to his interlocutors a chance to make a metaphysical ascent, provided they are ready to let Socrates' words sink into their souls and to germinate there. And so the limited, particular horizons that we began with will give way to the possibility of finding our way to a higher ground from which to see clearly.

This dialogue about Socratic dialogue purports to give us a formula for approaching the Forms in their universality. But Plato's text implies that monologue is the proper successor of dialogue. The initial dialogism of the *Symposium* is the product of a collection of naive particularities.¹⁶ And, further, even if one finds the idea of ascent to monologism to be a comforting thesis, there is a strong sense that the socially good and beautiful are the only people who will be positioned to make this ascent. One need only look at the people at the party. And the early dismissal of the flute-girl is itself a sign that this is even more exclusive event than your average elite party.¹⁷ The already lofty can and should rise further. Gentlemen are the ones who can move from their empirical privilege and mount onto the plane of metaphysical distinction. And from this higher vantage they can discern the unitary Form of The Good instead of being mired in the confusion of many partial instantiations of the good, a collection of fragments that tend only to deceive and to pull us away from our upward journey. Everything that rises must converge, and an empirically good man is obligated to attempt the ascent towards the better until he has The Good Itself.

Table-talk about Books about People who Talked at Tables

Plato's dialogue takes its title from a concrete social institution. The symposium was a key cultural event: gentlemen gathered, discoursed, and drank. Plato's *Symposium* takes something that was sociologically lofty and then enfolds it in the literary sublime while arguing, of course, that this same gesture is also a means of achieving the philosophical

¹⁴ To anticipate what follows somewhat, Winkler notes that the Aristophanic joke about love in the *Symposium* turns into the core of the romantic plot of the novel. See John J. Winkler, "The Invention of Romance," in *The Search for the Ancient Novel*, ed. James Tatum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 37. Like so many connections between this dialogue and that genre, these ties are distinctive because of their ironies and surprises rather than owing to their tidy indications of linear descent.

¹⁵ See Plato, *Opera*, ed. J. Burnet, vol. II (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), *Symposium* 210a-211d.

¹⁶ On the *Symposium* and its relationship to Bakhtin's dialogism and novelistic discourse see Kevin Corrigan and Elena Glazov-Corrigan, "Plato's Symposium and Bakhtin's Theory of the Dialogical Character of Novelistic Discourse," in *The Bakhtin Circle and Ancient Narrative*, ed. Robert Bracht Branham (Groningen: Barkhuis, 2005), Corrigan and Glazov-Corrigan are much more up-beat in their appraisal of Plato's commitment to polyglossia than I am.

¹⁷ She is cursorily dismissed (*χαίρειν ἔαν*). But, if she wishes, she might play to herself or to the womenfolk inside the house (Plato, *Symposium* 176e). On the gender dynamics of the dialogue, see David M. Halperin, "Why is Diotima a Woman?" in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York/London: Routledge, 1990), 113-151.

sublime. As a specifically literary conceit, the fecund possibilities of table-talk will remain productive for centuries, if not millennia. Massive, encyclopedic works such as Athenaeus’ *Deipnosophistae* and Macrobius’ *Saturnalia* are sympotic texts. Portraits of gentlemanly dialogues offer the framework for a variety of mannered works that are preoccupied with the lives and habits of the elite. And what becomes clear when reading these various works is that dramatic dialogue and social theory have been pointedly fused.¹⁸ One dramatizes community formation and community values. But none of this is merely a rewriting of the Platonic text. A closer inspection of the details of several of these later works will reveal a set of structural ironies that displace Socrates’ philosophical irony. That is, dialogue is taking on a life of its own. In fact, dialogue is becoming a vehicle for articulating the impossibility of the very sort of monological synthesis that one associates with Plato and the theory of the Forms. We find in such texts a heterogenous moment that is neither ‘classical’ nor ‘novelistic’. These texts are instead piously oriented towards the monologism of the former while evincing—in form, in practice and often as well in theory—an affinity with the dialogism of the latter.

I would like to pluck out a few related strands of thought that are gathered from the rich, variegated tapestry of Imperial prose. Specifically I would like to look at some passages from texts written by people who are both extremely interested in Plato and also drifting away from the very conceptual framework to be found in this same Plato whom they idolize. People still read Plato and think about him carefully, but ‘Plato’ and ‘Athens’ are by now remote cultural objects no matter how much effort one expends on making them proximate, immediate, and vital. In fact each term can at times label nothing more than the idea of a center towards which a heterogenous project moves. That is, a ‘return to origins’ can mask a postlapsarian power-grab that cloaks itself in antique, conservative trappings.

Plutarch’s Platonizing takes place in a world where Athens has long since ceased to be a cultural and political power-house. Plutarch is a Greek living within a Roman empire. He posits the relevance of that Greek past to the Greco-Roman present. Most obviously we can look at the *Parallel Lives* where (often Athenian) Great Men are paired up with Exemplary Romans. Plutarch’s *Life of Marius* opens and closes with explicitly Platonic meditations, meditations about self-moderation, the wisdom required of leaders, and the problem of a ruler insatiable for power. Marius, a man who prided himself on his ignorance of Greek, would, our biographer implies, have done well to read something like Plato’s *Republic* and its account of the soul.¹⁹ Such gestures send an implicit message to Plutarch’s readers: “Certain truths are timeless. Go back to the old Greek philosophers and you can understand the Rome of the 90s BCE that gave us the Empire of the 90s CE.”

But, conversely, the chaotic, broken lives—and *Lives...*—of Otho and Galba make one wonder about the actual ability of the biographical project to explain the Empire of living memory and the discord of 69 CE. For example, *Otho* 14 is exceptionally deceptive about the part played by Plutarch’s own patron in the civil war of that year. Plutarch describes visiting a civil war battle site with Mestrius Florus many years later. Mestrius’ “insincere partisanship” (μὴ κατὰ γνώμην) during the chaos of the Year of Four Emperors is casually

¹⁸ Plato’s contemporary Xenophon also writes a *Symposium*, but this work is much less ambitious philosophically: instead the participants all focus on a socio-political story of gentlemanly moderation in the face of desire. And in many ways Xenophon’s text offers the surer template for a history of prose fiction as an exercise in the theory and practice of social reproduction. For ‘gentlemanly moderation’ see Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 78-93.

¹⁹ See Plutarch, *Marius* 2 and *Marius* 46. The former is effectively the first chapter of the life, the latter is the last chapter.

mentioned in the course of a long digression on the unusual fate of the bodies of some of the dead. Furthermore Plutarch does not explicitly note here that Mestrius is his own patron. The true political principles and resolutions of these men, that is their “sincere partisanship” (*γνώμαι*), are left strategically opaque. What are these beliefs? What were they? It turns out that, in contradistinction to the timeless truths heaped upon us elsewhere, more timely meditations are not necessarily all that pellucid. And, in contrast to old Attic meditations, contemporary Antonine ones are not very thick on the ground. They emerge only in little details that poke out once every so often in the *Lives*.

We can hear a nostalgic, centralizing major chord not just in Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*, but so too in his *Dialogue on Love*. But things have changed, and perhaps fundamentally. The topic of the dialogue and general pattern of the articulation of the titular theme may be familiar enough, but the invocation of the old Greek thinking on these issues is flagged precisely as old thinking. New questions have emerged, especially when it comes to female agency. In the *Symposium* Plato’s Diotima is a woman, yes, but she is really an abstract figure, a sage and not a lover. Conversely Plutarch’s Ismenodora is herself a lover. And the dialogue is predicated on the fact that she is rich, in love, and determined to get her boy. The dialogue will transition away from Platonic pederasty and towards heterosexual marriage. The final moments of the text are Roman and imperial and heterosexual.²⁰ And so, even though we begin with Plato and allusions to the *Phaedrus* (749a), there is a sustained attack on the sublimity of homoerotics throughout rather than a presupposition of the excellence of the institution. Here the contrast with Plato’s *Symposium* is stark. Plutarch writes something that has Platonic beats and rhythms and melodies, but the song itself is not at all the same old Athenian tune.²¹ This is new music for a new world even as it poses as a faithful remake of a golden oldie.

Plutarch is hardly alone in his effort to insist that yesterday’s Greece should be considered vital to a contemporary agenda even as this same effort to posit the relevance simultaneously exposes the many ways in which the past is truly past. The converging, ascending purity of the old Athenocentric thesis is revealed to be but a single cultural thread rather than an eternal philosophical truth. And, while precious, this same thread is not some golden filament that will unerringly lead one past the maze of the contemporary and up and out to some higher, timeless plane. Imperial writers may well revere the Greek past, but they do not live in it. This situation produces inevitable complications.²²

Lucian, a man whose native language was perhaps Syriac writes a variety of works in the Greek of classical Athens. He has laboriously acquired the canonical learning, and he is not ready to turn his back on it.²³ His ‘pure’ Greek fetishistically reconstructs (the fantasy

²⁰ The text ends with the story of a Gaulish wife whose fidelity to her husband makes everyone hate the emperor Vespasian. See Plutarch, *Amatorius* 770d-771c. Conversely Alcestis is merely a member of a class of self-sacrificing persons at Plato, *Symposium* 208b. And she is introduced introduced as part of a condescending line of argument in *Symposium* 179b: “But even women are willing to die on another’s behalf [...]”

²¹ See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 3: The Care of the Self* (New York: Vintage, 1988), 193-210; the conclusion of the chapter summarizes his observations on the manner in which Platonic erotics has been dismantled in the course of the piece: “There can no longer be a place for [boys and pederasty] in this great unitary and integrative chain in which love is revitalized by the reciprocity of pleasure.” Foucault, *Care of the Self*, 210.

²² The “Greekness in process” described by Goldhill has as one of its chief elements the conjuring of an Athens that likely never was, and yet this is an Athens against which one stakes out a variety of stances as part of a process of self-positioning within the contemporary world of the Roman empire. See Simon Goldhill, “Introduction: Setting an Agenda,” in *Being Greek Under Rome: Cultural Identity, the Second Sophistic and the Development of Empire*, ed. Simon Goldhill (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 20.

²³ “Both Lucian and Philostratus see Greek culture—its establishment, value, maintenance,—as a question

of) a specific place and time, and this same erudite Greek hierarchically distinguishes men from one another in a polyglot empire where the Greek language itself is not a single, simple thing.

Lucian’s ‘classical Greek’ is not an idiosyncratic anachronism. It is instead a representative moment in a centuries-long effort to construct a legitimate linguistic center that can be seized and monopolized by a certain class of man. Consider, for example, the various collections of Attic words that survive in antiquity. They are teaching tools that enable people to police their own Greek and that of others so as to ensure that it is sufficiently ‘pure’. Athenaeus (late second century CE) cites Philemon’s *On Attic Words*. Aelius Dionysius (second century CE) writes a work on Attic words. The grammarian Orus (fifth century CE) likewise has a *Collection of Attic Words*. See entries like the following: “We say *bibliopôlên* and not *biblopôlên*. Theopompus: ‘I’ll stone the booksellers (*bibliopôlous*).”²⁴ Failing to add the iota after the first lambda in the word exposes that ‘you’ are not one of ‘us’, i.e. you are not one of the (educated) people who can speak the Greek of Athens from nearly one thousand years ago. Instead ‘you’ are one of the (uneducated) people who speak the everyday Greek of the Roman empire. And this word-gathering project goes on for a very long time indeed: Thomas Magister (late thirteenth century CE) has a *Collection of Attic Names and Words*. An analogous phenomenon is occurring in the Latin world as well.²⁵ A tremendous amount of energy was exerted in the name of actively stemming the tide of polyglossia and building dykes to keep the vernacular off the learned page.

Nevertheless, if Socrates cannot imagine leaving Athens, men like Lucian—men who were born outside of and might perhaps never see Athens—can only have an ironic relationship to the organic intellectualism that Socrates espoused.²⁶ Socratic irony as seen in the dialogues of Plato finds itself displaced into a variety of formal ironies in a subsequent author. As Alcibiades insists in the *Symposium*, Socrates’ deceptively rough appearance and his lowbrow language hide inner treasures.²⁷ But in Lucian the figure of the philosopher has been inverted. Glossy surfaces now hide cavernous vacuity. In Lucian’s works men of learning are typically frauds, and what they know tends to be a sort of bookish know-how that gets you admitted to the right sort of society and recognized as the right sort of reader of the right sort of text.

The living voice fetishized by Plato is replaced by bibliomania: men talk like books. Writing spells the death of memory: see Plato’s *Phaedrus*. But now one speaks ‘by the book’, ‘from the book’, and ‘like a book’, and the interest gained on the ancient legacy bastardizes the original figure of inception-and-conception.²⁸ The valorized productive and reproductive ‘psychic pregnancy’ of Plato’s *Symposium* has vanished.²⁹ Philosophical dialogue turns into an

integral to their intellectual projects, and to the social impact of their writing,” see *ibid.*, 7.

²⁴ Orus, *Das attizistische Lexikon des Orus*, ed. Klaus Alpers, Sammlung griechischer und lateinischer Grammatiker 4 (Berlin, 1981), fr. 19: “βιβλιοπώλην, οὐχὶ βιβλοπώλην λέγομεν. Θεόπομπος: ἰτούς βιβλιοπώλας λείσομαι.”

²⁵ For the absurdities of the same, see Erik Gunderson, “The Paraphilologist as ‘Pataphysician,’” in *Pataphilology: An Irreader*, ed. Sean Gurd and Vincent W. J. van Gerven Oei (North Charleston: Punctum, 2018), 169–217.

²⁶ Goldhill says the following on Lucian’s Scythian: “The ironist’s discussion of Athenian irony seems designed to make the scene of learning the site of a ludic confusion of voices.” Goldhill, “Introduction,” 4.

²⁷ See again Plato, *Symposium* 221e.

²⁸ See Derrida on Plato’s *Pharmacy*. Deeply ambiguous figures like interest-and-offspring (*tokos*) haunt the Platonic figuration of ‘The father of the Discourse’. That is, the ‘pure’ and ‘original’ version of dialogue is already obsessed with bastards precisely because it is working so hard to constitute its own immaculate, ordinary status. Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” 75–84.

²⁹ For Plato on psychic pregnancy and the ascent towards the good, see Frisbee C. C. Sheffield, *Plato’s*

occasion for a collection of erudite jokes and nothing more. Lucian's own *Symposium* turns the table-talk of the philosophers into a drunken brawl that recalls the mythical fight of the Centaurs and the Lapiths.³⁰ By shunning the earnest propaedeutic project of the *Phaedrus* with its insistence upon presence and the living word, Lucian's bookish inversion learnedly repeats Plato's argument, wittily illustrates its content, and validates it, albeit in a most ironic manner. Lucian shows that Plato 'got it right' both because of his own efforts and in spite of them. In Lucian we have book-culture turning against itself just as Plato said it would. And yet we do not have access to the monologic discourse of Truth.³¹ We are amused (by the Platonic image), but not improved (because it really is just Plato-as-book that we have here). Given the amount of bluff and bravado that lurks behind all of Lucian's portraits of performances of erudition, the lives of sophists—and therewith Philostratus' *Lives of the Sophists*—take on a necessarily picaresque quality. The story of wisdom has come to have a very different form and content indeed.

Lucian's community of the wise dissolves and devolves, it does not converge and ascend. And the audience is meant to laugh a bookish laugh at this very failure of wise speech to yield cohesion and coherence. The mystagogic experience of the Platonic corpus—just ask any Neoplatonist who lived during these same postclassical centuries I am surveying—leads us to an encounter with The One, and we find that The Word is fundamentally bound up with Rationality itself. The demystifying world of Lucian moves in the opposite direction: the erudite reader pushes beyond an ecstasy of surfaces and into a vacant land of bemused disappointment where instead of The Word and The One we find a plurality of old words chattering among themselves, most of which signify their own opposites.³² The Educated Man can 'center himself' via his education, but a transcendental reward does not follow. He becomes a member of the unfooled 'smart set', a man who can stand apart from and above his contemporaries. This is a quasi-dialogic moment and one that can readily be distinguished from the dialogues of ascent that we find in Plato, but the free play of the encounter between voices that a richer dialogism would provide has been severely constrained by the selective and interested investments made by these erudite players of a specific social game.

While the above moves too quickly and too coarsely through my example texts, I wish

Symposium: The Ethics of Desire (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 127-133. One might note as well that missing in Lucian is the figure Sheffield calls the "desiring agent who occupies the higher mysteries," that is, the protagonist of the philosophical project valorized in the *Symposium*.

³⁰ According to Männlein, the piece perhaps parodies sympotic literature more generally. Irmgard Männlein, "What Can Go Wrong At a Dinner-Party: The Unmasking of False Philosophers in Lucian's *Symposium* or the Lapiths," in *Double Standards in the Ancient and Medieval World*, ed. Karla Pollmann (Göttingen: Duehrkohp und Radicke, 2000), 249.

³¹ See Plato, *Phaedrus* 275b on the disastrous pupils of the book: "They will be polymaths and seem most prudent without the need for any teaching. Yet, for the most part, they will be senseless and difficult to get along with, become seeming-sages instead of actual wise men. (πολυήκοι γάρ σοι γεγόμενοι ἀνευ διδαχῆς πολυγνώμονες εἶναι δόξουσιν, ἀγνώμονες ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πλῆθος ὄντες, καὶ χαλεποὶ συνᾶναι, δόξοσοφοὶ γεγονότες ἀντὶ σοφῶν)."

³² Karen ní Mheallaigh is much more optimistic about Lucian. On his modernism: "Instead of performing straightforward homage to the models of the past, *mimêsis* in Lucian's hands will become a weapon with which to assault the strictures of a stifling Classicism." Karen ní Mheallaigh, *Reading Fiction With Lucian: Fakes, Freaks and Hyperreality* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 4. For Lucian's interest in hybridity, see also *ibid.*, 12-13. But I am hesitant at junctures like *ibid.*, 18. Is the piece on pantomimes really unironic in its praise of the low-brow bump-and-grind? And the *Theacher of Rhetoric* does not seem to be 'funny' unless one is ready to laugh at gender non-conformity. For the deeply conservative nature of such laughter, see the fifth chapter of Erik Gunderson, *Staging Masculinity: The Rhetoric of Performance in the Roman World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 149-186. In general, ní Mheallaigh emphasizes a very different sector of Lucian's exuberant corpus than I do. Her *index locorum* testifies to this.

only to adumbrate a problematics of prose fiction. Hitherto we have looked at a high style and high culture collection of texts that offer valorized fictions of their very milieu. I have chosen my examples to highlight internal tensions and in so doing exaggerated features of a body of texts that is typically rather straight-laced and normalizing. This sketch will, I hope allow us to make the necessary pivot to what one typically thinks of under the heading of prose fiction. My chief claim is that there is not a strong divide between the fictionalized world of table-talk and the more freely imagined worlds of ancient prose authors. Nor should one expect that there would be any such divide. All prose authors would have themselves come through a curriculum that had made them familiar with not just oratory and philosophy as academic disciplines but also with these same as the fodder for fictional dialogues.

Lucian's works are full of what one might think of as medial forms between philosophical engagement, erudite table-talk, and prose fiction. He has dialogues of the gods, dialogues of the dead, and dialogues of courtesans. He gives voice to the various strata of genteel learning: characters familiar from epic, tragedy, comedy, and philosophy are all given witty little literary turns here and elsewhere. His *Trial of the Consonants* turns spelling disputes into a court battle about property rights. Historiography gets more than one ironic send-up. And Lucian's *True History* underscores the question of the relationship between prose and fiction in the strongest possible terms: everything in it is marked as a lie. But lying is no mere nullity with a torpid and negative relationship to a fetishized truth. This same text is sometimes referred to as the first science fiction novel given that it includes a trip to the moon and stars. Untruth qua untruth is giving birth to literary possibilities.³³

In Lucian's corpus we can see an author sliding between the free play of the imagination as a specifically scholarly exercise and the free play of the imagination as productive of what we might think of as a distinctly literary freedom: the imagination can go anywhere and it can do anything; it can produce impossible combinations and it can play with them according to its fancy. Personally I find that Lucian is too often overly interested in sneering at the ill-educated. That is, his works still cling to the idea of a culturally hegemonic center against which all else will be evaluated. On the one hand we roam far and wide and productively, but, on the other, we never lose sight of the fact that a certain kind of educated person is writing and, by implication, reading these works.³⁴

The Displaced Bookishness of the Greek Novel

Ancient prose narratives generally embody still further freedoms than the ones that Lucian allowed himself. Long narratives might impose certain commitments to coherence of character and plot, but other constraints are lifted. There is no requirement for a unity of place. In fact, exotic locations are often favored. And the cast of characters can vary widely to cover a striking mix of stations, sexes, and ethnicities that would severely strain most antecedent literature with the notable exception of Homer's *Odyssey*.

While there is much that is divergent in theory, in practice these prose fictions contain a variety of convergent features that connect them with the rest of the genteel prose tradition. They accordingly represent an extension of educated discourse and not a radical break from

³³ It is new, but not, of course, radically new. See Froma Zeitlin, "Visions and Revisions of Homer," in *Being Greek Under Rome: Cultural Identity, the Second Sophistic and the Development of Empire*, ed. Simon Goldhill (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 242: "And who is the guide and teacher (*archegos kai didaskalos*) of all this mendacity? Why Homer's Odysseus, of course, and particularly in the narration of his fabulous wanderings before the Phaeacians."

³⁴ See Erik Gunderson, "Men of Learning: The Cult of *Paideia* in Lucian's *Alexander*," in *Mapping Gender in Ancient Religious Discourses*, ed. Todd C. Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele (Boston: Brill, 2007), 479–510.

it. The ethical milieu is familiar to readers of Plato and Xenophon even if many plots are centered on the once peripheral issue of chastity.³⁵ We hear any number of speeches delivered as per school training. The characters we see at the core of the plot are frequently the sort of persons that we would be happy to invite to a proper Greek symposium: that is, they are well-bred leading citizens of their communities.

It must be noted, though, that the socially peripheral are often also the concrete agents that advance the plot: the good and the beautiful are all too often passive and merely register a (trite) reaction to a world that changes around them and that is largely working beyond them. The concrete logic of a fallen world is experienced as a ‘test of character’ by such people, elite individuals who can be far less savvy about power than are their debased interlocutors. While the fair couple virtuously reacts, pirates, eunuchs, satraps, and slaves make things happen. This situation perhaps also works as an ideological double for the novels’ own relationship to the literary past. The non-elite genre is making the real difference somewhere in the background while normative schemata are upheld in the foreground.³⁶

There is an obvious continuity with prior literary and cultural traditions on display within the Greek novels. If you were to take Homeric epic and mix it up with some of Menander’s New comic plays and throw in some Athenian forensic oratory and a few dashes of Herodotus, you would have most of what you need available to you to construct one of these on your own.³⁷ But there are assuredly innovations here and a set of choices that can reveal a programmatic break with the past and a self-assertion on the behalf of a new kind of writing.³⁸

For example, *Chaereas and Callirhoe* though written in the first century CE is set in fourth century BCE. The action takes place after the fall of Athens. In fact, the heroine’s father is a general who was instrumental in Athens’s defeat (1.1). This is something we learn at the very opening of the narrative. And so this book that is post-Athenian in form is explicitly post-Athenian in content. And even as the plot will take us from west to east and back again,

³⁵ Foucault famously sees this as part of a constellation of shifts that mark a key transition in the History of Sexuality. And this sort of change of emphasis fits in with “a new stylistics of existence” that is emerging. See Foucault, *Care of the Self*, 71; Goldhill shows how productive reading the novels along these lines can be in Simon Goldhill, *Foucault’s Virginité: Ancient Erotic Fiction and the History of Sexuality* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

³⁶ A concrete example: the eunuch Artaxates knows how to read and to manipulate the King. And these manipulations drive the course of the plot. Artaxates thinks that offers of money and power might influence Chaereas to betray virtue, but he is wrong. Chaereas, the ‘hero’ of the story is virtuous but reactive. Artaxates, the ‘agent of the plot’ is vicious and highly active. See Chariton, *Chaereas and Callirhoe* 6.3–5. Artaxates will engage in a similar back-and-forth with Callirhoe in 6.7.

³⁷ See Graham Anderson, *Eros Sophistes: Ancient Novelists At Play* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1982), 2–7; compare Kuch for whom few antecedent genres have been omitted from the novel, just as Bakhtin had himself asserted. Heinrich Kuch, “Die Herausbildung des antiken Romans als Literaturgattung,” in *Der antike Roman: Untersuchungen zur Literarischen Kommunikation und Gattungsgeschichte*, ed. Heinrich Kuch (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1989), 11–51; in addition to the high genres, one might add a dash of Aulus Gellius. On the connections between prose fiction, erudite miscellanies and ‘table talk’ more generally, see Hendrik Müller-Reineke, “Facts or Fiction? The Fruitful Relationship Between Ancient Novel and Literary Miscellany,” in *The Ancient Novel and the Frontiers of Genre*, ed. Marília Pinheiro Futre, Gareth L. Schmeling, and Edmund P. Cueva (Eelde: Barkhuis, 2014), 69–81.

³⁸ See Daniel Seldon, “Genre of Genre,” in *The Search for the Ancient Novel*, ed. James Tatum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1994), For Seldon the novels are ‘about’ anti-Platonic generic mixing, and their ‘essence’ is this very hybridity that emerges out of a programmatic, structural deployment of syllepsis. Zimmermann offers a consonant but less ambitious thesis: we see a symphony of antecedent genres mobilized by a ‘bastard’ upstart genre that is fighting for its legitimacy. Bernhard Zimmermann, “Die Symphonie der Texte: Zur Intertextualität im griechischen Liebesroman,” in *Der antike Roman und seine mittelalterliche Rezeption*, ed. Michelangelo Picone and Bernhard Zimmermann (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1997), 3–13.

Athens, a natural geographical stop-over is omitted from the trajectory of the plot.³⁹ In fact the middle of the plot and the geographic center of the text comes when Callirhoe crosses the Euphrates (5.1). A different Greek world is on display here, and it is one that is preoccupied with an exotic non-Greek Persian hegemony. There is a lot of nationalistic self-assertion in here: a Greek reader swells with pride to see these characters get the better of the Persians. But these Greeks and their pride demand to be read as non-Athenians. Characters that we might today call Italians and Turks delight in their cultural identity as non-Athenian Greeks. And the climax of the novel may well include public speeches in the theater and so perhaps recall Attic drama (8.7). But the sequel to the dramatic retelling of the plot is a settlement of new citizens in Syracuse. Men who were Egyptians will become Syracusans.⁴⁰ Athens was notorious for its reluctance to admit new citizens, and it most assuredly avoided taking in such radically strange figures during the heyday of Pericles' citizenship laws. Of course, that Athens had lately been vanquished by the father of our heroine.

The plot of *Chaereas and Callirhoe* accordingly acts as a sort of allegory for its own literary-historical situation: it speaks to Greekness in a post-Athenian multi-ethnic imperial universe where identities are fluid and Greekness itself is something that one can achieve or attain.⁴¹ And this novel is by no means alone in playing these games. The novels regularly emerge from and keep an eye upon the old cultural milieu, but they simultaneously speak to an inadequacy of old forms to handle the new, more global contents, whether these contents be the specific plot itself or just the novel as a literary form.

Achilles Tatius' *Leucippe and Clitophon* is another such novel. It also never makes it to Athens. The mid-point of the novel arrives when the characters see a crocodile on the Nile and then make an entry into wondrous Alexandria (4.7; 5.1).⁴² But before then we have been treated to a variety of inset genres. There is an obsession with myth that is both implicit and explicit. The characters are also aware of the plots and tropes of tragedy. There is a courtroom drama at the end, complete with clever speeches. There are many philosophical moments. Natural history makes an appearance. But there is a particular emphasis on love and the philosophy of desire.

A lot of what gets felt by the characters is also anatomized within a quasi-philosophical framework. We even have complex discussions of erotic matters that recall Plato and Xenophon, but this time we are not in an Athenian home but aboard a ship heading east. And the plot itself will offer its divergent answer to the question of the relative merits of heterosexual desire as against the sublime homoeroticism of the Platonic circle. Specifically, the novel ends with a collection of heterosexual unions. Even if one decides that this novel is not especially successful on an aesthetic level, there is no denying that it has ostentatiously swallowed all of the high genres. This is post-Athenian literature that signals an Alexandrian pedigree.⁴³ And it sees as its particular virtue its own hybrid form

³⁹ On the politics of the representation of the various places in the novel, see Jean Alvares, "Some Political and Ideological Dimensions of Chariton's *Chaereas and Callirhoe*," *The Classical Journal* 97, no. 2 (2001): 113-44; on Athens in particular, see Alvares, "Some Political and Ideological Dimensions," 119-20.

⁴⁰ For the manner in which Chariton is building an idealized Syracuse with elements such as this see Alvares, "Some Political and Ideological Dimensions," 135.

⁴¹ Hock's suggestion that New Testament scholars read the ancient novels is predicated on the notion that aspects of the world of the biblical narratives are often convergent with these contemporary fictions. See Ronald F. Hock, "Why New Testament Scholars Should Read Ancient Novels," in *Ancient Fiction and Early Christian Narrative*, ed. Ronald F. Hock, J. Bradley Chance, and Judith Perkins (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1998), 121-38.

⁴² The Nile matters a great deal to Heliodorus as well. See Tim Whitmarsh, *Narrative and Identity in the Ancient Greek Novel: Returning Romance* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 120-22.

⁴³ The Nile passage occasions a paroxysm of specifically bookish literary play in Achilles Tatius. See Sandrine

even as, ironically, the plot itself is obsessed with sexual purity and centers on the question of whether or not Leucippe can and will save her sexual favors for Clitophon.⁴⁴

Leucippe and Clitophon seems unable to decide about the degree of its separation from the past. Athens may be missing, but the novel effectively presupposes the historical replacement of Athens by Alexandria, a city that appointed itself Athens' successor. And we are in a liminal moment from a Bakhtinian perspective: there is polyglossia here, but there is also a longing to cash in on the cultural center.⁴⁵ In it we see an aggregation of the classical genres. And there is the suggestion that the novel itself might be a superlative synthesis of them rather than an innovative break from the classical monologism.⁴⁶

The long, ambitious novel of Heliodorus plays similar games. The narrative is not told in a linear fashion. And the reader, like the characters, has to move between and among Delphi, Egypt, and Ethiopia. The chief conceit of the plot is that the periphery and the center are importantly connected. The heroine is an Ethiopian princess who has been mistaken for a proper Greek girl from Delphi. There is a programmatic de-exoticization of the periphery. The Delphic navel of the world and the Ethiopians at the world's edge are in profound communication. A collection of allusions to the Homeric corpus enables this cosmopolitanism. Meanwhile the novel eschews reference to the concrete Roman and imperial politics that has in fact connected such disparate lands.

Even if Delphi does offer a notional center for the Greek-speaking reader who picks up this Greek text, another sort of center has been displaced. An Athenian character is present, but only as a friend of the central couple. He is good for a lot of inset storytelling, and his own history is very 'tragic' in the sense that this Athenian's personal story seems to line up strongly with that genre that was so celebrated at Athens. But Knemon is not someone who will make it to the end of the novel. He bows out after about two thirds of the narrative. In fact the heroine no longer really trusts him (6.7): she latches onto an opportunity to part ways with him; and he is likewise ready to exit from this story and to return to his affairs in Athens. In a book obsessed with virtue, the Athenian was weighed and found wanting. The owls have all fled from Athens.⁴⁷

Dubel, "Le phénix, le crocodile et le flamant rose: sur le bestiaire égyptien d'Achille Tatius," in *Présence du roman grec et latin: Actes du colloque tenu à Clermont-Ferrand, 23-25 Novembre 2006*, ed. Rémy Poignault and Sandrine Dubel (Clermont-Ferrand: Centre de Recherches A. Piganiol-Présence de l'antiquité, 2011), 404.

⁴⁴ Conversely, see the final section of *The Ancient Novel and the Frontiers of Genre* which is labeled "Hybrid Forms": here one can see Christian non-novelists in the late antique period picking up on novelistic material. Marília Futre Pinheiro, Gareth L. Schmeling, and Edmund P. Cueva, *The Ancient Novel and the Frontiers of Genre* (Eelde: Barkhuis, 2014).

⁴⁵ Alvares casts a wider net and comes to a more nuanced conclusion about the relationship between the novels and culture more generally. He sees in various novels "narratives about how their protagonists, as they mature, accommodate themselves to the social and political realities of their milieu, and, more importantly, find or create alternatives to those realities." Jean Alvares, "The Coming of Age and Political Accommodation in the Greco-Roman Novels," ed. Michael Paschalis et al., (Groningen), 2007, 18; see also the highly convergent remarks of Steve Nimis, "The Prosaics of the Ancient Novels," *Arethusa* 27 (1994): 404.

⁴⁶ A more hard-line answer: the classical genres break and are rendered obsolete; the novel is the new container for these fragments; the novel is part of the development of new esthetic criteria. See Nimis, "Prosaics," 407-8; similarly, but less the emphasis on breakage, see Steven D. Smith, "Bakhtin and Chariton: A Revisionist Reading," in *The Bakhtin Circle and Ancient Narrative*, ed. Robert Bracht Branham (Groningen: Groningen University Library, 2005), 183-90.

⁴⁷ John R. Morgan, "Heliodorus the Hellene," in *Defining Greek Narrative*, ed. Douglas L. Cairns (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 261: "This structural relegation and negative moral marking of Athens constitute a deliberate alienation from the cultural centre of mainstream Hellenism." Whitmarsh on

It may well be absurd to summarize so many novels in such a short span, but I hope that my point is clear enough: these novels are not just vehicles for their plots, they are also worried about learning and literature. Homer, the father of ‘adventure literature’, is presupposed throughout. So too is there a constant engagement with rhetorical theory and practice. Tragedy and comedy inform, both explicitly and implicitly, the characters and situations.⁴⁸ Longus’ novel is virtually unintelligible unless one is conversant with the highly erudite pastoral tradition. Mixing and matching is encouraged. Achilles Tatius’ final rhetorical duel even contains a gibe that the opposing side is pretending that its lewd comedy ought to be mistaken for a tragedy.⁴⁹ The speaker’s genre-play in fact occurs in the course of offering a completely inaccurate description of the (novelistic) situation. Did he know more about novels, then he might be more inclined to believe that the plot of the novel he finds himself in is ‘in fact’ no fiction and that the girl really is chaste, despite her many adventures.

The novels have taken up the old schoolhouse questions, but they are answering them diegetically. And in the course of their exposition, they inevitably innovate. The space and time of telling acts as an index of spatial and temporal questions that challenge the very notion of the adequacy of some center to speak as a central authority.⁵⁰ While my own impression is that most of these authors actually believe in the ability of Greek education to act as a legitimate hegemonic discourse of a center that poses as the center, a set of glaring issues arises that exposes the limits of any such pretense.⁵¹

The authors are part of a cosmopolitan Roman empire. Some may not even be native Greek speakers.⁵² They are writing about a valorized culture that they have laboriously acquired. They are not effortless inheritors of that same culture, sons of Plato whose classical Greek comes to them as a birth-right. These books may be speaking to old concerns and doing so in the familiar language of the past, but they also contain new elements and ones that are not part of that tradition. They offer a global synthesis of

the programmatic opening of the novel: “This text forces us to read the genre, and the Hellenocentric assumptions upon which it is predicated, through fresh eyes.” Whitmarsh, *Narrative and Identity*, 109.

⁴⁸ Boy-marries-girl-in-the-end is the classic New Comedy plot structure. A notable example of the deployment of tragedy-as-objectified-genre: Heliodorus’ novel opens with a ‘tragic’ scene observed by an uncomprehending bandit audience. One is sensitive to the play with genre even before we hear the word in the narrator’s comment at *Aethiopica* 1.3: “Ἡ μὲν ταῦτα ἐπετραγῶδει [...].” (“And so she was voicing these tragic laments, [...].”). See Heliodorus, *Héliodore. Les Éthiopiennes*, ed. R.M. Rattenbury and T.W. Lumb (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1960).

⁴⁹ See Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Clitophon*, ed. E. Vilborg (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1955), 8.10.4. Note that the opening of speech to which 8.10 responds is flagged by the narrator as being Aristophanic. The designation is somewhat unexpected given the occasion and the speaker. See *Leucippe and Clitophon* 8.9.1: “ἦν δὲ εἰπεῖν οὐκ ἀδύνατος, μάλιστα δὲ τὴν Ἀριστοφάνου ἐξηλικῶς κωμῶδιαν.”

⁵⁰ The lost *Wonders Beyond Thule* seems to have particularly trafficked in this game wherein ‘the marginal is central’, at least for the novelistic imagination. The narrative seems to consist substantially of tales of the exotic periphery. Other fragmentary novels also seem to have situated themselves within the learned fantasy of the margins: *Ninus* (Assyria); *Sesonchosis* (Egypt); *A Babylonian Story*; *A Phoenician Story*.

⁵¹ Whitmarsh on the politically suspect slide between high culture and culture: “[W]e should guard against any assumption that such rare birds [as Callimachus, Plutarch and Lucian] described the norm (even if they undoubtedly sought to prescribe it).” Tim Whitmarsh, “The Romance Between Greece and the East,” in *The Romance Between Greece and the East*, ed. Tim Whitmarsh and Stuart Thomson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 7.

⁵² On the manner in which the Hellenistic age saw Greece confront in earnest four other major neighboring civilizations, see the first chapter of Arnaldo Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom: The Limits of Hellenization* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 1-21. And these aliens soon start contributing elements of their wisdom to the Greek-speaking world in the form of non-Greek intellectuals who nevertheless write in Greek.

literary history that renders the discrete voices of different Greek times and places as segments of a new sort of comprehensive narrative form, a form that can encompass all other forms as mere moments of itself. Accordingly Homer becomes a proto-novelist and not an epicist.⁵³ He made a good start of it, but he did not finish the business.

Though initially received as second-rate and low-brow works by modern scholars, an important feature that enables the displeased to declare that these texts are ‘stupid’ is, of course, an actual species of stupidity to be found in the novels. The specific obtuseness they manifest is a self-interested numbness to the established hierarchy of the legitimate elements of the learned traditions of classical Greece. The treatment of these elements evinces a reconfigured sensitivity that converts the objects of the literary past into mere objects to be manipulated within the context of the literary present.⁵⁴

If the symbolic coherence of the Athenian socio-cultural universe has dissolved, it has been replaced by only the coherence of plot and consistency of character.⁵⁵ And, obviously there is an implicit politics of form in any substitution that displaces the politics of a concrete then and there polis. In these texts the discourse of the doctor and the poet do not arrive as mere preludes to hearing the speech of the philosopher, who will himself proffer a speech genre that synthesizes and transcends these other discourses. Instead philosophical discourse is itself just another way of talking. The net result is a text that will inevitably strike a certain kind of reader as mere sophistry given that *sophia* has been dethroned from her pride of position.

And so we have my first initial outline of the ‘morosophistic discourse of ancient prose fiction’. We have moved from wisdom in literature to literature that is informed by wisdom-literature, but this same literature is by no means ready to reduce itself to a philosophical or even gentlemanly agenda. Literary artifice offers a literal and metaphorical first step on a centripetal project when we read Plato’s *Symposium*.⁵⁶ But later prose fiction no longer strives to journey towards that one table around which a hegemonic elite gathers in order to achieve an even more potent discursive consensus.⁵⁷ In later authors we see completely

⁵³ And, of course, they have a point. On the novelistic aspects of Homer, see Kuch, “Die Herausbildung,” 39-40; on Heliodorus and his self-conscious recasting of Homer, see Whitmarsh, *Narrative and Identity*, 112-15.

⁵⁴ For Bakhtin the Greek novels are incomplete representatives of novelistic discourse’s full potential because they lack an ironic distance vis-à-vis style. Mikhail Bakhtin, “From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse,” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 66; much of the current scholarship on these novels is very much engaged with the manifold number of styles embedded in these novels, and it is in fact hard to say that there is not a very refined sensitivity to questions of style in the novels and even ironic deployments of styles. Perhaps one should instead affirm that there is nevertheless a hesitation towards a radically ironic relationship to the question of style that would dethrone ‘high style’ as itself nothing more than a mere style among others. The analog of this is an investment in ‘the classical body’ within the Greek novels while we see a much more ‘grotesque body’ in the Latin novels. On the two kinds of bodies, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 1st ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 29 and 31-32. And, similarly, ‘carnavalesque’ laughter suffuses the aesthetic of the Latin novel while it is generally alien to the surviving Greek novels with the notable exception of Pseudo-Lucian’s *The Ass*, a warped and abridged text.

⁵⁵ On how the skilled reader’s artful reading is itself conjured as a centripetal force by the Greek novels, see Tim Whitmarsh, “Dialogues in Love: Bakhtin and His Critics on the Greek Novel,” in *The Bakhtin Circle and Ancient Narrative*, ed. Robert Bracht Branham (Groningen: Groningen University Library, 2005), 119. That is, ‘the politics of coherence’ is a specifically textual and readerly politics.

⁵⁶ On the centripetal and the centrifugal, see Mikhail Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 272.

⁵⁷ In fact, to the extent that prose fiction is a ‘Mediterranean’ phenomenon with deep roots in the cultures of Greece’s neighbors, then the very form of prose fiction is of itself always already an ectopic hybrid relative

heterodox journeys that are not, for all that, simply ignorant of the sort of centering games of Plato. They are instead guilty of a high sin against Platonism: they know what Socrates said, but they do not automatically give ear to it. Instead they are in pursuit of other voices and other stories and other paths to other kinds of knowledge.⁵⁸ And if Socrates refused to leave Athens, these writers pointedly write Athens out of their works.

Apuleius and Petronius Wrote Such Stupid Books

I wish to push things a bit further by transitioning to the Roman novels. They are the more obvious terrain for us to cover given the remit of the journal as a whole, of course. In the Greek novels we see an adumbration of the issues that surround the high and the low, and they also mix in meditations on wisdom, especially ones that concern the gentlemanly ethics of moderation and self-restraint. One should hold fast to Foucault's insight that philosophy, diet, and sexual ethics are all part of an interlocking 'care of the self' which is also a 'technology of the self' that both enables and constrains subject-production. But the Roman novels are full of cracks and fissures. The high can go missing entirely as the plot is given over to the low and the (at best) middling. Our bad subjects have a deeply problematic relationship to wisdom in general and moderation in particular. And their fates speak only to a fitful mechanism that does not contain a seamlessly meshing set of parts that allow for the smooth reproduction of the obvious goodness of the overdetermined collocation of notions that governed the first two thirds of this study; namely good men eating good food while speaking of The Good. And, much as happened to the elite sociality, eschatology either goes missing from these books or it arrives in the form of a jarring religious miracle.

Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* is a Latin rewrite of a mostly lost Greek novel.⁵⁹ The first and last books are additions on Apuleius' part. So too is the middle inset tale of Cupid and Psyche. All three additions are pointedly philosophical. The first book has no bearing on the plot proper. In it the narrator meets a man who tells a story about how he met up with an old friend named Socrates and talked with him under a plane tree just like they did in Plato's *Phaedrus*.⁶⁰ That is, the narrator Lucius is in dialogue with a man who had been part of a quasi-Platonic dialogue. Of course this interview with Socrates is not the climax of the novel but only its opening. Indeed the interview happens to someone other than the narrator, and it takes place at a period before the dramatic time of the narration. This Socrates is introducing a soon to be discarded minor character to the metaphysics of magic and not to the theory of the forms. This Socrates was been bewitched and is walking around in an undead state since enchantresses have stolen his heart. But Socrates does not know this fact about himself. When Socrates stoops over to drink from the river after his chat under the tree, he topples over dead. It would seem that we are being invited to take this as a metaphor for the relationship between Platonic dialogue and novelistic discourse: one is dead and does

to the centripetal gambits of Athenocentric biases. For a review of the back and forth we can see in prose between cultures and over centuries see Whitmarsh, "Romance."

⁵⁸ Bakhtin, "Prehistory," 47: the novel is a collection of images of languages whose interrelationships are dialogic. And polyglossia is the interanimation of these languages. Bakhtin, "Prehistory," 50.

⁵⁹ For a survey of Apuleius' thematic deformations that break from the typical Greek novel, see Stavros Frangoulidis, *Transforming the Genre: Apuleius' Metamorphoses* (Groningen: Groningen University Library, 2007).

⁶⁰ On the broad set of connections between Plato's *Phaedrus* and Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, see Jeffrey Winkle, "'Necessary Roughness': Plato's *Phaedrus* and Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*," *Ancient Narrative* 11 (2013): 93–131.

not know it; the other is just getting started.⁶¹ One is but the overture; the other is the complete symphonic work.

The center of the *Metamorphoses* is occupied by a story told by an old woman to a young girl being held hostage by bandits. This story swallows up the last part of the fourth book, the whole of the fifth book, and most of the sixth book of an eleven book novel. And even though our clueless narrator mocks it as the prattle of an old woman, no reader can fail to have noticed that the fable of Cupid and Psyche is redolent of philosophical motifs, and specifically Platonic ones at that. This fable embedded in the novel makes it clear that fiction is the vehicle that has been chosen to talk about desire, the soul, and transformation. The psychic life of characters over time and in contact with other characters enables the dialogic imagination of novelistic discourse to do the work of Platonic dialogue in a new and scandalously expanded form.⁶²

Cupid and Psyche work as a Platonic myth run wild. Their story does not come as a climax to an argument or as an encapsulation of a thesis. Instead it is unannounced, misunderstood by its internal audience, and opaque in its function for the external audience. It is both obviously about the book and part of the book, but the book is by no means reducible to this tale. This story is a semi-centering center that disorients, and it is absolutely not a centering center that offers the key with which to unlock the whole.

The eleventh book of the *Metamorphoses* makes quite clear the shape of this scandalous expansion of Platonic possibilities. After Lucius' story is over—at least it is over by this point in the original Greek novel—we get a whole extra book, and one whose interpretation has split critics for generations: is this a joke or are we supposed to take it seriously? Doubtless the correct answer requires a synthesis that transcends the two poles. What is in this book? Well, we find out that our narrator is actually a priest of Isis and that he has studied at Rome. He probably should have told this to us up front. Again we have an unthinkable combination where periphery and center are meeting, exotic and familiar combine, and high and low unite. And instead of an ascent to The Form of the Good, we find ourselves confronted with a cultural and mythological manifold. And, indeed, we realize that this book has tricked us and that we have to go back all over and to read it anew in light of this perspective that was withheld from us at the beginning. And much as the narrator himself had to undergo a series of initiations, so too will we need to read and reread this book.⁶³ Enlightenment may well emerge out of a narrative arc and its discursive

⁶¹ John R. Morgan says the following on the philosopher in the Greek novels: “[A]lthough these novels frequently evoke philosophical intertexts and are not shy of ideas and big issues, philosophers as characters are not used as vehicles of those ideas [...] It is almost as if there is a consistent and deliberate disjunction between philosophy as a profession and the ideas that the texts articulate.” John R. Morgan, “The Representation of Philosophers in Greek Fiction,” in *Philosophical Presences in the Ancient Novel*, ed. J. R. Morgan and Meriel Jones (Groningen: Groningen University Library, 2007), 48.

⁶² On the need to reread see John J. Winkler, *Auctor & Actor: A Narratological Reading of Apuleius' Golden Ass* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Walter Englert, “Only Halfway to Happiness: A Platonic Reading of Apuleius' Golden Ass,” in *Philosophy and the Ancient Novel*, ed. Marília Pinheiro Futre and Silvia Montiglio (Groningen: Groningen University Library, 2015), 81–92; Winkler argues that one is supposed to engage in a specifically Platonic rereading. But a Middle Platonism that is filtered through Egyptian allegories seems like it should be distinguished from Plato's Platonism. A bolder and perhaps more fruitful route is offered by Ahuvia Kahane. See his Neoplatonic meditations on finding ‘inclusive speech’ in Apuleius, that is, a rhetorical mode that entertains a discourse of alterity and a historical regime of truth via a “cancellation of the opposition between legitimate and illegitimate speakers,” see Ahuvia Kahane, “Disjoining Meaning and Truth: History, Representation, Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* and Neoplatonist Aesthetics,” in *Philosophical Presences in the Ancient Novel*, ed. J. R. Morgan and Meriel Jones (Groningen: Groningen University Library, 2007), 266.

⁶³ And this formal feature of the novel's structure perhaps corresponds to ‘Egyptian allegory’ for someone like

trajectory, but reason and narrative are pointedly not one and the same thing. This represents a break from the philosophical tradition where the same word, *logos* can and should be used to span both notions. Moreover within the philosophical schema the reason-of-the-narrative and the narrative-of-reason necessarily converge and reinforce one another.

And this brings us to the second and third books of the *Metamorphoses*. These are where we see Lucius before he is turned into an ass. The person we see there is the sort of clever young gentleman that might otherwise have fancied himself a suitable dinner guest at a Platonic symposium. He is educated and full of himself. In particular he is quite convinced that he has the world in which he is moving pretty well figured out, except, of course, for the bit about magic, a dangerous mystery that fascinates and entices him. Lucius may be our narrator and he may well focalize the novel's actions for us but the plot holds this representative of the traditions of learning up for ridicule throughout. He is literally made into the butt of the grand civic joke at a public Festival of Laughter. Of all of the people in the city, he alone is unaware of his own story and the role he is playing in this festival. And everyone laughs precisely because he thinks he knows what is going on and tries to deploy some razzle-dazzle oratory to wriggle his way out of a situation that he fundamentally misunderstands (3.4-7).

Similarly Lucius learns precisely nothing from the story of Socrates from the first book, and he specifically fails to see that that story is his own story. In book two Lucius casts a mythologically and aesthetically informed eye over a statue group depicting a curious Acteon being turned into a stag for peering at things he should not look upon. But his erudition is misplaced in that he does not appreciate that here too he is encountering his own story, something that his aunt ominously hints is the case.⁶⁴

Similarly Lucius thinks that he is going to have some agreeably casual sex with a simple slave-girl named Photis. But he is too dim to see who is really the bright bulb in the relationship. And a symptom of his obtuseness is her teasing him with the label of *scholasticus* during their sex talk: "Careful my learned fellow..."⁶⁵

The novel stages the inadequacy of its own clever readers to appreciate novelistic discourse.⁶⁶ The trick ending, much like the Festival of Laughter, will even trip up the cleverest of the clever readers. These readers have almost certainly been trained like a Lucius. And their horizon of expectations can be expected to converge with his.⁶⁷ And yet

Plutarch. See Whitmarsh on Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride* 360e-f: "Allegory, particularly in connection with Egyptian mythology, routinely distinguishes between demotic and initiated comprehension." Whitmarsh, *Narrative and Identity*, 132.

⁶⁴ Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 2.5.2: "'Tua sunt' ait Byrrhena 'cuncta quae uides' [...]" ("Yours,' said Byrrhena, 'is everything you see' [...]"). The edition used is Apuleius, *Apulée. Les Métamorphoses*, ed. D. S. Robertson, trans. Paul Vallette, Collection Budé (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1945).

⁶⁵ Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 2.10.5: "'Heus tu, scolastice,' ait 'dulce et amarum gustulum carpis. Caue ne nimia mellis dulcedine diutinam bilis amaritudinem contrahas.'" ("Careful, my learned fellow,' she said, 'You are snatching at a morsel that is both sweet and bitter. Make sure that the excessive sweetness of the honey does not entangle you in a long-term biliously-bitter contract.'").

⁶⁶ On the axial role that failure plays in the ancient novel more generally, see Gareth L. Schmeling, "Narratives of Failure," in *The Greek and the Roman Novel: Parallel Readings*, ed. Michael Paschalis et al. (Groningen: Barkhuis, 2007), 23-37; see Jennifer H. Oliver, "Queer World-Making in Petronius' *Satyrica*" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2016), on 'queer failure' in Petronius.

⁶⁷ See Fletcher on the contemporary scholarly 'horizon of expectations' that reduces intertextuality to a question of recognizable quotations. Richard Fletcher, "Kristeva's Novel: Genealogy, Genre, and Theory," in *The Bakhtin Circle and Ancient Narrative*, ed. Robert Bracht Branham (Groningen: Groningen University Library, 2005), 234-38; Fletcher likewise suggests that commentaries on commentaries (on

it is exactly cleverness of this stamp that is reduced to mere sophomorphism within the novel, a learned stupidity. Lucius is perfectly capable of delivering a brilliant piece of impromptu forensic rhetoric when suddenly on trial for murder. But his audience howls with laughter at his performance: the genres in which he thinks and with which he is comfortable are not in fact the relevant genres for making it through this text. Lucius will dismiss the old woman and her fable as sub-philosophical and therewith allow the contents of the middle of his own novel to sail past him.⁶⁸ It is precisely his traditional education that trips Lucius up and leaves him unable to see his here and now world for what it really is, a medley of speech-genres whose polyphony is ‘extra curricular’.

Yet another novel poses similar challenges to the smart set. Petronius’ *Satyricon* offers a thorough-going assault on schools and scholars. Stupidity is the order of the day. To the extent that people are clever in the book, this cleverness is always evidence of either a low cunning or an abuse of high culture for sordid ends. At times we see both. The fragmentary novel opens with talk about teachers and students. The discussion has an almost modern feel to it: the curriculum is abused for being flashy and shallow and too-little invested in the classics. The students are denounced for demanding as much: the customer is always right, and all that. But neither party to this discussion is himself anything other than a scoundrel, and each could himself be labeled as a buffoonish pretender rather than a representative of the real thing.

But that seems to be the point: there is no such thing as the real thing in this world. Though the author is steeped in the classics, the novel itself is anti-classical. Both world and work chew up and spit out the old education and the rendered remainders constitute the bloody raw material for a new sort of narrative that puts into question the well-tempered past in the name of a polyphonic and riotous present. The old center is exposed as being empty. In fact, according to this barbed fiction, the old center of someone like Plato is itself *merely the fiction of a center*. Meanwhile the world is full of other narrative possibilities that can, and indeed must, be explored.

That opening scene from the *Satyricon* saw Encolpius talking to a teacher named Agamemnon. The scholar is a man with an epic name but a comic present. He is not a Homeric hero. He is not even a heroically gifted scholar of Homer’s poetry. Instead he is a second-rate educator of middling youths who sponges for meals at the tables of men for whom he has contempt and who do him the favor of returning this same contempt. At Trimalchio’s dinner the schoolteacher is a guest of honor only to the extent that it is thrilling to put him in his place and to evince an ostentatious indifference to the high-culture that he pretends to represent (48.5-7).

At every turn all of the characters show a sensitivity to the idea of Homer and the classics, but nobody really has any use for the classical past as a centripetal and organizing force. Low-brow Trimalchio engages in a boorish bricolage that mixes and matches gladiators and epic poems (29.9). The predatory pedophile Eumolpus composes a political epic about civil war that is so over-full of itself that it never actually attains any aesthetic gravity. His unlearned audience throws rocks at him (90.1). The more erudite narrator thinks no better of the verses. The inset epic is a pointed failure.

Meanwhile the narrator is more than happy to keep on re-writing his own sexcapades in

commentaries...) can get us closer to the spirit of the dialogism in question, a spirit that tends to elude the academic fetish of discrete, authoritative to-the-letter filiation. Fletcher, “Kristeva’s Novel,” 256-57.

⁶⁸ As the story of Desire and Soul ends the narrator says, “Sic captivae puellae delira et temulenta illa narrabat anicula [...]” (“And that’s the story the drunk and raving little old lady told the captive girl [...]”), *Metamorphoses* 6.25.1.

quasi-Homeric terms. His life is a veritable *Odyssey*, but one where all of the characters have been given libidinous roles. The Cyclops is a sexual rival (101.7). The witch Circe with her spells is converted into a attractive, confident woman whose charms are not quite enchanting enough to rouse the narrator's refractory genitals (127.6-7). And if Odysseus famously spoke to his heart within him, Encolpius self-consciously riffs off of Homer by speaking to his own penis in similar terms and offering a (literary-)theoretical justification for doing so (132.13).

As an epic Homer's *Odyssey* conjures a whole lost world of greatness, a fully-realized vision of a then that also paints a portrait of an expansive there, a rich territory across which a hero had his adventures. The world of the novel exposes the pastness of that past, in both chronological and ideological terms. What Bakhtin would call epic monologism is no longer an adequate vehicle for the representation of cultural coherence. Indeed, in Petronius' case we find an explicit positing of something that is often implicit in the other novels: there is no such thing as a coherent culture. The contemporary world is too big and too heterogenous for that. There are too many voices and too many people pursuing too many ends. If Odysseus seeks a *nostos*, a return to his place of origin, a broken novel like the *Satyricon* seems to have no beginning nor end.

But even in the case of a complete narrative like Apuleius', the moment of return and narrative closure is presented as anything but that: it is a moment of radical transformation that both challenges our sense of the beginning—for the narrator has been hiding something important about himself from us from the start—and it also challenges our sense of the ending—for we have arrived at a point that is alien to our expectations that were shaped by the experience of participating in the narrative's world.

Instead of ascent, convergence, and closure as per Plato and a certain classicizing canonic, these novels will linger with antithetical themes. Leveling, disparity, and open-endedness lend the novel its novelty. Educated authors and bookish readers may well be presupposed, but the point of the whole exercise is not a reaffirmation of the already-said or the mere transcription of older forms into a more contemporary prose idiom. And if the latter were the aim, then one could only say of the novels that they are sad failures: Platonic dialogue is more edifying, Attic tragedy is more likely to stir fear and pity, and Homeric epic is more grand.

Novelistic 'vulgarization' is not so much the problem as the solution to the old impasse. If Apuleius and Petronius pose the question of the adequacy of the old centripetal education within the context of the new centrifugal world, the *Alexander Romance* stages that very inadequacy as the substance of the thing that is there instead of a plot. The *Alexander Romance* is a hybrid text in a hybrid world. The work was a super smash hit to judge by the number of manuscripts and their distribution.⁶⁹ It comes in Greek, Latin and Syriac versions. There are even Arabic, Ethiopic, Hebrew and Turkish variants. It is a piece that gets reworked by various hands at various times and in various places. People keep finding themselves in their otherness via this text.⁷⁰ But it is also a text that is singularly unfaithful to the youth who united the world under a Greek banner. The text's very origins offer testimony to a vigorous impetus towards hybridity. The text seems to be a fusion of a first century epistolary novel

⁶⁹ "Ce titre rassemble une myriade de textes, pour un récit qui a connu au Moyen Âge une sphère de diffusion plus large encore que celle de la Bible, et qui a été traduit en une trentaine de langages," see Christine Sempéré, "La recension *epsilon* du *Roman d'Alexandre*: les avatars d'une métamorphose," in *Présence du roman grec et latin: Actes du colloque tenu à Clermont-Ferrand (23-25 Novembre 2006)*, ed. Rémy Pignault and Sandrine Dubel (Clermont-Ferrand: Centre de Recherches A. Piganiol-Présence de l'antiquité, 2011), 561.

⁷⁰ "[...] ses réécritures successives dans les avatars d'*ε* construisent un sens nouveau qui contribue à l'élaboration de la figure du héros, garante de la vitalité du mythe à travers les âges," *ibid.*

that features Alexander, a third century history of Alexander, and various Egyptian materials whose dates are themselves likely disparate.⁷¹

The pedantic reader will see only stupidity in here: it is all a mess of atrociously ignorant chronological and geographical references heaped together with an indiscriminate mix of fact and fiction. But this fluid, open text was something that later antiquity and further centuries delighted in. Within the textual event of the *Alexander Romance* the question of ‘what Alexander means’ can be wantonly uprooted from ‘the Hellenic tradition’. Instead Alexander becomes a cipher for new edifices built from the shards of the collapsed older version of learning.⁷² This Alexander is indeed a heroic figure that brings the world under his sway, but the world so united is no longer one that reflects the imperialistic desires of a Macedonian youth. Instead this world itself is a literary construct full of magic, wonders, and dreams. Aristotle may be present in the narrative, but he is very much akin to the sort of Aristotle one might see in a Hollywood film today. Of course an actor will be found to play Aristotle because his name is in the cast of characters, but this Aristotle is not in least true to or informed about Aristotle himself. And, much as a contemporary audience goes to watch an ‘Alexander’ so as to see swords, sandals, and stars like Colin Farrell and Angelina Jolie, readers of the *Alexander Romance* would be well advised not to get preoccupied by the notional Greek past of its subject matter. That is a mere background that potentially distracts us from the work getting done here and now.

Petronius has his Trimalchio make risible blunders in his cultural references. Some guests laugh, but that does not stop them from eating his food. And maybe Trimalchio’s stupidity is no mere stupidity: when he forces the educated to compromise themselves he evinces a sort of cunning. And in the *Alexander Romance* we see similar ‘epic blunders’. But this is an epic that consists almost entirely of blunder.⁷³ There is no inset audience chortling derisively. There is nobody around to laugh at the narrator. There is only the reader and the fact of the narration.

Indeed the central figure is not an epic hero of the old stamp but instead a protean trickster. And his greatest trick is the manner in which he displaces Greek epic as a whole with a new late antique novel. Novelistic discourse itself both reflects and embodies the discourse of the present and the future. This half-educated prose displaces the over-erudite verse of an Alexandrian poet and Homeric scholar such as Callimachus. Alexander may well have enabled the emergence of Hellenistic Greek as a self-consciously erudite generalization of ancient Greek culture, but that very same gesture laid the seeds for a counter-culture that enables polyphonous, low-brow, vernacular literature to rise up as well.

Once upon a time a dinner party of the Greek Sages constituted a site of the possible gathering of all knowledge and all culture. It promised a glorious moment where both body and soul could ascend to a specifically Greek sublimity. But, in the course of literary history, that sort of table gets overturned by rowdier, less disciplined guests. The more genteel might well believe that there is something tragic in this tumult, but a morosophistic outlook enables us to see that these clods have made an irrefutable case both in theory and in practice: what had masqueraded as a discourse of the all was in fact just the story of a part. And this part had

⁷¹ For example, the Nectanebo material might actually come into the Greek out of a Demotic original. But this material may itself be extremely old, perhaps dating from the third century CE. Richard Jasnow, “The Greek Alexander Romance and Demotic Egyptian Literature,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 56 (1997): 101. In which case the first version of the romance is either deeply hybrid or at least immediately becomes hybridized.

⁷² *Alexander Romance* 2.7: “One Greek idea confounds hordes of barbarians.”

⁷³ We are, though, sensitive to epic: see *Alexander Romance* 1.21 where the violent feast is supposed to remind us of centaurs and Lapiths and Odysseus and Penelope.

insinuated itself into the position of the whole. And, for more than mere aesthetic reasons, one has to give ear to such an unruly claim. This morosophistic discourse is an important legacy, like it or no. For my part, I rather like it. But maybe I am just being stupid.

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