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Book Review

Collected Ancient Greek Novels

Edited by B. P. Reardon
Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989. 827 pages.

When I was an undergraduate major in English and Philosophy, now longer ago than most of my graduate students have been alive, I was taught that the novel began either in the English 18th century or, according to some of my more historically sensitive professors, in the English 16th century. No less an authority than Ian Watt, whose *The Rise of the Novel* I dutifully read, confirmed their teachings. Of course, as a Hispanic student and reader of Cervantes, I knew that Ian Watt was mistaken. I knew that the novel really began in Spain, the first so-called modern novel being *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha;* or if not in Spain, then in the Italy of Boccaccio and the France of Marguerite de Navarre. Eventually I did read Petronius's *Satyricon* and Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* and, a bit later, some early Greek novels. But in both fields my attempts to remedy my provincialism remained unsystematic.

Therefore, when the opportunity rose to review B. P. Reardon's *Collected Ancient Greek Novels* and thus to explore the Greek novel more deliberately and to reflect on its significance, I took it, with gratitude. This book, edited by one of the major scholars of the Greek novel, was first published in hardback in 1989 and has now been reissued in paperback. It contains nine complete novels and two summaries, as well as fragments from eight other narratives. The nine complete novels are: *Chaereas and Callirhoe* by Chariton, *An Ephesian Tale* by Xenophon of Ephesus, *Leucippe and Clitophon* by Achilles Tatius, *Daphnis and Chloe* by Longus, *An Ethiopian Story* by Heliodorus, *The Ass* by Pseudo-Lucian, *A True Story* by Lucian, *The Alexander Romance* by Pseudo-Callisthenes, and *The Story of Apollonius King of Tyre* by that most prolific of all authors, anonymous. The

summaries are of *The Wonders Beyond Thule* by Antonius Diogenes and of *A Babylonian Story* by Iambichus.

Although today's academic and literary circles, including classicists of my generation, are not particularly cognizant of the Greek novel, this was not always the case. In scholarship, several generations of scholars were instructed by Edwin Rhode's 19th-century pioneering study entitled *Der grieschiche Roman und seine Vorläufer* (The Greek Novel and its Precursors, 1876). And some of the "novels" and authors included in Reardon's anthology were quite prominent in former centuries. According to Tomas Hägg, whose 1983 study, *The Novel in Antiquity* is considered by Reardon himself to be the best general work in English on the early Greek novel (Reardon 16), Heliodorus was judged in the 16th and 17th centuries to be the equal of Homer and Virgil (see Hägg 1). Heliodorus's *Ethiopian Story* or *Aithiopika* influenced writers as diverse as Sidney, Cervantes, and Racine (Reardon 352). Longus's pastoral novel, *Daphnis and Chloe,* was read and imitated by Renaissance pastoral writers and later admired by Goethe. Thus it is clearly evident that the subject of the Greek novel belongs to a long-forgotten but once important branch of the history of western literature. A reading of Reardon's anthology, together with some reflection on the place of the Greek narrative tradition in European literature, will help to graft that branch back onto the tree of literary history. The result should be a more accurate understanding of the history and significance of the novel in western civilization than we now generally teach our students.

As Hägg notes in his 1983 study (xi), the genre was born in the West in the Hellenistic period after the death of Alexander the Great, flourished during Rome's imperial consolidation and expansion, and continued to be written well into the rise of Byzantium. Greek novels were therefore written primarily between 200 B.C.E. and 400 C.E. Consequently, the texts under consideration in this review essay came from periods not generally associated with the most important Greek literature. Our ignorance of Greek novels, though it may be inexcusable, is

nonetheless understandable.

It is not hard to adduce further reasons why the Greek novel should have fallen through the cracks of literary and cultural history. First, "the Greek novel" remained a genre without a name for perhaps two millennia. The ancient Greeks did not identify their own prose narrative as "novels." In fact, the term "novel" came into widespread use in Europe only in the 17th century. Neither did the Greeks use the term "romance," a term which in the Middle Ages identified long prose narratives. Since in Aristotle's day the "novel" simply did not exist as a genre (Hägg 3) there could be no theorizing of it, as there was, say, of tragedy (and supposedly of comedy), and later of lyric. The fact that some writers and scholars viewed the novel as the stepchild of the epic accounts, in part, for Heliodorus being placed alongside Homer and Virgil in the Renaissance. Others considered the novel to be related to myths and legends, that is, to narratives with a cosmogonic function or a heroic dimension.

Once we accept as plausible the generic claims of the works anthologized by Reardon, however, we recognize a definite kinship between the newly named "novels" of antiquity and several more recent incarnations of the genre. In fact, the Greek novel resembles, *mutatis mutandis,* today's mass market romances, westerns, adventure stories, and science fiction. Perhaps it is this similarity of Greek novels to the more "popular" literary forms of today that has contributed to their neglect as objects of scholarly inquiry.

The kinship between the old and the new can be demonstrated through a description of the pattern and plot of the more typical of the Greek romances. That pattern, says Reardon, is of "initial felicity broken by journey and separation; danger to life, limb, and chastity [or fidelity]; rescue by divine agency; and eventual reunion through similar means" (Reardon 125). Usually, the hero and heroine are not married to each other at the beginning of the tale. Usually, though they fall passionately in love, they do not consummate that love immediately but rather are separated by circumstances until the very end when, at long

last, they come together in marriage. The most constant challenge of each lover is that of fidelity in the face of enormous difficulties. This is true in the first extant Greek novel *Chaereas and Callirhoe,* in which the hero and heroine start out married, are separated, and are eventually reunited. The plot of *Chaereas and Callirhoe* is so typical of the genre that merely to summarize it accurately communicates the flavor of adventure and romance in these novels.

One day, the young, divinely beautiful and virginal Callirhoe, who has never been out in public before, goes to the temple with her mother. As she walks home, she sees the equally young, virginal and handsome Chaereas. They immediately fall in love, and soon Chaereas gains her hand in marriage. Just after the marriage is consummated, however, Chaereas, in one of his first but increasingly characteristic moments of gullibility, believes the false accusations of his new wife's infidelity, kicks her in the diaphragm during an argument and knocks her unconscious and dead. At least so he thinks. Although he is tried for the murder of his new wife and readily acknowledges his guilt, he is acquitted. All this takes but four or five pages. The remaining hundred or so unfold in the following way: presumably at the same time that Chaereas is being tried in court, Callirhoe, having been buried alive, awakens in her tomb and sobs so loudly that grave robbers, who happen to be sacking the tomb at the moment, hear her and kidnap her, taking her with them on a sea journey. Soon they decide to sell her into slavery to the household of the first ruler they come across. This happens to be Dionysus, ruler of the kingdom of Miletus and namesake of the God but in other respects a man of quite normal appetites. Naturally, the moment that Dionysus sees his new slave Callirhoe, he falls in love with her and wants to marry her. She, appalled at this new situation, in despair about her status as a slave, depressed at her separation from Chaereas (who, she believes, has given her up for dead), suddenly discovers a new complication. She is pregnant with Chaereas's child. Conveniently, she then has a dream in which Chaereas appears to her and asks her to take care of the child.

This dream persuades her to marry Dionysus in order to give her unborn child a good home and all the advantages of royalty. The question of whether or not her marriage to Dionysus demonstrates a lack of fidelity to Chaereas is glossed over, as are several other ethical issues throughout the novel. In the meantime — and there are lots of meantimes in ancient Greek novels — Chaereas comes to pray at Callirhoe's tomb and discovers that it has been tampered with. The tomb is searched. Callirhoe is gone. Chaereas falls into even deeper despair about this mystery, but the mystery is soon clarified by one of Callirhoe's abductors, who is caught when a search on the high seas of the abandoned pirate's cutter turns up Callirhoe's funeral offerings. Under torture, this abductor, a man named Theron, confesses that Callirhoe has been sold into slavery. After Theron is crucified in front of Callirhoe's tomb, Chaereas embarks on a voyage to reclaim his wife. In the meantime, Dionysus continues his wedding plans with Callirhoe and marries her. Of course, *fortuna* — and there is a lot of *fortuna* in ancient Greek novels — decrees that before Chaereas arrives in Miletus he should be captured and enslaved by Mithridates' men in the kingdom of Caria, which is next to Miletus. In a plot twist too complicated to summarize briefly, Callirhoe believes that she is burying Chaereas in Miletus at the same time that Chaereas, in Caria, is being told by Mithridates that Callirhoe has married Dionysus. Shortly after these events transpire, Callirhoe gives birth to a healthy boy, actually Chaereas's son but believed by Dionysus to be his own. Posing as Chaereas's benefactor, Mithridates encourages Chaereas to write a letter to Callirhoe which he, Mithridates, promises to transmit to Callirhoe. In his letter, Chaereas bemoans his discovery of her marriage to Dionysus and recalls for her what the two of them, in their youth and innocence, once shared. Dionysus intercepts the letter, attributes its authorship to Mithridates (in this Dionysus is wrong) and complains to the King of Persia that Mithridates is trying to seduce his wife Callirhoe by means of this letter (in this Dionysus is right). The King of Persia summons Dionysus, Mithridates and Callirhoe to

Babylon for a trial. So off they all go to Persia, where Callirhoe's beauty makes her the envy of all the women and the object of desire for many of the men. The King of Persia, smitten by Callirhoe's beauty, delays the start of the trial for as long as he can in order simply to keep Callirhoe in Babylon. In the meantime, Mithridates has gotten Chaereas to agree not to reveal himself to Callirhoe before the trial. To this Chaereas reluctantly agrees. The trial begins. Dionysus, believing Chaereas to be dead or otherwise unavailable, declares to the court that the only way that Mithridates can be innocent of the accusation both of having authored the letter to Callirhoe and of attempting to seduce her would be for Chaereas to appear in the flesh, right then and there. Lo and behold, Chaereas reveals himself. Callirhoe rushes toward him but is prevented from embracing him. Chaos ensues as everyone realizes that Callirhoe has two husbands, both of them very much alive. The King of Persia must now decide to whom Callirhoe really belongs. (This is typical of the patriarchalism of Greek culture: men decide the fate of women.) Hoping all the time to seduce Callirhoe himself, the king puts off the decision. And then *fortuna* intervenes again: a rebellion breaks out in Egypt, threatening the sovereignty of Persia. So off go all the Persians, Dionysus joining them, to battle the Egyptians. Taking advantage of the chaotic situation, Dionysus sends a messenger to Chaereas with the news that Callirhoe has gone off to war with his troops. Chaereas, as gullible now as he was at the beginning of the narrative, believes Dionysus and rushes off to volunteer on the side of the Egyptians in order to take his revenge on Dionysus and the Persians. And in effect Chaereas's plan succeeds, for he is so fierce a warrior that he becomes an admiral in the Egyptian navy and defeats the Persians. He then finds Callirhoe again and finally learns of Dionysus's lies. *Fortuna* conveniently decrees that Dionysus be killed in battle. With the moral problem of bigamy thus finessed, Callirhoe and Chaereas are reunited and return to their home in Syracuse, there to live happily ever after. The fact that at some point during all these adventures their son has died is passed over

as inconsequential. The end.

As Mikhail Bakhtin has noted in his commentary on the Greek novel in *The Dialogic Imagination,* such a plot may be complex, but it is not profound. Nor does it indicate much literary sophistication. The characters are flatly drawn. *Fortuna* plays an extraordinarily large role. Neither verisimilitude nor plausibility count for much in the twists and turns of the plot. There are many battles, both between armies and individuals. The hero and the heroine swing between enormous emotional highs and lows. There are variations of these conventions, of course, but they were so widely known and so widely followed that they could be easily parodied.

Such a parody is the focus of *The Ass,* where the hero is transformed into a donkey through the misuse of a love potion. In that animal shape, he goes through all the adventures that the human heroes of other Greek romances endure. He, too, is sold into servitude. He, too, wanders about the known world, narrowly escapes death a number of times, and is tempted by beautiful women. One such beautiful and lascivious woman succeeds in seducing him (yes, he is still a donkey) and in enjoying him all night long. Some time later he finds the antidote (eating roses) which turns him back into a man. That metamorphosis accomplished, he returns to that same woman, hoping to repeat their night of pleasure. She, however, now spurns him because, by becoming a man again, he has lost his donkey phallus. Eventually he is reunited with his original beloved back home and presumably she, not knowing what he once possessed as a donkey, has no complaints about his sexual performance. As a work of literature, *The Ass* is not strong; as a parody, it is enjoyable though, like most parodies, its humor is both broad and crude.

The last issue to be raised in this commentary on *Collected Ancient Greek Novels* is the interest that the Greek novel in general might have for scholars of comparative civilizational analysis. These novels show western civilization in times of transition and consolidation. I do not consider it accidental that the Greek

novel gained and maintained its popularity in the tumultuous Hellenistic era after the death of Alexander the Great, as well as during the establishment and expansion of the Roman Empire and the formation of the Christian West. This genre, though escapist in nature, reflects the uncertainties of those times and a concomitant desire for stability. Thus, almost every novel contains episodes of warfare, piracy, kidnapping, ransom, travel, and encounters with exotic peoples. Almost every novel presents a world which is thrust into chaos by forces beyond the control of any single individual. And just as importantly, those forces, usually described as fate or *fortuna,* lead the world back into a kind of harmony, a harmony most often represented as a return home or as the union of lovers long kept apart. These are the fantasies, I believe, of cultures experiencing great instability.

"Civilizational" touches abound. Almost every novel contrasts life in urban societies with life in rural societies, showing clear preferences now for the first, now for the second. Sophisticated court novels express the first set of cultural desires; pastoral novels, of which *Daphnis and Chloe* is the best example, express the second. In almost every novel, the main characters sense how important the difference is between civilized and non-civilized peoples, and they strive to be counted among the civilized. Sometimes the difference is manifested in speech, for barbarians cannot speak or understand the language of civilized peoples. Sometimes the difference is in terms of appearance, for barbarians not only dress differently but some of them do not even possess human shapes. Sometimes it is the behavior of people which identify them as barbarian and uncivilized. According to the narrator of *An Ethiopian Story,* "once embarked upon a course of action, the heart of a savage brooks no turning back. And when a barbarian loses all hope of his own preservation, he will usually kill everything he loves before he dies, either in the deluded belief that he will be reunited with it beyond the grave or else to save it from the shameless clutches of his enemies" (Reardon 377). A character may even prefer death among the civilized to life among the barbarians. So says Thisbe in *An*

Ethiopian Story: "Better to die at your hands [those of Knemon, her lord and master] and be buried like a Greek than to endure a life worse than death and suffer the torment of a savage's love, which causes me, as an Athenian, more pain than any hatred" (Reardon 385).

The quirky glimpses into popular consciousness afforded by the ancient Greek novel call to mind later medieval thought and suggest that at least in some respects the popular imagination in western civilization remained obsessed with similar issues for more than two millennia, whether that imagination was Greek or Roman, classical or medieval, pagan or Christian. For instance, *Leucippe and Clitophon* contains an enthusiastic description of an elephant which states, among other things, that an elephant's breath, which "is almost indistinguishable from Indian spices," is a strong antidote to headaches (Reardon 223-24). That statement might be found in works by any number of authors from Herodotus to Marco Polo.

We should not be misled by these details into believing that ancient cultures were simply gullible concerning either exotic medicinal remedies or the humanity of distant peoples. Many writers in ancient cultures were well aware of the difference between truth and fantasy in the descriptions of societies separated from them by language, custom, and geographical distance. Even Herodotus himself, whom later generations dubbed "The Father of Lies" because of his willingness to transmit rumor and cultural fantasy, wrote that while he felt obliged to write down what he was told he was not obliged to believe it all. That skepticism toward the description of the Other or toward travel narratives is the foundation of Lucian's *A True Story* (the Greek term in the title is "Historia," the same as it is in Herodotus). Lucian parodies tall tales from the earliest days of epic poetry (Homer is a frequent target here) to his own day in the second century of the common era.

Somewhere along the way, in the long tradition of the description of the cultural Other which winds from Homer through Herodotus, Pliny, St. Augustine, Isidore of Seville,

Marco Polo, and Christopher Columbus down to our own day, the understanding was lost that these were often merely the descriptions of imaginary and imagined beings. A Greek novel like *A True Story,* which is deliberately outrageous in its disregard for verisimilitude, or *The Alexander Romance,* which indiscriminately mingles fact and fiction, are useful reminders that descriptions of the Other in western civilization, and probably in all civilizations, should be regarded with skepticism. It is sobering to read the same sort of description of an exotic Other, in sometimes remarkably similar language, in a poem, in a history text, in a parody, in a biography, in a travel account, or in an official letter.

As the rabbis say, not everything that is thought should be spoken, not everything that is spoken should be written, and not everything that is written should be published. I would add that not everything published should be believed or relied upon. Where does that leave those who would do research in comparative civilizations? Ever more cautious, I would hope, about textual evidence and the generalizations based on that evidence, and ever more appreciative of the richness of the cultural imagination and of a tradition like that of the Greek novel.

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