

Finding the Time for Ancient Novels

Simon Goldhill

This essay looks at the history of the novel, starting from the influential postwar critical insistence on the importance of the novel as a nineteenth-century genre. It notes that this tradition singularly fails to take account of the history of the novel in antiquity – for clear ideological reasons. It then explores the degree to which the texts known as the novel from antiquity, such as Longus’s Daphnis and Chloe, Petronius’s Satyricon, or Heliodorus’s Aethiopica, constitute a genre. Although there is a great deal of porousness between different forms of prose in antiquity, the essay concludes by exploring why the ancient novel, ignored by critics for so long, has now become such a hot topic. It argues that much as the postwar critics could not fit the ancient novel into their histories, now the ancient novel’s interests in sophisticated erotics, narrative flair, and cultural hybridity seem all too timely.

There was a schoolmaster at my junior school who was feared for his violent and debilitating outbursts of temper. Once, my classmates and I earnestly reported to each other, he actually had a fit and the class had to be stopped. We explained this with nine-year-old knowingness: “because he had been in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp.” In those days, Holocaust memorial days had not yet been institutionalized; the curriculum did not relentlessly privilege World War II; Primo Levi and the huge industry of the writing about war crimes or posttraumatic stress had not yet become a staple. We had no idea what “being in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp” actually meant. It is hard now to remember the stoic or traumatized silence of that generation of fighters. My own father, who had been wounded three times and survived thanks to an operation in a French cellar, where calvados was both the antiseptic and anaesthetic, never spoke of his war-time experiences, except, when pushed, in the barest of outlines. As children, we played at war, without correction.

As I reached the higher classes of the school, I was given Ian Watt’s book *The Rise of the Novel* to study, along with F. R. Leavis’s *The Great Tradition*.¹ Particularly for my adolescent idealism, these books were inspirational because, as literary critic Stefan Collini reflects, they embody a “moment when literary criticism seemed important in part because it was about so much more than literature.”² I did not know then that Ian Watt had been in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp. He had been reported dead to his family, spent three-and-a-half years in horrific

conditions building the bridge over the River Kwai, suffered disease and malnutrition so severely that he was hospitalized for months after the end of the war, and experienced the psychological torment of watching lethal violence meted out to his comrades.

How this wartime experience affected Watt's critical agenda has recently become the subject of debate, largely due to biographer Marina MacKay's book *Ian Watt: The Novel and the War-Time Critic*. Watt's book, one of the most influential critical studies of the twentieth century, established a story for the rise of the novel that became an integral part of postwar understanding of literature. His explanation of the emergence of the novel as a form in the eighteenth century is intellectually ambitious and insists on a broad comprehension of social change. For Watt, the scientific, social, economic, and intellectual developments of the eighteenth century were key to the literary expressivity of the novel. For him, a new empirical and, above all, realistic representation of individual experience was the hallmark of the new literary form: "The novel is surely distinguished from other genres and from previous forms of fiction by the amount of attention it habitually accords both to the individualisation of its characters and to the detailed presentation of their environment."³ This new narrative form entailed a new reading public and created the imaginary of this modern audience. The novel was a product of its time and spoke to how the times were a-changing.

By the 1980s, particularly with the rise of critical theory, Watt's account came under severe attack, but was never fully displaced. That he placed *the rise of the novel in England* – in London, indeed – was decried as essentialist, oversimplified, and excessively nationalist, not to mention historically short-sighted in its ignoring of prose fiction from the sixteenth century onward, not least in Spain.⁴ Even to take the category of "the novel" for granted took the sword to this much more complex and longer history of prose fiction. His book, in short, was marred because it was a product of *its* time and was thus no longer fit for how the times were now a-changing.⁵ Yet Watt's influence has persisted. His was still the story to fight against when the late and much missed Srinivas Aravamudan subtitled his 2012 study of Orientalism "Resisting the Rise of the Novel."⁶

Watt himself was publicly and stridently critical when David Lean's movie *The Bridge over the River Kwai* appeared, the same year as *The Rise of the Novel*. He hated the film precisely because of what he specified – from personal experience – to be its fantasy of escape and its focus on the deeply unconvincing story of one American's individual heroism. That is, he hated it for its *novelistic* qualities: the movie's collapse of multiple perspectives, conflicting possibilities, and downright mess into a nicely ordered teleological plot. Watt knew well how any person had to be selfish to survive in the camps, but also wrote: "All our circumstances were hostile to individual fantasies, surviving meant accepting the intractable realities which surrounded us."⁷ Nonetheless, none of Watt's critics, as far as I am aware,

for all their attempts to dismiss his book as a product of the political blinkers of a particular moment, sought to link his writing with his experience as a survivor of the horrors of war, at least until very recently. It is not hard to hazard some reasons why Watt's war should be thought now to be so significant. In recent years, the situatedness – Donna Haraway's productive term⁸ – of a writer has become a route to move beyond naive identity politics into a more complex idea of how an author inhabits a time, a place, a network; the development of a personal voice in critical discourse has combined with studies of life-writing to explore the complexities of self-representation, even and especially in genres that eschew any explicit narrative of the self. Criticism of the novel, a genre that still so often narrates the story of an individual or individuals in a set of contingent circumstances, inevitably, it seems, provokes reflections on how the self is placed in history. Yet to make the connection between Watt's personal experience in the camps and his critical writing, for all MacKay's careful exegesis, remains a fearsomely complicated task, and threatens to slip back into a misplaced and uncomprehending knowingness: "because he was in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp."

It might seem easier to see Watt alongside other great critics of the immediate postwar period, who constructed large-scale narratives about literary tradition. F. R. Leavis, who had been an ambulance worker in World War I, published *The Great Tradition* in 1948; Erich Auerbach, exiled to Istanbul, produced *Mimesis* in 1946.⁹ Auerbach's topic was the representation of reality in Western literature; Leavis defined a tradition of moral seriousness that he saw as central to the history of the novel. For many, Watt, Auerbach, and Leavis mark a moment when, after the violence and horror of World War II and the threat of continuing global conflict, the memory of the literary history of Europe, with its shared heritage of writing and intellectual engagement, offered a cultural hope to set against political despair. We could add many others, of course: Ernst Robert Curtius's *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, for example, appeared in 1948 or, on a far smaller scale, but with considerable influence, T. S. Eliot's essays "What is a Classic?" (1944) and "Virgil and the Christian World" (1951).¹⁰ Literary criticism indeed was about "more than literature." At stake was what culture might mean after World War II. If "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," as Watt's friend Theodor Adorno paradigmatically declared, what is the worth of literary culture?

For a classicist today, however, Leavis's *Great Tradition* and Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* immediately appear to embody a strikingly blinkered historical perspective. For if there is any genre that has come back into the limelight of classical studies in the last thirty years, it is the ancient Greek and Latin novel, and neither Watt nor Leavis show any interest in this deep history of the genre. For them, what matters in the novel – its privileged place as sign and symbol of the values of European civilization – is likely to be dissipated by telling a longer, more intricate, more variegated history. I aim to explore not just the history of the history of the novel with

an eye specifically on its ancient Greek and Latin forebears, but also, more precisely, what such a history can tell us about the situatedness of the literary critical engagement with prose fiction. Why is it now that the Greek novel has proved so compelling to so many readers? When texts from antiquity, silenced for so long, begin to speak to modernity, what does this changing understanding of the history of literature indicate?

It would be as well to begin with three sets of summary starting points. The first concerns the ancient Greek sources. There is no explicit ancient category of “the novel” (as there is of “epic” or “tragedy,” say). Nor is there a category of “romance” (a term often used to denigrate some fictions as subnovelistic).¹¹ But there are five extended prose fictions in Greek, written between the first and the fourth centuries, which survive in full, and fragments of many others, all of which are usually known today as “novels” (the convenient, anachronistic title self-servingly helps tie classics back into the Great Tradition). All these novels are love stories, and each involves the travails of a young and beautiful couple who are in different ways separated from their goal of a happy marriage, until the last page of the book. Probably the best known of the Greek novels today is *Daphnis and Chloe*, not least because of Ravel’s music (the lovers are separated from marriage in this novel by their ignorance of sex: even naivety is a sophisticated and ludic plot device in the novel). Although there is no word for “novel” in ancient Greek, all five Greek texts have internal markers of generic self-awareness: they have similar tropes and narrative structures, and they play games with the expectations of such tropes (love stories, above all, will have their clichés and their ideological presuppositions). The novels are written in a developed literary language, with many echoes of earlier literature, which implies – or calls for – an educated audience, aware of the history of love stories back to Helen of Troy. These are self-conscious, amused, and amusing narratives. As we will see, these texts are generically porous, with links to travel writing, philosophy, rhetoric, historiography, and epic. There are also many other forms of prose – again we will discuss this below – that border on these central “novels,” including Jewish and Christian prose texts. A good deal of recent criticism has incisively outlined the elements of the genre of the ancient Greek novel, the limits of its definition as a genre, and the connection between the different types of Greek and Latin prose, especially the shared strategies of erotic novels and the Christian scriptures.¹² The novel is now a staple of classical curricula and scholarly publication, though it is still rare for even literary scholars of later periods to be fully aware of these funny and sophisticated texts.

It was not always thus. The history of the reception of the Greek novel in particular – my second starting point – swerves between moments of excited rediscovery, aggressive disdain, and total ignorance. In the West, the rediscovery of

Longus's *Daphnis and Chloe* and of Heliodorus's *Aethiopica* are significant cultural events of the Renaissance; and the Greek novels are consequently present and instrumental as models or resources for the era(s) when the modern novel is said to rise. Both books are translated into English and French from the sixteenth century, both are very widely read and imitated, but they are treated quite differently. Where *Daphnis and Chloe* is very much a tale of pastoral love (itself a genre attractive to so many forms in the period, from literature to art to opera), Heliodorus's prose is welcomed as an epic – in terms to delight Lukács.¹³ Its combination of travel, romance, and adventure fueled many a book in the early modern era. In the nineteenth century, by stark contrast, even when studied, the novels were usually regarded as late and degenerate forms, heavily scarred by their origin in the dangerous East. Erwin Rohde, who was a great friend of Friedrich Nietzsche, and who spent many years researching the novels, nonetheless dismissed *Daphnis and Chloe* as “revolting, hypocritical sophistication” (his book was hailed by Mikhail Bakhtin as the best book on the Greek novel).¹⁴ The origin of the novel was debated within racist polemics about the Orient: its location in the Greek East (Asia Minor) was often taken as a sign and cause of its separation from the true well-springs of classical Hellenism.¹⁵ In short, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the novel had been largely banished from the hallowed halls of Hellenism, except as an example of degeneracy in prose. This Victorian disdain helps explain why the ancient novel is still unknown to many modern readers.

The Latin novel, my third starting point, has had a different trajectory, without the ideological framing of Philhellenism, which defines so much of the nineteenth-century response to antiquity. There are two main extant Latin novels, and one of these, by Petronius, does not survive in a complete form. Both Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* (also known as *The Golden Ass*) and Petronius's *Satyricon* have authors who are known from other texts (unlike any of the Greek writers), and we have other extant works by Apuleius. Petronius is, it is usually assumed, the established figure in the court of Nero, described by Tacitus's wonderful phrase as “the connoisseur and judge of what is tasteful,” *elegantiae arbiter*, a man of “sophisticated extravagance,” *erudito luxu*.¹⁶ Apuleius was a notable in Roman Africa, a philosopher and rhetorician, once accused, according to his own defense speech, which may be fictional, of using magic to gain the attention of a rich widow. Both authors had lives fit for a novel.¹⁷ Both novels have passages that could not be given to schoolchildren because of their explicit, exuberant, and delightfully perverse sexuality, which also guaranteed them a readership elsewhere. (Petronius's *Satyricon* provides a plot and a style for Fellini.) Both also have passages of a quite different sort that have stimulated art of multiple forms, and both enter the history of the novel in English easily. Apuleius's tale of “Cupid and Psyche,” for example, is translated in full in the middle of Walter Pater's novel *Marius the Epicurean*, a centerpiece of the role of classicism at the heart of British aestheticism;¹⁸ the orig-

inal title for F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* was "Trimalchio in West Egg," after the *Cena Trimalchionis*, "The Dinner Party of Trimalchio," an extended scene in Petronius's *Satyricon*. The Latin novels' bawdy and episodic fiction feeds into picaresque and erotic narrative, especially in the early modern era.¹⁹ Apuleius's tale of the hero's transformation into a donkey and back again was a particularly stimulating narrative to recalibrate ideas not just about the limits of the human but also about conversion, an integral crisis of the Reformation. If in the eyes of the nineteenth-century Greek novels were texts of the degenerate East, the Latin novels were texts *about* degeneracy, and were read within a broadly Christianizing context as signs of the moral and social decline of the Roman Empire. As many a novelist, artist, and filmmaker have discovered, to show a Roman orgy is a particularly gratifying way to assert a moral superiority.

So, why has the Greek novel in particular come back into such prominence now? I think there are four main reasons. The first concerns erotics. Rohde, as I just indicated, hated *Daphnis and Chloe* because of its "revolting, hypocritical sophistication." He disliked that the novel used the innocence of its hero and heroine to expose the lasciviousness of its readers: the text flirts and titillates its readers with a naivety they cannot share. When Chloe, wracked by a desire she cannot name or understand, exclaims, "I wish I were a flute, so that he could blow me," or when she secretly touches her own body to test "which bits of herself were softer than him," it is easy to see what upset Rohde.²⁰ But for Michel Foucault, the Greek novel was a key juncture in his history of sexuality. Foucault's *History of Sexuality* was a defining work of the 1980s. His return to antiquity to explain how Christian sexuality took shape emphasized how the asymmetrical, temporary Greek erotic partnerships, which recognized controlled pleasure as good and male-male relationships as acceptable, were reconfigured into symmetrical, long-term relationships between men and women. The Greek novel, he argued, was precious testimony of this transition. The novels know of the history of Greek erotics, but privilege at their heart a young male and female couple of the same age and background who seek a permanent tie of mutual affection. These books, claimed Foucault, demonstrate how a community could change not just its normative structures but its cultural imaginary. The novels, which are published during the period when Christianity comes into prominence across the Roman Empire, trace such a transition. When the heroine of Heliodorus's *Aethiopica* is said "to make a divinity of her virginity," the imminence of Christian morals looms.²¹

Foucault's broad history has proved hugely influential. It has been extensively criticized, for sure, for its focus on a restricted set of texts, for its focus on a masculine story, and, with regard to the ancient novel, for his failure to deal either with the humor of the texts – the transgressive laughter of sexuality also can be disruptive to the normative structures Foucault insisted upon – or with the persistence

of the hierarchies of gender relations, which outlive any epiphenomena of equality. Nonetheless, Foucault's claim that sexuality was not pathologized before the nineteenth century – you could not “be a homosexual” in terms of medical, legal, and other normative discourses before this era – has resulted in a corresponding interest in texts that are not only before such pathologization but also mark the transition between the culture of Christianity and the inherited and different normativities of Greco-Roman culture. Both anthropology and cultural history have used the otherness of different sexual regimes to explore and criticize the rhetoric of naturalness with which sexual propriety is invested. This exercise in defamiliarization has found the Greek novel *bon à penser*, “good to think with.” The Greek novel, that is, may have offended public Victorian moral commitments, but it speaks with purpose to our contemporary debates about sexuality. When Achilles Tatius stages a (very sexy) debate about whether it is better to sleep with a boy or a girl, its easy assumption of multiple sexual choices and polymorphous pleasures fits excitingly with a certain modern self-representation of metrosexuality. The combination of the novels' self-conscious wit, narrative glee, and eye-opening variety of erotic expectations makes the genre extremely attractive to contemporary critics, ever keen to express their own modernity through a rediscovered, authoritative past.

The second reason for the novel's return to favor concerns the very idea of genre. It has become a commonplace in the history of literature that the novel became a dominant genre in the nineteenth century, reaching a new large audience and replacing epic or drama as the form that expressed reality in a normative way. Whether we turn to the huge popularity of a figure such as Walter Scott to see a changing image of the historical past, or Charles Dickens to appreciate the changing urban environment as a social map, or Charlotte Brontë to appreciate shifting patterns of emotional inner life, the novel came of age, it is argued, in the nineteenth century, as a key, formative guide to a culture's imagination as well as its narratives: it is a product of its time and a witness to that time. Consequently, the history of the novel becomes invested with a special authority, which makes attempts at re-dating the genre's emergence and hence its impact especially provocative. Rewriting this history changes our sense of modernity and its self-assertions. To keep the standard narrative in place, one response to the evidently much longer history of prose fiction has been simply to ignore any works before the eighteenth century, with an inevitable reaction that draws pointed attention to such gaps. Another has been to try and delimit what counts as a novel. The word “Romance” in English (though not in other major European languages) has been repeatedly used to reserve the authority of the title of novel for whichever elements of the Great Tradition are thought supreme. It might seem hard to deny Cervantes's *Don Quixote* the title of novel – this is the beginning of the *seventeenth* century – but *Don Quixote* is already also a parody of earlier forms. Defin-

ing and dating the novel turns out to be a project replete with ideological commitments about the place – in all senses – of cultural value. To establish the Greek novel in this tradition is not so much the traditional gesture of classicism – finding a genealogy for Western values in an idealized classical antiquity – as an attempt to recognize a longer and more nuanced history than the most self-important narratives of nineteenth-century preeminence can allow.

The fullest and richest version of this revisionist argument is found in Margaret Anne Doody's aggressively if parodically titled *The True Story of the Novel*. This long critical study aims to reveal "the connections of ancient fiction and our own." She offers a sprawling, partial account, under the immediately provocative principle that "Romance and The Novel are one." The first three hundred pages of her book consist of two sections: "The Ancient Novel" and "The Influence of the Ancient Novel"; in the remaining 185 pages, on the "deep rhetoric" of the novel, Doody takes her defining tropes also from the ancient novel: Eros, Ekphrasis, the Goddess, and the like. For her, the connection between the ancient and modern novel is "inescapable," all pervasive, and only requires a shift in perspective to become visible, a shift her book sets out to provide.²² Now, Doody's desire to find such connections also erases many a major historical and ideological difference (for her, unlike Foucault, whom she does not cite, Eros flies without change across time and culture). She spends no time wondering if fiction itself is a transferable category. It is an account that knows exactly what counts as a novel, and she is all too happy to list her candidates from antiquity.

But it is here that the argument about genre becomes insistently difficult and shows the problem at the heart of the issue. Doody includes in her list of novels "Joseph and Aseneth"; Lucian's *True History*; and "Paul and Thekla," for example. "Joseph and Aseneth" is a short prose version of the marriage of the biblical figure, Joseph, and the wars of succession that follow from it.²³ It expands a verse or two from Genesis, primarily to explain how Joseph, a founding father of the Jewish people, could have married a non-Jew. It exists in two different forms (at least) and seven different languages, and if it started out as a Jewish text, it is adopted by and adapted to a Christian readership through translation. It combines tropes from erotic Greek narratives with intertestamental narratives such as Maccabees or Esther. If such a text is included in the history of the novel, is there any good reason not to include the Gospels, though the genre of the Gospels has vexed scholars for generations, and simply to put the Gospels under the category of fiction would certainly upset many of Scripture's readers?²⁴ Lucian's *True History*, by contrast, is a wonderful parody of historiography and travel writing within historiography. It announces from the start that unlike other historians, he at least knows that everything he says is false (a paradox that wilfully plays with the category of fiction). It smartly mocks the reader's desire for certainty and closure, not least by announcing at the end of its second book that everything will become clear in

the next book, a book that does not exist. Lucian, with his typical narratological panache, announces his own lost book, his own absent conclusion and closure. If a parody of historiographical travel writing is included as a novel, what of historiographical travel writing such as Pausanias? “Paul and Thekla” is a hagiographic narrative of Thekla’s conversion to Christianity and her subsequent life and death. It has scenes that seem to echo the novel of Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Cleitophon*, one of the sexiest and most intellectually rich of the ancient Greek novels.²⁵ But it is a saint’s life, and there are hundreds of such texts. Again, to call all these works “novels” is to stretch the definition to the breaking point, not least because of their use as devotional texts in ritual settings. Doody’s list of novels, that is, points out that alongside the five texts we have been calling novels, there is a string of other prose texts of varying lengths, different implied audiences and uses, and different intellectual frameworks, which narrate stories, parody narrative styles, and adopt and adapt narrative styles. The five novels include passages that look like historiography, philosophy, art history, travel narrative, and rhetorical speeches; and by the same token, hagiography, history, rhetorical speeches, travel narratives, philosophy, and so forth include passages of narrative that look like the prose of the novels, and may even take the shape of what we might call novellas.

This mutually infecting dynamic of porousness raises serious questions for the notion of genre. Does the lack of a word for “novel” alter our recognition of the five, polyphonous texts as belonging to a not-yet-named tradition that will retrospectively claim them for itself? Does the very polyphony of the ancient novel – something that even Bakhtin, who both knew the ancient novel and wrote about polyphony, failed to address – make affiliation to a generic tradition necessary or impossible? The five novels, that is, *both* have the generic markers of repeated tropes and narrative expectations *and* borrow from and are echoed in other prose works of the same period. This makes it especially hard to settle on any hard and fast criteria of generic affiliation even for these five central test cases.

“What are the signs of generic affiliation?” is one pressing question provoked by the fragmented and incremental styles of modernism and taken up by recent literary theorists. So, too, have critics begun to explore the self-interest and ideological presuppositions of literary history, especially as a teleological account of the self in history. The ancient novel is a fascinating test case for both agendas. We must ask not only whether some or all of ancient prose fiction should belong to the history of the novel, but also what is at stake for us in such a determination. When we try to include or exclude particular texts from the genre and history of the novel, what is at stake for the critic? The ancient novel thus becomes a particularly testing example for a major debate in literary criticism, and this too brings it to the fore for contemporary scholarship.

The third driving force behind the resurgence of the ancient novel follows from the second, and concerns narratology: the study of the techniques of nar-

rative. One particularly influential genealogy of modern literary criticism starts with Viktor Shlovsky and the Russian Formalist critics from the beginning of the twentieth century.²⁶ They aimed to explore how literary narrative functioned as a form. In one branch of influence – Marxist analysis of literature like Lukács, say, or Raymond Williams – the representation of reality as a political truth is directly linked to the forms of expressivity used: socialist realism. Bakhtin, whose work between the wars became influential only after it was translated into French in the 1970s, is perhaps best seen as an extension of such formalist analysis into particularly sophisticated areas of time and space and multiplicity of voices.²⁷ In another branch, Gérard Genette in Paris in the 1970s and 1980s, followed by Mieke Bal and others, developed such formalist analysis into a full-scale system of description of narrative's tropes and strategies of expressivity.²⁸ Yet it is striking the degree to which such analyses depend on nineteenth-century prose fiction for their test cases. Even Bakhtin uses the ancient novel primarily as a fall guy to contrast the polyphony and complexity of other forms from the static models of a classical idealism.

One of the most charismatic studies of the ancient novel that helped stir its more general revival was Jack Winkler's *Auctor et Actor* (1985), significantly subtitled *A Narratological Reading of Apuleius' "The Golden Ass."* Winkler used a fluid, narratological analytic to explore the playful self-consciousness of Apuleius's narrative technique, articulating the tensions between the author as character and the author as writer in the first-person narration. Winkler brilliantly showed how the narrative techniques of Apuleius led the reader down the garden path of inevitably failing acts of (mis)interpretation. The journey of the novel's hero from curious traveler to donkey to religious initiate mapped a reader's equally bumpy and picaresque journey of reading. Above all, Winkler demonstrated that modern literary critical desire to contrast the complexity of modern narrative technique with an imagined white temple of simple and austere classical idealism was a self-serving fantasy. The ancient novel was as complex and engaging as any modern text. Heliodorus's *Aethiopica* is an even more intricate text, whose nested narratives, multiple narrators, and intricate journeys of interpretation and misinterpretation seem designed to drive a reader to distraction, as we try, like the hero and heroine, to stay on the path toward a narrative conclusion in marriage, a scene never quite reached, though often promised.²⁹

Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* would have us believe that his description of the material plenitude of Homer and the gap-marked narrative of the Bible define the modes of ancient representations of reality. The ancient novel, with its brilliant exposure of both the self-deceptions and lures of the first-person narrative, and its recognition of the role of the reader as interpreter in the third-person narrative, stands as a vivid rejoinder to such oversimplifications of antiquity. Ancient literature is nobody's childhood, and the ancient novel, in the hands of such fine narra-

tological analysis, has been one route for classicists pointedly to demonstrate this to other disciplines, still beholden to Auerbach's and other similarly misplaced visions of a simpler time.

There is a politics to all this, however, which makes up the fourth transformation of the ancient novel. The Greek novels are all written from within the Roman Empire. But none mentions any Roman word, any Roman institution, or recognizes the power structures under which the authors of the novels lived. The men and women who identified as Greek lived as subjects of the empire, and while the elite continued to maintain their local status, and engaged with Rome and its institutions in a range of ways, the power battles of the imperial court and the marching of armies passed the Greeks by: they held such office as they did, as Plutarch bitterly observes, "like children walking in their parents' shoes."³⁰ Yet Greek was the language of the Roman elite too (*kai su, teknon*, "and you too, my son" was what Caesar said in Greek to his killer Brutus, not the Shakespearian Latin *et tu, Brute*). Greek culture – its art, drama, philosophy, music, and literature – dominated the Roman scene. One of the most surprising elements of the empire, and an element recognized as surprising by the Romans themselves, was that the dominant power was itself dominated – captured, as Horace puts it – by the culture of one of its captured countries. The novels have provoked thus a passionate discussion within classics about the literature of resistance. This writing from below turns a blind eye to the realities of Rome, and turns its gaze back toward a classical past when there was no gap between Greek prestige and Greek political action. The Greek novel has become a key resource for thinking how the culture of the Roman Empire functioned for those who were not its Roman masters.³¹

Heliodorus's *Aethiopica* starts its story (if not its narrative) in Delphi, the center of the Greek world, and travels to Ethiopia, a country known since Homer as "the end of the known world," where it reestablishes its heroine as not the Greek maiden she has appeared to be, but as the princess of Ethiopia.³² It reverses Homer's *Odyssey*, which takes its hero, Odysseus, from the belly button of the ocean, as far from human inhabitation as one can be, to his bed in the center of his house on an island in the middle of the Greek world. What's more, Heliodorus's heroine, Charikleia, is White, but her parents are the Black king and queen of Ethiopia. (Her mother had looked at a picture of Ariadne as the child was conceived, which imprinted the fetus with that image of a Greek girl.) The novel does not merely trace the topography of empire from center to margins but revels in cultural difference, fluidity of identities, and the contingencies of status.

The Greek novel thus provides striking testimony from the mother of empires of how the colonized can write back. When so much current literary criticism is concerned with both identity (national and cultural) and the postcolonial – that is, with how literature speaks to power – the Greek novel gives a particularly fascinating example of how complex the dynamics of cultural prestige and self-

representation within imperial society can be. It is especially fascinating to see how much Christian prose of the era appropriates and reshapes the narrative forms of such fiction. As Christianity comes to take over the institutions of empire, its own narratives are based on the fictional strategies of the culture it inhabits. Winning hearts and minds depends on the persuasive stories that the desire for power can tell. The transformation of the Roman world is articulated through its changing fictions. Again, the most pressing concerns of contemporary literary criticism, where it is about “more than literature” – identity, power, social change – find its questions rivetingly explored in and through the ancient novel.

Especially in these four ways, the ancient novel has been made to speak loudly and clearly to modernity. Is, then, this recent critical reevaluation no more than a product of its time? Is literary history no more than a mirror of contemporary interests? Have I simply described how fashion re-clothes and re-brands? Such glib historical determinism does no service to literature nor to its critics and historians. Better to ask what makes texts readable, now. Much as literature contests and creates the imaginary in which the normative is shaped – the novels’ erotics and Christian erotics are also in competition with each other’s normative vision – so the *attachment* of scholars to their object of study and the *affect* with which they approach their study requires a far more complex sense of situatedness, certainly a more nuanced analytic than the flying of identity politics allows. To inhabit modernity is the condition from which we must read the texts of antiquity, but it is a condition that is negotiated, disavowed, contested. What it means to be of one’s time or, indeed, to be untimely requires deep reflection and care, if we are not going to revert to the misplaced and inadequate knowingness of “because he was in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Simon Goldhill, an International Honorary Member of the American Academy since 2009, is Professor of Greek Literature and Culture at the University of Cambridge. He is the author of *Preposterous Poetics: The Politics and Aesthetics of Form in Late Antiquity* (2020), *A Very Queer Family Indeed: Sex, Religion, and the Bensons in Victorian Britain* (2016), *Sophocles and the Language of Tragedy* (2012), and *Jerusalem: City of Longing* (2008).

ENDNOTES

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- ¹² Simon Goldhill, *Foucault’s Virginité: Ancient Erotic Fiction and the History of Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); David Konstan, *Sexual Symmetry: Love in the Ancient Novel and Related Genres* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994); and Tim Whitmarsh, *Narrative and Identity in the Ancient Greek Novel: Returning Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), each with extensive bibliography.
- ¹³ Georg Lukács’s classic of Marxian theory, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1971 [1915]) is saliently subtitled *A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*.
- ¹⁴ Erwin Rohde, *Der griechische Roman und seine Vorläufer* (Leipzig, Germany: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1914), 549.
- ¹⁵ From Huet onward, see Phiroze Vasunia, “History, Empire and the Novel: Pierre-Daniel Huet and the Origins of the Romance,” in *The Romance between Greece and the East*, ed. Tim Whitmarsh and Stuart Thomson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 332–335; and Tim Whitmarsh, *Dirty Love: The Genealogy of the Ancient Greek Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- ¹⁶ Petronius, *Annals*, xvi.18.

- ¹⁷ Petronius is indeed a key figure in Henryk Sienkiewicz's Nobel Prize-winning novel *Quo Vadis: A Narrative of the Time of Nero*.
- ¹⁸ Stefano Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* (Basingstoke, United Kingdom: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009); and Charles Martindale, Stefano Evangelista, and Elizabeth Prettejohn, eds., *Pater the Classicist: Classical Scholarship, Reception and Aestheticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
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- ²⁰ Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe*, 1.14, 1.13.
- ²¹ Heliodorus, *Aethiopica*, 2.33.5.
- ²² Doody, *The True Story of the Novel*, xvii, 1, 303.
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