It is well known that the few chronological and biographical hints we are restricted to concerning the authors of Greek novels as well as the works themselves are totally insufficient to locate them surely and finally in time and geographical area or to assess their social and economic standing. We can doubtfully say that the five novels surviving in their complete form (if we may say this much)—the so-called "Big Five"—go back to the imperial period; many other novels, only fragmentarily preserved, and their unnamed and completely unknown authors, probably covered an even greater period of time. Consequently, the conclusion that may be reached by an enquiry on the social and economical conditions reflected in such works cannot possibly be referred to or supported by an actual social and economic background historically testified to by other sources. It is significant, in this connection, that in none of these works any mention is made of the Roman empire, within whose political jurisdiction and cultural and ideological framework these authors and their works must presumably be located.

On the other hand, the form of state, the civil institutions, the war conventions, the law implications, the social structure, the economic background (as well as the religious and ideological attitudes) of such novels are largely to be referred to Greek tradition: or, if related to other countries and peoples, they are made to agree with the general Greek imagination, thus often reflecting manneristic behaviors and ideas. However—and luckily—besides these intended, unequivocal and predictable representations (or in between them), ways and actions sneak in, that are not consistent and appropriate, e.g., democratic elements in monarchical states, individual attitudes of solidarity and generosity in the midst of a legal situation spelling social humiliation and rejection, independent handling of one's affections where habits of submission and surrender to another's will prevail. It is to be surmised that this takes place beyond the authors' awareness.
and consistency; they thus mix old ideas with new and different experiences. It is precisely in this gap, that the Greek novelists do not try to close, however, that their documentary contribution and value clearly lie. In other words, it is in the breaches, so to speak, of the tale\(^1\) that historical information is hidden, which is all the more precious in as much as it is unconscious and all the more authoritative by being uncalled for. In relation to the reality of the facts, which is set as a model but made into a myth rather than faithfully reproduced, and perhaps adventurously reflected rather than carefully reconstructed, such naive suggestions, disturbing contradictions and quiet inconsistencies, witness an unstable and culturally intricate situation. They are the precarious but precious indication of a change centering on confined and secondary things (down to eating habits, dressing fashions, medical proceedings, means of communication), which, however, eventually affect important affairs (such as the conception and use of power, the political activity of cities or states, the administration of justice, the circulation of consumers' goods and precious metals, minted or otherwise), up to the supporting structures, constituting the most conspicuous and prominent materializations of that society (the relation between the ruling and the ruled, the division of the people into ranks, if we wish to avoid the word "classes", the legal position of free individuals and of slaves, the areas of personal independence either in compliance or in opposition to ethical principles inwardly assimilated, if not actually written).

Of such transformations, which appear as plain and deep to a wide-range examination as they seem flimsy and unconspicuous from a limited point of view, the Greek erotic novels too can be respectable witnesses. Even though their authors may often appear unattentive economists, heedless historians and incompetent philosophers, the information with which they unwittingly present us constitutes a noteworthy endowment, truly an alluring and durable acquisition.

The societies portrayed by Chariton\(^2\) belong to different states: the democratic polis of Syracuse, the monarchical states of Persia and Egypt (the latter at first a province subject to a foreign power, later on an independent state). Unequivocal indications force us to place the story in the fifth century B.C. The tale takes place within the

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\(^1\) Genette (1972) 75 works out a subtle tripartition of narrative reality. The passage (and the book) are read with profit.