Chapter 1

Mapping the Roots: The Novel in Antiquity

Massimo Fusillo

1 Love and Adventure

The few allusions to the Greek novel in ancient authors are characterized by a fully negative connotation: Philostratus, Persius, and Julian the Apostate do not actually describe a genre, but qualify this literature as ephemeral, entertaining and superficial. As a matter of fact the ancient novel never received any rhetorical codification, never entered the realm of canonical and classical forms, and remained for centuries, even in modern times, more or less a marginal and minor genre, quite successful but often considered dangerous from a moral point of view, until, we might say, the Romantic revolution.

Starting from these traces we could come to the conclusion that the ancient novel was a phenomenon similar to the modern paralittérature, or entertaining literature, or Trivialliteratur. It is a parallelism that should be made with several cautions, first because the ancient world did not have anything similar to culture industry or mass media, and second because repetition and imitation were not considered a negative factor in ancient, medieval and pre-modern cultures. Moreover, it is certainly impossible to give an abstract definition of para-literature, just as it is impossible to give an abstract definition of literature itself.

Nevertheless there are some features of the Greek novel, especially in its first phase, that can recall the category of para-literature: the repetition of toposi and narrative situations, the basic and simple psychological characterization; the absolute dominance of sentimentalism; the setting in the highest social level; the consolatory character of the happy ending mandated by the genre; the frequent use of summaries and recapitulations in order to help the public follow the complex plot. Everybody can recognize in these features similarities with modern feuilletons, soap operas, TV series, and so on. But we must always remember some crucial points. Psychological characterization is, for example, a typically modern aesthetic category, that cannot be

1 Philostratus, Epistles 66; Persius, Satires 1.134; Julian the Apostate, Epistles 89b, 301b.
2 See Fusillo, “Il romanzo antico come paraletteratura”.
3 See Couégnas, Introduction.
mechanically applied to classical texts. Moreover, the Greek novel cannot be treated like a single, homogeneous macro-text: there are significant differences and nuances between the various works and authors. Generally speaking, we can distinguish between a first phase, popular and sentimental, which can be quite easily labelled as para-literature (Chariton, Xenophon of Ephesus), and a second one, more complex from a structural and rhetorical point of view, strictly linked to the Second Sophistic, which played a crucial role in the history of the Byzantine and modern novel (Achilles Tatius, Longus Sophistes, Heliodorus). But even within those two periods there are important differences, for example between the more refined, nuanced Chariton, rich of innovative variations and psychological insights, and the more elementary Xenophon of Ephesus, totally focussed on the evolution of the plot. And of course we cannot forget the other subgenres of the ancient novel we will deal with later. To sum up: the label of para-literature can be a good starting point to understand the role of the ancient novel in the system of literary genres, but must be then articulated according to the various idiosyncratic narrative and aesthetic strategies of the single works.

If we read the first novel of the Western tradition, Chariton’s *Adventures of Chaireas and Callirhoe*, we can already find a quite developed use of generic narrative situations, especially regarding the relationship between lovers and rivals, and the unusually sympathetic representation of Dionysius, a character who destabilizes the system of identifications, as we will see below. The authorial voice – an external narrator, extradiegetic-heterodiegetic – is quite an intrusive one, which sometimes makes explicit his direction of the events. In a significant moment of the so-called infra-textual closure, the beginning of the final book, we read the following interesting passage:

And I think that this last chapter will prove very agreeable to its readers: it cleanses away the grim events of the earlier ones. There will be no more pirates or slavery or lawsuits or fighting or suicide or wars or conquests; now there will be lawful love and sanctioned marriage. So I shall tell you how the goddess brought the truth to light and revealed the unrecognised pair to each other.

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5 The extradiegetic narrator hovers over the story he tells, and he does not appear as a character within it; for the terminology see Genette, *Narrative Discourse*.