

ANCIENT PHILOSOPHICAL FICTION:

AN INTERVIEW WITH TIM WHITMARSH

By Alexander Myklebust

Tim Whitmarsh is A. G. Leventis Professor of Greek Culture at the University of Cambridge. He is best known for his work on the Greek literary culture of the Roman Empire, the Second Sophistic, and the ancient Greek novel. His works include many articles and monographs, the most characteristic ones being: *Greek Literature and the Roman Empire: The Politics of Imitation* (2001), *The Second Sophistic* (2005), *The Cambridge Companion to the Greek and Roman Novel* (2008), *Narrative and Identity in the Ancient Greek Novel: Returning Romance* (2011) and his forthcoming *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World*. Zacharias Andreadakis is a 4th year graduate student at the University of Michigan and a visiting scholar at the University of Oslo, writing his dissertation on the ancient novel from a philosophical perspective. His research focuses primarily upon Platonism, fiction, and virtue ethics.

Dear Tim, I will start with this rather clichéd question: What got you into the study of fiction? And why, of all genres, ancient fiction?

The texts are very magnetic, and particularly the first novel I read, Heliodorus' *Aethiopian stories*, which is like nothing else in antiquity. It is an incredibly complex story, with flashbacks as well as opaque oracles predicting later events. It has complexity that foreshadows the *Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco. Having studied Homer and Greek tragedy, Heliodorus blew my mind. As a graduate student, I decided to work on the novels, so I have a long history of working with them. My Ph.D. had a chapter on Heliodorus – I have always loved Heliodorus.

So do I, as you know. I am actually very happy to hear that you started with Heliodorus. Heliodorus is, arguably, the hardest ancient writer, both in terms of the Greek, but also in terms of plot. As a kind of fiction, you compare it to Umberto Eco. Would you say that you see fiction as a unified field, in that respect?



Illustration: Vilde Ung

You mean fiction through the ages?

Yes. Do you think that there is a story to be told about how fiction retains some of its ancient characteristics in modern versions?

I sense two different versions of that question. The first is whether fiction is some sort of cultural universal and if there is a central human need for fiction. I think this must be right, because fiction gives us an area in which to experiment with alternative realities. Anthropologists have studied thoroughly the role of play, for example, or the role of theatre, ritual theatre, etc. I think fiction plays a similar role. It allows us to explore ideas that are of particular urgency, either culturally or for the individual, in the safe environment of the make-believe. This is probably responding to a universal need. On the question of whether Greek fiction itself has a direct impact on modern fiction, I think that it is a yes and no answer. Yes, absolutely, in the sense that when Jacques Amyot translated Heliodorus in the 16th century, the response was absolutely sensational, and that had a huge literary effect on European literature. On the other hand, I would say that fiction and types of fiction are historically responsive, so you get different types of fiction in different eras. What is going on with the

Greek and the Roman novels, but particularly in the Greek ones, is very different from what we see in the modern novel, particularly of the 19th century and later, with the realist novels. The latter was responding to a very different set of cultural needs.

This is an interesting take. So you have not made up your mind whether fiction is more of a cultural construct or an anthropological need?

It is an anthropological need, but modalities of fiction vary culturally. So, for example, in early Greek culture, we do not really have an equivalent to the novel. We have epic poetry, which has fictional elements in it, and which has great self-consciousness about its own fictionality, as exemplified by the figure of Odysseus as narrator, or his Cretan lies, etc. There is a form of fiction carrying on there, but the type of fictionality that comes out there is more a subversion of the expectation of truth-telling. The whole function of epic poetry is to be veridical – it is to have the authority of the Muses and the narrator pertaining to a central code of truths. Actually, the *Odyssey* is a playful tricking of that veridical mode. The acknowledgment of this element of fictionality in the *Odyssey* is very different from the kind we get in, say, Lucian's *True Stories*, in the 2nd century AD, where he says right at the start that “the only thing you should believe in all this is that it is all made up, it is all lies.”¹ That is something almost unconceivable in early Greek culture. So, fictionality is universal, but the degree to it and the cultural space for it, varies from time to time.

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I take mainly two things from what you just said: one is the veridical function of earlier fiction (epic poetry), and the other is your mention of modalities of fiction. So, given that fiction, for our present purposes, should be related to philosophy, do you think that ancient fiction had some philosophical modality to it?

Yes. I mentioned Lucian's *True Stories* and the claim that the one thing you should believe is that everything in it is a lie. That is an echo of Socrates saying that he is the wisest of all men because he knows that he knows nothing. Fiction in the Roman period (2nd–4th century AD) was written by people

that were actually saturated in early literature and earlier philosophy. On a simpler level, all these are reminiscences of Plato in particular. Plato comes out very heavily in the novels. There is another way, however, in which fiction is philosophical. Fiction is a projection of a particular worldview – and it is often a self-conscious projection of that worldview. Fiction is normally written at length, and this gives you the space to explore the implication of constructing a particular world-view. So, even if it may not be capital “P” philosophical, implicitly it addresses theories of world-making, if you like. Let me give one example: If you look at the early romances of Chariton, Heliodorus, Achilles Tatius and so on, these are written at a time when one of the principal issues in the world of philosophy is questioning determinism and how you can combine a providential view of the world with free agency. The novels reflect that absolutely. I mentioned the use of prophesy through oracles in Heliodorus. You get a prophetic motif in other novels too, but here you also get a very strong sense of plot predetermination because it is generically encoded that all of these romance novels have to end in a couple getting together in a legitimized marriage. So, they may be wandering around in Egypt, they may be kidnapped by pirates or whatever, but actually, there is some sense of predestination, a determinism to the generic function of the plot itself. So the way in which individual agency and choice is played off by looking at the prerequisite of a happy ending, has all sort of resonances against this larger background of stoic versus epicurean ideas – that is, predestination versus randomness of fate.

You mentioned Lucian before and his famous True Stories dictum. Albert Camus defines fiction as a lie through which we tell the truth, and he insisted that, in order to produce philosophy, you have to write novels. Would you read the ancient novels as, arguably, a reactive movement to philosophy?

Reaction to philosophy – you mean something more than just a reflection of current philosophical ideas?

Yes, can fictional narrative be taken as an effort to produce a counter-paradigm for undercutting dominant ideas?

Plato makes a very strong use of stories and myth. The idea that philosophy could be enacted through storytelling is seeded, in that sense, right from the very start. That means also that Plato is in particular associated with a certain kind of fictionality in his philosophy. He is really seen as a utopian philosopher. His *Republic* and *Laws* are seen as references to cities that could never be built. He is often opposed to the figure of Alexander the Great in this respect. Plato invented laws and a republic, but he never put them into practice. His whole Sicilian mission failed whereas Alexander was a philosopher in action, according to Plutarch's claim. He had a view of the world, he knew what he wanted to do, and then he went ahead and did it – that is political philosophy in action. So, Plato is associated with a kind of disengagement from reality, with theoreticism and philosophy being seen as a means of escape from reality. The world of *doxa* (belief) around us, he sees as unreal, we need to get beyond that into a kind of higher, transcendental realm. That is mocked in Lucian: When he goes to the underworld, he meets several philosophers but Plato is not there, because he is living on his own on an island where he puts into practice his political philosophy. This is one example, if you like, of novels using the relationship with philosophy in a commenting sort of way and at the same time exploring a long-standing cultural stereotype of Plato.



Illustration: Ashild Aurlien

It just occurred to me that in the first book of Apuleius' Metamorphoses, there is a verbatim mention of a Socrates who makes up a very funny story about a dreadful situation where people are displaying unphilosophical behaviors, to say the least. I have thought of a more specific question for you,

though, since IFIKK at the University of Oslo actually combines the study of classics, history of art and ideas, along with philosophy. What do you think is the place of the study of novels in a philosophy department?

You mean ancient novels or novels in general?

I would say novels in general. Is there a space for novels of any sort in philosophy departments? Or, to put it differently, what is the place of fiction in philosophy?

Good question. Philosophy, as it is conventionally constructed, is seen as a very strictly defined type, isn't it? The style of writing is often very crisp and very resistant to metaphor or to imaginative journeys, whereas in antiquity this was rather different.

Philosophy was not seen as rarefied in quite the same way. It could be seen as such, of course, since there were philosophers who were seen as very cerebral and separated from things, but philosophy was broadly seen as an art of life, particularly with Socrates being the paradigm case of

this. Socrates influenced the Cynics, the Stoics, the Sceptics and so on. The ultimate purpose of philosophy was to actually teach you how to lead a good life. That is, probably, congenial to a novelistic worldview as well. Ancient novels tend to be more invested in the idea of morality, and not necessarily focusing on good people. Achilles Tatius, for instance, has characters that are deceitful and lustful, and it seems a clear inversion of paradigms. Ancient novelistic literature is about how one lives a good life. Look at the idea of a happy ending, for example. It is a version of what the ancient philosophers would call *eudaimonia* – it is attaining not just a desire but also a position in society, a return to a polis, that is, a Greek city. The question of how you actually get there has an important connection, in that sense, with ancient philosophy as an art of living. One small example of this is found in Chariton, where the heroine finds herself pregnant in Miletus, while her husband, Chaereas, resides back in Sicily. While living in her new environment, Miletus, she meets a new man, Dionysius. She then has to make a calculation of whether to reject Dionysius, and stay loyal to her first husband, or marry him for the sake of the

baby, and pretend that the baby is his – therefore giving her baby a good life. She chooses loyalty to her child. This is an example of what the Stoics called the *kathekon* (the duty, what is appropriate), which does not really produce clear moral answers. You cannot say “I am a virtuous person, so I will do the virtuous thing.” It often involves an irresolvable dilemma, but getting it right is important for whether you achieve a sense of *eudaimonia* in the end. In ancient terms, the practical question of *eudaimonia* in the novels can be seen as played out in philosophical questions about how you actually achieve the good life.

Speaking of good lives, I am reminded of Pierre Hadot's book, Philosophy as a Way of Life (1995), which is very influential to the thought of both Martha Nussbaum and John Cooper, especially in his relatively new book titled Pursuits of Wisdom (2012). Hadot thinks that in order to be a philosopher, you have to give up things – you have to become a specific type of person. Do you think that once we engage with fiction we change? Do you think that you have to become a specific type of person to engage with, enjoy, or create fiction?

Answering in ancient terms again, what fiction does is to pose the question of how you relate change to continuity in human identity. The general question in the novel is how you return home and how do you reintegrate. On one level, then, it is about restoration of equilibrium. You have a city that is complete, and then it is torn apart by abduction of one of the characters or by pirates or whatever, and then the city is incomplete and needs to be restored in the end. That model would suggest that identity, then, is something that is either working or malfunctioning. In the majority of the plots, it is working at first, and then it malfunctions – and then it flips back to working again at the end. However, the novels are also rites of passage in the anthropological sense, partly because they involve young people that leave as teenagers and come back as experienced people to take an adult role, and partly because – and this goes back to the *Odyssey*, really – the novels are about cumulative experience: they are about learning lessons and the course of your experiences, and then using this applied reason to explicate yourself from difficult scenarios. When Odysseus is watching the maids while he himself is disguised, and when they are about to sleep with the suitors, he wants to kill them but he says to himself: “No, remember, when you were back with the Cyclops, the key was that you did not rush into

killing Polyphemus, because then you would not have gotten out of the cave. You waited and found the right moment.” Novels are about the ratio of different roles of identity: the idea that the self is essentially the same *and* the idea that the self can be transformed by experience. People reading novels are being encouraged to think of the novel as a journey not just for the characters but also for themselves. You live your life in a chaotic whirlpool – and narrative teaches you how to deal with that: You learn your lesson from these things so that you will not panic in the future. The transformative power of novelistic media is there.

I am quite in agreement with that notion. I think that the more you read fiction, the more you put yourself, as Kant would put it, to this als-ab (as-if) situation. You find your own ways to progress through life. As a means of conclusion, what would you suggest as a first, indicative read so that uninitiated philosophers may discover the joys of ancient fiction?

I first mentioned Heliodorus. He is a fantastic read and quite unlike anything in antiquity, curiously modern, playful, subversive, allegorical, high-minded, exotic. His novel is set in Egypt and Ethiopia – so from a Greek perspective, in a distant place. That sense of displacement is catholically thematized there. It is probably the most influential of the Greek novels. *Daphnis and Chloe*, the first pastoral novel on love and Chariton's *Callirrhoe*, a novel mainly focused on the actions of a woman are also unique, excellent reads.

Thank you very much for this interview. Hope to have you in Oslo sometime soon.

NOTES

¹You can read an excerpt of Lucian's *True Stories* on page(page number).