

Greek novel and the ritual of life: an exercise in taxonomy

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Nothing is less persuasive than alleging that novels are ‘allegorical’ in a modern age of sophisticated literary criticism. Yet it is perhaps time that we saw where a modern sense of allegory might fit in the kaleidoscope of approaches to the meaning, or effect, or characteristic methods of operation, of literary text.

So, to start simply, Vergil’s *Eclogues* are about anything but sheep and the *Georgics* have rather limited use for the student of agriculture. These texts have reference to something other than these topics. Vergil’s reference is hard to state explicitly: it is to art, life, human nature, and the nature of the living world. But reference to something other may be more persistent and systematic. In the novel of Apuleius, for instance, there are in my opinion particular significances inherent in sleep, witches, Psyche’s sisters, and the demon Cupid. These significances have their basis in a thought system to which we know Apuleius subscribed and that thought system, middle Platonism, has a context which can be traced and which shows the excitement of these ideas and their importance for subscribers.¹

These additional references of text extend well beyond formal literature. In the case of mythology, I have also taken an interest in this process and have been one of those who have referred many myths, in their origins, to rituals of initiation which one may suppose to have happened in specific geographic locations.² Indeed, whatever one’s theory of myth, it is liable, from Creuzer to the present day, to rest on the claim that the sense of myth,

¹ Dowden 1998.

² Dowden 1989; 1992, ch. 7.

whether in its formation or in its continued use, depends on something other than that which it overtly relates.

Finally it is possible to merge discussion of these two fields, myth and novel, as I did in a study which looked at myth, literature and ritual as complementary languages which could be used to instantiate a sort of passage-rite archetype. This could be seen played out in materials as diverse as the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, the Greek romance, drama, particular rituals, and of course myths.³ It is this approach that I want to develop here.

Whatever the theoretical problems surrounding *metaphor*, there is a discernible commonsense view: metaphor is ‘the process of describing one thing as if it were another’, in the words of a computing website (an area in which there is much systematic interest in metaphor).⁴ So we can see that metaphor reaches out from where we are to something comparable that invests the current object of discussion with some particular ambience or power. But of course *all texts talk about one thing but are really about another, otherwise they would have no textuality*. So all texts, if admittedly in some special sense, are metaphorical at any one moment or ‘allegorical’ when viewed in their entirety – they must key into frameworks of ideas and their textual and paratextual representations.

There are other terms too which belong in this company, particularly *symbol*. The Romantics believed this term extracted the imaginative contents (all that mattered) from allegory, a term which, now desiccated, could be abandoned.⁵ It is possibly this historic shift that underlies so much of modern critical discomfort in our discipline with allegory:

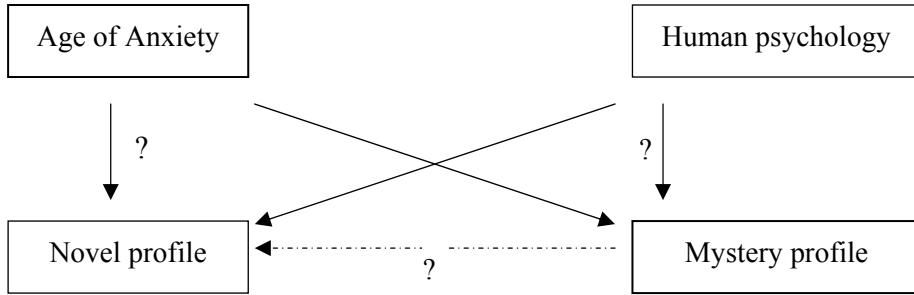
In terms of the significances communicated by these methods of figuration, the symbolic is inward and essential while the allegorical is external and artificial. (Madsen 1995, 122)

An extreme position in the history of allegory is held by the Greek ‘ideal’ novels as envisaged by Merkelbach in his *Roman und Mysterium*. There is, however, the problem that Merkelbach ‘may without a doubt be regarded as

³ Dowden 1999.

⁴ Phil Anderson, on *Metaphors and VRML Simulations*, at: <http://www.cise.ufl.edu/~fishwick/rube/tutorialsenior/metaphor.htm>.

⁵ There is a celebrated passage of Goethe (*Maximen und Reflexionen*) on the subject, see Eco 1985, 217–218. On symbol and allegory, see also Dawson 1995, 76.



mistaken in his ideas'.⁶ Indeed this book was widely rejected by the scholarly community,⁷ though at the same time strangely influential: it is a fact that it encouraged several scholars in the 1960s and 1970s to study the novel, an odd thing if it was completely mistaken. Did it really add up to nothing at all?

Bryan Reardon responded convincingly to this question. In *Courants littéraires* he offered the suggestion that the novel somehow expressed the *Zeitgeist*, captured the spirit of the age, and the *mystery rites* did too. 'Spirit of the age' has become rather more problematic over the years and we do not so easily subscribe to an 'age of anxiety' as E.R. Dodds did before the age of Ramsay MacMullen.⁸ Thus retreating from this position in turn, we arrive at a more universal and psychological view, that 'what we have in both cases is a myth, an idealistic vision of man's journey through life' (Holzberg 1995, 30). So, this is what confronts us (see the diagram above):

1. an identifiable mapping of ideas and motifs in the novel that may be compared with the ritual or experience of the mysteries – we can call this a *profile*.
2. the claim of Merkelbach that the novel profile is *derived from* the mystery profile.
3. the view that both profiles derive from some other profile, lying somewhere amidst broader aspects of human experience. This experience and its forms of expression may perhaps be characteristic of

⁶ Holzberg 1995, 30.

⁷ Turcan 1963.

⁸ Dodds 1965; MacMullen 1981, 123: 'what sense does it make to assign a single character to so long an era? – as if one were to say, "In Italy, Switzerland, the Low Countries, Britain, France, and Spain between about 1400 and 1600, people were tense and worried."'

the age (Reardon, cf. Dodds, *Age of Anxiety*). Or perhaps they are universal (Holzberg, and my own piece on passage-rites, above).⁹

Discernable through this all is a discomfort with Merkelbach's theses as much as a lack of intellectual conviction about them. They somehow disobey the protocols of our criticism and commit an error in scholarly discourse.

This 'error' is at its starkest in unguarded, self-assured allegorisers. Fulgentius *Mitologiae* 3,6 provides a definitive example. In this extract I have divided the section into numbered clauses and highlighted the characteristic language of allegorical presentation:

1. Ciuitatem posuerunt *quasi in modum mundi*,
2. in qua regem et reginam *velut deum et materiam* posuerunt.
3. quibus tres filias addunt, *id est carnem, ultronietatem quam libertatem arbitrii dicimus et animam*. Psice enim Grece anima dicitur, quam *ideo* iuniorum uoluerunt, *quod* corpori iam facto postea inditam esse animam dicebant; hanc igitur *ideo* pulchriorem, *quod* et a libertate superior et a carne nobilior.
4. huic inuidet Venus *quasi libido*;
5. ad quam perdendam *cupiditatem* mittit; sed *quia* cupiditas est boni, est mali, cupiditas animam diligit et ei *velut* in coniunctione misceatur; quam persuadet ne suam faciem videat, *id est cupiditatis delectamenta discat* (*unde et Adam quamvis videat nudum se non videt, donec de concupiscentiae arbore comedat*)
6. neve suis sororibus, *id est carni et libertati*, de suae formae curiositate perdiscenda^{<e>}¹⁰ consentiat;
7. sed illarum conpulsamento perterrita lucernam desub modio eicit, *id est* desiderii flammam in pectore absconsam depalat uisamque taliter dulcem amat ac diligit.
8. quam *ideo* lucernae ebullitione dicitur incendisse, *quia* omnis cupiditas quantum diligitur tantum ardescit et peccatricem suae carni configit maculam.
9. ergo *quasi* cupiditate nudata et potenti fortuna priuatur et periculis iactatur et regia domo expellitur.

⁹ 'Any dramatic story presumably springs from the same psychic faculty as the drama of the mysteries', Henry Chalk, *CR* ns 13 (1963) 162.

¹⁰ I do not see how else this can make sense.

1. They [Apuleius and Aristophontes] included the State *as an image of the world*,
2. and in it they included the king and queen *as God and matter*.
3. They gave them three daughters, *i.e. flesh, spontaneity – which we call free will – and soul*. For Psyche is the Greek for soul and they wanted her to be the younger sister *for this reason, because* they were saying that the soul is added afterwards to a body that is already made; and she is more beautiful *for this reason, because* she is above free will and more noble than flesh.
4. She is envied by Venus, *i.e. lust*;
5. to destroy her she sends *longing* (cupiditas); but *as* longing can be for good or for bad, Longing falls in love with the Soul and has intercourse with it *as though* in marriage; but he persuades her not to look upon his face, *i.e. learn the pleasures of longing (that is why Adam, though he can see, does not see that he is nude until he eats from the tree of desire)*
6. and not to agree with her sisters, *i.e. flesh and free will*, on the curiosity to learn about his shape;
7. but, terrified by their pressure, she takes out a lamp from under its cover,¹¹ *i.e.* she reveals the flame of desire that was hidden in her breast and when she sees it is so sweet she loves it deeply.
8. She is said to have burnt it (Longing) due to the lamp boiling over *for this reason, because* all longing blazes up to the extent that it is loved and fixes the mark of sin upon its flesh.
9. Therefore, *as it were* by longing, she is denuded and deprived of her power and riches, and tossed by danger, and driven out of the royal palace.

Fulgentius' whole purpose, inspired by the Muses, is to bring the apparent absurdities of myth into the system of philosophy. To do this he constructs, as we see here, a set of equations, which are in effect non-negotiable: they are delivered in a didactic, *ex cathedra* register, the same register that is used

¹¹ *modius*, as in passages in the gospels about hiding your light under a 'bushel' (Matthew 5,15; Mark 4,21; Luke 11,33). The cover must have been shaped like the head-dress of Serapis also called a *modius*, which in turn must have resembled a measuring tool (a cup with no bottom?) for a bushel's quantity.

for dry scholiastic explanations, for instance of obsolete words.¹² In this discourse we say that this sister *is* or *stands for* the flesh and expect our audiences not so much to believe it as learn it.¹³ This bald form of statement, without an obvious imaginative dimension summons up the desiccated allegory that Goethe and others left behind. Indeed, this is ultimately what is problematic about it. Of course it is more problematic if the underlying ideas of the ‘pre-text’, the real text to which allegory refers us, have no interest for the critic and strike no chords.

The starting point for such allegory is the defence of Homer. When allegory is applied to the *Odyssey*, which is the most influential case for narrative, it becomes ethical and philosophico-religious, addressing the question of which *bios*, which type of life, we ought to live. So from Ps.-Herakleitos, *Homeric Problems* 72,2 we discover that ‘the *kykeon* of Circe *is* [NB] the vessel of pleasure from which the intemperate drink and on account of their daily satiation lead a life worse than that of swine ... but the good sense of Odysseus overcame the luxury of Circe.’ Similarly, Odysseus with his self-control sails by ‘the land of the Lotus-Eaters, productive of strange pleasure’ (70,3). In this same reading, before the Sirens ‘il est l’image du Juste dont l’âme, sourde aux appels de la nature, délivrée du poids de la chair et de ses désirs, est capable, à la mort, de s’élancer vers l’immortalité du ciel d’où elle était tombée sur la terre’.¹⁴

This commonplace allegorical interpretation of the *Odyssey* leads to a sense that great narrative has meaning for our *bios*, our target life. And the *Odyssey* has very clear intertextuality with our novels. It is revealing that what Ps.-Herakleitos allegorises is not the *Odyssey* as a whole, but ‘the wandering of Odysseus’ (§70), that loss of home which is so central to the novels. In this reading Odysseus becomes a *type* of the person finding their way through life; his function is to be the vehicle for a *bios*.

I think it actually follows from this background that the novels must take some stance relative to the moral instructive agenda of Hellenistic and Roman Homer and the allegories which ‘Ethical Homer’, as we may call him,

¹² Cf. Fulgentius, *Expositio sermonum antiquorum ad grammaticum Calcidium*, §3: Pollinctores dicti sunt qui funera morientia accurant; unde et Plautus in Menecmi comoedia ait: ‘Sicut pollinctor dixit qui eum pollinerat’. Pollinctores dicti sunt quasi pollutorum unctores, id est cadauerum curatores, unde et Apuleius in Ermagora ait: ‘Pollincto eius funere domuitionem paramus’.

¹³ Cf. Kurz 1982, 31 on *bedeutet/ist*.

¹⁴ Carcopino 1956, 195, summarising the position of P. Courcelle against Cumont.

deliberately embedded in his text (cf. Dawson 1995, 40–41). When authors and audiences knew how symbolically or allegorically Ethical Homer wrote, it was only a matter of time before others followed his lead. The work of Ethical Homer is however not one of persistent, sustained, allegory and it would not lend itself therefore to sustained Fulgentian equations, and desiccated scholastic explanation. Rather, he rests on situation and some iconic moments – a frame embracing some meaningful incident rather than anything more mechanical and pervasive; situation often matters more than detail. So we must be ready to soften the lines of those who are overly didactic in their allegorical interpretation of authors writing in the wake of Ethical Homer. This means Fulgentius and it also means Philo, who goes to extremes in his determination to show a scripture brimming with significance. He outgrees the Greeks in the density of philosophical significance, in order to gain accreditation for Philosophical Moses. He is able to do this because of the unique scriptural role of the writing of Moses. But unless the novel also had this scriptural role, we should look to Ethical Homer rather than to Philosophical Moses for our method.

Yet at the same time this softer allegory, closer to literary significance in our discourse, still has an overarching significant frame. And to state the frame, a fairly dry discourse is inevitably required, however repellent. Without Ps.-Herakleitos we do not grasp the range of association underpinning the work of Ethical Homer and miss the point of his work. In this respect Ethical Homer had a great influence too on his contemporaries, such as Vergil, who was able to build on Ethical Homer's method by making Aeneas into a *type*, not only of the man striving for progress towards virtue, but also of Augustus – an equation which Kurz baldly states¹⁵ and which one might wish to qualify, but not exactly to deny. It is after all an indisputably important aspect of Aeneas that he stands in a *typological* relationship to Augustus.

We can now consider the position of Merkelbach in this discourse. For him 'die Romane wirklich Mysterientexte sind' (vii) and 'der Roman des Antonius Diogenes ist ebenso ein religiöses Buch' (232). Thus this is not a case of literary register and the philosophical dimension of text, but of an alleged historical role of the text and a role which assimilates the authors to Philosophical Moses more than Ethical Homer. This explains, or serves to justify, the

¹⁵ Kurz 1982, 43: 'Vergil hat Aeneas konzipiert als figura von Augustus'.

scholastic mode of presentation, where the language of equation is very prominent. Thus, in *Apollonius of Tyre*, ‘nun ist die Kronosinsel Tyrus ... eine Allegorie der Seligeninsel, des Elysiums’ (162) and in Achilles Tatius ‘Tyros ist eine Chiffre der Kronosinsel-Insel der Seligen’ (116 n.1). The texts brim with significance. In Antonius Diogenes, Derkyllis and Mantinias must flee from Tyre (227) and in his sleep Deinias returns to Tyre to find Derkyllis and Mantinias there: ‘die reise im Schlaf (vom Mond nach Tyros) ist ein pythagoreisches Motive’ (231). In Achilles, Kleitophon and Leukippe must through their *Fall* (infolge ihres Sündenfalls) leave their true home, ‘Tyre’ (116, 122): ‘der Sündenfall symbolisiert den Sturz der Menschenseele aus der himmlischen Heimat in die Welt der Materie’ (116 n.1). Or consider the detail of Psyche’s water-carrying: this is a ritual practice alluded to in the text – if a girl is being initiated this is represented in depictions by Psyche carrying water, if a man, then Eros (p. 39). So Merkelbach is not just stating a series of points of reference, a ‘frame’. His discourse is a didactic one resting on the explication of an abundance of detail in a manner which is ‘authentically’ Fulgentian or Philonic. It is the correct manner of interpretation for a religious text. Like the approaches of Fulgentius and Philo, it is strong in its coherence and compulsive force. But it is weak precisely because it is relentless and because it must recategorise the novels as mystery-texts rather than literary works in our sense. There is a strong feeling, when reading Merkelbach, of exaggeration, of having failed to save the phenomena, of having tried too hard. Yet much of the observations Merkelbach makes could be preserved within a sort of minor thesis that would bring *some* of Merkelbach’s theory within general scholarly discourse.

Sarcophagi may seem a great distance from the novel, but a look at the problem of interpreting sarcophagi may be suggestive. The Greek novel, with its formulaic construction and patterns of reassurance, itself constitutes a late mythology. The novels are like a sequence of mythological sarcophagi, encasing not the dead and the thoughts we have about the dead, but the world of the living, the thoughts Greeks had about their lives and the value of those lives. *The novel is a sarcophagus of the living*, lushly decorated with its type-scenes and rococo melodrama. And it has a meaning, or a sense of a meaning. But in how much detail should either novel or sarcophagus be decoded?

In the case of the sarcophagi and funerary symbolism, what corresponds to Merkelbach’s *Roman und Mysterium* is Cumont’s towering *Symbolisme*

funéraire des romains. And if Merkelbach had Robert Turcan review him so sceptically, so Cumont had A.D. Nock to contend with (and, for good measure, Turcan later).¹⁶ Thus neither Merkelbach nor Cumont should be dismissed as idiosyncratic in their error. They share a world view which promotes similar areas of the intertext – ritual, Pythagorean, mystic – and infuses the texts with a disturbing quantity of meaning. Thus in the case of Cumont and the sarcophagi, the call for a retreat from Fulgentian absolutism is neatly presented by Nock (1946,169):

Cumont says outright: ‘La sculpture funéraire de Rome prouve ainsi par diverses compositions combien d’esprits y avaient adhéré à la doctrine pythagoricienne de l’immortalité lunaire ou luni-solaire’ (p.251). Surely this goes too far.

Nock’s ‘too far’ has some interest for us as we try to find an alternative to the ‘completely mistaken’ Merkelbach.

More recently, Michael Koortbojian has written a particularly useful book on *Myth, Meaning and Memory on Roman Sarcophagi*.¹⁷ In this work, he seeks to construct a more dilute form of the acceptance of meaning in the sarcophagi. He accepts *analogy* as ‘essential to the mythological imagination’, even if ‘the correspondence between the dead and the imagery with which they were celebrated was seldom neat’. He sees the art as working through *abstraction* from given mythological themes, which themselves form a *typology* – so that, eg, Endymion is a *type*. ‘The sarcophagi present analogies not identifications’, he pronounces. Thus the language of the equation has gone.

In contrast with the sarcophagi, which grieve at an always premature death and privilege mythology of such death (Koortbojian 1995,8), the novels use a temporary period at the beginning of adult life in order to celebrate the values of that life which stretches endlessly ahead of the heroes and heroines of the novel on its last page. No novel tells of the death of its hero and heroine, or starts from their tomb, or speculates about the end of their days. Children too receive only exceptional fleeting mention: who can describe Psyche’s Voluptas (*Met.* 6.24), or remember Philopoimen and Agele (Longus 4.39)? The novel is a passport to a life, not the life itself.

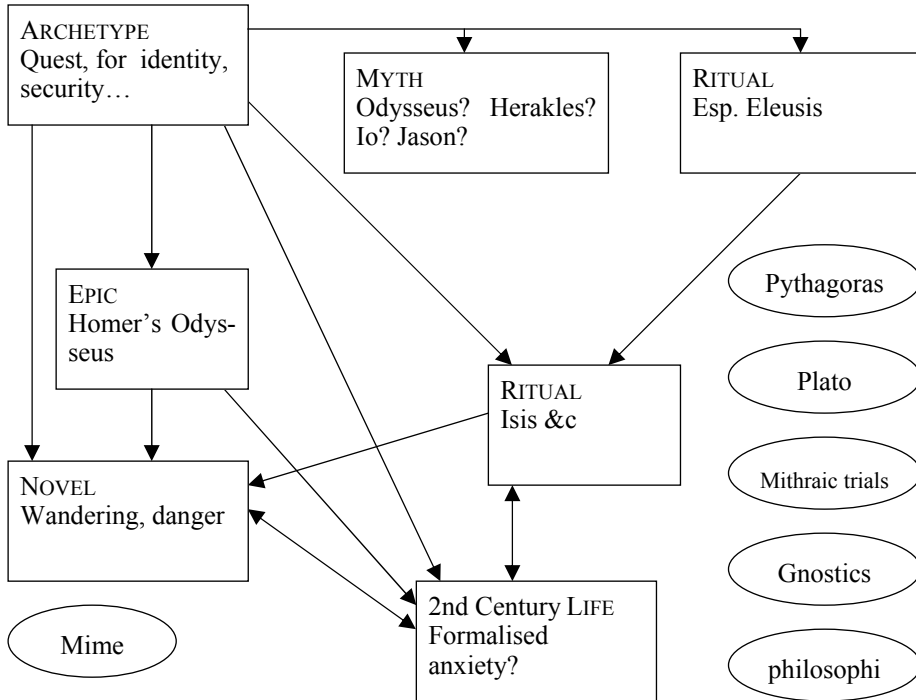
¹⁶ Nock 1946, Turcan 1978.

¹⁷ Koortbojian 1995; quotes from pages 3, 2, 4, 9.

The activities of the novel can be categorised in different ways, but I think it is helpful in our present context to emphasise the interaction of virtuous speech and deeds with the threat of *loss of direction*. Thus the myth of the novel, when full account is taken of the youth of its heroes, shows its origin in the *Odyssey*, but rewrites its plot. If the *Odyssey* had become a pattern for life's journey, there is something illogical about life's journey consisting so much of separation from home, unless home is a metaphorical concept indicating the true targets of the just man, or unless home is 'yonder' and this life a mere prelude to our metaphysical return. But the novel has transformed this. Odysseus has become Telemachus, an apprentice hero. With this rejuvenated Odysseus travels his Penelope, quite the counterpart of Odysseus himself, and self-evidently reflecting the positive valuation of (at least well brought-up) women in the social environment of the novelists. There is no Troy. The travels of the heroes have become a threat to their direction and identity and values, as a prelude to the lives which they will lead. The novel is *formative*. To Bakhtin's underlying objection that the action of the ideal novel was without any effect on the heroes or their world, we respond that it is accrediting, and metaphorically initiatory.¹⁸ Metaphorical initiation has the dynamics of real initiation: it is life-changing, consists of a typology of ordeal (so stressed by Bakhtin), wandering, finding, and role-play. However elaborated by the Hellenistic and imperial religions, the *locus classicus* for this set of types is the wandering and suffering of Demeter in reconciling herself to the lifelong role of her daughter. This is a female mythology of some authority which has clearly contributed to the Penelope factor.

In this paper I have rarely mentioned, or made claims about the true meaning of, any particular Greek novel. My opinion is that the novels privilege different areas of the intertext in different ways – even Merkelbach was prepared to regard Chariton as an anomaly. But there remains a sort of ontological argument. The aberrations of Merkelbach and Cumont and even of Henry Chalk on Longus (or, if you will, of Dowden on Heliodoros) need to be accounted for, not dismissed. There is a more complicated picture into which they can be inscribed. Allegory is only an extreme, or selective, highlighting of intertextual material. It is not necessary to keep undesirable mystic material out of the frame, only to assign it its position in the stemma:

¹⁸ Bakhtin 1978, 250–252, 257, 260.



This is the beginning of a sketch of some of the intertextual relations underpinning, and giving meaning to, the Greek novel. It will quickly be seen that powerful cultural manifestations impact on the novel and on the readership of the novel, and it is not at all implausible that the mystery cults have some part in this texture. Though it seems old-fashioned to resurrect the Platonic form, in its dress as Jung's or Northrop Frye's archetype, it is at least useful to remind us of the psychological basis for prevailing motifs and scenarios. Choices clearly have to be made in the critical language with which we approach these issues. Eco has sketched out some possibilities including motifs, frames (in the Artificial Intelligence sense – contexts for interpretation), scenarios, 'prefabricated *fabulae*', Proppian function lists – all different ways of trying to get a grip on genre and *topos*.¹⁹ What matters here is to observe that the same prefabricated *fabula* is told in a variety of circumstances and that a genuine relationship subsists between them if the common *fabula* can be observed. Mystery rites tell the story, epic told the story, the novel tells the story. And people's lives must have told the same story when

¹⁹ Eco 1979, §4,6,6.

their owners subconsciously read them. The relationship between these tellings is fundamentally metaphorical. Thus the novel is a metaphor of life and the novel is a metaphor of the mysteries, and life itself, when conceptualised according to these texts, sees itself for instance as a metaphor of the *Odyssey*. The difficulty in applying metaphor lies in establishing the direction of flow: which is the real *narratum*, or pre-text²⁰ that is told in *metaphors* drawn from other fields? Perhaps it is the mythic archetype, which can only be expressed through metaphor or, as Jung put it, ‘dreamt on’.

The ideal Greek romances are frankly unlikely to be *Mysterientexte* or allegory in that strict sense. They do however have a subject and tell a sustained meta-story, which makes them an *allegoria* of sorts – discourse directed to something other and beyond the text and creating its textuality. This is also what is done by the *Odyssey* and by the rituals of the mysteries, themselves constituting a ‘text’ if ritual is a language. The ultimate referend then becomes an ancient world sense of a *bios*, a choice of direction and identity amidst uncertainty. The ingredients of this world are types and leitmotifs within that meta-narrative: types like Odysseus and like the Tele-machean heroes of the novel, like Circe and Arsake and Dido; leitmotifs like apparent death, recognition, wandering, loss, trials, reassurance (*tharrei!*) and achievement. If we want to account for these types and motifs, we should not allege poverty of imagination and invention amongst the novelists, or put them in an antiseptic literary quarantine, or conjure up huddles of initiates listening rapt to their *Mysterientext*; we should rather recognise a compulsion to tell the inner story that matters. And as for the age of anxiety, it never happened because it has always been within us.

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²⁰ This influential word is a term of Quilligan’s, in the form ‘praetext’, cf. Kurz 1982, 40.

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