

MICHAEL PASCHALIS, STELIOS PANAYOTAKIS AND GARETH SCHMELING
(EDS.): *Readers and Writers in the Ancient World*
Ancient Narrative Supplementa 12
2009. Pp. xviii , 286. Groningen: Barkhuis & Groningen University Library
Hard cover € 87.00
ISBN 978-90-77922-54-5

Reviewed by Vered Lev Kenaan, The University of Haifa,
vered.lev.kenaan@gmail.com

Readers and Writers in the Ancient Novel is a collection of articles that, as the title suggests, focuses on the ancient novel's written form as a key to understanding it as a literary genre. The editors call attention to the centrality the ancient novel grants to both historical and fictional images of "readers" and "writers." The title of the present collection of essays suggests a dramatic move away from an earlier notion of the novel's popular readership. The methodological shift that took place in the mid-1980s has radically changed studies of the ancient novel. Scholars have gradually abandoned the focus on folkloric and popular concerns and invested much more interest in the sophisticated context, and have turned, as a result, more to questions of readership and reception. In 1994 two seminal articles on the ancient novel's readership appeared in James Tatum's *The Search for the Ancient Novel*, in which the exploration of the genre was still described as a contribution to "the newest chapter in ancient literature." Both Susan A. Stephens' "Who Read Ancient Novels?" and Ewen Bowie's "The readership of Greek Novels in the Ancient World" responded critically to modern discussions of the ancient novels, challenging the idea that the ancient novel was a low and popular type of literature intended for a broad and uncultivated audience.

More specifically, both Stephens and Bowie argued against the association of the ancient novel with inexperienced readers, and with women in particular (as Brigitte Egger, for example, has argued in her influential work), or more generally with "people who had not yet moved definitely from orality to literacy" (as Tomas Hägg, among others, affirms in "Orality, Literacy, and the 'Readership' of the Early Greek Novel").¹ As for the hypotheses that literary incompetence required reading aloud, mime performances that transmit the novel's main plot lines, or possibly even the use of illustrated texts, the general consensus today is that the novel's highly textual

¹ In Eriksen, R., ed., *Contexts of Pre-Novel Narrative: The European Tradition*, Berlin, 1994: 72 n. 50.

complexity cannot be dismissed and should determine the novel's horizon of expectations. The ancient novel, according to many scholars, addressed a highly educated, elite group of readers who were able, according to Bowie, "to pick up the novelists' allusions to earlier literature and to respond to these allusions in the intended direction." (1994: 418)

Before considering some of the interesting approaches to the ancient novel's textuality offered by this collection of essays, we may ask ourselves what it means to write today on the ancient novel's textuality, whether the present volume's emphasis on the written dimension of ancient prose fiction is in fact new, and how exactly it contributes to our understanding of the ancient novel's textuality in light of its last few decades of research. These questions and others, which seem to me crucial for spelling out the intellectual significance of *Readers and Writers in the Ancient Novel*, are not highlighted by Gareth Schmeling, who otherwise provides in the Introduction detailed and useful summaries of the eighteen articles and abstracts that are included at the end of the book.

All eighteen articles accept the notion of the ancient novel's sophisticated textuality, and most seem to agree as well that the ancient novel is the product of a highly developed age of literacy. Hence, most of the essays do not question the association of the ancient novel with written culture and written communication. The dominant role the figures of readers and writers have in shaping the novel's textuality is taken for granted and seen as unproblematic. Thus, for example, Tim Whitmarsh and Niall Slater each in their own way consider the relationship between the ancient novel and the development of the space of the written text. Whitmarsh examines how fictional travels and geographical space and the text's architectonic space are interrelated and contribute to the conception of the novel as a written text and as an autonomous object. Niall Slater chooses the fascinating topic of epigraphy and its various embodiments in the novel. His focus on the novel's representations of the reading of inscriptions shows how the novelists exploit the written word especially as a means of commemoration.

Intertextuality and the art of allusion are at the center of the contributions by Marília Futre Pinheiro, Warren S. Smith, Michael Paschalis, Stephen Harrison and Vincent Hunink. Futre Pinheiro highlights the novel's textual complexity, its interactive quality, by pointing to its two antagonistic discursive modes. She argues that the use of writing both as a way of acknowledging its fantastic nature and of lending itself credibility is one of the novel's main characteristics. The articles by Smith and by Paschalis, in turn, treat the figure of Encolpius, the poet in the *Satyricon*, through a comparative

examination of his oral model (Smith on the Homeric bard) and his literary inspiration (Paschalis on Seneca's Claudius as a ridiculous literary persona). Harrison examines the presence of the *Iliad* in Apuleius's fiction and Hunink considers how readings of Homer and Virgil create crucial turning points within Augustine's *Confessions*. Richard Stoneman and Ken Dowden examine the relationship between textual and authorial identities. Speculations about the identity of the *Alexander Romance*'s author, argues Stoneman, need to take into account its affiliations with the novel and its literary aims. Dowden considers the identity of Diktys in the context of the history of the reading of his text and the stance of its supposed author. Richard Hunter, Richard Fletcher, Luca Graverini and Wytse Keulen, and Jean-Philippe Guez examine different drives or principles of fiction writing: curiosity (Hunter), translation (Fletcher), illegitimate pleasure (Graverini and Keulen) and the affect of wonder (Guez). Maaïke Zimmerman situates the reading of Apuleius and the question of his enigmatic textuality retrospectively through the focus on the history of the allegorical reading of the *Metamorphoses*.

Four other essays take a different approach to the ancient novel's textuality. David Konstan, Stephen Nimis, Ewen Bowie and John Morgan explore the relationship of the ancient novel to written culture and communication in light of the novelists' constant negotiation with oral culture and oral communication. These essays problematize the ancient novelists' notions of reading and writing, and in doing so, they offer, in my view, new horizons of inquiry. There is no question that the ancient novel belongs to an age of "full literacy", which, according to Eric Havelock, is based on an educational system that creates readers for a writer. And yet, the analysis of literary written texts must also take into account the rich and influential tradition of modes of orality and performance that continue to be alive even under the hegemony of literacy.

Are readers and writers the figures that the ancient reader would more naturally associate with prose fiction than, say, storytellers and listeners? Should we consider the ancient novel through the prism of storytelling or of fiction writing? Or should we perhaps allow for a new typology and a new textual space, the twilight zone between orality and literacy? These are some of the questions that arise as one reads those studies that touch upon the tension between literacy and orality in the ancient novel. Moreover, consideration of the unique characteristics of the ancient novel's textuality and readership provides us with better tools to examine its place within the history of the novelistic genre.

This is the direction, for example, taken in David Konstan's essay, "The Active Reader and the Ancient Novel." The terms active and passive readers imply a set of oppositions that can be associated with two forms of textuality and two different reading practices. The active reader is intrigued by textual enigmas and constantly involved in a dialogic interaction with the text. The passive reader is totally immersed in the powerful narrative and captivated by its emotional effects. In the history of the novel, the image of the passive reader is typically associated with the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century and with the realistic novel of the nineteenth century.

Konstan, like other scholars who argue against the novel's popular readership in the ancient world, discourages tendencies to search for an analogue to the ancient genre in the realist novel of the nineteenth century. And yet, his essay takes the question about the ancient novel's conventions of readership in new directions. Rejecting the affiliation of the novel with the kind of readership that popular literature seems to cultivate, David Konstan associates the ancient novel's sophisticated form of textuality with oral conventions of literary reception. Did the ancients, for example, read their novels aloud or silently? And what does this distinction imply in the ancient world?

We might pause here for a moment to consider the book's cover and wonder why Van Gogh's "Novel reader" was chosen to illustrate *Readers and Writers in the Ancient World*: a sitting woman holding a book in her hands immersed in silent reading. Can this 19th-century image of the novel's typical reader capture the actual reading and writing habits of the ancient novel's public? Were the ancient novel readers intimately caught up with the text-object in their hands, like Van Gogh's female reader? Were they, too, able to forget the outside world while consuming the written text rapidly and breathlessly? These questions are central to David Konstan's article.

It is refreshing to relate the novel to the problem of silent reading in antiquity. We may recall that it was mainly Bernard Knox's 1968 article that led to a rejection of the standard view that in the ancient world silent reading was unusual and almost unheard of. Moreover, in relation to fictional narratives, the studies of G. Cavallo, which motivate Konstan's main argument, suggest that the ancient novels testify to an increasing popular literacy involving what Cavallo calls a 'letteratura di consumo', with a readership associated with middle levels of society and reflecting the sentimental and unsophisticated responses of its audience. Should we imagine silent reading in this connection, as a practice tied to popular literacy? More specifically, does silent reading imply a surrender to the world of illusion in a way differ-

ent from reciting and reading aloud, as in the case, say, of epic poetry, whose enchanting effect similarly takes control over the reader's imagination and emotions? Cannot silent reading be the mark of an engaged and active type of reader as well?

For Konstan, works intended for reading aloud demand concentration and alertness no less than works intended for private reading (whether silent or not). His analysis suggests that the reading of the novel was basically dialogical and interrogative. Although Konstan assumes that group recitation, reading aloud and in company were mostly characteristic of antiquity, his aim is rather to show a close relationship between the novel's textuality and an active form of readership, which was common in antiquity to a great variety of discourses and genres. Konstan argues that the novel's tendency to exploit riddles and enigmas, as well as its frequent generation of ethical dilemmas, demand a constant hermeneutical engagement from the reader. Highly interpretive skills and active readership are thus not limited to specific or elevated discourses and genres. Konstan argues that the interrogative relationship to the text is common to both canonical and non-canonical works, to oral performances and to written texts.

What I find innovative in Konstan's approach and in the other three essays in this volume that share similar methods is the attempt to articulate, through the focus on ancient prose fiction, a new understanding of textuality that does not accept the clear-cut distinction between orality and literacy. The ancient novel's hybrid form of readership manifests a fusion between reading practices typical of both orality and literacy. The complex relationship between literacy and orality is also central to Stephen Nimis's "Cite and Sound: The Prosaics of Quotation in the Ancient Novel". Here, however, the terminology shifts from literacy to "prosaics", which for Nimis is fundamental to his study of the ancient novel. Nimis uses the term "prosaics" to designate a new kind of textuality, which he connects specifically, though not exclusively, with the ancient novel. Moreover, "prosaics" signifies a relationship, an interaction, or even, "an attack on the system of oral transmission and performances" (S. Nimis, "The Prosaics of the Ancient Novel", *Arethusa* 27.3 (1994) 387-411).

The idea that the ancient novel pertains to a written culture is widely accepted, but Nimis's approach seeks to understand the emergence of ancient prose fiction in the context of an on-going process of compensation and response to the loss of the performer's voice, the bodily gestures, and the temporal and spatial dimensions that any oral performance of verse involves. Hence, his reflection on the unique textuality of the ancient novel invites a

Derridean notion of supplement and *différance*. The prose of the ancient novel always operates as an “exegetical supplement”; it is a discursive activity that evolves from the need to compensate for the absence of a performer and, in this sense, appears to be almost obsessed with the reader in its incessant endeavor to communicate in various ways and levels. Writers, for whom communication with the reader is indispensable, are usually those for whom the decline of the oral tradition is experienced as a loss. I can see how this argument works well in the case of Plato, who is a prominent representative of this type of author. On the one hand, Plato retains in writing the dialogic dimension of live oral conversation, but, on the other hand, he mourns the loss of speech (the “father”) while contemplating the invention of writing in the *Phaedrus*. If we consider Plato’s literary creativeness as a function of his ambivalent relationship to oral culture, we can make sense of a paradoxical characteristic of his writing, namely, his decision to introduce as the protagonist of written dialogues an oral philosopher who refuses to write down his own dialectics. Plato’s response to the progress towards literacy is completely different, however, from that of the ancient novelists. The novelists’ writing displays a much more comfortable relation to the culture of literacy. Nimis’ study is dedicated precisely to the novelists’ response to orality, or more precisely to the loss of oral culture. More specifically, he examines how the ancient novel responds to the absence of the performer and the decline of verse.

Nimis examines the novel’s prosaics through the inscription of voice. His analysis, which focuses on three examples of quotation (the private letter, the story within a story, and ekphrasis), discloses the ancient novel’s attraction to the presence of the voice. The inscription of a lost voice in the novel is tied to a wide range of hidden vocalic presences: from the epic bard, the model figure of the novel’s author, who through his voice and bodily gestures creates a reality, to verse citations from various genres, which originally were performed in public, to internal quotations from letters or speeches of absent protagonists. The novel’s tendency, Nimis argues, to inscribe lost voices in the narrative should be regarded as a major cause of its celebrated textual complexity.

Bakhtin’s polyphony is given here a new emphasis: the novel’s multiplicity of voices charges it with a multiplicity of meanings, as the repeated, quoted, cited, paraphrased text leaves the question “Who is that speaking?” obscure. Nimis neatly argues that the written text exploits the lack of a performer to its own advantage. The use of secret messages and buried meanings by multiple speakers produces textual folds, which are neither public

nor private. Nimis contributes to the discussion concerning the relationship of the ancient novel to orality by showing how ancient prose uses orality in order to augment its own textual space.

The relationship between the written text and orality is further developed in Bowie's "The Use of Bookishness" and Morgan's "Readers Writing Readers, and Writers Reading: Reflections of Antonius Diogenes." These essays analyze the fragments and the summary by the 9th-century Byzantine scholar Photius of Antonius Diogenes' *Incredible Things beyond Thule*. Photius's summary provides for students of the ancient novel a fascinating means not only of recovering the potential significance of Antonius Diogenes' novel but also for deciphering the nature of prose fiction through the particular case of a novel whose entire existence depends, in effect, on one reader's response. From Photius we learn that the pair of lovers does not share adventures, but that they, like Odysseus and Penelope in their nocturnal reunion, spend time together telling and listening to tales of their experiences.

Photius' summary discloses a narratological structure whose complexity is characterized by the image of a "Chinese box" or "a set of Russian dolls." The novel's series of storytellers and transcribers creates two genealogical lines: the first traces the oral transmission of the story through various sets of narrators and listeners, while the second traces the production and survival of the manuscript through the novel's multiple writers. Bowie argues that the way in which the Greek Novel recognizes the force of its own written textuality is connected with an interest in articulating its close relationship with orality and story-telling. For Bowie the presence of a series of oral narrators in the novel emphasizes the magical effect of writing without which no access to 'oral narratives' would be possible.

One of Bowie's exciting insights concerns the name Cymbas, to whom Deinias relates his story. Bowie points out that one of the meanings of *cymbas* is a type of container, and, in this sense, Cymbas's role in the novel is analogous to other containers, the bag (*peridion*) and the box (*kibōtion*), which contain and preserve the written narrative. Thus, the analogy between the human and the lifeless containers makes the question 'which of them preserves the story better?' unavoidable.

Morgan's essay discusses how this novel resists the sharp distinction between orality and textuality. According to Morgan, Antonius Diogenes used the two different genealogies of narrators and listeners and the pseudo-transcribers and writers in order to display an affinity between story-telling and story-writing. Morgan persuasively shows how the novel rejects the

traditional dichotomy between the ephemeral and frequently changing character of the oral text and the stable and reliable character of the written text. Morgan argues that the novel undermines the traditional set of oppositions between the written *logos* and the oral *mythos*: oral and written transmissions alike create multiple narrative versions that reflect multiple interests and perspectives. Both oral and written texts depend on different cultural, local, and gender identities. Hence, the written, like the oral, story is always connected to the concrete presence of its author and reader.

Once we recognize the ancient novel as a multilayered text, its multiplicity of meanings may be seen to be articulated through multiple figures of authors and readers. To put it differently, a text that produces various images of authors and readers is necessarily interested in creating different layers of meaning. Hence, the novel's rich textuality can be seen as a function of its ability to embrace a dual readership (passive and active, immersed and distant—that latter involving a hermeneutical reading practice), which in turn implies a dual kind of meaning (literal vs. allegorical, psychological or emotional vs. intellectual). I have argued elsewhere that the novel achieves its unique form of textuality through its dramatization of the tension between the text's oral and written dimensions. More specifically, it is through the novel's insistence on the double presence of the figures of the listener and reader on the one hand, and the narrator and the writer on the other hand, that it creates its unique textual space. The exemplary case is Apuleius' tale of Cupid and Psyche. When Apuleius's ass concludes the story of Cupid and Psyche which he has overheard he refers to it as a *bella fabella*, meaning that this story is worthy to be written down. At the same time, however, it is clear to the novel's reader that the original *fabula anilis*, the oral version of the Cupid and Psyche tale, told by an old woman to a young girl represents a different layer of the story's significance. The story's complex textuality derives, therefore, from the tension and the interrelation between its oral and its literary authorities, between its different sets of audiences, listeners and readers alike.² The ancient novel offers us a model of textuality that never gives up its oral sources. Moreover, the written text embraces oral principles in order to establish its reliability, vivacity and textual depth. Can this characteristic of the ancient novel's textuality—its attachment to the oral origins of the written text—provide us with a new prism through which we might reopen the question of textuality in the age of modern, postmodern fiction

² Vered Lev Kenaan, "Fabula Anilis: the Literal as a Feminine Sense", in *Collection Latomus: Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History*, 2000: 370-391.

writing, and even virtual forms of writing? This is a question for a separate investigation.