

‘LOOSE FICTIONS AND FRIVOLOUS FABRICATIONS’:  
ANCIENT FICTION AND THE MYSTERY RELIGIONS  
OF THE EARLY IMPERIAL ERA

by

GERHARDUS ADRIAAN VAN DEN HEEVER

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PROMOTER: PROF. J. S. KRÜGER  
JOINT PROMOTERS: PROF. H. S. VERSNEL  
PROF. J. N. VORSTER

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I declare that ‘Loose Fictions and Frivolous Fabrications’: Ancient Fiction and the Mystery Religions of the Early Imperial Era is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

G. A. van den Heever

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## PREFACE

Every student starts out on the adventure of scholarship standing on the shoulders of his academic forebears. Happy, therefore, is the student on whom, during this life of wandering, Fortune smiles to steer his or her path to cross with those of truly remarkable teachers. I have been extremely fortunate in this regard. I gladly dedicate this study to the three important teachers who had a foundational influence on my formation as scholar:

J. S. (Kobus) Krüger accepted me as student at a very critical crossroad in my career at Unisa, and has been the most patient supervisor a student can desire (and I have not been the easiest student to live with!). With truly Buddhist patience he accommodated more than one change of topic. From Kobus I inherited a conditionalist approach to the study of religion, an approach that has helped me to conceptualize religious studies in a very different manner than before. Kobus was first responsible for

my shift in primary focus from theological studies to the study of religion, specifically *Religionsgeschichte*, which for me implied a sea change in the way I performed my scholarship. For this, and his continued enthusiasm, support, and collegiality I will remain forever in his debt.

Johannes Vorster taught me all I know about rhetoric, and it is through his own writings and suggested reading, but most of all through many long (and sometimes late-night) discussions that I came to understand the meaning and necessity of a rhetoric of inquiry. What I learned about rhetoric as an adventure of suspicion has changed my own academic work fundamentally, and for this I am truly thankful.

H. S. (Henk) Versnel is as scholar, colleague, and friend one of the most stimulating conversation partners a student can hope for, and without his studies on the rolling good times of the Saturnalia this study could not have been written. From the moment of our first meeting the scintillating brilliance of his writings and his zest for life, and the extreme thoroughness of his academic work and judgement, and the creativity of his analyses have impressed on me an ideal to strive to emulate. If this study falls short, then this reflects on the shortcomings of the student and not the teacher. I was trained as a theologian, specializing in New Testament Studies, but over the years my interest in history of religion was stimulated and formed in no small measure due to the exposure to the works of Henk Versnel, himself first and foremost a classicist and ancient historian. In this I owe him a debt of gratitude.

As I complete this study the world has been for a few years now in the throes of a low-intensity ‘world war’ after 9/11. The military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq took place in a world increasingly polarized between the ‘freedom-loving’ (Christian) West (i.e. America and Britain) and ‘jihadist, fundamentalist’ Islam. The concomitant rise in all kinds of fundamentalisms, not least of which in religion, has not left South African society untouched. Here too, scholarship of religion – the rational study of religion – takes place in a context of an increasing and deliberate irrationalization of society, where anti-intellectualism is promoted as a desired end. And so, this study is also dedicated to the last of the Boethians, those who pursue rational scholarship, critical thinking, and the value of classical learning in a time (to borrow from Morris Berman) of the twilight of classical and intellectual culture. *Sic transit gloria mundi*.

Finally, I also dedicate this study to the memory of my mother, who sadly did not live to see its completion.

Tshwane, June 2005.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION.

### FRAMING THE QUESTION: FICTION AND MYSTERY RELIGIONS OF THE EARLY ROMAN IMPERIAL ERA

#### 1. PRESENT, YET ABSENT: PEERING THROUGH THE MISTS AT ANCIENT MYSTERY RELIGIONS

##### *1.1 What Happened to Mystery? From the Untergang der Mysterien to 'Imperial' Mysteries*

The phenomenon 'ancient mystery religions' constitutes one of the most fascinating facets of the religious landscape of the circum-Mediterranean world from pre-classical

antiquity through to its supposed demise in late Antiquity in the recently Christianized Roman Empire of the fourth century of the Common Era (and not least because of the peculiar treatment they received in religio-historical studies – the subject of this thesis). Reaching an acme in the first two centuries of the Christian era, these mysteries or mystery religions exerted an enormous influence alongside traditional cults on the religious, social, cultural, and political landscape of the Mediterranean and Near Eastern world for almost a millennium. The most famous of the ancient mysteries, the Eleusinian mysteries, continued to function uninterrupted until the destruction of the Telesterion in 395 C.E. by the Christian Goths under Alaric. Yet, despite the ‘conversion’ of Constantine to Christianity,<sup>1</sup> the tolerance shown by him and his successors, Constans and Constantius II, and later co-emperors Valens and Valentinian I during the latter half of the fourth century C.E., to Hellenic religion in general including the mysteries created conditions for these cults to endure –

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<sup>1</sup> In 311 C.E. Constantine, Licinius (the co-caesars), and Galerius, ‘senior emperor’ who not long before with Diocletian had been responsible for the most severe persecution of Christians in the empire and who was now terminally ill on his deathbed, issued the edict of Serdica granting freedom of worship to all Christians. After the battle of the Milvian Bridge at the entrance to Rome in 312 in which Constantine (and Licinius) defeated emperor Maxentius – a victory won after seeing a light cross superimposed on the sun prompting his command to have the Christ monogram painted on the soldiers’ shields, so the mythology – Constantine, together with his co-emperor Licinius, issued the Edict of Milan in 313 C.E. according to which Christianity was declared a legitimate religion: ‘the most lawful and most holy religion,’ increasingly identifying the One Supreme Power with Jesus Christ. This from a man whose family and forebears, and he himself (for a long while at least), venerated and worshipped the Sun-god. His continuing military and political successes, no doubt granted by the grace of his new divine Champion, convinced him of his calling as God’s champion and at the councils of Arles (Arles) in 314 but especially at Nicaea in 325 he took a leading role in encouraging the formulation of an orthodox creed for Christianity (or actually providing the formulation himself). Yet he was a deeply superstitious man and perhaps possessed only a most rudimentary understanding of the theological issues involved; and like many of his time, he had himself baptized only at the very end of his life, ‘when he could sin no more’, Michael Grant, *The Roman Emperors. A Biographical Guide to the Rulers of Imperial Rome 31 BC – AD 476* (London: Phoenix, 1997), 231. Consult Grant for an overview of the dynasty of the House of Constantine (pp. 216–256; on Constantine, 227–234). What motivated Constantine? Perhaps a sense that only Christianity possessed the organization, the world outlook and sense of purpose needed to wield the various conflicting components making up imperial society into the kind of unity demanded by imperial policy, Grant, *Roman Emperors*, 231. I belabour this point in order to underscore the arguments presented later that the fate of mysteries is inextricably linked to the imperial context with its attendant ideologies that formed the social location for the discourse of which the mysteries were part, the period with which this study is concerned. For an exposé of the history of and historical circumstances surrounding and leading to Constantine’s ‘conversion’, consult among others H. W. Singor, “De Beking van Constantijn: 310–312,” *Lampas* 36, no. 2 (2003): 103–127 – the choice for the ‘Christian symbol’ of the cross was inspired by its similarity to the graphic symbol of the sun, the four-rayed star. The cross-star was essentially a very auspicious and eventually successful conjunction of symbols of invincibility. Constantine’s ‘Christianity’ was another way of venerating the invincible Sun, Sol Invictus, and the epithet Invictus rapidly became a fixed feature of imperial titulature, Singor, “Beking,” 116–117.

sometimes to even flourish.<sup>2</sup> It was the combined effect of imperial legislation (imperial edicts against pagan cults in general, but which were not always strictly enforced), proscription of sacrifices, Christian mob riots and willful destruction of sanctuaries, and in general wide-ranging changes in worldview and social discourse that led to the mysteries being ‘put out of business.’<sup>3</sup>

Constantine cut an ambiguous figure: he upheld the Roman civic religion and occupied the position of *pontifex maximus*, although with Christian interpretation – as ‘civic bishop’ presiding over the state cult (i.e. Christianity) – but with all the normal trappings and ritual of the traditional state cult of Rome, a practice continued by his successors. ‘Constantine succeeded in making Christianity a Greco-Roman civic religion.’<sup>4</sup> And although he reinforced his edicts against pagan religion with an expansive building programme of churches, he nevertheless maintained civic cults of Rhea and Tyche, complete with temples and rituals, and instituted public ceremonies

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<sup>2</sup> A series of laws from the time of Constantine beyond the end of the fourth century to the codification of imperial edicts in Constantinople at the time of Valentinian III (425–455) attempted to regulate religion in prohibiting pagan sacrifice or revoking the privileges previously bestowed on office bearers of cults and mysteries (as in the law of 7 December 396 issued at Constantinople), thereby pulling the carpet from under traditional cults. However, urban Greeks and rustic *pagani* continued to visit temples and sacrifice, also to practice initiatory rites (*teletē*, or mysteries); priesthoods for traditional cults survived in urban centres, sometimes with imperial support: Julian’s (the Apostate) grant of wine and grain from the imperial estates in Asia Minor to the priesthood of Cybele at the cult centre at Pessinus was still in force at the end of the century, mainly due to the fact that the cult centre was also a service point for social and public welfare – and this was no unique case. Imperial legislation also protected temples against destruction as these had reverted to the *res privata* of the emperor. Otherwise, despite legal requirements of confiscations, fines, and executions to end the practice of sacrifices, these laws were not always enforced because of the entrenched power of local élites, the sometimes open tolerance from Constantinople itself, as well as concern for revenue (religion was not for free: whatever benefits you derived from the service provided at temple, sanctuary or shrine, it came at a price). The priesthoods continued to service the cult of Demeter and Persephone at Eleusis, although by the end of the century the hereditary priesthood, the Eumolpid family had died out, leaving the priesthood in the hands of an office bearer from Thespieae. Although the pagan historian-philosopher Eunapius of Sardis, who reported this, said that soon the cult will become extinct because the office bearer held the rank of *pater* in the cult of Mithra at the time of this succession, he was probably already seeing the Christian storm clouds gathering which descended on Eleusis in the form of Alaric’s Gothic hordes (accompanied, in Eunapius’s account, by marauding and destructive monks – no secret to where Eunapius’s religious tastes lay); on the whole, cf. Frank R. Trombley, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization C. 370–529. Volume I* (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 115/1; Leiden/New York/Köln: Brill, 1994), 25–8.

<sup>3</sup> See Frank R. Trombley, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization C.370–529. Volume II* (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 115/2; Leiden/New York/Köln: Brill, 1994) for a richly documented history of the process of Christianization of the later Roman Empire.

<sup>4</sup> Vasiliki Limberis, *Divine Heiress. The Virgin Mary and the Creation of Christian Constantinople* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994), 27.

celebrating him and Tyche Constantinopolis, and issued coins with Helios (the Sun) and other pagan symbols.<sup>5</sup> It was Valens's brother, Gratian (reigned 367–383), who was the first emperor to refuse the office of *pontifex maximus* to thereby turn his back decisively on the cults of the city of Rome. It was left to Theodosius to deliver the *coup de grâce* by closing temples and sanctuaries, giving the buildings over to the Great Church, or use them for different purposes; and by his Theodosian code, the collection of edicts and legal codes prohibiting pagan religious activities, now not only proscribing public ritual but also private rituals and private beliefs. But even then Christianization did not mean the sudden disappearance of pagan religion.<sup>6</sup> According to the autobiographical account of his missionary travels into the hinterland of Asia Minor up the Maeander valley, the church historian John of Ephesus recounts in his *Ecclesiastical History* how he found the old cults (with shrines, temples, sanctuaries, and rituals, and all) alive and well among the *pagani* of the hill towns and inland cities – this in 542 C.E., almost 150 years after Theodosius!<sup>7</sup> Hellenism (and Hellenic religion, one might add) was a way of being Greek. Our notions of a distinction between religion and culture are inappropriate for an understanding of the ancient world.

And yet one should caution against a hasty conclusion about the ‘demise’ of the mysteries. As cultural practices and social discourses they were so deeply woven into the warp and woof of (mainly Greek-speaking) Mediterranean societies from pre-classical Antiquity onwards – even beyond the Middle Ages to the present day – that they, arguably, continued to leave their mark on the religions of the region: the veneration of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of Christ, originated from the well-known ‘mothers of the gods’ of the mysteries (Isis, Cybele/Magna Mater, Rhea, Demeter);<sup>8</sup> the iconography of Mary cradling the baby Christ directly imitates Isis with the baby

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<sup>5</sup> Limberis, *Divine Heiress*, 23, 27.

<sup>6</sup> Limberis, *Divine Heiress*, 33.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. G.W. Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1–4.

<sup>8</sup> A short history of the deification and veneration of Mary in late Antique Byzantine theology, that is in post-Constantinian Christianity, is found in Limberis, *Divine Heiress*, 121–42. Mary's position as Mother of God (*theotókos*) and Saviouress (*sōteira*) originated in direct imitation of these goddesses.

Horus/Harpocrates on the lap; and the infant Dionysus sitting on the lap of Hermes<sup>9</sup> (the latter evidence of a two-way street, really, with early Christian conceptuality and late Antique Dionysiac mystery imagery intermingling),<sup>10</sup> and then there is, of course, the contentious issue of possible mystery influence on Christian rituals such as baptism and eucharist.<sup>11</sup> One can gain a sense of the extent to which Christian writers

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<sup>9</sup> As in the famous Dionysiac scenes in the panels of the New Paphos-mosaic from Cyprus, cf. Bowersock, *Hellenism*, 52–3.

<sup>10</sup> On a different level, one may gain a sense of the omnipresence of these cultic veneration by comparing the forms of the ‘mother of god’ mysteries (mysteries as performance and pageantry – see later) with, for instance, the veneration of Saint Agatha in Catania, Sicily – the care lavished on the image, the Feast itself, a two day *Carnivale*, the processions, the enthusiasm of the *devoti*, cf. Theresa Maggio, *The Stone Boudoir. In Search of the Hidden Villages of Sicily* (London: Headline, 2002), 169–92. A Latin inscription on the largest bell of the cathedral in Catania (quite appropriately called Agatha) reads ‘I cast out demons, I calm the storms, I call to the living, I cry for the dead.’ Who cannot be struck by the similarity to the Isis aretologies? As Theresa Maggio describes the Feast of Saint Agatha, it is clear how this festival and the veneration it embodies help define the identity and social cohesion of the community – precisely the kind of function mystery religions had in Antiquity.

<sup>11</sup> This was a particularly popular strain of argument in the late 19th century, especially prevalent in the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* and the scholarship influenced by and dependent on these. The enthusiasm unleashed by the many discoveries of religious texts, artifacts, and sources generated many comparisons of Christianity with ‘oriental’ cults with a view to demonstrating the genealogical relationship between them: Christianity derived from, grew out of, ‘was influenced by’ these ‘oriental’ cults. Two examples from this broad approach: after surveying the history of mystery religions from the classical to imperial era, Gustav Anrich then proceeds to first present Gnosticism as a kind of mystery, then Gnostic-influenced Christianity itself as a mystery religion, especially with regard to the so-called ‘Arcandisciplin’ (the command to silence, for example in church fathers Augustine and Basil who held that the sacraments of baptism and eucharist contain unspeakable mysteries or secrets, 164–167), then pointed to the differentiation between catechumens and baptized as parallel to the differentiation between initiates/*epopts* and uninitiated in the mysteries (as well as the mystery character of baptismal catechism, 168–179), and finally setting out the outward ritual form and cathartic function of the Christian sacraments of baptism and eucharist (leading to identification with the divine and as the attainment of immortality) as evidence of mystery influence, 179–235, Gustav Anrich, *Das antike Mysterienwesen in seinem Einfluß auf das Christentum* (Hildesheim/Zürich/New York: Georg Olms, 1990); see also the influential Richard Reitzenstein, *Die Hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen nach ihren Grundgedanken und Wirkungen* (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1956). According to Reitzenstein Christianity represented the end-point of a process of steady interiorisation of the mysteries, clearly seen in the pneumatology of Paul, where the ecstatic possession of the Holy Spirit presents the union with the divine and partaking in divine life: spirit possession gives knowledge (*gnosis*) which signifies divinized existence (esp. 74–81).

Since Reitzenstein and the famous Belgian scholar, Franz Cumont, set the tone for this kind of inquiry, the issue has received divergent appraisals, cf. Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, Mass./London: Harvard University Press, 1987), 1–4 ‘Introduction’, especially note 1, for a short summary of scholarly constructions of Christianity as mystery religion; see also Devon H. Wiens, “Mystery Concepts in Primitive Christianity and Its Environment,” in *ANRW Part 2, Principat*, 23.2 (ed. H. Temporini and W. Haase; Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1980), 1248–84 for an overview of the debates over the supposed influence of mystery religions on nascent Christianity since the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*. An example of a recent negative evaluation: A. J. M. Wedderburn, ‘Paul and the Hellenistic Mystery Cults,’ in *La Soteriologia dei Culti Orientali nell’ Impero Romano* (ed. Ugo Bianchi and Maarten J. Vermaseren; EPRO 92; Leiden: Brill, 1982), 817–833. Finally, a positive recent evaluation: Kurt Rudolph, “Das frühe Christentum als religionsgeschichtliches Phänomen,” in *Geschichte und Probleme der Religionswissenschaft* (by Kurt Rudolph; Studies in the History of Religions 53; Leiden/New York/Köln: Brill, 1992), 301–20, esp. 310 with extensive literature overview in n. 27.

from the second to the fourth centuries responded to the phenomenon of the mysteries/mystery religions when surveying the numerous references to, and dialogues against, the mysteries:<sup>12</sup> on the one hand railing against the mysteries and using the mysteries as comparisons to demonstrate the reasonableness of the Christian religion (Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* 2 – the mysteries are absurd fables about the birth and death of the gods; Origen, *Contra Celsum* 22; Tertullian, *Ad Nationes* 7; Hippolytus, *Refutatio Omnium Haeresium* 2, 3 – a clear impression of the wide-spread occurrence of the mysteries), and on the other, the presentation of the Christian religion (with its central myth of the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ) and the sacraments of baptism and eucharist as mysteries, the supreme mysteries that overtook the others (John Chrysostom, *Hom. Act.*, *Hom. Matt.* 18:23, *Hom. Phlm.*, *Hom. Princ. Act.*, *Hom. 1 Thess.*; Augustine, *De Diversis Quaestionibus* LXXXIII, 80; Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogicae Catecheses*, Procat., 19, 23; Ambrose, *De Mysteriis*, 1).

Although, at first glance, it would seem strange to begin with a consideration of the eventual Christianization of the Roman Empire, there is, of course, a good reason why one should start at this very point in a study on the mysteries/mystery religions of the ancient world, that is, start with their ‘demise.’ The process of Christianization of the Roman Empire demonstrates so well how religion functions as a social discourse, and how changes in the religious landscape had much to do with social formation and ideological discourses. In fact, it is the steady ‘imperialisation’ of religion in the Roman Empire from the first through fourth centuries that on the one hand led to the promotion of Christianity as sole state cult, and on the other hand affected all religions

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In general, the literature on mystery religions is literally inexhaustible, but a recent bibliography is provided in Bruce M. Metzger, “A Classified Bibliography of the Graeco-Roman Mystery Religions 1924–73 with a Supplement 1974–77,” in *ANRW Part 2, Principat, 17.3* (ed. H. Temporini and W. Haase; Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1984), 1259–423.

<sup>12</sup> And the following only represents a small selection of what is available, thus a quick overview, and only representing usage of the word ‘mysteries,’ cf. *The Early Church Fathers on CD-ROM*. Logos Library System Version 2.1 1997 (= *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* [ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; 1885–1887. 10 vols. Repr. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994]; and *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 1 and 2 [ed. Philip Schaff. 1886–1889. 14 vols. Repr. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994]).

of the period to the extent that they all, in some way or another, evolved as imperial products themselves – and the mystery religions of the imperial era are no exception. So the interest here is in the (literal) imperial nature of mystery religions of the period.

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Constantine, of course, did not invent a universalised and imperialised Christianity. The Roman state cult (i.e. Christianity) under Constantine and his successors was what it was as a result of a long development. Polytheism in the Graeco-Roman world had long started to drift towards universalism, henotheism, and monotheism.<sup>13</sup> The establishment of the imperial cult (since Julius Caesar, but perfected by Octavian/Augustus) as a way to focus the universal identity of the Roman Empire in a cultural context of pluralism; the universalisation of cults such as that of Isis and Dionysus;<sup>14</sup> the gradual enhancement of imperial cult by the promotion of Sol, the Sun, from Aurelian (270–275) onwards; and Helios-Mithras under Julian, pointed the way to the eventual ‘Christian doctrine of empire forged by Constantine and formulated by Eusebius; one god, one empire, one emperor.’<sup>15</sup> It is the history of an imperializing religious mentality.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> I mention these terms in the same series since I am convinced that they are not different in kind but only in degree. All three tendencies are examples of imperial discourse, that is, the tendency to locate power in a centralized authority: universalism – it has cosmic significance above all else; henotheism – one authority venerated above all others; monotheism – there is only one authority. But the process of establishing a monotheistic religion demonstrates so well that logically monotheism, as discursive artifact, is still a kind of henotheism.

<sup>14</sup> Henk S. Versnel, *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion I. Ter Unus. Isis, Dionysos, Hermes: Three Studies in Henotheism*. (Studies in Greek and Roman Religion 6.1; Leiden/New York/København/Köln: Brill, 1993), especially 37: ‘... the concurrence of the growth of henotheism on the one hand, and the development of hierarchical lines in the social setting of the *polis* and of monarchical forms of rulership in the political setting of the Hellenistic empires on the other, are more than sheer chronological coincidences.’

<sup>15</sup> Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 51. Christianization meant the growing conviction that ‘knowledge of the One God both justifies the exercise of imperial power and makes it more effective,’ Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 3. ‘... the Christianization of the Roman Empire was not merely a “transformation” or “transition” within a limited segment of time. It was part of a wider and longer process by which the idea empire, and in particular monarchy, was conjoined with belief in the One God – monotheism,’ Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> See in this regard especially H. W. Pleket, “Godsdienstgeschiedenis als Mentaliteitsgeschiedenis. De ‘Gelovige’ als Onderdaan van de Godheid in de Griekse Wereld,” *Lampas* 12, no. 1 (1979): 126–51, reworked and translated as H. W. Pleket, “Religious History as the History of Mentality: The ‘Believer’ as Servant of the Deity in the Greek World,” in *Faith, Hope and Worship. Aspects of Religious Mentality in the Ancient World* (ed. H. S. Versnel; Leiden: Brill, 1981), 152–92; as well as the scintillatingly brilliant study of Henk S. Versnel, *Ter Unus*.

Isis, especially, was promoted via numerous aretalogies ('praises published in stone') as tyrant (*tyrannos*) of every land, as the Queen of heaven that arranges the paths of stars, sun and moon, as creator (who separated heaven and earth), who founded and established civilization, who, as Queen, governs rivers, sea and wind, thunderbolts and seamanship and lords over fate;<sup>17</sup> or as she herself with complete confidence proclaims to the hapless Lucius (Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, XI, 5): 'I who am the mother of the universe, the mistress of all the elements, the first offspring of time, the highest of deities ... foremost of heavenly beings, the single form that fuses all gods and goddesses ...' The latter an oft-repeated epithet of Isis in inscriptions: *myrionyma*, Isis of the thousand names, Isis the supreme encapsulation of all other deities. As an inscription from Capua (CIL X, 3800) has it: *te tibi una quae es omnia* – you are the one and all.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The famous and most complete aretalogy of Isis, from Kyme in Asia Minor, dating from the second century C.E., Marvin W. Meyer, ed., *The Ancient Mysteries. A Sourcebook. Sacred Texts of the Mystery Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean World* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987), 172–4.

<sup>18</sup> Henk S. Versnel, *Ter Unus*, 50, but see the whole chapter pp.39–95. See also pp.96–205 on henotheistic aspects of the cult(s) of Dionysus, especially noteworthy the characteristic acclamations of *heis Dionysos*: 'These deities manifested themselves as autocratic rulers to whom a mortal could only respond with an attitude of humble subservience or even slavery. This went hand in hand with the appearance of new forms of a more intense and personal relationship between god and man, sometimes accompanied by well nigh Christian experiences and expressions of sin, guilt, confession and mercy. In this context in particular we meet with claims that the god is 'great', indeed greater than other gods. He is 'unique' and outshines all other deities by his greatness, as expressed in the acclamation *heis theos*,' Henk S. Versnel, *Ter Unus*, 204–5. In the light of this inscriptional context, I would contend, one should revisit our conventional understanding of the Jewish creed of Deut 6:4: *sjema jishraël jahwē elōhēnu jahwē ehad* to be an example of the same henotheistic ideology exemplified by Dionysus, Isis, Artemis Ephesia, Mithras, Iuppiter Dolichenus, and Iuppiter Heliopolitanus, especially if one heeds the context of Deuteronomy 6. Just the previous chapter contains the narrative of the giving of the law tables which start with the words: 'You must have *no other gods* beside me' (5:7, my emphasis) and 'You must not worship or serve them ...' (5:9). The law-giving scenes of Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 fit into the larger historical narrative of Genesis to 2 Kings as the history of the centralisation of cult and deity (hence the long battle against independent cult places in ancient Israel, the occulted yet scarcely disguised presence of indigenous Canaanite deities and popular conceptions of Jahwe in Israelite religion – especially such unexpected discoveries such as the Kuntillet 'Ajrūd inscriptions of 'Jahwe and his Asherah,' but see the pervasive polemics in the prophetic literature of ancient Israel). The whole settlement history of Israel is driven by the gradual onset (or through-set) of centralised authority – kingdom, deity, cult place. It follows the same pattern as the *dekateusis* colonisations known from the ancient world, according to which a section of the population is expelled, dedicated to the god Apollo at the shrine in Delphi, and then sent off to colonise a new land as possession where they are to live according to the laws of the god; cf. on this topic Lily Knibbeler, "Saving the City. Ambiguities in Ancient Greek Crisis Management" (Ph.D. diss., State University of Leiden, 2005). 'One god' is an index of a social ideology.

Roughly contemporary to this triumphal procession of Isis through the Mediterranean world (so Versnel), we find the same upward mobility in the Persian god Mithras, newly metamorphosed into a mystery deity: Mithras as *deus invictus, aeternus, augustus, dominus, genitor, incorruptus, megas, omnipotens, sanctus, summus*.<sup>19</sup> Also from the East, among the oriental dieties marching triumphant on Rome we find another – Iuppiter Dolichenus – acclaimed as *sanctus, hypsistos, aeternus, exsuperantissimus, kyrios, megistos, conservator totius mundi*.<sup>20</sup> And yet another divine confrater of the Dolichean, Iuppiter Heliopolitanus: *augustus, despotēs, kyrios, hypatos, rex deorum*.

The term ‘religious mentality’ does not denote privately held beliefs or assent to doctrinal formulae, what is commonly (and unthinkingly) referred to as ‘religious belief’, but rather the collective construction of a worldview,<sup>21</sup> with the added aspect of the social and ideological ‘generatedness’ of such a worldview, and thus of its public, social, and political significance and function, that is, as a discursive formation.<sup>22</sup> As Henk Versnel put it: the imperialising religious mentality with its imperialised gods is a projection upwards on to the great stage screen of the sky of changes in conceptions of social and political existence down here below – it is the enskyment of power and authority with a vengeance.<sup>23</sup> Pleket traces the trajectory of this development by delineating the process of intensification of relationships of

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<sup>19</sup> Ennio Sanzi, “A Few Historical-Religious Frameworks for the Study of the Oriental Cults in the Roman Empire,” in *Theoretical Frameworks or the Study of Graeco-Roman Religions* (ed. Luther H. Martin and Panayotis Pachis; Thessaloniki: University Studio Press, 2003), 162 (with references to the published inscriptions).

<sup>20</sup> Sanzi, “Historical-Religious Frameworks,” 165 (with references to the published inscriptions).

<sup>21</sup> Pleket, “Religious History,” 152.

<sup>22</sup> I use this term in a somewhat more expanded sense than its original use by Michel Foucault. Foucault coined the term to refer to the institutionalisation of historically situated fields of knowledge together with their objects under discussion, cf. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (ed. A. M. Sheridan Smith; London: Tavistock, 1974), Chapter 2: 31–9; and Joseph Rouse, “Power/Knowledge,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault* (ed. Gary Gutting; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 93. To this I would add the following: not only is our study of the object and the constitution of the study field and discipline historically situated, the historical object *itself* is the result of a historically situated and constituted way of representing something *as this or that*. This study is an attempt to demonstrate the discursivity of both the mysteries themselves as well as the scholarly construction of the mysteries in contemporary scholarship. See below.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Religion as the sacralisation of socially prescribed (whether traditional or not) human behaviour and relationships, on the one hand, and the supernatural as the hypostatization of society on the other, both these truly Durkheimian functions of religion are forms of projection,’ H. S. Versnel, “Religieuze Stromingen in het Hellenisme,” *Lampas* 21, no. 2 (1988): 126.

dependency of worshippers on deities (and the concomitant gradual but ever steeper – and accelerating – promotion of deities to ever higher echelons of authority and omnipotence) as well as the dissemination of the phenomenon to ‘touch the lives’ of a veritable heavenly host: accelerating trends existing *in nuce* in classical Greece, as the Hellenistic age turned into the early Roman Empire, the faithful were transformed into humble servants of the deities (*Therapeutēs*, *Hypourgos*, *Latris*, *Hypēretēs-Doulos*) and the gods into tyrants (*Pantokrator*, [*Pam-*]*Basileus*, *Kyrios*, *Despotēs*, *Tyrannos*, *Dynamis*).<sup>24</sup> To summarise: these developments constitute an index of the inroads made by oriental gods (hierarchical, ‘vertical cults’ – so Pleket)<sup>25</sup> and orientalised Greek deities in the Graeco-Roman world in a dual hierarchisation process – the institutionalisation of autocratic government with an intensified stratification of power relationships, and as its mirror image, the institutionalisation of a set of religious discourses of imperialised gods as tyrants, kings, and exercisers of power (that is, as veritable powermongers).<sup>26</sup> What united both sides of the hierarchisation process was the glorification of power. The pairing of imperial power and divine power was a perfect marriage made in heaven and on earth.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> I will not list the epigraphic evidence separately for each of these terms: Pleket’s argument is extensively substantiated with reference to the relevant epigraphic, inscriptional evidence. My interest lies in the interpretation of the significance of this development.

<sup>25</sup> Meaning: elevated omnipotence demanding über-humble subservience, cf. Pleket, “Religious History,” 161. But note: this hierarchisation process also touched the representation of traditional deities – Artemis Ephesia was herself translated into *Sōteira*, *megalē*, *Prōtothronia*, *Basilēs kosmou*, *Kyria*, *Ouranios Theos*; she is *megistē*, *hagiōtatē*, *epifanestatē*, as we also know from the biblical account of Acts 19:23–41 of the uproarous enthusiasm of the Ephesian relicmakers, see Rick Strelan, *Paul, Artemis, and the Jews in Ephesus* (BZNW 80; Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1996), 52, but of course this was a result of Persian influence, which endured well beyond Persian political hegemony over the area – ‘[t]he Oriental impact on Asia and on Ephesian cults remained well into the imperial period,’ Strelan, *Paul, Artemis, and the Jews*, 42.

<sup>26</sup> One thinks in this regard mainly of Isis, Sarapis, Sol Invictus, Mithras, Meter (and the other mother gods), Mēn Tyrannos, Dea Syria/Atargatis, but also Asclepius, Artemis, Heracles Panocrates, and the Eleusinian gods, and of course, the imperial mysteries, Pleket, “Religious History,” 156, 160.

<sup>27</sup> Both the *Megas* and the *Heis* acclamations flourished above all in the Roman period in the cult of Eastern deities (Serapis, Isis) and of colleagues from Asia Minor. The hierarchical structure of the imperial age explains why such slogans were also fashionable in acclamations to rulers and local magnates and benefactors. The Oriental deities, who were hierarchical by nature, found in their worshippers a ground well prepared by the structure of society for the “seed” of the ideology of power ... The *Dynatoi* [= ‘the powerful’, GvdH] are the divine counterpart of the social *potentes* (*honestiores*), and the divine colleagues of the stars, whose *dynamis* (or *dynameis*) is frequently praised in astrological treatises in the Roman empire. Finally *dynamis* of powerful gods has a very concrete parallel in the *dunamis* of a wealthy Late-Roman benefactor who is praised for having paid everything *ex oikeias dynameōs*’ Pleket, “Religious History,” 179.

So what is the significance of this? Isis, Dionysus, Helios-Sun, Mithras<sup>28</sup> – they all feature large in the mysteries of the imperial era, and (if one wants to accept the Merkelbachian theory of ancient fiction as mystery texts) also in the Greek novels as well as in other fictional works. The question of their relation is inextricably bound to the growing imperialisation and universalisation represented by the Roman Empire of the first through fourth centuries. Far from being innocent bystanders or victims caught in the crossfire, the mysteries *were themselves complicit in the process*. The mysteries created networks of relationships for the celebration of power and its benefits, and by doing so, helped to undergird imperial society.<sup>29</sup>

They did so in dual fashion: on the one hand, the Roman Empire was characterized by the stratified diffusion of power, as Simon Price has so decisively demonstrated, in which reciprocal relations of patronage; homage, panegyric, veneration and honours; public largesse, festival, and games; architecture, ritual, and images;<sup>30</sup> and even less

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<sup>28</sup> There were others too who had mysteries – Sabazios, Jupiter Dolichenus and Heliopolitanus, Magna Mater/Cybele, Dionysus (*Kathegemon* = leader), the Great Gods of Samothrace, the Kabiri. The latter four were long part of the club of classical mysteries, and thus had a notable ancestry in this regard, but in the period under consideration the door to the club was prised open and others entered as well: the flowering of mysteries of the imperial era should be seen as a sign of the vitality and flowering of ‘paganism’ – ‘In a sizable number of cults well enough documented for us to tell true innovations from features that are simply not earlier known to us, a general refreshing can be seen over the course of the second and third centuries. It affected the rituals associated with Demeter at Pergamon, Artemis at Ephesus, Hecate at Lagina, and the hoax at Abonuteichus [i.e. the cult of Glycon instituted by Alexander, Lucian’s ‘false prophet’ – GvdH]. All these developed their own “mysteries” because, perhaps, that was the thing to do,’ Ramsey MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1981), 106. This in itself is an important issue that is rarely, if ever, analyzed and theorized, although H. S. Versnel, “Religieuze Stromingen” inspired me to look in this direction. However, since most standard works on the religious history of the Graeco-Roman world tend to treat the mysteries as a fairly stable and unchanging phenomenon (as a snapshot rather than a moving video recording, to speak in a parable), it is the change in the nature and appearance of mysteries as a result of, as contributing to, as an epiphenomenon of the changes in religious and political mentality that interests me and is the focus of this study. Of course, what lies at the back of my mind is the conditionalist approach to religion, the theory that many years ago first alerted me to these kinds of questions, and which has stayed with me ever since: J. S. Krüger, “Conditionality, Religious Experience and Conceptualisation,” in *Paradigms and Progress in Theology* (ed. J. Mouton, et al.; HSRC Studies in Research Methodology 5; Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 1988), 209–22.

<sup>29</sup> ‘It was certainly recognized throughout antiquity, at least by people able to look at their world with any detachment, that religion served to strengthen the existing social order,’ MacMullen, *Paganism*, 57. The practice of multiple initiations into different mysteries just demonstrates the social function of religion even clearer (Hadrian had himself initiated into various mysteries). The fact that so many deities could live peacefully next to each other in the same shrine and sanctuary and even be dressed in exchanged garb surely tells a tale of the construction of an empire out of divergent peoples and their worldviews and myths as social narratives of identity (cf. MacMullen, *Paganism*, 93–4).

<sup>30</sup> The ‘beneficial ideology’ of the emperor as *pater patriae*, took most tangible form through benefactions in the form of building works and gentrification programmes. The imperial presence was

directly, an ideology of exotic excess and wonderment, of public spectacle and pageantry; served to cement the empire into a political whole by institutionalising channels for the flow of power and definition of relationships and positions vis-à-vis Roman might.<sup>31</sup> And within these the mysteries played a significant yet rarely recognized role. On the other hand, the recognized function of mysteries, namely the celebration of well-being, whether this be participation in festive banquets and confraternities, extreme experiences, soothing of maladies and allaying fears, was also the hallmark of the early imperial era – as the decree of the *koinon* of Asia from 9 B.C.E. had it: the beginning of good tidings, the fresh start to everything.<sup>32</sup> The

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not only announced in stone, but also kept in the public eye by means of it. Statues, reliefs, and images of the emperor and his family adorned public buildings, public spaces, and private homes; combined with commemorative events like imperial birthdays, accession celebrations, sacrifices, games, and processions the reality of imperial power and hegemony was literally built and ritualized into being as well as constantly reinforced and maintained. Cf. Mary T. Boatwright, *Hadrian and the Cities of the Roman Empire* (Princeton, N.J./Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2000), 6.

<sup>31</sup> S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power. The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). See also Daniel N. Schowalter, *The Emperor and the Gods. Images from the Time of Trajan* (Harvard Dissertations in Religion 28; Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1990), and Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (trans. Alan Shapiro; Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1988). The literature on the Roman Empire and the imperial cult is vast and unoverseeable. However, among the very many titles, these of Price and Zanker have become classics. If Price took his cue from ritual theory and described imperial cult (mainly but not exclusively) within the context of habituated and scripted actions, Zanker focused on the representation of imperial ideology in stone – in statue, inscription, and building programme – and empire literally cast in stone (to amend the idiom somewhat). For Price imperial cults were a way of representing power relationships, the need for which arose out of the tension between Greek traditions of civic autonomy and Roman authority. This was not completely foreign to the Greek world as they already had experience of divinised autocrats in the Hellenistic dynasties, and so used a known symbolic system to integrate Roman authority into their world by means of imperial cult. ‘The imperial cult, like the cults of the traditional gods, created a relationship of power between subject and ruler. It also enhanced the dominance of local élites over the populace, of cities over other cities, and of Greek over indigenous cultures. That is, the cult was the major part of the web of power that formed the fabric of society. The imperial cult stabilised the religious order of the world. The system of ritual was carefully structured; the symbolism evoked a picture of the relationship between the emperor and the gods. The ritual was also structuring; it imposed a definition of the world. The imperial cult, along with politics and diplomacy, constructed the reality of the Roman empire,’ Price, *Rituals and Power*, 248. See also Steven Friesen, ‘The Cult of the Roman Emperors in Ephesos. Temple Wardens, City Titles, and the Interpretation of the Revelation of John,’ in *Ephesos: Metropolis of Asia. An Interdisciplinary Approach to Its Archaeology, Religion, and Culture* (ed. Helmut Koester; Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1995), 240–5.

<sup>32</sup> See below, chapter 4. On the well-being celebrated in the mysteries, this was certainly for the biggest part of the history of scholarship on the mysteries the slant taken, albeit in a generally theologising manner, understood as reborn into union with the god (whatever that meant), or some kind of spiritual quietude (liberated from the *angst* of death). But consider the following: a line of a graffito on the walls of the Mithraeum in the Santa Prisca basilica in Rome reads *rebus renatum dulcibus atque creatum*, ‘reborn and created for delights,’ or the ‘blessed state of divine grace and companionship with the gods’ as fruits of initiation extolled by Theon of Smyrna, and many other examples in chapter 1: ‘Needs and Answers,’ MacMullen, *Paganism*, 54. Perhaps the best clue to the benefits of being initiated can be found in the tomb of Vincentius, part of the catacomb of Praetextatus in Rome, an

mysteries constituted an institutionalised ‘Saturnalian good times rolling.’ The regularity with which a plethora of games, and especially the Ludi Saeculares were celebrated, and out of cycle, shows how much this was an inherent part of the reality that was the Roman Empire.<sup>33</sup>

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inscription which reads: *manduca, bibe, lude, et veni ad me, cum vives, benefac; hoc tecum feres*, ‘eat, drink, and be merry, and come to me ...’ The context for the inscription is important: it accompanies the fresco of Vincentius at banquet table with ‘seven pious priests,’ *septa pii sacerdotes*, which itself is part of the fresco cycle depicting the death of Vibia (the wife of the owner, Praetextatus? Or of Vincentius?) *abreptio vibies et discensio* (Vibia’s rape or kidnap into the underworld, after the manner of the rape of Persephone), which is followed by a scene depicting Vibia in front of the tribunal of Dis pater (god of the dead) and Aeracura (prob. Hera Kyria = ‘Lord’ Hera, a provincial goddess) and accompanied by Mercury and Alcestis; the narrative obviously presupposes that she withstands the judgement, for in the next fresco she is inducted into the blessed banquet by the good angel (*inductio vibies*) to take her seat at the centre of the table among the *iudicati* for the feasting to follow, cf. MacMullen, *Paganism*, 54 and on this cult and catacomb, see the detailed discussion in Martin P. Nilsson, *Geschichte der Griechischen Religion. Zweiter Band: Die Hellenistische und Römische Zeit* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1961), 662–3. Telling is Nilsson’s comments on this: ‘Das ist eine für uns auffallende Vermischung von Religion und weltlichen Vergnügungen; die Religion dient eigentlich als Deckmantel für die weltliche Festfreude. Wem dies anstößig vorkommt, sollte sich jedoch erinnern, daß es im griechischen Kult seit langem so gewesen war, was man im Anfang der Kaiserzeit noch nicht vergessen hatte ... Die Festfreude war ihm so sehr die Hauptsache, daß er dafür eine vulgärepikureische Sentenz brauchte,’ Nilsson, *Geschichte II*, 667. Therein lies the rub, of course, for if we construe religion to be faith conventionally understood to be assent to doctrinal truths and an affective relation to a very important invisible person (as Don Cupitt satirically put it), then this will be seen as an expression of vulgar Epicureanism, and not religion. For a generation of scholars raised on a diet of Otto and Eliade religion is fascinated awe before the irruption of the sacred (thus, conceived in very serious terms). However, when one views religion as discourse, as we do here, the Praetextatus frescoes become perfectly understandable. The Greeks were irredeemably *diesseitig* (so Versnel), religion was ‘weltliches Vergnügen,’ as I will argue in this study – so it is my thesis that Nilsson and so many others simply got it wrong. It is then possible to come to see how exactly appropriate this kind of ‘religion’ is for the imperial era – and I accept that these frescoes testify to a Sabazian mystery – (Praetextatus, the owner of the property, was proconsul of Asia in 362–364, and held various priesthoods in Roman and oriental cults, including the cult of Sabazios here). (See below chapter 4 for a discussion of the imperial ideology of the Saturnalian return of the Golden Age.) And note, further, the god venerated here, Sabazios, has the epithet *Hypsistos*, ‘highest,’ an imperialised deity! And yet at the same time, his cult always had a frivolous and fun side, for he was constantly identified with Dionysus and with the Jewish god, Jahwe(!), Nilsson, *Geschichte II*, 658–67, esp. 662. On the *pax deorum*: this specific catacomb was also used for Christian burials, and there is nothing to distinguish between the Sabazian iconography and early Christian iconography if we compare these scenes to similar representations in known Christian catacombs (scenes of the *fractio panis*, for instance), cf. Graydon F. Snyder, *Ante Pacem. Archaeological Evidence of Church Life Before Constantine* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2003).

<sup>33</sup>The Secular Games (from *saeculum* = hundred years) were instituted in the Republic as celebrations of renewal at times of intense political tension, 249 B.C.E. (at the height of the First Punic War) and 146 B.C.E. (after the battle of Pydna which led to the incorporation of Achaea and Macedonia into the nascent Roman Empire). Intended as celebration every hundred years of Roman renewal, the cycle and sequence were regularly interrupted and adapted according to the needs of the reigning emperor. It was not celebrated again before Augustus, who (representing a truly new beginning for Rome) had it re-instituted in 17 B.C.E. but now transformed from a republican festival into a celebration focused on the emperor and his place in the rebirth of Rome (for the text, an inscription, see Mary Beard, et al., *Religions of Rome. Volume 2. A Sourcebook* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], 139–44, the discussion in Mary Beard, et al., *Religions of Rome. Volume I. A History* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], 71–2, 201–6). Helped on by fictitious traditions Claudius celebrated the Ludi in 47 C.E. (800th anniversary of the founding of Rome) and Domitian in 88 (six years ahead of the Augustan cycle). Thereafter in 148 (Antoninus Pius),

Certainly, the mysteries/mystery religions constituted only one element in this chain of power flow, and perhaps not even the most obvious or conspicuous one. But power is not always articulated and exercised in a crudely direct manner – it can be hidden behind many façades: in our period, behind grand architecture, grand gestures of largesse, and in a finely orchestrated system of celebrations of good times. The many inscriptions testifying to the ‘salvific’ effect of the mysteries should also be read in this context: power over fate (a speciality of Isis), yearning for wealth and health,<sup>34</sup> for a good year, for safety at sea, a pleasant life, the postponement of death.<sup>35</sup> But consider too: *Renatus* (‘reborn’ – so the crowds in wonder at Lucius’s miraculous return to human form, Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses, or The Golden Ass*, p. 280), and *vives beatus* (‘you shall live in bliss’ – also for Lucius in *The Golden Ass*); *rebus renatum dulcibus atque creatum* (‘reborn and created for delights’ – the Santa Prisca Mithraeum inscription, see above); Plutarch’s ‘fully liberated and released’<sup>36</sup>; sharper: *in aeternum renatus* (‘reborn in eternity’ – even though a Christian forgery in a Mithraeum)<sup>37</sup> – evidences of pious enthusiasm run rampant, these are the equivalents on the side of cultic benefits of the ever higher promotion of the gods. The praises reach ever higher skywards – if the gods and the emperors can be elevated ever higher, so can the outpourings of praise. It is our over-familiarity with Christian language that occludes the wonderment exhibited here: Reborn! Reborn in eternity!

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204 (Septimius Severus), and 248 (the millennial celebrations under Philip I). Apart from these, *ludi* proliferated under the empire – in the early first century the games counted 77 days, in the mid-fourth century 177. This was due to games being added to ancient festivals, to new festivals being instituted and games put on to commemorate the building of new temples, Beard, et al., *Religions 1*, 262–3. These were not merely entertainment events, as Christian writers would inveigh against attendance because of the religious nature of these (e.g. Tertullian *The Shows*, and [Cyprian] Novatian, *The Shows*). Games were occasions for mass participation: 50,000 seated and 5,000 standing spectators in the Colosseum; 150,000 in the Circus Maximus; according to an anecdote preserved in Suetonius *Augustus* 43.1 the shows put on by Augustus drew such large crowds that the city was left empty and military guards had to be stationed in the streets to prevent robbery, Beard, et al., *Religions 1*, 263. This for Rome, but the situation elsewhere would scarcely have been different.

<sup>34</sup> A main benefit of the mysteries, as Lucius reports: ‘I had no reason to repent of the trouble and expense, because by the bounty of the gods the fees that I earned in the courts soon compensated me for everything’ (*Metamorphoses, or The Golden Ass*, cited from the Penguin edition [1950], 293), and it had better be, for his three-fold initiation cost him an arm and a leg.

<sup>35</sup> Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 18.

<sup>36</sup> MacMullen, *Paganism*, 54.

<sup>37</sup> MacMullen, *Paganism*, 54 n.15.

This is the kind of extreme language to go with the extreme experience of Lucius: ‘I approached the very gates of death and set one foot on Proserpine’s threshold, yet was permitted to return, rapt through all the elements. At midnight I saw the sun shining as if it were noon; I entered the presence of the gods of the under-world and the gods of the upper-world, stood near and worshipped them’ (p.286). This is a divinely appointed system (the emperor at the top) ... it surely evidences the pleasure of the gods, no?

In building and playing itself, the imperial system carried its own legitimation. Behind this statement lurks another authoritative(!) source of epistemic power: Michel Foucault. The following commentary on the significance of Foucault’s analysis of power is taken from Rouse,<sup>38</sup> and it should be noted that the whole of the analysis undertaken in this study is in a sense guided, albeit it in the background, by a Foucaultian understanding of power. It is worth citing at length:

Agents may thereby also exercise power unbeknownst to themselves, or even contrary to their own intentions, *if other agents orient their actions in response to what the first agents do* [my emphasis – GvdH]. It is in this context that we can understand Foucault’s assertion that ‘power is everywhere not because it embraces everything but because it comes from everywhere’ (HS, 93 [= *History of Sexuality I*, original French edition, GvdH]). Power is not possessed by a dominant agent, nor located in that agent’s relations to those dominated, but is instead distributed throughout complex social networks ... Foucault would go on to emphasize the heterogeneity of the alignments (*dispositifs*) that dispose power. They include not just agents but also the instruments of power (buildings, documents, tools, etc.) and the practices and rituals through which it is deployed ... Foucault used the term ‘strategies’ for the multiple ways in which heterogeneous elements align or conflict with one another to constitute power relations. Once we recognize the complex and contested dynamics of knowledge production, we might say of knowledge as well as of power that ‘it

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<sup>38</sup> Rouse, “Power/Knowledge,” 106–7.

is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society' (HS, 93).<sup>39</sup>

A final remark in this line of argument needs to be made, and a rather playful tongue-in-cheek one at that: if it is mainly 'oriental' gods and cults (in their hierarchical and monarchic garb) that provide the impulse towards and raw materials of the widespread phenomenon of mysteries/mystery religions, and if it is mainly in the Greek-speaking eastern provinces of the empire that the imperial cult flourished (at least at first), and if it is mainly Greek-speaking élites in the eastern provinces that produced the fictional cultural production the connection of which with the imperial outlook I am arguing here for, then one can discern the gradual drift of the empire (and its conception of itself) eastwards to the cultural and political ambit of New Rome (i.e. Constantinople) so that in the end, for Constantine and his successors, the empire could still be Roman even if the West and the city of Rome had been lost. Byzantium was, amongst others, the result of the processes I describe and analyze in this study. It took the Greeks almost 500 years to avenge and overturn Pydna (and the evidence of Greek literary production of imperial era goes a long way in support of this view). The mysteries were essentially a product of the Greek world, so were the novels and most of the other genres of ancient fiction. The confluence of these two lines, mystery and novel, therefore point to the steady *Graecisation* of the Roman Empire.

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I have been getting ahead of myself. This study started at an unconventional point, with a bit of an alternative to the conventional interpretation of the mysteries as personal, salvific, and ecstatic religion in a time of religious decline. But it is exactly in this that the main argument of this thesis is announced, namely a redescription of

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<sup>39</sup> Rouse, "Power/Knowledge," 106–7, 111. Decontextualising this excerpt and citation, one may also apply this to ancient society. The 'production of knowledge' in that sense would then carry the sense of discourse, meaning namely a way of representation that creates consciousness and world outlook (which I also call in this study worldmaking and mythmaking) with all it entails.

the mysteries as social discourse, and as imperial discourse, and this in counterpoint to current common understandings of the phenomenon.

This is then, in effect, a study of religious change, a change brought about by evolving social discourse (of which cultural artifacts like novelistic fiction constitute comparative evidences) of the Roman Empire of the first four centuries of the Common Era. To do this is to situate religious practices into their proper (albeit scholarly constructed) concrete historical contexts. But simultaneously, this implies a different way of looking at religion itself. When the discursivity of religion is foregrounded to such an extent as here, then it lies to hand to work with ‘religion as a natural category.’<sup>40</sup> The theoretical framework for this study is therefore defined by what is called a social theory of religion, in which mythmaking, worldmaking, social formation, and social discourse describe different facets of this set of ‘human *arts de faire*’<sup>41</sup> that is mystery religions of the early imperial era.

## 1.2 ‘Der Geheime Reiz des Verborgenen.’ What Do We Know about the Mysterious Mysteries?

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<sup>40</sup> Russell T. McCutcheon, *The Discipline of Religion. Structure, Meaning, Rhetoric* (London/New York: Routledge, 2003), especially chapter 1 (‘Form, content, and the treasury of devices’) and chapter 9 (‘Methods, theories, and the terrors of history. Closing the Eliadean with some dignity’). The phrase signals an approach to religion that situates ‘religious phenomena’ back into their originary contexts delineating the discourses – and the various rhetorical devices – that give rise to ‘religion’ as well as its scholarly conceptualization. See below. As an example of the application of this kind of approach to the study of historical religions, cf. the collection of essays in *Redescribing Christian Origins* (ed. Ron Cameron and Merrill P. Miller; SBL Symposium Series 28; Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004).

<sup>41</sup> I.e. ‘practices of everyday life,’ a phrase borrowed from Michel de Certeau (*The Practice of the Everyday Life*, 1984), Willi Braun, “Religion,” in *Guide to the Study of Religion* (ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon; London/New York: Cassell, 2000), 10.

From a bit of an alternative to the conventional:<sup>42</sup> mystery religions are conventionally understood to be ‘secret religious cults’ that flourished in the Graeco-Roman period, being first attested for the classical mysteries of Eleusis near Athens, then others in the Greek world (the Andanian, Dionysian, and Samothracian mysteries), eventually to include other wide-spread and important mysteries derived from Hellenised ‘oriental’ deities and cults (Isis and Sarapis, Mithras, Magna Mater and Attis, Sabazios, Jupiter Dolichenus, and other ‘normal’ or traditional religions and cults that developed mysteries, like that of Artemis and of course, the imperial mysteries). In contrast to traditional national, city and civic cults that were celebrated in public, and into which one was born or participated in by virtue of being included in the particular society, the mysteries were ‘elective cults’ – that is one became a member by choice (or by divine calling) and by consequent initiation. The process of initiation implied dramatic rituals (‘things performed’, *drōmena*, or a mime pageant called a *drama mystikon*), extreme experiences,<sup>43</sup> the showing and touching of cult

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<sup>42</sup> As stated earlier the body of literature on the mysteries is vast. Overviews of the mysteries themselves and their histories can be found in the following classical sources: Otto Kern, “Mysterien,” in *Paulys Realencyclopädie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft*. Bd. 23 (ed. Wilhelm Kroll; Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1935), 16.2: 1211–350 [=PW]; Wolfgang Fauth, “Mysterien,” in *Der Kleine Pauly. Lexikon der Antike*. Bd. 3 (ed. Konrat Ziegler and Walther Sontheimer; Stuttgart: Druckemüller, 1969), 1533–42 [=KP]; Fritz Graf, “Mysteria,” in *Der Neue Pauly. Enzyklopädie der Antike*. Bd. 8 (ed. Hubert Cancik and Helmut Schneider; Stuttgart/Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 2000), 611–26 [=NP]; the classic Nilsson, *Geschichte II*, 345–71, 622–701; Ugo Bianchi, *The Greek Mysteries* (Iconography of Religions. Section XVII: Greece and Rome; Leiden: Brill, 1976); Kurt Rudolph, “Mystery Religions,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. Vol. 10 (ed. Mircea Eliade; New York: Macmillan, 1988), 230–8; Marvin W. Meyer, “Mystery Religions,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary on CD-ROM. Version 2.0c. 1995, 1996* (ed. David Noel Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1995), n.p.; Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (trans. John Raffan; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 276–301; Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* – the best recent overview; and Marvin W. Meyer, ed., *The Ancient Mysteries. A Sourcebook. Sacred Texts of the Mystery Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean World* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987). The latter work contains, apart from literature lists, also translations of the significant sources. See now also Walter Burkert, “Initiation,” in *Thesaurus Cultus et Rituum Antiquorum (ThesCRA)*, vol. II (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005), 91–124 for an extensive overview of mystery initiations (although the article also has material on other types of initiations).

<sup>43</sup> Experiences that could be described as dying and rising, as being reborn, cf. Lucius in the already mentioned reference to the *Metamorphoses*, or *The Golden Ass*, and the recounted cases of blood-spattered priests after the *taurobolium* in the cult of Magna Mater, who experienced ‘rebirth.’ In a saying attributed to Aristotle in Synesius (*Dio* 10) the purpose was ‘not to learn something’ but to have an experience (*pathein*) and be put in a certain state of mind (*diatethēnai*), Marvin W. Meyer, “Mystery Religions”. There is evidence for initiation tests and trials in Mithraism, Roger Beck, “Soteriology, the Mysteries, and the Ancient Novel: Iamblichus *Babyloniaca* as a Test Case,” in *La Soteriologia Dei Culti Orientali Nell’ Impero Romano*. EPRO 82 (ed. Ugo Bianchi and Maarten J. Vermaseren; Leiden: Brill, 1982), 535–6: a mithraeum at Carrawburgh in England had a tomb-like pit which was likely used for a ritual of burial, an experience ‘enhanced’ by a trial of fire from the very nearby hearth. Other

objects ('things shown', *deiknymena*, in the case of the Eleusinian mysteries an ear of grain, in the case of the Dionysian mysteries a phallus and female genitals), and may have included some 'instruction' in the founding myth or *hieros logos* ('things recited', *legomena*; but this is a hugely contentious issue in the scholarship – on how to conceive of this 'myth' see below). So the mysteries had simultaneously a public side (parades and processions, performances of music, dance and mime) and a private, 'secret' side, where cult meetings and meals/banquets and initiations took place.<sup>44</sup>

The Greek words for mysteries reveal something of the social function of the rituals. The word 'mystery' can be understood to be derived from either *myeein* (to initiate) or *myein* (to close), the latter referring to the practice of 'maintaining closed lips in order not to reveal the holy secret to outsiders.'<sup>45</sup> An initiated person is a *mystēs*. Mostly, the word 'mystery' occurs as a plural noun *mystēria*, celebrations of festive initiations and recurrent participation in cult pageant and dramatic presentation. Related is *telein* (to initiate, to celebrate), *teletē* (festival, ritual, initiation), *telestēs* (initiation priest), and *telestērion* (initiation hall). Synonymous is the term *orgia* (ritual) which draws attention to the ritual aspect of the celebration.<sup>46</sup> To put it in different language: the mysteries, by manipulating images, relating stories ('myths'), staging pageants of mime, dancing, and emotional experience, created societies within societies.<sup>47</sup> In the period studied here, the imperial era, mysteries proliferated, and this should be seen as an index of changes in society.<sup>48</sup> The social

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references to these kinds of gruesome and severe rituals in early Christian writers, Beck, "Soteriology," 536 and note 16.

<sup>44</sup> The Eleusinian mysteries involved huge crowds – at its height the Telesterion could house a few thousand participants, but other mysteries were mostly celebrated in smaller groups of tens (like the Mithraic mysteries) or low hundreds (as in the Dionysiac mysteries).

<sup>45</sup> Marvin W. Meyer, "Mystery Religions".

<sup>46</sup> Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 8–10.

<sup>47</sup> Greekness was defined by the Eleusinian mysteries, but only after Athens took control of the site with its attendant religious rituals; the mysteries of the Kabiri at Samothrace, for instance, also fitted in well in a pan-Hellenic context; it was the 'oriental' mysteries that created a problem – witness the suppression of the Bacchanalia in Rome in 186 B.C.E., the suppression of Isiac mysteries with destruction of Isiac shrines in 59, 58, 53, 50 and 48 B.C.E., and the tight control over the Magna Mater cult after her introduction in Rome in 204 B.C.E. See further below, chapter 5 on the social aspect of the mysteries.

<sup>48</sup> A comparable phenomenon can be found in the influx and growth of 'new religious movements' and 'alternative religions' as described by sociologists of religion, cf. Stephen J. Hunt, *Alternative*

boundaries constituting and maintaining these ‘societies within societies’ were drawn and strengthened by strict injunctions to secrecy (the Eleusinian mysteries were called *arrhētos teletē*, ‘unspoken ritual’). However, in a number of Christian writers we do have the silence broken, to a point, in that they report on some of the scenes and some of the *symbola* or *synthēmata* (fixed formulae as kinds of mini-creeds).<sup>49</sup>

One of the vexing questions regarding ancient mystery religions has to do with the fact that, while the ancient mysteries/mystery religions are inscriptionally so well attested from classical times (and even before) through the Roman imperial era up to the destruction of the famous sanctuary of Eleusis by the Goths, very little is actually known about the ‘contents’ of these mysteries: the images, the performances, the beliefs, and the myths or doctrines that formed the cognitive aspect of these religious traditions.<sup>50</sup> We have archaeological remains of sanctuaries, artifactual remains

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*Religions. A Sociological Introduction* (Aldershot/Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2003), and George D. Chryssides, *Exploring New Religions* (London/New York: Cassell, 1999).

<sup>49</sup> In Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus *Refutatio Omnium Haeresium*, Eusebius of Caesarea *Praeparatio Evangelica*, Firmicus Maternus *De Errore Profanarum Religionum*, Arnobius of Sicca *Case Against the Pagans*. The most famous citation is preserved in Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* 2.21.2: ‘I fasted, I drank from the *kykeon*, I took out of the *kiste*, worked, placed back in the basket (*kalathos*) and from the basket in the *kiste*,’ in connection with the Eleusinian mysteries; also in the *Protrepticus* 2.15 ‘I have eaten from the drum (*tympanum*), I have drunk from the cymbal (*kymbalon*), I have carried the sacred dish (*kernos*), I have stolen into the inner chamber (*pastos*, = shrine)’ in connection with Magna Mater, Marvin W. Meyer, *Ancient Mysteries*, 18–9, 114–5. For the revisionary scholar-historian this must be a felicitous juxtaposition: if there is any trustworthy veracity to these two descriptions, and note they relate to two different mysteries, it is surely obvious that they are so similar as to be virtually identical. Which raises the question, namely that apart from superficial differences, in what were they so different? Or rather, I contend, that for the observer in the Roman imperial period, the mysteries are just so many different manifestations of the same, like describing different church denominations all deriving from the Dutch Reformed tradition.

<sup>50</sup> A number of remarks need to be made with regard to definitions right at the outset of this study. I use the term ‘mystery religions’ only by way of a nod to conventional usage. Strictly speaking, we are not dealing with religions in the sense that they constitute neatly demarcated entities separate from Greek and Roman religion, which in themselves do not constitute coherent ‘religions’ with neatly defined orthodoxies and centralised authority and organisation, but much rather, with more or less loosely connected traditions of cultic veneration of traditional gods, heroes, supernatural beings, boundaries, natural phenomena, and the like. The mysteries functioned as an option within and alongside these, that is within the framework formed by ‘Greek and Roman religion,’ and with their intensification of experiences that were otherwise part of ‘normal’ and ‘ordinary’ religion it can be maintained that they did ‘not constitute a separate religion outside the public one; they represent a special opportunity for dealing with gods within the multifarious framework of polytheistic polis religion,’ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 277. On my use of the term ‘mystery cult’ interchangeably with ‘mystery religion,’ cf. Roger Beck, “Four Men, Two Sticks, and a Whip: Images and Doctrine in a Mithraic Ritual,” in *Theorizing Religions Past. Archaeology, History, and Cognition* (ed. Harvey Whitehouse and Luther H. Martin; Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira, 2004), 88: ‘For readers other than classicists, I should make explicit the connotations of the term *cult* in the ancient context; and particularly, I should make clear what the term does not connote. Please put aside all sociological baggage associated with sect-cult or cult-church differentiation, as well as the invidious and pejorative

(remains of animal sacrifices), we have inscriptions attesting to the founding, giving of benefactions to, and organisation (and personnel) of mysteries and mystery cult groups, but – if one has to take the mysteries to be kinds of ritual religion, religion as performance especially as *scripted* performance – we do not have the ‘script,’ or the defining, celebrated or accompanying myth.<sup>51</sup>

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folk associations of the word “cult” now current. They are without meaning or utility in the ancient context. The word “cult” is classicists’ shorthand for people who “pay cult to” a particular god or gods in the sense of worshipping them. It is the worship, normally by acts of sacrifice, which is properly the cult (*cultus*), not the association of worshippers. The Romans, a practical people, cultivated their gods just as, agriculturally, they cultivated their fields.’

It is furthermore a misnomer to speak of the ‘content,’ or the beliefs, myths or doctrines, of mystery religions as if one can distinguish between the content and form of religion, and as if religion is essentially defined by the internalised truths called ‘beliefs’ or doctrinal statements, that is, cognitive content. For the inappropriateness of this kind of distinction, see the article by Donald S. Lopez, “Belief,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (ed. Mark C. Taylor; Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 21–35 for a discussion of the creation of Theravada Buddhism focussed on belief and cognitive content after the analogy of Christian catechism (according to Lopez, this identification of religion with personal assent to statements of truths, that is, ‘beliefs’, is a demonstrable late mediaeval, European development); a similar argument is made by Richard A. Horsley, *Religion and Empire. People, Power, and the Life of the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), see especially pp. 13–25 in this regard his discussion of how the discovery of ‘original’ or ‘pure’ Buddhism in nineteenth century Europe was the result of a fantasy of the recovery of lost wisdom, and the search for the original Edenic languages. The fashion for European Orientalism saw the French find their inspiration in China (and Indochina subsequently became the colonial domain of France) and its mandarin class of gentleman-scholars. German Romantics idealised the mysticism of India. However, after the Opium War of 1839 and the Indian mutiny of 1857 both China and India lost favour due to their perceived corruptness. Orientalist fantasy then converged on the Aryans, the origins of the classical Greeks so highly favoured in Europe at the time as the forebears of European civilisation, the Aryans being the light-skinned conquerors of the Indian subcontinent the exploits of whom the Europeans were now emulating, as well the Indian philosophy of reason and restraint: ‘classical’ Buddhism. The ‘classical’ Buddhism constructed by Europeans was characterised by an exclusive focus on texts and the lost wisdom contained in them (leading to the intensive collection of manuscripts, linguistic study, and editing of critical editions), the obsolescence of the living context of religious practice (and by implication, the native informant), a primary focus on the philosophy and eventually also meditation even though this was relevant only to a small group of Buddhists, namely monks who devoted a lifetime of training and discipline in the inculcation of the philosophy. But here was what European intellectuals wanted: an agnostic, rationalist, ethical individualism grounded in philosophical reflection. Finally, this ‘classical’ Buddhism also did not include ritual, which ordinarily is very prevalent in Buddhist practice. Although theoretical description as it pertains to the interpretation of ancient mysteries/mystery religions will feature in greater depth later on, let it be said here that many of the problems with which this study is concerned are raised by the theoretical definitions employed by a generation of scholars on ancient fiction and Graeco-Roman mystery religions.

<sup>51</sup> The theory of mysteries as scripted performance will be dealt with later in the section on mystery religions as social discourse. However, it needs to be mentioned here that the issue of the supposed secrecy maintained in mysteries is not a simple or straightforward one. It needs to be deconstructed in a rhetoric of inquiry. The idea that the mysteries were in essence secret societies pure and simple, depended on Isaac Casaubon’s interpretation of the mysteries, in spite of knowing them to be focused on ritual, as *arcanum doctrinam*. This gave rise to the idea that the mysteries were in the first place concerned with secret teachings or *dogmata*. And this identification itself was part of a Protestant-Catholic polemic, see Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism; Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 57.

It is exactly these *lacunae* in our knowledge of the ‘content’ of the mysteries that the Kerenyi-Merkelbachian hypothesis attempts to fill in, and which explains the question of the relevance of ancient fiction for our understanding of the mysteries.<sup>52</sup> Although one should sever the link between myth and ritual, as if ritual is to be understood straightforwardly as an enactment of a more original and foundational myth (as argued largely in the Myth and Ritual school),<sup>53</sup> and therefore subvert the logic underlying earlier studies of the mysteries that the ritual needs a myth, in fact *we actually do know more about the mysteries* than was previously thought, enough for a better description and fuller understanding of this so tantalizingly evasive phenomenon. The road to this fuller knowledge runs through a reconceptualisation of the problem, which is what this study is about.

## 2. CONCEPT FORMATION: STUDYING RELIGION AS DISCURSIVE PRACTICE

### 2.1 Discourse Theory and a Rhetoric of Inquiry

So, this study is not about ancient mystery religions, the mysteries per se, nor about ancient fiction in itself, but primarily about the manner in which this connection is *conceptualized*, and this explicitly as a *religio-historical* undertaking. From this formulation follow a number of important implications.

First, this reflection on a particular and very concrete case of concept formation is primarily guided by the awareness that the object of study (and this holds true for all historical research) is constituted through acts of classification and taxonomy, that is, through definition. And furthermore, that these acts of definition derive their content

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<sup>52</sup> See chapter 2 below. In short, both Kerenyi and Merkelbach held that the Greek novels of the second to fourth/fifth centuries C.E. were encoded mystery texts, *were* the myths or *hieroi logoi* of the mysteries.

<sup>53</sup> See the incisive criticism of the Myth and Ritual school and the attendant assumptions that ruled in this field of study in Henk S. Versnel, “Gelijke Monniken, Gelijke Kappen: Myth and Ritual, Oud en Nieuw,” *Lampas* 17, no. 2 (1984): 194–246, and Henk S. Versnel, *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion II. Transition and Reversal in Myth and Ritual*. (Studies in Greek and Roman Religion 6,2; Leiden/New York/Köln: Brill, 1993), especially 1–14 (Introduction) and 15–88 (Chapter 1: ‘What is Sauce for the Goose is Sauce for the Gander: Myth and Ritual, Old and New’).

and form from scholarly traditions of inquiry, themselves the products of social interests and ideologies embedded in them. In other words, the conventional ways of conceptualising ancient mystery religions and their relation to ancient fiction are discursive formations. Any study of ancient religion (and I would argue, of religion in general) should therefore also entail a study of the scholarly discourse on that particular field of research. This study, then, is simultaneously a metatheoretical reflection on the way we speak about ancient religion, ancient fiction, and the ancient mystery religions. It deals with discourse analysis and the rhetoric of inquiry.

Second, implied and embedded in the conventional discursive construction of ancient religion and ancient fiction is a particular theory of religion that occults, or negates, the social embeddedness and discursive origins of ‘religion.’ In order, then, to attempt to solve the problem posed by the riddle of ancient mysteries and the possible connection with ancient fiction as myth, religion itself needs to be reconceptualised, retheorised, and by doing so, an aspect of Graeco-Roman antiquity is redescribed – in requisite different theoretical categories.

Third, although this study is focused on a single, delimited problem, namely the relation or connection between ancient fiction and ancient mystery religions, it simultaneously deals with the way we write history as well as the way we theorise religion. So, the topic of ancient fiction and ancient mystery religions forms a window onto the discourse of religion and history of religion (*Religionsgeschichte*). One can therefore say that this study aims at history through historiography, and *Religionsgeschichte* through theory of religion.

To put it in other words, it is a study of scholarship on religion and the making of religion, both as *discursive practices*.

In the sense used here, the term discourse refers to more than simply language or language use.<sup>54</sup> ‘Discourse’ does not denote here the total configured contents of

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<sup>54</sup> In the common sense of the term ‘discourse’ is usually taken to refer to language, but in discourse theory the term is extended to designate more than just language systems, but also ‘any unified, coded or systematic practice of signification’, or to put it in Heideggerean terms, the web of meaning-giving signifying relations (*Bewandnisganzheit*), Tim Murphy, “Discourse,” in *Guide to the Study of Religion* (ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon; London/New York: Cassell, 2000), 398; it includes ‘any

linguistic utterances, not only the configurations of tropes and topics as they occur in texts or sets or canons of texts, that is, what texts say. Rather, “[d]iscourse” ... throws both the object of scientific analysis and that analytical activity itself into question in one and the same gesture.<sup>55</sup> A study of discourse thus entails a study of the object of analysis (text, culture, utterances, systems and processes of significations and their resulting ‘solidified’ meaning-artifacts) but also the way in which scholarly analysis itself is put into discourse, is a product of signification processes.<sup>56</sup> To understand both ‘objects of analysis’ and the study of those ‘objects’ as products of signification processes is to see them as discursive practices. Quite literally this means that scholarship in this vein and from this perspective does not deal with fixed and solid objects, phenomena, meanings or meaning-artifacts. Rather it is to view them as constituted and constructed in and through meaning-producing, meaning-inducing, meaning-suffusing, and meaning-suggesting actions. In this sense ‘meaning’ as ‘what can be understood’ is not a solid object, the objective result of a signification process, but is defined exactly by its ephemeral character as continually arising and yet eternally deferred in the never-ending praxis of making (and constructing) meaning. Meaning is therefore a political concept, it resides in and arises out of action and counteraction, debate and counterdebate (and this applies equally to the other two members of the triad, truth and interpretation). What is presented here in this study therefore operates on two levels simultaneously: on the level of the description and analysis of events in the period of the early Roman Empire, and on the level of the description and analysis of the descriptive and analytic praxis. What is at issue in the argumentation presented here is the *representation-as-construction* of ancient fiction as well as mystery religions in the context of the Roman empire, that is, how both fiction (or: Greek novel) and mystery religions are rhetorically evoked and

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system of interrelated meanings, regardless of the form these take. Thus one can analyze types of behavior, clothing, furniture, architecture, painting and so forth, and find discrete sets of meanings which manifest themselves in these objects, which pass between them, and which make them significant,’ Murphy, “Discourse,” 399.

<sup>55</sup> Murphy, “Discourse,” 396. In the following I depend largely on Murphy’s discussion of discourse.

<sup>56</sup> Murphy, “Discourse,” 396.

‘manufactured’ in a specific context (or ‘context of situation’ or set of exigencies)<sup>57</sup> as well as how contemporary scholarship ‘creates’ the phenomenon of religion, of mystery religions of the early imperial era and their relation to ancient fiction, in light of and in response to a present ‘context of situation.’ This study is not concerned with stating truths (which statement should not be taken to indicate a willful and deliberate economy with truth!), but rather with the positing of possible understandings.

At theoretical and metatheoretical level this study thus stands at the intersection of various strands: scholarship on religion, scholarship on mystery religions of the early imperial era, ancient fiction including the Greek novel, the Roman Empire and imperial ideology, and all refracted through the prism of rhetoric, especially theories of rhetoric as epistemic.<sup>58</sup>

## *2.2 Conceiving Mysteries as Mirrors of Contemporary Religiosity*

Mysteries/mystery religions have had a fascinating career path through religious scholarship the past one and a half century. In the process the mysteries were transmogrified into contested images of religiosity relevant to the nineteenth century, and these still form the essence of portraits of the mysteries in contemporary scholarship. The mysteries were either examples of ‘personal religion’ of ‘union with

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<sup>57</sup> ‘Context of situation’ or exigency is not to be taken in the sense of the *real* situation or context in which the *real* phenomenon was operative however much these existed. Rather, it recalls the artificiality of scholarly constructions of these ‘real life contexts,’ how they were imagined. This should, however, not be taken to mean flights of fancy pure and simple. These terms and phrases remind us that our scholarly investigations and constructions are matrixed by sets of scholarly traditions, themselves not independent of ideological and social interests, and we only have access to history, historical contexts, and the *stuff* of history through matrices of terministic screens. Juxtaposing different sets of (interpreted!) data, leads to portraying, that is constructing, history and historical artifacts differently. And this, to put it simply, is what this study demonstrates.

<sup>58</sup> For my understanding of rhetoric and the use of rhetoric here I am particularly dependant on the following studies: Johannes N. Vorster, “The Epistemic Status of Rhetoric,” *Neotestamentica* 28, no. 2 (1994): 469–93, and Johannes N. Vorster, “Why Opt for a Rhetorical Approach?” *Neotestamentica* 29, no. 2 (1995): 393–418. In these two studies Vorster sets out the case for an understanding of rhetoric as epistemic, that is as a way of constructing knowledge, in contrast to a classically influenced understanding of rhetoric as formal *method* of interpretation. Approaching rhetoric as epistemic approximates a multileveled study of discursive practices as mooted here. I return to these questions in chapter 3, see below.

the deity' as answer to the decline in traditional religion,<sup>59</sup> or a remnant of Roman Catholic-like ritualistic religiosity in an era of Protestant rationalism.<sup>60</sup>

Working from the present backwards a few examples would suffice to demonstrate this trajectory:

'The mystery cults of the Hellenistic-Roman world were a product of the age, a response to the changing attitudes of individual and social conditions. Both the oriental cults that had penetrated the Greek world and the old Greek cults were hellenized into mystery cults, mysteries, or *mysteria*, a Greek term that meant "initiation." The term was applied to the cults in which membership depended upon the participation of the initiate in a personal ritual that resulted in the *individual's identification or close relationship with the deity of the cult* ... [T]hree essential characteristics are common to all the mystery cults of the time: (1) a purification rite by which the initiate is granted admission and participation in the activity of the cult; (2) a sense of a *personal relationship or communion with the deity or deities of the cult*; and (3) the hope or promise of a *life of blessedness after death* (my emphasis, GvdH).'<sup>61</sup> At the end of her discussion of the mystery religions, Tripolitis would conclude that it was the universal and egalitarian character of the mysteries that accounted for their widespread popularity: 'They were *individualistic*, addressing the *spiritual needs of the individual*, and they also provided the devotees with meaningful fellowship with individuals who possessed the same knowledge of salvation. Last, they provided a *personal, closer relationship to the divine*, protection from the adversities of

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<sup>59</sup> The allusion to contemporary commentary on religion in nineteenth century Europe is unmistakable.

<sup>60</sup> In J. G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1890/1900/1907–1915) the putative decaying and revitalized vegetation – the vicissitudes of an incarnate 'vegetative spirit' expressed in ritual – was expressed in the myth of a dying and rising god and this formed the core of the myth and cult of such diverse cults as that of Osiris, Adonis, Thammuz, Attis, Dionysus; Egyptian, Syrian, Babylonian, Phrygian, and Greek religion. Although Christianity itself is rarely mentioned in a comparative manner in this context, yet running as an undercurrent to these studies, for Frazer Christianity shared the myth and the mystery rituals with these cults, and represented the growing accommodation of a once-pure Christianity with the pagan *Umwelt* – 'pagano-papist' apologetics: 'Taken together, the coincidences of the Christian with the heathen festivals are too close and too numerous to be accidental. They mark the compromise which the Church in the hour of its triumph was compelled to make with its vanquished yet still dangerous rivals. The inflexible Protestantism of the primitive missionaries, with their fiery denunciations of heathendom, had been exchanged for the supple policy, the easy tolerance, the comprehensive charity of shrewd ecclesiastics ...,' Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 85–115, 116–44, the citation here from p. 92 n. 14.

<sup>61</sup> Antonia Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age* (Grand Rapids, Mich./Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2002), 16–7.

this life, and the hope of some sort of *blissful world after death* (my emphasis, GvdH).<sup>62</sup>

In a similar vein, more extensively documented and argued, the magisterial exposé of the Hellenistic age, Peter Green in his *Alexander to Actium*:<sup>63</sup> the mysteries of the Hellenistic-Roman era were part of an interconnected complex of phenomena such as the flourishing of ‘foreign cults,’ the flowering of oracles, astrology, and magic – the mysteries were symptomatic of a descent into the irrational.<sup>64</sup> All these were epiphenomena of developments in the area of politics and society. As the city-states of classical antiquity lost their autonomy in the Hellenistic period, the experience of political impotence translated into personal surrender to superhuman power (whether political or transcendental in the form of Tyche, or other less elevated but no less malignant divine beings). But now, with the decline of the city-states of old also went hand in hand the decline of traditional *polis* religion,<sup>65</sup> and this opened the gate for a proliferation of private religious clubs and associations where the old *polis*-derived identity was replaced by a new communal identity built on communal worship and shared banquets access to which was granted by initiation.<sup>66</sup> In these kinds of *Ersatz*-communities the solitude of urban existence was exorcised in the exhilaration of emotional enthusiasm,<sup>67</sup> in which salvation in the hereafter was promoted as remedy to the ills of this life.<sup>68</sup> Together with magic, astrology, oracles, and epiphanies the mysteries constituted alternative societies, rites of passage into

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<sup>62</sup> Tripolitis, *Religions*, 36.

<sup>63</sup> Peter Green, *Alexander to Actium. The Hellenistic Age* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), especially 586–601.

<sup>64</sup> Green cites the famous work of E. R. Dodd, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951) at the start of this section. The work of Dodd was immensely influential to a generation of scholars of Graeco-Roman religion, and his legacy endured even longer.

<sup>65</sup> ‘Were not the Olympian deities still officially worshipped? Did not every *polis* retain its traditional divine patron? All true; and yet the image had grown dead and hollow, eaten away at the heart by the boreworms of political impotence, creeping secularism, social fragmentation, loss of cohesive identity. Cities and empires had become too vast and heterogeneous to give adequate psychological support to inheritors of the old, local *polis* tradition: their society was no longer either integrated or manageable,’ Green, *Alexander to Actium*, 587.

<sup>66</sup> Green, *Alexander to Actium*, 589.

<sup>67</sup> ‘Indeed, the second century [B.C.E.] (for reasons that by now should be clear enough) seems to have ushered in a general wave of religious emotionalism throughout the Mediterranean; if *bien-pensant* conservatives expressed shock, the poor, the desperate, and the dispossessed were (in every sense of the word) ecstatic. Initiatory rites for Isis, Mithras, and Cybele all seem to have been developed during the late Hellenistic period, at a time when, for an ever-increasing proportion of the populace, bleak prospects on this earth made the promise of salvation in the hereafter look peculiarly attractive ....’ Green, *Alexander to Actium*, 591–2.

<sup>68</sup> Green, *Alexander to Actium*, 589.

‘the utopias of the desperate.’<sup>69</sup> Here again it is the socially constitutive function of the mysteries, but in its context conceived to be part of the slide into superstition, utopian fantasies, and the irrational, that is highlighted as the remedy for the lost individual in search of salvation.

So too F. W. Walbank links the rise in mystery religions, and influx of oriental religions to socio-political developments:<sup>70</sup> ‘But many new religious developments were a response to changes in *individual attitudes* and to new social conditions. With the reduced power of the city-states went a *decline in men’s confidence in their traditional cults* and a growing interest in mystery religions and this was encouraged by a *falling off in the rationalism* that had been characteristic of much fifth-century sophistic thought. The mystery cults involved secret initiation ceremonies and promised *individual salvation* ... This trend towards revelation, *irrational and emotional* ... (my emphasis, GvdH).’<sup>71</sup> And he continues: ‘More important to the ordinary man and woman were the oriental cults, especially those of Egypt, which increasingly penetrated the Greek world *to fill the gap left by the collapse of belief in the indigenous gods* ... In particular cults offering a *personal contact with the divinity* or the promise of *personal survival after death* were especially popular (my emphasis, GvdH).’<sup>72</sup>

Enough, these are three representative examples. In summary, what is common to this kind of conception of the mysteries are in the first instance their individualism, that is, their character as receptacles for alienated individuals; in the second place, their offering of salvation, conceived as (mostly but not exclusively) the overcoming of death; in the third place, union with divinity; and finally, their character as irrational, enthusiastic (or charismatic), and superstitious. Of course these portrayals of the mysteries did not suddenly appear out of nowhere. These evidence the effective history of earlier scholarship on the mysteries, itself deeply implicated in the birth and rise of the study of religion as science.<sup>73</sup> Gustav Anrich in his then groundbreaking

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<sup>69</sup> ‘What is of rather more interest is the fact that such an elaborately traumatic enactment of rebirth should have found so ready a market. The age was hungry for visions, for miracles, for knowledge of what lay beyond the boundaries of nature and reason ...,’ Green, *Alexander to Actium*, 600, 595.

<sup>70</sup> F. W. Walbank, *The Hellenistic World* (Fontana History of the Ancient World; London: Fontana, 1992).

<sup>71</sup> Walbank, *Hellenistic World*, 218.

<sup>72</sup> Walbank, *Hellenistic World*, 220–1.

<sup>73</sup> For a good overview of the rise of *Religionswissenschaft*, ‘Science of Religion,’ as a discipline and the effect of its embeddedness in European culture at the beginning of the nineteenth century on its

work, delineated the ‘religious meaning’ of the mystery cults thus: the goal of the mysteries is the attainment of *sōtēria* guaranteed by the initiation rite, and this *sōtēria* consists of ‘blessed immortality’ in the afterlife, as well as a new life on earth in union with and under the protection of the particular deity;<sup>74</sup> next in importance to immortality is the idea of purification (*Entsöhnung/Kathartik*) effected in a wide variety of rituals from water lustrations to blood baptisms like the *taurobolium* and *kriobolium*;<sup>75</sup> essential to the initiation into the mystery is the fact that the mysteries do not only effect a *subjective* experience of unity with the divine, but the rite also effects the objective attainment of the realities constituting the *sōtēria*, so that the *mystēs* has now received the *character indelebilis* of *sacratus*, *renatus*, and *tauroboliatus*;<sup>76</sup> the benefits accrued from initiation into a mystery do not preclude multiple initiation into other mysteries, the reason being the increasingly magical-superstitious view taken of the mysteries, which prompted the initiands to seek ever more secure guarantees for the *sōtēria* in multiple initiations and purifications;<sup>77</sup> and lastly, the development of religious, mystery communities as societies within society.<sup>78</sup> Richard Reitzenstein added to these the interiorisation of the mysteries as a

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origins, see Hans G. Kippenberg, *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age* (Princeton, N.J./Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), as well as (among other of the included essays in the cited volume) Kurt Rudolph, “Die Religionskritischen Traditionen in der Religionswissenschaft,” in *Religionswissenschaft und Kulturkritik*. (Beiträge zur Konferenz The History of Religions and Critique of Culture in the Days of Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950); ed. Hans G. Kippenberg and Brigitte Luchesi; Marburg: Diagonal-Verlag, 1991), 149–56, and Richard J. Plantinga, “Romanticism and the History of Religion: The Case of W. B. Kristensen,” in *Religionswissenschaft und Kulturkritik* (Beiträge zur Konferenz The History of Religions and Critique of Culture in the Days of Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950); ed. Hans G. Kippenberg and Brigitte Luchesi; Marburg: Diagonal-Verlag, 1991). The discovery of irrationalism, the solitary individual, the identification of the mysteries as nature and vegetation religions, and the enthusiastic/ecstatic nature of this religiosity was, arguably, an epiphenomenon of the cultural period known as Romanticism. Although Romanticism as cultural movement lasted only about three decades up to about the 1830s, its effects were felt much longer. It can be argued that the picture of late Antiquity that emerged in scholarship and had become the standard portrayals by the end of the century, was the result of a romantic envisioning of the world.

<sup>74</sup> Anrich, *Antike Mysterienwesen*, 47.

<sup>75</sup> Anrich, *Antike Mysterienwesen*, 51–4.

<sup>76</sup> Anrich, *Antike Mysterienwesen*, 54. But note the unmistakable influence of a Protestant interpretation of sacramental ritual in the differentiation between subjective experience and objective effect, the latter being evidence of a superstitious and magical view of ritual, characteristic of Catholicism, the direction into which the mysteries developed. The Catholic Church accommodated itself to late Antique religiosity as it became the state church.

<sup>77</sup> Anrich, *Antike Mysterienwesen*, 55.

<sup>78</sup> Anrich, *Antike Mysterienwesen*, 56.

growing tendency towards the ‘faith’ of mysteriosophy,<sup>79</sup> and the increasing syncretism effected by the mysteries.<sup>80</sup>

The path to this construction of the mysteries was paved earlier in the nineteenth century. The emerging picture of the religious history of the ancient Near East was an answer to cultural, social, and political developments in Europe, especially Romanticism.<sup>81</sup> Romanticism as style and as cultural movement itself was a reaction to two centuries of rationalism and increasing industrialization. The alienation resulting from these social and political upheavals led to the birth of history in a two-fold sense: the birth of the modern scholarly discipline of history and history as a popular sense of a longing for a long-lost paradisaal time of wholeness.<sup>82</sup> On the plane of popular culture this ranged from rediscoveries of the ‘merrie England’ of the Middle Ages (in fiction as well as in cultural movements such as the Arts and Crafts movement), to the wholesale revival of Gothic in architecture and literature, and followed by Romanesque, and Byzantine styles, as well as classical revivals of Greek

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<sup>79</sup> So clearly seen in the Hermetic and Gnostic material, the end point of the trajectory from Eleusis in classical Antiquity to the Gnosticism of late Antiquity, cf. Reitzenstein, *Hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen*, 242–3. Again, the tendency is unmistakeable, the mysteries function as foil or counterpoint for the religio-historical conceptionalising of early Christianity, a point also underscored by Kippenberg, *Discovering*, 118–9. In the history of religio-historical scholarship on early Christianity it is especially with reference to Paul and the Pauline tradition that the mystery religions have been useful as illuminating ‘background,’ see above. It is not difficult to understand why. The Pauline language of ‘mystery,’ the particular portrayal of baptism, and the complex of expressions of unity with Christ (in Christ, with Christ, etc.) as dying with and rising with Christ, not to mention Pauline charismatic spirituality, have served as the justification for reading of the Pauline literature against the ‘background’ of both Gnosticism and mystery religions.

<sup>80</sup> Reitzenstein, *Hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen*, 240–2.

<sup>81</sup> I draw on the analysis of William Fleming, *Arts and Ideas* (Fort Worth, Tx.: Harcourt Brace College, 1995), 511–45.

<sup>82</sup> See Fleming, *Arts and Ideas*, 543: ‘Above all, the romantic view included a sense of history. Creating imaginary places far apart from workaday situations proved a welcome refuge from the increasingly industrialized and mechanized world ... However, “Any time but now, and any place but here” became the battle cries of romanticism.’ See also Plantinga, “Romanticism,” 157–8: ‘The primary characteristic of Romanticism, van der Leeuw thought, is longing (Verlangen). This continual and insatiable longing is for another world, for anything other present, condemning reality ... In thus holding that Romanticism and religion bear certain unmistakable resemblances, van der Leeuw meant that Romanticism and religion are similarly inclined to long for past golden ages and to dream of alternative realities and states. “Es war sonst wirklich besser.” Homesickness and mourning for a past age are the fundamental Romantic feelings ... The search becomes restless, frenzied. The longing cannot be satisfied and thus tears become unavoidable and melancholy predominant. To alleviate the situation, the Romantic idealizes some place or state: Italy, India, the North America, fantasy worlds, the forest, night, the depths of the earth. *Ultimately, the Romantic attempts to heal the brokenness and to satisfy the endless longing in his life by seeking an immediate unity, by seeking the infinite in the finite or the divine in nature* (my emphasis, GvdH).’

and Roman styles.<sup>83</sup> Simultaneously this period also saw the wholesale importation of the Orient into the ‘imaginative repertory’ of the arts and architecture,<sup>84</sup> and this at a time when discoveries in the field of archaeology and text collection and translation began to transport the exotic Orient into the historical scholarly consciousness of religious origins. Apart from these developments, the period also saw the birth of the individual as hero: ‘Romantic social and political thought viewed the status of people as individuals first and foremost and as members of society secondarily. The romantic period was also the age of the emancipation of the individual and the era of the great hero attained such heights by personal efforts.’<sup>85</sup> Finally, Romanticism also entailed the deification of nature in art as yet another way of expressing longing for the lost pastoral idyll.<sup>86</sup> In religio-historical studies this found expression in the discovery of the category of salvation religion.<sup>87</sup> Salvation religion was understood to indicate a kind of world-negation (or *Weltverneinung*, as Hermann Siebeck formulated it).<sup>88</sup> In a context of the merging of Christianity with industrialized society, salvation religion became a culture-critical and philosophical term with which to postulate the autonomy of religion. As Kippenberg comments on Troeltsch: ‘Religion was thus something other than an ethical ideal; it was the basis of practiced subjectivity. The autonomy of religion and the irreducibility of the individual were two sides of the same coin. *Only religion can protect culture from a permanent descent into materialism and save the human personality.*’<sup>89</sup> Romantic values! And furthermore, the more resolutely Christianity was interpreted as a historical phenomenon embedded in its contemporary context, the more its defining categories emerged in religio-historical

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<sup>83</sup> In part, the revival of Gothic was exactly in answer to the French empire of Napoleon, and formed the basis for a national English style, Fleming, *Arts and Ideas*, 544.

<sup>84</sup> Fleming, *Arts and Ideas*, 534–5.

<sup>85</sup> Fleming, *Arts and Ideas*, 531, compare also: ‘All this was, perhaps, a positive assertion of the diminishing self in the face of a growing organization of society under collective control’ (531). The artist as hero exemplified the importance of emotion over reason, of enthusiasm over restraint, of inspiration over rational argumentation.

<sup>86</sup> Fleming, *Arts and Ideas*, 537.

<sup>87</sup> Kippenberg, *Discovering*, 120ff.

<sup>88</sup> Kippenberg, *Discovering*, 121.

<sup>89</sup> Kippenberg, *Discovering*, 122–3, emphasis mine.

view to express a distance from the world: eschatology, apocalypticism, mysticism, and asceticism.<sup>90</sup>

So here we have it: lost and longing individuals, enthusiasm, irrationalism and possession, a return to nature as the fount of religion, a heightened clamour for the (distant) past – the birth of the characteristic picture of the mysteries. And it should be, as Plantinga says: ‘Given that the birth of the history of religion as a field of study followed not long after the demise of Romanticism in the nineteenth century, and that the former is in some sense a product of the latter, might there be more than an accidental relationship between the two?’<sup>91</sup> All the famous names in the newly founded discipline of *Religionsgeschichte* were found in the gallery of Romanticism: Gerardus van der Leeuw, Johan Huizinga,<sup>92</sup> Schleiermacher, Max Müller, C. P. Tiele, Chantepie de la Saussaye, Nathan Söderblom, Rudolf Otto, Joachim Wach, and Friederich Heiler,<sup>93</sup> as well as Jane Harrison.<sup>94</sup>

This was the context against which the work of figures such as J. G. Frazer<sup>95</sup> and Otto Pfleiderer<sup>96</sup> gain in significance. Both traced the origins of Mediterranean and oriental religions (and thus the mysteries) to an origin in vegetative religion of a dying

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<sup>90</sup> Kippenberg, *Discovering*, 123.

<sup>91</sup> Plantinga, “Romanticism,” 159.

<sup>92</sup> Yme B. Kuiper, “The Primitive and the Past. Van der Leeuw and Huizinga as Critics of Culture,” in *Religionswissenschaft und Kulturkritik* (Beiträge zur Konferenz The History of Religions and Critique of Culture in the Days of Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950); ed. Hans G. Kippenberg and Brigitte Luchesi; Marburg: Diagonal-Verlag, 1991), 113–25.

<sup>93</sup> Rudolph, “Religionskritischen Traditionen,” 151–2. The establishment of Science of Religion linked up with the theology of Schleiermacher: ‘Religionswissenschaft ist zwar überlieferungskritisch in ihrer philologisch-historischen und quellenkritischen Methode, die mit entzaubernder Wirkung auf alle religiösen Dokumente, seien sie kanonischen oder heiligen Charakters, anwendet, aber in ideologischen Grundfragen ist sie theologisch oder religionsphilosophisch im eben genannten Sinne orientiert,’ Rudolph, “Religionskritischen Traditionen,” 152. One can now immediately detect the origins of Otto’s *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, in fact, as Rudolph puts it, this provenance of Religionswissenschaft turned it into a *theologia naturalis*, Rudolph, “Religionskritischen Traditionen,” 154.

<sup>94</sup> Renate Schlesier, “Prolegomena zu Jane Harrisons Deutung der Antiken Griechischen Religion,” in *Religionswissenschaft und Kulturkritik* (Beiträge zur Konferenz The History of Religions and Critique of Culture in the Days of Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950); ed. Hans G. Kippenberg and Brigitte Luchesi; Marburg: Diagonal-Verlag, 1991), 193–235, especially 232–235. Harrison played a leading role in the Myth and Ritual school, and was famous for her writings on the history of Greek religion, formulating a view of the origins of Greek religion and the mysteries in nature religion, or vegetative cults.

<sup>95</sup> In his oft-republished *The Golden Bough*.

<sup>96</sup> Various works: *Das Christusbild des urchristlichen Glaubens in religionsgeschichtlicher Beleuchtung*, and *Die Entstehung des Christentums*, and issued in English as well.

and rising god as the expression of seasonal cycles of nature, and this view was hugely influential due to the influence of the Pan-Babylonian School at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>97</sup>

However much the ancient and classical mysteries may have been founded on such an originary myth expressing seasonal cycles in the metaphor of dying and rising gods (and this is not certain), the fact is – as Jonathan Z. Smith so cogently argued, repeatedly – that the myths at issue are not static nor repetitions of the eternally recurring, to use a phrase made famous by Mircea Eliade. As narrative discourse *qua* form and narration they are inherently rhetorical, that is they are rhetorical interventions within particular contexts.<sup>98</sup> And as, again *qua* Smith, we deal with religions in constant change and development, we are dealing in the imperial era with ‘archaic Mediterranean religions in their Late Antique phases,’ that is with ‘historical processes of reinterpretation, with tradition.’<sup>99</sup> Far from having in the mysteries a-historic religions with static worldviews and myth, we are looking at adapting traditions, the vicissitudes of gods and the ritual celebration of participation in these vicissitudes as *products of the imperial era* from the mid-first century onwards.<sup>100</sup> My argument, then, in this study is that in the mysteries of the imperial era we are not

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<sup>97</sup> The Pan-Babylonian School saw myth as essentially cyclical, following an ‘astronomical Babylonian pattern,’ or a ‘seasonal Canaanite pattern,’ Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 85–115. Hugely influential *and* hugely controversial: a history of scholarship in Christian history and New Testament literature was devoted to the refutation of these theories in order to insulate Christianity from these supposed influences or genealogical relations, the rhetorical techniques of which form the subject matter of Smith’s (in itself hugely influential) book.

<sup>98</sup> See the critique of this type of explanation of myth and ritual in the essays of Jonathan Z. Smith, where he clearly overturns this view by showing how myths and rituals are to be understood as social performances grounded in, and elicited by, specific social circumstances. As Smith puts it in the Introduction to his essay volume *Jonathan Z. Smith, “Map is not Territory,” in Map is not Territory. Studies in the History of Religions* (Jonathan Z. Smith; Leiden: Brill, 1978), xi: ‘I have come to insist that it is *not sufficient to merely name a text*; rather, it is necessary both to *locate a text within a history of tradition* and to provide some sort of explanation for the processes of continuity and change (my emphasis, GvdH).’ Exceedingly well-written discussions of myth and ritual, the emergence of the Myth and Ritual school of (mainly) Cambridge, and the polyparadigmatic function of myth, ritual and religion are to be found in the earlier mentioned works of Henk S. Versnel, “Gelijke Monniken, Gelijke Kappen” and Henk S. Versnel, *Transition and Reversal*. In the main he shows how myths and rituals are strategies for dealing with ambiguous situations, hence the remainders of inconsistencies and ambiguities not smoothed over in myths and rituals.

<sup>99</sup> Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 106–7.

<sup>100</sup> Smith uses in this regard the useful distinction between locative and utopian traditions. See chapter 5 for a discussion on the relevance of this for an understanding of the mysteries and their relation to fiction.

dealing so much with dying and rising gods as metaphors for seasonal cycles, but with *rhetorical commentary on the imperial context* itself.

In conclusion: we have made a long detour through the fate of the mysteries in the imperial era to come to an effective history of a Romantic view of the mysteries, a rhetoric of inquiry. Since it is the conceptualization of the phenomenon that is the interesting fact to be studied, this is where this study began. In addition, the conceptions of literature should also be revisited in order to see them, just as the myths of the mysteries, as social discourse, as rhetorical commentary on the imperial context. The next three chapters will pursue this line of argumentation. The last chapter will again pick up where we left off above, to begin with a consideration of the mysteries as the imperial and Late Antique phase of ancient religion.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **ANCIENT FICTION AND RELIGION**

#### **1. FROM FICTION TO THEORIZING MYSTERY RELIGIONS: A SHORT HISTORY OF A DISCOURSE**

Reinhold Merkelbach was not the first to draw attention to the relationship of ancient fiction to ancient and late antique religion. In his *Die griechisch-orientalische Romanliteratur in religionsgeschichtlicher Beleuchtung* (Tübingen, 1927) Karl Kerényi argued for an origin for the ancient novel in religion, based on his reading of the *Romanfiguren* (the characters populating the novels) – the passivity characterizing their understanding of self and world, as well as the tremendous influence of Egyptian-Anatolian gods together with superstition on the actions of these characters, led Kerényi to posit a religious origin for the ancient novel.<sup>101</sup> To be sure, the utopian travel novels, the Alexander novels and the Trojan novels did not count among the true novels that provided the grounds for Kerényi's theory, so the theory worked for the so-called 'true' or 'ideal' novel romance.<sup>102</sup> According to him the various elements of the novel should be analyzed and interpreted religio-historically, which means that the Egyptian myths provided the prototypes and models for the travels and

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<sup>101</sup> Isolde Stark, "Religiöse Elemente im antiken Roman," in *Der antike Roman. Untersuchungen zur literarischen Kommunikation und Gattungsgeschichte* (ed. Heinrich Kuch; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag Berlin, 1989), 145. And not only the Egyptian-Anatolian gods: in general the emergence of the novel as genre is the result of a flood of 'oriental' influences, so Helm: 'Es ist selbstverständlich, daß ein so phantasiebegabtes Volk, wie die Hellenen es waren, noch dazu angeregt durch die Wunder des nahen Orients und die von dort einströmenden Wirkungen, seine Lust zum Fabulieren nicht nur in Sagen und Göttermýthen, sondern auch in Erzählungen aller Art, nicht nur in epischen Versen, sondern auch in einfacher Prosa bestätigt hat,' Rudolf Helm, *Der antike Roman* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956), 7. Furthermore, it is the imperial world that came into existence after Alexander's conquests that kindled the fires of fantasy from which crucible arose the genre of the novel. For the importance of this 'imperial context' for the novel and its significance as social discourse, see below chapters 3 and 4. Kerényi stood in a tradition running from Erwin Rohde over Richard Reitzenstein (the historian of religion, but who was also an accomplished classicist!) that held that the most common motifs of the novels, namely the adventurous wanderings of ill-fated lovers, occur regularly in oriental fables, tales, and entertainment literature, so that to give an account of the whence of the novelistic contents one needs to investigate oriental literature. In this case it is religious literature that provides the closest parallel, so that a religio-historical approach is most fruitful in this regard, Karl Kerényi, *Die griechisch-orientalische Romanliteratur in religionsgeschichtlicher Beleuchtung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1962), x.

<sup>102</sup> For my purposes I will not make a distinction between the 'ideal novels' – the Greek romances – and other fictional literature, or make a distinction between the 'sophistic novels' (Longus's *Daphnis and Chloe*, Achilles Tatius's *Leucippe and Clitophon*, and Heliodorus's *Aethiopica*), and Chariton and Xenophon on the other hand, see Tomas Hägg, "Orality, Literacy, and the 'Readership' of the Early Greek Novel," in *Contexts of Pre-Novel Narrative. The European Tradition*. (ed. Roy Eriksen; Approaches to Semiotics 114; Berlin/New York: Mouton De Gruyter, 1994), 47. My interest lies, rather, in the cultural significance of the literary production of the period, therefore a historical interest in fiction as discursive formation, which is another way of saying my interest is religio-historical, only 'religion' is understood here within the framework of more recent theory of religion and myth – as social formation and discursive formation; an interest I hope to pursue more fully in a later study. Here my concern is to rephrase the religion-fiction connection in a different theoretical perspective, which I hope, will provide some way to continue with a kind of Merkelbachian approach.

travails of the loving couples of the novels, in particular the myths about Isis and those concerning the death and ‘resurrection’ of Osiris, and in this view, furthermore, the novels represent the accounts of the sufferings of these gods.<sup>103</sup>

Merkelbach took up the project of a religio-historical interpretation of the ancient novel and in the process went one step further to include not only the Isiac mystery cult, but all the major mystery cults of the early empire. Not only do the novels present the reader in narrative format with Egyptian myths,<sup>104</sup> but also with Mithraic,<sup>105</sup> Dionysiac,<sup>106</sup> Pythagorean,<sup>107</sup> and Helios<sup>108</sup> myths, but the narrative texts themselves *are* mystery texts, or are themselves mythologies. Since the origins of epic, lyric and drama should be sought in religion, it follows that the same should hold for the novel.<sup>109</sup> ‘The ancient romances are intimately connected to the mysteries of antiquity in decline, namely the cults of Isis, Mithras, Dionysus, and the sun god. The novels constitute the principal sources for these religions, about which we would

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<sup>103</sup> For an extensive list of Egyptian mythic topics featuring in the novels, see Isolde Stark’s summary of Kerenyi’s argument, Stark, “Religiöse Elemente,” 146. In general, Kerenyi’s argument is constructed with reference to the following aspects: the geographical settings of the novels as evoking the same world as the mythical accounts of Isis and Osiris (44–66); the prevalence of death and resurrection as narrative motif (also in the context of lovers’ relations like in Isis and Osiris, a *hieros gamos*) (24–43), combined with oft recurring motifs like divine sufferings (95–122); crucifixions, miraculous deliverances and apotheoses (123–150); and the role of fortune (177–205).

<sup>104</sup> Isis in Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses, or The Golden Ass* (syncretically identified with and variously masquerading as Psyche – the suffering Isis, with Venus – the reigning Isis, also with Demeter, Hera, Aphrodite, Persephone, Artemis, Nemesis and Tyche); in Xenophon’s *Ephesian Tale* (under the guise of Artemis); Isis and Osiris in Achilles Tatius’s *Leucippe and Clitophon*; and finally a Greek Isis novel purported to be at the origins of the *History of Apollonius, king of Tyre*. With regard to the two novels set in Ephesus, Chariton’s *Chaereas and Callirhoe* and Xenophon’s *Ephesian Tale*, one might now also surmise that these are ‘Artemis or Aphrodite mystery texts’, see the discussion of the social setting of Chariton in Douglas R. Edwards, “Pleasurable Reading or Symbols of Power? Religious Themes and Social Context in Chariton,” in *Ancient Fiction and Early Christian Narrative* (ed. Ronald F. Hock, et al.; Atlanta: Scholars, 1998), 31–46; Douglas R. Edwards, “Defining the Web of Power. The Novelist Chariton and His City Aphrodisias,” *JAAR* 62, no. 3 (1994): 699–718. For Artemis see Christine M. Thomas, “At Home in the City of Artemis. Religion in Ephesos in the Literary Imagination of the Roman Period,” in *Ephesos Metropolis of Asia: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Its Archaeology, Religion, and Culture. Harvard Theological Studies 41* (ed. Helmut Koester; Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1995), 81–117.

<sup>105</sup> Cf. the *Babyloniaca* of Iamblichus, a ‘Mithras novel’.

<sup>106</sup> Cf. Longus’s *Daphnis and Chloe* – a novel reflecting Dionysiac mysteries.

<sup>107</sup> As in Antonius Diogenes’s *Wonders Beyond Thule*. The novel presents the mystery ‘doctrines’ of Pythagoreanism.

<sup>108</sup> Cf. Heliodorus’s *Ethiopian Tale* – the ‘Helios novel par excellence’: Stark, “Religiöse Elemente,” 148.

<sup>109</sup> Reinhold Merkelbach, *Roman und Mysterium in der Antike* (München/Berlin: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1962), Preface.

otherwise have very little evidence,' so Merkelbach.<sup>110</sup> In effect the novel romances are the scripts for the performances of mystery rituals, our only source for the 'beliefs' held by these mystery cults, which were traditionally, of course, secret societies for which we would not otherwise have any historical information at all.<sup>111</sup>

Merkelbach's controversial thesis placed the issue of religion *and* fiction as well as religion *in* fiction firmly on the agenda of studies of the ancient novel, even though his thesis was not generally accepted.<sup>112</sup> Even Kerenyi distanced himself from Merkelbach's 'much too simplistic statement of the case.'<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> 'Die antiken Liebesromane hängen eng mit den Mysterien des sinkenden Altertums zusammen, mit den Kulturen der Isis, des Mithras, des Dionysos und des Sonnengottes. Die Romane werden zu Hauptquellen für diese Religionen, über die wir sonst nur wenige Zeugnisse haben,' Merkelbach, *Roman und Mysterium*, preface. Note the characteristic disparaging evaluation of religion in the late antique period, an echo of E. R. Dodds' 'age of anxiety'. On Merkelbach, compare the witty judgement of Roger Beck: 'To adapt a saying, inside every ancient novel is a mystery-text wildly signalling', Roger Beck, "Soteriology, the Mysteries, and the Ancient Novel: Iamblichus *Babyloniaca* as a Test Case," in *La Soteriologia Dei Culti Orientali Nell' Impero Romano*. *EPRO* 82 (ed. Ugo Bianchi and Maarten J. Vermaseren; Leiden: Brill, 1982), 527.

<sup>111</sup> For a discussion of the phenomenon of secrecy, secret societies and the attendant concept of 'mystery', see Jan N. Bremmer, "Religious Secrets and Secrecy in Classical Greece," in *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions* (ed. Hans G. Kippenberg and Guy G. Stroumsa; Leiden/New York/Köln: E. J. Brill, 1995), 61–78; Walter Burkert, "Der geheime Reiz des Verborgenen: Antike Mysterienkulte," in *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions* (ed. Hans G. Kippenberg and Guy G. Stroumsa; Leiden/New York/Köln: E. J. Brill, 1995), 79–100; and Luther H. Martin, "Secrecy in Hellenistic Religious Communities," in *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions* (ed. Hans G. Kippenberg and Guy G. Stroumsa; Studies in the History of Religions 65; Leiden/New York/Köln: E. J. Brill, 1995), 101–22. Merkelbach and other, older, scholars of ancient religion still proceeded from the assumption that there was a secret in the mysteries that had to be kept secret upon pain of death, sanction and censure – a 'doctrine' that could not be spoken, hence the portrayal of the novels as disguised 'showings' or epoptics. But see below on this interpretation.

<sup>112</sup> Most writers on the topic distance themselves at some point from Merkelbach. A case in point: '... Merkelbach's specific explanation [that the novels are the direct successors of oral miracle stories – GvdH] is hardly convincing; on any account, it presupposes that one also accepts his general theory that the genre has its roots in religion, the extant novels (except that of Chariton) being actual *Mysterientexte*', cf. Hägg, "Readership," 48. Or see Niklas Holzberg, *The Ancient Novel. An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1995), 30: 'There is no need for us to examine this theory in any depth, since its underlying assumptions have already been disproved several times, and it is now almost unanimously rejected by scholars.' Sharpest: 'This is all nonsense to me,' Ben Perry, *The Ancient Romances*, cited in V. Schmidt, "'Roman und Mysterium.' Een Opzienbarende, Omstreden These," *Hermeneus* 25 (1995): 79.

<sup>113</sup> Stark, "Religiöse Elemente," 147 n. 69, referring to Kerenyi's *Der antike Roman. Einführung und Textauswahl* (Darmstadt, 1971). In this book Kerenyi softened his original argument somewhat by viewing the Greek novel romances as a 'parallel phenomenon to the spread of initiations into foreign mysteries in the Roman empire' as a kind of secularisation. And, of course, not only Kerenyi, Stark lists other authors who also repudiated Merkelbach's thesis.

## 2. NOVEL AND FICTION: A RELATIONSHIP TESTED – *LEUCIPPE AND CLITOPHON* AS TEST CASE

One can, however, point to numerous instances of contact between the ancient novel and its religious world or the religious values reflected or assumed in the novel. And here, for instance, one can use as an illuminating test case the parallel between the myth of Isis and Osiris and its ‘use’ as plot framework in *Leucippe and Clitophon*.<sup>114</sup> There is an uncanny, but very real similarity between the plot of Achilles Tatius’ *Leucippe and Clitophon* and the portrayal of the myth of Isis and Osiris in Plutarch’s *De Iside et Osiride*.

As an example, one can start by considering, among other possibilities, the sacrifice scene of Leukippe in Book 3 of *Leucippe and Clitophon* 15ff.<sup>115</sup> Kleitophon watches from the distance from the Roman (Egyptian cavalry) camp how the bandits are sacrificing Leukippe. He sees how she is led to an earthen altar with a coffin near it. A libation is poured over her, and she is led around the altar to the accompaniment of a flute while a priest intones what sounds like an Egyptian hymn. Then she is tied to stakes in the ground, and the sacrificer plunges a sword in her and cuts her open from the heart to the abdomen while Kleitophon, horrified, watches her entrails ‘leaping out’. Her entrails are pulled out and carried to the altar and the bandits share a meal of it.

Of course it is one of the many artful devices which abound in this romance to effect a ‘resurrection.’ Some time later Kleitophon learns that his beloved Leukippe escaped her would-be gruesome fate. His slave-companion Satyros and their travel-companion, Menelaos, an Egyptian native to that region, had been captured by the *Boukoloi* (the brigands or ‘Desperadoes’) and initiated into the banditry, a process which required them to perform the human sacrifice. So they obtained by happy

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<sup>114</sup> But see also now for a similar argument with regard to Mithraic myth and ‘Mithraic fiction,’ Beck, “Soteriology”.

<sup>115</sup> I have retained the dual spelling of Leukippe and Kleitophon in the narrative, and Leucippe and Clitophon in the title of the work, in accordance with the translation of John Winkler in B. P. Reardon, ed., *Collected Ancient Greek Novels* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1989), 170–284.

coincidence the stage props of a Homer actor-reciter (a sword with retracting blade) and they set out to prepare the elaborate scam. An animal bladder was stuffed with the entrails, sewed shut and hid beneath Leukippe's robes. After the mock-sacrifice 'Leukippe's' liver was roasted and shared among the bandits and what was deemed left of her, interred in the coffin.<sup>116</sup>

Then the cavalry arrives and destroys the band of bandits and Kleitophon is united with Satyros and Menelaos, and eventually also with Leukippe. Menelaos performs some hocus-pocus, recites magic words and removes the contraption from Leukippe's stomach. The book ends with a parable of the phoenix as (unintended?) commentary on what transpired before.

I would like to contend that this is a 'refictionalised' version of the myth of Isis and Osiris. According to the myth Osiris reigned over Egypt and 'delivered them from their destitute and brutish manner of living'. He later travelled through world spreading civilization. Then he is killed by Typhon 'by a treacherous plot'. Osiris is tricked and locked into a chest specially made to measure. The chest is dropped in the river and so sent off to sea. The chest washes up, is 'shipwrecked', at Byblos where Isis eventually finds it and brings it back to Pelusium in the delta area of Egypt. Here Typhon stumbled across the chest, recognizes who is inside and dismembers Osiris' body and scatters the parts in different places. Isis dutifully searches the swampy delta area, finds the parts (save the phallus) and buries them. Isis' son, Horus, eventually avenges Osiris' death and dismemberment by defeating Typhon in battle.

What is important in the context of this argument, is the interpretation given to this myth by Plutarch:

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<sup>116</sup> A similar scene, in Lollianus's *A Phoenician Story*, recounts how the body of a boy is roasted over a fire, and afterwards how his heart is cut out, seasoned with barley and olive oil, and eaten by the *initiates*(!). While gathered around the leader, they touch the heart, and swear by an oath 'over the blood of the heart' not to betray [the secret?] on pain of torture. This is accepted to be an initiation scene and thus evocative of the mysteries: the elements are there – the narrative of participation in death, the touching of an object, the oath to secrecy, cf. J. J. Winkler, "Lollianus and the Desperadoes," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 100 (1980): 155–81. Only fragments of this novel exist, so we cannot know what the character of the whole was like, but it would seem from the extant fragments that it is a fairly crude adventure story, which might suggest that the initiation scene, although modelled on the mystery rituals, does not constitute any reference to a real initiation practice. However, the eating of the boy does evoke the tearing apart and eating of Dionysus by the Titans and the Maenads.

Stories akin to these and to other like them they say are related about Typhon; how that, prompted by jealousy and hostility, he wrought terrible deeds and, by bringing utter confusion upon all things filled the whole Earth, and the ocean as well, with ills, and later paid penalty therefor. But the avenger, the sister and wife of Osiris, after she had quenched and suppressed the madness and fury of Typhon, was not indifferent to the contests and struggles which she had endured, nor to her own wanderings nor to her manifold deeds of wisdom and many feats of bravery, nor would she accept oblivion and silence for them, but she intermingled in the most holy rites portrayals and suggestions and representations of her experiences at that time, and sanctified them, both as a *lesson in godliness and an encouragement for men and women who find themselves in the clutch of like calamities*. She herself and Osiris, translated for the virtues from good demigods (*daemones*) into gods, as were Heracles and Dionysos later, not incongruously enjoy double honours, both those of gods and those of demigods, and their powers extend everywhere ... (*De Iside et Osiride* 27) (my emphasis, GvdH)

Later in the same commentary Plutarch, after exploring the etymology of ‘Osiris’ as joy and fructifying and regenerating moisture, claims that this whole narrative ‘is an image of the perceptible world’ (54).

If ‘encouragement for those in the clutch of like calamities’ is the point of the Isis and Osiris myth/narrative, then Achilles Tatius’s *Leucippe and Clitophon* is a treasure-house of ready references for ‘being in the clutch of like calamities.’<sup>117</sup> In fact the whole novel is not only a long *ekphrasis* on the opening scene of the interpretation of the painting of the rape of Europa (1.1), but the many accounts of dangers, quasi-deaths, and quasi-resurrections are a play on a syncretized divine power (i.e. Isis>Aphrodite/Artemis>Tyche) so that one should understand the image of Isis Tyche (as in the Cumaean aretalogy: ‘fate hearkens to me’) implicit in the narrative. A few examples:

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<sup>117</sup> For the sake of synopsis, I have limited myself here to excerpts and citations from *Leucippe and Clitophon*, but paging through the other novels, one can find many similar instances.

Book 3.10: Kleitophon laments their situation after the *boukoloi* ('rangers' or 'desperadoes') capture him and Leukippe on a river bank – 'O gods and spirits, if you do exist and hear our prayers, what great crime did we commit, to be overwhelmed by this avalanche of adversities? Now that you have put us in the hands of Egyptian bandits to deprive us even of sympathetic hearing. A Greek bandit would respond to our speech, and his hard heart might melt at our prayers ... I can only communicate my cause by expressive gestures, display my desires in sign language. O massive misfortunes! Must I pantomime my miseries?'<sup>118</sup>

3.20: Satyros in explaining how it came about that it was possible to rescue Leukippe by means of the stage props in the mock sacrifice – 'And Satyros continued: "While I was being dragged towards their camp, I wept and mourned, master, for I had learned the fate of Leukippe, and I begged Menelaos to save her by any and every means. Some god came to our help."'<sup>119</sup>

3.22: Satyros on persuading Menelaos to play along with the ruse to rescue Leukippe – 'This speech convinced him, and Fortune acted as our co-conspirator.'<sup>120</sup>

4.1: Kleitophon trying to persuade Leukippe into sex after the bandit episode, now safely ensconced in the army camp – 'When I went in I embraced her and felt in myself certain stirrings of manly energy. But she shied away, and I said: "How long are we to defer the rites of Aphrodite? Consider the incredible adventures we have already gone through – shipwrecks, pirates, human sacrifice, ritual murder. Let us use this opportunity while Fortune is smiling from clear skies: this may be the calm before a greater storm." And she replied: "But it would still be wrong to do that. The day before yesterday, when I was crying because I was going to be butchered, Artemis appeared, standing above

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<sup>118</sup> Reardon, *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, 213–4. The words 'to pantomime his miseries' are actually quite telling in this context. The scene follows directly after the depiction of the painting of the deliverance of Andromeda and Prometheus in the temple of Zeus Kasios in Pelusium. Both were chained to rocks, both tormented by wild beasts (Andromeda by the sea monster, and Prometheus by an eagle), and both rescued by demigods – Andromeda by Perseus, and Prometheus by Herakles. To pantomime the miseries is to enact in your own life the depicted miseries in the (mythical) narrative. This is, in effect, a *mise en abyme*: the audience of the novel enact in their lives the miseries that Leukippe and Kleitophon enact in their lives after the model of Andromeda and Prometheus. This is the second instance of an *ekphrasis* in the novel, so that one must conclude that the narrative is a kind of declamation on the images (and the narratives they signify) described, and in the context of the plot describing all kinds of enactments of these narratives/images, one might ask whether the mysteries were not, after all, meant to be dramatic enactments of mythic narratives (that is, narratives of deliverance) so that the mysteries were massive 'salvations.'

<sup>119</sup> Reardon, *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, 218.

<sup>120</sup> Reardon, *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, 220.

me in my sleep, and said, “Do not be sad, you shall not die, for I will stand by you and help you. You will remain a virgin until I myself give you away as a bride. No one but Kleitophon will marry you.”<sup>121</sup>

4.9: Kleitophon lamenting Leukippe after her epileptic fit, induced by an Egyptian soldier Gorgias, who had his own lusty designs on Leukippe and overdosed her on an aphrodisiac – ““Did Fortune rescue us from robbers for you to become dementia’s pawn? Our good fortune in each case has proved bad luck: we have escaped domestic danger only to suffer shipwreck; we have survived the sea, and eluded the outlaws, yes – because we were being groomed for delirium. And if you ever do recover your wits, my dearest, I can only fear that god must have some other calamity in store. Who could be more disaster-prone than we, who are even frightened of good fortune? But if only you would return to sanity and self-possession, let Fortune begin a new round of her game.”<sup>122</sup>

5.2: Kleitophon in Alexandria with Leukippe, on the eve of another round of adventure, this time due to the shenanigans of the erstwhile saviour Chaerias who saved Leukippe from the aphrodisiac overdose, all because he himself had in the meantime developed a taste for Leukippe, and was planning to have her kidnapped – ‘As it happened, this was the holy month of the high god whose Greek name is Zeus, but who in Egypt is known as Serapis. For this celebration there was a torchlight procession, a sight to surpass any other in my experience – for evening had come, and the sun was set, yet night was nowhere, only a second sunrise of light in shimmering fragments, as if Alexandria meant to surpass the very heavens in splendor. I also visited the Beneficent Zeus and the temple of Zeus Celestial. After praying as suppliants to the high god that he would add no further chapters to our tale of perils, we went to the lodgings that Menelaos had rented for us. But the god, I suppose, did not listen to our prayers, and further trials were in store for us on Fortune’s obstacle course.’<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Reardon, *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, 221–2.

<sup>122</sup> Reardon, *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, 226.

<sup>123</sup> Reardon, *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, 233. This is followed by yet another *ekphrasis*, this time on a painting of the rape of Philomela, with Tereus attacking her and having her tongue cut out. It is a composite picture showing a progression of scenes: Philomela pointing to the embroidered pictures of Tereus, Philomela fighting off Tereus, the women showing Tereus his dinner (the head and hands of his infant son in a basket), Tereus brandishing his sword at the women. Again there is a declamation on the meaning of this painting: Menelaos suggests Kleitophon and Leukippe put off their planned journey to Pharos for the unfavourable signs in the painting.

5.7: Chaireas had hired pirates to abduct Leukippe but Kleitophon and the coast guard corner the pirate vessel, and when the pirates saw themselves cornered they beheaded Leukippe, or so it seemed; Kleitophon retrieves the headless body and buries 'Leukippe' – 'Eventually we reach land, and I disembarked and fell to weeping, holding her body in my arms. "This time, Leukippe, you are without doubt dead twice over, divided in death between land and sea. I hold a headless relic; I've lost the real you. Oh, what an unfair division between land and sea: I have been left the smaller part of you in the guise of the greater, whereas the sea, in a small part of you, possesses all of you. Yet now, since Fortune denies me the kisses of your lips, come then, let me kiss your butchered neck."'”

But then Fortune plays a cruel practical joke on Kleitophon: he finds Kleinias, his earlier slave-companion who was parted from them after an earlier shipwreck and receives the news that Sostratos, Leukippe's father in the end gave his permission for Leukippe to marry Kleitophon, so the friends match Kleitophon with a widow, Melite, for an opportunist marriage, but, says Satyros ““He ignores her, nourishing fantasies that Leukippe will come back to life.””<sup>124</sup>

5.17: Leukippe lands up as a slave to Melite – ““Have mercy on me, m'lady, as one woman to another. I am free by birth, though now a slave, as Fortune chooses.””<sup>125</sup>

7.2: A prisoner in Kleitophon's cell egging another on to tell his life story – ““What happened to you at the hands of Fortune? It seems that though you did now wrong, you fell foul of a wicked deity.””<sup>126</sup>

7.5: Kleitophon, on hearing from another prisoner that Melite had Leukippe, her slave, handed over to a no-good with orders to kill her, and who apparently promptly executed his duty – ‘So I said: “Which deity deceived me with a brief bout of joy? What god put Leukippe on display in this new plot of disasters? I did not even satisfy my eyes -- yet they gave me the only happiness I had. I did not take my fill even of looking. All my pleasure was just a dream! O my Leukippe, how many times have you died on me! Have I ever had a rest from mourning? I am always at your funeral, as one death hastens to replace another.

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<sup>124</sup> Reardon, *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, 238–9. Leukippe survived the pirates' kidnap plot because they murdered Chaireas and decided to make money out of Leukippe, perceived to be able to draw a good price, and killed a prostitute instead.

<sup>125</sup> Reardon, *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, 241.

<sup>126</sup> Reardon, *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, 260.

But those were practical jokes that Fortune played on me; this is no longer one of her tricks. Well then, Leukippe, how did you really die? In the case of those sham deaths I always had some consolation, however small: in the first, your whole body was left me; in the second, I lacked only your head (as it then seemed) for a proper burial. But now you have died twice over -- body and soul are gone. You escaped from two gangs of cutthroats, but Melite's pirates have killed you. Oh the unholiness and sacrilege of it: how many times I kissed your butcher, how our limbs intertwined in defilement, and the ultimate gift of Aphrodite I gave to her, not you!"<sup>127</sup>

7.12: While the court case against Kleitophon is still proceeding, Leukippe escapes from her captor Sosthenes – ‘... her usual courage and optimism returned, for her memory of having been so often and unexpectedly saved from present dangers encouraged her to use this opportunity.’<sup>128</sup>

On one level then, *Leucippe and Clitophon* is the story of two young lovers buffeted by the machinations of fate/Fate, that is on the story level, as romance, as novel. On another level, the story is a Sophistic declamation through the repeated *ekphraseis* on three pictures of mythic themes that portray mythic rapes. Mythic rapes and murders are central to the myths of Demeter and Persephone, Dionysus, and Isis and Osiris. If the mysteries, then, are enactments of mythic narratives, this novel can, in parallel, be understood to be a declamation on a myth of rape similar to the myths underlying the mysteries. What, then, prevents us from understanding the novel as a *hieros logos* (and perhaps, also as a first step towards mysteriosophy)? According to the conventional viewpoint, the myths associated with the mysteries concern the sufferings of the gods, but this, I would contend, one needs to recast. The phrase ‘suffering of the gods’ allows too quickly a shortcut into theology (like fate, the ‘gods’ *can* lead astray), whereas what is the core of the ‘myth’ is a tale of rape, abduction, murder, and good ending. It is my contention that it is the ‘gods’ of the

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<sup>127</sup> Reardon, *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, 262. Of course, it does not end here: Kleinias visits Kleitophon, who in deep anguish and disconsolation, desires to die himself. Says Kleinias, “Who knows whether she is alive this time too. Hasn’t she died many times before? Hasn’t she often been resurrected? Why be hasty about your death?” (262). A dramatic reversal of fortunes follow during the ensuing court case where Kleitophon is tried for murder, he is acquitted.

<sup>128</sup> Reardon, *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, 267.

conventional view that cause the misdirection (and therefore it does not matter whether this novel is an Isis novel, or *Daphnis and Chloe* a Dionysus novel, or *An Ephesian Tale* an Artemis/Isis novel, or *An Ethiopian Story* a Helios novel) – the Sophistic character of these novels with their *ekphrases* and declamations should direct our attention to the central fact of these novels, and that is the plot – vicissitudes and good endings. And this is what one should see – how narratives function as the stuff of mime and dramatic enactment.

Furthermore, the myth of Isis and Osiris and the romance of *Leucippe and Clitophon* create the same narrative world. And this can be seen in a number of illuminating points of contact between the two narratives. Both are stories of shipwrecks, the hints of adultery, the dismemberment, the parallel between the bandits and Typhon (=forces of uncivilisation), geographical locales (between Phoenicia and Egypt; Typhon and bandits in swamps; Pelusium, the burial place of Osiris and landing place of Leukippe and Klitophon after the shipwreck). But there are also several inversions. Unlike in the myth, in the novel it is the female heroine who faces dismemberment. The direction of travel is inverted, in the myth is from Egypt to Phoenicia and back whereas in the romance it from Phoenicia to Egypt and back via Asia Minor.

Nonetheless, the adventure romance of Leukippe and Kleitophon can be understood as a refictionalised version of the myth, perhaps not directly as a mystery text, but definitely as a reappropriating and re-operationalising of the folkloric motifs and narratives underlying the myth itself. And one should remember, myth only ever existed as narrative and that as different versions to boot – in the world of oral transmissions of folklore we do not have a fixed and stable ‘original,’ only different versions to start with. Even in antiquity it was realized that this is what has happened, and Plutarch was himself aware of the intersections between myth and fiction. After recounting the myth to his interlocutor, Clea, he turns his nose up, ever the snob, at the popular fictions feeding off the myth or repackaging the myth in novelistic fashion:

That these accounts [that is, the recounted myth – GvdH] do not, in the least, resemble the sort of loose fictions (*mytheumasin ararois*) and frivolous fabrications (*diakenois plasmasin*) which poets and writers of prose (*logografoi*) evolve from themselves, after the manner of spiders, interweaving and extending their unestablished first thoughts, but that these contain narrations of certain puzzling events and experiences, you will of yourself understand.’ (*De Iside et Osiride* 20)

By arguing for a qualitative difference between his recounted version of the myth and the other, fictional, versions of it (calling them by the derogatory term ‘empty/idle concoctions’), Plutarch actually witnesses to the existence of story plots that encapsulate or imitate the mythic narrative. If the *plasmata* of the Plutarch citation indeed refers to what we now call novelistic fiction (as I think it does), then these words attest to the existence side by side of Greek novel and the myth/mythic narrative (or the *logoumena*) of mystery cults. When he later interprets the plastic representation of Osiris as an erect male member to be the signification of his creative power (*De Iside et Osiride* 51) and the representation of Isis by means of lunar symbols (the moon governing love affairs) as signifying her presiding role in love affairs (*De Iside et Osiride* 52),<sup>129</sup> Plutarch himself establishes the link between the myth of Isis and Osiris and adventure love romances. In light of the characteristics of oral folklore it is in any case difficult to distinguish between the (pure) myth (of the mystery) and fictional versions of it. Therefore, the main question raised by these convergences, and the one that concerns me here, is how one should theorize the similarities and ‘points of contact’ between ancient fiction and religion/religious myth.

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<sup>129</sup> See for instance the best known of the Isis aretalogies, the one from Cyme, Asia Minor: ‘... I brought together woman and man (l. 17) ... I compelled women to be loved by men (l. 27) ... I devised marriage contracts (l. 30),’ Marvin W. Meyer, ed., *The Ancient Mysteries. A Sourcebook. Sacred Texts of the Mystery Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean World* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987), 173.

### 3. NOVEL AND FICTION: A RELATIONSHIP TESTED – IAMBLICHUS’S *A BABYLONIAN STORY* AS TEST CASE

The full text of *A Babylonian Story* has not survived, apart from a few fragments, and the only longish version of the novel exists as a summary in the Byzantine librarian Photius’s *Bibliotheca*. One can gain a sense, however, from the summary of the novel that it is a kind of picaresque rags-to-riches novel with dramatic swings in fortune for the characters involved. From internal narrative details it seems that Iamblichus, a ‘non-hellenised Syrian’ (so his autobiographical account preserved in the *Bibliotheca*), flourished and wrote the novel around 165 C.E. during the reign of Marcus Aurelius.<sup>130</sup> This makes him more or less a contemporary of Achilles Tatius, with whom he is in fact favourably compared by Photius: *A Babylonian Story* is less of a salacious, shameless pornographic novel than *Leucippe and Clitophon*, and dwells on ‘really serious subjects, not on frivolous fictions (my emphasis, GvdH).’<sup>131</sup> It would seem, then, that Photius read Iamblichus’s novel as Plutarch read his own version of the Isis-Osiris myth in contradistinction to Achilles Tatius and his fellow novelists; put differently, Photius delivers the same value judgement on Iamblichus’s tale as Plutarch delivers on his own interpretation of the Isis-Osiris myth – *this* is religion/myth, *that* is frivolous fiction.

What is there in *A Babylonian Story* that makes a mystery reading possible and perhaps plausible?<sup>132</sup> Merkelbach pointed to a number of features that link this novel with Mithraism: the provenance of the author (Syria/Armenia), the eastern setting of the narrative (Babylonia), the many occurrences of *Scheintode* as plot devices in the novel that parallel the place of ritual death in the Mithraic cult.<sup>133</sup> Other allusions in

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<sup>130</sup> Reardon, *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, 783, 788.

<sup>131</sup> Which is not quite true, from the summary it is clear that *A Babylonian Story* itself contained a good amount of sex and deceit, apart from dangers and adventures (but then, initiation into the mysteries of Aphrodite is frequently mentioned in *Leucippe and Clitophon* with the very clear meaning of inducement to sexual intercourse). However, the fact that Photius recognized in the novel before him some ‘serious subjects’ should alert us to the possibility that here, in fact, may be an indication that parts of the narrative (at least) were recognized to convey us to the world of the mysteries. The reference in *Babylonian Story* 1 [74a], Reardon, *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, 785.

<sup>132</sup> I am following here the arguments (positive) of Beck, “Soteriology”.

<sup>133</sup> Cf. Beck, “Soteriology,” 529: ‘On what grounds did Merkelbach judge the *Babyloniaca* to be a Mithraic text? The work, of course, was not assessed in isolation; since the other novels were mystery-

the narrative, too, would seem to bear this out:<sup>134</sup> the field with the well and lion stele where the action starts (3) relating to the spring in the mithraeum and the Mithraic lion grade; the crown of Sinone, the heroine, (a wild meadow flower garland) lost in flight (3), recalls the crown that the Mithraic initiate ritually declines, according to Tertullian, *The Crown* 15; the three mile long cave in which the lovers hide (3) recalls the Mithraic *spelaeum*; the soldiers finding the two lovers apparently dead, giving them their funerary rites (4), are the Mithraic grade of soldiers or *milites*; the ravens who wake them (4) are the Mithraic grade of *coraces*.

While Beck finds these allusions telling (and not completely irrelevant), the fact remains that the ‘evidence’ is ambiguous, since all these allusions occur concentrated at the beginning of the novel epitome, and do not contribute to a coherent and consistent pattern throughout the novel epitome to warrant a clear identification of the novel with the Mithraic mysteries, apart from drawing on known *topoi* circulating in the world of the author.<sup>135</sup> There are, however, two narrative elements that do bear closer scrutiny within this framework.

The first is the cave with which the epitome begins. Iamblichus ultimately derives the image of the cave dripping with honey from Homer’s *Odyssey* 13.102–112, but in closer chronological proximity to Iamblichus we find the third century philosopher Porphyry’s treatise on Homer’s cave, *On the Cave of the Nymphs in the Odyssey*, itself drawing on an earlier neopythagorean allegory on the *topos* by Numenius of

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texts, then so was the *Babyloniaca*, for it bore all the hallmarks of the genre. For Merkelbach, then, the question was rather: to what mystery should the *Babyloniaca* be assigned? Mithraism recommended itself ...’

<sup>134</sup> Beck, “Soteriology,” 529.

<sup>135</sup> See for instance B. P. Reardon, cited in Beck, “Soteriology,” 534, the *Babyloniaca* simply voices ‘that common stock of religious metaphor in which the whole age thinks.’ Because the sequence of events of the story do not follow the symbolic presentation of a Mithraic initiation sequence, it may be doubted whether this novel presents a Mithraic *via salutis* (so Beck). See also the discussion published at the end of Beck’s essay: Versnel agreeing with a situating of the text in a more general cultural and religious atmosphere rather than understanding it as cult transformed into fiction (538); possibilities of reading some of the central Mithraic allusions in the context of other cults such as Cybele and Attis (Culiano, 538); lack of clarity with regard to possible cultic use of such a text obviously also aimed at a general public (Bianchi, 539), that is was it meant as an allegory and would it have been understood as such?

Apamea.<sup>136</sup> Numenius had integrated into his work Mithraic material, derived in turn from the now lost multi-volumed *History of Mithraism* by the historian Euboulos.<sup>137</sup> If the allegorised cave of Numenius-Porphyry did feature at the back of Iamblichus's mind, then one may draw a number of parallels between the cave episode in *A Babylonian Story* and the Mithraic-neopythagorean interpretations of the cave. In Porphyry the cave is a symbol of the material cosmos and entry into it and exit from it via the two entrances resemble the descent into and ascent from material existence, just as the Mithraic cave or mithraeum was itself explicitly constructed to signify the cosmos (witness the astrological symbols used).<sup>138</sup> So the flight of the two lovers into and out of the cave may be interpreted as the descent of the soul into the created world and its liberation from it. The well-water in the cave (4) may signify genesis as in Porphyry, *Cave* 10–12. Most telling, however, is the multivalent and ambiguous symbol of the honey: the bees who fed on snakes produce poisonous honey, so while the two lovers overcome with hunger lick the sweet honey, they fall into a coma, and in addition, the soldiers who enter the cave are stung by the ferocious bees, so that some are injured, others killed. But honey also had a wholesome side. According to Porphyry, it was used for purification for the Mithraic lion grade, and signified preservation for the Perses grade.<sup>139</sup> This recalls the portrayal of Mithras in another context, the magical papyrus B. M. P. gr. 46<sup>140</sup> in which Mithras (in the guise of Zeus-Helios-Mithras-Sarapis) is invoked by the terms *meliouche*, *melikerta*, and *meligenetōr* – ‘he is the god who sustains (*echō*) with honey, who destroys (*keirō*) with honey, and who creates with honey.’<sup>141</sup> As Roger Beck concludes on the strength of these considerations: ‘Thus, Iamblichus’ episode of the bees, the poisonous honey,

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<sup>136</sup> Porphyry wrote a century or so after Iamblichus, but Numenius was a contemporary of Iamblichus.

<sup>137</sup> Cf. also Luther H. Martin, *Hellenistic Religions. An Introduction* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 114.

<sup>138</sup> Roger Beck, “Ritual, Myth, Doctrine, and Initiation in the Mysteries of Mithras: New Evidence from a Cult Vessel,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 90 (2000): 145–80, and Beck, “Soteriology,” 532.

<sup>139</sup> Porphyry, *Cave* 15 and 16, Beck, “Soteriology,” 532.

<sup>140</sup> In Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae* vol. 1, 180ff, Beck, “Soteriology,” 532 n.10.

<sup>141</sup> Beck, “Soteriology,” 532, ‘These complementary yet contrasted functions are well captured by Iamblichus – if allegory is his game – in the image of the bees and the honey which both feeds and kills.’

the *Scheintod* of the lovers, and the death of some of their pursuers, if it is allegorical, may have to do equally with the larger cycle of genesis into this mortal world and its hazards as with initiation into the smaller compass of the Mithraic *spelaeum*.<sup>142</sup>

There is another narrative element that is significant in this context, and that is the plot of the novel itself, a tale of dramatic reversals and adventures, and ill fortune. This in itself was indicative of what being initiated into a mystery saved one from: a life of wandering, as the prospective initiates at Eleusis would declare (repeating the ancient words spoken by the goddess Demeter herself upon arrival at the site): ‘And so I wandered and have come here.’<sup>143</sup> Perhaps the clearest and most extensive expression of this is to be found in Book 11 of Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses, or The Golden Ass*, in the scenes of Lucius’s return to human form:

[As the high priest says to Lucius after shedding his asinine form] ‘Lucius, my friend,’ he said, ‘you have endured and performed many labours and withstood the buffetings of all the winds of ill luck. Now at last you have put into the harbour of peace and stand before the altar of loving-kindness. ... But blind Fortune, after tossing you maliciously about from peril to peril has somehow, without thinking what she was doing, landed you here in religious felicity. Let her begone now and fume furiously wherever she pleases, let her find some other plaything for her cruel hands. ... What use was served by making you over to bandits, wild dogs and cruel masters, by setting your feet on dangerous stony path, by holding you in daily terror of death? Rest assured that you are now safe under the protection of the true Fortune, all-seeing Providence, whose clear light shines for all the gods that are.’<sup>144</sup>

Or as Luther Martin translates it: rescued from ‘a maze of miserable wanderings.’<sup>145</sup> While the tale of Lucius extols the power of Isis Tyche, the idea of being saved from wandering was not absent from Mithraism either. A Mithraic

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<sup>142</sup> Beck, “Soteriology,” 532.

<sup>143</sup> *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* 133, Luther H. Martin, “The Anti-Individualistic Ideology of Hellenistic Culture,” *Numen* 41, no. 2 (1994): 127.

<sup>144</sup> Page 179, Penguin edition.

<sup>145</sup> Martin, “Anti-Individualistic Ideology,” 127.

catechism from Egypt speaks of this earthly life as a wandering,<sup>146</sup> so too an inscription on a base of a sculpture of ‘Bacchus, with a Satyr, a Maenad, a Silenus, and Pan’ found in the Walbrook Mithraeum in London, which (corrected) reads: *hominibus vagis vitam*, ‘life to wandering humans.’<sup>147</sup> Several things strike one as noteworthy here. First, the fact that for both the Isiac and Mithraic mysteries, sublunar existence can be characterized as ‘wandering.’ And if ‘wandering’ is equivalent to being buffeted by the whims of Fate and ill fortune (so dramatically portrayed in the novels as extreme adventures, exposures to dangers, deaths and resurrections, and reversals of fortune) then all the novels, and all the mysteries have the same ‘message,’ namely good endings after lengthy runs of very bad luck. This is why I contend that it is not necessary to identify every individual novel with a specific (and separate) mystery deity. At the level of mythic narrative, the same rhetoric is operative. It is not without significance that a statue of Bacchus should be found in a mithraeum, especially when accompanied by such exotic characters as a satyr, a Silenus, a maenad and a Pan. All these are present in the fresco cycle of the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii. So here is another link with the mysteries. Second, if initiation into the mysteries is to be understood as a kind of homecoming, as in Eleusis and in Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses*, then the question arises, a homecoming to what? For the *mystēs* at Eleusis it is incorporation into Athenian society, for Lucius it was the incorporation into an exclusive society of devotees of an oriental god, complete with characteristic dress and hairstyle (or rather, lack of it).<sup>148</sup> Lucius’s return to human form, literally a return to the human world (*redieris ad homines*, *Metamorphoses* 11.6), is ‘predicated on his association with the society of Isis, one of the most prominent of the Hellenistic subcultures.’<sup>149</sup> As the period progresses, from the classical period to the principate, the mysteries increasingly play the role of constituting new, fictive kin relationships as basis for a new social and collective

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<sup>146</sup> Martin, “Anti-Individualistic Ideology,” 127.

<sup>147</sup> Martin, “Anti-Individualistic Ideology,” 127.

<sup>148</sup> ‘Socialized into a companionship of priests,’ *Metamorphoses* 11.19, Martin, “Anti-Individualistic Ideology,” 128.

<sup>149</sup> Martin, “Anti-Individualistic Ideology,” 127.

identity.<sup>150</sup> And this is why the mysteries, in the imperial era, replete with imperial imagery and ‘imperialised gods,’ were such effective vehicles for the maintenance of imperial society. It has been remarked upon in other contexts, that each of the novels end with the lover pair coming home, reintegrated into their home society, taking their place in society. Should one understand these good endings as more than mere pleasurable denouements to adventure stories, but rather as fictionalised mirrors of the socially constitutive function of the mysteries? It is an attractive option, and one I will pursue and argue in greater detail in the last chapter, but if we might peek ahead, the same ideology of wandering through ill fortune to come home in a new society under the sway of good fortune is exactly the (promoted) mentality governing the imperial era. The mysteries of the imperial era were part of this social discourse.

So, however one wishes to approach the question, the issue of the relation of ancient fiction and religion will not go away. In addition, in order to account for the genesis of the novel as literary genre recourse is still often taken to the religious mentality of late antiquity, a putative degenerated ‘age of anxiety.’ But this is too vague (even misleading) and does not help to describe in greater detail and perhaps theoretically more appropriately the phenomenon of ancient fiction vis-à-vis the Graeco-Roman world of the late first century onwards but also the religious mentality(-ies) of that world. The topic of the ancient novel in its relation to late Antique religion can be reconceptualized and redescribed, but for that one needs to approach the question from a different theoretical framework, and this study is an experiment in that direction.

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<sup>150</sup> Martin, “Anti-Individualistic Ideology,” 128.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RELIGION, FICTION, AND GENRE: SETTING THE STAGE FOR THEORIZING ANCIENT MYSTERY RELIGIONS**

#### 1. FROM THE GENRE OF THE NOVEL TO THEORIZING ANCIENT MYSTERY RELIGIONS

##### *1.1 Defining the Genre of Ancient Fiction: Whence the Origins of the Novel?*

Right from the inception of the modern study of the ancient novel questions as to genre and especially the origins of the genre have dominated discussion of ancient fiction. Erwin Rohde's *Der griechische Roman und seine Vorläufer* set the stage for a concentration on the problem of the novel's genesis. In keeping with an older school of thought for whom interpretation meant the identification of sources and the explanation of origins, the ancient novel has been variously related to the epic, Hellenistic historiography, the novella, fantastic travel tales, love poetry, folk stories,

popular narratives, drama and school exercises in rhetoric.<sup>151</sup> Modern theorists on the origin of the novel, such as Bakhtin, Frye, and Scholes and Kellogg, would come to insist on the novel as a hybrid, as an ‘un-genre,’ cannibalistically ingesting all the other genres,<sup>152</sup> a point made with regard to the ancient novel as well.

## 1.2 *The Novel and Its World: Fiction and History*

While there is something to be said for an investigation of intertextual relations obtaining between ancient novels and these other genres of Hellenistic and Graeco-Roman literary production, what is of interest in the traditional search for the origins of the genre of the ancient novel, is the way in which these questions helped frame the issue of the relation of the novel to the world in which it originated.<sup>153</sup> It was Ben

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<sup>151</sup> Niklas Holzberg, *The Ancient Novel. An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1995), 29. For an earlier statement of this view, see Rudolf Helm, *Der Antike Roman* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956), 7 – the novel first appeared in the guise of other literary forms before it ‘came out’ as novel: ‘Zunächst trat es nur in andern Literaturformen in die Erscheinung, und im Epos, im Drama, im Mimus ward dem Romanhaften ein Heimatsrecht, ehe es selbständig Gestalt gewann.’ The epic is succeeded by novel; the novel absorbed the adventure topics of foundlings, pirates, recognitions and rediscoveries; the novel represents in narrative the fortune-driven *Schicksale* of humans enacted in the art of mime. These following in the footsteps of the progenitor of all the modern studies of the Greek novel, Erwin Rohde: the Greek novel derives its soul of the erotic fable from erotic poetry of Hellenistic poets, embodied this in fantasy travel tales inherited from the poets (*Reisefabulistik*), infused by a healthy dose of rhetoric (the novel is located right in the centre of the Second Sophistic), and spiced with a dice of entertaining history writing mixed with romantic love scenes – a poor genre, considering the stereotypy of its plot elements, reported in Karl Kerényi, *Die griechisch-orientalische Romanliteratur in religionsgeschichtlicher Beleuchtung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1962 [1927]), vi.

<sup>152</sup> Andries W. Oliphant, “A Small New Thing: The Novel’s Histories of Convergence and Divergence,” Unpublished paper read at The European Seminar for Research in Fiction, held at the University of Aarhus, Denmark, June 2001 (Aarhus, Denmark, 2001): In contradistinction to theories that either posit an unbroken history of the novel running from ancient sagas, epics, and legends (thus positing an ancient prehistory), or assert that the novel is a creation of 18th century Europe (thus positing a break with pre-novelistic narratives) Oliphant argues that ‘the novel is a hybrid form of narrative with no positive identity. While not simply a continuation, it emerges from past forms of narrative to establish a form which, for all its distinctiveness, draws on other literary and non-literary forms of narrative, both old and new. Its difference from other narratives and other literary forms implies a complex relationship to them. It is a mongrel form with no stable or pure identity’; see also the overviews in Wallace Martin, *Recent Theories of Narrative* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1986), 31–56.

<sup>153</sup> Central to these concerns, in light of how the organization of narrative is theorized, is a conceptualization of the way the novel projects reality and world: ‘The novel, as a specific form of narrative, has since its emergence spawned a wide range of theories that attempt to locate its origins and specify its nature. This is done by distinguishing it from other forms of narrative. Fuelled by a taxonomic mania, these attempts have sought to establish the distinctiveness of the novel in relation to

Perry who gave such eloquent currency to the idea that the genre of the novel was *sui generis* – ‘The first romance was deliberately planned and written by an individual author, its inventor. He conceived it on a Tuesday afternoon in July, or some other day or month of the year.’<sup>154</sup> And subsequently much energy was spent on the exact delineation of the genre of the ancient novel, the essence of fictionality and its difference from history.<sup>155</sup> Here, however, one runs up against a problem when one considers how the relation fiction-history has been conceived in the history of theorizing the novel and its origins.<sup>156</sup> If the modern novel is born in the ‘epic synthesis,’ the reuniting of the two strands of empirical narrative (allegiance to truth) and fictional narrative (allegiance to the ideal) – both born from the epic as the allegiance to the traditional tale or *mythos* – that is, born of the grafting of fact on to fiction, this is no less true of the ancient Greek novel/love romance.<sup>157</sup> Characteristic of the novel, modern and ancient, is the way it represents a deliberate confluence of reality and fantasy, fact and fiction. If it was the vividness (*enargeia*) of the narration (implying the presence of story-telling in history) that compelled belief in the veracity of the historical account,<sup>158</sup> then equally it is the conventions of realism employed in the novel that created the ‘illusion of belief’ in fiction as if it were fact.<sup>159</sup> The cluster of rhetorical devices that combine to create the verisimilitude and believed-veracity of

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other forms of narrative as well as to other genres. Central to this has been a preoccupation with determining the epistemological status of [the] novel,’ Oliphant, “A Small New Thing”.

<sup>154</sup> *The Ancient Romances* (1976), 175.

<sup>155</sup> John J. Winkler, “The Invention of Romance,” in *The Search for the Ancient Novel* (ed. James Tatum; Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 23–38; Daniel L. Selden, “Genre of Genre,” in *The Search for the Ancient Novel* (ed. James Tatum; Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 39–64; and David Konstan, “The Invention of Fiction,” in *Ancient Fiction and Early Christian Narrative* (ed. Ronald F. Hock, et al.; Atlanta: Scholars, 1998), 3–17.

<sup>156</sup> For an overview of ancient views on fictionality and history, see T.P. Wiseman, “Lying Historians: Seven Types of Mendacity,” in *Lies and Fiction in the Ancient World* (ed. Christopher Gill and T.P. Wiseman; Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1993), 122–46, and J.R. Morgan, “Make-Believe and Make Believe: The Fictionality of the Greek Novels,” in *Lies and Fiction in the Ancient World* (ed. Christopher Gill and T.P. Wiseman; Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1993), 175–229.

<sup>157</sup> Martin, *Recent Theories*, 36–40, with reference to the taxonomies of Frye and Scholes and Kellogg. If the modern novel is a modern counterpart of the epic and a resurrection in the Spanish picaresque and *Don Quixote* of the Greek prose romance, as modern theorists hold, then modern theories of the origin of the novel may profitably be used in cross-epochal comparisons to elucidate the character of the ancient novel.

<sup>158</sup> Wiseman, “Lying Historians,” 140–5.

<sup>159</sup> Morgan, “Make-Believe and Make Believe,” 195–6.

fiction, called realism, include historiographic form,<sup>160</sup> real geography,<sup>161</sup> authentic detail, pretense to historical authenticity,<sup>162</sup> closeness to social reality, and manner of narration.<sup>163</sup> What we have in the ancient novel is fiction in the form of history.<sup>164</sup> This is in a sense a mirror image of history as discipline (and the principle holds equally well for the practice of ancient history), being itself the product of self-sustaining fictions – the ability to diagnose the false (as myth),<sup>165</sup> scientificity as the preferential (referential) discourse dealing with the ‘real,’<sup>166</sup> and the ideological repressing of its own social conditions of production, thus hiding the values built into its narrative representation of the past (as the fictional/writerly connection of events in meaningful patterns giving the narrative a pragmatic efficacy) from view.<sup>167</sup> So the product of history writing as the sum total of a culture’s representations of the past ‘can be compared to myth if we define myth as a story permeated by social practices.’<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> The titles of novels such as *Aethiopica*, *Ephesiaca*, *Babyloniaca* occurred as titles of historical works too. Other novels’ titles pretend to relate real events, as in Chariton’s novel ‘Events concerning Chaereas and Callirhoe.’ So too the beginnings of the novels situate the following tales in the midst of purported real events: ‘The Syracusan general, Hermocrates, the man who defeated the Athenians, had a daughter, Callirhoe’ (Chariton); ‘There’s a city in Lesbos called Mytilene’ (Longus), to name only two examples. See Morgan, “Make-Believe and Make Believe,” 197–8.

<sup>161</sup> ‘The entire geography of the novel’s world – distances, directions, sailing times – approximates reality so closely that there seems nothing odd when the recent Budé Chariton includes a map tracing the fictitious movements of its fictitious characters,’ Morgan, “Make-Believe and Make Believe,” 198.

<sup>162</sup> Deliberately emulating historians like Herodotus in style, Morgan, “Make-Believe and Make Believe,” 198.

<sup>163</sup> Not only emulating the diction of Herodotus or Thucydides, but also using archaisizing Atticizing diction, and declamatory descriptions (*ekphrasis*), Morgan, “Make-Believe and Make Believe,” 205.

<sup>164</sup> Morgan, “Make-Believe and Make Believe,” 205.

<sup>165</sup> It is largely through rhetorical operations that historiography as technical discourse is able to distinguish between the two discourses of science and fiction. In accordance with its own criteria history as science ‘credits itself as having a special relationship to the “real” because its contrary is posited as “false,”’ Michel De Certeau, *The Certeau Reader* (ed. Graham Ward; Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 38.

<sup>166</sup> De Certeau, *Certeau Reader*, 39, 46.

<sup>167</sup> ‘... [T]he “real” as represented by historiography does not correspond to the “real” that determines its production. It hides behind the picture of a past the present that produces and organizes it ... [A] mise en scène of a (past) reality, that is, the historiographical discourse itself, occults the social and technical apparatus of the professional institution that produces it ... Representation thus disguises the praxis that organizes it,’ De Certeau, *Certeau Reader*, 40.

<sup>168</sup> De Certeau, *Certeau Reader*, 51.

In discussions of ancient fiction, fiction is regularly contrasted to history (which is identified with what is true, reliable and credible, that is anti-fiction).<sup>169</sup> The vast amount of histories produced in the period, together with the copious amounts of revisioning of history and myth (and one need only to consult Albrecht Dihle's extensive overview in *Greek and Latin Literature of the Roman Empire. From Augustus to Justinian* [London/New York: Routledge, 1994 (1989)] to gain a sense of the output), should alert us to another aspect of the writing of history, as Michel de Certeau pointed out, the presence of the fictional right at the very heart of history. In order to understand and properly evaluate the claims to truth in historiography one needs to pay attention to the rhetoricity of history itself, its own curious mixture of science and fiction, of myth and history. In his 'History: Science and Fiction' (from *Heterologies*)<sup>170</sup> Michel de Certeau inverts the political and logical distinction between science/history and fiction by showing how fictionality as the repressed Other intrudes upon and resides right in the centre of the discourse of history. The historian's discourse does not escape the constraints of those socio-economic structures that determine the production of representation in society. The corollary of this is that the represented 'real' does not correspond to the 'real' real outside the discourse from which it was generated. It functions rather on the level of the mythical by creating a 'theatre of references and of common values.'<sup>171</sup> The resulting story has the character of an injunctive, it 'signifies' in the way a command is issued. History, then, is a performative discourse, and the storytelling that characterizes it has a pragmatic efficacy in that as it recounts the real, it manufactures it. Furthermore, history as myth needs to repress and hide the memory of the conditions under which it is produced in order to ground the discourse in a timeless world of evidentiary quality to give it legitimacy. In doing that it changes contingent history into Nature. History as fiction, and fiction as history, both, are performative discourses.

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<sup>169</sup> 'The internecine strife between history and storytelling is very old,' De Certeau, *Certeau Reader*, 37.

<sup>170</sup> De Certeau, *Certeau Reader*, 37–52.

<sup>171</sup> De Certeau, *Certeau Reader*, 41.

### 1.3 Fiction, Truth, and Mythmaking

The problem of truth vs. fiction is exactly indicated by the opposition of myth and history, *mythos* and *logos*. These two terms originally denoted the same reality, namely ‘word’ or ‘story’. In the ancient world a *mythologos* was a storyteller, but when later Greek philosophers and historians started to question the traditional tales regarding the gods and heroes in the period of ‘sophistic enlightenment’ the word *mythos* came to mean ‘implausible story’ (Herodotus 2.23.1) or ‘mere fabulous tale telling’ as opposed to true history (Thucydides 1.22.4), or popular but false stories and even outright lies opposed to *logos*.<sup>172</sup> What should not be forgotten is the fact that the historical questioning of myth is not in the first instance an indication of the possibility of determining truth vs. falsehood, but of a redefinition of society via its defining and identity giving stories, at the very least a contest as to whose stories will count as definitive, as is clear from the polemics in Plato’s *Republic* (398a; also 605c and 568a-c): while his own myths sound very much like ... myths, what is at stake in his repudiation of the ‘stories of the poets’ is the contest for the right to define the proper constitution of the state, the right to define the proper constitution of ‘the good’, ‘the true’ and ‘the just.’ As Wendy Doniger put it: It was a contest in which ‘the myths that Plato didn’t like ... were lies and the myths he liked ... were truths.’<sup>173</sup> What is at stake here in the opposition of myth and *logos*/history is the politics of representation, the politics of discursive constructions of what should count as the real, as well as constructions of worldview and society. In light of the foregoing it might well be asked whether the concept ‘myth’ might not be better understood as a discursive strategy whereby a group of people fabricate their most important meanings.<sup>174</sup> In this perspective myths cease to be seen as narratives about the gods or

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<sup>172</sup> Russell T. McCutcheon, “Myth,” in *Guide to the Study of Religion* (ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon; London/New York: Cassell, 2000), 191.

<sup>173</sup> Cited in McCutcheon, “Myth,” 192.

<sup>174</sup> McCutcheon, “Myth,” 199.

heroes and set in primordial times, but rather as a technique or strategy, not a genre with stable characteristics that allow us to distinguish myth from folk tale, saga, legend or fable, but as a class of social argumentation found in all human cultures, as active processes.<sup>175</sup> Myths are vehicles for the construction of social identities, ordinary human means of fashioning and authorizing their lived-in and ‘believed in’ worlds, of the transformation of collective agreements of a people into truths held to be self-evident. Following Paul Veyne in his study on the myths of the Greeks, one can say that truth is not a transhistorical invariant but a work of the constitutive imagination.<sup>176</sup>

‘Mythmaking is a species of ideology production, of ideal-making, where “ideal” is conceived not as an abstract, absolute value but as a contingent, localized construct that comes to represent and simultaneously reproduce certain specific social values as if they were inevitable and universal.’<sup>177</sup> Social formation by means of mythmaking is explicitly caught up in the ideological strategies of totalization, naturalization, rationalization and universalization. Despite attempts to construct a past or future long removed from the present, mythmaking takes place in a specific socio-political moment and supports a specific judgment about the here and now. One man’s myth is another man’s history!

## 2. THE REFERENTIALITY OF FICTION

### 2.1 *What is Fiction (Good) For?*

The upshot of arguments such as the foregoing is, of course, is that generic classifications that pit fiction against other genres as something in a class of its own (and then divorced from historical reality) are not very helpful in answering questions as to the connections between ancient fiction and religion. Rather, what is needed is to

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<sup>175</sup> McCutcheon, “Myth,” 200.

<sup>176</sup> Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths? An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination* (trans. Paula Wissing; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 117–8.

<sup>177</sup> McCutcheon, “Myth,” 204.

understand fictional discourse as one performative discourse among many others. Only then will it be possible to come to any kind of meaningful conclusion as to the relation of ancient fiction to late Antique mystery religions – the Merkelbachian question this study started off with.

At issue in the ‘Merkelbach wars’ is the question of the referentiality of fictional works, that is, the relationship obtaining between fiction and the reality surrounding it and about which it speaks. In other words, what is fiction (good) for? Or yet again, what is the function of fiction? Almost consistently commentators approach the ancient novels through modern eyes, eyes accustomed to viewing fiction as ‘that which one reads for relaxation’, that is non-serious reading, or readings without social and political consequences. Thus Berber Wesseling writes on the audience and their use of ancient fiction, ‘the function is that of all fiction, namely entertainment ... this entertainment provided by the novels consisted in satisfaction of emotional needs, wish fulfillment, escape, and – in addition – intellectual or aesthetic pleasure.’<sup>178</sup> Niklas Holzberg in a similar argument gives a nod in the direction of comparison of the ancient novel with modern media genres, film and television:

It [the ancient novel] expresses an outlook on life which today would be labelled ‘escapism’. In this too the ancient novel resembles the ‘dream factory’ of the modern film and television world. The novels of antiquity are principally designed to indulge the consumer’s need to compensate private problems by withdrawing into a make-believe world.<sup>179</sup>

Albrecht Dihle, in his magisterial and voluminous *Greek and Latin Literature of the Roman Empire. From Augustus to Justinian*, put an even sharper spin on the novel’s dissociation from its context with his dismissive judgement of the exotic settings and fantasy tales characteristic of ancient fiction: ‘Of course the works do to

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<sup>178</sup> Berber Wesseling, “The Audience of the Ancient Novels,” in *Groningen Colloquia on the Novel* (ed. H Hofmann; Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1988), 77.

<sup>179</sup> Holzberg, *Ancient Novel*, 30. It is ironical that Holzberg should choose to compare the ‘escapism’ of ancient fiction with modern cultural production in the form of film and television, for these have received intense scrutiny in cultural studies as discursive artifacts and practices, as constitutive of social identity and social ideologies. See the discussion of Eagleton below.

some extent reflect the authors' own everyday lives: but most references to such contemporary local reality are certainly unintentional, as, on the whole, *the authors meant to transport their readers into a fantasy world* (my emphasis, GvdH).<sup>180</sup>

## 2.2 Pitting Fiction Against History and Context

The net effect of statements like the foregoing is to divorce ancient novels from the world surrounding them, an operation facilitated by an understanding of fiction as unreality, fantasy, and 'made-up.' This is what is at stake in the definition of the genre prose fiction or the ancient novel. When the genre of prose fiction is defined as a static category attaching to the object, the fictional work, it necessitates oppositional demarcations of genres, for example fiction/novel versus history, versus science, versus philosophy, versus religion, etc. When fiction/novel is contrasted to history ('human doings in the past' [Herodotus 1.1] however much embellished), to science (how the world works), to philosophy (what is truth? what is virtue?), and religion (the nature of and service to the gods), fiction is relegated to the private world of individual entertainment, to fantasy, and make-believe. Fiction is thus not-history, not-philosophy, not-science, not-religion. Even more pointedly, in this view fiction is by nature intentionally designed not to relate to reality outside it, whether that be the shared world of myths of a given group in antiquity or other bodies of transmitted narratives or traditional lore, audiences or addressees, or as David Konstan puts it, 'rather than respond to a common cultural stock, it offers itself as an exemplum.'<sup>181</sup> It has 'referential autonomy' and deliberately suspends referentiality.<sup>182</sup> A case of art imitating art. The ancient novel is in this sense *sui generis* in that it does not interact with any world outside of it however complex that interaction may be conceived to be, it just is itself, it does not erect any text world that relates in any way to another

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<sup>180</sup> Albrecht Dihle, *Greek and Latin Literature of the Roman Empire. From Augustus to Justinian* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994), 236.

<sup>181</sup> Konstan, "Invention," 14.

<sup>182</sup> Konstan, "Invention," 6, 14.

world outside it. 'Rather than addressing a defined and self-conscious cultural group, the novel constructed for itself a literary community of readers whose point of common reference was the novel itself. The implicit awareness on the part of writers and readers of the novel's referential independence is what constitutes the genre as fiction.'<sup>183</sup>

Put like this, of course, it becomes impossible to even contemplate with any seriousness the theories of Merkelbach and Kerenyi, for by definition fiction cannot refer to religious reality. When nevertheless it is granted that novels do reflect their religious context this is just because it forms part of the *Lokalkolorit*, the scenic context featured in the narrative:

The novel has been seen as the Hellenistic myth, expressive of man's solitude and search for union with another being, human or divine. Such a view, overplays the solitude of the central characters in novels, and we do not need to explain why the adventure plot, familiar since the *Odyssey*, continued to attract the readers of our period. Love is likewise a primary ingredient of literature which calls for no special explanation. But the combination of love and religion tells us much about the spiritual life a novelist might expect his reader to find meaningful. *Religion was an increasingly prominent constituent of private and public life. That suffices to explain its role in the novel*, and few scholars accept Merkelbach's ingenious hypothesis that all the love romances save Chariton are mystery texts, communicating an allegory of the progress of the initiate through ordeals, death and resurrection to recognition by and union with the deity. *The correspondences Merkelbach noted are adequately explained by the common model of both novels and mystery ritual. That model is life, and it is about life as a Graeco-Roman reader saw it (or wished to see it) that the novelist writes.* (Emphasis mine, GvdH)<sup>184</sup>

More recently also Graham Anderson dismissed the Kerenyi/Merkelbach hypothesis of the novels being mystery texts, by criticizing not only the idea that the

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<sup>183</sup> Konstan, "Invention," 15.

<sup>184</sup> Ewen Bowie, "The Greek Novel," in *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature. Vol. I: Greek Literature. Part 4: The Hellenistic Period and the Empire* (ed. P.E. Easterling and B.M.W. Knox; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 127–8.

novels originate in mystery religions, but also the idea that they are scripted religious liturgies:

... not only is our knowledge of Greek mystery religions still very incomplete; it has always seemed as difficult to imagine the vast baroque novel of Heliodorus as a liturgical performance, however much primeval myth or ancient religion may have found its way into the text. No one has to postulate local mysteries at Bayreuth or La Scala to explain the plots of *Parsival* or *Aida*.<sup>185</sup>

### 2.3 But Fiction Shares in the Life of Its Context

It is one thing to hold that the ancient novels, being fiction, do not give direct access to the religious, social, and cultural context of the Graeco-Roman world, and that they serve (only) to entertain, to serve ‘emotional needs,’ provide ‘escapism,’ solve ‘private problems,’ tell us about the ‘spiritual life’ of the readership/audience, but beyond that do not themselves maintain religious identity or contribute to cult life.<sup>186</sup>

It is quite another thing to recognize that behind phrases like these lurks an unspoken understanding of Graeco-Roman society and how fiction was produced and communicated in that society – social questions being implied since it deals with social discourse. There is therefore a curious duality in the preceding views about fiction and referentiality. On the one hand it is all fantasy ‘made-up’, dreamed up, created out of thin air as it were, unrelated to historical contexts. And yet they are still

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<sup>185</sup> Graham Anderson, *Ancient Fiction. The Novel in the Graeco-Roman World* (London/Sydney: Croom Helm, 1984), 4. However, Anderson’s stand on the issue is not without ambiguity – a later chapter (5, ‘Myth and mystery’, 75–87) devotes much attention to the presence of religion and mystery in the ancient novel, although the main direction of use runs from novel to religion: ‘... the ablest authors are able to use religion as a servant of fiction’ (85) and while many novel plots have a religious dimension these are mostly manipulated and altered by the authors for their purposes and according to their tastes and for the artistic effect. This is again a case for religion as *Lokalkolorit*.

<sup>186</sup> This is a classic instance of the effect of the separation of religion and the public sphere so prevalent in the West and that still dominates our conceptualization of religion. When religion is defined as ‘belief’, that is an interior state of affect, related to a system of doctrines held to be true (by the individual through intellectual assent), then of course religion is not related to fiction or other cultural artifacts in mutually determining systems of signification and production of discourse. Equally in this view is fiction ‘that which individuals do with their loneliness.’ But for a critique of this understanding of religion, see Donald S. Lopez, “Belief,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (ed. Mark C. Taylor; Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 21–35.

regarded as speaking about recognisable reality, the recognisable contemporary social world, ‘sharing in the life of the Graeco-Roman world.’<sup>187</sup> It is this fact, ‘that it shares in the life of the Graeco-Roman world’ that forces a consideration of ancient fiction as communicative texts, as rhetorical and discursive artifacts, for what is important here is *heuresis* and *taxis*, (re)presentation and arrangement/configuration, how a world is projected by configuring references as well as cultural and social codes (not only the complete repertorium of linguistic signs, but also conventional ways of speaking, as well as conventional ways of presenting social and cultural phenomena, value-laden as this or that).

Ironically, the putative ‘escapism’ and fantasy world of ancient fiction can also be read differently and lead to an almost exact opposite conclusion. The very same ‘escapism’ and fantasy world that divorced the ancient novel from its context can also be understood to ground it in that very historical context. Thus Heinrich Kuch could argue that the happy endings following on the characters’ travails and travels with their triumph over misery so characteristic of ancient fiction (and not only of the ‘true

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<sup>187</sup> It has long been recognized that ancient fiction constitutes a perfect mining ground for insight into the contemporary social, cultural, and political contexts and values of the Graeco-Roman world. For instance, gender relations, the position of women and marriage, social classes, urban culture, political, social, and cultural customs have all received their share of attention. Among the many essays dealing with social reality and the ancient novel/ancient fiction one can point to the following: Judith Perkins, “The Social World of The *Acts of Peter*,” in *The Search for the Ancient Novel* (ed. James Tatum; Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 296–307, Kurt Treu, “Der Realitätsgehalt des antiken Romans,” in *Der Antike Roman. Untersuchungen Zur literarischen Kommunikation und Gattungsgeschichte* (ed. Heinrich Kuch; Berlin: Akademie Verlag Berlin, 1989), 107–25, Fergus Millar, “The World of the *Golden Ass*,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 71 (1981): 63–75, Suzanne Saïd, “The City in the Greek Novel,” in *The Search for the Ancient Novel* (ed. James Tatum; Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 216–36, John Bodel, “Trimalchio’s Underworld,” in *The Search for the Ancient Novel* (ed. James Tatum; Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 237–59, and Brigitte Egger, “Women and Marriage in the Greek Novels: The Boundaries of Romance,” in *The Search for the Ancient Novel* (ed. James Tatum; Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 260–80. Related to this but pursuing the issue of the communication of the novel in its historical context of origin and production, that is as discursive artifact in a social context, are the following: Douglas R. Edwards, “Defining the Web of Power. The Novelist Chariton and His City Aphrodisias,” *JAAR* 62, no. 3 (1994): 699–718, Douglas R. Edwards, “Pleasurable Reading or Symbols of Power? Religious Themes and Social Context in Chariton,” in *Ancient Fiction and Early Christian Narrative* (ed. Ronald F. Hock, et al.; Atlanta: Scholars, 1998), 31–46, and Christine M. Thomas, “At Home in the City of Artemis. Religion in Ephesos in the Literary Imagination of the Roman Period,” in *Ephesos Metropolis of Asia: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Its Archaeology, Religion, and Culture. Harvard Theological Studies 41* (ed. Helmut Koester; Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1995), 81–117. It is this latter approach that I deem of greater promise for the line of inquiry pursued in this study.

novels' or romances) represent for its readers an imaginary triumph over the harshness, miseries, and dangers that constitute the threatening environment of their (real) daily lives. The 'utopian' nature of the ancient novel resides in its erection of a counterreality to contemporary states of affairs.<sup>188</sup> The essence of this argument is that the reference of a work of fiction can be veiled in that it is ostensibly about the story facts, the contents of the work, while on another level it speaks to and into its social context of origin.<sup>189</sup> This study is concerned with this complex interplay of dual reference in literature.

### 3. RECONCEIVING THE GENRE OF THE NOVEL

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<sup>188</sup> Heinrich Kuch, "Funktionswandlungen des antiken Romans," in *Der Antike Roman. Untersuchungen zur literarischen Kommunikation und Gattungsgeschichte* (ed. Heinrich Kuch; Berlin: Akademie Verlag Berlin, 1989), 75–6. The volume originated in the former East Germany and it may be surmised that a contextual reading of fiction should be especially at home in such an ideological context (but make no mistake, all readings are ideological, even or maybe especially those that ostensibly eschew contextual readings): 'Such "pure" literary theory is an academic myth: some of the theories we have examined in this book are nowhere more clearly ideological than in their attempts to ignore history and politics altogether. Literary theories are not to be upbraided for being political, but for being on the whole covertly or unconsciously so – for the blindness with which they offer as a supposedly "technical", "self-evident", "scientific" or "universal" truth doctrines which with a little reflection can be seen to relate to and reinforce the particular interests of particular groups of people at particular times,' Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory. An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 195. However, ideological or discourse analysis in its many guises (and I include New Historicism here) has become a respectable approach or 'broad church' or cocktail of methodologies in mainstream literary theory (one needs only to think of such hugely influential scholars as Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton), and it is in this line of inquiry that I find myself at home too. Eagleton labels this approach 'political theory.'

<sup>189</sup> This is something with which gospel scholars are intimately familiar. For example: the two Gospels of Matthew and John are ostensibly narratives about the life and career of Jesus of Nazareth 50 to 60 years before. Yet the nascent identity formation of early Christian groups in Syria and Ephesus in opposition to Judaism is narrativized into the life story of Jesus, with the effect that the stories are less about Jesus of Nazareth than about the social contexts, the social interests, and the emerging identities of these early Christian communities. See for instance with regard to the Gospel of John the classic statement of this argument by J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), as well as Wayne A. Meeks, "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," *JBL* 91 (1972): 44–72, and Wayne A. Meeks, "Breaking Away: Three New Testament Pictures of Christianity's Separation of the Jewish Communities," in *"To See Ourselves as Others See Us." Christians, Jews, "Others" in Late Antiquity* (ed. J. Neusner and E.S. Frerichs; Chico: Scholars Press, 1985), 93–115; in my own work on the Gospel of John I have worked on the implications of literary theory (especially theory of communicative texts) on the rhetoric of the narrative, see for example Gerhard van den Heever, "Finding Data in Unexpected Places (Or: From Text-Linguistics to Socio-Rhetoric). Towards a Socio-Rhetorical Reading of John's Gospel," *Neotestamentica* 33, no. 2 (1999): 343–64. Even earlier this has been a cornerstone of historical criticism of the gospels, the way social interests have been written into the transmitted traditions.

### 3.1 *Placing the Genre of the Ancient Novel in the Domain of Rhetoric and Discourse*

To rephrase the issue of the genre of the ancient novel and the function of fiction in terms of its contextuality is to take leave of generic definition as a case of taxonomy and form, which cannot be solved anyway, and to transpose the original problem of the novel and religion into the domain of rhetoric and discourse.<sup>190</sup> Genres are ‘literary institutions’ or social contracts between authors and readers,<sup>191</sup> on the first level, and on the second level, conventions pertaining to later readers decoding the communication of the work. On both levels identification of genre functions to signify the proper use of the cultural artifact, but understood in the sense of ‘social contract.’<sup>192</sup> The diction of the original work, the Atticising language and style, the references to Homeric epic, the clearly rhetorical style of the narrated speeches, all attest to the embeddedness of the ancient novels in social conventions of communication as these were valued and authorized within the circles now identified with that cultural movement called the Second Sophistic. On the second level, that of modern scholarship, it is equally true that our conceptualization of the nature of fiction also impact on our reading and use of ancient fiction. This means that we need to understand and interpret literary works on three levels simultaneously: on the most immediate level, from the perspective of the reader, the text is the interweaving of words, phrases, expressions, motifs and themes, and references to an ‘outside’ world

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<sup>190</sup> ‘While genre study no longer predominates in scholarship on ancient fiction today, work in the field continues to consider categorization a prerequisite for exegesis ... The point is not that scholars working in this area are unaware that the rubrics “novel” and “romance” are problematic, but that course offerings, conferences, and publications persist in massively reinforcing these categories as “a matter of convenience,” while remaining for the most part oblivious of the critical consequences this entails,’ Selden, “Genre,” 47, n. 81. This was the point made above, that a certain understanding of the genre of the ancient novels rendered them quaint (or barbarous and empty – so Erwin Rohde on the value of the *Aethiopica*), but effectively removed them from serious consideration when describing Graeco-Roman antiquity, attitudes displayed well by the authors referred to above.

<sup>191</sup> Selden, “Genre,” 47, a reference to Fredric Jameson.

<sup>192</sup> ‘[G]enres exist if readers think they exist,’ Selden, “Genre,” 45, citing Tzvetan Todorov, and then Selden continues with this perceptive remark (perceptive because this encapsulates the direction this discussion should follow): ‘... though if we take this observation seriously, it leads us from questions of taxonomy and form back to the sociology of fiction.’

which as an ensemble gives material voice to the vision of reality and the world espoused by the author and projected to the audience as an invitation to share in the vision (level 1 – the *heuresis* and *taxis* mentioned earlier). On another level the text is the nexus of rhetorical situation, audience and the complex world in which the communication event took place (level 2). On yet a third level, the text is also a nexus of all the above and the present reader, him/herself immersed in social settings and ideologies distinct from the world in which the textual communication originated (level 3).<sup>193</sup> To argue a case for the connection of ancient novel and religion is to operate on all three levels. Levels 1 and 2 concern an interpretation of the ancient novel in its communicative context. Level 3 concerns the way we conceptualize this relationship today (simply put: whether we today should read ancient novels as mystery texts, and use an array of theoretical tools to argue the case one way or another). (Of course, the argument pursued here provides the justification for the largely methodological and theoretical character of this study, because the ancient novels are what they are for us since we approach them through the complex maze of theoretical approaches and methodologies that define and inform our readerly contexts and activities. It is therefore, for me, not an option to approach the ancient novel with a naive description of the novel that remains captive to the contents level – what Jonathan Z. Smith in another context called ‘data writ large.’<sup>194</sup>)

In this understanding, how we conceptualize and theorize genre and fiction is a function of rhetoric, or put differently, genre is itself part of the rhetoric of the text, part of the act of presenting something *as* this or that, and it does so as a social game of communication. And it is only by moving beyond the boundaries of genre as taxonomy and form, and by reconceptualizing fiction as fiction-in-context that it becomes possible to contemplate the connection of the ancient novel and mystery religions of the Graeco-Roman age. After all, taxonomy and form are notoriously difficult categories to use in determining genre in the sense of how a work’s message

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<sup>193</sup> Van den Heever, “Finding Data,” 344.

<sup>194</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, “Bible and Religion,” *Bulletin of the Council of Societies for the Study of Religion* 29, no. 4 (2000): 91.

should be decoded. For instance, Gibbon certainly intended to write the history of the rise and fall of the Roman empire, but this is nowadays read as literature rather than as history; the Icelandic sagas are read as literature and as history; and the realism and purported truth-value of news reports share this very characteristic with the novel, at least at the time of the much-vaunted birth of the modern novel in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries – the word ‘novel’ was used for both true and fictional events.<sup>195</sup> Modern definitions of genre have equally contributed to the demise of usefulness of static categories of taxonomy and form in interpreting literary texts, for ‘genre’ itself is not a monolithic concept. Genre can refer to text organisation (that is, matters of taxonomy and form), text contents, but also to text function, all three kinds of definition being irreducible to each other.<sup>196</sup> It depends on how we want to relate to the texts in question and how we situate them in a given social context.<sup>197</sup> When text function (communicative functions such as expressive, referential, directive, phatic, poetic, and metalinguistic) also becomes a definitional category for organizing texts in a class, that is as genre, then we have finally moved the problem of ancient fiction and mystery religions into the domain of rhetoric and discourse. For genre is a *concept* and not a fixed property pertaining to an object. Genre as concept is manufactured and used by the reader/scholar in an act of classification and definition with a view to interpretation, and this, of course is where the rhetoric of inquiry comes in: reading texts *as* these kinds of texts, in light of certain interests, with a view to certain ends,

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<sup>195</sup> ‘A distinction between “fact” and “fiction”, then, seems unlikely to get us very far, not least because the distinction itself is often a questionable one ... Novels and news reports were neither clearly factual nor clearly fictional: our own sharp discriminations between these categories simply did not apply,’ Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 1–2. In the field of Biblical Studies an ongoing battle has raged between those who read the biblical ‘historical’ narrative as history (and therefore as factual) and those who read it as myth, or mythistory (and therefore as fiction).

<sup>196</sup> Jan van Luxemburg, et al., *Inleiding in de Literatuurwetenschap* (Muiderberg: Coutinho, 1983), 153–63. It is actually more complex than this: apart from the three categories mentioned, style, reading attitude, and language situation (how the voice is constructed) also come into play. Traditional readings of the ancient novel have remained mainly on the level of topic/contents and referentiality.

<sup>197</sup> ‘As the philosophers might say, “literature” and “weed” are *functional* rather than *ontological* terms: they tell us about what we do, not about the fixed nature of things. They tell us about the role of a text or a thistle in a social context, its relations with and differences from its surroundings, the way it behaves, the purposes it may be put to and the human practices clustered around it,’ Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 9.

the logic of which is generated by our social location – that is to say, reading, as much as writing, is a kind of discourse.<sup>198</sup>

### 3.2 *The Social Function of the Novelistic Text as Cultural Artifact*

To push the argument further one can say that a text is only adequately explained or interpreted when one moves beyond description of its ‘internal structure.’<sup>199</sup> A text as cultural artifact is embedded in the network of human relationships, social, political, and economic interactions, communication games, and conventions of linguistic significations that surround it. Therefore, a complete theory of the literary text must also account for the function of the text in society in order to explain the text adequately, that is, we must also know its ‘external relations.’ It is one of the tenets of discourse analysis that meaning originates in ever-widening circles of signification: words-in-sentence, sentences-in-text, texts-among-other texts, texts/literature-amidst-practices, and practices-in-society. Thus text interpretation is not only a question of semantics, but also implies and includes a sociology of literature where the focus is on the relations between texts and users of texts, relations characterized by pragmatic relations as described in semiotics.<sup>200</sup> At the heart of textual communication lies the twofold communicative structure of content and relationship, or report and command, a structure that marks all human communication. The report conveys the data of the communication, the command the instruction as to how it is to be taken, what to do with it. Communication and meta-communication thus go hand in hand and are two sides of the same coin. Each projection of reality as presented fiction-as-fact implies by virtue of its being selected, manipulated, and projected (that is, ‘being shown in

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<sup>198</sup> Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 10–2. Similarly, following in the footsteps of Jonathan Z Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (ed. Mark C Taylor; Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 281–2, Willi Braun, “Religion,” in *Guide to the Study of Religion* (ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon; London/New York: Cassell, 2000), 3–18 has argued for the ‘emptiness’ of religion as concept. Concepts are produced in and for the act of inquiry and analysis.

<sup>199</sup> T. A. Van Dijk, *Moderne Literatuurtheorie. Een Eksperimentele Inleiding* (Amsterdam: Van Gennep, 1971), 46.

<sup>200</sup> Van Dijk, *Moderne Literatuurtheorie*, 46–7.

this way or that' with a 'vocabulary that activates the following possibilities of meaning construction'), a command to see this, believe that and do the other.<sup>201</sup> To understand literary communication in this manner is to run counter to approaches to literature that assert its autonomy and independence from socio-historical reality, according to which literature creates its own reality and therefore has no reference to 'real' socio-historical reality, nor to have any pragmatic aim apart from aesthetic pleasure.<sup>202</sup> However, there is a growing tendency in contemporary literary theory noticeable in that social and literary questions converge across a range of approaches – how the specific constructedness of text and interpretation serve as social agency with a view to worldmaking and social formation. Pride of place among these go to New Historicism, according to which texts are caught up in the social processes and contexts from which they emerge.<sup>203</sup> It focuses on processes of production and consumption of texts. Four broad assumptions characterize New Historicism: first, literature is viewed as essentially connected to other material realities that make up its social context (texts are cultural artifacts among a range of other such as relics, social and cultural practices, as productions and interpretive practices interacted upon by various forces); second, literature is not privileged over other kinds of texts or social practices (literature, together with all other cultural production, contributes to the construction of context and the story called history); third, there is no essential distinction between literature and history (literature and social context define and shape each other mutually; literature influences the construction of social context, and social context impacts on the production of literature – the same is true for the relationship obtaining between literature and other cultural phenomena); fourth, the shape of the past, and the conceptualization of the interaction between literature and social context are a product of present readers' interests, values and experiences.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> P. Watzlawick, et al., *The Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study in Interactional Patterns, Pathologies and Paradoxes* (New York: Norton, 1967), 52.

<sup>202</sup> Van Dijk, *Moderne Literatuurtheorie*, 47–8.

<sup>203</sup> Gina Hens-Piazza, *The New Historicism* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 6.

<sup>204</sup> Hens-Piazza, *New Historicism*, 6–7.

To be sure, there is more to fiction than ‘frivolous lies.’ In fact, through fiction we can read ‘history’ in a different fashion than normally taken to be the case: through fiction we can read a society’s sense of self, its own existence as discursive formation displayed in the multitude of narratives it generates. Therefore, ironically, the ‘lies’ of fiction tell us the factual truth about how a society imagines itself, as Keith Hopkins put it:

Serious historians of the ancient world have often undervalued fiction, if only, as I have said, because by convention history is concerned primarily with the recovery of truth about the past. But for social history – for the history of culture, for the history of people’s understanding of their own society – fiction occupies a privileged position.<sup>205</sup>

To conclude: fiction (and by extension, the novel) is not just fiction. It is a social discourse and it makes a world of difference to read the ancient novels or love romances in this way.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FICTION AND CONTEXT, RHETORIC AND SOCIAL DISCOURSE**

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<sup>205</sup> Keith Hopkins, “Novel Evidence for Roman Slavery,” *Past & Present* 138 (February 1993): 12.

## 1. ART, CULTURAL ARTIFACTS, SOCIAL DISCOURSE, AND SOCIAL IDEOLOGY

Since two of our extant Greek novels begin with an interpretation of a work of art, a painting,<sup>206</sup> it is perhaps appropriate to illustrate the discursivity and contextuality of artworks by reference to another genre of painting, Georgian portraiture.<sup>207</sup> In his book *The Georgians. Eighteenth-Century Portraiture and Society* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1990) Desmond Shawe-Taylor provides a fascinating account of how the ‘lowly’ genre of portraiture in Georgian England was embedded in the network of social and cultural values that formed the matrix that governed the production of this artform. The choice of subject and how it was executed (*heuresis/inventio*) – the shift from history painting (i.e. religious, mythological, allegorical, and strictly ‘historical’ subjects) to portraiture; the reconceptualization of, and to a certain extent the depersonalization of portraiture to serve as vehicle for philosophical ideas such as nobility or to express appropriate character or persona,<sup>208</sup> the use of mythological and artistic allegory to reinterpret the sitter,<sup>209</sup> the portrayal of ‘gentlemanly values,’<sup>210</sup> in

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<sup>206</sup> The Prologue to Longus’s *Daphnis and Chloe*, a picture of a rural idyll, of women giving birth, caring for babies, babies exposed, suckled by animals, being adopted by shepherd, growing up and falling in love, pirate raids and attacks; and Achilles Tatius’s *Leucippe and Clitophon* 1.1–2, with its famous description of the painting of the rape of Europa/Astarte/Selene, carried off by the bull toward Crete. For a detailed interpretation of the imagery of the latter painting, see Selden, “Genre,” 50–1.

<sup>207</sup> The act of comparison across disciplinary, cultural and historical/epochal boundaries is a constant feature of the argument in this study. There are good reasons for this. In the first place, identification of genre is a matter of classification for the purposes of comparison and explanation. Literally, to explain a text is to indicate how a text functions or creates meaning with regard to a certain specific aspect, and this explanation proceeds by means of comparisons with other texts or cultural artifacts deemed similar in this respect. In the second place, the juxtaposition of phenomena or sets of data serves to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange, but it is this operation that teases out from the data the possibility of seeing things anew, or seeing new relationships, that is, to theorize, in the original sense of the word *theoria*. To encapsulate this procedure, Jonathan Z. Smith has given currency to the so-called fourfold procedure of interpretation: description, comparison (as widely as possible to gain maximum validity), redescription (revisiting and redescribing the data in the light of the comparisons), and rectification of categories (translating data into new theoretical categories in an act of traduction). See Smith, “Bible and Religion”, see especially 87.

<sup>208</sup> Desmond Shawe-Taylor, *The Georgians. Eighteenth Century Portraiture and Society* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1990), 28–32.

<sup>209</sup> Shawe-Taylor, *Georgians*, 33–60; mythological narratives and references to famous artworks from either Rome or the Renaissance provide the stereotypes with which the sitters will be interpreted.

<sup>210</sup> “‘Feeling, courage and good nature’ make up the cardinal virtues of the true gentleman, according to the eighteenth-century view, but the greatest of these is good nature,” Shawe-Taylor, *Georgians*, 69.

Rousseauian fashion attuned to Nature as the source of social justice and personal morality (which is why the class of patrons for this portraiture sympathized both with the American colonists in the War of Independence and the Revolution in France), the portrayal of bonhomie and domestic character in contrast to earlier aristocratic self-assurance,<sup>211</sup> a new conception of femininity and modesty,<sup>212</sup> a romanticized conception of Nature as a gentleman's park,<sup>213</sup> the employment of 'historical style' as deliberate reference to Classical styles, but more pointedly to Renaissance and Mannerist tradition, to lend grace and *gravitas* to the depiction of the sitter<sup>214</sup> – attest to the social rhetoric of the art. In these paintings can be discerned a new class consciousness and class awareness announcing itself in the way in which it elected to portray and reproduce itself.<sup>215</sup> The world projected by these artworks may have no basis in reality, but that is not the point – the world does not lend itself to objective access as it is always socially constructed. 'World' is a product of rhetorical interaction. Humans render a world, like an artist, a narrative configured in the act of selection, of presenting things *as* this or that, of juxtaposing narratives as epic and myth, in the act of creating networks of signifying relations, in imbuing these with values, and in the act of responding to these in authorized ways of acting.<sup>216</sup>

It is with respect to the projection of a world that it should be clear that the artwork and fiction are not vehicles solely of aesthetic pleasure, or as has been stated with regard to ancient fiction, 'entertainment,' 'escapism,' or 'fantasy.' However we wish to define aesthetic pleasure, it cannot mean a-contextuality, the solitary individuality of the text or artwork. Arguably, this has nowhere been so foregrounded as in the recent surge of interest in the cinematographic work of the late Leni Riefenstahl,

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<sup>211</sup> Shawe-Taylor, *Georgians*, 81–98.

<sup>212</sup> Shawe-Taylor, *Georgians*, 99–126.

<sup>213</sup> Shawe-Taylor, *Georgians*, 127–45.

<sup>214</sup> Shawe-Taylor, *Georgians*, 147–64.

<sup>215</sup> Social class and identity are not natural phenomena, they are discursively created, cf. 'The exalted – but, for the well-born, inconvenient – conception of a gentleman is naturally a middle-class invention. But if there are only middle-class writers, like Burney and Richardson, to describe high-society, so there are only middle-class painters, like Reynolds and Gainsborough, to paint it,' Shawe-Taylor, *Georgians*, 71.

<sup>216</sup> William Paden, "World," in *Guide to the Study of Religion* (ed. Willi Braun and Russell T McCutcheon; London/New York: Cassell, 2000), 334–47.

‘Hitler’s film maker.’ Her film, *Olympia*, on the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, is a celebration of the body beautiful, and her innovative cinematographic techniques (close ups of the athletes, innovative angles of vision, slow motion) made the film gripping viewing. But there is also no denying that apart from the ‘aesthetic pleasure’ derived from watching the film, apart from the literal contents of the artwork (the bodies on display), it is simultaneously a celebration of the Nazi cult of the perfect body. The vehicle for ‘aesthetic pleasure’ was deeply embedded in a social and political ideology of the master race.<sup>217</sup> It may be argued even that it is exactly the ideology that renders the artwork ‘aesthetically pleasurable,’ for it is imaginable that viewers in other contexts may find the exhibition of raw bodiliness and prowess repugnant. Even taste is not an individual matter but a social construct.

## 2. SOCIAL DISCOURSE AND THE ANCIENT NOVEL

It does, therefore, not help the consideration of religion and fiction very much to see the function of fiction in an untheorized ‘narrative pleasure,’ or ‘entertainment,’ or ‘fantasy,’ and so on.<sup>218</sup> All roads still lead to social discourse. In fact, even when reflection on ancient fiction centres on its function as ‘entertainment,’ escapist literature, pleasurable reading, or ‘fantasy,’ religious discourse is never far away in scholarly thinking on the matter, with the rise of ancient fiction, especially the love romances, being conventionally linked to the ‘myth of the Hellenistic period,’ that is the reaffirmation or re-orientation of the individual in an ‘age of anxiety’ – the result of the loss of autonomy of Greek city states, foreign domination, the alienation from social and civic contexts (an alienation visible in the ‘centrality of the individual’), loss of identity in imperial kingdoms, and the experience of all kinds of vicissitudes,

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<sup>217</sup> Related to this issue, see now the following important two books on film, popular culture, and the making of a national mythology: John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), and Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil. The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

<sup>218</sup> ‘We might argue, for example, that fiction in general answers to a universal human need for narrative pleasure,’ J. R. Morgan, “Introduction,” in *Greek Fiction. The Greek Novel in Context* (ed. J. R. Morgan and Richard Steinman; London/New York: Routledge, 1994), 3.

from physical to ‘spiritual’ threats and dangers.<sup>219</sup> In this kind of interpretation the romantic love of the love romances is understood as sublimation of civic involvement, imaginative cop-out as myth, a ‘literary Disneyland’, and the use of romantic fantasy is understood to redeem both the boredom of material security (of the new class of provincial élites) and the concomitant feeling of having no control over one’s own life.<sup>220</sup> ‘The canonical romances were written in response to a demand not simply for fiction, but for a particular kind of fiction, which constitutes their social and political context,’ so Morgan.<sup>221</sup> This ‘particular kind of fiction’ is marked by its stereotypical plots, which suggested that the writers knew they had a winning formula at hand.<sup>222</sup> The phrase ‘winning formula’ suggests the presence of what scholars of rhetoric call a fantasy.<sup>223</sup> A fantasy is a shared vision of the world (‘how the world is’) that is built up in mutual communication within a small group. When this is communicated more widely, the vision of the world is legitimated when other members of the group lock into this vision, and a fantasy chain results. When more groups lock into this shared vision of the world a rhetorical vision is the result. Fantasy theme analysis describes the social function of popular literature.<sup>224</sup>

At this point, in light of the foregoing, one should again reconsider the way the relation of novelistic literature and other fictional literary production in the Graeco-Roman world and late Antiquity to religion, mystery religions and cults, is conceptualized. Although attempts have been made to relate the ancient novel to its social context, describing this link as novelistic fiction being the ‘myth of late

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<sup>219</sup> Holzberg, *Ancient Novel*, 29–32, ‘The novel as a product of political, social and cultural upheavals.’

<sup>220</sup> J. R. Morgan, “Introduction,” 3: ‘... the relentless accumulation of perilous adventures which they undergo is a sort of literary Disneyland offering a compensation in fantasy for the routine security of urbanized reality. But at the same time they also enact a spiritual unease and sense of powerlessness by casting the protagonists as noble but passive victims of a contingent and malevolent universe, except that, unlike real life, the novels hold out the implication that everything is actually under control, guided by a shaping intelligence and ultimately meaningful.’

<sup>221</sup> J. R. Morgan, “Introduction,” 3.

<sup>222</sup> J. R. Morgan, “Introduction,” 3

<sup>223</sup> E. G. Bormann, “Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision. The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality,” in *Methods of Rhetorical Criticism. A Twentieth Century Perspective* (ed. B.L. Brock, et al.; Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 210–22.

<sup>224</sup> And not only popular literature, but the essay of Bormann dealt with the varying constructions of gender roles in the popular romance series Mills and Boon.

Hellenistic society' is not enough, or perhaps even misleading, for it leaves untheorized the nature of *religion* as a concept and as historical phenomenon. Terms and phrases such as 'individual' and 'emotional needs' among others attest to the (Western, Christian) theological underpinning of this kind of construal of the relationship.<sup>225</sup> Not only is religion misconceived as an individual interior state, but fiction itself is (for these purposes) misconceived as an a-contextual vehicle for individual consumption. It is this dual need for reconceptualizing religion *and* fiction that determines any revaluation of Merkelbach and the purported 'myth of the late Hellenistic world,' a hitherto unresolved theoretical issue that should alert us to the prematurely dismissive stance of Merkelbach's detractors. To dismiss the religious function of ancient fiction is to operate with and betray a certain understanding of both religion and fiction,<sup>226</sup> which renders problematic the conventional ways in which the ancient novel, and ancient fiction and Graeco-Roman literary production in general, and their relation to social context have been understood. For instance, apart from the earlier remarks on Hägg, Holzberg, Dihle, Wesseling, and Anderson, one can also point to J.R. Morgan as an example of how the relationship is often assumed (somehow to be) but never concretely explained or theorized:

'But we do not need to follow Merkelbach all the way to allow that novel and cult were *operating in the same general market* ... The relationship between fiction and religion is a highly significant and suggestive one. In a sense, they cater to the same need to reassure the individual of his personal worth and discover meaning in the tangled web of his daily experience' (my emphasis, GvdH).<sup>227</sup>

Now this is exactly the issue that needs to be explained and explored. What does it mean to 'operate in the same market'? What happens on the side of production and reception of fictional texts when they operate in the same market as religious cults?

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<sup>225</sup> I will come back to this later when the theory of religion as discursive practice is discussed.

<sup>226</sup> Religion as *sui generis* phenomenon concerned first and foremost with individual assent to 'truths,' and fiction as autonomous artwork.

<sup>227</sup> J. R. Morgan, "Introduction," 8.

Of course, they ‘share in the life of the Graeco-Roman world,’ which ‘sharing’ has already been much studied and theorized in literary theory and communication theory, especially in such fields as text linguistics, text pragmatics, and discourse analysis.

### 3. NOVELS AS TEXTS-IN-COMMUNICATION

When literature is studied under the rubric of texts-in-communication, then it is clear that text production and text reception are two sides of the same communicative coin. What unites the two are the cultural scripts or cognitional frames (‘cognitional schemata’), that is cultural knowledge in the long-term memory together with context in its aspect of socio-psychological influence, which steer the process of the production of textual meaning as well as the process of interpreting the textual meaning.<sup>228</sup> Text production is the deliberate configuration of social and cultural codes of (in our case, mainly linguistic and textual) communication in order to manufacture meaning. These social and cultural codes include authoritative traditions and canons, mores and values (as they pertain to the specific class and group), conventional styles of communication, and typical scenes and topics for specific purposes and contexts. Interpretation, then, would mean that we should be on the outlook for the schemata or frames that conditioned the author’s reception of prior tradition (or representation of tradition in his own mind) and production of a new text (thus giving evidence of an author’s understanding of the meaning possibilities on offer in the prior text and the deliberate fit between intended communication and intended addressed context). The ‘deliberate fit between intended communication and intended addressed context’ (regardless of whether the ‘fit’ actually succeeds) is

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<sup>228</sup> Work on this first came to the fore in artificial intelligence, especially with attempts to design translation machines. See for example Ruth Wodak, “Strategies in Text Production and Text Comprehension: A New Perspective,” in *Cooperating with Written Texts. The Pragmatics and Comprehension of Written Texts* (ed. D Stein; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1992), 493–528, and Annely Rothkegel and Barbara Sandig, *Text-Textsorten-Semantik. Linguistische Modellen und Maschinelle Verfahren* (Papers in Textlinguistics; Hamburg: Helmut Buske, 1984).

achieved *inter alia* through the selection of terminology, vocabulary, phraseology; topics and narratable episodes; metaphorical juxtaposition of fixed expressions onto new contexts of meaning; what to say and how to say it to make sense in the context (again *heuresis* and *taxis*). In short, moulding language to suit the context! Of course, readers do the same. Their representation of the text (as decoded or interpreted, how they ‘summarize’ what the text means) is not the same as the original text. They too are conditioned by their frames or schemata. While we can, of course, have no empirical data on the representation of the text by the original readers, we can at least imagine from the frames or schemata employed by the author how he (or maybe she) envisaged them and their context to be. Cognitive frames form the implicit text base without which the explicit text base (the material text) would not be intelligible in its context.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> There are many examples of readings of ancient texts that combine a consideration of cultural frames (often derived from plastic or figurative arts) with what is given in the explicit text base. I will mention only three: J Cilliers Breytenbach, “Paul’s Proclamation and God’s *Thriambos*. (Notes on 2 Corinthians 2:14–16b.),” *Neotestamentica* 24 (1990): 257–271; Gerhard van den Heever, “Theological Metaphorics and the Metaphors of John’s Gospel,” *Neotestamentica* 26 no. 1 (1992): 89–100; and in the context of this essay, see especially David L. Balch, “The Suffering of Isis/Io and Paul’s Portrait of Christ Crucified (Gal. 3:1): Frescoes in Pompeian and Roman Houses and in the Temple of Isis in Pompeii,” *Journal of Religion* 83, no. 1 (2003): 24–55. The importance of the latter essay lies in its implication that, although the Greek novels cannot be taken to be a popular mass medium in our modern sense of the term (despite the existence of a number of complete novels and quite a number of papyrus fragments, the novels did not enjoy mass readership, a conclusion borne out when comparing the remaining texts and text fragments of novels with other works of ‘high culture’, cf. Wesseling, “Audience”, and Hägg, “Readership.”” and Susan A. Stephens, “Who Read Ancient Novels?” in *The Search for the Ancient Novel* [ed. James Tatum; Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994], 405–18 – the novels seem not to have been popular at all [p. 414]; a similar argument in Ewen Bowie, “The Readership of Greek Novels in the Ancient World,” in *In Search of the Ancient Novel* [ed. James Tatum; Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994], 440–1), nevertheless, the fact is that they floated in a sea of other representations of versions of the same narratives (Lucian recounts, in *De saltatione* 2 and *Pseudologista* 25, how scenes from novels or scenes similar to these, were sometimes mimed by street performers, and although these were by no means performances of the novels themselves, they did circulate stock episodes and scenes that also occurred in novels and so kept them alive in the public mind and eye, cf. Stephens, “Who Read Ancient Novels?” 409). For instance, as Balch shows, the mythic narrative of Io’s peregrinations to the land of Isis and eventual restoration to humanity, occurs in various preserved frescoes in Pompeii, Rome and elsewhere, and it also reflects a similar plot to Achilles Tatius’s *Leucippe and Clitophon* and Plutarch’s version of the myth in *De Iside et Osiride*. What is more, their occurrence in the dining halls and other public spaces of patrician homes inspired many verbal interpretations of the allegorical meaning of the image portrayed, Balch, “Suffering of Isis/Io,” 26–8. See also G.W. Bowersock, *Hellenism*, 41–53 (chapter 4: ‘Dionysus and his world’) for the portrayal of scenes from Nonnos’s *Dionysiaca* in various floor mosaics from the Levant. Next to these one may also mention the Metiochus and Parthenope mosaics evoking the eponymous novel (known otherwise only from a papyrus fragment) from Daphne, a suburb of Syrian Antioch, datable to the Severan period, as well as two Ninus mosaics, one from Daphne and the other from Alexandria ad Issum, of which the former show Ninus contemplating a portrait of Semiramis

Saying this, it should be understood that text production is no neutral or innocent activity. However much story-tellers think they construct purely imaginary story worlds, these imaginary worlds contain implicit instructional aspects in that the selection and arrangement of frames and topics (choices as to what to present and how to present it) imply covert commands to ‘see this, believe and think that, and do the other.’<sup>230</sup> In short, they shape the way we see the world and act on this seeing. It is this aspect that helps explain, on the one hand, why a narrative can on the surface (at the level of contents) be about one thing, while it is actually telling a different story in its context – making the text a metaphorical text, and on the other hand, why certain kinds of narrative become popular in certain kinds of socio-cultural and socio-political contexts.

#### 4. THE METAPHORICITY OF THE NOVELISTIC TEXT

##### 4.1 *The Pragmatic Conditions of Text Communication: Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Seagulls’*

As an example of the first, the metaphoricity of the text, I should point to the text on which the final section of Harald Weinrich’s *Sprache in Texten* is based, the short sketch by Walter Benjamin, ‘Die Möwen’ (‘The Seagulls’, from *Städtebilder* [ed. P. Szondi; Suhrkamp: Frankfurt, 1963], a collection of travel writings reflecting his

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(even if one wants to follow Ewen Bowie’s interpretation that these rather suggest mimed roles, following Lucian, cf. Bowie, “Readership of Greek Novels,” 448–9). Apart from settings in the dining halls of patrician homes, paintings of mythical narrative scenes could also be admired (and declaimed on) in temples, as depicted in *Leucippe and Clitophon* and *Daphnis and Chloe*. In the case of these two novels it could be argued that the novels themselves are *ekphraseis* of a graphic portrayal of mythic narrative. Putting it like this one might, with proper reservation, indeed liken the function and effect of the Greek novels to that of modern mass media. Although relatively few had access to the novel as text for the purposes of (private) reading, whatever form that took, the narratives themselves lived in the public domain and could be seen and ‘read’ by a far wider public. However, my argument in this essay pertains to the readership of the novel, that is, that class of inhabitants of the Roman empire who could and did buy or commission written novels, alongside other works of ‘high literature’ such as history, rhetoric, and so on. But the issue is, of course, not just a matter of readership of the novels, but of social discourse, that is, to which group or class of inhabitants of the Roman Empire should we assign the imagined reality borne by the literary production of the period?

<sup>230</sup> This kind of theory is called C-I-T Linguistics, Communication-Instruction-Text Linguistics. A good exposition of this is found in Harald Weinrich, *Sprache in Texten* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1976).

travels through Scandinavia in 1929).<sup>231</sup> The short sketch describes the movement of the ship out at sea at dusk, pitching from side to side on the choppy water; the ship's mast sways like a pendulum, and swarms of seagulls follow the movement of the mast to and fro. At the level of text contents and the way images are used in the narrative, it soon becomes clear that three sets of metaphors determine the meaning of the sketch: the 'nations of seagulls' ('Möwenvölker'), the movement of the mast as pendulum, and the 'play' of the seagulls in two groups, West and East, chasing each other, as if weaving a pattern of signs.<sup>232</sup> For the successful decoding of the meaning of the text an author has to give the reader some orientation signals (which could be of formal nature or based on the contents). In other words, the text has to actualize relevant scripts or frames to aid and direct cognition and interpretation. In the context of 'The Seagulls,' the title orientates the reader to the topic of sea travel. But more than that, in the context of other cultural codes, on the level of semantic history, the seagulls of the text (called 'messengers' at the end of the sketch) evoke and connote the whole literary tradition from antiquity to the present of personifying birds as winged messengers, from the stereotype of the ancient poet as singing, dying swan to Baudelaire's famous 'Albatros' poem, to the god Hermes as winged messenger, to the Christian tradition of winged angels as birdlike beings. On the basis of this organizing or base metaphor other images gain metaphorical power: at the end of the sketch, as the darkness closes in, the author remains as the threshold through which the unnamed messengers criss-cross and give their messages, effectively turning the author into a seer divining the future on the basis of his reading of the signs.<sup>233</sup> Text metaphors, or the theory of the metaphorical nature of the text, implies understanding the text-in-its-communicative context as the place where metaphors come into being and operate.<sup>234</sup> To analyse a text in its context means analyzing the pragmatic conditions of the communication that made possible the 'text event.'

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<sup>231</sup> Weinrich, *Sprache*, 328–41.

<sup>232</sup> Weinrich, *Sprache*, 330–3.

<sup>233</sup> Weinrich, *Sprache*, 330–6.

<sup>234</sup> 'Text-Metaphorik soll heißen, als Ort des Metaphernereignisses den Text-in-der-Situation anzusehen. Ein Text wird in seiner Situation analysiert, wenn die ("pragmatischen") Bedingungen der

#### 4.2 Text in Counter-Determining Situation

Applied to our example one can relate this text to the historical situation of the author in 1929. This was a portentous time for the Western world, but particularly for Germany. In 1929 the New York Stock Exchange crashed, drawing the world into a massive economic crisis leading into the Depression of the early 30s. The economic crisis and its fall-out shook the already unstable Weimar Republic, leading to growing polarization of politics and extremism on the Right and the Left, and violent confrontations in the streets of Germany. In political theory the polarizing, oppositional categories of ‘friend’ and ‘enemy’ characterised the definition of the domain of the political (and which led to politicians over the world to deliberately calculate the eventuality of war). For the intellectual, like Walter Benjamin, (scholarly and philosophical) neutrality was not an option as both from the Right and the Left neutrality was denigrated (so too was ‘intellectual’ turned into a derogatory term) and pressure applied to join one or the other partisan side. One of the ‘enemies’ (of Benjamin), Carl Schmitt, sent him a copy of a book he had written on the origins of the German tragedy. The book dealt partly with the concept of melancholy, which for Benjamin defined the situation of the intellectual, probing, questioning, reflecting, self-doubting. The intellectual as melancholic stands in between the activism of the ideologically self-assured, politically committed. The melancholic phrases in the sketch, ‘melancholy’ or ‘heavy-heartedness,’ ‘the lead-heavy heart,’ suggest that while ostensibly a description of a marine journey, ‘The Seagulls’ is a commentary on the growing political polarization of German (and European) society and the problematic position of the intellectual.<sup>235</sup> All in all, if one follows this kind of reading, it is possible to expand the notion of metaphoricity to include the concept of text-in-its-communicative situation as a metaphor. An approach like this is made

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Kommunikation, die das Textereignis möglich machen, mit analysiert werden,’ Weinrich, *Sprache*, 337.

<sup>235</sup> Weinrich, *Sprache*, 337–9.

possible when the whole text is taken as a metaphor, where metaphor here is defined as a *text in a counter-determining situation*.<sup>236</sup>

## 5. THE SOCIAL COMMUNICATION AND IDEOLOGY OF CULTURAL ARTIFACTS

### 5.1 *The Biblical Film Epic*

As an example of the second, the explanation of the popularity of certain kinds of narrative in certain social, cultural, and political contexts, one can point to the biblical film epic (especially the work of Cecil B. DeMille), the ‘myth of the American

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<sup>236</sup> Weinrich, *Sprache*, 341. One can offer many more examples. I will give only one more, and taken from my own context in Afrikaans literature. The history and emergence of Afrikaans as language and as literature are characterized to a very large extent by its social, cultural, and especially ideological opposition to British imperialism (from the early nineteenth century onwards). Two important way stations on this historical line must be highlighted: the work of the novelist, journalist, historian, Gustav Preller (d. 1943), and that of the novelist, F.A. Venter (1916–). Through the period after the First World War up to the late 1930s Preller wrote, apart from fiction, numerous histories/historical studies of the Great Trek (the movement of Dutch colonists from 1835/6 to 1838 from the Cape into the interior with a view of establishing Dutch states free from British rule), and the South African War of 1899 to 1902. Both events, Great Trek and South African War, gained paradigmatic status for Afrikaner self-identity and mythmaking, especially in the 1930s, and again especially around 1938, the centenary celebrations of the Great Trek. It was in this period that the Covenant of 1838, made by the Trekker commando at Blood River a few days before the decisive battle against the Zulu and in which they vowed to remember the (prayed for) God-given victory as a Sunday and to build a church to commemorate the event, was rediscovered and deliberately employed for ideological purposes to strengthen Afrikaner political solidarity and resistance to British dominance. This fed into the awakening of the nationalist movement with its accompanying racist ideology throughout the Second World War, shortly after which the National Party came to power (1948 to 1994) and instituted the policy of apartheid. In this context it should be noted that the (in Afrikaans circles) well-known, and at the time popular, tetralogy of novels on the Great Trek by F.A. Venter appear at a politically charged time and, arguably, served to undergird the ideology of the newly independent South Africa under Nationalist rule (South Africa became an independent republic in 1961, after leaving the Commonwealth for criticism of its racial policies). *Geknelde Land* (‘Oppressed Land’) appeared in 1960, *Offerland* (‘Land of Sacrifice’) in 1963, *Gelofteland* (‘Land of the Covenant’) in 1966, and *Bedoelde Land* (‘Promised Land’) in 1968. These historical novels covered in a kind of an epic the whole history of the Great Trek up to the final settlement in the old Transvaal, after losing the newly established Trekker republic of Natalia to the British in 1843. Coming at the time they were published, at the time of independence and the Sharpeville massacre (1961), which latter event gained iconic status in the liberation struggle, the growing international isolation and criticism of South Africa because of apartheid, the first boycotts, the case challenging South Africa’s mandate over South West Africa (now Namibia) before the International Court of Law in The Hague (1966), these novels helped cultivate a sense of divine calling as justification for Afrikaners’ self-identified place in history, identity, and God-given historical purpose in a divinely ordained apartheid state. These novels helped maintain a social and political ideology by telling their readership a story of trials and tribulation, of victory, and divinely ordained ownership of the land. Given the social, cultural, and political context in which the Greek novels were produced, the parallels are unmistakeable; see J.C. Kannemeyer, *Geskiedenis Van die Afrikaanse Literatuur I* (Cape Town/Pretoria: Academica, 1978), 41–57, 75–91, 146–153, 257–264, and J.C. Kannemeyer, *Geskiedenis Van die Afrikaanse Literatuur II* (Cape Town/Pretoria: Academica, 1983), 54–7, 219–27.

superhero,' and the Captain America genre of comic strips and films (such as *Independence Day* [1996], *Air Force One* [1997], and the Rambo film *First Blood* [1982]).<sup>237</sup> The biblical film epics of Cecil B. DeMille, in particular *The Ten Commandments* (1956), came at the time of the Korean War and emerging Cold War, and through the portrayal of the heroism of the righteous in the face of enemy threat, it produced a sense of America being the bulwark against evil in an increasingly threatening environment.<sup>238</sup> The genre of the biblical spectacular was marked by 'melodramatic interest focusing on the conflict between a villain driving the action and a hero who must decide between duty and either power or pleasure.'<sup>239</sup> Two filmic techniques helped to establish the mythic stature of these films, namely: the use of the boom shot created the epic scope of the narrative in that it sets the action against a 'wide panorama of history,' and the use of actual religious figures such as

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<sup>237</sup> See the earlier mentioned Lawrence and Jewett, *American Superhero*, Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America*, Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, "Captain America Takes on Iraq," *Tikkun. A Bimonthly Jewish and Interfaith Critique of Politics, Culture & Society*, January/February 2003 (cited from the online version <<http://www.tikkun.org/magazine/index.cfm/action/tikkun/issue/tik0301/article/030112a.html>> accessed 26 February 2004), and the review of the *Captain America* book by J. R. Burkholder, "Star-Spangled Salvation," *Sojourners*, February 2004 (cited from the online version at <<http://www.soj.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj0402&article=040233b...>> accessed 26 July 2004).

<sup>238</sup> The study of religion and popular culture (the latter as resource for the former) has become hugely popular recently, and consequently literature on religion and film, and more generally the literature on religion and popular cultural production, is fast becoming a vast body of scholarly writing. A useful overview of recent literature is found in Peter W. Williams, "Review Essay: Religion Goes to the Movies," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 10, no. 2 (2000): 225–39. In the context of the issues raised in this paper I want to refer in particular to Gerald E. Forshey, *American Religious and Biblical Spectaculars* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1992), cited and discussed in Williams, "Religion Goes to the Movies," 230–2. It is with reference to the function of popular culture as mythmaking activity set in specific discursive contexts that a study of religion and film and popular culture creates a useful analogue and meaningful comparisons to the issue of ancient fiction and religion. In a survey of the interaction between religion and popular cultural production as mythmaking, worldmaking, and ideology it is argued by the contributors to Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr., eds., *Screening the Sacred. Religions, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film* (Boulder, Col.: Westview, 1995), that popular cultural production, in this case film, is a major source of cultural meaning and that popular culture, even though it be highly secularized, continues to draw on traditional religious themes, narratives, and symbols (in particular from Judaeo-Christianity) in its retelling and reconfiguring of narratives that not only reinforces the basic narrative (and religious) patterns, but also becomes a kind of religious worldview in itself. In this sense 'religion' can be understood in a way that includes myth in that religion deals with universal mythic archetypes, and myth with human interactions with the sacred. Such cultural representations reveal the symbol systems and values basic to culture. And finally, the argument is that religion has social and political effects, and that culture (including both religion and popular cultural production) is shaped by politics, and itself helps shape politics.

<sup>239</sup> Williams, "Religion Goes to the Movies," 230.

Jesus or the apostles ‘established the action *in illo tempore* and, therefore, potentially archetypal.’<sup>240</sup> As mythical narratives refracting social values, cultural discourse, and political ideology they were intended ‘as, if not *romans á clef*, at least easily read analogues with the issues of the day, such as the Depression, the rise of the great dictatorships, and, eventually, the Cold War.’<sup>241</sup> And furthermore, as mythical narratives they took their evolving shape from the social and ideological discourses in which they were embedded and which formed the context for their formulation: the persistent theme running through these ‘biblical spectacles,’ the ‘quasi-religious, biblical melodramas,’ was the clash between ‘wholesome rural values and decadent urban mores.’<sup>242</sup> As the half century progressed from the 1930s to the 1960s the theme evolved from one focused locally through a conservative take on the Depression on Americans’ succumbing to the lure of urban wiles over rural virtue (Rome being the paradigm of urban corruption), to one where Nero came to represent the prototype of the mad dictator (as the shadow of emerging Nazism fell over Europe), to, eventually, the Cold War period where the 1956 remake of Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments* functioned as a Cold War allegory on the superiority of faith to reason and freedom to slavery.<sup>243</sup> In *The Ten Commandments* Ramses the Pharaoh is the typical tyrant, Dathan represents the ‘enemy within,’ both who fail because of their materialistic preoccupations. The portrayal of the typical tyrant and the enemy within accord with DeMille’s own political proclivities – as supporter of the Hollywood ‘Black List’ and conservative activist he turned the biblical narrative into a contemporary commentary on the world-encompassing politics of the Cold War: the moral of the story is that ‘divine providence can be counted on to intervene on the side of those who keep the faith: if America remains true to its mission, the forces of Communism, without and within, will ultimately be defeated.’<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> Williams, “Religion Goes to the Movies,” 230.

<sup>241</sup> Williams, “Religion Goes to the Movies,” 230.

<sup>242</sup> Williams, “Religion Goes to the Movies,” 230.

<sup>243</sup> Williams, “Religion Goes to the Movies,” 231.

<sup>244</sup> Williams, “Religion Goes to the Movies,” 231.

## 5.2 Captain America and the Myth of Edenic Origins of America

According to Jewett and Lawrence the popularity of this mythic construction, clearly exhibited by the ‘Captain America complex,’ derives from the superimposition of Judaeo-Christian, biblical tradition (with its many instances of promotion of redemptive violence, or just violence, for instance the book of Revelation that proved to be influential in shaping attitudes on either side of the battle line in the American Civil War, and subsequently sanctioned other American political and military interventions) on to the Edenic myth of American origins.<sup>245</sup> The interpretation of America as the new heaven and earth by its early (European) discoverers, Columbus among others, was part of Renaissance Europe’s quest for El Dorado, the recovery of the Golden Age, and was the expression of millennial hopes at the time vigorously promoted in Europe. So right from its inception, America was the embodiment of an earthly Paradise and refounded Eden,<sup>246</sup> a myth that guided the progressive colonization and settlement of the western plains. However, the natural disasters and social evils that gainsaid the Edenic myth generated a new discourse on the origin of these evils – ‘Indians,’ the antagonists of ‘Indian captivity narratives’; the ‘Oppressor and Despot,’ the English king; all kinds of conspirators from abolitionists to mulattos to ‘renegade Negroes,’<sup>247</sup> all responsible for the attack on paradisiacal (pure, rural) American existence (often serving as metaphorical and symbolic stand-ins for other debilitating factors such as natural disasters undermining agriculture in an area not ideally suited to farming settlement, as well as destructive bureaucratic meddling) – a discourse that gave rise to the myth of the American superhero, the lone ranger figure that operates outside of democratically elected institutions, because these are largely powerless to solve the crisis, to rescue communities in crisis. In literature and public spectacle the American West was portrayed as a region of high adventure where

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<sup>245</sup> Jewett and Lawrence, “Captain America Takes on Iraq”. See also Lawrence and Jewett, *American Superhero*, 21–48.

<sup>246</sup> Explicitly characterised as such by eminent figures in early American history such as Franklin and Jefferson, cf. Lawrence and Jewett, *American Superhero*, 23–4.

<sup>247</sup> Lawrence and Jewett, *American Superhero*, 27–8.

communities were threatened and came under attack from 'Indians,' raiders, and other kinds of criminals, and where the heroes had to rescue beautiful heroines from these countersocial forces. For the purposes of this article what is of interest is the way in which a cultural heritage, namely Puritan/Protestant Christianity, itself the result of mythical discourse, functions as the rationalization for the colonization of the American West and the nascent American empire, and in its idealization of a millennial Golden Age led to the portrayal of the 'Wild West' as a romantic entity where heroism can be displayed in the rescue of damsels in distress, and where the Other (the indigenous peoples and the outlaws that inhabit the strange world of 'Far Away') can be caricatured and demonized as the destabilizing threat to the Edenic ideal. And all this as social discourse in which the identity of the group is being formulated. It is this feature that invites a comparison with the Greek romantic love adventures of late Antiquity.

## 6. COLONIALISM AND NOVELISTIC FICTION

### *6.1 Imperial Adventure Romance*

The depiction of the colonized world as both a romantic entity and simultaneously as a region of high adventure and threatening danger to be overcome, and where heroism is a highly valued trait, and where through these heroic deeds civilization is restored (or extended to new territory), is a typical feature of imperial literature. In fact, it is part of the imperial mentality or world outlook that popular cultural production and cultural artifacts should be designed to circulate stock images of heroic taming of the wild Other, as well as the rescuing of the distressed and extending (or restoring) civilization to the world of the afflicted. A cross-cultural comparison with Greek fiction, in particular the love adventures, is in this context highly enlightening.

The political integration of the Mediterranean into the Roman Empire went hand in hand with the preservation of the cultural integrity of the Greek provinces of the

empire and the simultaneous eulogizing of Rome (the histories charting the rise and progress of the Roman empire were written by Greeks – ‘from Appian, to Cassius Dio and Herodian, for the best part of a century Roman history was written by Greeks for Greek speakers, in Greek’).<sup>248</sup> The historical works set the stage for a panorama against which another set of narratives, novelistic fiction, could be projected. The origin in the Greek-speaking eastern provinces of the empire of the Greek novels we deal with here is therefore not a case of fortuitous happenstance. It is not by coincidence that the Greek novels are, apart from being love stories or romances, also adventure narratives of swashbuckling heroes and dramatically rescued heroines, the ancient equivalent of *The Princess Bride*, or the graphically gruesome, more recent *Pirates of the Caribbean*, to name only two examples of a well-established genre. As adventure tales the typical feature of the hero setting off on a journey beset by dangers, life-threatening circumstances, and eventual overcoming of these in joyous reuniting with a loved one and the home city evince the positive character of imperial fiction – the world had been turned into a fantasy playground where the (geographically distant) Other represented the romantic (and romanticized) exotic that not only fires and draws the imagination, but also in comparable circumstances (such as the British Empire of the high Victorian age) caused many young men to seek honour and fortune in far lands, through minor imperial offices or military careers. It is the romantic imperial fantasy that generates the category of adventure narratives, which themselves not only reflect the imperial fantasy but also contribute to the maintenance of imperial values, ethos, and practices.<sup>249</sup>

Without empire, I would go so far as saying, there is no European novel as we know it, and indeed if we study the impulses giving rise to it, we shall see the

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<sup>248</sup> Peter Garnsey and Richard Saller, *The Roman Empire. Economy, Society and Culture* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 183.

<sup>249</sup> John McClure, A., “Late Imperial Romance,” *Raritan* 10, no. 4 (1991): 111–30, the reference is to the electronic version <<http://search.epnet.com/direct.asp?an=9604085109&db=aph>> (accessed 2004/02/09). The text itself is a literature review of ‘late imperial romance,’ that is the oeuvre of Joseph Conrad and E. M. Forster (the ‘negative phase’ of imperial literature), but it sets these off against the whole tradition of imperialism and the attendant imperial narratives and fiction, narratives of exploration, discovery, and conquest.

far from accidental convergence between the patterns of narrative authority constitutive of the novel on the one hand, and, on the other, a complex ideological configuration underlying the tendency to imperialism.<sup>250</sup>

It has been remarked on by historians of literature that the novel arose in imperial contexts, first in the first through third centuries of the Christian era, and then again from the seventeenth century onwards.<sup>251</sup> The reason for this is that the romance/love adventure needs ‘regions rich in the “raw materials” of adventure, magic, mystery, Otherness.’<sup>252</sup> For the greater part of the last four centuries of European history the relation between romance and imperialism was symbiotic and mutually generative. The imperial opening up of the world ‘created new heroic professions (explorer, colonial soldier, and administrator) but also provided new sites for the playing out of old stories: quests for wisdom and treasure, struggles with demons and magicians, tests of strength against monstrous enemies. It provided an endless stream of material for writers of popular historical and literary romances. And popular romance in turn provided a valorizing vision of expansion.’<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Edward Saïd, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 69–70. Indeed it is argued that one of the rhetorical techniques for creating the illusion of realism, namely totalising perspective, that is, the ability and the right to oversee the world, is also the ideological ‘technique’ underlying the imperial mentality.

<sup>251</sup> The first (modern) novel is usually taken to be Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, but the ancient romances/Greek novels played their part in helping to shape the modern novel, Percy G. Adams, *Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 8, 22–3: ‘[*Don Quixote*] became for two hundred years by far the most influential prose fiction work ever written, even competing early with the *Aethiopica* and such epics as *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581) and perennially with those of Homer and Vergil.’ See also p. 28–9: ‘The *Aethiopica*, translated into English in 1569 and issued in French eight times between 1547 and 1626, has been considered by Huet, Magendie, and Mylne, the most influential single prose work for the development of the seventeenth-century serious French fiction. Not only does it imitate the more ancient Greek epic but it contains certain patterns that become standard – ships, travels, exotic lands, pirates, shipwrecks, handsome lovers separated and remarkably reunited, feats of bravery and strength almost superhuman, and recognition of the aristocratic birth of supposed commoners. These and other features can be found in the eighteenth century and later in the tales of Prévost, Fielding, Smollet, and a hundred other novelists. Still, another “romance” tradition that became a permanent and important part of the novel is that of Apuleius’s *Golden Ass*, with its picaresque wanderings of the metamorphosed hero, the allegorical search for the roses that will restore him to manhood, the satire, the Cupid and Psyche interpolation that parallels the main allegory – all to go with the usual love intrigues, robbers, villains, even magic. *The Golden Ass*, translated by west Europeans even earlier than the *Aethiopica*, is found subtly everywhere ...’

<sup>252</sup> McClure, “Late Imperial Romance”.

<sup>253</sup> McClure, “Late Imperial Romance”.

## 6.2 The Imperial Birth of Travel Narrative

The birth of the modern novel, furthermore, coincided with an explosion in travel narratives.<sup>254</sup> Spanish, Portuguese, English, and French travel narratives were widely distributed and read, and translated into other European languages. By the end of the sixteenth century, when the rush to colonize and build empires was on its way, European travellers had already been on every continent, except Australia, and the various descriptions of campaigns, conquests, strange and far away lands, peoples and their customs had begun to feed an almost insatiable demand for knowledge, but more pointedly the thrills, of the exotic and the marvellous.<sup>255</sup> Of even greater relevance is the fact that the accounts of the gold-hunting, colonizing, missionary, and discovery voyages and campaigns of the Spanish, the French, and the English were often very thrilling (recall the *enargeia* of ancient historiography) and close to fiction.<sup>256</sup> In fact, these travel accounts often provided the settings and contents of the early (modern) novels.

## 7. THE ANCIENT NOVEL AND THE EARLY ROMAN EMPIRE

In light of the foregoing it would do well to turn our attention again to the Greek novel, and ancient fiction in general, as the ancient counterpart of the imperial phenomenon described above.<sup>257</sup> It was Glen Bowersock who said that

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<sup>254</sup> The travel narrative, of course, had an ancient pedigree from Xenophon, to Pausanias, to the many early Christian and later medieval pilgrims' guides (including Egeria and the Bordeaux Pilgrim), to late Antique lists of antiquities, city plans, road and route maps, local guidebooks (like Polemo of Ilium), to Bede, to Petrarch, the *Crusader's Manual*, and the very many travel accounts following on the 'discovery' of the New World and the onset of the great scramble for colonies, cf. Adams, *Travel Literature*, 39–80.

<sup>255</sup> Adams, *Travel Literature*, 38–80. See also Matthew Sweet, *Inventing the Victorians* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), 136–54, chapter 3: 'A Defence of The Freak Show.' Sweet demonstrates how the opening of strange new far away places created a market for the freakish, often putatively found in some exotic far-off location.

<sup>256</sup> Adams, *Travel Literature*, 52.

<sup>257</sup> My argument is, of course, different from the conventional one that links the genesis of the Greek novel to a rise of a middle class in the Roman Empire as well as to a consequent general increase in literacy, a view rightly criticized by Stephens, "Who Read Ancient Novels?" 406–7. These factors,

Prose fiction needs to be considered in a broad context, broader than the novel alone. To talk, as some do, of the world of the *Golden Ass* or the world of the Greek novel is to suggest that these works somehow have a separate, self-contained world of their own, whereas they ought to be seen as *part* of something larger, which is the Graeco-Roman empire.<sup>258</sup>

Hovering over this citation and over all of the foregoing, of course, is the sense that it is not just the Graeco-Roman world in general but specifically the *fact* of the Roman Empire that constitutes the generative matrix for the Greek novel and all of ancient fiction as we now know it. It was in this sense that it was maintained all along that one should see the novel as a kind of social discourse, for it is in the conjunction of these three topics – namely the social discursivity of fiction, the imperial setting, and imperial religion as another social discourse – that the ‘Merkelbachian’ argument of this study comes together.

### *7.1 Imperial Outlook – A Taste for the Exotic*

The political consolidation of the Graeco-Roman world under the control of the Roman Empire provided a context for Greeks to assert themselves culturally with great self-confidence once more. This went hand in hand with a renewed sense, too, of the cultural and ethnic diversity of the make-up of the empire (a revival in the early empire of a Herodotean interest in other peoples and other places), which in itself may arguably have been one of the main motivations for empire building, namely to include the new and the exotic in the boundaries of the empire even as the horizons

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rise of middle class, increase in literacy, as well as the greater availability of books and all kinds of texts due to the invention of the printing press, coupled with encouragement of private reading of the Bible from the Reformation onwards, all describe the material context for the rise of the modern novel, but these conditions did not obtain in the late Hellenistic and Roman periods. However, my argument is that it is the *imperial context* itself that generates these kinds of narratives, and the similarities and comparability of the two sets of data reside in the imperial contexts and the kind of discourse typical to these contexts.

<sup>258</sup> G. W. Bowersock, *Fiction as History. Nero to Julian* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1994), 15.

opened up.<sup>259</sup> Fiction was a well-suited vehicle to satisfy the flowering interest in other peoples and places, for ancient fiction (like its modern counterpart) entextualized a betravelled cosmos, either into other far away and exotic places, or into the weirdly exotic imaginary space of fantasy. Imperial fiction is concerned with the inhabitants and events on the margins, with going away (by choice or through force), and with confrontation with the unknown.<sup>260</sup>

If the Greeks and Romans had long had a notorious taste for the freakish, it was certainly the case that freaks announced themselves significantly only in Hellenistic and especially in Roman imperial art and society.<sup>261</sup> Human curiosities were as sought after as exotic animals like ostriches and giraffes,<sup>262</sup> and according to Plutarch there existed a ‘monster market’ (*teratōn agora*) alongside the normal slave market.<sup>263</sup> Human oddities populated the world of the Roman emperors as intimate companions, informers, erotic love-slaves (deformed used as *deliciae* by aristocratic women), alongside anomalous animals.<sup>264</sup> Not only were freak shows held (Suetonius reports that Augustus had a habit of displaying rare and noteworthy things on days when no other shows took place), but museums were set up to house lifesize models of human curiosities, much like the ‘Hottentot Venus,’ Saartje Baartman, in a Paris museum at the beginning of the nineteenth century.<sup>265</sup> A more elevated level of interest in the customs and cultural oddities of foreign peoples (as well as a quite modern tolerance for them) – Chinese, Indian Brahmins, Persians, Medes, Bactrians, Edessenes, Arabs, and Germans – is represented by the wide ranging curiosity of the Syrian Christian

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<sup>259</sup> G. W. Bowersock, *Fiction as History*, 31–3.

<sup>260</sup> G. W. Bowersock, *Fiction as History*, 33.

<sup>261</sup> See especially Robert Garland, *The Eye of the Beholder. Deformity and Disability in the Graeco-Roman World* (London: Duckworth, 1995), for example p. 45: ‘... the emperors themselves constitute a fascinating phenomenon in terms of their impact upon the social history of deformity ... being essentially outside the social organism over which they presided, emperors alone were able to indulge their monstrous cravings to the full ... it may also have been *ennui* on a massive scale, combined with a perverse and seemingly inexhaustible appetite for the exotic and bizarre, which induced the emperor and many wealthy Romans to pay exorbitant prices for human “freaks”.’

<sup>262</sup> G. W. Bowersock, *Fiction as History*, 33.

<sup>263</sup> Garland, *Eye of the Beholder*, 47.

<sup>264</sup> Garland, *Eye of the Beholder*, 48–54.

<sup>265</sup> Pompey was the first to set up such a museum. See Garland, *Eye of the Beholder*, 54–5.

sage of the late second, early third century, Bardaisan.<sup>266</sup> Add his knowledge of Egypt to the mix, and you describe the physical world that appears in various configurations in the novels and other works of fiction like the apocryphal acts of apostles and the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, and not only that, the opinions expressed by Bardaisan and his students were in accord with the tales about the foreign Other told in contemporary Graeco-Roman fiction.<sup>267</sup>

The bizarre characters that populate imperial fiction from Petronius's *Satyricon* to Antonius Diogenes's *The Wonders Beyond Thule* to Lucian's *True History*, testify, alongside the combination of travel to far-away and fantasy destinations with romantic plots, to a growing fascination with the fictional and the marvellous from the first century onwards.<sup>268</sup>

But the overt creation of fiction as a means of rewriting or even inventing the past was a serious business for many of the ancients, and for us the enormous increase in fictional production of all kinds during the Roman empire poses major questions of historical interpretation ... Fiction must necessarily include not only overt works of the imagination, such as the novels and Lucian's *True Stories*, but also the rewriting of the mythic and legendary past as part of the creation of a *new and miraculous present* ... The immense body of fictional narratives that we tend to call novels today must be seen within this larger context of fabrication and rewriting.<sup>269</sup> (Emphasis added, GvdH)

## 8. IMPERIAL IDEOLOGY: THE EXUBERANT INVENTION OF THE RENEWED GOLDEN AGE

### 8.1 *Paradoxes and the Fantastical*

Exactly, from this distance the first imperial century presents itself as a carnivalesque, exuberant, excessive celebration of imperial good times (at least in the self-

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<sup>266</sup> G. W. Bowersock, *Fiction as History*, 46–8.

<sup>267</sup> G. W. Bowersock, *Fiction as History*, 48.

<sup>268</sup> G. W. Bowersock, *Fiction as History*, 37.

<sup>269</sup> G. W. Bowersock, *Fiction as History*, 12–3.

representation of those classes who produced literature, and they themselves represented only the upper fraction of society – for whom the times could be said to be good). It was the return of the mythical golden age, the *Saturnia regna*, the *Saturnia saecula*, or the *saeculum aureum*, the long gone age of Kronos or Saturn whose return is not only desired but actively touted as having indeed returned in the reign of the historical Augustus.<sup>270</sup> It is a time, so the utopian vision goes, when according to the panegyric chorus of Virgil, Ovid and Horace (sung *in unisono*) the earth will give her bounty, animals will live in harmony with one another and man will not feel the strain of hard work (Virgil), when there is peace and refuge after the ravages of the civil war, nature is beautiful, the earth fecund, weather ideal, and harmony reigns among all living creatures (Horace), and when there is social harmony, natural fecundity, political peace, economic security, personal happiness, a time noble and simple, rustic and blissful (Ovid).<sup>271</sup> Any vestiges of realistic restoration dreams of justice returned under an ideal ruler were quickly swept away in a surge of enthusiasm for the fantastic, topsy-turvy, ‘hyperbolic fairy tale vistas of a

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<sup>270</sup> The principal mythographer of this returned golden age is Virgil in the *Fourth Eclogue* and the *Aeneid*, but there is also Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and the *Carmen Saecularum* of Horace; and of course, Augustus himself had a hand in this – commissioning and eventually finishing the *Aeneid*, as well as instituting the *Ludi Saeculares* in 17 B.C.E., well outside of official calculations, to mark and celebrate the beginning of a new era; see on this topic especially the excellent discussion of Henk S. Versnel, “Two Carnavalesque Princes: Augustus and Claudius and the Ambiguity of Saturnian Imagery,” in *Karnavaleske Phänomene in Antiken und nachantiken Kulturen und Literaturen. Stätten und Formen der Kommunikation im Altertum I* (ed. Siegmund Döpp; Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 1993), 99–122, and H. S. Versnel, *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion II. Transition and Reversal in Myth and Ritual* (Studies in Greek and Roman Religion; Leiden/New York/Köln: Brill, 1993), 89–227. However, all was not plain sailing in the artistic making of the renewed golden age – one should be ever aware of the difference between ideal and reality, ideology and material conditions: Horace and Ovid could laud the advent of the new Augustan golden age in the *Metamorphoses* and the *Carmen Saecularum*, but they both had a keen awareness that the Saturnian age arrived on the back of immense destruction during the civil wars and with a perversion of Republican values as well as with the demise of private freedom; nevertheless, Augustus was shrewd enough to harness literature and the arts as political tools in the project of legitimizing imperial policy and rule. Both Ovid and Horace suffered for their subtle criticism of the new phenomenon of the empire, see Michael André Bernstein, “‘O Totiens Servus’: Saturnalia and Servitude in Augustan Rome,” *Critical Inquiry* 13 (1987): 458–60. The successions of Tiberius, Caligula, Nero, Diocletian, and later Constantine were hailed as Saturnian beginnings, while Claudius’ self-promotion as Saturnian princeps came in for heavy stick in Seneca’s *Apocolocyntosis* (‘The pumpkinification of Claudius’), so too could the death of Vitellius be portrayed in Saturnian terms, see Henk S. Versnel, “Two Carnavalesque Princes,” 109 n. 49. In the *Apocolocyntosis* Seneca mocks Claudius for turning Saturnian anomie into the standard of his emperors, Henk S. Versnel, “Two Carnavalesque Princes,” 109.

<sup>271</sup> See A. B. Giamatti, *The Earthly Paradise and the Renaissance Epic* (New York: Norton, 1966), 24–30 for an overview.

genuine utopia,' as one can witness in the flowering of panegyric language in dedicatory inscriptions and edicts pertaining to the position of the emperor – whatever Augustus may have thought about the adulation at the start of his reign, in the way he was constructed by sycophant-élites (especially in the Greek eastern provinces), early in the principate he cast aside the bonds of mortal humanity and earth to take up his abode among the gods. The superabundant blessings and benefactions bestowed by the emperor placed him in a category of his own, that is among the gods: so an edict from the governor of Asia decreed about the new calendar in honour of Augustus (9 B.C.E.), and mirrored by the decree of the Koinon itself –

... the most divine Caesar's birthday, which we might justly consider equal to the beginning of all things. If not exact from the point of view of the natural order of things, at least from the point of view of the useful, if there is nothing which has fallen to pieces and to an unfortunate condition has been changed which he has not restored, he has given the whole world a different appearance, (a world) which would have its ruin with the greatest pleasure, if as the common good fortune of everyone Caesar had not been born. Therefore (perhaps) each person would justly consider that this (event) has been for himself the beginning of life and of living, which is the limit and end of regret at having been born ... [the edict issued by Paulus Fabius Maximus]

... since Providence, which has divinely disposed our lives, having employed zeal and ardor, has arranged the most perfect (culmination) for life by producing Augustus, whom for the benefit of mankind she has filled with excellence, as if [she had sent him as a savior] for us and our descendants, (a savior) who brought war to an end and set [all things] in order; [and (since) with his appearance] Caesar *exceeded* the hopes of [all] those who received [glad tidings] before us, not only *surpassing* those who had been [benefactors] before him, but not even [leaving any] hope [of surpassing him] for those who are to come in the future; and (since) the beginnings of glad tidings on his account for the world was [the birthday] of the god ... [First decree of the Koinon of Asia]<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> Both citations from *Rome and the Greek East to the Death of Augustus* (translated and edited by Robert K. Sherk; Translated Documents of Greece and Rome; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 124–5.

A decree from Halicarnassus says about Augustus –

... peaceful are now land and sea, the cities flourish by good order, concord and plenty. This is the acme of the production of all that is good ... [which process has been set in motion] by eternal and immortal *physis*, which has now granted humanity its greatest blessing, by introducing Caesar Augustus into our fortunate lifetime, the man who is the father of his fatherland, divine Rome, who is Zeus Patroios and the saviour of the entire human race ...<sup>273</sup>

The best of all beginnings, the best that could be hoped for, ever, the abundance of beneficences, and on the other hand, the spectacle of empire,<sup>274</sup> the heaping of titles and honours,<sup>275</sup> the blurring of the dividing lines between divine and human, the whole world within the reach of the empire, adding to that the real, Saturnalian behaviour of emperors,<sup>276</sup> the emperor himself a freakish character in the official freak show that was the empire, and it could be said that the arrival of the *imperium* together with the persona of the princeps and imperator, has now itself become a marvel and a *paradoxon*. And this opened the sluice-gates for an avalanche of the fantastical.

## 8.2 *The Visual World of Spectacle: The Context for the Adventure Novel*

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<sup>273</sup> Henk S. Versnel, "Two Carnavalesque Princes," 103.

<sup>274</sup> So well described in *The Art of Ancient Spectacle* (ed. Bettina Bergmann and Christine Kondoleon; Studies in the History of Art 56; New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1999).

<sup>275</sup> For a description of the escalation of divine honors for the emperors in Ephesus, and by implication the geographical area mentioned in the novels and in which they originated, see chapter 2 of Sijf Van Tilborg, *Reading John in Ephesus* (Supplements to Novum Testamentum; Leiden/New York/Köln: Brill, 1996), 25–57.

<sup>276</sup> In particular, of course, Nero the philhellene politician, artist, dancer, athlete, poet, and grossly vulgar exhibitionist, whose behavior comes close to that described of Trimalchio, the rich and vulgar host of Petronius' novel, *Satyricon* – an intended hint? There are possible indications in the narrative that knowledge of contemporary events in Rome and of the emperor's behavior was presupposed among the readership of the novel, for instance the references to theatrical spectacles and gladiatorial contests; see Niall W. Slater, "From *Harena* to *Cena*: Trimalchio's *Capis* (Sat. 52.1–3)," *Classical Quarterly* 44 (1994): 549–51.

One should not underestimate the effect of processions, spectacles, and triumphs in the ‘paradoxification’ of the empire.<sup>277</sup> While the art of spectacle and the triumphal procession were not Roman inventions,<sup>278</sup> they gained a particular significance in the context of the empire. Spectacle and triumph, far from sedate and sober occasions,<sup>279</sup> constituted extreme and overwhelming experiences: apart from the noise, vociferous response and shouting from both audience and soldiers, there were also pageants in which paraded, of course, the triumphator made up in the image of and impersonating Jupiter Capitolinus, but also defeated generals and royalty, captured images of their gods, placard bearers, troupes of musicians and large brass bands of trumpets and horns, paintings depicting battle scenes, models of destroyed cities, moving mechanical set-pieces portraying important campaign events or mythic episodes and animated statues,<sup>280</sup> captured and looted trophies carried on portable platforms –

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<sup>277</sup> See Jonathan C. Edmondson, “The Cultural Politics of Public Spectacle in Rome and the Greek East, 167–166 B.C.E.,” in *The Art of Ancient Spectacle* (ed. Bettina Bergmann and Christine Kondoleon; Studies in the History of Art 56; New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1999), 77–95 for a description of the interplay between Roman and Greek forms of spectacle at the crucial period of Roman ascendancy in the Greek world, that is after the defeat of Macedon and the battle of Pydna; the point being that the over-the-top nature of the spectacle was a vehicle for announcing, advertising, and promoting Roman hegemony in the Greek East.

<sup>278</sup> The visually and theatrically extravagant procession combined with a festival that ran over several days, was known from Philip II of Macedon (348 B.C.E.), and we have an example of Alexander the Great’s lavish procession plus contests on his return to Phoenicia from Egypt in 331 B.C.E., also the famous and paradigmatic procession of Ptolemy II Philadelphus in the 270s B.C.E. As the Roman republic made inroads into the eastern Mediterranean world, triumphant field commanders had their triumphal processions, both abroad and repeated in Rome itself. For a discussion of the confluence of Roman and Greek culture in the art of spectacle, see Edmondson, “Cultural Politics”. The triumphal processions following on the conquest of Macedon (those of L. Aemilius Paullus at Amphipolis, 167 B.C.E., L. Anicius Gallus in the Circus Maximus, Rome, 166 B.C.E.), and on the other side, the victory celebrations of Antiochus IV ‘Epiphanes’ of Syria at Daphne, September – October 166 B.C.E., demonstrate how Romans started to borrow Greek cultural expressions (choruses and musicians), and the Greeks borrowing Roman elements (gladiatorial displays), albeit with due adaptation for the cultural context – all in the service of promoting the imperial ideal and the incomparable sovereignty of Rome (Antiochus’ victory celebrations came after his aborted campaign in Egypt, where he was prevented by the Roman commander from advancing into Egypt, nevertheless the celebration was put on to assert and consolidate his power internally within the Seleucid empire), Edmondson, “Cultural Politics,” 85.

<sup>279</sup> If the earliest Roman triumphs were more sober, by the time of the late Republic and the advent of the Principate they had become noisy and boisterous extravaganzas, costly, carefully scripted theatrical events (‘ostentatious display’, ‘visual splendor’), Richard Brilliant, “‘Let the Trumpets Roar!’ The Roman Triumph,” in *The Art of Ancient Spectacle* (ed. Bettina Bergmann and Christine Kondoleon; Studies in the History of Art 56; New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1999), 224–5.

<sup>280</sup> ‘... similar fabulous machinery marked Hellenistic stage effects and was taken to a high pitch in Rome,’ Ann Kuttner, “Hellenistic Images of Spectacle, from Alexander to Augustus,” in *The Art of*

treasures on display, herds of exotic animals like tigers, lions, and especially elephants, and *tableaux vivants* in which mythical and historical scenes were enacted in a kind of allegorical commentary on the present celebrated event.<sup>281</sup> These assaults on the senses not only grew more elaborate (each new staged procession aiming to surpass the previous), but also preserved, and consciously evoked, the *pompa triumphalis* of Dionysus (the god's 'raucous epiphany,' so Brilliant) as described by Callixeinos and preserved in Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae* 5, 196a–203b).<sup>282</sup> Add to these the enacted military campaigns, naval battles (with ships in flooded amphitheatres), performed violence (gladiatorial fights, killings of various kinds of undesirables), and wild beast fights and displays in theatres and amphitheatres, and one finds oneself within the broad sweep of narrative scenery encountered in the novels, but which existed everywhere for public consumption.<sup>283</sup> In a very real sense the enacted and performed spectacle, as well as the textualized and the graphic and plastic portrayals of spectacle, forms the diorama of the discursive world in which the ancient novels had their home, and which created the world of novelistic references in a kind of intertextuality on a very grand scale. Moreover, the novels stood at the confluence of narrative scenes, mythic 'portraiture,' ritual as habituated action and

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*Ancient Spectacle* (ed. Bettina Bergmann and Christine Kondoleon; Studies in the History of Art 56; New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1999), 99.

<sup>281</sup> Compare also Claudius' spectacle as part of a triumph in the Circus Maximus in Rome, in which he presided, dressed in military cloak, over the enacted storming and sacking of a town and the subsequent surrender of the British kings: a reconquest of Britain to justify his claim to the title Claudius Imperator Britannicus (Suetonius *Claudius* 21.6), Brilliant, "Roman Triumph," 228.

<sup>282</sup> Brilliant, "Roman Triumph," 223. Dionysus' triumphal procession from India to Greece through Asia Minor is not a reflection of the 'original' myth of Dionysus, but a Hellenistic invention, one which became very important in the maintenance of imperial ideology, the figure of Dionysus crafted as an emperor himself, cf. Brian Bosworth, "Augustus, the *Res Gestae* and Hellenistic Theories of Apotheosis," *Journal of Roman Studies* 89, no. 1 (1999): 2–3.

<sup>283</sup> Apart from the Isis/Io mythic narrative discussed by Balch (see note 24 above), one should think of such examples as the exotic Nilotic scene preserved in mosaic (ca. 125 B.C.E.) from a nymphaeum-like hall on the forum of Praeneste, depicting Egyptian scenery (which include Egyptian architecture, priests, and peasants, and black hunters chasing exotic animals), with a romanized cuirassed emperor enjoying a spectacle victory banquet (with an automaton – a moving statue of Victory – pouring the wine), Kuttner, "Hellenistic Images of Spectacle," 100; as well as the famous Dionysiac marriage scenes from the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii which prefigured by about half a century the enactment of the marriage (and banquet revel) of Aphrodite/Cleopatra and Dionysus/Antony, when Cleopatra came to meet Antony on barge, imitating Aprodite 'in the manner of a painting,' surrounded by a costumed crew of 'Nymphs,' 'Graces,' and 'Erotes,' Kuttner, "Hellenistic Images of Spectacle," 101.

scripted performance – a world of images and narratives of which the novels constituted but one element.

If one must take the *Satyricon* of Petronius as the first novel of imperial times, then the celebration of *paradoxa* and the weirdly marvellous occur at a time when news of other marvels also started to circulate in the Roman Empire: tales of an impostor king crucified yet risen from the dead ... and deified. Also, it is not by coincidence that depictions of revivifications also turn up in the Greek novels, and one should not be blinded by the difference in terminologies (*anastasis* [Christian literature] vs. *anabiosis* [Greek writers]) to see that in the range of possibilities from *Scheintode* and other ‘resurrections’ and reappearances in the novels,<sup>284</sup> to real revivifications,<sup>285</sup> to tours of heaven and hell reported in such widely divergent types of texts as Jewish and Christian apocalypses and paradoxographies like Antonius Diogenes’s *The Wonders Beyond Thule*, to the apotheoses of dead and/or living emperors, we are looking at a massive entextualized freak show in a world in which the boundaries between divine and human, between heaven and earth had been breached. It is literally a world turned upside down.

When the likes of ‘conscientious’ thinkers as Polybius, the second century B.C.E. historian, Celsus, the pagan philosopher, and Sextus Empiricus, the grammarian, felt the need to devote serious attention to distinguishing between true and false history, this was called forth by the blurring of the categories – there was as much truth in fiction as there was fiction in history.<sup>286</sup> In fact, it was exactly the appearance of wholesale fictionalizing that created the problem of truth, of what constituted true history.<sup>287</sup> In this, a world redolent with the marvellous fictional, ‘truth’ becomes

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<sup>284</sup> Each of the novels contains a description of a coming to life of some sort: Achilles Tatius’ *Leucippe and Clitophon* (three times), Antonius Diogenes’ *The Wonders beyond Thule* (more than one), Heliodorus’ *Aethiopica*, Chariton’s *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, and Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses* or ‘*Golden Ass*’ – ‘one of the most beloved themes in the Greek romances,’ G. W. Bowersock, *Fiction as History*, 99, a reference to Erwin Rohde. On the whole phenomenon, see chapter 5 of G. W. Bowersock, *Fiction as History*, ‘Resurrection.’

<sup>285</sup> However one wants to view the reality of these reports, for instance the reported miraculous resurrections in Christian literature as well as in Philostratus’ *Life of Apollonius* and the *Heroikus*.

<sup>286</sup> G. W. Bowersock, *Fiction as History*, 1–27.

<sup>287</sup> There is an exact parallel in the seventeenth century when the philosophy, or science, of history was newly conceived as the endeavour to ‘check sources, eliminate hearsay, and destroy superstition,

stranger than fiction. In a topsy-turvy world the truth is everything but plain, ‘there is something sinister going on behind the scenes ... which is actually the truth’ – tabloid truth!<sup>288</sup> The literary production of the empire resembles the modern day tabloid press, when viewed through these lenses. Is the world, then, not good enough? Invent one!

## 9. INVENTED HISTORY

### 9.1 Refictionalizing and Remythologizing the Roman Empire

It is in this context that the large-scale refictionalizing and remythologizing characteristic of the period should be understood. If in earlier times Thucydides, and during the transition to the Roman period, Polybius, wrote histories stripped of fable, myth, and fantasy to provide examples and paradigms for the exercise of civic and political responsibility in the context of the *polis* (i.e. ‘political history’), in the late Hellenistic period and in the empire, history once again embraced divine and heroic genealogies, mythic and legendary accounts of pre-history, and generally all kinds of exotic and fantastic tales.<sup>289</sup> History thus became a handmaiden to myth and tall tales, following the expansion of geographical and cultural horizons resulting from the

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lies, and credulity,’ Adams, *Travel Literature*, 12. The trouble arose from the use in fiction of such narrative ruses as calling the fictional works ‘adventures of ...’, ‘life of ...’, ‘history of ...’, ‘the travels of ...’, ‘the memoirs of ...’, ‘the journal of ...’, or ‘the confessions of ...’ cf. Adams, *Travel Literature*, 8.

<sup>288</sup> See Fiona Black, “Lost Prophecies! Scholars Amazed! *Weekly World News* and the Bible,” in *Culture, Entertainment and the Bible* (ed. George Aichele; JSNT Supplements 309; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 20–43 for the similarities between biblical tradition and tabloid truth. Traditional biblical scholars who have been brought up on historical criticism, are trained to distinguish between myth and history in the biblical text, so Black argues, and in this they can be said to be the modern counterparts of such sceptics as Polybius, Celsus, and Sextus Empiricus. But the point Black makes is that biblical narrative is as incredible and marvellous as tabloid ‘news reporting,’ or ‘tabloid truth’ as she puts it. (On this score, the question doubles back to put the modern scholar and reader of ancient texts in the dock, so to speak: should one make, for instance, a qualitative difference between the accepted, ‘canonical marvellous’ of the Christian tradition, and the obviously weirdly, excessively way-out of ‘tabloid truth’ modern or ancient?) The point is equally valid for much of ancient literature. When the marvellous starts to dominate to this extent, it creates a context where the marvellous determines the accepted emplotment of what is to be taken as real – truth is not what you can see, there is ‘something going on behind the scenes.’ And this, of course, invites even more speculation.

<sup>289</sup> Emilio Gabba, “True History and False History in Classical Antiquity,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 71 (1981): 52–3. ‘In the Hellenistic period, changing cultural interests and the responses thereto of historians meant that historical research lost much of its political element and returned to traditional narrative forms ...’ (52).

conquests of Alexander and the interest generated by the strange, miraculous, and far away exotic recounted by the new generation of geographers and historians – ‘an enormous paradoxographical literature reflects one of the central concerns of middle-brow culture in the Hellenistic and Roman periods.’<sup>290</sup> When the problem of the credibility of recounted phenomena or facts is not countenanced, then the boundaries separating history and fiction get blurred to such an extent that history itself becomes fiction, just as fiction, in this case the novels, started off life as history-like writings.

It is in this context that the novel develops, with its close links with local history and its proliferation of fantastic and exciting episodes. The subject matter of the earliest novels were historical or pseudo-historical persons, sometimes national heroes of the distant past, around whom myths and legends had clustered. The novel is thus a lesser form of history writing, which attracts its readers by its emphasis on the fantastic or the erotic, both elements which are present in so-called dramatic history.<sup>291</sup>

## *9.2 The Fabulous and Mythic in History: The Category of the Historical as Myth and Fable*

The result of the developments described above was a genre of literature in which myths, heroic legends, historical and geographical data, and scientific information were scrambled with the exotic, portentous, and the abnormal.<sup>292</sup> And this showed in ‘serious’ history writing, now almost synonymous with paradoxography: the first century C.E. mythographer and paradoxographer, Ptolemy Chennos, could label his history *New History* (he was also the author of a mythological novel, *Sphinx*, as well as a [anti-] Homeric-type epic, *Anthomeros*);<sup>293</sup> Lucian could spoof the genre with

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<sup>290</sup> Gabba, “True History and False History,” 53.

<sup>291</sup> Gabba, “True History and False History,” 53.

<sup>292</sup> Gabba, “True History and False History,” 53.

<sup>293</sup> Dihle, *Greek and Latin Literature*, 234. The other title under which the *New History* was known, was *The Paradoxical History*, ‘a completely irresponsible rewriting of many of the famous stories of the past ... in a pose of scholarly precision,’ G. W. Bowersock, *Fiction as History*, 24–5; the *Sphinx*, listed in the *Suda* as a *drama historikon*, was most probably a romance or a romantic novel. Ptolemy Chennos, ‘the Quail,’ is a good example of the conjunction of reimagined, send-up of history, Homeric revisionism, and the fictional and novelistic in early Roman imperial literature.

some tall tales himself – *True History* (a utopian fantasy involving a travel to the moon), and then went on to produce a ‘serious theory of historiography’ and to ridicule the fashion in history writing, in *How to Write History*; antiquarian learning, covering such topics as mythology, genealogical and heroic legends, as well as the concordance of intertexts for understanding poetry, provided the verisimilitude of pseudo-historical writings – ‘history as fable’ (*historia fabularis*);<sup>294</sup> the invention of imaginary sources creating the impression of scholarship, evidenced in the so-called *Lesser Parallel Lives* and the *Historia Augusta*; Diodorus Siculus included in his five volumed history of the Mediterranean world, the *Historical Library*, the utopian tales of Dionysius Skytobrachion, Euhemerus and Iambulus, and these were taken seriously as history; and the antiquarian-historical writings of Phlegon of Tralles, a freedman of the emperor Hadrian, the author of a compilation of stories about curious facts of history and the natural world, lifted from reports in other literature, stories about people returning from the grave (!), or the birth of deformed creatures (‘some parts of his book read like well-formed novellas’).<sup>295</sup> ‘Such so-called paradoxographical writing was a fairly important branch of philosophical-scientific as well as of entertainment literature.’<sup>296</sup>

### 9.3 Social Meanings of the Strange: Paradoxography as Social Discourse

The implicit social discourse inherent in this historico-paradoxographical literature is demonstrated by the island settings chosen for late Hellenistic and early Roman description of utopias. In these narratives – Euhemerus’s story of the inhabitants of Panchaea, an island in the Indian Ocean; Iambulus’s account of his stay on the Island of the Sun (also in the Indian Ocean, ‘on the equator,’ a pseudo-scientific description of utopian life on an island in a state of nature, based on egalitarian principles, the

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<sup>294</sup> Gabba, “True History and False History,” 54.

<sup>295</sup> Dihle, *Greek and Latin Literature*, 238. He also wrote an influential chronography, a description of Sicily, a book about Roman festivals, and one on the topography of the city of Rome.

<sup>296</sup> Dihle, *Greek and Latin Literature*, 238.

presence of strange and symbolic animals, where inhabitants are welcome so long as they reach their own level of perfection); and the account of Dionysius Skytobrachion of the utopian islands, one in the west called Hesperia, in the lake Tritonis, beyond the Columns of Hercules (that is, in the Atlantic Ocean) and inhabited and ruled by the Amazons, and the other Nysa (by implication in the east, in accordance with Hellenistic myth regarding the origins of Dionysus), a city on an island in a river, where Dionysus was supposedly brought up<sup>297</sup> – the utopias are located outside the normal order of things, where nature and social order are inversed. They constitute imaginary, topsy-turvy worlds where nature gives up its bountiful fruits automatically without the need for human toil and agriculture, where humans live in egalitarian harmony without a particular social organisation, in blissful isolation uncorrupted by contact between communities. In spite of being the kind of accounts satirized by Lucian as extravagant fantasies, these narratives present the reader with a social critique of contemporary imperial society (the late Hellenistic empires with the Roman empire in the ascendancy).<sup>298</sup> Importantly, also, they were not confined to a Greek readership, these and similar utopian fantasies circulated in Latin as well: Euhemerus through the translation of Ennius and Manilius (the first Latin author of a paradoxography, and who ‘spoke seriously of the city of the Sun on the island of Panchaia’),<sup>299</sup> and the *Admiranda*, a work of antiquarian curiosity written by G. Licinius Mucianus, consul and king-maker of Vespasian.<sup>300</sup> It is in the world of Latin literature that these utopian fantasies had their longest and most far-reaching influence: if the Roman general Sertorius (a younger contemporary to the senator-paradoxographer, Manilius) desired to escape from the horrors of the civil war to the Islands of the Blessed beyond the Columns of Hercules, he did so on the strength of

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<sup>297</sup> Gabba, “True History and False History,” 58.

<sup>298</sup> And apart from the fantastical utopian islands, Diodorus also described historical islands in utopian terms: Corsica, Sardinia, the Balearic islands, Gabba, “True History and False History,” 59.

<sup>299</sup> Gabba, “True History and False History,” 59.

<sup>300</sup> Governor of Syria at the time of Nero’s death, during Vitellius’ short-lived occupation of the imperial throne, he conspired with the governor of Egypt, Tiberius Julius Alexander, to support Vespasian’s claim to the throne.

sailors' tales about their gentle climate and luxuriant growth of edible fruits.<sup>301</sup> He was acting out the utopian and social fantasies that were beginning to circulate in the Saturnalian, return of the Golden Age, visions espoused by writers like Horace (the *Sixteenth Epode*, written in the spring of 38 B.C.E. during the civil war), and his contemporary, Virgil (whose *Fourth Eclogue* dates from 40 B.C.E.).

#### 9.4 Fantasy and Religious Mythologizing: The Ideology of Apotheosized Rulers

The obvious importance of these island settings of utopian fantasies derives from the fact that they represent the extremities of the known world, and moreover, as extremities they represent the transgressed boundaries into the world of the fantastical, as seen in Lucian's *The Wonders Beyond Thule*. But there is another aspect to them, and this is seen in the emerging imperial myths that justified the apotheosis of the emperor (especially when one compares the self-promotion of Augustus' *Res Gestae* with the Hellenistic doctrine of apotheosis).<sup>302</sup> The myth of the eastern triumphs of Dionysus was a creation of Alexander, triumphs which he surpassed in the conquest of India, and which caused him to be hailed as even more successful than Herakles and Dionysus, and which justified his recognition as divine. The theme was developed by Hellenistic writers such as Megasthenes (Dionysus as the *fons et origo* of Indian civilization and kingship) and Hecataeus of Abdera (who elevated Osiris as the Egyptian counterpart of Dionysus into a world conqueror, of Arabia, India, and Greece), and demonstrated in the famous pageant of Ptolemy Philadelphus – testimony to the attraction of the newly created legend for rulers and subjects.<sup>303</sup> Callixeinos's description of this procession with its visual construction of the return of Dionysus, complete with an eighteen foot statue of the god, elephants,

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<sup>301</sup> Recounted by Plutarch *Sertorius* 8.2–5, 9.1, Gabba, "True History and False History," 59.

<sup>302</sup> Bosworth, "Hellenistic Theories of Apotheosis". The mythology by which the apotheosis of the Roman emperor was argued was, of course, not a Roman invention. In this they continued a mythological and ideological program set in motion by Alexander the Great. The Roman 'invention' lay in promoting the idea that the Roman emperor, Octavian/Augustus, went *far beyond* the achievements of his predecessors.

<sup>303</sup> Bosworth, "Hellenistic Theories of Apotheosis," 3.

and varied triumphal train, was as spectacle, a truly overwhelming marvel itself. In Virgil's description of Augustus's triumphal march across the East he matches the ascendant imperator with the Greek god, but has him surpass the achievements of both Alexander and the god by letting him reach the natural limits of the world, and transcend them (the conquests include Mount Atlas [the *Axis Mundi*], the southern fringes of the Sahara desert, the northern ocean beyond the Caspian and Azov Seas and the Rhine, colonies on the Atlantic coast of Africa and beyond, even beyond the stars and the sun).<sup>304</sup> Greater than Alexander, greater than the conqueror-deities Herakles, Dionysus, and Osiris, and surpassing their labours for the benefit of humankind, in true paradoxographical fashion Augustus became a god himself.<sup>305</sup>

#### *9.5 Invention of Tradition: Rome as Acme of Greek History*

The ideology operative in this remythologizing portrays Augustus as the climax of Roman history, but also the existence of Rome and the *imperium* as the acme of Greek history. The invention of history characteristic of this mythological reconceptualizing of history is, of course, amply demonstrated by Virgil's magnum opus, the *Aeneid*, but also in such openly mythologizing fictions as the two rewritings of the Trojan conflict, the *Ephemeris belli Troiani* of Dictys of Crete, and the *Acta diurna belli Troiani* by Dares the Phrygian.<sup>306</sup> The latter two works are especially relevant in this connection because they demonstrate the dual aspect of Greek thinking about the Roman Empire.<sup>307</sup> In the Dictys text the Greeks are portrayed as

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<sup>304</sup> *Aeneid* 6.756–853. Cf. Bosworth, "Hellenistic Theories of Apotheosis," 4–6.

<sup>305</sup> Two criteria combined to make the case for apotheosis: universal conquest to the limits of the world, and benefactions to humankind. For the latter, Augustus was said to revive the Golden Age of Saturnus and to bring felicity to Latium (see the decree from the Koinon of Asia cited earlier, along with the Virgilian myth in the *Fourth Eclogue* and the *Aeneid*). 'Augustus, the ultimate descendant of Aeneas' son, Iulius, will make the Empire coterminous with the Ocean and the stars. Thanks to his achievement the civil wars will end and an era of peace and civic discord will supervene. The reward is apotheosis; Venus will welcome him into heaven, laden with the spoils of the East, and he will be invoked in solemn vows ... Augustus has conquered the world, achieved universal peace, and will ultimately enter heaven,' Bosworth, "Hellenistic Theories of Apotheosis," 6.

<sup>306</sup> Stefan Merkle, "Telling the True Story of the Trojan War: The Eyewitness Account of Dictys of Crete," in *The Search for the Ancient Novel* (ed. James Tatum; Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 183–96.

<sup>307</sup> Both were originally written in Greek by authors unknown (the Dares text a 'free and enlarged rewriting of the Dictys'), subsequently translated into Latin, Dihle, *Greek and Latin Literature*, 368. A

culturally, morally, and militarily superior to the Trojans, who are depicted in negative terms as morally inferior. The epic makes the following two statements about the war: the Trojan War is a campaign by a civilized and peaceful nation that had suffered injustice at the hands of unscrupulous barbarians; and in the process the Greeks underwent a moral decline themselves.<sup>308</sup> If Dictys wished to describe Troy (the mythological forebears of the Romans) as barbarian (and anti-Roman sentiment was probably the point of the Dictys epic), later Greek writers would tend in the other direction in their versions of the Trojan conflict.

Most Greek writers at the time reacted to the imperial hegemony of Rome by concentrating on a glorious Greek past, ignoring the Romans completely.<sup>309</sup> But for others such as Dio Chrysostom and Philostratus it was a different matter, and here a comparison with the Dictys epic is enlightening. According to Dio in his *Troikos Logos* (*Orationes* 11) Troy had never been sacked by the Greeks, in fact, it was the Greeks who lost the war because of their unprovoked attack on Troy, and in this Dio expressed his sympathy for the heirs of Troy, the Romans.<sup>310</sup> Philostratus' *Heroicus* is probably to be considered in part a direct polemic against the Dictys epic in which a positive picture of the Trojans is drawn.<sup>311</sup> If it was a reinvention of myth that created the ideological basis for the creation of the empire, then it is significant that the whole era is characterized by the wholesale reinvention of history.

## 10. FOUNDATION HISTORIES AND GREEK REACTION TO

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complex frame narrative describes how 'Dictys', a Cretan eyewitness to the Trojan war wrote the true history of the conflict in Phoenician letters and had a copy of the text buried in his grave near Cnossus. During Nero's reign it was 'found' by shepherds after an earthquake opened the grave, upon which Eupraxides presented it to the Roman governor of Crete, who sent Eupraxides on to Rome to present it to the emperor, who in his turn had it translated into Greek and placed in the Greek library.

<sup>308</sup> Merkle, "Telling the True Story," 191. The love-affair of Achilles and Polyxena serves as the central focus of the work through which to describe the changing character of the Greeks (from controlled and civilized to equally cruel and destructive).

<sup>309</sup> And this is certainly true of the novels, which contain no references to the imperial context in which they were conceived and received. Cf. Merkle, "Telling the True Story," 193.

<sup>310</sup> Merkle, "Telling the True Story," 193.

<sup>311</sup> Merkle, "Telling the True Story," 193–4. As instances of polemic: according to the *Heroicus* Protesilaus declares that Idomeneo did not take part in the Trojan War (*Heroicus* 30), and then in *Heroicus* 26.10 it is stated that writing did not exist at the time of the Trojan War, so destroying the frame narrative of the Dictys epic.

## ROMAN IMPERIAL RULE

### *10.1 The Greek Invention of History*

Why all this production of histories? And why the increase in production of foundation histories of Greek cities in the Roman world? What we are looking at is essentially a search for roots, socio-cultural, ideological, and political – a discourse to define the place of Greek élites in a Roman world. It is now customary to observe that the novel as well as the flowering of historiographical and other literature is to be situated in the wider cultural context of revival of Greek culture from the late first/early second century C.E. onwards through the period known as the Second Sophistic. Far from being merely a leisure time activity, the literary production of the period signifies the way in which the Greek élites of the empire juxtaposed the Roman present on their Greek past, thereby appropriating the values of the empire as well as participating in it.<sup>312</sup> The Second Sophistic as recreation of the present in the light of the distinguished Greek past, as a revival movement of the recovery of Greek heritage, was also for that very reason a redesigning of the past in the image of the present. Historical themes had always played an important role in rhetorical declamation and formed the basis of local ruling élites' self-conception of their position in society.<sup>313</sup> In a context that can be described as the 'most successful period of urbanization known anywhere in the ancient world' (the mid-first to mid-third century C.E.),<sup>314</sup> the successes of local Greek élites in climbing the Roman imperial career ladder (both in the provinces and in the capital, Rome, itself) found extensive expression in Greek cultural hegemony, renewed consciousness of their cultural

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<sup>312</sup> Jaap-Jan Flinterman, "De Tweede Sofistiek: Een Portie Gebakken Lucht?" *Lampas* 29, no. 2 (1996): 135–54.

<sup>313</sup> Simon Swain, *Hellenism and Empire. Language, Classicism, and Power in the Greek World AD 50–250* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 112.

<sup>314</sup> Swain, *Hellenism and Empire*, 108. In light of literary sources as well as archaeological evidence, it was far from a period of decline, see also H. S. Versnel, "Religieuze Stromingen in het Hellenisme," *Lampas* 21, no. 2 (1988): 111–36.

superiority, and their political involvement and patronage in the local setting.<sup>315</sup> This was the world of the past, the Hellenistic world after Alexander.<sup>316</sup> The past provided the justification of the power and position of the Greek élites in the cities of the eastern provinces of the empire.<sup>317</sup>

In a recent publication, *Rome in the East. The Transformation of an Empire* (London: Routledge, 2000), Warwick Ball has extensively shown how this process progresses throughout the eastern provinces through the spread of a constructed identification with imperial ideology to the point where non-Latins began to occupy imperial thrones. The purveyancing of cultural goods and the concomitant valorizing of Roman imperial vision is the hallmark of the literary production of the period. A case in point is the Alexandrian historian, Appian, who worked as an imperial administrator in Egypt, the author of a *Roman History* in twenty four volumes. Appian recounts the entire history of Rome from the legendary story of Aeneas through the successive conquests of different countries up to his day.

The tenor of this enumeration is panegyric since Appian puts the establishment of the global Empire down to the virtues of the Romans, properly highlighted by comparing their achievements with those of Assyrians, Medes, and Macedonians. Thus the author's view of history gains a certain depth. Appian himself took great personal pride in being a citizen of the global state and having attained high honours by serving its emperor in Greek Egypt, his native country.<sup>318</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> '... a profound satisfaction with being Greek and living and continuing to live in the traditional Greek city,' Swain, *Hellenism and Empire*, 109. In addition, the new focus on marital fidelity exhibited in the novels arose out of an increasing value put on control of the self and the body (important topics in imperial political philosophy) as well as the fact that the local elites supported their position and ensured their survival as class through marital alliances, Swain, *Hellenism and Empire*, 118–30.

<sup>316</sup> For historical references in the Greek novels, such as Ninus, Parthenope, Sesonchosis, Callirhoe's father (the Syracusan general Hermocrates), the allusions to the Hecatomnid dynasty ruling Caria in Chariton's novel, see Swain, *Hellenism and Empire*, 110–2.

<sup>317</sup> '... the past setting of the ancient Greek novel appealed to the Greek elite because of the role of the past in their ideology of power. They enjoyed the past in the novel for exactly the same reasons they enjoyed it in the world of declamatory oratory and in civic life ... We might have expected at least some of the novels we are interested in to have been set in the real Roman world where their writers and audiences lived. That this is not the case strongly suggests that readers wanted their social and ethical concerns to be played out in a world entirely of their own,' Swain, *Hellenism and Empire*, 112–3.

<sup>318</sup> Dihle, *Greek and Latin Literature*, 244–5.

## 10.2 Greek Fiction and the Roman Empire

On the one hand the Greeks played along with the creation of an empire, as ideology and as practice, as a world and opportunity for the advancement of class interests, but on the other hand they occulted the very vehicle of those opportunities, Rome, from their literature, that is apart from the ‘panegyrists’ who lauded the fact of the empire.<sup>319</sup> Evidence of this duality can be discerned in the so-called epistolary novels in which Greeks engaged with the empire as their social and political context.<sup>320</sup> Especially relevant are the *Letters of Socrates and the Socratics*, written at the end of the second, beginning of the third century C.E. in which the Greek author addresses other Greeks from the imperial age. The topic that dominates is the relationship between intellectual and political potentate. Despite the near unanimity of late Hellenistic and early imperial philosophies on the issue of the art of living (to abandon the fruitless search for the unattainable: power and wealth) philosophers regularly clashed with Roman imperial authority, or at least existed in a tense relationship to it (Nero and Domitian both banished philosophers from Rome). This confrontation between Greek culture and Roman power politics, however, found expression in literature, where, not to sharpen the conflict, the antagonism was

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<sup>319</sup> For example, Rome governed her vast empire with a very small bureaucracy. The Romans relied on existing leagues, vassal and client kingdoms, and newly created districts of associated cities. Within these the distribution of priesthoods, other privileges, and cultic enactments ensured the display of loyalty towards Rome. Greek cities increasingly framed their relationship with Rome within their traditional institutional, historical, and cultural structures. ‘Greek cities in the Antonine period focused their rivalries on claims to priority in the esteem of the Roman overlords and in displays of loyalty,’ Clifford Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2000), 62. See for example the case of Tiberius Claudius Diogenes, the honorand of an inscription from Aphrodisias: first listed as reasons for the honor are his holding of a high priesthood of Asia and his position as Sebastophant, the equivalent of a *flamen Augusti*, Ando, *Imperial Ideology*, 62. Hadrian had judged the Greeks of Asia Minor in the early second century to be sufficiently comfortable with their status within the empire to establish a new league dedicated to the celebration of Hellenic culture. In later Greek political philosophy Rome had united the world into a single city (Aelius Aristides and Rutilius Namatianus, as well as Themistius in the fourth century). Prudentius could laud Rome’s achievement as being made possible by God, similar sentiments were expressed by Josephus (*Jewish War* 2.390; 6.110; 6.411); so did Polybius two centuries earlier attribute Rome’s victories to the operation of Fortune and the necessity of nature, Ando, *Imperial Ideology*, 64.

<sup>320</sup> Niklas Holzberg, “De Griekse Briefroman,” *Hermeneus* (1995): 71–7.

projected into the past.<sup>321</sup> Coming at a time when narrative prose fiction also flowers (the early empire), with Greeks living under absolute monarchy despite local constitutional pretensions to the contrary, they are stamped by nostalgia for the lost glory of the Greek past, where the silence about Rome says something about Greek comportment with the fact of the empire and their participation in it. So the double and contradictory aspect of Greek comportment with the empire – acceptance and critique – can be seen in the absence of Rome from the novels, as well as in the images of survival and triumph over adversity in myth, fiction and graphic arts. And this is my theory: the Roman Empire created the conditions in which the fictional, the fantastical, the marvellous, the paradoxographical, and the novel could flourish; and it flourished especially in the Greek-speaking provinces of the eastern Roman empire due to the ‘imperial reach’ of the imaginary narrated worlds (as buy-in to the imperial ideal) as well as cultural sublimation of a disempowered position yet in which the provincial Greek-speaking élites survived and ‘made it.’ In other words, to take up the theoretical perspective above, far from ‘just’ romantic adventure stories, the Greek novels are encoded narratives of survival in a politically and socially fragile world, an aspect that becomes visible when one considers the nature of religion and mysteries in the late antique world.

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<sup>321</sup> Holzberg, “Griekse Briefroman,” 76.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **AND SO WE COME TO RELIGION ...**

#### 1. FRAMING THE QUESTION AND QUESTIONING THE FRAME

This study started from the premise that the question of the relationship between fiction and mystery religions of the imperial era should be reframed, and conversely, that the conventional scholarly and conceptual framing of these phenomena should be questioned. Already at the beginning of this study<sup>322</sup> it was announced after previewing the history of the scholarly study of the mysteries/mystery religions, and subsequently after surveying ‘the career path of the mysteries’ in the history of religions,<sup>323</sup> that the mysteries/mystery religions are, literally, the creations of scholars’ studies – the discursive artifact that arises from the juxtaposition of *Zeitgeist*, cultural and theological presuppositions, interpretation traditions, and theory of religion on to the ‘raw data’ for the mysteries.

In this context ‘conceptual framing’ is another term for the theorizing inherent in our construction and representation of ‘religious’ phenomena, and to ‘question the frame’ is to theorize with a self-conscious awareness. This is what is meant by the now famous statement of Jonathan Z. Smith that

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<sup>322</sup> See above Chapter 1, p.20ff.

<sup>323</sup> See above, Chapter 1, p.28ff.

there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy. For this reason, the student of religion, and most particularly the historian of religion, must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study.<sup>324</sup>

The distinction that Smith makes between 'imagining gods and deities' and 'imagining religion'<sup>325</sup> is a fundamental one that runs as a golden thread through much of his work. In light of earlier arguments offered here (see above Chapter 1) 'imagining gods and deities' suggests the complex and manifold ways in which deities and other superhuman beings and agencies are projections of human understandings of the complex processes of epicmaking, worldmaking, and social formation, i.e., symbolic interpretations of human world, the way humans imagine a world into being. To put it in yet other words, after the famous parable of the invisible gardener (Anthony Flew), it is interpreted or matrixed experience. 'Imagining religion' evokes a particular phase in the history of humankind (that is, since the Enlightenment) in which the bewildering variety of matrices of experiences called religion/s – a discovery that is the result of Western imperial conquest – gives rise to various taxonomies and categorial classifications with which to deal with the explosion in anthropological data, a result of which is the emergence of 'religion' as a generic category, a *summun genus*.<sup>326</sup> Just as each living language is a particular, concrete, and contextualized set of grammatical rules and communication conventions

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<sup>324</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion. From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 'Introduction,' xi.

<sup>325</sup> Smith, *Imagining Religion*, xi: 'If we have understood the archeological and textual record correctly, man has had his entire history in which to imagine deities and modes of interaction with them. But man, more precisely western man, has had only the last few centuries in which to imagine religion. It is this act of second order, reflective imagination which must be the central preoccupation of any student of religion.'

<sup>326</sup> Cf. Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (ed. Mark C Taylor; Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269–84, especially 275, but see also p.281–2: "'Religion' is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define. It is a second-order, generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as "language" plays in linguistics or "culture" plays in anthropology. There can be no disciplined study of religion without such a horizon.'

and symbolic codes; and each living and lived culture is a particular, concrete, and contextualized set of symbols and practices; so each living and lived 'religion' is a particular, concrete, and contextualized set of epicmaking, worldmaking, mythmaking, and socially formative practices. No-one speaks language in general, or lives a culture in general. In a like manner religion does not exist in general. The category 'religion' is a concept in scholarly employ to organize and categorize phenomena and data as well as the relations between them.

The coherence of the argument and the theoretical position taken here, is provided by the metaphor of mapping.<sup>327</sup> In the context of a discussion of scholarly work as a framing it would serve us well to consider the significance of two parables for imagining the relationship between religion, history and the history of religion, the first an allegory about a map without distortion, a 'map with absolute congruency to its subject matter, and, hence, a map that is both absolutely useless to second-order intellection, as well as for finding one's way around.'<sup>328</sup> The dual play on first order and second order intellection, or, as it is phrased in the context of this discussion: the interplay between 'map' and 'territory', is foundational to the argument pursued here. On the one hand, the scholar of religion is engaged in a second order reflection on religious phenomena of various types. The scholar is reconfiguring, redescribing, comparing, and rectifying categories, often in terms and categories with which the 'insider' to that religious tradition would not necessarily agree. It is true that the scholar of religion represents the concepts, beliefs and judgements that together inform and make up the subject's identification of his or her experience, but 'at the level of explanation, in my sort or language at the level of redescription, the scholar offers "an explanation of an experience in terms that are not those of the subject and

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<sup>327</sup> The mapping metaphor derives from Jonathan Z. Smith, "Map is not Territory," in *Map is not Territory. Studies in the History of Religions* (Jonathan Z. Smith; Leiden: Brill, 1978), 289–309. In this act of theorizing the scholar does not necessarily repeat the language of religious insiders, in fact, they may not recognize themselves in the scholarly representation, Bruce Lincoln, "Reflections on 'Theses on Method,'" in *Secular Theories on Religion. Current Perspectives* (ed. Tim Jensen and Mikael Rothstein; Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2000), 117–21.

<sup>328</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, "Bible and Religion," *Bulletin of the Council of Societies for the Study of Religion* 29, no. 4 (2000): 90.

might not meet with his approval. This is perfectly justifiable and is, in fact, normal procedure”.<sup>329</sup> The scholarly procedure of mapping data in accordance with theory, what Jonathan Z. Smith calls the ‘comparative enterprise’, that is the fourfold procedure of description, classification, comparison, and explanation,<sup>330</sup> or ‘the four moments in the comparative enterprise’ — description, comparison, redescription and rectification of categories,<sup>331</sup> denies the possibility of the student of religious phenomena merely repeating or paraphrasing the subjects under scrutiny. Much of biblical scholarship is characterized by an unwillingness to seriously engage in considerations of theory of religion. At most, theory and its necessary entailments are reduced to method, a procedure of reading texts that avoids any effort at redescription. In most cases exegesis amounts to nothing more than paraphrasing (this is still the case, for example in the classic exegetical genre, the biblical commentary). In consequence, theories of literature as well as social theories have been adapted and pressed into service of exegesis, but these only serve to ‘escape the “cost” of those theoretical positions’.<sup>332</sup>

On the other hand, as will become clear in the discussion to follow, religious language itself, as speech act, as social action, as rhetoric and as propaganda, is a mapping onto experiences of religious and cultural matrices, of social interests and ends, of world creating strategies. In a sense, ‘primary’ religious language is itself a second order reflection and intellection. Aside from the question whether it is possible at all to have unmatrixed experience, that is pure experience before interpretation (and I do not believe that to be possible), in view of the *examples offered here of historical instances of proposing religious viewpoints*, as rhetorical statements or proposals, one can say that religious language is also second order reflection. It should be noted that the historian of religion only has access to texts and artifacts, that is, experiences that

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<sup>329</sup> Wayne Proudfoot: *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) as cited by Smith, “Bible and Religion,” 90.

<sup>330</sup> Smith, “Bible and Religion,” 87.

<sup>331</sup> Smith, “Bible and Religion,” 87; see also Burton L. Mack, *The Christian Myth. Origins, Logic, Legacy* (New York/London: Continuum, 2001), 70–4, a discussion of Smith’s theoretical position.

<sup>332</sup> Smith, “Bible and Religion,” 90.

have been organised, filtered, matrixed and mapped, shaped and presented to pursue a specific end. The rhetoric of the text/discursive artifact itself, the world it creates *and proposes*, militates against seeing religious texts as simply expressive of inchoate experience. Religious texts, especially of the kind under consideration here, propose world and so attempt to *evoke or create experience* in accordance with the worldview and ideology offered.

Strictly speaking, one should differentiate between three orders of language, ‘first’ second order religious language which is not accessible to the student of religious phenomena, being pre-reflective, unorganized and unlanguage ‘pre-experience experience’; ‘second’ second order language, which is what is found in religious texts from oral exclamation to imperial dictate, being *experience as it is conceptualized and presented or proposed*; and third order language, that is the language of the scholar in the endeavour of comparison and redescription (*itself not without its ideological and rhetorical thrust*).

From ‘primary’ religious language and practice, to scholarship and theorizing we are speaking one language within the context of another, as Tim Murphy put it.<sup>333</sup> While religion itself is a mapping on to experiences of conceptual matrices, and in this sense does not exist objectively ‘out there’ apart from its existence as organising concept,<sup>334</sup> scholarship on religion or the theorizing of religion is equally a mapping – of theoretical matrices on to religious phenomena.<sup>335</sup> Rethinking our dual metaphor of

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<sup>333</sup> Tim Murphy, “Speaking Different Languages: Religion and the Study of Religion,” in *Secular Theories on Religion. Current Perspectives* (Tim Jensen and Mikael Rothstein; Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2000), 183–92.

<sup>334</sup> Willi Braun, “Religion,” in *Guide to the Study of Religion* (ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon; London/New York: Cassell, 2000), 3–18.

<sup>335</sup> Apart from the work of Jonathan Z. Smith, consult also Lincoln, “Reflections”. In this act of theorizing the scholar does not necessarily repeat the language of religious insiders, in fact, they may not recognize themselves in the scholarly representation. Compare the last two ‘theses’ of Lincoln: ‘12. nature and sacrosanct status – may be regarded as heresy and sacrilege by those who construct themselves as religious, but it is the starting point for those who construct themselves as historians. 13. When one permits those whom one studies to define the terms in which they will be understood, suspends one’s interest in the temporal and contingent, or fails to distinguish between “truths,” “truth-claims,” and “regimes of truth,” one has ceased to function as historian or scholar. In that moment, a variety of roles are available: some perfectly respectable (amanuensis, collector, friend, and advocate), and some less appealing (cheerleader, voyeur, retailer of import goods). None, however, should be confused with scholarship.’

‘map’ and ‘territory’ within this framework, implies that we do not operate with a unidimensional metaphor. Rather, our ‘maps’ and ‘territories’ are three dimensional or multi-dimensional. In essence this means that rhetoric is everything, and ubiquitous. Having been filtered through cultural matrices, terministic screens and rhetorical frames, all experience and reflection upon experience or theorizing of experience, that is, every map and territory, is the result of an act of cultural creativity. We *make* our world ... at every conceivable level.

But now, back to the parables:

In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, these Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographer’s Guild struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point by point with it. The following generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography, as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all of the Land there is no other Relic of the Discipline of Geography.<sup>336</sup>

The second parable or allegory also derives from a short story of Jorge Luis Borges. It is the story of ‘Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote.’<sup>337</sup>

The story recounts the literary achievements of the fictional Pierre Menard, who in 1934 set out to write, not a copy of Cervantes’ Don Quixote, but *the* Don

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<sup>336</sup> Smith, “Bible and Religion,” 91, a quotation in its entirety of Jorge Luis Borges’ ‘Exactitude in Science’ from his *Collected Fictions* (New York, 1985), 325.

<sup>337</sup> Smith refers to this story in the context of his discussion of George Foot Moore’s discussion of borrowings in Jewish religion, according to which the Jews borrowed concepts from other traditions, borrowings that were possible because ultimately these concepts were deeply rooted in Judaism itself. Therefore these were not ‘real’ borrowings. In this context Smith refers to Borges’ tale of Pierre Menard as an example of reproducing what was already there, see his ‘In Comparison a Magic Dwells’, Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 30–1. The tale of Borges is taken from Jorge Luis Borges, “Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote,” in *Ficciones* (Jorge Luis Borges; New York, 1962), 45–55. I will make somewhat different use of the allegory. Borges’ tale is a curious mixture of verisimilitude and the absurd, of fantasy and the seemingly historical. However, it can be profitably mined for its implications for the type of argument followed here in the context of an exposition of a theory of religion.

Quixote. 'His aim was never to produce a mechanical transcription of the original; he did not propose to copy it. His admirable ambition was to produce pages which would coincide — word for word and line for line — with those of Miguel de Cervantes.'<sup>338</sup> Menard's *Don Quixote* was, however, not quite the same as Cervantes'. The differences between the two works were extremely subtle, for the latter differed from the first not in literal form, but in implications. For example, since three hundred years have past between the writing of the first and the second *Don Quixote*, in which *Don Quixote* itself became part of the complex history of the internecine years, the naturalness surrounding the writing and character of the first is lost in the second.<sup>339</sup> Menard does not attempt to be Cervantes, he tries to be Cervantes *as Menard*, a task, however skilfully accomplished (that is, with regard to achieving accurate and faultless seventeenth century Spanish grammar and style), executed not without a certain measure of affectation. The vividness of the bristling life of the world of the first novel is missing from the second, and the repetition of a seventeenth century soldier's discourse against letters in favour of arms (and that now from a contemporary of Bertrand Russell) strikes the reader as artificial ('reapse into these nebulous sophistries!').<sup>340</sup> According to the narrator, the texts of Cervantes and Menard are verbally identical, but the *Don Quixote* of Menard is 'almost infinitely richer'<sup>341</sup> because of the irony involved. Repeating an anterior work in a later context is to be complicit in meanings you might not agree with, but also to make the text say something it did not say and mean the first time around.<sup>342</sup>

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<sup>338</sup> Borges, "Pierre Menard," 49.

<sup>339</sup> 'To compose *Don Quixote* at the beginning of the seventeenth century was a reasonable, necessary and perhaps inevitable undertaking; at the beginning of the twentieth century it is almost impossible. It is not in vain that three hundred years have passed, charged with the most complex happenings — among them, to mention only one, the same *Don Quixote*', Borges, "Pierre Menard," 51.

<sup>340</sup> Borges, "Pierre Menard".

<sup>341</sup> Borges, "Pierre Menard".

<sup>342</sup> With regard to the former: '...his resigned or ironic habit of propounding ideas which were the strict reverse of those he preferred', Borges, "Pierre Menard", and with regard to the latter aspect, see the comparison between the two texts:

'The latter [Cervantes], for instance, wrote (*Don Quixote*, Part One, Chapter Nine): [... truth, whose mother is history, who is the rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, example and lesson to the present, and warning to the future.] Written in the seventeenth century, written by the "ingenious layman" Cervantes, this enumeration is a mere rhetorical eulogy of history.

Menard, on the other hand, writes:

[... truth, whose mother is history, who is the rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, example and lesson to the present, and warning to the future.]

History, *mother* of truth; the idea is astounding. Menard, a contemporary of William James, does not define history as an investigation of reality, but as its origin. Historical truth, for him, is not what took place; it is what we think took place. The final clauses — *example and lesson to the present, and warning to the future* — are shamelessly pragmatic,' Borges, "Pierre Menard".

The Pierre Menard parable of Borges raises a number of considerations pertinent to a discussion of the relationship between scholarly reflection and religious experience and phenomena, that is, between the scholar of religion and his or her subject of study.<sup>343</sup> The first issue that attention is drawn to is the impossibility of repeating an anterior work. As the literary work becomes part of its own effective history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) meanings, significances, functions and uses are accrued to it which makes the later duplicate a stranger to the original. The meaning determining context of the duplicate creates a different set of meanings. When duplication or rewriting is nevertheless attempted, it has the character of affectation and artificiality. In the context of a discussion of the study of religion it implies that the scholar of religion cannot simply repeat or reflect the religious (or insider) viewpoints of the religious texts and phenomena studied. However sympathetically the data is represented and interpreted, description and interpretation cannot entail the reproduction of the tradition, religion, myths, rituals and so on. It cannot privilege the self-representation of the subjects studied. That would be to simply recreate the data, in the image of our parable: it would be to write an identical text to the first. Scholarly description and interpretation always has the character of translation in the sense of *traduction*.<sup>344</sup> The ‘text’ of description, interpretation and explanation is a *translation*<sup>345</sup> of the data into the matrices and categories of theory.<sup>346</sup> Theory, therefore, in a very real sense *creates* the resulting scholarly construction of the

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<sup>343</sup> I am leaving aside questions of a literary nature, such as the absurd, bizarre and fantastical in Borges’ oeuvre. I will focus here only on what it can be made to say for the scholarly reflection on the study of religion.

<sup>344</sup> From traduce, to misrepresent. Theorizing, that is the mapping of theory on to data, always implies a metaphorical process or, the act of translation, if you wish. It is the proposal that the second order language appropriate to one domain (the familiar/the known) may translate the second order language appropriate to another domain (the unfamiliar/the unknown), or in the Durkheimian sense as followed here in this study, the proposal that the second order language appropriate to society (in this case the known) may translate the second order language appropriate to that of religion (in this case the unknown). It behoves us to keep in mind that ‘translation is never fully adequate. There is always discrepancy. (To repeat the old tag: “To translate is to traduce.”)’ Smith, “Bible and Religion,” 91.

<sup>345</sup> Again, in the sense of changing of condition of existence, or transformation.

<sup>346</sup> The representation of data in scholarly theorizing and thinking demands more than a mere paraphrasing of the subject material. For the scholarly and theoretical purposes of comparison weak translation will be insufficient for purposes of thought. As Smith put it: ‘To summarize: a theory, a model, a conceptual category, *cannot be simply the data writ large*’ Smith, “Bible and Religion,” 91 (emphasis in original).

subject.<sup>347</sup> The relationship between theory and data poses, for the study of religion, in light of the history of the discipline, an especially problematic and thorny issue. The ‘founding’ of the study of religion as ‘science of religion’ by F. Max Müller in the late nineteenth century and the identification of science of religion with phenomenology of religion as the objective study of religion through ethnography and history (the term ‘phenomenology of religion’ was coined by Chantepie de la Saussaye in 1887) went hand in hand with the aspiration to scientific objectivity, which in the field of the

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<sup>347</sup> In this regard I want to draw attention to the distinction made by Norwood Hanson between ‘sense-datum’ words or ‘data-words’ and ‘theory-loaded’ words, see Braun, “Religion,” 9. Although the context in which Braun refers to Hanson deals with concept formation in religious studies scholarship, the issue is relevant here as well. Hanson illustrates the difference between ‘sense-datum’ words or ‘data-words’ and ‘theory-loaded’ words with the following illuminating example. Consider the two words ‘hole’ and ‘crater’. In Hanson’s example ‘hole’ (as ‘spatial concavity’) is a data-word, that is, its minimal lexical meaning can be ascertained by observation, and let us assume for the moment that something like objective observation is possible. In contrast to this, to label a certain spatial concavity a ‘crater’ already expresses an interpretation as to its origin, namely that its creation was quick, violent and explosive. But note, the formation of the ‘hole’ is not a given, only the absence of matter in the concavity. How this effect was produced and how we should name the phenomenon is the result of assumptions and interpretations. The ‘crater’ is therefore produced by our assumptions and interpretations. In general, concepts ‘are products of scholars’ cognitive operations to be put to work in the service of scholars’ theoretical interest in the objects of their research. Concepts are not given off by the objects or our interests’, Braun, “Religion,” 9.

As part of a discussion of the idea, definition and category of ‘religion’ (the context for the discussion being an argument pre-empting the possible accusation of arbitrariness in selecting the phenomena to categorise as ‘religious’ for the sake of scholarly study and [re]construction of religion) Gavin Flood articulated this point as follows: ‘But while constraints upon religious narratives are in one sense objective and texts exist independently of research, these narratives are also partially constructed by the research programme itself. Religious narratives articulated in written and oral texts are the primary data of the human sciences. The constraints which result in the ordination of a Buddhist nun at a Buddhist monastery in the south of England are independent of research methods, but those methods nevertheless construct the ‘data’ through research questions and in the attempt to specify constraints. A research programme, that for example seeks to show how language in the nun’s ordination not merely reflects the social act, but generates it, selects data to corroborate the theory. Data are generated by the interaction of the theoretical paradigm with the material or objective constraints. The research programme — or more specifically the particular researcher — is therefore placed in a dialogical relationship with its/her ‘object’ — a tradition articulated in texts, forms of behaviour, personal biography or whatever — and the result of their interaction is the study, monograph, or course of lectures. As Bakhtin has observed, scholarship or research responds to and reproduces another’s text in a second, framing text that comments, evaluates and so on’, Gavin Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology. Rethinking the Study of Religion* (London/New York: Cassell, 1999), 49–50.

This also holds true for the data scholars use for the construction of the ancient Mediterranean world and for the interpretation of ancient texts within the context of that world. It will be clear as the argument of this study unfolds, that the categories, theories and scholarly viewpoints espoused by me and juxtaposed as investigative grid on to the data, are not ‘given off’ by the data themselves. This reading of both the imperial rhetoric and the context of mystery religions will therefore always be vulnerable to the accusation of being spurious, quirky and idiosyncratic. However, the fecundity of the theory and its application will be measured by their ability to explain data and to create a credible reconstruction of the rhetorical *agon* evidenced by these two traditions. In sum, in a very real sense, interpretation *creates* data.

study of religion translated into causal explanations of religion, yet through non-reductionist descriptions and interpretations.<sup>348</sup> The massive presence of phenomenologists of religion in the history of the discipline, from Max Müller, de la Saussaye to Eliade, had as a result that phenomenology of religion became the dominant paradigm in the academic study of religions.<sup>349</sup>

Religious studies within the framework of phenomenology of religion can be typified as a discourse with a method but without a theory (Gavin Flood characterises this approach as ‘antitheoretical’), because of the reluctance to impose theory on data, and the wish to allow religious phenomena to reveal themselves.<sup>350</sup> In phenomenology what is important are the data and their illumination, by whatever method. What is needed is ‘fellow feeling’ or empathy. The assumption is, of course, that the religious data are transparent as ‘religious’.<sup>351</sup> However, the ‘timelessness’ which in this way comes to pervade phenomenological studies of religion causes it to be blind to the historical situatedness of the scholarly study of religion. The ideological foundations and presuppositions built into scholarly research, according to which data are selected, sifted, organised and created, call for reflexive thinking and research.<sup>352</sup> However, what is most important in the context of this study is to understand the effect of the hidden assumptions of phenomenology of religion on the description of religion and on the history and character of the discipline of history of religion as a whole. It has been pointed out that a theological and ahistorical perspective governs the phenomenological understanding of religion in, for example, Mircea Eliade’s work.

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<sup>348</sup> This particular confluence of discursive streams was formed by Husserlian phenomenology and Hegelian philosophy, see Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology*, 31. As such Husserlian phenomenology was an outgrowth of German philosophy of the subject (*Subjektsphilosophie*) of German idealism of the late Enlightenment and early Romanticism. The Husserlian transcendental ‘I’ as the absolute ground for certainty resulted, in the shape of the eidetic reduction and *epoché*, in a search for timeless essences, Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology*, 9–10. It is from phenomenology in general, and Husserl in particular, that phenomenology of religion derived some of its central concepts, namely ‘bracketing’ (*epoché*), truth statement, the intuition of essences, and empathy, Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology*, 16.

<sup>349</sup> Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology*, 8.

<sup>350</sup> Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology*, 16.

<sup>351</sup> Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology*, 16.

<sup>352</sup> As Flood put it so beautifully: ‘Moccasin walking or empathy does not provide a sufficiently rigorous theoretical basis on which to build an academic discipline,’ Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology*, 4. ‘Moccasin walking’ refers to the Indian adage ‘never judge a man until you have walked a mile in his moccasins’.

A major problem with this approach is that it sees religion as transcending history and, therefore, as a *sui generis* phenomenon, outside of history and socio-political structures.<sup>353</sup> Two examples will serve to illustrate this point. The first is taken from *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (p. 21):

Every ritual has a divine model, an archetype; this fact is well enough known for us to confine ourselves to recalling a few examples. ‘We must do what the gods did in the beginning’ (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, VII, 2,1,4). ‘This the gods did; thus men do’ (*Taittiriya Brāhmaṇa*, I, 5, 9, 4). This Indian adage summarizes all the theory underlying rituals in all countries. We find the theory among so-called primitive peoples no less than we do in developed cultures.

This passage illustrates Eliade’s theory of hierophany or the manifestation of the ‘sacred’ in religious forms, especially in ritual which according to this theory, recapitulates myths of origins. In fact, in this view, the origins of rituals are in myth. Not only has the theory of hierophanies become suspect in cultural materialist perspectives,<sup>354</sup> but it is also clear (now with the benefit of distance and hindsight) that these theories of myth and ritual harbour implicit theological assumptions as well as ahistorical understandings of religion.<sup>355</sup> In this view, religion transcends history.

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<sup>353</sup> Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology*, 6. But note, this study is not about phenomenology of religion as such, nor is it within the purview of this study to give an overview of all possible approaches. We are concerned here with a specific theory of religion, as social construction, social formation and mythmaking. The point on phenomenology of religion is only raised here to illustrate the background against which Jonathan Z. Smith developed his practice of historico-comparative studies of religion. Many essays of his take issue, for example, with Eliade’s work and present rereadings of his work.

<sup>354</sup> See the critique of this type of explanation of myth and ritual in the essays of Jonathan Z. Smith, where he clearly overturns this view by showing how myths and rituals are to be understood as social performances grounded in, and elicited by, specific social circumstances. Exceedingly well-written discussions of myth and ritual, the emergence of the Myth and Ritual school of (mainly) Cambridge, and the polyparadigmatic function of myth, ritual and religion are to be found in the earlier mentioned works of Henk Versnel – Henk S. Versnel, “Gelijke Monniken, Gelijke Kappen: Myth and Ritual, Oud en Nieuw,” *Lampas* 17, no. 2 (1984): 194–246, and Henk S. Versnel, *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion II. Transition and Reversal in Myth and Ritual*. (Studies in Greek and Roman Religion 6,2; Leiden/New York/Köln: Brill, 1993). In the main he shows how myths and rituals are strategies for dealing with ambiguous situations, hence the remainders of inconsistencies and ambiguities not smoothed over in myths and rituals.

<sup>355</sup> See the discussion below on ‘place’ and ‘centre’.

The second example of what a phenomenological description would be like, comes from Gavin Flood:<sup>356</sup>

For example, a phenomenological account of a Hindu ritual offering 108 pots of sanctified water to Ganeśa, will simply describe the pots and the actions of the participants in a way that assumes a detached objectivism. A dialogical account will assume the presence of the researcher, will be explicit about the research questions brought to bear upon the situation, and will focus on the analysis of language-as-performance in relation to action within a historically circumscribed horizon. Similarly, a dialogical reading of the New Testament might focus on the text as a literary document and upon the differing historical contingencies that produced both it and its reader.

The contrast in this example between what Flood calls a phenomenological approach and a dialogical approach,<sup>357</sup> neatly illustrates the ‘antitheoretical’ stance of phenomenological studies and its feigned objectivity. Moreover, it is under the guise of ‘detached objectivism’ that it becomes possible to reproduce, in the terms and with the conceptualisation suggested by the research subject(s), the religious expressions and their meanings, of the native or insider viewpoint. If gods are named as agents in the insider version of their ‘binding narratives’ or myths, does it follow that the researcher should conclude from that that myths are narratives about the primordial activities of the gods, and that religion is the reverence paid to superhuman beings?

The net effect of this kind of theorizing is to remove the religions of late Antiquity from their embeddedness in history, a removal which makes possible claims to their individual uniquenesses (especially a problem with regard to scholarly study of early Judaism and early Christianity). These constructions were aided by an Eliadean theory of religion which held religion to be a *sui generis* phenomenon. For Mircea Eliade transcendence and the sacred had an objective existence that could (only) be

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<sup>356</sup> Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology*, 7–8.

<sup>357</sup> Flood’s term ‘dialogical approach’ includes all the elements of the theory of religion espoused in this study, namely self-reflexivity, narrative (and narrative theory), history (and historical contingency), culture, signs, socio-political domains or contexts of meaning-creation as well as social and cultural theory. Flood clothes this contrast also in other terms, namely the contrast between a ‘philosophy of consciousness’ (that is, phenomenology) and a ‘philosophy of the sign’ (dialogical approach).

perceived and experienced by religious insiders. Quite apart from the religious value of such a theological worldview, the effect on scholarship was to fence off religion from investigative practices derived from other disciplinary contexts.<sup>358</sup> If religion is a way of speaking about cultural and human *arts de faire*, and if, as it is our purpose here, the ‘life’ of religion is to be located in the ‘complex fabric of active interests of people in the real world’,<sup>359</sup> then we should also understand that the transcendent, superhuman beings of myth and religious discourse<sup>360</sup> only exist as discursive entities. As Braun puts it:

‘... insofar as the gods or ancestors “live,” it is contemporary people who give them life by talking about, to and with them. This, in turn, suggests that the object of the scholar’s study is not the gods but the complex social operations by which, and the conditions which, people discursively bring the gods to life. This orientation opens new lines of inquiry: what human interests are served in keeping the gods alive? What are the variety ramifications for self, society and culture in the cultivation and preservation of the gods?’<sup>361</sup>

This is the perspective from which this study proceeds too. The rhetoric of mythmaking, ritual, performance, narrative worlds as social mythologies, and the discourses about gods as they are exemplified by the two sets of religious

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<sup>358</sup> The literature on the topic is far too numerous to cite, but for a good discussion of the theoretical issues involved, cf. Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion. The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), Russell T. McCutcheon, “Redescribing ‘Religion’ as Social Formation: Toward a Social Theory of Religion,” in *What is Religion? Origins, Definitions, and Explanations* (ed. Thomas A. Idinopulos and Bryan C. Wilson; Leiden/Boston/Köln: Brill, 1998), 51–72 and Russell T. McCutcheon, *The Discipline of Religion. Structure, Meaning, Rhetoric* (London/New York: Routledge, 2003). For a meta-history of the field of the study of religion, see Jonathan Z. Smith, “A Twice-Told Tale: The History of the History of Religion’s History,” *Numen* 48, no. 2 (2001): 131–46. Smith argues here that the specific self-conceptualization of the study of religion in terms of ‘presence’ (self-evident language expressive of thought – a neo-Kantian Enlightenment ideal) led to the insistence on the incommensurability of the field to other disciplinary fields and methods and hence on the uniqueness and essential transcendence of the subject matter of religious studies. He suggests that we should rather take the ‘Saussurean route’ of taking ‘religion’ to be a general, taxonomic category (akin to ‘culture’ in anthropology and ‘language’ in linguistics) and rather conceive of the appropriate methodology as one of translating the second-order conceptual language of one domain (the known) for the second-order conceptual language of another (the unknown), Smith, “Twice-Told Tale,” 143–4.

<sup>359</sup> Braun, “Religion,” 11.

<sup>360</sup> However one wants to name them: gods, spirits, ancestors, and so on.

<sup>361</sup> Braun, “Religion,” 11.

phenomena/practices and literature, as social actions in the service of the pursuance of social interests and social formation, put this study squarely within the ambit of social and cultural anthropological theories of religion. This was borne out and demonstrated by setting ancient fiction, the Greek novel, and Graeco-Roman mysteries in the context of the Roman Empire of the first three or so centuries, and by theorizing the ‘material’ relationship obtaining between these.<sup>362</sup> To describe the purview of this thesis in this way is already indicative of an alienation and estrangement from the (purported) native or insider viewpoint of Graeco-Roman religions. In the interest of theory formation, or theory application, redescription and comparison, this is a necessary and indispensable estrangement. For this reason phenomenology of religion as theoretical approach is seen as inadequately distanced from the subject matter to enable and facilitate the scholarly comparative and explanatory enterprise of description, comparison, redescription and rectification of categories.<sup>363</sup>

The map parable of Borges extends the application of the Pierre Menard parable even further in the direction of the relationship between theory and religion. The parable points to the fact that a map that is completely co-extensive with the territory it describes, is useless. Such a map is not a map at all. It is nothing but a copy of the country the cartographers had set out to map. As a map it was useless, since in terms of the parable, to ‘read’ the map was never to have left the landscape at all. The map could not explain the country it was supposed to map; and no reader would be able find directions through the landscape of the countryside. The implications for the study of religious phenomena and the conceptualisation of religion are clear.

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<sup>362</sup> Related to the approach taken here, is the theory labelled ‘conditionality,’ cf. J. S. Krüger, “Conditionality, Religious Experience and Conceptualisation,” in *Paradigms and Progress in Theology* (ed. J. Mouton, et al.; HSRC Studies in Research Methodology 5; Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 1988), 209–22; also J. S. Krüger, *Along Edges. Religion in South Africa: Bushman, Christian, Buddhist* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 1995), and J. S. Krüger, *Sweeping Whirlwinds. A Study of Religious Change: Reformed Religion and Civil Religion in the City of Pretoria (-Tshwane) (1855–2000)* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2003), especially 46–69. In short, Krüger maintains that religion and spirituality have a material (alongside intellectual) base, meaning they are caught up in processes of historical change, as encompassing worldviews are nevertheless embedded in and are the products of social and other material factors, Conceptions of the divine are as much conceptions of self and society, as well as the material world surrounding us.

<sup>363</sup> Smith’s critique of Mircea Eliade (for all the appreciation expressed for his illustrious teacher) boils down to exactly this, namely the theological captivity of phenomenological studies in religion.

A map represents an interpretation and explanation of the territory concerned. It does so by arbitrarily juxtaposing categories, points of reference, and symbolic codes on to a severely foreshortened graphic representation of the territory or landscape. All this is done according to specific perspectives, necessitated by or called for according to the purposes the map should serve. That explains the existence of a variety of maps: political, ecological, historical, economic and agricultural, as well as geographical maps. It is in this sense that theories function like conceptual maps, by selecting from the vast amount of raw data exactly and only that which will be represented in symbolic codes within the co-ordinates, categories and frames of theory with a view to description, comparison and explanation. Selecting, collecting and ordering according to a defined taxonomy, that is the task of the historian or scholar of religion.<sup>364</sup>

It should soon enough become clear, in the course of this exposition on religion, history and the history of religion, why we started with a parable about a constructed map. The twofold metaphor of ‘map’ and ‘territory’ characterises much of the theoretical thinking of Jonathan Z. Smith on religion and the study of religion (the ‘social constructivist theory of religion’), and in order to properly conceptualize ‘religion’ and the study of religion, as it becomes relevant in this religio-historical study, we needed to tease out from these metaphors their implications for a study of religion.<sup>365</sup>

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<sup>364</sup> This is the importance of the statement of Smith about religion ‘having no data’ and that of Braun about religion being a concept acting as a taxonomic tool: ‘we must regard religion as a concept, in the technical sense, and not as a substance that floats “out there” ... Concepts are ideas used to allocate the stuff of the real world into a class of objects so as to position these objects for thought that is aimed toward explanation of their causes, functions, attractiveness to individuals and societies, relationships to other concepts’, Braun, “Religion,” 11.

<sup>365</sup> Especially important here, in connection with the map-territory metaphor, is the collection of essays of Jonathan Z. Smith in idem. *Map is not Territory. Studies in the History of Religions* (Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity 23; Leiden: Brill, 1978), notably the essays ‘Map is not Territory’ (289–309), ‘The Wobbling Pivot’ (88–103), ‘The Influence of Symbols on Social Change: A Place on Which to Stand’ (129–146), ‘Wisdom and Apocalyptic’ (67–87), ‘Birth Upside Down or Right Side Up?’ (147–171), ‘The Temple and the Magician’ (172–189), and ‘Good News is No News: Aretalogy and Gospel’ (190–207); also Smith, *Imagining Religion* and Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1987). A very good overview of Smith’s theory of religion and his approach to the study of religion is found in Sam D. Gill, “Play,” in *Guide to the Study of Religion* (ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon; London/New York: Cassell, 2000), 451–62, Sam D. Gill, “Territory,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (ed. Mark C.

Religion is a mode of human creativity. What scholars of religion study is one mode of the construction of worlds of meaning. This is the domain where questions are sought to answer about what it is to be human. These questions are raised, and answered, in the context of history, the framework within whose perimeter those human expressions, activities and intentionalities that we call 'religious' occur.<sup>366</sup> Religion is the quest to manipulate the human situatedness in order to have space in which to meaningfully dwell. It is the attempt and the power to define human existence and its meaning in relation to the larger scheme of things, whether grand narrative or social spheres. Religion is the attempt to 'map, construct and inhabit such positions of power through the use of myths, rituals, and experiences of transformation.'<sup>367</sup> Religion, therefore, has the dual aspect of reflection on and organizing of experience. The chaotic stream of lived experience is categorized, sifted and organized according to the language of symbols and social structure that expresses an individual's or a culture's vision of its place, its perspective on the world.<sup>368</sup> From this it should be immediately apparent that the rhetoricity of world creation is central to this concept of religion.

The allegory above already suggested the importance of the concepts of perspective and place, and maps have to do with place. Two categories of place are significant in this respect, namely locative and utopian.

A locative vision of the world emphasises place whereas a utopian vision emphasises the value of being in no place.<sup>369</sup> In a locative map of the cosmos all incongruities are smoothed away by the assumption that all fits neatly together (the interconnectedness of all things) and that the way the world is presented is an adequate presentation of the world. The locative map is necessarily a centred map.<sup>370</sup>

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Taylor; Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 298–313 but especially Sam D. Gill, "No Place to Stand: Jonathan Z. Smith As *Homo Ludens*, The Academic Study of Religion *Sub Specie Ludi*," *JAAR* 66, no. 2 (1998): 283–312.

<sup>366</sup> Smith, "Map is not Territory," 291.

<sup>367</sup> Smith, "Map is not Territory," 291.

<sup>368</sup> Gill, "No Place to Stand," 288.

<sup>369</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map is not Territory*, 101 ('The Wobbling Pivot').

<sup>370</sup> Gill, "No Place to Stand," 289.

Such a centred map depends upon some order or set of organizing principles that defines the perspective on the world. What is not-centre is relegated to the periphery, to the category of the chaotic or profane. What is, of course, implied is the power of the rhetoric to define what is central, what is the true perspective on the world. In the history of religion this is the perspective most often encountered by the scholar and historian for this mostly represents the perspective of the élite and literate classes who had the means and the motive to produce the texts we study.<sup>371</sup>

There is an interdependence between the locative centre-oriented map and the utopian chaos-generating map.<sup>372</sup> The utopian map is not simply the structural equivalent and parallel to the locative map; it can not be conceived of if not in terms of the rejection of and rebellion against the locative map.<sup>373</sup> These two maps stand together in complex relationships that are fundamental to religion. It is the incongruity or moment of non-fit that is of interest to the historian of religion, the tug-of-war between locative and utopian perspective, between dominant and suppressed viewpoint, that is, the rhetoric of representation and mystification in a context of unequal power relationships. The locative and utopian maps 'remain coeval possibilities which may be appropriated whenever and wherever they correspond to man's experience of the world'.<sup>374</sup> The locative and the utopian maps are therefore to be understood as rhetorical strategies, and the religion of a given society that the historian of religion can describe is the result of the interplay between these two.

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<sup>371</sup> This is a very important problem in the study of history. Are we to take our sources at their word? If we only consider the ancient Near East, it is clear that to a very large extent (if not totally) the 'average man and woman in the street' has been relegated to the silence of non-existence. They were not important to write about. Inscriptions present us with what the sovereign wanted to have portrayed. Wisdom literature present us with the courtly take on politics and life in general (see Jonathan Z. Smith, "Wisdom and Apocalyptic," in *Map is not Territory*, 67–87). The Old Testament itself is representative of the myth of a Davidic dynasty and its claim on the Land of Israel. The other 'mythology' of Jewish origins, the two main works of Josephus, the *Jewish War* and the *Jewish Antiquities*, also give us history in the service of aristocratic ideology. In the case of early Christian literature we cannot take Paul, for example, as a yardstick of how things were 'on the ground'. His presentation of reality *as* this or that is in fact 'creating the ground.'

<sup>372</sup> Gill, "No Place to Stand," 289.

<sup>373</sup> Gill, "No Place to Stand," 290.

<sup>374</sup> Smith, "Map is not Territory," 309.

If humans are world creators, then the religious and social actions are generated by and given meaning in the terms of fit, the relationship between map and territory. Religions take shape in the process of juxtaposing experience with structuring maps. In terms of our allegory, the locative map is the attempt to force congruence between map (worldview) and territory (experience).<sup>375</sup> In the locative perspective the map is stretched to encompass all aspects of territory. In this type of map a scale of one to one is sought. The motivation is to find the meaning of experience in the corresponding perfect and complete fit of the map. By contrast the utopian map is ‘an anti-map attitude’.<sup>376</sup> The utopian motivation is to shrink the scale and inclusiveness of maps, to diminish their influence, to find meaning in experience itself rather than in any map correspondences. These two attitudes towards map are mirror-images. Neither is achievable in pure form. When a map achieves full scale it is experienced either as suffocating or as indistinguishable from the territory it charts.

In this place-founded imagination of religion, map, whatever its kind, is indispensable. A range of attitudes exists about the relationship between map and territory spanning a domain defined by the ideals at the opposing extremes of ‘locative’ and ‘utopian’. Seen in this light, the study of religion is shifted away from a classification of map types, of the identification of religion with one map coordinate, to an examination of the dynamics of the relationships between maps (worldviews) and territories (human experiences). It is to see that religiousness occurs in the play between map and territory, worldview and experience.

The kind of interplay sketched here is expressive of the distinction between what scholars of religion call critical religion as opposed to primal religion.<sup>377</sup> ‘Primal

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<sup>375</sup> Gill, “No Place to Stand,” 290.

<sup>376</sup> Gill, “No Place to Stand,” 291.

<sup>377</sup> Michael Pye, “Religion and Identity: Clues and Threads,” in *Religion and the Reconstruction of Civil Society. Papers from the Founding Conference of the South African Academy of Religion, January 1994* (ed. J. W. De Gruchy and S. Martin; Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1995), 3–17, especially 8–15; and John Cumpsty, “The Importance of Starting from Both Ends: An Appreciative Response to Michael Pye’s Keynote Address,” in *Religion and the Reconstruction of Civil Society. Papers from the Founding Conference of the South African Academy of Religion* (ed. J. W. De Gruchy and S. Martin; Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1995), 18–39, especially 20–24, 32–36. See also Gerhard Van den Heever, “On How to Be or not to Be: Theoretical Reflection on Religion and Identity

religion' is religion that is 'coterminous with a specific, natural society' whereas critical religion stands in 'some tension to natural society and offers a differentiated perspective upon it.' In the case of primal religion, society, culture and religion are highly interwoven so as to be indistinguishable as was the case with traditional Graeco-Roman religions, or *polis* cults as they are also labelled. Critical religion implies a world orientation that requires some distancing from mainstream society. Allegiance in this regard is acquired by opting out of naturally obtaining relations, from society or family and kin. Critical religion is founded on counter-intuitive insights into what counts as ultimately real and meaningful and constitutes a redefinition of the individual's position vis-à-vis the larger society as well as a critique of that society. Socially it institutionalizes artificial communities based newly or redefined, fictive kinship. Such religions, as non-natural societies, are also 'soteriological religions' since their *raison d'être* is to 'save from,' and they do so by creating societies within society. The ritual mechanisms by means of which this is accomplished are rituals of incorporation and rituals of enforcement.<sup>378</sup> It is a question of positionality, of place intruding on the conceptualization and projection of world, and as such, serves to signal the social nature of the myths and religious worlds constructed.

The significance of turning the study of religion upside down into a study of its manufacturedness lies in the fact that it demonstrates so visibly how religion, far from being a *sui generis* phenomenon, is deeply implicated in and embedded in, and in fact, *is* a social discourse.

## 2. RECONCEPTUALIZING RELIGION: A SOCIAL THEORY OF RELIGION

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in Africa," *R&T* 8, no. 1&2 (2001): 11 for an interpretation of this twofold typology and its relevance for theorising religious identity.

<sup>378</sup> The complex process of initiation by investigation (as to suitability), purification/washing, exorcism, chrism – the baptismal process – is an early Christian example of incorporation rite. But it was by no means unique to early Christianity, the account of Lucius's initiation into the cult of Isis in Apuleius's *Metamorphoses, or The Golden Ass* evidences the same process. In Christianity the Eucharist and confession would be examples of rituals of enforcement.

One of the problems that bedevilled past thinking on the relationship fiction-religion stemmed from the way religion was conceptualized. Underlying past debates on Merkelbach was an unspoken assumption about religion as an interior state of belief as assent to truths, parallel to the way literature was relegated to the private enjoyment of individual.<sup>379</sup> By theorizing them both as species of social discourse one can entertain a new perspective on the topic. As Mack put it: ‘Religion thought of as traffic-with-the-divine implicitly works with an anthropology of the autonomous individual, not with a social anthropology.’<sup>380</sup> And yet, it is the challenge to see ancient religion as a social formation that will bring us closer to understanding religion in the ancient world. In fact, it was the reading of the ancient religious context as an age in decline, an age of anxiety for the lost individual in search of contact with the divine, that makes it impossible to see the complex relationship between fiction and religion in the Graeco-Roman world. So we need to reconceptualize religion for our purposes. Following Burton Mack, one can profitably study religion as a set of social actions in the intersection between social formation and mythmaking.<sup>381</sup>

‘Myth’ is in the context of this study a particularly problematic concept. The modern study of myth was fuelled by such assumptions as that myths are ‘systems of “belief”, and that the underlying questions had to do with the “reasons” for thinking

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<sup>379</sup> In recent years this has been exposed as the (Christian) theological legacy of, mainly, William James and Mircea Eliade (and before them, Rudolf Otto), which was immensely influential in over half a century of theorizing about religion. See for a short overview of the issues involved Burton L. Mack, “A Radically Social Theory of Religion,” in *Secular Theories on Religion. Current Perspectives* (ed. Tim Jensen and Mikael Rothstein; Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2000), 123–36, and McCutcheon, “Redescribing ‘Religion.’”. Consider also Philip A. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations. Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2003), 120: ‘[t]he traditional view reflects modern distinctions between politics and religion, that, as Simon Price also stresses, do not fit the ancient context, where the social, religious, economic, and political were intricately interconnected and often inseparable. Second, the view involves the imposition of modern notions concerning “individualism,” “private” vs. “public,” and related definitions of religion (such as those offered by William James and Rudolf Otto) stress emotions or feelings of the individual as the heart of religion, emphasizing an equation between “personal” or “private” and genuine religiosity, and there is a tendency among some scholars to apply this to antiquity ... However, such individualistic and (sometimes) antiritualistic definitions of religion are problematic when applied to non-Western (or even non-Protestant) religious phenomena, modern or ancient.’

<sup>380</sup> Mack, “Radically Social Theory,” 129.

<sup>381</sup> Mack, “Radically Social Theory,” 131.

that the myths were “true.”<sup>382</sup> It was because of this that myths generated a number of research questions that required cognitive explanation.<sup>383</sup> If myths were stories about gods and primordial origins, in what way can they be said to be true? Consequently, questions arose regarding truth, reason, and belief, and an attendant set of questions came to dominate religio-historical scholarship, namely questions regarding the relation of myth to ritual, and the nature of religion as a myth-ritual complex.<sup>384</sup> With the rise of ethnography and the impact this made on the study of religion, myths came to be seen as parts of a cultural whole, a larger pattern of transmitted narratives, practices and performances, and cultural production. Myths were thus no longer treated as narrative remnants from a primordial past, but set, together with ritual, within a real-life context – as cultural symbols.<sup>385</sup> Whether by means of functionalist theories (questioning the ways in which myths encapsulate and inculcate values and attitudes), or structuralist theories (analyzing the way in which myths embody the mode of thinking of a people) myths became an invaluable tool for ethnographers in the endeavour of social description and analysis.<sup>386</sup> So instead of being ‘false’ in the sense of non-real, or fictional, myths rather open a window on to a society’s self-imagination, the kind of image a social group or society constructs in order to imagine themselves into being, or to maintain the social group. It is in this sense that ‘myth’ was used in this study, namely as a designation for identity-giving, identity-generating, or identity-maintaining narratives.<sup>387</sup> ‘Narratives’ not only denote texts of varying lengths, but include pictorial depictions and symbols (which, as we have seen earlier, in the Graeco-Roman world often ‘floated’ on a sea of narrative). It is for this reason, too, that ancient fiction along with its modern counterpart – artifacts of modern mass culture: fiction and cinematography – *and* in combination with

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<sup>382</sup> Mack, *Christian Myth*, 14.

<sup>383</sup> Mack, *Christian Myth*, 15.

<sup>384</sup> Mack, *Christian Myth*, 15. See also the earlier mentioned work of Versnel, “Gelijke Monniken, Gelijke Kappen,” and *Transition and Reversal*.

<sup>385</sup> Mack, *Christian Myth*, 16–7.

<sup>386</sup> Mack, *Christian Myth*, 17.

<sup>387</sup> For this kind of theory of myth, see Russell T. McCutcheon, “Myth,” in *Guide to the Study of Religion* (ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon; London/New York: Cassell, 2000), 190–208.

graphic ensценations (performances and *tableaux vivants*) have been treated in this study as *mythography* – the writing of the myth of a particular society at a particular time in a particular context. Ancient fiction, mystery performances-plus-*ekphraseis*, mystery cults complete with symbols and social arrangements, are examples of socio-mythic inventions. In the term ‘socio-mythic invention’ *socio* denotes the domain or site and interests involved, *mythic* the process by which a society (or group within society) is imagined into being, and *invention* the rhetorical techniques involved in creating, establishing and maintaining myth. *Socio* means that religion plays a central part in creating groups, as well as the identity that binds them together as members of that group. *Mythic* refers to the way the manufactured identity is encapsulated in a number of efficacious narratives and habitualized and routinized practices that together, as an ensemble create the common understanding of self of the group members buying into this artifice of self-projection. *Invention* evokes the rhetorical nature of the construction of a narrative of identity, the selection of narratives and ‘pasts’ from which to manufacture a history, the arrangement of the narratives, their contextualization and imbuing with values and importance and significance.<sup>388</sup>

To study religion as social formation is to pay attention to the social forces that generate the specific religion(s) as active and ongoing social processes, as well as the social institutions that result from this interaction.<sup>389</sup> In this sense, social formation refers to a ‘specific and coordinated system of beliefs, acts, and institutions that construct the necessary conditions for shared identities.’<sup>390</sup> Mythmaking refers to the way in which images, stories, and exempla from the past (ancestors, events, concatenated strings of events as history) are configured and used to construct and shape a collective imagination about the present and to make a world in which to live.

Humans assemble meaning, and this is what is meant by ‘mythmaking’, through a dual process of *bricolage* and translation. *Bricolage*: picking out the useful bits from

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<sup>388</sup> Gerhard van den Heever, “Diversity: Religions and the Study of Religion,” *R&T* 11, no. 3&4 (2004): 208.

<sup>389</sup> McCutcheon, “Redescribing ‘Religion,’” 58, a reference to the work of Jonathan Z. Smith.

<sup>390</sup> McCutcheon, “Redescribing ‘Religion,’” 59.

tradition (oral or written); from the overarching epic or foundational history-as-mythology; from images available in the context; philosophies, ethics, stories as examples; rhetorical moves and standard tropes and topics ... and popular culture. Translation: to speak one language in the context of another, that is, to set the new connections arising from the bricolage in a new context, literally the context of the perceived demands of the social space.<sup>391</sup> So a ‘cognitive poetics’ does not concern the goings-on in a solitary individual mind, but the construction of shared reality on the basis of and in answer to the questions posed by the social context. This recontextualization, therefore, tells us something about the socially constitutive nature of the discourse (or: ‘the social construction of reality’). World in this sense is understood as a *habitus*, an imagined order of things as social context for the present, so that the symbols of the mythic world not only act as vehicles for political and cultural representations but also for the social interests generating the whole process.<sup>392</sup>

## 2. ANCIENT MYSTERIES AND SOCIAL FORMATION IN THE EARLY IMPERIAL ERA

### *2.1 Imperial Phenomena*

The mysteries have been interpreted in modern scholarship as the re-enactments of narratives of dying and rising gods,<sup>393</sup> from classical antiquity to the demise of the mysteries in the Christian empire. However, the paucity of evidence for mysteries of these dying and rising gods, at least as regards a flowering of these mysteries, before the imperial era is remarkable.<sup>394</sup> If the emergence of mystery cults of ‘oriental origin’

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<sup>391</sup> Tim Murphy, “Speaking Different Languages: Religion and the Study of Religion.”

<sup>392</sup> Mack, “Radically Social Theory,” 133.

<sup>393</sup> See chapter 1, ‘2.2 Conceiving Mysteries as Mirrors of Contemporary Religiosity.’

<sup>394</sup> Cf. the vexing question raised by Ugo Bianchi regarding the paucity of evidence for mysteries of the ‘oriental gods’ before the imperial era: ‘Iside dea misterica. Quando?’ H. S. Versnel, “Religieuze Stromingen,” 116. The rich world of mystery religions is a defining characteristic of the Roman Empire. In this context attention needs to be drawn to the fact that if the religious world(s) of the early Roman Empire can be characterized, it is by the flowering of mystery cults/religions, for it is in this

with central myths of dying and rising gods can be said to be a defining characteristic of the Roman Empire, then this constitutes an important phenomenon to consider as we reconceptualize mystery religions/mystery cults (and these ‘oriental religions,’ far from being pure imports, were themselves transformed by Romans into imperial products suited to Roman tastes). Far from being static myths (as if Eleusis remained an unchanging model for all time), the ‘mystery myths’ should rather be seen as rhetorical discourses within the imperial context.<sup>395</sup>

Jonathan Z. Smith has consistently argued in his work over the years against static pictures of religion, instead seeing Graeco-Roman religions as ancient religions in their late Antique phase.<sup>396</sup> (None of these religions, or mysteries, was new, and even in the one case of known invention – Mithraic mysteries<sup>397</sup> – use was still made of veritably ancient traditions and symbols.) Even when elements of these mysteries remained constant, we still need to consider the new meaning they acquired in the early imperial context. In chapters 2, 3 and 4 of this study I have indicated how the ‘myths’ and the performances of the mysteries were embedded in a wider encompassing, paradoxographic celebration of Saturnalian good times. As such they helped create and maintain imperial ideology and the power of the imperial state.<sup>398</sup> If the classical mysteries (Demeter at Eleusis, the Kabiri on Samothrace, the Andanean mysteries) originated as family or kin organisations, by the early empire this was no

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‘class’ of religious phenomena that one can see most clearly how religion as performance created the conditions and processes described above, namely the imperializing of religion and society.

<sup>395</sup> See chapter 1, p.33 n.100, a reference to Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism; Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 106–7.

<sup>396</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, “Hellenistic Religions,” in *The Encyclopedia Britannica, 15th Ed. Vol. 8* (1974), 749–51.

<sup>397</sup> See below.

<sup>398</sup> How pervasive was this? We know from the literary production of the period that at least the imperial élites, the wealthy, and those involved in imperial bureaucracy subscribed to this ideology. What did the lowly and the poor think, and how did it affect them? Apart from some inscriptional evidence that seems to suggest a pervasive buying in to the purported good times, or express the *diesseilige* requirements of inhabitants of the Graeco-Roman world, we can only guess.

In addition, the ‘beliefs’ transmitted by traditional Roman religion had as contents ‘the meaning of Roman life and history,’ that is, religion exercised a socio-ideological function, Luther H. Martin, “History, Cognitive Science, and the Problematic Study of Folk Religions: The Case of the Eleusinian Mysteries of Demeter,” *Temenos* 39–40 (2003–04): 92, citing Mary Beard, et al., *Religions of Rome. Volume 1. A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 75, 113.

longer the case.<sup>399</sup> Originally locative cults with a strong focus on centre,<sup>400</sup> they were transformed into utopian cults in the Roman Empire.<sup>401</sup> Cut loose from any political and ideologically centring function mysteries flowered everywhere, became the transportable cult type par excellence. This development was strengthened by the phenomenon of multiple initiations known for the late Ancient world. Multiple initiations in essence created a trans-imperial citizenship.

## 2.2 *Mystery Cults as Social Discourse*

Late Antique religion, and the mysteries of the Hellenistic and imperial age should be explicitly included here, did not lead to a growing individualization but rather to the reverse, to a 'heightened, if redefined, social reality.'<sup>402</sup> Hellenistic cultural fragmentation led not to individualism but to a plurality of subcultures, and it is into these that Hellenistic religions saved one from individualism.<sup>403</sup> Participation in religious activities was a kind of socialization, the opposite of which was to be a

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<sup>399</sup> Even in classical antiquity the mysteries of Eleusis and Samothrace were known to have a pan-Hellenistic function, that is, to define Greekness in the ancient world. The fact of the traditional family priesthoods at Eleusis tells of the original kin-function of the initiation.

<sup>400</sup> Typical of all temple cults with a strong centralizing tradition – official priesthoods, importance of place (the cultic centre or temple as located on a divinely appointed location, or a place with mythical significance), and purity regulations. Temple cults usually functioned as ideological centres for temple states as well as for native kingdoms pre-Roman Empire, cf. Jonathan Z. Smith, 'Wisdom and Apocalyptic' and 'The Temple and the Magician' in *Map is not Territory*, 67–87, 172–189 respectively.

<sup>401</sup> 'Utopian' in the sense of no-place.

<sup>402</sup> Luther H. Martin, "The Anti-Individualistic Ideology of Hellenistic Culture," *Numen* 41, no. 2 (1994): 125.

<sup>403</sup> Note the comment by Philip Harland: 'Louis Robert, Paul Veyne, Peter Brown, and others challenge notions of wide-spread rootlessness in the Graeco-Roman world. As Peter Brown observes, "many modern accounts of religious evolution of the Roman world place great emphasis on the *malaise* of life in great cities in Hellenistic and Roman times. Yet the loneliness of the great city and the rapid deculturation of immigrants from traditionalist areas are modern ills: they should not be overworked as explanatory devices for the society we are studying. We can be far from certain that [as Dodd states] "such loneliness must have been felt by millions." There is truth in the observation that associations could provide their members with things they might not otherwise get in precisely the same way elsewhere. However, we should not speak of widespread feelings of economic, religious, or social deprivation (e.g., exploitation, alienation, loneliness) as the principal factor or cause of associations as socioreligious groups or movements in the ancient context,' Harland, *Associations*, 96.

wanderer.<sup>404</sup> So, to cease to be a wanderer is to be socialized into a religious association. Salvation had to do with status conferred through group membership.

Although Hellenistic internationalism did challenge the classical view of a collective identity conferred by one's city of origin – the view still represented by Aristotle – it did not challenge the social basis of identity by producing any ideology of individualism. Rather, it produced alternative strategies of social inclusion, strategies defined not by place of birth but by inclusion in a newly defined international plurality of social groupings in which membership was conferred by invitation and instruction.<sup>405</sup>

The mysteries of the imperial era functioned as kinship groups, with two kinds of associations depending on how the group is defined: either as an alliance of fictive siblings, or as an alliance of fictive descendants from the cult deity.<sup>406</sup> If the communities of initiates were replacements of ancient social groups,<sup>407</sup> then the proliferation of these clubs or societies during the Hellenistic and Roman imperial era was the result of the conditions of empire.<sup>408</sup> The 'conditions of empire' were social mobility (resulting from military service and commercial enterprise),<sup>409</sup> but to these I would also add: a new sense of imperial citizenship. If in Hellenistic associations and cult groups ethnic 'brothers' banded together in the pursuit of comradeship, the successive empires in the Mediterranean world created a cosmopolitan culture in which the membership of these associations (many of which were called mysteries) lost their ethnic meaning and started to attract a wider membership, and in this they followed the example set by the developments in the cult at Eleusis.<sup>410</sup>

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<sup>404</sup> See Martin, "Anti-Individualistic Ideology," 127 for a discussion of the wanderer terminology in mystery religions (examples: Apuleius' *Golden Ass* 11.20 and the *Homeric Hymn* to Demeter 133; and a Mithraic inscription promises 'life to wandering humans').

<sup>405</sup> Martin, "Anti-Individualistic Ideology," 130.

<sup>406</sup> Luther H. Martin, "Akin to the Gods or Simply One to Another? Comparison with Respect to Religions in Antiquity," in *Vergleichen und Verstehen in der Religionswissenschaft* (ed. Hans-Joachim Klimkeit; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1997), 153.

<sup>407</sup> A reference to Franz Cumont, Martin, "Akin to the Gods," 153.

<sup>408</sup> Martin, "Akin to the Gods," 154.

<sup>409</sup> Martin, "Akin to the Gods," 154.

<sup>410</sup> Martin, "Akin to the Gods," 154.

Kinship recruitment into these fictive kin societies was modelled on the juridical idea of adoption (*huiothesia*). So in a number of mysteries, initiation was understood not only as adoption, but also in terms of the result of the adoption, namely rebirth (adoption as the rebirth from the womb of the new mother).<sup>411</sup> The many instances (referred to earlier in chapter 1) of rebirth indicated as one of the benefits of initiation, thus signal simultaneously the social fact of being included in a new society, as well as signalling the triumphant celebration of imperial good times as member of new fictive kin group.

In the formation and maintenance of such religious groups secrecy played an important constitutive part. However, far from having as its purpose to hide the myth of the religious or the mystery cult group, the keeping of secret had a social function, namely to strengthen social cohesion and to serve as a facilitator in the imagination of a second world alongside the manifest world.<sup>412</sup> ‘The closed nature of such groups was not a *sui generis* characteristic of their “mystery” or religiosity but simply of their bounded identity: their non-exclusivity with respect to one another is well documented – one might be and often was initiate in any number of these groups.’<sup>413</sup>

So the mysteries to which the novels are related as myth are social formations organized in the same manner as other religious groups in antiquity, functioning in the same manner, that is, were focused more on ritual enactments than on secret teachings. Piety and religion in antiquity were more attuned to the performance of rituals within group or communal settings as ways of establishing and maintaining the correct relationships with the gods than with individual, solitary experiences. When viewed like this, the whole question of the relationship of the Greek novels with mystery religious cults can be redefined: the novels are not coded remains of mystery

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<sup>411</sup> Martin, “Akin to the Gods,” 156.

<sup>412</sup> Luther H. Martin, “Secrecy in Hellenistic Religious Communities,” in *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions* (ed. Hans G Kippenberg and Guy G Stroumsa; *Studies in the History of Religions* 65; Leiden/New York/Köln: E. J. Brill, 1995), 108. ‘The “doing” of secrecy, in other words, is not primarily a concealing of some knowledge, but rather embodies the ritual procedures necessary for the formation and maintenance of social boundaries’ (110).

<sup>413</sup> Martin, “Akin to the Gods,” 157.

cult secrets we would not otherwise have known, but part of the same social construction of reality in which all the other instances of imperial era literary production, iconographic portrayals, and religious cult groups, including the mysteries, were embedded. What we should consider is the intersections between various ensembles of images, imagined histories, imagined social space, and social actions. On this score, it should be re-emphasized, it is not so important to attempt to relate the various novels to specific mysteries or mystery cults as Merkelbach did in his *Roman und Mysterium*, for what is important is the social discursivity of the cult and its ‘cultic technologies,’ and at this level there is a large overlap and similarity between the various mysteries.

It is not by coincidence that the mysteries experienced a flowering exactly in the imperial era, and furthermore, it is not by coincidence that it is exactly those mysteries that flower that have imperial overtones – Dionysus,<sup>414</sup> Isis,<sup>415</sup> Helios/Mithras,<sup>416</sup> and the imperial mysteries themselves.<sup>417</sup> In fact there is evidence of considerable overlap between them and imperial mysteries were often inserted into other mysteries, and the emperors integrated into the other cults, so that being a Demetriast, or Dionysus *mystikos* often meant simultaneously being an imperial *mystikos*. (Although there is no direct evidence of the incorporation of imperial mysteries into cult associations of Isis or Sarapis in Asia, we do have an inscription from Rome about a group of *Paianistai* [paean singers] probably originally from the Greek East who chose both the Sebastoi gods and Sarapis as its divine patrons, which might suggest that rituals

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<sup>414</sup> Mark Antony entered Ephesus as ‘New Dionysus’ in 38 B.C.E. Hadrian too appeared as ‘New Dionysus’ in 129 C.E. in Ephesus. Apart from these instances, the important ‘imperialization’ of Dionysus is a construction of the post-Alexander era of the Diadochi.

<sup>415</sup> The imperial myth of Osiris as conqueror had soon as its counterpart the imperial Isis of the aretalogies. The Flavian father and son, Vespasian and Titus, devoted themselves to Isis and spent the night before their triumph in Rome in her sanctuary on the Campus Martius.

<sup>416</sup> Helios in the guise of Apollo was the tutelary deity of the Julio-Claudians. But consider also ‘Neronian solar fantasy ... Nero set the fashion for imitating the sun god,’ Roger Beck, “Ritual, Myth, Doctrine, and Initiation in the Mysteries of Mithras: New Evidence from a Cult Vessel,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 90 (2000): 167. So too did the sun gain imperial status under the Severan dynasty – as Sol Invictus (!).

<sup>417</sup> See H.W. Pleket, “An Aspect of the Imperial Cult: Imperial Mysteries,” *Harvard Theological Review* 58, no. 4 (1965): 331–47 for a discussion of imperial mysteries as religion. He argues that when compared to other cults, the imperial cult exhibited as much ‘genuine religious sentiment’ in the hymns, sacrifices, rituals, and the rest of the performances.

for the imperial gods were a normal part of the activities of this group.)<sup>418</sup> So the well-known inscription of the Demetriasts at Ephesus (*IEph* 213) demonstrates how the imperial gods could be important for the self-identity and practices of the group concerned:

To Lucius Mestrius Florus, proconsul, from Lucius Pompeius Apollonios of Ephesus. Mysteries and sacrifices are performed each year at Ephesus, lord, to Demeter Karpophoros and Thesmophoros and to the revered gods (*theois Sebastois*) by initiates with great purity and lawful customs, together with the priestesses. In most years these practices were protected by kings and revered ones, as well as the proconsul of the period, as contained in their enclosed letters. Accordingly, as the mysteries are pressing upon us during your time of office, through my agency the ones obligated to accomplish the mysteries necessarily petition you, lord, in order that, acknowledging their rights ...<sup>419</sup>

The imperial gods are incorporated within the ritual life or mysteries of this group, and if we can state with Harland that ‘the mysteries were among the most respected and revered acts of piety in the Greco-Roman world, and that few actions so effectively maintained fitting relations between the realm of humans and that of the gods,’ then we must conclude that the empire formed the core of all symbolic constructions of reality.<sup>420</sup> If ritual is ‘action wrapped in a web of symbolism’ and if through ritual a conceptualization of the world is constituted, then the mythical discourse that accompanies ritual enwraps the action with numerous instances of story/narrative and graphic portrayals.<sup>421</sup> That is not all: the invention of new myth, new prose narratives, exuberant utopian fantasies can all be linked to the unleashed

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<sup>418</sup> Harland, *Associations*, 131.

<sup>419</sup> Harland, *Associations*, 117–8.

<sup>420</sup> Imperial mysteries themselves could be consciously modeled on other mysteries such as those of Dionysus, Demeter, Kore and so on, Harland, *Associations*, 129.

<sup>421</sup> See for instance the interplay between myth and ritual in a Mithras cult artifact in Beck, “Ritual, Myth, Doctrine”. If the imperial mysteries can be taken as normal case for what went on in other mysteries, then the audience/participants would have seen drama/*tableaux vivants*, dances, mythical portrayals, processions with showings of sacred objects and images, hymn singing and choruses, and spectacular light effects, cf. Pleket, “Imperial Mysteries,” 337–44.

creativity that was the early empire. The symbolism is the same everywhere: to survive and overcome in an adventurously dangerous world.<sup>422</sup>

I believe that it is in this sense that one should understand the statement by Averil Cameron that novelistic literature provided the emerging Christian world with a kind of mythic structure and so served to create a new worldview.<sup>423</sup>

### 3. MYSTERIES, FICTION, AND CULT GROUPS: LIGHT FROM PROSOPOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE

A final consideration must be given to the prosopography of both the novels and the mysteries. There is no direct evidence that ties any of the novels with any mystery cult group, but there is some indirect evidence regarding the personages involved in both. For example, Chariton, the author of *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, not only reflects the realities of cultic politics of his home city, Aphrodisias in Caria, and how the city promotes itself as imperial cult centre making an intimate connection between Aphrodite of Aphrodisias, the Julio-Claudian house (Venus Genetrix being an ancestor), and Rome, but he himself is a member of the city élite, secretary to the lawyer Athenagoras.<sup>424</sup> Similarly the novelist, Antonius Diogenes, he of *The Wonders*

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<sup>422</sup> There is perhaps something comparable in this to the present-day rise and popularity of extreme sports. In a culture saturated by ever extreme experiences, the search for the sublime takes on a death-defying ‘plunge’ into the sublimity of extreme experiences in extreme sports. It is exactly the fact that you will survive that creates the vicarious death experience and the subsequent affirmation of life (‘a self-transforming experience’), Amanda du Preez, “The Rhetorics of the EXtreme,” paper presented at the Eighth International Conference on Rhetoric and Scripture, Pretoria, 9–12 August (2004). The modern equivalent of the ancient fear-inducing experience of entering into the dark cella of the temple and the confrontation with the bright lights (e.g., Apuleius)? We can actually now compare the ‘mystery imagery of travel and travail’ of novels and myth with the earliest Christian iconography, so aptly described by Graydon F. Snyder, *Ante Pacem. Archaeological Evidence of Church Life Before Constantine* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Macon: Mercer University Press, 2003). If the early Christians met in groups that resembled other cult associations, what were the predominant narrative images? Symbols of conflict like the anchor, the boat, the fish; symbols of deliverance like the dove and the orante; symbol of the deliverer, the wonderworker; symbol of supremacy, Mary; symbol of defeat, the cross; of the narrative pictorial depictions, we have the Jonah cycle, Noah in the ark, Daniel in the lion’s den, Susannah and the elders, the three young men in the fiery furnace, Jesus as healer and the resurrection of Lazarus – all images of deliverance from dangerous circumstances. Translate these images into narrative episodes, and one is transported into the narrative world of the Greek novel and mythic narratives where similar stock episodes abound.

<sup>423</sup> Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire. The Development of Christian Discourse* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1994), 89–119.

<sup>424</sup> Douglas R. Edwards, “Surviving the Web of Roman Power: Religion and Politics in the Acts of the Apostles, Josephus, and Chariton’s *Chaereas and Callirhoe*,” in *Images of Empire* (ed. Loveday

*Beyond Thule*, stems from Aphrodisias ('a city richly favored by the Roman government'), as attested by a sarcophagus inscription, whose two names suggest Roman citizenship, which may have been awarded in the latter part of the first century to a forebear ('Flavius Antonius Diogenes' attests to the awarding of citizenship in the time of the Flavians).<sup>425</sup> On the other side, the mysteries of Mithras may have been invented by a circle of Commagenians, 'military and civilian dependants of the dynasty of Commagene as it made the transition from client rulers to Roman aristocrats' (a family with extensive contacts with the Roman aristocracy in the capital city), in the mid- to late first century C.E. and in which process the leading astrologer of the time in Rome, Ti. Claudius Balbillus (related by marriage to the Commagenian dynasty: he was the father-in-law of C. Iulius Antiochus Epiphanes, the son of the last ruling king of Commagene) played the leading role.<sup>426</sup> Moreover, with regard to the cult of Isis inscriptional evidence would suggest that it was the élites (scholars, statesmen, generals, courtiers, priests, ambassadors) that formed the majority of adherents of the cult (not least because of the high costs involved in becoming an initiate), with a minority from the lower classes.<sup>427</sup> Similarly, the archaeological evidence with regard to the mysteries of Dionysus, especially as these pertain to the sites where the inscriptions and iconography were found, suggest that these mysteries involved the well-to-do rather than any kind of underclass;<sup>428</sup> and if we add what we know of the imperial mysteries, where priesthoods and other offices were occupied by the local élites, then we can safely say that the two groups – those who played a leading role in the mysteries and those who produced literature – came from the same social niche.

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Alexander; JSOT Supplements 122; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 179–201, and Douglas R. Edwards, "Defining the Web of Power in Asia Minor: The Novelist Chariton and His City Aphrodisias," *JAR 62* (1994): 699–718.

<sup>425</sup> G. W. Bowersock, *Fiction as History. Nero to Julian* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1994), 38–9.

<sup>426</sup> Roger Beck, "The Mysteries of Mithras: A New Account of Their Genesis," *Journal of Roman Studies* 88 (1988): 115–28.

<sup>427</sup> Cf. Sarolta A. Takacs, *Isis and Sarapis in the Roman World* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

<sup>428</sup> Martin P. Nilsson, *The Dionysiac Mysteries of the Hellenistic and Roman Age* (Lund: Gleerup, 1957), 146.

[T]he readership of the novels was probably the same as that of other, more highbrow, Greek literature – that is, from the élite and wealthy classes. The same people who read the histories also read the novels. What is surprising, if the novels did appeal primarily to an élite audience, is that the readers would then belong to the same classes that, in Ephesos, were building imperial cult temples, funding statues of Roman rulers, making dedications and offerings to them, and entering the Roman social orders as equestrians and senators.<sup>429</sup>

All the same, despite benefiting from an imperial peace in a period of cultural efflorescence, the way to live meaningfully in a Roman world was to face backward into a glorious Greek past. Indeed, it took some radically creative reimagining of Greek élites from the eastern Roman provinces to conceive of the Roman Empire in which they were carving out for themselves a good position, an empire which was beginning to serve eminently as the vehicle of their self-advancement, as the acme of Greekness and as the embodiment of a heroic Greek identity.

In conclusion: this chapter has moved from the theoretical to the historical, from a reflection on our way of theorising religion, to an exposé of the historical processes of social formation and mythmaking. In the latter, this chapter continues the line of questioning of chapter 4 with its elucidation of the formation of imperial myths and the role of fiction in that context. It should have become clear in the course of this chapter that theory is not exhibited here for the sole purpose of ‘showing’ theory, but for its role in describing, interpreting and explaining developments in the religious history of the Roman imperial era. Similarly, history is not unpacked with the sole purpose of telling a story, but as avenues into and as sites for theorizing religion. This mutual play is what I regard as the true purpose of any religio-historical study.

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<sup>429</sup> Christine M. Thomas, “At Home in the City of Artemis. Religion in Ephesos in the Literary Imagination of the Roman Period,” in *Ephesos Metropolis of Asia: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Its Archaeology, Religion, and Culture. Harvard Theological Studies 41* (ed. Helmut Koester; Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1995), 115.

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