

Travel in Heliodorus: Homecoming or Voyage to a Promised Land?

DAVID KONSTAN

Brown University
Providence RI 02912 USA

RESUMO: Em quatro dos cinco romances gregos, a narrativa inicia e termina no mesmo lugar, e a resolução assume a forma de um retorno ao lar. A Etiópica, de Heliodoro representa uma exceção a esse padrão: embora a heroína de fato retorne a sua casa, o protagonista masculino abandona seu país e se instala em uma terra estrangeira. Neste artigo, sustento que o romance de Heliodoro une dois arquétipos de viagem, um – um nóstos – inspirado na Odisséia, enquanto o outro tem como modelo viagens de iniciação e a descoberta da terra prometida. É tentadoramente sugerido que pode haver aqui alusão à saída dos judeus do Egito, conforme narrado na Septuaginta.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: romances gregos, Heliodoro, Etiópica, regresso ao lar, terra prometida, viagem de iniciação.

Among the most conspicuous features of the ancient novels is the vast distances that the protagonists travel in the course of their adventures. This element is pronounced enough to have led Mikhail Bakhtin to conclude that their fundamental dimension was that of space rather than time.¹ But although far-flung voyages are common to all the novels, with the partial exception of Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*, the nature of journeys is not uniform across the genre.

In the two earliest Greek novels, Xenophon's *Ephesiaca* and Chariton's *Callirhoe*, the hero and heroine set out from and return to the same location. This circularity is emphasized in the opening and closing sentences of the narratives. Thus, Xenophon's novel begins: "There once was a man in Ephesus..." (*ên en Ephesôi anêr*), and it concludes: "[Hippothon] lived out his life in Ephesus with Habrocomes and Anthia" (*diêgen en Ephesôi meth' Habrokomou kai Anthias*). Chariton begins his story, in turn: "I am going to relate a love story that took place in Syracuse" (*pathos erôtikon en Surakousais genomenon diêgêsomai*), and it ends with Callirhoe, the heroine, declaring to Aphrodite: "For you have revealed Chaereas to me again in Syracuse" (*palin gar moi Khairean en Surakousais edeixas*). One may argue, as I myself have done, that

this return to the initial locus of the story is in some respects a perfunctory gesture of closure.² It rounds off the action-packed tale of the separation and reunion of the leading couple, but in both novels they are in fact restored to each other elsewhere: on Rhodes in Xenophon's novel, on the island of Aradus in Chariton's. It is certainly true that the goal of the hero and heroine is not to return home but to find one another. Silvia Montiglio has recently argued that this coda-like or superfluous quality of the final return is characteristic of Hellenistic and later narratives, beginning with Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautica*, where the finale of the great expedition is hastily summarized in a few verses.³

Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe* differs from the other ancient novels in that the scene is restricted to the island of Lesbos. Its beginning, nevertheless, recalls the opening formulas of Xenophon and Chariton: "In a grove on Lesbos..." (*en Lesbôi en alsei...*). The conclusion makes no mention of Lesbos, but then, the action never leaves the island. However, when the story proper begins, there is a second *mise-en-scène*: "There is a city on Lesbos, Mytilene..." (1.4: *polis esti tês Lesbos Mutilênê...*), and it continues: "and at two hundred stades from this city of Mytilene there is the farm of a prosperous man..." At the conclusion, in turn, we are told that, after the young couple are wed in Mytilene, "at daylight they agreed to return again to the farm" (4.37: *palin eis ton agron êlaunon*), and this movement to Mytilene from the country and back again rounds off the story in a similar way to the other novels. So too, Achilles Tatius' novel begins, "There is a city, Sidon, by the sea" (*Sidôn epi thalattêi polis*). But again, there is a second commencement, as Clitopho enters upon the story proper, and this runs: "I am a Phoenician, and Tyre is my homeland" (1.3.1: *emoi Phoinikê genos, Turos ho patris*), and he explains that his uncle, who is the father of Leucippe, lives in Byzantium. Thus the final words, "We decided to pass the winter in Tyre, and then to travel to Byzantium" (*en têi Turôi parakheimêsantes dielthein eis to Buzantion*), again neatly close off the narrative. Once more, however, we may observe that the reunion of the couple takes place rather in Ephesus, and that over the course of the novel the couple have sought each other rather than a return to the home cities.

To this pattern, Heliodorus' novel constitutes a manifest exception. As Romain Brethes observes in his recent dissertation: "À la différence des romans de Chariton et de Xénophon, adeptes d'une rigoureuse *Ringstruktur*, les *Éthiopiennes* présentent un caractère linéaire et paradoxal."⁴ The story ends, all right, with a scene in which the couple are crowned and accompanied in procession to Meroe (*epi tèn Meroên parepemponto*) for the formal marriage. But the novel opens, as is well known, *in medias res*, and the site that is specified is simply a beach near the western-most mouth of the Nile. Egypt, however, turns out to be neither the beginning nor the end of the voyage for Theagenes or Chariclea, but rather a way-station in their journey. There is, moreover, another difference between the structure of this novel and the others we have mentioned. In Heliodorus, the hero and heroine are together much of the time, and the obstacles to

their union are not merely external. One of the narrative motives for the exceptional emphasis on chastity outside marriage in this novel, which many commentators have remarked on, is the need to keep the action directed toward the final destination in Ethiopia; thus, before their elopement, Chariclea insists that Theagenes swear that "he will not engage in sex before I recover my family and my home or, if fortune prevents this, then at any rate when he has made me his willing wife, or not at all" (4.18.5). For the couple have a goal, which is not just that of joining in wedlock but also reaching the place where Chariclea was born, where she will be reunited with her parents and recover her royal status -- again, a narrative element unique to this romance.

Before considering further the significance of this feature, and how it relates to the paradigms of homecoming and pilgrimage, let me compare the opening of yet another novel, this one in Latin. The first paragraph of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* is sufficiently dense to have inspired an entire volume of essays devoted specifically to its interpretation.⁵ I wish to consider it briefly here in relation to the narrative movement of the Greek novels. In this, I am largely indebted to an important paper by Niall Slater.⁶ The *Metamorphoses* begins: "Now, I shall stitch together various stories for you in that Milesian idiom..." (*at ego tibi sermone isto Milesio varias fabulas conseram*). Coming straight from a reading of the first four Greek novels, we might conclude that the narrator is from Miletus; but of course we would be wrong: Apuleius is referring to the genre of the Milesian tale. The paragraph continues: "if only you do not disdain to read an Egyptian papyrus inscribed with the wit of a pen from the Nile (*modo si papyrus Aegyptiam argutia Nilotici calami inscriptam non spreveris inspicere*). Is the narrator, then, from Egypt? No, he is merely indicating the origin of his writing materials. And then: "I begin. Who is this fellow? In brief, Mount Hymettus in Attica, Corinth on the Isthmus, and Taenarus in Sparta are my race of old" (*Exordior. Quis ille? Paucis accipe. Hymettos Attica et Isthmos Ephyrea et Taenaros Spartiatica*). He is from Greece, then; but which city, and why the multiplication? He continues: "Soon, a settler in the city in Latium" (*Mox in urbe Latia advena*) -- is he, in fact, a resident of Rome? -- "to Thessaly, for there too..." (*Thessaliam -- nam et illic*): so his roots are, perhaps, in Thessaly... It is as though Apuleius were deliberately confusing the geographical indicators, radically disrupting or diffusing the spatial precision of the Greek romances.

Toward the end of the *Metamorphoses*, in turn (11.27.32), we suddenly learn that the narrator, who has by now returned to Corinth -- one of the loci mentioned in the preface -- and will soon again be off to Rome -- yet another place related to his past (but what of Thessaly, Miletus, Egypt, or Athens and Sparta for that matter?) -- is in fact from Madaura in North Africa (*Madaurensis*). This apparently gratuitous piece of information is, of course, an allusion to the birthplace of the author, Apuleius. But why is it introduced here, out of the blue? It would seem that, once more, Apuleius is shuffling up or complicating the spatial coordinates. What is clear is that he has no

desire to suggest the kind of return to the point of origin that characterizes the novels by Xenophon, Chariton, Longus, and Achilles Tatius.

To return to Heliodorus, at the beginning of the novel, both the origin of the pair and their destination are obscure, and are revealed only gradually. When, early on, they are referred to as *xenoi*, "strangers" (1.18.1), the reader knows as little of their origins as do the characters in the story. Again, when Chariclea for the first time purports to reveal her identity to the bandit leader Thyamis -- and, simultaneously, to the reader -- the information is false: "We are Ionians by race, and among the first citizens of Ephesus" (1.22.2). At the same time, she identifies Theagenes as her brother (1.21.3; the ruse had in fact already been used previously, cf. 5.26.3), and this the reader, at least, knows by now to be a fiction. As Chariclea says, with a savviness that characterizes her during most of the novel, "Sometimes a lie is a noble thing [*kalon*], when it helps those who tell it and does not harm those who hear it" (1.26.6). When Calasiris appears on the scene, we are informed that he considers Theagenes and Chariclea to be as good as children to him (2.23.2), and that he himself is from Memphis (2.24.5: *emopolis men Memphis*). He goes on to relate how he met Charicles, the adoptive father of Chariclea, in Delphi, but the girl's true origin still remains unknown, since Charicles himself, who received her as a foundling in Egypt, is in the dark about it (2.32.3). Theagenes is introduced as the leader of the Aenianians of Thessaly and a descendent of Achilles (2.34; he is first named at 3.3.4). While Calasiris is busy plotting the elopement of the couple, he spends a sleepless night "meditating where we could escape in secret and considering to what country god [*ho theos*] was now sending the youths" (4.4.5). Shortly afterwards, with the decipherment of the band that is Chariclea's birth token, we learn that she is of royal birth and from Ethiopia (4.8, cf. 4.11.4). With this, Calasiris determines to lead her and Theagenes to Ethiopia (4.13.2).

Chariclea's voyage to Ethiopia, then, finally assumes the form of a homecoming. In this, it resembles not so much the other Greek novels, nor the Latin novels, so far as one can judge the form of Petronius' *Satyrical*, but the *Odyssey*. The first time we encounter Odysseus in the *Odyssey*, he sits, like Theagenes and Callirhoe, weeping on a beach (*ep' aktês*), on a remote island, longing to return home (*noston oduromenôi*), for the nymph Calypso no longer pleases him (5.151-55; the scene is adumbrated in the opening verses of the epic, 1.13-15, 48-59). Again, like Theagenes and Chariclea, Odysseus is midway in his journey: he has set out, of course, from Troy, and was washed up on Ogygia after his last comrades were destroyed, as we learn in detail from his own lengthy narrative of the events leading up to his captivity by Calypso and his escape to the land of the Phaeacians. Here again, there is a structural parallel with Heliodorus' narrative: in both the epic and the novel, the background events that lead up to the point at which the story commences are filled in subsequently by the characters themselves. What is more, in both, this circuitous narrative procedure occupies precisely the first half of the work: twelve out of twenty-four books in the *Odyssey*, five

out of ten in the *Aethiopica*. Whereas the other Greek novels recount the protagonists' departure from home and their subsequent return, the *Odyssey* and the *Aethiopica* are simply homeward journeys. And whereas in the other novels the main characters are seeking each other in the first instance, and home only incidentally, in Heliodorus and in Homer's *Odyssey* achieving home is the central objective, and the precondition -- in different ways, to be sure -- for the final union between the principal couple, in both tales after an ordeal. In a word, the *Odyssey* and the *Aethiopica* are *nostoi*

This resemblance between the *Aethiopica* and the *Odyssey* is only partial, however, because in the novel only one of the protagonists, Chariclea, is in fact going home. Theagenes will be abandoning his native land permanently; as Calasiris tells Chariclea, Theagenes "is prepared to accompany us wherever in the world we wish" (4.13.2). This again is an element foreign to the other ancient novels: the motif of a journey to a new land. Although in a strict sense Chariclea is returning to her origin, her voyage too partakes of a sense of adventure, of movement forward rather than back. In the remainder of this paper, I consider some features of this other archetype, and the way it manifests itself in Heliodorus' novel. For one of the sources of the richness of the work is, I think, the way it blends together different paradigms of travel.

One narrative element that is characteristic of voyages to a new land is the role of the guide, often a person endowed with a special wisdom or holy status. The character who fulfills that role in the *Aethiopica* is clearly Calasiris, a priest who leads the young couple out of Delphi, not without trickery, and subsequently -- after they have been separated -- conducts Chariclea to Memphis, where they meet up with Theagenes. Here, "the prophet Calasiris, having returned to his homeland after long years" (7.11.3), and having seen his sons reconciled, dies. The young couple are thus left without guidance, and must face on their own the threat posed by Arsace, who has conceived a passion for Theagenes. They agree to continue the ruse by which they represent themselves as brother and sister (7.13.1), but in the end suffer her wrath. At last, a friendly emissary takes them out of the cell in which Arsace had imprisoned them, and escorts them south by night toward Thebes, where the Persian satrap over Egypt is engaged in battle with the king of Ethiopia and father of Chariclea. On the way, they are captured by the Ethiopians. At this point, Chariclea recognizes that "she was being led by fate, and she became hopeful of better things" (8.17.1). Romain Brethes observes that "Plus le voyage touche à sa fin, plus Chariclée sourit, alors que la situation n'est guère favorable aux amoureux" (op. cit., p. 288). This is true, and the reason is that she becomes ever more conscious of the direction and the goal of the voyage, and in this way grows into and assumes the role that Calasiris had played.

Ethiopia is represented as a highly civilized land, ruled by a strong and humane king. It is thus a worthy end point for the voyage of the young couple. But when they finally reach Meroe, it emerges that they have to be sacrificed, in accord with an ancient rite; their arrival thus precipitates a religious crisis, with the result that the practice of

human sacrifice is abolished. Their pilgrimage thus seems to have not only a goal but a mission, which will transform the values of Chariclea's birthplace.⁷

A voyage that begins in suffering and confusion but approaches a goal that is gradually clarified as the protagonists achieve an ever more intense awareness of its purpose; the function of a guide who cannot complete the journey, leaving the young protagonists, now properly instructed, to travel the final distance on their own; the discovery of a realm that is just, but which nevertheless requires and undergoes a moral reformation: all these elements suggest to me the pattern of a symbolic journey of initiation.⁸ To a certain extent, Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* provides a parallel. In any case, the archetype is widespread, and elements of it may be found in poems as different as Virgil's *Aeneid* and Dante's *Commedia*. I would like to suggest, in conclusion, a possible source that seems not to have been considered in this connection.

In a recent book entitled *I romanzi antichi e il Cristianesimo*, Ilaria Ramelli observes that, while research into the relationship between the Greek novel and ancient Christian literature has increased notably in recent decades, nevertheless, it has been mostly oriented until now toward finding "characteristic elements of the ancient novel in the literary products of early Christianity, whether the New Testament, Patristic literature, or above all the apocrypha.... Little, however, has been done in the opposite direction."⁹ Ramelli has discovered a possible echo in Heliodorus of a scene in the Gospels. When Theagenes believes that Chariclea is dead, his friend Cnemon, who knows that she is safe, asks: "Why are you lamenting over one who is alive? Chariclea is alive and safe. Courage!" (2.2.1: *ti tèn ousan thrêneis; esti Kharikleï et sôizetai. tharre*). Ramelli (133) compares this with John (20:13, 15), where the question is posed to Mary Magdalene: "Why are you crying?" (*ti klaieis*), while in Luke (24:5), the words of the angel are "Why do you seek him who is alive among the dead? He is not here, but is risen" (*ti zêteite ton zônta meta tôn nekrôn; ouk estin hôde, alla êgerthê*). It is well known that the church historian Socrates (*Historia Ecclesiastica* 5.22.157-161) identified our Heliodorus with the bishop of Tricca in Thessaly. Whatever the value of this testimony -- and Ramelli (125-30) has provided important arguments against dismissing it out of hand -- it is not implausible that a writer of the third or fourth centuries should have some familiarity with the Bible. Glenn Bowersock has, indeed, suggested that the story of Jesus had a direct influence on the formation of the novel in its earliest stages, in the mid-first-century during the reign of Nero.¹⁰ But knowledge of Scripture need not have been confined to the New Testament.

The reader first encounters the ruse adopted by Chariclea, by which she identifies Theagenes as her brother, shortly after the opening of the novel, when they find themselves in Egypt and in the power of bandits whose leader, Thyamis, becomes enamored of Chariclea (1.21). The rest of the gang consent to give Chariclea to Thyamis as his share of the spoils. An obvious antecedent to this deception is the story in Genesis (12:11-19), in which Abraham advises Sara, outstanding for her beauty, to pretend to be

his sister rather than his wife, so that the Egyptians will not kill him in order to have her. The Pharaoh's subordinates praise her to him and bring her to his palace.

It is Calasiris, as we have seen, who guides the young couple while they are still in Egypt, but he dies at an advanced age in the bosom of his family, and Theagenes and Chariclea must complete the voyage to Ethiopia on their own. While the parallel is not entirely exact, I tentatively suggest that a possible model for the broad flow of events is to be found in Moses' role in leading the Hebrews out of Egypt. He too dies at a very old age of one hundred and twenty years (Deuteronomy 34:7), without succeeding in entering the promised land but leaving it to his general, Joshua, to complete the journey (34:4).

Finally, the abolition of human sacrifice in Ethiopia, with which the novel concludes, has an analogue in the story of Abraham and Isaac, which was also understood to have marked the end of this barbarous practice.

The verbal parallels between the *Aethiopica* and the Septuagint are not close, but then, Heliodorus has an ample style, and one would not necessarily expect direct echoes of the spare and humble language of the Septuagint. It is possible that closer parallels are to be found in later retellings of the Exodus story, which may have been known to Heliodorus. However that may be, I am inclined to think that the analogies identified above with the Biblical voyage to the promised land may not be wholly accidental.

NOTAS

¹ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); on Bakhtin's approach to the ancient novel, see Bracht Branham, ed., *Bakhtin and the Classics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002).

² David Konstan, *Sexual Symmetry: Love in the Ancient Novel and Related Genres* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

³ Silvia Montiglio, *Wandering in Ancient Greek Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁴ Romain Brethes, *De l'idéalisme au réalisme: pour une étude du comique dans les romans de Chariton, Xénophon d'Ephèse, Achille Tatius et Héliodore* (Thesis: Université de Paris La Sorbonne, 2004) 270.

⁵ Ahuvia Kahane and Andrew Laird, *A companion to the prologue of Apuleius' Metamorphoses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁶ Niall Slater, "Space and Displacement in Apuleius' Golden Ass," *Ancient Narrative supplementum* 1 (2002) 161-76.

⁷ A voyage of Greeks to an ostensibly barbarian country which brings about the end of human sacrifice recalls the situation in *Iphigenia in Tauris*, but the focus there is on Greece as the advanced civilization. Heliodorus' tale is quite different from such ethnocentric narratives of visits to foreign lands, with their rescue motif involving the liberation of a hostage; cf. also Euripides' *Helen*.

⁸ Paul Schubert, "Le parcours de deux prêtres dans les Éthiopiennes d'Héliodore," *Maia* 49 (1997) 257-63, sees an initiatory element in the novel, though not in the precise terms proposed by Reinhold

Merkelbach (*Roman und Mysterium in der Antike* [Munich: Beck, 1962]). Schubert argues that Heliodorus could let Calasiris die, but Charicles had to live in order to learn the truth. He also remarks on Chariclea's resemblance to Calasiris (263), and points out the circular character of Chariclea's journey (264), although this does not necessarily exclude an alternative pattern for that of Theagenes.

⁹ Ilaria Ramelli, *I romanzi antichi e il Cristianesimo* (Madrid: Signifer, 2001) 19.

¹⁰ Glenn W. Bowersock, *Fiction as History: Nero to Julian* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

ABSTRACT: In four of the five ancient Greek romantic novels, the narrative begins and ends in the same place, and the resolution takes the form of a homecoming. To this pattern, Heliodorus' *Aethiopica* represents an exception: although the heroine does, in fact, return home, the male protagonist abandons his country and settles in a foreign land. In this paper, I argue that Heliodorus' novel unites two archetypes of travel, the one -- a *nostos* -- inspired by the *Odyssey*, while the other is modelled voyages of initiation and the discovery of a promised land. It is tentatively suggested that there may be an allusion here to the journey of the Jews out of Egypt, as narrated in the *Septuagint*.

KEY-WORDS: Greek novels, Heliodorus, *Aithiopica*, homecoming, promised land, voyage of initiation.
