

Tim Whitmarsh, *Beyond the Second Sophistic: Adventures in Greek Postclassicism*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013. Pp. xiii + 278. ISBN 978-0-52027681-9. US\$49.95.

Tim Whitmarsh's *Beyond the Second Sophistic* consists of ten substantially revised and updated essays and five previously unpublished pieces, all of them focusing on literature of the Hellenistic and Imperial Era. In the Introduction (pp. 1-7), Whitmarsh clearly displays his primary motivation by explaining that his neologism 'postclassicism' is intended 'principally, to mark an aspiration to rethink classicist categories inherited from the nineteenth century' (p. 1). This volume underscores the limits and dangers of this popular if unspoken classicist aesthetic, which attributes ideological value to certain kinds of ancient texts by placing them at the centre of scholarship and deliberately ignoring others. Whitmarsh offers a new approach, reading the literature of the Hellenistic and Imperial Era as 'a plural cultural system' (p. 2) in which marginality and crossing points constitute the highest interest. More precisely, he aims to 'expand the range of material that scholars of the Hellenistic and early imperial periods have traditionally covered' (p. 5) and 'to do away entirely with the idea of the culturally central, the paradigmatic, to dispense with hierarchies of cultural value' (p. 6). By doing so, he also wants 'to pose sharp questions about how and why we think of Greek literary history in the way that we do' (p. 2).

The first section, 'Fiction Beyond the Canon' (pp. 9-134), questions two conventional views of ancient fiction focused on teleology and derivation. Since Rohde's 1876 work,¹ the study of fiction in Greek literature has centred on the five fully extant novels of the Imperial period and devoted significant effort to identifying their models in earlier Greek literature, excluding any contact with or influence from foreign literatures. To Whitmarsh, both aspects of this approach still influence contemporary scholars, as shown by their 'general reluctance to consider Hellenistic prose narrative on its own terms' and their belief that the production of the traditional Greek novels, like Greek culture in general at the time, 'was insulated from non-Greek influence' (p. 13). In Chapter 1, Whitmarsh challenges the first premise by arguing that fiction, being a 'cultural universal' (p. 12), needed no invention and had, in fact, been present in Greek literature since Homer. He then traces its relevant development in the Hellenistic Era, using the apparently marginal text, Euhemerus' *Sacred Inscription*, as his test case. Finally, Whitmarsh also challenges the second of Rohde's premises by showing points of contact between Greek fiction and narratives coming from Syrian, Semitic and Egyptian literature. In Chapter 2 Whitmarsh goes on to recontextualise the traditional Greek novels by associating them with a diachronic model of generic identity, which is developed by the late novelists through their allusions to the early romances, as we see in Heliodorus' reuse of Xenophon's *Ephesiaca*. In this way, the role of the traditional Greek novels in ancient fiction is not dismissed but relativised. Finally, in Chapter 3 Whitmarsh returns to Euhemerus' *Sacred Inscription* to offer a detailed analysis of its fictional nature.

The five subsequent essays in this section draw attention to more specific kinds of texts that expand the canon of literature of the Imperial Era. Chapters 4 and 5 argue that first-person narratives such as Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* and Lucian's *The Ass*, by deliberately conflating the figures of the narrator and the author, call into question the narrator / author divide so central to modern narratology. In Chapter 6, Whitmarsh sees the *Alexander Romance* as problematising a 'crossing point' of literature, namely the ambiguous area between letters and fictional narrative. The exchanges between Alexander and Darius are not only descriptions of states of affairs – as suggested by the documentary nature proper to letters – but also represent fictional ways of construing the relationship between the two kings as fiercely competitive. Finally, Chapters 7 and 8 contribute to two recent trends of scholarship on literature of the Imperial Era: the literary re-evaluation of Philostratus' *Heroicus* and the study of how the mimetic representation of art through ekphrastic discourse lies at the origin of the fictionality of the Greek novels.

The second section of this volume, 'Poetry and Prose' (pp. 135-208), challenges the 'classicist' interpretation of the marked use of prose typical of the Imperial Era – a

¹ Usually cited as E. Rohde, *Der griechische Roman und seine Vorläufer* (Leipzig 1914³).

phenomenon which Whitmarsh dubs 'prosography' (p. 190) – as a sign of the contemporary dissolution of poetics. Whitmarsh undermines this view, first by showing that poetry existed in the Imperial period, as proven by epigrammatists of the Early Roman Empire (Chapter 9), Mesomedes (Chapter 10) and Lucian's paratragedies (Chapter 11), and then by exploring how the dominance of prose in the Imperial Era is thematised and discussed by contemporary texts (Chapter 12). 'Prosography' is thus the result of a cultural choice rather than of an effective lack of poetry and literary creativity.

The third and final part, 'Beyond the Greek Sophistic' (pp. 211-47), questions Rohde's modern projection of 'postindustrial nationalism' (p. 3) on the Second Sophistic, which generated a still influential portrait of the Greeks of the Imperial Era as an idealised aristocracy defending its identity from Roman domination and the spread of Eastern forces. Whitmarsh shows how, from the second century BC onwards, Jews adopted the traditional Greek forms of tragedy and epic as vehicles for their narrative traditions and for developing their own identity, as we see in Ezechiel's tragedy *Exagoge* (Chapter 13) and (Chapter 14) in the Homeric appropriation evident in Theodotus' fragmentary epic poem (2nd century BC) and reflected in the fourth Sybilline oracle (1st century AD). Overall, this phenomenon proves that the Hellenocentric view of the Postclassical Era tells only part of the truth, as at that time Greek literature was also written and used by non-Greeks to speak about their own traditions and identities.

Given the recent surge of interest in literature of the Roman empire,² Whitmarsh's new postclassical approach opens up possibilities for expanding future research in new directions. It successfully challenges conventional views of literature of the Imperial Era by problematising the still prevalent teleological and source-based approaches to ancient Greek fiction, and invites us to make a new assessment of postclassical prose texts and to include in the canon both poetry and Greek texts produced by foreign writers. In addition, because its different essays combine to form a cohesive message, this volume meets a need in current scholarship on literature of the Roman empire, making the most of the many specific contributions that have emerged in the last decade or so. As a result, *Beyond the Second Sophistic* is of great importance for anyone currently working on postclassical literature.

Finally, I would highlight another considerable merit of Whitmarsh's book. Although the invitation to go beyond the 'canon' has recently been made by other scholars,³ Whitmarsh can claim originality in making it the main thrust of his book. His volume repeatedly stresses the need for and fascination with going beyond the established scholarship and any hierarchy of values. Strikingly, Whitmarsh applies this method even to his own research, since this volume goes beyond his earlier intensive work on postclassical literature. His 2001 monograph aimed to demonstrate how texts of the Imperial Era were the place of construction of Greek identity.⁴ His more recent *Narrative and Identity* focused on the 'Big Five' novels rather than on other fictional texts.⁵ By offering in the current volume a wider concept of identity and fiction, Whitmarsh approaches his own research from a 'post-classical' and 'marginal' perspective. By doing so, he encourages every scholar of ancient literature to acknowledge the limits of any given classification, challenge established ideas and move beyond. This is the value of postclassicism – an application of post-structuralism to the ancient world. The cost of not taking this initiative is high, immobilising research into the static frameworks of classicism.

Moreover, by setting this methodological goal, Whitmarsh's book also raises a very important question: having deconstructed patterns of classicism in the study of literature of the Imperial Era, what is the next step? Overall, this volume offers no definite answer, but it opens up three relevant avenues for research, inviting readers to look *beyond* the traditional Greek novels, the dominance of prose and the Hellenocentric view of literature of the Roman empire. Furthermore, Whitmarsh briefly mentions a fourth promising 'beyond'

² For example, G. Schmeling, 'International Conferences on the Ancient Novel (ICAN): The Intellectual Growth of an Idea, the Explosion of a Movement', *AN* 10 (2012) 89-93.

³ For example, G.A. Karla, *Fiction on the Fringe: Novelistic Writing in the Post-classical Age* (Leiden, Boston 2009).

⁴ T. Whitmarsh, *Greek Literature and the Roman Empire. The Politics of Imitation* (Oxford 2001).

⁵ T. Whitmarsh, *Narrative and Identity in the Ancient Greek Novel: Returning Romance. Greek culture in the Roman world* (Cambridge; New York 2011).

(pp. 37-38), the comparative study of pagan and early Christian texts, on which scholars are beginning to embark.⁶ As a result, Whitmarsh's volume launches a variety of 'next steps' that, as is proper to its poststructuralist agenda, should be read as provisional and open to further modifications.

Following these avenues of research, however, is not the only route to developing the scholarship on literature of the Imperial Era and on the ancient world as a whole. Although a theoretical agenda is often omitted in current scholarship, different steps have recently been taken by both Squire and Grethlein:⁷ the former has in fact adopted a historicist approach which sees the Roman Era, regarding its images, as a world distinct from modernity, while the latter has offered a transhistorical view of both classical and postclassical narratives focused on their impact on the human experience of time. With its challenging theoretical agenda, *Beyond the Second Sophistic* may thus lead scholars to compare the postclassical approach found therein with other ways in which current scholarship is taking this 'next step'. In encouraging a criticism of this kind, I see a lasting benefit of Whitmarsh's volume for current scholarship.

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⁶ M.F. Futre Pinheiro, J. Perkins and R. Pervo (eds.), *The Ancient Novel and Early Christian and Jewish Narrative: Fictional Intersections* (Groningen 2013).

⁷ M. Squire, *Image and Text in Graeco-Roman Antiquity* (Cambridge and New York 2009); J. Grethlein, *Experience and Teleology in Ancient Historiography* (Cambridge 2013).