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Poetica, retorica e comunicazione nella tradizione classica

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ADOLF M. HAKKERT EDITORE

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THE *ALEXANDER ROMANCE*: THE CUNNING OF THE OPEN TEXT

I wish to make two claims about the nature of the fictional, or rather fantastical, narrative of the deeds of Alexander the Great known as the *Alexander Romance*. The first is that the *Romance* is an example of a special kind of text, which I shall call an open text. By the phrase «open text» I do not mean to identify a genre, but rather the way in which a certain kind of literary work is produced. The second claim is that the *Romance* is centered primarily on the exhibition of a kind of verbal or rhetorical wiliness - the ability to turn the tables on one's adversary by the play of wit. It is the clever riposte itself, rather than the requirements of a well-formed plot or the illustration of character, that motivates the narrative. I go on to suggest that open texts are particularly hospitable to representation of such verbal dexterity as an end in itself: in this way, the two claims about the nature of the *Alexander Romance* are interrelated.

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The *Alexander Romance* is one of several stories about the lives of historical or quasi-historical figures that enjoyed an enormous popularity in the middle ages, although in modern times they have fallen into neglect. In a recent collection in which English versions of the ancient Greek novels have for the first time been made available in a single volume, the translator of the *Alexander Romance* remarks in his introductory note: «Its author is unknown, its date uncertain, its literary qualities doubtful; but eighty versions in twenty-four languages testify to a popularity and diffusion exceeded only by the Bible»[1]. The comparison with the Bible, I shall suggest later, extends beyond the favor both works enjoyed with their readerships.

For sheer popularity, the *Alexander Romance* also had competition from the so-called *History of Apollonius King of Tyre*, a Latin biographical fiction composed originally, in all likelihood, around the third century A.D. (it is possible, but in my view improbable, that it was based on a Greek model). The Latin text of the *History of Apollonius* survives in over a hundred manuscripts, and it was translated or adapted in as many as a dozen languages, including Anglo-Saxon, before the Renaissance. It continued to exert a considerable influence on Renaissance literature, most notably in the case of the Shakespearean drama *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*[2].

A third example of this kind of popular, quasi-biographical romance - this

[1] K. Dowden, *Pseudo-Callisthenes: The Alexander Romance*, in AA.VV., *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, Berkeley 1989, 650.

[2] For the textual history and influence of the *History of Apollonius*, see G.A.A. Kortekaas, *Historia Apollonii Regis Tyri*, Groningen 1984, 5-9, 14-22; E. Archibald, *Apollonius of Tyre: Medieval and Renaissance Themes and Variations*, Cambridge 1991.

time involving a character of much humbler station than Alexander or Apollonius - is the Greek *Life of Aesop*, composed some time between the first century B.C. and second century A.D. This *Life* survives in numerous manuscripts that testify to its broad diffusion in the mediaeval world[3]. Yet another instance of biographical fiction that entertained and edified audiences in late antiquity is the ancient *Life of Homer*, ostensibly written by the historian Herodotus, which again involves a figure more picaresque than heroic. Today, this work is generally dismissed as the unreliable and imaginative fable it surely is, insofar as accurate information about the historical Homer goes - a subject that continues nevertheless to elicit a good deal of invention among scholars[4].

The four narratives mentioned above have in common a central figure or protagonist whose career is described from youth to death. This element serves as the armature of the story, providing the skeleton or, more modestly, the spine on which the episodes depend. The armature does not amount to a principle of genre, such as biography (if indeed biography, whether ancient or modern, may be said to constitute a genre): although the *Alexander Romance* has in common with the *History of Apollonius*, the lives of Homer and Aesop, and, for that matter, with saints' lives and the Gospels themselves the fact that it is organized around events in the career of a central actor, this is not enough to endow these several works with the self-conscious participation in a tradition that characterizes epic, tragedy, or the novel.

A second feature common to these various texts is their episodic character. All four contain what appear to be digressions or departures from the organic development of the work, and give the impression that scenes and incidents have been added and subtracted at will. The episodic form is to some degree a function of the armature: the story of an individual's life serves as the pole on which to hang an indefinite string of adventures and encounters. This loose principle of organization distinguishes the *Alexander Romance* and its relatives from the well-constructed pattern of the so-called ideal Greek novels, that is, those by Xenophon of Ephesus, Chariton, Longus, Achilles Tatius and Heliodorus, in which the several scenes are integrated into the overall account of the separation and reunion of the primary couple[5].

It is not just the relative flexibility in regard to incident, however, that

3 See B.E. Perry, *Aesopica*, Urbana 1952, 27-32; N. Holzberg, *Der Äsop-Roman: Eine Strukturanalystische Interpretation*, in id., *Der Äsop-Roman: Motivgeschichte und Erzählstruktur*, Tübingen 1992, 33-75; T. Hägg, *A Professor and his Slave*, in AA.VV., *Conventional Values of the Hellenistic World*, Aarhus 1996.

4 Text in *Homeri opera*, ed. Th.W. Allen, V, Oxford 1946; translation in M. Lefkowitz, *The Lives of the Poets*, Baltimore 1981, 139-55. For the possible survival of motifs from the *Life* in modern tales about Homer related on the island of Chios, see K. Rhomaios, *The Pseudo-Herodotean Life of Homer and Chios*, in *Chios: A Conference at the Homereion in Chios, 1984*, edd. J. Boardman - C.E. Vaphopoulou-Richardson, Oxford 1986, 21-26.

5 For the plot forms of the ideal novels, see D. Konstan, *Sexual Symmetry: Love in the Ancient Novel and Related Genres*, Princeton 1994, 14-59.

marks texts like the *Alexander Romance*. They are also remarkably accommodating toward the inclusion of different forms or styles of narration. The *Life of Aesop*, for example, which is composed in segmentary fashion, is interspersed with fables that circulated independently under the name of Aesop or were otherwise available in anthologies and, perhaps, in oral tradition. The *History of Apollonius* contains a set of verse riddles that Apollonius poses to test the wits of a woman who turns out to be his daughter; most of these riddles survive in an separate collection attributed to a certain Symphosius. The *Life of Homer* is studded with epigrammatic bits of epic verse. The *Alexander Romance* itself is marked most notably by the inclusion of a series of letters by and to Alexander. These letters have seemed a sufficiently foreign element in the context of the *Romance* as a whole for scholars to have advanced the hypothesis that one of the sources of the *Romance* as we have it was an epistolary novel concerning the deeds of Alexander.

The only example of an epistolary novel that survives today from classical antiquity is the group of seventeen letters centering on the figure of Chion of Heraclea, a student in Plato's Academy. This collection was probably put in final form somewhere around the second century A.D., though it seems to reflect political and philosophical issues that were topical a century or two earlier[6]. But the practice of composing letters in the name of famous people was popular in antiquity. The epistles attributed to Plato include at least some that were written after his death, presumably by disciples in the Academy, and these, or others like them, may have inspired the sequence concerning Chion. The so-called letters of Themistocles, the Athenian statesman in the early part of the fifth century B.C., appear to have a plot line of sorts; these epistles were actually written in second or third century A.D., the heyday of the genre[7]. To this period too may be dated the collections circulating under such names as Hippocrates, Euripides, the orator Aeschines, and the sixth-century B.C. tyrant Phalaris, all widely read, to judge by the number of manuscripts that survive, though again they are largely neglected today[8]. It may not be out of place here to mention also the collection of letters by Saint Paul and his colleagues, as a sign of the taste for epistolary narratives.

Whether epistles attributed to Alexander the Great circulated as an independent collection with a continuous narrative line may be left moot[9].

6 See D. Konstan - Ph. Mitsis, *Chion of Heraclea: A Philosophical Novel in Letters*, Apeiron 23, 1990, 257-79; N. Holzberg - St. Merkle, *Der griechische Briefroman: Gattungstypologie und Textanalyse*, Tübingen 1994, 28-32.

7 J.L. Penwill, *The Letters of Themistokles, An Epistolary Novel?*, Antichthon 12, 1978, 88-103.

8 Cf. D.A. Russell, *The Ass in the Lion's Skin: Thoughts on the Letters of Phalaris*, JHS 108, 1988, 94-106 on the letters of Phalaris; Th. Rütten, *Demokrit, lachender Philosoph & sanguinischer Melancholiker: Eine pseudohippokratische Geschichte*, Leiden 1992 on those attributed to Hippocrates; P. Rosenmeyer, *The Epistolary Novel*, in AA.VV., *Greek Fiction: The Greek Novel in Context*, edd. J.R. Morgan - R. Stoneman, London 1994, 146-65 on epistolary fiction generally. One may note especially the Cynic letters in this connection.

9 See Holzberg - Merkle, 7 for brief discussion and bibliography.

Whatever their provenience, the biographical framework of the *Alexander Romance* was capable of readily absorbing such a series of letters, and of interpolating them at suitable points in the story. The work that results from this conflation of literary sources, however, is not a stable text that assembles once and for all the disparate elements of which it is composed into a fixed and integrated account. Rather, the epistles and other assimilated materials are loosely attached to their context, and may, like the narrative episodes mentioned earlier, be added or dropped without significantly disrupting the work.

The *Alexander Romance* thus differs from the technique of *contaminatio* or 'combination' practiced by comic poets such as Terence and the novelist Apuleius. These artists melded scenes or episodes drawn from disparate sources into coherent tales in which the seams are so perfectly spliced that scholars are often at a loss to locate just where the joins are[10]. Nor again do the letters in the *Alexander Romance* represent simply the insertion of documentary or pseudo-documentary materials into an ostensibly historical or third-person account, like the treaties that Thucydides occasionally cites more or less verbatim in his history of the Peloponnesian War. Such quotations serve an evidentiary function, and are precisely situated in the narrative. By contrast, the intrusive matter in the *Alexander Romance*, whether letters or subordinate tales and episodes, often seems slack and expendable.

The textual history of the *Alexander Romance* confirms the impression that the text presents of its segmentary composition, which may accrue or lose elements without damage to its structure. For the *Romance* survives in various versions that differ considerably in the number and arrangement of episodes and insets. The several variant texts are not more or less faithful derivatives of a single archetype or authoritative narrative, which may be reconstructed by pruning away the additions and corruptions that the text has endured over centuries of copying and occasional wilful tampering. With ordinary literary works there is at least in principle the hope, however elusive, of recovering something that may plausibly be thought of as the author's original composition. Once written down, such texts are closed to further evolution, save by accident. In the case of what I am calling open texts, such as the *Alexander Romance*, the *History of Apollonius King of Tyre*, or the *Life of Aesop*, however, the effort to retrieve an original form is not only futile but detrimental. For such a procedure would generate a text less authentic than any of the diverse recensions transmitted by the manuscript tradition - a work that in fact no one had ever read or written[11].

[10] On contamination in Apuleius, see Konstan, *Sexual*, 127-38; cf. B.E. Perry, *The Ancient Romances: A Literary-Historical Account of their Origins*, Berkeley 1967, 236-82; H. van Thiel, *Der Eselroman*, I: *Untersuchungen*, München 1971.

[11] Cf. R. Merkelbach, *Die Quellen des griechischen Alexanderromans*, München 1977², 171; C. García Gual, *Éléments mythiques et biographie romanesque: la Vie d'Alexandre du Pseudo-Callisthène*, in Cl. Calame, *Métamorphoses du mythe en Grèce antique*, Geneva 1988, 132 on the "tradition ouverte" of the text.

Open texts, I am suggesting, are a particular kind of artistic entity, distinct from the works that typically constitute the modern literary canon. By their nature they admit a degree of variation or indeterminacy that is incompatible with authorial control; this is one of the reasons why such compositions are commonly anonymous. Correspondingly, the aim in editing an open text is not to to prune away ostensible supplements or to reduce the multiple recensions to an initial or genuine original[12]. Rather, an editor's responsibility is to present one or more of the existing versions as independent texts[13]. Thus, A. Riese, the nineteenth-century editor of the Teubner text of *The History of Apollonius King of Tyre*, elected in his second edition (1893) to present two different versions of the story, which he labelled the 'A' and 'B' recensions; almost a hundred years later (1988), the editor of the new Teubner text, Gareth Schmeling, decided to offer yet a third variant as well, which he called 'C'. The oldest manuscript ('G') of the *Life of Aesop* was edited for the first time as recently as 1952, and was printed along with two other versions[14]. This procedure has the virtue of indicating clearly the peculiarly volatile nature of such works, and of offering the modern public better access to what the ancients actually wrote and read. Nevertheless, it too involves a selection, more or less arbitrary, from a set of variants that cannot be reduced to an authoritative stemma or hierarchy descending from an autograph manuscript.

Historical investigation into the sources of open texts may, to be sure, help account for the layering of the narrative and identify the moment at which particular passages or features entered the tradition. But they do not lead to the recovery of a superior or purer form of such works. To analyze a composite text like the *Alexander Romance* into its supposed constituent parts is like pulling apart a collage: the individual bits of material stuck onto the canvas reveal something about how the image was put together, but the bare canvas is not a prototype of the final product. There were undoubtedly earlier stages in what we may call the pre-history of the *Alexander Romance* or the *Life of Aesop*, and they are to some extent recuperable by analysis. In the *Life of Aesop*, for example, there are strata that arguably go back as far as the fifth century B.C. or even earlier[15]. The mistake, however, is to suppose that the various existing versions are false or inferior forms.

Open texts, then, are by nature multiple. To put the point provocatively:

[12] Cf. D. Konstan - M. Roberts, [Review of *Historia Apollonii regis Tyri*, ed. G. Schmeling], AJPh 113, 1992, 470-73.

[13] For various recensions of the *Alexander Romance*, see U. von Lauenstein, *Der griechische Alexanderroman Rezension Γ: Buch I*, Meisenham am Glan 1962; H. van Thiel, *Leben und Taten Alexanders von Makedonien: Der griechische Alexanderroman nach der Handschrift L*, Darmstadt 1974; J. Trumpf, *Vita Alexandri Regis Macedonum*, Stuttgart 1974 (Byzantine version).

[14] Perry, *Aesopica*, 1952.

[15] See Hägg, *A Professor*.

an authoritative version of the *Alexander Romance* or the *History of Apollonius* would not be an example of the kind of text these works represent. The manifold renderings are not expanded or abridged editions of the archetype, like the abbreviation or condensation that novels such as Xenophon's *Ephesiaca* or *The Ass* attributed to Lucian perhaps suffered[16]; rather, they are authentic instantiations of a work that is not subject to limitation or closure by way of appeal to an original.[17]

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We have observed that there are two respects in which the *Alexander Romance* formally resembles its congeners such as the *History of Apollonius* and the lives of Aesop and Homer: like them, it is an agglutinative work, remarkably susceptible to additions, subtractions, and transpositions of passages and episodes, and each has as its armature the biography of a single figure, from whose name its title is derived. We have remarked too that the connection between these two features is not entirely accidental. Aristotle notes in the *Poetics* that a well-formed story will not take as its subject a person's entire life with its multiple vicissitudes, but will single out a particular episode that has an integral and coherent shape, such as the wrath of Achilles or the homecoming of Odysseus (51a 16-32). A plot or *mythos*, as Aristotle says, imitates a single action (*praxis*), which is not the same as a life history. We may add that the so-called ideal Greek novels respect this prescription as well. Biographical fictions like the *Alexander Romance*, however, flout Aristotle's advice: so long as an incident relates to the career of the protagonist, they happily admit it without regard for unity of action. As a result, the amplification and modification of episodes, as witnessed in the production of multiple versions, do not appear to perturb such works. The principle by which to understand such narratives may not, accordingly, reside chiefly in the shape of the plot, which Aristotle regarded as the soul of drama[18].

If plot is not the formative principle of the *Alexander Romance* and its fellows, it is tempting to identify their central concern as the representation of character or *êthos*, which Aristotle deems a secondary and in theory

16 Against the proposition that the text of Xenophon's *Ephesiaca* was significantly abridged or tampered with, see T. Hägg, *Die Ephesiaka des Xenophon Ephesios - Original oder Epitome?*, C&M 27, 1966, 118-61; J.N. O'Sullivan, *Xenophon of Ephesus: His Compositional Technique and the Birth of the Novel*, Berlin 1995, 100-39; on "The Ass", see J.J. Winkler, *Auctor & Actor: A Narratological Reading of Apuleius' Golden Ass*, Berkeley 1985, 252-56.

17 Contrast Dowden, 652: «It would be easier to judge the work if we knew what the author's original looked like». Dowden recognizes that «in the *Alexander Romance* the theme - Alexander's life and deeds - is so dominant over the form in which it is expressed that scribes at times alter its shape», but he concludes that «older versions are close enough to each other for us to come within sight of the author's original». In his translation, Dowden relies primarily on recension 'B'.

18 St. A. Nimis, *Narrative Semiotics in the Epic Tradition: The Simile*, Bloomington 1987, 62, argues that Aristotle's formula is in fact not wholly applicable to Homeric epic.

dispensable element in tragedy (50a 24-27). The biographical tradition concerning Alexander, for example, appears to place the emphasis on his education and character[19]. Just how the *Romance* is indebted to biography is not entirely clear, but Carlos García Gual sees the correspondence between Darius and Alexander as well suited to revealing traits of personality such as the authors of *bioi* or 'lives' sought to achieve: «La *prosôpoiía* était réussie et l'*êthos* des personnages était bien mis en scène dans ces écrits; voilà bien des raisons pour admettre les lettres comme une pièce essentielle dans la biographie, quoiqu'elles soient présentées avec un certain désordre»[20]. Nevertheless, the almost promiscuous inclusiveness of the *Alexander Romance* tends to disrupt the representation of a Alexander as a coherent moral type, such as Plutarch's Caesar or Suetonius' Nero. In the *Romance*, Alexander's values are variable and adapted to the immediate occasion, as may be expected of a work that incorporates elements of miscellaneous origin.

If the overall narrative of the *Alexander Romance* is motivated in the first instance neither by plot in the Aristotelian sense nor by the representation of virtues and deficiencies of character (though both principles may contribute to the organization of local episodes), does the assortment of sundry materials in the text manifest some other purpose? I suggest that one of the principles of selection is the revelation of Alexander's canny wit, his ability to turn his adversaries' pretensions against them with a clever word or observation[21]. We may illustrate the role of this verbal jiu jitsu, as it were, by means of an example drawn from Book 1 of the *Romance*.

According to the *Romance*, Alexander was the son not of Philip of Macedon but rather of the former king of Egypt, Nectanebo, an adept of magical arts who fled to Pella in Macedon when he perceived that the gods supported the foreign armies marching on his country (1.3). In Macedon, he seduces Olympias, the wife of Philip, by pretending to be the god Ammon, and makes her pregnant with his child, the future Alexander. Nectanebo sends a dream to the absent Philip which mollifies him, but in spite of various signs and miracles Philip continues to relapse from time to time into jealous anger over the adultery. When Alexander comes of age he decides to participate in the Olympic games, and Philip takes this opportunity to divorce Olympias and marry Cleopatra. Alexander appears at the wedding banquet and gives his

19 Cf. A. Momigliano, *The Development of Greek Biography: Four Lectures*, Cambridge Mass. 1971, 82-83.

20 García Gual, 131.

21 A probable model for such verbal combat is to be found in the lives and sayings of Socrates and the Cynics. For an attempt to relate the trial of Socrates to the lives of the poets, see T. Compton, *The Trial of the Satirist: Poetic 'Vitae' (Aesop, Archilochus, Homer) as Background for Plato's 'Apology'*, AJP 111, 1990, 330-47; cf. also Fr. A. Adrados, *The 'Life of Aesop' and the Origins of the Novel in Antiquity*, QUCC 30, 1979, 93, 100, who sees an analogue in Plutarch's *Symposium of the Seven Sages*. On Socrates in relation to the *Life of Aesop*, see M. Schauer - St. Merkle, *Äsop und Sokrates*, in Holzberg, *Der Äsop-Roman*, 90-96; cf. Holzberg, *Der Äsop-Roman*, 74 on the satiric spirit of the *Life*.

father his victor's wreath with the words, «when in turn I give my mother, Olympias, to another king, I shall invite you to Olympias's wedding» (1.20) - a good instance of the kind of repartee favored by the *Romance*[22].

Lysias, the brother of Philip's new bride Cleopatra, returns the taunt by affirming to Philip that he will now «have legitimate children, not the product of adultery - and they will look like you» (1.21). To this, Alexander responds by hurling a cup at Lysias and killing him on the spot: Alexander's rejoinders are not uniformly droll. But when Philip rises with his sword drawn and then trips over the foot of the couch, Alexander announces: «Here is the man eager to take over the whole of Asia and subjugate Europe to its very foundations - and you are not capable of taking a single step». Only then does he seize his father's sword and wreak havoc among the guests.

Some days later, Alexander visits the still ailing Philip (whom he delicately addresses by name rather than as 'Father'), in an effort to reconcile him with Olympias; in turn, he induces his mother to accept her husband back, and bids both his parents: «Now embrace each other: there is no shame in your doing so in front of me - I was, after all, born from you» (1.22). The Macedonians are impressed by Alexander's astuteness, and Philip is sufficiently appeased to send Alexander with a large army to subdue the city of Methone, which had rebelled against his rule. «But Alexander, on his arrival at Methone, persuaded them by clever argument to resume their allegiance» (1.23). The text does not reveal how Alexander conciliated the Methoneans, but the detail caps his already demonstrated skill with words, even if his shrewd remarks are backed up each time by superior strength. The display of verbal dexterity or smartness toward those in positions of power links Alexander with figures such as the slave Aesop in the *Life*, who continually bests his master, the philosopher Xanthus, by brazenly outwitting him by means of nit-picking exercises of logic. Even though they do not, like Alexander, lead armies, readers can identify with the cunning of this magician's son who speaks out with impunity before authorities.

Not just domestic life, but war too provides occasions for the play of wits. When Alexander, at the head an army bent on conquering Persia, reaches the city of Tyre, he is initially repulsed by the Tyrians. A dream warns him not to go himself as messenger to Tyre, and so he sends a letter demanding the submission of the city - the first of the many letters that stud the romance (1.35). The Tyrians flog the messengers bearing the epistle in order to determine which of them is Alexander - here one notes the wisdom of the dream - and then slay them. A second dream, involving a contrived pun on satyr (*satyros*), cheese (*tyros*), and the name of the city, Tyre, presages Alexander's victory, and he proceeds to take the town without further ado or explanation. The *Romance* evinces little interest in scenes of war and courage; rather, it consistently draws attention to the role of insight and interpretation, the ability to decipher or manipulate words.

[22] Translations are based on Dowden.

The same note is sounded in Alexander's relations with Darius. Thus, Darius early in the conflict sends Alexander a letter along with a strap, a ball, and a chest full of gold. The accompanying missive interprets the various objects in such a way as to indicate Alexander's presumptuousness in attacking Persia: the strap, for example, is for Alexander's chastisement, while the ball is intended as a childish toy for him to play with. Alexander reads the letter aloud to his troops, and then eases their consternation by asking: «why are you upset at what Darius has written, as though his boastful letter had real power? There are some dogs too who make up for being small by barking loud, as though they could give the illusion of being powerful by their barking» (1.37). With this, he remands Darius' messengers to be crucified.

The aggression against the messengers threatens to put Alexander on the same level as the Tyrians; as such it might, in another kind of work, have represented a pivotal moment in the action or an illuminating revelation of Alexander's character. In the *Romance*, however, it provides the occasion for some further repartee. Thus, Alexander explains that since Darius had described him as a brigand, «I am killing you as though you had come to a ruthless man, not a king». Hardly a brilliant contribution, but the messengers are quick to beg for life and to concede that he is obviously a great king indeed. Alexander elects to spare them because of their cowardly plea, or else, according to recension 'A', in spite of it - it hardly matters which, so long as a *bon mot* of some sort lurks in his rejoinder - and he adds, with no fine regard for consistency: «a king does not kill a messenger».

Inevitably, Alexander writes back to Darius - this epistle too is read aloud before the army - and among assorted threats he offers a counter-interpretation of the Great King's riddling gifts: with the strap, he says, he will beat the barbarians, while the ball represents the world that Alexander will dominate (1.38). Once again, as in the enigmas recited by Apollonius King of Tyre, or the pointed fables deployed by Aesop, it is Alexander's astuteness in relation to symbols that is the center of interest. Letters, in this respect, are simply a way of playing the game of competitive intepretation at a distance. They accrete to the text, it appears, for the same reason that anecdotes do in general, namely, to furnish one more instance of the keen tactics by which the characters wrestle for control over the word.

A while later, when Alexander is camped with his forces outside of Persis, which is here taken as the seat of Darius' empire in Persia, he has a dream in which he is instructed not to send a messenger but rather to go as messenger himself to Darius, dressed in the manner of the god Ammon (2.13). This he does, crossing the river Stranga at night when it turns to ice. Announcing himself as «the messenger of King Alexander», Alexander declares that «Alexander is here» and asks when Darius wishes to join battle, adding a jibe about the weakness a king displays if he is slow to fight (2.14). Darius responds with irritation to this impertinence: «Is it you I am joining battle with or is it

Alexander?» Invited in for dinner by Darius, the disguised Alexander puts all the cups that come his way in his pocket. To Darius' perplexed inquiry about what on earth he thinks he is doing, Alexander ingeniously replies: "Greatest King, this is what Alexander does when he gives a dinner for his officers and guards - he makes a present of the cups - and I thought you were like him." The narrator continues: «So the Persians were astonished and amazed at what Alexander said: for every story, if it carries conviction, always has its audience enthralled» (2.15).

Alexander in this anecdote serves as his own emissary, and his words take the place of the epistle he might otherwise have sent. Message and sender are effectively collapsed, as Darius himself seems to perceive. The theft of the cups is a gratuitous touch surely not intended to reflect on the greed of Alexander but rather once again on his supple way with language, and the author or compiler - better yet, redactor - at this point cannot refrain from reflecting explicitly on the spell-binding effect of a good move in the game of speech. The concluding observation effectively sums up, I think, the motive behind the entire narrative.

In the end, Alexander is suddenly recognized, and he manages to sneak out of the dining hall with the cups safely in his pouch, making his way back across the frozen river just before the sun's rays melt it and cut off the pursuit of the Persians. The clever remark is thus supported, as often, by a combination of luck and bold cunning.

The *Alexander Romance* is receptive to an indefinitely iterable series of such episodes. Although the story has progressed from Alexander's difficulties with his father to his conflict with Darius, and in this respect exhibits the linearity concomitant upon biography, at every turn the narrative is prepared to accrue further incidents that exhibit the same point again and again: Alexander's mastery of language and his supple ingenuity. It is not, as we have seen, a question of morals, and there thus is little effort to maintain consistency of characterization: Alexander is as good at giving a crafty excuse for killing Darius' messengers as he is at trumping the barbarians and taking credit for pardoning the emissaries[23]. The personality of the protagonist is constituted by his wit rather than by ethical traits.

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It would be possible to conclude at this point that both character and plot in the *Alexander Romance* are largely subordinated to the governing strategy of rhetorical jousting and positioning for advantage, and that the pre-eminence accorded to the manipulation of language is well adapted to the additive and expandable quality of the open text. Words here are darts rather than signs; we

[23] Other such inconsistencies are evident in Alexander's attitude toward Darius at 2.17 and 2.20, and again in his response to the Persian satraps who assassinate Darius at 2.21; to be sure it is possible to provide a psychological or strategic explanation, but in a text such as this one that would be largely beside the point.

are in a labile world of sophistic *eris* or competition rather than a Platonic universe of transcendent values, and, accordingly, the text projects neither a well-formed conception of *êthos* nor a sense of a formally complete action or *praxis*. Improvisation is more important than rules in such a system, and practice, even deviousness, is superior to law[24].

But a work so exposed to intrusion from without will not necessarily preserve even the kind of rhetorical unity we have so far claimed for it, and about two thirds the way through the *Alexander Romance* seems indeed to take a turn in a different direction. After the defeat of Darius, Alexander has reached the pinnacle of power. He punishes the assassins who treacherously slew Darius, and writes with exemplary courtesy to Darius' mother and wife, who are his captives. The two women reply not just with gratitude but with reverence, and Alexander's return note strikes a new chord: «I will struggle to act worthily of your affection - since even I am a mortal man» (2.22). Alexander neither needs or tries to score points against helpless women who are entirely in his control. The women, in turn, are a synecdoche for the Persian empire and indeed for all of Alexander's erstwhile enemies: he is securely on top, and there is no scope here for verbal jostling or the bandying of insults. The balance of Book 2 is taken up by a single letter written by Alexander to his own mother, Olympias, and to Aristotle, in which he describes a series of fantastic adventures in some of the more remote regions of the earth.

Alexander encounters giants of various description, strange beasts and plants, invisible demons, stones that turn people black, and uninhabited lands shrouded in darkness. He descends to the ocean floor in a jar like a bathysphere and when he barely escapes with his life, he reflects to himself: «Alexander, give up attempting the impossible» (2.38). Setting off once more in search of the Isles of the Blessed, Alexander again finds himself in an impenetrable mist, passes by a fountain of youth from which in ignorance he fails to drink, and is warned off further progress by a bird that inquires: «Alexander, why do you tread the land that is God's alone?» (2.40). Finally (in the 'A' recension), Alexander devises a contraption that allows him to fly on the backs of two powerful birds, where he meets with yet another warning, this time delivered by an airborne human-like creature: «Alexander, do you investigate the things of heaven when you have not grasped things on earth?» (2.41).

Apart from its length, Alexander's epistle to his mother, which itself suffers accretions and losses in various recensions of the *Romance*, nestles easily among the numerous letters incorporated in the text, but it is clearly more of a foreign body than the main run of missives; unlike them, it is not a means of linguistic rivalry that supplements direct oral confrontations. Rather, the epistle draws upon a popular tradition of wonder tales that often take the

[24] Cf. P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge 1977.

form of travels to the ends of the earth[25]. With Alexander as the hero, the narrative exploits the bizarreness of the remote landscapes in order to sound the theme of human limits: neither the sea-bottom nor the air, but rather the solid earth is man's natural habitat, and Alexander, for all his achievements, must forego visiting the Isles of the Blessed and drinking from the spring of immortality. In this respect, the narrative looks back to Gilgamesh's journey in pursuit of eternal life, and forward to Dante's Odysseus sailing on his final voyage in search of the mountain of Purgatory[26].

Alexander, as we have seen, receives warnings from various and strange figures, but he does not answer back. There is none of the competitive flyting that marks his verbal performances in the previous portions of the *Romance*, and when he does venture a wise observation, it is addressed to himself: «What good does it do you, Alexander, to have regrets over a matter that is past», this in connection with having failed to imbibe the waters of immortality (2.41). To be sure, the list of adventures he relates is easily expanded or diminished without affecting the structure of the report; in this respect the contents of Alexander's letter are suited to the format of the open text. But the epistle here is not just dialogue conducted by other means, but is rather a record of events addressed to a correspondent who is remote and uninvolved in the immediate action, like the reader of the *Romance* itself. However rearrangeable the events internal to the report may be, moreover, the letter itself cannot be placed just anywhere in the text - and this for reasons of theme. It must come after Alexander has conquered Darius and achieved mastery over the known world, for it is only then that the topos of mortal finitude becomes relevant to his condition.

Nevertheless, Alexander's exploits at the planet's edge do not mark the end of his career. He returns to the inhabited world to resume his military activities, this time marching against Porus, who is described as the king of India (3.1). India is remote enough to be seen as a continuation of Alexander's exploration of the limits of the earth, but the contest with Porus is in fact a reprise of his earlier struggle with Darius. Porus sends Alexander the same kind of arrogant letter, warning him to not to test his strength with that of a god (3.2; cf. 1.36); again Alexander reads the epistle out to his troops, and deflates the king's pretentions in his reply. Furthermore, Alexander decides to reconnoitre inside Porus' camp: «once more Alexander became his own messenger» (3.3), and his clever backtalk wins him gifts. Finally, he defeats Porus in single combat.

Alexander then visits the land of the gymnosophists, that is, the naked wise men or Brahmans, and engages with them in an exchange of philosophical conundrums that leads again to the topic of mortality: Alexander defends his

25 See J. Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought: Geography, Exploration, and Fiction*, Princeton 1992.

26 García Gual, 130: «Avec la curiosité d'Ulysse et l'audace d'Achille, il devient un symbole de la passion héroique tendue vers l'impossible»; cf. p. 137.

restless efforts to subdue other peoples despite - or indeed because of - the transience of life (3.6)[27]. Thereafter, he visits a shrine containing two sacred trees that prophesy his imminent death in Babylon (3.17). Two modes are mixed here: koan-like puzzles and the swapping of clever retorts, which recall the contests of wits in the earlier part of the *Romance*, and the authority of oracular voices that convey reminders of impermanence and fatality; the debate with the Brahmans partakes of both styles.

Indeed, the message concerning human limits itself cuts two ways: it subverts pretensions to glory, but at the same time leaves intact the dignity of mortal striving because all meaning resides finally in the game itself and the skill with which it is played. The Brahmans represent the doctrine of withdrawal from the material world that is one response to finitude: «Why then,» they ask Alexander, «if you are mortal, do you wage so many wars? To win everything and carry it off somewhere? Are you not in turn going to leave these things behind for others?» (3.6). Alexander persists in expanding his domains because change is in the nature of things: «Everyone takes things from everyone else and delivers them up to others: nothing belongs to anyone». The lack of heroic transcendence justifies the constant exercise of intellect and courage.

From India, Alexander passes to Ethiopia where he corresponds with the queen, Candace. Again he disguises himself, this time as one of his own guards, Antigonus, and enters the kingdom of Meroë together with Candace's son, whose wife he had helped rescue from enemy territory. Candace, however, recognizes him: «So you must now realize, Alexander, that whenever a man thinks that he is brilliant, there will be another man still more brilliant than he» (3.22). She agrees, however, to keep his secret and bestow gifts upon him for his services to her son. Her other son, however, is married to the daughter of Porus, and the two set to duelling over whether to slay 'Antigonus'. At Candace's urging, Alexander reconciles the brothers by offering to bring the real Alexander to them. Candace is deeply impressed by this display of sagacity.

Alexander visits yet another oracle that advises him of his coming death, and then arranges the submission of the Amazons by mail rather than through warfare. Another inserted letter to his mother records further visits to gloomy and mysterious places, including the City of the Sun and a mountain where a caged bird advises him: «Alexander, from now on stop matching yourself with the gods» (3.28). The *Romance* concludes with Alexander's death by poisoning in Babylon, the result of a conspiracy between Antipater, the regent in Macedon who had been mistreating Olympias, and disloyal members of Alexander's own retinue. This matter is related as third-person narrative, although the text indicates that the conclusion will take the form of another letter by Alexander to his mother (3.30); whether such an epistle would have

27 For variations on this episode, see T. Hägg, *The Novel in Antiquity*, Berkeley 1983; for historical content, R. Stoneman, *Naked Philosophers: The Brahmans in the Alexander Historians and the Alexander Romance*, JHS 115, 1995, 99-114, esp. 110-13.

reported the same or other events must remain moot.

In the finale of the *Alexander Romance*, the theme of mortality converges with that of Alexander's own death, and thus provides a sense of closure to an otherwise cumulative type of narrative that can in principle continue to assimilate new installments exemplifying ever and again Alexander's astuteness in dealing with adversaries, such as Polus, Candace and the Amazons in Book 3. Of course, the demise of the hero necessarily terminates the tale, but such a finish, which pertains to all biography, is extrinsic. In the *Alexander Romance*, the conclusion has the logical force of a denouement, in which a question planted in the text - in this case, the tension between ambition and mortality - finds its solution in the final turn of events. The story thus affords what Frank Kermode calls the «sense of an ending»[28].

At the same time, Alexander's return from the extremes of the world, as related by him in his letter to his mother, affirms the value of his endlessly recurring escapades and confrontations. These constitute the essence of mortal life, which takes place not in a realm of absolute meanings but in a political and rhetorical space in which one is forever grappling with others and seeking to gain a hold or an advantage. Here, cunning is all, and this is the quality in which Alexander is richest. Part of the genius of the *Alexander Romance* is the way in which it organizes an open text, which is hospitable to ever new incursions of foreign materials, around a narrative axis that has a genuine resolution. It is a strategy that does not compromise the celebration of craftiness for its own sake in an interminable sequence of episodes, but manages nevertheless to provide a facsimile of novelistic coherence grounded in the theme of heroic mortality[29].

Texts like the *Alexander Romance* are in general, I suppose, subject to pull in two directions: on the one hand toward a mere collection of anecdotes without a natural terminus, and on the other hand toward the integrity and closure characteristic of the novel and of drama. *The History of Apollonius King of Tyre*, for example, has been substantially drawn into the orbit of the ideal Greek novels, though its fundamental shape remains quite distinct from theirs[30]. Contrariwise, the habit of treating texts as open and cordial to every kind of addition may lead to what looks today like reckless disregard for principles of structure in fictional biography. A case in point is the conclusion to the Athenian Xenophon's story of the Persian king Cyrus, the *Cyropaedia* or 'Education of Cyrus', where the title indicates the central place of *êthos* or character in the narrative. After the the death of Cyrus has been described, a

[28] F. Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, Oxford 1966.

[29] Writing of oral epic, Nimis, 62 observes: «Closure is anathema to propulsive poetics, whose entire mechanism is geared to continuation, to preventing the breakdown of the performance. I do not mean to say that the endings of these works are completely fortuitous or that they do not achieve a resolution of sorts. Rather, the point is that the overall plot and its resolution is only one of the many concerns of the poet».

[30] See Konstan, *Sexual*, 100-13.

final chapter recounts the subsequent decline of Persian character. This move has seemed anticlimactic and out of place, and, although recent critics are disposed to accept the authenticity of the passage, the editor of the Loeb translation warns the reader in a note attached to the beginning of the chapter: «Chapter VIII [of Book 8] can be considered only as a later addition to Xenophon's work... It spoils the perfect unity of the work up to this chapter... The chapter is included here in accord with all the manuscripts and editions. But the reader is recommended to close the book at this point and read no further»[31]. Such is the alarm produced when the pattern of a *Bildungsroman* is disrupted by what appears to be an arbitrary encroachment on the text.

We began by observing that the *Alexander Romance* is one of a group of works produced in the first two or three centuries of this era in which anecdotes involving a high degree of verbal wit are loosely organized around a biographical core[32]. These works share a textual tradition that is multiform rather than hierarchical, and look back to a continual generation of recensions rather than to a unique and authoritative original. It may be that such compositions reflect oral forms of the dissemination of prose literature that mark them off from classical written works and enable them to recover something of the dynamic instability of archaic poetry, at least until it was fixed in texts by the Alexandrian scholars[33]. They seem to speak, however, to an audience interested less in heroic combat than in the uppitiness of a man of wits, emphasizing wiliness over martial power even when the protagonist is none other than Alexander the Great. The *Alexander Romance* is not a story of warfare but rather an ego fantasy, in which a small man - Alexander is said at one point to be about three and a half feet tall (3.4) - stands up to haughty kings and giants and succeeds as much through scrappiness as force[34].

[31] Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, ed. and trans. W. Miller, II, Cambridge Mass. 1914, 438 s. There is no linguistic basis for denying attribution of the final section to Xenophon, and modern critical opinion favors its authenticity on structural grounds; cf. J. Tatum, *Xenophon's Imperial Fiction: On 'The Education of Cyrus'*, Princeton 1989, 224; D.L. Gora, *Xenophon's Cyropaedia: Style, Genre, and Literary Technique*, Oxford 1993, 299 s.

[32] The date of the earliest versions of the *Alexander Romance* is uncertain. Thiel, *Leben*, XII suggests the late 3rd century A.D.; *The Greek Alexander Romance*, trans. R. Stoneman, Harmondsworth 1991, 8-17 believes that it may be earlier by several centuries.

[33] García Gual, 134 remarks that the author of the *Romance* «avait ramassé et 'raccomodé' des textes avec un esprit plus proche de celui d'un rhapsode ancien face à la tradition épique que de celui d'un historien»; cf. Stoneman, *The Greek*, 17-19, who sees in the *Odyssey* a literary antecedent of the *Alexander Romance*. Adrados, 106 argues that an oral tradition lies behind the *Life of Aesop*. For the idea that Xenophon' *Ephesiaca* was inspired by a tradition of oral prose composition involving formulaic expressions and motifs, see O'Sullivan, 16-19, 30-98.

[34] Some of this same spirit is evident in the biographical and historical accounts of Alexander, e.g. by Plutarch and Arrian, and it may be, as Kenneth Sacks has suggested to me, that certain historical figures who were morally ambiguous and noted for their wiliness, like Themistocles, Alcibiades, Demetrius Poliorcetes, and Alexander himself, were naturally suited to the bon-mot. Another case is Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, which is half-way between a traditional biography and a wonder-tale, and bears a certain resemblance to the open texts discussed above.

It may also be that these fabular romances appealed to the same kind of readership as did the biographical narratives contained in the Gospels. Here too, the story of a life provides the scaffolding on which depend a series of anecdotal encounters, more or less elastic in their number and arrangement, that exhibit the superior cleverness, the skill in riposte and parable, of a figure who appears weak and vulnerable (a concern with questions of mortality and immortality is also evident in these works). The four versions of the life of Jesus correspond, in a sense, to the multiple recensions of the *Alexander Romance* and the other open texts. The inclusion of the epistles of Paul and others in the New Testament may itself testify to a literary taste like that which was receptive to the *Romance*: it was perhaps less strange than it seems now to consolidate within a single work a quasi-biographical narrative and a miscellaneous collection of letters[35].

The idea of sacred writ ultimately halted innovations in the lives of Jesus. However, works such as the *Alexander Romance* remained exposed to mutation and variation, enduring as open texts until the invention of printing put an end both to their adaptability and their popularity.

Providence David Konstan

[35] Cf. G.W. Bowersock, *Fiction as History: Nero to Julian*, Berkeley 1994, who argues that the Gospels provided a major impetus for the development of ancient fiction generally. The *New Testament* remained open into the 4th century A.D. One may also compare in this regard the various narratives comprised in the Apocryphal Acts.