

THE SPEAKING BOOK: THE PROLOGUE TO APULEIUS' *METAMORPHOSES**

at ego tibi sermone isto Milesio varias fabulas conseram auresque tuas benivolas lepido susurro permulceam, modo si papyrum Aegyptiam argutia Nilotici calami inscriptam non spreveris inspicere. figuras fortunasque hominum in alias imagines conversas et in se rursum mutuo nexu refectas, ut mireris, exordior. 'quis ille?' paucis accipe. Hymettos Attica et Isthmos Ephyrea et Taenaros Spartiatica, glebae felices aeternum libris felicioribus conditae, mea vetus prosapia est; ibi linguam Atthidem primis pueritiae stipendiis merui, mox in urbe Latia advena studiorum Quiritium indigenam sermonem aerumnabili labore nullo magistro praeunte aggressus excolui. en ecce praefamur veniam, si quid exotici ac forensis sermonis rudis locutor offendero. iam haec equidem ipsa vocis immutatio desultoriae scientiae stilo quem accessimus respondet. fabulam Graecanicam incipimus. lector intende: laetaberis.

This opening paragraph of Apuleius' novel has been a noted battleground for scholars for at least the last century. The main issue has been the identity of the speaker of what is evidently a prologue to the work; this prologue very likely imitates the opening of the Greek ass-story of Lucius of Patrae on which Apuleius seems to have based his own narrative, but since the opening of Lucius' work can only be reconstructed conjecturally from a third-person summary in Photius, it cannot help us to identify a speaker in Apuleius' prologue. This speaker has been variously viewed as Apuleius himself, Lucius the narrator of the novel or a combination of the two, but each of these identities presents problems.¹

A brief digression from this central issue is first required, on the matter of punctuating the first half of this paragraph. The text given above differs from the version of the standard editions of Helm and Robertson in three respects: the placing of full stops after 'inspicere' and 'refectas', and the replacing of a full stop after 'mireris' by a comma. Here as usual in classical texts the MSS. should not be regarded as authoritative in punctuation (though the third of these changes does in fact have MS. support), and the editor should choose what makes best style and sense. The vulgate version of a six-line paragraph ending with a purpose clause which involves a fourteen-word object governed by a mere two-word 'ut mireris' right at the end of the sentence seems an oddly unbalanced structure for such a master of rhetorical syntax as Apuleius, especially in such a prominent position at the head of a work. Given the desirability of breaking up this unwieldy sentence, 'inspicere' is evidently a good place to stop, after an opening pair of main and subordinate clause, and 'modo si...inspicere' reads better as a concluding clause rather than a parenthesis.

Once the second sentence begins with 'figuras fortunasque hominum', it clearly emerges as a prefatory statement of the material of the book, echoing the similar

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¹ On the connection between Apuleius' prologue and that of 'Lucius of Patrae' cf. A. Scobie, *Apuleius: Metamorphoses I* (Meisenheim, 1975), p. 65. Apuleius himself is proposed as the prologue-speaker by H. Riefstahl (*Der Roman des Apuleius* (Frankfurt, 1938), p. 22), Lucius by most editors, and especially K. Burger (*Hermes* 23 (1888), 489–98). A combination of the two is suggested by E. Rohde, *RhM* 40 (1885), 66–91 and F. Leo, *Hermes* 40 (1905), 605–6. There is further bibliography and a useful summary of the history of the question by K. Dowden, *CQ* n.s. 32 (1982), 427–8 and in the recent treatment by C. Harrauer and F. Römer, *Mnem.* 38 (1985), 353–72.

programme of Ovid's identically-titled *Metamorphoses* (1.1–2 'in nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas / corpora'). Such prefatory statements of intent need their own main verb, and this is the motive for attaching 'exordior' to the end of the second sentence and making 'ut mireris' parenthetic. 'figuras fortunasque hominum ... exordior' now looks like Vergil's opening 'arma virumque cano' or Silius' 'ordior arma', and the resemblance is surely not accidental.² The linking of 'exordior' to the sentence containing 'mutuo nexu' also seems appropriate since both are metaphors connected with weaving. Once the separation of these first two sentences is effected, we have a wheedling preface in the subjunctive, inviting interest in the story ('conseram ... permulceam ... modo si non spreveris'), followed by a firm programme in the indicative for the work in progress ('exordior'): here 'ut mireris', though now parenthetic, is significant, for it points to the element of 'wonder-story' which is clearly present in Apuleius' novel of Thessalian magic and Isiac conversion and is common in other ancient novels.³

The structure of this opening speech is thus established as formally analogous to other prologues; but this does not give much guidance as to its speaker's identity, a question to which we now return. The autobiography given to the speaker by the writer indicates that he is Greek in origin and mother-tongue. Quite apart from the fact that this is couched in unrealistically elaborate terms (see below), it is very unlikely to apply to Apuleius, son of a *duumvir* from Madauros in Africa Proconsularis, established as a Roman *colonia* in the Flavian period: Apuleius' own statements about his home city and about the Greek language strongly suggest that it was not a place where Greek was influential, and this is backed up by its epigraphic record.⁴ Apuleius surely spoke Latin before Greek (though it is possible that Punic was his first language), and thus cannot be the speaker of the prologue.

Equally strong objections apply to identifying the speaker as Lucius, the novel's narrator, or as a combination between Lucius and Apuleius. The view of the novel presented by the prologue-speaker, regarding it as an enjoyable and fictional conglomeration of stories with Milesian and Egyptian literary connections, suggests that he cannot be Lucius the narrator of the main part of the novel, which is presented as a first-person account of an actual life. The combination of Lucius and Apuleius, with one of them asking the question 'quis ille?',⁵ seems equally improbable (such a dialogue seems artificial in the extreme, and neither has any motivation for enquiring the identity of the other), while the notion that Lucius speaks throughout, first as a general non-characterized narrator and then in his proper person as Lucius the experiencer of the events of the narrative,⁶ is intriguing but unlikely: there is no

² For similar uses of 'exordior' with direct object cf. *Met.* 1.5 'quod inchoaveram porro exordiar', *Petronius, Sat.* 61.5 'talem fabulam exorsus est', Gellius 4.9.5 'rem quampiam novam exordiri'.

³ For this element cf. Scobie, *op. cit.* (n. 1), p. 71, and *id.*, *Aspects of the Ancient Romance and its Heritage* (Meisenheim, 1969), pp. 37–54.

⁴ Cf. Apuleius, *Apol.* 4 with Butler and Owen's note, and *Apol.* 24. The extant epigraphic record of Madauros contains only four Greek inscriptions (two of which have a Latin version appended) and 795 items in Latin (S. Gsell, *Inscriptions latines de l'Algérie* (Paris, 1922), pp. 181–266; pp. 181–2 give a good account of the history and high degree of Romanization of Madauros). The influence of Greek, though felt in the cosmopolitan sea-port of Carthage, seems not to have reached far inland – cf. O. Rössler in G. Neumann, J. Untermann (edd.), *Die Sprachen im römischen Reich der Kaiserzeit* (Cologne, 1980), pp. 267–84.

⁵ This view of the prologue as a dialogue between Apuleius and Lucius is that of F. Calonghi, *RIFC* 43 (1915), 209–36.

⁶ The view of Dowden, *loc. cit.* (n. 1).

reason why the reader should assume such a significant switch of perspective after ‘quis ille?’, the answer to which surely assumes that the speaker of ‘paucis accipe’ is in every detail identical with that of ‘at ego tibi’.

More popular in recent accounts has been the suggestion that Apuleius’ prologue resembles that of a Plautine comedy, and is thus spoken in the person of a prologue-speaker, in some sense separate from both author and narrator. There are indeed affinities between the two forms of opening, which seem to have been perceived in the medieval and Renaissance tradition of Apuleius’ novel⁷ and which have been well explored recently;⁸ the invitation to the reader/listener, the self-revelation of the prologue-speaker, the identification of the forthcoming story as a Greek one and the promise of pleasure from the performance are all recognisable elements of Plautine prologues. And yet the appearance of a prologue-speaker in a novel is crucially different from that of a play. The existence of a prologue-speaker notionally external to the characters of the play, usually an actor who will take part in the forthcoming piece and sometimes acting as a mouthpiece for the author, is both an accepted comic convention and a piece of visible theatre: it is plain both what his role is and when it ends (he leaves the stage). In the *Metamorphoses*, by contrast, there seems to be no comparable role or break: the prologue-speaker claims both to be the physical and literary constructor of the piece the reader is about to experience (‘varias fabulas conseram’), and to be its deliverer or narrator (‘lepido susurro permulceam’), and thus cannot be separated from the main body of the narrative by means of a convenient exit.

Thus the speaker of the prologue of Apuleius’ novel cannot be Lucius, Apuleius, a combination of the two, or a notionally separate prologue-speaker; it must be delivered by a character who is permanently present in the novel, who can happily show detachment and omniscience about its contents, and who fits the autobiographical data given in a way that neither Apuleius nor Lucius does. There is a single candidate which fits this description: the book itself, conceived as a personified physical object.

The motif of the speaking book, the work of literature which introduces or describes itself, is not unfamiliar in classical literature; more significantly, it occurs in prefatory contexts in works with which we can safely assume Apuleius had some familiarity. Most notable is the separate epigram prefacing the second edition of Ovid’s *Amores*, where the three books of the collection explain to the reader that they have been cut down from an original five:

qui modo Nasonis fueramus quinque libelli,
tres sumus: hoc illi praetulit auctor opus.
ut iam nulla tibi nos sit legisse voluptas,
at levior demptis poena duobus erit.

⁷ That the opening of the *Met.* was viewed as a comic prologue as early as the Middle Ages is shown by the fact that in B.M. Harleianus 4838, written before 1400 by Coluccio Salutati, it is divided into (bad) iambic lines; Salutati adds comments beginning ‘hic autem auctor comicus fuit’ (for this and the attribution cf. A. de la Mare, *The Handwriting of Italian Humanists* (Oxford, 1973), p. 42). The prologue was defended as metrical in the editions of scholars as distinguished as P. Beroaldus (1500) and J. J. Scaliger (anonymous reviser of the edition of Vulcanius, 1600).

⁸ By Warren S. Smith, *TAPA* 103 (1972), 513–34. This notion has been taken up by Dowden (loc. cit., n. 1), J. Tatum, *Apuleius and the Golden Ass* (Ithaca, 1979), pp. 25–7, and J. J. Winkler, *Actor and Auctor: A Narratological Reading of Apuleius’ Golden Ass* (Berkeley, 1984), pp. 183–203.

The first epigram of Martial's tenth book is similar, comically apologising for the length of the book which contains it:

si nimius videor seraque coronide longus
esse liber, legito pauca: libellus ero.
terque quaterque mihi finitur carmine parvo
pagina: fac tibi me quam cupis ipse brevem.

The technique is taken from Hellenistic poetry, and there are a number of further examples.⁹ In these cases we have a clearly self-referential introduction to the book spoken by the book itself. The prologue of Apuleius' novel does not reveal itself so instantly as being spoken by the book, but readers of the *Metamorphoses* will in the course of the novel experience other surprising turns and narratological tricks;¹⁰ it will be seen in the close investigation which follows that the book is the most plausible (and I think the only) identity for the prologue's speaker, and that this would have been recognised by an alert ancient reader.

It is clear that Apuleius' prologue contains several forms of *captatio benevolentiae* common in prefaces.¹¹ The speaker begins with a promise of enjoyable stories if the reader will endure to listen to him, goes on to apologise for Egyptian connections, and ends by asking for indulgence towards any harshness of style. Such *τόποι* might suit any speaker, but one in particular suggests the book itself. 'Modo si papyrus Aegyptiam argutia Nilotici calami inscriptam non spreveris inspicere' is presented as a parenthetic *captatio*. What precisely is the speaker apologising for here? 'Argutia Nilotici calami inscriptam' is not a literary self-depreciation: 'argutia', verbal wit, is a virtue for Apuleius as for Cicero.¹² What the speaker feels he needs to excuse to Roman readers is his foreign connection: Egypt and Egyptians were not respectable in the Roman mind.¹³ But what are these Egyptian links? It has been plausibly suggested that there is some hidden reference to the later prominence of the Egyptian elements of magic and Isis in the novel, but this will not of course strike the first-time reader, for whom the Egyptian connection should have some immediate meaning. Here the book as speaker makes eminent sense: the book apologises for Egypt since it is literally Egyptian in origin, being made of papyrus, which was well known in antiquity to be produced only in Egypt.¹⁴ The first-time reader suspects some allusion to future Egyptian content in 'argutia Nilotici calami inscriptam', but sees at once that 'papyrus Aegyptiam' apologises for the book's own physical origin in a non-Roman and suspect region. This self-deprecating allusion to one's own foreign origin and consequent unworthiness to speak before a Roman audience is a prefatory *τόπος*;¹⁵ as in other cases, it refers to the speaker himself, here the book.

As already hinted, similar conclusions may be drawn from the autobiography which follows an imaginary reader's enquiry ('quis ille?') as to the speaker's identity, natural enough since the novel has begun so abruptly with an unattributed address to the reader. As has been pointed out, the details of this life-story fit neither Apuleius the author nor Lucius the narrator,¹⁶ though many have claimed the latter.

⁹ Conveniently collected by J. C. McKeown, *Ovid Amores, II: A Commentary on Book One* (Liverpool, 1989), pp. 1–2. For the personified book in classical literature more generally, cf. N. M. Kay on Martial 11.1.

¹⁰ Cf. Winkler, *op. cit.* (n. 8), *passim*.

¹¹ On such *captationes*, cf. T. Janson, *Latin Prose Prefaces* (Stockholm, 1964), pp. 124–48.

¹² Apuleius, *Ap.* 95, Cicero, *Brutus* 167, *Orator* 110.

¹³ Cf. J. P. V. D. Balsdon, *Romans and Aliens* (London, 1979), pp. 68–9.

¹⁴ Cf. N. Lewis, *Papyrus in Antiquity* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 3–5.

¹⁵ Cf. *Panegyrici Latini* 12.1–2, Macrobius, *Sat.* pref. 11–16, Janson, *op. cit.* (n. 11), 130–2.

¹⁶ Cf. esp. Smith, *art. cit.* (n. 8), p. 516.

'Hymettos Attica et Isthmos Ephyrea et Taenaros Spartiatica, glebae felices aeternum libris felicioribus conditae, mea vetus prosapia est' is not a realistic statement of local origin. It is true that *prosapia* refers to a literal lineage elsewhere in Apuleius,¹⁷ but the claim to be simultaneously from Athens, Corinth and Sparta, expressed with baroque elaboration and learning, is surely not to be taken at face value, even if Lucius the narrator happens to be a Corinthian, a detail which we are not told until near the end of the novel's first book (1.22). What the speaker means is that he is quintessentially Greek by origin, or rather by language, for he goes on to explain that it was in these places (i.e. 'real' Greece) that he learned to speak 'real' Greek: 'ibi linguam Atthidem primis pueritiae stipendiis merui'. The notion of tripartite schooling in three cities gives the literal-minded reader pause here; in fact, this notion, like other elements in the biography, is best explained by the assumption that this is the life-story of the book itself.

The notion of a native Greek (such as the book claims to be) learning good Attic in youth is unproblematic in the age of the Second Sophistic. But if the speaker is neither Lucius nor Apuleius (and neither fits the bill), what is this to mean? The suggestion that the book is speaking solves the problem. On that assumption, the book is simply saying that he first appeared in good Greek when he was young, an allusion to Apuleius' use of an earlier Greek source, whether the Δούκιος ἢ Ὀνος of Lucian or the *Metamorphoses* of Lucius of Patrae, a debt more directly acknowledged at the end of the prologue ('fabulam Graecanicam incipimus').¹⁸ The idea of the book as a 'puer' occurs in the last poem of Horace's first book of *Epistles*,¹⁹ but here the notion is extended to designate a book in its earliest version. Once this assumption is made, another detail in the life-story gains a sharper relevance. The three cities of the speaker's 'origin' in Greece are praised as 'glebae felices aeternum libris felicioribus conditae', 'fertile soils preserved for ever in even more fertile books'. Fertility ('glebae felices') is a common motif of the praise of places,²⁰ but to stress that cities have achieved fame through the books they produce or stimulate seems to be an unusual substitution of the much commoner notion that cities achieve fame through their citizens.²¹ Thus books are substituted for men; this is unexpected, until we assume that the speaker is himself a book, naturally much more interested in the fame of books than in human glory, and himself personified and substituted for a human figure.

The assumption that the book is the speaker also makes sense of the migration to Rome and laborious learning of Latin which conclude the speaker's life-story. It has often been asserted that these details refer to the narrator Lucius, who does indeed migrate from Greece to Rome in the last pages of the novel (*Met.* 11.26.1). But the novel does not mention any painstaking learning of Latin by Lucius; at one point he turns without further ado to make money by pleading in Latin in the Roman courts (*Met.* 11.28.6), which hardly suggests that he needs to acquire the language. If the speaker is the book, and the mention of Greek origins refers to the fact that the book derives from a Greek original, then migration to Rome will stand for translation, and language-learning for being turned into a Latin version. Apuleius uses elsewhere this

¹⁷ *Met.* 3.11.1, 6.23.4, 8.2.5, 9.35.3, 10.18.1; *Ap.* 18; *De Deo Socr.* 23.

¹⁸ For a recent view and useful survey of the question of Apuleius' Greek source(s) in the *Metamorphoses* cf. H. J. Mason in *Aspects of Apuleius' Golden Ass*, edd. B. L. Hijmans, Jr., R. Th. van der Paardt (Groningen, 1978), 1–15.

¹⁹ Cf. E. Fraenkel, *Horace* (Oxford, 1957), pp. 356–9.

²⁰ Cf. Menander Rhetor 1.342.2ff. Spengel, E. Kienzie, *Der Lobpreis von Städten und Ländern in der älteren griechischen Dichtung* (Kallmünz, 1936), pp. 39–40, 49–57.

²¹ Kienzie, *op. cit.*, pp. 68–79.

same image of migration from Greece to Rome for switching from Latin to Greek,²² and it is something of a commonplace in Latin authors who talk about their imitation of Greek originals, which they metaphorically transport from Greece to Italy.²³ Also a commonplace in such contexts is another detail in the life-story: the speaker claims to have acquired Latin 'nullo magistro praeunte'. The claim that the speaker acquired Latin 'with no master preceding me' appears unusually fulsome ('nullo magistro' would be fully adequate if the speaker is simply claiming to be an autodidact in Latin). However, if the speaker is the book itself, then this becomes a much more interesting statement, a literary claim for priority of a type frequent in programmatic Latin passages discussing relationships to Greek models – the claim that the author (or in this case, book) is the first to render his model from Greek into Latin, sometimes accompanied by the obvious parallel-assertion that no-one else has done the same thing before.²⁴ Thus the Latin book of the *Metamorphoses* which is before the reader itself speaks out to claim (plausibly enough) to be the first Latin translation of its Greek original. The notion that translation from Greek to Latin is a hard labour also appears in a famous Lucretian context which talks about making versions of Greek models:²⁵ this underlies 'aerumnabili labore' in the life-story, otherwise a pointless detail which fits neither Lucius nor Apuleius.

The preface moves to its close with a reference to the possibility of stylistic harshness in an unaccustomed language and an assertion that a translation or transformation of an original in another language is an appropriate vehicle for subject-matter which itself concerns transformation (i.e. metamorphosis through magic). The first of these is once more a prefatory convention and *captatio benevolentiae*,²⁶ of course highly ironic for the consummate style of the work it introduces, while the second is an original witticism: neither tells us much about the identity of the speaker, though the stress on performance and speaking ('locutor', 'vocis immutatio') suits the personified and speaking book as well as any other speaker. The final address to the reader, 'fabulam Graecanicam incipimus. lector intende: laetaberis', could again be suitably spoken by the book; though addresses to the reader by the narrator are found in the main narrative of the novel, the occurrence of this particular address in the mouth of the book itself, drawing attention to its own physical existence, would be highly appropriate at its beginning, echoing the opening of Ovid's third book of *Tristia*,²⁷ and neatly marks the transition to the narrative proper in the second chapter of the novel (it is a notable feature here,

²² In the 'false preface' wrongly attached in the MSS. tradition of Apuleius to the *De Deo Socratis*, a passage made part of the *Florida* by Thomas and Fragment 5 by Beaujeu: 'tempus est in Latium demigrare de Graecia.'

²³ Cf. Lucretius 1.117–19 'Ennius ut noster cecinit, qui primus amoeno / detulit ex Helicone perenni fronde coronam / per gentis Italas hominum quae clara clueret', Vergil, *G.* 2.176 'Ascraeumque cano Romana per oppida carmen', 3.10–11 'primus ego in patriam mecum, modo vita supersit, / Aonio rediens deducam vertice Musas.'

²⁴ Cf. the passages cited in n. 23, and Horace, *Odes* 3.1.2–4 'carmina non prius / audita Musarum sacerdos / virginibus puerisque canto', 3.30.13–14 '*princeps* Aeolium carmen ad Italos / deduxisse modos', *Ep.* 1.19.32–3 'hunc quoque, non alio dictum prius ore, Latinus / vulgavi fidicen', Propertius 3.1.3–4 '*primus* ego ingredior puro de fonte sacerdos / Italia per Graios orgia ferre choras.'

²⁵ Lucretius 1.136–42 'nec me animi fallit Graiorum obscura reperta / difficile illustrare Latinis versibus esse, / multa novis verbis praesertim cum sit agendum / propter egestatem linguae et rerum novitatem; / sed tua me virtus tamen et sperata voluptas / suavis amicitiae quomvis efferre laborem / suadet.'

²⁶ Cf. Janson, loc. cit. (n. 11).

²⁷ *Tristia* 3.1.1–2 'missus in hanc venio timide liber exulis urbem: / da placidam fesso, lector amice, manum.'

since the other addresses to the reader all occur much later, in the last three books of the novel).²⁸ When the narrator begins talking about a trip to Thessaly, it is fairly clear that the identity of the speaker has changed, without any kind of formal exit. Indeed, if it is the book that speaks the prologue, there can be no formal exit, for the book itself cannot depart from the narrative which it physically contains; in the prologue we hear the voice of the book itself, in the second chapter that of the main character of its narrative, a narrative which the prologue has already introduced.

Thus I hope to have established a new identity for the speaker of the prologue to Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* – not the omniscient author Apuleius or the main narrator Lucius, neither of whom fits the life-story which the speaker gives, nor some kind of separate prologue-speaker, whose entrance would be as much a mystery as his exit, but the voice of the book itself, which can of course anticipate from sure knowledge the story which it contains (hence the allusions to Egypt and metamorphosis); it has no need to exit from the novel to which it inseparably and physically belongs, and can freely combine the privileges of both author and narrator. No other candidate makes so much sense of otherwise mysterious details in the text, and of the stress on the change from one language to another. Moreover, the book which speaks its own preface or description is not an ingenious modern invention, but a device known to Latin poets well before the time of Apuleius and recognisable by his more alert ancient readers.

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²⁸ *Met.* 9.30.1, 10.2.4, 11.23.5.