

BOOK REVIEW

Apuleius' Invisible Ass. Encounters with the Unseen in the Metamorphoses. By GEOFFREY C. BENSON. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. Pp. xi + 299. Hardback, \$99.99. ISBN :978-1-108-47555-6

This ambitious analysis emphasizes kinds of invisibility in Apuleius' novel, the fiction's relationship to the author's middle Platonism and the unresolved, perhaps unresolvable question, of the novel's surprising eleventh book—its tone and purpose. Benson has carefully read relevant scholarship; he cites and quotes it generously. This scrupulosity is helpful with a text so contestable and recently thus contested, even when the resumés interrupt a complex argument.

What is the world beyond the senses? Is it real, transcendent, subject (through magic spells) to human control, as certain Egyptian papyri promised customers? The juggernautical influence of Jack Winkler's ambivalence does not oppress this author. He inclines to a more Schlamian, Platonesque perspective on "matters" and beings beyond phenomenal perception.¹

"Invisibility is a slippery concept," already in Plato (9). Benson finds it in Apuleius' philosophical works and in his novel. He cites Psyche's servants and husband, and Lucius' *social* invisibility as an ass, among bestial humans, gods and daemonic forces. He perhaps possessively considers it "one of the organizing principles in the *Metamorphoses*" (13). Apuleius' background is by far the best known of any ancient novelist's, attested by his own writings, later authors and (probably) even epigraphical monuments in Tunisian Madauros.

¹ John J. Winkler, *Actor & Auctor. A Narratological Reading of Apuleius' The Golden Ass*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1985; Carl C. Schlam, *The Metamorphoses of Apuleius. On Making an Ass of Oneself*, Chapel Hill 1992.

Chapter 1 analyzes the prologue once again, looking for a determinate voice. None is to be found, not Apuleius', Lucius', even a daemon's. Benson dabbles in Pythagorean and New Testament acousmatics, where a being has a disembodied voice, one that in writing loses all its paravocalic qualities (pitch, volume, accent etc.). Benson asserts the confusion over the prologist's identity is intended to disorient, even unnerve scrupulous readers (40, 58). "The point of the prologue" is to obscure the celebrity sophist's identity (50), a questionable assertion for both Winkler's first- and second-time readers. Lucius is *curiosus* and so is the reader. Even admirers of the weird Apuleius hesitate to attribute post-modern "death of the author" motives to the African rhetor. More provocative is Benson's thesis that Apuleius intentionally presses the bounds of human hermeneutic capacity to show up phenomenologists, for instance, in the episode of Lucius' repulse of Hypata's bandits.

Chapter 2, "Invisible Man," explores Apuleius' grim picture of humanity. As an eavesdropping ass, Lucius hears humans voice unethical views (Platonic roots in Gyges' ring and Glaucon, *Resp.* 360b-c). The beast of burden is hiding (*latibulum*) in plain sight, seeing while his *multiscius* (9.13.4) human intelligence remains unperceived. Even in Rome's surveillance society, his asinine skin renders him socially invisible (cf. *Apol.* 16. 9-13). The continuity consists of Lucius inability to connect, as Arthur Heiserman argued.² Benson deploys Cicero's interesting defense of fantastic/impossible narratives (*de Off.* 3.39) which includes Gyges' ring story (94-5). Benson refers to the novel's darkness, its attention to "the inadequacy of human sense perceptions" (263), but he does not tarry over its social critique of Rome's oppressive institutions and occupiers' ideology.

Chapter 3 examines the "Cupid and Psyche" drunken-hag's old-wives recitation, how it fits or upends the rest of the novel. Is there a right way to see the unseen (20), to envisage the invisible? This seductive tale's length and action in an alternate, somewhat more benevolent world raise questions about "reality." Sight taboos are central. So is the problem of representing the unseen—servants, musicians, elevator winds etc. as well as Cupid hidden by the dark although not actually

² In his here uncited and largely forgotten study, *The Novel before the Novel*, Chicago 1977.

invisible. (103). No love at first sight in this ancient novel (106)! Benson discusses ancient concepts of *fantasia* and the “eye of the mind”—perception versus Platonic *theoria* or conception (117). His Apuleius traps readers and “protect[s] C&P’s (his abbreviation) secrets” (122). This approach is part of Benson’s crypto-allegorical, also esoteric mystical, approach, one usually associated with Reinhold Merkelbach’s 1962 *Roman und Mysterium* bombshell. Benson boldly faces the contentious question of whether Psyche’s mega-inset tale mirrors in contrast or parallels Lucius’ career and its unexpected upshot (127; cf. Ch. 5 on Book 11). The more Platonic and/or mystical your reading of the nested narrative, the more it seems parallel. But the down-to-earth read of it (*narrationibus lepidis anilibusque fabulis...avocabo*) may also find these two lost souls mired in their earthly, sensual and undivine limitations. Psyche contemplates suicide five or six times, Charite who hears her story commits it and Lucius must outpace both when seeking surcease of pain and release from terror. Lucius’ anamorphosis and conversion to Isiacism in itself constitutes traumatic ego-murder and social suicide. The later Lucius narrator (another can of worms; see Ch. 1) leaves unclear whether the internal “you are there” narrator, Lucius the long-eared Ass, sees any relevance to himself in the *bella fabella* (6.25). Ontology becomes the focus, and *On the God of Socrates* the key, but Benson correctly concludes that the “*Metamorphoses* is not quite philosophy” (147) nor “scripture” (259).

Chapter 4 further searches for Apuleius’ anxious but fundamental metaphysics, however. A divagation into mutilation and disintegration, also ingestion of human bodies, pauses the hunt.³ Bodies are key to “the metaphysics of the *Metamorphoses*” (157), but this hardly surprises us, whether or not Apuleius is wearing his philosophical toga in this text. After all, writers of fictions *avant et après la lettre*—Ovid, Shakespeare, and Kafka, let alone Homer—question “the continuity of identity after physical changes” (163). Paradoxical indeed it is that chop and change provide the thematic unity of plot and character in this singleton novel (166). Is Apuleius obsessed with the metaphysics of bodies and their

³Page 155 n.22 offers an exemplary note on this disturbing topic.

dismemberment or disintegration? Not “in explicit terms,” Benson admits (173). True, the narrator—sage or buffoon—comes to distrust his senses, for example, in the incident of inflated goat-skins (2.32). But, readers well before Ben Perry couldn’t make good sense of this narrative.

Chapter 5 argues for an aporetic ending to Apuleius’ “diverting and therapeutic” novel, one that never provides the narrator’s “present perspective” reflecting on his earlier life, wandering through an earthly hell until he stumbles on—or providentially intercepts—Isis’ salvific parade. It is Winklerish but with a wink. A different, more religious than philosophical, *aporia* emerges. It allows Apuleius to appear less isolated and less modern than Jack Winkler concluded in his revolutionary and suspenseful analysis. Some critics insist that Lucius must be better than a “gullible chump.” Benson loses the comic Lucius, especially in Book XI, for the religious searcher, while acknowledging that Lucius the strange beast may never have “seen” what he claims to have seen, heaven and hell and gods galore, as he stumbles towards his western Bethlehem. Benson rightly allows doubt for Lucius’ reports of his visions, dreams and face-to-face encounters with the divine (e.g., 11.19, 20, 24, 27) extra-sensory realm, somewhere beyond the hermeneutical horizon of all uninitiated readers (207 n.28). Focalization for initiation into *sacrorum arcanis* switches from uncomplicated and unmitigated (sic) internal focalization to “camera-eye,” i.e., some external incomprehension for close encounters with matters hidden, unknown, knotted, secret, protected from profane curiosity (11.22)—the sights and sounds of silence. “This (intended) glitch in the internal focalization” (216, 223, 238) is well argued for contributing to readers’ confusion as well as for our understanding of the initiated devotee of Isis. Lucius becomes less informative as the narrative “fades out” further, distancing the character from us with each of his three initiations. Better reporting could be dangerous to one’s health (cf. Paus. 10.32.17, cited on 229). Nevertheless, if Lucius has seen the light, this clueless figure differs clearly and laughably from pre-Platonic sages and neo-Platonic Plotinus (235). The risk-taking magic-seeker gets what he wants with so little personal ratiocination and study that Benson himself vacillates. Perhaps we can describe, as Benson does, Lucius’ opaque narrations and divine revelations as

therapeutic illusions (239), because Lucius confuses hallucinations and fictions with reality (249).

Chapter 6 explores fitfully the discontinuities and tension between Books 1-10 and Book 11. Benson concludes that the *Metamorphoses* is a cryptic and daemonic text about a world poised between sensible and an otherwise intelligible reality (foreshadowed at 61). Benson's study illuminates the role of vision and unvision, both phenomenal and metaphysical, in the Sophist Apuleius' novel. Along the way, he offers insightful notes such as that on the Second Sophistic (90 n.99). He is thorough and fair in summarizing the burgeoning body of recent Apuleian criticism. The book is a solid contribution to Apuleian metaphysics, contextualizing this imposing apparent frivolity among Apuleius' more serious, less often read productions.

Carl Schlam's masterful exposition of Platonism in the *Metamorphoses* extensively discussed the role of malicious *Fortuna*, upper and lower case, as well as *fatum*, *sors* and *eventus*, more rarely capitalized. The hierarchy of "destiny" words (cf. *de Plat.* 1.12) and Lucius' disquisition on the unpleasant disposition of divine providence (e.g., *Met.* 9.1 fin.) are surprisingly absent from Benson's curiously (ingeniously, humorously?) titled essay. More *curiositas* about Apuleius' sense of humor would help here. Does *voluptas* infusing fables, approved by Middle Platonists, inflect and undermine Apuleius' dark humor and his message—assuming he has one?

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