

Geoffrey C. Benson: *Apuleius' Invisible Ass. Encounters with the Unseen in the Metamorphoses*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2019. XI, 299 p. £ 78.99/\$ 105.00. ISBN: 978-1-108-47555-6.

The central question of most scholarly studies of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* is how to interpret the end of the novel: as a sincere description of religious experience, as a satire of religious credulity, or, in an argument popularized by Jack Winkler in his 1985 monograph "Auctor & Actor. A Narratological Reading of Apuleius' *Golden Ass*",¹ as aporetic in that it offers both serious and satirical possibilities without giving the reader guidance as to which to choose. While satirical and comic readings gained force in the 2000s especially through the work of Stephen Harrison,² the later 2000s and 2010s saw a rise in popularity of seriocomic interpretations, particularly in the work of Luca Graverini and Stefan Tilg,³ as well as a return to more serious religious and philosophical approaches to the novel.⁴ Geoffrey Benson's wide-ranging and excellently researched "Apuleius' Invisible Ass", a revision of his 2013 University of Chicago dissertation, stands at the cusp of a new direction in Apuleian studies. While Benson begins by aligning himself with Winkler's aporetic reading of the novel, he ends with the suggestion

- 1 J. Winkler: *Auctor & Actor. A Narratological Reading of Apuleius' Golden Ass*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 1985.
- 2 S. J. Harrison: *Apuleius. A Latin Sophist*. Oxford 2000. See also A. Kirichenko: *A Comedy of Storytelling. Theatricality and Narrative in Apuleius' Golden Ass*. Heidelberg 2010 (Bibliothek der klassischen Altertumswissenschaften. 2. Reihe. N. F. 127); though Kirichenko also discusses possible philosophical approaches to the novel.
- 3 L. Graverini: *Literature and Identity in The Golden Ass of Apuleius*. Translated by B. J. Lee. Columbus, OH 2012 (previously published as: *Le Metamorfosi di Apuleio. Letteratura e identità*. Pisa 2007 [Arti spazi scritture 5]); S. Tilg: *Apuleius' Metamorphoses. A Study in Roman Fiction*. Oxford 2014.
- 4 Sparked especially by the publications of: W. H. Keulen/U. Egelhaaf-Gaiser (eds.): *Aspects of Apuleius' Golden Ass*. Vol. III: *The Isis Book. A Collection of Original Papers*. Leiden/Boston 2012; *Apuleius Madaurensis: Metamorphoses*. Book XI: *The Isis Book. Text, Introduction and Commentary* by W. H. Keulen, S. Tilg, L. Nicolini, L. Graverini, S. J. Harrison, S. Panayotakis and D. van Mal-Maeder. Essays by F. Drews, W. S. Smith and U. Egelhaaf-Gaiser. Leiden/Boston 2015 (Groningen Commentaries on Apuleius). See also the earlier publication of U. Egelhaaf-Gaiser: *Kulträume im römischen Alltag. Das Isisbuch des Apuleius und der Ort von Religion im kaiserzeitlichen Rom*. Stuttgart 2000 (Potsdamer Altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge 2).

that this *aporia* may be philosophical as well as literary, with the goal of providing diverting literary entertainment that may ultimately guide the reader toward a transcendent experience. This ‘therapeutic’ or ‘educational’ approach to the *Metamorphoses* has recently gained traction through the work of Benson, Richard Fletcher, and Jeffrey Ulrich,⁵ and is to my mind an especially effective method for integrating the complex literary, philosophical, religious, and social contexts within which Apuleius lived and wrote.

“Apuleius’ Invisible Ass” is the first in-depth study of invisibility, the unseen, and ways of envisaging the unseen in Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*. Benson’s introduction (“Uncovering the Unseen in Apuleius”, pp. 1–27) provides a thorough overview of ancient and modern concepts of invisibility, drawing on sources as diverse as the *Papyri Graecae Magicae* (PGM), Homer, modern fantasy novels, and science and technology. It outlines different types of invisibility, including ‘perceptual’ (disappearing, becoming transparent, or being camouflaged), ‘social’ (of marginalized individuals and populations), ‘narratological,’ and as achieved through mechanisms such as metamorphosis or contact with the divine. This rich range of approaches to the unseen allows Benson to connect Apuleius’ literary program in the *Metamorphoses* with his works on Platonic philosophy as well as his wider social and cultural environs. In the chapters that follow, Benson works his way through the *Metamorphoses* roughly chronologically, examining invisibility and attempts to envisage the unseen in the prologue (Chapter 1), the frame narrative, especially Lucius’ transformation into an ass (Chapter 2), the *Tale of Cupid and Psyche* (Chapter 3), episodes of physical mutilation and transformation, especially in the latter books of the novel (Chapter 4), and Book 11 (Chapter 5). A concluding chapter considers the change in tone from Books 1–10 to Book 11 and what this might mean for the novel’s reader. While the links between chapters and subsections of chapters are sometimes left to the interpretation of the reader or delayed to the concluding chapter, there is much to be gained from Benson’s thought-provoking discussions of the invisible and unseen throughout this book.

5 R. Fletcher: *Apuleius’ Platonism. The Impersonation of Philosophy*. Cambridge 2014 (Cambridge Classical Studies); J. P. Ulrich: *Choose Your Own Adventure. An εἰκὼν of Socrates in the Prologue of Apuleius’ Metamorphoses*. In: *AJPh* 138, 2017, pp. 707–738; J. P. Ulrich: *Hermeneutic Recollections. Apuleius’ Use of Platonic Myth in the Metamorphoses*. In: *CPh* 115, 2020, pp. 677–704.

In Chapter 1 (pp. 28–61), “Apuleius’ Daemonic Voice,” Benson addresses the long-debated question of the identity of the prologue narrator, arguing that it should be understood, in Mladen Dolar’s terms,⁶ as an “acousmatic” or “disembodied voice” that cannot be seen or identified (pp. 28–29). Drawing on Apuleius’ Middle Platonism, he suggests that it might be viewed as a *daemon*, though it has both daemonic and non-daemonic qualities. The effects of opening a novel with an acousmatic voice are both literary and philosophical. On the one hand, a *daemon* acts as an intermediary in ways similar to a translator, as Apuleius emphasizes in Socr. 133 and 155; the prologue speaker thus draws attention to the novel’s status as a translation while obscuring the presence of its author/translator. On the other hand, an acousmatic voice inspires “an unusual mix of wonder, terror, and confusion” (p. 57) that disorients its audience and prompts the reader’s curiosity. Though Benson does not mention this until the conclusion, this idea of the reader’s involvement and disorientation ties into his ultimate interpretation of the novel as esoteric and transcendent.

Chapter 2 (pp. 62–97), “Invisible Man: Lucius, Gyges, and the Ethics of the *Metamorphoses*,” argues that when Lucius becomes an ass, he becomes invisible in the “phenomenological” or “perceptual” (pp. 68–71) as well as the “social” senses (pp. 78–85). Although he is physically visible, he is functionally ‘in’visible as a donkey, treated as and equated to a slave. To prove that Lucius’ asinine state should be considered a type of invisibility, Benson discusses a selection of spells in the PGM that promise to make their practitioners invisible by transforming them into animals. He then examines the ancient ethical dimensions of invisibility by comparing Lucius’ experiences as an ass with those of the ancestor of Gyges in Plato’s *Republic* (359d–360b) who used an invisibility-granting ring to wicked ends. Benson argues, however, that unlike the ancestor of Gyges, Lucius behaves badly both before and after he is rendered ‘invisible’ through metamorphosis. Likewise, his invisibility allows him to observe how badly others from all levels of Roman society behave in private, creating a “twisted and dark” vision of the world (p. 88). The chapter ends with a discussion of the genre of the *Metamorphoses*, suggesting that while it is certainly entertaining, these ethical considerations demonstrate that it is also intended to instruct, much in the manner of a Platonic dialogue.

6 M. Dolar: *A Voice and Nothing More*. Cambridge, MA/London 2006 (Short Circuits).

Chapter 3 (pp. 98–148), “Invisibility and the Structure of Reality in *Cupid and Psyche*,” is the second longest and one of the most complex chapters in the volume. Understandably so, for it examines the invisible and unseen in the *Tale of Cupid and Psyche*, which features the invisible wind god Zephyr, servants who are nothing but voices, and a mysterious husband who forbids his wife to look upon his face. While the tale examines topics such as the nature of reality that would have been of interest to a Platonic philosopher, Benson argues that there are “significant gaps” (p. 99) between *Cupid and Psyche* and Apuleius’ Platonism in his other works; in this respect, he follows Richard Fletcher’s model in his 2014 book “Apuleius’ Platonism. The Impersonation of Philosophy.”⁷ The effect of these gaps is to raise philosophical questions without answering them, pointing to Benson’s interpretation of this tale and the novel as aporetic (pp. 147–148). The main gap Benson focuses on is a question of vision: “how can humans envisage and represent what they cannot normally see?” (p. 103). Psyche attempts to envisage the invisible and divine in the wrong ways, through imagination (*phantasia*) and physical vision. While *Cupid and Psyche* never demonstrates the ‘right’ way to envisage the unseen, Apuleius’ other works, especially *On the God of Socrates* and *On Plato and His Doctrine*, demonstrate that one should use Platonic *theoria*, a “rational mental process” (p. 116) of drawing analogies between the material/sensible and divine/intelligible layers of reality. By leaving *Cupid and Psyche* open to interpretation, the text presents itself as esoteric and encourages the reader to perform their own philosophical *theoria* to reveal its hidden meanings. After establishing the presence of these concepts in the *Tale of Cupid and Psyche*, Benson explores in brief how these may relate to the novel as a whole, though he defers his conclusions to Chapter 5 on Book 11.

Chapter 4 (pp. 149–183), “Scattered Bodies and Gleaming Limbs: The Symbolism and Metaphysics of Fragmented Bodies in the *Metamorphoses*,” counters a theoretical counterargument that invisibility cannot be a central motif in a novel that depicts so many examples of physical bodies that are fragmented, dismembered, mutilated, eaten, and transformed. Benson begins with the literary symbolism of bodily fragmentation: the novel itself has metamorphosed as a translation from Greek to Latin, its episodic nature makes it seem ‘dismembered,’ and Lucius’ transformations in Book 11

7 See note 5.

are mirrored by a transformation in the novel's tone and focus, raising questions about "the continuity of identity after transformation" (p. 167). These literary conflicts between "appearance and reality, between outer form and inner substance" (p. 167) may be linked with the novel's interest in Platonic metaphysics, particularly the distinction between "changing, invisible, intelligible reality" versus "our sensible, fluctuating, material world" (p. 173). There follow a number of fascinating but dense and tangential discussions of Platonic interpretations of myths of dismemberment such as those of Osiris and Dionysus, bodies as "unreliable signifiers" (p. 174), the unreliability of human sense perception, and some possible metaphysical meanings of Lucius' religious fasting in Book 11. These seem to be connected by a common theme of the deceptiveness of the physical world in the novel, which Benson argues may indicate that the text itself should also potentially be taken as deceptive: it is both ripe for allegorical interpretation and repeatedly demonstrates that the pursuit of hidden meanings is fraught with danger. While Benson again defers his conclusions about these ideas and the novel's deeper meaning for the next two chapters, Chapters 3 and 4 clearly establish how the *Metamorphoses* problematizes vision and presents multiple layers of reality in a Platonic fashion.

Chapter 5 (pp. 184–238), "Apprehending the Egyptian Gods: Focalization and Mysticism in Book 11," at last tackles the problem of the novel's interpretation and advances Benson's Winklerian but more philosophically informed argument for an aporetic ending. This aporia is produced through a change in vision: Benson draws on Gérard Genette's concept of focalization to argue that we can trace a change in Book 11 from "internal focalization," "narrative where readers can visualize what Lucius the experiencing character sees," to "camera-eye narrative" or "external focalization," where "the narrator does not let readers perceive what the experiencing character sees" (p. 186).⁸ This change in focalization distances Lucius from the reader and creates uncertainty as to whether or not Lucius has really had the subjective religious experiences he describes. In addition to Winkler's model of literary aporia, Benson briefly suggests a philosophical model – the Platonic dialogues, in which Socrates' method is to raise questions without answering them – but leaves the implications of this suggestion for the next and final chapter.

8 G. Genette: *Narrative Discourse. An Essay in Method*. Translated by J. E. Lewin. Foreword by J. Culler. Ithaca, NY 1980.

The concluding chapter (pp. 239–264), “The Power of the *Metamorphoses*,” provides the fullest explanation of Benson’s literary-philosophical aporetic model and its intended effects on the reader. He proposes that reading and interpreting this esoteric novel that exhibits such a remarkable change in tone, content, and focalization from Books 1–10 to Book 11 “may have an effect similar to that of initiation, which disorients but ultimately puts [one] in touch with the divine” (p. 240) and suggests that “admiring the beauty of the novel and interpreting it provide a pathway to a higher, immaterial reality” (p. 239). Although Plato cautioned against the diverting pleasures of fiction, Middle Platonists such as Apuleius were more open to the idea that fictional stories could be beneficial, therapeutic, and educational, as I also discuss in my book.⁹ As Benson argues, contemplating the literary pleasures of the *Metamorphoses* and exploring its methods of envisioning the invisible may help lead the reader toward a higher reality, “provid[ing] a pathway to something transcendent and divine” (p. 255). He ends on a darker note, suggesting that both the *Metamorphoses* and the Greek *Onos* focus on human limitations and “present readers with terrifying worlds from which some may hope to escape” (p. 264).

“Apuleius’ Invisible Ass” is a welcome and timely addition to Apuleian studies. Benson is to be commended for drawing attention to invisibility, an often-neglected dimension of a novel known for its vivid imagery and physicality, as well as for his use of a wide range of approaches and scholarship including literary theory from both within and beyond the field of Classics, philosophy, the PGM, scientific and technological concepts of the unseen, and contemporary art. While this volume is admirably well-researched, Benson sometimes shies away from making bold claims and more clearly differentiating his work from that of previous scholars. This is especially apparent in his treatment of Winkler, with whom he aligns himself closely but from whom he differs in key ways: Benson’s argument for transcendence-producing aporia is quite distinct from Winkler’s literary aporia and far more convincing given Apuleius’ dedication to Platonic philosophy. While this book, much like Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*, is often esoteric, dense, and digressive and sometimes leaves the reader in a state of aporia, the stimulating ways in which Benson brings together literary, philosophical, artistic, cognitive, and comparative approaches to the invisible

9 E. Adkins: Discourse, Knowledge, and Power in Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*. Ann Arbor, MI 2022.

and unseen produce a work that is itself a diverting pleasure to read and whose contemplation is sure to lead the reader, if not to philosophical transcendence, then at least to a higher understanding of Apuleius' novel.

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