

An Old Wife's Tale*

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The mixture of serious and comic elements is a major feature that the novel, as Mikhail Bakhtin has long since shown,¹ shares with other literary genres, like satire. The connections between the *Metamorphoses* and satire are a rather new frontier of Apuleian scholarship; from this point of view this paper owes much to one of Maaïke Zimmerman's latest contribution to our understanding of Apuleius' novel. Specifically, my contribution springs from a reflection on her discussion of the 'satirical' qualities of the *Metamorphoses*.² As is well known, as author and editor of a Groningen Commentary and of a collection of essays devoted to the central tale of the novel, she has also offered an outstanding contribution to the interpretation of *Cupid and Psyche*.³ This tale, it could be said, poses the same problem as the novel as a whole: How should we read it? Is it simply a sophisticated literary entertainment or does it contain some sort of philosophical or religious lesson that Lucius and/or the reader should be able to recognize?

* This contribution is a revised version of a chapter from Graverini 2006, which will be published in Italian later this year. I am happy to anticipate this part in this collection in honour of Maaïke Zimmerman.

¹ On Bakhtin's views on the ancient novel, see now the collection of essays edited by Branham 2005.

² Zimmerman 2006. Other recent contributions on the connections of the *Metamorphoses* with Roman Satire are e.g. Plaza 2003 and Keulen 2004 (esp. 262–264; 269–270); see also the first section of Ken Dowden's article in this volume on the dialogic form of Apuleius' prologue. This kind of research is of course much more developed with regard to Petronius' *Satyrica*, on which see now Rimell 2005. See also Wytse Keulen's chapter on the Roman novel in Graverini–Keulen–Barchiesi 2006.

³ Zimmerman et al. 2004; Zimmerman et al. (edd.) 1998; van Mal-Maeder–Zimmerman 1998.

My first answer is very straightforward: we should read this tale and this novel however we wish. This stance is substantially a vulgarization of John Winkler's assessment of the *Metamorphoses* as a 'non-authorized text' that has no predefined interpretative key built into itself.⁴ Winkler defends this view with a complex and original reading based on a narratological and literary interpretation of the novel. In my view, however, a vulgarization of his sophisticated assessment like the one I offer here is not altogether unwarranted. The interpretation of any text is ultimately both a responsibility and a right of the reader; this is particularly true of narrative texts, which are usually much less straightforward than, for example, historical or philosophical treatises in trying to impose a particular way of reading on the reader. Of course we all like to think that we can somehow convince other readers of the correctness of our own reading of a text, and thus our interpretations (even the aporetic ones, like Winkler's) are all grounded on particular features of the text itself, and/or on broader literary and cultural contexts related to it. Here, my own way of extracting meaning (or, better, of exploring the possible existence of a meaning) will not be to analyse directly those passages that allow a religious/philosophical interpretation. Neither will I emphasize other passages that could suggest the author/narrator's detachment from, or even critical view of, religious and/or philosophical systems.⁵ Rather, I will linger on the narrative boundaries of the tale of *Cupid and Psyche*, hoping that those boundaries can offer a favourable vantage point from which to consider the tale (and the novel) as a whole, and to make at least a few inferences about its nature. Ambiguity, we will see, will not be completely ruled out; but the resulting picture will prove to be remarkably different from what Winkler and others have suggested.

⁴ Winkler 1985. This is his conclusion: '...if I am right in my contention that the *Golden Ass* deliberately lacks key elements of authorization and that it resembles a set of games for readers to play, provoking them to decide... then the last word belongs neither to Apuleius nor to me but to you.' (p. 321).

⁵ For a survey of the religious and philosophic ideas reverberating in *Cupid and Psyche* see especially Dowden 1998, with further bibliography, and his paper in this volume. After Winkler 1985, the 'seriousness' of the *Metamorphoses* as a whole has been more directly challenged in various studies by Danielle van Mal-Maeder and Stephen Harrison: cf. e.g. van Mal-Maeder 1997 and 2001 (esp. pp. 14–16 and 409–411); Harrison 1996, 510–516; 2000, 235–259; 2000–2001. See Graverini 2006 for a discussion on these points.

1 *Aniles fabulae*: literary and philosophical polemics

An old woman tells the tale of *Cupid and Psyche* to the young and desperate Charite; at 4,27,8 she introduces it with the words *Sed ego te narrationibus lepidis anilibusque fabulis protinus avocabo* ('But right now I shall divert you with a pretty story and an old wife's tale').⁶ Here, *anilis fabula* could be understood as a simple declaration of literal truth, since *Cupid and Psyche* is actually a story told by an old woman. However, we must not forget that expressions like *anilis fabula* have a quite remarkable literary history as generic designations, a history that could induce us to consider these words as a rather derogatory definition of the central tale of the novel. This history was thoroughly examined years ago by Matteo Massaro⁷ in an extremely interesting paper that – perhaps because of its focus on Horace – has almost always escaped Apuleian scholarship. I will now discuss just a few of the passages he has carefully collected, adding a few others and finally shifting the focus from Horace and satire to narrative literature and, more specifically, to Apuleius. It will be, I think, a useful exercise in helping us to understand Apuleian self-irony, and most of all to see how he constructs his novel as a compromise between, or better a blend of, seriousness and frivolity.

The best starting point is offered by two texts that eluded Massaro's attentive eye, but are well-known to Apuleianists. The first is a passage from a letter addressed to the Senate by Septimius Severus, quoted in the *Historia Augusta* (*Clod. Alb.* 12,12):

*maior fuit dolor, quod illum [i.e. Clodium Albinum] pro litterato laudandum plerique duxistis, cum ille **neniis** quibusdam **anilibus** occupatus inter Milesias Punicas Apulei sui et ludicra litteraria consenesceret.*

It is even a greater source of chagrin, that some of you thought he should be praised for his knowledge of letters, when in fact he is busied with old wives' songs, and grows senile amid the Milesian stories from Carthage that his friend Apuleius wrote and such other learned nonsense.⁸

⁶ Here and elsewhere, translations from Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* are by Hanson 1989.

⁷ Massaro 1977. See his n. 1 at p. 205 for an extensive survey of the preceding literature.

⁸ Trans. Magie 1921.

A similarly prejudiced view of most kinds of fiction is expressed by Macrobius in his commentary on Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis* (1,2,8):

Fabulae, quarum nomen indicat falsi professionem, aut tantum conciliandae auribus voluptatis aut adhortationis quoque in bonam frugem gratia repertae sunt. Auditum mulcent vel comoediae, quales Menander eiusve imitatores agendas dederunt, vel argumenta fictis casibus amatorum referta, quibus vel multum se Arbiter exercuit vel Apuleium non numquam lusisse miramur. Hoc totum fabularum genus quod solas aurium delicias profitetur e sacrario suo in nutricum cunas sapientiae tractatus eliminat:

Fables – this very name acknowledges their falsity – serve either merely to gratify the ear or to encourage good works. Our ears are charmed by the comedies of Menander and his imitators, or by the narratives full of imaginary vicissitudes of lovers in which Petronius Arbiter so freely indulged and with which Apuleius, astonishingly, often amused himself. A philosophical treatise expels this whole category of fables that promises only to gratify the ear from its shrine and relegates it to nurses' cradles.

The *Historia Augusta* and Macrobius passages⁹ are two late examples of an age-old literary tradition that uses (or alludes to) the definition of 'old wives' tales'¹⁰ as a weapon in literary polemic: it identifies a lower and contemptible kind of narrative, sheer fiction that has nothing to teach to superior minds in search of superior truths.

To our knowledge, the first author who frequently adopted expressions like *anilis fabula*, granting them literary dignity, was Plato¹¹ – who of course was also indisputably a model for our *philosophus Platonicus*. In the Athenian philosopher's works, an old wife's tale is often a false myth, a story that

⁹ On which see e.g. Harrison 2002, 144 f.; Graverini 2005, 193.

¹⁰ Here, and in the rest of this paper, I will be assuming that there is no difference between old women, nurses and midwives, at least as regards their narrative skills. Their tales, as the various passages quoted in the text show, are almost always dismissively considered as children's talk.

¹¹ Massaro 1977, 106–108 (see p. 106, n. 1, for the possibility that the poetess Corinna wrote some books of Γεροῖα = *aniles fabulae*). He quotes *Theaetetus* 176b, *Lysis* 205d, *Republic* 1,350e, *Gorgias* 527a and *Hippias maior* 285e–286a, to which add *Laws* 10,887c–e, *Republic* 2,377a and *Timaeus* 26b–c.

has no rational ground and that should have no place in the philosopher's utopia. At *Republic* 2,377a – 378d Socrates explains that all the myths that mothers, nurses, and elderly people tell children should be carefully evaluated and selected, to rule out all those (the greatest part) that could have deleterious effects on their education. At *Theaetetus* 176b Socrates has nothing good to say about pursuing virtue merely in order to enjoy a good reputation: to him, this is nothing more than a γράων ὕθλος. There are, however, also some examples of at least partially good and useful old wives' stories in Plato. At *Laws* 10,887c–e the Athenian speaks very harshly against those who do not believe in the existence of the gods, in spite of all the myths that they have heard from their mothers and almost took in along with the milk of their nurses; and at *Timaeus* 26b–c Critias refers to an instructive tale he has heard from his old father. Indeed, Plato's view of myths and tales fluctuates, and for good reasons: he sees that the stories narrated by poets can confuse and mislead those who hear them, but he is also aware of a good story's potential to transmit useful ideas. Socrates himself explicitly points out this ambivalence at the end of the *Gorgias*. He tells Callicles a μάλα καλὸς λόγος, a 'very beautiful story', about the judgement that awaits the soul after a man's death (523a–526d); he is afraid that Callicles might consider this tale merely a μῦθος... γράός, an 'old wife's tale' (527a), and therefore he insists that the story is both true and useful. He concludes:

Let us therefore take as our guide the doctrine now disclosed, which indicates to us that this way of life is best – to live and die in the practice alike of justice and of all other virtue. This then let us follow, and to this invite every one else; not that to which you trust yourself and invite me, for it is nothing worth, Callicles (527e).¹²

So, at the end of the *Gorgias*, a tale that is truthful and is (or should be) of the greatest importance for its audience is concealed as a μῦθος... γράός: it is up to the reader to grasp its true meaning, and not only to appreciate (or despise) it for its 'mythical' qualities.

Nevertheless, this same text confirms for us that an old wife's tale is, strictly speaking, useless; and when Plato points out some positive value of myths, as in the above mentioned passages from the *Laws* and the *Timaeus*, he normally avoids expressions like μῦθος γράός and adopts wider turns of

¹² Trans. Lamb 1925.

phrases like ‘the tales which they have heard as babes and sucklings from their mothers and nurses’ (*Laws* 10,887d), as if to avoid the contempt that was probably normally connected to such definitions.

This contempt has a long literary history after Plato. Closer to Apuleius’ times we find it, for example, in Philostratus’ *Vita Apollonii* 5,14,1, where Menippus dismissively defines the Aesopic tales as ‘frogs,... donkeys, and nonsense for old women and children to chew on’.¹³ Nurses could clearly have also a more sophisticated repertoire, since at *Eikones* 1,15 Philostratus considers the possibility that his reader could know from his nurses’ tales the story of Ariadne abandoned by Theseus on the shore of Naxos. But, whether sophisticated or not, nurses’ tales are always false, or at least need careful consideration before being believed; their main quality is well pointed out by the Phoenician at *Heroikos* 7,10:

When I was still a child I believed such things, and my nurse cleverly amused me with these tales, singing and even weeping over some of them.¹⁴

Of course, the musicality and the seductive charm that make such tales agreeable and believable to children are off-putting to many adults, especially when serious education is in question. An essential step on the path toward moral and intellectual improvement, it seems, was jettisoning child-like narrative illusions – at least the worst of them.

Quintilian, for example, uses ‘old wives’ tales’ referring to the idle pedantry of excessive and superfluous commentary on the poets. *Enarratio historiarum* (‘the explanation of stories’)¹⁵ is, for him, a part of the *grammaticus*’ job. However, a *grammaticus* (‘teacher of literature’) should not treat minute details or obscure authors: whoever concerns himself with these

¹³ Trans. Jones 2005. Apollonius does not agree with Menippus: see *infra*, section 3.

¹⁴ Trans. Berenson Maclean–Bradshaw Aitken 2001.

¹⁵ I prefer to change Russell’s 2001 translation of *historiae* as ‘historical allusion’, which seems to me too limited (even though he refers to his note at 1,4,4 where it is pointed out that ‘*historiae* covers historical, geographical, mythological, or even scientific information’). Colson 1924, 114 *ad loc.* explains that ‘Q. of course uses the word in its wider sense. As the grammatical school dealt exclusively or almost exclusively with poetry, the “mythical” element naturally preponderated’.

things, he says, could just as well devote himself to *aniles fabulae*.¹⁶ In this passage, the difference between *historiae* and *fabulae* is not the same as between historiography and fiction.¹⁷ Historiography, according to *inst.* 2,4,2, is the exclusive competence of the *rhetor* and not of the *grammaticus*, who should treat only poetic *fabulae*. In his treatment of the *grammaticus*' task, Quintilian is therefore tracing a boundary that is completely inside the realm of fiction ('*fabulae*'): what should remain outside the classroom are only those *fabulae* that are trivial, ludicrous or morally repugnant, and that are not part of the normally agreed-upon *corpus* of myths treated by renowned authors.¹⁸ Cicero, in *De natura deorum* 3,12, is not as much interested in tracing boundaries, but it is clear that *aniles fabellas* are for him those myths that convey a too 'human' and base image of the gods.¹⁹

Seneca²⁰ is more harsh and drastic – and, for our purposes, more interesting. In the *De beneficiis* the philosopher maintains that, for the subject he has chosen, it would be pointless to discuss the three Graces and their iconography:²¹ these topics are typically adopted by Chrysippus and more generally by the Greeks (1,3,8), but they are detrimental to expository clarity. Seneca thinks it is better to come directly to the point:

¹⁶ Cf. Quint. *inst.* 1,8,19 *nam qui omnis etiam indignas lectione scidas excutit, anilibus quoque fabulis accommodare operam potest* ('for anyone who goes carefully through every page, whether worth reading or not, may just as well deploy his energy on old wives' tales', trans. Russell 2001).

¹⁷ Pace Massaro 1977, 122, who catalogues this passage by Quintilian under the heading of 'polemica storiografica'.

¹⁸ 1,8,21 *Quod evenit praecipue in fabulosis usque ad deridicula quaedam, quaedam etiam pudenda, unde improbissimo cuique pleraque fingendi licentia est, adeo ut de libris totis et auctoribus, ut succurrit, mentiantur tuto, quia inveniri qui numquam fuere non possunt* ('This happens especially in mythology, and sometimes reaches ludicrous or even scandalous extremes, so that the most unscrupulous writer has plenty of scope for invention, and can even lie in any way that occurs to him about whole books or authorities – all quite safely, because those which never existed cannot be found. '; trans. Russell 2001).

¹⁹ Other relevant passages by Cicero are listed by Massaro 1977, 108–109.

²⁰ Cf. Massaro 1977, 114.

²¹ But this is only a *praeteritio*, and Seneca actually offers a short essay in allegoresis: 'Their faces are cheerful, as are ordinarily the faces of those who bestow or receive benefits. They are young because the memory of benefits ought not to grow old. They are maidens because benefits are pure and undefiled and holy in the eyes of all; and it is fitting that there should be nothing to bind or restrict them, and so the maidens wear flowing robes, and these, too are transparent because benefits desire to be seen' (1,3,5; trans. Basore 1935). Even for Seneca, it seems, old wives' tales are not totally meaningless.

As for those absurdities, let them be left to the poets, whose purpose it is to charm the ear and to weave a pleasing tale (*ures oblectare... et dulcem fabulam nectere*). But those who wish to heal the human soul, to maintain faith in the dealings of men, and to engrave upon their minds the memory of services – let these speak with earnestness and plead with all their power; unless, perchance, you think that by light talk and fables and old wives' reasonings (*levi ac fabuloso sermone et anilibus argumentis*) it is possible to prevent a most disastrous thing – the abolishment of benefits (Sen. *Ben.* 1,4,5–6).²²

Here we are well beyond Plato's stern caution: what is at stake in this passage is the very notion that a myth or a story could possibly be useful in support of moral and philosophical reasoning. All the *fabulae* are relegated to the realm of poetry, of what is *dulce* and not *utile*, and of what is merely devoted to *ures oblectare*: all of this inevitably reminds us of Apuleius' prologue and its promise to *ures permulcere*.²³ All fiction is 'useless' literature, just entertainment lacking any moral or philosophical value; sweetness and an ear-soothing musicality (cf. also the Phoenician's words in Philostratus' *Heroikos*, quoted above) are its trademark.

2. Apuleius' prologues and the satiric tradition

If we read Apuleius' prologues in the *Met.* with the eyes of a Seneca – both the prologue to the novel as a whole, voiced by the *ego*, and the prologue to *Cupid and Psyche*, voiced by the sub-narrator, the *anus*²⁴ –, we are forced to consider whether these narrators are consciously adopting the discredited *persona* of a brilliant entertainer who addresses his public merely to amuse and divert it without any 'higher' purpose. However, I think that we have not yet obtained the final answer to the fundamental question, outlined in the first two paragraphs of this paper, about the 'seriousness' of the *Metamorphoses* and its central tale. Not all ancient authors shared Seneca's harsh judgement about the complete uselessness of *mythoi* and *aniles fabulae*. Even Plato, as we have seen, advised the rulers of his utopian city to care-

²² Trans. Basore 1935.

²³ On this metaphor and the ear-soothing rhetoric it implies see Keulen 2003, 8–19 and *ad loc.*; Graverini 2005 and 2006.

²⁴ See below, section 4, on the parallelism between the two passages.

fully select them and to purge them of anything that could be dangerous to the good health of the State and of its citizens, but he did not recommend their complete elimination; and, in his dialogues, Socrates frequently employs myths in his philosophical discussions.

As a matter of fact, sometimes expressions like *anilis fabula* are not polemical; this is especially true when the author applies this definition to *his own* work (either directly or, as it is often the case in narrative texts, through the voice of a fictional character), with fairly evident self-irony. Socrates, as we have seen, *almost* adopts such a self-ironic pose at the end of the *Gorgias*; Horace's *Satire* 2,6 takes a step further. Here are the verses that introduce the well-known Aesopic story of the two mice:

Amid this talk my neighbour Cervius prattles away telling old wives' tales that are to the point (*garrit anilis / ex re fabellas*). For if anyone praises Arellius' wealth, unaware of the troubles it brings, he begins like this...²⁵

The story is told during a country banquet where the food is simple but the table-talk is worthy of the platonic *Symposium* ('we discuss what has more relevance to us and not to know is an evil': 72 f.),²⁶ and it serves as a narrative counterpart to a discussion about happiness, friendship, and the nature of the Good (73–76). Of course it contains a moral teaching – do not all Aesopic fables have a moral? – but we have to take into account the destabilisation provoked both by an introduction that uses a deprecatory terminology (*garrit; anilis... fabella*) and more generally by some peculiarities of the

²⁵ *Satires* 2,6,77–79; trans. Muecke 1993. This passage is the main focus of Massaro 1977: he links Horace's verses especially with Plato's usage of self-ironic expressions like *γραιὼν μῦθος* in the *Gorgias*, and states that 'l'atteggiamento in cui lo spirito socratico sembra più fedelmente rivivere in Orazio molto più che in Cicerone è quel gusto indefinibile dell'ironia pensosa che li conduce entrambi a presentare formalmente e sostanzialmente la loro verità più sentita come una *anilis fabella*' (p. 110). At p. 112 he points out a similar attitude in Apuleius.

²⁶ Bond 1985, 85 even sees this fable as the equivalent of a Platonic myth. On the connection between Horace's country dinner and Plato's *Symposium* see e.g. Muecke 1993, 205 *ad* 2,6,67 ff. and *passim*. According to West 1974, 74, the Town Mouse's dislike for the country is similar to the feelings Socrates expresses at *Phaedrus* 230d; and 'the Town Mouse is a philosopher, not however a Myo-Platonist, but a fashionable Pseudo-Epicurean'. More generally, on the relationship between Greek philosophy and Roman satire, see Mayer 2005.

satiric genre itself. As a result, the reader feels compelled to draw a moral teaching from this *fabula*, but his task turns out to be more difficult than it appears at first blush. It is also difficult to decide to what extent Horace himself supports this teaching, and to whom it is addressed. These interpretative pitfalls are well described by Susanna Morton Braund:

It seems as if the moral of the fable – that a simple, safe and independent life is preferable to a luxurious and dangerous life of dependency – is designed to stand as the moral for the satire as a whole. But, we might ask, who is actually responsible for the telling of this fable – and, by extension, endorsing its moral? Horace the author? ‘Horace’ the character within the poem? The neighbour Cervius? Or even Aesop? And which of the audiences is the target of the fable? The original group of neighbours, including ‘Horace’, at the dinner-party in the country? The implied audience in the poem as a whole, that is those inside Maecenas’ coterie and those outside who envy those inside? Or the original Roman audience when Horace the poet first produced this poem? Or any audience since then? Us? This small example highlights the wide range of potential relationships between author and audience in the genre of satire. Satire is always a tricky and slippery type of discourse to interpret. The author tends to play games with us by creating a mask or voice, a satirist who is persuasively and seductively authoritative, and then by undermining that authority. This he does by writing into the mask some equivocation, inconsistency or ambivalence which creates uncertainty for us about the relationship between author and mask, between poet and *persona*.²⁷

Both Platonic dialogue and satire are dialogic-narrative literary genres in which the author does not (necessarily) speak directly to his audience, but he can let his characters do that in his stead – in fact, he can even be part of the audience, as is the case in Horace’s *Satire* 2,6. Dialogue and narrative are, in so many ancient authors, a privileged means for conveying moral and philosophical ideas, but they are also a hindrance to those readers who, like modern scholars, try to reconstruct with some degree of accuracy the thought of an ancient author. Socrates narrates the final myth of the *Gorgias*, and the text offers no explicit hint about Plato’s attitude towards Socrates’ words. Of course we can make reasonable hypotheses, but ultimately the exact degree

²⁷ Braund 1996, 59.

of correspondence between Plato's thought and Socrates' words is a matter of speculation,²⁸ as well as the degree of historicity in Plato's portrait of Socrates. Dialogue and *mythos*, in short, are useful tools for transmitting moral and philosophical ideas in an agreeable form, but they are also an obstacle that prevents us from directly accessing Socrates' or Plato's thought, and from effectively distinguishing them. Something similar is afoot in Horace's *Satire* 2,6. The tale of the two mice indeed tells us something, namely that wealth has its drawbacks (cf. the *sollicitas opes* of l. 79: in Horace, the introductory verses in a way play the role of Aesop's ὁ μύθος δηλοῖ ὅτι, 'the story shows that', in a less intrusive and pedantic form); but if we want to gather more information or more definite teachings from this text, all we can do is to try to read between the lines, and to make some educated guesses. To what extent did Horace really yearn for a poor and rustic life? How many hardships must one suffer to be *tutus ab insidiis*?²⁹

My chief concern here is the deprecatory terminology adopted in the introductory verses. Despite all the hermeneutic uncertainty that surrounds this text, I think it is fairly clear that the irony conveyed by the words *garrit anilis... fabellas* is directed not against any moral teaching that the story may convey (however indirectly), but against its being merely a tale and table-talk: morally relevant, perhaps, but certainly not the highest possible exercise in literary or philosophical discourse. More exactly, what we have here is self-irony, since in these verses Horace himself is explicitly placing his own *Satire* at a literary level that is well below that of an inescapable model for any serious dinner conversation, Plato's *Symposium*. That he does so by adopting terminology that is probably rooted in the works of the same Plato also adds to the irony of the passage. This kind of self-irony seems to be

²⁸ The 'division of roles' between the author Plato and his character Socrates is exploited by David Sedley in his recent interpretation of the *Theaetetus*: 'The *Theaetetus* does indeed contain a Platonic message, but that message is not articulated by the speaker Socrates. Socrates fails to see the Platonic implications, and instead it is we, as seasoned readers of Plato, who are expected to recognize and exploit them' (Sedley 2004, 8).

²⁹ Oliensis 1998, for example, states that 'the "country mouse" costume does not quite suit the poet of the Sabine farm' (p. 50, with further bibliographical references at n. 38). *Satire* 2,2 – and, in broader terms, the satiric genre as a whole – pose a similar problem. Freudenburg 2001 points out that at 2,2,1, Horace promises to teach us *quae virtus et quanta... sit vivere parvo*, but it is the peasant Ofellus who is entrusted with this teaching: and 'the relationship of Horace to his invented (or really remembered?) Ofellus is every bit as problematic and inscrutable as that of Socrates to the Wise Diotima, or of Plato to Socrates' (p. 112).

particularly well suited to satire, since this literary genre often encourages the author to meditate upon himself, his own work and its features, to assert its merits but also to underscore its lower status as compared to 'higher' poetry.³⁰ It is not by chance, I think, that this self-irony concerns a tale. A tale can be, after all, a perfect tool for the satirist: it allows him to hint at serious ideas in an intermediate register and without pedantry,³¹ and as we have seen it also serves to keep a safe distance between the poet and his satiric *persona* (a useful feature especially for a satirist like Horace in his second Book). I would furthermore suggest that it is also a good way to obtain the blend of *utile* and *dulce* that Horace recommends at *Ars Poetica* 333 ff.,³² since such a blend, as we will see shortly, was often advertised as a quality of tales and fables. But first it is useful (and, I hope, also pleasant...) to take a long leap forward in time, to follow the history of *aniles fabulae* within the genre of Latin *Satura*.

Martianus Capella's *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*, while much later than Apuleius' novel, is nevertheless an ideal bridge from satire³³ to what mainly concerns us here, narrative. Martianus indeed is highly indebted, as regards both style and subject matter, to his renowned fellow-countryman Apuleius, and it is actually unclear, at least to me, whether the model for the passage we are going to read is Horace, Apuleius, or both of them. The *De nuptiis* ends with a dialogic *sphragis* that we can consider as a dramatisation of the uncertain relationship between the satiric poet, his work, and the *personae* that populate it: in these final verses 'Marziano si rivolge al figlio omonimo e scarica la responsabilità di questo lavoro farraginoso e scadente

³⁰ At *Satires* 1,4,34 ff., for example, Horace reports some critical statements made by those who do not like the poetic genre he practices (*quos genus hoc minime iuvat*, 24): in their words, his verses are something very similar to old wives' tales (*et quodcumque semel chartis illevertit, omnis / gestiet a furno redeuntis scire lacuque, / et pueros et anus*). He replies by confessing that he does not even consider himself a poet (*primum ego me illorum dederim quibus esse poetas / excerpam numero*).

³¹ The first poem in Horace's collection contains sketches of as much as four different tales: the fable of the ant (1,1,33 ff.), the anecdote of the Athenian (64 ff.), Tantalus' myth (68 f.), Ummidius' *fabula* (95 ff.).

³² A passage that is also concerned with fiction: cf. l. 338 *facta voluptatis causa sint proxima veris*. The correct mix of *utile* and *dulce* was of course the subject of a wider debate in ancient literary criticism; at *epist.* 1,16,14 f., describing the nice landscape of his country-place (*infirmo capiti fluit utilis, utilis alvo. / hae latebrae dulces...*), Horace even seems to make a joke of it.

³³ On the satiric and Menippean qualities of the *De nuptiis* see Cristante 1978, 685 and n. 14, with further references. See also Pabst 1994, 105–133; Kanaan 2000, 373–378.

su *Satura*, l'ispiratrice e autrice del racconto. A sua volta il genere letterario ribatte le accuse e le ritorce in tono sprezzante e scommatico contro Marziano'.³⁴ The first verse of this *sphragis* defines Martianus' work in the very same terms already adopted both by Horace and Apuleius: *habes anilem, Martiane, fabulam...* ('here you have, Martianus, an old wife's tale': 9,997,1). Here, the author himself again attaches the definition to a work that, though bizarre, can certainly not be considered void of any didactic aim nor resistant to allegorical interpretation. It should be noted that in this passage *anilem* is the text offered by James Willis³⁵ and based on a *varia lectio* in the codex E; D¹ and R¹ have *sanile*, C¹ *sinilem*, all the others *senilem*. I think that Lucio Cristante³⁶ is right in recommending *senilem*, which is both better attested and – given the very frequent occurrence of the *iunctura* 'anilis fabula', 'senilis fabula' being on the other hand virtually unheard of³⁷ – clearly a *lectio difficilior*. In other words, Martianus is humorously elaborating on a well-known topos, adapting to himself, an old man, a definition commonly used in literary and philosophical polemic. However, in my opinion, the debate about whether the adjective applies to *Satura* or Martianus (a subject discussed at some length by Cristante) has no effect on rejecting *anilis*: a tale can be *anilis* even though its narrator is not an *anus* like the old housekeeper in the brigands' lair. Neither Socrates nor Cervius were old women, of course,³⁸ and a similar example is offered by another late text that was probably influenced by both Apuleius and Martianus.

Fulgentius, 'Martiani simia' in Willis' words, defines his own *Mitologiae* as a *rugosa sulcis anilibus fabula* (*myth.* 1, p. 3,13 ff. Helm: 'a story furrowed with an old woman's wrinkles'); just like Martianus' *anilis fabella* it has been conceived at night by the light of a lamp (*nocturna praesule lucerna* in Fulgentius; *lucernis flamine* in Martianus).³⁹ Fulgentius places himself not far from the realm of *satura*: he says that his master, to whom the

³⁴ Cristante 1987, 19. On 'Martianus und Satura' see also Grebe 1999, 848–857.

³⁵ Willis 1983; cf. Willis 1975, 133.

³⁶ Cristante 1978, 689 f.

³⁷ Sometimes old men tell tales, as does Critias' father in Plato's *Timaeus* 26b–c (and indeed, except *Cupid and Psyche*, it seems that old wives' tales are *not* normally told by women: see below, section 4), but I know of no occurrences of *iuncturae* like *senilis fabula* or *πρεσβύτου μῦθος*.

³⁸ Even though, as is well known, in the *Theaetetus* Socrates repeatedly defines himself as an old midwife (149a ff. and *passim*).

³⁹ On Fulgentius' passage and its relationship with Martianus and Apuleius, see Pabst 1994, 137; Kanaan 2000, 384–387; Mattiacci 2003, 232–234.

work is dedicated, always appreciates his *cachinnantes... nenias lepore satyrico litas*, 'ridiculous lullabies peppered with satiric charm'. He also styles his work as different from that of a *poeta furens*, and puts it on a lower level: he is just an interpreter of dream-like and trivial stories, *onirocreta soporis nugas ariolans*.⁴⁰ His witty lullabies and old wives' stories, however, are meant to be taken seriously, and Fulgentius stresses this point with some literary and mythological examples: he is not curious like Psyche nor shameless like Sulpicia, he is not interested in Phaedra's turbid passions nor unsteady like Hero, who let her torch die out and allowed her beloved Leander to drown in the sea without its guidance. His model will rather be Cicero, the Platonic rhetor, and his philosophical use of myth in the *Somnium Scipionis* (1,3–5, p. 3,16–4,7 Helm). Fulgentius' perspective is rather different from Macrobius' in the passage I quoted at the beginning (*Somn.* 1,2,8), even though a serious interpretation of fictional tales is the focus of both writers. Macrobius' aim was to differentiate the *Somnium Scipionis* from those *fabulae* that are only intended to titillate the ears of their audience and offer no philosophical teaching, while Fulgentius instead implies that all, or at least most myths can be read so as to obtain philosophical instruction. Fulgentius condemns Psyche's curiosity and Phaedra's passions, but he will not refrain from telling their stories and extracting a meaning from them (*quid sibi illorum falsitas sentire voluerit*: 3,117, p. 69,3–4 Helm): so, while Macrobius rejects Apuleius' novel and all similar *fabulae*, confining them in *nutricum cunas*, Fulgentius can exploit a wider tradition of myths and tales and bend them to his philosophical purposes. His attitude is less stern than Macrobius', and he can even indulge in some self-irony about his own work, defined as a *rugosa sulcis anilibus fabula*.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Note that (*h*)*ariolor* means 'to speak by divine inspiration or with second sight, prophecy', but it can also be used (esp. in comedy) in facetious or pejorative sense (see *OLD* s.v.); the *ThLL* (VI 2534,7) offers a meaning of 'absurda loqui, nugari'.

⁴¹ Kenaan 2000, 384 ff. is right in emphasizing that, in his allegorical reading of *Cupid and Psyche*, Fulgentius banishes from his own text Apuleius' original, long, detailed and ingenious story and concentrates instead on a censored and paraphrased version that provides a skeleton which is convertible into allegory. Most of all, Fulgentius obliterates the narrative situation that provides the context for the tale in Apuleius, and 'completely disregards the story's female narrator and female audience' (387): in so doing, he eliminates its *anilis fabula* qualities, and somehow makes it similar to the *fabulae* that Macrobius too considered acceptable. Nevertheless, both in his prologue and in the discussion proper, Fulgentius is clearly less censorious than Macrobius in his selection of myths that allow a serious interpretation.

3 More tales: Phaedrus and Aesop

A certain disposition to cross the frontiers of pure and childish entertainment towards the realm of education and teaching was, after all, nearly a requirement of the narrative genre. Phaedrus is very well aware that he is working within a minor literary genre, but nevertheless he repeatedly points out that his stories contain useful moral precepts. See for example the verses with which he introduces a tale *de mustela et muribus*:

I seem to you to be fooling, and I do indeed wield the pen lightheartedly, so long as I have no very important theme. But take a careful look into these trifles (*neniae*): what a lot of practical instruction (*utilitas*) you will find in tiny affairs! They are not always just what they seem to be. Many people are deceived by the façade of a structure; it is the unusual mind that perceives what the artist took pains to tuck away in some inner nook.⁴²

Phaedrus' stories are, in the author's words, only a literary *lusus*, and nothing more than *neniae*, trivial tales⁴³ – a definition not unlike *anilis fabula* that, as we have seen, Septimius Severus attached to Apuleius' 'Milesian' production in his letter to the Senate. These *neniae*, however, if carefully interpreted, will offer their reader great *utilitas*. We are therefore in a literary space that is between *dulce* and *utile* and that includes them both. The name σπουδογέλοιον, already in ancient times a definition of this ambiguous literary space,⁴⁴ is implicitly referred to in Phaedrus' prologue:

A double dowry comes with this, my little book: it moves to laughter, and by wise counsels guides the conduct of life (*duplex libelli dos est: quod risum movet / et quod prudenti vitam consilio monet*: 1, prol. 3–4).

But the coexistence of *utile* and *dulce* is a typical feature of fabulistic literature from its beginnings, and Phaedrus is most probably following a tradition already established by Aesop. Gellius says about the latter:

⁴² 4,2,1–7; trans. Perry 1965.

⁴³ Cf. also 3 prol. 10 *legesne quaeso potius viles nenias*.

⁴⁴ The σπουδογέλοιον is of course a complex subject; for a broader discussion and bibliographic references see Graverini 2006.

Aesop, the well-known fabulist from Phrygia, has justly been regarded as a wise man (*sapiens*), since he taught what it was salutary (*utilia*) to call to mind and to recommend, not in an austere and dictatorial manner, as is the way of philosophers, but by inventing witty and entertaining fables (*festivos delectabilesque apologos*) he put into men's minds and hearts ideas that were wholesome and carefully considered, while at the same time he enticed their attention.⁴⁵

As we have seen, in Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii* 5,14,1 Menippus claims that Aesop's tales are nothing more than 'frogs,... donkeys, and nonsense (λήροι) for old women and children to chew on'. Apollonius however replies that he considers Aesop's tales 'more conducive to philosophy' than the myths told by poets. One of the reasons he adduces is that Aesop 'uses humble subjects to teach great lessons' (ἀπὸ μικρῶν πραγμάτων διδάσκει μεγάλα: 5,14,2). Another reason is the tales' different attitude towards truth: the poets tell their myths pretending they are real, but Aesop,

by promising a story that everyone knows to be untrue, tells the truth precisely in not undertaking to tell the truth... someone who tells an untrue tale while adding instruction, as Aesop does, makes plain that he uses falsehood for the benefit of the listener. It is also a charming trait to make dumb animals nicer and deserving respect from humans. (5,14,3).

As we see in this passage, Aesopic fables in Philostratus' *Life* are tantalizingly close to the novel. Apollonius' claim that Aesop 'tells the truth precisely in not undertaking to tell the truth' inevitably reminds us of Lucian's programmatic statement in *True Histories* 1,4,⁴⁶ and Menippus' dismissive definition has the same tone and almost the same words as the passages from the *Historia Augusta* and Macrobius quoted at the beginning of this paper. But even though a novel can very well be an old wife's story about a donkey, there is also a great difference between novel and Aesopic fable: apart from any consideration about the greater extent and complexity of the novel narra-

⁴⁵ 2,29,1; trans. Rolfe 1946².

⁴⁶ '...as I had nothing true to tell, not having had any adventures of significance, I took on lying. But my lying is far more honest than theirs [i.e. lying historians and philosophers], for though I tell the truth in nothing else, I shall at least be truthful in saying that I am a liar' (trans. Harmon 1913).

tive structure, an explicit moral, something like Aesop's usual ὁ λόγος δηλοῖ ὅτι, 'the tale shows that', is not a typical novelistic ending.⁴⁷ Even more clearly, the novel is also remarkably different from satire, be it after the manner of Menippus, Horace or Martianus Capella, and from philosophical dialogue. However, all these genres share an inclination to understatement and self-irony⁴⁸ that hints at their 'lower' position in comparison with nobler genres (moral and philosophical treatises, poetic treatment of myths in epic and drama).⁴⁹ In a quasi-paradoxical way, through this very understatement these texts reassert their ambition to achieve the same edifying goals as those genres, though by means of a different and lower literary form, open to entertainment and narrative illusion as well as teaching and truth. *Neniae* and *aniles fabulae* are often used as keywords in literary polemic; but when an author adopts such definitions for *his own* work, he is actually applying to it a sort of trademark that discloses its seriocomic nature.

4 Back to Apuleius

In my opinion, this is exactly the case in Apuleius. There is no doubt that the old maidservant of the robbers, defining her tale as an *anilis fabula*, underscores its being a mere diversion, a means of soothing the young Charite's desperate grief. This *anilis fabula* is actually told by an old woman.⁵⁰ To my

⁴⁷ Mithras' and Sisimithres' speeches in Apuleius 11,15 and Heliodorus 10,39 are closest to what could be called an explicit moral in ancient novels; however, they are views expressed by characters inside the narrative, not direct authorial interventions.

⁴⁸ Even though it is true that only in the novel can self-irony develop into actual laughter and mockery at the expense of the narrator: see Maria Plaza's lucid analysis of the Risus episode (2003, 356).

⁴⁹ This feature, I think, could figure among the 'Systemreferenzen' discussed by Zimmerman 2006, and can be considered as a consequence of the 'Menippean' character of Apuleius' novel (on which see Zimmerman 2006, 88–90).

⁵⁰ Again, I think that Kenaan 2000 is right in emphasizing that both the old narrator and her intended audience, Charite, are female: this underscores even more the 'feminine' qualities of this particular *anilis fabula*. However, I cannot see how Lucius' definition of *bella fabella* at 6,25,1 can strip *Cupid and Psyche* of its *fabula anilis* qualities and be 'a first step in transforming this text into... a philosophical allegory' (Kenaan 2000, 383). While I clearly agree that philosophy and allegory play a role in *Cupid and Psyche*, and that the tale has different 'layers of meaning' (384), Lucius' words at 6,25,1 are to me on the very same level as the old narrator's introduction at 4,27,8. Both passages can be read as plain statements made by ingenuous characters in the tale *and* as forms of self-ironic winking

knowledge, this is the only example, while all the other major *aniles fabulae* are told by men (Socrates, Cervius, Martianus Capella, Fulgentius and so on). It could even be said that this is a case of 'a verbal expression being converted into fictional reality', similar to those discussed by Maria Plaza and by Thomas McCreight in this volume.⁵¹ At the end of the tale (6,25,1), the ass defines the old woman as a *delira et temulenta... anicula*, and his words indeed contribute to the negative characterization of the narrator. However, as I have argued elsewhere,⁵² Lucius' comment should be read also as a subtle way of showing that the tale is a sort of degraded epic.⁵³ While the words *delira et temulenta* categorize the narrator, the expression *anilis fabula* (contained in what we can rightly consider a prologue) labels the narrative, and both designations are useful hints (aptly located immediately before the beginning and after the end of *Cupid and Psyche*) as to how the tale should be received. In both cases, an implicit reference to a 'superior' kind of literary discourse is embedded in a contemptuous expression that reflects both the 'lower' status and the 'higher' models of *Cupid and Psyche* as a literary product.

But, besides such considerations about the tale's position in the ancient literary panorama, its being an *anilis fabula* also raises a question about its meaning: if I am right in what I have pointed out so far, through the old maidservant's words Apuleius is preparing the reader for an agreeable and diverting tale that conceals some kind of teaching. What kind of teaching? Unfortunately, this problem is too complex to receive here even a cursory treatment. I will discuss it elsewhere,⁵⁴ but I wish to point out right now that I do not think that it is possible to offer a completely precise and rationally demonstrable answer to such a question. In other words, it would be difficult

by a skilled author that skilled readers can recognize; as such, they allude to the different kinds of reception allowed by this tale.

⁵¹ For a comparable instance of narrative concretisation of a metaphor for 'entertaining rhetoric/fiction' see Keulen 2003b, 167 f. (on juggler imagery in the sword-swallower-scene, *Met.* 1,4); see Graverini 2003, 211 with n. 10 for similar developments of poetic similes.

⁵² Graverini 2003, 214 f.

⁵³ Even though, as Danielle van Mal-Maeder and Maaïke Zimmerman rightly point out (1998, 86), her being an alcoholic explains the fact that wine-drinking is repeatedly highlighted in the tale. The old and drunken woman is also a typical comic character: cf. Plautus, *Cistellaria* 149 *et multiloqua et multibiba est anus*; *Curculio* 76–77 *anus... multibiba atque merobiba*.

⁵⁴ Graverini 2006.

to apply to the details of Apuleius' novel the same hermeneutical method that, according to Iamblichus, transformed Pythagoras' 'teaching by symbols' (διὰ συμβόλων διδασκαλία) from old wives' talks into philosophical teachings:

Unless one can interpret the symbols, and understand them by careful exposition, what they say would strike the chance observer as absurd – old wives' tales, full of nonsense and idle talk (γελοῖα ἂν καὶ γραώδη δόξειε τοῖς ἐντυγχάνουσι τὰ λεγόμενα, λήρου μεστὰ καὶ ἀδολεσχίας). But once they are deciphered, as symbols should be, and become clear and transparent instead of obscure to outsiders, they impress us like utterances of the gods or Delphic oracles, revealing an astounding intellect and having a supernatural influence on those lovers of learning who have understood them.⁵⁵

In a way, a minutely and scrupulously applied allegorical interpretation would really transform Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* into a Delphic oracle: namely, an obscure riddle open to wild misinterpretations, just like Apollo's oracle at 4,33,1–2.⁵⁶ Narrative, indeed, can be a much more agreeable "read" than a moral or philosophical treatise, but it inevitably has some shortcomings as regards the communication of well-defined ideas: more than in any other literary genre, the construction of meaning is the result of a cooperation between text and reader. What should be noted in any case is that the old maidservant's words prepare us for a tale that has *both* serious *and* comic aspects. That the 'serious' side is both highlighted and blurred by the narra-

⁵⁵ *The Pythagorean Life* 23,105 (cf. also 32,227); trans. Clark 1989. See Massaro 1977, 112 f., who is more optimistic than I about the possibility of applying Iamblichus' allegorical method to Apuleius' novel.

⁵⁶ See Hijmans in the present volume. From Iamblichus' words we understand that such method is to be applied, more than to narrative proper, to maxims like 'One should not enter a shrine, or worship at all, while on the way to somewhere else; not even on finding oneself outside the temple doors. Sacrifice and worship barefoot. Leave the highway and use the footpaths' (23,105); or 'don't poke the fire with a knife' (32,227). Symbolic and allegorical interpretation of both Platonic and biblical myths, that otherwise could appear to be παραπλήσιοι τοῖς παραδιδόμενοις ταῖς γραυσίν, is instead a point in Origen's *Against Celsus* 4,36 ff.; see Massaro 1977, 115 ff., who shows that, after St. Paul's first *Epistle to Timothy* 4,7, old wives' tales frequently appear in Christian polemic against pagans, Jews, and heretics.

tive development is, in my view, an essential feature that Apuleius' novel shares with other serio-comic literary genres, especially with satire.

It is, actually, a feature of the *Metamorphoses* as a whole, and not only of *Cupid and Psyche*. Again, this is a statement that obviously needs to be demonstrated with a wider scope and in more detail. Within the scope of this paper, I only point out the strong and well-known parallelism between the *Metamorphoses* and the inserted tale of *Cupid and Psyche*. Not only can we view Psyche as a mythic counterpart to Lucius,⁵⁷ but there are also striking similarities between the two introductions: 1,1,1 *At ego tibi sermone isto Milesio varias fabulas conseram auresque tuas benivolas lepido susurro permulceam* ('But I would like to tie together different sorts of tales for you in that Milesian style of yours, and to caress your ears into approval with a pretty whisper') and 4,27,8 *Sed ego te narrationibus lepidis anilibusque fabulis protinus avocabo* ('But right now I shall divert you with a pretty story and an old wife's tale').⁵⁸ Both texts are prologues, to the whole novel and to the embedded tale respectively; if the novel and the tale have similar prologues, it is an obvious assumption that they share the same literary features – for example, they are both explicitly linked with the 'Milesian' genre.⁵⁹ In other words, not only *Cupid and Psyche* but the novel as a whole could be defined as an *anilis fabula*: after all, this is exactly what Septimius Severus and Macrobius do in the passages quoted at the beginning of this paper.

My point is that Septimius Severus and Macrobius, for the sake of their more or less polemical arguments, miss or deliberately obscure the serio-comic character of Apuleius' novel, and choose to take the definition of *ani-*

⁵⁷ On the many thematic correspondences see e.g. Smith 1998.

⁵⁸ On the similarities between the two passages cf. Scobie 1975, 66; Winkler 1985, 53; Kenney 1990, 13 and 22 f. But they were already clear to ancient readers: Fulgentius, in the prologue to his *Mitologiae*, blends allusions to both of them: *additur quia et mihi nuper imperasse dinosceris ut feriatas affatim tuarum aurium sedes lepido quolibet susurro permulceam: parumper ergo ausculta dum tibi rugosam sulcis anilibus ordior fabulam* ('add that, as you know, you have just ordered me to caress your ears, while they are resting from work, with some pleasant whisper: so, listen for a little while, as I spin a tale furrowed with an old woman's wrinkles'). See Mattiacci 2003, 232 ff.

⁵⁹ Cf. 4,32,6 *propter Milesiae conditorem*, with Zimmerman et al. 2004, 84 s. *ad loc.* My statement consciously breaks Ken Dowden's 'PROHIBITION I: No one shall refer to a genre of "Milesian Tales"' (Dowden 2001, 126); however, Keulen 2003, 61 shows that 'the adjective *Milesius* and the substantive *Milesia*... are both attested in expressions for 'fiction', or 'novels'.' See also Hijmans in this volume, n. 13.

lis fabula at face value and to apply it to the whole *Metamorphoses*: point-less literature, without any edifying value and acceptable only as a pastime for women and children. It is, after all, a charge that the novel had to face often throughout its history: but it is also a typical claim of many novels that their ‘low’ form and their foolish contents actually suggest something valuable.⁶⁰ Peter Walsh aptly quotes, as an epigraph to his chapter on Apuleius, the prologue of Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel*:

Therefore is it that you must open the book, and seriously consider of the matter treated in it, then you shall find that it containeth things of far higher value than the box did promise; that is to say, that the subject thereof is not so foolish as by the title, at the first sight, it would appear to be. And put the case that in the literal sense you meet with matters that are light and ludicrous, and suitable enough to their inscriptions; yet must you not stop there, as at the melody of the charming syrens; but endeavour to interpret that in a sublimer sense, which, possibly, you might think was spoken in the jollity of heart... for in the perusal of this treatise, you shall find another kind of taste, and a doctrine of a more profound and abstruse consideration, which will disclose unto you the most glorious and dreadful mysteries.⁶¹

The *Metamorphoses*, of course, contains no such explicit statement. However, Apuleius’ use of the common generic descriptor *anilis fabula* (as well as other features of his novel that cannot be discussed here) underscores exactly this kind of ‘menippean’ ambiguity, and sets the novel in a vaguely delimited space between ‘low’ and ‘high’, comic and serious.⁶² This kind of ambiguity is, in my opinion, one of the main ‘satiric’⁶³ qualities of the *Meta-*

⁶⁰ On this topic in modern novels, see e.g. Celati 1975, 5–49.

⁶¹ I reproduce the English translation offered by Walsh 1970, 141.

⁶² According to Ken Dowden (in this volume, subsection ‘*Sequence I*’), ‘the old woman at the robbers’ camp is a jarring variant of the Mantinean Diotima (“God-honoured from Prophetville”’). On the seriocomic nature of the *Met.* cf. also Keulen 2003b, focussing on Lucius’ satirical characterisation as a pseudo-philosopher.

⁶³ In satire, the adoption of a satiric *persona* and self-parody clearly affect the self-representation of the poet as a superior and authoritative model of life, but they do not obliterate the protreptic aim of his poetry. See e.g. Freudenburg 1993, 21: ‘Horace understands that the scoffer cannot exempt himself from the degradation he metes out, for his own humiliation is central to his mission of leveling and exposure, a festival mission that concerns the dying nature of all men, the instability of their beliefs and their institutions.

morphoses. This cannot be fully appreciated if we accept the Winklerian and post-Winklerian hermeneutical trend according to which the reader has to choose between a serious and a comic interpretation of the novel: in both cases, there is inevitably something that gets lost. Neither am I inclined to accept an aporetic stance as the final result of a *lectio scrupulosa* of Apuleius' novel: the peculiar blend of serious and comic elements inevitably results in some perplexity on the reader's part but, especially in a tradition influenced by Platonic dialogue, such an aporia is only a first stage towards philosophical knowledge. With the caveat that a novel is not a philosophical dialogue, and that the ideas it suggests are inevitably more vague and blurred, I think that what Charles Kahn asserts about aporia in Platonic dialogues could be easily accepted also as regards Apuleius' novel:

... the aporetic dialogue... is his [i.e. Plato's] literary device for reinterpreting the Socratic elenchus as the preparation for constructive philosophy. The reader is to accompany the interlocutor in the recognition of a problem. But the more astute reader will also recognize some hints of a solution. Hence the tension between the surface conclusion in *aporia* and the implicit hints of positive doctrine. These dialogues embody in their literary form the notion of creative perplexity that is Plato's reinterpretation of the Socratic elenchus.⁶⁴

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Anything that has pretensions to stability in a world where the wheels of life and death are constantly in motion the satirist unsettles, his own self included. In so doing he teaches the pretentious fool how to live, how to join the larger party of the dying, helpless fools who know that wealth is to be spent, wine is to be drunk, and authority mocked because tomorrow brings death. His mockery, despite all appearances, is deeply felt and moral in nature. He preaches the one true, unalterable fact of human behavior, that all must die, and in so doing he teaches us how to live'.

⁶⁴ Kahn 1996, 100.

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