

# Posthumous Parleys: Chatting Up the Dead in the Ancient Novels

NIALL W. SLATER  
Emory University

‘I began with the desire to speak with the dead’  
(Greenblatt 1988, 1)

Stephen Greenblatt’s famous opening to *Shakespearean Negotiations* invokes the yearning felt by readers of all kinds, the desire to recover the animation that once inhabited texts inherited from the past and engage them in conversation. What is metaphor for the ‘salaried, middle-class shamans’<sup>1</sup> who practice literary criticism in academe today could be much more concrete for the ancients. As the reiteration of stories about the discovery of silent reading in antiquity show,<sup>2</sup> for centuries readers read aloud, and many never read otherwise, rendering the normal reading experience a form of conversation with the absent author, ventriloquizing through the reader. The experience of reading a first-person epitaph out loud is only the most marked example of conversation with the dead, because the absent authors of most literary texts were removed not only in space but time from their readers. Every reader of Plato engaged Socrates in conversation – even if hoping in vain to say something more penetrating than ‘Surely not, O Socrates.’<sup>3</sup>

Beyond the ordinary reading experience, the Greeks and Romans also imagined even less mediated dialogues with the dead in the form of necromancy, scenes of which we find represented in both Greek and Latin novel-

---

<sup>1</sup> Greenblatt 1988, 1.

<sup>2</sup> The standard discussion of silent reading in antiquity is Knox 1968; cf. also Svenbro 1993, 160–186 and *passim*. Manguel 1996, 41–53, ‘The Silent Readers,’ reviews such standard stories as Caesar silently reading a note in the Senate and Augustine’s famous comments on the fact that his teacher, St. Ambrose, *only* read silently (*sic eum legentem vidimus tacite et aliter numquam*, *Confessions* 6, 3, 3).

<sup>3</sup> *Crito* 49c: οὐ δεῖ δῆπου, ὦ Σώκρατες.

istic traditions.<sup>4</sup> The present paper first undertakes the parallel reading of two such consultations with the dead, one a direct narrative from Heliodorus and the other an inset tale from Apuleius, both to illuminate each of the scenes in its original context and to develop a typology for novelistic necromancy. The formal necromancy in the *Golden Ass*, however, is not the only posthumous parley Apuleius offers his readers, and other exchanges with the dead may have significant implications for the interpretation of that novel as a whole. The present reading proceeds backward in time historically, an approach not in accord with most reader-response models, but it is premised on the assumption that the preserved scenes in both novelistic traditions are substantially representative of beliefs that were generally available or at least plausible to contemporary readers.

We begin then with the scene of necromancy that closes the sixth book of Heliodorus's *Aethiopica*. The heroine Charicleia and Calasiris are in pursuit of the hero Theagenes, who has been captured by a force of Egyptian brigands. They come across the aftermath of a battle between Persian and Egyptian forces and find an old woman on the battlefield, embracing and lamenting over the body of one of the fallen Egyptians. They comfort her, though not so much out of charity, as the narrator informs us, but in the hopes of gaining information from her about the outcome of the battle and the possible fate of Theagenes (ἐπιχειρεῖν τι παρὰ τῆς πρεσβύτιδος, εἰ οἶόν τε, ἐκμανθάνειν, 6.12.3). The old woman agrees to conduct them to the next village, but only after she has finished the proper rituals for her dead son, fallen on the field. She requests privacy, and Charicleia and Calasiris withdraw to a distance – close enough, however, both to see and hear her activities.

The old woman's elaborate preparations are worth reviewing in detail:

Ἡ γὰρ πρεσβύτις ἀνενοχλήτου καὶ ἀκατόπτου σχολῆς ἐπειλήφθαι νομίσασα πρῶτα μὲν βόθρον ὠρύξατο, ἔπειτα πυρκαϊᾶν ἐκ θατέρου μέρους ἐξῆψε καὶ μέσον ἀμοφοῖν τὸν νεκρὸν τοῦ παιδὸς προθεμένη κρατήρᾳ τε ὀστρακοῦν ἕκ τινος παρακειμένου τρίποδος ἀνελομένη μέλιτος ἐπέχει τῷ βόθρῳ καὶ αὐθις ἐξ ἑτέρου γάλακτος, καὶ οἶνον ἐκ τρίτων ἐπέσπενδεν· εἶτα πέμμα στεάτινον εἰς ἀνδρὸς μίμημα πεπλασμένον δάφνη καὶ μαράθῳ καταστέψασα εἰς τὸν βόθρον ἐνέβαλλεν. Ἐφ' ἅπασι δὲ ξίφος ἀνελομένη καὶ πρὸς τὸ ἐνθουσιῶδες σοβηθεῖσα καὶ πολλὰ πρὸς τὴν σεληναίαν βαρβάρους τε καὶ ξενίζουσι τὴν ἀκοὴν ὀνόμασι κατευξαμένη τὸν βραχίονα ἐντεμοῦσα καὶ δάφνης ἀκρέμονι τοῦ αἵματος ἀποψήσασα

<sup>4</sup> See Ruiz-Montero in this volume, Chapter 3 above, who discusses necromancy as part of a larger interest in magic in the novels.

τὴν πυρκαϊᾶν ἐπεψέκαζεν, ἄλλα τε ἅττα τερατευσαμένη πρὸς τούτοις ἐπὶ τὸν νεκρὸν τοῦ παιδὸς προσκύψασα καὶ τινα πρὸς τὸ οὐρὸς ἐπάδουσα ἐξήγειρέ τε καὶ ὀρθὸν ἐστάναι τῇ μαγγανείᾳ κατηνάγκαζεν. (6.14.3–4)

Supposing herself now secure against any intrusion or observation, the old woman began by digging a pit, to one side of which she lit a fire. After positioning her son's body between the two, she took an earthenware bowl from a tripod that stood beside her and poured a libation of honey into the pit, likewise of milk from a second bowl, and lastly of wine from a third. Then she took a cake made out of fine wheat flour and shaped it into the effigy of a man, crowned it with bay and fennel and flung it into the pit. Finally she picked up a sword and, in an access of feverish ecstasy, invoked the moon<sup>5</sup> by a series of grotesque and outlandish names, then drew the blade across her arm. She wiped the blood onto a sprig of bay and flicked it into the fire. There followed a number of other bizarre actions, after which she knelt over the body of her dead son and whispered certain incantations into his ear, until she woke the dead man and compelled him by her magic arts to stand upright. (trans. Morgan 1989)

As all commentators have noted, the ritual evokes many elements of the *nekuia* in *Odyssey* 11.23ff., where Odysseus calls the shades of the dead to a similar trench filled with honey, milk, wine, and water,<sup>6</sup> to which he then adds the blood of the sacrificial victims. Yet even a brief comparison of the two scenes shows how differently the world of the *Odyssey* and the world of Heliodorus conceive the relation between the living and the dead. In Homer the insubstantial dead seem to be drawn by the life force especially in the blood. In Heliodorus by contrast the magical power of the elements (including a small amount of the witch's own blood<sup>7</sup>) combined with incantation<sup>8</sup> compels rather than entices the spirit of the dead man back into his body, and it requires no small effort on the part of the old witch to bring about reanimation. The first effort produces only nodding and bodily motion, after which the body collapses again.

<sup>5</sup> The narrative notes that the moon was full just two nights before (τρίτη γὰρ μετὰ πανσέληνον, 6.14.2), making the witch's invocation all the more powerful here; for the moon and necromancy, see Ogden 2002, 201 and 236–240 (his text numbers 214–223).

<sup>6</sup> πρῶτα μελικρήτω, μετέπειτα δὲ ἡδέϊ οἴνω, τὸ τρίτον αὐθ' ὕδατι. (*Od.* 11.27–28).

<sup>7</sup> An innovation in a necromantic context, according to Ogden 2002, 201.

<sup>8</sup> The *lack* of an incantation in the Homeric *nekuia* bothered some in later antiquity, and one was eventually supplied, recorded in a fragment of Julius Africanus's *Kestoi*, 18: see Ogden 2002, 183–184 for translation and discussion.

Ὁ δὲ ἀπεκρίνατο μὲν οὐδὲν ἐπινεύσας δὲ μόνον καὶ τῇ μητρὶ τὰ κατὰ γνώμην ἐλπίζειν ἀμφιβόλως ἐνδοῦς κατηνέχθη τε ἀθρόον καὶ ἔκειτο ἐπὶ πρόσωπον. (6.14.6)

The dead man made no reply, merely nodded his head ... Then he suddenly collapsed and fell flat on his face.

While the atmosphere of the scene produces a thrill of horror, Heliodorus's text has also carefully prepared the reader to disapprove of the witch's attempt to gain knowledge in this way. In an illuminating discussion of magic throughout Heliodorus, Meriel Jones has demonstrated how Calasiris's distinction, laid out in Book 3, between base and heavenly knowledge anticipates the scene here in Book 6, making the old woman 'the embodiment of Kalasiris' definition of base magic.'<sup>9</sup> Calasiris asserts:

Ἡ μὲν γάρ τις ἐστὶ δημώδης καὶ ... χαμαὶ ἐρχομένη, εἰδώλων θεράπεινα καὶ περὶ σώματα νεκρῶν εἰλουμένη, βοτάναις προστετηκυῖα καὶ ἐπωδαῖς ἐπανέχουσα, πρὸς οὐδὲν ἀγαθὸν τέλος οὔτε αὐτὴ προϊοῦσα οὔτε τοὺς χρωμένους φέρουσα, ἀλλ' αὐτὴ περὶ αὐτὴν τὰ πολλὰ πταίουσα... (3.16.3ff.)

There is one kind [of wisdom] that is of low rank and ... crawls upon the earth; it waits upon ghosts and skulks around dead bodies; it is addicted to magic herbs, and spells are its stock-in-trade; no good ever comes of it; no benefit ever accrues to its practitioners; generally it brings about its own downfall ....

All this is precisely what the old witch on the corpse-strewn battlefield is doing. Her first attempt only temporarily pulls the corpse upright, nodding on invisible strings, followed by complete collapse. Only after a second, more powerful effort can she force speech from the corpse – and it is not a speech she welcomes.

Her purpose in resorting to necromancy is clear: the old woman wants information about the fate of her surviving son, who has gone on with the Egyptian forces to attack Memphis. Angered by her meddling with black magic, her deceased son informs her that his brother, her other son, will perish in the forthcoming conflict:

---

<sup>9</sup> Jones 2004, 83.

Οὔτε ὁ παῖς σοι περισωθεῖς ἐπανήξει οὔτε αὐτὴ τὸν ἀπὸ ξίφους ἐκφεύξει θάνατον ἀλλ' αἰεὶ δὴ τὸν σαυτῆς βίον ἐν οὔτως ἀθέσμοις πράξεσι καταναλώσασα τὴν ἀποκεκληρωμένην πᾶσι τοῖς τοιούτοις βιαίαν οὐκ εἰς μακρὰν ὑποστήσῃ τελευτήν... (6.15.3)

Your son shall not return alive, nor shall you escape death by the sword. The whole of your life you have spent in sinful practices such as this, but soon you will meet the violent end that awaits all such as you.

The dead son thus predicts the mother's own imminent death, in punishment for practicing black magic before the priest Calasiris and the innocent girl Charicleia. This reference to the unseen eavesdroppers and witnesses of her activities drives the old woman into a frenzy,<sup>10</sup> and she rages about the battlefield seeking them – only to impale herself accidentally on a broken spear shaft sticking up from the field (ὠρθωμένῳ κλάσματι δόρατος 6.15.5), which brings the prophecy of her death to fulfillment.

The scene in Heliodorus thus offers a typology for parleys with the dead. It involves a necromancer, a ritual including both incantations and physical elements to bring about the reanimation of the corpse, a desire for knowledge available only to the dead, and a test of the truth of the prophecy uttered by the deceased. The same structural elements appear in a necromancy in Apuleius's *Golden Ass*, reported within the tale of Thelyphron in Book 2.<sup>11</sup>

Byrrhaena calls upon Thelyphron to entertain the guests at her dinner by relating the story of how he came to lose his nose and ears. Thelyphron explains that he was hired to guard a corpse from witches overnight and thought he had succeeded until the mourners carry the body out for the funeral procession. At this point an old man confronts the mourners and accuses the widow of having poisoned the deceased, his nephew, for the money. In order to prove his accusations, the old man brings forward an Egyptian necromancer:

<sup>10</sup> Ogden 2002, 201 interprets the old woman's rage as 'caused by the belief that she has been a victim of the evil eye,' though that implication is not quite clear to me. Heliodorus makes an earlier, explicit reference to the evil eye at 4.5.3ff., where Calasiris stages a fake exorcism of its influence over Charicleia. As Jones 2004, 80–81 notes, however, Charicleia herself, unlike her adoptive father Charicles, is not taken in by this performance, and her understanding seems to establish a bond between herself and Calasiris. If we are to read the old woman's rage as fear of the evil eye, the memory of the earlier scene further underscores the superiority of both Calasiris and Charicleia to any such superstition and therefore also to the scene they have witnessed.

<sup>11</sup> See briefly Ruiz-Montero in Chapter 3 above.

*'veritatis arbitrium in divinam providentiam reponamus. Zatchlas adest Aegyptius propheta primarius, qui mecum iam dudum grandi praemio pepigit reducere paulisper ab inferis spiritum corpusque istud postliminio mortis animare'* (2.28)

'Let us entrust the judgement of truth to divine providence. Zatchlas the Egyptian is here, a prophet of the first rank, who has just now pledged for a great fee to bring back the spirit from the shades below for a little while and to reanimate this corpse from beyond the threshold of death.'

Zatchlas proceeds to put some magic herb (*herbulam*) on the mouth and chest of the corpse, then prays to the rising sun. This is the result:

*iam tumore pectus extolli, iam salubris vena pulsari, iam spiritu corpus impleri: et adsurgit cadaver et profatur adulescens: 'Quid, oro, me post Lethaea pocula iam Stygiis paludibus innatantem ad momentariae vitae reducit officia? desine iam, precor, desine ac me in meam quietem per-mitte.'* (2.29)

The chest lifted with breath, the veins pulsed with health, and the body was filled with life. The corpse sat up and spoke like a young man: 'Tell me, why after drinking the draughts of Lethe and swimming the pools of the Styx do you call me back to the duties of this fleeting life? Stop now, I beg, stop and release me back to my rest.'

Though the corpse speaks almost at once, the resurrection proceeds in two stages. First he sits up (*adsurgit*). Like the corpse in Heliodorus, the dead man protests being called back to life and tries to resist. The struggling (*commotior*) prophet must threaten him with the Furies (*Diras*). At this apparently the corpse stands up:

*suscipit ille de lectulo et imo cum gemitu<sup>12</sup> populum sic adorat* (2.29)

He picked himself up from the bier and with a deep groan thus addressed the people.

---

<sup>12</sup> The mss. read *gestu*, and I have followed the correction to *gemitu* preferred by Hanson 1989 and others. Van Mal-Maeder 2001, 381 prefers Hildebrand's *questu* as palaeographically more plausible. In either case, the phrase suggests strong resistance to articulate speech on the part of the corpse.

For unless Apuleius himself is nodding, *suscipit* here must mean something different from the previous *adsurgit*.<sup>13</sup> Thus compelled by the magician, the dead man testifies clearly that his adulterous wife poisoned him.

The reaction to these extraordinary developments by the audience within the narrative, however, is more varied than that in Heliodorus:

*populus aestuat, diversa tendentes, hi pessimam feminam viventem statim cum corpore mariti sepeliendam, alii mendacio cadaveris fidem non habendam.* (2.29)

The crowd seethed, tending to differing opinions, some thinking that this vilest woman should be buried alive immediately with the body of her husband, while others thought that one should put no faith in the fictions of a corpse.

This diversity of audience response may startle the modern reader,<sup>14</sup> but from another point of view the problem is not insignificant. How can one really tell whether it is the dead man himself speaking? If there is such a thing as a ‘typical’ necromancy in the ancient world, as Antonio Stramaglia has pointed out, it does not usually employ the entire body of the deceased.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Ken Dowden (pers. comm.) has suggested to me that *suscipit* here might mean ‘he answered, he took up the conversation,’ as at Vergil, *Aen.* 6.724, where Anchises willingly answers a question from Aeneas. Van Mal-Maeder 2001, 381 too translates *suscipit* as ‘repenant la parole’ (Ogden 2002, 139 as ‘responded’). While such a meaning cannot be ruled out absolutely here in Apuleius, the corpse’s resistance to speaking (*not* typical in necromancy in general: see Stramaglia 1990, 188–191; 208–209) would seem to be at odds with the tone of *suscipit* if this verb is to be taken to imply mutual conversation. Of even more significance is the force of *de lectulo*, which Van Mal-Maeder 2001, 380–381 compares precisely to the previous use of *de corpore* as a prepositional phrase ‘marquant la provenance ou l’origine d’une action, d’un événement, d’un objet.’ If *de lectulo* simply indicates the place from which the voice proceeds, it is otiose: we already know the corpse’s location. With *suscipit* as a verb of physical motion, however, *de lectulo* has much more point.

<sup>14</sup> Unlike the crowd reaction in Apuleius, *Florida* 19, a passage to which Richard Fletcher (pers. comm.) has kindly called my attention. There the famous doctor Asclepiades, happening upon a funeral, detects signs of life yet in the body and orders the burial halted. Some in the crowd believe the doctor, some do not: *murmur interea exortum; partim medico credendum dicere, partim etiam irridere medicinam*. Divided opinion, however, is much more plausible before the doctor has revived the man – which he then succeeds in doing. Fletcher also notes very similar language about death in the two passages: cf. *Metamorphoses* 2.28 *ab inferis spiritum corpusque istud postliminio mortis* with *Florida* 19 *ab inferis postliminio domum rettulit confestimque spiritum recreavit*.

<sup>15</sup> Stramaglia 1990, 188–189. Consider, however, the Egyptian comparanda, many later than Apuleius and some influenced by Christian traditions, noted in Morenz 1948.

The young Egyptian magician (*iuvenem*, 2.28), perhaps suborned by the *grandi praemio* offered by the old man,<sup>16</sup> might have summoned another dead spirit to do his bidding – how could the audience tell? Moreover, the very tale that the corpse tells shows that witchcraft could force a dead body into motion:

*nomine ciere non prius desierunt, quam dum hebetes artus et membra frigida pigris conatibus ad artis magicae nituntur obsequia* (2.29)

[The witches] did not cease rousing me by name until my sluggish joints and cold limbs with halting efforts tried to obey the commands of their magic art.

They would have succeeded, had the living narrator Thelyphron not been quicker to obey. Could not the audience therefore suspect Zatchlas himself of employing the very same magic and then ventriloquizing through the animated corpse?<sup>17</sup>

A valid test of the deceased's claims about the past (that is, that his wife poisoned him) might seem to be a prophecy about the future which can then be verified or disproved, just as the prophecy of the dead soldier in Heliodorus was. At first glance appears that this is just what happens, when the corpse suddenly turns on the narrator Thelyphron:

*'dabo', inquit, 'dabo vobis intemeratae veritatis documenta perlucida et quod prorsus alius nemo cognorit vel ominarit'<sup>18</sup> indicabo* (2.30)

'I shall give you,' he said, 'I shall give you crystal-clear proofs of my unsullied truth, and I shall reveal what no one else in fact could know or predict.'

He proceeds to retell the events of the night before, not from the unreliable narrator Thelyphron's point of view, but apparently from his, the corpse's, own point of view. It happens that the dead man shares the name of Thely-

<sup>16</sup> Fick 1985, 143 is not alone in finding irony in Zatchlas's financial motivations here.

<sup>17</sup> Zatchlas's emphasized youth is atypical for an Egyptian magician (Stramaglia 1990, 179–182). Some notion that the magician pulls the strings of the body but himself supplies the voice may lie behind Lindsay's translation of *profatur adulescens* as '[he] spoke in a young man's voice.' The uncle is old, but that does not mean the deceased husband is necessarily still young. The use of *adulescens* may imply that his voice did not sound the way it usually did, or did in his final hours.

<sup>18</sup> Robertson's emendation for the ms. *cognominarit* is adopted by Hanson 1989 and defended by Van Mal-Maeder 2001.



phron with Byrrhaena's guest. The witches called out that name, the enchanted would-be guard answered – and was mutilated in place of the corpse. The witches then replaced his missing nose and ears with wax. In horror Thelyphron the narrator reaches up to his face – and the false parts come away in his hand. The end of the inset tale vanishes from the narrative here, as Thelyphron tells how the crowd's laughter bubbled up around him (*risus ebullit*), and he slunk away. The laughter within the story blends seamlessly with the laughter of Byrrhaena's guests (*rursum cachinnum integrant*, 2.31).

The reader may guess, but cannot actually know even in terms of Thelyphron's own narrative whether the corpse's statement won over the doubters in the divided crowd and convinced them of the wife's guilt. Moreover, the truth of the corpse's claim about Thelyphron's losses is not sufficient logical proof of any other statements he may make.<sup>19</sup> A further nice point is whether the corpse has prophesied about a future event (Thelyphron's wax ears would fall off) or simply reported another past event (though dead, he saw the witches perform the mutilation), the two possibilities underlined by the two verbs, *cognorit vel ominarit*. Perhaps the evidence of our narrative can be pushed no further here.

The comparison of the two scenes nonetheless confirms a basic typology for dialogues of the living with the dead, common to both the Greek and Roman novels: a necromancer, a ritual involving both prayers and magical substances, a difficult physical reanimation, and a test of the validity of the prophecy.<sup>20</sup> The resultant model can be tested against at least one other posthumous parley in Apuleius – a conversation in which neither of the participants quite realizes at the time that it *does* take place *post mortem*, the implications of which will lead readers in new directions.

When our narrator Lucius meets two travellers on the road in Book 1, they famously begin discussing the believability of stories. One of Lucius's

<sup>19</sup> Stramaglia 1990, 195 on argument by false inference; cf. Winkler 1985, 76 and Drake 1977, 6; 10.

<sup>20</sup> Many compare the far more detailed account of Erichtho's raising of a corpse from the battlefield in Lucan, *Pharsalia* 6. 588–830 to the scenes in the novels (e.g., Ogden 2002, 192–193 and Jones 2004, 83 n. 23). It is well worth noting, however, that Lucan's dead soldier denies having yet seen the fates and therefore cannot specifically prophesy the leaders' fates. Moreover, the reanimation is so powerful that further herbs and incantations are required to send the soldier back to the dead: *carminibus magicis opus est herbisque, cadaver / ut cadat*, 822–823. Though in fact the earliest of our recorded examples, Lucan seems to be deliberately playing with the traditional elements of necromancy here.

interlocutors, Aristomenes, relates his own encounter with an old friend named Socrates, entrapped in Thessaly by the witch Meroe. The story is sufficiently familiar that detailed summary of the earlier part of Aristomenes' attempt to rescue his friend is unnecessary. Suffice it to recall that Meroe and another witch invade the inn where Socrates and Aristomenes are staying, stab Socrates in the throat, remove his heart, and replace it with a sponge. The next morning Aristomenes attempts to flee before his friend's death is discovered, fearing he will be blamed for the murder, but he is surprised by one of the servants at the inn and returns to his room. In despair Aristomenes attempts to hang himself but accidentally falls on Socrates, who thereupon wakes up, and they depart together.

Socrates and Aristomenes do converse, both at the inn (1.17) and on the road – but they say almost nothing of interest. They make rude jokes with each other like the old friends that they are. They begin to discuss dreams, and Socrates admits he dreamt his throat was cut the night before (*ipse per somnium iugulari visus sum mihi*, 1.18)<sup>21</sup> – but decides what he needs is a good meal. Even though he looks very pale, Socrates manages to put away a good bit of bread and cheese. Then he tries to drink from a stream – his cut throat opens up, the sponge pops out, and Socrates is gone.

The whole narrative from Socrates' 'awakening' onward is a conversation with the dead,<sup>22</sup> but in this parley essential elements of the previous typology are missing. There is a witch, who performs both the murder and the necromancy. She seems to need no incantations or herbs, though she does employ the unparalleled magic sponge.<sup>23</sup> Far from being a difficult struggle, the reanimation itself seems as natural as waking from sleep – so much so that Aristomenes (and perhaps the first-time reader of Apuleius as well) believes his experiences were just a nightmare. Where Thelyphron had a false dream of security and completely failed to see what really happened, Aristomenes sees the reality but mistakes it for a dream – until the final disaster. Most curiously, conversation with the dead yields the living no useful information – no revelation about anything unknown from the past nor prophecy for the future. We might in general wish to speak with the dead –

<sup>21</sup> More dizzyingly Apuleian questions: can the dead dream? and if so, are their dreams true? Stramaglia 1990, 192 cites Artemidorus 2. 69 on the veracity of the dead in dreams: ἔτι τῶν ἀξιόπιστων εἰσὶ καὶ οἱ νεκροί, ἐπεὶ πάντως ἀληθῆ λέγουσι.

<sup>22</sup> Noted by Winkler 1985, 72.

<sup>23</sup> As Scobie 1975, 109 *ad loc.* points out, Pliny *NH* 9. 69 considered the sponge an aquatic animal. Meroe instructs it (1.13) to travel back to the sea via a river: '*spongia, cave in mari nata per fluvium transeas.*' She thus treats it more like an animal familiar than a magical substance such as herbs.

but who would want to talk with this Socrates? Better perhaps to do as Aristomenes does: bury him under the plane tree (*platanum*, 1.18)<sup>24</sup> and go on.

Have we reached a point of *aporia* then? Perhaps – but there might be one more conversation to test, though its scale is so vast as to prohibit any comprehensive treatment. Andrew Laird has offered an intriguing and subtle argument for the view that the whole of the *Golden Ass* may be a posthumous parley, a conversation of the reader with a dead narrator.<sup>25</sup> As Laird shows, the language of the Apuleian prologue contains much that is familiar from Roman epitaphs, while the closing chapter can be read as an account of the narrator's own encounter with death, an interpretation which appeals especially to the potential double meaning of the very last word of the preserved text, *obibam*, meaning either 'I encountered' or 'I died.' The whole of the novel is a ring composition, 'a circle that ever returneth in / To the self-same spot'<sup>26</sup> – and that spot is the prologue.

But if the novel as a whole is a dialogue of the readers with the dead narrator – why should such readers put faith in the fictions of a corpse? In his two undoubted narratives of posthumous parleys, Apuleius offers the reader the subtler, less expected treatment first: the focus is on the fate of Socrates, and by the time the reader is absolutely sure this *was* a dialogue of living with dead, the narrator and his narrative are hurrying on to other scenes and events. Only later does the reader experience the more conventional necromancy related by Thelyphron. In structuring the stories thus, so that the elements only become clear on a second reading, Apuleius has given his readers not just one but two ways of disbelieving or disregarding anything that the dead may have to say. The more patent is his deftly twisted version of a necromancy in Book 2, subtly subverted by stopping short of the expected ending. Raising a corpse from the dead is not good enough for some in the crowd: 'Neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead' (Luke 16: 31). Some think the dead man is telling the truth, some think he is lying – and the farcical uproar ensures that readers will never know if the crowd all came to an agreement at the end, only that they joined together in laughing at the tale's far from omniscient narrator. Yet more subtly, but even more subversively, the novel's first posthumous parley suggests that even if we could chat with the dead Socrates, he might have nothing more interesting to say than any of our other travelling companions. If

<sup>24</sup> The Platonic plane tree of *Phaedrus* 229a, as all commentators duly note.

<sup>25</sup> Laird 2001, 275–276: 'The suggestion is that the narrator is dead, even as he narrates' (a view adumbrated by Winkler 1985, 72).

<sup>26</sup> E.A. Poe, 'The Conqueror Worm.'

both of these posthumous parleys are contained within a narrative which is itself a dialogue with a dead narrator, how shall we judge the reliability of the voice we have been listening to?

I began with the desire to speak with the dead – but the dead, like every other text, having been writ, persist in answering only through the words we already know. Heliodorus employs necromancy for a genuine thrill of horror, mixing Homeric learning with Egyptian exoticism, but in the service of a master narrative in which heavenly knowledge ultimately triumphs over base knowledge. Apuleius's dialogues with the dead skew more toward the humor of Lucian – and away from Heliodoran moralizing. If we as readers nonetheless persist in seeking wisdom, heavenly or base, from the ending of the *Golden Ass*, the answer to our questions might well come as Minos's does to the troublesome pirate Sostratos in Lucian's *Dialogues of the Dead* 24.<sup>27</sup>

ὄρα δὲ μὴ καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους νεκροὺς τὰ ὅμοια ἐρωτᾶν διδάξῃς.  
See to it that you don't teach the other corpses to ask questions like that.

### Bibliography

- Drake, G.C. 1977. 'The Ghost Story in *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius.' *Papers on Language and Literature* 13, 3–15.
- Fick, N. 1985. 'La magie dans les *Métamorphoses* d'Apulée.' *REL* 63, 132–147.
- Greenblatt, S. 1988. *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hanson, J.A. 1989. *Apuleius: Metamorphoses*. 2 vols. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Jones, M. 2004. 'The Wisdom of Egypt: Base and Heavenly Magic in Heliodoros' *Aithiopika*', *Ancient Narrative* 4, 79–98.
- Knox, B.M.W. 1968. 'Silent Reading in Antiquity', *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 9, 421–435.
- Laird, A. 2001. 'Paradox and Transcendence: The Prologue as The End,' in A. Kahane and A. Laird (eds.), *A Companion to the Prologue to Apuleius' Metamorphoses*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 267–281.
- Manguel, A. 1996. *A History of Reading*. London: HarperCollins.
- Morenz, S. 1948. 'Totenaussagen im Dienste des Rechtes: Ein ägyptisches Element in Hellenismus und Spätantike', *WJA* 3: 290–300.

<sup>27</sup> Already condemned by Minos's tribunal, Sostratos by his questions establishes that all the murders he committed were ordained by Clotho (Fate), so he himself cannot be held responsible. Minos declares him a sophist (σοφίστης) as well as a bandit (ληστής) and releases him from punishment – but not before issuing his warning!

- Morgan, J.R., trans. 1989. *Heliodorus: An Ethiopian Story*, in B.P. Reardon (ed.), *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 349–588.
- Ogden, D. 2002. *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds: A Sourcebook*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Scobie, A. 1975. *Apuleius Metamorphoses (Asinus Aureus) I: A Commentary*. Meisenheim am Glan: Hain.
- Stramaglia, A. 1990. ‘Aspetti di letteratura fantastica in Apuleio. *Zatchlas Aegyptius propheta primarius* e la scena di necromanzia nella novella di Telifrone (*Met.* II, 27–30)’, *Annali della Facoltà di lettere e filosofia, Università di Bari* 33, 159–220.
- Svenbro, J. 1993. *Phrasikleia: An Anthropology of Reading in Ancient Greece*. trans. J. Lloyd. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Van Mal-Maeder, D. 2001. *Apuleius Madaurensis Metamorphoses Livre II: Texte, Introduction et Commentaire*. Groningen: Egbert Forsten.
- Winkler, J.J. 1985. *Auctor & Actor: A Narratological Reading of Apuleius's The Golden Ass*. Berkeley: University of California Press.