

Apuleian Ecphrasis: Depiction at Play

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‘The god of the Greek novel is indeed an improvising sophist.’
—Whitmarsh 2005, 89

The surface narrative playfulness of Apuleius’s novel, *The Golden Ass*, has never been in doubt; even those who find sober meaning and revelation at the end of the journey acknowledge the play inherent in the tale of an ass. On the linguistic level, the constant metamorphic play of archaism and innovation is equally obvious. Whitmarsh has recently argued that the genre of the novel itself, at least in its Greek incarnation, particularly demonstrates the blend of tradition and innovation characteristic of the Second Sophistic.¹ Yet at first glance, the world of *The Golden Ass* does not seem to be the Greek novel’s ‘strange but coherent’ world of Sophistopolis, as Russell dubbed it, but the hinterlands of the ‘real’ second century, as Millar famously claimed.² Closer examination suggests that, whatever its evidence for contemporary social conditions, this Roman novel’s relation to surrounding reality is far more flexible than it might initially appear.

I also believe too little has yet been made of Apuleius’s initial decision to re-imagine both a story and a narrator that pre-existed his own. Whatever the details of the relations between an earlier Greek ‘Ass’ narrative on the one hand and both the surviving Greek *Onos* and Apuleius on the other, it is clear that Apuleius took over the armature of an earlier transformation story, including many specific incidents in the same sequential order, and made of them something distinctly different and altogether his own. In other words, he treated the previous narrative very much as the great declaimers of the Second Sophistic treated the common inheritance of Greek history: as material that could be re-fashioned in virtuoso display for new cultural purposes.

¹ Whitmarsh 2005, 86–88.

² Millar 1981; Russell 1983, 21–39.

It might be revealing to approach the whole of *The Golden Ass* as an extremely extended *melete*,³ a historical declamation in character, in which Apuleius writes a new first person narration for a pre-existing fictional character, Lucius. An important corollary of such an approach would be a better understanding of the ways in which Apuleius, like a declaiming sophist, expects his readers as audience to perform a role in this re-imagination of a previous fiction as well.⁴

Such a view of our author's novel as declamation in character may seem just a reformulation of persona theory—albeit a vivid one. It usefully reminds us that Apuleius is *not* the first-person narrator of the *Golden Ass*—but even more, as we must always remind ourselves, *we* are not necessarily the readers that narrator addresses. Reader response criticism has always emphasized the horizon of expectations against which original readers approached particular works as differentiated from the expectations and cultural repertoire of readers today. The cultural consumption of *meletai*, however, reminds us not only that ancient readers themselves varied in their repertoire and expectations as they approached literary forms but might also be expected to play a *characterized* role in that reception process. The audience listening to a self-defense speech by Socrates needed to play Athenian jurors in their own minds. This has provocative implications for consumption of narrative fiction. The readers Lucius addresses may be a role played by actual readers, then or now, for the purposes of a particular reading.

A full-scale reading along these lines is well beyond any single article. As one step along the way, I propose here to look particularly at two examples of one of the characteristic tropes of both declamation and the ancient novel, that is, the ephrasis, for evidence of Apuleian innovation even beyond other examples influenced by the Second Sophistic—and perhaps also for the readers' double role as audience for both narrator and author. While all of the ancient novels display both simple and spectacular examples of ephrasis, the sense of play with the conventions of visual description seems to grow markedly in the later novels under the influence of the Second Sophistic. Bartsch puts it succinctly and compellingly in her still invaluable study, *Decoding the Ancient Novel*, thus:

³ On the *melete*, cf. Reardon 1971, 104–114 and, both more briefly and provocatively, Schmitz 1999, esp. 71–77. See Riess (this volume) on interactions of the *melete* with Apuleius's *Apology*. The *melete* can seem quite alien to modern literary sensibilities, but one might compare the popular cultural phenomenon today of fan-authored fiction, wherein enthusiasts write their own speeches and narratives for Buffy the Vampire Slayer and her cultural confreres.

⁴ Webb 2006 is especially illuminating on the audience's role-playing.

In *Aethiopica* and *Leucippe and Clitophon*, description plays with its own conventional status, with the *expectations* of the readers that it functions as a device worthy of interpretation and proleptic of the truth. Manipulating the careful readers' attention to pattern and detail, Heliodorus and Achilles Tatius use ephrasis and oneirography to undermine such expectations and to play with the shifting nuances between readerly detection and readerly deception. And ultimately, as an authorial tool to illuminate or to obscure, the descriptive passages in these novels lay bare the illusory power of the readers to make of the text what they will.⁵

This play of 'readerly detection and readerly deception' is most obvious in the description of the Diana and Actaeon sculpture group near the beginning of Book 2.⁶ The sculpture and the narrative undoubtedly offer a warning to Lucius about curiosity—though we still discuss the details of how that warning works and what hope—or despair—it may offer.

Two ephrasis that open books of the novel show how the novelist can play with the conventions of description in surprisingly innovative ways. Both too may offer warnings, though much subtler, to the alert reader. Ephrasis is profoundly visual—yet Apuleius delights in showing us ways of seeing without seeing, perhaps hearing without hearing. Two ephrasis of exploration offer insight into what there is—and is not—to see in his text.

Last night I saw upon the stair
A little man who wasn't there
He wasn't there again today
Oh, how I wish he'd go away...
—William Hughes Mearns

The first ephrasis requires some background from the Greek novel tradition. Ephrasis of a city is a particularly showy subcategory of geographical description and quite familiar from Greek fiction.⁷ Such descriptions may serve straightforwardly narrative purposes. In Chariton's *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, the description of the remarkable situation of the city of Tyre (7,2), an island connected to the mainland only by a narrow causeway much like Mont St. Michel, serves to highlight the ingenuity of our hero, Chaereas. Unlike Alexander the Great, who really took Tyre by siege, Chaereas succeeds by

⁵ Bartsch 1989, 39.

⁶ Treated at length in Slater 1998.

⁷ Saïd 1994.

what one might call Trojan mercenaries: he and his fellow Greek mercenaries pretend to be deserting from the Egyptian side, rushing up to the gates of Tyre (7,4). When the defenders unbar to welcome them, they succeed in jamming the gates open and allow the other besiegers to storm the city. An even more spectacular description of the siege of Syene in Book 9 of Heliodorus's *Aethiopica* displays more of the paradoxical vein of Second Sophistic play, as the besiegers, by building an outer encircling wall and diverting the course of the river Nile, transform the powerfully fortified city into an island threatening to sink into the waters.⁸

Recently, Morales's brilliant if sometimes breathless book on Achilles Tatius uses a city ephrasis as a key part of her argument for the erotics of vision in *Leucippe and Clitophon*. Book 5 opens with Clitophon's great description of his arrival in Alexandria. The city itself is a man-made wonder, far exceeding the natural wonders such as the hippopotamus, the crocodile, and even the crystal clear waters of the Nile with which he has already entertained his readers. In a novel of classic form, with its spectacularly beautiful hero and heroine, this description of the city's beauty seems to be more than just a showpiece (5,1,1–5, trans. Winkler 1989):

As I was coming up to the city entrance whose gates are dedicated to Helios, suddenly the beauty of the city struck me like a flash of lightning (ἀστράπτον τὸ κάλλος). My eyes were filled to the brim with pleasure (μου τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς ἐγέμισεν ἡδονῆς). A double row of columns led straight across the entire city from this entrance of Helios to the opposite entrance of Selene, Sun and Moon being the guardians of the city gates. Between the columns there lay the city's open area. Crossing it is such a long journey that you would think you were going abroad, though you are staying at home (ἔνδημος ἀποδημία).

Proceeding a little distance into the city, I came to the quarter named for Alexander himself, where I saw a whole other city, one whose beauty was split up in separate sections: for a row of columns went in one direction, and another just as long crossed it at right angles. My eyes tried to travel along every street, but I was left an unsatisfied spectator (θεατῆς ἀκόρεστος). The totality of its beauty was beyond my eyes' scope. At every moment when I was actually glimpsing some parts, I was on the point of seeing more and pressing on to others still but reluctant to pass

⁸ Compare the "shipwreck" of an infantry battle in the robbers' marsh city in Achilles Tatius 4,14, well discussed by Whitmarsh 2005, 88

some by. That which I actually saw kept my gaze fixed (ἐκράτει τὴν θέαν τὰ ὁρώμενα), while that which I expected to see would drag it on to the next.⁹ Turning round and round to face all the streets, I grew faint at the sight and at last exclaimed, like a luckless lover (δυσερωτιῶν), ‘Eyes, we have met our match (ὀφθαλμοί, νενικήμεθα).’

But then I saw two new and unheard-of contests. The city’s very largeness challenged its loveliness, and the populace vied with the city for size

Morales contrasts this description to the ‘cold, particularizing gaze’ in Strabo’s description of the same city (*Geography* 17,1,6–10), filled with precise measurement and spatial orientation, and concludes that Clitophon’s description makes Alexandria ‘so visible, so eye-intense that it cannot be seen.’¹⁰ This is indeed geography written by lightning flash, and Clitophon’s emotional response to what he sees does predominate heavily over urban plan and architectural detail, but the space is nonetheless articulated on an axis from one gate to another. Within this space lies another city, an urban ‘mise en abîme’ in the form of the district named for Alexander,¹¹ which seems to be shaped by the right angles of a colonnaded cardo and a decumanus. Morales emphasizes Clitophon’s position as an ‘unsatisfied’ or ‘insatiable’ spectator (θεατῆς ἀκόρεστος),¹² although that blurs the distinction between his eyes, which are ‘filled to the brim with pleasure’ (τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς ἐγέμισεν ἡδονῆς) and the narrator himself, whose eros for seeing is unsuccessful (δυσερωτιῶν) or shares in defeat with his eyes (ὀφθαλμοί, νενικήμεθα).

Despite the hyperventilation here, this description is not so removed from an actual cityscape that the reader is deprived of the opportunity, of which Bartsch reminds us, to look for hidden signification behind the spatial articulation, to try to discern in the gendered gates of the Sun and the Moon and the city’s vast but articulated plan clues to fates of our hero and heroine. One very challenging phrase in particular seems to hold out the prospect of decoding a truth, even as it denies the contemporary ability of the narrator to do so: ἔνδημος ἀποδημία. Morales sees in this oxymoron the very definition of the uncanny, the familiar that has been defamiliarized, and it is a chal-

⁹ This sentence of translation I take from Gaselee’s Loeb, while the rest is Winkler.

¹⁰ Morales 2004, 102.

¹¹ Saïd 1994, 232 notes that Achilles’ description of the harbor within the harbor of Sidon is a ‘mise en abîme.’

¹² Morales 2004 gives both translations.

lenge to translate.¹³ Nonetheless, the narrative context here is crucial: Clitophon has arrived as a tourist, but Alexandria is to be his new home for some time. Moreover, he will lose his beloved Leucippe to pirates in the very harbor of this city, on what is meant to be a simple three hours' tour to the famous lighthouse. One measure of the greatness of Alexandria then is the possibility to play out such an exotic adventure within its confines.

The details of this description in Achilles Tatius offer a basis for seeing more clearly what is remarkable in Apuleius's version of a city ephrasis, also taken from the beginning of a book. The passage is very familiar, since it is usually treated as one of the cardinal examples of the narrator Lucius's *curiositas*.¹⁴ Indeed, if Clitophon is an 'unsatisfied spectator' before the spectacle of Alexandria, Lucius's yearning must seem almost pathological. Yet it is well worth noting the play with scale and with the process of vision which underlies Apuleius's particular twist on the city ephrasis.

Lucius awakens on his first morning in Hypata, eager to see the wonders of this capital city of Thessaly. The irony of this collocation should not slip by unremarked. To be the capital of Thessaly is rather like being the Paris of Kazakhstan: Hypata is simply the biggest place in the boondocks. Into its cityscape Lucius wanders, and here is what he describes (*Met.* 2,1,2–2,2,3):

... suspensus alioquin et voto simul et studio, curiose singula considerabam. nec fuit in illa civitate quod aspiciens id esse crederem, quod esset, sed omnia prorsus ferali murmure in aliam effigiem translata, ut et lapides quos offenderem de homine duratos, et aves quas audirem indidem plumatas, et arbores quae pomerium ambirent similiter foliatis, et fontanos latices de corporibus humanis fluxos crederem; iam statuas et imagines incessuras, parietes locuturos, boves et id genus pecua dicturas praesagium, de ipso vero caelo et iubaris orbe subito venturum oraculum.

*Sic attonitus, immo vero cruciabili desiderio stupidus, nullo quidem initio vel omnino vestigio cupidinis meae reperto, cuncta circumibam tamen. dum in luxum nepotalem similis ostiatim singula pererro, repente me nescius forum cupidinis intuli.*¹⁵

¹³ Morales 2004, 104. Winkler takes thirteen words for these two in Greek, Gaselee nine. Morales herself opts for 'you could be a tourist at home.'

¹⁴ One small example: Lindsay, in the passage to be quoted below, translates *cupidinis meae* as 'my curiosity.' I have modified this to 'my desire.'

¹⁵ Except where noted, the text of Apuleius is quoted from Hanson 1989; translation sources vary but, where not otherwise noted, are my own.

I was so agog with desire and zeal and I savored every detail with gleeful curiosity. In fact, there was nothing that I, gazing as I walked about the city, did not believe to be something other than it was. Everything seemed to me to have been just struck by some fatal incantation into a quite contrary image. I thought the stones on which I trod were petrified men, that the birds twittering in my ears were enchanted men with plumes, that the trees surrounding the Pomerium were men magically spiriting into leaves, and that the waters of the fountains were flowing human bodies. I thought that the statues would step down and walk, that the pictures would move, that the walls would speak, that the oxen and other cattle would tell me strange news, and that the heavens and the sun's orb of glory would make a sudden annunciation ...

Thus bewildered (or rather stunned) with the cruel intensity of my search, though I found not the slightest vestige or footprint of what my desire sought, I strayed round and round the city. At length while promenading from door to door like some well-to-do idler, I found myself unexpectedly turning into the marketplace

(trans. Lindsay 1962, modified)

To be dully prosaic for a moment: what does Lucius *see*? He encounters stones, birds, trees, fountain waters, statues, pictures, walls, and cattle—but there is not one main verb of seeing in this whole passage. He considers (*considerabam*), believes (*crederem*), and encounters (*offenderem*), but he at most looks on participially (*aspiciens*) in a clause subordinate to what he believes. Moreover, the descriptions in this supposedly visual ecphrasis seem to highlight senses *other* than sight. He experiences Hypata by touch and by sound, stepping on the stones (*lapides quos offenderem*), listening to the birds (*aves quas audirem*). Imagination supplies further tactile and auditory experiences: the liquid flowing of the waters (*fontanos latices*),¹⁶ the speaking cattle and walls (*locuturos ... dicturas*), the oracular sun. The most visual element he imagines is the animation of inanimate representation: images will acquire motion, as statues and paintings walk (*incessuras*).¹⁷

¹⁶ This phrase, occurring here for the first time in Latin literature: *GCA* (Mal-Maeder 2001), 61 seems deliberately paradoxical: what would fountains flow with other than liquid? Cf. *latices simulatos fontis Averni*, Verg. *A.* 4,512.

¹⁷ Pace *GCA* (Mal-Maeder 2001), 61 on *statuas et imagines*, the second noun seems unlikely to be a pleonastic synonym for the first: Lucius imagines not merely that three-dimensional statues will become animate but that two-dimensional painted figures will rip themselves loose from the surface as well and become three-dimensional. That such

Although the first-time reader may not notice immediately amidst the fulsome description of what Lucius does *not* see, it is utterly impossible to draw a picture of the actual city of Hypata from these words or even to trace the most abstract pattern of his own movements within it: Lucius simply goes round and round in space (*circumibam*). Not only that—until we reach the statues and pictures, these cattle, birds, and trees have given us no particular reason to believe we are even *in* a city. His mother's old friend Byrrhena will soon boast to him that Hypata 'far excel[s] all other cities in temples, baths, and public works' (*templis et lavacris et ceteris operibus longe cunctas civitates antecellimus*, *Met.* 2,19,5).¹⁸ Lucius's description offers not one word about these standard public attractions in Hypata—though he does mention the culturally inappropriate *Pomerium*.¹⁹ Most readers do notice here that Lucius's account is profoundly shaped by his desire to see the results of magic at work.²⁰ The result, however, is that we readers tour the world of the narrator's mind: all of these elements of nature he imagines to be metamorphosed human beings. His text is a remarkably visual description of *not seeing*: the nouns are virtually invisible placeholders for their imagined human predecessors.

A corollary is perhaps less obvious: Lucius describes a city populated with everything *but* citizens: elements of nature, artistic representations,

was within the scope of the ancient imagination is demonstrated already on a cup by the Amasis Painter (Norber Schimmel collection, attributed by Beazley 1971, 67), in which the figure on a metope (possibly painted low relief sculpture, possibly only painted outline on a flat metope) is climbing down out of his architectural space. Von Bothmer 1985, 217–218, cat. 60, Side A, and color pl. 7 illustrates the vase and calls the figure 'daemonlike.'

¹⁸ Saïd 1994, 219 calls this 'standard praise' for a city. Only with Lucius's trial during the Festival of Laughter does it become clear that Hypata possesses a theatre, another 'hallmark of urban life.' (Saïd 1994, 221).

¹⁹ The *Pomerium* was originally the religiously consecrated and defined space of the city, which Rome's population soon outgrew. The term first appears in the *Golden Ass* at 1,21,3 where a joke about Milo implies a similar understanding: he lives outside not just the *Pomerium* but the whole city (*qui extra pomerium et urbem totam colit*), which would imply that parts identifiable as *urbs* have spilled beyond the original bounds of the *Pomerium*. In Lucius's fevered description here, however, the *Pomerium* is specifically bounded by *trees* (*arbores quae pomerium ambirent similiter foliatis*, *Met.* 2,1,4), which suggests its edge is right up against nature, although Grimal would take the *Pomerium* as 'un boulevard extérieur.' Cf. *GCA* (Mal-Maeder 2001), 61. Such a road might be both tree-lined and within recognizable city space, yet the contrast of 1,21 and 2,1 must generate some confusion in the reader.

²⁰ Compare for example Mathis (this volume), who takes this passage as the launching point of 'Lucius' Erotic Adventures.'

even multiple kinds of herd animals, but no actual humans. This fulsome description not only enacts the failure to see what Hypata really looks like—it further implies there is not one other human being to be seen on his whole tour. Only when the narrator reaches the provision-market (*forum cupidinis*),²¹ a generic marker of any city as opposed to the country, does the narrative re-enter the world of other people.

This description of the city is followed very quickly by that of the Diana and Actaeon sculpture group, noted above. Beyond the warning about curiosity almost all readers see in that ecphrasis, Lucius's viewing of the sculpture enacts his subjection to the dangerous and devouring gaze of the goddess—a subjection that alert readers can see, though the narrator cannot. One wonders also about its close connection to Lucius's city ecphrasis—could this be a response to just such a pairing of city ecphrasis and visual representation of ominous myth in Achilles Tatius? In that novel, the ecphrasis of Alexandria is soon followed by the appearance of a painting of Procne, Philomela, and Tereus, which is first described by Clitophon (5,3,4–7) and then, at her specific request, explained to Leucippe (5,5)—the ecphrasis that warns of the kidnapping to come. It is intriguing to speculate about a possible connection: an early date for Achilles, and not too late a date for the *Golden Ass*, would make it possible for Apuleius to be playing a variation here.²²

To these two ecphrasis opening Book 2, both cityscape and sculpture group, we can usefully contrast the detailed ecphrasis that opens Book 5, as Psyche, wafted from the cliff tops to the valley floor, awakens to a vision of her new home (*Met.* 5,1,2–5,2,3):

videt lucum proceris et vastis arboribus consitum, videt fontem vitreo latice perlucidum. medio luci meditullio prope fontis adlapsum domus regia est, aedificata non humanis manibus, sed divinis artibus. iam scies ab introitu primo dei cuiuspiam luculentum et amoenum videre te diversorium. nam summa laquearia citro et ebore curiose cavata subeunt aureae columnae, parietes omnes argenteo caelamine conteguntur, bestiis²³ et id genus pecudibus occurrentibus ob os introeuntium. mirus prorsum homo, immo semideus vel certe deus, qui magnae artis subtili-

²¹ Hanson 1989 gives the more accurate translation for *forum cupidinis*; cf. also *GCA* (Mal-Maeder 2001), 66.

²² Morales 2004, 5 argues for a second century date for Achilles, perhaps even the first half. Harrison 2000, 9–10 and *passim* would date the *Golden Ass* late in Apuleius's career, perhaps even in the 180s.

²³ *GCA* (Zimmerman et al. 2004), 117 notes that Hanson translates as though he had printed *bestiis*, so I have followed that text here.

tate tantum efferavit argentum. enimvero pavimenta ipsa lapide pretioso caesim deminuto in varia picturae genera discriminantur. vehementer iterum ac saepius beatos illos qui super gemmas et monilia calcant! iam ceterae partes longe lateque dispositae domus sine pretio pretiosae totique parietes solidati massis aureis splendore proprio coruscant, ut diem suum sibi domus faciat licet sole nolente: sic cubicula, sic porticus, sic ipsae valvae fulgurant. nec setius opes ceterae maiestati domus respondent, ut equidem illud recte videatur ad conversationem humanam magno Iovi fabricatum caeleste palatium.

invitata Psyche talium locorum oblectatione propius accessit et paulo fidentior intra limen sese facit. mox prolectante studio pulcherrimae visionis rimatur singula, et altrinsecus aedium horrea sublimi fabrica perfecta magnisque congesta gazis conspicit. nec est quicquam quod ibi non est. sed praeter ceteram tantarum divitiarum admirationem hoc erat praecipue mirificum, quod nullo vinculo, nullo claustro, nullo custode totius orbis thesaurus ille muniebatur. haec ei summa cum voluptate visenti offert sese vox quaedam corporis sui nuda et: ‘quid,’ inquit, ‘domina, tantis obstupescis opibus? tua sunt haec omnia ...’

She saw a grove, planted with huge, tall trees; she saw a glistening spring of crystal water.

At the midmost center of the grove beside the gliding stream is a royal palace, constructed not with human hands but by divine skills. You will know from the moment you enter that you are looking at the resplendent and charming residence of some god. High coffered ceilings, exquisitely carved from citron-wood and ivory, are supported on golden columns. All the walls are covered with silver reliefs, with wild beasts and herds of that kind meeting your gaze as you enter. It was indeed a miraculous man, or rather a demigod or even a god, who used the refinement of great art to make animals out of so much silver. Even the floors are zoned into different sorts of pictures made from precious stones cut in tiny pieces. Truly blessed—twice so and even more—are those who tread upon gems and jewelry! All the other quarters of the house throughout its length and breadth are likewise precious beyond price, and all the walls are constructed of solid gold masonry and sparkle with their own brilliance, so that the house creates its own daylight even though the sun deny his rays. The rooms, the colonnades, even the doors flash lightning.

Every other luxury too is equally matched with the house's magnificence, so that you may quite correctly think it a heavenly palace constructed for great Jupiter's use in his human visitations.

Psyche, attracted by the allurements of this beautiful palace, came closer, and as she gained a little more confidence, crossed the threshold. Soon her eagerness to look at such beautiful things drew her on to examine every object, and on the other side of the palace she spotted storerooms built with lofty craftsmanship and heaped high with vast treasures. Nothing exists which is not there. But beyond her wonderment at the enormous quantity of wealth, she found it especially amazing that there was not a single chain or lock or guard protecting this treasure-house of all the world. As she was gazing at all this with rapturous pleasure, a voice without a body came to her. 'Mistress,' it said, 'why are you so astounded at this great wealth? All this belongs to you ...'

Here the experience is relentlessly visual (*videt ... videt ... videre ... videatur*) as a clearly fictional/ allegorical character wakes up inside a sacro-idyllic landscape: here 'real' nature around a mirroring pool, in which is reflected a fairytale palace,²⁴ greets a mythic heroine, as sculpted nature and myth mirrored in an artificial stream in Byrrhaena's entry hall greeted the 'real' Lucius. A few observations: while this description allows readers to see more of what Psyche sees than in Lucius's ecphrasis of Hypata, the outlines still waver hazily. Color seems subordinate to glitter, for although ivory, gold, and silver have specific colors, their hues seem less important than the shimmering of virtually every surface.²⁵

The surfaces are animated in surprising ways as well. The sharp c-sounds here help carve out the silver reliefs on the walls: *parietes omnes argenteo caelamine conteguntur*. Most note the impossible wealth here: not even the Golden House of Nero had actual gold columns. Since this is a fairytale palace, most look to poetry and fiction, such as Ovid's palace of the Sun or Philostratus's description of a palace in India, as the visual repertoire from which the reader may draw precedents to imagine the scene.²⁶ Seeing this primarily as poetic hyperbole, though, may distract us from possible

²⁴ Cf. Mantero 1973, 52–65 for folk-tale parallels.

²⁵ Cf. Murgatroyd 1997, 358, 363.

²⁶ Note the silver engravings on the doors of Helius's palace of at Ov. *Met.* 2,5–6 (*nam Mulciber illic / aequora caelarat medias cingentia terras*). Philostr. *VA* 2,20 describes the palace at Taxila; see also below, note 30.

historical sources—and conceal play with the possibilities of scale. Relief wall panels of silver are every bit as improbable as gold columns—both would make poor building materials at full-scale. Comparison to near eastern wall reliefs in stone or brick is not really to the point. The technique might rather suggest miniature work: a jewel box could well show panels of silver relief articulated by engaged gold columns, such as can be seen on the late 4th CE century silver and gilt wedding casket of Projecta.²⁷ Cupid's palace resembles an inflated jewelry casket as much or more than it does previous literary palaces. Note also that these silver beasts rush to greet the viewer (*bestiis et id genus pecudibus occurrentibus ob os introeuntium*), just as Actaeon's dogs in the sculpture group of Book 2 rush, not at their master, but at the onlooking narrator Lucius.²⁸ A rising tricolon of possibilities describes the artist of this creation: *mirus prorsum homo, immo semideus vel certe deus*. The last must be the right answer, because the creator has in fact turned inanimate silver into living, ravaging beasts: *qui magnae artis subtilitate tantum efferavit argentum*.²⁹

Discussion of the floors has turned on whether the mind's eye should see a palace equipped with opus sectile or mosaic work. Cut stones shaped into pictures (*lapide pretioso caesim deminuto in varia picturae genera*) probably suggest mosaics, but both views can be argued—though literal-minded commentators usually then assure us that actual mosaics made of gems are unknown. Once again, however, if one imagines an originally miniature scale, gem mosaic in or on a silver and gold casket is eminently possible—until inflated to the size of a palace.

Finally, let us turn to the walls themselves, made from solid gold. Undoubtedly the description of Alcinous's palace in *Od.* 7,84ff. lies somewhere behind the vision here, and other literary exemplars may be sought, but a much more recent historical precedent may be nearer to hand. Note particularly that the gold walls seem to generate their own light, whether the sun is shining or not: *ut diem suum sibi domus faciat licet sole nolente*. This of course is not actually a property of gold—the light must come from some-

²⁷ The wedding casket of Projecta and Secundus, dated c. 380 CE and from the Esquiline Treasure, is now in the British Museum. Its sides show full length human figures between columns, while the sides of the lid show Cupid's riding sea creatures rendered at the same scale as the humans.

²⁸ Diana and her flanking dogs encounter the viewer *introeuntibus obvium* (*Met.* 2,4).

²⁹ *GCA* (Zimmerman et al. 2004), 118 discusses Apuleius's use of a novel etymology by which *efferavit* means 'to transform into wild animals.' Of course, the artist who can wreak this *metamorphosis* is none other than the author of the literary description, Apuleius himself.

where.³⁰ It seems here to come from or through the walls themselves—as light did in one of the wonders of Nero’s Golden House, the remarkable Temple of Fortuna, described by Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History* (Plin. *Nat.* 36,163):

Nerone principe in Cappadocia repertus est lapis duritia marmoris, candidus atque tralucens etiam qua parte fulvae inciderant venae, ex argumento phengites appellatus. hoc construxerat aedem Fortunae quam Seiani appellant, a Servio rege sacratam, amplexus aurea domo; quare etiam foribus opertis interdium claritas ibi diurna erat alio quam specularium modo tamquam inclusa luce, non transmissa.

In Nero’s reign a stone was discovered in Cappadocia with the hardness of marble, white and translucent even where yellow veins occurred. For this reason it was called phengites. Out of this Nero built the Temple of Fortune called Fortuna Seiani, consecrated by king Servius [Tullius], including it within his Golden House. Thus even when the doors were closed, during the day it was as bright as day inside—but not like specular stone [mica],³¹ for the light was trapped within, rather than transmitted.

Of course, the palace in Apuleius is even more remarkable: the light comes out even when the sun does not shine. Still, some influence of this natural wonder on the supernatural description of the palace seems possible.

Visual inflation is matched by rhetorical inflation. Structurally similar praise of interior space appears back in Book 2 in a short ecphrasis of Byrrhena’s dining room (*Met.* 2,19,1–2):

<mens>ae opipares citro et ebore nitentes, lecti aureis vestibus intecti, ampli calices variae quidem gratiae sed pretiositatis unius: hic vitrum fabre sigillatum, ibi crustallum inpunctum, argentum alibi clarum et aurum fulgurans et succinum mire cavatum et lapides ut bibas; et quicquid fieri non potest ibi est.

There were luxuriant tables gleaming with citron-wood and ivory, couches draped with golden cloth, generous cups of varied appeal but

³⁰ In the Temple of Helios in Taxila, discussed by Philostr. *VA* 2,24 (and cited by Fick-Michel 1991, 175, who sees general eastern influence on Cupid’s palace in Apuleius), the gold walls shine out *like* the sun (ὕπαστράπτει χρυσὸς ἀγλὴν ἐκδιδοὺς ἐοικυῖαν ἄκτινι), but that does not preclude the sun being the ultimate source of light there.

³¹ For the evidence showing that *specularis lapis* was mica, cf. Bailey 1932, 18, 130–133, 266–269 and the preceding chapters in Plin. *Nat.* 36,160–162.

alike in costliness—here skillfully moulded glass, there flawless crystal, elsewhere shining silver and glistening gold and marvellously hollowed-out amber and precious stones made to drink from—in short, everything impossible was there.

(trans. Hanson)

Here are the same luxuries—citron, ivory, silver, gold, and precious stones—deployed at more realistic scale. Lucius praises all of these—but hurries on to conversation about magic.

In Book 5, sight pulls Psyche into the glittering, bejewelled space of the palace. The eye which has already penetrated through rooms and colonnades³² now yields to the temptations of vision (*prolectante studio pulcherrimae visionis*, *Met.* 5,2,1) and pulls the body after it into storerooms of treasure on the far side of the palace (*altrinsecus aedium*, *Met.* 5,2,1). The old woman describes Psyche's motion with the phrase *intra limen sese facit*. The *GCA* commentators regard this as 'probably colloquial,' but whatever its source, it seems quite abrupt. After a long zoom shot into the interior of the palace from an external vantage point, the narrative moves Psyche at a great speed through the palace and apparently out the back to another building or at least architecturally distinct area of storehouses chock-a-block with treasures. The narrative rings a fascinating change upon Lucius's previous description of Byrrhaena's house. His hyperbolic praise of her arrangements claims 'everything impossible was there' (*quicquid fieri non potest ibi est*, *Met.* 2,19,2), yet few readers will pause to think how large the category of *adynata* might be. In the storerooms of this palace by contrast, the narrator tells us that 'nothing exists which is not there' (*nec est quicquam quod ibi non est*, *Met.* 5,2,1). The effect is a reversal of interior and exterior: all of existence anywhere else lies within a contained space subordinate to the palace. Cupid's palace is a Klein bottle, a single-sided container with no boundary.

³² I am unsure whether to follow Hanson's reading of *valvae* here or *GCA* (Zimmerman et al. 2004), 121 and the second hand in F in reading *balneae*. To the palaeographical argument the *GCA* editors add the fact that baths in the palace are mentioned again later in the tale of Cupid and Psyche—but this argument privileges the old woman as omniscient narrator over the focalisation through Psyche's viewpoint here (precisely the opposite of the *GCA* editors' own argument with regard to *magno Iovi* p. 122 that all the language of seeming and perception indicates Psyche's perception). One could certainly see rooms, colonnades, and doors from outside the palace—but it is far more doubtful that baths would be distinguishable from other kinds of rooms to such an exterior view.

Yet paradoxically, this bounded space is simultaneously defined by its lack of the usual markers of boundedness for wealth: ‘there was not a single chain or lock or guard protecting this treasure-house of all the world’ (*nullo vinculo, nullo claustro, nullo custode totius orbis thesaurus ille muniebatur*, *Met.* 5,2,2). At this very moment, the climax of a relentlessly visual experience wherein Psyche’s visual pleasure is at its height (*ei summa cum voluptate visenti*, *Met.* 5,2,3), comes a sudden and complete shift in sensual experience: a voice bereft of any embodiment and therefore any visual dimension (*vox quaedam corporis sui nuda*, *ibid.*) speaks. And what does it say? *tua sunt haec omnia* (*ibid.*)—an unmistakable echo of Byrrhena’s words to Lucius after his very powerful but not necessarily perceptive visual experience of the Diana and Actaeon group, *tua sunt... cuncta, quae vides* (*Met.* 2,5,1).

Some provisional conclusions about Apuleius’s play with depiction are in order. Unlike some critics of the Greek novels, few or none of Apuleius’s readers have ever been inclined to dismiss his ecphraseis as interruptions of the narrative flow or empty decoration. A general thematic relevance to curiosity and desire for ownership or control has always been apparent. At the same time, these ecphraseis are clearly additions to the pre-existing narrative. We have no reason to believe an earlier Greek narrative spent much time on a description of the city of Hypata, and nothing of the whole Cupid and Psyche tale has any precedent. Apuleius plays the game under rules much like those of the *melete*: he rejects no ‘historical’ feature of the earlier narrative apart from the very ending, but he re-writes motivations, adds speeches and descriptions, and fundamentally re-imagines the whole narrative.

Both examples meditate on vision and desire, but the erotics of vision in these two ecphraseis are almost diametrically opposed. In Book 2, Lucius’s pre-existing desire prevents him from actually experiencing the sights with which he is presented: desire trumps sense experience. For Psyche, however, vision and desire are virtually equated: to see is to desire, with no intermediation.

With their extremes, these ecphraseis also test the limits of the tactile dimensions of ancient theories of vision. Theories of intromission and extramission, of *simulacra* flowing into the viewer’s eyes or rays emerging from them to touch the objects of sight, competed and sometimes converged in antiquity and in particular in the ancient novels.³³ Lucius’s tour of the city

³³ For a particularly stimulating discussion of these, cf. Bartsch 2006, 57–83.

raises the question: if the image of what is *not* seen seizes the viewer's soul more powerfully than what *is* seen, what does that imply for haptic theories of vision? Lucius's eyes touch nothing—and nothing touches them. Psyche's eyes, by contrast, are a tractor beam: once locked on target, they can be pulled in turn into a world where the visual seems to reign supreme—but where in fact the unseen, embodied in the husband who is to be experienced by every sense but the visual, is far more important.

And these are but a few steps along to the way to the final visions which all readers of the *Golden Ass* must eventually contemplate, both Isis and the worshipper she has manufactured out of our narrator. Neither of these ephrases on its own will tell us what the playful novelist intended by that ending, but both do show us the virtuoso Latin sophist pushing against the very bounds of sensual experience and its describability.