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Apuleius' Invisible Ass: Encounters with the Unseen in the 'Metamorphoses'. By Geoffrey Benson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. [xi] + 299.

Much scholarly attention has been paid in recent decades to the only complete Latin novel that has survived from classical antiquity, namely Apuleius' eleven-book *Metamorphoses* or *Golden Ass* (*Asinus Aureus*), a double title in use since Late Antiquity. Geoffrey Benson contributes an innovative and welcome addition to our understanding of the novel. To readers working on Apuleius the volume's title might perhaps recall the heading of a chapter in Carver's book on the survival and reception of the *Metamorphoses*, which deals with its progressive disappearance during the Early Middle Ages.¹ B.'s book, however, explores an aspect of the novel that has so far remained underappreciated, since it focuses on the theme of invisibility, which B. considers one of the main themes of the *Metamorphoses* from beginning to end.

The volume is divided into six main chapters preceded by an accessible Introduction, in which B. gives a brief account of Apuleius' life, novel, and the author's status as a Platonic philosopher, before focusing on invisibility as a theme. This discussion considers first Greco-Roman evidence, such as the invisible Homeric deities, the ring of Gyges, and the spells of practitioners of magic, and then seeks to assess Apuleius' interest in invisibility, while also taking into account the popularity of invisibility on the modern collective imagination. Apart from a passage in *De dog. Plat.* 1.5 p. 190–91, where Apuleius describes the incorporeal Platonic god as ἀόρατον (“invisible”) after Plato (cf. e.g. *Phd.* 85e; *Ti.* 36e), and a reference to daemons *quorum forma inuisitata* (“whose appearance is invisible”) in *Flor.* 10.3, direct linguistic evidence of Apuleius' fondness for invisibility is rather scant. B. acknowledges that in the second century AD the Roman vocabulary of invisibility was not as rich as the Greek one. B. suggests that this lack has hitherto prevented scholars from ascertaining

¹ Robert Carver, *The Protean Ass: The Metamorphoses of Apuleius from Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Oxford, 2007), 47–60 (“The Invisible Ass”).

the importance of invisibility as a theme in the *Metamorphoses*, noting how this is far less prominent in the other surviving ass-story, entitled Λούκιος ἢ ὄνος (“Lucius or the Ass”, hereafter simply *Onos*), which is transmitted in the Lucianic corpus. In what follows, B. summarises the book’s content, highlighting how his enquiry will position himself in the wake of Winkler’s idea that the finale of the novel might be aporetic,² as it does not allow readers to determine clearly whether Lucius’ enthusiasm for the Egyptian mysteries of Isis and Osiris in Book 11 should be taken seriously or not. B. shows excellent command of the relevant bibliography in the Introduction and throughout the whole volume. Particularly noteworthy is footnote 97, which covers almost entirely p. 26 and part of p. 27, where B. offers a very helpful overview of the monographic studies devoted to the *Metamorphoses* after Winkler’s *Auctor & Actor*.

Chapter 1 deals with the elusive identity of the narrator in the so-called prologue of the *Metamorphoses* (*Met.* 1.1). B. examines this passage, attempting to reconstruct the impressions it could have elicited from first- and second-time readers of the novel, and summarises the scholarly debate on the prologue before proposing his own interpretation. Attention is paid to the *Onos* and its possible source, i.e. perhaps the Greek *Metamorphoseis* ascribed to Lucius of Patras in Phot. *Bibl.* 129. Here it would have also been interesting to discuss the verbal similarity between the prologue and Photius’ summary of the *Metamorphoseis* in *Bibl.* 129, since this may point to Apuleius’ possible refashioning of his Greek model, as noted e.g. in Mason, Dowden, and Graverini.³ B. applies to the prologue Barthes’ poststructuralist theories about the annihilation of the authorial voice,⁴ and borrows Dolar’s terminology to depict the narrator’s voice in the prologue as disembodied or acousmatic.⁵ This is a voice coming from an unidentifiable speaker, and modern audiences could perhaps be

² John Winkler, *Auctor & Actor: A Narratological Reading of Apuleius’s Golden Ass* (Berkeley, 1985), 124–25.

³ Hugh Mason, “Greek and Latin Versions of the Ass-Story,” *ANRW* 2.34.2 (1994), 1673, 1692; Ken Dowden, “Prologic, Predecessors, and Prohibitions,” in *A Companion to the Prologue of Apuleius’ Metamorphoses*, ed. Ahuvia Kahane and Andrew Laird (Oxford, 2001), 125–26; and Luca Graverini, *Apuleio. Metamorfosi. Volume I (Libri I–III). Testo critico e Nota al testo di Lara Nicolini* (Milan, 2019), 139–140.

⁴ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image-Music-Text*, ed. and transl. Stephen Heath (London, 1977), 142–48.

⁵ Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006).

familiar with this idea from cinema when thinking, for example, of the narrator voiced by Alec Baldwin at the beginning of Wes Anderson's *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001). B. originally argues that ancient readers of the novel might have identified the narrator disembodied voice with a daemonic being, and draws attention to Apuleius' description of other acousmatic voices in the description of Socrates' personal daemon in *De deo Soc.* 20 p. 165–66, and the *uox ... corporis sui nuda* welcoming Psyche to Cupid's palace in *Met.* 5,2,3–4. B. observes that comparable ideas emerge from the description of daemonic assistants (πάρεδροι), usually deceased people, in the *Greek Magical Papyri*. Perhaps it would have been interesting to explore Apuleius' explanation of the daemonic nature of human souls and the fact that these souls could become harmful daemons according to their conduct in life (cf. *De deo Socr.* 15 p. 150–54); this idea features in Tert. *De anim.* 56–57, where he discusses the non-Christian belief that the souls of the dead were coerced by practitioners of magic. B. does not ultimately claim that the speaker of the prologue is a daemon but “there is still something daemonic” about it (p. 47). Although B. admits that this thought-provoking hypothesis is speculative (p. 51), he is right in emphasising that the prologue seems to elicit the readership's *curiositas* by intentionally obscuring the identity of the narrating voice.ⁱ

Chapter 2 seeks to highlight the relevance of invisibility in the plot of the *Metamorphoses* by focusing on the inconspicuous profile of Lucius-ass. B. argues that especially after Lucius' accidental theriomorphosis (*Met.* 3.24), he can easily pry into the lives of the humans he encounters. In order to apply the idea of invisibility to Lucius-ass, B. needs to use a figurative sense of this concept. For what is actually invisible is not the donkey, but Lucius' human identity disguised behind the asinine shape: the mishaps of Lucius-ass drive the main plot points of the *Metamorphoses* (and the *Onos*) up until his anamorphosis in the finale. To corroborate the association between Lucius' theriomorphosis and his invisibility, B. draws on recipes for invisibility from the *Greek Magical Papyri*, but the two concepts are not entirely coterminous and the comparison seems to remain a little vague in the reviewer's opinion. B. then argues for some possible Platonic ramification of Lucius-ass' status as an

unrecognised observer. This might have been meant to offer ancient readers some insight on human (mis)behaviour, sparking a moral debate in a similar way as the story of Gyges' ring in Plato's *Republic*.

Chapter 3 focuses on the two-book inserted novella of Cupid and Psyche (*Met.* 4.28–6.24), considering its role in the economy of the novel and the hidden meanings it may conceal. First, B. takes into account the portrayals of invisible figures in the novella: Zephyr and especially Psyche's mysterious husband, Cupid. Second, B. discusses the manner in which Psyche attempts to envision the invisible once she is in Cupid's divine realm, noting the relevance of the concept of *phantasia* as theorised in ancient literary criticism, and the negative consequences brought about by her desire to perceive her daemonic husband through physical senses. B. recognises the presence of fault lines between the so-called *bella fabella* (as the tale is described at *Met.* 6.25.1) and Apuleius' philosophical works, arguing that Psyche's adventures do not offer a positive Platonic *exemplum*. B. accepts the analogies between the story of Lucius and that of Psyche on different levels, and that the tale can be seen as a *mise en abyme*. However, he attracts attention to the possibility that the lowly narrator of the novella, an old drunk woman, might actually be possessed by the same daemonic speaker of the prologue. The very length of the novella may cause a sort of disruption in the main events of the ass-novel, which according to B. might draw the readership's attention to the layers of fictionality in the novel, in a way that calls to mind the Platonic arrangement of the universe described in Apuleius' philosophical writings. In sum, Platonic undertones can be clearly detected in the novella – similarly to the novel – but its overall sense is difficult to grasp and was perhaps intended to be so.

Chapter 4 turns to the abundant references to corporality and descriptions of bodily parts throughout the *Metamorphoses*, the presence thereof B. identifies as a possible counterargument to the relevance of invisibility. Although rather speculative, the argument is cleverly articulated. B. guides readers through a compelling analysis of various ekphrastic and dramatic depictions of physicality in the novel, skilfully tracing their possible models, comparable texts, and discussing the

relevant bibliography. What, at first, may appear as a detour from the earlier discussion of the invisibility theme, is then incorporated within the main argument through an allegoric, Platonising reading of this corporal dimension: by focusing on the brute, ever-changing, material world in which most of the plot is set from Book 1 to 10, the narrator may be underscoring *ex negatiuo* the importance of a higher, concealed dimension, which was mainly accessible to philosophically minded readers.

Chapter 5 offers an analysis of Book 11. This contains the novel's finale and differs significantly from the ironic and erotic tone of the ending of the *Onos*, given the emphasis on the Egyptian mysteries. As B. points out, there is a notable difference from the way the narrator tells the story in the previous 10 books. For the so-called *Isis Book* does not offer clear depictions of Lucius' religious experiences and his encounters with the divine when he dreams of Isis or during his initiations into the mysteries of Isis and Osiris. This lack of clarity is achieved through a gradual shift from an internal to an external focalisation, especially during Lucius' interaction with the divine, as B. carefully shows by commenting on several passages of Book 11. Instead of siding with the prevailing seriocomic or satirical interpretations, B. reprises Winkler's argument that the finale is constructed to be cryptic and ambiguous. The narrative in the *Isis Book* stimulates but does not satisfy the curiosity of Apuleius' keen reader – explicitly addressed by the narrator as *studiose lector* at *Met.* 11.23.5 – since it does not make it possible to visualise Lucius' actions or his intention in the same clear way as in the previous parts of the novel. Likewise, B. argues that a Platonic reading offers no pathway to an unequivocal understanding of Lucius' mystical experiences. This intentionally cryptic tone would obviously fit well the relevance of mystery cults in the *Isis Book*.

In Chapter 6, B. draws on the results of the previous chapters in order to raise some wider interpretative questions about the possible sense of the *Metamorphoses* in the light of his aporetic reading. Invisibility – although loosely intended – is an important theme, since readers of the novel are required to visualise the fictional world in which the story unfolds. From a Platonic viewpoint, B. suggests that the novel may be considered as a “daemonic fiction” (p. 240). In fact, this does not only

serve to divert readers, but it presents signals which may enable some to seek transcendent, divine levels of reality through allegory. The chapter is followed by a bibliography and a comprehensive general index, allowing to handily track individual topics, passages, as well as ancient and modern authors.

In conclusion, B. deserves praise for contributing a stimulating argument to the scholarship on Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, which allows both students and expert readers to appreciate the role of invisibility in the novel and explore it from a new perspective.

Leonardo Costantini

Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg

ⁱ Towards the end of Chapter 1, B. looks into the much-debated reading *Madaurensem* in *Met.* 11.27.9, which seemingly points to an overlap between the protagonist Lucius and the author Apuleius. On this technique and its effects, see also Ken Dowden and Amanda Myers, “The Visibility of the Author in the Ancient Novel,” in *Dynamics of Ancient Prose*, ed. Thea Thorsen and Stephen Harrison (Berlin/Boston, 2018), 89–104 and esp. 89–91; 94–95, discussing how putting the author’s identity in the foreground serves to break the suspension of disbelief.