

PLATONICA IN THE *METAMORPHOSES* OF APULEIUS¹

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Apuleius is now best known as the author of a comic romance, but he prided himself on being a Platonic philosopher. In the *Metamorphoses* Apuleius has reshaped the old story of a man transformed into an ass so as to culminate in a vision of salvation. The account in Book 11 of Lucius' restoration to human shape and subsequent initiations is presented in terms of cult symbols and service. The language and incidents of the preceding books, however, reveal an abundance of Platonic concepts and motifs.² This paper will consider how Apuleius' philosophic concerns are expressed in the *Metamorphoses*, in particular

¹ An abbreviated version of this paper was delivered at the 1969 meeting of the APA. References, unless otherwise noted, are to the text of the *Metamorphoses* edited by Helm (ed. tertia cum add., Leipzig 1955).

² Earlier attempts to interpret the tale of Cupid and Psyche in terms of the myth of Eros in the *Phaedrus* have lately been summarized with approval by Pierre Grimal in the introduction to his edition of this tale in the "Érasme" series (Paris 1963) pp. 12-14. An interpretation of the whole of the *Metamorphoses* as a philosophic allegory has been put forth recently by R. Thibau, "Les Métamorphoses d'Apulée et la Théorie Platonicienne de l'Erôs," *Studia Philosophica Gandensia* 3 (1965) 89-144. Thibau finds encoded references to philosophic doctrine throughout the adventures. Thus, for example, Lucius' host in Hypata, Milo, is identified with Milo of Croton as a representative of Pythagoreanism. The name of the city, Hypata, which appears in the *Republic* (443D) as the term for a musical string and is connected with the noetic by Plutarch (*Quaest. Platon.* 9), is taken to suggest the direct pursuit of the divine, without the arduous progression through philosophic stages. Thibau's work is often illuminating, but, like Merkelbach's Isiac interpretation, in striving for an excessive consistency of symbolic significance, it loses touch with the character and force of the narrative.

A number of Italian scholars have taken, I believe, a sounder approach. B. M. Portogalli, "I problemi della critica apuleiana," *Cultura e Scuola* 2 No. 8 (1963) 44-50, in a critical survey of some of the recent work on Apuleius, argues for the need to study the *Metamorphoses* from the basis of the philosophic ideas developed by Apuleius in his other writings. In a separate essay, "Sulle fonti della concezione teologica e demonologica di Apuleio," *SCO* 12 (1963) 227-41, Portogalli tries to define the distinctive

in Book 10, the concluding stage of the adventures of the Ass. We can gain an understanding of his philosophic interests from his *Apology* and from the speech *De deo Socratis*, the only one of the four philosophic works attributed to Apuleius which can be accepted with assurance as authentic.³

The numerous references to Plato's works in the *Apology* suggest Apuleius' continuous reading of the Dialogues, and give plausibility to recognizing reflections of them in the *Metamorphoses*. In *Apology* 25 Apuleius argues that *magus* is the Persian word for *sacerdos*, and he cites *Alcibiades I* (121E) as authority that the Persians required a prince to be taught *μαγεία*. Plato crowns the list of those attacked by the ignorant as *magi*, because *providentiam mundi curiosius vestigant et impensius deos celebrant* (*Apol.* 27). Apuleius explains his having a divine image made of wood which he addresses as *βασιλεύς* in accordance with Platonic teaching.⁴ The emphasis in the *Apology* is on Plato as a philosopher of the divine, and Apuleius closely associates his own devotion as an initiate with his pursuits as a philosopher (*Apol.* 64): *ceterum Platonica familia nihil nouimus nisi festum et laetum et sollemne et superum et caeleste*. This is in keeping both with the tendencies of second century Platonism and with the combination of philosophic and cultic material in the *Metamorphoses*.

philosophic position of Apuleius, considering his works together. She sees in the *Metamorphoses* the expression of a religious view close to that of Plutarch.

C. Moreschini, "La demonologia medioplatonica et le *Metamorfosi* di Apuleio," *Maia* 17 (1965) 30-46, maintains that the tale of Cupid and Psyche was elaborated by Apuleius under the influence of Middle-Platonic demonology. The *Metamorphoses* as a whole, however, he regards as reflecting Apuleius' movement away from the Platonism of which he was so proud at the time of the *Apology*, toward unphilosophic, mystic salvation.

³ B. Axelsson, *Akzentuierender Klauselrhythmus bei Apuleius: Bemerkungen zu den Schriften De Platone und De Mundo* [Vetenskaps-Soc. i Lund årsbok (1952) 5-20] (Lund 1953), demonstrated that the clausulae in *De Platone et eius Dogmate* and *De Mundo* include an accented rhythm, earlier thought to have first appeared in the third century A.D. The two works are by the same author but differ from the four works certainly by Apuleius in rhythm and in other points of verbal usage. J. Redfors, *Echtheitskritische Untersuchung der apuleischen Schriften De Platone und De mundo* (Lund 1960), examines with great thoroughness all aspects of the question. Despite his cautious *non liquet*, the evidence he presents rules out accepting these treatises as Apuleian. The Apuleian authorship of *De deo Socratis* is, on the other hand, well established, not only by the manuscript tradition and testimonia, but also by the closeness in language, style, and clausulae to the principal works.

⁴ In *Apol.* 64-65 Apuleius cites *Phdr.* 247E, *Epp.* 2.312E, and *Lg.* 12.955E.

In the *Apology*, Apuleius also indicates that he accepts from Plato the belief in *daemones* (*Apol.* 43), a subject he treats more fully in *De deo Socratis*. The title is somewhat misleading, in that explication of the *signum* of Socrates is subordinate to a broader discussion of the doctrine of *daemones*. The nature of daemons as *animalia* intermediate between gods and men and providing communication between them is first set forth in more or less theoretical terms. Apuleius then discusses the consequences for human practices of worship and divination. He concludes with an exhortation to turn away from external appearances and cultivate wisdom, the perfection of what is divine within us. Concern for one's *genius* should be the impetus for the philosophic life, of which Socrates is the example to be imitated.

As Giovanni Barra has shown,⁵ the relationship of *De deo Socratis* and the *Metamorphoses* can be seen in Apuleius' continued concern with the separation of man from the divine and with the search to bridge this chasm. It is through *daemones*, Apuleius explains, that both magic and the mysteries have their efficacy. It is the movement from magic, as an attempt to manipulate the divine for human ends, to the mysteries, a reverent joining with the divine, which marks the scope of the *Metamorphoses*.

The way in which Apuleius characterizes the telling of stories in the *Metamorphoses* suggests that we look for more than their literal meaning. The tale of Cupid and Psyche is told by an old serving-woman in an attempt to comfort Charite (4.27), just as Aristomenes, in the story which opens the *Metamorphoses*, along with the other assistance he offers his bedeviled friend, tries to cheer him up with stories, *fabulis permulcere* (1.7). The verb *permulcere* recurs in the *Metamorphoses* in significant contexts. It is used of Pan when he offers good advice to Psyche after Cupid has abandoned her (5.25/122, 27), and of the priest who checks Lucius' impatience to be initiated (11.21): *spei melioris solaciis alioquin anxium mihi permulcebat animum*. The use,

⁵ G. Barra, "Il valore e il significato del *De deo Socratis* di Apuleio," *AFLN* 9 (1960-61) 67-119. Barra accepts the view of *De Platone* and *De Mundo* as earlier works of Apuleius. He traces an increasingly elaborate treatment of demonology from these works to the *Apology* and *De deo Socratis*. Much of his research and interpretation is presented in an abbreviated form in the introduction and commentary published with the text and translation of *De deo Socratis* by Barra together with V. Pannuti, *AFLN* 10 (1962-63) 81-141.

then, of *permulcere* in the opening lines of the *Metamorphoses* suggests more than meaningless diversion (I.I): *At ego tibi sermone isto Milesio varias fabulas conseram auresque tuas benivolas lepido susurro permulceam*. *Permulcere* can translate the Greek ἐπάδειν. The stories delight the ears, but like the charms which Socrates recommends to Charmides (157A), they can also implant σωφροσύνη with fair words, and like the charm of which Socrates speaks in the *Phaedo* (77E), they can comfort the child within us. The *Metamorphoses*, as a whole, like the tale of Cupid and Psyche within it, can be both entertaining and a parable of hope.

The opening story of the *Metamorphoses* tells of the death of Socrates. In this Socrates, however, bodily desires overrun his intellect and his apparent survival after death is a grim hoax. The tale introduces the main themes of the *Metamorphoses*, curiosity, sex, and subservience to fortune, and sets them in contrast with the goals of philosophic excellence. That Apuleius intends us to ponder this contrast is brought out, I believe, by the return at the very end of the Ass's adventures to the example of the death of Socrates.

Apuleius' view of metamorphosis has an affinity with Plato's picture of a soul coming to inhabit an animal body, which forms part of the mythic accounts of the experience of ψυχαί between rounds of earthly existence.⁶ We may compare Apuleius' announced intention to present *figuras fortunasque hominum in alias imagines conversas et in se rursus mutuo nexu refectas* (I.I) with the description in the *Phaedrus* (249B) of how souls are gathered to make a choice of a new life: ἐνθα καὶ εἰς θηρίου βίον ἀνθρωπίνην ψυχὴ ἀφικνεῖται, καὶ ἐκ θηρίου ὅς ποτε ἄνθρωπος ἦν πάλιν εἰς ἄνθρωπον. In whatever way we understand such καλοὶ λόγοι in Plato, it is clear, from the emphasis on judgment of the souls and on the choice of a new life that the doctrine of transmigration serves as a moral parable. The animal is a symbol for the absence of guiding intelligence over the passions and appetites. Thus in the *Phaedo* (81E) those who are dominated by γαστριμαργία and ὕβρις and φιλοποσία are said to pass into the form of asses and other such beasts. Like such transmigration, Lucius' transformation into an ass follows a descent *ad serviles voluptates* (*Met.* II.I5).

⁶ *Phd.* 81A–82B; *Resp.* 617D–620D; *Phdr.* 248C–249C; *Tim.* 42C, 91E–92B. On sources of and variations within these expressions of the doctrine of transmigration see M. V. Bacigalupo, "Terimorfismo e Trasmigrazione," *Filosofia* 16 (1965) 267–90.

Various forms of greed occur in the *Metamorphoses*, but it is lust which predominates. The ass was noted in antiquity for its large phallus, and the use of *ὄνος*, *asinus*, and *asellus* to refer to lusty males is well attested.⁷ This association provides the basis for the conclusion of the *Λούκιος ἢ Ὀνος*, an epitome of what was in all likelihood Apuleius' source. In this Greek version, Lucius, restored to human form, returns to the woman so enamored of him as an ass. She throws him out in disgust on finding him no better equipped than a monkey.

The two elaborately described scenes of the lovemaking of the protagonist, with Fotis in Book 2 (15-17) and with the *matrona* in Book 10 (19-22), are adapted by Apuleius from his Greek model. The two scenes are placed symmetrically with respect to one another and a recurrence of certain details reinforces the impression that they are meant to be compared.⁸ In the interim, the male partner has been transformed. The form of an ass is, however, the perfect expression of Lucius' sexuality. The metamorphosis changes his appearance, but it serves to objectify rather than alter his nature.

Furthermore, the transformation suggests the shifting appearances of the world through which the hero moves. This theme is developed through numerous incidents involving disguises and deception. It is only through the final transformation, from man into *mystes*, that Lucius escapes from the precarious world of appearance to embrace the divine revelation of a secure reality.

The encounter between the Ass and the *matrona* is the central event in the final sequence of adventures, comprising Book 10, in which the

⁷ For the evidence of the association of the ass with strong sexual desire see F. Olck, "Esel," RE 61 (1906) 634 ff. J.-G. Préaux, "Deus Christianorum Onocoetes," *Homages à Léon Herrmann* (Bruxelles 1960) 639-54, discusses the obscene use of the ass as part of an analysis of anti-Christian parodies. These sexual associations may be connected with the much earlier role of the ass as the object of a fertility cult, in the second millenium, prior to the spread of horses, on which see the excellent study by A. H. Krappe, "'Ἀπόλλων Ὀνος," CP 42 (1947) 223-34. A comprehensive survey of almost all the associations of the ass in antiquity is included, somewhat confusedly, in an analysis of the stories of the man's loss of immortality through this animal by W. Deonna, "L'Asin," RBP 34 (1956) 5-46, 337-64, 623-58.

⁸ In each case Lucius returns to his room to find the woman has made careful preparations (37, 9; 252, 5). Measures to insure privacy from slaves are mentioned in each (37, 11; 252, 13). Fotis administers wine to heighten passion, just as the *matrona* applies *oleum balsaminum* (37, 21; 252, 17). Both times the woman is the more aggressive (39, 5; 254, 3).

Ass passes into the possession of two brothers, a gourmet chef and a confectioner, and their master, Thiasus. This sequence is set between two stories involving doctors. The first (10.2–12) is a variation of the story of Phaedra, of a stepmother sick with a forbidden passion. It is introduced as a tragedy, but it has a happy ending. We are told in a play on lines of Vergil that the doctors cannot diagnose the stepmother's illness, but it is the cleverness of the doctor from whom she seeks poison for her stepson that prevents the tragedy. Believing that medicine should be devoted to human health, he substitutes a sleeping potion for the desired poison.

The sale of the Ass to the cooks follows, introduced by the remark (10, 13): *At ego tunc temporis talibus fatorum fluctibus volutabar*. The Ass returns in various ways to human behavior. He feasts on the delicacies men enjoy, he drinks wine, sleeps in a human bed, and finally makes love with a *matrona quaedam pollens et opulens* (10.19).

The juxtaposition of the clever doctor and the cooks marks this change in the Ass's fortunes as fraudulent. The contrast between medicine, which rests on a true understanding of human good, and cookery, a knack of pandering to man's appetites, is developed by Plato in the *Gorgias*.⁹ In the possession of the chefs and Thiasus, the Ass becomes human in a purely animal sense. Hence the irony of Lucius' remark after he has been entrusted to a trainer who teaches him table manners and how to order servants about (10.17): *atque haec omnia perfacile oboediebam, quae nullo etiam monstrante scilicet facerem*. Such "human" tricks are those of a trained ass.

The pleasures of this apparent upswing of fortune are soon doused by the plan to exhibit the Ass copulating with a woman convicted of multiple murders as the climax of the "games" his master is to give. The tale of the condemned woman's crimes (10.13–28) balances the "Phaedra" story. Having taken revenge on a supposed rival, she decides to dispose of her husband and, like the stepmother, turns to poison. In this case the doctor is compliant, though she tricks him into drinking some of his own medicine.

The contrast between the two doctors seems to show that even a true *τέχνη* is not secure against corruption.¹⁰ In order to avoid

⁹ Plato, *Grg.* 463E–466A; 500B–E; 517D–518B; 521E–522E.

¹⁰ Suggested by Thibau (above, note 2) 131.

payment and to acquire the entire inheritance for herself, the condemned woman treats her own daughter and the doctor's widow to a poisoned lunch, thus converting cookery as well as medicine to murder. The rapid profusion of deaths in this story is ludicrous, but it is a macabre comedy, bringing us back to the corrupt and violent world of the preceding books of the novel.

The scene of lovemaking between the Ass and the *matrona* is richly laid. Luxurious tapestries glow in the light of candles. There is an abundance of perfume, recalling the place of *κομμωτική*, or *unguentaria*, as it is termed in the *De Platone* (2.9), in the scheme of the pseudo-technae in the *Gorgias* (465B). The repeated comparison with Pasiphae brings out the insatiability of the *matrona*, which may be associated with a Platonic view that pleasure can never satisfy desire (10.22):¹¹

illa uero quotiens ei parcens nates recellebam, accedens totiens nisu rabido et spinam prehensens meam adplicitione nexu inhaerebat, ut hercules etiam deesse mihi aliquid ad supplendam eius libidinem crederem nec Minotauri matrem frustra delectatam putarem adultero mugiente.

Thiasus, the name of the owner of the Ass during this adventure, signifies a Dionysiac band, and ithyphallic asses are frequently included in representations of a *θίασος*.¹² The joyousness of exuberant potency is juxtaposed with the Platonic sense of the ass as an expression of uncontrolled passion. The latter implies a standard of moderation by which the former can be measured, as if, to paraphrase the comment on the frenzy of the Syrian priests (8.27), men, in the presence of divinity, were not wont to become better, but to become asses.

The Dionysiac associations of the ass point to an interpretation of the *munus* given by Thiasus as a debased religious celebration. It is given in the theater at Corinth. Three acts are planned, and the first two are described as the Ass waits his turn (10.29-32). A group dance for boys and girls is followed by an elaborate mime of the Judgment of Paris, the high point of which is the appearance of Venus (10.31):

super has introcessit alia, uisendo decore praepollens, gratia coloris ambrosei designans Venerem, qualis fuit Venus, cum fuit uirgo, nudo et

¹¹ The *matrona* is compared to Pasiphae also in 10.19/251, 25. For the Platonic view see especially *Grg.* 493B.

¹² See Olck (above, note 7) 669-75.

intecto corpore perfectam formositatem professa, nisi quod tenui pallio bombycino inumbrabat spectabilem pubem.

Although described in witty and sensual phrases, the mime is a travesty of what truly deserves wonder and adoration.

The motif of impersonating Venus is first introduced in the *Metamorphoses* in connection with Fotis (2.17):

laciniis cunctis suis renudata crinibusque dissolutis ad hilarem lasciuam in speciem Veneris, quae marinos fluctus subit, pulchre reformata, paulisper etiam glabellum feminal rosea palmula potius obumbrans de industria quam tegens uerecundia.

Psyche also played the role of the goddess, albeit unwillingly (4.28). Moreover, the story of Cupid and Psyche concludes with a scene which is placed in a theater and during which Venus dances (6.23-24). But there the dance is part of the celebration for Psyche who, having endured her wanderings and trials, is made immortal and joined to Cupid in everlasting marriage, whereas here it is a prelude to a mockery of marriage,¹³ an exhibition of bestiality.

The mime of a wanton Venus, bribing Paris "to sell his judgment for the profit of his pleasure together with the destruction of his race," thus draws together a thread running through the entire novel. This figure of earthly delights is patron of unbridled lust which fills the world with malice and misery. Lust and its consequences are presented in a profusion of incidents and tales, from the witches' use of magic to pursue lovers or revenge slights, through the tangle of adultery stories in Book 9, to the career of the murderess with whom the Ass is supposed to be mated. The contrasting figure of *caelestis Venus* is one aspect of *Regina caeli*, from whom the Ass seeks release from this bestial life. Under her governance sexual relations form a part of the divine order of nature (11.2):¹⁴

quae primis rerum exordiis sexuum diuersitatem generato Amore sociasti et aeterna subole humano genere propagato nunc circumfluo Paphi sacrario coleris.

¹³ The exhibition is spoken of as a marriage (10.29): *Talis mulieris publicitus matrimonium confarreaturus.*

¹⁴ The self-revelation of Isis similarly includes *Paphia Venus* (11.5/269, 21).

In the *Apology* Apuleius presents the conception of two opposing Venuses as a central Platonic teaching (*Apol.* 12):

mitto enim dicere alta illa et diuina Platonica, rarissimo cuique piorum ignara, ceterum omnibus profanis incognita: geminam esse Venerem deam, proprio quamque amore et diuersis amatoribus pollentis; earum alteram uulgariam, . . . alteram uero caelitem . . .

Apuleius clearly has in mind the distinction developed in the *Symposium* (180b ff.) between Aphrodite Pandemos and Aphrodite Urania.¹⁵ He has weakened, however, the contrast drawn in the *Symposium*, for he does not exclude love between the opposite sexes from the realm of the Heavenly Venus. Rather, Apuleius contrasts the fierce and uncontrolled passion which is present in both men and animals with the unique capacity of humans to recognize divine beauty in another's soul. *Caelestis Venus* in the *Metamorphoses* is explicitly sexual and thus even further removed from the figure in the *Symposium*. Nevertheless, the contrast between the two Venuses is fundamental to the novel and represents Apuleius' adaptation of Platonic doctrine.

Within the tale of Cupid and Psyche, Venus and the Olympians are objects of satire. At the same time, the tale tells a different kind of myth, that of Psyche's fall and redemption. This difference between ways of talking about the gods can also be seen in the contrast between the mime which closes Book 10 and the subsequent revelation of Isis and the description of her festival. The Platonic condemnation of stories which present the gods as corrupt¹⁶ is suggested by the denunciation which the Ass is roused to utter when he sees the goddesses offering bribes to Paris (10.33):

Quid ergo miramini, uilissima capita, immo forensia pecora, immo uero togati uulturii, si toti nunc iudices sententias suas pretio nundinantur, cum rerum exordio inter deos et homines agitatum iudicium corruperit gratia et originale sententiam magni Iouis consilii electus iudex rusticanus et opilio lucro libidinis uendiderit cum totius etiam suae stirpis exitio? . . .

The Ass goes on to describe the unjust judgments against Palamedes

¹⁵ Although this formulation of the two Venuses occurs in the speech by Pausanias, Apuleius seems to attribute it to Plato, as does Plotinus (*Enn.* 3.5.2). A less developed version is presented by Socrates in Xenophon (*Symp.* 8.9).

¹⁶ E.g., *Resp.* 377c ff.

and Ajax, and concludes with the case of Socrates. This grouping recalls one of the closing passages of the *Apology* (41B), in which Socrates speculates on meeting Palamedes and Ajax and comparing his experience with theirs.¹⁷

The course of the adventures thus concludes with Socrates, as it began with his ironic namesake. In the celebrated encomium at the close of the *Symposium*,¹⁸ Socrates is compared to a *silenus* and a satyr, figures probably derived from a pre-classical cult of the ass and often associated with asses.¹⁹ The λόγοι of Socrates are said to be clothed in language like the skin of a wanton satyr, for his talk is of asses and smiths (221E). To the ignorant his words are ridiculous, but those who are able to open them find them filled with meaning.²⁰ In the *Metamorphoses* the development of serious themes within a comic narrative is a form of σπουδογέλοιον expressed by this comparison.²¹ The account of the devotee in the final book of the *Metamorphoses* may be compared to the revelation of divine images within the comic and bestial form of a *silenus*.

tu uero crassis auribus et obstinato corde respuis quae forsitan uere perhibeantur. minus hercule calles prauissimis opinionibus ea putari mendacia, quae uel auditu noua uel uisu rudia uel certe supra captum cogitationis ardua uideantur; quae si paulo accuratius exploraris, no modo compertu euidencia, uerum etiam factu facilia senties.

In Plato the language of the mysteries is used playfully to express the experience of philosophic enlightenment.²² For the Platonists of later antiquity cult symbols and service play a much more central

¹⁷ Pointed out by Vallette in his note on this passage in the Budé edition of the *Metamorphoses* (Paris 1945) III, 135.

¹⁸ *Symp.* 215A-E; 221D-222A.

¹⁹ On the origin of the silenoi and satyrs, in particular as reflected in the stories of Midas and Marsyas, see Krappe (above, note 7) 226-31 and Deonna (above, note 7) 638. On the ass as the mount of silenus see also Olck (above, note 7) 653 and 671.

²⁰ With this passage in the *Symposium* (221E) we may compare *Met.* I 3:

²¹ There is a good discussion of this aspect of the comparison of Socrates to a silenus, in connection with the use of it by Erasmus and Rabelais, by W. Kaiser, *Praisers of Folly* (Harvard Univ. Press 1963) 55-60.

²² On Plato's use of the language of the mysteries see A. Diès, *Autour de Platon* (Paris 1927) 97-99, 438-43; E. des Places, "Platon et la langue des mystères," *AFLA* 38 (1964) 9-23; and E. Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, revised edition (New York 1968) 1-16.

role, and it is in such terms that Apuleius brings the *Metamorphoses* to its conclusion. Apuleius has, however, infused his narrative with a variety of Platonic motifs, which may allow us to see in the *Metamorphoses*, not sectarian propaganda, but a syncretistic vision in harmony with Apuleius' conception of Platonism.