

*At ego: An Unsettling Refrain in Apuleius' Metamorphoses*

With tongue in cheek, the introduction to *A Companion to the Prologue of Apuleius' Metamorphoses* adjourns with a vote about the controversial identity of the Prologue speaker (Kahane and Laird 2001:5): “This House believes that the speaker of the Prologue is Lucius,” the protagonist of Apuleius’ novel. The question *quis ille?* posed at the outset in the Prologue (1.1), followed by the failure of the ensuing text to answer this question definitively, makes explicit the problem of identity of the Prologue speaker and introduces a general question of identity that will surface throughout Apuleius’ work. As a continuum of Kahane and Laird’s compendium on the Prologue, I suggest that we take a closer look at the initial two words of the Prologue, *at ego*, by tracing them beyond the Prologue and throughout the entire *Metamorphoses*, in order to investigate further the issue of identity and its problematic connection to speech. I argue in this paper that the refrain *at ego* becomes a hallmark of Lucius’ incapacitation, his inability to use his voice to speak and to control self-definition at the very moment that he draws attention to himself as the subject of his story.

Unusually beginning such an elaborate piece of literature with the humble and colloquial *at* (Scobie 1975: 66, Laird 2001:277, *et al.*), this adversative delineates the *ego* (whose identity in the Prologue remains indeterminate) as separate from others. Where distinctiveness from the crowd could signify uniqueness as a positive attribute, an assertion of individuality, *at ego*, by its very separation from others, will be revealed as emphasizing the fragmentation of this self, aporetic in its isolation from others. Informed by Dolar 2006, for whom the voice plays a critical role as the fulcrum of human connection to other humans and the interiority of the self, I demonstrate that Lucius descends into a self-absorption that reveals a rupture from the external

world and a loss of the capacity of language to tether the self. Particularly remarkable is that several textual passages that begin with the refrain *at ego* (including 1.26, 2.6, 3.10, 3.12, 3.22, 11.14), extracted from the rest of the novel, signal a clear progression of the deterioration of Lucius' control over his actions and his ability to speak as a human, and, finally, over his very identity, prior to his transformation into the ass. Lucius' true metamorphosis, his transformation from one being into another, is effected not just when he becomes an ass (despite the warranted scholarly attention to Lucius' physical metamorphosis) but at the moment when the connection between being human and being able to present oneself adequately through the spoken word is severed.

But the text joins *at ego* with *tibi* in the Prologue, and my reading (with reference to de Man 1979, Cavarero 2000 and 2005, and Butler 2005) locates the dissolution of Lucius' identity in the (auto)biographical project that is dependent at key junctures on someone other than the narrator. I consider the attempts of other characters (particularly the Hypatan magistrates and Photis prior to Lucius' metamorphosis into an ass in Book 3, and the goddess Isis following Lucius' anamorphosis to human form in Book 11) to wield power over Lucius, revealing that it is precisely the process of address to someone else (*at ego tibi*), someone outside the *ego* (Henderson 2001), that makes the autobiographical project possible but simultaneously perilous, perhaps out of the control of the *ego*. Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* delineates the prevalence and necessity of human exchange through language at the same time that it problematizes this exchange, demonstrating the vulnerability of the human participant in speech shared with someone else.

## Bibliography

Butler, J. 2005. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York.

de Man, P. 1979. "Autobiography as De-facement." *Modern Language Notes* 94 (5): 919-930.

Cavarero, A. [1997] 2000. *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*. Trans. P.A. Kottman. New York.

———. [2003] 2005. *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*. Trans. P.A. Kottman. Stanford, CA.

Dolar, M. 2006. *A Voice and Nothing More*. Cambridge, MA.

Henderson, J. 2001. "In Ya (Pre)face..." In A. Kahane and A. Laird, eds. 188-197.

Kahane, A. and Laird, A., eds. 2001. *A Companion to the Prologue of Apuleius' Metamorphoses*. Oxford.

Laird, A. 2001. "Paradox and Transcendence: The Prologue as The End." In A. Kahane and A. Laird, eds. 267-281.

Scobie, A. 1975. *Apuleius Metamorphoses (Asinus Aureus) Book 1: A Commentary*. Meisenham am Glan.