

Priests and Prejudice: Graves, Apuleius and Translated Muses

Simon Brittan-Ortiz

Discussing his approach to translating Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, Robert Graves comments that the task involves

... essentially a moral problem: how much is owed to the letter, and how much to the spirit. 'Stick strictly to the script', and the effect of authenticity is lost. Here I have sometimes felt obliged to alter the order not only of phrases but of sentences, where English prose logic differs from Latin; and to avoid the nuisance of footnotes I have brought their substance up into the story itself whenever it reads obscurely. (Graves 8)

He then begins his translation by separating the whole of Apuleius' first paragraph from the rest of the text, giving it the title 'Apuleius' Address to the Reader'. The final three-word injunction of this paragraph to 'pay attention' and 'find pleasure' in what is to follow—*Lector intende: laetaberis*—Graves employs as a Latin postscript to his own Introduction. Graves' text therefore begins at *Thessaliam... ex negotio petebam*, 'Business once took me to Thessaly...'. The impression this creates of *Metamorphoses* as a collection of tales beginning with 'The Story of Aristomanes' and introduced by an autobiographical proem is entirely false; and a comparative reading of 'Apuleius' Address to the Reader' with the opening lines of the Latin *Book I* soon makes clear that Graves' technique has its root in other and more complex concerns than 'English prose logic' or the 'nuisance of footnotes'.

His parenthesizing of the opening of *Book I* is highly important, apart from any considerations of authenticity, in that it seriously affects the reader's interpretation of the rest of the text, for the opening tone of *Metamorphoses* is one of studied literariness—precisely the tone that Graves is always at pains to suppress in those authors with whom he claims particular affinity. Apuleius in fact begins as though in the middle of a literary debate, with *At ego tibi sermone isto Milesio varias fabulas conseram...*, 'But I would like to tie together different sorts of tales for you in the Milesian style', which Graves renders as '... you

should be amused by this queer novel, a string of anecdotes in the popular Milesian style'. The condition that follows, *modo si papyrus Aegyptiam argutia Nilotici calami inscriptam non spreveris inspicere, figuras fortunasque hominum in alias imagines conversas et in se rursus mutuo nexu refectas ut mireris*, means, literally, 'if you don't mind looking at Egyptian papyrus inscribed with the sharpness of a reed from the Nile, so that you may be amazed at men's forms and fortunes transformed into other shapes and then restored in an interwoven knot.' In Graves' translation, '... *papyrus Aegyptiam... inscriptam*', 'Egyptian papyrus inscribed with the sharpness of a reed from the Nile', becomes, astonishingly, 'the Egyptian story-telling convention...'; and *Book I's* '... men's forms and fortunes transformed into other shapes and then restored in an interwoven knot' is then employed by Graves as a defining characteristic of this spurious literary genre: '... which allows humans to be changed into animals and, after various adventures, restored to their proper shapes'. Apuleius presents the reader with a collection of tales not in 'the Egyptian story-telling convention' but in the *Milesian* style, and Graves' eagerness to pass over this without proper explanation can be attributed to the fact that "Milesian tales" usually refers to pornographic stories named after Aristides of Miletus, translated from Greek into Latin by the Roman historian Sisenna in the first century B.C. And to interpret any of the episodes of *Metamorphoses* as pornographic would be wholly incompatible with the Apuleius Graves is anxious to create. To prevent such a reading Graves gives only the secondary (uncertain) interpretation of 'Milesian' as suggesting 'florid in style', and goes on to explain that Apuleius employs such language in order to parody that of the professional story-teller (who, he unhelpfully adds, 'is still found in the West of Ireland').

Graves' approach to his author is made clear by his comment on William Adlington's translation of 1566: Adlington, so Graves, was working with an unedited text and without a reliable Latin dictionary and therefore 'often made bad mistakes. But at least he realized that *The Transformations* was, above all, a religious novel.' (Graves 8) As proof of his claim Graves offers a quote from Adlington:

Since this book of Lucius is a figure of man's life and toucheth the nature and manners of mortal man, egging them forward from their asinal form to their human and perfect shape (beside the pleasant and delectable jests therein contained) ... I trust that the matter shall be esteemed by such as not only a delight to please their fancies in recording the same, but also take a pattern thereby to regenerate their minds from brutal and beastly custom.

It is quite true that Adlington's translation suffers badly from his imperfect Latin; but unless a text that claims to be morally improving is automatically a religious one, there is nothing in the quotation above to suggest that he interpreted *Metamorphoses* as 'above all, a religious novel'. Adlington's approach in fact conforms to the English humanist view of art, derived through Italian critics from Aristotle's *Poetics* and later expounded most famously in Sidney's *Apologie*, that it should seek both "to teach and to delight". It does so by improving upon Nature, for, according to Aristotle,

it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen—what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. The work of Herodotus might be put into verse, and it would still be a species of history, with meter no less than without it. The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular.

Adlington's contemporary Roger Ascham developed this idea in his discussion of 'Imitation' in *The Scholemaster* (1570):

And as in ports[r]aicture and paintyng wise men chose not that workman that can onlie make a faire hand, or a well facioned legge, but soch one as can furnish vp fullie all the

features of the whole body of a man, woman, and child, and with all is able to, by good skill, to fiue to euerie one of these three, in their proper kinde, the right forme, the trew figure, that naturall color, that is fit and dew to the dignitie of a man, to the bewtie of a woman, to the sweetnes of a yong babe...

Ascham's argument here is that artistic representations need not be accurate in the modern sense, but should accentuate those qualities, physical or otherwise, perceived as belonging to the ideal form of the represented person or object. Thus "right forme," "trew figure" and "naturall color" are all necessary attributes of the idea "dignitie" as personified by men, "bewtie" as personified by women and "sweetnes" as personified by children. Actual subjectivity is subordinated to perceptions of the 'nature' of human beings—men must be portrayed as 'manly,' women as 'womanly,' kings as 'kingly' and so on—allowing for a system of categorization which then becomes applicable as set of rules for social conduct: men *must* be manly, kings *must* be kingly. Allegory, in other words, is the vehicle by which art may 'teach and delight', and it is as an essentially allegorical work that Adlington reads Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*. Indeed, he goes out of his way to make this clear in both his Letter Dedicatory to Thomas, Earl of Sussex and in his address to the reader, from which the quotation by Graves above is taken:

The fables of Atreus, Thiestes, Tereus and Progne signifieth the wicked and abominable facts wrought and attempted by mortall men. The fall of Icarus is an example to proud and arrogant persons, that weeneth to climbe up to the heavens. By Mydas, who obtained of Bacchus, that all things which he touched might be gold, is carped the foul sin of Avarice... And in this feined jest of Lucius Apuleius is comprehended a figure of mans life, ministring most sweet and delectable matter, to such as shall be desirous to reade the same...

Further, and more importantly:

... may not the meaning of this worke be altered and turned into this sort: A man desirous to apply his minde to some excellent art, or given to the study of any of the sciences, at the first appeareth to himselfe as an asse without wit, without knowledge, and not much unlike a brute beast, till such time as by much paine and travell [i.e. labour] he hath atchieved to the perfectnesse of the same, and tasting the sweet floure and fruit of his studies, doth thinke himselfe well brought to the right and very shape of a man. (Adlington 5-9)

Graves' use of the word 'religious' is not only an attempt to direct the reader's approach to Apuleius—in the context of the England of the 1560s to which he applies it, it is also quite inaccurate. Sixteenth-century theorists of poetry are happy to point to the moral virtues that classical literature, especially epic poetry, can inculcate; but they regard classical religions with a mixture of pity and derision, and frequently express regret that the laudable human attributes described in their poetry should be placed in the context of so "barbaric" a worship. Adlington may have found *Metamorphoses* a moral work, but he would not have described it as seriously religious.

Graves however is intent on presenting not only *Metamorphoses* but also its author in the context of the cult of Isis: as a collection of religious allegories and 'spiritual biography' written by 'a priest of Aesculapius, the God of Medicine, as well as of Isis and Osiris' who 'was also a poet and a historian'. Apuleius' greatest desire, according to Graves, was

... to show his gratitude to the Goddess whom he adored, by living a life worthy of her favour—a serene, honourable and useful life, with no secret worm of guilt gnawing at his heart as though he had withheld some confession from her or mistrusted her compassion. (Graves 12)

To present *Metamorphoses* as the 'spiritual biography' of a penitent become a priest of Isis is to present it as a dedicatory work to the goddess herself: Isis becomes Apuleius' muse, and Apuleius himself thus becomes a 'muse poet' and therefore acceptable to Graves, who

attempts to reinforce this construction of his author by means of a cavalier attitude to history. The only real source of information on Apuleius' life is Apuleius himself, and details can be inferred only from two of six surviving texts: the *Apology*, an ironically erudite defence against the charge of having employed witchcraft to seduce a wealthy widow; and *Florida*, a collection of passages from his other oratory whose character can be deduced from their title. From these writings, he seems to have studied at Carthage and Athens, travelled widely and finally resettled at Carthage. And it is clear that he was interested in the religious aspects of philosophy: but this does not make him an author whose work must be read devotional to Isis. Graves' approach to this historical conjecture is either to treat it as gossip:

Perhaps he had run through his allowance by drinking and whoring in the brothels and getting mixed up with the criminal classes like the debauched young nobleman Thyasus...
(Graves 12)

to which the only real response is, yes: and perhaps he hadn't; or to try to pass it off as fact:

At all events, when he finally reached Corinth and was given a helping hand by Thyasus, he was pretty well down at heel and ripe for repentance and conversion

which is simply irresponsible. Both of these methods of discussing the past are also employed, to the same effect, by Graves' Claudius. On the one hand he can appear reassuringly candid:

Reading over what I have just put down I see that I must be exciting rather than disarming suspicion, first as to my sole authorship of what follows, next as to my integrity as an historian, and finally as to my memory for facts. But I shall let it stand; it is myself writing as I feel, and as the history proceeds the reader will be the more ready to believe that I am hiding nothing... (Claudius 15)

The irony here is that Claudius' unreliability as an historian must now by his own admission be listed with those things he claims to have no desire to hide. Certainly the passage above serves as an apt introduction to the rest of Claudius' personal 'history', which begins with 'I cannot remember my father' and makes liberal use of similar disclaimers: 'I have been told that...'; 'I do not know whether Octavia was truly the author... but if she was...'; and especially 'I believe my account true and will continue to do so until it is supplanted by one that fits the facts equally well'. (*Claudius* 24-29)

But Graves' Claudius is so constructed as to inhabit his creators' own poetics and private world of mythology, as Claudius' account of his encounter with the Sibyl at Cumæ, and particularly his interpretation of her prophetic verses, make clear:

The lines about Claudius speaking clear puzzled me for years but at last I think that I understand them. They are, I believe, an injunction to write the present work ... Apollo has made the prophecy, so I shall let Apollo take care of the manuscript. As you see, I have chosen to write in Greek, because Greek ... is Apollo's own language. (*Claudius* 18-19)

In other words, Claudius sees himself as writing under the auspices of Apollo. But in the context of Graves' own poetics, such writing must be regarded as highly problematic, since Apollo is

... a patron of the intellect, not of intuitive truth: of metre, not rhythm; of novelty, not of timelessness. (*On Poetry* 326)

For Graves to have created in Claudius a character of such complexity, depth and refinement is a serious literary achievement, but issues become confused when we see Graves attempting to recreate Apuleius according to the same guiding principle, which holds writing that can be ascribed to the Muse to be "real" and "dedicated", while "Apollonian" writing is seen as self-serving obsequiousness.

In order to construct his subject as the Muse-inspired priest of Isis, Graves needed to address the potential problem of Apuleius'

“pleasant and delectable jests’, especially the bawdy ones”.¹ (Graves 9) In particular, his treatment of the bestiality episode in *Book X* is worth close examination. For Graves, this scene represents a step in Lucius’ transition from asinine to human form, part of the process by which he is ‘encouraged slowly to reassert his humanity’ (Graves 11) and ultimately therefore a sign of his spiritual regeneration. But in Graves’ reading this process entails a reassertion not only of a natural supremacy of humanity over the bestial but also, parallel to it, of one social class over another. Lucius’ misfortunes are brought about not because of his general licentiousness but because ‘though a nobleman, he decided on a frivolous love-affair with a slave girl’. This occurs because one of

the main religious principles that Apuleius was inculcating... was that men are far from equal in the sight of Heaven, its favour being reserved for the well-born and well-educated... (Graves 9)

Further, while to be abjectly poor, though free, is ‘a sign not necessarily of moral baseness but of ill-luck’, a slave girl ‘is necessarily base’. (Graves 10) Lucius’ debasement, then, according to Graves, is brought about by his sexual intimacy with the ‘base’ Fotis. In the same way, he sees his re-humanization as connected with another sexual act—this time, necessarily, with a woman of recognized wealth and influence who distances herself from any possible charge of baseness since she is able to prove ‘her genuine love for the ass by planting pure, sincere, wholly unmeretricious kisses on his scented nose’. (Graves 14)

In spite of his attempts to impose this social construct upon the remote past, the unfortunate pseudo-logic which characterizes Graves at his most unpleasant, is demonstrably his own. Firstly, he confuses heaven’s favour (and thus encourages his readers to do the same) with financial eligibility for admission to the priesthood: he would not have needed to search far into the Roman religious mythology with which he was certainly well acquainted to find numerous examples of the bestowal of heaven’s favour upon the ‘low-born’. To avoid this contradiction, Graves stresses Apuleius’ interest in Platonic philosophy, in particular its rejection of Olympian deities. But he also

ignores the fact that the *lex canuleia*, introduced as a socio-economic necessity to permit marriages between plebeians and patricians, was already in force in 445 B.C., some three hundred and twenty-five years before Apuleius' birth. (Nor indeed was the rejection of the Graeco-Roman mythological tradition so widespread as Graves seems to imply.)

How is it that in this 'above all religious novel' the woman who has sexual intercourse with an ass, far from being 'base', escapes all censure and actually demonstrates 'genuine love'? Certainly not, according to Graves, in order to induce laughter or to heighten the episode's erotic appeal. Though the text of *Metamorphoses* (Book X: 20-23) certainly admits both of these interpretations, one aspect in particular of the relevant passages, which has so far escaped critical attention in the context of Graves' interest in the work, helps to explain how he was able to arrive at his own reading of it. Apart from its obvious eroticism, the episode is characterized by an underlying sense of mystery and ritual gravitas. The chamber in which the sexual encounter takes place is fitted out with 'luxurious and splendid fittings'; the bed is covered with 'gold cloth and Tyrian purple' and in the room 'wax candles sparkled with brilliant light and whitened the night's darkness'. (Hanson II: 255) The woman's personal preparations are equally ritualistic:

Then she stripped herself of all her clothes, including the band with which she had bound her lovely breasts. Standing next to the light, she anointed herself all over with oil of balsam from a pewter jar, and lavishly rubbed me down with the same, but with much greater eagerness. She even moistened my nostrils with frankincense. Then she kissed me intimately—not the sort of kisses tossed about in a whorehouse, the money-begging kisses of prostitutes or the money-refusing kisses of customers, but pure and uncorrupted... (Hanson II: 255)

It must be remembered that we are reading this having been informed by Graves in his Introduction that the ass, though sacred to the god Seth, murderer of Isis' husband Osiris, had originally been considered

so holy that its ears, stylized in the form of twin feathers, became a symbol of sovereignty for all Egyptian deities. (Graves 10-11) With this in mind, it is easy to see how 'gold cloth and Tyrian purple' and 'wax candles' sparkling with 'brilliant light' can be read as endowing the scene with a quasi-religious atmosphere. In particular, the disrobing and subsequent anointment constitute to this day central elements of coronation ritual. Both take place before actual coronation and signify, respectively, the discarding of one (purely secular) identity prior to the adoption the new (partly religious) one; and purification or the receiving of god's grace. It is quite possible then that Graves felt comfortable with the idea of a re-birth of Lucius as human being and devotee of Isis by means of ritual sexual intercourse between an ass, with mythologically ascribed divine or semi-divine qualities, and a woman who recognizes or at least senses the animal's god-like attributes and who is of the right social rank to function as a 'priestess'. In this way the sexual act becomes a devotional one, and the woman's *Te solum diligo* ('You alone I love') and *Sine te iam vivere nequeo* ('I cannot live without you') elements of its litany.

This reading is possible only as a result of Graves' crucial suppression of Apuleius' comment on the impropriety of the woman's passion in Book X: 19. The text reads

*Nec ullam vesanae libidini medelam capiens ad instar asinariae Pasiphae complexus meos ardentem expectabat. Grandi denique premio cum altore meo depecta est noctis unius concubitum.*²

Both Hanson and Adlington correctly translate this to convey the idea of the madness of her desire:

She took no remedy for her insane passion but, like some asinine Pasiphae, ardently yearned for my embraces. She therefore bargained with my keeper, offering him a large price to lie with me for one night ... (Hanson 253)

...and could find no remedy to her passions and disordinate appetite, but continually desired to have her pleasure with me, as Pasiphae had with a Bull. In the end she promised a

great reward to my keeper for the custody of me for one night
... (Adlington 217)

Graves however omits any direct mention of the necessity for a cure:

In fact, she grew so passionately fond of me that, like Pasiphae in the legend who fell in love with a bull, she bribed my trainer with a large sum of money to let her spend the night in my company. (Graves 214)

For her passion to be 'insane' or her appetite 'disordinate' would—for Graves—reduce the episode to the level of 'mere' sexual pleasure, a concept which seems to afford Graves some difficulty: see for example his coy translation of '*tam vastum genitale*'—'my huge organ' (Hanson II: 257)—as 'the formidable challenge of my thighs'. (Graves 215) Even Adlington manages to express ass-Lucius' concern as to whether 'she could be able to receive me'. (Adlington 218) Graves' choice of 'challenge' is in itself interesting and, in this context, the word is singularly out of place: where Apuleius discusses the scene in terms of the woman's willingness to 'contain' (Hanson) or 'receive' (Adlington) ass-Lucius, Graves' 'challenge' implies an act of male sexual aggression. The same discrepancy occurs a few lines later where *totum recepit*—'she took in absolutely all of me' (Hanson) becomes 'She... met my challenge to the full'. (Graves 216)

In his critical writings (among which this essay numbers the Introduction to his *Metamorphoses* translation) Graves inhabits a problematic landscape in which moral virtues, 'pure' poetry, and his own brand of mysticism are inextricably bound to the class distinctions that sought to impose a sense of cohesion upon the England into which he was born. It is arguably his own acute awareness of the tensions created by this social inheritance, as much as any interest in the history of poetic myth, that leads him to reject Christian devotion as a possible source of true literary inspiration. Yet even when he does so, he is often content to employ criteria that have nothing to do with literature. Discussing Apuleius' contemporary St Augustine, for example, in the context of his reaction to *Metamorphoses*, he informs us that

His father Patricius, a nominal Christian, was a violent, vulgar fellow from whom he inherited neither rank, money, nor a predisposition to virtue; so that even if he had wished to become a priest of Isis he could not have qualified for the honour. (Graves 15)

And Apuleius' version of the myth of Cupid and Psyche (*Metamorphoses*, Books IV-VI) earned him the respect of 'the better sort of Christians'. If this is intended as irony, it sounds too much like Graves' parenthetical disparagement of his hated arch-Apollonian Virgil—'...this dark-complexioned, heavily-built man...'; '...his girlish shyness...'; '...a course [in Greek] at Athens would have been beyond his family's means' (*On Poetry* 303)—and of his modern English equivalent—'...pricks of professional conscience at which a bright young red-brick lecturer cannot do more than guess' (*On Poetry* 279)—to ring true.

But the most blatant misrepresentation of Apuleius occurs in Graves' treatment of *Metamorphoses* XI: 5. It is in fact a misrepresentation not only of Apuleius but of the very religion of which Graves makes him a devotee. The passage in question is that in which the goddess Isis appears in answer to ass-Lucius' prayers and lists the various names by which she is known:

... Inde primigenii Phryges Pessinuntiam deum matrem, hinc autochthonos Attici Cecropeiam Minervam, illinc fluctuantes Cyprii Paphiam Venerem...

In one place the Phrygians, first born of men, call me Pessinuntine Mother of the Gods, in another the autochthonous people of Attica call me Cecropian Minerva, in another the sea-washed Cyprians call me Paphian Venus... (Hanson II: 299)

Graves renders the same passage as:

The primeval Phrygians call me Pessinuntica, Mother of the gods; the Athenians, sprung from their own soil, call me

Cecropian *Artemis* (my italics); for the islanders of Cyprus I am Paphian Aphrodite...

In other words, Graves simply substitutes one goddess for another as though the different names were universally accepted as signifying different personifications of the same one. Cecropian Minerva derives her name from Cecrops, according to the commonest tradition the first mythological king of Attica, from whose soil he was born and to which land he gave his name. Minerva is the Roman goddess identified with the Greek Athena, but plays no role in any specifically Roman myth. Artemis on the other hand was identified by the Romans with the Italian and Latin Diana, and was worshiped in particular in the mountainous areas of Greece, in Arcadia, in Sparta, in Elis, and on the mountain of Taygetus. Her most famous shrine in the Greek world was that at Ephesus. Perhaps Graves felt he could get away with this substitution because, in Isis' words, ... *Cretes sagittiferi Dictynnam Dianam...*—'to the arrow-bearing Cretans I am Dictynna Diana' (Hanson II: 299); and the ancient Cretan Dictynna was sometimes identified with Diana, who as we have seen was identified by the Romans with Artemis. But why, in any case, should Graves wish to stress an at best tenuous connection with Artemis at the expense of Apuleius' definite 'Minerva'? It seems likely that the answer is connected with Minerva's attributes, which are analogous to those of the Greek Athena's: she presided over intellectual, and, in particular, academic, activity; and Athena's favourite animal was the owl—into which bird Lucius had originally hoped to be magically transformed. Artemis meanwhile was conflated at Ephesus with an extremely ancient Asiatic fertility goddess—and was explained as a personification of the moon. As for Isis herself, her cult was widespread in the Graeco-Roman world and various hellenistic myths—the story of Io for example—were assimilated into her own. Graves is conveniently silent on the fact that, by the time Apuleius was writing, she was regarded as ruler of the sea, the fruit of the earth, the elements, the dead, and as controller of the transformation of objects and beings. It is clearly in this last function that her real relevance to Apuleius' story of the metamorphosis of Lucius lies.

Notes

1. In this context, Graves is especially severe on the 'offensively crude' sexual humour of Lucian of Samosata, whose work *The Ass* was used by Apuleius as the source for *Metamorphoses*. Yet the example he quotes differs insignificantly from his own translation of *Metamorphoses*: 'Your sinuous motions send a shiver down my spine. He'll be a lucky man whom you allow to stick his fingers into your stew...' (Graves' Lucian); 'I love watching you wriggle your hips. And what a wonderful cook you are! The man whom you allow to poke his finger into your little casserole is the luckiest fellow alive. That sort of stew would tickle the most jaded palate.' (Graves' Apuleius).

2. Pasiphae was the wife of king Minos of Crete. Her sexual union with a bull resulted in the Minotaur, half-bull and half-man. One version (see Grimal, 348) holds Pasiphae's insane passion to have been caused by Aphrodite's desire for revenge because Pasiphae had despised the goddess' cult.

 Works Cited

- Apuleius, Lucius. *The Golden Ass*, trans. Robert Graves. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986.
- *Metamorphoses*, (2 vols.) Ed. and trans. J. Arthur Hanson, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard, 1998.
- Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Richard Janko, Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1987.
- Ascham, Roger. 'Of Imitation' (from *The Scholemaster*) in: G. Gregory Smith, ed., *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, vol.1, Oxford: OUP, 1959.
- Henley, W.E. ed., *The Golden Ass of Apuleius*, trans. William Adlington, 1566 (The Tudor Translations, vol. IV) London: D. Nutt, 1893.
- Graves, Robert. *I, Claudius*. New York: Smith and Haas, 1934.
- *On Poetry: Collected Talks and Essays*, New York: Doubleday, 1969.
- Grimal, Pierre. *The Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, trans. A.R. Maxwell-Hyslop, Oxford: Blackwells, 1998.