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lucundiora alia reperiri queunt: on the praefatio of Noctes Atticae by Aulus Gellius

Abstract: I luoghi prefatori, soprattutto quando si fanno cassa di risonanza del testo, meritano un'attenzione particolare. In questo contributo discuto della *praefatio* di Aulo Gellio alla luce delle nuove acquisizioni della critica e con soluzioni originali.

Abstract: Prefaces, especially when intimately connected to the text, deserve a specific attention. In this article I discuss Aulus Gellius' *praefatio* under the new acknowledgments and with original results.

Parole-chiave: Aulo Gellio, prefazione, contaminazioni, stile, coppie sinonimiche

Keywords: Aulus Gellius, preface, contaminations, style, synonymic couples

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Introduction

Iucundiora alia reperiri queunt: these are the words with which Gellius's *Noctes atticae* begins, in *praef.* 1, in a truncated way. There is, indeed, an implied object in these words: it could be the lexeme *oblectamenta* (I personally believe we are dealing with a specific term such this) or a lexeme indicating books, works, writings (more generic terms).

This study will focus on the *status quaestionis* regarding research on the preface of the *Attic Nights* and on the work in general, and then it will move on to an original and unpublished discussion on aspects of the text not yet examined by the critics. The work is proposed as a sort of draft for the publication of a commentary on the *praefatio*, of which I offer some preliminary findings.

The *praefatio* to *Noctes atticae* by Aulus Gellius has been the focus of criticism¹ in various ways, with a particular interest shown to the effective coherence of the main characters in *Noctes atticae* with what is programmatically stated in the preface².

There has also been focus on the stylistic features of Gellius's writing that can be identified, as in the totality of his work, even in this text placed at the beginning³.

It is important to mention that the most recent lines of research on Gellius's work concern various aspects: from the role of reading and of the reader to intertexts⁴; from philological-textual aspects⁵ to the most varied themes⁶.

A reading of the *praefatio* to *Noctes Atticae*

My first thesis is that the preface to *Attic Nights* plays the classic prestigious role of an incipit, that of anticipating and gathering together the main lines of the work. In a few pages, therefore, Gellius introduces the text as faithfully as possible to the text itself: giving life to a prose that is certainly more accurate, dense, articulated, full

of citations, but substantially in line with that which will unfold in the course of the work⁷.

The second original aspect concerns the recipient. A limit has been noted in the criticism that has not been interested if not indirectly in the perspective (which seems crucial) of the ideal and real recipient of the *Attic Nights*, as outlined by the author in the preface. As a matter of fact, Astarita's text addressed the problem of the recipients of the work and launched a debate on the subject⁸.

In this programmatic space, Gellius calls into question the main poles of the communication circuit (sender - text - code - recipient); the protagonists in action on the scene of cultural communication established in the *Noctes Atticae* are punctually outlined, as well as the dialogue with intertextual models and references to *auctoritates* of Greek and Latin culture. In the first instance, Gellius recalls the 'official' recipients, the children of the author. This is an ancient *topos*, which dates back to Cato the Censor, and which meets and merges with another traditional and purely Roman topic, that of the contrast, or rather (here) of the coveted conciliation between *otium* and *negotia*. The author then reflects on the figure of the ideal reader (especially in paragraphs 13 and 14; but this profile is underlying all the pages of this programmatic space). Conversely, one can also see what I could define as the anti-reader, presented in great detail and which, in a solemn context intertwining *topoi*, intertextual references and direct quotations, giving life to a page of valuable prose and suggestive efficacy, is asked not to approach the *Noctes Atticae* (Gell. 19):

Erit ... optimum ut qui in lectitando, percontando, scribendo, commentando numquam voluptates, numquam latore ceperunt, nullas hoc genus vigiliis vigilarunt [...], sed intemperiarum negotiorumque pleni sunt, abeant a noctibus his proculatque alia sibi oblectamenta quaerant.

For those ... who have never found pleasure nor busied themselves in reading, inquiring, writing and taking notes, who have never spent wakeful nights in such employments, who have

never improved themselves by discussion and debate [...], but are absorbed in the turmoil of business affairs — for such men it will be by far the best plan to hold wholly aloof from these “Nights” and seek for themselves other diversion.

The author also reserves some space for himself (with hints to *praef.* 4, 12, 23, 24), although this space is not sufficient to shed light on a biography and a profile that is still poorly specified and which, on the basis of the data available, cannot be further specified except in a conjectural way⁹.

Ample space within the preface is given to the presentation and definition of the text and, in a more nuanced way, of the code. The work is in fact a ‘bridge’ between the issuer and the recipient, the possibility of acquiring culture for both; as a link in a chain of others, numerous texts with which to dialogue, often controversially; as if the text is the result of a work consisting of different phases, which are recalled on several occasions.

The last element of the *praefatio* that needs to be pointed out is the immediate, not accidental presence of the Greek language and culture within the text - and therefore of the horizon common to both the author and the readers of the work -, a symptom of a situation of widespread bilingualism and the existence of a real Hellenistic-Roman culture¹⁰. Both the adhesion and distancing from other authors of the same literary genre (as in *praef.* 4, 11), and the sources used by Gellius (*ut librum quemque in manus ceperam seu Graecum seu Latinum*), and the quotations and intertextual references¹¹ reveal a cultural horizon in which the boundaries between the two civilizations are decidedly blurred. It is significant that even these elements of bilingualism and substantial unity with Greek culture, early, are immediately present, put into practice within the *praefatio* itself, especially with the solemn, topical quotation from Aristophanes, which constitutes the most intense point of the pages we are examining. The passage, in fact, could worthily close the preface: what follows brings a sudden, almost strident drop in tension (*Volumina commentariorum ad hunc diem viginti iam facta sunt, praef.* 22).

Also through the dense web of citations and insertions preceding the acknowledgment of the work length¹², Gellius embellishes his Preface with elements that will then be diluted in the body of the work. In short, the tendency of the *praefatio* to act as a mirror (amplified) of the whole text is confirmed¹³.

Commentary

Scholars have been particularly interested in the second paragraph of the *praefatio* (Gell. 2):

Usi autem sumus ordine rerum fortuitus, quem antea in excerpendo feceramus. Nam proinde ut librum quemque in manus ceperam seu Graecum seu Latinum vel quid memoratu dignum audieram, ita quae libitum erat, cuius generis cumque erant, memoriae quasi quoddam litterarum penus recondebam ut, quando usus venisset aut rei aut verbi, cuius me repens forte oblivio tenuisset, et libri, ex quibus ea sumpseram, non adessent, facile inde nobis inventu atque depromptu foret.

But in the arrangement of my material, I have adopted the same haphazard order that I had previously followed in collecting it. For whenever I had taken in hand any Greek or Latin book, or had heard anything worth remembering, I used to jot down whatever took my fancy, of any and every kind, without any definite plan or order; and such notes I would lay away as an aid to my memory, like a kind of literary storehouse, so that when the need arose of a word or a subject which I chanced for the moment to have forgotten, and the books from which I had taken it were not at hand, I could readily find and produce it.

The phases of the composition of the work are, broadly speaking, two: the first consisted in the *excerpere*, in the actual collection of the material; the second phase here is not yet explicitly indicated, but only suggested by the contrast between the *antea excerpendo* and some subsequent stage in which the criterion of the *order*

*rerum fortuito*¹⁴ has been maintained. The verb *excerpere*, used here in a more abstract meaning than the original meaning of ‘harvest’ in agriculture, nevertheless retains the significance of its primary concrete image, linked to the land (see *ThLL*, II, 264, *excerpo*).

The initial declaration, *usi autem sumus order rerum fortuito*, seems to me to be remarkably effective even at a level of placement of the words: it can be easily divided into two mirroring parts, in which the logically solid terms are separated by an element that acts as a link with the previous section (perhaps with the first words of the preface, now lost; perhaps as a simple formula for passing away) or as a determinant. This interposition, which gives rise to the figure of the hyperbaton, does not however cause a fracture: the effect is that of fluidity and at the same time effective conciseness.

Among scholars, there are those who believe that the expression *ordine rerum fortuito* should not be taken literally, in fact there are several traces, in the course of the work, of a deliberate organization and arrangement of the material, which had as its purpose the *varietas* and an impression of absolute, free imagination¹⁵; others, on the other hand, believe that the founding criterion of the *Noctes Atticae* is really that of the random order¹⁶, as Gellius declares in the *praefatio*, admitting, however, the possibility of a subsequent revision, which, however, would not have changed the initial order of the various *commentarii*.

The structure of the paragraph is dyadic: not only the pairs of lexemes, but also at a broader level, the structure of the phrase and the development of the arguments have binary channels. The main poles of the discourse are therefore:

- *Ut librum quemque (...) ceperam / vel quid (...) audieram*: with this formula the duality - topical - of the sources (written and oral) is made explicit. The image of the books held (*capere*) by the hands (*in manus*) is pregnant and realistic.

- *Memoratu dignu / ita quae libitum erat*: note the different selective potential that Gellius attributes to the two channels: from the books that, casually, come into his hands, he annotates everything, without selecting; otherwise, however, he filters the news coming

from the oral channel (which must meet the topical requirements of usefulness and dignity). However, this differentiation could respond to stylistic needs (the creation of the pair *memoratu dignum ... ita quae libitum erat*) or to adhere to a generic *topos* that wants to harmonize the principle of utility (referable to the sphere of *negotia*) and that of pleasure (referable to the *otium* sphere)¹⁷.

- *Adnotabam (...)* / *recondebam*: in this case, the solidary position of the two verbs, which also have the same tense (and the imperfect conveys the idea of the duration and iteration of the action), redefines the bipolar characteristic of the section of the text we are examining.

- *Quando usus venisset (...)* / *et libri non adessent*: also in this case the bipolarity is conveyed by the syntactic solidarity between the two coordinated propositions (in which the verbs have the same manner and the same time, and occupy, together with the subjects, the same position within the sentence).

At a lower level of pairs or triads of lexemes¹⁸, the following elements can be identified:

- *Seu Graecum / seu Latinum*;
- *Cuius generis / cumque erant*¹⁹;
- *Indisincte / atque promisce*²⁰.

As is evident, the bipolar structure informs the whole sentence, even with a series of lexical micro-dyads included in argumentative macro-dyads. In the first level, the lower one, there are not only (almost) synonymic pairs such as *indisincte atque promisce* or *inventu atque depromptu*, but also lexemes such as *Graecum ... Latinum, rei ... verbi*, indicating different referents.

A last paragraph that I propose here with comments is the twelfth (Gell. 12):

Ego vero, cum illud Ephesii viri summe nobilis verbum cordi haberem quod profecto ita est: πολυμαθη νοον ου διδασκει, ipse quidem volvendis transeundisque multi sadmodum voluminibus per omnia semper negotiorum

intervalla in quibus furari otium potui, exercitus defessusque sum; sed modica ex his eaque sola accepiquae aut ingenia prompta expeditaque ad honestae eruditionis cupidine mutiliumque artium contemplationem celeri facilique compendio ducerent aut nomine aliis iam vitae negotiis occupatos a turpi certe aestrique rerum verborum imperitia vindicarent.

I myself, on the contrary, having at heart that well-known saying of the famous Ephesian “Much learning does not make a scholar”, did it is true busy and even weary myself in unrolling and running through many a scroll, working without cessation in all the intervals of business whenever I could steal the leisure; but I took few items from them, confining myself to those which, by furnishing a quick and easy short-cut, might lead active and alert minds to a desire for independent learning and to the study of the useful arts, or would save those who are already fully occupied with the other duties of life from an ignorance of words and things which is assuredly shameful and boorish.

Note the *ego vero* formula at the beginning of the paragraph, which recalls the same structure as *praef.* 10 (*Nos vero*): after having looked at the panorama of the production of miscellaneous, variously placed in a bad light, Gellius on the other hand affirms his own originality, made possible at a syntactic level typical of forms of precedence of the personal pronoun, thus placed in an emphatic position, and followed by the adverb that performs an aversive function.

The dialectic between *otium* and *negotia* is topical, as it has already surfaced in *praef.* 1.

There has been much discussion, starting from this passage and from *praef.* 23 (*quantum ... a tuenda re family procurandoque cultu libero rum meorum dabitur otium*), regarding the professional and intellectual profile of Gellius: should we take the data reported here literally? Or is it a *topos*? We do not have sufficient information to settle the question, but the position of Bernardi Pierini who favors a full-time intellectual figure, at least for most of his life, seems to be

acceptable²¹. However, a few lines later Gellius scornfully describes the *homines aliis iam vitae negotiis occupatos*, thus overturning the perspective on the *otium - negotia* relationship.

The double indication on the identikit of the ideal reader (the people desiring an *honestae eruditionis* and the knowledge of the *utilium artium*; the men immersed in the *negotia*), which will be better explained in the following paragraphs, reveals a precise awareness, on the part of Gellius, of the work he is presenting. There are no ambitious claims to have illustrious readers, to cover all branches of knowledge or to be the *primus auctor* of the genre²²; here Gellius demonstrates the extent of a real awareness of his own limits and of the concrete purposes of his *Nights*.

We refer to the more extensive work of the full commentary on the Preface for further analysis, relating to the language and style of this passage; our contribution aims to reread, in the light of secondary sources, an important and too often underestimated author, who in the prefatory pages lays the foundations for the construction of a rich and stimulating work for specialist and non-specialist readers.

Notes

1 SACERDOTI 2003.

2 Cf. FAIDER 1927; MARACHE 1967; MARÉCHAL 1929.

3 CALCANTE 1992; MARACHE 1957; ID. 1981; of a certain interest is also PORTALUPI 1974.

4 HOWLEY 2018.

5 HOLFORD-STREVEENS 2020.

6 SQUILLANTE 2016.

7 Differently from what many other scholars have done regarding the differences in style between the praefatio to *Naturalis Historia* – very accurate – and the rest of the work – characterized by a rough style. About this, cf. ASTARITA 1993, 181.

8 Cf. also DILIBERTO 1996.

9 Cf. BALDWIN 1975, 6: «Gellius is reticent on birthplace and family [...]». Baldwin makes a series of hypothesis, sometimes not plausible, on Gellius's origin and on his trips («The notion that he derived from Africa is probably a delusion [...] Gellius' world as bounded by Italy, Greece, and books»); on the

economic condition of his family («It is reasonable to suppose that Gellius had adequate birth and means»); on the members of his family («Gellius twice mentions his children, *Praef.* 1, 23. The concern expressed for their education suggests that they were sons. Women play no role in the *Noctes Atticae* [...]. Children do not always cannot a wife, but one does not see Gellius as a playboy bachelor!»).

10 Many scholars mention the spread of bilingualism during the Age of Antonines. Cf., as an example, MASELLI 1979, 52; LA PENNA 1978.

11 Gamberale dealt with the issue of quotation and translation in Gellius (GAMBERALE 1968, ID. 1970, but also more recently ASTARITA 1993; BEALL 1997).

12 See the long list of Greek and Latin titles in *praef.* 6-8; the presence of a Greek proverb, quoted in Latin, in *praef.* 11; a saying of Heraclitus, quoted in Greek, in *praef.* 12.

13 Regarding this, one should also point out the presence, apparently causal, but probably not, of certain terms (ex. *penus*, in *praef.* 2, and *vescae*, in *praef.* 16) which will then become subject of reflection in following chapters.

14 MARACHE 1967, XVI-XVII.

15 FAIDER 1927; HOLFORD-STREVENSON 2020.

16 MARACHE 1967, XIII; MARÉCHAL 1929.

17 In this regard, Minarini (MINARINI 2000, 540) suggests that Gellius has «a modest and realistic attitude which reminds us of Horace's *miscere utile dulci* in N. A.».

18 MARACHE 1981.

19 This pair is a little bit different from the others: the first part (*cuius generis*) strengthens the indications on the matrix *disparilitas – varietas* già presenti; the second part, on the other hand, seems to function only as a counterpoint to the first, that is, in order not to interrupt the supporting structure, dyadic, of the period. But by itself, this insertion (*cumque erant*) does not bring any relevant information, it appears without meaning with respect to the context.

20 See MARACHE 1957, 218 who presumes that this adjective is a legal term – rather than a neologism – ‘employé là par plaisanterie’.

21 BERNARDI PERINI s.d., 10.

22 Cf., in contrast, Plin. *nat. hist.*, *praef.* 14.

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