

Incarnating Proteus in Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*

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1 Introduction

Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, the novelistic biography of a first-century Pythagorean philosopher and ascetic, is increasingly recognised as a literary work of considerable subtlety, and one which plays complex games with fact and fiction.¹ Though it may initially appear to possess only a sprawling structure, presenting an ambling and digressive narrative from the protagonist's mysterious birth to his equally ambiguous death, a number of recent scholarly studies have revealed overarching and often intricate patterns and connections spanning the work as a whole.² It is with the deployment of one of these mythic paradigms, Proteus, that the present article is concerned. In the three stories related about the birth of Apollonius various relationships to deities are suggested; all of these contribute to the metaphoric construction of Apollonius' character,³ both in the text's initial programmatic chapters and through oblique recollections of these suggestions later in the text. Though the nature of Apollonius, and in particular his status

¹ See especially Bowie 1994; Billault 1991, 1993, 2000 and 2009; Francis 1998; Swain 1999; Whitmarsh 2004; Schirren 2005 (with the thoughtful review article by Gyselinck 2007); Schirren 2009; Gyselinck and Demoen 2009; Miles 2009.

² Elsner 1997; Schirren 2009; Praet 2009; Praet, Demoen and Gyselinck 2011; Miles 2016a.

³ On metaphoric characterisation see the brief summary by De Temmerman 2014, 30-31, who writes of characterisation by paradigm (being one type of technique for metaphoric characterisation): 'One of the most omnipresent types of metaphorical characterization in the ancient Greek novels (and indeed, much of ancient narrative in general) is the association of characters with (or dissociation from) intertextual paradigms' (2014, 35). On this practice in the *Life of Apollonius* see Van Dijk 2009 (on Odysseus); Praet, Demoen and Gyselinck 2011 (on Dionysus and Pentheus); Miles 2016a on Hippolytus. A different type of evocation of myth in the *Life* is discussed in Praet 2009, on which see below n.49.

as divine or mortal, is left ambiguous,⁴ some indications of that nature are given through the deployment of these mythic paradigms. The story of Proteus' annunciation to Apollonius' mother just before his birth is the first of a relatively small but important group of references to this god, which play a number of related roles in the work to follow, establishing the character of Apollonius and of the text as a whole, and reflecting on his ambiguous nature as a being who is never quite identified as either divine or human. The ambiguous, and indeed ambivalent attitudes to Proteus in literature and philosophy prior to the *Life* make him, as will emerge in the following discussion, a risky paradigm to evoke; it is precisely this riskiness, it might be added, that makes him so suitable. In the discussion to follow, I attempt to pin down more clearly the nature of the ambiguities and tensions concerning Proteus in this text. It is possible, furthermore, as I shall suggest in the third section of this article, that Proteus was already at this time associated with Platonic thinking on reincarnation and processions of souls, as he certainly was in later centuries.

Even before the annunciation of Proteus, the first, and in many respects most important, of the paradigms for Apollonius is Pythagoras, the 'ancestor of [his] wisdom'.⁵ Prior to the introduction of the *Life*'s protagonist, a prologue outlines the characteristics of Pythagoras which will be most relevant to the depiction of Apollonius: he had experienced previous incarnations (including one as Euphorbus at Troy), was a vegetarian and avoided animal sacrifice, was on close terms with the gods, and was sent down to humanity by Zeus himself (*VA* 1,1). Though I do not propose to examine anew the uses of Pythagoras in the *Life*, a few remarks on this prologue are necessary for my discussion of Proteus. Firstly, the Pythagoras evoked here and in the remainder of the work is as much a figure of myth as of philosophical history.⁶ Secondly, the use of Pythagoras as a paradigm for Apollonius is clear: the prefatory chapter mentions only those aspects of Pythagoras that will figure prominently in Apollonius' version of Pythagoreanism.⁷ Lastly the notions that Pythagoras and Empedocles possessed a special, daemonic nature, and that they also had experienced previous incarnations, will be important in the case of Apollonius himself. Both of these ideas about Empedocles and Pythagoras will be evoked in the text's depiction of Apollonius as an incarnation of Proteus.

⁴ Flinterman 1995, 62-63. As Goulet observes (1981, 176), such ambiguity of status is typically Pythagorean.

⁵ Aptly chosen (from *VA* 8,17,14) as the title of Flinterman 2009; this and Flinterman 1995 are the fullest discussions of Apollonius' Pythagoreanism.

⁶ On the difficulties of disentangling the historical Pythagoras from the myth see Burkert 1972; Zhmud 2012.

⁷ Omitting, for instance, Pythagorean interests in music and mathematics, on which see O'Meara 1989.

This apparently leisurely prologue initiates the technique of metaphoric characterisation,⁸ which will be an important one for the text as a whole, and begins to establish the ambiguous nature that Apollonius, as an exemplary Pythagorean, will turn out to possess. For establishing and exploring this ambiguous nature, the equally ambiguous figure of Proteus will prove to be just as important as Pythagoras himself.

2: *Metaliterary Cues and Mythic Paradigms*

While his mother was pregnant with [Apollonius], an apparition of an Egyptian *daimōn* came to her, Proteus, who changes form in Homer. And she was not afraid, but asked him what it was with which she was pregnant. And he said: 'With me'. And when she said: 'And who are you?' 'Proteus,' he said, 'the Egyptian god.' Why should I narrate to those who are educated in the poets what Proteus was like when it comes to wisdom, how changeable he was, and different at different times, and able to escape from capture, and how he knew, as it seemed, and foresaw everything? And one must remember Proteus, especially when my account as it progresses will show that the man had greater foreknowledge than Proteus, and that he was greater than many perplexities and impossible circumstances, especially at the moment when he was most constrained (*VA* 1,4).⁹

After its prologue on Pythagoras, and a brief discussion of the sources that Philostratus claims to have used,¹⁰ the *Life* proper begins with the stories of Apollonius' birth and the omens surrounding it. This tale of the apparition of Proteus is not the only story which Philostratus tells about Apollonius' birth, but its position in the work and its content give it a particular importance.¹¹ Menelaus' tale of wrestling

⁸ The *synkriseis* of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* are a related type of metaphoric characterisation. See on this Larmour 2000, 277-279.

⁹ Translations are my own.

¹⁰ The question of Apollonius' disciple Damis and his record of the master's life have been much discussed. See Bowie 1978, 1663-1667. Despite Anderson 1986, 155-173, the question is really whether the invented document is supposed to be taken for a real one or is a marker of fictionality. On the fictionality of the *Life* see especially Gyselinck and Demoen 2009.

¹¹ It is not surprising that this annunciation has received much attention from those primarily interested in comparing Apollonius and Jesus of Nazareth. On such comparisons see Hempel 1920; Bieler 1935-1936; Petzke 1970; Koskenniemi 1994.

Proteus in order to hear his prophecies regarding his homecoming is told at *Odyssey* 4.351-570: trapped on the Pharos, Menelaus must, with the help of the sea-god's daughter, Eidothea, ambush Proteus as he emerges from the sea with his flock of seals for a midday sleep. Having wrestled Proteus while the sea-god transforms into a lion, a snake, a leopard, a boar, water, and a tall tree (*Od.* 4.454-458) he is then able to hear the prophecies he requires, about his own homecoming and those of the other Achaeans.¹² As the narrator observes, Proteus is famous for his versatility and elusiveness, an elusiveness which, as Flinterman notes,¹³ also characterises the traditions concerning Apollonius. In addition to the suggestion of transformation, the identification with Proteus explains or conveys Apollonius' talent for prophecy. This is stated in as many words by the narrating voice.¹⁴ Of course, numerous examples of Apollonius' prophecies are given in the course of the *Life*, and his speech is characterised as oracular in style. His final, posthumous prophetic utterance is delivered in hexameters,¹⁵ transforming the now deceased Apollonius into a literally oracular figure. The significance of Proteus' reputation for wisdom hardly needs to be laboured, as the narrator notes (*VA* 1,4).

While the surface implications of the identification of Apollonius with Proteus are clear, and are stated directly by the narrating voice itself, it is evident that the passage invites readers to reflect further on the connection. 'One must remember Proteus' (μεμνήσθαι χρη τοῦ Πρωτέως (*VA* 1,4)), we are told, when the text reveals Apollonius' foreknowledge and his ability to extricate himself from difficulties. It is often the case that Philostratus, when posing an *ainigma* for his readers, will make overt part of its meaning and leave other aspects to be interpreted.¹⁶ In the case of Proteus there are a variety of possible associations, and a correspondingly large range of possible interpretations. Anderson notes the variety and incompatibility of the stories concerning Apollonius' birth, but nothing beyond this.¹⁷ Flinterman aptly observes that '[t]he tradition that Apollonius was an incarnation of Proteus confronts us directly with the controversial character of the

¹² Still valuable for its compilation of material concerning Proteus is Herter 1957. Morgan 1999, 17-101 meticulously assembles the background of associations which could be expected of the initial readers of Vergil's Proteus in the fourth book of the *Georgics*.

¹³ Flinterman 1995, 52. On the more generally 'Protean' character of the *Corpus Philostratum* see Elsner 2009.

¹⁴ γινώσκειν τε ὡς ἐδόκει καὶ προγινώσκειν πάντα ('he knew, as it seemed, and foresaw everything' (*VA* 1,4)). That Philostratus credits Apollonius with greater prophetic skills than Proteus need not conflict with his identification with the sea god.

¹⁵ Speaking as if from Delphic tripod (ἐκ τρίποδος): *VA* 1,17; final hexameter prophecy: *VA* 8,31.

¹⁶ On the use of partial or complete silences in the *Life* see Miles 2009, 139-144.

¹⁷ Anderson 1986, 144-145.

protagonist of the *VA*,¹⁸ while Fuhrer, somewhat similarly, observes the associations of sophist and sorcerer.¹⁹

There has recently been an increasing tendency to see in Proteus a programmatic figure for the text to follow. Whitmarsh argues for a metaliterary use of Proteus and sees this paradigm as closely connected to the ‘marked ambiguity as to whether Apollonius is a practitioner of sophistry and *goēteia*’. Noting the use of Proteus as ‘a common *comparandus* for sophists’ and that Apollonius’ Protean escape from his leg-fetter when imprisoned appears to contradict the text’s insistent denial that Apollonius was a magician, he argues for an ongoing tension between the text’s denials of magical practice and the possibility that Apollonius was, after all, a magician.²⁰ Gyselinck and Demoen observe the implications of elusiveness and prophetic skills, as well as of *goēteia*. They also rightly see in Proteus a metapoetic figure, and take his variability (*poikilia*) as a reflection on the text as much as its protagonist. In the same edited volume, Praet emphasises the allegorical possibilities of Proteus, a topic to which I shall return in the final section of this article. Schirren, emphasising like Gyselinck and Demoen the metapoetic aspects of the *Life* and of Proteus, sees the use of the sea-god in the opening chapters as giving ‘*den erwünschten Wink für die Frage nach dem fiktionalen Status*’, and as essentially undermining the apparently encomiastic tone of the work. He also wishes to read in this passage a reminder of the limitations of Proteus’ prophetic capabilities in Homer, suggesting similar limitations for Apollonius’ own ostensible omniscience.²¹ I shall have more to say in response to all of these points in the following discussion.

Proteus had by the third century a long history as the consummate sophist, as an image of philosophical changeability, and as the archetype of the magician. Given that part of Philostratus’ stated purpose in the *Life* was to dispose of the accusations of *goēteia* that his protagonist had attracted, the choice of Proteus as the god whom Apollonius embodies appears a risky one; Proteus could be a symbol of shifty changeability, as is clear, for instance, from Plutarch’s *De Amicorum Multitudine* (97a-b), where the metamorphoses of the changeable character who can undertake all kinds of activities, is ‘the work of some Proteus, but not a fortunate one nor very useful’ (97a).²² The presence of this metamorphic *daimōn* in the *Life of Apollonius* does, however, offer considerable narrative gains. Besides

¹⁸ See Flinterman 1995, 52-53; quote from 53.

¹⁹ Fuhrer 2004, 11-12.

²⁰ Whitmarsh 2001, 228-230 (quote from 229).

²¹ Schirren 2005, 48.

²² Πρωτεύως τινὸς οὐκ εὐτυχοῦς οὐδὲ πάνυ χρηστοῦ τὸ ἔργον... (97a).

the implications of wisdom and prophecy, the association of Apollonius and Proteus can also be read as an instruction for the reader on how to interpret what follows. When rereading this passage, or recalling it in the course of reading as the narrating voice instructs us to do, it may be difficult to see what the changes of Apollonius might be.²³ Though there is some hint of development in Apollonius' journey to study with the Brahmans, there is little room for improvement in a character depicted as a paragon of philosophic virtue since his youth. Consequently, when Apollonius is shown learning, there is some awkwardness: the difficulty of reconciling the sage's constant perfection with an account of his education in India results in Apollonius appearing curiously below average in his dealings with Iarchas, arguing for instance that justice is simply abstaining from doing anything wrong (*VA* 3,24). It is not, then, at the level of direct characterisation that Apollonius displays this Proteus-like quality which Philostratus attributes to him, though his various travels and encounters do imply a certain versatility and resourcefulness. Much more changeable, however, are the various historical and mythic figures with which the author associates him, and his implied status as god or mortal. There runs throughout the *Life* a persistent comparison of Apollonius to Odysseus, and in his Indian travels Apollonius is compared to his favour with Alexander. This latter comparison leads in turn to further comparisons with Heracles and Dionysus, whom Alexander himself had claimed as paradigms and predecessors.²⁴ The chapter on Proteus serves to alert the reader to these changing patterns of characterisation by allusion, and does so through identification with this first, and in some respects central figure, Proteus. The technique of employing mythic paradigms is itself announced by means of a mythic paradigm.

A similar programmatic Proteus appears in the opening of Nonnus' *Dionysiaca* (1,13-33). Here, after an invocation of the Muse, the poet asks her to bring him Proteus with his changeable form (ποικίλον εἶδος ἔχων) to assist him in his changeable song (ποικίλον ὕμνον (1,15)). Proteus is then used to describe the shifts in the plot and its incorporation of a great number of myths about Dionysus; highlights of the *Dionysiaca* are systematically connected with the forms of Proteus (1,16-33). If Proteus should become a serpent, for instance, the poet says that he will sing of Dionysus destroying the snake-haired giants, and if he becomes a lion, he will sing of Bacchus 'stealthily draining the breast' of Rhea 'the lionbreeding goddess' (1,16-21). The mutability of Proteus is made to correspond

²³ As Gyselinck and Demoen observe, Philostratus has Apollonius announce himself as a consistent, 'flat character' in his defence speech: 2009, 106.

²⁴ On Odysseus: Van Dijk 2009; Alexander's use of myth: Bosworth 1988, 278-290; Dionysus in the latter parts of the *Life*: Praet, Demoen and Gyselinck 2011.

with the mutations of the plot and, indirectly, of Dionysus himself. Philostratus, by contrast, ascribes this same changeable quality (*poikilia*) directly to his protagonist.²⁵ In both of these programmatic uses of Proteus, the key aesthetic notion of *poikilia* is evoked and ascribed to the metamorphic god.²⁶ Much as Nonnus would later claim *poikilia* as a defining quality of his own Protean text, Philostratus uses Proteus here to announce the variety and changeability of the narrative to follow.²⁷

Given Philostratus' emphatic instruction to readers to keep Proteus in mind (*VA* 1,4) any later references to him stand out. The first of these, Apollonius' relating of his previous life as an Egyptian sailor on the Pharos, will be discussed in the following section, as this bears on his mixed status as divine and human. In addition to this, Proteus recurs on two other occasions. Firstly, when Apollonius and Damis are in prison and Apollonius wishes to comfort his fellow prisoners, he compares his intended reassurance of the inmates with words to Helen's mingling of drugs from Egypt in a bowl of wine to comfort Menelaus and Telemachus (*VA* 7,22; *Od.* 4,219-234).²⁸ Damis replies that the story is likely to be true, since Helen associated with Proteus or (according to the Homeric version) with Polydamne daughter of Thon.²⁹ Since Damis does not seem to be aware of Apollonius' Protean nature, he is saying more than he knows. For the reader, recalling what Philostratus has told us earlier of Proteus' incarnation in Apollonius, it is implied that the prisoners will have access not just to someone who has learned from Proteus how to comfort suffering, but to the divine source itself.³⁰

²⁵ On the programmatic function of Proteus in Nonnus see Shorrock 2001, 20-23. Hopkinson (1994, 34 n.21) also notes the application of ποικίλος to Proteus in the *VA* and at Lucian, *Sacr.* 5 but does not compare the passages further. It is likely that Nonnus was aware of Philostratus as a precedent when making use of Proteus in this way. On Nonnus and the novels see Frangoulis 2014.

²⁶ Gyselinck and Demoen 2009, 107 rightly observe the importance of the term here and compare the ascription (at *Heroicus* 43) of the same quality to Homer's deliberate reworking of what he supposedly knew to be the 'true' story of the Trojan War.

²⁷ Gyselinck and Demoen similarly observe that the use of *poikilos* as *tertium comparationis* 'might therefore be read as a metafictional commentary by the author on the overall formal and stylistic versatility that he is about to display' (2009, 107).

²⁸ Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen* is also in the background here, especially 14 on the drug-like effects of persuasion.

²⁹ For Helen's stay in Egypt with Proteus see Herodotus 2.112 ff. Polydamne is the wife of Thon in Homer (*Od.* 4.228), not his daughter as Damis/Philostratus states. This could be an error in quoting from memory as easily as a variant tradition.

³⁰ A similar comparison between consoling words and Helen's 'sorrow assuaging' (νηπενθής) drugs appears in the anecdote of Antiphon's consolatory use of rhetoric in the *VS* (498-499).

Just a few chapters later, a further reference to Proteus occurs. This time, Domitian is rebuking Apollonius as a treasonous and dangerous magician. Apollonius has used a paradox the same as that employed by Apuleius in similar circumstances (*Apol.* 26,11-23), asking how, if he really were a magician, anyone could bind him, and if he is bound, how he could be a magician (*VA* 7,34).³¹ The notion of the unbindable magician may in itself call Proteus to mind, but Domitian's response makes this connection more directly: 'I will not set you free until you turn into water, or some animal or tree' (*VA* 7,34). As was the case with Damis' reference to Proteus, Domitian says more than he knows. Though he insults Apollonius as a wizard of Protean powers, readers have already been told to regard him as a sage incarnating Proteus. In literary terms, this is a species of dramatic irony, in religious terms, a *klēdōn*.³²

By the time of the *VA*, there was a substantial tradition of using Proteus both in philosophical discourse and in speaking about philosophers.³³ In the Platonic dialogues, Socrates jokingly likens his interlocutors to the old man of the sea on three occasions (Plat. *Euthyphr.* 14d3, *Euthyd.* 288b7, *Ion* 541e7).³⁴ In each of these cases, the character described as Protean has shifted his position in the argument, so that Socrates can ironically interpret his transformation as an attempt to avoid telling the truth which the speaker claims to know. Closer to Philostratus' time, Proteus had become the *cognomentum* of the Cynic Peregrinus, who immolated himself at Olympia. Whether this was a title which he applied to himself, as Lucian states (*Peregr.* 1), or a description applied by others,³⁵ the connection between philosophical changeability and Proteus evidently continued. To Lucian, of course, the title Proteus is as pretentious and contemptible as everything else about Peregrinus, and he jokes that, like Proteus, Peregrinus turned into fire (*Peregr.* 1). His appearance in Aulus Gellius, however, who praises Peregrinus' moral teaching (Gell. 12,11), informs us that other views of the Cynic and of his use of this name were current.

It is clear from the story told by Philostratus in the *Lives of the Sophists* that Peregrinus was known to Philostratus (*VS* 563-564).³⁶ This brief notice of Peregrinus is far from positive, stressing his half-barbaric speech (ἡμιβαρβάρω

³¹ The motif of the unprosecutable witch also appears in narrative form in the *Golden Ass* (1,8-10).

³² See also on this passage Whitmarsh 2001, 229.

³³ For a summary of these developments see Fuhrer 2004.

³⁴ See also Finber 1982

³⁵ As Aulus Gellius suggests (*Noctes Atticae* 12,11): *philosophum nomine Peregrinum, cui postea cognomentum Proteus factum est.*

³⁶ The *Proteus* attributed to Philostratus of Lemnos in the *Souda* (Φ 422) remains mysterious. As Münscher (1907, 547-548) and Hirzel (1896, II: 340 n.1) already argued, despite the

γλώττη) and insolence (κακῶς ἀγορεύων). In fact, the point of the story is how well Herodes Atticus dealt with rudeness like that of Peregrinus.³⁷ Though Philostratus knew of Peregrinus Proteus and his spectacular death, this does not mean that his identification of Apollonius with Proteus must recall the Cynic. A reference to Peregrinus in the initial definition of Philostratus' philosophic hero Apollonius is hardly likely. Schirren is certainly correct that Philostratus' silence regarding Lucian is not due to ignorance of his work,³⁸ but this does not mean that the reference to Proteus in *VA* 1,4 must be an intertextual reference to Lucian's *Peregrinus*. This would indeed endanger, or render ironic, the encomiastic function of the *Life*, but it is not a connection which the text compels us to make.

Rather, both Peregrinus' title and Philostratus' claim that Apollonius was an incarnation of Proteus are separate instances of the same tradition of comparing philosophic changeability to the transformations of Proteus. If, as Wright plausibly suggests,³⁹ the passage from Pollux of Naucratis quoted by Philostratus in the *Lives of the Sophists* (*VS* 593) was part of a declamation on the versatility of sophists, it would provide a further example of an association of a praiseworthy versatility with the Homeric figure. The associations for this type of comparison seem

proximity of the titles *Proteus, Dog or Sophist* (Πρωτέα, Κύνα ἢ σοφιστήν), this is unlikely to be one work, given the absence of the definite article before Κύνα, and because the latter combination (Κύνα ἢ σοφιστήν) resembles the double-titles of numerous Lucianic texts. This conclusion is also reached by de Lannoy (1997, 2398). As Patrick Robiano observes (in correspondence), in addition to these difficulties, the combination *Proteus, Cynic or Sophist*, would bring the hypothetical Philostratean work very close to the well known work of Lucian. Given that the two titles should be treated separately, the title *Proteus* alone tells us very little: it could have dealt with the cynic or could equally have been concerned directly with the sea-god. The options were already weighed up by Münscher (1907, 547-548).

³⁷ It is possible, though I think it unlikely, that Philostratus shows a hint of admiration of Peregrinus in his description: 'for this Peregrinus was one of those who practise philosophy with such vehemence (τῶν οὕτω θαρραλέως φιλοσοφοῦντων) that he even threw himself into a fire at Olympia' (*VS* 563). This depends, however, on how θαρραλέως is read. It can be taken as complimentary, indicating Peregrinus' courage, as Wright takes it in her Loeb translation ('one of those who have the courage of their philosophy'). Alternatively it can refer to excessive boldness or audacity (LSJ *s.v.* 2). Given the generally negative depiction of Peregrinus in this passage it is better to take it in the second sense.

³⁸ Schirren 2005, 50. Philostratus' *Imagines* 2,9 ('Pantheia') certainly responds to Lucian's *Imagines*: see the brief remarks of Elsner 2004, 182 n.10 and Squire 2013, 135, n.85. It is probable that a further comparison of Philostratus' and Lucian's works will reveal more such engagements.

³⁹ Wright 1921, 238 n.1. The references to Himerius, however, should be to 31,73; 68,63 and 68,69.

to range from evasiveness and even shiftiness to more positive sorts of philosophical metamorphosis. It is this mixed inheritance, and its combination of aptness and riskiness, that makes Proteus an attractive mythic paradigm for Philostratus.

A similar comparison of a philosopher / holy-man to Proteus is made in Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*, when Cnemon suspects Calasiris of trying to avoid telling him the rest of his story (Hld. 2,24,4). Here too, as in several of the comparisons of Apollonius to Proteus discussed above, the allusion is more apt than the speaker realises. While Cnemon's immediate reference is simply to the way in which Calasiris is telling his story, apparently avoiding telling Cnemon what he most wants to hear, Calasiris is also Protean in a wider sense. Calasiris' cultural identity, as an Ethiopian who is fluent in Greek and is just as comfortable in Greek culture as in his own, is certainly Protean. Likewise his foresight and wiliness are Protean, as is the prophetic role which he plays in the dreams of Theagenes and Charicleia after his death (Hld. 8,11,2-3).⁴⁰

The assimilation of Apollonius to Proteus is both important in the *Life* as a whole and many-faceted. What initially seems a simple Homeric allusion spreads out, when examined, into a complex network of associations. Besides implying Apollonius' prophetic ability and wisdom, it serves as an interpretive guide to the reader, indicating the various changes of Apollonius' character to come, and in particular his characterisation through comparisons with figures of Hellenic tradition. The technique of characterisation by allusion is introduced by an instance of that very technique. In addition, this equation draws on a history of comparisons of philosophers, or those engaged in philosophical discourse, to Proteus, applied for various reasons, ranging from change of one's position in argument in the Platonic dialogues, to change of philosophic orientation in the case of Peregrinus Proteus. The later references to Proteus in book seven serve to keep Proteus, and hence Apollonius' Protean nature, in readers' minds, and to recall the *Life's* opening as it begins to move towards its end.

3 Incarnation and Reincarnation: the nature of Apollonius

In addition to the passages discussed so far, one further passage of the *Life* develops Apollonius' Protean characterisation in another direction. When Apollonius visits the Brahmins, he is asked by their leader Iarchas about his previous life. After some initial hesitation, he states that he was the pilot of an Egyptian ship,

⁴⁰ On Calasiris and narrative techniques of the *Aethiopica* Winkler 1982 remains fundamental. On the comparison of Calasiris to Proteus: Hunter 2014, 151-155. On Heliodorus and Philostratus: Morgan 2009.

who lived in a hut on the Pharos, ‘where Proteus lived once long ago’ (οὗ πάλαι ποτὲ ὁ Πρωτεύς ἔκει (VA 3,24)). There are similarities, then, in both character (Egyptian sea-god/Egyptian sailor) and habitation (Pharos). The most notable action which Apollonius recalls from this lifetime, deceiving some pirates who had attempted to bribe him to betray the ship that he was piloting, adds some Protean slipperiness and cunning to this earlier incarnation (VA 3,24). Anderson speculates that ‘Apollonius might have been responsible for shaping reminiscences of past lives to traditions he himself perhaps put about’, or that it may be an invention of Philostratus.⁴¹ As is so often the case when dealing with the traditions concerning Apollonius, there is no way of knowing, as Anderson himself acknowledges. Whatever the source of the accounts of Proteus’ appearance at Apollonius’ birth and the previous life on the Pharos, the reference to Proteus in recounting the pilot’s story invites readers to draw connections between these two parts of the text.

It also, however, presents a certain difficulty: Apollonius may now be worthy to be called a *daimōn* incarnate, but his previous incarnation appears, for all its Protean attributes, to have been as a thoroughly ordinary human being, whose greatest achievement was merely refusing a bribe (VA 3,24). Is the pilot also an incarnation of Proteus? How should readers reconcile the notion that Proteus himself has incarnated as Apollonius with this account of a previous incarnation that by Apollonius’ own admission fell well short of the divine? No direct explanation is given to reconcile these stories, and it is clear that it is an instance of a broader slippage in the text between mortal and divine. The case of Pythagoras, moreover, is similar; like Apollonius, Pythagoras is credited with a sequence of earlier incarnations, as Euphorbus and others (Iamb. VP 14 and Porph. VP 45).⁴² He is at the same time said to be a god, the Hyperborean Apollo (Iambl. VP 6, Porph. VP 28). Like Philostratus, Iamblichus and Porphyry in their accounts of Pythagoras’ life do not overtly reconcile these statements. In the case of Iamblichus and Philostratus, however, a kind of solution is implied, as I shall argue below.

Recognising the difficulty of reconciling the statements that Apollonius is Proteus incarnate and that he has experienced previous incarnations, Du Toit has argued that the *daimōn* Proteus could be considered a sort of accompanying spirit, a *Begleitdämon*.⁴³ Against this reading, however, is Proteus’ statement that Apollonius’ mother will give birth to a child who *is* he, rather than one accompanied by him. Du Toit recognises this objection and responds that since Proteus is born

⁴¹ Anderson 1986, 235.

⁴² On the various reasons for choosing Euphorbus as Pythagoras’ previous incarnation: Hendry 1995.

⁴³ Du Toit 1999.

in the same body as the soul of Apollonius, Apollonius therefore is in a sense identical with him, as the soul and the *daimōn* form a unity. The conflation here of accompaniment and identity is problematic. Flinterman offers further criticisms of du Toit's hypothesis in connection with Apollonius' foreknowledge, and sensibly concludes that 'the Philostratean account of Apollonius' faculty of foreknowledge seems to be a combination of sometimes conflicting notions'.⁴⁴ The ambiguity of Apollonius' ontological status is central to his characterisation, and it is the maintenance of this ambiguity, rather than any straightforward resolution, at which the *Life* aims.

It is worth noting, moreover, that a divine nature and a succession of incarnations is similarly claimed by Empedocles in the lines which are quoted in the opening chapter of the *Life of Apollonius*:

Hail, I appear to you an immortal god, no longer mortal

and

For already I became once both a girl and a young man (*VA* 1,1=D.K. frs. 112 and 117).⁴⁵

The combination of divinity and a series of incarnations is thus presented early in the text, inviting readers to consider these elements in the characterisation of Apollonius. In both their introduction and in their subsequent occurrences, the relationship between these ideas is never clearly explained. Like Pythagoras and Empedocles, Apollonius is depicted both as an incarnation of a higher being and as a 'normal' human soul going through a sequence of lives.

Solmsen addressed a somewhat similar, though distinct, problem of reconciling beliefs in reincarnation of heroes (such as Palamedes' reincarnation as an Indian boy, *VA* 3,22) and in the posthumous activity of these heroes at their tombs in both the *Life of Apollonius* (*VA* 4,16) and the *Heroicus*,⁴⁶ a work which is generally recognised as having a close relationship to the *Life*.⁴⁷ Solmsen's solution was to view these apparently contradictory beliefs as coexisting relatively comfortably since both could be considered Pythagorean.⁴⁸ In the case, however, of

⁴⁴ Flinterman 2009, 168.

⁴⁵ χαίρετ', ἐγὼ δ' ὄμμιεν θεὸς ἄμβροτος, οὐκετι θνητός καὶ ἤδη γάρ ποτ' ἐγὼ γενόμεν κόρη τε κόρος τε (*VA* 1,1 = D.K. fragments 112 and 117).

⁴⁶ Solmsen 1940, 565-567.

⁴⁷ Grossardt 2006, 14-23; Rusten and König 2014, 7-11.

⁴⁸ 'By the application of a Pythagorean point of view to the subject of the heroes he may well have satisfied himself as well as many of his readers': Solmsen 1940, 569. If, with

the different combination of ideas present in the depiction of Apollonius, both as Proteus incarnate and as the next in a series of incarnations, it must be added that the combination works not merely because both beliefs could be accepted as Pythagorean and so reconciled in that very broad sense, but rather that the conjunction of two ontological status in a single being was in itself characteristically Pythagorean. Apollonius' nature, consequently, cannot be fully understood without both elements.

Apollonius' slippage between categories, moreover, is emphasised by the points of contact between his previous incarnation and his divine nature as Proteus: both the pilot and Proteus dwell on the Pharos, and are associated with the sea and trickery. There is a clear gradation of qualities: while the pilot shows a certain wiliness, Apollonius has a share of a higher kind of Protean intelligence. It is in this sense, it seems, that he is identified as Proteus, by sharing unusually fully in the characteristics of his guiding deity. The two incarnations of Apollonius reflect at different levels the characteristics of the deity whom they are supposed to incarnate.⁴⁹ This suggests the Platonic notion of divine processions under the leadership of particular gods (*Phdr.* 246e-248c), whom souls can come to resemble more or less closely. When incarnated as Apollonius, this soul has reached a more advanced point in the Protean procession. It is far from improbable to see this idea reflected in Philostratus: it is plain, after all, that he had closely read a

Schirren, we see the reincarnation stories as basically comic (2005, 269-270), there is perhaps no need to look for a consistent picture. It is difficult, however, to find in these scenes sufficient justification for a comic reading (on which as a general issue in Schirren 2005, see Gyselinck 2007). Schirren also sees a further break with theories of metempsychosis in Apollonius' ascent to the heavens (2005, 308). Since the fate of Apollonius' soul is hardly clear, however, it is impossible to be sure of any conflict. It is, moreover, evident from Plato's myth of Er that celestial journeys and reincarnation can readily be combined: *Republic* 614b-621d.

⁴⁹ Patrick Robiano (in correspondence) rightly raises the question of why there is no reference to Proteus at *VA* 5,24. Here Apollonius, visiting Alexandria, sees twelve men being led away to execution and prophesies that one will be found not to be guilty, and will be released. The passage presents a constellation of Protean qualities: prophecy, proximity to the Pharos, Apollonius' likeness to a god (5,24,1), and the name of the acquitted man: Pharion. This last detail in particular surely invites us to recall Proteus, but Philostratus avoids a direct allusion. This allusion without an allusion does, however, let him have it both ways: he can recall the sea-god for the knowing reader without foregrounding too sharply the potentially risky comparison.

great deal of Plato,⁵⁰ and that at times he draws heavily on the *Phaedrus*, in particular in the opening of the *Heroicus*.⁵¹ Though we should not ascribe any one philosophical affiliation to Philostratus, whose work is characterised rather by a learned eclecticism which draws happily on whatever is of use to him in a particular context, Platonism does feature prominently in his thinking. This idea of procession would later be used more explicitly by Iamblichus to make sense of the mixed status of Pythagoras: though he was not literally, according to Iamblichus, a son of Apollo, he is an advanced soul sent ‘under the leadership of Apollo’ (ἀπὸ τῆς Ἀπόλλωνος ἡγεμονίας (*VP* 8)).⁵² It is quite possible then that a similar idea underlies and makes sense of the representation of Apollonius as both Proteus incarnate and as having a previous life with its own Protean characteristics. Much as this notion would later allow Iamblichus to present a Pythagoras who seems at different times to be both mortal and divine, reconciling the contradictory traditions with which he had to work, so Philostratus, whatever the sources of his own account of Apollonius may be, more obliquely suggests this same idea in the depiction of his protagonist across two incarnations.

It is just possible too that the choice of Proteus is further motivated by particular traditions of allegorical interpretation of the Egyptian *daimōn*. Praet has argued that Philostratus’ *paideia* would have extended to the Pythagorean and general allegorical tradition, and sees him as drawing on such traditions in his choice of Proteus in the *Life*.⁵³ In particular, he argues that Philostratus draws here on the Neopythagorean interpretation of Proteus as the monad, which gives rise to everything and so in a sense contains the properties of everything.⁵⁴ Heraclitus the

⁵⁰ The study of the philosophical content in Philostratus has lagged behind that of the *corpus*’ literary and rhetorical strategies and its contributions to the social history of its times, not least because it has so often been asserted that there is little or no philosophical content in the *Life* (see Praet 2009, 284 n.4 for a summary of such comments). Some recent work, however, includes Belousov 2014 on the teachings ascribed to the Brahmans; Miles 2009 on Philostratus’ use of Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Praet 2009 attempts a wholesale rethinking of the nature of philosophical content in the *Life*. Following Cremonesi (2005, 10-12), he agrees that, on a view informed by Hadot’s notion of philosophy as a way of life (1991, 1995), ‘Apollonius’ way of life is ancient philosophy’ (Praet 2009, 284 n.4), and goes on to develop a detailed allegorical reading of the *Life* as a progression through the series of planetary deities. The type of reading proposed by Praet is far from implausible in Philostratus’ era, and deserves to be taken more seriously than it appears to have been so far.

⁵¹ Hodkinson 2011.

⁵² See on this O’Meara 1989, 37-39; Gorman 1985, 134; Brisson and Segonds 2011, xviii-xix; Miles 2016b.

⁵³ Praet 2009, 316-318.

⁵⁴ Praet 2009, 317, citing Pseudo-Iamblichus, *Theology of Arithmetic* 7. Sextus Empiricus reports a reading in which Proteus was the first cause and Eidothea the substance shaped by matter (*Adv. math.* IX (*Adv. dogm.* III) 5. See also on this passage Buffière 1956, 179 ff.

allegorist also identifies Proteus as a figure of the creation of the world, and his transformations as symbolic of the four elements.⁵⁵ I would add that there is a further allegorical interpretation of Proteus which, though reported significantly later than Philostratus, may also be relevant to his choice of this particular deity. Proclus, in his *Commentary on the Republic of Plato*, discusses the myths concerning transformations of the gods, and gives an elaborate allegorical reading of Proteus as the leader of a procession of souls, seeing this passage of the *Odyssey* as prefiguring the *Phaedrus*' notion of divine processions (246e-248c). Though Proclus' Proteus is 'not yet a god' he is a 'messenger intellect' (νοῦς ἀγγελικός), with a procession of souls following him, represented in the myth by his flock of seals (Procl. *In Remp.* 1,112-113). Much of Proclus' allegorising, like much allegorising in general, is traditional. It is not personal inventiveness, after all, to which allegorical readers aspire, but the unearthing of ancient and concealed truths, and to that end they generally borrow freely from their predecessors. As Sheppard has observed, the distinctions between Proteus as 'messenger intellect', Eidothea as 'daimonic soul' (ψυχὴ δαιμονία), and the seals as 'rational souls' (ψυχὰι λογικαί) only existed in the post-Iamblichean system, and very likely derive from Proclus' teacher Syrianus, who frequently transposes earlier allegories (of a physical or ethical nature) into terms of specifically Neoplatonic metaphysics.⁵⁶ This, obviously, postdates Philostratus, and possesses in any case a degree of philosophical technicality for which he nowhere shows any inclination. Nonetheless, the general pattern of development for these complex, late Platonist readings of Homer is a gradual refinement of earlier, less intricate readings. It is quite possible, though uncertain, that the main point of connection, between Proteus as leader of seals and the *Phaedrus*' processions of souls, had already been made by the time of the *Life of Apollonius*. If this is so, then Proteus is both the god whom Apollonius follows and, in his greatest lifetime, incarnates, and also a symbol of the very notion of divine processions.

4 Conclusion

In addition to announcing Apollonius' oracular and prophetic character, the dream of Apollonius' mother and the subsequent references to Proteus carry a heavy load, almost an overload, of further implications. By allusion to Proteus the *Life*

⁵⁵ Praet 2009, 316; Heraclitus 64-67.

⁵⁶ Regarding Proclus' interpretive practices in these essays more generally, including his indebtedness to his teacher Syrianus, see Sheppard 1980, 78-103.

indicates its own stylistic *poikilia*, the versatility of Apollonius and the changeability of the mythic paradigms used for his metaphoric characterisation. Suggesting philosophical changeability and rhetorical versatility, as well as shiftiness, the evocation of Proteus contributes to Philostratus' game of denying that Apollonius was a sophist and magician, while leaving open the possibility that he might have been just this after all. Proteus also, finally, develops the text's reflections on Apollonius' status as both human and divine, combining and reconciling its ideas on incarnation and reincarnation. Proteus provides the means of approaching two separate ideas about Apollonius' nature, both of which, and their combination, could be characterised as Pythagorean, and reconciling them through a notion of divine processions.⁵⁷

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⁵⁷ I am grateful to *Ancient Narrative*'s anonymous reader for an astute and helpful report and to Patrick Robiano for his helpful and stimulating correspondence following the online publication. Parts of this article were discussed too long ago with my then doctoral supervisors at the University of Western Australia, Judith Maitland and Neil O'Sullivan, and subsequently with colleagues at the University of Ghent: especially Kristoffel Demoen, Danny Praet, Wannes Gyselinck and Koen De Temmerman.

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