Pinning down Proteus: Some Thoughts on an Innovative Interpretation of Philostratus' *Vita Apollonii*

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In the beginning of the *Vita Apollonii* (1, 4) the god Proteus appears in a dream to the pregnant mother of Apollonius, prophesying that she will give birth to him, Proteus. The narrator comments: “*Now for those who know the poets why should I describe how wise Proteus was, how shifting, multiform and impossible to catch, and how he seemed to have all knowledge and foreknowledge? But the reader must bear Proteus in mind, especially when the course of my story shows that my hero had the greater prescience of the two, and rose above many difficult and baffling situations just when he was cornered*”.

The interpretative history of the *Vita Apollonii* (VA) of Flavius Philostratus, written between about 220 and 250 AD, reflects perfectly this ‘protean’ nature of its protagonist Apollonius of Tyana, a Cappadocian Pythagorean who lived in the first century AD.¹ This immensely rich and vast work of elaborate prose has recently been honoured with a new translation and edition in the Loeb series by Christopher Jones,² along with a more recently published third volume containing Apollonius’ letters, testimonia and *Eusebius’ Reply to Hierocles*.³

¹ See J. J. FLINTERMAN, *Power, Paideia and Pythagoreanism : Greek identity, conceptions of the relationship between philosophers and monarchs and political ideas in Philostratus' Life of Apollonius*, Amsterdam, 1995, 52–53. For an interpretation of this passage as an interpretative cue, see especially T. WHITMARSH, *Greek literature and the Roman empire : the politics of imitation*, 2001, 228–230. As he puts it: “*The Apollonius is as tricky and elusive as its subject* (230).

² C. P. JONES, *Philostratus. The Life of Apollonius of Tyana, vol. I and II, The Loeb Classical Library, 16 and 17*. Cambridge MA, 2005. All passages of the VA in this article are quoted in the translation of Jones. Concerning the Greek text of the *Vita Apollonii* Christopher Jones explains in his introduction: “*Given the lack of a proper edition of the Life, I have tried to produce an interim text by taking Kayser's of 1870 as a point of departure, and improving it in various ways*” (vol. I, p. 25). A new critical text edition of the *Vita Apollonii* is being prepared by Gerard-Jan Boter.

³ C. P. JONES, *Philostratus. Apollonius of Tyana. Letters of Apollonius. Ancient Testimonia. Eusebius' Reply to Hierocles, vol III, The Loeb Classical Library, 458*. Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2006. Price: 22,50 €. ISBN 13 978-0-674-99617-5. Eusebius’ refutation of Hierocles’ anti-Christian polemic entitled Φιλαλήθης which had argued that Philostratus’ Apollonius was superior to Jesus Christ, was traditionally published together with the VA as a Christian antidote against Philostratus’ pagan poison. Jones breaks with this

The *Vita Apollonii* has been read as a pagan counter-gospel, as a solemn and historically accurate biography, an allegorical travel story, and as a novelistic piece of pseudo-philosophical fiction ‘based on (some) true facts’. Only in the last decade or so could the latter description be taken as a positive appreciation. The VA, with its 8 books divided over 2 Loeb volumes, is the longest biography in ancient Greek literature. It is a generic hybrid, containing encomiastic elements, platonic dialogue, travel stories (Apollonius travels beyond the borders of the known world, to the Indian Brahmins and the Ethiopian sages), zoological and ethnographical digressions (about elephants, snakes, “The Long-Headed-Ones” and “Shadow-Footed Men”), paradoxography (griffins, unicorns, gold gathering ants), miracle stories, oracular apophthegms, a highly rhetorical *apologia*, and three alternative versions of Apollonius’ death (ranging from the more straightforward “dying of old age” to assumption into the heavens in a Cretan temple, with musical accompaniment by an invisible maiden choir). In short: the VA is a rather unsettling text for 21st century readers.

Yet, especially since the article of James A. Francis in 1998, one of the main scholarly quarrels on the VA, whether it should be regarded as a historically accurate biography or merely as entertaining fiction, has made place for more interesting and promising lines of interpretation.⁴ Francis has argued convincingly that “fiction” should not be equated with “unseriousness”. This equation had led to a perception of the VA <as> “either a failed novel or a bad history”. Instead, Francis wanted to focus on the question of the precise purpose of the “contract of fictional complicity” between author and reader. Simply put, *how was this work to be believed?* What might be the serious point that Philostratus wants to make in

tradition and publishes Eusebius’ reply together with the letters of Apollonius, a (disputed) source for the chimerical “historical Apollonius”, and with a selection of ancient *testimonia* on Apollonius and Philostratus’ VA, until now a desideratum for the VA-Forschung.

⁴ J. A. FRANCIS, “Truthful fiction: new questions to old answers on Philostratus’ « Life of Apollonius ».” *AJPh* 119, 3 (1998), 419–441. Other interesting approaches to the *Vita Apollonii* include E. L. BOWIE, “Philostratus : writer of fiction.” in J. R. MORGAN and R. STONEMAN (eds.), *Greek Fiction. The Greek Novel in Context* London, 1994, 181–199; J. J. FLINTERMAN, *Power, Paideia and Pythagoreanism : Greek identity, conceptions of the relationship between philosophers and monarchs and political ideas in Philostratus’ Life of Apollonius*, Amsterdam, 1995; J. ELSNER, “Hagiographic geography : travel and allegory in the « Life of Apollonius of Tyana ».” *JHS* 117, (1997), 22–37; T. WHITMARSH, *Greek literature and the Roman empire : the politics of imitation*, 2001, 225–246; T. WHITMARSH, “Philostratus.” in I. J. F. DE JONG, R. NÜNLIST and A. BOWIE (eds.), *Narrators, Narratees, and Narratives in Ancient Greek Literature*, Leiden, 2004, 423–439; V. PLATT, “Virtual Visions: Phantasia and the perception of the divine in the Life of Apollonius of Tyana.” in J. ELSNER and E. L. BOWIE (eds.), *Philostratus*, Cambridge, forthcoming.

writing this curious form of fiction, or should we say ‘faction’? After underlining the effectiveness of fiction as a device to convey serious ideas, Francis poses in his conclusion the question “(...) *whether by the complexities of his narration, representation, and fictional revisionism, Philostratus has actually violated his side of the contract of complicity*” (quotations from Francis p. 425, 438, 438–439). Is the VA too believable? Francis called for a new (...) study incorporating both new insights into fiction and, just as important, a narratological analysis. This reads as a blurb for Thomas Schirren’s new book, “Philosophos Bios (...)”.⁵

Opmerking [FLeW1]: Is dit elegant?

The point of departure of his study is, indeed, the tricky question of fictionality in the VA. A slippery text like this calls for a firm theoretical grip, and this is one of the strong points of “Philosophos Bios”: after a short introductory section on the VA (*I. Einleitung und Forschungsüberblick zur “Vita Apollonii des Philostrat*, p. 1–13), Schirren combines literary theory (Iser, Goodman and Genette, to name a few), semiotics (Peirce) and the philosophy of Ernst Cassirer (“*die Philosophie der Symbolische Form*”, hence the title *Die antike Philosophenbiographie als symbolische Form*), to frame and endorse his unorthodox and sympathetic reading of the VA (*II. Zur Fiktionalitätsfrage narrativer Texte*, p.15–68). In agreement with Francis who underlined the possibility of “truthful fiction” for a better understanding of the VA, Schirren objects to the sharp distinction between “fact” and “fiction” in classical literature, approvingly quoting Patricia Cox who interpreted the lives of Origen and Plotinus as narratives “*using fiction to convey truth*”.⁶ Schirren goes a few steps further in questioning this conventional distinction by embedding fiction theory within the broader epistemological framework of Cassirer’s philosophy, developed independently from Peirce’s semiotic program, but in fact closely related to Peircean semiotics. Cassirer’s thinking consists of a critique of the idealistic conception of signs as mere vehicles for unchangeable and ideal packages of meaning. Rather, according to Cassirer and Peirce, signs structure and create reality; human beings can only meaningfully relate to reality through “semiosis”. As Cassirer exegete John Michael Krois puts it: “*What seems immediately present to us is always more: it always possesses expressive,*

⁵ T. SCHIRREN, *Philosophos Bios : die antike Philosophenbiographie als symbolische Form : Studien zur Vita Apollonii des Philostrat*, Heidelberg, 2005. Price 55,00 €. ISBN 3-8253-5118-1.

⁶ P. MILLER-COX, *Biography in late antiquity: a quest for the holy man*, Berkeley (Calif.) 1983.

representational or significant symbolic value” (his translation of Cassirer’s key notion “*symbolische Prägnanz*”).⁷

Moving over to literary theory, Schirren understands fiction not merely as a representation (*mimesis*) of a given reality but rather as a possible modelling of reality. In semiotic terms: a given set of signs (conventionally called “reality”) is interpreted, replaced by or reshaped into another set of artistically manipulated signs (conventionally called “art”). For a reader of the VA, a work of art where history and literary invention are so masterfully intertwined, this semiotic conception of fiction conveniently blurs the conventional distinctions between reality and artistic representation.

But before turning to the VA, Schirren applies the philosophy of the symbolic forms to the genre of the philosopher biographies which he considers to be the “architext” (Genette) of the VA, the group of texts with which the VA is connected via shared “*topoi*”, content or compositional patterns (*III. Der Philophenbios als Architext*, p. 69–211). He does not use the concept of genre rashly: genre is thought of in terms of literary conventions shared by a group of texts, which regulate the production and reception of a literary work, especially through the use of *topoi*. These “common” *topoi* bring key moments in the philosopher’s life into relief, and at the same time connect the “vita” with other texts, adding a broader significance to the particular life. These *topoi* are positively evaluated by Schirren as “*Momente oder Bestandteile symbolischer Prägnanz*” (210).

A philosopher leads an exemplary and ambitious life, always under threat of not living up to his ambitions and not practicing what he preaches. Since this philosophical quest for unity of “doxa” and “praxis” can be taken as a symbol for a more general human striving, this “symbolic value” is, Schirren claims, precisely the *raison d’être* of these texts.

His flexible concept of genre, allows the author to analyse texts spanning more than 500 years. They range from the *Apology of Socrates*, over Plato’s *Letters*, some of Plutarch’s *Parallel lives*, to the collection of vitae by Diogenes Laertius, the parodies of Lucian, and the lives of Pythagoras and Plotinus written by Porphyry. Although Schirren offers some very interesting interpretations in his discussion of these texts (especially of the vitae of Diogenes

⁷ J.M. KROIS (2004), “More than a Linguistic Turn in Philosophy: the Semiotic Programs of Peirce and Cassirer”, *Sats – Nordic Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 14–33, quoted from p. 25 – 26. For non-German readers perhaps a more readable introduction to Cassirer and Peirce than Schirren’s second section.

Laertius, p. 113–137), his interpretative acuity is demonstrated especially in the fourth and last section of the book where he returns to the VA.

In the first chapter of this final section on the VA (*IV. Erbauliches, Wunderbares und Poetologisches in der Vita Apollonii*, p. 213–318), Schirren focuses on the apologetic tendency of the Vita. It seems to have been Philostratus' intention to portray Apollonius as a man with superhuman powers resulting from *sophia*, not *mageia*. Philostratus stresses this explicitly many times at crucial points in his story (beginning and ending), vehemently repudiating traditions that suggest that Apollonius was in fact nothing but an ordinary magician.⁸ In the course of the story, however, Apollonius is said to have performed several miracles strongly reminiscent of magical practices. This is interpreted by Schirren as an incongruence that gets even more complicated by the fact that intertextual allusions and narratorial comment function as signals for the overall fictionality. In his careful close reading of the miracles in the VA Schirren argues that these episodes are systematically signalled as “literary fictions”. He interprets this as a sign for “*eine spezifische Distanznahme (...), die die Magie als Element in einer fiktionalen Erzählung ausweist und dadurch entpragmatisiert, dass die Magie aus dem rituellen Kontext gelöst wird*” (230).

Let us consider one example: in book four the narrator tells his readers the story of Apollonius' exposure of a Lamia, a vampire-like lady who falls in love with beautiful men, fattens them with pleasures and feeds on their flesh. Her latest victim happens to be a philosopher, Menippus, a pupil of Apollonius. Just before their wedding Apollonius

⁸ The testimonia on Apollonius collected by Jones in the third Loeb volume (see note 3) suggest that the pre-Philostratean Apollonius had a rather dubious reputation. Cassius Dio reports Apollonius' “vision” in Ephesus of the assassination of Domitian in Rome, of which he stresses that it “*really happened, even though one should doubt it a thousand times*” (*Histories* 67, 18, 1, in the translation by Jones, p. 89). Elsewhere Cassius Dio suggests that Apollonius was a mere μάγος and a γοής (*Histories* 77, 18, 4). The latter label was applied to Apollonius by Christian apologetics to refute the image of the philostratean Apollonius as a Hellenic superhero and reduce him to a mere wizard. The strong affirmation of Hellenism in the VA should be read against the backdrop of the Severan dynasty with its Syrian background and religious syncretism as well as the rise of Christianity. Simon Swain argues that “(...) *Philostratus' highly self-conscious Hellenism involves antipathy towards rival groups of all sorts, and that in the 220s and 230s Christians, however minor a threat they might still seem, were one of these* (185).” See S. C. R. SWAIN, “Defending Hellenism: Philostratus, *In honour of Apollonius*.” in EDWARDS, GOODMAN and PRICE (eds.), *Apologetics in the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews and Christians*, 1999, 157–196.

intervenes: entering the banqueting hall luxuriously decorated by the lady, Apollonius asks his pupil whether he knows the story of Tantalus' gardens "*which exist and yet do not exist?*" (...) "*That*", said Apollonius, "*is how to regard this display. It is not material, but the appearance of matter*" (VA 4, 25). Thereupon he unmasks the rich lady as a "Lamia", a female vampire. At that moment the gold and silver, the cooks and servants all prove illusory and vanish under Apollonius' scrutiny.

Schirren rightly points out that this "ghost story" is transformed into an almost Platonic "*Metapher der scheinbaren Freuden der Sinnenwelt*" (220).

At the same time, Schirren sees in the episode intertextual allusions to the *Nea*: "*In der Neuen Komödie treten auch oft Geister auf, allerdings falsche, die sich dann als schöne Mädchen entpuppen oder als fauler Zauber*" (221, referring in footnotes to Menander's *Phasma* and Plautus' *Mostellaria*). His conclusion: "*Das solchermassen Dargestellte erreicht durch den intertextuellen Bezug auf komische Literatur eine besondere Komik, da so in den erbaulichen Philosophenbios unversehens die erotische Welt der Komödie und des Liebensromanes einbricht* (ibid.).

From our 21st century viewpoint, trained as we are to discover ironies and post-modern playfulness on every page we read, it is tempting to interpret this literary sophistication and alleged allusions as "ironic". However, the question arises whether such a reading is compatible with the literary ethics and aesthetics of the Second Sophistic, and whether the "intertextual allusions" are effectively intended to function as such. I will return to these questions in the final pages of this article.

The climax of the ambiguous apologetic tendency in the VA is a beautiful example of the interpretative games that Philostratus is playing, as Schirren points out in his discussion of the never performed "Apology of Apollonius" in the last book of the VA (Schirren p. 236–238). After forcing his judge, the emperor Domitian, with razor-sharp one-liners to acquit him of the charges, Apollonius vanishes miraculously from the court. At that point the narrator pauses his story and introduces an apology that Apollonius had prepared in case he was allowed the time to defend himself at greater length. For reasons of completeness the narrator desires to include this speech in his account of the life. It serves as a lengthy *anakephalaiosis* of the past seven books, with testimonies and anacolutha due to indignant interruptions by the emperor, features typical for this genre.

Since the speech is introduced as never actually performed, this seems to correspond to the contract of fictionality that Schirren sees installed at the beginning of the VA, where the

memoirs of Apollonius' travelling companion "Damis from Niniveh" are mentioned. These "deltai" were brought to the empress Julia Domna, who commissioned the narrator to rewrite the accurate but clumsily written *apomnèmonemata* in a style that was rhetorically apt and "in honour of Apollonius of Tyana". In short: Schirren suggests that if the *anakefalaiosis* of the story is signalled as a literary fiction, representing events that never actually took place, then what is summarised, namely the VA, is fictional too. The narratorial comment before the inclusion of the apology is therefore reinforcing the contract of fictionality that was installed at the beginning of the VA.

Occasionally, however, Schirren's interpretative enthusiasm leads him to present textual features as obvious markers for fictionality, distance or irony, where other explanations seem perfectly plausible or, worse, where the alleged incongruity is not incongruous at all. This lays bare an essential interpretative problem: how can we decide, in view of the temporal distance between us and the text and its context, whether a textual element is to be read as an allusion or an irony marker? Although Schirren demonstrates an impressive knowledge of the literary context of the VA and applies classical rhetorical theory (for example on *oratio figurata*) very convincingly to endorse his interpretations, he is sometimes too eager to discover an ironic incongruence, for instance in his discussion of VA 8, 2. Apollonius talks about the different rhetorical registers that he has mastered, namely the capacity of speaking either concisely or at length, as well as the rhetoric of silence. Here Apollonius refers to Socrates as a philosopher who remained silent during his trial. Schirren interprets this as an ironic incongruence signalled by an "*eklatanten Verstößen gegen allgemein bekannte Fakten*" (240). This would be a legitimate conclusion, if only there would not actually exist a tradition that Socrates indeed did not defend himself (see Appian, Roman History, 11, 7, 41 and Maximus of Tyre, Or. 3, 1–8).

The in my view most interesting and original pages of the book are dedicated to the famous passage in book two of the VA, where Apollonius instructs his disciple Damis on mimesis and the nature of art (VA 2, 21–22). Apollonius/Philostratus argues here, quite uniquely in Greek aesthetical theory, that the faculties of creative activity are also present in an equally creative process of reception, for example when we recognise shapes of animals in the clouds. Schirren develops the original and highly attractive hypothesis that this passage can be interpreted metapoetically. In his discussion of the role of mimesis in both the production and reception of visual arts, Philostratus, as Schirren observes, appears to be communicating his own implicit poetics. This should be read together with another episode where Apollonius

discusses *fantasia* (VA 6, 22). To quote Schirren: *Implizit wäre damit gesagt, dass sich der (implizite) Autor bei den Darstellung auf seine eigene Phantasia verlassen und sich an den Bildwelten des θεῖος ἄνθρωπος orientiert habe, um den zu porträtierenden Apollonius angemessen zur Darstellung zu bringen* (281).

He goes even further and recognises in these theoretical passages an apology for the fictionality in the VA, since every human being is in fact a “mimetes”, constructing his own version of the world. Here, perhaps, we should mention that the passage on mimesis implies also that it is possible to perceive certain forms and features in art as meaningful, even when there is no such significance intended, as is obvious in the example of the animal shaped clouds “*unless we should consider God as a painter*” (VA 2, 22). Whereas Schirren recognises an almost structuralist world view in this passage, a less daring (or more cautious?) interpreter might object that his appreciation of Philostratus almost as a worthy predecessor of Cassirer himself, is based on a reading of this passage that is perhaps slightly over-imaginative. Although the literature of the Second Sophistic demonstrates a “pre-post-modern” awareness, so to speak, of the power of language to create and manipulate reality, it remains an open question to what extent we are, legitimately or not, projecting our own worldview and aesthetics on these texts.

In the last chapter on the VA, we find the clearest articulation of Schirren’s interpretation of the VA. After theorising the notion of “irony” (referring to Quintilian as well as Wayne C. Booth), he suggests that several features of the text under analysis can be interpreted by the knowing reader as signalling “irony”, suspending the suspension of disbelief, as it were. But since the interpretation of these features as signals of irony, requires a skill only reserved for the educated elite, the VA can be read *both* as a serious *vie romancée* in praise of Apollonius, and as a highly playful and indeed *ironic* text.⁹ Schirren justly remarks that reading a text as “ironic” implies questions about the system of norms and values shared between reader and

⁹ A comparable point on the textual ambiguity of the VA has been made *en passant* in T. WHITMARSH, *Greek literature and the Roman empire : the politics of imitation*, 2001. Whitmarsh argues, unlike Schirren, that Philostratus is intentionally characterising Apollonius as a godlike philosopher *and*, more implicitly, as a sophist and a γόης: “*The pleasure of reading Apollonius lies in Philostratus’ teasing his reader with the possibility of the return to the other <sc. from ‘philosopher’ to ‘sophist/goēs’>: in the final analysis, there is a marked ambiguity as to whether Apollonius is a practitioner of sophistry and goêteia*” (229). It is somewhat surprising that Schirren’s copious bibliography mentions not a single work by Tim Whitmarsh, in spite of the similarity of approach.

author. He confines himself to posing these questions; the possible significance of irony in the life of a Cappadocian Pythagorean allegedly commissioned by a Roman empress, is only summarily hinted at. Instead, in the concluding pages, he tries to forge the bridge between his two subtitles “Die antike Philosophenbiographie als symbolische Form” and “Studien zur *Vita Apollonii* des Philostrat”, by regarding the VA as the “*wohl reflektierteste*

Auseinandersetzung der Antike über die Bedingungen literarischer Biographie”

(Vorbemerkung, x). The hermeneutic circle is closed: *Die vorliegende Studie versucht vor dem Hintergrund der Gattungsgeschichte als Architext die VA als eine implizite Reflexion über die Bedingungen solcher Texte als Fiktionen im weiteren Sinne zu begreifen* (322).

However, the reader of “Philosophos Bios” might have the impression that Schirren is trying here to square his hermeneutic circle. I do agree that Philostratus is playing with the fictional or literary status of his text, by foregrounding his artful rhetorical and literary elaboration of his alleged sources, and playing with the ontological status of his text. The relation, however, between the VA and the “architext” as defined by Schirren, drifts a bit out of focus in the second part of the book. Whereas Schirren focuses in the first half of his book on the role of *topoi* as crucial tools for the production of meaning, his actual reading of the *Vita Apollonii* reveals the intertextual games and perhaps ironies, but the supposed “architext” of the *philosophos bios* is scarcely brought into account.

Schirren seems to have built two massive bridgeheads, one focusing on the lives of philosophers and the way these biographies function as symbolic forms, another discovering and interpreting signals in the VA that seem to subvert the apparent serious intention of the work. But the bridge between them, which tries to connect fiction with irony, is still under construction. As a consequence, the relevance of some of the theoretical chapters in the first half of the book, written in a rather dense type of philosophical and abstract German, is not always clear to me with regard to his analysis of the VA.

However, the abundant and expert use of both antique and modern theory has resulted in a fine example of “New School Philology”, where the combination of philological skill and thorough knowledge of literary theory results in highly original readings. Theory serves to reveal and question certain intuitive assumptions about literature and interpretation, which allows and invites the reader to think along (or against) the carefully developed argument of Schirren and to question the assumptions on which he has built his interpretation of Philostratus’ text.

We might for example wonder whether this ironic reading of the VA, where “incongruities” spanning several hundreds of pages are exposed as irony markers and resolved into an

“ironic” interpretation, is not an example of what Malcolm Heath coined the “*integrating tendency*” of contemporary criticism. This refers to the propensity in modern criticism “*to seek coherence in thematic unity*”, whereas “*the characteristic tendency of ancient criticism was to seek coherence in thematic plurality ordered primarily at a formal level*”.¹⁰

When we compare the VA with the overtly comical and ironic texts of Lucian, we might wonder whether “irony” is such a good label for the VA. The form of irony that Schirren reads into the text is a sustained literary technique brilliantly applied, for example, in Lucian’s *True Histories*. But Schirren’s selection of episodes that *can* be read as ironic, is only a minor portion of this enormously long text. Admittedly, as Schirren reveals on every page that is dedicated to the VA, this bizarre text is indeed playing games with the reader, both stressing and undermining its truthfulness, creating ambiguities, and blurring the relation between reality and literature. But whether this literary playfulness is actually subverting the meaning of the text and undermining the alleged serious intentions of the narrator is still an open question.

Anyhow, reading the VA forces us to think about the limits of interpretation, about the (sometimes hidden) assumptions on which we rely while reading, and about the differences and similarities between our aesthetics and the literary system of the Second Sophistic. This problem becomes crucial, for example when Schirren discusses VA 2, 39 where Apollonius teaches the Indian king Phraotes that the gods take care of the good and punish the bad.

Schirren remarks: “*Es ist ein auffallend simples Modell, das schon Ennius mit epikureischen Argumenten im Telamon widerlegen lässt. Daher wird man sich der drängende Frage kaum entziehen können, ob es hier nicht auch – gerade in seiner Simplifizierung – ironisch gemeint ist*” (p. 268). Here literary aesthetics (irony) and worldview come together: is the moral of this episode meant to be read as ironic, or is it simply part of a worldview that is no longer ours?

To conclude, in the recent and expected stream of publications on the writings of Philostratus, Schirren’s interpretative monograph marks the appearance of yet a new guise of this Protean text: that of an ironically smiling sophist.¹¹ When indeed Philostratus is inviting his readers to

¹⁰ M. HEATH, *Unity in Greek Poetics* Oxford, 1989, quoted from p. 5 and 150.

¹¹ The oeuvre of Philostratus is currently enjoying an ever growing scholarly fascination and interest: the bibliography on the *Imagines* has grown tremendously in recent years (for an excellent interpretation and recent bibliography, see R. WEBB, “The *Imagines* as a fictional text: *Ekphrasis*, *Apatê* and Illusion.” in M. COSTANTINI, E. GRAZIANI and S. FOLET (eds.), *Le défi de l’art. Philostrate, Callistrate et l’image sophistique*, Rennes, 2006, 113–136. Not less than three commentaries and translations have been published in recent years in both German

read his text creatively, Schirren has done so brilliantly, offering a whole range of original, thought-provoking and exciting new readings of a text that unremittingly proves to be indeed as protean and difficult to pin down as its protagonist.

and English: A. BESCHORNER, *Helden und Heroen, Homer und Caracalla : Übersetzung, Kommentar und Interpretationen zum Heroikos des Flavios Philostratos*, Bari, 1999; J. K. B. MACLEAN and E. B. AITKEN, *Heroikos*, Atlanta (Ga.), 2001; P. GROSSARDT, *Einführung, Übersetzung und Kommentar zum Heroikos von Flavius Philostrat*, Basel, 2006. A volume with collected essays on the Heroicus has been published recently: E. B. AITKEN and J. K. B. MACLEAN (eds.), *Philostratus's Heroikos : religion and cultural identity in the third century C.E.* Leiden, 2004. A comparable volume on the Vita Apollonii is forthcoming with the same publisher: K. DEMOEN and D. PRAET (eds.), *Theios Sophistès. Essays on Flavius Philostratus, Vita Apollonii*. Cambridge University Press has announced a volume on Philostratus, edited by Jas Elsner and Ewen Bowie.