PART ONE

CONSTRUCTING AUTHORITY: GELLIUS’ ROMAN CULTURAL PROGRAMME

legendo autem et scribendo uitam procudito
‘but through reading and writing you have to fashion your life’

Varro, *Menippean Satires*, 551
(Τὸ ἐπὶ τῇ φακῇ μύρον, ‘Sweet Oil in the Lentil Soup’)

CHAPTER ONE

GELLIUS THE ROMAN EDUCATIONALIST

The Praefatio: Protocols of Authority

The chapter in which Gellius most explicitly formulates his authority is the Praefatio, in which he presents himself in his role of author, and elucidates his cultural and educational programme to the reader. In this Praefatio, he refers to two central activities from which he—and, mutatis mutandis, also his readers, who are encouraged to follow his example—derives his authority. The first one is the activity of reading, studying, memorising and excerpting texts (Praef. 2–4; 12). The second activity consists of the vivid debates and discussions with ‘rival followers of the same Muse’ (Praef. 19 eiusdem Musae aemulos), by which Gellius claims by implication to have (im)proved himself as an authority.

These two activities and their related competences—knowledge of the authors that matter (auctoritates) and the ability to prevail in debate—are programmatic in a double sense, both as (potential) sources of authority within Gellius’ cultural-educational programme and as a frame of reference for the understanding of how authority works in the following chapters of Noctes Atticae. Significantly, Gellius describes the protocols of authority both in terms of work and in terms of play (Praef. 19 voluptates … labores).

The first activity is the one with which Gellius brings himself most clearly into the spotlight in the Praefatio, namely as someone who spends hours in libraries to read and excerpt texts in order to create a kind of literary storehouse (penus litterarum, Praef. 2) as an aid to his memory, whenever he might need to remember an important word or fact. This activity also forms the origin of the work’s title: during long winter nights spent on a country estate in Attica, Gellius brought together all these notes and excerpts and composed the present work in twenty books (Praef. 4), to which he gave the appropriate title Noctes Atticae.1

---

1 On the title see Vardi 1993.