CHAPTER EIGHT

THE IMPERIAL CONTEXT OF GELLIUS’ AUTHORITY

Modesty and caution in addressing the powerful

In the foregoing part, we have seen Gellius’ role as an intellectual taking shape against the polemical and competitive background of the various cultural ideals of his time, propagated with fervour by charismatic intellectuals who were competing for the emperor’s approval, and trying to attract as many followers as possible. As we have seen, Gellius makes frequent allusions to the polemics and invectives that resulted from these rivalries, which form an important frame of reference for Gellius’ own cultural enterprise. In his Noctes Atticae, Gellius aims to prove the superior ‘market value’ of his Roman cultural programme against other cultural options, and to establish his authoritative position within the Roman intellectual elite. The importance of the emperor’s judgment in such intellectual rivalries is well illustrated by a remark of the notorious polemicist Galen, who was a successful competitor for imperial preferment, and relates proudly that Marcus Aurelius called him ‘the first of physicians and the only philosopher’ (14, 660 Kühn).

By contrast, Gellius never refers explicitly to the emperor as the person for whom he establishes his authority. Yet, by comparing Noctes Atticae with other imperial texts such as Pliny’s Naturalis Historia and Plutarch’s moral writings, or more contemporary writers such as Fronto and Apuleius, we may catch glimpses of the impact of the emperor on Gellius’ self-presentation, and throw light on his indirect and cautious strategies of literary communication. As we will see, throughout the Noctes Atticae the emperor’s crucial role of ‘assessor of intellectuals’ and ‘arbiter of knowledge’ can be highlighted as an implicit but omnipresent frame of reference for Gellius’ self-presentation as a cultural authority.

Along these lines, by placing Gellius’ self-fashioning in an ‘imperial’ context we may also throw some light on the function of his own literary persona, i.e. on the way Gellius views his own useful role as an authority in relation to someone who will benefit from his literary out-
put. Gellius often chooses to establish his authority in an oblique way. Much of what he reveals about his cultural responsibility and about the political context in which he unfolds this responsibility is stated by implication. By placing his self-presentation in a contemporary context, we may form a clearer picture of what this responsibility might have been. Although Gellius appears extremely careful to avoid mentioning any direct connection between himself as a writer and his ruler, a closer investigation of his allusive strategies allows us to ‘tease out’ an ‘imperial’ dimension in his literary communication.

If we transfer this to a discussion of readership, we may presuppose two levels of literary communication in *Noctes Atticae*. On the one hand, Gellius is writing for the members of the Roman elite, offering them *Noctes Atticae* as a cultural-educational programme that participates in an ideological process of maintaining and reinforcing social cohesion and cultural identity (cf. Habinck 1998). On the other hand, the authorial voice in *Noctes Atticae* reveals awareness of the highest authority in matters of judging intellectuals and their knowledge, an awareness which points to the emperor as an ‘ideal reader’, without excluding the possibility of a wider readership.

Gellius’ caution and lack of straightforwardness in defining the relational implications of his cultural-educational role should not be viewed in isolation, but can be illuminated in an ‘imperial context’ as well. Greek sophists, for example, showed little inclination to cast themselves explicitly in a role of ‘admonisher’.¹ The same may have been true for many philosophers. In his essay *Philosophers and Princes*, written after a period of severe tension between Roman emperors and philosophers, Plutarch shows that some philosophers were hesitant to advise rulers on kingship, because this made them liable to charges of flattery and personal ambition.² Plutarch’s interest in the figure of the philosophic adviser of someone in power is evident in *Philosophers and Princes, Rules for Politicians* and *the Uneducated Prince*. Yet, like Gellius, Plutarch articulated his symbouleutic authority in a very subtle, sophisticated way. He does not offer pragmatic advice to the empire’s rulers in a straightforward manner. Although his political essays could be interpreted as advice to the emperor, they never address Trajan explicitly, but rulers and magistrates in general.³

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¹ On ‘sophistic attitudes’ see Flinterman 2004.
² Cf. Plut. *Cim. princ. philos. esse diss. 1* (Mor. 776B) and see Rawson 1989, 234.
³ See Rawson 1989, 250f. Tim Whitmarsh in his BMCR-review of Stadter and van