CONCLUSION: CONSTRUCTING CULTURAL AND POLITICAL CONTINUITY

Gellius’ conception of authority turns out to be closely intertwined with hierarchy. Like authority, hierarchy does not manifest itself as an unshakable status quo in *Noctes Atticae*, but as an object of continuous scrutiny and debate. Expressing himself through the rich traditions of Latin literature, Gellius actively participates in this debate. Through sophisticated techniques of satirical exposure, his chapters invite the reader to observe meaningful reversals between apparent hierarchy and unstated hierarchy on several levels, and to acknowledge Gellius’ cultural authority in a contemporary context. The image that many people have of Gellius nowadays, that of the uncritical admirer of the intellectual celebrities of his age (Fronto, Favorinus, Herodes Atticus) proves to be wrong, if we carefully read *Noctes Atticae* in its literary and politico-cultural context.

Gellius’ self-fashioning can be described in terms of ‘constructing authority’, related to his role of Roman educationalist working in the ideological tradition of Varro, Cicero, Quintilian, and Tacitus. His *Noctes* can be viewed as a Roman cultural programme that provides a literary repertoire of cultural identity for the Roman elite. The agenda behind Gellius’ project is the agenda of the Latin intellectual aristocracy, which traditionally vindicated the continuity of its elite monopoly on knowledge by attacking those who threatened this continuity (in Gellius’ case: the grammatici). Moreover, it maintained its internal unity by scorning those intellectuals whose extreme philhellenism or other controversial cultural pursuits posed a risk to social cohesion among the Roman elite.

Roman ‘cultural authority’ can be explained in two ways, the intrinsic authority of Roman culture itself, and the authority of Roman authors like Varro and Gellius, whose writings participate in a dynamic process of cultural continuation.¹ Gellius’ role of cultural authority is

¹ On cultural continuation see Brownlee-Gumbrecht 1995, x: “a … culture will
not a passive one, as a writer who merely collects excerpts of a literary and cultural heritage which came down to him in a ‘natural way’. His role is an active and dynamic one, constructing his perception of the world through a consciously selective elaboration of a common past presented in the form of *commentarii* (‘notes’, but also ‘memoirs’). Moreover, his role is competitive, as he establishes his authority in a process of interaction with cultural rivals, such as the *grammatici*, or, on a more subtle level, Fronto, Favorinus, and Herodes Atticus, who are commemorated by Gellius in a way that suits his own cultural and ideological agenda.

Gellius’ ‘construction of authority’ is also visible in his imaginative use of literary resources and techniques. He projects himself in various roles, which are constructed in the spirit of Latin literary traditions (Menippean Satire) and contemporary Roman intellectual culture (Fronto’s teachings). His use of linguistic topics, sympotic questions, and satirical anecdotes reflects the playful, competitive mentality of the Antonine cultural world. By constructing the role of his younger self as the admiring *sectator* of charismatic intellectuals, Gellius presents a satirical comment on contemporary cultural phenomena (eloquent Greek sophists enthralling Roman audiences). In the spirit of Lucianic writings, he invites the reader to recognise the satire and to acknowledge where true authority lies.

Yet, in contrast with the *grammatici*, who were socially inferior and thus could be openly criticised, his ‘admired masters’ and social superiors Fronto, Favorinus, and Herodes Atticus are not directly and explicitly satirised by Gellius, but via innuendo and allusion hidden in playful scenes of dialogue and philological debate. Gellius relies on the operating interpretive strategies of his sophisticated imperial audience, making the reader his accomplice in reconstructing an underlying satirical thrust from apparently innocuous philological topics and minutiae. Inviting his Antonine audience to pursue an ‘investigational rhetoric’ that scrutinises a person in the light of his character and reputation, Gellius shifts the interpretative burden onto the reader, for whom the *exempla* of *Noctes Atticae* speak volumes when placed in a political context. Moreover, in a tradition of Roman imperial writing, Gellius employs a ‘language of praise’ for his beloved masters that may be con-

be preoccupied with its origins, exploiting continuation as a way of celebrating the empowering myths that serve as its self-legitimation.”