

‘I, Porphyry’: The Narrator of the *Vita Plotini*¹

Porphyry’s *Life of Plotinus* is an oddity among ancient biographies, which themselves are an often surprising group of texts, especially if approached from the expectations of modern biography. Particularly notorious is the text’s unusual structure.² Written by Porphyry as an introduction to his edition of his master’s works (*The Enneads*), it is in several respects a unique document. It opens with the surreptitious creation of an image of its protagonist, who was unwilling to have his portrait painted, rejecting such a representation as merely ‘an image of an image’. His students overcome this difficulty by bringing the artist Carterius to his lectures, where he is able to form mental impressions of his subject, allowing him to create a full portrait (*Plot.* 1).³ From this anecdote the *Life* moves directly to his death, before recounting a series of observations and personal anecdotes and concluding with an oracle on Plotinus’ posthumous fate. Incorporated into this account are personal recollections (‘I, Porphyry...’) as well as the words of others (Longinus, Eustochius, Apollo), and of Plotinus himself.

John Dillon has recently argued for a reading of the *Life of Plotinus* as a fairly straightforward, factual account, opposing his interpretation to that of Patricia Cox.⁴ There is much to be said for this, and it is true that within certain limits, Porphyry was attempting to give as much factual information as he could. Nonetheless, even factual accounts are never entirely straightforward, and the unusual narrative choices in this short biography, far more than choices of motif, call for explanation. An analysis of these narrative choices, by shedding light on the most fundamental formal characteristics of the text, and in particular the construction of its narrator, provides an approach to the text’s functioning as an idealising account, and the kinds of meaning which can legitimately be read into it. Narrative choices have philosophical implications, and in a writer (and reader) as interested in issues of interpretation as Porphyry,⁵ a high level of awareness is to be expected in the construction of the text and his own persona in it.

The *Life of Plotinus* presents an ‘overt’ narrator, who reflects directly and indirectly on his narrative, stressing the limitations of what he can tell us (1) and his own arrangement of testimonies (22.1-2). In the course of his recollections of Plotinus we learn a great deal about this narrator: his depression, his closeness to Plotinus, his

¹ I am grateful to the audience at ASCS 31 for stimulating discussion both during and after the session, and to the editor and anonymous referee. This paper represents some first thoughts which will form part of a larger project investigating Porphyry’s narrative choices in the *Vita Plotini*. I am grateful to the University of Tasmania for an Internal Research Grant, which contributed to the researching of the current paper.

² See, for instance, the structural analyses by Goulet 1992 of the *Life* as a whole and of Brisson and Flamand 1992, and Goulet 1982a of the oracle quoted within it.

³ Subsequent in-text references are to the *Vita Plotini* unless otherwise noted.

⁴ Dillon 2006; Cox 1983.

⁵ This interest in interpretation is sufficiently demonstrated by the essay *On the Cave of the Nymphs* and in the fragments of *On Cult Images* and *Homeric Questions*.

philosophical experience.⁶ This is a narrator who takes great care to make clear his own relationship to his protagonist, and who insists on his own presence and activity. This goes well beyond the reiterations of ἐγὼ ... Πορφύριος.⁷ The Porphyry whom we meet in this text is developed quite fully as a character in his own right.

No narrative functions in isolation from other, more or less closely related ones. Consequently, the question arises of what model of narrator the narrating voice of the *Life of Plotinus* evokes. For a committed Platonist like Porphyry, the representation of any philosopher, especially one as respected as Plotinus, readily calls to mind the composite portrait of Socrates which emerges in the Platonic dialogues. The implicit comparison of Plotinus to Socrates has long been noted,⁸ and equally important in this comparison, as in all such comparisons, are the differences between them. Plotinus emerges as a figure who, despite his Socratic features, is also markedly un-Socratic in important respects. The description, for instance, of Plotinus' remarkable powers of concentration (*VP* 8.12-19) may well recall Socrates' capacity for absorption (*Symposium* 175b),⁹ but the differences between these two types of concentration are just as important. Unlike Socrates, Plotinus was able to concentrate on those around him as well as his internal train of thought. Similarly, the rejection of homoeroticism in a philosophical context is quite different in Plotinus' case (15.7-18) to that of Socrates (*Symposium* 216d ff.). Plotinus, in short, is as markedly unlike Socrates as he is like him. Similarly, the type of narrator which the text constructs, that is, the Porphyry who speak to us and reports the words of others, makes important departures from the kinds of narrators found in the Platonic dialogues, as well as recalling them.¹⁰

As in several Platonic dialogues, the narrator of the *Life of Plotinus* might be called a 'disciple narrator'.¹¹ In common with such narrators in Plato, this choice of narrator makes a strong claim to reliability: as eye-witnesses, such narrators are (it is implied) more reliable than someone speaking from mere hearsay. Porphyry also resembles the Platonic disciple narrators in that he creates a world where philosophical dialogue is a passion. Porphyry's description of his marathon debates with Plotinus implies a similar single-minded devotion to philosophical enquiry.¹²

In these respects then, Porphyry closely resembles his disciple predecessors in the Platonic dialogues, but he departs from this model in the extent to which his own

⁶ It is no surprise that the *Life of Plotinus* is the major source for Porphyry's life as well as that of Plotinus. See Bidez 1913.

⁷ As is well known, Porphyry refers to himself by name repeatedly in the *Life*. Clark (2000, 35) is not alone in seeing this as producing an 'unintentionally comic effect'.

⁸ See Cox 1983, 114-120 on this.

⁹ Schirren also observes this point (2005, 190) and sees in it a representation of the emanation of *Nous* into the sensible world.

¹⁰ Narratological comparisons between a wide range of Greek texts are now facilitated by the useful volumes of de Jong et al. 2004 and 2007.

¹¹ Disciple narrators appear, for instance, in the *Phaedo* and *Symposium*. See Morgan 2004, 364-358 on this type of narrator in the dialogues..

¹² This same chapter (13) contains a further, more specific, allusion to Plato's *Protagoras*. Thaumasius, like Protagoras (335e ff.), favours set speeches over the truly Platonic (or Socratic) approach which Plotinus and Porphyry take.

character is revealed. The Platonic disciple narrators, as Morgan observes, ‘are usually colourless, transparent and covert’.¹³ Porphyry as narrator is none of these things. The narratorial overttness, judgements of character (as, for instance, that of Olympius of Alexandria, 10.1-4), and stance of philosophical authority (for instance in judging the periods of Plotinus’ work, 6.27-37) which Porphyry displays, establish this disciple narrator as a teacher in his own right. These features, moreover, bring the narrator of the *Life* closer to Socrates as narrator in those dialogues where he assumes this role.¹⁴

Porphyry as narrator then, combines features of two of the main types of narrator in the Platonic dialogues: the Socratic and disciple narrators. This is related in part to the further duality between Porphyry as narrator and Porphyry as character. It would be misguided to see a radical discontinuity between these two Porphyries: this is certainly no Apuleian *auctor* and *actor* scenario.¹⁵ Nonetheless, the distinction between the two is important. This appears most clearly in the episode of Plotinus dissuading Porphyry from suicide (11).¹⁶ The older Porphyry implicitly agrees with the judgement of Plotinus at the time: his desire to die was not based on reasoned conviction. If he had not come to this same conclusion the episode could not function as an illustration of Plotinus’ perception of character (περιουσία ἡθῶν κατανοήσεως (11.1)). In this respect, and in the philosophical positions which he takes, Porphyry the narrator has moved closer to Plotinus than the Porphyry who appears as a character in the *Life*.

Unlike the Socratic narrator, however, Porphyry does not entirely understand the motivations of the characters within his narrative.¹⁷ In the case of everyone else in the circle of Plotinus, Porphyry gives his brief judgements as definitive (e.g. 7). In the case of Plotinus though, he remains the disciple who only partly understands his teacher’s motivations. We are told, for instance, that it was ‘from some such cause’ (ἀπὸ τῆς τοιαύτης αἰτίας (10.31)) as the evocation in the Isaeum that Plotinus wrote his essay on *daimones*.¹⁸ This, certainly, is not a strong expression of uncertainty, but simply an admission that, while Porphyry does not know the precise reason, he is aware that it was something of this sort. A stronger expression of uncertainty appears slightly later: when Plotinus stated that the gods worshipped at the temples should come to him rather than that he should go to them, Porphyry claims to have been unable to understand what he meant (10.35-39).

These expressions of uncertainty on the narrator’s part serve several purposes: they establish the reliability of the information for which he *is* willing to vouch, and they emphasise the difficulty of fully understanding Plotinus.¹⁹ Even after some decades

¹³ Morgan 2004, 366.

¹⁴ Morgan 2004, 361-364.

¹⁵ The distinction of *auctor* and *actor* is central to Winkler 1985.

¹⁶ On Eunapius’ subsequent development of this story see Goulet 1982b.

¹⁷ See Morgan on this quality of the Socratic narrator: 2004, 363.

¹⁸ On this episode and the question of Plotinus’ attitude to magic see Dodds 1951, 283-311 challenged by Merlan 1953, who in turn is critiqued by Armstrong 1955. See also the balanced reassessment of Brisson 1992a.

¹⁹ This is a difficulty experienced as much by his readers as his companions. Cox (1983, 102) is certainly correct to stress the mysteriousness of Plotinus in Porphyry’s

of reflection, Porphyry can still only speculate about some of Plotinus' words and actions. Porphyry as narrator is obliged to play a double role. He must at the one time speak as a respectable philosophical voice, able to edit and introduce these difficult works, and at the same time be the dutiful disciple serving his master's memory.²⁰ The narrator of this text is also an implied reader of the text which this one serves to introduce: he is attentive, careful in his reasoning, dedicated to enquiry, not overconfident in his current opinions and willing to change them in response to argument.²¹

For a Platonist, any mimetic representation whether in writing or in visual media raises problems.²² The portrait of Plotinus described in the opening chapters of the *Life* has been much discussed, as to a somewhat lesser extent have the implications of this scene for the written portrait which Porphyry presents.²³ The opening of the text with the anecdote of the portrait is, as practically all those writing about the *Life* observe, a striking departure from standard biographical form.²⁴ It is difficult not to see in this a raising of issues of representation, and in this regard too most who have approached this episode are agreed. One possibility in the interpretation of this passage is to see in it an implicit claim for the superiority of Porphyry's own, verbal portrait of Plotinus.²⁵ Certainly, the transition directly from the anecdote of the portrait to Plotinus' disease of the bowels (2.1) makes a strong, and eminently Platonic statement, about the limited and transitory nature of bodily beauty and mimesis of it.²⁶ Narrative, we might well think, would better represent the true nature of Plotinus than a picture. However, to see the comparison in this passage of visual

account, and the use of historical exemplars to try to represent Plotinus' nature to readers of the *Life* (1983, 107 ff.) though the passages from the *Enneads* cited in support of this position are not always apt. On this quality of mystery see too Edwards 2000.

²⁰ On Porphyry's motivations for editing the *Enneads* see Saffrey 1992; and on the earlier edition of Eustochius, Brisson 1992b (who argues against its existence) and Goulet-Cazé 1992 (who affirms it).

²¹ These qualities are demonstrated, for instance, in Porphyry's conversion to Plotinus' view of Platonism (18.8-23) and in the account of Plotinus' discussions with him (13.10-17).

²² The *loci classici* in Plato himself are *Republic* 376c ff. and 595a ff.

²³ On the implications of this scene within Plotinus' thinking on visual art see Rich 1960, Pépin 1992a, Edwards 1993, Stern-Gillet 1997.

²⁴ See for instance Cox 1983, 108 ff. and Edwards 1993, 480.

²⁵ Edwards 1993, 484 and 490. Similarly Francis (2003, 579) states that the episode of the portrait makes 'a rhetorical claim that Porphyry's biography, the portrait in words, presents the true image of his master.' The implicit contest between verbal and visual art is a recurrent issue, which becomes explicit at least as early as Pindar (e.g. *Nem.* 5.1-5). I intend to examine Porphyry's thoughts on the reading of statues in his *Peri Agalmatōn* in another paper.

²⁶ Compare with this Hypatia's response to her admirer, showing a used sanitary pad to discourage his desire (Damascius, *Life of Isidorus of Alexandria*, fr. 102 Zintzen). Here too it is the abrupt transition from the apparent beauty of the body to the details of its functioning which make the point, though in this instance issues of representation are not at stake.

and literary representation in such a clear-cut manner neglects the problematic status of narrative as well as visual representation in Platonism.²⁷

Edwards has remarked in passing that opening with a picture, while not apparently a convention of ancient biography, is a convention of the ancient novels.²⁸ Though I would not regard the opening of the *Life of Plotinus* as overtly novelistic (and this is not what Edwards suggests), the comparison between the narrative role played by these opening *ekphraseis* in the novel and the episode of the portrait is instructive.²⁹ In the novels which open with an image, it is usual that the following narrative makes sense, in some way, of the image with which the text starts. Porphyry suggests but rejects this convention. He opens with an image but does not describe it, and goes on to explicate not the image or even the body of which that image was supposed to be a representation, but what he sees as Plotinus himself, in so far as this is possible.

The movement of the *Life of Plotinus* as a whole is towards establishing the nature of Plotinus and his relationship to divinity. This concern with the ontological status of the protagonist is a recurring feature in the biographies of holy men: comparison can be drawn, for instance, with Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, the *Life of Pythagoras* by Porphyry himself and *On the Pythagorean Life* of Iamblichus.³⁰ In the *Life of Plotinus* the ambiguous ontological status of the protagonist is gradually and riddlingly revealed by the narrating voice. This is done through its orchestration of a number of secondary narrators, culminating in the oracle of Apollo.

The testimonia which Porphyry explicitly marks as the voices of others are arranged in ascending order of importance. In the deployment of these secondary narrators, the *Life of Plotinus* could be considered a sort of dialogue, offering various perspectives on Plotinus before culminating in the prophecy. Porphyry as narrator shapes this progression, and also appears as the privileged voice which interprets each of the other witnesses.³¹ In the representation of a Platonic philosopher and latter-day

²⁷ Edwards recognises this and observes that: '[o]f course, [Porphyry's text] is itself a mere *eidōlon* in comparison with the soul of the great philosopher, or even with the souls of those disciples who aspire, with the example of Plotinus and the help of his biographer, to fashion their lives and characters into an image of the Good' (1993, 490).

²⁸ 1993, 481 n.8.

²⁹ *Ekphraseis* (in the modern sense of 'descriptions of artworks') appear at the opening of *Daphnis and Chloe*, *Leucippe and Clitophon*. An *ekphrasis* in the ancient sense (simply 'description') opens Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*. Regarding Porphyry's knowledge of the ancient novels, we know at least that he was familiar with *The Wonders Beyond Thule*, to which he refers in his *Vita Pythagorae* (10.2).

³⁰ The fourth gospel can also be usefully compared with the *Life of Plotinus* in this and in other respects, as Edwards demonstrates: 2000, 66-69.

³¹ On the riddling nature of the early chapters and the provision of materials to correct the witnesses to Plotinus' greatness, see Edwards (2000, 63-4). Goulet (1992, 79) notes the repetition of the sequence 'introduction, citation, commentaire' in the presentation of these witnesses, and compares it with Porphyry's approach in the *Philosophy from Oracles* and *On Cult Images*.

Socrates,³² this dialogic structure also appears as a recollection of the Platonic dialogues.³³ Just as the *Enneads* themselves show clear signs of their origins in the spoken discussions of Plotinus' school,³⁴ the *Life* which introduces the essays follows Platonic (and Socratic) precedent by its use of dialogue, not only in the inclusion of pieces of dialogue between the characters involved (in, for example, chapters 1, 10, 15) but also as a structuring principle of the text as a whole. These various perspectives are at the same time approaches to the character of Plotinus and to the nature of the ideal *philosophos*.³⁵

The observation of an Egyptian priest (10), the letters of Amelius (17) and Longinus (19) are offered as partial testimonies to Plotinus' nature. To the latter two Porphyry does offer responses, and on these occasions his view is presented as authoritative and final. Nonetheless, the words of others are included verbatim, leaving open the possibility of questioning Porphyry's judgement, or siding instead with that of the other witnesses. Porphyry appears in these instances both as internal narratee and as narrator. As internal narratee, he guides the external narratees in how the testimonia to the nature of Plotinus should be interpreted, both by implication (the order in which these are arranged) and in his own comments on each piece of evidence. Nonetheless, both as narratorial arranger and as internal narratee, Porphyry leaves interpretive room for his readers. In these implicit dialogues between the witnesses and Porphyry, the discussion largely focuses on relatively worldly matters: whether or not Plotinus was guilty of plagiarism from Numenius, and the style and value of his writing. The culmination of the sequence of perspectives in the oracle of Apollo enacts a transformation of the narrative, accompanying the apparent transformation of Plotinus.

The transition from biographical prose to oracular verse is at the same time a shift to a secondary, omniscient narrator from the primary, limited one. The apparent change in state of being ('daimon, man once' (22.23)) is accompanied by a change of genre: biography to prophecy. Implicit in this is a movement from evidence to inspiration, human enquiry to divine knowledge. Comparable with this move is the shift from dialogue to myth in some of the Platonic dialogues (for instance *Republic* 613e-621d, *Phaedrus* 274c-275b).³⁶ As Morgan observes, the narratees tend to be prominent in

³² Porphyry obliquely suggests the Socratic character of Plotinus by citing the oracle on Socrates immediately before the oracle on Plotinus (22.11).

³³ On the importance of past conversations in Platonic dialogue, see Morgan (2004, 369-370). On the Platonic dialogues as narrative: Blondell (2002).

³⁴ Brisson and Pradeau set out their translation of *Enneads* 38-41 as a dialogue. Their response to the review of Barakat on BMCR (2007.11.06, responding to 2007.10.31) makes clear their reasons for this: Plotinus' method in his school was clearly to teach through dialogue (as Porphyry himself tells us), and there are frequent linguistic markers in the *Enneads* which make it clear that an interlocutor is to be imagined. See also Clark 2000, 37.

³⁵ Dillon (2006, 164-165) has recently criticised readings of the *Life* which see an idealising function of this sort. This seems to me overly sceptical. The *Life* does indeed depict Plotinus as a particular individual, not as a type, but this is not necessarily incompatible with the use of Plotinus to embody a philosophic ideal.

³⁶ For a succinct narratological overview of the Platonic myths see Morgan 2004, 373-375.

the Platonic myths.³⁷ Though Porphyry, strictly speaking, is a secondary internal audience, since the ostensible addressee of the oracle is the deceased Plotinus himself, it is Porphyry as internal narratee who guides us, the external ones, in our own interpretive efforts.

This guidance though, is strikingly limited, far more so than in the earlier sections of the text. In the first part (23.1-29), dealing with Plotinus during his mortal life, he interprets the oracle's words within a Plotinian framework. In the second (23.29-40), however, he stays much closer to the oracle itself, paraphrasing or quoting it directly. His final interpretive comment (23.36-40), like the final words of the main part of the oracle itself (excluding the dismissal of the Muses) emphasises the eternity of Plotinus' new state of existence. There is no real attempt, however, to translate this part of the oracle into philosophical language. It is, rather, left as an object of interpretation for the reader. The choice of paraphrase over interpretation constitutes a refusal to interpret like those discussed above and for a similar purpose: the posing of a problem for the *Life's* readers. The difference here is that the oracle, from Porphyry's perspective, touches upon what for him and for Plotinus was an area beyond the reach of language: experience of the One.³⁸

Conclusions

The narrator of the *Life of Plotinus* presents a mixture of two of the major narrator-types in the Platonic dialogues: the disciple and Socratic narrators. This is reflective of a subtle balancing act which Porphyry is obliged to play: he must at the one time understand Plotinus and his works and be philosophically equipped to edit and introduce the *Enneads*, while simultaneously maintaining a sense of Plotinus as the master who can only ever be partially comprehended. This dominant narratorial voice shapes the introduction and reception of the other voices which are heard, and arranges these witnesses in an ascending scale, gradually approaching Plotinus and his relationship to the One. Within this dialogic portrait of Plotinus, the narrating voice leaves silences as hermeneutic prompts, calling upon the interpretive capacities of the reader. Its final silence is of a somewhat different kind, indicating an area where, for a follower of Plotinus, silence is all that will ever be possible.

³⁷ Morgan 2004, 371-2.

³⁸ This experience of the One is explicitly described as ἄρρητον, in the only occurrence of this word in the *Life*: ἔτυχε δὲ τετράκις που, ὅτε αὐτῷ συνήμην, τοῦ σκοποῦ τούτου ἐνεργείᾳ ἀρρήτῳ καὶ οὐ δυνάμει (23.17-18).

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