

## Introduction

The shift from using Athenaeus as a mine of pithy references to reading his text in its continuity and architecture provides us with a different standpoint and opens many new perspectives. Instead of focusing on some tiny islands, such as a word, an object, or a quotation, one has to take in account a wider horizon.

Christian Jacob, *The Web of Athenaeus*<sup>1</sup>

A Note on Organization: I wish to reassure the modern reader that this book meets your requirements. It is composed of 55 discrete articles, tables, and figures, and, like almanacs and experimental Latin American novels of old, you are encouraged to read them in any order, skipping them as you please, and following narrative threads of your own weaving. The footnotes will only point out the most obvious thematic echoes and authorial redundancies.

That said, all effort has also been made to provide a satisfying experience to the old-fashioned reader who chooses to read from start to finish. For example, the pages have been ingeniously numbered in the order in which they appear, and they have also been fashioned out of light paper for easy turning by frail hands. Good luck, old-timer. I hope you enjoy yourself.

John Hodgman, *The Areas of My Expertise*<sup>2</sup>

“noli” inquit Fauorinus “ex me quaerere, quid ego existumem. scis enim solitum esse me pro disciplina sectae, quam colo, inquirere potius quam decernere.”

“Don’t ask me,” said Favorinus, “what *I* think. For you know that I am accustomed, according to the sect I call home, to inquire, rather than to decide.”

Aulus Gellius, *NA*, 20.1.9

<sup>1</sup> Jacob 2013: vii.

<sup>2</sup> Hodgman 2005: 21.

### Approaching the *Noctes Atticae*

For all the literature that survives from Greek and Roman antiquity, and for all the careful study to which it has been subjected by modern scholars, the spaces in which it was produced and consumed are still largely lost to us. Only briefly, and with uncertain agendas, do ancient authors let us into the salon and library and *recitatio*;<sup>3</sup> even more rarely do they let us into the psychological and intellectual experience of reading Roman literature as a Roman. Fortunately, there is one author who not only narrates, at length, the private minutiae of his life in Roman letters, but makes such narration a crucial part of his literary program: Aulus Gellius, author of the *Noctes Atticae* (henceforth *NA*).

In almost four hundred short essays, Gellius explores what it meant, in the latter half of the second century CE, to *know*, and what it meant to *want* to know. The nature of interest, the role of desire and passion in learning, are central considerations as Gellius' work fashions its author and its reader alike as members of a literate elite, and as participants in a particular set of interests in the cultural and linguistic world of the past. It details the characters and the processes and the mental experiences of relating to the past through the written word, and in so doing gives a close, intimate account of the mental lives not just of ancient Romans, but of those particular ancient Romans most closely involved in the establishment and guardianship of the canon of classical literature around which our modern discipline orients itself. Gellius deploys an innovative and unique – yet very historically precise, and very Roman – suite of techniques for narrating and representing the life of the mind and the nature of knowledge.

The *NA* is, like its hero Favorinus, defined by three paradoxes.<sup>4</sup> 1) Conspicuously – almost aggressively – disordered, its themes and arguments nonetheless become indisputably clear and structured to any sustained reader. 2) Gellius paints a detailed self-portrait of an intellectual life that nonetheless tells us almost nothing about him as a historical person. 3) The *NA* is crammed full of quotations and summaries of earlier texts, yet does all of its most important argumentative work – as a text – in the frames surrounding that material.

The apparent chaos of the text is crucial to its project. It enhances the “reality effect” of the *NA*, mimicking the unpredictability and disorder

<sup>3</sup> *Inter al.*: Cicero finds the younger Cato in the library at *De Finibus* 3.7 (see Frampton 2016); Pliny the Younger reflects on the private *recitatio* at *Ep.* 8.21 (see Winsbury 2009: 95–110).

<sup>4</sup> Philostratus, *VS* 489. I expand on Favorinus as hero of the *NA* in Chapter 5.

not only of intellectual life, in which ideas and questions arise without warning, but also of memory itself, which is rarely linear.<sup>5</sup> That chaos also reveals itself, on sustained reading, to be crafted from a consistent diversity of essay types: it becomes clear that some essays will be accounts of Gellius' own reading, while others will resemble notes or research pieces, and still others will be anecdotes of encounters with learned figures of Gellius' own lifetime. Underlying this disorder, too, are webs of interrelation and intra-text that join disparate passages – in no immediately obvious order – by subject matter, primary source, or critical method. The more of the *NA* a reader has consumed, the more able that reader will be to contextualize any one given essay from it.<sup>6</sup>

The *NA* is devoted, in literary terms, to the figuring and fashioning of intellectual personae; the lesson it teaches is not only how to fashion one's own intellectual self, but how to scrutinize another's. The narrator and subject of the *NA* is a vividly realized individual and yet also an everyman, anonymous enough in the particulars of his life for the reader to easily see himself or herself in his outline. An older Gellius looks back on his younger self, relating embarrassing and instructive moments from his youth, addressing a similarly adult reader in the common language of self-aware maturity. He relates encounters with real people in specific places, but also with slightly anonymized people in slightly unclear places; the reality effect of his shuffled essays is mirrored by the verism of his anecdotes, which have the fine points and sharp edges of real experiences, but are just generic enough to read less as real experiences than as realistic ones. And in a world of people scrutinizing one another's performances and appearances in any setting, he crafts carefully a picture of his and others' *interiority*, showing the relationship between the interior and the exterior.

Gellius' primary reading material and subject matter are unquestionably focused on the way that literature and text from Rome's (relatively) distant past may be carefully scrutinized for evidence of Roman cultural and linguistic history – a practice of collecting words from and facts about antiquity sometimes described as “antiquarianism.”<sup>7</sup> But this cultural historical and literary knowledge is always accompanied by some commentary or

<sup>5</sup> Marchesi 2008: 48.

<sup>6</sup> Instead of the standard “chapter,” to refer to the units of text into which each book is divided by Gellius (Latin *capita*), I use “essays” as a reminder that these individual units of the text are formally distinct from the modern literary chapter, and as a provocation to consider their literary nature. I expand on this last point in Chapter 1.

<sup>7</sup> Gellius the “antiquarian”: Stevenson 2004. But the term is post-classical and has its own history: Momigliano 1950.

value judgment on it: things from the past used in the present in a particular way, the way they are used seeming more interesting than the thing itself. This is Gellius' program of meta-knowledge, and it makes possible an *NA* that functions not as an encyclopedic source of answers to questions, but as an invitation to further question-asking on the part of its reader. Couched in vivid accounts of how and why he read them, the things Gellius reads from the Greek and Roman past are thus prompts for intimately related mental and intellectual processes, stories of thought and reflection that collectively make the *NA* far more urgently focused on the present of its second-century Roman author and reader than its "antiquarian" subject matter might suggest.

This book is intended for scholars and students interested in reading and understanding the *NA* as a literary product of the late second century CE, and as a milestone in the Western intellectual and humanist traditions. It invites you to read the *NA* as a *text*, rather than merely a source, and offers some guidance on how to go about doing that. The *NA* is as susceptible to – and as rewarding of – literary reading as any other classical text. Like other works of classical literature, its internal structures and strategies only become apparent on successive rereadings, or under sustained, close attention; but most of us have not had the experience of reading and rereading texts like the *NA* throughout our classical education. This book, the product of much reading and rereading in the *NA*, seeks to share some of the insights such reading can produce, so as to point the way toward further reading for others more newly come to the text.

### The Challenge of the *Noctes Atticae*

What kind of a thing is the *NA*? What kind of a thing is the reading of it? In what follows, I will explore the ways in which it is a literary undertaking of second century CE Rome, the way its reading is the reconstruction of and participation in a Roman program of study and reflection on the nature of study and reflection. But it is worth, at the outset, stepping back briefly and considering the nature of the task before us.

The miscellaneous appearance of the *NA* may invite comparison to the early modern commonplace books it in fact influenced, and to the *Wunderkammern*, the "cabinets of curiosity," that so vividly symbolize the amateur collecting habits of the early modern man of leisured learning.<sup>8</sup> But a full treatment of the *Wunderkammer* as a cultural practice, as a mode

<sup>8</sup> Gellius and the humanists: Grafton 2004. On the cabinet: Findlen 1994.

of collecting, must consider not just the objects it contains, but how they came to be there. A full accounting of any one specific *Wunderkammer* as an object, indeed as a text, would necessarily consider not only the contents but the cabinet itself: the materials, the joins, the shape and size and aesthetics, for all these are crucial in determining how the contents are combined and presented. Moreover a *Wunderkammer* is, of course, a deeply idiosyncratic and personal assemblage: it serves not the needs of the modern spectator, but of the original creator, who in stocking its shelves and niches fashions a picture of himself.

This book concerns itself – to adopt another analogy – with the “dark matter” of Gellius’ work. To account for the apparent gravitational mass of the universe, indicated by the relative movement of interstellar bodies, astrophysicists postulate a variety of ubiquitous and substantial matter that simply cannot be observed directly by modern means. Fortunately, the dark matter of the *NA* is observable; the trick is simply to re-train ourselves, as readers, to observe and consider not the earlier and older literary texts that Gellius quotes, but Gellius’ own words: the frames and rhetorics and discursive modes that introduce, coordinate, evaluate, and condition the use of the older “primary” materials Gellius sometimes said to have “gathered” in the *NA*. This framing and *propria voce* material is a substantial part of the text, binding it together and giving it purpose – we are simply not inclined, by our training as Classicists, to study it.

In this way, the *NA* resembles the fictional twin cities of Beszel and Ul Qoma in China Miéville’s novel *The City and the City*:<sup>9</sup> the two cities, Miéville’s reader comes to understand, occupy the same geographic spaces, but are divided so absolutely by culture and politics that the inhabitants of one city do not see inhabitants of the other, even passing on the street. Deep taboo, not to mention an ominous extralegal force, enforces this perceptual reality; to deny it is a transgression of the grossest sort. A similar transgression of custom is needed to refocus one’s readerly attentions from the facts and fragments in the *NA* to their framing. As the protagonist of the novel comes to realize, the way the two cities restrict their own perception allows a *third* place to exist, beyond anyone’s awareness: only by training himself to see what he has always unseen can he begin to see that which he did not know existed. In looking past Gellius in search of Cato and Ennius, I suggest, we might similarly be unseeing, unintentionally and unaware, something crucial: an entire literary text hiding in plain sight.

<sup>9</sup> Miéville 2009.

To speak of miscellany as literary work may be provocative, and yet it should not be, for the simple reason that miscellany characterizes many literary genres of great antiquity, including the polymetric poetry book and the epistolary collection.<sup>10</sup> But it is also worth considering the book of gathered “knowledge” as a site not only for literary ambition, but creative expression. “The main advantage that this book has over libraries, and indeed all of its almanackian predecessors, is that all of the historical oddities and amazing true facts contained herein are *lies, made up by me*,” writes one modern miscellanist.<sup>11</sup> It may be that the formal qualities of the gathered knowledge book offer unique opportunities and modes to the book’s author: cabinetry is itself, after all, an art.

If the *NA* is anything like a cabinet of curiosities, the present study is an attempt to read not the curiosities but the cabinet itself. Containers and cabinets signify and speak as surely as do curiosities, and indeed, may be even more revealing of the cabinet’s nature as a cultural artifact. The curiosities come from elsewhere, perhaps from everywhere, but the cabinet and its creator are fully and truly, in their making and person, products of their time and place. The great challenge is to understand the complete thing as an artifact, and not to prejudge its purpose or its project before we hear that project articulated in its own terms.

We might imagine, two thousand years hence, that media archaeologists or digital philologists could recover the complete archive of YouTube, circa 2015, after centuries of searching for the lost films on the twentieth century: they would be delighted to have so many fragments, even if of poor quality, or even if remixed or reused. But in their desire to reclaim these lost texts, they would neglect the rich data about the world of 2015 that such an archive preserves: information about users, and the comments they leave, and the playlists they create. There would be a very real danger that these scholars would prize “twentieth century film” as a form over “early twenty-first century short digital video.” Valuing the thing collected as a form, over the architecture and practice and forms of the collecting itself, these scholars would find such an archive a valuable tool, and happily put it to use, but not for the purpose for which it was originally assembled. A similar hazard attends the *NA*.

<sup>10</sup> I expand on this point in Chapter 1. See, most recently and comprehensively, Fitzgerald 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Hodgman 2005. See also sequels Hodgman 2008, Hodgman 2011. The jumble of nonsense articles and charts gradually gives way to reflections on reading, history, and contemporary culture: “Secrets of the Mall of America” (Hodgman 2005: 64–68) is a grim account of American Islamophobia in the years following September 11, 2001; “Possible contacts with alien life” (Hodgman 2008: 489–500) reveals itself gradually to be a love letter to the author’s wife.

The *NA* is not an archive, nor is it a library. It is something much more precious – a testament, and account, a *witness* to the library, or rather, a world of libraries. Here, embedded within the archive of surviving literature from the ancient Roman world, is a rich, scintillating account of the archive's own formation and operation, of the lifestyles of those who dwelt within and around it. To treat the *NA* as anything less – as, for example, simply an epitome of other, lost, more distant stretches of the archive – would be to do ourselves the great disservice of willingly abandoning evidence in a field of study where such evidence is already quite precious and rare.

### **The Nature of the *Noctes Atticae***

The *NA* of Aulus Gellius is a work that stages, repeatedly and with constant variation, encounters between the curious and the knowledgeable, between students and knowledge. These encounters are very precisely historically situated in the Antonine Rome of the author's lifetime, and they are often unpredictable: whether between Gellius and something he read in a book, or between one expert and another on the streets of Rome, the *NA*'s encounters are presented as naturally emergent phenomena, the result of the happenstance collisions between the particular men and books in circulation in, around, and between Rome and Athens in the middle and latter half of the second century CE.

The staging of these encounters has specific literary qualities: as accounts of nocturnal research, or as dialogic narratives, they show Gellius' acquaintance with both classical and more modern thinking and writing about and within those forms. These encounters also stage specific cultural values, most crucially, the nuanced and charged cultural relationship between Greece and Rome. By reading one such encounter, we can see how these provocative qualities of the *NA* rise to the text's surface. Identifying them and exploring their significance will afford a picture of the approach this study takes, and how it differs from and builds on previous recent scholarship on the *NA*.

In the world of the *NA*, accidental meetings are always productive.<sup>12</sup> In *NA* 20.1, the random walks and twisting streets of imperial Rome bring together two men in the *area Palatina*: Sextus Caecilius, renowned jurist, and the philosopher Favorinus, a Gaul by birth who had fashioned

<sup>12</sup> People often “just happen” (*forte*) to be where they are, or to encounter one another, e.g. 1.7.4. Gunderson 2009: 155.

from the raw material of Greek *paideia* and sophistic performance (as well as the unusual gender presentation of his congenital cryptorchidism) an unparalleled status as a celebrity intellectual of the Greek-speaking world.<sup>13</sup> Caecilius and Favorinus, waiting to pay their respects to the emperor, fall into conversation about the Twelve Tables, the ancient laws of Rome. Gellius, whose presence goes unexplained, reports the conversation (*NA* 20.I.4-5):<sup>14</sup>

eas leges cum Sex. Caecilius inquisitis exploratisque multarum urbium legibus eleganti atque absoluta brevitate verborum scriptas diceret, “sit” inquit “hoc” Favorinus “in pleraque earum legum parte ita, uti dicis; non enim minus cupide tabulas istas duodecim legi quam illos duodecim libros Platonis de legibus. sed quaedam istic esse animadvertuntur aut obscurissima <aut durissima> aut lenia contra nimis et remissa aut nequaquam ita, ut scriptum est, consistentia.”

“obscuritates” inquit Sex. Caecilius “non adsignemus culpae scribentium, sed inscitiae non adsequentium, quamquam hi quoque ipsi, qui, quae scripta sunt, minus percipiunt, culpa vacant. nam longa aetas verba atque mores veteres obliteravit.”

When Sextus Caecilius, who had researched and studied the laws of many cities, observed that the Twelve Tables were written with an elegant and pure brevity of language, Favorinus replied, “What you say may be the case in the greater part of those laws; indeed, I read those Twelve Tables with no less pleasure than the twelve volumes of Plato’s *On the Laws*. But it seemed to me that some of those laws of yours were either very obscure, or very harsh, or on the other hand too lenient and slack, or not at all to be applied as they are written.”

“Let’s not assign obscurity,” replied Caecilius, “to a crime on the writers’ part, but ignorance on the readers’ – although actually those who don’t understand what is written are not at fault. For a long period of time has rendered illegible ancient language and customs.”

In full, this essay is one of the longest in the *NA*, and as the first essay in the final and twentieth book, begins a formal conclusion to the work. My approach to the *NA* is concerned with why, in this programmatically significant passage, we see represented not only reading, but – principally – *speech about reading*.<sup>15</sup> Favorinus recounts vividly his experience of reading, claiming to take equally high-libidinous pleasure in reading the Twelve

<sup>13</sup> Also known as a “sophist.” For this reading of Favorinus, Gleason 1995: 158.

<sup>14</sup> Here and throughout, unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

<sup>15</sup> In this I depart from the approach of Gunderson 2009: 197–199, for whom reading, as an ahistorical phenomenon, is the central concern of the *NA*. For my own treatment of reading in the *NA*, see Chapter 2.

Tables and Plato's *Laws*, and also narrates his critical response in the course of that reading.<sup>16</sup> My study is concerned with this attention to the cognitive and psychological experience of reading, a level of attention peculiar in ancient literature generally but characteristic of the *NA*.

Favorinus also stages an improbable *synkrisis*, between Plato's *Laws* (a lengthy treatise on the hypothetical laws of an ideal states) and Rome's Twelve Tables (an ancient document of statutory law). This provocative, momentary showdown between Greece and Rome is also typical of the *NA* in the questions it raises about primacy, about difference and sameness. Is Favorinus sincerely praising the archaic style of the Tables, let alone the famously obscure style of Plato's *Laws*?<sup>17</sup> Does he mean to exclude, with this peculiar inter-genre comparison, Cicero, or the laws of ancient Athens, each a more appropriate comparison for Plato and the Tables respectively? Is he describing a state of affairs in which philosophy and literature emanate from Greece, while harsh law and cruel power emanate from Rome? Or is he merely being provocative for the sake of argument? As he will shortly admit, his custom and philosophy is not to take positions, but to ask questions – not to settle arguments but to start them (20.1.9: *noli ... ex me quaerere quid ego existumem. scis enim solitum esse me ... inquirere potius quam decernere.*). This peculiar juxtaposition and open-endedness is typical of the *NA*'s functioning as a book not of answers, but of questions; though founded on scholarly research, its literary and interactive mode is not encyclopedic but protreptic, often demanding its reader finish the work it has begun.

Caecilius, too, makes provocative assertions. By far the most impressive living jurist in the *NA* (although only appearing this once), he is a true intellectual, having studied not only the laws of Rome but many other states.<sup>18</sup> His interests are not limited to law, but encompass language too: his initial praise of the Twelve Tables is in *stylistic* terms, which Favorinus indulges him. But Caecilius also reminds us that however we inquire into ancient law, we are pursuing not an obscure or marginal activity, but rather one of the most central Roman concerns: the *mos maiorum*. *Mores* of antiquity are encoded in the *verba* of antiquity, which are obscured by the *aetas* separating past from present. Gellius' characters thus announce the project of this essay – which is indeed the project of the

<sup>16</sup> For Favorinus the erotic reader, see Chapter 5. In this passage note too that Caecilius gives him a rapturous hug, but also chastises him for “attacking or defending whatever gives you pleasure” (20.1.21).

<sup>17</sup> Lucian, *Icaromennipus* 24: ψυχροτέρους ... τῶν Πλάτωνος νόμων (“colder than Plato's *Laws*”).

<sup>18</sup> Howley 2013: 26–28.

*NA* – as one of linguistically-oriented cultural history (which is to say, “antiquarianism”): by correctly understanding the language and literature of the past, one may more fully grasp and appreciate the ancient customs of Rome, and its historic identity as a state. This relationship with the distant past and its textual artifacts transcends – indeed, seems to respond consciously, as a corrective, to – mere faddish, stylistic archaism.<sup>19</sup>

Some groups in the *NA* seem constituted specifically for certain kinds of intellectual activity.<sup>20</sup> Others, like this one, come together by chance as the flows of people and power bring individuals and ideas into spontaneous, informal collision. In this case, the Roman jurist and the Greek(ish) philosopher meet while waiting to greet the emperor.<sup>21</sup> But it would be wrong to see this activity, or any other in the *NA*, as oriented *around* the emperor. Brought together by chance in this liminal space on the margins of formal space and activity, the group actually disperses when the emperor appears (20.1.55):

haec taliaque alia ubi Sextus Caecilius omnibus, qui aderant, ipso quoque Favorino adprobante atque laudante disseruit, nuntiatum est Caesarem iam salutari, et separati sumus.

When Caecilius had said these and other such things, with the approval and praise of everyone present and Favorinus himself, it was announced that Caesar was receiving visitors, and we were separated.

(My reading here skips about 40 chapters of Latin text, and the substance of the conversation, in which Caecilius offers a stirring defense of Roman lawgiving wisdom, not to mention a thoughtful account of how cultural-historical distance is crucial to correct interpretation. This, too, is part of my project – not to disregard the substance and quotations at the heart of Gellian essays, but to deliberately focus on the too-neglected frameworks and rhetorics that introduce and condition what is typically understood to be the *NA*'s “content.”)

The imminent arrival of the emperor dissolves and concludes the encounter, and seems to necessitate some socially ordered separation of the participants. Much Latin literature written in the era of the principate is naturally concerned with the person and power of the *princeps*. But part of

<sup>19</sup> Howley 2014b, Vessey 1994. I am concerned with Gellius' interest in the recovery and use of past knowledge as a discrete and real act. An alternative model of Gellius' understanding of the past is “cultural memory”: Heusch 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Johnson 2010: III.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. 19.13: *stabant forte una in vestibulo Palatii*.