



PHILOSTRATUS
AT THE WISSENSCHAFTSKOLLEG
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My year at the Wissenschaftskolleg has been dedicated to an early third-century AD Greek writer named Philostratus. More specifically, I have been working on a monograph (co-written with Jaś Elsner at Oxford/Chicago) on just one of Philostratus' works: the *Imagines*. This short but hugely challenging text purports to describe a gallery of paintings displayed in a private villa on the Bay of Naples. Carefully arranged over two

books, Philostratus' 65 tableaux evoke a host of different subjects, ranging from Greek myths (and their various literary treatments), through iconic moments in Greek history, to landscape vignettes of near and far-off lands. The whole work is framed as a series of addresses, delivered by our master exegete to a young boy, with a host of elder youths imagined as standing by.

Our book tackles the *Imagines* thematically, exploring both its relation to ancient traditions of set-piece description (or "ecphrasis") and its wider transhistorical importance within the project of art criticism. The *Imagines*, we argue, is much more than a work of simple description. As a – one might even say "the" – foundational work of Western art history, Philostratus uses his make-believe gallery to interrogate how pictures might be translated into words and conversely how words might be rendered as pictures. Philostratus thereby explores the most fundamental question of all: how do viewers find meaning in what they see. On the one hand, the *Imagines* has an immediate importance for approaching the artistic, cultural and intellectual horizons of the period in which it was written (the so-called "Second Sophistic"). On the other, the text has a pressing relevance for the disciplinary pursuit of art history writ large: Philostratus exposes the playful interstices that always and necessarily bind together the visual and verbal realms.

I would have liked to report here that the book is finished, in press and available to pre-order from all good bookshops. Sadly, that's not the case: we'll be working on the volume for some time to come. For me, though, the freedom to pursue different paths around the project has been one of the most cherished aspects of Wissenschaftskolleg living: I have had the time to read, to stop and think (and think again), to pursue unexpected leads and not least to exchange ideas with others from different intellectual perspectives.

During his opening address to us about the Wissenschaftskolleg back in September, Thorsten Wilhelmy put his finger on precisely that opportunity, framing it in terms of what he labelled "interruption". My year has certainly been interrupted – not least by a new-found obsession with a fourth-century, Latin picture-poet named Publilius Optatianus Porphyrius (who has affectionately become known at the Wissenschaftskolleg as "POP"). Still, I can confirm how stimulating such interruption can prove, and I hope the Wissenschaftskolleg will continue to encourage it. It is a virtue little known in Britain, where the pressures of research funding, and the horrors of the "Research Exercise Framework", tend to demonise diversion as deviation. In terms of my own work, these interruptions have resulted in a dozen or so articles and chapters – some pursued on my

own, but others with friends made during the course of the year (including a hugely fun project with Jonas Grethlein on a little-known Greek Imperial text of the first century AD, the so-called *Tabula Ceбетis*). I am profoundly grateful to the Wissenschaftskolleg for having given me that opportunity, and to all the staff for their various forms of help and support: I have never known an institution so rich in its smiles and so generous in sharing them.

Just as rewarding have been the various conversations – with all their miscellaneous threads – shared with other Fellows. Looking back on those exchanges, what strikes me as so special about them is their range. I had sometimes heard the Wissenschaftskolleg referred to as the ultimate “ivory tower” – somewhere free from all the burdens of everyday life, academic or otherwise. What I found unique was precisely the opposite: our various discussions were recurrently conducted on a personal rather than purely academic level; likewise, whatever their intellectual basis, our conversations seemed always to seep outwards, touching upon ever bigger and broader questions, never forgetting the human as well as humanistic stakes. Academic life – at least in Britain – has far too few opportunities for such discussion; the closest parallel that comes to mind are the late-night debates conducted with fellow students as a teenager.

Poor Philostratus has been very patient about all these interruptions. Wherever my year’s readings and writings have taken me, though, Philostratus has continued to loom large. Returning from conversations at lunch – and pedalling my wonky homeward way after wine-soaked Thursday symposia – I have often wondered what Philostratus himself might have made of the experience. With that in mind, I end this report with one possible depiction, imagining how a Philostratean tableau of the Wissenschaftskolleg might have read.*

No, my boy, this land is not Arcadia, nor are you looking upon the crest of Olympus, where Homer says one feels no rain and hears no wind. For look: do you not see how these people, though Greek in their enthusiasm for discussion, speak a strange and foreign tongue? Some talk without interruption, while through their thoughtful expression you see in the eyes of others a

* My English takes its lead from the Loeb Classical Library translation of Arthur Fairbanks (*Philostratus Imagines, Callistratus Descriptions*. Cambridge, Mass., 1931); there is a somewhat better German edition of the *Imagines* by Ernst Kalinka and Otto Schönberger (*Philostratos: Die Bilder*. Munich, 1968).

certain hesitancy, as if speaking a language recently learned. Well then, let us try to make out what the painting shows.

You see, I think, a lake, with the earth bearing reeds and rushes at its sides. The land all around is covered with thick green forest – with lofty cypress, fir and pine, as well as with oaks and cedar; each is depicted according to its nature, and the whole place is tracked by hunters of boar and deer. But – look! – amid this forest, the land gives rise to a great house looking out onto the lake, built on four, I think, or possibly five storeys. It is resplendent with all the trappings of luxury, but especially splendid by reason of the different people gathered within; they have been collected, I think, with real judgement. In this regard above all we must praise the painter: for the palace seems not to be a painting at all, but rather a true building. Do you not see, here at the splendid entrance, the flowers of yellow, dark blue and red? Can you catch their sweet smell, or are your senses dull? Listen carefully: for the fragrance of these roses shall come to you through my speech.

Inside the palace, you see activities of every sort. For the painter bestows the very image of things that are, of things that are happening, and in some cases of the ways in which they take place. Leaving aside the others for the moment, look here at the biggest court, and at the figures seated in discussion. Here, at the front, someone seems to be speaking, with the rest not only looking on (as though the speaker were a picture), but also listening and adding words of their own. If you praise the painter for his cleverness in rendering the speaker's great height – or the bright colours of his clothes – you praise an insignificant aspect of his art. Wherein, then, lives the cleverness? The painter does not just show just one man speaking, but rather all now taking part, some agreeing, others raising their hands to intervene (although there is no trace of hostility in their faces). The speaker, as he responds, is not perturbed by his surroundings, but is as bold as though he were standing on the speaking platform at Athens. If we care to listen attentively, perhaps he will even speak Greek.

As you go on to other parts of the painting, you meet here four handsome youths sitting close by, each dressed in black (whether they are Greek or Gallic, you could not say) and each supporting a lyre – three on their shoulders, but one balancing the boxwood delicately between his legs. But why, then, are the Muses coming hither? And why do they now crown the youths with their crests of laurel? The reason, I think, is that the young men are playing first this song, then that – some melodies are sweet paeans offered to Apollo, but other tunes are discordant in their bacchic dithyramb. For listen: can you hear the music echoing in your ears? You see at any rate the looks in the eyes of all who listen, some preferring this present song, others now contemplating the symmetry of that earlier tune. But lo! Foremost among those listening sits a fair Bacchante

with chestnut hair, not dancing, no, but beating time with her golden cymbals: the cymbals are attached to her right wrist, and with the outstretched fingers of her left hand she grasps first this one, then that, jingling a rival tune; a kind of radiance falls upon her forehead, though no whit more charming than the bloom on her cheek. But let us speak of these things with bated breath, my boy, lest we interrupt the music and dissolve the sights in front of us.

And here, towards the lower boundary of the painting, do you see the tables laden with food? Beautiful maidens are busying themselves, attending to the preparations for the daily feast, with swarthy Bacchus standing by. See too how the people eat and make merry, having in their eyes the look of Pramnian or perhaps Thasian wine. If you care for raised or unleavened bread, they too are both here nearby in the deep basket, seasoned with poppy seed. Look at the pears on pears and apples on apples, all fragrant and golden: would you not say that their redness has not been applied from outside, but has blossomed from within. Why, my boy, do you too not then take the honeyed fruits and fragrant relishes? Do you not know that in a little while they will elude your grasp?

But the most charming aspect of all is this. For just as the Seasons themselves paint the meadows, you see how the painter has painted the different seasons of the year: here the white snows of winter press thickly upon the silver firs, but over there you see people reclining amid the spring meadows, each one painted scent and all, resplendent in the gleam of morning dew; here, the days are short and weary, yet there the evenings grow long, warm and thick in honey-suckle fragrance. For look how the people revel and sing, whirling this way and that under the setting midsummer sun. But let us withdraw, my boy, and leave these strangers to their dancing: for soon, their revels will cease, and the hyperborean fantasy return to dream.