

A Banquet of Words

With Lucius the Ass

Alice Lucchiari*

Reading Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* engenders in anyone gifted and cursed with what Romans would call *curiositas*, the same effect of a magic circus. Taken on a journey by Lucius the donkey, the readers find themselves in the spotlights of a show, where the different textures of laughter, the mesmerizing flames of the fire eater, and murmurs of enchantment vibrate through the crowd, filling the room with effervescent excitement and an ineffable sense of marvel.

Now, what I propose in this Milesian discourse is to string together for you a series of different stories and to charm your ears, kind reader, with amusing gossip – always assuming that you are not too proud to look at an Egyptian book written with the sharpness of a pen from the Nile; and to make you marvel at a story of men's shapes and fortunes changed into other forms and then restored all over again. So I'll begin. But who is this? In brief: Attic Hymettus, the Isthmus of Corinth, and Spartan Taenarus, fruitful lands immortalized in yet more fruitful books, these make up my ancient ancestry. It was there that I served my earliest apprenticeship to the language of Athens. Later, arriving in Rome a stranger to its culture, with no teacher to show me the way, by my own painful efforts I attacked and mastered the Latin language. That then is my excuse, if as an unpractised speaker of the foreign idiom of the Roman courts I should stumble

and give offence. In fact this linguistic metamorphosis suits the style of writing I have tackled here – the trick, you might call it, of changing literary horses at the gallop. It is a Grecian story that I am going to begin. Give me your ear, reader: you will enjoy yourself. (Apuleius 1998, 1)

On one side, the story of Lucius can be read as the paradigm of the soul's journey to knowledge, an unfolding of truth where pain purges the deviations of the soul and finally leaves space for divine light. On the other, someone could argue that *The Golden Ass* is an odd fable about a donkey who tells vulgar stories of adultery and in a ridiculous turn of events, is blessed by the goddess Isis.

Let us first explore the author's background and the historical context in which he wrote his novel, and then come back to the meaning of the story.

Apuleius (125-170 CE) was born in Madauros, a Roman Colony in North Africa, and spent most of his life in Carthage, though he travelled a lot in Greece and Italy as a pleader in courts. His education consisted of rhetoric studies, poetry, geometry, music, and philosophy and he held numerous public

* I am Alice Lucchiari, a student of philosophy and art with a passion for exploring the intersections between aesthetic theory and existential thought. Currently, I serve as an editor for the ESJP, where I contribute to curating insightful and thought-provoking philosophical texts. My academic journey focuses on sociology and philosophy of culture and I am particularly interested in how art reflects and shapes human experience. I also have a deep passion for literature, which I was able to nurture in the past year thanks to my experience as an intern at the Museum of books Kasa dei Libri, Milano. In my free time I like to read, write, sing and when the Dutch weather permits, indulge in long walks in the city.

honours throughout his lifetime. Moreover, Apuleius oversaw the function of priest of the god of medicine Aesculapius and had a certain acquaintance with mysteries rites, to which he had been initiated in Greece (Sandy 1997, 8). Among the amusing details of his biography that are known by us, one could mention Apuleius' marriage with a wealthy widow called Pudentilla, the incredibility of which instigated accusations of sorcery by relatives of the woman. To defend himself, Apuleius pronounced the speech *Apologia*, which successfully rebutted these allegations. In retrospect, though, Lucius's obvious obsession with sorcery and his writer's evocative use of words in the novel, makes it difficult for the reader to believe Apuleius was not a magician.

Apuleius lived in the period of the Antonine Emperors, a politically peaceful time in the Roman Empire history characterized by enlightened rulers, social harmony, and flourishing culture. The most characteristic aspect of this historical period was a sense of displacement related to the blurring of boundaries between Latin, Greek, and oriental cultures, a form of cosmopolitanism which already started in the Hellenistic period and peaked in the third century CE (Sandy 1997). Understanding this cultural phenomenon as a process of globalization *ante litteram* sheds light on the striking contemporaneity of Apuleius' work and its characteristics that mirror postmodern tendencies. It is no accident that Apuleius is considered the master of linguistic and stylistic pastiche – a phenomenon that will come to be considered a defining mark of postmodernism by authors such as Frederic Jameson – swinging wildly between neologism and archaism, from the profane style of the robbers' tale to the mystical one of the initiatory rituals, blending multifarious elements with the effect of a playful kaleidoscope (Canali 2003, 6).

Another feature of this period was a wide-spread disillusionment with the traditional religion and the need for a

new spirituality, which Apuleius' fascination with the occult is exemplary of. The Olympic deities were slowly losing credibility and new religious practices gained popularity, including the Isiac religion, the cult of Mithra, Gnosticism, Christianity, the art of dream interpretation, and syncretic cults.

The cultural realm was dominated by an elite of intellectuals increasingly concerned with an aestheticization of life and the mastery of language. It was a moment of popularity for the Greek cultural movement called Second Sophistic (stretching between the second and the fourth century CE), which Apuleius was a representative of. The term "sophist" in Apuleius' time indicated *virtuosos* who improvised on different themes in public spaces and were able to involve the audience through their rhetorical abilities, travelling around different regions of the Empire for money and success. This movement had the merit of bringing culture out of schools, but was criticized for putting too much focus on technique other than content and for an ignoble disinterest toward real societal issues (Sandy 1997). Nonetheless, it seems that Apuleius's endeavour in *The Golden Ass* is not limited to a meaningless exercise in rhetoric virtuosity, but whether this is the case is left for readers to decide.

Now that the historical context in which *The Golden Ass* was written has been explored, the question arises: What is *The Golden Ass* actually about? This novel can be envisaged as a matryoshka doll, where multiple narrators take the word, and heterogeneous stories are inserted and juxtaposed in a complex framework. The story unfolds in eleven books, and it already appeared in literature before Apuleius's work. The author was inspired by the satire on Greek superstition *Lucius or the Ass* written by Lucian of Samosata, who was probably referring to another text by Lucius of Patras (Apuleius 1998, Introduction).

The main character Lucius, whose identity is blurred with Apuleius' one, is a young man from Corinth who starts a

journey to Thessaly, a region renowned as the land of magic. The main character has a strange fixation with witchcraft and when he stops in the town of Hypata, for his (mis)fortune he is hosted by a man whose wife is a magician. Thanks to the help of the maid Photis, with whom Lucius has a love affair, the anti-hero gets a chance to finally satisfy his inborn curiosity by drinking a magic potion that would get him transformed into an owl. Unfortunately, by a mistake of his lover, Lucius drinks a portion that metamorphosizes him into a donkey instead.

This is a turning point in the novel: Lucius has overindulged in his curiosity, and he must now be purged to gain back his human nature. In the body of a donkey, Lucius goes through a myriad of unfortunate and tragicomical vicissitudes, which could reminisce to the modern reader the adventures portrayed in *Orlando Furioso* by Ariosto or in *Candide* by Voltaire. As the story unfolds, various characters are inserted in the weave of narration, among which a particularly important one is the fable of Cupid and Psyche, which stretches from book fourth to sixth, when Lucius is kept captive in a cave by some bandits. The tale is told by an elderly woman in order to calm Charite, another captive, who would not stop crying. According to the tale, Psyche was an extremely beautiful young girl whose beauty was so incredible that made Venus filled with jealousy. For this reason, the deity of love asked his son Cupid to make Psyche fall in love with the most terrible man on earth. An oracle instructed the girl's parents to leave her on a mountain, where a dragon-like creature would wait for her. However, Cupid himself could not resist the beauty of the young lady and fell madly in love with her. Therefore, instead of a dragon, Zephyrus, the god of the West wind, appeared to Psyche on top of the mountain and brought her to a magnificent palace where she would meet her future spouse Cupid. Cupid became her secret lover, who visited her bedroom every night, but whom she was never allowed to see in any kind of light. Because of

her sparkling curiosity and manipulated by her sisters, Psyche one night tried to discover with the help of a lamplight her lover's identity, who, disappointed by such an act of betrayal, abandoned her. Psyche started wandering desperately and performing a series of tasks set by Venus as a punishment of her beauty, among which one required the young girl to visit the underworld. Finally, with the help of nature's creatures and Cupid, Psyche overcame all obstacles, was transformed into a goddess and accepted as a daughter-in-law by Venus.

The events that follow this soothing moment of storytelling are definitely less sweet and rather unfortunate. Indeed, the remedy required for Lucius to return human - to eat roses - appears to be an impossible enterprise all the way until book 11th. The final of this interminable series of bizarre situations finds Lucius in a circus, exhibited to the audience for his human-like oddness. One day, a woman from the audience falls in love with the donkey and pays a considerable amount of money to spend the night with him. The circus owner is inspired by this event and decides to present Lucius as the lover of a horrible lady who was sentenced to be devoured alive by the beasts for her crimes. Lucius is frightened and in a moment of extreme despair runs away from the circus. He arrives at a seashore a few miles from Corinth and invokes the goddess Isis, begging for help. The goddess listens to his prayers and during the night her epiphany appears to Lucius. During this vision, he is instructed to participate in a rite in celebration of the goddess where he would finally eat the roses and get back his human shape. Isis promises Lucius salvation and immortality and asks him in return to become her priest. At the end of the novel, Lucius follows the instructions of the goddess and, after regaining his human body, continues the initiation to the cult in Rome.

The one that has just been described appears as a quite bizarre narration, which might make the reader wonder whether

some hidden meanings are to be unveiled. Indeed, *The Golden Ass* is well-suited to receive the widest range of interpretations. This also means that we might spend a lot of effort coming up with elaborate philosophical interpretations of a story whose author was just trying to play with us. Nevertheless, it is worth exploring the different facets of this iridescent text.

Starting from the Middle Platonic¹ formation of Apuleius, it is tempting to interpret the whole story of Lucius as an instantiation and *variatio* of the soul's journey towards knowledge. In the course of the story, Apuleius strategically disorients the readers in order to evoke their curiosity and to show the dangers of such a state of being when directed to impious objects. According to DeFilippo (1990, 471), the key to understanding *The Golden Ass* is to focus on this very concept of *curiositas*, a word that appears twenty-four times in the book, considering all its semantic domain. *Curiositas* cannot be directly translated with the English word curiosity and rather has a similar meaning to the Ancient Greek πολυπραγμοσύνη (polupragmosúnē, “meddlesomeness”), which refers to an inappropriate interest in the affairs of others and is an obstacle to a genuine pursuit of virtue. Both Psyche and Lucius are described as having an intimate relationship with this soul disposition, which constitutes the reason for their misfortunes. Keeping the concept of “meddlesomeness” in mind, one should turn to book fourth of Plato's *Republic*, where justice is described on two levels. In behavioural terms, justice means not meddling in the affairs of others. On the other hand, in psychological terms, justice refers to a balanced relationship between the three parts of the soul – rational, spirited, and appetitive – which should not meddle with one another. An unjust man, then, is a person whose three parts of the soul are unbalanced and who is dominated by instincts and appetites (DeFilippo 1990, 480-481). Lucius and Psyche, being curious creatures, represent this very type of immoral beings.

Moreover, not irrelevant is the association made in Plato's *Phaedrus* between meddlesomeness of the soul and the figure of Typhon (DeFilippo 1990, 480-483). According to DeFilippo, to understand the cruciality of this association between curiositas as “meddlesomeness” and Typhon in the platonic framework of *The Golden Ass*, a further step is required. In the treatise *De Iside et Osiride*, the historian and philosopher Plutarch offers a Middle Platonic interpretation of the Isis religion. To explain the existence of evil in the world, Plutarch refers to the presence of two world souls, a good, rational one (Osiris) and an evil, irrational one (Typhon). Isis represents a third element between these two: the feminine principle receptive to all forms, which can be drawn back to the platonic idea of the receptacle². Typhon is the principle of violence responsible for the psychic “meddlesomeness” and is often associated with the figure of ass, according to the tradition a daemonic animal, in the platonic sense of daemon³. This is relevant for reading the Golden Ass, as it is generally accepted that Apuleius was influenced by Plutarch and it appears to be no coincidence that in the novel there are two references to Plutarch as an ancestor of Lucius. Following from this, DeFilippo (1990, 489) argues that Lucius' metamorphosis represents an actualisation of his inner Typhonic “meddlesomeness”, which can only be cured by the intervention of Isis. This interpretation can be applied to the story of Psyche as well, which becomes the allegory of the soul's journey to a higher plane of existence, allowed by overcoming its submission to *curiositas*.

This platonic line of interpretation opens a psychological perspective on the story, which in the 20th century inspired psychoanalytical critics. According to the Jungian analyst Erich Neumann (2013), the fable of Cupid and Psyche represents a mythic expression of the individuation of the feminine, a process of differentiation of the singular consciousness from a state of psychological fusion with the Great Mother, symbolized

by Venus. The communion between Cupid and Psyche represents then an integration of the masculine and the feminine, which in the Jungian tradition is thought to intensify the process of individuation.

Having considered these seemingly illuminating interpretations, readers might encounter a feeling of suspicion and find themselves wondering whether Apuleius was simply playing with them. Winkler (1985), in his famous narratological interpretation, understands *The Golden Ass* as a hermeneutical game disguised as a bildungsroman of the soul, where the very intention of the author is to engage the reader in acts of interpretations and not to convey any deep religious meaning. Drawing from works by the semiologists Greimas and Brémond, Winkler focuses on the narrative duplicity of the novel, which is pervaded by a comical tension between the role of Lucius as *actor* (protagonist of his actions) and *auctor* (narrator). This tension erupts in various parts of the story, where the narrator Apuleius/Lucius challenges his own credibility and awakens his audience's critical sense: "But perhaps at this point the attentive reader will start to pick holes in my story and take me up on it. 'How is it, you clever ass you,' they will say, 'that while you were confined in the mill you were able, as you say, to know what these women were doing in secret?'" (Apuleius 1998, 140).

In the midst of these possibilities, one thing appears clear: *The Golden Ass* demands wit, critical attitude and, most importantly, a sense of humour. Apuleius's work is an itinerary made of literary signs and symbols that explodes in the last book in a liberation of light that inebriates the spiritual reader with enchantment and makes the ironic one smile. While caressing their ears with his pirouettes of sounds, Apuleius teaches his readers many lessons: how tragedies sometimes turn out to be comedies, how to become a hermeneutic *virtuoso*, how to enjoy the art of wondering and wandering. Embarking in

Apuleius' galloping⁴ prose is starting a pilgrimage on a torturous mountain road, where every little encounter provides the soul with surprising meaning. Every conversation is infused with magic, and words carry within them the vital force to keep walking, filling the stomach more than food, as pointed out by Lucius "having dined solely on conversation" (Apuleius 1998, 13-14).

I hope that the readers' curiosity to explore Apuleius' maze of interpretation has been stirred up: *lector intende; laetaberis!*⁵

Notes

1. Middle Platonism refers to various interpretations of Platonic philosophy developed between the first and third century CE. As it is not possible to identify a specific school of Middle Platonism and the philosophers associated with this current often expressed diverse if not conflicting views, the use of this category is debatable (Zambon 2006).
2. The receptacle is presented by Plato in the *Timaeus* as that in which all becoming takes place. Next to the Ideas and their imitations, it is a characterless substratum which provides a spatial location for the bodies it receives (Plato 1888).
3. Apuleius (2017) in *De deo Socratis* defines daemons as beings positioned at a middle level between human and gods, sharing with the first a susceptibility to passions and with the latter immortality.
4. In the prologue Apuleius defines his writing style as "leaping" with the neologism "*desultoriae*".
5. "Give me your ear, reader: you will enjoy yourself" (Apuleius 1998, 1).

References

- Apuleius, and Christopher P. Jones. 2017. *Apologia*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Apuleius, and E. J. Kenney. 1998. *The Golden Ass or Metamorphoses*. London: Penguin.
- Apuleius, and Luca Canali. 2006. *L'asino d'oro, O, Le Metamorfosi*. Milano: Rizzoli.
- DeFilippo, Joseph G. 1990. "Curiositas and the Platonism of Apuleius' Golden Ass." *The American Journal of Philology* 111 (4): 471. doi:10.2307/295242.
- Neumann, Erich. 2013. *Amor and Psyche: The Psychic Development of the Feminine*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.
- Plato, and R. D. Archer-Hind. 1988. *The Timaeus of Plato*. Salem, N.H: Ayer Co.