

## FAILURE AND PROGRESS IN APULEIUS' GOLDEN ASS

**Abstract:** *Failure and progress in Apuleius' Golden Ass: the subject that prevails through all the books of Apuleius' work is the one that includes a failure that leads to a progress in the end, like an initiation rite that Lucius must follow. It is a big first failure, then a whole chain of them that condemns Lucius. Some business affairs take him to the city of Hypata, but his uncontrollable curiosity takes him further. The structure of the story shows us how Lucius seemed predestinated to fail, not only ignoring the constant warnings, but also feeling them as a trigger for his curiosity. So, the unlimited curiosity blinds him even after his big failure. In his asinine form, Lucius passes through a handful of dangerous and frightful adventures, suffers more than he would have ever imagined and, unable to speak, he assists the most terrible situations – at this point, complete failure and annulation seemed unavoidable. Like an initiation rite, where the initiated must surpass an amount of probations that usually involve sweat, tears, and blood, Lucius passes all this and, in the end, he learned nothing, failing by himself, taken by curious blindness. The final despairing situation leads him to meet the goddess Isis, the one and only route to salvation and, more than that, to a personal improvement, to an intellectual progress of self-knowledge and intimate familiarity with the goddess. Learning through his mistake: it is failure that leads Lucius to progress and final salvation. Both the failure and the progress paths are well marked by comprehension steps. At first, Lucius is blind and not able to learn; only after his big attitude change, on book twelve, through Isis, he's ready for progress.*

Apuleius from Madauros, a prose writer from the 2nd century AD, left us this precious narrative. The plot is quite simple: the curious Lucius goes to Hypata for some business affairs, but his uncontrollable curiosity takes him further. He is a host at Milo's house, whose spouse is a witch. Lucius wants not only to see, but also to try this kind of magic, but his fortune leads to an error that transforms him into a donkey. Though the cure for this mistake is quite simple, this character ends up involved in the most incredible stories, passing through the hands of the most horrific owners, and only after all this does he get divine salvation.

It is a big first failure, then a whole chain of them that condemns Lucius to a whole lot of suffering. This structure shows us how this character seemed predestinated to fail, not only ignoring the constant warnings, but also feeling them as a trigger for his curiosity – an unlimited curiosity blinds him even after his big failure. But let us not forget that he is a 'golden' ass, which means he will constantly be followed and protected by Fortune, also blind. So, the subject that prevails through all the books

of Apuleius' work is the one that includes a failure that leads to a progress in the end, like an initiation way that Lucius must follow.

The structure of this novel has a particular way of showing this process of failure and progress. Lucius first mistake, taking the potion that Milo's slave, Photis, gave him, is the biggest failure of the whole novel, which leads to all kinds of events. But after this main failure, that will only be solved by the end of the story, there is a peculiar structure of smaller forms of failure that lead to smaller forms of progress, in a continuous and circular way.

In his asinine form, Lucius passes through a handful of dangerous and frightful adventures and, unable to speak, he assists to the most terrible situations – at this point complete failure and annulation seemed unavoidable. Like a rite of initiation where the initiated much surpass an amount of probations that usually involve sweat, tears, and blood, Lucius passes all this and, in the end, he learned nothing, failing by himself, taken by that curious blindness. The final despairing situation leads him to meet the goddess Isis, the one and only route to salvation and, more than that, to personal improvement, to an intellectual progress of self-knowledge and intimate familiarity with the goddess, Osiris, their mysteries and rites.

Let us not forget that before the biggest mistake of all, Lucius had all kinds of warnings about the possibility of failure through so many examples of curiosity that leads to big drama. The first warning comes while he is still on his way to Hypata, where his curious personality takes him to take part in a conversation between two future travel companions. Lucius tells them “Well, after I heard that—I am a man with a craving for anything new and unheard of, as a rule—“Would you mind sharing your story,” I say, “with me? It's not that I'm nosy, but I do like to know the alpha and the omega or, at any rate, as much as I can.” (I.2)

It is Aristomenes who tells him the story of his friend Socrates, whom he found in a miserable state: I.6.4 “O Aristomenes!” he said. ‘You have no idea of the serpentine ins and outs of my misfortunes, of their relentless attacks, of all of their

changes back and forth.”. In a “passionate pursuit of some gladiatorial spectacle” (I.7.5), Socrates leaves his house and falls on Meroe’s hands, a powerful witch, whose maleficent attitude is well described with clear examples of the punishments she gave to her ex-lovers. Socrates ends up dead after a night visit of Meroe and her assistants. When asked about his opinion on the veracity about this story, Lucius says that he does believe it, but takes no further message from it than a moment of entertainment. A bit further, in II.1, Lucius adds: “I am, as a rule, a man driven to distraction, wildly eager to learn by my own experience about things unheard of, signs and wonders, and I kept returning to the fact that I was surrounded by—was in the very heart of— Thessaly itself. The whole wide world in clear and unanimous voice sings of the spells and incantations of Thessaly as the cradle of the art of magic. And then there was Aristomenes, and his traveler’s tale that sprang to life from the backdrop of this very community. I went about sticking my nose into everything I saw, detail by detail”. Instead of taking this story as a serious advice about Hypata’s dangers, Lucius makes the opposite interpretation, led by his massive curiosity and initial blindness, thinking that he really shall look for, and not avoid all these supernatural situations.

In I.21, Lucius asks for directions to Milo’s house, and an old lady warns him about his host: “the last word in greed, the bottom of the barrel in stinginess and squalor, and has no good reputation here”. But the biggest, most spectacular warning of the novel is the ecphrasis of Byrrhena, a wealthy *matrona* close to Lucius’ mother. What she sees, and should interpret as a warning, is on each corner “the very image of Nike; each poised upon a suspended globe, not walking but skimming the dew with the sole of one foot” (II.4-5), a clear presence of Fortune and her power through the entire novel. There is also a statue of Diana in “the symmetrically balanced center of the entire space”, and also “an image of Actaeon waiting for Diana to take her bath, sticking his nose in and staring at the goddess; even now he was becoming an animal and turning into a stag”. Though Lucius stares in front of all this, he is not able to read the clear warning, again about curiosity and punishment, through Actaeon’s example,

not even after Byrrhena saying to him, metaphorically, “All the things that you see now belong to you”.

So, in II.5, Byrrhena is truly direct and warns Lucius “Be on your guard! But be especially on guard against the evil arts and criminal snares of that woman Pamphile: she’s the one who’s married to that Milo, the man you call your host. She’s a witch; her reputation is unsurpassed; she’s believed to be the master of every incantation of the crypt”. Once again, Lucius’ reaction to these warnings is the exact opposite of what it was supposed to be: his curiosity increases. He was “even itching” to learn from “such a teacher as this”.

In II.11, Lucius expresses that he was aware of “Byrrhena’s cautions and counsels”, but applies them only by avoiding looking Pamphile in the eye. In the meanwhile, he tries to reach the witch’s secrets through an intimate involvement with the servant of the house. Photis warns him not only about this involvement, but also about what it will lead to. To one of Lucius’ advances, in II.7, she replies “Get out of here, you doomed little boy! Get out of here and as far from my hearth as you can! If you are singed by the flames in my furnace even in the first degree, you will roast deep down inside”, and, once again, in II.10, she clearly says: “Now you listen, schoolboy! You’re helping yourself to an appetizer — sweet, yes, but bitter too. Beware!”

There is also the episode of the Festival of Laughter, in II.32-III.12, where Lucius is exposed to shame, on a city annual ritual, all this caused by Photis. Feeling guilty, the young girl accepts Lucius insistence to see her patron’s sorcery in action. III.19: “to forgive you all your trespasses that have involved me in these suffocations of soul, so offer me what I beg from you with all my prayers and imprecations — show me your mistress when she is setting in motion some device of the Practitioners of the Divine Arts, when she is calling upon the gods, or, at any rate, when she metamorphoses herself—show me, so I can see her! You see, I am a man of passion, eager to embrace the arts of magic face to face”. Now that this thirst for watching the magic in progress was relieved, he wants more, and wants to try the metamorphosis

himself. III.22: "O please! While the circumstances dictate the terms just give me a portion, a gram, a grain, of that ointment from that jar!" Though she notices that her lover is nothing more than a "cunning fox", Photis, in III.24, "with infinite fearfulness creeps inside Pamphile's chamber and takes out a small jar from that little chest".

But her insecurity leads to this big, first and determinant mistake: the metamorphosis of Lucius in a donkey, instead of a bird, like he saw happen to Pamphile: III.24. "But there is no down, and there are no feathers anywhere, but my own hairs, of course, grow coarse and gross into bristles; my soft, tender skin hardens into a hide; and at the very ends of the palms of my hands and the soles of my feet all my digits together, no longer discrete or five in number. From the base of my spine a fully developed tail comes out of hiding and into the light. Now my face grows hideously lengthwise, my mouth grows breadthwise, my nostrils gape outward, my lips hang downward; not only that, but my ears are covered in upstanding bristles of the most appalling growth. And I could see no consolation for this pitiful metamorphosis except for this: although I was no longer capable of embracing my Photis, my own unnatural endowments were swelling nicely".

Photis panicked and started to blame herself, though she immediately pointed the solution for Lucius temporary problem: to bite some roses in bloom. *Alea jacta est* for all the further events. Relihan (2007) says that when Apuleius claims in the opening sentence of the novel that he is going to tell a Milesian tale, he implies that the reader will hear a sequence of stories, frequently scabrous, erotic, and violent. He adds that Apuleius is eager for encores, unwilling to let the performance end.

Already In his asinine form, Lucius immediately sees some fresh roses that he can eat, if it wasn't a group of robbers that take him to his cave, using him as a carrier. Charite, a desperate kidnapped girl, to whom an old lady, the servant of these thieves, tells Cupid and Psyche's story, another warning of curious behaviour that leads to complete disgrace, only fixable by a sort of probation. Lucius tries to escape with

Charite, though they are immediately caught by their owners. Fortunately, Charite's husband-to-be comes to save her and the donkey.

Lucius could barely complain about his asinine life, when a young slave takes him for a walk and makes him suffer all kinds of torture. When Lucius tries to get rid of the kid, the child ends up disappearing, so his mother and the villagers appear to suggest all kinds of punishments. After Charite's tragic death, it doesn't take too long until Lucius is for sale in the slave market. In VIII.24, he lets us know, in quiet despair: "But my fortune—that Fortune, Fortune most savage and sadistic, the Fortune whom I could not flee though I flew from her through so many regions, whom I could not appease despite all the evils I had been through—again turned her blind eyes on me and threw before me a buyer, one most particularly suited to my own backbreaking catastrophes". He belongs now to a group of priests devoted to a Syrian goddess, some really weird and effeminate charlatans that wanted more from Lucius than just carrying their belongings.

Once again, fortunately free from this danger, Lucius falls in a spiral of completely deviant owners, from whom he sees and hears all kinds of adultery situations, all caused by women. Some of them he's able to expose, like one who had her lover hidden under a wooden trough, and whom Lucius steps on his hand. During these 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> chapters, asinine Lucius supports these worst owners, in a descendent path to decadence and complete annihilation. He is bought by a man who is amazed by his human behaviour, exposing him like a circus attraction. X.17 "First he taught me carefully how to recline at the table, leaning on my elbow; then he taught me how to arm-wrestle and even how to dance". In Corinth, the donkey's sexual performance was being sold to a high-class lady. If everything seemed to get better, the final fall is unbelievable: this hideous owner, thinking that exposing Lucius as a circus animal, and also selling private sexual sessions was not enough profit, decides to expose him in the city games, making him have sexual intercourse with a woman who was accused of homicide of five people. X.29: "That was the sort of woman to

whom I was to be joined in the holy bonds of matrimony, and in public! But I could surely find consolation for my destruction and my end in this slender slip of a hope: it was Spring just dawning, now painting the world in flower buds like precious stones, now clothing the meadows in a red and purple glow; the roses were just beginning to burst through their cloak of thorns and breathe their cinnamon scent, roses that could return me to the Lucius I used to be". Seeing himself in this exposing and humiliating situation, though still with a tiny bit of hope, Lucius runs away, desperate, to the beach, where he has his greatest moment: finding Isis. The goddess appears to him at dawn, presenting herself as the full representation of all feminine divinities, in contrast with all those deviant women that Lucius had to deal with, especially in this last period. XI.5 "Here I am, for I have taken pity on your misfortunes; here I am, in all good will and benevolence. So set aside your tears, put aside your wailings and your weeping, cast aside your sorrow; for now there dawns upon you through my Providence the day of your salvation". It is Isis who points him the way out of such suffering: there would be a procession in her honour on the next day – Lucius should find a priest that would have some roses that would return him his human form, but only under the promise of a lifelong devotion to Isis. It is clear that Lucius accepts the proposal and, on the next day, as promised, he finds the priest and eats the roses that reverse the horrific metamorphosis that led him to that spiral of failures and little hopes and progresses, immediately followed by another failure, and so on. XI.12 "the priest approaches, carrying my destiny in his hands and my very salvation — a crown for me and yes, by Hercules, a crown that fits, because I had drained so many and so appalling labors to the dregs, because I had walked the paths of so many perils to their ends and had now, through the Providence of the greatest of goddesses, overcome the Fortune that had wrestled with me so sadistically".

This devotion to Isis not only stops this whole suffering process – an inevitable path for Lucius, first because he's always on Fortune's hands, and also because it was necessary to open his mind, clear his spirit, and prepare him for another level of

knowledge, now deserved – it also takes him to the level of initiate into the spiritual knowledge of the mysteries of Isis and Osiris, a path of steps that progress to a higher level, now accessible because he is now enlightened, only because there was a probation period that allowed him to learn how to target his curiosity for a major objective, how to focus on what is really important and understand what is not perceptible at the first sight. XI.15 “O Lucius, you have come to the Port of Rest and to the Altar of Mercy. Down the slippery slope of your green youth you fell to the depths of delights unworthy of a free man and carried back the left-handed prize of your unlucky desire to stick your nose in. But be that as it may, the blindness of Fortune, even as she crucified you with the most terrible trials, has brought you by her witless wickedness to the blessedness of this holiness”.

In fact, it is not hard to understand Apuleius’ strategy on what concerns failure and progress in this novel. After all, it concerns an extremely curious young man that commits the biggest mistake of his life. Deprived of what he used to have, his human characteristics, though not losing his rationality, he falls in a hole of despair only with tiny bits of hope. Only when he achieves the mental exhaustion to run away, hiding himself, willing to die if that is what it takes to repair a failure that seems unrepairable, he is finally saved by the divine hand that, recognizing his effort to increase inside his asinine and lower position, offers him the opportunity to follow a different path, that also requires effort, curiosity and dedication, but that leads to a true level of progression compared with what is earthy, stained and idle. Relihan (1935: xxix) points out that “Apuleius’ tale is full of asides to the reader in which the ass talks about his retention of human intelligence despite the loss of his human voice. Lucius wants to regain his humanity, and when he does he is no longer the man he once was but is remade”.

Learning through his mistake: it is failure that takes Lucius to progress and final salvation. Both the paths of failure and the progress are well-marked by comprehension steps. At first, Lucius is blind and not able to learn; only after his probation, and also his big attitude change, on book 11, through Isis, is he ready for



progress. But is this a real path of salvation or just another mistake guided by that curious blindness?

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