



Schizophrenia in the *Golden Ass*

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Abstract: Lucius, the narrator of Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, meets the diagnostic criteria of schizophrenia. This observation suggests (1) that schizophrenia is *not* a recent disease, as historians of psychiatry assert, but that—whatever its origin and nature—it is at least ancient and probably eternal. It also suggests (2) that Lucius is an unreliable narrator of the novel *because* he believes his own delusions even more sincerely than most readers do.

Keywords: schizophrenia; etiology of schizophrenia; Apuleius; *Golden Ass*; *Metamorphoses*; psychiatry; DSM-5; Borges; *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*; NIMH

This paper begins with a caveat that it represents no more than a thought experiment in progress. It draws together ideas I have developed piecemeal over many years of thinking about Apuleius' *Golden Ass* in the light of J. J. Winkler's ideas about the novel's unreliable narrator. Winkler (1985) attributed the novel's unreliable narrator to Apuleius' experimentation with a kind of narrative akin to modern detective fiction. In this paper, I would like to suggest a different reason. As I

shall argue, the narrator is unreliable because Apuleius presents him to us as a schizophrenic.

What is schizophrenia? According to the website of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), schizophrenia is a chronic, severe, incurable, and disabling brain disorder. It affects about 1% of Americans today—that is, about 3.2 million individuals. Its cause is unknown but most experts assume it is genetic.¹ According to E. Fuller Torrey, the founder and Executive Director of the Stanley Medical Research Institute and a high-profile schizophrenia researcher, “schizophrenia is caused by changes in the brain and ... these can be measured by changes in both brain structure and brain function. ... Schizophrenia is thus a disease of the brain in exactly the same sense that Parkinson’s disease, multiple sclerosis, epilepsy, and Alzheimer’s disease are diseases of the brain.”²

Behind this confident rhetoric lies a heated controversy. NIMH states that schizophrenia has affected people throughout history, but historians of psychiatry disagree. If you aren’t familiar with psychiatric controversies, you will be surprised to learn that schizophrenia is a very late arrival to the annals of medicine. The disease is barely 200 years old. The first clinical descriptions date only to 1809 in London and Paris³, and repeated attempts to find examples of schizophrenia in the vast literature of ancient Greece and Rome routinely come up empty. A 2003 survey determined that “in ancient Greek and Roman literature, there were no descriptions of individuals with schizophrenia.”⁴

The sudden appearance of schizophrenia just two centuries ago, followed by a furiously rapid proliferation of cases, has given rise to ongoing debates about whether the disease has always existed or whether it really is an epidemic of recent origin, comparable to the outbreaks of syphilis and AIDS. The debate is called the “recency vs. persistency hypotheses.” It explains why researchers worldwide are frantically looking for causes and trying different treatments—some physical, such as electroshock, lobotomy, or surgery (all of which are still in use), but the majority of them increasingly chemical, especially neuroleptic (or “antipsychotic”) drugs.

I would like to suggest that the whole apparatus on which the recency

¹ NIMH (2016).

² Torrey (2011).

³ Gottesmann (1991) and Noll (2007) xi-xiii.

⁴ Evans, McGrath, and Milns (2003).

hypothesis depends is fundamentally wrong, and that we classicists can help show it. In my view, (1) Lucius, the narrator of Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, easily meets the diagnostic criteria for schizophrenia, (2) Apuleius meant for readers to see him that way, and (3) that fact is why Lucius presents as an unreliable narrator.

What is schizophrenia and what does it look like? Since those who know Greek are likely to guess wrong, let me start by telling or reminding you what schizophrenia does *not* refer to. First, despite the etymology, schizophrenia does not mean a split personality. If you are thinking of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, you are very much mistaken. Second, the schizophrenic is not a raving psychotic who has lost all touch with reality, of the kind we often see in Hollywood movies. Typically he is a functioning individual.

How do we tell when someone is schizophrenic? Here are the diagnostic criteria of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition*, which is usually known as the DSM-5 (emphasis added):

Criterion A lists the five key symptoms of psychotic disorders: 1) delusions, 2) hallucinations, 3) disorganized speech (e.g., frequent derailment or incoherence), 4) disorganized or catatonic behavior, and 5) negative symptoms (i.e., affective flattening, alogia or avolition). At least two of these five symptoms are required to be present during a 1-month period and at least one symptom must be one of the first three (delusions, hallucinations, disorganized speech). Only one Criterion A symptom is required “if delusions are bizarre or hallucinations consist of a voice keeping up a running commentary on the person’s behavior or thoughts, or two or more voices conversing with each other.”

Schizophrenia is also marked by “social/occupation dysfunctions.” What does that mean? It means that:

One or more major areas of functioning such as work, interpersonal relations or self-care are markedly below the level achieved prior to the onset (or when the onset is in childhood or adolescence, failure to achieve expected level of interpersonal, academic, or occupational achievement).

In plain English, this means schizophrenics start to do poorly in school or at work and their hygiene can be appalling.

These criteria do not mention a fact that clinicians often taken for granted, namely that schizophrenia tends to manifest in late adolescence (late teens to early 20s).

At any rate, Lucius seems to meet not just two of the five, but all of the DSM-5 diagnostic criteria.

Consider the “social/occupation dysfunctions.” At the outset of the novel, Lucius is an unmarried young man, presumably about 20 or 25 years old. He is a curious and naïve adolescent on the cusp of manhood, with the whole world open to him. He comes from a good family, much seems to be expected of him, and he is poised for a lucrative career in the import/export business. In short, he is attempting to make the transition from dependence to independence. That fact is one reason the novel has been taken for a *Bildungsroman*, a coming-of-age story.

But it also makes him exactly the right age for schizophrenia to appear, and as we know, his original mission to Thessaly, which was a business trip (*Thessaliam ex negotio petebam* 1.2), fails spectacularly. The novel ends with him not as a successful merchant but as a member or priest of a cult engaged in bizarre religious behaviors. He shaves his head, he keeps donating money, and so on. His last words in the novel assert that he is happy performing his new duties (*munia...gaudens obibam*) but his bliss seems to be less real than he says. Many scholars, most recently Stefan Tilg, note that *obibam* appears to pun on the idea that Lucius “was dying (*obibam*).”⁵ I agree with this view, and would add that “I’m dying” is a typical schizophrenic metaphor for existential distress, much as we know that “I was abused” or “I was raped” or “I am drowning” are.

What about the other symptoms? In the rest of this paper I move through each of the five major symptoms:

- delusions
- hallucinations
- disorganized speech
- disorganized or catatonic behavior, and

⁵ Tilg (2014) 141-142.

- negative symptoms

1. *Delusions*

According to the DSM, schizophrenic delusions are typically persecutory or grandiose or both, but other themes, such as jealousy, religiosity, or somatization, may also occur. They are usually organized around a coherent theme. It is said that the persecutory themes may predispose the individual to suicidal behavior, and the combination of persecutory and grandiose delusions with anger may predispose the individual to violence.⁶ This is the source of the popular belief, and perhaps fact, that schizophrenic individuals are “dangerous to themselves or others,” especially family members.

Lucius’ arrest and trial for murder at the Laughter festival in books 2 and 3 bears all the hallmarks of a schizophrenic delusion. As he tells the story, the whole city is conspiring to persecute him. (The episode brings to mind Kafka’s *The Trial*, just as the novel as a whole evokes his *Metamorphoses*.) Just so, the episode that precipitates the trial—that is, Lucius’ killing of wineskins that he mistakes for men—seems to be a hallucination.

In the same spirit, of course, Lucius’ very transformation into a jackass can be read as a delusion of persecution, perhaps the grandest of all. It is notable that while in ass form, Lucius repeatedly contemplates suicide. It is also remarkable, to me at least, that as the narrative wears on Lucius begins referring to himself increasingly as “my ass” rather than himself as an ass (*me asinum*). This line of speech reads as a dissociation or at least a lack of commitment to the delusion.

In this connection I have always wondered about a remarkably different account of the burglary of Milo’s house that we hear of at the start of book 7:

[A]nother one of the band of robbers arrived ... and then made the following report to his band of brothers:

“As for what’s up with Milo’s house in Hypata, the one we ransacked not so long ago...it was not by questionable inferences but by demonstrable arguments that [according to the local mobs of people] the finger pointed

⁶ The language in this paragraph deliberately adapts that of the diagnostic criteria for schizophrenia found in DSM-IV, the predecessor of DSM-5.

toward someone named Lucius as the mastermind indubitably behind the crime—this was the common conviction of the entire crowd. In the days just prior he had, by bogus letters of introduction, contrived to present himself to Milo as an honest man; he had commended himself to him so solidly that he was invited to share Milo’s hospitality and was accounted one of the bosom members of his host’s household. But as he stayed there for a few days, insinuating himself into the soul of Milo’s serving girl with a false front of affection, he investigated the bolts and bars of the front door as circumstances allowed, and thoroughly and thoughtfully scrutinized the very rooms in which all of Milo’s treasure was usually kept.

And it was no insignificant indication of who the guilty party was that, in fact, on that very same night, at the very same moment of your outrageous offense, that same man ran away, and could not thereafter be discovered anywhere.”⁷

Of course, Lucius’ larger narrative implies this account is false. But could it be true? If so, and if Lucius is the unreliable narrator he is often claimed to be, his entire account of turning into a jackass and being kidnapped and tormented by sadistic robbers could be a colossal schizophrenic metaphor for his guilty conscience, much as in Greek tragedy Aeschylus and Euripides hint the Furies haunting the murderous Orestes might be.⁸

This line of interpretation falls in line with a passage at the start of a short story from 1940 titled *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* by the Argentine experimentalist Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986):

Bioy Casares había cenado conmigo esa noche y nos demoró una vasta polémica sobre la ejecución de una novela en primera persona, cuyo narrador omitiera o desfigurara los hechos e incurriera en diversas contradicciones, que permitieran a unos pocos lectores—muy pocos lectores—la adivinación de una realidad atroz o banal.

⁷ All translations of Apuleius’ *Golden Ass* in this paper are that of Relihan (2007), occasionally modified.

⁸ I expand on this theme in a forthcoming paper to be titled “The Myth of Paranoid Schizophrenia in Classical Perspective: Aeschylus’ *Libation Bearers* and the Legacy of Thomas Szasz.”

Bioy Casares had had dinner with me that evening and we had lost all track of time in a vast debate over the way one might go about composing a first-person novel whose narrator would omit or distort things and engage in all sorts of contradictions, so that a few readers—a *very* few—might divine the horrifying or banal truth.

A schizophrenic narrator is an obvious means of achieving this aim. Is it possible, then, that with *The Golden Ass*, Apuleius sought to compose a first-person novel whose narrator omitted or distorted things and engaged in all sorts of contradictions, so that a few readers—a *very* few—might divine the horrifying or banal truth? If so, that horrifying or banal truth must be that the *Golden Ass* is really the tale of a young man, Lucius, who succumbs to schizophrenic delusions and, in their grip, turns to a life of crime and homelessness.

In my view, this line of interpretation is not only authorized by the prologue but may even be demanded by it. The famously enigmatic prologue offers us the best example in the novel of the second diagnostic criterion, namely (auditory) hallucinations.

2. *Hallucinations*

Schizophrenic hallucinations are usually auditory. In common parlance, they are what we call “hearing voices.” The voices can express various ideas but usually fall into patterns. They may mock the individual who hears them or threaten him. They may command him to harm himself or others. They may also suggest he enjoys exalted birth or that he has been chosen for a special, often divine, mission. Because psychiatrists arbitrarily exempt religious beliefs, Judaism, which meets the last two criteria, is not considered a symptom of schizophrenia. In fact, however, until recent times about half of all schizophrenic delusions (or hallucinations) were religious in nature (Krzystanek, Krysta, Klasik, and Krupka-Matuszczyk (2012)). And a clear proof that people in ancient Greece and Rome claimed to experience schizophrenic hallucinations appears in Plautus’ *Menaechmi*. In the climax of the play the protagonist, who is feigning “insanity” (*insania*), pretends to hear Apollo’s voice

commanding him to kill his wife (831-881).

Apuleius took a special interest in the hallucinated “voice” (*daimonion*) that Socrates claimed to hear; he wrote a whole treatise, the *De Deo Socratis*, about it. I would like to suggest that he toys with the idea in the *Golden Ass*, specifically via the invisible voices Psyche hears in Cupid’s palace (5.2):

And as she inspects all this with the greatest of passion and delight, a disembodied voice (*vox quaedam corporis sui nuda*) presents itself to her. “Why, my lady,” it said, “does your jaw drop at the sight of such a welter of wealth? All these things belong to you. ... We, whose voices you’re hearing (*quarum voces accipis*) are your handmaidens...

More to the point, Lucius himself seems to hear voices right from the outset of the story. The first sentence of his prologue famously begins:

At ego tibi sermone isto Milesio varias fabulas conseram... Exordior. “Quis ille?” Paucis accipe. Hymettos Attica...mea vetus prosapia est;

But I’ll—let me string some tales together for you, stories of all sorts.... I’m starting. “Who’s *that* guy?” Listen briefly. Hymettus in Attica...is my pedigree from of old.

We cannot tell who the *tibi* is that Lucius is talking to, or that he thinks he is talking to, when he begins his story in mid-conversation (cf. *at*, “But”). But it could be the same person, or voice, that interrupts him getting started (*exordior*) by pointing a finger at him and asking a third person, “Who’s *that* guy?” I do not think I am mistaken in detecting a hostile tone to the (deictic) pronoun *ille*.

Translators invariably soft-pedal *quis ille?* Like most others, for example, Relihan translates it “*But who is this man?* you say.” The problem, however, is that the Latin makes it clear that Lucius, the narrator, is hearing someone else’s voice and talking back to it.

In my view, this pointed question is what makes it apparent that Lucius is presented to us as a schizophrenic narrator, as one who talks to himself or his “voices.” Because there is no one else obviously around, his interlocutor can only be

one of his imaginary voices. Furthermore, Lucius seems to refer to this “voice” a moment later. He states:

Iam haec equidem ipsa vocis immutatio desultoriae scientiae stilo quem accessimus respondet.

As a matter of fact, this *immutatio vocis* provides a nice analogy to the manner of composition that we have brought to bear here—much skill and quick leaping from one thing to another, like circus performers on their two trick horses.

Relihan renders *ipsa vocis immutatio* as “change in my language” and, with others, takes it to refer to Lucius’ switch from Greek to Latin. But that makes scant sense of *iam*. In my view, Lucius can equally mean “As a matter of fact, already this very shifting of voices...,” referring back to the voice asking *quis ille?* If so, and if Apuleius’ readers took that interpretation for granted, then we would do well to consider whether *all* the fantastical elements in the narrative that follows—the transformations, the dream(y) and grandiose apparition of Isis, the torment of the robbers, and so on—are simply the ravings of a (paranoid) schizophrenic narrator.

3. Other symptoms

The last three symptoms can be dealt with summarily. The third, disorganized speech, refers to strange speech. It is sometimes called word salad or schizophrenese. As in James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, it is marked by the frequent use of neologisms, and some, though not all, consider it identical to glossolalia, or speaking in tongues. As the catalogue in Lara Nicolini’s recent book (Nicolini 2011) shows, of course, this phenomenon is the very essence of the narrator’s style in the *Golden Ass*. The novel is packed with bizarre puns. *Conseram*, the first verb of the novel, which could be either future or subjunctive, and which could come from *conserere* “to plant” (cf. *sermonem serere*) or *conserere* “to weave together” (cf. *exordior*), is only one of endless examples.

Lucius’ braying attempts to articulate human speech while in ass form would count as examples of the fourth synonym, disorganized or catatonic behavior, just as

his repeated thoughts of suicide while in ass form easily meet the criteria of negative symptoms— affective flattening, alogia, or avolition. In fact, his entire experience in ass form, in which he mostly sees himself as the passive victim of the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, meet these criteria.

4. Conclusions

What can we conclude? Two points.

First: if schizophrenia—whatever its origin—really did meet mankind only in 1809, then it is astonishing that not only some, but that *all* of its chief symptoms are on display in a novel written 1900 years ago. This suggests psychiatric historians ought to read Apuleius’ *Golden Ass*.

Second: J. J. Winkler called Lucius an unreliable narrator. I say we can take that observation a step further and state that Lucius is a schizophrenic *and therefore* unreliable narrator: in other words, he *is* bullshitting us, but only he believes his own bullshit even more sincerely than we do. The model is Kafka, not Conan Doyle.

If this line of interpretation seems promising, a suitable next step is to investigate the inset story of Cupid and Psyche. If it is allegorical, as it seems, it may well tell us what Apuleius thought of the union of one’s desires with one’s soul or mind in a context that we consider biological (medical, pathological), but that he may have considered an eternal part of the human condition.

M.F.

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