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Author
Krauss, Katherine Elizabeth

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Parody and Paradox: Novelty and Canonicity in Lucian's *Verae Historiae*

Katharine Krauss
Barnard College
Comparative Literature
Class of 2016

Abstract: The Verae historiae is famous for its paradoxical claim both condemning Lucian's literary predecessors for lying and also confessing to tell no truths itself. This paper attempts to tease out this contradictory parallel between Lucian's own text and the texts of those he parodies even further, using a text's ability to transmit truth as the grounds of comparison. Focusing on the Isle of the Blest and the whale episodes as moments of meta-literary importance, this paper finds that Lucian's text parodies the poetic tradition for its limited ability to transmit truth, to express its distance from that tradition, and yet nevertheless to highlight its own limitations in its communication of truth. In so doing, Lucian reflects upon the relationship between novelty and adherence to tradition present in the rhetoric of the Second Sophistic.

In the prologue of his *Verae historiae*, Lucian writes that his work, "τινα…θεωρίαν οὐκ ἄμουσον ἐπιδείξεται" (1.2).[1] Lucian flags his work as one that will undertake the same project as the popular rhetorical *epideixis* since the *Verae historiae* also "ἐπιδείξεται." Since, as Tim Whitmarsh writes, "sophistry often privileges new ideas" (205:36-7), Lucian's contemporary audience would thus expect his text to entertain them at least in part through its novelty. Indeed, the *Verae historiae* fulfills these expectations by offering a new presentation of the Greek literary canon. In what follows I will first explore how Lucian's parody of an epic *katabasis* in the Isle of the Blest episode criticizes the ability of the poetic tradition to transmit truth. I will continue by examining how, in contrast to Karen ní Mheallaigh's argument in *Reading Fiction with Lucian: Fakes, freaks, and hyperreality*, Lucian distinguishes his own work from, and does not (as ní Mheallaigh claims) align it with, this problematized tradition. The paper will then conclude with an analysis of Lucian's critique of his own work's ability to transmit truth in the episode inside the belly of the whale.

The protagonist's journey to the Isle of the Blest similarly establishes itself as a parody of the epic *katabasis*. As Lucian writes, "οὔπω δὲ δύο ἢ τρεῖς ἡμέραι διεληλύθεσαν, καὶ προσελθὼν ἐγὼ Ὁμήρῳ τῷ ποιητῇ, σχολῆς οὔσης ἀμφοῖν, τά τε ἄλλα ἐπυνθανόμην καὶ ὅθεν εἴη" (2.20).[2] The protagonist of the *Verae historiae* meets with and, as he recounts, "ἐπυνθανόμην" a significant figure from the past, "Ὁμήρῳ," thereby gaining wisdom or a form of truth from him in a fashion similar to that of the journeys taken by epic heroes into the Underworld. Lucian further heightens the similarities between the protagonist's journey to the Isle of the Blest and the *katabasis* of an epic hero through his description of the island, "βούλομαι δὲ εἰπεῖν καὶ τῶν ἐπισήμων οὔστινας παρ᾽ αὐτοῖς ἐθεασάμην πάντας μὲν τοὺς ἡμιθέους καὶ τοὺς ἐπὶ Ἴλιον στρατεύσαντας" (2.17).[3] By highlighting his protagonist's participation (at least in part) in the world of epic populated by "τοὺς ἐπὶ Ἴλιον στρατεύσαντας," Lucian strengthens the similarity between his protagonist's journey and those undertaken by characters in epic.

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[1] "boasts a little food for thought that the Muses would not altogether spurn"

[2] "Hardly two or three days had passed before I went up to Homer the poet when we were both at leisure and questioned him about everything. 'Above all,' I said, where do you come from?'"

[3] "But I desire to mention the famous men whom I saw there. There were all the demi-gods and the veterans of Troy"

Despite these initial similarities between an epic *katabasis* and the journey taken by Lucian's protagonist, in his protagonist's journey to the Isle of the Blest, Lucian quickly reveals his own echoes of the epic trope to be parodic in nature in order to demonstrate the inability of the poetic tradition to transmit truth. As Karen ní Mheallaigh writes in her work *Reading fiction with Lucian: Fakes, freaks, and hyperreality*, Homer's "revelation" of himself to the protagonist as Tigranes of Babylon ultimately results in the following phenomenon:

> [Lucian]…challenges notions about the possibility of contact with the author more generally as well, because paradoxically Homer's self-disclosure does not make him more familiar to readers but, rather, displaces him to an even remoter degree: behind the mask of 'Homer' lies Tigranes, and however remote or specious 'Homer' was felt to be, Tigranes the Babylonian is even less recognizable and less believable (2014:239).

As ní Mheallaigh concludes, the truth about Homer which the protagonist had sought when he asked Homer "καὶ ὅθεν εἴη" (2.20)[4] is simultaneously revealed and not revealed, as the truth which is revealed to the protagonist is one in which Homer becomes "even…less believable."[5] The ability of the *katabasis* to reveal truth to the protagonist as is traditional in epic is thus thwarted. This failure of the *katabasis* is rendered comic through the gap between the protagonist, who believes that Homer "ἱκανῶς ἀπεκέκριτο" (2.20),[6] and the author and audience who witness Homer's "revelation" of truth as an indication of his inability to provide the very truth the protagonist believes he has. The protagonist's journey therefore becomes not only mimetic but parodic of an epic *katabasis*. Lucian renders the *katabasis* parodic through its inability to convey a meaningful form of truth (from the point of view of the readers) to the protagonist. Lucian thus conveys through parody the insufficiency of the epitome of the poetic tradition, Homer himself, as a source of truth.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Lucian not only reveals the insufficiency of the poetic tradition in the Isle of the Blest episode but also distances his own text from it through the metapoetic themes in Homer's couplet dedicated to Lucian's protagonist. At the end of the Isle of the Blest episode, he "τῇ δὲ ἐπιούσῃ ἐλθὼν πρὸς Ὅμηρον τὸν ποιητὴν ἐδεήθην αὐτοῦ ποιῆσαί μοι δίστιχον ἐπίγραμμα: καὶ ἐπειδὴ ἐποίησεν, στήλην βηρύλλου λίθου ἀναστήσας ἐπέγραψα πρὸς τῷ λιμένι" (2.28)[7]. In *Reading Fiction with Lucian* ní Mheallaigh reads this moment metapoetically:

> The author's prologal [sic] desire to write *True stories* as a monument for posterity is realized when he erects an inscription on the shore of the Isle of the Blessed which inscribes his name and presence for all time into the very landscape of the hereafter (2.28)…. Given that the Isle of the Blessed in *True stories* is populated exclusively by the poets, writers and philosophers of the canonical past, Lucian's gesture hints at his ambition to join the ranks of the classics. In this respect, the inscription's emphatic liminality – it stands on the shore of the Isle of the Blessed beside the harbour where it is erected just before Lucian's departure – is suggestive of the tentative nature of Lucian's

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[4] "Where do you come from"
[5] Ní Mheallaigh claims Lucian's Babylonian Homer to be "even… less believable" in light of his subversion of Hellenistic scholarship on Homer which claimed Homer to have origins in places traditionally considered "Greek."
[6] "He had answered satisfactorily"
[7] "On the next day I went to the poet Homer and begged him to compose me a couplet to carve up, and when he had done so I set up a slab of beryl near the harbor and had the couplet carved on it."

literary ambitions, or the fact that, as an as-yet-living-author, he cannot expect to dwell fully there yet; in writing the *True stories* he is precociously staking his claim *ante mortem* (2014:255).

Ní Mheallaigh is right to read this moment of inscription as a metapoetic meditation since it is a moment in which the protagonist highlights his own act of transcription by relating how he "ἐπέγραψα" Homer's couplet. Furthermore, as Lucian reveals shortly after, not only are his readers witnessing an act of writing within the text, they are also witnessing an act of writing by the protagonist who, due to his similarity in name to Lucian, is almost conflated with him, being called "Λουκιανὸς" in Homer's couplet (2.28). Thus, just as ní Mheallaigh implies in her assertion that the inscription is "suggestive of the tentative nature of Lucian's literary ambitions," Lucian provokes his readers to reflect upon and draw parallels between the claims made by the protagonist's monument and those made by the *Verae historiae*.

However, although ní Mheallaigh correctly teases out the metapoetic themes in the protagonist's moment of inscription, her reading of the "emphatic liminality" of the inscription does not hold up when the monument is considered within the context of both the Isle of the Blest episode, and the *Verae historiae* as a whole. Earlier in the Isle of the Blest episode, the protagonist finds himself judged by Rhadamanthus. The protagonist recounts, "ὡς δὲ ἔδοξεν αὐτῷ, ἀπεφήναντο, τῆς μὲν φιλοπραγμοσύνης καὶ τῆς ἀποδημίας, ἐπειδὰν ἀποθάνωμεν, δοῦναι τὰς εὐθύνας, τὸ δὲ νῦν ῥητὸν χρόνον μείναντας ἐν τῇ νήσῳ καὶ συνδιαιτηθέντας τοῖς ἥρωσιν ἀπελθεῖν" (2.10).[8] Rhadamanthus condemns the protagonist upon his arrival at the Isle for "φιλοπραγμοσύνης," thereby implicitly condemning the protagonist's "ὑπόθεσις ἡ τῆς διανοίας," namely, "περιεργία καὶ πραγμάτων καινῶν ἐπιθυμία καὶ τὸ βούλεσθαι μαθεῖν τί τὸ τέλος ἐστὶν τοῦ ὠκεανοῦ καί τίνες οἱ πέραν κατοικοῦντες ἄνθρωποι" (1.5).[9] In other words, Rhadamanthus implicitly condemns the "ὑπόθεσις" or motivation for the journey. If we accept ní Mheallaigh's reading that the Isle of the Blest represents the "canonical past," Rhadamanthus has thus judged the protagonist's journey, and by extension, Lucian's recounting of said journey, to be one that does not entirely fit within this classical corpus.

Lucian alludes to his own displacement outside this poetic canon not only within the Isle of the Blest episode but within other episodes as well. At the beginning of his narrative, Lucian asserts that his protagonist starts his journey, "ὁρμηθεὶς γάρ ποτε ἀπὸ Ἡρακλείων στηλῶν" (1.5).[10] By starting his protagonist's journey at the location accepted by the poetic canon as the limits of the geographical world, the "Ἡρακλείων στηλῶν," Lucian reveals that his protagonist's journey will literally cover entirely new territory. This claim that the protagonist's journey (i.e. the central narrative) will surpass the boundaries previously set by the "Ἡρακλείων στηλῶν," metapoetically implies that the narrative must in some sense divorce itself from the traditional canon because of the novelty of its material. Due to both this claim at the beginning of the narrative and Rhadamanthus' claim of the *Verae historiae*'s displacement from its literary predecessors in the Isle of the Blest episode, I would thus read the emphasis on placing the monument "πρὸς τῷ λιμένι" (2.28)[11] (i.e., a liminal space with respect to the "canonical" one

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[8] "When he had come to a conclusion, sentence was given that for being inquisitive and not staying at home we should be tried after death, but that for the present we might stop a definite time in the island and share the life of the heroes, and then we must be off."

[9] "The motive and purpose of my journey lay in my intellectual activity and desire for adventure, and in my wish to find out what the end of the ocean was, and who the people were that lived on the other side."

[10] "Once upon a time, setting out from the Pillars of Hercules"

[11] "Near the harbor"

situated on the Isle of the Blest) as an explicit departure from a classical model and not as an unquestioning embrace of an "ambition to join the ranks of the classics."

While Lucian emphatically separates his work from the poetic canon he criticizes, he does not hold his own text as an exception to the criticism that literary texts and traditions are a limited source of truth as revealed through the metapoetic and philosophical meditations in the whale episode. As the protagonist and his companions first descend into the whale, the protagonist recounts, "τῇ ἐπιούσῃ δὲ διαναστάντες, εἴ ποτε ἀναχάνοι τὸ κῆτος, ἑωρῶμεν ἄλλοτε μὲν ὄρη, ἄλλοτε δὲ μόνον τὸν οὐρανόν, πολλάκις δὲ καὶ νήσους: καὶ γὰρ ᾐσθανόμεθα φερομένου αὐτοῦ ὀξέως πρὸς πᾶν μέρος τῆς θαλάττης" (1.32).[12] The method by which the protagonist and his companions view the outside world is inherently episodic, as alluded to by the fact that the protagonist and his companions see "ἄλλοτε μὲν ὄρη, ἄλλοτε δὲ μόνον τὸν οὐρανόν"[13] through the whale's mouth. However, despite the disjointed nature of their views of the outside world, the protagonist and his companions nevertheless construct a coherent narrative of their relationship to the outside world, that the sea monster "φερομένου αὐτοῦ ὀξέως πρὸς πᾶν μέρος τῆς θαλάττης."[14] According to Massimo Fusillo's article *The mirror of the moon: Lucian's A true story—from satire to utopia*, the reader of the *Verae historiae* experiences a similarly disjointed narrative since Lucian exacerbates the "rapid juxtaposition of episodes" (1999:365) common to the adventure tale. Therefore, in order to create a coherent narrative, the reader must implicitly undergo the same project as the protagonist and his companions, that of constructing a continuous narrative from a series of episodes. Through this similarity verging on conflation between characters and reader, Lucian establishes a dynamic in which the protagonist's views of the world outside the whale have metapoetic resonances.

Lucian sceptically examines the value of these views of the world outside the whale in his allusion to Plato's allegory of the cave. The Cypriot whom the protagonist and his companions meet in the belly of the whale confides, "'καὶ γὰρ ἡμεῖς ἄνθρωποι ὄντες καὶ ἐν γῇ τραφέντες νῦν θαλάττιοι γεγόναμεν καὶ συννηχόμεθα τῷ περιέχοντι τούτῳ θηρίῳ, οὐδ᾽ ὃ πάσχομεν ἀκριβῶς εἰδότες: τεθνάναι μὲν γὰρ εἰκάζομεν, ζῆν δὲ πιστεύομεν'" (1.33).[15] The Cypriot's uncertainty as to whether to believe himself "τεθνάναι" or "ζῆν" once inside the dark belly of the "θηρίῳ" thematically reflects (although perhaps in a comically exacerbated manner) the ignorance of the men inside the cave described by Socrates in the *Republic*. By extension, the views of the outside such as those described by the protagonist upon his entrance into the whale would become the glimpses of truth afforded those in Socrates's cave. Since, as stated above, these views of the real world and glimpses of truth are episodic in nature, Lucian highlights the limited ability of his protagonist to view truth while in the belly of the whale. Because of the metapoetic resonances of these views of the outside world, the limited ability of these episodic views of the outside world to convey truth imply that Lucian's narrative affords a limited perspective on truth as well.

The limitation that Lucian highlights in his own text, namely that it is a limited source of truth, is the same critique that he launches against the poetic tradition in the Isle of the Blest episode. Lucian's project of distancing himself from the poetic tradition he critiques through the

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[12] "On rising the next day, whenever the whale opened his mouth we saw mountains one moment, nothing but sky the next, and islands frequently, and we perceived by this that he was rushing swiftly to all parts of the sea."

[13]" mountains one moment, nothing but sky the next,"

[14] "was rushing swiftly to all parts of the sea."

[15] "As for ourselves, though we are men and were bred on land, we have become sea-creatures and swim about with this beast which encompasses us, not even knowing for certain what our condition is—we suppose that we are dead, but trust that we are alive."

placement of his inscription at the edge of the Isle of the Blest would thus seem in one sense to have fundamentally failed. However, as mentioned in the introduction, since the *Verae historiae* is at least in part a rhetorical *epideixis*, this seemingly paradoxical relationship of simultaneous distance from and yet similarity to the classical canon reads not as a failure on Lucian's part to produce a distinct literary text but as a clever mimesis of a contemporary tradition. As Tim Whitmarsh writes, sophists often found themselves needing to balance rhetorical innovation with "the association between Hellenism and traditional conservatism" (2005:55-6). By embodying a delicate balance between similarity to and distance from the classical canon, Lucian's complex and often contradictory relationship to his literary predecessors becomes a mirror reflecting its own socio-historical moment of literary reception.

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