

Reversing Meaning: Making Metaphor Reality in Lucian's *True Histories*

In the introduction of his science fiction adventure the *True Histories*, Lucian lambastes those authors who attempt to present their own fictive writings as fact. His real problem with these authors, such as Ktesias and Iambulus, is not that they are writing are fiction, but that they refuse to admit they are doing so. As he says, "I did not complain of their lying *per se*...I was amazed that they thought they would get away with writing lies!" (V.H. 4.1-4). Not wanting to feel left out, Lucian sets out to compose his own fanciful tale, but he gives us, the readers, ample warning of his intentions. The one true thing he admits in his novel is that "I am a liar" (V.H. 4.9).

The misrepresentation of reality is at the heart of the charges that Lucian lays against those claiming to speak authoritatively. Language then becomes a way of obfuscating meaning, or at least the representation of meaning. These mendacious authors create a disconnect between the objects they claim to describe and the language they use to describe them, most often due to inexperience with the *realia* of the signified. Besides admitting his attention to write fiction, what sets Lucian apart from these other authors? In this paper I argue that Lucian is meditating on the nature of language and meaning by reversing the way in which metaphor functions; metaphor ceases to be a window to reality and instead becomes the guiding force for creating the world in his narrative. Lakoff and Johnson's work on the nature of metaphor is a useful tool in exploring Lucian's deployment of metaphor in his narrative. For them, "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another," (5). Metaphor is an integral part of the perceptual system that allows us to order the universe in a coherent manner (3). It essentially is a linguistic tool for defining meaning.

Metaphor in the *True Histories*, instead of being *determined* by some ostensible real system of objects, becomes the *determinative* force. Instead of representing reality, a way of transferring or expressing the essential quality of other objects, it becomes a force that creates reality. One of the most striking examples of this appears in Lucian's description of the reproductive methods of the moon-people. According to Lucian, "they do not conceive in the stomach, but in the calf (of the leg)" (V.H. 22.6). The English makes this merely a stray observation about the absurd anatomy of these lunar inhabitants. In Greek, however, the word for calf is γαστροκνημία, literally meaning "belly of the leg". Observation of the body part creates the opportunity for metaphorically expression. Since it appears to swell out like a belly, it *becomes*, linguistically, the belly of the leg. In Lucian's narrative, on the moon, metaphor becomes reality, or at least his fictive reality, and hence the calf does not just look like the belly of the leg, but it in fact functions as such.

This paper explores Lucian's transformation of the nature of metaphor in the *True Histories* which serves as a reminder of the true power of language as well as a further indictment of those who purport to express reality, but are in fact writing fiction. When read in this way, Lucian's fantastic novel explores the power of language, in this case Greek, as a supplier of meaning and cultural currency in the Second Sophistic world in which he is writing.

Works Cited:

Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: 1980.