

Lucian's *Nigrinus*: What is the Effective Corrective?

Lucian's *Nigrinus* is stuffed: a genre-defying, curiously organized piece of narrative and biographical rhetoric framed by dialogue, it draws upon traditions of tragedy and comedy, wallows in Homer, models itself after Plato, and even smacks of Juvenal. Both its biographical material and its tone have been interpreted variously as genuinely flattering, shamelessly pandering, or playfully teasing (Anderson 1978, Smith 1897, Tarrant 1985 respectively). This paper examines the character of Nigrinus, the reactions of the so-called "Convert" (Clay 1992) and other interlocutor, and the tenor of the philosophy itself practiced within the work, and discards any possibility that the piece could be ultimately flattering or serious. Rather, the subtly sarcastic piece lampoons its eponymous "philosopher" and his student: they utter quotes the original contexts of which deflate the *Nigrinus*' characters and their claims, and likewise offer details which highlight their hypocrisy or at least their unreliability.

For instance, Nigrinus likens himself to Hector being whisked away from battle with Agamemnon by quoting *Iliad* 11.163, ἔκ τ' ἀνδροκτασίης ἔκ θ' αἵματος ἔκ τε κυδοιμοῦ ("out of the manslaughter and out of the blood and out of the battle-din"), but where Hector was reserved explicitly in order to drive the Greeks back to their ships only a short time later, Nigrinus follows by explaining that he chose to stay at home in the future, preferring a life which seems γυναικώδης and ἄτολμον to the majority of folks (*Nigr.* 18)—hardly the stuff of a Homeric hero. The student himself figures Nigrinus' speech as more tempting, more modern, than the Sirens and lotus of Homer with no reference made to their potentially fatal distracting properties (3), but then, after the student has recounted the vices of Rome per Nigrinus' instruction—ubiquitous fascination with wealth and power, lack of liberty and free speech, rampant flattery, hedonism, and bad music (15–16)—Nigrinus declares Rome herself the best school of virtue and likens the

city to the Sirens. Unlike Odysseus, however, you must sail through with hands unbound, ears unstopped, body free—to test one’s soul, of course (19). This comes immediately after declaring his intention to stay at home, “away from the arrows.”

Lucian thus satirizes popular philosophy, its proponents, and audience, while apparently endorsing satire itself as the most, or perhaps the only, effective corrective—the sole life-change possibly presented as positive comes after Athenians sarcastically mock an ostentatiously rich fellow (13). Then, rather than letting the work’s muddled organization go unremarked, I attribute it partially to the multiplicity of Lucian’s targets and the interwoven nature of his rhetoric: not only is the author mounting assaults on at least three targets, if Rome is included, but pieces of attacks on one target also aid our interpretations of the others, which inhibits a more orderly topical division. Lastly I consider the tempting proposition that Lucian here has invited himself to the banquet of Roman satiric tradition, as a consciously Hellenized author claiming for himself the criticism of Rome, confirming from a Greek perspective, that of an outsider, the complaints of and colluding with such authors as Horace, Persius, Petronius, Martial, and Juvenal; or does he serve up a similar menu only coincidentally?

Bibliography

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