Lucian's *Nigrinus*: the Problem of Form

Graham Anderson

The *Nigrinus* is the most persistently reinterpreted of Lucian's dialogues:¹ most scholars have felt that it is too eccentric in form to be accepted at its face value as a tribute from an admirer to an unknown philosopher Nigrinus. The work begins exceptionally with a covering letter followed by the usual frame dialogue, and the speaker opens with a flourish of absurdly exaggerated enthusiasm after a visit to Nigrinus, to his listener's eventual annoyance; when finally forced to talk about his recent interview, he drifts from praise of Athens (12-14) to condemnation of Rome (15-34), with occasional contrasts to Nigrinus' own conduct. After these twenty sections of moral platitude, he abruptly describes his 'conversion' in the concluding frame, in the same exaggerated terms as before.

Several explanations of this sequence have been offered: Lucian is held to be writing genuine ἀπομνημονεύματα or ἔγκωμιον and ψόγος; he is held to be saying one thing in the frame, another in his recollections of Nigrinus' conversation—as the result of either inept revision or deliberate intent to conceal his real purpose, artistic or political; and the contrast in mood between frame and centre is difficult to resolve. This is at the heart of the problem, and it has long been recognized that Lucian is trying inter alia to adapt the structure of one of Plato's more eccentric dialogues. But as well as evaluating such solutions, it is important to compare Lucian's techniques of organization as they appear in the rest of his work.

One line of approach has been to look for a genre which will account for the work with as little further qualification as possible: since Lucian claims to be recollecting what Nigrinus has said (6ff), it would be natural enough to expect a collection of ἀπομνημονεύματα: this form traditionally allowed a haphazard arrangement of bons mots,

which could be mixed with biographical information; moreover the speaker promises to attempt his report ἀπαγόρευσαν. Hirzel accepted this explanation and accordingly grouped Nigrinus with Demonax. But comparison with this genuine example of ἀπομνημονεύματα makes it futile to place Nigrinus in the same class. In the latter case we have a sophisticated frame dialogue, not a mere catalogue of sayings; and Lucian has attempted to classify his subject matter into topics, which he has scarcely done in Demonax. And his claim to be paraphrasing freely (Nigr. 11, cf. 8) need only be a studied imitation of Plato, Phaedrus 228D; it certainly would not preclude him from arranging Nigrinus’ speech in a deliberate way.

Bompaire and Müller draw attention to one aspect of this arrangement: Nigrinus begins with praise of Athens (13–14) and passes on to condemnation of Rome. Both scholars take the whole speech as a syncrisis between Rome and Athens. Bompaire has then to explain the remarks on Nigrinus himself in 17–20 and 26–28 as “deux fragments d’un éloge de Nigrinos . . . sorte de contrepoint interne.” But the ψάγος of Rome is really too long to balance the two anecdotes about Athens; and it is difficult to believe that Lucian ran out of things to say about his own adopted city when he had only to go to any rhetorician’s manual for the scheme of the πόλεως ἐπαινός. But there is an obvious reason why he does not allow Nigrinus to dwell on Athens at any length: if he had praised the city in greater detail as the ideal home for philosophy, it would have been difficult to explain why Lucian had had to come to Rome at all for his ‘conversion’.

Others have set out to explain the dialogue by reconciling Nigrinus’ speech with its surroundings: they assume that Lucian devised the one to divert attention from the other, so that he had to make jokes against himself in order to disown an early, naïve conversion, or to disguise an attack on Rome. But Lucian has much more convincing ways of expressing himself on either subject: if he wants to show that

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8 Der Dialog, ein literarhistorischer Versuch II (Leipzig 1895) 292. A. Peretti, Luciano, un intellettuale greco contro Roma (Florence 1946), argues that Lucian’s claim is shown to be sincere by the diversity of tone and style within Nigrinus’ discourse.


4 Th. Litt., RHM N.F. 64 (1909) 98f.

5 L. Hasenclever, Ueber Lukians Nigrinus (Diss. Munich 1907) 44f. The theory was revived by Peretti, op. cit. (supra n.2), against which see Bompaire, op. cit. (supra n.1) 510f. The basic weakness of Hasenclever is to overestimate what can be said by means of λέξει ἐκχυματισμένη.
he has been duped by a philosopher, he can write the kind of speech which is clearly ἐκχυματικέμενος, like Hetoi
cloes’ letter in Convivium 22–27 or the false rhetor’s speech at Rhetorum Praeceptor 12–25; Nigrinus’ monologue, with its conventional diatribe topics, is quite un-
like either. And if Lucian wants to sneer at Romans, he can do so without any such bizarre ‘cover’ elsewhere. ⁶

Variants of this analysis still persist, however: Bompaire assumes that Nigrinus himself is fictitious and that the conversion is a device to diversify the banal satire in the central section. ⁷ Caster took the opposite view: ⁸ Nigrinus is a real character, and the frame the real point of interest, with its “drame primitif de la conversion.” Neither explanation is strictly necessary: Lucian uses both themes elsewhere without feeling obliged to provide any diversion (‘Roman’ details in a moral satire in De Mercede Conductis; his own ‘conversion’ in Somnium); when he does mix Cynic content and literary frame, as in Icaromenippus, Necyomantia, Gallus or Convivium, his methods of blending the two scarcely give rise to any problems: he could simply do otherwise when he chose.

Such attempts to explain Nigrinus in terms of a single genre or an uneasy combination of genres are unsatisfactory. One can choose instead to believe that Lucian had made a successful synthesis: E. J. Smith ⁹ saw the work as a sophistic Panathenaicus, in which Lucian has blended the appropriate reminiscences of Plato’s Menexenus with a compliment to Nigrinus; and in so doing she has at least recognized that Lucian need not be attempting anything out of the ordinary. But his own practice elsewhere has still to be considered. Often he will use the same sequence of topics in quite dissimilar works, so that the same outline can be made to provide an extravagant fantasy or a routine encomium: there is much more common ground than we should expect between works as dissimilar as Imagines and Charon. ¹⁰

In the present case a large section of Nigrinus follows the same sequence of motifs as Icaromenippus, a fantastic jeu d’esprit whose subject (Menippus’ trip to heaven) has nothing to do with Lucian or Rome.

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⁶ Demon. 18, 38, 40; Alex. 30; Merc.Cond. 41.
⁷ Op.cit. (supra n.1) 530; 510f.
⁸ In Mélanges offerts à M. Octave Navarre (Toulouse 1935) 471–85.
⁹ AJP 18 (1897) 339–41; with elaboration as E. J. Putnam (the same), CP 4 (1909) 162–77.
¹⁰ In particular the miraculous revelations produced by combining portraits (Imag. 3ff), or mountains (Charon 3ff) with the aid of ὁ λόγος (Imag. 5) or Homer respectively.
A friend criticizes his newly-returned companion for being aloof. The stranger allows himself to be misunderstood and holds his audience in suspense. He hints at his new-found happiness, but uses a strange jargon, and makes appeals to friendship. He has just met an eminent philosopher who has given him a new clearness of vision, and set him off on four elaborate rhetorical similes, opening his eyes to the folly of mankind as seen from above. He recognizes the follies of potentates, philosophers and the rest of mankind. Where the resemblance to Icaromenippus stops, a resemblance to Gallus takes over: 

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So much for the sequence of typical Lucianic themes. Several attempts have been made to analyse the overall shape of the dialogue, and it is very largely on the strength of this that the author's intention has to be judged. Müller¹¹ and Hasenclever¹² offer careful catalogues of subject matter; both Müller and Bompaire¹³ note that it is really 17-20 and 26-28 which seem out of place, relating as they do to

¹¹ Op.cit. (supra n.3) 576f (with conclusions based on Hasenclever).  
¹² Op.cit. (supra n.6) 53ff; also A. Quacquarelli, La retorica antica al bivio (l’Ad Nigrinum e l’Ad Donatum) (Rome 1956) 51, who takes 35-37 with the speech, but preparatory to the conclusion, and takes only 26-28 as “parentesi encomiastica” of Nigrinus.  
¹³ Op.cit. (supra n.5) 576; op.cit. (supra n.1) 277.
Nigrinus rather than to Rome. Bompaire's "sorte de contrepoint interne" is an adequate description, but it has once more to be related to Lucian's practice elsewhere. The following division is a fair one, though there will clearly be room for minor difference of opinion over the analysis of 13–34.

1–6 (Lucian), fresh from his conversion, begins to tell a friend about his experience, but is swept away by his new enthusiasm into a long rhetorical excursion.

13–34 Nigrinus' 'speech'

13–14 Two stories about Athens. Topic I
14–16 Rome: how a philosopher should resist the turmoil of life. Interlude
17–20 Nigrinus' own reactions. Topic II
21–25 The rich and their parasites, especially philosophers. Interlude
26–28 Nigrinus' own reactions. Topic II
29–34 The follies of mankind, Roman style. Interlude
35–37 Lucian's dramatic conversion. Topic III
38 His friend is convinced.

This analysis does not attempt to deny the casual confusion in Nigrinus' speech: his second interlude (26–28) is closely linked with the discussion of philosophers which precedes, and the extravagances in 30–34 still hark back to the tables of the rich, which have only been mentioned incidentally in connection with κολακεία: any overlapping of topics is to some extent inherent in the subject matter itself. But there is another element here. Lucian is a facile writer, who tends to fall back not only on set sequences of themes but on a basic structure which can be adapted to fit as many situations as possible. One should not have expected to find that the divisions discerned above are in fact very close to those of Lucian's Timon or Piscator: three main panels framed on one side by a two-part exposition,\(^\text{14}\) on the other by what might best be called an 'exposure scene': in these latter cases the hero exposes shams; in Nigrinus Lucian's porte-parole exposes his own inner feelings. But that still leaves us with the offending interludes. The nearest analogue to Nigrinus is Convivium: there Lucian has divided

\(^{14}\) For a full discussion of Lucian's arrangement of material within dialogues see Anderson, op.cit. (supra n.1) 135–63.
his cynicizing material into three sections (11–19, 28–37, 42–45) punctuated once more with interludes. In Convivium these interludes were literary contributions set between the narrated events; here Lucian has instead dovetailed two vaguely biographical parentheses into what is meant to be the casual drift of conversation.

But there is another important consideration: Lucian tends to be a little disorganized when he is delivering a piece for a single occasion.\(^\text{18}\) In this case the frame (1–12, 35ff) suggests that he is trying to combine as much material as possible, as though for a single opportunity to impress; Platonic reminiscences are more thickly concentrated here than anywhere else in his work;\(^\text{16}\) while the whole ensemble, with its apparently serious central reported speech, is an attempt to reproduce something of the Menexenus. There is also a profusion of cross-references to the rest of Lucian’s own writings. Bompaire explains the opening as “parodie laborieuse, que n’allègent pas certaines grâces platoniciennes”; but this is consistent with Lucian’s technique of developing prologues for their own sakes: at Navigium 1–17 and Anacharsis 1–19 the Platonic setting runs to nearly half the dialogue.\(^\text{17}\)

As to the self-satire so conspicuous in Nigrinus 8–12, Lucian has used the same technique in Convivium 3–4, where Lydnus is cast as a scandalmonger who pretends to be reluctant to tell tales; here he affects to be too inspired to be brought down to earth—an allusion to Socrates’ mock-modest comments on his performances in Phaedrus, a situation which Lucian uses in several other contexts. It is no surprise if this quaint fusion of material is occasionally ambiguous in tone.\(^\text{18}\) Lucian could muddle his material much more than this when he tried

\(^{11}\) Even the bad join after 34 should be no surprise. In a carefully organized work such as Toxaris, the central portion ends in a similar anticlimax after Toxaris’ last tale, which seems very perfunctory after the main story in 44–56. Nor was Lucian the only rhetor to make questionable experiments in his occasional works: the author of Demosthenis Encomium joins the two halves of his ‘original’ encomium in the clumsiest possible manner (1–26, 27–49); and Philagrus of Cilicia’s combination of ἐπιτάφιος and ἐγκώμιον was hailed as μεθρακωλόν (Philostr. VS 579).

\(^{16}\) F. W. Householder, Literary Quotation and Allusion in Lucian (Diss. Columbia 1941) 36; W. H. Tackaberry, Lucian’s Relation to Plato and the Post-Aristotelian Philosophers (Toronto Studies philol.ser. 9, 1930) 64ff; Hasenclever, op.cit. (supra n.6) 18ff, 62f.

\(^{17}\) This makes the question of balance between frame and central section irrelevant: Lucian develops each independently.

\(^{18}\) In several of the passages imitated by Lucian, Plato was in fact presenting material which he scarcely approved: Aspasia’s curious speech which forms the centrepiece of Menexenus; Lysias’ worthless speech (Phdr. 230ff); and Protagoras’ specious display (Prt. 328δ / Nigr. 35). And these reminiscences might have introduced an ironic speech by
to include too much: one need not look any further than the con­
cluding section of De Saltatione.¹⁹

In terms of Lucian’s usual techniques of composition, then, the
Nigrinus does follow a familiar sequence of themes and a familiar
arrangement; it has no more surprises than one expects in Lucian’s
most casual and overloaded compositions. What can a product of
this kind tell us about Nigrinus himself? Was the name a pseudo­
nym²⁰ or a figment of Lucian’s imagination?²¹ Had he been either,
Lucian’s work might have been more intelligible; but there is no
motive. The work at its face value suits what Lucian tells us about
Nigrinus: that he sent it as a compliment to an (otherwise unknown)
Platonic philosopher of that name—in an effort presumably to display
as much of his own repertoire as he could, including a superficial com­
mand of Plato.²² The work could easily have been intended as a
sample of Lucian’s much-vaunted blend of Dialogue and Comedy,
specially refined for a particular reader; there is no reason why he
should not have altered the blend accordingly.

Nor does it seem necessary to continue the search for a single central
purpose, let alone a mission, for the dialogue. If we must have a single
subject, we need not make an artificial choice between ‘Rome’ and
‘conversion’; the basic compliment to Nigrinus is contained in the
motif ‘the philosopher makes an impressive revelation by turning his
back on the evil city’. We can compare Dio of Prusa’s presentation of
Theophilus’ rejection of Alexandria (Or. 32.97) or Philostratus’ report
of Apollonius of Tyana at Antioch (VA 1.16). Such poses offered easy
opportunities for Lucian. I have shown elsewhere how readily he
could ring the changes on such themes as ‘miraculous revelation’ and
‘the philosopher views mankind from a vantage-point’:²³ Nigrinus
dispenses revelations about Rome as from the back of a theatre (Nigr.

Nigrinus were they not outweighed by the large number of other allusions. The compar­
ison of Nigrinus’ speech to the bite of a mad dog might seem uncomplimentary (cf. Herm.
86), but the author of De Saltatione uses it as a compliment, and Lucian compares the effect
of his audience at Dips. 9 to the bite of a poisonous snake.

²⁰ Albinus, as argued recently by Quacquarelli, op.cit. (supra n.12) 43–49, following an old
suggestion by Fritzsch. Again this would only be effective if Lucian had included some­
things like the Rhetorum Praeceptor’s speech (Rh.Pr. 13–25) in place of Nigrinus’ harmless
platitudes.
²¹ Hasenclever, op.cit. (supra n.6) 11–17; Bompaire, op.cit. (supra n.1) 530.
²² Hirzel, op.cit. (supra n.2) II 292; Helm, RE 13 (1927) 1752; Caster, op.cit. (supra n.8).
²³ Op.cit. (supra n.1) 16f and n.118, 111.
18) as readily as Hermes reveals the follies of Troy to Charon from the top of Parnassus (Char. 23), or Empedocles exposes those of Alexandria and oriental courts to Menippus from the moon (Icarom. 14ff).

As usual Lucian seems more interested in the literary presentation of his revelation than in what is actually revealed. And the kind of hostility to Rome shown in Nigrinus could easily have commanded assent from a Roman intellectual, such as Nigrinus purports to be:24 there was nothing very harmful in a Greek’s presenting a Roman condemning Rome. No doubt Roman courtiers under the Severi found little to offend when Philostratus presented the consul Telesinus condemning his fellow Romans before the visiting Apollonius (VA 4.40).

UNIVERSITY OF KENT AT CANTERBURY
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24 So, rightly, C. P. Jones, Plutarch and Rome (Oxford 1971) 128: “Lucian in fact illustrates the cultural bond between the educated classes of east and west... The enemies of Rome are not to be sought at this cultured and affluent level, but below.”