

Lucian's *Nigrinus*: the Problem of Form

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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 *ἐγκώμιον* 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*,

¹ For extensive bibliographical summaries, see J. Bompaigne, *Lucien écrivain, Imitation et création* (Paris 1958) 277f, 504ff; and J. Palm, *Rom, Römertum und Imperium in der griechischen Literatur der Kaiserzeit* (Lund 1959) 44–57. For the convergence between Lucian's handling of Roman themes and his many other interests, see G. Anderson, *Lucian, Theme and Variation in the Second Sophistic* (Leyden 1976) 85–89.

which could be mixed with biographical information; moreover the speaker promises to attempt his report *ἀτάκτως συνείρων*. Hirzel² 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 Müller³ 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 *ψόγος* 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 ἔπαινος*. 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, naive conversion,⁴ or to disguise an attack on Rome.⁵ But Lucian has much more convincing ways of expressing himself on either subject: if he wants to show that

² *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.

³ *Op.cit.* (*supra* n.1) 277; *Eos* 32 (1930) 576.

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 *λέξις ἐχηματικὴ μὲνη*.

he has been duped by a philosopher, he can write the kind of speech which is clearly ἐκχηματισμένος, like Hetoimocles' 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 unlike 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. Smith⁹ 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.

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.

	<i>Nigrinus</i>	<i>Icaromenippus</i>
A friend criticizes his newly-returned companion for being aloof.	1	1
The stranger allows himself to be misunderstood and holds his audience in suspense.	1-2	1-3
He hints at his new-found happiness, but uses a strange jargon,	1 1-12	2 1
	(rhetorical)	(scientific)
and makes appeals to friendship.	6	3
He has just met an eminent philosopher who has given him a new clearness of vision,	4	13
	(Nigrinus)	(Empedocles)
and set him off on four elaborate rhetorical similes,	Hindoos 5 Lovers 7 Actors 8f Actors 11	Shields 16 Chorus 17 Millet 18 Ants 19
opening his eyes to the folly of mankind as seen from above.	18 (from the theatre)	15 (from the moon)
He recognizes the follies of potentates, philosophers and the rest of mankind.	17-23 24-28 29	15 15 16

Where the resemblance to *Icaromenippus* stops, a resemblance to *Gallus* takes over:

	<i>Nigrinus</i>	<i>Gallus</i>
The rich misuse their wealth, and his vision has brought about a dramatic change of heart.	30-34 36	28 32 (<i>Micyllus</i>)

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 Bompaigne¹³ 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 contrepoin 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,	<i>Introduction</i> I
7–12	but is swept away by his new enthusiasm into a long rhetorical excursion.	II
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13–34	NIGRINUS' 'SPEECH'	
13–14	Two stories about Athens.	TOPIC I
14–16	Rome: how a philosopher should resist the turmoil of life.	
17–20	Nigrinus' own reactions.	<i>Interlude</i>
21–25	The rich and their parasites, especially philosophers.	TOPIC II
26–28	Nigrinus' own reactions.	<i>Interlude</i>
29–34	The follies of mankind, Roman style.	TOPIC III
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35–37	Lucian's dramatic conversion.	
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,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.¹⁵ 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;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. Bompaigne 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.¹⁷ As to the self-satire so conspicuous in *Nigrinus* 8–12, Lucian has used the same technique in *Convivium* 3–4, where Lycinus 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.¹⁸ Lucian could muddle his material much more than this when he tried

¹⁵ 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 μερακιώδης (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.* 230E ff); and Protagoras' specious display (*Prt.* 328D / *Nigr.* 35). And these reminiscences might have introduced an ironic speech by

to include too much: one need not look any further than the concluding 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 pseudonym²⁰ 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 command 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 comparison 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.

¹⁹ See G. Anderson, *GRBS* 18 (1977) 285f.

²⁰ Albinus, as argued recently by Quacquarelli, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.12) 43–49, following an old suggestion by Fritzsche. Again this would only be effective if Lucian had included something 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).

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²⁴ So, rightly, C. P. Jones, *Plutarch and Rome* (Oxford 1971) 128f: "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."