

INTRODUCING A SOPHIST: LUCIAN'S PROLOGUES

R. BRACHT BRANHAM

University of California, Berkeley

In a well-known passage of the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle observes that the most essential function of a prologue is to give the τέλος of the discourse that follows (1415A22–24). Although scholars have carefully classified the basic compositional schemes of Lucian's introductory works (προλαλιαί) or prologues, the rhetorical and literary functions of these short engaging pieces have been ignored.¹ Yet the prologues are interesting not only as some of the best examples of what must have been a very common and characteristic kind of rhetorical performance in the Second Sophistic,² but also for what they reveal of the τέλος of Lucian's art in miniature. If Mras's attempt to analyze the prologues into two or three simple rhetorical structures introduces "a precise classification where Lucian admits of none," Anderson's construction of a "flexible formula"³ of two rhetorical elements is not much more illuminating of Lucian's aims and techniques in his introductory performances. Recognizable rhetorical elements such as the short anecdotal narrative (μῦθος, διήγημα) or ecphrastic description are indeed typical of the prologues, but how are they used? And what do they reflect of Lucian's intentions in the longer performances which they served to introduce?

¹ K. Mras, "Die *prolatia* bei den griechischen Schriftstellern," *WS* 64 (1949) 71–81; G. Anderson, "Patterns in Lucian's *Prolaliae*," *Philologus* 121 (1977) 313–15; cf. A. Stock, *De Prolaliarum usu rhetorico* (Diss. Königsberg 1911); J. Bompaigne, *Lucien écrivain: imitation et création* (Paris 1958) 286–88; B. P. Reardon, *Courants littéraires grecs des II et III siècles après J-C* (Paris 1971) 165–66.

² Cf. Reardon (above, note 1): "C'est un genre [i.e., the *prolatia*] à la mode à l'époque," 165. Lucian is a notoriously difficult writer to place. He represents himself in the *Bis Accusatus* as having abandoned the practice of epideictic and forensic rhetoric, the staples of sophistic performance, in favor of more inventive, literary forms. Yet it is clear that he continued to use sophistic devices and gave public readings superficially like those of other sophists (*Prom. Es* 2). Hence I use the term "sophist" here in the neutral sense of "public literary performer," a common one in the second century, not to deny that his work differs significantly from that of Philostratus' sophists or to characterize his skill in the prologues as specifically "sophistic" as opposed to rhetorical or poetic. For this use of σοφιστής see E. L. Bowie, "The Greeks and their Past in the Second Sophistic," *Past and Present* 46 (1970) 5.

³ Anderson (above, note 1) 315.

Three of the prologues, the *Zeuxis*, the *Prometheus Es in Verbis*, and the *Dionysus*, are particularly important for understanding Lucian's sense for his audience and the role of comedy and novelty in his works.⁴ A characteristic feature of these pieces is the way Lucian uses an ostensibly improvisational opening to establish an informal rapport with his audience: he interrupts himself in the middle of his first sentence to signal his intentions to the audience (*Dionysus* 1, *Zeuxis* 1). In both cases the interjection is an invitation, "why don't I tell you the following story?" (*καλύει γὰρ οὐδὲν οἶμαι* . . .). This offhand manner of introduction serves to lend the performance an air of genuine spontaneity. The *οἶμαι* following the anacoluthic opening suggests the casual relationship of a storyteller to his audience. Lucian tries to make his listeners properly receptive to his performance by consistently characterizing them as cultured men, artists, scholars, and most importantly, friends (*Herod.* 8, *Dom.* 2–3, *Zeux.* 1, 12). For it is the role of the prologue not only to cultivate a favorable response from the prospective auditors by putting them at their ease and whetting their appetite for the kind of entertainment that follows, but also to sketch for them the form of judgment appropriate to performances of this particular type. Such preparations are essential to a successful performance. If the audience comes expecting the broad humor of the mimes or erudite philosophy or florid panegyric, they will be disappointed and the performance will fail (*Electr.* 6).

Thus the prologue must work in two directions seeking to define both the artist and the kind of audience he seeks. That Lucian gained a reputation for being different from other sophists is shown by the fact that he must continually use his prologues to define more precisely the nature of that difference. Thus in the *Zeuxis* Lucian uses an elaborate ecphrasis of Zeuxis' painting of a mother Hippocentaur nursing twin Hippocentaur babies to illustrate how bizarre subject matter still requires expert execution lest its incongruous character amount to nothing more than bluff designed to impress the audience with its sheer oddity (3–7). He may be rightly famous for his own oddities, but he does not want his audience to be primarily concerned with his producing a series of literary curiosities or to expect to be entertained only by the newness and strangeness of his work (12). For if he wins his reputation this way he would be little different from Antiochus, who, as he describes in a brief anecdote, used the strange appearance (*τὸ καινόν*) of elephants to bluff his way to victory over the Galatians (8–11). Lucian wants his audience to be aware not just of his novelty, but that as in *Zeuxis*'

⁴ In addition to these works Lucian's *προοιμιαί* include the *Heracles*, *Electrum*, *Dipsades*, *Harmonides*, *Herodotus*, and *Scythia*. The *De Domo* and *Somnium* are formally related to this group, though the former is probably too long for an introduction. Cf. Anderson (above, note 1) 314, note 5.

painting, it is executed with the technical virtuosity and appreciation of tradition (τὸν ἀρχαῖον κανόνα, 2) that would please an audience of artists (γραφικοί, 12). Such an audience consists of πεπαιδευμένοι ("educated men") whose literary background is deep enough to allow them to distinguish mere novelty from true invention, allusion from theft, and to tell the difference between bad or stupid writing and parodies which expose those qualities in the works of others.⁵ Thus Lucian juxtaposes positive (ecphrasis) and negative (the anecdote) examples of the use of novelty (καινότης) to invite a receptive but critical response from his audience by illustrating the difference between the artist's use of exotica and the exploitation of it by Antiochus merely for the purpose of creating shock and surprise. All this expresses Lucian's sense of himself as extraordinary enough to require an explanatory introduction if he is not to be misunderstood. He asks to be taken seriously, but according to the proper criteria.

Significantly the *Prometheus Es in Verbis* is also concerned with the proper role of novelty and invention (τὸ καινουργόν, 3). Lucian opens the work sparring rhetorically with the forensic orator who has praised him with the extravagant epithet, "a literary Prometheus." Again he is wary lest an expectation of the bizarre for its own sake spoil the reception of his performance, but he is also aware of the potential for irony in the compliment: Prometheus may be the very emblem of the creator, but in Athens the potters were called "Prometheuses" (1). In spite of his disclaimers and ironic manner, Lucian shows himself proud of his work because of its novelty, but not because of its novelty alone (ἐμοὶ δὲ οὐ πάνυ ἱκανὸν εἰ καινοποιεῖν δοκοῖν, 3): it must be appropriate and aesthetically justified (χαρίεν, 3). Inartistic novelty only makes a bad work worse (3): This precept is illustrated in a brief narration of Ptolemy's vain attempt to impress the Egyptians with a black camel and a two-colored man, half-black and half-white (4). Lucian then proceeds in Socratic fashion to disparage his own most notorious creation, the comic dialogue, as more like these freakish unions of things unsuited to one another, such as a Hippocentaur or a black camel, than a successful blending of compatible ingredients which enhance each other, like wine and honey (5). For dialogue is quiet, esoteric, and elitist, preferring to stay at home in the company of a few friends, where comedy is more risqué, gregarious, and Dionysian. They do not even like each other. Comedy mocks the high seriousness of the philosophers and would drench them in Dionysian

⁵ Words like παιδεία, πεπαιδευμένοι, and εὐφνής are frequently used to describe the intended auditor and are contrasted with terms denoting the unappreciative audience such as ὄχλος or βάρβαρος (cf. *Herod.* 8, *Dom.* 6, *Apolog.* 3). Cf. also *Dom.* 3 where Lucian skillfully conflates the roles of speaker and auditor in order to induce his audience to identify with him and share his pleasure in praising the hall: the εὐμαθής ἀκροατής can imitate the panegyrist, having learned his words by heart. Cf. *Zeux.* 2.

liberties, while dialogue insists on taking his conversations with the utmost seriousness (6). The antithesis is of course similar to that drawn in the *Bis Accusatus* with its emphasis on the notion of democratizing the esoterica of philosophy. However, since the speaker is responding to a compliment, he feigns reservations about the wisdom of his concoction instead of defending it aggressively as the Syrian does in the *Bis Accusatus*. He nevertheless vigorously denies that it is stolen: where, he asks, could he have stolen such oddities (7)? He will rest content with his curious creation, such as it is, for fear that by changing his mind now he would resemble Epimetheus more than Prometheus.

The *Prometheus Es* is an ironic apology for Lucian's principal literary innovation, the comic dialogue, and is interesting in that it makes explicit the author's claim to originality in an age not known for it and confirms the characterization of this form of dialogue, found also in the *Bis Accusatus*, as an incongruous combination of inherently divergent traditions. Although these works are written primarily with a view to defending the artistic value of Lucian's hybrid of comedy and philosophical dialogue, and hence are of course tendentious, they nevertheless point to a quality found in many of Lucian's major writings, the curious blend of serious and comic qualities, the peculiar incongruity which he appropriately compares to that grotesque meeting of man and beast, the Hippocentaur.⁶

Thus the prologues are used to mediate between Lucian the performing artist and his audience by highlighting important features of his art and defending them against potential criticism and misunderstanding. In the *Prometheus Es* and *Zeuxis* the case for the defense is made through playful personifications of Lucian's art and its literary forefathers, comedy and philosophical dialogue, and through the aesthetic

⁶ Commentators have disagreed over exactly which works the speaker is referring to in the *Zeux.*, *Prom. Es*, *Pisc.*, and *Bis Acc.* (See J. A. Hall, *Lucian's Satires* [N.Y. 1981] 30–33 with note 50, p. 546). This question, however, cannot be answered, for there is simply insufficient evidence. After all, Lucian is not writing literary history, but defending an aesthetic and entertaining his audience. We cannot be sure, for example, that whenever the speaker compares his work to a Hippocentaur he is referring to the same pieces (cf. Hall 32). He is clearly alluding to similar qualities, however, and these qualities are certainly to be found in some of the "Menippean" dialogues. But the "Platonic" dialogues also exhibit the combination of philosophic and comic discourse which is made so much of in the *Bis Acc.* and *Prom. Es*, though of course the connection with Old Comedy is lacking. We should not apply Lucian's playful description of his works in too literally minded a fashion. With the exception of the *Vitarum Auctio*, which is referred to in the *Pisc.* (27), we cannot even begin to be sure of the chronology of most of the works relevant to the question. It is the aesthetic which the speaker is advocating that is of primary interest. And while the aesthetic is exemplified by some of the "Menippean" dialogues, its governing ideas are clearly relevant to other works as well. For the distinction between "Menippean," "Platonic," and other dialogues, see Reardon (above, note 1) 172–73. For a full discussion of the problem of dating Lucian and his works, see Hall, chap. 1.

the speaker articulates by means of pointed ecphrases and humorous anecdotes. The most important device used in the prologues, however, is the illustrative story about famous figures in some way analogous to the performer such as the painter Zeuxis (*Zeux.*) or the eloquent old Celtic Heracles (*Herc.*) or Anacharsis, the outsider from Scythia (*Scyth.*). These short narratives often seem at first to be unrelated to the immediate occasion and to be recounted only for their intrinsic interest. We have already noticed the apparently casual manner in which they are introduced. But they are always followed by an *applicatio*, that is, an interpretation of the story, or of an art work in the story, that shows the relevance of the narrative to the immediate occasion by drawing a parallel between the speaker and the subject of the anecdote. Thus they became demonstrations of the very kind of critical appreciation which the main performance calls for.

The *Dionysus* is an almost perfect example of the genre of sophistic prologue and can serve as a concluding illustration of Lucian's subtle elaboration of this form. It is particularly important as it takes the comedic quality of Lucian's art as the subject to be explored in the longer of its two short tales. It is not unusual for a prologue to involve some light, self-deprecating humor as when the speaker compares his works to the elephants of Antiochus (*Zeuxis* 12) or some comic incongruities as in the image drawn of the old bald Heracles with his followers attached to him by a chain through his tongue (*Herc.* 3). But the *Dionysus* is the only prologue in which the *μῦθος* is told to explicate the nature and function of comedy in the author's works. The speaker begins by reminding his audience of the disdainful and contemptuous reception which greeted Dionysus' invasion of India and helps them to imagine the kind of description which the Indian messengers must have given of the approaching army: the ranks consist of raving women, wreathed in ivy, covered with fawn skins, carrying headless spears, and shields that sound like tambourines (because they are). The speaker delights in the bizarre incongruity the legend offers of Bacchants, normally associated with reveling, manning a military expedition. He heightens the incongruity latent in the story to the point of comedy by imagining the mythical invasion as if it were an historical event seen through the eyes of one to whom all such things are new, stripped of the preconceptions and background which make the story merely an old and familiar legend to a Greek audience. He makes us imagine what these messengers could report of the general himself: he rides in the car behind a team of panthers, is quite beardless, has horns, wears a garland of grape clusters with a ribbon in his hair and is dressed in a purple gown and golden slippers. A couple of rather odd-looking characters, Silenus and Pan, are his lieutenants. The Indians roar with laughter when they hear of this crazy army of women chasing animals and tearing them limb from limb. The speaker

describes the whole scene in minute, absurd detail in order to make the audience see the sight as new and strange as it appeared to the Indians. His method is to transfer the object to a new sphere of perception by describing it with the fascination and uncomprehending air of one who is completely innocent of such matters.

This is of course the technique of estrangement so well analyzed by Shklovskij, who uses Tolstoy to illustrate how familiar objects and events are made strange by being described as if they were just seen for the first time. The effect is often subtly comic as when Tolstoy in describing "the scene of the mass in *The Resurrection*" uses "the prosaic expression 'small pieces of bread'"⁷ to refer to the host. Lucian is a master of this method of altering our perceptions to give us a new and often uniquely comic perspective on familiar traditions.⁸ As the Russian formalists also pointed out, the technique of estrangement is closely akin to parody and hence we would expect to find it in the repertoire of a writer for whom parody is so important. It can be used, however, in any number of ways and its use needs to be specified in a given context. Its presence in the *Dionysus* serves to make it a model of Lucianic art.

But to return to the story: Those ridiculous (γελοῖος, 3) soldiers proceed to set fire to the country until the Indians are forced to meet their despised invaders in battle. The Indians approach with their elephants. Dionysus holds the middle with his officers, Silenus and Pan, on either side. The watchword is "*Euoi!*" With tambourines and cymbals

⁷ V. Ehrlich, *Russian Formalism* (The Hague 1965) 150–51. Such parodic techniques are of course important in satire. The technique of estrangement is the principal device of *Gulliver's Travels* and is skillfully exploited throughout Juvenal 3 and 10 among many other possible examples. Cf. A. Kernan, *The Cankered Muse* (New Haven 1959) chap. 1, reprinted in abridged form in *Satire: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. R. Paulson (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1971).

For comparable uses of this technique in Lucian, see the beginning of the *Anacharsis* where it is used very effectively in the Scythian's unorthodox description of the venerable institution of Greek athletics. Cf. also the ecphrasis of a Celtic painter's depiction of Heracles: *Heracles* 1–3. As in these examples, Lucian's treatment of familiar material often does more than revitalize it: it makes the audience view it in a new context. Thus it is not simply a reaffirmation of shared beliefs. Cf. Anderson, "Lucian: a sophist's sophist," *YCS* 27 (1982) 65: "One can say that in an age of political, cultural and spiritual stability it took Lucian's eclectic technique to revitalize what everybody had always read and always believed." This characterization of Lucian fails to acknowledge the extent to which his parodic techniques bring something new into being by revealing unexpected or unnoticed relations between familiar ideas and modes of expression. Cf. Reardon's discussion of Lucianic parody (above, note 1), 176: "Bref, le parodiste établit des rapports *inusités* entre penseurs and pensées, à des fins de comédie" [emphasis mine].

⁸ It is significant that Lucian had to write an introduction which reproaches his audience for not taking him seriously enough because he writes comedy (*Dionysus* 5). It is another indication of the fundamentally ambivalent quality of his most characteristic modes of writing.

beating, a satyr signals the beginning of battle with his horn and Silenus' jackass chimes in with something appropriately martial (*ἐννάλιον τι*, 4). But when the maenads reveal the steel on their thyrsus-points, the Indians and their elephants flee in disorder and are captured. They learn by experience not to despise those appearing ludicrous and strange (4).

The *applicatio* is obvious. The speaker applies the story to himself and his audience: Like Dionysus in India he may appear satyr-like and comic (*γελοῖος*, 5), but his thyrsus too has a point. If his prospective listeners will get down off their elephants and, instead of despising his satyrs and Sileni, drink their fill at his bowl, they will know the Bacchic frenzy once again and join in shouting "*Euoi!*" Thus Lucian uses the story to admonish his audience against dismissing him as "merely comic" (5). The tale of Dionysus' invasion is the perfect vehicle for this admonition, for in telling and interpreting it the speaker gives a demonstration of his seriocomic art on a small scale. The comic narrative is made to apply directly to his artistic intentions and the relationship between the performance and his audience. Furthermore, the story does not instruct in addition to being comic, but by means of being comic. For the work to perform its rhetorical function, the audience must be made to envisage the maenads first as comic (*γελοῖος*) and only afterwards as something to be taken seriously, as effective warriors. The *Dionysus* is thus a paradigm of Lucian's seriocomic art and shows it to be thoroughly integrated: the relationship between the serious and comic elements is not to be conceived externally as one of message to decoration as the Horatian dictum on mixing the *utile* with the *dulce* might suggest (*A.P.* 341–44). Instead the means constitute the end, for the comic form of the tale is essential to its meaning as the speaker interprets it.⁹ It therefore serves to reflect some of the defining qualities of Lucian's major work.

Thus Lucian's prologues, far from being mere mechanical assemblages of rhetorical components, are carefully contrived introductory performances which make deft use of such sophistic specialties as ecphrases and short anecdotal narratives to elicit the audience's good will and to define by example both the characteristic qualities of Lucian's art and the kind of interpretative skills it requires of an audience. Lucian would be very surprised to hear them dismissed as "inconsequential trifles."¹⁰ For as a public performer, a *σοφιστής*, he would be the last to underrate the value of advertising his art—or the art of advertising to an audience of second-century traditionalists.

⁹ Anderson (above, note 1) 313.

¹⁰ I would like to thank Bryan Reardon, Peter Brown, Mark Griffith, W. S. Anderson, Jack Winkler, Ann Cumming, Dan Kinney, and the anonymous referee and editor of *TAPA* for their time and thoughtful criticisms.