

*Lucian's Poetics*

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Lucian is an author inextricably connected to prose. In this chapter, I argue that poetry is a crucial and overlooked aspect of his literary identity. I use close readings of different pieces of Lucian's verse writing to highlight some key features of a Lucianic poetics – that is, the self-conscious exploitation of the dynamics of poetic language to create an intensely layered, archly self-critical textuality which demands closer attention. I then suggest how this poetics relates to Lucian's wider approach to the literary tradition, and his perception of his own role in continuing it; a self-constructed mandate to reanimate the genres and conventions of the inherited past, to deflate them, disrupt them, and ultimately repossess them.<sup>1</sup>

**Lucian in Verse; Lucian on Verse**

A colleague recently asked me about my research plans for the summer. When I told him that I was writing a chapter on 'poetry in Lucian', there followed a long pause. Regarding me with kindly bemusement, he eventually replied: 'Ah, that's a fun topic, given that he only writes in prose.' This response is both decidedly underwhelming (and we shall return to the complex connotations of 'fun' for Lucian) and not entirely true. The Second Sophistic was for a long time considered to be an era where poetry was almost entirely annexed by prose. *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, which stops in the middle of the third century, has only two pages on imperial Greek poetry, and Christian Habicht, writing about Lucian's near-contemporary Pausanias, felt able to declare with confidence that in imperial Greece 'poetry was dead'.<sup>2</sup> The situation is now very different. Thanks to the surging interest in recent scholarship in post-classical Greek

<sup>1</sup> All texts and translations of Lucian are taken from the most recent Loeb editions unless otherwise stated. Other editions are noted *ad loc.*

<sup>2</sup> Respectively Easterling and Kenney 1985 and Habicht 1985.

poetry, verse is increasingly recognised as having offered a living medium of expression in imperial Greek culture, with forms such as epic, epigrams, hymns, and drama acting as powerful vehicles through which traditional language and themes were renegotiated.<sup>3</sup> The sophists themselves had a direct stake in this world of poetic production. Melic poetry was an integral part of the imperial court's self-presentation,<sup>4</sup> and a number of the period's most celebrated orators also enjoyed wide-ranging poetic careers.<sup>5</sup> Lucian, the most famous sophist from this era, is one of the most overlooked of these sophists-poets;<sup>6</sup> he joins Nicetes of Smyrna the tragedian and Scopelian his pupil, whose poetic reputations are memorialised in Philostratus' *Lives of the Sophists*, although all of their works are lamentably lost,<sup>7</sup> and Aelius Aristides, whose prose *Hymn to Sarapis* begins with a programmatic statement about prose now taking over a traditionally poetic domain, but who actually wrote more verse hymns than prose.

That Lucian turned his hand to verse should not, however, be surprising, given the intense attention that he lavishes on traditional poetry throughout his work. Lucian criticises and critiques, purveys and parodies a wide range of ancient Greek poems across his enormous collection of publications. In keeping with the Hellenic traditionalism, canon-building energies, and education patterns of his time,<sup>8</sup> his favourite subjects/targets are drawn from Old Comedy (an avowed model for his blistering satire and generic inversions), classical tragedy (which, as several studies have shown, occupies a central role in his writing),<sup>9</sup> and archaic epic, chiefly Hesiod and above all Homer. An iron-grip command over the Greek poetic canon was essential for the sophist's successful display of *paideia* – a command which

<sup>3</sup> Modern bibliography on imperial Greek poetry, especially epic, is now pleasingly too copious to be listed here. See for just a few examples Hopkinson 1994; Miguélez-Cavero 2008; Hunter and Carvounis 2008; Cameron 2016; and Goldhill 2020 for wide-ranging explorations. For recent treatments of individual poets, see e.g. Kneebone 2020 on Oppian; Greensmith 2020; Bär, Greensmith, and Ozbek 2022 on Quintus; Cadau 2015 on Colluthus; and Accorinti 2016 on Nonnus.

<sup>4</sup> See Baumbach 2017 for further discussion and references.

<sup>5</sup> The sophists' poetic activities were first given serious and sustained attention by Ewen Bowie in a series of articles on Greek poetry in the second and third centuries (1989a; 1989b; and 1990).

<sup>6</sup> As my recent conversation with a colleague demonstrates, most classicists presume that Lucian, like many of his famous sophistic contemporaries such as Philostratus, wrote exclusively in prose. On Philostratus' embedded poetry, see Greensmith 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Scopelian composed in all poetic genres and is specifically praised for epic and tragedy: he wrote an epic called the *Gigantias* and furnished the *Homeridai* with material for their poetry' and in tragedy is said to have rivalled even his teacher (Philostratus, *VS* 1.21).

<sup>8</sup> For these much-discussed aspects of the Second Sophistic, on which I can only touch very briefly here, see e.g. Goldhill 2001a; Kim 2010; Richter and Johnson 2017; and for education in the imperial period, Morgan 1998 and Too 2001 (especially the chapter by Connolly).

<sup>9</sup> Karavas 2005; Whitmarsh 2013: part 11.

simultaneously enabled easy recall and ‘extempore’ recitation and connoted a deep and hard-won literary knowledge – and Lucian conveys his mastery of this game not only through quotation and allusion but also through engagement with ancient poetry’s most fundamental authority, generic make-up, and tone. To take by means of illustration just some of the most striking examples, in the *True Histories* (a text to which we shall return) Lucian dramatises the popular sophistic pursuit of *Homerkritik* by staging a meeting with the ghost of Homer himself and interviewing him on the truth about his life and works (*True Histories* 2.20). As Larry Kim has shown, this treatment of Homer aligns Lucian with several other imperial prose authors (chiefly Dio Chrysostom and Philostratus, against the background of critical discussions such as those in book 1 of Strabo) who are united by their interest in the historical truth of Homer’s account, their explicit and detailed discussion of Homer’s poetry, and their centralisation of the figure of Homer himself.<sup>10</sup> Lucian also challenges the intrinsic connection between epic poetry and vatic, revealed truth. In the mini-dialogue *A Conversation with Hesiod*, Lycinus (one of the many masks donned by Lucian) rounds on Hesiod directly to attack the prophetic claims of his poetry. Hesiod’s meagre defence that all his poetry belongs to the Muses, so technically the issue should be taken up with them, not him, is exposed as spineless and unsatisfying. More expansively, in *Zeus Refuted*, Lucian uses a dialogue between Cyniscus and Zeus to scrutinise and ridicule the contradictions in the traditional Greek religious system, and these critiques are rooted in the ‘teachings’ of Homer and Hesiod and framed in epic quotation:

ΚΥΝΙΣΚΟΣ: Ἴδου ταῦτα, ὦ Ζεῦ· ἀνέγνως γὰρ δῆλον ὅτι καὶ σὺ τὰ Ὀμήρου καὶ Ἡσιόδου ποιήματα· εἰπέ οὖν μοι εἰ ἀληθῆ ἐστιν ἅ περὶ τῆς Εἰμαρμένης καὶ τῶν Μοιρῶν ἐκείνοι ἐρραψωδῆκασιν, ἀφικτα εἶναι ὅποσα ἂν αὐταὶ ἐπινησῶσιν γεινομένων ἐκάστω;

ΖΕΥΣ: Καὶ πάνυ ἀληθῆ ταῦτα· οὐδὲν γὰρ ἐστιν ὅ τι μὴ αἱ Μοῖραι διατάττουσιν, . . .

ΚΥΝΙΣΚΟΣ: Οὐκοῦν ὅποταν ὁ αὐτός Ὀμηρος ἐν ἐτέρῳ μέρει τῆς ποιήσεως λέγη,

μή καὶ ὑπὲρ μοῖραν δόμον Ἄιδος [= *Il.* 20.336]

καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα, ληρεῖν δηλαδὴ φήσομεν τότε αὐτόν; (*Zeus Refuted* 1–2)

CYNISCUS: It is this, Zeus: you certainly have read the poems of Homer and Hesiod: tell me, then, is what they have sung about Destiny and the

<sup>10</sup> Kim 2010: 140–74. See also Hunter 2009b: 44–6.

Fates true, that whatever they spin for each of us at his birth is inevitable?

ZEUS: Unquestionably. Nothing is independent of their control . . .

CYNISCUS: Then when this same Homer in another part of his poem says:

‘Take care lest before your fated hour you go to the house in Hell’ and that sort of thing, of course we are to assume that he is talking nonsense?

This palpable poetic energy is unleashed in Lucian's stand-alone verse compositions. These survive in two main forms. First, the scoptic epigram. Lucian is certainly . . . or probably . . . or possibly the author of many examples of this epigrammatic subgenre, which had its floruit in the first and second centuries CE and is conserved mainly in book II of the *Palatine Anthology*. The epigram's performative flair and precocious attitude make it an excellent vehicle for Lucian's quick and arid wit.<sup>11</sup> There are, however, major problems with attribution: the *Anthology* is filled with issues of shaky authorial identity and vague ascription, and these are exacerbated in Lucian's case by the confusion (or conflation) of similar names like Lucillius and Lucianus, making it difficult to state with confidence which, if any, of the sixty-three epigrams variously assigned to him are genuinely his work.<sup>12</sup> But we can be sure that Lucian is there somewhere in *Anth. Pal.* II, hiding in plain sight with his characteristic elusiveness, and sometimes it becomes possible to sight him, if not permanently to pin him down. A four-line mock-epitaph to Lollianus (the sophist from Ephesus celebrated in Philostratus *VS* I.23, the first chair of *sophistik* in Athens, and in charge of the city's food control)<sup>13</sup> is unusually ascribed only to Lucian in the manuscripts and displays *in nuce* some of the techniques which will become more pronounced in the texts explored later in this chapter:

Εἰπέ μοι εἰρομένω, Κυλλήνιε, πῶς κατέβαινε  
 Λολλιανοῦ ψυχῆ δῶμα τὸ Φερσεφόνης;  
 θαῦμα μὲν, εἰ σιγῶσα· τυχὸν δέ τι καὶ σὲ διδάσκειν  
 ἦθελε· φεῦ, κείνου καὶ νέκυν ἀντιάσαι. (*Anth. Pal.* II.274)

Tell me in answer to my question, Cyllenian Hermes, how Lollianus' soul went down to the house of Persephone? A miracle, if in silence, and perhaps it wished to teach even you something. Ah, to think of meeting him even as a corpse!

<sup>11</sup> As Goldhill pithily puts it (2020: 42) ‘the epigram has attitude. And only attitude.’

<sup>12</sup> See Bowie 1989a: 251 for further details. For the more intentional name games played by Lucian, see especially Goldhill 2002a and ní Mheallaigh 2010. The murky identity ground of the *Anthology* is ironically a great posthumous home for him in this respect . . .

<sup>13</sup> He is also commemorated in an inscription in Athens dated to after his death in 142 CE.

The address to Cyllenian Hermes directly merges Odyssean epic allusions with the conventions of sepulchral epigram. Εἰπέ on its own is common in epitaphs,<sup>14</sup> but the precise formula Εἰπέ μοι εἰρομένῳ occurs only twice in the *Odyssey*, the second time in the second *nekyia*, as the ghost of Agamemnon addresses the ghostly suitor Amphimedon and asks him how he too ended up down there (*Od.* 24.114).<sup>15</sup> The *Odyssey*'s second underworld scene opens with Cyllenian Hermes, who calls the spirits of the suitors to make their descent (*Od.* 24.1). This double echo of Homer's final book not only summons a clearly relevant epic context but also draws attention to the epigram's own secondary status as a repetition and rewrite: *Odyssey* 24 was itself by Lucian's time notorious for its supplementary status – this is the underworld again, *again*. The epigram also reverses all points of the Homeric dialogue: now Cyllenian Hermes is the called not the caller, and Lollianus is the substitute for the suitor. Lollianus had a reputation for being magnanimous, benevolent, and fair, and Philostratus (who is suspiciously, perhaps offensively silent about Lucian in his biography of the sophists) copiously praises him for his liberal attitude when dealing with famine in Athens. By aligning Lollianus with the Homeric characters who are paradigmatic for their recklessness and brutal consumption, Lucian subtly conveys his sophistic rivalry. Then in the second verse, Λολλιανοῦ provides an anachronistic jolt, a contemporary name in an epic formula. The tension between speech and silence (θαῦμα μὲν, εἰ σιγῶσα, 'a miracle if in silence') further blends Homeric katabatic taciturnity (according to the terms of the *Odyssey*'s first *nekyia*, the shades of the underworld cannot be heard by mortals unless they drink blood), with sophistic garrulousness (Lollianus in Philostratus' account charged high sums for rhetoric lessons – hence the epigram's διδόσκειν/ἤθελε, 'it wished to teach' – and also exclaimed a lot, and loudly, at the Athenians during his time in office).<sup>16</sup> The final exclamation at what it would be like to see the famous sophist καὶ νέκυν ἀντιάσαι reconfigures a strong tenet of Homeric grief, where intimacy is focused not only on sight but on touch, as for example in Odysseus' famous wistful desire upon seeing the ghost of his mother to clasp her insubstantial form. The sentiment of meeting a corpse also plays into the reanimating culture of Lucian's own day, which was fascinated by the possibility of close encounters with resurrected figures from mythology (via hero cults), history, or contemporary times.<sup>17</sup> All of these collisions and contradictions between theme and context, conceit

<sup>14</sup> Examples in Bowie 1989a: 252 n 83. <sup>15</sup> Also at *Od.* 15.263. <sup>16</sup> E.g. *VS* 527.

<sup>17</sup> Further discussion in the following two sections.

and reality give the epigram an uncanny *thauma* entirely worthy of Lucian, which both intensifies and undercuts his playfully acerbic jibes.

The second type of Lucian's verse composition is a very different, unique creation. The *Podagra* is a 334-line paratragedy about Gout. It is Lucian's most extended piece of verse, and the only apparently complete Greek tragedy to survive between the late fifth century BCE and the fourth century CE.<sup>18</sup> The play begins with the anguished monologues of a man afflicted with the condition, and a chorus describes the mesmerising powers of the goddess Gout and her Bacchic-style rites. Gout herself then appears in an epiphany to sing her own praises and recount her victims, opponents, and worshippers. A messenger arrives, bemoaning his difficult long journey on foot (he too, of course, has gout) and leads in 'criminals' for Podagra to put on trial: evil doctors who have tried to devise a cure. The doctors are confronted, they repent, and finally Podagra pardons them.

When working on imperial Greek literature, one becomes accustomed to including decidedly eccentric sentences in scholarly prose;<sup>19</sup> but even by these standards, this plot summary was *very* odd to write. The play makes for an even quirkier read in full.<sup>20</sup> An eclectic combination of two of Lucian's favourite sophistic modes – adoxography and encomium – it clearly aims 'to display the inevitable trappings of tragedy, rather than recreate a tragic plot as such'.<sup>21</sup> This display is so overt, the parody so heavy-handed, that some have queried whether the humour is sophisticated enough to be Lucianic and disputed its authorship.<sup>22</sup> The *Podagra* is Lucianic from every angle: an experimental, metrically morphic exploitation of the conventions, clichés, and limitations of tragedy, which knowingly recasts tragedy's own antagonistic relationship to the even more lofty genre of epic.

It is worth looking in more detail at how this mimesis-cum-mocking occurs. The first thing to note is the scale. For a tragedy, 334 lines is short,<sup>23</sup> but it is long for a joke. Compared to the fast-paced scoptic energy of the

<sup>18</sup> See Whitmarsh 2013: 177. Whitmarsh's discussion of the *Podagra's* 'gouty poetics' (2013: 182–5) is the best and most incisive analysis of the poem to date, although much work remains to be done.

<sup>19</sup> 'Oppian radically compares a turtle to a tortoise' and 'Nonnus leaves the rank seal skins to Homer' are 'highlights' from my own recent work.

<sup>20</sup> The full text is available in the seventh volume of the Loeb series, and there is also a complete edition, translation, and commentary in Greek by Karavas 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Anderson 1978b: 153. Whitmarsh 2013: 182 thinks that the play is likely an adoxographic parody of Mesomedes' extravagant hymns to personification, e.g. Nemesis and Physis. For adoxography, see Billerbeck and Zubler 2000.

<sup>22</sup> See Anderson 1978b: 149 and Bowie 1989a: 254.

<sup>23</sup> Bowie 1989a: 254 suggests that this may reflect contemporary practice – imperial tragedies such as those by Nicetes and Scopelian may have been much shorter, but we simply cannot know.

epigram, the parody here is sustained, and the effect is (temporarily) all-engulfing. Reading the *Podagra*, quite simply, takes up some time, and to appreciate the joke – obvious as it is – we must ‘appreciate’ the poetry, and immerse ourselves in the ludicrous world of Lucian’s paratragic verse.<sup>24</sup>

Once inside this world, the reader is bombarded with echoes, allusions, parallels, and reversals drawn from tragedy, epic, comedy, and their rivals or alternatives.<sup>25</sup> Lucian continues to focalise the contrasts between theme and form crucial to parody, and which we saw in the Lollianus epigram, but expands them on multiple, interlocking levels.<sup>26</sup> The metrical mixology is extreme: the chorus starts with a lyric hymn, *Podagra* herself vaunts in iambics, and the final ode is formed in the myuric, a ‘cutting-edge’<sup>27</sup> (or certainly conspicuously non-classical) metre where the iambus substitutes for the final foot of usual hexameter (312–34):

Οὔτε Διὸς βρονταῖς Σαλμωνέος ἤρισε βία,  
 ἀλλ’ ἔθανεν ψολόεντι δαμεῖσα θεοῦ φρένα βέλει,  
 οὐκ ἔρισας ἔχαρη Φοῖβω σάτυρος Μαρσύας,  
 ἀλλὰ λιγὺ ψαίρει κείνου περὶ δέρματι πίτυς. (312–15)

Mighty though Salmoneus was, he could not rival thundering Zeus,  
 But was slain and smitten in the heart by smoking thunderbolt;  
 Nor did rivalry with Phoebus bring joy to Satyr Marsyas;  
 All his music now is where his skin hangs on rustling pine-tree.

In donning these different metres, Lucian is doing more than just showing off his skills. To change metre is to alter the feet, and the *Podagra* ends with the goddess’ wish fulfilled: the foot has been infected for good, and no remedy restores it to hexametric wholeness. The metrical deviations thus mirror the podiatric content.<sup>28</sup> On the lexical level,

<sup>24</sup> I refer throughout to ‘reading’ as the main mode of receiving the *Podagra*, because nothing at all is known about its original context, but whether or not it was also performed or recited, it was certainly intended to be read.

<sup>25</sup> In this necessarily brief discussion, I shall not attempt to list all or even many of the specific parallels: these have been thoroughly compiled by Karavas 2008. My focus instead is on the effects of these parallels, and the dialogue between the ‘hidden’ Lucianic author and the designedly disoriented reader.

<sup>26</sup> This accumulation of allusions, parallels, and riffs, which creates an aesthetic close to baroque or even excessive in flavour, offers a telling contrast to Lucian’s avowed restraint when it comes to Atticising language in his prose. As Karavas stresses (2008: introduction), Lucian avoids and stigmatises both hyper-Attic excess and the gaucheness and ignorance of pseudo-Atticism.

<sup>27</sup> Whitmarsh 2013: 182.

<sup>28</sup> This connection evokes the puns between metrical and physical foot prevalent in Roman poetics, most strongly in *Amores* 1.1: Ovid wanted to write hexameters, but Cupid laughed and ‘stole away one foot’. See Thonemann in this volume (Chapter 9) for an example of Lucian’s possible direct

Lucian's penchant for games with unfamiliar language (the central concern of his dialogue the *Lexiphanes*, which satirises linguistic pretentiousness) is accommodated within this tragic setting and verse form in the goddess' excruciatingly long list of the remedies used against her, which is ripe with quasi-medical and botanic terminology and reads like the sort of multi-compound, hapax-filled, scatological list at home in an Aristophanic comedy:

ἄλλοι πράσιον, οἱ δὲ ποταμογείτονα,  
 ἄλλοι κνίδας τρίβουσιν, ἄλλοι σύμφυτον,  
 ἄλλοι φακοὺς φέρουσι τοὺς ἐκ τελμάτων,  
 σταφυλῖνον ἐφθόν, οἱ δὲ φύλλα Περσικῶν,  
 ὕσκούαμον, μήκωνα, βολβούς, σίδια,  
 ψύλλιον, λίβανον, ῥίζαν ἔλλεβόρου, νίτρον,  
 τῆλιν μετ' οἴνου, γυρίνην, κόλλαν, φακόν,  
 κυπαρισσίνην κηκίδα, γυῖρον κριθίνην,  
 κράμβης ἀπέφθου φύλλα, γύψον ἐκ Πάρου,  
 σφυράθους ὄρειας αἰγός, ἀνθρώπου κόπρον,  
 ἄλευρα κυάμων, ἀνθος Ἀσσίου λίθου·

(152–62)

Some grind horehound, and others try pondweed try;  
 Some crush nettles, and others use comfrey;  
 Some bring duckweed from the ponds against me, or  
     use carrots boiled or leaves of peaches,  
 Or henbane, poppy, Colchicum, grenades,  
 Or fleawort, frankincense, or sodium,  
 The root of hellebore, or mixed with wine  
 The fenugreek, rissole, glue, or pulse,  
 Or cypress sap, or finest barley meal,  
 Boiled cabbage leaves, gypsum brought from Paros,  
 Man's excrement or turds of mountain goat,  
 Or mash of beans, or crop from Assian stone.

In terms of mythological parallels, beneath the play's overall thematic direction, which draws on Euripidean tragedies such as *Hippolytus* and the *Bacchae* (a major model for the chorus' ecstatic odes) lie many more deviant reminiscences. The gouty-man's opening monologue contains several allusions to classical tragedies, whose content, we are reminded, is uncannily close to this most un-tragic of themes. Comparing his pain to a narrow chasm whose angry waters are cramped by 'rocky caves' (23–6),

engagement with Ovid. Whitmarsh (2013: 184–5) notes this play on the similarity between metrical foot and literal foot in messenger speech and its 'anti-epic, limping mode', but I think the idea applies more broadly to the metrical versatility of the whole play – the feet keep changing.

the man calls to mind the cavernous space of Philoctetes' exile, thus Philoctetes' own toils with a gruesome, unhealing wound.<sup>29</sup> His description of his staff as his 'third foot' which helps his step and guides his path (55–7) is a double evocation of Oedipus – both the riddle which he solves and the stick on which he walks in exile when he is blind, old, and in pain.<sup>30</sup> The goddess Gout then glosses and extends these mythological comparanda, as she lists the figures from myth who suffered from the disease (249–62): Zeus, Priam, Achilles and Odysseus (who both died from it), Philoctetes and Podarces. In this list of characters shared by epic and tragedy – comprising anyone with a foot connection, whether in name, epithet, or myth – Lucian performs a witty reduction of these canonical heroes' lofty, *kleos*-seeking lives and deaths. Gout gleefully explains that Odysseus did not die from a stingray, the ignominious accident narrated in the *Telegony*, but, even more ingloriously, 'was slain by me' (261–2); and Odysseus and Achilles, Homer's most agonistic, diametrically opposed Greek rivals, are united against their will by their shared unheroic end.<sup>31</sup> But there is more to it than that. We have discussed the reanimating energies and desire for 'close encounters' with the mythological past strongly present in the culture of imperial Greece. A key part of this culture was an imaginative, revitalising approach to the literary tradition too. Homeric epic and classical tragedy, the apex of Hellenic common cultural property, offered a set of fixed communal markers which could be variously reached for, activated, and 'expanded from within'. As I have argued in detail elsewhere, writers who chose to engage creatively with these poems – from the composers of classroom *ethopoiia* to performers of rhetoric or epic, to the sophistic writers like Lucian and company – could adapt, change, and redraft passages or themes in the knowledge that they were working within a shared understanding of what was and was not, for instance, Homer or Euripides. This literary tradition was 'objectified' and *because of* its solidity, it became ripe for experimental re-assembling.<sup>32</sup>

This reassembling is exactly what we see in Lucian's 'reductive' heroic deaths-by-Gout. Working within the confines of these myths, he pithily makes them always-already-relevant to his superficially incongruous theme: Oedipus *did* walk on a staff, Achilles' foot *was* his problem, the *Telegony* (like the second *nekyia* of *Od.*24) was already a later supplementation of Homeric myth; Odysseus' 'original' Homeric cause of death was

<sup>29</sup> The caves in this comparison are Sicilian, but the broad association remains.

<sup>30</sup> As predicted by Tiresias at *OT* 454–6.

<sup>31</sup> Further discussion along these lines in Whitmarsh 2013: 185.

<sup>32</sup> See Greensmith 2020: chapter 2 for this argument in full, with examples.

left open-ended.<sup>33</sup> This ironic reshaping of the poetic tradition using its own constitutive parts is what links the moves of the *Podagra* with the Lollian epigram. Both poems are 'fun', but in and through their playfulness they convey Lucian's dynamic approach to his verse models; the repeatedly shifting intermix of old and new to produce an uncanny aesthetic which goes far beyond mere contrast imitation.

It is clear from this excursion into Lucian's poetry that our sophist is an important witness to the ongoing vitality of verse in the Second Sophistic, and an active contributor to the era's poetic corpus. We cannot, however, push this contribution too far – yet. Statistically speaking, Lucian's verse oeuvre pales in comparison to his vast and variegated prose output: in his writerly treatises and on the sophistic stage, prose remained for Lucian (as it was for all sophists) the main medium of communication. What is more, Lucian's ability in and enthusiasm for Greek poetry is accompanied by many barbed digs at poetry (as already seen in the *Conversation with Hesiod*) and assertions of its inferiority to rhetoric. A clear example of the latter is the *Encomium of Demosthenes*, a riveting and richly layered dialogue which, like the *Podagra*, has wrongly been stripped of Lucianic authorship by some editors insensitive to its wit and nuance.<sup>34</sup> The narrator, an unnamed rhetor, and a poet named Thersagoras bump into one another on Homer's birthday and debate the superiority of Homer versus Demosthenes. Demosthenes emerges victorious, not only through the arguments themselves, but also through an amusing usurpation of form. Thersagoras defends Homer in prose, using a perfectly formed series of rhetorical manoeuvres; first a *synkrisis* and then a prose encomium.<sup>35</sup> The virtues of Demosthenes and the powers of prose are shown to pour forth from the tongue of the spokesman for the poetic tradition. Lucian thus seems to affirm a fundamental divide between prose and poetry in his period. As Ewen Bowie sees it, despite their ventures into poetic composition, the sophists kept poetry at a safe distance: the 'frontiers' between the forms 'remained discernible', and a full amalgamation was undesirable.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Tiresias states elliptically in his prophecy that Odysseus will die away from the sea in old age (*Od.* 11. 134–7). He does stress that his death will be gentle, which death by Gout is surely anything but, but this prophecy is reported by Odysseus himself in his notoriously untrustworthy *Apologoi*. For the slippery unreliability of Odysseus in Second Sophistic conceptions, see especially Dio's *Trojan Oration*, as analysed in Kim 2010.

<sup>34</sup> See, e.g., Macleod 1967, who decries its 'lack of inspiration'.

<sup>35</sup> The encomium is, in fact, directed at Demosthenes, which furthers the irony.

<sup>36</sup> Bowie 1989a: 213.

However, binaries and frontiers are a distinctly un-Lucianic currency. As is clear from the chapters throughout this volume, Lucian is defined by a lack of definition: he is programmatically polyphonic, slippery, and self-subversive.<sup>37</sup> His varied and reversible attitude towards verse thus suggests a polyvalent approach to *poetry itself* – one which, like all aspects of his identity, defies coding or compartmentalisation. This polyvalence is best observed neither in his stand-alone poetry nor in his prosaic critiques of verse, but rather in the area in between. The remainder of this chapter therefore turns to what may be called Lucian's 'second-order poetry':<sup>38</sup> sections of verse material which Lucian inserts into predominantly prose works. Here, Lucian is neither totally shifting formal modes, nor is he simply commenting on poetry from an exegetical distance; rather, he creates space for poetry within the strictures of prose and uses the techniques and practices of literary criticism to manipulate the reader into performing the act of judging his 'new' verses. In these moments, Lucian reveals how fluid and precarious any exclusive categories of literary belonging really are, as the lines between verse and prose, author and critic, ridiculer and ridiculed are erased and then defiantly redrawn.

### *Menippus and Zeus Tragoedus: The Satire of Form*

Lucian's satirical dialogues represent one of his most overpoweringly innovative forms, which variously flaunt and thematise their promiscuous hybridity and 'self-conscious modernity'.<sup>39</sup> Fusing components of Old Comedy, Cynic diatribe, fable-esque fiction, and Platonic dialogue, Lucian unveils his searing explorations of philosophy, theology, and the pretensions of public life (some of which we have already seen in the previous section). The literary function of these dialogues is essential to their power. As many scholars have stressed, disruption is crucial to the force of all satire, and to Lucian's central role in shaping it in this dialogic mode, and this disruption is achieved through the highly performative blending of oppositions: a constantly shifting relationship between similarity and difference, antithesis and

<sup>37</sup> Whitmarsh 2001: 249–53 is a powerful expression of this view of Lucian in specific relation to the 'many masks' of his identity politics.

<sup>38</sup> Thus Bowie 1989a: 253. I use the term with no pejorative or hierarchical connotations.

<sup>39</sup> See Hall 1981; Branham 1989; and Whitmarsh 2001 (quoted phrase at 78) on Lucian's satirical dialogues more broadly.

amalgamation to create paradoxical juxtapositions which raise inherent questions about the reality of the world.<sup>40</sup> Form is a crucial part of this process. Lucian's dialogues contrast and combine generic forms – for instance, rhetoric and philosophy, and even perhaps parody and dialogue<sup>41</sup> – and aesthetic ones, chiefly through the interlocking alternation between prose and verse, which is a constitutive feature of the 'Menippean' mode of satire. So when Lucian uses and *creates* poetry within his dialogues, he harnesses these techniques to interrogate the distance not only between poetry and prose but between himself as prose satirist and the ancient canonical poets whose words he recomposes. Verse thus becomes a fundamental part of how these satires destabilise the world.

Let us turn to two Lucianic dialogues which play out these ideas and contain the most substantial interlacing of prose and verse. The *Menippus* charts the journey of the eponymous Cynic down to Hades to ask Tiresias about which philosophy he should follow. The ghostly setting is obviously a close parody of the *Odyssey* II *nekylia*: as in the Lollian epigram, Lucian returns to the Homeric underworld as an inherited space of secondariness, literary resurrection, and fictive creativity. By infusing this Homeric setting with other katabatic models – such as the contest of Aristophanes' *Frogs*, and Plato's *Republic*, which begins with the word κατέβην and marks descent as the cue for wide-pronged philosophical enquiry – and making Menippus himself the new downward-voyaging hero, Lucian signals his genre-blending ambitions in this very choice of cast and scene.

In this new satirical underworld, Lucian embeds both poetic quotation and his own rewriting of traditional verse forms. The key moment is the flamboyant entrance of Menippus himself, who arrives in Hades uttering some lines of poetry:

MENΙΠΠΙΟΣ: ὦ χαῖρε μέλαθρον πρόπυλά θ' ἑστίας ἐμῆς,  
ὡς ἄσμενός σ' ἐσεῖδον ἐς φάος μολών.

<sup>40</sup> We have already seen these contrastive amalgamations in the epigram and the *Podagra*. The polyphony of the dialogue form expands the potential for further blending. Cf. e.g. Whitmarsh 2001: 248 (using Bogel 1995: 45): 'satire is not a response to a prior difference but an effort to *make* a difference'. On Menippean satire, see Weinbrot 2005, whose definition of this baggy subgenre is 'a kind of satire that uses at least two different languages, genres, tones, or cultural or historical periods to combat a false and threatening orthodoxy'. For Lucian's satire directly, see Branham 1989: 57: Lucian's method of the *spoudogeloios* (seriocomic) centres on 'a bizarre union of contrary qualities and agonistic traditions' to provoke the audience to consider the subject simultaneously from divergent, conflicting perspectives.

<sup>41</sup> See Vallée 2007 for more on this suggestion.

ΦΙΛΟΣ: Οὐ Μένιππος οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ κύων; οὐ μὲν οὖν ἄλλος, εἰ μὴ ἐγὼ  
 παραβλέπω· Μένιππος ὄλος. τί οὖν αὐτῷ βούλεται τὸ ἀλλόκοτον  
 τοῦ σχήματος, πῖλος καὶ λύρα καὶ λεοντῆ; πλὴν ἀλλὰ προσιτέον γε  
 αὐτῷ. χαῖρε, ὦ Μένιππε· πόθεν ἡμῖν ἀφίξει; πολὺς γὰρ χρόνος οὐ  
 πέφηνας ἐν τῇ πόλει.

MENIPPUS: Ἦκω νεκρῶν κευθμῶνα καὶ σκότου πύλας λιπῶν, ἴν' Ἄιδης  
 χωρὶς ὤκισταί θεῶν.

(I.I–II)

MENIPPUS: All hail, halls and portals of my home!

What joy you give mine eyes, to light returned!

FRIEND: Isn't this Menippus the Cynic? Assuredly nobody else, unless  
 I cannot see straight; Menippus all over. Then what is the meaning  
 of that strange costume – a felt cap, a lyre, and a lion's skin? Anyhow,  
 I must go up to him. Good day, Menippus; where under the sun have  
 you come from? It is a long time since you have shown yourself in the  
 city.

MENIPPUS: I come from Dead Men's Lair and Darkness Gate, Where  
 Hades dwells, remote from other gods.

On the surface, these verse insertions simply serve to announce who Menippus is, identifying him by one of his 'stock' characteristics, the mixing of prose and verse. However, the specific components of this mix are more complex and revealing. Despite the recognisably Homeric setting, Menippus begins by quoting not from epic but from tragedy: his first lines are from Euripides' *Heracles* (523–4) and the second from the *Hecuba* (1). As was the case with the quotations in the epigram and the *Podagra*, these are far from random choices: Heracles was a salient sighting in Odysseus' original katabatic experience, but he is now also the subject of exclamatory slang; as the friend retorts "Ἡράκλεις, ἐλελήθει Μένιππος ἡμᾶς ἀποθανῶν;" ('Heracles, did Menippus die without us knowing it?', 1.12). The phrase from the *Hecuba* is the first line spoken by the ghost of Polydorus in the prologue of that play. The line's original context is a profoundly un-katabatic space: a ghost has returned to the land-of-the-living to address a tragic audience from above. So Menippus picks a piece of poetry which is ostensibly neatly relevant to his current situation, but which on closer inspection emphasises how new and unfitting he is for this literal and literary world.

The friend then reprimands Menippus for his tiresome tragic pretence (Παῦσαι, μακάριε, . . . τραγωδῶν, 'Stop doing tragedy, my blessed friend', 1.17) and implores that he speak plainly like him: λέγε οὐτωσί πως ἀπλῶς, ἀπλῶς, 'plainly', 'simply', echoes Plato's description in the *Hippias Minor* of Achilles' heroic mode, when Hippias contrasts him to Odysseus

(Achilles is truthful and simple (ἀληθής τε καὶ ἀπλοῦς), Odysseus 'poly-tropic and lying' (πολύτροπος τε καὶ ψευδής, *Hp. mi.* 365b)). However, Menippus responds by elevating his poetics further, moving from tragedy to epic, and shifting from quotation to creative adaptation:

ᾧ φίλότης, χρεῖώ με κατήγαγεν εἰς Ἄϊδαο  
 ψυχῇ χρησόμενον Θηβαίου Τειρεσίαο.

Friend, it was necessity that drew me below to the kingdom of Hades, to seek prophecy there from the spirit of Theban Tiresias.

This line is taken from that most poignant moment of Odysseus' underworld account, where he meets the ghost of his mother and talks to her without touch:

ὦς ἔφατ', αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ μιν ἀμειβόμενος προσέειπον·  
 'μήτηρ ἐμή, χρεῖώ με κατήγαγεν εἰς Ἄϊδαο  
 ψυχῇ χρησόμενον Θηβαίου Τειρεσίαο. (Od. II.163–5)

My mother, it was necessity that drew me below to the kingdom of Hades, to seek prophecy there from the spirit of Theban Tiresias.

By substituting Odysseus' μήτηρ ἐμή, 'my mother', with ᾧ φίλότης, 'friend', Menippus makes a straightforward switch for the purposes of sense. But the specific choice of φίλότης also conjures a very different Homeric greeting. It is reminiscent of how Achilles greets the Iliadic embassy, his friends-turned-adversaries who come to debate and persuade:

χαίρετον· ἦ φίλοι ἄνδρες ἰκάνετον – ἦ τι μάλα χρεῖώ  
 οἱ μοι σκυζομένω περ Ἀχαιῶν φίλτατοί ἐστων. (Il. 197–8)

Welcome, for you are friends indeed who have come – and the necessity must surely be great – you who even in my anger to me are dearest of the Achaeans.

The repeated *philos* cognates, the exclamatory tone, the shared discourse of necessity (already there in the original passages: χρεῖώ . . . χρεῖώ) all work to make Menippus the new katabatic hero a *blend* of Achilles and Odysseus: he speaks using the combined diction of the two heroes whose modes of speech were considered to be diametrically opposed, recasting an opposition rooted, ironically, in the embassy scene itself.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Hippias cites Achilles' famous retort to Odysseus' lengthy embassy speech (*Il.* 9.307–13) as the basis for his verdict at *Hp. mi.* 365b.

Menippus then goes even further, and explains his poetic outbursts:

Μὴ θαυμάσης, ὦ ἑταῖρε· νεωστὶ γὰρ Εὐριπίδῃ καὶ Ὀμήρῳ συγγενόμενος οὐκ οἶδ' ὅπως ἀνεπλήσθην τῶν ἐπῶν καὶ αὐτόματά μοι τὰ μέτρα ἐπὶ τὸ στόμα ἔρχεται.

Don't be surprised, my dear fellow. I have just been in the company of Euripides and Homer, so that somehow or other I have become filled with poetry, and verses come unbidden to my lips.

These interludes are not simply a garnishing to denote Menippus as a stock character, but they are written into the narrative world of this dialogue. Menippus – who was himself by Lucian's day a figure of legend<sup>43</sup> – recounts in a micro-*apologos* his close encounter with the shades of two even more ancient figures. The Homeric setting is thus made retroactively to facilitate the reanimating penchants and sophistic skills in extempore quotation which are characteristic of Lucian's contemporary times. And in a final added twist, αὐτόματά μοι τὰ μέτρα ἐπὶ forms a trimeter; a verse line not from Homer or Euripides, but much more comic in flavour (possibly borrowed or adapted from a lost comedy). Menippus' mimetic contagion through proximity to these dead poets has made him spontaneously spout poetry that does not even belong to them.

The *Menippus* offers an instructive initial example of how Lucian creatively embeds new-old poetry into his prosaic world and uses the aesthetic effects to communicate directly, over his characters' heads, with an audience highly conscious of an entrenched but evolving literary tradition. The epistemic dilemma at the heart of the *Menippus* is thus reflected and realised through the interplay between prose and verse, which are held up as appositional ways of articulating the world and critiquing its inherited conventions.

An even more elaborate case of this interplay is found in the *Zeus Tragoedus*. One of Lucian's most extravagant dialogues (involving thirteen characters in three scenes), the *Zeus Tragoedus* uses a philosophically triggered crisis in Olympus to stage an aggressive confrontation of cultural opposites, in this case a pious Stoic (Timocles) and a freethinking Epicurean (Damis).<sup>44</sup> A philosophical debate in Athens is threatening to

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Branham 1989: 21 on this chain of impersonation.

<sup>44</sup> As Branham 1989: 166–7 stresses, such a confrontation is very much in the mould of Aristophanic comedy, and the *Zeus Tragoedus* is particularly modelled on the *Birds*. The plot is also an expansion of the themes seen in *Zeus Catechised*.

cut off the flow of sacrifice to Olympus, and the 'drama' begins with Zeus, overcome with anxiety, summoning the gods to an assembly, where he proposes that they visit Athens to influence the dispute. As the gods assemble, we realise that they are appearing as actual statues, formed of marble, ivory, silver, and gold. They debate, as *figures*, the precarity of their own substance in the eyes of mortals. As R. Bracht Branham emphasises, the central issue at stake in the *Zeus Tragoedus* is whether the gods should be regarded as 'mere words' (ὀνόματα μόνον, 4) or honoured as before: the threat of Damis' Epicurean position denotes 'a rhetorical view of the gods as names, words, representations, as cultural artefacts rather than facts'.<sup>45</sup> The danger of language itself is thus at the heart of the scenes on Olympus – the representational gap between 'what' the gods are, versus how they are expressed and conceived – and Lucian enacts it by centralising *poetic* diction in these opening scenes.

Hermes begins the dialogue with four lines of iambic trimeter:

Ἦ Ζεῦ, τί σὺννοῦς κατὰ μόνας σαυτῷ λαλεῖς,  
ὠχρὸς περιπατῶν, φιλοσόφου τὸ χρῶμα ἔχων;  
ἔμοι προσανάθου, λαβέ με σύμβουλον πόνων,  
μὴ καταφρονήσης οἰκέτου φλυαρίας. (1.1–4)

What is in your mind, Zeus, that you speak alone to yourself,  
Walking around pale, with the hue of a philosopher?  
Confide in me, take me as counsellor of your toils;  
Do not scorn the blather of a slave.

Tim Whitmarsh has astutely identified the source of these lines as a comic poet, possibly Menander (*fr. adesp.* 1027 *PCG*, which seems to show a slave counselling his master to take his advice), and shows how Lucian has carefully adapted his source to produce an immediately disorienting effect; removing the original comic elements and giving the words a 'tragic feel' to fit the generic expectations of the title, but substituting in a bathetic joke about philosopher's proverbial paleness, and changing the Menandrian word for advice (*sumboulias*) in the final line for the more deflatingly pretentious *phluarias*. The text thus hovers 'between quotation and appropriation, between tragedy, comedy and satire, between classic verse and parodic prose'.<sup>46</sup> Then however, the text switches to an epic identity, as Athena pipes in with a Homeric remix of her own.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Branham 1989: 168. <sup>46</sup> Whitmarsh 2013: 178.

<sup>47</sup> Whitmarsh does not say as much about this poetic insertion (he notes the switch to Homeric style hexameters (a marker of Athena's identity and a sign of the heterogeneity of poetic genres) and the inclusion of 'one genuinely Homeric line . . . and one and a half-adapted lines', 2013: 179).

ΑΘΗΝΗ: Ναί πάτερ ἡμέτερε, Κρονίδη, ὕπατε κρειόντων,  
 γουνοῦμαί σε θεά γλαυκῶπις, τριτογένεια,  
 ἐξάυδα, μή κεῦθε νόω, ἵνα εἶδομεν ἦδη,  
 τίς μῆτις δάκνει σε κατὰ φρένα καί κατὰ θυμόν,  
 ἦ τί βαρὺ στενάχεις ὤχρὸς τέ σε εἶλε παρειάς; (1.4–8)

Athena: Yes, father of us all, son of Cronus, supreme among rulers,  
 Here at your knees I, the grey-eyed Tritogeneia, beseech you:  
 Speak your thought, let it not lie hidden in your mind, and let us too  
 know it.  
 What is the care that consumes your heart and soul with its gnawing,  
 And causes the deep, deep groans, and the pallor that has seized your  
 cheeks?

Athena constructs a miniature Homeric cento, which incorporates lines, formulae, and words from different parts of Homer to create something new, which is fitting for both the fictional scenario of the dialogue and the Lucianic voice behind it.<sup>48</sup> The first two lines mimic her opening plea at the start of the *Odyssey* (1.45); however, here she describes herself by her epic epithets (γλαυκῶπις, τριτογένεια), which does not ever happen in Homer.<sup>49</sup> This self-poeticisation offers an early, subtle indication of the gods' awareness of their own place in tradition, as Athena uses the building blocks of Homeric verse to give voice to her own epic form. Her third line echoes Thetis' words to Achilles in the *Iliad's* first book (*Il.* 1.363) but, in a similar manner to the Lollianus epigram's treatment of *Od.* 24, it reverses the relationship between speaker and addressee: the Homeric parent called her child, here the child calls her parent. And by changing ἀμφω, 'both', the final word of Thetis' original line, to ἦδη, 'now', Lucian's Athena gives a miniature nod to the antiquity of this line, and to her belatedness in appropriating it: ἦδη also means 'already', and these lines have 'already' been done, but not quite like this before. The fourth verse conjures a contextually apt Homeric metaphor of care 'consuming' the mind or heart,<sup>50</sup> which taps into the central concern of the dialogue: without sacrifices, the divine

<sup>48</sup> For further on the connections between Lucian's embedded poetry and centones, see the conclusion to this chapter.

<sup>49</sup> In Homer, γλαυκῶπις is most frequently part of a speech introduction or conclusion formula, and usually the domain of the Homeric narrator. Zeus uses it once to describe Hera (*Il.* 8.406). The much rarer τριτογένεια is used only by the Homeric narrator and Zeus. That Zeus is the only divinity to use these epithets speaks to his special status as a 'depicter' of the gods – an idea which Lucian runs with but which is already rooted in Homeric epic. This is perhaps corroborated by the fact that Nestor is the mortal who uses both epithets most frequently (and is the only mortal to speak τριτογένεια, at *Od.* 3.378) – the Homeric character most renowned for his experience-based perspective and skills in constructing speech.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. e.g. *Il.* 5.493.

consumption will be over. And the final line is borrowed not from Homeric speech but from Homeric narrative; in the *Iliad*, it describes how Paris retreats, panic-stricken, from battle (*Il.* 3.35). In an unnerving redistribution of roles, Athena aligns Zeus' fretting with the abnegation of epic's most notoriously cowardly mortal, which sets us up for the shifting of positions, forms, and associations to come.

Zeus now speaks (1.10), and he is also in the versifying mood. His words move us from Athena's epic back to tragedy, and all his initial quotations come from Euripides.<sup>51</sup> We have seen from the tragic quotations in the *Menippus* that Euripides appears to be a firm favourite in Lucian's satirical poetic ploys. The proverbially belated, iconoclastic, rebellious tragedian,<sup>52</sup> renowned for his close-to-the-bone portrayal of the gods and the limitations of human reverence, is an ideal voice-piece for Lucian, but a comically disastrous one for Zeus.<sup>53</sup> In the context of his concerns in the *Zeus Tragoedus*, Zeus' penchant for Euripides thus conveys the wonderfully dizzying notion of a traditionalised god worrying about the decline in traditional religion, but formulating this concern using the most 'modern' of the traditional tragedians.

Hera clocks Zeus' Euripidean obsession, and with similar frustration to Menippus' friend in the underworld,<sup>54</sup> tells him to calm his frantic versifying, which is not for her:

Κοίμισον ὄργαν, εἰ μὴ κωμῳδίαν, ὦ Ζεῦ, δυνάμεθα ὑποκρίνεσθαι μηδὲ  
 ῥαψωδεῖν ὥσπερ οὗτοι μηδὲ τὸν Εὐριπίδην ὅλον καταπεπώκαμεν,  
 ὥστε σοι ὑποτραγωδεῖν (1.19–21)

Lull your anger to sleep, Zeus, seeing that I'm no hand either at comedy or at epic like these two, nor have I swallowed Euripides whole so as to be able to play up to you in your tragedy rôle.

But Zeus does not cease, either from his anger or his poetry: he responds with another tragic quotation ('You do not know, or else you would shriek mightily', *fr. adesp.* 293 *TGrF*), and his versifying energy spills over into the assembly itself. Rather than getting on with the matter at hand, Hermes

<sup>51</sup> Respectively: the opening of the *Orestes* (*ZT* 1.10–12), the *Hercules Furens* (13), and then an unknown fragment which has been commonly attributed to Euripides (2.3). See Whitmarsh 2013: 179–80 for a good discussion of these quotations.

<sup>52</sup> A reputation most famously voiced in ancient reception in Aristophanes' *Frogs*.

<sup>53</sup> Compare for instance Timocles' later grappling attempt to portray Euripides as 'saving heroes and destroying impious people like [Damis]', a view which Damis gleefully undermines by quoting some of Euripides' more 'agnostic' lines about the gods (*ZT* 41).

<sup>54</sup> The *philos* in *Menippus* 1.17 uses the titular term of this dialogue to describe the Cynic's own tragic role-playing (τραγωδῶν), and Hera herself uses an intensified form of it later (ἐπετραγώδεις, 5.1).

and Zeus first discuss *how* they should discuss the problem – literally, what form the divine address should take (*Zeus Tragoedus* 6–7). Zeus insults Hermes' bland and prosaic first proclamation and asks him to ennoble it 'with metre and high-sounding, poetical words' so that the gods may be more eager to assemble. This meta-exchange is filled with literary critical language. Zeus calls Hermes' first attempt ψιλὰ καὶ ἀπλοϊκὰ. ἀπλοϊκὰ is an extremely rare word for unmusicality or plainness; by using such a complex term for a simple sentiment, Zeus is enacting in his own diction what his instruction to Hermes demands. ψιλὰ can mean either 'prosaic' or function as an epithet for poetry without music; by using two terms with musical connotations, Lucian perhaps also acknowledges the muted nature of the dialogue form – whether prose or poetry, his satires are unaccompanied. Hermes replies that he is a rubbish poet (ἐγὼ δὲ ἥκιστα ποιητικός εἶμι) and worries that if he composes wrongly shaped verses, he will become a laughing stock. This self-description is humorously at odds with Hermes' reputation in the early Greek poetic tradition, where he is communication-obsessed and as 'twisty' as the wordsmith Odysseus,<sup>55</sup> and, during the Ares–Aphrodite saga sung by Demodocus in the *Odyssey*, he is the maker of the joke, not the target: when asked by Apollo if he too would be willing to be ensnared with bonds if it meant that he could lie with Aphrodite, he retorts that he would be happy for three times as many bonds to clasp him, and for all the gods to look on, and divine laughter ensues (*Od.* 8.334–43). His self-deprecation is also undermined by his diction in this very speech. When fretting that the gods will laugh παρ' αὐτοῖς ἐπὶ τῇ ἀμουσίᾳ τῶν ἐπῶν, he takes up Zeus' penchant for ornate exegetical language: ἀμουσία is another rare term which combines the idea of an absence of (musical) harmony with that of a lack of education or refinement. It is a word especially associated with Euripides, occurring four times in his surviving plays, and not in any other extant tragic author.<sup>56</sup> Hermes thus avows his lack of poetic refinement using a refined term drawn from Zeus' favourite tragic poet.

The presence of this aesthetic terminology has a further ironic dimension. We have seen that many of Lucian's works are filled with evaluations of traditional poetry, but that his own verse compositions have (to put it mildly) fared badly in the verdicts of modern critics. In his chapter in this volume, Richard Hunter has argued that Lucian uses embedded poetry of

<sup>55</sup> Enshrined for example in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, which twice gives him the epithet *polytropos* (*Hom. Hymn Herm.* 4.13; 439), linking him with his mortal avatar Odysseus in the Homeric tradition.

<sup>56</sup> Euripides is in fact the earliest attested author to use the word, so it could even possibly be a coinage.

an intentionally 'bad' kind to expose the inadequacies or empty pretensions of his characters; thus, for instance, the ropery elegiacs performed by the grammarian Histiaios in the *Symposium* (41) display the superficiality of his cleverness, 'which simply uses the great poetry of the past for its own demeaned purposes', and his folly in blindly adhering to written prescriptions.<sup>57</sup> This sort of 'lesson' is extremely relevant to the *Zeus Tragoedus*, but it is also undermined by it. Hermes is intensely worried about being negatively judged, and both he and Zeus have in their vocabulary the sorts of words required to form such verdicts. In this dialogue, then, the characters are *involved* in the poetic judgements, both in anticipating them and delivering them. This involvement points to the difficulty in discerning the internal from the external (author, audience, reader, critic) in all of Lucian's shifty and polyphonic texts. Is Hermes the poet here, or Lucian, or both? Are the gods on Olympus the correct judges of what makes good or bad poetry, or do the mortals below know better?<sup>58</sup> As soon as we start to judge this poetry – either to 'appreciate' it, and unlock its allusive strands,<sup>59</sup> or to ridicule it for being technically deficient or unoriginal – we also open ourselves to judgement, for taking it too seriously and not recognising the ironist(s) behind the irony. In loftily criticising Lucianic verse, we, like Hermes, risk no longer residing inside the joke and are prone to being made the butt of it, becoming bad readers of bad poetry.

These perils of aesthetic criticism are dramatised in the versifying which follows. Zeus, undeterred, suggests that Hermes recite from Homer, because he probably has some verses memorised (μεμνηῆσθαι δέ σε εἰκός). Hermes, like any decent imperial *pepaideumenos*, would have had to learn and recite Homer during his education. But in fact, Hermes does more than that. His 'extempore' composition has, true to form, attracted disdain from modern readers: for Branham, it's 'a homemade bit of Homeric doggerel'.<sup>60</sup> The verses enact this verdict (justifying Hermes' earlier protestations) and deflate it. With dubious rhythm (the text is very uncertain)<sup>61</sup> and a heady mix of allusions, Hermes matches and betters Athena's opening centonic creation, and displays the god's highly Lucianic poetic

<sup>57</sup> Hunter in Chapter 2 above 36–7.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. *ZT* 41, where Damis pronounces Homer (in somewhat faint praise) to be 'a good poet' (ποιητὴν μὲν ἀγαθόν), but not necessarily a witness to the truth.

<sup>59</sup> As, of course, I am doing throughout this chapter . . . <sup>60</sup> Branham 1989: 169.

<sup>61</sup> There is also some corruption in the manuscripts here, and possibly a missing word in the first line – see Harmon 1915: 100–1.

skills – skills which are destined to be disdained, but entirely, expressively aware of that:

Μήτε τις οὖν θήλεια θεὸς . . . μήτε τις ἄρσην,  
 μηδ' αὖ τῶν ποταμῶν μενέτω νόσφ' Ὀκεανοῖο  
 μηδέ τε νυμφάων, ἀλλ' ἐς Διὸς ἔλθετε πάντες  
 εἰς ἀγορὴν, ὅσοι τε κλυτὰς δαίνυσθ' ἑκατόμβας,  
 ὅσοι τ' αὖ μέσατοι ἢ ὕστατοι ἢ μάλα πάγχυ  
 νώνυμοι βωμοῖσι παρ' ἀκίσιοισι κάθησθε.

(*Zeus Tragoedus* 6)

Never did a man of the gods stay away nor ever a woman,  
 Never did a stream stay at home save only the river Oceanus;  
 Never a Nymph; so to the palace of Zeus you are to come in a body,  
 to confer there. I bid you all, whether you are feasters on famous hecatombs,  
 whether you are the highest or the lowest class of gods, or even if  
 you sit nameless beside altars that yield you no savoury odours.

Hermes' new Homeric proclamation overtly mimics the scenario which has triggered it: he summons the gods by versifying the variations in and precarity of their own fame – how they are honoured, named, and (re) called. His first line continues his mimetic education from Zeus about how to speak. He mirrors Zeus' own speech formula when he calls an assembly himself in the *Iliad* (8.8), but in this context, the mention of females also offers a wry reminder of Hera's initial assumption about the cause of Zeus' anxiety (after telling him to stop speaking like Euripides, she presumes that he's upset, as usual, over a love affair with a woman (*Zeus Tragoedus* 2)). He then switches to a declining series of divine 'classes', to focus on the discourse of absence which is driving the current crisis. The most significant of these is those who κλυτὰς δαίνυσθ' ἑκατόμβας, 'feast on famous hecatombs'. Not only does this continue Athena's technique of selecting from Homer apt terminology for divine feasting, but it also points more deeply to the shifting status of divine *literary* commemoration. The Homeric epithet for ἑκατόμβη is κλειτή: κλυτός, 'famous', is used mostly to describe people rather than objects, both heroes and gods. In Homer, both terms have two meanings: either fine-looking and splendid in appearance, or famous. Lucian has Hermes mobilise the second meaning and substitutes in the variant used more commonly for the Homeric gods, to drive home how both the gods *and* their traditional rituals are a part of the objectified literary tradition; rooted in Homer, his language, and his 'type scenes', learnt in school and reperformed and adapted by contemporary writers and critics. Homer's poetry is what *gives the gods* their traditional

form; an archive of ritualised discourse which shapes and justifies their continued modes of worship.<sup>62</sup>

Mimetic composition therefore shapes the opening of the *Zeus Tragoedus*: discussion of poetry bleeds into poetry itself, and the gods recognise their own parasitic relationship both to the world of mythic religion constructed in verse and to the verdicts of prose literary criticism, and they actively participate in continuing both strands of their figuration. These dynamics continue to exert an impact even when the dialogue ostensibly 'reverts' to prose.<sup>63</sup> Zeus likes Hermes' verses a lot more than Branham does (Εὖ γε, ᾧ Ἑρμῆι, ἄριστα κекήρυκταί σοι, 7), and they succeed in enticing the gods to assemble. Once Zeus begins to address them himself, he is struck with a stage fright of his own and almost totally forgets his Demosthenes (14–15). In a reversal of the situation in the *Encomium of Demosthenes*, verse is suggestively implied to be more embedded in the memory of the performer than classical rhetoric, which is prone to slip away under stress. And later, Apollo tries to squirm out of giving an oracle, but when pressurised into it by Momus, spouts some quasi-hexametric verse which triggers laughter from the gods (31). Here, we have a continuation through inversion of the fickleness of poetic judgement found in Hermes' proclamation. During his initial *recusatio*, Hermes had cited Apollo as part of the reason for his reluctance: 'Apollo gets laughed at for some of his oracles' (6). Now the original hexametric god has indeed received ridicule and has relinquished his own superior position in the humour of Demodocus' Odyssean song: there he set up Hermes' joke, now he is the victim of a set-up himself – laughed at, rather than laughed with. And this mockery is triggered by none other than Momus, a non-Homeric god, whose entire identity is based on critical – and criticising – humour. With the divine personification of satire behind Apollo's oracle and leading the laughter at his performance, we realise that it could never have received any other response. By drawing a contrast between the reception of Hermes' verses and those of Apollo, Lucian exposes the circularity and subjective self-fulfilment of any 'straight' judgements of satirical poetry, as traditional ritualistic hexameters can become blame-worthy and comic, whilst a demurring foray into Homerising verse can achieve a positive reception and exert a persuasive effect.

In summarising the effects of the *Zeus Tragoedus*, Branham points to the loaded cultural question that it could raise: 'what if the gods actually

<sup>62</sup> See Gagné 2024 for an intricate articulation of what he terms the 'ritual archive of epic.'

<sup>63</sup> Thus Whitmarsh 2013: 180: after Hera reprimands Zeus for his versifying, 'we revert to prose for most of the rest of the dialogue'. Whitmarsh accordingly does not treat in any detail the code-switching in the assembly itself and its aftermath, bar discussion in a footnote (2013: 180 n. 14).

conformed so closely to the traditional modes of representation as to consist of marble or ivory, speak in verse in several metrical patterns, and *act, in general, like Greeks?*<sup>64</sup> It is not quite, however, that these gods act like Greeks ‘in general’. They act like a highly specific type of Greek: culturally pluralistic, generically disobedient, deeply knowledgeable and well-schooled in poetry, anxious about performing it, but also anxious *to* perform it, who is engaged in an intensely self-conscious meta-relationship with epic and tragic verse. Lucian’s gods are *Lucianic* Greeks, and this identity gives them a revitalising energy, knowingly at odds with the dangerous artificiality of their (literally) artistic form. In this respect, Lucian’s games with verse criticism in the *Zeus Tragoedus* can also be read as anticipating some of the negative verdicts about his first-order poetry too: the Lucianic gods produce a mixture of commentary and re-composition which satirises both poetry and criticism of poetry in one Momian swoop. The *Zeus Tragoedus* thus joins the *Menippus* in displaying the deep and multifaceted relationship between content and form in Lucian’s dialogic mode. As Menippus’ verse provides the road map for his epistemic quest, and the old, artificial gods are given a new relevance through their sophistic remastering of old verse and lessons in aesthetic criticism, poetry is revealed as neither simply the target of nor the vehicle for Lucian’s cultural commentary; poetry *is* the cultural commentary.

### ***True Histories: Homer’s Neo-Epic***

The final stop on this journey through Lucianic poetics takes us to one of the most famous of our sophist’s works. We have seen how in the *True Histories* Lucian narrates a meeting with Homer to dramatise and deconstruct some familiar moves of Homeric criticism. Let us now consider this meeting in more detail, in light of the self-ironising, critically aware treatment of poetry performed in the satirical dialogues. Lucian once again opts for an afterlife context as the setting for the *True Histories* encounter: this time, the underworld of the Lollianus epigram and the *Menippus* is exchanged for a more celestial, but equally murky panorama. Lucian’s Isle of the Blessed is a veritable dead poets’ society, filled with shadowy, ethereal heroes and celebrities plucked from the classical canon; figures who never grow old, but wander ‘like shadows . . . upright and dark’ (*True Histories* 2.2). This static existence of the island’s inhabitants, caught

<sup>64</sup> Branham 1989: 169–70, my italics.

in a strange middle state between life and death, can reflect their situation in canonised texts, where they 'remain the same every time the text is read, never aging, never developing'.<sup>65</sup> And yet it is also in this very setting that *new* poetry is composed. Lucian first teases us with the premise of another book of Homer, which never made it back to the real world:

συλλαβόντες οὖν τοὺς νενικημένους καὶ δῆσαντες ἀπέπεμψαν ἔτι μᾶλλον κολασθησομένους. ἔγραψεν δὲ καὶ ταύτην τὴν μάχην Ὅμηρος καὶ ἀπιόντι μοι ἔδωκεν τὰ βιβλία κομίζειν τοῖς παρ' ἡμῖν ἀνθρώποις· ἀλλ' ὕστερον καὶ ταῦτα μετὰ τῶν ἄλλων ἀπωλέσαμεν. ἦν δὲ ἡ ἀρχὴ τοῦ ποιήματος αὐτῆ, νῦν δὲ μοι ἔννεπε, Μοῦσα, μάχην νεκύων ἠρώων. (*True Histories* 2.24)

They arrested the enemies they had conquered, put them in fetters, and sent them back to the Land of the Impious for even harsher punishment. Homer wrote an account of this battle and, as I was departing, he gave me the book rolls to bring back to the land of the living. But afterwards we lost it along with everything else. But this was beginning of the poem:

Now tell me, Muse, of battles of the shades of heroes!<sup>66</sup>

Here, we have more 'bad Lucianic poetry', but from the pen of Homer himself. Scholars have keenly emphasised how this line is as hollow as the setting which produces it. For Diskin Clay, it is 'comically disappointing, an inert moment of creation'; and for Karen ní Mheallaigh, its anticlimactic content shows that Homer is only capable of 'simply rewriting himself, rather than composing something new: even Homer cannot escape himself; he is stifled by the weight of his own tradition'.<sup>67</sup> But the knowingness of this anti-climax, Lucian's *poetics* of Homer's bathos, is what makes the line so brilliantly defiant of this entirely valid verdict. Lucian entices his future critics to analyse this 'non epic', a Homeric self-continuation born from and dependent on this self-abnegating fiction. In the descriptive build-up to these verses, Lucian once again gives us cues for how to receive them. With ἔγραψεν, Homer becomes a writer who composes τὰ βιβλία: a nod to the fixed, bookish nature of Homeric verse as it was received thanks to the work of Aristarchus and his 'pedants', whose views Homer has already set right in their earlier conversation (2.20). Whilst the musical vocabulary in the *Zeus Tragoedus* drew attention to the unmelodious nature of rhetorical prose, here Lucian is suggesting that a (post) modern Homer has moved on from music too. The ἀρχή of this

<sup>65</sup> Kim 2010: 161. <sup>66</sup> Translations of both *True Histories* passages adapted from Clay 2021.

<sup>67</sup> Clay 2021: 43 and ní Mheallaigh 2014: 242–5.

new tome starts by recycling the opening of the *Odyssey*; but its first words replace the metonymic ἄνδρα with νῦν δε, a temporal conjunction to signal, paradoxically, both continuation and contemporariness.<sup>68</sup> And ‘now’, we are told, it is the battle of dead heroes that is being sung – with the shades like those at the *end* of the *Odyssey*, and a new noun in the feminine accusative (from Iliadic μῆνιν to post-Odyssean μάχην) taking up the narrative mantle. A μάχην νεκρῶν is, from a Homeric perspective, entirely oxymoronic: the whole point in a Homeric battle is to live or die, and a battle of the corpses, like some sort of Netflix-ready zombie apocalypse, would go on forever. The incipit of this new poem thus points to the reiterative, unending environment of this land of the canonical dead, but also to the idea that ‘long gone’ poetry is somehow still alive and fighting.

In a brilliantly cynical comment on the literary tradition, Lucian makes Homer acknowledge his deep antiquity and the inescapable oldness both of all traditional epic – its heroic subjects themselves are now corpses, long, long dead – and of the writers who composed it. And yet Homer also refuses to turn away from the corpse of this corpus and let it fully die. Thanks to Lucian’s close Homeric encounter – his meeting with Homer in the fiction of this story and his creative interaction with his poetry – Homeric poetry *is* still developing, even if Homer’s body is trapped. The canon is ever-old and yet not getting any older; a new book of Homer is complete but not ‘transmitted’ to the land of the living; and the dead corpses become the subject of the epic tradition revived for an imperial readership in Lucianic prose.

As Lucian prepares to leave, he begs Homer to compose once more:

Τότε μὲν οὖν τὰ περὶ τὸν πλοῦν παρεσκευασάμην . . . τῇ δὲ ἐπιούσῃ ἐλθὼν πρὸς Ὅμηρον τὸν ποιητὴν ἐδεήθην αὐτοῦ ποιῆσαί μοι δίστιχον ἐπίγραμμα· καὶ ἐπειδὴ ἐποίησεν, στήλην βηρύλλου λίθου ἀναστήσας ἐπέγραψα πρὸς τῷ λιμένι. τὸ δὲ ἐπίγραμμα ἦν τοιόνδε:  
 Λουκιανὸς τάδε πάντα φίλος μακάρεσσι θεοῖσιν  
 εἶδέ τε καὶ πάλιν ἦλθε φίλην ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν. (*True Histories* 2.28)

Well, then I prepared to set out to sea . . . The next day, I approached the poet Homer and begged him to compose me a distich. He composed it, and

<sup>68</sup> Compare for instance the opening of Quintus’ *Posthomerica* or Eudocia’s *Martyrdom of St Cyprian*, which both start with εὔτε.

I set up a slab of beryl near the harbour and had the couplet carved on it.  
It was:

All of this world did Lucian, beloved of the blessed gods,  
observe, and then to his beloved homeland did he return.<sup>69</sup>

Here, it is Lucian who fixes this new Homeric poem into writing (ἐπιτέγραψα turns now into the first person): Lucian the character now writes more Homer, mimicking the moves of the author behind him. And once again, the composed piece sticks closely to Homer's originals, both in its metre – from δίστιχον and ἐπίγραμμα we might expect elegiacs, but instead we get hexameters – and in its language: μακάρεσσι θεοῖσιν is a common Homeric formula,<sup>70</sup> and the phrase φίλην ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν occurs frequently across the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Within these parameters, the new composition displays its humorous creativity. The verse only uses the aorist, which just may be a nod towards the completed nature of Homer, who is now posthumously composing again.<sup>71</sup> The notion that Lucian saw τᾶδε πάντα performs a reductive encapsulation of the detailed and personalised knowledge acquired by Odysseus and announced at the start of the *Odyssey*: Odysseus 'saw the cities and learnt the minds of many men' (*Od.* 1.3–4), whereas Lucian simply 'saw everything'. In fact, the only specific detail commemorated in this poem is in the glaring neologism of Λουκιανός. Now Lucian joins Lollianus as a Second Sophistic heroic subject and trumps him in his epigram by being fitted into real epic metre. But the presence of Lucian's own name is particularly striking. We have seen how through accident or design it is difficult firmly to attach a name to many suspiciously Lucianic works. Indeed, Lucian only uses his signature six times across his whole oeuvre.<sup>72</sup> It is thus intensely significant that he chooses (and uses) the famously anonymous Homer to engage in a rare act of self-naming. This name game powerfully underscores the symbiotic relationship between Lucianic prose and traditional verse that we have traced throughout this chapter. Very-much-dead Homer is reanimated as a Lucianic poet, composing the sort of cleverly disappointing poetry of which Aristarchus and his fellow critics would despair, but Homer's authority and material are the tools by which Lucian signs and

<sup>69</sup> Diskin Clay oddly does not translate βηρύλλου λίθου ἀναστήσας . . . πρὸς τῷ λιμένι, which is important for the emphasis on materiality.

<sup>70</sup> See *Il.* 1.599, 5.340, 14.72, 15.38; *Od.* 1.82, 5.186, 8.326.

<sup>71</sup> Lucian's Homer here also resolutely uses the augment: a pointed deviation, perhaps, from the 'real' (or, 'older') Homeric practice?

<sup>72</sup> See Goldhill 2002a: 61–7.

seals his meta-fictional poetics, revealing himself as composer, scribe, and subject of Homeric verse.

### Coda: Lucian (and) the Poet

To end, I shall return to the idea of policed frontiers between poetry and prose in Lucian's era. My readings have sought to show how Lucian does not simply contribute to a poetry/prose divide, but rather how he caricatures it and collapses it. But there is a further way in which these binaries can and should be broken down. I mentioned at the start of this chapter the surging interest in imperial Greek poetry, an energy which happily shows no signs of abating. Much recent scholarship on these poets – who were also for a long time considered to be the authors of straightforwardly 'bad' verse – has attempted to draw connections with the concerns and techniques of the Second Sophistic: Oppian, Quintus, Triphiodorus, and, later, Christians like Nonnus, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Eudocia also perform, process, and manipulate the problems of 'Greekness', belatedness, institutional power, and *paideia*.<sup>73</sup> But the other side of this relationship has not yet been fully considered. Lucian's inventive recomposition of Homeric and classical poetry shares much common ground with the approaches of many 'fully fledged' imperial Greek poets; Quintus' large-scale expansion of the space between the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the remixing manoeuvres of the Greek (and Latin) centonic tradition, and the redrafting and code-switching proclaimed in verse paraphrase. Developing this dialogue between Lucian and the imperial Greek poets is an important part of the ongoing work to be done on this endlessly revealing author and may further unveil his pluralistic approach to verse and verse criticism, and the teasing aesthetics of his writing. Lucian, it is repeatedly clear, despises containment. Reading him not just with Dio Chrysostom, Philostratus, or Aelius Aristides, but also with the cannily elusive imperial Trojan poets, or even the programmatically protean Nonnus is a new way to extricate him from 'the usual crowd'; a shifting and surprising literary alliance which, one imagines, he would rather enjoy.

<sup>73</sup> See particularly Baumbach and Bär 2007, who read Quintus Smyrnaeus directly in the context of the Second Sophistic. For caveats to this approach, see Maciver 2012 and a developed model in Bär, Greensmith, and Ozbek 2022. On Lucian and Christianity, see Bozia, Chapter 13 in this volume.

**Recommended Reading**

Bowie's article on 'Greek Sophists and Greek Poetry in the Second Sophistic' (1989a) is an essential starting point for everyone interested in the poetic output of these prosaic orators. On the satirical dialogues, Branham 1989 and Whitmarsh 2013 are engaging and revealing takes. On the *True Histories*, see ní Mheallaigh 2014, and on the meeting with Homer, Kim 2010 especially chapter 5 on 'Homer on the Island'.