



***Noticing Irony in Lucian and More: A Challenge to the Wit of Readers***

*Many readers do not pick up comic irony at first, and More's Lucian translations provide a good opportunity to begin encountering, recognizing, and gaining experience with this type of irony. Learning to perceive the ironies in Lucian's dialogues is an excellent way to prepare readers for an encounter with More's Utopia, a work in which the ironies are often lost on readers. Learned and well-read teachers have themselves remarked in frustration: "Why don't these authors (Lucian and More – and their forerunner Socrates) just come out and say what they have in mind?" More's Lucian translations are an early example of what More in Utopia will call "the indirect approach" of "another philosophy," a kind of philosophy that More suggests is better suited to life in the real world.*

**Lucian of Samosata (ca. 125-180 AD) on Himself**

When asked by Philosophy about his calling as a writer and thinker, "Frankness" (representing Lucian) writes: "I am a bluff-hater, cheat-hater, liar-hater, vanity-hater, and hater of all sorts of scoundrels, who are very numerous, you know...." Philosophy at first asks for the death of Frankness, but eventually Philosophy joins Truth, Virtue, and Plato in siding with Frankness/Lucian. (Loeb Lucian v.3, 31, 57-9).

**Lucian on the Comic Dialogue**

"Dialogue and comedy were not entirely friendly and compatible from the beginning. Dialogue used to sit at home and indeed spend his time in the public walks with a few companions; Comedy gave herself to Dionysus and joined him in the theatre, had fun with him, jested and joked, sometimes stepping in time to the pipe and generally riding on anapests. Dialogue's companions she mocked as 'Heavy-thinkers,' 'High-talkers,' and such like. She had one delight—to deride them and drown them in Dionysiac liberties. She showed them now walking on air and mixing with the clouds, now measuring sandals for fleas—her notion of heavenly subtleties, I suppose! Dialogue, however, took his conversations very seriously, philosophizing about nature and virtue. So, in musical terms, there were two octaves between them, from highest to lowest. Nevertheless, I have dared to combine them as they are into a harmony, though they are not in the least docile and do not easily tolerate partnership." (Lucian v.6, 425-27)

**Plato on Irony and Dialectics**

Behind the comedy and ironies of Lucian and More stands Plato, who understood irony and dialectics as integral parts of the highest work proper to the soul, the work of perceiving the true and the good. This work of seeing requires thorough training in dialectics, and it requires that one bring to bear all of one's reasoning powers.

"Teachers cross-examine a man's words when that man thinks he is saying something and is really saying nothing, and they easily convict him of inconsistencies in his opinions; these they then collect by the dialectical process, and placing them side by side, show that they contradict one another.... He, seeing this, is angry with himself, and grows gentle towards others, and thus is entirely delivered from great prejudices and harsh notions... thus producing the most lasting good effect on the person who is the subject of the operation. For as the physician considers that the body will receive no benefit from taking food until the internal obstacles have been removed, so the purifier of soul is conscious that his patient will receive no benefit from the application of knowledge until he is refuted, and from refutation learns modesty; he must be purged of his prejudices first and then made to think that he knows only what he knows, and no more." (Plato, *Sophist* 230)

"Only when all these things—names and definitions, and visual and other perceptions—have been compared with one another and tested, proving them by kindly proofs and employing questionings and answerings void of envy—only then, when reason and knowledge are at the extremity of human effort, does there burst out the light of intelligence and reason regarding the nature of any object." (Plato, *Seventh Letter*, 344b)

**Thomas More on the Work of Reason**

Over twenty years after his youthful Lucian translations, More wrote this about strengthening reason:

"Reason is by study, labor, and exercise of logic, philosophy, and other liberal arts corroborate [i.e., strengthened] and quickened; and the judgment—both in them and also in orators, laws, and stories [i.e. histories]—much ripened. And although poets are with many men taken but for painted words, yet do they much help the judgment, and make a man among other things well furnished in one special thing, without which all learning is half lame...a good mother wit." (*EWTM* 581)