**Botanical Succubi and the Boring Whale:** *Paranoia and terrestrial claustrophobia as impetus for extraterrestrial exploration in Lucian’s* True Histories

Lucian’s *voyage extraordinaire* begins grounded in unexpected realism. The entire Prologue is dedicated to insisting that his contribution to the “fiction free-for-all” is distinct from a previous tradition of blatant lying committed by “ancient poets, historians and philosophers who wrote much of mythical monsters (§1:2).”[[1]](#footnote-1) While we are forewarned of the following narrative’s fictitious nature, we are simultaneously wise to the narrator’s purported authenticity. By admitting to writing untruths, he casts himself as a source that is *at least* more reliable than the likes of Homer. As such, it is possible to excavate a surrealist potential in Lucian’s fantasy, and extract some kind of critical interpretation despite the narrative’s satirical complexion.

As the voyage begins, Lucian creates a realistic framework with which to situate his reader by revealing an explicit motive and objective. Driven by “intellectual curiosity” and a “desire to know how far the ocean stretched,” Lucian’s pursuits are logically inspired. Furthermore, his nautical preparations are entirely un-extraordinary. He is preoccupied with the quotidian concerns of having “sufficient water on board,” a “well-equipped armoury, and offering a high salary for “the very best helmsman.” When they finally land after eighty trying days on the high seas, they “lay on the ground for a long time, as you might expect after such extended hardship.”[[2]](#footnote-2) These detailed attempts to ground fantasy in some base of reality allow for a range of varying degrees of possibility and impossibility throughout the journey. Even though Lucian denigrates his tale as pure fantasy, we are attuned to the elements of reality with which we can observe in stark contrast to the flights of incredibly absurd fancy.

We discover that the “furthest point Heracles and Dionysus reached,” is disappointingly terrestrial. Despite their divine status, their legacy is restricted to earthly adventures—their footprints etched into the ground and surpassed by mere mortals. The issue of transcending the gods by way of extraterrestrial voyage has its roots in (an even more ancient imagination) even older literature and religious thought, and stubbornly persists to this day. (When images of the Eagle Nebula captured by the Hubble telescope were released to the public, people saw the figure of Jesus.)

Lucian’s imagination subconsciously captures the universal essence of humanity’s extraterrestrial aspirations and anxieties. The narrative subliminally expresses fear and loathing towards confined space and “groundedness.” Lucian and his troupe experience a sort of bizarre claustrophobia when they fall into “internal worlds,” and consistently attempt to escape or remain in “open universes.” When, for instance, they happen upon a colony of disturbingly licentious botanticals, Lucian plants the seed of suspicion that builds and provides the paranoiac momentum that ultimately propels them into outer space. The hybrid vine-women, who seem otherwise fascinating and curiously tantalizing, are cast in a grotesque shadow. They are described as a “monstrous kind of vine (§1:8),” suspiciously friendly, promiscuous, and literally intoxicating. We are hyperaware of the fact that something is terribly wrong with these creatures, but cannot pinpoint the origin of our aversion towards them. Sure enough, the vine-women turn out to be sadomasochistic succubi who, after having “vinosexual intercourse” with their victims, grab onto their genitals and cause them to take root. They become irrevocably grounded, a state of pathetic existence that inspires a very potent anxiety throughout the journey. Lucian and his men flee from this horrific scene and immediately set sail. The fear of being “grounded” is so real that it is reflected in the movement of the narrator’s imagination, which carries our protagonist on an extraordinary gust of wind into the open sky (§1:10). Having escaped from the clutches of an unpleasant and vile terrestrial doom, our heroes are transported to a liberating, unearthly perspective: “lots of other islands came into our view nearby […] and another piece of land below, with cities on it, rivers, seas woods and mountains. So we guessed that this was our world (§1:10).” From this enlightened position, their former planet is reduced to a vague summary of unimpressive geography.

A couple worlds later, our cosmic pioneers find themselves in the belly of a whale. There, they go through alternating phases of hopeless despair, half-hearted attempts to adapt, and overwhelming restlessness. Though the cavity is large enough to “contain a city of ten thousand souls,” and the “whole place looked as though it was under cultivation,” our poor heroes take one look around and “[weep] copiously (§1:32).” A similar feeling of restless panic that spooked us in the land of the botanical succubi, also pervades this incubated atmosphere. It is heightened by the unnerving revelation that their only other fellow human has been trapped there for twenty-seven years. Disoriented and claustrophobic, they realize that they are “prisoners shut into this monster.” Their only recourse is to work out their aggressions through war. By harassing and provoking the other bizarre inhabitants, they are able to temporarily endure their solitary confinement. Their conquests against the absurd creatures—the Picklers and the Triton-Pans, the Crabhands and the Turbotfeet—speak to Lucian’s perspectives regarding the nature of man. When the alien species begin discussing a treaty, the men decide “not to make peace” and “cut them all down to the last one.” (Explain more here about how they also alter their environment…Are there environmental undertones here? Commentary on destruction of nature? Inability to coexist. The men are parasites.) This massive extermination results in what seems to be a sort of pastoral ideal:[[3]](#footnote-3)

We occupied the land, which was now bare of enemies, and lived in it without fear for the rest of our time. Mostly we exercised and hunted. We also worked the vines and gathered the harvest from the trees. All in all, we were like people luxuriating at liberty in a vast prison with no escape route. We lived this way for a year and eight months. (§1:39)

But we soon realize that men are inherently parasitic, and their extermination of the flesh-eating, crayfish-faced foes does not prevent the destruction of their benign host. When all potential conflict within the whale has been subdued, they must be content as spectators to the external conflict, which they observe through the whale’s mouth. A glimpse of the outside world inspires resentment within the passengers, towards their confining, yet life-sustaining environment:

From then on, though, I could no longer bear my life in the whale. I was fed up with hanging around and began to look for a way to escape. (§2:1)

Bored into insanity by the tranquil inertia they have forced upon this cavernous world, they begin exacting deranged revenge, hacking away at the whale’s side and setting the forest on fire. The stench of decay emphasizes the staleness of enclosed atmosphere and heightens the desperation to escape.

Hostile enclosure is confronted again on the island of the impious, which boasts the most horrific smells, “the sort you might get if you burned bitumen, brimstone and pitch together,” the ugliest landscape, a barren “skeleton of rocks and stony places,” and the cruelest existence—being “suspended by the genitals in the smoke rising from a slow fire.” The geography is remarkably confining—rivers of mud, blood and fire encircle the land, and “the whole place had just one narrow entrance (§2:30).”

In contrast to the dread inspired by these hellish wombs, Lucian is desperately nostalgic for extraterrestrial paradise. Their escape from the whale brings them to an exotic Valhalla in the sky, inhabited by disembodied, “impalpable and fleshless” alien spirits, who glide around in purple spider webs, and feast in perpetual pleasure. The landscape is open, and although there are no specific references to the position of this place, we get the sense that it is suspended above other worlds. When their time on this island expires, Lucian “made indignant protests and wept with frustration to think of all the good things [he] was about to leave behind in exchange for more wanderings (§2:27).”

Simultaneously navigating and rendering this unique otherworldly aesthetic, Lucian exposes the conflicting motives and temptations of an eyewitness storyteller. For Lucian, the purpose of literature is not to attempt to record history, but to create it and to be self-authored into posterity. The creation of fact is far more truthful and noble an endeavor than the attempt to preserve an impossibly corruptible memory. To impress this point, Lucian satirically targets the lies of historians, while simultaneously proving firsthand that poets are, to the extent of being creators of fact, incapable of any mendacious tendencies whatsoever. On the Island of the Blest, the narrator converses with a revered Homer, who reveals that “a charge of libel had been brought against him by Thersites because of the way he had ridiculed him in the poem, and the case was won by Homer, with Odysseus for his lawyer (§2:20).”[[4]](#footnote-4) The authority of Homer’s imagination is absolute. Though he is an imagined figure, Odysseus nevertheless carries a stamp of venerable legitimacy. It is automatically assumed that Odysseus would make a formidable defense attorney. On the other hand, Ctesias of Cnidos and Herodotus are both referenced as prisoners of the Island of the Wicked, where they are being punished for telling—and specifically *writing* “what was not true.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Lucian’s conspicuous aside at this moment reinforces his underlying message: “On seeing them, I had good hopes for the future, for I have never told a lie that I know of (§2:32).”[[6]](#footnote-6) Throughout the novel, Lucian reiterates his integrity as an honest writer. While this seems contradictory to his confession in the Prologue, Lucian is in fact impressing upon his readers, the impossibility of conveying any experience or event without creating a story. He argues additionally, that any story that conveys to its reader meaning—rather than fact—is inherently “A True Story.”

Notes:

🡪 Upon meeting Endymion, alien abduction survivor and, consequently, King of the moon, they are promised “the most comfortable life possible” and guaranteed adventure. (Unfinished thought)

* Mythology and religion relationship to exploration of space. (Kepler tried to reconcile)

🡪 Throughout the narrative, hints of a collective human psyche repressed by the boundaries of realism and physical laws…

🡪 Lamptown—robots, they are products of human technology, tools…organized civilization of alternate life form. Somewhat logically configured—artificial intelligence, they do not really have wills, but they have mimicked the organization of human society. Their purpose is unclear, except to be used by humans in a parallel universe, and to appear when summoned by the Lamp King…

🡪 Potable/Edible planets

🡪 The weird biology of alien creatures (bald and hairless, conceive in their calves, sweating milk and honey, hairy stomachs…

🡪 WHALE: Altering their environment…Are there environmental undertones here? Commentary on destruction of nature? Inability to coexist. The men are parasites

1. Lucian, "True Histories," in *Chattering Courtesans and Other Sardonic Sketches*, trans. Keith Sidwell, 309-346 (London: Penguin Books, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. S.C. Fredericks, "Lucian's True History as SF," *Science Fiction Studies* (SF-TH Inc) 3, no. 1 (March 1976): 49-60. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. S.C. Fredericks, "Lucian's True History as SF," *Science Fiction Studies* (SF-TH Inc) 3, no. 1 (March 1976): 49-60. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid, 325. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid, 337. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid, 337. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)