

Lucian: The True History

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The True History

Context: In this composition, Lucian weaves a clearly imaginary tale of a fantastic Odyssey-like voyage in which he and his shipmates are lifted up by a whirlwind to the moon where a number of adventures take place before they return to earth and into the belly of an enormous whale. The part of this journey of philosophical interest occurs when Lucian arrives on a heavenly island reigned over by Rhadamanthus, where we pick up the narrative. As usual Epicurus receives praise and other philosophers receive far different treatment.

Character: Lucian narrates his experience on the voyage.

I should now like to name the famous persons I saw. To begin with, all the demi-gods, and the besiegers of Troy, with the exception of Ajax the Locrian; he, they said, was undergoing punishment in the place of the wicked. I heard that Rhadamanthus was dissatisfied with Socrates, and had several times threatened him with expulsion, if he insisted on talking nonsense, and would not drop his irony and enjoy himself. Plato was the only one I missed, but I was told that he was living in his own Utopia, working the constitution and laws which he had drawn up.

For popularity, Aristippus and Epicurus bore the palm, in virtue of their kindness, sociability, and good-fellowship. Aesop the Phrygian was there, and held the office of jester. Diogenes of Sinope was much changed; he had married Lais the courtesan, and often in his cups would oblige the company with a dance, or other mad pranks. The Stoics were not represented at all; they were supposed to be still climbing the steep hill of Virtue; and as to Chrysippus himself, we were told that he was not to set foot on the island till he had taken a fourth course of hellebore.

The Academics contemplated coming, but were taking time for consideration; they could not yet regard it as a certainty that any such island existed. There was probably the added difficulty that they were not comfortable about the judgment of Rhadamanthus, having themselves disputed the possibility of judgment. It was stated that many of them had started to follow persons traveling to the island, but, their energy failing, had abandoned the journey half-way and gone back.

I have mentioned the most noteworthy of the company, and add that the most highly respected among them are, first Achilles, and second Theseus.

Before many days had passed, I accosted the poet Homer, when we were both disengaged, and asked him, among other things, where he came from; it was still a burning question with us, I explained. He said he was aware that some brought him from Chios, others from Smyrna, and others again from Colophon; the fact was, he was a Babylonian, generally known not as Homer, but as Tigranes; but when later in life he was given as a homer or hostage to the Greeks, that name clung to him. Another of my questions was about the so-called spurious lines; had he written them, or not? He said they were all genuine; so I now knew what to think of the critics Zenodotus and Aristarchus, and all their lucubrations. Having got a categorical answer on that point, I tried him next on his reason for starting the Iliad at the wrath of Achilles; he said he had no exquisite reason; it had just come into his head that way. Another thing I wanted to know was whether he had composed the Odyssey before the Iliad, as generally believed. He said this was not so. As to his reported blindness, I did not need to ask; he had his sight, so there was an end of that. It became a habit of mine, whenever I saw him at leisure, to go up and ask him things, and he answered quite readily—especially after his acquittal. A libel suit had been brought against him by Thersites, on the ground of the ridicule to which he is subjected in the poem; Homer had briefed Odysseus, and been acquitted.

It was during our sojourn that Pythagoras arrived; he had undergone seven transmigrations, lived the lives of that number of animals, and completed his psychic travels. It was the entire right half of him that was gold. He was at once given the franchise, but the question was still pending whether he was to be known as Pythagoras or Euphorbus. Empedocles also came, scorched all over and baked right through; but not all his entreaties could gain him admittance.

The progress of time brought round the Games of the Dead. The umpires were Achilles, holding that office for the fifth, and Theseus for the seventh time. A full report would take too long; but I will summarize the events. The wrestling went to Carus the Heraclid, who won the garland from Odysseus. The boxing resulted in a tie; the pair being the Egyptian Areus, whose grave is in Corinth, and Epeus. For mixed boxing and wrestling they have no prize. Who won the flat race, I have forgotten. In poetry, Homer really did much the best, but the award was for Hesiod. All prizes were plaited wreaths of peacock feathers.

Just after the Games were over, news came that the Damned had broken their fetters, overpowered their guard, and were on the point of invading the island, the ringleaders being Phalaris of Agrigentum, Busiris the Egyptian, Diomedes the Thracian, Sciron, and Pityocamptes. Rhadamanthus at once drew up the Heroes on the beach, giving the command to Theseus, Achilles, and Ajax Telamoniuss, now in his right senses. The battle was fought, and won by the Heroes, thanks especially to Achilles. Socrates, who was in the right wing, distinguished himself still more than in his lifetime at Delium, standing firm and showing no sign of trepidation as the enemy came on. He was afterwards given as a reward of valor a large and beautiful park in the outskirts, to which he invited his friends for conversation, naming it the Post-mortem Academy.

The defeated party were seized, re-fettered, and sent back for severer torments. Homer added to his poems a description of this battle, and at my departure handed me the manuscript to bring back to the living world; but it has unfortunately lost with our other property. It began with the line:

Tell now, my Muse, how fought the mighty Dead.

According to their custom after successful war, they boiled beans, held the feast of victory, and kept high holiday. From this Pythagoras alone held aloof, fasting and sitting far off, in sign of his abhorrence of bean-eating.

We were in the middle of our seventh month, when an incident happened. Scintharus's son, Cinyras, a fine figure of a man, had fallen in love with Helen some time before, and it was obvious that she was very much taken with the young fellow. There used to be nods and becks and takings of wine between them at table, and they would go off by themselves for strolls in the wood. At last love and despair inspired Cinyras with the idea of an elopement. Helen consented, and they were to fly to one of the neighbouring islands, Cork or Cheese Island. They had taken three of the boldest of my crew into their confidence; Cinyras said not a word to his father, knowing that he would put a stop to it. The plan was carried out; under cover of night, and in my absence—I had fallen asleep at table—they got Helen away unobserved and rowed off as hard as they could.

About midnight Menelaus woke up, and finding his wife's place empty raised an alarm, and got his brother to go with him to King Rhadamanthus. Just before dawn the look-outs announced that they could make out the boat, far out at sea. So Rhadamanthus sent fifty of the Heroes on board a boat hollowed out of an asphodel trunk, with orders to give chase. Pulling their best, they overtook the fugitives at noon, as they were entering the milky sea near the Isle of Cheese; so nearly was the escape effected. The boat was towed back with a chain of roses. Helen shed tears, and so felt her situation as to draw a veil over her face. As to Cinyras and his associates, Rhadamanthus interrogated them to find whether they had more accomplices, and, being assured to the contrary, had them whipped with mallow twigs, bound, and dismissed to the place of the wicked.

It was further determined that we should be expelled prematurely from the island; we were allowed only one day's grace. This drew from me loud laments and tears for the bliss that I was now to exchange for renewed wanderings. They consoled me for their sentence, however, by telling me that it would not be many years before I should return to them, and assigning me my chair and my place at table—a distinguished one—in anticipation. I then went to Rhadamanthus, and was urgent with him to reveal the future to me, and give me directions for our voyage. He told me that I should come to my native land after many wanderings and perils, but as to the time of my return he would give me no certainty. He pointed, however, to the neighboring islands, of which five were visible, besides one more distant, and informed me that the wicked inhabited these, the near ones, that is, 'from which you see the great flames rising. The sixth yonder is the City of Dreams; and beyond that again, but not visible at this distance,

is Calypso's isle. When you have passed these, you will come to the great continent which is opposite your own; there you will have many adventures, traverse divers tribes, sojourn among inhospitable men, and at last reach your own continent.' That was all he would say.

But he pulled up a mallow root and handed it to me, bidding me invoke it at times of greatest danger. When I arrived in this world, he charged me to abstain from stirring fire with a knife, from lupines, and from the society of boys over eighteen; these things if I kept in mind, I might look for return to the island. That day I made ready for our voyage, and when the banquet hour came, I shared it. On the morrow I went to the poet Homer and besought him to write me a couplet for inscription; when he had done it, I carved it on a beryl pillar which I had set up close to the harbor; it ran thus:

This island, ere he took his homeward way,

The blissful Gods gave Lucian to survey.

I stayed out that day too, and next morning started, the Heroes attending to see me off. Odysseus took the opportunity to come unobserved by Penelope and give me a letter for Calypso in the isle Ogygia. Rhadamanthus sent on board with me the ferryman Nauplius, who, in case we were driven on to the islands, might secure us from seizure by guaranteeing that our destination was different. As soon as our progress brought us out of the scented air, it was succeeded by a horrible smell as of bitumen, brimstone, and pitch all burning together; mingled with this were the disgusting and intolerable fumes of roasting human flesh; the air was dark and thick, distilling a pitchy dew upon us; we could also hear the crack of whips and the yelling of many voices.

We only touched at one island, on which we also landed. It was completely surrounded by precipitous cliffs, arid, stony, rugged, treeless, unwatered. We contrived to clamber up the rocks, and advanced along a track beset with thorns and snags—a hideous scene. When we reached the prison and the place of punishment, what first drew our wonder was the character of the whole. The very ground stood thick with a crop of knife-blades and pointed stakes; and it was ringed round with rivers, one of slime, a second of blood, and the innermost of flame. This last was very broad and quite impassable; the flame flowed like water, swelled like the sea, and teemed with fish, some resembling firebrands, and others, the small ones, live coals; these were called lamplets.

One narrow way led across all three; its gate was kept by Timon of Athens. Nauplius secured us admission, however, and then we saw the chastisement of many kings, and many common men; some were known to us; indeed there hung Cinyras, swinging in eddies of smoke. Our guides described the life and guilt of each culprit; the severest torments were reserved for those who in life had been liars and written false history; the class was numerous, and included Ctesias of Cnidus, and Herodotus. The fact was an encouragement to me, knowing that I had never told a lie.

I soon found the sight more than I could bear, and returning to the ship bade farewell to Nauplius and resumed the voyage. Very soon we seemed quite close to the Isle of Dreams,

though there was a certain dimness and vagueness about its outline; but it had something dreamlike in its very nature; for as we approached it receded, and seemed to get further and further off. At last we reached it and sailed into Slumber, the port, close to the ivory gates where stands the temple of the Cock. It was evening when we landed, and upon proceeding to the city we saw many strange dreams. But I intend first to describe the city, as it has not been done before; Homer indeed mentions it, but gives no detailed description.