

Ben Jonson's Lucianic Irony

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TO READERS of the second-century Greek satirist Lucian of Samosata the view of the earth from the surface of the moon is no new phenomenon. His character Menippus, the Cynic philosopher, harnessed to a vulture's left wing and an eagle's right, paused at the moon on a flight from Olympus to Heaven and obtained from it a telescopic insight into the activities of men, swarming below like ants in an ant-hill.¹ The synoptic vision of the *κατασκαυπος*, the observer from on high, was conventionally used by the Cynics to belittle human concerns:² in another of Lucian's dialogues Menippus reduces life to the scale of a pageant in which Fortune dresses the actors for their brief and changing roles (*Menippus*, 16). But Lucian's interest in this device went further than parody of a Cynic trope. His Platonist philosopher Nigrinus also sits high in the theatre to obtain a better view (*Nigrinus*, 18). 'What we need,' says Hermes to Charon, 'is a high place somewhere with a good view in all directions' (*Charon*, 2). Lucian's writings span many years and many genres but almost all reflect in some way his search for a detached point of vantage, a rejection of prior commitments, a compulsion to get out in order to look in. The most apparently serious of his philosophical dialogues, *Hermotimus*, argues for scepticism on the ground that no choice of philosophy can be valid without experience of all. And detachment, he implies, is as necessary for the artist as for the philosopher. The creator of the universe must have stood outside it (*Icaromenippus*, 8). Lucian is scornful of musicians and men of letters who sell themselves to patrons (*The Dependent Scholar*, 4), of actors who over-identify with their roles (*Of Pantomime*, 82-4). His revival of the dialogue-form, often using speakers from history or Homeric myth, provided

¹ *Icaromenippus*, 11-19. Titles of Lucian's works in this article are those of H. W. and F. J. Fowler, trans. *The Works of Lucian*, Oxford, 1905.

² J. Bompaire, *Lucien Ecrivain: Imitation et Création*, Paris, 1958, p. 327.

perfect cover for an artist in irony who set out, as he tells us, to unite philosophical discussion with the irresponsible wit and fantasy of Aristophanic comedy (*A Literary Prometheus*, 5-6). Equally effective as a distancing device were his techniques of literary allusion, which, as M. Bompaire has exhaustively demonstrated, so pervade his work that his main claim to originality lies in the extent of his imitation.¹

He did, however, invent a satiric mode — coolly farcical, learnedly evasive, ironically sharp — which contributed much to the serio-comic masterpieces of Renaissance prose-satire. A line of influence has often been drawn from Lucian through Erasmus, More and Rabelais to Swift, but before we try to find a place in it for Jonson it will be well to clarify what we mean by influence. The strenuous pastime of source-hunting has fallen into disrepute, so little need be said about Jonson's borrowing of Lucianic incidents and ideas, though Herford and Simpson's tally of these may not be exhaustive. In at least one play, *Volpone*, Lucian's presence counts for more than the sum of Jonson's specific borrowings, as it does not, for example, in *Poetaster*. But in general such borrowings reflect the kind of witty allusiveness practised by Lucian himself, and are chiefly useful as showing how Jonson's intimacy with this author links him to the tastes of the early sixteenth-century humanists.² Doubts extend to the value of trying to isolate literary influences of a larger kind, in terms of tone and technique, at a time when much knowledge of the classics was drawn haphazardly from commonplace-books, mythological manuals, dictionaries and other intermediate sources. Certainly we cannot hope to prove anything, if we venture into the shadowy field of an author's creative processes. But the exercise may be useful if it helps us to explain recognized features of the author's work.

My contention is that the satiric standpoint of Lucian and his humanist imitators decisively influenced, or at least authoritatively supported, Jonson's approach to dramatic art, especially following his withdrawal from the *Poetomachia* in 1601-2. We may

¹ J. Bompairc, op. cit., p. 742.

² C. R. Thompson, *The Translations of Lucian by Erasmus and Sir Thomas More*, Ithaca, New York, 1940, p. 3, mentions 270 printings of works by Lucian before 1550.

consider first whether he was capable of recognizing such a standpoint, secondly how he might have defined it, and lastly the evidence of its effect on his work.

The first question need not detain us. While modern critics tend to play down Jonson's classicism in favour of more appealing and accessible qualities, we should not underestimate his first-hand knowledge of the classics or his status as a pioneer of deliberate and sophisticated imitation. The early Comical Satyres, though they may impress us chiefly as bold experiments bearing little relation to ancient comedy, plainly reveal Jonson's interest in the character of classical authors and his attempts to apply their voices to contemporary issues on the public stage. This is not found in his 'ideal' figures, such as Crites and Cynthia or Virgil and Augustus, for the obvious reason that Jonson's moral and literary idealism, especially with regard to the relationship of the poet to the court, was formed by a variety of influences, modern as well as ancient. But we do find it among the more objectively-conceived figures, notably the satirists. *Asper-Macilente* is a diptych-analysis of the Juvenalian temper as revived in the 1590's, the satirist as indignant outsider, with and without 'the mindes erection'. Ovid and Horace, as they appear in *Poetaster*, are primarily significant as embodiments of the ethos suggested by the writings of each. They leave no doubt that Jonson was capable of assessing and recreating for his own purposes the character and stance of a classical author.

But we shall be disappointed if we look for an embodiment of Lucian in Jonson's plays, and this is hardly surprising since Lucian, as we have seen, belongs to the class of invisible satirists who offer no autographed self-portraits corresponding to the Horatian or Juvenalian *persona*. Jonson made a partial attempt to dramatize the Lucianic standpoint in *Cynthias Revells* (1600). Blending of Homeric myth with moral allegory links this play ultimately to Lucian through the comedies of Lyly, and a direct borrowing from the *Dialogues of the Gods* opens its first act. Cupid and Mercurie, as witty commentators on the human scene, furthering their respective causes through disguise and practical jokes, show a measure of Lucian's playful cynicism. But they soon become embroiled in the author's earnest indignation over abuses of the courtly ethic. Comment must give way to correction, and

Mercurie's incitement of Crites to act as a judicial scourge is not at all what we would expect from a Lucianic god. By Jonson's time Lucian's image had been tarnished by the Reformation's attacks on his atheism and simplified by the use of his flimsier dialogues as school-texts. So long as his detachment was associated with irresponsible sophistry or bemused supernatural reaction to human vagaries—the 'Lord, what fooles these mortals be!' of Shakespeare's Puck—it could hardly afford a tenable stance for a moralist at the turn of the century. Donne, for example, in urging the need for religious commitment in his *Satyre III*, implicitly refutes the scepticism of the *Hermotimus* as well as the eclecticism of Horace. And Shakespeare, in his miniature survey of satiric attitudes in *As You Like It* (II, vii), gives little more weight to the Lucianic cynicism of Jacques' speech on the Seven Ages of Man than to the same character's earlier dalliance with the pose of Juvenal: both reactions are criticized by contrast with the simple remedial act of feeding the hungry.

There is hardly need to stress that Lucian, in this guise, could make no appeal whatever to Jonson, who, as the most morally-committed dramatist of his age, never ceased to believe in 'the office of a comick-Poet, to imitate justice, and instruct to life' through the 'proper embattaling' of vice and virtue.¹ His cynical use of the Menippean viewpoint is confined to dramatic contexts;² elsewhere he allows it, significantly, to 'good men' who, 'placed high on the top of all vertue, look'd downe on the Stage of the world, and contemned the Play of Fortune' (*Discoveries*, 1100-8). But to apply the play-metaphor to the whole business of living made, for him, a mockery of the significance of human action, of man's responsibility to determine his character and work out his salvation. This central concern of the humanists is deeply rooted in Jonson's thought. It is typically expressed in one of the finest and most revealing of his poems, 'To the World', where the speaker turns away from the stage of life to

. . . make my strengths, such as they are,
Here in my bosome, and at home.

¹ *Volpone*, 'The Epistle', 121-2; *Discoveries*, 1041. Quotations and references are from *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford, Percy and Evelyn Simpson, Oxford, 1925-52.

² E.g. Robbin Good-fellow in *Love Restored*; Mercurie in *Mercurie Vindicated*; *The Divell is an Asse*, I, 1; *The New Inne*, I, 111, 126-37.

Menippus had regarded the quest for self-fulfilment as the funniest turn in the human spectacle, the chaos resulting when every member of the chorus insists on 'doing his own thing' (*Icaromenippus*, 17). But Jonson believed that within the limits of the moral order this is what we must do, and he uses the acting-metaphor to condemn our failure:

I have considered, our whole life is like a Play: wherein every man, forgetfull of himselfe, is in travaile with expression of another. Nay, wee so insist in imitating others, as wee cannot (when it is necessary) returne to our selves . . . (*Discoveries*, 1093-6)

The relevance of this to Jonson's attacks on imposture, affectation and perversion in the comedies has often been noted. We are actors but we shouldn't be. The moral is bluntly stated in the Comicall Satyres but in the later and greater comedies it is much less explicit. From *Volpone* on, the actors are left to act out their parts, exposing themselves and each other but with no authorial agent to strip them of their illusions. The stage of the satirized actors becomes self-contained, and the satire grows subtler as the stage becomes wider and more life-like, so that we almost think, when we reach *Bartholmew Fayre*, that the author has come to tolerate the play, to accept that we are actors and that we can't help it. The view of Jonson's comic development as a process of growing tolerance is widely held. Jonas A. Barish has noted how Jonson's

satiric tendency to insist on the gulf between things as they are and things as they ought to be wanes noticeably in the course of his career, and his attitude becomes more and more that of the man whose recognition of folly in himself prevents him from judging it too harshly in others.¹

It is attractive to associate the triumph of the middle comedies with an access of fellow-feeling for humanity and a slackening of didactic principle. But it will be wiser to find consistency, if we can, in a writer who valued it so highly. We can do so, if we recognize that Jonson's withdrawal of his satiric spokesmen from the stage led him to view his actors in a more detached but no less critical spirit, and if we interpret symptoms of tolerance and

¹ Jonas A. Barish, *Ben Jonson and the Language of Prose Comedy*, Cambridge, Mass., 1960, p. 146.

moral compromise in the plays as a deliberate exercise in ironic ambiguity. It is now time to cast light on this by looking back to the discovery and development of Lucianic irony by Erasmus and More.

Theirs was the view of Lucian which would influence a latter-day humanist such as Jonson, and he would deduce it partly from their criticism, partly from their creative imitation. Their critical comments are mostly prefixed to the Latin translations of over thirty of Lucian's pieces which, between them, they published between 1506 and 1512. They had been attracted to him as a stylist in their study of Greek; they were charmed, like the Utopians, by his graceful wit; and they found topical relevance in his attacks on superstition and abuses of learning. Erasmus praises him in Horatian terms for combining *utile* and *dulce*, seriousness and fooling: 'sic seria nugis, nugis seriis miscet.' He admires the dramatic quality of his dialogues, enjoys their allusiveness, and concludes that no comedy or satire can match them for pleasure and profit.¹ More attributes the effectiveness of Lucian's satire to the subtlety of his approach.² Both clearly took him seriously as a moralist and saw that his wit was not only decorative but useful for a cultivated Christian as an urbane alternative to direct abuse. 'He revives the sharpness of Old Comedy (*dicacitas*), but stops short of its headlong insolence (*petulantia*).'³

It is not hard to trace in such comments an awareness of Lucian's irony — More indeed notes Socratic irony in *The Liar* — but harder to be sure that it has been distinguished from Horace's, whose *ridentem dicere verum quid vetat?* underlies their whole assessment. The association of the two ancient satirists, based on the contrast with Juvenal, continues as late as Dryden, who praises Lucian as the supreme master of irony after observing his near relation to Horace.⁴ Renaissance writers rarely analysed or distinguished ironic procedures, but showed their understanding more clearly in practice. This is no place for detailed discussion

¹ Dedication of *Gallus* [*The Cock*], *Opera Omnia*, ed. J. Leclerc, Leiden, 1703-6, I, 245. Cited as *Opera*.

² *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More*, ed. E. F. Rogers, Princeton, 1947, p. 111.

³ Erasmus, *op. cit.*

⁴ *Prose Works of John Dryden*, ed. E. Malone, 1800, III, 374, 378.

of Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly* or More's *Utopia*, two very complex works whose debts to Lucian are generally recognized. Both, however, emphasize a simple difference between Lucian's irony and Horace's which is of some importance for our understanding of Jonson. In Horace's satires — with one exception (II, v) which resembles a Lucianic *Dialogue of the Dead* — the poet appears *in propria persona* as narrator or actor. Irony occurs when he is criticized or mocked or expresses a view which we suspect to be less than the author's considered position, but we are never in doubt that he represents the author within the scope of the particular poem. In a Lucianic dialogue, as in most fiction or drama, the author may be present in one of the characters but need not be, and therefore when he seems to be present we can never be quite sure that he is. (The difference results in the common impression of Horace as 'human' and that of Lucian as evasive, cynical, frivolous and 'inhuman'.) Erasmus in *The Praise of Folly* complicates the simple irony of a mock-encomium by allowing the object of praise to speak for herself and to put up a strong case with evidently serious implications. He thus employs, and subtly transcends, the Lucianic type of irony by starting a kind of dialogue in the reader's mind between what is specious and what is valid in Folly's arguments, his own position being effectively cloaked by the *persona* of the speaker. More in *Utopia* might seem to come closer to Horatian irony by introducing himself into the dialogue, but in fact does not, since the elaborate mystification he practises from the start by asserting fiction as fact makes it impossible, in spite of much circumstantial evidence, ever to be certain that More is More.

This deliberate baffling of the reader is carried further by Erasmus and More than by Lucian. Unlike *The Praise of Folly*, Lucian's praise of *The Parasite* had been wholly and obviously specious, and his *A True History*, unlike *Utopia*, had opened with a declaration of its falsehood. The purpose of the humanists, jesting apart, was less to conceal dogmatic positions of their own than to tease the reader out of his, using the dramatic method to coax more rigid minds into a recognition of paradoxes and moral dilemmas which cannot be simply resolved without loss of wisdom. One such issue, relevant to this essay in the way it looks back to Lucian and forward to Jonson, is the extent to which

public behaviour should be determined by moral principle, the famous debate on 'accommodation'. The passages are well-known and should be read in context, but we may recall that both follow Lucian in opposing the philosopher to the play of life. Nigrinus had not been tempted to accommodate: the play for him was partly a source of amusement, partly a temptation to be squarely faced and withstood (*Nigrinus*, 18-20). In answer to this, Erasmus's Folly condemns the philosopher's rejection of the play as a denial of the only reality we have. Unmasking the actors in the name of truth destroys the illusions by which we live. Wiser, she argues, to accept the limitations of human wisdom, 'to wink at the crowd or stray along with it sociably' (*comiter errare*, a brilliant ambiguity: *Opera*, IV, 429). The debate is politically applied in *Utopia*. To Raphael's contention that the philosopher is hamstrung in the context of *realpolitik*, More retorts by distinguishing between the academic kind of philosophy (*scholastica*) and a philosophy more suited to public life (*civilior*) which 'adapts itself to the play in hand'. Don't desert the commonwealth because politics is a dirty game. 'What you cannot turn to good you must make as little bad as you can' — a compromise denounced by Raphael as violating Christ's injunction to preach truth from the housetops.¹

Erasmus's dedication of *The Praise of Folly* to More significantly compliments him on his ability to accommodate his behaviour to the crowd while opposing it in judgement. In the two passages discussed, and others like them, the authors' primary aim was to be ambiguous, and continuing critical debate about their 'true' positions shows how successful they were.² Jonson, I suspect, saw a stricter intention behind the game of irony than do those modern interpreters who stress the comprehensive tolerance of Erasmus and More in their early writings. He remembered the former's resentment at having his views identified with Folly's and his claim to have used her to preach 'obliquely' the stern ideals of his *Prince*.³ And he would probably not dissociate More's

¹ *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, ed. E. Surtz and J. H. Hexter, New Haven, 1965, IV, 98-9.

² E.g. C. S. Lewis on the More passage, 'I am all at sea', in *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, Oxford, 1954, p. 169.

³ *Epistola Apologetica ad Martinum Dorpium*, *Opera*, IX, 2-3.

'real' view on accommodation from the stand on principle which led to his death. But that he understood their use of ironic ambiguity, and attempted to apply something like it to the comic stage, may reasonably be inferred.

It remains, then, to indicate the aspects of Jonson's work which the Lucianic tradition can help us to understand. This will involve summary judgements on particular plays and also the danger of making exaggerated or over-exclusive claims. Did Jonson need Lucian or Erasmus or More to teach him the ironic handling of theme and character? And what of other influences, ancient or contemporary? To the tracker of influence this type of question is Boojum to the Baker or the Snake on the Ninety-Ninth Square. One can only retort that Jonson habitually looked for guides, if not commanders, and that the Lucianic tradition offers the best parallel for the particular kinds of irony he practised.

These include an exceptionally detached attitude toward his works as artifacts and toward his audience as their rhetorical object, together with a calculated strategy to tempt the latter into false or over-simple interpretations. These features are traceable as early as the Quarto *Every Man in his Humor* (1598) in the ambiguous presentation of the rogue and the justice, but are conspicuously absent from the Comicall Satyres, where Jonson's eagerness to grapple with his audience and make himself clear had bred resentment and misunderstanding, the messy degradation of art and the artist known as the Poetomachia. His response in the following years was proud withdrawal: to 'scorne the world' and lodge with Lord D'Aubigny, to Roman tragedy 'high, and aloofe', to courtly Entertainments and a comedy worthy of the universities. The worlds of *Sejanus* and *Volpone* are the creations of an ironist, self-contained worlds of preying Machiavels whose downfall, however the unthinking may applaud it, is due to no triumph of active virtue and promises no lasting betterment of society. The savagery of satiric tone in both plays has understandably been labelled Juvenalian, but Jonson would probably have disputed the term, especially as applied to the comedy. *Volpone* is also, after all, very funny in a way that Juvenal is not. In his dedicatory Epistle Jonson confesses to 'sharpnesse' in his satire but denounces 'petulancie', the distinction Erasmus had

made in marking off Lucian from Old Comedy and in defending *The Praise of Folly*.¹ Jonson's disavowal of 'particular' satire translates Erasmus *verbatim*, and his attack on the 'garbage', 'brothelery' and 'blasphemy' of the contemporary stage follows the humanist's on those who have 'stirred up the hidden bilges of vice *ad Juvenalis exemplum*'.² Though the Epistle is a *post facto* document, it aligns *Volpone* with the humanist concept of Lucianic *joco-serium* and opposes it to neo-Juvenalian muck-raking. Thus the centrality of the play's borrowings from Lucian and Erasmus is no accident. Critics have traced the themes of degeneration from Lucian's *The Cock* and of universal folly from Erasmus's satire, and we may add that the irony of Lucian's ninth *Dialogue of the Dead*, a main germ of the plot, is bleak enough in itself to have inspired Jonson's. The cynical pleasure of old Polystratus at having cheated his suitors and enriched his parasite is presented without comment by the author: an objectification of satiric vision which Jonson followed and furthered by his use of beast-fable.

The temptation of the audience in *Volpone* occurs in three stages: first, throughout most of the play, to applaud the figures of evil, while they are attractive and successful; second, when their ruin is imminent, to applaud the figures of goodness and justice and suppose that they have brought it about; lastly, to applaud *Volpone* for the reason he suggests, that his crimes have no moral bearing beyond the action, that the play is only a play. The first temptation, simply to invert right and wrong, is broader and more obvious irony than Jonson was ever to attempt again, though it recurs in a less sinister form whenever we are invited to admire the inventiveness of his rogues. Its Erasmian equivalent would be to accept Folly at her own valuation. The second and third temptations, which tease the unwary spectator into a state of hopeless moral confusion about what he has seen, recall Erasmus's subtler gambits and look forward to Jonson's method in the subsequent comedies.

In a passage paraphrased in *Discoveries*, Vives expresses the rhetorical commonplace that the greatest care in composing a

¹ *Opera*, I, 245; IV, 403 ('ne licentia exiret in rabiem').

² *Ibid.*

speech should be paid to the end, where the listener's attention is halted and focussed (*in fine subsistit intentio, & sese colligit*).¹ He adds a few lines later that, if misunderstanding occurs, it need not be the speaker's fault. As Jonson expands him,

if the obscurity happen through the Hearers, or Readers want of understanding, I am not to answer for them; no more then for their not listning or marking; I must neither find them eares, nor mind.

(*Discoveries*, 1984-7)

The endings of Jonson's four great comedies leave us with the impression that they do not mean quite what they have said, and that the invisible artist, so far from paring his fingernails, is watching us keenly to see if we have taken his finer point. The trick-ending of *Epicoene* is a reminder that Jonson's audiences are the objects, not to say victims, of a rhetorical process: it subtly dislocates our attitude to what has gone before, particularly our allegiance to True-wit, including us along with him in the irony of which he has seemed to be spokesman. If we have difficulty in placing Jonson's 'wit'-characters in the moral structure of his comedies, it is because their function is to promote ambiguity, to lure us intelligently into attractive, plausible, but morally compromising positions. In *The Alchemist*, Love-wit and Face are 'accommodators' who, by asking for our applause, seek to implicate us in their conspiracy to rate wit above morals, opportunism above fixed identity. And the most devious of the tribe is Quarlous, the cynical gamester of *Bartholmew Fayre*. Mocking the urge of the ridiculous censors to unmask the actors and spoil the play, he proposes an All Fools' Banquet in honour of human frailty, a wholesale rejection of the critical faculty in favour of 'Flesh, and blood' at which an embarrassing number of Jonson's critics have connived. The parting embrace proffered by these characters is genial indeed, but hides, in more or less threatening forms, the rhetorical intent of Erasmus's Folly, soon to be voiced openly by Milton's Comus, to 'wind me into the easie-hearted man, / And hugg him into snares'. All Jonson's accommodations conceal a conscious irony which, like Erasmus, he expects the judicious to perceive.

He was by no means a natural ironist. His beliefs were simple and downright, the opposite of Lucian's scepticism. He did not

¹ *De Ratione Dicendi*, quoted Herford and Simpson, note to *Discoveries*, 1957-2030.

share Erasmus's compulsion to see two sides of every question, or the subtle and compassionate wisdom of More. Two kinds of irony he did possess: one was inherent in his satiric imagination, the irony which transforms life into exaggerative and simplifying metaphors, the vision of the *κατὰστυλοποιός*; the other was a product of rhetorical training, the irony of cool manipulation of response. Both these, as it seems to me, were crucially reinforced by the example of the Lucianic tradition at a time when didactic over-commitment had reduced his art to alternate railing and preaching, and his sense of the poet's dignity had been upset by involvement in a public altercation. But didacticism never ceased to threaten his artistic detachment. The ironic ambiguities we have noted in his comedies are directed less toward the wisdom of paradox and suspended judgement than toward an inquisition on the audience's critical faculty, a separation of Spectators from Understanders. Committed to the theatre, he could not afford, like Swift, to 'laugh and shake in Rabelais' easy chair', but instead fretted at misconstruction and repeatedly urged that his plays should be read. The Lucianic Jonson of this essay is a less attractive proposition than the genial giant of some recent criticism. But we should recognize that the channelling of the didactic urge into irony was vital to the success of his greatest works. Irony was the controlling key of the creative tensions on which they were built, between appetite for life and moral discipline, between *jocus* and *serium*, antimasque and masque. And it is impatience with irony which marks the ultimate decline. When Wittipol in the fourth act of *The Divell is an Asse* is converted from a dangerously ambiguous figure into a simple champion of virtue, a play whose devil-plot has promised to be a brilliant application of Lucianic irony descends into explicit moralizing and the sequence of Jonson's comic masterpieces comes to an end.