SELECTIONS FROM
LUCIAN’S DIALOGUES OF THE DEAD

Translated with a short Introduction by Peter Valente
INTRODUCTION

Lucian’s *Dialogues of the Dead* are a series of thirty dramatic episodes, in the form of dialogues, between characters in ancient Greek history and literature. The dialogues are concerned with criticizing certain habits and ways of thinking that may have been valued in life but are rendered meaningless in the “other world” of Hades, the world of the “dead.” Mennipus and Diogenes, both Cynics, are the ringleaders of this crowd of “dead souls” and the harshest critics of the vanity of human life.

Cynicism was an ancient school of Greek society based on the idea that man, guided by reason, could achieve happiness by living in a way that was natural for humans and rejecting all conventional desires for power, wealth, sex, and fame, to pursue instead a simple life free from all possessions. Diogenes of Sinope (c. 412-323 BC) took the principles of Cynicism to the extreme by falsifying coinage, sleeping in a tub, and eating raw meat, all in defiance of conventional values. Very little is known about the satirist, Mennipus of Gadara, who flourished in the 3rd century BC., but though none of his works survive, his influence on Lucian is apparent in the Dialogues. Mennipus tells Tiresias, in Dialogue 9, “Tiresias, it would be hard to say whether you were blind or not. Everyone is blind nowadays and can’t see the forest for the trees!” This is Lucian’s provocation for his fellow Romans. The Dialogues satirize and expose the “blindness” that Lucian thought was indeed “deadly” to Roman society.

The word, “Cynic” is derived from the Greek word meaning “dog-like.” In the words of Diogenes, quoted by Stobaeus, a 5th century compiler of Greek authors, “other dogs bite their enemies, I bite my friends to save them.” But Lucian’s *Dialogues of the Dead* amuse as well as instruct and in many ways are just as relevant today as they were during his time.
CROESUS- Pluto, we’ve had it up to here with this Cynic, snarling and strutting around like he owns the place. We’ve got enough troubles down here, so if you don’t transfer him to another neighborhood of Hades we’re going to pack our bags and move.

PLUTO- Why? What harm is he to this province of dead souls?

CROESUS- My friends Midas and Sardanapalus and I can no longer reminisce about the good old days when there was lots of gold, copious luxuries and treasures to enjoy, or even shed a sentimental tear, because all he does when he hears us is break out laughing and calling us offensive names. He says we’re “slaves” and “garbage.” Then he starts singing show tunes. And that does it. We just have to leave. In short, he’s a nuisance.

PLUTO- Menippus, what do you have to say for yourself?

MENIPPUS- It’s true. All of it is true! I detest these abject swine. It’s not enough that they lived these decadent lives filled with excess but they have to keep blabbing about it even down here, harping on the good old glory days. It makes me sick and so I take pleasure in mocking them.

PLUTO- But you mustn’t. Have pity on their lives. They have lost so much and they are in pain.

MENIPPUS- Pluto! You’re not going to suddenly soften up and offer them your sympathy? What will the other gods say about you then?

PLUTO- Stop before you say something you’ll regret. My reason is simply this: I can’t stand all this quarreling. It just adds more noise to an already loud and noisy place.

MENIPPUS- Well, scumbags, you’re a disgrace to your respective nations and I promise you I won’t stop telling you what I think of you. Wherever you go I’ll follow close behind, laughing, jeering and singing until you all crack under the pressure.

CROESUS- You’re presumptuous aren’t you?

MENIPPUS- Not at all. On the contrary, you were presumptuous in life and thought you could trample on men’s freedom, expecting everyone to bow down at your feet, but you
forgot there was a thing called Death. Now it’s goodbye to all that. This is payback time. You’ll cry, pull your hair out, wail, but no one will hear you. You’ve lost everything!

CROESUS- No, don’t say it’s so. Not everything. Not my heap of exquisite treasures…

MIDAS- And my shining gold….

SARDANAPALUS- And my delicate creature comforts….

MENIPPUSS- THAT’S RIGHT! Now you can accompany me with your whining and I’ll just chime in with one of my favorite show tunes!
MENIPPUS: Tiresias, it would be hard to say whether you were blind or not. Everyone is blind nowadays and can’t see the forest for the trees! There’s no telling Phineus from Lynceus these days. However, I know you’re a seer and the poets have told me that you enjoy the distinction of having been both a man and a woman. Now I’d like to know, in your opinion, was it better being a man or a woman? I mean which enjoyed a more pleasant life?

TIRESIAS: I’d say the woman no doubt about it. Much less troublesome since they have mastery over their men; there’s no fighting with them and winning; you can’t build a high enough wall to keep them out; useless to argue with them in an assembly or cross examine them in a court of law.

MENIPPUS: Well, I know you’ve heard of Medea. In Euripides doesn’t she have compassion for her own sex given their hard lot in life, the pains they have to endure in childbirth? Which reminds me, when you were a woman did you have any babies or were you barren?

TIRESIAS: What kind of question is that?

MENIPPUS: Oh it’s nothing. I just thought I’d ask but if it’s too much trouble to answer….

TIRESIAS: No. I was not barren. But I didn’t have a child, not exactly.

MENIPPUS: But you could have. That’s all I want to know.

TIRESIAS: Yes, I could have. Does that answer your question?

MENIPPUS: And was your sex-change gradual? I mean did you slowly grow a beard and over time become a man? Or was it instantaneous?

TIRESIAS: What are you trying to get at? I’m starting to think you doubt my words.

MENIPPUS: And you’re surprised? I mean it’s a hard story to believe. And am I just supposed to swallow it whole, like I was born yesterday, without asking any questions?
TIRESIAS- Then I suppose you find all those stories of women being turned into birds or trees or beasts just as unbelievable. Take for example Aëdon or Daphne, or even Callisto.

MENIPPUSS- If I happen to meet any of these fine ladies someday I’ll be sure to ask them. But to get back to your story, my dear friend: were you a prophet in your days as a woman or did you suddenly begin to see into the future as a man?

TIRESIAS- You must be kidding with your nonsense. I once settled an argument between the Gods and, as a thank you present, Hera gouged out my eyes; Zeus then consoled me for my loss and granted me the gift of prophecy.

MENIPPUSS- Once a liar always a liar, Tiresias! I guess that’s your trade. Oh you prophets! There’s not a bit of truth in your empty words.
DIALOGUE 14: HERMES AND CHARON

HERMES- Ferryman, I’ve got my account books right here and if it’s ok with you I’d like to calculate how much you owe me so as to prevent any arguments later.

CHARON- I agree. It’s better to get this all straightened out now to prevent future problems.

HERMES – Ok, the first item on the list is that anchor you ordered. That was for $250.

CHARON- Woah! That’s steep.

HERMES- Yes, but so help me Pluto, it’s what I paid for it. Now let’s see…. Next is this single strap for the oar costing $16.

CHARON- All right 250 plus 16 is 266. Write down 266.

HERMES- And then there was the needle for that tear in your sail: $40.

CHARON – Ok, $40. Add that to the 266.

HERMES- Next is the wax you used to fix that leak in your boat, the required nails, and the bit of rope that you made into a brace. In total, $100.

CHARON- That was money well spent. You’re a smart shopper, Hermes.

HERMES- I’ve double-checked the account books and that seems to be all. Now when can you pay me?

CHARON- Well, I can’t now. I’m broke. But if there is a war or a plague soon then there’ll be a rush of passengers and I can then make a huge profit by doubling and even tripling my rates.

HERMES- Oh, so in other words I’ll just have to sit tight and hope for some kind of disaster and then, maybe, you’ll pay me?

CHARON- Nothing else can be done, Hermes. The traffic is slow during times of peace.

HERMES- Well what difference does it make even if you don’t pay me now. Do you remember, Charon, when men were brave and would arrive wounded and all covered with blood? Now, we get an occasional few who were poisoned by their wives or their
sons, or a few rich ones with their bellies puffed up who died from complications due to obesity; these are a sorry lot in comparison with men of ancient times. Apparently some end up here because of some elaborate plot gone wrong that involved money, of course.

CHARON- Ah, you can never have enough.

HERMES- True. So you can’t blame me if I’m a bit pushy and want my money now.
DIALOGUE 26: ACHILLES AND ANTILOCHUS

ANTILochUs- Achilles, what was it you were saying to Odysseus the other day about death? I couldn’t believe my ears! All I can say is that the language you used was not worthy of a student of Chiron and Phoenix. You were saying that you’d rather be “bound to the soil” and the servant of someone who was “lacking in means” rather than king of the dead. Now maybe I could understand how a cowardly Phrygian, barely clinging to his dear life, would say such things: but for Peleus, greatest of all heroes, to entertain such ignoble thoughts is simply disgraceful and contradicts all your brave actions in life. I am shocked! Even when you had that long inglorious term in office as ruler of Phthia you said so yourself that you would rather die in the pursuit of fame and glory on the battlefield rather than waste away.

AChilles- O son of Nestor, how could I have known the kind of place Hades would be. When I was alive I thought that to pursue fame and glory was everything but now I know how wrong that kind of thinking was. I don’t care if the living sing of my heroic exploits and praise my bravery. Here there is no difference between one man and another. A certain equality reigns among the dead. Antilochus, here my beauty and my strength mean nothing. Those dead Trojans are not afraid of me and the dead Achaeans don’t look up to me as their ruler either. Each man speaks to the other with respect. After all, in the darkness and gloom no man stands out. Everywhere the dead are the same, “both the cowardly and the brave.” But these thoughts annoy me. I would rather be alive and somebody’s servant.

ANTILochUs- Yes, but Achilles what can you do? No man can avoid death. Nature will have her way. And it’s no use crying over spilt milk. This is the way things are down here. And anyway, all your friends are present. Odysseus will be here soon as will all the others. Be comforted that all of you share the same fate and that you will not have to suffer alone. Look over there and you’ll see Heracles, Meleager, and all the other great heroes. I’m sure neither of them would choose to return to the upper regions and occupy themselves in the role of a hired servant to some beggar or vagabond.
ACHILLES- Ah, Antilochus, you’re trying to make me feel better and I appreciate it. But for some reason the memory of certain parts of my life troubles me. I imagine everyone here feels the same way but prefers to stay quiet about it and, what is worse, to suffer in silence.

ANTILYCHUS- Not worse, but in fact better. There is no use in speaking about it. Best to be silent, endure your fate, and bear it at all costs. This is certainly preferable to wasting words talking about it and being thought ridiculous, as you have, for harboring such wishes.
DIALOGUE 27: AEACUS AND PROTESILAUS

AEACUS- Protesilaus, why do you abuse Helen? I’ve seen you clutching her neck with a firm grip and throttling her and throwing her around? What’s the meaning of this?

PROTESILAUS- Why? Because she’s the reason I’m down here. If not for her I’d still be alive and able to finish the repairs on my house and I could be enjoying my honeymoon with my new bride. Instead the house remains half-finished and my lovely wife is now a widow.

AEACUS- You should blame Menelaus and leave Helen alone. It was he who led you to Troy for the sake of her. And we know what kind of women she is.

PROTESILAUS- Yes, you’re right. (To Menelaus) Explain yourself.

MENELAUS- You’ve got the wrong man, Protesilaus. Instead, you should blame Paris. It was he who, in flagrant violation of the law of wedlock, kidnapped my Helen. He deserves to be throttled by you and by all the Greeks and even the barbarians because of the countless deaths his stupidity caused.

PROTESILAUS- (grabbing Paris’ arm) I’ll show you. (grabbing his throat) I’ll never let you go until justice is served!

PARIS- (tearing Protesilaus’ hand from his neck) Come on now. You wouldn’t want to commit a crime in your attempt to be just. I’m more like you than you think. Am I not also a lover? Am I not also a servant of Eros? Am I not also possessed and driven to the point of madness by her divine power? You know how unstable Love can be and how useless it is to resist when under her spell. Wherever Love leads you must follow. You know, Protesilaus, that all I say is true.

PROTESILAUS- You’re right. I can’t argue with your reasoning. How I wish Eros himself was here right now! He is the one who deserves to be throttled and shaken up a bit.

AEACUS- Ok, that’s enough. I, myself, am on the side of Eros and will defend his cause against you. Eros would be the first to admit that he caused Paris to be overwhelmed with
love and reckless passion. But as for your death, Protesilaus, you cannot blame Eros. You can only blame yourself. In your pursuit of fame and glory you never considered your wife and when the ships touched the Troad¹, you were the first to leap onto the shore, ahead of everyone else and so great was your desire for fame that you met your death there.

PROTESILAUS- Very well, Aeacus, I will defend myself and put the matter to rest. I see clearly now that the Fates are most responsible for my being here. Without question it must have been that the thread of my life was spun out long enough and that finally Atropos interceded and cut it with her sharp nails.

AEACUS- Exactly. You see now that there is no reason to blame our good friends.

¹ This is the historical name for the Biga peninsula, located in the Northwestern part of Anatolia, Turkey.
DIALOGUE 30: NIREUS, THERSITES AND MENIPPUS

NIREUS- So, here we stand, Thersites. Let Menippus judge which of us is the more beautiful. Look at me. Can you say that he is more handsome than me?

MENIPPUS- Well, who in Pluto’s name are you? Tell me that first. (to himself) As if it makes any difference.

NIREUS- I am Nireus. That man on my left is Thersites.

MENIPPUS- You are Nireus? And he, Thersites? Are you sure? I mean I can’t really tell the difference yet.

THERSITES- I am sure of this one point; I am like you. Homer may have said that you were the most handsome of men but I don’t trust his words. After all he was blind! He could’ve altered the shape of my face so I looked like an ape, shaved all the hair off my head, and still I would not have been considered any less of a man as far his eyes could see! Now tell me, Menippus, which of us is the more handsome?

NIREUS- I am without a doubt the most handsome of men; I, the son of Aglaia and Charopus. Here are the very words of Homer: “Fairest of all who gathered beneath the Trojan wall.” And it’s me he’s speaking of!

MENIPPUS- Well, when you first arrived here you weren’t exactly the handsomest man to have ever graced the floors of Hades! Your bones are no different than anyone else’s, except for the fact that they are more brittle and I imagine it would be rather easy to bash your skull in. And so I have come to think of you as rather feminine and lacking in the virility that marks a real man.

NIREUS- Go ask Homer what I was like when I sailed the rough seas with the Achaeans.

MENIPPUS- Keep on dreaming, Nireus. I see what you are now and that’s what counts. The past is ancient history.

NIREUS- What? Do my good looks mean nothing in this place? Am I not superior to other men because of them? Ah, Menippus, this is too much!
MENIPPUS- Get used to it. Look at yourself in the mirror. You’re not handsome at all!
No man here is. All men are alike. And that’s that!
DIALOGUE 28: PROTESILAUS, PLUTO AND PERSEPHONE

PROTESILAUS- I entreat you, O King of the Underworld and you, daughter of Demeter, do not deny a lover’s prayer.

PLUTO- What is this all about? Who are you? What is your name?

PROTESILAUS- My name is Protesilaus and I am the son of Iphiclus, from Phylace. I fought for the Achaeans and was the first man to fall at Troy. I ask for one day’s leave from here to return again to the world of the living.

PLUTO- Ah, yes, my friend, that’s a familiar request around here. Many would love to go back to the world of the living; but I’m afraid I cannot grant your wish.

PROTESILAUS- But Pluto I do not love my life as much as I love my new bride, whom I sadly left behind, newly wedded in the very bridal chamber, when I was called to duty and sailed away on the stormy seas – only to meet my death, as soon as I disembarked from the ship, at the hands of Hector who was waiting for me. This love for my wife wears me down and I have no moments of peace. I need to see her, please, if only for an hour, and then I will return.

PLUTO- Look, didn’t you drink from the waters of Lethe?

PROTESILAUS- Yes, numerous times, but I tell you nothing seems to work. My love is even stronger than that river of oblivion and I simply cannot forget her.

PLUTO- Just wait for her. She’ll be here soon enough. There’s no reason for you to go back to the world of the living now.

PROTESILAUS- No, I can’t wait. I can’t. Oh! Pluto, you have been in love yourself and know what it is to yearn for another. You must know how I feel right now.

PLUTO- Protesilaus, what good would it do you to return to the upper world for only an hour? After that short time you’ll find yourself here again, the memory of her still fresh in your mind, and your pain will be even worse!

PROTESILAUS- I will try to persuade her to come back here with me; and then, Pluto, you will have her in addition to me, two dead instead of one.
PLUTO- You are mad! This is not right. Such a thing has never happened before.

PROTESILAUS- You call me mad. Let me refresh your memory and then judge whether I am sane or not. When Orpheus grieved for Eurydice didn’t you grant his request to be with her? And didn’t you allow Heracles to rescue Alcestis, my kinswoman, from this very place?

PLUTO- Look at yourself in the mirror. You look like everyone else around here. Now, would you want to present your bare ugly skull to your pretty wife. She won’t even recognize you and you’ll end up frightening her. She’ll run away from you and then what will you do. You’ll return, humiliated, and regretting that you ever went back to the upper world. It will have been a useless journey.

PERSEPHONE- All the same, my husband, I want you to help him. Tell Hermes that when Protesilaus first enters the bright upper world to touch him on his forehead with the caduceus and transform him back into the handsome youth he was when he first left the bridal chamber.

PLUTO- Well, since Persephone has spoken on your behalf I will allow you to return.

(To Hermes) Conduct this man back to the world of the living and change him into a handsome bridegroom again. But mark my words, Protesilaus, you’ll be back here after one day. I will not allow you to remain in the upper world a second longer.