

## The laughter within the *Dialogues of the dead*<sup>1</sup>

### *O riso no Diálogos dos mortos*

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**Abstract:** The *Dialogues of the Dead* are among the most popular and controversial works of the *corpus lucianeum*. This article's aim is to explicit and analyze the different aspects of laughter in these dialogues (besides their philosophical implications), in order to provide a new comprehension of problems and difficulties often associated with this work. We may also mention and deal with some of the main themes displayed throughout the dialogues: self-knowledge, mortality, greed and vanity, for example. Besides, we try to delineate a different way of understanding Lucian's attitude towards philosophical laughter – mainly as Plato and the Cynics define it.

**Keywords:** Lucian; laughter; *Dialogues of the Dead*; philosophy; Cynicism.

**Resumo:** Os *Diálogos dos Mortos* estão entre os mais populares e controversos trabalhos do *corpus lucianeum*. O objetivo deste artigo é explicitar e analisar os diferentes aspectos do riso nesses diálogos (além de suas implicações filosóficas), a fim de oferecer uma nova compreensão de problemas e dificuldades frequentemente associados à obra. Nós mencionaremos e trabalharemos também com alguns dos principais temas trazidos pelos diálogos: autoconhecimento, mortalidade, ganância e vaidade, por exemplo. Além disso, tentaremos delinear uma maneira diversa de entender a atitude de Luciano no que diz respeito ao riso filosófico – sobretudo a partir da maneira como o definem Platão e os cínicos.

**Palavras-chave:** Luciano; riso; *Diálogos dos Mortos*; filosofia; cinismo.

## I

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The *Dialogues of the Dead* are among Lucian's works that received the most strikingly divergent interpretations by scholarship.<sup>3</sup> While Bompaire (1958, p. 561) in his encyclopedic study defends that the *Dialogues* are a transposition of certain rhetorical and literary forms to a *mise en scène* on the Underworld, Baldwin (1961, p. 201) argues that Lucian's "purpose is to establish a programme of social criticism unmistakably associated with the Cynics". In a different way of approaching this work, Relihan (1987, p. 189-192) believes that Menippus's character, as a hero, provides the coherence to the whole. That is the opposite of what Branham (1989, p. 143) says about the minor dialogues in general, since for him "instead of one text unified by plot or argument we have a series of detachable moments, like a book of epigrams or short poems, but with no detectable relation among them". The difficulty at stating whatsoever about Lucian and his works has commonly been admitted by all of these scholars and is apparent in their divergences. In this essay, we will try to discover the reason for such uneasiness by analyzing primarily the ultimate source of laughter in these dialogues, besides some of their comic strategies.

First, it is important to bear in mind that "laughter is essentially communal" (BRANHAM, 1989, p. 163) and, therefore, only possible when certain values are shared for a community. As it has been stated by the enlightening study of Bergson:

Laughter must be something of this kind, a sort of SOCIAL GESTURE. By the fear which it inspires, it restrains eccentricity, keeps constantly awake and in mutual contact certain activities of a secondary order which might retire into their shell and go to sleep, and, in short, softens down whatever the surface of the social body may retain of mechanical inelasticity. (BERGSON, 2003, p. 18)<sup>4</sup>

This assumption is especially important when we consider something that underlays all *Dialogues of the Dead*. As it is stated by Menippus's last words in the last dialogue (according to the order of  $\Gamma^5$ ): "In Hades all are equal, all alike".<sup>6</sup> The ultimate condition shared in the

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<sup>3</sup> BRANDÃO, 2001, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> In the original: "Le rire doit être quelque chose de ce genre, une espèce de *geste social*. Par la crainte qu'il inspire, il réprime les excentricités, tient constamment en éveil et en contact réciproque certaines activités d'ordre accessoire qui risqueraient de s'isoler et de s'endormir, assouplit enfin tout ce qui peut rester de raideur mécanique à la surface du corps social." (BERGSON, 1938, p. 20-21).

<sup>5</sup> The numbering of the dialogues here presented follows the most dominant manuscript tradition, which preserved in  $\Gamma$  the most important representative of the family  $\gamma$ . We add in brackets also the traditional reference number of the

Underworld by every character once mortal is their equality (*isotimía*). That is the value predominating throughout the main parts of these *Dialogues*, as it is often openly said by some of the characters themselves.<sup>7</sup>

However, if everyone is equal and share the same honors, what attitudes can become laughable and why? As the application of Bergson's idea to this case makes it clear, any attitude that may try to subvert the Underworld's main value, *i. e.* equality. That is mainly due to "memories from the life above" as they are expressed by some characters' "groans". In this regard, Diogenes message to Menippus (in *D. Mort. 1 [1], 1*) is enlightening since he states that:

Here you'll be able to laugh endlessly without any doubts, as I do now – and particularly when you see rich men, satraps and tyrants so humble and insignificant, with nothing to distinguish them but their groans, and see them to be weak and contemptible when they recall their life above.<sup>8</sup>

So the memory of a lost condition (as it is expressed by the word *memnēménoi*) and, despite its irreversible loss, the desire's expression to regain it (as it can be understood of the people groaning, *oimōgés*) are ways of trying to ignore the Underworld's equality. This first dialogue also provides a list of the types most propitious to express such regret for losing the previous life: satraps, tyrants, rich men, philosophers, handsome and strong people.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, the first dialogue works almost as a proemium to the whole series, exhibiting the main objects of laughter in the eyes of this society. What is laughable, however, is not so much the pursuit of

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dialogue. The order presented, however, cannot claim to preserve Lucian's one (if the author really determined a specific order). Cf. for more details McLeod's introduction in: LUCIAN, 1961, p. ix-xi.

<sup>6</sup> Throughout this essay, we use Macleod's translation of Lucian. In the original: "*isotimía gár en hádou kai hómoioi hápantes.*" (*D. Mort. 30 [25], 2*).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. BRANDÃO, 1996, p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> In the original: "entaútha dè ou paúsēi bebaíōs gelôn katháper egò nún, kai málista epeidàn horâis toûs plousious kai satrápas kai tyránnous hoúto tapeinoûs kai asémous, ek mónes oimogês diaginoskoménous, kai hótí malthakoî kai agenneîs eisi memneménoi tôn áno."

<sup>9</sup> According to Brandão (1996, p. 34), it exists a graduation, starting with the possession of material wealth and going to the possession of physical features, power and intellectual advantages. Correspondingly, this graduation would serve comic effects, implicating a lowering of traditionally high values.

these things on earth (though from the Cynic point of view, as it is represented by Diogenes and Menippus,<sup>10</sup> this is also ridiculous), but to keep longing for these things in the after-life.

Here it may be interesting to remember the relation made by Plato (*Phil.* 48c-d), through Socrates, between the ridiculous (*tò geloîon*) and self-ignorance.<sup>11</sup> This relation is not of small significance for the comprehension of Lucian's laughter in the *Dialogues of the Dead*. The incapacity of all characters that have been previously rich, handsome, powerful or reputedly sage, in acknowledging their present state of equality towards everyone else seems to be the main comic source in these dialogues. Socrates next words after the passage in the platonic text just mentioned are employed to divide in three the number of ways in which someone can be affected by lack of self-knowledge: in regard to wealth (*khremata*), to physical qualities (*eîdos*) and to virtues (*aretai*). Finally, he proceeds to define what kind of difference can exist within the effects of self-ignorance. According to him (*Phil.* 49 b-c), being "powerful" (*dýnatos*) or "powerless" (*adýnatos*) is what can make "ignorance" (*áгноia*) about one's own condition "hateful and infamous" (*ekhthrá te kai aiskhrá*) or "naturally ridiculous" (*tèn tôn geloîon [...] táxin te kai phýsin*). In the Underworld, due to the absence of power or any kind of distinction (the shadows are frequently called *asémoi*), according to this platonic division, the only possibility for self-ignorance is to be ridiculous.

In the same way, the direct mention, both in the platonic and in one of the lucianic dialogues,<sup>12</sup> of this ancient precept, as inscribed in the Oracle of Delphi -"Know thyself" (*gnôthi sautôn*) -, strengths the perception that the comic here is related to ignorance, not to any kind of ignorance, but to self-ignorance. Reading carefully the *Dialogues* we may find some passages where not knowing something, or rather, not knowing it anymore (through forgetfulness), is even desirable.<sup>13</sup> One has to acknowledge his own condition, know himself and forget what has been

<sup>10</sup> We tend to agree with what is defended by Bompaire (1958, p. 183, n. 6), for whom the roles of Menippus and Diogenes in Lucian's works are confused and often undifferentiated. Relihan (1987, p. 191), however, argues that Menippus is used in ways distinct from the other Cynics in the *Dialogues of the Dead*.

<sup>11</sup> In Fowler's translation, Socrates says that the ridiculous "involves the opposite of the condition mentioned in the inscription at Delphi" and Protarchus completes "You mean 'Know thyself', Socrates?" (*tò 'gnôthi sautôn légeis, ó Sókrates?*).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *D. Mort.* 3 [2], 2.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *D. Mort.* 13 [13], 6. At the end of this dialogue, Diogenes advises Alexander to "take a stiff drink of the water of Lethe, and repeat the dose frequently", in order to forget his earthly possessions and "stop sorrowing for the loss

irremediably lost. Once again, memory of the past life and reluctance in letting it go are ways of self-ignorance and, consequently, objects of laughter.

This same principle can be applied all along the *Dialogues of the Dead* to show how deeply even the most apparently shallow dialogue is related to this platonic form of comic. From the point of view of the characters' attitudes towards one another, we can find in these dialogues two main typical tendencies: a mockery of one's incapacity of "knowing himself"<sup>14</sup> and an agonistic dispute, where a *tour de force* is established between the speakers.

## II

The most part of the laughter in the *Dialogues of the Dead* is provoked where mockery seems to prevail by the demonstration of some characters' difficulty in knowing themselves well enough to accept an inevitable situation (*i.e.* inevitable from their perspective). When this inevitable situation is death itself, the mockery is made even figurative by the dialogue's *mise en scène* on the Underworld.<sup>15</sup>

The humor of such situations is made evident by the conflict aroused by desiring the opposite of something inevitable, as it is clear from the antithesis contained in the summary description of the following *Dialogues*: 2 [22], where Charon tries to make the penniless Menippus pay the fare; 3 [2], where the dead Croesus, Midas and Sardanapalus refuse to accept the loss of the goods that they once had in life; 4 [21], where Socrates is despised for having presented fear when faced with death (despite his traditional fearlessness of dying); 5 [18], where

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of Aristotle's "goods". In the original: "sù dè kàn tò Léthes hýdor khandòn epispasámenos píe kai aúthis píe kai pollákis: hoútos gàr paúsei epì toís Aristotélous agathoís aniómenos".

<sup>14</sup> It is not wrong to say "himself" in this context, since the only female whose voice sounds briefly in this group of dialogues is the one of the goddess Persephone (in *D. Mort.* 28 [23], 3). Other female figures are mentioned only *en passant* and have no active role. Cf.: BARTLEY, 2005, p. 362.

<sup>15</sup> As Bartley (2005, p. 362) notes: "Strongly visual descriptions exist mostly to highlight the characters of the dead, such as the description of the accoutrements that must be given up before boarding the ferry of Charon at Dialogue 20.2-11." Here it may be interesting to remember Bergson's remark (1938, p. 52) about this strategy of humor: "Est comique tout incident qui appelle notre attention sur le physique d'une personne alors que le moral est en cause." Note, for example, the mention of the softness typical of Persian's skulls in *D. Mort.* 6 [20], 2.

Menippus seems surprised that the Achaeans have ignored that Helen was nothing more than a short-living thing; 6 [20], where Menippus pities Homer for having praised figures that became utterly worthless, then ridicules the eastern kings that thought themselves gods and mocks the philosophers whose doctrines were shown by death to be false (Pythagoras's dogmatic interdiction of eating beans, Empedocles's vainglorious trick of throwing himself in the Etna and Socrates's pursuit of beauty); 7 [17], where Menippus tries to convince Tantalus that, even if he is thirsty, feeling it or complaining about it will make no difference (since he is already dead); 8 [26], where Menippus derides Chiron for not having acknowledged that death would be as monotonous as life; 9 [28], where Menippus mocks Tiresias for all the past stories told by him, even though his presence on the Underworld proves that he was as mortal as everyone else; 10 [3], where the dead prophets, Trophonius and Amphilochus, are ridiculed for defending that their divine parts are still prophesying on earth; 11 [16], where Diogenes tries to convince Heracles that he could not have been mortal and immortal at the same time; 13 [13], where Alexander is reprehended by Diogenes for not having learnt to realize the insecurity of the Fortune's gifts; 14 [4], where Hermes tries to get paid by an impoverished Charon, unable to quit his debt because of the low taxes of death; 20 [10], where Menippus, accompanied by Hermes and Charon, mocks the handsome, the powerful, the strong and the sophisticated thinkers, for being reluctant in leaving their earthly possessions before entering the Underworld; 21 [11], where Crates and Diogenes despise the people that desired to obtain in life useless things (from the point of view of death and of the Cynics themselves); 22 [27], where the three Cynics – Diogenes, Crates and Antisthenes – mock the people that lived ignoring death's inevitability; 29 [24], where Diogenes mocks the dead Mausolus for groaning, remembering and longing for his previous life on earth; 30 [25], where Nireus's attempt at being considered handsomer than Thersites meets no success, since all the dead look alike.

This simpler way of mocking the incapacity of accepting something absolutely clear from the Underworld's perspective is completed by another one. In the group of dialogues where

heritage is the main theme,<sup>16</sup> we may find a different kind of mockery, based mainly in the ridiculous provoked by the difference in the intention of someone's action and its result. We may also understand this kind of laughter as a mockery of someone's lack of self-knowledge, since the error is provoked by ignorance of the consequences of someone's own actions.

The *Dialogues of the Dead* in which such feature is the most prominent are the following ones: *15 [5]*, where Pluto instructs Hermes to let the old rich Eucrates surpass in life all the youths that err thinking the old man's heritage already theirs; *16 [6]*, where Pluto reprehends Terpsion for having pretended to be a friend of someone whose death he desired the most; *17 [7]*, where Zenophantus mocks his friend Callidemides for having tried to speed up the death of his already moribund benefactor; *18 [8]*, where Cnemon laments for having risked his life in order to augment his own fortune; *19 [9]*, where Polystratus speaks mockingly about all the youths that loved him in the hopes of inheriting his property and ended up with nothing.

It may be noted, that in spite of an apparent tone of morality, this group of dialogues defends mainly the accordance of someone's action (and more than that, of its consequences) with its own intentions. For what a strange morality would it be in the *D. Mort. 18 [8]*, in which the falling of Cnemon's roof upon his head is suggested to be linked with the publication of his will, leaving all his property to Hermolaus. What is mocked here is not the pursuit of richness,<sup>17</sup> but the inadequacy of Cnemon's action concerning his own intentions, since the main consequence of making public his will was not getting richer, but dying instead.<sup>18</sup> The pursuit of richness is not condemned *per se*, since Hermolaus, "like a greedy bass that has swallowed both hook and bait", is almost praised by the reply of Cnemon's interlocutor: "not only that, but he's swallowed you the fisherman as well".

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<sup>16</sup> The understanding of these dialogues as a whole is suggested by their disposition (in identical sequence both in the most dominant manuscript tradition, as found in Γ, and in the traditional order), besides their treatment of a coincident theme.

<sup>17</sup> According to Brandão (1996, p. 20), Lucian's attitude towards wealth is not revolutionary. He criticizes, through laughter, but he does not condemn richness, neither praises poverty, in absolute terms.

<sup>18</sup> This is made clear by the mocking remark of Cnemon's interlocutor at the end of this dialogue, where he says: "you've been caught by your own cunning." In the original: "*ὅστε σόφισμα κατὰ σαυτοῦ συντέθεικας*".

We believe to have shown that, in these dialogues, the mockery is mainly built up as a critic of self-ignorance. In other words, we think that humor – as we unilaterally depicted it – in every precedent dialogue is stated in defense of the maxim: “Know thyself”.

We ought to acknowledge, however, that even where such “positive” assertion is made as clearest as possible, a certain amount of uneasiness always remains after the last word. That is mainly due to the dialogic form of Lucian work, if we may apply the theorization established by Bakhtin of “polyphony” and “dialogism” as literary concepts.<sup>19</sup> As it has been noticed by Relihan (1987, p. 192), Menippus “appears as a type of the vainglorious individual whose pride in personal achievement is an object of Cynic criticism in the *Dialogues* [...]” It can be argued that he and (in our opinion) the other Cynics as well, ridiculing so often people for not knowing themselves, were also acting ridiculously from the Underworld’s perspective. They themselves were trying to undermine the universal valor of equality through the establishment of the principle of self-knowledge as a measure of someone’s own achievement in life and death. From the perspective of the Cynics, which at first glance would seem to be the heroes of these dialogues,<sup>20</sup> this principle is true and can be used to establish the humor in regard of anyone else’s self-ignorance. What they seem to ignore, however, is that death makes all equal – even the Cynics – and that their wisdom can only lie in realizing that their wisdom makes no difference.<sup>21</sup>

This undermining force inside the Cynic voice, whose perspective seems to prevail throughout the *Dialogues of the Dead*, is responsible for generating the uneasiness already mentioned within this unilateral way of reading them.<sup>22</sup> If we change the perspective, as the dialogic form invites us to do, all the characters that criticize the others for not knowing themselves appear also ridiculous in their attempt at differentiating themselves, since they are all dead and no differentiation can exist among them. Their vainglory is a way of self-ignorance as

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<sup>19</sup> Cf.: BAKHTINE, 1970.

<sup>20</sup> In the “mocking dialogues”, the apparent positioning of a “right” side seems to have caught Relihan (1987, p. 192) in one of Lucian’s traps, since the scholar defends Menippus’s heroic character in these dialogues. In our opinion, even where Menippus seems to possess the main voice, there is no “right” side – only different ones.

<sup>21</sup> We merely enlarge the breadth of Relihan’s assertion (1987, p. 202) about the uselessness of Menippus’s wisdom.

<sup>22</sup> Halliwell’s survey of Lucian’s oeuvre, within the frame of Greek laughter, takes into account only this unilateral version of understanding it (mainly from the perspective of Cynic characters). His conclusion, even if suggesting the possibility of laughing simultaneously (in the *Dialogi Mortuorum*) about life and death, does not draw any attention to the laughable ridicule of the people themselves laughing about the others (Cf. HALLIWELL, 2008, p. 470-471).



great, or even greater, than these forms of self-ignorance ridiculed by them. The principle “Know thyself” appears as the measure of ridiculing the others and, simultaneously, from a different perspective, of acting themselves ridiculously.<sup>23</sup>

### III

Basing our analysis on the relation established by Plato, between the ridiculous and self-ignorance, we found a way of interpreting the most part of the *Dialogues of the dead* from a double perspective, since the maxim “Know thyself” (and the valorization of self-knowledge) can be understood as working for the Cynics or against them. We had ascertained, however, that taking into account the characters’ attitudes towards one another, we could find a second main typical tendency, besides the mocking one, in these dialogues: an agonistic dispute, where a *tour de force* would be established between the speakers.<sup>24</sup>

In the dialogues where this tendency is the most prominently to be found, the uneasiness already mentioned seems at first even amplified. This effect is due to the lack of what could be seen as a “right” side in derision of a “wrong” one.<sup>25</sup> All the characters are given voice to present their arguments in order to win the rhetorical competition that seems to take place.

The agonistic dialogues are the following ones: 12 [14], where Philip reprehends Alexander for having believed (and maybe believing still) in his divine ascendancy; 23 [29], where Agamemnon tries to convince Ajax to forgive Odysseus; 24 [30], where Sostratus pleads his innocence based on the argument that he could not be guilty of something already spun for him by Fate; 25 [12], where Hannibal contends with Alexander for the first place; 26 [15], where

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<sup>23</sup> It may be interesting to evoke Bakhtin’s words about a monologic discourse to compare the implications of Lucian’s dialogic one: “Dans un monde du monologue tertium non datur: la pensée est ou bien affirmée ou bien niée, sinon elle cesse tout simplement d’être une pensée ayant sa pleine signification.” (BAKHTINE, 1970, p. 94). The opposite is, therefore, true about the “*pensée*” contained in this lucianic “*monde du dialogue*”.

<sup>24</sup> Brandão (2001, p. 229) talks about the dialogue as an agonistic space in which a crisis can be mimetized and displayed.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. the n. 19 of this article.

Antilochus criticizes Achilles for his infamous words to Odysseus<sup>26</sup>; 27 [19], where Aecus reprehends Protesilaus for blaming someone else, besides himself (or as it turns out, his Fate), as the cause of his own misfortunes; 28 [23], where Protesilaus prays Pluto and Persephone to be sent back to life for a single day with his unforgettable wife.

It may be noted that some motives already mentioned receive an analogous treatment in these seven dialogues, as for example, the necessity of accepting something inevitable, the representation of forgetfulness as a medicine in the after-life and, of course, the importance of knowing oneself. The difference, however, of these dialogues is that – even though it presents a rhetorical *tour de force* – the initial equality of arguments in which the characters seem to display their dispute is undermined throughout the dialogue.

This difference may be due mainly to the fact that some arguments really seem to take into account the principle of self-knowledge in regard of the present circumstances (or to develop it in the act of speaking, as it is in Protesilaus's case). The apparent equality between the rhetorical contenders seems to be destroyed by one side's understanding of their present condition – and, in this way, equality is undermined by self-knowledge. That is the reason why Philip reprehends so firmly his son's aspirations at comparing himself with the gods. This is also the reason why Ajax can affirm so inflexibly his hate for Odysseus, in spite of his recently acquired respect for Athena; or why Sostratus comes to convince Minos about his innocence (despite the criminal deeds during his life); or why Scipio can persuade Minos about the greatness of Alexander over Hannibal; or why Antilochus comes to present a more convenient attitude than Achilles's one (in regard to their present state as dead people with no distinction); or why Protesilaus is made to discover that instead of complaining about his Fate he could try to change it.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> As these words are reported in the *Odyssey*, XI, 489-491.

<sup>27</sup> This unitarian interpretation of the *D. Mort.* 27 [19] and 28 [23] is suggested by their concatenated disposition (in immediate sequence according to the order as found in Γ or having three dialogues between them, in the traditional order) and their coincidence of subject.

Besides the reasons already mentioned, all these dialogues have some characteristics in common: a positive account of the principle “Know thyself”<sup>28</sup>; the presence of Epic characters; the absence of Cynics; a far less obvious humor and almost no mockery. These evidences make us conclude that they are essentially different from the other dialogues analyzed in the previous parts of this article.

#### IV

Having briefly scrutinized all *Dialogues of the Dead*, we hope to have clarified the main relations between some of the comic features of this oeuvre and a philosophical understanding of the world.<sup>29</sup> We intend to conclude soon, but let us make a brief excursus about the absence of a remarkable voice: that of Odysseus.<sup>30</sup> Even though it may be hard to ascertain the significance of an absence, we think that Odysseus’s silence in the *Dialogues of the Dead* is a very important one.

Lucian seems to accept the *katábasis* as it is related by Laertes’s son in the *Odyssey*, as the allusions in the dialogues between Ajax and Agamemnon,<sup>31</sup> on the one hand, and between Achilles and Antilochus,<sup>32</sup> on the other, make clear. Even if Tiresias is depicted as a false prophet and a liar in *D. Mort. 9 [28]*, this depiction is made by Menippus and his voice, as we have already seen, has to be relativized. In any case, Lucian does not deform Homer’s accounts of the Underworld, but rather performs them. One may think (besides the three dialogues already mentioned) also about *D. Mort. 11 [16]*, where the physical description of Heracles on the

<sup>28</sup> Philip even exteriorizes it (in *D. Mort. 12 [14], 6*): “Aren’t you ashamed, Alexander? Won’t you learn to forget your pride, and know yourself, and realise that you’re now dead?”. In the original: “καὶ οὐκ αἰσχύνηι, ὁ Αἰλέξανδρε, οὐδὲ τὸν τύφον ἀπομαθήσει καὶ γνῶσει σεαυτὸν καὶ συνήσει ἕδε νεκρός ὄν?”

<sup>29</sup> For a contrary view of Lucian’s relation towards philosophy, cf. BOMPAIRE, 1958, p. 125-7.

<sup>30</sup> As acknowledged by Möllendorf (2010, p. 76, n. 7): “Ebenso mag von Interesse sein, dass beispielsweise eine *a priori* für eine Sprecherrolle prädestinierte Gestalt wie Odysseus fehlt [...]” Odysseus may not be heard, but he is seen by Menippus among “the finest of the Greeks” (“*áristoi tôn Hellénon*”), in *D. Mort. 6 [20], 1*.

<sup>31</sup> *D. Mort. 23 [29]*.

<sup>32</sup> *D. Mort. 26 [15]*.

Underworld is not profoundly different from the one made by Odysseus in Alcinoos's court. What differs is only the speculation about the divine significance of such a presence there: Odysseus is said to have seen Heracles's shade, but the attempt at arranging this sight within the traditional account of his apotheosis is merely speculative.<sup>33</sup>

If our assumption about Lucian's acceptance of Odysseus's *katábasis* in the Homeric account is correct, he receives an advantageous point of view that almost none of the other characters depicted in the *Dialogues of the Dead* had: he knows already in life what expects him after death. He is gifted with the advantage that Achilles (both in the *Odyssey*, XI, 489-491, as in the *D. Mort.* 26 [15], 2), complains to have missed when he made his choice of a brief, but honorable life, instead of a long and obscure one. Odysseus knows already how miserable after-life is when he makes his choice of a mortal destiny, by returning to Ithaca, instead of remaining with Calypso, on the island of Ogygia.<sup>34</sup>

In this sense, it may as well be of interest to remember his characterization in the *Odyssey's* *proemium* as a man who saw the cities of many people, having learnt their minds.<sup>35</sup> In view of the relation already shown to exist in the *Dialogues of the Dead*, between self-ignorance and the ridiculous, Odysseus would be the less ridicule of all the Greek mortals at Lucian's disposal. Unless Odysseus's accounts in the Phaeacians' court were to be utterly dismissed as lies (as they are said to be in another of Lucian's book, *A True Story*<sup>36</sup>), the self-knowledge acquired through his *katábasis* would be difficult to become object of ridicule. Any decision made by him, would have been with an ultimate consciousness about death's miserable condition.

<sup>33</sup> In Homer's *Odyssey* XI, 601-604: "tòn dè met'eisenóesa bien Herakleíen,/ eidolon: autòs dè met'athanátoisi theoísi/ tértetai en thalíeis kai ékhei kallísphyron Hében,/ paída Diòs megáloio kai Héres khrysopedíλου".

<sup>34</sup> According to Brandão (2001, p. 261), Odysseus's experience of the other is a functional element of his return. It can be said that he chooses to stick with what is characteristic of his own self (*tà oikeía*) in a conscious way only because he really experienced the alterity (*tà exotiká*).

<sup>35</sup> In the original (*Odyssey*, I, 3): "pollôn d'anthrópon íden ástea kai nóon éгно".

<sup>36</sup> In one of the first lines of this work, Odysseus's stories are considered charlatanry by the narrator (*Verae Historiae* 1, 3): "arkhegòs dè autoíis kai didáskalos tés toiaútes bomolokhías ho toû Homérou Odusseús, toís peri tòn Alkínoun diegoúmenos anémon te douleían kai monophthálmous kai omophágous kai agríous tinàs anthrópous, éti dè poluképhala zôa kai tàs hupò pharmákon tòn hetaíron metabólás, hoís pollà ekeínos pròs idiótas anthrópous toús Phaiakas eterateúsato".

## V

After this brief excursus intended to explain Odysseus's silence (or at least to speculate the reasons for it), we return to our main argument in order to conclude this article. We believe to have shown how a dispute of principles is in the core of all *Dialogues of the Dead*. If, on one hand, the universal equality of the Underworld is often stated, and even used as a resource to ridicule people who try to undermine it, on the other, the principle of self-knowledge is openly displayed as the only way of dealing properly with any due circumstance (in this case, death itself).

Concerning equality, the Cynics laugh about anyone else trying to put it aside – by remembering earthly possessions and reclaiming them – but they become laughable as well in attempting to differentiate themselves through the possession of a comprehensive self-knowledge. What they seem to ignore is that, in laughing about people who seem to ignore themselves, they act ridiculously on the basis of their own self-ignorance, since the Underworld's equality could not be undermined by anything (as the valorization of self-knowledge as a “new” principle would suggest). The platonic assertion about the ridiculous – as it is related to a powerless self-ignorance – is, therefore, one of the sources of laughter displayed by Lucian, independently of the perspective in which the characters are taken.

The same criterion is important to understand why some dialogues do not present such laughable features, but rather display some serious considerations about the nature of life and death. In the dialogues where a rhetorical *tour de force* takes place, the apparent initial equality among the contenders is actually undermined by arguments capable of reflecting their present circumstances (by the means of an acute self-knowledge).

Schematically, we could display our analysis as it follows: in the mocking dialogues, the claims of superiority based on self-knowledge are put aside by the principle of equality; in the agonic rhetorical dialogues, the apparent equality is put aside by the principle of self-knowledge. That is the reason why in the *Dialogues of the Dead* the arguments seem to be undermined from within (even if this interpretation does not invalidate a more direct and unilateral one).

Our considerations could be taken as intending to conclude that an absolute negativity undermines Lucian's work, making it impossible to have determinate objects of laughter.<sup>37</sup> Quite on the other hand, we believe that a positive message – even if it may seem dubious in its applicability – is clearly defined throughout these dialogues and this is a possibility of balance between their two main principles: the one of equality (*isotimía*) and the other of self-knowledge (*gnôthi sautòn*). The possibility of such balance has implications both upon the mortals, for whom Lucian's dialogues were presented in the actual occasion of performance, and upon the fictitious dead depicted in these dialogues: for, on one hand, the mortals must acknowledge the inevitability of their deaths, while, on the other, the dead must see the uselessness of speaking and learn to say nothing, enduring it all...<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> As Relihan (1987, p. 204) does it when – talking about the *Dialogues of the Dead* – he argues that: “These fantasies are in themselves quite arresting, but this is self-destructive fantasy.”

<sup>38</sup> We paraphrase the last words of Antilochus to Achilles (in *D. Mort.* 26 [15], 4), in which he seems to distill the ultimate possibility of wisdom for the dead: utter silence. In this same basis, we tried to justify Odysseus's silence. Antylochus's original words in the dialogue are “*tò gàr anophelès toû légeîn horômen: siopân gàr kai phéreîn kai anékhesthai dédoktai hemîn, mè kai gélotá óphlomen hósper kai sù toiaûta eukhómenoî*”.

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