

**William SEAVEY**

**Lucian's Lamp: A Platonic Semiology of the Second Sophistic**

During the Second Century C.E., Lucian of Samosata developed a rhetorically novel doctrine stressing judgment of character by joining the blossoming quasi-science of physiognomy with traditional Platonic ideas about the soul. His subversive use of current physiognomic doctrine begs further explanation: first of context, then of contemporary physiognomy, and finally of Lucian's combination.

By the Second Sophistic, "original" philosophy—that is, debating the nature of fundamental and enduring principles—was rare, supplanted by an increasingly complex philosophical rhetoric that sought novel methods of presenting old arguments. As a consequence, a good deal of what passed for philosophy was merely a search for capable guides to philosophy. Philosophic zealotry becomes scarcely distinguished from religious proselytizing in a search for adherents to the various sects. Within them all, in the Second Sophistic, the art of rhetoric dominates and determines how arguments are fashioned. In this competitive sectarian context, Lucian combined a sort of Platonism (meta-)physiognomy.

As a discipline, physiognomy began in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.E. but flourished as a commonplace under the florid rhetorical styles of the Second Sophistic. Lucian too employed typical physiognomic method, but in several passages he begins to transcend physiognomy's methodology—a knowledge of the physical—into an investigation of the metaphysical. In the *Cataplus*, for example, an underworld judgment scene has Rhadamanthys judging Cyniscus, asking him to strip so he can examine marks (*stigmata*) on the back of his *soul* earned for evil deeds, parallel to the *stigmata* slaves might earn for misbehavior. Cyniscus is clean except for a few faint traces of former brands subsequently washed away by philosophical training (2.47). Similar passages can be found in earlier writers (a famous example at Euripides *Med.* 516-19), but their expressions most often lament the absence of such capabilities among humans. Lucian's passages, on the other hand, consider that metaphysical reflections are capable of being grasped. He develops this theme in a later work titled *Hermotimus*, written in Platonic dialogue form, wherein he explores the possibility that there may in outer fact be signs indicating the nature of a person's inner soul. As a corollary to physiognomy (which searches outer physical clues for practical uses), Lucian's new discipline searches invisible inner clues for philosophical uses, indicating the nature of a soul and of identifying the best and true philosophy, or at least the best guides for finding it. Lucian accomplishes this with a sweeping combination of physiognomy and Platonic doctrines of the soul, Sophistic doctrines of the logos, and Menippean-Cynic doctrines of common sense—a combination that deserves a fresh look.

In the *Hermotimus* Lucian imitates Platonic form in order to display rhetorical prowess and novel approaches. The novelty he presents has been under-appreciated because serious rivalry for philosophic guides died with the Second Sophistic. The attempt, however, is noteworthy because Lucian articulated what Second Sophistic Greeks had attempted to find: a semiology of the worthy philosophical guide.