



Hume's Deathbed Reading: A Tale of Three Letters

Annette C. Baier

Hume Studies Volume 32, Number 2, (2006) 347-356.

Your use of the HUME STUDIES archive indicates your acceptance of HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use, available at

<http://www.humesociety.org/hs/about/terms.html>.

HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the HUME STUDIES archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Each copy of any part of a HUME STUDIES transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

For more information on HUME STUDIES contact

humestudies-info@humesociety.org

<http://www.humesociety.org/hs/>

Hume's Deathbed Reading: A Tale of Three Letters

ANNETTE C. BAIER

Abstract: Adam Smith's famous account of Hume's death, in his letter to Strahan, included a reference to what Hume had been reading shortly before his death, Lucian's "Dialogues of the Dead." But when one reads those, one becomes puzzled by Smith's report that Hume had been trying out excuses to delay death, for no such scene occurs in those Lucian dialogues. Fortunately Smith's was not the only letter written about exactly what Lucian dialogue Hume was reading.

Our knowledge of what David Hume was reading shortly before he died (at age sixty-five, probably of a liver tumor, after a two-year illness that weakened him but caused him little pain), is due to letters his friends and doctors wrote, and to the journal of the curious James Boswell, who visited Hume and reported what he said, and what he was then reading. On the day of Boswell's visit, July 7th, 1776, a month and a half before his death, Hume was reading George Campbell's just-published *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, and he advised Boswell to read Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, also published earlier that year. It is Adam Smith's letter to William Strahan, Hume's London publisher, written on November 9th, 1776, that has furnished the received version of Hume's deathbed reading. Smith's letter to Strahan was published in 1777 along with Hume's brief autobiography, *My Own Life*, written earlier in the year he died. In it he refers to his long illness and reckons upon "a speedy dissolution." In his letter, Smith said that when he called on Hume on

August 8th, he was reading Lucian's "Dialogues of the Dead." In an earlier letter, written before Hume's death, on August 14th, to Alexander Wedderburn, he had simply said that Hume had been reading the dialogues of Lucian, and thinking what excuse he could offer to delay death. He did not expect to be able to delay it, and was taking emotional farewells of some of his close friends, such as James Edmonstoune. The conversation with Smith was bravely facetious, but he had had some family worries to trouble him, so the Lucian readings would be light relief during a difficult time, rather than a steady diet of irreligious satire. His devout sister was in a distraught state,¹ and any irreligious reading that David was doing would surely have upset her.

Lucian of Samosata, the second-century satirist, became a favorite author of Renaissance humanists, and was one of Hume's favorites. In his *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (EPM 6.1; SBN 21),² he refers to him as "a very moral writer," although licentious with regard to pleasure, and prone to "spleen and irony" when speaking of virtue. He was widely read in Hume's day, and was sometimes used in introductory classes in Greek. In 1396, the government of Florence had invited the Byzantine scholar, Manuel Chrysoloras, to teach ancient Greek in a public seminar, and he used Lucian as a text.³ Erasmus and More translated some of his dialogues into Latin, and Dryden wrote a book about Lucian based on those translations. John Locke had the Oxford students whom he was tutoring in Greek translate Lucian.⁴ An English translation of Lucian's works by Charles Cotton appeared in 1675, under the title *Burlesque upon Burlesque: The Scoffer Scoff'd*, and these dialogues, especially the dialogues of the dead, were imitated first in Italy, by Leon Battista Alberti, in the fifteenth century, then in England by William King and Matthew Prior in the seventeenth, later by George Lyttleton and Elizabeth Montagu, and in France, by Rabelais, Fontenelle and Fenelon.

Hume was likely reading Lucian in the Greek, as he prided himself on being able to do that—he had been taught Greek at Edinburgh University, and says in *My Own Life* that he had improved his mastery of it after finishing his *Treatise*. When given a French translation of the Lucian dialogue, "Zeus Rants" or "Zeus, Tragic Actor" by Morellet, in 1766, he said in his letter of thanks that he had compared Morellet's French with the original Greek, and found it as elegant and animated, but at times inexact in rendering the sense.⁵ Smith said, both to Wedderburn and to Strahan, that the dying Hume had joked about what excuses he could offer Charon, to delay his departure from the land of the living. He had, he said, no daughter to marry, no house to finish building, no enemies on whom he wished to revenge himself. But he could try the excuse that he had been busy correcting his published works, and would like to stay awhile to see what effect they had, especially in "hastening the downfall of the prevailing systems of superstition." Charon's response is expected to be "That will not happen for these many hundred years . . . get into the boat this instant, you lazy loitering rogue." Smith gives this

report to show with what serenity, good humor, and lack of vanity, Hume faced death. This conversation was on the 8th of August, 1776, a month after Boswell's visit. Hume died on the 26th of that month, in what one of his doctors, Joseph Black, called "such a happy composure of mind that nothing could exceed it."

A while back I was asked by a Hume correspondent, Emilio Mazza, of Milan, if I could tell him just which Lucian dialogue of the dead contained anything like the excuses Hume considers and rules out, when he joked with Smith, since he had searched for them in vain in the thirty Lucian dialogues named "Dialogues of the Dead." I replied I knew no more than Smith had told Strahan, and expressed mild surprise that no-one, till then, seemed to have cared exactly what Hume had been reading. The Adam Smith story had been accepted, unchecked. But fortunately the Otago University Library had by then acquired James Fieser's *Early Responses to Hume* and this included the full text of the letter written by another of Hume's doctors, William Cullen, to John Hunter on September 17, 1776, a month before Smith's letter to Strahan, and a month after Smith's letter to Wedderburn.⁶ Mossner, Hume's biographer, had included part of Cullen's letter as an appendix to his biography, but not the part naming the dialogue. According to Cullen, Hume was reading Lucian's "Kataplous," in English, "The Downward Journey," sometimes also called "The Tyrant," after one of its main characters, the tyrant Megapenthes. And this Lucian dialogue, translated by Francis Hickee into English as early as 1634, under title, "The Infernall Ferrie, Or, The Tyrant"⁷ (Keener, 27) contains many of the excuses Smith mentions, offered by Megapenthes to try to delay his departure from this life. So the puzzle was solved, and it is in a way shocking that it took the Hume community so long to even raise the question. (You may note that my mild surprise turns to being shocked, once I myself have the neglected information.) But although Lucian was widely read in Hume's day, the overlap between readers of Hume these days, and readers of Lucian, seems to have been almost nil. Only in Milan, it seems, was anyone interested both in Hume and in Lucian. The rule that one should read all one's author's authors is in any case an almost impossibly demanding one with an author as widely read, both in ancient and in modern writers, as was Hume.

Here is what Cullen wrote about Hume's deathbed reading:

A few days before his death a friend found him reading, and upon inquiring what was the book, Mr Hume told him it was Lucian, and that he had just been reading the dialogue entitled Kataplous, in which Megapenthes, arriving on the banks of the Styx, offers many pleas for being allowed to return for sometime to the world. Mr Hume said the fancy struck him to think what pleas he himself might offer on such an occasion. He thought he might say that he had been very busily employed making his countrymen wiser, and particularly in delivering them from

the Christian superstition, but that he had not yet completed that great work. This he at first thought might be sufficiently specious: but then he reflected that Mercury would tell him it was idle to think of remaining for that purpose, and it would be time enough to return for that purpose in two or three hundred years.⁸

This account differs from Smith's to Wedderburn, written a month earlier, in specifying the Lucian dialogue, and the brand of superstition that it was Hume's great unfinished work to defeat, in leaving out the excuses that did not fit Hume's situation, and in having the excuses offered to Mercury rather than Charon. (In fact in the dialogue they are offered to the fate Clotho, in the presence of both Mercury and Charon.) It differs from Smith's letter to Strahan, written a month later, in the three latter ways, and in naming the Lucian dialogue(s) Hume was reading as "Kataplous" or the "Downward Journey," rather than the "Dialogues of the Dead."

The dialogue, "Kataplous," which Cullen says Hume was reading, is not one of those included in, or even usually in the same volume⁹ as, Lucian's influential and much imitated "Dialogues of the Dead," at least not in editions of Lucian such as the Loeb, nor, as far as I have been able to find out, in editions Hume would have used. It is believed to have been written considerably earlier than the later "Dialogues of the Dead," and it, along with a similar dialogue, "Menippus, or the descent into Hades," founded a slightly different genre. Lucian's "Dialogues of the Dead" (which are usually referred to by their number, not by separate titles) take place on the far side of the River Styx, and are conversations between those, usually the famous, who are thoroughly and usually long dead. Lucian's characters include Socrates, Diogenes, Alexander, Scipio, Hannibal. It was this Lucian genre, in which the famous dead moralize, that had the most imitators. Samuel Johnson had a low opinion of it as a genre, saying that once an author had selected his characters, it was all too predictable what they would be made to say.¹⁰ But the "downward journey" was not so predictable and was the better vehicle for satire, for unmasking the pretensions of the over-confident. In such "downward journey" or "descent" dialogues, the recently dead converse with Charon, Mercury, or the fate Clotho, and in some cases try to delay their departure. Then they are ferried across the river, and are judged by Rhadamanthus or Minos. "Kataplous" inspired such modern imitations as Antoine Houdar de la Motte's *Fables Nouvelles*, the third part of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, and Henry Fielding's *A Journey from this World to the Next*. Hume had helped Madame Riccoboni to translate Fielding's novel, *Amelia*, into French, and on some accounts¹¹ was also reading Fielding at the end. Fielding was a great admirer of Lucian, whom he saw, along with Cervantes and Swift, as making up the great triumvirate of satirists. He planned to translate him, and his own play, *An Author's Farce* has scenes on the banks of the Styx, with

Charon as a character, demanding and not always getting his fare—ragged poets are sometimes ferried for free. Then there is his *A Journey from this World to the Next*, which takes its travellers, guided by Mercury, across the river to the gates of Elysium, where Minos, who seems to have very Humean standards of merit, decides who can enter. The travellers include the supposed author, who has died of a fever, in his forties, at his home in Cheapside in 1741, after a dissolute life, which Minos overlooks, since it harmed no other persons. Among those encountered are spirits travelling in the other direction, and a large part of the work is taken up with Julian the Apostate telling of his various reincarnations. It would be a suitably easy and light book to read on one's deathbed, but there are no excuses for delaying death to be found in it; on the contrary, its spirits seem glad to be done with life, and all dread reincarnation.

If the accounts of Hume reading Fielding as well as Lucian at the end are reliable, he may have been reading more than one “downward journey,” as spiritual preparation for his own. We know he was reading Lucian, and reading Campbell's *Rhetoric*, which refers to Lucian in a footnote to the chapter on wit, humor and ridicule, and he may have been reading Lucian's imitator, Fielding. But the excuses for delay that, in conversation with Smith, he ruled out as not applicable in his own case come not from any imitator but from Lucian's own “Downward Journey.” And the excuse Hume himself mock-proposes, of wanting to wait to see the downfall of the Christian superstition, can be seen as loosely modelled on Megapenthes' plea to wait to subdue the Pisidians and Lydians, as its expected reply is on that of Clotho to Megapenthes in the dialogue, “why man, you are asking for a stay not of a day or two but twenty years. . . . Get into the boat!” She also addresses him as “vile wretch.”

Does it matter whether, as Adam Smith reports, Hume was reading Lucian's “Dialogues of the Dead,” or, as Cullen reports, Lucian's “Downward Journey”? Frederick Keener, authority on English dialogues of the dead, sees quite a difference between the two genres,¹² but even he sometime calls “the Downward Journey” “Lucian's extra dialogue of the dead.”¹³ Classical scholars differ on how much difference there is between these earlier and later dialogues. The Codex used by Chrysoloras in Florence in the fourteenth century (Vaticanus Graecus 87) is atypical in collecting the dialogues “Charon,” “Menippus,” and “the Downward Journey” along with the “Dialogues of the Dead,”¹⁴ and it is not impossible that that was the Greek text Hume had. He could, of course, have been reading several dialogues, from one or from different volumes, on different days, or even on the same day, as none of the dialogues are very long. But if we want to see what Lucian excuses Hume's, as reported by Smith and Cullen, were repeating, then we need to know he was reading the “Downward Journey.” My Milan correspondent was puzzled by Hume's mention of Charon, who does not usually figure in Lucian's “Dialogues of the Dead,” whose characters have long finished with the ferryman's services.

(Dialogues 2, 14, and 20, where Charon figures, are exceptions. In the long dialogue 20, Charon and Hermes discuss the possible need for a new ferry, and how its load might be lightened by its passengers shedding what they are vain about.)

Hume in his published writings refers neither to “Kataplous” nor to the “Dialogues of the Dead.” He does refer to the dialogues “Menippus,” “Salaried Posts in Great Houses,” “The Ship,” “The Parliament of the Gods,” “Icaromenippus,” “Saturnalia,” “Zeus Catechised,” and “Timon or the Misanthrope,” and in addition there is the indirect mention of “Zeus Rants” in the letter to Morellet. In his publications he gives the Latin names of the dialogues in his footnotes, so he may have had the Latin texts on his shelves, as well as the Greek and possibly the English, and at least one dialogue in its French version.¹⁵ No Lucian texts were in the library of Hume’s nephew, Baron Hume, who, after his father John’s death, inherited all Hume’s books except the 100 volumes of her own choosing that Hume left his sister Katherine in his will. It is not likely that she chose what he had been reading at the end, as she would have deplored it. Several books that Hume mentions, and clearly possessed, were absent from Baron Hume’s library. What did remain, by the time Baron Hume had the books catalogued, were the works of several Lucian imitators: Swift, Fontenelle, Houdare la Motte, Fielding, and Lyttleton.¹⁶

One puzzle remains. Cullen in his letter refers to an un-named friend who found Hume reading Lucian, and who told him which dialogue it was. This friend could well have been Adam Smith, who in two letters says he saw Hume reading Lucian. Other visitors around that time, August 8th, included Hume’s old friend, James Edmonstoune, known as a fellow-infidel, but not especially as a reader of Lucian. Smith was such a reader, and refers to Lucian in his lectures on rhetoric, in particular in the ninth lecture. But if it was Smith who told Cullen that Hume, when he visited, was reading “The Downward Journey,” why did he tell Strahan that it was “the Dialogues of the Dead”? In his letter to Alexander Wedderburn, he had been vague, simply reporting that Hume had been reading “the dialogues of Lucian.” Did he not expect Wedderburn to know the different dialogues? Or did he expect him to know them so well that he could tell which dialogue it must have been, from the excuses offered? (Wedderburn, later Lord Rosslyn, after he retired as Lord Chancellor, was a cultured and well-read man.) Did Smith think that Wedderburn would work out for himself what dialogue it was, while Strahan and the public would prefer Hume’s reading to have been the slightly less satirical “Dialogues of the Dead,” and so given them a slightly doctored version of the truth?

Smith himself knew Lucian’s dialogues quite well, and surely knew the difference between eighteenth-century imitators of the “Dialogues of the Dead,” such as Fontenelle, Fenelon, and George Lyttleton, and the more satirical imitators of the “Downward Journey” such as Swift, Fielding, and de la Motte. But perhaps

Hume was reading both, or perhaps Smith himself preferred the dialogues of the dead to the earlier more satirical dialogues. After comparing Lucian's ridicule with Swift's—Lucian ridicules the follies of the grave, Swift the follies of the “gayer sort,” Smith assures his students that not all Lucian's writings were “confined to subjects of a ludicrous nature, he has many discourses of a serious cast, recommending the different virtues.”¹⁷ In Lecture 10 he compares Lucian as a moral teacher with Addison, who avoids Lucian's “bold and extravagant strokes of humour” and would never “put a ludicrous speech into the mouth of a dead man.” Nor would he, like Swift, “throw out biting sarcasms in his own person.”¹⁸ Smith seems to prefer the serious Addisonian approach to the Lucianic. There is very little sarcasm or satire to be found in his own writings. (His *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is a humorless, sometimes preachy work. It does contain one footnote reference to Lucian, to his account of Zeno the Stoic's method of suicide—self starvation, Lucian says in “Macrobioi.” And he also quotes Lucian once in *Wealth of Nations*, on how philosophers should be paid.) So Smith might well have wished that it had been the more serious Lucian dialogues, not the satirical “Kataplous,” that Hume chose to read at the end, and may have wished this partly for the sake of Hume's pious sister.

Smith was writing his letter about Hume's death and deathbed reading for publication,¹⁹ and there was considerable public interest in how the Great Infidel had faced death. To be reading and mock-casting himself in any Lucian dialogue was to offend Christian notions of how one should meet death,²⁰ and Smith does not hide the fact that Hume was mocking “prevalent superstitions,” and choosing to consider comic versions of pagan stories about what happens after death, as if, as he put it at the end of his “Natural History of Religion,” he was “opposing one species of religion to another, (to) set them a-quarreling, while we ourselves, during their fury and contention, happily make our escape.”

It could have been seen as an act of vanity had Hume cast himself as a participant in a conversation with the famous dead, with Socrates, or Alexander, or Montaigne (a favorite with the modern Lucian-imitators). What he did, in the reported conversation, was borrow ridiculous excuses from an obscure tyrant, who is in the Lucian dialogue unfavorably compared to the cobbler, Micyllus. In so doing, he scoffed at himself and his own pretensions. Hume did, in fact, figure after his death in several inferior dialogues of the dead (one with a general in the American Revolutionary army, both rejoicing in the American victory over England), and also in Landor's later Lucian-derivative *Imaginary Conversations*, where he converses with his dramatist-friend John Home, to whom his *Four Dissertations*, containing his “Natural History of Religion,” was dedicated. And he figures in a just-published twenty-first century one, conversing with John Rawls about justice.²¹ But he was not casting himself as someone worth listening to, after his death. Rather he likened himself to a ridiculous forgotten tyrant, wanting to wait around

till all his old earthly enemies had been vanquished. Of course, as he said firmly to Boswell, he did not expect any afterlife, pagan or Christian. He calmly awaited annihilation, or at least a speedy dissolution, not downward journeys nor conversations with the famous dead. He was busy till the last correcting his writings, and trying to arrange the publication of his *Dialogues on Natural Religion*, without much help from Adam Smith, who feared they would offend. Hume's nephew arranged their publication in 1779, and they did offend. His *History of England*, with its blistering account of the role in Britain of the Christian religion, of Christian crusades against Muslims, Christian persecutions of Jews in England, of Protestant Christians against Catholic Christians, and of Catholics against Protestants, also offended, and in 1827 was put, with the rest of his writings, on the Index. It was his provocative writings that he depended on for any afterlife, and they are lasting well. And his prophecy that it would take three hundred years before his countrymen were free of "the Christian superstition" was fairly accurate, as recent polls in Britain found that over 80 percent now believe that religion does more harm than good. (That may however have more to do with Muslim terrorists than with the influence of Hume's writings.) The irony that had characterized much of his writing is present also in what he chose to read, and what he said, as he lay on his deathbed. Adam Smith may have misled us, a little, as to exactly what he was reading, or at least as to what bit was relevant to the excuses he tried out. He can be forgiven for that, especially as he had to wait till the twenty-first century for anyone to check his report. It seems the eighteenth century had more eager readers of Lucian than the nineteenth, or the twentieth.²²

Or is it that all the earlier Hume scholars knew their Lucian so well that they automatically corrected Smith's inaccurate published report, so were not puzzled? Was this article really necessary? Maybe not, but writing it was diverting, and "by attaching myself to any other business or diversion, I *feel* I should be the loser in point of pleasure."

NOTES

1 She seems to have been mentally ill when Hume died. See Geoffrey Hunter, "David Hume: Some Unpublished Letters," *University of Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 2 (1960–1961): 127–50.

2 Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals: A Critical Edition*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), abbreviated "EPM" and cited by section and paragraph number, followed by page numbers in the "SBN" edition, *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

- 3 See David Marsh, *Lucian and the Latins* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 13. Marsh says it was Ernesto Berti who established this.
- 4 See Roger Woolhouse, *Locke: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007), 47.
- 5 Letter 400, in *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1969), 2:157–8.
- 6 Letter of Joseph Black to Adam Smith, Grieg, *The Letters of David Hume*, 2: Appendix 1, 449.
- 7 See Frederick M. Keener, *English Dialogues of the Dead: A Critical History, An Anthology and Checklist* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), 51.
- 8 William Cullen to John Hunter, Sept 17, 1776, in James Fieser, *Early Responses to Hume: Life and Reputation*, 2 vols. (Bristol Thoemmes Press, 2003), 1:292.
- 9 The exception is the Fowler and Fowler expurgated Oxford Clarendon translation of 1905, which puts “the Downward Journey” in volume 1, along with the “Dialogues of the Dead,” “Charon,” and “Menippus.”
- 10 Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, 3 vols. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1905), 3:451–2.
- 11 See Fieser, *Early Responses to Hume*, 372. It was *Tom Jones* this account says he was reading.
- 12 See Keener, *English Dialogues of the Dead*, 4.
- 13 See *ibid.*, 12.
- 14 See Marsh, *Lucian and the Latins*, 14.
- 15 Emilio Mazza informs me that Morellet translated “Peregrinus” in 1768. He may have sent Hume a copy.
- 16 See David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton, *The David Hume Library* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Bibliographical Society in association with The National Library of Scotland, 1996).
- 17 Adam Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (Indianapolis, Liberty Press, 1985), 51.
- 18 Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric*, 53.
- 19 Hume’s *My Own Life* was also written to accompany future editions of his published writings, and that helps explain what is, and is not, included in it. I discuss this in “Hume’s curriculum vitae, his ‘own life, written by himself,’” forthcoming in *Death and Character: Further Reflections on Hume*, Harvard University Press.
- 20 One outraged Christian wrote to the Edinburgh “Weekly Magazine,” after the publication of Smith’s letter, “Can anything be more frivolous, more childish, more indecently wanton and presumptuous in a dying man . . . than Mr H-’s sportful dialogue with Charon?” (Fieser, 406).

21 Flavio Baroncelli, "Rawls and Hume: a Fable," in *New Essays on David Hume*, ed. Emilio Mazza and Emanuele Ronchetti (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2007), 259–66.

22 Any knowledge I now have of Lucian, and of his imitators, is due to reading in response to Emilio Mazza's good questions. He has also answered many of my questions about Hume and Lucian, Hume and French imitators of Lucian, and even supplied me with information about Hume and the pseudo-Lucian. I also thank anonymous reviewers for *Hume Studies* for some needed corrections.