Lucian's *Saturnalia* is itself Saturnalian in form, a heteroglossic collection of dialogue, law, and letters, to which the disparate voices of the letter collection form the contradictory conclusion. Moreover it treats in Greek an institution profoundly Roman: a seven-day festival in which existing authority is overturned and the lost golden age restored. One might be tempted to see in Lucian’s *Saturnalia* a perfect metaphor for the Second Sophistic, conventionally seen as a profound cultural yearning for the greatness of past authority and a program for bolstering Greek identity under the empire but here made acutely and ironically self-aware of the limits to resurrecting lost golden ages. The goal of the present study must be considerably more modest: to examine how the letters reshape the narrative implicit in the earlier sections, tantalizing the reader with the prospect of “overhearing” a god at work. Taken together, however, the letters instantiate and explicate the inversions and evasions of power and responsibility that the festival of the Saturnalia itself put in play.

Lucian’s *Saturnalia* consists of three parts: a dialogue between a priest of Saturn/Cronus and his god and boss; then a narrative by a priest named Cronosolon of his encounter with Cronus and the laws for the festival he was inspired to promulgate; and finally a collection of four ΕΠΙΣΤΟΛΑΙ ΚΡΟΝΙΚΑΙ: one to Cronus, followed by his direct reply, then Cronus’s letter to the rich with their reply. While some have found this structure problematic and even attempted to argue for separate works, there is a temporal and narrative logic to the whole. In order to appreciate the function of the letters, we must first look briefly at the preceding parts, beginning with the dialogue.

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1 While the official day of the Saturnalia was 17th December, by Cicero’s time the festivities lasted seven days. Augustus cut the public celebration to three days, but it gradually lengthened again under the empire (Dio Cassius 60.25.8). Balsdon 1969: 124–126 remains useful. See König, above p. 190, on another Lucianic dialogue, the *Symposium*; and the contributions by Bär and Rosenmeyer (pp. 66–68) on letters in Lucian’s *Verae Historiae*.

2 For epistolary narrative allowing the reader to “overhear” or “eavesdrop” on characters’ otherwise inaccessible thoughts, see the Introduction to this volume (pp. 3 and 14), and the contributions by Gordon (p. 142), Bär (pp. 226–227), and Repath (p. 237).

3 See Anderson 1976: 152–154, with summary of previous discussions.
Here are the opening gambits on each side:

**ΙΕΡΕΥΣ**

*Ω Κρόνε, σὺ γὰρ ἔοικας Ἀρχεῖν τὸ γε νῦν εἶναι καὶ σοὶ τέθυται καὶ κεκαλλιέρηται

παρ’ ἡμῶν, τί ἢν μᾶλλον ἐπὶ τῶν ιερῶν αἰτήσας λάβοιμι παρὰ σοῦ;

**ΚΡΟΝΟΣ**

Τούτο μὲν αὐτὸν σε καλῶς ἔχει ἐσκεφθαί ὦ τι σοι εὐκτέον, εἰ μὴ καὶ μάντιν ἀμα

ἐθέλεις εἶναι τὸν Ἀρχόντα, εἰδέναι τι σοὶ ἥδιον αἰτεῖν. ἐγὼ δὲ τὰ γε δυνατὰ σῶν

ἀνανεύσω πρὸς τὴν εὐχήν.4

Priest:

Cronus, since you seem to be in charge now, and we’ve sacrificed and gotten favorable omens, what exactly in return for these sacrifices would I get from you if I asked?

Cronus:

It's better if you figure out what you're praying for, unless you want your ruler to be a prophet too, and know to ask what would really please you. And I, as far as I can, won't deny your request.

Here is “do ut des” religion at its cagiest, the priest hoping for the best Cronus might have to offer, and Cronus trying to keep the bidding down. The priest then confesses he wants land, slaves, and movable wealth, to which Cronus instantly replies that these are not in his power or job description (οὐ γὰρ ἐμὸν διανέμειν τὰ τοιαῦτα), and the priest should apply to Zeus. Cronus goes on to explain that he really rules for seven days only, and his power only extends to governing his own festival. Herein lies the fundamental comic premise for the whole work. The priest’s dilemma turns out to be the one so well formulated by Woody Allen: “God is not dead; he’s just an underachiever.” He has appealed to Zeus already, to no good effect, and still wants to know what Cronus can do for him. He rejects Cronus's promises of success in dicing and drinking at the festival and asks instead for knowledge: specifically, the truth of traditional accounts of how Zeus overthrew Cronus and chained him in Tartarus. Cronus indignantly rejects the question as Saturnalian impudence in and of itself but when pressed further insists that he gave up power voluntarily:

οὐτὲ ὁ Ζεὺς βίᾳ τὴν Ἀρχήν, ἐκόντος δὲ μου παραδόντος αὐτῷ καὶ ὑπεκκόσταντος,

Ἀρχεῖ. (Sat. 6)

Nor does Zeus rule by force, but I willingly handed over to him and abdicated.

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4 The texts of Lucian used here are drawn from the Loeb edition, for the *Saturnalia* Kilburn 1987. Translations are my own, though for the *Saturnalia* much informed by Kilburn's.