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Seventh Volume 1993

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Francis Cairns and Malcolm Heath

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hexameter' *CQ* n.s. 40 (1966) 140–71, 298–320.

52. *et radiis iuga subdita matutinis* (62). 'Theme and variation' is an Ovidian technique repeatedly stressed by E.J. Kenney '*materie superatur opus*' *CR* n.s. 22 (1972) 39 n.1; 'The style of the *Metamorphoses*', in *Ovid* ed. J.W. Binns (London and Boston 1973) 132 with n.106.

53. Cf. *Doxogr. Gr.* 374.23ff. (Diels). Bömer *ad loc.*

54. *Op. cit.* (n.13) 4.

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LUCAN'S PRAISE OF NERO

VINCENT HUNINK

In his study of ancient invective Severin Koster hailed Lucan as the first poet to introduce a 'subjective' form of invective into epic, thus paving the way for the celebrated epic invectives of Claudian.[1] And certainly parts of Lucan's *Bellum Civile* (*BC*), which treats the mid first century BC civil war between Pompey and Julius Caesar, direct large quantities of abuse, insult and scorn at the character of Caesar. Lucan uses every available rhetorical device to paint his Caesar in the darkest possible colours, giving him all the traits of a devil incarnate: he is bloodthirsty, tyrannical, cruel, arrogant and entirely devoid of moral scruples. He uses men, money and nature to pursue his aim, which is, not the acquisition of power so as to implement new policy, but the total destruction of all religious, social and political order.[2] Since antiquity many students and readers of Lucan have suspected that there is more to these passages than meets the eye: Lucan's invective and insults have seemed to them too strong to be aimed merely at the long-dead Julius Caesar. In their view, the real targets are the principate in general and the Emperor Nero in particular.

Certain pieces of historical evidence would appear to support this view.[3] Initially Lucan held a privileged position in Nero's *cohors amicorum*. But on both sides growing jealousy and pride accompanied the growth of literary ambition. One anecdote tells of Lucan's anger when the emperor walked out of his *recitatio*. As a result Lucan supposedly criticised Nero and his most powerful friends in an 'insulting poem' (*famosum carmen*). Lucan eventually took part in the Pisonian conspiracy of AD 65 against Nero. Its discovery led to the execution or enforced suicide of all participants, including Lucan. So the events of Lucan's life seem to argue for an interpretation

of *BC* as a manifesto of political opposition to the principate.

But then a curious problem arises. The only explicit mention of Nero in *BC* is in the proem of Book 1, where the work is dedicated to him as patron of arts and culture[4] in a fervent, even extravagant, panegyric. After picturing the devastating results of the civil war on the Italian landscape, Lucan proceeds (1.44–66):

> multum Roma tamen debet civilibus armis,
> quod tibi res acta est. te, cum statione peracta
> astra petes serus, praelati regia caeli
> excipiet gaudente polo; seu sceptra tenere,
> seu te flammigeros Phoebi conscendere currus,
> telluremque nihil mutato sole timentem
> igne vago lustrare iuvet, tibi numine ab omni
> cedetur, iurisque tui natura relinquet,
> quis deus esse velis, ubi regnum ponere mundi.
> sed neque in arctoo sedem tibi legeris orbe,
> nec polus aversi calidus qua vergitur austri,
> unde tuam videas obliquo sidere Romam.
> aetheris inmensi partem si presseris unam,
> sentiet axis onus. librati pondera caeli
> orbe tene medio; pars aetheris illa sereni
> tota vacet, nullaeque obstent a Caesare nubes.
> tum genus humanum positis sibi consulat armis,
> inque vicem gens omnis amet; pax missa per orbem
> ferrea belligeri conpescat limina Iani.
> sed mihi iam numen; nec, si te pectore vates
> accipio, Cirrhaea velim secreta moventem
> sollicitare deum Bacchumque avertere Nysa:
> tu satis ad vires Romana in carmina dandas.

It is a strange paradox that the alleged target of *BC* is here addressed in the most enthusiastic terms. We know that in his early years Lucan did write a poem in praise of Nero.[5] But the laudatory proem of *BC* seems hard to reconcile with the apparent anti-Neronian nature of the rest of the work.

Hitherto, in essence, two solutions to this problem have been advanced. The first assumes that the praise of Nero in the proem is simply insincere, and that it contains ironic hidden meanings and veiled insults. Thus Nero poised as a star in orbit and threatening to disturb the balance of the sky with his weight (53–7) might be a hint at his corpulence; the 'cloudless, clear sky' (58f.) could be a glance at his baldness; his 'looking askance' (55) might allude to his squint; and, in general, the dedication of *BC* to a man whose own poetry gave rise to nothing but laughter and scorn would have seemed patently absurd and insincere. This ironic interpretation, which goes back to

antiquity, has enjoyed considerable popularity.[6] It allows *BC* to preserve its basic unity of function, since even in his apparent praise of Nero Lucan would remain fiercely anti-monarchical and anti-Neronian.

Today, however, a majority of scholars subscribe to a second, non-ironic view of the proem. Their position is that, although Lucan's praise of Nero may seem extravagant and implausible to us, it is in fact firmly rooted in the traditions of Roman imperial panegyric. If we read Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* or Calpurnius' *Eclogae*, the same flattering and adulatory tone can be perceived.[7] Again, the identification of Nero with Apollo and Bacchus is in line with Neronian ideology;[8] and even Nero's personal interest in astronomy is well attested.[9] Finally there are no linguistic indications in the actual text of the proem which give us reason to doubt its sincerity or to assume any ironic intention.[10]

But how, then, are we to explain the apparent contrast between the proem and the rest of *BC*? An ingenious solution has been proposed: the contrast must simply be accepted as a fact, and *BC* seen as divided into two distinct parts. The first part is the work of a Lucan still on speaking terms with the emperor, and so is not anti-Neronian. The second part, composed in a later phase, reflects Lucan's changed feelings for Nero, i.e. hatred and enmity towards Nero, disguised as ferocious invective against Julius Caesar, Nero's ancestor,[11] and hence antipathy in general towards imperial rule. This solution is founded on the brief biography of Lucan by Vacca: it states that Lucan published three books of *BC* (often identified as Books 1–3) before a ban was imposed by Nero on its further publication; the remaining books were published after Lucan's death.[12]

Although I agree fully with most modern scholars that the ironic view of the proem must be rejected, the notion of dividing *BC* into two chronologically and ideologically distinct parts is very unsatisfactory, and fails to do justice to Lucan's work. First of all, there is no clear-cut division between Books 1–3 and Books 4–10 as far as hostility to Caesar is concerned. Caesar is blamed and censured from beginning to end. The greater sharpness of tone in the later books simply reflects the development of the theme. Thus Book 7, with all its criticism of Caesar, its account of loss of freedom and its censure of the gods, is also the book where the main battle is fought. It is only natural for the poet to intensify pathos and invective as the epic's climax approaches. Furthermore, even though *BC* exhibits many inconsistencies, such a sharp ideological shift would, in my view,

effectively destroy it by any standards as a work of art. Perhaps most importantly, the bipartite explanation, like the ironic approach, emphasises extra-literary elements rather than actual themes of the epic.

If examined critically, the very concept of anti-Neronianism in Lucan is problematic. Nero is mentioned by name only in the proem, where, as I have shown, he is eulogised. The rest of the epic contains invective and insults against Julius Caesar, but they seem to be directed at no-one except Caesar. For the Romans, the concept of 'anti-Caesarism', i.e. personal hatred of the successors of Caesar and Augustus, did not exist; and modern historians tend to deny rather than assert continuity between the positions of Julius Caesar and Nero.[13] In addition, to regard Nero as the real target behind Caesar is to assume that the ancient *Vitae* are trustworthy and also to subscribe to the biographical fallacy, which equates an author's life and work. Contrariwise, if *BC* had any political significance at all, it was not a pamphlet about the contemporary state of affairs.

If we discard the traditional view of *BC*, Lucan's criticism of Caesar can be better understood. What gives *BC* its own special 'unity' is its consistently rhetorical and pathetic tone. Through a variety of paradoxes, exclamations, bizarre themes and original adaptations of old topics, Lucan incessantly searches for pathos, tension and contrasts to illustrate the fundamental paradox underlying his work, that of 'civil war'.[14] This means that maximum effect is sought in each individual passage: and Lucan's praise of Nero is perfectly in accordance with contemporary genre rules, as is his pathetic censure of Caesar. Just as the prologue required praise of the emperor and Lucan supplied it, so, when elsewhere indignation and moral protest were needed, Lucan supplied that. Lucan was well trained in the schools of declamation. Praise or censure of tyrants were stock themes for pupils, as we may see in the works of Seneca the Elder. Lucan's consistently negative image of Caesar in this way matches his post-Vergilian, rhetorical mode of epic composition. The invective against Caesar is, then, of a literary and rhetorical type and is not intended for direct political consumption; and there is no personal hatred, envy or insult against Nero, or any other living person in *BC*. Lucan can, with Koster, be counted as Claudian's predecessor in epic invective, but the contemporary political dimension so prominent in Claudian's *In Rufinum*[15] is not yet present in *BC*. This is not to say that *BC* can be dismissed as empty rhetoric, as it often was before the current renaissance of Lucan studies. Rather, it

should be appreciated in the light of its own pre-Romantic standards: in these terms *BC* is brilliant, full of vigour, talent and wit, but politically quite innocent.

Lucan seems to have found a much more effective (if somewhat vulgar) way of insulting the emperor in real life. Suetonius *Vita Lucani* 4 tells how one day the poet visited a public latrine and, *clariore cum crepitu ventris*, as the Latin decently says, recited a half-line by Nero: *sub terris tonuisse putes*, 'you would have thought that it thundered under the earth'. This intertextual joke upon Nero's solemn line about earthquakes is likely to have annoyed the Emperor a good deal more than all the rhetoric of *BC*.

NOTES

1. S. Koster *Die Invektive in der griechischen und römischen Literatur* (Meisenheim am Glan 1978) 168; on Claudian's invective, cf. recently E. Potz 'Claudian's *In Rufinum*' *Philol.* 134 (1990) 66–81.

2. Lucan also uses 'invective' on other levels. Koster (n.1) deals with his condemnation of Egypt and Cleopatra in Book 10. Many other examples might be adduced, from traditional censure of riches, to full-scale condemnation of civil war.

3. On the personal relationship of Lucan and Nero, cf. Suet. *Vit. Lucani* 4–6; Vacca *Vit. Lucani* 12–16. On Lucan's death, cf. Tac. *Ann.* 15.70; Suet. *Vit. Lucani* 9; Vacca *Vit. Lucani* 17; *Vit. Lucani* 3.5. On the poet's last words, cf. V.J.C. Hunink 'Lucan's last words', in *Studies in Latin literature and Roman history 6* ed. C. Deroux (*Collection Latomus* 217, Bruxelles 1992) 390–407.

4. Cf. in general M. Morford 'Nero's patronage and participation in literature and the arts' *ANRW* II.32.3 (1985) 2005–31.

5. Cf. Suet. *Vit. Lucani* 1: *prima ingenii experimenta in Neronis laudibus dedit*; Vacca *Vit. Lucani* 13: *certamine pentaeterico acto in Pompei theatro laudibus recitatis in Neronem fuerat coronatus.*

6. Cf. e.g. E. Griset 'Die Eloge auf Nero', in *Lucan* ed. W. Rutz (Darmstadt 1970) 318–25; I. Lana, 'Il proemio di Lucano' *Studi di storiografia antica in memoria di L. Ferrero* (Torino 1971) 131–47; F.M. Ahl *Lucan, an introduction* (Ithaca/London 1976) 30, 47–8 a.o.

7. For references to Calpurnius, the Einsiedeln eclogues and Seneca, cf. Morford (n.4) 2011, 2037. For Lucan's general inspiration, cf. also Verg. *Georg.* 1.24–42.

8. Cf. Morford (n.4) 2014.

9. On astronomical aspects of the proem, cf. P. Arnaud 'L'apothéose de Néron Kosmokrator et la cosmographie de Lucain au premier livre de la Pharsale (1,45–66)' *REL* 65 (1987) 167–93; A. Le Boeuffle 'Le séjour céleste de Néron' *BAGB* (1989) 165–71.

10. A non-ironic view of the proem is generally adopted by modern Lucan scholarship. For a convenient survey of recent literature on this question, cf. W. Rutz 'Lucans "Pharsalia" im Lichte der neuesten Forschung', mit einem

bibliographischen Nachtrag 1979–1982 vom Verf. und 1980–1985 von Heinrich Tuitje, *ANRW* II.32.3 (1985) 1457–537; esp.1482–5. To this may be added P. Grimal 'Le prologue de la Pharsale et les intentions de Lucain' *VL* 96 (1984) 2–9; Morford (n.4) esp. 2014–15; A.M. Dumont 'L'éloge de Néron' *BAGB* (1986) 22–40; F. Brena 'L'elogio di Nerone nella Pharsalia: moduli ufficiali e riflessione politica' *MD* 20–21 (1988) 133–46.

11. Clear examples of this line of thought are W.D. Lebek *Lucans Pharsalia. Dichtungsstruktur und Zeitbezug* (Göttingen 1976) e.g. 10–27 and 279–84; Grimal (n.10).

12. Vacca *Vit. Lucani* 13: *ediderat ... tres libros quales videmus*; 18: *reliqui enim VII belli civilis libri ...*.

13. Cf. P.H. Schrijvers *Crise poétique et poésie de crise; la réception de Lucain aux XIXe et XXe siècles, suivi d'une interprétation de la scène 'César à Troie' (La Pharsale, 9,950–999)* (*Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen; Mededelingen van de afdeling Letterkunde*, Nieuwe Reeks, deel 53 no.1, Amsterdam/New York etc. 1990) 13f.

14. For this interpretation of Lucan's work, cf. V.J.C. Hunink *M. Annaeus Lucanus Bellum Civile Book III: A Commentary* (Amsterdam 1992); cf. further J. Masters *Lucan's Bellum Civile* (Cambridge 1992).

15. Cf. Potz (n.1). Potz shows how *In Rufinum* combines fierce criticism of the dead Rufinus with panegyric of Stilicho. Thus the effect comes from the opposition of the two men. In the case of *BC* such an opposition is lacking, Nero not being contrasted with Caesar in any way.