

LAYING IT ON WITH A TROWEL: THE PROEM TO LUCAN AND RELATED TEXTS

The extravagant, not to say fulsome, praise showered upon Nero in Lucan's proem to his *De Bello Civili* (1.33–66) tends to divide scholars neatly into two factions. In the blue corner are those for whom it is 'obviously' sarcastic or ironic in some degree, whether they consider it intended to be circulated privately or understood only by a small group of initiates, or else see it as actually being *designed* to offend the princeps. In the red we find those who attempt to explain what the modern palate finds offensive by reference to the *Realien* of Nero's reign and to the processes of literary representation in general—and what we loosely call 'rhetoric' in particular—current in the poetry of the time.

The portion of the proem which from the Middle Ages on seems to have caused most offence is that predicting Nero's apotheosis, or, more precisely, his katasterism after death (1.45ff.). That this baroque fantasy has an illustrious precedent and clear model in Virgil's encomium of Augustus in the proem to the *Georgics* (1.24–42) has not been sufficient to calm the anxieties of all readers. This is in part because of the well-known unease that persists in many quarters over the 'sincerity' of that model itself and indeed the whole tenor of Virgil's literary treatment of the Augustan principate, an unease which it would be both time-consuming and unnecessary to document here. But in the case of Lucan's proem suspicion of the author's sincerity has been greatly increased by a long tradition of interpreting two details of the passage in question as snide references to defects in the personal appearance of the nominal honorand. In which part of the Heavens, Lucan asks, will Nero take up residence (1.48ff.)? So too Virgil had worked from the assumption that Augustus would have a free choice (*G.* 1.24ff., noting 'velis' in v. 26), but while weighing up the possibilities Lucan goes further and offers the following advice:

sed neque in Arctoo sedem tibi legeris orbe
nec polus aversi calidus qua vergitur Austri,
unde tuam videas obliquo sidere Romam.
aetheris immensi partem si presseris unam,
sentiet axis onus. librati pondera caeli
orbe tene medio; pars aetheris illa sereni
tota vacet nullaeque obstent a Caesare nubes. (1.53–9)

When Nero is told not to look upon Rome *obliquo sidere*, it is argued, Lucan is mocking his squint, while the fear that the weight of his divinity might throw the cosmos out of balance is triumphantly interpreted as a sneer at his being what we are now, and in this case rather appropriately, encouraged to call 'gravitationally challenged'.

This line of approach has a long pedigree, appearing in the *Adnotationes super Lucanum*, the *Commenta Bernensia* and the writings of the twelfth-century scholar, Arnulf of Orleans. Its most emphatic and most persuasive restatement in recent years can be found in Frederick Ahl's general introduction to the *De Bello Civili*.¹ Ahl

¹ Lucan. *An Introduction* (Cornell Studies in Classical Philology, XXXIX, Ithaca/London, 1976), pp. 47f.

wisely rejects the more extreme, and easily disproved, claims of this tradition—that Nero had a hernia and one foot bigger than the other, and suffered from baldness to boot—but believes that both the squint and the alleged obesity are confirmed in effect by Suetonius' description of the emperor as being 'oculis caesis et hebetioribus' and 'cervice obesa, ventre proiecto' (*Nero* 51). But a squint is a squint, and the weakness of sight implied by 'hebetioribus' squares far better with myopia than it possibly could with 'obliquo sidere'. Moreover, a very similar phrase is used of Domitian at *Dom.* 18 ('grandibus oculis, verum acie hebetiore') and it seems, shall we say, unlikely that Rome would have had two emperors suffering from a not especially common physical defect in the space of a couple of decades. Had either or both had so distinctive a problem with their eyes Suetonius would in any case surely have been as willing to remark on the peculiarity directly as he was to record the fact that in old age Augustus lost part of the sight in his left eye (*Aug.* 79) or, on the positive side, that Tiberius enjoyed particularly sharp sight and could even see in the dark (*Tib.* 68). This latter passage, in fact, makes it perfectly clear that 'oculis... hebetioribus' must refer specifically to dimness of sight, since it says that Tiberius' unusual acuity of vision in the dark only lasted for a short time after he opened his eyes, then 'rursum hebescebant'. As for obesity, there is no compelling evidence that Nero was so afflicted. When applied to individual parts of the body *obesus* appears to refer to unusual thickness, not to general corpulence.² Suetonius' physical descriptions of the Caesars elsewhere occasionally comment separately on the categories of body and neck: thus Gaius Caligula is described as 'corpore enormi, gracilitate maxima cervicis et crurum' (*Cal.* 50), while Claudius is said to have been generally well-built ('prolixo nec exili corpore erat') and, in a phrase recalling that used of Nero, full-necked ('opimis cervicibus', *Cl.* 30). Of Nero's body Suetonius says not that it was obese but only that it was marked with spots and malodorous ('corpore maculoso et fetido', *Nero* 51). The projecting stomach, then, should surely best be seen as referring to a pot-belly, an aberration, like the thick neck, from a physique not otherwise deviant enough from the norm to warrant comment. Here compare also the description of Domitian as 'deformis et obesitate ventris' (*Dom.* 18). Nero, it appears, had an unusually thick neck and a protruding stomach, but could be reproached with nothing so striking as Domitian's paunch, let alone true obesity.³

The truth is that the tradition of the Middle Ages, hostile to the first persecutor of the Church, has here as elsewhere indulged itself in wild fancy with no basis in historical reality; the author of the *Commenta Bernensia* has let himself go with particular, and, even for the gullible, transparent abandon. This kind of game is one which anyone with enough malice and a reasonable degree of single-minded ingenuity can play, and so far we have played it largely on the terms laid down by the school of Arnulf. Finding oneself obliged to haggle about the various physical shortcomings of the first Roman emperors is, to say the least, a little distasteful. It is, in such circumstances, hard not to sympathize with O. A. W. Dilke, who complains of 'puerile humour' and stoutly declares that 'the ancients were very conscious of the specific field of each genre, and the opening of an epic was no place for a skit of any kind'.⁴ It might be objected here that Dilke's view takes too little account of the

² See *OLD* s.v. 2, citing Hor. *Epod.* 12. 3 'naris obesae' and, with a metaphorical reference to artistic insensitivity, Calp. *Ecl.* 4. 147f. 'carmina.../...obesis auribus apta.'

³ Contrast W. R. Johnson, *Momentary Monsters. Lucan and his Heroes* (Cornell Studies in Classical Philology, XLVII, Ithaca/London, 1987), p. 121.

⁴ 'Lucan's Political Views and the Caesars', in *Neronians and Flavians I* (ed. D. R. Dudley, London, 1972), p. 76.

powerful processes of generic subversion that animate much of Lucan's fierce brand of poetics, and that a poet who violates or subverts generic convention in every part of his work might well choose to do so with particularly outrageous élan in the all-important proem. Dilke's assumptions, however, have at least the merit of proceeding from observation of the conventions which seem to be standard in the literary tradition, and are to that extent surely rather less capricious than those of some very illustrious scholars who have placed themselves in the opposing camp. W. R. Johnson, for example, records without any substantial argument his conviction that Lucan's prediction of the emperor's katasterism is 'an ingenious parody' of Virgil's address to Augustus.⁵ J. P. Sullivan, with only a footnote to Ahl which appears to indicate that he accepts that critic's views on the relationship between the poet and the emperor and what it implies for the interpretation of the proem, confidently states that Lucan is 'indulg[ing] in an absurd piece of hyperbole' which is intended 'either to subvert his eulogy further and convey a hint of the insincerity of his flattery to the sophisticated, or to exaggerate his feigned devotion to his friend the emperor'.⁶ Simply put, Dilke takes due account of the audience's generically conditioned expectations of epic, while what appears to motivate the more sceptically minded interpretations mentioned here, I would suggest, is the feeling that no one could say the kind of thing that Lucan says to Nero and actually expect to be taken seriously. This assumption, moreover, is often accompanied by a belief that the gullible recipient of the flattery and feigned devotion was too slow-witted to notice that he was being made a fool of: that, at any rate, is what I take to be the inevitable implication of Sullivan's apparent exclusion of Nero from the ranks of the sophisticated.

It must be acknowledged that there is a certain amount of evidence for the existence in antiquity itself of not wholly dissimilar attitudes to over-ingenious encomia. The monstrous excesses to which *adulatio* could be taken in the reign of Domitian are scathingly mocked by Juvenal in the fourth Satire. When the Picene fisherman presents the outsize turbot to the imperial tyrant he grandly declares 'ipse capi voluit' and Juvenal sardonically comments as follows:

quid apertius? et tamen illi
surgebant cristae. nihil est quod credere de se
non possit cum laudatur dis aequa potestas. (69ff.)

And it was a very similar distaste for the repeated circulation of spectacular lies that sickened the heart of Saint Augustine during his days as professor of Rhetoric at Milan three centuries later: 'die illo, quo, cum pararem recitare imperatori laudes, quibus plura mentirer, et mentienti faveretur ab scientibus' (*Conf.* 6.6). But these passages provide their own reminders of the historical context of such adulation and therefore give due warning of the dangers of assuming that a conception of sincerity and belief identical to our own is at work. Juvenal may feel that the flattery of the fisherman was crudely palpable ('quid apertius?') and that there are no limits to the megalomania of the tyrant, but the fisherman's speech is entirely 'sincere' in the sense that it is intended to win favour and was taking no risks at all that might give offence. What is astonishing about it, in other words, is not that such crudely adulatory

⁵ Op. cit., p. 121. Johnson also pits his opinion only against those who see the passage as 'a clumsy imitation' of Virgil, while failing to acknowledge that the whole line of argument taken by, for example, Grimal and Thompson (below, n. 8), clearly works from the premise that the imitation is skilled and, in the context, effective.

⁶ *Literature and Politics in the Age of Nero* (Ithaca/London, 1985), p. 145.

rhetoric could be employed with wholly serious intent but that any ego should be so inflated as to take its tropes literally. As for Augustine, his words clearly reveal the conventionality that surrounded the recitation of panegyric. He knew he was, in the literal sense, lying and so did his audience—and so, more likely than not, did his honorand—but the point is that everyone expected him to do just that. No one, that is, looked for literal truth—what a modern moral outlook would be inclined to call ‘sincerity’—in this kind of writing, and only the bizarre puritan spirit of the future saint was perturbed by its absence. To put it rather contentiously, extravagant, unbelievable lies were the standard stuff of the genre. The tropes of the proem of the *De Bello Civili* must in their turn be seen as operating within this nexus of social, cultural, historical and rhetorical conventions: the burden of proof lies on those critics who believe that Lucan is violating or burlesquing these conventions from some personal or political motive, while any piece of comparative material which shows the use of similar devices in contexts where there is no reason to suspect hostile intent on the part of the author strengthens the case for the essential seriousness of the passage, regardless of what Lucan’s ‘real’ feelings about Nero may have been.

There is no space here for more than the briefest review of some of the attempts made to defend the seriousness of Lucan’s praise of Nero by reference to contemporary political concerns and to similar topoi in other literary works. But mention must be made of, for example, the demonstrations offered by A. D. Nock and P. Grimal of the link between the list of distant lands which the Romans, embroiled in civil war, have so far failed to add to the empire (1.15ff.) and the attested expeditions to Armenia and Ethiopia organized in Nero’s reign.⁷ Again, both Grimal and, independently, Lynette Thompson have shown that the apotheosis predicted by Lucan can be made to square well with the emperor’s own astrological preoccupations and the ideological use made in contemporary propaganda of astrological imagery and symbolism.⁸ Furthermore, the fear that the divine weight of the katasterized emperor may throw the entire universe out of kilter if he takes up position anywhere other than at the centre has been shown by Thompson and also by J. R. Jenkinson to have a clear parallel in the *Hercules Oetaeus*.⁹ There, in a passage which cannot be suspected of harbouring concealed ironies, the chorus speculates on the question of where in the heavens Hercules will take up residence and asks ‘loca quae sereni/deprimes caeli’ (1569f.). Both thought and wording have obvious similarities

⁷ A. D. Nock, ‘The Proem of Lucan’, *CR* 40 (1926), pp. 17–18; P. Grimal, ‘L’Eloge de Néron au début de la Pharsale, est-il ironique?’, *REL* 38 (1960), pp. 296–305.

⁸ Grimal, art. cit., pp. 302–5; Lynette Thompson, ‘Lucan’s Apotheosis of Nero’, *CPh* 59 (1964), 146–53.

⁹ Thompson, art. cit., pp. 148f.; J. R. Jenkinson, ‘Sarcasm in Lucan i. 33–66’, *CR* n.s. 24 (1974), pp. 8–9. Weight, of course, was a traditional attribute of divine beings, and had been since Homer: see *Iliad* 5.838f., where, when Athena mounts Diomedes’ chariot, μέγα δ’ ἔβραχε φήγυμος ἄξων / βριθοσύνη. δεινὴν γὰρ ἄγεν θεὸν ἄνδρα τ’ ἄριστον. The use to which the idea could be put in encomiastic poetry can easily be seen in a number of passages in the *Silvae* where the object of Statius’ praise is the emperor Domitian: see *Silv.* 1.1.18ff., 56f. ‘inssaque pondere tanto/ subter anhelat humus’, 4.2.25f. ‘ille penates/implet et ingenti genio gravat.’ It is quite easy for modern readers to import into texts which use this topos a comic effect which there is no good reason to believe was intended by the author. This is true, for example, of Virgil’s picture of Aeneas, son of a goddess and future god himself, weighing down Charon’s boat (*A.* 6.413f. ‘gemuit sub pondere cumba/sutisil’). So too, in a passage of high pathos where humour is surely out of the question, Statius makes the seer Amphiarus say to Apollo, who is disguised as a human charioteer, that he knew it was him all along because his weight had put unusual strain on the chariot (*Theb.* 7.779ff. ‘olim te, Cirrhaee pater, peritura sedentem/ ad iuga...axe trementi/ sensimus’).

to Lucan's 'aetheris inmensi si presseris unam' and 'pars aetheris illa sereni' (1.56, 58). Objections and counter-objections multiply with ease. It might, for example, be argued that Lucan is imitating Seneca but undermining the topos by a process of *reductio ad absurdum* ('sentiet axis onus'). That, however, would surely mean that he was not only attacking Nero but also writing a disrespectful parody of his revered uncle and tutor, and such a scenario is unlikely to appeal to many scholars. On the other hand, it is possible that the imitation may be felt to proceed in the reverse direction, with Lucan providing the model either for Seneca or, more likely, for some unknown later author who, for reasons of his own, chose to ignore the original's satirical intent, or else simply failed to understand it.¹⁰ Jenkinson tries to counter this line of attack in his firm assertion that '[i]t is hard to believe that Seneca ... and hard to believe that any writer later than the *De Bello Civili* would have sought to ally the very serious and august passage of the *Hercules* with a passage in Lucan whose tone was, or even seemed likely to be, the opposite of serious and august'.¹¹ Jenkinson's argument is not wholly convincing, but none the less certainly has some merit for our present purposes. If a later author decided to ignore the ironies of the well-known presumed model in Lucan, then he certainly ran an unnecessary risk of being misunderstood himself. If on the other hand he saw no such irony, then the likelihood that the model was free of intended irony altogether is considerably increased. But here the whole matter is in danger of passing beyond the reach of meaningful critical control and becoming an exercise in pure speculation. What is established beyond doubt by the parallel in the *Hercules Oetaeus* is that Lucan is using a topos that was perfectly capable of conveying a serious compliment, and it seems best to assume that he was doing exactly that unless proof positive can be found to the contrary.

This body of comparative evidence may not seem to everyone fully conclusive, but it adds up to a powerful case and one far better founded than gut-reactions of distaste or incredulity.¹² The remainder of this paper will be devoted to adducing a small amount of additional, and perhaps less ambiguous material, which, it is hoped, will strengthen the case for viewing both the proem to Lucan's epic and another roughly contemporary work as serious eulogy.

Let us begin with Lucan's injunction to Nero that he should take up position in the centre of the heavens and not at the extreme north or south:

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.

(1.53–7)

Claudian, a particularly accomplished panegyrist, undoubtedly had both Lucan and Virgil in mind in his poem on the third consulship of the boy-emperor Honorius,

¹⁰ As is well known, Otto Zwierlein has made a convincing case for putting the composition of the *Hercules Oetaeus* as late as the middle of the second century, 'certe post Silium Italicum' (*L. Annaei Senecae Tragoediae (Scriptorum Classicorum Bibliotheca Oxoniensis)* [Oxford, 1986], p. vi).

¹¹ Jenkinson, art. cit., p. 9.

¹² It seems worth observing that the articles cited in the preceding paragraph have not always been accorded the attention their arguments seem to warrant. Ahl, op. cit., p. 47 n. 54, somewhat misrepresents the force of Nock's article, and cites Grimal without addressing the evidence he presents. Not one of the four appears in Sullivan's bibliography, and Johnson's splendidly impressionistic monograph, owing its origins as it does to a series of lectures, has no room for in-depth discussion of such matters. Those who wish to trace the history of the scholarly debate on the question of irony in the proem further will find a convenient bibliography at Jamie Masters, *Poetry and Civil War in Lucan's Bellum Civile* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 137 n. 101.

delivered in Milan in A.D. 396. There he describes how Theodosius the Great, after entrusting the care of his two sons to Stilicho on his death-bed, ascends to heaven in the form of a star, while the constellations make room to welcome him:

Arctoa parat convexa Bootes,
 australes reserat portas succinctus Orion
 invitantque novum sidus, pendentque vicissim
 quas partes velit ipse sequi, quibus esse sodalis
 dignetur stellis aut qua regione morari. (III Cons. Hon. 170–4)

Here the direct model is the first *Georgic*, but Lucan's detail about the great weight of the katasterized emperor has left clear traces too. Some seventy lines before, Claudian has told us that Theodosius delayed his ascent in order to ensure that he passed the world on to his son in good order:

quamvis emeritum peteret natura reverti
 numen et auratas astrorum panderet arces
nutaretque oneris venturi conscius Atlas,
 distulit Augustus cupido se credere caelo,
 dum tibi pacatum praesenti traderet orbem. (III Cons. Hon. 106–10)

So great and so heavy a star will cause such an addition to the weight of Atlas' vast burden that even at the thought of it he staggers. There can be no serious doubt of Claudian's 'sincerity' here. His personal feelings about the dead emperor—whom he may well never have even met—or about his ineffectual son are quite beside the point. His loyalty to Stilicho is too well-established ever to have been questioned, and there can be no reasonable grounds for suspecting that he may be taking pot-shots at his patron's revered father-in-law, let alone for surmising that Theodosius, 'like Nero', was obese. Claudian's ingenious capping of Lucan's lines here is solid evidence for the fact that at least one professional writer of panegyric poetry took this model 'straight', and consequently that the idea itself was within the bounds of what was sayable according to the conventions of Latin panegyric writing. The passage of Lucan in question, moreover, has a neat parallel in another poem by Claudian where the underlying idea is perhaps made more explicit. Claudian rejoices that in A.D. 404 Honorius has chosen to celebrate his sixth consulship in Rome itself. That the star-like prince has returned to the true centre of the world is an omen of the very best kind for the future of the empire, and Claudian makes his point by analogy with a piece of astrological lore:

namque velut stellas Babylonia cura salubres
 optima tunc spondet mortalibus edere fata,
 caelicolae cum celsa tenent summoque feruntur
 cardine nec radios humili statione recondunt:
 haud aliter Latiae sublimis Signifer aulae,
 imperii sidus propria cum sede locavit,
 auget spes Italas; et certius omina surgunt
 vitrici concepta solo. (VI Cons. Hon. 18–25)

Stars which are propitious in themselves, then, are conceived as being most influential and powerful in shedding their blessings when they are at the zenith, that is, in Lucan's words, 'orbe ... medio.' The phrase 'obliquo sidere' is clarified by 'nec radios humili statione recondunt': Nero is imagined as a beneficial star encouraged to shine full upon his beloved earthly home from the zenith so as to ensure that the power of his rays is in no way dimmed or lessened.

Some readers are also uncomfortable with the very extravagant claim that Lucan makes right at the beginning of his encomium. There he declares that, if the reign of Nero could not have been brought about except as the result of civil war, then civil war with all its horror was worth the price, just as the sinful rebellion of the Giants (the standard metaphor in Roman poetry for social and moral chaos) was amply recompensed by the many benefits of the rule of Jupiter (1.33–8). Certainly, the extreme phrasing of ‘iam nihil, o superi, querimur; scelera ipsa nefasque/hac mercede placent’ (37f.) is rather hard for us to take, especially as the horrors of civil war are in the remainder of the poem so vividly recorded. In this context it is worth taking the time to quote and discuss a few lines from the first Einsiedeln Eclogue which have something of the same ring to them:

tu quoque Troia sacros cineres ad sidera tolle
atque Agamemnoniis opus hoc ostende Mycenis!
iam tanti cecidisse fuit! gaudete, ruinae,
et laudate rogos: vester vos tollit alumnus! (38–41)

It is generally accepted that the reference here is to Nero’s epic poem, the *Troica*, though those who think the eclogue to have been written too early in Nero’s reign for that take these lines to be an allusion to the speech in which the young prince won tax exemption for the citizens of Novum Ilium by appealing to their shared history with Rome and the Julian house through his ancestor Aeneas (Tac. *Ann.* 12.58).¹³ In either case the general idea is clear enough; the ruins of Troy are raised up again in the passionate prose or august verse of Aeneas’ great descendant and this new immortality is a matter for joy that makes all the woe and misery of the legendary fall of the city well worth while. Here Sullivan feels that we can discern ‘satiric exaggeration’ and that the ‘sarcastic note’ is ‘surely confirmed in the last five lines that survive’:¹⁴

ergo ut divinis implevit vocibus aures,
candida flamenti discinxit tempora vitta
Caesareumque caput merito velavit amictu.
haud procul Iliaco quondam non signior ore
stabat et ipsa suas delebat Mantua cartas. (45–9)

Sullivan gives no argumentation to support his reading of these extracts as sarcastic, apparently feeling that the ‘exaggeration of Nero’s poetic talents and vanity’ is obvious enough. That in itself is quite unacceptable. Equally hyperbolic praise seems to have been regularly lavished on another Caesar who prided himself on his poetic gifts, namely Domitian. Statius, in the proem to his *Achilleid*, addresses Domitian as one distinguished in the arts of both poetry and war, though commenting that the latter leaves too little time for the former:

at tu, quem longe primum stupet Italia virtus
Graiaque, cui geminae florent vatumque ducumque
certatim laurus—olim dolet altera vinci—, (1.14–16)¹⁵

Doubt has recently been cast on the sincerity of Statius too—as was remarked above, subversion spotting is a seductively easy game to play and its techniques can

¹³ See e.g. J. Wight Duff and Arnold M. Duff, *Minor Latin Poets* (Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, MA, 1934), p. 329 note d, and Sullivan, *op. cit.*, p. 58. The references to Virgil and Homer which follow (vv. 48f., discussed below) make an allusion to Nero’s epic poetry seem more likely.

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 58.

¹⁵ See further O. A. W. Dilke, *Statius, Achilleid. Edited with Introduction, Apparatus Criticus and Notes* (Cambridge, 1954), ad loc. (p. 81).

be brought to bear on almost any text¹⁶—but what Statius gives us here, I would contend, is pretty much the standard praise for the imperial amateur. It is certainly in accord with, but far less extreme than, the extraordinary assessment of Domitian's poetry offered by Quintilian (*Inst.* 10.1.91f.), who asks what could be 'sublimius, doctius, omnibus denique numeris praestantius' than his works and to whom Minerva would more willingly reveal the secrets of her arts. Compare also the similarly effusive prediction of Silius Italicus in his eulogy of Domitian that 'huic sua Musae/sacra ferent, meliorque lyra, cui substitit Hebrus/et venit Rhodope, Phoebos miranda loquetur' (3.619–21): if Domitian surpasses Apollo and Orpheus, why should not the author of the *Einsiedeln* Eclogue portray Homer as removing the poet's crown from his own head and placing it on the young prince's, or Virgil as tearing up his poems as he realizes that they have been surpassed and rendered obsolete by the far greater compositions of Nero? The very common currency of the entirely serious topos of the honorand excelling the bards of old, historical and legendary, is also clearly seen in Statius' poem for Lucan himself, a poem commissioned by the dead poet's widow, Polla Argentaria and in which there are no grounds whatsoever for the most cynical of minds to look for sarcasm:

attollat refluos in astra fontes
Graio nobilior Melete Baetis;
Baetim, Mantua, provocare noli.

(*Silv.* 2.7.33–5)¹⁷

If this seems ludicrous to us, it remains clear that it is 'sincere' in the sense that it is intended as a compliment: what reason is there for not seeing in the *Einsiedeln* Eclogue the same motive when a variant of the same topos is used? Far from confirming any note of alleged satire or sarcasm in the poem's assertion that Nero's writings will solace Troy for her fall, the prevalence of such language in contemporary and nearly contemporary poetry goes quite some way to guaranteeing its essential earnestness. That first statement, moreover, has literary precedent in a topos as old as Homer. In the context of epic poems on the Trojan War, one can hardly fail to think of Helen's belief that her dishonour and Paris' is the result of a bitter fate decreed for them by Zeus so that they may be 'a song for men still to be' (ὥς καὶ ὀπίσω/ἀνθρώποισι πελώμεθ' αἰοῖδοι ἐσσομένοισι, *Iliad* 6.357f.).

The ruination of Troy is compensated by the sublime works that Nero has made from its inspiration, while, for Lucan, the ruination of the Republic with all its sinful horrors is compensated by the beneficent reign of the same prince. The parallel is clear, but not exact, and further evidence would be helpful. A potentially valuable piece of such evidence can, I think, be adduced from a work of a much later period, from the panegyrics of Sidonius Apollinaris in the middle of the fifth century. Using such material is naturally far less satisfactory than pointing out similarities between the text under consideration and others which are contemporary with it, or nearly so, as we have mainly done so far. And certainly, we shall not want to range ourselves with those who hold that ancient literature in its structures and use of topoi was so consistent that, in effect, 'In a very real sense antiquity was in comparison with the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a time-free zone'.¹⁸ But the text I wish to consider was written under an autocratic regime which, if more oppressive and less tolerant of

¹⁶ See Margit Benker, *Achill und Domitian. Herrscherkritik in der 'Achilleis' des Statius* (Diss. Furth, Bayern, 1987), passim (review, M. J. Dewar, *CR* 38 [1988], 252–3).

¹⁷ See further H. J. van Dam, *P. Papinius Statius. Silvae Book II* (Mnemosyne Supplement 82, Leiden, 1984), ad loc. (p. 470).

¹⁸ Francis Cairns, *Generic Composition in Greek and Latin Poetry* (Edinburgh, 1972), p. 32.

literary opposition than the early principate,¹⁹ none the less operated in a fairly similar manner, while the author in question was thoroughly imbued with a literary and rhetorical tradition of great stability and antiquity. In brief, Sidonius knew the works of his first-century predecessors inside out, used largely identical techniques and is in general a good though by no means infallible guide to the ethos of their compositions. And we must at least acknowledge the possibility that, despite the considerable time-gap involved, this native speaker of a language whose subtleties are in all too many ways lost to us may well have been better able than we are to detect in his models any nuances of tone that were intended to be sarcastic or humorous.²⁰

The passage of interest here comes towards the end of Sidonius' panegyric of the emperor Majorian, delivered at Lyon in A.D. 458. The task entrusted to Sidonius was one of the greatest delicacy. It was his aim to aid in the reconciliation of the Gallo-Roman nobility with the new regime after the recent deposition of the emperor Avitus, one of their own number. Avitus had been raised to the purple shortly after the assassination of Petronius Maximus and the sack of Rome by Geiseric the Vandal in 456. Despite his strenuous measures to deal with the chaos that ensued, Avitus failed to win over the support of the Italian senators and was forcibly removed from office by the barbarian general and Majorian. Though spared and created bishop of Placentia, he died in suspicious circumstances while returning to Gaul. He had been something of a hero among his Gallo-Roman peers and they now rose in a bloody revolt which had its centre at Lyon, the greatest city of Gaul. The revolt was crushed late in 458 by Majorian, with Lyon capitulating on fairly favourable terms, negotiated by Petrus, the *magister epistularum*, a little before his arrival. Majorian seems to have been inclined at first to a degree of severity, and he imposed a heavy tax burden which the citizens were anxious to see remitted. Sidonius' task was to reconcile their new master to the people of Lyon and intercede on their behalf for his mercy.

The duty imposed on him cannot have been much to Sidonius' taste: Avitus had been his own father-in-law. But it would be absurd to believe that he would risk giving offence to an already aggrieved conqueror from whom he hoped to obtain a rather important favour, and frankly fantastic to imagine that he nursed secret hopes of undermining the cause at the service of which he had agreed to put his famed

¹⁹ Nero in particular, it must be admitted, had a reputation for considerable tolerance towards personal attacks made against him in verse, and Suetonius preserves for us a nice collection of lampoons current in his reign (Suet. *Nero* 39). But it is worth noticing the limits of what Suetonius considers tolerance: he appears astonished that Isidorus the Cynic and the actor Datus suffered no more outrageous punishment than 'mere' exile (*ibid.*). And men of rank were not permitted perfect *libertas* either, as is shown by the banishment of Antistius Sosianus by the senate under the *lex maiestatis* in 62 (Tac. *Ann.* 14.48f.).

²⁰ The referee for *CQ* sounds a judicious note of caution on this point, arguing that 'it seems just as plausible to say the subtleties of first-century Latin are as accessible to us as Sidonius, and that we may be better readers of Lucan than he', and asking 'would a German scholar who worked on Shakespeare be a worse interpreter of his meaning than a modern English poet?' There is certainly much in this, and I am reminded of a very frustrating argument I once had with a Swiss woman. She stoutly maintained that being a native speaker of French automatically (almost genetically) guaranteed that, by simply opening her mouth and pronouncing Latin as if it were French, she would come closer to the authentic classical pronunciation than any poor Anglophone foolish enough to put his trust in the conclusions of scientific philology. But the situations are not perfectly comparable. Sidonius is both scholar and poet, and the language he studies and writes in is a more than usually artificial literary construct, which, under the influence of tradition and of the schools of rhetoric, was surely far less fluid and subject to change than the idioms of English poetry have been since the sixteenth century. His 'reading' of a predecessor in this same tradition must be treated with a considerable degree of respect if we are to avoid the excesses of *Besserwissen*.

eloquence. To that extent, whatever his personal feelings about Majorian may have been, his encomium will undoubtedly have been 'sincere'. And so without disfiguring his elevated speech with the sordid mention of so unheroic a subject as money, he pleads with passion for the new emperor to take pity on the poverty of the people:

et quia lassatis nimium spes unica rebus
venisti, nostris, petimus, succurre ruinis
Lugdunumque tuam, dum praeteris, aspice victor:
otia post nimios poscit te fracta labores.
cui pacem das, redde animum: lassata iuveni
cervix deposito melius post sulcat aratro
telluris glaebem solidae. bove, fruge, colono,
civibus exhausta est. stantis fortuna latebat;
dum capitur, vae quanta fuit! post gaudia, princeps,
delectat meminisse mali. populatibus, igni
etsi concidimus, veniens tamen omnia tecum
restituís: *fuius vestri quia causa triumphí,*
ipsa ruína placet. (Carm. 5.574–86)

A long recital of the woes of the city, woes that Majorian could more truthfully be said to have inflicted than to have come to relieve. A recital, moreover, capped by the extraordinary protestation not simply that it was all worth while to have earned the security and peace of the kindly emperor, but that it is a positive pleasure: *ipsa ruína placet*. The phrasing and sentiment are strikingly similar to Lucan's

iam nihil, o superi, querimur; scelera ipsa nefasque
hac mercede placent. (1.37f.)

lines which are followed in their turn by the parallel list of the woes and crimes of the civil war which might otherwise seem to be intended to undercut the hyperbolic statement. Indeed, it is hard not to believe that Sidonius is imitating Lucan's proem deliberately, extremely good evidence that he, for one, took it at its rhetorical face value.

In a fairly recent article Frederick Ahl has convincingly demonstrated that ancient rhetorical theory laid considerable emphasis on a 'figured' style, akin to and often covering the same ground as irony, which allows a writer or speaker to say one thing on the surface and to be readily understood as actually meaning another.²¹ This style, normally called *σχημα*, is discussed with particular fullness by Demetrius in his *On Style* and by Quintilian in the *Institutio Oratoria*; both authors, especially Quintilian, are shown to lay great stress on its usefulness as a means of voicing criticism of autocratic rulers readily comprehensible to an audience without putting oneself in the danger that would naturally accompany blunt and outspoken hostility.²² As Ahl puts it, 'Blunt speech gives way to oblique speech in situations where the speaker is (or feels) threatened or unsure of his audience. Many ancient poets, and all ancient theorists, lived when overt criticism of the ruling powers was dangerous. They sensed the need for obliqueness. But they also sensed the greater persuasiveness of oblique suggestion.'²³ Although there are many individual points on which issue could be taken with Ahl's interpretation of the evidence, and though many qualifications could be added to his model as a whole, there is no real reason to doubt that such techniques were used often enough to be accessible to an attentive audience or readership. The question we are concerned with here is whether there are good grounds for believing that such a process is at work in the proem to the *De Bello Civili*. It will be clear

²¹ 'The Art of Safe Criticism in Greece and Rome', *AJPh* 105 (1984), 174–208.

²² See especially Demetrius, *On Style* 287–95, and Quintilian, *Inst. Or.* 9.2.66 (discussed by Ahl, art. cit., pp. 177ff., 189ff.).

²³ Art. cit., p. 184.

enough by now that in my view no sufficiently convincing grounds have so far been advanced in the case of the passage of Lucan under discussion in this paper. To detect covert allusions in the proem to Nero's squint and obesity is not possible for the simple reason that Nero suffered from neither, and so the phrases examined above could not bear a secondary meaning, or at least certainly not the one alleged. And moreover, even if they did seem to refer to some such deformity in the person of the emperor one could find better grounds than a vague reliance on the shifting sands of 'good taste' for discounting the apparent reference as illusory. One could in fact appeal to the exposition of the figure in Demetrius and Quintilian themselves: Demetrius illustrates the need for caution in the use of *σχήμα* by remarking that the one-eyed Philip II of Macedon was moved to rage by any reference to the Cyclops or even any mention of the word 'eye' in his presence (*On Style* 293), while Quintilian advises his readers in general to avoid using ambiguous words or puns ('*verbis dubiis et quasi duplicibus*', *Inst. Or.* 9.2.69f.) in the context of *σχήμα*.²⁴ And we have seen that the other objections raised against the extraordinary claims of the proem rest rather on subjective feelings of incredulity than on due consideration of the topoi available to contemporary encomiasts. The extravagance of the medium, with the high value it placed on sheer outrageousness of idea and expression alike, will always be alien in some measure to the modern reader. But the more we seek to establish the limits of the sayable in Latin panegyric writing, the further they seem to stretch. The Roman eulogist was clearly perfectly prepared to say ten impossible things before breakfast, but neither he, nor his honorand, nor his audience was expected to take them literally: that Juvenal satirically imagines Domitian as being vain and naive enough to make precisely that mistake is no reason to assume that the historical Nero would. Much darkness surrounds the composition of the proem, and those who are uncomfortable with it can themselves ask many uncomfortable questions. Was it written before or after Nero's ban forbidding Lucan to recite his verse in public? Was it delivered in the presence of an obtuse and uncomprehending prince while the knowing courtiers tittered into their sleeves? Or was it circulated privately for the amusement of a malicious few? Or did Nero hear and understand the mockery of his pretensions but find himself powerless to act in the face of its clever ambiguities without making himself look still more of a fool? So great indeed, is the uncertainty that those who want to do so are still free to detect irony or downright sarcasm where they will. But the fact remains that the whole passage is, in its ideas and its language alike, thoroughly dependent on the standard techniques and modes of expression that were the common currency of encomiastic writing in the imperial era. I doubt that the *Laudes Neronis* which Lucan recited at the emperor's quinquennial games, and for which he was duly crowned,²⁵ were substantially different in character.

APPENDIX

In this discussion I have tried to limit myself as much as possible to the text of the proem itself, while excluding analysis of those more stridently anti-Caesarian passages which are found in the later books of the epic (see in particular the violent authorial outbursts at 7.454–9 and 9.601–4). In this my intention has been to concentrate on the language and topoi of the proem as an audience would have first experienced them, given the conventions of encomiastic writing. As must by now be

²⁴ Cited by Ahl, art. cit., pp. 200 and 196 respectively.

²⁵ See the Suetonian *vita* of Lucan, printed at C. Hosius (ed.), *M. Annaei Lucani de Bello Civili libri decem* (2nd edition) (Leipzig, 1905), p. 335. 21–5; also Stat. *Silv.* 2.7.58.

quite clear, I am convinced that the text as it stands will have given such an audience no substantial reason for suspecting irony at a first hearing or reading. As Elaine Fantham has recently pointed out, however, 'the biggest dilemma in considering the *De bello civili* is to reconcile Lucan's denunciation of Caesar's victory for imposing tyranny on the poet's own generation, with the adulatory preface' (*Lucan. De Bello Civili. Book II* [Cambridge, 1992], p. 13). This being so, there is room for argument that latent ironies would come to the surface at a *re-reading*, and that echoes of the proem in subsequent parts of the epic might force upon the audience or reader a reappraisal of what was at first taken too literally. This seems to me a far more promising line of inquiry than that so far normally taken in evaluations of the proem, which, as we have seen, tend to rely on the practically worthless assertions of the rabidly anti-Neronian scholiasts. The kind of insight into the overall structure of the poem which might be obtained by the use of such a technique is evident in, for example, Masters' recent monograph on Lucan. One of the many fascinating suggestions made in this work is the identification of a link between the proem's imagery of balance and stability (1.53–8) and the apparent unbalancing of the Roman world when the Senate does what Lucan urges Nero not to do, that is, leaves Rome (5.1ff., esp. 36f.: see Masters, *op. cit.*, pp. 98f.). Masters also shows how the text as it stands establishes a parallelism between Nero and Apollo, or more correctly, the *numen* that dwells at Delphi, the centre of the world: compare 1.57f. 'librati pondera caeli/ orbe tene medio' and 5.93f. 'terris inserta regendis/ aere libratum vacuo quae sustinet orbem', and see Masters, *op. cit.*, pp. 140f. Note also that the imagery of gigantomachia that begins the proem (1.34ff.) is picked up by the speech of the Massilians to Caesar at 3.315ff. If Masters' argument is accepted, then the reader who at this juncture recalls the proem might perhaps reinterpret what he originally thought of as a straight-forward piece of panegyric, and now see it as containing veiled criticism of the emperor. Personally, I do not find this or any other attempt to establish verbal or thematic links between the proem and the explicitly anti-Caesarian portions of the later books strong enough actually to compel such a re-reading. No doubt others do, but in any case, even if a re-reading of this kind is consciously written into the text by the poet, it should not be assumed that the proem was intended to possess such latent irony when first composed and recited. If we believe Vacca's assertion that Lucan 'ediderat... tres libros quales videmus' it is only sensible to assume that these three books almost certainly must be I–III, and thus include the proem. If so, then although 'the proem must have become a moral embarrassment to its author in later years', none the less 'the ban on Lucan's poetry was also a ban on revision in the form of a 'second edition', and Lucan was not even free to disown his praise' (i.e. to disown it *publicly*. Fantham, *op. cit.*, pp. 13f.: see further *ad loc.*). If Lucan was eager to recant his adulation but could not simply destroy the existing text of the proem, it is conceivable that he might attempt to undermine it in retrospect by building into later portions of his epic passages that encourage subversive re-readings of the type envisaged. But I see no conclusive evidence that he has in fact done so: instead, I would argue that his recantation takes the form of the passionate, and almost hysterical, denunciations of the tyranny of the principate found at e.g. 7.454ff. For what it is worth, I accept the view, based on the testimony of Vacca, that the proem as we have it is a fossil, written in all 'sincerity' as a piece of serious encomium before the quarrel with Nero and the imposition of the ban on Lucan's work.

An alternative line of attack for those who still feel that the proem is ironic and subversive is to attempt to link it with passages in Lucan's own models, and to demonstrate that the processes of imitation at work destabilize the meaning of the

surface text. The most cogent attempt to do this has been made by Stephen Hinds in his very thought-provoking article 'Generalising About Ovid' (*The Imperial Muse. Ramus Essays on Roman Literature of the Empire. To Juvenal Through Ovid*, ed. A. J. Boyle (Berwick, Australia, 1988), esp. pp. 26–9). Hinds argues that when Lucan imagines Nero replacing Phoebus in the sun-chariot he has in mind Ovid's account of Phaethon's disastrous ride, and thus intimates that Nero's rule will turn out to be a disaster of cosmic proportions (Luc. 1.48–50, Ov. *Met.* 2.1–400). He takes the phrase *igne vago* to acquire in the circumstances of an allusion to Phaethon 'a worrying connotation', i.e. that Nero's course will be as destructive as was that of the unfortunate boy in the myth. And he isolates what seems to be a direct verbal echo of Ovid's account a few lines later when Lucan compares the fall of Rome into the anarchy of civil war to the Stoics' final conflagration ('antiquum repetens iterum Chaos', Luc. 1.74; 'in Chaos antiquum confundimur', Ov. *Met.* 2.299). This is by far the most effective case for the proem's irony in print, but even so I do not find it sufficiently compelling. Above all, the general link with Phaethon seems to me to be far from assured, though admittedly it occurred to the scholiast too. Lucan speaks of the chariot of Phoebus, and that in itself militates in some measure against the use here of Ovid, who is careful to distinguish between Apollo and Sol (see Fontenrose, *AJPh* 61 (1940), 429–44). Furthermore, as Hinds himself acknowledges, *vagus* is a standard epithet for the planets (including the sun) as opposed to the 'fixed' stars. As such, it normally implies a regular and pre-set course, and it is not easy to make it stretch here to refer craftily to an erratic one: see *OLD* s.v. 1c. It is also difficult to imagine the Earth blithely 'nihil mutato sole timentem' in the same sentence as a sun careering out of control in the manner Hinds suggests is implied by *igne vago*. Indeed, if there is in fact a deliberate allusion in Lucan's text to the Phaethon story as told by Ovid, it could be said to work better as a compliment: under *this* change of driver the same Tellus who was terrified in *Metamorphoses* 2 rests easy, with nothing to fear because Phoebus' replacement is not an ineffectual boy but his own equal, the earthly Sun, Nero. That leaves the repetition of the phrase 'antiquum Chaos' to be considered. It too I think inconclusive, and not just because it is the *only* apparent direct verbal echo adduced from Ovid's version of the Phaethon tale. It is a natural enough phrase to use in the circumstances, and since both poets have Stoic ideas of the destruction of the cosmos in mind they may even be drawing independently on the same source, or standard phraseology of their individual but related sources. At any rate, it can only have force if the supposed allusions to Phaethon in lines 48–50 are accepted, and they are far from certain. Finally, in Hinds' presentation this network of allusions derives much of its cogency by piggy-backing on the 'evidence' which can be derived from the scholiasts' picture of a fat tyrant with a squint. If we remove their fantasy, as I hope we have successfully done above, then Hinds' own suspicions are correspondingly weakened by isolation. What I should like to stress, however, is that though the individual arguments adduced by Hinds do not overcome my own scepticism, it is precisely the methodology he applies which I consider most likely to bear fruit.²⁶

University of Calgary

MICHAEL DEWAR

²⁶ I would like to express my gratitude to the referee for *CQ* who made several very useful observations which have greatly added to the clarity and force of this paper.