LAUS NERONIS:
THE SEVENTH ECLOGUE OF CALPURNIUS SICULUS

Calpurnius Siculus has been served badly by posterity, being neglected to the point of near complete oblivion or, if noticed at all, dismissed contemptuously. However recently more favourable judgments of the poet's work, which see merit in both the content of Calpurnius' poetry and its technical dexterity, have been forthcoming.

While these offer a persuasive reassessment of Calpurnius' poetics, unfortunately his supporters have felt the need to disassociate the poet from the apparent praise he showers on the emperor of the day, normally believed to have been the Emperor Nero. Two factors seem to be at work here: one is the modern distaste for the notion of the "court" poet, the second probably a wish to distance Calpurnius from a "bad" emperor; a similar approach can be detected frequently in Virgilian criticism, where there is a wish to absolve the poet from these sins.

Three recent major studies of Calpurnius, those of Leach, Davis, and Newlands, unite in seeing Calpurnius' final eclogue as indicative of the poet's doubts about Nero's rule. The poem begins with Corydon being

(1) E.g. J. Wight Duff, A Literary History of Rome in the Silver Age (1927) 330: "The importance of the eclogues of T. Calpurnius Siculus rests as much on their testimony to the continuance of one aspect of Virgil's influence as upon intrinsic poetic value".


(3) Since the publication of Haupt's edition of the eclogues in 1875 (De carminibus bucolicis Calpurnii et Nemesiani = Opuscula 1), Calpurnius has generally been dated to the reign of Nero, a view to which the present author subscribes. See however for a contrary view, placing Calpurnius in the third Century A.D., E. Champlain, The life and times of Calpurnius Siculus, "J.R.S." 68, 1978, 95 ff. History and the date of Calpurnius Siculus, "Philologus" 130, 1986, 104 ff, with bibliographic references to replies to Champlain's first article and E. Courtney, Imitation, Chronologie Littéraire et Calpurnius Siculus, "R.E.L." 65, 1987, 148 ff. Even if this position is correct, the author believes that the discussion of the ideology of the poetry which follows would, mutatis mutandis, apply to either period.

(4) Such criticism seems founded on the notion of the artist as a "free agent". This view was, of course, not at all common in antiquity. Cicero, for example, states that the highest function of poetry is to praise great men, Pro Archia 19 ff.

greeted by the elderly Lycotas on his return from Rome. Lycotas remarks on Corydon's long absence from the country which has made it necessary to award a singing prize to one of his lesser rivals, Stimicon. Lycotas' speech carries slight echoes of Mopsus' lament for Daphnis, showing his high estimation of Corydon's abilities. Corydon's response to his friend's greeting however is hostile or indifferent, he no longer cares for rural pursuits. He is then asked by Lycotas to describe Rome and launches into a description of the wonders of a *venatio* there which lasts for over half the poem.

This section is normally taken to refer to the games held in the temporary amphitheatre erected by Nero on the Campus Martius in 57 A.D. This conjecture is strengthened by the fact that Corydon dwells on the sea beasts he saw - we know such animals were a special feature of these games. It may be significant that Calpurnius chooses to describe the *venationes* held here rather than gladiatorial games. This could be to emphasize the lack of cruelty on the emperor's part: it is at these games that Nero decreed no gladiator was to be killed outright. However the *venatio* also gives Corydon more scope to describe the scene to his friend using rural parallels familiar to him. The homely nature of these parallels further serve to emphasize the splendour of the hunt, a legitimate pastoral activity, at Rome compared to those found in the countryside.

Finally Lycotas, moved by Corydon's description, asks him to describe the emperor himself. Corydon replies that, sadly, because of his lowly status, he could not get near to the emperor, but nevertheless even from afar he seemed to have the appearance of both Mars and Apollo, and here the poem draws to a close.

Leach sees Calpurnius' sumptuous description of the amphitheatre and the inversions of the natural world found there as an implicit criticism of the Neronian order. The amphitheatre for her is described in "barbarian splendour", while the *venatio* is a "travesty of reality". The emphasis on the physical is intended to produce "aesthetic repugnance", and demonstrates

48-9.


(9) See Virgil, *Ec.* 3.74-75.

the spiritual bankruptcy of the Nero's regime: the amphitheatre is "the perverted realization of the once-promised golden age"; "there is no more promise of justice or talk of a golden age, only of ivory, gems, and glittering gold". Leach's conclusion is inevitable - "far from encomium, the poems are a chronicle of disappointment". Yet, if this is true, the seduction of Corydon's tale reaches well into the pastoral bower. Lycotus receives Corydon's description with unbridled enthusiasm reducing Leach to special pleading in the face of his acceptance of Corydon's point of view: "even Lycotus is swayed... The corruption of the city is contagious".

Lycotus' approval perhaps ought to warn us that not all is well with Leach's reading of the poem. Even she concedes that Calpurnius' criticism of Nero, if such it is, is muted and somewhat obscure in form, and that "its darker meaning is reserved for readers capable of sharing the poet's dissatisfaction", a group whom she tentatively identifies with a literary circle associated with the satirist Persius. The detection of dissent therefore is almost entirely an argumentum ex silentio.

In addition to a lack of positive evidence, the description of the amphitheatre can be construed in an entirely positive way. Leach seems motivated, in part at least, by a modern distaste for the arena, a distaste shared only by a minority of intellectuals in the ancient world. The texts disapproving of the games which are quoted by Leach can easily be paralleled by others which praise this institution. Indeed there is a famous parallel celebration of imperial games in verse - the Liber Spectaculorum of Martial. If Tacitus passes over the games of 57 rapidly, it is more because of the emperor concerned than the spectacle itself. Indeed it may be argued that his haste is to disguise the fact that the hateful Nero staged such a popular event. The games certainly were popular and Imperial propaganda exploited their popularity to the full. Augustus' games, for example, feature

(12) Op. cit. 84.
(14) Most notoriously Pliny, Panegyricus 33. Cicero's ambivalence towards the institution, Tuscul. Disp. 2.17.41, is also of interest, though perhaps more surprising to modern eyes are the views of Symmachus, who while normally regarded as a humane man of letters was disgusted that the prisoners he had acquired for his son's prætorian games committed suicide to avoid dying in the arena (Ep. 2.46). Modern parallels to this ambivalence might be found in Spanish intellectual responses to the Corrida, or English views on boxing and fox-hunting.

(15) Tacitus statement that "little of note" happened in this year and his subsequent attack on historians who praised the games at length as acting beneath the dignitas of Roman history (Annals 13.31) is important in this regard.
strongly in the justification of his rule to posterity, the *Res Gestae*\(^\text{(16)}\).

Nor need the richness of the amphitheatre be a sign of barbarism; all over the Roman Empire euergetic inscriptions record money spent on games and the adornment of buildings, clearly in the expectation that this would bring approval from their audience. Again Augustus thought it worthwhile to emphasize the richness of the public buildings he had constructed in his reign, reminding us of his boast, recorded by Suetonius, that he had found Rome made of brick and left it built of marble\(^\text{(17)}\).

Similarly Leach regards Corydon's statement that he saw every kind of wild beast, *vidi genus omne ferarum*, as simple boasting. However this seems once more to be the repugnance of modern, not ancient taste. Precisely the same phrase is used by Suetonius when he describes, with approval, a set of games put on by the emperor Titus, *dedit... atque uno die quinque milia omne genus ferarum*\(^\text{(18)}\). The importance placed upon acquiring exotic beasts can be see in Cicero's correspondence with the aedile Caelius\(^\text{(19)}\).

The list of any animals has a distinct Northern air to it\(^\text{(20)}\). The games of 57 A.D. may well be those which led Julianus, a shadowy individual in charge of games at this time, to despatch a Roman *eques* to the North in search of amber to decorate an amphitheatre\(^\text{(21)}\). If this is the case, it is more than likely that he brought home with him some representative fauna too, and Calpurnius is probably not only using a standard form of praise for a good set of games, but also alluding to this special effort to procure entertainment which was more exotic than normal.

The opinions on games and ostentation we possess from antiquity are usually *a posteriori* judgments of the benefactor concerned, and as such are constructed to reflect a view about their provider's broader character. However it is clear that in general such benefactions were regarded as a good thing, which it took further vices to sully. Nero's games were vastly popular in his own day, indeed his fame was such that souvenirs of the "greatest showman of them all" were still circulating some three hundred

\(^{(16)}\) Chapters 22, 23.  
\(^{(18)}\) Suetonius, *Vita Titi* 7.  
\(^{(19)}\) Cicero, *Ad Fam.* 2.11.  
\(^{(20)}\) However the assertion by, inter alios, Keene, *op. cit.* 153, that a polar bear is mentioned in lines 65-66, seems unfounded, see A. T. Fear, *Polar Bears in Antiquity*, "Liverpool Classical Monthly" 18.3, 1993, 43 ff.  
\(^{(21)}\) Pliny, *N.H.* 37.45.
years after his death\(^{22}\). It is unwise to see Calpurnius, a contemporary witness, reflecting anything other than praise for them.

Far from using the amphitheatre's splendour as a method of reproach, Calpurnius is probably using it as a symbol of the wealth and prosperity which Nero's reign has brought to the earth, a recurrent theme in his poetry. Leach notes the use of *adynata* in the description of the games and sees these as bombast. However *adynata* are precisely one of the poetic devices used to invoke the golden age, the most famous example being the coloured sheep of Virgil's fourth eclogue. Compared to his predecessors in the pastoral genre Calpurnius is a remarkably 'concrete' poet: the real world of his own day often obtrudes into the timeless pastoral age of the bower, as the description of the golden age in factual terms in his first eclogue shows. Here in the closing poem of the collection the *adynata* of the arena are probably a similar device. Literary convention is boldly projected into the real world, but, as in the previous poems, the intention is positive, not pejorative.

Two other readings of the poem, those of Newlands and Davis, also find dissatisfaction with Nero expressed in the poem. Newlands, like Leach, sees problems with the sumptuous description: the amphitheatre symbolises "a material culture that attaches the highest importance to luxury and extravagant display", where "objects are valued on the basis of appearance alone"\(^{23}\).

However the thrust of the criticism is that Calpurnius portrays Corydon as a profoundly alienated individual. For Davis Corydon has "accomplished nothing" by his visit to Rome, and at the same time has gained a sense of shame towards his rusticity. The poem is, in sum, "a record of frustration and disillusionment"\(^{24}\).

Newlands' approach is similar, though more muted. Corydon's journey to Rome is again interpreted as a failure, from which he is forced to return disillusioned to his old home where he can no longer find peace. Newlands finds that Calpurnius has little sympathy with the rustic world, as such, detecting ironic echoes of Theocritus' fifteenth idyll in the poem. Nevertheless she sees significance in Corydon's isolation in Rome - there is no sign of his friend and patron Meliboeus in the city, and she also emphasises that unlike Tityrus, who, despite being a peasant, was able to meet his god face to face, Corydon because of his poverty can only catch a glimpse of him from far away. For Newlands this shows the complaint of the poet that


\(^{24}\) *Op. cit.* 49.
“only wealth and prestige, not moral uprightness... give... access to the emperor”\(^{25}\). Finally for Newlands, therefore, unlike Davis, the critique of the regime is much narrower: Calpurnius is merely complaining about a lack of patronage.

Need we, however, accept that Calpurnius wishes to criticise Nero at all? The seventh eclogue is a subtle reworking of Virgil’s first eclogue, with echoes of the ninth also present. Given Virgil’s fame and the classical emphasis on genre, it would have been impossible for Calpurnius’ audience to read his work without that of Virgil being ever present in their minds.

Nevertheless there are strong contrasts between the two poems. The most obvious is that while Calpurnius ostensibly uses the dialogue form in this poem, this is simply a device to frame his description of the amphitheatre and *venatio* which form the core of the poem.

However there are many other differences which, while not being so striking, are of greater importance in changing the ethos of Calpurnius’ poem. There is an overwhelming note of sadness in Virgil’s first eclogue. Meliboeus is being forced into exile to the ends of the earth, on the way he encounters old Tityrus whose trip to Rome has allowed him to stay on his farmland, poor though it is in parts.

It is clear that it was the insecurity of the times that forced Tityrus to go to Rome. There he met his benefactor, the *iuvēnis deus*, obtained his security, and retired contented to pursue his old life in the country. Rome astounded and overwhelmed the shepherd, yet this effect was transitory: Tityrus is now perfectly content with his old life once more, as he lies beneath the beech tree playing songs in praise of his rustic love Amaryllis. Indeed it is precisely this old life that his benefactor has given him, *pascite ut ante boves, pueri, submittite tauros*.

The circumstances in Calpurnius’ poem are entirely different. Here it is the youth, Corydon, who has gone to Rome. Unlike Tityrus, Corydon was under no compulsion to make his journey, Calpurnius’ countryside is at peace. Perhaps the most insistent theme of all the preceding poems is the security that now exists throughout the land. Nor has Corydon any need to seek *libertas* as had Tityrus. Again the preceding poems have made it clear that this already exists. Newlands and Davis assume that the journey was made to seek fame and fortune as a poet, but there is no hint in the poem itself that this was the case. In the other two ‘court poems’ Corydon expresses the hope that Meliboeus will take his verses to the emperor as Meliboeus has the right of audience with him. At no point however does Corydon assume that he will obtain this favour.

We must remember that Calpurnius' pastoral world is far more firmly grounded in reality than that of Virgil. The games of 57 A.D. were a real event, and no doubt large numbers of country-folk flocked into Rome to see them\(^{(26)}\). Corydon would have been one of them. There is no need to assume any other motive for his journey. That he enjoyed the peace and security to make such a journey for pleasure is, once again, a sharp contrast with Virgil's Tityrus.

The journey to Rome also has vastly different effects on Corydon. Unlike Tityrus, who appears to have come back almost immediately to the country, Corydon has lingered long in Rome. Lycotas remarks that he has come \textit{lentus ab urbe}. There is a sharp contrast here with Tityrus who is described as \textit{lentus in umbra}\(^{(27)}\).

Calpurnius continues the contrast. Tityrus contentedly plays tunes to his love and clearly regards this as the height of happiness. Corydon on the other hand is no longer interested in pastoral song. Meliboeus calls his old friend \textit{fortunatus senex}, but Corydon castigates Lycotas' old age, \textit{o pipier, o duro non mollior axe}, \textit{Lycota}. The reason for this is his rustic complacency, \textit{qui veteres fagos nova quam spectacula mavis cernere}. Once again there is an echo of Tityrus, who lies \textit{sub tegmine fagi} here.

Throughout Calpurnius' poem, there is an attack on the complacency and conservatism of old age\(^{(28)}\). Both shepherd's emperors are described as a \textit{iuvenis deus}, but, while for Tityrus the proof of divinity is found in the fact that his benefactor has given him back his past life, for Corydon it is the new marvels, \textit{nova spectacula} that the emperor exhibits, which are important; wonders which amaze not only rustics such as himself, but even city-dwellers hardened to spectacles\(^{(29)}\).

Where then is Corydon's alienation? Unless we accept the unfounded view that Corydon had gone to Rome to become a poet, it does not seem to exist at all. Corydon went to see the games in Rome and these have surpassed his wildest dreams. Moreover the effect on him has awakened him from his rustic complacency for ever, for Corydon, unlike Tityrus, things will never quite be the same again.

Perhaps the strongest argument for disappointment is Corydon's viewing the emperor from a distance. However this need not necessarily be

\(^{(27)}\) Perhaps Calpurnius is also playing on the various meanings of \textit{lentus} here, whereas Corydon returns \textit{lentus}, with the meaning 'slow in time', is Lycotas who is also \textit{lentus} slow with the meaning 'slow in mind'?
\(^{(28)}\) Perhaps it is significant here that \textit{umbra} can also mean delusion as well as "shade".
\(^{(29)}\) Lines 40-46.
as great a stumbling block as is often thought. As has been emphasized above, Calpurnius is a realistic poet, he has already described in detail the various seating arrangements in the amphitheatre, and it was simply the case that the poor were seated furthest from the emperor\(^30\). Given these two facts, Corydon's being able to perceive the emperor's resemblance to divinity even from a distance, must be taken as praise, showing that this is an unmistakable aspect of Nero's appearance, not as a criticism of the emperor's distancing himself from the poet. Nero's divinity is clear even to the lowliest of his subjects.

Calpurnius' use of the gods Apollo and Mars in this context is also significant. Apollo is an obvious choice given Nero's enthusiasm for the arts\(^31\). The reference to Mars probably refers to the honours heaped upon Nero when his swift actions led to a Parthian withdrawal from Armenia in 55 A.D. These included the voting of triumphal robes for the emperor, the celebration of an ovation, and the erection of his statue in the temple of Mars Ultor\(^32\). There may also be a slight allusion to the new aggressive forward policy initiated in Britain in 57 A.D. with the appointment of Quintus Veranius as governor of the province\(^33\).

The two gods were also those especially cultivated by Augustus\(^34\). Calpurnius' choice of deities therefore not only underlines Nero's personal virtues, but also connects the young ruler to the best of emperors, whose reign was also said to have heralded the beginning of a Golden Age, Augustus.

Corydon's view of the emperor is the best he can expect given his lowly social position. Even despite this disadvantage he is able to see the reality of the new golden age predicted in the god-like countenance of the emperor. His disappointment is not that of having been deceived, as he can see the god has indeed arrived, but merely that of being unable to get more of a good thing.

It is hard therefore to see any alienation in Corydon. Instead he appears to have been woken from his rustic sleep by his visit to Rome, unlike Titurus who merely wished to win back his complacent existence, Corydon's eyes have been opened to the wider world which exists outside the pastoral


\(^{(31)}\) It was a parallel used by Calpurnius' contemporary, the author of the *Einsiedeln Eclogues*.


In this respect the seventh eclogue can be seen not as the culmination of Calpurnius' frustration with Nero's regime, but rather the reverse. The collection begins with the prophecy of the Golden Age by the woodland god Faunus in the first eclogue and here in the final poem Corydon manages to visit Rome and see its substance in person, a process which revolutionizes his outlook on the world.

Why did Calpurnius approach his theme in this manner? The answer is provided not by mere sycophancy, but by the politics of his day. Nero was young, progressive, and proud of it. Much of his reign was a vain attempt to educate Rome in the ways of Hellenism, part of which involved compelling more elderly members of the Roman aristocracy to participate in artistic events. Two years after the date of this poem the young emperor held a series of Hellenistic artistic performances to celebrate the shaving of his beard, they were significantly named the Juvenalia. Calpurnius therefore by his emphasis on the openness of youth has produced a poem which does not merely celebrate a set of Imperial games, but one which aligns him with Imperial policy in general, a veritable laus Neronis. As such he ought to be regarded not as a sycophantic poetaster, but as a skilful and enthusiastic supporter of the young emperor's attempted Roman cultural revolution.

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