

TWO SATIRICAL EPIGRAMS

Abstract: Two Epigrams by Lucilius explained.

Key words: Lucilius, Epigrams.

Resumen: Explicación de dos epigramas de Lucilio.

Palabras-clave: Lucilio, epigramas.

I shall throw light on two satirical epigrams, whose text has hitherto baffled scholars. The first is *A.P.*, XI, 89 (by Lucilius):

Ὅ βραχὺς Ἑρμογένης, ὅταν ἐκβάλη εἰς τὸ χαμαὶ τι,
ἔλκει πρὸς τὰ κάτω τοῦτο δορυδρεπᾶνω.

The latest commentators, to whom for the sake of brevity I refer the reader (Paton and Aubreton, in their editions published respectively in the *Loeb Classical Library* and in *Collection Budé*), cannot offer a satisfactory explanation of this apparently enigmatic couplet. Paton (*loc. cit.*) follows Jacobs¹, in stating that the poem contains «an absurd hyperbole», to the effect that «even things on the ground are too high for him to get at».

Aubreton (*loc. cit.*), after stressing that both those critics who accuse Lucilius —a very skilled and witty epigrammatist— of writing absurdities in this poem and those editors who want to alter κάτω into ἄνω in line 2 are wrong, is himself unable to propound any convincing elucidation of the piece.

Yet the solution to this puzzle is easy to find. The δορυδρέπανον was a sickle with a long handle, which could be used in order to draw towards oneself («*unco trahere*», Jacobs, *loc. cit.*) an object which could not otherwise be reached. The phrase ἔλκει πρὸς τὰ κάτω cannot mean «pulls it down», (so Paton; «*hernieder zu sich*» Beckby, who, in his edition, follows Paton's rendering), which would be logically and contextually impossible: here, τὰ κάτω means «the lower limbs of his body», i. e. «his legs» (cf. LSJ, s.v. κάτω 2, *e* and Thes., s.v. κάτω 1371, B-C), and ἐκβάλη signifies «lets fall», «drops» (cf. LSJ, s.v. ἐκβάλλω, III).

The meaning of the couplet is that Hermogenes is so short that, if he drops an object onto the floor so that it comes to rest a certain distance from his feet, he cannot reach it by bending over, and must therefore draw it towards his feet, in order to pick it up, by means of a δορυδρέπανον. The hyperbole (customary: cf. *A.P.* XI, 87, 88, etc.) is here very witty.

Having solved the problem presented by *A.P.* XI, 89, I shall now unravel the conundrum presented by *A.P.* XI, 210 (also by Lucilius):

¹ Fr. Jacobs, *Animadv. in Epigramm. Anthol. Gr.*, III, 1, Lipsiae 1802, p. 345f.: «*frigida hyperbole et inepta: nam si poetae acumen recte assequor, Hermogenes*

eo, quod projicit, inferior fuisse dicitur, ita ut illud unco versus terram trahere opus haberet.»

Ἄνθρακα καὶ δάφνην παραβύεται ὁ στρατιώτης
 Αὔλος ἀποσφίγγας μῆλινα λωμάτια·
 φρίσσει καὶ τὸ μάτην ἴδιον ξίφος· ἦν δὲ ποτ' εὔπης·
 «Ἐρχοντ',» ἔξαπίνης ὑπτιος ἐκτέταται.
 οὐδενὶ δ'οὐ Πολέμῳ προσέρχεται, οὐ Στρατοκλείδῃ,
 ἀλλὰ φίλῳ χρῆται πάντοτε Λυσιμάχῳ.

Paton and Aubreton have contributed (*loc.cit.*) useful material to the understanding of this epigram: the lines are evidently aimed at a pusillanimous soldier, who fears the approaching enemy (ἔρχονται line 4). However, the first couplet, which is crucial for the comprehension of the poem, has confounded the critics: Jacobs (*Animadv. in Epigramm. Anthol. Gr.*, II, 2, Lipsiae 1800, p. 508ss.) could not make sense of lines 1-2, and concluded: «*videant sagaciores*». Paton translates the first distich «Aulus the soldier stops his ears when he sees charcoal or laurel, wrapping his yellow duds tight round his head», and adds: «this is the only meaning I can elicit from this possibly corrupt couplet. The soldier is supposed to be afraid of the crackling of charcoal or laurel when lighted». Beckby, in his edition, follows Paton (the soldier «verstopft sich, wenn Kohle und Lorbeer knistern»). This explanation cannot be correct, because the crackling of the laurel on the coal was regarded to be a favourable omen: cf. RE, s.v., *Lorbeer*, 1441, 5ff.: «wenn die Zweige (*scil.* of the laurel) im Feuer laut knisterten, galt es als gutes Zeichen»².

It follows that, if the cowardly soldier had heard the laurel crackling on the coal-fire, he, far from stopping his ears in despondency, would have felt encouraged not to fear for his life in the impending battle. The said crackling (*crepitet ... bona signa*, Tibullus, *loc. cit.*) would have told him that he was not going to die at the hands of the enemy.

Literally, the first couplet means «he stops³ his ears, as far as coal and laurel are concerned»⁴.

The upshot of all this is that the soldier is derided, in the epigram, because he was so frightened at the thought of his possible death in the imminent battle that he, after putting the laurel on the coal-fire in order to obtain an *omen* concerning his survival or otherwise in the fight, was seized with irresistible terror⁵ and stopped his ears for fear of receiving a *malum signum* which would have been manifested by the laurel not crackling.

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² The best on this has been written by K. Flower Smith, *The Elegies of Tibullus*, reprint Darmstadt 1971, p. 471 (on Tib. II, 5, 81).

³ Cf. Thes., s.v. βύω : e. g. βύει, φράσσει τὰ ὦτα; βύων τὰ ὦτα, etc. The preverb παρα-, in παραβύω, is strengthening.

⁴ The *accusativus pendens* (or accusative of respect) at the beginning of the sentence (ἄνθρακα καὶ δάφνην, = «as far as coal and laurel are concerned») is of course very common in later Greek. In a paper on the text of Dio Chrysostomus (*Mus. Philol. Londin.* in the press) I have shown interesting examples from Dio Chrysostomus, Plutarch and Galen.

⁵ In general, superstitious people are easily scared, because they suffer from δειλία πρὸς τὸ δαιμόνιον (i.e. fear that the gods are hostile to them): cf. Theophr. *Char.* XVI, 1, and *Stoic. Vet. Fragm.* III, p. 98, 42 as well as p. 99, 13, von Arnim. In particular, people who consulted oracles or resorted to *divinatio* because they were worried about their future feared, naturally enough, receiving a *malum signum*: material in A. Bouché-Leclercq, *Histoire de la divination dans l'antiquité* (frequent reprints). Aulus was by nature «*perterrefactus*», and avoided («*vitab*», «*fugib*») any *malum signum* («*male ominatos*»: cf. Jacobs, *loc. cit.*).