Calpurnius Siculus, Eclogue I.33-88

Faunus's prophecy about the glorious future of Rome under the reign of a new emperor, probably Nero

Name of the author: Calpurnius Siculus
Date: 54 CE to 55 CE
Language: Latin
Category: Roman
Literary genre: Poetry
Title of work: Eclogues
Reference: I.33-88

Commentary:
The dates of Calpurnius Siculus's own life and of his pastoral work, the Eclogues, have been debated a lot. However, it is highly probable that Calpurnius wrote this work under Nero's reign (for the bibliography see the editions of Calpurnius's Eclogues by Jacqueline Amat, p. vii-viii, xix-xxiv; and by Maria A. Vinchesi, p. 15-20). The first Eclogue, which could be dated from 54 or 55 CE, is part of the political poems. It opens with a scene in a bucolic autumnal landscape. Two characters, Corydon – probably Calpurnius Siculus's himself – and his brother Ornytus decide to protect themselves from the heat of the day by taking refuge in a sacred wood dedicated to Faunus, the ancient italic god who was the protector of the herds and who was a famous soothsayer. In this place, they discover on the bark of a beech tree, a prophecy written by Faunus and dealing with the future of Rome under a new ruler.

After a short passage in which Faunus settles the prophecy in a pastoral context and praises the fact that the security is back in the countryside (v. 36-41), the god broadens his perspective and announces the opening of a new Golden age, aurea aetas (v. 42-45). As Maria A. Vinchesi rightly remarks, this theme of the renovatio of the Golden Age was inspired by all the literature produced during the Augustan period by authors like Horace, Virgil, Tibullus or Ovid, but it also became an important theme of Nero’s propaganda at the beginning of his reign (see the references in Maria A. Vinchesi’s commentary, p. 125-126). This idea that the emergence of a young man announces the opening of a new era, clearly recalls Virgil’s fourth Eclogue (Virgil, Eclogue IV.1-63). If the iuvenis, “the young man” (preferable to Duff’s translation “young prince”), mentioned by Calpurnius, and the parvus puer, “little baby,” of Virgil’s fourth Eclogue are both associated with the opening of a Golden Age, they are different in one respect: the iuvenis, even if he is not named, represented for the readers of Calpurnius’s Eclogue a known man, Nero (Maria A. Vinchesi’s commentary, p. 101). This hyperbolic association between the young man’s advent and the renovation of the Golden Age also appears in verses 64-70. Faunus claims that the plena quies, the “full peace” provided by the “young man,” will renew “the reign of Saturn in Latium,” an allusion to the legend according to which Saturn had been expelled from heaven by Jupiter and had taken refuge in the Latium, where he inaugurated the Golden Age. Such a reference can be found in Virgil’s Aeneid or Eclogues (Maria A. Vinchesi’s commentary, p. 64). However, Faunus surprisingly adds that this full peace will not only renew the Golden Age of Saturn but also the “reign of Numa.” This allusion to the king of Rome, known to be the founder of the Roman religion and cults, shows that, in matters of customs or religious practices, the young prince was coming back to an ideal and pure model.

After the announce of the advent of a new Golden Age (v. 42-45), Faunus presents the main characteristics of this new era, characteristics which look very similar to some themes of Nero’s political program during the first year of his reign, as we known them thanks to Tacitus (Annals XIII.4.2) and Seneca (De Clementia I.1.8) (Wiseman, “Calpurnius Siculus,” p. 67). The first theme is the most important in Faunus’s prophecy, it is that of security and peace (secura pax, v. 42; candida pax, v. 54; plena quies, v. 63). To prove that this new reign will initiate a long period of peace, Faunus uses an epic figure, that of the goddess of war, Bellona, in chains (v. 46-47), who becomes even more monstrous as she practices autophagy (v. 48). This image has two meanings: first the autophagy could be seen as a symbol of the atrocity of the civil wars; but the fact that it is applied to Bellona means that the main cause of these inner conflicts was destroying itself (v. 49-50; Maria A. Vinchesi’s commentary,
In his prophecy, Faunus also mentions that a comet appeared in the sky (v. 77-79), or of the interdiction expressed by Anchises to his sons to use their vigour against their “country’s very vitals” (Virgil, Aeneid VI.832-833). Calpurnius Siculus’s image of Bellona practicing autophagy and the Virgilian excerpts may have been a source of inspiration to Lucan, especially in the proem of the Civil War (see Lucan, The Civil War I.2-3; see Paul Roche’s commentary of Lucan, De Bello Civili, p. 98-99).

The claim that the new Golden Age opened by the iuvenis was going to put an end to civil conflicts and would thus bring civic concord is another main theme of Faunus’s prophecy. Actually, the god predicts that this peace will be different, deeper than the Augustan peace, because it will not only mark the end of foreign wars, but it will also put an end to public strife, publica discordia (v. 54-57). This idea appears also when Faunus foresees that Rome shall not know battles like Philippi any more (v. 50-51). The battle of Philippi in 42 BCE, opposing Brutus and Cassius to Antonius, Lepidus and Octavian, became for many authors, especially during the Augustan period, the symbol of an atrocious civil strife wasting the Roman forces (Virgil, Georgic I.489-490; Maria A. Vinchesi’s commentary, p. 133). Faunus carries on with this theme and adds that Rome shall not celebrate triumph over “her captive self” (v. 51). Through Faunus’s voice, Calpurnius Siculus wanted to stress the idea that the new Neronian regime would be better that the Augustan one, because it would not be based on the violent repression of some seditious fellow citizens (Maria A. Vinchesi’s commentary, p. 133). This new regime will bring a long period of peace and will bring back concordia in the Roman state.

The third element which is central in Faunus’s prophecy and which characterizes the advent of this iuvenis founder of an age of peace, is that he will also restore the justice and the law. This theme is embodied by the return of Themis, the goddess of Justice (v. 43-44), and is also explicitly mentioned: sed legibus omne reductis / ius aderit; “Nay, laws shall be restored; right will come in fullest force” (v. 71-72). This restoration of the leges and of the ius will also lead to a restoration of the institutions, especially of the consulsiphi (v. 69-71), but also of the usual legal life in the forum (v. 72-73). Such an idea fits in with the Neronian propaganda of the years 54-55 CE, whose aim was to stigmatise Claudius’s policy and reign, described by Faunus as an afflictum aevum, an “age of oppression” (v. 73). Calpurnius Siculus uses the same arguments as Tacitus and Seneca, who presented Claudius as an adversary of the institutional legitimacy as he settled public procedures or trials in the privacy of his imperial palace (Tacite, Annals XIII.4; Maria A. Vinchesi’s commentary, p. 142), or gave the main part of the legal power to his procurators, mainly composed of knights (Tacitus, Annals XII.60; Seneca, Apokolokyntosis IV.1.23-24; see Raoul Verdière’s commentary, p. 237). The allusion to the fact that senators will not be oppressed anymore (v. 60-62) is also a way to stigmatize his predecessor Claudius, as a criminal or a murderer of senators, an image which is conveyed by Suetonius, Tacitus or Seneca (for the references, see Maria A. Vinchesi’s commentary, p. 138-139).

In his prophecy, Faunus foretells a glorious future under this iuvenis’s reign, a reign which is presented as a restoration of the Augustan ideology, as the emperor is both a guarantor of the peace and security and a restorer of justice, laws, and religious order. Highlighting the fact that this new regime will prevent civil conflicts and that it had not emerged from a context of civil strife, Faunus suggests that the young prince will even surpass Augustus himself.

Finally, one of the main aims of Faunus’s prophecy is to confirm that the young Nero is the saviour of the Julian family, which is presented here as the only family legitimate to rule the Empire, contrary to Claudius who appears as an usurper. Nero had close ties with the Iulii (v. 45), since his mother Agrippina was the granddaughter of Augustus. In two passages of his prophecy, Faunus mentions that the iuvenis is a god (deus ipse, v. 46; melior deus, v. 73). Such an idea fits in with the Augustan poetry which celebrates the princeps as if he was a god on Earth (Virgil, Eclogue I.6-7, 18). In his prophecy, Faunus also mentions that a comet appeared in the sky (v. 77-79), a comet which has been identified by some scholars as the comet of 54 CE which foretold Claudius’s death (on the debate, see Maria A. Vinchesi’s commentary, p. 145). If some comets could be interpreted as sinister omens – as for instance the comet appearing just before Claudius’s death (Suetonius, Life of Claudius XLVI) or the comet foretelling the civil war after Caesar’s murder (Virgil, Georgic I.488; Tibullus II.5.71) – the comet mentioned by Faunus is presented as the sign of a future beneficial event. This comet is liquidum (v. 79), limpid, contrary to most of the others, which were said to be glowing, as a prediction of some bloody event – it was actually the case after Caesar’s comet (v. 80-83). The prophecy ends with a general statement in which Faunus praises the young new emperor for his strength which will enable him to support the whole Roman world, in opposition with Claudius’s physical disability (v. 84-85; see Maria A. Vinchesi’s commentary, p. 149). The sentence “the world will pass to a new ruler without the crash of reverberating thunder” (v. 86), confirms the main idea of the prophecy: the fact that Nero’s advent occurred without any civil strife is presented here as an omen and a confirmation that the concord will be preserved during his entire reign.
Keywords in the original language:

- affectus
- arma
- aurea aetas
- Bellona
- bellum civile
- Caesar
- clementia
- cometes
- consul
- deus
- discordia
- Faunus
- forum
- lulii
- juvenis
- lex
- Numa
- orbis
- pax
- placidus
- pompa
- populus
- quies
- Roma
- saeculum
- sanguis
- Saturnus
- securus
- senatus
- sidus
- Themis
- translatio
- tribunal
- triumphus

Thematic keywords in English:

- Augustus
- Bellona
- civil war
- Claudius
- comet
- concord
- dynasty
- Faunus
- Golden Age
- Julius Caesar
- justice
- law
- Nero
- oppression
- peace
• prophecy
• restoration
• Roman legal order
• Saturn
• security

Bibliographical references: Vinchesi, Maria Assunta, _Calpurnii Siculi, Eclogae_ (edition, translation and commentary by Maria Assunta Vinchesi; Firenze: Felice le Monnier, 2014)

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