

‘TENEBRICOSUS’ AND IRONY IN CATULL. 3*

Understanding of mood is very important for the correct interpretation of a literary text, especially a lyrical one. Meanwhile, this aspect is especially difficult to share with a multicultural audience: emotional hints expressed by certain words and references to some texts and events are naturally grasped by contemporaries, but are obscure for later readers. To a considerable degree it is the case also for irony.¹

Scholars find irony in Catullus far more often than in other Roman poets; specific language of his polymetra—with its multiple use of diminutives, superlatives, exclamations and repetition—makes them, in the opinion of a modern reader, *too* affective; therefore, scholars often prefer to interpret it as irony.² In fact it is often difficult to solve the problem if there is irony in one or another text or not in general, because the idea of irony is complicated and everyone perceives it subjectively; more attainable is to find out whether the word/expression in question adds ironical tone to the whole text or to its part, and the best way to do it is to examine semantics and stylistic nuances of the word/expression in a variety of other contexts.

The subject of my interest is the mood of Catullus’ *carm.* 3.³ There is no single view on it among scholars: sometimes it is defined as a mock

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¹ The term ‘irony’ is used in the wide sense.

² A striking example of such debates is *carm.* 49: does Catullus give these praises to Cicero sincerely, or should we interpret them *cum grano salis*, or, after all, is there pure derision behind hyperbolic glorification? Each of these views has its followers. For the history of the question see: E. V. Slugin, “Gratias tibi maximas Catullus agit (Cat. 49)”, *Hyperboreus* 2 (1996) 194–200.

³ It is necessary to say that by ‘passer’ I mean a bird, and I do not see any obscene implication here. The problem of ‘passer’-meaning is secondary in this case but worth being briefly discussed. To begin with, though ‘passer’ is often thought to be a sparrow (e. g. W. G. Arnott, *Birds in the Ancient World from A to Z* [London–New York 2007] 228), it can’t be so, because, firstly, sparrows are distrustful of people and it is difficult to handle them; secondly, they do not have a beautiful appearance or sing charmingly (s. M. Schuster, “Valerius 123”, in: *RE* 7A [1948] 2368–2369; C. J. Fordyce [ed., comm.], *Catullus* [Oxford 1961] 88). M. Schuster and O. Keller think that ‘passer’ is a blue rock thrush (M. Schuster [n. 4]; O. Keller, *Die antike Tierwelt* II [Leipzig

dirge,⁴ sometimes as an ironic pastiche,⁵ sometimes as a love poem.⁶ They often find irony in *carm.* 3 because, in their opinion, it is impossible to mourn *so* for a little bird. Only one argument is concrete: D. F. S. Thomson adduces ‘tenebricosus’ (“qui nunc it per iter tenebricosum / illuc, unde negant redire quemquam”) as a strong reason for some kind of irony saying that it is “a colloquial, even somewhat vulgar form, which lightens the tone and firmly identifies it as mock-heroic”.⁷ However, it is disputable.

1913] 80; s. also *OLD*, s. v. 1). I disagree with them because blue thrushes have such evident qualities (bright feathering and melodious singing), that Catullus would have mentioned them in his praise to the nestling. So, I think, ‘passer’ is a little bird which kind the author himself did not consider necessary to define (s. В. П. Смышляева, *Римский поэтический авиариум* (V. P. Smyschljaeva, *Roman poetic aviarium*) [Ufa 2005] 117; cf. also W. D’Arcy Thompson, *A Glossary of Greek Birds* [London–Oxford 1936] 268: “Στρουθός is very often used generically, like Lat. *passer*, <...> of any small bird”). Therewith, in modern Romanic languages words, that originate in ‘passer’ (Rom. *pasăre*, Sp. *pájaro*, Port. *passaro*), mean simply a bird (W. Meyer-Lübke, *Romanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* [Heidelberg 1911] 464–465).

⁴ А. И. Пиотровский (пер., комм.), *Катулл, Книга лирики* (A. I. Piotrovsky [tr., comm.], *Catullus, Book of Lyrics*) (Leningrad 1929) 140; P. Y. Forsyth (ed.), *The Poems of Catullus: a teaching text* (Lanham, MD 1986) 110–111; С. В. Шервинский, М. Л. Гаспаров, *Катулл, Книга стихотворений* (S. V. Shervinsky, M. L. Gasparov [ed.], *Catullus, Book of Poems*) (Moscow 1986) 214.

⁵ F. G. Doering (ed.), *C. Valerii Catulli Veronensis Carmina* (Altonae 1834) 3: “In hoc carmine vere ludicro poeta de melliti Lesbiae passeris morte luctum indicit”; G. P. Goold, “Catullus 3. 16”, *Phoenix* 23 (1969) 200: “The tone of the hendecasyllable is light, facetious, playful, bantering, satirical. The poem is a mock-elegy”; K. R. Walters, “Catullan Echoes in the Second Century A. D.: CEL 1512”, *CW* 69 (1976) 353–359; D. F. S. Thomson (ed., comm.), *Catullus* (Toronto etc. 2003) 207. Cf. Grimaldi: “We have, then, at the referential level two poems on Lesbia’s pet sparrow. Beneath this level there are the poems of reflective, ironic comment by the poet on himself and his love affair. <...> Indeed if a parallel is to be drawn with Meleager’s poem it will be: As Phanion killed the young hare so Lesbia killed Catullus’ love not by overaffection but by toying with it. <...> C. 2. 2–6 lends new meaning to c. 3. The presence of this rather bitter comment in these poems is further strengthened by the fact that even at the referential level their tone was very likely openly parodic as a comparison with *Anth. Pal.* 7. 199, 203 might indicate” (W. M. A. Grimaldi, “The Lesbia Love Lyrics”, *CPh* 60 [1965] 92).

⁶ Fordyce (n. 3) 92: “...the simple emotion which turns the lament for the dead pet into a love-lyric, and makes commonplace and colloquial language into poetry, owes nothing to any predecessor”; K. Quinn (ed., comm.), *Catullus, The Poems* (London 1973) 96: “Poem 3 is a delicately ironical, graceful love poem...”, though it “follows closely the traditional pattern of a dirge”; Forsyth (n. 4) 111: “The delicate charm of the poem becomes most apparent at its conclusion, where the mock dirge is transformed into an understated love poem: while the ostensible subject of the piece is the bird, its true focal point is Lesbia”.

⁷ Thomson (n. 5) 209. Thomson also notices (207): “In lines 11 and 12, both the sounds (*it per iter*) and the language, with the off-hand colloquialism of *tenebricosum*

According to *DELL*, ‘tenebricosus’ is formed from archaic ‘tenebricus’, the traces of which are found in Old French; moreover, Romanic languages give ground for reconstruction of the form ‘*intenebricus’.⁸ Along with ‘tenebricus’, ‘tenebrosus’⁹ is also formed from ‘tenebrae’—A. Vaniček considers it a full synonym to ‘tenebricus’ and ‘tenebricosus’.¹⁰

P. E. Knox, an author of a classical article about adjectives in *-osus*,¹¹ shows how contradictory generally recognized views on this problem are: some words in *-osus* are traditionally defined by commentators of Latin authors as poetic (according to a popular statement, this suffix “substitutes” Greek *-όεις* and *πολυ-* in poetry), some, on the contrary, as colloquial (‘formosus’).¹² But we should also take into account the third sphere of use—prosaic (or “scientific and technical”).¹³

Knox shows that all these descriptions are exaggerated (many “poetic” epithets appear in technical writers—medics, geographers etc.; ‘clivosus’, ‘mucosus’, ‘squamosus’, ‘frondosus’, ‘nimbosus’ etc. do not have Greek analogs) and demonstratively proves that stylistic connotations of each word should be defined separately and, what is more, sometimes the same epithet has different shades in different contexts. In Laberius, who used ‘annosus’ first (“non mammosa, non *annosa*, non *bibosa*, non *procax*”, *Mim.* 99

and *negant* (continued in *male sit*, and in the use in poetry of *bellus*), render the tone by degrees more and more quasi-comical and almost flippant, so that the threatening shades of Orcus, and of solemnity, are kept at arm’s length”. Fordyce notes that “the word [sc. *tenebricosus*] has no pathetic or romantic associations in Catullus’ contemporaries” (Fordyce [n. 3] 94). S. also Quinn (n. 6) 99. W. Kroll does not mention connotations of *tenebricosus* but notes in the commentary: “die ernstesten Töne wirklicher Grabgedichte klingen hier parodistisch” (W. Kroll [ed., comm.], *C. Valerius Catullus* [Leipzig–Berlin 21929] 6).

⁸ A. Ernout, A. Meillet, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine: Histoire des mots* (Paris 41967) 1206; Meyer-Lübke (n. 3) 324.

⁹ There is unmetrical ‘tenebrosus’ instead of ‘tenebricosus’ in *V*—an obvious replacement of the quite rare word by a more usual one. The emendation ‘tenebricosus’ was proposed by Veronese humanist Antonius Parthenius who published a commentary to Catullus in 1485.

¹⁰ A. Vaniček, *Griechisch-lateinisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Leipzig 1877) 285.

¹¹ P. E. Knox, “Adjectives in *-osus* and Latin Poetic Dictionary”, *Glotta* 64 (1986) 90–101.

¹² The fact that “a variety of semantic content may be found in one suffix [sc. *-oso-* / *-lento-*] according to its context” noted E. W. Nichols (E. W. Nichols, *The semantic Variability and semantic Equivalence of -ōso- and -lento-*, Diss. [Yale 1914] 19). According to Leumann, the origin of *-osus* is controversial; semantically such adjectives correspond to Greek ones in *-όεις* and *-ώδης*. Leumann also spoke against one-sided conclusions about semantics of adjectives in *-osus* (M. Leumann, *Lateinische Laut- und Formenlehre (Handbuch der klassischen Altertums-Wissenschaft, Abt. II, Tl. 2, Bd. I)* [München 1977] 342).

¹³ Leumann (n. 12) 342.

Bonaria), the epithet is colloquial; however, this adjective was introduced into Roman poetry by Vergilius in an epic simile of Aeneas with an oak: “ac velut *annoso* validam cum robore quercum / Alpini Boreae nunc hinc nunc flatibus illinc / eruere inter se certant” (*Aen.* 4. 441–443). After Vergilius poets freely use ‘annosus’, but it is found in prose rather rarely until late antiquity. Speaking about ‘annosus’ I cannot help mentioning Horatius: ‘annosa cornix’ in *Od.* 3. 17. 13 (“aquae nisi fallit augur / *annosa* cornix”) belongs to elevated style and ‘annosum palatum’ in *Sat.* 2. 3. 274 (“quid? cum balba feris *annoso* verba palato, / aedificante casas qui sanior?”) to low.

Catullan words in *-osus*¹⁴ are also stylistically different: e. g. ‘ventosus’ and ‘frondosus’ (*carm.* 64. 12, 59, 96) are elevated and ‘febriculosus’ (*carm.* 6. 4) (“verum nescioquid *febriculosi* / scorti diligis”) is not.

A history of ‘tenebricosus’ can be a good illustration to the thesis proposed by Knox. This adjective is found in Roman literature 11 times: besides Catullus, *Cic. Vat.* 11; *De cons. prov.* 8; *Pis.* 18; *Luc.* 73; *Varr. RR* 3. 9. 19; *Ant. rer. divin.* fr. 57 Mirsch; *Colum.* 8. 14. 11; *Hygin. Fab.* 146. 1; *Sen. Ep. mor.* 50. 3; 86. 4. As for Ciceronian ‘tenebricosa popina’ (*Pis.* 18), that commentators of Catullus often cite, substandard connotations of ‘popina’ need not be shifted to the adjective: cf. ‘tenebricosus specus’ (*Varr. Ant. rer. divin.* fr. 57 Mirsch) concerning a cave of Sibylla that was deeply revered by Romans.¹⁵

On the other hand, in Cicero’s *De provinciis consularibus* (8) ‘tenebricosus’ is used in a “lofty” stylistic context: “lateant libidines eius illae tenebricosae” (a clearly high-flown character of the passage is very important here). An example from Ciceronian *Lucullus* (*Acad.* II, 73 = 68 B 165 DK) should also be mentioned: “ille [sc. Democritus] esse verum plane negat, sensus quidem non obscuros dicit sed tenebricosos (sic enim appellat eos)”. This fragment shows that for Cicero ‘tenebricosus’ was stronger than ‘obscurus’.¹⁶ H. Diels¹⁷ correlated Cicero’s passage with

¹⁴ Catullan adjectives in *-osus* (asterisk marks words that are found in Catullan poetry for the first time, double asterisk marks hapaxes): ‘aestuosus’ (7. 5; 46. 5), ‘araneosus’* (25. 3); ‘cuniculosus’** (37. 18), ‘curiosus’ (7. 11), ‘ebriosus’ (27. 4 bis), ‘febriculosus’ (6. 4), ‘formosus’ (86. 1, 3, 5), ‘frondosus’ (64. 96), ‘harundinosus’** (36. 13), ‘imuginosus’** (41. 8); ‘iocosus’ (8. 6; 36. 10; 56. 1, 4), ‘laboriosus’ (1. 7; 38. 2), ‘morbosus’ (57. 6), ‘muscousus’ (68b. 58), ‘nervosus’ (67. 27), ‘ostriosus’* (fr. 1. 4), ‘otiosus’ (10. 2; 50. 1), ‘pilosus’ (16. 10; 33. 7), ‘spinosus’ (64. 72), ‘spumosus’* (64. 121), ‘studiosus’ (116. 1), ‘sumptuosus’ (44. 9), ‘tenebricosus’ (3. 11), ‘ventosus’ (64. 12), ‘verbosus’ (55. 20; 98. 2).

¹⁵ Quinn writes that “*tenebricosum* seems hardly a more solemn word than *pipiabat*—Varro uses it of a henhouse (*R.* 3. 9. 19) and Cicero of a tavern (*Pis.* 18)” (Quinn [n. 7] 99), as if ‘tenebricosus’ would change its nature if used with a “high” noun.

¹⁶ Cf.: Ch. Brittain (tr.), *Cicero on Academic Scepticism* (Indianapolis—Cambridge 2006) 43: “rather than saying that the senses are obscure, he calls them dark”.

¹⁷ H. Diels, W. Kranz (ed.), *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* II⁶ (Zürich 1952) 177.

Democritus’ one (68 B 11 DK) and concluded that Latin ‘tenebricosus’ is a translation of Greek ‘σκότιος’: “ἐν δὲ τοῖς Κανόσι δύο φησὶν εἶναι γνώσεις: τὴν μὲν διὰ τῶν αἰσθήσεων τὴν δὲ διὰ τῆς διανοίας, ὧν τὴν μὲν διὰ τῆς διανοίας γνησίην καλεῖ προσμαρτυρῶν αὐτῇ τὸ πιστὸν εἰς ἀληθείας κρίσιν, τὴν δὲ διὰ τῶν αἰσθήσεων σκοτίην ὀνομάζει ἀφαιρούμενος αὐτῆς τὸ πρὸς διάγνωσιν τοῦ ἀληθοῦς ἀπλανές”. In itself ‘σκότιος’ is a poetic word (it occurs in Homer (*Il.* 6. 24) and in lyrical parts in Euripides (*Alc.* 989; *Ion* 860) but is rare in prose); LSJ note its use in the Democritus’ fragment as metaphoric.¹⁸ It is thus plausible, that Cicero uses accordingly not vulgar or colloquial but rather a lofty word to render stylistic aura of Democritus’ ‘σκότιος’.

In addition, there are several examples that look like containing quasi-scientific lexic. Varro says about a henhouse: “eas [gallinas] includunt in locum tepidum et angustum et tenebricosum” (*RR* 3. 9. 19); Columella about chickens: “sintque calido et tenebricoso loco” (8. 14. 11). Even example from Seneca’s *Epistulae*, where the words of a silly slave are given literally – she goes blind but does not understand it and says that “it’s darkish in the house” (“ait domum tenebricosam esse”; 50. 3), may be a mockery of her use of “technical language”: she can speak her masters’ language. So, these three fragments belong to the third, “prosaic”, group.

A passage from Hyginus is especially worth mentioning: “Iovis negavit Cererem passuram ut filia sua in Tartaro tenebricoso sit” (*Fab.* 146. 1). ‘Tenebricosus Tartarus’ is unexpected in a bare mythological textbook and looks like a quotation from a poet; anyway, it has no colloquial shade here. It is extremely significant that Hyginus, like Catullus, uses this epithet concerning the underworld.

Meanwhile, ‘tenebricus’ and ‘tenebrosus’, that are often used about Hades,¹⁹ undoubtedly belong to “high” poetry (however, there is single “per tenebrosum et sordidum egressum” in Petronius [*Sat.* 91. 3], but it resembles the instance with ‘annosus’ in Horatius). ‘Tenebricus’ is found in Cicero in a poetic translation of a passage from Sophocles’ *Trachiniae* (1097–1099): “Haec e Tartarea tenebrica abstractum plaga / Tricipitem eduxit Hydra generatum canem?”²⁰ (*Tusc.* 2. 22) and in Pacuvius: “Nam te in tenebrica saepe lacerabo fame / Clausam et fatigans artus torto distraham” (fr. 158 Schierl). An editor of Pacuvius’ tragedies Petra Schierl notes that ‘tenebricus’ in contrast to ‘tenebrosus’ and ‘tenebricosus’ is

¹⁸ LSJ s. v. I, 1.

¹⁹ ‘Tenebrosus’ about Hades: Ovid. *Met.* 1. 113 (“tenebrosa in Tartara”); 5. 359 (“<...> tenebrosa sede tyrannus [sc. Pluto] / exierat”).

²⁰ It should be noted that in the original Hades has no attribute: “...τόν θ’ ὑπὸ χθονὸς / Ἄιδου τρίκρανον σκύλακ’, ἀπρόσμαχον τέρας, / δεινῆς Ἐχιδνῆς θρέμμα...”

an artificial form,²¹ but it contradicts *DELL* (s. above). In fact a question of what is primary—‘tenebricus’ or ‘tenebrosus’—does not have decisive force; apparently, ‘tenebricus’ is rarer than ‘tenebrosus’ and ‘tenebrosus’. It is evident that both Pacuvius and Cicero use ‘tenebricus’ as an equivalent to ‘tenebrosus’, appropriate for iambs.

‘Tenebrosus’ is almost totally absent in poetry, but it does not mean that it is colloquial: it does not fit hexameters and distiches prosodically. For Catullus, ‘tenebrosus’ may be just an equivalent to ‘tenebricus’, good for an ending of hendecasyllable (as ‘tenebricus’ in Cicero’s and Pacuvius’ iambs): in *carm.* 41. 8 there is ‘imuginosus’ invented by Catullus in the same position.

To sum up, there is no instance where ‘tenebrosus’ is indisputably colloquial or vulgar—all examples show either poetical or “scientific and technical” use. Moreover, it is significant that adjectives in *-osus* in principle have various semantics. Lastly, ‘tenebricus’ and ‘tenebrosus’ are ordinary epithets of Tartarus and there is no reason for finding in them any semantic or stylistic differences from ‘tenebrosus’—a choice from ‘tenebrosus’, ‘tenebricus’ and ‘tenebrosus’, to my mind, depends to a large extent on prosody. These three points allow consideration that ‘tenebrosus’ in *carm.* 3 does not indicate, that the poem is of low stylistics (someone may suspect that it is “lofty” and adds parodic colour but it is another thesis that can hardly be proved).

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В статье прослеживается история прилагательного ‘tenebrosus’ и рассматриваются его коннотации; на этой основе опровергается тезис Д. Ф. С. Томсона о том, что ‘tenebrosus’ в Catull. 3. 11 имеет разговорный оттенок и это придает всему стихотворению пародийный эффект.

The author investigates semantics of Latin *tenebrosus* and its various connotations. She argues against D. F. S. Thomson’s assertion that *tenebrosus* in Cat. 3, 11 has colloquial character, which lends to the poem a degree of parody.

²¹ P. Schierl (ed., comm., transl.), *Die Tragödien des Pacuvius* (Berlin–New York 2006) 256; Leumann and *OLD* consider that ‘tenebricus’ is a back-formation from ‘tenebrosus’, and the latter is derived by analogy with ‘bellicosus’ (Leumann [n. 12] 337; 341–342; *OLD* s. v. *tenebricus*).