Erasmus in the Rain

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The following is poem 82 in the standard edition of Erasmus’s works:

Obsecro, quid sibi vult, ingens quod ab aethere nimbus
Noctes atque dies sic sine fine ruit?
Terrigenae quoniam nolunt sua crimina flere,
Coelum pro nobis solvitur in lacrimas.

Clearly it’s been raining for a long time, *noctes et dies*. Big black clouds fill the air and oppress the world. The verb *ruit* is particularly nice: the cloud falls onto the world, like an attacking army. The speaker wonders why. It’s not clear who’s supposed to answer the question of lines 1–2: perhaps the sky itself, perhaps God, perhaps no one in particular. The speaker vents his frustration in a question.

In the second couplet, the speaker supplies his own answer: heaven itself weeps for our misdeeds, since we don’t. The poetic word *terrigenae* raises the tone of the poem considerably, compared to the rather ordinary idiom *quid sibi vult* (which turns up in authors from Seneca to Petronius). Although the satirist Lucilius uses it, *terrigenae* really belongs to epic language (Lucretius 5.1411, 1427; Ovid *Met.* 3.118, 5.325, 7.36, 7.141, Lucan 3.316, 4.553, and so on — though nowhere in Vergil). At first the speaker seems to distance himself from those humans who have done wrong, or at least from those who show no remorse: *nolunt* is third person. The last line, though, brings the speaker and the reader into the narrative with *nobis*: it’s on our behalf that the heavens cry.
In classical Latin, of course, a *crimen* is usually a charge or an accusation, but it can also mean the fault that someone is accused of, as for example in Ovid Met. 2.447, “Heu, quam difficile est crimen non prodere vultu,” where Callisto’s face clearly shows that she’s slept with Jupiter: an action, not a mere accusation.

The word order here is entirely straightforward; the only difficult phrase is *ingens … nimbus*, which is distracted to colon boundaries in the regular way (by Watkins’s Rule).

Although Erasmus’s most important texts are in prose, such as the *Praise of Folly*, the *Adages*, the *Colloquies*, and the theological works, he was also quite a competent poet, as this little verse shows.

We may render:

What is the meaning of this ceaseless rain?
Why do the black clouds constantly attack?
As earthlings feel no sorrow for our crimes,
Heaven itself weeps to supply the lack.