

Reading Lucan's Light

Of the many disturbing episodes to confront readers of the *Bellum Civile*, none captures Lucan's vision of the effects of civil war with such stunning metaphorical economy as the depiction of Caesar feasting over the corpses of his enemies on the morning after Pharsalus (7.787-99). The subject of Lucan's epic has been described as "a specific cultural dismemberment" (Boyle 1996; cf. Quint 1993) and in the limb-strewn Pharsalian landscape we are presented with an unforgettable image of violence that literalizes Caesar's rearrangement of Rome's political body (Leigh 1997; Bartsch 2005). But the poem's evocation of a new, post-Pharsalian political order depends on more than piles of carnage and rivers of gore to make its point: of equal significance my paper argues—especially with regard to Roman literary tradition and the early reception of the *Bellum Civile*—is Lucan's staging of his gruesome scene at daybreak (7.787: *postquam clara dies Pharsalica damna retexit*).

Rome's epic poets had long connected moments of foundation and refoundation of their state with the light of the rising sun. Ennius' *Annales* has Romulus catch sight of the birds that confirm his status as Rome's sole founder *simul aureus exoritur sol* (line 87 Skutsch). Similarly, the longest surviving fragment of Cicero's *De Consulatu Suo* connects Rome's rebirth—implicitly heralded in the infamous line, *O fortunatam natam me consule Romam*—to the replacement of a statue of Jupiter on the Capitol, turned emphatically toward the rising sun (fr. 10 Courtney, 56: *sancta Iovis species claros spectaret in ortus*, 58: *solis ad ortum*). In Vergil's *Aeneid*—where "[c]oordinate with the progress from disaster toward success there is a general movement from storm and darkness to the calm serenity of new light" (Poe 1965.324-25; cf. Keith 1925)—the links

between foundation and sunrise are highlighted by descriptions of daybreak at key moments: Aeneas' refugees set out from Troy (2.801-802), first catch sight of Italy (3.521-3), reach the mouth of the Tiber (7.25-6), and, in a metonymic gesture toward the foundation of Rome that the poem never shows, start laying walls for their new settlement (7.148-9) all in the new light of dawn.

Characteristically, Lucan invokes and simultaneously perverts the earlier epic tradition. As in his predecessors' poems, daybreak signals the birth of a new Roman order, but instead of optimism the *Bellum Civile* offers only despair. In clear daylight the new reality of Caesar's power is revealed, as all things are made subject to the warlord's omnipotent gaze (7.789, 796: *cernit*, 791: *spectat*, 792: *numerat populos*, 794: *agnoscat*, 794: *iuvat...non cernere*, 795: *lustrare oculis*). But the light in Lucan's poem is tainted. Aligned with Caesar (cf. König 1957), sunlight in the *Bellum Civile* is mournful (1.235), bloody (7.427), uncovers the unspeakable (4.529), and ushers in great quantities of crime (7.114-15); to delay its coming, Lucan shrouds his epic in the gloom of abortive (1.234-5) and hesitant sunrises (7.1-6) and threatens to plunge his narrative into shadows (7.552-6), swelling further the already impressive catalogue of antagonistic and obfuscating gestures that scholars (e.g. Masters 1992) have found at work in his text. In other words, daylight marks the arrival of Caesar's Rome as something at once new and undesirable; it also offers insights into the poem's immediate reception. Statius (*Silv.* 2.7), Martial (7.21 and 22), and Quintilian (*Inst.* 10.1.90) provide our earliest evidence for ancient readings of Lucan, and it is not surprising, I suggest, that each frames his reaction to the *Bellum Civile* in terms of light and darkness. Recent works (e.g. Newlands 2011) cite perceived etymological connections between *lux* and Lucan's name to explain these authors'

claims, but this is only part of the story. Focusing attention on Lucan's sunlight, my paper enriches our understanding of these early responses by highlighting an equally fundamental source of inspiration—the *Bellum Civile* itself.

Bibliography

Bartsch, Shadi. 2005. "Lucan," in J. M. Foley ed. *A Companion to Ancient Epic*. Oxford: 492-502.

Boyle, Anthony (ed). *Roman Epic*. New York and London.

Keith, Arthur L. 1925. "The Dawn in Vergil," *Studies in Philology* 22.4: 518-21.

König, Fritz. 1957. "Mensch und Welt bei Lucan im Spiegel bildhafter Darstellung," in *Lucan*, Werner Rutz ed. Darmstadt: 439-76.

Leigh, Matthew. 1997. *Lucan: Spectacle and Engagement*. Oxford.

Masters, Jamie. 1992. *Poetry and Civil War in Lucan's Bellum Civile*. Cambridge.

Newlands, Carole. 2011. "The First 'biography' of Lucan: Statius *Silvae* 2.7," in P. Asso ed. *Brill's Companion to Lucan*. Leiden: 435-51.

Poe, Joe Park. 1965. "Success and Failure in the Mission of Aeneas," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*. 96: 321-36.

Quint, David. 1993. *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton*. Princeton.