

Lucan's *Pharsalia*: The Stoic Cosmos as a Mirror

At the center of Lucan's *Pharsalia* is an extended allegory that binds a Rome hurtling toward Civil War to a cosmos careening toward the Stoic *ekpyrosis* (conflagration). Recently, scholars have worked to elucidate the oft-noticed contradiction in Lucan's depiction of the Stoic cosmos, namely that his cosmos is both Stoic and not Stoic (Lapidge 1979, Sklenar 1999). Attempts to pigeon-hole the *Pharsalia* into one of these categories lead to myopic or incomplete readings of the text. In his article concerning this contradiction, Paul Roche (quoting D. Feeney) notes, 'In literary criticism you can often go a long way by saying, if someone brings up a problem, "Yes, that's the point"' (Roche 2005).

This paper, drawing from recent studies of Stoic physical theory, will further elucidate the contradiction found in Lucan's text and will offer ways of understanding this contradiction and its essential rhetorical role in the epic.

The contradiction involves the relationship between Stoic physics and Stoic ethics, a topic much debated in recent years. The orthodox theory holds that knowledge of Stoic cosmology is necessary for living a virtuous life. Most scholars agree that one reason (among others) that knowledge of Stoic cosmology was desirable was because it provided the Stoic with a providential view of the cosmos (Inwood 2009). This argument for the benefit of the cosmic viewpoint was often employed by Stoic philosophers to account for "the apparent counterintuitive thesis that pain and death are not evils" (Boeri 2009). Seneca, Lucan's uncle, writes as much in his *Consolatio ad Marciam*. There, Seneca comforts a friend by relating to him the end of the world-- when star will clash with star, when the great conflagration will burn all things. These sentiments, of course, do not seem comforting save for one sentence: *Et cum tempus advenerit, quo se mundus renovaturus extinguat* (6.11-17). The reminder that all cedes so

that the cosmos may be renewed at the *palingenesis* allows us to view our immediate circumstances from a distance that puts a single human life into perspective from the viewpoint of the cycle of eternal recurrence.

Using the allegorical connection between Rome and the cosmos, Lucan emphasizes this cosmic viewpoint within this epic; however, the view from the top is anything but comforting, anything but providential- and, it is anything but distant. If Lucan's depiction of the cosmos is Stoic, a view which has been sufficiently demonstrated, how can this be?

The allegory drawn between Rome and the cosmos is not a simple-form allegory but, as Quintilian writes, "[There is] another kind of allegory, where what is expressed is quite contrary to what is meant... there is irony, which our rhetoricians call *illusio*" (*IO* 8.6.54). And, to further complicate the illusion, Lucan extends and exaggerates the grotesque aspects of the cosmos through hyperbole, going so far as to exclude the elements of *palingenesis* by which Seneca provides *Consolatio ad Marciam*.

Thus, while Lucan's formulation of the Stoic cosmic cycle is incomplete, it is technically correct. The illusion rests only in his failure to include the *palingenesis*. Lucan creates an allegorical structure that makes impossible the synthesis that the intellect desires to achieve because one of the parts is incomplete. Because the reader does, in fact, recognize the Stoic doctrine that usually provides comfort (only to find horror), the discomfort she feels upon realizing its absence is more acute.

Not only is the solace offered by the *palingenesis* absent, the distance between the human view and the cosmic view does not exist in Lucan's epic. In leaving out the *palingenesis*, the cosmos, at war with itself, is just a reflection of a Rome. Through this reflection, Lucan

exaggerates the scale of Rome's rupture, concentrating all the horror of a cosmic apocalypse back onto Rome.

Thus, when Brutus confronts Cato, saying, "...*Melius tranquila sine armis/ Otia solus ages; sicut caelestia semper/ Inconcussa suo volvuntur sidera lapsu,*" Cato rejects Brutus's reading of the ordered, fixed cosmos, looks to the sky, and says, "*Sidera quis mundumque velit spectare cadentem/ expers ipse metus? Quis, cum ruat arduus aether/ Terra lebet mixto coeuntis pondere mundi,/ Compressas tenuisse manus...*" (*Phars.* 2.266-273, 289-293).

Lucan's sage looks to the cosmos only to see Rome's reflection. And he is afraid.

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