

Killing Fields: the Poetics of Ploughing and Civil War in Imperial Latin Literature

Recent scholarship has become increasingly aware of the importance of visual commemorations of death in Roman society and their indirect replication in Latin literature. According to an important article by Victoria Pagán which examines literary “aftermath narratives” in civil war contexts from Sallust to Statius, the author argues that the emotive potential of battlefield visitations and viewings offered to ancient authors an unparalleled literary opportunity to explore the “intertwining nexus of past, present and future” as the Roman state struggled to “transition from the violent disruption of war” to a collective state of political, military, social and psychological equilibrium.

In this paper I will examine what I suggest represents a further development of Pagán’s theory regarding “aftermath narratives” in Latin literature; namely scenes in which the bones of Roman soldiers on civil war battlefields are later struck by farmers using ox-driven ploughs, a type-scene which I will refer to as “inverted ploughing” due to its evocative juxtaposition of the generative potential of plough-agriculture with the destructive consequences of unmitigated civil stasis. I will argue that this aesthetically gruesome metaphor would have appeared all the more troublesome to contemporary Roman readers due to the talismanic importance of the plough as a symbol of Rome’s agro-centric origins and its close association with Rome’s most famous moral *exemplum*, the Republican dictator Cincinnatus. As we shall see, the diachronic development of this provocative *topos* in the work of such diverse authors as Propertius (1.22), Ovid (*Her.*1.47-56), Horace (*Odes* 2.1.29-35), Virgil, (*Geor.*1.489-514), Lucan (*BC* 7.847-872) and Statius (*Theb.*4.434-442) served to dramatically problematize crucial elements of Rome’s cultural ethos and evoked in readers’ minds the possibility that, in contrast to the promise of a potential future resolution suggested by Pagán’s “aftermath narratives,” scenes of “inverted ploughing” instead

raised the possibility that the state might *never* recover from the damage it suffered during the catastrophic internecine conflicts of the Late Republic and Early Empire. It is my hope that a thorough examination of such developments may shed new light on the manner in which the collective anxieties roused by civil war remained in the forefront of Roman literary culture throughout the troubled course of Rome's Julio-Claudian period and beyond.

Bibliography

Pagán, Victoria. "The Mourning After: Statius' *Thebaid* 12." *The American Journal of Philology*. 121.3 (2000): 423-452.