

Finding a Way Through: Of Walls, Corpses, and God in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*

In this paper, I explore how sacralized space just outside and inside walls of bodies and the state in *Bellum Civile* allows characters to attempt to create an alternate theology to the traditional pantheon and even become deified themselves through shifting identities: becoming the wall, becoming human again, becoming deified. Through inverting the categories of abject and sublime, inside and outside, subject and object, above and below, and full and empty, the text allows the characters to try to find meaning, protection, and virtue in a world the narrator constantly reminds us is full of crime, despair, and meaninglessness. That characters such as Phemonoe and Scaeva, on the one hand, and Caesar, on the other, can create the space for a kind of divinity within the universe of their own bodies speaks to this generation of an alternative of religion (not unlike the rise of mysteries, soldier-specific cults, and a fascination with the Asian uncanny traditions, a response to the traditional hearth, home, and state theology failing in crisis). These characters are engaged in a continuous construction and destruction of sacred boundaries of the self, body, and state, and each houses and is impregnated with a type of *numen* or *deus* in the body, both willingly and unwillingly, and each has the potential to embody or create mass graves or heaps of bodies. Through the lenses of Agamben's *Homo Sacer* and *Remnants of Auschwitz* as well as the politics of mass graves and Mbembe's *Necropolitics*, I will attempt to excavate these very spaces which house both the universe and divinity and morph into the circumstances and moral ambiguity of civil war.

Phemonoe, reluctant and seemingly false *vates*, whose body is impregnated and invaded by Apollo, the "spirit of the rock" (164-5), and all of space and time, becomes a microcosm of and battleground for *imperium* and Rome itself. Imagery of rape, violence, domination, and impregnation (*confugit*, 162; *concepit*, 163; *ingessit*, 165; *potitus*, 165; *inrupit*, 167) points to a

violent spiritual battle, possession, and colonization at the site of her body by a Caesar-like Apollonian force (5.163-9). The borders or walls of her body, her neck (5.170), mind (5.167), breast (5.97, 116, 163, 169, 178), viscera (5.175), and womb (5.175) are breeched by supernatural and imperial forces, and they cannot hold. The stress of civil war and the struggle to find or banish divinity ultimately kill her. This uncanny and unnatural impregnation and the heaping (*congeriem*, 5.178) of all space and time (175-8) break her open, and, like Rome, she cannot sustain the pressure of this tyrannizing and annihilating Caesarian force. Ultimately the multiplicity of her identity — the housing of *numen*, all of space and time, Apollo, her own identity — creates an unsustainable chaos that mirrors the chaos that is Rome at war with itself. Outside becomes inside, inside becomes outside, and she collapses on herself.

Scaeva's, Caesar's berserker soldier, constantly changing physical identity and loss of individual identity allow him to metamorphose into a wall for Caesar (6.201), to construct heaps of bodies into a wall (6.199), and to make himself into a divinity (6.253). Scaeva represents the convergence and locus of the text's anxiety over the search for virtue, divinity, and heroism. When Scaeva is dying, "a crowd of his brothers lifts him up as he's collapsing" (*labentem turba suorum/excipit*, 6.251-2). Another way to translate "*turba*" would be "confusion" or "chaos" (*OLD* s.v. 1), which speaks to the necessary and underlying Caesar's nihilistic void of a presence, which both destroys and sustains all characters, places, and institutions of the poem. In terms of Agamben's *Homo Sacer*, Rome itself is a state of exception and an ever-shifting zone of indistinction, which supports the violence that Caesar enacts, as represented by Scaeva.

While Phemonoe and Scaeva struggle to construct internal walls and divinity, Caesar externalizes these figures and possesses them. By externalizing and keeping them separate and outside of his body, he can successfully sustain them — he makes heaps (*cumulis*, 790; *acervos*,

791) of corpses into walls, and sees his own gods in them (*suos superos*, 796). He creates a state of emergency in which he excepts himself as sovereign and Roman citizens as *Homines Sacri* and, by doing so, allows himself to be outside the juridical order and kill Romans indiscriminately (Agamben, 1998: 169-70). When Jupiter declares Rome an “empire without end” (*imperium sine fine*, Verg. *Aen.* 279), the boundaries of the body politic become permanently destabilized. We see, as its natural conclusion, in Lucan’s world, those boundary markers, the walls themselves and individual citizen bodies, become the loci of mass graves and the collapse of the universe.

Bibliography

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