

“The Ghosts Swarm”: The Triumph of the Dead in Lucan’s *Bellum Civile*

Quotation from Rae Armantrout’s “Unbidden”

In this paper I argue two seemingly opposing visions of spirituality regarding Lucan’s Caesar: first that Caesar creates a deity of his own alternate to the traditional pantheon in heaps of putrefying corpses; second that the ghosts of those whom Caesar has killed possess (in a supernatural sense) his body in both an act of colonization and impregnation, therefore emasculating him and conquering him. The latter spirituality will win out in the end. To help make sense of these new types of soteriologies, I employ Giorgio Agamben’s corpus and Mbembe’s *Necropolitics*, which will help me navigate these issues sovereignty, theology, authoritarianism, death, and spectacle.

I will look at Caesar and his body as a body politic whose boundaries must be defended and can be breached. 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. By collapsing 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. Caesar sees his fortune and his gods in the heaps because that’s how he wields and gets his power, from the absolute brutal deployment and display of his power over life and death: the spectacle of the putrefaction of the people of Rome and their melding together, loss of identity, and his absolute take-over of identity. Creating alternate theologies is not unlike the rise of mysteries, soldier-specific cults, and a fascination

with the Asian uncanny traditions, all a response to the traditional hearth, home, and state theology failing in times of crisis.

On the other hand, ghosts and the dead inhabit and possess Caesar (*omnes in Caesare manes*, 7.776), impregnating and occupying him, colonizing his body as a feminine territory, a mass grave site, and a means of liberation for the dead. Lucan's Caesar encapsulates how one body may house two opposing yet complementary figures and forces: the Sovereign and Homo Sacer in the form of the ghosts of the soldiers he's killed. I argue that it is through containing these two figures, Caesar is impregnated and therefore emasculated, becomes a mass grave, and is finally defeated. Agamben defines *Homo Sacer* as a figure who cannot be sacrificed but can be killed, and he argues that the Sovereign and Homo Sacer operate outside the bounds of law and at the border of it. Both of these figures dwell in a space he calls the "state of exception," which means they are both excepted from society and are not subject to normal law and custom. In this way, by housing both figures, Caesar attempts to give himself the freedom to behave both as a god and a monster. The ghosts, though, prevent him from doing so.

By attempting to externalize his divinity in the heaps of corpses, which become fragile, melting walls (*cumulis*, 790; *acervos*, 791) in which he sees own gods (*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.

But the dead get their revenge in the end by occupying Caesar as an invading force in their dissipation. Death grants them the freedom to become the earth, sky, and water: Drink these waters, Caesar, breathe this air, if you can. But the rotting multitudes rob the Pharsalian fields from you and take the plains back when the victor has fled (Drink these waters, Caesar, breathe this air, if you can. But the rotting multitudes rob the Pharsalian fields from you and take the plains back when the victor has fled. (Drink these waters, Caesar, breathe this air, if you can. But the rotting multitudes rob the Pharsalian fields from you and take the plains back when the victor has fled (*has trahe, Caesar, aquas, hoc, si potes, utere caelo./ sed tibi tabentes populi Pharsalica rura/eripiunt camposque tenent uictore fugato.* 7.821-824).

Bibliography

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