

Blood and the Death of Rome in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*

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Abstract

This paper is an analysis of the symbolism of blood in Lucan's epic poem *Bellum Civile*. The first part of the article discusses several examples that show Lucan's interest in the value that blood has when it is flowing inside someone's body, and conversely the loss of that value when the blood is shed in battle. It then reveals a parallel between the unusual descriptions of the flow of blood, and the more usual descriptions of the natural flow of water. Various examples of this parallel suggest that Lucan develops a striking image of the bloodshed of Romans becoming as normal as natural phenomena. This bloodshed thus represents the inevitable death of Rome caused by this civil war, since Lucan subtly suggests that the bloodshed and death of individual Romans only translates into the bloodshed and death of Rome itself after the main battle of this war. The theory advanced by this paper can add to the theories of some recent scholarship on this poem, which generally argues that Lucan is not so optimistic about the future of Rome as was once believed.

Lucan's epic *Bellum Civile* (or *Civil War* in English)¹ is a poem obsessed with bloody death, and does not flinch in its descriptions of it. Many of the deaths may not be realistic, but that is only because Lucan makes them unusually gruesome. This essay will closely examine the way blood is described in this poem, and attempt to determine the theme promoted by Lucan in his use of this imagery. Ultimately, and especially in light of relevant scholarship, I will conclude that the way Lucan describes blood confirms his nihilistic attitude towards the subject matter, as well as his conviction that the civil war he writes about will ultimately lead to the death of the Roman state.

Imagery of Blood

Let us consider first the description of blood while it is still in the body, completely or partially. The common feature of such blood is its ability to give life or strength, provided that it is moving within the body and not staying still. Laelius describes bodies that "move with hot blood" as strong enough to hurl a javelin.² One soldier at the battle of Massilia uses his remaining blood to jump onto an enemy ship.³ Others put pressure with their hand on their bleeding entrails until their blood can "give strong blows" (3.677-9).⁴ In the Libyan inhabitant's account to Curio of the mythical origins of his land, he says that Antaeus gained the upper hand over Hercules in their wrestling match when

¹ Marcus Annaeus Lucanus was a Roman poet who lived from 39 to 65 A.D. The *Bellum Civile* is an epic poetic rendering of Caesar's Civil War (49-45 B.C.), which resulted in the victory of Julius Caesar and in the eventual overthrow of the Roman Republic and establishment of the Empire.

² Lucan 1.363-365; cf. 2.556-558. In this paper, Latin text is quoted from Lucanus, *De Bello Civili*, ed. D. R. Shackleton Bailey (Stuttgart: B. G. Teubner, 1988). English translations are from Lucan, *Civil War*, tr. Susan H. Braund (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

³ 3.622-626. The use of the ablative form *sanguine* ('blood') here, which I read as an ablative of means, emphasizes that the soldier uses his blood as the means of boarding the ship.

⁴ 3.677-679.

his veins began to be “filled with warm blood” (*calido complentur sanguine venae*).⁵ Lentulus urges his fellow senators to act like strong senators if they have “physical strength worthy of ancient blood” (“dignum ... sanguine prisco robur”).⁶ The start of the battle of Pharsalia is delayed because the soldiers’ “cold blood congeals in their entrails” (*gelidus in viscera sanguis ... coit*)⁷; when their blood is not flowing, it is as if they do not have the strength or ability to fight.⁸

There are examples of this theme in non-military contexts as well. Marcia equates her blood with maternal strength (*vis materna*) and says that while it was in her (*inerat*) she was able to obey Cato’s order, but now cannot do so because there is no blood in her.⁹ She obviously does not literally bleed to death, and nor is she wounded in battle; but considered together with Lucan’s many similarly themed descriptions of the blood of soldiers at war, this non-military example only strengthens the importance of blood imagery. In the famous necromancy scene, Erichtho’s attempt to bring a soldier back to life is successful once his “restrained blood becomes hot” and “runs into his veins” (*astrius caluit curo ... et in venas ... cucurrit*).¹⁰ When Cornelia is reunited with Pompey, she is “able to” (*posse*) suffer her husband’s face only after her blood has been recalled to the surface of her body.¹¹ Finally, the Psylli are able to resist snake venom because their reliance on their blood is so great: *fiducia tanta est sanguinis*.¹² These examples are obviously quite varied, but what they have in common is the idea that one’s blood, especially when it is flowing or hot, gives him or her the strength or ability to do something.

There is also a theme of blood having a value or price. In Book 2, Cato says, *hic redimat sanguis populos*.¹³ In her Oxford World’s Classics edition, Braund translates this as, “Let this my blood preserve the people”; but the verb *redimo*, as a compound of *emo*, in fact has a stronger connotation of value and purchase. It could thus also be translated as, “Let this my blood ransom the people” or “Let this my blood buy back the people.” This emphasizes the idea that the blood has a high value that can be expressed in terms similar to price. Caesar later stops his soldiers from rushing to battle too soon because it will cost him blood, saying that no army can conquer for free: *non ullo constet mihi sanguine bellum. / vincitur haud gratis iugulo qui provocat hostem*.¹⁴ He is concerned about losing the value that his soldiers’ blood gives him. Pompey considers his blood to have a “value” or “price”: *pretium sanguinis*.¹⁵ Cato says to the late Pompey’s soldiers, *potuit vestro Pompeius abuti sanguine* (“Pompey was allowed full use of your blood”).¹⁶

As may be expected, the opposite of such imagery is also true: when characters lose their blood, or when it is frozen or restricted from moving inside the body, it takes away their strength, ability, value, or life. It may seem obvious and unremarkable that someone who loses too much blood dies, but it is an unavoidable fact that Lucan does not simply describe characters bleeding to death; his descriptions of blood loss are strange and shocking, and this naturally invites us to consider Lucan’s

⁵ 4.630.

⁶ 4.17-18.

⁷ 7.467-468.

⁸ See also 2.157-159, 3.677-679, 3.746-747.

⁹ 3.338-339.

¹⁰ 6.750-751.

¹¹ 8.68-69.

¹² 9.898-899.

¹³ 2.312.

¹⁴ 4.274-275.

¹⁵ 8.9.

¹⁶ 9.263-264.

purpose in including them in the poem. In addition to certain earlier examples, others will be listed here. In the account of the war of the 80s BC, the speaker describes how, when Scaevola was sacrificed, some blood came pouring out of his throat: *parvum ... sanguinis effudit iugulo*.¹⁷ At Massilia, Catus is pierced by two spears at once, one in the chest and one in the back, and his blood literally “stands still, uncertain from which wound to flow” (*stetit incertus, flueret quo vulnere, sanguis*), until “at the same time abundant blood drives out both spears, destroys his life, and scatters death into his wounds” (*donec utrasque simul largus cruor expulit hastas divisitque animam sparsitque in vulnera letum*).¹⁸ The blood, which again is the subject of the clauses, stands still while it is inside the body but then flows out of the body with such abundance that it destroys Catus’s life. This is the opposite of the strength- and life-giving nature of blood that flows abundantly inside a body, where it is supposed to be.¹⁹ The most important examples of this idea, as will be seen later, are from the account of the battle of Pharsalia in Book 7.²⁰

Just as blood is described as having value while it is inside a body, so also when blood has been shed there is often a sense of loss or of something having been paid for with that lost blood. For example, one character who is bleeding to death hurries to use what strength he has left with his remaining blood to build a funeral pyre and jump into the flames.²¹ That he is so

concerned about dying of immolation rather than of bloodshed represents the importance attached by characters to their blood. It is not hard to imagine why characters value their blood so much, given how blood often represents life, as has been shown above. The most vivid example of this is when a stream (literally, a ‘flowing’ or ‘running’) of blood is described as *discursus animae*, as if *anima*, ‘soul’ or ‘life’ itself, is the liquid that is flowing. One important point to remember here is that individual Roman lives, represented by their blood, are repeatedly described as having a value. This emphasizes the already horrific abundant bloodshed and loss of life.

Another theme of the description of blood in the poem is the parallels between blood and natural water, by which I mean natural phenomena such as rivers, seas, or rain. If we take certain descriptions of blood in isolation and substitute *liquidus* or *umor* (‘liquid’) where Lucan uses *sanguis* or *cruor* (‘blood’), and then ask someone unfamiliar with the poem to guess what liquid is referred to, it is easy to imagine that the person would say it was water. Early in Book 1, the battle of Pharsalia is already foreshadowed with the words, *diros Pharsalia campos impleat* (“though Pharsalia fill its dreadful plains”).²² We would expect plains to be filled with water, in a flood, because this is a natural occurrence. But of course, as is narrated in Book 7, it will be blood that fills the “awful plains”, *diri campi*, of Pharsalia. Before then, Caesar alludes to past battles in Gaul, describing his soldiers’ blood as having been poured out (*diffusus*) in northern lands.²³ In the account of the conflict between Sulla and Marius, the stones in the temples are described with the adjective *lubricus*, which can mean ‘slippery’ or ‘flowing,’ and with the verb *madeo*, ‘to be wet’ or ‘to be drenched.’²⁴ It would be normal to expect stones to be wet from a rainfall, but here they are reddened by gore. The same verb later

¹⁷ 2.128-129.

¹⁸ 3.589-591.

¹⁹ For a detailed discussion of this idea of blood transgressing natural boundaries by exiting the body, see Shadi Bartsch, *Ideology in Cold Blood: A Reading of Lucan’s Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997) 10-47.

²⁰ For further examples, see 3.639-641, 3.657-658, 4.542-543.

²¹ 2.157-159.

²² 1.38-39.

²³ 1.301. A similar description is repeated by his soldiers at 5.267-268.

²⁴ 2.103-104.

describes sons who are drenched by their fathers' blood.²⁵ Lucan expresses a wish that the Roman earth or ground be kept unstained (*immaculata*) by Pompey's blood.²⁶ In the sacred grove at Massilia, the trees that Caesar will cut down are "purified by human blood" (*omnis humanis lustrata cruoribus arbor*)²⁷; if trees are to be touched by any liquid, we would naturally think of rainwater. Afranius describes blood as poured out upon the plains (*cruor effusus campis*).²⁸ After the battle of Pharsalia, Caesar walks through a heap of bloodshed (*in alto caedis ... cumulo ... vadis*) as if he were wading through rainwater after a flood, and then sees the fields "swimming in blood" (*arva natare sanguine*).²⁹ As a result he is unable to see the ground, as though it has been flooded.³⁰

These examples all concern images of blood relating to land the way we would normally expect water to. There are also several instances of blood mixing with water itself; this makes the parallel even more vivid, because it is as though drained blood actually becomes part of the water. As an ill omen, Charybdis is said to hurl up a "blood-stained sea" (*sanguineum mare*).³¹ Part of a river is described as being "broken off by a bloody pile of debris" (*strage cruenta interruptus*); a "flow of blood" is "poured out through the whole plain" and "charges into the river" (*sanguinis alti ... campumque effusa per omnem ... ruens Tiberina in flumina*); and eventually, it "breaks up the blue sea with a torrent of blood" (*sanguine caeruleum torrenti dividit aequor*).³² The contrast between the blue colour of the sea and the torrent of blood that flows into it is especially striking. Elsewhere, Nereus "reddens with citizen blood" (*rubuit civili sanguine Nereus*).³³ At Massilia, "deep blood foams in the water" (*cruor altus in unda spumat*), the waves are "obstructed by condensed blood" (*obducti concreto sanguine fluctus*), and the sea is "mixed together with blood" (*permixtum sanguine pontum*).³⁴ It is particularly interesting that *cruor* is modified by the adjective *altus*, which would more naturally be used to describe a deep sea. Several further examples of this theme can be found in the poem.³⁵ Finally, when Pompey flees Thessaly, the Peneus River is "reddening with Emathian carnage": *Peneus amnis Emathia iam clade rubens*.³⁶ This last example is particularly important, as will be shown later.

There are also more figurative comparisons between blood and water. Crassus's ability, while he was alive, to prevent war between Caesar and Pompey is compared to the Isthmus that prevents the Ionian Sea from "shattering into the Aegean": *si terra recedat, / Ionium Aegaeo frangat mare*.³⁷ The implication is that now that Crassus is dead, it is as if the Isthmus has receded; and the waters of the Ionian and Aegean Seas crash together as if Roman blood were mixing with the land, water, and other Roman blood. When Caesar reaches the Rubicon, it is described as "small"; however, once Caesar "breaks down the barriers of war", the river is suddenly *tumidum* ("swollen").³⁸ It was once

²⁵ See 2.149-150.

²⁶ 2.735-736. Lucan could have written simply *Roma immaculata* ('unstained Rome'), but by instead writing *Romana tellus immaculata* he draws the reader's attention to the physical ground where Rome is located. This is a further example of Lucan's vivid geographical imagery when discussing mass amounts of blood on the ground.

²⁷ 3.405.

²⁸ 4.354. See also 4.391-392, 4.785, 4.795, 6.61, 6.224-225, 6.579-580, 7.292-294, 7.635, 7.637, 7.836-837, 7.854.

²⁹ 7.721-729.

³⁰ See 7.794-795.

³¹ 1.547-548.

³² 2.212-220.

³³ 2.713. Nereus is a Titan god, but can also be used as a personification meaning simply 'the sea.'

³⁴ 3.572-577.

³⁵ See 3.639-641, 4.567-568, 6.307, 7.116, 7.176, 7.700, 7.789-900.

³⁶ 8.33-34.

³⁷ 1.100-106.

³⁸ 1.185, 204.

small, but now is swollen, and Lucan uses both adjectives matter-of-factly without noting any change. This is significant because the small river becomes swollen at the exact moment when Caesar breaks down the barriers of war, thus allowing himself to bring about the mass water-like flow of blood that will happen later. But the strength of the water changes again; when Caesar has finished crossing it, it is *molli*, ‘soft’ or ‘weak.’³⁹ It is significant both that the water is described with an adjective that implies it has agency, and that the description of the crossing implies that Caesar is able to tame or subdue it. In fact, Laelius later describes how the Caesarian army has “subdued” (*compescuit*) the waves and “overcome” or “broken down” the Rhine (*fregit ... spumantem ... Rhenum*).⁴⁰ It is also noteworthy that the verb *spumo* (‘foam’, ‘froth’) is used elsewhere to describe both blood and water.⁴¹ Descriptions of one body of water flowing into another can be compared to the image of Roman blood flowing into the sea as if it itself were a river.⁴²

One final parallel between water and blood is particularly important for understanding Lucan’s attitude; this has to do with his preference to not know the causes of either natural water phenomena or of bloodshed (i.e., of the war). In Book 1, he describes the various locations men gather from to fight under Caesar.⁴³ It is, in the first place, notable that he describes the waters at those locations in terms that fit with the themes noted above. For example, the Isara River “flows” (*lapsus*) into another river; a harbour “puts pressure on” (*urquet*) the sea; and the ocean alternately “floods” (*funditur*) and “withdraws from the shore” (*refugis*). Lucan then digresses and wonders why these movements happen, but ultimately dismisses such attempts, preferring to accept the phenomena as natural.⁴⁴ We may wonder why Lucan feels so strongly about preferring not to know the causes of these water movements, especially after he brought the issue up in the first place. It seems out of place in a section describing the contingents of Caesar’s army. Is this simply a case of Lucan showing off his geographical knowledge?⁴⁵ It is actually much more important than that, as is seen when we compare it to this later passage:

hanc fuge, mens, partem belli tenebrisque relinque,
 nullaque tantorum discat me vate malorum,
 quam multum bellis liceat civilibus, aetas.
 a potius pereant lacrimae pereantque querellae:
 quidquid in hac acie gessisti, Roma, tacebo.
 Mind of mine, shun this part of battle and leave it to darkness
 and from my words let no age learn of horrors
 so immense, of how much is licensed in civil war.

³⁹ 1.221-222.

⁴⁰ 1.370-371.

⁴¹ For blood, see 3.573. For water, see 2.486.

⁴² For natural water flow, see e.g. 1.400-401. For similarly described flow of blood, see 8.33-34.

⁴³ See 1.392-465.

⁴⁴ 1.412-419.

⁴⁵ See Braund xxxv for an example of this argument.

Better that these tears and protests go unheard:

whatever you did in this battle, Rome, I shall not tell.⁴⁶

This digression also seems out of place in the context of the battle of Pharsalia, because of course Lucan goes on to do just the opposite: he does give an account of the battle. So why does he include this digression saying that he will not? This will become clear later, but for now it is important to note that there is an important parallel between these two passages, especially given all the other ways water and blood (representing warfare) are compared, as well as the uses of the similar pronouns *quaecumque* and *quidquid*.⁴⁷ The first passage makes sense in light of the second; Lucan would rather not know about the civil war, because it is painful to talk about. The first passage is thus an allegory that emphasizes the importance of the second.

The Death of Rome

To understand how such an excessive focus on bloodshed fits into the poem as a whole, let us first look at certain themes discussed by other scholars. Shadi Bartsch has noted that there are two main schools of scholarship on the *Civil War*. One sees the poem as essentially pro-Republican and informed by the tyranny of Lucan's own day under the reign of Nero and his involvement in the Pisonian conspiracy.⁴⁸ The other sees the poem as primarily cynical or nihilist, because there are so many unresolved tensions or unnatural situations.⁴⁹ She herself attempts to occupy a middle ground of sorts; she argues that by becoming increasingly pro-Pompeian and pro-Catonian when all hope has been lost, Lucan expresses his belief in the human necessity of believing in an ideology even though "the world as it is is not built for ... ideology."⁵⁰ In other words, detaching oneself from the world, the horrible world in the case of this poem's setting, "is not the answer."⁵¹

A good example of the first school of scholarship, which as Bartsch notes is older than the second, is Frederick Ahl's *Lucan: An Introduction*. Ahl suggests that Caesar is "not so successful in destroying the ideal" of republican freedom.⁵² He also argues that Cato's journey through the Libyan desert is "a journey to death and a kind of immortality like that purchased by Hercules with the golden apples of the Hesperides"⁵³ and that Cato represents an ideal of *libertas*, which attains a "moral victory" over Caesar.⁵⁴ This seems to suggest that Lucan is not quite nihilistic; he portrays a character who represents *libertas* ('freedom') as possibly having achieved an immortality of sorts.

Bartsch likewise implies that Lucan is more optimistic than a complete nihilist would be. She, similarly to Ahl, argues that he adopts an ideological stance in favour of Pompey and Cato and against Caesar. As has been noted above, her view occupies a middle ground between the two main readings of the poem, so for her Lucan's outlook is of course more negative than it is for Ahl. Her argument that Lucan insists on adopting an ideological stance in the events of the war despite the futility of his side winning makes sense, but she later claims that Lucan "chooses to believe that

⁴⁶ 7.552-556.

⁴⁷ Both words mean 'whatever' and come at the end of each digression. I argue that Lucan uses them because he wants his reader to sense that he does not want to know the facts.

⁴⁸ The Pisonian conspiracy was a plot in 65 AD to overthrow Emperor Nero from his throne.

⁴⁹ Bartsch 5-6.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 129.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 130.

⁵² Frederick M. Ahl, *Lucan: An Introduction* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1976) 57.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 260.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 278.

it is possible that what *he* pronounces can become fate, because he has predicted it.”⁵⁵ This theory and Ahl’s miss the point of the true negativity of Lucan’s outlook, as will be shown by considering how Caesar’s, Pompey’s, Cato’s, and Rome’s blood is described in light of the overall themes of the description of blood that have been outlined above.

In the first place, it is an unavoidable fact that Pompey and Cato die and Caesar lives. Caesar will, of course, be assassinated after the events of the poem, but Lucan does not allude to this in such vivid detail as he does the deaths of the other two leaders. Besides, as Ahl rightly notes, Caesar is important not as much for who he is as for what he represents, i.e., tyranny.⁵⁶ So, even his personal death does not mean that the tyranny he represents will die.

Not much can be said about Cato’s death, as it is not in the completed text of the poem but almost certainly would have been in a later book.⁵⁷ But Lucan does, when lamenting about the terrible effects of the battle of Pharsalia, allude to Cato’s life being taken away from him.⁵⁸ This is a rather vivid description of Cato’s death, to suggest that death itself misses him, and we may compare the use of the same verb, *careo*, to describe the Emathian ground’s lack of abundant bloodshed: *tellus tam multa caede careret*.⁵⁹ Cato’s life is thus compared to the Roman blood that is soaked up by the ground.

Similarly, the description of Pompey’s death fits with some of the themes of the depiction of blood as well. Lucan describes in detail Pompey’s body being “struck by the shores” and “tossed about by the waters”: *litora Pompeium feriunt, truncusque vadosis / huc illuc iactatur aquis*.⁶⁰ This makes us think back to the scene where Pompey is fleeing from Thessaly to Lesbos, and the sea itself is described as being “reddened by Emathian bloodshed.”⁶¹ In this way, Pompey’s blood is mixed with the mass bloodshed of the Roman soldiers at Pharsalia, because both bloods are mixed with the water of the same sea.

The description of the battle of Pharsalia is just as bloody as those of Massilia and Ilerda, but it is ultimately more negative in tone. As Lucan notes:

non istas habuit pugnae Pharsalia partes
quas alie clades: illic per fata virorum,
per populos hic Roma perit; quod militis illic,
mors hic gentis erat: sanguis ibi fluxit Achaeus,
Ponticus, Assyrius; cunctos haerere cruores
Romanus campisque vetat consistere torrens.
Pharsalia did not have those elements of battle

⁵⁵ Bartsch 149.

⁵⁶ See Ahl 274-275.

⁵⁷ This poem is not, in fact, complete. It breaks off abruptly in Book 10, which is considerably shorter than the other nine books.

⁵⁸ 6.311.

⁵⁹ 6.580.

⁶⁰ 8.698-699. For similar descriptions, cf. 8.708-710; 8.723-724; 8.753-754; and 8.761.

⁶¹ 8.33-34; see above.

which other calamities had: there, Rome was ruined by the destinies
of warriors, here by entire peoples; a soldier's death there
was here a nation's death; here streamed Achaean blood,
Pontic and Assyrian – all that gore is stopped from sticking
and congealing on the plain by a torrent of Roman gore.⁶²

As it turns out, Lucan does describe this battle in more general terms than the earlier ones. The earlier battles were bad enough for involving the shedding of Roman blood at the hands of Romans, but we get the impression that they were the sum total of the bloodshed of individual soldiers, while Pharsalia is literally the death of a nation, *mors gentis*. Earlier in the poem blood, and death, are more individualized.⁶³ But it is only at Pharsalia that we see descriptions of blood as distinctively Roman, with the adjectives *Romanus* or *Hesperius*.⁶⁴ The image *sanguine mundi*, “the blood of the world,” is even used.⁶⁵ The only examples we get of such vocabulary in previous books are when Pharsalia is directly foreshadowed.⁶⁶ The effect of this is to emphasize the battle of Pharsalia as the death of the Roman nation, *mors gentis*, after previous battles had been (merely) the simultaneous deaths of many Roman individuals. If we thus look at the blood flowing into the sea along with the Enipeus River as distinctly Roman blood, then the fact that Pompey's blood is mixed with this Roman blood means that he becomes an addition to the general slaughter of the Roman state. One of the purposes of having so often emphasized the flow of blood outside the body as representing the death of the owner of that blood is thus to emphasize the stark reality of the death of the Roman state as Lucan conceives of it, a death that includes Pompey.

Why, then, does Lucan include the passage at the end of Book 8 where he considers the possibility that Pompey did not actually die, because he was not buried?⁶⁷ It cannot be more than a case of wishful thinking. This is not because of its implausibility, since the point is not the individual deaths or lack of death of the main characters, but rather the death or lack of death of what they represent. Rather, the consistent vividness of the representation of death by blood

outside the body means that there is no doubt that Pompey is actually dead. His son says that he has seen his father's blood⁶⁸, and the figurative mixing of this blood with the blood of Rome has been noted. It is true that his ‘spirit’ (*manes*) is said to “place itself in Brutus's chest and Cato's mind” (*in sancto pectore Bruti / sedit et invicti posuit se mente Catonis*).⁶⁹ This may suggest that what Pompey represents will live on, but recall how Lucan earlier alludes to Cato's death.⁷⁰ Brutus is more problematic, but we must remember that within the poem he is not a leader that Lucan can rally around like he can Pompey or Cato. We know historically that he goes on to kill Caesar, but as

⁶² 7.632-637

⁶³ E.g., 2.713 (*civili sanguine*) 2.736 (*sanguine Magni*), 3.577 (*suo sanguine*), 4.542-543 (*cruore meo*), 7.81 (*sanguine Caesaris*), 3.588-591, 3.625, 3.638-641, 3.657-658, 3.678-679, 3.713-713, 3.746, 4.278, 4.805.

⁶⁴ E.g., 7.116 (*sanguine Romano*), 7.511 (*Romanus cruor*), 7.539 (*Romano sanguine*), 7.728-729 (*Hesperio sanguine*).

⁶⁵ 7.233.

⁶⁶ E.g., 5.200-203 (*Hesperio sanguine*), 6.583-584 (*mundi sanguine*, “the blood of the world”).

⁶⁷ See 8.823-872.

⁶⁸ 9.136-137.

⁶⁹ 9.1-18.

⁷⁰ 6.311.

Braund notes⁷¹, the *Civil War* is too grim a poem to focus on this fact. Besides, we also know from historical fact that Brutus ends up committing suicide rather than fighting in defense of freedom, a choice that Lucan explicitly condemns in his account of the mass suicide of Vulteius and his soldiers.⁷² This does not suggest that Brutus is a character Lucan can support ideologically in opposition to Caesar.

As for Cato, Ahl argues that because of the parallel between Cato marching through Libya and Hercules journeying to the Garden of the Hesperides, Cato achieves a similar immortality.⁷³ This comparison does not work, however, if we consider an earlier reference to the story of Hercules wrestling Antaeus on his way to the Garden.⁷⁴ There is no hint in this story of Hercules having shed any blood; the closest we get is when he “drenches his limbs with liquid” (*perfudit membra liquore*), but this is simply a case of “keeping to the custom of the Olympic palaestra” (*Olympiacaе servato more palaestrae*)⁷⁵. In other words, this liquid is the oil poured by athletes over their bodies, and there is no reason to believe that it makes Hercules weaker. He puts the liquid there on his own, so this does not fit into Bartsch’s scheme of unnatural crossings of boundaries of liquids.⁷⁶ In fact, the only mention of blood in the scene is that of Antaeus’s, which gives him strength because it flows inside his body. The ground “seizes his sweat” (*rapit arida tellus / sudorem*).⁷⁷ Given the theme of the ground being drenched in blood, one may expect a word for ‘blood’ to be used as the object of *rapit*, but ‘sweat’ is used instead, suggesting only that the giant is using great strength in the fight, a fact that only makes Hercules’s ability to avoid losing more impressive. The point is that this scene is markedly different from other scenes that describe liquids in a battle or a struggle, especially their interaction with the body and the ground. In contrast, *caruisset vita Catone* (“life was absent from Cato”)⁷⁸; the significance of the use of the verb *careo* has been noted above. The difference between Lucan’s depictions of Hercules and of Cato is significant enough that any comparison between the Greek demigod and the Roman senator is not strong.

This does not mean that there is no truth to Ahl’s theory, however. In fact, it shows Lucan’s tendency to express wishful thinking in vain. The poet may very well be suggesting a comparison to the immortality of Hercules, but other evidence shows that he knows this cannot be a reality. The similar nature of his suggestion of Pompey’s immortality has been noted. This is why Bartsch also sees Lucan as too optimistic; she seems to jump to the conclusion that Lucan is creating the possibility of his wishes becoming true. However, this is not the case. That Lucan hopes that his wish for the immortality of the republican freedom represented by Pompey and Cato is true does not mean that he thinks it can be true. His conviction that it cannot be true is shown by how his descriptions of their deaths are similar to his general description of bloodshed and the death that is represented by it.

It is much different for Caesar, however. Caesar, rather than shedding his own blood, relishes the shedding of others’ blood.⁷⁹ Whereas Pompey⁸⁰, and Rome itself, lose much blood (and therefore

⁷¹ Braund xxii.

⁷² Lucan 4.574-579.

⁷³ Ahl 260.

⁷⁴ Lucan 4.593-655.

⁷⁵ 4.613-614.

⁷⁶ Bartsch 11.

⁷⁷ 4.629-630.

⁷⁸ 6.311.

⁷⁹ E.g., 2.439-440, 2.536, 4.390-392, 5.311-312, 7.728-729.

⁸⁰ See 6.157.

die), the only allusions to potential bloodshed for Caesar are unrealized wishes. When Caesar stops his men from attacking the Pompeians at Ilerda, he explains that he does not want the war to “cost [him] any blood”: *non ullo constet mihi sanguine bellum*.⁸¹ An angry Cicero asks Pompey, “Why are you keeping the world’s swords away from Caesar’s blood?” (*quid mundi gladios a sanguine Caesaris arces?*).⁸² Cicero’s (and Lucan’s) wish is never fulfilled. Caesar is later seen only to be revelling in the massive amount of blood lost by the Roman state. At the very end of the poem, he is in a more difficult situation, and for once is ‘weak’ or ‘uncertain’ (*pendet*) and ‘doubtful’ (*dubius*). He is even “about to be defeated”: *vincendus tum Caesar erat*. But then, Lucan destroys this hope by finishing the sentence with *sed sanguine nullo* (“but with no blood[shed]”).⁸³ After such a consistent emphasis throughout the poem on the significance of losing one’s blood and how it represents death, it is now very hard to believe that Caesar, and the tyranny he represents, can actually be defeated “with no blood.” We must therefore qualify Ahl’s theory that Lucan portrays Caesar and Caesarism as “more vulnerable” in Book 10.⁸⁴ This appears to be a case of Lucan wishing Caesarism could be defeated, but admitting that it is not.

To return to Pharsalus, it is finally necessary to consider the purpose of Lucan’s focus on the often hostile movements of natural bodies of water. For all his descriptions of water in this way, the ultimately most significant one is where he lists possibilities for a certain phenomenon of water crashing into the shore, but then gives up without explanation, saying he has no interest in

making such inquiries.⁸⁵ This is despite his description of such natural movements as *crebros* meaning ‘repeated’, ‘frequent’, or ‘regular.’ If such movements are so normal, seeing as they are constantly repeated, why the strong aversion to knowing their causes? It is because this is an allegory for the similar movement of blood following the battle of Pharsalia. The parallel between 1.412-419 and 7.552-556, where Lucan says he would rather not talk about the bloody events of the battle either, has been noted above. Lucan closes Book 7 with an admonition of the Thessalian land itself for having played host to the death of the Roman state, symbolized by the mass shedding of Roman blood. He lists various ways in which the land *would have* been cursed, using subjunctive verbs⁸⁶, before saying that this would be true only *si non prima nefas belli sed sola tulisses* (“if you alone, not first, had borne the crime of war”).⁸⁷ *Thessalia*, the subject of *tulisses*, is modified by the adjective *prima*. It is not, however, *sola*. In other words, this battle is unprecedented in nature; this is easy to understand given that it is the death of Roman *libertas*.⁸⁸ But if it is also not the only such event, that means it is the first of many, and Lucan makes it seem as though the subsequent battles⁸⁹ occur as a result of Pharsalus and are similar to it. Thus, the level of Roman bloodshed at Pharsalus is made even more significant by the idea that it will be repeated later on. Importantly, Lucan gives no end to this cycle; as has been shown, he wishes that the characters who personify resistance to it could be immortal, but knows that they cannot. It thus seems as though this is the start of a natural cycle, similar to geographical phenomena.

⁸¹ 4.274.

⁸² 7.81.

⁸³ 10.541-542.

⁸⁴ Ahl 306.

⁸⁵ See 1.412-419. This passage has been discussed above.

⁸⁶ See 7.860-867.

⁸⁷ 7.868.

⁸⁸ 7.432-433 (*redituraque numquam Libertas ultra Tigrim Rhenumque recessit*).

⁸⁹ Mentioned at 7.871-872.

This can now obviously be compared with the *moves tam crebros* (“such regular movements”) of earlier, referring to the causes of natural movements of water. Lucan appears to fear that the flow of Roman blood will become as natural as the repeated movements, *moves crebri*, of water. This is why he suddenly backs away from wanting to know the causes of those natural phenomena; it is an allegory for the future cycle of Roman death, which he also does not want to tell. That Caesar represents this onslaught is shown by the various descriptions of him as rushing through the world to war as if he himself were a body of water.⁹⁰ Considering the theme of blood representing strength or ability while inside the body, we can see how Caesar’s blood, which never crosses the boundary of his skin, ultimately makes him stronger than his opponents who bleed and die, including the Roman state itself figuratively.

The prospects for Rome’s future become even more grim when we look at an important passage near the beginning of Book 1. The fall of the Roman state is being directly compared to the end of the universe:

sic, cum compage soluta
 saecula tot mundi suprema coegerit hora
 antiquum repetens iterum chaos, [omnia mixtis
 sidera sideribus concurrent,] ignea pontum
 astra petent, tellus extendere litora nolet
 excutietque fretum, fratri contraria Phoebē
 ibit et obliquum bigas agitare per orbem
 indignata diem poscet sibi, totaque discors
 machina divulsi turbabit foedera mundi.
 So, when the final hour
 brings to an end the long ages of the universe, its structure dissolved,
 reverting to primeval chaos, then fiery stars will plunge
 into the sea, the earth will be unwilling to stretch flat her shores
 and will shake the water off, Phoebē will confront
 her brother and for herself demand the day, resentful
 of driving her chariot along its slanting orbit, and the whole

⁹⁰ E.g., 2.439-443.

discordant mechanism of universe torn apart will disrupt its own laws.⁹¹

Lucan foreshadows the “chaos” that will happen, and describes it as the ultimate state of the elements, including water, being in discord. Looking at this within the blood-water allegory, it obviously does not bode well for the survival of the Roman state. We have to conclude that

Lucan thinks that Rome will fall, ultimately as a result of the cycle of violence begun by the civil war with which this poem is concerned.

This consideration of blood imagery thus fits better with the work of Bartsch’s second school, which she says deals with Lucan’s reflections on “the collapse of the Roman Republic”.⁹² For example, Henderson makes many interesting points regarding the significance of certain words or phrases, and how they contribute to the sense of discord or tension in the poem. One such example is his theory that *hic stabit civilibus exitus armis*⁹³ means that all future civil wars will literally ‘stop’ or ‘stay’ at Rome (the passage is from the account of the Sullan-Marian war). Thus, “All ‘battlefield’ in BC, however ‘Emathian’ at the concrete level, will take place on, on a displacement of, the *Campus Martius*.” Therefore, “‘Here, Rome, will be the end of civil war, civil war after civil war after civil war after ...’ – for this is the only ‘end’ (*exitus*) of civil war: *not* to end. That is ‘the logic of civil war’ (*hoc ordine belli*).”⁹⁴ This idea fits with the one suggested in this paper, namely that in comparing Roman bloodshed to cycles of natural phenomena Lucan despairs of the hope of any end to civil war. This attitude of Lucan’s thus shows itself in another context not directly related to blood or water, which only strengthens the theory that Lucan has this attitude.

Dinter discusses Lucan’s use of body vocabulary, including the “cosmic body,” the “Roman state body,” the “military corps,” the “human body,” and the “textual body.”⁹⁵ Of particular relevance to this essay’s argument is his consideration of the cosmic, Roman state, and human bodies. In his words, “The reader witnesses [the] concept of the human body as barrier repeatedly throughout the epic.”⁹⁶ His argument is that the different categories of body are related; thus, if we accept his theory, we can see how the violation of the barrier of the human body by the shedding of its blood can be compared to the similar figurative shedding of the Roman state’s blood. Bartsch also discusses the concept of “boundary violation” that is popular among Lucan scholars, and notes that “the imagery of boundary violation becomes grimmer and more startling as human bodies are used as the medium for its expression.”⁹⁷ Much of the opening chapter of Bartsch’s book discusses examples of this theme. We can see here how the shedding of human blood, especially at Pharsalia, can be taken to represent other boundary violations, such as the Roman law that should theoretically prevent Caesar from crossing the Rubicon.⁹⁸ But he does, violating both the boundary imposed by the river itself and that imposed by the law.

⁹¹ 1.72-80.

⁹² Bartsch 5-6.

⁹³ 2.224, translated by Braund as “this will be the outcome fixed for civil strife.”

⁹⁴ John Henderson, “Lucan: The Word at War”, in *Fighting for Rome: Poets and Caesars, History and Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998: 165-211), 179.

⁹⁵ Martin Dinter, “Lucan’s Epic Body”, in Christine Walde, ed., *Lucan am 21. Jahrhundert – Lucan in the 21st Century – Lucano nei primi del XXI secolo* (Munich and Leipzig: K. G. Saur, 2005: 295-312), 296.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 306.

⁹⁷ Bartsch 13-15.

⁹⁸ See *ibid.* 14 for discussion.

In short, Henderson, Bartsch, and Dinter all discuss various ways in which Lucan emphasizes the warlike nature of his poem's content. This 'second school' of Lucan scholarship thus sees Lucan as more nihilistic than an older scholarly work such as Ahl's book does. My theory, of the never-ending stream of Roman blood representing the state's death, and of this being suggested by an allegory of cyclical movements of natural water, can thus complement this revisionist theory.⁹⁹

When we examine Lucan's method of describing blood, certain patterns emerge. In his poem, blood represents strength and life while it is flowing inside a body, and weakness and death when it has passed outside the body. It is also similar in many ways to how water is described, both in the poem and conventionally; in particular, Lucan focuses on the image of blood drenching the ground and flowing into the sea following the battle of Pharsalia. Given these patterns, we can eventually conclude that Lucan is, rather nihilistically, convinced that the civil war will lead to the triumph of Caesar (and the tyranny he represents), over Pompey and Cato (and the freedom they represent), until the Roman state is destroyed.

⁹⁹ More can be said about this topic beyond this paper. Possible further considerations include a comparison between the natural thirst for water experienced by Pompeian soldiers at Ilerda in Book 4, and a contrast between Caesar's use of the strength given him by his blood to wage war and the Psylli's use of their own blood to resist snake venom (thus preserving the lives of the Romans who are attacked by those snakes).

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