

Miscellanea

Lucan III, 450–2, and Vergil's *Georgics*

In Book 3 of Lucan's epic *Bellum Civile* (BC), Julius Caesar attempts to conquer Massilia, which has ventured to oppose his plans (BC 3,298 ff.). In preparing a full-scale siege, he needs a large quantity of timber for his war apparatus. To solve this logistical problem, he cuts down a grove close to the city, even though it is considered sacred by the Gauls and various terrifying phenomena may be observed within it. Lucan's Caesar does not know fear and is not hampered by moral or religious scruples.

The closing lines of the section on this sacred grove (BC 3,399–452) tell how Caesar has the material transported to the city:

'Utque satis caesi nemoris, quaesita per agros
plaustra ferunt, curvoque soli cessantis arato
agricolae raptis annum flevere iuvencis.'¹
(BC 3,450–2)²

The first clause ('Utque ... ferunt') seems hardly surprising in lines which close a larger section of the felling of trees: when enough timber has been cut, carts are sought to transport it. The cold facts may be said to reflect Caesar's profane attitude, which has dominated the preceding text.³

The poet might have left things at that. However, after having consciously alluded to agriculture by means of *per agros*, a phrase not strictly necessary in the text, he adds a picture of the effect of Caesar's measures in that sphere. The farmers' oxen are confiscated; hence they cannot cultivate their fields and grow products.

It is well known that Lucan in many places echoes passages from Vergil's *Aeneid* in a process of *imitatio* and *aemulatio*.⁴ His work as a whole is sometimes even designated as an 'anti-Aeneid'. But owing to their concentration

¹ I use the new Teubner edition of Lucan by D.R. Shackleton Bailey: *M. Annaei Lucani de bello civili libri X*, edidit D.R. Shackleton Bailey, (Stuttgart, 1988).

² '(...) When timber enough had been cut down, / Wagons were commandeered in the countryside to convey it, / Oxen too, and the farmers, deprived of the means of their ploughing, / Looked at the idle earth and bewailed the loss of their harvest.' Thus the lines are rendered in: *Lucan's civil war*, translated into English verse by P.F. Widdows, (Bloomington/Indianapolis, 1988) p. 63.

³ For a full analysis of the section on the sacred grove, see: Vincent Hunink, *M. Annaeus Lucanus*, *Bellum Civile* book III, a commentary (Amsterdam, 1992), pp. 167–187.

⁴ For a recent example see: David P. Kubiak, 'Cornelia and Dido (Lucan 9,174–9)', in: *CQ* 40 (1990), 577–8.

upon the *Aeneid*, Lucanean scholars tend to underestimate the importance of Lucan of Vergil's other great poem, the *Georgics*. With their slow, impressive rhythm, Lucan's lines are a clear allusion to two places in the *Georgics* which seem to have remained unnoticed up to now.

At the end of Book 1 of his *Georgics* (1,463–514), Vergil enumerates several portents leading to the murder of Caesar and to civil war. Immediately after his mention of Philippi, Emathia and Haemus, with the well-known confusion of Philippi and Pharsalus,⁵ Vergil describes how in the future farmers will find Roman weapons in their soil:

‘scilicet et tempus veniet, cum finibus illis
agricola incurvo terram molitus aratro
exesa inveniet scabra robigine pila’
(*Georgics* 1,493–5)

The plough is traditionally called ‘curved’ or ‘bent’.⁶ But since Vergil speaks about civil wars, including the very civil war that the *Bellum Civile* is all about, Lucan's text seems a deliberate echo of Vergil's. The dignified tone of the verse is very different from the usual monotony of Lucan's verse and may be taken as a clear indication of Lucan's imitation.

But there is another passage in the *Georgics* which may have inspired Lucan. In the closing section of Book 2 (2,495–542), Vergil praises rustic life by contrasting it with the evils of urban life. In lines 503–15 he does so by means of a priamel.⁷ Various forms of corruption, greed and crime are all contrasted with one single example of virtue:

‘agricola incurvo terram dimovit aratro:
hinc anni labor, hinc patriam parvosque nepotes
sustinet, hinc armenta boum meritosque iuvencos.’
(*Georgics* 2,513–515)

Here we have not only another example of the ‘bent plough’ (513; cf. BC 3,451), but also an explicit mention of the *agricola* (513; cf. BC 3,452), the year's crop (514; cf. BC 3,452) and the oxen (515; cf. BC 3,452). Together with the rhythm and the similar position at the end of a larger section, this may well indicate a connection between the texts.

Taken as such, Lucan's echo of Vergil may still seem rather superficial. But under the surface lies a sharp ideological contrast between the Augustan poet

⁵ On this poetical license see J.O. Thomson, ‘Place-names in Latin poetry’, in: *Latomus* 10 (1951), 433–8, esp. 434; J.H. Brouwers, ‘Vergilius en Lucanus’, in: *Lampas* 15 (1982), 1/2, 16–27, esp. 19–21; as well as commentators on the present passage in the *Georgics* and on Ov. Met. 15,823–4.

⁶ Cfr. also Lucr. 5,933; 6,1253; Verg. Georg. 1,170; 2,189; Ov. Met. 3,11; Fast. 2,517; further TLL 2,399,50 ff.

⁷ On this device see: William H. Race, *The classical priamel from Homer to Boethius*, (Leiden, 1982).

and his Silver Latin successor. Whereas Vergil's lines hail farmers as the cornerstones of society, in Lucan's text we see how farmers are robbed of their main tool, their carts and oxen, and are thus prevented from working. In Vergil's *Georgics* the tone is optimistic and positive, the building up of society taking a prominent position. Lucan, for his part, concentrates upon society's disintegration, as is manifest by his very theme. The forces of destruction threatening Roman civilization are embodied in Julius Caesar. As their main exponent, he violates not only the legal, social and religious order, but even what we in our days tend to see as the very basis of human society, the economic order.

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