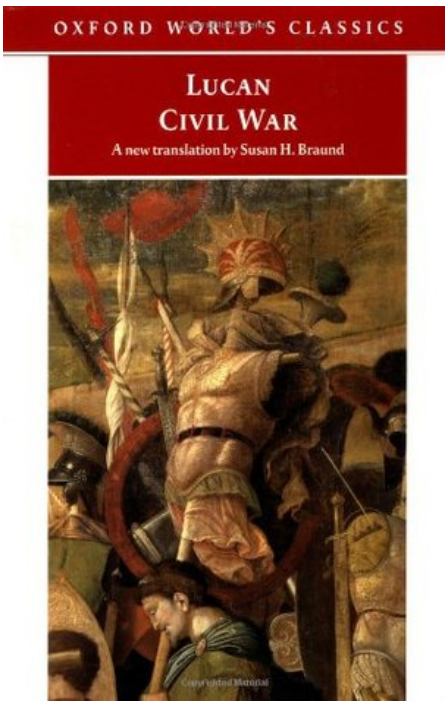

Civil War

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Lucan's epic poem on the civil war between Caesar and Pompey, unfinished at the time of his death, stands beside the poems of Virgil and Ovid in the first rank of Latin epic. This newly annotated, free verse translation conveys the full force of Lucan's writing and his grimly realistic view of the subject. The work is a powerful condemnation of civil war, emphasizing the stark, dark horror of the catastrophies which the Roman state inflicted upon itself. Both the introduction and glossary set the scene for readers unfamiliar with Lucan and explore his relationship with earlier writers of Latin epic, and his interest in the sensational.

Civil War Details

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From Reader Review Civil War for online ebook

Roman Clodia says

Lucan was the nephew of Seneca the Younger (one-time tutor to Nero and forced by him to commit suicide) and so he has a very personal response to hereditary monarchy which comes over very clearly in this text. Re-telling the story of the civil war waged between Julius Caesar and Pompey, he also explores the re-establishment of monarchy vs. the supposed independence of the republic.

This is a very literary text and relies on the reader's knowledge of other Roman epics especially Virgil's Aeneid, but also Ovid's Metamorphoses which itself challenged what the epic genre could and should encompass. But it's not strictly essential to have a knowledge of either Roman literature or even history to enjoy this book though it undoubtedly helps in terms of exploring the nuances.

Braund's translation (OUP Oxford World Classics 1992) of the Latin poetry is in free verse, and is flowing and powerful. Her notes and especially introduction are excellent contextualising the poem in many directions.

I have to admit that this isn't one of my favourite Latin texts but Lucan's sensational episodes are very gothic and almost worth reading in themselves, replete as they are with bloody portents, witches, and all manner of gore. Caesar's affair with Cleopatra is also extremely lurid but it's a shame that the text breaks off at that point as Lucan never finished the poem. So worth a read but not a good introduction to Latin literature.

Jim Coughenour says

Lucan's *Civil War*, written in his early 20s before he was compelled to kill himself by Nero, is an astonishingly exuberant poem that presents history as political theater – in this case, the clash between Julius Caesar and Pompey. Unlike the usual epic, he dispenses with the machinations of deities and stages instead the raw contest between two egomaniacs with armies criss-crossing the Mediterranean. The narrative is high-spirited, packed with the pornography of war, and races from scene to scene only to stop in mid-sentence.

In Book 7, immediately following the decisive battle of Pharsalus, he offers what may be the most nihilistic oration in all of ancient literature. Here is the heroic glory of battle, according to Lucan:

> Your wrath does nothing. Whether the corpses rot
> or a pyre undoes them makes no difference.
> Nature welcomes everything back to her
> peaceful bosom, and bodies owe their end
> to themselves. All these peoples, Caesar,
> if fire does not burn them now, it will
> burn them with the earth, burn them with
> the sea's abyss; a common pyre awaits
> the world, it will mix their bones with stars.
> Wherever Fortune calls your soul, *these* souls
> are there too. You won't ascend any higher

> into the breezes, or lie in a better place
> beneath the night of Styx. Death is free
> from Fortune. Earth takes all that she gives birth to,
> and heaven covers whoever has no urn.

This punchy new translation by Matthew Fox is a pleasure throughout.

Perhaps such poetry could only be written by a brash young man, a privileged member of the Roman aristocracy, educated in Athens, a nephew of the Stoic philosopher Seneca. No wonder Nero, with his artistic pretensions, was jealous. Lucan wasn't content with being the superior poet; he had to rub coarse salt in the wound. James Romm, in his recent biography of Seneca, tells the tale:

> Most likely it was now that Lucan uttered a bon mot that later became legendary. While using a public lavatory, he heard the sound of his own flatulence echoing through the hollow privy beneath him. His quick literary mind seized on an apt quotation – from the poetry of Nero. *You might think it had thundered beneath the earth,* Lucan intoned, gleefully spoofing the emperor's verse about an eruption of Mount Aetna. Those who heard him hastened to leave the latrine, fearing that their presence there put them in danger.

It's no surprise that Lucan, who lustily despises Caesar throughout the *Civil War*, came to see the assassination of Nero as a civic duty and joined the conspiracy to kill him. Unfortunately, the plot was discovered and everyone died. He was hardly a hero at the end, but as his terrific poem proves, heroes count for nothing.

Adrienne says

Excellent and readable translation.

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else fine says

I'm actually reading the Robert Graves translation, which I was too lazy to import manually. I love his informal introductions. So far, it's very enjoyable.

Andrew Fairweather says

"Grievous alas! is it, and ever will be, that Caesar profited by his worst crime—his fighting against a kinsman who had scruples."

Lucan's Civil War is some of the most insane stuff I've read in a very long time. If Hieronymus Bosch wrote history, surely this is not far from what he'd come up with. Passages spare no detail in describing the eye popping (literally, eyeballs are popped from their sockets) and gore encrusting madness that results from Caesar's challenge to Pompey (worse than Hanya Yanagihara!!). Loved ones are defaced, heads bodies decapitated, as corpses become grist for the mill that is the war machine. The poem culminates (but does not

end with) the battle of Pharsalia (indeed, Lucan's poem is frequently referred to as 'Pharsalia'), but what counts is the legacy of the battle itself and the shock waves it waves wrought on Roman society itself.

Lucan has rightly been described as a writer of 'rhetoric'. Civil War is peppered throughout with gorgeous passages, some of which go on at length. I feel that one such passage at the beginning of book two sums up the philosophy of the work better than any other--as it is rather lengthy, I don't feel comfortable quoting the Latin :

"For when Rome had conquered the world and Fortune showered excess of wealth upon her, virtue was dethroned by prosperity, and the spoil taken from the enemy lured men to extravagance: they set no limit to their wealth or their dwellings; greed rejected the food that once sufficed; men seized for their use garments scarce decent for women to wear; poverty, the mother of manhood, became a bugbear; and from all the earth was brought the special bane of each nation. Next they stretched wide the boundaries of their lands, till those acres, which once were furrowed by the iron plough of Camillus and felt the spade of a Curius1 long ago, grew into vast estates tilled by foreign cultivators. Such a nation could find no pleasure in peace and quiet, nor leave the sword alone and grow fat on their own freedom. Hence they were quick to anger, and crime prompted by poverty was lightly regarded; to overawe the State was high distinction which justified recourse to the sword; and might became the standard of right. Hence came laws and decrees of the people passed by violence;"

According to Lucan, the Civil War comes indirectly as a result of a culture of greed and excess which knew no limits. Caesar is a personification of a sign of the times, with his lack of regard for culture or custom, with a respect for nothing but his own ambition. Fittingly, the gods play no role, no character becomes divinely inspired, but all who play this game do so with an eye towards Fortune, an unfaithful spirit of sorts which most venerate without calculable return (Caesar seems pretty lucky though). In a universe without divine intervention, to know one's lot becomes a curse :

"Olympus, see fit to lay on suffering mortals this additional burden, that they should learn the approach of calamity by awful portents? Whether the author of the universe, when the fire1 gave place and he first took in hand the shapeless realm of raw matter, established the chain of causes for all eternity, and bound himself as well by universal law, and portioned out the universe, which endures the ages prescribed for it, by a fixed line of destiny; or whether nothing is ordained and Fortune, moving at random, brings round the cycle of events, and chance is master of mankind—in either case, let thy purpose, whatever it be, be sudden; let the mind of man be blind to coming doom; he fears, but leave him hope."

All that's left for inspiration are the tales of men--

"Man’s destiny has never been watched over by any god. Yet for this disaster we have revenge, so far as gods may give satisfaction to mortals: civil war shall make dead Caesars the peers of gods above; and Rome shall deck out dead men with thunderbolts and haloes and constellations, and in the temples of the gods shall swear by ghosts."

At more than one point are alternatives to civil war appealed to in contrast to the useless and destructive folly

of the civil war. That we put so much effort into destruction and war itself--what could become of roman society had it instead put its efforts into the subjugation of other nations, rather than its own peoples! Or better still, as the poet Tibullus would have encouraged, to the efforts of peace...

"interea pax arva colat. pax candida primum
duxit araturos sub iuga curva boves;
pax aluit vites et sucos condidit uvae,
funderet ut nato testa paterna merum;
pace bidens vomerque nitent, at tristia duri
50militis in tenebris occupat arma situs,
rusticus e lucoque vehit, male sobrius ipse,
uxorem plaustro progeniemque domum"

There are some players in this game which embody the Stoic spirit that Lucan advocates--but most of what is in Lucan's word is base (which makes sense given that the Stoics always seem to be an elect at odds with the rabble...). The social order has been ruptured, and eye for an eye is the only law. Caesar of course, will pay with his life for the trend of corruption he began, and though the reader knows this, they will nevertheless be dazzled by this Epic-Historical-Philosophical masterpiece.

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sologdin says

silver age literate epic, taken from history rather than mythology. Caesar is almost a standard epic hero, to the extent that he is kinda a dick, similar to earlier Achilles (and later Lucifer). famous scene is the inverted katabasis in book VI, wherein pompey, instead of descending to the underworld, as is proper, has erichtho bring unfortunate decedent back to earth. great stuff.

Eadweard says

"The men, too, as they head for war and the opposing camps,
pour out just complaints against the cruel deities:

‘O how unfortunate that we were not born in the time
of the Punic war, to fight at Cannae and at Trebia!
It is not peace we ask for, gods: inspire with rage the foreign nations,
now rouse the fierce cities; let the world league together
for war: let lines of Medes swoop down from Achaemenid
Susa, let Scythian Danube not confine the Massagetae,

let the Elbe and Rhine’s unconquered head let loose
from furthest north the blond Suebi; make us again
the enemies of all the peoples, only ward off civil war.
From here let the Dacian strike, from there the Getan; let one leader face

Iberians, the other turn his standards to confront the eastern quivers;
let no hand of yours, Rome, be swordless. Or if it is your decision,
gods, to devastate the Hesperian name, then let the mighty ether
gather into fires and fall to earth in thunderbolts.
Cruel creator, strike both parties and both leaders together,
while they are still innocent. Must they contest
the rule of Rome with this great crop of crimes unprecedented?"

"Already the corpses, melting with decay and blurred with time’s
long passage, have lost their features; only now do miserable parents
gather and steal in fearful theft the parts they recognize.
I recall how I myself, keen to place my slain brother’s
disfigured face on the pyre’s forbidden flames,

examined all the corpses of Sulla’s peace
and searched through all the headless bodies for a neck
to match the severed head."

"Then every ship which attacked Brutus’ timbers
stuck captive to the one it hit, defeated by its own impact,
while others are held fast by grappling-irons and smooth chains
or tangled by their oars: the sea is hidden and war stands still.
Now no missiles are hurled or shot by arms,
no wounds from weapon thrown fall from afar,
but hand meets hand: in the naval battle the sword
achieves the most. Each stands leaning from his own boat’s

stronghold to meet the enemy’s blows and none when killed
fell in his own ship. Deep blood foams
in the water, the waves are choked by clotted gore
and the ships, when hauled by iron chains thrown on board,
are kept apart by crowds of corpses."

"The victorious Moors did not enjoy to the full the sight
which Fortune gave: they do not see the streams
of gore, collapsing limbs, and bodies hitting
the earth: every corpse stood erect, crushed in a mass.
Let Fortune call up grim Carthage’s hated ghosts
with these new offerings, let blood-stained Hannibal

and the Punic shades accept this grim expiation.

It is a crime, gods, that Roman ruin on the earth
of Libya helps Pompey and the Senate’s prayers!
Better that Africa should conquer us for herself."

"You collapse when battle is removed, because, although your blood
was shed, fighting gave you strength. As he falls, a crowd of comrades
catch him and, rejoicing, set him fainting on their shoulders;
and they worship the deity, so to speak, confined inside
his stabbed breast and the living semblance of mighty Heroism.
They vie to pluck the weapons from his transfixed limbs,
and they adorn the gods and naked-breasted Mars
with your armour, Scaeva, happy in this claim to fame
had robust Iberians or Cantabrians with tiny weapons
or Teutones with lengthy weapons fled from you.
But you cannot adorn the Thunderer’s temple
with spoils of war, you cannot yell in happy triumphs.
Unhappy man! with such enormous valour you bought a master!"

"But when dead bodies are preserved in stone, which draws the inmost
moisture off, and once the marrow’s fluid is absorbed and they grow hard,
then greedily she vents her rage on the entire corpse:

she sinks her hands into the eyes, she gleefully digs out
the cold eyeballs and gnaws the pallid nails
on withered hand. With her own mouth has she burst
the noose and knots of the criminal, mangled bodies as they hung,
scraped clean the crosses, torn at guts beaten
by the rains, at marrows exposed and baked by the sun.
She has stolen the iron driven into hands, the black and putrid
liquid trickling through the limbs and the congealed slime
and, if muscle resisted her bite, she has tugged with all her weight.
And if any corpse lies on the naked earth, she camps
before the beasts and birds come; she does not want to tear
the limbs with knife or her own hands, but awaits
the bites of wolves, to grab the bodies from their dry throats.
Nor do her hands refrain from murder, if she needs
some living blood which first bursts out when throat is slit
and if her funeral feast demands still-quivering organs.

So through a wound in the belly, not nature’s exit,
the foetus is extracted to be put on burning altars.

And whenever she has need of cruel, determined spirits,
herself she creates ghosts. Every human death is to her advantage.
She plucks from young men’s faces the bloom of cheek
and from a dying boy cuts off a lock of hair with her left hand."

"She ceased and, with night’s darkness doubled by her craft,
her dismal head concealed in a murky cloud, she wanders
through the corpses of the slain, thrown out, denied a grave.
Fast fled the wolves, fast fled the carrion birds, unfed,
tearing free their talons, while the witch of Thessaly
selects her prophet, and by examining innards chill
with death she finds a stiff lung’s lobes, entire,
without a wound, and in a corpse she seeks a voice."

"From this battle the peoples receive a mightier wound
than their own time could bear; more was lost than life
and safety: for all the world’s eternity we are prostrated.
640
Every age which will suffer slavery is conquered by these swords.
How did the next generation and the next deserve
to be born into tyranny? Did we wield weapons or shield
our throats in fear and trembling? The punishment of others’ fear
sits heavy on our necks. If, Fortune, you intended to give a master
to those born after battle, you should have also given us a chance to fight."

Evan Leach says

Civil War is the only surviving work of Lucan, a Roman writer from the 1st century. Written during the reign of Nero, Lucan’s *Civil War* was arguably the last great epic poem written in antiquity (at least in the West). The poem as we have it is unfinished (Nero ordered Lucan to commit suicide at the age of 25), but what’s left is a fairly complete story of the war between Julius Caesar and Sextus Pompey, all the way to its grisly end.

“They all bought, but he sold Rome.” IV. 824

The Oxford World’s Classics edition argues that *Civil War* “stands beside the poems of Virgil and Ovid in the first rank of Latin epic.” I would not go quite that far. *Civil War* is a bit of a controversial classic – the poem has a few quite glaring turnoffs, and has earned its share of detractors over the centuries. Even classical scholar Moses Hadas, who considered Lucan to be worth reading, described his vices as “shrieking

and easy to find." Two of his faults in particular may test the modern reader. The first is Lucan's passion for the grotesque, which is almost absurd. The poem dwells on horrible, repulsive situations with a kind of morbid glee. Here are a few examples that I found to be particularly memorable:

[I]n the naval battle the sword achieves the most. Each stands leaning from his own boat's stronghold to meet the enemy's blows and none when killed fell in his own ship. Deep blood foams in the water, the waves are choked by clotted gore and the ships, when hauled by iron chains thrown on board, are kept apart by crowds of corpses. Some sank, half-dead, into the vast deep and drank the sea mixed with their own blood…"

Etc., etc. It gets worse:

Catus fights, boldly holding on to Greek post, at one moment he is pierced in his back and chest alike by weapons shot together: the steel meets in the middle of his body and the blood stood still, unsure from which wound to flow, until at one moment a flood of gore drove out both spears…"

One more for the road (not for the squeamish):

"That day a unique form of hideous death was seen, when a young man in the water by chance was transfixed by the beaks of converging vessels. The middle of his chest was split apart by such tremendous blows, the bronze of the beaks resounding; from his crushed belly the blood mixed with entrails spouted gore through his mouth. "

Gross. For what it's worth, this obsession with the grotesque is simply a reflection of the taste of his day. Seneca the Younger (Lucan's uncle) displays a similar lean towards the lurid in his tragedies. But that doesn't make it incredibly fun to read. Fortunately, Lucan calms down a bit in the poem's second half and largely spares us these horrors by the time we get to Pharsalus.

The other potential turnoff is the poem's bombastic and rhetorical style. Lucan regularly imposes strained, artificial speeches on his protagonists, often at the most unlikely times. This is the nature of the genre, to some degree, but Lucan stretches it to the limit. Much more so than Virgil or Ovid's epics, Lucan's poem *feels* like it's about 2,000 years old. This is not helped by Lucan's frequent, enthusiastic, and unintelligible digressions into astronomy, geography, zoology or whatever other subject catches his fancy.

So the poem has its problems. But there are plenty of things working in its favor. Lucan writes with fire and conviction, and his fervor can be contagious when he's at his best. Unlike the great epic poems before it, *Civil War* deals with actual human beings participating in a historical conflict. There's no real hero of the poem: Caesar is presented as a bloodthirsty warmonger, Pompey as the lesser of two evils. The closest the poem comes to a moral hero is Cato, who's very much off in the wings. The lack of an infallible, superhuman protagonist is refreshing and makes the poem more interesting. The relationship between Pompey and his wife Cornelia gives the poem an emotional hook, and the Battle of Pharsalus (which I was a bit nervous going into, given Lucan's love of slaughter) is a suitably epic set piece. While Lucan has had plenty of critics, he's had plenty of fans too; Dante ranked Lucan with Homer, Virgil, Horace and Ovid in his own epic over 1,000 years later.

Ultimately the best thing about Lucan may be that he didn't try and simply copy Virgil. *Civil War* adopts some of the scenes and key themes of its genre, but it is very much an original work. That's more than can be said for any of Lucan's epic-writing contemporaries from the death of Augustus onward. While the poem has its faults, at least it is trying to do something a little different. Fans of the classics are encouraged to give this

poem a go, but with reservations. **3 stars**.

Shannon says

It's alright. Some of it is a little hard to follow but the gorey bloody bits were pretty good. I don't like Lucan half as much as I like Statius or Ovid.

David Sarkies says

An Anti-Caeserian Account of the Civil War
24 August 2011 - Lausanne

Lucan was a contemporary of Nero, and in fact died at the age of 25 when he slit his own wrists after he was discovered involved in a plot to overthrow the emperor (it seems as if this was a dignified way to die in the early empire). As such Lucan's poem regarding the civil war between Caeser and Pompey remains unfinished. It is clear from the text that Lucan does not like Julius Caeser, and that the translator of the version I read (Robert Graves) does not particularly like Lucan. So, if the translator does not like the writer, why does he bother translating the book. Well, he answers that question himself: because of its historical value.

The Pharasalia does give a good outline of the civil war, right up to Caeser's arrival in Egypt and his seduction of Cleopatra, however it is questionable as to whether this is what would be termed revisionist history. Considering that the other source of the civil war is from Caeser's own hand (and further sources, such as Suetonius and Plutarch, were written a lot later), there can be an argument that Caeser's account could be somewhat biased. However, it is clear that Lucan is quite biased as well as he does not paint Caeser in a particularly appealing light.

Now, interspersed amongst the text are a lot of stories relating to mythology, as well as some pseudo-scientific theorising (and I say pseudo-scientific because it seems that Lucan attributes a lot of things to the gods). There are also some interesting accounts, such as Caeser rowing across the Adriatic Sea in a row boat (and it is interesting how Lucan says that it is when he makes landfall that he regained his empire, suggesting, and there is a lot of truth to it, that while he was in the middle of the Adriatic in a rowboat he was no longer master of his own destiny, nor was he master of Rome, but then considering that he was in the middle of a civil war, he wasn't master of Rome anyway). The other story was that of Cato's march through the desert to visit the oracle that Alexander of Macedon had visited. The story of how Cato refused water, and marched alongside his troops, gives a lot of credence to his character. However, since Cato was originally on the side of Pompey, and that Lucan is an admirer of Pompey (as well as a barracker for Caeser's assassins), it is not surprising that he paints him in a really attractive light.

After Pompey's defeat, and his assassination in Egypt, Lucan raves for quite a while about how undignified a death it was, how he was denied proper burial rights, and how such a great man deserves many more honours than what he received. However, it should be remembered that Caeser was just as horrified at Pompey's undignified murder as was Lucan. However Lucan is writing very much a 'what if' book, believing that all of Rome's current troubles are the result of this one civil war, and he lays all of the problems faced by Rome squarely on Caeser's shoulders. He does forget though that Ceaser did turn down the crown, and that he had

also seen major flaws in the Republican system of government, yet even though his murderers, who were appalled at the idea of a single ruler, ended up moving Rome further to the Imperial State by killing Caeser. Further, they forget Sulla, who established himself as dictator, and then stepped down once his reforms had been completed. The other thing that is forgotten is that Caeser did not proscribe (that is mark for death) any of his enemies, and it is because of this that he ended up meeting his fate.

The time that Lucan wrote in was a much different time than the one that he writes about. It was about 100 years after the events in his poem, and Rome had changed. There was no freedom, and Nero ruled the empire with an iron fist. If you disagreed with Nero, you pretty much kept your mouth shut because there was no freedom of speech. It is in a sense why the Pharasalia was Lucan's way of criticising the current regime, however he ended up not simply keeping it in his poem, but attempted to act it out in his own life, which resulted in his suicide.

At the end of the poem (or at least what he wrote of it) he seems to describe it as lasting for as long as the story of Ceaser lasted, however why this particular piece of literature was kept in the absence of other works is beyond me. I can't read Latin so I cannot comment on it's poetical value, though it does provide us with an interesting, if somewhat biased, view of the ancient world.

VANY says

se me saltarem os olhos tbm quero que me usem como máquina de guerra

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AGamarra says

"Y vosotros, ancianos, chusma despreciable y sin gota de sangre, serán simples espectadores, ya como plebe romana, de nuestros triunfos. ¿O imaginan que la carrera de César puede acusar la mengua que supone su deserción? ... ¿O acaso piensan que me han prestado alguna ayuda decisiva? Jamás la providencia de los dioses se rebajará de forma que los destinos se preocupen de la muerte y de la vida de gentes como ustedes ... el género humano vive en función de unos pocos."

Lucano compuso su poema épico "Farsalia" para hablarnos de los conflictos de la Guerra Civil romana entre Julio César y (su yerno) Pompeyo. Obedeciendo éste los deseos del Senado, es encargado de defender Roma contra el ataque de César, quien luego de perder las esperanzas en lograr ser cónsul de la República y verse acorralado por la opinión de unos pocos decide atacar Roma, tras lo cual se dará la huida de Pompeyo para ofrecer una mejor resistencia. Es así que César atraviesa el Rubicón y se enfrasca en la guerra.
Hay una parcialidad del autor con Pompeyo, al cual aplica el sobrenombre de Magno, lo retrata como un héroe, leal y de gran corazón; mientras que a Julio César lo describe como caprichoso, astuto y por momentos cruel. No deja sin embargo de referirse a sus cualidades, el futuro dictador romano tiene una velocidad de un rayo para atacar y tomar posiciones, es el hijo predilecto de la diosa de la Fortuna, por momentos parece un semidiós al que nada le puede salir mal.
Las ideas de Lucano son confusas, aunque aceptando emperadores tiene grandes reparos en hablar una época de bienestar durante la guerra civil y llama tirano al que pretende quedarse en el poder prescindiendo del senado.
Las descripciones por momento saturaron, a veces eran muy nimias y otras veces ocasiones hubo donde al hablar de temas mitológicos se veían pasajes forzados (el mismo autor muestra un grado importante de

escepticismo) en la obra que no me llegaron a convencer, parecían pasajes parchados a la nueva historia, no guardaban una armonía como he visto en otros épicos.
Lamentablemente por la cantidad de altibajos no me terminó de gustar mucho, pero hay datos interesantes como las proclamas de los generales, las acusaciones mutuas, los episodios de hambruna o pobreza de las tropas y de los valores de la virtud romana. Pero sin embargo a pesar de tocar temas muy interesantes siento que no le dio la fuerza necesaria a todos, algunos pasajes muy importantes parecen desdibujados, no bien explicados y uno duda su real importancia en la historia que quiso contar Lucano.

Samuel Valentino says

This book was both fascinating and boring. Not in turns - simultaneously. I've never read anything else like it - I would be falling asleep while wanting to turn the page. And it keeps on lumbering away, in it's enthrallingly tedious way, until chapter 6.

And suddenly it turns into Conan the Barbarian.

Or something very similar. Lucan goes from a grandiose if straightforward account of the end of the Republic right into the Thessalian Witches. These are magicians so powerful that it leads to a theological aside on the author's part, wondering whether the gods were compelled to obey them, or simply chose to do so; and if they chose to, why? They can stop Jupiter's chariot in its tracks, and even threaten Hades himself. It's one of the most amazing fantasy accounts I've ever read.

Lucan occasionally rises to this level - previously, he describes the prophetic ecstasy of the Oracle of Delphi, and later gives an incredible version of Medusa and her power. If only the whole work were dedicated to this sort of thing, it would probably rank as one of the best mythological epics written.

For what it is, however, the best part of the book are the individual epigrams - Lucan was an orator, and the introductory material says the book reads better as a rhetorical manual than an epic. And the lines are good - one example is spoken to Caesar about Pompey, prior to crossing the Rubicon: "Half the world you may not have, but you can have the whole world for yourself."

If you're not interested in Roman history, this book won't convince you. But if you are, you can get quite a lot out of this first century poetic account of the end of the Roman Republic.

Gustavo Offely says

«Great things destroy themselves: such is the limit the gods place on all success.»

A palavra epic antecede frequentemente a palavra fail. As quedas de pessoas com má coordenação motora, a má música e as campanhas publicitárias são as coisas mais épicas que existem. Aristeia é coisa do passado distante e à aretê dissemos adieu nos anos 60. Não sei se isto é grave, nem sei se é verdade (em 1990, Walcott escreveu Omeros).

Umas das vantagens de ler cronologicamente este género de poesia tão anacrónico é poder associar versos felizes a palavras, conceitos e acontecimentos históricos tão familiares, mas tão difíceis de memorizar:

Erínias, Rubicão, o cerco de Brindisi, etc.

Pharsalia é um poema sobre a guerra civil entre Júlio César e a facção liderada por Pompeu Magno. Spoiler: César ganhou. Está aqui uma coisa de apetite para quem gosta de meteorologia (sabe-se sempre de que lado sopra o vento) e para quem aprecia astronomia especulativa (não que eu saiba a diferença). Para os aficionados de feitos de guerra varonis também não está mal: há olhos arrancados, suicídios de grupo e todas as virtuosas bravatas do género. A guerra é coisa que aleija, conclui Lucano, especialmente quando César ganha.

Catherine Woodman says

I have been reading Roman poetry to my youngest son for the last several months, and I have to say that while I would not have guessed it, I have really enjoyed it, content wise. Most surprisingly, this is my favorite one. I had heard of the other three poets. They are big names from the ancient world--Catullus, Ovid, and Virgil--heavy hitters all three. But I had never heard about Lucan.

He was from Cordoba, a family with minimal Italian blood but his grandfather was Seneca the elder, and his uncle Seneca the younger--both big names in the ancient world. He grew up with Nero, and died because of his opposition to him, which is why this poem was never finished.

It is a poem about the Civil War, about Caesar crossing the Rubicon and Pompey daring Caesar to a fight and then hightailing it out of Rome when Caesar took the dare. Lucan didn't care for either of them all that much, and it is hard to disagree with the things he didn't like, but that's not what I liked about his epic. I liked the cadence of it, which is dactyl hexameter. Not that I would have recognized that, but I do know that is the poetic form that Homer wrote in. I also like the rawness of it, and the humor. It is hard boiled without being bitter. I am not what I would call a great fan of the war novel either, but somehow this really made me think. It also gave me a window into a time long gone by. Maybe I have reached the time in my life to pick up the Iliad.
