

BOOK REVIEW

Lucan and the Sublime: Power, Representation and Aesthetic Experience. Cambridge classical studies. By HENRY J. M. DAY. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. x, 262. \$95.00. ISBN 978-110-70206-03.

Henry Day's *Lucan and the Sublime: Power, Representation, and Aesthetic Experience* makes the case that the *Bellum Civile* is a sublime poem and Lucan a major thinker in the tradition of the sublime. Day notes in his introduction that he means not to introduce new interpretations, but rather to show how the poem's multiple meanings emerge from its aesthetics. On Day's reading, Lucan's contending voices, his Pompeian sympathy and Caesarian complicity, are forms of the sublime, expressing dimensions of Roman historical experience.

In Chapter 1 ("The Experience of the Sublime"), Day defines the parameters of his study by surveying recurring patterns in the ancient and modern sublime with special attention to two aspects: the potential variety of the sublime object, which may be textual or natural, inspiring or disturbing; and the sublime experience as a transfer of power from the object experienced to the subject who experiences it. For Longinus, the sublime experience of classical texts transfers uplifting power from an otherwise inaccessible past to the reader in the present. For Lucretius, the sublime experience of nature involves an encounter with a potentially overwhelming natural phenomenon, over which one nevertheless attains power through comprehension of its true workings. To present the sublime in textual form, however, requires primarily vivid materialization. Representational transparency may prove an obstacle rather than a means to achieving that effect.

Chapter 2 ("Presentation, the sublime and the *Bellum Civile*") frames the poem's presentational paradox as fundamental to its concept of the sublime: Lucan articulates a theme (civil war) that he frames as 'unspeakable' (*nefas*). Accordingly, in place of a transparent account of one side against the other, Lucan deploys arresting narrative and rhetorical techniques to provoke sublime experience. Day gives the example of the narrator's apostrophized refusal to recount a terrible event, which he then addresses suddenly and powerfully. The narrator

thus engages readers in a moment of shared narrative loss (the refusal) in order to jolt them with rhetorical energy, opening a path to sublime experience.

Chapter 3 (“The Caesarian sublime”) focuses on Caesar both as a subject who experiences the sublime and as a sublime object, whom the reader experiences. As the former, Lucan’s Caesar offers a perverse parallel to Lucretius’ Epicurus, hinting at a tyrannical impulse latent in the sublime. Both seek sublime experience in defiance of cosmic boundaries and traditional pieties, but in Epicurus the byproduct is psychological freedom for all who follow suit, whereas Caesar denies freedom to all but himself. Caesar’s association with lightning and other forceful natural phenomena represents him as a sublime object of metaphorically equivalent stripe. Day’s argument for the association of the Nile as a sublime object with Caesar would benefit from addressing whether the Nile, via its Egyptian exponent Acoreus, resists identification with Caesar.¹ Also, Day argues that Caesar retains sublime status in spite of succumbing to fear and confusion in Book 10’s Alexandrian War episode, citing in particular a narrative emphasis on the temporariness of Caesar’s setback. I do not necessarily disagree, but it nevertheless seems possible to argue that the Caesarian sublime crashes in on itself amidst Book 10’s spectacle of vulnerability. Nonetheless, critical engagement with the sublime substantially enriches scholarly conversation on the end of the poem.

In chapter 4 (“The Pompeian Sublime”), Day draws on Frank Ankersmit’s study of the overlap between communal trauma and the sublime; in particular, how a traumatic event—such as the Roman Republic’s defeat at Pharsalus—creates a break between the present and the past. Day argues that the battle paradoxically both erases the pre-Pharsalian Roman identity and preserves it as an inaccessible past self. Pompey, embodying this pre-Pharsalian identity, projects sublimity through the tension between magnitude and decay, as in the programmatic simile likening him to a lofty, yet weak-rooted oak. Pompey’s make-shift grave marker captures this tension as well insofar as it is described as paltry, soon to disappear, but nevertheless more illustrious than the grandest monuments. Pompey’s katasterism in Book 9 attests to the uncontainable character of the Pompeian sublime in post-Pharsalian Roman historical experience. Pompey and the historical identity that he embodies abide not in spite of their destruction, but through it.

¹ On the role of the Nile in Lucan’s epic, see now Eleni Manoloraki’s *Noscendi Nilum Cupido: Imagining Egypt from Lucan to Philostratus* (De Gruyter, 2012).

In sum, this is a very important book that gives Lucan studies a significant new critical lens through which to reconsider existing interpretations and to develop new ones. It overlaps with significant examples of current Lucan criticism, notably Christina Walde on trauma and post-memory in *Brill's Companion to Lucan* (Edited by Paolo Asso. Brill, 2011) and Martin Dinter's *Anatomizing Civil War* (Cambridge, 2012), especially his treatment of *fama* (which Day argues is a sublime object in itself). I hope that scholars continue to probe the Lucanian sublime, especially in connection with Cato's role. Readers will find this book well edited, clear, and very well written.

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