

1 LUCAN THE NIHILIST

Je contemple d'en haut le globe en sa rondeur,
Et je n'y cherche plus l'abri d'une cahute.

Avalanche, veux-tu m'emporter dans ta chute?
—Baudelaire, *Le goût du Néant*

Recent scholarship, influenced by developments in literary theory, has replaced the pro-Stoic, pro-Pompeian Lucan of an earlier day with a dark, sinister, at times grimly parodic poet for whom reality is chaotic, fragmentary, and ultimately meaningless. His rehabilitation in the classical canon, moreover, results in part from the ability of a readership whose own tradition includes Kafka and Beckett to appreciate the nihilism of Lucan's art, much as the Middle Ages, which also furnished him with a receptive audience, valued him as an author scarcely less grotesque than its own gargoyles. The present study, while partially adopting what has become the orthodox view of Lucan, attempts a heretical (because more traditional) presentation, necessary for two reasons. First, close reading figures not much more prominently in the recent line of Lucan criticism than it did among its predecessors, and it remains the largest single gap in the vast secondary literature. Second, much recent analysis proceeds from the fundamentally erroneous postulate that Lucan can only describe his incoherent universe by imitating it.¹ This premise overlooks the paradox on which Lucan's

1. This is the view especially of Henderson (1988) and Bartsch (1997). Quint's notion of "resistance to form" (1993, 147) is the most coherent statement of the view of Lucan that I oppose.

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aesthetics depend: that it is possible to describe chaos without being chaotic, to document with clinical precision the absence of precision in language, to make a logical case for the absence of logic. In a word, Lucan need not, and therefore does not, resort to the stylistic practices of some of his (post-)modern champions to get his point across.² And Lucan has a point, a perfectly lucid one: sheer randomness governs the universe; civil war is a manifestation of that randomness; and—as the current orthodoxy rightly insists—in a random universe, the associations between words and their meanings are completely arbitrary. This randomness, however, does not prevent Lucan from being systematic in his exposition of a world without systems, and he is particularly systematic in his integration of moral terminology into his nihilistic scheme, as evidenced by his careful positioning of two programmatic statements. In the proem, *iusque datum sceleri canimus* [we sing of legality bestowed on crime] (1.2) announces the equivalency of moral opposites as a major theme of the epic; toward the end of book 1, the astrologer Figulus reads the same message in the stars: *scelerique nefando / nomen erit virtus* [unspeakable crime will be termed virtue] (1.668–69).³ Few things more vividly exemplify Lucan’s jumbled cosmos than the semantic misadventures that befall *virtus* during the course of his epic. For him, *virtus* is a paradigm of disorder; I intend here to search for the order in its presentation.

As a governing term of my inquiry, *nihilism* must not be allowed to fall victim to itself. In the spirit of Lucan’s own paradox, therefore, I begin by defending it against the very semantic indeterminacy to which it gives rise. The use of the term *nihilism* by recent interpreters of Lucan has, unfortunately, been as casual⁴ as it has been enthusiastic,

2. This is pace in particular Henderson (1988). It will, moreover, be seen immediately that I disagree with Bartsch (1997) on the issue of the *Bellum Civile*’s central paradox: she locates it in the conflict between partisanship and nihilism; I maintain that the nihilistic cosmology does indeed vitiate the partisanship: one can recover from Lucan no reason to side with Pompey, only a pitiless demonstration of the absence of any reason.

3. The echo is noted by Bartsch (1997, 51).

4. Bartsch (1997) uses nihilism more or less interchangeably with “cynicism” and “deconstruction”; the term also appears in Masters 1994 (168–69) and Rudich 1997 (133). The clearest exposition of the “nihilistic” Lucan (though it shuns the term) is Johnson 1987, on which I initially based my own formulation (see Sklenář 1996, vii, x, n. 5).

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as if consensus and repetition sufficed to validate it; the term still needs to be defined and its applicability to Lucan justified, especially since it goes back no farther than the nineteenth century,⁵ thus inviting a charge of anachronism as well as incoherence. To the first charge, one can readily respond that the mere absence of an ancient counterpart for a modern term does not mean that the concepts covered by that term are not operative in an ancient text, provided, of course, that a close reading can show them to be operative. As for *nihilism*, the term has two possible denotations; it can refer either to the doctrine that “moral norms or standards cannot be justified by rational argument” or to a belief in “the emptiness and triviality of human existence.”⁶ It is in this second sense that I speak of Lucan’s nihilism, for ultimately, as my reading of him will show, he does believe that human existence is empty, that all striving—whether for glory, for excellence, for power, or for principle—comes to naught in the crushing randomness of the universe.

Lucan’s image of the cosmos as a malfunctioning machine has understandably captivated many of the scholars who adopt the nihilist approach. Johnson, for example, refers aptly enough to “the Stoic machine gone mad” (1987, 10). I offer a different mechanical metaphor: the machine stands not so much for the universe itself as for the conception of it that Lucan has rejected. The instrument with which he demolishes the Stoic machine is not the sledgehammer but the screwdriver: piece by piece, he dismantles the Stoic cosmological formulations in order to reveal the nullity behind them.

He begins the exposition of his antirational cosmology in a prominent section of the *Bellum Civile*’s long proem:

Fert animus causas tantarum expromere rerum,
immensumque aperitur opus, quid in arma furem
impulerit populum, quid pacem excusserit orbi.
invida fatorum series summisque negatum
stare diu nimioque graves sub pondere lapsus

5. See Olson 1972, 514.

6. Olson 1972, 515.

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nec se Roma ferens. sic, cum compage soluta
saecula tot mundi suprema coegerit hora
antiquum repetens iterum chaos, [omnia mixtis
sidera sideribus concurrent,]⁷ ignea pontum
astra petent, tellusque extendere litora nolet
excutietque fretum, fratri contraria Phoebe
ibit et obliquum bigas agitare per orbem
indignata diem poscet sibi, totaque discors
machina divulsi turbabit foedera mundi.

(1.67–80)

[My mind prompts me to expound the causes of such great events, and an immeasurable task opens up: to say what drove a mad populace to take up arms and what jolted peace out of the world. It was the jealous sequence of fate; the fact that the highest things are foreclosed from standing upright for long; overwhelming collapses under sheer excess of weight; and Rome unable to sustain herself. So too, when the structure of the universe has disintegrated and the final hour, reverting to primeval chaos, has brought to an end so many of the world's ages, will the fiery stars fall seaward; the earth, unwilling to spread out her shores, will shake the ocean off; the moon, scorning to drive her chariot along her slanting orbit, will travel athwart her brother and demand the day for herself; and the whole unmeshing gear-work of a universe blasted apart will confound its own laws.]

As many commentators have noted, the imagery in this passage is strongly reminiscent of the Stoic theory of *ekpyrōsis*,⁸ in which the celestial fire draws the other elements up toward itself and thereby consumes the entire universe. Hence Lucan imagines the stars falling into the sea (*ignea pontum astra petent*): in fact, the sea would be rising

7. Most editors follow Bentley in deleting *omnia . . . concurrent*.

8. For an excellent, richly detailed analysis of the Stoic themes in this passage, see Lapidge 1979, 360–63. Useful summaries of *ekpyrōsis* can be found in Pohlenz 1964 (1:78–79), Sandbach 1975 (78–79), Hahm 1977 (185–99), and Long and Sedley 1987 (1:279), on all of which I have leaned heavily. To my knowledge, the most elaborate ancient exposition of *ekpyrōsis*—elaborate despite (or perhaps because of) the extreme hostility of the source—is Philo's treatise Περὶ ἀφθαρσίας κόσμου, especially 8–9, 83–103, and 120–29.

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up toward the stars, but Lucan adopts the perspective of a terrestrial observer, from which the stars would appear to be falling. The world-conflagration, moreover, is a metaphor for the civil war and its causes.⁹ These causes, though multiple, are not discrete; instead, they comprise a chain of causation, as indicated by *series* in the reference to the first cause (*invida fatorum series*) and further suggested by the paratactic arrangement in which all four causes are listed. The semantic force of *series* does not confine itself to the first cause, but rather governs a sequence in which each cause results directly from its predecessor. *Summisque negatum / stare diu* and *nimioque graves sub pondere lapsus*, then, are both consequences of fate's jealousy, which imposes ruin as the penalty for excess, a penalty that Rome, grown too great to sustain itself (*nec se Roma ferens*), must inevitably pay. Yet beyond exploiting *ekpyrōsis* for its metaphorical value, Lucan depicts it as an eventual certainty, as the future verbs introduced by *sic* indicate. *Ekpyrōsis* is not merely a cosmological image that civil war resembles but a reality that must and will occur.¹⁰

Lucan formulates this reality in such a way as to contradict the Stoics' rationalistic concept of *fatum*. A cornerstone of Stoic doctrine is that nothing is arbitrary; thus, *fatum*, *casus*, *fortuna*, and *natura* in Stoic Latin signify the providential order and are regularly interchangeable with terms for divinity itself,¹¹ god being inseparable from nature and reason (*logos*). Lucan, by contrast, postulates a *fatum* whose destruction of Rome corresponds to the return of primeval

9. Its metaphorical function is well described by Lapidge (1979, 359): "Thus the dissolution of the cosmos is viewed as parallel to (and, in poetic terms the result of) the destruction of the state."

10. See Johnson 1987, 17–18.

11. Cf. Cato's letter to Cicero (*Cic. Fam.* 15.5.2):

supplicationem decretam, si tu, qua in re nihil fortuito sed summa tua ratione et continentia rei publicae provisum est, dis immortalibus gratulari nos quam tibi referre acceptum mavis, gaudeo. quod si triumphī praerogativam putas supplicationem et idcirco casu<m> potius quam te laudari mavis. . . .

Shackleton Bailey (1977, 1:450 [ad loc.]), adducing a useful parallel from Seneca (*sic nunc naturam voca, fatum, fortunam. omnia eiusdem dei nomina sunt variae utentis sua potestate*, *Ben.* 4.8.3), observes that Cato follows Stoic usage in applying the same significance to *di immortales* and *casus*.

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chaos, a concept that has no place in the Stoic scheme.¹² Like everything else in the Stoic scheme, *ekpyrôsis* is a rational process, part of a regular cycle of death and regeneration. The same fire that consumes the cosmos constitutes the seed of a new cosmos organized in exactly the same way as its predecessor. Thus, even as it destroys the cosmos, *ekpyrôsis* also inaugurates the cycle of renewal.¹³ At no point does it allow the cosmos to become disordered; it is not a disruption, but a rigorous working out, of the *foedera mundi*, hence “a phase in the life of god.”¹⁴ Lucan has reversed the significance of *ekpyrôsis*, transmuting it into a terrifying vision of the fire at the end of time (*suprema hora*). Nowhere does he suggest that this stage will be followed by a restoration of cosmic order: rather, he supplants the Stoic model of a rational cycle with images of an irreversible descent into cosmic anarchy, thereby pressing his Stoic imagery into the service of an explicitly anti-Stoic position: that the universe is governed not by *logos* but by *alogia*.

To be sure, in the lines immediately following 1.67–80, Lucan seems to suggest that something can still be recuperated from his cosmic wreckage:

in se magna ruunt: laetis hunc numina rebus
crescendi posuere modum.

(1.81–82)

Taken literally, these lines state a universal proposition that the collapse of great things is divinity’s way of limiting excessive growth. That

12. This is contra Lapidge (1979, 361–62), who attempts to accommodate *antiquum repetens iterum chaos* to traditional Stoic cosmology. Citing a line of Stoic doctrine that derives *chaos* from *cheesthai*, he argues that Lucan’s *antiquum chaos* alludes to the cosmic moisture whose quenching of the world conflagration allows the universe to be regenerated. It is nevertheless clear from the context that Lucan takes *antiquum repetens iterum chaos* to represent the universe’s reversion to an unorganized condition—a condition for which Stoic doctrine does not allow.

13. This is a vexed matter. As Philo (Ἀφθ 87–93) gleefully points out, there is a fatal gap in the Stoic cyclical theory: if fire requires the other elements for fuel, then by exhausting them, it destroys its own means of sustenance; when all the fuel is gone, the fire must necessarily be extinguished altogether and be left with no power to generate a new cycle.

14. Long 1985, 21.

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this law has resulted in Rome's destruction and will result in cosmic destruction is a pessimistic enough doctrine, but it leaves open the possibility not only that we may mercifully die before the final cataclysm but that the cataclysm itself represents the operation of some divine logic. No sooner has Lucan offered this consolation, however, than he begins to withdraw it and to accelerate his nihilistic view of the universe toward the present. Book 2 opens with the complaint that the dreadful events of the civil war were revealed by portents (with specific reference to the succession of bad omens at the end of book 1):

cur hanc tibi, rector Olympi,
sollicitis visum mortalibus addere curam,
noscant venturas ut dira per omina clades?
sive parens rerum, cum primum informia regna
materiamque rudem flamma cedente recepit,
fixit in aeternum causas, qua cuncta coerces
se quoque lege tenens, et saecula iussa ferentem
fatorum immoto divisit limite mundum,
sive nihil positum est, sed fors incerta vagatur
fertque refertque vices et habet mortalia casus,
sit subitum quodcumque paras; sit caeca futuri
mens hominum fati; liceat sperare timenti.

(2.4–15)

[Why, ruler of Olympus, did you resolve to inflict on tormented mortals the further distress of apprehending through frightful portents the disasters yet to come? Whether, when he first took in hand the shapeless realm of raw matter as the fire died down, the artificer of the universe fixed the causes into place for all eternity, regulating himself by the same law by which he governs all things, and with the immovable boundary of fate parceled out the universe, which accepts the ages prescribed for it; or whether nothing is ordained, but random chance strays hither and thither, bringing one change after another, and accident rules mankind—either way, let whatever you have in store be sudden; let humankind's intellect be blind to future calamity; let the fearful have license to hope.]

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Lucan's position here is agnostic, committing him to neither a regulated nor an unregulated universe, as the *sive . . . sive* correlative clearly indicates. But one of those two correlatives entertains a possibility not considered in the proem's cosmology, namely, that the lack of cosmic governance is a present fact, that the universe might be random even now, contrary both to Stoicism and to traditional theology.¹⁵ Lucan further crystallizes his anti-Stoic position by establishing an antithesis between *casus*, on the one hand, and *parens rerum*, on the other—between chance and governing divinity.¹⁶ For a Stoic, this would constitute a false antithesis, since both terms designate the divine *logos*. For Lucan, however, either chance rules, in which case the universe is random, or there is some sort of governing divinity, but the one leaves no room for the other. Lucan has, in other words, rejected the Stoic definition of *casus* just as surely as he rejected the Stoic conception of *fatum* in book 1, and he has redefined as their own opposites these Stoic synonyms of cosmic order.

The demolition of Stoicism's terminological certitudes enables Lucan's nihilism finally to appear without qualification:

sunt nobis nulla profecto
numina: cum caeco rapiantur saecula casu,
mentimur regnare Iovem.

(7.445–47)

mortalia nulli
sunt curata deo.

(7.454–55)

These lines, which Lucan utters just as the narrative of the battle of Pharsalia begins, have proved especially troubling to critics, even the

15. As Johnson (1987, 78) demonstrates, this possibility is incompatible also with the very existence of Lucan's addressee, *rector Olympi*.

16. The standard interpretation of this antithesis as a contrast between Stoicism and Epicureanism (see, e.g., Ahl 1976, 233) is surely justified by the immediate context. Within the larger fabric of the poem, however, it is evident that Lucan is not trying to mediate between two philosophical schools but, rather, developing his own cosmology based on a pessimistic—and therefore un-Epicurean—view of *fors incerta*.

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astutest of whom have hesitated to acknowledge the literal meaning of the text. D. C. Feeney (1991), for example, interprets the passage to mean that “the gods exist, but have no care for human affairs, and events in the world are therefore random chance” (282). Feeney ultimately concludes that “Lucan maintains Stoicism’s belief in providential government of the natural world; the absence of divine regulation of human affairs is an exposed exception to a comprehensive system” (284). Yet the plain sense of *sunt nobis nulla numina* is “we have no gods”;¹⁷ the following sentence flatly declares the doctrine of a supreme being to be a falsehood: “because the ages are swept along by blind chance, we lie in saying that Jupiter rules”;¹⁸ and there is nothing in the text to indicate that *nulli deo* differs in meaning from *nulla numina*.¹⁹ human affairs are of no concern to any god, *because there is no god*.²⁰ Nor is it possible to salvage Lucan’s faith by postulating a providence that regulates the natural world but ignores human events. As the dysfunctional *ekpyrōsis* of book 1 shows, Lucan accepts—for the purpose of destroying Stoicism—the Stoic position that human affairs and the natural world are inextricably linked. If *alogia* so governs human events as to allow for civil war, then it must govern the cosmos as well. In reality, Lucan’s outburst in book 7 fulfills his initial predic-

17. It would take me far from my topic to rehearse the debate concerning Lucan’s apostrophe to Nero at 1.33–66 (for a superb recent treatment of this issue, see Dewar 1994), but it seems to me that 7.445–47 contains the hermeneutic key to that passage, in which Nero ostensibly represents a restoration of cosmic order: in a universe without *numina*, to call Nero a *numen* (*sed mihi iam numen*, 1.63) is to transact in worthless currency. If I am right, moreover, in discerning a progressive and systematic exposition of nihilistic cosmology throughout the *Bellum Civile*, 7.445–47 cannot be ascribed to Lucan’s falling out with Nero between the publication of books 1–3 and the composition of the later books.

18. Against most interpreters, who take *cum* in 7.446 as concessive, I follow Braund (1992, 141: “since human life is swept along by blind chance, we lie that Jupiter is king”), who is surely right to take it as causal. Lucan is asserting that the rule of blind chance is a present fact and that it is therefore false to claim that Jupiter rules.

19. Thus, the language will not support Bartsch’s assimilation of this passage (1997, 113) to her view that “the narrator *enacts* belief even as he acknowledges the lack of any grounds on which to hold that belief.”

20. Due (1970, 214) admits the possibility of Lucan’s outright atheism: “ces dieux inexistantes ou indifférents.”

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tion of an aleatory universe;²¹ he has pursued his antilogical premise to its logical conclusion.

As was true of the Stoics, Lucan's theory of language is subordinated to and reflective of a larger worldview. For him, complete arbitrariness reigns in language as in the cosmos, and the nihilism of Lucan's linguistics is, like the nihilism of his cosmology, systematically anti-Stoic in character. The Stoics distinguished four elements of the sign: the *sêmainon*, or signifier; the *sêmainomenon*, or signified; the *tynkhanon*, or external object/referent; and the *lekton*, or "thing said," "statement."²² The Stoic theory of the sign thus anticipates that of Saussure in many respects,²³ with one crucial difference: for the Stoics, arbitrariness in signification manifests itself only so far as the connection between the first and third elements cannot be understood except by a speaker of the language to which the *sêmainon* (as spoken word) belongs, and, obviously, the *lekton* depends on this connection. What is important is that the connection is always there, even if unperceived.²⁴ Of course, Stoicism, in its extreme rationalism, cannot admit the doctrine of the floating signifier: in a rational universe, the various elements of the sign must add up;²⁵ if a sign is incomprehensible to me, it is because my understanding is inadequate, not because the sign's elements are out of joint. To this view Lucan opposes a complete arbitrariness of the signifier, a linguistics in which the same chaos that governs the universe also governs the relations between *sêmainon* and *sêmainomenon*. By this process, the traditional moral terms gain the

21. This is contra Le Bonniec (1970, 180), who takes 7.445–57 to be purely rhetorical and thus argues that the passage does not detract from Lucan's Stoic convictions; more useful is Due's characterization (1970, 213–14) of Lucan's authorial stance as that of a lapsed Stoic.

22. Sext. Emp. *Math.* 8.11–12 (*SVF* 2.166; Long and Sedley 1987, no. 33B). An alternate and probably preferable interpretation of *lekton* is "sayable": see Long and Sedley 1987, 1:199; Atherton 1993, 44; Schubert 1994, 25.

23. For a superb elucidation of the correspondences between Stoic and Saussurean theory, see Manetti 1993, 92–94.

24. See Manetti 1993, 94–95.

25. See Atherton 1993, 92–93.

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ability to mean their own opposites and hence lose the ability to mean anything.

It might conceivably be objected that Lucan's linguistics has other precedents, notably Thucydides' famous account of the breakdown of language in the wake of the Corcyrean *stasis* (3.82),²⁶ along with Sallust's sustained reworking of that theme in the *Bellum Catilinae*.²⁷ The historiographical tradition no doubt furnished Lucan with an association between civic and semantic decomposition. But whereas the historians look to political, for the source of linguistic, chaos Lucan regards both types as expressions of an anarchic cosmos. Lucan's linguistics are also rooted in the Latin poetic tradition. The reversal of *fas* and *nefas* occurs already at Catullus 64.405 (*omnia fanda nefanda malo permixta furore*), and Lucan's Figulus quotes *sceleri nefando* from Catullus 64.397 (*sed postquam tellus scelere est imbuta nefando*). Vergil explicitly connects the reversal of *fas* and *nefas* with the Roman civil war at *Georgics* 1.505 (*quippe ubi fas versum atque nefas*), and by the time it reached Lucan, Ovid had guided this trope through its comic phase:²⁸ indeed, part of its appeal for Lucan may well have been that it had taken on the savor of a stale joke. Lucan's innovation was to incorporate this traditional pattern of reversals into an absurdist cosmology, for which he found an ideal conceptual structure in the intellectually fashionable Stoicism of his day—ideal precisely because it had been erected in support of a thesis diametrically opposite to his own.²⁹

Lucan, then, has a coherent theory of incoherence, evident in the

26. For the definitive study, see Loraux 1986.

27. See Sklenář 1998, 215–16.

28. Cf. Ov. *Ars Am.* 1.739–40:

Conquerar an moneam mixtum fas omne nefasque?
Nomen amicitia est, nomen inane fides.

29. An exhaustive introduction to the Stoic background to Lucan would be quite out of place here, especially since the scholarship is amply supplied with such material; I recommend Fantham 1992a, 11–14. I have therefore deemed it appropriate to lay the Stoic material under contribution only where it is directly relevant to my analysis—which remains, in the end, a literary study and already treats Lucan's Stoicism in greater detail than most scholarship of its type.

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poetic and narrative tools with which he examines the chaos of moral terminology, especially of *virtus*. As the courage of the traditional epic hero, *virtus* becomes a positive vice;³⁰ as the Stoic virtue of Cato, it becomes an empty gesture; and the conflict between Pompey and Caesar represents, from the outset, a contest of *virtus* against itself, in which the language of morality is ultimately crushed under the burden of contradiction and, along with all other values and meanings, swept away by the cosmic avalanche.

30. Henderson (1988, 143) writes: “The poem is set against its own form. It will tarnish that commemoration of ‘manliness’—*andreia* or *virtus*—which it must enact.”