

# Materiali e discussioni per l'analisi dei testi classici

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ESTRATTO



1999  
Istituti Editoriali  
e Poligrafici Internazionali®

Pisa · Roma

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DIRETTORE RESPONSABILE: Gian Biagio Conte (*Università di Pisa*)

Abbonamento annuo (1999): Italia L. 60.000 (privati); Italia L. 80.000 (enti). Estero U.S.\$ 60 (individual subscribers); estero U.S.\$ 80 (academic institutions) (supplemento spedizione per posta aerea: U.S.\$ 10). Un fascicolo: Italia L. 40.000; estero L. 80.000.

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Vincent Hunink

*Sleep and death (Lucan 9, 818)*

In Lucan's brilliant catalogue of Roman soldiers that are attacked by poisonous African snakes (*Bellum Civile*, 9, 734-838)<sup>1</sup>, the fifth one to fall victim is a certain Laevus. The poor soldier is personally addressed by the poet, in a case of *apostrophe*, one of Lucan's favourite devices<sup>2</sup>.

At tibi, Laeue miser, fixus praecordia pressit  
Niliaca serpente cruor, nulloque dolore  
testatus morsus subita caligine mortem  
accipis et socias somno descendis ad umbras.

(9, 815-818)

Unlike the preceding four cases, this Egyptian snake does not cause spectacular changes in the human body (rapid consumption or suppuration, excessive bleeding, or swelling) but strikes its victim with sudden death. Caught in an unexpected *subita caligo*, the man dies on the spot. The thought is rounded off in line 818, which is commonly explained as follows: «in this sleep you go down to the shades of your fallen comrades».

This line of interpretation, with *somno*<sup>3</sup> describing the state or process which Laevus enters into and *socias umbras* referring to his former comrades who are already in the underworld, is followed by all modern translators whom I have consulted (Bourgerly, Duff, Braund, Widdows, Little, Ehlers, Luck, Pontiggia, Canali, Holgado Redondo, and Viansino). But the sense is not quite satisfactory: Laevus would first receive death (*mortem accipis*) and only then descend into sleep (*somno*).

1. For secondary literature on this scene, see Elaine Fantham, *Lucan's Medusa-Excursus: its design and purpose*, in: «MD» 29, 1992, pp. 95-119, note 1. Recently, the same scholar wrote at some length on Lucan's third book: *Religio... dira loci: two passages in Lucan de Bello Civili 3 and their relation to Virgil's Rome and Latium*, in: «MD» 37, 1996, pp. 137-153.

2. Further bibliographical references to this poetical element may be found in: Vincent Hunink, *Lucan, Bellum Civile Book III, a commentary*, Amsterdam 1992, on 3, 159.

3. The variant reading *tygias* of the MSS MS is no longer defended by editors.

There is, however, a different interpretation that seems to have been generally overlooked by translators. Lucan is probably alluding to the old poetic topos of 'Sleep brother of Death'.

This epic topos is as old as Homer, where Hypnos and Thanatos are called brothers (*Il.* 14, 231) and even twins (16, 672). It is also present in the work of Hesiodus (*Th.* 756; cf. also 212). In Latin literature, the most famous place is in Vergil's *Aeneid*, where Sleep is called *consanguineus Leti Sopor* (6,278). The reference to Vergil's line was made already in the Medieval *Adnotationes super Lucanum*, where for 9, 818 there is the following entry: «et socias somno descendis and undas», ut Vergilius 'et consanguineus Leti Sopor'. Although editors have not missed this entry or the parallel as such, they have until now failed to take it into account<sup>4</sup>.

Lucan's uncle Seneca alludes to the topos as well: *frater durae languide mortis* (Sen. *Herc. fur.* 1069). In Silver Latin epic, it is further represented in Valerius Flaccus (*fratrique simillime Leto* 8, 74) and Silius Italicus (*nox similes morti dederat placidissima somnos* 15, 180). Apart from this close mythological family tie, sleep and death are frequently associated in a more general way; cf. e.g. Verg. *Aen.* 6, 522 *alta quies placidaeque simillima morti*, a line that echoes Hom. *Od.* 13, 79-80.

Lucan, who does not explicitly refer to the topos of sleep and death elsewhere in his epic, seems to have devised an ingenious variant to it. We should render 9, 818 as follows: «you go down to the shades that are related to sleep». *Somno*, then, is a dative dependent on *socias*<sup>5</sup>, and *umbras* does not denote specific shades of fallen comrades, but the dead in general. Not only would the close relationship of sleep and death be reduced to a more general connection, but the poet's focus would also be on death as a relative of sleep rather than the other way around. Lucan would thus distinguish himself from other poets, particularly Vergil, and make a change that is quite relevant in the text. For, in this context of horrible casualties, the focus on death cannot be called inappropriate<sup>6</sup>.

4. See for example: Giovanni Viansino, *Marco Anneo Lucano: La Guerra Civile (Farsaglia)* (2 vols.) Milano 1995, pp. 897 and 863. In a note Viansino refers to «sonno 'consanguineo della Morte' (= Virgilio, E. 6, 278)» but nonetheless renders «e dormendo te ne scendi alle ombre dei tuoi compagni [già] morti».

5. The dative with *socius* is unusual, but Latin words expressing close relationships naturally take a dative (e.g. *sociare*). On a formal note, the juxtaposition of *socias* and *somno*, reinforced by alliteration of s-, suggests a close connection between these words.

6. Similarly, in Cic. *Tusc.* 1, 38, 92: [*mortem*] *somni simillimam uolunt esse*, the focus is also on death rather than sleep.

One could object that this interpretation reduces to some extent the pathos of the apostrophe. It should, however, be noted that taken as a whole, the section on Laevus measures no more than seven lines. This is notably shorter than most of the other tableaux of dying soldiers in the passage 734-838. Accordingly, the poet appears less interested in displaying pathos. The next few lines (9, 819-821) are learned rather than pathetic: they contain a complex allusion to Arabic poison. So, learning rather than pathos seems the immediate aim here. Similarly, the next victim, an anonymous soldier, gets only 6 lines (822-827) which are largely made up by learned allusions to traditional examples of 'swiftness'. At this stage of the passage 734-838 lengthy development of pathos is not what Lucan is primarily looking for. By contrast, he inserts some brief, clever allusions to the epic tradition.

Laevus is not 'asleep' but utterly dead, and so he goes down to join the shades that are related to sleep. In less than a full line Lucan manages to imitate and emulate both Homer and Vergil. For poor Laevus, the poet offers no consolation whatsoever, not even that he will join his comrades; the man merely serves to trigger the poet's intertextual play.

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