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Review

Reviewed Work(s):

Rhétorique et poétique dans la Pharsale de Lucain. La crise de la représentation dans la poésie antique

by

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To say that studies on Lucan are flourishing has become something of an understatement. Recent decades have produced an incredible amount of studies, translations, commentaries on individual books, and countless articles and notices. Lucanean studies have now even led to a scholarly debate between followers of the radical (mostly English) and more conservative (continental) approaches; see the polemical survey by E. Narducci, in: P. Esposito and L. Nicastrì (edd.), *Interpretare Lucano*. *Miscellanea di Studi* (Naples 1999).

Recent French Lucan studies, meanwhile, seem to belong to a different, peaceful world, one might almost say 'a world of their own', in which current international scholarly trends and issues are hardly even reflected. A recent example is a study by Jean-Christophe de Nadaï (N.), most likely a revised version of a dissertation (although this is not stated explicitly in the volume). The title *Rhétorique et poétique* (...) does not betray very much about the content, 'rhetoric' and 'poetry' both being important but vague words for anyone speaking about Lucan. The subtitle refers to a 'crisis' in representation in ancient poetry, which makes one suspect that postmodern issues will be dealt with. This, however, is not the case.

Instead, N. proceeds to a long analysis of the Lucanean poem in terms of Aristotle's *Poetics*, a classical text, which, nonetheless, does not to have been a starting-point for Lucan himself. Although N.'s rather literary French does not always present matters in a transparent way, it seems clear that he considers Lucan's poetry as a problem, because of the dominant impact of rhetoric on the poet's style, and because of his often prosaic representation of scenes, which conflicts with some of Aristotle's rules.

The basic problem thus seems to be: is Lucan's work really 'poetry' at all, apart from its metrical form? N.'s analyses result in a clearly negative answer: in aristotelian terms, Lucan's approach no longer qualifies as a fitting *mimesis*, but at best as an *anti-mimesis*. The poet himself is argued to have been aware of this. There is no 'poésie véritable' in his work, only the emotion of regret for its absence.

It does not come as a surprise that N. has little good to say about Lucan's predilection for lurid scenes. These are invariably considered a matter of bad taste, with the tacit assumption that all modern readers would agree and with the suggestion that ancient readers must have felt equally repulsed, although neither claim is necessarily true. Why

could scenes of horror and war not be a source of pleasure to the poet and his audience(s)? One only needs to think of modern film to realize that this is perfectly possible.

The very nature of this discussion brings readers back to the period before, say, 1970. The question whether the *Bellum Civile* is 'genuine poetry' or not, assumes a general agreement on this term that is simply no longer existent. Many classicists nowadays venture to depart from the classical canon, as it is represented by a.o. Aristotle's *Poetics*. The sheer popularity of Lucan, both in past periods and in modern scholarship, would indicate that its contents are appreciated as a new, exciting form of poetry rather than that they must be considered a literary failure. Accordingly, studies may be expected to shed further light on these special, innovative aspects of the poem, instead of depreciating it.

I do not argue, of course, that every reader must love and praise Lucan's poem, but I suggest that it is of little use to analyse it in terms of a classical ideal that is no longer shared by all, and of which, moreover, it may be questioned whether it was ever shared by post-classical Latin poets.

If my criticism amounted to these remarks, I would conclude that N. has written a somewhat 'timeless', classical book, restating the old case that Lucan stands way behind Vergil and Horace. But regrettably, there is more to complain. The book leaves serious students of Lucan nearly completely in the dark for lack of any useful research tools. There is no index locorum, which would have been a great help, given the fact that N. discusses numerous fragments in a rather scattered order. N. provides just a table of contents, a small list of literary terms and a short bibliography.

This bibliography is a disgrace. Of its meagre eight pages, five and a half are devoted to general works of reference, including embarrassingly misspelled names like 'Franken' and 'Shackelton Bailey'. It is remarkable for the total absence of any commentary or translation after 1962 (the ultimate low being a reference to a single translation in German from 1843). Only two and a half pages of articles and books on Lucan are listed. Here two collections of essays (*Entretiens Fondation Hardt*, 1968; and Lucan, *Wege der Forschung*, 1970) are dominant: all essays contained in these two volumes have been specified as separate items in the bibliography. No more than 30 other items have been included, most of these in French and a few older ones in German. The rare footnotes mostly contain short references to ancient texts or French classics (Boileau, Voltaire, Bossuet), without adding more literature or raising other issues.

A scholar that produces a voluminous study with such a defective apparatus may hardly expect to be taken seriously at all: he is either blatantly arrogant or terribly uninformed. How can one possibly write

a chapter on 'poésie et spectacle' in Lucan and not even mention Leigh's acclaimed study *Lucan: Spectacle and Engagement*, 1997?

To sum up, the study deals with Lucan in a truly outdated manner, on the basis of norms and ideals that are no longer shared by all classicists and that fail to do justice to post-classical Latin poetry. It does so partly by leaving out of account all that dates from after 1962, and by largely ignoring anything written in other languages than French. The book should never have been published in this form.

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