WHY LUCAN’S POMPEY IS BETTER OFF DEAD*

Abstract: The unexpected return of Lucan’s Pompey to civil war as a ghost (9.1–18) leads to newfound success vis-à-vis enemies and allies alike. The language and imagery of this postmortem narrative revisits the portrait of Pompey’s decline in Books 1–2, where it activates a latent theme of victorious return in spite of death. Pompey’s acts of possession as a ghost further intensify the impact of his return, insinuating his presence into the subsequent history of Roman resistance to Caesarism.

Book 9 of Lucan’s De Bello Civili opens with the ghost of the recently assassinated Pompey rising from the ashes, soaring to the heavens, and then strikingly returning to the world of civil war. The ghost next enters the bodies of both Brutus and Cato (9.17–18): et secerum vindex in sancto pectore Bruti / sedit et invicti posuit se mente Catonis (“And, an avenger of crime, he settled in the holy breast of Brutus and placed himself in the mind of unconquerable Cato”).1 In this text, death is not the end for Pompey after all. Yet Lucan has left his reader to labor for eight books under the misapprehension that Pompey’s part in the civil war will indeed conclude with his murder on the Egyptian shore. Such a deviation from audience expectations provokes the reader both to wonder at the poet’s purpose and to review the poem for indications of how to interpret this unanticipated development.

Pompey’s strange trip through the heavens and stranger return to earth have received much scholarly attention, especially with regard to one or more of three questions: how to define the passage of Pompey’s soul into Brutus and Cato in

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1 All translations are my own. The text of Lucan is from Shackleton Bailey (1997) and the text of Vergil from Mynors (1969).
cultural and philosophical terms; how this event reflects on Pompey’s status; and how it relates to the later appearances and embodiments of Pompey’s umbra in the poem. I focus here on the less explored issue of the relationship between Pompey’s appearances as a ghost in Books 9 and 10 and his early portrait prior to departure from Italy (1.129–43; 2.531–736). I find that Pompey’s postmortem narrative activates an unanticipated theme of victorious return latent in those earlier passages.

2 Pichon (1912) 208–9 argues that Pompey’s entry into the persons of Cato and Brutus is made possible by the cosmic sympathy of Lucan’s eclectic Stoicism. Having partaken of the divine through his celestial ascent, Pompey returns a portion of it to his earthbound hosts. Marti (1945) 373 reads DBC 9.17–18 in connection with her larger thesis that Pompey is a Stoic profanes. Thus, Pompey gains habitation in the perfectly wise Brutus and Cato, which in turn elevates him. Brisset (1964) 124–6 reads the moment as the culmination in Pompey’s pattern of improvement throughout the poem. Le Bonniec (1970) 163, 193–4 suggests that Lucan depicts Pompey as a divine hero of the city, after the model of Greek hero cult. Stok (1996) 73 reads 9.17–18 as a passing of the torch to Cato and Brutus. Esposito (1996) 116–17 argues that Pompey’s ascent ennobles him and his passage into Brutus and Cato transmits this celestially ennobled self into champions better suited to represent the Republic. Rudich (1997) 165–7 dismisses 9.1–18 as an embarrassingly weak flight of rhetorical fancy and confused philosophy. Narducci (2002) 335–49 argues, however, that it is a polemical response to the tradition of Caesar’s catas terism in which Pompey gains inspiration to continue civil war from his ascent to the heavens. He then transmits this inspiration to Cato and Brutus. Sklenár (2003) 127 notes contra Marti that the Stoic sources she cites as evidence (Sen. Dial. 625 and 11.9.8–9) make no mention of the soul entering into others as an avenue toward perfection. On the contrary, Pompey’s return to the realm of civil war serves to retract the Stoic spiritual status that the ascent of his spirit at BC 9.1–16 suggests. As such, he finds it part of the poem’s nihilistic subversion of Stoicism in general. Santini (2009) 387–9 is struck by the contrast between the philosophically textured celestial journey of 9.1–14 and the abrupt turn toward the vengeful death-spirit of popular belief in 9.15–18. The sections, observes Santini (391–2), juxtapose ideologically contradictory positions—the sage’s distance from the world versus the partisan’s vengeance—for which the poet offers no resolution in the poem as we have it. Gowing (2005) 88 and Bernstein (2011) 267–69 stress the passage of Pompey’s soul into Cato and Brutus as an act of memory. Bernstein further addresses the aspect of inspirational transmigration in the tradition of Ennius’ dream of Homer. Its function, he argues, is to transmit a historical legacy, which the poem implies is ultimately frustrated by hostile fate and the character flaws of Pompey’s survivors and contemporaries.

3 Ahl (1976) 188-9 views the release of Pompey’s ghost from the ashes as a potent symbol for the liberation of the cause of libertas from the corrupt body of the Republic, while simultaneously raising the question of whether that newly purified ideal can ever become reality. Johnson (1987) 71–3 argues that the whole passage is a purposefully absurd caricature of the titular champion of Republican libertas, a position Narducci (2002) 335–7 vigorously attacks.

To flesh out the later portrait of Pompey, let us consider his rise from his own ashes in the context of his later ghostly interventions. Hardie in particular has drawn attention to the dead Pompey’s active agenda, describing his ghostly activities as “possession,” a term he defines as one entity invading the person of another. After settling in Brutus and Cato in Book 9, Pompey’s ghost in Book 10 overwhelms Pothenus, the architect of his assassination (10.333–7), causing him to mount a self-annihilating assault against Caesar. In a more passive gesture (10.524), near to the end of the poem as we have it, the shade of Pompey is said to receive Achilles, another conspirator in his assassination, as a sacrificial victim. Most remarkably, perhaps, the ghost is described as preventing Caesar’s death from occurring prematurely in the inappropriate setting of Egypt (10.6–8).

These actions indicate that Pompey’s ghost is quite capable of causing a derangement of the will in those it possesses, as well as of manipulating events generally, yet Brutus and Cato are not shown to experience any influence at all. How Pompey’s ghost operates on mortals differs from one case to another. In some situations it aggressively seeks to dominate the will of others in a fashion consistent with the sense of the English “possession,” but only in some.

A number of scholars have found the epithet scelerum vindex in 9.17–18 Fury-like in implication, but here we come to an impasse. Because we know from its other activities that Pompey’s ghost is capable of directing the will of the living to suit its own ends, the aggressive and purposeful force of the epithet scelerum vindex appears at odds with the passive nature of Pompey’s possession of Brutus and Cato. Schotes offers a solution to this apparent contradiction by suggesting that the ghost’s actions toward Brutus and Cato represent Lucan’s combination of the popular belief that the ‘death spirits’ (manes) of a murder victim seek vengeance and the traditional epic device of double-determination.

5 Hardie (1993) 35. See also Santini (2009) for a close and comprehensive examination of the traditions of postmortem revenge clustering around the figures of Pompey and Caesar.
whereby a divine entity—in this case Pompey’s ghost—adds its own will to that of a mortal already determined upon the same course.⁸

Yet the epithet scelerum vindex performs another duty as well. It serves as a reformulation of the first words that Pompey speaks in the poem. At Capua, Pompey addresses his troops as a scelerum ultores (‘O avengers of crime,’ 2.531).⁹

In the Capua speech, Pompey tries and fails to rouse his army to make a stand against Caesar in Italy. These symmetrical moments—when Pompey addresses his troops as scelerum ultores and when the narrator calls Pompey scelerum vindex both mark beginnings; the first, of Pompey as an active, if mostly ineffective, agent in the poem; the second, of the dead Pompey’s interventions among the living. The first marks an occasion when Pompey fails to bind others to his purpose, the second when he serves his own purpose by binding himself to others in the pursuit of their agendas.

Immediately following Pompey’s failed speech to his troops is his retreat from Capua to Brundisium, a maneuver Lucan characterizes through a bull simile that draws on Vergil’s Georgics and Aeneid (2.601–9).¹⁰

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pulsus ut armentis primo certamine taurus
silvarum secreta petit vacuosque per agros
exul in adversis explorat cornua truncis
nec redit in pastus nisi cum cervice recepta
excussi palcuere tori, mox reddita victor
quoslibet in saltus comitantibus agmina tauris
invito pastor trahit, sic viribus impar
tradidit Hesperiam profugusque per Apula rura
Brundisii tutas concessit Magnus in arces.
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When a bull, driven from the herd in its first contest, seeks out the hidden places of the wood and through empty fields, an exile, he tests his horns against opposing tree-trunks; nor does he return to the pastures until his neck is recovered and his flexed muscles have proven satisfactory; soon, a conqueror, he leads his restored columns, while his bulls follow, to whatever forest pastures he wishes, though the herdsman be unwilling. So Magnus, unequal in strength, handed over Hesperia and fleeing through Apulian meadows retired to Brundisium’s secure citadel.

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¹⁰Fantham (1992) 130.
Fantham summarizes the difficulties of this passage. First, there is the glaring disparity between the suggestion of Pompey’s triumphant return as victor (2.605) and the historical facts of his defeat and ignominious death; second, Pompey has not, at this point, lost his agmina that they may be restored to him as suggested at 2.605–6; third, there is the question of the invito pastori’s identity at 2.607.

If the reader puts these lines in the context of Pompey’s postmortem career, however, the force of the simile changes. Pompey does regain freedom of movement—quite dramatically so—after his death. Pompey’s battle lines are lost at Pharsalus, but restored to him after his death through Cato’s command in Libya, Brutus’s participation in the conspiracy against Caesar, and Brutus’ own command in the civil war of 42 BCE.

The disparity between what the reader knows is the fate of the historical Pompey and the simile’s intimation of a victorious return has been explained as an example of deviant focalization; i.e. the narrator has without announcement shifted the perspective informing the simile to that of the retreating Pompey. His vain expectations of victory have slipped into the narrator’s characterization of the retreat. I very much agree with this explanation—at this point in the text. In Book 9, however, Pompey’s possession of Brutus alters the historical narrative that Book 2’s bull simile describes. Through his possession of the host-body of Brutus, Pompey does experience vengeance over Julius Caesar and in this sense does achieve victory over his opponent, even though this triumph comes under conditions that the Pompey of Book 2 would surely neither anticipate nor desire.

Allusions to Pompey’s death in 2.603–5 underscore the complex relationship of Pompey’s death to the simile. Mention at 2.604 of the bull’s recovered strength, cervix recepta (“with his neck restored”), is especially striking.

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11 Fantham (1992) 197.
12 For a study of this question, which is not within the scope of this article, see George (1992) and Thomas (2009/10), both of whom argue that the pastor is Cato. George examines the question from the standpoint of Stoic philosophy, interpreting it in light of Book 9’s bee simile (9.285–92) in which Cato is referred to as pastor (9.291), while Thomas focuses on those clues that the simile provides to the reader in Book 2.
13 Fantham (1992) 197 cites George for this interpretation per itinera in which he also notes that the usage recalls Vergil’s bull simile (A 12.263–6, which discloses Turnus’ delusional mindset as he prepares for the final encounter). See Thomas (2009/10) for discussion of Lucan’s use in the context of the bull simile in Homer, Apollonius, and Vergil as well as its symbolic and historical associations. See Ormand (1994) 46 for its classification as deviant focalization.
in light of Pompey’s death and return.  

Furthermore, the bull prepares for his next contest by sharpening his horns in adversis trunci (2.603). In context, trunci means “tree-trunks,” but in combination with cervice recepta it forcefully evokes the headless, discarded corpse of Book 8. After Book 9’s revelation, however, cervice recepta suggests the rejuvenation of Pompey via the paradoxical image of a healed decapitation. Similarly, the phrase in adversis trunci attaches to trunci, as signifier of Pompey’s ignominious death, the simile’s image of a period of training gathering of strength, and preparations for return.

Without knowledge of Book 9, references to head and trunk can only call to mind Pompey’s death, intensifying the simile’s irony. Yet, a warning that all is not as it appears may be found immediately following the bull simile in the narrator’s description of the foundation of Brundisium, the city to which Pompey retreats. These lines, following closely upon the bull simile’s prediction of victory, further signal to the reader how to interpret the poem’s many anticipations of Pompey’s doom (2.610–12): urbs est Dictaeis olim possessa colonis, / quasi Creta profugos vexere per aequora puppes / Cecropiae victum mentitis Thesea velis (“The city was once settled by Dictaean colonists, whom Cecrobian ships carried fleeing from Crete over the seas with sails that lyingly told of Theseus’ defeat”). The mythic tradition about Theseus has it that on his return to Athens the hero forgot to change his sails from black to white, the agreed upon signal of his success. Seeing the black sails and despairing, his father threw himself into the sea.

Lucan here refers not to a misperception of Theseus’ death, which he might have done, but to Thesea victum (“Theseus defeated”). While Pompey does die, through his continuation in civil war as a ghost, he escapes final defeat. As written, the Theseus exemplum is especially suited to Pompey’s situation. It cites an instance in which a text, i.e. the sails, “lies,” because its would-be message of victorious return fails to conform to the code by which its reader is to arrive at that interpretation. The first-time reader of Books 1–8 operates on the assumption that Pompey’s death signifies his final defeat. This equation of death with defeat constitutes an interpretive code in light of which the bull simile’s reference to victory must appear deceitful. Theseus’ father and Lucan’s reader are similarly ill-equipped to read the signs with which they are confronted, and so

14 Tobias Torgerson pointed out to me in conversation the significance of cervice recepta in view of Pompey’s decapitation.

15 I thank the anonymous reviewer of this article for alerting me to the interpretive potential of trunci here.
must misunderstand the positive message that each sign in fact conveys: Theseus is returning victorious, and so will Pompey.

I turn now to the imagery with which Pompey is first introduced in the poem and its connections to 9.1–18, beginning with Pompey’s programmatic metaphor (1.135): stat magni nominis umbra (“he stands, the shadow of a great name ...”). Here the word umbra signifies the disparity between the reality of Pompey’s inadequacy and the lofty reputation that his cognomen Magnus signifies. Yet, when Pompey takes leave of his ash pile at 9.1–3, he is a literal shade: at non in Pharia manes iacuere favilla / nec cinis exigus tantam conspectum umbram; prosiluit busto semistaque membra relinquens (“But his death spirits did not lie in Pharian embers, nor did a dusting of ash hold a shade so great; he leapt from his tomb and leaving behind his half-burned limbs ...”). Book 1’s metaphor has become Book 9’s reality. Death has turned Pompey’s character into his essence.

The broader context of Book 1’s umbra metaphor is also important to appreciating the scope of Pompey’s transformation in death (1.134–40):

...nec reparare novas vires, multumque priori
credere fortunae, stat magni nominis umbra,
qualis frugiiero quercus sublimis in agro
exuvias veteris populi sacra tataque gestans
dona ducem nec iam validis radicibus haerens
pandere fixa suo est, nudosque per aera ramos
effundens trunco, non frondibus, efficit umbram...

... nor did he acquire new strength, but trusted much to prior fortune. He stands the shadow of a great name, as a tall oak in a fruit-bearing field, which holds the spoils of an ancient people and the sacred gifts of generals, clinging with weakened roots, it is secured by its own weight, and pouring its bare branches outward through the air, it makes shade by its trunk, not its leaves...

Ahl and Rosner-Siegel have drawn attention to the parallel between references to Pompey’s headless body as a truncus and the oak of Book 1’s simile. I would like to draw one further parallel in this connection.

The oak produces *umbra* only from its trunk (1.140): *truncus, non frondibus, efficit umbram* (“... it makes shade by its trunk, not its leaves”). Pompey’s *umbra* emerges in Book 9 from the cremated remains of his *truncus*, or decapitated corpse. Lucan literalizes not only the *truncus* and *umbra* of the simile, but also the generative relationship between them.

This in turn establishes a telling contrast in the energy implicit in the two scenes. The qualification *non frondibus* identifies the oak trunk of the simile as a witness to feebleness, while in Book 9 Pompey’s own shade vigorously “leapt” (*prosiluit*, 9.3) from the ashes of his bodily trunk.17 The dead Pompey is from the first more vital than was the living. In this respect, the ghost reverses the crucial weakness of the living Pompey identified in 1.134. Book 9’s concretization of Pompey’s programmatic imagery facilitates an additional dimension in Book 2’s simile of a bull rebuilding its strength by testing its horns in *adversis trunci*. This image may now be seen as iconic of the rejuvenating relationship between Pompey and his death. In life Pompey fails “to contribute fresh strength” (*reparare novas vires*) to his position, relying instead on past fortune; but death, it turns out, infuses him with new strength.

Pompey’s acquisition of strength in Book 9 proceeds still further. His passive possession of Cato and Brutus, the first salvo in his return to civil war, is in itself an addition of new strength—their strength—to his purpose. He does not dominate or drive them; rather, their goals become his.19 To illustrate the consequences of this, we may look to the poem’s portrait of the dead Pompey’s presence in the history of civil war that unfolds after his demise. Lucan offers this to the reader in the form of a prophetic vision, inspired by Apollo and delivered by a Roman matron. The god makes the matron see major historical events down to Philippi in 42 BCE, where the vision is cut off.

When read without knowledge of Book 9, Pompey’s role is confined to his appearance as a decapitated trunk on the seashore (1.685–6): *hunc ego, fluminae deformis truncus harena / qui iacet, agnosco* (“This man, who lies as a shapeless

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17 Pompey’s headless body is referred to as *truncus* 1.685, 8.674 (*truncus*), 8.698, 8.722, 8.774 (*truncus*), and 9.14 (*truncus*). On Lucan’s use of the word *truncus* to associate the oak simile with the image of Pompey’s decapitated corpse, see Ahl (1976) 185 and Rosner-Siegel (1983) passim.

18 See OLD 1. Narducci (2003) 342–3 draws attention to Seneca’s use of the word in the contexts of the soul’s departure from the body (*Ep.* 58.35, 92.34), thunder (2.18.1), and fiery meteorological phenomena (*Ep.* 94.56, Nat. 1.14.5, 1.15.2, 2.57). The latter category in particular underscores the energy implicit in the word. See Wick (2004) 9.10.

19 The independence of mind that Cato retains after possession is evident in the critical assessment with which he infuses his eulogy of Pompey (9.190–214).
trunk on a sandy bank, I recognize”). When read in light of Book 9, the map of Roman resistance to Caesar and his successors in the remainder of the vision becomes overwhelmingly Pompeian in character. Each stage in this mini-history of Roman civil conflict following Pompey’s death (1.685–6) is governed either by a host of Pompey’s umbra or Pompey’s biological descendant: Cato on the Libyan campaign (1.686–8): dubiam super aequora Syrtim / ardentemque feror Libyen, quo tristis Enyo transtulit / Emathias actis (“I am carried across the seas to the unstable Syrtes and and Libya, where grievous Enyo has transported the Emathian battle-lines.”); Pompey’s sons in Spain (1.688–90): nunc desuper Alpis / nubiferae colles atque aeriam Pyrenen / abripimur (“Now I am snatched away over the cloud-carrying heights of the Alps and the high Pyrenees”); Brutus and the assassination of Caesar (1.690–2): patriae sedes reumeamus in urbis, / impiaque in medio peraguntur bella senati (“I return to the seat of my ancestral city, and impious war is carried out in the midst of the Senate”); and Brutus at Philippi (1.692–4): consurgunt partes iterum, totumque per orbem / rursus ca. nova da mihicernere litora ponti / tellaremque novam: vidi iam, Phoebus, Philippos (“The factions rise once more, and again I move through the whole world. Permit me to look upon new seacoasts and a new land: O Phoebus, I have already seen Philippi”).

As Book 2’s portrait of the foundation of Brundisium addresses the interpretive challenges of the deceptive bull simile, so does the vision’s first scene—the view of an unidentified corpse, headless and otherwise deformed—model the reader’s experience of a prophecy which can only prove misleading upon a first reading, as to the true extent of Pompey’s civil war presence. Scholarly investigation has confirmed, first, that Lucan’s use of trancus at 1.685 alludes to a description of Priam’s headless corpse in the Aeneid and, second, that Vergil—as Servius notes—adapts this description from the historical death of Pompey (A. 2.557–8): iacet ingens litore trancus, / avulsamque umeris caput et sine nomine corpus (“a great trunk lies on the shore, head ripped from its shoulders, a corpse without a name”). Hinds, in this connection, has identified the matron’s cry of aguosco as a poetic footnote, coded as prophecy, that confirms Lucan’s allusion to the Aeneid, while simultaneously underscoring the Vergilian scene’s relationship to the very historical incident that the matron witnesses.20 Thus, in an act of model readership, the matron detects Pompey’s literal and intertextual presence in spite of the deceptive visual text that confronts her. Yet, this interpretive feat is facilitated through the intervention of the god Apollo—an

event thoroughly surprising in its own right. Pompey’s no less unexpected appearance at 9.1 and, in particular, his possession of Brutus and Cato at 9.17–18 likewise force upon the reader recognition of Pompey’s presence—this time a distinctively Lucanian strand of the tradition in which the general’s ghost appropriates Apollo’s prophecy, stamping each of its historical revelations with his own identity.

It might be asked whether anyone else in the poem on the side of the Republic is better off for all this being the case. Here we are given no clear answer. Pompey’s ghost could be said to help bring about what justice can be got in the face of an envious fate implacably set on the destruction of the Republic. Alternately, the dead Pompey may seem to have sought only the victory that mattered to him—Caesar’s death at Rome—having perhaps sloughed off the decayed body of the Republic as he has his own charred remains. It is clear, however, that Lucan’s Pompey is far more vigorous dead than alive. Through both his proactive manipulation of events and his passive possession of Brutus and Cato he shapes the future of Roman civil war and insinuates himself into its still unfolding history.

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21 The narrator appears to forswear consulting Apollo (and Dionysus) in the encomium of Nero: ... nec si te pectore vates / accipio, Cirrhaeae velum secreta moventem / solicite deum Bacchumque avertete Nysa... (“nor, if as hard I receive you in my breast, would I wish to trouble the god who governs Cirrhaean mysteries or turn Bacchus away from Nysa,” 1.63–6). Feeney (1991) 275 in light of the dismissal of the traditional gods of poetic inspiration in favor of Nero, describes Apollo’s unexpected appearance at the close of Book 1 as “... a counterpoint, to remind us of what the poet’s tradition dictated he should do.”


