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And Then It Rained Shields: Lucan's Digressions and the Roman Past

The histories of great empires tell of heroic warriors and the intervention of gods in human affairs. Epic poems praise these feats and point to these god-sent gifts: The victors are favored by the gods. The poet may interrupt the narrative only to provide essential information that furthers the plot. Asides that do not further the plot are dismissed as digressions, in need of no further investigation. Far from merely marring the progress of the narrative and thereby the value of the poem, Lucan's narrative delays reflect the poet's reluctance to narrate a story of Caesarian triumph (J. Henderson, "Lucan the Word at War" in *Fighting for Rome* [Cambridge, 1998]; J. Masters, *Poetry and Civil War in Lucan's Bellum Ciuile* [Cambridge, 1992]). In one of these asides in Book IX, Lucan debunks the long-held state cult of the sacred shields and inundates the reader with natural-scientific explanations for the supernatural. Lucan's detractors dismiss his asides as either digressive or merely secondary; this paper argues, instead, that the poet digresses in order to transgress. The Roman victors, according to these digressions, were not the elect of the gods, and the Roman past must be re-assessed.

To challenge the ancestral myth of the fall of the sacred shield is an act of transgression. According to the myth, while King Numa (714/13-671/0) was officiating sacrifice, a shield fell from the sky. To protect the god-sent shield from theft, King Numa had 11 identical shields made and instituted a priestly college to guard them. Twice a year the priests had the ritual duty to bear the sacred shields around the city. Dressed in the armor of the archaic foot soldier, they beat on their shields to mark their triple-rhythm dance while singing a ritual hymn whose meaning was already obscure to our ancient sources.

Disbelieving the story that the shield was a god-sent gift, Lucan produces the hypothesis that a stormy wind might have snatched the shield, the famous ancile, from some soldier's hands and caused it to fall from the sky. Lucan's explanation is brazen. This important Roman state cult supported the myth of the shield sent as a gift by the war god Mars; but Lucan undermines this deeply held belief.

Using bizarre language rich in scientific terminology, Lucan boasts his knowledge of such natural phenomena as the wind, the tides, and the geography of the continents. I argue that Lucan's digressions on natural history grant validity to his arguments. To insure credibility in his revolutionary attitude towards an ancient Roman state cult, Lucan resorts to scientific discourse. If someone can come up with such a lame explanation as to presume that a shield fallen from the sky has been sent down by the war god Mars, Lucan argues that he has just as much of a right to claim that the shield was actually not sent down by some god but was transported by the wind. So he does not deny the fact altogether. Lucan accepts the ancient tradition of the fallen shield but offers a rational alternative to the mythical explanation: it was the wind that snatched the weapon from some soldier's hands and made it fall before Numa. With his rationalizing hypothesis, Lucan unmask a widely held belief and casts doubt on the very validity of Roman religious ritual.

Neither ancient nor modern interpreters have realized that Lucan is here criticizing an age-old ritual. As social practices, such religious rituals enforced solidarity within the community and provided the ideological foundations for military action. In the sly, indirect, digressive mode of the aetiological excursus, Lucan deploys his rhetorical expertise in conveying the tension between the epic poem's function as a celebratory medium and the poet's intention to critique the nation's social values. In line with the poetic tradition within which he operates, Lucan claims for himself the prophetic authority of a Roman uates, that is, a bard, a poet, but also a prophet, a mouthpiece of the muses. Lucan describes himself as a uates in order to endorse the authority of his truth-claims. His poetic knowledge is what as a poet-uates he has apprehended from both his Muse and his literary predecessors. As a poet-uates, Lucan claims that his poetic knowledge embraces the divine and the human spheres, the theological as well as the historical. By criticizing an age-old tradition about an ancient cult, Lucan also undermines the traditional 'poetic knowledge' that he has derived from his predecessors. Perhaps the elect of the gods are not chosen at all. Accident is all.