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The Struggle Within: Focalization in Lucan and the Issue of Believability

Kirk Ormand's important narratological reading of Lucan's *Pharsalia* opens doors to new ways to approach Lucan ('Lucan's *Auctor Vix Fidelis*' CA 13 [1994]: 38-55). By analyzing the *Pharsalia* in terms of internal and external narratees, he concludes, 'Lucan is concerned specifically with what is not in the narrative, or what in the narrative cannot be believed(53). Ormand does not take his implications far enough. As there are multiple narratees in the *Pharsalia*, so there are multiple narrators. There is an external narrator, who advances the plot, and internal narrators, who are characters within the poem and who address either other characters (internal narratees) or the reader (external narratee). This internal narrator can be a proper character, such as Pompey when he gives speeches to his men. The poet, however, also makes himself a character in the poem. He manifests himself in this capacity whenever he directly addresses someone. As the internal narrator persuades the internal narratee, the external narrator tells a different story to a different narratee.

I will isolate two instances in which the internal narrator tells a different version of events than the external narrator: Pompey's flight from Italy (2.607-736) and his flight from Pharsalus (7.647-727). In both cases, internal narrators make excuses to exonerate Pompey's actions. In both cases, internal narratees believe these excuses while we, the external narratees, may well not. And in both cases it is the internal narrator, at odds with the external narrator, who promotes these disturbingly variant perceptions.

This disagreement between the narrators requires us to decide which we should believe, whether the internal narrator or the external narrator. It is important to notice that there is a systematic distinction between the poet-character and poet. The internal narrator is a Pompeian whereas the external one is not. By recognizing that the narrators are split in their political allegiance, just as the rest of the characters are, we can see a function of Lucan's disturbing portrayal of Pompey. The poet, by dividing himself into external and internal narrators, embodies the prevalent feeling of the civil war and provokes the same feeling in the reader: whom does one trust? what side can one choose when faced with fighting one's own kinsmen? We, the external narratee, face the same dilemma when reading *about* the civil war as Roman citizens must face *in* the civil war. Thus, Lucan creates in the reader the very feelings and tension his characters feel.

Such a reading of the *Pharsalia* helps to alleviate the problems associated with the presentation of Pompey's character. Readers are uncomfortable with Pompey because his actions do not correspond to the poet's lavish praise of him (e.g., F. Ahl, *Lucan: An Introduction*, Ithaca 1976; S. Bartsch, *Ideology in Cold Blood: A Reading of Lucan's Civil War*, Cambridge 1997). Now we see that readers are not meant to be comfortable. Thus, the overall tone of the poem creates a replication of the emotions associated with war.