1

CAESAR AT THE RUBICON

When Caesar finally appears as an actor, after Lucan's extensive introduction at the beginning of book 1 (1–182), he crosses a number of boundaries. First is the Alps, whose crossing immediately conjures up reminiscences of Hannibal (picked up a little later by Caesar himself in 1.303–5).[1] But that is a limit casually transgressed;[2] now he comes to the river Rubicon. The tiny stream (*parvi Rubiconis*, 185) is puny in comparison with the hugeness of the enterprise (*ingentis ... motus*, 184), but the huge apparition of Roma (*ingens ... patriae trepidantis imago*, 186)[3] steps in as if to reinforce it, and in her appeal to Caesar to go no further, re-emphasises the sanctity of the Rubicon as a limit which no army may legally transgress:[4]

[1] The motif of Hannibal's invasion is played on extensively in the *Bellum Civile*: the civil war is worse than Hannibal's invasion (or Pyrrhus'), 1.30–1; Caesar recrosses the Alps backwards in 3.299; Pompey illogically chooses not to go to Spain because he does not want to cross the Alps (even though he is travelling by sea) – presumably he does not want to be a Hannibal like Caesar, 2.630; Caesar attacking Massilia like Hannibal attacking Saguntum, 3.350; Curio fighting in Libya has many Hannibalian (and Jugurthan) overtones – see Ahl 1976 chapter 3; Goebel 1981 p. 87 notes a parallel with Livy's Hannibal in the second half of Caesar's speech before Pharsalus; Caesar is worse than Hannibal in not burying his fallen enemies, 7.799–801; Pompey mistrusts the Mauri because they remember Hannibal, 8.284; more general references to Carthage and Libya abound, e.g. 3.157, 2.91, 8.269. Just as Caesar often plays the part of Hannibal, so Pompey is characterized by *delay*, as was Fabius.

[2] Lebek 1976 p. 116: 'Die Einleitung passt zu Lucans Konzeption von Caesars blitzartigem Handeln'.

[3] On *ingens* and *parvus* here, see Narducci 1980 p. 175 n. 3.

[4] Many models are suggested for the apparition. Thompson and Bruère 1968 p. 6: Ascanius and Apollo in *Aen.* 9.638ff, the ghost of Hector in *Aen.* 2.270ff, and of Creusa in 2.772–4; Grimal 1970 p. 56: Cicero's prosopopoeia in *Cat.* 1.17ff; Lausberg 1985 p. 1589: Achilles prevented by

'quo tenditis ultra?
quo fertis mea signa, viri? si iure venitis,
si cives, huc usque licet.' (190–2)

Caesar is struck with terror, and stops right on the verge of crossing ('languor *in extrema* tenuit vestigia *ripa*', 194), but none the less attempts to argue the point; and excusing himself to Roma in a grandiose address (195–203) makes his fatal decision, and crosses:

inde moras solvit belli tumidumque per amnem
signa tulit propere. (204–5)

The river, we notice, has suddenly become *tumidum*, a last-ditch attempt to oppose the *ingentis motus* where the *ingens imago* had failed. But apparently to no avail. Caesar's crossing is celebrated with the simile of the Libyan lion who, having brooded and stalked long enough, suddenly attacks and bursts through a group of hunters (205–12).[5]

No, that is not quite right. In spite of the 'undoing of delay', the perfect in 'tulit' and the adverb 'propere', Caesar has not crossed the river yet; or if he has, he must do it again.[6] For with line 213 we are back to where we started.

fonte cadit modico parvisque inpellitur undis
puniceus Rubicon ... (213–14)

Athena from drawing his sword (*Il.* 1.194ff); *ibid.* p. 1606: Achilles and the Scamander (*Il.* 21.211ff). On the historical sources and parallels, see Narducci 1980.

[5] Getty 1940 ad loc. says this simile comes from *Aeneid* 12.4–8 and from *Iliad* 20.164–74; and compares Sen. *Oed.* 919–20. Thompson and Bruère 1968 p. 8 add *Aeneid* 10.726–8 of Mezentius as an aggressive lion. See also Lebek 1976 pp. 120–1, Ahl 1976 pp. 105–6, and Lausberg 1985 p. 1584. All the commentators have missed the obvious point that Lucan's lion, inasmuch as he runs himself through by leaping at the hunters' spears, is pointing up Caesar's *suicide*; the effects of the civil war are that Caesar obscurely destroys himself: so also the ambiguity of 'in sua templa furit' 1.155, going back to the proem 'in sua victrici conversum viscera dextra' (1.3). Albrecht (1970 p. 287) at least sees the lion's death as a premonition of Caesar's assassination.

[6] The repetition of the river-crossing is noticed by Goerler 1976, who argues that repetition allows Lucan to depict the same event from two different points of view (Caesar's, and the soldiers').

This introduces seven lines of ecphrasis on the river (213–19) which pick up the earlier *parvi Rubiconis ad undas,* and explain why the river is – has been all along – swollen (as in 204); here too the notion of the Rubicon as a boundary is given due emphasis ('Gallica certus / limes ab Ausoniis disterminat arva colonis', 215–16). And now, finally, the crossing, given to us for a second time – but it is not Caesar who crosses: *primus*, which we expect to agree with Caesar, in fact agrees with *sonipes* (conveniently singular for plural); then the whole army crosses *en masse*; then ... Caesar is already across (*superato gurgite*, 223): *his* crossing has been passed over.

It is quite an extraordinary opening sequence: of course Lucan is making a deliberate play of the contradiction between Caesar's urgency and his own expansive, repetitive narrative. *Mora* itself is a boundary that Caesar is trying to break through: Lucan's account sets up a series of narrative devices that obstruct Caesar's progress, that impose boundaries he must cross. Indeed, that the Rubicon crossing is a 'scene' at all implies a stopping of the narrative before it has really got started, all the more so if we remember that Caesar's *Commentary* had ignored the Rubicon, and made the capture of Ariminum immediately afterwards the first of Caesar's actions in the civil war.

But more boundaries follow. In his eagerness to prosecute the war with all speed, Caesar breaks with normal Roman military practice and marches by night[7] (swift as an arrow or a shot from a sling, 229–30), and arrives at Ariminum, which is the *Latii claustra*, the gateway of Latium (1.253). It is daybreak: a boundary of time that marks the very first day of the war:

> ... vicinumque minax invadit Ariminum, et ignes
> solis Lucifero fugiebant astra relicto.
> iamque dies primos belli visura tumultus
> exoritur. (231–4)

This sunrise is the first of two that Lucan gives us for this single day,[8] a repetition which, if not as illogical as the repeti-

[7] Thompson and Bruère 1968 p. 7. [8] Syndikus 1958 p. 15.

tion of the river-crossing, none the less serves a similar purpose: to multiply the boundaries, and trip up the narrative. The second sunrise is ironically accompanied by protestations of urgency:

> noctis gelidas lux solverat umbras.
> ecce, faces belli dubiaeque in proelia menti
> urguentes addunt stimulos cunctasque pudoris
> *rumpunt fata moras*. (261–4)

Having captured Ariminum, Caesar is faced with the problem of justifying himself to his troops. That this is another *mora* and another boundary for Caesar to cross is clear from the simile of the race-horse straining to cross the starting-line:[9]

> ... accenditque ducem, quantum clamore iuvatur
> Eleus sonipes, quamvis iam carcere clauso
> immineat foribus pronusque repagula laxet. (293–5)

Eventually, after Caesar has confused his troops with pseudo-Aenean rhetoric,[10] Laelius manages to bring them round, and they shout approval. But Caesar must now call up his forces from Gaul, which are enumerated in a long, delaying, catalogue;[11] and typically, ironically, the delay is coupled with the insistence on *no* delay:

> [Caesar] nequo languore moretur
> fortunam, sparsas per Gallica rura cohortes
> evocat ... (393–5)

And finally, with his forces assembled and ready to go, he moves on. But then Lucan switches to an account of the panic at Rome that lasts until half-way through book 2; Caesar is left stranded by Lucan's capriciously changing narrative. If we

[9] Note the 'imagery of cosmic dissolution' in *repagula laxet*; for which see Lapidge 1979 p. 349 on the Stoic terms εἱρμός and ἀναλύω, and pp. 363ff on Lucan's application of such terms as metaphors in the action of the poem.

[10] For Caesar's pose as a new Aeneas, see Ahl 1976 p. 202 and 209ff, and Martindale 1984 p. 69.

[11] See Mendell 1942 esp. p. 5 for the delaying effect of geographical catalogues in Velleius Polybius and Curtius. Note too Ovid's catalogue of dogs in *Met.* 3, 'quosque referre mora est' (3.225). On delay in Lucan's catalogues, see chapter 3 pp. 54–5.

wish to extend this thesis further, as I think we should, we may note that the whole of the introductory portion of the book, so far as we know unique in narrative epic inasmuch as in its 182 lines it contains no action, just general reflection on Lucan's part (as well as an invocation of Nero), is a device to delay the Rubicon scene.[12]

So far so good; but what is the point? What does Lucan gain by this delay and this emphasis on boundaries and their transgression? In the first place, it gives substance to Lucan's starting-point; with the crossing of the Rubicon, the story begins, and Caesar crosses out of the mist of history into the action of the poem. As a second explanation, we might follow the line taken by Thompson and Bruère, and say that these transgressions emphasise Caesar's impiety, especially since the Rubicon-limit is sanctified by the apparition of Roma herself, and since the heavily Virgilian feeling of Caesar's reply to Roma lays bare, by its allusions to the piety of Aeneas and Ascanius, Caesar's hypocrisy.[13]

This is fair enough, but we can do more. Lucan is always on the sidelines, so to speak; often entering into the poem in his own person, he shouts encouragement or cries out in dismay.[14] But, powerless as Lucan may be to prevent the final catastrophe, he has at least the power, as poet, of delaying it within his poem; we can conclude, then, that Lucan is anxious

[12] Hence, perhaps, some irony in the introductory discussion of Crassus who was a *mora* for civil war (1.100) – the discussion itself is a *mora*. Dr P.R. Hardie (*per litteras*) has suggested another humorous point: 'iam' in 183 implies that, during the overextended prologue, Caesar has had time to cross the Alps! (Though of course it plays on an epic cliché: see Lebek 1976 p. 116 and n. 12.) On the baroque expansion of the prologue, see Albrecht 1970 pp. 284–5.

[13] Thompson and Bruère 1968 p. 7 on the Virgilian parallels in this speech. Their general thesis that Virgilian allusions point up by contrast Caesar's hypocritical impiety is too simple to be all-embracing, and does Lucan's ingenuity little credit; but that is only a small blemish in an otherwise useful article.

[14] See esp. Syndikus 1958 pp. 39–43; also Albrecht 1970 p. 273; Ahl 1976 p. 151; Williams 1978 p. 234; Mayer 1981 ad 8.827; Johnson 1987 p. 7; and Lausberg 1985 p. 1571 for a cautionary note on the extent of Lucan's innovativeness in this respect.

to display his reluctance to allow the action to proceed, and he achieves this by erecting barriers that are at once literary and artificial. But again there is more. Although Lucan is reluctant, he does yet continue the action; and in writing the poem he is allowing the civil war to be re-enacted, he *is* re-enacting the war.

Cairns[15] notes the standard convention whereby the author of a poem can describe himself as doing what he is writing about; this convention is fully explored by Lieberg,[16] who traces its use from before Virgil till well into Late Latin literature, and indeed detects its influence in some modern European literature. Lieberg restricts himself to examining those passages where poetry itself is explicitly the subject of discussion, places where, for instance, the bucolic poet is represented as a shepherd or the elegist as a lover, where the poet of an Iliad is seen as acting out himself the role of Achilles. From this convention Lieberg goes on to deduce the possibility that ancient poets regarded language – their poetry – as somehow constitutive of reality. Crucially for our discussion, Lieberg shows us that time and time again the poet of *war* is represented as a military commander, a *dux*;[17] more generally, since the poet is as often represented as a warrior,[18] we might say that the epic poet is strongly identified with his protagonists, be they generals or warriors; and the same applies to the other genres, in which the dramatic poet identifies with his actors, and the bucolic poet with his shepherds.

Lieberg does not make the final step (although he comes very close to doing so) of assuming that the convention of the poet as protagonist extends, beyond the context of explicit discussions of poetry within a poem, to exert its influence even on passages where no specific 'literary' point is immediately discernible, that is to say, on the structure, subject and treatment of the poem as a whole. But the step is a natural one, and

[15] 1972 p. 163 and n. 6.
[16] 1982 passim; chapter 1 (on Virgil) however summarises the main points of the rest of the book.
[17] *Ibid.* p. 88, 94; so also the historian Pollio, p. 75.
[18] *Ibid.* pp. 56ff, as Achilles; pp. 69–70; p. 89; p. 90; pp. 99–100, as Jason; p. 103.

it will become central to my position that Lucan, in spite of the comparative scarcity of *explicit* literary self-reference in his poem, identifies strongly with his two main protagonists (and with many of the lesser figures); so strongly that, to some extent, the poem is its own commentary: the actions performed within it (the subject-matter), and the struggles of its creator to narrate those actions (the 'composition-myth'),[19] run in symbolic parallel.

For Caesar to wage war is, in Lucan's terms, for the poet to compose epic. But we may press Lieberg's conclusions still further. If the poet's composition is constitutive of reality, if the poet, like Amphion,[20] magically 'creates' a reality through song, then in the same sense Lucan is 'creating' the civil war, he is actually 'waging a war', a war which, as we are told right at the beginning, is a *nefas*; surely too the poetic re-enactment of the war can be censured as being a cognate *nefas*. If the war is as evil as Lucan tells us it is, then the blame must rub off on the poet as much as it is attributable to his protagonists. Lucan has the choice: he need not write this poem; but he does, and it is at the Rubicon, the start of the action proper, that he makes his decision, and thus becomes a counterpart of the Caesar that he is portraying.

Seen from this point of view, the apparition of Roma takes on the quality of a literary *revocatio*, where, standardly, an authority figure appears (usually in a dream, hence the dream vocabulary *visa* ... *imago*, 186) to deter the poet from writing the poem he has started on.[21] Roma confronts Caesar and tells him to turn back; so Roma metaphorically confronts

[19] On this concept, see chapter 4, p. 139.

[20] Lieberg 1982 pp. 37–9 discusses the implications of the figure of Amphion, who built the walls of Thebes by singing.

[21] The *revocatio* was so overworked in the Augustan age that it is hardly surprising if Lucan feels no need to signal it – particularly since it had, by his time, reached such a height of sophistication that almost any authority figure could be substituted for the original Apollo. Examples are: Virg. *Ecl.* 6.3ff (Apollo); Hor. *Sat.* 1.10.31ff (Quirinus); *Sat.* 2.6.13ff (Horace himself); *Odes* 4.15 (Apollo); Prop. 3.3.13ff (Apollo); 4.1 (Horos); Ov. *Am.* 1.1 (Cupid); *Ars* 2.493ff (Apollo); liminal cases are Hor. *Sat.* 2.1 (Trebatius) and *Epist.* 1.1.7–9 (unnamed). The original *revocatio* is in the prologue to Callimachus' *Aetia*. See Wimmel 1960 pp. 135–42.

Lucan and tells him to desist from writing the *Bellum Civile*; and Lucan, as Caesar, unlike almost all the other poets who included *revocationes* in their works, refuses to comply. The identification of the Roma apparition passage as a *revocatio* is confirmed by an unmistakable allusion to Propertius 4.1. Here Propertius, who is about to write a grand poem on the ancient greatness of Rome, is confronted by Horos, who cries out 'quo ruis imprudens, vage, dicere fata, Properti?' (4.1.71), possibly parallel to Roma's 'quo tenditis ultra? / quo fertis mea signa, viri?' (1.190–1) – and advises him to write elegy instead. But just before Horos interrupts, Propertius, referring to his projected poem, addresses Roma in the following words:

> *Roma, fave*, tibi surgit opus, date candida cives
> omina, et *inceptis* dextera cantet avis! (4.1.67–8)

which is clearly alluded to in Lucan's 'Roma, fave coeptis' (1.200).[22] So Lucan, in ignoring this *revocatio*, is disobeying the sacred command of a divine figure, and is hence as impious as Caesar; and it is through Caesar that he enacts his own impiety. In spite of delay and hesitation, Lucan allows the action to continue; for being, in a sense, himself Caesar, he is as anxious as Caesar to move on.

But there are two sides (only two?) to any struggle. Lucan may be Caesarian in his ambition to recount, and thus recreate, the horrors of civil war, but none the less there *is* reluc-

[22] On *coeptum* as 'poetic endeavour' see Sharrock 1988 ad Ov. *Ars* 2.38. Statistically speaking, in the thirty-odd examples of *coeptum* as a substantive in Ovid, Virgil, Pseudo-Virgil, Lucretius, and Manilius (it does not appear in Horace, Propertius or Tibullus), fourteen explicitly refer to the matter or making of poetry: Ov. *Met.* 1.2, *Fast.* 4.784, 6.652, 6.798, *Ars* 1.30, 3.671, *Rem.* 704, *Pont.* 2.5.30, *Trist.* 2.555; [Virg.] *Culex* 25, 41; Virg. *Georg.* 1.40; Lucretius 1.418; Manilius 3.36. A further four seem to me to be eminently arguable cases of the type I am now discussing: Ov. *Met.* 7.194–5 (Medea's potions), Ov. *Met.* 8.200 and *Ars* 2.38 (Daedalus and Icarus), and Virg. *Aen.* 9.625 (Ascanius). *Coeptus* as an adjective qualifying a word like *labor* often bears the same explicit sense (e.g. Ov. *Ars* 1.771) but the statistics are not so compelling; so too with the substantival *inceptum*, of which the explicit examples are Prop. 4.1.68 and Hor. *A.P.* 14; and the adjectival 'inceptum ... laborem' at Virg. *Georg.* 2.39.

tance, there *is* 'mora', the narrative *does* make the gesture of tying itself in knots in order to obstruct the progress of its demonic protagonist. And in this weak, plaintive resistance to the evil of reenacting evil, we see another part of the schizophrenic poetic persona; another Lucan who has more in common with the figure of Pompey. For delay is Pompey's character-note: as Fabius to Caesar's Hannibal (see note 1), he wages his war above all by avoiding conflict, by escaping first from Rome, then from Italy altogether; he cannot bring himself to crush Caesar at Dyrrachium,[23] and must be bullied by his supporters into committing himself to battle at Pharsalus.[24] His desire to defer the end and prolong the now comes across very clearly, too, in his parting from Cornelia at the end of book 5.[25]

In the struggle between Caesar and Pompey, then, lies the paradigm of Lucan's narrative technique: the conflict between the will to tell the story and the horror which shies from telling it; between arrogant confidence in the triumph of evil, and a weak timidity that perforce identifies itself with piety, virtue, *fas*. The parallel can be developed further. Pompey represents the past: as an old oak that is honoured because of its antiquity, honoured simply because it has always been honoured, Pompey, the shadow of a great name, is a once-great general who now rests on his laurels. Caesar, by contrast, is powerful *now*, a bolt of lightning that will (we suppose) blast this past glory. Pompey is practically an old man (1.129–30); Caesar, by implication (though not in fact), practically a youth. Young opposes old; novelty opposes tradition; and in this dualism we see the conflict at the heart of Lucan's relation to the epic genre. To write epic at all involves some allegiance to the tradition, and for that reason Pompey, the symbolic embodiment of Lucan's poetic heritage (one thinks of Virgil in particular),[26] is what Lucan would like to be. But in this admiration

[23] 6.299ff. [24] 7.51–123.

[25] 5.722–815; see esp. 732–3, 'blandaeque iuvat ventura trahentem / indulgere morae et tempus subducere fatis'.

[26] Interestingly, Quintilian used the Pompeian image of the dead but sacred tree to describe the poet Ennius (*Inst. Or.* 10.1.88).

there is always an 'anxiety of influence';[27] and to use Bloom's terms, the 'strong' poet, the 'ephebe', must represent the past as corrupt, dead, tottering – must, indeed, destroy it, in order to earn the honour that the past will not relinquish; the new poet standing at the end of a tradition must be a Caesar.

The poem is a civil war. Lucan is Caesarian in his ambition, but Pompeian in his remorse; the Pompeian in him condemns Caesar, but the Caesarian in him condemns – kills – Pompey. This paradox, this internal discord which aligns the poet with each party and with both simultaneously and with neither, is one of the fundamental premises of the poem's violent logic; and will be the basis for much of what I will have to say in the ensuing chapters.

[27] The title of an influential work by Bloom (1973).