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review of:

Carmelo Salemme, *Lucano: la storia verso la rovina*, Napoli 2002

Text published in: *Mnemosyne* 57, 2004, 107-8;

Recent years have brought to light a regrettable breach in studies on Lucan. On the one hand, there is the influential Anglo-American school with its various postmodern approaches (Henderson, Masters, Bartsch), on the other hand one may observe continental traditions which firmly reject such radical ideas and defend a more conventional, philological approach. The wide rift between both currents of thought recently became manifest in Emanuele Narducci's provocative essay 'Deconstructing Lucan, ovvero le nozze (coi fichi secchi) di Ermete Trismegisto e di Filologia' (in: P. Esposito, L. Nicastrì, (edd.), *Interpretare Lucano. Miscellanea di Studi*. Napoli, 1999), which amounts to a declaration of war upon the Anglo-American school.

Carmelo Salemme has now published a small volume of five studies on Lucan (four of them published between 1999 and 2001 as separate articles), which is bound to please only the continental group of scholars. The works of the Anglo-American academics are hardly ever cited, let alone discussed. This is a pity, since for one thing, these studies have opened up the exiting prospect of Lucan as a playful, inventive, and provocative poet, who is fond of extravagant pathos, puns, and intertextual play. Hardly anything of this is to be found in the present volume, which confronts readers with a rather customary picture of Lucan as a weighty thinker, pondering important questions of Fate, History, and the End of the World. The titles of the essays may speak for themselves: '*Mundi ruina e funus*', 'Onde e macerie', 'Il senso della storia', 'Le ragioni della storia', 'La storia verso la rovina'.

The essays have relatively few new insights to offer. The central importance of concepts such as *ruina* and *funus* to the poet's imagery has been observed before (among others by Salemme himself, in an article dating from 1976: *BStudL* 6, 1976, 302-20), as is the case for Caesar's all encompassing *furor*. Much space is devoted to quotations in Latin and Italian and to paraphrases of Lucan's text. Furthermore, the problem to be discussed is not always expressed in clear terms. For instance, the third essay is concerned with the poet's problem of how to interpret history in the context of contemporary experiences, but then goes on to discuss various episodes that seem to be of little immediate relevance to the theme (the Amyclas scene in book five, and characters such as Julia and Cornelia, Appius, Cato and others).

In all respects, we are confronted with a Lucan who is, above all, extremely thoughtful and pensive about everything he weaves into his poem. According to S. the basic tone of the poem is tragic ('atmosfera profondamente tragica', p.87), and he strongly opposes any suggestion that the *Bellum Civile* could be 'nihilistic', since it contains passages celebrating the staunchly Republican figure of Cato. More than a few scholars, however, have felt difficulties in accepting this excessively strict Cato as an authentic model and ideal, rather than as, at least partly, a caricature of Stoic wisdom as such. But for S. there can be no room for doubt here, and W.R. Johnson's influential *Momentary monsters* (1987), which first attempted to put Lucan's Cato into perspective, is dismissed in a short footnote (p.87-88). Surely, if the Anglo-American challenge is to be met with, something more is needed.

Another example may illustrate S.'s exclusively serious approach. In 4,393-4 Lucan echoes Virgil's famous *felix qui rerum potuit cognoscere causas* (*G.* 2,490) in the words *felix qui potuit mundi nutante ruina / quo iaceat iam scire loco*. According to S. the Lucanean lines are 'versi solenni, definitivi' (p.17), whereas they could also be considered a funny mimic of the famous line.

No doubt, Lucan has performed the poetical task he set himself with much attention, talent, and craftsmanship. But we must not forget that he was not a veteran soldier or an experienced politician who bitterly and personally regretted the loss of Republican freedom, but a brilliant young artist moving in the highest circles (including the imperial court), and a poet thoroughly trained in the rhetoricians' schools. Anglo-American and North-European scholars seem more readily inclined to accept such a paradoxical and playful Lucan than their colleagues from Mediterranean countries.

S.'s book on Lucan, then, will appeal above all to Italian scholars and their supporters. To the other camp, it will be merely another example of the sort of conventional studies it opposes.

Meanwhile, what seems to be necessary is studies from either side in the debate that discuss in detail the methods, examples, and conclusions of the other side, instead of merely neglecting or dismissing them. Only in this manner, real progress in Lucanean studies may be expected.
