In the Shadow of a Colossus: The Influence of Plato's *Timaeus* on Lucan's Cosmology

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Lucan's *Pharsalia* reaches well beyond the borders of Latium in both the scope of its narrative and its sources of inspiration. Although Epicurean and Stoic philosophy played important roles in informing Roman thought and shaping Lucan's ambiguous cosmology, Plato's *Timaeus* warrants investigation. Superficially, these authors share little philosophically, yet they parallel one another in context. Both were writing during a time in which their republican and democratic political systems were in decline, scarred from a period of prolonged internal discord and war. Reflecting this context, both authors mobilize republics into cosmological wars. Hosting Timaeus and Critias, Socrates asks his guests to re-frame his Republic dialogue through a kind of war. Rather than the ideal city of the *Republic*, stable and pure, the *Timaeus* presents Athens as it is in its "true character"[1] made manifest in the cosmos, em-

[1]Plato, "Timaeus," in *Complete Works*, by John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, 1224-91, trans. Donald J. Zeyl (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 1997), 20b.

bodied like an animal "in motion or engaged in some struggle or conflict,"[2] sung into being in the register of epic poetry. In materializing the republic, the *Timaeus* contains the seeds of instability, with primordial chaos brought into a healthy constitution and order. Lucan's republic sees this noxious seed bloom, breaking out into corruption and abomination. The relationship between the *Timaeus* and the *Pharsalia* does not suggest a shared Platonic philosophical framework, but, rather, a potential thread of influence and resemblance. Bridged indirectly through Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, it will be argued that there is progression of logic of destabilization from the *Timaeus* to *Pharsalia*. An analysis of Lucan's proximity to Plato through Egyptology, Ovidian mediation, and bodily allegory, reveals how the *Pharsalia* draws poetic and literary inspiration from Plato's *Timaeus*, tapping an underappreciated vein of intertextuality.

The most direct connection between Plato and Lucan is found in Egypt. As Caesar begins his inquiry with the priest, Acoreus, Lucan nods directly to the *Timaeus* and its author: "If your ancestors taught their sacred matters / to Plato of Athens, was ever a guest here worthier to / hear them, or more able to grasp the world?"[3] Here, Lucan is drawing on a long tradition in Graeco-Roman Egyptology, one of sages who, seeking Egyptian knowledge, make their pilgrimage to this ancient land for lore,[4] while simultaneously setting Plato as the standard among them. Plato's pride and place within Egyptological tradition is corroborated by Dr. Jonathan Tracy, who comments that, if the well-educated Lucan were to be familiar with any Egyptology, he would have read

[2]Plato, "Timaeus," 19b-c.

[3]Lucan, *Civil War*, trans. Matthew Fox (New York: Penguin 2012), 10.302.

[4]Jonathan Tracy, "Science, Egypt, and Escapism in Lucan" (PhD diss., University of Toronto 2009), 148.

Herodotus and Plato's *Timaeus*.[5] By invoking Plato at the start of Caesar's inquiry, Lucan nods to this heritage. Whether or not it was his intention, this offers the audience a chance to reflect on the *Timaeus*' narrative and its conception of Egypt.

In the opening of the dialogue, Critias presents his kinsman, Solon, the "wisest of the seven sages," and his pilgrimage to Egypt,[6] where he learns from an Egyptian priest on their history, customs, and geography. This inquiry of a priest mirrors the activity of Caesar in book 10, who fills in for Solon, and briefly takes on an uncharacteristically philosophical disposition of intellectual patience and leisure: "I've always had free time for the powers above."[7] In the *Timaeus*, as well as in Ovid's Metamorphoses, Egypt is presented as resilient to change. It is a place of refuge during times of cosmic strife, safe in its geography, its distance, and the Nile's protected secret source.[8] This natural shelter from fires, floods, and war, are what the *Timaeus* suggests are the conditions for Egypt's unbroken traditions, preserving their civilization while others crumbled, creating a learned society of ancient wisdom and lore.[9] This is what Tracy describes as Egypt's "escape backwards,"[10] the idealized vision of Egypt as a repository of memory of ancient epochs, one which would be able to correct the errancies of the present age.[11] He suggests that Plato used this view of Egyptian resilience in his "pursuit of Athenian renewal," designed to "show his Athenian readership a way out from turmoil and civic strife [...] what

[5]Jonathan Tracy, "Science, Egypt, and Escapism in Lucan," 10.
[6]Plato, "Timaeus," 20d-26e.
[7]Lucan, *Civil War*, 10.231.
[8]Tracy, "Science, Egypt, and Escapism in Lucan," 146-7.
[9]Plato, "Timaeus," 22c-e.
[10]Tracy, "Science, Egypt, and Escapism in Lucan," 148.
[11]Tracy, "Science, Egypt, and Escapism in Lucan," 147-8.

Athens used to be but also what it can be again."[12] Plato's vision of Egypt provides Athens with a sense of continuity. Even if they are not the ideal city, there exists a stability within their republic that can weather the storms of strife. This reassuring vision of Egypt as a stabilizing point of reference is foiled in Lucan's Ptolemaic Egypt.

Just as Egypt presented as kindred in constitution to Athens, so too is it sympatico with Rome. However, rather than a refuge, Egypt shares Rome's sickness. Instead of reinforcing its constitution, it is infected with instability, embroiled in civil war: "discord in their hearts, their minds were split."[13] Something has gone wrong. While Tracy suggests that the utopian vision of Egypt is preserved, underlining several dialogues,[14] he makes it clear that, "within the moral economy of the Pharsalia [Egypt is] an accursed land."[15] Lentulus' suasoria to Pompey follows the old fashioned belief found in the *Timaeus* that Egypt will be a place of safety and stability.[16] However, he draws false hopes, as, rather than a hope for Roman restoration, it is Egypt's very kinship with Rome that heralds their shared decline. Rather than being governed by a conservative and pious priestly class, as in the *Timaeus*, here, Egypt's social order revolves around the corpse of "Philip of Pella's crazy offspring," the man who "[spurned] Athens,"[17] and captured the world through hateful envy. Rather than a refuge from disaster, or a repository of old ideals, distanced from the world's calamities, Egypt houses imperial exemplars of corruption, vice, and civil discord. With Caesar taking the role of sage, the premature ending of

[12]Tracy, *Lucan's Egyptian Civil War*, 5.
[13]Lucan, *Civil War*, 295.
[14]Tracy, "Science, Egypt, and Escapism in Lucan," 152.
[15]Tracy, "Science, Egypt, and Escapism in Lucan," 151.
[16]Tracy, "Science, Egypt, and Escapism in Lucan," 152.
[17]Lucan, *Civil War*, 296.

Pharsalia provides us with an opportunity to reflect on Caesar's pilgrimage, learning the lessons of a dystopian society, and reconsider the epic poem through the foil of its reassuring Timaen counterpart.

Returning to the linchpin of their relationship, Lucan's intertextuality with the *Timaeus* is informed by Ovidian precedence. Dr. Peter Kelly refers to G.B. Conte's remark on aemulatio as being as much a "system of differences"[18] as similarities. In this way, Lucan's absence of divine agents stands out from the wider epic genre. In particular, the absence of a demiurge or a divine arbiter of his epic chaos sets the *Pharsalia* in direct conversation with the *Metamorphoses* and, by extension, the *Timaeus*. Like Lucan, Ovid is ambiguous in his philosophical perspective and eclectic in his influences. However, Kelly suggests that the *Metamorphoses* should be considered a "synthesis of many major cosmogenic works [...] to match textually his all-encompassing history,"[19] and focuses on the intertextuality between Ovid and Plato's *Timaeus* which, among all his influences, holds a "programmatic position" in the cosmogony of the *Metamorphoses*.[20] In both *Metamorphoses*[21] and the *Timaeus*,[22] the universe begins in chaos, a primordial state in which the world is disordered and with opposing qualities of four elements in conflict with one another, with no stability or fixity. Chaos could be evocative of a host of traditions, such as Hesiod's *Theogony*, but the introduction of a demiurge overtly aligns Ovid with Plato. Kelly picks up on the shared language used to describe this divine agent,

[18]Peter Kelley, "Crafting Chaos: Intelligent Design in Ovid, *Metamorphoses* Book 1 and Plato's *Timaeus*" *Classical Quarterly* 70, no 2 (2020): 747.

[19]Kelly, "Crafting Chaos," 734.

[20]Kelly, "Crafting Chaos," 743.

[21]Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Stephanie McCarter (New York: Penguin, 2023): 1.6-20.

[22]Plato, "Timaeus," 49a-53a.

the "craftsman," through Ovid's choice of opifex and fabricator, and the directly correlating 'artificer' of the *Timaeus*.[23] These titles of the 'craftsman,' and their underlying artistic quality, lend support to Kelly's interpretation of Ovid's use of Plato's for designing a cosmogony which blurs art and reality.[24] Rather than maintaining Plato's distinctive boundary between the divine model of the demiurge and its material copy, Kelly suggests that Ovid creates a dialogue between them, with the effect that both the poem's text and the cosmos it creates become transgressive and mutable.[25] The effect of this instability is that, unlike the fixed and ordered world of the *Timaeus*, the demiurge of the Metamorphoses only establishes an uneasy and impermanent peace. Chaos is not confined to the primordial past: "it is an ever-present threat throughout the rest of the poem."[26] By incorporating Plato's demiurge into the cosmogony it is meant to shape, Ovid is creating the conditions for the divine artificer to be changed by its art, and thus be subjected or violated by it.

The absence of a demiurge in Lucan is an extension of Ovid's process of destabilization in an increasingly materialized world. A critical parallel between the demiurges, and crucial to the "threat" which Kelly presents, is one he is missing in his analysis. Both demiurges use the oral word in ordering the cosmos. In the *Timaeus*, the demiurge is described as "prevailing" over the material chaotic world by "persuading" it and subjecting it toward what is best.[27] The demiurge maintains a critical distance from the material world, literally 'ordering' to follow its design. In contrast to this top-down

[23]Kelly, "Crafting Chaos," 742.
[24]Kelly, "Crafting Chaos," 746.
[25]Kelly, "Crafting Chaos," 746.
[26]Kelly, "Crafting Chaos," 746.
[27]Plato, "Timaeus," 48a.

model, Ovid's "god and better nature" litigates the conflict,[28] suggestive of arbitration, even equality between order and chaos. Even as the demiurge descends closer to its subject, its voice maintains a sense of order as law. The importance of the demiurges, and their oral order is in their absence and silence in Lucan. Nothing "prevails" over the material world of *Pharsalia*, nor is there a divine arbiter to adjudicate the looming conflict. In this vacuum, Caesar fills the void. Rather than litigating the world, or persuading it toward order, Caesar's power of rhetoric perverts Platonic and Ovidian precedence, convincing a shaken cosmos into a gross reversal: conferring law on crime.[29] Caesar fulfills Kelly's threat found lurking within the *Metamorphoses*, with a material being usurping the demiurge's position within the cosmos and the return to chaos – a corporeal coup of heaven. The distance between mortal and divine collapses, ultimately metastasizing under Nero, whose very weight buckles the sky.[30] While Platonic philosophy does not guide Lucan's cosmos, the *Timaeus*' cosmology informs its process of divine degradation. As seen in Lucan, what remains in the absence of the demiurge is a colossus unbound, a cosmic body in metamorphoses.

The imagery of a cosmic body permeates Pharsalia. In Martin Dinter's "Anatomizing Civil War," he elaborates the corpus of the Roman bodily imagery at play within the poem, and characterizes it as the unifying literary image which acts as the "narrative glue that connects the many different episodic limbs of the epic body."[31] The language and imagery of the body is applied to nearly every aspect of Lucan's cosmos: the geography becomes personified in

[28]Ovid, "Metamorphoses" 1.20.

[29]Lucan, *Civil War*, 1.2.

[30]Lucan, *Civil War*, 1.59-62.

[31]Martin Dinter, *Anatomizing Civil War: Studies in Lucan's Epic Technique*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015): 10.

the gigantomachy;[32] the military corps is made a body of Pompey or Caesar, or a collection of his hands.[33] The Roman state, the *Orbis Romanus*, is a body in itself, a corporeal cosmos, with the conflict of the civil war being a contest for who will be its head (caput).[34] Similarly, in the Living Thing of the *Timaeus*, the material cosmos is embodied, in this case the body – an all-encompassing colossus.[35] Rome's *corpus* is a monstrous imitation of the Timaean body's smooth and seamless whole. Similar to the corruption of Nasidius,[36] Rome has congealed into a chaotic and "bloated body," a singularity lacking individuality or freedom, made passive in its disorder.[37] Akin to fate of Tullus,[38] Rome's whole body becomes the wound of *Pharsalia*. This contrast between the Timaean whole and the disfigured body of Rome is representative of what Dinter describes as the "dichotomy between a closed and open ideal."[39] Lucan presents a world which isn't disfigured, an epic body which "exposes the cracks and cracks and fissures in a genre that seeks to pass itself off as seamless whole."[40] This is a "vivisection of the Roman body"[41], and the fruit of Ovid's metamorphic process of transmuting the Timaean divine into the material world. In its construction of an ideal cosmic body, the *Timaeus* provides Lucan with an imagistic framework, a model to be mutilated.

Having established Plato's proximity to Lucan, one can imagine the Timaean body and its organs mapped onto the Pharsalian Ro-

[32]Dinter, *Anatomizing Civil War*, 11.
[33]Dinter, *Anatomizing Civil War*, 22-3.
[34]Dinter, *Anatomizing Civil War*, 19-20.
[35]Plato, "Timaeus," 33.
[36]Lucan, *Civil War*, 9.982-999
[37]Lucan, *Civil War*, 7.476-479.
[38]Lucan, *Civil War*, 9.1000-1009.
[39]Dinter, *Anatomizing Civil War*, 28.
[40]Dinter, *Anatomizing Civil War*, 29.
[41]Dinter, *Anatomizing Civil War*, 28.

man *corpus* and the characters who populate it. The significance of the *caput* imagery becomes ever richer and more versatile when considering the decapitation of the Timaean head, the center of intellect, and its potential cascading consequences and effects as a natural process. The inciting incident would be the chopping of the neck. Here, Plato and Lucan directly use the same language of "isthmus," with Plato using it to describe the neck as the boundary which separates the head from the "trunk" of the body,[42] and Lucan using it to describe the role of Crassus within this wider Roman body as the boundary between Caesar and Pompey.[43] With the death of Crassus, the isthmus collapsed. Its head now void, the newly automatized organs of the cosmic body would attempt to fill the gap, just as the leading figures of Rome assert their claim to *caput mundi*. The strongest to assert his claim is the "hard heart"[44] of Caesar. Like the Timaean heart,[45] Caesar controls the "guardhouse" of the Roman army, and heats the swelling passion of the spirit within the body, just as he inflames the whole Roman world with *furor*. Though not a valid replacement for the *caput*, in the absence of reason, there is nothing to direct the spirit, nor an authority to command the lungs to cool the body – there are no guardrails to contain him. On the other hand, "the mind of unconquered Cato,"[46] is the most valid candidate, being the most akin with the *caput*'s nature. Like the mortal head of the body, Cato embodies the closest imitation the divine.[47] His rebuff of Labienus' request for a divine "model,"[48] coupled with Lucan's near deification of his con-

[42]Plato, "Timaeus," 69d-e.
[43]Lucan, *Civil War*, 1.106-118.
[44]Lucan, *Civil War*, 10.87.
[45]Plato, "Timaeus," 70b-d.
[46]Lucan, *Civil War*, 9.19.
[47]Plato, "Timaeus," 60c-d.
[48]Lucan, *Civil War*, 9.710-34.

duct and *exempla*,[49] establishes Cato as a representative of the ideal Roman and arbiter of reason. However, in the absence of the old *caput*, Cato is anachronistic, ridiculous, a mind without a head. He is nothing more than an echo of an absent order. The last organ to consider would be the Pompeian liver. Although Lucan never uses the term "liver," Pompey is akin to it in nature. The Timaean liver is passive, anxious, and surrounded by "images and phantoms"[50], whether they be dreams of past glories[51] or the shades of dead wives.[52] Like Pompey, the liver is pathetic, but possesses a redeeming "grasp of truth," given that it is the center of divination. This art, however, is only useful insofar as it is interpreted by a sound mind.[53] In the absence of a *caput*, Pompey can only anticipate and then endure disaster, as he does at Pharsalia[54] and the banks of the Nile.[55] In this scramble to replace the decapitated *caput*, Rome's body politic is a horrific corpse vivified, and the *Timaeus* offers rich organic allegory to complement the elemental language of the Caesarian lightning and Pompeian Oak.

Given Lucan's familiarity with the *Timaeus* through Egyptology and Ovid, it is perhaps surprising that it has yet to be incorporated into *Pharsalia*'s intertextual cosmogony. Lucan's account of Egypt draws him into the realm of Platonic Egyptology and situates Caesar in the footsteps of Solon, contrasting Plato's resilient utopia with his Lucan's degraded dystopia. The risks of grafting Platonic ideals to Lucan's epic can be treated through examining their indirect relationship through the mediation of Ovid. Given

[49]Lucan, *Civil War*, 9.755-59.
[50]Plato, "Timaeus," 71a-b.
[51]Lucan, *Civil War*, 7.8-22.
[52]Lucan, *Civil War*, 3.8-36.
[53]Plato, "Timaeus," 71e-72b.
[54]Lucan, *Civil War*, 7.99-107.
[55]Lucan, *Civil War*, 8.706-8.

Ovid's direct and emphatic allusion to the *Timaeus*' demiurge, the absence of such a figure in Lucan' cosmogony can be seen as an extension of the *Metamorphoses*' process of increasing destabilization and materialization of the cosmos. The product is one in which Lucan's epic cosmogony, the Roman *corpus*, resembles a mutilated Timaean body. If read in concert with pre-existing interpretations of the Lucanian epic, intertextuality between the *Timaeus* and the *Pharsalia* offers complementary and expansive possibilities for new epic allegory. While we should remain cautious to conclude that Plato and Lucan were in direct conversation, the opportunity to prove that conclusion remains enticing.

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