THE DREAM OF POMPEY

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In Lucan’s uneven poem, with its strange mixture of inflated rhetoric, parade of never very recondite learning, Stoic-tinctured republicanism, distorted history, and, every now and then, flashes of real sublimity, there is hardly to be found a finer passage than that which describes the dream of Pompey the Great on the night before the Battle of Pharsalos. As it is also a rather difficult episode, on which I know of no adequate commentary, I have thought it worth while to set down what seem to me either true or at least plausible explanations of some of its obscurities. I need hardly quote it in full or even outline it, especially considering to whom this little essay and its companion pieces are addressed. Pompey dreams that he is young again, at the time of his first (actually his second) triumph, and is in the theatre named after him, applauded and cheered by the thronging audience. Lucan is anxious to give the reason why he dreamed of that in particular:

seu fine bonorum 20
anxia uenturis 2 ad tempora laeta refugit,
siue per ambages solitas contraria uisis
uaticinata quies magni tulit omina plancus,
seu uetito patrias ultra tibi cernere sedes
sic Romam Fortuna dedit.

Per ambages solitas. Lucan assumes, then, as a thing generally known that dreams, or some of them, ‘go by contraries’ as our saying has it. He may be right; but if so, it is rather strange that it is so hard to find any other ancient author mentioning such a belief. I have so far come across but one instance (mentioned by C. E. Haskins in his commentary; Housman comments for the most part only on passages where the reading is doubtful or the grammar has been badly misunderstood, and the copious Oudendorp is silent on this line), namely Pliny the Younger, Epp. I, 18. Writing to Suetonius, who has been worried by a dream that seemed to portend failure in a suit at law in which he was to take part, apparently as an advocate, he informs him that it makes a difference enventura soleas an contraria somniare, and then goes on to tell of a dream of his own in which he thought that his wife’s mother implored him not to plead in his first important case. Despite this visionary warning, he went ahead, succeeded brilliantly, and thus laid the foundation of his career at the Roman equivalent of the Bar. Pliny then, who seems from several indications in his correspondence to have been a mildly superstitious man, divides humanity into those who dream ‘by contraries’ and those who do not. But if we look at the best-known work on this topic which we have, Artemidoros’ five books con-

1. Lucan, Phars. vii, 7–44.
2. Housman would read anxia menti curis, on a hint in the scholia and because it was not the dream but Pompey’s mind which was troubled and went back to the better days of the past. If Lucan’s mind had been as clear and logical as Housman’s, this would be an impressive argument, but it was a weakness of that admirable scholar to assume that the authors whom he edited or commented on thought as coherently as himself. Lucan, in my opinion, did not.
cerning dreams, we find nothing of the sort. Significant dreams, he tells his son, no doubt basing the statement on his own experience as a diviner and also on the contents of his extensive specialist library, are of two kinds only, the theorematic and the allegorical. The former, which almost always come true quite soon, are perfectly straightforward and need no interpretation; what we see in the dream is exactly what will happen. The latter need interpreting, for what we see (or hear) in them alludes more or less obscurely to something else. He gives abundant illustrations, which prove at least the ingenuity of himself and his fellow-experts in finding some kind of meaning in the incoherent nonsense which made up a great part of dreams then, as it does now. So little does he regard the principle of 'contraries' that he actually gives a different explanation of some two or three dreams which he records, and which that method of interpretation would fit very well. Two sick persons, a man and a woman, dreamed that they had gone to temples, he of Zeus and she of Aphrodite, to enquire of the respective deities whether they would recover or not. Zeus, that is, presumably, the cult-statue in the temple, nodded in reply; Aphrodite tossed her head back in the classical (and modern) Greek gesture of dissent. The man died next day, the woman recovered. Artemidoros is obliged by his methods to say that in nodding one looks at the ground (and so the grave) and to toss the head back is to look away from it, and that was what the divine responses really meant. But 'by contraries', as any old wife of modern times would interpret the visions, is surely a much more natural method. Another invalid was to undergo an operation for an abscess on his abdomen. He dreamed that Asklepios struck him on the belly with a sword and that he died. But the operation resulted in his cure. Here Artemidoros leaves his son to work out for himself how the dream is to be fitted to the facts. I wonder if the young man agreed with Lucan and Pliny and explained it per ambages solitas, despite his father's authority.

Sic Roman Fortuna dedit. As a Stoic, Lucan naturally believed in predestination, and therefore that since Pompey never saw Rome, or Italy, again, it was fated that he should not. But he seems here to hint that a return to Rome was somehow due to him, though he never says so outright. If any such idea lurked at the back of his mind, that would fit the present passage very well. It was long held that if something was to happen, it might suffice if it happened in a dream. This is attested by two passages more than half a millennium apart. In Sophokles, Iokaste tries to soothe her husband's fear that he may form an unnatural union with his mother. She says:

σον δ' ἐς τὰ μητρὸς μὴ φοβοῦ νυμφεύματά 
πολλὸι γὰρ ἡδὴ κὰν διέφασαν βροτῶν 
μητρὶ ξυμμυράθησαν.

Commentators whom I have looked at, from the scholiast down to Jebb, nearly

3 Artem. iv, 1 (p. 201, 13 ff. Hercher), cf. i, 2 (p. 4, 9).
4 Artem. i, 1a (p. 2, 10).
5 Artem. v, 71—72 (p. 268, 8—15).
6 Artem. v, 61 (p. 265, 16—18).
7 For instance, in ii, 5, Pompey sailing from Italy looks steadily at litora nunquam aduisus reeditura suos.
8 Soph., O.T. 980—82.
either say nothing here or are quite off the point, but Murray in his verse translation gets the sense aright. He renders:

And thou, fear not thy mother. Prophets deem
A deed wrought that is wrought but in a dream.

Iokaste means that if Oidipus, like many other people, has dreamed of so impious an action, that suffices to fulfil the prophecy of which she is so contemptuous, as, she perhaps implies, the rest of it has been fulfilled if old Polybos' death was brought on or hastened by grief for the absence of his supposed son. The other testimony is a grotesque dream-interpretation, again from Artemidoros. To dream of being beheaded, he informs us, is good if one is on trial for a capital offence, for then it means that he will not be sentenced to death; no one can be decapitated twice. If, then, there was any sort of prophecy that Pompey should return to Rome, and Lucan knew of it, perhaps would have mentioned it if he had lived to complete his poem, this dream might have been taken as its deceitful fulfilment. The dream itself would seem to be none of his invention, for both Plutarch and Zonaras i.e., presumably Cassius Dio, inform us that Pompey dreamed of being in a theatre with a crowd applauding him. Lucan's contribution was the brilliant exposition of the dream and the moving reflexions added. Concerning one of these I now venture to put forth a little private heresy which I have long held, in order to know if it will stand the test of examination by the competent.

Lucan, immediately after the passage quoted above, asks that the camp-noises (sentries' challenges and trumpet-calls) shall not wake Pompey from his last happy hours. He continues:

crastina dira quies et imagine maesta diurna
undique funestas acies feret, undique bellum.

It seems to be the universal belief that the dira quies is the dream he will have the next night. Concerning the phrase itself there is no doubt in the mind of anyone who has even a smattering of Silver Latin; it means a horrible, terrifying dream or nightmare. Tacitus, whether he is borrowing from Lucan or not, uses it again to describe the dream in which Caecina saw the ghost of Varus inviting him to follow into the German swamps. Nor need there be any hesitation in allowing that imagine diurna can mean image(s) remembered from the previous day. The world did not have to wait for modern investigators of dreams to tell it that much of their material is the result of recent sense-
impressions, for that is explained in Aristotle. The *funestae acies* might indeed be expected to make a deep impression on Pompey’s sight and hearing. It is also, perhaps, no strong argument against the orthodox interpretation that by Lucan’s account of his hero’s flight and arrival at Lesbos he can have got little or no sleep in the night following the battle. We must allow greater discrepancies than this if we are not to become foolishly hypcrritical of any long work of the imagination, whether epic, novel, or anything else. Still, *udent tanti*. Now for my pet heresy. May it not be that the *dira quies* is no literal dream but the actual, waking sights and sounds of the day of battle? If that can be supposed, it seems to me that *imagine diurna* gains in force; it is now the direct sense-impressions received during the daylight, which yet are so horrible that they are more like nightmare visions than real experiences. It is not, of course, implied that the sight of a battle was particularly terrible to an old soldier like Pompey; but, as Plutarch insists, *that* battle was a novel experience to him, for it was the first and only one in which he was heavily defeated, and to look upon the troops he personally commanded retiring in wild disorder without even the excuse of great losses (whatever Lucan may rhetoricise about the enormous slaughter) must have seemed an incredible spectacle, a very nightmare, however cautious he admittedly had been about provoking a general engagement until compelled to do so by his ridiculously over-confident council of war. It may still, however, be asked if any ancient would describe a terrible and unexpected real event as a horrible dream. I think he might, on occasion, and claim high authority for it, at all events in poetry. Lucan, like every other educated Roman, knew his Homer, and not the least admired and imitated episode in the *Iliad* is the pursuit of Hektor by Achilles around the walls of Troy. There much the same figure as I suppose Lucan to use occurs very plainly, for allusions and subtleties are not in the elder poet’s manner:

> ὁς ὅ ἐν ἄνειγο ὃς δὲν ὄνταται ἐφιγοντα διώκειν
> ὅτι ὅ ὃν ὄνταται ὑποφύγειεν ὅτι ὅ διώκειν
> ὁς ὃ τόν ὃ δὲν ὄντατο μάρωνα ποιάν, ὅτι ὅς ὃς ἀδέξει.

It may, however, still be objected: would Lucan expect a rather obscure allusion, even to a well-known passage like this, to be understood? If I am right it was not understood, at least by anyone whose opinion has come down to us; but Lucan is quite fond of passing allusions to the work of older poets, some of them fairly subtle. I give two or three random examples. At the very beginning of his poem (i, 2—3), he writes

> populumque potentem
> in sua uictrici conuersum uiscera dextra.

Here assuredly he means his readers to recall Anchises’ plea in Vergil, *Aen.*

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16 Arist., *de somniis*, 459a24 ff. The diviners called dreams produced by such natural means *ἐνιαυτα* (as indeed Aristotle does), reserving the term *δυσιμονος* for significant dreams. Artemidoros i. lb. (p. 3, 5 ff.) explains at some length that an *δυσιμονος* merely ‘reminds of things which are’, i.e., reflects actual feelings or desires and has no further significance.

17 Plut., *Pomp.* 73.

18 Pompey’s army lost altogether about 15,000 men, Caes., *B. C.* iii, 99, 4, of whom not more than 6,000 were legionaries, Pollio *op.* Plut., *op. cit.* 72.

19 X 199—201.
vi, 833, *neu patriae vallidas in miscera vertite uiris*. In vi, 198—99 he is indulging in heated rhetoric about the stubborn courage of Scaeva, and apostrophising the Pompeians assures them that no ordinary missiles are of avail against him:

hunc aut tortilibus uibrata falarica neruis
obruat aut uasti muralis pondera saxi.

The allusion is patent to *Aen.* ix, 704—06, where Turnus overcomes the formidable Bitias:

non iaculo, neque enim iaculo uitam ille dedisset,
sed magnum stridens contorta falarica uenit
fulminis acta modo.

And pretty certainly on one occasion Lucan behaves like the learned lady in Juvenal, who *inde Marowem atque alia parte in trutina suspendit Homerum* 20. That is vi, 411—12, where speaking of the attempt of the Aloadai to ascend to heaven he says

inscrut celsis prope se cum Pelion astris
sideribusque uias incurrens absulit Ossa.

Homer says 21 that the brothers intended to pile Ossa upon Olympos and Pelion on Ossa; Vergil (*Geor.* i, 281—88) inverts the order. Now if Pelion was nearly, but not quite among the stars while Ossa was actually blocking their courses, Lucan would seem to mean that both these venerable authorities were wrong and the true order was Olympos-Pelion-Ossa. What obscure authority or what fancy of his own he followed we do not know.

So I am not unwilling to suppose an obscure allusion to the famous Homeric passage, when to my mind it makes an already powerful poem yet more impressive. Incidentally, Lucan no doubt remembered that Vergil had directly and openly imitated Homer’s lines; Vergil, whom, if Suetonius tells truth, he had openly and early come forward to rival 22.

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20 Juv. vi, 436—37.
21 ‡ 315—16.
22 Verg., *Aen.* xii, 909—11; Suetonius, *Vit. Luc.*, *init.*
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