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Plagues, Oblivion, and the Anonymous Dead: Echoes from Seneca's *Oedipus* and Lucan's *Civil War* to Covid-19

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Abstract

The dead who are piled up in the literary worlds of Seneca's *Oedipus* and Lucan's *Civil War* are not very different than those of modernity. In their anonymity and silence, they speak so much about the atrocities and traumatic events of the societies in which they live. In *Oedipus*, nameless citizens claustrophobically are joined to one another in death, and, in *Civil War*, heaps of dead rot as Caesar looks on. One cannot help being reminded of the mass graves on Hart Island, the refrigerated morgue trucks, and the mass funeral pyres in India. This essay explores how the dead in these two ancient texts reverberate through time to the dead of our current pandemic, and, though anonymous and silent, haunt the living through their suffering, alienation, and absence. Through sheer numbers and the spaces, they leave behind, these ghosts gain a collective voice they never had while living.

Key words: mass graves, COVID 19, Seneca's *Oedipus*, Lucan's *Civil War*, haunting

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What does a society and the people in that society do when they have been exposed to collective and individual trauma over the course of years and years?¹ There are several responses of course; a few are addiction, depression, anxiety, PTSD, and forgetting in the form of dissociation. Traumatic events create gaps and silence within a trauma survivor, and the events themselves become “unspeakable” (7). What strikes me about these tropes of contagion, pollution, death, and trauma is that they are fundamentally rooted in religion and politics, family and mourning, memory and forgetting, identity and anonymity, which we see playing out with the pandemic right now. I hope to make a series of observations about the upheaval of funerary rituals, society, and politics in civil war and plagues in literary Neronian Roman and our pandemic reality; how the dead ultimately affect ancient societies and us in similar ways; how we fail them; how they gain power in death; and how they may triumph over us in the end through that power.

The power of the anonymous dead is immense. Perhaps even more powerful than the illustrious dead. No images remain in my mind more nightmarish and permanent than piles of bodies at Nazi death camps. Part of the horror of experiencing COVID, either contracting the virus, supporting friends and loved ones who have contracted it, or simply watching the effects of the virus around us, is the sheer mass effect of it, and few images of

¹ Christine Walde describes the effects of trauma on a group or society in her chapter on post-memory in Lucan’s *Civil War*: “In clinical traumatology, ‘trauma’ denotes a deep influence on a human being’s psyche exerted by violent events or experiences that

this effect are more powerful than the mass graves on Hart Island in New York, the refrigerated morgue trucks, the mass funeral pyres in India, the mass graves in Brazil and Peru, the list goes on. Sally Raudon writes in her article on the mass graves on Hart Island:

Mass graves are associated with war crimes, slavery, epidemic contagion, and natural disasters; that is, when exceptional circumstances supersede normal social rules, either because of an urgent need to dispose of overwhelming numbers of bodies after crisis or because the dead are perceived as less than full citizens or fully human (and, in the case of war, potentially both). In most societies, mass graves indicate a bad death, because individual burial crucially arms personhood by signaling who is ‘grievable’: some lives are recognized as worth celebrating, while others are deemed less than human and disposed of anonymously (2022: 87).

The dead who are piled up in the literary worlds of *Oedipus* and *Civil War* are not very different than those of modernity. In their anonymity and silence, they speak so much about the atrocities of the societies in which they live. In *Oedipus*, we will see in the first choral ode nameless citizens claustrophobically joined to one another who have died from plague, and in *Civil War* we will see heaps and piles of putrefying dead as Caesar looks on in glee, as both narrator and audience read in horror and shock.

Seneca’s *Oedipus* and Willful Oblivion

The plague in Seneca’s *Oedipus* is not the only traumatic event that has occurred; it has

cannot be integrated into the coordinates of everyday experience. ...On the level of groups and societies, traumata are extraordinarily violent events causing a discontinuity in day-to-day routine.” (284-5).

in fact, arisen from several founding traumatic events: Oedipus' initial exposure as an infant (because his parents received a prophecy that he would kill his father and commit incest with his mother; the piercing and binding of his feet as an infant to prevent his escape from death; Oedipus' commission of fratricide; Oedipus' commission of incest with his mother²). In ancient Greece, with any sort of commission of crime or occurrence of placing things where they're not where they're supposed to be (rape, the defilement of a woman by someone who is not her husband; murder, the taking of a life when it is not sanctioned) individuals or cities incur ritual pollution (*miasma*). As Robert Parker writes in his authoritative work on *miasma*, "The basic sense of *mia-words* is that of defilement, the impairment of a thing's form or integrity" (1983:3). The person who commits these offenses or accursed activities is deemed dangerous and then therefore "polluted." In Oedipus, pollution incurred by murder and incest arrives in the form of a plague that strikes down everyone (except Oedipus and his family initially). We can make the direct link from *miasma*, or pollution, to plague.

² Fitch (2002: 39) "As an audience, we certainly register the monstrosity of the attempt to construct oneself, but we can also admire the struggle, even sympathize with it - in a man or a woman, we would add - because we are all involved in a similar struggle on our own accounts, beyond a matter of choice." They are remarking on a Salman Rushdie quote "A man who sets out to make himself up is taken on the creator's role, according to one way of seeing things: he's unnatural, a blasphemer, an abomination of

We can see the plague's traumatic destruction in the following passage from the first choral ode:

Nec ulla pars immunis exitio uacat,³
 sed omnis aetas pariter et sexus ruit,
 iuuenesque senibus iungit et gnatis patres
 funesta pestis, una fax thalamos cremat,
 fletuque acerbo funera et questu carent.
 quin ipsa tanti peruicax clades mali
 siccauit oculos, quodque in extremis solet,
 periere lacrimae.

Oed. 52-9

Not any part has the space to be immune to death, but every age and sex equally collapse to ruin. The deadly plague joins young to old and fathers to sons. One torch burns the marriage beds. Funerals lack fierce wailing and lamentation. In fact, the intractable destruction of such great evil has dried out eyes; and as is common in extreme situations, tears die.

As the text states in its somewhat tortured language and syntax, which I would argue reflects the tortured and painful events befalling Thebes, there is no space (away) from death (destruction) because of the plague. There is a distinct claustrophobia to the vocabulary and syntax: "there is no space (vacat);" "collapse (ruit)," "join" (iungit). As noted above the claustrophobia indicates a sense of piling up or heaping of bodies, which

abominations. From another angle, you could see pathos in him, heroism in his struggle. in his willingness to risk" (*The Satanic Verses*, London, 1988, 49). Fitch John G. and Siobhan McElduff. 2002. "Construction of the Self in Senecan Drama" in *Mnemosyne* 55: 18-40.

³ Translations are my own and follow the Latin passages immediately. I discuss at length the Latin subsequently.

removes identity, a luxury only of individual graves.

With individual graves come tears and loud lament, but, as we have here, there is neither: “Funerals lack fierce lamentation and mourning”; intractable destruction has dried out eyes ... tears die.” This lack implies citizenry’s mass response of incomprehensibly at the “intractable destruction,” which, in turn, implies a repression of emotion and dissociation from reality as defense mechanisms, which resembles the collective forgetting and disregard of the COVID dead.⁴ Kenneth Doka describes this as “the disenfranchisement of grief” which is not “openly acknowledged, socially validated, or publicly mourned” (1989, p. xv). As Sara Albuquerque, Ana Margareda Teixeira, and Jose Carlos Rocha argue in response to the current pandemic about the disenfranchisement of grief, “This experience of grief might pose difficulties in terms of emotional processing and expression, as one may not recognize his/her right to grieve, and in terms of social support, by diminishing the opportunity to freely express their emotions, and to obtain expressions of compassion and support”

⁴ Raudon writes of the Hart Island dead: “Using Rikers Island inmates for labor has been another sign of stigma and abandonment in this process. Many critics saw the use of inmates to bury the dead as marking this labor with a troubling banality of exploitation and erasure—the disenfranchised burying the forgotten” (2022:89).

⁵ Cf. Elizabeth Asmis (2009: 115) very persuasively argues that Seneca constructs a “new type of Stoic hero in her excellent essay “Seneca on fortune and the kingdom of god”: “This essay will investigate the construction of a new type of hero: Seneca’s ideal of the virtuous Roman as a fighter against fortune. Based on traditional patriotic ideals, this construction

(2021:1). The similarity of the psychological responses to trauma in the ancient and modern worlds is striking and notable. The necessity of individual burial and lamentation rituals as means of catharsis for survivors seems to be universal for individual and community closure.

Because Oedipus is the source of this plague and pollution, and he’s king, it is through him that the citizens and city will experience a catharsis, and it isn’t until very late in the tragedy that we see Oedipus take full responsibility and attempt to expiate for his crimes and cure the plague.⁵ The imagery surrounding Oedipus’ physical catharsis is replete with that of death, dying, and sickness. Since he is head of state, one cannot help but wonder if, when he takes his eyesight and spews gore from his eye sockets, that this is the blood of his country’s people, his father and mother.

subitus en uultus grauat
profusus imber ac rigat fletu genas—
et flere satis est? hactenus fundent leuem
oculi liquorem. sedibus pulsi suis
lacrimas sequantur: hi maritales statim
fodiantur oculi. ...
rigat ora foedus imber et lacerum caput
largum reuulsis sanguinem uenis uomit.
Oed. 952-79

is influenced jointly by Stoic moral principles and the Roman conception of Fortune...By transferring his allegiance from the Roman state to god, or his own moral self, Seneca’s Roman here calls in question the legitimacy of the state and its rulers. The state is viewed as the domain of fortune; and it yields to a kingdom which is coextensive with the community of mankind as ruled by god.” Oedipus does this very same thing: he renounces and severs his allegiance to his kingdom and transfers it to himself as virtuous hero once he’s cast out his vices. Asmis, Elizabeth. 2009. “Seneca on Fortune and the Kingdom of God” in *Seneca and the Self*. Edd. Shadie Bartsch and David Wray. Cambridge.

Suddenly, oh, a heavy downpour makes my cheeks heavy with tears - and is it enough to weep? My eyes will shed trivial liquid no more. Let them, pushed from their sockets, follow the tears; let this husband's eyes be dug out immediately. A foul shower floods his face and his head, torn apart, vomits out a large amount of blood from the veins that have been torn out.

The evolution of Oedipus' decision to pay for his crimes with his eyes begins with a metaphor equating his tears to heavy rain (*profusus imber*), which metamorphosizes, at the end of the description, into gory rain (*foedus imber*). This recalls the lack of mourning imagery we saw at the beginning of the tragedy and implies that Oedipus is paying at least in kind for the lack of mourning prior to this. At the revelation of his crimes, his epiphany, he wants to take on sole responsibility for them and for making them right.

The focus on rain, a cleansing healing image, blood, especially blood which has been shed, and vomit illustrates not only Oedipus' absolute commitment to expiate for his city's salvation and his own sins and links his own sorrow, suffering, and physical pain to his citizenry. It also points to imagery of sickness, attempts to cleanse because of the sickness, and resulting death from that sickness. *Imber* can refer to rain (*OLD* s.v.1)⁶, but also a rain-storm, snow or hail-storm (s.v.1), which would imply that the rain is out of control, or,

rather, cannot be controlled. This out-of-control nature is emphasized by the adjective *profusus*, which means "immoderate or profuse ..." (s.v. 1) or of feelings and activities "immoderate, excessive." The verb from which *profusus* is derived, *profundo*, reveals more nuanced readings: it can refer to emitting fluids from the body: especially to shed freely (blood or tears). And so, we can conclude that Oedipus is sobbing so hard that his tears resemble a torrential rainstorm, and he cannot control his emotions or the bodily emissions that stem from such emotions, a sign of being ill and lamenting.

That the torrent (*imber*) becomes foul (*foedus*) is another indication of illness. *Foedus* derives from the verb *foedo*, which means "to make filthy or unclean, soil, befoul" (1a); "to defile, pollute (something holy)" (1b); or "to destroy the purity of, corrupt, contaminate" (1c). This transformation from Oedipus' sobs as cleansing to polluting is indicative of both sickness and the difficulty of healing that sickness. More importantly, it's a transference of sickness from the citizenry to Oedipus as he's healing them. It also demonstrates that Oedipus, the king, is a stand in for the city of Thebes itself; he's the body politic. He reflects their attempts to both heal and then fail at healing, because they, and he, haven't found the proper cure. The people of Thebes cannot heal their plague because the fault of the origin of the plague lies with its king.

⁶ *OLD* refers to the Oxford Latin Dictionary, and I will omit *OLD* from now on, as I don't use any other dictionaries.

And so, Oedipus, by digging out his eyes, is searching for some sort of escape and isolation through religious cleansing, just as most of us seek isolation from one another from those infected with COVID. We can see this in the other verbs Oedipus employs that describe the act of digging into the eye sockets. The first verb to function in this way is *scrutor*, which means to probe or examine a place for something hidden, search (1a); to search a person for concealed weapons (1b); to thrust at, probe (without the obvious idea of examining — and which points to his anger and frustration —(1c); to look searchingly at, scan, scrutinize (1d); to make research into a subject, investigate, inquire into (2); to probe for something hidden, to seek out (3). This verb in this context touches on all sorts of main themes in the present work: isolation, frustration, knowledge, ignorance, sight, blindness, violence, deoculation, punishment, and an attempt to cure his city.

The verb *euoluo* can be interpreted similarly: The *OLD* defines it as: to eject with a rolling or coiling motion, roll out (1); to cause to flow, roll (2); to tear or wrench out (3a); to uncover, unwrap (4a); to unfold by mental processes, discover, open out (b); to open or spread out (c); to unwind (5); to unroll a papyrus roll; to read through (a); to turn over in one's mind (6); to make known by narrative, exposition, etc. Unfold (7); to unroll, unwind (8). Once again, Seneca employs a verb whose more subtle nuances imply acquiring information or explaining information. Just as *scrutor* means probe and try to understand, *euoluo* means tear out and think about. In this context, both verbs are concerned with

the violence Oedipus metes upon himself as well as explain Oedipus' path to being cured and curing Thebes. There must be a way. At a more symbolic level, these verbs and the way Oedipus uses them imply that the acquisition of knowledge is a painful and difficult process.

And, I have no doubt that “*avide*” functions as a pun for “don't look!” the alpha privative negating the imperative “*vide*,” a command that Oedipus gives himself and one that draws the audience's attention to his divided self, the battle that he's fighting against himself, the denial that he wants to perpetuate, and the fear and disgust that he feels at the things he's done and seen. That he's searching for some sort of knowledge only underscores the contradiction inherent within Oedipus and his current situation: how can he look at the festering wound he's inflicted upon his country, his family, and, almost immediately, about to inflict upon himself? Such introspection and self-awareness would be unbearably painful, and so, he follows his advice to not look and digs out his eyes.

There is no doubt that the language Raudon uses to describe the language of Hart Island equates the island in at least some ways with a rotten body politic, much as Oedipus' head, the literal head of the head of state, is now blind after symbolically vomiting out the gore of Thebes' citizens, Iocasta, and Laius.

Once on the island, the landscape itself seems to conspire in concealment. The land quickly recovers from each open pit, leaving minimal visible evidence of the deceased save for a burial marker for each trench: ‘Each mass grave ... disappears from view within a season.’ Earthmoving equipment fills in the

hole, and the winter kills the crabgrass each year so, after a season enriched by the abundant resident wildlife, the bare earth will sprout spring grass and the land holding the trench will be detectable only by those who know where to look (95-6).

This passage is replete with imagery of hiding and seeing, secrecy and revelation: “conspire,” “concealment,” “open,” “visible,” “evidence,” “burial,” “marker,” “disappears,” “view,” “fills,” “hole,” “bare,” “detectable,” “look.” Rouden chooses diction that is menacing and conspiratorial, rife with criminal intent, just as Oedipus committed crimes (though unintentionally). The passage implies that the state is concealing a horrible secret in the form of the anonymous dead, just as Oedipus, in his willful ignorance, refuses to acknowledge he’s the perpetrator of all that’s wrong with Thebes. Rouden writes that the guards at Hart Island do not let visitors go to the site of where their loved one is buried. They are surveilled the entire time (95) so they don’t see the gaping holes of the mass graves. It’s like the contradiction of Oedipus’ eyeless head. He dug out his eyes so he could be in the dark, but the digging was extremely problematic to begin with.

Though Oedipus clearly does not want to examine his actions, he, in creating these holes, is literally carving out a physical space for himself to find peace and be safe, a quiet space that is far removed from his present horrifying circumstances.⁷ We can deduce this goal by looking closely at the definitions of the words the author uses to describe the

eye sockets themselves: *vacuus*, *recessus*, and *sinus*, all three of which indicate or describe a hollow of some sort, and all three of which, in addition, can refer to a safe refuge from pollution, plague, and violence. First, *vacuus*: at first glance, it refers to an empty space; but it can also invoke themes that are related to Stoicism and freedom from work and worry. The adjective derives from the verb, *vacō*, which Seneca employs in his treatises quite a bit and means to be vacant, empty, or unfilled; to present a gap or empty space (1); to be destitute or devoid (3a); to be exempt from duty (b) to be left free for a person’s use (4a) to be free from obligations or occupations (b) there is room or space (5a) there is time or leisure for, while the noun, *recessus* refers to the action of going back or retiring, retreat, withdrawal (1); distance back or away; seclusion; a recessed formation or arrangement (2); a receding part, recess, depression (3); a place of withdrawal, secluded place, retreat, haunt, refuge (5). And finally, *sinus*, whose third definition delineates a refuge, shelter, or embrace. Thus, investigation into the various nuances of these words whose definitions, at first, simply indicate holes, reveals that Oedipus attempts, once again, unsuccessfully, to create a safe and plague free space for himself and cut himself off from the troubles that he’s authored, or, at least that’s the idea. He’s horrified by the violence, harm and wrong he’s caused, and he, by digging out his own eyes, has constructed a space for himself for quiet.

⁷ Asmis writes “By setting moral effort over against the onslaughts of fortune, Seneca wrests the most

intensely active victory from what appears to be the most devastating crisis of defeat” (2019: 115).

Seneca's macabre attempt to dig out a safe place for himself, one which is dark and conceals the horrors he's perpetrated and caused in the form of miasma and the plague resembles Raudon's description of the reception of the existence of Hart Island: "The shock caused by Hart Island's COVID-19 burials sits at the interstices of knowing, not knowing and denial. These states include absence and invisibility, public secrecy, indifference, mutual pretence, tender deceit, ignorance and forgetting. Hart Island oscillates between revelation and concealment, presence and representation, individual knowledge, and collective silence" (2022: 97). Oedipus' shock and shame at the murder, incest, and their aftermath eerily echo the themes in the quotation above. Oedipus benefits from the oblivion of ignorance and forgetting where the scars on his feet originated, the denial of the original prophecy by his parents, the not knowing his true origins, the tender deceit of Iocasta, and the collective silence as people died from the plague.

And finally, we come to the darkness: "tantum est periculum lucis" (such is the peril of the light), a statement which has caused me much consternation. The whole passage is as follows (971-9):

Tantum est periculum lucis. attollit caput
causique lustrans orbibus caeli plagas
noctem experitur. quidquid effossis male
dependet oculis rumpit, et uictor deos
conclamat omnis: 'parcite en patriae, pre-
cor:
iam iusta feci, debitas poenas tuli;
inuenta thalamis digna nox tandem meis.'

⁸ Busch, Austin. 2007 "Versane natura est? Natural and Linguistic Instability in the Extispicium and Self-

rigat ora foedus imber et lacerum caput
largum reuulsis sanguinem uenis uomit.
Oed. 971-9

Such is the peril of the light. He lifts his head and looking around with his empty sockets at the empty space, he tests the darkness. Whatever dangles from his poorly uprooted eyes, he breaks, and triumphantly he shouts to all the gods: "spare my fatherland, I pray: now I've done just things, I've payed the penalties that were owed; I've found night fit for my marriage bed." Foul rain drenches his face, and his torn apart head vomits much blood from his plucked away veins.

Austin Busch helps with interpreting this puzzling phrase (2007: 260): "The *Naturales Questiones* provides one lens through which to view Oedipus' self-blinding. The night sky reflects the divine order governing the natural universe, but this rational structure is visible only to the observer willing to abandon superficial modes of perception to rely on *philosophia*, which is *non...oculis contenta*. Viewed from this perspective, Oedipus' self-blinding amounts to a decision to stop looking at the worldly universe superficially, that is, to move beyond the cosmos' profound divine order."⁸ I would argue in addition that Oedipus wants to be kept in the dark, to the origins and violence and the plague itself. He desires oblivion. The personal after-effects can especially be seen in the following passage:

Bene habet, peractum est: iusta persolui patri.
iuuant tenebrae. quis deus tandem mihi
placatus atra nube perfundit caput? 1000

Blinking of Seneca's Oedipus." *Classical Journal* 102: 225-67.

quis scelera donat? conscium euasi diem.
nil, parricida, dexteræ debes tuæ:
lux te refugit. uultus Oedipodam hic decet.
Oed. 998-103

It's good, it's done. I've paid just punishments to my father. The shadows are pleasing. What pleased god finally veils my head with a dark cloud? Who has pardoned my crimes? I have escaped the day that was my accomplice. Parricide, you owe your right hand nothing. Light has fled you. This face befits an Oedipus.

Indeed, Oedipus' deoculation hasn't prevented him from seeing, because, in the very next line, the messenger describes him as "looking around at the expanses of the sky with his empty sockets." His sight seems to encompass more than it originally did, because now, he can see "expanses" (plagas), and he tests out his new abilities to see the night. Stoics looked to the sky, especially constellations and stars, for guidance. Oedipus has not hindered himself from doing this.

At face value, this statement seems to indicate that "light" has caused Oedipus to blind himself, and, of course, that's true, because, after he has figured out who he actually is and what he's done, all that he's brought out into the open has caused him great pain and pushed him over the edge of rational thought and behavior. And here we have a paradox that is inherent within Oedipus himself and his present state: the light that has been shed on Oedipus has brought immeasurable darkness to him, literally, because he's blinded himself, and figuratively, because he needs to shelter himself as his life, family, and kingdom are

collapsing all around him. There is no future for them, and therefore all he can see is darkness.

Despite this grim forecast that Oedipus no doubt sees, he declares himself the victor who has done justice in his perverse and bizarre war against himself. Our own officials have "moved" on from COVID, while many of us in the public are still battling the disease and dying every day. Oedipus remains the sickness and the cure, the perpetrator and the punisher. As Ali Wu writes about the governments' responses to the COVID:

When it proves impossible to keep the number of deaths low, governments want mostly to excuse themselves through other calculations and measurements, and simultaneously, to downplay the socio-psychological impact of death by ignoring the pathos of loss and pretending that deaths belong to an invisible and unanswerable world ([Chwastiak, 2008](#); [Funnell, 1998](#)). For example, the official death toll due to coronavirus depends in part on decisions as to whether COVID-19 is recorded on the death certificate. No matter how worrisome a patient's symptoms seem to be, s/he will not be confirmed as a COVID-19 case without being tested. Even if this person dies, his/her case is not going to be recorded as a death related to coronavirus without testing. In fact, the entire process of testing, diagnosing, confirming, curing, recording, and reporting is political, subject to judgments on what coronavirus is or what it does to us (2-3).

After he "frees" himself from his eyes, he declares that he has won his battle and paid the price for his crimes. The messenger calls him "victor," and Oedipus himself says that he's done justice. Can anyone who looks like he's been through a meat-grinder be called victor? He's won, but at a huge cost. He, at this point,

embodies wholly the sin he thinks he's committed, and he always will, as he marked his sin on his own face. He is victim and victor, sacrificer and sacrificed, and master and slave. At the same time his people have died, his Iocasta, and his Laius.

The pollution and vices, however, will be his guides and teachers, as they should be, warnings for him and others for what not to do. Oedipus is a compromise, a walking symbol of trauma and catharsis for himself, his family, and his kingdom. As he travels as a monstrous exile beyond the borders of Thebes, he attempts to reverse the transgressions his parents met upon him, attempting to reverse the wounds they inflicted on his feet with the wounds he inflicted on his own face, an ever wandering, ever moving monument to pain and hope, but now he's inured to the peril of the light.

Lucan's Civil War and the Anonymous Dead

In this section, I will examine how the metaphors of contagion and plague can help shape our understanding of how people and things haunt us and how ghosts who have the ability to "infect" others are not so different from deities. Two seemingly opposing visions of spirituality exist in Lucan's Caesar: first that Caesar creates a deity of his own which is alternate to the traditional pantheon in heaps of putrefying corpses; second that the ghosts of those whom Caesar has killed possess (in both supernatural and infectious senses) his body in an act of colonization and impregnation, therefore emasculating him and

conquering him. The latter spirituality, alternate to the hegemonic pantheon and Caesar's strange, external deification, will win out in the end through retaliation.

Caesar dominates the heaps of corpses though in the following passage through counting them and creating his own religion in the dead:

postquam clara dies Pharsalica damna retexit,
nulla loci facies reuocat feralibus aruis
haerentis oculos. cernit propulsa cruore
flumina et excelsos cumulis aequantia colles
corpora, sidentis in tabem spectat acervos
et Magni numerat populos, epulisque patur
ille locus, uoltus ex quo faciesque iacentum
agnoscat. iuuat Emathiam non cernere terram
et lustrare oculis campos sub clade latentes.
fortunam superosque suos in sanguine cernit.

Luc. 7.787-96

After the bright day uncovers the ghastly Pharsalian plain, no appearance of the place calls his eyes back as they're sticking to the fields which brought death. He looks at the rivers driven forward by blood and the bodies in heaps becoming equal to the lofty hills, he watches the mass sinking into putrefaction and counts Magnus 'people (implies mass), and that place is opened up for feasts, that place from which he may look at the expressions and faces of those who lie dead. He's delighted to not see the Emathian earth and to look at the fields hiding under the carnage with his eyes. He sees Fortuna and his own gods in the blood.

Imagery of exposure fills this passage, as it filled the passages above — *clara dies* (bright day); *retexit* (uncover); *patur* (expose); *latentes* (lying hidden). Caesar has inflicted a

vast wound upon the body politic which lies exposed and vulnerable to infection, an indication of mass trauma. This is of course no better represented than by the heaps of putrefying bodies (*tabes, cruore; cumulis; clade*), bodies which belonged to Roman citizens and who have now lost their identity at the hands of Caesar.

The putrefaction which Caesar delights in is an impossible occurrence because the battle of Pharsalus occurred only the previous day. This is not the only passage in which time and space are distorted, and, in fact, this is a common trope.⁹ Experiencing a disruption of time is a symptom of trauma as victims of trauma often describe time slowing down, stopping, or speeding up during the traumatic event or after it. Psychoanalyst Robert D. Stolorow writes, “Experiences of emotional trauma become freeze-framed into an eternal present in which one remains forever trapped, or to which one is condemned to be perpetually returned by life’s slings and arrows. In the region of trauma all duration or stretching along collapses, the [traumatic](#) past becomes present, and future loses all meaning other than endless repetition” (2015).

This is not the only instance when time is distorted in *Civil War*. In book five, as Apollo is inhabiting his prophetess Phemonoe, he rapes, impregnates her with all of time at once, and eventually kills her by choking her (*faucesque obstruxit Apollo*, 197).

⁹ IM Crosson writes, “Multiple spatial and temporal frames thus converge and continue running in parallel throughout the epic,” (2020:28).

uenit aetas omnis in unam
congeriem, miserumque premunt tot saecula pectus,
tanta patet rerum series, atque omne futurum
nititur in lucem, uocemque petentia fata 180
luctantur; non prima dies, non ultima mundi,
non modus Oceani, numerus non derat harenae.

All time arrives into one heap. So many ages crush her miserable breast. Such great series of happenings lie exposed, and every future struggles into the light, and deaths that are endings struggle as they seek a voice. There is no beginning, no end of the world.

There are many narrative similarities to the previous passage where Caesar looks at the rotting heaps he defeated. Each passage describes a sequence of traumatic events, a violent penetration; heaps; is a distortion of time and space or place; observation of violent death. Stolorow writes of the profound nature of the effect of trauma’s ability to alter the trauma victim’s sense of time: “because trauma so profoundly modifies the universal or shared structure of temporality, the traumatized person quite literally lives in another kind of reality, an experiential world felt to be incommensurable with those of others,” (2015).

Many of us have also experienced feelings of distortion of time as we’ve suffered a mass trauma event. As Bakó and Zana argue, “during the COVID period, observations of both our therapy sessions and ourselves have shown us how we relate to events in the external world much faster than usual, and, in some cases, in a radically different manner. In

March 2020, the general public mood changed in a matter of days” (Bakó and Zana 2021: 515). In this quotation, they draw attention to an acceleration and distortion of time similar to that which we see in book seven and book five of *Civil War*. They speak in the plural, “our,” “ourselves,” “we,” “general public,” which reflects the mass traumatic events throughout Civil War as well as Seneca’s *Oedipus*. Their phrase, “in a radically different manner” reflects the realities of times of civil war and pandemic: routines are disrupted; time either stands still or speeds up; work routines are disrupted; loved ones die or are permanently disabled. Things will never be the same.

To return to the previous passage, as Caesar sees his gods — *suos superos*— in the heaps of dead soldiers, he recognizes two contradictory things: the sheer power of the masses of soldiers whom he has killed (he can’t tear his eyes away from the heaps); and, at the same time, he attempts to appropriate that power for himself, he can only see *his* gods. The possessive reflexive adjective, *suos*, is very telling of his megalomania and his myopic, narcissistic desire to possess everyone and everything.

Caesar mistakenly sees his own power and divinity in the dead, but he fails to name and pay tribute to the individual dead soldiers thereby robbing them of identity and dignity and delighting (*iuvat*) in the carnage before him. At the same time, the lacuna which mass death allows the birth of new sorts of faith

and spirituality. For example, in book six, Scaeva’s brothers in arms worship the *numen* (divinity) housed in his breast.

nam sanguine fuso
uires pugna dabat. labentem turba suorum
excipit atque umeris defectum inponere gaudet;
ac uelut inclusum perfosso in pectore numen
et uiuam magnae speciem Virtutis adorant;
telaque confixis certant euellere membris,
exornantque deos ac nudum pectore Martem
armis, Scaeuam, tuis.

Luc. 6.250-7

For, with blood poured out, fighting was giving you strength. A crowd of your brothers lifts you up as you are slipping and rejoices to place you, after you failed, on their shoulders, and they worship the living specter of great *Virtus* as being a divinity (*numen*) interred in his pierced breast, and they compete to grab the weapons from his transfixed limbs. They adorn the gods and Mars naked with respect to his chest with your weapons, Scaeva.

Saylor writes: “Scaeva’s mutilation signals no compensatory gain in spiritual faculties, no transcendence of the flesh or the world of sight and feeling” (251).¹⁰ I wholeheartedly disagree. This passage, to me, reads like a devotional text, with Scaeva’s brothers, here described as “*turba suorum*,” lifting him up in consecration to what they perceive as a divine force. The word *turba* is fitting because it indicates a confusion of boundaries or a wild crowd. Through the confusion of Civil War, these soldiers can find something redeeming and sacred in their fellow soldier, while Scaeva remains problematic and full of crime.

¹⁰ Saylor, C.F. 1978. *Belli Spes Inproba: The Theme of Walls in Lucan, Pharsalia VI*. *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 108: 243-257.

Scaeva's body, emptied of blood (*sanguine fuso*) and his limbs which have been perforated (which is wall language) are a gateway through which his divinity (*numen*) in the form of *virtus* may manifest itself. That *virtus* has been devalued in civil war, as Fantham and Hömke argue, does not alter the fact that Scaeva's brothers choose to worship it as being a *numen* in his breast. In having been robbed of freedom, dignity, and hope, the soldiers create their own vexed dignity and hope through a spirituality alternate to the traditional pantheon, a sort of magic which in turn confers a magic quality on Scaeva. The horror and atrocity allow a "revelation" and "uncovering" of new ways of coping, grieving, and living. When people don't trust the institutions which supposedly support them, they create their own which will support and help them.¹¹ Scaeva becomes simultaneously a ghost (*specter*) and a deity (*numen*).

The dead soldiers, their pollution, and their ghosts do just that. The lack of proper funerary rituals and the erasure of the identity of the dead ultimately act as a sort of "liberation." The dead restore and reclaim the pollution they supposedly don't emit on the battlefield and harness that pollution for

¹¹ Leib argues that "They (*homines magi*) exist outside of the *fides*, or communal faith, as Agamben would say, and thus, we struggle to hear in them anything more than a kind of singular, unverifiable speech. Nothing binds the infidel's words to the truth of a community, and when nothing prevents a lie, speech loses all meaning. 25 Yet sometimes such speech persists and grows, insisting upon itself while talking about foreign gods, or the injustices committed against it by those on the inside, and this makes the community nervous. Here, where babble becomes blasphemy, we find that what is ultimately so

ultimately retaliating against Caesar. The shades occupy, infect, and colonize Caesar's body. We see this in the following passage:

umbra perempti
 cuius adest; sua quemque premit terroris imago:
 ille senum uoltus, iuuenum uidet ille figuras,
 hunc agitant totis fraterna cadauera somnis, 775
 pectore in hoc pater est, omnes in Caesare manes.
Luc. 7.772-6

The phantom of a killed citizen is present;
 Each man's own ghost of terror afflicts him.
 This man the faces of old men, that man sees
 figures of youth, the corpse of a brother dis-
 turbs this man from his deep dreams. A fa-
 ther is in this chest. All shades are in Caesar.

To conclude by turning back to book seven, the narrator addresses Caesar in a mournful and angry but triumphal voice. After the anonymous dead have decayed into the water and their ashes have dissipated into the sky, they will eventually be free and defeat Caesar:

has trahe, Caesar, aquas, hoc, si potes, utere caelo.
 sed tibi tabentes populi Pharsalica rura
 eripiunt camposque tenent uictore fugato.
Luc. 7.821-824

Drink these waters, Caesar, breathe in the
 sky, if you can. But the rotting multitudes rob

threatening about these voices is not their simple being-thus but their blatant disregard for the conditions of "our" sovereign truth" (*The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 31, no. 3 (2017): 358-71.)

He goes on to say, "Western history—which is to say, under the gaze of sovereignty—magic has routinely been attributed to the outsider, but this was almost always to degrade that outsider's speech in some way: magic, which does not "really" exist, is a kind of babble or malicious, collective hypnotism" (Leib 2017:365)

the Pharsalian fields from you and take the plains back when the victor has fled.

This apostrophe firmly puts agency in the hands of the “*tabentes populi*” (rotting multitudes) who will overtake Caesar, who was previously unstoppable. The fields of Pharsalus are a site of a mass crime, and the dead weaponize their own ritual pollution and putrefaction in an act of biological and spectral warfare. The pollution itself is deified because of Caesar’s arrogance and absolute criminality. The dead retaliate against Caesar in dissipation, decay, and anonymity. As ghosts, dust, ash and putrefying liquid, they haunt and infect Caesar.

The COVID dead as ghost is a useful metaphor. Just as Scaeva, a magical, though berserker, soldier, becomes a “specter (or ghost) of virtue” to his brothers in arms, just so beloved loved ones who have been lost to COVID can be remembered as dying in an unjust way, but remembered fondly. Just as the vengeful ghosts retaliate against Caesar and haunt him, just so all of us are haunted by those who have died from this awful pandemic. We’re scared and angry, and we want them (and it) to leave us alone. Gabriel Schwab writes of traumatic and violent pasts: “While we foreclose mourning by burying the dead in our psyche, those dead will return as ghosts. Violent histories have a haunting quality even before their legacy is passed on to the next generation” (2010: 2). There is great power in occupying the role of ghost, because, as we saw in the case of Scaeva, they occupy the role of deity as well, ghost/deities who control our time, our lives, and our deaths.

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