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Philip Hardie

Excerpt

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Introduction

We know very little for certain about the life of Lucretius.¹ The late-antique legend of a poet writing in the intervals of sanity after a love-potion given to him by his wife drove him mad, fostered the idea of a lone genius struggling to complete his visionary masterpiece on philosophical enlightenment against the constant threat of total mental breakdown. An unprejudiced reading of the poem might yield the impression of a fanatical adherent of Epicureanism who sweeps aside the traditional cultural and political concerns of Roman society in order to propagate the message of a Greek philosophical school which advocated an alternative life-style of ethical self-perfection in the company of a few like-minded individuals – a ‘fundamentalist’, somewhat to extend the meaning of that term as applied to Lucretius by David Sedley,² at odds with the prevailing values of late Republican Rome, and whose one goal is to persuade his readers of the urgent need to convert to Epicureanism.

Yet recent work in Latin literary studies on genre, allusion, and intertextuality has made it increasingly clear that this apparently self-marginalizing author is very much at the centre of the literary history of the last years of the Republic and of the early Empire – just as much so, indeed, as is his contemporary Catullus, whose poetry more obviously locates itself on the wider social, political, and cultural stage of contemporary Rome. Even allowing for the inevitable distortion in our perception of intertextualities consequent on the fact that the Catullan corpus

¹ For an ingenious attempt at a reconstruction, based on unprovable identifications with other ancient evidence, see Canfora 1993; see also P. G. Fowler and D. Fowler 2003: 888. The traditional dating of the *De Rerum Natura* in the mid 50s BC has been called into question by Hutchinson 2001, arguing for a date of 49 or 48 BC.

² Sedley 1998: ch. 3 ‘Lucretius the fundamentalist’, an argument that Lucretius has no serious philosophical interest in anything other or later than the unmediated doctrines of Epicurus himself, and thus that Lucretius is deliberately out of touch with intervening philosophical developments.

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and the *De Rerum Natura* are the first fully extant substantial works of non-dramatic Latin poetry, no-one now would seriously doubt that both Catullus and Lucretius are decisive for some of the major directions, and much of the detail, of the poetic production of the following decades in Rome.³

For Lucretius this has always been clear in the case of the genre of didactic, a kind of poetry marginal to post-Romantic notions of the literary, but central within an ancient poetics where entertainment and instruction were never kept rigorously apart. The *De Rerum Natura* is massively influential on Virgil's *Georgics*, and thereby on the later didactic poems of Ovid and Manilius. The importance of Lucretius for the *Georgics* is already registered in Macrobius' lists of parallels;⁴ it was emphasized by W. Y. Sellar,⁵ and has now been comprehensively mapped by Monica Gale.⁶ In my 1986 book on the *Aeneid* I made a case that the *De Rerum Natura* is hardly less a presence in the *Aeneid* than it is in the *Georgics*.⁷ My emphasis there was on the ways in which the cosmological structures of the *De Rerum Natura* were diverted to the imperial ideology that informs the setting and actions of a heroic narrative epic, a process eased by the prior exploitation by Lucretius of epic themes in his didactic poem. One of the results of these two instances of the 'contamination' of epic and didactic models is the reinforcement of what is in any case an originary association in the Greco-Roman tradition between the two kinds of *epos*, hexameter poetry on the deeds of gods and heroes and hexameter poetry of instruction. Chapters 4, 5, 7, and 8 of this volume extend, in various directions, this exploration of the links between narrative epic and didactic.

The tradition that in his youth Virgil was an Epicurean has led to a search for elements of Epicureanism in his first major work, the *Eclogues*, encouraged by *otium* as a value shared by practitioners of Hellenistic philosophy and the fictive inhabitants of the pastoral world, by the rejection of warfare and political ambition by pastoral poet and his

³ For a fuller survey of Lucretius and later Latin literature in antiquity see P. Hardie 2007a. There is a significant number of places in the poetry of Virgil and Horace where there is combined allusion to Catullus and Lucretius (for an example see 36–7), a phenomenon that I shall examine in more detail elsewhere.

⁴ *Sat.* 6 (with many parallels also for the *Aeneid*).

⁵ Sellar 1877: 199 'The influence, direct and indirect, exercised by Lucretius on the composition and style of the *Georgics* was perhaps stronger than that exercised, before or since, by one great poet on another.'

⁶ Gale 2000. See also P. Hardie 1986a: 158–67; Farrell 1991: 84–104, 169–206 on Lucretius in the *Georgics*.

⁷ P. Hardie 1986a: ch. 5.

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characters, and by the Epicurean retreat into the Garden. Many individual allusions to the *De Rerum Natura* have been spotted in the *Eclogues*, but a sense that the genres of pastoral and natural-philosophical didactic stand far apart from one another may have inhibited a more far-reaching search for the Lucretian in the *Eclogues*. It could recently still be claimed that ‘Lucretius was known to Virgil when he wrote the *Eclogues*, but does not yet seem to affect him in more than a superficial way.’⁸ In Chapter 1 I read the *Eclogues* book for a sustained engagement with large-scale structures of thought and image in the *De Rerum Natura*. My conclusion on Virgil’s fascination with the *De Rerum Natura* in all three of his major works is that ‘It is almost as if at the beginning of his career Virgil intuits that Lucretius’ capacious textual universe will provide space within which to develop the projects of all three of his major works.’⁹

The other major conduit for the channelling of Lucretian intertextuality into the mainstream of Augustan poetry is Horace, the close friend of Virgil, Plotius Tucca, and Varius Rufus, all members of an Epicurean circle,¹⁰ and himself the subject of a life-long interest in Epicureanism. Varius Rufus is one of the great gaps in our knowledge of Augustan poetry, clearly a major figure whose works now survive only in exiguous fragments. One of Varius’ lost poems the *De Morte* may well have been an Epicurean poem on the fear of death, inspired by the *De Rerum Natura* and the Epicurean philosopher Philodemus’ prose treatise *On Death*: if so, another mainstream channel for the conveyance of Lucretian material into triumviral and Augustan poetry (allusion to the *De Morte* in Virgil’s eighth *Eclogue* gives a *terminus ante quem* of 39 BC).¹¹ Horace’s extensive use of Lucretius in the *Satires* and *Epistles*, both hexameter works with strong generic affinities with didactic, is well recognized. Horace makes a loud Lucretian signal in his adaptation of the honeyed-cup simile (*DRN* 1.936–42) at the beginning of his first satire, 1.1.24–6 *quamquam ridentem dicere uerum | quid uetat? ut pueris olim dant crustula blandi | doctores, elementa uelint ut discere prima* ‘although what stops a man laughing from telling the truth? As teachers often coax boys by giving them little cakes, to encourage them to learn the first elements’, at the same time as the next line seeks to establish a distance between Horace and his Lucretian model, *sed tamen amoto quaeramus seria ludo* ‘but let us

⁸ Jenkyns 1998: 211.⁹ P. Hardie 2007a: 127.¹⁰ Moles 2007: 168, referring for the claim that Horace himself *was* an Epicurean to Armstrong 2004.¹¹ See Hollis 2007: 260–73.

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put aside games to inquire into serious matters' – ironically, since there is far more laughter in the *Satires* than in the *De Rerum Natura*. In Chapter 6 I trace a set of Lucretian allusions across the whole *œuvre* of Horace, and demonstrate that Lucretius (as opposed to Epicurean material more generally) is more pervasive in the *Odes* than has hitherto been recognized.

Turning from the imitators of Lucretius to the *De Rerum Natura* as viewed by modern criticism,¹² a number of features of the poem now generally recognized show that, despite its apparent tunnel vision as a vehicle for Epicurean evangelism, it was always at the centre of Roman literary institutions. Since E. J. Kenney's classic article on the Alexandrian learning worn by Lucretius, we have become accustomed to the idea that the archaic, Ennian, patina of much of the poem, so far from being the mark of an old-fashioned poet out of touch with contemporary literary developments, is only part of a complex poetic self-positioning within the history of Greek and Latin poetry up to and including the Hellenistic poets and their Roman 'Alexandrian' successors.¹³ Whatever the conclusion about Lucretius' position within the history of Epicureanism, he is no conservative 'fundamentalist' when it comes to poetic traditions. A strong sense of an allusive literary history is found, for example, in the account at *DRN* I.117–26 of the Dream of Homer at the beginning of Ennius' *Annals*. As well as making a polemical point about the belief in the post-mortem survival of the soul, this passage also constructs a chain of succession running from Homer through Ennius to the modern poet Lucretius, retrospectively defining an epic-didactic tradition of hexameter poetry *de rerum natura*. Stephen Hinds has showed us that this kind of literary history by allusion reaches far back in the history of Latin literature.¹⁴ We are most used to it in the neoteric poets and their Augustan successors: in Chapter 4 I analyse a large-scale example in the most self-conscious of all Latin poets, Ovid, in a climactic position near the end of the *Metamorphoses*, which both alludes to and overgoes Lucretius' proemial engagement with Homer and Ennius.

Other aspects of the 'modernity' of Lucretius have to do with the structure and organization of his material. 'Lucretius' is the earliest surviving Latin poem in which the "book" is handled as an artistic unit and plays an integral part in the literary architecture of the whole."¹⁵

¹² For a succinct survey of recent scholarly and critical trends see Gale 2007a 'Introduction'.

¹³ Kenney 1970. On the range of genres alluded to in the *DRN* see Gale 2007b: 67–70.

¹⁴ Hinds 1998: ch. 3.

¹⁵ Kenney 1971: 18. Until Herculaneum yields up a complete text, we cannot know for certain how carefully organized Ennius' *Annals* was in this respect. For the detail see Farrell 2007: 76–91.

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In this the *De Rerum Natura* is in keeping with what we can reconstruct of the practice of Hellenistic poems in multiple books, or poetry books with multiple poems, and anticipates the complex architecture of, for example, the *Georgics* or the *Aeneid*. At the level of the linear reading of the text, the *De Rerum Natura* is characterized by an alternation of moods, of passages of dark and light, of more and less technical passages, whose purpose, according to many critics, is the deliberate manipulation of the reader's response to clearly defined protreptic and rhetorical ends,¹⁶ this in opposition to an earlier fashion for seeing such variation as the symptom of a poet whose heart was at odds with his head, an 'anti-Lucrèce chez Lucrèce'. If that is true, nevertheless the changes in pace and mood, apparent contradictions which turn out to be nothing of the sort, were a fertile point of departure for poets like Virgil and Horace whose texts are standardly these days read for ideological and psychological tensions and contradictions. In her book on the use of the *De Rerum Natura* in the *Georgics* Monica Gale shows how Lucretian complexity translates into Virgilian contradiction and *aporia*. In Chapters 5 and 6 of this volume I look at how Lucretius' handling of the marvellous and the sublime (in fact an area where it is arguable that Lucretius does not achieve a totally integrated manipulation of the reader's psychology) provokes an undecided oscillation between an aspiration to lofty flights and visions, and a failure of nerve.

The essays in this volume are grouped under three broad headings, each of them an area of major concern for poets engaged with the political, cultural, and artistic conditions of the emerging and early principate.

I TIME, HISTORY, CULTURE

At *De Rerum Natura* 1.445–82 Lucretius argues that time has no existence in itself separate from bodies and their motion. Events in the past have no *per se* existence, but are the accidents of the places where they occurred, and of the bodies and the spaces once occupied by those bodies. In one of his most brutal acts of reduction, Lucretius presents five lines of richly imagistic and epicizing summary of the Trojan War from the Rape of Helen to the Sack of Troy: all this, the stuff of traditional epic, the narrative that lies at the origin of the foundation and history of Rome, vanishes into insubstantiality compared with the reality of atoms and space. Time and that which is measured by time, history, have no reality

¹⁶ An overview of the literature in Gale 2007a: 5–7.

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of their own. For the individual the memory of past philosophical conversations and friendships is a source of pleasure, but what happened in the remoter past is as much a matter of indifference as what will happen after our death: another of Lucretius' exercises in the epic manner shows that the world-shattering events of the Punic Wars, the most critical turning point in Roman history, are nothing to us (*DRN* 3.832–7).

Jane Austen's novels never refer to the events of the Napoleonic Wars, but modern criticism has not found it difficult to embed her work in its contemporary historical context. It is perhaps not surprising that in an age of historicisms of various kinds, of what Charles Martindale refers to as 'culturalism' or 'ideology critique',¹⁷ recent work has increasingly drawn attention to the ways in which Lucretius is engaged with the realities and representations of Roman history and politics.¹⁸ And the *De Rerum Natura* has its own epic plot that pivots on a before and after, the revolution in the condition of humankind brought about by the coming of Epicurus and his revelation of Epicurean truth. This salvation history is of a kind that was in the air in both the western and eastern Mediterranean in the later first century BC, and offered a powerful resource to Octavian and his supporters in their claim to have saved Rome from the chaos and moral decline of civil war. The figurative divinity with which Lucretius invests his philosophical saviour Epicurus is akin to the forms of godhead in which Julius Caesar and then Octavian/Augustus were cloaked; the *Eclogues*, one of the earliest poetic texts to feel its way towards what would become institutionalized as the cult of the emperor, draws recurrently on Lucretian imagery of the divine great man (see 31–2).

Furthermore book five of the *De Rerum Natura* presents one of the most elaborate and nuanced of surviving histories of human culture from antiquity. Lucretius' purpose is to present an anti-teleological and anti-providential history of mankind that accounts for the whole of recorded and unrecorded time in terms of his atomist philosophy. His vivid and persuasive pictures of the various stages of human development provided rich material for later poets' location of the remarkable times in which they lived within a long perspective of human and Roman history, whether through acceptance of or polemical engagement with the Lucretian version of things. Chapters 1 and 2 trace a number of responses to Lucretius on time and history in Virgil and Horace, reaching from Virgil's first major work, the *Eclogues*, to possibly Horace's last composition, the

¹⁷ Martindale 2005.¹⁸ See D. Fowler 1989; Schiesaro 2007.

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Ars Poetica. Lucretian models are useful for thinking about histories both political and literary (but in Rome literary histories tend to reflect political and military narratives).

II SUBLIME VISIONS

The sublime has been a rather understudied category in modern histories of Latin literature. Notable exceptions to this statement are Gian Biagio Conte's essays on Lucretius and the *Aeneid*;¹⁹ the last, however, is written without reference to Conte's own anatomy of the Lucretian sublime. James Porter has written extensively on the sublime in antiquity, and points to intriguing parallels between Lucretius and ps.-Longinus that suggest that both are parts of a wider history of the sublime in antiquity that remains to be written.²⁰ Piet Schrijvers has drawn attention to the close affinities, both in broad outline and in detail, between *On the Sublime* and Latin literature of the first centuries BC and AD in their treatment of the awe and wonder aroused by great natural phenomena, with particular reference to Silius Italicus, whose *Punica* is deeply indebted in this as in other respects to the *Aeneid*.²¹

The chapters in this section are contributions to this still incomplete history of the sublime in Latin literature. The response of both Virgil and Horace to the Lucretian sublime is profound and conflicted, manifesting a complexity that results from a failure to achieve what might be called a Lucretian purity of purpose. One might doubt, indeed, whether even Lucretius succeeds in taming the psychological experience of the sublime sufficiently to conform with the Epicurean ideal of *ataraxia*. His chief strategy is to divert the thrill and amazement aroused by a pre-Epicurean experience of an unpredictable, mysterious, and god-filled universe to exhilaration at the scientific vision of an infinity of atoms tumbling through an infinite void. The Virgilian and Horatian sublime is experienced in the face of a universe to which the gods have returned; it is also a sublime transferable from the natural world to the world of Roman history (Schrijvers refers to the 'historical/political sublime'),²² so inscribing the sublime at the origins of an imperial aesthetic that will find grandiose expression later in the literature of the Neronian and Flavian

¹⁹ Lucretius: Conte 1966 and 1994; Virgil: Conte 2007.

²⁰ Porter 2007. A conference on 'The Classical Sublime' was held in Cambridge on 14–15 March 2008.

²¹ Schrijvers 2006.

²² Schrijvers 2006: 101.

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periods. This is an aesthetic that neither Virgil nor Horace find it entirely easy to control, and in the case of Horace there is a distinct sense of discomfort, visible in an alternation of attraction to and distancing from a Lucretian sublime.

Lucretius is the major catalyst, I argue, in the development of an early imperial aesthetic of the sublime in Virgil and Horace, but the Lucretian sublime itself comes with a history. One of the most sublime (if perhaps surprisingly so) episodes in the *Aeneid* is the intervention of *Fama* together with its sequel in Book 4. In Chapter 3 I attempt to demonstrate that the person of *Fama* is largely put together out of Lucretian bits and pieces; but *Fama*, one of the meanings of whose name is 'tradition', is also generated out of Ennian material already put to use by Lucretius, and, further back, out of Ennius' own Empedoclean source. Lucretius, as we have seen, is as concerned as Virgil or Ovid, to give a version of the literary history that stretches back before his poem. Chapter 4 is a revised version of an older article in which I discuss an Ovidian commentary on and continuation of this literary history of what I label 'Empedoclean epos'.

III CERTAINTIES AND UNCERTAINTIES

One aspect of the Virgilian and Horatian failure (or reluctance) to commit to the Lucretian 'purity of purpose' is the inability to match sublime viewings to an assured possession of an intellectual truth (paradigmatically Lucretius' sublime vision of Epicurean physics at the beginning of *De Rerum Natura* 3). A contrast between Lucretian certainties and Virgilian uncertainties plays well for adherents of the 'Harvard School' of Virgilian criticism.²³ Chapter 4 in the previous section of this volume has already shown how recurrent sublime – Lucretian – viewings in the *Aeneid* do not lead to a clear and monolithic intellectual grasp on reality.

In this section I look at further responses to the authority of the Lucretian 'epic of knowledge'. Chapter 7 takes a formal feature of Epicurean and Lucretian argument, the use of multiple explanations, used in the *De Rerum Natura* in orthodox Epicurean fashion to reinforce philosophical certainty, and pursues its use in later didactic and epic, from Virgil's *Georgics* to Statius' *Thebaid*. There is a clear line of descent from the Lucretian models, but complexity – and further uncertainty – results from the combination, or contamination, of the Epicurean model

²³ E.g. Perkell 1989: 10–11.

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of explanation with expressions of alternative explanation at home in the non-didactic hexameter tradition.

In Chapter 8 I move forward in time to one of the latest, and one of the greatest, major exercises in the classical epic tradition, Milton's *Paradise Lost*. This is a poem which, unlike the ancient line of Virgil's epic successors, does assert a confidence in the poet's ability to achieve an assured knowledge of reality and to convey this to the reader. I argue for a far-reaching analogy between the didactic strategies of Lucretius and Milton, based on an attentive and insightful reading of the *De Rerum Natura* by Milton. *Paradise Lost*, the masterpiece of the Christian Milton, turns out to be one of the most Lucretian of epics in the classical tradition.

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Time, history, culture