

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84801-5 - The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius

Edited by Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie

Excerpt

[More information](#)

STUART GILLESPIE AND PHILIP HARDIE

Introduction

Lucretius' *De rerum natura* (hereafter *DRN*), together with Catullus 64 (a much shorter narrative mythological poem on the wedding of the parents of Achilles, Peleus and Thetis), are the first fully surviving examples of a hexameter *epos* in Latin. The Greek word *epos*, 'epic' in hexameters, includes both narrative poems on the deeds of heroes (in the line of the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*) and didactic poems that give instruction in some body of knowledge (in the line of Hesiod's *Works and Days* and *Theogony*). This formal link, through the shared metre, between what might appear to be two very different kinds of literary product is important: the *DRN* is both a poem of instruction and a celebration of the godlike achievement of Lucretius' philosophical hero Epicurus. Both the *DRN* and Catullus 64 were massively influential on later Latin poetry, not least because of the intense engagement with them on the part of the classic Roman hexameter poet, Virgil. Lucretius and Catullus are the two giants of Latin poetry at the end of the Roman Republic, without whose innovations and refinements in poetic technique and subject matter it is hard to imagine the works of Augustan classicism by Virgil, Horace, and the rest.¹

For all the differences between Lucretius and Catullus in terms of themes and poetic *persona*, they share the status of major contributors to the naturalisation of Greek culture in Rome (the 'hellenisation of Rome'), a process coextensive with the history of Roman civilisation but which reaches a new intensity and sophistication in the late Republic, to feed into that blend of Roman and Greek that we know as Augustan classicism.² Both Lucretius and Catullus are major importers from the post-classical, Hellenistic, Greek world. Catullus is the chief representative of Latin 'Alexandrianism', the use of poetic techniques associated with Callimachus, Apollonius of Rhodes

¹ On the direct relationships between Lucretius and Catullus see pp. 69–70 below.

² For a perceptive study of the way in which Catullus 64 thematises the relationship of a Roman readership to a glamorous world of Greek culture see Fitzgerald 1995: ch. 6.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84801-5 - The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius

Edited by Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie

Excerpt

[More information](#)

STUART GILLESPIE AND PHILIP HARDIE

and other writers active in Alexandria and other Greek cultural centres in the centuries after the death of Alexander the Great. The *DRN* is an important monument in the history of the reception in Rome of Greek philosophy and science. That history was well under way in the second century BC; Lucretius and his contemporary Cicero mark a significant new stage of the large-scale adaptation and translation of Greek philosophical texts into Latin, so inaugurating a philosophical vocabulary for what would be the chief language of philosophy in the medieval and early modern periods.³ Lucretius girds up his loins for the difficult task of ‘shedding light in Latin verses on the dark discoveries of the Greeks’ (*DRN* 1.136–7)⁴ in an endeavour of both linguistic and cultural translation, the propagation of a Greek philosophical doctrine with the intention of changing radically the way that Lucretius’ Roman audience thinks and lives.

That philosophy is Epicureanism, one of the two major dogmatic post-Aristotelian schools, together with Stoicism (the third major school being the sceptical continuation of Plato’s Academy).⁵ Like other schools of Greek philosophy, Epicureanism offered systematic coverage of the three major branches of philosophical thought: epistemology, physics and ethics. The purpose of philosophy is practical, to ensure the happy life. For Epicurus the highest good is pleasure, the *uoluptas* personified in Venus in the first line of the *DRN*. An enduring caricature of Epicureanism misrepresents this as a gross sensual hedonism;⁶ in fact Epicureans maximise pleasure through the removal of pain, a goal achieved by the limitation of desires and the elimination of mental disturbance (*ataraxia*). In practice Epicurean ethics largely coincides with that of the other Hellenistic schools and is compatible with the conventional private virtues of Graeco-Roman culture. When Horace, for example, engages in popular-philosophical moralising, it is often difficult, and unnecessary, to specify whether he is drawing on Epicurean or Stoic platitudes. What sets Epicureanism apart from the other schools, as a lasting

³ See pp. 19–20 below; Powell 1995a; and various essays on philosophy at Rome in Griffin and Barnes 1989, and Barnes and Griffin 1997.

⁴ For discussion of Lucretius’ famous protest at the ‘poverty of the Latin language’ see Farrell 2001: 39–51; on the details of his practice in translating Greek technical terms see p. 22 below.

⁵ On Hellenistic philosophy in general see Long and Sedley 1987; on the wider history and reception of Epicureanism see H. Jones 1989, Warren forthcoming. For a detailed account of Lucretius’ use of Epicurus see ch. 1 below; on the flourishing community of Epicureans in the Bay of Naples see ch. 2 below.

⁶ Lucretius refers polemically to this distortion in his description of the unhappy, and un-Epicurean, life of luxury at *DRN* 2.24–8, alluding to features of the palace of the Phaeacian king Alcinous in the *Odyssey*, whose sensual delights were sometimes interpreted as an image of Epicurean pleasure: see D. P. Fowler 2002 ad loc.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84801-5 - The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius

Edited by Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

scandal to conventional ways of thinking, is its physics, which includes theology (an account of the nature of the gods being a standard part of ancient philosophical doctrines on the nature, *physis*, *natura*, of the world). Adopting the atomist theories of the Presocratic philosopher Democritus, Epicurus teaches a radical and anti-teleological materialism. Everything is made up of indivisible (*a-tomos*) particles of matter moving, colliding, and congregating at random in an infinite void. The gods exist,⁷ but they too are made up of a particular kind of atom, and they exercise no providential government of the sublunary world.

The *DRN* has the ethical goal of converting its readers to the Epicurean way of life, but its subject matter, as its title indicates, is for the most part physics, not ethics.⁸ A true understanding of the nature of the universe is the precondition for Epicurean happiness, above all through the removal of the fear of the gods and of what happens after death (for the Epicurean merely annihilation). Another distinguishing characteristic of the Epicurean school was its near-idolisation of its founder, with the consequence that it was easy for Lucretius, working within the hexameter epic tradition as broadly defined above, to represent Epicurus as a uniquely great hero, engaged in a titanic struggle against the forces of superstition and darkness – ‘titanic’ in the sense that a recurring image of the poem is an assault, such as that of the mythical Titans or Giants, on the traditional Olympian gods, as Epicurus’ mind (and Lucretius’ and the reader’s minds following after) ranges sovereign through the infinite void. The *DRN* is balanced between a sense of intellectual control of the mysteries of nature and a continuing wonder and amazement at the vastness and impersonality of the universe revealed by the power of Epicurus’ mind. The poem is an important and hitherto inadequately recognised document in the history of the sublime, as James Porter shows in chapter 10 of this volume.

*Docti furor arduus Lucreti*⁹

The *DRN* is an unsettling poem whose aim is to produce in its reader a settled peace of mind. In his dogged and unswerving pursuit of a single truth Lucretius also emerges as a writer of paradox, although, arguably, some of the paradoxes are ones that later centuries have read into the poem. Statius in

⁷ Or at least material images of the gods exist, from which we form our concepts of the gods: for the evidence for this now widely held ‘idealist’, as opposed to ‘realist’, view of Epicurus’ gods see Long and Sedley 1987: 1, 144–9; Peta Fowler in D. P. Fowler 2002: 239–40 n. 48.

⁸ For an outline of the contents of the *DRN* see p. 81 below.

⁹ Statius, *Silvae* 2.7.76: ‘learned Lucretius’ sublime frenzy’.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84801-5 - The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius

Edited by Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie

Excerpt

[More information](#)

STUART GILLESPIE AND PHILIP HARDIE

his one-line thumbnail of Lucretius juxtaposes the rationality of the doctrine of the *DRN* (*docti*) with the ‘madness’ (*furor*) of the poem’s lofty inspiration. ‘Learned’ also points to the kind of poetry that is produced by art or technique (*ars*), as opposed to the untutored outpourings of genius or inspiration (*ingenium*, *furor*), an opposition central to the poetics of Lucretius’ day, but which, Monica Gale argues in this volume,¹⁰ Lucretius deliberately collapses in a poem that presents itself as *both* inspired *and* carefully crafted.

Another opposition which forcibly strikes the modern reader, that between poetry and science (or philosophy), would have been less apparent to the ancient reader: as a specimen of didactic poetry, the *DRN* belongs to a central genre in Graeco-Roman antiquity, and one which enjoyed a long life in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, both in Latin and in the vernaculars. Yasmin Haskell (ch. 11 below) traces some of the developments in neo-Latin didactic poetry of the early modern period, a tradition of considerable importance in the history of European culture¹¹ but to which little attention is usually now paid. Moreover, a strong scientific didacticism runs through some of the central monuments of the western canon. Although Dante could not have had direct access to the text of Lucretius, rediscovered in the early Renaissance,¹² one Dante scholar has developed an illuminating comparison between Dante and Lucretius in order to expound the connection between ‘true knowledge’ and ‘poetry’ that underpins the *Divina Commedia*.¹³ Spenser’s debt to Lucretius as well as (for his period) the more usual source of Ovid as a poet of physical law in *The Faerie Queene* has long been recognised.¹⁴ Milton was a keen reader of Lucretius, and *Paradise Lost* is significantly indebted to the *DRN* as a poem that teaches its reader a sublime vision of a universe.¹⁵ James Thomson’s *The Seasons*, one of the most widely read poems of the eighteenth century, draws on the *DRN* in manner and structure.¹⁶ This strain grows fainter after the eighteenth century, but around its end Erasmus Darwin, grandfather of Charles and a leading figure in the scientific culture of the time, wrote a number of strictly didactic poems with strongly Lucretian elements, pervasively influential on the Romantics.¹⁷ Part of the Darwin legacy came down to Tennyson, whose copious scientific imagery led T. H. Huxley to call him perhaps the only poet since Lucretius to have

¹⁰ See p. 72 below.

¹¹ And indeed American culture: on the Mexican neo-Latin poets Diego José Abad and Rafael Landívar see respectively Kerson 1988 and Laird 2006: 55–6, 59, 91 n. 68.

¹² On the medieval and early Renaissance transmission of the *DRN* see ch. 12 below.

¹³ Boyde 1981 (‘Introduction: Dante and Lucretius’).

¹⁴ See pp. 245–7 below. ¹⁵ See pp. 177, 268–70 below.

¹⁶ See p. 267 below. ¹⁷ See pp. 291–2 below.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84801-5 - The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius

Edited by Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

taken the trouble to understand the work and methods of the scientist, and whose poem *The Two Voices* has been called ‘the closest thing to Lucretius in English Literature’.¹⁸ The merely ‘glancing engagements’¹⁹ with Lucretius in twentieth-century poetry are one sign of a perhaps final divorce between science and poetry: as Nikolay Nikolayevich, uncle and intellectual mentor of Pasternak’s physician-poet Dr Zhivago, expresses it, ‘When modern man is vexed by the mysteries of the universe he turns to physics, not to Hesiod’s hexameters.’²⁰ Recent studies of science and literature have tended to reverse the perspective: instead of looking at how poetry is used as a vehicle for the expression of scientific truths, the focus has been on the ways in which supposedly objective and value-free scientific discourse about the natural world and its history is unavoidably implicated in metaphorical and anthropocentric uses of language. The metaphors through which Lucretius builds his Epicurean universe can be analysed along the lines of Gillian Beer’s investigation of Darwin’s revolutionary theory as verbal construct.²¹

What might have struck the ancient reader as anomalous is the use of hexameter poetry to present the technical philosophy of one of the post-Aristotelian Hellenistic schools, and one whose founder, Epicurus, appears to have disparaged poetic uses of language.²² In a calculated strategy Lucretius presents a modern philosophy in the vatic manner of an old-fashioned Pre-socratic philosopher, drawing specifically on the model of Empedocles, who had presented his thought in hexameter verse.²³ The *DRN* is a gospel of rationalist materialism, a manifesto of modernity in the sonorous voice of an Old Testament prophet. A defining generic feature of ancient didactic poetry is its careful attention to the relationship between poet and addressee, typically figured as a second-person singular, and often explicitly named (Memmius is the named addressee, intermittently present, of the *DRN*, probably to be identified with C. Memmius, a prominent politician, praetor in 58 BC, and patron also of Catullus).²⁴ Lucretius’ didactic voice is highly distinctive, speaking from on high to a child afraid of the dark in a mixture of pity and scorn: *o miseris hominum mentis, o pectora caeca!* (‘O pitiable minds of men, o blind hearts!’), *DRN* 2.14). As Dryden puts it, Lucretius ‘seems to disdain all manner of Replies, and . . . this too, with so much scorn and

¹⁸ For both citations see Spencer 1965: 162.

¹⁹ P. 312 below. ²⁰ *Dr Zhivago*, ch. 2.10.

²¹ See Kennedy 2002: 70–2, discussing Beer 1983.

²² See p. 94 below. ²³ See p. 64 below.

²⁴ Didactic addressee: see the essays by Obbink (Empedocles) and Mitsis (Lucretius) in Schiesaro, Mitsis and Clay 1993. On the identification of Memmius see Bailey 1947 on *DRN* 1.26; p. 54 below.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84801-5 - The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius

Edited by Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie

Excerpt

[More information](#)

STUART GILLESPIE AND PHILIP HARDIE

indignation, as if he were assur'd of the Triumph, before he enter'd into the lists'.²⁵

In order to proselytise for his messages of scientific rationality Lucretius often uses the language and rhetoric of ancient religious revelation and initiation (in this continuing a practice found in earlier Epicurean texts). At the beginning of Book 3 Epicurus is the hierophant of the atoms and the void: the *diuina uoluptas* . . . *atque horror* ('divine pleasure and terror', 28–9) felt by Lucretius is a paradoxical combination of emotions at home in religious experience. Most notable is Lucretius' decision to begin the *DRN* with a hymn to Venus, which masterfully uses the full palette of ancient hymnic convention to produce a stunning picture of the power and beauty of the traditional goddess of love and her effects. Attempts to dissipate the religious afflatus of the passage by reducing Venus to an allegory of orthodox Epicurean physics and ethics have not persuaded all readers.

This and other episodes in the *DRN* where a non-Epicurean view of the world is presented with a vividness and passion beside which the Epicurean truth seems pallid have prompted some to detect anxiety and division behind the façade of confident certainty, an 'antiLucretius in Lucretius',²⁶ loath to renounce the beauty, mystery and variety of the world of illusion that most of us inhabit for the austere truth of a reality reduced to the 'third-person perspective' of atoms blindly colliding in the void – a poet of 'involuntary spirituality'.²⁷ Lucretius is a superb diagnostician of the discontents of civilisation: must he not really have suffered the ills for which he offers a cure? Particularly haunting are the description at the end of Book 3 of the rich man who cannot stay in one place because what he is really trying to escape from is himself, and the extraordinary account at the end of Book 4 of the insubstantiality and emptiness of sexual desire, as lovers strive violently to mingle in the impossible primal union which had afforded Plato matter for a myth in the speech of Aristophanes in the *Symposium*.²⁸

The passage on sexual desire in Book 4 may have contributed to the invention of the story of Lucretius' madness, reported in the biographical notice in St Jerome's version of the *Chronicle* of Eusebius (under the year 94 BC): 'The poet Titus Lucretius was born. In later life he was sent mad by a love-potion; in the intervals of his madness he composed a number of

²⁵ Dryden 1956–2000: III, 10.

²⁶ The phrase is that of Patin 1868 (vol. 1, ch. 7: 'Du poème de la nature. L'Antilucretèce chez Lucrèce'). For a recent discussion see W. R. Johnson 2000: 103–33.

²⁷ Patin 1868: I, 132.

²⁸ For a penetrating treatment of Lucretius the analyst of human anxiety see Segal 1990. For some modern responses to Lucretius on desire see pp. 322–3 below.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84801-5 - The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius

Edited by Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

books, later edited by Cicero. He died by his own hand at the age of forty-four.²⁹ Less is certainly known about Lucretius than about almost any other Latin poet;³⁰ in this gap the apocryphal story in Jerome has expanded to become the ‘myth of Lucretius’, a stimulus for versions of Lucretius as a tormented and suicidal individual driven by dissatisfactions not simply sexual. A gloomily melancholic figure replaced a pugnacious, blaspheming earlier one during the nineteenth century and threw a long shadow over twentieth-century readings, many of which are ‘tinged with the sad legend of the saddest pagan who had cut himself off from cosmic comfort and paid the price’.³¹

An alternative response to these apparently un-Epicurean moments in the *DRN* has been to see them as part of a carefully controlled strategy of persuasion: know your enemy, allow him to present himself in his most alluring or most insidious form, before applying to the reader the unfailingly efficacious nostrums of Epicurean truth.³² Lucretius is good at using his enemies’ weapons against themselves: for example the metre and language of Ennius, the writer of the national epic celebrating the divinely favoured success of Rome, are deployed to teach that political and military ambition are misguided, that the gods are absent.³³ It is a strategy that could be used against Lucretius; Patin’s term ‘Antilucrèce’ is an allusion to the title of the best-known neo-Latin poem in the Lucretian tradition, Cardinal Melchior de Polignac’s *Anti-Lucretius, sive De Deo et Natura*, a defence of Christian orthodoxy that uses Lucretian tactics against Lucretius.³⁴ The adversarial nature of Lucretius’ philosophical and poetic procedures makes for an unusually combative reception history, one of the best-known manifestations of which is Tennyson’s poem depicting in his hour of madness and doom the arrogance and complacency of a Lucretius who fails fully to accept the doctrines of his Master, even calling in his despair to the gods he has cast aside: ‘yet behold, to you | From childly wont and ancient use I call’.³⁵

²⁹ At a later stage a wife by the name of Lucilia was introduced as the agent of the love-potion: see p. 208 below, and Canfora 1993b: 32–3.

³⁰ Canfora 1993b makes an ingenious attempt to expand what is known and to provide a detailed historical context, largely on the basis of the letters of Cicero. For an attempt to read autobiographical hints in the *DRN* see Wiseman 1974: 11–43.

³¹ W. R. Johnson 2000: 133; see further p. 299 below.

³² This unified reading of Lucretius now predominates, whereas ‘two voices’ readings of Virgil continue to be fashionable.

³³ See pp. 61–3 and 96 below. ³⁴ See pp. 165, 196 below.

³⁵ Tennyson, *Lucretius*, 208–9. For Tennyson see further pp. 301–3 below.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84801-5 - The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius

Edited by Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie

Excerpt

[More information](#)

STUART GILLESPIE AND PHILIP HARDIE

Poet of modernity: theology, science, politics

‘The theses that reality consists exclusively of atoms and void, that atomic interactions are purposeless and reflect no plan, that there are no immaterial spirits, and that the gods do not care about humanity and produce no effects in the visible world’³⁶ – these teachings could provoke charges of impiety or even atheism in pagan antiquity, but there is little evidence that Epicureanism was ever regarded as dangerous in the way that it was in the Christian world.³⁷ Dante places the Epicureans ‘who consider the soul mortal together with the body’, in the sixth circle of hell (*Inf.* 10.115). Various expedients could be used to excuse an interest in the *DRN*, via what Valentina Proserpi calls the ‘dissimulatory code’:³⁸ an open acknowledgement of the error of Lucretian teaching, sometimes paired with a positive valuation of his poetic virtues,³⁹ or the enforcement of a division between content and form easy enough to make in a didactic poem on so technical a subject (but one that recent criticism has been at pains to qualify or even deny).⁴⁰ The honey round the rim of the cup could be enjoyed so long as one did not drink deeper; the medicinal wormwood had turned into poison. The *DRN*’s content was safer if it remained within the learned language of Latin: published translations into vernaculars appear late compared with many other classical texts, sometimes, as with Italian, demonstrably because of suppression of early attempts.⁴¹ The anxieties of the forces of conservatism and reaction were not unfounded, since the *DRN* plays an important role in the several movements of libertinism and enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁴² Indeed the names of his more prominent eighteenth-century admirers – Voltaire and Kant, d’Alembert and Rousseau – are synonymous with the phenomenon we call ‘the Enlightenment’.

The poem also plays no small part in the history of modern science, as a stimulus to the development of the corpuscularian and atomist theories that precede modern atomic physics.⁴³ One should not claim too much: the *DRN* was but one of a number of available testimonia for Epicurean physics, and, as is often the case when we are dealing with the reception of the doctrines contained in the *DRN*, it is more a general Epicureanism than a response specifically and solely to Lucretius that is at issue. Furthermore ancient and modern atomisms are very different animals; the former is the product of

³⁶ P. 131 below.³⁷ Ancient charges of Epicurean atheism: Obbink 1989. For the ‘Christian reaction’ see ch. 4 of H. Jones 1989.³⁸ Pp. 214–16 below. ³⁹ See pp. 215, 228 below.⁴⁰ See ch. 6 below. ⁴¹ See p. 215 below.⁴² See especially chs 9, 14 and 17 below. ⁴³ See ch. 8 below.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84801-5 - The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius

Edited by Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

abstract reasoning about plurality, change, and the nature of first principles on the part of Presocratic philosophers of nature,⁴⁴ while the latter develops out of experimental and mathematical science. There is an important question here about continuity and discontinuity in the history of knowledge:⁴⁵ Lucretius' disconcerting modernity may be something of an illusion. On the other hand the *DRN* is the most detailed surviving source for many aspects of Epicurus' atomism. It was an important text for Newton⁴⁶ and continued to be a reference point in nineteenth-century controversies between theists and materialist naturalists.⁴⁷ Einstein pays tribute to Lucretius in a preface to a 1924 translation of the *DRN*, opining that the true goal of the poem is not so much Lucretius' expressed intention to free mankind from superstition and fear, but rather to convince his reader of the necessity of the atomic-mechanical world picture, although he could not openly say as much to the practically minded Roman reader. But Einstein stops well short of avowing any immediate scientific debt to a man who, he writes, could have had no inkling of the findings of modern science that we learn in our infancy. The modern child is by now wiser than the ancient teacher.⁴⁸

Lucretius also plays a part in the history of anti-creationist reconstructions of the development of life on earth, with the account in Book 5 of the random and materialist origins of living beings, only the fittest of which survive. Thus far Lucretius may be said to anticipate Darwinianism, but his belief in the fixity of species runs counter to the theory of evolution proper.⁴⁹ Through his impact on Giambattista Vico, the Neapolitan historian of ideas whose *Principi di una scienza nuova* (1725) is the first comprehensive study of human society, descends a further line of Lucretius-influenced evolutionary thought.

The *DRN* is a text that impinges on politics, as well as religion and science. Its Epicurean message is that one should withdraw from political life to pursue the philosophical goal of happiness: the small circle of friends, rather than the larger structures of city and state, is the best context for this. The picture of a group of people in an idyllic landscape, content with the satisfaction of their natural and necessary appetites (2.29–33, 5.1392–6), is an image of a perfect society. Yet the *DRN*, despite its relative paucity of explicit

⁴⁴ For a lucid account of the thinking behind ancient atomism(s) see Wardy 1996.

⁴⁵ See Kennedy 2002: 2–3, 23–5.

⁴⁶ See pp. 141–2 below. The Latin inscription on the base of Roubiliac's statue of Newton in the antechapel of Trinity College, Cambridge is taken from *DRN* 3.1043 (of Epicurus), 'The man whose genius outdid the human race' (*qui genus humanum ingenio superavit*).

⁴⁷ See pp. 307–8 below.

⁴⁸ Diels 1924: viA–b. We are grateful to Niklas Holzberg for providing a text of this work.

⁴⁹ See Campbell 2003: 1–8.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-84801-5 - The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius

Edited by Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie

Excerpt

[More information](#)

STUART GILLESPIE AND PHILIP HARDIE

references to Roman history and society, is a political poem, informed by a deep concern about the problems of contemporary Rome. Gregory Hutchinson has recently used this as an argument for a downdating of the *DRN* to the beginning of the full-scale civil war between Caesar and Pompey, in 49 or 48 BC (as opposed to the traditional dating in the mid-50s BC).⁵⁰ Lucretius' anti-providentialist reconstruction of the prehistoric development of civilisation in Book 5 glances at the historical Roman experience at a number of points; he breaks off from his account of the role of astronomical and meteorological phenomena in the origin of religion to give a picture of a general embarked with all his forces at sea praying to the gods in the middle of a storm, a powerful image (whoever the general might be) of the interconnection of the religious, the military and the political at the heart of the Roman state.

Lucretius' version of Epicureanism is not atheist. The Epicurean view of the gods is in fact more traditionalist than the other Hellenistic schools of philosophy in that it holds up an image (and perhaps the reality) of anthropomorphic divinities, contemplation of and prayer to whom serves the purpose of bringing human minds closer to the *ataraxia* enjoyed by the gods. What Lucretius attacks without mercy is the superstitious belief in the intervention of angry gods in human affairs. As an attack on superstition rather than (valid) religion the *DRN* has spoken powerfully to thinkers and writers who identified perverted or misguided forms of religion as the source of political strife or repression, for example in the religious wars of late sixteenth-century France or among the more radical of the English Romantics (pre-eminently Shelley).⁵¹ As a poem that conveys a strong sense of political crisis and was composed as the events that would lead to the 'Roman revolution' of Augustus were gathering to a head, the *DRN* has had a particular relevance in times of civil strife or revolution. Hence another paradox, whether apparent or real – that a poem which advocates political quietism has often found itself at the centre of heated political debates.

Lucretian episodes

The *DRN* is a tightly unified structure, deploying philosophical, poetic and rhetorical resources to the end of constructing an irresistible account of the Epicurean universe and the consequences that flow therefrom for maximising the welfare and happiness of the individual.⁵² Commentators no longer agree

⁵⁰ G. Hutchinson 2001; see p. 124 below. See ch. 3 below on the Roman relevance of the *DRN*.

⁵¹ See respectively pp. 154–5 and 295–8 below.

⁵² Chs. 5 and 6 below explore the coherence of Lucretius' discursive methods and structures.