

LISA PIAZZI, *Lucrezio e i Presocratici. Un commento a De rerum natura 1, 635-920*. Testi e commenti 1, Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2005, 322 pp., ISBN 88-7642-151-3.

It has seemingly become fashionable to select for separate publication and comment a section of the *DRN* dealing with a particular topic. Piazzì's book follows those by R.D. Brown on 4.1030-287 (Leiden-Boston-Köln 1987), D.P. Fowler on 2.1-332 (Oxford 2002) and G. Campbell on 5.772-1104 (Oxford 2003); and like them will clearly take rank as an essential aid to the interpretation of the poem as a whole. Lucretius' anti-Presocratic polemic raises several questions:

Why does it occupy this prominent place in the first book of the *DRN*?

What were the targets? Whom was Lucretius really getting at?

How did he go about it? What were the poetic and polemical tactics that he deployed in this assault?

David Sedley has shown that in promoting these attacks on the Presocratics to this early position Lucretius was departing radically from the order of the Περὶ Φύσεως (D. Sedley, *Lucretius and the transformation of Greek wisdom*, Cambridge 1998, 190-3). To the motives that he detects for this shift of emphasis I would add another. The purpose of the *DRN* is essentially protreptic and destructive, a ground-clearing operation to dispel illusion and to point its readers to a correct understanding of the nature of the universe, man's place in it, and how to live happily therein. The sole source of enlightenment was the teaching of Epicurus; all competing philosophies were, to a greater or lesser degree, simply wrong, and the first priority was to

bulldoze out of the way the clutter of false doctrine obstructing the path to the true vision of reality.

Polemic had indeed been characteristic of the school from Epicurus himself onwards, as has been demonstrated by Knut Kleve ("The philosophical polemics in Lucretius", *Lucrece*, Entretiens Hardt 24, Geneva 1979, 39-75). Their targets included, unsurprisingly, their contemporaries, and *a priori* one would not expect it to have been otherwise with Lucretius. He did not live in an ivory tower; he was a man of his age, fully abreast, as his poetry demonstrates, of the culture of that age, deploying subtle and sophisticated poetical and rhetorical techniques to enforce his message. As the choice of Memmius as dedicatee indicates, that message was addressed to men themselves living in the mainstream of that culture, exposed to the false notions taken over from earlier philosophers and propagated by competing contemporary schools. The interlocutors conjured up by Lucretius for confutation represent the actual opposition.

It has been generally held that the opening salvo in the polemical offensive against Heraclitus is really to the address of the Stoics, a broad hint that effect being conveyed by the scornful allusion to the *stolidi* who prefer sound to sense (1.641, 1068). A weighty attack on this thesis was mounted by D.J. Furley ("Lucretius and the Stoics", *BICS* 13, 1966, 13-33), and his objections have been recently supported by Sedley (*Lucretius and the transformation of Greek wisdom*, 73-5, 91-2). I would not venture to dispute their conclusion that the theories attacked by Lucretius are for the most part not specifically Stoic, but I wonder whether that mattered much to him? I suggest that the reason why Stoicism might have been the real target in his sights was, simply, its contemporary prominence. From the second century onwards it had been a significant influence on Roman political thought (F.H. Sandbach, *The Stoics*, London 1975, 140-8). It would hardly be surprising if Lucretius, dedicated to the Epicurean vision of detachment from public affairs, should have seen in them a prime obstacle to enlightenment and singled them out for special attention. Of the reputed benefactors of mankind compared disparagingly with Epicurus, it is Hercules, the Stoics' pet hero, who calls forth his most scornful rhetoric, the grandiloquent recital of his exploits

cut down to size, in a ploy of which Lucretius was a master (cf. 2.644-5), by the one-line comment that the sensible way to deal with monsters is to stay away from where they live. The diatribe against the notion of a benevolent divine Providence (5.156-234) targets a thesis 'characteristic of Stoicism' (Sedley, *Lucretius and the transformation of Greek wisdom*, 76). All this being so, I continue to believe that it is more likely than not, as now argued by P. (28-30; cf. 782-802n.) that the references to the *stolidi* were meant to identify the Stoics; and to suggest that behind the obvious pun there may lurk a mischievous (mis)application of the analogy invoked more than once in the poem between the letters of the alphabet and the atoms. Just as largely the same letters go to form the words for fire and wood (1.912-4), so with Stoics and fools, the difference being that in this case the two things are not (very) different. As we might say now, they share almost the same genetic make-up.

To make a final point which I think has tended to be overlooked. In declining to name the enemy outright, Lucretius was conforming to the style of literary polemic – and it is one of the merits of P.'s discussion that it pays close attention to Lucretius' poetic tactics – that he had inherited from his Greek predecessors. As Pindar, Callimachus and Theocritus had not deigned to name their critics and rivals, so Lucretius does not identify the 'cranes' with whose croaking his own 'swan-song' is contrasted (4.180-2, 909-11). As with them, so with the philosophical adversary: those whom the cap fitted might wear it.

Consideration of Lucretius' polemical tactics is complicated by a number of uncertainties. How many of the original Presocratic texts had he actually read? *Prima facie* Empedocles is the most likely candidate, but even there one cannot be sure how much of this knowledge was direct and how much depended on what had passed through the filter of the intervening philosophical and doxographical tradition (7-10). Thus when it can be shown that he is misrepresenting the argument he is refuting, it is not always possible to be sure if the misrepresentation is deliberate. That his argumentative technique can on occasion be fairly termed unscrupulous is undeniable: see e.g. P. on the treatment of Anaxagoras at 875-90 (55-8). To a captious critic the famous simile

of the honey on the cup might suggest that poetic charm was to be used to seduce rather than to assist intellectual conviction. There is also to be taken into account, as P. goes on to remark, the influence of the diatribe and its robust, no-holds-barred style of debate. That is the style in which Heraclitus, admired by the *stolidi* for all the wrong reasons, is held up to obloquy. He was indeed *clarus* – for lack of clarity, *ob obscuram linguam*, the oxymoronic wordplay (cf. 875 *copia tenuis*, unremarked by the commentators) making a crucial point about the *DRN* itself by underlining the contrast between Heraclitean obscurity and Lucretian lucidity, later to be explicitly emphasized in the celebrated poetic *prise de position* (1.933-4 = 4.8-9). Chronologically Heraclitus belongs some way behind the head of the Presocratic procession; but predecessors such as Anaximander, Thales and Xenophanes receive only passing mention, sandwiched between him and Empedocles (705-15). He comes first as the prime example of How Not To Do It.

In sharp contrast, in what follows Empedocles is treated with a veneration second only to that accorded to Epicurus himself, and, as P. points out (42-3), in language very similar to that of the *laudes Epicuri*. This was a case of deep calling to deep, 'la tematica, a lui molto cara, della divinità del poeta-filosofo che annuncia verità salvifiche per l'umanità' (43). The literary treatment proclaims this shared conviction that poetry in the high epic mode was an appropriate medium for the communication of philosophical truths – a view to which contemporary Epicurean opinion would have been more sympathetic than was the Master himself. In bringing Empedocles on to the scene Lucretius abruptly modulates from the plain style in which hitherto the argument has been conducted into the language of high poetry (716-41, with P.'s notes). The elaborate description of Sicily as a land of natural marvels is a poetic *tour de force*, hinting at the background of Hellenistic learning that is to become overt in Book VI. That is a demonstration that Lucretius was following in the literary footsteps of Empedocles, as he was following in the philosophical footsteps of Epicurus (3.3-4). He too can communicate philosophical truth in great poetry: here is How To Do It. Of course this would hardly carry conviction if Empedocles' philosophical position had been, like that of

Heraclitus, indefensible; but, as P. points out (44-6; 716-41, 742nn.), he was regarded by later Epicureans as a precursor of atomism and so treated respectfully¹.

Lastly, to Anaxagoras, also treated with comparative respect as having helped to pave the way to atomism (53-5). Sedley notes that only twice in the *DRN* does Lucretius resort to transliterating a Greek technical term, here *homoeomeria* (830, 834) and elsewhere *harmonia* (3.100, 118, 131, 4.1248), arguing that by so underlining the alienness of these words he is satirizing the theories that they identify (Sedley, *Lucretius and the transformation of Greek wisdom*, 48-9). The two cases are not quite on all fours: whereas *homoeomeria* is found nowhere else in classical Latin, *harmonia* was a semi-naturalized musical technical term; Lucretius' point was that that was where it belonged. P. points to other practical reasons, but that of the alleged inadequacy of Latin, the *patrii sermonis egestas* (1.832, 3.260; cf. 1.139 *egestatem linguae*), needs qualification. Like Cicero's similar complaint (*De Fin.* 3.51 *hac inopi lingua*), these apologies are not to be taken at face value. They should be read rather as masking boasts (cf. J. Farrell, *Latin language and Latin culture*, Cambridge 2001, 40-3)². The term *homoeomeria*, as P. observes (54-5), embraces a complex of ideas which need to be unpacked for the reader, and that is precisely what Lucretius, in clear and idiomatic Latin, proceeds to do. As Cato had said, grasp the facts, and the words will follow. However, an accurate grasp of the facts does not necessarily entail scrupulosity in the deployment of the words,

¹ It was an uncharacteristic lapse on P.'s part to swallow Grimal's attempt to distinguish *primordia* from *principia* in Lucretian terminology (46 n. 44). As I pointed out when that piece was reprinted in his *Rome: la littérature et l'histoire* (2 vols, Roma 1986), it rests on a reading of *DRN* 1.483-4 which a glance at *Ep. ad Hdt.* 40-1 suffices to prove fallacious (*Gnomon* 62, 1990, 76-7).

² It is a pity that P. has evidently not come across Farrell's book, since his discussion of these polemics ("The language of reality", 39-51) offers an interesting reinforcement of her reading of them. See in particular the suggestion that 'Reading *Stoici* as *Stolidi* parodies the Stoic method of finding the "true names" of things, the ἔτυμοι λόγοι, that lurk beneath the surface of language' (47).

as is demonstrated by P.'s analysis of Lucretius' examination of what he calls Anaxagoras' escape-route at 875-96 (55-8). This she sees as a product of the entrenched dogmatism of Epicureanism, illustrated by the comment on the school attributed to Cotta by Cicero (*ND* 2.73): isolation manifested in the *κυνικὸς τρόπος*. That is an interesting suggestion, though I think that the influence of contemporary political and forensic rhetoric may have had as much to do with it. The aim of the *genus acre* (the most appropriate term for the grand style as Lucretius employs it), as expounded by Marcus Antonius in the *De Oratore*, was to persuade by evoking in the mind of the hearer whatever emotions the case being argued should call for, *ut animos eorum ad quemcumque causa postulabit motum vocemus* (2.115). Lucretius wrote for victory, *vincere verbis* (5.735), sometimes adjuring the reader to admit defeat, *victus fateare necesse est* (1.624, 5.343), and where logic or charm might not carry conviction he was prepared to use force.

P.'s text is that of Bailey, except for line 665, where Marullus' *ulla* (if his it be; see *CR* 54, 2004, 369) is preferred to Lachmann's *alia*. There is not much to choose, and for what it is worth, it is closer to the transmitted *mia*; but P.'s arguments in its favour seem to me overstated, and *alia* sharpens the rhetoric: Lucretius has stopped all the boltholes he can think of – have these people any more up their sleeves?

657 I think she is right to follow Bailey in obelizing *muse*, but mistaken in favouring *in esse* as giving good sense, for the reasons I give in my review of Flores' s edition (*CR* 54, 2004, 368).

716 *Acragantinus*: no critical note, and the discussion of the spelling in the commentary fails to mention that *OQG* offer *agr-*, *rec*. Smith, perhaps rightly, against the prevailing editorial consensus. Cf. *Hor. carm.* 1.21.8, where Shackleton Bailey and Nisbet-Hubbard support *Gragi* against the earlier editorial vulgate *Cragi*. At *met.* 9.646 it seems more probable than not that Ovid, in a context of other Greek names, would have adopted the Greek spelling, but can one be sure of Lucretius?

721 *Aeoliae*: Heinsius' correction, generally adopted, 'non persuade molto'; P. flirts with Sandbach's tentative *Aeolidae*, but prefers his safer fall-back *Italiae*. I am not clear that the degree of learning that

Lucretius must be credited with if he wrote *Aeoliae* was beyond him; I refer again to the marvels listed in Book VI, drawn from some quite recondite literary sources.

744 *aera solem imbrem terras animalia fruges: solem] rorem*
Christ • imbrem] Maas, Bailey: ignem OQ. It is true that *imber* = the element is well attested, true also that *sol* = fire is supported by ἥλιος = πῦρ in Empedocles, Ennius and Varro. But Lucretius nowhere else uses *sol* for the element, whereas *ros* = water occurs at 1.777. At all events, Bailey's argument that 'the change [of *solem* to *rorem*] is far less probable' than that of *imbrem* to *ignem* can be disposed of. (a) At 784-5 the corruption of *imbrem* to *ignem* is primarily due to *ignem* in 783. (b) The corruption of *rorem* to *solem* is relatively easy: *r* and *s* were easily confused in early minuscule, and Housman noted that the change of *r* to *l* 'is very early and common' (*Classical Papers*, 161, with Horatian examples).

759 *veneno: venenum* is the property of J.S. Reid, not Merrill, as P. could have learned from Smith's edition, which indeed might usefully have been consulted in a number of places.

873-4 P. opts for the economical solution adopted by Bailey and Smith, transposition of the lines with a lacuna following, rightly judging that the evidence of the papyrus does not help matters much.

884-5 Though following Bailey, P. thinks Munro's solution, transposing and keeping *herbis* in 885, the most elegant of those proposed; I agree and would myself have printed it.

914 *notemus*: I do not see how the causal sense suggested by Bailey can be justified. P. rejects Giussani's explanation of *cum* as concessive, styling it improbable, but it gives the obvious sense here. In fact Lucretius prefers the indicative with *cum* in this construction (Kenney on 3.107), the usage restored by Brieger's easy correction to *notamus*.

The commentary is on an ample scale, very much fuller than Bailey, with more extensive citation of Epicurean and other philosophical texts, and much more detailed linguistic and stylistic comment. It could with advantage have been more tightly disciplined. The part played in furthering Lucretius' argument by alliteration, word-order, and the relationship of sound to sense, is rightly emphasized, but much repetition and

645-6 Latin syntax is more flexible than grammarians sometimes allow to appear. Talk here of 'sequence of tenses' misses the point; the guide is sense. Ernout hits the nail on the head, 'si vraiment elles sont nées', sc. as they claim. Lucretius asks, 'How could this possibly be so if it is in fact as they say?'

655 For a full discussion of this type of enclosing structure see T.E.V. Pearce, *CQ* 16, 1966, 305-16, evidently unknown to P.

660 The note on *cernunt* (but why here rather than at 642?) rather misses the point. The word is not a synonym for *video*. Like *materies* and *puto* of agricultural origin, it means 'sift', hence 'discern', 'distinguish' (*OLD* s.v. 5-6). The *stolidi* 'discern', or they think they do (one can almost hear the quotation marks) truth beneath Heraclitus' dolled-up paradoxes; here they fail to see the fallacy exposed by Lucretius, whereas at 657 they had grasped the strength of the opposing case and evaded it.

667 *scilicet*: a favourite word of Lucretius' (35x, of which 33 at the beginning of the verse as here); why not discuss here rather than at 809?

675-8 *corpora ... corpora*: at 1.483-4, which should have been quoted here, Lucretius explicitly draws attention to the fact that he uses the word in these two senses, of atoms and of compound bodies, an ambiguity taken over from Epicurus (Bailey, II, 681). P.'s note on 676 only touches on the point tangentially.

685 *figurae*: this is the first occurrence of the word in this technical sense in the poem, and the first mention of the various shapes of the atoms: see 2.333-80, 661-99 and Bailey ad locc.

690-2 *hic*: 'la quantità lunga della *i*' repeats Bailey's error: it is the *syllable*, not the vowel, which is 'long' or 'heavy'. It is high time that commentators stopped parroting this piece of misinformation.

701 *omnia*: '= *cetera omnia*'. Correct, and a point not noticed by even so good a grammarian as Munro; cf. E. Löfstedt, *Phil. Komm. zur Peregrinatio Aetherae*, Oxford-Uppsala-Leipzig 1911, 174 'ein ziemlich gewöhnlicher, aber von den Kritikern merkwürdigerweise immer wieder beanstandeter Sprachgebrauch'. *OLD* recognises this sense for *cunctus* (2a), but not for *omnis*; see *ThLL* ss.vv. *cunctus* 1400.38-

50, *omnis* 614.57-616.19, covering an immense range of variations. The grammars are not very helpful; see e.g. Plaut. *Rud.* 199, Verg. *Aen.* 1.15, 2.743, Ov. *am.* 3.1.19-20, *met.* 8.187, 750, etc.; A.J. Bell, *The Latin dual & poetic diction*, London-Toronto 1923, 195-6. The frequency of this usage in late Latin suggests that it was originally colloquial.

707 Pascal noted in a comment picked up by Bailey that as a matter of fact in such final constructions Lucretius uses the dative with the gerundive and the genitive with the gerund. I cannot see what is the ‘*tesi inaccetabile*’ here that P. regards as refuted by ‘*moderne teorie semantico-generative*’.

710 *rerum naturas*: not, as Bailey would have it, ‘simply a paraphrase for *res* nor “gli elementi naturali”, cioè in definitiva como sinonimo, sia pure meno generico, di *res*’ (P.), but rather ‘things with their various characteristics’ (*OLD* s.v. *natura* 10a).

714-5 Here and elsewhere Ennius’ *Annales* are cited from Vahlen, whose edition was superseded over twenty years ago by that of Otto Skutsch.

719 *aspargit*: neither Bailey’s nor P.’s notes really address the point at issue here. (a) Can the variations between the spellings in compound forms of *spargo* between *a* and *e* found in the MSS be plausibly accounted authorial? (b) If they can, what is the intended effect? (c) If they cannot, should the variant spellings in the MSS be followed *faute de mieux* or normalized? At 1.309 *dispargitur* the spelling with *a* clearly lends verbal reinforcement to the argument (cf. *CR* 54, 2004, 367), and similarly with *dispargitur* at 3.539, 4.895, *conspargere* at 3.661. A case can also be made out for the spelling with *a* in spite of the MSS at 3.20, 4.1237, 6.839. There is no obvious reason for preferring the transmitted *exspargi* at 5.371, but I do not think it hazardous to conclude that the spelling with *a* was Lucretius’ preferred usage, and normalize the lot on that premiss. The interaction of sound and sense in Lucretius’ verse has been demonstrated convincingly by the work of Deutsch, Friedländer and others, most recently by Ivano Dionigi (*Lucrezio. Le parole e le cose*, Bologna 1988, 1992²).

729 The note does not make it unambiguously clear that *in se* is not a true monosyllabic ending like *virum vi* in the preceding verse; it would have been helpful to cite Hellegouarc’h’s *Le monosyllabe dans l’hexamètre latin*, which is in the Bibliography.

739 *tripodi a Phoebi*: ‘anastrophe di *a* è rara e appartieni al latino arcaico’. No authority is offered for this statement. It is indeed rarer than with other prepositions, but if Cic. *Div.* 1.106 *obitu a solis* is anything to go by, it is not exclusively archaic. What is relatively unusual is the placing of the genitive after the preposition; but cf. 1.740 *principiis ... in rerum*, 3.1088 *tempore de mortis*, Cat. 69.6 *valle sub alarum*, Verg. *georg.* 3.313 *usum in castrorum*, Ov. *Her.* 17.87 *orbe ... in mensae* and Kenney ad loc.; K-S I 587-8, Bömer on Ov. *met.* 5.336.

758 *iam ... habebis*: ‘you will already have grasped’, sc. since it has been explained at 540-50. On this use of the ‘future of probability’ see K-S I 142-3, H. Blase, “Tempora et Modi”, in G. Landgraf, *Hist. Gr. d. lat. Sprache*, III 1, Leipzig 1903, 119, Housman on Manilius 2.432, al.

796 *ea quae nequeunt convertier usquam*: translators miss the sense of *usquam* here; not ‘mai’, ‘nowhere’, ‘in any case’, but ‘anywhither’ (*OLD* s.v. 3), i.e. into anything else. The same directional sense at 6.1060, 1075.

798 Translators fudge the anacoluthic syntax, glozing over the missing connective in 799 by paraphrasing. None of the solutions tentatively canvassed by P. is persuasive, and it will certainly not do to supply *et* after *ignem* in 799: postponement of *et* and *atque* was a neoteric innovation. Either Lucretius suffered incoherence to pass muster for once, or there is something fairly radical wrong with the text.

805-8 *indulget ... fovet tribuitque ... non possint*: here too talk of ‘sequence of tenses’ is unhelpful. The construction with the protasis in the indicative is characteristic of conditions embodying threats, stipulations, et sim. (K-S II 392-3).

843 *tamen*: P. acutely picks up a nuance missed by commentators, that the particle implicitly concedes that, as regards the rest of his teaching, Anaxagoras was not all that far wide of the mark: it was over the void that he went really wrong. A good point, and a reminder of the need to attend closely to Lucretius’ use of language.

857-8 P. makes the interesting suggestion that the use of *res* here in two different senses is an example of the sort of ‘polisemia e metaforizzazione’ proscribed by Epicurus. It could hardly have struck Lucretius or the most hypercritical reader as such. *Res*, with

its multiplicity of senses (*OLD* distinguishes 19) and no real Greek equivalent, was simply taken for granted as a basic linguistic resource.

871 *-que ... -que*: a specifically epic touch, on the model of the Homeric τε ... τε: see Skutsch on Enn. *Ann.* 170, 171.

897-900 Commentators underplay the role of rhetoric in reinforcing the argument. This grandiloquent description is put into the mouth of the opposition to suggest that they expect Lucretius to be awed into acquiescence by the sheer majesty of these phenomena – precisely so that their purely emotional approach to the matter can be deflated by hard scientific fact, signalled by an abrupt drop in the stylistic level, from *genus acre* to *genus tenue*. Exactly the same tactic is deployed at 6.121-31, where thunderstorms are cut down to size by the homely analogy of a pricked balloon. The introductory *scilicet* at 901 sets the tone: ‘yes, we know all about that, but...’.

The book is furnished with a very full bibliography (curiously, however, lacking Kirk-Raven-Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 2nd edn, Cambridge 1985) and serviceable indexes. My criticisms are not to be interpreted as detracting from the solid merits of Dr Piazzzi’s work. This is a significant contribution to the better understanding and appreciation of Lucretius’ great poem which will be widely welcomed.

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