

**SITUATED KNOWLEDGE:
RESPONDING TO LUCRETIUS
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I

I begin with a personal story, not to affirm its uniqueness (rather the reverse, in fact), but to testify to the way in which personal history affected my reading of a particular text. I grew up, in the 1940s and 1950s, in a family atmosphere of piety—Protestant piety. It was an atmosphere filled with old-fashioned goodness, with caring, and with love. But it was also permeated by a kind of religiosity which, as a teenager, I found increasingly irksome. There was, for example, an emphasis on the will of the Father—the heavenly Father, but also rather definitely the family Father. There was a curious insistence on the need to be saved—and consequently an insistence on sin, *from* which one needed to be saved. There was a greater interest in one's immortal soul than in one's body and in the pleasures of this world; in fact, the very concept of pleasure was suspect. (All this was in Britain, but readers will no doubt think of similar strains of religiosity in Canada or the United States or wherever they grew up.) Inevitably, after much turmoil of mind and emotion, I reached a moment of decision, a moment which I still remember distinctly; I was walking home from church service one Sunday at the age of fourteen when I decided that this notion of a divine Father was simply a human invention, that I could not and did not believe it.

This personal history naturally coloured my response to Lucretius when I began to study him a few years later as an undergraduate. I was delighted by his insistence that the universe does not operate at the arbitrary will of gods but by spontaneous natural processes. Our lives are centred here, on this earth, said Lucretius, and we should look to the pleasures of this

life, not to rewards or punishments in a fictitious afterlife; again, I agreed wholeheartedly.

My first response to Lucretius, then, was coloured and emotionally charged by the personal history which I have outlined.¹ However, the fact that this history is personal to me does not preclude it, I hope, from being relevant to others. Although it is personal, it is certainly not unique; on the contrary, this kind of tussle between traditional religion and the demands of reason has been fought out in countless individual lives, especially over the past century-and-a-half. So although a reading of a text is always situated (to use my title word) in the personal history of a particular reader, that reader's personal history, in turn, is situated in the broader history of the society and culture. The personal voice, therefore, need not be merely personal, in the sense of being eccentric or individualistic or subjective in a negative sense; certainly it carries the energy of the individual's experience, but it is also in some sense representative.²

Since the time of Jerome, responses to Lucretius have often been conditioned in some way, as mine was, by the relationship of particular readers to Christianity. An influential example is that of Henri Patin and his famous lecture "Du poëme de la nature. L'antilucrèce chez Lucrèce," of 1859–60 (= Patin 1868.117–37). The anti-Lucretius of Patin's title is a supposedly religious but unconscious side of Lucretius's personality—an "involuntary spirituality"—in contrast to the overt persona of Lucretius which is rationalistic and hostile to religion. Patin himself uses a strongly personal voice in his lecture, and it becomes evident that the reason why he detects this religious and spiritual element in Lucretius is that he *wants* to detect it, as a religious man himself who is also committed to the value of classical literature. He affirms that, "Religious feeling is so natural to humans, that it manifests itself now and then through the doubts of the sceptic, the denials of the atheist." Patin dwells, for example, on Lucretius's picture of the earth as a creative source of life, deserving the name of

1 My adoption of direct autobiographical narrative is not intended to disregard the problems associated with that mode. In what sense is the retired professor writing the story the same person as the teenaged boy? Does the professor really have access to the teenager's thoughts and emotional turmoil?

2 The reality of shared experience opens up the likelihood of shared readings of particular texts: this conclusion was drawn by Gary Mathews, the designated commentator at the APA's 1995 colloquium on the personal voice. A reader may agree with an interpretation written impersonally, but can scarcely *share* it if the personhood of the interpreter is concealed.

“mother,” and he declares that this picture is one “in which we love to find some element of our own concept of Providence.” We can also listen to Patin bringing persuasion to bear on his students within the intellectual culture of his time and place. Lucretius personifies nature, *Natura gubernans*, as guiding the courses of the sun and the movements of the moon (5.76f.). Patin believes that, with this figure, Lucretius unconsciously reintroduces into the world the divinity which he believed he had banished from it. “Does this figure,” asks Patin of his students, “not make you think of the God whom Bossuet represents as ‘holding from the highest heavens the reins of all kingdoms’?”³

When it was published, Patin’s lecture had a powerful influence on subsequent readings of Lucretius, not least because of the force of Patin’s personal conviction. From a present-day perspective, many critics might view Patin’s influence as less than benign. Monica Gale, in her recent book, describes Patin’s interpretation as “casting a long shadow over modern criticism of the *De Rerum Natura*” (1994.1).⁴ Gale sees her own book as attempting to dispel that shadow finally and to refute the notion of the spiritual anti-Lucretius. It is a fine book, which deserves to succeed in its purpose, but I should like to comment briefly on its methodology. It began life as a Cambridge Ph.D. thesis, and the method it uses is one which has become traditional in classical scholarship: it bases itself on Lucretius’s text and on other ancient texts, and represents itself as constructing an argument directly from those texts. Of course, examining the ancient texts is essential work, but since Dr. Gale wanted to terminate the line of interpretation stemming from Patin, she might also have asked what was the originating impulse for his particular interpretation. The answer, as we have seen, is clear and, in fact, explicit in Patin’s text. His impulse was a desire to see Lucretius as actually though unconsciously religious in a “spiritual” way. Patin’s reading of Lucretius, then, needs to be understood as situated within his own belief-system and within the belief-systems of his times. Similarly, a reader of Gale’s book needs to understand the inheritance of New Critical

3 The original text of my three longer quotations is as follows. “Le sentiment religieux est si naturel chez l’homme, qu’il se fait jour, par moments, à travers les doutes du sceptique, les négations de l’athée” (Patin 1868.127). “Cette mère, en qui nous aimons à retrouver quelque chose de notre Providence . . .” (1868.125). “La figure même employée par le poète ne vous fait-elle pas songer au Dieu que Bossuet représente ‘tenant du plus haut des cieux les rênes de tous les royaumes’?” (1868.120).

4 I reviewed Gale’s book in *EMC* 40 (1996) 339-43. On the futility of attempts to infer contradictions in Lucretius’s personality from the text of the *DRN*, see Dalzell 1996.41-44.

assumptions in *her* belief that the *DRN* is a unity in which “every poetic device, from alliteration to personification,” including similes, repetitions, and use of myth, is adapted to the clear and persuasive presentation of Epicurean doctrine (1994.2).

The case of Patin illustrates the general principle that, by studying the history of the reception of a text, we can at least redeem ourselves from the errors of the past. We can do so by seeing that particular interpretations of the past are embedded in the belief-systems of the past. This does not, of course, entail any attitude of superiority over the past; on the contrary, it reminds us forcefully that our own interpretations are similarly situated in the present of our own lives and our own culture. We can “at least” redeem ourselves from the errors of the past, but we cannot escape the particularity of our own viewpoints.

I

Now I should like to return to the story of my own response to Lucretius. During the course of my professional career in Canada I had the opportunity to read the *De Rerum Natura* some ten times with successive groups of students. On each occasion, my students and I admired the close integration of poetry and philosophy in that text, and, at each rereading, I found myself increasingly fascinated by the question why—to put it bluntly—poetry of this kind is no longer written. By “poetry of this kind” I mean a poetry of knowledge: not necessarily poetry in the didactic genre, or poetry in the Lucretian mode, but rather poetry which would engage with a body of systematic knowledge—with what today we would call science. Not only is such poetry not written nowadays, but there is an orthodoxy of critical opinion which says that it should not or cannot be written: that poetry belongs to its own special world and has its own mysterious kind of knowledge, quite distinct from rational knowledge. This divorce of poetry from systematic knowledge is, of course, a symptom of a larger contemporary problem epitomised in the phrase “The Two Cultures”:⁵ on the one side, tweed-jacketed humanists concerned with imagination and identity and other intangibles, and, on the other side, white-lab-coated scientists con-

5 This catchphrase for the cultural separation between the sciences and the humanities was coined by Snow 1959 [1964]. Snow described a situation in which scientists and humanists spoke mutually incomprehensible languages, and regarded their intellectual worlds as mutually exclusive.

cerned with reason and cold, hard facts. The division between the two cultures is based in part on some such caricature of their respective procedures, but it is nevertheless a powerful and institutionalised division, which determines how intellectual work is done and, as we all know, how research funds are allocated. So I was drawn by Lucretius into this issue of the two cultures, and specifically to the possibility of a relationship between poetry and science. This direction of my interests grew out of my experience as a professional classicist, that is to say, out of my repeated engagement with Lucretius and with the intellectual culture of antiquity which *did* generally believe in the compatibility of poetry and knowledge (though, of course, there were exceptions, most notably Plato and Philodemus).⁶ Without that immersion in the ancient world, I would have had no grounds, no foundation, for questioning the current assumption that poetry and science are unassimilable, radically different discourses, belonging to different worlds of thought.

The process I have just described is one in which my own thinking was influenced and modified by the ancient texts I was studying. Earlier in this paper, I represented the scholar's involvement with a text as a one-way process in which the scholar's viewpoint colours his or her interpretation. What I would now add is the likelihood, or the reality in my case, of an interactive process. Once we accept that the interpreter is not a detached and objective observer but part of the process, then it becomes understandable that he or she may be affected by the process, as well as affecting it. Much as I dislike cybernetic language, the model of a feedback loop is useful here. There is input into the loop from the individual scholar, and from the cultural context of that scholar, and from previous scholarship and its cultural context, *and* from the material being studied. Each kind of material interacts with the other kinds of material in the loop and creates feedback for the working scholar.

My response as a classicist to the *DRN*, then, was one of admiration, followed by a feeling that today, too, we should have a poetry of

6 Since not all critics of Lucretius become engrossed in the question of the Two Cultures, it is clear that this direction of my interests was influenced not only by my classical reading but also by factors personal to myself (though, again, by no means unique), among which I would identify the following: a belief that contemporary poetry needs to escape from the ghetto into which it has written itself; a personal tendency to insist on the relevance of ancient texts to contemporary experience; a reading of Berman 1981; and the fact that Berman was a colleague at the University of Victoria.

knowledge, whatever appropriate form it might take. This response can be read, in terms of ancient rhetorical theory, as a desire to see *imitatio* of the *DRN*, with the caveat that *imitatio* is not to be interpreted narrowly. Quintilian believes that imitation is a natural sequel to admiration in human activity: *atque omnis vitae ratio sic constat, ut quae probamus in aliis facere ipsi velimus* (10.2.2: “and the whole system of life is such that what we esteem in others, we want to do ourselves”).⁷ Though many literary scholars confine themselves to criticism, I would argue that criticism need not be remote from the process of *imitatio*.⁸ Charles Martindale suggests persuasively that “numerous unexplored insights into ancient literature are locked up in imitations, translations and so forth” (1993.7). Reciprocally, I would suggest that much criticism implies the possibility of further successful writing by identifying what is admirable in a particular text. Specifically, those studies of Lucretius which admire the integration of poetry with philosophy imply (consciously or not) the desirability of such integration. If admiration leads to a desire for imitation, as Quintilian believes, it becomes clear why this particular critic’s personal admiration for the *DRN* led him to envisage and define the case for modern imitation.

III

I return once again to the journey of enquiry which I undertook out of admiration for the *De Rerum Natura*. I can speak only briefly about its results, since this colloquy is more concerned with process than results, and, in any case, my enquiry is ongoing. In brief, then, I began to understand how drastically the “other culture,” science, has changed over the last hundred years—or, more particularly, how the philosophy and epistemology of science have changed—and what important implications these changes might have for relations between the two cultures. One key moment in the history of change in science was Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity (1905), which established, among other things, the then revolutionary concept that time is not absolute but relative to the position of the observer. Another key moment was Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle of 1926,

7 For this reason, I would regularly offer my students the option of doing original writing which, in some way, reflected their study of ancient texts. Students often described this option as a welcome alternative to seemingly endless demands for critical analysis of texts.

8 A critical study which explicitly asserts the relevance of ancient texts to contemporary writing is W. R. Johnson 1982.

which established that the act of observing a subatomic particle affects the outcome of the observation: the more accurately an observer decides to measure the position of such a particle, the more uncertain its momentum becomes, and vice versa. Both in relativity theory and in quantum mechanics, then, the viewpoint of the observer is part and parcel of the observation.

The discoveries of Einstein and Heisenberg were early examples of a broad trend in the history of science and of philosophy, a trend which can be called the death of objectivism.⁹ It has gradually become clear that it is not possible to give a single correct objective account of the world “out there”—not possible in natural language, not possible in scientific language, not possible even in mathematical language. This understanding is so crucial that I shall italicise the next two sentences. *There are no neutral observational data. Our observations and our language, in fact, construct a certain picture of reality, rather than recording a reality which exists independently.*

How is this relevant to the issue of the Two Cultures? Objectivism, I would argue, was an enormous barrier between the Two Cultures because it represented science as absolute knowledge, a God’s-eye-view of the truth completely alien from and impregnable to the kind of enquiry practiced in the humanities. The death of objectivism in the twentieth century allows us to see that scientific observation and scientific theory are indeed embedded in human culture and part of human history. To quote Stephen Jay Gould (1987.103):

Great thinkers are not those who can free their minds from cultural baggage and think or observe objectively (for such a thing is impossible), but people who use their milieu creatively rather than as a constraint . . . Such a conception of science not only validates the study of history and the role of intellect—both subtly downgraded if objective observation is the source of all good science. It also puts science into culture.

In relation to my particular interest, the death of objectivism allows a poetry of knowledge to become thinkable again because poetry is the discourse above all others which voices relationship, which insists on a relationship

9 There is a particularly helpful description of objectivism and its demise in the Preface and Introduction of Mark Johnson 1987.

between the thing which is known and the person who knows. Clearly this last argument would take another paper, or several papers, to elucidate and support, and it is not directly relevant to this colloquy.

But the relationship between the knower and the known needs to be voiced in scholarship also. I would argue that the death of objectivism in science and philosophy undermines the objectivist stance across the disciplines. The objectivist voice in scholarship makes claims which cannot be substantiated. Even in scientific discourse itself, use of the objectivist voice is not necessarily as disinterested as it appears to be, but may function, for example, as a means of claiming authority.¹⁰

To repeat a phrase used earlier in this paper: we cannot escape the particularity of our own viewpoint. What follows from this situation in terms of academic practice? What follows is that academic scrupulousness *requires* the scholar-critic to acknowledge that any interpretation, including his or her own, comes from a particular viewpoint, and that the viewpoint is part and parcel of the interpretation. This, as it seems to me, is the strong answer to those who object that essential qualities of scholarship, such as precision and responsibility, may be compromised by what they see as the subjectivity and emotionalism associated with the personal voice. To state the answer negatively: it is academically unsound not to identify one's viewpoint or to imply that one has none. To state it positively: it is as essential for scholars in the humanities to identify their viewpoint as it is for scientists measuring relative velocity to include their own position and movement in the measurement. And, indeed, precision and responsibility remain indispensable. These criteria of good scholarship, so far from prohibiting use of the personal voice, in fact require that knowledge must include the presence and position of the knower.¹¹

The possible methods of identifying one's standpoint are almost infinitely varied. Certainly the situated nature of interpretation legitimates the personal voice. Whether one chooses to *use* the personal voice may be a

10 See particularly Gross 1990, Myers 1990, Prelli 1989. Further references to the rhetorical analysis of academic discourses are given by Martindale in Hallett and Van Nortwick 1997.96 notes 6-8. In literary criticism, the chief objection to the impersonal style is that it represses the critic's own reasons for engaging with a text or (to state the matter more fully) for devoting a considerable portion of his or her life to it.

11 Similarly Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz at p. 193 of this volume: "To acknowledge one's position and the consequences of that position for one's reading or interpretation is responsible behavior, not self-indulgence."

question of strategy. Susanna Braund (1997.50) rightly invokes the rhetorical criterion of *to prepon*, of appropriateness to a particular audience and context—though that criterion is clearly double-edged, since it could become a justification for self-censorship. Earlier I argued that the personal voice is unlikely to be exclusively personal, and, to this extent, language and argument may in themselves identify the scholar's viewpoint: the titles of Northrop Frye's *Myth of Deliverance* and Charles Martindale's *Redeeming the Text* immediately provide hints about the Christian orientation of their thought.¹² But if we choose to use an *impersonal* voice in a particular context, we need to subvert its inherent pretensions to objectivity, and, similarly, we need to resist any suggestion of objectivity in others' use of an impersonal style.

IV

My journey of enquiry, then, has taken me well beyond the disciplinary boundaries of classics into such realms as the history and philosophy of science, though the impetus for my journey was classical, specifically Lucretian, and I travelled, as Seneca says, *non tamquam transfuga sed tamquam explorator*. Actually, to define one's status in exploring other disciplines, in doing interdisciplinary work, I prefer to use the image of the *xenos*, the traveller who comes into other realms of knowledge as a stranger, but also as a guest. As a *xenos*, one has to answer (read, "I have to answer") the formulaic questions, "Who are you, and from where, and with what purpose have you come?" The best way of answering them and, indeed, anticipating them, as it seems to me, is to use the personal voice, to declare one's personal interest and situation. Within the community of one's own discipline, one has a certain standing as a citizen of the discipline. But clearly one does not have equal rights in other disciplines. So, in doing interdisciplinary work, it seems wise to acknowledge that one arrives as a stranger, a *xenos*. As a stranger, one hopes for *xenia*, the kind of courtesy that is shown to strangers. One hopes that it includes forbearance for one's strange ideas and forgiveness for one's ignorance of local customs. In return,

12 Marilyn B. Skinner, in a paper delivered at the 1992 Cincinnati conference on "Feminism and Classics," drew a useful distinction between the "personal" and the "positional" voice. For the purposes of the present paper, I have elided this distinction because, in practice, the personal and the positional interact, as Rabinowitz illustrates in this volume by tracing her own intellectual odyssey in the context of the historical evolution of feminism.

one needs to show reciprocal courtesy and, above all, awareness of one's own situation, the situated nature of one's knowledge and one's enquiry.

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