

## L. VARIUS RUFUS, *DE MORTE* (FRS. 1–4 MOREL)

Already an admired senior poet to Virgil in the *Eclogues* (9.35), Varius by the mid-thirties, B.C. had established himself as the leading epic writer of his day (Horace, *Sat.* 1.10.43–4). It is a sobering thought that we do not know even the titles of the serious hexameter works which had won him so high a reputation, except for *de Morte*, quoted four times by Macrobius (from whom we may gather that the poem was not split into more than one book). The precise nature of his *de Morte* has attracted numerous guesses;<sup>1</sup> of these one should perhaps be cleared out of the way immediately. Several modern scholars are confident that Varius' theme was the murder of Julius Caesar, and some have even expanded the title to *de Morte Caesaris*, without the slightest justification. In fact there is a much more plausible guess, brought forward by A. Rostagni;<sup>2</sup> I think it is possible to strengthen Rostagni's arguments, and so to set the *de Morte* more firmly in a historical context and a continuing literary tradition. The poem is a most regrettable loss—it remained in Virgil's mind throughout his life, and the six-line simile of the hunting dog (fr. 4) seems to me of the highest quality.

The Proban Life of Virgil states that Varius belonged to an Epicurean group of friends which included Virgil, Quintilius Varus, and Plotius Tucca; as it happens, two papyrus fragments from Herculaneum survive wherein the Epicurean philosopher Philodemus addresses Varius and Quintilius, perhaps Virgil and Plotius Tucca as well.<sup>3</sup> So the Epicurean connections of Varius are firmly established. And among the other works of Philodemus was a treatise *περί Θανάτου*, parts of which remain;<sup>4</sup> in view of this it seems a reasonable hypothesis that Varius' *de Morte* should, like Philodemus' *περί Θανάτου*, have been a philosophical work aiming to free men from the fear of death. Such a desire was of course central to the Epicurean system, and on the poetic side Varius would have as an inspiration the splendid third book of Lucretius, *de Rerum Natura*. One might imagine Varius' poem to have been prompted by Philodemus' treatise, which Horace also apparently read with profit.<sup>5</sup> T. Kuiper<sup>6</sup> favoured 43 B.C. as the date of Philodemus' work, and this is accepted as 'approximately right' by Momigliano,<sup>7</sup> but I do not see why Philodemus cannot have written rather earlier. As we shall discover, the attacks on Antony in Varius frs. 1–2 clearly refer to his conduct in the months following Caesar's murder. Perhaps they fit best into the summer of 44 when several Epicureans stood out against Antony;<sup>8</sup> they are inconceivable after the formation of the Second Triumvirate until Antony once more became unpopular and vulnerable<sup>9</sup> (e.g. the

<sup>1</sup> See Bardon, *La Littérature latine inconnue*, vol. ii, pp. 28–30.

<sup>2</sup> *Rivista di filologia* N.S. 37 (1959), 380–94.

<sup>3</sup> The texts, with a summary of the voluminous scholarship on them, are conveniently reproduced by M. Gigante, *Cronache ercolanesi* 3 (1973), 86–7. Varius' name is certain in both fragments.

<sup>4</sup> D. Bassi, *Herculaneum Volumnum Quae Supersunt*, Collectio Tertia, vol. i (Milan, 1914), 19 ff. Gigante, *Ricerche*

*filodemeae* (1969), pp. 63–122, discusses and annotates the most interesting portions.

<sup>5</sup> e.g. *Odes* ii. 14.23 on the cypress (Gigante, *Ricerche filodemeae*, p. 111)—one can cite several other points of contact.

<sup>6</sup> *Philodemus over den Dood* (Amsterdam, 1925), p. 96.

<sup>7</sup> *JRS* 31 (1941), 154.

<sup>8</sup> Momigliano, op. cit. 153–4.

<sup>9</sup> A point which Rostagni (op. cit. 383) appears to overlook.

period of the Perusine War, when Varius may already have been associated with Maecenas, and Octavian himself lampooned Antony<sup>10</sup>). Abuse of Antony for his part in land confiscations (Varius fr. 1.1–2) seems in any case unlikely after Octavian had incurred greater odium on precisely the same ground—as a *terminus post quem non* remember that Varius *de Morte* must be earlier than Virgil's eighth *Eclogue* (fr. 4.6 = *Ecl.* 8.88). If we wish to attribute *de Morte* to 44 B.C., or at least to the first part of 43 B.C., perhaps *περὶ Θανάτου* could have been a little earlier than Kuiper and Momigliano allow; the philosopher and the poet might also have been discussing their ideas and writing simultaneously.

Now for consideration of the fragments. Nos. 1 and 2 seem to belong together.<sup>11</sup>

fr. 1                   Vendidit hic Latium populis agrosque Quiritum  
eripuit, fixit leges pretio atque refixit

fr. 2                   Incubat ut Tyriis atque ex solido bibat auro

Virgil's imitation of fr. 1 runs 'vendit hic auro patriam, dominumque potentem/ imposuit; fixit leges pretio atque refixit' (*Aen.* 6.621–2), and Servius remarks on line 622 'possumus Antonium accipere', with which one may agree; the parallel to quote is Cicero, *Phil.* 12.5.12, relating to Antony's measures which he passed off as the wishes of the murdered Caesar, 'immunitates ab eo civitatibus, sacerdotia, regna venierunt: num figentur rursus eae tabulae, quae vos decretis vestris refixistis?'<sup>12</sup> Incidentally Servius suggests that *Aen.* 6.621 may contain another contemporary Roman allusion, to Curio 'Gallorum captus spoliis et Caesaris auro' (Lucan 4.820), but I doubt this; it seems to me that Virgil, in describing a whole category of the damned, has widened and generalized his model, leaving untouched 'fixit leges pretio atque refixit' to confirm the imitation and recall Varius' reference to Antony.

'Selling Latium to the nations' raises interesting historical problems. Presumably 'Latium' here stands for Latin rights, *ius Latii*. The closest approach I know to Varius' statement (which has the air of a sweeping exaggeration) lies in Cicero, *ad Att.* 14.12.1 (22 April 44 B.C.): 'multa illis [the Sicilians] Caesar, neque me invito (etsi Latinitas erat non ferenda. verum tamen—) ecce autem Antonius accepta grandi pecunia fixit legem "a dictatore comitiis latam" qua Siculi cives Romani; cuius rei vivo illo mentio nulla.' It emerges that Caesar had conferred Latin rights on at least some Sicilians; Cicero, well disposed as he was to Sicily, thought this excessive—but nothing like as outrageous as Antony's proposal to make them full Roman citizens. For the extension of Latin rights in this period see Sherwin-White, *The Roman Citizenship*<sup>2</sup>, particularly pp. 360 ff.; it is difficult e.g. in the case of Spain to decide whether the grant was made under Julius Caesar or Augustus. If the offer of full citizenship made by Antony to the Sicilians was in any sense a wholesale one, Octavian must later have cancelled it. No other source apparently connects Antony with malpractice over Latin rights.

'Robbing citizens of their land' must refer to two agrarian laws which followed soon after Caesar's death. First came a *Lex Antonia de coloniis in agros deducendis*,

<sup>10</sup> Morel, *FPL*, p. 103 (from Martial 11.20).

<sup>11</sup> Morel would join them (supported by M. Wigodsky *Virgil and Early Latin Poetry*, p. 103 n.507).

<sup>12</sup> I would not argue that the *de Morte*

must be later than March 43 (the date of the Twelfth Philippic); the catch phrase including 'figere' and 'refigere' could have been current during the previous year (cf. 'fixit legem' in *ad Att.* 14.12.1, which I quote later).

passed by L. Antonius as Tribune of the People, perhaps in April, and then a consular *Lex Antonia Cornelia Agraria* in early June. The latter was rescinded in January 43 B.C.<sup>13</sup> Charges of luxurious living (Varius fr. 2) were of course cast up against Antony throughout his career.

Is it possible to guess the context of these attacks upon Antony in Varius' poem? There is no guarantee that isolated fragments will belong to the main argument of a lost work. But, as it happens, frs. 1–2 fit excellently with a common Epicurean argument, and are helped to an appropriate place by parallels with Lucretius and imitations in Virgil. They speak of injustice committed for wealth and luxury. Lucretius also has much to say on this theme early in book 3 (59–63):

denique avarities et honorum caeca cupido  
quae miseros homines cogunt transcendere finis  
iuris et interdum socios scelerum atque ministros  
noctes atque dies niti praestante labore  
ad summas emergere opes . . .

and one cannot fail to recognize the allusion to contemporary Rome (70–3):

sanguine civili rem conflant, divitiasque  
conduplicant avidi, caedem caede accumulantes;  
crudeles gaudent in tristi funere fratris  
et consanguineum mensas odere timentque.

To the Epicurean such a frenzied search for power and money was partly caused by a fear of death (Lucr. 3.63–4 'haec vulnera vitae/haud minimam partem mortis formidine aluntur'); men try by these means to gain security and fence themselves in.<sup>14</sup> Virgil, towards the end of the second *Georgic*, contrasts the seeker for power and money with a countryman. He does not advance the strict Epicurean argument that such behaviour is inspired by fear of death, but echoes both Lucretius 3 (e.g. *G.* 2.510 'gaudent perfusi sanguine fratrum', cf. *Lucr.* 3.72 above) and Varius, *de Morte* (*G.* 2.506 'ut gemma bibat et Sarrano dormiat ostro', cf. *Varius fr.* 2), reinforcing the suspicion that his two model passages were basically similar.

Finally, a small point derived from 'hic' in *Varius fr.* 1.1. It is striking that in the Virgilian imitations both of fr. 1 and of fr. 2 we find the pattern 'hic . . . hic', 'one man . . . another' (*Aen.* 6.621–2 and *Georgics* 2.505–8 'hic petit excidiis urbem . . . /hic stupet attonitus rostris, hunc plausus hiantem . . .').<sup>15</sup> If 'hic' in Varius also means 'one man . . .', it seems that Antony may have been linked with other characters from recent Roman history (perhaps equally recognizable as individuals) whose misconduct sprang ultimately from the fear of death. The contemporary political allusions would be much more marked than in *Lucr.* 3.70–3 (above), but it is worth mentioning that Philodemus too in another work (*περί θεῶν*) introduced references to Antony and the Liberators.<sup>16</sup>

I have not spoken about *Varius frs.* 3 and 4, which describe the breaking-in of

<sup>13</sup> The basic discussion of Antony's agrarian legislation was by W. Sternkopf in *Hermes* 47 (1912), 146–51.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Bailey on *Lucr.* 3.31–93 (vol. ii, p. 996) for the same idea in other Epicurean texts.

<sup>15</sup> Bailey's text with commentary gives the same pattern in Lucretius 3.83. But it seems much more likely that 'hunc' in 3.83 picks up 'hunc . . . timorem' in 82, and that 'suadet' (84) is corrupt.

<sup>16</sup> Discussed by Momigliano, *op. cit.* 154.

a spirited horse<sup>17</sup> and a Cretan hound pursuing a deer; fr. 3 looks like a simile, as is fr. 4. These fine passages would bring vivid epic colouring to the Epicurean argument. One can think of ways in which they might have been used, e.g. fr. 3 in connection with training the mind to face death (a favourite point), or fr. 4 with a refusal to be diverted from seeking the truth.<sup>18</sup> I set no store whatever by these particular suggestions, and only make them to show that frs. 3 and 4 need not rule out my view of the whole poem. If then Varius, *de Morte* was an Epicurean work directed against the fear of death, perhaps the famous lines at *G.* 2.490–2 may denote Varius as well as Lucretius,<sup>19</sup> for of both could it be said ‘metus omnes et inexorabile fatum/subiecit pedibus, strepitumque Acherontis avari’.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Professor Long points out that the taming of animals was a subject which interested Epicureans (cf. P. Huby, ‘The Epicureans, Animals and Free-will’, *Apeiron* 3 (1969), 17–19).

<sup>18</sup> A refusal to be diverted is also the essence in Silius’ imitation of Varius fr. 4

(*Punica* 10.79–82).

<sup>19</sup> The echo of Lucretius 3.37 ‘et metus ille foras praeceps Acheruntis agendus’ is obvious.

<sup>20</sup> For comments and information I am indebted to Mr. E.W. Gray, Professor R.G.M. Nisbet, and Mr. David Sedley.