

LUCRETIUS' PRAYER FOR PEACE AND THE DATE OF *DE RERUM NATURA**

In an article in these pages from 2001, G.O. Hutchinson challenges the *communis opinio* on the date of Lucretius' poem, suggesting that rather than in the mid 50s B.C., the work received its final form only in 49/8, at the time of the civil war between Caesar and Pompey.¹ Hutchinson's reading is based primarily on lines 1.29–43 of *De rerum natura*; he argues that Lucretius' appeal to Venus to put to sleep the *fera moenera militai* (29) and to give peace to the Romans (40) by seducing and pacifying the war god Mars makes sense only in a historical context of serious military action. Similarly, he takes as indicative of a major political crisis Lucretius' claim that at this time, *patriai tempore iniquo* (41), the poet himself is unable to attend to his task *aequo animo* (42) and his addressee Memmius cannot neglect his duties toward the common good. After establishing his new date, Hutchinson proceeds to show that all supposed pieces of evidence for an earlier composition either are unreliable or admit of differing interpretations. Thus, Cicero's mention (*Q Fr.* 2.10.3; 54 B.C.) of *Lucreti poemata* need not refer to the finished *De rerum natura*; the dates given by Jerome (51/50 B.C.) and Donatus (55 B.C.) for Lucretius' death do not inspire confidence (and cannot, at any rate, both be correct); the reference in Cornelius Nepos to the 'death of Lucretius and Catullus' (*Att.* 12.4) does not imply that the former died earlier than the latter, or even that both deaths occurred in quick succession; and purported allusions to Lucretius in Catullus can be explained through the use of the same source or a shared poetic idiom. Hutchinson's refutations are persuasive enough, and none of the traditional arguments for an early date presents an insurmountable obstacle to his thesis, provided that it can otherwise be supported. His proposal therefore has to stand and fall with his reading of the first proem. Does the poet's appeal to Venus really show that civil war was raging when Lucretius wrote the poem – or, to put it somewhat differently, has the text been devised in such a way as to give this impression?

To answer this question, we need to consider for a moment the function of the proem in a text like *De rerum natura*.² Ancient epic and didactic poems typically have introductions that announce the work's topic and set in motion what might be called its poetic plot. Operating according to a principle that I have termed poetic simultaneity, such texts stage their own coming into being by presenting the illusion that the poem is being composed only as it evolves.³ In the Homeric

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¹ G.O. Hutchinson, 'The date of *De rerum natura*', *CQ* 51 (2001), 150–62. Hutchinson's date is tentatively accepted by A. Schiesaro, 'Lucretius and Roman politics and history', in S. Gillespie and P. Hardie (edd.), *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius* (Cambridge, 2007), 41–58, at 53–4.

² On prefatory conventions, see also the article by Victoria Pagán in this volume.

³ On poetic simultaneity, see K. Volk, *The Poetics of Latin Didactic: Lucretius, Vergil, Ovid, Manilius* (Oxford, 2002), esp. 6–24.

epics, for example, the poet appeals to the Muse as he embarks on his task of singing about a specific topic; the underlying assumption is that his invocation is successful and that the inspiration of the bard by the Muse enables his subsequent composition. In the course of the epic, the poet occasionally refers to the ongoing process of his 'singing', keeping up the impression that the creation of the poem is taking place simultaneously to the readers' reading (or the audience's listening). In didactic, this poetic plot is at the same time a didactic plot, as the poet who composes the poem is also a teacher who teaches his student(s).⁴ It is again typically the proem that sets up the teacher–student constellation and creates the conditions that get the poet started on his poetic teaching speech.

In other words, there is in didactic poetry a sense of an intratextual narrative beyond the work's actual content; of a storyline that features such characters as the poet-teacher, his student and his inspiring deity; of a plot that has its beginning in the poem's proem. To return to Lucretius, we thus need to ask what 'happens' at the beginning of *De rerum natura*. The poet is setting out on his instruction of Memmius on the topic of the 'nature of things' (25–6) and he is, in an original twist, appealing for help not to the traditional Muses, but instead to Venus – a fitting goddess to invoke since she herself, as the poet explains, is concerned with governing the *rerum natura* (21). Lucretius asks Venus for two things. First, she is supposed to take on a Muse-like role and assist him in writing his poem (24), specifically by endowing it with 'eternal charm' (*aeternum ... leporem*, 28). And second, as we have seen, the poet entreats the goddess to seduce Mars away from his warlike activities and to usher in peace on earth, with special benefit to the Romans.⁵

The proemial conventions just described raise the expectation that the poet's prayer will be answered: if the invoked deity did not heed the poet's call, the poem would not exist. Thus we are to believe that Venus indeed lends her charm to Lucretius' verse. This is apparent especially from the famous self-referential passage that includes the honeyed cup simile (1.926–50 ~ 4.1–25): there, it is the poet who now has the ability to drench his poetry in charm (*musaeo contingens cuncta lepore*, 1.934 = 4.9). If Venus thus fulfils the first part of Lucretius' prayer, what about the second, the call for peace? Not only would it be strange for a proemial goddess not to do what she is told, but the text itself suggests that the writing of *De rerum natura* takes place at a moment of relative peace.⁶ This is in fact implied by lines 41–3:

⁴ On the didactic plot, see D. Fowler, 'The didactic plot', in M. Depew and D. Obbink (edd.), *Matrices of Genre: Authors, Canons, and Society* (Cambridge, MA, 2000), 205–19.

⁵ In a neat juxtaposition, Lucretius presents Venus within a few lines in both a military role (she is supposed to be his *socia*, 'ally', in writing poetry; on this image, see J. J. O'Hara, 'Venus or the Muse as "ally" [Lucr. 1.24, Simon. Frag. Eleg. 11.20–22 W]', *CPh* 93 [1998], 69–74) and a pacifistic one (as the polar opposite and the appeaser of Mars).

⁶ That we are to imagine Venus as answering Lucretius' prayer for peace is suggested by J. Vahlen. 'Über das Prooemium des Lucretius', in *Gesammelte philologische Schriften*, vol. 2 (Leipzig, 1923), 12–31, at 21 (first publ. 1877): 'indem er die Gewährung der Bitte nach Dichterart stillschweigend voraussetzt'. See also D.P. Fowler, 'Lucretius and politics', in M. Griffin and J. Barnes (edd.), *Philosophia Togata: Essays on Philosophy and Roman Society* (Oxford, 1989), 120–50, at 128: 'it seems that we are to suppose that the prayer is granted'. Fowler maintains that the 'logic here is not straightforward' because the 'allegory of the address to Venus demands that the achievement of the plea be achieved by the reading of the *De Rerum Natura* and the reader's conversion' (ibid.); however, this problem exists only if one buys into Fowler's specific line of allegorical interpretation.

nam neque nos agere hoc patriai tempore iniquo
possumus aequo animo nec Memmi clara propago
talibus in rebus communi desse saluti.

The poet states clearly that in a crisis involving the fatherland, he himself is unable to 'do this' (i.e. write his poem) with a calm mind, while Memmius is duty-bound to attend to the needs of the commonweal. What this means is that at such a time of war, *De rerum natura* could not exist: the poet would not be able to compose it (at least not *aequo animo*), and Memmius would not be able to attend to it, that is, listen to the teacher's instruction. However, immediately after this statement Lucretius launches into his poem and continues for six books, without any indication that he is not doing so *aequo animo*. In those passages where he refers to his own ongoing composition, he stresses his enjoyment, his pride in his achievement, and his intense concentration.⁷ His only anxiety concerns Memmius' ability to follow his teaching;⁸ there is no further mention of the political situation, let alone the possibility that it might interfere with the poet's project. As for Memmius, he is apparently taking a break from the 'common good' and has instead enrolled in the poet's course in Epicurean physics, to which Lucretius expects him to be able to devote his full attention: *uacuas auris <animumque sagacem> | semotum a curis adhibe ueram ad rationem* (1.50–1).⁹ That the poet's student is at least potentially at leisure and carefree implies that the political situation is not all that bad; coming so soon after the invocation to Venus and after the statement of 41–3, the description of Memmius in these lines seems to indicate that the goddess has meanwhile indeed worked her charms on Mars and that the threat of war has, at least temporarily, been averted.¹⁰

It is important to realize that lines 41–3 by no means imply that at the moment of their writing – this particular point in the poetic plot – there really obtains the kind of *patriai tempus iniquum* that would keep Lucretius and Memmius from concentrating on the poem. As is well known, Latin frequently uses forms of

⁷ Enjoyment: see e.g. *noctes uigilare serenas* (1.142), where the adjective would seem to allude to Epicurean peace of mind (cf. *sapientum templa serena*, 2.8), and the repeated *iuuat* in 1.927–8; pride: see 1.921–50; concentration: see 4.969–70, where the poet describes himself as writing about *rerum natura* even in his dreams (his reference to his own activity as *agere hoc* [4.969] harks back to 1.41, as also noted by Hutchinson [n. 1], 160 n. 23).

⁸ On Lucretius' anxiety-ridden interactions with Memmius, see esp. P. Mitsis, 'Committing philosophy on the reader: didactic coercion and reader autonomy in *De Rerum Natura*', in A. Schiesaro, P. Mitsis and J.S. Clay (edd.), *Mega Nepios: Il destinatario nell'epos didascalico* (Pisa, 1993 = MD 31), 111–28.

⁹ Hutchinson does not discuss lines 1.50–1, but their potentially problematic relationship to 1.41–3 was much debated in earlier scholarship. See Vahlen (n. 6), 20–1; H. Diels, 'Lukrezstudien I', *Sitzungsberichte der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften Berlin* (1918), 912–39, at 919–25; R. Reitzenstein, 'Das erste Prooemium des Lukrez', *Nachrichten von der Königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen* (1920), 83–96, at 93–4 + n. 1; F. Jacoby, 'Das Prooemium des Lucretius', *Hermes* 56 (1921), 1–65, at 47–51; E. Wistrand, 'De Lucretii prooemii interpretatione', *Eranos* 40 (1942), 43–7; and F. Giancotti, *Il preludio di Lucrezio* (Messina, 1959), 139–48.

¹⁰ This is not the place to discuss the vexed question of lines 1.44–9. Whatever originally stood between lines 43 and 50, I am working on the assumption that the address to the carefree student occurred soon enough after the poet's prayer for peace for the causal connection to be felt. That Lucretius envisages but a momentary respite from war is clear from *interea* (1.29), glossed as 'while I am composing my poem' by C. Bailey, *Titi Lucreti Cari De rerum natura libri sex* (Oxford, 1947), ad loc.

posse in the indicative in situations where many modern languages would employ a conditional or subjunctive:¹¹ what is being expressed in this particular passage is the reality of the lack of Lucretius' and Memmius' capability to do certain things under certain circumstances, but *not* the reality of the circumstances themselves, which are purely hypothetical. An idiomatic English translation would be: 'At a time of political crisis, I would not be able to do this with a level mind, nor would the illustrious offspring of Memmius in such a situation be able to forsake the common good.'¹²

The logic of the poem's argument thus runs as follows. The inception and progress of the poem are contingent on Venus' keeping Mars at bay; as Lucretius clearly says, his work could not proceed *patriai tempore iniquo*. However, *De rerum natura* clearly does exist and evolves without a hitch from the poem to the end of Book 6. What we therefore have to conclude is that its composition does *not* take place at a time of war – if at a time when the threat of war is clearly felt, since otherwise the invocation to Venus would be unnecessary.¹³

Obviously, this line of reasoning pertains primarily to the work's fictional poetic plot. Lucretius' persona within the poem is not the historical Lucretius, and even if according to the logic of the poem's intratextual drama, Venus is expected to grant peace and thus enable the composition of *De rerum natura*, this does not necessarily mean that Lucretius himself was writing at a time of relative political calm. However, since readers have a tendency to identify a poem's persona with its actual author (an identification encouraged by the text itself), and since the addressee of *De rerum natura* is presented as being a well-known contemporary Roman politician, it seems likely that Lucretius would have aimed at keeping his didactic plot reasonably 'realistic' and would not have placed his own and Memmius' intratextual counterparts in an impossible scenario. In other words, if he really was writing in 49/8, it would have been quite absurd for him first to claim that in such a crisis neither he nor his student could dedicate himself to a philosophical didactic poem – and then to go on and compose the poem anyway.

Hutchinson does not discuss any of these issues in detail, but he seems to have some awareness that his reading endangers the logic of poem's narrative (160 + n. 23). His solution is to assume that the supposed references to the civil war are a late addition to the text. They would then be interruptions, as it were, of the poetic plot: while Lucretius has been composing his poem *aequo animo* and Memmius has been listening, the latest developments really do constitute a *patriai tempus iniquum*. By rights this should mean that *De rerum natura* cannot exist, only that

¹¹ See R. Kühner and C. Stegmann, *Ausführliche Grammatik der lateinischen Sprache: Satzlehre*³ (Leverkusen, 1955), §44 1.a), with examples.

¹² For similar uses of *posse* in Lucretius, see e.g. 1.400–1, *multaque praeterea tibi possum commemorando | argumenta fidem dictis corradere nostris* (the poet threatens Memmius that he could provide many more arguments for the existence of the void, but he does not actually do so), and 3.627–8, *nec ratione alia nosmet proponere nobis | possumus infernas animas Acherunte uagari* (if the soul were immortal – which it is not – it would have to be furnished with five senses: we could not imagine the souls in the underworld in any other way).

¹³ Like myself, Wistrand and Giancotti (n. 9) believe that lines 41–3 and 50–1 imply that Lucretius is composing at a time of peace. However, unlike myself (and, earlier, Vahlen [n. 6]), they do not accept the conceit that Venus is temporarily granting this peace in reply to the poet's prayer; instead, they assume that the peaceful situation obtains from the very beginning of the poem and that Lucretius is asking Venus not to end an ongoing war, but to perpetuate the current peace. This interpretation leads Giancotti (145–8) to posit 62 B.C. (the relatively calm year after the uncovering of the Catilinarian conspiracy) as the date of the poem.

it already does by virtue of having been written earlier. This is of course possible (and it is certainly likely that Lucretius worked on the poem for an extended period of time), but since the logic of the text works impeccably – in fact, considerably better – without this assumption, there seems to be no pressing reason to make it in the first place. Matters would be different if it could be shown unequivocally that Lucretius' political allusions in the proem must refer to 49/8. However, lines 41–3 and the preceding prayer for peace have been taken by scholars to point to quite a few different time periods,¹⁴ and the general vagueness of a phrase like *patriai tempus iniquum* is such that it 'would fairly describe the condition of Roman society at almost any time from the tribunate of Tiberius Gracchus in 133 B.C. to the establishment of the principate by Augustus in 27 B.C.'¹⁵

I conclude that the proem of *De rerum natura* was most likely not written in 49/8 – a time of severe crisis that, according to Lucretius' own statement, would have been unpropitious for composition – and that there is therefore no reason to date down the poem as a whole. I have no new suggestions to offer about the correct date, though it seems most reasonable to go back to those sources that point to the mid 50s, a time of great political uncertainty when internal peace at Rome was certainly endangered, but open civil war had not yet broken out.

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¹⁴ **59 B.C.**: H.A.J. Munro, *T. Lucreti Cari De rerum natura libri sex*⁴ (Cambridge, 1886), ad 1.41–3; **58 B.C.**: W.E. Leonard and S.B. Smith, *T. Lucreti Cari De rerum natura libri sex* (Madison, WI, 1942), ad 1.42; **55/4 B.C.**: F.H. Sandbach, 'Lucreti poemata and the poet's death', *CR* 54 (1940), 72–7, at 77; **54 B.C.**: L. Canfora, *Vita di Lucrezio* (Palermo, 1993), 49–51; **54/3 B.C.**: P. Grimal, 'Le poème de Lucrèce en son temps', in O. Gigon (ed.), *Lucrèce* (Vandœuvres–Geneva, 1978), 233–70, at 237–40; **52–50 B.C.**: L. Herrmann, 'Catulle et Lucrèce', *Latomus* 15 (1956), 465–80, at 474. Note that all the authors quoted assume that Lucretius' addressee is C. Memmius L. f., the praetor of 58, and are trying to fit the poet's words to certain stages in his patron's career; by contrast, Hutchinson (n. 1, at 158–9) now suggests that Lucretius is instead addressing C. Memmius C. f., the tribune of 54.

¹⁵ Leonard and Smith (n. 14), ad 1.41