II

YASMIN HASKELL

Religion and enlightenment in the neo-Latin reception of Lucretius

The Renaissance bishop and poet Marco Girolamo Vida may have aimed a gentle rebuke at Lucretian imitators when he warned the aspiring Latin poet to avoid the example of those who 'pour out and pile up all things in their verses, without method, without art, especially if it is unknown, hidden, and not suitable for the ears of the crowd, such as the secret motions of the radiant heavens, or the inaccessible nature of the gods, or the uncertain origin of the impenetrable soul' (*De arte poetica* 2.194–9).¹ Many of the writers who composed Latin Lucretian poems in the early modern period did so wearing the robes of philosopher, physician, mathematician, even priest. Latin, the natural language choice for scholarship, science and theology from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, brought challenges and opportunities of a different order from those facing Lucretius' vernacular imitators. Latin Lucretianists more frequently composed long philosophical poems, and engaged more freely with current and controversial topics in science and religion. To imitate Lucretius in Latin was perhaps a less risky business than it was in the vernacular, the learned language screening out unauthorised access by less educated readers, and many women. Thus a former Jesuit, Camillo Garulli, could publish, in Catholic Rome, a Lucretian poem endorsing the Copernican 'hypothesis' at a time when it was still officially proscribed by the Church (1777). On the other hand, neo-Latin poets were arguably in greater danger of being pulled into Lucretius' ideological orbit, if not sucked into the black hole of heresy.

This essay will explore some neo-Latin responses to Lucretius' thematics of religion and enlightenment. How did neo-Latin poets negotiate or exploit for their own purposes Lucretius' attacks on superstition? How did they represent both the enlightened individual and the cultural/intellectual progress of mankind? The primary focus on Italian poets, dictated partly by constraints

¹ Reference to Lucretius is suggested by R. G. Williams in Vida 1976: 155 n. 28. Translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

of space, is not arbitrary. Italy saw the earliest Renaissance imitations of Lucretius and some of the most poetically accomplished and influential. It produced the most intellectually audacious Lucretian poems of the sixteenth century. And in the age of Enlightenment, paradoxically, Catholic Rome was the scene of a Lucretian poetic movement unparalleled elsewhere in Europe. Lucretius would prove as useful a model for the defenders of Christian doctrine as for those who sought to undermine it.

Lucretius and the humanists

A copy of the *DRN* was retrieved from the saddlebag of the Greek mercenary and poet of exile Michael Marullus, who drowned while trying to cross the swollen river Cecina in 1500.² The 'great' Lucretius is named as poet of 'Nature' in one of Marullus' epigrams (1.16) and, unsurprisingly, most critics have looked for Lucretian influence in Marullus' *Hymni naturales*, a collection of hymns to the pagan gods that was conceived under the star of Florentine Neoplatonism. The syncretistic riddle of the *Hymni* has resisted complete solution by appeal to Neoplatonic, Orphic and Christian frameworks, and the not-so-shadowy presence of Lucretius throughout the work – significantly prominent in the opening, central and closing hexameter hymns – is intriguing. What place do the materialism and indifferent divinities of Lucretius have in a work in which the poet prays to the traditional gods with apparent fervour and sincerity?

The most didactic of Marullus' hymns is the longest and central hymn to the Sun (3.1). Marullus departs from Julian's hymn to King Helios, which was enjoying a vogue among the Florentine Neoplatonists, by affirming the *material* nature of the sun, in pointedly Lucretian terms. He praises the solar god as the principle of life (see especially 69–101 for rich parallels with Lucretius' hymn to Venus), who fills all with his 'sacred' light, giving sight to eyes and colour to all things (133–4). The joys of spring, nature's abundance and abiding vitality even as individuals pass in and out of the 'sweet breezes of light' (*dulces . . . luminis auras*) are celebrated in Lucretian terms, and 'if anyone believes there is room for death he wanders lost, having strayed far from the true path of Nature' (100–1). But this same life-giving and sometime providential Sun averts his gaze from the destruction of our greatest achievements. The 'piety' of the Greeks did not save them from capture by the Turks, so many 'golden temples of the gods' have succumbed to the flames. There are shades here of Lucretius mocking belief in a Jupiter

² Marullus had been preparing a commentary on the text, preserved in part in Pietro Candido's notes to his 1512 Florentine edition.

who strikes down his own temples and images (DRN 6.417–20), but for Marullus the realisation of divine indifference is more personal, more painful: ‘and should I hesitate to admit that there is nothing sacred on the earth?’ (266).

Marullus warns us in this hymn not to attempt to avert evil destiny through incense or prayers (253–4). Coppini is right to contrast such prayers, with which she compares the superstitious god-bothering of a certain Caecubus, satirised by Marullus in one of the epigrams (2.15), with the sophisticated poetry of the hymns themselves.³ But if they are distinguished by a high degree of literary and philosophical knowingness, the hymns do not, in the end, advance a coherent natural philosophy. Despite the programmatic overtones of the title *Hymni naturales* – which seems to promise *De rerum natura*, and to recall Menander Rhetor’s designation of Parmenides’ and Empedocles’ scientific poems as *Hymnoi physikoi* – the consolations of Lucretius’ science figure less in the hymns than his enlightened persona. Marullus maintains a religious, even mystical, outlook, even as he adopts a Lucretian perspective to reflect on the gap between ideal and material worlds, between the enlightened individual and the benighted mass of humanity.

The sighs of the soldier are never far below the surface of Marullus’ poetry, and a Lucretian voice is often raised in the name of peace. Already in an epigram to his fellow-Greek exile Janus Lascaris (4.6), Marullus had contrasted his own restless life of soldiering with his friend’s philosophical contentment.⁴ Lascaris stands aloof, like the Epicurean sage of DRN 2.1–19, devoted to the Muses and looking down with an easy heart on the things which we, the wicked mob, admire (*facili pectore despicias* | *Prave quae populus nocens* | *Miramur*: for *despicere*, cf. DRN 2.9; 3.26). Marullus grieves that man outdoes the beasts in wickedness, since even tigers and lions do not harm their own kind, killing only to sate their hunger (cf. DRN 3.68–73, where fear of death is said to inspire unnatural fraternal violence). The remainder of this deeply Lucretian poem is a meditation on the mythological torments of DRN 3.978–1023, with pessimism prevailing over philosophical hope. Like the epigram to Lascaris, it closes with a half-muttered death wish, a prayer to return to the heavenly fatherland, whence ‘we can look down on (*despectemus*) so many futile cares of men’; and for wisdom not to ‘admire empty and vain things’ (*nil vanum, nil admiremur inane*, 104; cf. *miramur* in Ep. 4. 6). The *ataraxia* of the Epicurean sage remains a seductive but impossible spiritual goal for the soldier-poet – at least in this life.

The final hymn, to Earth (4.5), is eloquent of an internal conflict in the poet between his vocation as freedom-fighter and career as mercenary. As

³ Coppini 1995: 25.

⁴ See Dionigi 1985.

an *exemplum* of how much we owe our parents, Marullus revisits Lucretius' wailing infant, shipwrecked in this world, whose only good fortune is not to know how many labours are in store for him (44–8: cf. *DRN* 5.222–7). In the following lines he alludes to *DRN* 2.640–4, where devotees of the Great Mother brandish weapons to demonstrate their readiness to defend parents and *patria*. But where that Lucretian passage had culminated in *rejection* of the divinity of the earth, Marullus clings to the poetic fiction of her sacredness and sentience, even as he subtly references Lucretius' corrective coda: 'but what good is it to use nice phrases now if we pollute such holy names with foul deeds?' (picking up *eximie* in *DRN* 2.644–5). Then, in almost the same breath as he enjoins armed defence of the mother(land), he asserts that it is sacrilege (65) 'to dare to wound the common mother by dividing her', condemning war as the product of luxury and avarice, of 'false consciousness' Lucretius-style. Interestingly Marullus does not follow Lucretius in condemning superstition as a source of murderous error. In the hymns, old-time Greek religion and philosophical enlightenment coexist in an uneasy peace.

In the marriage proposal to Neaera, the longest of his epigrams (2.32), Marullus appeals to the other Lucretian 'enlightenment' mentioned above: the collective progress of the human race (vv. 103–16). The dispossessed Greek suitor reviews Lucretius' account of man's rise from savagery to civilisation in *DRN* 5: the first age was rough, lawless and ignorant; men lived in the forests with wild beasts, ate acorns, slept on the ground; they counted their flocks and herds with nuts, not on their fingers. It was *Greece* that first shaped our minds and showed us the power of speech (cf. *DRN* 6.1–8, the gifts of Athens, culminating in Epicurus). His share in the cultural capital of Greece affords Marullus a position from which to sue for the Italian Neaera's hand.⁵ In his *Nutricia*, a potted verse history of classical poetry, the leading humanist of Medicean Florence, Angelo Poliziano, would also pay tribute to Lucretius' narrative of cultural evolution. Poliziano viewed Marullus as a rival, and it is quite possible that he wrote with a sideways glance at the upstart *Graeculus* who had encroached on his philological patch and poached his star pupil, Alessandra Scala: Poliziano credits an apostrophised 'Poetry', not Greece, as the patron of progress.⁶

Marullus' German editor, Beatus Rhenanus, regretted the poet's lack of faith in Providence, but flirtation with Lucretius was not yet a heretic's game in Italy. Naples was an early hub of interest in the *DRN*, and two

⁵ For detailed discussion see Haskell 1998c.

⁶ For another possible precedent for Poliziano's use of Lucretius in Lorenzo Bonincontri, see Gambino Longo 2004: 266–7 n. 42.

successive presidents of the Neapolitan humanist academy, Lorenzo Bonincontri (1410–91) and Giovanni Gioviano Pontano (1422–1503), both edited Lucretius and imitated the *DRN* in their astrological didactic poetry. Pontano, Marullus' one-time mentor, extolled Lucretius' rhetorical power towards the end of his influential dialogue on poetics, *Actius*: 'He drags the reader wherever he wants to go, he proves what he wants to prove, with the greatest subtlety and art, he exhorts, deters, stirs up, pulls back – all, finally, with elevation and ornament, when there is need of it, and this wonder (*admiratio*) we have been talking about.'⁷ In the same context, however, Pontano declared that the purpose of poetry was to encourage virtue by teaching the immortality of the soul, raising the pious to heaven and condemning the wicked to Tartarus. We might well imagine Lucretius' atoms rolling in their grave, but Pontano's statement should not be read as preemptive self-censure. It speaks less of an anxiety of Lucretian influence than of the cheerful poetic opportunism of this generation, which found in the Roman poet a sweet-talking ally in the humanist project of uniting eloquence and wisdom, rather than a dangerous philosophical opponent to be engaged with on his own terms. Pontano heard Lucretius' critique of religion loud and clear, but used it selectively, for his particular purposes. Goddard shows how, in his *Urania*, Pontano cunningly exploits Lucretius' attacks on superstition to undermine Pico della Mirandola's strictures on judicial astrology.⁸

The first early modern Latin poet really to lock horns with Lucretius on the subject of religion was Antonio della Paglia (1503–70). 'Aonio Paleario' was executed for heresy in 1570 – not, to be sure, on account of his didactic poem on the immortality of souls, but of his later conversion to the cause of the Tuscan reformers. His *De animorum immortalitate* (1535) is the first of several early modern anti-Lucretian poems, culminating in Cardinal de Polignac's *Anti-Lucretius* of 1747. It is probably motivated less by the desire to set *Lucretius* straight than those who might be waylaid by the modern materialism of Pietro Pomponazzi (1462–1525), who denied the immortality of the soul. Paleario was the first neo-Latin poet to exploit the *DRN* as a continuous poetic foil, and he aimed to instruct but also delight humanist readers with his ingenious rehabilitation of Lucretius to prove the existence of a providential God, angels and immortal souls, true prophets, and the reality of posthumous rewards and punishments.

Paleario's anti-Lucretian voice is most strident at the beginning of his second book, where he contrasts the good *Gravius homo*, Plato, with a caricature of Epicurus (2.18–21), 'who in his zeal for leisure dared to raise his mortal face against the gods, impotent idiot, and then to provoke the gods with

⁷ Translation from Previtera's Latin text 1943: 238–9.

⁸ Goddard 1991b.

words; busy looking into what might please the palate, he was never able to tear his mind away from loaded tables.' Paleario praises the civilising benefits of religion, which is the source of good faith, social bonds, compassion, peacefulness and sexual morality (contrast Lucretius' negative account in *DRN* 5). Without fear of God and eternal retribution, the vices 'have laid human life low in foulness' (*humanam foede vitam stravere iacentem* 2.46; cf. *DRN* 1.62). The Christian poet uses Lucretian carrots and sticks throughout his poem to cajole the reader into religious faith. Those who follow God's law are portrayed as living the life of Lucretius' gods (1.217–19): 'Now the power and blessed seats of the heavenly ones appear to me, where there is true peace, and where a better sun radiates all with his lamp and the ether is always cloudless' (*Iam mihi caelestum numen sedesque beatae | apparent, ubi vera quies, ubi lampade lustrat | omnia sol melior semperque innubilis aether*: cf. *DRN* 3.18–22).

In his final book, Paleario assumes the role of poet-prophet to edify and terrify us with revelations of heaven, hell and purgatory, the senescence of the earth, and the Last Judgement. In those final times the earth will cease to be fruitful (3.400ff.; cf. *DRN* 2.116off.). Allusions to the meteorological and terrestrial terrors of *DRN* 5 and 6 (plague, earthquake, eclipse) are deployed here, ironically, to induce shock and awe in the reader. Paleario has no compunction about twisting Lucretian logic to prove the existence of an afterlife: 'It is indeed the case, but we ourselves cannot perceive it with our eyes (*non cernere quimus | ipsi oculis*: cf. *DRN* 2.837), ignorant as we are of things and uncertain of the future; but it is not false for that reason'. In Lucretius, the things not to be dismissed because we cannot perceive them are, of course, the atoms. To support his supernatural science, Paleario adduces marvels of nature and human technology, notably the magnet (199–216; cf. *DRN* 6.906–16, and *passim*) and gunpowder. He here recalls a famous Lucretian passage in which we are reminded that the heavens are no longer marvellous because we now understand them (3.246–51; cf. *DRN* 2.1026–43).

Paleario's application to the afterlife of Lucretius' argument from the marvellous is perverse indeed, accompanied as it is by a nod to modern scientific progress: 'it is clear, to be sure, that there are now many brilliant discoveries which earlier generations said could never occur' (*Multa quidem nunc esse liquet praeclara reperta, | quae fieri numquam dixere prioribus annis*, 252–3; cf. *DRN* 2. 1035–6).⁹ Curiously, though, it resonates with a more

⁹ He presents the magnet as ultimately inexplicable, quoting Lucretius' explanation of it (*DRN* 6.1031–2, 1037, 1085) as a *fabula nova* (2.211–16). While Paleario treats in passing the four element theory, and atomist and rival ancient theories of soul, natural philosophy takes a back

scientifically inflected didactic poem, published two decades later, on the venereal plague of the Renaissance: *Syphilis, sive de morbo gallico* (Verona, 1555). Lucretius is usually claimed to have exercised an influence on the science as well as the poetry of its author, the physician and humanist Girolamo Fracastoro (1478–1553).¹⁰ Lucretius' description of the plague at Athens is an obvious model for Fracastoro's account of the origins of syphilis in Book 1. What has not yet received the attention it deserves, though, is the presence there of material from *DRN* 5, which feeds a poetics of wonder that Fracastoro cultivates throughout his poem.¹¹

If Lucretius habitually uses formulae such as 'no wonder' (*nec mirum*) to rationalise the workings of the cosmos, and to combat superstitious belief in the gods,¹² Fracastoro, by contrast, insists on describing the venereal disease as 'unusual', 'strange', 'marvellous' in its genesis, transmission and bizarre symptomatology. In a 'wonderful' passage in the first book he undermines Lucretius' scepticism (*DRN* 5.837–924) about the earth's perennial capacity to bear monsters:

Forsitan et tempus veniet, poscentibus olim
 Natura, fatisque Deum, cum non modo tellus
 Nunc culta, aut obducta mari, aut deserta jacebit,
 Verum etiam Sol ipse novum (quis credere possit?)
 Curret iter, sua nec per tempora diffluet annus.
 Ast insueti aestus, insuetaque frigora mundo
 Insurgent, et certa dies animalia terris
 Monstrabit nova, nascentur pecudesque feraeque
 Sponte sua, primaque animas ab origine sument . . .
 Quae quum perspicias, nihil est, cur tempore certo
 Admirere novis magnum marcescere morbis
 Aera, contagesque novas viventibus aegris
 Sydere sub certo fieri, et per saecula longa.

(1.169–85)

Perhaps a time will come, at some future behest of Nature and the fates of the Gods, when not only the earth which is now cultivated will lie either covered by the sea or as a desert, but even the Sun himself (who could believe it?) will run a new course and the year will not flow according to its normal seasons. But unusual heat and unusual cold will rise against the world, and the day

seat to natural theology in his poem. Contrast Scipione Capece's *De principiis rerum* (Venice, 1546), on the elements, which is appended, with Paleario's poem, to the 1631 Frankfurt edition of Lucretius.

¹⁰ See also pp. 132–3 above. Goddard 1993 queries whether Fracastoro's theory of disease 'seeds' is especially Lucretian.

¹¹ See Haskell 1999: 80–8.

¹² See Conte 1994: 20–1.

appointed will show forth new creatures on the earth, cattle and wild beasts will be born spontaneously and take life from their primal source . . . When you consider these matters carefully there is no reason why you should wonder that at an appointed time the great expanse of air should grow languid with new diseases and that new contagions should affect frail living creatures under a destined star after the passage of long centuries.¹³

In a delightful and quite modern twist, then, Fracastoro exhorts us not to wonder at the fact that there have been, and always will be, wonders. But the physician-poet's attempt to put wonder back into Nature is, paradoxically, more 'scientific' than Lucretius' attempt to remove it. Where Lucretius boasts that his subject is difficult to write about (1.136–9), Fracastoro apologises that his is difficult to write about because it is not fully understood (1.256–60):

Yet I am in my mind under no illusion that it is difficult to tell of heaven's actions or their order and to discover precise causes in everything: so long are the periods of time over which they sometimes postpone their effects, and sometimes (which can lead one astray) chance and accidents, which vary according to particulars, are intermixed.¹⁴

It is this long view of history which allows Fracastoro to claim that syphilis is simultaneously wonderful *and* natural, to transform horror and alienation into a form of admiration and acceptance: syphilis is an object inspiring both curiosity and poetry not because it is supernatural and inexplicable, but simply because it is new to the present generation. Where for Lucretius natural philosophy is a *fait accompli*, for Fracastoro it is, implicitly, work in progress. The poets in our next section may be more daring, but they are also more dogmatic.

Lucretius and the heretics

Four Lucretian philosophical poets fell foul of the post-Tridentine Church in Italy and are commemorated on the monument to Giordano Bruno in Rome's Campo dei Fiori: Aonio Paleario, Scipione Capece, Marcellus 'Palingenius' Stellatus and Bruno himself, who was burnt at the stake there in 1600. To what extent was Lucretius implicated in the trials and tribulations of these reformers and heretics? It is true that the *DRN* was never placed on the Index of Forbidden Books and was read much more widely in Italy in the second half of the sixteenth century than has traditionally been assumed.¹⁵

¹³ Translations from Eatough 1984.

¹⁴ See Gambino Longo 2004: 202–3.

¹⁵ See Gambino Longo 2004; Prosperi 2004, esp. 97–117; ch. 13 below.

But the assumption of the mantle of missionary philosopher-poet would not have been without risk at a time when the Church was anxious to assert its univocal authority throughout the peninsula. At least two of our modern Lucretiuses seem to have imitated the wrong poet at the wrong time. Their mistake was less the (in any case selective) adoption of particular elements of the ancient poet's philosophy than of a defiant Lucretian *attitude*, which carried the threat of heresiarchy.

Both Palingenius and Bruno arrogate to themselves the almost godlike authority which Lucretius had imputed to Epicurus. In his great congeries of a poem, the *Zodiacus vitae* (Venice, 1534?–1538?), in twelve books, Palingenius attacks all the traditional sources of learning (humanist, medical, religious, etc.) to substitute his own highly idiosyncratic vision. It is telling that the poem opens with the words *mens mea*. The poet-narrator takes us on a personal journey through a world now physical, now allegorical. This is a work of multiple didactic and satirical voices, not all of them singing in concert. In the third book the poet meets and converses with Epicurus, but the ancient philosopher gets his comeuppance only after he has delivered a long, speciously convincing lecture on the pursuit of pleasure. We hear Lucretius in the passage on the mythological torments suffered by the victim of avarice (2.192–4; 506–14); the advice to seek a wife (or prostitute) rather than madly to 'desire and hope for what you cannot have, when you can dispel the disease with an easy remedy' (2.290–3); Epicurus' denial of life after death and posthumous punishment (3.125–77); the diatribe of *Mors* (6.76–114), whose consolations echo those of personified *Natura* in *DRN* 3. Throughout the poem we are frequently excoriated for our obtuseness (2.59–61): 'O mortal breasts full of blind shadows, and minds fenced in with the blackness of stupidity' (*O caecis mortalia plena tenebris | Pectora, et o mentes caligine circumseptas | Stultitiae*; cf. *DRN* 2.14–16.). Palingenius disingenuously declares his Catholic faith in the preface to the poem, but his denial of God's involvement in our world, his presumption of life on other stars, and his exhortation to commerce with the *coelicoli* – their delightful existence is extrapolated from that of Lucretius' intermundial gods rather than the Christian saints – are hardly orthodox. Add to this the unremitting satire of clerical corruption which endeared him to Protestant readers, and it is not difficult to understand why his corpse was exhumed and subjected to a posthumous auto-da-fé.

Palingenius had accepted the traditional Aristotelian configuration of the cosmos, with the opposition between celestial and terrestrial matter, but had projected an infinite light-world beyond the spheres (inhabited by *dii nobiliores*). Bruno quotes closely from Palingenius in the final book of his Frankfurt trilogy of philosophical didactic poems (1591), observing, with

uncharacteristic generosity, that Palingenius is 'almost awake'; but Bruno is more daring in his physics. He was the first philosopher to combine the atomist theses of an indivisible minimum and an infinite physical universe of innumerable worlds with Copernican heliocentrism. He seeks to do for his own physics and metaphysics in the Frankfurt trilogy what Lucretius had done for Epicurus. But Bruno's 'Lucretian' style is far from the rhetorically polished one approved by Pontano in the *Actius*. It has an angry and iconoclastic edge designed to slice into the hallowed claims of Aristotelian physics and Catholic tradition (indeed, of the Christian religion). Bruno learned his anti-humanist Lucretian manner from the plain-speaking Palingenius, who programmatically warned against the seductions of lascivious classical poetry and professed a poetics of truth (e.g. in the proem to his sixth book).¹⁶

In his monumental Lucretian didactics, Bruno frequently mobilises a metaphors of sleep and wakefulness, of chimeras and monsters, of revolution and revelation. In *De immenso* ('On the infinite universe') 4.1 he invokes the mutinous giant Enceladus, buried under Mount Etna, who is liberated from his burden by the realisation that the earth is not at the centre of the universe. Rather than the animal gods of the Nile, the gods of superstition, Enceladus asks why we do not 'worship instead real men, who, relying on the strength of their intellect, have scoffed at the threats of heaven and found a world beyond worlds, beyond the painted ceiling?' (cf. *DRN* 5.117–21). Bruno himself is one of those 'real men', but also the rebellious giant; the painted ceiling is the firmament, the physical limit of the Aristotelian cosmos, but also the constraining power of the Christian religion. Bruno continues boldly: 'Where [now] is that feigned throne of the gods, where the harsh judgement seat?'

Bruno is more brutal than Lucretius in associating the philosophical errors of his opponents with their moral limitations. In the final (eighth) book of the *De immenso*, the professional philosophers are bearded, gloomy, fastidious types, who demand special garments, titles and praise. They are beset by the monsters impossible in the Lucretian universe: 'They think they are awake inasmuch as they follow their *simulacra*, and the idiots weave together these empty shapes, figments of madness, in their brains, wretches, and they weary the gods, the fauns and satyrs, the centaurs and half-beasts, half-men, who can do nothing, and have no existence' (cf. *DRN* 2.700–17; 4.580–1, 732–48; 5.878–924). The allusion to 'half-beasts, half-men' could well be a snide reference to Christ, who is the flouter of Nature and bringer of fear

¹⁶ See Haskell 1998a: 120–3. Bruno's 'macho' Lucretian style differs radically from that of Paleario, Capece and Fracastoro.

in Bruno's most provocatively anti-Christian work, the *Spaccio della bestia trionfante*.¹⁷ Earlier in the *De immenso* the phantasms are more specifically metaphors for the traditional physics (7.8): 'Therefore it is clear that the multiple spheres of the heaven are vain, the prime mover and proud motor have disappeared, and the [other] motors flourish under the false image of that God, which we can credit with no more existence than the figments of poets, Hell, the kingdoms of Rhadamanthus, the Gorgon, Centaur, Scylla, Geryon, Chimaera.'

Bruno's polemic against traditional religion and cosmology should not, however, distract us from the fact that he was a *religious* thinker before he was a martyr to science. The prose commentary accompanying the verses just quoted reminds us that the true motors of the stars are souls. In *De immenso* 4.15, Bruno endowed the earth with a *vis animai* which is not only co-ordinative but motive. Lucretius (*DRN* 5. 556–8) had used the *vis animai* which sustains the weight of our body as an *analogy* for the relationship between earth and space. Bruno *literally* animates the heavenly bodies, who dodge one another around space in a spirit of self-preservation!¹⁸ In *De triplici minimo* ('On the triple minimum') 3.1, Bruno mocks our fear of death, but co-opts Lucretian language on the indissolubility of the atom to prove the immortality of the soul.¹⁹ It may be that it was his pantheist convictions that induced Bruno to ascribe to *all* atoms the spherical shape which Lucretius had reserved for the highly mobile spirit ones. Bruno was explicitly questioned about his attraction to Lucretius at his trial for heresy. The relationship between the two writers was more personal, more ideological, than strictly philosophical.²⁰ It is ironic that the Jesuits, Bruno's persecutors, were to produce some of the most accomplished Lucretian imitators of the following centuries.

Lucretius in the eighteenth century: religion and science

Less than twenty years after Bruno was burned at the stake, the Jesuit Famiانو Strada, in his *Prolusiones academicae*, put a light-hearted Lucretian poem on magnetic telegraphy into the mouth of Cardinal Pietro Bembo.²¹

¹⁷ There Bruno had adopted a frankly Lucretian stance on the evil consequences of the fear of death: see Ingegno 1985: 125.

¹⁸ See Salvatore 2003b for Bruno's imitation of Lucretius on the impossibility of lovers' bodies merging (*DRN* 4.1105–16) to prove the impossibility of planets colliding (*De immenso* 6.5). I am grateful to Gabriele Dasso for apprising me of the contents of this article.

¹⁹ Haskell 1998a: 130–1. ²⁰ Haskell 1998a: 132.

²¹ Described by C. A. Gordon 1962: 303–7.

The best-known modern Lucretian poem in Latin was undoubtedly the *Anti-Lucretius* of Cardinal Melchior de Polignac, a product of Polignac's travels through Europe and discussions with leading intellectuals from Bayle to Leibniz, published posthumously and incomplete; Polignac's Latin education was courtesy of the Society of Jesus. It was the Jesuits who were the most prolific composers of Latin didactic poetry in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – including poetry about philosophy and science. Virgil's *Georgics*, to be sure, remained the primary model for Jesuit didactic poetry, even on scientific subjects, but one suspects that that choice was dictated as often by literary preference as religious scruple.

In the dedication to his *Philosophia novo-antiqua* ('New-Ancient Philosophy', 1704), the Milanese Jesuit and mathematician Tommaso Ceva (1648–1737) frankly acknowledged Lucretius as his model.²² Ceva's curious title encapsulates his stated mission to reconcile the best of ancient and modern natural philosophy, incorporating some of his own more or less original reflections. The poem comprises six 'dissertations', with its centre of gravity in cosmology and mechanics, and engages with live issues for Catholic science (Copernican theory; Descartes's physics and denial of animal souls; Gassendi's atomism). A projected seventh and eighth book would apparently have treated arguments for the immortality of the soul and proofs of the existence of God, but these were never published (if ever begun).

The reviewer of the poem for the Jesuit journal of Trévoux (1728, 503–24) identifies Ceva's Book 3, in particular, as a sort of pre-Polignacian *Anti-Lucretius*. Ceva undertakes to snare his opponent just as insidiously as Lucretius had poisoned his readers with the honeyed cup, to wrap him up in a ball of thread, like a spider netting a drone with its slender thread. The book is in fact as rollicking and satirical as it is didactic and Lucretian, and while the ostensible target is ancient atomism, Lucretius and Epicurus serve as whipping boys for more contemporary 'freethinkers'. The poet has his sights on the conceited modern follower of Lucretius, who is secretly flattered when he overhears someone in the street whispering, in awe, that 'he does not care that his mind is composed of round atoms'. The book concludes with a drink and tête-à-tête between the poet and a delightfully self-important Epicurus, whose hopes of recruiting the genial Jesuit into his sect are brutally dashed on the last page.

²² The poem, in successive editions, was to become something of an ideological football between the Jesuits and their enemies in eighteenth-century Tuscany. Its place in these polemics has been documented by intellectual historians, but the literary aspects of Ceva's poem have been largely overlooked. See Haskell (forthcoming b).

Ceva never lets the sublime Lucretius get off the ground. Throughout his poem he is careful to check human pretensions to absolute knowledge of nature as promised in the *DRN*. The proem to the final book warns against the proliferation of philosophical error, which is traced back, significantly, to Greece (to Pythagoras and Plato; cf. the Athenian Epicurus in the proem to *DRN* 6). The great diversity of opinions is 'due, no doubt, to the fact that the mind of man is buried in darkness'. Ceva offers an analogy of human ignorance worthy of Lucretius, except that he does not indicate a path to enlightenment through philosophy:

Hinc, velut puer, cui vitta coeracet
 Circumducta oculos, aequales inter ephebos
 Cursitat hac illac, si quenquam forte prehenset;
 Quem simul ac tenuit, subducto denique velo,
 Non illum esse videt, quem credidit: Haud secus atris
 In tenebris caeci discurrimus; ultima donec
 Obscuram ex animo nubem detraxerit hora.²³

(Ceva 1704: 96)

Hence it is just like the boy whose eyes are covered by an encircling blindfold, who rushes about now here, now there, among his young mates, in the hope of grabbing one of them; and as soon as he has taken hold of someone and the veil is removed, he sees that the one before him is not the one he thought. In just this way we blindly rush around in the darkness, until our final hour removes the obscuring cloud from our mind.

In a touching passage in the fifth book, the Jesuit geometer had looked forward to God's revealing the answers to all our natural-philosophical questions after death!²⁴ For the present, we are to be content with a partial vision of nature – which is not to say a naïve and unscientific one, only that philosophical speculation should not conflict with Catholic teaching.

The *Philosophia novo-antiqua* was written at a moment of particularly lively Italian interest in the *DRN* – Alessandro Marchetti's translation was circulating, but not printed until 1717 – and of what Ceva bemoans as a perverted taste for 'novelty' and foreign books. The Jesuit did not want to render that forbidden fruit any more tantalising and so writes an anti-Lucretian poem in which allegory, fable, anecdote and invective dominate over the stylistic flavours of the *DRN*. It is not that Ceva pays mere lip-service to Lucretius: he is, rather, decentred, refracted through other poets, almost 'deconstructed'. In his *Anti-Lucretius* Polignac imitates the *DRN* more openly. From the outset he lectures and cajoles a named addressee,

²³ Ceva 1704: 96.

²⁴ Ceva 1704: 81.

a certain young 'Quintus', with atheist leanings.²⁵ Epicurus and Lucretius are ubiquitous in Polignac's poem, but, as for Ceva, they are only the thin end of a more dangerous modern wedge, which includes the philosophies of Gassendi, Hobbes and Spinoza.

Voltaire's early enthusiasm for Polignac's project gave way, after the poem's publication, to qualified public praise and withering private scorn (in a letter to Mme Du Deffand of October 1759). In 'Sur l'Anti-Lucrèce de Monsieur le Cardinal de Polignac' (1747/8) he regretted, more than the poem's style 'trop peu varié', its unjustified censure of Epicurus' personal morality.²⁶ Polignac deliberately misreads Lucretius' attacks on superstition (*religio*) as a wholesale rejection of 'religion', which he interprets as a recipe for hedonism, lawlessness and social disintegration.²⁷ Ceva's 'Epicurus', interestingly, had anticipated and rejected the familiar charge that his philosophy was a licence to sin: 'Pleasure must be decreed – not that pleasure which rumour attributes to us, but the kind to which the tranquil repose of the mind gives rise, and freedom from bodily pain.' Polignac leaves no room for doubt that the only 'enlightened' individual is the religious one. In Book 1 he provides starkly contrasting portraits of the lazy and selfish life of Epicurus, 'content with himself alone, totally devoted to himself' (*uno contentus se se, sibi deditus uni*), and the truly blessed life of the committed Christian, who comes to the aid not only of friends and relatives, but strangers, maintaining an inner tranquillity when duty dictates his participation in public affairs, and even war.²⁸

William Mason opined in his biography of Thomas Gray that he had abandoned his Latin didactic poem on Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding* because of the 'little popularity which M. de Polignac's *Anti-Lucretius* acquired, after it had been so long and so eagerly expected by the learned'.²⁹ Polignac's endorsement of Descartes over Newton already drew criticism from Voltaire, and may have especially irked English readers, but reports of the poem's poor reception must be balanced against the spate of full or partial translations (into French, English, Italian, German and Dutch)³⁰ which followed its publication, and many reprints of the Latin text. Money

²⁵ See Tsakirópoulou-Summers 2004, who illustrates Polignac's thoroughgoing use of Lucretian language and rhetoric, but shows that the *philosophical* positions Polignac counters in his first book, in which *religio* is pitted against *voluptas*, are largely drawn from Epicurus' own writings rather than the *DRN*.

²⁶ Voltaire 1968: xxxc, 337–40. ²⁷ Tsakirópoulou-Summers 2004.

²⁸ On Polignac see also p. 165 above.

²⁹ Gray 1775: 157–8. I am grateful to Stuart Gillespie for this notice. Gray's fragment was also published in an Eton anthology of 'poems in the Lucretian style' (Eton, 1839). See Bradner 1940: 304–7 for three such specimens by Robert Percy Smith (1770–1845).

³⁰ See C. A. Gordon 1962: 300.

attributes Gray's abandonment of the *De Principiis Cogitandi* not to any 'malaise in neo-Latin didactic, so much as a reluctance in Gray to finish anything'.³¹ Indeed, the early London printings of Polignac (1748, 1751) may have prepared the way for a really rather successful English neo-Latin poem in the anti-Lucretian tradition, the *De animi immortalitate* (1754) by Isaac Hawkins Browne (1705–60).³² Browne's accomplished poem, in two books, inspired no fewer than five English translations, and the Latin text continued to appear in anthologies and separate reprints until 1833.³³

Browne argues in his first book that our social institutions, arts and scientific achievements are evidence of a divine spark, of a 'living force of soul' (*vivida vis animi*). Our intimations of an afterlife must have a basis in fact, and, *pace* Lucretius, death *is* something to us.³⁴ Browne turns Lucretian *religio* on its head, finding evidence for the soul's immortality in 'primitive' cultural practices. All peoples expend care on the corpse and erect monuments to the dead; the Indian widow fearlessly mounts her husband's funeral pyre. In Soame Jenyns' translation: 'Grant these th'inventions of the crafty priest, | Yet such inventions never cou'd subsist, | Unless some glimm'rings of a future state | Were with the mind coeval and innate.' But Browne can still scoff at the animal-headed gods of antiquity, the leek god of the Romans: 'That there's a God from Nature's voice is clear, | And yet what errors to this truth adhere! | How have the fears and follies of mankind | Now multiply'd their gods, and now subjoin'd | To each the frailties of the human mind.' Reason must be our guide, and, even now that we have the benefit of Christian revelation, Nature can still help us discover the truth.

Browne praises Bacon and Newton as noble souls and bringers of light (Browne 1745: 7), but while there is much elevation in the *De animi immortalitate*, there is no science to speak of.³⁵ In Italy, meanwhile, a group of poets associated with the Roman College of the Society of Jesus were harnessing a sublime Lucretius to the triumphal chariot of modern science. Voltaire charged Polignac (as well as Lucretius and Descartes) with being a poor *physicien*, but no one could say of the poets of this Roman 'school' that

³¹ Money 1999: 143.

³² Browne's poem also connects with Paleario's, known in England through the anthologies of Atterbury (1684) and Pope (1740).

³³ Bradner 1940: 277.

³⁴ If we were nothing but dust and shadow, the criminal on his deathbed would have no concern about his posthumous reputation (*at nihil ad nos postera vox, erimus si nil nisi pulvis et umbra*). Browne 1745: 8; cf. DRN 3.830 *Nil igitur mors est ad nos*).

³⁵ Edmond Halley's Latin Ode to Newton, accompanying the first edition of the *Principia mathematica* (1687), served as a model for numerous eighteenth-century poems celebrating Newtonian science in English; Albury 1978 explores its debt to Lucretius.

they did not know their stuff.³⁶ They took their bearings from a Jesuit professor of philosophy, Carlo Noceti (1694–1741), who wrote ‘hard’ scientific poems on the rainbow and the Northern Lights, and from the Croatian, Benedict Stay (1714–1801), whose ecclesiastical advancement was assured by the stunning success in Italy of his poem on the physics of Descartes, a veritable Lucretius-by-numbers (*Philosophiae libri vi*, Rome, 1744). Stay followed this work of his youth with an even more ambitious *Philosophia recentior*, on Newtonian physics, published in ten books between 1755 and 1791; it was accompanied by notes and supplements by his compatriot, Jesuit physicist, Roger Boscovich. Over the course of the next thirty years, Jesuit poets such as Boscovich, Giuseppe Maria Mazzolari, Camillo Garulli, Gregorio Landi Vittori and Bernardo Zamagna grappled in verse with the most formidable subjects of the age: astronomy and meteorology, geodesy, acoustics, optics, electricity and even aeronautics.

The aesthetic of this poetry was an unapologetically elite and Enlightenment one. Poets of the Roman school revel in their modernity, viewing outmoded theories, and especially the errors of the ancients, with condescension. The scientific wormwood is rarely palliated with ornamental myths, but readers are invited to wrestle with hexameter descriptions of the latest scientific instruments and technological toys. Lucretian influence is ubiquitous, if not always freely confessed.³⁷ The hymn to Venus becomes a hymn to the experimental method, or to gravity; modern scientific heroes (Copernicus, Galileo, Descartes, Mairan, Newton, Boscovich) are praised, à la Epicurus; poets reflect, like Lucretius, on the difficulty of writing scientific poetry. But what Lucretius gains in coverage he loses in ideological power, and the Jesuits’ warm effusions about modern science are carefully insulated from the more explosive aspects of Enlightenment thought.³⁸ The general absence of reference to Polignac is striking. It is indicative less of *campanilismo*, perhaps, than of a reluctance to bring God too directly into the equation of scientific poetry. For the priest-poets of the eighteenth-century Collegio Romano, the cultivation of science, including the laborious *versification* of science, becomes a virtuous ascesis *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*. They thus achieve what might have seemed impossible at the beginning of this chapter, the apparent reconciliation of religion and enlightenment in Lucretian poetry.

³⁶ Haskell 2003: 178–244.

³⁷ Mazzolari was somewhat peeved when his poem on electricity was described as Lucretian. See Haskell 2003: 235–7 for his protestations of Virgilian faith.

³⁸ Gregorio Landi Vittori saves refutation of the errors of the ‘polytheists’, ‘atheists’, ‘deists’, etc., for the twelfth and final book of his *Institutiones philosophicae* (Rome, 1767).

Further reading

Ludwig (1988) is a useful general introduction to neo-Latin didactic poetry. There are two recent studies of Lucretius in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy: Prosperi 2004 and Gambino Longo 2004. For MARULLUS: editions by Chomarat (1995a) and Coppini (1995b), and especially the latter's commentary; Dionigi 1985; Boccuto 1984. POLIZIANO: Bausi 1996, Pizzani 1990. BONINCONTI: Heilen 1999, Haskell 1998b. PONTANO: Goddard 1991a. FRACASTORO: Goddard 1993, Eatough 1984. PALEARIO: Sacré 1992, unfortunately printed without the rich commentary (in Dutch) accompanying his 1986 Leuven doctoral dissertation; Sacré 1999, Nüssel 1999, Gordon 1962. PALINGENIUS: Chomarat 1996, Nosei 1927. BRUNO: Monti 1991, Salvatore 2003a, 2000b; Haskell 1998a on Bruno and Palingenius. JESUITS: Haskell 2003 and forthcoming b (on Ceva); on STRADA, C. A. Gordon 1962. POLIGNAC: Tsakirópoulou-Summers 2004, A. Masson 2004, H. Jones 1991, C. A. Gordon 1962. Reinhold Glei is preparing a modern edition and commentary of the *Anti-Lucretius*: cf. Glei 1995 and forthcoming. GRAY, BROWNE: Money 1999, Clark 1991.

Among many other more or less anti-Lucretian poems of the early modern era are the *De sphaera* (1584) of George Buchanan (Gee forthcoming, Haskell 1998b, Naiden 1952); the *De contemptu mortis* (1621) of Daniel Heinsius; the *Mundus Cartesii* (1749) of the French Jesuit Pierre Le Coëdic (Haskell 2003); the *De deo uno* (1777) of the Polish Jesuit Ignatius Wilczek; and the epic-didactic *De deo deque homine* (1769–80) of the Mexican Jesuit Diego Abad (Kerson 1988). From Fracastoro onwards, Lucretius was an important model for medical poets, including Claude Quillet (*Callipædia*, 1655, on eugenics) (Ford 1999); Malcolm Flemyng (*Neuropathia*, 1740, on 'hypochondria'); Johann Ernst Hebenstreit (*De homine sano et aegroto*, 1753) (Haskell forthcoming a). Post-revolution, poets such as Hieronymus de Bosch (*Carmen de aequalitate hominum*, 1792) and Franz Hebenstreit (*Homo hominibus*, c. 1792) (Schuh 1974) discovered, for the first time, a socialist Lucretius.