*Si fuit ut facerent*: Reconsidering the Past in *DRN* 5.1341-9

In his celebrated history of human civilization, Lucretius discusses among other issues the use of animals in warfare (5.1297-1349). After recounting briefly the developments in the military exploitation of horses, the text focuses on the deployment of wild beasts, which begins with the Carthaginian initiative to train elephants and culminates in further experimentation with lions, bulls, and boars. Through a series of vivid vignettes, the text offers evidence that attests to the failure of these experiments and to the fallacy of the conjectural anticipations that led to them. In the final lines of this account, however, the narrator expresses doubt about the immediately preceding reconstruction of the past. He revisits the reasoning behind the deployment of wild animals, and reinterprets the latter as a successful act of desperation rather than an unsuccessful aggressive strategy (5.1341-9). This recantation, a unique occurrence in the *DRN*, poses several interpretative problems that have prompted scholars to doubt the authenticity of the passage as a whole (e.g. Müller 1975, Deufert 1996) or in part (e.g. Munro 1886). I believe, however, that these lines are an integral part of Lucretius' account, and in this paper I argue that the poet’s reassessment in 5.1341-9 alerts his audience not only to the difficulties involved in producing a reconstruction of past events that conforms fully to the principles of Epicureanism, but also to the generic complexities of such a narrative.

The treatment of the subject in lines 5.1297-1340 is compelling. The successive attempts to refine and expand the military employment of animals appear to be consistent with the Epicurean model of technological and cultural development, according to which human reason enhances through practice, trial, and error what is originally taught by nature (Epic. *Her.* 75; cf. *DRN* 5.1452-57). Furthermore, the passage is captivating in its vividness and flatters discretely its intended audience. The markedly non-Roman deployment of elephants and wild animals in the battlefield (for the latter, see West 1975, Gil 2004, Courtney 2006) is juxtaposed to the use of horses, a common practice of the Roman army. In this tacit competition of military cultures, Rome is clearly victorious: horses are suitable for war, whereas lions, bulls, boars, and often elephants prove to be a deadly threat to their own masters.

The spell of this charming narrative, however, is broken when the narrator intervenes to expose its shortcomings (5.1341-9). Lucretius does not doubt the historicity of the facts recounted in the previous passage (*pace* Deufert) but their interpretation. More specifically, he attacks the assumption that humankind repeatedly misjudged the nature of these animals even though our world (but not necessarily all worlds, 5.1344-6) provides sufficient empirical evidence for an accurate assessment (e.g. 5.982-998). Thus Lucretius alerts his audience against superficial applications of Epicurean principles and recommends a cautious approach even to the most compelling accounts. I suggest, however, that these lines draw attention to the poet’s role not only as a teacher of Epicurean philosophy but also as a historian. As Marincola has shown (1997), a polemical attitude towards other reconstructions and interpretations of the past is a central feature of Greek historiography. By evoking the rhetoric of polemics in the context of his inferential history, Lucretius draws attention to the complex generic identity of his text and asserts its legitimacy both as philosophical and as historiographical discourse.

Cited Bibliography:

Courtney, E. 2006. “Lucretius and others on animals in warfare.” *MH* 63:152-3.

Deufert, M. 1996. *Pseudo-Lukrezisches im Lukrez.* Berlin. New York.

Gil, H. 2004. “Lucrezio y Los Leones.” *Habis* 35:193-8.

Marincola, J. 1997. *Authority and Tradition in Ancient Historiography.* Cambridge.

Müller, C. 1975. *T. Lucreti Cari* De Rerum Natura *Libri Sex.* Zurich.

Munro, H.A.J. 41886. *T. Lucreti Cari* De Rerum Natura *Libri Sex.* Cambridge.

West, S.R. 1975. “Problems with lions. Lucretius and Plutarch.” *Philologus* 119:150-1.