

Lucretius and Thucydides on Stasis: *De Rerum Natura* 3.59-64

My paper calls attention to a heretofore unnoticed allusion to Thucydides in Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* and offers reevaluation of the place of the historian in Lucretius' thought.

While Lucretius' interpretation and adaptation of Thucydides' plague narrative (*History* 2.48-2.54) has been studied by Lucretius' sixteenth and twenty-first century readers alike, his interpretation of Thucydides' narrative and analysis of civil strife (stasis) on the island of Corcyra has received almost no attention. In his proem to book 3, Lucretius notes the consequences of the fear of death (*mortis formido*) which make his teaching so necessary. Among these consequences are what Lucretius calls the "wounds of life" (*vulnera vitae* 3.63). They are *avarities* (avarice) and *honorum caeca cupido* (blind desire for honors). I argue that Lucretius, in singling out *avarities* and *honorum caeca cupido*, follows Thucydides' diagnosis of the cause of the phenomenon of stasis. "The cause of all these things [i.e. the violence of and loss of meaning in civil strife] is desire for rule originating in grasping for more and love of honor" (πάντων δ' αὐτῶν αἴτιον ἀρχὴ ἢ διὰ πλεονεξίαν καὶ φιλοτιμίαν 3.82.8). Lucretius' Thucydidean intertext does not just originate *ex nihilo* but rather reveals a timely and considered engagement with the historian.

In referencing Thucydides' conjunction of grasping for more and love of honor, Lucretius engages with a passage of the historian that not only offers a rare window into the historian's thought, but also has special relevance for the political context and political teaching of Lucretius' poem. Simon Hornblower, Thucydides' pre-eminent modern commentator, calls Thucydides' interpretation of *stasis* in 3.82 as "is the most substantial expression of direct personal opinion in all Thucydides" (Hornblower, 478). That Lucretius would allude to the

historian in the opening lines of the third book of his poem suggests that the poet's debt to Thucydidean thought is more substantial and considered than is often supposed—particularly by readers of Lucretius who insist that he puts Epicurean teaching in Latin dactylic hexameter. Lucretius focus on the “wounds of life” of *avarities* and *honorum caeca cupido* emphasize that there are social and political consequences to the fear of death. Yet, Lucretius does not announce that these social and political consequences can be cured by Epicurean thought. In adapting Thucydides' vocabulary, Lucretius assumes a Thucydidean posture of pessimism: there is no “cure” to the pathologies that lead to civil strife.

Lucretius' adaptation of Thucydides on stasis is one of political timeliness. As Christopher Pelling notes, Thucydides' description of stasis in Corcyra would become a major touchstone for Roman readers of Thucydides who lived through the civil strife(s) of the first century BCE. Thucydides, Pelling writes, provided “narrative codes” to later readers who would have to make sense of political life falling apart (Pelling, 108). In invoking the paradigmatic stasis passage, Lucretius differs from other Roman adaptations of the historian (most notably, that of Sallust in *Bellum Catilinae*). Lucretius employs a Thucydidean “thematic code.” It is one that stands at odds with the tradition of post-Socratic philosophy which offers solutions and cures (be they political or psychagogic) to the social and moral conditions of stasis and *discordia*. The Thucydidean intertext of *DRN* 3.59-3.64 undermines any optimistic reading of the poem, and shows how Lucretius engages with alternatives to Epicurean philosophy.

## Sources

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