

LANGUAGE AT THE BREAKING POINT: LUCRETIUS 1.452

ergo, praeter inane et corpora, tertia per se
nulla potest rerum in numero natura relinqui,
nec quae sub sensus cadat ullo tempore nostros
nec ratione animi quam quisquam possit apisci.
nam quaecumque cluent, aut his coniuncta duabus
rebus ea invenies aut horum eventa videbis.
coniunctum est id quod nusquam sine permittali
discidio potis est seiungi seque gregari,
pondus uti saxis, calor igni, liquor aquai,
tactus corporibus cunctis, intactus inani.

1.445–54

‘A property’, according to the author of *De Rerum Natura* in 1.451–4, ‘is that which can never be sundered and separated without fatal dissolution, as weight is to stone, heat to fire, liquidity to water, touch to all bodies, intangibility to void’. *seiungi seque gregari*. As elsewhere Lucretius, that most committed practitioner of word-play,¹ makes his verb mirror the very separation which it describes. With the exploitation of tmesis here we may compare, for example,

inter enim fugit ac penetrat per rara viarum, 6.332

...et radios inter quasi rumpere lucis, 5.287

or, still more boldly,

caerula distinguens inter plaga currere posset, 5.1374

all cited as instances of tmesis ‘appropriate to the sense’, together with the present passage, and others, in M. F. Smith’s useful note on 3.860.²

However this is not yet to do justice to the precision of the verbal analogy in 1.452. Let us consider the passage more closely. In the universe as described by Lucretius in this part of *De Rerum Natura*, the sum of things consists of two forms of existence, bodies (*corpora*) and void (*inane*). There is no third form of independent existence (445–8): whatever else can be spoken of is either a property (*coniunctum*) or an accident (*eventum*) of *corpora* or of *inane* (449–50). *eventa*, further discussed in 455–82, need not concern us now; our interest is in Lucretius’ treatment of *coniuncta* in 451–4.

A *coniunctum* is an inseparable property: to separate it from the body with which it is conjoined will be to bring about that body’s fatal dissolution. Take its weight away from stone, take its heat away from fire, its liquidity from water, its touch from any body, its intangibility from void: in each case you will make it impossible for that thing to carry on any existence whatsoever. And as with these, so too, in its own way,

¹ See P. Friedländer, ‘Pattern of Sound and Atomistic Theory in Lucretius’, *AJP* 62 (1941), 16–34; J. M. Snyder, *Puns and Poetry in Lucretius’ De Rerum Natura* (Amsterdam, 1980).

² W. H. D. Rouse and M. F. Smith, ed., *Lucretius, De Rerum Natura*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass. and London, rev. 1975). Other examples offered, besides 3.860 itself, are 1.651, 3.262 and 5.299. An investigation of how many other Lucretian tmeses are in some way appropriate to the sense might do worse than to start with the unanalysed catalogue in H. A. J. Munro, ed., *T. Lucreti Cari De Rerum Natura Libri Sex* (London, 4th ed. 1886), commentary on 1.452.

with the tmesis analogy. Take its conjoined *se* away from *segregari*: what you threaten to do is, in very precise terms, to make it impossible for that word to carry on any verbal existence whatsoever. This particular tmesis is suggestive not just of separation, like all other tmeses, but of separation *and* fatal dissolution. Take its *inter* away from *interfugit*, its *inter* from *interrumpere*, its *inter* from *intercurrere*: in each case separation will occur, but *not* fatal dissolution. *fugit*, *rumpere* and *currere* are still perfectly capable of carrying on a healthy existence as meaningful Latin verbs. But if *segregari* suffers the threatened loss of its conjoined *se*, it will become a mutilated, senseless fragment. *segregari*, *aggregari* and *congregari* all mean something; but as a simple verb *gregari* is utterly without existence in the lexicon of republican Latin.³

And as with *gregari*, so with *se*. If bodies need their *coniuncta*, so *coniuncta* cannot exist independently of the bodies (or void) whose inseparable properties they are. This is true of weight, of heat, of liquidity, of touch, of intangibility – and, in its own way, of *se*. *se*, interpreted by ancient and modern authorities as an archaic equivalent of *sine*,⁴ is a prepositional prefix which depends for its significance in Latin on its participation in a verb like *segregari* (or *seungi*), just as touch is dependent on a body, or intangibility on void. Those are inseparable properties; *se* is, as indeed the grammar books put it, one of the inseparable prefixes. Once more, the particular choice of tmesis has been crucial. *inter* (like *a*, *de*, or *sub*) functions when conjoined with a verb as a prefix, but it is also an independent preposition with an existence of its own in the universe of the Latin language; *se*, just as the Lucretian analogy demands, is not.

To sum up: at the very point where he is writing not just of separation in a body, but of separation *and* fatal dissolution, Lucretius has produced a tmesis which, besides (like all other tmeses) enacting a separation, also gestures interestingly towards a complete dissolution of sense in the word concerned.

So far so good; and it is tempting to let the matter rest here. However, the tmesis analogy as just interpreted contains one worrying imperfection, which it would perhaps be dishonest to ignore.

A *coniunctum* on its own can have no place in the universe of things; analogously, we have argued, this conjoined *se*, when standing in tmesis, risks becoming a meaningless fragment with no place in the universe of words. *This se*: it is here that the possible problem lies. The prepositional prefix *se* may have no independent existence in Latin; but we cannot label *se* a meaningless fragment without acknowledging the slightly awkward fact that of course there is a perfectly good word *se* in the Latin lexicon: the reflexive pronoun of the third person. It would be better for the clarity of the Lucretian analogy, we may reasonably feel, if the detached prefix in 1.452 stood out with immediate conspicuousness as a non-word requiring something to complete its sense. As it is, Lucretius' *se* hides its threatened anomalousness from the casual glance through that outward similarity to the independently existent reflexive pronoun. Not so much a flaw in the analogy as, perhaps, a small untidiness.

But there may be worse to come. For Lucretius' cut-off prefix to resemble *any* independently existent Latin word is distracting; for it to resemble the reflexive pronoun *se* is surely unfortunate in the extreme. Let us remind ourselves just what the distinction is which Lucretius seeks to make at this point in his poem's argument:

³ See *TLL* and *OLD* s.v. *grego* for the belated entry of the simple verb into Latin (first at Statius, *Ach.* 1.373) as a back-formation from *aggrego* and *congrego*.

⁴ For the relationship between *se* (also written *sed*) and *sine*, see Paulus, *Fest.* p. 336 M. *sed pro sine inveniuntur posuisse antiqui*; for a modern discussion, Ernout-Meillet s.v. *sed*, *se*, *so-*. A few examples of *se* as an independent preposition are found 'fossilized' in archaic legal formulae (thus, in the XII Tables, *se fraude*); otherwise it is wholly superseded by *sine*, and survives only as a prefix.

ergo, praeter inane et corpora, tertia per se
nulla potest rerum in numero natura relinqui 1.445–6

So began our initial quotation from *De Rerum Natura* a few lines above the tmesis analogy in 452. The key phrase here is repeated in the same sense no less than seven times in the 100-odd surrounding verses:

omnis ut est igitur *per se* natura duabus
constitit in rebus; nam corpora sunt et inane 1.419–20
corpus enim *per se* communis dedicat esse
sensus... 1.422–3
praeterea *per se* quodcumque erit... 1.440
tempus item *per se* non est... 1.459
nec *per se* quemquam tempus sentire fatendumst
semotum ab rerum motu placidaque quiete 1.462–3
...videndumst
ne forte haec *per se* cogant nos esse fateri 1.465–6
perspicere ut possis res gestas funditus omnis
non ita uti corpus *per se* constare neque esse 1.478–9

Again and again, Lucretius drives home the lesson. Only bodies and void can exist independently: they are, in the poet's own terminology, the sole *per se* existents. *coniuncta* and *eventa* cannot exist *per se*: a *coniunctum* cut off from its body (or from void) ceases to be viable – just as a *se* cut off from its *segregari* ceases to be viable. It is now that we see, or think we see, just how unhappily Lucretius has been tripped up by the language of his analogy. His *se* in tmesis, hovering on the brink of displacement from the Latin language, represents that which cannot exist...*per se*. A *se* represents what cannot exist *per se*: the analogy appears now not so much untidy in its expression as perversely misleading.

Let us take stock. Three main options appear to be available to the reader at this point. First, and most desperately, he can jettison the whole attempt to read significance into the tmesis of 1.452 as misbegotten. Second, as just outlined, he can take the coincidence between *se* and *se* as an unfortunate lapse in authorial control spoiling an otherwise elegantly worked out analogy. *semidoctus Lucretius* plays with but is in the end outplayed by his language: the formulation is one for which many faint-hearted Lucretians will be happy to settle.

But for more tenacious readers of *De Rerum Natura* a third option remains. Why, we should ask, does Lucretius bother to explain so carefully in 1.445ff. that *coniuncta* and *eventa* are not *per se* existents? Evidently because there may be some danger of confusion on this score. So, in the section on *eventa* which immediately follows the lines on *coniuncta*, the poet begins by cataloguing some obvious examples of *eventa* (455–8); but he goes on to devote by far the greater part of his discussion (459–82) to the elucidation of possible grey areas – areas where circumstances might tempt us, and where circumstances have tempted others (see especially 464–8),⁵ into mistaking *eventa* for *per se* existents.

It is this danger of seeing a *per se* existent where none is there, surely, which our tmesis analogy is concerned to address in the section on *coniuncta*. Take its conjoined

⁵ These 'other', confused interpreters of physics, against whom Lucretius directs his polemic in 1.464ff. (and also, implicitly, in 1.462 *nec...fatendumst*), are identified by C. Bailey, ed., *Titi Lucreti Cari De Rerum Natura Libri Sex* (Oxford, 1947), commentary on 1.459–63, 464–82, as Stoics; D. J. Furley in *BICS* 13 (1966), 13–14, rejecting this identification, inclines to the view that the poet's target here need not be specific.

prefix away from *segregari*, and you have something, *se*, which at a casual glance you may be tempted to take as an independently existent word. Consider more carefully, and you will see your mistake. Not everything which looks like the word *se* is the word *se*: not every *se* is a *per se* existent. Lucretius' analogy has daringly flirted with confusion precisely so as to teach us how to recognise such confusion for what it is. As explicitly in the case of *eventa*, so implicitly here. We must make sure that we learn how to distinguish a *coniunctum* from an independent existent: even, or especially, where superficial circumstances conspire to mislead us.⁶

Is it reasonable to read all this significance into a mere verbal tmesis? I think so: as a physicist no less than as a poet, Lucretius is extraordinarily sensitive to the detailed workings of language. The most overt demonstration of this is, of course, the famous comparison between the letters and the atoms of *ligna* and of *ignes* (1.897–914); but our author's interest in the power of paronomasia does not end there.⁷

Furthermore, if we are disposed to ignore the implications of the tmesis of *se* in 1.452, can we still ignore them after a remarkable word-play which Lucretius executes just ten lines later, in his section on *eventa*? The sentence concerned has already been quoted in my catalogue of *per se* passages:

nec per *se* quemquam tempus sentire fatendumst
semotum ab rerum *motu* placidaque quiete 1.462–3

What we have here, surely, is a knowing variation on the verbal conceit ten lines above. Is it possible to take its *se* away from *semotum*? At first sight, we may think that it is: the word *semotum* is bracketed in this sentence by what appears to be a playful enactment of its separation into its two constituent parts, viz. *se*... | *semotum*...*motu*. If we consider more closely, however, we will see that the separation is a sham: once again, we are dealing with two different kinds of *se*. We are compelled after all to admit that independent existence for *se* apart from *semotum* is not possible – any more than is independent existence for time apart from the movement of actual things, any more than is existence for an *eventum* apart from the body, or bodies, whose accident it is. The lines offer us a possibility, only to dismiss it as a delusion. The *se* of *semotum* may look like the *se* of *per se*, but it is not the same: the lesson of ten lines earlier is repeated.

Appearances can be deceptive: the path to the discovery of the nature of things is not always easy. Are we good enough readers to follow the analogies of Lucretius? Are we good enough physicists to follow Epicurus?⁸

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⁶ I would tentatively suggest that Lucretius underlines the lesson by actually including in his sentence a quiet pointer towards the 'correct' interpretation of the *se* in *segregari*. *se* here is an archaic equivalent of *sine* (n. 4 above): so is it mere coincidence that just above this *se* in our texts of Lucretius we encounter... the word *sine*?

coniunctum est id quod nusquam *sine* permittali
discidio potis est seiungi seque gregari 1.451–2

Suggestive placement of related verbal elements in the same line, or in two successive lines, is a standard feature of Lucretian etymologising: see Snyder, op. cit. 67–8 with 90–108. An example at 2.344–5 is noted by me in *The Metamorphosis of Persephone: Ovid and the Self-conscious Muse* (Cambridge, 1987), 37.

⁷ For discussion of the *ligna/ignes* passage, see Snyder, op. cit., chapter 2; on the diversity of Lucretian word-play, see especially her chapter 5.

⁸ This short paper owes its origin to Robert Wardy, whose 'DRN contra Anaxagoram: Lucretius on what Atoms are not' (seen by me in typescript; forthcoming in *Classical Philology*) is to my mind the most stimulating and suggestive article written on Lucretius for years. I am grateful to him, as also to Catherine Atherton, Glenn Most and Patricia Rosenmeyer, for especially helpful comments on an earlier draft.