

Barron, Richard (2014) *Composition portfolio*. MMus(R) thesis.

<http://theses.gla.ac.uk/5241/>

Copyright and moral rights for this thesis are retained by the author

A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge

This thesis cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the Author

The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the Author

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given

Supervisor: Professor Sweeney

**Commentary on
MMus Composition Portfolio**

I tuik ane quair

Richard Barron

Matric No 7931371b

Resubmission

April 2014

Acknowledgement

I have to thank Professor Bill Sweeney, my supervisor, for his constant encouragement and support over the last two years, and for his advice during the writing both of the two pieces that make up the portfolio and of this commentary.

Abstract

The two pieces in my composition portfolio are settings of lines taken from, respectively, Robert Henryson's *The Testament of Cresseid* and Lucretius' *De rerum natura*. In this commentary I outline what drew me to these poems: the literary and philosophical tradition to which they belong, their poetic language and their humanist sensibility. I state my aim of writing pieces that might carry a sense of the overall meaning of the poems and embody that sensibility. I discuss my use of the language of the poems, in particular the generation of musical material from the sounds of the words of the text, from the ideas and images expressed, and from the atomist philosophy expounded by Lucretius. I also suggest the significance of the overall structure of each piece in embodying the characteristic sensibility of its source poem.

I tuik ane quair...

A commentary on settings of lines from two old poems

This portfolio consists of two vocal pieces, each a setting of some lines from a venerable poem. The first piece to be written was *Of fair Cresseid*, which uses around fifty lines from Robert Henryson's late medieval Scots poem *The Testament of Cresseid*. The other piece, *26 lines*, goes further back in time, to Lucretius' great poetic exposition of Epicurean philosophy, the *De rerum natura*. In this commentary I aim to outline what drew me to these poems, to show how I tried to use their texts and language, and to suggest how the two resultant pieces, quite different but possessed of a common sensibility, might make up a coherent portfolio.

Why these poems?

I had known - and neglected - the two poems for many years. Though greatly celebrated, neither is now widely known beyond the circles of classical scholarship or Scots literary studies. They were brought back to mind for me by the appearance of contemporary treatments: Seamus Heaney's translation of *The Testament of Cresseid* into modern English,¹ and Stephen Greenblatt's rollicking (but much questioned) tale of how the rediscovery of the *De rerum natura* in the early 15th Century is supposed to have sparked the Renaissance.² But I found each of these modern responses, in its way, a disappointment. Greenblatt concentrates on the adventures of a 15th Century manuscript hunter rather than on the atomist theory that underpins Lucretius' humanist philosophy and drives his poem's argument and expressive power.³ And while Heaney's version of *The Testament* is accomplished and sensitive, its generous dual-text presentation simply served, for my purpose, to emphasise the rugged force of the original's language. 'That lady bricht of hew', Henryson's description of Cresseid in her halcyon days, seems to me to carry far

¹ Robert Henryson, *The Testament of Cresseid and Seven Fables*, transl. by Seamus Heaney (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), pp 1-47.

² Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the Renaissance Began* (London: The Bodley Head, 2011).

³ See for instance John Monfasani, "The Swerve: How the Renaissance Began", *Reviews in History*, 05 July 2012 (URL:<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1283>, accessed 23 August 2013).). *The Swerve* won the Pulitzer Prize for general non-fiction in 2012, but has been heavily criticised by medievalists puzzled by Greenblatt's disregard of the philosophical and scholarly traditions of the Middle Ages.

more phonic energy than 'that lady in her radiance'.⁴ Later, when she is stricken with leprosy after cursing Venus and her son Cupid, Heaney's 'God knows if she was not heartsore and stunned' cannot match the world of grief conjured in sound by the original:

*Gif scho in hart was wa eneuch, God wait.*⁵

Indeed, Heaney himself remarks that his 'sense-clearing' cannot hope to capture fully Henryson's 'tolling tragic note'.⁶

So I turned to the original poems, both set deep in the tradition of western literature and philosophy. Lucretius, writing in Latin in the first century BC, looks back to the atomist philosophy of the Presocratic thinkers Leucippus and Democritus, and principally to their successor Epicurus, who taught that, since the world and everything in it is formed from and dissolved in the ceaseless flow of atoms, rather than by the will of the gods, we can get on with living our lives as calmly and happily as possible, free of the fear imposed by religion. These thinkers, in other words, presented a remarkably prescient scientific theory as the rational basis for a humane doctrine of the good life. We are not used to seeing subject matter of this kind in poetic form: but Lucretius was writing in a genre established by his Greek forebears. Beyond antiquity, Epicureanism continued to exert influence on philosophers and scientists from Giordano Bruno in the Renaissance to Boyle, Dalton and Maxwell in later centuries.⁷ And, from the time when his text became available, Lucretius has always been known to the poets, from Tasso to MacDiarmid and Muir.⁸

Chaucer knew of Lucretius but lived too soon to see a text.⁹ Henryson, on the other hand, knew and admired the poetry of Chaucer. He describes how, on a freezing Scottish night, he beguiled his time:

I tuik ane quair – and left all uther sport –

⁴ Henryson, transl. Heaney, pp 4-5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 26-7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p xiii.

⁷ See Monte Johnson and Catherine Wilson, 'Lucretius and the history of science', in Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp 131-148.

⁸ Valentina Prosperi, 'Lucretius in the Italian Renaissance', in Gillespie and Hardie, pp214-226, eg p 218, and

Stuart Gillespie and Donald MacKenzie, 'Lucretius and the moderns', in Gillespie and Hardie, pp 306- 324, eg pp 312-6.

⁹ Stuart Gillespie, 'Lucretius in the English Renaissance', in Gillespie and Hardie, pp 242-253, p 245.

Drawing on a literary tradition stretching back to Homer's *Iliad*, Henryson takes the story of Cresseid (Criseyde in Chaucer, Cressida in Shakespeare) from the point where Chaucer leaves it, when she jilts her lover Troilus for Diomedes, who in his turn deserts her for another. Her tragedy is then played out at the confluence of three world-views: the late mediaeval poet looks back at the pagan morality of the archaic culture from which the story comes, but at the same time searches forward for new, more humane judgements – to say nothing of the twenty-first century lens through which we see the story.

The two poems have several features in common. Venus is a big figure in both. In *The Testament of Cresseid* she is 'the blind goddess'¹¹, merciless towards the former favourite who has blamed her for her loss in love. The council of the gods, called by Venus and her son Cupid, imposes on Cresseid the judgement of an utterly implacable morality, and Henryson, the medieval schoolmaster learned in canon law, offers no criticism of her harsh fate.¹² But the failed recognition scene between Cresseid and Troilus is marked by compassion for the tragedy of their lost opportunities, and his memorial to the woman 'sumtyme countit the flour of womanheid' suggests a posthumous forgiveness that calls in question Venus' vengefulness.¹³ In the words of Agnes Mure Mackenzie, the poem's "stern justice has a profound and aching pity, and something also of the sense of redemption that comes at the close of a tragedy of Shakespeare's".¹⁴ Lucretius, on the other hand, opens the *De rerum natura* with an eloquent invocation of the goddess of love: 'alma Venus', the bountiful, nurturing wellspring of all life. The apparent paradox has always puzzled scholars: why would a determined materialist begin his exposition of atomist philosophy in this way? Theories abound – a persuasive interpretation is that Lucretius' benign Venus is an allegorical representation of the creative energy of nature, from which flows the endless stream of atoms and which, by virtue of its

¹⁰ Henryson, transl. Heaney, p 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p 12.

¹² For what little is known of Henryson's life, see J.A.Tasioulas, *The Makars: The Poems of Henryson, Dunbar and Douglas* (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1999), pp 2-4.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p 44.

¹⁴ Quoted in MacDiarmid's introduction in Robert Henryson, *The Testament of Cresseid and Other Poems*, selected by Hugh MacDiarmid (London: Penguin Books, 1988), p 13.

process, frees humanity from obligation to and fear of the gods.¹⁵ And, by observing a convention very familiar to a contemporary readership steeped in Homer, he immediately sets the *De rerum natura* in the grandest of poetic traditions.¹⁶

Both Lucretius and Henryson use highly expressive poetic language. Some examples from *The Testament* have already been quoted. Two further graphic vignettes are worth quoting here. In one terrifying image, as Cresseid dreams of the summoning of the gods to judge her, Henryson overlays Christian cosmology on classical myth to signal the immensity of what is happening:

*Cupide the king ringand ane silver bell,
Qhuilk men nicht heir fra hevin unto hell.*¹⁷

In a contrasting image, spare monosyllables reflect the natural simplicity of Cresseid's movement and the finality of Troilus' failure to recognise her:

*Than upon him scho kest up baith her ene –
And with ane blenk it came into his thocht
That he sumtime hir face befor had sene.
But scho was in sic plye he knew hir nocht.*¹⁸

But whereas Henryson's language is used for narrative, dramatic and reflective purposes, Lucretius' purpose is didactic, and his expressive powers are deployed in the service of detailed philosophical argument and its graphic illustration. His account of the flow and collision of atoms through the universe is packed with percussive alliteration:

*cuncta necessest
aut gravitate sua ferri primordia
rerum aut ictu forte alterius.*¹⁹

(Every atom must be carried onwards either by its
own weight or by a chance blow from another.)

¹⁵ An overview of possible explanations of Lucretius' invocation of Venus is given in Elizabeth Asmis, 'Lucretius' Venus and Stoic Zeus', in Monica R Gale (ed.), *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2007), pp 88-103.

¹⁶ In the *Iliad* Homer invokes his 'goddess', in the *Odyssey* his 'muse'.

¹⁷ Henryson, transl. Heaney, p 12.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p 38.

¹⁹ II.83-5. The translation is my own, entirely functional and with no ideas of poetic quality.

Of course, we can't see atoms, but Lucretius readily backs up his science with examples of natural phenomena that are invisible but unquestionably exist. His description of the savage power of the wind has the same alliterative punch:

*venti vis verberat incita pontum
...perfurit acri
cum fremitu saevitque minaci murmure ventus.*²⁰

(The mighty wind whips up and batters the sea...
Its fierce howl rages and roars with savage threat.)

But our human experience is not all violence and collision: a gentler sound world reflects the serenity attained by the wise:

*Sed nil dulcius est, bene quam munita tenere
edita doctrina sapientum templa serena.*²¹

(But nothing is sweeter than to possess the strong
serene temples built from the teaching of the wise.)

Both poems, then, are couched in vital poetic language. Each has a cogent 'plot' - one a tragic story, the other an arresting scientific thesis. Each is embedded in the western literary and philosophical tradition and draws on its predecessors in that tradition. Each stands at the threshold of the Renaissance, Henryson in his own time, and Lucretius through the rediscovery of his text a decade or two later. The ancient poet confidently propounds his humanist doctrine that what is essential for the good life is not obedience to divine judgement but a rational understanding of the world and of our ephemeral place in it. The later poet is more constrained: he cannot extricate his protagonist from the inexorable judgement of the gods (and, by implication, of the morality of his day). But the dignity and generosity manifested in Cresseid's testament and memorial reach towards a more humane sensibility that might transcend that harsh judgement.

²⁰ I.271, 275-6.

²¹ II.7-8.

It was this compelling array of shared qualities that drew me to these very different poems. Their vibrant language seemed to me to offer rich potential for musical expression, as did the story of one and the atomist theory of the other. But, beyond that, the ultimate legacy of each poem is its humanist sensibility, nascent in one, boldly developed in the other. Could I carry that sensibility over – or, to borrow Dryden’s vivid image, “transfuse” it – into my two settings? ²²

My approach to the poems

Lucretius does not do things by halves: his philosophical accounts and physical descriptions are characterised by an intense cumulation of argument and detail, resulting in a monumental poem of over seven thousand lines. Though not on the same scale, *The Testament of Cresseid* is also a long poem – six hundred and sixteen lines. With this portfolio in mind, I envisaged that each piece would be around fifteen or twenty minutes long. There was clearly no question, in either case, of attempting to set lengthy passages, unless I were to choose from each poem a particular section or scene that might stand on its own, such as Lucretius’ invocation of Venus or Cresseid’s lament for her lost beauty. Instead, I decided to aim for pieces that might carry a sense of the overall meaning of the poems – that would seek to embody their humanist sensibility.

The Testament of Cresseid is a narrative poem, with dramatic and lyrical elements, framed by the reflections of the poet. It has two main human characters, Cresseid and Henryson himself. I chose to set what I saw as key moments from the poem: Cresseid’s desertion of Troilus and her rejection in turn by Diomedes; her defiance of the gods and their merciless punishment; her loss of beauty and health; her subsequent meeting with Troilus, when neither recognises the other; her death and the memorial laid by Troilus. Henryson tells the story, Cresseid lives it. *Of fair Cresseid* uses just over fifty lines of the original Scots text: a compact selection with plenty of musical potential – all the examples I have quoted from the text come from the extracts used in the setting. The forces used were those available at the Sound

²² In Henryson, transl. Heaney, p. viii, Heaney refers to Dryden’s use of ‘transfusion’ in the preface to *Fables, Ancient and Modern*. He compares his experience of translating Henryson to Dryden’s ‘modernisation’ of Chaucer.

Thought festival of March 2012, when the piece was performed: a mezzo-soprano part for Cresseid, associated with flute, bass clarinet (doubling basset clarinet) and violin, and a baritone part for Henryson, associated with violin, viola and cello.

Making choices from the *De rerum natura*, so much longer, so dense with detail and ideas, seemed a far less straightforward undertaking. I decided to restrict the choice of text severely, to a very limited series of extracts that might, I thought, distil key elements of the poem and, at the same time, generate good musical ideas. This led me to a structure of five parts: an opening section representing the invocation of Venus, followed by a closely related contemplation of Venus; a section using extracts relating to the poem's central principles of reason and matter; a section setting lines from passages describing natural phenomena; and a conclusion using lines reflecting on the serenity that the wise can attain. From Lucretius' seven thousand lines, as my title suggests, I used no more than twenty-six. Unlike *The Testament*, the *De rerum natura* has no cast of characters other than its ideas, no voice other than the poet's. To try to represent the grandeur and complexity of that voice, I decided to set the selected lines for an eight-part chorus, with occasional short solo passages, and with organ accompaniment: a substantial ensemble in which the various voices could, like Epicurean atoms, move independently or converge, sound together or apart.

Using the language of the texts

It will be clear, from what I have said about the language of both poems, that from an early stage I had no doubt that I should use the original texts rather than translations. There is always a question about accessibility of language: will the audience be able to hear and understand the words? In *26 lines*, ironically, Latin is the medium not for familiar religious meanings but for a quite different materialist, humanist thesis; listeners are, nonetheless, accustomed to hearing musical settings of Latin texts. Scots is also, at least in this country, very familiar to listeners. Henryson's late medieval Scots may be archaic and literary, but it remains readily accessible, especially with the help of translation (or often simply transliteration) into modern English. And my selections from both texts are so brief that they can conveniently be included, with translations, in programme notes. The point is often made, anyway, that the sung text is very often heard only imperfectly, whatever language is

used. In their entertaining discussion of these issues as they affect opera, Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker point to two “separate domains” of the libretto: one is “the narrative element, basically the plot and its characters”, while the second is the “representation” of the narrative in the specific words of the text.²³ Those primarily interested in the first of these domains might favour translations, they suggest, whereas an interest in the qualities of the text is better served by the original libretto – however clearly or otherwise the words are heard. My two pieces, of course, are on a much smaller scale, not in any way comparable with opera – but the “domains” identified by Abbate and Parker may still be relevant. *The Testament of Cresseid* has a strong narrative element, with clear characters and plot; and the *De rerum natura* has, if not a plot, a comparable structural sense in its clear thread of argument and powerful moral message. In aiming for pieces that would give some sense of the overall meaning of these poems, I had effectively decided, in each case, to enter the plot (and argument) domain. On the other hand, my interest in the musical potential of the original language of each poet had pointed me firmly in the textual “representation” direction. How was I to deal with this tension?

In *Leaves from his life*, Janáček gives some illuminating insights into his methods of developing musical ideas from speech. He talks of sounds leading to an idea, and shaping themselves into “an intellectual concept”, or of “ripples of emotion” compelling “rhythms of tone” that lead to the “conception of a musical composition, an unconscious spontaneous compilation in the mind”.²⁴ He shows, for example, how hearing the names Beatrice and Dante suggested to him a range of different tonal patterns and rhythms, or how he turned the short, real-life conversation of two girls waiting for their boyfriends first into musical figures and then into a musical line.²⁵ In working on material for *Of fair Cresseid*, I tried to use an approach of this kind, thinking carefully about how some key words and phrases should sound when spoken. We don’t know precisely how medieval Scots sounded, or what the inflections of the voice might have been, but we can aim for plausible patterns or contours of sound that might at any rate satisfy the Scots ear of the twenty-first

²³ Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, *A History of Opera: The Last Four Hundred Years* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), p 2.

²⁴ Vilem and Margaret Tausky (eds. and transl.), *Janáček: Leaves from his life* (London: Kahn & Averill, 1982), pp 73 and 103.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 57-58 and 49-50.

century. For instance, the words that I took to open Henryson's part, "I tuik ane quair" presented an immediate choice – would the voice go up or down at the end of the phrase? Nowadays, that might depend on where you come from; and, anyway, the inflection would be at least partly affected by the mood of the speaker. I went for a tone of sombre reflection, and sent the voice down at the end of the phrase:



Example 1: *Of fair Cresseid* b.14

But the same material is developed to lead to the key epithet, "fair Cresseid", this time with a hopeful, upwards inflection:



Example 2: *Of fair Cresseid* bb.18-20

A variation of the same figure can then be used for another, striking epithet:



Example 3: *Of fair Cresseid* b.24-25

Later, after Cresseid has cursed Venus and Cupid, Henryson returns to his opening musical figure to recount her collapse (b.99), and tells us of Cupid ringing his silver bell to summon the gods – using, in what I intended as an ironic reverse, the same musical line that described Cresseid when she was "bricht of hew". A figure worked from a speech pattern, then, can be used to generate the musical material for a central set of events.

Rhythm too offers important issues and opportunities in inventing musical patterns from speech. An immediate question for me was how to accent "Cresseid". Heaney thinks the stress goes on the second syllable.²⁶ Certainly, in Henryson's first

²⁶ Henryson, transl. Heaney, p ix.

mention of her, the one that I took for the title of my piece, the iambic metre immediately throws the stress onto that second syllable:

Of fair Cresseid and worthie Troylus.

But this doesn't always work: for instance, the stress falls clearly on the first syllable of the name in the phrase "O cative Cresseid", or in the line:

The way quhair Cresseid with the lipper baid.

There is, then, no hard and fast rule. In any case, the poet can simply cut across the rhythm of his metre as it suits. For example, in Cresseid's cry "O fals Cupide", the natural stress on the first syllable of "Cupide" disrupts the normal iambic metre of the line, drawing our attention sharply to the reckless impiety of her complaint against the god of love and his mother. It also provides a splendid opportunity to use the Scotch snap, and to follow it with another as Cresseid anathematizes Venus as "the blind goddes" (bb. 92-6).

Apart from taking advantage of such variations in stress as they occur, I recognised the risk of monotony in simply falling in with the tempting iambic rhythm of the verse. It is possible, however, to follow the characteristic rhythm but to vary how it is set. In the next passage (bb.103-110), for instance, the natural stresses are largely observed, but the rhythm is slowed first by a syncopation, then by a triplet, by another syncopation and by a tenuto repetition of the words "Cupide the king", before a resumption of the uninterrupted metre heralds the baleful ringing of the god's silver bell. I tried also to make rhythm and melodic shape interact. In the opening of Cresseid's lament for her lost beauty (bb.147-158), for example, the melodic line flows haltingly through syncopations, elongated vowels and triplets, while Scotch snaps, on major sevenths or minor seconds, mark her pain.

This method, which falls firmly into the words/text domain identified by Abbate and Parker, provided my main approach to inventing musical material in Cresseid. I did, however, use some others closer to their narrative domain. Contrasting instrumental colours reflect the characters: a string trio for the detached, thoughtful Henryson; flute, clarinet and violin for the glamorous, volatile Cresseid. I also aimed to use texture and dynamics to set mood. A sombre, reflective tone, for instance, is set at the beginning, with sustained lines moving only slowly and mostly by small intervals;

when Cresseid first appears, the same kind of texture (and tonality) is suggested, but is swiftly broken up to reflect her outrage at being deserted by her new lover. In other places musical ideas are prompted not so much by the sound of the text as by the images that it expresses. A quick arpeggio and pizzicato figure gives a splash of colour to the image of “that lady bricht of hew” (bb.25-6). Later, it flashes again when Cupid’s silver bell summons the gods to pronounce Cresseid’s punishment (bb.110-11). The same figure makes a poignant reappearance near the end of the story, as Cresseid blinks in near-recognition of Troilus (bb.214-5); and finally, when a kind of redemption is granted, its light plays on the “goldin letteris” written on Cresseid’s tomb (b.253). Familiar musical associations signal certain events: Henryson’s string trio sounds the trumpets for the approach of Troilus’ cavalry (bb.193ff.), and falling lines, in the style of a tombeau, mark both Cresseid’s despair at her sudden deformity (bb.144ff.) and the poet’s solemn account of Troilus’ memorial to her (bb.247ff.).

As I have indicated, *Of fair Cresseid* was the first piece in the portfolio to be written. My approach to it had been straightforward: I had dealt with its linear plot in a linear way, with colour, texture and dynamics to suit. It was in my efforts to derive musical material from the sound of the spoken word, however, that I felt I had achieved something more distinctive to my understanding of the poem. In starting work on 26 lines, I had two main methods in mind for generating musical material from the *De rerum natura*. One was to remain in Abbate and Parker’s domain of words and text and to take further what I had tried in *Of fair Cresseid*. I found that the same kind of method that I had previously used with words and phrases such as “I tuik ane quair” or “Cresseid” was again productive. Classical Latin metres are governed by quantity rather than by stress accent. While the metre therefore presents the risk of falling into too regular a pattern – this time a dactyl+spondee habit (‘strawberry jumpots’!), it equally offers rich rhythmic potential that can be combined with the melodic contour inherent in the spoken word. The first words of the poem, “Aeneadum genetrix” (“mother of Aeneas’ race”, that is, mother of the Romans and by implication of the human race), offer precisely that mix of opportunity and trap – the potential for a striking melodic shape formed from the spoken word “Aeneadum” and a trite “ta-ta-tum” for “genetrix”. I tried to combine contour and quantity for the

former and to deal variously with the latter, sometimes observing the metre and sometimes cutting across it:



26 lines 1 bb.10-11 ²⁷

Similar opportunities arise with the phrase “per te quoniam genus omne animantum / concipitur” (“since through you every kind of living creature is conceived”): from the melodic shape of the spoken word I derived musical material that is used widely throughout the piece (1 b.21, soprano parts). The melodic figure formed from another phrase from these early lines of the poem, “caeli subter labentia signa” (“under the shifting signs of heaven”) also reappears several times in later sections, its spondaic vowels inviting long, sustained lines and textures:



26 lines 1 b.7

Melodic contours are suggested by the rise and fall of vowels, and rhythmic patterns, certainly in the case of classical Latin poetry, by their quantities. But, just as for Henryson, a distinctive feature of Lucretius’ language is the vigour of his use of consonants. A phrase quoted earlier, “terrorem animi tenebrasque” (“darkness and terror of mind”), brims with expressive consonants – the percussive *t*, the brusque *r*, the sinister *m* and *n*, rounded off with the abrupt *-asque*. The musical figures derived from the potent alliterative and onomatopoeic qualities of these words provide all the material for the first part of the third section. The short-short-long rhythm of “tenebras” is sung at different speeds by different voices, the slowest recalling the sustained textures used in a much less sinister context in the first section. There is a

²⁷ References to the text of *De rerum natura* use Roman numerals for the books, eg II.7-8. To avoid confusion, I have used Arabic numbers to refer to the sections of 26 lines, eg 3 bb 30-69. There is no correspondence between the books of the poem and the sections of the score.

gradual diminution until in b.30 the word appears in a percussive speech-like rhythm that is then taken up for "terror". A counterpoint between the two words of the phrase follows, with "terror" sung in varied, spasmodic rhythms, often with a swooping portamento, all intended to mirror the visceral fear experienced by those still benighted by religion – until its violent climax is overtaken by the high solo voice heralding the power of reason (3 bb. 30-69).

There are other examples where the sound and meaning of the words are indivisibly bound up with the sound and behaviour of the phenomena described, phrases that offer similar invitations to generate musical material and effects. I quoted earlier the passage that resounds with the primordial clash of atoms ("gravitate sua ferri primordia" etc., II.83-5), and the one that whistles, beats and roars with the force of the wind ("venti vis verberat" etc, I.271-6). Again, I tried to mirror, or rather to realize, these phenomena in music: in the first case with repeated, accented rhythmic patterns leading to a brief, violent fugato (3 bb.102-117); in the second with an onomatopoeic emphasis on the letter *v* and on the percussive "verberat", and with dynamics veering between a pianissimo rattle and another fugato climax (4 bb. 1-25).

This kind of procedure might be characterised simply as word-painting - not that, in the hands of composers such as Monteverdi, Handel or Haydn, word-painting is a simple device. In the chorus 'Wretched lovers' in Handel's *Acis and Galatea*, for example, a graphic semiquaver theme depicts the giant Polyphemus lumbering down to wreck the lovers' idyll. This vivid representation becomes one of the subjects of a complex fugal movement counterpointing the lovers' wretchedness and the giant's depredations: the word-painting is a crucial element of the formal construction. I had the same kind of aim in the instances quoted from *26 lines* in the previous paragraph. The intended effect is not simply one of depicting an action or event with evocative musical devices such as, in *Of fair Cresseid*, the trumpet calls for the approach of Troilus' cavalry. On the contrary, in passages such as those quoted, it can be argued that Lucretius' words are tangibly infused with his understanding of the essence of the phenomena being invoked: phonic quality, verbal meaning and reality (as he sees it) are as one. (An influential strand of Lucretian scholarship may support such a view: Monica Gale refers to the arguments of Paul Friedlander and others that for Lucretius there is a repeated

analogy between the particles which constitute the real world and the letters that form the words of the poem, and that “verbal structures are intimately linked to the meaning of the poem”.²⁸) On this view, if sound, meaning and reality are indeed as one, the generation of musical material from the words offers a productive way of attempting to realize their meaning in music. Abbate and Parker’s distinction between the domains of words/text and plot/argument begins to look less applicable to setting this poetry, where words and argument are symbiotic.

The approach I have just described is one of the two main methods that, as I indicated earlier, I had in mind for generating musical material from the *De rerum natura*. The other was prompted by Lucretius’ atomist theory itself. Could the idea of his atoms constantly flowing through the universe, colliding with others, forming ephemeral beings and phenomena and then continuing on their endless course, be used to suggest musical lines, textures and events? I first attempted this with what became the second section of 26 lines, the Contemplation of Venus, which is based entirely on two phrases, “alma Venus” (almost untranslatable into English – something like “nurturing Venus” or “bountiful Venus”), and “hominum divomque voluptas” (“pleasure of men and gods”). I had in mind the opening of Haydn’s *The Creation*, where tonality and form (dissonance and, supposedly, formlessness) are used to represent the idea of chaos. This section of 26 lines uses the idea of the atoms and their movement in two different ways at the same time, through the treatment of the words and through the movement of musical lines. The words are broken up into individual syllables; vowels are for the most part emphasised by sustained notes, but several of the consonants in these phrases – *v*, *l*, *m* – are also amenable to a voiced lengthening. In the early part of this section, several voices tune in and out of a sustained unison D, until the texture gradually opens out as the tones, like the poet’s atoms, vary their paths when they collide with others. The sustained notes also gradually break up, and the complete words “alma” and “Venus” are at last fully constituted (2 bb.25-7). The second part of the section starts with hocketing on the syllables of “hominum divomque voluptas”; the words are never fully formed, but the hocketing subsides into a sustained chord at the end of the section. The aim throughout the section, then, is to make the sounds – vowels

²⁸ Monica R. Gale (ed.), *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies: Lucretius* (Oxford University Press, 2007), pp.8-9.

and consonants, tones and texture, moving and colliding like atoms – interact with meaning, with the poetic manifestation of reality.

The first section, the Invocation, opens with a joyful shout, calling on Venus as “Aeneadum genetrix” – but breaking up the words and syllables between the voice parts. Thereafter, as I showed above, the spoken sounds of phrases from the opening of the poem are used to form musical shapes: four pairs of repeating lines gradually interact to form shifting masses of sound. Once again, but by different means, sounds – this time words and phrases, melodic lines and texture – interact with meaning. As I worked through the piece, I continued to aim for this kind of fusion. A similar example, this time in the third section, is the setting of the phrase “corpora et inane” (“(there are) bodies and emptiness”), where, like atoms in the void, the disembodied particles of words rattle around within the hollow sound-space set by the organ (3 bb.70-101). Elsewhere, in the passage about the inevitable crumbling of the walls of the world, one of the few homophonic passages in the piece, a different approach is taken (4 bb.79-101). The voices act together, reflecting the stout constitution, for the moment, of our world; but as the walls are stormed (“expugnata”), the music reaches a climax and then subsides, the homophony disintegrates - and we face the impermanence of our existence.

Structures and sensibilities

That impermanence is ineluctable: but its acceptance, for the Epicurean, can be serene. The approaches so far discussed relate largely to the generation of musical material, sounds and textures from individual words or phrases, although I have suggested that some of these are used or adapted more widely through the pieces. These methods can be used to portray character, to evoke emotion and to illuminate events, as in *Of fair Cresseid*, or more ambitiously, as in *26 lines*, to realize in music the meanings of individual ideas and arguments. But earlier, in outlining why I chose these two poems, I spoke of my aim to produce pieces that might carry a sense of the *overall* meanings of the poems and of their humanist sensibilities. This could not be met simply by piecing together individual passages and effects, however closely they might have been worked from the text: there had to be, for each piece, an overall view and structure that could promote that aim.

It is therefore appropriate here to provide a summary of the structural features of the pieces.

Of fair Cresseid: summary of structure:

Section 1 (bars 1-49): introduction, scene-setting, rejections

- Baritone and strings
- Tonality: basic mode of the piece established (E-F-G-Gsharp-B-D-Dsharp) – E the tonal centre (more or less)
- Sustained string texture followed by more agitated figures reflecting Troilus' rejection by Cresseid and her rejection by Diomeid
- Key melodic material introduced in baritone part

Section 2 (bars 50-124): Cresseid's complaint against the gods and her dream of their council

- Mezzo and wind; baritone and strings; instrumental tutti
- Phrygian mode (on E)
- Instrumental gestures based on existing thematic material
- Instrumental passage 112-124: figure based on 7ths represents Cupid's bell ringing through heaven and hell; cello solo (123) intended to reflect the implacable judgement of the gods

Section 3 (bars 125-193): Cresseid's realization, lament and warning to other women

- Baritone, strings and wind: mezzo with wind and cello
- Tonality: same mode as Section 1, but up a 4th
- Sustained opening texture recalled; tombeau-like descending figure/canon introduced (145ff, 173)

Section 4 (bars 194-223): Cresseid and Troilus meet, but do not recognise each other

- Tutti; strings at 213ff recall earlier gestures (eg 24, 109) – irony suggested
- Return to original mode
- Change of pace for Troilus and his cavalry

Section 5: (bar 224 to end): Cresseid's testament and death; memorial set up by Troilus

- Mezzo and wind: baritone and strings
- Phrygian mode
- Earlier sustained texture reprised in both wind and strings; descending figure/canon recalled from Section 3, this time in Phrygian mode (249ff).

This structure is coherent in a narrative sense: it is based on five key moments from the poem. It is also intended to be musically coherent. Two main modes, distinct but related, are the basis of its tonal structure. There is textural and dynamic variation within an overall shape, and in particular the sustained texture of the opening is used and re-used, in different contexts and with varying instrumentation throughout the piece. And as was described earlier, key melodic material, derived from the sounds of the text, reappears throughout.

26 lines: summary of structure:

Section 1	Invocation
Length	4 minutes
Text I.1-5	(i) Aeneadum genetrix (opens and ends section, but varied dynamics and tessitura) (ii)caeli subter labentia signa (iii) Aeneadum genetrix (iv) quae mare navigerum.....concelebras (v)per te quoniam genus omne animantum / concipitur
Translation	(i) Mother of Aeneas' race (ii)under the shifting signs of heaven (iii) Mother of Aeneas' race (iv) who fills the sea laden with ships (v) since through you every kind of living creature is conceived
Thematic source	Derived from contours and rhythms of text
Pitch-class set	(i) all 12 tones (though hints at iv) (ii) F - G flat - G - A - C - D flat - D - E flat - E (iii) A - B flat - B - C - D - E flat (iv) E - G sharp - A - C - D (v) B - C sharp - D - F - F sharp - G sharp - A sharp
Style/texture/dynamics	Short ensemble opening and close then mobiles + organ interjections f intro, then varied dynamics, p to f climax overall; finally p reprise of opening ensemble

Section 2	Contemplation of Venus
Length	2 minutes
Text I.2	(i) alma Venus (ii) hominum divomque voluptas
Translation	(i) nurturing Venus (ii) pleasure of men and gods
Thematic source	Original
Pitch-class set	All tones except G flat
Style/texture/dynamics	(i) sustained syllables, words fragmented; p (ii) hocketing; varied dynamics, ends p Texture gradually opens out from D; tones, like atoms, vary their path as they collide with others

Section 3	Terror, matter, reason
Length	5-6 minutes
Text (i) I.146-8 (ii) I.420 (iii) II.83-5	(i) ...terror(em) animi tenebras(que)... ...sed naturae species ratioque (ii) corpora sunt et inane (iii) ...cuncta necessest aut gravitate sua ferri primordia rerum aut ictu forte alterius.
Translation	(i) darkness and terror of mind...but the aspect and reason of nature (ii) there are bodies and there is void (iii) Every atom must be carried onwards either by its own weight or by a chance blow from another.
Thematic source	(i) Mobiles: <i>caeli subter</i> ; <i>per te/genus omne</i> ; sub-section ends with affirmation of nature and reason with theme clearly recalling final mobile (<i>per te</i>) of Invocation section (ii) Mobile: <i>per te</i> again (iii) reminiscent of Mobile <i>per te</i>
Pitch-class set	(i) Ambivalent between (ii) and (v) from Invocation section (ii) As for <i>per te</i> (ie (v) from Invocation section again, with E added) (iii) based on wedge C sharp – D – B – E – A sharp – F – G sharp (ie similar to (ii)) and on transposition starting G sharp (down 4 th)
Style/texture/dynamics	(i) Sustained, dark; <i>p</i> , eventual cresc to <i>ff</i> (ii) Fragmented, moving to familiar theme (cf <i>per te</i>) (iii) Brief fugato effect; Sprechstimme against repeated portamento accented figure; rhythmic, vigorous, moves to <i>ff</i> climax.

Section 4	Natural phenomena
Length	5-6 minutes
Text (i) I.271-6 VI.96 VI. 175-182 (ii) II. 1148-9	(i) venti vis verberat incita pontumperfurit acri cum fremitu saevitque minaci murmure ventus. ...tonitru quatuntur caerula caeli ventus....fervidus....quae faciunt nictantia fulgura flammae (ii) ...magni...circum moenia mundi expugnata dabunt labem putrisque ruinas.
Translation	(i) The mighty wind whips up and batters the sea.....Its fierce howl rages and roars with savage threat. The blue skies shake with thunder. The burning wind (scatters the seeds of fire) that kindle flickering flashes of flame. (ii) The walls of the great world will be stormed all around, and will collapse into crumbling ruins.
Thematic source	(i) Related to Mobile <i>caeli subter</i> from Invocation section, esp chromatic movement for <i>verberat</i> and <i>caeli subter</i> contour for <i>perfurit</i> etc Fire passage: related to Mobile <i>per te</i> from Invocation section (ii) Also related to Mobile <i>per te</i> from Invocation section
Pitch-class set	(i) As (ii) in Invocation section (<i>caeli subter</i>) plus A flat; then, for final

	fire passage, as (v) in Invocation section
	(ii) As (v) in Invocation section, plus D sharp
Style/texture/dynamics	(i) Starts p , dynamic surges, rhythmic figures, Sprechstimme; organ solo with choral interruption; violent fugal passage to ff ; Thunder – turbulent, with organ pedal passage; Fire – soprano solo and organ, p/mf , unstable, ‘flickering’ (ii) Homophonic ensemble p-ff , subsides to ppp .

Section 5	Fulfilment
Length	2 m 30
Text II.7-8	Sed nil dulcius est, bene quam munita tenere edita doctrina sapientum templa serena
Translation	But nothing is sweeter than to possess the strong serene temples built from the teaching of the wise.
Thematic source	Mobile <i>per te</i> from Invocation section
Pitch-class set	As (v) in Invocation section, with accidentals in organ passages
Style/texture/dynamics	Gioioso, varied dynamics, organ interjections; choir parts contrapuntal, then serene homophonic ensemble gesture at end, ppp ; ends with fff organ ‘splash’.

That *26 lines* also has five sections is coincidental: they are designed to provide a coherent structure of settings that distil key elements of the poem, a structure that, to return to Abbate and Parker’s operatic dichotomy, will inhabit the plot/argument domain. Although more complex in structure, *26 lines* is, like *Of fair Cresseid*, intended to be musically coherent. A wide variety of pitch-class sets is used, but there is a considerable degree of tonal correspondence across the sections, and the melodic material established in the first section, and derived from the sounds and rhythms of the words of the text, provides the basis for musical material in all succeeding sections except the second. In the discussion in the previous section it became evident that the two domains of word/text and plot/argument were not in fact distinct in the process of inventing musical material from individual words and phrases. The same applies here in respect of the overall structure of *26 lines*: that structure derives from Lucretius’ argument and doctrine, but much of the musical matter that makes up its sections, and that gives them coherence as a whole piece, is generated from the words of the text. Words and argument are indivisible.

The overall textural and dynamic shapes of both pieces are intended to be significant. In addition to the thematic continuities that have been discussed, *Of fair Cresseid* has a clear dynamic and emotional arc, moving from Henryson’s sombre introduction, through Cresseid’s turbulence and despair to her acceptance of her

condition, and finally, after her death, to public forgiveness and redemption. The opening texture and its recall reflect this shape: the same sustained lines characterise the opening passage, Cresseid's realization of her catastrophe, and the solemn ending. This arc is quite conventional in its musical rise and fall: but it springs directly from Henryson's "quair" and from his re-telling of it: this is not simply a bald account of an ancient legend, but an account that places Cresseid's story in the context of human (and not divine) reflection and redemption.

As I have suggested, *26 lines* has substantial continuity in terms of its musical material. But beyond that, it too is intended to have an overall dynamic embodying its meaning. The first section opens with organ and chorus in a joyful shout, followed by a serene, reverent choral section. The second section, which comes from the same opening hymn in praise of Venus, is more contemplative at first, then breaks up into cheerful hockets. The third section starts with a sinister and violent account of the darkness and fear caused by religion, then breaks into a fragmented texture reflecting the atoms in the void; but above the most troubled passage emerges the serene voice of reason. The fourth section turbulently portrays the threatening violence of natural phenomena, then ends pianissimo with the sombre recognition that our world will eventually collapse. But the final section returns to the joyful mood of the first, celebrating the serenity and wisdom of those whose reason enables them to understand the workings of the universe; and it ends by recalling the opening of the piece with another jubilant burst on the organ.

Performance

Of fair Cresseid has been performed once, at the Sound Thought festival of March 2012, under the title *The Testament of Cresseid*. The performance went well. I felt that the instrumental parts, and especially the contrast between the colours and textures of the two distinct ensembles, worked effectively. The language of the text did not cause difficulty for the performers: the baritone was very familiar with Scots, and the mezzo – not a Scot – readily negotiated any initial difficulties. There was, however, an unintended contrast between the two voice parts: the baritone sang his part accurately and sensitively, while the mezzo gave a strong, but less faithful, dramatic performance. The main lesson that I took from the occasion was that in places the music needed more space than the score suggested or than was allowed

in performance; this was certainly the view of the clarinettist – my supervisor, Bill Sweeney. There are therefore some changes in tempi in the score now submitted. Performance takes from seventeen to eighteen minutes.

26 lines has not yet been performed. I have been in contact with the Director of University Chapel Choir, and with the University Organist, to discuss the possibility of a performance. The vocal parts in this piece are in many places technically demanding, and are likely to require singers of a professional standard. It has indeed been suggested to me that it may be more practicable to try to arrange a performance using a single singer for each part.²⁹ The duration of the piece is around nineteen minutes.

Conclusion

At the outset I stated the aim of showing how these two pieces might make up a coherent portfolio. I chose Henryson's words "I tuik ane quair" as the title of this commentary to reflect the provenance of each of the poems within a long literary-philosophical tradition, and to reflect my aim to realize key qualities and meanings of their texts in *Of fair Cresseid* and *26 lines*. Both are vocal pieces, though their forces are quite different. In each piece, I attempted to achieve coherent musical structures, in terms both of the musical material used and of overall shape. In both, I generated melodic and rhythmic material directly from the sounds of the text, and, more ambitiously, tried in *26 lines* more varied ways of directly embodying the ideas of the poem in musical textures. Initially, the idea of a distinction between the domains of word/text and plot/argument looked promising as a means of theorising some of these approaches, but broke down in the case of *26 lines*, where words and argument seemed intrinsically linked with each other and, I intended, with their musical realization. I believe that the use of more varied musical materials and methods in *26 lines* resulted in a more flexible compositional approach as the portfolio progressed. Finally, I have tried in this commentary to demonstrate that both poems are infused, albeit to different degrees, with a strong humanist sensibility. That is what ultimately drew me to them, and is what I have tried to distil in *Of fair Cresseid* and *26 lines*.

²⁹ I am grateful to David Lee, who is a professional singer, for this comment, made during last semester's Voices, Words, Music seminar for post-graduates.

Bibliography

- Abbate, Carolyn and Parker, Roger, *A History of Opera: The Last Four Hundred Years* (London: Allen Lane, 2012)
- Asmis, Elizabeth, 'Lucretius' Venus and Stoic Zeus', in Monica R Gale (ed.), *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2007), pp 88-103
- Gale, Monica R. (ed.), *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies: Lucretius* (Oxford University Press, 2007)
- Gillespie, Stuart, 'Lucretius in the English Renaissance', in Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp 242-253
- Gillespie, Stuart and MacKenzie, Donald, 'Lucretius and the moderns', in Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp 306- 324
- Greenblatt, Stephen, *The Swerve: How the Renaissance Began* (London: The Bodley Head, 2011)
- Johnson, Monte and Wilson, Catherine, 'Lucretius and the history of science', in Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp 131-148
- Henryson, Robert, *The Testament of Cresseid and Seven Fables*, transl. by Seamus Heaney (London: Faber and Faber, 2009)
- Henryson, Robert, *The Testament of Cresseid and Other Poems*, selected by Hugh MacDiarmid (London: Penguin Books, 1988)
- Monfasani, John, "The Swerve: How the Renaissance Began", *Reviews in History*, 05 July 2012 ([URL:http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1283](http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1283), accessed 22 August 2013)
- Prosperi, Valentina, 'Lucretius in the Italian Renaissance', in Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp214-226
- Tasioulas, J.A., *The Makars: The Poems of Henryson, Dunbar and Douglas* (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1999)
- Tausky, Vilem and Margaret (eds. and transl.), *Janáček: Leaves from his life* (London: Kahn & Averill, 1982).