

“I Fear the Versed”

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O purveyor of paronomasia, begetter of wit and skeptical grimace alike,
 you scholar so bold as to pen yourself muse of your own miss-metered poem,
 sing a punnish punishment for the enemies of Lucretian delight!
 Like a swamp mother emerging from her putrescence-blistered lakebed
 who, desecrating the Danish drinking hall, avenges her ill-fated son—
 so must you, crooked songstress, retrieve the severed arm of Roman artistry
 and labor to manicure the claws of one poet's Grendellian pride.

Impious Lucretius, son of who knows whom, rushed the fields of civil war
 armed with neither a named sword, nor a fifteen-page fleet at his command,
 but a honeyed weapon of deception, a tool to turn a phrase, so that
 he might set to verse the universe disemboweled by the Greek philosopher.

Not just a philosopher, no! A god! "A god, illustrious Memmius!"

Epicurus, a soul somehow reassembled from an infinitude of scattered atoms,
 swooped down to the blood-soaked field and gripped our chance poet by the tunic.

Despair having perced to the roote of his heart, he sputtered in Lucretius' ear:

Play for them, my greedy instrument, a tune of my many discoveries.

Reveal to them the true nature of death and those natural forces

they call the gods. Or tell them those gods still exist but

do not meddle in human affairs... either one, it doesn't really matter!

Anyway, in your wooden horse of a poem, stow my unexceptional message:

liberate yourselves from pain and worry—negative pleasure is the highest good.

Grateful for unprompted inspiration from his Athenian Enkidu, Lucretius seized the advice.

He yearned to bask in Roman applause, whether this meant flinging a few hip rhymes together

or scaling the peaks of Mount Helicon and threatening the Muses at knife point for his laurels.

He fantasized of piled bronze, and could feel the weight of fame-wrought wealth in his pocket.

Eager to realize his poetic dream—to ditch his reputation as a "Nobody"—the ambitious wordsmith

dashed from the battle gripping his wax tablet like a son, while wise Epicurus remained perched

atop his shoulder. Having been coaxed beneath a fruit-bearing tree, or having perhaps stumbled

into a shaded wood after taking a couple of left turns away from the straight road, he composed

De Rerum Natura—a philosophical epic in six parts. His versified Epicurean textbook required 7,400 lines to adequately expound the laws of nature and how nature intended us to be.

Departing (for now) from the assumption that Lucretius composed *On the Nature of Things* to satiate his hungry ego, one must wonder about his true purpose for weaving another's philosophy into verse. Perhaps anticipating this sentiment, he twice presents us with a flowery justification of his rhetorical strategy:

“Just as when physicians try to give loathsome wormwood □ / to children, they first touch the rim of the cup all □ / around with the sweet, golden liquid of honey, □ / so that the unsuspecting age of children may be tricked as far □ / as their lips, and so that meanwhile the child might drink down □ / the bitter wormwood juice and though deceived, be not deceased, □ / but rather by such means be restored and become well, □ / so I now, since this system seems for the most part to be / too bitter to those who have not tried it and □ / the common people shrink back from it, I wanted to explain □ / our system to you in sweet-spoken Pierian song □ / and touch it, so to speak, with the sweet honey of the Muses. □”

(I.936-947)

This honey-wormwood refrain can be used as a reference for understanding the inner workings of the poet's persuasive method. Conceiving of his Greek mentor's ethics steeped in natural philosophy as a bitter but healthful concoction containing a universal cure for fear and darkness of the mind, the ailments of mankind, Lucretius attempts to make Epicurus' doctrine more palatable by glazing the rim with a thick ring of honey. He renders the work in verse. The obstacles of his system that require a coaxing of the audience are, after some investigation, made

sweet with clarity. The way in which poetry functions as a persuasive device, especially within the spheres of moral and natural philosophy, is a stickier matter.

This essay will take the form of an exposition and hardly impartial, partial defense of poetry in Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*. Our project will blossom from the inquiry: why verse? The laughably concise question, when turned over in the reader's mind in the context of this particular work, expands into a massive jumble of peculiarities. Lucretius' conception of persuasion, of humanity, of nature—all when introduced to his poetry—come forward and clash in a muddle of seeming contradictions. In order to gain an understanding of how verse best suits Lucretius' rhetorical task, we must untangle these knots as we follow poetry's thread throughout his comprehensive account of the natural world.

Our exposition, similar to all things in the universe, will be composed of many miniature seeds of inquiry. So one does not find oneself lost in the minutiae, the investigation will go as follows: the first third of the essay will address the reasons why Lucretius need use verse—a relatively dry pursuit that will supply an overview of his whole project and a detailed summary of Epicurus' ethical doctrine through the lense of *De Rerum Natura*. What we learn of Lucretius' conception of human nature will lead into an explication of the 'spoonful of honey makes the medicine go down' passage, this time reconsidered with the physics of his system. The last two-thirds are when the real fun begins! We will finally dig into the poetry—why an epic poem? Does Lucretius have any ulterior motives for adopting this writing style? Is verse really an adequate complement to the philosophical doctrine he is attempting to promote? From these questions and others like them we will develop a better understanding of what poetry is for Lucretius—an understanding perhaps pleasurable for the prose-minded pessimists in the room. All

of our findings will be tried against the poem's bitter finale. We will all leave a little sad, a little skeptical, a little less likely to pick up a copy of Erasmus Darwin's *The Botanic Garden*.

To begin, our way into the Lucretian poem conundrum lies in identifying obstacles that would prompt the firepower used by the poet in his rhetorical charge. Lucretius does not attempt to conceal his persuasive strategy—the offsetting of the reader's prejudice with a dazzling rhetorical display—from his audience. He is forthright in stating that he must account for a slew of difficulties that make Epicureanism appear “too bitter to those who have not tried it” (I.944). Under the heading of “bitterness,” he gathers the doubts of the readers unfamiliar with his system and slathers them in honeyed verse.

Lucretius reveals the most prominent of these snags in his initial praise of Epicurus. Interrupting his explanation of creation from “first beginnings” to laud the Athenian swan to his swallow, he writes:

It used to be that human life, polluted, was lying / in the dirt before our eyes,
crushed by the weight of religion, / which stretched out its head on display from
the regions of heaven, / threatening mortals from above with its horrible-looking
face. / It was a Greek man who first dared to raise his mortal eyes / against
religion, and who first fought back against it. (I.66-71)

Epicurus' philosophy is at odds with faith in the gods, an unpleasant conflict in ideology for the religious reader. Lucretius describes religion as a device designed to implant in the mind fear and worry associated with consequences of the afterlife. It also leads—he believes—to confusion, because men incorrectly attribute causation to the gods that ought to belong to nature herself and the “first beginnings” she employs. We do so in hope that the world was created for us (II.176).

Whether it follows from the Epicurean laws of the universe or is just an attempt to cling to some shred of orthodoxy, Lucretius does not renounce the gods entirely. Instead, in order to make fixation on anything other than one's current state appear ridiculous, he maintains that while they do exist, "the entire nature of the gods / spends everlasting time enjoying perfect peace, / far removed and long separated from our concerns" (I.44-46). He casts a hollow model of belief: an impression of snooty deities apathetic to the lives of men. He shames the "superstitious" crowd who spend their lives worrying and worshipping in vain. Upon shedding the weight of this moral burden, followers of Epicurus acquire a new definition of piety: the ability "to look upon everything with a tranquil mind" (V.1203).

The dismissing of religion begets troubling consequences surrounding the mystery of what happens after one's time on earth. Because man cannot ascertain what the fate of his spirit will be when he passes, Lucretius explains, he has "no means of resisting [religious beliefs], no power...[and] death must bring with it the fear of eternal punishment. / For people do not know what the nature of the soul is" (I.110-111). Lucretius renders the soul, made up of first beginnings like everything else in the universe, mortal (III.532). Reassuring Memmius of the absence of any possible tie to existence after life, he laments the toll taken on the human psyche in believing otherwise. Fear of dying, Lucretius claims, "throws human life into deep and utter confusion, / staining everything with the black darkness of death / and leaves no pleasure clear and pure" (III.38-40). This all-consuming terror he attributes in part to the threat of suffering in the afterlife, and partially to one's self-pity in imaging the circumstances of one's death. The sudden transition from personhood into nothingness as endorsed by Epicurus should seem a welcome reprieve by comparison. A desire to combat common assumptions about death deeply

ingrained in the minds of all humankind by ignorant, yet perpetual fear fuels the formulation of Lucretius' rhetorical strategy.

For his final trick, he will attempt to sell the notion that emotional attachment is ridiculous. For the reason that we ought to avoid fixating on the fates of our souls we should, similarly, loosen certain ties to others as well. Hinting at this tenet of Epicureanism throughout the work, Lucretius parades it before the reader quite memorably while broaching the subject of love. He separates sex and love entirely—the first, a bodily need resembling hunger that must be filled to alleviate discomfort, and the second, a waste of time. Though he deems sex inevitable from puberty onwards, attachment that blossoms from the act should be uprooted for the sake of maintaining an even temperament. Cursing the consequences of our bodily desires he smugly proclaims, “nor does one who shuns love lack the enjoyment of Venus, but rather receives the enjoyment without the penalty” (IV.1073-1074). Love, in Lucretius' eyes, takes the form of illusion, petty quarreling, embarrassment and torture in common chains, all drawing interest away from one's present well-being. He goes so far as to liken feelings of affection to illness, stressing that “the pleasure from [Venus] is more pure for the healthy than the lovesick” (IV.1075). Lovers must be cured of this disease for their own health. Can we dare say what remedy the subtle poet has in mind?

The stance Epicurus takes on the subjects of love, death, religion and other facets of the human condition is the deterrent to readers that Lucretius must smother in “the sweet honey of the muses” (I.947). The repression of natural behaviors urged by his philosophy constitutes its bitterness—that is, the repression of what most would consider natural. Lucretius sees things differently; what we deem human nature is not only unnatural, but leads us to hold up

inappropriate values as the highest virtues of mankind. In his overhaul of our common assumptions about nature, he discards our beliefs about what is naturally human, as revealed in his introductory statement: “we must not only give a correct account of celestial / matters...[but] also take special care and employ keen reasoning / to see where the soul and nature of the mind come from” (Book I.127-131). Thoughts of where man is and where he belongs in the transitory, atom-riddled scheme of the universe preoccupy Lucretius as he crafts *De Rerum Natura*.

With an eye to the common disconnect between how man is and how he ought to be, the reader encounters a twofold problem throughout the Lucretian humanity discussion: (1) what is human nature and, once that has been determined, (2) on what should we, as humans, base our sense of morality? The answer to the second part is quite obvious for a follower of Epicurus—on what feels good, of course! We would attribute this response to any hedonist, though Epicurean pleasure-seeking will certainly prove more complex as this essay goes on. Most classical philosophy dealing in ethics teaches moderation of natural impulses. Plato attributes virtue to balance of the tripartite soul and, while Aristotle uses pleasure as a means of sniffing out the good, he claims that “moral excellence comes about as a result of habit” conditioned in situations where one has a choice of a mean between excess and defect (Aristotle, 1103A.14 & 1106B.36). For Lucretius, the method is simple: adhere to the nature of your soul. But what is that nature, and how does it differ from those incorrectly posited by other philosophers? As his ethic directly reflects his view of man’s nature, understanding part one of our inquiry is of paramount importance in developing a nuanced argument for Lucretius’ rhetorical project.

Materialism in its most extreme form invites the notion that all aspects of man, physical and psychological, find their origin in the atomic stew of the cosmos. For this reason, Lucretius’

sense of human nature is founded on Epicurus' laws of physics—a stance comparable to that of one who hypothesizes that the laws of nature, like that of gravity, offered an explanation of our mental processes. He develops an account of humanity based on the behaviour of matter, the very same material behaviour that accounts for everything from celestial phenomena to magnets. While this means that little of the cause of our conduct is uniquely inherent to us, it fosters a strong connection between man and nature.

The first two books of *On the Nature of Things* cover the laws of physics, which flow effortlessly into Books III and IV on sensation and other aspects of the human condition; the sliding of the scope from the atomic level up through the description of man reflects Lucretius' attitude on the direct dependence of human character on the material world. At the beginning of Book I, he summarizes our possible knowledge of creation in two laws: “nothing can be created from nothing,” and “nothing can be destroyed into nothing” (I.154 & 237). He argues that if something could come from nothing, then anything could come from any other thing—but this would compromise the well-ordered stability of nature. Man would occasionally sprout feathers and trees would bear mismatched fruits, all because nothing could have claim to its own special seed. On the other side of the matter, nothing can suffer utter destruction as things and their parts would pass away at random and nature would quickly run out of material to use in its construction of other things. These two laws—together resembling our modern understanding of the conservation of energy—simultaneously eliminate any need for divine creation and, because they also apply to the first beginnings of the soul, the possibility of an afterlife. Though they do not directly translate to aspects of human nature, but to characteristics of what one considers

man's spiritual nature, the atomic theory that follows from these laws shapes humanity in this way: it reduces all behavior down to an interaction between material beginnings.

Lucretius again characterizes this interaction in two parts—a primary motion which follows a simple, downward path and the other, an inexplicable tendency to “swerve” from this course so as to collide with other particles. Because the downward motion of evenly spaced atoms cannot produce compounds, he posits another which enables creation and results in consequences far beyond the purely physical (II.224). “If every motion is always linked,” he speculates, “from where, I say, is free will, torn from fate, by which we go wherever pleasure leads each of us?” (II.251-259). Lucretius uses free will—the ability to wrench one's fate away from the guiding grip of nature—as proof of this second, erratic motion. In doing so, he describes man's behavior as operating within the laws of physics. For, even though it is this control over the beginnings of motion that gives us choice in a world ruled entirely by structured chance, it is not altogether free. Man shares this capacity with the whole of the universe. It is the same, random shifting of seeds from their parallel motion that has created everything else around him. Due to its arbitrary character, atomic swerve also eliminates the possibility of divine providence altogether.

As a staunch materialist, Epicurus inadvertently strips humanity of its vibrant, multi-dimensional nature. Man—a conglomeration of eternal seeds accounting for the body, mind and soul—grows and matures as nature adds atoms to his original clump of first beginnings. In death, first the tiny soul atoms and later, the more substantial seeds composing the body, break apart into their original unities only to be sculpted into something else at the beck and call of chance. Though Lucretius differentiates between the body, mind and soul (each entity composed

of its own particular seeds), their shared materiality unifies them. He constrains the human spirit to primarily physical ends. “Since neither wealth nor high birth nor the glory of ruling / do our body any good at all, so it remains, / that they cannot be thought to benefit our mind at all either” (II.36). Lucretius proclaims: what is good for the body dictates precisely what is good for the soul. His belief could be seen to clash with the cultivation of intellect and the concept of a higher self. In pages to come, the apparent struggle of a poet composing 7,400 lines of flowery yet didactic verse with a philosophy that devalues the spirit will be a subject of inquiry. “Songs [only] soothe the mind and [give] delight when [the listener has] sufficiently eaten,” and thus striving towards psychological fulfillment separate from physical satisfaction proves illusory, if not altogether impossible (V.1390).

In prophetic response to the Bard’s question, Lucretius confirms that one *can* desire too much of a good thing. Unlimited self-indulgence does not a happy mortal make. On paving before the reader a “little footpath” to fulfillment, he reveals the shortcomings of the human spirit and proposes a cure:

“[Epicurus] realized...that the vessel was the cause of its own defect, / and all things within it were corrupted by its defect...partly because he saw it was leaky and full of holes, / so that in no way could it ever be filled up, / partly because he perceived that it completely polluted, so to speak, / everything which it had taken in with a noxious taste. / And so he removed impurities from our hearts with his truth-revealing / words and placed a fixed limit on desire and fear. / He set out what the highest good [pleasure] is towards which / we all strive.” (VI.17-28)

The soul is a porous cup that cannot long contain happiness and contaminates what little it does retain with superstition. Epicureanism—a philosophy which denies any influence to the gods and eliminates fear in excess—acts as a solvent to separate care and worry from the spirit’s conserved pleasure. Through quieting both fear and ill-placed desire, as well as ordering the needs of the body above worldly ambition, one can attain “the highest good.” Moderation is especially important for certain elevated forms of pleasure. Whereas food and drink satisfy a particular hunger or thirst completely for a time, “from the face and beautiful color of a person nothing is given the body except images, insubstantial”—any pleasure derived from such an experience flows swiftly through the soul’s pores (IV.1094). Once the fulfillment of bodily needs has quelled all pain, the level of pleasure one feels cannot increase, but only take on different forms (V.1200). Introducing a “fixed limit” is not in conflict with the proposed idea that the Lucretian ethic is directly linked to pleasure and Epicurus’ conception of the nature of the soul. Rather, for the sake of mental repose, Lucretius argues for a limiting of feelings opposed to the immediate needs of the body. Temperance in the interest of undiluted pleasure makes a pious man.¹

De Rerum Natura is, at heart, an ethical work. Not only does Lucretius spotlight human nature in the two central books of the poem (Books III & IV out of six), but he includes the laws of Epicurean physics and expounds the forces of nature with the intention of justifying his sense of morality. Using an atomistic conception of the world to prove the soul material, he reduces the spirit to an extension of the body. In light of this relationship, what should man consider moral? It seems to an outside perspective as a shedding of romantic relationships, detachment from society, and bitter apostasy. From this controversial means of questing after mental tranquility

¹ Lucretius redefines this term in Book V: “Piety is not...to lie prostrate on the ground with open palms / before the shrines of the gods, nor to sprinkle altars / with a profusion of the blood of beasts, nor to join vow to vow. / It is rather to be able to look upon everything with a tranquil mind” (1194-1203).

the reader can plainly see a need for tactical persuasion on Lucretius' part, but the question stands: why poetry? The reason for his method, far more than its resounding need, lurks behind his sugary verse.

If it is at all founded in Epicurean philosophy, Lucretius' choice mode of persuasion is likely linked to something material. This suggests that within the bounds of Epicureanism there exists a physiological explanation for the rhetorical efficacy of poetry. From what Lucretius tells us of his verse—that it acts as sweet honey coating the rim of bitter medicine—we might discover a connection in the relationship between sensation and health, both within the body and the material soul.

Lucretius instructs his readers that taste, similar to the other senses, is an interaction between the pores of the palate and the first beginnings of external matter. As we can see, everyone has a distinct outer appearance caused by the variation of their seeds, and the seeds composing an individual's taste buds ought to behave no differently. Everyone has a particular palate with particular pores. These pores, or passages—be they large, small, triangular, square, many-angled, hooked or round—interact in certain ways with various taste particles, each of which are also formed in their own peculiar shape. By virtue of our personalized tongue passages, “what is sweet to some becomes bitter to others” (IV.658). If pores were permanently fixed, some would never taste the sweetness of honey nor cease to sweep the cauliflower from their plates into the jowls of greedy dogs pacing below—but tastes can change.

When disease infiltrates the body, confusing and rearranging the pores, the seeds of food and drink no longer fit as they did formerly. Illness changes the passages of the mouth so that the “bodies which before were suitable to sensation / now are not...[for] others fit better, / [and]

when they...[enter] are able to produce a bitter sensation,” (668). If what should be sweet tastes bitter, one requires medicine to cure the body and restore the mouth pores to their original, healthy configuration. Because Lucretius understands the soul as corporeal, it is not inconceivable that a similar process could occur in the mind.

As different but intertwined entities, mind and soul share mortality and a material nature. The mind as the “intellect,” containing the “rational and guiding principle of life,” is a mass of minute but material seeds that resides in the heart (III. 94 & 179). While the soul, responsible for life and motion, spreads itself throughout the body and limbs, the mind functions like an organ no less obscure than an eye or a foot (96). Because organs like the eye, ear, nose or tongue have their own constructed passages, there should exist a porous counterpart for feeling in the mind on an even tinier scale. Lucretius perhaps refers to this feature of the heart when he encourages the reader to “stop being scared off by newness alone. / Don’t spit reason from your mind,” he instructs, “but rather with sharp / judgement weigh things carefully” (II.1040-1043). He depicts the mind with the mouth-like property—as Englert here translates “spit” from “*expuere*”—of expelling good sense without deliberation, like an undeveloped palate rejecting food with rich flavor. When Lucretius draws a comparison between the mind and the body in stating that, “...just as the body itself / suffers dire diseases and powerful pain, / so the mind suffers sharp cares, grief, and fear,” he determines afflictions of the heart to be analogous to physical pain, but prior implications push this relationship further (459). For Lucretius, cares, fear and grief are bodily.

We know that when man is sick the food which is usually sweet to him becomes bitter and the body appears to function like a filter that can be externally adjusted (IV.664). Can we

then say the same of what goes on in the heart? If the mind weighed down by grief and corrupted by fear is equivalent to the body suffering from disease, one would need to find a means of working on the mind's filter, like medicine in the prior example. The round atoms of poetry flow smoothly through the pores, masking the hooked first beginnings of Epicureanism—the cure for potential bitterness attached to Lucretius' understanding of the nature of things.

Lucretius' diction in passages dealing with the initial "bitterness" of his system emphasize the overlap of the physical with the psychological in support of his rhetorical method. He draws from a string of words such as *tristis*, *taeter*, *acerbus* and *amarus* to describe acrid tastes as well as emotional distress. For instance, he employs "amarum" when posing the question, "[what] is so bitter, if it all comes down to sleep and repose, / that someone could waste away in eternal grief?" (III.910-911). With a primary meaning of "bitter in taste" or "pungent," "*amarus*" stands out in a passage rebuking those who fear death (*Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 2012). In the honey wormwood refrain—corresponding with the aforementioned connotation—it is the "*laticem amarum*" that the doctor masks with honey and serves to the unsuspecting child (I.940). Similarly, the emotional becomes sensible in a discussion responding to the question of why certain foods healthful for some are poisonous when ingested by others. Speaking of the presence of both kinds of seeds in food, just as both sweet and bitter seeds are present for potential sensation, he uses "*triste*" as bitter (VI.769-771). While also used to refer to a biting taste, its primary meaning of "depressed, gloomy and unhappy," continues to blur the line between taste and feeling (2179). As the psychological drifts into the territory of the physical, so does the figurative appear to become literal.

Observed earlier for its influence on the relationship between body and soul, Epicurus' doctrine of materialism permeates the text down to the level of poetic meaning. In the introduction of Book I, Lucretius humblebrags that he "must use new words for many things / because of the poverty of [his] language and the newness of the subject matter" (I.138). False modesty aside, this warning speaks more to the absence of Greek philosophical terms in his Latin than a shortage of adjectives. His circulating of several words referring to bitterness both of heart and tongue in passages on both feeling and taste evinces Lucretius' nearly interchangeable treatment of the faculties of the body and mind. Under these conditions, poetry could very well act as honey on the rim of bitter wormwood not only in the figurative, but in a literal sense. Thus, the image Lucretius presents to us at the outset of the poem not only harmonizes with his impression of Epicurus' philosophy, but provides the reader with a provisional definition of poetry in the author's eyes: a pleasing form of deception with corporeal consequence. However, as but a brief justification of poetry within the laws of Epicureanism—using what Lucretius directly tells us of his rhetorical method alone—this current means of inquiry hardly penetrates the author's mind in search of his true purpose in turning to verse.

For those who feel that the poetry has been taken too lightly and too literally up to this point, we will now shift the focus from our framing of explicit connections to a wide shot of the poetic landscape of Lucretius' work. Further inspection of its structure and his poetic devices of choice yields additional insight into how verse suits his philosophical project. With possible objections looming in the background, his method of persuasion cries out for justification beyond what he tells us in the twice repeated honey-wormwood refrain. An answer as to whether or not poetry serves a greater role in the work than that of a mere rhetorical crutch will emerge as we

contemplate Lucretius' unspoken motives throughout the whole of his "sweet-spoken Pierian song" (I.946).

Gripped by the "the savage claims of war," Rome in the time of *De Rerum Natura* could have easily been the birthplace of an historical, rather than a didactic, epic (I.29). Lucretius opts for the latter, hoping to soothe the climate of his troubled republic by holding up the *ataraxia* of Epicureanism—rather than violent victories of combat—as an end goal. Though he does throw out the occasional allusion to the tales of Homer, he instead seeks inspiration in the form of the Greek didactic epic characteristic of Hesiod and Empedocles. Imitating the Greek poets, Lucretius peppers his work with speeches of praise and invocations for assistance in weaving his golden words. In certain sections of the poem, though, the style seems incongruous with the content.

Book I commences with an address to Venus: "mother of the descendants of Aeneas, pleasure of humans and gods..." Lucretius implores, "it is you who...makes the ship-bearing sea and the fruitful earth / teem with life" (I.1-4). The supplication of the goddess seems straightforward enough; it is beautifully written, plays upon the interests of Roman listeners, and adheres to convention. Under the guise of invoking Venus, he evokes Roman pride in the very first clause. However, when one continues reading only to stumble upon Lucretius' blasphemous assertion a mere sixty lines in—"it used to be that human life, polluted, was lying / in the dirt before our eyes, crushed by the weight of religion"—one begins to find fault in the opening lines (I.63-64). Telling Venus that you are "striving for [her] to be [your] ally in writing," then revealing that she, the goddess of pleasure, is walled off and powerless with the rest of the deities in their Olympian prison is nonsensical (I.24). The end of Book IV sheds light on Lucretius' use

of the Roman goddess' name as a versatile euphemism for the vocabulary of reproduction. The language of fertility, images of springtime, and a depiction of her seduction of Mars within the initial address reinforce a similar interpretation here. Lucretius employs the opening invocation not as a celebration of divine power or a gesture of piety, but rather as a scene of birth.

More on the Homeric than the Hesiodic end of the epic spectrum, Lucretius selects a hero for his philosophical journey. Brave discoverer of the nature of things, man turned god, the exalted Epicurus conquers religion and rescues mankind from ceaseless folly. Leveling the gods to a position of insignificance, Lucretius elevates Epicurus in their place—a status anyone can achieve if they devote themselves to the pursuit of true pleasure. When man attains tranquility of mind, he is godlike (II.7-19). It comes as little surprise then when, rather than Venus or Bacchus, Lucretius invokes the Greek truth-seeker at the start of Book III. His rhetorical deification of Epicurus is quickly replaced by full-fledged idolatry. The poet's praise reaches new heights in an emotional declaration to the poem's recipient: "he was a god, a god, illustrious Memmius!" (V.8). The historical epic—though it customarily incorporates the Greek pantheon as a plot device—displays great human achievements in a similar light. The format of the epic poem is, thus, appropriate for Lucretius' project because of its tradition of adopting man's heroic accomplishments for its subject. Lucretius desires to spotlight Epicurus, but also instruct Roman readers in how they too can become an Epicurean Achilles of their war-fraught society.

The old-fashioned poet is a grecophile in a society that widely values high office, military honors and wealth. He also adopts the Greek style to ease readers with varied interests into a Greek philosophy. He provides an example of this choice in a few lines devoted to the "gloriously famous Athens" that ring in a final praise of Epicurus at the start of Book VI. While

his choice to compose words of reverence for the Greek capital could have been ironic—the Book ends with a horrific depiction of the Athenian plague—Athen’s biggest claim to fame is that she “bore a man found to possess such intelligence, / who once spoke everything from his truth-revealing mouth” (VI.5-6). By relation to Epicurus alone, Greece in Lucretius’ dramatic representation is a bastion of the arts. His commitment to introducing Greek beliefs into a nation wary of philosophy spurs his decision to write in the sweet old style.

Second to Quintus Ennius and his histories, Lucretius is one of the earlier Roman poets to adopt the Greek epic (I.116-119). Preceding Virgil’s *Aeneid* by thirty years, could *On the Nature of Things* be a product of Lucretius’ desire to become the author of *the* great Roman epic? Could the composition of 7,400 lines in painstaking dactylic hexameter amount to nothing but a throwing of his hat into the ring in hopes that laurel wreath might soon appear in its place? Often reminding the reader that no man short of wit could invent so complex a poem as he, the prideful poet demands recognition for his labor.

Lucretius writes as if he is giving the Greek poets of old a run for their drachmas. Appealing to the muses, incorporating language of poetry contests, and even implying that his work will be the proverbial swan song, he shares with the audience precisely what he stands to gain if his poem succeeds. He pretends to invoke the muse of epic poetry for assistance in concluding Book VI, pleading, “Calliope, point out for me as I run / my course the white chalk finish line, skilled / Muse that you are...so that with you leading I might win the crown with glorious praise” (VI.92-95). Lucretius uses this convention of the epic to emphasize his own poetic ability. Since he bundles the muses with the gods, it is unlikely that he incorporates these invocations as anything more than a literary device. Therefore, every supplication of the muse

functions as a way to accentuate the arduousness of his task—what an incredible poet he must be that he has somehow managed to rise to the occasion! The author’s ambition also colors the end of Book I. Praising the the novelty of his project, he boasts: “it is a joy to pick new flowers / and to seek a preeminent crown for my head from that place / when the Muses had wreathed the temples of no one before” (IV.3-5). Lucretius repeatedly brags about being the first Roman to properly write a philosophical poem, i.e. an Epicurean poem. For sheer innovation alone—as if he really is competing against all of Rome in a dionysian style poetry competition—he deserves to “win the crown with glorious praise.”

The almost-award-winning poet shows versatility in his range of figurative language by festooning the middle books of his poem with a swan motif. Yielding again to his propensity for repetition, Lucretius twice compares the message he wishes to “relate in verses more sweetly spoken than they are many, / [to] the brief song of the swan...[an effort] better than that clamor / of cranes which is scattered on the ethereal clouds of the south wind” (IV.180 & 910). He earlier describes Epicurus as the swan that he desires to imitate, though he cannot possibly compete with him (III.5-7). Then, he again refers to the “swans from the twisting valleys of Mt. Helicon,” appropriately, in an explanation of how one hears (IV.546). These repetitious references call attention to Lucretius’ poetic endeavour as a swan song—the beautiful melody of the bird just prior to its passing. In this way, it could be both a means of softening the blow of death—further sugar coating for his “death is nothing to us” argument—and also a way of acknowledging this letter to Memmius as his final (and only) philosophical song. And what a song it is! Far nicer than anything his contemporaries, those clamoring cranes, could hope to produce.

Lucretius describes his own poetry as deceptive, comparing himself to a doctor that tricks unsuspecting children into drinking medicine so as to improve their health (I.935-942). The poet's now questionable agenda makes one wonder whether his use of verse has been a healthy deception or an insidious ploy for personal gain. When revisiting Lucretius' assurance of Memmius—that “it is [his] excellence and the pleasure of [his] friendship / [he hopes] to have with [him] that urges [Lucretius] to undergo hardship”—readers must roll their eyes in disbelief (I.140). Though ridiculous to imagine that he would compose such an elaborate poem without the intention of spreading Epicureanism in an attempt to improve the lives of his fellow Romans, his pride surrounding the genre darkens his self-confessed deception. The success of his project provides his message with a greater platform, but also provides him greater repute.

As if one did not have reason enough to suspect Lucretius' motivation, an apparent conflict between his poetry and the philosophy that he claims to be interpreting contributes fodder to our growing fire of discontent. From this initial disagreement a smattering of contradictions emerge that all influence our perception of the poet's intentions—one must decide whether we are studying a hero or a hypocrite.

One can trace the discord back to a piece of advice from him who first exposed the inner-workings of nature. “Only the wise man will be able to converse correctly about music and poetry,” reports Diogenes Laertius as the advice of Epicurus on the conduct of life in his *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, “without however actually writing poems himself” (X.120). Only the wise man can speak correctly about the arts, but would a good Epicurean dare dabble in verse? Just as Epicurus believes the philosopher would do well to avoid delivering “fine speeches” and composing panegyrics, so he ought to steer clear of the foul poison of the muses (X.118 & 120).

This is not to say that one cannot write to preserve one's name in time—"the wise man] will leave written words behind him...and he will make money, but only by his wisdom" (X.120).

While Lucretius might interpret such sentiments as justification for seeking fame for his craft, he defies his teacher by doing so in verse. This collision of ideals between poet and philosopher manifests as subtle contradictions that spring up from the text like atoms swerving from a unified path.

Prior to revealing his poetic mission at the end of the first Book, Lucretius critiques the philosophies of Epicurus' contemporaries. He derides Heraclitus and his writing style, complaining that "stupid people find more impressive and attractive / all things that they see hidden beneath twisted words, / and they judge those things true which can caress / their ears prettily and which are colored with delightful sound" (I.641-644). Suspending our knowledge that this passage pertains to aphorisms rather than poetry, something very similar could be said of the poet's own style. Would not verse be even more effective for enticing the mob? Either he is boldly lumping his own readers with those "stupid people" seduced by Heraclitus' pretty words, or he is guilty of hypocrisy. Probably founded in a little of both, Lucretius' misstep proves a sign of caution for the wary reader; poetry might not complement Epicureanism as nicely as we were once led to believe.

A further complication arises concerning the intended place of art in Epicurus' conception of pleasure, a topic Lucretius broaches during his retelling of the origin of poetry. He credits the invention of music to early humans imitating bird calls and increased development of rhyme and rhythm to the lighthearted play of a primitive "woodland race of earth-born people" (V.1379-1381). Somewhere in between this epoch of the carefree folk and the rise of the modern

man, an unfortunate shift takes place: humanity is ravished by an unquenchable thirst for innovation. Just as the lover goes through others, incapable of finding in them the satisfaction he desperately needs, so society thirsts for new pleasure, leaving the old in its wake. We replace piles of leaves and twigs with beds of linen, and animal skins with finely embroidered robes (V.1416-1429). The rise of materialism (not atomism in this instance, but obsession with material possessions) culminates in the throwing of human life “into the abyss...[which sets] in motion from below the great tides of war” (V.1435). This greedy turmoil only heightens our need for arms, laws and roads, but also art, songs, sculpture and poetry. Through his history lesson, Lucretius draws a contrast between the written poetry used to “hand down mighty deeds” of men in the later era and the bird-chirping, reed-piping festival music of yore. Epicurus looks upon the constant unrest in humanity caused by the pursuit of novelty with sorrowful eyes.

Untrusting of innovation, Epicurus views poetry as a frivolity. Amidst his storytelling, Lucretius hearkens back to the ethical doctrine of the Epicureans, elaborating that “the human race toils purposelessly and in vain / forever and consumes its lifetime in empty cares, / doubtless since it does not know what the limit of possessing things is, / and in general how far true pleasure increases” (V.1430-1433). Absence from bodily pain—and the *ataraxia* that such a state creates—constitutes true pleasure. The false images of the lover, the wealth of the miser, the rising in ranks of the public official, the fine clothing of the shallow sophisticate, the fame-seeking of the delusional poet, these are not the pursuits of true pleasure so says Epicurus. These achievements will flow through their porous cups, so humans must limit their desires of them. Though not a “possession” in the traditional sense, poetry shares a common property with all of the listed false delights: it can draw one’s interest away from the highest good. Is writing in

verse when prose would suffice then any different from clothing oneself in gold and purple silks when animal hides provide the same level of comfort? To a mind untouched by the values of Epicurean philosophy, the answer is likely ‘yeah, they are pretty different.’ For Epicurus, the philosopher who shuns love, society and the gods because they can potentially cause distress, his response very well could be ‘no.’ Due to beliefs about pleasure, he condemns writing poetically what one could convey through plain language.

The reader feels conflicted when Lucretius’ tone becomes uncharacteristically bright in the conclusion of his history lesson. Overlooking the hesitations of the philosopher, the poet appears to find comfort in creative aspects of human progress. Describing the steady rational development of the spirit over the ages, he explains that “time gradually brings everything into sight / and reason lifts [humanity] onto the shores of light. / For [humans] saw one thing after another become clear in their minds / until they reached the highest pinnacle of the arts” (V.1454-1457). Lucretius, unapologetic braggart that he is, likely means to suggest that his philosophical poem is the “highest pinnacle of the arts.” He has to laud the poets—he sees himself as the greatest of them. The things which reason makes “clear in their minds” after stepping “onto the shores of light” are then a reference to the teachings of Epicurus.² In this way, he derives some good from the urge for unceasing acquisition which naturally accompanies modernization. The quest for innovation which created war simultaneously brought mankind to its peak intellectual capacity realized through Epicureanism and *De Rerum Natura*.

² Imagery of both the shores and light of reason are used in a parallel passage from Book V framing Epicurus as the human described: “He was a god, a god, illustrious Memmius, who was the first one to discover this system of life which now is called wisdom...[and] rescued life from such great waves and such great darkness and situated it in such calm waters and such clear light” (8-12).

Despite Lucretius' brief, self-serving defense of poetry at the close of Book V, prior statements rule out the authenticity of his endorsement. He does not value further cultivation of intellect which, in his own story, accompanies the epic poem. In fact, he repeatedly cuts down the "wonder" associated with philosophizing. "There is nothing so great or so wondrous," he asserts while justifying the bitterness felt by an individual new to Epicureanism, "that little by little all do not decrease their wonder at all" (II.1028-1029). Once one accepts Epicurus' physical doctrine as truth, one need no longer contemplate existential mysteries. Lucretius rejects wonder over and over again throughout the central books and even paints it as menacing in the final leg of his poem. He warns that, "for those who have learned well that the gods live a tranquil life, if still at times they wonder in what way / things can take place...[they] are brought back again to their ancient religious beliefs" (VI.58-62). He discourages further poking around because of the potential threat it poses—one could stumble back into the clutches of "haughty masters." Epicurus, sailing boldly to the shores of reason, has illuminated all one needs to know of existence. Weaving this knowledge into verse, Lucretius has already attained the pinnacle of the arts. Regardless of what he tells the reader at the end of the fifth book, he not only devalues philosophizing in general and presumably poetry written after his own but finds it potentially harmful. To pose the question, this time with certainty in its foundation: if the beliefs he has adopted are inherently anti-poetic, why does Lucretius insist on writing an epic? Because of his message and good intentions, he deems himself a noble exception to Epicurus' rule.

Lucretius must go against the values of his only god for the sake of selling his philosophy. As evinced by his treatment of the followers of Heraclitus, he knows how to shape a system of beliefs so as to have it appeal to the common man. Make something that sounds nice,

however impractical it might be, and someone is bound to agree with it! Are his values heroic or contradictory—is he a poetic martyr or a greedy egoist? This portion of our investigation has led us down a path of judgement fixed upon the poet (much to Tutor Zepeda’s delight) more than his rhetorical method. A salvageable observation we might pull from the slanderous wreckage behind us is a more nuanced understanding of Lucretius’ own attitude towards his poetry. While he takes pride in what he is creating, he also appreciates the danger of the weapon he wields. It is not his sound logos, but poetry’s inexplicable tie to emotion that will ultimately capture the minds of the masses.

Understanding Lucretius’ rhetorical project as an act of artistic rebellion brings to light a previously undivulged justification for his use of verse. He recognizes poetry’s capacity to communicate with its listeners on a plane that pedantic, philosophical prose cannot, a virtue that makes it a potential counterforce to the pathos of religion. In the religious practices of his time, he perceives an ability to unconsciously sculpt the thoughts of followers through one of their passions, namely fear. Citing the common practice of augury and the influence it has on the public, he scolds Memmius warning that “even [he] today...will be overcome / by the fearful words of seers and try to desert us. / Why not, since so many are the dreams they can now / invent for you...and throw all of your fortunes into complete confusion with fear!” (I.102-106). As previously noted, Lucretius extends accusations like this one to all facets of religion. He asserts that men began to worship the gods because “they sought refuge for themselves in attributing everything / to [them],” and that their faith now feeds off “fear...[which insinuates] itself / into their hearts, [and] throughout the world keeps holy / the shrines, lakes, groves, altars, and the images of gods” (VI.54-55 & V.73-75). The grip that belief has on the emotions hardly

weakens when countered with rational argumentation alone. Although Lucretius builds up Epicurus' system through series of examples and insists that if he relies upon "true reason," the reader "will learn these things, led by little effort. / For one thing will be clarified by another," the evidence in support of Epicureanism is not strong enough to convert the whole of the quarrelling republic, or even Memmius, it seems, unaided (I.1114-1115). Instead, as religion engages with people on an emotional level, so can "songs soothe [the] mind and [give] delight" to their listeners, slipping through the cracks in their rational armor (V.1390).

When humanity is pushed to its physical and emotional limits, Lucretius claims that faith can only go so far. During the plague of Athens, when a quarter of the capital's citizens perished, devotion to the gods dwindled. No "longer was [there] reverence of the gods or their divinity / of much worth: the present grief was completely overwhelming" (VI.1276-1277). Ceaseless suffering on a widespread scale had the Greeks doubting the existence of their deities. As it was shown that poetry and religion work in a similar way upon the mind, one wonders if song can still function after exposure to severe agony in a way that Greek belief could not.

At the close of Book VI, Lucretius serves us our bitter medicine—this time strong enough that no amount of honey could conceal it. He devotes a little under one hundred lines to a gratuitous description of the symptoms of the plague from contraction to death—gruesome images of suffering and putrid decay. The depiction of physical pain pales in comparison to the following scenes of mental anguish that permeate Athens like a fog. This final passage, which is gut-wrenching despite the author's cavalier treatment, feels both anticlimactic and antipoetic. How could one consider the fear-induced amputation of infected limbs, the sight of the diseased corpses strewn about the street repelling even scavenging animals, the confused squabbling of

grief-ridden relatives as they ruthlessly tug and shove at the dead atop a funeral pyre as “[touched] with the sweet honey of the Muses?” In short, how can the poem’s conclusion possibly fit the author’s professed rhetorical method? Though still writing in verse, Lucretius seems to draw back the curtain of deception at the end of his poem, leaving the reader faced with a grave decision.

Structurally, the poet’s choice is defensible. Four of the work’s six books end with a reference to the mortality of all things. Book III, the chapter that marks the end of the first half of the poem and houses a description of the material soul, closes with a 300-line assault on societal thanatophobia; it relies rhetorically upon rapid fire insults in the voice of Nature herself. These minor scenes of destruction build up to the poem’s grim conclusion. Just as we witnessed a striking scene of creation in the opening of the first Book, so we must endure a graphic scene of death at the close of the last. Just as the poem had to end, so did Homer, so Epicurus, so I and you. Lucretius may have included this vignette and the numerous others like it as a way to accustom the reader to the topic of death, a last attempt to remove fear of the subject through familiarity. Or, perhaps he had a more complex objective in mind as he composed this final passage.

The plague of Athens is not just a death scene with shocking scope--no, it is a scene of widespread death by disease. The perfect end to the extended metaphor of doctor and ailing child that prompts Lucretius’ use of verse, the plague presents different sides of illness: the physical and the psychological. Though they are closely tied, as one will recall from our earlier foray into Epicurean physics, the symptoms linked to the latter are what Lucretius attempts to treat with a

hefty dose of Epicureanism. Describing an instance of infection, he emphasizes the toll that mental anguish takes on victims in their quick-approaching demise:

“When the force of the disease traveled through the throat and filled / the chest,
 flowing right into the grieving heart [or mind] of the sick, / then truly all the
 barricades of life were collapsing...straightaway the strength of the whole mind
 and all / the body languished, then at the very threshold of death. To these evils,
 impossible to bear, anxious anguish / and wailing intermingled with groans were
 constant comrades.” (VI.1151-1159)

Here it is not the disturbing bodily afflictions (as we understand them) that generate the worst pain, but the infected individual's heart, poisoned by utter hopelessness. Lucretius goes on to describe this as “the rational faculty of the mind [being] perturbed by grief and fear,” which even causes some to mutilate themselves to add but a few days more to their torturous lives (VI.1183). Throughout his poem, Lucretius has diagnosed the early symptoms of a similar illness in all of his readers. One will recall the many passages on the fear of death and of the gods. If he has selected this event for his rhetorical finale because it harmonizes with the theme initiated by the honey-wormwood analogy, how is an audience member (as the infected child) meant to feel while observing it?

The poet provides us with an example of how a true Epicurean would react to this scene of suffering. At the beginning of Book II, Lucretius revels in the drowning of shipwreck victims. He proclaims: “sweet it is...to gaze from the land upon the great struggles of another, / not because it is a delightful pleasure for anyone to be distressed, / but because it is sweet to observe those evils which you lack yourself” (II.1-4). Bad news, this shipwreck is life and those struggling

to keep their heads above the surf are the fools that did not heed the teachings of Epicurus. The only way one can drag oneself out from the crashing waves of worry is to make oneself numb to fear and grief, like the gods in quiet Olympus who gaze upon the plight of man with indifference. Using the Athenian plague as a sort of first trial for his audience, Lucretius now gives us the opportunity to “look down upon others [from our enlightened sanctuary] and see them lose / their way” (II.9-10). Adopting his feeling of condescending pity as he cries out “O wretched minds of men, o blind hearts!” to us drowning convalescents, we now are meant to reflect on the scene of the plague not only with heavy-hearted self-recognition, but inklings of reform (II.14). The doctor has raised us to his station. We can identify and separate ourselves from needless grief and fear. But, as we still ache for those lost in pestilence-wrought confusion, so has he gazed upon a sorry sea of suffering to which he now extends a charitable offering—a poem.

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