

## LUCRETIUS' PROGRESSIVE REVELATION OF NATURE IN *DRN* 1.149–502

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THE MOST CONTROVERSIAL PASSAGE of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* is undoubtedly that which opens it. The first 148 verses of Book 1 provide a formal introduction to the topics, the genre, and the very reason for his poem, but the combination is uniquely heterogeneous and unexpected, whether in a Republican didactic poet or in an Epicurean disciple. Lucretius' prayer to Venus would seem incompatible with his subsequent revelation that the gods are indifferent to human concerns, and he attacks the terrors of *religio* with greater urgency and vehemence than Epicurus ever had. The Proem used to be adduced as evidence of mental instability, or of dissatisfaction with Epicurean materialism; still others saw the Epicureanism as merely a pretext for inspiring entertaining poetry.<sup>1</sup> Scholars more sympathetic to Lucretius' Epicurean mission have increasingly accepted a more functional reading: in 1–43, the poet seduces the non-Epicurean reader with the erotic imagery of Venus and then Mars, while at 44–148 the abruptly Epicurean discourse encourages a more perceptive reader to revisit the Hymn for philosophical symbolism.<sup>2</sup>

What the divergent readings have in common is that they isolate 1.1–148 as qualitatively distinct from the argumentation that follows—"purple passage" for some, philosophical allegory for others. We come to expect such an episodic and uneven presentation in an eclectic didactic poet like Vergil or Horace, but it requires fuller explanation in a poet who "treads in the footsteps" of Epicurus. Volk (2002) has recently provided a welcome re-evaluation of the genre markers of didactic poetry, and her chapter on Lucretius (despite her stated misgivings as to intentional fallacy) demonstrates once and for all how important it was for the poet to set up a productive relationship with the Roman reader, construed as a possible but distrustful Epicurean convert. Epicureans were notoriously distrustful of both the emotional appeal and the communicative ambiguities of Homer's epic in particular, and they accused mythographers of contributing to humanity's insecurities and ignorance.<sup>3</sup> As Philodemus shows in his works on rhetoric, on

<sup>1</sup> Although Anglo-American scholars appear more skeptical both of Jerome's biography and of Patin's *anti-Lucrèce* than their European counterparts, a widespread view remains that Lucretius' priorities are literary rather than philosophical: Kenney (1970) presents the work firmly within the genre of Hesiodic epic, analogous to Vergil's *Georgics*, as does Donahue (1993), who suggests that Lucretius' main inspiration was Callimachus; West (1994) sees no other aim to Lucretius' imagery than aesthetic.

<sup>2</sup> See Elder 1954 in particular for the hedonistic aspects of Venus, and Sedley 1998 for the most comprehensive survey of "Empedoclean" readings of the Proem.

<sup>3</sup> For the evidence, see Obbink 1995: 15–34. Epicurus distinguished between enjoyment and education when it came to poetry. It is a telling indication of Lucretius' own orthodoxy that he attacks

Homer, on poetics, and indeed in his own poems, contemporary Epicureans were more prepared to speculate on the indirect or incidental usefulness of poetry. But Book 5 of *On Poems* (17.20–24) provides the limits of such speculations, claiming that poetry which is equally entertaining and instructive is impossible, for no human has ever had a “preconception” of it: οὐ γεγραφότος τινὸς τῶν ποιητῶν τ[οι]αύτας περιέχοντ[α] [ποι]ήματα διανοίας [οὔ]τ’ ἂν γράψοντος (“for none of the poets has ever written poems containing such thoughts, nor would any ever write”).<sup>4</sup>

It has been often assumed, especially since Classen 1968, that Lucretius is faithful to the message but not the techniques of Epicurus; I intend to make a stronger case for Lucretius’ orthodox didacticism, by unifying the strategy of the Proem and first arguments. Formally, the Proem does indeed yield at line 149 to a more discursive and “scientific” exposition of atomistic theory, the “philosophical armature” which Clay (1983) treats as a separate chapter. But I suggest that by reading 149–502 as an extension of the Proem, we may appreciate even further the complexity of Lucretius’ project of affective manipulation.

Although since Amory 1969 scholars have agreed that every verse both *docet* and *delectat*, they make this case for sound effects, for rhetorical tropes, and for cross-references. Consensus is that Lucretius is teaching two or three lessons at once, always to the same curious but inexperienced reader—except in the Hymn to Venus, where it has become increasingly accepted that *voluptas* means “sexual gratification” to a non-Epicurean reader but “natural pleasure” to the Epicurean.<sup>5</sup> How do we move from one translation to the other? As the poem progresses, Lucretius teaches the non-Epicurean to reinterpret by offering two basic contrasts, one of doctrine (unquenchable lust vs. controlled passion for the sake of reproduction), the other of metaphor (creative Venus vs. emasculating Venus at the end of Book 4). But the poet himself does not explicitly resolve either contrast, for *haec Venus est nobis* (4.1058) is left as a contradiction for the reader to explain.<sup>6</sup>

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not Ennius but Epicurus’ own enemies, *veteres Graium poetae* at 2.600 and 5.405, for myths on divine nemesis.

<sup>4</sup>Recent re-evaluations in Obbink 1995 of the papyrus fragments of Philodemus have drawn attention to the incidental ethical utility that could be found in Homer and the tragedians. Asmis’s essay in particular (Obbink 1995: 15–34) has suggested that a philosophical poem would be compatible with Philodemus’ claim in *On Poems* that the literary worth of a poem depends to some extent on the ethical value of its content. The problem is simply that he does not state the expected conclusion. Indeed, his fifth book *On Poems* is structured in overwhelmingly negative terms, even more than in his other extant fragments; it is unclear what Philodemus has to offer in place of his critics, other than poetry which “in style imitates that which teaches what is beneficial” and “in thought participates half-way between that of the wise and that of the ignorant” (25.34–26.7).

<sup>5</sup>Gale (1994: 208–228) surveys recent interpretations of the “intentional polyvalency” of the Proem; she integrates most of them into an Epicurean amalgam of pleasure. By the end of the poem the reader can better understand Venus and Mars as initiating many of the different kinds of tensions explored throughout the poem; by then all of their powers will have been “redistributed” to Epicurus and Nature, who deserve the same attention as mythological protagonists.

<sup>6</sup>Brown 1987: 200: “this is all that our revered goddess of love amounts to.” Venus is named twenty-one times in the diatribe against lust that concludes Book 4, clearly setting up a revision of the

Scholars have generally assumed that Lucretius' rational arguments suffice, noting how frequently he appeals to *ratio* in accepting truths that are admittedly difficult to swallow (e.g., Minadeo 1969: 106–112; Gale 1994: 139–155). And yet, Lucretius' positive counterexamples, far from embellishing "the natural goal," tend to include details which not only a Roman would find disturbing: the insensitivity toward an "excellent wife and sweet children" (3.894–903) or especially the "ugly little wife" who provides our only choiceworthy pleasure at the end of Book 4.<sup>7</sup> No wonder Roman novices find the message *tristior* (1.944 = 4.19); how exactly does Lucretius use poetry to "sweeten" it?

I submit that Lucretius' variations of hymn, tragedy, and diatribe enable the reader to feel how the one correct interpretation leads to a lasting form of pleasure, whereas any alternative leads to pain. Juxtapositions of creation and destruction have a more graphic and far-reaching effect in the poem than illustration of Empedocles' natural cycle: they enlighten the reader by evoking self-centered pride, unmasking the fear that underlies it, and then directing him toward a more appropriate desire. In this light, the Proem is structured as a series of emotional tests: is Epicurus a hero because he is a Roman *dux*, or because he brought back in triumph the limits of human *potestas* (62–79)? Do the tributes to "eternal" Ennius and "ever-flowering" Homer offer the promise of immortality, or are they just perpetuated by the "terrifying words of priests" (103–126)? Such emotionally heterogeneous passages prepare the reader for a "second syllabus" (127–148). This third level demands a higher degree of attention and participation, in return for which the poet promises to explain why Homer's ghost and religion's "horrifying head" (63–64) are not worth caring about.<sup>8</sup>

Such a complex reading is readily granted to the Proem. I wish to extend it to Lucretius' ensuing verses on life and death, atoms and compounds, visible and invisible. 1.149–502 will thus serve both as an introduction to, and as the clearest example of, Lucretius' pedagogy in the remaining six books. This passage on the

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Proem. The reader can still celebrate Venus as a metonymy for Spring as late as 5.740, but by now it is clear that behind the myth the reality of Venus involves movements of atoms.

<sup>7</sup>Brown (1987) emphasizes that in the end love remains a positive force of generation, compatible with Epicurean ethics, as long as it does not degenerate into the obsessive lust exemplified in both epic and love-poetry; the conclusion is therefore a rhetorical illustration of a human relationship stripped of divine connotations. This acknowledges the reader's discomfort with such an ending more effectively than either Nussbaum's suggestion (1994: 186) that it endorses the more mundane and informal requirements of a successful marriage, or Dalzell's (1982: 215) that on the contrary Lucretius' satire here shows his own distaste for the Epicurean message.

<sup>8</sup>The most controversial verses are on divine *ataraxia* (1.44–49). Schrijvers (1970: 189–191) persuasively suggests that the main focus is the appeal to Mars: since Mars cannot hear him, he must hope that Venus can mediate as *hominum divumque voluptas*. By the end of the poem, the reader learns that this refers to the pleasure that defines Epicurean gods, and to which humans should aspire. See *contra* Gale 1994: 216–217. Regardless of whether these verses are a spurious interpolation, though, the overall impression remains that the introduction to the Proem is systematically undermined: see Clay 1983: 95–99 and Thury 1987: 290–292 for more detail on the "rearrangement" of the Proem.

surface fulfills the promise of physical knowledge in the first syllabus (50–61), but emotionally, it arouses, confronts, and resolves the *terrorem animi* (146) which for Epicureans is the whole point of scientific research in the first place. The pressing question is not “what is the universe made of?” but rather “what is it to us?” As in the Proem, Lucretius disguises his answer, subtly portraying *Natura* as alternately Providence, Enemy, and physics; in so doing, the poet examines three different accounts of the relationship between humans and the natural world. From the perspective of Epicurus’ discoveries, would Nature like, dislike, or ignore us? Should we feel relieved, dejected—or undisturbed? Various passages from the *De Rerum Natura* seem to support all three of these responses, but the Epicurean alone is able to select one “appropriate” to our nature (Diog. Laert. 10.34.8: οἰκείαν).

I thus wish to reapply the conclusions of scholars who have examined the recurrence of jarring contrasts in the poem, starting with Anderson (1960).<sup>9</sup> The more formalist aspects of his reading should be grounded in the philosophical context supplied by Schrijvers (1970) and Clay (1983), together arguably the most influential (certainly the most cited) cornerstones of modern Lucretian scholarship, insofar as they reinterpreted the poem through Epicurean theories of knowledge and education. Both Epicurus and Lucretius would thus advocate a form of instruction that appeals to conscious and subconscious; the disciple is made to experience first comfort, then disorientation, before achieving self-control.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Anderson (1960) first suggested that it was up to the reader to note that key images are depicted as “positive,” “negative,” or “neutral” when referring respectively to Epicureans, to humans, and to the universe; Minadeo (1969) responded that there was no need to resolve the contrasts, intended to replicate Empedocles’ cyclical alternation of life and death.

Anderson’s blueprint is sound, but his rationalistic solution leaves too much to the reader’s calculations: the budding disciple is supposed to learn the lesson by giving greater prominence to the passages associating Epicurus himself with light, victory, and successful navigation, but how can he forget the rest? Minadeo assumes that by accepting that creation is always bound to follow destruction, the disciple inevitably will submit to the natural process (see esp. 110). Although Minadeo recognizes the need to appeal to the subconscious, he does not account for the importance of the “journey” motif towards an ever more detailed self-awareness both in Epicurus and Lucretius: clearly some progress must take place within the poem.

These two works pioneered a number of specific studies of constructive contrasts: Jope (1989) has unrified the “emotional strategy” (19) of Lucretius’ explanations of natural phenomena in Book 6, which seem at first terrifying but then neutral; Nussbaum (1994: 140–191), has followed Brown’s (1987) lead in showing that the decline of love into lust in Book 4 gradually strips Venus of artificial additions by love-poets; Segal (1990) has explained how Lucretius heals the fear of death by depicting death as repulsive and then attractive. Thury (1987) suggests with only a few examples that Lucretius teaches by alternating “different perspectives,” one blurred as if from a distance, the other up close and reliable. But nobody has emulated Anderson’s scope, contrasting value-laden terms in the entire poem.

<sup>10</sup> Schrijvers (1970) was so controversial in his application of Epicurean theory of perception to the graphic imagery of the poem that at least three full-length articles soon appeared primarily to criticize it, including Thury 1987. Nevertheless, he was arguably the first to distinguish different levels of education *per falsa ad vera* in the poem, founded on “basic metaphors” within “explicit,”

Gale (1994) and Volk (2002) have persuasively taken the protreptic step of this process further; in different ways they demolish any lingering reservations about Lucretius' manipulation of his reader, and they show the aggressive confidence with which he takes his role as teacher.

And yet, when the stakes are so high, even this all seems to leave too much up to the reader. See, for example, Volk 2002: 99: "without ever fully noticing how we arrived at this conclusion in the first place, we may come away from the *De Rerum Natura* thinking that a poem about physics is not *ab nulla ratione*." In fact, Gale (1994: 155) complains that Lucretius should have made the reader's choice clearer: "whether it is in fact possible to . . . prevent [the reader] from following the charms of Venus, rather than accepting her replacement by the ultimately impersonal *natura*, is open to question." I suggest that while Lucretius does indeed appeal to the subconscious in the many different ways shown by these scholars, he also wants the reader at a later stage to recognize consciously each step of the process. Epicureans may have marketed the more "common sense" aspects of their message to attract new disciples, but the more advanced stages of philosophical inquiry were increasingly cerebral. It is true that the highest pleasure consists in the removal of pain, for which a simple reassurance may suffice (*RS* 3, 18). But against their opponents' taunts of shallowness, Epicurus and his followers respond that the path to wisdom requires constant reflection and gradual improvement, as students learn to choose between pleasures and pains Fortune throws their way.<sup>11</sup> Although excessive amounts of alcohol provide immediate gratification, only the superior pain of a hangover can convince the student to focus instead on the "natural" pleasure of quenching the body's thirst. Accordingly, I shall examine within Lucretius' text the same "hedonistic calculus," as he evokes in different readers different mental images and emotional responses. The interpretation of each term is a gauge of philosophical preparation, and it is the resulting emotion as a "criterion of truth" that signals whether the reader has internalized the argument.<sup>12</sup>

A reader-response interpretation can make sense of the elitism which distinguishes so much of Late Republican poetry. Horace's *Satires* begin with three diatribe poems, whose very vehemence and incompetence deliberately sabotage

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"implicit," and "physiological" aspects of Lucretian poetics. Clay (1983) has been most influential in demonstrating the subconscious levels of Epicurean instruction, clarifying the insistence on repetition and memorization in the Epicurean tradition.

<sup>11</sup> Epicurus himself wrote only in vague terms of constant progress towards greater "precision" (*Ep. Hdt.* 36.3: ἀκριβέστα), by means of "sober reasoning" (*Ep. Men.* 132.3: νήφων λογισμός). But Philodemus more explicitly applies the hedonistic calculus to pedagogy: in both *On Anger* and *On Frankness*, he advises weighing up a student's resistance before adopting "biting" anger as a last resort.

<sup>12</sup> For the potential value of feelings in Epicurean epistemology, see Asmis 1984: 167–171; the primary sources are generally terse and ambiguous, but they do imply that our "affects" provide us with reliable information about our own reactions to external stimuli.

the narrator's authority.<sup>13</sup> Shortly afterwards, the familiar Augustan *recusatio* reveals lyric poets challenging epic by incorporating and distorting it, consciously lowering their own standards in the process.<sup>14</sup> In the wake of narratological studies of Vergil's *Aeneid*, Stephen Wheeler has recently encouraged us to distrust the authorial voice in epic even further; he has more extensively applied modern reader-response theory to the entire project of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, showing that the poem distinguishes between the limited perspective of a listening audience and the hindsight of a reading audience.<sup>15</sup> In some sense Lucretius' contemporaries had all learned from developments in Roman public speaking to look for different *personae* in their literature. What is distinctive about Lucretius is his evangelical appeal: he is more explicitly concerned with changing his reader, not with excluding or including him.

A "first reader," directed through the Hymn to Venus, scrolls through the poem as Ennian epic, interpreting Lucretius' poetry through traditional Roman values—indeed through the constant apostrophes to the politically involved Memmius (1.42–43). This is after all the primary audience whom Lucretius appears to envision at 1.943–947 (= 4.18–22), whose ignorance prompts the crisis mentioned at 1.29–43. But as soon as the poet replaces Venus with *natura* at 1.56, the "wormwood" of the doctrine first emerges, as well as the first challenge: unlike Venus, nature is destructive too. Any reader who mourns for all victims of "natural laws" is liable to succumb to *religio* and despair (paradigms of which may be, e.g., the impoverished farmers at 2.1164–74 or the shipwrecked commander at 5.1226–35). But in order to move beyond a vicious cycle of fear, temporary relief, and enslavement (see 5.1180–92), such a reader can become an "expert reader"—not by recourse to a lifetime of studies and reflection—but simply by applying a panoptic view of parallels and contrasts in language and imagery between different sections of the poem. This reader is not more advanced because of previous exposure to Epicureanism (indeed, there is very little in the *De Rerum Natura* that needs to be explained by external Epicurean sources), but rather because he has finished the poem. By taking stock of teachings Lucretius does

<sup>13</sup> See Freudenberg 2001: 15–23. McNeill (2001) furthermore recovers from Horace's text consistent appeals to at least five different audiences: the poet employs "created self-images in order to shape the perceptions of those around him," and aspires to "total control and constant manipulation of these same audiences" (7).

<sup>14</sup> Davis 1991 remains the classic study on Horace's *Odes* as unified by the definition of their genre in opposition to epic and elegy, each in turn sampled and marginalized (see esp. 36–39).

<sup>15</sup> See Wheeler 1999: 66–93. His distinction between "narratorial" and "actual" audience recalls Lucretius' Memmius (as outlined by Mitsis [1993]). But his further separation of "reading" from "listening" audiences is more relevant to Lucretius' poem: "the narratorial audience hears the poem 'for the first time' in temporal sequence, having no foreknowledge of how the narrative will turn out. It does not encounter the poem as a fixed text, but as a flow of words, images, characters, and scenes. The implied audience, on the other hand, is not limited to the time-flow of the poet's performance. It can approach the *Metamorphoses* as a written work and has the luxury of rereading" (86–87).

not ever contradict, this reader understands that the figures for whom he felt sympathy are all victims not of their environment as they imagine, but rather of their own ignorance. Kinship with other Romans is replaced by a much more durable, reliable, and pleasurable affinity with the natural world.

Lucretius warns repeatedly that an anthropocentric philosophy can only lead to disappointment, but words do not suffice: the reader must feel this disappointment in order to find the incentive to look for pleasure elsewhere. Only such a reader can overcome perhaps the biggest test of all by the end of the poem; once this reader has tempered his pity for humanity with his admiration for the natural order, he has no further need for reassurance from the poet, for he understands that the Plague of Athens is terrifying only to uninitiates.<sup>16</sup> And even though evidence from silence would suggest that Lucretius had no contact with other Epicureans in Italy, there is a possibility that an "Epicurean reader" may be envisaged, given his preoccupation with poetry as a medium. After all, this disciple is in a position to supplement Lucretius' physics with the School's ethical doctrines, and thus to indulge in the kind of pleasure which does not interfere with the quest for *ataraxia*. As a result, there is something in the *De Rerum Natura* for everyone: even though Lucretius expressly appeals to the beginner, more advanced re-readers will derive benefit from observing at a distance various misinterpretations of Nature, "for it is pleasant to view evils from which you yourself are free" (2.4: *quibus ipse malis careas quia cernere suave est*).<sup>17</sup>

Epicurus himself had justified the style of his *Letters* as appealing to disciples of varying levels of proficiency. His compendium *To Herodotus* is first of all "for those who are unable to examine in detail" his more advanced works *περὶ φύσεως* (35.1–2: τοῖς μὴ δυνάμενοις . . . ἐξακριβοῦν); but it will also prove a

<sup>16</sup> Although it is often felt that the ending is due to either aesthetic balance or lack of revision (see most recently Volk 2002: 82, n. 41), any approach that acknowledges Lucretius' philosophical mission must accept that this final illustration of misery and ignorance provides a test. Only traditional readers will identify with the Athenians' tragic plight, as they may have done in reading Thucydides; proficient readers will see it as a cautionary tale, that the Athenians were responsible for their own social breakdown. Thus Clay 1983: 266; Gale 1994: 228; Schiesaro 1994: 102–103.

<sup>17</sup> As Jope (1983), Segal (1990), and Nussbaum (1994) have shown, Lucretius' pedagogical strategy resembles modern psychoanalysis in its displacement of a subject's emotions for the purpose of objective confrontation. Supported by Epicurean doctrine, the *De Rerum Natura* achieves meaning once its readers engage in critical self-observation of their reactions. The comparative value judgments ascribed to these emotions, however, recall more strongly Stanley Fish's original "ideal informed reader," whose panoptic circuit of the poem makes the text relevant (1980: 48–49). For Fish as for Lucretius, meaning is produced "when the readers become literary critics" (5), and, more specifically, when such a reader has a "vision" of what the text "does" to him or her, rather than what it "says."

Wolfgang Iser presents a text in terms of different perspectives which the reader gradually clarifies and unifies, foregrounding elements from the background and vice-versa; Lucretius' shifting presentations of *natura* parallel Iser's version of the reader's "wandering viewpoint" (1978: 108–118). Even though Lucretius asserts more control over his text's reception than these theorists have in mind, the *De Rerum Natura* undoubtedly responds to Iser's ideal of a literary work which "disturbs" its readers, rewriting their cultural codes even while their interpretation is being imposed upon the text.

useful reminder to those “who have sufficiently progressed in their overview of the whole” (35.7–8: τοὺς προβεβηκότας δὲ ἱκανῶς ἐν τῇ τῶν ὅλων ἐπιβλήψει), and it would not hurt “one who has made it to the end” either (36.5–6: τῷ τετελεσιουργημένῳ).<sup>18</sup> Philodemus’ works *On Anger* and *On Frankness* confirm that Epicureans followed Aristotle in instructing through judicious alternation of praise and criticism. In fact, Epicurus himself refers to “the admonishing method” (τῷ νοθετητικῷ τρόπῳ) as a way to modify the atomic composition of the soul of domesticated animals (*On Nature* [34.25].22–24); the anti-determinist context of the passage may suggest that he was further interested in the physics of overcoming the resistance of a particularly recalcitrant listener through some form of trauma.<sup>19</sup> Lucretius, however, addresses his poem primarily to an intellectual elite, which has the background and the patience to appreciate the erudite epic, but which at the same time is prejudiced against Epicurus and Epicureans. It is not a case of accommodating different levels of education, of social background, or even of natural intelligence: Lucretius’ yardstick is rather the degree of sympathy for the Epicurean message—and the willingness to be persuaded. Hence the role of Memmius, whom Lucretius approaches in a spirit of “sweet friendship” (141: *suavis amicitiae*), but whom he subtly badgers and compares to a frightened child in need of his teachings. Clearly this Memmius can bear little resemblance to the praetor of 58 B.C.E. if Lucretius is appealing for his patronage, and his relationship with Lucretius in the poem is thoroughly intratextual.<sup>20</sup> But I am more interested in the extratextual interaction of poet and reader, for I take Lucretius at his word that there is a crisis in Roman society that he intends to resolve with the message of Epicurus. Memmius thus is a “straw addressee,” for, as Mitsis 1993 has shown, Lucretius reassures his audience by criticizing the opposition of a third party, with whom the audience may have more in common than meets the eye: “in winking with the poet behind the back of the fool, we ourselves may be swallowing more of the poet’s medicine than we suspect” (128).

The “first reader” of the *De Rerum Natura* is construed as superficially recalcitrant but ultimately impressionable. He presumably clings to a traditional

<sup>18</sup>The terminology is recalled at the end of the letter as well (82–83), and it may be pertinent to the shadowy role of κατηγεμόνες in Epicurus’ Garden—“leaders/experts” who could discuss physics and ethics at the highest level. By making a “circuit” around the message (περιοδεῖα: περίοδος), the disciple can remain strong in times of doubt; see Clay 1983: 77; Nussbaum 1994: 132–133; Obbink 1995: 531–537.

Note further that this may have been a bone of contention for Epicureans in Lucretius’ time: Diogenes Laertius (10.26) mentions a polemic between “genuine” (γνήσιοι) and “sophist” Epicureans, confirmed by Cicero’s Torquatus (*Fin.* 1.31). The first-century papyrus *On Choices and Avoidances* (11.14–20) criticizes those who are content merely to memorize Epicurean basics (τὰ κυριώτατα), instead of making them preliminary to scientific investigation.

<sup>19</sup>By the same token Philodemus begins *On Poems* 5 with a list of different types of beneficial prose works, among which are λόγοι νοθετητικοί, “speeches of admonition.”

<sup>20</sup>See Volk 2002: 79–83. She deliberately (10–12) avoids questions of an extratextual nature in order to concentrate on the internal dynamics of didactic poetry in general.



Romanocentric upbringing, if Lucretius' tribute to a *Graius homo* (66) is intended to startle him.<sup>21</sup> He gravitates towards Lucretius' poetic "charm" (28: *leporem*), but he is equally susceptible to the "terrifying words of priests" (102–103: *uatum / terriloquis victus dictis*). Although such a reader is expected to remember what he has read, gradually receiving the different pieces of an increasingly large puzzle, he does not instantly embrace the message. He is in need of constant distraction to resist slipping back into his old ways, and he puts up a fight at least as late as 6.673 (resuming 647–654), unable to comprehend greater volcanic eruptions than that of Etna. Such a reader can follow a formal argument just as carefully as an "expert" reader: the difference lies in the reaction. To differentiate between readers, therefore, we should reflect upon the most likely emotional responses evoked by different passages and their contexts; as Lucretius' roller coaster ride of pleasure and pain takes shape, its didactic purpose will become more evident. As my analysis of 1.149–502 will show, Lucretius' teachings are successful only when they evoke the correct, stable, and philosophical form of pleasure.

As a solemn introduction to Epicurean physiology, Lucretius begins in the same way as does Epicurus in his *Letter to Herodotus*. Because, he states, all bodies are formed from regular patterns of atomic combination and dissolution, "nothing can be born from nothing." That is to say, there is no reason to fear monsters or miracles, which are figments of an ignorant imagination. But to Epicurus' maxim Lucretius adds two adverbs, *divinitus umquam*, which stress that creation is forever independent of the gods. Scholars have generally explained these qualifiers through Lucretius' greater preoccupation with teleological religion, but perhaps their emotive abruptness has been overlooked.<sup>22</sup>

Is Lucretius sensitive to the discomfort he has caused in his neophyte reader? He certainly proceeds to describe reassuringly, in the course of ten separate arguments, the bounty of which a personified Nature is capable on Her own. In order to wean the Roman reader from the empty comforts of divine Providence (154), Lucretius emphasizes the certainty with which Nature herself determines life and death. Seven forms of the adjective *certus/certa/certum* appear within forty verses, always referring to the physical laws which govern the process of

<sup>21</sup> As well as the reassessments of Scipio (3.1034–35) and Hercules (5.22–42), note the conspicuous absence of Rome from the text, even at the end of Book 5 and the beginning of Book 6, where Lucretius surveys the pinnacle of human achievement. This interpretation of *Graius homo* complements that of Clay (1983: 97–98), who sees Lucretius as conciliating the "first reader" by avoiding praise of Epicurus by name.

<sup>22</sup> Compare *Ep. Hdt.* 38.7–8, πρῶτον μὲν ὅτι οὐδὲν γίνεται ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος ("first of all, nothing come from nothing"), and *DRN* 1.149–150, *principium cuius hinc nobis exordia sumet, / nullam rem e nilo gigni divinitus umquam* ("The foundation of this for us will begin from what follows, that nothing ever comes from nothing through divine intervention"). Bailey (1947: *ad loc.*), Asmis (1984: 57), and Sedley (1998: 198–199) show Lucretius' twist to Epicurus' arguments, but see especially Schiesaro 1990: 117–118 for the emotional impact: the first reader is still reeling from the tragedy of Iphigenia (80–101).

birth.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, *certus* is, after *magnus* and *parvus*, the most common adjective in the poem, almost always modifying the *foedera naturae*.<sup>24</sup> In Epicurean ethical theory, "certainty" is a prized virtue, to the extent that Epicurus associates wisdom with a consistent ability to give an opinion on any topic.<sup>25</sup> The uninitiate, by contrast, is imagined as "aimlessly wandering" (*errans, vagans*), an activity which Lucretius systematically invests with pejorative connotations.<sup>26</sup> Without the certainties discovered by Epicurean physics, the ignorant Roman is restless and jittery, reflected in Lucretius' sketch of the aristocrat who cannot find peace (3.1053–67): he races to his country villa, but his luxuries provide no relief, and he is already itching to return to the city. In Epicurean terms, certainty is equated with self-control and independence. Even if Lucretius does not yet explain the benefits of predictable physics, the reader will by the end of the poem have experienced the despair of a universe controlled by capricious gods (see Jope 1983: 229–230).

Because the natural world runs like clockwork, there is no reason to fear the unknown. To this end, Lucretius describes in scientific detail the propagation of individual species (159–174), the dependence of crops upon the seasons (176–184), the slow process of maturation (185–191), the common need for food (192–198), and the similar external characteristics of each species (199–207). As Jane Snyder has observed (1980: 37), Lucretius repeatedly associates in this passage the adjective *certus* with the verb *creo*, most notably at 1.169: *at nunc seminibus quia certis quaeque creantur* ("but now, since each thing is created out of certain seeds"). The didactic strategy becomes clear by the end of the poem: any reader who does not believe that atoms interact according to established natural principles is susceptible to the *vates*' myths. The advanced reader is familiar with the more notorious later passages in which Lucretius will magnify

<sup>23</sup> 168: *mater certa*; 169: *seminibus certis*; 173: *certis in rebus inest secreta facultas*; 176: *certa semina*; 189: *semine certo*; 192: *certis* [*sc.* life-giving] *imbribus*; 207: *materies certast*. Note also the aberrations which would arise without the guiding hand of Nature: *incerto partu* (164); *subito exorerentur / incerto spatio atque alienis partibus anni* (180–181).

<sup>24</sup> In the course of the poem, the adjective recurs ninety-seven times, most notably in formulae such as *certum ac dispositum constat* (3.787; 3.794; 5.131; 5.138). Cf. also 2.303: *nec rerum summam commutare ulla vis potest* ("and no force at all can change the universe").

<sup>25</sup> Diogenes Laertius thus qualifies the sage (10.121b.8–9): *δογματιεῖν τε καὶ οὐκ ἀπορήσειν, καὶ καθ' ὕπνου δὲ ὅμοιον ἔσεσθαι* ("[the wise person] will have an opinion and not be at a loss, and he or she will remain the same even when asleep"). Epicurus furthermore portrays uninitiates as gullibly following one opinion after another: most of the fragments of *On Nature* Book 12 rebut a charge of plagiarism by turning it against the fool who tends to "be clumsy in one's thoughts" (*σολοικίζειν*, as at [27.31].1–6), "impetuously beginning to support one [empty opinion] after another" (*ἐξαπίνης δ' ἀρχόμενος καθ' ἑτέρον ἕνα καθ' ἓν*, [27.30].9–11). No wonder Cicero chooses to parody the stubbornness of the Epicurean Velleius as "fearing nothing as greatly as being seen to be in doubt about something" (*Nat. D.* 1.18: *nihil tam verens quam ne dubitare de aliqua re videretur*).

<sup>26</sup> Conversely, Lucretius' own practice of straying from more familiar paths of poetry is defined by *peragro* (1.926 = 4.1). Edwards (1993: 76) notes the constant repetition of *vagari* at 2.43–109; those who aspire to individual immortality exhaust themselves in "wandering" after the wrong sources.

the consequences of neglecting the natural "limits" (e.g., 2.700–709; 5.878–924). Once Lucretius has expounded his doctrine of the atomic soul in greater detail, he will show how impressionable humans add substance to their dreams and delusions; these insecurities tend to develop if unchecked by *ratio*, and the diseased mind will ultimately plague itself with fictitious monsters, like Cerberus, the Furies, and Tartarus (3.1011–13). If the reader underestimates Nature's control over Her creations, life will truly become hellish (1018–23): *mens sibi conscia factis / praemetuens adhibet stimulos torretque flagellis . . . / hic Acherusia fit stultorum denique vita* ("the guilty conscience, fearing in advance for itself because of its crimes, applies the goad and sears itself with the whip . . .; in conclusion, the life of a fool becomes like Acheron here on Earth"). Early in the narrative, though, Lucretius is reluctant to expose the horror such delusions entail. Instead, he insists on the plain childishness of ascribing intentionality to divine creators, which he ridicules through a list of *adynata* (1.159–207) that would result from this fallacy: fish would crawl on land; babies would turn suddenly into adults; giants would wade through oceans. There is no sarcasm, no antagonism, not even a second person singular: through these humorous illustrations, Lucretius gently—and pleasurably—demystifies the process of creation.<sup>27</sup>

In a new phase of the argument, the reassurance of certainty is combined with a motif presented as even more attractive: childbirth. When Epicurus in his own work mentions the "seeds" of compounds, he seems to be employing technical language rather than metaphor.<sup>28</sup> In the hands of a poet, though, the design of illustrating invisible phenomena through analogy expands into a vision of cosmic parenthood, a suitably pleasurable image with which Lucretius can "sweeten" the first of his doctrinal arguments. If compounds could arise out of nothing, "how could there be the established mother [we see] for things?" (168). With a characteristically unexplained "thematic anticipation" (Clay 1983: 248), Lucretius prematurely introduces the metaphor of "Mother Earth," a figure which he will justify in atomistic terms in Book 2. Though atoms are elsewhere designated impersonally as *primordia rerum*, Lucretius in this section uses terminology "appropriate to living organisms with a creative capacity of their own" (Wormell 1965: 52–53): *semina* (160; 169; 176; 185; 189; 206; 225), *genitalia corpora* (167), even *mater-ies* (245), as well as referring to a "creative assembly" (182–183: *genitali / concilio*) and describing a "meeting of seed" (185: *seminis . . . coitum*).<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Gale (1994: 219) and West (1994: 137–139 in his new Appendix) add that the motif of fixed creativity is similarly illustrated not only in the Proem, but also at 5.737–750, where Lucretius reassures the student with even more poetic detail that meteorological phenomena are regulated by Nature.

<sup>28</sup> See Schrijvers 1978: 83 and Clay 1983: 88. In accordance with his "demythologizing" strategy, Epicurus avoids personifications of "physical laws," although he does in his ethical literature pay homage to Nature as a guide for a "natural life."

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Schrijvers 1970: 221; Gale 1994: 39. On the word play of *materies/mater/terra*, see Snyder 1980: 93–94 and 135–136. Note also that, as Bailey (1947: *ad loc.*) opportunely points out, Lucretius

Whereas other Epicureans focus on a newborn child's immediate search for pleasure (the so-called "cradle argument," after Brunschwig 1986), Lucretius alone depicts nativity as an attractive event in itself. For example, Lucretius' examples of seasonal produce (174–175) are roses, corn, and grapes, which are "coaxed" into "being poured forth by the autumn": *vites autumno fundi suadente*.<sup>30</sup> The poet dramatizes the Earth's fertility by describing the "lively earth" (178: *vivida tellus*) with the same adjective as Epicurus' exuberant conquest (1.72). As Snyder has shown, Lucretius operates through "false etymologies" in order to expand the semantic connotations of key terms: associated with *vita*, therefore, is not only *vivo* but *vis*. Lucretius intends this "life force" to compensate for the frailty of all newborn creatures, whose environment is able to provide for them at birth. The grammatical ambiguity of verse 179 may be deliberate (*tuto res teneras effert in luminis oras*: "[the earth] safely brings forth tender bodies into the shores of light"): the adjective *teneras* may modify either *res* or *oras*—or perhaps implicitly both, confirming that babies are born into an appropriate and responsive environment. Note the different presentation of childbirth at 5.223–224 (*nudus . . . infans, indigus omni / vitali auxilio*, "naked . . . dumb, in need of every life support"); the expert reader may return to our passage with some skepticism, but for now the impression is that this is a world worth being born into. Although creatures require protection to survive, the nuance of *tuto* defines the role of Nature, *vitam tueri* (195). Such "best of all possible worlds" optimism in Book 1 seems strikingly Stoic, and his later insistence on the natural "flaw" (2.181, 5.199) could not be more alien to the world he is here describing.<sup>31</sup>

All creatures are thus protected by "natural bonds" which ensure the regular continuation of the life cycle; though Lucretius appears alarmed by human weakness later in the poem, his existential pessimism is temporarily downplayed. Instead, Lucretius insists on the solidity of bodies (215–264), whose atomic connections are complex enough to resist most impacts. In order to destroy a compound, an external force must be strong enough to "disentangle the atomic knots" (220: *discidium parere et nexus exsolvere*), before eventually "shattering it apart with a blow" or "penetrating the void within and causing its dissolution" (222–223: *donec vis obiit quae res diverberet ictu / aut intus penetret per inania dissolvatque*). Against these indefinite relative clauses of purpose, Lucretius sets aside an unambiguous main clause: "nature allows the death of nothing to be

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has yet to explain the characteristics of atoms, including insentience, which will be introduced at 1.483. Even the knowledgeable reader may be thus tempted to ascribe human values and emotions to this atomic "matter."

<sup>30</sup> For the soothing connotations of *suadere*, cf. 1.140–142, where Lucretius emphasizes its etymology from *suavis*: *sperata voluptas / suavis amicitiae quemvis efferre laborem / suadet* ("the desired pleasure of your sweet friendship seduces me into undertaking any labor").

<sup>31</sup> Asmis (1982) has convincingly read Lucretius' "Hymn to Venus" as a parody of Cleanthes' Stoic "Hymn to Zeus," whose power "governs all things with law" (2: νόμου μέτα πάντων κυβερνῶν); this deceptively providential reading is particularly appropriate to 1.149–261.

seen" (224: *nullius exitium patitur natura videri*). For any body to survive for even a moment, it must be well equipped with "assorted bonds of eternal material" (244–245: *nexus principiorum / dissimiles constant aeternaque materies est*). Through alliteration and hyperbaton, Lucretius affirms a solid truth, that "things remain intact" (246: *incolumi remanent res corpore*), until a force can be found which is "fierce" enough to confront the "interweaving" (246–247: *dum satis acris / vis obeat pro textura cuiusque*).<sup>32</sup>

To the inexpert reader, the affective treatment of this entire passage appears to replace Divine with Natural Providence, and Lucretius crystallizes this dramatic fiction with a final burst of creative forces (1.250–261):

- 250      *Postremo pereunt imbres, ubi eos pater aether*  
           *in gremium matris terrae praecipitavit;*  
           *at nitidae surgunt fruges ramique virescunt*  
           *arboribus, crescunt ipsae fetuque gravantur;*  
           *hinc alitur porro nostrum genus atque ferarum;*  
 255      *hinc laetas urbes pueris florere videmus*  
           *frondiferasque novis avibus canere undique silvas;*  
           *hinc fessae pecudes pingui per pabula laeta*  
           *corpora deponunt, et candens lacteus umor*  
           *uberibus manat distentis; hinc nova proles*  
 260      *artubus infirmis teneras lasciva per herbas*  
           *ludit lacte mero mentes percussa novellas.*

Afterwards, the rains dissipate when Father Aether has ejaculated them into the folds of Mother Earth; but in their place, shining crops arise and the branches turn green on the trees, which grow and are themselves burdened by their produce. From this union, moreover, both our species and that of wild animals is nourished; from this union we see our fertile cities flourishing with children, as well as the leaf-bearing woods singing everywhere with newborn birds; from this union the flocks, exhausted with their fat, stretch out their bodies in the flourishing fields, and milky-white juice flows from their extended teats; from this union the newborn offspring on shaky limbs play licentiously in the soft meadows, "smashed" to their newborn skulls with the unmixed milk.

This tableau recalls in both style and content the first forty-three lines of the poem, with a highly stylized representation of kinetic pleasure.<sup>33</sup> Following the

<sup>32</sup> Note the verbal parallels with 5.91–96, when Lucretius' focus will switch instead to the hazards of the natural world. Lucretius similarly emphasizes the intricacy of inner atomic connections, but his purpose there is to hyperbolize their cataclysmic destruction (94–95: *tris species tam dissimilis, tria talia texta / una dies dabit exitio*: "three species so diverse [sea, sky, and earth], three textures of such magnitude—one single day will deliver to destruction"). As Segal (1990: 101–104) notes, the first reader of Book 1 is not yet ready for such an "invasion of one's somatic boundaries," which Lucretius will first show how to overcome by anticipating the end of the entire world at 2.1023–1174.

<sup>33</sup> For the verbal and structural parallels, see Conte 1994: 29–30, tracing a movement from "static contemplation" to "dynamic creativity" in both passages. Conte's reading is itself compatible with a "reader response" interpretation of the poem, insofar as he envisions its strategy as filling the inexpert reader with "inadequacy" before the "sublime" of the universe, thus compelling the reader to transcend

graphically sexual union of "Father Sky" and "Mother Earth,"<sup>34</sup> crops flourish in a double chiasmus at verses 252–253. As humans and beasts are once again interrelated as Nature's children (254.4–5), the diction becomes more elaborate, including the unique compound *frondiferas* (256), the epic periphrasis *lacteus umor* (257), the anaphora of *hinc* (254, 255, 257), the rare ablative noun *pingui* (257), and especially the unprecedented metonymies of "pregnant cities" (255) and lambs "smashed on neat milk" (261). At this point, style and substance collide, as Lucretius' imagination has produced a vision derived from delusion, not experience. No less utopian than Horace's *arva beata* in *Epode* 16 or Vergil's *aurea gens* in *Eclogue* 4, the sudden and unrestrained succession of poetic tropes composes an *amplificatio*, which has no place in the observable world.<sup>35</sup>

For the details of his bucolic fairy tale, Lucretius resorts to parallels from those "old Greek poets" who indulge in telling lies (2.600; 5.405).<sup>36</sup> But it is still too early for Lucretius to spell out the epistemological dangers of being attracted to such tales. After Lucretius has completed his account of the unchanging characteristics of atoms, he will eventually satirize those who take the Earth's maternity at face value. Especially when describing the procession of Cybele (2.600–660), he distinguishes his own liberal use of metaphor (658–659) from the naive superstition of the Corybantes (660). An informed reader may eventually return equipped to select the Epicurean nuances of Lucretius' diction, particularly in the final verses. The newborn lambs "drunk" with milk anticipate various moralizing references to the state of the uninitiate: "weak" (3.447: *infirmo*) and even "alcoholic" (3.1051: *ebrius*). Three forms of the adjective *novus* appear within six lines (256, 259, 261), focalizing the poet's description through the unreliable eyes of youth. Modern scholars generally interpret the pleasure of this passage as a protreptic prelude to philosophical detachment, but Lucretius' treatment is harsher.<sup>37</sup> As in the opening lines of the poem, this entire blend of procreation, infancy, and wanton abandon is ultimately intended to reflect reality from the

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mortal limitations and to embrace infinity. But the question remains: why would such a reader ever want to switch to a "cosmic perspective" without some foretaste of the higher pleasure in store, in opposition to the many other passages which appeal to the reader's "traditional" selfishness?

<sup>34</sup>For the sexual connotation of *praecipitavit* (251), as well as expansion upon the reproductive imagery in this passage, see West 1994: 4–7; this passage is clearly intended to arouse the same titillation as the Proem.

<sup>35</sup>Maguiness 1965: 76: "we find *abundantia* where an unusual or even fantastic situation is envisaged." For contrasting assessments of the Roman's originality in this particular passage, see Schrijvers (1978: 88–89), who sees this as an example of Lucretius' unorthodox "eclecticism," and the reply of Schiesaro (1990: 74–87), who suggests that Epicurus would condone the metaphor of the Earth as a living creature. Still, no extant Epicurean text comes even close to Lucretius' "Empedoclean" scope and intensity here.

<sup>36</sup>Schiesaro (1990: 108–122) provides the most comprehensive philology of the Greek *topos* of Mother Earth; see further Schrijvers 1978: 88–89 on the "deceptive" incorporation here of Stoic and Peripatetic doctrine.

<sup>37</sup>Schrijvers (1970: 226–229) provides a rhetorical reading of Lucretius' *amplificationes* of Earth's fertility, which evoke the sense of wonder more properly associated with the atoms themselves. Clay

point of view of one who is inexperienced not just in life, but also in philosophy. Any reader who yearns to improve should transcend such misplaced optimism, "retranslating" Lucretius' descriptive vocabulary, however attractive it may have initially seemed.

After this visual climax, the poem abruptly takes a new emotional direction. Lucretius' expert reader has learned to isolate and interpret that which at first glance seems to clash with Epicurus' teachings, but what of the uninitiate? "Shock treatment" is prescribed: the poet's pleasurable presentation of the relationship between humanity and the universe is suddenly undermined by scenes of natural disasters. The poet gives characteristic notice of a transition by opening with *nunc age*, followed by a two-line summary of the preceding argument: after dismissing what cannot account for life and death, he explains how everything consists ultimately of atoms and void alone. At this point, the poet briefly departs from Epicurus' version in the *Letter to Herodotus*, in order to emphasize that the *primordia* are invisible to the naked eye. Since there are many other bodies which cannot be perceived by humans but whose powerful effects are noticed, Lucretius concludes that there is no reason to disbelieve the existence of atoms. Although he is following a standard Epicurean methodological principle of analogy, his particular affective twist is to exaggerate human vulnerabilities and limitations.<sup>38</sup>

Hurricanes and floods are described in powerful lines that anticipate the material of Book 6, through a concentration of sound effects derivative of Ennius: alliteration, assonance, archaic vocabulary, and a compound adjective (275), as well as persistent terminology from epic similes (1.271–279).<sup>39</sup>

*Principio venti vis verberat incita pontum*  
*ingentisque ruit navis et nubila differt;*  
*interdum rapido percurrrens turbine campos*  
*arboribus magnis sternit montisque supremos*  
 275 *silvifragis vexat flabris: ita perfurit acri*  
*cum fremitu saevitque minaci murmure ventus.*  
*sunt igitur venti nimirum corpora caeca*  
*quae mare, quae terras, quae denique nubila caeli*  
*verrunt ac subito vexantia turbine raptant.*

(1983: 109–110) argues that the poem begins with a partial translation of *natura* as attractive "genesis," which the poem supplements by showing the need for the more destructive aspects as well. I contend that an Epicurean reading of this passage should evoke not indifference but rather aversion to the simple-minded *lascivia* of the lambs.

<sup>38</sup> Even though it is generally recognized that this natural nightmare undermines the preceding *bieros gamos* (see, e.g., Hardie 1986: 182–183 on its "programmatic function"), their different implications for the human condition have not yet been explored. The reader's feelings for Nature are inevitably channeled through the human characters in the poem who experience Her effects, and the ultimate test for the reader is to decide which particular characters are appealing.

<sup>39</sup> Cf., for example, *Il.* 5.87–93 or 11.492–495; see in the same tradition *Aen.* 2.304–307. For Ennius' pervasive influence on Lucretius, see Maguiness 1965: esp. 84–85.

In the beginning, the stirred power of the wind lashes the sea, sinking massive ships and scattering clouds. Sometimes, rushing throughout the fields with a rapid whirlwind, it covers them with large trees, and it torments the mountain peaks with forest-breaking blasts. In this manner the wind thoroughly rages with a piercing howl and a menacing grumble. No wonder, therefore, that winds are hidden bodies which sweep the sea, the earth, and finally the clouds of the sky, which they snatch away as they harass with their sudden whirlwind.

For the first time the reader here experiences Lucretius' characteristic magnification to cosmic terms of the weather. Its destructive effects are portrayed as universal, through numerous expressions of size (272: *ingentis*; 274: *magnis* ... *supremos*), compound verbs with "strengthening" prefixes (272: *differt*; 273: *percurrens*; 275: *perfurit*), and finally a tripartite survey of the natural world (278). Whereas previously at 250–253, the "rains perish" in order to impregnate trees with "offspring," now at 282 and 286 the same rains accumulate on the mountains to sweep away "entire trees" (284) with their destructive floods. We might expect this to be the *tristis* physical doctrine in need of poetic honey, but in fact the sheer power of Nature is not depicted in scientific or value-neutral terms. In contrast to the utopian bliss of the previous verses, Her dramatic forces now display a bestial rage (275–276), whose violent effects are emphasized by the "slaughter" implicitly inflicted upon humanity: *stragem propagant* (280); *dat sonitu magno stragem* (287).<sup>40</sup>

Still, only a first reader of Lucretius can interpret the violent terminology as fatalistic, or otherwise pessimistic; linguistic associations elsewhere in the poem show that Lucretius is focalizing this vision of Nature through the reaction of the uninitiate. The richest example of "underlying affects" involves the combination of *minax* and *murmura* (276), which Lucretius memorably associates with the origin of *religio* in three separate instances:<sup>41</sup> the re-reader understands that the "murmurs" of natural phenomena are only "menacing" to the superstitious. *Turbidus* (286) also consistently denotes natural processes which appear "hellish" only to the fool who cannot explain them.<sup>42</sup> Finally, Lucretius identifies winds and rivers in many different ways in this passage, the most important of which is that they are *caeca* (295). While the expert reader will translate the term according to its passive connotation ("imperceptible" = atomistic ἀόρατα or ἄδηλα), the uninitiate is liable to personify these winds, thus engaging an active translation

<sup>40</sup> *Saevio* and *fremitus* in particular tend to bear especially dehumanizing connotations in Lucretius. For the former, see 4.1006 in reference to wild hunting dogs; 5.1075 on a horse in heat. For the latter, see 3.297 on lions who *pectora rumpunt*; 5.1316 on lions unleashed in battle.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. 1.68–69, on Epicurus' conquest; 5.1193, on the celestial phenomena which terrify humanity into inventing divine wrath; and less explicitly, 6.197–198, on the winds.

<sup>42</sup> This is most evident in Lucretius' assimilation of a terrifying storm to the darkness of Acheron (4.169: *perquam subito fit turbida foede*). When the elements seem to engage in civil war (6.376: *tempestasque cietur turbida caelo*), only the uninitiate laments the "turmoil" (673: "*at nimis est ingens incendi turbidus ardor*"). Jope (1989) collects other examples in which Lucretius externalizes the empty fear of the weather.



with martial connotations: "the forces of nature are blindly and relentlessly mad."<sup>43</sup>

Further examples of invisible processes are listed—smell, heat, cold, sound, vapor, erosion—in verses which are generally interpreted as scientific statements of the range of human vision. And yet Lucretius continuously emphasises human limitations. For the philosopher, as always, uncomfortable reminders cannot be repeated often enough—in this case, of our blindness: we can smell something "but we never see" it, "nor do we see burning heat, nor can we lay hold of cold with our eyes, nor are we in the habit of seeing voices" (299–301). Shortly afterwards, "it has not been observed in any way" how water evaporates, for "our eyes can in no way see" the particles of vapor (307–310). Are we handicapped more by our eyes or by our minds in perceiving the world around us? The conclusion (321) expresses with some difficulty the underlying nuances: *invida praecluserit specimen natura videndi*. Although the genitive gerund *videndi* is generally construed with *natura* ("our un-seeing sense of sight has barred the appearance [of smells, etc.]"), the paranoid reader is prepared to rearrange the word-order, associating the genitive with *specimen* and adding malice to *invida*: "evil-eyed Nature has restricted the appearance derived from our sight."<sup>44</sup>

In this context, Lucretius' inference that "nature affects things through hidden bodies" (328: *corporibus caecis igitur natura gerit res*) appears neutral to the expert reader but sinister to everyone else.<sup>45</sup> In defining a certain body as "unseen," Lucretius qualifies that it is only "unseen by our limited eyes"—in spite of which it does still exist. Whereas Epicurus' corresponding section on body and void (*Ep. Hdt.* 39.6–40.5) enforces correct epistemological criteria, what impresses in Lucretius' account is that, on the contrary, the position of human beings is continuously jeopardized by threats they cannot perceive.<sup>46</sup> Because of this particular emotional subtext, the reader cannot fail to assess the penetrability of human bodies (346–357) as a further reminder of human weakness. Although the presence of void does entail some positive consequences, allowing food to be digested and dispersed (350–354), the conclusion is gloomy. Cold "spreads

<sup>43</sup> Lucretius closely associates the two meanings of the adjective in the proem to Book 2: his passionate apostrophe (14: *o miseras hominum mentes, o pectora caeca*) is followed by the repeated simile of children who tremble in the darkness (55–56: *in caecis tenebris*). For further semantic manipulation of *caecus/caeca/caecum* in Lucretius, cf. Anderson 1960: 6 and Clay 1983: 315, n. 11.

<sup>44</sup> Bailey (1947: *ad loc.*) notes the two possible translations, although he keeps the mss reading *speciem* for *specimen*. Brown (1984: *ad loc.*) also suggests that *praecluserit* implies "closing the door on something": humans would therefore be literally "barred" from higher knowledge.

<sup>45</sup> Schiesaro (1990: 23–24 and 122–124) bases upon this point his ground-breaking exploration of the poem's analogies. Lucretius first persuades his reluctant reader to accept the existence of atoms by exposing the fallibility of human knowledge: "Topposizione visibile / non visibile (*caeca / aperta*) vige soltanto in relazione alle nostre possibilità conoscitive, ma non intacca la corporeità in quanto tale . . . ."

<sup>46</sup> Sedley (1998: 200–201) categorizes this entire section as one of only ten additions to Epicurus' *On Nature*.

throughout the bones" until these are frozen "stiff" (355: *rigidum permanat frigus ad ossa*); the word-play of *frigus* (and implicitly *frigidus*) and *rigidus* evokes the ultimate chill of "rigor mortis" (cf., e.g., 3.530: *gelidi vestigia mortis*). In such conditions, it might have been nice to have our mass "packed together" (345: *materies . . . stipata quiesset*) as an impregnable fortress!

That the entire universe is founded upon invisible bodies is indeed an unpleasant truth for those new to the idea; despite the likelihood that *volgus abhorret*, Lucretius deploys the affective resources of poetry not to console, but rather to parody the impetuous reaction of this very same *volgus*. At least when the gods were in charge, one could hope to avert their anger through prayer and sacrifices; according to this new *religio*, all humans are at the mercy of natural forces they cannot even perceive, let alone control. This whole section clearly provides an instance in which Arragon's famous observation is corroborated (1961: 389): in a reversal of the "wormwood with honey" simile, it is the *doctrina* which makes the poetry palatable, for only Epicurean physiology can dispel the reader's initial terrors.

For the Epicurean, however, unpleasantness is always temporary. Lucretius dispels the storm clouds in a passage which assuages negative feelings by redirecting them in a didactic context. The reader is alerted that a new and difficult truth is at hand by Lucretius' rhetorical challenge to accept the existence of void (397–417). Only atoms and void fundamentally exist, and "anything else that has a name" (*quaecumque cluent*) is a temporary combination of these. Lucretius is then free to spell out some uncomfortable consequences of this principle: human ideals and affairs come and go, whether slavery or freedom, poverty or wealth, war or peace (455–456), and only the natural constituents (451–454) remain: *manet incolumis natura* (457). This passage neatly reorganizes the two hitherto observed characterizations of Nature into a kind of "emotional syllogism": whereas the preceding passages alternately imply that Nature blesses or curses humanity, this third argument resolves the dispute by inferring only that Nature reigns supreme.

As a symbol of human delusions of grandeur, the Trojan War is amplified but then abruptly deflated before our very eyes. Even the first reader is by now somewhat prepared, for Lucretius has previously blamed the philosophical flaws of Ennius on Homer's misperception of the *rerum natura* (1.124–126). But in a passage of intense passion, Lucretius seems to revel in the violence fueled by the most notorious love affair of antiquity (464–478):

Denique Tyndaridem raptam belloque subactas  
 465 Troiugenas gentis cum dicunt esse, videndumst  
 ne forte haec per se cogant nos esse fateri,  
 quando ea saecula hominum, quorum haec eventa fuerunt  
 inrevocabilis abstulerit iam praeterita aetas;  
 namque aliud terris, aliud regionibus ipsis  
 470 eventum dici poterit quodcumque erit actum.  
 Denique materies si rerum nulla fuisset  
 nec locus ac spatium, res in quo quaeque geruntur

475 *numquam Tyndaridis forma conflatus amore  
ignis, Alexandri Phrygio sub pectore gliscens  
clara accendisset saevi certamina belli,  
nec clam durateus Troianis Pergama partu  
inflammasset equos nocturno Graiugenarum;  
perspicere unde possis . . .*

And finally, when they say that raped Helen and Troy-born peoples subdued in war are in fact the case, it must be seen that they do not force us by chance to admit that these are the case per se. Indeed, the irrevocable passing of time has already carried away those generations of humans of which these episodes were "accidents." Whatever has happened may be said to be an "accident," one derived from the earth, another from the specific location. Finally once more, if there had been no material for things, nor time nor space in which all these things take place, never would the fire, fueled by love through the beauty of Helen, growing within the Phrygian heart of Paris, have kindled the famous struggles of savage warfare; nor would the Trojan Horse of wood, with its nocturnal birth of Greek sons kept secret from the Trojans, have set Troy on fire. From all this you may now truly understand . . .

The "coating" of Lucretius' version pays lip service to Homer but is ultimately redefined by its atomistic context. After distancing himself from those who enjoy Homer too much (465: *dicunt*), the philosopher must reinterpret the rape of Helen as derivative (*eventum*) of past atomic arrangements (467, 470, 482). As Diskin Clay (1983: 125) aptly states, this scientific definition is "a striking formula that reduces the Roman concept of *res gestae* . . . to the status of accidents competing for a brief span of time." The entire passage parodies Greco-Roman epic traditions through an exaggerated use of Hellenizing terminology: *Tyndaridis* (464, 473); *Troiugenas* (464); *Alexandri Phrygio sub pectore* (474); *durateus Troianis partu* / . . . *equos nocturno Graiugenarum* (476–477). Greek transliterations generally bear pejorative connotations in Lucretius, whether in reference to Anaxagoras' ridiculous *homoeomerian* (1.830), or to the euphemisms voiced by the deluded lover (4.1159–1169). These verses are no exception, expressing in a foreign language ideas foreign to the Roman Epicurean.<sup>47</sup>

Lucretius amplifies the pathos by figuratively setting on fire extremes of love (473–474: *conflatus amore ignis*) and hatred (475: *accendisset saevi certamina belli*), a metaphor which generally represents for Lucretius the violent consequences of losing self-control, whether to anger (3.304–305: *irai fax . . . / fumida*) or to lust (4.1077: *ardor amantum*; cf. 1084–90). Amid the smoke of such blazing melodrama, the expert reader can *perspicere* (478) the light: the spectacle is entertaining but nothing more.<sup>48</sup> The didactic function of this passage

<sup>47</sup> Sedley (1998: 50–51) sees a different purpose to "evoking Greece" in these lines, to place the Trojan War in a "remote" and "exotic" world (like the description of magnets at 6.1044–46). My reading of this passage is consistent instead with Sedley's "shunning of the exotic" (54–57).

<sup>48</sup> For *perspicio* used in Book 1 in the wider sense of "noticing the deeper implications," cf. 156–157: *tum quod sequimur iam rectius / perspicimus* ("only then will we perceive more correctly what we are

is to induce a "clarification" of the emotions aroused by poetry, a lesson to be applied both subsequently and retroactively. It is an identical waste of emotion to imagine that Nature feels either fondness or animosity towards humankind.<sup>49</sup>

Why should Roman readers embrace this rationalization of their beloved Homeric/Ennian epic? After Lucretius has attracted the uninitiate through pleasant imagery, after he has undermined this presentation through its reverse image, and, finally, after he has exposed the shallowness of both illustrations, the poet steers his reader toward an emotion which resists contradiction. Although humans' affairs on an observable level are temporary and otherwise secondary, their basic constituents are invincible: "no force can extinguish them; these things are ultimately victorious, thanks to their [truly] solid body" (485–486: *nulla potest vis / stingere; nam solido vincunt ea corpore demum*). Once more the imagery of fire recurs, but in an improved affective context: although poets have celebrated the "flames" of Paris' lust and the "burning" of Troy, the only fire really worth commemorating is that of the unquenchable atoms. As a corollary of depicting natural processes through familiar analogies, Lucretius seeks not to eradicate but to purify the emotions aroused by poetry.

Lucretius' message is universal: when we transcend ourselves through the perspective of Nature, our empathy for human affairs is sublimated into a more enlightened emotional response, namely admiration for the underlying natural order. To reinforce the argument, Lucretius reproduces this affective presentation of events when he distinguishes atoms from their secondary characteristics (2.842–1022). Although we may prize "pleasant" bodies like marjoram, myrrh, and spikenard (847–848), the smells, sounds, or tastes that initially attract us are accidents of a body that is changeable, transient, and therefore subordinate. The underlying atoms themselves are untouched by "softness, rotting, or thinness" (860), and as such they provide "the immortal foundations on which the sum of salvation relies" (862–863): these are truly worthy of a poet's celebration. By grasping that our "invincible" building blocks forever transcend the dissolution of their compounds, we may preserve the conventional appeal of immortality: "the potentially gloomy notion that Man means nothing in the equilibrium of Nature" is "compensated by the staggering thought that Man is part of this eternal flow of matter" (Schiesaro 1994: 94).

In this light the educated reader will reinterpret the hymn to maternity encountered at 1.251–264 as a celebration of life *sub specie aeternitatis*. It is not the reader's, Lucretius', or even Epicurus' life that Lucretius immortalizes, but rather

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pursuing"); 949–950: *dum perspicis / omnem naturam rerum qua constet compta figura* ("while you are starting to perceive the entire nature of the universe and the shape in which it consists").

<sup>49</sup>My interpretation, I believe, recasts in a philosophical context Gale's literary assessment of the passage (1994: 110), which she sees as launching another criticism at epic poetry: "not only does it encourage error and superstition, it also wastes its energies on trivia." Hardie (1986: 232) also detects the "irony" here, otherwise unexplained.

the isonomic cycle.<sup>50</sup> Likewise, the images of vulnerability that in the subsequent passages appear so pessimistic are now brightened by the atomic impregnability shared by all humans. To subordinate one's own death to the eternity of Nature is to redeem one's mortal limitations; this fills the Epicurean with *divina voluptas* . . . *atque horror* (3.29–30). The difference from the *horror* experienced by the *volgus* at 1.945 = 4.20 is that the Epicurean feels part of something greater than himself, which he worships in accordance with its “venerability” (*Ep. Hdt.* 77.5: σέμνωμα).<sup>51</sup>

The extended Proem thus gives notice of a pedagogical strategy. Over and over, Lucretius tempts his novice reader to experience an alternation of delight and horror; every time, he exposes both emotions as impetuous and self-centered, in contrast to a more philosophical presentation of the same topic. In other words, it is not just the more pessimistic passages that we should be challenging but the superficially optimistic ones as well. Even the enticement of the Hymn to Venus is open to question, when the poet asks Venus for the same *lepos* as sexual attraction. The first reader may appreciate the warmth with which animals are “humanized,” as they are slaves to their love in the same terms as Catullus is to Lesbia (see, e.g., Amory 1969: 162–164). But from the Epicurean perspective of a reader who returns after Book Four, those who blindly pursue Venus are “dehumanized,” at the beck and call of Venus wherever she may lead them (1.15–16: *ita capta lepore / te sequitur cupide quo quamque inducere pergis*: “thus captivated by your charm, they all follow you lustfully wherever you proceed to lead them”).<sup>52</sup> Two centuries later Diogenes of Oenoanda will similarly compare to sheep the mass of ignorant humans, who copy down everything they hear from others (fr. 3 Smith,

<sup>50</sup> Edwards (1993) recalls that Lucretius poignantly avoids using *aeternitas* in direct reference either to himself or to Epicurus. His ambitious hopes for his poem at 1.27 reflect entirely upon his subject matter, for only Nature is truly immortal—and thus a worthy inspiration for a poet.

<sup>51</sup> Although some scholars still see an element of fear or discomfort in Lucretius' vision (see Clay 1983: 106 and 137 on the “starkness” of the revelation and Segal 1990: 79–80 on Lucretius reliving his frightening introduction to Epicurean physics), Giannotti's chapter on the topic (1989: 3–124) provides exhaustive evidence that *voluptas* and *horror* are not in opposition to one another. Lucretius' trembling reflects a vision of Nature in mind and in body, “un piacere panico” (112), in accordance with the emotional experiences (πάθεισι) allowed by Epicurus in Diog. Laert. 10.117.8. Gale (1994: 194) expands upon Bailey 1947: *ad loc.* in emphasizing the language of “mystery” initiation.

I would add that Lucretius actually follows standard Epicurean practice in responding to superior objects of perception with the appropriate “awe.” See especially Philodemus *On Piety* 758–772: πάντα γὰρ σο[φόν] καθαρὰς καὶ ἀ[γί]ους δόξας ἔχειν [περὶ] τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ [μεγ]άλῃν τε καὶ σεμνὴν ὑπελ[ι]φέναι ταύτην τὴν φύσιν· ἐν [δ]ὲ ταῖς ἑορταῖς μ[ά]λιστα ἐ[ῖ]ς ἐπίνοιαν αὐτῆς βαδίζοντα διὰ τὸ τοῦνομα πάντα ἀνὰ στόμ' ἔχειν π[ί]σ[τε]ι σφοδ[ρο]τέρως κατα[σχε]ῖν (“for every sage has pure and sacred beliefs regarding the god, as well as understanding its great and venerable nature: especially in religious festivals this sage, in proceeding to an awareness of this nature by keeping the [appropriate] name entirely on his lips, takes possession of it with more vehement confidence”).

<sup>52</sup> Apart from the *servitium amoris* at 4.1037–1191, consider Epicurus' glorification of independence, insulated against Chance (*Ep. Men.* 133–134, *Sent. Vat.* 47). Other Epicureans were perhaps even more emphatic: Cicero (*Tusc.* 5.27) quotes Metrodorus' “military occupation” of fortune, while Diogenes of Oenoanda (fr. 112 Smith) decries the “military service” of the non-Epicurean, under someone else's orders.

4.12–13: ὥς τὰ πρόβατα). Comparisons with the animal world are attractive to Epicureans as foils for the artificial constructions and concerns of humans; but Lucretius' insistence on *ratio* (as Epicurus' on λογισμός) shows that Epicureans were as mindful of the potential of the human intellect as their Hellenistic rivals, and a sheep's happiness is no excuse to shirk the task of "practising these things day and night" (*Ep. Men.* 135.5–6).

Fans of Heraclitus unthinkingly adopt as truths words which have been "polished with *lepos*" (1.644–645); Lucretius, on the other hand, appeals to a reader who can detach himself from the poetic charm, enjoying the poetry and reflecting on the content. That is why the only explicitly programmatic passage in the work comes as late as 1.921–950, a digression which marks a formal conclusion to the first fundamental argument of the poem, that the universe is constituted by atoms and void. The "deception" (1.941: *decepta*) is clearly not that the poetry consoles us for the difficulty of the doctrine, for we have seen that if anything it compounds the potential gloominess of Epicurus' revelations. Here, every reader is explicitly challenged to be on guard against Lucretius' verses, but only the expert reader knows how to build constructively upon this warning. Only such a reader has learned the difference between worshipping Venus and Nature, or Cybele and Earth, or the Trojan War and the indestructible atoms. And only such a reader is authorized to enjoy the epic poetry of every passage, whether deceptive or not, "provided that he or she refrains in actual fact from infecting the soul with degrading religious superstition" (2.659–660).

Through his different appeals to the emotions, Lucretius sweetens doctrines which may have previously tasted like "wormwood." The Epicurean universe has no need of a conscious pilot, and Lucretius' *amplificationes* of "Mother Earth" and "Stepmother Earth" are not only misleading but also symptomatic of humanity's illness. In the course of the poem, the reader transcends the need to personify *rerum natura*, once unsavory Nature can be reassessed as delicious nature. By the time Book 6 concludes in a nightmare of human impotence, the reader should feel not relief for being spared by "Her," but rather the ecstatic acknowledgment of kinship with "it."

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