

ON THE NATURE OF "ON THE NATURE OF THINGS": LUCRETIOUS' PHILOSOPHICAL POETRY

by Richard D. Ferrier

Lucretius, the Roman poet, the maker of the poem *De Rerum Natura*, was a disciple of a teacher, Epicurus of Athens. Epicurus had founded a school in his lifetime, one of the two chief philosophical schools dominant in the classical world in the four centuries surrounding the birth of Our Lord. The other was Stoical. When reading Lucretius, we should keep in mind that he makes his poem inspired by Epicurus, a teacher long dead but with a living following, a teacher whose books were extensive, and whose teachings, at least among those who read Greek, were widely known. Thus, like Virgil, his near contemporary, Lucretius is not *original*, except insofar as he reforms the material of a tradition which he inherits. More particularly, he is not an original physicist or philosopher. On the other hand, he is almost unique as a poet, as you may confirm by your own experience of poetry. Indeed, some of you may think he is no poet at all.

It will be more interesting, and perhaps more profitable, then, to consider Lucretius as a poet than a physicist. Two corollaries follow: We cannot keep Epicurus out of the account since he plays muse to our possible poet, and we need to consider what relations philosophy and poetry might have, and in particular whether poetry can support, or supplant, philosophical teaching. These two considerations will govern the first two parts of this paper. In the third part we will consider in more detail what Lucretius' poetry is actually like.

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# I

## *Epicurus*

Besides Lucretius, there were three other atomists in antiquity. Leucippus and Democritus, the Pre-Socratics, may be said to be the originators of the *doctrine*; Epicurus founded the *school*. One might pause to consider what happens to philosophy in a school of philosophy. Such a school exists for the transmission, the handing down, the *tradition* of philosophy. It is essentially unoriginal. Philosophy in a school means the doctrine or wisdom of the master or founder. Now, learning never takes place without the desire for understanding, so that philosophy in its other more radical sense, love of wisdom, cannot be absent from a school in which anyone thinks. Still, the dominant sense of philosophy in a school of philosophy is the sense of doctrine, and so, in a school, the answer given leads and directs the question posed.

But what is such a doctrine about? Another common but secondary use of the term "philosophy" may give us a clue. When we speak of a man as having a "philosophy of life," we seem to mean by "philosophy," answers—doctrine. May this not be significant? Consider that everyone is said to have, or to be capable of having, such a philosophy. Can the same be said of a philosophy of nature or of language? Not at all—or at least not so much. It is the chemist, the linguist—in short, specialists—who have such views. Perhaps others steeped in books and words, even in other subjects, do too. Why should this be so?

May it not be that knowing how to live concerns us all, immediately, as men? It is only by an argument, an argument for which Socrates is portrayed by Plato to have died, that a life devoted to the love of wisdom—philosophy in its root sense—can be shown to be the good life for men.

What bearing does all this have on the Epicurean school of philosophy? Just this; that a school which attracts students to a philosophy is a more promising enterprise if it takes philosophy more as "philosophy of life" and less as speculative, or as love of

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wisdom. It should come as no surprise, then, that Epicurus, who is remembered today as a precursor of modern natural science but whose school was a flourishing enterprise and a living tradition, should have subordinated all other branches of thought to ethics. Nor is it surprising to find that his disciples, Lucretius among them, should refer to him as the *Master*.

But let the master himself speak, for we have some of his very own words:

If our *dread* of the phenomena above us, our *fear* lest death concern us, and our inability to discern the limits of pains and desires were not *vexatious* to us, we would have no need of the natural sciences.

Consider how different the state of soul of the physicist is from Aristotle's: "All men, by nature, desire to know" becomes "a dread of experience vexes us, and hence we desire to know"! Epicurus is also remembered today as an advocate of pleasure; the adjective Epicurean, derived from his name, signifies one devoted to the pleasures of the flesh, and yet, once more, hear the master himself.

The end of all our actions is to free us from pain and fear. Once we have secured this, the storm of the soul is stilled.

We begin to see here what the life of pleasure actually amounts to!

When we say that pleasure is the end...we mean by pleasure, *the absence of bodily pain and inquietude of soul*. Pleasure is not an endless series of drunken carousals and gaiety. It is not enjoyment of fish and other varieties of the gourmet table that makes life pleasurable...Rather, it is sober thought and reflection, inquiry into...choice eliminating those opinions that bring the greatest agitation to the

soul...Of all this the beginning and chief good is prudence...prudence is more precious than philosophy itself.

Why not take the founder at his own word? Epicurus finds himself a man of delicate sensibility. The Cosmos, the gods, and the myths, upset him. According to Aristotle, philosophy begins in wonder. That wonder—wonder at the otherness and majesty of the world, both moral and natural—expresses itself in Epicurus' philosophy as a feeling of oppression. Oppression leads to resentment and rebellion. Lucretius' first mention of Epicurus is rich in the imagery of oppression and violent rebellion.

When human life lay *grovelling* in all men's sight, *crushed* to the earth under the *dead weight* of superstition whose *grim* features *loured menacingly* upon mortals from the four quarters of the sky, a man of Greece was first to raise mortal eyes in *defiance*, first to stand erect and brave the challenge. Fables of the gods did not *crush* him, nor the lightning flash and the *growling menace* of the sky. Rather, they quickened his manhood, so that he, first of all men, *longed to smash* the constraining locks of nature's doors. The vital vigor of his mind *prevailed*.

Lucretius is right in identifying a spirit of rebellion in Epicurus. Epicurus must cancel that otherness which expresses itself as *disease*.

Vain is the discourse of a philosopher which does not heal any suffering of man. For just as there is no profit in medicine if it does not expel the diseases of the body, so there is no profit in philosophy either, it does not expel the suffering of the soul.

Regarded positively, Epicurean philosophy promises self-suf-

ficiency; "*autarcheia*, independence, is the greatest of all possessions." This word *autarcheia* is a substantivized form made from the intensive *autos* and a verb *aecheo*, meaning, as a transitive verb, to ward off, keep off; as an intransitive, to be strong, be sufficient. The passive form may be translated, "to be satisfied with."

How can a man be self-sufficient with respect to nature, or his fellow men, or God? In particular, what can philosophy contribute to such self-sufficiency? Consider the knowledge of nature. What is known is, so to speak, tamed by that knowledge; its complete otherness, its alien character with respect to the self, is overcome. Thus, even if the independent and hostile otherness of nature cannot be subdued in practice, through technique, nonetheless, through a speculative physics a kind of mastery is achieved. Is speculative physics possible? Epicurus does not entertain any doubts: it must be possible to know nature. This "must" gives his explanation the character of self-deception. Now, self-deception is possible concerning theory; we can stubbornly hold onto any opinion whatever through self-will. It is much harder to deceive oneself about control over nature. Epicurus hasn't the stomach for this second campaign, or deception. We have to wait for modern materialism—I have Marx in particular in mind—before we reach cosmic engineering.

In the same way that otherness and power are banished from nature, so in ethics. Ethics includes justice and virtue, political and private goodness. The city involves other free individuals, who cannot be imagined away; they will act and think freely whatever I think of them, just as events in nature will happen whatever I think or wish. Trans-political goodness appears to rest on our relation to the divine. By denying the power of the Gods and the immortality of the soul, Epicurus triumphs, in thought, over the charms of virtue. Eternal and absolute justice, too, he denies, offering in its place a social contract and changing standards. The otherness of other men, however, cannot be destroyed by thought alone. And besides, like all men, the Epicureans certainly felt the need of human companionship. How is this need accommodated? By restriction of human relationships to that least other of all others, the friend.

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The predictable, reliable, same-as-I other, the friend, is thus central to Epicurean life. Brotherhood, the least affectionate, the most intellectual and equal of the family relations, is the metaphor the disciples apply to themselves. The master, Epicurus, says:

The wise man will not fall in love...  
The wise man will not marry and rear a family...  
He will not be active in politics...

But he also says,

He will, if needed, lay down his life for a friend.

More problematically, for Lucretius, at least, the master adds:

The wise man will not make poems.

## II

### *Poetry and Philosophy*

Is it possible for a poem to be philosophical? Is it proper for a philosopher to present doctrine in a poem? That Lucretius claims to be a poet cannot be denied. Consider these lines which occur near the end of Book I and are repeated exactly as the proem to Book IV:

...But high hope of fame has struck my heart with its sharp goad and in so doing has implanted in my breast the sweet love of the Muses. That is the spur that lends my spirit strength to pioneer through pathless tracts of their Pierian realm where no foot has ever trod before. What joy it is to light upon virgin springs and drink their waters. What joy to pluck new flowers and gather for my brow a glorious garland from fields whose blossoms were

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never yet wreathed by the Muses round any head. This is my reward for teaching on these lofty topics, for struggling to loose men's minds from the tight knots of superstition and shedding on dark corners the bright beams of my song that irradiate everything with the sparkle of the Muses.

This passage, in both books, immediately precedes the important figure of the cup of wormwood, a bitter but health-giving potion, smeared about its rim with honey. At present we merely note this figure; we shall return to it in the third part of this paper.

Calliope, the muse of heroic and epic poetry, or poetic inspiration generally, is invoked in these lines from Book VI:

For this task I invoke your aid, Calliope, most gifted of the Muses, tranquilizer of men and delight of gods. Point out my path along the last lap to the predetermined winning post, that by your guidance I may earn with eminent acclaim the victor's crown.

Our poet not only has composed a work in verse, but he takes pains to point it out—to claim that he is a poet. Moreover, he seems to think that special honor is due him because he is a new kind of poet. We wonder: In what does this novelty consist?

Is it possible for a poem to be philosophical? What does this question mean? Perhaps this: Can a fabrication, a composition of images, or imitations, be the work of a friend of wisdom? That is, can it be friendly to wisdom? Socrates, a shameless quoter and misquoter of poems, sharpens this question at the end of the *Republic* by pointing out that philosophy, unlike poetry, seeks to behold originals. The question then becomes, what friendship can there be between the way of seeking originals and the art of composing images? Put this way, it is hard to arrive at any other conclusion than Socrates' own—regretfully to banish the poets, charming though they be, from the city

which is founded by and ordered to philosophy. And yet, the author of the *Republic*, Plato, ends his dialogue—itsself a fabrication of images as well as a composition of arguments—with a myth.

Why would the philosopher do such things? I can see two possible reasons: *First*, the truth, or some aspect of it, may be somehow ineffable—words which reveal such truth could only be suggestive of what they really intend. There is a letter of Plato's, the 7th, in which he says this about his so called theory of forms—that it cannot be put in words.

*Second*, suppose philosophy means wisdom, and not the passionate search for wisdom. Moreover, let that wisdom be primarily wisdom about the conduct of life. Poetry could then fulfill a twofold purpose in the service of, and in harmony with, wisdom. It could correct the folly of common, pre-philosophic thought and sentiment, and it could attach the heart to the frame of mind and order of sentiments which constitute this wisdom and lead to happiness. This would be especially in order if the truth should appear unpalatable, if it should be in conflict with the natural dispositions of the human heart and the conventional notions of civilized men. If I have given the correct account of Epicurus as a philosopher, it is this second view of philosophical poetry that ought to prevail in Lucretius and not the need to transmit an ineffable wisdom. To see whether this is so, let us return to the poem itself.

### III

#### *A View of De Rerum Natura*<sup>1</sup>

*"Aeneadum genetrix, hominum dioumque voluptas, alma Venus"*

The poem begins with praise of Venus. "Mother," "delight," and "nourishing," she is called. Mother of the sons of Aeneas, of an already powerful race; no longer in childhood, nor yet in the summer of dominion and Empire, but rather in the stormy spring of youth. Delight of all, in that she gives life and life is good.

This is the book of world birth, in which the already born rejoice. Not the morning of creation. but the vernal equinox as returning image of that first morning. Vernal rebirth as the type of nature—Venus in her benevolent mask.

We look about, with the poet, at already born nature and find it benevolent and fruitful. The sea "buoys up our ships," and the earth "yields our food." Venus, the morning star, rising in the east before the sun, calms the sky and sea; the earth "flings up sweet flowers," and then—dawn; the return of the sun to earth and to its starting point in the sky. Not the morning of the world's birth but a moment of great sympathy with that morning, framed by a glow of sunlight in the east and Zephyr stirring from the west. All nature feels the same urge, "so that with passionate longing they reproduce their several breeds."

This impulse, the *longing to reproduce one's kind*, is the power Lucretius invokes to begin his poem, his teachings. It is the same longing that Socrates in the *Symposium* ascribes to the desire for everlasting life. Lucretius, too, harbors this desire. His first pictures of the poets, the men he is imitating, stress their immortality. Ennius' garland is "evergreen," his verses "eternal." Homer is "ever flourishing." Or again, here at the beginning of the poem he invokes Venus, "Give to the verses, Goddess, eternal charm."

*De rerum natura*: on the nature of things, on the birth of things. The nature of things as exposed by an account of the birth of things. This is the subject of the inquiry and the focus of Book I. And since the birth of birth is sexual love, this opening book abounds in the imagery of desire. Thus besides Venus herself and the vernal madness of animals, we find, on the level of the gods, a prayer for Venus to seduce and thereby subdue Mars, so that Rome, the poet, and his hearer, may have the chance for happiness.

The atomic theory, too, is born in Book I. The reasoning establishes two axioms: Nothing can ever be created by divine power out of nothing; there is no creation, no annihilation. Nature resolves everything into its first bodies and never reduces anything to nothing. From these two axioms, Lucretius deduces

the principles of natural being, the generative sources. This is an analysis, however, and not a synthesis. The "going back" is not in time, but in being. That is, nature is from atoms—Lucretius never uses this word, by the way—and void, not in the order of becoming, but in order of being. Lucretius generates the elements *in thought*. Their actual role in the generation of this world is to be shown in another book, Book V.

Even here, in establishing his two axioms, Lucretius makes his arguments in images of birth. Both creation and annihilation are refuted by the evidence of birth as we see it now in the already existent world.

These images of Venus, desire, and birth, are set off by two other images; one is of major interest in any account of nature: destruction. Destruction comes last. The book closes with an imagined catastrophe, not of the world as it is, but rather, of the world as Empedocles and, following him, some Stoics, imagine it to be. This imaginary destruction of a fictitious world darkens the dawn of Book I, but not totally. It passes over the spring sun like a cloud—insubstantial and transient. Lucretius has not yet told us, or Memmius, to whom the poem is addressed, that the day of doom, with which he refutes the world of Empedocles, will strike his own world, too.

The other image is the dual one of "honey and wormwood." Lucretius gives an account of this image, but it is a strange one. Is it satisfactory? The text, which is repeated in Book IV, reads:

My art is not without a purpose. Physicians, when they wish to treat children with a nasty dose of wormwood, first smear the rim of the cup with a sweet coat of yellow honey. The children, too young as yet for foresight, are lured by the sweetness at their lips into swallowing the bitter draught....In the same way our doctrine often seems unpalatable to those who have not sampled it, and the multitude shrink from it. That is why I have tried to administer it to you in the dulcet

strains of poesy, coated with the sweet honey of the Muses.

Now there are problems in trusting this explanation. First, what has Memmius swallowed that is so bitter? He has seen spring, Venus benevolent, a hope for immortality in poetry, and a reminder of this last in this very passage: "high hope of fame has struck my heart."

Furthermore, when a physician wishes to fool a child, he does not tell him how bitter the medicine will taste. Can this comparison of Memmius to a child be compete? It is more likely that Lucretius is warning Memmius against unintelligent acceptance of Epicurus' doctrine, since Lucretius looks for a friend in Memmius, or in any Epicurean, and not a child.

What can the wormwood signify? The passage which follows teaches that the universe is infinite, but the consequences of this are not drawn until Book II. There, the conclusions and their imagery will be bitter indeed. But here in Book I, the poet seems to have little by way of bitter medicine for Memmius to quaff. And for his own part, he expects

to light upon virgin springs and drink their waters...to pluck new flowers and gather for my brow a glorious garland from fields whose blossoms were never yet wreathed by the Muses round any head.

When these flowers fade, the wormwood will come to hand. In summary, Book I is rich in birth imagery in which the poet and the philosopher participate, siring progeny in enduring poetry and generations of disciples. Destruction and the bitter wormwood are prophetic and distributing exceptions to the otherwise sunny mood. As reasoning, the book is chiefly analysis to discover the principles or beginnings. What synthesis there is has not yet reached to compound substances or, as we might say, to chemistry. Lucretius has not built a world, even in speech, yet. As poetry, the book is framed by images of birth and de-

struction, but the destruction is of a false world. The eternal has been found. The elements as generative sources are laid bare. It remains to make the world.

## BOOK II

*The War of the Elements*

Even though he will face mortality and the awful expanse of eternity, Lucretius could draw hope from the survival of his offspring, in writing, and so in the readers' souls. That hope is weakened in the second book of *De Rerum Natura*. Just as "plodding age" was the only force which might stop his honeyed tongue in describing the generation of things, so age alone will certainly bring all to destruction and give even the poet a taste of wormwood. The force of time, disparaged in Book I, is added to the stasis of atom and void in Book II, to produce motion, change—the next levels of synthesis in the construction of nature, which will be completed in Book III.

Time and the elements give motion. The great image of Book II is an image of motion.<sup>2</sup> Book I was framed with opposing images of birth and destruction. So is Book II. The beginning: an enduring fortress, the philosopher secure in the tower, immobile and removed; the end: the destruction of a tower, "ramparts breached...and crumbling in ruins," and the farmer among his withered and decayed vines in a world destined for collapse. Between these static images—the fortress removed from violence, from motion, and the fortress ruined by it—comes the central image: war. Four times in the first part of this book, the imagery of war, specifically the legions in motion, appears. 1) In the opening vision, 2) in the appeal to Memmius' personal experience, 3) as a proof of the eternal motion of the atoms, and 4) in support of the claim that the whole need not appear to move, though the parts never rest.

Mighty legions waging mimic war...And yet there is a vantage ground, high among the hills, from

which all these appear immobile—a blaze of light, stationary upon the plain.

Let us delay a moment to reflect on the poetic achievement of these last few lines. They do more than illustrate and make plausible a piece of natural philosophy. They continue the martial tone which is corrective of the venereal mood of Book I. They connect the perspective of wisdom with the perspective of deceived sense, and thereby cast doubt upon the security of philosophic detachment, while at the same time they reflect the pleasure attendant upon occupying that post of detachment. But above all, they continue in a way strangely soft and pleasing, the imagery of violence and war which makes Book II the book of the seeds of death.

Lucretius will, like his master Epicurus, deny that we pass the gates of death. But, as Socrates points out in the *Symposium*, there are other ways of participating in immortality: offspring, fame, disciples, laws—all are ways of outliving our own time. If the nation, the race, the brotherhood live on, perhaps there will be a kind of untouched high place, a place of rest and security.

Mortals live by mutual interchange. One race increases by another's decrease. The generations of living things pass in swift succession, and like runners hand on the torch of life.

Would that this were so! For here would be eternity and generation for a poet to rejoice in. Here would be endless copies of this poem in nature's material, a race of Epicureans, grandfathered by Epicurus himself, fathered by Lucretius.

But the chain of reproduction itself will prove mortal. Near the end of this book, Lucretius exhorts Memmius, just as he did before revealing the wormwood in Book I.

Give your mind now to the true reasoning I have to unfold. A new fact is battling strenuously for

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your ears, a new aspect of the universe is striving to reveal itself.

With this invocation Lucretius prepares the wormwood. We begin with the seemingly innocent proposition contained in the honeyed cup of Book I, an unfinished argument which will be advanced here in Book II. The world is in infinite space. It has brother worlds. It is therefore an animal in a species. Like all animals, it will pass away. And if this world, that is, the organized world, passes away, the known truth—requiring as it does a body of a certain degree of organization, a sentient, living body—passes away. Poetry, wisdom, science—are all destined for destruction.

### BOOK III

#### *The Finite Individual*

Poetry is making. Lucretius is making a world in his poem, and although we have just seen that that world will pass away, it was not yet fully made in Book II. We have been moving up from elements to compounds to organisms. In Book II, we were at the level of inorganic chemistry. Not until Book III do we reach life. The destruction of the world in Book II required in its proof the analogy with animal life; it was therefore not a full proof but an anticipation. The full draught of wormwood comes with the realization of the death of the organism, the final topic of Book III.

Each of the first three books ends with a destruction: in I and II, of the whole; in III, of the individual. A single scheme or theory of nature, however, has been developing through these three books. That is, if Book I is the book of birth of the theory of nature, Book III sees its maturity, the explanation of life and soul. In modern terms, we have moved from physics to biology. This motion, from the simple to the complex, is not an historical account of the generation of the world. It is a philo-

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sophical account, and only through the making of the poet is it conceived as any generation at all.

## INTERLUDE

The historical generation and destruction of life, the world, and the city, are topics for the second set of books. What is expressed as formula in Book III is to be shown as history—past or present—in Books IV through VI. For example, the eternal constituents and the eternal whole are named in Book III, but the test of their eternal character comes in the historical destruction of the world in Book V.

### BOOK IV

#### *The Bitter Sweet*

The previous book has argued to the central doctrine of the mortality of the soul. In this argument, Lucretius has closely followed Epicurus, whose praises he had sung in the proem to that book. The fourth book begins by repeating the image of honey and wormwood. This repetition serves at least two purposes. It justifies the poetic presentation, the “honeying” of philosophy, and it suggests that the reader consider whether the bitter might not, in part, have become sweet. The first of these serves as a kind of correction to the poet’s inferiority as set out in the proem to Book III. There he compared himself to one who follows another’s steps, to a swallow contending with a swan, a kid racing a goat, and he calls Epicurus his father. Here, however, he repeats the lines, cited already, which praise his own art. Again, he crowns himself in reward for his own poetry.

The subjects dealt with in this book—images or films thrown off by things and erotic passion—are best understood by considering the cup as tasted. The chief reason for discussing images is not the explanation of vision and the other senses, but rather the explanation and consequent debunking of the visions of the dead and the gods. These visions terrify us. But if the dead are



no more, we can steel ourselves against this fear and achieve as a result *autarcheia*—self sufficiency. Mortality, the bitter, has become sweet. But this is not all. Venus, erotic passion, is shown to be harmful and disquieting. Eros, which Socrates seductively argues in the *Symposium* to be the root of philosophy, becomes its enemy. We are not to convert the insatiable desire to be one with the beloved into a higher eros—we are to overcome it. What is good in Venus is the simple pleasure—which may be had promiscuously—and the offspring. What must be renounced is the Love.

This image of the beloved then is what we term Venus. This is the origin of the thing called love, that drop of Venus' honey that first drips into our heart, to be followed by numbing heartache.

The sweet has become bitter.

The book ends with procreation. We turn here from the mortal animal to the ongoing species. This means that we have given scientific content to the Venus of Book I, the book of birth. We have, now, if not Venus hostile, at least Venus debunked. We also have, momentarily, the possible immortality of the species, a way, according to both Aristotle and Plato, for mortal beings to share in immortality. Is the species immortal?

The question is not settled here, though we know from the anticipation in Book II how it will be settled—against human hopes in favor of the insentient elements and void.

## BOOK V

### *The Great Cycle*

In Book V, Lucretius completes the whole cycle of the world. Because he can do this—because Epicurus taught him how—he and Epicurus assert their claims to divinity. They encompass the whole, from birth to destruction. The boast with which Lu-

cretius opens Book V takes on a more reasonable character when read this way.

Who has such power within his breast that he could build up a song worthy of this high theme and these discoveries? Who has such mastery of words that he could praise as he deserves the man who produced such treasures from his breast and bequeathed them to us? No one I believe, whose body is of mortal growth. If I am to suit my language to the majesty of his revelations, he was a god—a god indeed, my noble Memmius—who first discovered that rule of life that now is called 'philosophy'! Who by his art rescued life from such a stormy sea, so black at night, and steered it into such a calm and sunlit haven.

The first image is complemented by the final one. As the book closes, we behold the progressive advance of our race in language, agriculture, statesmanship, productive arts, until, "By their arts, they scaled the topmost peak." This Olympus has two peaks—the achievement of the master art "called philosophy," by which the Master "rescued life from such a stormy sea," and the artist who marries the prose of philosophy with his own mastery of words, thereby earning his own title, "No one whose body is of mortal growth." It is a claim to divinity! What happens between these sunlit peaks?

We are taken to the very bottom: to chaos and despair. "Memmius," he says, "I will not hold you off any longer with promises." Eyes open, we survey all nature from some height reminiscent of the philosopher's tower of outlook on humanity in Book II. How changed will this nature be from the gentle and fertile nature of Book I! First, a prophecy: Do you see all this, this excellent frame of things, earth, sea, sky? "All these a single day blot out." As if to soften the shock of these words, a long digression ensues. Lucretius compares himself, favorably, with Apollo's prophets. The gods are gently set aside, both as

judges and as authors of creation. How could they be responsible—and here we return to our survey, our overlook—for this nature? and the picture darkens. Venus turns her face to reappear in her second mask, hideous and harmful: “It is an observed fact that the universal mother is also the common grave.” The water turns stormy; earth, far from yielding up crops, must be split “with down-pressed plough”; the “glow diffused” becomes the fiery sun with intemperate heat. The amorous and sportive beasts are metamorphosed into “the fearsome brood of wild beasts, a menace to the human race.”

This nature, of frosts and gales, of crags and bogs, Lucretius dissolves. The first prophecy of doom was in Book II, and it is Book II's images that recur.

Look about you and you will see the very stones mastered by age, tall towers in ruin and their masonry crumbling; temples and images of the gods defaced, their destined span not lengthened by any sanctity that avails against the compacts of nature. The monuments of the great seem to ask us why we look there for immortality. The uprooted boulders rolling down a mountainside proclaim their weakness in the face of a lapse of time by no means infinite; for no sudden shock could dislodge them and set them falling if they had endured from everlasting, unbruised by all the assault and battery of time.

Towers and time. War, at Troy and elsewhere. The very phrase “warring elements” is used.

Since civil strife races among the world's warring elements on so vast a scale, it may be that their long battle will some day be decided.

Not only are individuals “children of time,” that is, mortal, but the very sky, sun, earth and sea—the props and frames of na-

ture. Even though the achievements of Epicurus and Lucretius are godlike, they too are mortal. Philosophy and poetry, too, will pass away.

The hard lesson of Book III is repeated. Only the three are immortal: atoms, void, and the whole. We rest now, at the very bottom, the end of this world. Where does Lucretius move next?

He takes a turn both logical and shocking. He builds the world, in imagination, out of chaos—but not out of this chaos, rather out of the past chaos which led to this world. Thus he can return to the summit at book's end. But he has another reason for returning to the past. He wants to image his own finitude, lack of power. In this temporal disjunction, he reveals his despair, his servitude to time. Neither he, nor Epicurus, nor the known truth—nothing but the immortal three—can pass through the chaos at the bottom of the cycle. He can only return within his own cycle to the source.

The intellectual achievement of the book is to take us, once, around the great cycle of the world, from perfection to chaos, present to future; from chaos to perfection, past to present. In the center, at the bottom, we realize the mortality even of the gods—Lucretius and Epicurus. We see the destruction of poetry and philosophy because of the destruction of the world.

Book V completes the themes in the other books, but it leaves the reader with the taste of honey. Epicurus and Lucretius—friends—sit on the top of one cycle, gods as much as there are gods. Epicurus himself lives in monuments, but even monuments and “tall towers” (cf. Book II) fall into ruin. Rock splits, records fall down—the poet as well builds his monument mockingly.<sup>3</sup> The obverse of Venus has been developed, but the finale, human progress and the arts have appeared in all their glory. Lest the reader be deceived by this glory, lest he rest his hopes on the city, one last taste of wormwood is necessary.

## BOOK VI

### *Wormwood—The Plague*

Book VI is the most sober and least songful book in the poem. Is it just for this reason that Lucretius invokes the Muse, Calliope, here? The sobriety of the book is shown by, among other things, the correction of the praise of Epicurus as divine which opened the fifth book. There he was a god—here he is a man. In like manner, the cultivation of cereal crops, attributed to Ceres in Book V, is more soberly assigned to human invention in Book VI.

Again, the dramatic cosmogony of the end of Book V, which, I think, anyone would call poetry, gives way, in the long central section of this book, to static and descriptive cosmology, or, as some editors prefer to call it, meteorology. The central passages in this book describe the thunderbolt not as the poets do, as the shaft of Jupiter, but as a natural phenomenon, precisely to debunk the celestial thunderer. The arguments are those of Aristophanes' sophisticated and physiological Socrates, absent the high spirits and madcap pacing which render Socrates so comical.

To be sure, the poem does not cease to follow in measured and euphonious syllable, but here, more than anywhere else, what Aristotle says in the *Poetics* of the works of Parmenides and Empedocles most temptingly applies to Lucretius—namely that he has put natural philosophy in verse. Empedocles, incidentally, invokes that same muse, Calliope, in his own philosophical poem, *On Nature*. And, of all the ancients, only the two venerable atomists, Democritus and Epicurus, receive more praise from Lucretius than Empedocles, who alone of the three writes poetry.

I have spoken already of the laudatory poetry of the poem. For what, precisely, is Epicurus praised? This it would seem: When mankind has reached the summit of art, the city, Athens, they found their cup of pleasure defiled with a foul savor—an inordinate fear and desire. These he limited by revealing the truth about nature. Lucretius does not say how this works. If,

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however, we have been attentive, we know how. Both are limited by mortality. The consequence is expressed by an extended simile: men without natural science are like children in the dark who fear the unknown. As their fears are banished by sunlight, so ours are banished by the Epicurean account and Lucretian vision of nature—*Naturae Species Ratioque*. There is no mention of banished desire. This simile has appeared twice before, in identical words, and part of it a third time. Lucretius repeats nothing of similar length so often. Here is an instance of poetical honey—not because it is specifically original or delightful—but because it makes the sweet precede the bitter. Epicurus' medicine limits our hopes as well as our fears—as we have seen in the previous book.

This medicine as wormwood is the final image of the sixth book and of the entire poem. As the final picture, it is to be compared with the first—benevolent Venus. This picture, borrowed in nearly every detail from Thucydides, though with significant omissions, is the plague of Athens—nature malevolent. Athens, the type of the city, has been portrayed as generator of law, prosperity, and philosophy. Lest anyone have faith in the first two, we see a spectacle that only philosophy can account for but not transcend. The last image Lucretius presents us, the hideous spectacle of the plague that ruined Athens. The dregs of the bitter cup.

### EPILOGUE

I feel some remorse at the difficulty of this paper: it is occasioned by my resolve to follow the path of Lucretius' long and complex poetic composition. I offer a prosaic penance—a simple review of my central claims.

1. Epicurus is not a natural philosopher, neither is he a poet—his doctrine is negative, ethical, and goes against the heart.
2. A) Lucretius, on the other hand, is a great poet—his poem

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presents the Epicurean doctrine in images and an order designed to go less against the heart.

b) Since Epicureanism is less a search for wisdom than an effort to escape from an unhappy sense of dependence, spells and incantations suitably accompany its arguments. This is what makes a poetical presentation of its doctrine a great work.

c) Lucretian poetry does not attempt to rise to the ineffable, but rather to correct and form the desires of the heart and the habits of the imagination against their natural and customary bent. It is a tale intended, though mistakenly, to make us better and wiser, calmer and more cheerful in the face of an indifferent universe.

3. The main thing we can learn from Lucretius and Epicurus is not what scientific materialism comes to—since they are not really scientists—but what humanism and especially the desire for the free self come to, even when pleasure is expressly embraced. Epicureanism, in spite of itself, shows the transcendent character of our natural hopes, since it remains a bitter doctrine, unnatural in its pessimism. At the level of the heart alone these teachers of selfishness show us that pure autonomy is profoundly unsatisfactory.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> At this point, a fairly detailed knowledge of the poem is in large measure presumed. I have used the widely available Latham translation (Penguin Books) and, as will appear, have concentrated on the opening passages of each of the six books.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Thucydides, who calls the Peloponnesian War the greatest motion in history.

<sup>3</sup> This sentence is taken from Robinson Jeffers' poem "To the Stone-Cutters," which—in 10 terse lines—states much of what I argue in this essay:

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Stone-cutters fighting time with marble, you fore-defeated /  
Challengers of oblivion / Eat cynical earnings, knowing rock splits,  
records fall down, / The square-limbed Roman letters / Scale in the  
thaws, wear in the rain. The poet as well / Builds his monument  
mockingly; / For man will be blotted out, the blithe earth die, the  
brave sun / Die blind and blacken to the heart: / Yet stones have  
stood for a thousand years, and pained / thoughts found / The  
honey of peace in old poems.