

Lucretius, *The Nature of Things*

CVSP 201

“Poetry as argument, poetry as plea for a quiet peace”

D.J. Wrisley
Civilization Sequence Program
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Titus **Lucretius Carus** (98-55 BCE) was a poet-philosopher of the 1st century Roman republic and the author of a didactic epic, *The Nature of Things* (*De Rerum natura*). He is a follower of Epicurus, the 4th century BCE Greek philosopher who advocated the value of a *life of quiet contemplation far away from the corruption of politics and human society*.



In this work Lucretius accomplishes *three major tasks*:

- (1) he brings together poetry and philosophy, doing something that very few have done, making an argument in beautiful verse!
- (2) he blends scientific inquiry with an ethics of leisure and a rejection of fear
- (3) he redefines the universe in natural, rather than supernatural terms

WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF EPIC?

- (1) a rhyming poem
- (2) a story written in lofty, poetic language
- (3) a focus on a central hero who makes a long journey confronting enemies and nature
- (4) a poem about the origin and future of a culture
- (5) a hero whose destiny is in the hands of a supernatural force (the gods)

Introduction of an “epic” Epicurus:

“When human life lay on the ground obscenely, in full view, Prostrate, crushed beneath the weight of Superstition, ... the first among them who dared raise / His human eyes to her was Greek, the first man to withstand her... *He was the first man who desired / To break the close-barred gates of Nature down. The vital force of his intelligence prevailed, and he advanced his course / Far past the blazing bulwarks of the world, and roamed the whole / immeasurable Cosmos in his mind and in his soul.* / In triumph he returns to us, and brings us back this prize: / To know what things can come about, and what cannot arise, / And what law limits the power of each, with deep-set boundary stone. / Therefore it is the turn of Superstition to lie prone, / Trod underfoot, while by his victory we reach the heavens.” (1: 62-79)

How does Epicurus’ voyage differ from other epics?

- 1) it is voyage in the mind, a philosophical voyage
- 2) this poem does not tell a story
- 3) the gods play no role in human life

WHAT CAN HEROISM BE IN A WORLD WHERE THE GODS ARE SO FAR FROM HUMAN LIFE?

Chronology of 1st c. BCE Rome

100 - riots in Rome; two public officials murdered. Caesar born.

98 - Lucretius born

91 - Sulla marches on Rome, and a bloody Civil War begins.

85 - Cicero’s *On Invention, Rhetoric*; also records Epicurean dialogues

82 - Sulla becomes dictator. Arrests and executes more than 4000 key citizens, 40 senators.

79 - Sulla rearranges Republic with laws, retires to private life

71 - Spartacus’ massive slave revolt put down. 6000+ are crucified and their bodies displayed along the Appian Way.

70 - birth of Virgil, author of the *Aeneid*

64 - Roman annexation of Syria and Lebanon from Seleucids;

58 - Gaius Memmius becomes praetor; *On the Nature of the Universe* published by Cicero (?)

15 - Augustus settles in Phoenicia; construction begins on Roman Temple of Jupiter at Baalbek (Heliopolis)

**WHO WAS EPICURUS AND WHAT DID
LUCRETIUS BORROW FROM HIS THINKING?**

Epicurus was an Athenian philosopher (341-270 BCE). Lucretius uses the following principles from his thought:

- (1) all of natural science rests on the evidence of the senses, we come to know things via our senses.
- (2) a theory of atoms and particles which make up the visible universe, all of which are not visible to the naked human eye.
- (3) an acknowledgement that the gods exist, but a denial of their importance in the lives of men
- (4) the idea that death awaits us at any time, so we ought to live life the best we can before death (*carpe diem*, seize the day).
- (5) a moral theory of happiness, which puts pleasure, tranquility and contemplation above all other things.

SUPERSTITION, LIFE AND DEATH

A. If the gods do not interfere in our lives, then we do not need to live in fear of their retribution. Dispelling superstition is the same as dispelling the fear in which we live our lives.

B. There is no afterlife. Mythical characters do not exist, but instead, *the idea of them exists inside of us*. We have created the stories of them suffering in the world of myth to explain the way we suffer in life. Cf. demystification of the examples of Tityus and Sisyphus in Book 3.

“No one is given life to own, we all hold but a lease.” (3:971)

C. The absence of the fear of death allows us to imagine a life free from worry and pain of worry.

D. Life has no *telos*, that is, no predetermined direction, no ultimate end, no destiny.

There is no “ghost in the machine.”

CLINAMEN, THE “SWERVE” OF ATOMS

There is no ultimate end and order is not increasing.

“When bodies fall through empty space / Straight down, under their own weight, at a random time and place, / They swerve a little. Just enough of a swerve for you to call / It a change of course.” (2: 217-221).

Clinamen

- Means man is not the slave of a determined world, but rather ‘lord of himself’
- Guarantees human free will
- Sets out a powerful principle for creation in the universe

LUCRETIUS ON RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY: “One thing I am concerned about: you might, as you commence / Philosophy, decide you see impiety therein, / And that the path you enter is the avenue to sin. / More often, on the contrary, it is *Religion* breeds / Wickedness and that has given rise to wrongful deeds...” (I: 80-85)

The hymn to Venus: an example of close reading

**A. “Life-stirring Venus, mother of Aeneas and of Rome,
Pleasure of men and gods, you make all things beneath the dome
Of sliding constellations teem, you throng the fruited earth
And the ship-freighted sea – for every species comes to birth
Conceived through you, and rises forth and gazes on the light.” (I: 1-5)**

- Venus as mother of Rome, Epicurean pleasure, principle of nature, muse, etc...

**B. “So eagerly does each pant after you, so do they heed,
Caught in the chains of love, and follow you wherever you lead.
All through the seas and mountains, torrents, leafy-rooted abodes
Of birds, and greening meadows, your delicious yearning goads
The breast of every creature, and you urge all things you find
Lustily to get new generations of their kind.
Because alone you steer the nature of things upon its course...” (I: 16-22, emphasis mine)**

- an example of the passionate, poetic language of Lucretius
- Venus leads all things to an end, Venus as sensual/generative
- Venus as a poetic embodiment of Nature?

**C. “For you only can favour mortal men with peace, since Mars,
Mighty in Arms, who oversees the wicked works of wars,
Conquered by Love’s everlasting wound, *so often lies*
Upon your lap, and gazing upwards, feasts his greedy eyes
On love, his mouth agape at you, Famed Goddess, as he tips
Back his shapely neck his breath hovering at your lips.
And as he leans upon your holy body, and you reach
Your arms around him Lady, sweet-talk him with honeyed speech,
Pleading for a quiet peace for Romans...” (I: 31-40, emphasis mine)**

-The lusty love-making of Mars and Venus, honeyed speech (i.e. poetry) as a plea of peace of mind.
-the sexual encounter between Mars and Venus as primal drama of the universe

Thought Questions for the Lucretius:

- What are the connections between the two civilizations—Rome and Greece?
- Is the philosophy of ancient Rome simply derivative of Greek philosophy?
- How can we understand contemplation as a way of fighting off chaos?
- By taking away both the idea of a purpose and an end in nature, how does Lucretius understand history?
- What does Lucretius see as the future of Rome?
- How long can an empire last if its men withdraw away from engagement and politics into contemplation?
- If Mars and Venus’ perennial embrace represents conflicting tendencies in the world, what does this mean for men in history?
- Can peace and love truly be brought to Rome? If so, how?
- Can that city assert itself despite the forces greater than it?
- Can a human city, like Lucretius’ universe, last forever?