Lucretius,

*De rerum natura*

(*The Nature of Things):*

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

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http://tinyurl.com/Lucretiushandout

http://tinyurl.com/Lucretiusclouds
The importance of Lucretius

• Lucretius brings together the worlds of poetry and philosophy
  – his poetry makes a philosophical argument!
• he blends scientific inquiry of the universe with an ethical theory
  – understanding the material elements of the universe helps us live richer lives!
• he redefines the object of human marvel and admiration, from the supernatural to the natural
  – Stop worrying about the gods, look into nature!
A word cloud of the Leonard translation of Lucretius’ The Nature of Things
Al Jazeera vs Al Akhbar, top stories on Syria 12 April 2016
A world cloud of Lucretius’ Nature of Things – with highlighting circles
A word cloud of Lucretius’ Nature of Things – highlighted again
Lucretius and Ancient Rome

Aspects of today’s lecture:

• Lucretius the poet
• 1st century BCE Roman history
• aspects of the poem
• Macro-readings of Lucretius’ language
• Brief comparison and contrast with other readings you have done this semester
Lucretius and 1st c. BCE Rome

• Adapted elements of Greek thought.
• Wrote “our land is in her hour of need.” (1:43)
• Was disillusioned with the glorious claims of republic, and empire, as well as the corruption of his day
• Does not put his society on trial, does not discuss an ideal society.
What do you think a poet like Lucretius, disillusioned with his city, and disappointed by corruption in his time, would do?

1. He would write a satirical book about it.
2. He collect his family and travel.
3. He would retreat into a philosophical life.
4. He would start an anti-corruption party.
• Examined “by what principle the sun and moon run on their courses / and all phenomenon upon the earth, and governing forces” (1:128-129)

• “these shadows of the mind, [which] must be swept away / Not by rays of the sun nor by the brilliant beams of day / But by observing Nature and her laws.” (1:146-148)
Poetry of Argument - Latin didactic epic

image: translation of Lucretius, Englished in 1651
A Google n-gram of “Lucretius”
Epic description of 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.”

Lucretius, I: 62-79
Lucretius’ work versus epic

• It is a philosophical voyage; he “roamed the whole / immeasurable Cosmos in his mind”
• This poem is not primarily narrative, that is, it does NOT tell a story
• The gods play no significant role in human life
Word cloud based on Maureen Gallery Kovacs’ translation available at ancienttexts.org
A word cloud of Samuel Butler’s translation of the Odyssey
Word cloud from Storr translation (Loeb edition) available at ancient-mythology.com
A word cloud of the Leonard translation of Lucretius’ The Nature of Things
Lucretius and Religion

• “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)
Question #2 – Comprehension

Who is the Greek “hero” of Lucretius’ philosophical poem?

1. Superstition
2. Epicurus
3. Nature
4. Philosophy
Question #3 : Thought question

If the gods no longer control us, which answer do you think best describes what they are doing now...?

1. They have disappeared
2. They live in far away mountains
3. They sit on Olympus drinking ambrosia
4. They have died
Other “non-clickable” questions raised by Lucretius

• If the gods no longer control us, what is the source of what happens in the world? Man’s will? Chance?

• What can an ethical life—a life directed towards happiness—be like in a world without divine influence? What happens to ethics in a materialist framework?

• What can life, or even heroism, be like in a world without the influence of the gods?
Epicureanism: 
Greek Thought Reinvented Across the Centuries

• Principle beliefs

1. Natural science rests on the evidence of the senses
2. A theory of what is invisible to the naked eye that makes up the visible universe
3. The gods exist, but they have no importance in the lives of men
4. The principle of carpe diem (seize the day).
5. Moral theory of happiness – tranquility

• Some followers/admirers of Epicurus (341–270 B.C.)

• Lucretius (99–55 B.C., Epicurean poet)
• Cicero (106–43 B.C., critic who recorded Epicurean monologues)
• Horace (65–8 B.C., poet)
• Diogenes Laertius (early 200s A.D., biographer of Epicurus)
• Pierre Gassendi (17th c.), French opponent of Descartes
• Thomas Jefferson (1743 - 1826), 3rd president of the United States
Superstition and the Gods

• Superstition: believing too much in the importance of the gods and fearing their retribution.

• They are “removed from us and far from mortal strife.” (46).
Question #4 : Inference

Lucretius says that superstition means believing too much in the importance of the gods and fearing their retribution. What is the logical conclusion you might draw from this?

1. The gods do not require sacrifice.
2. They are indifferent to our morality.
3. There is no reason to fear an afterlife.
4. The gods come to be seen like forces in the natural world.
5. All of the Above
Superstition, cont.

• No reason to fear.
• Dispelling reliance on religion -> dispelling human fear
• There is no afterlife.
Tityus

- Odysseus sees Tityus, the son of Earth, in the underworld perpetually devoured by vultures. *(Odyssey, 11: 576-581)*

- “There is no Tityus prostrate in Hell, who’s ripped apart / Forever by flapping vultures. Nor when they probe his giant heart / Is there sufficient sustenance for them on which to dine / Throughout eternity” *(Lucretius 3:91-92)*
Sisyphus

- Myth of Sisyphus: must roll the rock up the hill (Odyssey, 11:593-600)
- We have created the stories of suffering in myth to explain the way we suffer in life.
- Humans, like Sisyphus, are “driven to seek power—an illusion after all—which is never given” (3:996-997)
Superstition and the Gods

- Superstition: believing too much in the importance of the gods and fearing their retribution.

- There is no afterlife.
  - Debunking of myths
  - Demystification of legends

- The absence of the fear of death allows us to imagine a life free from worry and the pain of worry.
Question #5: Speculation

After all I have said so far, on what do you think Lucretius is going to base his understanding of the world?

1. writing on cave walls
2. the words of oracles
3. A theory of particles
4. a hybrid theory somewhere between Plato and Aristotle
Particle theory (atoms)

The *visible* universe is made up of *invisible* component particles

- **Axioms** of Lucretius’ atomic theory of the universe
  - *nature resolves everything into its component atoms and never reduces anything to nothing*
  - *there is vacuity in things*
  - *material objects are of two kinds: atoms and compounds of atoms.*

- ALSO the **building blocks for his ethical theory**

- the **universe is one large stable system.**
  - It neither shrinks nor expands.
  - The number of atoms neither decreases nor increases.
  - Order is constantly being destroyed and recreated.
Telos

Lucretius evacuates the universe of *telos*, the belief that a supernatural force is determining action on earth and that all things which happen have a purpose, and of the importance of the gods

− There is no “ghost in the machine.”
Clinamen

- Democritus’ (mid-5th century) model of the universe:
  - atoms moved through space with absolute linearity.
- Lucretius following Epicurus: Atoms do not always fall in a straight line.

- “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).
Importance of Clinamen

• (1) man is not the slave of a determined world, but rather ‘lord of himself’
• (2) human free will exists
• (3) a powerful principle for creation in the universe

For Lucretius the accidental encounter is the primary cause of motion and action in the natural world. This is fundamentally different from a principle of motion leading us toward a final end.
Question #6 : Factual Recall

What is *telos*?

1. the Greek word for atom
2. the “direction” in which the gods are taking us
3. a synonym of nature
4. a bitter syrup served in a Greek frappe
Define Clinamen

1. the linear movement of atoms
2. complex groups of atoms, i.e. molecules
3. Lucretius’ sister
4. The random swerve of atoms
Question #8 : Factual Recall

Which of these is not a consequence of clinamen?

1. it introduces uncertainty into systems
2. it guarantees change in the universe
3. it makes the accidental encounter into a principle of creation
4. it means the order of the universe is always decreasing
“Clinamen” (2005)
Carlos Planchon
Lucretius Book 3
Lucretius on human history

“[T]his world is the product of Nature, ... things colliding into each other by pure chance / ...; no aim in view, at random, blind, / Till ... certain atoms suddenly combined / [the source] Of earth, of sea, of sky, of all the species of living beings.” (2:1058-1063)

Phases in the development of the mankind:
- Plants → animals → monsters → bush people → humans
- Monstrosities were created, mutants, accidents of nature, but not the sort described in classical mythology.

Phases in the development of human society:
- communal living → spoken language → mutual alliances → invention of property → discovery of gold → human corruption → poverty/piety/fear
Disasters in human history

- When “the whole earth moves beneath our feet, and cities tumble, / To the ground, hit hard cities badly shaken, threaten to crumble, / Is it surprising mortal men are suddenly made humble, / And are ready to believe in the awesome might and wondrous force / Of gods, the powers at the rudder of the universe?” (5:1236-1240).
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