

A READING OF  
LUCRETIUS'  
*DE RERUM NATURA*



LEE FRATANTUONO



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For J. D. B. Hamilton,  
with deep respect and abiding affection





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## Preface

I first read selections of Lucretius' mystifying and enigmatic epic of the universe in the spring of 1993, in a wonderfully congenial undergraduate seminar offered by the late Professor Gerard Lavery. Our text was the 1942 edition of Leonard and Smith—and our knowledge of such figures as Epicurus and Ennius minimal. But our sense of wonder at the strange and haunting loveliness of the poet of the nature of things was profound.

My term paper for that course was on the influence of Lucretius on Lucan, a paper that today is an embarrassment to revisit. I was fascinated that spring by the idea that Lucretius' poem was the first surviving integral epic of ancient Rome—and I was intrigued by the idea that later epic poets surely found both inspiration and challenge in the elegantly beautiful, disturbingly obscure hexameters of the *Aeneadum genetrix*. And the memory of many a serene night in Loyola Hall with the poet of the atoms and void is fresh and pleasant.

A complete reading of the epic came only in the summer of 1996—and, in the fall of 2007, the first chance to teach my own undergraduate class on the poet. By then, work on Virgil occupied most of my time, and I was reminded every day of the pervasive influence of Lucretius on later Latin epic. And so in some sense the idea was always present that I would return to Lucretius, to engage in a closer study of his eerie verses.

*A Reading of Lucretius' De Rerum Natura* is another idiosyncratic introduction to a difficult epic. Like its predecessors, it proceeds verse by verse through the poem, offering a commentary or *explication de texte*. It assumes that epics are meant to be read from start to finish, without excerpting and abridgment. Lucretius has not been the subject of much in the way of introductory treatments and surveys (indeed in some ways certain aspects of his work seem to mitigate against the attempt); in this regard I have aimed at

producing something on a scale more akin to Masson's *fin de siècle* work than the briefer, exemplary volumes of Monica Gale and John Godwin. As with my previous introductions to Latin epics, I have endeavored to make the book appealing to a wide and diverse range of audiences. Still, an already long book would have been even longer had all the Latin been given a translation. There are outstanding English versions of Lucretius available: those of Melville, Smith, and Stallings (in alphabetic, not judgmental order) would constitute my triad of recommended options. Kany-Turpin has a wonderful edition with French verse translation and brief, good notes published by Aubier/Flammarion.

Works such as this inevitably have a good deal of paraphrase, a feature that some find useful for grounding oneself in an argument, and which others find less than pleasing. In a change from its predecessors, *A Reading of Lucretius' De Rerum Natura* offers brief titles and divisions through the chapters to make the progress of the argument through the long sections easier to follow (and rather in the tradition of the Lucretian manuscript *capitula*). The present volume does not presuppose knowledge of its three predecessors, but those familiar with the arguments of the *Madness* volumes will find frequent connections (especially in the notes) to theories and speculations raised there, and in several respects this book can serve as introduction to that trilogy.

The Latin epic with which Lucretius was most in competition was Ennius' *Annales*, a work that has sadly not been treated well by the ravages of time. That poem was what we might call a narrative epic, a "story" that proceeded from a starting point in time and advanced through the course of the years. In the reading of Lucretius offered in these pages, the poet of the *rerum natura* offers both didactic exposition and narrative commentary on Rome and the world; his poem is in that sense "greater" than Ennius' because of its broader scope and more comprehensive commentary: an omnibus epic for the republic that is now the *de facto* master of the known world. I have attempted to show how the more stereotypically "scientific" passages fit together with the more conventionally "poetic" sequences to produce an epic achievement that displays unity and organization, narrative thrust and progress, and careful attention to the balanced presentation of themes and analysis thereof. Lucretius is herein taken seriously as an epic master of the first order, as a poetic composer who justly merits the garland crown of which he sings—and certainly not the verdict of "rebarbative" that was once applied to his work.

And so this book is not, I should make clear, a primer in Greek philosophy. Nor is it a detailed account of the debt owed by this or that later poet to Lucretius (though such echoes and allusions pepper its pages). Indeed, the influence of Lucretius on each of his successors would merit a monograph apiece. One will not find a treatment of how Lucretius is or is not a "good"

Epicurean, or the relationship of the poet to his Epicurean contemporaries. The present study is a “reading” of the poem by someone who has been haunted by its verses for over twenty years, and who has read the works that succeeded it in the Latin epic tradition many times over. If it has a goal, it is to instill a deeper love for Lucretius in his readers, and along the way to raise questions and to offer avenues for further inquiry. But while it is not an introduction to the thought of Epicurus, or of his contemporaries and philosophical predecessors, it is to be hoped that those who approach Lucretius from the discipline of philosophy will find material of interest in these pages, and a commentary on a great poet that is of value to those whose time is more often spent with prose than verse.

And, like any work on an ancient author, there is an acute awareness throughout of the fluid state of scholarship on the text of the poet; Lucretius’ epic presents significant difficulties of a textual nature, and the notes reflect the large number of places where the reading is uncertain, and where there is a question of a lacuna or other more or less serious textual crux that challenges ingenuity and invites sober reflection. The pages of this book make liberal use of subjunctives and cautionary adverbs—and also of the at least occasionally valuable tool that is speculation. Lucretius more than once enjoins his reader not to be surprised or in a state of marvel about this or that terrestrial or celestial phenomenon—and yet never have I experienced a greater sense of *wonder* from a Latin poet than in the experience of reading his hexameters.

The notes and bibliography list a vast range of Lucretian scholarship. I would like in particular to acknowledge my debt to the work of David Butterfield; Diskin Clay; and Monica Gale; among the commentaries, Fowler’s magisterial edition on the opening sections of Book 2; Kenney’s revised Book 3; and Brown’s splendid edition on the closing movements of Book 4. Lucretius is an exceedingly difficult author, and all those who have endeavored to help his readers achieve greater understanding and appreciation of the poet deserve to some extent our appreciation (and often sympathy).

It is a pleasure to express gratitude to several individuals who made the writing of this book easier by their help and support, by the example of their work and generosity in discussing questions, and by virtue of their friendship: Timothy Joseph; Karl Maurer; Lisa Mignone; Blaise Nagy; Michael Putnam; Alden Smith; Caroline Stark; Cynthia Susalla; David Sweet; and Richard Thomas. Michael McOsker of the University of Michigan was a student in my Fall 2007 Lucretius class—and he has saved me from many an error, especially on anything Epicurean. My former professor and fellow bibliophile David Sider found me my edition of Bailey before it had been brought back into print, and his aid and counsel through graduate school made my work possible.

A special word of thanks is due to Marissa Popeck, now of the University of Vermont, who was a significant help to me in the process of completing this project—not least by reading the entire manuscript when it was in a quite nascent state. Marissa’s insights and wisdom never fail to make difficult situations more manageable, and her assistance has been invaluable. She has helped me both to understand Lucretius and to appreciate his epic with greater clarity and refinement of vision. She is a promising scholar of both Lucretius and the ancient medicine that recurs throughout the epic as a favorite metaphor of the poet.

As with all my work, the inspiration, encouragement, and example of Seth Benardete are palpably felt. Conversations with Seth on the relationship of Lucretius to Lucan (and Manilius) are cherished memories of a happy time. I was privileged to be in the final Lucretius class with Professor Lavery, and the final Lucan one with Professor Benardete.

The dedication of this book is in acknowledgment of an old debt. Professor John D. B. Hamilton was an undergraduate advisor and mentor at Holy Cross, a learned and patient guide through courses on Greek Lyric Poetry, Aeschylus, and Horace’s *Odes*. It is a pleasure and honor to be able to offer this reflection on Lucretius’ epic in grateful appreciation for all he has done for me in the course of more than two decades.

The present volume was completed on February 4, 2015—a day after Professor Lavery’s *onomastico*, and on the eve of Saint Agatha, the great patroness of Catania and defender against the perils of Etna. It is hoped that this book will be of some help to others who embark on the harrowing, and yet ultimately serene quest for truth that Lucretius’ epic challenges his readers to pursue.

Lee Fratantuono  
Delaware, Ohio, U.S.A.  
February 4, 2015

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## Introduction

Nepos' *Atticus* says that Lucius Junius Calidus was—at least in the author's estimation—by far the most elegant poet of Rome after the death of Lucretius and Catullus.<sup>1</sup> The high praise of the biographer cannot be fairly evaluated; Calidus is barely a distant memory even to specialists of late republican poetry. Titus Lucretius Carus—the author of a mysterious epic on the nature of things—might have appreciated the Nepotic sentiment; fashions and tastes change, and works of literature and the arts are lost through the relentless course of the ages. We have a fair amount of Catullus' poetry, and a more or less complete long poem of Lucretius—the earliest surviving Roman epic that is in a state of reasonable integrity. That epic poem—the so-called *De Rerum Natura* or *On the Nature of Things*—has cast a spell of wonder from antiquity through the Renaissance and to the present day.

As for contemporary Roman opinions on Lucretius, we have Cicero's letter to his brother Quintus of February 54 BC, which ends with the oft-quoted observation *Lucreti poemata ut scribis ita sunt, multis luminibus ingeni, multae tamen artis. sed cum veneris. virum te putabo si Sallusti Empedoclea legeris; hominem non putabo.*<sup>2</sup>

We have no idea what Cicero and his brother discussed about Lucretius (or the lost *Empedoclea* of Gnaeus Sallustius); scholars have exhaustively dissected every possible nuance of the passing reference to our poet in a winter letter of the great Roman statesman. The very degree of the analysis reflects the paucity of information we possess about the epic poet of the nature of the universe; his exact dates of birth and death are only some of the mysteries that confront those interested in constructing a biography for the poet. Dates of 98 to 55 BC for a lifespan are plausible—but absent new information, there can be no certainty.

If we can believe Jerome's entry on Lucretius in the *Chronicon*,<sup>3</sup> the most important detail and salient feature about the poet's life is madness and insanity. According to the celebrated text, the poet was driven mad by a love potion (*amatorio poculo in furorem versus*), and he composed his poem *per intervalla insaniae*—only to commit suicide at the age of forty-four.<sup>4</sup> The story has undeniable appeal; it “matches” possible sentiments of anti-Lucretian feeling on the part of educated Christians, and it “accords” (in at least something of an ironic way) with the poet's attack on the hazards of passionate eroticism in the fourth book of his epic.<sup>5</sup> It is a note of dramatic flair amid dry details of birth, death, and poetic achievement for an ancient *curriculum vitae*.

And as if the love story and the suicide were not enough, Jerome also alludes to the involvement of Cicero in the “emendation” of the poem: *aliquot libros . . . quos postea Cicero emendavit*—a less theatrical detail in the obituary, but one fraught with significant problems all the same. As with the text of the aforementioned letter, scholars have debated exactly what is to be inferred from this brief reference to the work of Cicero (or, less likely, his brother) in “emending” the poems (or books?) of Lucretius.<sup>6</sup>

Noteworthy too is the detail in the so-called *Vita Donati* that Virgil assumed the *toga virilis* on the day that the poet Lucretius died.<sup>7</sup> The tradition—whether true or not—does draw a powerful association between the two composers of epic verse; Virgil is seen as succeeding to the mantle of his Epicurean predecessor.<sup>8</sup>

The madness referenced in Jerome's notice of the poet may have been inspired at least in part by the tribute of Statius (*Silvae* 2.7.76) to the *docti furor arduus Lucreti*—the sublime or lofty madness (whether of poetic inspiration or not) of the learned Lucretius.<sup>9</sup> Fury and madness are also recurring images in the poet's epic; the *De Rerum Natura* in some ways sees fury as a peculiar and proper possession of humanity.

In Statius' *Silvae* Lucretius appears in a Calliopean miniature catalogue of Roman epic poets; he follows Ennius and precedes Atacine Varro and Virgil.<sup>10</sup> The poet of the universe is associated with both lofty heights and madness; indeed both images will appear prominently in his epic, especially in the closing third of the epic (Books 5–6).

We pillage the poet's work for more information about the *Mensch* at our own peril.<sup>11</sup> The fact remains that we know next to nothing about our author, and the question of whether or not he liked dogs or enjoyed mountain hiking is ultimately without definitive answer, let alone much relevance for an appreciation of his epic and its influence.<sup>12</sup>

Tantalizing (if meager) evidence remains, then, to give some hint as to what a few men of the classical and late antique world thought of Lucretius; certainly stories of poisoning and erotic fury—possibly inspired by over-imaginative readers of this or that passage of the poet's work—left their



impression on later artists.<sup>13</sup> The most powerful of these acts of *hommage* is probably that of Virgil: *felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas, / atque metus omnis et inexorabile fatum / subiecit pedibus strepitumque Acherontis avari* (G. 2.490–492).<sup>14</sup> Certainly the immense influence of Lucretius on later Latin epic poetry cannot be overestimated.<sup>15</sup> There is no Latin epic of the classical era after Lucretius that does not reflect the powerful and profound inspiration of the haunting and eerie song of the atoms and void—indeed, in no small way we shall see that Lucretius’ *primordia* or first beginnings are nothing less than the atoms of Roman epic.

Study of Lucretius demands careful consideration of the work of his own poetic antecedents—certainly Homer and Ennius are prominent among them—and also the philosophical figures whose theories and doctrines loom large in the arguments and expositions of our poet’s epic. Competition and the struggle for poetic preeminence is a prominent theme of Lucretian song; throughout, the epic composer is concerned with the question of the attainment of a prize garland from the Muses, the merit of his original and hitherto undreamt song. Again, the pervasive element is one of *omnibus*; Lucretius responds throughout to a wide range of prose and poetic predecessors.

No figure receives higher praise in Lucretius’ epic than the philosopher Epicurus. And consideration of the teachings of Epicureanism and the Epicurean schools brings us inevitably—admittedly by dint of historical accident—to the wonder of Vesuvius and its fateful eruption in AD 79, when the Villa of the Papyri at Herculaneum was frozen, as it were, in a moment of time.<sup>16</sup> Work on reading and deciphering recovered texts from a natural disaster that Lucretius might well have described in vivid detail (had he written his poem in a later age) continues apace—alongside the continuing reception of the poet and his Epicurean antecedents and contemporaries.<sup>17</sup>

Work on the text of Lucretius inevitably brings mention of the so-called Codex Oblongus and the Codex Quadratus—the ninth century manuscripts in Carolingian miniscules on which we depend for our earliest “complete” (more or less) witnesses.<sup>18</sup> The work of Renaissance humanists and conjecturists, emenders and critics presents another huge arena for study and contemplation<sup>19</sup>—not to mention the labors of modern scholars. For the text of Lucretius is significantly more problematic than that of Virgil, Ovid, or Lucan; it is difficult to speak of a “best” modern edition.<sup>20</sup> What is certain is that there are a significant number of textual cruces in our poet, and that many of them defy definitive solution in the absence of new evidence.

When we consider the fragmentary state of Ennius’ *Annales* (let alone the other vast losses to Latin and Greek literature, especially in poetry and philosophy)—and the problematic state of Lucretius’ own text—one can experience an understandable state of despair. Many statements need to be qualified and footnoted with caution and consideration of alternatives; we are in a realm of greater mystery than that posed by the work of Ovid or Lucan.

Indeed, Lucretius' real rival for both subject matter and enigma is the mysterious author of the Augustan-Tiberian *Astronomica*—Marcus Manilius.<sup>21</sup> Poetic investigations of the nature of the heavens may bring with them a certain inherent quality of wonder and mystery—but in the case of Lucretius, much of the enigma is occasioned by lack of knowledge of the circumstances of composer and composition, and of the actual text of the poem.

The *De Rerum Natura*—if that is indeed the title—is divided into six books of more or less equal length.<sup>22</sup> The books divide neatly into subjects: the first provides an introduction to the poet's atomic theory, while the second explores in detail the qualities and workings of the atom. The third book is devoted to the eradication of the fear of death, while the fourth considers the problem of visual phenomena, of illusions, erotic passion, and love. The fifth is a study of the heavens and the earth, and in particular of the history and development of man. The sixth and last book is devoted to the wonders of the heavens and the earth, including the terrible marvel that is the power of pestilence and plague. There are certain affinities between the odd-numbered and even-numbered books of the epic, and also between the first and last books of its two respective halves. Not only the proems of the books, but also the individual endings are of special note. There is a high degree of organization and of artful, elegant arrangement of the diverse material of the epic; there is a remarkable degree of close connection between the different sections of the poem, and throughout a sense that the poet is in full control of what could easily have become a ramshackle and rambling epic composition.

The work commences with an invocation to Venus, the goddess of the *gens Iulia* and mother of Aeneas—the *Aeneadum genetrix*.<sup>23</sup> The epic begins in a decidedly Roman context; soon enough Venus is asked to intercede with her lover Mars to bring peace to the troubled political situation of the Roman Republic.<sup>24</sup> The poem ends in Athens, in the midst of the ghastly pestilence that struck the city of classical glory and signal human achievement during the Peloponnesian War. In the overall "chronology" of the poem, then, we move backwards in time, from Rome to Athens; along the way through the six books, however, we catch flashes of both the more distant past, and the dimly glimpsed future.

Lucretius ostensibly follows in the footsteps of Epicurus, the aforementioned celebrated Hellenistic philosopher (341–270 BC).<sup>25</sup> But along the way, as we have seen, he pays particular homage to both Democritus and Empedocles, and he engages with the ideas of a wide range of other major thinkers of ancient philosophy. The sheer range and vastness of this engagement is the product of his theme, which is nothing less than everything in the universe. And for Lucretius, that universe is infinite, and thus beyond definitive consideration in all its parts by frail mortals—even gifted poets and philosophers. There are plausible alternative theories for some phenomena—and for others, uncertainty as to the mechanism that explains a given reality.

Repetition is a key feature of Lucretius' poetic exposition of this *omne*. These repetitions are part of the expression of the poet's passionate vigor and zeal for this theme. And perhaps the most frequently expressed of his doctrines is the fact that the world and its creations are mortal; we may well be the product of the fortuitous combinations of eternal atoms, but those atomic compounds are endowed with a perishable nature—for one day, a blow will come along that is sufficient to shatter the atomic bonds that provide the frame and structure of the all too fragile organisms. Death broods over the *De Rerum Natura*—though there may still be time for serene nights in which the poet may keep vigil on his theme. There may be time, in fact, for six songs—one less than the seven that might have been invested with Pythagorean or Orphic significance. And Virgil, for his part, would double the number of books of Lucretius.

In this world of atomism and fatality, Epicurus may be a *de facto* god for Lucretius, a figure worthy of praise in proem and poem<sup>26</sup>—and yet Epicurus too succumbed to death. Death brings with a complete lack of sensation; there is nothing then to fear in death, but also nothing to cherish and to celebrate—there is utter and definitive oblivion.

For Lucretius, this lack of sensation is the essence of the argument against those who would feel fear or anxiety in the face of death; the *timor mortis* is to be eradicated not only because it brings men suffering and mental torment, but also because it is oftentimes inextricably tied to the power of superstition or *religio*, a force responsible for savagery and atrocity throughout human history—not least the Agamemnonian sacrifice of Iphigenia.

Understanding of the nature of things will lead, then, to liberation from the fear of death—and, in consequence, to a life of serenity and freedom from the irritations and stress of anxiety. The fear of death is the summit of human concern; the Epicurean system shows how said fear can be driven from our hearts and minds. There is a strong sense throughout, too, that anxiety can be alleviated both by the composition and the appreciation of epic verse; one can be strangely soothed even by reading disturbing verses.

And to be sure, in the closing verses of the poet's penultimate book, we shall learn of how man reached the zenith of his achievement—the so-called *summum cacumen*. That height is necessarily a temporary glory; the world, after all, is eminently mortal. By the end of the epic, we shall be immersed not in a world of serene, Epicurean tranquility, but rather in a scene that is rooted in something quite different indeed—a world of bloody violence and savage fighting over the pyres of the dead.<sup>27</sup> The Athenians of the Peloponnesian plague were not fortunate enough to have access to Epicurean teaching—and yet even in Athens under the plague, the *religio divom* and respect for the *numina* of the gods collapsed in the face of the tremendous suffering of the pestilence—the *praesens dolor* of the epidemic.<sup>28</sup> Sometimes, ghastly, grim necessity accomplishes that which philosophy struggles to achieve.

Every individual must inevitably face the specter of death—and so too every world and every nation therein. For Lucretius, Rome and Athens are the two cities of major concern; we spend more time, in some sense, on the second city—but the first looms large over the entire epic, indeed from its first verse. Rome is in some sense the child of both Venus and Mars;<sup>29</sup> the significance of such primal forces as love and war was of interest both to the philosopher and to the Roman.<sup>30</sup> Even were Lucretius not particularly interested in his *patria*,<sup>31</sup> the appeal of considering the problem of a realm that was not only the master of the Mediterranean, but also the veritable offspring of the deities of sex and violence might well have proven irresistible. For the Epicurean theologian, the gods do not care about mortal affairs and do not intervene in human history; they do not sire children with mortals, and so the behavior of the Romans is all too Roman and not the result of Venus and Mars *per se*.<sup>32</sup>

And questions of Rome inevitably bring the problem of Roman identity, the very problem allegedly inherited from the parentage of Venus on the one hand and Mars on the other: Troy and all that it represents, and the Rome of Italy and the Italians. These questions would be considered in later Roman epics, in the works of Virgil, Ovid, and Lucan—and they find consideration and expression in Lucretius' treatment of the universe. Lucretius was greatly inspired by the Roman Homer, Ennius: and the poet of the *Annales* was the epic poet of Roman history, of Troy, Romulus, and the rest. Lucretius is a fundamental and foundational Roman poet of the problem of Roman identity.

Lucretius is concerned with human history and Roman identity—but as we have seen, he has comprehensive, omnibus goals.<sup>33</sup> And his chosen mode of discourse is poetry, indeed the dactylic hexameter of a Homer or a Hesiod. He explains his rationale for the employment of verse; it is more than once compared to the honey that a doctor might put on a cup, so as to trick a child into drinking the bitter medicine of *absinthia*.<sup>34</sup> Poetry is “lovelier,” some might say, than prose accounts of philosophy and scientific rationales; poetry is replete with aesthetically pleasing imagery borrowed from the worlds of simile and metaphor, the rich treasures of the natural world and of borrowings from one's verse predecessors.

And the poet is associated with the quest for a sort of immortality, the pursuit of eternal and undying fame through the composition of creative, original, awe-inspiring works of art. Lucretius will speak openly of the attainment of a crown after his entrance into the trackless ways of the Muses, the *avia Pieridum*—lonely paths where none before him (of mortal poets at least) had trodden.

But there is no powerful proclamation of poetic immortality in Lucretius that can be compared with the end of Horace's odes; no triumphant declaration to match *non omnis moriar*.<sup>35</sup> Instead, there is a rather relentless proclamation of the finality of death, and of the permanence only of the atoms—for

after all, one day the very world itself will be destroyed, and there will thus be no chance for lasting memory.

In the face of all of this death and decay, it is no surprise that Lucretian scholars struggle on occasion to find reason for optimism in his verse.<sup>36</sup> Some would argue that there is ultimately little or none in the face of the ultimate dissolution of the *natura mundi*, and that the assurance that there will at least be no sensation of loss or pain is insufficient in the face of the reality of the totality of the destruction and ruin.<sup>37</sup> There are scenes in the *De Rerum Natura* that are as lovely as any in Latin poetry; there are moments of serene repose and absolute delight.

These are not the images with which the poet leaves us as he closes his epic; however, by then such pictures are the distant memories of a work that seems to end on a note far different from that of its commencement. For Lucretius is interested not only in the apparent propensity of human beings to commit acts of violence—whether Romulus with his brother Remus in the Roman imagination, or the quarreling Athenians of the plague—but also in the illusions and seemingly beautiful lies that haunt our visions and sense of sight. Many of those images lead directly to the problem of erotic love and uncontrolled passion; they are destructive in ways that put into sharp relief the poet's concern with destruction both swift and slow. Lucretius is in some ways the most social of the Roman poets; his seemingly introverted wish for serene nights with poetry and philosophy coexists with his interest in and desire for the betterment of his fellow man.

The pessimism, then, may seem oppressive; the darkness may seem to cast a pall over even some of the more sunlit and radiant passages of the epic. And yet there is a scene that stands out from the poem in a particular way, a moment that reflects a vision of the composer poet that defies the oppressive gloom—a passage that is deeply invested in questions of social interaction and the relationship of men with each other in the bonds of societal interaction and commonalty. At 6.1230 ff., in the midst of the grisly account of the plague at Athens, Lucretius notes that the most pitiable circumstance was how men sought to avoid death by staying apart, in self-imposed quarantine; they avoided their relatives and friends and shirked any sort of moral obligation to provide comfort to their dying kinsmen. And yet, amid this terrible demonstration of human fear of the grave, as well as abdication of societal and familial responsibilities and the obligations of *pietas*, there were those who visited their relatives anyway—and they were the “best” (*optimus*) of men. They died, to be sure—but so did those who stayed away from the bedside of friends and family. In a world where death is the common end of all, there is no nihilism here in the matter of human morality, no permission to forget about or ignore one's responsibilities to society and friend—even in the face of the oblivion of the loss of memory, or the idea that no one will remember your good deeds and acts of mercy and justice.

All the same, the picture that Lucretius paints here is not one of serene repose or happy enjoyment of an idyllic summer day or the fruit of the vine and the fields—it is the depiction of a suicidal act of *pietas* amid the inevitability of death, a respect for the *mores* that make a society, and that define *amicitia*. It is a meaningless act relative to the infinity of the universe and the ultimate fate of death and non-sensation that awaits the sinner and the saint alike—and yet it stands forth as a defiant declaration of moral decency amid the madness.<sup>38</sup> And it compels one to wonder if *pietas* can be called suicide in a scenario where all are, after all, likely to succumb to death.

And so the best of men displayed *pietas* while friends and family were actually alive and could be comforted in some way (however futile)—and most men displayed a perversion of *pietas* in the battles for funeral pyres for their dead kinsmen.<sup>39</sup> The poet's call for his readers to aspire to join the ranks of the best amid disaster and horror is powerful, despite the equal if not greater force that threatens ever to engulf the world and its creations. And there is no comforting assurance that the *optimi* who visited sick friends and relatives were not involved in brawls over bodies and pyres; the closing verses of the epic leave us with a vision that allows no door to solace except in the assurance that death will bring relief from all sensation.

Both the actions of the men who stay behind in fear, and of those who pursue futile acts of charity on behalf of loved ones, can be characterized, too, as actions of free will. Lucretius explores the question of human *voluntas* at great length in his epic; it is in some ways at the heart of his exploration of the problem of the atoms.<sup>40</sup> Lucretius profoundly explores and considers something of the mystery of whether or not there can be free will in a predetermined world, indeed of whether the free will we enjoy is an illusion. And in the end, the existence of free will for men seems ultimately to be linked to the problem of what a given individual knows and does not know about the future; inference is sometimes possible—definitive detail and certainty, never.

What are to make, then, of Lucretius' majestic and mysterious composition, this enigmatic epic of everything that exists? If the summit of human history and achievement were the teachings of Epicurus, then said teachings are, ultimately, perishable together with everything else in the world—for in the end, all will be destroyed. Lucretius does not contradict or repudiate the basic tenets of Epicureanism; he does not argue for some other system in place of the atomic theories and philosophical doctrines of his declared master and god.<sup>41</sup> And, we should note, there are places (especially in Book 5) where he considers alternative explanations for celestial and other phenomena that cannot be explained definitively. But the Lucretian world is an aging, dying world—and we have reached the apex of human achievement—though perhaps not of poetic glory.<sup>42</sup>

But Epicureanism is not immortal or eternal (any more than its founder), and even before it was invented, it was not the only cure for the oppressive power of *Religio* that the poet so powerfully decries in his first book. There was *praesens dolor*, too—a degree of pain and suffering that was just as eloquent and effective as both Epicurus and his poetic acolyte Lucretius at eradicating the fear of the gods and the dread superstition of religion. Suffering was able to overthrow *Religio* without the need for abstruse arguments or honeyed cups of wormwood.

Throughout, transience is the operative factor in the world of creation: the only lasting and permanent thing is the atomic foundation of nature. Matter and void are the two fundamental elements of the universe; the atoms and the void provide raw materials and space for the workings of creation and the generative forces of nature. Even the greatest of human accomplishments will fade; at some future point, oblivion will reign.

And so Lucretius begs Venus to ask her lover Mars for peace for Rome—because the troubled times of the poet's Republic seem to bespeak the possibility of the dissolution of the city. The *tempus iniquum patriae* is a harbinger of the end<sup>43</sup>—a potential catalyst for a rush toward destruction from which there is no recall. Or, in atomic terms, a breaking of atomic bonds that cannot be restored in the way a person can gather his thoughts again, as it were, after being struck in the head. A parent should be able to help a child; a pair of parents should exercise a sense of *pietas* toward offspring and home—and so a prayer is reasonable, even if the poet has no expectation of seeing it fulfilled.<sup>44</sup> In the end, the prayer is for a respite, a pause in the more or less straight march to the finish. If there is a relay race toward the grave of nations, the poet hopes for a pause.

But if your divine parents are Venus and Mars, then perhaps surprise is unwarranted if strife and violence are afoot; Rome was born, after all, in fratricide, and Aeneas fought his own war in Italy to secure a new home for his Trojan exiles. In Lucretius' vision Rome is eminently Italian, and yet the stain of her Trojan origin remains all too indelible.<sup>45</sup> And while Rome may have been supreme in so many arenas of human competition, in the end it may be Athens that achieved the greatest heights of human glory—just as Athens saw at least a harbinger of the nadir of human behavior and accomplishment. In the matter of poetic preeminence, however, there may be room for the poet of Latin epic to take his crown as the furious poet of the city that is condemned to a destiny of madness by virtue of its parentage.

Rome was master of the Mediterranean; by Lucretius' day Rome was the center of the known world. And so fittingly for a Roman song, there are few subjects that Lucretius does not treat (at least in passing) in the course of his omnibus epic. But there is a definite unity and progression to the poem, a discernible and careful advance from the opening invocation to Venus to the horrors of the quarrel at the flaming plague pyres in Athens. That progress is

one of decline and of a downward slope from the mountain summit that represents the crown of human achievement; first the master didact explains the workings of the universe, and then he explores what happened to the creations of one world and one created organism in particular—the history of man in the *natura mundi* that the poet's audience calls home. Implicit in the question of the history of Athens is the problem of Rome; the Athens that saw both the heights and depths of human history was, after all, now just a part of a Roman world.

But the world is tired, and history draws ever nearer to its end. Decline and destruction, ruin and harbingers of the final dissolution abound. And there are two sorts of destruction that the poet details in both image and philosophical exposition: the sudden and the slow. Both types of dissolution and ruin can be illustrated in the events of our world; we can appreciate that death can come both in an instant and over a long expanse of time. The *natura mundi* suffers both possibilities of destruction. In the course of the epic we come to see that Venus represents the slower sort of ruin, and Mars the swift; the destructive force of water and fire alike can also be explained in similar terms.<sup>46</sup> Troy, for that matter, suffered a swift end on the night that the city of Aeneas was invaded and sacked; it endures a slower sort of decay and decline through the march of the Roman ages. In the end, the poet's consideration of these interrelated dualities provides a frame and support for the epic's vast edifice: Venus and Mars, ruin slow and swift, Troy and Rome, falsehood and truth, illusion and reality, creation and destruction. Many dualities in human life, too, are related intimately to the problem of *voluntas*; for Lucretius, there is also the matter of making proper inferences from the (for him) infallible evidence of the senses. By the time we come to the end of the poem, we may have more than simply a better understanding of the mechanisms of nature and the workings of the universe—more too than guidance and direction in the matter of how to confront the fear of death. As we have seen, we may find that the poet has offered commentary on problems of a more ethical and societal nature, indeed reflections of significant consequence for a study of both individual and state. We may find the atoms for the epic of another age, the inspiration for the reflections of a later poet on both the nature of heroism and the problem of revenge and justice.

For Lucretius' didactic epic of the *Aeneadum genetrix* also offers a profound meditation on the nature of *pietas*, and a carefully wrought, passionately argued exposition of the place of man in world and universe—of man in relation to his fellows. This consideration of a virtue that certainly for Virgil was a peculiar trait of Aeneas is especially pronounced as Lucretius' epic draws to its close—in an important sense the *Aeneid* takes up its poetic predecessor's meditation on *pietas* from the closing movements of Book 6.<sup>47</sup> If *pietas* is concerned with the proper relationship between mortals and immortals—and with the relationship between relatives and kinsmen—then ul-



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