

CHARLES SEGAL

Lucretius on Death and Anxiety

*Poetry and Philosophy in de
Rerum Natura*



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Lucretius on Death and Anxiety

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POETRY AND PHILOSOPHY
IN *DE RERUM NATURA*

Charles Segal

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To the memory of Craig Manning

June 26, 1935–February 10, 1986

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PREFACE

LUCRETIOUS's great poem *On the Nature of Things*, the longest sustained, non-hostile exposition of Epicurean philosophy to survive the collapse of pagan culture, aims at helping mankind by promoting spiritual tranquillity. Yet the work exhibits what for the modern reader is a shocking vividness in describing the process of dying. This study explores this contradiction, if contradiction it is. I am particularly concerned with the ways in which Lucretius's poetic expression and changing levels of style enable him to present fears about death that are not always stated explicitly or articulated fully in the formal logic of his argument. His approach to the fear of death, although informed at every point by Epicurean physics and psychology, has a weight and precision of detail that are nowhere to be found in Epicurus's extant writings. Consciously or not, Lucretius uses the expressive resources of poetry to supplement the abstractness, distance, and generality in the philosophy. This concern for emotional expressiveness and the maximum impact on the reader also accounts, at least in part, for the detailed descriptions of physical injury in books 3 and 5 and for the puzzling ending of the poem, an account of the great plague at Athens in 430 B.C.

From Constant Martha on, the fear of death forms a chapter or major section of nearly every book on Lucretius. Such discussions necessarily concentrate on the third book. The involving satirical vigor of the concluding diatribe (*nil igitur mors est ad nos*, "Death then is nothing to us," 830–1094) has tended to overshadow the less attractive-looking first two-thirds of the book, which, surprisingly, has not been carefully studied, especially from the point of view of language and style. It has, however, both a poetic and philosophical force that is distinctively Lucretian. Taken together with the accounts of the death of worlds in books 2 and 5 and the account of the plague in book 6, it offers a particularly rich field

for examining how the poet's language gives form to the emotionally charged atmosphere that surrounds the fear of death.

Lucretius's concern with the soul's survival in the afterlife may seem less pressing to our time than to ages more committed to Christian dogma. Dante placed Epicurus among the heretics of *Inferno* and doubtless would have placed his disciple there too had he known the poem. But Lucretius does have something important to tell us about a fear that is an inevitable concomitant of our being both mortal and intelligent. The range and nuance of feeling and the images and associations that only poetry can evoke enable him to explore dimensions of the fear of death that the prose writings of Epicurus could not touch.

As my primary aim is the elucidation and interpretation of the texture of Lucretius's poetry in relation to the philosophical content, I shall not go into detail on his sources or on his physiological theories, subjects that have been fruitfully discussed in the recent work of Pigeaud and Schrijvers (in the *Fondation Hardt* volume on Lucretius). Although my principal concern is Lucretius's poetic expression, there are also implications for attitudes toward death in classical antiquity. This large and important topic lies beyond the modest limits of this study, but I have briefly sketched some possible directions in the closing chapter.

The nature of Lucretius's argument and of my own analysis has sometimes necessitated discussing the same passage in different contexts and from different perspectives. I apologize for the occasional overlap. The text of Lucretius is generally cited from Bailey's third edition, with commentary (Oxford, 1947). Fragments of Epicurus are cited from Usener, occasionally from Arrighetti. The *Letters* are cited from H. S. Long's Oxford text of Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae Philosophorum* (Oxford, 1964), volume 2, which is abbreviated as D.L. In citing Greek, I have generally transliterated individual words but not whole phrases or sentences. Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated, and they aim at reasonable fidelity to the original rather than elegance.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THIS STUDY owes much to two graduate seminars on Lucretius that I taught at Brown University and an undergraduate course at Princeton University on death in literature. I recall with pleasure and thanks my students' curiosity, questions, and interest. A sabbatical leave from Brown University and a Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1985–86 provided the precious leisure in which I could re-read and rethink Lucretius. During this time I benefited greatly from the hospitality, personal associations, and library resources of the American Academy in Rome, the American School of Classical Studies in Athens, and the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. For research support in the later stages in the work and aid in the preparation of the manuscript I am indebted to Princeton University and to the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Palo Alto, California, where funding was provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities (#RA-20037-88) and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. To all of these institutions I am deeply grateful. I also thank my colleagues in the Department of Classics at Princeton University for collegial interest and advice.

Several friends and colleagues discussed Lucretian and Epicurean problems, commented on parts of the manuscript, or generously provided copies of publications. I particularly thank David Furley, Charles Garton, David Konstan, and Martha Nussbaum. Joanna Hitchcock of Princeton University Press gave her usual sound advice and warm encouragement. I owe many improvements in accuracy and consistency to Sherry Wert's careful copyediting. I am indebted to the anonymous readers of the Press for detailed and helpful criticisms. Ronnie Hanley and Andrew Keller of Princeton University retyped much of the work and valiantly struggled with word processors and their problems. Sharon Ray helped with the index, and Sterling Bland coordinated final details at the Press.

Finally, and most important, I thank my wife, Nancy Jones, for being a keen and supportive discussant of nearly every aspect of the book, *praepandens lumina menti*.

A version of Chapter 9 originally appeared in *Ramus* 15 (1986): 1–34; it has been thoroughly revised and recast for this volume. I thank the editors of *Ramus* and Aural Publications for permission to reuse this material here. I have elaborated on some of the matters involving literary history found in Chapter 8 in my article on the Second Proem in *Harvard Studies*. In both cases, readers are referred to these works for further details and bibliography.

. . .

I dedicate this work to a gifted and erudite scholar whom *mors immatura* cruelly carried off just as his efforts and ability were beginning to bear fruit and he was nearing the completion of the Ph.D. program in Classics at Brown University. Despite heavy obstacles of poverty and illness, Craig Manning achieved distinction as a teacher and budding scholar. In his unassuming manner he conveyed his intellectual intensity, his enthusiasm, his love of scholarship, and his breadth of knowledge. He carried his great learning lightly. He gave generously to his students, friends, and fellow graduate students. He will be long remembered and sorely missed.

Lucretius on Death and Anxiety

—Are you afraid of Death?

—Not of death but maybe what leads to it.

—Doesn't life lead to it?

—I'm speaking of sickness, accident—being incapacitated; unable to run my life; that can be worse than death. I'm afraid of the unexpected. What I can expect I can deal with.

—Bernard Malamud, *Dubin's Lives*

The extreme of the known in the presence of the
extreme

Of the unknown.

—Wallace Stevens, "To an Old Philosopher in Rome"

Should I have died less cheerfully before having read the *Tusculans*? I think not. And now that I find myself close to death, I feel that my tongue has grown richer, my courage not at all.

—Montaigne, "Of Physiognomy"

Chapter 1

LUCRETIUS'S ADEQUACY TO THE FEAR OF DEATH: LOGIC, POETRY, AND EMOTION

FOR LUCRETIUS, death both is the greatest anxiety and embodies the greatest mode of anxiety. In one of the highest tributes that one ancient poet offers to another, Virgil seems to recognize this fact. Applying Lucretius's own encomium on Epicurus to the poet himself, Virgil congratulates his predecessor not only on "knowing the causes of things"—that is, explaining the workings of nature in a rational, scientific way—but also on trampling underfoot "all fears, and the doom against which no prayer avails, and the roar of greedy Acheron" (*Georgics* 2.490–92):

felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas
atque metus omnes et inexorabile fatum
subiecit pedibus strepitumque Acherontis avari.

The young Virgil was both an Epicurean and a reader of Lucretius (as we see from *Eclogue* 6.31–40); and when he turns in the next lines of the *Georgics* from fear to his own delight in the gods of the countryside and the pastoral demigods Pan, Sylvanus, and the Nymphs, he perhaps implies that Lucretius's heavy toil has freed him to enjoy this happier side of nature (*Georgics* 2.493–94):

fortunatus et ille deos qui novit agrestes,
Panaque Silvanumque senem Nymphasque sorores.

(Happy too is that man who knows the gods of the country, Pan and old Silvanus and the sister Nymphs.)

Be this as it may, Virgil clearly understands that the central theme of the *De Rerum Natura* is the struggle against anxiety and particularly anxiety toward death.¹

This insight of Lucretius's greatest reader also underlies the present study. Few poets in Latin deal more powerfully with death. Few also so beautifully convey their joy in the vital energies of the world as these pervade even the tiniest movements in nature. What then is the relation between Lucretius's philosophy and the extraordinary expressiveness of his poetry? Studies of Lucretius over the last quarter-century have shown that his poetic style is not merely the honey that coats the bitter taste of philosophy, in his own rather self-deprecating figure (1.936–50), but itself is an essential element in his argument. It remains, however, to integrate his poetry of death and war into the overall appreciation of his poetry of life and happiness, and that is the task of the present book.

From Statius and Saint Jerome on to Tennyson and our own time, Lucretius has fascinated readers at least as much for his contradictions as for his consistencies. An exponent of a philosophy whose goal is serenity, he exults in emotional intensity, what Statius called *docti furor arduus Lucreti*, "the steep madness of learned Lucretius" (*Silvae* 2.7.76). Committed to the ideal of peace in the soul, he writes extraordinarily detailed accounts of violence. War is the basis of many of his most powerful images, including one of the poem's controlling metaphors, the battle between life and death.² Closely following Epicurus, he advocates a calm objectivity and impersonality in viewing death; yet he has a vivid sympathy for birth, nurture, and growth. Scornful of conventional beliefs in the gods, Lucretius will appear to many readers to be in some

¹ Among the fullest general studies of death in Lucretius are Martha, *Le poème*, ch. 5, esp. 132ff.; Sikes, *Lucretius*, 125ff.; Logre, *L'anxiété*, 185–215; Boyancé, *Lucrece*, ch. 6, esp. 145ff.; Perelli, *Lucrezio*, ch. 2, esp. 115ff.; Schmid, "Lucretius Ethicus"; and Stork, *Nil igitur mors est*, which has a useful introduction on the general importance of the fear of death in Lucretius (pp. 1–5).

² See, for instance, 2.573–76; in general, Klingner, "Lucrez," 203; Minao, *Lyre of Science*, chs. 2 and 3, *passim*.

sense a religious spirit. One will think immediately of his celebration of the blessed abode of the gods and his awe at the vision of infinity in the proem of book 3 or his description of the majesty of the heavens in book 5, with its "solemn constellations of the sky's night-wandering torches and the flames that fly" (5.1188–93).

Like other Hellenistic philosophers, Epicurus aims at achieving a godlike invulnerability.³ Lucretius, on the other hand, has the Roman concreteness about the practical realities of life and a poet's appreciation of the rich and disturbing physicality of the world around us. The philosopher George Santayana long ago put his finger on the weakness in Epicurus's treatment of the fear of death. Epicurus, he suggested, did not confront "the radical fear of death," of which the driving force is the love of life:

Epicurus, who feared life, seems to have missed . . . the primordial and colossal force he was fighting against. Had he perceived that force, he would have been obliged to meet it in a more radical way. . . . The love of life is not something rational or founded on experience of life. It is something antecedent and spontaneous. It is that Venus Genetrix which covers the earth with its flora and fauna. It teaches every animal to seek its food and its mate, and to protect its offspring; as also to resist or fly from all injury to the body, and most of all from threatened death.⁴

Modern interpreters may demur at this certainty about Epicurus's fear of life, but few will disagree on Lucretius's enthusiasm for Venus Genetrix and all that she embodies. Indeed, the rhetoric of this passage seems itself inspired by Lucretius's own opening invocation to Venus, *Aeneadum genetrix*.

Other tensions may be due to unresolved issues within Epicureanism itself. As Martha Nussbaum observes, the Epicurean voice of nature urges us to accept the limits of our mor-

³ See Mitsis, *Epicurus' Ethical Theory*, Introduction, esp. p. 2; Nussbaum, "Mortal Immortals."

⁴ Santayana, "Lucretius," 52.

talities; but another voice, ultimately echoing the Platonic and Aristotelian praise of the life of the intellect, confers on the wise man an aura of quasi-religious transcendence, albeit within this life.⁵ Thus Epicurus ends his *Letter to Menoeceus* (D.L. 10.135) with the exhortation to meditate on his precepts day and night, for in this way “you will never suffer disturbance sleeping or waking, but you will live as a god among men; for one who lives amid eternal goods is not like a mortal creature.”

On the one hand, Epicurus would have us accept the material basis of our life in this fragile world of continual atomic dissolution and renewal. On the other hand, he has us look to the gods, in their serene and remote indifference, as eternal models of the highest peace, as we see them in the proem to Lucretius’s third book. To put the contrast a little differently, as a creation of impersonal physical processes, life is of no particular concern to the universe; but from the point of view of the human consciousness that it brings into being, it is indeed of the highest value.⁶ This tension, as one would expect, is strong in Lucretius, with his passionately engaged vitalism; and one of its manifestations, as we shall see, is an approach to death that is more personal and emotional than anything in Epicurus’s extant writings.

If, in certain areas, Lucretius has his own way of interpreting Epicureanism, this does not mean that he is deeply divided against himself. Epicurean science does for him something analogous to what the heroic tradition does for Homer. As in the case of the Homeric simile, the unifying frame of a larger system encourages and legitimizes observations of everyday experience without the loss of poetic elevation or purpose. Lucretius drew from Epicurus an expansive overview of nature at once systematic and morally engaged, enthusiastic and precise, all-encompassing, yet attentive to the smallest detail.⁷

While the ethics of Epicurus gave him a high moral aim—

⁵ See Nussbaum, “Mortal Immortals, 324–27.”

⁶ See DeLacy, “Process and Value,” *passim*.

⁷ For indications of some of Lucretius’s indebtedness to Epicurean science along these lines, see Klingner, “Lucrez,” 191.

nothing less than saving mankind from suffering and unhappiness—the physics provided a model of nature both grand in its infinity and intelligible to human reason. Because of the unity of the atomic processes that are the same for every phenomenon of the world, all of nature can be perceived in its permanence, coherence, and interconnectedness.⁸ Thus the human body and the universe are linked by their common origins in the movements of atom and void, and their different lives and deaths illuminate one another.⁹

Through Epicurean physics, Lucretius becomes sensitized to a range of phenomena that had rarely found its way into the high style of Latin hexameter poetry: the specks of dust in a sunbeam, or the iridescence in a pigeon's feathers, or the splendor of a peacock's tail, or clothes drying, or the reflected light from an awning in the theater, or the sensation of cold on the teeth. His zeal to prove and explain the workings of the invisible atomic world leads him to daring analogies and elicits brilliant observations of nature. The notion of infinity, whether of worlds, size, or number, stimulates his visual imagination. Thus we have accounts of elephants and wild beasts in battle, cloud formations and comets, seashells and the sloughed skins of snakes or cicadas. He can convey the grandeur of space and the vastness of time as almost no other Latin poet. He heroizes Epicurus for his journey to the flaming walls of the world (1.69–77), but he himself repeatedly looks at the infinite reaches of space and conveys his awe at the breadth and power of the vision, whether in a general reflection on the “deep and vast immensity” that lies open before him or in his personal response of “divine pleasure and shivering awe” at Epicurus's uncovering of nature's secrets (1.957, 3.28–30).

The world for Lucretius is a place of marvels. His wonder even borders on a sense of the sacred. Venus, personification of the life force that he so admires, has a “sacred body” as she covers Mars in her embrace (*corpore sancto*, 1.38). Sicily holds among its volcanic fires and subterranean roars “noth-

⁸ See Santayana, “Lucretius,” 27–29; now Schiesaro, *Simulacrum*, 17–48.

⁹ See below, Chapter Five.

ing more glorious nor more sacred and wondrous and dear" than the philosopher Empedocles (*nec sanctum magis et mirum carumque*, 1.729–30). Democritus's principles, though sometimes erroneous, are "holy" (*sancta viri sententia*, 3.371). His own words, he claims, are poured forth with "more holiness and far greater certainty of truth" than those of the Pythian priestess on Apollo's tripod at Delphi (5.110–12; cf. 1.736–39).

Is it surprising, then, that a poet with so developed a sense for the marvels, variety, and sanctity of life would feel toward death something less than the cool indifference counselled by Epicurus? Lucretius counselled this too, and believed his counsel (so far as one can tell). But one to whom life mattered with the intensity and passion that Lucretius everywhere exhibits might well appreciate the ordinary man's anxieties and fears. He may well have sympathized with that "radical fear of death" which, as Santayana suggests, stems from a keen, delighted, and passionate love of life.

We must not here fall into the appealing abyss of the "anti-Lucretius in Lucretius," the poet inwardly divided against himself and his doctrine. Even if he did not find in Epicurus's writings his own enthusiasm for life and living things, he found many other things. The poet who could find in the "hoped-for pleasure of sweet friendship" the inducement to stay awake for the long night vigils of poetic toil (1.140–45) would have repended to the jubilant, almost evangelical celebration of friendship by his Master: "Friendship goes dancing around the world, announcing to us all to awaken to blessedness."¹⁰ He would have admired Epicurus's deathbed provision for his disciple's children. Thrilling to the awesome divinity of Epicurus's intellect, he would have been deeply touched by the closing sentence of the *Epistle to Menoeceus* on the quasi-divine life of the wise man, cited above.¹¹

¹⁰ *Sententiae Vaticanae* 52; cf. *Kyriai Doxai* 27. For the importance of friendship in Epicurus's thought, see Frischer, *The Sculpted Word*, 75–76, with further references; also Clay, "Epicurus' Last Will," 254–55.

¹¹ On the godlike life of the wise man, see Frischer, *The Sculpted Word*, 77–79, with the references there cited. We may note too the almost cultic

For all of his own passion and appreciation of the irrational, Lucretius fully shares Epicurus's belief in the power of reason to explore the dark places of man's nature and nature's irrationality. In human life he identifies "a certain hidden force," *vis abdita quaedam*, that, like religious superstition, "crushes human affairs" and mocks man's pretensions to power and authority (5.1233–35). This "hidden force" belongs to the uncontrollable violence of nature, storms, earthquakes, tidal waves, and other disruptive phenomena of nature that Lucretius analyzes in book 6. But such a force operates in human life too, and particularly in the areas of love, death, and war—the areas of Freud's *eros* and *thanatos*.

Victorian interpreters have often yielded to the temptation of a biographical view and attributed Lucretius's absorption with death to a deep pessimism or a morbid personality. Tennyson's portrait of a great but gloomy mind struggling with incipient madness remains impressed on the English-speaking world. In the same spirit Constant Martha apostrophized, "O most sincere of poets, contemplating the force of your genius in the greatness of your ruin."¹² For Santayana, Lucretius is a poet of "profound melancholy."¹³ Among more recent scholars, E. E. Sikes, for example, regards Lucretius as personally "obsessed" with death.¹⁴ To the psychiatrist Logre, Lucretius's apparently welcoming attitude toward death and his unconcern with the physical pain attending it are the perfect symptoms of a suicidal personality.¹⁵ Luciano Perelli, who lays great stress on the mood of anxiety throughout the poem, sees an unconscious contradiction between Lucretius's ratio-

vation of the Master, on which see *ibid.*, 205ff., and Clay, "Cults of Epicurus," *passim*.

¹² Martha, *Le poème*, 172.

¹³ Santayana, "Lucretius," 46.

¹⁴ Sikes, *Lucretius*, 126.

¹⁵ Logre, *L'anxiété*, 214–15. See also Lortie, "Crainte anxieuse," 51ff., who quotes Père Sertillanges, *Le problème du mal* (Paris, 1948), 151, to the effect that Lucretius "avait tellement peur de l'Achéron que par contraste l'anéantissement lui paraît une délivrance" (Lortie, "Crainte anxieuse," 62).

nal, Epicurean view of death as liberation and the “obsessive form” that death assumes within the work. This obsession, he suggests, negates or at least obstructs the poet’s explicit attempt to reassure his audience and instill a serene acceptance of death as part of the ἀταραξία, or freedom from disturbance, that is among the gifts of his espoused doctrine.¹⁶

The dark strain is perhaps not to be denied; yet it is not death alone that absorbs Lucretius, but the struggle between life and death.¹⁷ If he shows us the destruction of our world and our selves, he also reminds us of the indestructibility of the atoms that will combine into new worlds. If he depicts the aggressive violence and self-destructiveness of mankind, his aim is to provide the medicines of reason and understanding that can turn us to a better use of our lives.

That man is educable by rational instruction is the underlying assumption of Lucretius’s poem. He drew from the Master the optimistic belief that philosophy could revolutionize our lives and bring us almost godlike happiness (cf. 3.319–22).¹⁸ Epicurus’s own godlike divinity is both a model and an incentive (cf. 3.3–30, 5.7–12 and 49–57). But man is also subject to irrational fears and hopes and may “wander” or stray from the path of reason (2.9–10). Hence the repeated pleas to the reader to exert himself and join with the poet in the battle against the darkness of ignorance and superstition. In following in the footsteps of his master and alleviating human suffering by bringing reason where unreason was, he is also following the humane tradition of θεραπεία, the healing of souls in Greek philosophy. But as a poet he is also keenly aware of how deep-seated is the irrational in us all; and he possesses a unique power of imagination and visual representation in exposing that irrationality.

¹⁶ Perelli, *Lucrezio*, 102: “Se dunque nelle intenzioni del poeta il tema della morte viene introdotto come desiderio di liberazione dal timore della morte, poeticamente il pensiero della morte assume una forma ossessiva che annulla le intenzioni serenatrici.” See also pp. 51–52 and 115ff.

¹⁷ See Minadeo, *Lyre of Science*, chs. 2 and 3; Klingner, “Philosophie und Dichtkunst,” 150ff.

¹⁸ See most recently Mitsis, *Epicurus’ Ethical Theory*, 148–49.

Epicurus posits an intimate relation between the sufferings of the body and of the mind that follows from the continuum of the physical processes, extending from the visible to the invisible. Epicurus's great predecessor, Democritus, drew an explicit parallel between the healing of bodily ills and healing the soul (68 B31 and B288 Diels-Kranz). Epicurus, perhaps intentionally, echoes his words (frag. 221 Usener). Before Democritus, Greek tragedy explored medical analogies for emotional or psychological disturbances. Lucretius himself assumes the doctor's role when he would apply the honey of poetry to the wormwood medicine of his doctrine (1.936–38, repeated in 4.11–13). He may be drawing as much upon the literary tradition as on the atomic theory (cf. the similar metaphor in Plutarch's *On the Education of Children* 18.13D). But he is firmly within the tradition of atomism, at least as far as Democritus and Epicurus are concerned, in this shading over of his argument in book 3 from the physiological bases of the soul's maladies to ethical and psychological concerns. Alongside the proofs of the soul's physical weaknesses and therefore mortality, according to the atomic theory, there is much in the first part of book 3 that belongs to the ancient "medicine of the soul," the Democritean *ιατρικὴ ψυχῆς*.

Lucretius's treatment not just of death but of the *fear* of death brings together the two strongest directions in the *De Rerum Natura*: the ethical-emotional *θεραπεία* of the soul through Epicurean science and the poetic tradition that offers wisdom and consolation in the face of man's greatest fear and worst ill. The latter is rooted in the compassion for the mortal condition as a whole in both epic and didactic hexameter poetry, where the subjection to mortality constitutes the defining characteristic of the human race.¹⁹ The combination of common-sense argumentation, the "hard" evidence of Epicurean science, and the humane wisdom and authority of an ancient poetic tradition enables him to meet diverse anxieties at many levels and for many different kinds of readers.

¹⁹ For example *Iliad* 9.319–20, 12.322–28; *Odyssey* 11.34–41, 218–22; Hesiod, *Works and Days* 100ff. and *Theogony* 603ff.

For Lucretius, as an Epicurean thinker, death is a scientifically understood process, the dissolution of atoms. But death has another, darker side, hidden in the shadows: the fear of the painful process of dying through massive physical injury and fears about annihilation, the total extinction of one's self, dissolution into nothingness. These are not confronted directly in book 3, but do appear, powerfully, in the account of the plague at Athens in book 6. Some of those fears, however, are already anticipated in the imagery, if not in the overt arguments, of book 3. My analysis will try to show how the language of book 3, and especially the metaphorical descriptions of death, even within the framework of the scientific rationality of the atomic process, convey its other side, the dark fears that are hidden in the shadows and need to be brought forth into the light in order to be grappled with and overcome (cf. 1.146–48).

One way to bring these fears into the light without seeming to countenance them is to present them through figurative language, chiefly imagery. In this way Lucretius is able to acknowledge their emotional reality but also to keep them under the control of Epicurean rationalism and the “truth” of the atomic processes. Inevitably a certain tension develops in places between the poetry and the scientific philosophy. This tension, however, is not so much a contradiction as an inevitable result of the crossing of complementary currents in Lucretius's work: a poet's interest in conveying the raw power of the terror and horror that death inspires in us as human experience, and a moralist's concern to eradicate such fears and enable us to accept with tranquillity the inevitable end.

Book 3 is concerned primarily with two aspects of the fear of death: anxiety about what happens to our bodies after we die, and the folly of those who believe the traditional myths about the afterlife, especially the punishment of the soul in the Underworld.²⁰ As observers from antiquity to the present have pointed out, however, this most systematic attempt in the

²⁰ For the closing section of book 3, see Conte, “Trionfo della morte”; Stork, *Nil igitur mors est*; and Wallach, *Lucretius and the Diatribe*.

poem to eradicate the fear of death neglects the two powerful anxieties noted above, the fear of suffering in the process of dying and the instinctive fear of annihilation.²¹

These omissions are all the more striking since some Epicureans did in fact pay attention to at least the first item, pain attendant on the process of dying.²² Diogenes of Oenoanda, for example, clearly recognized the suffering of a long terminal illness (frag. 376, cols. 2 and 3, Chilton). Lucretius's contemporary, the Greek poet and Epicurean philosopher Philodemus, also mentions the fear of a slow and painful death by prolonged illness (*De Morte* 5.9ff. and 28.14ff.), but argues that the soul's separation from the body in death is not necessarily a painful process (8.1–9.12). He is sympathetic to men who would prefer to die in battle and, like Montaigne, observes that in many cases a long terminal illness is no more painful than death in battle (28.20–32). Presumably, however, it can also be no less painful.

Experience will not necessarily have borne out Epicurus's optimistic view that prolonged pain in serious illness will be endurable and intense pain of only brief duration (*Kyriai Doxai* 4); and Lucretius's contemporary, Cicero, makes this criticism at length (*De Finibus* 2.28.93–30.96). Against Epicurus's consoling thought that the memory of past happiness helps us in times of physical pain, Plutarch objects that such thoughts are of little avail amid the writhings and convulsions of the body gripped by mortal illness (*Non Posse Suaviter Vivi Secundum Epicurum* 18.1099E). Cicero makes a similar point in the *Tusculan Disputations*, observing that such a tactic is of no more help than it would be to remind a man suffering from

²¹ This point is made in Giussani's excursus to book 3, *T. Lucretius Cari* (1897), 3:140–41; see also Perelli, *Lucrezio*, 101–2.

²² Epicurus himself recognized that grief at death is a natural reaction and is preferable to insensitivity: Plutarch, *Non Posse Suaviter Vivi Secundum Epicurum* 1101A–B (frag. 120 Usener). Unfortunately Epicurus's *On Diseases and Death* (frag. 18 Arrighetti) is not extant; see Gigante, "Philosophia Medicans," 55. See also Santayana, "Lucretius," 52 for a criticism of Epicurus's inattention to the process of dying. He cites Francesca's "Il modo ancor m'offende," of Dante, *Inferno* 5.

extreme heat that he once swam in the cold rivers of his native Arpinum (5.26.74). Cicero is probably reflecting the commonplace view of his time when he quotes Epicharmus: *emori nolo, sed me esse mortuum nihil aestimo* (“I do not want to suffer death, but to be dead I consider as nothing,” *Tusc. Disp.* 1.8.15).²³ Such concerns with the process of dying surface in other Roman writers of the period or shortly after, like Tibullus and Propertius.²⁴

In his polemical treatise, *Non Posse Suaviter Vivi Secundum Epicurum*, Plutarch argues at length that Epicurus does not address the real fears about death. These concern not the afterlife but rather the loss of consciousness, “oblivion, ignorance, and darkness” (λήθη, ἄγνοια, σκότος, 10.1093A). Returning to this point near the end of his treatise, Plutarch maintains that the terror of non-being is far more powerful than the myths about Hades (26.1104C). “The face of death that all men fear as terrifying and grim and dark is that of loss of sensation, oblivion, and ignorance” (ἀναισθησία, λήθη, ἄγνοια, 26.1104E). For this reason, Plutarch goes on, men feel disturbance and malaise about expressions like “he has been destroyed” and “he is no longer” (οὐκ ἔστι). Instead of removing the fear of death by his *Tetrapharmakon*, including the maxim that “What has no sensation is nothing to us” (*Kyriai Doxai* 2), Epicurus only confirms it, for he virtually demonstrates its power: such a “dissolution into the absence of thought and sensation” (τὴν εἰς τὸ μὴ φρονεῖν μηδὲ αἰσθανόμενον διάλυσιν) is the very thing that our nature fears (27.1105A).

In describing our terror at the vast nothingness of our non-

²³ Sikes (*Lucretius*, 132) remarks, “The ordinary man does not, perhaps, fear death in the abstract so much as the painful process of dying.” Kenney (*Lucretius III*, 32–33) quotes Byron on Juvenal 10: “I should think it might be read with great effect to a man dying without much pain” and also Cornford, “I do not know how common the horror of death may be among normal people; but, where it exists, is it not often the prospect of extinction that horrifies them?”

²⁴ Michels, “Death,” 175, notes that by contrast to Lucretius, Propertius is deeply involved with the process of dying.

being, Plutarch in fact uses some of the same imagery as Lucretius does (as we shall see) when he deals with the soul's dissolution. Plutarch remarks that Epicurus's sayings in effect leave us "immersed in non-being from which we can never emerge" (30.1106E). It is the very infinity (ἀπέραντον) and unchanging continuation of this condition that is so terrifying: "Our soul is poured forth into a yawning ocean of infinity" (30.1106F). Epicurus's consolation for death, in Plutarch's view, removes our only hope: "For if, as Epicurus says, death takes place also with pain, the fear of death is entirely inconsolable since it leads us to the loss of good things through a path of suffering" (30.1107A).

Epicurus himself seems more concerned with overcoming infinite desires than with the fear of the infinite void after death; and in fact most of his warnings against the "unlimited" are directed at desire.²⁵ If we limit infinite desire by what is "necessary" (τὸ ἀναγκαῖον), we can achieve that autonomy or self-sufficiency (αὐτάρκεια) through which we approximate the calm of the gods (fragment 458 Usener = Porphyry, *De Abstergentia* 1.54). Epicurus's fullest advice on this subject is a brief passage in the *Letter to Menoeceus* (D.L. 10.124):

Death is the cessation of sensation. Whence the true knowledge of the fact that death is nothing to us renders enjoyable the mortal part of life, not adding limitless time (ἄπειρον προστιθεῖσα χρόνον) but rather taking away the longing for immortality. For there is nothing terrifying in living to one who has genuinely grasped the fact that there is nothing terrifying in not being alive.

The failure to understand this limit of desires and of time may also be the reason why men amass wealth and power, with the resultant crimes to which Lucretius refers at the beginning of his discussion of the fear of death (3.59–77).²⁶

²⁵ See, e.g., *Kyriai Doxai* 10 and 15; in general, see Schmid, "Lucretius *Ethicus*," 137ff.

²⁶ Schmid, "Lucretius *Ethicus*," 139ff., makes an interesting and convincing case for linking this passage with the Epicurean warning against unlimited desires. See also Miller, "Art of Dying," 172. We may compare also *Kyriai*

Epicurus's rationalism, however, seems not to have explored the possibility that men could fear this very infinity of non-being. According to a passage in Porphyry (frag. 458 Usener), he may have paired the insatiable desire for "life, wealth, and property" with "fearing the terror associated with death as limitless" (τὸ κατὰ τὸν θάνατον δεινὸν ὡς ἀπέραντον).²⁷ Porphyry seems to be expounding Epicurus's thoughts on death in the *Letter to Menoeceus* cited above and not elaborating theories of his own. But even if he is transmitting Epicurean doctrine, he implies not that infinity itself is the source of fear but rather that the issue is the extension of our desires to the limitless time beyond our death. We fear that we will somehow be deprived of these goods for infinite time (cf. Lucretius 3.900ff.).

In urging us toward the prospect of a livable happiness, Epicurus, like Lucretius, is aware of the fragility of our being, of the dangers surrounding life on every side, and of the changing, ephemeral nature of our circumstances.²⁸ Philodemus reflects this spirit of practicable, manageable happiness when he remarks, "The sensible man, having determined that he can obtain everything conducive to the autonomy for a happy life, walks about, for the rest prepared for burial, and he enjoys the single day as if it were a lifetime" (*De Morte* 38.14–19). It is the marring of lived life that is pitiable, he suggests, not death per se (*De Morte* 33.30ff.); and Lucretius would doubtless agree (cf. 3.59ff., 978ff.).

To Plutarch's arguments about the fear of infinity, then, Epicurus could answer, as others had before him, that such fears are based on false assumptions about "goods" and about the afterlife, since both will matter to us as little after our death as they did before our birth.²⁹ There is, however, something not

Doxai 19: "Infinite time and time that is limited hold the same pleasure, if one measures the limits [of pleasure] by rational accounting."

²⁷ On these relationships, see Schmid, "*Lucretius Ethicus*," 150–53.

²⁸ Cf. Epicurus, *Kyriai Doxai* 7; Lucretius 5.218–34, 1120–30.

²⁹ Cf. Lucretius 3.870–903 and 972–77; also Pseudo-Plato, *Axiochus* 365D, 370A. See Puliga, "*Chronos e Thanatos*," 252–53; also Furley's study

entirely rational about the fear of death that Epicurus's *Tetrapharmakon* seemed to some not to have addressed. When in the *Letter to Menoeceus* Epicurus does acknowledge death as "the most terrifying of evils" (τὸ φοικωδέστατον τῶν κακῶν, D.L. 10.125), it is only in the context of asserting that it is "nothing to us." There remains the very troubling tension that many people, both ancients and moderns, continue to feel between our finitude and the infinity of our future non-being. The proof, based on the soul's mortality, that we do not experience infinity after death does not necessarily eliminate our anxiety about an infinite void stretching before us.

Plutarch's criticisms were written a century and a half after Lucretius; but, as the discussions in Cicero and Philodemus noted above indicate, they may reflect objections voiced by philosophical opponents over a long period. Lucretius may or may not have known of these counter-arguments to his Master's thought. As a poet, he probably had an intuitive sensitivity to this more emotional dimension of his contemporaries' fears about death; and this awareness is reflected, as I shall argue, indirectly in the language of book 3. If Plutarch's images of the terrifying infinity of the sea of non-being and of immersion, for example, appear repeatedly in Lucretius,³⁰ it is not because the Roman writer is necessarily using a common source anterior to both himself and Plutarch, but because as a poet he is keenly aware of the terrors that haunt the human mind.

Lucretius's emphasis on the fears about the afterlife presents still another problem. These anxieties seem not to correspond to the actual concerns of his day. Funeral inscriptions and other indications of popular attitudes, studied by scholars as diverse as Franz Cumont, Tenney Frank, and Richmond Lattimore, suggest that in fact the belief in an afterlife played

of the "mirror of the past" argument in Lucretius 3.832ff.: Furley, "Nothing to Us?" 76ff.

³⁰ See, for example, Lucretius 3.829, discussed below, Chapter Four. Rambaux, "La logique," 216–18, however, tries to show that Lucretius's argumentation often follows the structure of an implicit dialogue, answering the objections of an imaginary interlocutor.