

## *Perferre Dolorem: Lucretian Intertextuality in Aeneid IX*

This paper argues that Virgil employs Lucretian intertextuality in the Nisus and Euryalus episode of *Aeneid IX*; these Lucretian allusions ultimately heighten the distinction between Lucretius' and Virgil's respective definitions of *pietas*. Ultimately, this accentuates the *pietas* expressed by Nisus and Euryalus and, by extension, Aeneas.

Lucretius exerted a powerful influence on Virgil; allusions to Lucretius pervade the text of the *Aeneid*. Multiple scholars have detected a trend in these Lucretian references: Virgil frequently uses Lucretian imagery and language to contradict Lucretian ideas (e.g., Dyson, 1996.) This paper examines the Nisus and Euryalus episode through this lens, arguing that Virgil uses Lucretian language to craft Nisus and Euryalus as anti-Lucretian figures. This heightens the poignancy of the youths' dilemmas and defines Virgilian *pietas* in opposition to Lucretius.

Virgil shapes Nisus and Euryalus as anti-Lucretian figures through their desire for glory, entreaties to the gods, and fear of death. Nisus initiates their mission by confiding in Euryalus: "My mind is restless to attempt a great attack, nor is it content with peaceful quiet" (*aut pugnam . . . invadere magnum/mens agitat mihi, nec placida contenta quiete est*, Aen. IX.186-7.) His words suggest Lucretius' definition of *pietas* as "the ability to look on the world with quiet mind" (*pacata posse omnia mente tueri*, DRN V.1203). Nisus clearly lacks the peace Lucretius prescribes. His situation also recalls Lucretius' condemnation of martial glory as a false search for fulfillment (DRN II.37-61.).

Nisus and Euryalus are also anti-Lucretian in their approach to the gods: Nisus' desperate invocation of Diana begins *tu, dea, tu* (Aen. IX.404); Lucretius' opening address to Venus includes the phrase *te, dea, te*. (DRN. I.6.) Lucretius invokes Venus purely for literary

convention; he does not believe that gods intervene personally in human affairs. He eventually argues that peace comes only with the repudiation of traditional Roman religion. In contrast, Nisus cries out to an actual goddess to deliver him from real physical peril; if she does not hear him, he is lost. Nisus and Aeneas also participate in rituals condemned by Lucretius (such as sacrifice and the lifting of hands.)

Further, when Euryalus faces imminent death, Nisus emerges, no longer able to endure his pain (*nec . . . tantum potuit perferre dolorem*, Aen. 426.) Besides recalling Lucretius' description of Iphigenia's sacrifice as false piety (DRN I.101) these words echo Lucretius' assurance that pain does not continue after death: *non tamen aeternum poterit perferre dolorem* (DRN III.990.) Virgil echoes Lucretius' line, suggesting that for Nisus, Euryalus' death does hold eternal significance; he will never see his beloved again, and this loss brings lasting anguish. Epicureans permitted the initial pangs of grief; these represent an instinctual reaction, not an emotion based on cognition. (Konstan, 2013.) Yet endless grieving constituted an inappropriate reaction to death, which the Epicurean knows is not an evil. Nisus does not share the Epicurean perspective: For him, death is wholly a tragedy.

Additionally, Virgil describes Euryalus' death using the famous image of a drooping flower (Aen. IX.436-37.) This simile contrasts with Lucretius' perspective on nature, in which the natural cycle of dispersion and renewal allows atoms to maintain the balance of existence. Death must exist for this process to occur; *pietas* requires that readers serenely accept this fact. But for Nisus, Euryalus' death contradicts nature; it does not uphold it.

In Nisus' death, Virgil again recalls Lucretius' definition of *pietas*. Nisus grows still in death: *placidaque ibi demum morte quievit*, (Aen. IX.445.) While the pious life for Aeneas and his followers requires desire, exertion, and risk, death, though painful for survivors, brings calm

to the one experiencing it. At the episode's beginning, Nisus' desire for glory left him restless, unquiet; now at last he finds stillness. In the tragic world of the *Aeneid*, Epicurean *ataraxia* can be attained by the individual only in death.

The anti-Lucretian status of these youths reveals the distance between Virgilian and Lucretian *pietas*. For Lucretius, *pietas* involves interior tranquility, while Virgil's *pietas* demands exterior commitment, submission to gods, and strenuous action at the risk of grief and loss. Virgil's interaction with Lucretius also highlights the poignancy of Aeneas' position. Nisus represents an emotionally intuitive version of *pietas* which Aeneas is denied: While Nisus willingly jeopardizes the mission to rescue his beloved, Aeneas repeatedly subordinates his personal loyalties for the sake of the common good. Lucretian allusion in the Nisus and Euryalus episode reminds us that, for Virgil's Aeneas, there is no *ataraxia* to be found within this life.

#### Works Cited

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