

Lucretius's Broken Jar: Philosophical Transformations of a Poetic Image  
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An interesting aspect of the interaction between poetry and philosophy in the *De Rerum Natura* is the frequency with which Lucretius employs the same image or metaphor in different contexts to reflect different or even apparently inconsistent features of Epicurean doctrine (see, for example, Anderson *TAPA* 91 [1960]: 1-29). In this paper, I wish to call attention to cases in which a particular poetic image is recycled to illustrate both Epicureanism's ethical precepts and its vision of the physical universe. The effect, I believe, is usually to suggest to the reader the existence of some underlying link between these two halves of Epicurean doctrine. Carroll Moulton (1977) has examined Homer's use of similes in pairs and sequences (e.g., at *Il.* 2.455-83) to "illuminate and intensify" the movement of his narrative, and I wish to suggest that Lucretius employs a similar epic technique to produce psychological unity between apparently disparate elements of Lucretius's philosophy.

For example, Lucretius uses the image of blood-sacrifice first in an ethical context (condemnation of religion) in his account of Agamemnon's immolation of Iphigeneia (1.82-101). Later, explaining that different organisms of the same species nevertheless have dissimilar atomic compositions, Lucretius introduces a memorable passage in which a forlorn cow wanders the fields in search of her slaughtered calf (2.352-366): the cow knows that other calves, which contain different combinations of atoms, are not one she is looking for. Although the ostensible functions of the two passages are very different, the imagery and language of the second passage clearly recall the previous use of the same imagery in the Iphigeneia passage. A subtle connection is thus made between ethical and physical ideas, and the uniqueness of each creature becomes an unstated but strongly felt argument against the taking of life for religious purposes. (The same poetic phenomenon can be seen in Lucretius's employment, in both ethical and physical contexts, of images of a purple cloth or *ostrum* [2.34-8; 2.829-831] and of a dispassionate viewer contemplating the wanderings and battles of humans [2.1-13] or of motes of dust [2.114-120].)

The most fascinating example, however, of the way in which Lucretius employs changing valences of the same image to draw together his philosophical system involves recurring images of a broken or perforated jar (*vas*). This image, first used to prove the mortality of the soul (3.434-444), evolves step by step over the course of Book 3 from an image of the body (in contrast to the contents, or soul) to an image of the entire person (3.554-555, 3.791-793). Finally, at 3.935-941, the *vas* becomes an image of life itself, and takes on an entirely moral dimension as it used to argue against sadness at the thought of mortality. This dimension is confirmed and reoriented in 3.1003-1010, where the Danaids in the underworld, attempting to fill their *pertusum vas*, are an image of perpetual dissatisfaction with life's lot. Much later, in Book 6 – which was probably composed immediately after Book 3 (Bailey 1947: 32-7, 121-3) – the *vas* takes on its final moral significance in an image in which the *vas*, unenlightened by the insights of Epicurus, is seen as responsible for its own *vitium*. Lucretius's gradual transformation of the meaning of the broken jar reveals his intention to unify disparate philosophical concepts through the employment of a single poetic image and, ultimately, to develop in his reader the feeling that conquering the fear of death is akin to overcoming mortality itself.