

The Triumph of *De Rerum Natura*'s Last Book

Book 6 of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* has been the center of much discussion concerning the nature, intention, and format of the poem, with its assortment of explanations of bizarre natural phenomena, followed by an infamous description of the plague at Athens, which gives the poem a gruesome and, in the opinions of some, unsatisfactory ending. Others have argued persuasively that the poem has a coherent structure as an epic, and that the plague passage provides a didactic lesson for the reader (see e.g. Commager 1957, Gale 1994). I propose that the explanations of phenomena and of the plague in Book 6 fit in to the end of the epic by illustrating Lucretius as a victorious general celebrating a Roman triumph.

The *DRN*, though it is first and foremost a didactic poem describing the ideas of Epicureanism, also belongs to the genre of epic poetry, not only because of its use of dactylic hexameter, but because it contains military imagery that portrays the poem's arguments as a war fought over the reader's mind. Within the poem, the atoms themselves are depicted as doing battle and arrayed in military fashion. This sets the tone for a description of a war, as Lucretius writes, for example, that the essential elements of the world are *concita bello*, "stirred up by war" (*DRN* 5.381). With this as a background, the main battlefield then becomes the reader's mind and the arguments themselves fight against superstition and the fear of death. Epicurus, the founder of the philosophy which Lucretius describes, fights *dictis, non armis*, "with words, not with weapons" (*DRN* 5.50). So words become the weapons and actors in war, and the first five books of the poem give an account of this great war between Epicureanism and ignorance.

The sixth book begins with a description of Epicurus' victory, recalling the first book, which as Vinzenz Buchheit points out contains triumphal imagery in lines 1.62-79, as Epicurus emerges as a victorious general (Buchheit 1971). Here at the end of the poem, Lucretius transfers

this triumph to himself, calling the work his own *inceptum*, or “undertaking” (*DRN* 6.42) and reminding the reader, *docui* (I taught) these things (6.43). A few lines later, after Lucretius demonstrates that the reader should now be able to do his own reasoning, come the words *insignem conscendere curram*, “to mount a decorated chariot” (6.47). An unfortunate lacuna follows, but it is clear that Lucretius climbs into a chariot having conquered his enemy. John Godwin hypothesizes that “a whole page may have fallen out after 47, a page in which L. may have extended the image of the poet riding the Muses’ car into another ‘poetic preface’ ...” (Godwin 1991: 97). The imagery is certainly triumphant, and the remainder of the book constitutes a triumphal procession as Lucretius displays the spoils of his war. In Roman literary tradition, it is not unusual for a poem to end in a description of a triumph. Pointing to the works of Silius Italicus, Statius and probably Ennius, Mary Beard claims that “triumphs offered a suitable climax to poems celebrating Roman achievement” (Beard 2009: 42). In my reading, Lucretius displays the spoils of war for his triumph at the end of the *DRN*. These are the explanations of natural phenomena, now accessible because reason has conquered superstition. The sixth book does not contain the same type of arguments about the overall nature of the universe as the other five books. Those battles have already been fought and won, so now Lucretius can show off what is gained through the victory of reason: an understanding of the world’s more bizarre natural phenomena.

After the spoils are displayed, the much-discussed description of the plague follows. The poem’s ending serves the role of the conquered enemy in the triumph. The fear of death is displayed, which by the gruesome descriptions highlighting fear’s former strength shows how great an enemy has been brought down, and parades in front of the reader a fear of death which no longer possesses any power as an enemy. The fear of death has been subdued by reason and

now can be safely observed by the reader/triumph-viewer without presenting a danger to the mind.

Works Cited

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