

“Honey, I Shrunk the Muses!”: Lucretian Poetry at the Atomic Level

One of the major tenants of Epicurean philosophy states that “the blessed and immortal has no concerns (*pragmata*) nor is troubled by the concerns of another, so that it is never constrained by anger (*orgais*) or favor (*charisi*)” (*Principle Doctrines* 1). Given the centrality and importance of this teaching for quelling the anxieties associated with superstition, one is puzzled by the frequency and openness with which Lucretius invokes the Muses in his poetic homage to Epicurus, the man who “laid low religion” (1.78-79: *religio pedibus subiecta vicissim / obteritur*). Rather than indulge in poetic convention at the risk of embracing radically unorthodox views, however, Lucretius justifies his incorporation of the Muses through an important distinction: they are not goddesses at all but the deluded imaginings of primitive society, which mistook the sound waves of echoes for divine voices (4.572-594). Furthermore, his explanation of the physical characteristics of atoms and their various effects on the sense of hearing at 4.542-562 suggests that poetic “charm” (*lepor*), which is the Muses’ gift, is ultimately reducible to affections of pleasure occurring at the atomic level.

Lucretius’ incorporation of the Muses into his epic poem has received a considerable amount of attention from scholars recently. Particular emphasis has been placed on his engagement with the previous literary traditions of spiritual invocation, especially Hesiod (Gale 2007), Empedocles (Clay 1983, 2007) and Ennius (Harrison 2002, Gignon 1977). With regard to the role of the Muses, various studies have considered their instrumental function as “allies” of the poet’s didactic agenda (O’ Hara 1998) and their therapeutic and medicinal qualities (Kilpatrick 1996). On the other hand, certain scholars have called into question their level of involvement, with some maintaining that this is merely superficial (Rumpf 2003) while others view it as more profound (Snyder 1973). With regard to their actual nature, however, the

research has focused mainly on their human origins (Gale 1994) rather than on the possibility of explaining their existence in terms of Epicurean atomic theory. This study will attempt to fill the gap by demonstrating that the Muses are nothing more than the affection caused by waves of smooth atoms, which caress the sense organs and consequently produce a pleasurable effect.

An examination of the role and nature of the Muses in Lucretius' *De rerum natura* will necessarily involve a reconsideration of the previous scholarship concerning the influence of previous traditions and the manner in which the poet engages with his predecessors. Of primary importance, however, will be key passages in which the poet discusses the relationship between clarity and charm (4.8-9: *quod obscura de re tam lucida pango / carmina, musaeo contingens cuncta lepore*), both of which were instrumental for the acceptance and successful transmission of Epicurean doctrine within a poetic medium. Finally, this study will attempt to demonstrate the complexity which underlies the role of the Muses, who are instrumental for the charming communication of difficult doctrines but are ultimately reducible to the atomic elements of Epicurean physics.

Works Cited

Clay, D. 1983. *Lucretius and Epicurus*. Ithaca.

_____. 2007. "The Sources of Lucretius' Inspiration." In *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies: Lucretius*. Ed. Monica Gale. Oxford: 18-47.

Gale, M. 1994. *Myth and Poetry in Lucretius*. Cambridge.

_____. 2007. "Lucretius and Previous Poetic Traditions." In *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*. Ed. Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie. Cambridge: 59-75.

- Gignon, O. 1977. "Lukrez und Ennius." In *Fondation Hardt pour l'Étude de l'Antiquité Classique XXIV: Lucrèce*. Genève: 167-196.
- Harrison, S. J. 2007. "Ennius and the Prologue to Lucretius *DRN* 1 (1.1-148)." *Leeds International Classical Studies* 1.4: 1-13.
- Kilpatrick, R. S. 1996. "*Amicus Medicus*: Medicine and Epicurean Therapy in the *De Rerum Natura*." *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*: 69-100.
- O' Hara J. J. 1998. "Venus or the Muse as 'Ally.'" *CPh.* 1: 69-74.
- Rumpf, L. 2003. "Naturerkenntnis und Naturerfahrung: zur Reflexion epikureischer Theorie bei Lukrez." *Zetemata* 116.
- Snyder, J. M. 1973. "The Meaning of *Musaeo Contingens Cuncta Lepore*, Lucretius 1.934." *CW* 6: 330-334.