

Divine Humanity: Lucretian Influences on Blake's Antinomian Theology

I rest not from my great task!

To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes

Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought, into Eternity

Ever expanding in the Bosom of God, the Human Imagination.

- Blake, *Jerusalem* 1.5.17-20

William Blake was a poet obsessed with perception. He repeatedly states that the goal of his poetic project is to cleanse the “doors of perception” and thereby enable his fellow men to view the Infinite, Eternity, or as he says in the passage above “the Worlds of Thought.” In passages like the above Blake frequently uses both images and ideas familiar to the reader of Lucretius, thanks to the influence of certain Epicurean ideas upon the antinomian theological tradition from which Blake drew. Lucretius similarly finds the evidence for the tenets of Epicureanism everywhere, if the reader will only “look.” (2.112-20;206-9) But, owing both to the rhetorical constraints of his argument and the dogmatic constraints of his school, Lucretius does not insist that atomic theory is self-evident or that the senses may always be reliable witnesses. Indeed, the senses may deceive us, but this is because of mental activity that follows perception immediately, but still comes after the fact:

cetera de genere hoc mirande multa videmus,
quae violare fidem quasi sensibus omnia quaerunt—
nequiquam, quoniam pars horum maxima fallit
propter opinatus animi quos addimus ipsi,
pro visis ut sint quae non sunt sensibus visa.
nam nihil aegrius est quam res discernere apertas
ab dubiis, animus quas ab se protinus addit.

About this type (of perception) we see many remaining things
wondrously,
Which seek as it were to violate the trust in the senses regarding
everything--
In vain, since a part of them makes the greatest things mistaken
On account of the suppositions of the mind which we ourselves add,
So that those things which were not seen by the senses might seem to be.
For nothing is more painstaking than to separate clear things
From doubtful, which the mind immediately imparts by itself. (4.462-8)

Both Lucretius and Blake prescribe a cleansing of the perceptive process. In doing so Blake actually makes use of a Lucretian metaphor: "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite." Lucretius uses the idea of the senses as doors just before launching into a lengthy, negative portion of his argument wherein he attacks a series of mistaken Pre-Socratic ideas about the nature of the body, the mind, and their relationship. (3.370-623) Blake likewise uses the metaphor in the midst of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in which he attacks the Platonist idea of a rigid mind/body dualism using heaven/hell as a broader metaphor. In short he uses Hell as a signifier for bodily reality and Heaven for the spiritual in order to show that the two are the equally necessary contraries without which "is no progression. Attraction and repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence." (*The Argument, Marriage of Heaven and Hell*) At the point where Lucretius coins the metaphor, he has likewise been establishing an expanding universe of necessary dualistic relationships: atoms and void, the observer and the world, the reader and the poet. He goes on in Book Three to collapse the metaphor of a Greco-Roman mythic Hades into the everyday reality to which humans subject themselves and each other. In effect, then, Lucretius

and Blake not only deal with the same themes in their respective works: they use the same metaphors to conceptualize those themes. Blake therefore discusses a Lucretian theme (the essential unity of body and mind/soul), within a Lucretian dualistic frame (discussion of heaven/hell), centered on a Lucretian metaphor (the doors of perception). In this respect both Lucretian poetics and Epicurean philosophy exercised a hitherto underappreciated influence on Blake's poetic vision.

Bibliography

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