

Lucretian Laughter and Pastoral Pathos in *De Rerum Natura*, Book 5

This essay proposes that Lucretius establishes a connection between laughter and a pastoral-poetic world in Book 5 of *De Rerum Natura* through his description of a laughter-rich pathetic fallacy in vv. 1379-1404. Drawing upon Gale's observation that this passage is “evoking the idealized countryside of bucolic poetry” (1994: 135), I assert that the prevalence of laughter shared between nature and the world's earliest musicians illuminates a genre-specific connection between laughter and pastoral poetry—a connection that is also evident in poems by Theocritus and, later, by Vergil.

In Book 5 of *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius presents an atomistic account of the history of the physical world and the origins of terrestrial life and human civilization. After detailing the beginnings of agriculture, the poet chronicles in vv. 1379-1404 the birth of the arts—music and dancing, in particular—among primitive humans. There appears in the midst of this passage (vv. 1394-1398) a comprehensive pathetic fallacy wherein positive human emotions and emotional displays are ascribed to the natural world. Immediately thereafter, the natural world's display of emotion is mapped back onto its human inhabitants.

The pleasure of the singers (*iucunde corpora habebant*, v. 1394) finds a natural outlet in the laughing of the weather (*tempestas ridebat*, v. 1395). The pathetic fallacy is particularly effective insofar as the sympathy between the human and natural realms clarifies the emotional register of each, with *iucunde*'s positive charge forestalling potential negative associations of nature's subsequent laughter, and with laughter itself concretizing the general emotional state expressed by *iucunde*. Joking, conversing, and cackling occur in the wake of the weather's laughter (*tum ioca, tum sermo, tum dulces esse cachinni*, v. 1397), but these behaviors are presumably demonstrated by humans. The sympathy between nature and humans is thus

reversed: rather than nature taking on human emotions, human cackles echo and amplify the laughter of the weather. The gelastic vocabulary spreads contagiously from nature to humans, crescendoing from *ridebat* in v. 1396 to *cachinni* in v. 1397. The narrator rounds out v. 1398 with mention of an *agrestis musa*—the “rustic muse”—whose invocation serves as a reminder to the reader that the occasion for such *bonhomie* in Book 5 is the sharing of newly-discovered music.

I conclude, by way of brief examinations of laughter occurring in Theocritus' *Idylls* and of Lucretian phrases appearing in Vergil (e.g., *agrestis musa* in *Ecl.* 6.8), with the proposal that a connection between pastoral poetry and laughter may have been all but obligatory when Vergil embarked upon his own pastoral project, and that these verses from Book 5 of *De Rerum Natura* may have been an instrumental link in this tradition. The Lucretian passage recasts Theocritean figures, setting, and terminology (gelastic and otherwise) in a Latin idiom that sets the stage for the pastoral world of Vergil's *Eclogues*.

Bibliography

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