

Lucretius' *Mens Animi* and Rational/Irrational Fear

As the poet himself frequently notes, the principal difficulty facing Lucretius in composing the *De Rerum Natura* was the essential act of translation: bringing Greek ideas into Latin, philosophical ideas into poetry, and seemingly transcendent ideas down to their atomic components. When it came to matters of psychology, these three levels of translation coincide as Lucretius tries to explain the composition of the human mind and soul within a materialistic framework, using traditional Latin epic vocabulary to redefine some of the most basic human experience and assumptions. It is not surprising then that modern scholarship has sometimes had trouble assembling Lucretius' version of Epicurean psychology into a coherent whole.

At the center of Lucretius' translation are three crucial terms: *animus*, *anima*, and *mens*. The specific challenge to modern readers of the *De Rerum Natura* lies in deciphering how these three Latin terms correspond to their Greek (apparent) referents in the writings of Epicurus: η ψυχή and its two constituent portions, τὸ λογικόν and τὸ ἄλογον. As many readers of Book 3 especially will know, Lucretius' use of his three terms is slippery at the best of times. Wald (1968) argues that Lucretius blurred the lines between his terms on purpose, in order to present a holistic view of the mind and soul. By contrast Mehl (1999) argues that the lack of definition in the presentation of these terms is a result of the *egestas linguae* that Lucretius himself bemoans throughout the poem (1.136-39, 830-33; 3.258-61). Against this pessimistic view and expanding upon Wald's thesis, this paper argues that in one specific and recurring phrase using two of these terms, *mens animi*, we see that Lucretius is building upon the foundation that Epicurus previously established by attempting to demonstrate that the *animus* is one united whole in a specific respect: namely the unity of rational and irrational impulses in the experience of sublime or acute emotions, particularly fear.

As Sanders (2008) highlights, we have no surviving text which provides us with the Epicurean definition of fear, but we do have clear indications that Lucretius' account of it is both materialistic and cognitivist in focus. But when it comes to his use of *mens animi*, a particular type of human fear that is always being discussed: experiences at the boundary between the human and the transcendent, or experiences otherwise at the limits of human understanding. These range from the appearance of long dead men in our dreams (4.758), to the terror that struck Athens in the form of plague (6.1183), to primitive humans' visions of the gods themselves (5.149) and the realization that the soul itself is mortal (3.615). In each of these instances the reader is confronted with some version of the unknowable or supernatural, and in each instance Lucretius is similarly at pains to emphasize that while all of these phenomena have clear, material explanations, the actual experiences involved necessarily appeal to both the rational and irrational aspects of the mind, which may explain why, to an Epicurean, most human thought on these subjects goes so badly awry. It is perhaps for this reason that scholars and commentators who are seeking to clearly delineate Lucretius' unique presentation of Epicurean psychology tend to ignore these passages or represent them not as the marker of a paradoxical experience. In his magisterial commentary, Bailey (1947) either refers to the uses of these two terms together as placing emphasis on *mens* over *animi*, as basic synonyms, or as "tautological and unusual" (n. on 6.1183). Mehl similarly treats these passages not at all in his otherwise convincing account of Lucretian psychological theory. The typical treatments of these passages seem rooted in the idea of a united Lucretius, discounting as they do Patin's (1914) notion of *L'anti-Lucrece chez Lucrece*. However, in as much as Epicureanism sought to provide a universal understanding of natural phenomena (and for the Epicureans all phenomena were natural), I argue that the apparent tension between these two terms is not a repellant force of

logical contradiction. On the contrary, just as Lucretius is uniting the "supernatural" with naturalistic explanations, he captures in his poem the unique relationship between human rationality and those experiences at which that very rationality balks.

Bibliography

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