

Feasting by Homeric Torchlight: Ekphrasis and Cultural Transmission
at *De rerum natura* 2.24-26.

The brief description of golden statues of youths bearing torches for nocturnal banqueters at *Lucr.* 2.24-26 stands out as the only ekphrasis explicitly of art objects in *De rerum natura*. The passage is additionally important for being the first (negative) illustration of the principle that “nature” (*natura*) requires no more than what removes care and provides pleasure in moderation (2.20-22). Yet while scholars have long recognized the allusion here to similar statues in Homer’s palace of the Phaeacians at *Od.* 7.100-102, and have interpreted this as an effort, on Lucretius’s part, to dispel the charge that Epicurus was a “Phaeacian” philosopher devoted to hedonism (Bignone 1936: 1.317-18; Gale 1994: 112; Fowler 2002: 82, 93-95), no study has asked why Lucretius chooses artistic ekphrasis specifically as a means of accomplishing his purposes here. This paper takes up and develops a recent view of Roman ekphrasis as staging an “ambivalent *receptivity* to Greek culture” (Dufallo 2103: 1, italics his) to argue that by including an image of an artistic product actually known to Roman diners (Quaranta 1831: pl. XV; Chamoux 1950), Lucretius suggests that his audience should see such objects as symbols not only of excessive luxury, but also of broader Roman attitudes toward Greek culture that his poem counteracts and that the audience should attempt to avoid.

DRN is a poem that begins by enforcing a strong opposition between Greek and Roman. Epicurus is the *Graius homo* (1.66, “Greek man”) who first dared to lift his eyes skyward in opposition to the glowering face of religion; Lucretius asks Venus to seek peace *Romanis* (1.40, “for the Romans”) by seducing Mars; the *ductores Danaum dilecti* (1.86, “chosen leaders of the Greeks”) sacrifice Iphigenia, while Lucretius invokes Venus as *Aeneadam genetrix* (1.1, “mother of the Romans”); etc.

Along with this opposition, however, Lucretius outlines in Book 1 a version of cultural transmission from Greek to Roman that he wishes to reject, as it pertains to the literary, religious, and philosophical spheres. Ennius, although a model for Lucretius's epic versification, has fallen short in taking over from Homer, whose ghost he claimed to have visited him and explained *rerum naturam* (1.126, "the nature of things"), false notions of the underworld and indeed of Lucretius's own subject matter. Likewise Book 2, as Sydnor Roy (2013) has shown, opens with imagery suggesting Lucretius's own improvement upon Homer, insofar as Lucretius (2.1-13) asserts that it is sweet to watch shipwreck and battle from a distance (cf. the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*), and depicts the Epicurean sage observing misguided mankind wander (cf. 10, *errare...palantis*) and contend for status (cf. 2.11, *certare ingenio, contendere nobilitate*) (cf., again, Odyssean erring and Iliadic strife).

Yet at no point in *DRN* before the statues ekphrasis does Lucretius indicate directly that material culture is a possible conduit for Romans to adopt mistaken attitudes from Greece. Nature does not seek anything more welcome, Lucretius specifies, if one's house does not contain golden statues of youths *lampadas igniferas manibus retinentia dextris, / lumina nocturnis epulis ut suppeditentur* (2.25-26, "holding firey torches in their right hands so that light may be supplied to nocturnal feasts"), an "unusually close" rendering (Bailey 1947: 2.802) of Homer's αἰθομένας δαΐδας μετὰ χερσὶν ἔχοντες, / φαίνοντες νύκτας κατὰ δώματα δαιτυμόνεσσι (*Od.* 7.101-2, "holding burning torches in their hands, and giving light by night throughout the hall for feasters"). Roman banqueters, Lucretius suggests, may through their use of such statues come to see their misguided nocturnal revelry as behavior continuing and authorized by Greek heroic traditions going back to Homer. Thus as Book 2 substantiates and extends the first Book's insights through discussion of atomic motion, shape, and secondary qualities, so, too, it widens

the poem's regard on faulty cultural transmission by explicitly including visual art. Art, for Lucretius, is among *praemia, delicias quoque vitae* (5.1450, "the prizes and the luxuries of life"); his ekphrasis expresses receptivity to its Greekness ambivalently—and thus furthers Lucretius's goals in *DRN*.

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