

Lucretius's Beautiful Phlegm: Disgust, Pleasure, and the Aesthetics of Plague

In *De Rerum Natura* 6.1188-89, Lucretius describes the phlegm of the victims of his famous plague: *tenuia sputa minuta, croci contacta colore, / salsaque per fauces rauca vix edita tussi* “phlegm [that was] thin, scant, flecked with a saffron color and salty, scarcely passed through the throat with a hoarse cough.” This paper examines why Lucretius describes something so disgusting and noxious with such beautiful language, creating a discordant juxtaposition of aesthetic pleasure and human suffering.

The first line is a stylistic tour de force that would more fittingly describe a beautiful work of artistry or a Homeric sunrise. The phlegm's thinness (*tenuia*) befits Callimachean refinement, while the asyndeton and alliteration further develop the phlegm's seeming poetic beauty. The saffron color, as Faratantuono observes, “is completely out of place,” more evocative of a finely woven garment than the output of an unproductive cough. Lucretius's poetic language effectively renders appealing what is deeply unappealing: diseased phlegm.

Lucretius's high register here could be read primarily as meant to distract his reader's mind from the horror of the plague, but Lucretius's description is repugnant even as it elicits pleasure. The harsh alliteration of “c” sounds engages our sense of hearing as it replicates the victim's raspy and hacking cough, further evoked through the multiple spondees of line 1189. The saffron yellow compels us to visualize the phlegm's diseased discoloration. The phlegm's saltiness calls forth our sense of taste, forcing us to imagine at work in ourselves the plague's symptoms.

This unexpected mingling of the attractive and repulsive stirs the reader's aesthetic sense of disgust, which Overduin has described as a curious “mix of recoil and attraction, of repugnance and curiosity.” Recent work on disgust in ancient poetry, including that of Overduin

and Bartsch, has shown that poets carefully elicit disgust in their readers in the service of their larger philosophical and didactic goals, and Lucretius is no exception.

The line simultaneously recalls and recasts Lucretius' famous metaphor of the honeyed cup of wormwood, replacing the sweetness of poetry with the saltiness of disease. Each leaves a taste in the reader's mouth, and each invites us to consider if poetry can or even should overpower what is repugnant. In the honey/wormwood passage, poetry masks the unpalatable taste of something otherwise salutary, Epicurean philosophy. What tastes disgusting is in fact beneficial, and Lucretius's poetic honey allows us to enjoy its advantages without making us actually experience its flavor. This metaphor comes early in the collection (1.936-50), while his reader is still potentially recalcitrant, and Lucretius tops us off again at the start of Book 4.

By the time we reach the plague at the epic's conclusion, however, Lucretius no longer enables his reader to escape what she might find distasteful. In fact, he now pointedly compels her to imagine herself experiencing the more ghastly aspects of human suffering. One is no longer allowed, as at the start of Book 2, to occupy removed heights (repeatedly termed *suavis* or *dulcis*, "sweet," 2.1, 4, 6, 7) from which one might observe from afar the sufferings of man. Lucretius's plague once and for all removes any delusion that we can wholly avoid suffering and disease. These are, after all, ineluctable aspects of human life, ones so utterly out of our control. No matter how much poetic sweetness Lucretius applies, he cannot now trick our sense of taste entirely. We must experience the salty with the sweet because human life is unavoidably a blend of pain and pleasure. The goal of the Epicurean is to maintain the pursuit of *ataraxia* in the face of this.

Lucretius's description of beautiful, salty phlegm in fact enacts a reversal to his earlier honey/wormwood metaphor, a reversal hinted at already in the proem to Book 3, where

Epicurus's teachings become the flowers from which Lucretius derives golden nectar. As we imbibe more and more of Lucretius's poem, Epicureanism's bitterness is transmogrified into sweetness and joins in alliance rather than opposition with his poetry. By the time we arrive at the plague in Book 6, Lucretius's poetic sweetness is itself suggestive of Epicurean *hedone*. With the right philosophical preparation we can find *hedone* even in the most harrowing of circumstances. Once Epicureanism dispels our fear and horror, the seemingly antithetical experiences of pleasure and suffering, sweetness and disgust are no longer incompatible.

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