

Atomic Horses and Subatomic Gods: Valerius Flaccus's Appropriation of Lucretian  
"Distant Viewing" in *Argonautica* 2

Early in the second book of Valerius Flaccus's *Argonautica*, the Argonauts sail past horses grazing on a grassy plain: *attollit tondentes pabula Magnes / campus equos* (Val. Fl. *Arg.* 2.9–10). While scholars have noted in passing that this phrase combines Lucretius's famous simile-analogy of "atomic sheep" (*DRN* 2.317–22) with Vergil's reshaping of the image into an omen of four horses at *Aen.* 3.537–38 (Poortvliet 1991), Valerius's imitation of *DRN* 2.317 at *Arg.* 2.9 is much more precise than has been observed (Lucretius's *nam saepe in colli tondentes pabula laeta* becomes *Sepias. attollit tondentes pabula Magnes*). I argue that this forceful and early Lucretian parallel sets the program for an interpretation of the Argonauts' voyage over the next eighty lines (covering their first afternoon and night at sea, prior to their arrival at Lemnos) as a series of vignettes of Lucretian "distant viewing" (De Lacy 2007), in line with the function of Lucretius's simile. The expectations created by these successive Lucretian engagements, in turn, form important underpinnings for Valerius's subsequent Lemnian episode (not fully discussed here) and for the construction of his overall cosmos that have not previously been recognized.

Throughout this sequence of vignettes, the Argonauts repeatedly fill the shoes of Lucretius's hypothetical and emotionally detached Epicurean distant observer, even while they simultaneously engage in behavior diametrically opposed to Epicurean ethics, gazing gullibly at terrain seemingly shaped by the battle of the gods and giants at Pallene (*Arg.* 2.16–23), and staring in superstitious terror at the sublimity of the night sky (*Arg.* 2.38–47, cf. Hardie 2013). Furthermore, any emotional detachment or respite from terror and awe that they do achieve is due not to their acquisition of philosophical wisdom, but to direct interference from or

interaction with the divine (*Arg.* 2.1–5, 2.48–54). What results, I argue, is a philosophical tug of war within the mythological landscape, pitting anthropomorphism against rationalization, and personal contact with the divine against scientifically-discovered knowledge.

I further argue that this dichotomy resonates revealingly against the broader construction of Valerius's Argonautic cosmos. While there is an evident discrepancy between the Argonauts' various divinely-inspired moments of *avocatio* and *consolatio* and their apparent model, the rational (and trans-doctrinal) understanding of the natural world's causations that provides solace in both Lucretius and Seneca (Williams 2012: 213–57), I explore one possible avenue of resolution (and heightened friction) within the confines of the epic. In particular, the pervasive, multi-level anthropomorphism of the natural world and allegoresis of the divine world (one allegory is noted at Feeney 1991: 328–29) within the first 100 lines of Book 2 suggests the possibility of reading Valerius's whimsical and unpredictable gods (e.g., the dualistic persona of Venus at *Arg.* 2.102–6 and elsewhere, for which see Elm von der Osten 2007, Buckley 2013, etc.) as an overwriting of the atomic with the divine. Thus it is not so much that Valerius's cosmos is a straightforwardly "re-mythologized" Lucretian universe (cf. Hardie 1986, Gale 1994, Gale 2000), but rather that—here, at least—his gods themselves potentially assume the role of Lucretius's randomized atomic particles, resulting in an apparent interchangeability of the divine and the natural on a much more fundamental level. To the extent that a deep understanding of nature is even possible in Valerius's world, it may be that what is revealed is—for better or for worse—nature's composition from divine building blocks, all the way down.

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