

Repairing Faulty Jars: Allusion and Instruction in Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*

Lucretius has long been recognized for his complex deployment of images in *De Rerum Natura* (West 1969), increasingly with reference to his engagement with the literary tradition which precedes him (Kenney 1970, Rösler 1973, Tutrone 2006). The present paper focuses specifically upon the image of the jar (*vas* or *vasum*) as a didactic tool in *DRN*. This image has of course not gone entirely unnoticed in Lucretian scholarship (Schrijvers 1978, Welser 2009). The relationship of Lucretius to Empedocles and of Lucretius to Plato have likewise garnered scholarly attention (De Lacy 1983, Sedley 1998, Reinhardt 2004, Garani 2007); but the specific functions of Empedocles DK B100 and Plato *Gorgias* 493a-494a have not yet been fully articulated, especially in the context of Lucretius' broader didactic program. That Lucretius uses jar imagery pointedly is reinforced by the poet's acknowledgement at 3.555-57 that other images besides a vessel or jar may well exist to illustrate the philosophical point at hand (*sic animus per se non quit sine corpore et ipso / esse homine, illius quasi quod vas esse videtur, / sive aliud quid vis potius coniunctius ei / fingere, quandoquidem conexu corpus adhaeret*); by no means does he choose the specific image of the jar idly. Consequently, I suggest that jars function in *DRN* in a manner heretofore unrecognized in Lucretian scholarship, not only as a means of intentional intertextual allusion to previous literary (especially philosophical) works, but also as a component of one of the poet's overarching pedagogical strategies, namely the technique I call incremental didacticism. This technique finds form in Lucretius' reworking of a given image as it recurs over the course of the poem, and herein I examine this phenomenon specifically as it is observed in his subtle alterations to the various vessels and jars encountered in *DRN*. The slight changes which Lucretius effects in the descriptions of his jars subtly beckon the reader to pay ever closer attention to these vessels whenever they reappear, and at the same time the poet

manages to pose an increasingly thorough challenge to the pupil's adoption and practice of Epicurean teachings with each successive return to this philosophically loaded image.

Lucretius employs jar analogies on no fewer than eleven occasions in *DRN*. At first, the vessels themselves are forcibly shaken (*quassatis... vasis*, 3.434; *corpus, quod vas quasi constitit... conquassatum*, 3.440-41), and the pupil learns early to face such outside disturbances steadfastly. Not long thereafter, the jars grow slightly more difficult to manage, as these latest vessels, while not being moved by some outside force, are nevertheless riddled with holes (*omnia pertusum congesta quasi in vas / commoda*, 3.936-37; *laticem pertusum congerere in vas, / quod tamen expleri nulla ratione potestur*, 3.1009-10). Still later, in the proem to Book 6, the poet informs us that no less an authority than Epicurus himself has identified that the problem comes not from without, but from the vessel itself (*intellegit ibi vitium vas efficere ipsum*, 6.17). The implication of this revelation, of course, is that an individual's own mental fortitude, not the forces of the outside world, determine a person's success or failure in practicing Epicurean equanimity. Lucretius' subtle alterations to his jars throughout *DRN* not only reinforce that lesson but prepare the student to put it into practice over the course of reading the poem. Ultimately, the pupil is tasked with settling the metaphorical waters within, in stark contrast to the unsteady jars Lucretius leaves his reader to contemplate near the close of the poem (*ut vas interdum non quit constare, nisi umor / destitit in dubio fluctu iactarier intus*, 6.555-56) – even as the chaos of the ensuing plague scene will put this practiced *ataraxia* to the test.

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