

Similes Versus Analogies in Lucretius

Many scholars have discussed the language of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, and regarding one feature they often use terms that are not always easy to distinguish: in particular, similes, analogies and simple comparisons. This problem, which arises in reading Lucretius more than other poets (like Vergil, Apollonius and Homer), is what I would like to examine here.

First of all, to summarize some of my tabulations, I have identified 26 different similes in the six books of *DRN* (one is repeated twice and another once). Ten are shorter than one verse. This may seem to be a low total for similes in such a long epic poem and scholars indeed have tallied more (e.g., C. Schindler cites figures ranging from 160 to over 190). But after dealing with the thorny problem of distinguishing simple comparisons and analogies from similes, I decided to list them separately. Thus I have counted over 110 analogies as distinct from the more figurative similes.

What difference does this make? It's misleading to conclude that Lucretius devised more similes than Vergil because many of these are not of the same type as those in the *Aeneid*. They are there primarily to support a scientific assertion rather than to enhance a more literary aspect of his poem. Thus it is appropriate to distinguish these elements in Lucretius' 'didactic' epic from those in Vergil's 'narrative' epic. In this connection we may note that the total number of similes in the *Aeneid* provided by scholars differs widely from 101 (Beck) to 163 (Wilkins). My calculation is 140 similes (totaling 480 verses), 115 of which are formal "epic" similes occupying 3-9 verses and twenty-five are short clauses or phrases.

Here are some definitions with illustrations devised after comparing the relevant discussions in the publications of various scholars:

1] An analogy is a factual comparison or concrete example that supports or illustrates an abstract word or general principle, often part of a series:

"Clouds make a noise like canvas awning or paper being torn
or a garment hung on a line" (*DRN* VI.108-15 abbreviated).

2] A simile is a figurative comparison that could be removed with little or no logical effect, usually from a different subject area and not part of a series:

"As [*prothesis*] hounds [*vehicle*] very often find by their scent the leaf-hidden resting-place of the mountain-ranging quarry . . . so [*apothesis*] will you [*tenor*] be able to see one thing

after another in such matters. (*DRN* 1.404-09)

This is not a literal comparison and could simply be eliminated without grammatical or logical effect. Furthermore, in modern prose writers — and even in Plato — similes are often humorous. (e.g., *Phaedo* 109B: “we dwell around the sea like ants or frogs around a pond.”)

3] A simple comparison is a statement that expresses a similarity or difference, usually introduced by a prothesis (‘like’, ‘as’, ‘than’):

Bk 4.1211 By means of the mother’s seed [children] are born *like* their mothers. (*similes matrum*)

What makes the discussion of similes in the *DRN* difficult is that so many of Lucretius’ comparisons could be taken to be either similes or prosaic analogies, the only difference being in the degree of ‘figurativeness’. Many scholars avoid this problem by using a single term like ‘analogy’ (Schrijvers), ‘Gleichnis’ (Schindler), ‘illustration’ or ‘comparatio’ for all examples in their discussions. This does not affect their analyses of the content — except in the enumeration of similetic figures — but it does contribute to the misleading notion that there are more similes in the six books of the *DRN* than in the twelve books of the *Aeneid*.

This paper will discuss the distinction citing the views of various scholars (e.g., Gale [1994], Leen [1984], Schindler [2000]) on this issue. Comparison with Vergil will also be included.

Bibliography

- Gale, Monica: “Myth and Poetry in Lucretius” (Cambridge 1994); *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies Lucretius* (ed., Oxford 2007), esp. Chap. 11: P. H. Schrijvers, “Seeing the Invisible: A Study of Lucretius’ Use of Analogy in the *De rerum natura*,” 255-288).
- Leen, Anne: “The Rhetorical Value of the Similes in Lucretius,” D. F. Bright and E. S. Ramage, *Classical Texts and Their Traditions. Studies in Honor of C. R. Trahman* (pp. 107-123) (Scholars Press 1984).
- Schindler, Claudia: “Untersuchungen zu den Gleichnissen im römischen Lehrgedicht (Lucrez, Vergil, Manilius),” *Hypomnemata* 129 (Göttingen, 2000).