

## God is in the Details: Empedocles' Influence on Lucretius' Conception of the Philosopher Poet

The poetics of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* takes direct inspiration from the writing of Empedocles. Scholars have long noticed the similarity in thought and structure between the two poet philosophers (e.g. Sedley 2003, Volk 2002), but have not fully explored the depth or significance of Empedocles' influence on Lucretius. Taken as a whole, Lucretius' direct and indirect references to this Pre-Socratic philosopher provide a poetic statement of purpose for Lucretius. In this paper I argue that this Empedoclean influence on Lucretius in the *De Rerum Natura* provides the main criterion by which we can answer the question of why Lucretius chose to versify his philosophy, an essential step to understanding Lucretius' philosophy.

Conceptualizing Empedocles' poetics is essential before approaching their influence on Lucretius. In the first part of my paper I explore Empedocles' reasons for writing in poetry, which center on his belief in himself as divine and his understanding of poetry as the idiom of the gods (Parke 1981). This belief finds its greatest expression in Empedocles' self-identification with Demodocus (B33, B112), the divinely inspired Homeric bard (Hardie 2013). The Homeric allusions in the fragments of Empedocles ground his poetics and reveal the importance of verse to Empedocles.

Having established Empedocles' poetics, I next discuss his influence on Lucretius, which is strongest in the passages in which each poet discusses their beliefs about the transmission of knowledge (Garani 2003). For both, this is intimately connected to poetic form. Lines 1.267-269 of the *De Rerum Natura* follow the ideas found in a number of Empedocles' fragments (B171, B114, and B133) which concern the inadequacy of sight in comprehending reality. Lines 1.943-5

of *De Rerum Natura* further mirror Fragment B133 through a shared understanding of arriving at the truth as a painful process.

Lucretius, rather than invoking a traditional muse, calls upon Venus in his opening lines, the goddess whom Empedocles identifies as the unifying force in his cosmology. It is Venus who provides the poetic charm that enables the student of Lucretius to take the medicine of Epicureanism. The language of Lucretius' invocation of Venus (1.24-6) also alludes to Empedocles' invocation of Calliope (B114): both poets envision these two divine figures standing beside them rather than speaking through him, as the muses were wont to do.

I argue that, while Lucretius may have chosen verse, the idiom of the gods, to convey his philosophy, his philosophy is godless. He is taking up the tradition of the inspired bard but is removing the god behind the poet. Empedocles stops one step short of Lucretius, portraying himself as divine and thus bringing poetry into the world of men. Lucretius takes it further and entirely humanizes the sacred medium of poetry, redefining what divine means through his description of Epicurus, whose teachings, instead of his person, are divine.

### Bibliography

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