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From the Villa by Lucretius

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James Fowler
From the Villa

Titus Lucretius Carus
De Rerum Natura (excerpt)

Dear Gaius—don't take your Athens exile too hard.
You might've wound up staring down barbarians.
Now you're the man who didn't profane the Master's
estate with Roman gall. Not that he'd mind, his world
a constant construction site of atomic bricks.
Out my window the scene confirms it's all traffic.
The same liquid that Alexander drank to ease
his ceaseless thirst upholds a farmer and his grapes
on green Italian slopes. We humans crop up just
like the produce we cultivate, ripen and rot,
and come to no more than everything else that dies.
You say, my friend, this philosophy is too harsh,
a gay despair that masquerades as clear belief:
it sweeps all hope along with mortal fear into
the rubbish heap of superstition, leaving us
no final cause to act with dignity and grace.
I say if virtue needs reward or goad outside
itself, it's like fine metal mixed with baser stuff.
And no sane man would rather ghost it forever
by Acheron than dissipate into the stew
of elements that constantly creates new forms.
These days, you write, fresh prospects open before us,
referring, no doubt, to strange cults from south and east.
I can only advise you not place too much trust
in swaddled corpse and jackal-headed figurine
lest you yourself acquire an ass's ears and snout.
The only chance to live keeps knocking at the doors
of our senses, and we'd be fools to keep them shut
because we project some palace beyond the grave.

Sour critics like to picture us as hedonists,
stuffing ourselves stupid while pretty boys with fans
relieve our fevers. Pay no mind to such nonsense.
Pursuit of pleasure, yes, worthy a thinking man.
And don't kowtow too fast before those patriots
who bang the drum of service to our Roman thing.
You know how possible the drumming out of ranks.
Besides, are we the better when our young men die
to stretch our vaunted borders into Spain or Thrace?
The new heresy, I admit, but this gourmand
can do without Spanish olives at such a price.
In time this very earth will spend its store of seeds
and cede its elements to furnish other worlds.
Even the heedless gods have their generations.
We perch between midges and mighty Olympians,
our seats not the worst for savoring the spectacle.

Commentary

A few years ago I got around to a work long on my must-read list, *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*) by Titus Lucretius Carus, Lucretius for short. It is a lengthy poem that unfolds Epicurean materialism in compelling fashion. Upon finishing it, I turned to a sort of companion volume that had deservedly generated a lot of buzz, Stephen Greenblatt's *The Swerve*. In it Greenblatt argues that Poggio Bracciolini's unearthing of Lucretius's text in a monastery library contributed significantly to Renaissance humanism and the development of the modern, empirical world. It's the kind of scholarship that crosses over into the popular domain with its expertise intact.

But back to Lucretius. I chose to read him in A. E. Stallings's translation because it was recent, with favorable online reviews. Though I had once done schoolboy parsing of Virgil's *Aeneid*, I didn't dare tackle Lucretius in the original. His thorny Latin, I'm given to understand, is not for amateurs. I had learned an early lesson in grad school when some friends and I blithely decided to stage Euripides's *The Bacchae* in Greek. Ye gods, how I struggled to master my lines as Kadmos.

Of course, in the Lucretian-Epicurean system, the gods, should they even exist, don't give a flip for human ordeals. We cope unsupervised, taking what pleasure we can in the ceaseless churn of life stuff, headed for the atomic morass out of which we sprang. Whether you see such physics-based philosophy as liberating or dispiriting (literally, because in this worldview the soul goes the way of all flesh) will depend on something very basic in your psychology.

I found Lucretius's poetic treatment of these cosmic themes so personal, vivid, nimble, and concrete that I wanted to do a cameo of him at his moment in Roman history. I would not, as Tennyson did, follow the lead of St Jerome. This church father must have deemed Lucretius a threat to all right belief, as he remade him into a suicidal figure maddened by a love philtre. My portrait would be of a very sane man independent enough to cast a skeptical eye on militant Rome.

Stallings chose to render Lucretius's dactylic hexameter lines (suited for a universal epic) as iambic heptameter cou-

plets. Splitting the difference between her fourteeners and a standard blank-verse pentameter line, I would work in iambic hexameter. This would make my lines six syllables shorter than those in *De Rerum Natura*, but, after all, I was distilling, not translating.

The first version of my monologue had Lucretius standing by the banks of the Tiber composing a response to an unidentified distant friend. After critical feedback suggesting that I should better define the dramatic situation, I decided to place my poet in a country villa writing a letter to Gaius Memmius: patron, orator, former governor, minor poet, and dedicatee of *De Rerum Natura*. Memmius went to Athens after being kicked out of Rome for a political scandal. That he bought land and planned a building project that would have endangered the remnants of Epicurus's house (lines 3-4) seems quite a coincidence. Apparently Cicero talked him out of it.

Though some biographical sketches have Lucretius dying in 55 BCE, and Memmius wasn't banished until 53, that death date seems soft enough to allow me the liberty I've taken in having Lucretius refer to the house of Epicurus. This epistolary piece reaches forward in other ways too. I'll leave readers to figure out how Horace, Ovid, and Christ number among its rippling effects.

Source text:

Lucretius. *De Rerum Natura*. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.02.0130>