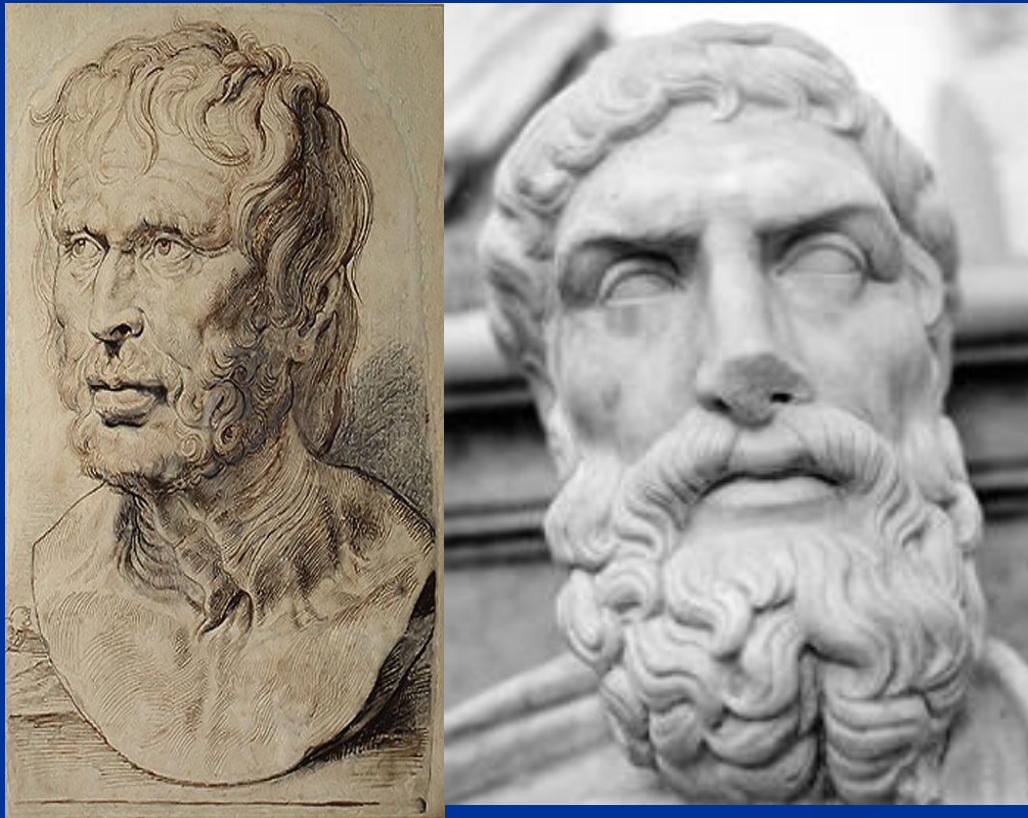


CLCS4009

READING ANTIQUITY: A SURVEY
OF ANCIENT LITERATURE



Lecture 18:
Philosophy in
Rome:
Lucretius and
Epicureanism

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Lucretius (Titus Lucretius Carus)

- Roughly contemporary with Catullus: born at the beginning of the first C BC, died sometime in the 50s BC
- Like Catullus in all likelihood also a relatively well-off citizen – he dedicates his works to the Memmius (a Roman aristocrat) with whom Catullus served in Bithynia
- Writes Epicurean philosophy – increasingly popular in Rome at this time, in competition with Stoicism

Epicurus and Lucretius

- Epicurus early 3rd C BC
- Materialist philosophy: the ideal is to achieve *ataraxia* (Greek for ‘tranquility’), not to be moved by fear or pain, death is final
- Lucretius gives only a section of Epicurean teachings: focuses on physics, which is the foundation of Epicurean ethics as laid out by other authors – it is to Lucretius the most pressing subject (Lucretius is our primary source of info on Epicurean physics).

Structure of *De rerum natura* (*On the nature of things*)

- Written in six books (falls into three matching pairs of books):
- 1/ The permanent constituents of the universe: atoms and void
- 2/ How atoms explain phenomena
- 3/ The nature and mortality of the soul
- 4/ Phenomena of the soul
- 5/ The cosmos and its mortality
- 6/ Cosmic phenomena
- Written in ascending scale: first pair: atoms; second pair: human beings; third pair: the cosmos as a whole.

Structure: *On the Nature of Things* / *On the nature of the universe (De rerum natura)*

Book 1

- Atomist theory, introducing four key points
- 1. Nothing comes into existence out of nothingness
- 2. Nothing dissolves into nothingness
- 3. Atoms exist
- 4. Void/emptiness/nothingness exists

■ Book 2

- Atomist theory
- Movements of atoms
- Shape of atoms
- Qualities of atoms
- The universe is infinite, without end, worlds are born and die

Structure: *On the Nature of Things*

Book 3

- Epicurean psychology
- The nature of the soul
- Fear of death unnecessary (esp. 830-1094)

Book 4

- Dreams, images, love [simulacra]

Book 5

- Origin/history of the world
- Heavenly bodies
- The earth:
 - animals and plants
 - humans
- Progression/evolution

Book 6

- Phenomena of the earth; sickness/illness
- The plague of Athens

Epicurean Poetry!?

- Epicurus demanded a simple style – clarity valued above all
 - Rejection of poetry
 - How can Lucretius still go for hexameter didactic?
 - Cf. proemium to Book 4
- Epicurus teaches that knowledge depends on sensory experience – another possible explanation for Lucretius' use of metaphor and imagery

*Next, since, concerning themes so dark, I frame /
Song so pellucid, touching all throughout / Even
with the Muses' charm- which, as 'twould seem, /
Is not without a reasonable ground: / For as
physicians, when they seek to give / Young boys
the nauseous wormwood, first do touch / The brim
around the cup with the sweet juice / And yellow
of the honey, in order that / The thoughtless age of
boyhood be cajoled / As far as the lips, and
meanwhile swallow down / The wormwood's bitter
draught, and, though befooled, / Be yet not merely
duped, but rather thus / Grow strong again with
recreated health: / So now I too (since this my
doctrine seems / In general somewhat woeful unto
those / Who've had it not in hand, and since the
crowd / Starts back from it in horror) have
desired / To expound our doctrine unto thee in
song*

Epic and didactic

- Teaching texts either in prose or in hexameter verse, like epic
- Important difference due to the Epicurean content: the narrator does not claim to be inspired by the Muses or visionary experience — his knowledge is based on *ratio* alone

*Mother of Rome, delight of Gods and men,
Dear Venus that beneath the gliding stars
Makest to teem the many-voyaged main
And fruitful lands- for all of living things
Through thee alone are evermore conceived,
Through thee are risen to visit the great
sun-
Before thee, Goddess, and thy coming on,
Flee stormy wind and massy cloud away,*

Similarities with Catullus

- Lucretius' inspiration does not come from philosophical sources alone: like Catullus, he is well read:
 - Homer, Euripides (cf. the references to Iphigenia in the first book), Ennius, Callimachus, and Hesiod e.g.
- Like Catullus, he plays with words:
 - Assonances and alliteration (frowned on by later Roman writers, but popular in this period)
 - Compound adjectives
- Unlike Catullus, he does not really like to invent new words

Afterlife

- Both Catullus and Lucretius have a crucial impact on later Roman literature
 - Love elegy (in combination with Roman comedy)
 - Roman didactic (Ovid's calendar poem *The Fasti*)
 - Roman epic (Vergil especially):
 - Virgil's *Georgics* 2.490-492: "Happy he who was able to know the causes of things, and who trampled beneath his feet all fears, inexorable fate, and the roar of devouring hell."

Further Reading: Editions and Translations

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Further Reading

- Clay, D., *Lucretius and Epicurus*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983.
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