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S. Georgia Nugent

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Mater Matters: *The Female in Lucretius'* *De Rerum Natura*

by S. GEORGIA NUGENT

EPIC POETRY CELEBRATES the creation of a certain kind of self.¹ That creation will often—but not always—be directed toward, tested through, and damaged or destroyed by war. Always, it will be male. This is not to say that females do not appear on the epic stage; they may even appear in the guise of heroic warrior—there is Camilla, there is Atalanta.² But each such figure is anomalous; the “real” subject of epic is how to be a man and, beyond that, how to be a community of men—an army, a *polis*, a republic, an empire.

Typically, such epics will address questions of autonomy and social comradeship, appetite and sublimation, intellection and action. Whether via the portrayal of Achilles sulking in his tent, Aeneas setting sail from Carthage and Dido, Tydeus single-handedly slaughtering an ambush party of fifty men, or even Epicurus laying bare the secrets of nature, epic provides narrative models for male life in the world. Of course, it also provides models for female life in the world. Looking in this light at the examples just cited, these possibilities would include being: a concubine in a soldier's tent, a suicide upon desertion by a faithless lover, a wife who receives news of her husband's death in battle, and a body which is revealed for the inspection of men. The narrative possibilities are not promising.

Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* is explicit about its project of self-construction, but the subjects of heroic epic, the waging of war and the governance of the state, provide a continuous backdrop to Lucretius' intense concern with the formation of the (properly Epicurean) self.³ The poet is self-consciously an evangelist, his goal to free the human soul from fear, his means the exposition of the philosophical doctrine of Epicurus. As we shall see, however, the human soul—indeed, the human mind to which the poem is addressed—turns out to be the possession solely of male readers. The female is not envisioned as a potential convert; in fact she is never represented in the poem as capable of thought. She is, however, vividly and repeatedly represented. Lucretius continually allies women and other female beings with the material stuff of which his Epicurean universe is

1. For consideration of another ancient genre from the standpoint of the gendered self, see Gans (1981).

2. See the treatment of Camilla in Robinson (1985) 71-72, where she concludes that [Renaissance heroines] “succeed because they are women; Camilla succeeds because, by Virgil's own standards, she is not one.”

3. On the imagery of battle in Lucretius' work, see Anderson (1960) 11-19, Segal (1986) and (1990) Chap. 9.

constructed, but his didactic work never depicts a single woman whom we could name.

Since Lucretius' work is not traditional, heroic epic, we cannot expect to find either masculine or feminine figures represented as subjects of an extended narrative or as agents deployed in a fully articulated fictive space. Cosmology and the explication of metaphysics do not feature narrative actors in the way that war waging, state founding, and the quest for a personal identity do. And yet the honey of poetry which Lucretius self-consciously applies to the bitter medicine of philosophical reflection often consists in images and brief vignettes in which he does animate figures for cameo appearances on the austere stage of Epicurean doctrine.

Lucretius' very zealotry as a proselytizer for that doctrine involves him in the constitution of one major protagonist throughout his poem, and that is the poem's reader.⁴ This character is never far from Lucretius' thoughts or words, is continually alluded to and, in the process, continually elaborated upon and constructed through the course of the poem.⁵ Umberto Eco, in an analysis of Pliny the Younger, has provided a clear discussion of the production of such a character, which he calls the "Model Reader." "Fortunately," he notes, "every text is always, more or less consciously, conceived for two kinds of Model Reader. The first is supposed to cooperate in actualizing the content of the text; the second is supposed to be able to describe (and enjoy) the way in which the first Model Reader has been textually produced."⁶ In examining the representation of the female in Lucretius' poetry we shall want to become that second reader and to consider both the (first) Model Reader which the poem constructs and also the ways in which the poet employs female images for illustrative purposes in the course of his exposition.

Lucretius' Reader

IS LUCRETIVS' MODEL READER gendered? The most immediate answer, of course, is "yes," insofar as the poem's addressee is explicitly named as Memmius, an historical figure whom we can identify and about whom we can specify at least a few particulars, among them his biological gender.⁷ Lucretius' evangelical aims, however, clearly do not end with this one individual but are intended to reach a wider—indeed, perhaps the widest possible—audience. In these terms, Memmius is simply a stand-in for Everyreader, a means of representing the

4. Keen (1985), noting that the reader is addressed "an average of every 17 lines," attempts a statistical analysis of the "412 addresses" which fails to yield appreciable results.

5. On narrative's creation of its own narratee, see Prince (1980).

6. Eco (1985) 302. See also Eco (1979). For another influential theorization of the concept of the ideal reader, see Iser (1978) esp. 34-38.

7. On the construction of "Memmius" in the poem, and his distinction from the "Memmius" of Roman prosopography, see Clay (1983) 212-25. Clay's introductory discussion is particularly illuminating on how recognition of a poetic "persona" is not strictly a modern preoccupation, but can be traced in ancient critical theory as well. Nussbaum (1989) 20 also recognizes that the reader is male, but holds "that does not mean that the poem takes no account of female experience."

addressee function, if you will.⁸ What can be said of this more amorphous, unnamed addressee, the potential convert, the reader who is me.

The question whether *this* reader is gendered has particular interest in the context of Epicureanism, a philosophical school remarkable for its apparent inclusion of females among its adherents and students.⁹ Has this aspect of Epicurean practice carried over to and influenced Lucretius' exposition? The issue is broached in Jane Snyder's brief survey of "Lucretius and the Status of Women."¹⁰ Snyder concludes that, in contrast to his philosophical master, the poet "apparently does not even consider women as potential converts to his cause—a surprising fact in view of Lucretius' missionary zeal."¹¹ Similarly, a wide discrepancy between Epicurean and Lucretian attitudes toward women was argued by John B. Stearns, who stressed that the variance is "no difference in mere treatment," but "a real clash of opinion."¹²

If we attend to the profile which emerges in the course of the poem, we note that Lucretius' Model Reader is enjoined particularly to refrain from waging war, aspiring to political office, and amassing wealth—and that none of these activities is directly open to late Republican Roman females.¹³ Certain locutions directed to the poet's addressee seem to militate against a woman's taking that role. For example, the addressee's *virtus* and the prospect of his *amicitia* (I.140) keep Lucretius burning the midnight oil to complete his poem, which he hopes will prove worthy (*digna*) of his patron's life (III.420).¹⁴ The metaphor of arguing a case (*causando* I.398) is less appropriate for a woman, who would have had no access to forensic exercise.¹⁵ Occasionally the reader is invited to undertake a thought experiment nonsensical for a woman, such as imagining "your legions" spread out over the field (II.40). These habits of thought introduce a suspicion that, when Lucretius introduces hypothetical individuals in passing, as he frequently does, with the use of *homines*,¹⁶ he has in mind not the noun's epicene sense as "persons" but specifically "men." This sense seems confirmed by Lucretius' taunting challenge to the addressee as combatant:

si tibi vera videntur,
dede manus, aut, si falsum est, accingere contra.
(II.1042–43)

8. On analogy with "the name of the author" and "the author function," Foucault (1984).

9. See Wallace (1908) 52–60 for a summary of the evidence and, more recently, Nussbaum (1994) 117. Cf. Plutarch *Mor.* 1129A.

10. Snyder (1976).

11. Snyder (1976) 18.

12. Stearns (1936) 350.

13. Cf. Classen (1968) 99 on Lucretius "selecting only those metaphors with which the reader is likely to be familiar—e.g. those taken from nature, sea, war." He cites also Davies (1931–32) on Lucretius' imagery being self-consciously "Roman."

14. On the political connotations of *amicitia* at Rome, see Brunt (1965). Of course the Epicurean value placed on friendship is well-known, but it is not particularly conspicuous in Lucretius. Cf. DeLacy (1957) 121: "Lucretius has no visible companion on the narrow path to the highest good" and Beye (1963) 165: "Personal relations apart from those between parents and children are presented only in terms of sexual love."

15. But see Simon (1990).

16. E.g., II.14, 48; II.60; III.41–93 *passim*, 870, 912–13, 1053; V.1120, 1150; VI.12–13.

Further, as Snyder notes, Lucretius' discussions of relations between the sexes invariably presuppose a masculine lover as subject, a female as object. This is certainly true of the extended discussion of sexuality in Book IV, discussed below, but it is also characteristic of more casual allusions such as II.437, where *Veneris res* is simply assumed to be synonymous with the pleasurable emission of a substance from the body: *iuvat egrediens*.¹⁷ Presumably "I," the Model Reader of Lucretius' text, am male. Snyder concurs: "nowhere in Lucretius do we find any indication that he advocated the freedom of women to pursue philosophy, or that he attempted to reach a female audience. . . . whether consciously or unconsciously, he does exclude women from his audience."¹⁸ Implicitly, Diskin Clay has arrived (presumably unwittingly) at the same conclusion when he notes in passing, in his 1983 study: "Lucretius' reader is a man of action, as is Lucretius himself" (emphasis added).¹⁹

Thus, the mind of Lucretius' narratee (i.e., the subject) is implicitly gendered as masculine. On the other hand, the narrated body (i.e., the object) often seems implicitly gendered as feminine. The human being considered strictly as a physical object, the "generic" Lucretian body, is remarkably porous, an open field traversed by forces. In its predisposition to pathology (i.e., from the point of view of its inevitable mortality) the body is honeycombed with orifices potentially open to assault or rape by exterior forces which may engender death in the interstices of its atomic mass.²⁰ Charles Segal, in his recent monograph, has drawn attention to the "boundary anxiety" and potential for dissolution in the Lucretian body, but he has taken no account of the way in which this problem may be gendered. Arguably, what produces anxiety, in Lucretius' view of physiology, is the threat of penetrability, which may be associated with feminization.²¹ If this is how Lucretius represents the body in general, how does he represent specifically female bodies?

Mother Earth

LET US TURN FROM the reader constructed in the text to the ways in which particular females are represented in the Lucretian text.²² Overwhelmingly, the female

17. Cf. Nussbaum (1989) 37.

18. Snyder (1976) 19.

19. Clay (1983) 216.

20. Cf. I.221-24, 244-49, II.406-07 (on harsh substances tearing into the sense receptors), 944-62 (on disturbance of the body by fatal and near fatal blows), III.170-74 (near fatal penetration by a weapon), 252-57 (on fatal impulses penetrating to interior or being checked at surface), 484-86 (forces able to penetrate the body may cause it to perish), 487f (epilepsy compared to being struck by a lightning bolt), 607-14, 806-18, IV.728-31 (*simulacra* insinuating themselves into the body, resulting in sense perceptions), VI.352-56 (on lightning melting bronze and gold). See Segal (1990) esp. Chaps. 6 and 7.

21. That is, Roman culture generally (although not necessarily Epicurean doctrine in particular) would encode penetrability as feminizing—and denigrating, as is well attested in Roman humor. See Richlin (1983) *passim*.

22. The representation of one particular female has been very extensively discussed in the literature, namely Lucretius' *Aeneadam genetrix*: Venus. The significance of this figure and her identification with or distinction from *natura* is a much vexed question, which is *not* the topic of this paper. Rather, my object is a more strictly delimited consideration of the sensible phenomena: women (with some attention to other female animals) and earth. (The *Magna Mater* passage provides an exception, for there Lucretius imperceptibly elides the distinction between earth and goddess.) For discussion of the more abstract *natura* and its/her relation to Venus, see, e.g.: Elder (1954); DeLacy (1957); Anderson (1960); Beye (1963); Amory (1969); Stewart (1970); Duban (1982); Asmis (1982); Catto (1989) and further bibliography cited there.

represented in Lucretius is the generative body.²³ At the most fundamental level, the female is, literally, the ground against which the male figure emerges, for the primary generative body is the earth, characterized unfailingly as mother and source of creation.²⁴ At times the poet merely uses an epithet or simple phrase to identify the earth primarily with reproductive and nutritive functions (*terras frugiferentis* I.3, *tellus*/. . . *alit atque auget*. . . *pabula praebens* I.228–29, *terra* . . . / *fota novet fetus* I.1032–33, *terrigena* V.1411 & 1427, etc.).

One more detailed way in which Lucretius formulates this concept seems to approach parthenogenesis, with the earth providing corporeal matter for generation:

principio tellus habet in se corpora prima

 quare Magna deum Mater Materque ferarum
 et nostri genetrix haec dicta est corporis una.
 (II.589, 598–99)²⁵

Here, as Diskin Clay has correctly recognized, “The conception of the Earth as *nostri genetrix* seems self-contained. . . but *et nostri genetrix* is radically modified by the word *corporis*. Even as it is introduced the conception of Mother Earth is reduced to matter.”²⁶ Anderson too has noted Lucretius’ word plays on *terra mater* and *materies*, an etymological association between the female reproductive function and basic matter found in the English language as well.²⁷ Neither scholar, however, explores the broader symbolic and cultural resonance of this association or the implications of woman’s “reduction” to “matter.” We shall return to these implications in the conclusion of this paper.

This passage which seems to suggest parthenogenic powers on the part of the earth is rendered more complex by the fact that Lucretius here also identifies earth with the Magna Mater. In the ensuing lines, the allegorization of the castrated priests of the goddess (with its moralistic message that those “who harm their mother” are not fit to engender children) reinforces the fundamental conjunction between this *terra/mater* figure and childbearing. Tellingly, however, less than 30 lines later, as soon as the earth is seen under another description (specifically that of political entity), it is immediately regendered as masculine: *ac virtute velint patriam defendere terram* (II.642).

In Lucretius’ cosmology the mother earth is so copiously fertile that her youth

23. For a sympathetic view of the “mysterious symphony of birth and generation” which “above all others fascinates and awes” the poet, see Elder (1954) esp. 98, 103. Elder’s suggestion of two levels of generation, physical and metaphysical, would seem to be more at home in a Platonic than an Epicurean context.

24. For an overview of the uses of the *terra mater* formulation, see Anderson (1960) 5–11, although I shall argue below that Anderson has introduced artificial distinctions within what is actually one unified symbolic construct.

25. Cf. also I.210, II.1156 where Lucretius expresses disbelief in a mythological origin for creatures, averring instead: *sed genuit tellus eadem quae nunc alit ex se*, V.795–96, and the unequivocal:

quare etiam atque etiam maternum nomen adepta
 terra tenet merito, quoniam genus ipsa creavit
 humanum atque animal
 omne. (V.821–24)

26. Clay (1983) 229.

27. Anderson (1960) 6. Cf. Snyder (1980) 39 and Ferguson (1987).

included episodes of spontaneous generation—beings simply sprang into existence from the fecundity of the earth. While vestiges of this phenomenon remain today in the spontaneous generation of a few small creatures (such as worms), the productivity of the youthful earth displayed itself on a much larger and more complex scale (II.871-73, II.928-29, V.797-98). Ancient gynecological theory explained a number of pathological disorders to which the human female was subject by reference to the debilitating effects of “the wandering womb”; Lucretian cosmology here employs an equally imaginative uterine theory to account for the generative powers of the earth.²⁸ The poet asserts that the early earth-mother was capable of giving birth to many and varied forms because of multiple, strategically located wombs:

hoc ubi quaeque loci regio opportuna dabatur,
crescebant uteri terram radicibus apti.
(V.807-08)

Again like a human female, this gestating earth in due time experienced lactation:²⁹

convertebat ibi natura foramina terrae
et sucum venis cogebat fundere apertis
consimilem lactis, sicut nunc femina quaeque,
cum peperit, dulci repletur lacte, quod omnis
impetus in mammas convertitur ille alimenti.
(V.811-15)

This possibility, however, no longer obtains. Such unregulated fecundity, which might include the production of the monstrous, is now relegated to the past.³⁰ Again, an argument is offered by analogy to the human reproductive cycle; now the earth is weakened, like a post-menopausal woman:

iamque adeo fracta est aetas, effetaque tellus
vix animalia parva creat, quae cuncta creavit
saecla deditque ferarum ingentia corpora partu.
(II.1150-52)

sed quia finem aliquam pariendi debet habere,
destitit, ut mulier spatio defessa vetusto.
(V.826-27)

Viewed in another way, the earth is now tamed, like a properly socialized wife, no longer capable of polymorphous productivity. In his treatment of the present age, Lucretius, like Hesiod, emphasizes the sameness and predictability of

28. See Aubert (1989) for a good general introduction to the topic, although concerned not so much with the wandering as with the timely opening and closing of the womb.

29. For the Lucretian emphasis on pregnancy and maternity, see: II.369-70, III.344-45, IV.1238ff; on lactation: I.258-61, 885-86, II.369-70, V.884-85. For a sentimental appreciation of motherhood and nursing in the poem, together with an implicitly Freudian view that Lucretius' rejection of erotic woman stems from an inability to resolve a madonna/whore complex, see Vertue (1956).

30. Cf. V.837-48 on the monstrous.

generation in nature, with like giving birth to like. Indeed, the principle of fixed origins and lines of descent is central to his physical theory.³¹

nam si de nilo fierent, ex omnibu' rebus
omne genus nasci posset, nil semine egeret.
.....
qui posset mater rebus consistere certa?
(I.159-60, 168)

In part, of course, this fixed genetic theory serves as a counter-argument to the possibility of random divine intervention in creation. In addition, however, we may discern here a motive similar to that of Hesiod, namely that of establishing certified lineage and legitimacy.³² Thus tamed, the potentially uncontrolled fecundity of mother-nature-earth presents no threat and is figured as a human female body which passes through stages from youthful fertility to barrenness in old age. If the human female's reproductive life cycle provides a model for Lucretius' understanding of the earth's fertility, so too does the earth-mother as primal fecundity provide the prototype for the representation of all females in Lucretius. Lucretius' treatment of *terra mater* both asserts her uncontrollable fertility and relegates it to a past era, associating stable and rational lines of descent with the current age of man. In this, his representation typifies a certain mode of structuring the understanding of fertility and sameness in reproduction which the theorist Jean-Joseph Goux, in his analysis of "symbolic economies," has called "paterialism," including assumptions that:

Nature is fertile but impotent. . . . Its very fertility is disorder.³³

In "good" (ideal) reproduction, the paternal position is institutionalized. . . . All the organizational and informational power that is immanent in "nature"—that is, in its generative operation—is denied and negated . . . all that remains of this nature is its negativity as passive receptacle, as neutral, plastic substance, reduced to the role of a simple matrix (womb), *mater*.³⁴

Insofar as he guarantees the permanence of sameness in reproduction, it is the father and not the mother who is responsible for life.³⁵

This life-giving father enters into the second mode in which Lucretius represents the earth's fecundity, more congruent with the human experience of sexual generation, namely that of a *hieros gamos*, scientifically rationalized, with *pater aether* sending showers into the lap of mother earth. The vocabulary the poet employs is clearly suggestive of ejaculation:

31. Note such phrases as: *incerto partu* (I.164), *seminibus certis certa genetrix creata / conservare genus* (II.708-09). On the importance of wordplays among the group: *certus/creare/mater/materies*, see Snyder (1980) 136-41.

32. On Hesiodic strategies, see Arthur (1982), (1983), Pucci (1977).

33. Goux (1990) 228.

34. Goux (1990) 227.

35. Goux (1990) 224.

pater aether
in gremium matris terrai praecipitavit.
(I.250-51)³⁶

denique caelesti sumus omnes semine oriundi;
omnibus ille idem pater est, unde alma liquentis
umoris guttas mater cum terra recepit.
(II.991-93)³⁷

In concluding this examination of Lucretius' mother earth, we may look with new eyes at his well-known, stirring evocation of Epicurus laying nature bare by force and recognize that this construct exhibits something of the same configuration of the qualities of the female, passive, insensate body which we have seen predicated of earth:

his ibi me rebus quaedam divina voluptas
percipit atque horror, quod sic natura tua vi
tam manifesta patens ex omni parte resecta est.
(III.28-30)

This metaphorical expression of the desire to "uncover" nature's body, to lay it bare "by force," remains today a workable formulation of the scientific enterprise. Compare, for example, the terms in which a modern scientist has described a similar approach to nature: "I liked to follow the workings of another mind . . . to see a relentless observer get hold of Nature and squeeze her until the sweat broke out all over her and her sphincters loosened."³⁸

We have seen ways in which Lucretius tends to deploy the complex: *mater/terra*/matter. Given the materialist basis of Epicurean thought, of course, it may come as no surprise that Lucretius emphasizes the very corporeality of the female. It is important to draw a methodological distinction here between an attempt to establish Epicurean doctrine and an inquiry into the possibilities of figuration which a text opens or forecloses. A study such as that of David Konstan on Epicurean psychology, for example, examines Lucretius' text in order to extract from it probable tenets of an Epicurean belief system.³⁹ From the point of view of such a research strategy, aimed at reconstructing a coherent edifice of Epicurean doctrine, the "reduction" of the female to matter, given the predilection of this philosophical system for materialist reduction, might be accorded neutral or even positive value. That, however, is not the project undertaken here. Rather, the attempt is to identify the lexicon and grammar of representational possibilities which the Lucretian text employs and thereby renders available and sanctioned for subsequent authorial practice within the genre. From this point of view, the reduction of the female to matter may acquire a quite different valence.

36. See Adams (1990) 92.

37. On *umor* as the alleged etymological basis of *amor* (based on Lucretius' own discussion of *Veneris...gutta* IV.1058-60) see West (1969) 95-96, as well as Friedlander (1941) 18, who also notes the play in these specific lines between *mater* and *terra*, 20. See also Snyder (1980) 46, 93, 134-36.

38. Keller (1983) 20 cited from Burr (1929) 82-83.

39. Konstan (1973) 2: "I examine Lucretius the poet in order to find out more about Lucretius the Epicurean."

Sexuality and the Female Body

THE ONE SUBSTANTIAL TREATMENT of the female not specifically concerned with the generative body is concerned with the sexual body. In the conclusion of Book IV, a book concerned throughout with sense perception, Lucretius provides an extended discussion of sexual attraction to women, often characterized as a "diatribe against love."⁴⁰ The avowed purpose here is to deconstruct romantic love, to expose the false consciousness which clothes the bare bodily function of sexuality in the glamorous trappings of erotic attachment. The passage has received a great deal of attention from various viewpoints, including that of biographical criticism (which has considered the lines evidence for the poet's melancholy, madness, and/or tragic erotic history), source criticism (which has traced relationships to literary traditions of diatribe, satire, and erotic poetry), and purely physiological investigation (which has investigated the sources and rationale for the gynecological information offered). What has not received sufficient attention, however, is the fact that the poet launches a two-pronged attack, focussing both on the body of woman and on language. Attending more closely to the poet's own use of language in the passage—particularly devices of repetition and ring composition—will also show that the discussion is much more tightly organized internally and closely connected to what precedes than has been recognized.

The discussion of sexuality itself is introduced by an explanation of male adolescent nocturnal emissions and consists of three major topics interwoven with one another: a detailed but deprecatory description of sexual intercourse, emphasizing its futility, is followed by an exposé of the foolishness of romantic love, after which we return to the topic of intercourse, with specific explanations of and advice on genetics and conception. A ten line coda takes up as a reprise the earlier theme of erotic involvement with one woman, apparently suggesting the (slim) possibility of a successful relationship.

Critical consideration of "this very disjointed book" (Bailey) abounds with talk of "the ostensibly incongruous collocations at the end of Book Four" (Brown), "digressions," etc. Brown addresses himself expressly to "the external and internal relationships of the concluding topics" (i.e., 823-1287).⁴¹ His strong preconceptions about the centrality of effluences and illusions, however, lead him to overemphasize these topics a great deal, while overlooking (or, at best, underestimating) the close and multiple connections both within these concluding lines and between them and the preceding discussions of sense perceptions and mental phenomena.

As noted above, an explanation of sexual dreams provides a transition from phenomena such as mental visions to sexuality. The discussion of sex proper begins with the line: *haec Venus est nobis; hinc autemst nomen amoris* (1058).

40. For thorough discussion, see Brown (1987) and Nussbaum (1989). For a particularly creative reading, associating Lucretius' therapeutic advice on love with broader aspects of the poem's ethics and physics (particularly the physics of motion), see Fitzgerald (1984).

41. Brown (1987) 39.

Lucretius' coupling here of the metonymic use of "Venus" with the explicit allusion to *nomen* alerts us from the beginning to his self-conscious attention to language in this context.⁴²

In the lines directly following, "this Venus" or *amor* is described specifically in terms of the senses which were the topics of earlier discussion in the book: *nomen*. . . *obversatur ad auris* (1062) recalls the discussion of hearing and voice (524-614), *simulacra* (1061, 1063) of sight (26-323), *pabula* (1063) and *alendo* (1068) of taste (615-72), *ulcus* (1068) and *volnera* (1070) of touch itself, which underlies all sense perception (230-38), and *motus* (1072) of motion (877-906).

In addition, Lucretius' discussion of the futility of sexual intercourse as a pleasure, in terms of its lack of an ability to provide satisfaction (1086-1120), is framed explicitly in contrast to his earlier discussion of the satisfiable desires for food and drink and their effective assimilation in the body (859-876, 954-56).⁴³ Even the reference to staining fine clothing with *Veneris sudor* (1128) finds an earlier counterpart in the description of racehorses frantically sweating and straining in their sleep (*in somnis sudare* 988).⁴⁴ In all of these ways, Lucretius' language integrates his treatment of sexuality with the preceding considerations of sensual and mental phenomena.

Turning from the physical mechanics of intercourse to the more elusive epiphenomenon of erotic attachment, Lucretius argues first that, in the context of women, signifiers become unstable and unreliable. In a famous excursus he satirically details and exposes the lies men use to delude themselves about the objects of their desire by reassigning linguistic signifiers.⁴⁵ We should compare here Lucretius' earlier strongly-worded objection to Heraclitus on the grounds of his employing deceptive language:

omnia enim stolidi magis admirantur amantque
inversis quae sub verbis latitantia cernunt
.....
..... et lepido quae sunt fucata sonore,
(I.641-44)

as well as his remarks on the possibility of discrepancy between sense data and the "vanity" of words:

42. Snyder (1980) 19-20 argues that Lucretius makes a distinction between *voces*, "the natural sounds...which were uttered naturally by early men," and *nomina*, representing the secondary, more derivative stage of language acquisition. See further discussion below.

43. The return here as well of the image of a sleeper dreaming that he is drinking from a river has been noted by commentators.

44. Whether *Veneris sudor* is indeed "a euphemism for semen," as Catto (1989) 103 n.2 confidently asserts, seems to me debatable.

45. Minyard (1985) has argued that in fact Lucretius' own poetic project is specifically to reassign or radically redefine terms central to the Roman cultural value system, such as *pietas*, *religio*, *virtus*, etc. This view seems to me untenable, both in light of the poem and in light of Epicurean theorizing on language. See Fowler's review (1988) with its claim that Minyard "offers a potted intellectual history of Rome....the result is an extremely annoying book." In treating this particular passage, Minyard does not take into account the fact that the lovers' practice would in fact accord with his own view of Lucretius' linguistic practice, i.e., the reassignment of signifiers to new referents in a way which subverts or even reverses their original meaning.

illa tibi est igitur verborum copia cassa
 omnis, quae contra sensus instructa paratast.
 (IV.511-12)

In addition, it is useful in this context to recall another of Lucretius' earlier observations in this book on the delusive sensual perceptions which may result from the mind's predisposition and circumscribed attention to sensual data, with the result that "you see what you want to see."⁴⁶ Bailey has considerable trouble with this discussion, wondering why it has come into Lucretius' exposition at the point it does ("it is not easy to see how the idea comes in here. . . . But why add this notion here?"). I think we can illuminate its placement, as well as the complex of overlooked relations which in fact connect Lucretius' concluding treatment of sexuality with earlier portions of Book IV.

The discussion of how selective attention to sensual perceptions may cause us to see what we want to see (805-17) follows quite closely on the description of a dream of sinuously dancing bodies (789-93):

cernimus in somnis et mollia membra movere,
 mollia mobiliter cum alternis brachia mittunt
 et repetunt oculis gestum pede convenienti?
 scilicet arte madent simulacra et docta vagantur,
 nocturno facere ut possint in tempore ludos.

Repeated emphasis on the suppleness (on Lucretius' use of *mollis*, see below) of these bodies in their "nocturnal play" leads me to suggest that what we have here is a dream of dancing girls, perhaps not entirely unrelated to the wet dream which, at 1030-36, will introduce the discussion of sexuality.⁴⁷

The suggestion may be strengthened by attention to the equally problematic lines which follow on the other side of the discussion of delusive perception. For here, Lucretius inserts what seems a strange intrusion, on the phenomenon of dream images changing gender on us, just as we get our hands on them:

sed femina quae fuit ante,
 in manibus vir uti factus videatur adesse,
 aut alia ex alia facies aetasque sequatur.
 quod ne miremur sopor atque oblivia curant.
 (IV.819-22)

Bailey simply throws up his hands here: "It is clear that these lines are an afterthought." Perhaps, instead, they are an after-image of the dream dancers above. In this case, it will not matter whether those *mollis* dancers were actually female or not—the mind may change their gender at will, in accord (as we have just learned) with its own predispositional desires. Reading the sequence of

46. Nussbaum (1989) 28, 37 suggests the importance of "attention to" perceptions and the beloved but does not elaborate on the way in which highly selective attention may actually distort perceptions. See Graver (1990) 108-12 for a treatment of the lover's perceptual pathology.

47. On the arousal of Roman males by erotic dancing girls, see A. T. Fear (1991). (I am assuming here that a fundamentally heterosexual orientation characterizes Lucretius' text, despite the very brief allusion at IV.1052-57 to the possibility that masculine desire may be aroused by boys.)

thought here in this way not only yields better sense, replacing randomness with a coherent development, but it also reveals that the development is predicated on a recurrent underlying concern with sexual phenomena and delusions.

Let us proceed one step further. The next phase of Lucretius' exposition, an anti-teleological argument, has again caused general consternation among commentators. Bailey (who settles for the catchall rubric, "Some Functions of the Body Considered in Connexion with Psychology") summarizes: "Lachmann bracketed 823-57 and 858-76 as subsequent additions by the poet. . . . Brieger and Diels bracket 823-57. . . . Susemihl rearranges the whole section from 823-1057." Apparently, drastic textual reconstructions are called for. Or are they? This discussion upon which Lucretius embarks, after his allusion to the sex changes to which dream figures are liable, is a vehement denial of the notion that our body parts are teleologically created, i.e., we should *not* believe that the uses to which we might put our bodily *membra* provide their *raison d'être*.⁴⁸

If the line of reasoning I have been tracing is correct, Lucretius' turn to an anti-teleological outburst should not surprise us. Rather, it would seem a coherent rejoinder to a potential argument in favor of sexual activity which might run something like: "But a man wouldn't *have* these kinds of dreams if it weren't appropriate (i.e., teleologically programmed in the body parts) for him to *act* on them!" In fact, in his following paragraph (which Brown designates "the most problematic of the whole group"), Lucretius does go on to treat appetites which, unlike sexual desire, are both necessary and satiable, namely hunger and thirst. The way in which he describes here the natural assimilation of food and drink in the body (858-76) may be directly contrasted to his later elaboration of the futile attempt to find an appropriate object of satisfaction for sexual hunger (1091-1120). Finally, an appreciation of the significance of those earlier dancing bodies may also help to explain why the next topic raised is in fact the motion of the body (877-906).

Nor have we finished with the private dancers. They reappear yet again at 973-83, thus providing a virtual ring composition framing the entire discussion of mental phenomena. Here they are explicitly a kind of after-image, the mental residue of men who have spent too much time in the theatre:

et quicumque dies multos ex ordine ludis
adsiduas dederunt operas.
.
per multos itaque illa dies eadem obversantur
ante oculos, etiam vigilantes ut videantur
cernere saltantis et mollia membra moventis.
(973-80)

Once again, these movers of *mollia membra* suggest feminine images. We might speculate that our avid theatregoers have passed "many days" at the Floralia,

48. Given Lucretius' penchant for verbal play, it is not amiss to note in this context his choice at line 828 to designate certain of those *membra* with the form *feminum*. Bailey notes: "an unusual by-form from *femur*, which must belong to a different root *femin*. There is no metrical reason for using it instead of *femorum*." No, but there may be quite another reason—namely, the way in which the word inevitably brings delusive females before our eyes once again.

proverbial for lasciviousness, where they may have encountered the *turba meretricia* Ovid describes as celebrating these *ludi*.⁴⁹ At any rate, the ring composition and closure which the dancers bring to the discussion of mental phenomena brings *us* back again to Lucretius' denigration of erotic love, having attempted to illustrate, by following the movements of the dancers, both the connections of sexuality to the preceding discussions and the poet's careful attention to the selection and selective repetition of language throughout.

Lucretius' claim, in his famous satirical excursus on lovers' follies, is that by practicing a delusive displacement which redefines deficiency as desirability, men subject themselves to the seductive powers of women. If she is a pygmy, the besmitten man pronounces his beloved "diminutive," if filthy, "carefree," if amazonian, "majestic," and so on and on (IV.1153-70). The juxtaposition of fanciful Greek pet names with (as Brown has noted) "bluntly realistic Latin terms" further serves to associate the female with an alien tongue, in contrast to the native language Lucretius so self-consciously employs for his own exposition (I.136-39, III.260-61, IV.969-70).⁵⁰

The specific "terms of endearment" chosen here have not occasioned comment by scholars, but we should note that the faults listed are limited almost entirely to bodily defects⁵¹ and filth,⁵² in keeping with Lucretius' general predilection for representing the woman as body. The only defects which might have reference to rational phenomena are those concerned with speech and language (1164-65). Of these, *balba loqui non quit* and *muta* might still entail actual physical deformity; whether they are intended in a milder, metaphorical vein is unclear. Thus, the *only* unequivocally mental disposition envisioned for a woman is: *flagrans odiosa loquacula* (1165). If, by her tendency to evoke misnaming on the part of men, the female destabilizes the language system, in addition she misuses it. Nor is this Lucretius' only allusion to that problem; he has earlier emphasized the way in which, to make matters worse, woman tends to speak ambiguously and to cause the male pain by doing so:

in ambiguo verbum iaculata reliquit
quod cupido adfixum cordi vivescit ut ignis.
(IV.1137-38)

Epicurean linguistic theory holds that human beings acquired language in two ways: first by nature (*physis*) and then by the assignment of words to things (*thesis*).⁵³ Epicurus' fullest discussion of the topic emphasizes the exhalation of air (*ton aera ekpemphein*) which men performed naturally upon experience of

49. See *Fasti* V.349-50 and Bömer ad loc. on proverbial *nudatio mimarum*: cf. Martial I.Prae., Val. Max II.10.8, Sen. Ep. 97.8: *Florales iocos nudandarum meretricum*, Juvenal VI.250 and Schol. XI.162.

50. Martha Nussbaum suggests to me that this strategy also emphasizes the importance specifically of *literature* in causing these delusions.

51. These include the characterizations: *nigra, caesia, nervosa et lineea, parvula pumilio, magna atque immanis, vivere non quit prae macie, iam mortua tussi, tumida et mammosa, simula, labeosa*.

52. *Immunda et fetida*.

53. The most extensive passage is *ad Her.* 75-76. Other relevant evidence is collected in Long and Sedley (1987) 97-101. Bailey's account is particularly lucid and coherent (perhaps more so than the Epicurean sources). See also: Long (1971), Konstan (1973) 44-51, Snyder (1980) 11-30.

various stimuli, sensual and visual (*pathe, phantasmata*).⁵⁴ The precise relationship between Lucretius' own account of the origin of language (V.1028-90) and that of Epicurus has been a topic of considerable debate, but most scholars agree that the Lucretian *emphasis*, at least, falls distinctly on this first, natural stage of utterance.⁵⁵ Bailey, with others, holds that in fact the poet "entirely neglects the later stages in which words were invented *thesei*" and "is concerned solely with the first stage in which words came *physei*."⁵⁶ Such a view, as we see in Epicurus' formulation above, emphasizes the character of language as a natural ejaculation from the body. As Snyder summarizes it, Lucretius holds that language came about "through natural processes common to both men and animals, that is, the natural emission of distinguishable sounds in response to various stimuli."⁵⁷

Given this theoretical physics of language, might we see any connection in Lucretius' text between the emission of sound and the emission of seed from the body?⁵⁸ For the most part, the poet's term of choice for the projection of voice from the body is *mitto* (cf. II.835, III.931) or *emitto* (cf. IV.504, 550, 795, V.1088, 1174). He also employs a consistent vocabulary for the projection of seed from the body; in this context, his preferred terms seem to be *cieo* and various forms of *iaceo*, *eiceo*. Both *cieo* and *iaceo*, however, occur as well in his discussion of the natural emission of sounds, specifically, the *most* natural of such voices, those of the animals: *saecla ferarum / dissimilis soleant voces variasque ciere* (V.1059-60) and *longe alias alio iaciunt in tempore voces* (1081 of bird calls). In addition, the particularly clear voice of a herald *perciet* (IV.562) the ears of his hearers, and "seeds of voice" (*semina vocis*) are "ejected" (*eiciuntur* III.495-96) from the body in an epileptic fit.

There may be some grounds for speculation, then, that Lucretius' accounts of the futility of erotic love and of the euphemistic turn in linguistic usage which often accompanies it share a similar character of having corrupted the most natural impulses toward the ejaculation of either seed or sound. In both cases a falling away from a more natural state appears together with the woman's presence as a full subject (evoking romantic fantasies or metaphorical language) rather than an uncomplicated object (evoking purely physical emissions).

The second point in Lucretius' case against erotic attachment to woman is that, ultimately, every female body is cloacal—the bottom line is: they all smell bad (IV.1171-91). For our purposes, the most troubling point here is the assertion that, be she ever so fair:

54. Another passage apparently underlines even more forcefully the necessary, even compulsory relationship between the presentation of certain objects and the utterance of sounds (τινὰς φθόγγους τοὺς [μὲν] ἀναγκασθέντας ἀναφωνῆσαι *ad Her.* 10.76). Interpretation differs on whether the οὐ συνορώμενα πράγματα referred to here are "certain objects" (Snyder [1980] 14) or "abstract concepts" (Konstan [1973] 48).

55. See esp. DeLacy (1939), Vlastos (1946), Bailey *ad loc.*

56. See also Offermann (1972), Schrijvers (1974).

57. Snyder (1980) 29. Her language here echoes the poet's own, for Lucretius begins his account with the assertion:

at varios linguae sonitus natura subegit
mittere, et utilitas expressit nomina rerum.
(V.1028-29)

58. For a strong emphasis on the corporeality of voice, see IV.532-33, 540.

nempe eadem facit—et scimus facere—omnia turpi,
et miseram taetris se suffit odoribus ipsa,
quam famulae longe fugitant furtimque cachinnant.
(IV.1173-75)

There follows a brief, parodic sketch of the proverbial *exclusus amator*, of whom the passage predicts:

quem si, iam ammissum, venientem offenderit aura
una modo, causas abeundi quaerat honestas.
(IV.1180-81)

Nor, Lucretius assures us, are women unaware of this liability:

nec Veneres nostras hoc fallit; quo magis ipsae
omnia summo opere hos vitae postcaenia celant
quos retinere volunt adstrictosque esse in amore—
nequiquam, quoniam tu animo tamen omnia possis
protrahere in lucem atque omnis inquirere risus.
(IV.1185-89)

We shall consider the subsequent conclusion of this passage below, but at this point it behooves us as readers, just like the *exclusus amator*, to inquire into the cause of the laughter. To be blunt: why does the woman smell bad?

Scholarly controversy over this question provides an illustration of Lucretius' own earlier observation (IV.701-02) on the difficulty of localizing the source of an odor.⁵⁹ In his recent commentary on the passage (ad loc. 1175), Brown puts forward the novel interpretation that what is referred to here is the gynecological practice of fumigating with foul-smelling substances as a means of driving (or drawing) a problematic wandering womb back into its proper place.⁶⁰ He develops this position in contrast to earlier proffered interpretations that the allusion is to flatulence (J. Godwin, following A.E. Housman),⁶¹ defecation (Lilja),⁶² or menstruation (M. Nussbaum, anticipated by A. Brieger).⁶³ Bailey's terse "perfumes herself, i.e. reeks," is indeterminate, but his equally fastidious paraphrase, "uses artifices to conceal her faults" is, I believe, on the right track in locating the problem as inherent in the woman's body, not external to it.⁶⁴ If this is so, while the medical practice Brown adduces is well-attested, I do not believe it best meets the conditions for rendering Lucretius' discussion meaningful and effective. Certainly, what is required in the referent is an offensive odor

59. *quare etiam quod olet non tam facile esse videbis / investigare in qua sit regione locatum.*

60. For ancient medical sources on this practice, see Brown (1987) ad loc., as well as von Staden (1992).

61. Housman (1972) 434 = Housman (1897) 240-41. In this, the only of the Lucretian notes written in Latin, Housman concludes that IV.1175 means "ut Romana simplicitate loquar, uissit sive bdei. sic omnia planissima sunt" and adduces a parallel from Jonathan Swift's *Strephon and Chloe*.

62. Lilja (1965) 143.

63. In a brief review of Merrill's edition, Brieger (1908) takes note of Housman's interpretation, but himself concludes with equal conviction: "Kein Mediziner wird hier etwas anderes finden als 'male olet ex mensibus.' Man frage doch einen!" As in Housman's case, such plain speaking concludes with a more literary turn, as Brieger calls to mind the memoirs of Casanova (II.1). Cf. Nussbaum (1989) 42-43.

64. So also Leonard and Smith ad loc.: "she 'fumigates herself because of her noisome smell' or 'she scents herself with offensive perfumes.' Whichever of these interpretations is preferred, it is clear that the mistress is trying to conceal or neutralize some offensive bodily odor."

that is common to—and inherent in—all women (which I take to be the import of *eadem facit. . . omnia turpi*). Any of the above scatological functions might meet this condition. In addition, however, the satiric point of the male's shock and revulsion—as well as the care allegedly taken by women to hide the unpleasant reality (*nec Veneres nostras hoc fallit; quo magis. . . celant*)—will be sharpened if the function in question is *not* common to men as well. Odors associated with specifically feminine bodily fluids remain a staple of misogynist humor—whether in the text, the comedy club or the locker room—even to the present day, and I suggest that they may well be Lucretius' subject here as well.⁶⁵

While it is fair to say that Lucretius (and, indeed, atomism) tends to reduce phenomena to primary physical components, yet only with the female is the result fetid air! It seems the best that can be said is that some manage to conceal it, and with some (as we shall see) you just learn to live with it. Again, an aspect of this treatment of the female which has not been sufficiently recognized is that the same negative reduction is practiced, not just on the (de-) eroticized human female body but also, finally, on the generative body of mother earth.

Earthiness

AMBIGUITY ALREADY LURKS in Lucretius' representation of the earth, which (as the good mother) is nurturing and peaceful. For in addition to being a cosmic womb, she is also seen as the final sepulchre:

cedit item retro, de terra quod fuit ante,
in terras.

(II.998-99)

praeterea pro parte sua, quodcumque alit augeat,
redditur; et quoniam dubio procul esse videtur
omniparens eadem rerum commune sepulcrum,
ergo terra tibi libatur et aucta recrescit.

(V.257-60)

Represented in these cyclical terms, the sepulchral quality of the earth is not necessarily negative. But her aspect as bad mother becomes more fully developed in Lucretius' discussion of earthquakes (VI.535-607) and of the disease- and death-producing powers of the earth.⁶⁶ Finally, she, like the human female, becomes the site of noxious air masses which, in earth's case, are not merely malodorous but actually life-threatening. Ultimately, we learn that earth's underside is an area of cavernous hollows (VI.537-38) and flowing streams (VI.540-41), emitting poisonous airs which cause destruction. The existence of these invisible subterranean features may—indeed must—be inferred on the basis of self-consistency; that is, earth's very self-identity decrees that it be

65. Dean-Jones (1994) indicates that the cause of halitosis in women was thought to be the direct association between vagina and mouth. See Richlin (1983) 249 n.: "the Romans had a general horror of female genitalia and their secretions and smells" (esp. *Virgilian Appendix* "Quid Hoc Novi Est" 26-37, Mart. 11.21).

66. Cf. Pliny's extraordinary catalogue of the power (*vis*) of menstrual blood, *N.H.* XXVIII.77-86.

riddled with potentially dangerous hollow spaces:⁶⁷ *undique enim similem esse sui res postulat ipsa* (VI.542).

The fact that the underside of the earth is thus constituted proves disastrous when these areas become filled with sudden gusts of air. The origins of such air masses is not clear; they may be either extrinsic or intrinsic to the earth itself: *aut extrinsecus aut ipsa tellure coorta* (VI.579). Their effect is to rumble about in the bowels of the earth, apparently gathering force and ultimately issuing in one of two natural disasters. They may burst forth from the earth, in the process rupturing its body with a chasm and causing an earthquake (582-90). Alternatively, such air masses may not find an exit but rather distribute themselves through the various cavities of the earth's underside and in so doing cause generalized tremors across its surface (VI.591-95).⁶⁸ Envisioning an extreme case of these terrestrial processes, Lucretius raises the fearful spectre of the spontaneous dissolution of earth's body:

metuunt inferne cavernas
terrai ne dissoluatur natura repente,
neu distracta suum late dispandat hiatus
idque suis confusa velit complere ruinis.
(VI.597-600)

The repeated use of *suus* seems particularly to underscore the way in which this nightmare of utter ruin is one of *self*-annihilation, as if such destruction were entailed within the very existence of earth. Caverns, gaps, the lurking possibility of a vast and destructive *hiatus* seem essential aspects of earth's nature.

What is true of the human female body seems to be true of the earth's body on a much grander scale. For example, if the movements of the female body in sexual intercourse may have the power to prevent conception (IV.1268-73), the movements of the earth in seismic episodes have the power to destroy already existent beings. Again, if odors emanating from the female body may be noisome, odors emanating from the cavities of the earth may be seriously, even lethally, noxious to life forms.

At VI.738ff, Lucretius takes on his most didactic tone (*nunc age. . . expediam*) to expound upon the nature of Avernian places (i.e., locations where emanations from the earth are poisonous to avian life).⁶⁹ The poet's concern, as ever, is to deny the unenlightened notion of supernatural agency—here, specifically, to deny that the properties of such locations derive from their being entrances to the mythological underworld. After almost fifty lines of introduction listing three such locales and providing a general account reaffirming that the earth comprises

67. On the Lucretian practice of drawing analogies from the visible to the invisible, see Schrijvers (1978), who devotes a great deal of attention to the earth as macrocosmic human body but none to this passage.

68. Compare the terminology for these numerous "pores" in the earth which foster seismic disturbance (*crebra foramina terrae* VI.592) with the earlier account of the earth's ducts for lactation (*foramina terrae* V.811).

69. See Cerasuolo (1986). Jope (1989) sees the terrestrial phenomena treated in the book as "a random selection of natural marvels" and does not notice at all the specifically noxious role of the earth, but does follow Bailey in recognizing, in a general way, that "the same physical causes of disruption produce disease in a man and the upheavals of the world."

a multiplicity of substances both salubrious and pernicious, Lucretius narrows his focus to the enumeration of various harmful fumes and, ultimately, to those originating in the earth (sulphur, bitumen, mephitic exhalations from gold and silver mines).⁷⁰ The vocabulary employed here echoes that appearing earlier in the context of the deluded *exclusus amator* and feminine hygiene.⁷¹ Having surveyed various instances of such vapors, Lucretius reaches a conclusion which, by its generalizing form, seems to emphasize once again the inherence of a deadly property (*mortifera vis*) in the very nature of the earth:

hos igitur tellus omnis exaestuat aestus
expiratque foras in apertum promptaque caeli.
sic et Averno loca alitibus summittere debent
mortiferam vim, de terra quae surgit in auras.
(VI.816-19)

This deadly power is further significantly generalized in Lucretius' concluding epidemiology, according to which the origin of disease (*ratio quae sit morbis* VI.1090) may be traced either to the sky or to the earth:

atque ea vis omnis morborum pestilitasque
aut extrinsecus, ut nubes nebulaeque, superne
per caelum veniunt, aut ipsa saepe coorta
de terra surgunt, ubi putorem umida nactast
intempestivis pluviisque et solibus icta.
(VI.1098-1102)⁷²

Thus with disease, as we saw earlier with unstable air masses, distinction is drawn between dangers arising from what is "extrinsic" (*extrinsecus*) and those inhering in the earth itself. The very terms of this opposition posit a sense in which evil occurrences, whether earthquakes or pestilence, are "intrinsic" to earth; they are implicitly seen as "natural" to her, rising up from the porous, moist, putrid mass which *is* her nature.

We have seen two main roles in the poem for women—the generative body and the (repulsive) erotic body, both of which can be finally reduced to a bad smell. At the lowest common denominator, the female is simply a stench in the nostrils of the male.

The Joy of Sex?

SOME READERS SEE another side to the story; they stress a dichotomy between Lucretius' attack in Book IV on blind, frenzied, masochistic erotic love and his

70. Cerasuolo (1986) 236 sees a progression of increasing intensity, moving from: exhalations from 1) things that grow on the earth to 2) substances produced from the earth to finally (and most dangerously) 3) the body of the earth itself. The claim is attractive, but the second category, comprising oil (or lampwicks?) and *castoreum*, is less than convincing.

71. Cf. *taetro odore* (VI.787) as, earlier of the mistress, *taetris odoribus* (IV.1175) and *acri / nidore offendit nares* (VI.791-92) as, earlier, *offenderit aura* (IV.1180).

72. Cf. with the final lines the earlier discussion of the spontaneous generation of worms:
stercore de taetro, putorem cum sibi nacta est
intempestivis ex imbribus umida tellus.
(II.872-73)

The earth's ability to bear and to kill are so closely analogous that they find expression in the same terms (noted as well by Anderson [1960] 11).

apparent recognition of another possible relation between the sexes which stresses mutuality, accommodation, and a realistic acceptance of the other. Such a view is based on three aspects of Lucretius' text: the concession at 1190-91 that one may overlook a woman's flaws, the more elaborate concession (which concludes the book) that an unattractive woman may ingratiate herself over time (1278-87), and the strictly physiological treatment of sexual pleasure and genetics (1192-1277).

Let us begin to examine these passages by considering the concessive couplet which, rather surprisingly, concludes the attack on misnaming and on odor:

possis

.....
 si bello animos et non odiosa, vicissim
 praetermittere et humanis concedere rebus.
 (IV.1188-91)

It might be objected that these concluding lines present a much more auspicious picture than we have seen before. Along with the later discussion at IV.1278-87 they lead some readers to find in the passage an optimistic tone overall and a surprisingly positive attitude toward marriage (or at least some form of long-term sexual association).⁷³ So, for example, Nussbaum. She emphasizes in this passage, however, the phrase *humanis concedere rebus*, at the expense of *praetermittere*, which can hardly mean, as she paraphrases, "see the beloved clearly."⁷⁴ In fact, the sense of *praetermittere* is precisely *not* "to see clearly," but rather its opposite: "to disregard (mentally), overlook" or "to leave out, pass over."⁷⁵ Can such a recommendation to overlook the other really provide a sound foundation for a relationship between like-minded partners (*ton homoion seautoi*, *ad Men.* 135), such as the Epicurean ideal of friendship recommends?⁷⁶

The question is further complicated when we note that, like the *molliamembra* of the dream dancers, the use of *praetermitto* recurs in this text, specifically providing a frame for the two derogatory treatments of women we have just examined—the discussion of pet names and of odors. If at the conclusion of the passage the would-be lover is advised to overlook aspects of the woman, in the introduction of the passage Lucretius warned that it is precisely the oversight of faults which gets the lover into trouble in the first place, so that he is "standing in his own way" (*tute tibi obuius obstes*):⁷⁷

73. See Goar (1971) and Betensky (1980), as well as Brown (1987) 87-91 discussed below and Nussbaum (1989) *passim*.

74. Nussbaum (1989) 44. Although she correctly translates "overlook all this," her discussion focusses on the optimistic possibility of clear-sightedness rather than the pessimistic necessity of oversight.

75. *Oxford Latin Dictionary* s.v. *praetermitto* 2 and 3.

76. Betensky (1980) 294 believes that Lucretius here "describes marriage in terms of friendship, the highest Epicurean ideal." On Epicurean friendship, see Long and Sedley (1987) 1.126-27, Cicero *De Finibus* 1.65-70. On friendship and marriage, see: Chilton (1960); Rist (1972) 134, 138; Arkins (1984).

77. We might want to argue for a distinction here between corporeal and mental or spiritual faults, since the first couplet involves willful delusion concerning faults of either sort, while the second occurs in a case where the *animus*, at least, of the woman is *bellum*. Implicitly, then, the concluding recommendation seems to be to ignore bodily defects. Yet these are precisely the feminine faults Lucretius has been concerned to expose in the passage these couplets frame.

et praetermittas animi vitia omnia primum
aut quae corpori sunt eius, quam praepetis ac vis.
(IV.1152-53)

Why should Lucretius begin by claiming that the habit of overlooking females' faults is the source of harmful erotic involvement that should be avoided and then conclude by recommending that one generously overlook females' faults—after all, they're only human?

The problem, I believe, lies in our understanding of that last concession. We need to remember that, contrary to a Judaeo-Christian moral intuition, for Lucretius the object of attack is not the sexual act considered as a purely physical function; rather, it is the perverse addition to that act of emotional investment:

novis conturbes volnera plagis
volgivaque vagus Venere.
.....
nec Veneris fructu caret is qui vitat amorem.
(1070-71, 1073)

In fact, like other Roman moralists, he recommends conveniently discharging sexual energy by an uncomplicated transaction with a prostitute.⁷⁸

Viewed against this background, is the object of Lucretius' concluding recommendation (*humanis concedere rebus*) really to "pardon human weaknesses" (Bailey), to "make allowances for the human condition" (Brown)? While *concedo* can mean "condone or overlook, grant indulgence," its more frequent meaning by far is something like "yield to, give way to, submit to."⁷⁹ To interpret Lucretius' apparent recommendation as an indulgent acceptance of the feminine deformities he has just been ridiculing causes "the argument . . . [to] take. . . a sudden and surprising turn" indeed (Nussbaum). It would be simpler, more coherent, and perfectly sensible in light of Epicurean thought to interpret Lucretius' advice to mean instead: "But if the woman is not a vicious person in spirit, then it's all right to overlook those bodily defects I've been talking about and indulge a natural desire for intercourse (provided it doesn't lead to the kind of romantic claptrap I've just satirized)."

Such an interpretation again has an advantage in yielding a coherent sequence of thought, since the following lines (connected with this couplet by *nec*) lead directly to a discussion of pleasure in sexual intercourse. On this interpretation, the sequence is clear: "go ahead and have sex . . . in which, by the way, the woman isn't always faking." The more traditional understanding yields the awkward sequence: "so be understanding about the faults the flesh is heir to. . . nor does a woman always fake pleasure in intercourse."

This ensuing discussion concerning pleasure in intercourse, and the subsequent treatment of the respective partners' contributions of genetic material to conception, is the second passage which has led to a notion of mutuality in

78. Cf. Leonard and Smith ad loc.

79. *Oxford Latin Dictionary* s.v. *concedo*.

Lucretius' treatment of sexuality. Brown sees here "the nearest Lucretius comes to describing 'healthy' sexual intercourse," yet emphasizes that the poet "stops well short of sentimentalizing the subject."⁸⁰ Nussbaum, more optimistically, sees the possibility of "a new understanding of intercourse, one that makes its aim the giving and receiving of pleasure on both sides."⁸¹ The language and imagery in which Lucretius discusses sexual union here, I believe, calls for a more sceptical position, closer to Brown's when he notes of Lucretius that "the sex drive . . . appears both to fascinate and repel him."⁸²

The particular phrasing of the opening couplet already seems to indicate a certain undermining attitude toward the subject: "And a woman's heavy breathing isn't *always* faked" (*nec mulier semper ficto suspirat amore* l 192). An ironic tension continues throughout. If coupling animals experience *mutua voluptas* (1201) it is while they are tortured by shared chains (*ut in vinclis communibus excrucientur* 1202). Given the associations of crossroads in Roman thought, can we be meant to take seriously the following example of dogs mating violently *in triviis* as an appropriate *comparandum* for human behavior (1202-05)? Nor does it help to be assured they act thus because *mutua gaudia* ensnare them in that Venereal trap and chain them there (*quae iacere in fraudem possent vinctosque tenere* 1206). Following from such a discussion of "mutual delight," the conclusion: *quare etiam atque etiam, ut dico, est communi' voluptas* (1208) is considerably less than convincing. Given his linguistic choices, I believe Lucretius' tone here is less that of "the joy of sex" than the job of sex. Such a view is strengthened by the conclusion of the passage, which shifts from the notion of pleasure to concentrate strictly on positions for maximizing the female's generative capabilities. Not surprisingly, the recommendation is for the woman to assume the position of an animal (1264-67). Discussion of this purposeful intercourse *more ferarum* is framed on either side by an assertion that wives should not engage in movement:

nec molles opus' sunt motus uxoribus hilum.
(1268)
coniugibus quod nil nostris opus esse videtur.
(1277)

Note specifically that what wives are to refrain from is *molles motus*. *Non opus est*: those movements belong to the dancers in dreams, but not to "our wives."

Whether or not we believe he has described an experience of pleasure, Lucretius undeniably continues with a graphic consideration of its potential results—a detailed consideration of genetics and fertility (1209-77). Here again, some readers have stressed the sexual parity in Lucretius' treatment of the two partners' respective genetic contributions to conception, for he follows the version of ancient genetic theory according to which both male and female

80. Brown (1987) 65-66.

81. Nussbaum (1989) 45.

82. Brown (1987) 66. See Jacobson (1990) and Allen (1991) for a remarkable sequence of masculine philological dickering over the linguistic details of orgasm in this passage.

partners produce and contribute semen.⁸³ The discussion is particularly explicit on this point in lines 1209-17, where the woman's seed may even "attack" the male seed by force (*subita vi corripuit*) and "conquer" it (*vicit*).⁸⁴ Yet the possibility for shared hereditary influence which Lucretius records in *this* passage, where his express topic is the possible combinations of male and female seed, vanishes in other treatments of heredity, where he is not explicitly focussed on this topic. For example, in the very next paragraph the genetic material momentarily envisioned as belonging to *parentes* is suddenly transformed into a transmission solely from father to father:

fit quoque ut interdum similes existere avorum
possint et referant proavorum saepe figuras,
propterea quia multa modis primordia multis
mixta suo celant in corpore saepe parentes,
quae **patribus patres tradunt** a stirpe profecta.
(IV.1218-22)⁸⁵

Similarly, in an earlier treatment of animal heredity, the only contributor of genetic material of whom Lucretius takes note is the father:

et fuga cervis
a patribus datur et patrius pavor incitat artus.
(III.742-43)

I suggest that a theory so lightly abandoned is not held with deep conviction; while Lucretius pays lip service to the orthodox Democritean position, it does not seem to have seriously influenced his thought on the woman's role in the reproductive process.

Finally, the third passage considered favorable to women, which has been seen as a "quiet but strong affirmation of the possibility of married happiness. . . in startling contrast to the attack on passionate love,"⁸⁶ is the discussion of the woman who wins a man over in time with which Lucretius concludes Book IV. This individual is a *deteriore . . . forma muliercula* (1279), a "homely little woman." Once again, we can detect a framing device at work here; we have seen her like before. Back at 1155-59 it was the ugly ones who caused the problem of erotic mislabelling and the rather silly result that each poor fool laughs at the misfortune of his fellow, but congratulates himself on his own:

multimodis igitur pravas turpisque videmus
esse in deliciis summoque in honore vigere.
atque alios alii inrident Veneremque suadent
ut placent, quoniam foedo adfligentur amore
nec sua respiciunt miseri mala maxima saepe.

83. For a brief discussion of the Lucretian view and its antecedents, see Blayney (1986) 231-32.

84. While the vocabulary here is certainly forceful, it sounds, to this reader, less egalitarian than paranoid.

85. Blayney (1986) 233 elides this transition by speaking of "ancestral characteristics transmitted from generation to generation" nor do other commentators remark upon the abandonment of the preceding theory. Brown (1987) 63 shows a similar tendency to identify the male with the human when he repeatedly discusses sexual desire as "a conspiracy of sight and semen." His treatment does not once qualify the sexuality in question as masculine, not universal.

86. Goar (1971) 76.

In the case of the *muliercula*, she manages by her obliging manner (*morigerisque modis*) and neatness of appearance (*munde corpore culto*) to persuade a man to spend his life with her. After all, Lucretius notes, anything will crumble if you beat on it long enough, and dripping water eventually hollows a stone! Is this vision of a life together really, as one scholar has claimed, “deeply moving in its unexpected affirmation of life and married love”?⁸⁷ I will return to this question shortly.

Of Fabrics, Fetishes, and Federation

THE POEM ASSIGNS one other significant role to women—that of non-creator/non-producer, in the cultural realm. In his inventory of the development of civilized skills in Book V—between the well-known discussion of the use of elephants in war and the development of agriculture—Lucretius devotes eleven lines to the origins of fabric construction:

Nexilis ante fuit vestis quam textile tegmen.
textile post ferrumst, quia ferro tela paratur,
nec ratione alia possunt tam levia gigni
insilia ac fusi radii scapique sonantes.
et facere ante viros lanam natura coegit
quam muliebre genus (nam longe praestat in arte
et sollertius est multo genus omne virile),
agricolae donec vitio vertere severi,
ut muliebribus id manibus concedere vellent
atque ipsi pariter durum sufferre laborem
atque opere in duro durarent membra manusque.
(V.1350-60)

It seems that Lucretius is concerned to counter here an implicit argument that weaving was the one area of women's inventiveness, an example of cultural productivity rather than reproductivity. We possess a notorious modern analogue to such an argument in Freud's lecture on “Femininity”:

It seems that women have made few contributions to the discoveries and inventions in the history of civilization; there is, however, one technique which they may have invented—that of plaiting and weaving. If that is so, we should be tempted to guess the unconscious motive for the achievement. Nature herself would seem to have given the model which this achievement imitates by causing the growth at maturity of the pubic hair that conceals the genitals. . . . If you reject this idea as fantastic and regard my belief in the influence of lack of a penis on the configuration of femininity as an *idée fixe*, I am of course defenseless.⁸⁸

In postulating that the female would have devised fabrics as a means of concealing her own genital deficiency, Freud reveals here a complex agenda of his own, a strange enough interweaving of his theories of feminine lack and

87. Goar (1971) 76. Contra, see Arkins (1984) 142: “in the concluding lines of Book 4—1278-87—Lucretius does make an implicit judgement about marriage and clearly suggests that marriage is a tedious business for the wise man. For the contemptuous diminutive *muliercula* (line 1279) is used to refer to the woman that the man marries and the book ends with a sarcastic, deliberately unattractive, depiction of the constant companionship of marriage.”

88. Freud (1965) 117.

fetishism, oddly undermined in the end by his own apparent aporetic identification with such feminine lack. At least it may be said, however, that he allots to the female, that creature who has made so few contributions to the history of civilization, the single invention of weaving.

Lucretius, on the contrary, is concerned to assure us that women certainly could never have invented anything. The essentialist "argument" offered begs the question entirely: because women are undoubtedly stupid and far inferior to men in art (*nam longe praestat in arte / et sollertius est multo genus omne virile*), they could hardly have invented an art. Lucretius goes further, however, and yet again one feels the force of an implicit objection raised, an unspoken rejoinder, namely: "Then why are women the weavers now?" Again, the poet has no argument to offer that does not beg the question—the suggestion that male weavers, shamed by hardy farmers, transferred textile production *muliebribus manibus* already assumes the gendered division of labor (i.e., the distinction between what is *severus* or *durus* and what is *muliebris*) that it is attempting to explain. The social myth Lucretius thereby constructs is informative: men win on all counts—that of priority (they thought of weaving first) and that of utility (after all, weaving is a "soft" business; men turned to the "hard" work of agriculture and thus improved themselves).⁸⁹

We might compare the result of this myth concerning women's relation to production with Joan Bamberger's well-known analysis of the cultural work performed by the myth of primitive matriarchy concerned with women's relation to power. Bamberger shows that myths of an original "Rule of Women" serve to "reaffirm dogmatically the inferiority of their present position" on the grounds that when women had power—which they originally did—they lost it because they didn't know how to handle it.⁹⁰ Lucretius' myth, on the other hand, asserts that when men had the skill of domestic productivity—which they originally did—they gave it away because they realized it was worthless. Both achieve the same effect—reinforcing and rationalizing women's cultural inferiority.

Earlier in his account of the evolution of civilization, Lucretius has made it clear that the presence of women—at least the practice of cohabiting with them—is the cause of a certain "softening" in the human race:

inde casae postquam ac pellis ignemque pararunt,
et mulier coniuncta viro concessit in unum
.....
cognita sunt, prolemque ex se videre creatam,
tum genus humanum primum mollescere coepit.
(V.1011–14)

We have seen the use of *mollis* in the context of sexual attraction above. Its semantic field is ambivalent in Lucretius. It may appear in the context of the most desirable Epicurean states of *ataraxia* and union with nature (II.29 = V.1392).

89. Note the weaving metaphor used of Lucretius' own discourse: I.418, VI.42. See Snyder (1983) and West's (1969) 80–82 subtle illumination of weaving imagery in Lucretius' writing by night, I.146–79.

90. Bamberger (1974) 279–80.

It may also connote morbidity, as when it is more or less synonymous with the mortality of bodies (I.754-55, II.859-61, 902-06) and characterizes the limbs in death-like states (III.592-96, VI.740-46). The latter connotations of impotence seem more relevant to Lucretius' account of societal development, since the result of mankind's "softening" is an inability to withstand outdoor conditions (*non . . . possent. . . ferre* V.1016), a generalized diminishment or weakening on account of "Venus" (et Venus *inminuit* viris V.1017), and the breaking of the spirit by the demands of children (*puerique parentum / blanditiis facile ingenium fregere superbum* V.1017-18).⁹¹

It is in this context of diminished powers that, in Lucretius' view, the social contract arises:⁹²

tunc et amicitiam coeperunt iungere aventes
finitimi inter se nec laedere nec violari,
et pueros commendarunt muliebrique saeculum,
vocibus et gestu cum balbe significarent
imbecillorum esse aequum misererier omnis.
(V.1019-23)

Explicitly, women and children provide the impetus for the development of these nonaggression pacts among male agents, whose primitiveness is emphasized in the text by their reliance on gesture and grunt. As we have seen above, however, such semi-articulate *voces* do have a positive association with the natural state. If early man is thus represented as the signifying monkey, early woman is represented as the *imbecillus* (weakling) on whose behalf he relinquishes an original autonomy and institutionalizes a degree of impotence.

Take My Wife. . . Please

IN THE REPRESENTATIONS which we have surveyed, then, we have seen the female reduced to matter, to the reproductive function, to the body specifically as malodorous or dangerous, and to the non-producer in the cultural realm who is nevertheless held responsible for the development of cultural forms, specifically under their description as a falling away from the state of nature. While these characteristics may seem unrelated or even mutually contradictory, they can in fact be understood as parts of a coherently interrelated symbolic whole.

Perhaps the best-known treatment of this symbolic construct and its implications is that of Sherry Ortner in her classic early feminist article, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?"⁹³ In her attempt "to expose the underlying logic of cultural thinking that assumes the inferiority of women," Ortner proceeded on

91. This passage is seen as positive and civilizing in contrast to Lucretius' earlier discussion of sexual union as indicating "the selfish, animal-like life-style of primitive man" by Watson (1984) 391.

92. See Furley (1978) 13 for the view that Lucretius' account of the development of social institutions is morally neutral, i.e., "that the later stages are not better, and can be worse, than the earlier." At 15-16 Furley apparently agrees with the assessment of "softening" presented here, but rejects generalizing such an assessment to the entire account of social evolution. Cf. Beye (1963): "The *mollescere* after *durus* in the context of their associations in the poem leaves no doubt that Lucretius is speaking of a decline" (p. 167). Cf. Nussbaum (1989) 24-25 and her more extensive discussion (1990) esp. 70-74.

93. Ortner (1974).

the hypothesis that women's "pan-cultural second-class status could be accounted for . . . by postulating that women are . . . closer to nature than men."⁹⁴ In the early sections of this paper, I argued that, in Lucretius' text, woman is indeed represented as close to nature, figured primarily as a maternal generative body.

Tracing the ways in which her postulate functions in biological, social, and psychological symbolic registers, Ortner emphasized that the male is identified unproblematically (and unconsciously) with "culture," while the female occupies a more problematic status intermediate between nature and culture and, therefore, a position of "greater symbolic ambiguity."⁹⁵ In the discussions here of unreliable, euphemistic language, of erotic involvement (as distinct from "natural," purely physical sexual activity), and of the manufacture of cloth, I have tried to show that woman is uneasily allied with the development of cultural forms. In each of these instances, I would argue that the presence of woman in the picture coincides with the introduction of the nonnatural: actions and desires which might once have seemed spontaneous and natural, in the presence of women now develop a tendency toward perversity, or at least unnecessary elaboration. Thus, the female does seem to occupy an ambiguous, intermediate status in her fluctuating identification, now with nature, now with culture.

As a result of her ambiguous status, Ortner claims, the female may more readily be "assigned polarized and contradictory meanings within a single symbolic system."⁹⁶ "That she often represents both life and death, is only the simplest example one could mention," she goes on to note.⁹⁷ In this light, it is worthwhile re-examining W.S. Anderson's important paper on "Discontinuity in Lucretian Symbolism," which argues that Lucretian imagery undergoes a transvaluation through the course of the poem. Of the six themes Anderson examines, two are Terra Mater and Venus Genetrix. He concludes that Terra Mater at first "unambiguously signifies the creative force of Nature," but is gradually transformed into a hostile and deadly force.⁹⁸ If, however, Ortner's arguments about the implications of identifying the female with the natural world and the reproductive function are correct, then ambiguity will be always already present, and what we have in Lucretius' exposition is not so much a shift or "discontinuity," but rather a gradual revelation of integrally related aspects of a symbolic whole.

We have seen that, in the Lucretian text, *terra mater* does indeed represent both life and death. The human female may do so as well. Consider the appearance of the *optima uxor* at III.894-95: *iam iam non domus accipiet te laeta neque uxor / optima*. Here, the wife functions, analogously to the house (and to the sepulchral earth), as

94. Ortner (1974) 68, 72. She makes the additional assumption "that every culture defines [nature] as being of a lower order of existence than itself." Within an Epicurean system, which holds life "in accordance with nature" as the highest value, this of course will not be true. And yet I believe Ortner's formulation can help to illumine our text—which perhaps only serves as yet another indication that the status and definition of the Epicurean "natural" life are not without ambiguity.

95. Ortner (1974) 85.

96. Ortner (1974) 87.

97. Ortner (1974) 85.

98. Anderson (1960) 6.

a space to be occupied or a receptacle, but also—and primarily—as a signifier of death for the male. Her presence in the text functions solely as a way of representing his absence. She is perhaps even the object of some ridicule, given the maudlin language of the passage and the fact that the point of introducing the sentimental picture at all is to expose its foolishness (900-01).⁹⁹

Let us return now to that other “little woman” represented in the text, the *muliercula* of Book IV’s “happily ever after” conclusion. The verbs Lucretius uses to describe her actions upon the man whom she persuades to spend his life with her are: *tunditur*, *vincitur*, *labascit*, *pertundere*—all elsewhere consistently used for the destruction or dissolution of bodies—and *concinnat*. This particular verb enjoys limited use by Lucretius; it occurs only here and three times in Book VI, where it signifies waterspouts which cause shipwrecks (437), cataclysmic earthquakes (584), and the disease-producing effects of pestilential air (1118). The range of these images I think will sound familiar by now.

Conclusion

I HAVE TRIED TO SHOW that, in explicit terms and also in more subtle underlying patterns of language and imagery, the female in Lucretius’ text is associated with body, particularly the body as capable of giving birth and providing nutrition. As the poet repeatedly stresses, however, in his arguments on the constitution of the cosmos, the soul, and the individual, what is subject to birth is also subject to death. Concomitantly, that which is largely identified with birth will not escape a corresponding association with death.

On the one hand, Lucretius allows punning relations among *mater*, *materies*, and *terra* to structure and underwrite the association of the feminine body with the bodily stuff of his universe. That universe, however, according to Epicurean materialism, is comprised of two equally necessary and mutually delimiting elements—matter and void. It is void which permits motion and prevents the absurdity of a Parmenidean cosmos: solidly packed and entirely static. But if the existence of void admits the possibility of motion, it also brings the threat of dissolution and death. What is utterly solid is indestructible, eternal. Only in the empty spaces of being can blows penetrate, diseases creep in, destructive forces of all sorts wrench apart our bodies and those of other objects. And Lucretius’ female body encompasses void within it in essential ways. After all, its very generative and nutritive capabilities are dependent upon the female body’s penetrability and the existence within it of cavities, ducts (*foramina*), hollow places, which do not to the same extent characterize the male.

Thus, the symbolic value of the female body is distributed over the two constitutive terms of the Epicurean universe. She is matter, but also void; fertility but also mortality. In this poem whose *raison d’être* is to provide a reasoned understanding of the composition of the cosmos and of one’s place in it, the female provides a means of figuring the world but does not possess a mind capable of understanding it.

99. For the satirical or ironic nature of the line, see Kenney, Leonard & Smith ad loc.