

# A Deadly Fever

Post by "Joshua" of January 15, 2023 at 8:39 PM

Yeah, it's not so much about bringing the gods into the equation, it's more about expecting that Lucretius would live up to the paradigm that he sets up in the beginning of the poem. To really understand what the Hymn to Venus represents, we need to know what the poet was reading. Lucretius had three principal influences in writing *On the Nature of Things*. The main influence was of course Epicurus, who provides all of the main content of the poem, which Lucretius translates into Latin, fleshes out, and then casts into verse. Epicurus is always going to be the focus of his loyalty in interpretation.

But Epicurus wrote in Greek and in prose. Poetry, and particularly epic poetry, has its own stylistic, artistic, and literary demands. Homer is always in the background, but Lucretius' two principal poetic influences were the Greek poet-philosopher Empedocles, and Ennius, an epic poet and the "father of Roman poetry".

Empedocles wrote two long-form philosophical poems, *On Nature* and *Purifications*, together totalling some 5000 lines. *On Nature* is for our purposes the more important of the two. In this poem, Empedocles puts forward a cosmology based on the four classical elements of Earth, Fire, Air, and Water. In addition to these two, he proposes two cosmic forces in conflict with one another--Love and Strife--which cause the elements to combine (Love) and separate (Strife). These four elements and the two forces that drive them can neither be created nor destroyed--like Lucretius, Empedocles writes that "nothing comes from nothing".

One thing that separates Lucretius from Epicurus is the metaphor in *DRN* which views Nature as operating with a restless, erotic energy. Epicurus writes of atoms joining to form compounds and compounds dissolving back into atoms, literally "un-cut-ables". Lucretius is not so technical--for him, atoms are *semina rerum*, 'the seeds of things', with the connotation of a sexually generative power. This is pure Empedocles. But Lucretius takes the Empedoclean approach more figuratively by using the images of Venus and Mars as stand-ins for Love and Strife. In the hymn to Venus, he presents the "nurturing mother" as metaphorically coming with the Spring, sowing flowers and crops, and filling every animal with an intense procreative lust.

One of the scribes who copied the poem evidently thought that Lucretius was very confused--he (the scribe) copied into the margin a later passage describing the gods living in deepest peace, with no role in creation. Why this appeal to Venus? But Lucretius wasn't confused. He was sticking diligently to a layered and textured metaphor dating back to the 5th century in Greece.

So the quite surprising thing is that Lucretius doesn't complete the analogy--the poem opened with Venus/Love/comboination/sexual generation. What Santayana expects is that Lucretius ought to have ended the poem more explicitly with Mars/Strife/dissolution/death, and thereby consummating in his poem a metaphor that was already four centuries old.