# Threads of Epicureanism in Art and Literature

## Post by “Eikadistes” of February 24, 2023 at 9:08 AM

(RE-POST): I wanted to include a few classical references (or direct theft) of Epicurus. We'll start with Virgil's ode:

"*He sung the secret seeds of Nature's frame –*

*How seas, and earth, and air, and active flame*

*Fell through the mighty void, and in their fall*

*Were blindly gathered in this goodly ball.*

*The tender soil then stiffening by degrees*

*Shut from the bounding Earth the bounding seas.*

*Then earth and ocean various forms disclose,*

*And a new sun to a new world arose.*

*And mists condensed to cloud obscure the sky:*

*And clouds dissolved the thirsty ground supply.*

*The rising trees the lofty mountains grace,*

*The lofty mountains feed the savage race,*

*Yet few, and strangers in the unpeople place.*

*From hence the birth of man the song pursued,*

*And how the world was lost and how renewed.*" (Virgil, *Eclogues*, vi.31)

Following this (much, much later), Edmond Halley wrote an ode to Newton in the forward of *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Matematica* (1687). While it is not necessarily Epicurean, the historical link is interesting:

"*...Then ye who now on heavenly nectar fare,*

*Come celebrate with me in song the name*

*Of Newton, to the Muses dear; for he*

*Unlocked the hidden treasuries of Truth:*

*So richly through his mind had Phoebus cast*

*The radiance of his own divinity.*

*Nearer the gods no mortal may approach*." (Edmund Halley, *Ode To Isaac Newton)*

And I may as mention Horace, since Virgil made the list:

"*Treat every day that dawns for you as the last.*

*The unhoped-for hours' ever welcome when it comes.*

*When you want to smile then visit me: sleek, and fat*

*I'm a hog, well cared-for, one of Epicurus' herd.*" (Horace, *The Epistles* 1.4.13-16)

Next, Edmund Spenser steals Lucretius' invocation to Venus from the beginning of Book I, and then, later, in the same poem, makes an allusion to *DRN* V:747.

"*Great Venus, Queene of beautie and of grace,*

*The ioy of the Gods and men, that vnder skie*

*Doest fayrest shrine, and most adorne thy place,*

*That with they smyling looke doest pacifie*

*The raging seas, and makst the stormes to flie;*

*Thee goddesse, thee the winds, the clouds doe feare,*

*And when though spreadst thy mantle forth on hie,*

*The waters play and pleasant lands appeare,*

*And heauens laugh, & al the world shrews ioyous cheare.*" (Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* 4.10.44)

"*Lastly, came Winter cloathed in all frize,*

*Chattering his teeth for cold that did him chill.*" (Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* 7.7.31.1-2)

The following is Lord Byron's rendering of *DRN* I-33-41:

"*In all thy perfect goddess-ship, when lies*

*Before thee thy own vanquished Lord of War?*

*And gazing in thy face as toward a star,*

*Laid on thy lap, his eyes to thee upturn,*

*Feeding on thy sweet cheek! while thy lips are*

*With lava kisses melting while they burn,*

*Showered on his eyelids, brow, and mouth, as from an urn!*" (Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage 4.51)*

I am now **convinced** that Shakespeare was *quite* familiar with ancient Greek philosophy:

"*LEAR: Why, no, boy: nothing can be made out of nothing.*" (*King Lear* 1:4.106)

"MERCUTIO: She is the faeries' midwife, and she comes

In shape no bigger than agate-stone

On the forefinger of an alderman,

Drawn with a team of little atomi

Over men's noses as they lie asleep." (*Romeo and Juliet* 1.4.52-56)

"*CELIA: It is as easy to count atomies as to resolve the*

*propositions of a lover. But take a taste of my*

*finding him, and relish it with good observance. I*

*found him under a tree like a dropped acorn*." (*As You Like It* 3.2.1332-1335)

"*OTHELLO: ...like to the Pontick Sea,*

*Whose icy current and compulsive course*

*Ne'er feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on*

*To the Propontick at Hellesport.*" *Othello* 3.3.453-456; allusion to *DRN* V:506-508)

There are a number of contemporary thinkers who have translated parts of DRN into English prose. For example, the French metaphysician Gilles Deleuze translates lines 633-634 from *De Rerum Natura*:

"*...out of connections, densities, shocks, encounters, occurrences, and motions.*" (Deleuze [1990a] 267)

In *The Advancement of Education* the English philosopher Francis Bacon translated *DRN* II:1-10:

"*In is a view of delight ... to stand of walke vpon the shoare side, and to see a shippe tossed with tempest vpon the sea; or to bee in a fortified Tower, and to see two Battailes ioyie vppon a plaine. But is a pleasure incomparable for the minde of man to be setled, landed, and fortified in the certaintie of truth; and from thence to descrie and behould the errours, perterbations,*

*labours, and wanderings up and downe of other men.*" (1605)

Of special note, French philosophy Denis Diderot invoked a line from *De Rerum Natura* as his personal motto. He paraphrases *DRN* IV:338 as an emblematic, rallying cry for the entire Enlightenment period:

"*Now we see out of the dark what is in the light.*" (*Philosophical Thoughts* 1746)

While they do not provide direct translation, we have notable reflections on Lucretian evolution from Erasmus Darwin (the less-famous grandfather of Charles) in *The Temple of Nature, or the Origin of Society* (1803) as well as David Hume in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), regarding the poetry of *DRN* V:772-878.

Even one of my personal heroes, **Carl Sagan** makes commentary on *DRN* II:1090-1092.

"*As Lucertius summarize [the Ionian philosophers'] views, '**Nature free at once and rid of her haughty lords is seen to do all things spontaneously of herself without the meddling of the gods**.*" (Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World*)

The English poet George Sandys offers a translation of *DRN* II:14-19.

"*O wretched minds of men! Depriued of light!*

*Through what great dangers, o[n] hou dark a night,*

*Force you your weary lives! and cannot see*

*How Nature onely craues a body free*

*From hated paine; a chearefulle Mind possest*

*Of safe delights, by care not feare opprest*." (1632)

Of the beginning Book III, Frederick II is posthumously recorded as having said that "*There are no better remedies for maladies of the mind*." We then note that Lord Tennyson translated *DRN* III:18-24.

"*...The Gods, who haunt*

*The lucid interspace of world and world,*

*Where never creeps a cloud, or moves a wind,*

*Nor ever falls the least white star of snow,*

*Nor ever lowest roll of thunder moans,*

*Nor sound of human sorrow mounts to mar*

*Their sacred, everlasting calm*!" (Lord Tennyson, *Lucretius* 104-110)

England's first Poet Laureate, John Dryden provides a brief reflection of *DRN* III:831.

"*What has this Bugbear death to frighten Man,*

*If Souls can die, as well as Bodies can?*"

The poet Thomas Grey seems to appropriate the tone and imagery of *DRN* III:895-897.

"*For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,*

*Or busy housewife ply her evening care:*

*No children run to lisp their sire's return,*

*Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share.*" (*Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* 21-24)

The poet Percy Shelley provides a beautiful rendition of *DRN* IV:415-420.

"*We paused beside the pools that lie*

*Under the forest bough,*

*Each seemed as 'twere a little sky*

*Gulfed in a world below;*

*A firmament of purple light*

*Which in the dark earth lay.*" (Shelley, *To Jane: The Recollections* 53-58)

William Wordsworth provides us with a version of *DRN* V:222-227.

"*Like a shipwrecked Sailor tost*

*By rough waves on a perilous coast*

*Lies the babe, in helplessness*

*And in tenderest nakedness*

*Flung by laboring Nature forth*

*Upon the mercies of the earth*

*Can its eye beseech? No more*

*Than the hands are free to implore:*

*Voice but serves for one brief cry;*

*Plaint was it? or prophesy*

*Of sorrow that will surely come?*

*Omen of man's grievous doom!*" (William Wordsworth, *To-Upon the Birthday of Her First-Born Child* 1-12)

In Book VII of *Paradise Lost*, John Milton elaborates on Lucretian evolution from DRN V:772-878. I recommend reading further in Book VII because Milton (to my surprise) appropriates a significant amount of Lucretian imagery.

"*Then Herbs of every leaf, that sudden flour'd*

*Op'ning thir various colours, and made gay*

*Her bosom smelling sweet...*" (*Paradise Lost*, Book VII)

Diogenes of Oinoanda borrows **heavily**, *directly* from Lucretius. While he does not write in verse, the fact that he cites lines from DRN justify to me that he should be included in this list.I will just list the connections:

- Diogenes' fr. 47.III.10-IV.2 corresponds with Lucretius' *DRN* III:953-955

- Diogenes' NF 126-127.VI-IX, fr. 20 corresponds with *DRN* V:156-173

- Diogenes' fr. 12.II.11-V.14 corresponds with *DRN* V around line 1040.

This is what I have compiled in terms of Lucretian references in my most recent read-through.

There was **one** other discovery I wanted to share (*somewhat off-topic, but just humor me...).* In Book VI, Lucretius alludes to the largest seismic event in Antiquity (*besides the earlier eruption of Mt. Etna and the later eruption of Mt. Vesuvius*). This event occurred on the North side of the Peloponnesian peninsula, almost directly West of Athens. Presumably, a number of Athenians would have experienced this event ... Athenians like Plato. This occured in c. 373 BCE, and lead to the complete destruction of the ancient city of Helike as well as all of its inhabitants. So what exactly happened? From records, ancient authors describe what we might call as a "collapse" of a plate. In this instance, such an event would lead to the complete collapse of land above the event. Uniquely, it would have appeared that an entire mass of land fell straight downward, dozens of feet over the duration of only a few seconds. As I mentioned, we would have expected Athenians (like Plato), who were just East of this event, to have been very aware of it. Exactly 13 years later, Plato published his dialogue *Timaeus* in which he (and he alone) describes the fabled allegory of Atlantis, which collapses into the sea.

*Coincidence*? I propose that the destruction of the fictional city of Atlantis was inspired by the collapse of Helike.