

A Deadly Fever

Post by “Joshua” of January 15, 2023 at 2:00 AM

Emily Austin's new book has invited many of us to reconsider how we think about the way in which Lucretius ends the sixth and final book of *De Rerum Natura*--with a horrific account of the Plague of Athens in 430 BCE. The ending has long been a source of conflicting opinions. George Santayana in his collection of essays called *Three Philosophical Poets* speculated, like many before and after him, the poem was unfinished--that the conclusion does not seem to satisfy the potential symmetry that Lucretius sets up in the Hymn to Venus, and that, properly finished, Lucretius would have ended with Mars on the warpath. It ends rather morbidly, but Mars never does get his marching cadence.

When I first read Santayana I went looking for clues--clues of the [A STILO MV](#) variety. I never found anything; that is, until tonight.

Before I get to that, lets review some of the hymn to Venus.

- Venus is portrayed as a nurturing mother who gave birth to the founding line of Rome.
- She fills the sea with ships and the land with grain
- Her coming dispels the clouds, placates the sea,
- Her generative power passes on the "teeming breeze of the west wind" (aura Favoni)
- She strikes the heart of man and beast and bird, urging them to procreate after their kind
- Lucretius asks her to placate her lover Mars, who lies on her lap and hangs from her lips by his mouth.

Now for the plague in Athens, starting with line 1138

- While Venus brought life to Rome, the plague brought death to Athens
- Under Venus, clear sky and calm ocean "shine with diffused light". The plague traverses "reaches of air and floating fields of foam"
- Venus' breeze carries life and warmth across the land. The plagued air carries foulness and death.
- It settles on the Athens, and human and beast alike lie rotting in the streets.
- Venus "alone governs the way things are". The plague makes Athens ungovernable, with temples and shrines heaped up with the bodies of the dead
- The hymn to Venus sets the stage for Epicurus. The plague ends rather abruptly.

OK! Now for my meaningless Kabbalistic word games! I mentioned that the section on the plague in Athens starts at line 1138 on the Perseus website. Here's the first sentence:

Quote from Perseus website

Haec ratio quondam morborum et mortifer aestus
finibus in Cecropis funestos reddidit agros
vastavitque vias, exhausit civibus urbem.

Quote from William Ellery Leonard

'Twas such a manner of disease, 'twas such
Mortal miasma in Cecropian lands
Whilom reduced the plains to dead men's bones,
Unpeopled the highways, drained of citizens
The Athenian town.

Quote from anonymous Daniel Brown Edition

Once such a plague as this, such deadly blasts, poisoned the coasts of Athens, founded by Cecrops. It raged through every street, unpeopled all the city, for coming from far (from Egypt, where it first began) and having passed through a long tract of air, and over the wide sea, it fixed at last upon the subjects of King Pandion.

Quote from Cyril Bailey

Such a cause of plague, such a deadly influence, once in the country of Cecrops filled the fields with dead and emptied the streets, draining the city of its citizens. For it arose deep within the country of Egypt, and came, traversing much sky and floating fields, and brooded at last over all the people of Pandion. Then troop by troop they were given over to disease and death.

Quote from H. A. J. Munro

Such a form of disease and a death-fraught miasm erst within the borders of Cecrops defiled the whole land with dead, and dispeopled the streets, drained the town of burghers. Rising first and starting from the inmost corners of Egypt, after traversing much air and many floating fields, the plague brooded at last over the whole people of Pandion; and then they were handed over in troops to disease and death.

"Mortal Miasma", "Deadly Blast", "Deadly Influence", "Death-fraught miasm"--these are translations of the *mortifer aestus*, the killing fever of the plague. I'll stick with deadly influence.

These are the last two words of the first line of the plague. *Aeneadum genetrix* are the first two words of the first line of the hymn to Venus. So we have the life-giving mother of Rome contrasted with the deadly influence of the plague.

I found a strange little anagram.

M O R T I F E R - A E S T U S -
F E T U S - O R E - M A R T I S

FETUS ORE MARTIS

Fetus, n., nominative singular, "Offspring"

Ore, n., ablative singular, "[from] the Mouth"

Martis, n., genitive singular, "[of] Mars"

A deadly disease-the 'offspring from the mouth of Mars.' In the beginning of the poem Venus restrains him, and Mars hangs pacified from her mouth.

In the end, they are irreconcilable. Venus breaths life, and Mars death. Love and Strife, generation and destruction, the two Empedoclean forces vying with one another in a struggle without end, and each made possible by the other.

So what do you think? 😊

Post by "Joshua" of January 15, 2023 at 2:31 AM

Some further considerations: it would be fair to object that it is war, and not disease, that is the province of Mars. This is true--and it's also true that the plague of 430 BCE coincided with a war between Athens and Sparta. Mars was Sparta's patron god, for obvious reasons, and Lucretius could have ended more explicitly with war as Santayana proposes. But disease works better for Lucretius on a moral level. Philosophy was for him a kind of medicine, and it was a medicine that people needed even if they didn't know it. Diogenes of Oenoanda makes it very explicit;

Quote

But, as I have said before, the majority of people suffer from a common disease, as in a plague, with their false notions about things, and their number is increasing (for in

mutual emulation they catch the disease from one another, like sheep)

And John Stuart Mill says this of his father:

Quote

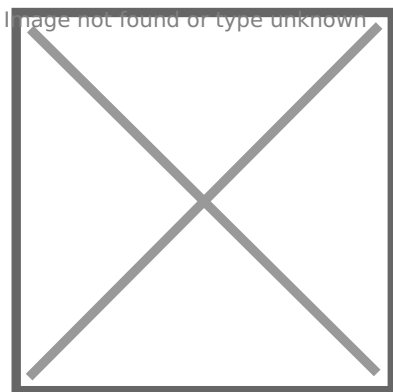
As it was, his aversion to religion, in the sense usually attached to the term, was of the same kind with that of Lucretius: he regarded it with the feelings due not to a mere mental delusion, but to a great moral evil. He looked upon it as the greatest enemy of morality: first, by setting up fictitious excellences—belief in creeds, devotional feelings, and ceremonies, not connected with the good of human-kind—and causing these to be accepted as substitutes for genuine virtues: but above all, by radically vitiating the standard of morals; making it consist in doing the will of a being, on whom it lavishes indeed all the phrases of adulation, but whom in sober truth it depicts as eminently hateful.

A further objection might be in the use of the word *fetus*. 'Offspring' or 'child' would be a non-standard usage, but it is justified at least in Horace: *Germania quos horrida parturit Fetus*. This translates as far as I can tell to *Germany gave birth to a horrible child*.

Lastly, [here](#) is an article which I have not read but which reinforces the connection between the beginning and ending of the poem.

Post by “Joshua” of January 15, 2023 at 2:37 AM

And finally, in *DRN* Book 1, 192-198 Lucretius uses *fetus* to describe the fruit of plants after rain.



[Lucretius, De Rerum Natura 1.192-198: From Rain to Letters to Elements](#)

“One must consider too that without a fixed annual amount of rain the land cannot produce its gladdening fruit nor is it the nature of animals bereft of their...
sententiaeantiquae.com

Post by “Godfrey” of January 15, 2023 at 4:13 PM

Fascinating! It's for good reason that the poetry of DRN became the subject of study in antiquity, even when the core ideas were marginalized by its opponents. I regret that I never studied Latin: it almost seems worth taking up just to gain a fuller appreciation of the poem. Thanks [Joshua](#) for your posts!

Post by “Cassius” of January 15, 2023 at 6:13 PM

Joshua I should look up what Santayana said before writing this, but as usual I will blunder forward without doing my research:

Is Santayana looking for Mars just to balance Venus in the opening because he thinks there should be another reference to the role of gods?

Maybe Lucretius had no desire to balance gods but to leave them behind, and the full reason for ending on the death and destruction note is that he intended to state or at least evoke the true ending of the Plague story, which is that the people of Athens gave up on worrying about the gods at all, and tried to enjoy life as best they could?

I gather that is what Emily Austin's book is suggesting?

And if so Santayana would be wrong in looking for an allusion about gods except as to a dismissal of them? (Meaning that part of Lucretius' point was that Mars on the warpath is exactly what did NOT happen to cause the plague?)

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/composition/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.