

LUCRETIUS' DIDACTICS OF DISGUST

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τῆς παιδείας ἔφη τὰς μὲν ῥίζας εἶναι πικράς, τὸν δὲ καρπὸν γλυκόν.
He said the roots of learning were bitter, but the fruit sweet.
Diogenes Laertius *Life of Aristotle* 5.21

The plague that closes Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* is a spectacle of disgust. Throats sweat with blood (6.47f.); tongues drip with gore (6.1149); breath reeks like rotten cadavers (6.1154f.); drinking water is contaminated when the sick dive into it (6.1174f.); black discharge pours from stomachs (6.1200); foul blood seeps from noses (6.1203); the sick slice off their own hands, feet, and genitals (6.1209f.); dead bodies are entombed by ulcers (6.1271).¹ Again and again Lucretius hits upon domains that have been identified as key disgust elicitors.²

I wish to thank the audience at the 2018 meeting of the Classical Association of the Middle West and South in Albuquerque, NM, where I delivered an abridged version of this paper. Many thanks are also due to the two anonymous peer reviewers, who generously offered numerous insights that helped me improve the final product. After this article was accepted for publication in *Ramus*, it was drawn to my attention that Rebecca Moorman gave a paper at the Society for Classical Studies meeting in 2020 that was also on disgust in Lucretius. Her work is forthcoming in *Classical Philology*, but I have not had the opportunity to consult it. If we have reached similar conclusions, we did so independently.

1. The function of Lucretius' plague is highly debated and the scholarship vast. For major treatments, see Bright (1971); Clay (1983), 257–66; Segal (1990), esp. 228–337; Gale (1994), 223–8; Penwill (1996); Fowler (1997); Finnegan (1999); Stover (1999); Fratantuono (2015), 459–73; Gardner (2019), 79–112; and Kazantzidis (2021), 60–75 and 122–74. For a good overview of scholarly views (at least up to the mid-1990s), see Gale (1994), 223–8. Similarly, the scholarship on disgust has been growing apace in recent years. Useful overviews are Tedeschini (2018) and Heinämaa (2020). Major recent(ish) treatments include Ahmed (2004), 82–100; Kelly (2011); Korsmeyer (2011); McGinn (2011); Menninghaus (2003); Miller (1997); and Nussbaum (2006). Two highly influential theorists of disgust in the 20th century were Kolnai (2004) and Kristeva (1982). On disgust specifically in ancient literature see esp. the edited volume of Lateiner and Spatharas (2017). My discussion of disgust is indebted especially to their introduction, 1–42. See also Kaster (2005), 104–33. Some scholarly attention has already been given to the role of disgust in Lucretius' presentation of women and sexual intercourse, for which see Nussbaum (1989), Nugent (1994), Brown (2017), and Pope (2019). My focus here is instead on disgust and pleasure with regard to the potentially bitter flavor of Epicurean doctrine.

2. See Haidt, McCauley, and Rozin (1994). The seven domains of 'primary' or 'core' disgust are food (e.g. rotten or contaminated foods), sex (i.e. practices considered taboo or perverse), body products (pus, mucous, fecal matter, etc.), envelope violations (gore, surgery, puncture wounds—'situations in which the normal exterior envelope of the body is breached or altered'), animals (e.g. cockroaches, rats, insects), hygiene (e.g. dirty toilet seats, soiled underwear), and death (corpses, disease). They add, moreover, an eighth domain for 'secondary' disgust: 'socio-moral violations' (e.g. 'Nazis, drunk drivers, hypocrites, and lawyers who chase ambulances'). See also Korsmeyer (2011), 122.

In Book 6, more than in any other book of the epic, we encounter what is *taeter*, ‘disgusting’. This adjective appears nine times in the final book (22, 217, 787, 807, 976, 1154, 1200, 1205, and 1266) after showing up one time each in Books 1 (936), 3 (581), and 5 (1126); six times in Book 2 (400, 415, 476, 510, 705, 872); and five times in Book 4 (11, 124, 172, 685, 1176). The vast majority of these instances describe disgust working upon our senses of taste, smell, sight, and even hearing (*OLD* s.v. 1); that is, ‘primary’ or ‘core’ disgust. At 2.510f., for instance, Lucretius speaks of a substance that is *taetrius... / naribus auribus atque oculis orisque saporis* (‘more disgusting to noses, ears, eyes, and the taste of the mouth’). But the word can also carry an ethical or moral nuance (*OLD* s. v. 2), suggesting ‘secondary’ disgust. At 5.1126, for example, the word describes Tartarus, into which thunderbolts ‘scornfully’ hurl sinners (*contemptim in Tartara taetra*). Here, Lucretius wants his reader to feel a sense of moral aversion to the idea of the Underworld, which throughout the epic he is at pains to prove is nothing but a poetic fiction.

Other key words Lucretius uses to signal disgust are *tristis* (‘bitter’ or ‘tart’), *foedus* (‘foul’), *amarus* (‘bitter’ or ‘sour’), *spurcus* (‘filthy’), and *turpis* (‘loathsome’). These words, like *taeter*, can signal both primary and secondary disgust. *tristis* and *amarus* pertain especially to the senses, particularly that of taste, whereas *foedus* and *spurcus* evoke what is soiled and unhygienic as well as what is morally or ethically debased.³ One key strategy Lucretius employs to help trigger the reader’s sense of disgust is the piling on of such words. At 1.62, for instance, he signals secondary or moral disgust toward traditional religion by describing how the Greeks ‘foully soiled’ (*turparunt...foede*) Diana’s altar with Iphigeneia’s blood. At 6.976f., he elicits primary or sensory disgust by describing ‘muddy sludge’, *caenum*, as *taeterrima...spurcies* (‘the most disgusting filth’). There are also particular items again and again associated with disgust, such as the plants wormwood (e.g. 1.936; 2.400; 4.11 and 124) and centaury (2.401 and 4.125).

Lucretius’ marked interest in disgust arises from his contention that atomic structures cause our sensory experience of the world. For him, disgust begins at the level of the atom and therefore has a scientific explanation. As he tells us at 2.414–29, certain atomic shapes produce feelings of discomfort in our senses. Some of these, he tells us, put off foul smells, such as *taetra cadauera* (‘disgusting cadavers’, 415). Others ‘are dreadful and foul to look at due to

3. *tristis* primarily means ‘sad’ or ‘gloomy’ but by extension can describe bitter taste (*OLD* s.v. 8b) and harsh sound (*OLD* s.v. 8b). Conversely, *amarus* pertains first to the senses, such as taste (*OLD* s.v. 1), smell (*OLD* s.v. 2), and hearing (*OLD* s.v. 3), and by extension to people, objects, and circumstances (*OLD* s.v. 5). For *foedus* as describing what repulses one’s senses, see *OLD* s.v. 1; for moral disgust see *OLD* s.v. 3 and 4. *spurcus* has associations with excrement, urine, and sexual practices deemed disgusting, such as fellatio and cunnilingus, for which see *OLD* s.v. 1a and 1b, and it also describes things that evoke moral outrage, particularly sexual offenses, for which see *OLD* s.v. 2. *turpis* can suggest repulsiveness to the senses in general (*OLD* s.v. 1) and to sight in particular, i.e. ‘ugly’ (*OLD* s.v. 2), as well as moral shame (*OLD* s.v. 3 and 4) and obscenity (*OLD* s.v. 4 and 5).

their loathsome appearance' (*foeda specie diri turpesque uidentur*, 421). Such things are made up of atoms 'with hooked points' (*flexis mucronibus*, 427) that physically 'enter our noses' (*penetrare...in nares*, 414f.) and 'assail our eyes' (*compugnunt aciem*, 420). Lucretius again develops this idea at 6.777–88, outlining things that are 'hostile' (*inimica*, 777) to the ears, 'repulsive' (*infesta*, 778) to the nose, 'rough' (*aspera*, 778) to the touch, and 'bitter' (*tristia*, 778) to the taste. He goes on to consider various 'foul and unpleasant' (*spurcaeque grauesque*, 782) items that 'cause repulsion in our senses' (*infesto senso*, 782), including the fatally 'disgusting odor' (*odore...taetro*, 787) of a flower that blooms on a tree on Mt Helicon.

Scholars of disgust have repeatedly emphasized the links between this emotion and the senses. As Korsmeyer states, 'Unusual among emotions, disgust virtually requires sensory input, especially from the bodily senses of smell, touch, or taste, though vision can evoke disgust fairly easily by engaging the synaesthetic imagination.' She links disgust with the sense of taste in particular: 'The mouth is an especially sensitive zone for the trigger of disgust, and indeed distaste may be the phylogenetic origin of disgust.'⁴ Such disgust is provoked 'at the prospect of (oral) incorporation of an offensive object'.⁵ For Lucretius too, the sense of taste seems to be an especially important component of disgust.⁶ He uses the word *taeter* especially to describe what strikes our sense of taste as bitter—the opposite of sweet. In Book 2.398–407, for example, the atoms that constitute what is *taeter* are rougher and more jagged than the smooth ones that make up things that are sweet. Whereas some substances, such as honey, 'touch the senses pleasantly' (*sensus iucunde tangere*, 2.403) and are entirely smooth in their atomic make-up, others, such as wormwood, are jagged and 'disgusting' (*taetra*, 400) and make us 'grimace from the foul flavor' (*foedo pertorquent ora sapore*, 401). A third atomic category contains a bit of both—these things are smooth and jagged, appealing and disgusting at once:

sunt etiam quae iam nec leuia iure putantur
esse neque omnino flexis mucronibus unca
sed magis angellis paulum prostantibus, ut qui
titillare magis sensus quam laedere possint.
fecula iam quo de genere est inulaeque sapes.

(2.426–30)

There are also substances that rightly are thought to be
neither smooth nor entirely hooked with crooked points.
Instead, they have angles that stick out only a little,

4. Korsmeyer (2011), 30–2. See also Miller (1997), 36: 'What the idiom of disgust demands is reference to the senses. It is about what it feels like to touch, see, taste, smell, even on occasion hear, certain things.'

5. Rozin and Fallon (1987), 23.

6. On the atomic explanation for taste in Lucretius, see esp. Zinn (2021).

so that they tickle the senses rather than hurt them.
In this category belong dried wine lees and elecampane's flavor.⁷

Such bittersweet substances defy easy categorization into what seem like distinct and mutually exclusive categories.⁸

The plague in Book 6, despite the revulsion it continually elicits, belongs to this hybrid category, with Lucretius producing in his reader a simultaneous experience of aesthetic pleasure and sensory disgust. Lucretius importantly often uses atomic structure as a metaphor for the written word, and vice versa.⁹ Words, passages, and whole poems can, like atoms, have a 'flavor' that triggers our senses. The plague's bittersweet flavor can indeed be expanded to encompass the epic as a whole since Lucretius repeatedly provokes these two seemingly antithetical emotional responses in his reader. As frequently in the epic, the small-scale workings of atoms closely relate to larger ethical matters. Not only does Lucretius explain how disgust works on our senses, he simultaneously exploits our own emotional responses of pleasure and disgust to further his philosophical goals.¹⁰ Controlling *why* and *when* his reader feels these emotions forms a key part of Lucretius' persuasive strategy. In what follows I zoom in on a particularly disgusting moment in the plague to show how Lucretius carefully evokes his readers' feeling of pleasurable disgust.¹¹ Drawing on Korsmeyer's theory of the 'sublate' in combination with an examination of Lucretius' poetics of disgust, I suggest that the plague will be experienced differently by those who have absorbed Lucretius' ethical teachings and those who have not. Whoever has accepted the finality of death and the body will find pleasure rather than despair in the disgust roused by the plague.

Beautiful Phlegm

The bittersweet quality of the plague is evident, to name one especially potent example, in Lucretius' description of the phlegm coughed up by the sick as one of the early symptoms of disease. In this instance, simply using words such as

7. All Latin is from the text of Leonard and Smith (1968). Translations are my own.

8. Elecampane in fact has a bitter flavor and was often mixed with honey and used in sweets or medicinally. See Plin. *NH* 19.29. The 16th-century herbalist John Gerard, in his *Generall Historie of Plantes*, describes it as 'sweet of smell, and bitter of taste'.

9. I therefore disagree with the assessment of Penwill (1996), 148: 'The description of the plague is unadulterated wormwood'. On the analogy between atoms and the written word (a relationship underscored by the very term *elementa*, 'alphabet' or 'atoms'), see *DRN* 1.196–8, 1.814–26, 1.907–14, 2.688–95, 2.1013–19. Scholars have long been attuned to this analogy. To cite just a few: Friedländer (1941), Snyder (1980), Dalzell (1987), Armstrong (1995), and Shearin (2020). For the idea that the poem itself, with its atom-letters, represents the *rerum natura*, see Minadeo (1969), Serres (1977), and Thury (1987).

10. On how Lucretius yokes rational and emotional argumentation, see esp. O'Keefe (2020).

11. Compare Kolnai (2004), 42, where he speaks of disgust's 'macabre allure'.

foedus or *taeter* is insufficient for producing both pleasure and disgust. Lucretius instead evokes our deep revulsion *and* curiosity through the poetically heightened description of a sticky, slimy bodily fluid, a substance that conforms to numerous major theories of disgust.¹²

tenuia sputa minuta, croci contacta colore
salsaque, per fauces rauca uix edita tussi.

(6.1188f.)

Phlegm thin, scant, tinted with a saffron color
and salty, scarcely passed through the throat with a hoarse cough.

By describing something disgusting with such poetically pleasing, even beautiful language, Lucretius creates a discordant juxtaposition.¹³ This is diseased phlegm that befits the most refined, polished poetic song. The asyndeton, the assonance of 'o', 'u', and 'au', and the alliteration of 't' and 'c' all develop the description's poetic richness. Line 1188 is a stylistic tour de force that would more fittingly describe a beautiful work of art—*tenuis* is a word that can denote finely spun fabric. On a metapoetic level, the phlegm's thinness befits Callimachean refinement and highly wrought verse.¹⁴ The saffron color, which Fratantuono remarks 'is completely out of place',¹⁵ is similarly more evocative of a beautiful garment that has been dyed or 'stained', *contacta*, or of a Homeric sunrise, two ideas encapsulated at once in the epithet κροκόπεπλος ('saffron-robed') Homer uses to describe the goddess Dawn.¹⁶ While the word *contingere* can have a negative aspect (cf.: *religione animum turpi contingere parcat*, 'let him refrain from *staining* the mind with foul religion', 2.660), it also evokes Lucretius' own practice of 'smearing' or even 'coloring' (*contingere*) his bitter philosophy with another sticky substance that is orangish-yellow in color, the sweet honey of poetry (1.934, 938, 947—a passage discussed below).¹⁷ Because all material is made

12. See, for instance, the discussion of bodily fluids in Kolnai (2004), 54f., where he speaks of the 'general disgustingness of the viscous, semi-fluid, obtrusively clingy' and cites mucus in particular. For bodily fluids in antiquity, see the edited volume of Bradley, Leonard, and Totelin (2021).

13. Pleasure and disgust are, of course, somewhat subjective emotional responses. Pleasure is perhaps harder to prove objectively, but my argument will be twofold: a) the accumulated use of rhetorical devices in these lines as well as their evocations of refined poetics create a poetically rich, and therefore pleasant, experience and b) disgust itself can have an aesthetically pleasant aspect.

14. For *tenuis* used of fabric, see *OLD* s.v. 2b. For thinness as a feature of Callimachean poetics see *Aet.* 1.1.21–4 and Verg. *Ecl.* 6.8. The relationship between Lucretius and Callimachean poetics has been the topic of much scholarly interest and debate. See esp. Nethercut (2018), with bibliography. Kazantzidis (2021), 122–47, has recently made the interesting argument that Lucretius' plague poetics are in fact anti-Callimachean even as they draw on Callimachean writings.

15. Fratantuono (2015), 463. He states, furthermore, 'This is the language of high epic, to be sure, and the imagery of grand narrative poetry'.

16. See, for example, Hom. *Il.* 8.1, 19.1, and 23.226. In his commentary on the Lucretius passage, Godwin (1991) remarks similarly that '*croci contacta* makes the spittle like some sort of fine cloth "dyed with saffron", an inappropriately elevated and beautiful term for the grotesque subject'.

17. On the overlap and confusion between *continctus* (from *tingo*, to 'wet' or 'dye') and *contactus* (from *tango*, 'to touch' or 'stain'), esp. in Lucretius, see Snyder (1973), 331. Citing the phlegm

of atoms and senses are the result of atomic interactions, the processes of seeing diseased phlegm and tasting honeyed wormwood is analogous. Just as our tongues can taste the ‘contact’ between the sweet atoms of honey and the bitter ones of wormwood, so too can we see and (through poetry) hear the disgusting-yet-beautiful ‘contagion’ of diseased phlegm. If this poem is analogous to an atomic compound, then it too can strike our senses in a similarly ambivalent way by mingling our sensory experiences of pleasure and disgust.

Lucretius’ poetic effects heighten our repugnance even as they elicit aesthetic pleasure. The saffron yellow compels us to visualize the phlegm’s diseased discoloration, while its saltiness summons its taste to our mouths. The alliteration of ‘c’ falls harshly upon the ear as it replicates the victim’s hacking cough, further evoked through the multiple spondees of line 1189. As we read the lines aloud we almost feel the raspy sensation within our own throats, as if the jagged atoms moving through us were themselves diseased—and of course to the Epicurean sound itself *is* made up of atoms.¹⁸ The very word *sputum*—from *spuo*, ‘to spit’—compels us to make a sputtering sound, a sound further mimicked by the alliteration of ‘t’. We see at work in this passage what one might term an ‘onomatopoeics of disgust’, a phenomenon that recurs across the epic. For instance, when we say *Tartara taetra* (5.1126), as Friedländer has observed, we produce a ‘terrible sound’ that illustrates the terribleness of the disgust we feel.¹⁹

By vividly stirring his reader’s senses of hearing, touch, sight, and taste, Lucretius compels us to imagine the plague’s symptoms at work in ourselves and to be disgusted by them. Lucretius’ detail about the phlegm’s taste might even make us wonder from whose perspective the phlegm is salty—whether it is that of the plague victim or perhaps that of an attending physician. As Kazantzidis has shown, ‘there are numerous instances in the [Hippocratic] Corpus... where bodily humors are designated through taste following subtle distinctions, such as salty, sweet, bitter, or acrid, which are clearly made by the physician’.²⁰ This detail, found nowhere in the Thucydidean passage on which Lucretius’ plague is based, may well be indebted to these Hippocratic texts.²¹ The idea that the saltiness of the phlegm may have been experienced by someone other than the victim (whose sense of taste may at any rate be dulled by disease) only intensifies the feeling of disgust it elicits. That the phlegm comes from a

passage as an example of this overlap, she writes: ‘Both may be used...to refer to color: the former in the sense of “to stain with color” and the latter in the sense of “to bathe with color”.’

18. See *DRN* 4.254–62. For Lucretius on sound, see most recently Zinn (2018). On the analogy between poetic sounds and atomic theory in the poem, see esp. Friedländer (1941).

19. Friedländer (1941), 25.

20. Kazantzidis (2017), 52f., citing the example of Hipp. *Morb.* 2.48, where the doctor describes ‘the sweet phlegm’ (τὸ σίαλον...γλυκύ) caused by lung disease.

21. On Lucretius’ adaptation of Thucydides’ account see especially Commager (1957), Stoddard (1996), and Foster (2009).

body whose parameters are being disintegrated by disease and death means that Lucretius hits multiple disgust domains at once.²²

The poetic pleasure and sensory disgust activated by this passage cannot easily be disentangled from one another as mutually exclusive emotional responses. In fact, it is the very experience of being disgusted that lends the passage some of its aesthetic pleasure.²³ Overduin has described the aesthetic of disgust as a strange 'mix of recoil and attraction, of repugnance and curiosity'—or, as Kolnai puts it, the 'starting point of disgust' is its 'curious enticement'.²⁴ In an epic that so often gives us a glimpse of the sublime,²⁵ Lucretius' beautiful, disgusting phlegm instead offers an inverse experience of the sublime, an experience that Korsmeyer has termed the 'sublate'—a moment of disgust that 'delivers a compressed insight'. The particular insight we gain from the sublate is a distinct recognition of our own frail corporeality and mortality:

These are not easy truths to grasp—truly to *know*. At one and the same time they are perfectly obvious—organic life is mortal, we are living organisms that will live out our allotted time and then pass from existence. Part of that passing away is a stage where the remainder of our corporeal selves will suffer disintegration and putrefaction. No one is surprised to make this discovery. But like so many existential truths, its magnitude slips through the mind and cannot be held. The sublate aspect of aesthetic disgust permits a moment of sustained recognition, providing a time to dwell upon mortality from a particularly intimate and fragile perspective.²⁶

22. For death and the breakdown of boundaries in the plague and larger poem, see Segal (1990), 94–170 and esp. 144–50, on the connections between putrefaction and atomic disintegration.

23. Morrison (2013), 230–2, also highlights the pleasurable experience, at least for an Epicurean, of reading the plague, but he does not link this to the aesthetics of disgust.

24. Overduin (2017), 141, and Kolnai (2004), 44. On the aesthetics of disgust see esp. Korsmeyer (2011) and Menninghaus (2003).

25. On the sublime in Lucretius see Porter (2007). Contrast my argument with that of Kazantzidis (2021), 147–60, who contends that Lucretius' plague in fact offers a sense of the sublime insofar as disease furnishes a microcosmic reflection of macrocosmic forces. He argues that the plague's distance in both time and place (Athens of the 5th century BCE) allows the reader to gain the needed distance for contemplating the plague as if it were a 'majestic catastrophe' and 'horrifying spectacle', drawing an analogy with the detached viewing described in the Proem of Book 2. He does not, however, account sufficiently for the presence of disgust, an emotion that refuses to let the reader remain a detached spectator.

26. Korsmeyer (2011), 154–8. On the sublate see also Korsmeyer (2008), 379, where she describes this as 'a somatic spasm that registers the inescapable, dolorous frailty of material existence'. For the sublate in relation to Greco-Roman literature, see Overduin (2017), 141f., and Hawkins (2017), 253–66. Kristeva (1982), 3, also recognized that disgust gives rise to a visceral awareness of one's own mortality and used this as a springboard to develop the theory of abjection: '[R]efuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death.'

The sublate differs from the sublime especially in its refusal ‘to permit the subject to feel removed from and superior to the intentional object’.²⁷ The plague in this regard runs exactly counter to the sublime, which provides us the ability to gaze from a safe distance. Lucretius’ plague—this paradoxically beautiful and disgusting phlegm—makes us face a hard truth that he has to a degree been protecting us from since the epic’s earliest books even as he has told it to us repeatedly: our bodies (and souls), constituted as they are of fragile atomic compounds, will break apart and die, most likely wretchedly.²⁸ In order for Lucretius to make us truly and viscerally *aware* of this, he must disgust us.²⁹ What the Epicurean can do is arrive at this realization without losing entirely the ἡδονή (‘pleasure’) and ἀταραξία (‘freedom from mental turmoil’) that form the philosophy’s highest goals and without faltering in the sublime perspective of the universe gained over the course of six books.

Having shown how Lucretius carefully manipulates and commingles his readers’ experiences of pleasure and disgust, I now want to zoom out from this passage to trace Lucretius’ larger handling of these emotions across the epic before I return again to their role in the plague. Whereas much has been written about the honeyed sweetness that Lucretius employs as a charm to hold his reluctant reader’s attention, his use of disgust has been insufficiently considered.³⁰ Lucretius first promises that his epic will try to shield us from disgust as much as possible, then he gradually gives us fuller and fuller doses as we become more able to face and *know* our own fragility and mortality.

Furthermore, the examination of disgust—focused as this emotion is on the body—sheds important light on how Lucretius and other Epicureans understood the inescapable reality of physical suffering.³¹ If sublate disgust compels us to *know* that we are mortal, Lucretius’ use of such disgust in the plague further compels us similarly to *know* that we too could suffer in this way. Yet Lucretius’

27. Korsmeyer (2008), 379.

28. Much has been written about Lucretius’ views of death. See especially Segal (1990); Gale (2001), 43–51; Olberding (2005); Taylor (2007); and Morrison (2013). On Epicurus, see Warren (2004).

29. Cf. Morrison (2013), 212: ‘One prominent tool (or set of tools) that Lucretius employs to achieve the *DRN*’s psychological project are descriptions of death and dying...that give the reader of the poem a strong impression of “how things feel” in such situations.’ The evocation of the reader’s sense of disgust plays an important role in Lucretius’ ability to know ‘how things feel’.

30. For an important study that considers how not only sweetness but also sharp, bitter flavors form part of the larger poetic, philosophical, and didactic goals of poets (especially the satirists), see Bartsch (2015), 141–212. She does not, however, offer a sustained consideration of Lucretius.

31. For another consideration of how the plague focuses us firmly on the physical suffering of the body, see Kazantzidis (2021), 67–75, 136–47. His reading, however, is far more pessimistic than mine: ‘when it comes to the body itself, there is little that the poet’s medicine can do to save us from trouble’. He proposes instead to focus on the poetics of the plague, seeing these two aspects largely as mutually exclusive: ‘I wish to read the plague...as a scene whose significance extends beyond the poem’s didactic/philosophical scope and touches upon wider aesthetic concerns that might have occupied Lucretius’ mind as a poet’ (137). My argument, however, sees the bodily suffering described in the plague and the poetry that describes it as deeply intertwined, especially if (as I argue below) poetic pleasure has now become symbolic of Epicurean philosophical pleasure.

yoking of pleasure and disgust suggests that one can still maintain ἀπαράξια even amid severe agony. Epicurean mental tranquility need not collapse when ἀπονία (the 'freedom from bodily suffering' that is another Epicurean aim) becomes impossible, and both poetry and philosophy can provide pleasures that stand alongside and mitigate such turmoil. Finally, even as Lucretius evokes sensory disgust to make his readers aware of their mortality and potential to suffer, he carefully directs his reader's sense of moral disgust so that, rather than instinctively dismiss Epicureanism as impious, his readers' outrage will be directed instead toward those who cannot accept death with equanimity.

Bitter Medicine

As early as the opening hymn to Venus, Lucretius aims to harness the persuasive powers of *uoluptas* ('pleasure'), *suauitas* ('sweetness'), and *lepos* ('charm') as a means to prevent his reader from rejecting the potentially repellent messages of his epic.³² He makes this explicit at the end of Book 1 in his famous simile of the honey smeared around the cup of wormwood, where it is to poetry that he attributes these pleasant qualities. Here, the philosophical content is beneficial medicine that tastes 'sour/bitter' (*amarus, tristis*) or—significantly—'disgusting' (*taeter*). Lucretius piles on keywords evoking disgust:

sed—ueluti pueris absinthia tætra medentes
 cum dare conantur, prius oras pocula circum
 contingunt mellis dulci flauoque liquore,
 ut puerorum aetas improuida ludificetur
 labrorum tenus, interea perpotet amarum
 absinthii laticem deceptaque non capiatur,
 sed potius tali pacto recreata ualescat—
 sic ego nunc, quoniam haec ratio plerumque uidetur
tristior esse quibus non est tractata, retroque
 uolgus abhorret ab hac, *uolui* tibi *suauiloquenti*
 carmine Pierio rationem exponere nostram
 et quasi musaeo dulci contingere melle,
 si tibi forte animum tali ratione tenere
 uersibus in nostris possem, dum perspicis omnem
 naturam rerum, qua constet compta figura.

(1.936–50)

But—just as doctors, whenever they try to administer disgusting wormwood to children, first smear the cups

32. See Classen (1968), 101: '*Lepor* is...understood as the outward dress that is given to the subject, to make it appear delightful, charming, captivating; to make it deceive the listener, who will in this manner not turn away from what appears to an outsider as *tristior*.'

around the rim with honey's sweet, yellow liquid,
 so that the boys' unwary age might be tricked
 as far as the lips, yet meanwhile drink up the sour
 wormwood juice and, though deceived, be not grieved,
 but instead be healed by such a method and grow well—
 so now I, since this system for the most part seems
 to be too bitter to those who've not tried it, and the multitude
 shrinks back from it, *wanted in sweet-speaking*
 Pierian song to expound our system for you
 and to smear it as if with the Muses' sweet honey,
 in case perhaps by this method I could keep
 your attention on my verses, while you examine the whole
 nature of things, by what structure it is arranged.

Much of the attention paid to these lines has concentrated on Lucretius' controversial use of poetic honey, which goes against the orthodox Epicurean stricture that a wise man will not employ poetry to teach.³³ But just as important here is the bitter wormwood, which represents Epicureanism itself, whose unconventional teachings about religion and the mortality of the soul would no doubt have seemed anathema and morally 'disgusting' (*taeter*) to traditionally minded Romans of Lucretius' day. Again, Lucretius employs poetics to evoke these seemingly contradictory flavors. *absinthia taetra* (1.936 = 4.11), is—to quote Friedländer—a phrase that 'not only means ugly but has that sound'. We must wince when we say these words, just as we wince when we drink the substance they describe. On the other hand, the act of sweetening, *uolui...suauiloquenti*, described with repeated 'w' sounds, lets us roll the liquid across our tongue to savor it, as if the smoothness of the letters imitated the 'pleasantness' (*uoluptas*; cf. *uolui*) of honey's smooth atoms.³⁴ Yet this sweet poetry itself holds no curative value in this formulation—this belongs only to the bitter medicine. In other words, we can be healed only if we drink in what disgusts us.

It is helpful to compare Lucretius' metaphor with Hippocratic writings dealing with disgust that have been examined by Kazantzidis.³⁵ Lucretius' prescription looks a lot like that found, as Kazantzidis points out, at Hippocrates *On the Regimen in Acute Diseases* 23, where the writer suggests mixing bitter black hellebore with sweeter or more aromatic substances (such as daucus, seseli, cumin, and anise) to offset the drug's bitterness. In both texts, these mask medicine's bitter flavor so that the patient will drink it. But germane here too are those passages in which it is the sickness itself that causes the patient to perceive foods and

33. On Lucretius, Epicurus, and traditional poetry, see esp. Gale (1994) and (2001), 8–21; Asmis (1991) and (1995); and Volk (2002), 94–9.

34. Friedländer (1941), 26–8. For alliteration as an imitation of atomic structure, see also Hendren (2012).

35. Kazantzidis (2017), 49f.

liquids as ἀηδής, 'unpleasant' or 'disgusting'—literally 'without ἡδονή'. As Kazantzidis states, 'Disgust, indicated as ἀηδία, is located by the Hippocratics in the area of the στόμα ['mouth'] and is described, in terms that link it primarily with the sense of taste, as a strong physical aversion to food and drink when a patient is still ill.'³⁶ At Hippocrates *Epidemics* 7.43, the writer explains how a sick man named Andreas could not drink anything with pleasure because his sense of taste had been affected by disease: μάλιστα δὲ τὸ στόμα ἀπεξηραίνετο, καὶ πόμα οὐδὲν ἡδέως προσεδέχετο, ἀηδίας πολλῆς ἐούσης περὶ τὸ στόμα ('And his mouth was parched, and he took no drink with pleasure since much ἀηδία was lining his mouth'). Perhaps, then, in Lucretius' honey/wormwood simile it is not the flavor of Epicurean philosophy *per se* that is disgusting as much as it is the reader's 'sickness' that keeps her from tasting it properly. If so, her sense of taste should improve as she imbibes the bitter medicine. When the course of treatment takes effect, the bitter flavor will become mollified, even transformed to sweetness.

Lucretius himself is keenly aware that disease can alter the perception of bitter and sweet flavors, a phenomenon he describes in Book 4. Here, taste is a product not only of the shape of the atoms that make up the food we eat but also of the shape of the atoms located in the inside of the mouth and throat.³⁷ When these latter are jagged and hooked we taste bitter flavors: 'What tastes sweet to some, therefore, can taste bitter to others' (*hoc...quod suaue est aliis aliis fit amarum*, 4.658). When one becomes ill, the interior atomic structure of an individual is especially likely to change:

quippe ubi, cui febris bili superante coorta est
 aut alia ratione aliquast uis excita morbi,
 perturbatur ibi iam totum corpus, et omnes
 commutantur ibi positurae principiorum,
 ut prius ad sensum quae corpora conueniebant,
 nunc non conueniant, et cetera sint magis apta,
 quae penetrata queunt sensum progignere acerbum.
 utraque enim sunt in mellis commixta sapore.

(4.664–71)

Indeed, when fever arises for someone and bile prevails
 or in some other way another force of disease has been aroused,
 then the entire body is disturbed, and all
 the positions of the atoms are interchanged,
 so that the bodies which before were suitable for sensation

36. Kazantzidis (2017), 49.

37. For how the individual tongue and palate effect 'flavor', *sapor*, see Zinn (2021), 187–90. As she points out, the tongue has 'gaps' and 'passageways' (*interualla uiasque*, 4.650) that differ from one person to another and can 'influence what sorts of bodies enter and by this influence our perception'.

now are not suitable, and other things are more fitting,
 which, once penetrated, are able to produce a bitter sensation.
 Indeed both types have been mixed together in the flavor of honey.

Not only does taste depend upon the atomic makeup of the individual taster, but some substances, such as honey, are here more likely to produce different flavors at different times and in different people insofar as they contain both types of atoms, i.e. ones that produce bitterness and sweetness. This line seems to undercut Lucretius' earlier descriptions of honey as purely sweet (i.e. 2.398–401, discussed above), but we could also read it as purposefully adding a new layer to Lucretius' use of honeyed sweetness across the epic. Nethercut uses this change to the atomic structure of honey as a key piece of evidence for his idea of 'provisional argumentation', Lucretius' 'technique of gradually redefining initial propositions'. He writes:

We should note...that both this passage and the honeyed-cup passage involve someone who is sick. In the honeyed-cup passage, it is the reader who is (implied to be) sick, but here in *DRN* 4 the reader is someone who has been sick but is now well enough to understand the more complex argument that Lucretius presents.³⁸

How we perceive pleasure and disgust therefore depends not so much on the inherent atomic structure of what we imbibe as on our own bodily health, just as how we perceive Epicurean doctrine depends not on its intrinsic bitterness but the wellbeing of our soul. Once we have imbibed the bitter medicine and are well, we will taste it for what it really is: Epicurean ἡδονή.³⁹

A Life Without Pain?

One challenge for Lucretius, however, is to keep the attention of his reader (nominally the addressee Memmius) long enough for the medicine to take effect. He must therefore again and again allay Memmius' disgust, and this simply cannot be achieved through poetry alone. The tenets themselves require a degree of sugarcoating that initially masks the reality that nothing, in the end, can change our mortal condition. Lucretius, in other words, does not offer us a full dose of sublimate disgust until the time is right, instead offering up images of sublime (almost divine) wellbeing for those willing to convert, and promises of mental and physical despair for those who are not.

38. Nethercut (2019), 524–30. For the idea of 'provisional argumentation', see also Nethercut (2021), 115–46.

39. For Lucretius' comparison of non-Epicureans to children, see the repeated refrain at 2.55–61, 3.87–93, 6.35–41.

To keep Memmius engaged, Lucretius repeatedly exhorts him to keep his ears open and receptive.⁴⁰ For example, at 4.912 he writes *tu mihi da tenuis auris animumque sagacem* ('Give me discerning ears and a keen mind'), and at 6.921, *quo magis attentas auris animumque reposco* ('All the more I ask for ears and a mind that are alert').⁴¹ Lucretius above all fears that Memmius will close his ears out of a sense of moral outrage:

uacuas auris animumque sagacem
semotum a curis adhibe ueram ad rationem,
ne mea dona tibi studio disposta fideli,
intellecta prius quam sint, contempta relinquas.

(1.50–3)

apply empty ears and a perceptive mind
removed from cares to true reason,
so my gifts to you, set out with faithful zeal,
you do not reject, despising them before they're understood.

Lucretius keeps Memmius' ears 'open' by ensuring his words are sufficiently sweetened, an idea we see made explicit later in Book 1 even before we get to the honey/wormwood simile:

quod si pigraris paulumue recesseris ab re,
hoc tibi de plano possum promittere, Memmi:
usque adeo largos haustus e fontibus magnis
lingua meo suavis diti de pectore fundet,

40. I do not agree with scholars who see in Memmius' reluctance a sign that he is foolish or willfully errant. For this view see, e.g., Mitsis (1993) and Volk (2002), 80–2, who suggests that 'Memmius appears remarkably unsympathetic, unwilling to learn, and even plain stupid'. These arguments rest on the assumption that there is a sharp distinction between Memmius and the outside reader, who will want to appear philosophically more advanced than Memmius. For the relationship between poet, addressee, and reader see also Geller-Goad (2020), 158–62, and Taylor (2020). For my purposes, Memmius and the reader are not necessarily one and the same, but they are closely enough identified that, when Lucretius asks Memmius to pay attention, he is asking us to do likewise.

41. On the idea of receptive ears as clean and open cf. also Horace *Epist.* 1.1.7: *purgatam...aurem* ('cleansed ear'). Ears recur in *Epist.* 1.2.51–4, where Horace draws heavily on Lucretius' metaphor of the *uas* (examined below) and declares that in order for someone to experience genuine pleasure, they must first be healthy themselves: *qui cupit aut metuit, iuuat illum sic domus et res / ut lippum pictae tabulae, fomenta podagram, / auriculas citharae collecta sorde dolentis. / sincerum est nisi uas, quodcumque infundis acescit* ('Whoever yearns and fears, his house and estate please him as much as paintings please one with infected eyes, or as much as wrappings please the gouty foot, or as much as lyres please sore ears clogged with filth. If the jar is not clean, whatever you pour in sours'). This Horatian passage makes me suspect that in Lucretius the morally ill cannot fully enjoy even the poetic honey around the rim of Lucretius' wormwood. As one is healed, the taste of the honey too will likely become more pleasing. One might even see Memmius' open ears as a reference to Odysseus and the Sirens. Lucretius thus offers to Memmius a kind of Siren song not to harm him but to inculcate Epicurean truth. On Siren imagery in Epicurean critiques of poetry see esp. Asmis (1991), 18f.

ut uerear ne tarda prius per membra senectus
 serpat et in nobis uitai claustra resoluat,
 quam tibi de quauis una re uersibus omnis
 argumentorum sit copia missa per *auris*.

(1.410–17)

But if you are *revolted* or draw back a little from the matter,
 this I am able plainly to promise you, Memmius:
 Such abundant gulps from great fountains
 will my sweet tongue pour out of my rich chest,
 that I fear sluggish old age will creep
 through our limbs and break apart our bonds of life
 before the whole supply of proofs about any one matter
 in these verses has been sent through your *ears*.

Lucretius carefully counters the possible disgust Memmius may feel by promising him endless quaffs of liquid from his sweet tongue. The Latin word *pigror* (to be *piger*, ‘sluggish’ or ‘unwilling’) is related to the impersonal verb *piget*, a difficult word to translate that is most often rendered as ‘to cause annoyance’ or ‘to cause disgust’. Kaster has described the *pig-* stem as conveying ‘an unpleasant state of diminished energy in which lassitude and aversion are combined—a weary sigh blended with “ugh”—as a result of performing, or at the prospect of performing, some action you regard as both taxing and repugnant’.⁴² Lucretius fears that Memmius’ response to his bitter message will be simply to back away from it in disgust, and he promises his addressee instead a flow of sweetness that will never stop.

Lucretius’ tongue is sweet in line 413, on the one hand, because it delivers *argumenta* that have been sweetened by poetry, as in the honey/wormwood simile.⁴³ On the other hand, Lucretius does not here explicitly disentangle the poetic and philosophical content of his verse. The liquid his sweet tongue will pour forth consists of Epicurean *argumenta*, philosophical ‘arguments’ or ‘proofs’. There are not two separate substances here, one bitter and one sweet, but one single liquid whose chief trait is *suauitas*. Lucretius thus counters Memmius’ possible disgust by making Epicurean tenets themselves, at least at this early stage in his didactic project, appear to be as sweet as possible as they flow from his mouth. His strategy is thus literally ‘persuasive’ (i.e. rendering something *suauis*, ‘sweet’), on two levels: a) poetry sweetens what may be disgusting and b) the potentially disgusting tenets are likewise sugarcoated.

We find a full dose of sweetness on offer at the opening of Book 2, one of Lucretius’ most ‘purple’ passages. Here, Lucretius paints an idealized vision of Epicurean ἀταραξία that lets us imagine ourselves occupying heights from

42. Kaster (2017), 160f.

43. The *largos haustus e fontibus magnis* (‘abundant gulps from great fountains’) surely look ahead to the ‘untouched’ poetic ‘fonts’ (*integros fontis*) of 1.927.

which we observe the suffering of others without suffering ourselves. Everything is *suauis* or *dulcis*:

suaue, mari magno turbantibus aequora uentis,
 e terra magnum alterius spectare laborem,
 non quia uexari quemquamst iucunda uoluptas,
 sed quibus ipse malis careas quia cernere *suaue* est.
suaue etiam belli certamina magna tueri
 per campos instructa tua sine parte pericli;
 sed nihil *dulcius* est bene quam munita tenere
 edita doctrina sapientum templa serena,
 despiciere unde queas alios passimque uidere
 errare atque uiam palantis quaerere uitae.

(2.1–10)

Sweet—when winds stir up the surface of the great deep
 to look from land upon another's great labor;
 not because someone being troubled is a pleasant delight,
 but because to see the evils you lack is *sweet*.
Sweet too to observe the great contests of war
 arrayed through the camps without your own share of danger.
 But nothing is *pleasanter* than to occupy the well-fortified,
 tranquil temples of the wise made lofty with learning,
 from where you can look down on others as everywhere you see
 them wandering and seeking the path of life as they go to and fro.

The Epicurean has here been transformed into a kind of god inhabiting tranquil temples removed from the suffering of mankind.⁴⁴ This is a process of deification that happens elsewhere in the poem as the traditional gods of myth get replaced by Epicurus and the heavenly bliss he has made possible for his followers on earth.⁴⁵ Lucretius again dials up the sweetness through poetic style, particularly repeated 's' and 'w' sounds that suggest sweetness: *suaue*, *uentis*, *uoluptas*, *suaue*, *suaue*, *sapientum*, *serena*, *uidere*, *uiam*, *uitae*.

The problem with this portrait of unadulterated ἡδονή, however, is that it is far too sugarcoated—it does not account for the reality that human beings, even those who follow Epicurus, must often suffer physical pain. Just a few breaths later Lucretius even holds out the enticing vision of a life lived without bodily or mental anguish: *nonne uidere / nil aliud sibi naturam latrare, nisi utqui / corpore seiunctus dolor absit, mente fruatur / iucundo sensu cura semota metuque?* ('Don't you see that nature demands for herself nothing except that

44. For the idea that the Epicurean achieves a divine standing here see De Lacy (1964), 51. Epicurus himself in the *Letter to Menoeceus* states that if you practice Epicureanism 'you will live like a god among humans' (ζῆσι δὲ ὡς θεὸς ἐν ἀνθρώποις, 135).

45. On the deification of Epicurus in the epic, see esp. Duban (1979) and Gale (1994), 191–207.

pain be gone, removed from the body, that, separated from anxiety and dread, she enjoy pleasant sensation in the mind?', 2.16–19). These lines translate into Latin the two Epicurean ideals of *ἀπονία* and *ἀταραξία*, both of which enable one's attainment of *ἡδονή*, an idea encapsulated in the Latin *iucundo sensu*, 'pleasant sensation'.

The problem is that, whereas *ἀταραξία*, as a mental response, is largely subject to our control, *ἀπονία* is often simply unattainable for a human being. As Penwill points out regarding the proem of Book 2, the sage there has simply 'avoid[ed] humanity's self-inflicted wounds', such as the 'desire for wealth and power'. He continues: 'We may be able to congratulate ourselves on escaping from error; from *natura* there can be no escape.'⁴⁶ While the human *mind* can inhabit divine realms, the human *body* remains subject to suffering, pain, illness, disease, and excruciating death. But in the opening of Book 2, the possibility of bodily agony has been withheld. Can the Epicurean sustain such tranquility when she herself is in the thick of a storm, a battle—or a plague? What does Epicureanism offer when the body must suffer, when we cannot simply remove ourselves from what is disgustingly painful? One may be tempted to see in the proem of Book 2 a model for reading the plague: as we encounter agonizing sufferings from which we are free, we should experience a kind of Epicurean detached pleasure.⁴⁷ But in the plague Lucretius does not let us get away with this—his repeated arousal of sensory disgust places us not upon celestial heights but among the suffering hordes.⁴⁸ We are reminded of our mortality and potential to suffer bodily distress in every line.

No matter how sweetly Lucretius may package his philosophical *ratio*, there is still the possibility that, given a tenet strange enough, Memmius will be disgusted and spit it out, as we see later in Book 2 when Lucretius cautiously presents to Memmius the idea that ours is not the only *mundus* ('universe') in existence:

nunc animum nobis adhibe ueram ad rationem.
nam tibi uehementer noua res molitur ad auris
accedere et noua se species ostendere rerum.

...

desine quapropter, nouitate exterritus ipsa,
expuere ex animo rationem.

(2.1023–5, 1040f.)

46. Penwill (1996), 151f. Also 155: 'The ulcerated corpses at the end of the work are the ultimate condition of all of us...and the nature of this end is in the vast majority of cases something over which we have no control... We must quit the seductive delights of the *Venusberg* and face the truth.' I would include the proem to Book 2, at least to some extent, in this category of 'seductive delights'.

47. This is how Kazantzidis (2021), 157, reads it: 'The plague is not the only destructive event with sublime aspirations in the poem. Already in the proem to Book 2, Lucretius has given us a taste of what it feels like to watch a scene of death and suffering from an elevated standpoint.'

48. However, Olberding (2005), 126, makes the important and salient point about the proem to Book 2 that the wise Epicurean is not *wholly* separated from the suffering of the world: 'Whatever his peace, Lucretius' sage has, and perhaps always must have, the world in sight.' In other words, the promise of divine detachment is already undercut in the proem of Book 2 itself.

Now apply your mind to true reason for me.
 For a new/strange thing struggles mightily to reach
 your ears, and a new/strange appearance of things to display itself.
 ...
 And so cease, frightened by the newness/strangeness itself,
 to spit reason from your mind.

Lucretius here tests the waters by introducing Memmius to an idea that may seem preposterous—but which will seem less so if Memmius has been making progress and imbibing plenty of his Epicurean medicine. If he is not ready to accept this teaching, he will, Lucretius fears, ‘spit it out’ (*expuere*, from the root *spuere*) as though disgusting liquid—such as, perhaps, diseased *sputum*. But if Memmius can stomach this strange, new idea, then perhaps he is ready to proceed to the harsher truths to come: the mortality of the soul in Book 3, the diatribe against erotic love in Book 4, the creation and eventual destruction of the world in Book 5, and the plague in Book 6.

Golden Words

Implicit in Lucretius’ request that Memmius not ‘spit out’ this strange doctrine is the suggestion that, as one *does* attain ‘true reason’ (*uera ratio*), one will be less inclined to reject it with disgust. For the Epicurean sage, nothing in this system will seem disgusting and the prospect of reframing the structure of the cosmos will in fact be nothing short of immensely pleasurable. At the opening of Book 3, this transformation of Epicurean doctrine itself from bitter to sweet is evident—just as Lucretius gradually corrects honey’s atomic structure from sweet to bittersweet, now the bitter wormwood in the cup starts to take on the qualities of sweet honey. This book takes as its topic the mortality of the body and soul, perhaps the most loathsome medicine of all for the Epicurean novice.

Here Lucretius figures himself as a bee, a traditional symbol for poets, flittering around and sipping nectar from flowers in a garden—not now the poetic flowers of 1.928 (*iuuatque nouos decerpere flores*, ‘it is pleasant to pluck new flowers’) but those of Epicurus’ ‘Garden’ (κῆπος), the name by which his community of followers became known.⁴⁹

tu pater es, rerum inuentor, tu patria nobis
 suppeditas praecepta, tuisque ex, inclute, chartis,

49. On Epicurus’ ‘Garden’ see Clay (2009). For the links between poets, bees, sweetness, and honey, see e.g. Waszink (1974), Liebert (2010), and Bartsch (2015), 133–41.

floriferis ut apes in saltibus omnia libant,
omnia nos itidem depascimur aurea dicta,
aurea, perpetua semper dignissima uita.

(3.9–13)

You are the father, the inventor of things, to us you supply
fatherly precepts, and, revered one, from your pages,
just as bees taste all things in flower-bearing glades,
we likewise feed on all your golden words,
golden, always most worthy of everlasting life.

The source of Lucretius' honeyed sweetness is no longer poetry but the philosophical writings, *praecepta*, of Epicurus himself that inspire—and thus work in tandem with—the verse. These tenets are now golden (*aurea*) like honey rather than disgusting (*taeter*) like wormwood.⁵⁰ Lucretius may in fact have in mind here the ancient belief that it was honey itself that bees plucked from flowers rather than just the sweet nectar used to make it.⁵¹ Epicurean teachings do not now need to be sweetened to make them more palatable because they themselves *are* honey, at least for Lucretius the bee-poet, for whom inspiration and pleasure arise from tasting (*libant*) and consuming (*depascimur*) what for others is foul. Lucretius thereby offers himself up as a model for what Epicureanism can become if we just keep drinking its disgusting flavor down: honey-sweet ἡδονή.

We are not, however, as far advanced as Lucretius himself is and will have to receive a top-up of poetic honey at the start of Book 4, where he repeats the honey/wormwood simile *almost* verbatim. Though traditionally taken as evidence for the incomplete state of the poem, the reinsertion of the simile at this point is a significant admission that even here at the poem's turning post his reader may not be quite ready for a full dose of unmitigated bitterness.⁵² The final line of the simile has received a significant change in this second iteration. Whereas in Book 1 Lucretius says his method of honeying what is *taeter* is required in order to hold Memmius' attention: *dum perspicis omnem / naturam rerum, qua constet compta figura* ('while you examine the whole nature of things, by what structure it is arranged', 949f.), in Book 4 he ends with *dum perspicis omnem / naturam rerum ac persentis utilitatem* ('while you examine the whole nature of things and become fully aware of its usefulness', 24f.). There

50. For honey described as 'golden' see Ov. *Fast.* 4.546 (*aurea mella*). On the Lucretian passage see also Volk (2002), 112: 'It is perhaps even possible to understand the repeated epithet *aurea* [sc. *dicta*] (3.12–13) as evocative of honey.'

51. On the debate about whether bees gathered honey or some liquid they then turned into honey, see Sen. *Ep.* 84.4.

52. For example, Bailey (1947) concludes at 1.921–50 'that the poet...wrote the substance of iv without a poem and placed the lines there for the time being, intending probably to come back and write another poem'. Gale (1994), 138f. with n.37, on the other hand, argues that the passage was intentionally repeated by Lucretius.

is a critical development in the reader/Memmius from one passage to the next. In Book 1 we are merely to be tricked long enough for Lucretius to lay out this new vision of nature, while in Book 4 he expects us to undergo a change of perception (*persentis*) and experience it not as foul but as useful. A transformation has taken place at the level of our senses. If Lucretius is successful, we will no longer taste things as we did before.

Cleansing the Jar

In order to correct our sense perceptions, Lucretius must first heal the sickness that has caused them to go awry. Looking back to 1.410–17, discussed above, it is significantly Memmius' ears (rather than his mouth) into which Lucretius promises to pour his sweetened *argumenta*. With this a new metaphor takes shape that Lucretius gradually develops in full: Memmius is a jar with 'ears' for handles, and this is the receptacle into which Lucretius pours his Epicurean medicine.⁵³ Lucretius has drunk abundantly from Epicurean fonts and now lets these teachings flow from himself into Memmius, as though from one jar into another.⁵⁴

The metaphor returns at the start of Book 6 in the lead-up to the plague, and here the notion of 'disgust' (*taeter*) is front and center. Lucretius tells us how Epicurus healed his followers of their faults like someone removing impurities from a dirty jar that gives everything poured into it a disgusting flavor:

intellegit ibi uitium uas efficere ipsum,
omniaque illius uitio corrumpier intus,
quae conlata foris et commoda cumque uenirent,
partim quod fluxum pertusumque esse videbat,
ut nulla posset ratione explieri umquam;
partim quod *taetro* quasi conspurcare *sapore*
omnia cernebat, quaecumque receperat, intus.
ueridicis igitur purgauit pectora dictis
et finem statuit cuppedinis atque timoris
exposuitque bonum summum, quo tendimus omnes.

(6.17–26)

He understood then that the jar itself caused the fault
and that by its fault everything inside was spoiled,

53. For the designation of a jar's handle in Greek as οὐς, 'ear', see LSJ II.1. The adjective 'two-eared' (δίωτος), moreover, designates a jar with two handles, a word whose Latinized version (*diota*) Horace uses at *Carm.* 1.9.8. On Memmius' ears and the jar metaphor here see also McCarter (2015), 79–81.

54. Lucretius again likens a person to a jar several times in Book 3. At 3.935–9, the individual unwilling to depart from life is a leaky *uas*, 'jar', a metaphor he reiterates when rationalizing the Underworld myth of the Danaids (3.1003–10). See also 3.440 and 3.555.

whatever came in from without—even agreeable things.
 He saw, on the one hand, that it was leaky and punctured
 so that in no way could it ever be filled;
 on the other, he realized that it tainted everything
 it had received inside as if by a *disgusting flavor*.
 And so, with truth-telling words he cleansed hearts
 and placed a limit on desire and fear
 and revealed the highest good, to which we all aim.

This passage returns us once again to the cup of Epicurean wormwood and suggests that the source of disgust there was not the bitterness of Epicureanism itself but the faulty—or sick—heart of the new initiate. No matter how agreeable the philosophy is as it is poured in, sickness will spoil it and make it taste *taeter*, like something one would spit out, a sputtering suggested by the ‘s’ and ‘p’ alliteration of *conspurare sapore*.⁵⁵ And yet as the medicine penetrates the heart and steeps the mind it heals us of our *uitia* so that the true taste of Epicurean ἡδονή can become apparent.

It is with this newly corrected perception that we must read the plague and the horrific suffering it contains. If we are successful Epicureans (i.e. the cleansed jar), as we imbibe truths that seem disgusting to others, our primary response will instead be one of delight. We can accept, even with pleasure, the finality of death and the possibility of pain that are so viscerally described in the plague because Epicurus has cleansed us of fear and provided us with a system of belief that aims always toward pleasure and delight.

Mitigating Pleasures

Once this transformation has taken place and our hearts are cleansed, Lucretius can reveal harsh truths as they really are, and we will neither spit them out nor turn away in disgust. The plague illustrates, once and for all, that death is not a horror to be feared but a blessing that frees us from suffering. Even for the most fervent Epicurean, a mortal life lived without bodily pain or disease cannot be guaranteed. In reality there are no heights on which we can escape our fundamental condition, yet the Epicurean is better equipped to face their mortality because they do not fear dying and in fact knows that death is a welcome release when physical pain becomes unbearable, as it is in the plague. The most distilled forms of ἀπονία and ἀταραξία are not in fact to be found in life at all, but in death, which releases us from all sensation.⁵⁶ This is an insinuation

55. Cf. the ‘s’ and ‘p’ sounds in Catull. 78b.1f., which also employs the same language of disgust and sweetness we find in Lucretius: *purae pura puellae / suavia comminxit spurca salivae tua* (‘your putrid spit has sullied my pure girl’s pure, sweet lips’).

56. See Porter (2003), 205.

made by *Natura* already at 3.943 when she refers to death as the *finem...laboris*, 'end of labor', and similarly at 3.1020f. Lucretius himself calls death a *terminus malorum* ('termination of evils') and *poenarum finis* ('end of punishments'). Even as early as 1.107f. he suggests that there is a *certam finem...aerumnarum*, 'a fixed end to troubles', implicitly death.⁵⁷

Amid terrible events such as the plague, the Epicurean's suffering will be mitigated by the tranquility produced by knowing that death will end it. Offsetting physical pain through philosophical enjoyment is a skill that Epicurus himself practiced, according to a letter he wrote to Idomeneus, recorded at Diogenes Laertius 10.22, during his own agonizing death (of kidney failure). Here Epicurus describes his final 'day' as 'blessed' (μακαρίαν...ἡμέραν) because he was able to alleviate his extreme bodily 'pains' (πάθη) by opposing them with 'the joy felt in his soul' (τὸ κατὰ ψυχὴν χαίρον) at 'the memory of past philosophical conversations' with his friend (τῆ τῶν γεγονότων ἡμῖν διαλογισμῶν μνήμη). In other words, philosophical pleasures (or even the memory of them) can offset physical suffering, though by no means can they cancel it out entirely. Kazantzidis, however, rightly warns us not to take Epicurus' ability to remember pleasure as too close a parallel for those suffering in the plague, many of whom are in such agony that they cannot even remember who they are (*DRN* 6.1213f.).⁵⁸ In Lucretius, pleasure comes not from the memory of past pleasures but from the gained awareness that death is an end, not a beginning, of agony (a point he develops also in the Underworld section of 3.978–1023, where afterlife tortures are the fictions of poets).

The poetic pleasure we derive from reading the plague, I submit, symbolizes such philosophical knowledge. As we saw in the description of diseased phlegm, even as Lucretius disgusts his reader's senses, he offers her numerous poetic delights and even imbues the phlegm with metapoetic qualities of refined Callimacheanism. Lucretius' attribution of sweetness and pleasure to poetry goes beyond just the honeyed-cup passage. At 1.924f., for instance, he describes his 'sweet love for the Muses' (*suauem...amorem / Musarum*) and twice reiterates how pleasant it is (*iuuat...iuuat*, 927f.) to produce original, Epicurean poetry. Poetic pleasure seems uniquely able to mitigate bitter or loathsome experiences. But the particular experiences it can mitigate, as well as its own symbolic associations, change as the epic proceeds. Whereas in the honey/wormwood simile poetic sweetness counteracts the bitter experience of Epicurean philosophy for the new initiate, in the plague it is visceral disgust to which poetic enjoyment

57. In treating death as an end to evils, Lucretius perhaps goes a step further than Epicurus himself does. Cf. Epicurus *Ep. Men.* 125f.: ἄλλ' οἱ πολλοὶ τὸν θάνατον ὅτε μὲν ὡς μέγιστον τῶν κακῶν φεύγουσιν, ὅτε δὲ ὡς ἀνάπαυσιν τῶν ἐν τῷ ζῆν <κακῶν αἰροῦνται. ὁ δὲ σοφὸς οὔτε παραιτεῖται τὸ ζῆν> οὔτε φοβεῖται τὸ μὴ ζῆν· οὔτε γὰρ αὐτῷ προσίσταται τὸ ζῆν οὔτε δοξάζεται κακὸν εἶναι τι τὸ μὴ ζῆν ('But many flee death like the greatest of evils, or they praise it as a cessation of the evils in life. But the wise man neither deprecates living nor fears not living. For neither does living offend him nor does he suppose it to be bad not to live').

58. Kazantzidis (2021), 71.

offers a release. Most significantly, poetry here works not so much at odds as in concert with philosophical pleasure.

The antithesis between honeyed poetry and bitter philosophy is in fact rarely as sustained in the epic as the honey/wormwood simile would have us believe.⁵⁹ In the opening hymn to Venus, for example, the goddess's *uoluptas* (1.1) and *lepos* (1.15 and 28) align her not just with Epicurean ἡδονή but also with the charm of poetry and the pleasure of poetic composition.⁶⁰ In other words, already at the epic's start poetry and philosophy delight us similarly, and we have seen poetry and philosophy further aligned at the opening of Book 3 when Lucretius the bee-poet gathers honeyed verse from Epicurus' philosophical garden. Poetic and philosophical pleasure, provided it is the *right* type of poetry and the *right* type of philosophy, in reality are one and the same.⁶¹ By rousing our sense of poetic pleasure amid the suffering and disgust of the plague, Lucretius reminds us that even amid extreme bodily pain the Epicurean can still retain a sense of ἡδονή. Poetic delight now equates philosophical delight, which is always available to us, just as it was to Epicurus upon his deathbed.

The plague therefore tests how we view death, whether we are finally able to consider the mortality of the soul not as something bitter but as something sweet.⁶² To do this, Lucretius has to expose human suffering in its most loathsome, disgusting extreme, has to make us *feel* and fully understand viscerally that we will end, as will anything made of fragile atomic compounds. This is an awareness that cannot be affected by promises of celestial wisdom and unmitigated pleasure. Nor is it an awareness we can attain by thinking of the plague as primarily a symbol for mental suffering, as many scholars have suggested.⁶³ The plague is a *physical* experience both for the actual sufferers Lucretius describes and for his readers, whose sense of disgust he stirs again and again in order to make us confront the mortality of our body *in our body*. Even while drinking in this bitter fact, the Epicurean will taste only sweetness, not because she has become anesthetized to pain but because she derives pleasure

59. See esp. Nethercut (2019).

60. For an overview of scholarly views of the hymn, see Gale (1994), 208–23. Lucretius' attribution to her of *lepos* (1.15), which he also asks her to grant to his words (1.28), aligns her with the *lepos* that poetry infuses into his work (1.934). For Venus as an 'Epicurean divinity' that 'stands for pleasure' see Asmis (1982), an argument endorsed by Volk (2002), 99.

61. To quote Gale (1994), 154f., 'Lucretius' own poetry...is both immediately pleasant and conducive to *ataraxia*... The sage need not shun the haunts of the Muses: indeed, he alone can write poetry worthy of the name, and combine *lepos* with truth in the service of *ataraxia*, for his reader and for himself.'

62. For the plague as a kind of final exam see Volk (2002), 82 with n.37, and Clay (1983), 266. Gale (1994), 228, adds the important caveat that 'the plague...is not merely a test of the reader...but also a warning that only Epicurus can rescue [the reader] from the fear and horror which the plague represents'.

63. For the plague as a metaphor for mental suffering see Gale (1994), 228: 'The physical squalor and decay of the plague-victim come to symbolize the mental condition of the non-Epicurean, the cracked and contaminated vessel of the poem to book 6.' Penwill (1996), however, argues against this view.

from knowing the true nature of death. That is why we find no vision of divine Epicurean bliss inserted as a conclusion to balance the plague, an unfulfilled intention that some scholars have attributed to Lucretius.⁶⁴ For a true Epicurean, no such vision is needed.

Conclusion: Redirecting Disgust

Lucretius does not, however, want to eradicate our sense of disgust entirely. Rather, he redirects it away from Epicureanism toward those who cling to false and destructive beliefs in harrowing moments. What ultimately is disgusting in the plague is not our own mortality or the breakdown of human bodies but the lack of equanimity with which people cling to life in their incorrect conviction that death is an evil. Perhaps the climax of disgust comes not with the phlegm in lines 1188f. but with the self-mutilations of genitals, hands, feet, and eyes humans undertake in the hope of avoiding death:

et grauitur partim metuentes limina Leti
 uiuebant ferro priuati parte uirili,
 et manibus sine nonnulli pedibusque manebant
 in uita tamen, et perdebant lumina partim:
 usque adeo mortis metus iis inceserat acer.

(6.1208–12)

And some, gravely fearing the thresholds of Death
 continued to live—deprived by sword of their manly parts,
 and others, though without hands and feet, were remaining
 in life nonetheless. Others destroyed their own eyes.
 So greatly had sharp fear of death come over them.

Lucretius elicits moral disgust in his reader, again, through alliteration, particularly of 'p', a sound often associated with scorn and curses: *partim*, *priuati*, *parte*, *pedibusque*, *perdebant*, *partim*.⁶⁵ Repeatedly during the plague men succumb to this utter fear of death. One lies on the ground *maesto cum corde* ('with a wretched heart', 1233), others neglect the sick because they are *uitai nimium cupidus mortisque timentis* ('excessively greedy for life and fearful of death', 1239), and the 'entire [city] grows disturbed and full of anxiety'

64. For the argument that Lucretius originally intended to include such a section after the plague, see Bignone (1945), 318–22; Kenney (1977), 22f.; and Sedley (1998), 160–5. Fowler (1997), 112, sums up this argument: a description of Epicurean bliss is required since 'in ending with the grim events of the plague at Athens, Lucretius...fatally undercuts the message of the poem, which is that mankind can be spiritually saved by conversion to Epicurean beliefs.'

65. Compare, for instance, the barrage of 'p' sounds that open Horace *Carm.* 2.13.1–6, in which he angrily curses the tree that fell on him: *posuit, primum, produxit, nepotum, perniciem, opprobrium, pagi, parentis, penetralia*.

(*perturbatus enim totus trepidabat*, 1280). Such behavior will seem morally reprehensible to the Epicurean and will trigger her sense of secondary disgust. Lucretius does in fact want to leave a bad flavor in our mouth—yet it should come not from Epicureanism but from those who refuse to convert to it.⁶⁶

From the beginning to the end of his epic, Lucretius carefully guides us through experiences of pleasure and pain, sweetness and disgust in the hope of turning us from false to true beliefs. Part of his persuasive strategy is to carefully regulate how, when, and by what these sensations are stirred. Disgust helps Lucretius fulfill a number of his philosophical goals, from making us confront viscerally our own mortality to opening our eyes to the folly of our fear of death. Just as sweetness and pleasure work in tandem with rational argumentation to entice us into new beliefs, so too does disgust offer Lucretius a strategy of opening our eyes through appealing to our emotions. Yet disgust is also a danger that he has to overcome, and he does so by carefully sweetening our palate until we can taste the true delight of the philosophy dripping from his honeyed tongue. The final vision he leaves us with is not of a world in which pleasure constantly has the upper hand and pain and disgust are avoidable—a world that belongs to the gods alone—but one in which for all mortals life is a bittersweet blend, just like the poem itself. What Lucretius empowers us to do is taste life—and death—as they truly are. Good ‘taste’ (*sapor*) is, after all, at the very heart of ‘wisdom’ (*sapientia*).

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66. Although a full consideration falls outside of the scope of this paper, Lucretius’ exploitation of disgust at the end of Book 4 is another useful example of how he elicits and then carefully guides this emotion. There, in order to direct us away from what many consider to be sweet—sex and love—Lucretius renders the female body as repellent as possible. Even a beautiful woman, he claims, *miseram taetris se suffit odoribus* (‘steeps her wretched self in disgusting odors’, 1175). If one were to see her in the midst of such grooming, Lucretius claims, he would immediately rush to leave. Lucretius thereby steers us away from erotic entanglement and toward Epicureanism. On the exact nature of these ‘disgusting odors’, see Brown (2017).

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