

# Seminal Verse: Atomic Orality and Aurality in *De Rerum Natura*

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For Lucretius hearing, like all other sense perceptions, is material<sup>1</sup>. Early in Book 1 Lucretius gives a digest of principles concerning atomic motion and tactile sense perception that he will develop more fully in Book 4. Although he specifically speaks of smell and hearing, the physics is more or less analogous for all the senses<sup>2</sup>. What strikes against our sense organs (*sensus inpellere*) must be material (*corporea*) because nothing can touch and be touched (*tangere enim et tangi*; *Lucretius* 1.298-304) unless it is substantial<sup>3</sup>. Since all sounds, including voice and words produced

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1 — I am grateful to my friend and colleague Jesse Weiner who provided valuable feedback on an early version of this paper and to the anonymous reviewers whose critiques honed the argument in ways that I could not have done on my own.

On Lucretius and the materiality of sense perceptions, see Schoenheim (1966); van Hoorn (1972) 52; Striker (1977); Long (1986) 21-30; Koenen (1997); Koenen (1999); Císar (2001). Koenen (1999) has the fullest discussion of material hearing and speech along with impressive surveys of comparanda from other schools of philosophy.

2 — Holmes (2005) 534-43 shows how *simulacra* producing sight and sound atoms producing hearing are necessarily emitted and received in rather different ways (i.e. producing *uox* assumes a level of agency that *simulacra* shearing off a thing does not).

3 — For discussion of how the atoms break free and move from a perceived object to the per-  
cipient, see Annas (1992) 158. For *sensus* meaning the mechanism and incidence of physical contact

by a human speaker, are likewise physically substantive, it follows that the production of hearing is a corporeal phenomenon. Atoms expelled from the body and mouth (*corpore, ore*; Lucr. 4. 549-50) of a person talking move through space to infiltrate and strike the ears of a hearer (4.553-62)<sup>4</sup>. These atoms are, as Koenen observes, “the acoustic equivalents of the visual *simulacra*, ultrafine corporal images which flow away from the sense objects and cause vision when they enter the interatomic passages of the eyes and strike them (IV 217-268)”<sup>5</sup>. As with sight, for Lucretius all verbal communications must include a source of material, material in motion, and a receptacle for material<sup>6</sup>. When put this way, the physics of orality and aurality are eroticizable and apt for depiction in sexual metaphor. Lee may have gestured toward this imagery when he used words like “pumped”, “spurt”, “stream”, and “pulse” to describe the motion of atoms moving from seen object to seeing subject<sup>7</sup>. With an eye toward sexualized discourse intrinsic to such a corporeal system, Nugent has already drawn critical attention to bodies as permeable receptors of violent ingress:

The human being considered strictly as a physical object, the “generic” Lucretian body, is remarkably porous, an open field traversed by forces. In its predisposition to pathology (i.e. from the point of view of its inevitable mortality) the body is honeycombed with orifices potentially open to assault or rape by exterior forces<sup>8</sup>.

The mechanics of speech and hearing for Lucretius is, I argue, one subdivision of this physics with a specific set of orifices and forceful movement of atomic stuff. By itself this claim would be interesting in regard to Lucretian poetics<sup>9</sup>. However, what is perhaps more remark-

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with corporeal sense organs in Lucretius, see Glidden (1979) 160-3. Commenting on Epicurus’ physics, Sedley (1989) 130 states that “His physical system is based on a division of all *per se* existents into body and void, a division which he proves to be exhaustive precisely by identifying body and void with the contradictories ‘tangible’ and ‘intangible’”.

4 — For a full treatment of Epicurus’ surviving material on the mechanics of sight and hearing, see Lee (1978) 27-59.

5 — Koenen (1999) 435. See also discussion on “effluences” in Brown (1987) 21-38.

6 — For sight, hearing, material effluences, and gendering language that turns things from masculine to feminine or feminine to masculine depending on whether a thing sends (masculine) or receives (feminine) material effluences, see Corbeil (2015) 100-101. For Lucretius eroticizing the intromissive materiality of sight, see Bartsch (2006) 58-79. For sight and other senses as shared experiences that Lucretius uses to impress upon his reader the immediacy of his physical and ethical message, see Lehoux (2013).

7 — Lee (1978) 29. For atoms and sexual metaphor in Lucretius, see also Anderson (1960) 19.

8 — Nugent (1994) 182. Nugent (1994) 182 goes on to say that “Arguably, what produces anxiety, in Lucretius’ view of physiology, is the threat of penetrability, which may be associated with feminization”.

9 — For a brief argument that Lucretius appropriated Empedocles’ use of sexual imagery to describe atomic behavior, see Garani (2007) 48-50.

able is the scandalous upshot of Lucretius' manipulation of this rather straightforward sexual image: Mars, Memmius, and the largely male, Roman audience of *DRN* risk being turned into effeminized repositories of semen-like verse and philosophy. I am not the first to notice such subversion in *DRN*. Regarding philosophers including Lucretius, Alex Dressler argues that:

While the Romans also promote [traditional] masculine ideals in their philosophy, they nevertheless, in the "literary" dimensions of that philosophy, primarily metaphor and figure, ground their theory in values ostensibly opposed to those of Socrates or modern liberals, including embodiment, vulnerability, and dependency. In doing so, the Roman philosopher entertains fantasies, strange to the reader familiar with his world, of the reversal of domination and subsequent subordination of man to the feminine entities of his speech<sup>10</sup>.

Commenting on Lucretius specifically, Dressler later claims that "Roman philosophy recognizes... the possibility... of man as a passive body like woman"<sup>11</sup>. In a similar vein but with a different collection of passages, I contend that as philosopher and poet, Lucretius figures men as effeminized receptacles and himself as the source of verbalized material even as he trades upon his own vincibility and receptiveness. I first examine an erotic image at the core of Lucretius' treatment of speech and hearing and calibrate it with concrete language in his discussion of human sexuality. Next I show how Lucretius utilizes similar language as he depicts Venus and Mars in the poem's opening lines. I then demonstrate how Lucretius, again with analogous sexual imagery and language, places himself in the role of Venus and his audience in the position of Mars. This was potentially embarrassing to ancient readers and I conclude the argument by offering explanation for Lucretius' gambit. To begin to unravel this highly fraught but consistent verbal game, let us turn to Lucretius' explanation of the physics of hearing.

Lucretius begins his account by asserting that hearing is a thoroughly tactile phenomenon. The language initially may seem colorless and technical but sexual undertones are detectible:

principio auditur sonus et uox omnis, in auris  
insinuata suo pepulere ubi corpore sensum.  
corpoream quoque enim uocem constare fatendumst  
et sonitum, quoniam possunt inpellere sensus (Lucr. 4.524-7).

10 — Dressler (2016) 5. My brackets.

11 — Dressler (2016) 145.

First, every sound and voice is heard when they have worked their way into ears and struck against the sense organ with their substance. Indeed we must acknowledge that voice and sound exist bodily since they are able to strike against the sense organ<sup>12</sup>.

Material (*corpore, corpoream*) penetrates orifices (*in auris insinuata*) and pounds (*pepulere, impellere*) against sensitive body parts (*sensus*). If one views these four lines in isolation, this eroticized reading may seem forced<sup>13</sup>. But just a few lines later Lucretius uses more readily identifiable sexual terms. After reiterating that sounds and spoken words must be material (*uoces uerbaque constant/corporeis e principiiis*; Lucr. 4.533-4), Lucretius offers a proof:

nec te fallit item quid corporis auferat et quid  
 detrahat ex hominum neruis ac uiribus ipsis  
 perpetuus sermo nigrae noctis ad umbram  
 aurorae perductus ab exoriente nitore  
 praesertim si cum summo clamore profusus.  
 ergo corpoream uocem constare necessest,  
 multa loquens quoniam amittit de corpore partem (Lucr. 4.535-41).

Nor does it escape your notice what a continuous dialogue<sup>14</sup> delivered from the rising brightness of dawn to the shadows of dark night removes from a body and what it takes away from men's<sup>15</sup> very strength and vigor. This is especially the case when a speech has been poured out with considerable audible volume. Therefore, it is necessary that voice be corporeal since he who speaks much loses a portion from his body.

The metaphor undergirding this description of sound particles passing from speaker to hearer is more patently sexual. In erotic register, *uis* and *neruus*, force and penis respectively, were terms common in literary contemporaries like Cicero and Catullus (e.g. Cic. *Ver.* 2.67; *Sest.* 16; Catul. 67.27)<sup>16</sup>. That they also bore sexual connotation in Lucretius is certain. When he describes the causes of primitive human coupling

12 — This and all subsequent translations are mine. For the Latin I use Bailey's (1947) edition of Lucretius.

13 — Lucretius can also treat atomic speech and hearing in decidedly non-sexual language as well. For example, see 4.563-71 and discussion of these verses in Shearin (2015) 113-14.

14 — Koenen (1999) 445 gives solid literary evidence that *sermo* here does not mean a speech like one delivered in the courts or in the *curia*, but rather that it must suggest conversation with interlocutors.

15 — Although the term *homines*, "people", does not inherently disambiguate between male and female, the forensic/deliberative/epideictic context of the tableau prompts the audience to interpret *homines* as men since women at Rome did not normally deliver speeches in courts or legislative assemblies.

16 — See Adams (1982) 38, 199. For plural *vires* as male genitalia or the sexual powers associated with them and in company with the lexeme *neru* (*eneruet*), see Horace *Epod.* 8.1-2.

Lucretius notes that this may have happened due to “a man’s violent force” (*uiolenta uiri uis*; Lucr. 5.964)<sup>17</sup>. *Neruus* appears, as we might expect, in Lucretius’ treatment of lust and sex: “Pent up desire [i.e. semen] issued itself forth from their genitalia” (*se erupit neruis conlecta cupido*; Lucr. 4.1115)<sup>18</sup>. As they are used in this passage, the addition of the terms *uires* and *nerui* make the delivery of the speech vividly and perhaps even uncomfortably corporeal, a speech that is “poured out” (*profusus est*) as a material issue (*corpoream*) from the speaker’s body (*de corpore*). If we turn to Lucretius’ initial treatment of male ejaculation later in Book 4, we find this same language. When semen first works its way through youths’ bodies (*primitus insinuatur/semen*), excited by the image of beautiful people young men *profundant*, “pour out,” large volumes (*ingentis fluctus*) of semen (Lucr. 4.1030-6)<sup>19</sup>. The *profundant* in these verses immediately stands out but we should also note the appearance of *insinuatur*. Indeed, Brown observes that *insinuare* is “a favorite Lucretian verb for subtle or unnoticed penetration” and we have already encountered such subtlety in its sexualizing use in the pericope on sound entering ears (*sonus et uox omnis in auris/insinuata*)<sup>20</sup>. Of course since the youths produce the very semen that works its way through their own bodies, we are not dealing with sexual penetration from a second party, but we are in the same semantic neighborhood. Additionally, in the present passage Lucretius goes on to assert that only a human force (*una hominis uis*) is capable of discharging human semen (*humanum semen ciet*) which has coalesced near the sexual organs (*in loca conueniens neruorum*; Lucr. 4.1040-3). As Lucretius uses *uis* here it does not mean one person sexually assaulting another, but the material simulacra shearing off a person, penetrating the eyes of another, and producing a mental image that leads to the discharge of semen.

In both passages from Book 4 we find *uis*, *profundere*, and *neruus* used to describe material delivery. But we should also read *semen* into the pericope on speech and hearing. Lucretius uses *semina* to mean both human semen, as he does when speaking of ejaculation, and atoms, as he does early in the poem when he equates “matter” (*materiem*), “productive

17 — Lucretius also uses *uis* in the context of desire (*uoluptas*), uncovering (*resecta*), and exposing (*manifesta patens*) at 3.28-30, though in these verses the sexual hue is muted.

18 — In regard to *nerui* in Lucretius’ discussion of sex, Brown (1987) 188 notes that “The use of *neruus* to refer to the male genitals is based upon their sinewy structure... In the singular it is usually crude..., but the plural, owing to its greater imprecision, sometimes has a more decorous tone”. I render *neruis* here as “genitalia” to pick up the “more decorous” or perhaps more clinical tenor noted by Brown. Lucretius also uses *nerui* to mean “nerves” or “sinews” without sexual connotation as he does when he speaks of the plague entering “nerves and limbs” (*neruos... et artus*) at 6.1206 in contrast to the “genital parts of the body” (*partis genitalis corporis*; 6.1207) in the very next line.

19 — On *insinuatur*, see Brown (1987) 174.

20 — Brown (1987) 174. See also Graver (1990) 100.

substance” (*genitalia corpora*), and “seeds of things” (*semina rerum*; Lucr. 1.58-9). Commenting on the various translational substitutes for *atomi* in this passage, Sedley notes that Lucretius “places the chief emphasis on their dynamic generative powers, already indicated in the procreative implications of *materies* (a derivative of *mater*), *genitalia* and *semina*”<sup>21</sup>. Thus when Lucretius states that voice is corporeal (*corpoream uocem*), we should also conceive it in a way resembling the seminal, issuing from a speaker to insinuate itself into the hearer (cf. Lucr. 5.1056). In other words, the one who speaks is a sexual subject compelling (*uis*) the hearer to become a sexually objectified receptacle<sup>22</sup>. Graver’s suggestion “that we read Lucretius’ account of sense-perception with special attention to the language of violence and vulnerability” points up the issue<sup>23</sup>. This erotic image for the physics of speech carries implications beyond poetics and Lucretius broaches these from the poem’s initial lines.

The first figure in Book 1 to be described as speaking is Venus. The tableau is famous: Mars, defeated by an eternal wound of love (*aeterno deuictus uulnere amoris*) lies recumbent gazing up at Venus with his mouth open (*inhians*; Lucr. 1.34-36)<sup>24</sup>. Although he appears to be ready to eat with mouth parted (and feeding is part of the overall image in the line; *pascit... inhians*; Lucr. 1.36), Mars – if his sexual appetite matches his lust for war – is not permitted to devour like some ravenous monster (*Nemeaeus... magnus hiatus*; Lucr. 5.24). Instead Mars must receive. Lucretius enjoins Venus to do the filling, with, for emphasis, the first word in lines 39 and 40 being forms of *fundere* – a term we recognize from Lucretius’ treatment of ejaculation and speech (*profundere*). From her draping vantage point above him (*hunc... /circumfusa super*), Venus is to “pour out pleasing words from her mouth” (*suauis ex ore loquellas/funde*; Lucr. 1.38-40)<sup>25</sup>. In light of Book 4, we must understand these spoken words to be material and semen-like. Normally we would expect ears to receive this material but Lucretius does not name them. Within the picture he creates, Mars’ open mouth<sup>26</sup>, topped by Venus’ mouth emitting the *suauis loquellas* from above, is the nearest open sense receptacle mentioned in the scene

21 — Sedley (1998) 38. Similarly, on the biological (i.e. reproductive) illustration at the base of these terms, see Schrijvers (2011) 258-60.

22 — Later in the poem metonymic Venus will again be given her own *uis* (*Veneris... uis*; Lucr. 4.1172). See Barra (1964) 151.

23 — Graver (1990) 96.

24 — For a survey of the growing bibliography on the proem, see Gale 1994, 208-9. See also Sedley (1998), 15-17.

25 — Cf. Verg. *A.* 5.842 (*funditque has ore loquelas*).

26 — For *hiare* and related terms suggesting bodily orifices and especially *cunni*, see Adams (1982) 95-6. Although later, Martial employs the *hia* lexeme in an objectified, vaginal sense: “your mutilated crotch lies open, perpetually agape” (*infinito lacerum patet inguen hiatus*; 3.72.5). See Ziolkowski (1985) 54, 54 n. 13.

(though Mar's oral feeding is also simultaneously a visual consumption (*pascit... inhians... visus*; Lucr. 1.36)<sup>27</sup>. Compromised in this way, Mars really is *deuictus*, degraded as he is to oral passivity, and, with his mouth stuffed, reduced to quietude (*placidam pacem*)<sup>28</sup>. Rather than a seduction this seems like something more violent, as Brown suggests<sup>29</sup>. Perhaps the tableau is closer to domination, a notion Lucretius signals a few verses previously when he makes Venus a sole governess (*sola gubernans*; Lucr. 1.21; cf. *vi... natura gubernans*; 5.77) over sexual vitality in nature<sup>30</sup>. Venus is imagined, for a brief moment, not simply as a nourishing Venus (*alma Venus*) from the poem's second line, but also as *Venus Victrix* conquering and inseminating warlike Roman masculinity<sup>31</sup>. Pushing back against Nugent's trenchant reading of Lucretius as an instantiation of male patriarchal writing and presumed readership, Fowler points to Venus, Mother Earth, and Natura in the poem and asserts that "However powerful the patriarchal schemata which encompass this trio, it seems to me that their energy is more than a little out of control. Venus in the prologue masters all things through *her* force"<sup>32</sup>. "Force" here is *uis* and I think that Fowler is justified in stating his case more emphatically: Venus penetrates everything and everyone, including Roman men and even Mars, an epitome of violent masculinity. Of course, by making Venus a forceful or violent penetrator – that is to say, by masculinizing her – we merely arrive back at the argument Nugent makes about Lucretius and his privileged male audience thinking narrowly about gender, sex, and power.

Though not in a seductively injurious way, this *Venus Victrix* is like the Venus and the woman described in Book 4 who ejaculate missiles (*telis*),

27 — For ears consuming pleasing or sweet speech, see Pl. *Poen.* 968: "What pleasing words do my ears devour?" (*quam orationem hanc aures dulcem devorant?*). For the poetic figure of ears ingesting voice of a deity, cf. Verg. *A.* 4.359: "I swallowed what Hermes' said with these ears" (*vocemque his auribus hausit*). See also Liv. 27.51.1 (*oculis auribusque haurire*); Hor. *Carm.* 2.13.32 (*bibit aure*); Ov. *Met.* 13.787, 14.309 (*auribus hausit*); Sen. *Oed.* 385 (*voces aure non timida hauriam*); Stat. *Theb.* 10.771 (*auribus... credentibus hausit*). Elder (1954), 109, 113 understands Venus to be pouring out the *suavis loquellas* "upon Mars", but this seems to ignore both the tableau (open mouth) and the atomic mechanics for speech and hearing (source of material, material in motion, receptacle for material).

28 — On the physical speechlessness that comes from being irrumated and for comments on Catullus' threat to silence his critics through irrumation in poem 16, see Richlin (1992) 149-50. Cf. also the pathic department of Mars and his wound with the sliced anus of the *cinaedus* in Mart. 6.37 and Richlin's (1992) 138 treatment of these verses from Martial.

29 — Brown (1987) 97. For seduction, see Nussbaum (1989) 27.

30 — For Venus' domination of Mars, see Anderson (1960) 25 and O'Rourke (2014) 2. Gigandet (1996) 223-34 likewise draws connection between *Venus gubernans* and *natura gubernans* in his overall argument that *natura gubernans* is a multivalent metaphor and not an embarrassing slip into teleological language.

31 — For Lucretius' manipulation of *Venus Victrix* discourse, see Gordon (2002) 101-4 and Grimal (1978) 239-40. Holmes (2005) 536-9 draws attention to the fact that in Lucretius' physics, producing and emitting voice is agentive on the part of the speaking subject in a way that passive movement of *simulacra* away from a person's body is not.

32 — Nugent (1994). Fowler (1996) 817; author's emphasis.

words (*verbum iaculata*), and *amor* – their own seminal/material *umor* – into men (Lucr. 4.1052-57, 1137)<sup>33</sup>. And yet she remains *alma Venus* in her domination of Mars for she is emitting material nourishment as he feeds agape (*pascit... inhians*; Lucr. 1.36). She is a wholesome source like *natura* that nourishes all a few lines later (*alatque*; Lucr. 1.56). Just the opposite, in Book 4 we find a perverted iteration of this ingestion image in 1058-72 where the erotic Venus of Roman imagination, ears, ejaculated semen, atomic *simulacra* as food, oral ingestion, feeding, and wound language again appear together<sup>34</sup>. Still, in Book 1 we sense a hint of this more aggressive Venus as we observe her controlling her male object as he feeds from her. For a male Roman audience who would naturally identify with Mars as an embodiment of their own sexual subjectivity, this suggests a reversal of gendered power roles<sup>35</sup>. If we take the *alma* of *Alma Venus* and the *alat* more literally, the proem depicts Venus suckling Mars (and everyone/everything else). In a tableau with an adult male being *devictus* and at the same time suckled, the specter of *irrumatio* hovers just beneath the surface. Indeed, staging irrumation (*irrumere = in + ruma*), literally meaning “to put in the teat”, necessitates an actor providing the body part which suckles and an object receiving the part that issues nourishment<sup>36</sup>. For Roman men, to be conquered and fed by corporeal oral ingress is to be the victim of a sexual act that is both violent and socially destabilizing. Although her statement concerns the satirical potential of such a proposition, Richlin’s observation is germane: “The violation of the mouth (irrumation) is thus one of the most strongly charged assertions of domination possible in Roman sexual humor, and indeed in

33 — For Venus, women, men, and the *amor/umor* (love/semen) wordplay in 4.1052-57, see Snyder (1980) 94. On *iaculata* in 4.1137, Brown (1987) 258 comments that “The word has a malicious edge and implies that she aims at the man’s vulnerable point”. The assignment of the wound/woundable location to the man and the projectile to the woman underscores the image’s gender reversal.

34 — Haec **Venus** est nobis; hinc autemst nomen amoris,  
hinc illaec primum **Veneris** dulcedinis in cor  
stillavit **gutta** et successit frigida cura.  
nam si abest quod ames, praesto **simulacra** tamen sunt  
illius et nomen dulce obversatur **ad auris**.  
sed fugitare decet **simulacra et pabula amoris**  
absterrere sibi atque alio convertere mentem  
et **iacere umorem collectum in corpora quaeque**  
nec retinere semel conversum unius amore,  
et servare sibi curam certumque dolorem.  
**ulcus** enim vivescit et inveterascit **alendo**  
inque dies gliscit furor atque aerumna gravescit,  
si non prima novis conturbes **volnera** plagis  
vulgivagaque vagus **Venere** ante recentia cures  
aut alio possis animi traducere motus.

35 — Dressler’s (2016) 156 assessment of Mars as “limp” is memorable.

36 — Adams (1982) 126.

Roman society”<sup>37</sup>. It becomes still more scandalous when Lucretius later swaps out Venus and depicts himself feeding and orally penetrating his male audience.

Book 4 opens with an image of oral ingress in language that connects it to Mars’ submission to Venus. The figure is the celebrated honey-rimmed cup appearing also at 1.926-50<sup>38</sup>. Like children not wanting to drink bitter medicine, Lucretius understands that his audience naturally retracts from his message. Doctors ring their cups with honey to make the tonic potable. Lucretius’ versification of Epicurean doctrine is analogous<sup>39</sup>:

...uolui tibi suauiloquenti  
 carmine Pierio rationem exponere nostram  
 et quasi musaeo dulci contingere melle (Lucretius 4.20-22).

I wanted to expound our argument to you with pleasing Pierian verse and, so to speak, to dab it with the Muses’ delightful honey.

To induce his audience to open their mouths and take in his *ratio*, Lucretius makes his words *suauiloquens*. Thematically and lexically, Lucretius draws our attention back to the proem in Book 1. We recall a submissive and *inhians* Mars into whose open mouth Venus pours her *suavis loquellas*. What are the *suavis loquellas*? Literally they are “sweet utterances”<sup>40</sup>. They are also, of necessity, substantive in Lucretius’ thoroughgoing materialism and, as noted above, they are seminal in quality. This is why Lucretius can call the atoms that variously impinge upon our senses *semina* in one verse and immediately equate these to the letters *elementalittera* that comprise *verba* in 2.687-94<sup>41</sup>. We encounter this interchangeable diction (*uerba, elementa*) when Lucretius earlier discusses the formation of words at 1.912-13 just before the first occurrence of the honey-rimmed cup tableau and his *suauiloquens carmen* (1.921-50). Lucretius’ sweet-talked *ratio* and the *loquellae* of his foil Venus are atomic *semina* streaming toward their object. And thrice over (the Venus/Mars pericope, the two honeyed cup pericopes) he suggests that his audience part their lips and receive<sup>42</sup>.

37 — Richlin (1992) 69.

38 — For another drinking/oral receptivity figure, see Lucretius 3.995-7. See also 6.68-72 for metaphorical spewing out and drinking. For analysis of the full passage and treatment of relevant scholarship, see Gale (1994) 141-51; see also Volk (2002) 96-99.

39 — For discussion and primary exempla of poets and philosophers linking honey/verse and honey/deception, see Edwards (1993) 75 and 78 n. 34, 35.

40 — For the *suau* lexeme’s base meaning of “sweet”, see *OLD* “suauis”, s.v. 1.

41 — For letters as atoms and the importance of this recurring analogy in Lucretius, see Friedländer (1941). See also Dalzell (1987) and Dionigi (1988) 19-24.

42 — Twice more in Book 4 Lucretius recalls the *suavis loquellas* poured out by Venus into

The oral quality of the indelicate figure comes into greater focus when we view Lucretius' discussion of the sense of taste<sup>43</sup>. The language he uses is familiar. As active subjects, smooth atoms (*levia... corpora*) "pleasurably seize and pleasurably handle" the objectified tongue (*suauiter attingunt et suauiter... tractant*; Lucr. 4.622-4)<sup>44</sup>. These *corpora* Lucretius renames as *semina* (4.644) a few lines later and tells us that they move through bodily openings (*foramina* 4.650, 656). For any given organism there is pleasurable (*suauae*) food composed of *leuissima corpora* (= *leuissima semina*) that infiltrate the gaps of its palate (*caulas intrare palati*; Lucr. 4.658-60). The opposite likewise penetrate (*penetrant*; Lucr. 4.662). Whether pleasurable or bitter, the *semina* "beget sense" (*sensum progignere*; Lucr. 4.670) in the mouth. That we are dealing in sexual procreation metaphor is certain. Indeed, later in Book 4 when Lucretius discusses human intercourse and conception we encounter terms like *semina*, *penetrare*, and *suscipere*, a near equivalent to *progignere* (Lucr. 4.1245-53).

Honey (*mellis*), Lucretius goes on to say in the passage on taste, is a food producing both bitter and pleasurable sensations (4.671-2)<sup>45</sup>. Lucretius' honeyed *loquellae* are similarly composed to engender pleasant and bitter sensations. These seminal verses are *suauis* but the *ratio* contained in them might generate a very bitter taste (*tristior*; Lucr. 4.19), since they forestall participation in the excessive political agonism and wealth accumulation of the late Republic<sup>46</sup>. Nevertheless, Lucretius demonstrates that his message is palatable by first making himself orally infiltrated in the poem of Book 3 where, like a bee, he claims to gobble down all of Epicurus' honey-like, golden words (*ut apes... lomnia nos itidem depascimur aurea dicta*; Lucr. 3.12)<sup>47</sup>. This language and imagery of oral consumption we have already seen with Mars feeding open mouthed on what comes from Venus (*pascit... inhians*; Lucr. 1.36). Moreover, a few lines before describing his honeying of the cup, he mentions that he too takes things in his mouth and does so with pleasure (*iuuat... l...haurire*;

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Mars' open mouth and makes himself the source of the sweetened material (*suauidicis... uersibus edam*; Lucr. 4.180, 909). On this lexical and thematic linkage, see Elder (1954) 113.

43 — Rosenmeyer (1996) correctly, I think, argues that for Lucretius taste, even though it is direct subject-to-object contact, functions like sight or smell, that is to say by *simulacra* moving from sensed object to sensing subject.

44 — For atoms and words as agentive units, see Kennedy (2002) 75-83.

45 — For the argument that the sweetness and bitterness of honey depends upon it consisting of both smooth and rough atoms, see Furley (1993) 85-6.

46 — For political situation and competition among Rome's elites at the time when Lucretius was composing his poem, see Grimal (1978) 233-46, Fowler (1989), Schiesaro (2007) 53-54. For excessive political ambition, agonism, and resulting civil conflict, see Pope (2016).

47 — This may be a subtle owning/undermining of the philosopher-as-pathic *topos*. For philosophers as pathics in Roman discourse, see Bartsch (2006) 5. For Epicurus and Epicureans as pathics, see Gordon (2002) and (2012) 139-77. Kenney (2014) 76 points out the intensifying quality of *de-* in *depascimur* for which word Kenney suggests "we graze right down" and I render "gobble down".

Lucr. 4.2-3)<sup>48</sup>. What enters his mouth though is pure (*integros*; Lucr. 4.2) and by extension what comes out of his mouth into the mouth/ears/eyes of his audience is likewise pure and poses no threat to the integrity of males (*pueri*; 4.11, 14), a perpetual anxiety at Rome<sup>49</sup>.

This atomic semen, Lucretius reiterates elsewhere, is fertile stuff<sup>50</sup>. Multiple voices are begotten (*gignuntur*) by one material voice making it sensible in many directions at once, Lucretius says when treating the physics of sound (Lucr. 4.603-5). This language of procreation (*gignere*) that we noted with the sense of taste (*progignere*) also appears when Lucretius discusses what this material does once inside a man's orifices. Eyes, for instance, become womblike when struck by bright light:

praeterea splendor quicumque est acer adurit  
saepe oculos ideo quod semina possidet ignis  
multa, dolorem oculis quae gignunt insinuando (Lucr. 4.329-31).

Moreover whatever brightness is piercing often burns eyes due to the fact that it holds many seeds of fire which by penetrating begets discomfort for the eyes.

This semen (*semina*) delivered from phallically pointed (*acer*) light begets (*gignunt*) pain through entering (*insinuando*) eyes<sup>51</sup>. Pain from the infiltrating light is sense perception, the felt product that comes from interacting with a phenomenal world. Perception is also the offspring engendered by taking in Lucretius' honey-worded *ratio*:

...volui tibi suauiloquenti  
carmine Pierio rationem exponere nostrum  
et quasi musaeo dulci contingere melle,  
si tibi forte animum tali ratione tenere  
uersibus in nostris possem, dum percipis omnem  
naturam rerum (Lucr. 4.20-25).

I wanted to expound our argument to you with pleasing Pierian verse and, so to speak, to dab it with the Muses' delightful honey, and see whe-

48 — For these passages being linked by their pastoral qualities, see Buchheit (1984) 157-58.

49 — For the integrity, i.e. unpenetrated orifices, of free boys and men at Rome, see Richlin 1992, 220-26.

50 — Lucretius' term *semen* is a translation of Epicurus' term σπέρμα (cf. Epicurus *Ep. Hdt.* 38). Bailey's (1928) 344 comment on the fertile quality of *semen*/σπέρμα is instructive: "It may then be maintained that Epicurus denoted by the 'seed' or 'germ' a definite conception of a stage in the process of creation, a complex of atoms of such shape and placed in such arrangements that they are now ready to create particular living or inorganic things".

51 — Cf. Lucr. 4.714-17 where the seminal atoms from cocks' bodies (*gallorum in corpore.../ semina*) bore (*interfodiunt*) their way into the pupils of lions and produce bitter pain. For discussion on this passage and atomic sight (and other sense perceptions), see Graver (1990) 92-3. See Pope (2018) for the sexual/reproductive language of these lines.

ther, perhaps, I might be able to hold your mind by our verses' import, while you perceive the entire nature of things.

Memmius and Lucretius' audience are supposed to perceive (*percipis*) the phenomenal world by influx of his material and seminal argument. In these verses there is, I think, an additional bit of wordplay that is based upon the verb *capere*. The honey-rimmed cup of medicine, Lucretius claims, causes youth to be deceived but not captured (*aetas... /...deceptaque non capiatur*; 4.14-16)<sup>52</sup>. The *suauiloquens carmen* is to have the same effect on Lucretius' audience, harmlessly deceiving and holding them. But like we have seen throughout the discussion, there is a darker, erotic edge to this image of sweet deception. By using the language of seizure, Lucretius both anticipates and plays upon anxieties linked to youth at risk of being charmed, enthralled, lead astray, or corrupted, all negative valences associated with *decipio* and *capere*<sup>53</sup>. Warping the youth, both intellectually and sexually, was a *topos* at least since Plato's Socrates and we can be sure that Lucretius was not ignorant of it. Lucretius acknowledges the deception he foists upon his audience to seduce them philosophically, even raising the stakes with poetic feints toward erotic permeability, while at the same time denying any commission of real *stuprum*. Like *alma Venus* of the proem who leads on nature's beasts captured by her charm (*capta lepore*; Lucr. 1.15), by making his verses charmingly (*lepore*; 4.9) potable, Lucretius captivates his audience and provides rational explanation so that they can intellectually grasp nature's laws (*percipis omnem naturam rerum*; 4.24-25). The offspring born from this sweetened, seminal libation is perception.

There is no doubt that this manifold and repeated metaphor is subversive. Roman men orally and aurally objectified<sup>54</sup>. But such subversion is already signaled from the poem's earliest verses before we arrive at Venus' conquest of Mars' orifices. If we continue to cycle back to *alma Venus* where Lucretius describes the power that she wields over biological reproduction among animals (*omne genus animantum/concipitur*; Lucr. 1.4-5), he notes that birds are "struck to the heart by your [Venus'] force" (*percussae corda tua uis*; Lucr. 1.13). *Uis* we have already seen in examining the section describing the forcefulness of a delivered speech and forced sexual congress. This *uis* anticipates procreation (*saecla propagent*; Lucr. 1.20) among the fauna and becomes the *uis* in the domination of Mars that

52 — For the wordplay on *capere*, see Snyder (1980) 81.

53 — See *OLD* "decipio", s.v. 1a; "capio", s.v. 17a-19b. Earlier in the poem, when noting the gods' unperturbability, Lucretius employs *capere* in the passive to discuss inducements for favors (2.651).

54 — Such a proposition directly opposes the concept of male impenetrability (see e.g. Walters (1997) 29-43) in Roman culture.

generates peace for Romans and the offspring of the Memmii (*Memmi... propago*; Lucr. 1.42). Just as Venus forcefully penetrates animals (*perculsae corda, incutiens per pectora amorem*; Lucr. 1.20, 19) with her reproductive potency, so she overpowers and infiltrates Mars' wound, mouth, and ears<sup>55</sup>. Although he, adept at *uis* and violent penetration (*armipotens*), lies suggestively near Venus' *gremium* (Lucr. 1.33), Mars is rendered the pathetic, penetrated as he is by her seminal speech<sup>56</sup>. Lucretius gives Venus the *gremium* but makes Mars the receptacle<sup>57</sup>. This is not the only passage in which a Venus becomes a phallus. When Lucretius later takes up the question of human sexuality, he will refer to a man's penis metonymically as a Venus (*virī venerem*) which emits *semina* (Lucr. 4.1270, 1273)<sup>58</sup>. That a female Venus can be thought to release semen accords with Lucretius espousing, in this same passage, a two-seed theory in which males *and* females produce semen (4.1209-62)<sup>59</sup>. This subversion of gender norms along with transfers of material from subject to object Lucretius revisits in the closing lines of his critique of human sexuality. In a positive vision of intimacy between a man and woman, Lucretius states that sometimes a woman overcomes a man. In such a relationship, a man is like a thing "assaulted by frequent blow" (*crebro tunditur ictu*) and thus "defeated" (*uincitur*; cf. *deuictus* 1.34). With language sign-posting back to his earlier verses on Venus, semen (*gutta, umor*), ejaculation (*iacere*), and feeding (*alendo*) on atomic *simulacra* (4.1058-68), Lucretius illustrates his point by comparing the woman's conquest over the man to falling drops of liquid forcefully penetrating stones (*guttas... cadentis/umoris... pertundere saxa*; 4.1284-7)<sup>60</sup>.

55 — For Venus' all-pervading immanence, see Asmis (1982) 466.

56 — Elder (1954) 116 is more delicate noting that "Mars, on the other hand, feels and suffers".

57 — Note how when Vergil repurposes this image (following Giussani [1896] 2.16), Vulcan does the speaking to Venus, seeks peace, and is poured out (*infusus*) onto the *gremium* of Venus (A. 8.404-6). See Edmunds (2002) 346 on Vergil's appropriation of this image and language from Lucretius. In a metaphor elsewhere, Lucretius turns the thirsty sands of the seashore (*bibulam... harenam*) into a *gremium* (2.375-76). The language of oral consumption/receptivity coupled with orifice language is striking. For the Greek literary tradition behind and vaginal sense of *gremium*, see Edmunds (2002) 348-51, 358, 358 n. 69.

58 — For Venus as penis, see Adams (1982) 57 where Adams cites this verse from Lucretius as an example. As Brown (1987) 366 notes, line 1270 "stresses the woman's initiative: instead of lying still and leaving it to her partner, "she herself with her buttocks" responds to the man's lovemaking". The figure of a penis as an active Venus which in turns grammatically receives the action of the female agent encapsulates the fluidity of masculinity and femininity in Lucretius' poetics. For Venus as metonym, see Clay (1996) 780-82.

59 — For ancient theories on female semen production and Lucretius and female semen, see Bailey (1947) 3.1313-19, Lonie (1981), and Brown (1987) 320-60.

60 — For *tundere* and *pertundere* in violent sexual register, See Adams (1982) 148. See Gordon (2002) 105 for a similar interpretation of this image of female/liquid penetrating male/stone.

In lines following the submission of Mars, Lucretius further develops the notion of orifices materially infiltrated. If lines 1.44-49 about the gods' utmost peace (*summa pax*; Lucr. 1.45) belong in the text, Lucretius picks up his argument after a half dozen lines starting at 50. If the contested verses are excluded, we find an uninterrupted, logical step<sup>61</sup>. Either way, Lucretius moves from mythical tableau to reality. No longer dealing in figures or archetypes, Lucretius comes to the heart of the matter, commanding his human audience to "apply unfilled ears to right thinking" (*uacuas auris... /...adhibe ueram ad rationem*; Lucr. 1.51). And who will do the talking now that he has pivoted from Venus? Lucretius himself, with language immediately invoking seed-scattering. Concerning the heavens and gods, "I shall begin to sow", he says and, "I shall make accessible the basic substance of things" (*disserere incipiam, et rerum primordia pandam*; Lucr. 1.54-5)<sup>62</sup>. But in explaining the *primordia*, Lucretius is also issuing – whether audibly through speech or visually through written words – material *primordia*, which he calls *semina* four lines later (1.59). The image is now expected: Lucretius as poet broadcasts (*disserere*) seminal atoms that enter the orifices (here the *uacuae aures*) of the audience. And, like Venus speaking to Mars in order to produce tranquility for Romans, Lucretius is going to fill the ears of humans with material reason in order to free them from the fears engendered by *religio* (1.62-79, 102-111), death (1.112-26), and natural phenomena (1.127-30)<sup>63</sup>.

Lucretius' figure of seminal speech may not just be provocative imagery overlaying Epicurean physics. If Lucretius interacts with the early Stoa or the Stoicism of his era, a reasonable supposition, we need to assess further what he might be doing with this figure in regard to Epicureanism's main rival<sup>64</sup>. An enduring Stoic concept from Zeno onward were the oft-mentioned σπερματικοὶ λόγοι ("generative principles"; e.g. *SVF* 1.102b, 2.1027)<sup>65</sup>. As quasi-metaphysical, quasi-elemental seeds of divine causation sown to link together the entire cosmos, σπερματικοὶ λόγοι do not, of course, map onto thoroughgoing materialism. The basic tenets of Epicurus' philosophy – an infinite universe of void and atoms without reason or purpose – stands in sharp contrast to such a (patently ridiculous, to an Epicurean) theory. Perceived absurdity of the concept

61 — Bailey (1947) 1.601-3 summarizes the arguments that the verses are an interpolation and makes the case that they ought to remain in the text. I am persuaded by both Bailey and Sedley (1998) 26-27 that the verses should not be bracketed.

62 — For erotic valence of *pandere*, see Pl. *Cur.* 56.

63 — For the poem itself being material *simulacra* that infiltrate the poem's audience, see Schiesaro (1994) 87-9.

64 — For Lucretius and his engagement with Stoicism, see Kleve (1978). For Lucretius' Venus in contrast to Stoicism, see Asmis (1982).

65 — On σπερματικοὶ λόγοι see Colish (1990) 31-32; Hahm (1977) 60-62, 75-76; Meijer (2007) 6-10; Garani (2007) 71, 243 n. 151.

along with the sexual sounding technical term may have rendered it an appealing target for poetic wordplay. Indeed, the potentially sexual valence of the phrase was assumed by Stoics themselves. Thus, concerning deity Stoics could say, “and just as sperm is enclosed in seminal fluid, so also god is the generative principle of the cosmos” (καὶ ὡςπερ ἐν τῇ γονῇ τὸ σπέρμα περιέχεται, οὕτω καὶ τοῦτον σπερματικὸν λόγον ὄντα τοῦ κόσμου; Diog. Laert. 7.136). Moreover, with no apparent embarrassment, Chrysippus seems to interpret a painting of Zeus orally penetrating Hera to indicate the Stoic concept of reason-bearing σπερματικοὶ λόγοι entering inchoate, feminine matter<sup>66</sup>. The phrase was plausibly available to Lucretius fully eroticized and ready to be turned back subversively against this sort of masculinized subjectivity. So, for Lucretius, spoken words are composed of semen/atoms – quite literally σπερματικοὶ λόγοι – that he receives from Epicurus and in turn pours into the receptive orifices of Roman men to engender in them rational perception. In addition to repurposing this common Stoic locution and its gendered philosophical discourse, Lucretius reduces it to mundanity. Uttered σπερματικοὶ λόγοι are not pneumatic, chained particles of divine will. They are simply contingent material things with no greater purpose than with what the speaker and recipient endow them<sup>67</sup>. Catcalls and philosophical axioms are materially the same and communicative of no cosmic design. As though to toy with Zeno’s interpretation of the painting in which Zeus irrumates Hera, Lucretius commences the poem depicting first Venus and then himself pouring out his version of σπερματικοὶ λόγοι right into the open mouth and receptive ears of his Roman audience likely more sympathetic to Stoic principles and Zeus’ sovereignty<sup>68</sup>.

Lucretius’ use of orality can be seen also in his repeated use of the verb *hiare*, its related forms, and analogous terms<sup>69</sup>. As we observed above, not many lines after Lucretius fashions the image of Venus pouring her seminal *loquellae* into the open mouth (*inhians*) of Mars, he

66 — I follow Struck’s (2004) 279-82 oral sex interpretation of the famous vignette. For primary sources, see *SVF* 2:1071-74. Struck (2004) 280 n. 4 should read pseudo-Clement of Rome (*Ps.-Clem.*) rather than Clement of Alexandria. See also Asmis (1982) 467 where Asmis essentially anticipates my argument by noting that “the Stoics interpreted the notorious motif of Hera pressing her head into the genitals of Zeus as the reception of the divine seed of reason by inert matter” and by further stating that “Lucretius completes the process of exalting the goddess Venus to a position which is fully equivalent to that of Stoic Zeus” or, in other words, a position of an *irrumatrix*.

67 — According to Lucretius, “language” (*nomina rerum*) develops by “usefulness” (*utilitas*; *Lucr.* 5.1029) rather than by design, divine or otherwise. Cf. *D. L.* 10.75 where Epicurus states that ὀνόματα, “language”, does not come to be by means of θέσις, “design”. On Epicureans and language, see de Lacy (1939) esp. 87-88.

68 — Asmis (1982). Martial will later lampoon straight-laced Stoics by turning them into pathics craving penetration; see Richlin (1992) 138-9.

69 — This discussion on *hiare* I owe to an excellent term paper written by Kelsey Storm Stewart, a former student.

invites Memmius (or the general audience) to tender his capacious ears (*auris uacuas*) to rational explanation of things<sup>70</sup>. We also noted that although Mars' oral cavity (and ears) stands open to take in, his mouth is not yawning wide for monstrous consumption like the Nemean lion we encounter in the introduction to Book 5 (*Nemeaeus... magnus hiatus*; Lucr. 5.24). Voraciousness, or more accurately, its opposite, subsistence level consumption, Lucretius addresses in lines preceding the appearance of the ravenous monster. After stating that people have divinized the givers of wine and grain, Lucretius comments that "it is possible for life to persist without these things" (*his posset sine rebus vita manere*; Lucr. 5.16). The theme that subsistence level consumption is sufficient for the Epicurean sage Lucretius will reiterate and develop later at 5.1117-19. In this passage, following up on his claim about basic maintenance, Lucretius points rather to the state of one's mind as the primary component for flourishing existence: "It was not possible to live well without a mind made pure (*at bene non poterat sine puro pectore uiui*; Lucr. 5.18)<sup>71</sup>. I take *pectus* here metonymically as "mind" since we know from an earlier portion of the poem that the chest is the seat of the mind (*idque situm media regione in pectoris haeret*; Lucr. 3.140) and a literal reading like "clean chest" is nonsensical. If we return again to the proem, we also find that animals' *pectora* are the objects of Venus' violent penetration ("hurting pleasant love into their breasts/minds" *omnibus incutiens blandum per pectora amorem*; Lucr. 1.19).

When we read just fifteen lines later that Mars is overcome with a perpetual wound of love (*aeterno devictus vulnere amoris*), we are not stretching, I think, if we understand that the anatomical site of his wound, similarly, is his chest, the seat of his *animus/mens* (Lucr. 3.139). His mind/chest, like the animals subject to Venus' *uis*, has been forced and lies open to receive the influx of Venus' *suaues loquellae* (cf. the *blandum amorem* that Venus forces into the animals' chests in 1.19; and perhaps here again *amor* = *umor*)<sup>72</sup>. The shift from organisms and apertures in their chests/minds which Venus fills with the drive to reproduce to Mars and his receptive chest/mind and mouth is a shift from the functions of nature (sexual procreation) to Nature's ethical message

70 — For discussion on the poem's intended audience (Memmius, general readership, both), see Keen (1985) 5. See Roller (1970) for an argument against importing significance to Memmius as addressee.

71 — So also at 5.1007-8 when Lucretius compares primitive human maintenance to his era of excess: "Back then lack of food delivered exhausted limbs to death. Just the opposite, now surfeit drowns them (*tum penuria deinde cibi languentia leto/membra dabat, contra nunc rerum copia mersat*). Within the verses, the *membra* is likely the elided object of *mersat*, but I do not think it wrong to understand also *nos* as an implied object that adds immediacy to the *tum... nunc* comparison.

72 — Chest wounds are a feature of epic poetry. Santos (2000) reports that 20 % (26/130) of the documented battle wounds in the Iliad were to the chest.

that Lucretius seeks to instill in his audience: people are never content with attainable pleasures. Instead an “undeviating thirst for life keeps us gaping” (*sitis aequa tenet uitai semper hiantis*; Lucr. 3.1084) like the dreamer who thirsts while he drinks (*sitit... potans*; 4.1100) and those in the plague who fall into wells “with mouth agape” (*ore patente*; 6.1175) but find no relief (6.1176-77)<sup>73</sup>. Gape though one will, death’s door always “lies open with a vast and terrifying mouth” (*patet immani et vasto... hiatu*; Lucr. 5.375). The reality is, according to Lucretius, no matter one’s hunger to live and consume pleasures, nature’s *semina* will not cohere forever and everyone, people of Memmius’ status included, must die. And since endless consumption results in injurious surfeit on the one hand (*rerum copia*; Lucr. 5.1007-8) and violence-inducing envy on the other (*invidia*; 5.1126, 1127, 1419), both impediments to tranquility, the rational and pleasurable course of action is to cease taking and consuming more than necessary<sup>74</sup>. To gaze agape into death’s yawning maw is to be filled with reason to shut one’s own mouth and be satisfied. It is just the opposite to the compartment of the old man whom Nature harangues in Book 3 since he “always craves for what is absent” (*semper aves quod abest*) and over whom death (*mors*) looms before he can depart sated and full (*satur ac plenus*; Lucr. 3.957-60). Of course, we cannot actually peer into a figural mouth of death to gain this salutary perspective and concomitant ethical precept, but Lucretius’ material, seminal verse conveys the image into our waiting sense organs<sup>75</sup>.

As noted, the suggestion of something like oral ingestion or irrumation here, if taken literally by a Roman man of Memmius’ status, would be subversive<sup>76</sup>. Just the opposite, normative power structures would license a figure like Memmius to play the role of *irrumator* rather than the irrumated<sup>77</sup>. On a different arc, by dedicating his poem to a figure of such rank as Memmius, there is a tacit admission, perhaps, that Lucretius occupies a lower position on the social ladder<sup>78</sup>. Consequently, though

73 — Commager (1957) 111-12 likewise connects the immoderate oral consumption in 3.1084, 6.1175-77, and 4.1100. Following Thucydides (2.49.2), Lucretius notes that the head with its intake orifices – the eyes and throat specifically – was the initial site of the disease’s manifestation.

74 — For Lucretius’ treatment of *invidia* as a main factor disrupting Roman people’s peace both individually and societally, see McConnell (2012) 110-14.

75 — See Thury’s (1987) argument that the poem itself is a material *simulacrum* that is meant to physically enter the body and mind of the audience.

76 — That *irrumare* always carried its sexual sense rather than some diminished meaning like “cheat” or “abuse”, see Richlin (1981) 40-46 and Fitzgerald (1995) 68.

77 — Oliensis (1997) 154: “Penetration is the prerogative of free men, penetrability the characteristic condition of slaves and women; sexual intercourse is an enactment and reflection of social hierarchy, and, conversely, social subordination always implies the possibility of sexual submission”. For a similar assessment see Fredrick (2002) 1-3.

78 — Roller (1970) argues that Memmius was not Lucretius’ patron or superior, but his equal. For the more traditional view that Lucretius addressed Memmius to cultivate him as a patron, see,

he need not abase himself to the depths of a *fellator*, one might expect that Lucretius take an ingratiating posture toward a social superior whose attention he wants to hold<sup>79</sup>. But here, as in so much of his poem, Lucretius' message upends Roman mores<sup>80</sup>. Memmius will be the one to lie back and receive what Lucretius is delivering, not a grandiose Priapic assertion of domination and consumption, but philosophical protreptic to unchain oneself from such pursuits<sup>81</sup>. Volk's description captures this forceful subject-to-object, speech quality of the poem.

Reading *De rerum natura* is an intense experience. Far from providing an impersonal, disinterested exposition of Epicurean physics, the poem takes the form of a speech by the persona to the addressee, the tone of which is urgent, sometimes even aggressive. At no points are we allowed to forget that it is the teacher who is speaking, that he is speaking to the student, and that the subject he is teaching is one of enormous importance<sup>82</sup>.

To make this palatable, Lucretius sweetens his verses and brandishes provocative figures like oral ingress that scintillate with scandalous playfulness<sup>83</sup>.

Although Memmius is on the receiving end of the coarse jest, Lucretius soberly shows him means by which he can liberate himself

for example, Allen (1938).

79 — Bailey (1947) 1.6.

80 — Beyond mores, as Schiesaro (2007) 42 points out, Lucretius undermines the entire mystique of Roman uniqueness and preeminence by arguing that all human institutions will decay and collapse while this world is one among infinite worlds.

81 — For *DRN* as philosophical protreptic, see Marković (2008) 29–46. On Priapic domination, see Richlin (1992) 27: “A correlative reason for this view [that it was intrinsically filthy] of oral sex was, of course, that it represented an assertion of the dominance of the one satisfied over the one doing the satisfying; hence the threat of irrumation – oral rape – represents both a strong staining and a strong degradation of the victim, and is the ultimate threat in invective, political or literary”. My brackets. I borrow and rephrase Godwin's (2004) 76 delightful locution “delusions of priapic grandeur”.

82 — Volk (2002) 73. Mitsis (1993) 113 rightly points out that Lucretius' rhetorical stance vis-à-vis his audience is not one that readily looks like a mutual exchange of ideas between equals: “Nor, by the same token, do I see any immediate, explicit concern for the reader's consent or any hints that individual choices and preferences have a role to play in one's absorption of Epicurean doctrine [contra Classen (1968) esp. 105–9]”. My brackets.

83 — For the honey-like atomic quality of the poetry itself as a delivery system of Epicurean precepts, see Gruber (2009) 200–217. Fratantuono (2015) 287–88 also sees playfulness in Lucretius' treatment of moving, penetrating *simulacra* and people's sexual misadventures, though for Fratantuono the playfulness is in the nature of Venus/*simulacra* toying with humans. Concerning the humor and scandal of *irrumare*, Richlin (1981) 42 notes, “Obscene poetry is meant to be funny and shocking at the same time; the reader is meant to laugh, but it is the literal, obscene picture which produces the harsh comic impact”. On wonders whether Lucretius – with his recurring oral sex and oral consumption figures – is also playing with the *topos*/caricature that Epicureans deem poetry morally bad because it leads to bad ends, like sex and drunkenness (Sext. Emp. *Math.* 1.298); see discussion in Asmis (1995), esp. 25.

from what is genuinely degrading – the vexatious and dangerous reality of social and political climbing at Rome<sup>84</sup>. Memmius gains opportunity to drink in Epicurean teachings issued pure from Lucretius' mouth and avoid fighting along the straitened routes of political ambition (*angustum per iter luctantes ambitionis*), a path that comes from seeking wisdom from "another's mouth" (*alieno ex ore*; Lucr. 5.1132-3)<sup>85</sup>. This mouth-to-mouth transmission grants Memmius and the rest of Lucretius' audience access to new knowledge that can ameliorate life, like the primitive humans into whose minds "it penetrated" (*penetrabat eos*; 5.1262) that it was possible for metals to be formed into useful tools<sup>86</sup>. However, until, as Graver phrases it, a reader "has been able to take in all of the nature of things", this proposition must remain scandalous<sup>87</sup>. But to take it all in, to be soft, that most detestable physical and moral state for Roman men (e.g. Cic. *Tusc.* 2.27; Cat. 25.1, 10), is Lucretius' end game<sup>88</sup>. It also marks, for Lucretius, our initial step beyond bestial living (*more ferarum*; 5.932) when "the human race first began to soften" (*tum genus humanum primum mollescere coepit*; 5.1014). Mutual security and freedom from pain, the interlocking goals of Epicurean philosophy, then flourish (Lucr. 5.1019-23; cf. Epicurus *RS* 31, 31, 33)<sup>89</sup>.

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84 — For renunciation of these pursuits, see Gordon (2002) 103-4. For Lucretius' antipathy toward these pursuits, see Bailey (1947) 1.10-12.

85 — He is freed from the cycle of passion and frustration experienced by the lover in 4.1091-100 whose sexual desire to consume orally cannot be satiated. See Brown (1987) 75-76 for discussion of Lucretius' use of food and drink language in these verses. Clay (1996) 790 captures this sentiment and the physics underlying the ethical message: "In contaminating the atomic with the human, Lucretius' metaphors serve an ethical end, for they hold up the invisible conflict of blind bodies moving blindly in space and engaging in battle as an image against which the tranquility of Epicurean philosophy is the alternative".

86 — On this unusual instance of *penetrabat*, Costa (1984) 140 comments that it is a "startling and original use of the word to which there is no real parallel (see *OLD* s.v. 5). It expresses the effect of this new idea hitting them forcefully, and may reflect the Epicurean theory that the *animus* is corporeal and perceptions do physically penetrate the mind".

87 — Graver (1990) 114.

88 — See also Gordon (2012) 187.

89 — I borrow from Nussbaum's (1994) 162 comments on this passage: "These 'softenings' are the necessary preconditions of promises and contracts, of community, of law. Hence, in Lucretius' view, they are necessary for a full flourishing human life".

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