

1 The existence of atoms and void

Invocation to Venus

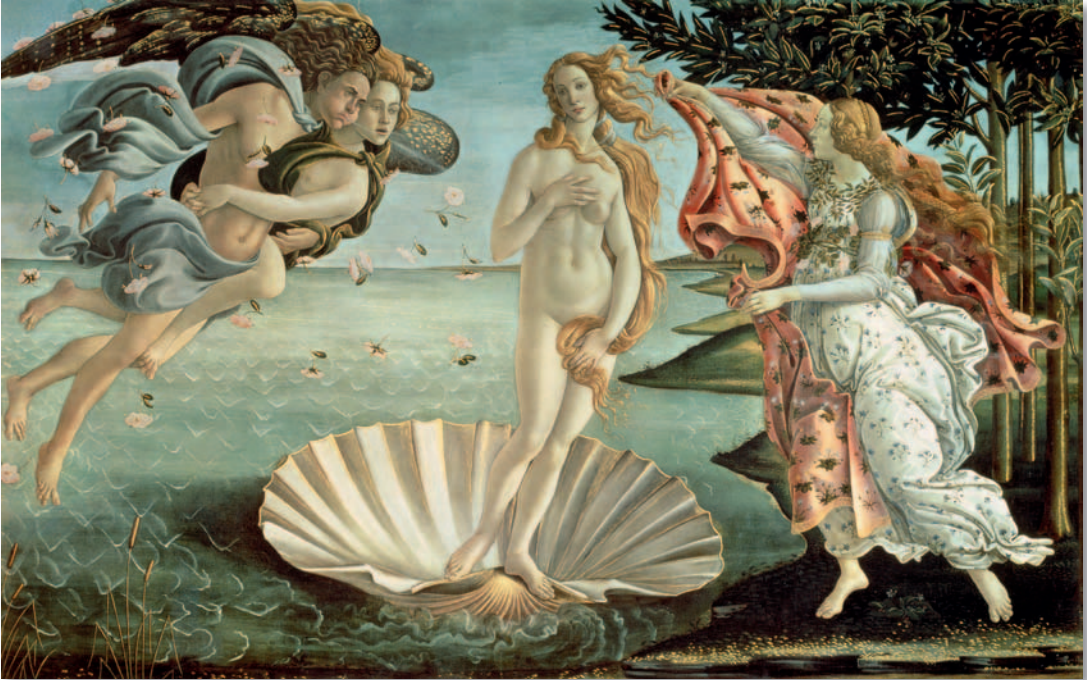
- 1.1–43 Mother of **Aeneas' line**, pleasure of men and gods, life-giving **Venus**, who beneath the wheeling stars of the sky fills with life both **ship-carrying sea and fruit-bearing land**, through you every species of living creature is conceived and emerges to see the light of the sun. **You, goddess**, it is you the winds flee, the clouds in the sky run from you and your coming. The earth in her artistry sends forth sweet flowers for you, the waters of ocean smile for you and the sky is becalmed and shines resplendent all around. No sooner does the first day of spring show its face and the

Aeneas' line Aeneas, the son of the goddess Venus and the Trojan hero Anchises, was the mythical founder of the Roman people; he escaped Troy's destruction and led a band of survivors to found a new city in Italy. Julius Caesar himself claimed descent from Venus, adopted her as his protectress and invoked her as *Venus Genetrix* (Venus the Mother), a title which Lucretius uses here.

Venus the Roman goddess of beauty and love here represents the life-force present in the world, the force which urges procreation and so gives life to all creatures. The Greek philosopher Parmenides (c. 510–450 BC) opened his philosophical poem with a similar allegory.

ship-carrying sea and fruit-bearing land though such compound adjectives can sound awkward in English and are not common in Latin either, Greek lends itself to their coining; compare the frequency of compound nouns in German with their infrequency in French and other Romance languages. Sedley suggests that to find two such Greek-sounding compound adjectives in the same line is an indication that Lucretius is imitating an original by the Greek philosophical poet Empedocles (c. 492–432 BC), and he goes on to remark (p. 87) that 'Lucretius is the servant of two masters. Epicurus is the founder of his philosophy while Empedocles is the father of his genre. It is the task of Epicurus' first poet to combine the two loyalties.'

You, goddess both the *Iliad* (1.1–7) and *Odyssey* (1.1–10) open with a short invocation to the Muse of Epic, as does the *Aeneid* (1.1–11); each then provides the briefest of overviews of the action of the poem. Lucretius' extended invocation to a goddess is unique in extant hexameter verse, both for its length and for its direct address of an Olympian goddess rather than one of the Muses, the goddesses who inspired poets. This invocation contains some of the formulaic elements of an ancient prayer: the address to a god, compliments and praise, a list of his or her spheres of influence and a request for favour or help.



The Birth of Venus, c. 1482, by Sandro Botticelli. Compare this to Lucretius' portrayal of Venus: the flowers appearing, the Zephyr blowing, the hint of eroticism.

life-giving breeze of the **zephyr** blow strong upon its release, than straightway the birds in the sky proclaim you and your arrival, goddess, their hearts invigorated by your power. Then the beasts, both wild and tame, frisk in the rich pastures and ford the fast-flowing streams; so captivated are they by your spell that they follow 15 you eagerly wherever you proceed to lead them. In short, across mountain, rapid river and sea, in luxuriant meadow and bird's leafy home, you drive the allure of love into all hearts and cause each generation eagerly to propagate the next. Only 20 you govern the nature of things: without you nothing springs up into the bright realm of day and nothing can be happy or lovely. So I desire you, goddess, as my companion as I write a poem attempting to set forth **the nature of things** for my 25

zephyr the wind from the west that disperses the clouds and brings warmth after winter; it has been released by Aeolus, god of the winds, from its imprisonment in its cave during the winter months.

the nature of things this phrase (Latin *de rerum natura*) provides our name for the poem. Epicurus had written a work with the title *About Natural Science* (Greek *peri physeōs*), on which Lucretius draws heavily for his subject-matter.



A coin minted by Lucius Memmius in 106 BC; the obverse shows the head of Saturn crowned with a laurel wreath; the reverse shows Venus driving a biga (two-horse chariot) and reads L MEMMI GAL = Lucius Memmius Galeria.

Memmius, whom you wish to excel in all things and to be honoured at every opportunity. For that reason too, grant my words everlasting appeal, divine one.

Meanwhile, make the **brute business of war** come quietly to rest across all land and sea. For only you can bestow serene peace on mankind, now that warlike

Memmius Gaius Memmius (c. 90–c. 48 BC), a contemporary of Lucretius: the only one mentioned in the poem. He is a typical example of a Roman with political ambition: he made important political connections by marrying the daughter of the dictator Sulla (138–78 BC) and then embarked upon a career in politics. In its early stages he spoke against Caesar but was later reconciled with him. He went on to become the governor of the Roman province of Bithynia. (Lucretius' contemporary, the poet Catullus, travelled there too and seems to have taken a violent dislike to him.) He was later found guilty of electoral bribery and went into exile at Athens. Memmius' up-and-down political career, his administrative experience and his fickle political allegiance are typical of politics in first-century Rome: his stressful experiences are just the sort that Lucretius will later (2.1–19) recommend be avoided. It is a bold move on Lucretius' part to choose Memmius as the addressee of his poem and his target for conversion to Epicureanism, for he would be unlikely to sympathize with a philosophy that advocated the rejection of political ambition. What is more, Cicero records that Memmius had the opportunity to preserve the remains of Epicurus' house in Athens by organizing the handover of the site to the head of the Epicurean School, but planned instead to put up a building of his own there (*Letters to Friends* 13.1). Venus was featured as 'protectress' on coins minted by Memmius' family, when the minting of Rome's coinage was in the hands of private families who could choose what was stamped on them.

brute business of war Lucretius has already experienced the bloody civil war between the generals Sulla and Marius in the 80s BC and Rome is now on the brink of an equally terrible civil war between the politically ambitious generals Caesar and Pompey – if it has not already started, for the exact years of the poem's composition are unknown.



Mars disarmed by Venus, 1824, by Jacques-Louis David.

Mars is directing the brute business of battle. At those moments when his incurable **love-wound** overpowers him, he flings himself into your lap: arching his smooth neck as he looks up, staring as he feasts his eyes on you, greedy with love, he lies back with his breath hanging on your lips. Lean down, goddess, and embrace him with your sacred body as he lies there; pour sweet words from your lips and request an untroubled peace for the Romans, sublime goddess. In these harrowing days for my country I cannot go about my work with an untroubled

Mars the Roman god of war and the supposed father of Rome's founder Romulus. Here he may represent strife, destruction and war, just as Venus did love, creation and peace. The military-minded Romans took pride in their descent from Mars, but here he is pictured at his most unwarlike and in thrall to Venus, who was also a divine ancestor of the Roman race through her son Aeneas.

love-wound Roman religion was polytheistic and its gods were anthropomorphic. Gods and goddesses enjoyed the pleasure of many relationships, both with each other and with mortals, and these relationships feature frequently in Greek and Roman literature. Mars and Venus were traditionally lovers: the story of their affair is told in *Odyssey* 8.255–366. Lucretius' description, reminiscent of the erotic Roman love elegy of the poets Catullus or Ovid, illustrates the difference between ancient and modern Western ideas of what is acceptable in the portrayal of divinity.

mind nor during such times can the illustrious offspring of **the Memmii** shirk his duty to **the common good**.

- 1 What clues does Lucretius give in this opening passage to the subject-matter of his poem?
- 2 Why do you think Lucretius chooses Venus to represent spring? How does he convey the excitement felt by the natural world at her arrival? You may wish to look at the opening lines of Chaucer's General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* to see how a great English poet handles this kind of theme.
- 3 What might modern writers cite as their inspiration instead of the Muses?
- 4 What do you think tales about a love affair between one god and another say about a religion's view of its gods?
- 5 Which has more impact: this passage's upbeat start or its despondent end?
- 6 What impression do you get of the style of the poem from its opening lines? How successful is the invocation to Venus in making you want to read on?
- 7 Is it clear why Lucretius invokes Venus rather than the conventional Muse?

Praise of Epicurus; the poem's philosophical subject-matter

1.50–158 To continue, then, clear your ears and rid your keen mind of all its cares and give your attention to the true philosophy. Do not scorn the gift which I have prepared for you with unswerving devotion, discarding it before it is understood. I will begin by describing to you the sublime system of the heavens and gods, and I will reveal the primary elements of matter out of which nature creates, grows and sustains all things, and back into which that same nature breaks all things down when they are dead. In giving my account I shall be calling them '**matter**' or 'generative particles' or refer to 'seeds' or give them the term 'primary elements' because from these first beginnings come all things that are.

the Memmii that is, both Gaius Memmius' immediate family and their ancestors. Roman aristocrats took great pride in their family name and achievements: busts of militarily or politically successful ancestors adorned the entrance halls of their houses, and masks of their ancestors were carried in the funeral procession for all to see when a family member died. Livy (*Histories* 1.8) tells us that Romulus, the first king of Rome, chose 100 men to be the first senators; they were later known as *patres* or fathers (hence our word 'patrician'). Some families in Rome claimed to trace their line all the way back to these first senators.

the common good that is, the safety of the Roman state, now threatened by looming civil war and the self-interest of powerful figures. A Roman aristocrat was expected to partake in political life: hence Memmius will not 'shirk his duty'. Unless Venus distracts Mars and civil war is thus avoided, he will not be able to give proper attention to Lucretius' poem.

matter Lucretius chooses to use this and the other terms he lists rather than the word 'atom' (Greek *atomos*), the nature and behaviour of which form the subject-matter of the first pair of books of his poem. In choosing to avoid the word atom he distances his poem from the theories of the Atomists (see Glossary, p. 152), for he wants his readers to acknowledge Epicureanism alone as the true philosophy; he also makes his poem more Roman by avoiding Greek terms and inventing Latin ones to replace them.

When human life lay ignominiously on the ground for all to see, **crushed by the weight of religion** which reared its head in the broad sky, its ugly face looming down over mankind, **a man from Greece first** dared to raise mortal eyes in defiance and be the first to make a stand. Neither tales of gods nor lightning bolts nor sky's intimidating thunder silenced him; rather, they provoked his keen, brave mind all the more so that he desired to be the first to **break open the tight locks on nature's gates**. So it was that the vibrant vigour of his mind gained a victory and he marched out far beyond the world's **flaming ramparts**, and in mind and thought he ranged across the endless universe. On his return as **conqueror** he reports back to us what can come into being and what cannot: that is, the system

crushed by the weight of religion in accordance with the Epicurean doctrine but in more dramatic language than we find in extant Epicurean texts, Lucretius pictures religion as a kind of monster oppressing mankind. By explaining the workings of the universe and our world, and especially by giving an account of natural phenomena, Epicurus hoped to demonstrate that the world exists and functions quite independently of any gods, for he observed how many people lived in fear of what they believed the gods might do to them at any moment; in addition, when they could not explain the workings of nature, they attributed inexplicable phenomena to divine power.

a man from Greece first Epicurus. Though he is only mentioned by name once (3.1042) in the poem, Lucretius opens each of the six books with a eulogy to Epicurus himself or to his teachings, offering prime position to the philosopher whose writings form the basis for the entire poem. Though Epicurus' scientific thinking owed much to his philosophical predecessors (especially the Atomists), Lucretius can justifiably claim that Epicurus was the first to use theories about the world and universe to try to help his fellow men by removing their fears and anxieties.

break open the tight locks on nature's gates Lucretius borrows the phrasing and imagery of a line from the *Annales* by the Roman writer Ennius (239–169 BC), a poem of which only fragments remain, which recounted Roman history from Aeneas' flight from Troy through to Ennius' own time. Virgil also used the same image at *Aeneid* 7.620–2. Roman poets frequently allude to their literary predecessors: to do so shows the learning of the poet himself, establishes his place in Rome's literary tradition and allows him to use such references as a starting-point from which to take a new direction if he so wishes. Here Lucretius imagines nature as a locked city which Epicurus is besieging in order to discover her secrets.

flaming ramparts Epicurus held that our world comprises a hollow sphere with the earth in the centre, surrounded by the air, in which the planets move, which is in turn surrounded by the ether in the outermost part of the sphere, the edges of which are permanently aflame and form a kind of wall.

conqueror Lucretius portrays Epicurus as a victorious general returning in triumph to Rome to give a report about a defeated nation. Over several hundred years Rome had gradually increased her dominion: first she defeated the cities of Italy, then she began to acquire new lands abroad, beginning with the island of Sicily and its independent Greek city-states.

by which there is a limit to what each thing can do, a **boundary-stone** which cannot be moved. So it is the turn of religion to lie crushed underfoot while his victory lifts us up to the heavens.

- 1 What indications are there in the passage that Memmius may not be a ready listener?
- 2 How does Lucretius convey his views on religion, his pity for humankind and his admiration for Epicurus in this passage?
- 3 Why does Lucretius mention that Epicurus was 'the first to make a stand': is there something inherently worthwhile in being the first to do something?
- 4 Can you find any similarities between Lucretius' praise of Venus at 1.1–43 and this passage?

One thing am I afraid of in these matters: that you might think you are taking up the principles of some **unholy system** and setting down a path of wickedness. Quite the opposite – too often this religion has given birth to deeds both criminal and unholy. Just so at Aulis did the chosen commanders of the Danaans, the pick of the heroes, foully stain the altar of the **virgin goddess of the crossroads** with **the blood of Iphianassa**.

boundary-stone (Latin *terminus*) the ancients marked property lines, such as those between the fields of one farmer and those of another, with stone markers, monoliths or cairns. Many statues of gods served the function of guarding property lines; the Roman god Terminus personified and protected these boundary markers. Lucretius employs touches like this, the address to Memmius and allusion to Ennius, to help Romanize the poem and thereby set the reader at ease, as he prepares to expound the unfamiliar ideas of Epicurean philosophy.

unholy system philosophy had clashed with religion in the past: Socrates (469–399 BC) was accused of impiety and put to death, while misconceptions about the Pythagoreans too led to their being marginalized in the fifth century. In defending the record of Epicureanism, Lucretius goes on the attack against religion, challenging its core claim of holiness with what seems almost an oxymoron: the claim that religion can be unholy.

virgin goddess of the crossroads Diana (Greek Artemis), goddess of chastity, the woods and the moon. More commonly the crossroads are identified with Hecate, an underworld goddess associated with magic and closely connected to Diana.

the blood of Iphianassa the Greeks (Danaans) assembled at Aulis to sail for Troy in their quest to retrieve Helen (who had eloped with the Trojan prince Paris), but in the absence of a favourable wind remained stuck in the harbour. The soothsayer Calchas explained that Artemis was angry at the Greeks and required the sacrifice of king Agamemnon's daughter Iphianassa (more commonly called Iphigeneia) before she would grant a favourable wind to allow the departure of the fleet. Agamemnon sent for her on the pretext that she would marry the hero Achilles, but when she reached the altar she was sacrificed instead. This pitiful tale forms the subject-matter of the Chorus' first song in Aeschylus' tragedy *Agamemnon* and the whole of Euripides' tragedy *Iphigeneia at Aulis*.

As soon as the **woollen band** encircling her virgin hair streamed down each cheek in equal lengths, as soon as she noticed her father was standing sorrowfully at the altar, that near him attendants were hiding knives and that her countrymen were weeping profusely at the sight of her, silent from shock she sank to her knees and slumped to the ground. At such a time it was no use to the **hapless girl** that she had been the first to give the name ‘father’ to the king. Snatched up in men’s hands she was conveyed trembling to the altar, not to be accompanied by a loud cheer of ‘Hymen’ as the solemn and sacred ritual was completed, but to slump down at the very moment of being wed, pure in the midst of impurity, a sorrowful victim slain by her father, so that a **successful and auspicious** outcome might be granted to the fleet. Such terrible acts could religion lead men to commit.

- ‘Such terrible acts could religion lead men to commit’ became a famous line and a rallying-cry for atheists down the ages. Would you agree that religion has led men to commit terrible acts?

You yourself may at some point be won over again by the dire-sounding warnings of the holy men and will then look to desert me. Indeed, what numerous fancies they are conjuring up for you at this very moment, which could undermine your life’s principles and confound all your fortunes with fears – and with good reason.

woollen band brides did wear a band (the *vitta*) around their heads, but the word Lucretius uses here (*infula*) describes the band put round the head of a sacrificial animal. However, Iphianassa’s sacrifice is forced on her against her will and is at odds with Roman religious practice, since the Romans entertained the conceit that the sacrificial animal should nod its assent before being slaughtered. Throughout lines 84–101 Lucretius interweaves the language of sacrifice and wedding. For example, at a Roman wedding it was the custom for the bride to be symbolically pulled away from her mother’s embrace (‘snatched up in men’s hands’), for the newly-weds to be ‘conveyed’ by wagon to the groom’s house and accompanied by the marriage-song of Hymen, the Greek god of marriage (this song features in poem 61 by Lucretius’ contemporary Catullus); there was also a sacrifice at the marriage ceremony itself, so that Iphianassa might have expected to see one attendant holding a knife, but not all of them doing so and trying to hide them.

hapless girl the sacrifice is now related from the standpoint of Iphianassa; other accounts emphasized the terrible tragic choice which her father faced (this comes to the fore in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* and in Electra’s defence of her father’s actions in Sophocles’ *Electra*). However, in this case it is important for Lucretius’ argument that there be no redeeming aspect to this act, and in his moving description of the tableau, filled as it is with pathos, he succeeds in demonstrating that all those involved suffer (not only Iphianassa herself, but also her father and his accomplices).

successful and auspicious a formula from Roman divination, which Lucretius uses in pointed contrast to the tragic event it describes, perhaps in order to undermine the credibility of religion.



A vase-painting of the Trojan princess Polyxena being sacrificed in a manner similar to Iphianassa; black-figure Tyrrhenian amphora, 570 BC.

Yet, if people could see that there was a definite endpoint to their troubles, they would have some rational basis to take a firm stand against the terrors of religion and the warnings of the holy men. But, as it is, they have no strategy for resisting nor the means to do so, since they must fear **eternal punishment after death**. For they do not know what the nature of the spirit is: whether it undergoes birth or whether instead it slips in as we are being born; likewise, whether it is broken down at death and perishes with us or whether it visits Orcus' darkness and desolate swamps or whether it can slip into another animal by the gods' doing, as **our Ennius** sang.

eternal punishment after death fear of this and the fear of the gods mentioned earlier are the two supreme fears which impair our experience of life, and the aim of Epicureanism and consequently of Lucretius' poem is to dispel them both. If Lucretius can demonstrate that both the spirit and the mind come into being and cease to exist when we do, then we will fear neither punishment after death nor, he hopes, death itself. Most Greeks and Romans held that after death, though the body decomposed, the spirit descended to the underworld. There were several names for the underworld: some began as the name of a god of the dead (Hades, Tartarus and Orcus – the last being a specifically Roman name) but came to signify the place too; others were features of the underworld (the rivers Styx and Acheron) or its entrance (Lake Avernus).

our Ennius after borrowing from Ennius at 70–1 Lucretius now mentions the great author by name. Ennius was from southern Italy and knew both Latin and Greek. He wrote a wide variety of works in Latin, including comedies and tragedies, as well as the aforementioned epic poem, *Annales*. He was considered by the Romans to be the father of Latin epic poetry because he was the first to write in Latin, though he kept the metre of all Greek epic, the dactylic hexameter. Ennius believed in the transmigration of the spirit at death: in *Annales* he claimed that Homer had revealed to him that his (Ennius') spirit had previously resided in the body of a peacock, in the body of Homer himself and in that of Pythagoras, who also believed in transmigration.

He was the first to carry an eternal wreath down from lovely **Helicon** and so to win bright fame among the peoples of Italy. Yet even he, while pronouncing his immortal verses, asserts that Acheron does exist, though neither our spirits nor our bodies abide there, but rather a kind of likeness, amazingly pale. He relates how the image of **Homer**, forever in his prime, ascended from there and began to shed salt tears and to reveal the nature of things through his words. This forces me to give **a proper explanation** of what happens in the skies, by what system the sun and moon follow their paths, and the power by which everything on earth occurs. Then, most importantly, we must use astute reasoning to discover the origins of the spirit and the nature of the mind, what it is that appears to us when we are awake but our minds are sick, or again when we are buried in sleep, so that in front of us we seem to see and hear **those who have met death** and whose bones are embraced by the earth.

The difficulties of elucidating the opaque discoveries of the Greeks in a poem in Latin do not escape my notice, especially as many require **a new vocabulary** when dealing with them because of the poverty of our language and the originality of the

Helicon a mountain in mainland Greece where the Muses were said to live and where Ennius claimed his vision of Homer appeared to him. To make a metaphorical wreath out of flowers picked on Mount Helicon is to succeed in writing great poetry: Lucretius himself expresses his hopes of doing the same at 4.3–4.

Homer to the Greeks Homer, poet of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, was not just the greatest poet but also a source of much knowledge, hence he might reveal ‘the nature of things’; to the Romans the former judgement still held true, but by Lucretius’ time science and philosophy had advanced to such a degree that the latter might not have done. To Ennius Homer remains in his prime because his reputation and his spirit are both immortal.

a proper explanation these lines give a preview of some of the content of the rest of the poem: Lucretius will explain ‘what happens in the skies’ in Book 6, ‘the nature of the mind’ in Book 3 and ‘what it is that appears to us’ in Book 4.

those who have met death Epicurus realized that people see images of the dead in their dreams or, if they are sick, even while awake, and that such visions are one cause of the belief in an afterlife. He aimed to provide a rational explanation for how these visions come about and thereby to rid us of that belief.

a new vocabulary ‘Lucretius like his contemporary Cicero was preoccupied with the task of presenting Greek philosophy in Latin’ remarks Tatum (p. 136). Lucretius, however, does import technical Greek terms when it suits him to do so, such as *homoimeria* (a condition whereby the parts of a thing are like each other and like the whole) at 1.830. He may wish to show off his virtuosity as a poet by devising new terms, but he may also wish to distance his poem from the theories associated with the philosophers who devised the original ones. Three times in his poem Lucretius complains about the poverty of the Latin language (here, 1.832, 3.260); however, Kenney (*CCL* p. 97) feels that this is ‘not an apology but an implicit boast’ of his own powers of invention. *Physics*, *atoms* and *theory* are all Greek scientific terms still used by us today and we too import technical philosophical vocabulary along with its subject-matter: there are no English words for *karma* or *nirvana*, for example.