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## Letters, Atoms and Transfer of Meaning in *De rerum natura*\*

*Abstract:* In the work of Lucretius, the aspects of translation, poetic creation and philosophical inquiry are presented as three different forms of the same process.

*Key words:* *De rerum natura*, Epicurean philosophy, translation, metaphor, language, knowledge.

I This paper will explore the relationship between poetry and philosophy in the work of Lucretius through analysis of the three interrelated aspects of the Lucretian poetic activity, namely *translation*, or mediation between Greek and Latin; *poetic creation*, or mediation between the realm of nature and the realm of poetic language; finally, *philosophical inquiry*, which seeks to mediate between the knowledge acquired through senses and the knowledge acquired through reasoning. In order to demonstrate how closely interrelated these three aspects of the work of Lucretius are, I intend to draw your attention to several places in his poem. My examples will be selected from the portions of *De rerum natura* devoted to the teaching on the soul and its two particular functions, sensation and thinking.

The choice of technical subjects, the soul, sensation and thinking, and the focus on the poetic language employed in the treatment of these subjects may seem to combine two different directions of research. One would expect here a certain degree of subordination; my purpose is, however, to put these two methods in a linear perspective. As every reader of *De rerum natura* realizes very quickly, Lucretius' work is gener-

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ated by a curious fusion of philosophy and poetry, and the relationship between the two is essential for understanding its nature. In particular, the way in which Lucretius uses stylistic effects often suggests a secret connection between the features in nature and the features in poetry.<sup>1</sup> This connection becomes explicit in one of his most striking analogies, the analogy between the letters of alphabet and atoms.<sup>2</sup> According to Lucretius' explanation, just as the poem he is composing consists of many letters common to many words, so in nature there are many atoms common to many things;<sup>3</sup> also, just as the position and arrangement of the letters in words make an essential difference in terms of their meaning, so the position and arrangement of the atoms in objects make an essential difference in terms of the character of the whole.<sup>4</sup>

Language, a system which reflects atomic structure of nature, is also a medium capable of reflecting natural phenomena. This tacit premise leads to the corollary which seems to be the foundation of Lucretius' work: thanks to the structural parallelism between the two systems, one may actually *translate* nature into poetry. I believe that this level of translation in *De rerum natura* should be associated with another level of translation, namely the translation from Greek to Latin. To clarify this point, I need to bring to our attention a couple of programmatic statements that we find at the beginning of the poem.

In Book Three Lucretius states that it was Epicurus who discovered

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. P. Friedländer, *The Pattern of Sound and Atomistic Theory in Lucretius*, *AJPh* 62, 1941, 16-34.

<sup>2</sup> The analogy seems to go back to Leucippus and Democritus. See H. Diels, *Elementum*, B. G. Teubner, Leipzig 1899, and W. Volgraff, *Elementum, Mnemosyne* 2, 1949, 89-115.

<sup>3</sup> 1.196-8 *ut potius multis communia corpora rebus | multa putes esse, ut uerbis elementa uideamus, | quam sine principiis ullam rem existere posse.* (All the citations from *De rerum natura* follow C. Bailey's *Titi Lucreti Cari De rerum natura libri sex*, Oxford 1947.)

<sup>4</sup> 1.823-6 *quin etiam passim nostris in uersibus ipsis | multa elementa uides multis communia uerbis, | cum tamen inter se uersus ac uerba necessest | confiteare et re et sonitu distare sonanti;* 1.912-4 *quo pacto uerba quoque ipsa | inter se paulo mutatis sunt elementis, | cum ligna atque ignes distincta uoce notemus;* 2.1015-1022 *namque eadem caelum mare terras flumina solem | significant, eadem fruges arbusta animantis; | si non omnia sunt, at multo maxima pars est | consimilis; uerum positura discrepitant res. | sic ipsis in rebus item iam materiai | [interualla uias conexus pondera plagas] | concursus motus ordo positura figurae | cum permutantur, mutari res quoque debent.*

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the truth.<sup>5</sup> He, Lucretius, only intends to expound Epicurus' teaching in Latin. The task is not easy, but the poet considers it to be rewarding:

*Nec me animi fallit Graiorum obscura reperta  
difficile inlustrare Latinis uersibus esse,  
multa nouis uerbis praesertim cum sit agendum,  
propter egestatem linguae et rerum nouitatem.  
sed tua me uirtus tamen et sperata uoluptas  
suauis amicitiae quemuis efferre laborem  
suadet et inducit noctes uigilare serenas,  
quaerentem dictis quibus et quo carmine demum  
clara tuae possim praepandere lumina menti,  
res quibus occultas penitus conuisere possis. (1.136-45)*

(And it does not escape my mind that it is not easy to illuminate in Latin verse the obscure discoveries of the Greeks, especially since one must treat many concepts with new words, because of the poverty of our language and the novelty of the material. But your excellence, and the delight of our pleasant friendship that I hope to enjoy, encourage me to carry through any task. This leads me to stay awake through the quiet nights, studying by which choice of words and which kind of poetry I can finally hold before your mind bright torches by which you may see deeply into hidden matters.)

This passage is obviously dominated by contrast between light and darkness: language, when properly used, brings light into darkness. The words illuminate obscure concepts, spread light like torches before one's mind and make one see otherwise invisible things.

Lucretius later expands this image and promises that the light will spread from one thing to another in a chain similar to the chain of torches lit one from another. Nothing remains isolated from this process, and finally the night must be dispelled:

*namque alid ex alio clarescet, nec tibi caeca  
nox iter eripiet, quin ultima naturai  
peruideas: ita res accendent lumina rebus. (1.1115-7)<sup>6</sup>*  
(For one thing will become bright by another, and blinding night will

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<sup>5</sup> 3.9 *tu pater es rerum inuentor.*

<sup>6</sup> The adaptation of a passage from Ennius (v. D. West, *The Imagery and Poetry of Lucretius*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1969, p. 30).

not rob you of your path until you have looked into the innermost depths of nature. In this way will things light torches for other things.)

This vivid image of chain-illumination remains within the frame of the contrast between light and darkness; however, this time the torches lit one by another throw light on another important field of the poet's activity, namely his deliberate conduct of his philosophical inquiry through association of ideas or through search for analogies. The coherence of imagery which Lucretius uses to depict the process of translation on one hand, and the cognitive progress granted by the reasoning *per analogiam* on the other hand, seems to emphasize conceptual unity of the two. Just as the process of translation brings light to obscure Greek philosophical concepts, the use of analogy brings the light of understanding from one place to another.

The clarity of word, as opposed to the obscurity of matter, is a recurring theme in *De rerum natura*. In another important passage containing a reference to his own work, Lucretius explains that one of the sources of pleasure that he derives from writing poetry is the fact that he is composing 'such bright verses about a dark theme' (*obscura de re tam lucida... | carmina*, 1.933-4). His verse composition should thus be observed as a part of his main task, namely to 'free the human soul from the bonds of superstition' (*artis | religionum animum nodis exsoluere*, 1.931-2), and the enlightening effect of his words is to be imagined as a continuation of the work of Epicurus, who brought human life 'from such darkness... into such bright light' (*tantisque tenebris | in... tam clara luce*, 5.11-2).

In the same important passage, Lucretius introduces another exegetic image. His task as a poet is to make Epicurus' bitter teaching palatable by the use of poetry. In this respect he compares himself to a healer administering bitter wormwood in a cup moistened with sweet honey (1.935-950).<sup>7</sup> In other words, his poetry adds sweet or pleasant taste to Epicurus' bitter intellectual cure for the human condition.

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<sup>7</sup> The comparison may easily be understood as an echo of the analogies between rhetoric (poetry) and medicine found in Gorgias and Plato. While Gorgias describes speech as a medicine for the soul (*Hel.* 14), Plato claims that only philosophy can be compared to medicine, and philosophers to doctors administering a medicine; rhetoric (poetry) may be compared only to the art of pastry cooking, and rhetoricians (poets) to cooks administering pastries (*Gorg.* 464 b-465 e). The Lucretian image appears to be a reconciliation of

The previous examples reveal two qualities which Lucretius attributes to language, viz. the light of *understanding* which it brings into darkness of matter and the *pleasure* which it provides. Let me follow this thread little bit farther. Both qualities, understanding and pleasure, appear in Aristotle's description of the effect of metaphor: τὸ γὰρ μανθάνειν ὀραδίως ἢ δὲ φύσει πᾶσιν ἐστί... ἢ δὲ μεταφορὰ ποιεῖ τοῦτο μάλιστα (For to *understand* easily is naturally *pleasant* to everyone... and metaphor produces this effect most frequently, *Rh.* 1410 b). In my understanding, the mechanism that we see at work in metaphor, usually described as a transfer of meaning, may be regarded as a paradigm of the two aspects of Lucretian translation I have indicated so far, the translation from Greek into Latin and the closely associated translation of nature into poetry. As I plan to demonstrate, it may also be regarded as a paradigm of the third and fundamental aspect of the mechanism of transfer in *De rerum natura*, namely the transfer of the knowledge acquired through senses to the areas which our senses cannot reach.

II Since Lucretius is writing poetry, the use of metaphor in his work appears to be natural and appropriate. But metaphors are not strictly confined to poetry. They make a substantial part of technical jargon in any discipline. One may wonder to what extent Lucretius was aware of this and what his attitude was towards metaphor.

In Book Three of *De rerum natura* there is direct evidence for an answer to this question. According to some Greek philosophers, Lucretius explains, mind and its power to perceive are a condition of the body—Greeks call this condition 'harmony' (3.100). After he refutes the theory of soul as a condition and confirms the assumption that the soul is material and located in the body, and that the body does not experience sensation because of the alleged harmony, Lucretius advises his reader:

*Quapropter quoniam est animi natura reperta  
atque animae quasi pars hominis, redde harmoniai  
nomen, ad organicos alto delatum Helicone,  
siue aliunde ipsi porro traxere et in illam*

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the opposed views of Plato and Gorgias, since our poet is to be compared to doctor and to pastry cook at the same time.

*transtulerunt*, proprio quae tum res nomine egebat. (3.130-4)

(Now that the nature of the mind and of the soul had been revealed as, so to speak, a part of a man, restore the word ‘harmony’, which was taken down to musicians from the heights of Helicon—or perhaps they themselves took it in their turn from some other source and transferred it to their art, which at that time did not have a name of its own).

Several interesting indications mark this passage. First, Lucretius is sensitive to the fact that the phrase ‘a part of a man’ (*pars hominis*), which he uses to describe the nature of mind and soul, is to be regarded as a metaphor. This is why it is preceded by the phrase ‘so to speak’ (*quasi*). He is also aware that in opposition to an illuminating metaphor like the one that he is using, there is an opaque sort of metaphor, like ‘harmony’. Finally, he understands the reason why certain Greek philosophers had to use a metaphor here: the thing indicated by it lacked its own name. This is why the term used in music was transferred to it. The verb *trans-fero* leaves little doubt about the rhetorical background of Lucretius’ observations. *Translatio* is a technical term and stands for Greek μεταφορά.<sup>8</sup> The idea that some metaphors are created as a result of necessity is also a commonplace of rhetorical theory.<sup>9</sup>

The inappropriateness of the concept of *harmonia* is also brought to our attention by the fact that Lucretius does not even bother to translate the term in Latin. The word, just as the idea it represents, remains in his text a foreign feature.<sup>10</sup>

**III** Now that we know that Lucretius’ use of metaphorical language is conscious and well-planned, I may proceed with an example of one of his particularly striking poetic techniques, namely his frequent play with *double entendre* on the literal and metaphorical meaning of the word which he uses.

Opening the section on the substance and composition of the mind, Lucretius uses the adjective *persubtilis* in order to indicate *fineness* as its

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Quint. 8.6.4; *Rhet. Her.* 4.45.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Cic. *De orat.* 3.155.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. D. N. Sedley, *Lucretius’ use and avoidance of Greek*, in *Aspects of the Language of Latin Poetry*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999, pp. 237-8.

primary quality, or rather the quality of its particles (3.179). Just as in the case of the simplex *subtilis*, the compound *persubtilis* in *De rerum natura* is our first testimony for the word in Latin. Simplex *subtilis* seems to stand for Greek λεπτός (3.195), and the compound *persubtilis* in the given passage stands for Greek λεπτομερής, coming from Epicurus' definition of the soul: ἡ ψυχὴ σῶμά ἐστι λεπτομερὲς παρ' ὅλον τὸ ἄθροισμα παρεσπαρμένον (the soul [i.e. nervous system and mind together] is a body consisting of small particles, interspersed throughout the whole tissue [of the human organism], *Ep. ad Herod.* 63).

But while Greek λεπτομερής means simply '[composed] of small particles', Lucretian *persubtilis* contains a weaving metaphor—it literally means 'that which can pass through warp' (*sub* + *tela*). This is one of the metaphors dear to our poet,<sup>11</sup> and indeed a fortunate one: the fundamental atomistic concept of the combination of the atoms requires imagery based on apposition, and excludes the idea of fusion. One must admit that the image of weaving is probably the most convenient to convey the concept.

In the following section Lucretius continues to use this image, referring to the substance of the soul directly with the word *textura* (3.209). Other instances of the poets' usage of the adjective *subtilis* confirm his correct understanding of the word's etymology and his conscious play with the metaphor it contains. For example, in the section devoted to visual perception, Lucretius explains that objects give off thin films of particles from their surface, *quae uolgo uolitant, subtili praedita filo* — 'thin as a thread which can pass through warp' (4.88).<sup>12</sup> In order to understand how thin these films are, one must realize *exordia rerum | cunctarum quam sint subtilia* (how thin the beginnings [i.e. atoms] of all the material objects are, 4.114-5). But taking the literal meaning of *exordium*, the phrase also means 'how thin the vertical threads of all the material objects are'. *Imagines* or thin films of a horse and of a man readily cling to each other, forming a deceptive new film of a Centaur, *propter subtilem naturam et tenuia texta* (because of their delicate nature and thinness of

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Light and Looms* in West 1969:80-82.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. 2.341 and 5.572.

their texture)—*subtilis natura* is used here as a synonym for fine texture (4.743).

Thus Lucretian *subtilis* and *persubtilis* do not represent an attempt at a literal translation of the corresponding Greek terms λεπτός and λεπτομερής. As in many other places in the poem, a precise translation from Greek into Latin is actually substituted for an appropriate image or metaphor which clarifies the aspect of φύσις in question.

It may strike us as odd that Lucretius uses an argument based on metaphor which actually emerged from the literal reading of the word *subtilis*. D. West gives numerous examples of this particular feature of Lucretius' imagery, 'the reckless fusing of the metaphorical and the literal, which would be inexcusable in a textbook' and which springs from 'the unrestrainable visualizing which is the source of so much energy and excitement in this poetry'.<sup>13</sup>

As I hope to show in this paper, the fascinating and puzzling poetic procedure that we see here, consisting in simultaneous focus on literal meaning of the word on one hand, and the latent metaphor it contains on the other hand, bears an obvious relation to the teaching of Epicurus. At the moment, I wish to limit my discussion to Lucretius' focus on literal meaning.

It seems that Epicurus disapproved of the use of words in unusual meanings, and was against arbitrary changes of the already existing links between words and objects. In *The Letter to Herodotus* we find a clear formulation of his view:

Πρῶτον μὲν οὖν τὰ ὑποτεταγμένα τοῖς φθόγγοις, ὧς Ἡρόδοτε, δεῖ εἰληφέναι, ὅπως ἂν τὰ δοξαζόμενα ἢ ζητούμενα ἢ ἀπορούμενα ἔχωμεν εἰς ταῦτα ἀναγαγόντες ἐπικρίνειν, καὶ μὴ ἄκριτα πάντα ἡμῖν «ἦ» εἰς ἄπειρον ἀποδεικνύουσιν ἢ κενὸς φθόγγους ἔχωμεν· ἀνάγκη γὰρ τὸ πρῶτον ἐννόημα καθ' ἕκαστον φθόγγον βλέπεσθαι καὶ μὴθὲν ἀποδείξεως προσδεῖσθαι, εἴπερ ἔξομεν τὸ ζητούμενον ἢ ἀπορούμενον καὶ δοξαζόμενον ἐφ' ὃ ἀνάξομεν. (*Ep. ad Herod.* 38)<sup>14</sup>  
(Epicurus warns Herodotus that we should first grasp the things to which the verbal utterances refer, in order to be able to distinguish

<sup>13</sup> West 1969:42-43.

<sup>14</sup> Based on C. Bailey's text in *Epicurus, The Extant Remains*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1926.

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opinions, matters of inquiry or questions by linking them back to these things. We should also grasp these things so that we do not have everything unclear while we keep explaining to infinity, and in order not to use empty verbal utterances. It is therefore necessary for us to see the first notion attributed to each verbal utterance, and it is necessary that there is no need for explanation, if we should have something to which we shall link a matter of inquiry, a question or an opinion.)<sup>15</sup>

Epicurus thus demands ‘one-to-one’ correspondence between a group of sounds and an object. This demand is based on two ideas about language and language-use: first, language must reflect reality; second, for successful communication it is necessary that the primary references of words are obvious to all participants. In my way of understanding, both of these requirements have an echo in the Lucretian example of *subtilis*. Thus the special focus on the first or literal meaning of words should be connected with the quality of clarity, which Lucretius emphasizes in his programmatic conclusion of the introduction to Book One. In other words, ‘it seems that the claims and perplexities of philosophical thought and dispute (sc. in Lucretius’ work) are ultimately reducible to the immediate and almost atomic clarity of a word’s first significance’.<sup>16</sup>

**IV** The following is another example of the way in which Lucretius supplements a literal translation from Greek by using a metaphor, in order to bridge a problem imposed by absence of an adequate Latin name for the concept he is trying to elucidate. In Book Three, Lucretius states that the soul is composed of four sorts of particles. These are particles of wind, air, warmth and a nameless element.<sup>17</sup> This nameless element is the finest and the most mobile part of the soul, and, in the process of sensation, it is the first to be moved.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> My interpretation of τὰ ὑποτεταγμένα τοῖς φθόγγοις and τὸ πρῶτον ἐννόημα is closer to D. K. Glidden (*Epicurean semantics*, ΣΥΖΗΤΗΣΙΣ, 1983, pp. 185-226), who suspects that Epicurus does not recognize intermediary interpretants between the verbal utterances and features of reality, than to C. Bailey (1926), who uses terms ‘meaning’ and ‘mental image’.

<sup>16</sup> D. Clay, *Lucretius and Epicurus*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1983, p. 67.

<sup>17</sup> 3.282 ff. The phrase *nominis expers* is an equivalent for the Greek ἀκατονόμαστον.

<sup>18</sup> 3.231-257.

The treatment of the subject begins with an echo of the complaint about the poverty of the Latin language, which we already met at the end of the introduction to Book One:

*Nunc ea quo pacto inter sese mixta, quibusque  
compta modis uigeant rationem reddere auentem,  
abstrahit inuitum patrii sermonis egestas;  
sed tamen, ut potero summatim attingere, tangam.* (3.259-61)

(Now, although I wish to give explanation how these components are mixed and how they are united, the poverty of my native language checks me against my will. Nevertheless, so far as I can touch upon the main points, I will tackle this topic.)

The following lines reveal the reason why the complaint occurs again in this part of the poem. When the poet undertakes to explain the nature of the fourth element, it becomes obvious how difficult it is to talk about an element which does not even have a name. While we can at least perceive wind, warmth and air, and thus have an idea about their particles, the fourth element is a matter so fine that it cannot be perceived:

*Nam penitus prorsum latet haec natura subestque,  
nec magis hac infra quicquam est in corpore nostro,  
atque anima est animae proporro totius ipsa.* (3.273-5)

(For this element hides itself and lies deep within and far beneath. In our body, there exists nothing beneath this limit and this element itself is the soul of our whole soul.)

As Bailey suggests, the adverbs *penitus* (within) and *infra* (beneath), indicating spatial distance, and the verbs *latet* (hides) and *subest* (lies deep), reflect the distance between the fourth element and our senses.<sup>19</sup> The idea of the 'depth' of the soul itself would be absolutely misleading. In effect, Lucretius is saying that there is nothing in our body that is farther below *the range of our senses*.<sup>20</sup> In the following line the idea is finally made clear through the force of an appropriately used metaphor: fourth element is *anima animae* (the soul of our whole soul).

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<sup>19</sup> Bailey 1947, vol. 2 ad 3.273-87

<sup>20</sup> Cf. 4.111-2 *quoniam primordia tantum | sunt infra nostros sensus tantoque minora* etc.

V The problem of the limits of our senses brings us to the field of epistemology. For Lucretius, as for Epicurus, sensation is the basis of our knowledge.<sup>21</sup> Let me take seeing as an example. According to Epicurus, we see things thanks to εἶδωλα, thin films emitted by objects. These films are supposed to preserve the forms of the objects from which they come and impress them on our eyes. But the films explain not only visual perception, smell and hearing—they also give an account of the process of thinking. The *differentia specifica* between the two is that the films which cause thought are thinner and finer than the films which cause perception. Frequent impinging of certain films leaves a certain result in our mind, and Lucretius seems to be referring to this result with the cognate nouns *notities* and *notitia*. These nouns may be his rather free interpretation of the Greek term πρόληψις.<sup>22</sup>

Lucretius does not give a definition of *notities*, but the contexts in which this word appears show that we may translate it as ‘notion’ or ‘concept’. A couple of examples strike me as being particularly instructive. In the passage explaining a conceptual likeness between the movement of the dust-particles in the beam of light and the movement of the

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<sup>21</sup> 1.422-5; 699-700. Cf. Epic. *Ep. ad Herod* 38.

<sup>22</sup> In the Epicurean philosophy of mind one of the basic concepts related to thinking is indicated by the term πρόληψις (Diog. Laert. *Vita Ep.* 31 a). Some scholars regard Lucretian *notities/notitia* as a rendering of πρόληψις, believing with Bailey that this term denotes a kind of expectation formed by empirical data derived from frequent sensations. However, this alleged Latin equivalent, taken from the common vocabulary, does not precisely convey the Greek notion of a knowledge ‘in advance’, an ‘anticipation’ or a ‘preconception’. As an answer to this incongruity, Bailey points out that Lucretius is often reluctant to translate a word literally and rather provides a natural Latin equivalent (Bailey 1947, vol. 1, p. 54). On the other hand, N. W. DeWitt interprets πρόληψις as a sort of innate idea, an ‘antonym of Plato’s ἀνάμνησις’, denying that Epicurus was an empiricist. Consequently, he believes that Lucretius did not understand the working of Epicurus’ πρόληψις (*Epicurus and His Philosophy*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1954, pp. 135-150). Glidden seems to be closer to him than to Bailey when he suggests that Epicurean πρόληψις are like the platonic forms, because ‘both designate portions of reality, as opposed to subjective thoughts’ (Glidden 1983, p. 224). In the following examples, the word *notities* may be translated as ‘anticipation’, but a less technical ‘notion’ seems to be less stretched and equally appropriate. It seems that the meaning ‘anticipation’ results more from our wish to make Lucretius entirely agree with Epicurus than from an accurate translation of what we see in Latin.

atoms in the void, Lucretius points out that a small everyday experience such as the perception of dust in the air can ‘give us traces’ and thus put us on the track ‘of a [more important] notion/concept’ (*dare...vestigia notitiae*)—the movement of invisible atoms (2.124). While the choice of words used here implies that the movement of atoms is a concept *hunted* by a philosopher, the overall sense of the passage shows that a concept of a phenomenon undetectable by our senses (movement of atoms) may be acquired by an *analogy* with a phenomenon well-known to our senses (movement of dust in the air under the beam of light). Similarly, in another passage we read that we can ‘form a concept’ of colorless bodies (*vorti in notitiam*) through the sense of touch, like blind people do (2.745). In these two cases notion or concept is gained not just through the senses, but through a sort of interaction between the senses and the mind.

**VI** We just saw how Lucretius compared the mind to a hunter. The image suggested an active role played by our mind in the process of forming an idea. This role seems to be the focus of a difficult Epicurean concept of ἐπιβολὴ τῆς διανοίας (projection of the mind).<sup>23</sup>

Earlier in the poem, in Book Two, Lucretius renders in Latin the phrase ἐπιβολὴ τῆς διανοίας. In this passage, already mentioned in the previous section, he claims that atoms have no color. Color is a secondary and changeable quality, and it actually depends on combination of atoms. Next, Lucretius wants to refute an objection:

*In quae corpora si nullus tibi forte uidetur  
posse animi iniectus fieri, procul auius erras.  
Nam cum caecigeni, solis qui lumina numquam  
dispexere, tamen cognoscant corpora tactu  
ex ineunte aevo nullo coniuncta colore,  
scire licet nostrae quoque menti corpora posse*

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<sup>23</sup> Bailey, author of the most complete analysis of the concept in Epicurus, argues that the phrase denotes activity of the mind which may be interpreted as ‘projection upon’, ‘attention to’, and in some cases as ‘apprehension’ and ‘view’. According to him, the ‘apprehension’ meant by this phrase includes apprehension of the finest films as well as apprehension of concepts, especially clear scientific concepts (C. Bailey, *The Greek Atomists and Epicurus*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1928, pp. 560-1).

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*uorti in notitiam nullo circumlita fuco. (2.739-45)*

(If by any chance it seems to you that no projection of the mind can reach these bodies, you wander afar from truth. For since the blind-born, although they have never looked on the sunlight, still identify by touch bodies which they never from their birth associated with any color, one may understand that for our mind bodies may also give rise to a general concept even if they are not painted with any color.)

The phrase 'projection of the mind' (*animi iniectus*) is an obvious translation of the Epicurean ἐπιβολή τῆς διανοίας. It suggests that the mind can move its attention in a certain direction, in this case 'downwards', beneath the limit of the senses, towards an apprehension of colorless atoms.

The other phrase rendering ἐπιβολή τῆς διανοίας, *animi iactus*, denotes the same process, but in a different direction. The mind moves its attention 'upwards', above the limit of the senses, towards the totality of the space of the universe:

*Quaerit enim rationem animus, cum summa loci sit  
infinita foris haec extra moenia mundi,  
quid sit ibi porro, quo prospicere usque uelit mens  
atque animi iactus liber quo peruolet ipse. (2.1044-7)*

(For the mind requires an explanation, since the totality of the space outside the borders of the world is infinite, what is it that lies out there. It wishes to extend its sight to that region, the region to which free projection of the mind would like to fly itself.)

The rationale of both phrases is clear: by a certain sort of action the mind can reach further than our senses, and essential elements of the scientific knowledge that we have are acquired through this activity.

**VII** It is time now to bring our observations together. We saw that Lucretius defines his basic task, the translation from Greek to Latin, as a task of a considerable difficulty. He has to interpret difficult Greek philosophical concepts with such an imperfect tool as the Latin language. The ideas of light and dark which he uses in the introduction to Book One define his overall task in terms of rendering the invisible visible.

We also saw that Lucretius points out that language bears a structural resemblance to nature. It consists of small elements, letters, which form an unlimited variety of combinations; every combination may be re-

duced to this simple set of signs for vocal utterances. According to Epicurus' principle discussed above, a word should correspond to an object in nature, or, in other words, a certain combination of letters should match a certain atomic formation. Thanks to this structural resemblance language becomes capable of reflecting nature and the way in which nature works.

The way in which Lucretius understands language may thus directly be related to the basic principle of Epicurus' *Main Doctrines*, viz. the atomic structure of the universe. The thread which brings us back to one of the basic Epicurean principles is not a surprising discovery. Epicurus composed his *Main Doctrines* as an epitome of the whole philosophical system he developed, and he expected his students to commit its maxims to memory. In this way they would always have in view the basic truths to which the reality can be reduced.<sup>24</sup>

However, Lucretius' work exhibits utmost confidence in the educational force of poetry, which does not seem to be consistent with the teaching of Epicurus, whose famous words, Παιδείαν δὲ πᾶσαν, μακάριε, φεύγε τὰκᾶτιον ἀράμενος (Hoist your sail, dear boy, and run away from all culture, Diog. Laert. X, 6) reveal the opposite attitude. But Lucretius' approach to Epicurus is determined by the needs of his own personality, his own time and his own society, and this is why his poetry finds justification in another Epicurean postulate:

ὅθεν καὶ περὶ τῶν ἀδήλων ἀπὸ τῶν φαινομένων χρή σημειοῦσθαι. καὶ γὰρ καὶ ἐπίνοιαί πᾶσαι ἀπὸ τῶν αἰσθήσεων γεγόνασιν κατὰ τε περίπτωσιν καὶ ἀναλογίαν καὶ ὁμοιότητα καὶ σύνθεσιν, συμβαλλομένον τι καὶ τοῦ λογισμοῦ. (Diog. Laert. X, 32)<sup>25</sup>  
(One should infer about that which does not come within the range of senses from that which does. For all our notions arise from our perceptions, through actual encountering, or through analogy, similarity or composition, with some aid from reasoning.)

This postulate explains Lucretius' general confidence in poetry, and places his particular interest in metaphors and poetic images on a firm

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Clay 1983, pp. 73-81; 176-91.

<sup>25</sup> After M. Marcovich, *Diogenes Laertius, Vitae philosophorum, lib. I-X*, vol. 1, Stuttgartiae-Lipsiae 1999.

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epistemological foundation. Lucretius assumes that poetry, the art of language, is capable of reflecting nature and communicating it through our sense-perception. Thus, in accordance with the general Epicurean views on our cognitive processes, he relates the literal meanings of words to our sense-experience, and uses their metaphorical meanings to form this sense-experience into theoretical knowledge and explain phenomena like atoms, void or soul—the phenomena which lie outside the range of our senses. Our examination of the Lucretian epistemology revealed that both cognitive categories which he mentions, *notities* (concept) and *animi iactus* (projection of the mind), involve precisely the mental activity by which we grasp a metaphor: recognition of analogy. Thus the work of Lucretius embodies the fact that we have been rediscovering in 20th century, namely that theory of verbal expression and theory of philosophical inquiry cannot stand apart.

In conclusion, even if this may sound pretentious, I think that, following the guiding principles we found in *De rerum natura*, we should be able to point out the exact place in Lucretius' mind where the three inter-related aspects of his poetic activity come together. Mediation between Greek and Latin, mediation between the realm of nature and the realm of poetic language and mediation between the knowledge acquired through senses and the knowledge acquired through inference—these three aspects, taken together, perfectly reflect the semantic field of the Latin word *translatio*. The mechanism indicated by the abstract *translatio*, namely the transfer from one place to another, from one language to another, or from one idea to another, comprises and unifies the threefold interpretative, poetic and philosophical nature of Lucretius' work. Finally, this mechanism also sheds light on a crucial point of convergence of poetry and philosophy, namely the use of the creative power of language as a bridge from the world of senses to the world of mind.

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