# *Nil igitur mors est:* Uncontrolled Desire and the Fear of Death in Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* and Vergil's *Aeneid*

Colin Cascio, Humanism in Antiquity II

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Titus Lucretius Carus and Publius Vergilius Marus were two of the most prominent authors in Roman history and all of literature. Both authors wrote epic poems that dealt with motifs such as fear, loss, and the inevitability of fate. But it is in grappling with these motifs that troubling themes start to emerge, dealing with desire and an individual's role in philosophy. Through their epic poems, both authors contest that uncontrolled desire for the material is a manifestation of the fear of death in the individual.

Lucretius' epic poem, *De Rerum Natura* attempts to make sense of the problem of uncontrolled material desire. The poem concludes that the root of this desire is the fear of death. Lucretius describes many instances in which desire runs rampant and leads to despair for the desirous, saying, "But nothing is more blissful than to… see them wandering everywhere in their random search for the way of life, competing for intellectual eminence, disputing about rank, and striving night and day with prodigious effort to scale the summit of wealth and to secure power" (*DRN* 2.7-11). Lucretius describes the sensation of seeing others suffer, while knowing that the observer is not suffering. He touches upon several themes that would eventually appear in Vergil's *Aeneid* but most notably the want for the material—"intellectual eminence," "rank," and "the summit of wealth"—and the pain that it brings. He describes this desire as a "random search for the way of life." Words like "random" and "search" portray those desirous as lost and confused. He even uses words like "competing" and "disputing" to show that this "search" is antithetical to what he deems good: the lack of desire. The phrases "striving day and night" and "prodigious effort" emphasize the futility and exhausting toil of this affair. But the most telling word that Lucretius uses is "wandering." The word evokes a

sense of confusion and the idea that something is missing: much like the feelings of the titular character of Vergil's *Aeneid*. Aeneas spends much of the epic "wandering," in search of a new home. Lucretius' sentiment above almost refers to Aeneas specifically. After rousing his men with a speech, a distraught Aeneas hides his true feelings from his crew. Vergil writes, "Aeneas said this, and though he was sick with worry he put on a good face and pushed his anguish deep into his heart" (*Aen*. 1.245-247). Aeneas' desire for a new home and his masking of his emotions bring on anguish, so much to the point that he becomes "sick with worry." The physicality of Vergil's descriptions evokes the idea of the holistic effects of Aeneas' worry. The anguish is so severe that it spreads from his mind to his body. The dichotomy between mind and body also shows that his desire is at odds with what is truly good for Aeneas. His "anguish" is tied to "putting on a good face," against what he feels. The key phrase in the quote though is "deep into his heart." The despair he feels manifests so viscerally into the core of who Aeneas is, that it strikes into the deepest part of him: "his heart."

Lucretius comments further on the manifestation of fear in desire, writing, "To this end they swell their fortune through the bloodshed of civil war and greedily multiply their wealth, heaping up murder on murder; they take cruel delight in a brother's death that should be mourned, and their relatives' tables are objects of abhorrence and fear" (*DRN* 3.71-74). Aeneas uses a quasi-"civil war" to found a new race and achieve glory for himself, "greedily multiplying his wealth by marrying the princess of Latium. Lucretius deliberately uses sharp imagery with vocabulary like "bloodshed," "murder," and "abhorrence and fear" to show the weight of the effects of this fear. He also juxtaposes "cruel" and "delight" once again to show the incompatibility between desire and freedom from fear, but the fact that it is "delight in a

brother's death" makes the sentiment that much more damning. His most interesting choice of vocabulary, however, is "tables." In the third book of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas and his men run afoul of a trio of harpies who, in turn, curse them. Celaeno, one of the furies says, "But you shall not surround your city with walls / until terrible hunger—and the way you wronged us— / drives you to chew and swallow your tables" (*Aen*. 3.293-294). This prophecy eventually proves to be much less dire than the crew anticipated, but its sentiment remains true. The tables here represent the material desire of Aeneas. It is only after he "chews and swallows" the tables—id est conquering his desire—that he is free from his toils and wanderings. The vocabulary that Vergil uses grounds the sentiment in the physical. The use of the future tense also provides a framework through which Aeneas operates by showing that Aeneas eventually will found a new race, giving the reader hope and a model through which to contextualize both the narrative and the philosophy.

A character that best represents the pain of desires is Turnus, the once betrothed to Lavinia and would-be heir to the Latium kingdom. Brash, abrasive, and desirous of the Latin throne, Turnus is dominated by a lust for power that brings about strife and his eventual downfall. His demise begins in book seven, when Allecto descends on Turnus whispering, "Turnus, will you allow all your work to be washed away, and the scepter handed to these Dardanian settlers?" (*Aen* 7.515). This simple question inflames Turnus's passion. She begins with a direct address and ends with the phrase "Dardanian settlers." This framing of the sentence helps contextualize what is at stake for Turnus by contrasting the two forces. Moreover, in the center of the sentence, the word "scepter" functions as a symbol of power which is normally handed to the next legitimate ruler. The use of the passive voice highlights

not only the powerlessness of Turnus but also the passiveness of the settlers. But what is perhaps most effective is the imagery of all Turnus' work "washing away" to the tides of history. This visitation incites Turnus to bring war to the settlers. To do so he rouses his men saying, "No, I mean to ring their walls with fire in broad daylight, and I will make sure they know they are not dealing now with the youth of Greece, Whom Hector held off for ten long years (*Aen*. 9.186-189)." Turnus responds to the phrase "wash away" used by Allecto when he expresses desire to "ring their walls with fire." The opposite imagery of water and fire shows the strength and resolve of both Allecto and Turnus—that they are like a force of nature. The opposition of the two forces also reflects that Allecto's intentions are incongruous to what will eventually bring Turnus "good." Turnus' inclusion of "broad daylight" shows his purpose is absolute and he does not want to sneak around in the dead of night like the Greeks did to the Trojans. He also evokes the idea of his prestige and honor by contrasting both his men and himself to "the youth of Greece" and evoking the idea of Hector, Aeneas' old friend. Lucretius would identify this exchange as a cause of Turnus' suffering, arguing, "And greed, again, and the blind lust of honours / Which force poor wretches past the bounds of law… dislodged afar from secure life and sweet, / like huddling Shapes before the doors of death" (*DRN* 3.60-70). Turnus's entitlement and "blind lust of honor" is simply—according to Lucretius—his fear of death: it is his loss of lineage and posterity to the Trojan settlers. Lucretius even alludes to the upcoming quasi-civil war between the Trojans and the Latins with the phrase "past the bounds of law." This security is "dislodged" from a sustainable and safe life by strife because it is predicated on uncontrolled desire.

Turnus' insatiable desire for power has much direr consequences than simple psychological erring. It brings about his inevitable destruction. Yet, because of his desire, Turnus wills his end unto himself. This moment singularizes when he announces his plan to attack the Trojans, against the signs of the gods, saying "The oracles these Phrygians boast of / don't scare me one bit" (Aen. 9.161-162). Turnus attacks against the gods wishes, against what is natural to him. He boasts about ignoring fear, but it is his failure to yield to fear and his failure to curb his desire to stop the Trojans that brings about his death. Even this is not enough for Turnus. He escalates the situation even more a few lines later, saying, "And I have my own fate: / to cut the heart out of a race guilty of stealing my bride!" (*Aen*. 9.166-167). Turnus equivocates his fate by equating *his* interpretation of fate with the gods'. By "cutting the heart out of a race," he doesn't want just to destroy them but to annihilate them entirely taking out the very core of the race itself. His presumption that Lavinia is his bride, and therefore his possession stems from his uncontrolled desire. Lucretius would compare Turnus' lust for power to an epic Sisyphus, writing, "Sisyphus too exists in this light before our eyes: he is the man who thirstily solicits from the people the rods and grim axes of high office and always comes away disappointed and despondent" (*DRN* 3.996). Turnus' continuous inciting of his men's' anger is like the politician continually running for office, and—just like Turnus—coming back in defeat. The "Sisyphean" task of acquiring approval is another manifestation of desire. The word "thirstily" highlights the material by connecting it to body imagery. Even the grim axes suggest fasces, making Turnus' power-hungry quest even more megalomaniacal. Lucretius is urging the reader not to think of Sisyphus as just a mythical figure but as someone affecting life in Rome in contemporary times, continuing, "For to seek power that is illusory and never

granted, and to suffer continual hardship in pursuit of it, is the same as to push up a mountain with might and main a rock that, after all this effort, rolls back from the summit and in impetuous haste races down to the level plain" (*DRN* 3.997). Almost the entire thesis of Lucretius' third book can be summed up in the first few words: "power is illusory." This power is predicated on the arbitrary will of the masses, and like material desire, is unsustainable. Just like a giant boulder on a mountaintop, he who is in power can quickly fall down to the most level plain.

One of the most common ways that material desire manifest so viscerally is in the idea of love. Its combination of physical and emotional craving lends to many opportunities for suffering. Lucretius devotes almost an entire book of his epic poem to the follies of love. To him, the idea of love is just the body's interpretation of images. But he argues that these images cause us pain, writing, "it is advisable to shun such images, to abstain from all that feeds your love, and to turn your attention elsewhere" (*DRN* 4.1061). His anaphoric repetition culminates in an ascending tricolon to drive home the point that desire of a lover, especially a singular lover, is pain. It is not enough just to ignore these images, but one must actively be distracted by something else. This is another spot where Lucretius uses physical language like "feeds" to show that this is a physical desire. All the infinitives that he uses are predicated on the word "advisable," showing that Lucretius' philosophy is beneficial to the reader. Lucretius explains further that these images are unsustainable, writing, "but from the fair face and complexion of a human being nothing passes into the body for enjoyment except impalpable images, a sorry hope often snatched away by the wind" (*DRN* 4.1097). Lucretius' description is somewhat bleak, emphasizing words like "nothing," "impalpable," "sorry." These words evoke a sense of

unfulfillment and emptiness, much like the “impalpable images” of love. He uses more physical imagery to tie the sensation to the material: “fair face” and “body;” however, he also combines that with more natural imagery. The phrase “snatched away by the wind” evokes a sense of both nature and the divine. The “wind’s” purpose is twofold: on the one hand, it represents the fleetingness of these images, that they can be blown away by something as fickle as a gust of wind; on the other hand, it also represents the divine power, something that only the gods control. Therefore, if the gods “snatch away” these images, they are not beneficial to the perceiver. There is no character more representative of this than Vergil’s Dido. Having been infatuated with Aeneas, whom she calls her new husband, she begins to neglect her governing duties. Vergil writes, “But the Queen, long sick with love, / nurses her heart’s deep wound / with her pounding blood, and dark flames / lick at her soul” (*Aen*. 4.1-4) Vergil opening his book with this line sets a tone of foreboding and trepidation. Dido is “sick with love,” evoking negative body imagery. Love is portrayed as a sickness that infects Dido and her mind. Vergil takes this metaphor even further, saying that it nurses her heart’s deep wound.” This is not just a sickness that infects her body, but the very core of who she is.  He then evokes images of evil: “pounding blood” and “dark flames,” which “lick at her soul.” These phrases juxtapose contradicting ideas, further emphasizing the folly of Dido’s obsessive attraction. Vergil then elaborates on Dido’s state of mind, writing, “thoughts of Aeneas— the man’s heroic lineage, his noble character— / flood her mind, his face and words transfix / her heart, and her desire gives her no rest” (*Aen*. 4.4-7). Vergil drives the point home most effectively with his verb choice, namely “flood,” and “transfix.” These words give the stranglehold which the image of Aeneas has on her much more gravitas. Vergil also opens the line with the word “thoughts.”

This word choice corroborates Lucretius' thesis that love is just the interpretation of images. But it is not just thoughts of Aeneas himself, but also his eminence and rank. "This vocabulary calls to mind Lucretius' observations in Book 2. The "random search for the way of life" (*DRN* 2.7-11) is what Dido is experiencing. Her "desire [giving] no rest" is perhaps the most complex phrase in this quotation. Not only does it portray her desire as a relentless force, but it giving her no rest alludes to her eventual downfall, by throwing herself on the sword.

Dido's and Aeneas' love tryst distracts both lovers from their duties; Aeneas from founding his race, and Dido from governing her people. Rumor descends to spread the news of Dido and Aeneas' relationship and sow the seeds of discord, saying, "and now they indulge themselves the winter long, / neglecting their realms, slaves to shameful lust" (*Aen*. 4.218-219). Vergil's vocabulary plays with sound as much as it does words. The consonance of the 'L' sound drives home the accusation of Aeneas and Dido, almost to the point of mocking. Words like "indulge," "neglecting," and "shameful" are loaded terms that imply a level of guilt and even embarrassment. The term "realm" reminds the reader of the responsibility which these two hold to their people. The inclusion of winter also drives home the point that the Carthaginians' leaders are abandoning them when they need the help the most: in the harsh winter months. Aeneas even neglects his fate so much that Jupiter sends Mercury down to remind Aeneas of his duty, saying, "Are you, of all people / laying the foundations of lofty Carthage / and building a beautiful city—for a woman?" (*Aen.* 4.299-301). The partitive genitive of "people" singles out Aeneas and reminds both Aeneas of his destiny and the reader of his prestige and lineage by singling him out amongst a myriad of other people. Aeneas is supposed to be laying the foundations of lofty Rome, not Carthage. This unexpected switch

highlights just how neglectful Aeneas is, due to his distraction by images of love. Vergil also juxtaposes city and woman—with beautiful functioning as a transferred epithet to compare the longevity and prestige of the city to the ephemerality of a human woman. This problem is not exclusive to Vergil. Lucretius comments almost directly on this incident, writing, "Remember too that the lover consumes his strength and is exhausted by the strain; remember that his life is ruled by another. His duties are neglected; his reputation totters and dwindles" (*DRN*. 4.1121-1123). Lucretius even uses the same language that Vergil uses: "neglecting" in *Aen*. 4.219, but he takes it one step further. According to Lucretius, Aeneas' life is ruled by Dido. Once again Lucretius employs vocabulary such as "exhaustion" and "strain" to show the futility of love and the desire for it and also "totters" and dwindles" to show the unsustainability of love and its images.

Dido's obsession with Aeneas quickly becomes one-sided. With a newly kindled passion to found a new home for his people, Aeneas becomes disinterested and leaves an impassioned Dido. Lucretius warns of disaster for the lovers, writing "but when love is frustrated and unrequited, the miseries you can spot with your eyes shut are countless" (*DRN* 4.1142). Dido is blind to everything except her passion for Aeneas. The adjective "countless" does more than describe a large number. It also highlights the incompetency of the one ensnared in love's grasp. The lover cannot even count the myriad of troubles he has created for himself. Dido's "frustrated and unrequited" love is taken to the worst possible extreme. Unable to take the pain, she falls on her sword. Vergil describes the pain that Dido feels right before she dies. He writes, "her anxiety mounts, and her love surges back / and seethes, wave after wave on a furious sea" (*Aen*. 4.619-620). The violent and almost-thrashing imagery creates a

strong sense of tension through Vergil's verb choice. The metaphor relating her pain to waves on a sea, crashing on the shore in a storm lets the tension build and build which will eventually climax at Dido's suicide. This rhetorically emphasizes and showcases the physical and emotional pain of desire for Dido. The reader deduces the harmful effects as well: death. At the end of his fourth book, Lucretius ponders a similar sentiment, he writes, "have you not noticed that even drops of water falling upon a rock in long lapse of time hollow out that rock?" (*DRN* 4.1287). Both authors end on very bleak notes, juxtaposing the seemingly small and insignificant power of love with the perceived might of even a queen. The images' ability to whittle and eventually fell Dido and any lover with the misfortune of falling victim to these desires paints a somber tone for understanding the ability to resist such desires and temptations.

Both authors' fourth books end in a way that becomes a microcosm for the rest of the epic poem, namely, the endings. The *Aeneid* ends abruptly and sharply with Aeneas killing Turnus instead of showing him mercy. Vergil writes, "The man's limbs / went limp and cold, and with a moan / his soul fled resentfully down to the shades" (Aen 12.1155-1157). Vergil starts the quotation with the body ("the man's limbs") and ends with the "soul." He follows the soul as it leaves Turnus' body out his mouth "with a moan," an expression of a deep-seated pain. The words "limp" and "cold" also show both the specific, and even sickening, physical effects of his death, but also show the state in which Turnus' soul was: cold and unfeeling, untouched by the benefits of philosophy or the freedom from desire. Even in Turnus' death, however, he still does not find peace. His soul leaves "resentfully" from his body showing that death is no end to suffering brought on by desire in the world of Vergil. The *De Rerum Natura* ends on a similarly bleak note. Describing the gruesome effects of the plague at Athens,

Lucretius delves into how it affected the people, writing, “with loud clamoring people would place their own relatives on pyres piled high for others and apply torches to them, often engaging in bloody brawls rather than abandon the bodies (*DRN* 6.1283-1285). Here, Lucretius’ philosophy is at its bleakest yet its most effective. People cling to death so tightly that they behave like animals instead of humans, getting into fights just so they can remain with dead bodies, whose lives have passed. But Lucretius’ main point is that death is a scary thing, and confronting it is not simple or easy. But Lucretius’ philosophy is not as bleak as it would seem. Death is natural but it does not have to be frightening. Lucretius closes his third book with a comforting sentiment, writing, “Therefore, however many generations your life may span, the same eternal death will still await you; and one who ended life with today’s light will remain dead no less long than the one who perished many months and years ago” (*DRN* 1090-1093). While the thought that death is absolute and all-encompassing can be disquieting, it also provides a strange sense of comfort. There is nothing humans can do to prolong or avoid death, so why fear it? To Lucretius and Vergil, death is a natural part of life. It is through these texts that philosophy was able to provide a way to confront questions about desire and the fear of death.

Works Cited

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