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Sweet Dreams Are Made of This: Lucretius, DRN 4.907-1026 and the Sound of Images

Book IV of the *De Rerum Natura* is devoted to the doctrine of sensation. After the famous proem, Lucretius illustrates the Epicurean doctrine of *simulacra* (*eidola*), images of unsurpassed fineness emanating from solid bodies (*DRN* 4.34-337; cf. Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus* 46-53). By colliding with the atomic texture of our sense organs, these *simulacra* cause us to experience sensations and perceive the physical world.

In the sections of Book IV devoted to sexual desire and to human perceptions during sleep and in dreams, Lucretius' propensity for sound play emphasizes key moments of Epicurus' doctrine, not to mention the ironies deriving from sound play. In this paper I shall focus on alliteration and assonance, as well as rhetorical features such as the etymological figure and paronomasia, which Lucretius uses as sound devices to draw attention to the doctrine of *simulacra*, an important part of the Epicurean theory of knowledge. Introducing his explanation of how one falls asleep, Lucretius explicitly calls to the attention of his addressee the specificity of his poetic language. Repeating a simile he employed earlier to explain the speed of the *simulacra* (180-2 = 909-11), he says that his verse shall be as short as the swan's song, and by so doing he alerts his audience to the phonic features of his diction. Indeed, the lines that follow are particularly rich in sound play.

For instance, describing the dislocation of the soul within and outside of the body as one falls asleep, Lucretius says (916-7): *somnus fit ubi est disTRActa per ARTus / vis animae*. The 'symmetrical' sound of the sequence TRA/ART focuses the attention of the audience on the phrase *distracta per artus*, which is key to the passage in question. Spreading through the limbs, some of the soul's atoms temporarily migrate out of the body, while some crowd together as if thrust into the body's innermost recesses (918). What is being described is nothing other than atomic displacement. Indeed, the assonance might suggest a flight of the soul's atoms away from the body, as well as the opposite motion of the soul's atoms congregating in a recondite recess within the atomic structure of the body. This same phrase is repeated in line 946 in a different metrical position, yet with the same rhythm (--uu--). Alliteration also plays a significant role in this passage. For instance in line 940, we find the quadruple alliteration in *p-*, *perveniant plagae per parva*, where the sound of the voiceless labial occlusive phonically mimics the sense of the expression: *p p p p*, like small repeated strikes of atoms upon atoms.

Far from being a mere stylistic feature, the poet's obsessive use of alliteration and assonance unveils, as I hope to show, a remarkable didactic strategy to alert both audience and addressee to the Epicurean doctrine's most significant aspects. As Lucretius himself says in the proem to Book IV, poetry is the honey needed to sweeten the bitter draught of Epicurus' difficult teachings.