

**Dan SOLOMON**

**Superstitious addition of opinion in Lucretius, 2. 598-660**

Lucretius account of the cult of Cybele (2. 598-660) is generally construed as a digressive apology for using mythological poetry to explicate Epicurean physics. After provocatively referring to the Earth as the great mother for containing the "seeds" of all living creatures, he self-consciously juxtaposes his choice of words with that of the Corybantes, who also acclaim their goddess as Magna Mater (2. 598-660). In recent years Piet Schrijvers, James Jope, and Monica Gale have more extensively contrasted the poetics of Lucretius with the ethics of the Corybantes; these scholars suggest that Lucretius intends respectively to seduce, to frighten, or to entertain the reader with a parody of allegoresis. But what in Lucretius' description would specifically induce the reader to choose philosophy over superstition here? What prepares us to accept his own conclusion that the actions of the Corybantes are attractive but irrational (*eximie disposta.../ tamen a uera ratione repulsa*)? I suggest that the cult of Cybele, when read in its epistemological context, is more explicitly a parable of un-Epicurean thought and language: the worshippers poignantly add their opinions to their direct perception of the goddess.

Epicurus basic principle for judging opinions is to isolate that which underlies the words that express them (Ep. Hdt., 37.6-38.2; all citations will be supplied on an accompanying handout); he appeals to criteria of truth which are universal, for they correspond to the collective unadulterated sense-perceptions all humans experience. In these terms falsehood arises as a result of an addition of opinion (*prosdoxazomenon*) to the perceptual data (Ep. Hdt., 51. 8-13, lines expunged by some editors but which well illustrate the Epicurean view). By integrating these two passages, scholars have to different degrees posited an epistemological model that associates falsehood with complicated extrapolation from the original perception.

Our primary Epicurean sources (as opposed to the versions in Diogenes Laertius and Sextus Empiricus) never illustrate this process by an example, but particularly helpful applications can be found in three separate accounts of how humans perceive the images of the gods. Epicurus *Letter to Menoecus* (123, 2-9), the anonymous POxy. 215 (col. 2. 1-11), and Diogenes of Oenoanda (fr. 19 Smith) all concur in portraying ostentatious acts of worship as additions of fear to appropriate (*oikeioi*) expressions of reverence for superior beings. It is not the act of worship itself which is problematic, for the ritual procession can in fact help the Epicurean to perceive the divine images; the main issue is rather the disposition of the worshipper, who either fears divine retribution or - what is more sinister - aims to promote his social status by appearing "more impressive" (*chariesteros*). Epicureans remind that only pleasurable blessedness and immortality underlie the divine primary notion. Worshippers who indulge in bizarre, mournful, and, of course, self-mutilating acts of worship are externalizing the painful connotations of Providence or Nemesis which they themselves have superimposed.

No wonder Lucretius accumulates verbs of addition (*adiunxere; cinxere; praedita; dant; attribuunt*) to denote the devotees misinterpretations of their *imago* (2.609):

statue/perceptual image). To the untrained eye the ceremony may appear an appealing display of filial piety and patriotism (see especially 642), but linguistic parallels with Lucretius' origin of superstition (5. 1194-1240) confirm that idolatry inevitably degenerates into violence, madness, and fear. From these delusions the author distances himself and his expert reader with two parallel sets of speaking verbs, indicating that the Corybantes reveal their ignorance in the manner by which they designate external objects (611; 612; 616, echoed at 633; 634; 641). In Epicurean terms, these people are opposing alien opinions to their own human nature, a transgression which Lucretius characteristically conveys through Hellenizing vocabulary. But when the poet himself adopts mythological or otherwise metaphorical diction, his beliefs legitimize his language (657: *proprium (=oikeion) proferre uocamen*), for his use of great mother directly signifies the Earth. For Epicureans, the only benefit of prayer is emulation of moral paradigms (6.68-78); by showing appropriate respect for the generative capabilities of the Earth, the sage will accordingly transcend mortal limitations through a cosmic perspective.