

Analysis of p. 59 On the Nature of Things (68-80)

Lucretius has a very descriptive and intriguing writing style and makes many suggestive and imperative statements throughout his book, On the Nature of Things. Lucretius is very opinionated on many topics including religion, life, matter, and human impulses. In a section of Book Two, he discusses matter as it relates to life and death. Specifically, Lucretius addresses the inevitability of development and corrosion that all living things experience.

In this section, Lucretius initially discusses that matter is not clumped together. He illustrates this argument strongly by separating the word “gummed” from the word “together”. This helps to prove his point of separation between all matter, and placing these two words apart from each other more clearly shows how distinct this separation is. After this statement he discusses the flow of all matter throughout the ages, and this section is not surprisingly very fluid. The commas occur as they should, and sentences are broken up correctly without pause. Matter is a prominent theme in this book, and Lucretius believes that atoms and matter are all made up from random chaos, and believes there is no purpose or order to living and dying, it just happens.

Lucretius explains that despite the flow of matter through the ages, “the universe persists”. Regardless of what people may do with their actions and choices, the world will continue to go on and life itself will not cease to exist simply because of one man’s actions. He puts emphasis on his statement that “the universe persists”, by allowing no room for argument with his period at the end of this phrase. This simple period actually expresses the finality and belief that he has in that statement and it is no surprise that this is his belief as his view on “the nature of things” quite obviously shows that people are simply beings with a life and a death. Lucretius finds no use in pondering the afterlife, and strongly discourages it, as it does not allow one to reach their potential ataraxia. To further explain this

randomness of the atoms, and the lack of continuity between each atom, Lucretius states: “For when atoms fall away, they leave the thing / Diminished; ... ” (73-74) The style, punctuation, and line break in these two lines is extremely suggestive. He breaks the line as soon as he discusses the atoms leaving, and with the new line says that they may also be diminished. The breaking of the line in such a spot makes a lot of sense, because Lucretius first suggests leaving as an absence, but then changes the meaning in the next line by proposing that atoms “diminish” rather than “leave”. This idea of fading away versus immediately disappearing is important, because the next concept Lucretius addresses is specifically about atoms as they relate to human beings (which is obviously somewhat different than all other living things).

After Lucretius finishes his statement about diminishing, he separates his thought with a colon and opposes his statement by explaining that though the atoms may leave, they will increase and reside someplace else (this is the idea that nothing can come from nothing, matter is never lost). As human beings grow older, things begin to change (wrinkles, agility, and energy) but Lucretius describes this process in a most beautifully intimate way. Instead of negatively describing the aging process, Lucretius chooses the word “blossom”. Lucretius is known for his poetic style, and this word choice is a great example of his strengths as a poetic writer. In a way, this “blossoming” is a metaphor between human beings and flowers. A flower starts off small, grows, and when it blossoms it is the most beautiful, but it will always die shortly after that last stage of beauty. Lucretius thinks that human beings are quite similar, and indicates this with his colorful description. Again, though, it is shown that all things must come to an end, and humans are no different than the tulips in their own yard.

In this short passage, the word “whole” is used twice, and the second time it is used it is capitalized. The first usage is an adjective describing the persistence of the universe. The second time the word “Whole” is the universe. After discussing the cycle of life and its completion of “blossoming”, he explains that the “Whole” is constantly renewed by this perpetual cycle.

This passage starts off with the small example of matter, and then proceeds to discuss the entire

universe and nature. Logically, Lucretius closes the passage with the discussion of human beings and *their* cycle of life. He explains that humans sacrifice their lives for many different causes, and in the process some groups of people may gain power and wealth, while others may “diminish” (possibly Lucretius’ version of the survival of the fittest). Though it is depressing to believe that people just come and go, Lucretius still manages to positively end the passage.

Often poets use metaphors and similes to help illustrate certain themes or points. As it is evident in the information preceding, Lucretius uses these tools quite often. “Round the short track all generations change / Like racers passing on the torch of life.” (79-80) Life is equivalent to a race track, which has much implication with Lucretius’ belief of the cycle of life (a distinct beginning and ending). And while running the “race of life”, the generations grow and change. In the end, each generation passes on the skills and tools (the “torch of life”) that are necessary for survival to their children.

This passage, though short, brings out Lucretius’ love for poetic language, and explains his perception of life in a most beautiful way. Throughout this book, Lucretius disregards the Gods, materialism, sexual experiences, and many others. He doesn’t believe that they matter, and this passage explains why. Though the cycle of life is just simply a circle to him, it still holds importance and meaning, even if only for the next generation. Lucretius focuses on the cycle of life, and not so much what happens during it. To him, it is irrelevant if one is wealthy or noble, because in the end everyone still dies. Lucretius’ argument does not appear so blunt and depressing, though, because of his flowery language and descriptive metaphors. Lucretius’ had a way with words, and this passage of *On the Nature of Things* most likely helped readers to accept (or at least consider) Lucretius’ opinion without feeling dismal because of it. Lucretius’ own way of shaping and helping the next generation.