

James I. PORTER

Body to Void: Horror Vacui, the Sublime, and the Structure of DRN

The critical closing books of Lucretius' poem have been too quickly labeled by consensus as the last pair of a triad devoted to "World" (as opposed to the pairs, "Atoms" of books 1-2, and "Man" of books 3-4), each pair repeating the triad within its own internal structure. The uncertainty of this internal repetition aside, books 5-6, apparently organized around ideas of prodigious earthly and cosmic marvels, are governed by a far subtler subtext. They are in fact about the porosity and voiding of sensible matter, and are ultimately about void as the absence (or unintelligibility) of matter itself. Hence, the dominant theme of book 5, the perishability of matter, its reducibility to nonsense; while matter paradoxically provides the concept of what is deprived of sense and vital motion. And hence, too, the extraordinary density of terms for emptiness in book 6: *cava*, *cavernae*, *speluncae*, *vacuum*, *vacefit*, *inanis*, *fauces*, *caulae*, *barathrum*, etc.

Book 6 makes a disturbing Epicurean argument in extremis: its focus is trained on bodies lapsing into emptiness, collapsing, and caving in. Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, vast cloud formations, magnets, and the boundless universe are all metaphors for the emptying out of sensation's contents. They represent the physics of sensation; as fearful, they represent an untrained response to the atomistic view of nature. They are fearful not because they threaten us with mortal danger, but (I wish to argue) because they involve us in a horror vacui. They confront us with the potential absence of a material foundation in which we can securely place our trust. Matter gapes wide in them. So stated, they are a precise mirror of the ontology of atomism itself and its ultimate threat to commonsense ontology. If you have any doubts about it, Lucretius says, just look down at the ground beneath your feet (cf. 3.26-27). Epicurus' attested aversion to Chaos (DL 10.2) and to the annihilation of matter (*nihil ex nihilo* or *ad nilum*) are further indices of the Epicurean horror vacui (the abhorrence of blank void).

The ethical alternative to fear may well be, however, the sublime (*voluptas atque horror*). A comparison with [Longin.] c. 35 will establish this point with astonishing exactness. It also raises a question about literary debts: is *De Subl.* alluding to DRN, or to a shared tradition? To claim that DRN's actual structure passes from Atomology to World is to misdescribe the poem in a most basic way. Rather, that structure describes a large-scale, macrocosmic trajectory that repeats the poem's innermost, and most sublime, dialectic -- namely, the passage from Body to Void -- with the ethical response of Mankind at its troubled center.