

***THE RECEPTION OF LUCRETIUS' SECOND PROEM:
THE TOPOS THAT NEVER WAS***

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to reappraise the famous Lucretian proem of the “shipwreck with spectator”. The analysis of early commentaries of the poem shows that our current interpretation, as reflected by present-day commentaries and scholarship, is biased by previous, Humanistic readings. These early readings, in turn, pointed to supposed parallels and antecedents to the Lucretian proem, which are not related to it. Once we discard the supposed parallels, we can fully appreciate the poignancy and singularity of the image, which in any case was not a topos in antiquity. Literary responses to the image have usually taken an antagonistic stance towards Lucretius and voiced the protests of the shipwreck victim rather than the serenity of the spectator. The question remains as to the significance of the image, which seems to voluntarily shake and subvert common ethics. The answer is to be found in Lucretius’ Epicureanism, which reveals the passage as being devoid of any callous overtones.

1. OLD READINGS, PERSISTENT INTERPRETATIONS

*Suave, mari magno turbantibus aequora ventis,
e terra magnum alterius spectare laborem;
non quia vexari quemquamst iucunda voluptas,
sed quibus ipse malis careas quia cernere suave est.
Suave etiam belli certamina magna tueri
per campos instructa tua sine parte pericli.
Sed nil dulcius est bene quam munita tenere
edita doctrina sapientum templa serena,*

*despicere unde queas alios passimque videre
errare atque viam palantis quaerere vitae,
certare ingenio, contendere nobilitate,
noctes atque dies niti praestante labore
ad summas emergere opes rerumque potiri.
O miseris hominum mentes, o pectora caeca!*¹

The shipwreck image that opens the proem to Lucretius' second book has never ceased to attract critical and scholarly attention since the *De rerum natura* was rediscovered in 1417. So much so, that investigating the passage's classical and modern reprises amounts almost to a literary sub-genre *per se* especially in the wake of Blumenberg's (1979) seminal study.

As present-day readers of Lucretius we can take full advantage of a number of critical approaches that have dispelled the centuries-long habit of reading the second proem as an expression of selfishness and even cruelty on the part of Lucretius. Readings such as that by Holtsmark (1967), or David Konstan's (1973) study on Epicurean psychology have long since reassessed the proem's significance, stressing that «the pleasure of the philosopher derives not from any active sadistic delight in the difficulties faced by struggling humanity, but from the uninvolved serenity which his own awareness and knowledge of the true workings of the world enable him to embrace»².

¹ Lucr. II, 1-14: «Pleasant it is, when on the great sea the winds trouble the waters, to gaze from shore upon another's great tribulation: not because any man's troubles are a delectable joy, but because to perceive what ill you are free from yourself is pleasant. Pleasant is it also to behold great encounters of warfare arrayed over the plains, with no part of yours in the peril. But nothing is more delightful than to possess lofty sanctuaries serene, well fortified by the teachings of the wise, whence you may look down upon others and behold them all astray, wandering abroad and seeking the path of life: the strife of wits, the fights for precedence, a labouring night and day with surpassing toil to mount upon the pinnacle of riches and to lay hold on power. O pitiable minds of men, O blind intelligences!» (tr. W.H.D. Rouse, rev. M. Ferguson Smith, Cambridge Ma. 1992).

² Holtsmark (1967: 196).

Nevertheless, the fact remains, as Holtsmark remarked, that the negative line of reading has «long commanded serious attention»³, and not only among scholars. The clearest proof of this widespread view is that almost all literary responses in the classical and early modern past stem precisely from this misinterpretation of the Lucretian text.

Although a long record of commentaries and critical readings may have got us into the habit of considering the proem as controversial, this does not rule out that the proem still manages to trigger strong reactions in the reader. This disturbance only affects a portion of the proem, i.e. its first two lines: the image that following Blumenberg we now identify as the *shipwreck with spectator*. Our misinterpretation of the image, due to some kind of psychological unease – that I shall try to better define – has over time sparked off a series of interpretative reading approaches that have infused misreadings of the text of Lucretius in widely circulated commentaries. The result has been to bias our reading of the proemial image even more and to reinforce our misunderstanding of it.

Now I do not think it can be denied that to us the force of the image is in large measure due to its unpleasantness. It may well be unfounded, but it is a fact that the image has been for centuries read as the very epitome of *Schadenfreude*, the “volupté maligne” that Montaigne avowed we feel in the sight of others’ misery:

Nostre estre est simenté de qualitez maladives: l’ambition, la jalousie, l’envie, la vengeance, la superstition, le desespoir, logent en nous d’une si naturelle possession, que l’image s’en reconnoist aussi aux bestes; voire et la cruauté, vice si dénaturé; car, au milieu de la compassion, nous sentons au dedans, je ne sçay quelle aigre-douce pointe de volupté maligne, à voir souffrir autruy; et les enfans le sentent;

³ Holtsmark (1967: 193).

*Suave, mari magno, turbantibus æquora ventis,
E terra magnum alterius spectare laborem*⁴.

It is highly unlikely that Lucretius had not foreseen the possibility of this image sparking strong (mostly negative) reactions, and I shall ask this question later on. But for now, I would like to better define the chronological terms of the response to the proem.

In his rich and insightful contribution A. Rodighiero has identified in Montaigne and his age the chronological boundary that led to a different, modern approach on the proem, now seen as the expression of selfishness and indifference and no longer – as was Lucretius' intention and his first readers' perception – as the expression of the Epicurean sage's detachment⁵. I would like to argue that this kind of negative reading dates from the first appearance of *De rerum natura*: there are a number of responses, polemical for the most part, from the foremost Latin authors that have not been yet identified. And the same applies for the first two centuries of Lucretius' rediscovery in the Humanism and Renaissance: broadly speaking, there was never a time when the Lucretian proem did not elicit strong and negative reactions. Actually, I would like to draw attention to the fact that many of the traits that we find in present-day critical literature (namely, in commentaries) on the proem, stem from early humanistic and Renaissance approaches to Lucretius, written at the time of his rediscovery. The identification of the continuous threads of critical readings from earlier to present-day commentaries will help us bring to the fore some interesting facts about Lucretius' II proem.

⁴ Montaigne (1962: 768): «Our being is cemented together by qualities which are diseased. Ambition, jealousy, envy, vengeance, superstition and despair, lodge in us with such a natural right of possession that we recognize the likeness of them even in animals too – not excluding so unnatural a vice as cruelty; for, in the midst of compassion we feel deep down some bitter-sweet pricking of malicious pleasure at seeing others suffer. Even children feel it» (tr. M. Screech: M. De Montaigne, *The complete Essays*, London 1993, p. 892). On Lucretius' conspicuous presence in Montaigne: Screech (1998).

⁵ Rodighiero (2009: 62).

2. NEITHER METAPHOR, NOR PROVERB

One of the clearest signs of the unease widely shared by readers of the proem is the notion, recorded by most commentaries, that Lucretius himself must have been aware of the image's awkwardness; and that he has therefore tried to 'amend' or 'soften' the first two lines by way of the third and fourth. Thus, in Ernout's view, «les vers 3 et suivants s'efforcent de corriger ce que cette exclamation égoïste peut avoir de choquant»⁶. The same applies for Munro's commentary, where we read that Lucretius «tries to soften» the hardness of the image «by the explanation of 3»⁷. Bailey, in his commentary, elaborates at some length on the mode of the first lines of the proem. He does so somehow reluctantly («There remain the introductory lines»), and only after discussing the meaning of the proem in general *without* the first lines⁸. When he finally deals with them, Bailey is positive that most readers find them egotistical and «almost cruel»: an opinion that he clearly shares and reinforces with the famous Baconian quote about 'Lucretian pleasure'⁹.

⁶ Ernout (1962-64: vol. 1: 203).

⁷ Munro (1978: vol. 2: 118).

⁸ «There remain the introductory lines (1-13) which to almost all readers have an unpleasant taste of egoism and even of cruelty. The Epicurean philosopher, secure in his own independence, gazing on the troubles and struggles of his fellow-men is an almost cynical picture; Bacon referred to it ironically as 'Lucretian pleasure'. Nor can it be wholly defended, for it is true that Epicurus' hedonism was essentially individualistic; the Epicurean must be freed from the pains of body and mind, and it would no doubt enhance his sense of pleasure to observe the contrast in the lives of others. Perhaps the only pleas which could be made in extenuation are that in practice the Epicurean, like the founder himself, showed a large degree of kindness to others [...], and that it was the aim of *Lucretius* to make converts, so that as many men as possible might share the Epicurean tranquillity» Bailey (1950: vol. II: 797).

⁹ Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning; Works* 3: 317; cfr. Passannante (2011: 128-29). See also the excellent discussion of this passage of Bailey's commentary in Konstan (1973: 3-8).

Arguing, though, that Lucretius introduces ll. 3-4 to «soften and correct» the opening image¹⁰ is tantamount to implying a less than perfect control on the part of Lucretius' over his means of expression. I actually believe that Lucretius deliberately chose the image *because* of its poignancy and disturbing quality. Indeed, the force of the image is such as to make the reader immediately attentive and receptive to what follows. As Joachim Classen has pointed out in a classic essay, Lucretius structures his arguments so as to immediately draw the reader's attention to what follows, in a manner that is strongly reminiscent of Cicero's recommendations for the proem¹¹.

*Attentos autem faciemus, si demonstrabimus ea, quae dicturi erimus, magna, nova, incredibilia esse, aut ad omnes aut ad eos, qui audient, aut ad aliquos inlustres homines aut ad deos immortales aut ad summam rem publicam pertinere... nam et, cum docilem velis facere, simul attentum facias oportet. Nam is est maxime docilis, qui attentissime est paratus audire*¹².

Another reading approach common to all commentaries to the proem and one that crept in at a very early date, is to interpret the image as a proverb: as just another occurrence of a well-known ancient *topos*. This reading approach is on a par with reading the image as a metaphor and, I would like to suggest, just as groundless.

Actually, reading the incriminated image as a metaphor or a proverb is an effective way to diminish its disruptive impact by denying its literality. Just as a metaphor is a figure of speech in which

¹⁰ Barigazzi (1987: 278) suggests that ll. 3-4 are meant as a defense to possible accusations of *malivolentia*.

¹¹ Classen (1968: 89).

¹² Cic. *De invent.* 1, 23: «We shall make our audience attentive if we show that the matters which we are about to discuss are important, novel, or incredible, or that they concern all humanity or those in the audience or some illustrious men or the immortal gods or the general interest of the state... for when you wish to make an auditor receptive, you should also at the same time render him attentive. For he is most receptive who is prepared to listen most attentively» (tr. H.M. Hubbell, Cambridge Ma. 1968).

a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another, in the same way a proverb or adage is a saying often in metaphorical form that embodies a common observation. Ancient precedents and parallels to the Lucretian shipwreck can be found in all the commentaries of the poem, but they do not hold up to closer examination. However, I shall start out by discussing the metaphorical reading, since of the two it is easier to invalidate.

The current interpretation of the shipwreck image as metaphorical quite simply stems from a sort of reversed reading that improperly projects the second part of the proem (ll. 7 ff. *sed nihil dulcius est...*) onto the first (ll. 1-6 *Suave mari magno... sine parte pericli*) and that finds no justification in the text. The metaphorical nature of the image is nowhere to be perceived for the attentive, unbiased reader. The image at ll. 1-2 is quite clearly *not a metaphor*: Lucretius presents us with a real situation to ponder (watching a shipwreck), immediately followed by a second, equally non-metaphorical, one (watching a battle). The metaphor proper only appears at l. 7: nothing is more gratifying than dwelling in the well-butressed temples erected by the doctrine of the *sapientes*; and from thence watching the wandering and fretting of others below, lost in vain pursuit of intellectual achievement and social prestige. If, in other words, the structure of the proem were reversed and lines 1-2 and 5-6 followed 7ff, instead of preceding them, then the harshness of the first image would be largely diminished¹³. As of course would be its impact on the reader. Why would the *metaphorical image* of the spectator watching another's shipwreck from the shore and drawing pleasure from his own

¹³ Cfr. Fowler (2002: 33): «Lucretius' example thus already anticipates the point of 7-13; the wise man safe on land is contrasted with the tempestuous disturbances of the unphilosophical life».

contrasting secure state be so shocking¹⁴?

Moving now onto the more frayed question of the «image as proverb» reading, it is an approach rooted in Lambin's hugely influential 1563 edition of the *De rerum natura*. Lambin was not the first to compare the shipwreck image with other ancient *loci*; Giovan Battista Pio in his 1501 commented edition remarked that a somewhat similar concept had been expressed by Statius as well: «Similis est illa de prudenti viro Papiniana sententia. Celsa tu mentis ab arce Despicias errantes, humanaque gaudia rides»¹⁵. Lambin, however, is the first commentator to offer multiple parallels for the shipwreck image, and to actively suggest that Lucretius might have borrowed from other sources, as we shall see later in further detail¹⁶. Today, Lambin's list of ancient precedents and parallels to the Lucretian shipwreck image is reproduced with little or no modifications in all the major commentaries to the poem. It does not, however, hold up to closer examination. In theory, if the image were Lucretius' personal rendering of a common *topos* or proverb¹⁷ that had subsequently

¹⁴ See for instance Rodighiero (2009: 59): «È noto che negli esametri d'attacco del secondo libro del *De rerum natura* l'evento descritto, osservato da chi dimora in spazi asciutti e saldi, è soltanto metaforico. All'origine dello sguardo lanciato dalla terraferma verso il mare in tempesta sono riconoscibili infatti gli occhi sereni del saggio: dal margine sicuro di un'esistenza che non teme derive, egli osserva tranquillo l'animato e agitato mondo circostante».

¹⁵ I quote from the edition Pio 1514, f. 43r. The reference is to Stat. *Silv.* 2. 2, 129-32: *Nos, vilis turba, caducis / deservire bonis semperque optare parati / spargimur in casus: celsa tu mentis ab arce / despicias errantes, humanaque gaudia rides*. «We, worthless crew, ever ready to serve perishable blessings, ever hoping for more, are scattered to the winds of chance; whereas you from your mind's high citadel look down upon our wanderings and laugh at human joys» (tr. D.R. Shackleton Bailey, Cambridge Ma., 2003). On this passage see Newlands (2002: 170-171).

¹⁶ Cfr. Lambin's (1563: 101) comment on the proem.

¹⁷ Ernout, *ad loc.*; Fowler (2002: 28): «The proposition [Lucretius II, 1-2] has a proverbial ring, and the general sense is paralleled in the Greek proverb ἐξάντης λεύσσω τοῦμόν κακὸν ἄλλον ἔχοντα (I, 81 Leutsch-Schneidewin, with their note)».

replaced all other existing versions by virtue of its poetical memorability, this would not be an *unicum* in the *De rerum natura*. The image of the poet as wise doctor, smearing the cup of bitter philosophy with the honey of poetry, stemmed from an ancient lineage of similar *topoi* that *De re. nat.* I, 936-942 obliterated and completely replaced for the ensuing ages¹⁸.

It is true that in the group of ancient examples usually quoted as parallels to the Lucretian proem, those predating the poem do share a character of proverbial vagueness and sententiousness, but when examined more closely they are only loosely related to Lucretius' proem. They all lack either one or both of the elements that make Lucretius' image so distinctive: the sea as scenery; the mirroring of the watcher's serene state in another's suffering. In other words, the older passages pertain the same semantic area, as they are illustrations of the concept of *securitas*, and as such they could be grouped together as proverbs; however, they express this concept in different fashions, only remotely reminiscent of *De re. nat.*'s second proem. On the other hand, in the later ancient passages, those dating *after* Lucretius, the wording is much closer to *De re. nat.*'s second proem for the very good reason that they are all meant as responses to it, as we shall see.

Let us start with the earlier passages, as listed by Don Fowler in his commentary, which collects and admirably expands on previous critical efforts. Fowler starts out by stating that *De re. nat.* 2, 1-2 «has a proverbial ring»¹⁹ and immediately proceeds to give a list of parallel passages, either literary or proverbial.

The first example he presents is the Greek proverb ἐξάντης λεύσσω τοῦμόν κακὸν ἄλλον ἔχοντα²⁰. The general meaning is vaguely reminiscent of Lucretius', but the terms are so general as to lose any specific resemblance. And while there is a visual connection between

¹⁸ Prosperi (2004: chap. 1).

¹⁹ Fowler (2002: 28).

²⁰ Leutsch, Schneidewin (1839: 81-82); «Free from danger I watch another caught by my troubles».

a serene watcher and an anguished watched, there is however no mention of either shipwrecks or even of the sea.

The second example is a fragment from Archippus and one already pointed out as the source for Lucretius by Lambin:

ὡς ἡδὺ τὴν θάλατταν ἀπὸ <τῆς> γῆς ὄρᾶν
ὦ μῆτέρ ἐστι, μὴ πλέοντα μηδαμοῦ²¹.

Here, as opposed to the previous example, the sea is the specific scenario, but any reference to the ‘other person’ that contrasts and mirrors the watcher’s serenity in his anguish is lacking.

The third passage pointed out by Fowler, following Lambin’s and all subsequent commentators’ lead, is a fragment from Sophocles:

Φεῦ φεῦ, τί τούτου χάρμα μεῖζον ἂν λάβοις
Τοῦ γῆς ἐπιψάσαντα κᾶθ’ ὑπὸ στέγη
πυκνῆς ἀκούειν ψακάδος εὐδούση φρενί²².

Again, the passage presents only a vague reminiscence with Lucretius’ very specific situation. Here, we find expressed a feeling of recovered calm and serenity that involves in some measure the sea and is enhanced by the awareness of the rain pouring outside: but there is no ‘other in peril’. Actually, I doubt that the Sophoclean fragment would have ever been taken into consideration as a possible parallel to Lucretius’ second proem if it had not been associated, starting, again, with Lambin, with a passage that has much more in common with it. And this is a Ciceronian quote from a letter to Atticus written in 59 BCE:

²¹ Archipp., fr. 43 K = PCG II, 45 «How sweet it is, o mother, to gaze from land at the sea, without sailing».

²² Soph., *TrGF*, IV F636: «Ah, ah, what greater joy could you obtain than this, that of reaching land and then under the roof hearing the heavy rain in your sleeping mind?» (tr. H. Lloyd-Jones, SOPHOCLES, *Fragments*, Cambridge, Ma. 2003). The fragment is reported in Stobaeus; κᾶθ’ is Meineke’s correction for Stobaeus’ καὶ. See Fowler (2002: 28) for further references to Tibullus’ use of this fragment.

Iam pridem gubernare me taedebat, etiam cum licebat: nunc vero, cum cogar exire de navi, non abiectis, sed ereptis gubernaculis, cupio istorum naufragia ex terra intueri: cupio, ut ait tuus amicus Sophocles κἄν ὑπὸ στέγῃ / πυκνῆς ἀκούειν ψακάδος εὐδούσῃ φρενί²³.

Once at the helm of the state/ship, Cicero has been forcefully pushed out of it. Now that the helm has not slipped from his grasp, but has been seized from him, he expresses the *ardent wish*²⁴ of contemplating his enemies' failure/shipwreck, from the shore of his forced inactivity. Of the group of classical examples usually quoted by commentaries in connection to the Lucretian passage, this is clearly the closest one in imagery (watching from the shore another's ship being wrecked). But Cicero's passage leaves no doubt as to where the source of pleasure lies for him: *precisely* in watching another's suffering at sea. Cicero's dream is one of retaliation, not of philosophical detachment, and it would thus make a dangerous parallel to Lucretius' image, in that it plays up the hostile meaning that readers generally perceive in it, the one they see evoked under the veil of denial in line 2, 3 of *De re. nat.*: «*non quia vexari quemquamst iucunda voluptas*». The dating of Cicero's letter means that we cannot establish whether he had read Lucretius' poem by then²⁵; since, as far as we know, there were no ancient precedents linking shipwrecks with spectators, it is very tempting to read the letter to Atticus as the first,

²³ Cic. *Ad Att.* 2, 7, 4: «I was long ago getting tired of being at the helm, even when it was in my power. And now that I am forced to quit the ship, and have not cast aside the tiller, but have had it wrenched out of my hands; my only wish is to watch their shipwreck from the shore: I desire, in the words of your favourite Sophocles, And safe beneath the roof/ To hear with drowsy ear the plash of rain» (tr. E.S. Shuckburgh, London, 1899-1900).

²⁴ As expressed by the anaphorical *cupio*: cf. Rodighiero (2009: 61).

²⁵ As Rodighiero (2009: 61n) points out, Cicero's letter dates from 59 BCE, while Cicero's famous letter to Quintus mentioning *Lucretii poemata* (*Ad Quintum fr.* 2, 9, 3) is of february 54: therefore it is hard to tell whether Cicero had read Lucretius' poem at the time of the letter to Atticus. On the letter as Cicero's possible reaction to Lucretius' proem: Rostagni (1961).

such reading of Lucretius' proem. Although attractive, I am inclined to disagree with this view. And this for the very good reason that Cicero does quote a poetical text as a way of commenting on his less than noble thought; but this text is not by Lucretius: it is the Sophoclean fragment acquired as a 'Lucretian parallel'. Why not quote Lucretius himself if the *De re. nat.* were the source of the passage? I think that, for Cicero, it was instead the well-trodden Alcaic metaphor of the state as ship²⁶ that triggered an image outwardly close to the Lucretian one, but very dissimilar from it in spirit. In Cicero, watching another's shipwreck is not the accidental foil that enhances the watcher's detachment, but the very fulfilment of a wish arisen from the opposite of detachment: an excessive involvement with political life.

As I suggested above, the ultimate consequence of reading the proem as commonplace (or metaphorical) has been to cloud our view as to what we should see as actual ancient parallels of, or responses to, Lucretius' second proem, while at the same time leaving us unable to perceive the presence of others.

3. DISTANCE AND COMPASSION

What makes Lucretius' proemial image so disturbing is the fact that it openly contradicts our ingrained belief that, as individuals, we share a common inborn compassion for our fellow human beings. More than that, the image invites us to ignore what is today and was in antiquity perceived as the role of proximity in promoting human compassion. In antiquity, it was a shared notion that our capacity to feel compassion is in direct connection with the distance (that is lack thereof) from the object that elicits it. The distance could be in space, in time or in kind:

²⁶ See the introductory note to Hor. *Carm.* 1-14 in Nisbet, Hubbard (1970); Huxley 1952; on the Ciceronian letter and Cicero's attitude in 59 BCE: Degl'Innocenti Pierini (2006).

the lesser the distance, the stronger our feelings. This is what Aristotle states in the *Rhetoric* (*Rhet.* 2, 8, 1386a):

For, in general, here also we may conclude that all that men fear in regard to themselves excites their pity when others are the victims. And since sufferings are pitiable when they appear close at hand, while those that are past or future, ten thousand years backwards or forwards, either do not excite pity at all or only in a less degree, because men neither expect the one nor remember the other.

The Aristotelian passage is quoted by C. Ginzburg²⁷ in an essay investigating whether, historically, the perception of distance has affected «an alleged natural passion such as human compassion». The same Aristotelian passage is also the starting point of David Konstan's organic discussion of ancient expressions of the emotion we identify as pity²⁸. Dealing as he does with Lucretius, it is all the more surprising that Konstan does not include the *De re. nat.*'s second proem in his discussion. But more on that later. For now I would like to stress that within this perspective, Lucretius' II proem suits the Aristotelian criteria perfectly, as there is no significant distance between the spectator and the shipwreck victim. They share the same circumstances of time and kind; most significantly, they share the same space, being, as they are, *within sight of each other*²⁹. In other words, Lucretius' image pairs together the two factors that in Aristotle's view most elicit compassion in human beings: proximity («sufferings are pitiable when they appear *close at hand*») and self-projection («*all that men fear in regard to themselves* excites their pity when others are the victims»). Nonetheless, the image envisages a reaction from the spectator that is the opposite of compassion. If this is the root of the generalized distress felt by readers of the proem, it is

²⁷ Ginzburg (1994: 48).

²⁸ Konstan (2001: 128-136: *Appendix: Aristotle on Pity and Pain*).

²⁹ Neurosciences have today confirmed the role of vision (that is of proximity) as trigger of compassion: physically seeing pain in another living being materially activates our brain to feel that same pain: cfr. Rizzolatti – Sinigaglia (2006).

clear why even scholars and commentators may have unconsciously tried to defuse the image by way of reducing it to *topos* or metaphor.

4. THE NAUFRAGUS' PERSPECTIVE IN OVID

In the analysis of Lucretius' proem and its legacy – philosophical as well as literary – one side of the question has been rather overlooked, and that is the *naufragus'* own perspective in relation to the spectator. As any watching process between two individuals is potentially mutual, so, the direction of the serene watcher's gaze towards the shipwreck victim is one that can all too easily be reversed. The watched can in turn become the watcher, but the drowning will not derive any *voluptas* from watching those that idly watch them.

In order to know the feelings harboured by the shipwrecked person as he is being gazed upon, we can turn to Ovid: he risked actual, non-metaphorical shipwreck in his journey from Rome to Tomis and recounted the special terror of impending death by water in *Tristia* 1, 2 (51-52: *nec letum timeo: genus est miserabile leti. / Demite naufragium, mors mihi munus erit*³⁰). Indeed the shipwreck imagery is one of the semantic constants in all of Ovid's poetry from exile and one that is developed with especial consistency in the *Tristia*³¹. Comparing one's sudden downfall with a shipwreck is a common *topos* of poetry and of ancient poetry; as it is expressing gratitude towards a benefactor through metaphors of drowning and rescuing. Less common is, on the part of the shipwrecked victim, contrasting the rescuer with the spectator: the one who saves us from drowning with the one who watches impassibly, unmoved by our plight, our imminent death.

³⁰ «I fear not death; 'tis the form of death that I lament. Save me from shipwreck and death will be a bonus» (Tr. A.L. Wheeler, Cambridge Ma. 1988).

³¹ On the topic in Ovid's exile production: Claassen (2012: 14-15, 185 on the prominence of the shipwreck imagery in *Tristia*).

In the *Tristia*, drowning and shipwrecks clearly emerge as Ovid's metaphors of choice to evoke his downfall and subsequent exile. This would not be particularly remarkable or original but for the fact that the metaphorical shipwrecks envisaged in Ovid's poems are never a solitary event and always involve one or more spectators. These, in turn, are never neutral witnesses of Ovid's sufferings: their attitudes and roles vary, from helpful, to culpably idle, to malignant and even actively vicious. Thus, in *Tr.* 1, 5, 35-36 Ovid begs his few remaining friends for help:

O pauci, rebus succurrite laesis
et date naufragio litora tuta meo³².

Whereas in *Tr.* 1, 6, 7-8 he contrasts the selfless abnegation towards himself shown by his wife with the avid profiteers that would rob him even of the planks of his wrecked ship:

Tu [his wife] facis, ut spolium non sim, nec nuder *ab illis*,
naufragii tabulas qui petiere mei³³.

But it is in *Tristia* 5, 9 that Ovid offers the perfect commentary to *De re. nat.*'s second proem from the *naufragus*' perspective:

Caesaris est primum munus, quod ducimus auras;
gratia post magnos est tibi habenda deos.
Ille dedit vitam; tu, quam dedit ille, tueris,
et facis accepto munere posse frui.
Cumque perhorruerit casus pars maxima nostros,
pars etiam credi pertimuisse velit
naufragiumque meum tumulo spectarit ab alto,
nec dederit nanti per freta saeva manum,

³² «And so, few though ye are, run all the more to aid my injured state and provide a secure shore for my shipwreck» (Tr. Wheeler).

³³ «'Tis thy doing that I am not plundered nor stripped bare by those who have attacked the timbers of my wreckage» (Tr. Wheeler).

*seminecem Stygia revocasti solus ab unda*³⁴.

Commentaries to this passage³⁵ usually refer to the opening lines of Catullus 68, which are however a very weak match:

*Quod mihi fortuna casuque oppressus acerbo
conscriptum hoc lacrimis mittis epistolium,
naufragum ut eiectum spumantibus aequoris undis
sublevem et a mortis limine restituum...*³⁶

The main difference to consider is of course that in Catullus the authorial voice is the rescuer and not the victim of the shipwreck, nor is there any mention of passive (pavid) watchers. The (anti-)model behind the Ovidian passage is in fact *De re. nat.* 2, 1-2, as demonstrated beyond any possible doubt by the presence of the spectator(s) watching securely from afar³⁷:

*Naufragiumque meum tumulo spectarit ab alto: [...] e terra
magnum alterius spectare laborem.*

The verbal echoes and symmetrical construction (*spectarit / spectare; ab alto tumulo / e terra*) bring to the fore the one changed element that reveals Ovid's vibrant anti-epicurean polemic:

³⁴ «Caesar's gift – that I draw breath – comes first; after the mighty gods it is to thee that I must render thanks. He gave me life; thou dost preserve the life he gave, lending me power to enjoy the boon I have received. When most men shrank with dread at my fall – some even would have it believed that they had feared it – *and gazed from a safe height upon my shipwreck*, extending no hand to him who swam in the savage seas, thou alone didst recall me half lifeless from the Stygian waters. My very power to remember this is due to thee» (tr. Wheeler).

³⁵ However, Green (2005: 286), following Luck (1977: 314) points to Lucretius' II proem: «The image of observed misfortune at sea inevitably recalls the opening of Book 2 of Lucretius».

³⁶ Catull. 68, 1-4: «That you, weighed down as you are by fortune and bitter chance, should send me this letter written with tears, to bid me succour a shipwrecked man cast up by the foaming waters of the sea, and restore him from the threshold of death...» (tr. F. Warre Cornish, Cambridge Ma., 1988).

³⁷ It has been remarked that the Lucretian spectator watches from the shore, not from up high; however, at DRN 2, 9, *despicere* implies a downward gaze.

naufragium meum / alterius laborem. It is worth noticing that it is not *someone else's* shipwreck that is being observed, but *naufragium meum*, my very own, and there is no room left for contemplation: the reversed perspective, with the metrical emphasis on *meum*, transforms *voluptas* into anguish. The onlookers caught affecting compassion (*pars etiam credi pertimuisse velit*) but not lending material help (*nec dederit nanti per freta saeva manum*) are exposed as the hypocrites they are.

But the shipwreck discourse has a further, surprising twist in Ovid's *Tristia*: just as the *naufragus* can return the spectator's gaze and become in turn the spectator from amidst the waves, so the *situation* can be reversed, under new circumstances, with the original watcher now drowning helplessly under the gaze of the former *naufragus*. As *Fortuna* is inherently capricious, so it is not advisable to express any but humane feelings at the sight of another's shipwreck (*Tr.* 5, 8, 3-11):

... *curve*
casibus insultas, quos potes ipse pati?
Nec mala te reddunt mitem placidumque iacenti
nostra, quibus possint inlacrimare ferae;
nec metuis dubio Fortunae stantis in orbe
Numen, et exosae verba superba deae.
Exigit a dignis ultrix Rhamnusia poenas:
inposito calcas quid mea fata pede?
 Vidi ego naufragium qui risit in aequora mergi,
 et 'numquam' dixi 'iustior unda fuit'.
Vilia qui quondam miseris alimenta negarat,
*nunc mendicatio pascitur ipse cibo.*³⁸

³⁸ «Why do you mock at misfortunes which you yourself may suffer? My woes do not soften you and placate you towards one who is prostrate – woes over which wild beasts might weep, nor do you fear the power of Fortune standing on her swaying wheel, or the haughty commands of the goddess who hates. Avenging Rhamnusia exacts a penalty from those who deserve it; why do you set your foot and trample upon my fate? I have seen one drowned in the waves who had

Ironically enough, the Lucretian proem had resonated in an unchallenged form at an earlier and happier time in Ovid's life: in *Metamorphoses* XV the Ovidian Pythagoras voiced his philosophical detachment exactly in the terms applied by Lucretius to the Spectator:

... *iuvat ire per alta*
astra, iuvat terris et inertis sede relictis
nube vehi validique umeris insistere Atlantis
palantesque homines passim ac rationis egentes
despectare procul trepidosque obitumque timentes
*sic exhortari...*³⁹

5. SENECA (AND VIRGIL)

As it has been noted, Epicurean philosophy did not preach to rejoice in the plight of others, but simply to draw inner satisfaction from the consciousness of one's secure state and, in this, it differed from Stoicism. Stoics, and Seneca, did recommend active intervention to help out fellow human beings, despite the fact that Seneca condemned *miserordia* as a weakness, *aegritudo animi*, in that the *sapiens* should not be affected by another's fate. If we turn to Seneca, we find a consistent undercurrent of polemic against Lucretius' Epicurean stance as embodied by the second proem.

In the *De beneficiis* a strong fragment of Lucretian memory – one that to my knowledge has gone so far unnoticed – is displayed in anti-Epicurean and anti-Lucretian mode. Generally speaking, if we

laughed at a shipwreck, and I said, "Never were the waters more just". The man who once denied cheap food to the wretched now eats the bread of beggary» (tr. Wheeler).

³⁹ «In fancy I delight / to float among the stars or take my stand / on mighty Atlas' shoulders, and to look / afar down on men wandering here and there – / afraid in life yet dreading unknown death, / and in these words exhort them...»; Ov. *Met.* XV, 147-152, tr. Brookes More, Boston, Cornhill Publishing Co, 1922. On this passage cfr. Bömer (1986: 297).

consider the *De beneficiis*⁴⁰, we find that in it the shipwreck imagery stands out especially in terms of its frequency. What is more noticeable, this often occurs in contexts discussing the opportunity of an active intervention on the part of the *sapiens* to rescue the shipwreck victims. Thus in 1, 5, 4 Seneca examines the permanent character of a good deed: «*Ex naufragio alicui raptos vel ex incendio liberos reddidi, hos vel morbus vel aliqua fortuita iniuria eripuit; manet etiam sine illis, quod in illis datum est*»⁴¹; 3, 9, 3 reflects on the difficulty of establishing equality between two different benefits «*'Dedi tibi patrimonium'. 'Sed ego naufrago tabulam'*»⁴². At 3, 35, 4 those rescuing the drowning are among the few that can give the gift of life: «*nec medico gratia in maius referri potest (solet enim et medicus vitam dare), nec nautae, si naufragum sustulit*»⁴³. Paragraphs 4, 1, 37 and 38 discuss ungratefulness⁴⁴ by telling the story of Philip's greedy soldier rescued from shipwreck by one generous stranger, whom in return he robs of his estate. Paragraph 4, 11, 1-3 dwells on the gratuity of benefits: we should not benefit others with the sole aim

⁴⁰ A recent, succinct treatment of *De beneficiis* in Inwood (2008: 65-94: 76): «Stoic ethics needs common sense in order to get off the ground, and in the case of good deeds Seneca relies on ordinary common sense for important general views about the nature of benevolence. His repeated claim that some particular course of action is not a good deed just because it involves a quasi-commercial exchange of services is supported primarily by the instinctive sense we all have about what counts as generosity». For a thorough discussion of the treatise's sources: Chaumartin (1985).

⁴¹ «If I have saved a man's children from shipwreck or a fire and restored them to him, and afterwards they were snatched from him either by sickness or some injustice of fortune, yet, even when they are no more, the benefit that was manifested in their persons endures» (tr. J.W. Basore, Cambridge Ma. 1935).

⁴² «'I gave you a fortune,' you say. 'Yes, but I gave you a plank when you were shipwrecked!'"» (tr. Basore).

⁴³ «Consequently, you cannot return too much gratitude to a physician (for physicians also habitually give life), nor to a sailor if he has rescued from shipwreck» (tr. Basore).

⁴⁴ Also focussing on ungratefulness is *Letter 81 to Lucilius*, which refers back to *De beneficiis* (81, 3) and can be read as an appendix to it: Inwood (2008: 75n).

of reward; the case in point is the *naufragus* that we help, never expecting to see him again:

*Ignoto naufrago navem, qua revehatur, et damus et struimus.
Discedit ille vix satis noto salutis auctore et numquam amplius
in conspectum nostrum reversurus debitores nobis deos delegat
precaturque, illi pro se gratiam referant; interim nos iuvat
sterilis beneficii conscientia*⁴⁵.

In 7, 15, 1 the intention of repaying a benefit is as laudable as the actual repaying itself:

*Etiamne, si in illa navigatione pecuniam, quam saluti tuae
contraxeram, naufragus perdidit, etiamne, si in vincula, quae
detrahere tibi volui, ipse incidi, negabis me rettulisse gratiam?*⁴⁶

Readers of *De beneficiis* are thus led to believe that no good deed is more exemplary or laudable or indeed more common in the ancient world than lending help to a shipwrecked wretch, such is Seneca's insistence on the imagery.

A comparative reading of Seneca's works reinforces the impression of uniqueness of the *De beneficiis* under this regard: nowhere else in Seneca's writings is the shipwreck imagery exploited or made relevant with any comparable insistence. On this heavily oriented backdrop I think it is impossible to mistake the polemical source referred to in *De ben.* 4, 12, 2:

⁴⁵ *De ben.* 4, 11, 3: «to a shipwrecked stranger, in order that he may sail back home, we both give a ship and equip it. He leaves us scarcely knowing who was the author of his salvation, and, expecting never more to see our faces again, he deposes the gods to be our debtors, and prays that they may repay the favour in his stead; meanwhile we rejoice in the consciousness of having given a benefit that will yield no fruit» (tr. Basore).

⁴⁶ «Even if, during that voyage, I was shipwrecked, and lost the money that I had raised to rescue you, even if I myself have fallen into the chains which I hoped to remove from you, will you say that I have not repaid gratitude?» (tr. Basore). Also dealing with the theme of shipwrecking, but not directly relevant to this discussion: *De ben.* 1, 1, 10; 4, 9, 2.

Adeo beneficium utilitatis causa dandum non est, ut saepe, quemadmodum dixi, cum damno ac periculo dandum sit. Latronibus circumventum defendo, at tuto transire permittitur; rerum gratia laborantem tueor et hominum potentium factionem in me converto, quas illi detraxero sordes sub accusatoribus isdem fortasse sumpturus, cum abire in partem alteram possim et securus spectare aliena certamina⁴⁷.

This one passage deals with the central notion that we should do good without expecting any retribution for it, and indeed in spite of the possible consequences; and although *aliena certamina* here are the legal battles of others, the immediate context is a pointed allusion to *De rerum natura*'s second proem. In the phrase «*cum abire in partem alteram possim et securus spectare aliena certamina*», it is not only *aliena certamina* that responds to Lucretius 2, 5-6 («*Suave etiam belli certamina magna tueri / Per campos instructa tua sine parte pericli*»); *securus* and *spectare* are tiles of the same mosaic. With *spectare* clearly echoing *De re. nat.* 2, 2, the very core of the controversial Lucretian proem: «*e terra magnum alterius spectare laborem*»; as for *securus*, *securitas* is the key-word of the Lucretian proem, evoked, if not spelled out directly, throughout the first nineteen verses. As has been pointed out, «[a]lthough Lucretius does not employ the term *securitas*... the term is concretely discernible in the passage's final syntagma: *cura semota* (removed from care). The perfect participle of the verb *semove*, also built with the prefix (*se-*), allows this phrase to capture the primary sense of *securitas*. In fact, Lucretius engages an entire program of elimination underscored by *se-*, the prefix of

⁴⁷ «So far from its being right for us to give a benefit from a motive of self interest, often, as I have said, the giving of it must involve one's own loss and risk. For instance, I come to the rescue of a man who has been surrounded by robbers although I am at liberty to pass by in safety. By defending an accused man, who is battling with privilege, I turn against myself a clique of powerful men, and shall be forced perhaps by the same accusers to put on the mourning that I have removed from him, although I might take the other side, *and look on in safety at struggles that do not concern me*» (tr. Basore).

apartness: *corpore seiunctus dolor, cura semota metuque* – an eradication of pain, concern, and fear that is achieved explicitly through distantiation»⁴⁸. Seneca seems to make masterful use of allusive memory to pointedly reverse the meaning and message of Lucretius' second proem⁴⁹: far from being desirable for the wise man to protect and relish his own *securitas* unmoved by the plight of others, he must reach out and help his fellow human beings, regardless of how this might affect or even destroy his *securus* state.

What is even more relevant, in the same treatise Seneca quotes a line from Virgil's *Georgics* to illustrate the difference between owning a good and owning the right to use that same good.

*Conduxi domum a te; in hac aliquid tuum est, aliquid meum: res tua est, usus rei tuae meus est. Itaque nec fructus tanges colono tuo prohibente, quamvis in tua possessione nascantur, et, si annona carior fuerit aut fames. Heu! frustra magnum alterius spectabis acervum in tuo natum, in tuo positum, in horrea iturum tua*⁵⁰.

The line quoted by Seneca (with the accidental inversion of *magnum* and *frustra*), *Georg.* 1, 158, is no other than the most famous and striking ancient response to Lucretius' second proem:

*Quod nisi et adsiduis herbam insectabere rastris,
et sonitu terrebis aves, et ruris opaci*

⁴⁸ Hamilton (2013: 101).

⁴⁹ Lucretius' name is notoriously very scarce in Seneca's writings, where it appears only five times: *Dial.* 9, 2, 14; *Ep.* 95, 11; 10, 68; 110, 6; *Nat.* 4, 3, 4 (Doppioni 1937: 13 n. 5). On Seneca's multi-faceted relationship with Epicurus and Lucretius: Schiesaro (2015).

⁵⁰ *De ben.* 7, 4, 7: «Suppose I have rented a house from you; you still have some "right" in it, and I have some right – the property is yours, the use of the property is mine. Nor, likewise, will you touch crops, although they may be growing on your own estate, if your tenant objects; and if the price of corn becomes too dear, or you are starving, you will
Alas! In vain another's mighty store behold,
grown upon your own land, lying upon your own land, and about to be stored in your own granary» (tr. Basore).

*falce premes umbras votisque vocaberis imbrem
 heu magnum alterius frustra spectabis acervum
 concussaque famem in silvis solabere quercu*⁵¹.

Seneca must have been aware that his Virgilian quote was a mimicking of Lucretius 2, 2. This is after all «the clearest single-line verbal echo of Lucretius in the entire *Georgics*»⁵²: a fact that was not unnoticed even by trudging pedant Nonius Marcellus in 4th century CE⁵³. In the *Georgics*, the context to this line is the aetiology of *labor*, a section that has been endlessly dissected and analyzed. Gale's recent treatment opts for a syncretic approach, arguing that «we should read the whole passage as suggesting that the Hesiodic, Lucretian and Stoic interpretations of history and civilization are all possible ways of viewing the world, none of which finally excludes the others, although they cannot be fully harmonized»⁵⁴. But I agree with Farrell and Otis that Virgil «in large measure agrees with Lucretius' conception of *labor*» and that «in the face of grim necessity, the Epicurean ideal of contemplation is in vain». I also share Farrell's view that we should consider this line not as «sardonic parody» of *De re. nat.* 2, but as «a genuine cry of despair». Now, whatever intentions we choose to attach to Virgil's Lucretian echo, I think we can agree that in the *Georgics* this line acts as a powerful boundary marker that differentiates (deprecatingly, or regretfully) the Virgilian universe from the Lucretian one by means of evoking it. For Virgil, the relationship between the gazing and the gazed upon is superficially the same as for Lucretius, with the former idle and the latter active. But the meaning

⁵¹ *Georg.* 1, 155-59: «Therefore, unless your hoe is ever ready to assail the weeds, your voice to terrify the birds, your knife to check the shade over the darkened land, and your prayers to invoke the rain, in vain poor man, you will gaze on your neighbour's large store of grain, and you will be shaking oaks in the woods to assuage your hunger» (Tr. H. Rushton Fairclough, Cambridge, Ma 1999).

⁵² Farrell (1991, p. 184).

⁵³ Non., p. 646 ed. Lindsay.

⁵⁴ Gale (2000: 66).

is completely reversed as (former) idleness has now thrown the watcher in despair, while the watched reaps the fruits of his activity.

The immediate context to the Virgilian quote is of limited relevance within the *De beneficiis*; here Seneca is illustrating a secondary point of his argument: the difference, as mentioned before, between owning a good and owning the right to that same good. But a closer reading reveals that a critique of the detached life applies to this passage as well. In this paragraph, the owner of the right to a particular good (an estate, a house, a carriage) fails to actively exploit it and is thus forced to contemplate the owner of the right (the tenant) thriving in his activity. Seneca's quoting Virgil's line is then perfectly in keeping with the rest of the treatise *and* with the anti-Lucretian mode that informs it. As in the rest of the treatise he has stressed over and over again the necessity of actively doing good deeds through a series of shipwreck-centred examples and with one pointed reference to *De re. nat.* 2, so here he is warning against other inactivity-related risks through an immediately perspicuous anti-Lucretian quote.

The *De beneficiis* stands alone in Seneca's oeuvre for its consistent reworking and reversing of the shipwreck imagery as presented in *De re. nat.*'s II proem⁵⁵. Other Senecan works dealing with the problem of *pietas* and active intervention towards fellow-humans make only occasional mention of shipwrecks, albeit the stress is always on our duty to offer our help to other human beings⁵⁶.

⁵⁵ For a discussion of Seneca's attitude towards shipwrecks in his life and works: Berno (2015).

⁵⁶ Nonetheless, the Stoic approach to human solidarity did not fare much better with Christian authors than the Epicurean approach. Stoics and Seneca discriminated between pity (*pietas*) and mercy (*miser cordia*) and warned against the latter, deeming it as a disturbance (*aegritudo animi*) for the wise man; for an overview of the topic and bibliography: Zincone (2001: 147-157); on Christian rejection of Seneca's approach: Konstan (2001: 121-124).

6. LUCRETIUS' SHIPWRECK WITH SPECTATOR: A STUDY IN SELF-PITY

In his discussion of the language of self-pity in the ancient world, David Konstan points to a Lucretian passage to prove his theory that the ancients, while «capable of feeling miserable and saying so», «did not normally speak of pitying or having pity for oneself»⁵⁷. However, even if we were to agree with Konstan, that for the ancients pity «presupposes a relationship between two parties, pitier and pitied», this does not rule out the possibility of self-pity, as a feeling triggered precisely by the mirroring of one's misfortunes in another being's. To prove his point Konstan refers to a passage in the III book where Lucretius demonstrates that the fear of death is groundless by mocking our tendency to project our inevitable death in a future when we – dead – shall not be there to experience death.

This is the relevant passage:

*ipse sui miseret; neque enim se dividit illum
nec removet satis a proiecto corpore et illum
se fingit sensuque suo contaminat astans.
hinc indignatur se mortalem esse creatum
nec videt in vera nullum fore morte alium se,
qui possit vivus sibi se lugere peremptum
stansque iacentem se lacerari urive dolere*⁵⁸.

Konstan's remarks on this passage deserve to be reported in full: «in the course of his demonstration that the fear of death is groundless, Lucretius argues that even someone who avows that death

⁵⁷ Konstan (2001: 65).

⁵⁸ Lucr. 3, 881-887; this is the passage in Konstan's own translation: «He pities himself, for he does not separate himself from that other, nor does he sufficiently distance himself from the body that has been laid out, and he imagines that he is that other one and, as he stands near, invests him with his own sensibility. This is why he is upset that he was created mortal, and he does not see that, in real death, there will be no other self, who might be alive and grieve that he has been snatched from himself and, standing by, suffer for the fact that he himself is lying there and being torn to pieces or incinerated».

is final and that there is no afterlife nevertheless imagines, in spite of himself, that he will be conscious of the pyre or of the animals that will lacerate his corpse; as Lucretius puts it: “he unconsciously makes a part of himself survive” (*sed facit esse sui quiddam super inscius ipse*, 3, 878). Under such an illusion, Lucretius continues, “he pities himself” (*ipse sui miseret*, 3, 881). *The point is that to pity oneself, one must imagine oneself divided in two: one self is in torment, while the other stands by as an observer, itself unharmed*» (my emphasis).

What is remarkable in this passage is not only, as Konstan surmises, the fact that this situation is unusual or that self-pity is here expressed through the phrase *ipse sui miseret*⁵⁹; but the fact that Lucretius has a full and clear understanding of the inner workings of self-pity.

Now, we could postulate that self-pity induced by dividing oneself into two is the most extreme case of a more natural process, which is common now as it was in antiquity: self-pity as self-reflection in another’s sufferings⁶⁰.

As Glenn Most notices, while it is true that there «is no word for self-pity in Greek» and «there is only a surprisingly small number of scenes of self-pity in the ancient Greek literature of the archaic and classical periods»⁶¹, the emotion of self-pity is already present and depicted, albeit rarely, in ancient Greek civilization. What is relevant from our perspective is that the very first of the few ancient Greek literary depictions of self-pity is one based on the same self-reflection process satirized by Lucretius. It is the scene in the *Iliad* where the female slaves mourn the dead Patroclus and respond to Briseis’ lament:

«So spake she wailing, and thereto the women added their laments; Patroclus indeed they mourned, but therewithal each one her own sorrows»⁶².

⁵⁹ Konstan (2001: 67-68).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 70 for a discussion on the logical status of pity and self-pity in English.

⁶¹ Most (2003: 59).

⁶² Hom. *Il.* 19, 301-302 (tr. A.T. Murray, Cambridge, Ma., 1924).

Self-projection is then already perceived by Homer as the normal process which enables self-pity through pity; and Lucretius can ferociously deride it not because it is uncommon, but because it is the norm, well known through experience to all of his readers, ancient and modern. Within this frame, the second proem is like a condensed version of the vitriolic attack on the fear of death: by offering to our consideration another's sufferings, Lucretius is warning us not so much against pity as against *self-pity*.

Lucretius' supposedly harsh attitude, as expressed in *De re. nat.* II proem, rests in the end on his Epicurean contempt for death. Far from ignoring how the image of the impassive watcher would impact on his readers, he deliberately chooses to shock them. He is well aware that the spectator and the shipwrecked person are one and the same, interchangeable. But his philosophy demands that, as spectators, we relish our separateness from the evils of the shipwrecked; and that as victims of a shipwreck, we do not fear death in the least as – doubtlessly – he would not have: *Nil igitur mors est ad nos neque pertinet hilum* (Lucr. III, 830). It is Lucretius' most difficult lesson, and as such, it is only appropriate that he has chosen to draw our attention to it in this difficult fashion. Readers ancient and modern have invariably recoiled from the call for moral strength hiding in plain sight in Lucretius' II Proem. The fact that throughout the centuries we have been misreading the image in all possible ways (as metaphor, as topos, as a cynical display of man's worst instincts) is probably the best commentary on the moral frailty for which Lucretius blames us.

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