



The New  
Antiquity

LUCRETIUS *AND*  
MODERNITY

*Epicurean Encounters  
Across Time and Disciplines*

Edited  
JACQUES LEZRA LIZA BLAKE

by

&

## Lucretius and Modernity

# *The New Antiquity*

Edited by **Matthew S. Santirocco**

Over the past two decades, our understanding of the ancient world has been dramatically transformed as classicists and other scholars of antiquity have moved beyond traditional geographical, chronological, and methodological boundaries to focus on new topics and different questions. By providing a major venue for further cutting-edge scholarship, *The New Antiquity* will reflect, shape, and participate in this transformation. The series will focus on the literature, history, thought, and material culture of not only ancient Europe, but also Egypt, the Middle East, and the Far East. With an emphasis also on the reception of the ancient world into later periods, *The New Antiquity* will reveal how present concerns can be brilliantly illuminated by this new understanding of the past.

**MATTHEW S. SANTIROCCO** is Senior Vice Provost for Undergraduate Academic Affairs at New York University, where he is Professor of Classics and Angelo J. Ranieri Director of Ancient Studies, and served for many years as Seryl Kushner Dean of the College of Arts and Science. He taught previously at the University of Pennsylvania, Columbia, Brown, Emory, and Pittsburgh. He is the former editor of the APA Monograph series, *American Classical Studies* and the journal *Classical World*. His publications include a book on Horace, as well as several edited volumes and many articles. In 2009, he was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and is currently Assistant Secretary of the Academy for Humanities and Social Sciences.

**Published by Palgrave Macmillan:**

*Horace and Housman* by Richard Gaskin

*Combat Trauma and the Ancient Greeks* edited by Peter Meineck and David Konstan

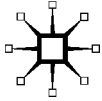
*Lucretius and Modernity: Epicurean Encounters Across Time and Disciplines* edited by Jacques  
Lezra and Liza Blake

# Lucretius and Modernity

**Epicurean Encounters Across  
Time and Disciplines**

*Edited by*  
Jacques Lezra  
and  
Liza Blake

palgrave  
macmillan



LUCRETIIUS AND MODERNITY

Selection and editorial content © Jacques Lezra and Liza Blake 2016

Individual chapters © their respective contributors 2016

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2016 978-1-137-58199-0

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission. No portion of this publication may be reproduced, copied or transmitted save with written permission. In accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, or under the terms of any licence permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, Saffron House, 6-10 Kirby Street, London EC1N 8TS.

Any person who does any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

First published 2016 by  
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

The authors have asserted their rights to be identified as the authors of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of Nature America, Inc., One New York Plaza, Suite 4500, New York, NY 10004-1562.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

ISBN 978-1-137-59189-0

E-PDF ISBN: 978-1-137-56657-7

DOI: 10.1007/978-1-137-56657-7

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lucretius and modernity : Epicurean encounters across time and disciplines /  
edited by Jacques Lezra and Liza Blake.  
pages cm—(The new antiquity)

1. Lucretius Carus, Titus—Criticism and interpretation. 2. Lucretius Carus,  
Titus—Influence. 3. Epicureans (Greek philosophy) I. Lezra, Jacques, 1960–  
II. Blake, Liza, 1984– III. Series: New antiquity.

PA6484.L854 2016

187—dc23

2015030189

A catalogue record for the book is available from the British Library.

## C O N T E N T S

---

*Acknowledgments* vii

Introduction 1  
*Jacques Lezra and Liza Blake*

### **Part I What Is Modern about Lucretius?**

One Michel Serres's Non-Modern Lucretius: Manifold Reason and the Temporality of Reception 21  
*Brooke Holmes*

Two Lucretius and the Symptomatology of Modernism 39  
*Joseph Farrell*

Three Lucretius the Physicist and Modern Science 57  
*David Konstan*

### **Part II What Is Lucretian about Modernity?**

Four The Presence of Lucretius in Eighteenth-Century French and German Philosophy 71  
*Catherine Wilson*

Five Epicureanism across the French Revolution 89  
*Thomas M. Kavanagh*

### **Part III Lucretian Figures of Modernity: Freedom, Cause, Truth**

Six How Modern Is Freedom of the Will? 105  
*Phillip Mitsis*

Seven On the Nature of Marx's Things 125  
*Jacques Lezra*

Eight All Sense-Perceptions Are True: Epicurean Responses to Skepticism and Relativism 145  
*Katja Maria Vogt*

### **Part IV Following Lucretius**

|        |  |     |
|--------|--|-----|
| Nine   | From Clinamen to Conatus: Deleuze, Lucretius, Spinoza<br><i>Warren Montag</i>  | 163 |
| Ten    | Notes on Leo Strauss's "Notes on Lucretius"<br><i>Alain Gigandet</i>   | 173 |
| Eleven | Reflections of Lucretius in Late Antique and<br>Early Modern Biblical and Scientific Poetry:<br>Providence and the Sublime<br><i>Philip Hardie</i> | 187 |
|        | <i>Bibliography</i>  | 203 |
|        | <i>Notes on Contributors</i>   | 215 |
|        | <i>Index</i>   | 217 |

## A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

---

The chapters collected in this book were read, in earlier form, at “Lucretius and Modernity,” a conference held at New York University (NYU) in the fall of 2011. The conference was the Annual Ranieri Colloquium in Ancient Studies, sponsored by NYU’s Center for Ancient Studies. Cosponsors included NYU’s Departments of Comparative Literature, Classics, French, and Philosophy; the Humanities Initiative; the Gallatin Fund: Classics and the Contemporary World; the Program in Poetics and Theory; and the Medieval and Renaissance Center. We gratefully acknowledge the support of each of these cosponsors, with special thanks to the Center for Ancient Studies.



## Introduction

JACQUES LEZRA AND LIZA BLAKE

### Lucretius and Modernity

“Lucretius reaches the mainstream”: thus, rather dolefully, Gordon Campbell titles his 2007 review of the *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies: Lucretius* and *Cambridge Companion to Lucretius* collections.<sup>1</sup> It is 2016 now; two millennia after the work was drafted, the long shadow cast by Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura* (*DRN*; before 50 CE) falls across the “mainstream” disciplines of philosophy, literary history and criticism, religious studies, classics, political philosophy, the history of science, and others. How do we account for the work’s *modernity*, if that is indeed what it is? Or perhaps for its arresting resistance to every effort to line it up with a period’s preoccupations—whether we have in mind the time of its composition; its rediscovery; its first, scandalized reception; its persistence as a Gothic, philosophical monster haunting the attics of the Enlightenment; its uncomfortable flirtation with critiques of determinism; its reentry into academic conversation in the late twentieth century? What does *DRN* mean to *us*? “Suave, mari magno,” we read at the opening of the second Book (2.1–2), “turbantibus aequora ventis / e terra magnum alterius spectare laborem” [Pleasant it is, when on the great sea the winds trouble the waters, to gaze from shore about another’s great tribulation], but nowhere do we find firm ground, ourselves, from which to contemplate serenely the tossing seas of Lucretius’s reception: we are always also aboard, always carried along in and on the poem.<sup>2</sup>

“Lucretius reaches the mainstream.” Does he, though? Has he? And if so, what happens to the “mainstream” on his arrival?

There is no doubt that over the past two decades interest in *DRN* has grown dramatically in academic fields and beyond. Hidden Epicurean influences on well-known writers have come to light; the decline of a school or of an orthodoxy has left room for a return to Lucretius, and to the Epicurean tradition more broadly—as with the eclipse of normative materialisms in philosophy and politics. Contemporary physics has found in the ancient atomist tradition a strange and evocative mirror.<sup>3</sup> The Lucretian

*declinatio*, the minimal and unpredictable swerve of atoms that the poem's Book 2 describes, provides a poetical precursor to debates regarding physical causation, moral responsibility, and their possible relation.<sup>4</sup> The place of Lucretius's poetics in the development of modern poetic genres, techniques, and themes has come into sharp focus; the strange resurgence of creationism in the United States is found to revive complexly the old counterarguments that Lucretius's poem provides, many years *avant la lettre*; political philosophers have identified what Louis Althusser called a "subterranean current" in the materialist tradition, flowing from Epicurus through Spinoza and Marx and to Deleuze, propelled by Lucretius's great poem.<sup>5</sup> Stephen Greenblatt's popular account of the poem's rediscovery by Poggio Bracciolini, and of its reception in early modernity, has won a Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award in the United States.<sup>6</sup> His subtitle is diagnostic: "How the World Became Modern." Outside the walls of the academy and within, though in different ways, the American twenty-first century seeks, and finds in the comic-heroic, fairy-tale-ish story of *DRN*'s survival, the story of its *becoming*.

When we refer to a work or to an author's "modernity" we have in mind at least three things.

First, works or writers are "modern" in a flatly chronological sense when they write in the era generally called "modern": the era of print culture, of the emergent nation-state, of secular conceptions of association and identity, of interiority, of the scientific method. We call "modernity" what we recognize as *our* period, and which we usually designate as beginning in "early modernity." "We" here means scholars, critics, and a general public that accepts a normative, Burckhardtian, or Weberian historiography, and imagines the European human animal to have suffered a period of darkness after antiquity, from which it is reborn when Petrarch ascends Mt. Ventoux and finds his past in the classics; or when Gutenberg revolutionizes the mode of textual production and of distribution; or, as in Greenblatt's account, when Poggio Bracciolini comes upon the manuscript of *DRN*.<sup>7</sup> Even within this book you will find "modernity" variously defined: Phillip Mitsis's chapter, for example, begins by arguing that for the discipline of the history of philosophy, "modernity" begins with Cartesian philosophy.<sup>8</sup> In this strict chronological sense, Lucretius is not, cannot possibly be, modern, living as he did centuries before "modernity" in any definition began.

"Modernity," in this first usage, usually signals a step out of obscurantism, dogma, "enchantment," or mythology, out of the rote performance of identities and into a world and a worldview in which method, interiority, subjectivity, and an emergent sense of autonomy emerge to replace these older ways of being. The step is a historical event: modernity arrives *at* a moment, and we can judge it to have arrived *from* a moment—our own—indebted to it for (among other things) the capacity to identify modernity's arrival. Needless to say, this prejudicial understanding of "modernity"—which is inseparable from value-judgments

explicit (those “dark ages” before “modernity” cleared out cankered, walled-in, cobwebbed thinking) and implicit (there are quasi-Hegelian developmental and teleological metaphors at work in historiography: a period may be “early,” “middle,” or “late”; it may reach “maturity”; it may be a moment when societies leave infancy and *acquire a voice*, as in Kant’s famous description of the Enlightenment)—in no way squares with what scholars of earlier periods have shown to be true.<sup>9</sup> Some of the clearest and most cogent critiques of the negative effects of this polemical modernity were collected in a cluster of miniature book-review essays in the journal *Exemplaria*, essays that reconsider Greenblatt’s argument about the world becoming modern by means of Lucretius from scientific, historical, book-historical, literary-historical, affective, secular, and ideological perspectives.<sup>10</sup>

Second, works and writers may be “modern,” too, when it seems *as if* they belong to our period, as we understand it—belong to it stylistically, conceptually, or thematically. Here the governing concern is to understand how different times come to see Lucretius’s poem as modern, where “modern” means something like “contemporary.”<sup>11</sup> The “modernity” of these older “modern” writers, or works, is not a matter of *when* they wrote, but of *how*, or of *what* they wrote; they are in these respects our contemporaries. Apuleius’s ironies are not only precursors to the novel, this mode of defining modernity might opine: they speak as much to our day-to-day experience as Bulgakov’s *Master and Margarita*, or Mann’s narratives, or Bolaño’s. Chronology and “modernity,” in this way of defining “modernity,” will prove antagonistic, or quite separate, concepts.

Finally, a writer or a work may be “modern” (or have a relation to modernity) when a later writer has based his or her “modern” work (now in either of the first two senses) on an earlier one: we might say that under this definition of modernity, we are speaking of something like Lucretius *in* modernity.<sup>12</sup> Among classicists, this reception history is often treated separately from the study of the poem itself. For example, Gillespie and Hardie’s *Cambridge Companion* breaks its Table of Contents into two sections, “Antiquity” and “Reception,” the latter collecting essays that treat how Lucretius was taken up and reworked in different centuries and countries. A number of the chapters in this book operate by this understanding of modernity, seeing how and why Lucretius’s poem moves into different times, disciplines, and authors.

Matters get slippery very quickly, of course—a chronologically “modern” writer may write deliberately classicizing, premodern works; our understanding of what makes our “modern” era “modern” may differ (one critical school’s “modernity” in this sense is another’s archaism, or yet another’s postmodernity). An author may be inconsistent, and appear out of time with him or herself: Lucretius, for example, may seem modern because of his secular impulses but non-modern because of his antiquated scientific beliefs (as Joseph Farrell argues in this book). Someone may well be my “contemporary” but not yours, though you and I live

at the same time. In his chapter in this book, David Konstan points out that someone I consider my contemporary might be so not because he or she is modern but because he or she is *postmodern*. One may go as far as Bruno Latour and declare that *We Have Never Been Modern*, or may follow the lead of Brooke Holmes in this book and think about nonlinear models of time and history in which concepts like “modernity” cease to have a clear meaning.<sup>13</sup> Lucretius himself—the poem itself, rather—makes matters harder for us still. (It helps not at all—indeed, quite the contrary—to observe that the tendency to make things hard for its readers and audience on this point is one of *DRN*’s most recognizably “modern” features.)

Lucretius as non-modern; Lucretius as modernity; Lucretius as modern; Lucretius in modernity. Modernity as period; as historical causation; as a-temporal, untimely connections; as a set of traits that define a way of thinking, writing, or acting in the modern world. There is a mixture, then, in this book, of two issues that are usually separate, or addressed separately: that of periodization, and that of reception studies. Each raises difficult methodological questions: under periodization, we must decide whether and then how to separate historical periods, what attributes belong to which period, and which authors or thinkers or artists belong where. In reception studies, if we accept that classical texts are resolutely classical, ancient rather than modern, then we must decide how to conceptualize the interaction between classical past and modern present. Are these texts and thinkers our contemporaries, mutating and almost living beings, changing with each century in response to new environments? Or are they texts of an ancient moment, whose potentiality to be used or misused by future centuries depends more on the ingenuity of future centuries than it does on any individual text itself?<sup>14</sup> Our chapters cut across both of these grains: they recognize that the distinction between how we conceive of periods and how we conceive of reception is itself *both* a characteristic of a period (ours, perhaps), *and* a mode of reception. Some of the chapters ask, polemically, what is at stake in classifying—or refusing to classify—Lucretius as “modern” (see especially Farrell and Konstan), while others use the question of classification to rethink temporality or reception itself (Holmes, Montag, Gigandet), or to rethink how Lucretius’s travels through later centuries might warp the history of philosophy (Wilson, Mitsis, Lezra), the history of poetry (Hardie), the history of politics (Kavanagh), etc.

### Modernity and Modality

*DRN* pays a great deal of attention, not to “modernity,” of course (that term’s lexical history begins considerably later), but to “modality,” its kin semantically and relative etymologically. Philosophy, as it is known in the West, takes shape around questions that Lucretius’s poem also seeks

to address: What shapes and what things are possible in nature, what outcomes, what causes? Of the possible ways of formulating statements about such things and their coming-into-being and going-out-of-existence at one or another time, which work best? Which are more truthful? How do conditions of enunciation and comprehension modify—modulate, *modalize*—such statements? The answers that *DRN* provides, however, swerve violently from the dominant metaphysical tradition. The poem's sense of what it means to "live," to "live at the same time" as another person, to live in time or in a time; and of what it might mean to appear *as if* one were something or other (to appear, say, to treat themes that resemble those that worry a "modern" writer, our contemporary); and more generally, what it might mean for one thing to *appear* at all, *to another*—these are all highly controversial. Moreover, the poem itself is, in an important way, a *mode* and a *modification* of, a *modulation* upon, a tradition. Lucretius's poem shows its readers, or the audience hearing the poem read, the currency of Epicurus's thought: for that reason Epicurus's *modernity* is the result, the product, the intended or the unintentional effect, of Lucretius's poem.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, as concerns the history of philosophy, *DRN* is the definitive example of how a chronologically distant work can be made contemporary. The central conceptual claim: that contemporaneity is *fashioned*; it is a *product*, not a "natural" state of affairs; contemporaneity is not part of the nature of things.

The poem fashions contemporaneity and "modernity" in various ways. We recognize, for instance, how carefully the poem establishes how it makes claims: the edges, drawn sharply in modernity, between pedagogical language, persuasion, and constative speech are constantly, and deliberately, crossed and marred. "Perspicere ut possis res gestas funditus omnis," writes Lucretius:

non ita uti corpus per se constare neque esse  
 nec ratione cluere eadem qua constet inane,  
 sed magis ut merito possis eventa vocare  
 corporis atque loci, res in quo quaeque gerantur. (1.478–82)

In Rouse's slow translation, this is:

So that you may perceive that things done never at all consist or exist in themselves as body does, nor are said to exist in the same way as void; but rather you may properly call them accidents [*eventa*] of body, and of the place in which the things are severally done.

"Possis eventa vocare / corporis atque loci:" you *may* call things done, *res gestas*, "accidents" (*eventa*), with a greater degree of merit (*magis ut merito*) than if you called them by another name, or thought of them as existing in themselves, as body does, or void. The verse instructs Memmius, not in what can be said to be *true*, but in how one *may speak*, with greater or

less merit. “Memmius,” it says, “you may call something done an event, and the event of calling, *vocare*, may be called, with greater merit than if you used a different word, ‘accidental’ or event-al.” To speak about things done, about *res gestas*, is to do something too, so the poem, a thing done, an act, a song, is an accident or an event supervenient to something else, a location or a body. Time, then, is a mode of matter, an accident, a supervenience. For that reason, being-in-time, or judging that events coincide temporally, or that so-and-so or this-or-that event or work are simultaneous, or “contemporaneous” or “modern,” are judgments concerning a modality, made or sung in a medium that is itself material.

The poem carries this *modalization* of its themes and techniques through with the most searching, unsettling thoroughness and self-consciousness. At one level, for instance, Lucretius’s physics sings how matter acquires a boundary, a measure, a quantity, one-ness, body, a *modus*—and then loses it. At the same place in the poem that *DRN* reflects upon how matter, subject to *foedera naturae* or pacts of nature, can be represented, it also reflects upon how it, the poem itself, fashions sound and sense poetically out of the elemental matter, letters and words, that the poet handles. Take the discussion of *simulacra* in Book 4, ll. 30ff. This is no doubt among the poem’s most famous, and perhaps the strangest, efforts to press a materialist outlook to its consequences: *esse ea quae rerum simulacra vocamus*, “there exist what we call *images* of things,” where “images” translates *simulacra*, given in the next line as *membranae* or thin films.<sup>16</sup> In both *simulacra* and *membranae*, ὑμήν (*hymen*) is probably the term Lucretius is seeking to render, as preserved in the Epicurean inscription of Diogenes of Oneonada.<sup>17</sup> Look: *simulacra*, membranes of things, their *hymen* or one of them, touch us. At every instant every thing casts off its thin film for another’s eye to catch: the shells of things trouble the air constantly. And Lucretius’s verse then touches us as well, bearing to our imagination on his letters a film of that forest of floating films; and now these words you are reading add another: alike, materially kin, but distinct. These films you are reading now are temporally related, but not coincident, since the *simulacrum* is the membrane of a body at a moment.

*DRN* is indeed a *simulacrum* of *natura* at a moment, and of the *simulacrum* of nature provided by Epicurus. Being also a material image, it follows the *foedera naturae* it depicts: that there will be sudden, spontaneous variation and event whenever there is body, void, and movement. Every analogy the poem provides regarding its material operation is thus *like* a membrane it casts off from itself, and it *is also* such a membrane, and hence separate, materially as well as temporally, from itself. Highly fashioned, reasoned modes of the poem’s matter, these reflexive moments also swerve violently from Lucretius’s text—according to a rule the poem lays out for its readers and audience. The poem understands itself immanently, but it represents itself exoterically. As to the *content* of such analogies—the register of alphabetical similes to itself that the poem unfolds, the marvelous pedagogical *simulacra* it offers for natural elements and for its own workings—here

something unexpected and uncontrollable happens as well, as if in accord with the *natural* rule of *declinatio*, the unexpected swerve that occurs “at times quite uncertain and [in] uncertain places” (2.218–19).

The definitive alphabetical analogy (throughout, but first at 1.196–98: “So . . . you may more readily believe many bodies to be common to many things, as we see letters [*verbis elementa*] to be common to words, than that anything can exist without first-beginnings”) states, as it were, theoretically, explicitly, its technique, what the poem seeks to *do*, and *how* it will accomplish it. The analogy, inasmuch as it is a poetic statement *in* the poem regarding *how* the poem makes statements poetically, in poetic matter, is a mode of the poem’s matter, of its *elementa*. Hence the paradoxical standing of the poem’s reflexive, metadiscursive moments: as *modes* of the poem, they are *like* the poem, *like* what happens at the poem’s elemental level. But to that extent and also necessarily, they are unlike it, in the way that the simulacrum is like the original, and indeed is materially *part* of the original, but exists distinctly from it, and always only records a past moment of the existence of the original—the moment at which the original shed its membrane, its film, its *hymen*.

And note: *similitude*, *simulacreity*, if such barbarism can be countenanced, is a reflexive relation. I am like my brother, but this also means that he is like me; an atom is like a mote of dust, and a letter is like an atom, and a poem composed of words made up of letters is like the things in nature—and vice versa. “What a piece of work is a man!” Hamlet will exclaim. “How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel[!]”<sup>18</sup> Man is *like* an angel in action, but this means necessarily that an angel is *like* a man in action as well.<sup>19</sup> The pedagogical, illustrative moments in which the poem provides analogues for natural phenomena are *like* what the poem’s discursive, “philosophical” exposition shows, as the poem is *like* the nature it sings—but natural things are like the poem as well, and the “philosophical” exposition in *DRN* is like the poetic and pedagogical analogues it spins off like membranes. On this unsettling description, natural things are like thin material film spun from the matter of the poem, and the “philosophical” exposition in *DRN* is also the thin *hymen* of its metadiscursive, poetical analogues. Membranes of membranes; films of films. Throughout, the philosophical principle of identity is in question, but so is the poem’s coherence. *DRN* is, and is not, contemporaneous with itself; it is, and is not, part of itself; it is fashioned coherently, and swerves, at uncertain times and places, from its fashion. It is a *simulacrum* of nature, which is its *simulacrum* too.

### *DRN*’s Disciplines

At the heart of *DRN*’s threatening attraction to scholars lies the poem’s paradoxical modalization of its medium, theme, and moment. We bring

Lucretius to us—to the “mainstream,” to our time, to the conventions and protocols of a specific discipline—as a way of escaping the verse’s radicalism. As the poet seems indeed to reach the mainstream, the number and variety of scholarly publications on his work and influence have increased correspondingly. What is notable is the continued compartmentalization of scholarly approaches. Despite the poem’s increased influence and visibility, very little resembling a cross-disciplinary conversation regarding *DRN* has taken place. Marked philological advances—spurred in part by scholarship on the Epicurean tradition—have not found echoes in the interpretation of the poem’s poetics; the use that political philosophy (and philosophy *tout court*) has made of the poem barely acknowledges that the work is, indeed, *a poem*; with very few exceptions, the poem’s physics and its poetics are treated separately.<sup>20</sup> Classicists engage the poem in a disciplinary context removed from contemporary literary critics; continental historians of science who follow the work of Michel Serres largely bypass the treatment of the poem to be found in departments of philosophy in the United States. Historians of Epicureanism treat *DRN* as an event in one history, and students and scholars of the classical epic treat it as an event in another.

This scattering of approaches is diagnostic, as is the stress on the poem’s “modernity.” Both speak at once to the evolution of academic disciplines, which frequently run in parallel rather than convergent or conversing tracks, and to the specific shape and content of Lucretius’s poem. One of the great, persistent oddities of *DRN* is indeed what we should call its systematic incoherence, and this oddity feeds the scattered way the poem can be read at one and the same time. By “systematic incoherence” we mean a number of peculiarities in the poem, which seem to work at different levels but hand in hand. What to make, first, of the poem’s seeming contradictions? How to reconcile, for example, the goal of achieving Lucretian *suavitas* or Epicurean katastematic pleasure (καταστηματικὴν—think of the observer at the shipwreck, in the lines from Book 2 cited above), on one hand, and the tragic vision of plague and desolation on which the poem ends (6.1138–286), on the other? The controversy these closing lines provoke remains unabated. Does the dismal ending stem from the poet’s despair? Or from his characterization, from the balanced Epicurean position the poem advocates, of the fate of the fearful, the unenlightened, of those whose moral sickness will be figured as physical morbidity? It is a matter of life and death—and of the possible life or death of the Lucretian tradition, which can be consigned to the ash-bin of lunatic, suicidal ravings on one reading (Jerome, about Lucretius: he was “driven mad by a love-potion and, having composed in the intervals of his insanity several books which Cicero afterwards corrected, committed suicide”<sup>21</sup>), or, on another, to the exalted tradition of moral philosophy that paints “the prospect of salvation and of a heaven on earth . . . [that] shines with a brighter and stronger light on account of this dark and hellish picture of what



life is like without the guidance of Epicurus,” as W. H. D. Rouse’s note has it.<sup>22</sup> What to make of the poem’s addressee? Is Memmius, the dense pupil, a proper stand-in for the poem’s reader? Will we learn? Did he? And the invocation—in what way is the mythological register on which the poem opens (“Aeneadum genetrix,” “alma Venus”) compatible with its strict critique of religion (1.62–80 and throughout)?<sup>23</sup> In what way is the extraordinary crafted-ness of the verse, the deliberate formalism with which it picks up and acts out the philosophical theses it expounds, compatible with the centrality of aleatory processes in those theses?

It is not improper to imagine these controversies regarding *DRN* as the effects of a system at work in the poem—loose, disaggregated, but a system after all, a set of rules (think here of the rules of nature, *foedera naturae*; we would be drawing an analogy to *foedera* or *regulae scribendi*, rules of writing) according to which the poem produces contradictions and impasses that require of its readers unforeseen interpretive and philological swerves, *declinationes* that bring different interpreters up against the protocols they are living and applying, sometimes unthinkingly. The less coherent the response at any moment to *DRN*, the less conventionalized, the less easily *collectivized*, the better a society—minimally, grammatically, “we”—will have been reading the work.

Perhaps it is this remarkable double condition, of diagnostician as well as agent of systematic incoherence, operating at so many levels and in so many different discursive registers, that brings *DRN* into “the mainstream” today. We bring the poem to us, we have said, as a way of taming the verse’s radicalism, but we do it at our peril. No academic discipline in the humanities—not philosophy, literary studies and literary history, classics, philology—can comfortably lay claim to a systematic organization that might protect it from derogation, defunding, or from an attack on political or economic grounds. None but the blind can still dream that the contradictions between the smooth globalization of economic market paradigms, the striated, pockmarked, and disaggregated fields of human culture, and the ephemeral and resisting nature of things, subject to the depredations of both and finally so threatening to both, can be systematically or coherently addressed, let alone resolved. There is no shore from which to watch, gently, distantly, as our societies and our universities toss and drown. We cannot lay claim to the disinterest and *suavitas* that the poem both presses on and denies its readers. *DRN* is a poem for our time, then, in the precise measure that it discloses to us at every step, and at every level, the incoherence of our experience of natural time and the contingency and fragility of our claims upon a collective experience (“our time”). It is a poem for our academic time, for the incoherent and fictitious time of the academy, as well as for the chaotic, plagued time in which the human animal strives suicidally to bring things—their natures and their ecologies—under the sway of laws of interpretation, extraction, manufacture, distribution, and consumption.

### Lucretius and Modernity: Clusters, Themes, Chapters

The chapters in this book are organized into four main clusters, each of which takes a different approach to tackling the question of what kind of work “and” might play in connecting the words, or concepts, “Lucretius” and “Modernity.” Our first cluster, “What Is Modern about Lucretius?,” is perhaps the most polemic. In it Brooke Holmes, Joseph Farrell, and David Konstan explore what, if anything, is particularly “modern” about Lucretius himself, focusing the question primarily through the lens of modern science. The three chapters, together, question the “modernity” at stake in our collective title *Lucretius and Modernity* by arguing against the usefulness of “modern” and “modernity” as key terms, whether or not they see Lucretian science as contemporary in some way with our own. In the second cluster, “What Is Lucretian about Modernity?,” Catherine Wilson and Thomas Kavanagh take up the question of Lucretius’s political modernity. Their chapters demonstrate the important and often radically conflicting political and philosophical uses of Epicureanism in Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment France. Our third cluster, “Lucretian Figures of Modernity: Freedom, Cause, Truth,” explores philosophical engagements with Lucretius’s poem. Phillip Mitsis, Jacques Lezra, and Katja Maria Vogt not only track engagements with key modern philosophers (including Locke and Marx), but also each explore a concept that figures centrally in modern philosophical debates. In the final cluster, “Following Lucretius,” Warren Montag, Alain Gigandet, and Philip Hardie trace encounters by later writers (Spinoza, Strauss, Renaissance poets) with the texture of Lucretius’s poem. These writers follow Lucretius in the sense of coming behind him, but they also follow Lucretian *vestigia* or traces to new and often unexpected places.

The chapters also speak to one another across the groupings and clusters, connected by threads of common interest and concern. One question that cuts across the book is that of reception, especially the reception of the “classics” by modernity; this is theorized most explicitly in Holmes’s chapter and the first cluster but is also at stake in Mitsis’s chapter. Wilson’s chapter examines Lucretius in Enlightenment Europe, but is explicitly concerned with his reception among philosophers, and for that reason ties in with the third cluster on Lucretius’s philosophical modernity. A shared interest in the varied reception in philosophy of Lucretius’s swerve brings Montag into an encounter with Mitsis and Lezra. The first cluster’s exploration of Lucretius’s scienticity resonates well with Vogt’s chapter on the Epicurean claim for the truth of sense perceptions. Key themes of science, philosophy, rationality, and politics unite all the chapters, weaving their ideas and arguments together. Each of the book’s 11 chapters is described in more detail below; together, they present a nuanced, skeptical, passionate, historically sensitive, and complicated account of what is at stake when we claim Lucretius for modernity—or what *has been* at stake across the intervening centuries between Lucretius’s poem and our own present(s).

Brooke Holmes's "Michel Serres's Non-modern Lucretius: Manifold Reason and the Temporality of Reception" engages with Michel Serres's reading in *The Birth of Physics*, in which he argues that the discoveries and interests of modern physics—with its emphases on fluid mechanics, turbulence, and flux—shows that Lucretius was "right" about his physics. Holmes argues that the most valuable contribution of Serres's argument is not so much its claim for Lucretius as a modern physicist, but how the Lucretian physics that Serres discusses allows us to rethink temporality—the temporality with which we think about something like "reception," but also the untimeliness of Lucretius's poem itself. Holmes reviews the different models and theories of temporality at work in Serres's study, including topological time (in which time has folds, tears, and crumples like a handkerchief), time as isomorphic with matter, and cyclical history. The various models all rely, Holmes argues, on Serres's understanding of liquid, nonlinear, turbulent history. She then uses the understanding of reception that flows from this liquid history as a lever to rethink the reception of classical texts and ideas more broadly. Current models of reception combat ideas of texts as timeless by anchoring them in the historical period that receives or encounters them; Serres's understanding of temporality, Holmes argues, allows us to see how Lucretius's poem in particular allows classicists to think reception studies.

Joseph Farrell's "Lucretius and the Symptomatology of Modernism" reviews a few arenas in which Lucretius is frequently said to be modern—science, rationalism, and atheism—and shows how Lucretius, when examined in these arenas, is decidedly not modern (or, perhaps, as Serres would have it, not "right"). In the context of ancient science, for example, Lucretius looks non-modern when compared to ancient astronomers who attempted to quantify and mathematize their observations about the universe, or to Aristarchus, whose heliocentric view of the universe, as Farrell puts it, makes "modern astronomy... a direct descendant of its ancient ancestor in a way that is certainly not true of atomic physics." Lucretius is antiquated, Farrell argues, not only from our perspective but also from his own time; rather than incorporate the latest scientific ideas into his poem, Lucretius brought forward Epicurean ideas in their entirety, something that Farrell compares to "evangelical fundamentalism." As a result, Farrell concludes that Lucretius is far less modern than other ancient authors—a claim best made when "modernity" serves as a descriptive, chronological claim rather than one of praise.

David Konstan's "Lucretius the Physicist and Modern Science," like Farrell's chapter, calls into question whether "modernity" is internally coherent as a concept that might neatly and disinterestedly divide historical periods from one another. In particular, he examines other examples of "modernity" (in discussions of novels and of perspectival painting), in which a genre or form is defined as "modern" in order to imply "an unambiguous advance" rather than one fashion among others in the history of narrative or art. Newtonian physics, likewise, Konstan argues, has

defined modernity and modern physics in a narrow way that excludes the mathematical and physical ideas of Epicurean philosophy from inclusion in a “modern” canon. Against these teleological models, Konstan reexamines the mathematical and geometrical concept of the Epicurean minima, arguing that Epicurean and Lucretian ideas of quasi-infinity align well with recent developments in post-Newtonian physics and mathematics. The chapter as a whole implies that “modernity” is not the most useful concept by which we might judge Lucretius, and Konstan ends with a proposal that is as much aesthetic as polemic: “Perhaps we can say, then, that Epicurean atomism is to modern physics as *Don Quixote* is to post-modern fiction: a flourish of creative freedom from a time before a single model came to dominate the field and that found an echo only when that model gave way to rival structures of thought.”

Catherine Wilson’s “The Presence of Lucretius in Eighteenth-Century French and German Philosophy” begins by reviewing the state of scholarship about Lucretian philosophy in the eighteenth century; some conventional understandings of Lucretius’s influence need to be reconsidered, while other seldom-noticed or studied aspects deserve more attention. In particular, she discusses the different parts of Lucretius’s poem that interested eighteenth-century audiences, including those sections focusing on origins: the origins of species, of societies, and of religion. To demonstrate this new focus, Wilson examines the work of the Comte de Buffon, a French naturalist who published a number of works in the eighteenth century that took up these central Lucretian and Epicurean themes. She also examines the role that eighteenth-century pessimistic readings of Epicurean philosophy, by Buffon and others, played in Kant’s turn to critical philosophy. In the end she concludes that if we are to consider the seventeenth century as thoroughly Epicurean, we should also, in light of her argument, see the eighteenth century, at least in its moral and political philosophy, as having a “distinctly Lucretian stamp.”

Thomas M. Kavanagh’s “Epicureanism across the French Revolution” begins by giving a historical argument, showing how the Epicurean philosophy that had been so popular during the French Enlightenment came to be replaced with a Stoic understanding of Republican virtue. Epicurean pleasure, with its emphasis on individual, sensual pleasures exchanged among others, came to be replaced during and after the Revolution by a “civic happiness.” As Kavanagh puts it: “Pleasure was grounded in the senses; happiness would flow from the congruence of all with the common good as dictated by the General Will.” In light of these historical developments, Kavanagh turns to *The Physiology of Taste*, a meditation on gastronomy published by Anthelme Brillat-Savarin in 1825. Brillat presented in his text, Kavanagh argues, a wide-ranging analysis of taste that traced taste in such disciplines as physiology, human anthropology, history, political and economic analysis, and more. More importantly, Brillat emphasizes the performative power of gastronomy, thereby creating a potential bridge between individual and shared Epicurean pleasures.

The emphasis on shared pleasures—and specifically the shared pleasures of taste—shows the political and ideological importance of Brillat’s text, which proposes, as Kavanagh writes, “a new social contract,” “a new and positive conviviality outside any General Will promising collective happiness.”

Phillip Mitsis’s “How Modern Is Freedom of the Will?” is a case study comparing the freedom of the will in Lucretius and John Locke; at stake in the study is the larger question of how we talk about Lucretius’s modernity. Neither a proponent of Lucretius as the harbinger of the modern, nor an advocate for the idea that Lucretius is avowedly antimodern or premodern, Mitsis argues that the comparison between Lucretius and the unquestionably modern Locke forces us to rethink, as he puts it, “the unbridgeable conceptual divide between antiquity and modernity.” Against traditional narratives in the history of philosophy that posit a radical break marked by Descartes and Cartesian philosophy, Mitsis proposes that the history of the philosophy of the will requires different topography, landmarks, and heroes. Mitsis then undertakes a meticulous comparison of Locke’s and Lucretius’s understanding of the question of the “freedom” of the will, showing in both, among other similarities, a combination of an understanding of voluntary action rooted in causal sequences but simultaneously, and importantly, an emphasis on the importance of the freedom of rational evaluation. After showing that it is more than possible that Locke’s incorporation of Epicurean arguments came from the Epicurean philosophy of Gassendi, Mitsis concludes with a methodological argument about the history of philosophy; tracing detailed histories of certain concepts, especially materialist concepts, as Mitsis shows, allows us to read continuities across the divide that so often separates ancient from modern.

Jacques Lezra’s “On the Nature of Marx’s Things” is a study of the philosophical and aesthetic “uses” of Lucretius in Marx’s early notebooks, compiled while he was pulling together notes for his doctoral dissertation. Lezra does a detailed reading of a Marxian epic simile, in which Petrarch is figured as a cold moralist clutching his coat and causing viewers to clutch their own coats in turn, and Lucretius is an acrobat causing viewers to forget themselves. Lezra then traces Marx’s early Epicurean musings into his later questions about the relationship between things and thought. In particular, Marx’s writing on the swerve, on the declination, or on the Hegelian “jump” from quantitative to qualitative relations, becomes, in Lezra’s reading, about possibilities for writing the history of philosophy, and about the status of philosophy and its uncertain position (is it swirling above the world of things like the acrobat, or bringing the world of the acrobat and the world below into some kind of relation?). This leads, for Lezra, to a reading of the poem’s poetics, to the traces of argument enacted at the level of the letter: Lezra shows that Marx learns from Lucretius’s poem *contingency*, the swerves or discursive declinations that register both in the content and in the form of Lucretius’s poem. At the

end of the chapter Lezra gestures to a larger argument about “how Marx’s early encounter with Lucretius will shape the nature of Marx’s things.”

Katja Maria Vogt’s “All Sense-Perceptions Are True: Epicurean Responses to Skepticism and Relativism” examines Lucretians’ bold epistemological claim that all sense perceptions are true, a claim that is mounted, she argues, as a defense primarily against skeptics and relativists. She reviews the variety of arguments that Lucretius mobilizes to support the claim that all sense perceptions are true. She begins by showing that Lucretius, and Epicurean philosophy more broadly, locates sense-perception in the sense-organs, not the mind, and shows that they are mere reporters of perceptual content (and therefore cannot alter sensation). She then shifts the debate about the nature of “truth” at stake in the claim that “all sense perceptions are true” to say that the truth is not propositional, and must go beyond the understanding of truth that is at work in a claim like “beliefs are true or false.” Ultimately, she proposes that in order to understand Lucretius’s claim that all sense perceptions are true we might understand it to be a claim that perception, like knowledge, is “factive”—that is to say, unerring, true by its very nature. However, she distinguishes the idea that perception is factive from the idea that perception is equivalent to knowledge; this distinction, she argues, disables the possible Platonic critique of relativism that might otherwise arise.

Warren Montag’s “From Clinamen to Conatus: Deleuze, Lucretius, Spinoza” studies Deleuze’s reading of Lucretius as it appears in an early essay on Lucretius and in that essay’s later revision in the appendix to his *Logic of Sense*. Deleuze, Montag argues, reads Lucretius through Spinoza, mapping Spinoza’s *conatus* onto Lucretius’s *clinamen* and, in the process, arguing that “Lucretius may prove as acute a reader of the *Ethics* as Spinoza is of *The Nature of Things*.” Deleuze’s linking of *clinamen* and *conatus* rereads the Spinozan *conatus* as no longer exclusively relevant to animate matter only; this reading goes against the grain of many current readings of Book 3 of Spinoza’s *Ethics*, which insist on seeing something like intention in the *conatus*. Montag shows that Deleuze’s insight allows us to see that Spinoza’s understanding of *conatus* is a mediated and reworked understanding of the Lucretian *clinamen*. Likewise, Deleuze’s combination of Lucretius and Spinoza allows us to understand a larger point about causation in all three authors: Deleuze adds Spinoza to Lucretius, Montag states, “as if he could discern in these thinkers past the barest signs, not of destiny, nor even the future, but of a present still to be known.”

Alain Gigandet’s “Notes on Leo Strauss’s ‘Notes on Lucretius’” opens with the strong claim that, for Leo Strauss, reading Lucretius both introduces us to modernity properly defined and helps us understand “how problematic the concept happens to be.” Gigandet gives a detailed account of Strauss’s unusual encounter with *DRN*, which, among other things, placed great emphasis on Lucretius’s *style*; his critique of religion, which Strauss thought was immanent throughout the poem and not just emergent in a few key passages; and its rhetorical structure, which, Strauss

thought, was a systematic reworking of the opening hymn to Venus. Gigandet shows that Strauss's scattered and symptomatic way of reading Lucretius sought to show the ambiguity of religion and theology in the poem itself. Ultimately, Gigandet argues, Strauss believed Lucretius to be "doubly involved in the origins of the 'enlightened' modernity" in that he sees not only the outlines of secular modernity but also its practical downfalls. Gigandet ends with a reflection on the Strauss's own style, reflecting on the refusal of systematicity inherent in the "notes" in which he chose to publish his interpretation of Lucretius's poem. Underlying both his interpretation and his style, Gigandet argues, is Strauss's elitism.

Philip Hardie's "Reflections of Lucretius in Late Antique and Early Modern Biblical and Scientific Poetry: Providence and the Sublime" examines Christian writers who, despite having antimaterialist agendas and outlooks, turned to Lucretius's *DRN* in their own works. Hardie shows in great detail how Lucretius was systematically incorporated and absorbed into hexameral poetry, poetry that recounted the six days of creation as told in Genesis. Some of the accommodation of Lucretius happened because Lucretius had already been reworked by previous writers: for example, Ovid mixes Lucretian cosmogony into his own, and was in turn revised to seem continuous with Christian cosmogony. Hardie documents the extraordinary flexibility of mind and rhetoric required for poets with providentialist worldviews to fit Lucretius into their poetry, paying particular attention to the way Du Bartas folds Lucretian philosophy into his poetry. At the end of his chapter he traces the trope of the "sublime Lucretian image of Epicurus' flight of the mind through the void," showing how Christian poets at once figure it as rational overreaching and attempt to, nevertheless, incorporate it into their worldviews.

### Notes

1. Gordon L. Campbell, "Lucretius Reaches the Mainstream," *Classical Review* 59:1 (2009): 115–17. Campbell's review covers both Monica R. Gale, ed., *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies: Lucretius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) and Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
2. Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, trans. W. H. D. Rouse, rev. Martin Ferguson Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992). Unless otherwise noted, both Latin quotations and translations are taken from this edition.
3. For more on this claim, see David Konstan's "Lucretius the Phycist and Modern Science" in this book.
4. See, for example, Michel Serres, *The Birth of Physics*, trans. Jack Hawkes, ed. David Webb (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000).
5. Louis Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978–1987*, ed. François Matheron and Oliver Corpet, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (New York: Verso, 2006).
6. Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011).