

Hum 110, Reed College
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Lucretius 1: Study Questions

In the opening of The Way Things Are, Lucretius is both beginning a text and speaking of the origin of "things." Post-colonial theorist Edward Said makes the following useful declaration about beginnings:

The problem with beginnings is one of those problems that, if allowed to, will confront one with equal intensity on a practical and on a theoretical level. Every writer knows that the choice of beginning for what he will write is crucial not only because it determines much of what follows but because a work's beginning is, practically speaking, the main entrance to what it offers. Moreover, in retrospect we can regard a beginning as the point at which, in a given work, the writer departs from all other works; a beginning immediately establishes relationships with works already existing, relationships of either continuity or antagonism or some mixture of both. But the moment we start to detail the features of a beginning--a moment likely to occur in examining many sorts of writers--we necessarily make special distinctions. Is a beginning the same as an origin? Is the beginning of a given work a real beginning--or is there some other, secret point that more authentically starts the work off? To what extent is a beginning ultimately a physical exigency and nothing more than that? (*Beginnings* 3).

To what extent is the opening of The Way Things Are both a practical and theoretical issue? As you will remember from our discussions of the *Aeneid* and the Republic, during the period in which The Way Things Are was written, Romans were concerned with both "newness" and tradition. As you read the beginning of The Way Things Are, I would like you to consider the issues raised but Said (including what the difference between a beginning and an origin might be), but here are some more specific questions as well to get you started:

1. What kind of reading methodology does Lucretius suggest that we should use when reading his poem? (How does the form/genre help answer this question? What other factors might we take into account?)
2. Look at the "Synopses and Notes" at the back of the textbook. Make an outline of the poem as a whole based on the synopses. What is the structure of the poem? How and where does the first book prepare us for and predict the subjects to come? How does the third book fit into this sequence?
3. The language of introducing. What type of diction does Lucretius use? How does this help tell us how to read the poem? What metaphors, themes, or similes does Lucretius raise in the first book? Are these echoed or picked up in book 3?
4. Said notes that "a beginning immediately establishes relationships with works already existing, relationships of either continuity or antagonism or some mixture of both" (*Beginnings* 3). Compare Lucretius' origin story to others we have read (and presumably he did too). Is his relationship to these texts--continuity or antagonism or some mixture of both? Is the relationship between books one and three one of

continuity or antagonism? Usually in a poetic sequence, the later poems in that sequence also have an "opening" or beginning," but it is less distinct than the initial poem. How would you characterize the opening of Book 3?

Suggested Readings:

Edward Said's *Beginnings: Intention and Method*. NY: Basic Books, 1975: 3-26.

Lucretius 2: Study Questions (Elegies)

Definition: a poem that relates the experience of loss and searches for consolation. (Helps us with the "work of mourning.") Designed to defend the individual against death.

Conventions: pastoral contextualization, the myth of the vegetation deity (particularly the sexual elements of such myths and their relation to the sexuality of the mourner), the use of repetition and refrains, the reiterated questions, the outbreak of vengeful anger or cursing, the procession of mourners, the movement from grief to consolation, the traditional images of resurrection, the elegist's need to draw attention, consolingly, to his own surviving powers, the elegist's reluctant submission to language itself. (Language becomes a substitute for what is lost.)

Traditional Form: dactylic hexameters and pentameters.

Structure: Basic passage through grief or darkness (the cathode--or way down) to consolation and renewal (the anode or way up).

Basic Questions Elegies Answer: Where is the deceased? Where am I? Does God/the gods exist? (Why) will no-one or nothing save us from death?

Bibliography:

Peter Sacks, "Interpreting the Genre: The Elegy and the Work of Mourning," The English Elegy, pp. 1-37

QUESTION: Is The Way Things Are an elegy? If so what is Lucretius' mourning? How does this change the way we read the poem?