

In Apollonius' epic, stress is laid upon the separation of the baby Achilles from both his parents. At 1.553–8 he appears in the arms of his centaur foster-parents as the *Argo* sails past Pelion, and at 4.813 Hera pathetically refers to the baby's longing for Thetis' milk, *τεοῦ λίπτοντα γάλακτος*. That verse hints at an etymology of the hero's name from *α-χείλος*,<sup>6</sup> the one who did not bring his lips to his mother's breast. Thus a specific reference to the nurturing power of breasts within a context recalling Apollonius' *Argonautica* is, at the very least, tonally ambiguous. In Apollonius' version, Peleus is left with nothing but despair, and Thetis' breasts are all but unused.<sup>7</sup>

The conclusions to be drawn from this are, of course, as nuanced as the reference itself. It could be argued that Catullus' is a 'positive' reversal of the Apollonian situation, or (less plausibly) that Catullus does not want us to know the Apollonian text *that* well. With either explanation, however, doubts remain.

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Richardson on *h.Dem.* 236.

<sup>7</sup> At 4.871 we are told that during the day Thetis used to anoint Achilles with ambrosia; it is reasonable, I think, to see this as all the nourishment he got.

#### A NOTE ON 'VIS ABDITA QUAEDAM' (*DRN* 5.1233)

usque adeo res humanas vis abdita quaedam  
obterit et pulchros fascis saevasque securis  
proculcare ac ludibrio sibi habere videtur

(5.1233–5)<sup>1</sup>

The curious phrase 'vis abdita quaedam' has traditionally divided commentators into two camps.<sup>2</sup> One group cautiously ensures that 5.1233–5 is kept consistent with the poem's overall scientific perspective and pre-empts any reference on the poet's part to a supernatural force. Munro, for instance, glosses the phrase as 'the secret power and working of nature'. He supports this interpretation by finding in Book 6 a passage that he believes refers to the same disruptive and destructive physical force (6.29–31).<sup>3</sup> Along the same lines Minadeo proposes that we regard 'vis abdita quaedam' as 'the principle of destruction in the universe'. He understands the phrase to refer to a force which balances the creative or generative force in nature, just as Strife counters Love in the Empedoclean cosmology.<sup>4</sup> It can be said in favour of this interpretation that the words 'vis abdita quaedam' must refer most immediately to lines 1226–32. Certainly, *vis* recalls the phrase 'vis violenti...venti' (1226), the violent force of the wind which destroys a naval effort, by sweeping a general, his fleet, his legions and his elephants into the sea.<sup>5</sup>

A second group of scholars prefers to understand 5.1233–5 as offering the layperson's superstitious explanation of a natural disaster, such as the storm at sea. For Giancotti, Bollack, Schrijvers, and Costa, 'vis abdita quaedam' is the 'vis

<sup>1</sup> Cited from C. Bailey, *Lucreti De Rerum Natura Libri Sex*<sup>2</sup> (Oxford, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> See C. Giussani, *T. Lucreti Cari De Rerum Natura Libri Sex* (Torino, 1929), v.146.

<sup>3</sup> Munro, *T. Lucreti Cari De Rerum Natura Libri Sex* (Cambridge, 1893), p. 344.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Minadeo, *The Lyre of Science. Formal Meaning in Lucretius' De Rerum Natura* (Detroit, 1969), p. 96. Also see Giussani, *op. cit.*, v.146; C. Bailey, *T. Lucreti Cari De Rerum Natura Libri Sex* (Oxford, 1947), i.1519; A. Ernout and L. Robin, *Lucrèce De Rerum Natura* (Paris, 1962), iii.170.

<sup>5</sup> The historical reference here seems to be the invasion of Pyrrhus. Cf. *DRN* 5.1302, 1339; Pliny, *HN* 8.16.

violenti...venti' (1226) misunderstood as the wrath of the gods.<sup>6</sup> The superstitious mind veils the natural force of the wind: hence 'vis *abdita*'. The adjective *abdita* reminds the reader that superstition, presented as 'terrorem animi tenebrasque' elsewhere in the poem (e.g. 1.146; cf. 2.55–61), conceals true explanations from mankind. What gives more weight to this reading is the fact that the specific concern of this section of *De Rerum Natura* is to show human irrationality and emotion producing distorted explanations of natural occurrences. Verse 1194 establishes superstition as the cause of misery for mankind ('genus infelix humanum'). An incorrect belief in the gods' control over nature leads mortals to worship at stones and altars, to lie prostrate on the ground, and to offer sacrifices and prayers before shrines in the hope of assuaging divine anger (1196–1204). Lucretius continues to show how lack of scientific reason affects the layperson's perception of natural decay and destruction in the remainder of the passage. At 1211 he blames 'rationis egestas' for speculation about the beginning and end of the world. Then, at 1218ff. he identifies fear as the emotion (cf. 'formidine divum' 1218; *pavore*, 1219; *timore*, 1223) which leads man to interpret a thunderstorm as divine retribution ('poenarum grave...solvendi tempus', 1225).

If this second reading is more consonant with the criticism of *religio* in Book 5, there remains a difficulty with the text. The indicative 'obterit' (line 1234) states that the misunderstood *vis* 'wears down' human endeavours, and so makes it appear that Lucretius himself advocates the superstitious viewpoint. One might argue that the poet initially espouses the superstitious perspective only to correct his position in the next line with 'videtur' ('seems X' with the implication that it is not 'X' by analogy with the Greek *φαίνεται* + infinitive) to show how easily *religio* can be engendered even when an atomist is concerned.<sup>7</sup> But it is doubtful that Lucretius intended this kind of ambiguity where the issue of *religio* is involved. If he is to accomplish his didactic aim and bring the reader to a state of calm, philosophical detachment, the poet needs to reject unequivocally the superstitious perspective evoked by 'vis *abdita quaedam*'.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the rhetorical question which closes the following narrative of the earthquake ('quid mirum si se temnunt mortalia saecula | atque potestates magnas mirasque relinquunt | in rebus viris divum, quae cuncta gubernent?', 1238–40) assumes that the audience is now completely reconciled to the atomist perspective. Only the subjunctive *gubernent* is required to dismiss the religious attitude reported in these lines. The indicative verb *obterit*, even if followed by the 'videtur' + infinitive construction to distance us from the religious interpretation of the storm, introduces uncertainty too close to the end of the argument against superstition.

The problem disappears if the verb *obterit*, textually the least secure word in the verses,<sup>9</sup> is emended to the infinitive *obterere*, so that it is parallel to the two other

<sup>6</sup> F. Giancotti, 'Postilla metodologica sull'esegesi di Lucrezio', in C. J. Classen, *Probleme der Lukrez Forschung* (Hildesheim, 1986), p. 426; M. Bollack, *La Raison de Lucrèce* (Paris, 1978), p. 214; P. H. Schrijvers, *Horror ac Divina Voluptas. Etudes sur la poétique et la poésie de Lucrèce* (Amsterdam, 1970), p. 170; C. D. N. Costa, *Lucretius De Rerum Natura V* (Oxford, 1984), p. 138.

<sup>7</sup> This interpretation was suggested to me by an anonymous referee of *CQ*. Incidentally, Diskin Clay, *Lucretius and Epicurus* (Ithaca, 1983), p. 219 advocates another ambiguous reading for lines 1233–5. He argues that the phrase 'vis *abdita quaedam*' functions in one of two ways depending on the type of audience. The scientific reader will know this *vis* cannot refer to the power of the gods and understand it as superstition, while the layperson will take *vis* to be a reference to the gods' power and thereby reveal his ignorance.

<sup>8</sup> See James Jope, 'The Didactic Unity and Emotional Import of Book 6 of *De rerum natura*', *Phoenix* 43 (1989), 16–34, especially pp. 22–3.

<sup>9</sup> *opterit* is the reading of O, which was deduced from Q's unmetrical *operit*. *obterit* is to be found in O corr. ELF.

infinitives *proculcare* and (*ludibrio sibi*) *habere*. One can imagine 'obterer(e) et' being mistaken for an imperfect subjunctive *obtereret*, and then being changed to a grammatically acceptable *obterit et* in a subsequent copy.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> An Ibycus search (kindly done by Professor David Furley) reveals that Lucretius frequently handled the scansion of infinitives by placing them before 'et'. There are seventy-five other instances of the pattern *-ere et* in *De Rerum Natura*, including one of *-erere et* ('gerere et', 6.539).

## TWO NOTES ON LUCRETII

### 6.548–51

et merito, quoniam plaustis concussa tremescunt  
 tecta uiam propter non magno pondere tota,  
 nec minus fexsultantes dupuis cumque uim†  
 ferratos utrimque rotarum succutit orbes.

In place of the corrupt line 550 Bailey (vol. 3, Addenda, p. 1758) would read

nec minus exsultant ipsa ut lapi' cumque uiiai

This comes near to satisfying; but even with *ipsa* the change of subject from *tecta* to *plaustra* is awkward, and *exsultant* is inappropriate to a lumbering *plaustrum* (cf. Virgil, *G.* 1.163 *tardaue Eleusinae matris uoluentia plaustra*).<sup>1</sup> I suggest reading *cisia* instead of *ipsa*. The *cisium* was a fast light two-wheeled vehicle which might well jump up on a rough road; and the first three letters *cis* could have become the *-es* of the MS *exsultantes*. Two further points: *lapis uiiai* is not 'a stone on the road' (Bailey and Rouse/Smith [Loeb, 1982]), but rather the stone of the road, i.e. the paving; and *utrimque* is not 'on one side or the other' (Bailey in notes) but 'on both sides'. There remains Ernout's objection that the suppression of the final *s* of *lapis* (which stands for *lapids*\*) is unlikely. One can only say that no one would have ventured to introduce by conjecture *pendentibu' structas* or *manantibu' stillent*, but both are found in Lucretius' text (6.195, 943).

### 6.970–2

barbigeras oleaster eo iuuat usque capellas  
 effluat ambrosia quasi uero et nectare tinctus,  
 qua nil est homini quod amariu' fronde ac extet.

So the best MSS, with *excet* for *extet* in O. One of the Italian MSS (F) has what is presumably no more than an emendation, *quo...frondeat extet*, and this has been adopted by M. F. Smith in the Loeb edition (1982). The asyndeton can be paralleled, but the second verb, *extet*, is very flat. *qua* and *fronde* should be kept. I believe Bailey was on the right lines when he proposed *fronde uigescat*, but this can be improved on. *uigesco* means not simply to grow but to grow vigorous; a more appropriate word, better suited to a plant, would be *uirescat*.

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<sup>1</sup> Conrad Müller seems to have had the same idea. His text has *nec minus exsultant currus, ubicumque uiiai...*; but this necessitates inserting an additional line of his own composition.