

# NOTES AND DISCUSSIONS/NOTES DE LECTURE

## ON LUCRETIUS *DRN* 2.371–373

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THIS IS THE TEXT OF LUCRETIUS 2.371–373 (Smith's 1992 Loeb edition):

*Postremo quodvis frumentum non tamen omne  
quidque suo genere inter se simile esse videbis  
quin intercurrat quaedam distantia formis.*

The syntax and meaning of these lines have been subject to controversy. In this note I propose to elucidate the meaning and to explain the syntax.

The two most recent commentators of this passage, Bailey (1947) and Leonard-Smith (1942) found the syntax of *frumentum* difficult. Bailey (1947: 2.864) states: "the construction is clear, but it is better to have it as a 'suspended' nom. (or acc.) 'in the case of any kind of cereal' than to 'supply' *sumere perge* from line 347." Leonard-Smith (1942: 346, *ad* 371) writes: "sentence seems ungrammatical or at least very loosely expressed." It is probable that a colon should be set after *frumentum*, *sumere perge* being understood from line 347. Apparently Lucretius means: "Now take any kind of grain you wish. <In spite of generic identity,> you will not, however, see that every grain resembles each other within its own kind, etc." A similar opinion was voiced by Merrill (1907: *ad loc.*) "*frumentum* may depend on *sumere perge* from 347, or it may better be regarded as a suspended nominative." Already Munro (1920: 3.37) appears to have considered *quodvis frumentum* to be a suspended nominative or accusative. This is his translation: "Lastly in the case of any kind of corn you like you will yet find that any one grain is not so similar to any other in the same kind . . . ." The construction of *frumentum* with *sumere perge* was suggested already by Creech (1770: *ad* 371). A more major corruption was posited by Wex (1852: 324), who writes "ante haec verba (*sc.* non tamen omne) duo hemistichia excidisse suspicor, nam *prostremo quodvis frumentum* non intelligo." Other commentaries (e.g., Lachmann 1882, Bockemüller 1873, Giussani 1968, Ernout-Robin 1925, and Giancotti 1994) have nothing to say about the construction of *quodvis frumentum*.

The only scholar to discuss these lines in some depth appears to be Reid (1911: 34). He, too, finds them obscure. He writes: "It must be admitted . . . that the Latin is strange; *frumentum* is the *genus*, but *omne* implies every individual within it. If *frumentum* could be taken as equivalent to *granum* (which is impossible) the difficulty would be lessened. The meaning seems to be: 'any class of cereal is not all through its members uniform, whatever the class (of cereal) be'." Despite Reid's doubt, there is nothing wrong with *frumentum* being the *genus* and *omne*

implying individuals within it. On the other hand, if *frumentum* could be taken as the equivalent of one grain, the difficulty would not be lessened but, rather, increased. We would then have the Latin: *quodvis granum non . . . omne . . . inter se simile esse videbis*. It is difficult to see what meaning can be assigned to the phrase "any grain not entirely similar among itself (*inter se*).<sup>1</sup> Reid, moreover, is wrong in asserting that it is impossible for *frumentum* to mean a single grain. This meaning is found in Vergil *Aen.* 4.406, where ants *grandia trudent . . . frumenta umeris*.

The correct interpretation of these lines is, in fact, the one that he finds strange. They can be translated as follows: "Finally you will see that any cereal, each of its own species, is nevertheless not entirely (*non tamen omne*) alike with respect to its parts (*inter se simile*) but that some difference in shapes intervenes." That the phrase *inter se simile* adverts to the constituents of the species *frumentum* is clear from 3.347–348. There *inter se* clearly refers to the constituents of various species (*generatim*), species mentioned in lines 342–344 (*sc.* human race, fish, trees,<sup>1</sup> wild animals, and birds). In our passage, the constituents of the species *frumentum* would, then, most naturally be the plants subsumed under a particular *frumentum*. A similar example of *inter se* used to refer to the relationship among unnamed but implied parts of the whole is found in 5.71–72:

*quove modo genus humanum variante loquella  
coeperit inter se vesci per nomina rerum;*

Here *inter se* refers to the understood parts of *genus humanum*, to wit *homines*.

Syntactically lines 371–373 are in the accusative and infinitive construction with *videbis* being the main verb.<sup>2</sup> *Frumentum* is the subject of *esse* with *quidque suo genere* being in apposition to *frumentum*. To sum up, both in syntax and meaning *frumentum* is a good fit in its context.

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<sup>1</sup> Although OQGP all have *arbusta*, most editors follow Bentley and print *armenta*, an emendation that, as pointed out by Smith in his 1992 Loeb edition, was first printed in the edition of J. Tonson of 1712. On the basis of Empedoclean material a return to the mss text has been advocated by Martin and Primavesi (1999: 185–186).

<sup>2</sup> That *quodvis frumentum* is the subject of the infinitive *esse* in an accusative and infinitive construction introduced by *videbis* was already seen by Valenti (1961: 79). He translates: "finalmente, verás que los granos de un cereal cualquiera no son, dentro de su misma especie, tan semejantes entre sí que no aparezca en sus figuras alguna diferencia." He, however, inexactly renders *frumentum* as "los granos de un cereal"; he also fails to translate *tamen omne*. I wish to thank the anonymous reader for enclosing Valenti's translation with a thorough evaluation.

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