Making a Text of the Universe: Perspectives on Discursive Order in the De Rerum Natura of Lucretius

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In the early nineteenth century, as physics was moving towards an apogee of determinism, the Marquis de Laplace conjured up the figure of a demon who, knowing the position and velocity of every mass in the universe, could calculate the universe’s entire history, past and future.¹ Many who have studied the physical world have harboured dreams of such a final theory (or nightmares, as it may be, in which there is no room for free will; Laplace’s figure was a demon). There has been much talk in recent years, brought to wider public attention particularly by the success of Stephen Hawking’s A Brief History of Time, of physicists perhaps achieving a ‘grand unified theory’ (otherwise loosely and rather misleadingly nicknamed a ‘theory of everything’), as well as a fierce debate over whether such an end is feasible. We might see a pretension of this sort already foreshadowed in Lucretius’ De rerum natura (DRN). In a famous passage in Book 1 (936–50), Lucretius compares people who are ignorant of the true workings of the world, and so suffer from irrational fears, to sick children. To encourage them to drink medicine, doctors smear the rim of the cup with honey to encourage the children to drink it all up and so recover. Similarly, Lucretius says, he smears the cup of his Epicurean

philosophy with the sweet honey of the Muses so as to entice the reader into reading the whole poem ‘while you are learning to see in what shape is framed the whole nature of things’ (dum perspicis omnem | naturam rerum qua constet compita figura, 949–50).

Lucretius’ poem thus sets itself up as offering a final, definitive explanation of every phenomenon in the universe. The phrase ‘the world of the text’ is often bandied about; here, however, we are being offered ‘the text of the world’. But even if this text claims to offer a ‘theory of everything’—in this case of a universe thought of as infinite in extension, and with no beginning and no end in time—it cannot be coextensive with what it sets out to describe. As Alessandro Schiesaro has recently remarked, ‘the most faithful replica of the true nature of the universe would make for a non-circumscribed and virtually non-readable text’. 2 ‘Virtually’ here feels like a prevarication. Could a text be readable which had no limits and no internal order? Or is it by conceiving of that universe as a ‘text’ that it becomes ‘readable’? The challenge for a work such as the De rerum natura, with its totalizing claims, is then to render all phenomena ‘intratextual’. This essay will therefore explore what that challenge may entail and what limits it may come up against. In considering how the ‘universe’ is treated as ‘text’, we may also conversely get a sense of the limits of universalizing theories of the text.

The palpable paradox of confining the infinite within the finite is addressed in the description of Epicurus in the prologue to Book 1 (62–79). Epicurus is presented as a military leader of epic stature ‘breaking open outwards the confining bars of nature’s gates’ (70–1) which kept mankind’s understanding shut in. The consequences of his action are described in the lines that follow (72–7):

\begin{verbatim}
  ergo uiuida uis animi peruicit, et extra
  processit longe flammantia moenia mundi
  atque omne immensum peragrauit mente animoque,
  unde refert nobis uictor quid possit oriri,
  quid nequeat, nita potestas denique cuique
  quanam sit ratione atque alte terminus haerens.
\end{verbatim}


3 Where an explicit translation of the Latin is not offered, I have generally placed an argumentative paraphrase before or, as here, after the extract.
The lively vigour of his mind prevailed, and he marched out beyond the flaming ramparts of the world and traversed in mind and thought the immeasurable universe, from where he returns to us as victor, telling us what can come into being and what cannot, in short, how the potentiality of each thing, its potestas [its quality of being potis, being able to be something], is limited [finita, enclosed within boundaries], and each thing has its boundary stone deeply set.

Epicurus’ sally carries him beyond the flaming ramparts of the world—but in his mind and imagination; and like a conquering Roman general, he sends reports home about the regions he has conquered. But his conquest is, paradoxically, a superhuman one, for he traverses the universe (omne, 74, everything there is), which is immensum, ‘immeasurable’. Yet measure it is precisely what he is represented as doing, for he maps and surveys the universe, as a general would conquered territory, showing how each phenomenon is subject to immutable laws, figured in the image of plots of land marked out with deep-set, and so immovable, boundary stones (cf. alte terminus haerens, 77). The metaphor rendered ‘literal’ in this description is that of property: what can and cannot happen in the physical world is limited (cf. finita, 76), ‘determined’ by the ‘properties’ of matter, and these properties can be inferred. Epicurus conquers the universe, but conveys his control, his understanding, of it by textualizing it: an infinite phenomenon, the universe, is ‘captured’ within the confines of a finite phenomenon, a text. An established tradition of Lucretian scholarship has in turn mapped some of the ways in which the DRN uses textual phenomena (notably combinations of letters) as analogies for the workings of an atomic universe; and how these seek to transcend the status of analogies to become themselves examples of those workings.4

In setting itself up as a ‘theory of everything’, Lucretius’ text emerges out of, and seeks to contest and displace, other descriptions of the world which make similar claims for themselves, primarily those modes of description which would place the divine at the cent...
religion and its modes of explanation. Humankind is depicted as lying grovelling under the heel of *religio* until Epicurus arises as its champion and overthrows the oppressor (1.62–79). His triumph reverses the earlier situation (1.78–9):

\[
\text{quare religio pedibus subiecta uicissim obteritur, nos exaequat uictoria caelo.}
\]

Therefore superstition in its turn lies crushed beneath his feet, and his victory lifts us level with the skies.

Thanks to the theories of Epicurus, we are now in the position formerly occupied by the gods. Discourse seeking to explain the physical world often explicitly sets itself up in competition with that of religion; the trope of humankind taking the place of God once a theory of sufficient explanatory power has been found is not peculiar to the *DRN*. Take for example the notorious concluding paragraph of Stephen Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time*:

However, if we do discover a complete theory, it should in time be understandable in broad principle by everyone, not just a few scientists. Then we shall all, philosophers, scientists, and just ordinary people, be able to take part in the discussion of the question of why it is that we and the universe exist. If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason—for then we would know the mind of God.\(^5\)

The method of the project is figured in terms of appropriation. Lucretius’ appropriations of the characteristic language and images of his opponents are adventurous, but present potential problems as well. In his praise of Epicurus in the prologue to Book 3, Lucretius proclaims that once the constraints on his imagination are removed by reading the philosophy of Epicurus, the whole universe lies open to be viewed in his mind; the ramparts of the world roll apart, and he sees things taking place throughout the whole void (14–17); the true nature of the gods can be seen (18–24), whilst nowhere is there a trace of the fabled Underworld (25). For one who has read and understood Epicurus, the earth is no obstacle to seeing everything that goes on below our feet (26–7). Lucretius characterizes the impact of Epicurean ideas as a vertiginous experience,

Lucretius discusses how our world is made from atoms and space and that gods did not involve themselves in human affairs! Read more. 2 people found this helpful. How incredible it is to read a poet and philosopher from 60 B.C. writing on the philosophical derivation of the idea that atoms must exist, that they have some spin on them, and that there is conservation of matter in nature! These thoughts about "atomism" would have been lost except for the fact that Lucretius presented them in a very good Latin poem. Although credit is given to Leucippus and Democritus for starting the idea of atomism, Epicurius and Lucretius were strong exponents of these ideas. The poem utilizes common observations to illustrate that the world about us is simply