CHAPTER 3

PHILOSOPHIC RESIGNATION: LIVING BEYOND HOPE AND FEAR

The two accounts of the eternal and infinite that conclude Lucretius’s exposition of his materialist physics point toward the insignificance and impermanence of our world. Lucretius next brings this cosmic teaching to bear on the human soul in the central portion of the poem. More specifically, these two books reveal the reaction of the soul to the question and nature of the eternal. In the syllabus, we were told that what is most needed to live well is an account of the composition of the mind and soul and an explanation of the images of the souls of the dead that terrify our minds when “laboring under disease, or buried in sleep” (I, 127–135). What Book I unites will be taken up separately in Books III and IV. Through an account of the material composition of the mind and soul, Book III seeks to free us of our fear of death, and by way of an account of the operations of our senses both physical and mental, Book IV explains why it is we believe we perceive that which cannot be. Liberation from the terror of the mind would therefore appear to require more than a material account of the soul. Such liberation will have to contend with the unwillingness of the reader to trust the senses and not be swayed by what Lucretius will call “the hazy additives of the mind” produced by our cares, fears, and hopes.

Books III and IV are dedicated to a common end but begin in remarkably different fashions. The proem to Book III begins with the strongest statement yet as to Lucretius’s indebtedness to the man from Greece. The proem to Book IV however, is one of two proems that make no mention of the man from Greece, and strongly affirms Lucretius’s originality and the singularity of his own achievement. One might be tempted to say that Book III is the most “epicurean” book and Book IV the most Lucretian. After such self-assertiveness, in Book V and the concluding

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book, Lucretius returns to prefacing each book with a praise of the man from Greece. Book IV for this reason stands out as a digression of sorts. This most Lucretian book ends with an attack on what may be our deepest of all cares, and the source of our most illusory hopes, love. That an account of love concludes the only book that begins with Lucretius’s assertion of his own uniqueness, a uniqueness that is based upon his having poetically sweetened the otherwise bitter the truth about the nature of things, suggests a decisive way in which Lucretius surpasses his master. Lucretius’s superiority is due to a superior understanding of the soul. He appreciates that the primary difficulty is not revealing the mortal nature of the soul but man’s rebellion against the fact of his mortality. Taken together, Books III and IV suggest that it is love as much as fear that is the source of those things that “terrify the mind.” The order of the presentation suggests that, despite having learned the truth about their mortal condition, men are still prone to illusions of the mind. The conclusion to Book IV suggests that such illusions have more to do with men’s hopes than their fears, more to do with erotic attachment than fear of death. The philosopher Lucretius knows that one must be an expert in erotics to communicate to the many the truth about the nature of the eternal.

I. Proem to Book III

Although Lucretius has praised the man from Greece before, Book III is the first to begin with such praise. In the proem to Book I, the man from Greece was credited as having been the first to discover the truth of what can and cannot be by shattering the gates to nature after having traveled in mind beyond the flaming walls of the world (I, 62–79). Lucretius here deepens the debt owed to the man from Greece by saying that he walks in the path first trod by him out of love and desire to follow him. Lucretius assures Memmius that he is not possessed of a desire to compete with the (still nameless) man from Greece as he is a swan and Lucretius but a swallow.¹ That Lucretius claims here, and only here, that he is merely following the man from Greece may be reason to see Book III as the most Epicurean book within the poem. It is also the only book where Epicurus is mentioned by name (III, 1042). The man from Greece has given Lucretius the clearest window onto the nature of things and, echoing the proem to Book I, has chased away the minds’ terrors, allowing Lucretius to see through the void beyond the walls of the world. In the proem to Book I, having traversed the void, the man from Greece is triumphant in casting down religion (I, 78–79). There is no corresponding triumphalism in the opening of Book III. Instead Lucretius claims that by seeing through the void, the peaceful abodes of the gods are revealed