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## Sexual freedom and feminine pleasure in Lucretius<sup>1</sup>

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### *Biography :*

*I have been a research engineer at the CNRS since 2009, specializing in the analysis of ancient sources and scientific information. I am an alumna of the École Normale Supérieure (A/L 1997), and I defended my PhD thesis at Paris-X Nanterre in March 2007 (The Epicurean Method and its Medical Model, under the supervision of Francis Wolff, <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-01425661>).*

*My research focuses on ancient philosophy and the history of medicine. I work more specifically on ancient Epicureanism, Scepticism, Hippocratic and Galenic medicine, and more generally on the history of empiricism and its links with certain ethical and political positions in Antiquity. I am also interested in the transmission of Epicurean texts in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and more broadly in the editorial history of Epicureanism. I am a founding member of the IPhiS project (Philological Information - Ancient Knowledge, [phi.hypotheses.org](http://phi.hypotheses.org)).*

### *Introduction: The erotic threat of Lucretius's woman*

In his 380s translation of Eusebius of Caesarea's *Chronica*, Hieronymus of Strido casts his gaze back to year 94 B.C. as he offers the following anecdote, which will go on to bear untold fruit:

*« T. Lucretius poeta nascitur. Postea amatorio poculo in furorem versus, cum aliquot libros per intervalla insaniae conscripsisset, quos postea Cicero emendavit, propria se manu interfecit anno aetatis quadragesimo quarto ». Chron., [96] 94 a.C.*

The poet Titus Lucretius was born. Driven mad by a love potion, in his moments of lucidity, he wrote a number of books which were later corrected by Cicero. He committed suicide during his forty-fourth year.

Fuel for the imaginations of Lucretius's humanist commentators, the romantic hypothesis has served as the basis for a host of charming narratives. Take, for example, Pomponio Leto's

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<sup>1</sup> The hypotheses developed in this article were presented in March 2018 as part of the symposium Perspectives féminines en philosophie ancienne et médiévale, for which I warmly thank the organizers. I would also like to express my gratitude to Griffin Lasher Smith for reviewing the English version of this text. My debt is also great towards the three reviewers of this article for their suggestions and remarks. All the errors remaining in this text are mine.

*Lucretii Vitae*. Reproduced at the start of the 1486 edition of Fridenperger's *De Rerum Natura*<sup>2</sup>, Leto's account incorporates a slight variation into Hieronymius's tale: though the supposed culprit of Lucretius's mania is still a love potion, his love affair now involves a very handsome young man by the name of Asterion. Girolamo Borgia, a pupil of Giovanni Pontano who transcribed his own philological notes in the margins of a 1495 edition of the text, has also written a biographical notice with a similar episode<sup>3</sup>. The text, titled *Vita Borgiana* and deemed by John Masson<sup>4</sup> to be a commentary on Suetonius's lost *Vita Lucretii*, also evokes a wicked woman directly responsible for the poet's death by poison<sup>5</sup>. The woman is finally named in 1511 in Giovanni Battista Pio's pioneering and exhaustive commentary on *De Rerum Natura*, a contribution that will be influential on how Lucretius is regarded in modern times:

*alii furore percitum, in quem Lucilia, sive uxor sive amica, amatorio poculo porrecto, eum imprudens adegerat, cum ab eo amari, non ei necem inferre, aut bonam mentem adimere, vellet.*

*Others [say] that he was taken to his death by a fit of madness due to Lucilia, his wife or lover, who had imprudently poured him a love potion, although she, who loved him, wanted neither his death nor his loss of reason<sup>6</sup>.*

Whether true or false, the story provides very interesting insight into what perceptions medieval commentators and editors harbored concerning female sexuality – or, more accurately, how these individuals regarded Lucretian treatment of the issue, which can be summarized as follows:

1. women are dangerous
2. sexuality is dangerous
3. sexuality, love and madness are deeply entwined (even if this entwinement is the product of a magical concoction).

That these distinct elements reappear in every ancient commentary on the Lucretian text is not only a feature of misogyny and base prudishness; their presence also seems to tally with the general Epicurean context, and fit neatly with what is typically said about the general framework of Epicurean ethics and their specific and complex (if quite negative) treatment of *aphrodisia* or *erotica*.

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<sup>2</sup> Today preserved in the Universiteitsbibliotheek of Utrecht (Litt. Lat. X).

<sup>3</sup> Today preserved in the British Library with the shelfmark IA.23564.

<sup>4</sup> Masson 1895, p. 220-237.

<sup>5</sup> As Masson says, there is no reason to systematically question these texts wholesale: there is embellishment and historical dramatization but against a backdrop he considers plausible. Nevertheless, whatever the likelihood these episodes truly occurred, their transmission sheds light on how erotic questions raised by the Lucretian poem were received.

<sup>6</sup> All translations of the Greek or Latin texts cited in this article are by myself.

This paper will focus on that treatment as it digs into the place of the three above-noted assumptions in ancient and medieval commentaries of Lucretius. Are they consistent with readings of Epicurean texts? What can be said about female sexuality in Epicurean ethics in general? What does this mean for general anthropological conceptions in Epicurean philosophy?

## 1. Sexuality as an ambivalent figure of ethos

### 1. 1. The calculation of desire

Epicureanism is based on the prescription of an economy of desires and pleasures. This is necessarily grounded in a rational calculation that seeks to determine which desires will create the conditions required for the experience of true pleasure and which desires can be eliminated – discarded as false, even dangerous. The Epicurean practical philosophy is structured around the *airèsis/phugè*, choice/rejection dichotomy. This distinguishes types of actions which are ordered according to a second dichotomy of affect motivating the action: pleasure/pain. What we call desire is therefore the movement of the psycho-corporal complex (a summation of the soul and the body) towards the choice or rejection of a reality on the basis of the pleasure or pain expected as a result<sup>7</sup>.

This movement of desire is itself a product of mental images which emanate from a feeling or affection in the body (in a radical empirical philosophy such as Epicureanism, all knowledge comes from sensation and all sensation is true<sup>8</sup>). Judgment will associate those same representations with connotations, projections, expectations. It is from this reason-driven addition that the possibility of error arises. Insofar as desire is not the product of a "pure" sensation but of the association of a representation with a sensation, there exists the possibility of false desires or, to use a specifically Epicurean term, empty desires – that is, desires constructed from illusory, false representations which are not based in a solid reality<sup>9</sup>.

Two main categories of desires exist in Epicurean ethics, namely, natural and non-natural. Among natural desires, we are presented with two sub-categories: necessary and unnecessary. This division is clearly articulated (though perhaps more so in the scolion than the primary text) in Epicurus's *Kuriai doxai* 29 and 30:

XXIX. Τῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν αἱ μὲν εἰσι φυσικαὶ καὶ <ἀναγκαῖαι, αἱ δὲ φυσικαὶ καὶ> οὐκ ἀναγκαῖαι, αἱ δὲ οὔτε φυσικαὶ οὔτε ἀναγκαῖαι, ἀλλὰ παρὰ κενὴν δόξαν γινόμεναι.

Among the desires are those that are natural and <necessary, those that are natural and > not necessary, and those that are neither natural nor necessary but arise from an empty opinion.

*Scholion.* φυσικὰς καὶ ἀναγκαῖας ἡγεῖται ὁ Ἐπίκουρος τὰς ἀλγηδόνας ἀπολούσας, ὡς ποτὸν ἐπὶ δίψους· φυσικὰς δὲ οὐκ ἀναγκαῖας δὲ τὰς ποικιλοῦσας μόνον τὴν ἡδονήν, μὴ ὑπεξαιρουμένας δὲ τὸν ἄλ-

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Morel 2013, p. 249-274.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Giovacchini 2012, p. 21-40.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Mitsis 2014 [1988] p. 59-80.

γημα, ὡς πολυτελεῖ σιτία· οὔτε δὲ φυσικὰς οὔτε ἀναγκαίαις, ὡς  
στεφάνους καὶ ἀνδριάντων ἀναθέσεις

*Epicurus considers natural and necessary those desires [for things that] relieve pain, such as drinking when you are thirsty; natural and unnecessary desires are those that add to pleasure without removing pain, such as various foods; and neither natural nor necessary is the desire for power and statues in its honour.*

XXX. Ἐν αἷς τῶν φυσικῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν μὴ ἐπ' ἀλγοῦν δὲ ἐπαναγουσῶν ἐὰν μὴ συντελεσθῶσιν, ὑπάρχει ἡ σπουδὴ σύντονος, παρὰ κενὴν δόξαν αὐταὶ γίνονται, καὶ οὐ παρὰ τὴν ἑαυτῶν φύσιν οὐ διαχέονται ἀλλὰ παρὰ τὴν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου κενοδοξίαν.

As for natural desires, those that do not cause pain when they are not satisfied, even if ardently pursued, also come from an empty opinion; and if they assert themselves it is not because of their intrinsic nature, but because of human blindness.

While these assorted distinctions are well-documented in Greek Epicureanism, in Lucretius they are not particularly formalized. The subject of ethics, if not secondary, is at least second among the various foci of *De Rerum natura*, which in any case concerns itself explicitly with physics and recalls Epicurus' *Letter to Herodotus* in its conception. There is very little mention of pleasure (though Cicero makes it the starting point in *De Finibus I* and a central feature of Epicureanism). Lucretius, for his part, substantially develops the anti-religious elements of Epicurean ethics, which is to say those concerning the fear of death, but expands very little on the *airesis/phugè* dichotomy. One notable exception comes at the end of book IV, which deals precisely with love and sexuality – i.e. in reality the most explicitly problematic case of pleasure.

Explicit allusions to sexuality are absent from Doxai 29 and 30. Yet modern commentators quite naturally see these as references to sexual pleasure, and this is almost certainly due to the fact that the Lucretian account is projected onto Epicurus's text. The text of *De Rerum natura*'s book IV seems to square so perfectly with Doxa 30 that the sexual reference in the sentence is almost obligatory. An exegetical debate proceeds about how to move sexual desire from the first category (i.e. natural and necessary) to the second (natural and unnecessary). Certain interpretations emphasize the fact that these desires are based on empty opinions. Others reason they lack natural limits. For instance, Martha Nussbaum<sup>10</sup> places sexual desire in the category described by Epicurus as natural and unnecessary because it is based on an empty opinion. To Nussbaum, such desires slot more snugly into the category described in Doxa 30, i.e. those whose failed fulfilment does not cause real pain (only belief in the necessity of a desire causes pain, not the desire itself); as such, these must be distinguished from empty, unnatural desires. Sexual desire is empty in the sense that it does not entail a need for its fulfilment; it remains natural insofar as it has the potential to be satisfied.

For his part, David Konstan<sup>11</sup> includes what he calls "erotic" desire in the category of empty desires because it is unlimited and, in this sense, not "necessary"; Konstan's argument rests on a comparison between erotic desire and thirst. Erotic desire that feeds exclusively on

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<sup>10</sup> Nussbaum 1994, Ch 4 : *Epicurean Surgery: Argument and Empty Desire*, p. 113.

<sup>11</sup> Konstan 2008, p. 70-72.

simulacra and not true representations<sup>12</sup> is analogous to natural and necessary desire; the former mimics the latter, but in reality the former is empty because there is nothing that can satisfy it.<sup>13</sup> Konstan clearly explains that the desire he calls erotic proceeds like any desire from a sensation linked to representations of what is likely to satisfy it: a glass of water for thirst, a beautiful person for loving desire.

Konstan hypothesizes that in the second case the representation is an empty simulacrum: a mental image to which reality cannot be matched. The physical sensation of love and the lack of the loved one is real; what is unreal and therefore illusory is to tether the pain of the loving sensation to the hypothesis that we can relieve that pain through possession of another. The trap arises from the similarity of the two mechanisms, which leads to the confrontation of a necessary desire (drinking) with an unnecessary one (making love).

The question is quite seriously complicated when we place these distinct hypotheses alongside another Epicurean text attributed to Metrodorus, Vaticana Sententia 51. In it, Metrodorus explicitly addresses sexual pleasure but does so by putting it, apparently, in the third category, reckoning that such pleasure is not only unnecessary but also and especially inherently dangerous:

Πύθθανομαι σου τὴν κατὰ σάρκα κίνησιν ἀφθονώτερον διακεῖσθαι πρὸς τὴν ἀφροδισίων ἔντευξιν. Σὺ δὲ ὅταν μῆτε τοὺς νόμους καταλύης μῆτε τὰ καλῶς ἔθει κείμενα κινήσῃς μῆτε τῶν πλησίον τινὰ λυπῆς μῆτε τὴν σάρκα καταξάινῃς μῆτε τὰ ἀναγκαῖα καταναλίσκῃς, χρῶ ὡς βούλει τῇ σεαυτοῦ προαιρέσει. Ἀμήχανον μέντοι γε τὸ μὴ οὐχ' ἐνί γέ τι τούτων συνέχεσθαι· ἀφροδίσια γὰρ οὐδέποτε ὤνησεν, ἀγαπητὸν δὲ εἰ μὴ ἔβλαψεν.

You tell me that you have an excessive appetite for the bonds of Aphrodites: for what concerns you, if you do not overthrow the laws, if you do not offend morals, if you do not afflict one of your relatives, if you do not exhaust your flesh and if you do not sacrifice vital needs, exercise your inclination as you wish; it is however impossible that this does not happen, and at least one of these disadvantages must happen to you: *aphrodisia* are never profitable, so it's a good thing if you get away with it.

Epicurus<sup>14</sup> appears initially to be arguing that sexual desire triggers a dilemma that rational calculation might solve, namely, by seizing on disdain for future suffering to diminish the pain of present longing: if abstinence is a source of pain, sexuality leads to an even more painful path; between two evils one must then choose the lesser and refrain from sex. The implication is that Sententia 51 links sex not only to desires whose non-fulfilment does not cause pain (and which are therefore to some extent indifferent in terms of their satisfaction), but also to unnatural desires, whose satisfaction is always problematic to a greater or lesser degree. Aside

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<sup>12</sup> « It is not that certain *simulacra* arouse limitless desire; rather, desires are limitless when they feed on *simulacra* », Konstan 2008 p. 70.

<sup>13</sup> « These vain desires are extrapolations upon or analogous to real needs, but rest, in some way, upon a false opinion », Konstan 2008 p. 72.

<sup>14</sup> I am not commenting here on the attribution of certain maxims, including this one, to Metrodorus, insofar as Metrodorus's orthodoxy in relation to the main positions of the founder of the Garden is well established. See Tepedino Guerra 2000..

from seemingly invalidating Martha Nussbaum's interpretation, this forces us to accept something which, conceptually, is exceedingly difficult: that sexual desire is unnatural.

In reality, all of these accounts must contend with the same difficulty, namely, that if we limit ourselves to the strict Epicurean corpus it is impossible to determine what we are talking about and, in particular, if we are talking about the same thing every time. Is what Konstan calls with ambiguity "erotic desire" purely sexual? Is it a loving or emotional desire? In any case, is it enabled by something other than, as his interpretation appears to suggest, mere physical hormonal tension? And do the two types of desires have identical status for Epicureans? Sententia 51 is highly ambiguous on this point. In Greek, the notion of *aphrodisia* embraces the same ambiguity as our eroticism by referring not only to coitus but to the whole apparatus—aesthetic or pornographic, but in any case cultural and sophisticated—which accompanies it and accounts for its flavour<sup>15</sup>.

Martha Nussbaum relies on another significant quotation, from Hermias's commentary of Plato's *Phaedrus* (=Us. 483). Hermias relates Epicurus's definition of *eros* as «an intense desire for union accompanied by suffering and distraction»<sup>16</sup>. This definition bundles all the difficulties together, associating terms referring to sex (*aphrodisia*) and passionate desire (*eros*) by tethering them to descriptions of behaviors that can be folded into a loving state as well as a pathological libidinous state.

What then can we establish with certainty from these Greek Epicurean accounts? Epicurus warns against a certain type of *eros*, and firm conclusions in this regard—is he referring to sexual *eros* alone or erotic in the broad sense?—are tricky; we may be tempted to pitch this ill-defined desire closer to the natural and unnecessary, but nothing in Epicurus' own texts compels us to do so; there is actually no grounds to sustain the claim that Epicurus singled out sex over other pleasures: it is neither absolutely honored nor absolutely refused.

## 1. 2. Rejection of sex or rejection of *eros*?

Let us first consider the purely sexual meaning of *eros*, if indeed this desire exists at all. In what way would Epicurus warn against sexual desire? Certainly not in the sense of an "inherently bad" desire. If that were the case, the message would be extremely questionable. The pain or discomfort caused by sexual tension can actually be relieved by the sexual act with or without another body. Above all, Epicurus would arrive at this point in flagrant and unnecessary contradiction with Lucretius, which should only be attempted in desperate times and with the utmost caution<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> See for example the synthetic explanations of Boehringer 2005, about the difficulty in understanding without anachronisms the reality of ancient sexuality. See also Pirenne-Delforge 1994 p. 376-377 about the polysemia of *aphrodisia*.

<sup>16</sup> Σύντονον ὄρεξιν ἀφροδισίων μετὰ οἴστρου καὶ ἀδημονίας.

<sup>17</sup> The question of the inconsistency of the Lucretian text has been very deeply worked on in recent years, both from an internalistic point of view (is the DRN text consistent

Lucretius walks a remarkably unambiguous path as regards sexual *eros*, which values and defends itself by contrast and opposition to emotional *eros*.<sup>18</sup> In *De Rerum natura*, sex is good and useful towards the general *telos* when not infected by the passion for love that so distorts it. As Martha Nussbaum explains very well,<sup>19</sup> in Lucretius unlike under the Platonic scheme it is amorous crystallization that deviates from truth and goodness and triggers madness<sup>20</sup>.

This position is wholly compatible with Epicurus's in the texts we have just reviewed: indeed, bearing in mind Epicurus urges caution with *eros* on the grounds that it differs from pure sexual relief, the texts take on a meaning that is both structured and coherent: in this sense it is a particular case of natural desire we must be wary of, for the natural and harmless use of sex can be easily diverted and deformed.

In this regard, there is an obvious similarity between sexual desire and the desire for wealth, another source of considerable misunderstanding in exegesis of Epicurean texts; in Philodemus of Gadara's *Economics* for example, we are told that without money, in poverty, one is miserable – hence the wise must manage their goods sensibly.

Π]άντα [μὲ]ν οὖν οὐ φευ[κ]τέον, ὧν ἴπα[ρχό]ντων καὶ πρ[άγ]ματα | ἔχει[ν] ἔστιν  
καὶ φροντίδ[α]ς | καὶ [ἀγ]ωνίας οἰασθήποτε, ὡς | προεῖπαμεν· τινὰ δὲ | δεκ[τέον],  
ὧν καὶ τὸν πλοῦ|τον, τ[ὸ] βάρος ἔχοντα | μεί|ιον ὅταν παρῆι, μᾶλλον π[ρ]ὸς |όλον  
[βί]ον ἀλλὰ μὴ πρὸς τ[ι]να |καιρό[ν]<sup>21</sup>.

« Certainly, we shall not avoid all things whose presence can cause kinds of trouble, worry and torment, as we have said before. And some deserve to be welcomed - including wealth - and their weight is reduced if they are present throughout life, and not just on a given occasion. »

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from Book 1 to Book 6?) and an externalist one (is Lucretius a good Epicurean student?). I do not intend to revisit this issue here, which was in my opinion perfectly addressed by Gale 1994, 1996 and O'Hara 2006. If David Sedley's thesis of a Lucretian fundamentalism can no longer really be assumed today, it nevertheless seems to me that we can begin by validating the hypothesis of a philosophical sincerity of Lucretius, which in this respect places coherence a minima as a prescriptive idea, even if it is not absolutely implemented. The paths opened by Gale (1994, 1996) or O'Hara (2006, ch. 3) regarding the rhetorical function of incoherence, or the possible failures of the Lucretian project in the details of such a *texte-monde*, are extremely fruitful. Nevertheless, in this paper I will assume that Lucretius has an extreme philosophical requirement towards his reader, and that he claims to offer him a consistent philosophical material. Lucretius' text is intended for a beginner but literate Epicurean, experienced in discursive and conceptual finesse, and fully capable of interpreting the multiple paradoxes presented by the poem.

<sup>18</sup> Brown 1987 p. 62-67 and 108-110.

<sup>19</sup> Nussbaum 2002 p. 75.

<sup>20</sup> Lucretius's position would therefore be close to that defended by Lysias in the *Phaedrus*.

<sup>21</sup> Col. 13, Cf. Tsouna 2013.



By this reasoning, the rational calculation must also take duration into account. To abstain from what is most often necessary but potentially a source of suffering is not sound calculation; it is better to look for the limit towards which we must strive so that, over the course of a lifetime, pleasures and sorrows are balanced. Hence, to abstain fully from all wealth is bad on the scale of an entire lifetime since a life in poverty is unpleasant. It is necessary to estimate the exact measure of wealth that will guarantee the maximum pleasure over the course of a lifetime and therefore counterbalance the necessary anxieties and worries that go with the possession of property. Too much wealth leads to too much strain: the balance is lost.

The difference between wealth and sex likely resides in the fact that the former requires measuredness and balance, not only quantitative but qualitative as well. What these texts seem to point to is that certain *qualities* of erotic relationships, and not simply the *number* of them, can upset the balance of happy life.

In other words, it is probably the transformation of the desire for sex into something *else* that is objectionable, because it superimposes an empty desire on a real one. The question still unanswered if we take the texts in this sense—and it is indeed precisely the question Lucretius himself raises—is how to identify the real and desirable form of sexual *eros*, and how to find a "pure" sexual *eros*, i.e. profoundly disengaged from any toxic affectivity but also from any erotic cultural apparatus diverting it from its natural meaning.

Once we have come to terms with the distinction between sexual, cultural and affective *eros*, we are in a position to understand the subversive power of the Epicurean position, which is fundamentally anti-Platonic and entirely reverses the hierarchy between the distinct dimensions of *eros*<sup>22</sup>—good and desirable if and only if it no longer has anything to do with the *eros* described by Plato. In Lucretius we find that inversion of the positive *eros* assumes one of two forms: random ejaculation in a random body (the vagrant Venus) or conjugal friendship, and hence antithetical to a vision that could be qualified, if anachronistically, as libertine. Ovid's will be the latter, in which there is both a decisive, drastic selection of a desirable body and the refusal of any conjugal life.

This subversion goes even further if we consider that the Lucretian description of sexuality is far less traditionally gendered than predominant comments on the text still suggest today – and that female sexuality plays a central normative role in the sense that, particularly in the figure of Venus, it provides a model (deeply secularized for the occasion) of free and happy sexuality – in short, perfectly Epicurean.

## **2. From vagrant Venus to Venus voluptas: another sexual morality**

### **2. 1. The ejaculatory Venus: Venus' true title ?**

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. M. Nussbaum 2002 p. 142.

The part of book IV that interests us can be analyzed as follows:

- v. 1030-1036: explanation of erotic dreams
- v. 1037-1057: puberty, desire and its physical manifestations: erection/ejaculation
- v. 1058-1076: praise of the vagrant Venus
- v. 1075-1099: illness of amorous Venus
- v. 1100-1120: empty and unlimited erotic desire
- v. 1121-1145: social consequences of love
- v. 1146-1189: the love trap built by the lover himself
- v. 1190-1209: truth of sexual pleasure
- v. 1210-1277: pleasure and reproduction: the double seed theory
- v. 1278-1286: praise of marital Venus

The very construction of the text indicates Lucretius's subversive intentions, for the introduction begins with the description of a particularly trivial set of *aphrodisia*: erotic dreams.

This introduction coolly removes passion from sex and contributes powerfully to the way romanticism and love will be walled off from the issue from the very outset.<sup>23</sup> The analogy between ejaculation and injury and the redundant wordplay surrounding *amor/umor* suggests the identification of sexuality with the evacuation of a fluid whose accumulation is embarrassing, the evocation of fantasies not only steering the direction of the jet but also facilitating its task. In this sense, sex fits neatly into the general definition of Epicurean pleasure as framed by the pleasure/pain dichotomy: it avoids the physical pain caused by accumulation. The role of fantasy as a visual support also reinforces the general physical hypothesis of mutual attraction: sexual desire is a manifestation of it (in the tendency of entities to attract each other spontaneously). Sex is therefore a physiological and immediately reciprocal phenomenon driven by a process that is mechanical.

The physiology of desire has as its physical model the emission of sperm,<sup>24</sup> i.e. an individual, selfish, solitary process: *eros* by its introduction via dream is described as masturbation to an illusory, absolutely fictional object of desire, any receptacle being sufficient to relieve the related organic tension<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> Brown 1987 p. 63.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Gigandet 2003.

<sup>25</sup> v. 1063-1067 *iacere umorem coniectum in corpora quaeque*

Does this mean, as v. 1058 (« Haec Venus est nobis ») might suggest, that the emission of sperm is the only true sense of loving desire?<sup>26</sup>

One might believe given the subject's spectacular introduction, framed as it is around the repurposing of Venus for ejaculation, that the model here described is gendered: as always in philosophical literature, sex is described from a male point of view and pitched in a male physiological framework. The impression is reinforced by the fact that the long diatribe that follows clearly sets out the scenario in a traditional fashion: an object of love which is female or with a feminine figure<sup>27</sup>, and the analysis of the male desire for it. Hence our Venus becomes male sexual desire defined as a relief discharge.

It is nevertheless important to begin with a disclaimer that will alter this reading considerably; inscribing this physiology of love within a general epistemological framework endows it with a scope which is far more ambiguous from the standpoint of gender. Throughout this entire section Lucretius draws inspiration from a medical model at least as old as Democritus himself, the *double seed*, whereby the seed that wins out is necessarily the most abundant.

This materialistic physiological model has met with remarkable success ever since it first appeared in the Hippocratic treatise *Peri gonès*, which in fact is in many respects structurally identical to the Lucretian text, not least in ch. 4. In particular, there are deep parallels with regard to the framing of infertility as an incompatibility of male and female sperm or a deficiency of one of the two. The two texts thus insist that the greater the pleasure for each partner, the more abundant the emission of seed; the child will in all cases resemble the one who has experienced the most pleasure<sup>28</sup>.

*Et commiscendo quom semine forte virilem  
femina vim vicit subita vi corripuit que,  
tum similes matrum materno semine fiunt,  
ut patribus patrio. (v. 1209-1212)*

And when by chance, in the mixture, it is the female seed that by a sudden force prevails over the male force and seizes it, then the children from the maternal seed resemble the mother, as those from the paternal seed the father.

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<sup>26</sup> Gigandet 2003 p. 99 : « Bilan : Vénus est le nom d'un processus physique dont Lucrèce souligne d'un bout à l'autre le caractère mécanique, anonyme, sans place pour une quelconque instance subjective. »

<sup>27</sup> v. 1053 *puer membris muliebribus*.

<sup>28</sup> Physiologies that repudiate the existence of female semen will thus attribute mechanical causes to female infertility (focusing on either the nature of the matrix or positioning) and totally separate the question of fertility of sexual intercourse from that of pleasure. Two consequences: 1) female infertility alone is the subject of advanced treatments (because seed production is assumed to exist so long as the male experiences pleasure) 2) female pleasure becomes an incongruity or a physiological surplus; see in particular Flemming, 2013, p. 565-590.

This means that there is secretion and joint emission (therefore ejaculation) by both men and women. Physiological symmetry means the expected relief is the same for both sexes.<sup>29</sup>

Curiously, this point, though obvious, seems to have gone unnoticed by most commentators of the text (who implicitly interpret the *corpora* of v. 1065, *iacere umorem coniectum in corpora quaeque*, as necessarily describing female bodies).

However, if we agree that Lucretius is not inclined towards contradiction, there is no reason to suppose the ejaculation he describes is exclusively male. A very important indication of this lies in the details the poet offers when qualifying the assorted Venuses: those of each member of the couple, v. 1200 *Venerem salientum* "the Venus of the assailants", and that of the only male, v. 1270 *virī Venerem*: the "Venus of the man".

The ejaculatory model is thus mixed and will, in a sense, anchor the entire text. The Lucretian demonstration starts with the erotic dream –perhaps the most raw and abstract version we have seen: ejaculation that does not even require a real object to satisfy itself– only to precipitate what is in fact the most concrete version: fertile intercourse where complementary female and male ejaculation accomplish the noble natural function of reproduction.

But whether solitary or dual, the mechanism is identical: tension, surge, relief. From this standpoint we understand quite well the role that vagrant (*volgiva* v. 1071) Venus comes to play here: because the erotic dream and mating obey the same physiological laws and offer the same relief, that relief's correlation to a privileged object or support is absurd: every receptacle is apt, and on the contrary an increase in possible receptacles ultimately serves as a backstop in that it prevents the mind from proceeding to misinterpretations, such as associating the relief with the relief support. Sexual vagrancy is valued as the safest way to dissociate the pleasure experienced and the body in or with which it is experienced.

## 2. 2. Venus voluptas and the question of reciprocity

But it should also be noted that this Venus, the vagrant one, is neither the only nor the first occurrence of Venus in *De rerum natura*; and would appear locked in direct competition with the Venus of book I, the one explicitly qualified as *voluptas*.

This apparent competition is immensely problematic, because *voluptas*, strictly speaking, is the Epicurean *telos* itself. If the *voluptas* of the vagrant Venus is real and corresponds to a real physical relief, how can we conciliate it with the Venus *voluptas* of book I, which advocates a pleasure that is no longer individual but whose essential dimension is that it is shared and that, as such, it contributes to harmony (via the reconciliation of Mars and Venus)? In this sense, it seems to us that the challenge of book IV is to propose, in addition to the model of ejaculatory, individual relief, a model of collective and reciprocal voluptuousness that escapes the aporia of the love model in the Platonic sense.

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<sup>29</sup> Cuny-Le Callet 2005, ch. 2, « Lucrèce et l'explication du monstre ».

The harmonic power of Venus corresponds to a complex dimension of this mythical figure in the text of Lucretius. An introductory reading reveals Venus as having two obvious symbolic functions: the sexual impulse on the one hand, and the desire for peace and harmony on the other. In it, like D. Konstan before us<sup>30</sup>, we detect the changing pace of two necessary steps towards wisdom: first to satisfy the needs of the flesh and then to attain the peace of the soul through concord (the flesh alone, even appeased, is not sufficient for joy). Friendship as a condition for peace and security is the next and necessary step for that peace of the soul that constitutes an assurance of divine life.

Nevertheless, on a second level, we can also appreciate in the figure of Venus an Epicurean desire to compete with the Stoic Zeus. Such is the reading offered by E. Asmis, who pits the Venus of Lucretius, symbol of pleasure, fertility and spontaneous and hazardous organization of the natural order, against an authoritarian, tyrannical and providential Zeus<sup>31</sup>. The powers of Venus are comparable to those of Zeus, but she performs them differently. Zeus is a giver of life (phusis) but also of reason (logos) and above all of law (nomos)<sup>32</sup>. The law of Venus is just as powerful, but does not imply any external constraints or demonstration of authority to be obeyed. The harmony created by Venus is thus freely consented to and not imposed; it is achieved by an internalized pacification of the world, not by subjugation.

As a power of Life, Venus *voluptas* presides over the generation and becomes Venus *genitrix*. In so doing, she superimposes a form of natural collective horizon on the goal of immediate relief from the sexual act. One can then wonder, first, whether Lucretius prioritizes between these two purposes and which one, Venus *genitrix* or ejaculatory Venus, is the most important; second, whether these two purposes contradict each other, particularly as regards the question of female pleasure; because the hypothesis that accommodates the double seed is invalidated by at least one other passage in which Lucretius appears to take the view that female pleasure is unfavorable to female fertility.

The passage in question is located in v.1268-1277:

*nec molles opus sunt motus uxoribus hilum.  
nam mulier prohibet se concipere atque repugnat,  
[...]  
id que sua causa consuerunt scorta moveri,  
ne complerentur crebro gravidae que iacerent,  
et simul ipsa viris Venus ut concinnior esset;  
coniugibus quod nil nostris opus esse videtur.*

And the soft movements are of little use to wives. Because the woman prevents herself from conceiving and deviates violently from it [...] Prostitutes have their reason for these movements, in order not to get pregnant too often, and at the same

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<sup>30</sup> Konstan 2008 p. 150-151.

<sup>31</sup> Asmis 1982 p. 458-470.

<sup>32</sup> These attributes are commented by Philodemus in *Peri eusebeias* where he comments on Chrysippus' *Peri theon*. Cf. Asmis 1982 p. 465-466 : « Lucretius presents Venus' conquest not as a forced submission on the part of the conquered, but as a voluntary, eager pursuit of the goddess. [...] Stoic Providence and Fate have been replaced by Epicurean desire and freedom. »

time make Venus even more attractive to men; it seems that it is useless for our wives.

Some commentators have inferred from this brief excerpt that Epicureans dissociated pleasure and procreation, in the sense that movements increasing female pleasure are also purported to decrease fertility.<sup>33</sup> Some stop short of such assertions and note simply that Lucretius's approach here is descriptive and not prescriptive: rather than value fertility in terms of pleasure, he merely points out a physiological circumstance that diminishes it.

But these two interpretations are based, in our opinion, on a misinterpretation, linked to a misunderstanding of the meaning of v. 1262. In the sentence "nec molles opus sunt motus uxoribus hilum", the movements of the woman compared to the prostitute are soft not in the sense that they signal pleasure experienced, but in the sense that they are intended to provoke the pleasure of the partner. Courtesans move in order to increase their lover's lust, they are at work at his service - and therefore adhere to a strategy of manipulation and possibly even deception, because their pleasure may very well only be simulated. Here, in reality, Lucretius adopts the notion of sincerity that was precisely linked to authentic female pleasure, in v. 1190 and as follows: the sincere woman is the one who seeks pleasure and does not affect love; she is also the one who uses sexual intercourse for her own good rather than exchange value.

*Nec mulier semper ficto suspirat amore,  
quae complexa viri corpus cum corpore iungit  
et tenet adsuctis umectans oscula labris;  
nam facit ex animo saepe et communia quaerens  
gaudia sollicitat spatium decurrere amoris.* (v. 1192-1196)

But a woman's sighs in love are not always feigned, when, their bodies mixed, embraced with the lover, she wet her lips with devouring kisses; for often she acts sincerely, and, seeking common joys, she invites us to travel through the place of love.

Here again the "locked in embrace" structure of the text takes on its full meaning and the disparate parts answer each other perfectly:

- the traps and illusions of love corrupt sexual pleasure with passion;
- however, sexual pleasure is an instance of truth, it is the place where Venus does not lie;
- pleasure is indeed necessary for fertility in the context of the theory of double seed;
- courtesans "trap" the male seed and effect a simulacrum of coitus which, lacking reciprocity, is not fertile.

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<sup>33</sup> Laurand 2007 §22 : « Les courtisanes font alors peut-être le meilleur calcul : en donnant plus de plaisir, en en prenant elles-mêmes sans doute plus (voir IV, 1192-1197, où est montré, de manière assez nouvelle sans doute et c'est suffisamment rare en philosophie pour être souligné, que la femme prend elle aussi plaisir à faire l'amour), elles ne risquent pas d'avoir d'enfants : on ne saurait beaucoup plus désolidariser le mariage du plaisir, puisque lorsque l'on recherche l'un, on évite la fin naturelle de l'autre, et lorsqu'on veut un enfant dans le mariage, on évite le plaisir».

Hence, far from contradiction there is, on the contrary, a balance between the two Venuses, for pleasure and generation are indeed two compatible and even complementary ends. It remains to be seen whether this harmony between pleasure and fertility adds to our understanding of what a relationship that is healthy, non-toxic and in tune with the call of Venus *looks* like - if such a relationship is possible and above all, as we may be tempted to interpret in book IV, if it is confused with the conjugal relationship.

### 3. The conjugal Venus, repellent or model?

#### 3. 1. Should the wise man marry or not?

According to an explicit passage from Diogenes Laertius' summary of Epicurean ethics<sup>34</sup>, the wise man should marry. In reality, things are not so clear: the text of the manuscripts here is corrupt, and there are indeed contradictory exegeses of this passage in particular, with or without the negation<sup>35</sup>: so, should the wise man marry or not marry? Some commentators urge focus on the text's literality<sup>36</sup>; others, Pierre-Marie Morel for instance, offer more subtle readings. Morel notes that the Laërtian testimonies<sup>37</sup> which mention this prohibition of marriage seem to be related to a lost Epicurean set entitled *Diaporiai*, and that these issues were therefore regarded as problematic within the Garden itself. Nussbaum for her part points to Lucretius's utilitarian approach: his own political will to respect the Roman family imperative would help him interpret Epicurus's reservations in such a way as is favorable to marriage<sup>38</sup>.

My own hypothesis is that Epicurus's reserves are not nearly as fierce as has been claimed. In fact, as we shall see, the conjugal relationship has a fairly significant number of advantages for an Epicurean.

#### 3. 2. Marriage, a place of disillusionment

Martha Nussbaum proposes quite judiciously to link what Lucretius says about marriage with what he says about sensory illusions, most of which are resolved by a spatial rapprochement: the closer we are, the better we see<sup>39</sup>.

In the context of the intersubjective relationship, Epicurus throws up other traces of appreciation for the close in relation to the distant, especially in Vatican Sententia 61.

Καλλίστη καὶ ἡ τῶν πλησίον ὄψις τῆς πρώτης συγγενήσεως  
ὁμοιοσύνης ἢ καὶ πολλὴν εἰς τοῦτο ποιουμένης σπουδῆν.

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<sup>34</sup> X, 119.

<sup>35</sup> Us. 19 (in *Epicurea* p. 97-98). Usener's critical apparatus here highlights this confusion among the editors of Diogenes Laërtius's testimony.

<sup>36</sup> See for example Brennan 1996, p. 346-352.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Morel 2011, n. 5 p. 145.

<sup>38</sup> Nussbaum 1994 p. 153.

<sup>39</sup> Nussbaum 1994 ch 4 : «Epicurean Surgery: Argument and Empty Desire».

Very beautiful is the sight of the loved ones, when the circle of the most familiar is in harmony or participates with zeal in establishing this harmony.

It is the sensible proximity that forms the basis of true affection; it generates a solid bond, created by the habit of frequentation, but also and above all a distillation of the gaze that replaces the illusion of dazzling love with the recognition of individual value which justifies the loving indulgence:

*Si bello animos et non odiosa, vicissim  
praetermittere <et> humanis concedere rebus. (v. 1190)*

And then you can also, when she has a beautiful mind and is not obnoxious, in turn blind you, and then concede to human nature.

The Venus here proposed no longer possesses anything divine or heroic in the poetic (i.e. religious) sense of the term. Conjugality is the state in which an individual's truth can emerge from under the gaze, because it rids the affectivity of the whole false apparatus whose cultural eroticism had overwhelmed the protagonists.

It is fascinating to observe how the solidity of the bond created by this disillusionment in love presupposes a de-crystallization, and therefore a real blasting process. It is in this respect that we understand the image of the drop of water digging the stone, expressed in l. 1274-1278. For the bond to be forged, there must first be a destruction, which could be both the destruction of the obstructive fantasy and its replacement by the real person revealed by habit, and that of the love bond itself, which must be broken for a healthy distance to generate the conjugal bond.

It is particularly interesting to contrast Lucretius and Ovid, who authored two poems, *Amores* and *Ars amatoria*, that offer the very same words on the illusionary power of *eros* but which, given insertion in two opposite demonstrations, afford it a completely different meaning<sup>40</sup>.

For Ovid the lie of *eros* is his condition of possibility. When desire is nourished only by this crystallizing divinization of the loved one, the woman can only be desired if she is not what she is - and the lover accepts these artifice and lies knowing they are the price of his pleasure. This need for camouflage in seduction makes the conjugal relationship altogether hostile to desire because the impossibility of hiding its true nature is implicit<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> Ovid, *Ars Amatoria* II 651-672 and Lucretius, *De Rerum natura*, IV, 1153-1170. See also, on this tremendous case of ancient intertextuality, Giovacchini 2014, pp.91-100, and Lehoux 2013 p. 144-146.

<sup>41</sup> There is in fact a positive use of artifice in the DRN, expressed by the well-known image of honey and absinthe, developed as if by chance in the same book IV (l. 11-25). The use of poetic art is presented by Lucretius as a legitimate ruse intended to lead the mind to the truth through a pleasure (honey) masking the bitterness and harshness of philosophical doctrine. This is a rhetorical tension in the Lucretian text, which I have already had the opportunity to analyze in a previous article (Giovacchini 2013, especially p. 48-49), and which must be taken into account when examining the different faces of



*Quod licet et facilest, quisquis cupit, arbore frondis,*

*Carpat et e magno flumine potet aquam!*<sup>42</sup>

What is permitted and easy, whoever wishes, let him go and pick the leaves of the trees, and drink water from a great river!

For Lucretius, however, the lie of eros is what prevents pleasure, in that it forces the two protagonists to a comedy that is doomed to failure, whereas *voluptas* can only succeed in sincerity. The role-playing game of love is hence despised and rejected by the Epicurean poet, who prefers the brutality of sexual intercourse delivered from all artifice and directed only towards the physical pleasures of both partners, and who supposes at the same time that the conjugal bond can accommodate this type of sexual relationship: *consuetudo concinnat amorem* (v. 1283).

### 3. 3. A new contradiction?

Is Lucretius's task ultimately to make a pronouncement on the rules of a good marriage? How can we reconcile this search for conjugality with the vagrant Venus? After all, marriage involves only one object.

A first hypothesis, put forward for example by Pierre-Marie Morel and Alain Gigandet, assumes a rather weak coherence of the whole at the end of book IV and casts this text, including Diogenes Laërce's ethical summary, as literature of an aporetic slant: as in Epicurus' *Diaporiai*, Lucretius would propose a fragmented sequence of sections dealing with the varying problems of *aphrodisia* without general demonstrative intention.<sup>43</sup>

This account is directly at odds with Martha Nussbaum's much stronger hypothesis, which inserts the Lucretian vision of marriage into the framework of a collective and social search for pleasure, marriage becoming, in Nussbaum's account, the political expression of the ideal of concord that is expressed to couples in the reciprocity of pleasure. In book IV, then, the pivot is from the individual to the couple and from the couple to the community. By this reading love is the other name for philanthropy, the only social cement Epicureans recognize, which consists in seeking the conditions for a common happiness based on the similarity and reciprocity of interests. Nussbaum ties the end of book IV to the beginning of book V and Lucretius's anthropological account of the first human communities: love explains the original social bonds, which are deeply beneficial for humanity; family tenderness brings men together and truly humanizes them (since before conjugality, they lead a bestial existence).<sup>44</sup>

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Venus. The pleasure of honey is a misleading pleasure to a certain extent; but it is not intended to remove or veil the truth, but on the contrary to make it possible to appropriate it; this is what distinguishes this philosophical Venus from the libertine Venus here criticized.

<sup>42</sup> *Amores* II, 19, 31-32. Cf. Laurand 2007 §5: « Les plaisirs non interdits, faciles à se procurer, les plaisirs naturels et nécessaires épicuriens pour tout dire, ne font pas plaisir – et surtout ils n'ont rien à voir avec la passion amoureuse. »

<sup>43</sup> Gigandet 2003 p. 108-110.

<sup>44</sup> Nussbaum 1994 p. 162.

A. Gigandet rejects this reading precisely because, hermeneutical effectiveness notwithstanding, it superimposes explicit norms on Epicurean anthropology, norms which are nevertheless absent from the Lucretian exposition, in which the constitution of societies is not explicitly and spontaneously linked to the Epicurean *telos*<sup>45</sup>. The Epicurean nature cannot be explained by ethical norms, because it avoids any teleological explanation; it is not spontaneously ordered towards a good and it is not organized in such a way as to produce norms. Venus will once more avoid becoming a providential authority, ergo the conjugal relationship cannot be misconstrued as a norm that ought be imposed. This relationship is a one-off accommodation, a state of affairs that can give way to shared pleasure or, on the contrary, a new opportunity for domination, alienation or perversion.

In this sense, conjugality is a possible state of Venus, as well as Venus-voluptas and vagrant Venus. The great lesson of this text is probably that these discrete conceptions of sexuality are not contradictory, rather, they correspond to distinct "measured" ways, in the sense that they are subjected to the rational calculation of pursuing pleasure. The picture proposed by Lucretius corresponds these varying instances to the same Epicurean category of natural pleasures, necessary in terms of thinking about not only the relief of sexual tension but also reproduction and the type of *philia* nourished by serene conjugality.

But the obvious point we hope to have underlined is that this picture makes sense from the moment we read the text from a female perspective: it is the presence of female sexuality and the description of female pleasure as a natural and essential circumstance of Venus itself which allows us to detect the coherence of the Epicurean conception of sexuality<sup>46</sup>. It is possible that the difficulties in grasping the meaning of the Epicurean extracts considered in the first part can be traced to the male perspective from which they are most often grasped, which casts *aphrodisia* in the light of traditionally gendered erotic imagery, the same one that Lucretius deconstructed in book IV of *De Rerum Natura*. And it is remarkable to note that historically, the hegemony of Venus and the harmonious conception of the affective commerce over which she presides will be turned against the Epicureans, depicting in them an immoral, vitiated, weak nature, at the antipodes of the *virtus*. This is what P. Gordon points out when she notes that Roman *pudicitia*, or sexual reserve, is indeed a quality which belongs to both men and women of the true *virtus*; lust, on the other hand, is a vice far removed from virility - the debauched betrays in itself a female dimension of abandonment, leading it to accept, for example, penetration. This explains why, where Greek opponents of Epicureanism

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<sup>45</sup> Gigandet 2003 p. 110 « À cet égard, il en va des institutions comme des techniques : elles ne produisent pas avec elles leur mode d'emploi éthique, et sont de ce fait inévitablement ambivalentes. »

<sup>46</sup> It is in fact another considerable difference between Lucretius and Ovid, the latter making the woman a prey, a conquest or a manipulator and adopting her point of view only in a rhetorical way and without any possible identification in the third part or *Ars amatoria*.

accuse Epicureans of being immoral, the charge as employed among the Romans is transformed, allowing them to see Epicureans first as effeminate.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, that Epicureans model happy life in terms of what is reciprocally and collectively pleasant is an obvious sign of their devirilization. This is crucial to understanding Plutarch's harsh words for the adage attributed to the Epicureans, "lead a hidden life!" – yet another accusation of softness and effeminization. Epicureans who reject political life reject glory and therefore "light", they prefer the darkness of a recluse and pleasant life – a woman's. The utopia imagined by Epicurus and perhaps partially achieved in the Garden, where we know that women took an active role in philosophical activities, may have been the Epicurean's dream of general exchange of pleasure and friendship, a reciprocal philanthropy informing a new social pact<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>47</sup> Gordon 2012, p. 109 : « as a Greek import and as the school that promoted « pleasure », the Garden threatened to disrupt a requisite component of Roman public life : the vigilant maintenance of the masculine self. A fundamental mode of response to this threat involved a seizing of control of Epicurean language ».

<sup>48</sup> After submitting this article, I was able to consult Pierre-Marie Morel's forthcoming article (Morel 2019) on what the author interprets as a Lucretian common approach between sex, love and politics. Morel considers that the positive amorous model of free sexuality is for Lucretius a counter-model, opposed to the situation of alienation characteristic of political life. "Il me semble donc que l'évocation de l'amour primitif, en un sens, mais plus encore la justification de l'amour volage, sont non seulement une alternative radicale à l'amour passionnel, mais encore un contre-modèle fécond face à cette autre forme d'union que constitue la vie sociale et face aux vaines ambitions qu'entretient la pratique politique." (Morel 2019 p. 80) Morel argues that the Lucretian position therefore values neither free sexuality nor conjugal affectivity for themselves, but only as alternatives to uncontrollable passion. Thus Lucretius would not constitute them as real practical norms - in particular not to be "en contradiction avec les restrictions formulées par Épicure à propos de la sexualité." Our reading in this sense proposes a more prescriptive interpretation of the DNR, in that we propose to read in book IV in backlighting a loving and affective ethics that could well constitute a true political model.

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