

*Kitsch, Death and the Epicurean*

Pamela Gordon\*

The exhortation *carpe diem* – a hackneyed counsel offered along with instructions to pour the wine – reduces Epicureanism to a trite saying. Similarly cloying is a platitude lampooned by Lucretius: “Brief is this pleasure for us insignificant humans; soon it will have passed, and we can never call it back” (*brevis hic est fructus homullis; | iam fuerit neque post umquam revocare licebit*, 3.914–915). These trivializations are not merely simplifications of a serious philosophical position. Rather, as I shall explain, “Epicurean” platitudes are profoundly anti-Epicurean. To put it another way: From its inception, Epicureanism was fundamentally opposed to kitsch. This essay explicates that anti-kitsch stance and explores how Lucretius combats kitsch, even as kitsch was enthusiastically circulated in other Roman contexts in the form of Epicurean objects and clichés. My concern is the ethical rather than the aesthetic ramifications of kitsch, and my primary focus is the revelation of Epicurean thanatology in the third book of *On the Nature of Things* that is often described as a diatribe against the fear of death. I offer my reading not as a replacement of that apt identification, but as a supplement. My argument is that the most vehement strains of Lucretius’ diatribe against the fear of death are a polemic against kitsch, and that this polemic intersects with a broader Epicurean tradition of frank criticism.

Rather than starting with a definition of kitsch and a defense of my anachronistic use of a modern concept, let me open with a simple Epicurean pronouncement most likely culled from a larger work: “Against other things it is possible to find security, but when it comes to death we human beings all dwell in an unwallled city,” (Πρὸς μὲν τᾶλλα δυνατὸν ἀσφάλειαν πορίσασθαι, χάριν δὲ θανάτου πάντες ἄνθρωποι πόλιν ἀτείχιστον οἰκοῦμεν, VS 31). In its original context, the metaphor of the defenseless city may have been complex enough to reveal Epicurus’

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specific cultural location as he wrote in proximity to the Athenian Acropolis and the Long Walls. But the isolation of the metaphor as it has survived magnifies its blunt representation of the vulnerability of all human life. The starkness of the image is an Epicurean stand against kitsch. I use the term kitsch as it appears in Milan Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, in which the narrator asserts that "kitsch is a folding screen set up to curtain off death."<sup>1</sup> Kundera's metaphor is more useful than a dictionary entry, and in the course of this essay I will supplement Kundera's sweeping declarations on the essence of kitsch with further elucidations.

### Putrefaction

Before examining the confrontation with kitsch in *On the Nature of Things*, it is necessary to take a closer look at Kundera's account of kitsch. Kitsch, he writes, is a word born in Germany "in the middle of the sentimental nineteenth century."<sup>2</sup> Since then it has been used to describe paintings of Elvis on velvet, bad poems about sunsets and drawings of large-eyed kittens. But by focusing on what he sees as the fundamental urge that creates kitsch, Kundera returns us to a deeper import of the word:

Behind all the European faiths, religious and political, we find the first chapter of Genesis, which tells us that the world was created properly, that human existence is good, and that we are therefore entitled to multiply. Let us call this basic faith a categorical agreement with being.<sup>3</sup>

For Kundera, this "categorical agreement with being" requires a refusal to acknowledge the existence of excrement.<sup>4</sup> Thus Kundera's narrator in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* describes the ideal he calls kitsch as "the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and the figurative senses of the word; kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence."<sup>5</sup> In a world of kitsch, no one eliminates and nothing rots.

Ways of thinking that require kitsch, and the various shapes in which kitsch appears, are of course not universal or timeless, and readers may

<sup>1</sup> Kundera: 1984, 253. Compare Kundera: 2006, 51: Kitsch is "a rosy veil thrown over reality." On the moral, rather than exclusively aesthetic, ramifications of kitsch, see Bielskis: 2018, who stresses that kitsch is formative: "It makes people pursue banal dreams."

<sup>2</sup> Kundera: 1984, 248. <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 248. <sup>4</sup> Kundera is in some ways indebted to Broch: 1933.

<sup>5</sup> Kundera: 1984, 248.

reasonably protest that I am rashly coopting a term designed for a critique of modern culture. Nonetheless, my hypothesis is that for Lucretius, kitsch is the absolute denial of putrefaction. To refuse to acknowledge putrefaction is to deny that everything is mortal, that the nature of things is larger than human existence and that “the entire world can be felled with a shocking, resounding crash” (*succidere horrisono posse omnia victa fragore*, *Lucr.* 5.109). This is why Lucretius refers so directly to the decomposition of the body in his most trenchant and sarcastic attacks against kitsch in the third book of *On the Nature of Things*. To some extent, moreover, Lucretius’ repudiation of kitsch may be understood as the impetus behind the harrowing description of the plague at the conclusion of the epic.<sup>6</sup>

One sign of Lucretius’ unflinching stare at death appears in the “vivid and repellent picture of the wriggling mass of white maggots” that are one of Lucretius’ demonstrations that a soul cannot survive the destruction of the body intact.<sup>7</sup> For Lucretius, some particles of the soul remain in the decaying flesh (3.717–721):

sin ita sinceris membris ablata profugit,  
ut nullas partis in corpore liquerit ex se,  
unde cadavera racenti iam viscere vermes  
expirant atque unde animantium copia tanta  
exos et exanguis tumidos perfluctuat artus?

But if it has departed and fled forth with its component parts so intact that it has left in the body no particles of itself, how do corpses exhale worms from flesh already grown putrid, whence comes all the great mass of living creatures, boneless and bloodless, that surge through the swelling limbs?<sup>8</sup>

The gleeful wordplay of *viscere vermes* (“from flesh . . . worms”) expresses latent inevitability. Like Lucretius’ well-known *ignis/lignis* puns (1.905, 1.907, 1.912 and 2.386–387) that capture the idea of wood (*lignis*) containing atoms capable of making fire (*ignis*), the phrase *viscere vermes* signals that flesh yields inexorably to worms. The poet follows this with an image of souls hunting for new homes among the maggots, “an especially outré example” of Lucretius’ use of a sarcastic *reductio ad absurdum* of an opposing explanation (3.727–729).<sup>9</sup>

After describing the finality of death and the mortality of the soul, Lucretius sums things up with frank Epicurean wisdom: “Therefore death is nothing to us” (*Nil igitur mors est ad nos*, 3.830), and he explains

<sup>6</sup> I will explore Lucretius’ presentation of the plague in a future essay. <sup>7</sup> Kenney: 2014, 168.

<sup>8</sup> In this essay I quote Rouse’s Loeb translation (as revised by Smith), with slight modifications.

<sup>9</sup> Kenney: 2014, 168.

dispassionately that death is so final that it is as though we had never been born “once immortal death has taken away mortal life” (*mortalem vitam mors cum immortalis ademit*, 3.869). But then we have an abrupt change of tone. As E. J. Kenney writes of lines 870–893, “this is the point where the diatribe-satirist takes over”<sup>10</sup> (3.870–875):

Proinde ubi se videas hominem indignarier ipsum,  
 post mortem fore ut aut putescat corpore posto  
 aut flammis interfiat malisve ferarum,  
 scire licet non sincerum sonere atque subesse  
 caecum aliquem cordi stimulum, quamvis neget ipse  
 credere se quemquam sibi sensum in morte futurum

Accordingly, when you see a man resenting his fate, that after death he must either rot with his body laid in the tomb, or perish by fire or the jaws of wild beasts, you may know that he rings false, and that deep in his heart is some hidden sting, although himself he deny the belief in any sensation after death.

The essential word *indignarier* (“to resent”) connotes irrational indignation and childish whining, and reappears when Lucretius adds that the complainer “resents that he was born mortal” (*indignatur se mortalem esse creatum*, 3.884). Servius Sulpicius Rufus uses the same term to describe misguided resentment “of us manikins” in a letter to Cicero after the death of Tullia (*Fam.* 4, 5, 4; 248 SB, March 45 BC). The letter avoids Lucretius’ graphic clarity, but the implication is clear: Death and decay are compulsory conditions, and protestations are futile.

When used in reference to the human body, the term *putescere* has shock value, as does its English cognate “putrefaction.” The phrase *corpore posto* (3.871) probably connotes placement in a grave, and *putescat* (3.871) could serve as a matter-of-fact reference to the decomposition of the interred body after a conventional funeral. Nonetheless, the word *putescat* conjures up the notion of defilement and a body’s resultant disgusting odor and appearance.<sup>11</sup> The word *putescere* is at home in the context of abandoned corpses, as when Cicero describes a body ignominiously left out to rot (*Tusc.* 1.102) and Horace describes what happens to the dishonored Ajax when burial is denied (*cur Ajax putescit*, *Sat.* 2.3.194). Comparison with Diogenes of Oenoanda’s reference to rotting flesh is instructive, and both he and Lucretius may have had a common source. Diogenes of Oenoanda writes that he does not fear Hades or shudder at the

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>11</sup> Lucretius also uses *putescere* when he describes how the body “rots away” after it is “ripped” from the soul (*convulsi conque putrescunt*, 3.343).

thought of the putrefaction (μύδησις) of the body (fr. 73 Smith). Elsewhere μύδαω and μύδησις (relatively infrequent words) appear in medical treatises to describe necrosis, ulcerated flesh and infected eyelids (Aret. *CD* 1.4; Galen 14.770; *HP VC*. 15). Significantly, Sophocles uses μύδησις in the context of the horrific exposure of the body of Polynices, the state of which compels the guards to sit up wind (Soph. *Ant.* 410). Lucretius' reference to "birds and beasts" (*volucres . . . feraeque*, 3.880–883) brings to mind the "classic fate of the unburied corpse in literary allusion from Homer onwards."<sup>12</sup> Whether conceived as oblivion or as rotting flesh, death is nothing to the Epicurean. Lucretius stresses the absurdity of the fear of mistreatment after death with the stark image of an impossibility: The deceased standing by in horror as he witnesses his own defiled corpse (3.879–883).

### *misero misere*

Lucretius' blunt references to worms and the decomposition of the body compel the reader to face the stark reality of death. With each elaboration of the theme, the reader sheds another false fear and clings less tightly to commonplace beliefs in immortality. But if his concern is kitsch that obscures the inescapable finality of one's own death, why does Lucretius focus such harsh and unsympathetic attention on the lamentations of the bereaved? Here it is important to keep all of Book 3 in view. After ridiculing the fear of the mistreatment of one's own corpse, Lucretius asserts that one may as well be afraid of being disposed of in a conventional manner: being set on fire, piled over with heavy earth or – a reference to embalmmnt – being suffocated with honey (while already dead). But then Lucretius shifts abruptly to a vignette of mourners bewailing the death of a young father. The scene offers a brief but vivid picture of the bereft home, wife and children. The lampoon of these grief-stricken mourners displays a sarcasm that seems to many readers particularly gratuitous, misdirected and even cruel (3.894–899):

"Iam iam non domus accipiet te laeta neque uxor  
optima, nec dulces occurrent oscula nati  
praeripere et tacita pectus dulcedine tangent.  
non poteris factis florentibus esse tuisque  
praesidium. misero misere" aiunt "omnia ademit  
una dies infesta tibi tot praemia vitae."

<sup>12</sup> Kenney: 2014, 190. Kenney accepts in part Feeney's (1978, 6) assertion that "birds and dogs, not birds and beasts, are the classic eaters of corpses."

“No longer now will your happy home give you welcome, no longer will your best of wives; no longer will your sweet children race to win the first kisses, and thrill your heart to its depths with sweetness. You will no longer be able to live in prosperity, and protect your own. Wretched man, wretchedly taken!” they say, “one fatal day has robbed you of all these prizes of life.”

Two aspects of this passage are parodic. First, the allusion to the happy home is expressed in overly sentimental language. In another time and place, the children would be emerging from the gate of the proverbial picket fence. Second, grief is expressed here in markedly maudlin tones. The words *optima* (“the best”) and *dulcis* (“sweet”) are typical epithets on sepulchral monuments, and the colloquial phrase *misero misere* (“wretched . . . wretchedly”) sounds especially mawkish, as does *una dies infesta* (“one hateful day”).<sup>13</sup> Kenney aptly stresses the “scornful echoes of the clichés of mourning,” but protests that Lucretius’ “implicit rejection of the natural concern of a man for what will happen to his family when he dies, though of a piece with his scornful rejection of all conventional mourning, denies a basic human need.”<sup>14</sup> To further emphasize Lucretius’ apparent lack of human understanding, Kenney adds that the concern for survivors, when expressed by Homer’s Hector as he parts forever with Andromache, “forms part of one of the most moving episodes in all literature.”<sup>15</sup> But perhaps this is the point: Although nothing in Lucretius’ language suggests a lampoon specifically of the *Iliad*, Lucretius may be mimicking clichéd imitations.

Tobias Reinhardt has argued that the shift in perspective from the readers’ fear of their own deaths to the topic of mourning the death of someone else is due to Lucretius’ determination to keep the focus on irrational fear. He notes the following: “What Lucretius is doing is trading one argument for the other, offering us an argument that is actually pertinent only to a particular kind of grief and to the fear of *being dead*.”<sup>16</sup> For Reinhardt, Lucretius is aware that a parent’s fear of dying young, and leaving the children defenseless, is a rational fear – when viewed from the perspective of a parent’s wish to protect a child. Such a fear might reasonably trouble a living parent. But the novice Epicurean reader is not yet equipped to comprehend the full Epicurean response to that reasonable fear, so Lucretius needs the reader to focus single-mindedly

<sup>13</sup> Kenney: 1971, 205, calls *Lucretius* 3.898–399 “deliberately banal.”

<sup>14</sup> Kenney: 2014, 193.

<sup>15</sup> Kenney: 2003, 193, citing *Hom. Il.* 6.456–465.

<sup>16</sup> Reinhardt: 2002, 293, emphasis in original.

on the simple argument that the dead have no concerns. A parent who no longer exists cannot miss the children. Reinhardt is right to examine how Lucretius steers the reader's philosophical progress as the books of the epic unfold. But his explanation is not entirely satisfying as an answer to the question of why Lucretius satirizes grief. Why does the poem turn so abruptly to a send-up of lamentation for someone whose passing might reasonably distress us: A man who has left behind his young family? Here too, a consideration of late twentieth-century explorations of the concept of kitsch is illuminating. When its broadest trajectory is read as a polemic against kitsch, the coherence of Lucretius' attack on the fear of death becomes clearer. In *Kitsch and Art*, Thomas Kulka writes that "[t]he success of kitsch depends on the universality of the emotions it elicits."<sup>17</sup> Their spontaneous response to a kitschy work of "art" pleases its consumers, but so does their awareness that they are responding in the right way, the way that everyone else responds. Here Kulka quotes Kundera's well-known concept of the second tear:

Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass.

The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass!

It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch.<sup>18</sup>

In the second tear there is an element of self-congratulation, but also a pleasure in this manifestation of universality. Continuing his own exploration of the definition of kitsch, Kulka writes: "It breeds on universal images . . . Since the purpose of kitsch is to please the greatest possible number of people, it always plays on the most common denominators."<sup>19</sup> For Kulka, three conditions are essential. First, kitsch displays objects or concepts that are "highly charged with stock emotions." Second, the subject matter must be immediately and effortlessly recognizable. Third, "kitsch does nothing substantial to enrich our associations relating to the depicted objects or themes."<sup>20</sup> Although his focus is on the visual arts, and the examples he cites are conventionally pleasing (puppies, kittens, cute children), Kulka's observations are relevant to the stock phrases indulged in by Lucretius' lugubrious mourners of the prematurely departed father.

The mourners, Lucretius continues, ought to add that the dead have no yearning for the pleasures whose loss they lament (3.900–901). Taking

<sup>17</sup> Kulka: 1996, 27.

<sup>18</sup> Kundera: 1984, 251.

<sup>19</sup> Kulka: 1996, 27.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 37–38.

another tack, the mourners continue with a reference to the endless sleep of the deceased, which contrasts with their own anguish (3.904–908):

“tu quidem ut es leto sopitus, sic eris aevi  
quod super est cunctis privatus doloribus aegris;  
at nos horrifico cinefactum te prope busto  
insatiabiliter deflevimus aeternumque  
nulla dies nobis maerorem e pectore demet.”

“Yes, you, as you now lie in death’s quiet sleep, so you will be for all time that is to come, removed from all distressing pains; but we beside you, as you lay burnt to ashes on the horrible pyre, have bewailed you insatiably, and that everlasting grief no time shall take from our hearts.”

Again, the language mocks the commonplaces of sepulchral monuments and formal lament. Of the three-word line, *insatiabiliter deflevimus aeternumque* (3.907), Kenney writes: “The effect of this verse on the cultivated Roman ear cannot have been other than grotesque.”<sup>21</sup> David West points out that *insatiabiliter* (“insatiably”) occurs elsewhere in Lucretius only in a description of swine enjoying a roll in the muck (6.978). He also reminds us that these lines are spoken in the voice not of Lucretius, but of unenlightened mourners: “Surely these pathetic rhetorical figures and astonishing rhythms are meant as sarcastic caricatures of the mawkish clichés used by such *stulti* and *baratri*.”<sup>22</sup> Noting the pompous and pretentious tone, Barbara Wallach identifies these lines as a parody of a now lost genre of consolatory literature that would have resonated with Lucretius’ Roman readers.<sup>23</sup> Kenney also points out the triteness of *aeternumque . . . maerorem* (“everlasting grief”).<sup>24</sup>

Continuing his lampoon, Lucretius describes maudlin drinkers who philosophize in clichés and lament their own deaths: “Brief is this pleasure for puny humans; soon it will be gone, nor can we ever call it back” (*brevis hic est fructus homullis; | iam fuerit neque post umquam revocare licebit*, 3.914–915). As though, Lucretius retorts, they think the worst thing about death is that they will be thirsty (3.916–918). Not all theoretical considerations of kitsch are germane to my reading of Lucretius, and I reiterate that foregrounding the anti-kitsch impulse of Epicureanism is not the only way to read Lucretius’ diatribe against the fear of death. But relevant here is Jason Wirth’s observation that “humor and irony are lethal to kitsch.”<sup>25</sup> Or, as Kulka formulates it: “Kitsch is indeed totally incompatible with

<sup>21</sup> Kenney: 2014, 195.      <sup>22</sup> West: 1969, 29.      <sup>23</sup> Wallach: 1976, 50.

<sup>24</sup> Kenney: 2014, 196. See also Lattimore: 1942, 243–246.      <sup>25</sup> Wirth: 2015, 127.



even the mildest form of questioning; that is, with irony.”<sup>26</sup> Mildness is not Lucretius’ *métier*, and his oblique irony often surges into sardonic contempt as he questions conventional responses to death.

Lucretius does not, however, condemn grief itself, nor does he present human sorrow as something contemptible. His strenuous critique of the irrational fear of being dead is not a full exposition of Epicurean theory and practice regarding the proper attitudes toward death. We know from Philodemus of Gadara’s *On Death*, for example, that Epicurean theory could countenance the fear of the consequences for the survivors of one’s own premature death as a rational cause for disquiet.<sup>27</sup> Rather, in the vignettes of the departed father and the maudlin drinkers, Lucretius’ focus is on the way that kitsch – the image of the stereotypically sweet children, the maudlin lamentation, the pseudo-philosophy, the falseness – diverts our attention from the reality of the unwalled city.

The clichéd lamentations for the young father have something in common with the inapt tombstone erected for the character Tomas in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: “HE WANTED THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN ON EARTH.”<sup>28</sup> Asserting the heir’s right “to express his father’s life in his own vocabulary,” the erstwhile estranged son chose the phrase despite his awareness of the incongruity with Tomas’ own worldview.<sup>29</sup> The disparaging ending to this section of the novel, while not closely applicable to Lucretius, stresses the incongruousness between the reality of death and the mourners’ hackneyed response: “Before we are forgotten, we will be turned into kitsch. Kitsch is the stopover between being and oblivion.”<sup>30</sup>

### A Parallel from Philodemus

Epicurean candor obliterates kitsch. Sometimes Lucretius stages a direct confrontation, as when he emphasizes putrefaction or gives a voice to a personified Nature who addresses not just Memmius or the implied reader, but all humanity (3.933–934):

“quid tibi tanto operest, mortalis, quod nimis aegris  
luctibus indulges? quid mortem congemis ac fles?”

<sup>26</sup> Kulka: 1996, 97.    <sup>27</sup> Sanders: 2011, 230. Cf. also Chapter 7 of Asmis in this volume.

<sup>28</sup> Kundera: 1984, 276.

<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Marie-Claude’s commemoration of the deceased Franz, “A RETURN AFTER LONG WANDERINGS,” exemplifies kitsch not only because of its trite religiosity but also because both Marie-Claude and the reader know that Franz died detesting her (*ibid.*, 276).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

“What ails you so, O mortal, to indulge overmuch in sickly lamentations?  
Why do you groan aloud and weep at death?”

But as I have argued, parody also leads to clarity. Pertinent here is a poem by Philodemus that I would also identify as an Epicurean critique of kitsch. The male speaker in *Epigrams* 3 addresses Xantho, who is described with a string of hyperbolic praises. She is “formed of wax” (κηρόπλαστε, 1), an inscrutable compliment unless it refers to her doll-like quality, a sense confirmed when she is equated to “a beautiful statue of the double-winged Pothoi” (διπτερύγων καλὸν ἄγαλμα Πόθων, 2). Two adjectives sound pedestrian in translation – “with the face of a muse” (μουσοπρόσωπε, 1) and “with perfumed skin” (μυρόχροε, 1) – but the fact that for us they are *hapax legomena* suggests that they would have sounded comically inflated or even bizarre. That suspicion is heightened by the only other attestation for the adjective “double-winged” (διπτερύγων), which occurs elsewhere as a descriptor for mosquitoes (Meleager 33). Next we have a plea that she sing a “sweet” maudlin song (*Epigrams* 3, 4–7 Sider = *AP* 9.570):

ψῆλόν μοι χερσὶ δροσιναῖς μύρον· “Ἐν μονοκλίνῳ  
δεῖ με λιθοδμήτῳ δὴ ποτε πετριδίῳ  
εὔδειν ἄθανάτως πουλὺν χρόνον·” ἄδε πάλιν μοι,  
Ξανθάριον, ναί, ναί, τὸ γλυκὺ τοῦτο μέλος.

Pluck for me with your delicate hands a fragrant song: “In a solitary rocky bed made of stone I must surely someday Sleep a deathlessly long time.” Yes, yes, Xantharion, sing again for me this sweet song. (Trans. Sider 1997)

Some scholars see a disjunction between the composer of this epigram and Philodemus as an Epicurean scholar. Thus Philip Merlan asks: “Is this the same Philodemus who quoted the tetrphramakos, with its ‘Death is nothing to us?’”<sup>31</sup> But the answer is an emphatic “yes” when we read these couplets as the words not of Philodemus “himself,” but as the ironically misguided words of his insufficiently Epicurean persona. Not all readers hear the repeated ναί, ναί as a maudlin refrain, but Sider is right to adduce the repetition in “No longer, no longer will your happy home give you welcome” (*iam iam non domus accipiet te*, Lucr. 3.894).<sup>32</sup> The male speaker in the epigram espouses an outlook on death that is as suspect

<sup>31</sup> “Ist das derselbe Philodem, der die Tetrpharmakos mit ihrem ‘Tod is ungefährlich’ zitiert?” Merlan: 1967, 490.

<sup>32</sup> Sider: 1997, 70–71.

as his exaggerated praise of Xantho, which has something in common with Lucretius' ridicule of the language of lovers (4.1160–1169).<sup>33</sup> Xantho, however, plays the role of the candid Epicurean who simultaneously deflates the would-be lover's schmaltzy language and his extravagant reference to the sleep of death. Rather than complying with his request to sing the sentimental lyrics, Xantho rebukes him with a parody of the song (*Epigram* 3, 8–9 Sider):

οὐκ αἴεις, ὦνθρωπε, ὁ τοκογλύφος; ἐν μονοκλίνῳ  
δεῖ σέ βιοῦν αἰεὶ, δύσμορε, πετριδίῳ.

Don't you understand, man, you accountant you? You must  
live forever, you wretch, in a solitary rocky bed! (Trans. Sider 1997)

Her use of the vocative ὦ ἄνθρωπε (ὦνθρωπε, 7) marks her response as a philosophical exhortation, or more generally as a notice to the addressee that he should stay aware of his human limitations. As examples of this usage in Epicurean contexts, Wolfgang Schmid cites Diogenes of Oenoanda's "O fellow human being" (fr. 3, col. 3.9 Smith; ὦ ἄνθρωπε) in his address to potential readers of his epigraphical invitation to Epicureanism, and "O mortal" in Nature's speech, quoted above (Lucr. 3.933–934).<sup>34</sup> Thus, in what Schmid aptly calls a "philosophical palinode," Xantho, as Sider puts it, offers a blunt Epicurean corrective in order to "bring him back to his Epicurean senses."<sup>35</sup> The song he had requested refers to death illogically and histrionically as a "deathlessly long" sleep in a redundantly stony, rocky tomb, a conceit she ridicules by heightening the illogicality: If he is asleep, he must be perpetually alive in this poetically embellished tomb.<sup>36</sup> Sider hears a similarity between Xantho's reproof and Nature's "chiding tones," but I would put a strong stress on Xantho's parodic tone.<sup>37</sup> If we had more of Epicurus' extensive corpus, we would know whether he too sometimes lampooned commonplace misconceptions and conventional platitudes.

<sup>33</sup> Compare Lucretius' disparaging *chariton mia* ("one of the graces," 4.1162) as used as a term of endearment by a delusional lover.

<sup>34</sup> Schmid: 1984 also cites P. Oxy. 2.215 (*de cultu deorum* = Epicurus 11 CPF, ed. Obbink).

<sup>35</sup> Schmid: 1984, 274. Sider: 1997, 67

<sup>36</sup> Lucretius also mocks the conventional equation between death and sleep. Commenting on a mourner who laments the "sleep" of the deceased, Lucretius writes: *illud ab hoc igitur quaerendum est, quid sit amari | tanto opere, ad somnum si res redit atque quietem, | cur quisquam aeterno possit tabescere luctu* ("Of such a speaker then we may well ask, if all ends in sleep and quiet rest, what bitterness there is in it so great that one could pine with everlasting sorrow?," 3.909–911).

<sup>37</sup> Sider: 1997, 69.

### Epicureanism into Kitsch

In *On Ends*, Cicero tells a story about a stroll around Athens with some erudite companions. Among them is Cicero's friend Atticus, who had a serious interest in Epicureanism and might – perhaps with qualifications – be called an adherent.<sup>38</sup> As they walk, an array of monuments and locales remind them of the Greek past. When they pass the Garden, Atticus remarks: “I could not forget Epicurus if I wanted to; my confrères have his image not only on plaques, but even on their drinking cups and rings” (*nec tamen Epicuri licet oblivisci, si cupiam, cuius imaginem non modo in tabulis nostri familiares, sed etiam in poculis et in anulis habent*, 5.3). Atticus acknowledges that he frequents the Garden, but adds an indication of his disinclination to revere the long-gone founder: “As the old proverb says, *I remember the living*.” A defense of my argument that Epicureanism was profoundly anti-kitsch requires that I acknowledge the proliferation of Epicurean accoutrements. In other words, I must acknowledge Epicurean kitsch. One person's art is another's kitsch, but I would assert that a ring depicting a philosopher qualifies as the latter, and the touch of amusement I hear in Atticus' remark suggests he would agree.

Several rings and intaglios depicting busts of Epicurus in profile have survived, and are presumably examples of the objects Atticus refers to.<sup>39</sup> Bernard Frischer counts six rings: five gems catalogued in Richter's *Gems of the Greeks and Romans*, and a gold ring.<sup>40</sup> To these Frischer tentatively adds a gem in Munich and I would add a glass gem at the British Museum.<sup>41</sup> Richter identified the miniature portraits through their resemblance to sculptures of Epicurus, and the appearance of the inscription “Epicurus” on one (a Carnelian ring). In addition, Richter catalogs two gems that might represent Metrodorus. Sadly, the dates and provenance of these apparently first- to third-century objects are not known. Before concluding that Epicureans in particular were assiduous ring-wearers, it is important to note that Richter also catalogs other relevant rings, including two depicting Aristotle and fourteen depicting Socrates. Thus, material philosophical kitsch was by no means uniquely Epicurean.

<sup>38</sup> See Gilbert's examination of Atticus' Epicureanism in this volume (Chapter 4).

<sup>39</sup> Listed in the catalogues as rings are items 438 bis (Richter: 1971) and British Museum: 1917, 0501.1636. The surviving intaglios were presumably settings for rings. Any of these objects may have been used as seals, perhaps on letters or wherever security was wanted.

<sup>40</sup> Frischer: 1982, 87 n. 1. Richter: 1971 (numbers 438, 438bis–441). The gold ring is British Museum: 1917, 0501.1636.

<sup>41</sup> Brandt et al.: 1968, number 361; and British Museum: 1923, 0401.798.

It is hard to know what sort of plaques or “tablets” (*tabulis*) Atticus has in mind, but Pliny the Elder also records with disdain that Epicureans among his contemporaries “bear portraits of Epicurus around with them, both privately and abroad” (*Epicuri voltus per cubicula gestant ac circumferunt secum*, *NH* 355). Pliny’s remark is in some ways inscrutable, and he may mean that people wear or carry (*gestant*) Epicurus’ portrait literally around their bedrooms (*per cubicula*) and also parade it around publicly (*circumferunt secum*). Disparagement is certainly implied, as the remark occurs in the context of Pliny’s complaint that instead of preserving wax models of themselves and recent ancestors (on display in the home and ready to carry in funeral processions), his contemporaries buy expensive works by foreign artists and “prize the likenesses of strangers” (*alienasque effigies colunt*, *NH* 355). After describing their ostentatious picture galleries, he adds that “the same people” display portraits of athletes in their “anointing rooms” (apparently where they and their guests prepare for exercise), and – in the passage quoted above – pictures of Epicurus in their private rooms (or specifically in their bedrooms). Here he takes a passing swipe at Epicureans, grumbling that they also observe Epicurus’ birthday and the traditional gathering on the twentieth of every month, but his general complaint is the broader collecting habits of his contemporaries. This brief tangent on Epicurean traditions implies that he views both the portraits and the festivals as indicative of excessive devotion to Epicurus.

As for the Epicurean cups, none has survived. But perhaps Lucretius refers obliquely to such paraphernalia when he describes the maudlin drinkers’ laments for the brevity of the lives of “puny humans” (3.914–915; mentioned above). In these verses, Lucretius moves from his critique of commonplace complaints about death to prefacing his imitation of the drinkers: “People also do this when they recline and hold out their cups and wreath their brows” (*hoc etiam faciunt ubi discubere tenentque / pocula saepe homines et inumbrant ora coronis*, 3.912–913). At first sight the poor saps who bemoan their future deaths seem to represent any inebriated, cup-holding, late-night philosophizers. The “eat, drink, and be merry” conceit pre-dates Epicurus, but in the context of *On the Nature of Things*, are these fools wayward Epicureans?<sup>42</sup> Kenney takes these lines as evidence for the prevalence of a trivialized Epicureanism in Republican Rome. In his view, Lucretius is describing how drunken inhibition brings out irrational beliefs hidden beneath an Epicurean veneer.

<sup>42</sup> For the conceit, see Athenaeus’ attribution of the similar sentiments to the fourth-century BC comic poet Amphis (Athen. 336c K–A).

Commenting on Lucretius' harsh response, Kenney concludes: "The situation is piquant: The real Epicurean arraigns the false."<sup>43</sup> Admittedly, even if Kenney is right about the drinkers' pretensions to Epicureanism, their cups are not necessarily emblazoned with portraits of Epicurus. Frischer points out, however, that a cup from Boscoreale that depicts Zeno (the Stoic) mocking Epicurus supports the assumption that cups decorated with Epicurus' image did exist, "since parody pre-supposes a serious model."<sup>44</sup> Like a coffee mug purchased in a museum shop, an Epicurus cup might be either cheesy or tasteful, depending upon the owner's sensibilities. But Cicero's account of the conversation as the friends pass the Garden suggests that Atticus detects cheesiness.

It would be interesting to explore whether certain formulaic refrains displayed on Roman funeral monuments were commonly perceived as Epicurean sentiments and whether Lucretius would mock them. Examples include jingles such as *non fui, fui, non sum* ("I was not, I was, I am not") and *balnea vina venus* ("baths, wine, sex").<sup>45</sup> But for now, I turn to Horace, who discerned the potential for kitsch in what I would cautiously characterize as the spoken equivalent of an Epicurean ring or cup: quasi- or pseudo-Epicurean slogans, prime among them the well-worn exhortation *carpe diem*. Although some readers take seriously the philosophical discourse of the *carpe diem* ode (*Odes* 1.11), I would describe Horace's proffering of the philosophical mottoes in *Odes* 1.11 as the devious maneuvers of an unreliable narrator. W. S. Anderson has described in detail how this works: The male speaker (perhaps to be understood as Horace's persona) engages discourse presented with gravity in other odes: the harsh weather outside, the advice to cut short hopes for the future, the injunction not to ask about troubling matters and the invitation to enjoy the wine instead.<sup>46</sup> Anderson demonstrates how these motifs are presented mechanically along with other clichés in *Odes* 1.11 by a half-avuncular and half-predatory speaker who is impatient to have sex with the justifiably wary Leuconoe. As Anderson points out, even the meter of the ode is suspect: "The speaker emerges as a person of clipped and perfunctory argument, who gets trapped, particularly by the choriamb, and exposed as a man of ready phrases and trite slogans." Six of the thirteen relentlessly repetitive metrical units (all choriamb) sound particularly glib: *scire nefas*;

<sup>43</sup> Kenney: 2014, 197.      <sup>44</sup> Frischer: 1982, 88.

<sup>45</sup> For the former, see *CIL* 8, 3463, and variants discussed by Lattimore: 1942, 83–85. For the latter see *CE* 1318, *CE* 1499 and variants discussed by Kajanto: 1969.

<sup>46</sup> Anderson: 1992.

*ut melius; quidquid erit; vina liques; dum loquimur; carpe diem* (“it is wrong to know”; “so much the better”; “whatever will be”; “strain the wine”; “while we are [merely] talking”; “harvest the day”; *Odes* 1.11.1–8). Here the rhetoric of other odes sometimes identified specifically as “*carpe diem* odes” is “reduced and essentially parodied, to work for the patent purposes of seduction.”<sup>47</sup> While Anderson does not mention Epicureanism in his insightful essay, *carpe diem* is not merely *philosophical* language, but is specifically *Epicurean*. The agricultural metaphor *carpe* (“harvest or pluck”) must be a direct echo of Epicurus’ similar-sounding καρπίζεται (‘harvest’; ‘enjoy the fruits of’), which may have appeared more aphoristically in other sources but has survived in Epicurus’ *Letter to Menoeceus*, where we read that the wise person chooses and “enjoys the fruits not of the longest time, but of the sweetest time” (χρόνον οὐ τὸν μῆκιστον ἀλλὰ τὸν ἥδιστον καρπίζεται, *Men.* 126). Nonetheless, in *Odes* 1.11, Epicurus’ reference to the harvesting of time has turned into trite “Epicurean” moralizing. But although Horace was likely not a card-carrying (or *ring-wearing*) Epicurean, his sardonic conjuring of Epicurean kitsch does not preclude an appreciation for authentic Epicurean wisdom. His send-up may be as much a self-parody as a lampoon of hackneyed Epicureanism.

Why was Epicureanism so easy to reduce to a slogan or to an object that can be worn on a finger or held in the hand? Any philosophical school could attract ill-informed practitioners or be subject to parody, but Epicureanism presents a special case. Although he was an Epicurean-friendly reader, Don Fowler found Epicureanism “austerely and challengingly simple.” In Epicureanism as a scientific philosophy he saw “a strong aspiration” toward “the one true story.” Epicureanism’s urge to explain all of reality as a result of the movements of atoms, its “constant aspiration to reduction,” led to a “thinness and clarity of the message.” But for Fowler, Lucretius’ *On the Nature of Things* represents a fundamental departure from early Epicureanism. Whereas Epicurus was a reductionist, Lucretius’ rich language suggests “multiple approaches to the world.”<sup>48</sup> Fowler sensed a tension between Epicurus and Lucretius that renders the latter’s epic “as deeply un-Epicurean as it is deeply Epicurean.”<sup>49</sup> I agree with Fowler about the richness and complexity of Lucretius’ presentation of Epicureanism, but the question of whether Epicurus’ approach is in fact

<sup>47</sup> Anderson: 1993, 120. Davis refers frequently to “CD odes” (i.e. *carpe diem* odes), e.g. Davis: 1991, 146. Note also the title of West: 1995, which does not discuss *Odes* 1.11 in detail: *Carpe Diem: Horace Odes I*.

<sup>48</sup> Fowler: 2002, 442. <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 443.

reductive lies outside the scope of this essay. Nonetheless, one result of the potential “thinness and clarity of the message” is that Epicureanism could be condensed to simple slogans and clichés, or even to one word. Cicero and Seneca routinely reduce the entire philosophy to “Pleasure” (*Voluptas*), and Marcus Aurelius chose as his label for Epicureanism the single word “Atoms.”<sup>50</sup> Others gave Epicureanism a two-word title: One of Lucilius’ characters calls it “Effluences and Atoms,” and Cassius (a friend to the Garden) counters Cicero’s hostile summation affirmatively with the Greek pair “Pleasure and Tranquility.”<sup>51</sup>

With the formulation of the *Principal Doctrines*, Epicurus may have begun this process himself. His followers sometimes expanded the *Principal Doctrines*, so that the text preserved by Diogenes Laertius (usually considered canonical) differs from the *Vatican Sayings* and the version displayed by Diogenes of Oenoanda. But sometimes faithful followers reduced the doctrines to the tetrapharmakos, the four-fold remedy for human suffering found in a text by Philodemus: “The gods do not concern us; death is nothing to us; what is good can be easily obtained; what is bad can be avoided” (PHerc. 1005, col. 4.9–14). Could this be kitsch? The potential is there, but my sense is that these statements possess a clarity that prevents them from sinking to the realm of irredeemable kitsch.

### Conclusion: Anti-Kitsch as Frank Criticism

When we read the diatribe against the fear of death as a polemic against kitsch, we can see more clearly that Lucretius is not presenting a full course in Epicurean thanatology, but is instead leading the reader through the first steps by stripping away the conventional clichés that occlude reality. The process involves the potential pain Lucretius refers to when he writes that Epicureanism may first seem “rather bitter” (*tristior*, 1.944), causing most people to “recoil” (*abhorret*, 1.945). Though ultimately liberating, both the message and its delivery can be harsh, and Lucretius’ metaphorical honey softens the bitterness of the medicine, but does not coat the whole. Lucretius’ reference to the initially bitter taste of Epicurean teaching resonates with a particular mode of therapeutic Epicurean instruction described in *On Frank Criticism* (PHerc. 1471), Philodemus’ fragmentary epitome of lectures delivered by his teacher Zeno of Sidon. We know from

<sup>50</sup> Abundant examples in Cic. *Fin.* and Sen. *Vit. Beat.* and Marcus Aurelius *Med.* 4.3, 6.24, 7.32, 7.50, 8.17, 9.28, 10.6, 11.18.

<sup>51</sup> Lucil. 820 W. Cic. *Fam.* 15.19.2 = SB 216.



this work that Epicurean advice and correction could be “mild” (μέτριον) or “harsh” (σκληρόν) and “bitter” (πικρόν), depending on circumstances such as the error being addressed, the status of the speaker and the fortitude of the hearer.

I take some aspects of Lucretius’ diatribe against kitsch as a manifestation of the more bitter type of Epicurean frank criticism. Lucretius’ treatment of death had begun by candidly appealing to the readers’ reason, carefully laying out the proofs of the mortality of the soul and the Epicurean assertion that “death is nothing to us.” Then, progressing from the appeal to reason to language that stirs the emotions, Lucretius’ tone ranges from quiet persuasion to harsher frankness, with his descriptions of putrefaction and the vignette of the father and his orphans being the most bitter. Philodemus was careful to specify that even the bitter mode of frank criticism must not include sarcasm and derision (*On Frank Criticism* fr. 23.1–4; cf. 37; 38), and perhaps he would not praise Lucretius’ diatribe. But Lucretius seems to employ varying degrees of mildness and bitterness depending on whether his target is Memmius or an unspecified, implied reader. When he addresses Memmius directly, he is as deferential as Philodemus advises a teacher to be when instructing someone of higher social status. When Lucretius gives Nature the opportunity to speak, he tempers the rebuke by remarking that she might justly censure “someone of us” (3.932). Lucretius also softens the blow by rhetorically presenting Memmius with the opportunity to rebuke *himself* (3.1024–1026):<sup>52</sup>

Hoc etiam tibi tute interdum dicere possis:  
 “lumina sis oculis etiam bonus Ancu” reliquit,  
 “qui melior multis quam tu fuit, improbe, rebus.”

This thought also you may at times address to yourself: “Even good Ancus has closed his eyes on the light, he who was better than you, unconscionable man, in many ways.”

But the most hypothetical of Lucretius’ implied readers do not require deference or the gentler types of frank criticism such as the approaches Philodemus recommends for the instruction of the most vulnerable. Like the theoretical mourners and other fools *within* Lucretius’ epic, the implied readers will not crumble under the teacher’s harsh reprimands. Meanwhile, the actual readers of *On the Nature of Things* are out of the

<sup>52</sup> If the singular second-person pronouns do not refer specifically to Memmius, Lucretius is giving the opportunity to the implied reader. Philodemus’ *On Frank Criticism* demonstrates that self-disclosure and mutual correction were essential aspects of Epicurean education (e.g. fr. 39–42 and, apparently, fr. 53).

direct path and are thus insulated from the sting of harsh criticism. Nonetheless, Lucretius' diatribe against the fear of death does not allow any of its actual or implied addressees to take refuge in platitudes and false assurances. To deny that our metaphorical city has penetrable walls – to pretend that human lives are not dispensable in the great scheme of things – and to bemoan the eventuality of one's own death . . . this is kitsch.