Conclusion

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Abstract and Keywords

The brief conclusion reflects on the fact that love and poetry both grapple with the impossibility of ever fully knowing or communicating with another person. Yet both also depend on that impossibility: the distance that inevitably separates one human being from another is the source of pleasure as well as frustration. This dual effect is forcefully conveyed in the poetry of Lucretius concerning love.

Keywords: separation, other people, pleasure, frustration, Lucretius

I do not know you. And you will never know me; no matter how hard I try, my words will never fully abolish the barriers that separate one consciousness from another. This is the problem that both love and poetry face and that they seek to overcome. As Percy Shelley writes in his essay “On Love”: 
If we reason we would be understood; if we imagine we
would that the airy children of our brain were born anew
within another’s; if we feel, we would that another’s
nerves should vibrate to our own, that the beams of their
eyes should kindle at once and mix and melt into our
own, that lips of motionless ice should not reply to lips
quivering and burning with the heart’s best blood. This is
Love.¹

Of course the desire for such communion is not peculiar to
love and poetry; it is inherent to all human relations and all
language. When I write literary critical prose, I too desire to
be understood, desire that you should feel and respond as I do.
But love is the most intense form of human relation, just as
poetry is the most intense form of language, and they are
linked by the lengths they will go to bridge the divide between
us.²

At the same time love and poetry also depend on division. In
De Rerum Natura (On the Nature of Things, first century
BCE), Lucretius writes vividly of the frustration but also,
implicitly, the pleasure that lovers experience as a result of
their inevitable separation. John Dryden’s translation (1685)
forcefully conveys this dual effect: (p.191)

    Nature for meat and drink provides a space,
    And when received they fill their certain place;
    Hence thirst and hunger may be satisfied,
    But this repletion is to love denied:
    Form, feature, colour, whatsoe’er delight
    Provokes the lover’s endless appetite,
    These fill no space, nor can we thence remove
    With lips, or hands, or all our instruments of love:
    But thin aerial shapes that fleet before the mind.

    . . . . . . . . . . . . .
    Our hands pull nothing from the limbs they
    strain,
    But wander o’er the lovely limbs in vain:
    Nor when the youthful pair more closely join,
    When hands in hands they lock, and thighs in
    thighs they twine,
    Just in the raging foam of full desire,
    When both press on, both murmur, both expire,
    They grip, they squeeze, their humid tongues
    they dart,
    As each would force their way to t’other’s heart—
In vain; they only cruise about the coast,
For bodies cannot pierce, nor be in bodies lost.³

This passage forms part of a long satiric diatribe, comprising the last 250 lines of book 4 of *De Rerum Natura*, in which Lucretius inveighs against love as a source of delusion.⁴ But if the lines are intended as a warning or antidote against the temptation of erotic passion, they are counter-effective. The lines are irresistibly erotic—perhaps even more so in Dryden’s version than in the original, simply because it is a translation. The original passage in Lucretius describes an experience of simultaneous intimacy and distance and at the same time produces such an experience. As readers we are invited to participate imaginatively in the young lovers’ passionate embrace through the intensely detailed description of it, while also being made aware of our exclusion: not only are we merely witnesses to the scene (we are not actually the lovers), but we experience it only through language (the lovers are not actually there). To this Dryden’s version adds a third level of pleasurably (p.192) frustrating mediation. However “luscious” the description may be (to use Dryden’s own term for his rendition of this passage), as a translation it gestures all the while toward an original text, an original experience, that remains, no matter how closely we may read and reread these lines, beyond our grasp.⁵
Dryden deploys all the resources of poetry to reinforce the sense of a desire for unity that is perpetually, provocatively thwarted. Notably, the heroic couplets in which he casts his translation suggest both conjunction and isolation. There is an undeniable satisfaction in the closure provided every twenty syllables, as each pair of lines combines and finds fulfillment in a climactic rhyme. But it is the satisfaction, as the opening lines put it, of “repletion,” of hunger sated or thirst quenched. Love and poetry, by contrast, always desire something more. Hence the enjambment in the third couplet above (“whatsoe’er delight | Provokes the lover’s endless appetite”): love is “endless” and will not be contained within the line. The extra metrical foot—two additional syllables—at the end of the following couplet (“With lips, or hands, or all our instruments of love”): “love” always seeks to extend beyond its allotted place. The effect is even more striking in the description of lovers’ embrace: “When hands in hands they lock, and thighs in thighs they twine.” Again an extra foot reaches beyond the usual line ending, joining the hands and thighs to complete the bodies’ entanglement. And, if the line is not technically enjambed (although the lovers certainly are), still the couplet remains for once grammatically incomplete, reaching into the couplets that follow to find resolution. Yet it is all “in vain.” A line or couplet can never actually “pierce” or intermingle with another line or couplet, any more than one human body can truly intermingle with another, and these pleasurable variations end up only drawing attention to the restrictive pattern that they resist yet that also makes them possible.

But the most erotic moment in the poem comes not in this passage about the impossibility of total union but at the very end of book 4, where Lucretius explains how love between two people can actually be realized. A woman conquers a man’s heart, Lucretius writes, simply by being pleasing and good every day, until eventually her virtues dissolve the boundaries that separate them. Love is thus achieved not in a single moment of interpenetration but almost imperceptibly, through repetition, as described in the final lines of the book: (p.193)

Quod superest, consuetudo concinnat amorem;  
nam leviter quamvis quod crebro tunditur ictu,  
vincitur in longo spatio tamen atque labascit.  
nonne vides etiam guttas in saxa cadentis  
umoris longo in spatio pertundere saxa?6
In sum, familiarity produces love; for whatever is struck by a repeated blow, however lightly, is eventually conquered and gives way. Don’t you see that drops of water falling on rocks make their way through the rock in the end?

Neither the imagery of these lines, which was already traditional by Lucretius’ time, nor the sentiment they express is particularly memorable. What makes them striking is the rhetorical question at the end, with its turn to the second person. As a didactic poem De Rerum Natura often addresses the reader directly, frequently in the form of a question. But the appearance of a question in this position (book 4 is the only one in the poem to conclude this way) and in this particular context makes the ending surprisingly poignant. Dangling where it does, the question conveys a sense of vulnerability: the poem, so insistent and even strident up to this point, suddenly turns into a dialogue, requiring the reader’s affirmation for its completion. At the same time the phrasing also suggests confidence in the reader’s assent. The question is not “Do you see?” but “Don’t you?”, which implies a common consciousness or understanding, a shared perception between speaker and listener: De Rerum Natura may seem a strange place to conclude, since it is not usually thought of as a love poem. But here, in the closing turn, the poem momentarily produces the intimate mutuality that it describes, in a way that I find thrilling and unexpectedly moving. Don’t you see? (p.194)

Notes:


Conclusion


(5) For Dryden’s comments on his own “lusciou$s$ English,” see “Preface to *Sylva*es,” in *The Poems of John Dryden*, ii. 249.

(6) Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* 4.1283–87; I use the text found in Brown, *Lucretius on Love and Sex*, 162.