

**EXPLORING THE WORKS OF DEMI THROUGH
THE LATIN VERSES OF LUCRETIUS**

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“Herr! gieb uns blöde Augen

*für Dinge, die nichts taugen,
und Augen voller Klarheit
in alle deine Wahrheit”.*

*“Lord, give us weak eyes for things of little worth,
and eyes clear-sighted in all of your truth.”*

Truth is terrible. The statement perhaps compels rephrasing into a question. Is the terrible word “truth” susceptible to intuitive or geometric cognition, to borrow from Pascal, so as to obtain some, even a modicum, of enlightenment? After all in the Bible, at least that part that Christians uniformly and in a single voice refer to as *The Old Testament*, God *speaks* to Moses but Moses is proscribed from *seeing God*. The imagination need not travel far to reach the imposing and arresting conclusion that God can be heard but not seen or seen only upon penalty of death. We are not told which is worse! Why assume? Indeed if God is truth then the visual juxtaposition between truth, the infinite, and the finite is so ineffably overwhelming and all consuming so as to wrest life from the very human condition. If truth is terrible in its finite expression for reasons beyond reason itself, then the search for a fleeting glance at truth is equally pernicious, difficult, daunting, and flatly perplexing.

Seemingly innocently buried in Book IV of Lucretius’ poem entitled *On the Nature of Things*, we find a most beautifully disconcerting but illustrative passage that perhaps illuminates the relationship between images (visual art), words, and poetry, all in the sickness, dread, and contexts of truth seeking. These verses appearance early in Book IV, instead of the very commencement of the poem, is both alarming and seductively suggestive. They mandate citation in the entirety:

I traverse the pathless haunts of the Pieribes never yet trodden by soul of men. I love to approach the untested springs and to quaff, I love to cull fresh flowers and gather for my head a distinguished crown from spots whence the Muses have yet veiled the brows of none; First because I teach of great things and essay to release the mind from the fast bonds of religious scruples, and next because on a dark subject I pen such lucid verses o'erlaying all with the Muses' charm for that too would seem to be without good grounds: Even as physicians when they propose to give nauseous wormwood to children, first smeared the rim round the ball with the sweet yellow hews of honey that the unthinking age of children may be fooled as far the lips, and meanwhile drink up the bitter draught of wormwood and thus beguiled yet not betrayed, but rather by such means recovered health and strength: So I know, since this doctrine seems generally somewhat bitter to those by whom it has not been handled, and the multitude shrinks back from it in dismay have resolved to set forth to you our doctrine in sweet-toned Pierian verse and o'erlay it as it were with the pleasant honey of the Muses, if haply by such means I might engage your mind on my verses till such time as you apprehend all the nature of things and thoroughly feel what use it has.

Shamelessly and starkly, with the cruelty of hierarchy bestowed by seemingly unbridled wisdom, the poet identified two grounds that galvanize and give rise to his verses. Both of which, in his mind at minimum, justify a deceit that shields us neophytes from the rough edges and bitter essence of truth.

To be sure, Lucretius relishes the satisfaction flowing from custody of what is great. “I teach of great things and essay to release the mind from the fast bonds of religious scruples...” The greatness of these things, certainly as presented in the poem, do command “*analytical*” attention, unfortunate as this word may be. The second part of the conjunctive “and” referencing religion is one that places the artist, in this case the poet and later the painter Demi, in the same footing as Priest and Diety: creators, one with verse and the next with brush stroke, and priest, artist, and poet as story tellers of their own mythology.

The second moving principle for Lucretius and, so we must conclude also with respect to Demi, is the personal conviction that “on a dark subject [each] pen[s] such lucid verses”, and strokes. Poet and artist inverse roles. Conventionality is fiercely challenged and transformed so as to create new visions and ways of understanding for all things that are. Suddenly truth is equated with darkness, at least from the human perspective. One dare also ask for poet and artist, can there be any other perspective short of the duplicitous musings of man purporting to view all that is from a theocentric perspective?

Let us spill some ink on these “great things” that Lucretius teaches that impel the use of verses as physicians apply honey so as to mitigate and meaningfully lessen the bitterness of the underlying substantive truth that make rhythmic words and colorful brush strokes soften for our grasp and spiritual consumption. Five fundamental propositions are here addressed.

First, religion is challenged as a true and worthy account “of the most high system of heaven and God.” Indeed the poet boldly asserts that “[w]hen human life to view lay foully prostrate upon earth crushed down under the weight of religion, who showed her head from the quarters of heaven with hideous aspects luring upon mortals,…” Moreover, in what is but a eulogy to Epicurus, the poet sings that “with hideous aspects luring upon mortals, a man of Greece ventured first to lift up his mortal eyes to her face and first to withstand her to her face. Him neither story of God nor thunderbolts nor heaven with threatening roar could quail: The only chafed wore the eager courage of his soul filling him with desire to be the first to burst the fast bars of nature’s portals. Therefore, the living force of his soul gained the day: on he passed far beyond the flaming walls of the wall and traverse throughout in mind and spirit the immeasurable universe; when he returns to conquer to tell us what can, what cannot coming to

being; insured on what principle each thing has its powers defined, its deepest boundary marked. Therefore, religion is put on the foot and trample upon in turn; us his victory brings level with heaven.”

The demystification of religion and placement of mortals at the same level as the gods so as to “bring level with heaven”, is a certain cornerstone of the truth that must be sugarcoated with the sensuous, seductive, and deceptive beauty of verse. The mysteries of nature, the happenstance and periodic penchant for natural catastrophes, the inexplicable roar of quakes and humbling celestial veins of electrical discharges that both entertain and cause men to cower, are now hardly justification for a religious foundation. The poet’s verse and the artist’s strokes are essential components that mediate between the brittleness of the human condition, i.e. its internal capacity to absorb truth, and truth itself. Both poet and artist are interpreters of nature and the things that are. Like the High Priest who serves as a bearer of secrets, so too poet and artist harbor first principles that can only be disseminated through verse and colored images.

The artist Demi does not rest her terrible truth on the hope and salvation that religion spawns. Like Lucretius, she finds recourse in form, that is, images while winged hairless and completely bald babies all too often adorn the canvas, bringing to mind the inflections of Raphael’s *puttis*. But Demi does not craft the fluttering *puttis* of Raphael or, centuries later, those of Murillo. To the contrary, Demi creates children, more specifically, babies in many instances, who never were faced with an opportunity even to question, let alone challenge, the destiny of death that befalls all mortals, but that is particularly cruel when it remorselessly engrafts itself on virtual newborns in the form of a merciless disease. Hopelessness and not hope pervade her canvases but always striking the appropriate balance that keeps her from engaging in

the mere exegesis of a celebration of the macabre. It is here that her genius shines as brilliantly as the colors emblazoned on her canvases.

Like Lucretius who in Latin verse attempts to depict Greek tragedy or the tragedy of the Greeks, Demi armed only with oil and conviction, attempts to provide a voice for the voiceless truth that defines an age where a child dies of hunger every two seconds while forty-four thousand more infants perish every month as victims of readily curable infirmities.

Approximately 2.8 billion persons live in what the World Bank defines as “poverty” i.e. people living an average of the equivalent of U.S. \$2.00 a day, while an additional 874 million live in conditions of “extreme poverty” as this term is defined by the World Bank, i.e. on U.S. \$1.00 or less a day. But Demi does not stop there. She sketches the threshold of hope by suggesting, all be it metamorphically and through images, the need to develop a collective consciousness. She begins this journey by focusing on what is primarily a non-curable illness. You see, it is by searching for what can not be readily seen that she provides content to the concept of hope within the two dimensional effort. The image of a winged but bald child in itself constitutes a library. Saint Paul writes of “fear and trembling”, but Demi paints while trembling with the fear that her terrible truth, the tragedy endemic to the quest for hope, may be too remorselessly stark, even when “sugarcoated” with the ocular nectar of colors. No, it is not religion or religious hope, but the potential contained by and in the human, that she summons, all so very directly in her compositions.

It is precisely through the adroit use of clustered flowers, commonly radiating with primary colors and a texture that longs to grasp the viewer, and at times even lacerate him in a

desperate pang of anxiety longing to command attention, that her artistic powers both, like Lucretius' verses, reveal and conceal. She asks the viewer to search and to stop looking. Beauty, her canvases screech out, is a pretext for the ineffable terrible truth that defines the human condition and that perhaps can find no solace in religion of any ilk.

Second, there is a mythology that transcends fear of the metaphysical in efficacy and immediacy, while placing man not in the middle of the universe but rather at the heart of his moral imperative. "This terror then and darkness of mind must be dispelled not by the rays of the sun and clattering shafts of day, but by the aspect and the law of nature; the wrath of whose design which shall bring with this first principle, nothing is ever gotten out of nothing by divine power."

Demi does not ask for miracles. Indeed, she appears to be the nemesis of *ex nihilo*.

The artist's very personal iconography certainly does not reach for the heavens, even though the heavens are incorporated but only as part of an entire system and not in the context of an absolute. Curiously, the verticality that is common in the *cuattrocento* and later again in the late sixteenth century and throughout the seventeenth century finds no place in her work. She bottoms her artistic competition on an almost naive and completely baroque first plane. Let us stop here.

Why would an artist engage in such construction? The busily ornate first plane bespeaks "immediacy." It highlights and underscores the "here and now" while never foreclosing options that infinity may present. In turn, Demi asks that we conceive of infinity as contained within the finite in the very realm of the human imagination. If so, if the mind is the place for the imagination and the imagination seat of the infinite within man, then this "first plane" aspires to

the creation of an immediate and tangible (never forgetting the tragic textures) aesthetic experience that elevates man from the shackles of metaphysics and places him in on the pedestal of science in the most primal sense of this word, “wisdom”.

After draining the viewer, seducing him, and depriving the spectator of any escape from the initial ambit, we are left standing before a work of art that has depleted us only to learn that the journey only has begun. Demi is not a primitive artist. She is an artist that delves in the primal: at times just hints of perspective. In other moments the very perspective itself that Alberti so bookishly “discovered” pulls the exhausted spectator deeper into the canvas. It is here that the artist, or in her case High-Priestess, uses with unparalleled skill or precedent space almost too judiciously. There are images, celestial objects, the music of the heavenly spheres, but it all seems to dissolve in that nothingness to which we have grown accustomed, wearily enough, to call “space”.

After dallying in a mystical landscape or in an ornate realm that is everywhere and nowhere in particular, the return journey commences: Back to the first plane. Only now the spectator is completely exhausted. Left with not a scintilla of strength, physical, moral or otherwise, the crisis envelopes the unexpected admirer. What to do? How do I get back from the canvas by first traversing the universe of that first plane? This effect is not improvised. It is an unconscious, I dare say conscious, design to bring the spectator to a state of complete and utter fatigue where she must seek to replenish the now wholly dissipated reservoir of human energy. Where will the strength to return come from? The spectator has one of two options. She may look to the heavens or seek within herself, exploring the deep confines and contours of the human, all too human, will. It is that will that renders the impossible possible, that defies gravity, teaches that a widow can not be consoled by words, nor an orphan by being showered

with gifts, or the mother burying her child with a litany of future promises in the form of heaven, hell, and prayer, a soldier saved from an ambush never conceivable, let alone expected, a priest satisfied in his human condition despite the longing for intimate spiritual and physical companionship that only a woman in space and time may yield, console the dying patient with the children's tale of a happy afterlife, comfort a child whose ears still ring with that ubiquitous echo of the firing squad, convince the elderly that the vertiginous and relentless decay and deterioration chocking the most minute physical fiber is actually beneficial and merely part of the process of life, agree and accept that the human condition (ending in death) is but a blessing to be celebrated, gulp the bitter syrup of daily injustice. Yes, Kierkegaard, you were right. Here it does rain on both the just and the unjust. But the essentially Danish gentleness of the imagery gets it wrong. It self is unjust. The unjust bloom while the just whither. Do not question it, son, it is the creator's private little secret not to be shared with little mortals. After all, does a character in a novel have any standing to questions the author's design? Again, the spectator has no choice. She can seek strength from heaven or from within. The canvas is eloquent enough. Do not seek from above that which you cannot create from within. Demi is the nemesis of *ex nihilo* unless creation can be fathomed as the fruits of the confluence of Man and Muse.

Third, hope as set forth in these canvases ablazed with color and minute, meticulous, and almost torturing painstaking detail that the spectator cannot elude, try as he may, must be anchored in space and in time, in the domain of "becoming". This becoming, however, is far from one that is not self-contained and regenerating. Demi does subscribe to the more modern poet's precept "that the larva grows where once tears ran." (*La larve file où se formaient les*

pleurs). A much cruder image from that of the used and abused sphinx. Here again Lucretius helps.

Moreover, nature dissolves everything back into its first bodies and does not annihilate things. For if all were mortal in all its parts alike, the thing in a moment would be snatched away to destruction before our eyes; since no force would be needed to produce disruption among its parts and undo their fastenings. Whereas in fact, as all things consist of an imperishable seed, nature suffers the destruction of nothing to be seen, until the force has encountered it sufficient to dash things to pieces by a blow of to pierce through the void places within them and break them up.

Demi is far from an ode to a perennially recycling materialism. She does share with the poet, however, one very strong conviction; there is no need to create a new world. In fact, her ambition is less than noble. Why create a new world when there is so much work to do in explaining the present one. Her canvases rife with children, children without ears or hair but gilded with flowers, colors, costumes, and treacherous surroundings that have been disguised by masterful brushwork that is unique to this artist as a finger print to each individual, bespeaks a nietzschian eternal return, but always a return to the present, to what is tangible to spectator as well as to the higher relief of her inordinately textured work.

The journey of these canvases is self-contained and rarely transcendental. They lead to introspection and shun classical salvation always placing greater emphasis on the exigency of the present. I bleed, suffer, and cry her iconic figures tell us but you, the spectator, are blinded by the very penetrable and perishable exterior of the beautiful.

Her figures may die but they are ever present always returning in an effort to assert themselves and share with all the beautiful tragedy that defines the eminently human essence of

our natures. “ A thing therefore never returns to nothing, but all things after destruction go back to the first bodies of matter.” the denigration of present suffering for the sake of a higher and future salvation cannot be grasped by the pain of a child playing the blind deadly game of hide and seek with destiny.

Fourth, there should not be a suggestion of other things or beings beyond those contained within the two dimensions of the canvas. “Therefore, beside void and bodies no third nature taken by itself can be left in the number of things, either such as to fall at any time under the ken of our senses or such as anyone can grasp by the reason of his mind.”

Yes, the task of explaining this world renders null and frivolous the construction of a new one. More importantly, it is equally misplaced, according to these canvases, to fashion a metaphysics, that is, a physics other than that which physicists and mathematicians contemplate and study within the framework and rubric of postulates, principles, and laws. Accordingly, Demi articulates her rules early in the engagement between spectator and canvas. The children are quizzical, sad, enthralled, pensive, and penetrating. *Nothing* more is necessary. She too has “rules of engagement.” The unique brushstrokes, unorthodox chromatic scheme, distribution of masses, and ever-present texture shall remain the solitary elements of the work. The human condition, which she portrays much like the proverbial “leaf in a storm” penetrated by innocence and corrupted by misunderstanding is all that matters and can ever matter to this artist whose unbridled exquisite hubris is matched only by her unique talent. “Therefore first-beginnings are of solid singleness, and in no other way can they have been preserved through ages during infinite time passed in order to reproduce things.”

Demi's paintings are timeless but their interior marks a very unique sense of finite time: a candle burns, a flower shrivels while another blossoms, children play in a syncopated adagio of fits of starts and stops that is rhythmically compelling and perplexing. "Time also exists not by itself, but simply from the things which happened the sense apprehends would have been done in time past, as well what is present and what is to follow after. And we must admit that no-one feels time by itself abstracted from the motion and calm rest of things."

The brittle balance between joy and suffering leads to the fifth of the propositions that Lucretius boldly asserts. "For we see that anything is more quickly destroyed than again renewed; and therefore that which the long, the infinite duration of all bygone time had broken up, demolished and destroyed, could never be reproduced in all remaining time." So we find it in a canvas that depicts nothing more tragic or common despite its extraordinary nature than the burial of a child. The vulnerability of life, of the balance between joy and suffering, lend themselves to destruction much readier than to creation. The terrific visual of a child's burial proceeding is depicted with a tonnage and torrent of emotions. Significantly, the formal event only is attended by children. Each small, like the decedent, but the little souls collectively, like a Greek funeral chorus, comprise a single whole suggesting that when one child dies all other somehow die as well as a speck of sand in the desert or a single drop of water in the ocean are each bound by all other particles of sand and droplets of water in desert and oceans across the globe.

While Demi shares with the poet the penchant and effects of destruction versus creation, she animates, literally provides a soul to matter in a way that the poet's verses refrain from singing. After all, is there not a meaningful distinction between the systematic destruction of

matter into component parts that permit of no further destruction beyond that of a self-contained body, and the defeat of the human spirit in a death without salvation of a soul who never sinned?

Lucretius and Demi, separated by so many centuries yet united in the common conviction that their respective arts' seductive natures served an elevating purpose in awakening man from the complacency of dogmatic slumber. Also, both poet and artist appear to share the additional belief that true art must pierce, lacerate, and penetrate so as to give rise to a new vision of the sublime and, necessarily, the banal. Art is supposed to move, form, and transform human consciousness despite the painful friction of such contortions. Clearly more unite the artist and the poet or, shall we say this artist and this poet, than could ever possibly separate them.

Lastly, both poet and artist shy from what they likely believe to be the ill effects of intangible aspirations, i.e. *dreams*. Instead, they appear to assert the painful proposition that *memories* are more important than dreams. While superficially the canvases portray children in a panoply of games, activities, and being in the world, and therefore, suggesting that the dream of a happy future pervades the composition, quite the opposite is true. The children represent childhood, that is, the past, a distant past and a quite faded memory. Their present status on the canvas is a calling to the past as their future not only does not exist, but shall never come into being. The message is not minced. The memory of a first born, the recollection of a parent's burial, the thought of a day when a bond was sworn until such time as death would do part, the first encounter with heroism, and the recurring experience of past betrayals, all appeared to outweigh the ethereal configuration of a future matrix that exists nowhere, not even in the mind, for any sustained period of time.

It is not proper perhaps to challenge either poet or artist. One question is indeed here relevant. Demi, why do so many of your children lack ears? Is it because they have fallen off? Did they ever have them? Could it be that you do not want them to hear the sound of that firing squad that has left an open wound in all of our hearts, and yours in particular, never, never, never, to heal again? will you ever rid yourself of this demon from within? I wonder. But perhaps, the very genius and pain that drives you to paint also has moved you forever distant from the poet. Both significantly have parted ways. Is it that your children lack ears because you believe God to speak to man with the voice of silence?