

THE MUSES' SWEET HONEY

Ethics, Aesthetics and Love in Lucretius, Nussbaum and Horror Vacui

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ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the relation of ethics and aesthetics, or of natural law and poetry. It confronts two opposing recent interpretations of the philosophical poem *On the Nature of Things*, written by the Roman poet Lucretius: Martha Nussbaum's ethical reading, as opposed to the aesthetical interpretation of Lucretius which I have elaborated.

Nussbaum claims that knowledge derived from literature, such as Lucretius' poetry, can supply the basis for a neo-Aristotelian natural law theory. She maintains that Lucretius propagates the ideal of mutual affection in a calm married life, cautioning against the dangers of romantic love. However, Nussbaum's interpretation is based on a one-dimensional reading that neglects the ambiguity in the content of Lucretius' poetry as well as the ambiguous relation between its philosophical content and its poetic style.

More generally, literature is by nature much too ambiguous to serve as a basis for ethics. Art has other purposes than showing the Good. Even if the modernist stress on the autonomy of art is considered one-sided, the moralistic view of art seems less adequate than the romantic one which holds that art mirrors the tragic, imperfect character of life in all its 'good' and 'bad' aspects.

KEY WORDS

ambiguity

ataraxia

Critical Schizoism

Epicureanism

Horror Vacui

lyrical love

multiperspectivism

postmodernism

natural law

romanticism

Ars Poetica

didactic poetry

epic love

ethics

love

modernism

narcissistic love

perceptive equilibrium

neo-Aristotelianism

sacral love

A pretty moral: Fümms bö wö tää zää, pögiff, kwi Ee

The big fish eat the little fish is the title of one of Breughel's famous etchings: as the belly of a huge fish is slit open, there spills out a host of smaller fish, many of which grasp yet smaller fish in their jaws. Shakespeare used the same moral metaphor in *Pericles* (II,1):

Third Fisherman Master, I marvel how the fishes live in the sea.

First Fisherman Why, as men do a-land, the great ones eat up the little ones: I compare our rich misers to nothing so fitly as to a whale, a plays and tumbles, driving the poor fry before him, and at last devours them all at a mouthful

Pericles [aside] A pretty moral.

Breughel was a forerunner of seventeenth-century Dutch genre painting, which typically had two levels of content. Ostensibly it held up a realistic 'mirror of nature,' But a deeper meaning lay beneath the surface of its realistic images. According to Horatius's *Ars Poetica*, the imagery of a painting should be interpreted in the same way as the words of a poem, and, like its sister poetry, painting should combine the pleasant with the useful.¹ In both cases, their main intention was to convey moral instruction.

From a Horatian point of view, Martha Nussbaum's recent

plea for an alliance of ethics and literature should be perfectly understandable. In modern times, the situation is quite different. As I shall argue, Nussbaum's thesis of the congruency of ethics and aesthetics has little plausibility under the modern view of art and literature, and, in retrospect, it rests on a one-dimensional reading of the pre-modern classics.

In present-day painting and literature, both realism and moralism have been largely eliminated under the influence of romanticism and modernism. Following Sade, the darker current of romanticism identified the Beautiful with Evil rather than with the Good, as is exemplified in Shelley's verses *On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery*:

Its horror and its beauty are divine.
 Upon its lips and eyelids seem to lie
 Loveliness like a shadow, form which shine.
 Fiery and lurid, struggling underneath,
 The agonies of anguish and of death.

In its more moderate form, romanticism saw 'evil' as an undeniable part of the real world which art should expose without moralizing.

As early as 1790, Kant's *Critique of Judgement* anticipated modernism by pronouncing the autonomy of art. A judgment of beauty, according to Kant, is based on a disinterested feeling of pleasure that is evoked by an object such as a painting or a piece of music through the harmonious coherence of its shape or composition. The interplay of formal elements pleases the imagination because it suggests purposiveness despite lacking any purpose or use outside itself. Thus, in Kant's aesthetics, only the first of Horatius's criteria *dulce* and *utile*, pleasant and useful, survives. With this definition, Kant also trivorced the classical trinity of the Beautiful, the True and the Good that had still ruled the art of the Dutch Golden Age: art, in consequence, neither reflects reality nor

entails moral instruction.²

After the second World War, the high priest of modernism, Clement Greenberg, took Kant's aesthetic formalism to new extremes. Greenberg characterized the abstract expressionism of post-war painters like De Koonig and Pollock as being the climax of a development that had started with the nineteenth-century impressionists. According to Greenberg's 'law of modernism,' successive avant-gardes had eliminated more and more of those artistic traditions that were inessential to the medium. In particular, all representation of the three-dimensional visual world was dismissed as a gratuitous, inappropriate illusion. 'Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or part to anything not itself' (6).³ This process of self-purification resulted in an art that was purely formal and abstract, consisting of compositions of shape and colour on a flat canvas. Modernist literature, by contrast, did not go so far as to abandon all reference to external reality but it did firmly renounce the narrative character of nineteenth-century realism. Experiencing the world as chaotic and fragmented, modernist authors like Proust, Kafka, Joyce and Musil tried to create an artificial order in their novels. Rather than mimicking reality, their works explored the subjective ordering of memory, or presented an autonomous order of literary elements. Some more radical poets reduced their 'absolute poetry' to pure sounds, as Schwitters did in *Ursonate*:

Fimms bö wō tāā zāā Uu,

Pögiff,

Kwii Ee.

Greenberg's theory of aesthetic progress was subsequently called into question by the trans-avantgarde of Postmodernism. This does not imply a return to pre-modern realism and moralism, however, but an even more radical fragmentation of

the former unity of the Beautiful Good Truth. Ihab Hassan signalizes a fundamental ontological 'indeterminacy' which results in a culture without centre, stability or authority. This is reflected in the stylistic pluralism of art and literature. Inspired by Picabia, postmodern art quotes playfully from various traditional styles as well as from popular art and kitsch. This led Arthur Danto to proclaim 'the end of art': postmodern art has no other ambition than to be *dulce*, to satisfy the public's need for amusement and decoration. At last art has been liberated from philosophical theory which wished to charge it with a historical mission. Likewise, in *The Death and Rebirth of the Novel*, Leslie Fiedler proclaimed the death of the novel.⁴ Postmodern authors take modernist doubts about the possibility of depicting reality to extreme lengths, but nonetheless reject the modernist effort to create an artificial order in literature. The result is a pluralistic literature, without organisational principles, containing neither statements about reality nor moral messages.

Martha Nussbaum: Love's knowledge

Such avant-gardist and trans-avantgardist proclamations may have a strongly caricatural element, yet they do hint at important contemporary developments. In this light it is rather surprising that Martha Nussbaum has recently taken the opposite route, in proposing to reunite the Beautiful with the Good and the True. In *Love's Knowledge* Nussbaum maintains, first, that literature communicates truth:

Literary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is, itself, a part of content—an integral part, then, of the search for and the statement of truth.

(3)

Literary style can express, much better than the conven-

tional abstract prose of philosophy, the mysterious and complex diversity of human existence in all its particulars. Second, Nussbaum maintains, this literary truth entails the morally good:

a form that itself implies ... that our task as agents, is to live as good characters in a good story do ... (3)

In the field of morality, too, literature displays a sensibility that is far superior to the bloodless abstractions of modern Kantian or Utilitarian moral philosophy. In Nussbaum's view, the classical trio of ontology, ethics and aesthetics converges most notably in its joint search for an understanding of love.

The ethical knowledge that can be drawn from literary (and other) sources results in a neo-Aristotelian, essentialistic doctrine of the human good and of natural law.⁵ According to Nussbaum, human nature is characterized by ten properties from which the conditions for a good human life or for human fulfilment can be derived:

1. Human *mortality* implies that everybody should have the opportunity to lead a complete human life until its natural end.
2. Our *physical needs*, like hunger, thirst and sex, imply that we must have the means to live a healthy life, with sufficient food, shelter, sexual satisfaction.
3. Since human beings have a *capacity for pleasure and pain*, unnecessary suffering must be avoided and one must be able to have pleasurable experiences.
4. Because of our *cognitive capabilities*, we must be able to imagine, think and reason.
5. *Dependency during childhood* forms a basis for mutual relationships: therefore we should have the opportunity to attach ourselves to others.
6. Human beings live in families and wider social networks,

- and have *social needs*; consequently, we should have the opportunity to engage in social interaction and to show concern for others.
7. Because of the human *relatedness to nature*, we should live in harmony with our environment.
 8. Our capacity for *humour and play* should have sufficient room to express itself.
 9. We should each be able to lead *our own life* in our own context, as a consequence of human *separateness*, or *individuality*.
 10. *Practical reason* is also an essential human capacity, so we should all be able to reflect critically upon the good life, and should be able to plan our own lives.

In the field of political theory, these ten commandments lead to a liberal social democracy with equal liberties and a welfare state. The freedom rights are a consequence of points 9 and 10. As to the distribution of social-economic goods, Nussbaum departs from the liberal ideal of state neutrality regarding ideals of the good life: the distribution should be such that it furthers the satisfaction of Nussbaum's ten essential human needs. Nussbaum stresses the literary background of her legal philosophy:

social democracy and the art of the novel are allies. Their focus is the human being, seen as both needy and resourceful; and their dominant passion is love. (391)

Lucretius: On the Nature of Love

To disprove Nussbaum's claim that aesthetics and ethics coincide in this way, I take her interpretation of one specific work of Western literature as an example. To give her a fair chance, I have chosen a work from classical times that tries to satisfy both criteria of Horatius's *Ars Poetica*, explicitly

aiming to be both *dulce* and *utile*: the philosophical poem *De Rerum Natura* (On the Nature of Things) written by the Roman poet Lucretius in the first century, B.C.E. In *De Rerum Natura* Lucretius propagated the materialistic philosophy that the Greek philosopher Epicurus had formulated two centuries earlier. Lucretius's Epicureanism aims to impart a realistic knowledge of the world that carries a moral message with it: understanding the nature of things means perceiving their utility (*persentis utilitatem*—LV 25). This practical morality dons the pleasant costume of poetry, Lucretius's only fundamental departure from Epicurus. Epicurus rejected the poetic form because it distracts the reader from philosophical truth. Lucretius, by contrast, defended his poetry with the argument that he was using the Muses' sweet honey (*musaeo dulci melle*—IV 22) to sweeten the bitter pill of philosophy. The beautiful, *dulce* poetical form of *De Rerum Natura* is intended to make Epicurus's useful but difficult doctrine easier to assimilate:

For I have chosen in sweet-tongued melody
 The Muses know to frame my reasoning
 For thy delight, and as it were to touch
 My theme with honey'd sweets of poesy,
 If so per chance I might avail to hold
 Thy mind upon my verses, till thou come
 To grasp the nature of the world entire
 And make the lesson of its use thine own. (IV 20-25)

According to Epicureanism, the universe consists of nothing but matter and empty space. Atoms, the smallest material particles, fly through an infinite void and combine according to causal natural laws. They are the elementary building blocks that, in diverse combinations, constitute all the phenomena of the world: stones, animals and human beings too, the human mind included. Lucretius draws an analogy between atoms ('seeds') and the letters of the

alphabet that go up to make the huge diversity of words in the verses of *De Rerum Natura*—the Latin *elementum* has the double meaning of element (or atom) and letter:

Nay, even in my verses everywhere
 Thou must confess that words and verses both
 In sense and ring of sound stand far apart
 So much can letters do, if we but change
 Naught save their order; but the seeds of things
 Have powers more manifold to bring to bear
 Whereby they can create each several thing. (I 823-829)

Just as the rules of word formation and grammar dictate linguistic order, fixed natural laws determine the regular course of natural events:

And yet thou must not hold that elements
 of every sort can be in every wise
 Together linked, else rising everywhere
 Strange monsters wouldst thou see, misshapen forms
 Seeming half man, half beast, and e' en at times
 Tall branches from a living body grown,
 Or limbs of earth-born beasts linked on with those
 Of creatures of the sea, while through the realms
 Of earth, the common Mother, would be nursed
 Chimaeras, breathing flame from their dead jaws. (II
 700-706)

Epicurus's materialistic ontology has primarily moral purposes. Its realistic knowledge of the world is intended to produce *ataraxia* or peace of mind by banishing all irrational and superstitious fears: one should not be afraid of death, nor of supernatural things like the wrath of the gods. Epicureanism teaches that the human soul consists of nothing but atoms, and these disperse at death simultaneously with the atoms of

the body:

And at last,
 When time's stern strength hath sapped the frame, and
 loosed
 Are all the limbs, their powers benumbed, anon
 The wits are lamed, tongue raveth, mind is shaken,
 All things give way and in one breath are fled.
 'Tis meet, then, that the nature of the mind
 Should all be scattered likewise, e'en as smoke
 Into the high-flung breezes of the air; (III 451-456)

And because the soul does not survive the body, death, 'the most frightening of bad things,' is not to be feared: 'since when we exist, death is not yet present, and when death is present, then we do not exist,' as Epicurus wrote in his *Letter to Menoecus*.

For when in life
 Each man doth picture to himself his fate,
 That birds and beasts will mangle him in death,
 It himself he pitieth. For ne'er
 Doth he distinguish from that loathsome thing
 His living self, nor hold himself aloof
 Far from that outcast corpse, but fancieth still
 That it is he, and as he standeth by
 Doth colour it with feelings of his own. (III 879-883)

As there is no life after death, fear of divine punishment in hell is irrational. The soul not being immortal, one should concentrate on this earthly life. Reject all superstitious beliefs in supposed divine plans, because natural science shows that everything proceeds according to fixed natural laws, without any supernatural intervention. Natural disasters such as

earthquakes and volcanic eruptions are not signs of divine wrath but merely natural events. Thunderbolts, for instance, are not thrown down by Jupiter but produced by outbursts of energy accumulated in the clouds.

But haply if it be

That Jove or other gods besides do shake
 With shuddering crash the shining dome of heaven
 And hurl their wrathful fires each where he will,
 Why, pray, make they not sure that whosoe'er
 Hath kept not from his heart some loathesome deed
 Of conscious guilt, felled by the fiery dart,
 Should breathe from out his shattered breast the flame
 Of heaven's avenging bolt, a lesson sharp
 For men to heed? Why, rather, oft will he
 Who has not known foul guilt be wrapt and snared,
 All innocent, in tangled tongues of flame,
 Caught on the instant in the whirling fires
 Of heaven? (V 387-395)

In general terms, the world is much too imperfect to be of divine creation.

In earthly life one should follow the natural feelings of pleasure and pain, which indicate what is appropriate or inappropriate to human nature. Knowledge of natural laws will show us how to live in a way that brings about the maximum of pleasure and the minimum of pain. Epicureanism propagates a very negative kind of hedonism, since life as a whole brings mainly misery:

Then too the child, like sailor tossed ashore
 By cruel waves, when nature first hath cast
 Him forth by travail from his mother's womb
 Upon the coasts of light, naked doth lie
 Upon the ground, speechless and stript of all

His life doth crave, and filleth all the place
 With woeful wailings, as is meet for one
 Whose life must pass through such flood of ills. (V
 222-227)

Lucretius therefore emphasizes that happiness can only be obtained by leading a temperate life and thereby avoiding suffering. The laws of nature help us to understand what is possible to achieve in life and where the limits of pleasure lie. Experience teaches us that our natural desires are easy to satisfy, but that immoderate longings will always result in frustration: the person who is ambitious will in the end always be surpassed by others, and the rich person lives in fear of losing his riches. Nevertheless, driven up by an irrational fear of death, many people cling anxiously to life and seek false certainty in the accumulation of wealth and power. They do so in vain, for such desires are insatiable. Moreover, at any moment, Fortune may turn into misfortune.

This is particularly true in the case of love:

'Tis this we know as Venus, this wherefrom
 Doth spring the name of love; this whence hath first
 Distilled into our hearts that honey'd drop
 Of Venus' sweetness, soon to be replaced
 By chilling care. (IV 1508-1060)

Love is but a melancholy illusion. Passion-blind, the lover projects his fantasies onto the loved person:

The black is 'honey-dark,' the unkempt and the foul
 'Hath such a careless grace,' this green-eyed jade
 Is 'Pallas' self; that one, all skin and bone,
 Is a 'gazelle,' the dwarfed 'a pet,' 'a grace,'
 'a pinch of unadulterated salt';
 One huge and bulky 'grand,' and 'distingue,' (IV

1160-1163)

Anyone who falls in love falls under the spell of a fruitless longing for union. Since lovers always remain separate persons, love can only lead to frustration.

And when at last with twining limbs they taste
 The flower of youth, when now their bodies feel
 A foretaste of delight, and Venus hath
 The man in act to sow the female soil,
 E'en then frame unto frame they widly lock,
 Mingling the mosisture of their mouths, and e'en
 Draw in each other's breath, as teeth on lips
 They madly press; yet all in vain, since naught
 Can they remove therefrom, nor penetrate
 Body in body, and thus merge in one. (IV 1105-1111)

Love therefore turns into something bitter and aggressive:

What they have grasped they tightly press, and e'en
 Give pain unto its body, and ofttimes
 Clash teeth on lips as mouth on mouth they crush,
 Since tainted is their pleasure, and beneath
 Lie secret stings, that goad them on to hurt
 The very thing, whate'er be, whence spring
 These germs of madness. (IV 1079-1083)

Lucretius advises us to refrain from all spiritual love and to stick to plain physical sex, following our natural desires. The love-sick should heal himself by means of promiscuity, casting his sperm into anybody willing to receive it instead of retaining it for one person only.

In general one should live a detached life, ideally that of a philosopher in his ivory tower:

Yet naught more gladsome than to hold secure
Those heights serene, by wise men's doctrine reared,
From which thou mayst look down, and all about
Behold thy fellows, wandering here and there.
Search for the way of life and find it not,
Striving for native wit and noble birth,
Striving both night and day with toil supreme
To master wealth and stand forth Lord of Things! (ll 7-
13)

Epicurean ethics are extremely egocentric: one should take one's own pleasure as the sole standard of a good life, and stay away as much as possible from the public and political domain. This hedonism leads to problems in social morality, however: what should I do if my pleasure conflicts with your pleasure? Lucretius's answer is that everybody who longs for inward peace has an interest in a peaceful society ruled by just laws.

This lawful order has come into being through cultural evolution. Originally man lived as a nomadic hunter in an animal-like natural state. He did not have any moral or legal prescripts and lived only to his own advantage. Later, however, people discovered agriculture, tools, and the advantages of a sedentary way of life in larger communities. It is in this context that mankind developed the gentler feelings of friendship and altruism. Because community life needed rules to go by, natural impulses became constrained by laws. From then on, pleasure in injustice was overruled by a fear of legal punishment. The common interest in a peaceful life within a well-ordered society, as opposed to the original violent state of being, is expressed by Lucretius in the metaphor of the social contract (V 1024 and 1143). This stable social order created opportunities for further cultural evolution, leading to art and poetry.

Later Christian adversaries of Lucretius's anti-religious

worldview concocted the story that Lucretius was unable to face the consequences of his own theory. He was said to have been driven mad by a hopeless love affair and to have committed suicide at the age of 44. Later psychologists speculated about a fierce inner conflict between reason and emotion in Lucretius's melancholic character, perpetuating the story of his insanity. In fact this is purely fictitious: almost nothing is known of Lucretius's personal life. All the same, *De Rerum Natura* could provide some sustenance for Lucretius's fictive biography. His purported melancholy might be inferred from his special focus on the calamities of nature, illness and death. His supposed split personality might derive from the tension between the sober, materialistic contents of Epicurus's doctrine and the poetic, often passionate form in which Lucretius expressed it in *De Rerum Natura*. The story of his fatal love affair corresponds with his vehement, graphic, detailed attack on romantic love. His supposed suicide might be an inference from the unfinished state of his poem: it stops abruptly in the middle of an apocalyptic passage which describes the horrors of a plague epidemic in Athens.

Nussbaum's Lucretius: Against the Religion of Love

What support does Nussbaum find for her neo-Aristotelian morality in Lucretius's Epicurean *On the Nature of Things*? Since Epicurus propagated an outspokenly anti-Aristotelian doctrine, the connection is not particularly obvious. To be sure, Nussbaum shares a number of Lucretius's moral opinions. Both philosophers view morality as a compensation for the fragility of human life. Both plead the case of a democratic state, ruled by law and justice. Lucretius appears to agree with the first three points of Nussbaum's list when he maintains that in the course of life, human beings should be able to satisfy their primary needs and, more generally, maximize their pleasure. To do this properly they must be able

to use their rational capacities (Nussbaum's points 4 and 10). Lucretius also points out the importance of recreation (V 1390 ff., corresponding to Nussbaum's point 8). But he is much more ambiguous regarding the inherent tension in Nussbaum's list between the individuality of point 9 and the sociability of points 5 and 6.

There is a fundamental contrast between Aristotle's stress on the social nature of man, and Epicurus's completely egocentric *ataraxia* or peace of mind, which demands a life of detachment and avoidance of personal involvement in public and private life. 'Live unknown,' is a central maxim Epicurus proclaimed. In the private sphere, for instance, Epicurus said that the wise should not marry since children disturb one's peace of mind. In the public sphere, the legitimacy of the law depends totally on the selfish consideration that legal order guarantees security and peace. Epicurus saw no principled reason that an individual may not break the law if this is to his advantage. Risk of detection is in practice the only Epicurean motive for respecting justice. In general, virtue is valuable only in so far as it provides individual pleasure, reversing Aristotle's thesis that happiness is the product of virtue. Lucretius seems to subscribe to the egocentric hedonism of Epicurus, particularly in his praise of the serene heights of a detached, philosophical way of life and in his preference for impersonal, sexual love over romantic, erotic love. This would make Lucretius's poem incompatible with Nussbaum's ethics.

It could be argued that their moralities meet halfway; however, in the sense that Nussbaum adheres to a mitigated Aristotelianism, Lucretius propagates an equally mitigated Epicureanism. For her part, Nussbaum has supplemented Aristotle's communitarianism with the liberal individualism of points 9 and 10. For Lucretius's part, she argues that several passages in *On the Nature of Things* suggest a less individualistic version of Epicureanism that is more sympathetic to the

bonds of marriage. In *Beyond Obsession and Disgust: Lucretius' Genealogy of Love*, Nussbaum concentrates on Lucretius's anti-love poetry.⁶ Nussbaum sees an analogy here with his anti-religious therapy. Like religion, erotic love is based on false beliefs: blinded by love, the lover falsely sees his beloved as a perfect goddess, however imperfect she in fact may be. Like religion, romantic love promises a transcendence of the limits of normal life into a transpersonal, mysterious union. And like false religious beliefs, these erotic hamper natural human flourishing. The lover expects too much and necessarily ends up becoming frustrated, dissatisfied with his imperfect daily life. By divinizing his beloved, he fails to recognize the other as a real person.

In modern times, religion has lost its force. The romantic mythology of love that has taken its place has become a 'secular religion' (p. 4). Nussbaum rejects this modern 'religion of love,' and she reads Lucretius's poem as a set of therapeutic arguments that aim to cure us of it:

They are therapeutic ... in a humane and constructive way. We shall see that they lead us not into an impoverished world, but into a world more richly human. They do this by exposing myths and delusions that prevent us from dealing with one another in a fully human way. They teach us to acknowledge one another, and ourselves, as human beings — that is, as beings both natural and social — in one of our most important and intimate activities. Through their complex and carefully crafted structure, they lead us to a world beyond the religion of love, beyond that world's emotions of vain longing, of awe and obsession, of disgust with the body and its limits, into a world both natural and rational. (6)

In Nussbaum's interpretation, Lucretius recommends abandoning erotic love for the more realistic, down-to-earth, reciprocal

love typified by the tranquil married life of a husband and wife with children. This 'natural' kind of love is unmarred by either the initially obsessive character of 'sick' romantic love or the feeling of disgust and disillusion that results when the mask drops. Instead of worshipping a divinized partner, marital love is aimed at a real person. Instead of a vain longing for total union, natural love within the marriage institution recognizes the otherness of the other, and emphasizes the reciprocal character of sexual pleasure. This is the *telos* of true love:

the proper or true aim of love... is not fusion, but intimate responsiveness. (51)

Lucretius's Multi-perspectivism

To come to this conclusion Nussbaum has not only studied Lucretius's philosophical arguments, but also 'their poetic expression, asking how the poetry is constructed, how it addresses the reader, from what perspective or perspectives it asks the reader to examine the phenomenon of love' (6). She sees it as a strength of the poetry that it expressed a variety of perspectives on the subject of love: personal, natural and social. Taken together, these perspectives present a complete theoretical and practical knowledge of love, which instructs us to substitute the stable love of husband and wife for romantic, erotic love. The personal perspective is to be found in Lucretius's arguments against erotic love in Book IV: the lover projects a fictive ideal onto the beloved, gets obsessed, grows mad, tries in vain to become one with the other, and this results in bitter frustration and aggression. Arguing from the perspective of nature, Lucretius maintains that mankind is not of divine but of animal origin. Therefore, sex as such is a natural desire that should not be repressed. However, as Book V indicates, human culture has elevated itself away from the

animal way of life. This puts love in a new, social perspective:

We are animals and not divinities: but we are also social creatures, for whom life in complex forms of community appears to be essential to flourishing life. (24)

As human culture evolves, sexual reproduction loses its character of a brute, biological mating. It takes the more gentle form of a stable family life with children, within the institution of marriage. Venus 'becomes civilized' (25).

In Nussbaum's interpretation, the description of the civilisation process of human love in book V is anticipated in Lucretius's verses about erotic love in book IV that are written from the individual perspective. Nussbaum reads in verses IV 1073-1076

Nor wanteth Venus's fruits who hath foresworn
Love's passion: rather doth he choose those joys
Which bring no pain. For surely to the whole
Of heart the joys thereof are purer far
Than to the love-sick.

not a distinction between sick *love* and healthy, pure *sex*, but an opposition between two kinds of love: *sick* love and *natural*, healthy love, the latter being identical to Nussbaum's reciprocal matrimonial relation. Lucretius' recommendation of promiscuous sex in the preceding verses 1061-1067 does not represent his real alternative to erotic love, she argues, but is merely meant as a temporary cure for the love-sick. As a proof Nussbaum points to later passages of book IV where Lucretius discusses procreation. In IV 1192-1196 Lucretius writes that women do not always feign their emotions, but sometimes experience sincere sexual feelings, resulting in mutual pleasure for both sexes. This could not be otherwise, because procreation would be impossible if women did not voluntarily

submit themselves to their male partners. These verses do not yet imply a plea for reciprocal love, nor for marriage, because they also refer to the mutual sexual attraction of animals:

So at cross-roads of
Will dogs, in frantic struggle to disjoin,
Pull eagerly in diverse ways amain,
While yet they cling in Venus' powerful toils. (IV
1203-1205)

This passage only presents the perspective of nature, maintaining that sexual feelings are natural to both sexes. Still, Nussbaum views it as a step to the social perspective which is finally announced in the very last verses of Book IV. Here indeed Lucretius refers to Nussbaum's calm, mutual affection: sometimes even unattractive women may arouse love, provided they conduct themselves pleasingly. Alternatively, husbands may simply grow accustomed to their wives (IV 1278-1278). According to Nussbaum, this finale of book IV is meant as a transition from the individual perspective to the social perspective of book V, which explicitly considers marriage.⁷ Cured of the subversive erotic passions in book IV, the reader will now be introduced to the civilized Venus. Taken together, these shifting perspectives are intended to persuade the reader into replacing the illusory 'religion of love' by the realistic affections of matrimony.

This seems to affirm Nussbaum's thesis that Lucretius's poetry departs from Epicurean therapy in the open character of its multi-perspectivism. Thus Epicureanism would be supplemented by an Aristotelian dialectical power, which, in line with Nussbaum's neo-Aristotelian ethics, produces a more positive perception of social and family life.

Love or Sex?

However, Nussbaums's interpretation of Lucretius, ingenious though it is, is based on a one-dimensional reading that neglects the ambiguity in the content of his poetry, as well as the ambiguous relation between its philosophical content and its poetic style. First, Lucretius's attitude towards marriage is far more ambiguous than Nussbaum suggests. He recommends impersonal sex as least as strongly as marriage, as a rational alternative to erotic love. Lucretius even describes marriage as an antidote to sexual pleasure, and advises lustful husbands to supplement their private family lives by dealings with public women. Elaborating on the procreative function of married women in IV 1268ff., he withdraws his earlier emphasis on the mutual sexual joys of both sexes: wives have no use for lascivious movements, for these hinder the proper reception of their husband's seed. For their sexual satisfaction men can better turn to whores who

May give the more of pleasure-wanton arts
Whereof our own good wives have naught of need. (IV
1276-7)

Even more critical is the fact that whereas Lucretius extensively criticizes erotic love, nowhere, as Nussbaum admits, does he positively recommend marriage. She presents two arguments to counter this objection. In the first place, Lucretius might have considered his readers not yet ready for a positive account of marriage while they were still absorbing the impact of his negative therapy. In the second place, a calm married life may not be a proper dramatic subject for literature.

it may be, as well, that it is also because the positive account of two particular people living together with mutual pleasure and mutual respect is not the stuff of poetry at all, until poetry and its language are

re-imagined. Perhaps it cannot be housed in any known literary genre, if all of these are built upon structures of quasi-religious longing and expectation. (56)

Whereas Nussbaum's first counter-argument is merely far-fetched, her second argument almost amounts to complete surrender. Amazingly, she seems to be filing a petition of bankruptcy against her own thesis that literature and morality are allies. Until now the poetry of *De Rerum Natura* has been presented as an un-Epicurean trait that supports Nussbaum's moralistic interpretation: literary form in general reflects the diversity of reality, thus contributing to the truth-value of literature; *in casu* the multi-perspectivism of Lucretius's poem compensates for the one-sided dogmatism of Epicurus's philosophical prose. But at the end of her study the alliance of literary form and moral truth unexpectedly inverts into straightforward hostility: the good life of ethics is too dull to match the dramatic nature of aesthetics.

The Divorce of Ethic and Aesthetics

This inversion not only raises strong doubts about Nussbaum's assertion that Lucretius intended to recommend marriage as the alternative to erotic love, but it indicates what is wrong with her moralistic reading of Lucretius's poem as such: she ignores much of what is *poetic* about it, in particular, the much-praised emotional, romantic side of his imagery. Just as Nussbaum's matrimonial ethic is out of place in literary drama, ethical argumentation generally goes poorly with poetry.

To be more precise, Lucretius's decision to use the poetic form has been interpreted in two ways, a rationalistic and a romantic one, both of which run contrary to Nussbaum's supposed alliance of ethics and aesthetics. The rationalistic position is as follows: although Epicurus prohibited poetry, the

poetic form of *De Rerum Natura* can be seen as entirely in accord with the pragmatic character of Epicureanism, being guided by a realistic assessment of what is humanly feasible. In this view Lucretius chose poetry for the purely strategic reason that its pleasing form would attract more readers. Seemingly romantic aspects of his poem, such as his passionate style and his graphic descriptions of natural, social and erotic disasters, are explained as the rational instruments of a didactic rhetoric: by vividly illustrating the painful things one should avoid, Lucretius wishes to talk the reader into an Epicurean detachment.

But in this rationalistic interpretation, Nussbaum is confronted with the problem that didactic poems are not representative of poetry as such. Didactic poetry is generally viewed as a continuation of philosophy by other means, and is strictly speaking not entitled to the predicate 'poetry' at all. Aristotle, for instance, maintained in his *Poètikè* that the philosophical verses of Empedocles's *On Nature* are not poetry but philosophical science in disguise:

those

But Homes and Empedocles have nothing in common
except the metre, so that it would be proper to call the
one poet and the other not a poet but a scientist. (I ,11)

In *Über das Lehrgedicht* ('On Didactic Poetry,' 1827) Goethe maintained that didactic elements are accidental to the three main literary genres, epic, lyric and drama. The opposing tradition of Horatius's *Ars Poetica*, which stressed the didactic utility of poetry, is now virtually extinct owing to the modernist emphasis on the autonomy of art. Even among those who find the claims of modernism exaggerated, there exists a general agreement on art's relative autonomy. In *The Meaning of Poetic Metaphor*, for example, Marcus Hester criticizes Wittgenstein's denial of the possibility of a private language

on the grounds that poetic metaphors do not refer to public objects: in poetry, general concepts interact to create new associations which are partly determined by the poem's unique formal properties such as rhythm, alliteration, assonance and rhyme, and each poem therefore constitutes a relatively autonomous self-referring system of symbols. Thus, viewed as didactic poetry, *De Rerum Natura* cannot count as a representative example of Nussbaum's happy marriage of the beautiful with moral truth.

The romantic position is that Lucretius's poetry has an aesthetic value that exists independently of its didactic utility. Shelly, for instance, admired Lucretius although he abhorred didactic poetry: what may as well be expressed in prose is tedious and superfluous in poetry. In particular, Shelley wrote, poets should avoid moralism:

Those in whom the poetical faculty, though great, is less intense, as Euripides, Lucan, Tasso, Spenser, have frequently affected a moral aim, and the effect of their poetry is diminished in exact proportion to the degree in which they compel us to advert to this purpose. (*A Defence of Poetry*. 502)

Thus it must be due to other qualities, such as creative imagination or sense of melody, that Shelley honoured Lucretius as a great poet: 'Lucretius is in the highest, and Virgil in a very high sense, a creator' (508). Adherents to the romantic view claim that Lucretius consciously saw poetry as something valuable in itself.⁸ They look for an explanation of this artistic departure from Epicureanism in Lucretius's romantic character. Lucretius is supposed to have had a tormented temperament that sharply contrasted with his rational Epicurean ideal of *ataraxia*. This inner tension between passionate emotion and cool reason in Lucretius's personality has found its expression in a similar ambiguity in

his poem, with the contrast of its rational contents and its dramatic and sometimes apocalyptic imagery—that also inspired the fictive story about Lucretius's fatal love life, madness and suicide.

This reading of *On the Nature of Things* can be supported by the fate of the French *poète maudit* Gérard de Nerval, whom one may consider a modern Lucretius. Nerval (1808-1850) put Lucretius's fictive biography into practice: he committed suicide at the age of 47 after having been driven mad by a thwarted love affair. As Nussbaum would expect, Nerval ascribed his erotic vulnerability to his reading of romantic love-literature such as Dante's *Vita Nuova*. He depicted his love-sickness and his madness in his novel *Aurélia, ou le Rêve et la Vie* (Arelia, or Dream and Life), just before hanging himself with what he believed to be the scarf of his beloved. It is asserted that Nerval left *Aurélia* unfinished, like *De Rerum Natura*. The difference between the two poets is that Nerval was a romantic in every sense, who explicitly rejected philosophy in favour of literature and religion. He maintained that the consolations of rationalistic philosophy are but a very poor substitute for religion. If natural science implies the death of God, nothing remains but a chilly, meaningless vacuum:

I had lost her for the second time. Everything is at an end, everything is past. Now it's me who has to die, die without hope!—But what is death? Nothingness? ... May God grant that. But even God cannot bring about that death is nothingness.

Why then is it that I think of *him* again for the first time since so long? The fatal system that had developed in my mind did not allow for such a solitary kingdom ... or better, that kingdom was the sum of all beings: it was Lucretius' god, powerless and lost in its immensity. [...]

When one's soul is floating up and down between life

and dream, between mental disorder and the return of cool reflection, one does well to look for relief in religious meditation; I have never been able to find it in philosophy, which has nothing to offer us but maxims based on prudence or at best reciprocity ...; philosophy fights inner grief by destroying sensibility; (*Aurélia* 80)

In his madness Nerval is pulled back and forth between a religious hope ('Despair and suicide are the result of a set of circumstances that are fatal to him who does not believe in immortality' [106]) and the hopelessness of an empty, Lucretian world ('O terror! This is the eternal distinction between good and evil. Is my soul an indestructible molecule, a globule that may swell with a little air but eventually returns to its natural state, or this emptiness itself, the image of nothingness that vanishes in the immensity?' [132]). Nerval ends his novel by declaring that he has finally found peace of mind in religious belief in the immortality of the soul, which guarantees reunion with his beloved in the afterlife. But in the ending of his real life, Lucretian despair took the upper hand. Might not Nerval's life and death reflect the fate of his classical counterpart? If so, Lucretius's romantic temperament must have manifested itself as a tragic poetic expressionism, which dramatically overwhelmed the *ataraxia* he vainly sought in Epicurus's rationalistic philosophy.

In this romantic interpretation, Nussbaum's reading is one-dimensional, neglecting the darker side of Lucretius's dualistic personality which gave his poem its tragic tension. It ignores an essentially poetic element of Lucretius's ambiguous philosophical poem: his fierce style and his passionate descriptions of nature and love. In other words, Nussbaum only succeeds in deriving her anti-romantic moral values from Lucretius's poem by stripping it of its literary value. That Nussbaum is well aware of this objection becomes apparent in her second answer to the question of why Lucretius did not

sketch a favourable picture of marriage: 'truly happy marriage, characterized by equality and mutuality, by equal devotion to truth, and by responsiveness and attention to both body and mind on both sides ... may not be good literature' (55). In short: 'where is the *story*?'

Anti-poetry

Nussbaum takes an even more radical step in her unexpected divorce of literature and morality, depicting literature as the very source of immoral romantic love. More than other false beliefs, she writes, love is a creation of literature. Romantic love stories present their readers with models or plots by which they interpret their own experiences, thus indoctrinating them with a false consciousness. Tales such as Plato's *Symposium* evoke a vain, overwrought longing for unity. Therefore, like erotic love, poetry smacks too much of false religion. Its

mission has been to fill people up with and then exploit, the jumped-up illusion-based desires that are, in their structure and intensity, characteristic of religious life, with its impossible hopes and anxious fears—sentiments that impede genuine human relationships. (56)

Since love stories make their readers dissatisfied with their prosaic daily life, Nussbaum argues, Epicurean therapy should undermine not only romantic love but romantic poetry. Since, as Lucretius claimed, the Venus of love and the Venus of poetry are one, if the former must be cured and re-imagined so must the latter. What we need is a therapeutic *reform* of poetry. Nussbaum ascribes the same therapeutic intention to Lucretius:

By his most unpoetical poetry, by frustrating our desire

for a story and giving us a conclusion that, though in verse, is anything but poetic, Lucretius begins to make us call our desire for poetry itself into question. (56)

Under this interpretation, Lucretius's use of poetry was inspired by a mixture of romantic and rationalistic motives. His passionate style reflects his initial irrational, romantic attitude, from which he gradually emancipates himself by rational Epicurean argument, as it were in the course of his poetical writing. His readers are conducted along the same therapeutic pathway. By the end of *On the Nature of Things*, now cured, we can dispense with poetry, 'just as it is not impossible for the man who has ascended to a high place by a ladder, to overturn the ladder with his foot after his ascent' (Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians* II 481). Lucretius's poem thus ends up transforming itself into anti-poetry:

So poetry against love will have to have a peculiar relation to its own traditions. It must turn poetry against itself, asking it to undo, using its own devices, some of its most cherished and most alluring structures. (7)

As an alternative to romantic poetry, Nussbaum pleads for a literary reform towards a kind of social realism that plainly depicts everyday life. Nussbaum's ethics might even entail the End of Literature, perhaps, as it would seem from the alternative fictive biography of Lucretius with which she ends her study. In this ethically correct version, Lucretius is successfully cured of the suicidal romantic madness traditionally ascribed to him :

Lucretius, free of illusion himself, and wishing to help others free themselves too, composes his poem. Having brought it to an end, having used poetry to bring poetry down, he stops his writing. He goes about his daily

business. Quite possibly is married. He loves and cares for his wife and children. He leads a more or less happy life. He is a good citizen. There are many things that interest and delight him. Concerning this life there may be little of literary interest to say. (57)

This implies that Nussbaum ought to abandon her literary ethics, since literature as it actually is does *not* lead to Nussbaum's morals. On the contrary, the Beautiful is either expelled or must be radically reformulated to fit her theory of the Good.

Not surprisingly, Nussbaum has omitted her passage about anti-poetry in the revised version of her original article *Beyond Obsession and Disgust* included in *The Therapy of Desire* of 1994. In its place she develops the following argument. Although Lucretius recognized the value of calm mutual affection, he failed to appreciate the component of erotic excitement that may be present in marital relations. Indeed, the risk of personal vulnerability that accompanies erotic surrender is unacceptable to the Epicurean ethic of rational self-control. Nussbaum proposes supplementing Lucretius at this point, allowing for a moderate version of erotic love on the condition that it recognizes the beloved as a separate person. This manoeuvre enables her to save at least that part of literature which celebrates such mild reciprocal eroticism. However, as Nussbaum's self-correction leaves room for moderate love stories only, it still implies a fundamental amputation of world literature. So we must conclude that her initial anti-poetical conclusion remains largely in force.

Perceptive Equilibrium

In the Introduction to her volume of essays *Love's Knowledge*, Nussbaum modifies her earlier opinion that literature and ethics have similar goals, but less radically than in her

discussion of Lucretius. She describes how her views on the relations of love-literature to ethics have passed through several stages. At first she thought that literature expressed a moral perspective which answered the question of how to live a fully human life. Subsequently, she became aware that literature does not in all respects 'contain a representation of that complete human good.' Erotic love stories can even subvert ethics. Proust's *A la Recherche du temps perdu*, for example, focuses on a solitary form of jealous, 'sick' love which is attended by sado-masochism.⁹

I argue that erotic love cannot be "domesticated" within an Aristotelian scheme for balanced and harmonious action toward the complete life, but must always be potentially subversive to the Aristotelian pursuit, because of this love's connection with anger and with the wish to harm. In erotic love, one risks not only loss, but also evil. (52)

Only love that is based on mutual affection supplies support for ethics. In her study of Lucretius, Nussbaum initially came to the more radical conclusion that such love is too humdrum for literature, which would irreversibly break her engagement of ethics and aesthetics. But since her literary ethics would not survive such an anti-poetical end, she later wisely abandoned this conclusion.

However, even if the End of Literature were not at stake, Nussbaum's second view of the relation of literature to ethics would already imply that literature as such cannot yield her ethical conclusions. Both love and love-literature express fundamentally conflicting, amoral and immoral tendencies. Since there are morally good and morally bad kinds of love and love-stories, it takes an extra-literary, philosophical point of view to distinguish between them. As Nussbaum concedes,

an Aristotelian defense of the priority of the particular does not mean discarding the guidance of general principles. Indeed, such rules frequently provide an invaluable sort of steering, without which perception would be dangerously free-floating. (165)

Consequently, in *Perceptive Equilibrium: Literary Theory and Ethical Theory*,¹⁰ Nussbaum supplemented her inductive literary approach with a systematic abstraction of philosophical ethics in the spirit of Rawls's *Theory of Justice*. She transforms Rawls' method of the *reflective equilibrium* into the method of the *perceptive equilibrium*: a holistic approach to examining our sense of life in order to bring our particular perceptions of human relations into balance with general ethical principles. The first step is to collect all kinds of philosophical and literary texts from diverse cultures and distil the main views of the good life out of them. Next, these views must be compared with one another and with our personal experience and moral intuitions. Finally, all these perspectives must be united in a balanced, harmonious whole that does justice to as many moral views as possible.

This coherence-criterion of moral truth presupposes that the findings of literature and all other kinds of human experience are largely coherent. That expectation has however already been undermined in the exemplary reading of one single poem, Lucretius's *On the Nature of Things*. More generally, Nussbaum's moralistic approach presupposes too much harmony in and between reality and art, to the exclusion of their irreconcilable and tragic aspects. To be sure, in its stress on narrativity, her literary ethic recognizes more plurality and conflict than Plato's abstract metaphysical ethics. All the same, Nussbaum's method of the perceptive equilibrium and the ten human goods that she distils from it, heterogeneous though they may be, require that this plurality of narrative and abstract perspectives is capable of being

summed up in one super-narration. Such a requirement denies the fundamental ambiguity of human existence which is reflected in art.

Ambiguity: Literature, Philosophy and Love

To start with literature, Nussbaum neglects the inherent ambiguity of Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*. She recognizes its multi-perspectivism, but wrongly maintains that these different perspectives can be united in one coherent synthesis. In fact, she can only escape from Lucretius's ambiguity by a selective, one-dimensional interpretation of *De Rerum Natura*, neglecting the ambivalence of its contents, and the disharmony of its contents and its style.¹¹

The ambiguity and multiperspectivism of Lucretius's poetry is exemplary of literature in general. In Plato's opinion, this is precisely what is so objectionable about poetry and why it is different from and inferior to law (and philosophy):

the poet, ... when he sits down on the tripod of the muse, is not in his right mind; like a fountain, he allows to flow out freely whatever comes in, and his art being imitative, he is often compelled to represent men of opposite dispositions, and thus to contradict himself; neither can he tell whether there is more truth in one thing than he has said in another. But this is not the case in law; the legislator must give not two rules about the same thing, but one only. (*Laws* IV 719)

In *The Art of the Novel*, Milan Kundera also refers to the ambiguity of literature as the specific difference that distinguishes it from philosophy. But Kundera advances it as an argument to reverse Plato's hierarchy: the modern novel is superior because its different characters present a plurality of perspectives, renouncing any claim that they can be summarized into one coherent panorama. By contrast to the

monistic approach of philosophy, Kundera argues, literary perspectivism gives a much better account of the modern fragmented world which has taken the place of Plato's classical unity of the Good, the Beautiful and the True and of its medieval successor, the Christian God:

As God slowly departed from the seat whence he had directed the universe and its order of values, distinguished good and evil, and endowed each thing with meaning, Don Quixote set forth from his house into a world he could no longer recognize. In the absence of the Supreme Judge, the world suddenly appeared in its fearsome ambiguity. The single divine Truth decomposed into myriad relative truths parcelled out by men. Thus was born the world of the Modern Era, and with it the novel, the image and model of that world. (6)

Any effort to synthesize the multi-perspectivism of a modern novel appears to be doomed to failure, as is Nussbaum's synthesis of Lucretius's multi-perspectivism. *A fortiori* this will be the case if one tries to distil a moral equilibrium from all the novels and poetry that make up world literature. In short, normative theory is underdetermined by literature, which is too poly-interpretable to produce moral guidelines such as Nussbaum's natural law theory.

This gulf is partly caused by the incompatibility of the categories of aesthetics and ethics: art has other purposes than showing the Good. Even if the modernist stress on the autonomy of art is considered one-sided, the moralistic view of art seems less adequate than the romantic one which holds that art mirrors the tragic, imperfect character of life in all its 'good' and 'bad' aspects. Apart from its formal characteristics, the main virtue of romantic art, beyond good and evil, is its authenticity: it confronts its reader with what is usually denied, with the abysmal aspects of life. As Baudelaire wrote

in his Hymne à la Beauté:

Viens-tu du ciel profond ou sors-tu de l'abîme,
O Beauté? Ton regard, infernal et divin,
Verse confusément le bienfait et le crime.¹⁸

Nussbaum recognizes that modern ethics and aesthetics have grown apart. Her effort to reunite them is admittedly inspired by a nostalgia for premodern times that harks back to an era two millenia before pre-Kantian moralistic realism. She longs for the unity of literature and ethics of pre-Platonic Greece when such poets as Sophocles and Euripides still exerted their traditional influence as ethical teachers:

For the Greeks of the fifth and the early fourth centuries B. C., there were not two separate questions in the area of human choice and action, aesthetic questions and moral-philosophical questions Instead, dramatic poetry and what we now call philosophical inquiry in ethics were both typically framed by, seen as ways of pursuing, a single and general question: namely, how human beings should love. (*Love's Knowledge*, 15).

Far from presenting art for art's sake, Greek tragedies played a central role in the public debate about the values of the community. However, they could only perform this role because the ancient world view showed a coherence that has disintegrated in modern times. Since it seems highly improbable that any modern author will be able to put the pieces back together, Nussbaum's literary ethics rests on a category-mistake.

Not only is literature ambiguous, but the other partner of Nussbaum's alliance, ethics, does not by itself lead to coherent results. The Good displays a disharmonious character too, as

becomes apparent in the conflict between the atomistic ontology and ethics of Epicurus and Aristotle's holistic view. As Sextus Empiricus sceptically remarked about ethics and metaethics,

the same thing is not accounted good by all with one accord, but by some virtue and what partakes of virtue, by others pleasure, by others painlessness, by others something else. Therefore the really good does not impress all men through sense-evidence.

And if it is perceived by reasoning, then, since each of those persons who are held in honour in the different sects has his own particular reason—Zeno one by which he opined that virtue is the good, Epicurus another by which he chose pleasure, Aristotle a different one by which he chose health—each of them likewise will introduce his own peculiar good, which is not a good by nature nor common to all. (*Against the Ethicists* 76, 77)¹²

These incoherences in and between ethics and aesthetics correspond with the ambiguity and incoherency of life itself. In her emphasis on harmony, Nussbaum does insufficient justice to the tragic, conflictual aspects of human life. Love, for example, does not serve a particular human end or good, but a plurality of conflicting ends. An intimate, reciprocal relation with a single partner is but one of these. Another good is to be found in what Milan Kundera has called *epic love*. In contrast with the *lyrical lover* who looks for the same female ideal in each loveaffair, the epic lover is sincerely curious about the unique personality of every new partner, experiencing every new love as an enlarging voyage of discovery. A flourishing epic love-life enables the epicist to develop new, unexpected potentials of his personality in each new erotic interaction.

Many people openly or covertly entertain both ends:

having experienced marital love for some time, they long for the other kind, and the other way around. Obviously, there is a deep and tragic conflict between the two predilections which cannot be solved without hurting others and oneself. Yet this seems to be a part of life that one cannot avoid without falling into either loneliness or boredom respectively. In my own case, my chosen perceptive equilibrium is a just middle between the two extremes of Nussbaum's monogamous love and Kundera's epicism. Instead of *ataraxia*, I prefer to have a stable and deep affectionate relation over a fairly long period and simultaneously satisfy my epic curiosity in a series of 'outside women'; and to spend the remaining days of the week in splendid Epicurean isolation—let us call this last option *narcissistic love*. In other words, I have pleasure in splitting my personality into at least three selves, the Nussbaum-type lover, the epic lover, and the narcissistic lover; and these three have to balance their conflicting goods.

Bataille distinguishes *sacral love* as a third *telos* of love, next to procreative and romantic love. Sacral love is an impersonal merging into an ecstatic, ritual sexual act. This can sometimes symbolize the unity of the universe, as it does in the symbolic union of male and female in Tantrism. Bataille recommends us to immerse ourselves into a Dionysian trance once in a while in order to transgress the limits of the rational, self-controlled ego, as well as all the other limits of a daily life that is organized in terms of economic and legal utility. Bataille views the economic and legal social order as useful but unpleasant, because it artificially suppresses our natural erotic energy. If Bataille is right, this suggests that Nussbaum's rationalization of human love will ultimately prove irrational, because her prudent approach excludes irrational yet fundamental erotic drives that cannot be denied without painful consequences. Again, there is a tragic tension that cannot be completely resolved in calm, marital affection. This also implies that human nature is not only characterized

by conflicting goods in the field of love, but that some of these goods conflict in their turn with other fundamental human aims. Nussbaum's civilized Venus cannot compensate for her negative side, the discontent of civilisation.

In the romantic view of art, Bataille's view of human life is closely related to the important disequilibrating function of literature referred to earlier. Literature discloses what remains hidden in normal and official human communication because the dominant order has excluded it as inapposite and therefore dangerous and unspeakable.

Whence, perhaps, a means of evaluating the works of our modernity: their value must proceed from their duplicity. By which it must be understood that they always have two edges. The subversive edge may seem privileged because it is the edge of violence; but it is not violence which affects pleasure, nor is it destruction which interests it; what pleasure wants is the site of a loss, the seam, the cut, the deflation, the *dissolve* which seizes the subject in the midst of bliss. Culture thus remains as an edge: in no matter what form. (Barthes 406)

This critical literary perspective may sometimes introduce a new moral and legal equilibrium, as Nussbaum would hope. But it seems over-optimistic to expect modern multi-perspectivism in general to produce such a synthesis. For instance, it seems improbable that Bataille's pornographic novel *Ma Mère* will contribute much to it.

Syn-Lucretius: Critical Schizoism

In my oratorio *Horror Vacui*, I extrapolated Lucretius's ambiguity in an aesthetic, amoral way that is quite the opposite of Nussbaum's literary ethics. *Horror Vacui* consists

of three philosophical poems.¹⁴ In parts I and II, Lucretius's poem is confronted with the counter-poem *Anti-Lucretius* which was written by the French cardinal and philosopher Melchior de Polignac in the 18th century. Polignac, in defense of his own religious worldview, attacked the atheistic materialist worldview that Lucretius had in common with modern natural science. Following Descartes, Polignac maintained that although our bodies are composed of material substance, the human spirit is immaterial; and that both substances are created by an immaterial super-spirit, God. As to love, Polignac fully agreed with Lucretius that it has a fundamentally frustrating character. Indeed, earthly happiness is generally too fragile to function as a criterion of good action. If God did not exist—a proposition which Polignac sets out to disprove—Lucretius would be correct in maintaining that the material world is situated in a mere vacuum. According to Polignac earthly life is not a positive thing, but, being imperfect and not absolute, is distinguished by what it lacks. 'Man is not sufficient unto himself: because in himself he can discern nothing but emptiness' (IX 699). Therefore, instead of loving an imperfect other human being, one should devote all one's love to the perfect Being of God.

According to Patin's *L'Anti-Lucrèce chez Lucrèce*, the spirit of *Anti-Lucretius* was already immanent in Lucretius's own ambiguous poem and in his dualistic personality: in spite of his explicit anti-religious doctrine, some of his verses express a deep religious sentiment.

This pseudo-dialectic of Lucretius's thesis and *Anti-Lucretius*'s anti-thesis elevates itself in part III into the pseudo-synthesis of *Syn-Lucretius* that immediately falls asunder in a skeptical conclusion: no coherent account can be given of such incompatible doctrines. Its poetic finale expresses my would-be doctrine of *Critical Schizoism*, which reflects the fragmented character of the world and the schizoid condition of man, as exemplified by Lucretius' multiple personality—particularly

by his ambiguous position of simultaneously being a detached spectator who looks down onto the world from serene Epicurean heights, and an actor who is part of that same world. As Nerval wrote,

A terrible thought occurred to me. 'Each person has a double,' I said to myself. — 'I feel two persons inside me,' a Father of the Church once wrote—; through the cooperation of two souls this composite germ has turned up in a body of which every organ has two similar halves. In each person there is a spectator and an actor, one who speaks and one who answers. The Orientals viewed them as two enemies: the good and the evil genius. 'Am I the good one? Am I the evil one?' I asked myself. 'Anyhow, the other is hostile to me.' (69)

This does not mean that all longing for unity should be banished, tragic and disquieting though this longing may be, because that is what gives human life its creative tension. By contrast to Nussbaum's anti-poetry and anti-love, my conclusion is an aesthetic and romantic one, as is shown in the musical poetry of *Horror Vacui*: metaphysical and religious illusions are to be replaced by temporary transcendence in art and love, without pretension that there is any truth in them. This sceptical conclusion is expressed in the following poem from *Horror Vacui*, which starts, in accordance with Sextus Empiricus's skeptical method, by opposing two contradictory views: Parmenides's thesis of Oneness and Zeno's anti-thesis of Plurality, stated alternately in the uneven lines and in the *italicized* even lines of the first verses. They were inspired by the deductions in Plato's late dialogue *Parmenides* with which Plato subverts his own former doctrine of a coherent world of true, good and beautiful Ideas.

The One is

many things arE

One

as many as there arE

Thing and another, indeterminate twoness

finite number infinitE

Split the difference makes treble

multiply countless inbetween thingS

named by empty minded featherless

two-faced twolegs

seeing-blind deaf-mutilated rolling

down the road of error

their toothless mouths full of

names nought but names

it's not

une pipe! Eros

sucks Anteros

fluidly greatandsmall-the Stranger cometh

mandrill is the measure of all things

Notes

¹ Under this view there is only a minor difference between poetry and rhetoric, the former having greater linguistic freedom.

² However, Kant did occasionally fall back on moralism, particularly in his theory of genius.

³ Likewise, Roman Jakobson proclaimed that the poetic or literary takes its own form, not its content, as its object.

⁴ From now on, Fiedler maintains, the only remaining possibilities are the Anti-art Novel or End-of-the-Novel Novel, that uses techniques such as parody, irony, and superfluous erudition to destruct the novel, and the Neo-Pop Novel that is based on popular literary forms such as detective stories, science fiction and fairy tales.

⁵ Elaborated in *Human Functioning and Social Justice*.

⁶ After finishing this paper I learned that Nussbaum had included a revised version of her 1989 article on Lucretius as chapter 6 in her most recent collection of essays, *The Therapy of Desire* (1994). Since in this new version Nussbaum has dropped a crucial passage concerning the moral status of literature, I continue to refer to the earlier publication, returning to her significant revision later on.

⁷ As further proof she points to verse IV 1124, which emphasizes the anti-social effects of erotic love: lovers neglect their duties and ruin their reputations.

⁸ As is suggested in Lucretius's invocation of Calliope, the muse of poetry, begging her to laurel him as a poet:

Trace thou the track before me, wisdom's muse,
Calliope, sweet solace unto men
And dear delight of gods, that led by thee
Mid high acclaim I may attain the crown.(VI 92-95)

⁹ I discussed Nussbaum's problematic way of dealing with Proust in *The Taste of Love* (Maris 1993).

¹⁰ *Love's Knowledge*, ch.6.

¹¹ Although in *Love's Knowledge* she emphasizes that style is fundamental to practical knowledge because it shows aspects of life that can not be expressed by words, 'style makes, itself, a statement' (7)

¹² Do you come from deep heavens or do you depart from the abyss, o Beauty? Your looks, infernal and divine, confusedly pour benefaction and crime.

¹³ Nussbaum has argued against the skepticism of Sextus Empiricus and postmodern scepticism in *Skepticism about Practical Reason in Literature and the law*.

¹⁴ Put to music by the American composer José-Luis Greco.

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