

# Rethinking Reality





# Rethinking Reality



Lucretius and the  
Textualization of Nature

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## →→ Preface ←←

This short book is the somewhat belated result of an invitation to deliver the W. B. Stanford Memorial Lectures at Trinity College, Dublin, in 1992. I chose as my topic Lucretius's poem *De Rerum Natura*, "On the Nature of Things." One impulse for this choice was the desire to relate aspects of the poem to current studies of science, in the suspicion that Latin studies and science studies had (with one or two notable exceptions) largely lost contact with each other, and that a consequence of this was that a text that still had the capacity to intrigue and to challenge had more or less fallen out of the loop and was regarded as a historical relic, well and truly consigned to the past. I would hazard a guess that this process was well under way by the time of the First World War, ironically perhaps at a point when the debate that had lasted for a generation over the "existence" of "atoms" was "resolved" in favor of their "reality." Jed Z. Buchwald has recently written that "by 1917, little doubt remained among physicists concerning atomic existence. A practical concern with atomic entities had by then replaced doubts about their reality, and physicists were beginning increasingly to use those entities in efforts to deduce macroscopic properties from their behavior in bulk."<sup>1</sup> If I may take this opportunity to signal my own rhetorical strategies, essay 1 below uses this period, and this debate, to kick-start its argument, and the significance of the

scare-quotes into which I've inserted several key terms should soon emerge in the course of that essay.

Members of the audience for the original lectures will find in the opening pages of essay 1 about the only resemblance here to the lectures I originally delivered in 1992, for at that time I was only beginning to appreciate the range of issues such a project would raise. Essay 1, therefore, more or less tracks my own attempts to understand those issues in science studies that I felt to be most salient, and I hope that others will find my discussion useful as an introduction to, and perhaps also as an intervention into, them. The issue I found myself returning to repeatedly was the relationship of representation and reality. Hans-Jörg Rheinberger has suggested that “[w]hatever escape we may seek, when it comes to the heart of what the sciences are about, we touch on representation.”<sup>2</sup> This is a bold assertion of the kind that will come under sustained scrutiny in essay 1, where I shall explore how the question of representation and reality is one that is not easily confined to the sciences, but impinges no less upon the discourses of history, philosophy, and rhetoric (to name but three) as well. The desire for *explanation* entails a pull toward reduction to one or other of these discourses, and essay 1 is framed as an exploration of what is involved in resisting any final distinctions between them. But apart from reductionism, representation and reality are bound up with current controversies surrounding the notions of “discovery” and “invention,” of “construction,” and of “final explanations.” Questions about Lucretius’s poem and its reception are used to set the argument in motion, but in this first essay, he is made to rub shoulders with Ian Hacking and Bruno Latour, whose writings over the last twenty years have played an outstanding part in provoking these debates and in setting their agenda and have managed to do so in a consistently accessible, entertaining, and good-humored way. Essay 1 seeks to intersect with other issues of current concern in science studies, notably what Lorraine Daston has termed “applied metaphysics” or “the biography of scientific objects”<sup>3</sup> and Hans-Jörg Rheinberger “the history of epistemic things,”<sup>4</sup> in which “objects” of knowledge are viewed as having

greater or lesser “reality” by virtue of their heuristic capacity. In the later stages of writing this book, I have found their work particularly useful for conceptualizing the difficult issue of continuity and discontinuity in the history of knowledge. Essay 2 brings the text of Lucretius center stage to be considered not so much as an *object* of study in the conventional manner of literary analysis as an epistemic thing in Rheinberger’s sense. Though it will only allude to such works tangentially, this second essay has obvious affiliations with a number of recent books on the textualization of nature, notably Hans Blumenberg’s *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt*<sup>5</sup> and James J. Bono’s *The Word of God and the Languages of Man*,<sup>6</sup> and, in relation to the “mapping” of the human genetic “code,” Richard Doyle’s *On Beyond Living*<sup>7</sup> and Lily E. Kay’s *Who Wrote the Book of Life?*<sup>8</sup> Relevant too are Evelyn Fox Keller’s discussions of what she calls “gene talk,”<sup>9</sup> although it is not my concern here to offer a similarly extended historical narrativization of what could be termed Lucretius’s “atom talk.”

I have inevitably incurred debts to many people for both practical help and general encouragement. John Dillon extended the invitation to give the Stanford Memorial Lectures and was a thoughtful and generous host; he deserves my apologies for waiting so long to see the resulting volume. I am grateful to the audiences of the lectures for their questions and comments, and in particular to John Luce for his constant enthusiasm. The University of Bristol awarded me a Research Fellowship for the academic year 1997–98, which relieved me of other duties and allowed me at last to get down to the serious work of writing the book. Friends and colleagues have offered me comments and reactions on various drafts and saved me from some of my rasher assumptions; in particular I would like to thank John Henderson, Charles Martindale, Mauricio Suarez, David Sedley, and Hayden White. At crucial stages, N. Katherine Hayles offered first encouragement and advice, and then a home for the manuscript that resulted. I would like to express particular gratitude to the anonymous readers of the University of Michigan Press, whose extensive suggestions went far beyond the call of duty and substantially transformed the final

version. LeAnn Fields has guided the book through the various stages of publication with patience and understanding. Last, but by no means least, Ellen O’Gorman has been there throughout.

Inscribed on the portrait of Bedell Stanford that hangs on the stairs leading up to the Common Room in Trinity College, Dublin, is the famous dictum associated with the name of Protagoras, “Man is the measure of all things.” This I have nodded to in the title of my second essay, in tribute to a man who was for me first a wise and humane teacher, then all too briefly a colleague, but ever a model of open and forward-looking enquiry.



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