

*The 'Medical Body' in Lucretius: A Few Thoughts on the Use and Abuse of 'Medical Discourse' in Latin Poetry*

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“You aint got but two shells. Maybe just one. And they’ll hear the shot.

Yes they will, but you won’t.

How do you figure that?

Because the bullet travels faster than sound. It will be in your brain before you can hear it. To hear it you will need a frontal lobe and things with names like colliculus and temporal gyrus and you wont have them anymore. They’ll just be soup.

Are you a doctor?

I’m not anything.”

The dialogue is that between the Father – who is trying to protect the Child - and a cannibal, from Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*; it encapsulates in a brilliant way how ‘medical discourse’ finds its way into literature and is subsequently (ab)used to create a variety of effects. Thus: a) in order to sound persuasively ‘medical’, you don’t have to be a doctor b) using ‘medical’ terms is about manipulating your audience and perhaps even intimidating it intellectually and c) some fancy medical vocabulary – such as ‘colliculus’ and ‘frontal lobe’ – which creates a rift from everyday idiom is necessary for the whole thing to work out.

My intention in this paper is to look at the various configurations of the ‘medical body’ in Lucretius along the lines drawn above. I will be mostly concerned with the discursive conditions under which the ‘medical effect’ is created throughout the *DRN*, and with how such effect is employed to establish a clear hierarchy between teacher and students. With regard to power dynamics, I will also take some time to examine the interesting (and often unacknowledged) fact that ‘medical discourse’ turns out to be especially relevant for Lucretius at points of a close and sustained engagement with previous Greek literature (Sappho, Thucydides, Callimachus and others). As I will argue, the ‘medical body’ in the *DRN* takes on significance as a conceptual construct which, among other things, helps to mediate and, in effect, shape our poet’s reception of the Greek past.