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Lucretius 6.799–803

By Martin F. Smith, Isle of Foula, Shetland Islands

800 *denique si calidis etiam cunctere lavabris*
plenior †efflueris† solio ferventis aquai
quam facile in medio fit uti des saepe ruinas!
carbonumque gravis vis atque odor insinuat
quam facile in cerebrum, nisi aqua praecepimus ante!

800 *efflueris* OQ: *effueris* U || 803 *aqua* OQUL: *aquam* ABF || *praecepimus* QU,
 O corr.: *pr(a)ecipimus*¹ O: *percepimus* ABF

The passage is part of Lucretius' argument (6.738–839) that the harm suffered by birds at lake Avernus, and by birds and certain other creatures at certain other locations², is due to natural causes, not to supernatural ones, the "Avernian places" (*Averna loca*, 6.738, 818) being not entrances to the underworld (6.760–768), but sources of noxious exhalations (6.818–839). To support his argument, he points out that the earth contains not only elements which are helpful to life, but also ones which are harmful to it (6.769–780), and he goes on to give examples of exhalations, which are, or can be, harmful to human beings (6.781–817). Two of the examples are presented in the five lines with which this article is concerned – lines which contain some problems of text and interpretation.

In 799–801 Lucretius mentions the danger of collapsing, if one takes a steaming-hot bath after a heavy meal. The taking of such a bath, which was supposed to assist digestion and regenerate the appetite, was condemned both by moralists, including satirists, and by medical writers³.

Although there is no doubt at all about the occurrence which Lucretius has in mind, there is a textual problem in 800: *eff(l)ueris* is corrupt, and it is not

* Drafts of this article were read by Professors J. Kany-Turpin, E. J. Kenney, M. D. Reeve, and W. S. Watt. I am very grateful for their helpful comments.

1 Lachmann reports *precipimus*, Diels *praecipimus*. M. D. Reeve, who has kindly examined Chatelet's facsimile, reports that O has *pre*, with a squiggle for *a* underneath the *e*, but that it is not clear whether the squiggle was written by the scribe or a corrector. The matter is anyhow of no importance.

2 For example, the spot on the Athenian acropolis avoided by crows (6.749–755), and a place in Syria, where quadrupeds reportedly collapse (6.756–759).

3 See the passages cited by J. E. B. Mayor, *Thirteen Satires of Juvenal* I (London/New York 1886) 153–154.

agreed how it is to be emended. Since the end of the nineteenth century, much the most popular emendation has been *et fueris*, with a comma after it. It is printed by, among others, Brieger, Giussani, Merrill (1907, 1917 texts), Ernout, Bailey (1922, 1947 texts), Gigon, Valenti, Büchner, myself, Dionigi, Godwin, Milanese, and Giancotti. Although attributed by some editors to Wakefield (who strangely placed a comma after *plenior* instead of after *fueris*), it was first printed, nearly three centuries earlier, by Naugerius in the second Aldine edition of 1515 and is to be seen in the texts of Petrus, Lambinus (1563–1564, 1565 editions), Gifanius, and Fay. It is unacceptable for two reasons: in the first place, although the postponement of connective *et* is common in Augustan and post-Augustan poetry, there is no occurrence of it in Lucretius; secondly, the expression is intolerably weak. Lambinus (1570, 1583 editions), Faber, Creech, Tonsen, and Havercamp print *plenior et solio in fueris*, but this is palaeographically implausible, and Lucretius never places *in* after the word with which it belongs.

Lachmann proposes *et laveris*, with a comma after it and with *cunctare* for *cunctere* in 799. The proposal, adopted by Bernays, Munro, and Bailey (1900 text)⁴, prompts Bockemüller to ask: “kann man im Bade Anderes thun als baden?” One might reply that one can do a great many other things in the bath, but Bockemüller is right in thinking that *et laveris* is superfluous to requirements and laughably feeble. The same applies to Diels’ *et lueris*, accepted by Martin⁵.

Among other suggestions to replace *eff(l)ueris* are *et frueris* (J. N. Madvig and Bockemüller, the latter of whom alters *solio* to *senio*), *e flustris* (Ellis)⁶, *et flueris* (tentatively suggested by Merrill in his edition of 1907, but already printed in at least three nineteenth-century texts)⁷, *effluviis* (another tentative suggestion of Merrill)⁸, *effultus* (Housman)⁹, *et pluris* (Romanes)¹⁰, *et sudes* (K. Müller), and *effertus* (Watt)¹¹. Of these suggestions, the only one which, in my opinion, merits serious consideration is that of Watt: *effertus*, although palaeographically less close to *eff(l)ueris* than several of its rivals, has the great advantage that it makes clear that *plenior* means “too full of food”: the point

4 Bailey in his 1900 text retains *cunctere*, perhaps by an oversight. In the commentary, though not in the apparatus criticus, in his 1947 edition he erroneously states that Lachmann reads *et lueris*.

5 Diels prints *cunctare* in 799, Martin *cunctere*.

6 R. Ellis, “On Lucretius, Book VI”, *JournPhil* 2 (1869) 225. He wants *e flustris* to mean “after being on the sea”, explaining that “the effect of the inhaled brine followed by a hearty meal [is] to produce fainting fits”. H. A. J. Munro, “Lucretius Book VI”, *JournPhil* 3 (1870) 123, rightly objects both to the impossibility of the Latin and to the implausibility of the explanation.

7 The texts of Eichstädt, Forbiger, and the Oxford edition of 1846.

8 Merrill makes the proposal first in “Criticism on the Text of Lucretius with Suggestions for its Improvement: Part II, Books IV–VI”, *Univ. of Calif. Publ. in Class. Philology* 3 (1916) 123–124, and mentions it also in his 1917 edition.

9 See T. B. Haber, “New Housman Lucretiana”, *CJ* 51 (1956) 388.

10 N. H. Romanes, *Notes on the Text of Lucretius* (Oxford 1934) 55.

11 W. S. Watt, “Lucretiana”, *Philologus* 140 (1996) 255.

that the bather has just consumed a heavy meal is essential, and *plenior* by itself might be taken to mean not “too full”¹², but “too fat” – a meaning which it has in, for example, Ov. *Ars am.* 2.661, Quint. *Inst.* 2.4.5, Celsus 1.3.14, 19; 1.9.4. But, although Watt’s proposal, which he makes somewhat tentatively, is on the right track, *plenior effertus* is, as he recognises, somewhat pleonastic. I am more attracted (and so now, Watt tells me, is he) by a suggestion made more than a century earlier – Brieger’s *ex epulis*. Brieger came to reject it, considering it too bold¹³, and adopted *et fueris*. No doubt the conjecture is bold, but I do not think that it is too bold. Let us examine palaeographical considerations first, then contextual ones.

Palaeographically, it must be admitted, *ex epulis* is some way from *eff(l)ueris*. However, the absence of a convincing emendation closer to the transmitted text suggests that there is a considerable corruption here, and it is not difficult to explain how *ex epulis* underwent alteration. Four of its eight letters survive in *eff(l)ueris*, and, whilst most of the individual letter-changes would be corruptions which can be paralleled in the manuscripts of Lucretius, the emergence of *eff(l)ueris* is most plausibly attributable partly to a general similarity between the two readings, partly to the scribe’s recollection of *effluit* (*effluit* O), which occurs in 6.795, just five lines above. The possibility that part of *ex epulis* was obscured or obliterated by a blot or tear cannot be entirely ruled out.

What makes *ex epulis* the best conjecture, in my judgement, is its excellent sense. As I have said above, one expects mention of food, and *epulis*, which is used by Lucretius in 2.26 (*lumina nocturnis epulis ut suppeditentur*) and means a sumptuous and heavy meal, is intrinsically appropriate in the present context. Furthermore, it derives support from Persius 3.98, the opening line of a no-unpleasant-details-spared description (3.98–106), imitated by Juvenal 1.142–146, of a man who goes straight from the dining-room to the bath and dies: *turgidus hic epulis atque albo ventre lavatur*. In *plenior ex epulis*, *ex* is primarily logical, “in consequence of”, as in Lucr. 5.1146, *ex inimiciis languebat*, but a temporal sense, “immediately after”, is perhaps intended to be felt as well; if there is a double meaning, the translation “too full after a banquet” preserves it.

Let us now turn to 6.802–803, in which Lucretius points out that charcoal-fumes easily attack the brain, unless we take preventive action. Aristotle *Sens.* 444 b 31–32 mentions the same danger: ... καθάπερ καὶ οἱ ἄνθρωποι ὑπὸ τῆς τῶν ἀνθρώκων ἀτμίδος καρηβαροῦσι καὶ φθείρονται πολλάκις (“... and in the same way that human beings are rendered drowsy and are often killed by charcoal-fumes”). Aristotle and Lucretius are quite right in saying that burning charcoal can be dangerous: it gives off carbon monoxide, which combines with

12 In 3.938, 960, Lucr. uses *plenus*, metaphorically, of one who is “full” after partaking of the feast of life, but in each case the context makes the meaning absolutely clear: *ut plenus vitae conviva* (938), *satur ac plenus* (960).

13 A. Brieger, *T. Lucreti Cari De Rerum Natura libri sex* (Leipzig 1894) lxxx: “olim audacius coniecram *plenior ex epulis*”.

the haemoglobin of the blood and interferes with the blood's supply of oxygen: serious carbon-monoxide poisoning can cause a coma or irreversible brain-damage and is often fatal. It will have been carbon monoxide rather than, as he believed, steam drawn out of the walls by the heat, which affected the emperor Julian when he had ordered burning charcoal (ἄνθρακας λαμπρούς) to be placed in his bedroom during cold weather in Paris. He relates that his head was filled with fumes and he almost suffocated (ἐμπιμπλαμένης δέ μοι τῆς κεφαλῆς ἐδέησα ... ἀποπνιγῆναι), though, when he had been carried outside and, on the advice of his doctors, had vomited, he quickly recovered¹⁴.

Whilst 802 and the first half of 803 present no difficulty, there is a problem in the second half of 803. Most editors read *nisi aquam praecepimus ante*, “unless we have taken water beforehand”, *aquam* being a conjecture, found in several Italian manuscripts, for *aqua* (OQU), which is retained by Martin, Romanes¹⁵, and André¹⁶ with *praecepimus*, “unless we have anticipated them (i.e. the fumes) with water”¹⁷, by García Calvo with a conjectural *praecidimus*, which he wants to mean “si antes con agua no se previene”¹⁸, and by Bockemüller and Richter¹⁹ with a conjectural *praecavimus*, “unless we have taken precautions beforehand with water”. Certainly there is no reason to prefer *aquam* to *aqua*, but is water wanted at all? Drinking it, washing with it, and evaporating it could not give any protection against the fumes, and, whilst a wet cloth placed over the mouth and nostrils would be of some help²⁰, one would expect Lucretius, if he were thinking of that, to have made his meaning clear.

I am much attracted by Kenney's proposal, put forward tentatively and without argument, *qua* for *aqua*²¹. For the corruption, cf. 6.923, where OQU have *aque* for *quae*. *aqua* could have come in under the influence of *aquai* three lines above, in 6.800. For *nisi qua*, cf. 5.1447 *nisi qua ratio vestigia monstrat*, “unless somehow reason reveals traces”. If Lucretius wrote *qua praecepimus* or *praecavimus*, he did not mention any specific precaution that is to be taken to prevent charcoal-fumes from entering and damaging the brains: “unless some-

14 Julian, *Misopogon* 341d–342 a. I am grateful to one of *MusHelv*'s anonymous readers for bringing the passage to my attention.

15 Romanes (n. 10 above) 55–56.

16 J. André, “Du nouveau sur le texte de Lucrèce”, *RPh* 50 (1976) 253.

17 Ellis (n. 6 above) wonders whether *aqua praecepimus* may not be right.

18 A. García Calvo, *Lucrecio, De la realidad* (Zamora 1997) 538–539.

19 W. Richter, *Textstudien zu Lukrez* (München 1974) 134–135. He is unaware that Bockemüller had conjectured *praecavimus* a century earlier.

20 All four uses of water mentioned here have been suggested. The wet cloth is the suggestion of Richter (n. 19 above) 135 n. 4. J. Godwin, *Lucretius: De Rerum Natura VI* (Warminster 1991) 151, has a strangely inconsistent note: first he says that “the meaning is clearly that of preventing the ill effects of charcoal fumes by taking precautionary draughts of water”; then, just two lines below, he expresses the opinion that Lucr. “is here probably thinking of the use of wet cloths bound in front of the nose and mouth to enable firemen to survive the ravages of smoke”.

21 E. J. Kenney, reviewing Richter's monograph (see n. 19 above) in *CR* N.S. 26 (1976) 181.

how we have anticipated them (or ‘have taken precautions’) beforehand”²². This vagueness might be explained on the basis that Roman readers, familiar with the use of burning charcoal for industrial and domestic purposes, did not need to be told that the only methods which would give really effective protection would be the provision of good ventilation or the complete exclusion of the fumes from the work-place or home. But I think it likely that what Lucretius actually wrote was *praeccludimus*, “shut out”, “block off”. The verb occurs in 1.321, 975; 3.524; 5.373. For the usage proposed here, cf. Sen. *Cons. Marc.* 22.6 *atque ita iussit lumen omne praeccludi et se in tenebras condidit. praeccludimus* and *praecepimus/praecipimus* are palaeographically close, and the corruption could well have been assisted by *percepit* (*praecepit* U) in the next line, 6.804.

I suggest, then, that 6.799–803 went like this:

800 *denique si calidis etiam cunctere lavabris*
plenior ex epulis, solio ferventis aquai
quam facile in medio fit uti des saepe ruinas!
carbonumque gravis vis atque odor insinuat
quam facile in cerebrum, nisi qua praeccludimus ante!

“Then again, if you stay long in a hot bath when you are too full after a banquet, it is often only too easy to collapse in the middle of the tub of boiling water. It is only too easy, too, for the oppressively powerful fumes of charcoal to penetrate the brain, unless somehow we shut them out beforehand.”²³

22 The same would be true of García Calvo’s *praecidimus*, if it could have the sense which he gives it, but I do not see that the word is possible in this context.

23 I am well aware that 6.804–805 have been emended and interpreted by some in such a way that they too refer to the effect of charcoal-fumes, but I firmly share the belief of most twentieth-century scholars that the lines present a new example – the danger of drinking wine when one is in the grip of a fever.