

Lucretian Subversion: Animal Speech and Misplaced Wonder in *Paradise Lost* 9.549–66

So glozed the tempter, and his proem turned;
Into the heart of Eve his words made way,
Though at the voice much marvelling; at length
Not unamazed she thus in answer spake.
What may this mean? Language of man pronounced
By tongue of brute, and human sense expressed?
The first at least of these I thought denied
To beasts, whom God on their creation-day
Created mute to all articulate sound;
The latter I demur, for in their looks
Much reason, and in their actions oft appears.
Thee, serpent, subtlest beast of all the field
I knew, but not with human voice endued;
Redouble then this miracle, and say,
How cam'st thou speakable of mute, and how
To me so friendly grown above the rest
Of brutal kind, that daily are in sight?
Say, for such wonder claims attention due. (*PL* 9.549–66)¹

The language used by the Satanic serpent in his encounter with Eve in Book 9 of *Paradise Lost* is key to Eve's subsequent temptation and eventual Fall. The first danger of the temptation scene, as John Leonard has argued, lies in her being drawn into a debate about the nature of the serpent's speech: "[T]he serpent speaks specifically about his speaking and attributes this supposedly new power to some as yet unspecified fruit" (141). He not only provides Eve with an account of how he came to possess the human gift of language, but also outlines how he came to possess the cognitive faculties that underlie it (*PL* 9.598–601). In what follows, I argue that the scene functions as a counter-didactic experience for Eve, specifically in its allusive reworking of a passage on the origins of language in the Roman Epicurean poet Lucretius' didactic poem 'On the Nature of Things' (*De Rerum Natura*, henceforth *DRN*). The key to the success of Eve's temptation in Book 9 is the way the exchange employs and subverts elements of this Lucretian account of language in *DRN* 5, announcing the confusion of Eve's cognitive faculties, and building the language of misplaced wonder which subverts the didactic message of Lucretius' poem.

The paradox of Milton's engagement in his Christian epic with the materialist and (from a seventeenth-century perspective) effectively atheist Lucretius has been considered in a number of studies in recent years, including Lewalski, Fallon, and Hardie. Scholars have drawn attention to the way in which Milton's epic shares significant features with Lucretius'

philosophical treatise, perhaps most strikingly, in Raphael's account of angelic materiality, and in a common didactic aim shared by both epic poems.² One of the hitherto neglected areas of Lucretius' didactic message which Milton engages with is his account of the origins of language (*DRN* 5.1028–90). There the Lucretian didactic poet provides his addressee, Memmius, with an account of the origins of human language, which he treats by analogy with the development of animal sounds. In depicting Eve's surprise at the physical capacity of the serpent to speak – which she had previously thought to belong to the domain of humans – Milton's Eve appears to subvert the Lucretian teaching about human and animal speech as proceeding from a common origin. At the same time, she erroneously attributes the quality of reasoning to beasts (specifically, the serpent), which, she admits, “in their looks [...] and in their actions” display “much reason” (*PL* 9.558–9). If this is an instance of Milton's engagement with the Epicurean poet Lucretius, it can be read against the background of a wider culture of the Epicurean revival of the 1650s.³ Milton would thus depict Eve's elevation of animal reasoning as leading to a deeper rejection of her previous reasoning powers. The language of wonder, moreover, which colours Eve's reaction to the speaking serpent, could serve as a further subversion of the Lucretian didactic message in *DRN*, enacting rather than avoiding the warning against attributing supernatural causes to natural phenomena. In Eve's case, the language of wonder manifests her idolising first of the serpent and then of the fruit. In succumbing to wonder, Milton's Eve thereby dramatizes the Epicurean warning which lies at the heart of *DRN* and its didactic aim to dispel misplaced wonder in humans.

One of the main mid-seventeenth century proponents of animal language on philosophical grounds was Pierre Gassendi, who attacked Descartes' (Aristotelian) position which denied the ability of animals to possess reasoning powers. Gassendi's emphasis on language as the expression of sensation, which Thomas Hobbes had also proposed (Gassendi, *Syntagma Philosophicum* II, 521–2, and Hobbes, *De homine*, II, 88 (10.1): see Serjeantson, 435), shares a vital feature with the Lucretian account of language: in Book 5 of *DRN*, the didactic narrator discusses the origins of human speech through an analogy with animal sounds to express sensation:

postremo quid in hac mirabile tantoperest re,
 si genus humanum, cui vox et lingua vigeret,
 pro vario sensu varia res voce notaret?
 cum pecudes mutae, cum denique saecla ferarum
 dissimilis soleant voces variasque ciere,

cum metus aut dolor est et cum iam gaudia gliscunt.

Lastly why is it strange that humane kind,
Indued with voyce and tongue, should as they find
A various sence of things, their thoughts possesse,
In various sounds of voyce, that sence expresse,
When euen the dumb beasts various cries eiect,
As ioy, or grieffe, or feare doth them affect? (*DRN* 5.1056–61, trans. L. Hutchinson)

Lucretius' treatment of the origins of language is indebted to a passage in Epicurus' *Letter to Herodotus* on the growth of civilization and the development of the arts. One of the key points that Epicurus makes is that names "did not originally come into being by coining, but men's own natures underwent feelings and received impressions which varied peculiarly from tribe to tribe, and each of the individual feelings and impressions caused them to exhale breath peculiarly, according also to the racial differences from place to place" (Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus* 75–6, trans. Long and Sedley). This distinction appears to have influenced the Lucretian teaching that "Therefore to suppose that someone then distributed names amongst things, and that from him men learnt their first words, is folly" (*DRN* 5.1041–3, trans. Rouse and Smith).⁴ The Lucretian passage attributes to beasts the adjective *mutus*: the "speechless" or "dumb herd", *pecudes mutae*. As Bailey noted, they are described as "'dumb' not in the sense of being unable to utter sounds, but unable to frame words" (1494, ad *DRN* 5.1059).

In encountering the serpent for the first time in *PL* 9 (see above), Eve attributes "mute[ness] to all articulate sound" as part of the condition of animals, as created by God ("The first at least of these I thought denied / To beasts, whom God on their creation-day / Created mute to all articulate sound"). As Serjeantson (429) has pointed out, Marin Cureau de la Chambre, in his *A Discourse of the Knowledge of Beasts* (1658), had posed the question of whether the anatomy of animals allowed them to utter articulate human-like sounds, and conceded that some species were physiologically capable of imitative sound (such as we see in a parrot). But the cognition underlying human speech, as a condition for animal participation in human rationality, was generally denied to them. In encountering the serpent, and hearing his speech for the first time, Eve expresses surprise in these two areas: the physical capacity of animals to express human language, and the expression of "human sense" (*PL* 9.554), which she later associates with "reason" (*PL* 9.559). While Eve marvels at the first phenomenon, the physical capacity of the serpent to utter human sounds, she unreservedly accepts the latter, the condition of reason

underlying his speech. Consequently, Eve's mistake lies in attributing human cognition to animals more readily than she allows the physical condition to be fulfilled.

Eve's chief cognitive error, however, as Milton builds the temptation scene, lies in describing the speaking serpent as a "miracle" and "wonder". This feature can be read as a further Miltonic engagement with the language of Lucretius, reversing the order of the possible and impossible⁵ as well the marvellous and the unmarvellous. In Lucretius' account, the human faculty for speech is paralleled in the natural world: the passage that explains the origins of human language begins with a programmatic qualifier *quid mirabile?* ("what is wondrous?"). Lucretius' argument about human speech is an argument derived from animal sounds, as the wondrous is replaced with the knowable. For Lucretius, forms of wonder are to be avoided. Wonder, and its negative corollary, *horror*, yields to a tendency to ascribe divine causes, and is often the result of secondary or related knowledge, rather than personal, sensory experience. An image reflected in a puddle, for example, produces the effect of a "wondrous sky" (*mirando ... caelo*, *DRN* 4.419) hidden beneath the earth.⁶ This visual effect, as Hardie (270–2) has noted, is recreated in Eve's early account of the moments following her creation, where she mistakes an image reflected in water for "another sky" (*PL* 4.459). Milton, possibly following the Daniel Pareus edition of Lucretius (as Lucy Hutchinson does in her translation), does not echo the Lucretian adjective *mirando* in Eve's description, yet the narrator appears to show Eve succumbing increasingly to wonder as the Fall sequence progresses. Lucretian warnings against misplaced wonder build in intensity in the lead-up to the Fall. Whereas in Book 5 the archangel Raphael had admonished Adam and Eve to "wonder not" (*PL* 5.491) about the plans of God, the process in which the Satanic serpent demystifies his own process of attaining language is imbued with the language of marvels. If Milton were attempting, in Raphael's account of creation, to present a version of Lucretian didactic (albeit 'corrected' to assert the continued involvement of the Judaeo-Christian God in the universe), we see a subversion of this didactic experience in the serpent's temptation of Eve. In the second half of her first speech, Eve asks the serpent to "redouble this miracle" (*PL* 9.562) and describes his ability to speak as "such [a] wonder" (*PL* 9.566). At *PL* 9.552, furthermore, Eve speaks "[n]ot unamazed" in answer to the serpent, a double negative that may parody the negative of the Lucretian *nimirum*, and expresses wonder in a subversion the language of the unmarvellous:

So glozed the tempter, and his proem tuned;
Into the heart of Eve his words made way,
Though at the voice much marvelling; at length
Not unamazed she thus in answer spake. (*PL* 9.549–52)

While, in Lucretius, wonder leads to the danger of ascribing supernatural causes to natural phenomena, Eve's wonder is the preface to rejecting the authority of God and the previous didactic authority of Raphael. As his narrative progresses, Eve is filled with more – and not less – wonder: she is “[y]et more amazed” and replies “unwar[ily]” at *PL* 9.614. Furthermore, she looks to the serpent for instruction, who, at this moment in the narrative, as he begins to lead Eve towards the tree, is compared to a fire “leading the amazed night wanderer from his way” (*PL* 9.640). The moments preceding the Fall itself are accompanied by the serpent's speaking, as Eve looks upon the forbidden fruit the narrator relates how “in her ears the sound / Yet rung of his persuasive words” (*PL* 9.736–7). Eve eats the fruit, finally, while she herself is still speaking – not the words of Scripture, but her own, echoing those of Satan: “So saying, her rash hand in evil hour / Forth reaching to the fruit, she plucked, she ate” (*PL* 9.780–1). Her words coincide with her Fall.