

TREADING THE AETHER: LUCRETIUS, *DE RERUM NATURA* 1.62–79

humana ante oculos foede cum vita iaceret
in terris oppressa gravi sub religione,
quae caput a caeli regionibus ostendebat
horribili super aspectu mortalibus instans,
primum Graius homo mortalis tollere contra
est oculos ausus, primusque obsistere contra;
quem neque fama deum nec fulmina nec minitanti
murmure compressit caelum, sed eo magis acrem
inritat animi virtutem, effringere ut arta
naturae primus portarum claustra cupiret.
ergo vivida vis animi pervicit, et extra
processit longe flammantia moenia mundi,
atque omne immensum peragravit mente animoque,
unde refert nobis victor quid possit oriri,
quid nequeat, finita potestas denique cuique
quanam sit ratione atque alte terminus haerens.
quare religio pedibus subiecta vicissim
opteritur; nos exaequat victoria caelo

(Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* 1.62–79)

As befits the proem to so original and immense an undertaking, this passage echoes, in order to retort them upon their inventors, the mythopoeic commonplaces of other ancient schools.¹ One such commonplace was the assertion that some man was the first to effect a revolution in life or thought: those who held with Empedocles that Pythagoras was the first to see beyond his generation,² or with Aristotle that Thales was the earliest cosmogonist and Plato the first discoverer of happiness,³ must learn that neither scientific truth nor human felicity was known before Epicurus. A figure dear to Plato and his admirers was that of the Gigantomachy:⁴ if he himself professed

¹ On which see P. R. Hardie, *Cosmos and Imperium* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 209–13 and the fine study of H. Reiche, 'Myth and Magic in Cosmological Polemic', *RhM* 114 (1971), 296–321. I am indebted for my knowledge of the latter to comments made by a referee on a previous version of this article.

² Cf. Empedocles Fr. 129DK, where Pythagoras is said to have striven with his wits until he saw the nature of all things up to ten generations beyond him. The parallel with the *vivida vis* of Epicurus is obvious: note also the significant placing of ἀνὴρ at 129.1, as of *homo* at *De Rerum Natura* 1.66. D. Furley, 'Variations on Empedocles in the Proem of Lucretius', *BICS* 17 (1970), 55–64, pp. 61–2, rightly rejects the doubts of Edelstein concerning the identity of the *Graius homo*; the suppression of the name may be intended to ape the anonymity of Pythagoras at Empedocles 129DK.

³ On *Metaphysics* 983b6 (Thales) and 986b24 (Xenophanes) see Reiche (1971), p. 320. On Plato see the elegiac lines cited by Olympiodorus, *In Gorgiam* 41.9 = p. 215.5ff. Westerink. Here Plato, an Athenian like Epicurus (*De Rerum Natura* 6.1ff.), is alluded to only as an ἀνὴρ and is called the 'first of mortals' to show how goodness and happiness are to be achieved.

⁴ *Sophist* 246a4–b3. On the Giants see F. M. Cornford, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge* (London, 1935), pp. 231–2. On the possibility that Lucretius was acquainted with Plato's dialogues see P. Shorey, 'Plato, Lucretius and Empedocles', *HSCP* 12 (1901), 201–10. I am not convinced by all the allusions collected by P. H. De Lacy in his 'Lucretius and Plato' in *ΣΥΖΗΤΗΣΙΣ: Studi sull'epicureismo greco e latino offerti a Marcello Gigante* (Naples, 1983), i. 291–307.

Pythagoras measures the universe, while Epicurus traversed *omne immensum*, explaining the *finita potestas* of all that the world contains. As Epicurus transcends the *flammanitia moenia*, so Hermias ascends to the aether and applies his rod to the fire. The other boast that Hermias caricatures is that of having rendered the soul immortal, which is the claim that the tale related by Maximus was designed to prove. In Hermias and in Maximus the journey to the aether occurs in association with the same cluster of Pythagorean phrases.

Lines 3.14-27 of Lucretius' poem adhere more closely to the tradition that I have postulated than 1.62-79. Lucretius imagines himself, not merely seeing with vivid eyes, like Epicurus, but looking down; beneath his feet he discovers, not religion, but the aether; he now expressly awards to Epicurus the attributes of divinity, and this passage forms the prologue to an argument that is intended to abolish the *Acherusia templa* and so to vanquish the fear of death.⁸ Lucretius is the follower, Epicurus the champion: conventional phrases stolen from their rivals suffice to extol the beatitude of the one, but not the prowess of the other. We thus have every reason to suppose that the poet knew the Pythagorean fantasy as it appears in later writers: can we confirm this deduction by appealing to texts that were already known in his day?

One work to which an allusion has been suspected in his third book is the *Axiochus*, then attributed to Plato.⁹ This dialogue contains either the antecedent or an early parody of the famous Epicurean dictum that death is nothing to us, because when it comes we are no more.¹⁰ Since it goes on to reject this aphorism, it would offer a natural target for an Epicurean polemic, and the argument that Lucretius was acquainted with it is strengthened by its epilogue (371e), which enumerates, in a similar order,¹¹ those denizens of Tartarus whom Lucretius (3.980-1010) proposes to take as emblems of the pains to which men subject themselves in life.¹² We might therefore be tempted to seek in the following passage the antecedent to Lucretius' celebration of his own victory over death:

You have transformed my opinions with your words. No longer have I any dread of death... but long since I have been conversant with higher things (μετεωρολογῶ), pursuing the divine and eternal course (*Axiochus* 370 d-e: Souilhé translates μετεωρολογῶ as 'je parcours les sphères').

This passage, like the others, asserts that a liberation from the fear of death, effected by the teaching of the sage, has been experienced as a heavenly ascent. Yet we do not find here the claim to possess an illuminated vision, much less to enjoy a vision of things below. The *Axiochus* serves us rather as a token that such a figure as Lucretius employs was already abroad in the other philosophical schools of his period, and in association with tenets which an Epicurean polemicist would feel

⁸ The *Acherusia templa* are a deplorable feature of Ennius' poetry at 1.120. Like Empedocles Ennius is a Pythagorean and an author against whom Lucretius measures himself: cf. 1.117-18 and 1.922-34.

⁹ See Souilhé's commentary (Paris, 1962) on the date of the *Axiochus*, and p. 128 on its relation to Epicurus.

¹⁰ *De Rerum Natura* 3.820-1; Epicurus, *Kuriai Doxai* 2; Cicero, *De Finibus* 2.100. On the difficulties of tracing commonplaces to particular sources see B. P. Wallach, *Lucretius and the Diatribe against the Fear of Death* (Leiden, 1976), pp. 15-20.

¹¹ Tantalus, Tityus and Sisyphus appear in the same order as in the *Axiochus*, and the Danaids also figure in both: *Axiochus*, loc. cit. and *De Rerum Natura* 3.1008-10. At *Gorgias* 525e the order is Tantalus, Sisyphus. Tityus, and the Danaids are mentioned only at 493b.

¹² Here again Lucretius seizes the opportunity to turn the conceits of others to his own account. For Pythagorean allegories of this kind see Plato on the treatment of the Danaids by certain 'Italian and Sicilian Muses' at *Gorgias* 493a and F. Cumont, 'Lucrèce et le Symbolisme Pythagoricien des Enfers', *Revue de Philologie* 44 (1920), 229-40.

himself bound to oppose. Plato's eschatology was credited by many, including Plato himself (*Gorgias* 493a), to Pythagorean masters. If we speculate that a Pythagorean commonplace lies behind the cognate passages in Lucretius and the *Axiochus*, we shall find supporting evidence in the *Clouds* of Aristophanes, which portrays Socrates as a theorizing ascetic and his school as a flock of pusillanimous 'souls'. When the Phrontisterion is sacked at the end like the Pythagorean lodge in Metapontum,¹³ Strepsiades (1503) retorts upon the teacher his earlier fallacy, that he 'walks on air and contemplates the sun' (225):¹⁴ ἀεροβατῶ καὶ περιφρονῶ τὸν ἥλιον.

Were the Pythagoreans a natural mark for an Epicurean controversialist? We have already seen (in the opening paragraph), that both Plato and Pythagoras are probably to be numbered among the objects of Lucretius' oblique polemic at 1.62–79. Epicurus is known to have denounced the famous Pythagorean aphorism that the goods of friends are common (Diogenes Laertius 9.2), and Velleius in Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* (1.83) names Pythagoras with Empedocles and Plato as one who has done most to spread the absurdities of religion. The dialogues of Plato which are known to have been disparaged by the Epicurean Colotes are those which, like the *Lysis*, the *Phaedrus* and the tenth book of the *Republic*, were felt to bespeak the influence of Pythagoras;¹⁵ one that became the cynosure of Pythagorean cosmogony, the *Timaeus*, was criticized by Epicurus himself in a work still current among his disciples at Herculaneum when Lucretius took up his pen.¹⁶

Lucretius wrote in the heyday of a revived Pythagoreanism, whose leading spirit, Nigidius Figulus, suffered the double opprobrium of being a magician and a philosopher. Cicero named Nigidius as the patron of his labours when he presented the *Timaeus* for the first time in a Latin dress (*Timaeus* 1.1). Pythagoreans in Rome were renowned for their brilliant pictures of the afterlife and their addiction to sacrifices.¹⁷ The antiquarian Varro made fastidious use of Pythagorean sources, while Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis* testifies to the attractions which their eschatology held for the most sceptical of Roman intellects. We see that this was a movement which Lucretius would not have declined to parody or forgotten to condemn.

Whether or not the turgid *Empedoclea* of Sallustius (Cicero, *Ad Q. Fr.* 2.9.3) was inspired by this Pythagorean renaissance we cannot tell; but Lucretius' frequent recurrence to the words and thoughts of Empedocles has been examined in a number of studies,¹⁸ and David Furley has shown that in his title, his prayer to Venus (1.1ff.),

¹³ The repetition of the line at 1503 would be more pointed if the boast was already notorious in the mouth of Socrates. On the representation of Socrates as a Pythagorean see A. E. Taylor, *Varia Socratica* (Oxford, 1911), pp. 129–77.

¹⁴ The verb translated 'despise' in Hermias is καταφρονῶ, the sense of περιφρονῶ is frequently the same. *Dispiciantur* in Lucretius 3.26 is no doubt the truer reading, but may suggest the ambiguous *despiciantur*.

¹⁵ On his satirical echoes of these dialogues, as recorded in Plutarch's *Adversus Colotem*, see P. De Lacy's Loeb edition of the *Moralia*, Vol. xiv (London, 1967), pp. 171–3. For his attacks on the content and authenticity of the Myth of Er see Proclus, *Comm. in Rem Pub.* 2.196ff. (Kroll) and Macrobius, *In Somnium Scipionis* 1.10–21.

¹⁶ See *On Nature* 29.28 Arrighetti. Empedocles is named as a source at 29.28.17.

¹⁷ On Roman Pythagoreanism see E. Rawson, *Intellectual Life in the Late Roman Republic* (London, 1985), pp. 291–7; on Nigidius also Pauly-Wissowa, *RE* xvii.1 (1936), 200–12. (Cicero, it seems, would not have agreed with Rawson's disparaging estimate of Nigidius). On sacrifice see Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 16.6.12 for a quotation from the *De Extis* of Nigidius. On the Pythagorean iconography and poetry of the afterlife see J. Carcopino, *De Pythagore aux Apôtres* (Paris, 1956).

¹⁸ For full bibliography see R. D. Brown, 'Lucretian Ridicule of Anaxagoras', *CQ* 33 (1983), 149 n. 21.

his eulogy of Epicurus (1.62ff.) and his tempered praise of Empedocles himself (1.715ff.), the Roman philosopher-poet has at once acknowledged and emulated his greatest predecessor in this art.¹⁹

In the passages cited above from the first and third books of the *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius has set himself to surpass the best of his predecessors in artistry and to ensure that Epicurus will surpass them in reputation. He will praise his Athenian mentor as Pythagoras and Plato were commended by the most eminent of their disciples; he and Epicurus will join the Giants in pulling down the insubstantial universe of Plato and Aristotle; conquering the fear of death in the one case, and religion itself in the other, they will show themselves to be wiser than the Pythagoreans, who dream of looking down on humankind from the flaming ramparts of eternity. In fact it was man before whose eyes lay life itself, prostrated by religion: when Epicurus raised his eyes to slay this celestial prodigy, he enabled his disciples to look down (though only in metaphor) on those who, like the Pythagoreans, pursue the fatuous quest of immortality within the mortal fabric of the world.

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¹⁹ Furley (1970), pp. 60ff. The relation of Lucretius to Empedocles is considered at greater length in my article, 'Lucretius, Empedocles and Epicurean Polemic', *Antike und Abendland* 35 (1989), 104–15, where I argue that Furley is wrong to suppose that most of the allusions pay Empedocles an unqualified compliment.