

IX.—Persius on Epicurus: A Note on *Satires* 3.83–84

JOHN W. SPAETH, JR.

WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY

Into his third Satire, in which he is pleading for high seriousness in the quest of the proper way of life, Persius introduces as representative of one wing of the opposition a blunt soldier (*aliquis de gente hircosa centurionum*) who scoffs at the ponderings of solemn men,

*aegroti veteris meditantés somnia, gigni
de nihilo nihilum, in nihilum nil posse reverti.*

Editors and translators of Persius have regularly interpreted the words *aegroti veteris somnia* of line 83 in a general sense: "the dreams of some sick dotard or other" (Conington), "sick men's dreams" (Drummond, Gifford), "the dreams of some sickly grey-beard" (Ramsay), "les rêveries d'un vieux malade" (Cartault), "les visions d'un vieillard malade" (Villeneuve), "the dreams of some old lunatic" (Tate), etc. This general interpretation is apposite, of course, but there are good grounds for believing that it does not go far enough, that rather the reference is intended, implicitly or explicitly, to be specific, and that by *aegrotus vetus* Persius is intentionally designating Epicurus.¹

In the first place, the tradition was well established in antiquity that Epicurus had suffered grievously from physical weakness and painful illness throughout his long life. Cicero, Seneca, Plutarch, and Diogenes Laertius all make mention more than once of his state of chronic ill health,² which was such that for many years, according to Diogenes (10.7), he was unable to leave his couch. He was long a victim of dropsy and various abdominal ailments,³ and finally an agonizing attack of urinary calculus or strangury brought his life to an end in its seventy-second year.⁴ Cicero,

¹ Ramorino (*Le Satire di A. Persio Flacco*, Torino,² 1920) seems to be the only editor of Persius to suggest this possibility. On these words he remarks, without additional comment: Qui il *vetus aegrotus* sarebbe Epicuro (non già *vetus* = *senex*, come vogliono alcuni).

² Most of the references may be found in Usener's *Epicurea* (Leipzig, 1887), frs. 122, 138, 177, 190; cf. also Suidas, s.v. *Ἐπίκουρος*.

³ Plu. *contra Epicuri beat.* 5, p. 1089e; 16, p. 1097e.

⁴ D.L. 10.15; cf. 10.22.

Diogenes, and the Herculanean papyri all cite letters of Epicurus written from his deathbed.⁵ Surely this inveterate invalid among the philosophers would answer eminently to the description of *aegrotus vetus*. Moreover, the likelihood that Epicurus is indeed the object of the centurion's scornful denunciation in Persius' satire is reinforced by the citation of Epicurean doctrine, expressed in obvious Lucretian language,⁶ that immediately follows: *gigni de nihilo nihilum, in nihilum nil posse reverti*. To be sure, this physical principle was not the sole property of the Epicureans; it had been a common tenet among the Pre-Socratics and was a recognized axiom in later philosophical schools, including even the Stoic, as several commentators have observed. Marcus Aurelius cites it in his *Meditations* (4.4). Yet the principle was more fundamentally Epicurean than it was anything else; and that it should be so regarded in the present passage seems to be the most natural and the most reasonable interpretation of the Roman satirist's intent. The reader should not conclude that Persius has presented here exclusively Stoic doctrine merely in order to have his brusque centurion reject it. Serious philosophy of any kind is subject to this barbarian's scorn. It should be observed, moreover, that neither Solon nor Arcesilas, who have been treated with comparable disdain a few verses earlier (79f.), was Stoic.

Thus by the use of a descriptive phrase combined with a relevant citation Persius seems to have introduced Epicurus allusively to his reader. This same technique of Alexandrian indirection can be discerned elsewhere in the Satires and can be recognized as characteristic. In 1.124, for example, Aristophanes is identified in the phrase *Eupolidem praegrandi cum sene*. In 4.1-3 Socrates is denoted as *barbatum . . . magistrum . . . sorbitio tollit quem dira cicutae* and Alcibiades is addressed as *magni pupille Pericli*. The third Satire furnishes several examples of this allusiveness besides the one under discussion. In lines 39-41 the tyrant Phalaris and the Syracusan Damocles are introduced descriptively without being named:

Anne magis Siculi gemuerunt aera iuveni,
et magis auratis pendens laquearibus ensis
purpureas subter cervices terruit. . . ?⁷

⁵ Cicero, *Fin.* 2.30.96; D.L. 10.22; *Vol. Herc.*² 1.128 (Usener, fr. 177).

⁶ Cf. Lucr. 1.150: *nullam rem e nilo gigni divinitus umquam*; 1.248: *haud igitur redit ad nilum res ulla*.

⁷ Cf. Horace, *Carm.* 3.1.17-19.

Similarly in lines 53f. the Stoic school is designated simply as

quaeque docet sapiens bracteis inlita Medis
porticus.

In lines 56f. the allusion to Pythagoras and Pythagoreanism is more recondite but still of the same general type:

tibi quae Samios diduxit littera ramos,
surgentem dextro monstravit limite callem.

Comparable to this is the implicit allusion to Midas in the phrase *auriculos asini* of 1.121.

These are a few outstanding examples of a distinctive feature of the satiric style of Persius. Another that deserves notice in a consideration of the passage under discussion is the poet's practice of incorporating Lucretian phrases into his own verse. In this his model Horace had pointed the way,⁸ though the satiric tone and content of Lucretius himself might have been reason enough.⁹ Lucretian influence upon Persius may be seen in 1.1 (*O curas hominum! O quantum est in rebus inane!*),¹⁰ 3.66 (*Discite, o miseri, et causas cognoscite rerum*), 6.3 (*veterum primordia vocum*), and 6.61 (*in decursu lampada*), and possibly in the thought of 2.24f. The use of Lucretian wording in 3.84 may well be deliberate, with the intent of making more distinct the implicit reference to Epicurus.

In summary, then, it is reasonable to conclude that in this passage (3.83f.) Persius presents the centurion, acme of Philistinism, as typical of one who rejects all ethereal philosophizing, however authoritative or however much it owes to a school of ethics which, in practice, would be most acceptable to him: since Epicurean behavior, to his way of viewing things, needs no philosophic apologist, he has only contempt for those misguided intellects which turn to pondering over the idle dreams of a senile invalid like Epicurus, capable of such balderdash as "Out of nothingness nothing, to nothing can nothing return!" This soldier is quite the opposite of those persons whom Seneca charges with being all too ready to

⁸ Cf. W. A. Merrill, "On the Influence of Lucretius on Horace," *Univ. of Calif. Pub. in Class. Phil.* 1 (1905) 111-129; C. Murley, "Lucretius and the History of Satire," *TAPhA* 70 (1939) 380-395, especially 391ff.

⁹ Cf. Murley, *op. cit.* (see note 8).

¹⁰ On this line, which the scholia assert to be a borrowing from Lucilius, cf. G. L. Hendrickson in *CPh* 23 (1928) 97-100; Murley, *op. cit.* (see note 8), 388.

attribute to the sponsorship of Epicurus their own lax ways of living:

Ille, quisquis desidiosum otium et gulae ac libidinis vices felicitatem vocat, bonum malae rei quaerit auctorem et, cum illo venit blando nomine inductus, sequitur voluptatem non quam audit, sed quam attulit, et vitia sua cum coepit putare similia praeceptis, indulget illis non timide, nec obscure luxuriatur sed iam inde aperto capite.¹¹

Rather he echoes the words which Seneca employs in another place, in a letter to Lucilius, when deploring the idle quibbling of certain philosophers:

O pueriles ineptias! In hoc supercilia subduximus? In hoc barbaram demisimus? Hoc est, quod tristes docemus et pallidi? ¹²

¹¹ *De Vita Beata* 13.2.

¹² *Epp. Mor.* 48.7.