

XXIV.—Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, Viewed as Epic

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A poem may be both didactic and epic, the latter term being far more explicit. The *De Rerum Natura* may be called a Miltonic epic. Superlative praise of it by many moderns and some ancients, and ancient grouping of Lucretius with epic poets by the *Dialogus de Oratoribus*, Quintilian, Antoninus, Fronto, suggest this. Homeric material, parallels, and idiom, and epic devices, support it. Lucretius himself seems so to regard his poem, which fits the epic criteria of (a) narrative with hero, (b) war, and (c) great design. A digression on the identification of *Graius homo* (1.66) is included.

Since Gifanius' literary genealogy in his *vita*,<sup>1</sup> Ennius-Lucretius-Vergil, some epic aspect of the *De Rerum Natura* has been familiar. Is this only a free, picturesque way of speaking, as when Will Durant<sup>2</sup> calls it a "noble epic," or Duff<sup>3</sup> says Lucretius' "unrivalled feat was to make Epicureanism epic" — something to be illustrated by reminiscences of Ennius in Lucretius and Vergil, of Lucretius in Vergil (and Aulus Gellius<sup>4</sup> puts this strongly), and so dismissed? Or is it a more substantial and inclusive fact? It is the purpose of this paper to attempt some orderly account of the evidence which may indicate that it was not excluded from the epic category in ancient times, and need not be by us.

## I

It is not a matter of two alternative classifications, didactic or epic. Homer was regarded as a teacher, *inter alia* of ethics (Hor. *Epist.* 1.2.1–31) and religion (Plato). Ennius even claimed that he revealed *rerum natura* (Lucr. 1.126). *Paradise Lost* and the Sixth *Aeneid* are surely didactic, epic though they be. In fact, Milton and Lucretius set out with a similarity of subject matter, though opposed in design, participating with one another by opposites, as Plato would say. One might paraphrase Milton and state Lucretius' purpose as "to deny eternal Providence<sup>5</sup> and impugn the ways

<sup>1</sup> Hubrech von Giffen ed. (Lugduni Batavorum, 1595). On p. 7 of the *vita*, Lucretius is frankly called an epic poet.

<sup>2</sup> *Story of Philosophy* (New York, 1926) 112.

<sup>3</sup> *A Literary History of Rome* (New York, 1927) 284.

<sup>4</sup> *Noct. Att.* 1.21.7.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. G. D. Hadzsits, *Lucretius and His Influence* (New York, 1935) 122 f.

of the gods to men" — as these were commonly then represented. Macaulay called the poem "the greatest didactic poem in any language." Sellar says, Lucretius "stands alone as the great contemplative poet of antiquity . . . in the union of poetical feeling with scientific passion."<sup>6</sup> Says Veitch,<sup>7</sup> the "impression of an incompatibility between the intellectual and the imaginative is shown to be groundless by many names in the course of abstract speculation . . . but there is no more complete type in history of the fusion of the two qualities than . . . Lucretius." Gamaliel Bradford (*Life of Darwin*, 54) calls this "passionate thinking." "Theoretical problems take hold on Lucretius like the ecstasies of love." Elsewhere (*op. cit.* 13) Veitch makes him unique among Romans "for the union of high speculative power, deep moral earnestness, and imagination that rises to the loftiest reaches of awe and grandeur."

Sublimity is the quality most often felt in Lucretius; as by Merivale,<sup>8</sup> Schanz,<sup>9</sup> Tenney Frank,<sup>10</sup> and by Ovid (*Amores* 1.15.23), Statius (*Silv.* 2.7.76), and Fronto (*Ad Verum* 1.1) among the ancients. Critics run to superlatives about him. Mewaldt:<sup>11</sup> "the greatest genius among Roman poets." Fowler:<sup>12</sup> "the noblest mind among all Roman thinkers." Symonds:<sup>13</sup> "the most perfect literary incarnation" of Roman character. Shotwell (*Introduction to the History of History*, 46): "the most marvellous performance in all antique literature." Andrew Lang:<sup>14</sup> "A certain largeness of touch and amplitude of manner mark him above all others that smote the Latin lyre."

What do these critics mean? Is there a literary *genre* more elevated than the epic? Or what is the inference as to his classification? If these and other such judgments are not to be repudiated, the simplest recourse is frankly to call him, with some revision of the concept, an epic poet.

As for the opinion of antiquity, in the *Dialogus de Oratoribus* (23), the writer says there are those who prefer Lucilius to Horace,

<sup>6</sup> *Roman Poets of the Republic*<sup>3</sup> (Oxford, 1905) 406 f.

<sup>7</sup> *Lucretius and the Atomic Theory* (Glasgow, 1875) 9.

<sup>8</sup> *History of Rome*, 2.353.

<sup>9</sup> *Gesch. der Röm. Litt.* (Munich, 1898) 1.172.

<sup>10</sup> *Vergil* (New York, 1922) 61.

<sup>11</sup> In *RE*, s.v. "Lucretius," 1682.

<sup>12</sup> *Religious Experience of the Roman People* (London, 1911) 358.

<sup>13</sup> *Fortnightly Review*, 23.44.

<sup>14</sup> *Letters on Literature*, 108.

Lucretius to Vergil. Lucilius and Horace being satirists, the implication is that Lucretius and Vergil also are a pair in the same literary category with each other. Quintilian (1.4.4) couples Vergil and Lucretius; and later (12.11.27) speaks of Lucretius and Macer as having been improved upon by Vergil. The Macer named may be Aemilius Macer, as in 10.1.36; and Peterson, in his edition of Quintilian, so indicates. On such an identification, the *Georgics* are meant, and the three considered as didactic. But the context could as well suggest the Macer addressed by Ovid (*Ex Ponto* 2.10.2), who wrote an epic on the Trojan War. But in 10.1.85–88, Quintilian names as epic poets: Homer, Vergil, Macer, Lucretius, Varro Atacinus, and Ennius in that order. The implication of this passage as to which Macer is meant in 12.11.27 would offset that of the Aemilius Macer reference in 10.1.36. It is more probable that Lucretius would be associated with an epic poet than with a writer on birds, snakes, and medicinal plants.

Antoninus asks Fronto (*Ad Anton.* 2.1, 104 Nab., 300 Haines) for various authors to read, and especially "for the genus of poets who could elevate and exhilarate" him, as "Lucretius or Ennius." Fronto (*De fer. Als.* 3, 224 Nab., 2.4 Haines) refers to Antoninus being "soothed by Lucretius or fired by Ennius." Elsewhere (*Ep. ad M. Caes.* 4.3.2, 62 Nab., 4 Haines) Fronto calls Lucretius an imitator of Ennius, and again (*De eloq.* 3.2, 149 Nab., 2.74 Haines) associated Ennius and Lucretius with Accius.

Of the moderns, Santayana and T. S. Eliot<sup>15</sup> couple Lucretius and Dante. Many parallels have been seen in Milton. A recent index of Milton lists thirteen in the *Paradise Lost* alone.<sup>16</sup> They are in nine of the twelve books and from every book of Lucretius.

Poets other than epic, of course, could and did quote or paraphrase Homer. But when the form and tone of the original are preserved, it is more significant; as in Lucretius' imitation of the *Odyssey* in the description of the abode of the gods (3.19–22 on *Od.* 6.42–45), or of the anthropomorphic candelabra in 2.24–6 from *Od.* 7.100–102. His choice of illustrations from Greek epic material — the sacrifice of Iphigenia, Paris' passion setting the conflagration of war and of the walls of Troy (1.473–7) — was occasioned rather by literary propriety than by the lack of Roman material. Apol-

<sup>15</sup> "Poetry and Propaganda," *Bookman*, Feb. 1930, 559.

<sup>16</sup> Frank Allen Patterson, *An Index to the Columbia Edition of John Milton* (New York, 1940).

Ionius of Rhodes, *Arg.* 1.1267 ff. has been compared to 2.355 ff.; *Ilias Latina* 857, to 2.681.

Even more impressive is the incorporation of intimate Homeric idiom. The *κέϊτο μέγας μεγαλωστί* of *Il.* 16.776 and *Od.* 24.40 appears in 1.741, *magni magno cecidere ibi casu*. The lions in 4.713 *meminere fugai*, in the idiom of *Il.* 11.71 and 16.771. *Spirantes . . . bellum* (5.392) is Homer's *μένα πνέοντες* (*Il.* 2.536 etc.). *Equis* (5.401) in the meaning of chariot follows that Homeric meaning of *ἵπποι*. The description of the horse in 5.1074 f. suggests *Il.* 6.511. The Homeric metaphor, "a web of words," appears as *pertexere dictis* in 1.418 and 6.42. The "golden chain" of *Od.* 8.19 is in 2.1154.<sup>17</sup>

Epic devices are present. The metaphor being more sophisticated than the simile, Lucretius, coming later, uses it more than Homer; and this is elaborately and effectively recognized in the Leonard-Smith edition. But there are Homeric similes as well. Comparisons to rivers, as in 1.280-7, follow *Il.* 4.452, 5.87, 11.492; cf. *Aen.* 12.523. I stress those in which, as in Homer, the extraneous matter is introduced first (1.936-47, 2.55-8, 3.832-42), especially those containing also parallel tags (1.404-9 *quietes-latebras*; 1.936-47 *taetra-tristior, mellis dulci-dulci melle, contingunt-contingere*). There are run-over words in the Homeric manner, as initial *nequiquam* (4.1110, 1188; 5.388), tmesis, and archaisms. "The repetitions become, as artistry, to the story of Nature what the Homeric become in the *Odyssey*, namely, moments of epic recall" (Leonard-Smith ed., 40). There are storms (as 1.278-89) and dreams (as 1.123-6), as in epics; and, though the mythology is repudiated, a clever, rationalized descent to the underworld in the Tantalus-Tityus-Sisyphus-Danaid passage late in the third book. Immediately following come: Ennian phrases, honor for both practical and literary inventors as in *Aen.* 6.663, and an application to Ancus (1026) of the line on Patroclus (*Il.* 21.107) "who was a much better man than you."

We looked above at modern and ancient estimates of Lucretius implying epic status, his being named with epic poets, parallels with such and techniques in common. How does he class himself? Invocations were reserved for the more elevated types of poetry. His is more imposing than those of Homer and Vergil. It is at the beginning of a work that the author is most conscious of the need

<sup>17</sup> See index of Leonard-Smith ed., s.v. "Homer," for other parallels.

and sources of aid, divine or human. Then especially he is apt to make acknowledgments to his models. For his thought, Lucretius at once looks to Epicurus (but on this identification of *Gratius homo* something is said below). The first person named who could be his literary model, the first person named at all other than Memmius and mythological personnel, is Ennius. Him the poet, although concerned with his eschatology, introduces with high tribute to his *poetical* standing:

qui primus amoeno  
detulit ex Helicone perenni fronde coronam,  
per gentis Italas hominum quae clara clueret (1.118 ff.).

And the second name he gives us, immediately, is Homer. Thereupon, after a brief statement of his design, he speaks of the difficulty of his *poetical* composition and his lucubrations on diction and metric.

After getting into his theme, and disposing of Heraclitus — first as a bad stylist — he pays lyric tribute to the man who was his actual model in this kind of verse; and it is mainly on the strength of Empedocles' poetic majesty that Lucretius assigns him the divinity which he had himself claimed, for Lucretius refutes his science. In all consistency, as far as this paper makes out a case, the Greek poet might be in the same category — with which his metre, grand style as seen in the fragments, and lofty theme are consistent.

Toward the beginning of the sixth book (93), when on the home-stretch as his figure runs, Lucretius (like Empedocles before him) invokes the muse of epic poetry, Calliope, "refreshment of men, of gods the delight." Whether or not he was influenced by Cicero's translation of the *Phaenomena* of Aratus,<sup>18</sup> he might well have addressed Urania instead, had he thought of his poem as merely didactic. Calliope, to be sure, is introduced with some freedom in connection with forms of elevated poetry other than epic.

## II

So far, we have been concerned largely with *testimonia* and resemblances to epics in certain details. Let us consider more broadly the criteria of this literary form. It is difficult strictly to delimit certain departments of literature. To distinguish explicitly between

<sup>18</sup> See John W. Spaeth, Jr., "Cicero, Model for Lucretius?" *CJ* 42 (1946-47) 105 f.

the novel and other prose narratives would not be easy. Though the manner of presentation readily classifies spoken drama, how do Plato's dialogues differ from closet drama? The term "tragedy" is applied alike to plots, as that of *Prometheus Bound*, with no peripety; to the *Oedipus Rex* type with reversal from happiness to unhappiness; and to the *Philoctetes* and *Alcestis* with a comedy order of peripety.

If a definition of epic poetry should be attempted, I suggest the following, largely a *cento* from Aristotle's *Poetics*. Classical epic is a representation of the serious in elevated style, in a narrative poem without time-limits, in dactylic hexameter, involving a hero, but more fundamentally a certain achievement, and martial or comparable exploits. (Naevius used a different metre in the *Bellum Punicum*; but I am aiming at the normal usage.)

Since epics are thought of as narrative poems, this is the most difficult of the several criteria for the *De Rerum Natura*. Something, however, can be said even here. Since *natura* in the title, like *phósis* (so Myres, *Political Ideas of the Greeks*, 385-6) means rather evolution than fixed character, there is the narrative of the coming into being of the universe from atoms and void, the transition from atoms to *res*, the rise of some compounds upon the dissolution of others, the entrance of man on the scene with an account of his soul and psychology, the development of society — communication through the birth of language, industry through fire, religion, social and political institutions. This is a cosmic narrative. Book VI must be regarded as an epilogue, not specifically included in the plan announced in 1.127-35 and recapitulated in more detail in 5.55-81. The last word of Book V is *cacumen*; it is difficult to mount from that, but the poet reflects in some detail on the world which he has made.

Before presenting Epicurus in the rôle of hero, I must digress. For Edelstein<sup>19</sup> has argued that Lucretius, in 1.66, was referring to the pre-Socratics rather than to Epicurus. Without disputing the point other than sketchily here, I should say that Edelstein's statements about previous challenging of the gods (remarked also by Duff<sup>20</sup> and Leonard-Smith<sup>21</sup>) are indisputable and Lucretius must have known of earlier sceptics. But (a) devotees are prone to

<sup>19</sup> "*Primum Graius homo*," *TAPhA* 71 (1940) 78-90.

<sup>20</sup> *Op. cit.* (above, note 3) 284.

<sup>21</sup> Leonard-Smith ed., *ad loc.*

claim more originality for the tenets of their masters than others would concede, even Democritus receiving here cordial respect rather than credit for what Epicurus had taken over from him; (b) Lucretius felt that, despite Xenophanes' satire, Anaxagoras' rationalism, Euripides' criticisms, no predecessor had thoroughly and effectively disposed of the old beliefs; and (c) *primus* (67) can indicate preeminence as well as chronological priority.

There had been Plato and many another in the ethical field before; yet Epicurus, in 3.2, is called *primus* there, too. Athens, in producing Epicurus, is said to have been the first (6.4) to give the solaces of life, whereas the world had known other comforters. Lucretius calls Epicureanism recent (5.335-7), and claims to be *primus cum primis* in translating it into Latin, disregarding Amafinius, Rabirius and the like.

Evidence, such as his own dramatic account of his conversion in 3.28-30, suggests a comparatively sudden interest in Epicureanism; and late-learners, says Cicero (*Fam.* 9.20) — referring, as a matter of fact, to his own alleged conversion to this sect — are immoderate. "He believed himself saved, and Epicurus his savior," says Leonard (ed., 29). DeWitt writes,<sup>22</sup> "Epicureanism was the only evangelical philosophy of the time. The door of admission was the experience of conversion." What men other than Epicurus had thought or done before his conversion was apt to be slighted by Lucretius. The poet who called his teacher a god (5.8) would class the pre-Socratics with those stars extinguished by the rising sun, Epicurus (3.1044).

Finally, the rhythm of the poem is against this being a tribute to others than Epicurus, the rhythm whereby each book but II and IV begins with or includes a tribute to him (1.66?, 3.1-13 and 1042-4, 5.8-12, 6.4). And the tribute to philosophers in 2.7-8 amounts to the same, since *sapientes* there are Epicureans to him. Since the opening of IV, repeated from 1.926-50, was hardly meant to stand, he may have meant to begin IV also with such a tribute. The fact that Epicurus is named only in the obituary notice in 3.1042 removes any significance from his not being named in 1.66.

To come back to the cosmic narrative, Epicurus as hero is obviously not involved as an agency for achieving the evolution of world and society, but as the one who really understood it and

<sup>22</sup> "Vergil and Epicureanism," *CW* 25 (1931-32) 91. Cf. G. F. Else, "*Moenia Mundi*," *CW* 37.136 f.

interpreted it to men. If we disregard the complication of the Trinity, Christ in *Paradise Lost* is not so much the prime cause in the divine plan as the means of bringing salvation directly to man. Such a religious-ethical function is performed by Epicurus, in Lucretius' view. He is prominent, by implication at least, in the polemics of the first book against rival philosophers. And the work is, in terms of him, tied together through five or six well-spaced tributes to him, as indicated above. The hero of the *Iliad* really figures in fewer than half of the twenty-four books. But, in both poems, the main character is in the background of the reader's thought throughout.

Milton and Lucretius intended to soar in no middle flight. And, when Epicurus is described as passing far beyond the flaming ramparts of the world, traversing all infinity in mind and soul — like Satan's flight in *Paradise Lost* — this, as epic material, dwarfs the description of golden-sandalled Mercury flying to Carthage. DeWitt<sup>23</sup> is doubtless right in saying that Lucretius missed Epicurus' sober psychological meaning of ἐπιβολὴ τῆς διανοίας in his *animi iactus liber* of 2.1047; and so perhaps in this passage (1.72–7), with its projection of the soul like that of Omar through the invisible, some letter of that after-life to spell. Cicero uses the same figure in *De Finibus*, 2.31.102; but compare *De Natura Deorum*, 1.20.54. We are here concerned, however, not with the poet's accuracy in interpreting his teacher's writings, but with his own poetic concepts.

In this whole paper, I have been purposely provocative in saying boldly what others have in part implied and urging unusual points of view. So, while I have made out a fair case, I hope, for a personal hero, in a more profound and pervasive way, *Natura Gubernans* could be represented as the hero, personalized as she is by the poet. The importance of this is out of proportion to the space I give it; the reader can readily recall passages to illustrate this obvious concept.

### III

After the narrative with its hero, a second criterion is represented by the *arma virumque* formula. The martial element is not far to seek here, for the battle is drawn. Heraclitus (1.638), in the enemy's ranks, *init . . . dux proelia primus. Terrifici vates,*

<sup>23</sup> "Epicurus, Περὶ Φαντασίας," *TAPhA* 70 (1939) 414–27. Cf. Clyde Murley, "The Religion of the Ancient Atomists," *Classical Bulletin*, 23 (1946–47) 47.



many an embattled Amphiarus, may induce Memmius to desert to their ranks (*desciscere*, 1.103). The reader is challenged by Lucretius to surrender (*dede manus*) or gird himself against him (2.1043). Opposing champions are mighty and mightily fallen (2.741).

A sally from the gates (Caesar's *eruptio omnibus portis*) is to be made on the evils of life (6.32). Figuratively, yes; but actual legions, auxiliaries, navies cannot put to flight your superstitions, fears, and cares (2.40-9). These and our vices Epicurus expelled *dictis, non armis* (5.50). Though we hear of the gory details of battles (3.642-56), we view from a distance war (2.5 f.) and the maneuvers of war (2.323-32). There is civil war (3.70), a grim distraction from the composition of the poem (1.41 f.); engines of war (6.329) appear, and the *caeli lorica* (6.954).

But even within the fabric of Lucretius' account of Epicureanism there is war. The atoms constantly clash in strife (2.573 f.). Says Martha,<sup>24</sup> "Lucretius interests himself in his atoms as Homer in his heroes. He rejoices at their success; he sorrows at their defeats." The notes in the sunbeam are seen

velut aeterno certamine proelia pugnas  
edere turmatim certantia nec dare pausam (2.118 f.).

*Pausam* is reminiscent of οὐ γὰρ πανσῶλή γε μετέσσειται in *Iliad* 2.386, or of Ennius' *Annales* (fr. 344): expectans . . . quae denique pausa pugnandi fieret. Small particles *inter se mortales mutua vivunt* (2.76). Each thing is *morte adiuta aliena* (1.264). Adamantine rocks stand *prima acie* (2.447 f.). The larger forces of the universe are roused to vain but ruthless war (5.381).

The whole vocabulary of Lucretius is, for a proponent of a mechanistic system, notably vitalistic. The invocation to Venus sets the concept of a sexual urge in the foreground. Things are to be born, reach their growth, and die. The Magna Mater is given many lines in the second book. Nature provides, *reservans semina rebus* (1.614). *Genitalia corpora* have their *concilia*, which *invida natura videndi* (1.321) hides from us. The alleged *principia* of other schools are dubbed mortal.

Nam quid in oppressu valido durabit eorum,  
Ut mortem effugiat leti sub dentibus ipsis? (1.851 f.)

<sup>24</sup> *Le poème de Lucrèce*<sup>6</sup> (Paris, 1905) 263.

Not only does Lucretius carry on the *clinamen* theory from his master, to which they attach the doctrine of the freedom of the will — half implying that the atoms swerve of their own choice; but all the supposedly dead things are personalized and envisaged.

The Italians of the Renaissance<sup>25</sup> insisted on war as an ingredient of epic. Milton, who knew this, says (*PL* 9.27–9) he is “not sedulous by nature to indite wars, hitherto the only argument heroic deemed,” regarding his own (14 f.) “not less, but more heroic than the wrath of stern Achilles.” The whole passage (13–41) is significant in terms of this paper.

#### IV

We come to a third, and more fundamental, criterion of the epic, Vergil's *tantae molis erat*. The exploits of the hero need not be martial. The *res gestae* of the *Odyssey* show a hero of many mental devices, and of great endurance. Adventures and long-deferred battles in the *Aeneid* are incidental to a main purpose and achievement. Considered as an epic, the *De Rerum Natura* anticipates Milton, in that the great task is not merely of a person, not merely of a state even, but ethical and universal. Indeed, the scope of Lucretius is greater than that of Milton, whose world is geocentric and anthropocentric where the Roman poet's is altogether infinite. Veitch<sup>26</sup> stresses concepts of spaciousness in Lucretius. Whether the goal be geographical, political, ethical, or religious; return to Ithaca, Rome founded, freedom from fear and a straight course set to the *summum bonum* (6.24–6), or paradise regained — the design is the great thing. In dimension and in august design, the *De Rerum Natura* qualifies under this third criterion. Odysseus reached Ithaca; Aeneas founded Rome. The achievement of the great task in Lucretius and Milton could not be final, however, in the sense of salvation experienced by all men, but rather in the elaboration of a scheme by which salvation was made available to them.

#### V

This has been called a didactic poem. Socrates had some trouble with Gorgias, in distinguishing rhetoric from other arts which per-

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Vernon Hall, *Renaissance Literary Criticism* (New York, 1945) 49; also 113, 192.

<sup>26</sup> *Op. cit.* (above, note 7) 16.

suade in that of which they are the arts. Horace (*Epist.* 2.1.126–33) recommends poets generally as teachers. For instance, the *Ars Amatoria* is quite specifically didactic of seduction. A mnemonic jingle for teaching the length of the months or something in Latin grammar is at least didactic verse; and Horace includes (135 f.) verses no more dignified.

Where Horace says that all poets are didactic, Ernout<sup>27</sup> is inclined to think that, properly speaking, only Lucretius is fully so. The category, *qua* category, seems to disappear in either case. The didacticism of Vergil's *Georgics*, for Ernout (and he would have disdained to compare our poet with those of the pedestrian muse), is quite different from that of Lucretius. What he describes with finesse at some length, DeWitt calls succinctly "the advent of the preacher."<sup>28</sup>

Now the term "epic," without all this qualification, places the *De Rerum Natura* much more effectively. One who had never read it, told that it was such, would know the relative elevation of the theme, the general tone of treatment, the approximate length, and the meter. If told only that it was didactic, he would know none of these things.

<sup>27</sup> Ernout-Robin, Lucrèce, *De rerum natura* (Paris, 1925) 1.xiii–xvi.

<sup>28</sup> "Notes on the History of Epicureanism," *TAPhA* 63 (1932) 167.