VERGIL AND LUCRETIUS

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‘I sang of pastures, fields, and captains’¹, says Vergil’s epitaph. The tradition, which we have no reason to doubt, is that Vergil wrote it himself. It seems to close the canon of his works. If he wrote anything else than the *Eclogues*, *Georgics*, and the *Aeneid* he does not wish to acknowledge it. There is a suggestion, too, of a completed design. The comment of Donatus is preserved by Servius. ‘In composing his poems Vergil followed the historical order; for the life of shepherds in the mountains came first, next the devotion to agriculture, and finally the burden of war’². It is notable that the poet does not describe his works in literary but in social terms. He does not say that he had written pastorals, agricultural-didactic, and epic, nor that he had imitated Theocritus, Hesiod, and Homer, but that his subjects were pastures, fields, and captains.

Her poets were the best philosophers of pagan Rome, and there is nothing more natural than that the poet on whom the mantle of Lucretius fell should devote his artistic life to a meditation on the destiny of man. In them more profoundly than in Varro or Cicero is reflected the political philosophy of Athens as viewed in the light of Roman experience. A succession of Athenian philosophers, of whom Epicurus is one, had pondered on the ambiguous destiny which had brought man from the peace of primitive life to the veiled or open warfare of civilization. The position of Epicurus in this succession of political thinkers is fundamental to the understanding of the history of his school. Without this background the relation of Vergil to Lucretius, which turns on their attitude to Epicureanism, is unintelligible.

In the *Republic* (II, 369ff) Plato makes Socrates paint in idyllic terms a primitive form of the State in which men live in peace and health to old age and bequeath the same life to their children. In face of criticism Socrates insists that in his opinion this is the true and wholesome form of the State. But this primitive State is dismissed as a city of pigs. Socrates is urged to go on to the description of the luxurious State, and consents to do so because in the luxurious State there will be a better chance to detect the origin of justice and injustice. One is left with the feeling that Socrates’ declared preference for the simpler State has been rather brushed aside than adequately considered.

That Plato himself felt the inadequacy of his treatment is proved by the *Laws*. There (III, 676ff) the fuller discussion comes. The stages through which human society passes are examined at great length, but the problem comes no nearer its solution. With a nostalgic glance at the virtues of primitive society Plato again passes on to discuss the sophisticated State. But the backward glance is filled with poignant regret. ‘If the men of old were not so well furnished with other arts, neither were they so well equipped for war. Such war, I mean, as now rages by land and sea, yea, and internally in the individual cities, under the names of actions at law and party strife, wherein men scheme by word and deed to injure one another. Yes, they were simpler, those men of old, but more manly, more virtuous in act, more just in every way.’

¹ *Cecini pasca*, *rura*, *duces*.
When Aristotle resumes this theme he does so in terms which go far to prepare the Epicurean solution. Aristotle's great contribution is his comparison of friendship, the virtue of the simpler stage of society, with justice, the virtue of the developed State. 'Friendship appears to be the bond which holds cities together. Lawgivers set more store by it than they do by justice. When men are friends there is no need of justice.' Friendship is also rooted in nature. In the animal world Aristotle detected a gradual progress in friendship proportioned to the practical wisdom possessed by each species. Friendship (philia) is, as it were, the altruistic aspect of practical wisdom (phronesis) and is at its highest in men. It precedes political society, for without it no society at all would exist. Such were the Aristotelian roots of the doctrine of friendship which was to flower in the Garden of Epicurus.

Dicaearchus also added refinements to the discussion of primitive versus sophisticated value which Epicureanism was glad to absorb. He explicitly undertook to divest the Golden Age of its mythical trappings and restore it to history. He taught that 'the earth in her prime spontaneously generated for mortals smiling crops and lusty vines, sweet fruits and gladsome pastures, which now can scarcely be made to grow by our toil.' Lucretius repeats this (II 1166ff). Dicaearchus mournfully observes that 'more men perish now by war and civil war than perished in the old days by flood, plague, blight, or the ravages of wild beasts.' Lucretius has this too (V 988ff). With Dicaearchus, too, blessedness is added to friendship as a characteristic of pre-political society. These opinions were current in the Athens of Epicurus. His contemporary Philochorus traced the history of Athens itself from the pastoral stage, when the future city of Solon and Cleisthenes slumbered in the seed of a few villages, down to his own day, when the public services were parcelled out among the twelve thousand richest citizens. We have no indication whether Philochorus looked upon this long history with pride or with misgiving. But we do know that Epicurus despised the political history of Greece, poured scorn on its lawgivers and statesmen, advised his followers to withdraw from political life, exalted friendship over justice, and sought his image of the divine in the survivals in the popular mind of the time when, as Dicaearchus put it, 'men were closer to the gods'. In short, Epicurus took the philosophers' eulogies of the simple life at their face value. He rejected Aristotle's paradox that man is by nature a political animal and founded a movement which, if it could have become truly universal, would have put the polis out of action. As Colotes naively wrote to the first Ptolemy: 'We teach how a man may best keep and preserve the end of nature, and how he may from the very beginning avoid by the exercise of his own free will the assumption of offices of magistracy and government over the people.'

That the spread of this movement, which, though not revolutionary, was anarchistic, was at certain times and places felt by those in power to be a threat, is beyond question. Such a moment was that in Italy when the Republic was staggering to its fall. In the belief that Epicureanism was promoting political despair Cicero, with extraordinary talent, created a philosophical literature in prose to combat it. With genius Lucretius transmuted the Epicurean system into

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3 Nic. Eth. 1141, 1155; Pol. 1280; Gen. An. 735 with the comment of Burnet, Ethica of Aristotle, pp. 344-5.
4 Porph., De Abstinentia IV, 2; Cic., De off. II, 5, 16; Varro, Res Rer. II, 1, 3.
a passionate poem which remains one of the masterpieces of world literature. In form the poem is a private preaching poured by the poet into the ear of his friend, the praetor Memmius. It rejects all the values of political society and urges the ethic of friendship. The poet is indifferent to the history of Rome and the mission of Rome. He offers purity of heart, peace of mind, simplicity of life, and the vision of the blessed immortals in exchange for military glory, political power, wealth, and civilized refinements. Both Horace and Vergil, spokesmen of their age, were swept off their feet by the poem. Both in the end rejected its teaching. Horace publicly proclaimed his escape from what he calls 'the crazy wisdom.' The more complex and profound reaction of Vergil we are now to examine.

It is certain that Vergil was in youth a convert to Epicureanism. He withdrew from Rome to the fellowship of the Garden at Naples, and he either wrote, or, as it is now the fashion to believe, later writers, desiring to supply his missing juvenilia, wrote for him, a body of poems revealing his long association with the Garden. But it is also certain that every work admitted by Vergil to his canon bears the hallmark of his rejection of the Epicurean movement. Vergil's allegiance is to the city, to government, to politics, to war, if need be. But he retains this much from his sojourn in the Garden, that the values which he entrusts to the protection of the fasces and the sword are those simple values the advocacy of which in the De Rerum Natura had secured his youthful allegiance. Like all sensible men Vergil intends to make the best of both worlds. Si canimus silvas, silvae sint consule dignae.

The debt of Vergil to Lucretius for his pastoral inspiration has been too little noted. We hear almost exclusively of Theocritus in this connection. But the silvestris musa of Eclogue I and the agrestis musa of VI are both from the fifth book of De Rerum Natura. These echoes proclaim a debt to Lucretius. But Vergil uses the same means to indicate his divergence. It is as if he insisted on his departure from the Epicurean point of view. For Lucretius, Epicurus, the philosopher, was god on earth: Deus ille fuit, deus, incolute Memmi. But for the followers of the Platonic tradition, and noticeably Cicero, whose influence on Vergil is profound, it was the statesman whose function came nearest to the divine. The salvation of society would come when the philosopher was king, not when he led his followers into the Garden. So in Eclogue V Vergil's shepherd cries of Daphnis-Caesar deus, deus ille, Menalca. The echo is unmistakable and deliberate. The same claim of divinity had been made for Augustus in Eclogue I: O Meliboeae, deus nobis baec otia fecit. Vergil has often in mind the magical lines of Lucretius about the shepherds' pipe

avia per nemora ac silvas salutisque reperta,
per loca pastorum deserta atque otia dia.

These otia dia in the Lucretian passage belong to primitive men, but Vergil insists that as things are even the shepherds' joys depend on that praesens deus, the statesman. The political content of Vergil's pastorals is a notable and original feature. It marks a breach with the Garden which Vergil is anxious to avow.

In the Georgics we find the same double motive in the frequent allusions to

Lucretius. They proclaim Vergil's love for his great predecessor as well as his
departure from his opinions. Vergil seems to have felt two huge defects in the
Lucretian conception of the relation between man and nature. In spite of
brilliant insights into the order of development of the arts the Lucretian account
is flawed by the too ready belief that every technical advance spells a moral and
social decline. The discovery of metals promoted agriculture, but was speedily
diverted to war. The invention of the art of navigation, a needless servant of
luxury, drowns men by the shipload. It is even suggested that men could get
along very well without bread and wine provided their hearts were pure. This
pessimistic view of technical progress is supported by the terms in which
Lucretius denies Providence. Only a little of the earth is cultivable, that little
demands back-breaking labour, and what is thus produced is at the mercy of
heat, cold, wind, rain, and the ravages of wild beasts. But luckily Nature has
made man hard and he can subsist on a hard diet.

All this line of argument Vergil turns against Lucretius in poetry of saner
emotion, richer observation, and keener insight. Lucretius had spoken of laws
of nature, foedera naturae; of human exertion, vis humana, as necessary to bend
those laws to human need; of the human race itself as a durum genus. These
phrases Vergil adopts as part of his customary acknowledgment of his debt to
the thought of his great predecessor. But he gives them all an optimistic
setting. Lucretius, by calling mankind a durum genus, meant that it could put
up with the privations of primitive life. In Vergil's mouth the phrase means
that man can face the toil which will make the desert blossom like the rose.
This is the starting-point for a reassessment of man's place in nature. The
niggardliness of nature is reinterpreted as a proof of providential care. It is the
father Jove himself who surrounds man with difficulties in order to force him
to develop his potentialities. For this doctrine of the moral, intellectual, and
social value of labour Vergil is indebted to Hesiod. But he takes the wisdom
of the old Boeotian farmer and restates it in terms which make it an adequate
answer to the defeatism of Lucretius; and, if the theological form in which he
cast his argument is not acceptable, yet the perception that it is in his struggle
with nature that man makes himself has never been more brilliantly expressed.
The whole relation of man to nature is set in a new light. The Lucretian
landscape, which is generally the scene of the operations of unaided nature
daedala tera, daedala rerum natura), is superseded by the Vergilian, from
which the spectacle of man's triumphant activity is rarely absent.

We may still, perhaps, ask why Vergil is not content to sing his own theme
without the perpetual reminder of the rejected values of the older poet. It is
because the appeal of Lucretius was so great and because the issues at stake
were so overwhelming. To the modern world with its renewed interest in
atomism Lucretius has appeared as a new and revolutionary voice, but in the
actual conditions of the collapse of the Republic and the struggle to achieve the
Augustan reconstruction Epicureanism was defeatist and reactionary, a summons
to abandon rather than to remake the world. Tennyson was not wrong in his
famous phrase about the sadness of Vergil at the doubtful doom of humankind.
Civilization did seem to hang in the balance, but for Vergil the solution was to

6 de Rerum Natura V 1286-91, 1000-6, 14-21, 195-234, 925-44.
7 Cf. de Rerum Natura I 586, V 207 and 925-6 with Georgics I 80, 198, 63.
try again to build the city, not to follow Lucretius back to the oitia dia of the
shepherds. Hence, even in his pastorals, Vergil begins to exalt the city of Rome
as something above the wisdom of shepherds and as the fountain of liberty;
even in his pastorals he reveals that he already has in mind to sing of kings and
battles. For he knows that the values of the countryside can retain their place
only in a mature political civilization, in a world which is prosperous and
plentiful because it is governed and policed. Epicurean anarchy was the dream
only of his youth.
Inevitably, then, an epic must be the culmination of his work and the hero of
his epic must be the founder of a city. It was good enough for Homer, the
singer of the vanished glories of a disintegrating world, to celebrate the exploits
of sakers of cities. But Vergil was the prophet of a new world to be built out
of the toil of the masses, the ingenuity of the gifted, the guidance of the states-
man. Labor omnia vicit improbus, he declares, and he never forgets it, nor is he
thinking only of the plough. In his superb praise of Italy he does not forget the
human cost of constructing her hill-perched towns:

Adde tot egregias urbes, operumque laborem,
tot congesta manu praeeruptis oppida saxis. (Georg. II, 155-6)

When Dances offers submission to Aeneas the climax of his offer touches the
same point:

quin et fatales murorum arrollere moles,
saxaque subvectare umeris Troiana iuvabir. (Aen. XI, 130-1)

And when Aeneas announces his generous terms of a settlement to Latinus he
abjures all idea of exacting such tribute from the Latins. The Trojans will build
their town themselves:

mihi moenia Teucri
constituent. (Aen. XII, 193-4)

As for the ingenuity of the gifted, he gives them a special place in heaven:

inventas aut qui vitam excoluere per artes,
quique sui memores alios fecere merendo. (Aen. VI, 663-4)

And these attitudes to physical toil and inventive genius are radical departures
from Epicureanism, just as much as is the dependence on the statesman for
salvation:

Di Patrii, Indigites, et Romule Vestaque mater,
quae Tuscum Tiberim et Romana Palatia servas,
hunc saltem everso iuvenem succurrere saeclo
ne prohibete. (Georg. I, 498-501)

But the most radical breach with the philosophy of the Garden was still to be
made. Lucretius had learned from Epicurus that all that was needed to save the
world was a change of heart. 'Friendship goes dancing round the world bidding
us all awake and join the praises of the blessed life.' Out of this conviction
Lucretius had written the invocation to Venus which introduces his poem.

8 Eclogues I 20-28; VI 3.
Venus is the mother of the Aeneadae, and all that is needful in order that Romans should live at peace is that Venus, when the eternal wound of love brings Mars to her arms, should plead with him the cause of peace. Seduced by this vision in his youth Vergil soon came to think otherwise. Peace was still the goal, but the only path to it was world dominion:

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tu \ regere \ imperio \ populos, \ Romane, \ memento —
hae \ tibi \ erunt \ artes — \ pacique \ imponere \ morem,
parcere subjectis \ et \ debellare \ superbos. \ (Aen. \ VI, \ 851-3)
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Again Vergil is not content to advocate his new creed without controverting the seductive pacifism of Lucretius. His hero is not one of the sons of Venus but the son and under the special protection of the mother who for Lucretius is the divine embodiment of peace. For what role then, does Vergil cast her? He sends her to Vulcan to beg a suit of armour for her son, and lest we should not at this moment remember the Venus who pleaded with Mars for peace, Vergil reminds us of her by his usual device of quotation. The eternal wound of love (\textit{aeterno devictus vulnere amoris}, \textit{De Rer. Nat.} \ I 34) subdues the Mars of Lucretius to a mood of peace. The same eternal wound (\textit{tum pater aeterno fatur devictus amore}, \textit{Aen.} VIII 394) makes the Vulcan of Vergil consent to forge the arms which will speed Aeneas to victory in his wars.

In thus reversing the role of the Goddess of Love does not Vergil seem guilty of an outrage, a desecration, a blasphemy? Montaigne, when he brought the two passages together, trembled as to how Vergil would sustain the comparison. Nor should I wish to contend (far from it) that in his anxiety to reject the folly of Epicureanism the poet of the Augustan reconstruction committed no follies of his own. Nevertheless even here Vergil had his reasons. His realism was a more costing and a more fruitful attitude than the idealism of Lucretius. When his Aeneas examines his shield he finds foreshadowed upon it the unique history of his country, the history of mankind. When he hoists it upon his shoulder he consecrates himself to active struggle for a destiny he only dimly understands:

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\text{Talia per clipeum Vulcani, dona parentis,}
miratur, rerumque ignarus imagine gaudet,
attollens umero famamque et fata nepotum. \ (Aen. \ VIII, \ 729-31)
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The \textit{De Rerum Natura} is the greatest philosophical poem of the ancient world. The \textit{Aeneid} is the greatest poem.
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