

## LUCRETIUS AND MEMMIUS

We all know the uncertainties that beset us when we try to extract a biography of Lucretius from the scanty testimonies that survive. We need not, however, as some commentators do, add to these uncertainties by gratuitously labelling the poem as a notably impersonal work of art. On the all important points Lucretius gives us the essential information. He tells us that he wrote the poem in order to convert his friend Memmius to Epicureanism — a major biographical fact, unless we decide to brush it aside. Necessarily, then, he tells us also of his own relation to his master Epicurus. What could be more important? In the third place he tells us why he wrote in verse. How much more do we want to know? He reveals himself very fully to us as disciple, as artist, and as friend. Of course it would be nice to know whether he ever stole apples when he was young, whether he was an only child, whether he hated his father, who taught him Greek, and how old he was when he first heard of Epicurus. But does it matter very much that we don't?

The discipleship of Lucretius, the nature of his devotion to his master, is one of the major topics of the poem. To the exposition of this theme he allots four set eulogies, which, as we should expect from an artist so economical in the disposition of his material, supplement rather than repeat one another. Taken together they picture a state of mind which I am unable to match elsewhere from pagan classical antiquity. Where else can we find, set forth with such intellectual and emotional fulness, a profession of faith in the

words of a long dead teacher? I have room to quote only one of the four eulogies and choose the second. It should rank as the *locus classicus* for the expression of the mood of discipleship. "You, who, when all was darkness, did lift up your bright torch, and, first of mankind, bring into light the true blessings of life, it is you I follow, O glory of the Greek race. In the deep prints your feet have made I now firmly plant my own, not in the ambition to vie with you can the swallow sing like the swan? or shall the kid with trembling lime seek to outpace the horse? — but out of love because I yearn to be like you. You are our father, the revealer of things. Like a father you instruct us; and from your pages, O glorious one, we suck, like bees in flowery glades, the honey of your golden sayings, your golden sayings whose truth is for evermore<sup>1</sup>".

We do not know whether Lucretius was born into the Epicurean movement. It is more likely that he was a convert. In either case it was his duty, as an Epicurean, to win fresh converts, and the approved method of propaganda was by personal contact. On joining the movement one took this pledge: "I will be obedient to Epicurus, in accordance with whom I have made it my choice to live". When the initiate had passed through various grades he, in his turn, became a teacher. A disposition to be amenable to correction was required of beginners, and an inoffensive technique of instruction was demanded of the guide. These practices seem to be reflected in the *De Rerum Natura*. Lucretius strove not only to be a faithful disciple but a tactful winner of souls.

The Caius Memmius whom Lucretius chose as the object of his propaganda was, in the opinion of almost all competent enquirers the man who was tribune of the plebs in 66 B.C., praetor in 58, governor of Bithynia in 57, and an unsuccessful candidate for the consulship in 54. Accused of corrupt practices he was exiled to Greece. He was a talented and cultured man, an orator, epigrammatist, and patron of letters. He took the poets Helvius Cinna and Catullus with him to Bithynia. Cicero tells us that his Greek scholarship was perfect but that he was contemptuous of Latin literature. He adds that

<sup>1</sup> *DRN* III, 1-13.

as an orator he succeeded less well than his natural endowments made likely, because he was shy of the labour, not only of speaking, but even of thinking<sup>2</sup>. Such was the man for whom Lucretius wrote the *De Rerum Natura* and the poem makes clear that Lucretius appreciated his failings as well as his virtues.

In dedicating his poem to Memmius Lucretius made use of words which seem to an increasing number of scholars plainly to announce the hope and the intention of converting him to Epicureanism. The poet speaks of the difficulty of his task in turning the prose treatises of Epicurus into a Latin poem and adds: "But your virtue and the hoped-for joy of sweet friendship persuades me to undergo any toil and leads me on to watch the clear nights through seeking the words and rhythms in which I may spread before your mind that clear light, by means of which you will be able to see into the heart of hidden things".

sed tua me virtus tamen et sperata voluptas  
 suavis amicitiae quemvis efferre laborem  
 suadet et inducit noctes vigilare serenas  
 quaerentem dictis quibus et quo carmine demum  
 clara tuae possim praepandere lumina menti,  
 res quibus occultas penitus convisere possis.

There is no word in this that is not an ordinary Latin word, but we surely cannot translate the passage correctly without considering the meanings with which these common words were charged in Epicurean circles. This caution applies specially to the phrase *sperata voluptas suavis amicitiae*. It is not irrelevant to recall that the followers of Epicurus formed a league of friends (*foedus amicitiae*), that the special quality of Epicurean friendship was often described by the adjective *suavis*, that those who lived in the sweetness of this friendship enjoyed a state of blessedness called in Greek μαχαρίωτης and in Latin *voluptas*, so that *voluptas suavis amicitiae* should properly be translated "the blessedness of sweet fellowship". Neither is it irrelevant to note that Lucretius speaks of this

<sup>2</sup> CICERO, *Brutus* 70, 247.

state as existing still only as a hope, *sperata voluptas*, a hope that will presumably be fulfilled if Memmius succeeds, through the light the poet plans to spread before his mind, in seeing into the heart of hidden things. A sensitive French scholar thus interprets the poet's meaning: "If Memmius, thanks to Lucretius, becomes a perfect Epicurean, then the merely human friendship which now unites them will become a philosophic friendship, much more complete, much more perfect<sup>3</sup>". If this line of interpretation is correct, as I for my part am sure it is, then the relation between Lucretius and Memmius is no formal one. It is not one merely between an unknown poet and a powerful patron. It is something much more intimate and much more full. The situation with which the poem presents us at the outset is rather this: Lucretius and Memmius are friends in the conventional sense; Lucretius is a convinced and scholarly disciple of Epicurus, while Memmius is an interested enquirer within the ambit of the movement; Lucretius designs to complete the conversion of his friend; the poem is the artistic expression of the propaganda directed to this end. Such is the situation implied in the poem. That the artistic situation corresponded to the historical reality pretty closely is, I think, certain. The poem is the idealised record of an actual attempt at conversion. It is probable that the death of the poet saved him from the realization that the attempt was doomed to fail. Not that the failure would have surprised him, for he candidly expresses his doubts whether Memmius, for all his *virtus*, had in him the making of a steadfast follower of the Master.

We have now glanced at two of the self-revelations of Lucretius, — his devotion to Epicurus and his ambition to convert his friend. We must next consider what he tells us of his poetic ambitions, his motives, that is, for casting his argument into verse form. Lucretius deals twice with this theme in almost identical words. I choose for translation the earlier and slightly longer, form. "Come now, learn what is to follow and hear a bolder theme. I am not unaware how dark the subject is; but a great hope of renown has smitten

<sup>3</sup> P. BOYANCÉ *Lucrèce et son disciple* (rev. d. Et. Anc. LII, pp. 212 ff).

my heart as with the thyrsus and thereby awakened in my breast the sweet love of the muses; and fired now by this, with all my faculties alert, I traverse pathless regions of the Pierides where no man before me has set foot. It is my delight to approach virgin springs and to drink deep; it is my delight to gather strange blooms, and to seek a glorious garland for my head from where the muses have never before veiled the brow of any man; first because I sing of great things, seeking to free men's minds from the stranglehold of mythology; and in the second place because, dark as the subject is, I fashion such clear songs, touching all things with the muses' charm. Nor does this lack justification. Just as doctors, when they give bitter wormwood to children, touch the brim of the cup round about with the sweet liquid of yellow honey, so that the innocent children, fooled so far as the lips, may drain the bitter draught, victims of a trick but thus no longer sick, since their health is restored thereby; so I now, since this philosophy seems somewhat harsh to those not familiar with it, and the world shrinks from it, have conceived the wish to set forth our philosophy to you in sweet Pierian song and to touch it with the honey of the muses, in the hope that thereby I might be able to hold your attention on my verses, until you see into the nature of things and grasp their plan''.

This revelation touches both the content of the poem and its form. The daring purpose of the poet is to free the minds of men from the stranglehold of the old myths and to substitute for the mythological explanation of nature and society the atomistic account of the nature of things. This constitutes the argument of the poem and nothing, of course, could be more in accord with the philosophy of the Master. So far as the content is concerned the poem is completely orthodox. But can the same be said for the form? A sentence survives in which Epicurus seems to condemn the writing of poetry. It has therefore been supposed that Lucretius was consciously heretical in choosing a verse form and that he is here justifying his departure from Epicurean precept. Recent enquiries have corrected this view. Epicureans did not condemn all forms of poetry. What they condemned was poetry as the vehicle of mythology. Lucretius therefore is orthodox in both

form and content. The warp and the woof of this poem is the Epicurean version of atomic science; and, if he retains certain of the traditional mythological features of epic verse, he is careful to insist that they are there for their imaginative appeal and not for their truth to fact. The hearer is warned not on any account to stain his mind with foul mythology. The *De Rerum Natura* thus stands stylistically at a parting of the ways. It is the first poem in which mythology is demoted from the realm of truth to the realm of fancy and becomes part of the equipment of the poet but not of the philosopher. This is one of its great novelties<sup>4</sup>.

But there is a second feature which is equally novel. The Epicureans were not interested so much in truth as in "saving" truth. Knowledge was not of value to Epicurus unless it could heal some misery of man. It follows that a didactic poem, in the ordinary sense, could not be undertaken by an Epicurean. To versify a body of knowledge was the kind of frilly culture which Epicurus despised. But a poem that would be the living expression of a personal faith would be a different thing. It might of course, have to carry a heavy load of scientific knowledge, but that would only be justified if the poet was personally convinced of its importance for life. "This, too, you will find it very useful to know", says Lucretius from time to time in a way that seems almost comic at first sight, — as if he was giving Memmius useful tips for passing a possible examination in atomism. But, of course, what he is really doing is something different. He is giving his personal guarantee of the efficacy of the particular doctrine in order to confirm the faith of the neophyte in the truth of Epicureanism. This is why those criticisms which allege that Lucretius made a bad choice of subject are beside the point. He had no choice. He was concerned only to expound the truth, and the saving truth, as he knew it. Hence his strange poem, though formally didactic, is as full of personal feeling as a lyric. Hence the detail of his out-of-date philosophy retains its power to hold the attention, not because of an extraneous prettiness added

<sup>4</sup> P. GIUFFRIDA, *L'Epicureismo nella lett. lat.*, 2 vols. Turin, 1940 and 1950; T. PETROVSKI, *Mythological Imagery in Lucr. (Essays on DRN)*, Moscow, 1947, ed. by T. P., pp. 168-80. In Russian).

by a skilful versifier, but because every word of it is weighted with emotion and controlled by a serious purpose. The novelty of this achievement can hardly be overstated. The *Phaenomena* of Aratus, whether in its Greek or Latin dress, is dead; the *De Rerum Natura* remain one of the supreme spiritual possessions of mankind.

What I have written so far must all fall to the ground if those expositors are right — and they are, I think, the vast majority — who see in the relationship between Lucretius and Memmius nothing intrinsic to the form and content of the poem. We must therefore consider what they have to say. They point out that in the seven or eight thousand lines of the poem the name of Memmius occurs only eleven times. So far the argument is not impressive. The poet says explicitly that he composed the poem in order to expound Epicureanism to Memmius; if after that he mentions him only ten times, that is not in itself reason to disbelieve him. There is, at first sight, more substance in the following facts, by which the argument is supported. It is pointed out that the eleven mentions are confined to three of the six books, viz. I, II, and V; it is further supposed that they were written first and that the absence of the name of Memmius from books III, IV, and VI means that, when they came to be written, Lucretius and Memmius had ceased to be friends and Memmius had dropped out of the poet's mind. This view, one of the gratuitous assumptions only too common in our difficult field of knowledge, has recently been challenged and, in my view, conclusively dismissed. Though Lucretius mentions the name of Memmius only eleven times he continues throughout the whole six books of his poem to address himself to one person. The argument, that "thou" means Memmius in three books and then ceases to mean Memmius and means only the general reader in the three remaining books, is not only in itself most improbable but is contradicted many times by the text, which plainly implies in the person addressed the same attributes and circumstances which are elsewhere in the poem ascribed to Memmius by name.

The details of this demonstration must be sought, where I found them, in the Introduction to the new French version

of the *De Rerum Natura* by René Waltz<sup>5</sup>. But the all-important consequence which follows from this demonstration must be quoted now in full. "The *De Rerum Natura* presents", Professor Waltz writes, "the somewhat unexpected character of being conceived from one end to the other as a sort of intimate sermon, from man to man, from friend to friend, a sermon in which the most dazzling and grandiose images mingle with the forms and tone of ordinary conversation, and which moreover is here and there on the point of transforming itself into dialogue. The perpetual apostrophes to Memmius, even when he is not expressly named, strongly emphasise this feature of the poem, as do also the objections, explicit or implicit, to which Lucretius makes reply in the course of his argument".

I fully agree with this. I agree also in the main with Professor Waltz when he adds: "But this is, of course, not the only idea Lucretius entertained about his work. Its scope and range are too vast for that. Indeed, it is not even the most prominent intention of the poet, above all in the eyes of the modern reader. It is unmistakably clear that through Memmius he aims at instructing and persuading the whole of suffering and distracted humanity, and through his immediate contemporaries he aims at the whole of mankind. To open to all those, whoever they may be, who can read and understand him, the way of salvation and of peace, to win for Epicurus the greatest possible number of disciples, such is his true object, such is the dominant passion of his heart and mind, such is the glory he promises himself. Such is the task of which the greatness and the beauty intoxicate him, fascinate him, lift him out of himself, make of him so magnificent a poet". To this I would offer a slight demurrer. The words suggest some divergence between the aims of converting Memmius and converting mankind, at least they seem to subordinate the former intention to the latter. This is not right. Conversion of individuals by personal contact was the Epicurean way, and the fitting way for Lucretius to appeal to a wider audience was to exhibit to it the process of individual conversion. An intimate preachment addressed to

<sup>5</sup> RENÉ WALTZ, *Lucr. de la Nature*. Paris, 1954.



one personal friend was for the Epicurean poet the appropriate form in which to address mankind. This, as indeed, I think Professor Waltz means us to understand, is the deepest explanation of the form of the poem. It is the choice of this form that explains the novel and potent appeal of the poem, and the appeal was potent enough to transform the literature of Rome. So intimate is the mood of the poem that even the poet's aspirations after undying fame are confidences entrusted to the ear of a friend.

It was the intention of the poet, as we have learned, to open to mankind the way of salvation and of peace. In what sense are we to understand these words? They can help us, I think, to remove a wide-spread misconception concerning the aims of the Epicurean movement. It is endlessly repeated, is it not, that the philosophies of the Hellenistic Age were individualistic? The bonds of the city-state, we are told, had broken and the task of philosophy was now to come to the rescue of men who found themselves transformed from citizens into individuals. Old Comedy, which concerned itself with public affairs, gave place to the New Comedy interested in private life. Interest in Epic poetry, with its king and captains, grew dim and the poets now turned the spotlight on shepherds and their loves. So too the noble ethic of Plato and Aristotle, with its basis in the citizen and the State, dwindled to the ethic of the porch and the Garden, the ethic of the individual life.

This argument, of course, does not lack substance; but it rests on too absolute a contrast between the individual and the State. These two do not exhaust the concept of society. Many other, and far older, ties bind men together than those which centre in the Assembly and the Senate. Aristotle, in his *Politics*<sup>6</sup>, distinguishes between the provinces of political and social life, specifically characterising the latter as the sphere of friendship. In his *Ethics*<sup>7</sup> he develops this line of thought in a way that anticipates some of the most characteristic ideas of Epicurus. "It is friendship", writes Aristotle, — though we might think it was Epicurus speaking. — "it is friendship which hold cities together. Lawgi-

<sup>6</sup> 1280 b.

<sup>7</sup> 1155 a, 1169 a.

vers set more store by friendship than they do by justice. Concord among citizens owes more to friendship than to justice; for, when men are friends, there is no need of justice; whereas, on the other hand, even if they are just, they need friendship to bring them together in the first instance. Nor is friendship necessary only as a means. It is also a noble thing in itself; for we praise those who love their friends and we think the possession of many friends a noble thing''.

It was this aspect of life which, Epicurus was so signally to develop. He filled a historical need. The more political forms failed, the more scope there was for non-political forms of association. The more the State failed to afford protection, the more necessary it became for individuals to unite to render one another mutual aid. The more justice became illusory, the more urgent it became to make friendship a reality. Here the Garden came to fill the breach. It was from the first a social organization the purpose of which was to promote those bonds between men which can be described rather as friendship than as justice. And, with the passage of time, as the oligarchical principal established itself ever more firmly throughout the Graeco-Roman world the sphere of justice narrowed, until, as the poets tells us, the goddess was obliged altogether to quit the earth, leaving her last footprints among the simple country folk. So were established the conditions in which men could despair utterly of political society and seek salvation in the Garden. One was driven to enter the Garden because one was convinced that the City had failed. And this happened not in one city but in hundreds. Epicureanism grew to the stature of an international movement and the message of Epicurus appealed to all mankind. It was as popular in Syria as in Greece; it was as popular in Italy as in Syria. About Italy, specially at the middle of the last century of the Pagan era when the *De Rerum Natura* was written we are, naturally, somewhat better informed. There a hundred long years of civil war preceded the composition of the poem, and, from the time of the Gracchi, a mounting sense of guilt had begun to haunt the conscience of the finer spirits. The endless shedding of brothers's blood had made it seem that the Roman people was

guilty of a crime which must be expiated. Epicurianism helped to define this sense of guilt and itself grew strong by reason of it. Civilization itself became suspect. Lucretius tacitly writes off the grandeur that was Rome. Her military and political glory mean nothing to him. They are part of the universal darkness in which Epicurus lifted up his shining light. With the poets of the next generation the political hope has revived. With his eyes on Octavian Horace asks: *cui dabit partis scelus expiandi Juppiter?*<sup>8</sup> With his eyes on Octavian Vergil pleads with the older gods: *hunc saltem everso iuvenem succurrere saeclo/ne prohibete*<sup>9</sup>. It was the fallen world that was also the subject of Lucretius' poem, but for him the saviour could still be only Epicurus. The political hope had not yet revived. The only salvation was to flee from "the city of dreadful night" into the refuge of the Garden.

This was, in a sense, a counsel of despair. But we strangely diminish the scope of the poet's interests and distort the quality of his feelings, if we think of him as solely concerned with the peace of mind of the individual and indifferent to public concerns. Our poet has, in fact, a distinct vocabulary for private as distinct from public affairs. When he wishes to analyse the spiritual plight of the individual he talks of his *animus* or his *mens*; and, if that mind is agitated by fear, darkened by ignorance, or crushed by care, then his phrase is *terror animi*, or *animi tenebrae*, or *pondus inest animo*. On the other hand, if he speaks of society he says *vita* or *humana vita*. An older way of life is *vita prior*. The good things of life, the blessings of life, are *solacia vitae*, *commoda vitae*. These are not in themselves states of mind but right ways of living, relationships with one's fellowmen, out of which happiness springs, as in these lines:

nunc etiam per magnas didita gentes  
dulcia permulcent animos solacia vitae<sup>10</sup>.

This will be clearer to us if we consider his terms for

<sup>8</sup> *Odes* I, 2, 29.

<sup>9</sup> *Georgics* I, 500-1.

<sup>10</sup> *DRN* V, 20-1.

wrong ways of living from which misery results. Social evils are *vulnera vitae*, wounds of life, such things as greed, ambition, and their fruits in civil war. When these social evils reach an intolerable pitch then they constitute a state of affairs called *Acherusia vita*, hell on earth. On the other hand, when the saviour Epicurus appears he comes to transform, not simply the opinions of men, but the very life of mankind:

Humana ante oculos foede cum vita iaceret...  
primum Graius homo etc...<sup>11</sup>

That is in the First Book. In the Last Book it is still the same. There it is claimed that Athens twice transformed the *life* of all mankind, once by spreading the knowledge of agriculture and again by initiating the Epicurean movement<sup>12</sup>. The agricultural revolution and the Epicurean way of life are comparable achievements, comparable in their effect on the wellbeing of mankind, although the former describes a material and the latter a moral revolution in Society. There is no room for doubt about it. In the opinion of Lucretius the teaching of the Master was not a philosophical innovation but a world'-shaking event, a fresh start for humanity. Lucretius, indeed, finds a middle point for human history in the mission of Epicurus, as Christians later did in the mission of Christ. Only in the light of this exalted estimate of Epicurus can we understand Lucretius's attempted conversion of Memmius.

We do not know as much as we should like about the methods of Epicurean propaganda, but that they could be most elaborate and intense is shown in the famous instance of the conversion of the Seleucid monarch Antiochus Epiphanes. Antiochus was known to be hostile to the sect, but this proved only a challenge to their zeal. A certain Philonides, whose name has not come down to us in any other connection, went with a large following of literary men to the Syrian court to win this important convert. This was not easily accompi-

<sup>11</sup> *DRN* I, 62, 66.

<sup>12</sup> *DRN* VI, 1-6.

shed. To overcome his objections one hundred and twenty-five separate tracts were required. Presumably, in view of the great number of literary men involved, these were specially composed for the occasion. Obviously we have here the fragmentary record of a remarkable missionary enterprise. Edwyn Bevan writes it in a satirical vein<sup>13</sup>. This may not be fair. If only a sentence or two survived describing the mission of the Jesuit Ricci at Peking, that great man too could be made to appear as a figure of fun.

The campaign of Philonides was a success, Antiochus, we are told, was converted and made good progress in the movement. Lucretius was not successful, but this was not for want of trying. He gives us two or three times what I take to be an intentionally humorous account of his zealous persistence. For instance he winds up his argument in support of the fundamental doctrine of the existence of the Void, in the following way: "Whatever difficulties you raise, you will be forced to admit the existence in nature of a void. I could provide many more proofs to bring you little by little to believe in my words. But for a man of your intelligence the hints I have given supply clues enough. When hounds are put on the trail of a mountain-goat their keen scent suffices to bring them to its secluded shelter in the bush; so you yourself in pursuit of this quarry will be able to advance from one discovery to another. You will be able to make your way into all the hidden places and bring the truth to light. But if you should grow sluggish and exhibit a tendency to lose the trail, one thing I can promise you, Memmius, without more ado. My tuneful tongue will pour over you such floods of eloquence drawn from the depths of my rich mind that I fear old age will cree over our failing limbs and set open the fastnesses of life before the whole store of my versified arguments on any single point can be poured into your ears"<sup>14</sup>. This self-portrait of Lucretius the evangelist in operation is worth a thought. It suggests that the seven thousand lines of the *De Rerum Natura* are only a sample of what Memmius was subjected to in real life. It suggests also that the poet

<sup>13</sup> *The House of Seleucus*, Arnold, 1902. Vol. II, app. x.

<sup>14</sup> *DRN* I, 398-417. Cf. also I, 958-83; IV, 524-48.

was not so fanatical as to have lost his sense of humour. He was still capable of seeing himself as others saw him.

Such was the manner of the propaganda. But what of its content? It involved, of course, the physical doctrine of the atoms and the void. But these physical doctrines were of importance to the Epicureans only as the basis for a radical reform in human life. It was necessary to convince Memmius of the existence of the void, but only as a stage to convincing him of the folly and wickedness of the life of luxury and ambition. A Roman pro-praetor was hardly less a personage than a Macedonian king. It would be a victory indeed if he could be induced to renounce the City and enter the Garden. Lucretius begins tactfully with generalities:

o miseras hominum mentis, o pectora caeca!  
 qualibus in tenebris vitae quantisque periclis  
 degitur hoc aevi quodcumquest!<sup>15</sup>

“O wretched minds of men, O blind hearts! In what darkness and dangers do we not spend our short span of life!” But he does not long remain at this impersonal level. Memmius, the statesman and soldier, is soon directly attacked. Abandoning his general satire on the powerlessness of luxury to rid men of the burden care the poet proceeds: “Wherefore since treasures avail nothing in respect of our body nor birth nor the glory of kingly power, you must take the next step and admit that these things are of no service to the mind. Or will you claim that when you see your legions swarm over the plain, swiftly displaying the emblems of war and strengthened flank and rear by powerful reserves and great force of cavalry, thereupon your mythological fancies take fright and fly panicstricken from your mind? Will you claim that when you see your fleet swarm forth and spread itself over the sea, thereupon your dread of death departs and lightens your breast of its burden of care? Nay, if we see that these things are food for laughter and mere mockeries, and in sooth the fears of men and the cares that dog their steps dread not the clash of arms and the cruel weapons; if unabashed fears and

cares mix among kings and kesars and stand not in awe of the glitter of gold nor the brilliant sheen of the purple robe, can you still doubt that peace of mind is not to be found herein but only in our philosophy?" For the Epicurean we know that "the crown of an untroubled life was esteemed above the highest offices of State". The words are those of Epicurus himself<sup>16</sup>. But the Athens of Epicurus was not mistress of the world; such precepts might find a readier acceptance in the school of Hellas than in the political centre of the ancient world. Epicurianism had entered upon a tenser phase of its struggle when a Roman poet tried to convince a Roman governor of this truth.

But what is this fear of death of which Lucretius has so many, and often such strange, things to say? What can he mean when he takes it for granted that the soldier Memmius is a victim of it? Is he not grossly exaggerating when he claims that it must be expelled from our minds because it throws *the whole of human life* into confusion?

et metus ille foras praeceps Acheruntis agendus,  
funditus humanam qui vitam turbat ab imo . . .<sup>17</sup>

The apparent exaggeration of this fear has been the main reason for the prevalence of the belief among commentators that the poet was on the verge of insanity. This conclusion, however, seems to be quite uncalled for if we pay attention to the various meanings the poet attaches to the phrase. It meant the fear of physical extinction. It meant the fear of punishment in the after-life. But it also had a social aspect. In this usage it was the equivalent of our phrase "the struggle for existence". It was that sense of insecurity which lies at the base of greed and competition. It was the urge that made men trample one another down in order to win security for themselves. It was, therefore, and this is a truth of the first importance for the understanding of Epicureanism, the precise opposite of "friendship", the denial of friendship. Friendship was not possible except for those who had overcome the fear of death.

<sup>16</sup> Plutarch, *adv Coloten* 31, p. 1125 c.

<sup>17</sup> *DEN* III, 37-8.

And as the life of the Garden was based on friendship, so the life of the City was based on fear, the fear of death.

Here is the poet's account of the matter in his own words: "Avarice and the blind lust for offices of state, which drive wretched men to transgress the bounds of right, and, as confederates in crime or agents of crime, to strive night and day with surpassing toil to struggle up to the pinnacle of power, these social sores (*Vulnera vitæ*) are mainly nourished by the fear of death. For a lowly and despised estate and biting need seem to be far removed from the life of ease and security and to be, as one might say, a sort of tarrying at the gates of death. Consequently, urged on by his vain fear, men wish to flee from this condition and put themselves beyond its reach. Thus, in their greed of gain they amass fortunes out of civil bloodshed, adding one fortune to another by heaping carnage on carnage. With heartless glee they welcome a brother's tragic death, and learn to hate and fear the hospitable tables of their kin"<sup>18</sup>. It is clear, is it not, that the fear of Acheron has for Lucretius a social as well as an individual aspect? His attack on the prevalence of this fear is part of his attempt to analyse the public disorders of his day. These, since they spring in the last analysis from the fear of death, can only be finally overcome when men learn from Epicurus that death is not fearful.

The intensity of feeling displayed by the poet in his long disquisition on the fear of death has, as I have already said, fostered the belief that he was unbalanced. But, if we reflect that this disquisition is in part an analysis of the corruptions of Roman society and that it is poured into the ear of a man who is not only the poet's friend but also a Roman praetor and an aspirant to the consulship, we can perhaps better appreciate its prophetic earnestness. In the poet's view Memmius was not exempt from this ignoble fear, which both degraded him and ruined society. Hence the mingled accents of tenderness and severity which characterise this portion of the poem. The nobly-born, the gifted, the rich and ambitious Memmius must be made to understand the rottenness of the foundations of his own life and of the Roman state; he must be made to

<sup>18</sup> DEN III, 59-73.



understand the source of his own wretchedness and the magnitude or the miseries he helps to inflict on mankind. No ordinary tact could meet the demands of this situation, and it is one of the great inspirations of the poet to make Nature administer the necessary instruction and rebuke. To himself he reserves simply the role of underlining the justice of her reproach. "Suppose", he says, "that Nature should suddenly give utterance and thus herself scold some one of us." And when the rebuke has been uttered he comments: "What answer have we but that her rebuke is just and her accusation true?" Again a second time he makes Nature speak, and a second time he adds: "Just, in my opinion, is her charge, just her indictment and rebuke".<sup>19</sup>

But the poet feels it necessary to search the heart of Memmius with a still deeper probe and his spiritual insight instructs him how this is to be done. He suggests to Memmius that he should rebuke himself, and puts into his mouth appropriate words of repentances and contrition. "This too you could say to yourself from time to time: 'Even good Aeneas has quitted the light of life, who was a far better man than you, presumptuous one. And since then many other kings and kesars have been laid low, who lorded it over mighty nations. He too, even he who once paved a way over the great sea and made a path for his legions to march over the deep and taught them to pass on foot over the salt pools and set at naught the roarings of the sea, trampling them with his horses, had the light taken from him and shed forth his soul from his dying body. The son of the Scipios, thunderbolt of war, terror of Carthage, yielded his bones to earth just as if he were the lowest menial. Think too of the inventors of all sciences and graceful arts, think of the companions of the Heliconian maids; among whom Homer bore the sceptre without a peer, and he now sleeps the same sleep as others. Then there is Democritus who, when a ripe old age had warned him that the memory-waking motions of his mind were waning, by his own spontaneous act offered up his head to death. Even Epicurus passed away, when his light of life had run its course, he who surpassed in intellect the race of men and quenched the light

of all, as the ethereal sun arisen quenches the stars. Will you then hesitate and think it a hardship to die? You for whom life is well nigh dead while yet you live and see the light, who spend the greater part of your time in sleep and snore while wide awake and cease not to see visions and have a mind troubled with groundless terror and can not discover often what it is that ails you, when, besotted man, you are sore pressed on all sides with full many cares and cannot abide in your true path owing to the aimless fluctuations of your mind"<sup>20</sup>. By the device of making Memmius remonstrate with himself the poet has managed to paint a picture of his patron and friend which is astonishing in its frankness. Nor indeed could such frankness be explained or excused except in the light of the circumstances of the age as understood by the poet. The "thou-art-the-man" quality of the writing is the measure of the poet's conviction that the fortunes of mankind were at stake. Life was hell on earth because fools made it so, and he did not wish Memmius to be for ever numbered among the fools.

By now we know most of what we can learn from the poem about the characters of the poet and his patron and the relationship between them. It would be easy to speculate on some external details of their relationship. The intriguing suggestion has been made that Memmius took Lucretius with him to Bithynia along with Catullus and Helvius Cinna<sup>21</sup>. It could be true. I suspect myself from the frequent allusions to hunting, from the keen interest in the behaviour of horses and still more of dogs, and from various indications of the poet's delight in being among the lonely places in the mountains, that the two men hunted together. But I wish to avoid speculations and trivialities and shall accordingly turn aside from these tempting digressions and conclude with the examination of one passage from the end of the sixth book.

I have tried to make out in this paper that Epicureanism was concerned to preach a social, if not a political, theory. This theory was that the origin for the competitive struggle was to be traced to the fear of death, and that a society based

<sup>20</sup> *DRN* III, 1024-52.

<sup>21</sup> L. A. MacKAY, *Notes on Lucr.* Univ. of Cal. Publ. in Class. Phil. Vol. 13, n<sup>o</sup> 14, pp. 433-46.

on mutual aid could only be established when mankind had overcome this fear. *Φιλία amicitia*, friendship, was a way of life, a discipline designed to overcome the fear of death and so allow men to pass, in the happiness of mutual goodwill, such span of life, be it short or long, as nature granted them. This is expounded at length in appropriate portions of the work, notably in books III and V; but it is often alluded to elsewhere and it crops up in a striking way near the very end of the poem. As you all know the last great theme of the poem is the plague at Athens in the time of Pericles and Lucretius bases his account of it on the famous chapters of Thucydides. Often he translates pretty closely, but he is also concerned to rearrange the details and give them an Epicurean application. It is thus that he goes beyond Thucydides in stressing the failure of traditional religion:

nec iam religio divum nec numina magni  
pendebantur enim: praesens dolor exsuperabat<sup>22</sup>.

Here the Epicurean colouring is evident. Epicurus claimed to give man the victory over suffering. Lucretius rejoices to record that the traditional religion gave no such victory. Even more notable is the Epicurean colour which is given to the contrasting pictures of the death, during the plague, of noble and ignoble men. It owes little to Thucydides. "Some" writes Lucretius, "out of their too great love of life and their dread of death refused to tend their own sick and were punished for their neglect, dying in their turn abandoned and forlorn, a shameful, evil death. Others, who stayed to attend their sick, died too, victims of the plague, as they laboured, with the tender supplications of the dying in their ears, at the task to which their sense of honour bound them. This then was how the best men died"<sup>23</sup>. So Memmius, who, in the opinion of his friend the poet, had not learned to overcome the fear of death, gets his last lesson. Truly, from one end of the poem to the other, the thought of him is never absent from the poet's mind.

R. FARRINGTON.

<sup>22</sup> *DRN VI*, 1276-7.

<sup>23</sup> *DRN VI*, 1241-6.