

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
ROMAN EPIC

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Contents

Lucretius (98 B.C.-55 B.C.)

Virgil (70 B.C.-19 B.C.)

Early Roman Epic Virgil and Lucretius are the two best known Roman writers of epic, that is of extended and grave dactylic hexameter poems devoted to issues of high importance. Yet while these two epic creators were separated by only a generation in birth—Lucretius (94-55 B.C.); Virgil (70-19 B.C.)—they wrote for totally different cultural milieux, and with deeply different visions of reality.

Lucretius and Epicurus Of the life of Lucretius we know little, except that he was an ardent supporter of the philosophy of Epicurus (341-270 B.C.), about whom equally little is known, except that his world-view, featuring intellectual withdrawal, the simple life, and a materialistic conception of reality caught on forcefully in a Mediterranean world torn by political conflicts and social uncertainties. The social cultural milieu of Lucretius, like that of Epicurus himself, was fraught and dangerous, and Lucretius, like his master, appears to have taken refuge in a grandeur of poetic vision, which offered the comforts of intellectual control. The nature of that poetic cosmology was tuned to withdrawal, for Lucretius wrote of the impassive material interlocking of atoms which, in their complex interweavings and swervings construct those intersections which for a limited time become, say, organic life and consciousness, which is thus itself, for a privileged moment, enabled to look back on the marvel of its own creation. Peace lies in this becoming equal to your own condition of being created.

Virgil and the epic Virgil, quite the opposite of Lucretius, did his epic writing in the high stakes environment of Rome's late first century transition from a rural democracy into a potentially world-shaping Empire. The company of such as Augustus himself, or of the literary patron of the culture, Maecenas, threw Virgil into sustained (and inspired) reflection on the meaning of his own culture, and the world-significance of Rome. Where Lucretius expounded the mysteries of the physical universe, and of their consequences for us in it, Virgil looked into the power of historical destiny, to find the triumphant panorama of which, by observing it, he made himself part.

Reading

Sedley, David, *Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom*, Cambridge, 2003.

Jones, Peter, *Reading Virgil: Aeneid I and II*, Cambridge, 2011.

Discussion questions

Does Virgil's side-story of Aeneas and Dido replicate the *amour* of Odysseus and Calypso in *The Odyssey*? In which epic is the hero more drawn to the seducer? Why?

Does Lucretius tell a story in his epic? Is there a narrative thread? How is he able to hold the reader's attention—many great readers have loved him—in a tale about cosmology?

Does Virgil, who makes Aeneas the founder of a great nation, manage to make Aeneas attractive or interesting as a 'person?' If your answer is toward 'no,' what then might draw us to the *Aeneid* today? If your answer is toward 'yes,' tell us how Virgil does it.

Lucretius (98-55 B.C.)

Roman epic and Greek culture. You will quickly see, from Potter's *Roman History*, that Roman culture is from the start deeply indebted to Greek culture, and Lucretius' epic, *De Rerum Natura; On the Nature of Things*, is just the proof we need. To write a long philosophical poem in Latin was to follow in the footsteps of early Greek literature, in which at least two major writers—Hesiod (in the *Theogony*, 8th century B.C.) and Parmenides (in *On Nature*, early fifth century B.C.)—developed their views of the world in formal epic poetry. (In so doing those Greek writers emulated the tradition, which goes far back into Middle Eastern and Indian philosophical and religious expression—*Enuma Elish* in Babylon, the *Vedas* in India—of consigning cosmological thought to poetry. To which we might add that the primal form of serious expression, throughout early cultures, is poetry, while prose is generally later to develop.)

Epicurus. Not only is Greek poetry, but also Greek thought, the founding energy for Lucretius. The third century B.C. Greek philosopher, Epicurus, was the master thinker behind Lucretius' view of the world. (Of him Lucretius writes:

*O glory of the Greeks, the first to raise
The shining light out of tremendous dark
Illumining the blessings of our life,
You are the one I follow...*

As the founder of the Epicurean school, Epicurus exercised great influence on the thought of Hellenistic Greeks and of many Romans. His dominant principle was atomism; a belief that the world is composed of atoms collocated by chance, and responsible, in their infinitely subtle interweavings, for the entirety of existence, from the infinitesimal to the cosmically vast. Lucretius develops many riffs off of this basic perception. The best known of these concern his headlong assault on the fear of death, which he sees as the supreme disturber of mortal peace and happiness.

Lucretius and the fear of death. Like Epicurus, and indeed like many Hellenistic thinkers, Lucretius thought the fear of death sufficient to destroy the pleasure of life, and overgrown with all kinds of misconceptions, principally the ignorant belief that we will have sensation, and be aware of our 'dead condition' after death. Lucretius takes special pains to argue away this ignorance, and to address also the subtler objections of those who see the world differently from him. One of those objections was that, even though we may be composed of atoms, and scatter to the winds at death, we may reassemble by accident and once again, at some time in the future, be conscious wholes again, essentially the persons we were before. To this Lucretius responds that even were this almost incalculably chance event to occur, we would be totally without memory, a new collocation entirely. So thorough does he believe the dispersal of the person at death, and the absurdity of fearing death as though it had any connection with our conscious presence?

Venus and the swerve. The vast poem in which Lucretius embedded this argument—and which is carried out in splendid dactylic hexameters, just as did Homer in the past and as Virgil will soon do in his *Aeneid*—scrutinizes all that is, starting with the human person, with his/her weaknesses, hopes, and dreams, and then moves on to encase the human in its worldly and finally cosmic setting. After an initial exordium to the goddess of love, Venus, who brings all organic things to growth and life, Lucretius takes his reader farther out into the world of human senses and perceptions, then into the inorganic stages of development of the world around us, with a magnificent reach into the nature of human societies and their growth, and onward out into the cosmos so noble but so devoid of all those theistic god-presences on which we typically rely for comfort in our human world. At the most, we might say, the universe provides a staging ground for our human efforts at society, and in particular for our free will—which might seem to be precluded by the compulsive and random movement of atoms in the void. This free will element, which for Lucretius is the foundation of the peculiar dignity of the human, enters through a *clinamen*, or *swerving*, of the atoms in the void, a swerving which introduces chance into random necessity.

Love and spring. Even the power of love, as we see in the opening of the poem (below) is to be understood in the terms of Epicurean physics, rather, say, than in the terms of Romance. The following passage may seem to boil down to a splendid praise of spring, and to the regeneration of nature through desire, and yet as the reader pursues the passage—reminiscent, say, of Chaucer's wonderful prologue to spring, or Wordsworth's loving poems about

spring and daffodils—we find ourselves drifting powerfully into a universe where random movements of atoms, not any benevolence in things, is the driver.

Mother of Rome, delight of Gods and men,
Dear Venus that beneath the gliding stars
Makest to teem the many-voyaged main
And fruitful lands--for all of living things
Through thee alone are evermore conceived,
Through thee are risen to visit the great sun--
Before thee, Goddess, and thy coming on,
Flee stormy wind and massy cloud away,
For thee the daedal Earth bears scented flowers,
For thee waters of the unvexed deep
Smile, and the hollows of the serene sky
Glow with diffused radiance for thee!
For soon as comes the springtime face of day,
And procreant gales blow from the West unbarred,
First fowls of air, smit to the heart by thee,
Foretoken thy approach, O thou Divine,
And leap the wild herds round the happy fields \\\nOr swim the bounding torrents...

Readings:

Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, translated by R.E. Latham (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1987).

Godwin, John, *Lucretius* (Bristol, 2004.)

Discussion Questions:

Why do you suppose Lucretius wrote his epic vision in poetry?

Would we write such a vision in poetry or prose today? What is the peculiar power of poetry, in rising to the height of such an argument about reality?

How do you interpret Lucretius' claim, that he composed *De Rerum Natura* in order to help free human beings from the fear of death? Does the argument he develops seem calculated to achieve that freeing? Are you afraid of death? What do you do about it?

Does Lucretius integrate the idea of the swerve into his argument, or does it seem to be an artificial ingredient, introduced in order to preserve the possibility of free will?

Virgil (70 B.C.-19 B.C.)

The Roman historical setting. Thanks to the nature of his epic, Lucretius did not clamor for attention to the historical setting in which he was writing. Yet well he might have done. The first half of the first century B.C. was a time in which Rome, and the Italian cities which surrounded it, and which were coming increasingly under Roman domination, was being thrown into the whirlpool of intense political and cultural change. The early formative centuries—4th and 3rd B.C.—had seen the firming up of the independent free spirited senate of the still largely agricultural Roman society, the value formative struggles of a hardy people who had taken charge of the Italian peninsula, and who were building the muscle soon to be required for intense military effort, wars against the Gauls in the North, and then the three exhausting Punic Wars, fought against the Carthaginians from 264 B.C.-146 B.C. In the century following the conclusion of these Wars, in which Rome was ‘victorious’ and consolidated its control of Italia, tumultuous developments forced the older rural Rome into legislative reform—here and throughout the civic arena the brothers Gracchi were the powerful innovators—and generated private political forces with their own armies, like Marius (157-86 B.C.) and Sulla (138-78 B.C.), which guaranteed a state of pressure cooker intensity to the whole peninsula. We are close to the period during which Julius Caesar and Pompey formed their first alliance—60 B.C. was the year—and with that we are stepping onto the rolling sidewalk of history along which the Roman Republic was careening toward Empire. No wonder, then, that we feel Lucretius’s epic might well have clamored for attention to its historical embedding. And indeed, if we look closely enough, at Lucretius’ stress on removing the fear of death, or on freeing mankind from superstition and anthropomorphic gods, we can see that in his work he *was* building himself a shelter from the chaos of his time.

The Aeneid. The same can be said, more obviously, for the work of Virgil in creating his *Aeneid*, which was written between 29 B.C. and 19 B.C., and which thus coincided with the accession to imperial power of Augustus Caesar (Emperor from 27 B.C. to 14 A.D.). Not only was Virgil a close friend of the man who was to become the greatest power figure of his age, but Virgil witnessed/heard about up close those tumultuous events—Julius Caesar’s seizure of power and assassination in 44 B.C., the death of Pompey, the battle between Augustus and Antony/Cleopatra, which ended with the Battle of Actium in 34 B.C.—which were the transition of Rome into a world power, and one whose influence is profoundly culture shaping to our day. While Lucretius sought for personal quiet and speculative freedom, as a haven from the chaos of his world, Virgil took another path, letting his epic imagination expand onto a new vision of the new world Augustus was ushering in.

Virgil and Homer. Virgil’s move was one of ultimate ambition, to write of world changing developments by following not only the dactylic hexameter epic tradition, inherited from the Greeks, but to create his epic directly out of the impulses of Homer’s two epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which were probably composed around the beginning of the first millennium B.C., and which had served as a virtual Bible for the Greeks—underwriting their mythical imaginations, their sense of group pride, and providing an exemplar for aesthetic taste.

The Iliad and the Odyssey. Put very roughly, the first half of Virgil’s epic follows the thematic developments of Homer’s *Odyssey* while the second half of the *Aeneid*—the ‘poem about Aeneas’—follows the thematic of the *Iliad*. This reversal of thematics, by which Virgil handles the sequence of events of Homer’s poems in reverse order, brings distinct attention to the second part of the *Aeneid*, which concerns the founding of the city of Rome by the hero, Aeneas, who has fled with his family and his family gods from the destruction of the citadel of Troy by the Greeks. While many moderns find the second half of the *Aeneid* less gripping than the first, in which Aeneas recounts the tales of his wandering after leaving Troy, and Virgil narrates Aeneas’ moving love affair with the Carthaginian Queen, Dido, there seems little doubt that for Virgil the true meaning of the epic lies in the second half of the *Aeneid*, in which Aeneas heroically defeats the regional Italic king, Turnus, and conquers Italy for Rome, the site of a new millennial world change. To call this monumental poem praise of Virgil’s friend Augustus, would be a huge understatement. The epic goes through and beyond flattery, to a level where the grandeur of the human enterprise is put out for viewing.

Invocation. In the fashion of the classical epic, Virgil opens with an invocation to the Muse, in which he sums up his whole theme. It will be up to the reader to consider the daring of emulation, and firmness of purpose, which Virgil demonstrates in opening as follows:

*I sing of arms and the man, he who, exiled by fate,
first came from the coast of Troy to Italy, and to*

*Lavinian shores – hurled about endlessly by land and sea,
by the will of the gods, by cruel Juno's remorseless anger,
long suffering also in war, until he founded a city
and brought his gods to Latium: from that the Latin people
came, the lords of Alba Longa, the walls of noble Rome.*

Readings: Virgil, *Aeneid*, translated by Robert Fitzgerald (New York, 1990.)

Putnam, Michael, *The Poetry of the Aeneid: Four Studies in Imaginative Unity and Design* (Cambridge, 1965).

Ross, David O., *Virgil's Aeneid: A Reader's Guide* (Oxford, 2007.)

Discussion questions:

It is customary to view the *Aeneid* as a panegyric of Augustus. Do you see another way of viewing the epic? What about the extreme brutality that marks the Romans' accession to power on the Italic peninsula? Is that brutality being justified in the poem?

Aeneas himself is called *pius*, in the *Aeneid*; a term suggesting *devout, reliable, mature*. Do you find Aeneas an engaging literary personality? Is he the stuff of a good novel?

How do you read the 'love affair' with Dido? Is there a true love exchange, or is their relationship entirely between blocks of national/ethnic groups of power? Is it hard for Aeneas to leave Dido?

ESSAY

What Stoic and Epicurean ideas did Lucretius import into his epic, *De Rerum Natura*? Are those ideas incorporated in such a way as to constitute parts of a flowing narrative? Does Lucretius manage to avoid didacticism?

Does Virgil avoid didacticism? His theme—or do you agree?—is arguably praise of Rome and Augustus. (There is much dispute about this.) If that is his theme, does he build it into a 'good story' while at the same time making his point?