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978-0-521-57032-9 - Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom

David Sedley

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## LUCRETIUS AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF GREEK WISDOM

This book is designed to appeal both to those interested in Roman poetry and to specialists in ancient philosophy. In it David Sedley explores Lucretius' complex relationship with Greek culture, in particular with Empedocles, whose poetry was the model for his own, with Epicurus, the source of his philosophical inspiration, and with the Greek language itself. He includes a detailed reconstruction of Epicurus' great treatise *On nature*, and seeks to show how Lucretius worked with this as his sole philosophical source, but gradually emancipated himself from its structure, transforming its raw contents into something radically new. By pursuing these themes, the book uncovers many unrecognised aspects of Lucretius' methods and achievements as a poetic craftsman.

David Sedley is Professor of Ancient Philosophy, University of Cambridge, and Fellow of Christ's College. He is the author, with A. A. Long, of *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (1987).

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*For Tony Long*

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## *Preface*

This book is the partial repayment of a debt. It was my desire to understand Lucretius better that led me into postgraduate research on Epicureanism. And, even more than the philosophy component of my Greats course at Oxford, it was that postgraduate research on Epicureanism that emboldened me to pursue the study of ancient philosophy as a career. It would therefore be only a small exaggeration to say that I learnt ancient philosophy in order to understand Lucretius. Until recently I have ventured little about Lucretius in print, but I have been thinking about him throughout my teaching career at Cambridge. This book is the outcome, and my way of thanking its eponymous hero.

My fascination with Lucretius was fuelled when as an Oxford undergraduate I had the good fortune, in 1966–7, to attend the wonderful lectures on Lucretius by the then Corpus Professor of Latin, Sir Roger Mynors. Mynors told us that he had himself in his early days been enthralled by Cyril Bailey's Lucretius lectures, none of whose brilliance, he remarked, showed through into Bailey's later monumental edition of the poet ('He had gone off the boil'). I like to think that some excitement from the real Bailey filtered through to me in those lectures.

Another debt is to David Furley, whose book *Two Studies in the Greek Atomists* I came across in Blackwell's while studying Aristotle for Greats. It was that book – which I bought for the then shocking sum of three pounds and nine shillings – that taught me not only how much interest Aristotle gained when he was read alongside other philosophers from a very different tradition, but also how much philosophical depth and subtlety there were to be found in Epicureanism, including that of Lucretius himself.

There are two other friends I should also like especially to thank. My copy of Martin Ferguson Smith's Loeb edition of Lucretius has finally fallen to bits during the writing of this book, a tribute to the fact that I rely on it at all times. His pioneering work on Diogenes of Oenoanda



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has also been a constant inspiration to me in my own studies of Epicureanism. And Diskin Clay, with his book *Lucretius and Epicurus*, has set a dauntingly high standard for anyone hoping to shed new light on Lucretius' poetry through the study of ancient philosophy. My book may be very different from his, but I have been constantly conscious of *Lucretius and Epicurus* as a model.

Many of my Cambridge colleagues, past and present – especially the ancient philosophers Myles Burnyeat, Geoffrey Lloyd, Malcolm Schofield, Nick Denyer, Robert Wardy, Mary Margaret McCabe and Dominic Scott, but also Ted Kenney and others – have engaged with me in debate about Lucretius at various times; and we have had three splendid Lucretius seminars. I have also learnt much from my students, especially from James Warren, with whom I have discussed Lucretian issues on many occasions.

Much of the background to this book lies in the Herculaneum papyri. In the nine months of 1971 I spent in Naples working on these uniquely difficult but rewarding texts, and during numerous return visits thereafter, I benefited from the help and hospitality of many, notably Marcello Gigante, Francesca Longo Auricchio, Albert Henrichs, Adele Tepezino Guerra, Giovanni Indelli, Gioia Rispoli, Salvatore Cerasuolo and Tiziano Dorandi. All of them, and others too numerous to mention, I thank warmly.

Those who have commented on earlier drafts of the material that found its way into this book include Jim Adams, Han Baltussen, Charles Brittain, Myles Burnyeat, Diskin Clay, Tiziano Dorandi, Don Fowler, Bill Furley, David Furley, Monica Gale, Philip Hardie, Ted Kenney, Mieke Koenen, Geoffrey Lloyd, Jaap Mansfeld, Roland Mayer, Catherine Osborne, Michael Reeve, David Runia, Samuel Scolnicov, Bob Sharples, Martin Smith, Voula Tsouna, Paul Vander Waerdt, Richard Wallace, Robert Wardy and David West. The penultimate draft of the entire book was read and commented on by Myles Burnyeat, Tony Long, Tom Rosenmeyer, Malcolm Schofield, Gisela Striker, Voula Tsouna and Robert Wardy. My warm thanks to all of these, and to many others who have contributed to discussion at various stages. Likewise to audiences who have responded to presentations of various parts of the book's thesis: at Berkeley, UCLA, Stanford University, Cornell University, the University of Wales, Duke University, the Bibliotheca Classica at St Petersburg, the Institute of Classical Studies in London, the Oxford Philological Society, the British Academy, the University of Leiden, the University of Durham, the Royal Netherlands Academy of

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Arts and Sciences, and the University of Nottingham. Miriam Griffin was kind enough to lend me some valuable unpublished work of her own on Cicero's philosophical vocabulary. I have been most grateful for the advice of two anonymous referees for Cambridge University Press: even if, as I suspect, they have both been named at least once above, let me take the opportunity to thank them once again. Susan Moore's scrupulous copy-editing has saved me from numerous errors, unclarities and inconsistencies. Finally, warm thanks to Pauline Hire of the Cambridge University Press for all her advice and encouragement.

To the University of Cambridge and to Christ's College I am grateful for granting me sabbatical leave during Michaelmas Term 1996, when the bulk of the book was written.

Over the last twenty-seven years I have enjoyed innumerable conversations about Lucretius and Epicureanism with Tony Long – first my research supervisor, then my collaborator, and at all times a wonderful friend and supporter. It is to him that I have chosen to dedicate this book, with gratitude and affection.

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The old quarrel between poetry and philosophy may have simmered down, but in Lucretian studies the two do not always manage to be as willing allies as they ought to be. Lucretius used poetry to illuminate philosophy. My aim in this book is to use philosophy to illuminate poetry.

Lucretius' achievements as a poet to a large extent lie in his genius for transforming Epicurean philosophy to fit a language, a culture and a literary medium for which it was never intended. In order to understand how he has brought about this transformation, we need to know all we can about *what* he was transforming and how he set about his task.

In Chapter 1, 'The Empedoclean opening', I try to show how he defines the pedigree of his literary medium. It is the poetic genre of the hexameter poem on physics, pioneered by Empedocles. Lucretius' way of proclaiming this, I argue, is to write a proem which emphasises the nature and extent of his debt to Empedocles.

In Chapter 2, 'Two languages, two worlds', I turn to a neglected linguistic aspect of Lucretius' enterprise, his ambiguous relationship with the Greek language. The transition from Epicurus' technical Greek prose to Lucretius' largely untechnical Latin verse is not merely a formidable task of conversion, it is also an opportunity for Lucretius to map out an interrelation between two cultures. The result, I argue, is a powerful message, encoded in his linguistic imagery, about the true universality of Epicureanism, a universality demonstrated by its unique ability to transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries.

In Chapter 3, 'Lucretius the fundamentalist', I defend a quite traditional view, albeit one which is increasingly out of favour. It is that Lucretius had no significant contact with, or knowledge of, contemporary philosophy or science. I argue for a strong version of this claim: Lucretius was a true fundamentalist, nourished on the unmediated scriptures of his school's revered founder. To refute systematically every claim ever made about recent or contemporary influences on Lucretius would

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have resulted in a massive and tedious chapter. But equally, it is important not to content ourselves with impressionistic assertions or appeals to mere likelihood. I have therefore sought in this chapter to present a comprehensive argument for my case – at any rate, one fuller and more systematic than has previously been attempted so far as I am aware. The upshot is that Lucretius really does rely directly on Epicurus' own writings, just as he tells us he does in the proem to book III. His reverence for the master's scriptures is so all-consuming as to obviate any interest in later philosophical or scientific developments.

Chapters 4–5 form a single block. Between them they try to answer the questions (a) what was the hallowed Epicurean material which Lucretius was transforming, and (b) how did he proceed with the task of transforming it? This leads me into another rather traditional activity, one which many will think recent Lucretian scholarship to be well rid of. I mean the activity of *Quellenforschung*. But I hope what I have come up with will not seem like a return to the endless and inconclusive joustings of Lucretian scholarship in the first half of this century. The text which everyone agrees was in some sense Lucretius' ultimate source for physics, and which I among others believe to be his single direct source – I mean Epicurus' great treatise *On nature* – is one about which we possess a huge amount of information. Yet, extraordinarily, this information has never been assembled into a coherent overview, let alone adequately exploited by Lucretian scholars.

Therefore my Chapter 4, 'Epicurus, *On nature*', is devoted to a full-scale evaluation of this work. I try to show its probable structure, all the way down to the sequence of contents in individual books. I also offer a characterisation of its style, and try to explain why it held a unique place in the affections of Epicureans. Finally, I offer a partial chronology of its composition.

In Chapter 5, 'Lucretius' plan and its execution', I give reasons for regarding the first fifteen books of Epicurus' *On nature* as Lucretius' direct source on physics. This leads me on to what I consider the single most significant proposal in my book. I argue that we can discern in Lucretius' text his actual procedure when composing the poem. (Others have made the same claim, with very different results from mine, but they have never based it on an adequate look at *On nature*.) Initially he worked his way through *On nature* fairly systematically, following the order of topics which Epicurus himself had said was the correct one. He omitted a number of topics and individual arguments, but rarely deviated from Epicurus' sequence. However, as he wrote he began to see how the mate-

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rial should be eventually reordered, into something very much like the six-book structure in which we now know it. This crucially included the decision, taken quite early on, to reverse the material of books III and IV from Epicurus' order into that which we now find in the poem.

Much of the fine detail of this restructuring, however, was undertaken in a second phase, in which he only got half-way through reworking the poem. Books I–III are, to all intents and purposes, fully integrated into Lucretius' master plan. But books IV–VI as we have them are, I am convinced, not fully reworked. In Lucretius' proems, which represent the latest stages of his work, I claim to be able to detect what his further plans were for books IV and V – plans which remain unfulfilled in the text as it has come down to us. This in turn seems to me to offer strong support to those who have found themselves unable to believe that book VI, including its closing description of the Athenian plague, is in the final state that Lucretius envisaged for it. I thus end Chapter 5 with a proposal about how far he had got with his plans for the plague passage, based partly on what has proved to be his method of composition in the preceding books of the poem, and partly on a moral motif which I believe to play an important part in Lucretius' grand design.

I thus strongly resist the view, which is threatening to become an orthodoxy of Lucretian scholarship, that the *De rerum natura* is in fact finished. But although I am by implication endorsing the ancient tradition that Lucretius died before putting the final touches to the poem, I have nothing new to say about that tradition, including Jerome's story that Cicero was the posthumous editor. My sole contribution to Lucretian biography is to be found in Chapter 2: Lucretius had been to Greece.

One finding of Chapters 4–5 is that when the voice of Epicurus shows through in Lucretius' text, a primary source used by Epicurus sometimes shows through too. This is Theophrastus' great pioneering doxographical treatise, *Physical opinions*. In Chapter 6, 'The imprint of Theophrastus', I take the same theme forward, charting particular Lucretian passages where Theophrastus is being either borrowed from or implicitly criticised.

Chapter 7 rounds off the story by looking close-up at the structure and argument of a single book, the first. Doing so makes it possible to see in some detail how Lucretius' reworking of his Epicurean material has transformed Epicurus' primarily deductive chain of reasoning into a radically new style of discourse, governed even more by the requirements of rhetoric than by those of philosophical dialectic.

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My single most earnest goal in writing this book is to be able to address readers who have themselves come to Lucretius through the study of Latin poetry. I hope to persuade some of them that there is much to learn about Lucretius, even as a poetic craftsman, by scrutinising the philosophical background to his poem in ways in which it is not usually scrutinised. I recognise that a certain proportion of the material in the later part of the book may be tough going for some readers. But I do very strongly urge even them at the very least to read the first two chapters, to skim the third and fourth, and to read the fifth and seventh. If they so prefer, they have my permission to ignore Chapter 6 altogether.

None of the chapters, with the exception of 3 and 6, assumes much prior philosophical knowledge on the part of the reader. All chapters involve some use of both Greek and Latin, but I have tried to translate all words and excerpts quoted in the main text.

Some of the material for this book can also be found in articles which I have already published or which are currently in press. They are the ones listed in the bibliography under my name for 1984 (Chapter 4), 1989a (Chapter 1), forthcoming (Chapter 7), 1997b (Chapter 5), 1998a (Chapter 6), and 1998b (Chapter 2). In all cases the material has been reworked and expanded for the book, and a good deal of it is entirely new.