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Patrick Boyde

Excerpt

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Introduction
Dante and Lucretius

Diagnosis and prescription

THERE IS NOTHING NEW IN THE CONTENTION THAT IT IS IMPOSSIBLE to separate the study of Dante's poetry from the study of his thought. Benedetto Croce did manage to persuade a whole generation of critics in Italy that the ideological framework and content of the *Comedy* had proved an obstacle to the free expression of Dante's poetic genius; but, in the longer term, Croce's attempt to banish content, structure and context from any discussion of the poem as poetry has only served to convince subsequent generations of their importance and indispensability. In 1980, we are no longer scornful of those early readers of the *Comedy* who sought to express their admiration by describing its author as 'a supreme philosopher, although a layman', 'a man of piercing intellect and tenacious memory, and most assiduous in his studies', 'a theologian to whom no doctrine was unknown', 'a poetic philosopher by profession'.¹

The moment is, then, a propitious one, but it is still scarcely fashionable to insist, as I shall do, that Dante is first and foremost a poet of the intellectual life, or that most of the distinguishing features of his mature poetry derive from his study of philosophy. And although the sky is generally clear, so to speak, there remain some patches of cloud and mist to be dispersed. The specialists on whom we depend for the correct interpretation of Dante's philosophical terminology, arguments and conclusions are sometimes naive and inflexible in their response to nuances of tone, to possible ambiguities and inconsistencies, or simply to the richness and multiplicity of meaning that characterizes great poetry. Literary critics, on the other hand, who show themselves to be subtle and sensitive in their close reading of the text may seem curiously little interested in *what* Dante is saying or *why*. In Italy, Dante's Catholicism can become a serious stumbling-block to readers outside the schools and universities, and many young Italians seem to repudiate the *Comedy* as part of the process by which they lose their religious faith. English students tend to misread Dante in different and contrasting ways: either they become alienated by the rigour, abstraction, schematization and reverence for authority that are among the hallmarks of thirteenth-century thought; or they are dazzled and blinded by their first discovery of

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the clarity, certainty and universal order embodied in the medieval world view. In general, also, many people misunderstand Dante's position because they are unable to draw back far enough from his work to see the resemblances between his culture and our own, or because they never study his thought in sufficient detail to be able to distinguish his attitudes and ideas from those of his teachers and opponents.

These in my view are the symptoms of a mild but persistent malaise that afflicts the study of Dante today at all levels of competence. And my diagnosis of the symptoms naturally points to the remedy here proposed. In this introduction I shall give a preliminary sketch of my personal understanding of the interrelationship between 'true knowledge' and 'poetry' in the *Comedy*; and I shall do this in the form of an extended comparison between Dante and Lucretius. In the eleven chapters that follow I shall offer a detailed and systematic exposition of the ideas and beliefs that lie at the heart of all Dante's thought – his ideas and beliefs, that is, concerning the place of man in the cosmos. That will make up one-half of the book. The other will consist of a no less detailed but deliberately *unsystematic* analysis of the many different ways in which Dante used and transformed this conceptual raw material to form the body of his poem. The two halves are not separated. In some chapters it is the exposition of ideas that comes first; in others it is the literary analysis; in others again they are presented simultaneously. But each presupposes and complements the other at all times, and every chapter is a compound of both elements.

The contents of this book are no more original than the proposition from which it takes its departure and which it is intended to illuminate. Although many of the details, connections and emphases occurred to me for the first time in the heat of composition, there can be no doubt that the seeds had been sown by my predecessors in the field, whose work I had read and only imperfectly remembered or understood. A book of this kind is built from materials that have been quarried by countless scholars, critics, commentators and popularizers from the fourteenth century down to the present day. But the enterprise will have been justified if the expository sections are clear and correct and if the more literary analysis is found to be stimulating and persuasive. If a cure proves effective, it does not greatly matter whether its success was due to a new drug, a traditional herbal remedy, or to the bedside manner of the physician.

Dante and Lucretius: the nature of the comparison

The names of Dante and the Roman poet, Lucretius, are often associated. They are the 'thinking' poets, the 'philosophical' poets *par excellence*. They are perhaps the only two writers who are allowed the titles of greatness in poetry and professional competence in philosophy. But the

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first vital point to grasp is that there was no direct link between them. Whereas Dante knew the works of Virgil intimately, it is quite possible that he never consciously registered the name of Lucretius; and it is quite certain that he could not have known more than a few lines from the *De rerum natura*, as quoted by one of the Latin grammarians or a Father of the Church: in Dante's lifetime the poem seems to have survived in just three manuscripts, all buried in monastic libraries north of the Alps. If there are any essential similarities between Lucretius's poem and the *Comedy*, they cannot be ascribed to the influence of the one work on the other. They would have arisen because two men of genius and of kindred temperament made a similar response to a similar experience of life, poetry, politics and philosophy in cultural situations that in certain key respects are uncannily alike.

In what follows I shall try to describe the similarities that I find important, and to suggest why they should be central to our appreciation of both poems. But to avoid any misunderstanding, I must make it clear from the outset that the differences between the two cases are far more striking, and, in the long run, more important. The two ideologies, for example, are almost diametrically opposed on every major issue from the structure of matter to the creation of the universe, from divine providence to the meaning of history, and from the nature of human happiness to the immortality of the soul. Dante's poem is a work of fiction, telling a story that is anything but a framework on which to hang philosophical discourses. The *De rerum natura* is didactic and expository throughout; its structure is that of a treatise; and the philosophy which it expounds is far narrower in range, less demanding intellectually, and a great deal less satisfying. However, it is precisely because of these radical differences, because Lucretius had no influence on Dante, and because his philosophy is so much simpler and his poem more straightforwardly didactic, that he can help us to see Dante in a different and helpful perspective.

The resemblances to be described will be presented under four main heads. I shall point first to certain parallels in the political and social circumstances of Dante's Florence and Lucretius's Rome. I shall then summarize what we know, or what we can reconstruct, about the early development of the two men, and I shall argue that they both underwent a kind of 'conversion' to a philosophical system at a time when they had already reached maturity as poets. Next, I shall call attention to important common elements in the two distinct bodies of knowledge which Lucretius and Dante sought to master and expound, and I shall dwell in particular on the close relationship between the ethical thought and the physical science. Finally, I shall discuss the state of language and literature in the two cities, and consider the nature of the challenge to which both poets had to respond as they strove to express or recreate in

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vernacular verse the concepts and insights that they had discovered in the sophisticated prose of a foreign culture-language.

I must also give notice that the various points of comparison and contrast will not be spelt out in detail until after I have given a connected account of Lucretius's circumstances, thought and poetry under the four heads that have just been indicated. The reader may rest assured, however, that nothing will be said about the Roman poet that is not relevant to a fuller understanding of Dante.

Lucretius: the political and cultural background

We know next to nothing about Lucretius from reliable, independent sources. But he seems to have been a Roman citizen, who lived in the first half of the first century B.C., and, in spite of some dissentient voices, a majority of scholars believe that he came from the kind of background that assimilated him to the Roman governing class. And as in the case of Dante, these simple assumptions concerning period, place and social class are vitally important.²

Rome was still a republic and had extended its power by force of arms to cover not only Italy but the whole of the Mediterranean basin. The energy of its citizens was nothing less than extraordinary, revealing itself not only in Rome's continuing strength and expansion abroad, but in the bitter dissensions at home, where we find electoral corruption, constitutional gerrymandering, and abuse of high office for personal advantage, against a background of an unceasing struggle for power between individuals acting in the name of a class or party.

Lucretius's early years were marked by a war (91–87 B.C.), in which Rome's immediate neighbours in Italy fought to obtain the privileges of Roman citizenship, and by the bitter and violent internal strife – at times erupting into civil war – which is associated above all with the names of Marius and Sulla. After Sulla's *coup d'état* and brief dictatorship, the rule of the senate was re-established in 79 B.C., but the party struggles continued, and in the year 63 a conspiracy headed by Catiline nearly led to an insurrection in the city itself. Not long after Lucretius's death, Julius Caesar, the political heir to Marius, was to defy the Senate and cross the Rubicon (49). Again there was open civil war, first between Caesar and Sulla's lieutenant, Pompey; then, after Caesar's short-lived triumph, between Octavian and Mark Antony. Peace would come only with Octavian's victory at Actium in 31 B.C. and at the price of a permanent dictatorship.

And yet within those same years of domestic struggles leading to the downfall of republican institutions, Pompey had conducted a victorious campaign in the Near East (67–62); while Caesar finally subdued Gaul and made successful punitive expeditions into Germany and Britain

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(59–50). It was also a time of renewed activity in all branches of literature, which had languished after the death of Plautus, Ennius and Terence, the great authors of the second century (Terence was the last of the three to die, in 159 B.C.). Greek had remained the language of higher education, and the relationship of Greek to Latin was almost exactly like that of medieval Latin to the Romance vernaculars in Dante's time.³ But now, in the last years of the republic, there was a deliberate and concerted effort to make the Latin language and Latin literature in all respects equal to Greek. Lucretius's contemporaries were Varro, Cicero, Caesar, Catullus and Sallust, all of whom were born between 116 and 86 B.C. His was the generation that finally forged a language equal to all the demands of poetry and philosophy, the language that would be used by the great writers of the Augustan age, from Virgil (born in 70 B.C.), to Horace, Livy, Propertius and Ovid (born in 43).

Lucretius: a late convert to philosophy?

In the *De rerum natura* Lucretius reveals himself as a man in the maturity of his powers who can address a prominent noble as friend and equal, or at least as a 'client' would address his 'patron'. He has clearly lived in the world and will appeal naturally and confidently to his own personal observations and to the experiences he has shared with his readers: *vidi* and *ut videmus* come to his lips with equal readiness. He is a master and lover of language, proud of his skill as a poet, and no less eager for recognition and the laurel crown than Dante and Petrarch were to be.⁴ And his poem champions an ethic which ran clean counter to official Roman morality, with its insistence on civic duty, fortitude, military prowess and the due observance of religious rites, as it also ran counter to the actual way of life of the Roman upper class which was characterized by greed, ostentation and 'freebooting political ambition'.⁵ Lucretius tells us nothing directly about himself or his life, but these facts together with other aspects of his poem make one suspect that his early life had been not unlike Dante's. Wary though we must be of conjecture, it is not groundless to speculate that as a boy and youth his education had been practical and literary in bias rather than philosophical; that as a young man he had written poetry imitating the admired models of the day, with a particular regard for the satires of Lucilius and above all for the epic verse of Ennius (for whom Lucretius expresses a reverence very like that of Dante for Virgil);⁶ and that in his adult life he underwent something approaching a religious conversion to the moral system of the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–270).⁷ And it is a matter of fact and not conjecture that he made it his mission to spread the 'good news' among his fellow Romans, using his mastery of poetic language and form to win their attention, to mingle instruction with delight, and to move them to

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reform and renew themselves within through the power of his advocacy. *Mutatis mutandis*, all these points can be paralleled in the case of Dante and his poem, and in both cases they have far reaching consequences.

Epicurus's ethic: (a) Happiness

We must now look a little more closely at Epicurus's teaching and the nature of Lucretius's response, concentrating obviously on those features which will most illuminate Dante's more complex response to the Christian Aristotelianism of his day.

Epicurus was first and foremost a moral philosopher who taught the science of living. And like the founders of almost every other philosophical or religious sect in antiquity, he regarded his teaching as a demonstration of the way to achieve happiness.

It must be noted that he himself did not use this word. He preferred to speak of 'pleasure' (*hēdonē, voluptas*); and his conception of pleasure was passive and negative. Both the key terms in his philosophy begin with the negative or privative particle *a-*, since pleasure is said to consist in *aponía*, meaning freedom from physical pain or want, and in *ataraxía*, meaning freedom from mental anxiety and stress.

But although his concept of *voluptas* may seem to be far removed from Aristotle's *felicitas* or from the *gaudium* and *beatitudo aeterna* later to be promised by Christian writers, we must not be misled by Epicurus's taste for understatement and his laudable concern to find a minimum definition in which all men can concur. Nor must we be misled by the perversions and distortions which his teaching suffered at the hands of his enemies – perversions which gave 'Epicurean' its current meaning of one 'who lives for the pleasure of the senses alone'.⁸ His emphasis clearly falls on *ataraxía*, not on *aponía*, on mind and not on body. It is abundantly clear from Epicurus's writings that for him happiness or pleasure demands a secluded and frugal life lived in the company of like-minded people who have abandoned the pursuit of possessions and political power for the sake of friendship and meditative contemplation. Epicurus did not deny the existence of the gods, and his account of their mode of being is clearly a sublimated view of the happiness possible to man on earth (as Lucretius will put it: 'nothing should prevent us from leading a life worthy of the gods – *dignam dis degere vitam*', III, 322). It is less sublimated and less sublime than Dante's vision of the joys of the blessed in heaven, but it is no different in principle. And it is certainly not ignoble or unworthy when described by Lucretius – or by Tennyson, in this free imitation:

The Gods, who haunt
The lucid interspace of world and world,

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Where never creeps a cloud, or moves a wind,
 Nor ever falls the least white star of snow,
 Nor ever lowest roll of thunder moans,
 Nor sound of human sorrow mounts to mar
 Their sacred everlasting calm.⁹

Epicurus's ethic: (b) 'The truth shall make you free'

The other essential feature of Epicurus's ethic is its claim to be founded on the truth. And this in two senses. It rests on the facts about human nature as determined by dispassionate rational inquiry, setting aside all wishful thinking and all forms of fear. And recognition of those incontrovertible but unwelcome facts is the first indispensable step on the road to happiness. Ignorance does not know the limits set by nature to our power and possessions; ignorance attributes disaster to the gods and seeks to propitiate them by undignified and barbarous sacrifices; ignorance lives in fear of punishment in an afterlife and cannot be happy.¹⁰ What Epicurus says in effect is: human nature is like this; this is the happiness possible to man; this is what you must do if you want to achieve that happiness.¹¹ At its noblest (which is to say, as expressed by a Lucretius) the essence of his teaching can be conveyed in the sublime promise made by Jesus and reported in the gospel of St John (8.32): 'And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.'

'If only men could know', writes Lucretius; 'if only men could know the causes of the heaviness they feel in their minds, if only they knew where that dead weight of misery in their hearts comes from, they would not lead the kind of lives we now see them lead, not knowing what they want and always moving from place to place as if they could set the burden down':

*Si possent homines, proinde ac sentire videntur
 pondus inesse animo quod se gravitate fatiget,
 e quibus id fiat causis quoque noscere et unde
 tanta mali tamquam moles in pectore constet,
 haud ita vitam agerent, ut nunc plerumque videmus
 quid sibi quisque velit nescire et quaerere semper
 commutare locum quasi onus deponere possit.* (III, 1053–9)

Moreover, it was not just the ethical teaching that Lucretius took from his master. Epicurus also taught him the pure love of wisdom, the delight of knowing a truth as true, of seeing with the eyes of the intellect, of hunting down a truth by following its tracks, penetrating the dark recesses of its hiding place and dragging it into the light of day; of seeing how one fact illuminates others so that the dark night of unreason no

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longer conceals the path, and the journey ends in a vision of the innermost secrets of nature:

. . . the lessons, one by one,
Brighten each other, no dark night will keep you,
Pathless, astray, from ultimate vision and light,
All things illumined in each other's radiance.¹² (I, 1115–17)

Epicurus's physical philosophy

As these lines show, the truth which allows one to dwell in the calm temples of the wise is not narrowly conceived. It takes in the whole universe and the whole of experience. The proper study of mankind is man, but the facts of human nature which lead to the Epicurean definition of happiness cannot be understood until one has grasped the facts about birth, growth and death in the rest of the cosmos. These cannot be understood unless it is known that the universe consists of matter and empty space and nothing else, and that matter itself is composed of an infinite number of almost infinitesimally small, indivisible particles (atoms), which are in eternal motion.¹³

The first two books of *De rerum natura* are given over to the study of atoms and their properties. And when Lucretius deals directly with man in the third book, his first concern is to show that man is no exception to the universal laws. He marshals more than twenty arguments to prove that the human frame, including what we call the 'soul' and the 'mind' (*anima* and *animus*), consists of atomic particles and vacancy and nothing else; that the 'soul-particles', dispersed as they are throughout the body, cannot survive as a separate entity after the dissolution of all the other atoms that form the body; and that death is final: only the atoms are indivisible and eternal. These are the physical facts on which the ethic rests. But the ethic itself is extremely simple and does not require or receive a detailed exposition. Topics drawn from the natural sciences still predominate in the three remaining books; and although the poem was probably left unfinished, there can be no doubt that these proportions are deliberate and justified. Epicurus set forth the *whole* nature of things: 'suerit/. . . *omnem* rerum naturam pandere dictis'. And Lucretius who follows in his master's footsteps will not let his reader escape until he has heard the 'full flood of his arguments'. 'Right reason and the nature of things compel', 'vera tamen ratio *naturaque* rerum/cogit . . .'.¹⁴ 'I will try to hold you with my verses,' he writes, 'while you take in the whole nature of things and see the practical benefit':

. . . dum percipis *omnem*
naturam rerum ac persentis utilitatem. (IV, 24–5)

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So it was to the moralist Epicurus that Lucretius owed his full discovery of nature and the scientific study of the working of the universe. His delight in the subject is everywhere apparent, and nowhere more so than in his response to the whole. The mingled emotions of horror and *divina voluptas* which Lucretius feels as he follows Epicurus, ‘travelling in mind and thought throughout the whole immensity and far beyond the flaming ramparts of the universe’, are superbly conveyed in his poetry. As a poet he is nowhere more exciting than when he writes of the eternity that has gone before us and will come after, or when he writes of infinite space and the eternal movement of the atoms:

There is therefore a limitless abyss of space, such that even the dazzling flashes of the lightning cannot traverse it in their course, racing through an interminable tract of time, nor can they even shorten the distance still to be covered:¹⁵

est igitur natura loci spatiumque profundi,
quod neque clara suo percurrere fulmina cursu
perpetuo possint aevi labentia tractu
nec prorsum facere ut restet minus ire meando. (I, 1002–5)

Lucretius and sensation

Like Dante, Lucretius is always admired for his frequent and vivid rendering of concrete detail. Unexpected similes and descriptions show us the shifting iridescent colours round a pigeon’s neck, the twitching and growling of dogs as they dream, children running out to meet their father and filling his heart with a silent sweetness, children afraid of the dark, or wetting the bed in their sleep, the passing cart which shakes the whole building, hot iron screaming when plunged into cold water, or forcibly submerged logs leaping out of the water on release. All these and many others like them came to Lucretius from his study of philosophy.¹⁶

Happiness, we remember, depends on knowledge; and all knowledge depends on the senses.¹⁷ Our senses cannot detect the processes by which puddles dry in the wind or clothes become damp in the sea air. They cannot see the ring, ploughshare or paving-stones being worn away over the years; they cannot see food being carried to every part of the body. But they do detect the products or the results of these processes. And from these results we may infer by use of our reason that the ultimate constituents of matter are those atomic particles moving in the void, even though they ‘lie far below the threshold of the senses’.¹⁸

Of course we have to be on our guard. We have to understand the process of sensation itself (and Lucretius will devote two-thirds of the fourth book to the subject). Otherwise the senses may lead us astray. Even if we set aside the special case of the sufferer from jaundice, a rectangular tower appears rounded if seen from a distance; at a greater

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distance, a flock of sheep and frisking lambs can seem no more than 'whiteness motionless against a green hill', and at a greater distance still even the tumult of an army exercise can appear as 'brightness still on the plain'. Stars seem to move against the clouds, and an oar thrust under water seems to bend. Boys who have made themselves giddy think that the walls are spinning and that the roof is about to collapse. But all these are recognized as 'illusions'; and it is the senses themselves that uncover the deception. Paradoxically, the greatest threat to the truth may come from the mind, from the erroneous interpretation which the mind 'adds to' the evidence, seeing and hearing only what it expects to see or hear.¹⁹

It is for these reasons, then, that Lucretius will never weary of repeating that we must put our trust in the senses. Unless the senses tell the truth, all reasoning must be false.²⁰ If we doubt, deny or set aside their evidence, we shall remain in a state of ignorance and superstition. Superstition breeds fear; ignorance makes us pursue impossible goals by impossible means: both lead to misery. That is why Lucretius will boldly affirm at one point that the senses are the foundations of life and happiness: '*fundamenta quibus nixatur vita salusque*'.²¹

This attitude to the senses, in turn, explains why his poem is so rich in close and accurate representation of what we see, hear, touch, taste and smell. The detailed descriptions are not there simply to give delight (although they do give delight; and what could be more appropriate in an Epicurean poem than *blanda voluptas*?). Nor are they there simply because Lucretius is a superb teacher who can always find fresh examples and analogies from familiar experience which will help an inexperienced audience to grasp and retain abstruse philosophical concepts. Many of his so-called similes are not similes at all in the conventional sense. He does not pick out likenesses between unlike and distinct actions or things. He is citing instances from everyday life of the cosmic laws and processes which we must try to understand, but which escape our attention because of their very familiarity, or because of their magnitude, or because they lie below the threshold of perception. He is not giving us descriptions in addition to the physical and ethical doctrine. He is giving the foundations on which those simple doctrines rest. The reader must learn to put his trust in what he can see and above all in what he can touch. Then his *vita* and *salus* will be assured.²² He will not attribute natural phenomena to the activity of the gods, nor attempt to influence their decisions and thereby seek out tyrannical masters of his own invention.²³

Epicurus's rejection of physical determinism

Vita salusque. As we have seen, the physical doctrine may bulk large, but it remains subservient to the ethical teaching. There was, however, one point at which Epicurean physics and ethics threatened to drift apart or