INTRODUCTION

On ne peut lire Lucrèce sans penser quelquefois que, par une fatale méprise, il a été détourné de sa véritable voie, qu'il était naturellement appelé vers un autre ordre de doctrines.

So wrote Patin[1] in 1868. His portrait of Lucretius as a man unconsciously torn between a professed allegiance to Epicureanism and an emotional attraction to religious ideas has cast a long shadow over modern criticism of the *De Rerum Natura* (henceforth referred to as *DRN*). Until recently, it was commonplace to speak of a conflict between philosophy and poetry or of internal contradictions in the poem.[2] Remarks of this kind have tended to be made particularly of passages where Lucretius uses mythological imagery, or personifies natural phenomena. Patin himself singles out Lucretius' personification of nature as *natura creatrix* or *natura gubernans*, and his ecphrasis of the rites of the Magna Mater in book 2, as examples of his 'spiritualité involontaire'; and more recent critics have followed his lead. Gavin Townend, for example, speaks of Lucretius' 'fascination' with mythology and his 'delight in relating... myths', despite the fact that 'normally he eschews myth, as totally misleading'. In the same volume, D. E. W. Wormell suggests that, in personifying *Natura*, 'Lucretius' intellect may have parted company with his imagination.'[3]

These statements result from what I believe to be a fundamentally misconceived view of the relationship between poetry and philosophy in the *DRN*, for which the poet may be in part

[1] Patin (1868), p. 127.

[2] See, for example, Rozelaar (1943); Regenbogen (1961); Wormell (1965); and Townend (1965). The idea that there is a conflict between emotion and intellect and/or poetry and philosophy in the *DRN* underlies numerous interpretations of individual passages: see, for example, Perret (1935); Numminen (1962); Perelli (1966–7). More recently, modified versions of Patin's thesis have been adopted by Ackermann (1979) and Caranci (1988).

[3] Townend (1965), p. 100; Wormell (1965), p. 53.

responsible. The famous image of the honeyed cup (1.936ff. = 4.11ff.) portrays the poetry as something separate from and subordinate to the philosophy of the *DRN*, as a sweet coating which merely covers the surface of the bitter doctrine and so induces the reader to swallow it. Lucretius is so eager to justify his un-Epicurean use of verse, playing down the rôle of his poetry by contrast with the healing power of Epicurean philosophy, that he perhaps underestimates his own genius. In the *DRN*, the poetry is much more than an external sweetener applied to the philosophy of Epicurus. As much modern criticism has demonstrated,[4] far from conflicting with Epicurean doctrine, every poetic device, from alliteration to personification, is deliberately adapted to the clear and persuasive presentation of Epicurus' *aurea dicta*. The aim of this book is to show that this is as true of the poet's use of myth as it is of his similes or repetitions.

The two full-length works on the subject which have appeared in recent years, Erich Ackermann's *Lukrez und der Mythos* (1979) and C. M. Melis' unpublished dissertation 'Naturae Species Ratioque: Myth and Meaning in Lucretius' (1984), both emphasize the didactic function of mythological elements in the poem. Yet neither work does justice to the coherence and originality of Lucretius' views of myth. Ackermann paints a somewhat fragmented picture of a rationalist but eclectic poet, influenced by allegorism, Euhemerism and philosophical criticism of myth in different parts of the poem. While rejecting Patin's 'anti-Lucrèce chez Lucrèce', he is still influenced by the notion that the poet felt an involuntary fascination with myth, and was unwillingly attracted by its *Sirenengesang*.[5] Despite frequent allusions to *modern* theories of the nature of myth, he makes little attempt to discover the poet's own views on the subject. Melis, on the other hand, explicitly sets out to demonstrate that the poet's approach to myth is both internally coherent and also consistent with Epicurean principles. Her thesis is that Lucretius believes myth to contain 'a grain of truth', which can be uncovered by means of allegorism and

[4] See, for example, West (1969), *passim*; Pasoli (1970); Snyder (1980), esp. ch. 5.
[5] See especially ch. 8, on *DRN* 4.572–94.

etymology. There is, however, a major weakness in her argument: she never explains *why* Lucretius should have wished to look for an underlying meaning in myth, when, so far as we can tell, Epicurus simply dismissed it without a backward glance. Her claim that Lucretius set supreme store by etymology because of its 'natural' origins is also open to question,[6] and leads her to some curious allegorical interpretations of her own, for which there is little textual support.[7] Finally, her desire to demonstrate Lucretius' consistency results in still more strained interpretations of the text: to claim, for example, that 'Liber' is a 'symbol of atomic death', simply because verbs like *fluere* and *liqui* are used elsewhere in the poem as metaphors for the loss of atoms resulting in decline and death, seems at once over-subtle and heavy handed. On the one hand, the associations which she detects are far from obvious; on the other, the assumption that Lucretius uses the same symbolism consistently throughout the *DRN* is dubious, at best.[8] An approach closer to my own is

[6] See Schrijvers (1974) on the relation between 'nature' and 'culture' in the Epicurean analysis of language.

[7] E.g. pp. 129ff., where she re-allegorizes the allegoresis of the rites of the Magna Mater (2.600–60) along Epicurean lines: Cybele's mural crown refers to the 'generative activities of Nature', because the verb *sustinere* is used elsewhere in the poem of the renewal of the world by atoms received from the surrounding void; the phrase *quamvis effera proles | officiis debet molliri victa parentum* (2.604f.) is 'really teaching us that Mother Nature tamed her savage offspring by building them into lasting and caring relationships, which succeeded the reckless sexual encounters of previous generations (5.962–5)'; and so on. It is difficult to see how the poet could, as Melis claims, ridicule Stoic allegorism while seriously proposing a still more ludicrously subtle allegoresis of his own.

[8] Cf. Anderson (1960). I have reservations about Anderson's conclusions and his use of the term discontinuity, but his article at least shows that caution is necessary in applying the symbolic meaning of an item in one context to the interpretation of other passages. The major flaw in the interpretations of both Melis and Anderson seems to me to be an over-simplification of the way Lucretius' symbolism operates. The connotations of a particular word or image are determined both by its immediate context and by resonances with other parts of the poem. Thus, we cannot isolate a specific symbol and assign it a univocal meaning which is either constant throughout the poem (Melis) or sharply 'discontinuous' depending on whether it appears in a positive, negative or neutral context (Anderson). Rather, the reader's interpretation of each symbol shifts back and forth as it appears in new contexts, and suggests connexions between different parts of the poem. To put it another way, any reading of the poem must be both diachronic and synchronic, and the recurrence of an image forces the reader to reassess earlier passages in which it has occurred, as well as affecting the interpretation of the immediate context and later instances of similar imagery. For an example of this kind of complex symbolism, see the discussion of the imagery of light and the sun in the *DRN*, pp. 202–6 below.

adopted by Schrijvers (1970), Clay (1983) and Hardie (1986). Clay deals only briefly with the subject,[9] but convincingly characterizes Lucretius' mythological 'digressions' as part of an overall strategy whereby the poet encourages the reader to look through the 'honeyed surface' of his words to their inner meaning, through *naturae species* to *naturae ratio*. He also offers a technical Epicurean explanation for Lucretius' approach to myth: mythical figures like the Muses are examples of 'the constructs the mind adds to its real experience: what Epicurus would call *προσδοξαζόμενα* ...'[10] Schrijvers also sees the mythological passages as part of a comprehensive didactic strategy. He argues that throughout the poem, and simultaneously with his account of Epicurean physics, the poet attempts to glorify the founder of the philosophy by means of implicit comparisons between his achievement, the *maiestas cognita rerum*, and the *mira* and *summa* of the universe. Lucretius instils a sense of wonder in the reader, and directs it towards Epicurus and his philosophy. Myth plays a part in this scheme, because one of its inherent properties is to arouse wonder and awe (*fascinans* and *tremendum*, in Schrijvers' terminology); but it is nevertheless also misleading, as the poet is at pains to make clear. His aim is thus to lead the reader *per falsa ad vera*. There is much of value in this approach, although Schrijvers is prone to exaggerate the centrality of the encomiastic element in the poem. I would also dispute his characterization of Lucretius' exploitation of myth as *per falsa ad vera*, which I believe underestimates the subtlety and originality of the poet's approach. For reasons which I hope will become clear, I believe that Lucretius sees myth as a *mixture* of truth and falsehood, which, if handled correctly, can corroborate *vera ratio*. Rather than teaching truth by means of falsehood, he exploits the truth concealed in myth to strengthen his exposition of Epicurean philosophy, while rejecting its 'literal' meaning.

Hardie's treatment of myth in Lucretius is a preliminary to his study of myth in Virgil, who, he argues, deliberately re-mythologizes phenomena which Lucretius had demythologized.

[9] Clay (1983), pp. 45–9, 226–50.
[10] P. 49; cf. pp. 229–34. The theoretical basis for Lucretius' use of myth is discussed in ch. 4 below.

He captures well the 'predatory' nature of Lucretius' relationship with myth, whereby the poet exploits mythological themes and images, while ostentatiously rejecting the myths themselves. He is also very sensitive to latent mythological themes in the *DRN*, particularly gigantomachic and epic imagery.[11]

In what follows, it is my intention to build on these ideas in order to show how Lucretius follows a consistent and comprehensive rhetorical, poetic and philosophical strategy in his use of myth. Far from betraying the unacknowledged hankering of an inner 'anti-Lucrèce' for the spirituality which Epicurean materialism excludes from the universe, the mythological passages are the product of a carefully reasoned response to the traditions of philosophical criticism and defence of myth and poetry. It can be argued that, far from exemplifying the conflict of philosophy and poetry, such passages constitute Lucretius' most triumphant reconciliation of those old enemies.

[11] See further chs. 3 and 5 below.

1

THE PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND: GREEK MYTH AND MYTHOLOGY

Lucretius tells us in the proem to book 3 that he regards his poem as an imitation of the achievement of Epicurus, in whose footsteps he follows (3–4). Epicurus is not only *rerum inventor*, but the oracle whose *aurea dicta* the poet records (9–13). Yet Lucretius did not write in an intellectual vacuum filled only by the master's inimitable writings. Epicurus' laconic pronouncements on the subject of myth and poetry[1] give limited assistance to the critic in interpreting the mythological 'digressions' which punctuate the *DRN*. In order to understand the reasons both for Epicurus' hostility to myth and for Lucretius' reaction against this hostility, we need to set the works against the philosophical context in which they were written, and examine the conflicting theories of the nature and significance of myth which were current in Hellenistic Greece and in Rome at the end of the Republican period.

The distinction between myth and mythology which I have drawn in the title to this chapter is based on Detienne's remarks in *L'invention de la mythologie* concerning the double meaning of the term *mythologie*, which denotes both a body of myths and the study of that body.[2] Although, as Detienne argues, it is not possible to separate these entirely, we might for the sake of convenience term the former 'myth' and the latter 'mythology'.[3] Both have a place in the history of Greek philosophy: on the one hand writers such as Plato or (perhaps more importantly for our purposes) Parmenides and Empedocles used myth as a vehicle for the presentation of philosophical ideas; on the other, the

[1] See pp. 14–18 below. [2] Detienne (1981), especially pp. 16f.
[3] It has not been possible to maintain this distinction throughout: elsewhere I have used the term 'mythology' in its more usual sense 'a body of myths, esp. that relating to a particular person, or belonging to the religious literature or tradition of a country or people' (*OED*, *s.v.*).

'mythological' tradition has a long history, and the value and nature of myth were the subject of heated debate from the archaic period onwards. The influence of both these trends can be detected in Lucretius' approach to myth, and the uses to which he puts it in the *DRN*.

The criticism of myth in antiquity

Any discussion of ancient attitudes towards myth must begin by confronting the difficult question of whether the Greeks and Romans actually had a unified conception of myth, as, for instance, a body of traditional stories distinct from other kinds of fiction, or from fields of enquiry such as theology and history.[4] The Greek word *μῦθος* is remarkably difficult to pin down: LSJ offers a series of translations ranging from 'word, speech' through 'tale, story, narrative' to 'fiction' and 'legend, myth'.[5] In earlier Greek literature, the term is practically synonymous with *λόγος*,[6] with which it is so often contrasted in later periods. Subsequently, *μῦθος* is frequently employed simply as a blanket term for anything about which an author is sceptical. Thus, Herodotus criticizes the *μῦθοι* of Homer and the poets,[7] only to be reprimanded by Thucydides and Aristotle for his acceptance of *τὸ μυθῶδες* ('that which resembles *muthos*').[8] The contrast with *λόγος* goes back at least as far as Pindar, who rejects the traditional *μῦθος* of Tantalus and Pelops in favour of his own *ἀλαθὴς λόγος* ('truthful account').[9] In this instance, *μῦθος* could perhaps be translated by our own 'myth', but elsewhere in Pindar[10] it denotes persuasive and deceptive speech, again contrasted with 'truth'. It is also noteworthy that the historians

[4] Cf. Detienne (1981), p. 104: 'Pas plus dans les enquêtes hérodotéens que dans les poèmes de Pindare, le "mythe" n'est pas un objet.'
[5] Cf. the ancient lexicographers' standard definition (derived from Aphthonius *Prog.* 1): *λόγος ψευδής, εἰκονίζων τὴν ἀλήθειαν* ('a fictional narrative, which is an image of the truth').
[6] See, for example, the fragments of Empedocles, where the terms are used as virtual synonyms; Xenoph. fr. 1.14, which speaks of *muthoi* and *logoi* about the gods; and Hes. *Op.* 106, where the 'myth' of the Five Ages is referred to as a *logos*.
[7] E.g. Hdt. 2.23 and 2.45. [8] Thuc. 1.21; Arist. *GA* 756b. [9] *Ol.* 1.28ff.
[10] E.g. *Nem.* 7.21–30 and 8.32f.

do not make any systematic distinction between myth and history, although both Herodotus and Thucydides are concerned to exclude elements which they regard as obviously fabulous.[11] The Hellenistic grammarians[12] divided *ἱστορία* ('narrative') into three categories: *ἀληθῆ* ('truthful'), *ὡς ἀληθῆ* ('resembling truth') and *ψευδῆ* ('untrue' or 'fictional'). The third category is often identified with *μῦθος/fabula*, and usually defined as involving 'unbelievable' elements like composite monsters and metamorphoses. But narratives concerning gods and heroes could be included in *ἀληθὴς ἱστορία* ('truthful narrative'; e.g. Sext. Emp. *Adv. Math.* 1.253). In general, both 'historical' and 'fictional' narratives tend to be classified in terms of probability or verisimilitude: the 'truth' of an account depends on whether the events it relates are physically possible, not on whether they actually occurred.[13] It may be misleading to translate *ἀληθής* as 'true' in this context: the concept which the grammarians have in mind seems to resemble verisimilitude or authenticity, rather than historicity.

When we turn to Latin literature, we find a similar state of affairs. The nearest Latin equivalent to the Greek *μῦθος* is *fabula*, with a similarly wide range of meanings, from the neutral 'talk, conversation', through 'slanderous talk, gossip', 'a fictitious story or report, tale, fiction', 'a legend, myth', to the more technical sense 'a play, drama'.[14] The *muthos/logos* dichotomy is paralleled in Latin by a not infrequent opposition between *fabula* and *res*: the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, for example, defines *fabula* as that which *neque veras neque veri similes continet res*.[15] Here again, there is no clear distinction between myth and simple falsehood or other kinds

[11] The ancient historians' criterion for determining what is or is not fabulous was what Paul Veyne calls 'the doctrine of present things': 'the past resembles the present, or, in other words, the marvellous does not exist'. (Veyne (1988), p. 14. Cf. p. 71).

[12] See e.g. Sext. Emp. *Adv. Math.* 1.252f.

[13] See further Puglisi (1985); Meijering (1987), pp. 72–90; Woodman (1988), pp. 70–116; Feeney (1991), pp. 42–5 and 250–60.

[14] *OLD*, *s.v.*

[15] *Rhet. Her.* 1.13; cf. Cic. *ND* 3.77, *Inv.* 1.27, Quint. *Inst.* 2.4.2, Isid. *Orig.* 1.40.1. For Servius (*ad Aen.* 1.235), the distinction between *fabula* and *argumentum/historia* is one of physical possibility, regardless of whether the events narrated actually occurred. Thus Pasiphae's story belongs to the former category and Phaedra's to the latter.

of fiction, although historians and philosophers alike may mark their rejection of certain traditions by denoting them as *fabulae*.[16]

Clearly, then, when the very words *μῦθος* and *fabula* are so imprecise in their reference, 'ancient criticism of myth' will not be a straightforward subject of enquiry. It is somewhat simplified, however, by the close association in the ancient world between myth and poetry. This connexion can be exemplified by two quotations. The first is from Plato's *Phaedo* (61b), where Socrates remarks that he had versified the fables of Aesop:

ἐννοήσας ὅτι τὸν ποιητὴν δέοι, εἴπερ μέλλοι ποιητὴς εἶναι, ποιεῖν μύθους, ἀλλ' οὐ λόγους.

realizing that a poet, if he is really to be a poet, must compose *muthoi*, not *logoi*.

Similarly, Plutarch observes in *De Audiendis Poetis* (16c):

θυσίας μὲν ἀχόρους καὶ ἀναύλους ἴσμεν, οὐκ ἴσμεν δ' ἄμυθον οὐδ' ἀψευδῆ ποίησιν. τὰ δ' Ἐμπεδοκλέους ἔπη καὶ Παρμενίδου καὶ θηριακὰ Νικάνδρου καὶ γνωμολογίαι Θεόγνιδος λόγοι εἰσὶν κιχράμενοι παρὰ ποιητικῆς ὥσπερ ὄχημα τὸ μέτρον καὶ τὸν ὄγκον, ἵνα τὸ πεζὸν διαφύγωσιν.[17]

Though we know of sacrifices which are unaccompanied by dancing or the flute, we know of no poetry that is free from *muthos* or falsehood. But as for the epics of Empedocles and Parmenides, Nicander's *Theriaca* and the maxims of Theognis, these are *logoi* which have borrowed the metre and the grandeur of poetry, as a carriage to lift them above the level of humble prose.

It is true that the term *muthos*, as we have already seen, could apply to any kind of fiction in these contexts, but in practice ancient poetry tends to employ traditional stories rather than inventing its own.[18] Moreover, the recurrent antithesis between *muthos* and *logos*, while not precisely equivalent to a distinction

[16] E.g. Cic. *ND* 3.77, and Livy's *Preface*, which opposes *poeticae fabulae* to *incorrupta rerum gestarum monumenta*. Later in book 1, the story that Romulus and Remus were suckled by a she-wolf is termed *fabula ac miraculum* (1.4.7). Varro (ap. Censorinus, *De Die Natali* 21) similarly contrasts the *multa fabulosa* of the 'mythical' age with the 'historical' age, whose *res ... gestae veris historiis continentur*.

[17] Cf. Plato, *Rep.* 3.392d, 394b and Arist. *Poet.* 1451 b 27. Both the Ciceronian and the Livian passages referred to in n. 16 above are also typical in associating the dubious *fabulae* with poetry. Compare Varro's *theologia tripertita*, discussed on pp. 85–7 below.

[18] Cf. Arist. *Poet.* 1453 b 22–5; Hor. *AP* 128–30.

between 'myth' and 'rational thought' or 'historical truth', seems to indicate an awareness of two different modes of thought which might loosely be termed mythical and rational, of which the former is appropriate to poetic and the latter to philosophical or historical discourse. Thus, even if the Greeks and Romans had no conception of myth as a body of stories or field of enquiry distinct from theology or history, it is still possible to talk about ancient criticism of myth if we regard this as a kind of shorthand for the criticism of a certain mode of thought exemplified by the poets (especially Homer), particularly in their treatment of the gods.

Myth in this sense tends to be attacked by ancient critics on two major counts: it is generally charged with either impiety or irrationality. The earliest known exponent of the first of these accusations is Xenophanes, who criticizes Homer and Hesiod in frs. 10–16 for their portrayal of the gods not only anthropomorphically, but also as thieves, adulterers and cheats and in general as perpetrators of 'everything that is a shame and a reproach among men' (fr. 11.2). Similarly, in fr. 1, which consists of a series of prescriptions for correct behaviour at a symposium, he advocates hymning the god *εὐφήμοις μύθοις καὶ καθαροῖσι λόγοις* ('with pious *muthoi* and pure *logoi*', fr. 1.13f.), and rejects stories of divine conflict such as the Titanomachy, Gigantomachy and Centauromachy, which he describes as *πλάσματα τῶν προτέρων* ('fabrications of former generations', fr. 1.21f.). Other Presocratics seem to have added their voices to the chorus of disapproval: Diogenes Laertius relates a tradition that Pythagoras witnessed the punishments of Homer and Hesiod in the underworld for the things they said about the gods (D. L. 8.21), and Heraclitus of Ephesus also speaks of the poets' lack of wisdom and the punishments they deserve (frs. 40 and 42), although the surviving fragments do not make it clear precisely what Heraclitus is objecting to. Pindar, as we have seen, also rejects impious *muthoi*, specifically the story of Tantalus and Pelops. But perhaps the best-known and most extensive critique of this kind is that of Plato, at *Rep.* 2.376e-3.392c, where he goes to some lengths to illustrate from the Homeric poems the kind of myths which must be excluded from