CHAPTER I

THE GENIUS OF LUCRETIUS

I

How far can a poet, without injuring his proper function, be a teacher? The early Greeks assumed that it was not only his right, but his duty to instruct, whether the instruction was theological, or moral, or physical. There was no rival of the poet in any one of these spheres. The Greek priests were concerned with ritual alone, and rarely, if ever, assumed the office of moralist; the philosophers, such as Parmenides and Empedocles, were content to follow the tradition of Hesiod, who had written verse simply because prose had not been invented. At the very end of the fifth century Aristophanes could still hold that the poet was bound to teach the adult, as the schoolmaster teaches the boy.[1]

But prose was now seriously competing with verse, as the medium for the exposition of philosophy, as well as of history. Aristophanes may have had good reason for his assumption that it was the business of Homer and Aeschylus to teach the manly virtues, but Plato showed that there was an "ancient quarrel" between the poet and the philosopher. His grounds were metaphysical no less

[1] See generally E. E. Sikes, *Greek View of Poetry*.

than moral; and if Aristotle suggested a means of reconciliation, his own definition of the poetic function rigidly excluded philosophy. To Aristotle poetry was concerned with "men in action", and even if human action were interpreted in the most liberal terms, there would be no place for an Empedocles, who was to count as a physicist rather than as a poet. Aristotle's theory was deeply imbued with the ethical purpose of the poet; but he drew a clear line of cleavage between the more or less indirect teaching of morals and the direct exposition of a scientific creed. And, since the days of Aristotle, the breach between science and poetry has, of course, been so enormously widened that any dream of an alliance may well seem impossible. If Atomism is a doubtful and dangerous subject for a Lucretius, no modern poet could conceivably trench on the highly technical ground of the modern physicist. Even for Aristotle Lucretius would have been placed with Empedocles outside the ranks of poets. But Aristotle did not convert his own contemporaries or successors: in the generation after the great philosopher, there was a marked return to the didacticism of Hesiod. The age of Alexander was scientific (according to its lights) and intensely erudite, not to say pedantic. If it was difficult to recapture the spirit of Homer, the learning of Hesiod offered an easier scope for imitation. So, to the Hesiodean subjects of cos-

mogony and agriculture, the Alexandrians added astronomy and the healing of snake-bites. And Lucretius was Alexandrian, in so far as he followed the didactic method of Aratus, whose *Phaenomena* was admired by other Romans than Cicero. Varro and Germanicus also translated the poem for which Ovid prophesied immortality:

Cum sole et luna semper Aratus erit.

In ancient times, therefore, there was abundant justification for a poem on Nature. The question remains whether modern criticism upholds the judgment. It is not denied that Lucretius was a great poet; but it has been strenuously denied that the *De Rerum Natura* is a poetic subject. A poet —it is often argued—has a reality of his own, and is not directly concerned with the discoveries of science or the logic of philosophy. He must deal, not with the bare facts, but with their appearance and its emotional significance. He may be influenced by his particular theory of the Universe, but it is not his proper business to expound his creed in detail.

There are indeed modern critics who would go further in their objections, by refining poetry to a "purity" which eliminates every trace of the philosophic. According to the school of Mr T. S. Eliot,[1] the original form of philosophy cannot be

[1] *The Sacred Wood*, p. 160 f.

poetic, and Empedocles, being a pioneer, with a new system to develop, could not approach his own theories with the detachment proper to a poet. Lucretius, it is true, takes over a system ready-made; but, on this view, he too is an innovator, since he expounds Atomism from start to finish, leaving no detail to be assumed. If, unlike Empedocles, he may sometimes halt between two different and discordant methods of approach, he must be classed, for all that really matters, as Empedoclean.

But the upholders of "pure" poetry claim too much. To dissociate all serious thought from the poetic region, to deny that a poet can be an original thinker, or to confine his proper activity to "a life of sensation", is the extreme of aestheticism. A few poets, ancient and modern, pass the test; the majority, with Dante, Milton and Goethe at their head, follow, more or less closely, a definite philosophy. Lucretius is surely to be added to their number, in spite of Coleridge's complaint that "whatever in Lucretius is poetry is not philosophical, whatever is philosophical is not poetry".[1] Coleridge must have forgotten the very opening of the *De Rerum Natura*, when Lucretius trans-

[1] In a letter to Wordsworth. This agrees with the well-known statement in the *Biographia Literaria* that "a poem is a species of composition which is opposed to works of science by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth". But Coleridge also held that a great poet must be a "profound philosopher".

formed the Empedoclean concept of Love and Strife, as the motive power of the Universe, into his magnificent prayer to Venus.[1]

As a Romantic, Coleridge was out of sympathy with didacticism; and, even if we agree that philosophy is a fitting subject for poetic treatment, there is still an objection to the didactic *manner*. This objection, as we have seen, was not valid in classical times, except for Plato; and there cannot be many, at the present time, who would "prefer to be wrong with Plato than right with the others". The Alexandrian Eratosthenes protested that poetry was concerned merely with Delight or Transport, not with Teaching, but the other critics disagreed; Virgil, in his *Georgics*, and even Ovid, in *The Art of Love*, were in the full Alexandrine current.

There the matter, at least in England, rested until the end of the eighteenth century. Poems like the *Essay on Man* had hitherto presupposed the right of the poet to be didactic. But the question became pressing in the Romantic age. For, although Wordsworth regarded himself as a teacher, Keats, in one of his most famous pronouncements, hated a poet who had "a palpable design" upon his reader. Erasmus Darwin's *Loves of the Plants* was certainly no great advertisement for the theory of Instruction. So, in the nineteenth century, it became common form to call didactic

[1] See below, pp. 117f.

verse an illegitimate cross between science and poetry. De Quincey is a good example of this early Victorian attitude. In his essay on Alexander Pope (1848) he is quite dogmatic. No poetry can have the function of teaching, and he bids us "look at the poem of *Cyder* by Philips, of the *Fleece* by Dyer, or (which is a still weightier example) at the *Georgics* of Virgil", asking whether any of these poets shows "the least anxiety for the correctness of your principles?" We may make De Quincey a present of *Cyder* or the *Fleece*, but the *Georgics* is different, and surely does not support his argument: it satisfies both his requirements—it is "beautiful", as well as "correct".

Anyhow, at the present day, we have ceased to be as positive as De Quincey. We have purged ourselves of certain Romantic theories, and are ready to acknowledge that poetry may teach us, if—in the words of a modern critic—it teaches us in art's way.[1] This, perhaps, is not very helpful, since the question may well be asked, What, precisely, *is* art's way? We may admit (unless we believe in "pure" poetry) that every poem must have some "content", and the highest content is no doubt philosophic; but another recent writer allows that "no one has yet succeeded in marking exactly at what point the philosophy becomes a hindrance in our poetic enjoyment. The uttermost

[1] J. L. Lowes, *Convention and Revolt*, p. 215.

that the most competent critic has been able to say is that the teaching must be indirect, and this, as we all feel, is inadequate".[1]

But is not this harping on indirectness, itself a survival of Romantic prejudice? Virgil, in his *Georgics*, is surely direct enough; but we enjoy that poem, because its teaching is coloured with imagination. Robert Bridges, in his *Testament of Beauty*, is frankly, though less obtrusively, as didactic as Lucretius, for whose downright method he substitutes a manner suggesting that he is a learner rather than a teacher. There is little real difference, however, between the technical language of the Roman and the English poet. No details of Atomism, as expounded by Lucretius, are, in themselves, less "poetic" than such lines as

> It was no flaw
> in Leibniz to endow his monad-atoms with mind.

Formally, such statements are pure prose; but they are to be judged not in themselves, but in relation to the whole poem of which they are a part. Coleridge warned us that a poem of any length neither can be, nor ought to be, all poetry; in the same way, Poe explained that a long poem must consist of flat passages interwoven with a series of inspired moments; and, before him, Dryden had pointed to the flats among the elevations of Milton. From

[1] E. E. Kellett, *Fashion in Literature*, p. 249.

Homer onwards, the need of relaxing the tension in poetry, at its highest, has been always recognised. What is true for Homer and Virgil, Sophocles and Shakespeare, must also be true for Lucretius. But, it may be objected, the passages of low emotional power are too numerous in the *De Rerum Natura* to be compared with analogies in (say) Dante or Milton. These poets work essentially in the grand manner, with but occasional excursions into the paths of prose. In Lucretius (it is argued) the proportions are reversed: Atomism bulks too largely: the Greek atom—which to Lucretius, as to Newton, is "matter in solid, massy, hard, impenetrable particles"—cannot be broken by any violence, least of all the violence of the Muses; there are too many desert tracts in the poem where Pegasus is not only pedestrian, but sinks deep in the sands. In this desert, the famous "purple patches" may be oases, but they are all too few. To drop metaphors, Poetry must begin where Science ends.

Such is a common, though not very instructed criticism of the *De Rerum Natura*; and if this were the conclusion of the whole matter, we should be forced to admit that Lucretius, as Quintilian said of Ovid, is only *laudandus in partibus*. If, however, we hold that poetry is not to be confined to mere emotion, but can find room for reason—provided that the intellectual faculty is not too predominant —we can put up a much better defence for the

De Rerum Natura. To begin with, we may boldly ask whether reason itself is always unpoetic.[1] "*Nil igitur mors est*": how much of the poetic force of these passionate words is not owed to *igitur* and its implications? Such is the pertinent question of a writer who argues that philosophic poetry, though rare, is to be recognised: if the *Essay on Man* is unsuccessful, Pope's failure was simply due to a lack of interest in his own philosophy.[2]

Perhaps Lucretius, whose avowed object was to please as well as to teach, might have pleased his modern—and even his ancient—readers more if he had tried to teach them less. After all, there was no lack of Epicurean prose-writers or lecturers in Rome—Amafinius and Rabirius in the Latin language, Phaedrus and Philodemus in the Greek. But would any one of these professors have dealt with Atomism like the poet? It is not merely that Lucretius waxes enthusiastic over his physics—enthusiasm, though valuable for a preacher or lecturer, is not the whole equipment for a poet whose mission is to transform scientific fact into human experience. Commentators, who find "arid wastes

[1] The argument here suggested of course runs counter to the usual ideas of poetry; see for example I. A. Richards, *Science and Poetry* (1926), p. 58, "Except occasionally and by accident, logic does not enter at all" (into the poetic approach).

[2] *Times Lit. Suppl.* Aug. 10, 1933. The *igitur* is in a legal argument, enforcing the truth of philosophical poetry; see ch. VII, p. 129.

of dry argument",[1] fail to see the real nature of this argument. The poem is an epic whose hero is not so much Epicurus as Man; and the atoms from which Man is formed are not only significant as the prime elements of the Universe. Although senseless themselves, they contain, in their wonderful changes and interactions, the promise and potency of all Life—human as well as animal and vegetable:

> The rain wastes away, when the Heaven-Father has tossed it into the lap of Mother Earth. But shining crops arise, and boughs are green on the trees which grow and bear fruit of themselves. Thence comes nourishment for the race of men and beasts; thence we see cities flourishing with children, and leafy woods singing with a new brood of birds.[2]

And this passage, early in the First book, might well be the text of the whole poem. Even in its most argumentative parts, Lucretius views the atoms in terms of life. His word to describe their combinations is *concilium*, which, as Masson saw, "is most unusual to denote things without life... apparently it must have conveyed to a Roman ear the meaning of 'an assemblage' of living beings".[3] Masson did not pursue this fertile subject; but a later scholar has shown that such Lucretian metaphors are largely drawn, not only from life in

[1] The words are from Merrill's edition, p. 43.
[2] I. 250.
[3] Masson, *Lucretius*, vol. I, p. 126.