

THE USE AND DEFENSE OF THE CLASSICAL CANON



in Pomponio Leto's Biography of Lucretius

by Ada Palmer

Leto's is the oldest vita of Lucretius, and an apologetic text carefully structured to counter the stigmas of suicide and atheism which dogged this Epicurean poet. Uniquely among scholars of Lucretius, Leto proposes a male lover "Astericon" as the cause of Lucretius' suicide, but defuses this suggestion of sin with classical endorsements and Christian allusions. Leto uses the vita to advertise his own scholarly prowess, crafting intentionally ornate sentences packed with rare Latin constructions and deliberately obscure classical references. A final direct address to Cicero admonishes the orator for misunderstanding Epicureanism, effectively blaming him for the sect's bad reputation.

Leto's fingerprints are all over the Lucretian textual tradition, in the form of annotations surviving in four different volumes. The manuscript now in Naples contains thousands of notes in Leto's hand, evidently written over a long period of reading and rereading, correcting and commenting on the language and content of the *De Rerum Natura*.¹ A manuscript at the Vatican, Ottob. lat. 2834, contains more notes, in a hand which is either Leto's or that of an associate, which appear extensively on the first folio, and sparsely thereafter. A manuscript at the University Library of Basel, with an owner's note of Bonifacius Amerbach dated 1513, boasts, in an inscription tooled into its leather cover, the fact that it contains Leto's annotations.² In fact, it contains a partial transcription of Leto's notes from the copy in Naples, but the existence of this transcript establishes that his annotations were highly valued at the end of the fifteenth century. Finally, another extensive set of annotations on the whole poem, written in Leto's hand, sur-

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¹ Napoli, Biblioteca Nazionale Vittorio Emanuele III. IV E 51. 1458; cf. Palmer 2014, chapter 2.

² Basel, Öffentliche Bibliothek der Universität. F.VIII.14. Written between 1458 and 1513, likely circa 1470.

vives in a copy of the 1486 Verona imprint of Lucretius preserved in Utrecht, which also contains Leto's short biography of the poet on its fly-leaves.³

This *vita*, and its accompanying annotations, date to sometime shortly before 1492, so seventy-five years after Poggio brought the *De rerum natura* back to Italy, but less than sixty years after it had started to genuinely circulate, since Niccolò Niccoli guarded it so jealously into the 1430s. The 1486 edition was the second printed version of the poem, but the text was still in terrible shape, badly in need of correction, in particular because its comparatively archaic Latin and unusual vocabulary made it especially prone to accumulating scribal error. The text also needed explication and promotion, since the poem was, as Quintilian had observed,⁴ difficult and, as Saint Jerome had hinted,⁵ best read with a commentary, while Lucretius himself was still very much a newcomer to the classical library, and not always welcome one. The association of Epicureanism with hedonism, depravity and atheism had been popularized in the Middle Ages by the criticisms of Arnobius, Isidore of Seville and especially Lactantius,⁶ and by broader European tendencies to associate heterodox philosophy with irreligion, wantonness and, especially, sodomy.⁷ These factors combined to make the *De rerum natura*, even in printed form, an exceptionally difficult and, to no small extent, dangerous text to work on. By 1517, only twenty-five years after

³ Universiteitsbibliotheek, Litt. Lat. X fol. 82 rar., reprinted in Leto 1993; see Dixon 2011, 191–216. The volume contains annotations by Leto, Sebastiano Priuli, Francesco Cerreto and at least one other person, but Dixon does not believe that the notes provide sufficient evidence to support the hypothesis (see Solaro 1998 and Campanelli 1993) that it was used in conjunction with a set of Lucretian lectures by Leto. On this volume and Leto's hand see also Paladini 1996.

⁴ “Nam Macer et Lucretius legendi, sed non ut phrasin idest ut corpus loquentiae faciant, elegantes, in sua quisque materia, sed alter humilis, alter difficilis” (For instance, Macer and Lucretius should be read, but not for forming phrasing, that is the body of eloquence; each is elegant in his own subject, but the former is shallow and the latter difficult), *inst.* 10.1.87.

⁵ “Puto quod puer legeris Aspri in Virgilium et Sallustium commentarios, Vulcatii in orationes Ciceronis, Victorini in dialogos eius et in Terentii comoedias, praeceptoris mei Donati aequae in Virgilium, et aliorum in alios: Plautum videlicet, Lucretium, Flaccum, Persium atque Lucanum. Argue interpretes eorum, quare non unam explanationem secuti sint: et in eadem re quid vel sibi, vel aliis videatur, enumerent” (I imagine that as a boy you read Asper's Virgil and Sallust commentaries, Vulcatius' on Cicero's orations, Victorinus' on his Dialogues and Terence's Comedies, my teacher Donatus's on Virgil, and others on others, such as Plautus, Lucretius, Flaccus, Persius and Lucan. Will you fault their commentators, because they have not backed a single explanation but enumerate both their views and others' on a particular passage?), *adv. Rufin.* I, 16.

⁶ See Panizza 1978, 76–107.

⁷ See Hunter & Wootton 1992, especially Wootton's chapter “New Histories of Atheism,” 54 and Davidson's “Unbelief and Atheism in Italy, 1500–1700”.

Leto's Lucretian activities, Lucretius would be banned from classrooms in Florence as an exemplar of lascivious literature likely to corrupt the youth,⁸ and Lucretius would remain a topic of particular concern for those responsible for drawing up the Index.⁹ This makes Leto's *vita* of Lucretius a telling window on his concerns as he introduces an author so strongly associated with all the most controversial aspects of the ancient world.

Unlike the cases of Virgil and Sallust, there are no medieval *accessus* of Lucretius, so Leto's is the earliest life of the poet, the first of eight treatments written before 1600. Leto's *vita* is extremely brief, 1,000 words in length, but even that is expansive given how little real information we have about Lucretius' life. He was born between 99 and 93 BC,¹⁰ probably to an aristocratic Roman family, but this is conjecture based largely on his skill with Latin, and the fact that he was friends with Gaius Memmius, son-in-law of the dictator Sulla. He wrote an Epicurean epic poem, and probably died before February of 54 BC, when we know Cicero read the work which, unfinished as it is, presumably would not have been circulated before the poet's death.¹¹ That Lucretius was well known in antiquity we deduce from a dozen references to his name in corners of the classical canon.¹² We know nothing more.

A little more was thought to be known in Leto's day, when the juiciest sources had not yet been discredited. We now do not believe St. Jerome's claim, in his translation of Eusebius,¹³ that Lucretius committed suicide after going mad from drinking a love potion, because, setting aside any argument about the efficacy of Roman love potions, it is precisely the sort of scandalous accusation which an enemy of Epicureanism would likely invent. We have also largely dismissed Jerome's claim that Cicero posthumously edited the *De rerum natura*; this has been discredited in many ways,

⁸ Mansi (ed.) 1901–1927, vol. 35, 270.

⁹ See Prospero 2004, ch. 2.

¹⁰ See D'Anna 2002, 189–97.

¹¹ “Lucreti poemata (ut scribis) ita sunt, multis luminibus ingeni, multae tamen artis; sed, cum veneris, virum te putabo, si Sallustii Empedoclea legeris, hominem non putabo” (Lucretius' poems are, as you wrote, containing many ingenious highlights, but much formal technique; but, when you return, I will think you a hero, if you have read Salustius' *Empedoclea*, though not human), *ad Q. fr.* 2.10.3.

¹² See Palmer 2014, ch. 3.

¹³ “Olympiade CLXXI anno secundo Titus Lucretius poeta nascitur, qui postea amatorio poculo in furorem versus, cum aliquot libros per intervalla insaniae conscripsisset, quos postea emendavit Cicero, propria se manu interfecit, anno aetatis quadragesimo tertio” (In the second year of the 171st Olympiad, Titus Lucretius the poet was born, who was later driven mad by a love potion, and having written some books in the intervals of his insanity, which Cicero later corrected, killed himself in his forty-fourth year), *HIER. chron.a.Abr.* 1923–4.

not least because we can see how easily such a conclusion might be jumped to by someone reading the letter of 54 BC in which Cicero mentions that he was reading the poem. We similarly no longer credit Donatus, who places Lucretius' death on the day Virgil assumed the *toga virilis*, both because we cannot find Donatus's source, and because it is too convenient a conjunction, early Latin dying as Virgilian Latin assumes the limelight, and pagan Epicureanism destroying itself to be replaced by the heavily Christianized pseudo-prophet figure which the Middle Ages made of Virgil.¹⁴

These non-facts, as we hold them, were inescapable problems for scholars working in a period when Jerome's story about Lucretius' suicide circulated far more widely than the *De rerum natura* itself. We must not forget the degree to which Renaissance readers tended to connect the quality of a work to the moral character of its author. A virtuous person produced good and edifying works, and if it was safe for a Christian reader to study the pagan classics it was safe because the ancients were paragons of nobility, honesty, moderation, etc. Petrarch and others advocated the study of the classics for moral self-improvement, and humanist attempts to carve out a safe space for pre-Christian works in Christian education largely depended on the ancients being morally good in a Christian sense: not the sort of people who get involved with love scandals, and go mad, and kill themselves. Jerome's suicide story thus had to be mitigated if the recently-recovered Lucretius was to be presented as an author safe for Christian contact.

Leto's *vita* uses nine ancient references to Lucretius: Jerome, Cicero's letter, both of Quintilian's references to Lucretius, which were transmitted independently, the reference in Ovid's *Amores*, the references in Macrobius and Marcus Terentius Varro, the fact that Virgil copies lines from Lucretius, and a medieval gloss on Ovid's *Ibis*, treated below. Leto does not use the references to Lucretius in Donatus and Statius, nor several others common in later treatments. With nine sources, Leto ties Lucretius' second biographer Avancius for the title of least sources used in a Lucretius *vita*, but this is a good thing, since later biographers such as Johannes Baptista Pius (1511), Hubert van Giffen (1565) and Denys Lambin (1570), who will boast eighteen, nineteen, even twenty-two citations, achieve these numbers by adding increasingly spurious sources, gathered by such tricks as treating instances of the names Lucilius or Lucullus as scribal errors intended to be Lucretius. This is a vivid case of what Patricia Osmond discussed in her pa-

¹⁴ "Initia aetatis Cremonae egit usque ad virilem togam, quam [XV] anno natali suo accepit iisdem illis consulibus iterum duobus, quibus erat natus, evenitque ut eo ipso die Lucretius poeta decederet?" (He spent the beginning of his life in Cremona, until he put on the toga of adulthood when he received fifteen years after his birth, when those same two were consuls, and it happened that the poet Lucretius died that same day), *Vita Virg.* 6.

per, philologists filling biographical gaps in their sources by using the same guesswork they used in correcting texts, in this case using the fact that the name Lucretius can be mis-transcribed as Lucullus or Lucilius as carte blanche to treat any reference to Lucullus, Lucilius or even Lucilia as a reference to Lucretius. That Leto does not do this as much as his successors does him credit.

Leto's *vita* begins with a general discussion of wisdom and the arts of language, framed around a quotation from Marcus Terentius Varro, whom he introduces as the "Father of Roman Letters".¹⁵ This quotation, which states that three aspects must be treated in discussing subject: *origo*, *dignitas* and *ars* (roughly origin or ancestry, dignity or merit and skill or technique), sounds from its subject as if it should come from Varro's *De Lingua Latina*, but it actually comes from the much less relevant *De Re Rustica*, and in it Varro is not discussing lofty philology and philosophy but agriculture and animal husbandry. This peculiar and obscure opening reference contributes nothing to our understanding of Lucretius, and, in fact, Leto does not use the *origo*, *dignitas* and *ars* in the remainder of the *vita*. Leto cites Varro as mere ornament, a way to connect Lucretius to a lofty and more acceptable figure in the Latin canon who was also recently returned. Lucretius' name, meanwhile, is absent from the opening section. This reference also reminds the reader of Leto's own scholarly achievement in overseeing the 1471 edition of Varro's *De lingua latina*¹⁶.

Leto goes on to tell that wisdom and knowledge come from God, an implicit declaration that Lucretius' wisdom and knowledge too must derive from God, downplaying Epicureanism's unchristian associations. He then discusses the conviction that it is mankind's possession of wisdom and language which separates us from the beasts. This implies that the office of philosopher-poet held by Lucretius is the ideal manifestation of the divine gifts which raise man above the animals. Philosophy, Leto says, is essential to the path to merit and Reason, and on this he cites another obscure early Roman, Gaius Fannius, a passing reference which, combined with the Varro passage, frames Lucretius as the colleague of a number of early Roman authors indispensable to the education of an ambitious man. As is typical of humanist prose, while later portions of the *vita* are comparatively simple, these opening sentences employ intentionally overcomplicated grammar, packing in unusual constructions, especially the passive periphrastic and

¹⁵ Leto begins: "M. Varro, Romanae linguae parens, tria observanda rebus omnibus tradit: origo, dignitas et ars." Solaro (2000), 26 lines 2–3; VARRO, *De re rustica* II, i, 1.

¹⁶ M. T. Varro, *De lingua latina* (Rome: Georgius Lauer, about 1471–72. ISTC iv00094000).

complex uses of the subjunctive, in an effort to display Leto's mastery of the Latin language.

The prologue segues into a dense pastiche of facts, beginning the claim that Lucretius condensed the thirty-seven books of Epicurus, mentioned on Book X of Diogenes Laertius, into six books. Leto states here that Varro claims there were originally not six but twenty-one books of the *De rerum natura*. This refers to part of the *De lingua latina* which states that Lucilius (sometimes mistranscribed as Lucretius) wrote twenty-one books on the division of Earth and sky.¹⁷ This is a possibility we now dismiss, but it was discussed by most of Lucretius' Renaissance biographers, among whom Leto is unusual in not voicing a firm opinion pro or con. Leto then says that Cicero edited the poem after the *furiosus* Lucretius killed himself, "for love of a boy, whom [Lucretius] called Astericon because of his paleness and extraordinary figure".¹⁸ This male lover named Astericon is not mentioned in any other Lucretian source, before or after Leto, but Giuseppe Solaro has traced it to a medieval gloss on a line 419 of Ovid's *Ibis*, which contains a pseudo-Lucretian line lamenting the author's unrequited love for this young man.¹⁹

The absence of Astericon from later Renaissance treatments of Lucretius, which discuss instead an equally spurious female lover or wife usually called Lucilia, is one of our strongest indicators that Leto's *vita* was not known to any of Lucretius' later Renaissance biographers. The printed biographies especially tend to always include every source or pseudo-fact in previous ones, and facts the new biographer disagrees with are particularly prized as opportunities to criticize and outshine a predecessor, so it is hard to believe any later scholar would have omitted such an exciting detail. The fact that Leto is the only biographer to propose a homosexual relationship is striking given the charges of sodomy which so plagued his own life and studies. The association of classical philosophy with homoeroticism was so powerful in the Renaissance, particularly due to the preeminence of Plato, that we might expect stereotypes of the age to lead most of Lucretius' biographers to presume a philosopher-poet would have a male lover, not female, so the heterosexual relationship described by all Leto's successors is itself remarkable. Of course, there are obvious advantages to proposing a female

¹⁷ "A qua bipertita divisione Lucilius suorum unius et viginti librorum initium fecit hoc: Aetheris et terrae genitabile quaerere tempus," *De lingua latina*, 5.17.

¹⁸ "Asserunt id ei accidisse ob amatum puerum, quem ab candore et forma egregia appellabat Astericon," Solaro 2000, 27 lines 25–27. Since this passage does not directly state that Astericon gave Lucretius the potion, it has sometimes been interpreted as suggesting that the potion was administered by a jealous third party, possibly female; see Holford-Strevens 2002, 5.

¹⁹ See Solaro 2000, 13; Solaro 1999, 153–9.

lover rather than a male one when one is trying to defend Lucretius' moral character in Renaissance Italy, and the substantially heterosexual nature of the erotic sections of the *De rerum natura* could be used to support such an assumption. That Leto did not do this shows either his confidence in his reading of the *Ibis* gloss, or a remarkably different attitude toward the defense of Lucretius than that taken by his successors.

Next, perhaps as an antidote to the negative associations of suicide and sodomy, Leto presents a dense mash of antique quotations recommending Lucretius, stringing together references to his name from Cicero, Quintilian and Ovid, and including Macrobius' discussion of the fact that Virgil copied lines from Lucretius.²⁰ This last fact is much touted by Lucretius scholars since, in an era when Virgil was the measure of all poetry, if the prince of poets copied Lucretius he must have thought him, not only worth reading, but of nearly equal skill. This, combined with the claim that the prince of prose Cicero edited the poem gives the *De rerum natura* a double stamp of highest quality; in fact, later biographers will exaggerate these connections, some going so far as to claim that Virgil himself was an Epicurean, and that Cicero hosted Epicurean philosophical meet-ups weekly at his house at which he gave Lucretius feedback on fresh verses, acting as a virtual co-author.²¹ Leto is, for his era, modest in making no further jumps than to claim that Cicero was a posthumous editor and Virgil an admiring plagiarist. Leto also chooses not to address the suggestion that Virgil was himself an Epicurean and a sensualist. Many later biographers of Lucretius will cite the famous Georgics quotation, "Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas/ atque metus omnis et inexorabile fatum/ subiecit pedibus strepitumque Acherontis avari," (Happy is one who has been able to understand the causes of things/ and has crushed underfoot all fears and inexorable fate/ and the clamors of greedy Acheron). and use it to argue that Virgil was a philosophical Epicurean—never a sensualist, just a philosophical Epicurean—but Leto touches only on Virgil's theft of Lucretian verses, edging strangely around the charge of Epicureanism which he handled so particularly in his own life of Virgil.²²

In his paraphrase of Quintilian, whom Leto calls the balance who judges letters, Leto uses an unusual reading of Quintilian's text to add yet another obscure Latin figure to those he has already presented as peers of Lucretius' pre-Virgilian era. This passage from Book X of Quintilian, "Empedoclea in Graecis Varronem ac Lucretium in Latinis qui praecepta sapientiae versibus tradiderunt," (Empedocles among the Greeks and Varro and Lucretius

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 27 lines 28–43.

²¹ Palmer 2014, ch. 4.

²² *Georgica* 2.490–2.

among the Latins, who handed down the precepts of philosophy in verse) is usually read as a statement that Empedocles, Varro and Lucretius all transformed the principles of wisdom (i.e. philosophy) into verse.²³ Reading *tradiderunt* as a literal act of translation, Leto instead tells us that Quintilian says Marcus Varro Atacinus translated the four books of Empedocles out of Greek into Latin.²⁴ This expansion of Quintilian's statement allows Leto to frame Varro Atacinus and Lucretius as translators of Greek wisdom, reinforcing his earlier claim that Lucretius' poem was more a condensation of Epicurus' writings than an original work, and generally presenting Lucretius as a scholar and commentator, like Leto himself. It also lets him further display his erudition by demonstrating his familiarity with both Varros.

This genuinely biographical segment of Leto's biography concludes very quickly, so that only 350 words out of roughly 1,000 treat Lucretius directly. The final biographical claim is that Lucretius wrote love poems in his youth, now lost. This too appears in no later biography. It has no clear source, but may be an imaginative reading of Statius' *docti furor arduus Lucretii* (the lofty madness of learned Lucretius), combined with the assumption that, since we hear about the lost youthful works of Ovid and Catullus, Lucretius must have had some too. Juvenilia is part of a stock narrative of the life of a Roman Poet. This willingness to state as fact guesses based on stock models about an ancient author's life will be responsible for introducing many new non-facts into the Lucretian tradition over the following decades. At the end of the biographical section, Leto states that it is not necessary to discuss Lucretius' skill at this point, since it will be made clear during his explication of the work, a clear indication that this *vita* was meant to introduce a longer examination of the poet, likely a critical edition, or possibly, as suggested by Solaro, a course of lectures.

Leto next treats the allegorical, physical and cosmological functions of Venus, and the etymology of her name and related words. This section draws upon M. T. Varro yet again, making Varro far more prominent in Lu-

²³ "...nec ignara philosophiae, cum propter plurimos in omnibus fere carminibus locos ex intima naturalium quaestionum subtilitate repetitos, tum vel propter Empedoclea in Graecis, Varronem ac Lucretium in Latinis, qui praecepta sapientiae versibus tradiderunt: eloquentia quoque non mediocri est opus, ut de unaquaque earum quas demonstravimus rerum dicat proprie et copiose" (Nor can the grammarian be ignorant of philosophy, when in almost every poem so many passages repeat the subtlest of natural questions, and in particular we have Empedocles among the Greeks and Varro and Lucretius among the Latins, who handed down the precepts of philosophy in verse; no middling eloquence is enough for the teacher to speak appropriately and thoroughly about the subjects we have just recommended), *inst.* I.4. 4–5.

²⁴ The absence of a translation of Empedocles from the works of Varro listed by Cicero in *Brutus* 60 did not deter Leto from reading the passage this way.

cretius' biography than Lucretius himself. It also cites Lucilius, an opportunity for Leto to display the fact that he does not subscribe to the tendency of others to conflate Lucretius and Lucilius. Leto also draws on Tacitus, and Cicero's *De natura deorum*. Venus' beauty and her birth from the sea and foam are presented as representations of the roles of heat, cold, wetness and dryness in forming generative powers of living things. Venus' union with Vulcan and adultery with Mars are allegorical descriptions of the motions of planets central to the functioning of the cosmos and animal reproduction. A passage from Homer is artfully repurposed as what was, for the late 1400s, the cutting edge of medical and cosmological science, reinforcing how indispensable useful knowledge of natural philosophy is hidden in the poets and especially the Greeks (Lucretius enjoying the status of honorary Greek for his connection with Epicurus). Leto uses sections from Book II of Pliny's *Natural History* to attribute the discovery of these generative powers of the planets to Pythagoras, and to claim that Juno, Isis and Cybele were also descriptions of the same astronomical phenomenon. This gives greater weight to Lucretius' own description of the rites of Cybele in Book II, and the invocation of Pythagoras and Egyptian wisdom calls to mind the syncretic claims made by Ficino and others about the divine wisdom, scientific and theological, possessed by the pre-Socratic sages who disseminated it in southern Europe, northern Africa and the Near East.²⁵ Leto succeeds admirably in reframing Epicurean *voluptas* and the Venus-Vulcan-Mars triad as, not licentiousness, but a divine topic which even Cicero considered worthy of philosophical treatment.

Next, as a single line alone, Leto presents a quotation from Traversari's translation of Diogenes Laertius' life of Epicurus, which states that there are two disturbances in the soul, *voluptas* and *dolor*, the first being natural to the human creature and the second foreign. This elegant summary of the Epicurean project to free the soul from pain by achieving the philosophical tranquility of *ataraxia* is notable for its compatibility with the moral projects of other less stigmatized ancient sects, such as the Stoics and Platonists. Following on the heels of Leto's treatments of medical and cosmological wisdom and his invocation of syncretism and the ancient sages, this passage reinforces the feeling that Epicurus' critics committed a grave injustice when they placed him in a less savory category than Seneca and Plato.

Chief on the list of those who have offended against Epicurus is, in Leto's depiction, Cicero. The final sixth of Leto's *vita* is a direct address to Cicero, accusing him of inconsistency for praising Epicurus in some parts of

²⁵ Ficino, *Theologica Platonica*, XVIII.1; Copenhaver 1992, esp. p. xlvi; Allen 1998, esp. ch. 1.

his work and criticizing him in others.²⁶ Leto reminds Cicero of the good accounts of Epicurus given by Seneca²⁷ and Diogenes Laertius, and the good things Cicero himself reported. He cites Epicurus' fasting and vegetarianism, combatting the stigma of hedonism, and his rejection of lovers male and female, defusing to some extent the negative impact of the Astericon story. Leto had enormous respect for Cicero and used him as a primary model in both his writing and his life, as highlighted in the papers of Patricia Osmond and Fabio Stok. That makes this invective against Cicero in defense of Epicurus even more striking. If Leto did self-identify with Cicero when he wrote his fiercely critical *vita* of Sallust, here he has turned on the Orator completely. We can perhaps see him here identifying with Petrarch's self-identification with Cicero, since, just as Petrarch felt betrayed by seeing the inconsistencies in Cicero's personal letters, so Leto may feel betrayed by Cicero's negative opinion of Epicureanism now that he has been able to digest it more thoroughly thanks to the *De rerum natura*. By imitating the accusations of philosophical inconsistency which Petrarch voiced in his letters to Cicero, Leto has good precedent here for daring to disagree with Cicero's negative descriptions²⁸. The criticisms which Lactantius and Arnobius voiced about Epicurus now seem to originate from Cicero's own lack of tranquility, rather than any reality of Epicurean thought.

Leto concludes with another invocation of Petrarch's attitude toward Cicero, in a final sentence in which Leto states that Epicurus only believed that the highest good lay in earthly, mortal things because he had the misfortune of being born before the advent of Christianity which proved, conclusively, the immortality of the soul. Just as Petrarch claimed Cicero would have instantly converted had he encountered the truth of revelation, so Leto attributes Epicurus' errors to innocent ignorance. This is the only acknowledgment anywhere in the *vita* of the genuinely unorthodox core tenets of Epicureanism, but instantly defuses them. A closing reference to Christianity also reinforces Leto's own orthodoxy, bringing the *vita* full circle to the opening treatment of divinely-inspired wisdom.

By ensuring that Lucretius himself features very little in his own biography, Leto turns this *vita* into a broader defense of Epicureanism, and the study of philosophical classics. Leto's Epicurus and Lucretius are no more unchristian than Cicero, and lived the same stock life as other wholesome Roman poets. The pagan gods Lucretius discusses are actually sophisticated ways of understanding natural philosophy, evidence of his connection to the

²⁶ The criticisms appear primarily the *De finibus* and *Tusculanae disputationes*, some in the *De natura deorum*.

²⁷ *Epistulae* 2.21.10.

²⁸ *Familiares* 24.3.4.

wisdom of the Greeks and the great pre-Socratic sages who were in such vogue in the late 1400s. Pagan and Christian sages are, in this framework, coequally stepping stones on the path toward the lofty intellectual realm, and part of one ongoing, elevated conversation. Anyone who claims that pagan and Christian authorities contradict each other is guilty, like a crabby Cicero, of introducing false inconsistencies where only harmony exists. Denial of the immortality of the soul is a simple error and, as Leto paints it, easily removable. Removing the soul's mortality from Epicureanism, and with it removing atomistic physics and Epicurus' denial of divine ordering in Nature, in order to retain *ataraxia* and mystical ideas about Venus may seem to modern eyes like throwing out the baby to keep the bathwater. Yet it is this declawed Lucretius, maximally compatible with Christianity, Stoicism, Platonism and especially Neoplatonism, who will fit easily into humanist syncretic projects, and thereby earn a place in every nobleman's library. A reading which makes the book seem safe in turn ensures its safe survival and dissemination, while also safeguarding Leto and his circle, as they themselves struggled to avoid persecution due to the same stigma of irreligion and perversion which had so long dogged Epicureanism.

Text and Translation:

Pomponio's life of T. Lucretius Carus

This short treatment of the life and character of Rome's premier Epicurean survives only on the flyleaves of a copy of 1486 Verona imprint of the *De rerum natura*, whose margins are filled with Leto's manuscript annotations. The *vita* was not printed in the Renaissance.²⁹ Other sets of Leto's corrections of the poem, mainly those in the Neapolitanus manuscript, were certainly known to later Renaissance scholars, notably Bonifacius Amerbach, whose manuscript transcription of Leto's notes survives in the University Library of Basel.³⁰ Johannes Baptista Pius, editor of the 1511 annotated edition, and the anonymous annotators of the Bodleianus manuscript³¹ and of a much-discussed copy of the 1495 edition preserved in Paris;³² but the presence of several claims in Leto's *vita* which are absent from all subsequent treatments of the poet show that this volume, and its brief biography, remained unknown.

²⁹ Verona: Paulus Fridenperger. ISTC i00333000. Utrecht Universiteitsbibliotheek Litt. lat. X fol. 82 (Rariora).

³⁰ Basel Univ. F.VIII.14.

³¹ Bodl. Can. lat. 32. Some notes and the text of the Bodleianus are reproduced in Parker's edition of 1855.

³² Paris BN M YC 397, V95.

Only tiny fragments of information about Lucretius' life survive from antiquity, almost all of them extremely suspect, making any biography of the poet rather like the constellations which once decorated celestial globes, connecting scattered specks into figures far too elaborate to be said to derive from the stars they are supposed to depict. Leto employs the reference to Lucretius in Jerome's translation of Eusebius' *Chronicon*, which gives the most information we have about the poet's death and the creation of the poem, though Jerome's account is discounted by modern historians as too contaminated by Christian anti-Epicurean stereotypes. Leto also refers to the passing references to Lucretius in Cicero's letter to Quintus, Ovid's *Amores*, Quintilian, Macrobius, Marcus Terentius Varro, and points out Virgil's debts to Lucretius. He frames his treatment with Cicero's discussions of Epicurus, and an opening reference to Varro, which bears no relation to Lucretius, but advertises Leto's masterful knowledge of Varro's rare and difficult work. A closing direct address to Cicero chastises him for his inconsistency in portraying Epicurus as a voluptuary in some references and an ascetic in others. The most exceptional biographical addition is Leto's unprecedented claim that Lucretius had a male lover, Astericon, a reference traced by Solaro (2000) to a medieval gloss on Ovid's *Ibis*.

Pomponius Laetus, untitled *vita* of Lucretius, in Utrecht, Universiteitsbibliotheek, X fol. 82 rar., flyleaf *recto* and *verso* and fol. ai *recto*.

Pomponius Laetus.

M. Varro, Romanae linguae parens, tria observanda³³ rebus omnibus tradit: origo, dignitas et ars.³⁴ In praesenti opere, quum de philosophia nobis dicendum esset, necessarium videri potuit de singulis disserere; et quoniam unde coepit sapientia³⁵ veteres ignoraverunt, et qui apud Graecos et qui apud nos scribunt, historice de ea re loqui, ut auctoritas illorum vel nostrorum poscit, non possumus. Sophia, quae est sapientia, a deo³⁶ mundi opifice venit, qui ante nostri salvatoris ortum ab Israelitis tantum intellectus est; de quo paulo post³⁷ dicemus. Si dignitas requiritur, pene totum genus humanum, quod sapere in eo consistit, philosophiae³⁸ dare operam conatur: aliter solo sermone a brutis dif-

³³ Left margin: M. Varro

³⁴ *rust.* 2.1.1.

³⁵ The word "philosophia" appears crossed out before "sapientia."

³⁶ Right margin: Sophia.

³⁷ Right margin: Israelitae.

³⁸ "Philosophiae" is underlined and "Sophiae" written in the margin as a substitute.

ferret, quod ubi esset ratio ignoraret.³⁹ Eius rei, ut de caeteris omittamus, inter quos maxima contentio est, primus Romanorum praecepta Latina ostendit soluta oratione C. Fannius.⁴⁰ Et eodem fere tempore, ut facilius⁴¹ ad eam pernoscendam iuventus alliceretur utque tenacius numerorum delinimento memoriae inhaereret⁴² T. Lucretius carminibus exametris descriptam⁴³ ostendit secutus Epicuri sectam, quoniam⁴⁴ volumina XXXVII in sex libros redegit,⁴⁵ quamvis M. Varro unum et XX fuisse adfirmat, quorum⁴⁶ principium non praetermisit, quod est: “Aetheris et terrae genitabile quaerere tempus”.⁴⁷ Quae volumina ipse auctor posthabuit, et aliud initium postea dedit.⁴⁸ Libri qui in manibus habentur a M. T. Cicerone, Romanae eloquentiae principe, emendati fuere: nam poeta, poculo⁴⁹ hausto paulatim tabescens, tandem furiosus factus manum sibi iniecit.⁵⁰ Asserunt id ei accidisse ob amatum puerum, quem ab candore et forma egregia appellabat Astericon.⁵¹ Cicero in epistulis⁵² ad Q. fratrem summopere Lucretium laudat.⁵³ Et Quintilianus, trutina litterarum, nos admonet ne ignari⁵⁴ simus philosophiae “propter Empedoclem in Graecis” quoniam⁵⁵ volumina quatuor transtulit M. Varro Atta cinius⁵⁶ cognominatus, “tum propter Lucretium”: hi tres “praecepta sapientiae versibus tradiderunt”.⁵⁷ Et in X libro sic ait: “Macer et Lucretius legendi quidem, sed⁵⁸ non ut Phrasin, id est corpus eloquentiae, faciant,⁵⁹ elegantes in sua quisque materia, sed alter humilis, [Page 2] alter difficilis.”⁶⁰ Attacinius Varro in his, per quae nomen est adsecutus, interpretis operis alieni non spernendus quidem,

³⁹ CIC. *off.* 1.50; QUINT. *inst.* 2.20.9.

⁴⁰ CIC. *Tusc.* 4, 6; CIC. *ac.* 1, 5; cf. Leto 1993, 56.

⁴¹ Left margin: C. Fannius.

⁴² QUINT. *inst.* 3.1.3–4 (LUCR. 936–41; 4.11–16).

⁴³ Left margin: T. Lucretius.

⁴⁴ Left margin: Epicurus.

⁴⁵ DIOG. LAER. 10.27.

⁴⁶ Left margin: M. Varro

⁴⁷ VARRO, *ling.* 5.17.

⁴⁸ Left margin: M.T.C.

⁴⁹ Right margin: T. Lucretii mors.

⁵⁰ HIER. *chron.a.Abr.* 1923–4.

⁵¹ Mss. Schol. in OV. *Ibis* 419; cf. Solaro 2000, 13.

⁵² Left margin: M.T.C. Right margin: Astericon.

⁵³ CIC. *ad Q. fr.* 2.10.3.

⁵⁴ Left margin: quintilianus.

⁵⁵ Left margin: Empedocles:

⁵⁶ “Attacinius” is split over two lines and underlined, and the name “Atratinus” is written in above the first half. Left margin: M. Varro Attacinus.

⁵⁷ QUINT. *inst.* 1.4.4.

⁵⁸ Left margin: Macer.

⁵⁹ Right margin: Phrasin.

⁶⁰ QUINT. *inst.* 10.1.87.

verum ad augendam facultatem dicendi parum locuples. Et Ovidius de Lucretio sic meminit:⁶¹ “Carmina sublimis tunc sunt peritura Lucreti, exitio terras quum dabit una dies.”⁶² Virgilius, lectione⁶³ ne Lucreti saepius repetita, maiestatem carminis in compositione adsecutus est. Ubi enim adsurgere licet, materia non repugnante, ita sublimis est ut heroicam dignitatem impleat. Scripsit in primo iuventutis ardore, forte ut iuvenile ingenium et ludendo exerceret, libros de amore, qui iam multis saeculis interciderunt. De arte dicere in praesentia necesse non est: in expositione operis, pro facultate atque viribus ingenii nostri, aperiemus. M. Cicero libro II de deorum natura sic ait: “quae autem dea ad⁶⁴ res omnis veniret Venerem nostri nominaverunt, atque⁶⁵ ex ea potius venustas quam Venus a venustate.”⁶⁶ Apud⁶⁷ Varronem:⁶⁸ ‘causa nascendi duplex: ignis et aqua, ab quoius vinctione foetus sumit Venus, quae victrix⁶⁹ vincire non⁷⁰ vinciri cupit; ipsaque victoria est quod superati⁷¹ vinciuntur. Et dicitur Caeligena: Poetae semen igneum⁷² cecidisse dicunt in mare ac natam e spumis Venerem, coniunctione ignis et humoris, quam haberent vim significantes Veneris. A qua vi natis dicta vita.⁷³ Lucilius: “vis est vita, vides, nos quae facere diva cogit”.⁷⁴ Quidam aiunt Venerem nominatam quod ei Venerius,⁷⁵ rex mortalium primus Paphi urbe Cypria, templum condidit; eo namque mari concepta concha vecta est. Id⁷⁶ templum postea Cynira exquisitissimis cerimoniis et⁷⁷ sacris sanctum et venerabile fecit, et

⁶¹ Right margin: Ovidius:

⁶² OV. *am.* 1.15.23–24.

⁶³ Right margin: Virgilius.

⁶⁴ Right margin: M.T.C.

⁶⁵ Left margin: Venus [unde].

⁶⁶ CIC. *nat.deor.* 2.69.

⁶⁷ Left margin: Venustas [unde]; Right margin: Varro.

⁶⁸ VARRO *ling.* 5.60–63.

⁶⁹ Right margin (faintly): nō

⁷⁰ “non” is underlined and “sed” written in above it. This reflects the fact that the Varro passage being paraphrased reads “non quod vincere velit Venus, sed vincire” leading the reader to expect “sed” rather than “non” before the second word in the comparison, and to expect that the second, not the first, of the two contrasted terms be the preferred one, but Leto is saying that Venus prefers *vincire* (to bind) to its passive *vinciri* (to be bound), instead of repeating Varro’s statement that she does not like *vincere* (to conquer) but *vincire* (to bind).

⁷¹ Left margin: Venus victoria.

⁷² Left margin: Venus Caeligena.

⁷³ Left margin: Venus vitae.

⁷⁴ Right margin: Lucilius. LUCIL. Fr. 1340 Marx.

⁷⁵ Left margin: Venerius Rex

⁷⁶ Left margin: Paphos cypria.

⁷⁷ Left margin: Cynira

oraculum ibi esse coeptum est.⁷⁸ Venus est generandi vis virtusque et causa: quumque nihil pulchrius generatione habeatur, ideo ei attributa est eximia forma; et quum nihil sit magis delectabile quam generare, dia voluptas nominatur vitae, rerum omnium parens et dux.⁷⁹ Nutrimento praeest, unde ubera et genitalia sub eius numine esse censentur.⁸⁰ Et rursus e mari genita fertur, quod est humidum et calidum et crebro spumas elicit, ut semen ex animalium genitalibus. Plinius ait⁸¹: “infra solem ambit⁸² ingens sydus appellatum Veneris, alterno meatu vagum, [Page 3] ipsis cognominibus aemulum solis et lunae: ante matutinum Lucifer, ab occasu refulgens Vesper nuncupatur. Naturam⁸³ eius Pythagoras Samius primus deprehendit⁸⁴ anno Urbis conditae CXLIIo. Ipso nomine non caret ambitione:⁸⁵ alii Iunonem, alii Isidem, alii Cybelen vocant.” Et item Plinius in haec verba: “huius natura cuncta generantur in terris, namque in alterutro exortu genitali rore conspargens, non terrae modo conceptus implet, verum animantium quoque omnium stimulat.”⁸⁶ Nupsit Vulcano,⁸⁷ qui est ignis; quouis humani simulachri caput tegit pileus, unde significatur motus in quo est ignis; et is, quum minus potens est ad generandum, a debilitate fingitur claudus, et ab assidue volvendo, qui est perpetuus motus, Vulcanus⁸⁸ appellatur. Qui quum superna habitet uxoremque longius intueatur, adulterum invenit, qui est vehemens et concitatus ardor, Mars appellatur, qui, ne torpesceret materia atque ociosa esset (Venus est), eam adamavit suaque diligentia succendit, a quo undique late generatio visitur.⁸⁹ Sabina vox est Mamers,⁹⁰ detractis litteris Mars remanet,⁹¹ quouis virtus est ignea, vehemens et plena sanguinis, hoc est vivacitatis.

Perturbatio est duplex, voluptas et dolor, quae in⁹² omne animal cadunt: alterum est proprium, alterum alienum.⁹³

Idem.

⁷⁸ TAC. *hist.* 2.3.1.

⁷⁹ LUCR. 2.172–3.

⁸⁰ Left marginal bracket lines 77–78 with “ubera et genitalia sub venere.”

⁸¹ PLIN. *nat.* 2.6. (or is it 36–8?)

⁸² Right margin: Plinius

⁸³ Right margin: Lucifer

⁸⁴ Left margin: Pythagoras; right margin: vesper.

⁸⁵ In right margin: Ven[us] multiplic[ibus] app[ellatur]

⁸⁶ PLIN. *nat.* 2.36–8.

⁸⁷ In right margin: Vulcanus ignis

⁸⁸ An “o” is written in above the first “u” in “Vulcanus.”

⁸⁹ HOM. *Od.* 8.266–366.

⁹⁰ Right margin: Mamers (Sabina vox.

⁹¹ VARRO *ling.* 5.73.

⁹² Right margin: Perturbatio duplex

⁹³ Traversari trans. DIOG. LAER. 10.34.

Miror Ciceronem, qui modo laudat modo vituperat Epicurum, illiusque voluptatem vitiorum incitamenta effingit. Tecum, M. Tulli, contendendo, quia [*vel fortasse quis; vox male legitur*] in deliciis ciborum et potus et cuiusvis genere libidinis Epicuri voluptatem ponas, et in hanc sententiam alios auctoritate tua traxeris. Dic, oro, qua ratione vir divitiarum spreto holeribus et aqua contentus erat? Nonne appetitum omnem abnegavit, dum consuetudine puerorum et foeminarum abstinerit?⁹⁴ Quum ieiunio corpus artaverit, a caeteris vero rebus quae ambitionem⁹⁵ tangunt adeo perseverantissime se alienavit ut portione exigui hortuli quosvis ad eum accedentes sit impertitus: ubi nam erat illius voluptas?⁹⁶ Video quod summum beatumque et aeternum bonum est in mortalibus, id esse minime putavit: quod vir scientiae plenus multo melius existimasset, si et deum optimum maximumve cognovisset et animas non interire con⁹⁷ optatissima resurrectione intellexisset.

Translation

Marcus [Terentius] Varro, father of Roman letters, taught that three things must be treated for all subjects: ancestry, merit and skill. In the present work, since we must discuss philosophy, it may seem necessary to treat each of these topics; yet since the ancients, both Greek authors and [we Latins], did not know whence understanding began, we cannot address these issues historically, as their precept and ours demands. Wisdom, that is understanding, comes to the world from God the Creator, this much was understood before the birth of our savior among the Israelites, as we will discuss shortly. If one seeks merit, as nearly the whole human race does, one tries one's hand at philosophy, upon which understanding depends: otherwise one differs from brutes only by language, because one is ignorant of where Reason lies. The first Roman to treat this topic in freestyle oratory, we omit many others by whom it was most passionately discussed, was Gaius Fannius, and at almost the same time Titus Lucretius expounded in hexametric poetry—so the youth would be more easily enticed to study it thoroughly, and so it would cling more fiercely to memory thanks to the enticement of meter—a description following the sect of Epicurus, whose thirty-seven books he reduced to six, although Marcus Terentius Varro asserts that were twenty-one, whose

⁹⁴ SENECA *epist.*, 2.21.10

⁹⁵ Left margin: [aliter] amicerit (alternative for artaverit)

⁹⁶ DIOG. LAER. 10.10–11.

⁹⁷ Ambiguous. Solaro 2000 suggests “concessa” (cf. Cappelli, *Lexicon abbreviatarum* 59). Or possibly the Italianate “con” is intended, a quasi-vernacular marking the sudden shift from Ciceronian classical Latin language and themes to this final culturally-mandated declaration of Christian piety.

incipit he included, which is: “To seek the fruitful time of air and earth”. The author himself thought these volumes unworthy, and later gave it a different incipit. The books which we have in hand were edited by Marcus Tullius Cicero, the prince of Roman eloquence: for the poet, wasting away little by little because of a potion he drank, was finally driven mad killed himself with his own hand. Some claim he killed himself for love of a boy, whom he called Astericon because of his paleness and extraordinary figure. Cicero in a letter to his brother Quintus praises Lucretius enormously. And Quintilian, the balance who measures letters, warned us to avoid ignorance of philosophy “using Empedocles among the Greeks,” whose four volumes Marcus Varro nicknamed Atacinus translated, and “using Lucretius,” these three who “related the principles of wisdom in verse.” And in Book X Quintilian said: “Macer and Lucretius should be read, but not for the formation of phrasing, which is the body of eloquence; each is elegant in his own subject, but the one is shallow and [Page 2] the other difficult.” Varro Attacinius is in the works, for which he has found fame, a translator not to be spurned, although not rich enough to augment one’s speaking skills. And Ovid commemorated Lucretius thus: “The poems of the sublime Lucretius will perish only/ when one day gives the world over to destruction.” Virgil, who often repeated Lucretius’ phrasing, sought to imitate his grandness in the composition of his own poem. Because whenever it is possible to soar, when subject matter permits, he is so sublime that he attains heroic style. He wrote books on love in the first ardor of youth, since vigorous youthful inclination trains itself even in play, but now many ages have blocked their transmission. It is not necessary to discuss skill at present: we will highlight that during our explication of the work, through our skill and the force of our natural inclination. Marcus Cicero in Book II of *De natura deorum* said this: “Our predecessors named this goddess who *veniret* (came) to all things *Venus*, and more probably the word *venustas* (attractiveness) derives from her than the name *Venus* from *venustas*.” M. T. Varro writes: “The cause of birth is twofold: fire and water, from whose binding Venus brings forth the fetus. This *victrix* (conqueress) desires *vincire* (to bind) not *vinciri* (to be bound); and victory itself is so named because the conquered are bound. And she is called Heaven-born: Poets say a seed of fire fell into the sea and Venus was born from the foam, a compound of fire and liquid, by which they mean that the *vis* (force) which these elements have is that of Venus. What is born from this *vis* (force) is called *vita* (life). Lucilius writes: ‘*vis* (force) is *vita* (life), you see, *vis* (force) compels us to do everything’.” Some say Venus is so named because Venerius, first king of the people of Paphus in Cyprus, consecrated a temple to her at the place to which she was carried from the sea by a shell at her con-

ception. The lyre later made this temple revered and venerable with most exquisite ceremonies and rites, and oracles were conceived there. Venus is the force, strength and cause of conception: since nothing is considered more beautiful than conception, extraordinary beauty is attributed to her; and since nothing is more delightful than conception, the goddess is called the pleasure of life, parent and leader of all things. Nourishment is primary, hence breasts and genitalia are considered her domain. And again she is said to be begotten from the sea, because it is wet and warm and repeatedly produces foam, like semen from the sex organs of animals. Pliny the Elder said: "The huge star called Venus circles around the sun, wandering a variable course, with names rivalling the Sun and Moon: for when heralding early morning she is called Lucifer, and when shining from the west at sunset Vesper. Pythagoras of Samos first discovered her nature in 612 BC. She does not lack grandeur in name: some call her Juno, others Isis, others Cybele." Pliny writes more: "By her nature all things on Earth are generated, for she sprays dew in her alternating ascents, and not only fills up Earth's generative reservoir, but stimulates all animate things." She married Vulcan, who is fire; a cap of human likeness covers his head, by which is signified that the motion within is fire; and he is formed misshapen by lameness, since his generative power is weak, and since he must always *volvere* (roll along), which is perpetual motion, he is called *Volcan*. When he dwells high above and views his wife from a great distance, he discovers an adulterer, who is fierce and rash passion, called Mars, who, lest the nutritive material stagnate and fall idle (this is Venus), made love to her passionately and burns with her industry, after which generation is seen far and wide in all directions. His Sabine name is *Mamers*, with some letters removed *Mars* remains, whose force is fiery, violent and full of blood, that is vigorous.

Disturbance, which falls upon every animal, is dual, pleasure and pain: the first is proper to our nature, the second foreign.

The same.

I marvel at Cicero, who sometimes praises sometimes curses Epicurus, and depicts his pleasure as an enticement to sin. I take issue with you, Marcus Tullius, since you assert that Epicurus' pleasure lies in luxurious habits of food and drink and whatever kinds of wantonness you care to allege, and by your authority you drag others into this opinion. Explain, pray, exactly by what reasoning this spurner of riches was content with vegetables and water? Did he not deny all appetites, while he abstained from relations with boys and women? While he curbed his body with fasting, he actually estranged himself from anything which touched upon ambition so persistently that anyone who approached him was granted a portion of his meagre garden:

where then was his pleasure? I see that he only barely believed that the greatest blessed and eternal good lies in mortal things, because a man full of wisdom would have judged much more rightly, if he had both known the best and greatest God, and had understood that souls do not perish, thanks to the most-hoped-for Resurrection.

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