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Reception of Epicureanism at Rome:
Cicero, Lucretius, and the Flexibility of Greek Models in the Late Republic

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Epicureanism, a Greek philosophical school founded in Athens c. 307 BCE, conceives of “pleasure” (αταρξία) as the ultimate human good.¹ This essay aims to investigate the reception of Epicureanism at Rome in the mid-1st century BCE, drawing on Cicero’s *In Pisonem* and Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura* as case studies. Each work addresses the question of whether Epicurus could operate within the framework of Roman cultural and political values and, consequently, whether he should be appropriated into Roman thinking. Through close examination of these two texts, I argue that each author ultimately builds his own version of “Epicurus” to serve his distinctive rhetorical aims. Cicero and Lucretius therefore come together to provide examples of a broader phenomenon surrounding the issue of Hellenization at Rome, namely, that of Greek figures being rewritten and repurposed in different contexts to serve different Roman agendas, revealing the flexible nature of Greek models at Rome and of Romans’ engagement with the Greek past.

Gaius Amifinius first introduced Epicurean doctrines to Latin prose around 125 BCE, from which point on the school and its core principles began to occupy an important role in Roman political discourse. D.S. Hutchinson identifies four “basic truths” professed by the Epicureans: (i) there is no next life, (ii) the gods are removed from human affairs, (iii) “what we need is actually easy to get,” and (iv) “what’s terrible is actually easy to endure.”² Taken together, these four principles comprise a philosophical system that places one’s own happiness

¹ Αταρξία (literally “unperturbedness”) refers to a distinctive kind of pleasure defined by freedom from mental distress; Bett, Richard, “Pyrrho,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified October 23, 2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pyrrho/>.

² This “four-part cure” comes from Philodemus of Gadara, *Herculaneum Papyrus 1005*, 4.9-14, as quoted by D.S. Hutchinson in his introduction to *The Epicurus Reader*, ed. and transl. by Brad Inwood and L.P. Garrison (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994), vii. The last two principles merit some elaboration: Epicureanism says that the greatest pleasure is tranquility of mind, which proceeds access to food, water, shelter, safety, and the “mental confidence” that these things are readily available. Conversely, the greatest pain is mental suffering (rather than physical), which can be alleviated by training the mind to recognize the limits of pain and resist the temptation to succumb to distress.

at the forefront of human life, a novel and potentially de-stabilizing proposition in the context of Roman social order. Principles (i) and (ii) directly challenge traditional concepts of Roman religiosity, granting freedom from divine retribution in the afterlife and lifting the obligation of orthopraxis that had always unified the Roman people under a shared sense of duty. Meanwhile, Principles (iii) and (iv) urge Epicureans to prioritize the basic necessities of life and tranquility of mind, simultaneously pointing them away from lofty ideals of self-sacrifice and participation in a larger whole.

Accordingly, the advent of Epicureanism in Rome sparked significant anxiety among the Roman elite about the ways in which this philosophical school might translate into the political sphere. In particular, many feared that an Epicurean mentality, with its emphasis on individual pleasure, would compel Romans to withdraw from political engagement and abandon the civic-minded ethos of the *mos maiorum*.³ Not all Romans, however, espoused such a negative view; in fact, some even celebrated Epicureanism for its cool and ordered rationality, going so far as to weave Epicurean principles into their own concepts of Roman virtue. To demonstrate the variety of responses to Epicureanism that arose among the aristocratic elite, I now turn to two contrasting examples of the ways in which Epicurean philosophy was discussed by eminent Roman writers during the mid-first century BCE.

I. In Pisonem

Cicero, for one, picked up on Roman anxieties about the underlying dangers of Epicureanism, weaving anti-Epicurean sentiments into his invective strategy. His speech *In Pisonem*, delivered in 55 BCE against L. Calpurnius Piso, proceeds under the established Ciceronian paradigm that “all specific cases can be classed under some general problem, and that

³ Gian Biagio Conte, “Lucretius and Epicureanism in Rome,” in *Latin Literature: A History*, transl. Joseph B. Solodow (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 157.

the arguments appropriate to the latter are applicable to the former.”⁴ To achieve this end, the speech presents Piso, a committed Epicurean, as recklessly self-indulgent, laying particular emphasis on his tendency toward profligacy and excess and thus implicitly ascribing these same evils to Epicureanism on a general level. One colorful scene, for example, imagines Piso as consul attending a banquet replete with garrulous music and dancing, drinking and even nudity: “When the house of your colleague was resounding with song and cymbals, and when he himself was dancing nude in the feast; in which, while he turned his whirling gyrations ...” (*cum conlegae tui domus cantu et cymbalis personaret, cumque ipse nudus in convivio saltaret; in quo cum illum saltatorium versaret orbem...*).⁵ Thus Cicero works to connect Epicureanism with a broader phenomenon of moral decline in Rome, immersing the Epicurean consul in a scene of drunken chaos and disorder. To build his case even further, Cicero also sets this scene against the backdrop of great “misery in the republic” (*in illis rei publicae luctibus*), venturing to suggest that Piso’s Epicurean mindset had led him to a life of negligence and delusion. As he forsakes the political turmoil and public grief (*luctibus*) in his midst for private enjoyment (*convivio*), Piso typifies a gross perversion of consular priorities, ultimately degrading the highest office of the state with his concern for leisure and grand displays of excess. In this way, Epicureanism emerges not only as distasteful, but even as fundamentally injurious to the republic.

In addition, Cicero also saturates his description of Piso’s Epicurean indulgence with themes of “Greekness” and “non-Romanness,” setting up a clear divide between Roman virtue and Hellenic vice. He describes, for instance, Piso languishing “amid the reeking orgies of his Greek crew” (*in suorum Graecorum foetore et caeno*).⁶ He proceeds to compare Piso’s activities

⁴ *De. Orat.* 2.133-135, as referenced in Phillip DeLacy, “Cicero’s Invective Against Piso,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 72 (1941): 49, <https://doi.org/10.2307/283040>.

⁵ Cicero, *Pis.* 10.22

⁶ *Ibid.* 10.23; literally, “in the stink and filth of his Greek companions.”

with “some feast of the Centaurs and Lapiths” (*quasi aliquod Lapitharum aut Centaurorum convivium*), bringing up these creatures as dangerous precedents from the realm of Greek mythology. His reference evokes the myth of the centauromachy,⁷ where the Lapiths and Centaurs erupt into battle at the wedding feast of Pirithous and Hippodamia. Thus he taints Piso’s image once again with the threat of bestial wildness, disorder, and indeed, even violence. Finally, Cicero goes on to frame Piso as so “foreign” to Roman values that he distorts the meaning of republican offices altogether. Here Cicero dares to suggest that Piso mistakes the external trappings of authority, such as the “lictors and toga praetextata, for the whole of the consulship itself” (*tu in lictoribus et in toga praetexta esse consulatum putas...*), once again attacking Piso’s over-emphasis on materiality and *luxuria*. Cicero thereby renders Piso’s consulship an empty shell, devoid of the “substance” that only republican virtue and understanding can impart. With these provocative remarks, Cicero clearly identifies Piso as a Greek “other” whose hedonism had infiltrated the highest political office in Rome and violated the sanctity of Roman *mores*.

Vivid and persuasive as it may be, the rhetoric of *In Pisonem* fundamentally misrepresents Epicurean principles, reflecting a common error that in fact runs throughout the Ciceronian corpus. In his philosophical writings, for example, Cicero repeatedly denounces Epicureanism for its tendency toward excess and luxury (*luxuria*). Clear echoes have been established between these texts and *In Pisonem*, particularly with the idea that Epicureanism “reduces men to animals.”⁸ But while Epicureans were indeed motivated by the pursuit of pleasure, as Hutchinson explains, “the discipline of Epicurean philosophy enables its followers to recognize *how little they actually need*, to enjoy possessing it, and to enjoy the confidence that

⁷ The myth was recounted in Greek public spaces such as the Temple of Zeus at Olympia and the Parthenon. Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* also recounts the myth in the context of the Trojan War.

⁸ DeLacy, “Cicero’s Invective,” 51; cf. Ath. 3.61, 7.9.

they will continue to possess it.”⁹ True Epicureanism therefore remains incompatible with Cicero’s vision of grand displays and indulgent behavior. Indeed, Epicurus himself defined pleasure as nothing more than the “absence of pain” (*απονία*). This state, he contended, represents the “limit” of all pleasure; dependence on luxuries only detracts from our happiness.¹⁰ Thus, close examination of Epicurean principles reveals a disconnect in Cicero’s understanding of what Epicurean “hedonism” really is. And yet, adapting the concept to suit his rhetorical aims, Cicero labors to associate his enemies with dangerous Hellenizing influences and represent their “generalized selfishness” as a threat to the common good.¹¹ We can therefore observe in Cicero the phenomenon of Epicureanism being re-framed across time, changing shape in Roman rhetoric to serve Cicero’s invective paradigm.

II. De Rerum Natura

Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*, an epic-didactic poem dated to around the same year of 55 BCE, presents Epicureanism in a radically different light. From the outset, the poem establishes itself as a kind of “diffusive gospel,”¹² aiming to replace the horrors of religious superstition (*religio*) with a new Epicurean rationality, emphasizing the ultimate authority of reason and the senses. Lucretius declares at the beginning that he will make known the “true course of the gods and heavens” and expose the “origins of things,” (*nam tibi de summa caeli ratione deumque / disserere incipiam et rerum primordia pandam*),¹³ re-fashioning the old epic form to rest on a new foundation of philosophical argument. He dedicated the work to his patron Memmius, a Roman statesman who had served as Tribune of the Plebs in 66 BCE. On the theme of

⁹ Hutchinson, introduction to *The Epicurus Reader*, viii.

¹⁰ Epicurus, “Principal Doctrines,” No. 3, Diogenes Laertes 10.139-154, in *ibid.*, 32.

¹¹ Dan Hanchey, “Cicero, Exchange, and the Epicureans,” *Phoenix*, 67, No. 1-2 (2013): 119, <https://doi.org/10.7834/phoenix.67.1-2.0119>.

¹² Fabio Tutrone, “Granting Epicurean Wisdom at Rome: Exchange and Reciprocity in Lucretius’ Didactic,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* (2017): 279, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44863963>.

¹³ Lucretius, DRN 1.54-55.

dedication, Fabio Tutrone has argued that the work can be situated in the milieu of Roman gift-exchange, with its verses of Epicurean wisdom coming forward as “gifts” (*dona*) to urge Memmius into a new mindset of logic and tranquility.¹⁴ The poem ultimately draws a sharp contrast with Cicero, holding up Epicurus in flowing hexameters as a savior and exemplar for the aristocrat Memmius to imitate in his own life.

With his persistent use of military language, Lucretius frames Epicurus as a new kind of epic hero, one not driven to the Homeric battlefield, but rather to the bold and relentless pursuit of knowledge. In a particularly striking passage, Lucretius celebrates Epicurus as “the first man who dared lift his eyes and take the first stand against religion” (*primum Graius homo mortalis tollere contra / est oculos ausus primusque obsistere contra*).¹⁵ Here he crafts an image of physical confrontation, presenting the idea of “religion” (*religio*) itself as an enemy to be faced in battle. The verb “dared” (*ausus*) abruptly shifts the tone by inserting an element of danger and risk, raising the stakes of Epicurus’ philosophical pursuits to match those of the epic heroes who, like Achilles and Agamenon, once “dared” to rush into battle with hearts on fire. But unlike the Homeric heroes who, overcome with rage, morph before our eyes into wind and fire and beasts of prey, Epicurus keeps a firm grasp on his humanity throughout the scene, retaining his definitive status as a man (*homo*) throughout the passage.¹⁶ Accordingly, the subsequent lines praise his distinctly human capacities, citing the “lively force of his mind” (*vivida vis animi*) and his “keen strength” (*acrem...virtutem*). The language of *virtus* is particularly significant here, evoking a distinctly Roman concept of manly virtue and thus implicitly ushering Epicurus into the company of Roman heroes. And so, with this brief sketch, Lucretius challenges Ciceronian

¹⁴ Tutrone, “Epicurean Wisdom,” 277.

¹⁵ Lucretius, DRN 1.66-67.

¹⁶ This observation presents an interesting contrast to Cicero, who, as noted above, contends that Epicureanism turns men into animals.

ideas of Epicureanism, representing Epicurus himself not as a slovenly creature besotted with earthly delights, but rather as a steadfast warrior, a man in full possession of his faculties and armed with the salvific force of reason.

Lucretius further counters Cicero by framing Epicurean philosophy as hard labor, drawing on the language of epic journeys to illustrate his point. He describes Epicurus, for example, advancing “far beyond the flaming ramparts of the Earth,” “wandering” across the “immeasurable all with mind and spirit” (*processit longe flammantia moenia mundi / atque omne immensum peragravit mente animoque*).¹⁷ His use of the word “wandered” (*peragravit*) in particular frames Epicurus as a “new Odysseus”—a long-journeying “man of twists and turns” (πολύτροπος) who must endure countless trials until he reaches his final destination. This subtle gesture towards the Homeric sphere serves to challenge the presumption that Epicureanism necessarily resists toil and self-sacrifice, countering once again Cicero’s imagined scenes of self-indulgence. Instead, Lucretius ventures with these lines to suggest that Epicurus, in his relentless pursuit of truth, dared to withstand the same kinds of harsh labor imposed on Greek models such as Odysseus and Hercules. And so, collapsing these Greek models onto one man and extolling his virtues in Latin verse, Lucretius shows with poetic flair that it is indeed possible to reconcile Epicureanism with Roman ideals of *labor* (work) and *duritia* (endurance). These virtues fall under the *via Romana*, or “Roman way” of life, which was believed to grant Rome the strength of character to reign supreme and civilize the world. By mapping these virtues onto a Greek-inspired hero, Lucretius suggests that the Greek past can in fact aid and enrich the Roman present.

Another key virtue that Lucretius highlights in Epicurus is that of ingenuity. The word “first” (*primus*) recurs three times throughout this short passage, calling attention to the

¹⁷ Lucretius, DRN 1.73-74.

groundbreaking nature of Epicurean doctrine. As Matthew Roller has demonstrated, Romans maintained a particular regard for the idea of “firstness.” But he further contends that, with their characteristic regard for the *mos maiorum*, the Romans’ sense of the word “first” did not necessarily pertain to those who accomplished something “novel,” but rather to those who “went beyond others within established, long-accepted categories of action and value.”¹⁸ This argument suggests that the word *primus*, in a truly “Roman” sense, must be understood as “taking the old ways of the *mos maiorum* to new heights.” And so, by zeroing in on Epicurus’ classically “Roman” virtues and inviting him into the circle of Roman heroes, Lucretius envelops the Greek philosopher in this very discourse of “firstness.” Operating under similar terms, Virgil went on to portray Aeneas just decades later as both a founder and innovator who “first came to the shores of Troy” (... *qui primus ab oris litora Troiae*),¹⁹ who, in all his bold ingenuity, also held his gaze fixed firmly upon the ancestors and thus came to be immortalized in hexameters for his distinctive virtue of *pietas*. By attributing to Epicurus this same balanced synthesis of innovation and old Roman customs, Lucretius primes him to be cast alongside Aeneas and other Roman “founders” who reached new horizons of excellence within the parameters of virtue set forth by their forebears.

Finally, although Lucretius is often seen as endorsing retreat from social and political life, his portrait of Epicurus complicates this conjecture somewhat, entertaining notions of the philosopher as a “civil servant.” On one hand, the Proem of Book II contends that a wise man possesses the ability to watch the perils of others with detachment,²⁰ directing readers toward a mindset of complete social apathy. And yet, as he closes his passage with a provocative image of

¹⁸ Matthew Roller, “The Exemplary Past in Roman Historiography and Culture,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Roman Historians* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 2009), 227, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521854535.014>.

¹⁹ Virgil, *Aen.* 1.1.

²⁰ Lucretius, DRN 2.6-14; see also 3.59-84, 995-1002, 5.117-35.

the Epicurus “placing religion under foot,” (*quare religio pedibus subiecta vicissim / opteritur*),²¹ Lucretius nonetheless imagines the Greek philosopher performing a critical public service: establishing a clear hierarchy of knowledge, setting boundaries and imposing a “limit” (*terminus*) to human understanding, effectively taming the fear and reckless passion, chaos and even bloodshed that religious superstition had produced in the past. The word *terminus* is particularly noteworthy here, evocative as it is of the boundary markers used in Roman sacrifices.²² As he appropriates the term into his own text, Lucretius shows Epicurus uprooting religious phenomena and re-claiming them for his own, incorporating each into his new empirical framework. In this way, Epicurus comes forward in the text as a distinct kind of “civic hero,” removed perhaps from the daily ebb and flow of the political arena and yet devoted in his own way to ensuring the common good by organizing the world into categories of understanding, propounding his doctrines of peace and tranquility to re-shape the world around.

III. The Flexibility of Greek Ideas

In the end then, Cicero and Lucretius take opposing sides of the debate around Epicureanism; however, a surprising connection nonetheless emerges between the two. Indeed, despite his vehemently anti-Epicurean rhetoric, a letter from Cicero to his brother Quintus expresses the opinion that “Lucretius’ work showed both art and genius” (*Lucreti poemata ut scribis ita sunt, multis luminibus ingeni, multae tamen artis*).²³ This puzzling opinion carries with it some important implications. In particular, it suggests that Cicero could appreciate the art (*artae*) of the poem without subscribing to the ideas contained therein: while he would have disagreed with the philosophical premises, he could still celebrate the *labor*, endurance, and

²¹ Ibid., 1.78-79.

²² H.H. Scullard, *Festivals and Ceremonies of the Roman Republic*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981): 79–80. Anyone who removed one of the *termini* was cursed and could even be killed. The reference here therefore calls to mind the violence attached to religious “superstition” that Lucretius sought to undermine.

²³ Cicero, Q. fr. 1.2.

craftsmanship required of producing good poetry. This praise circles back to reflect the ideas propounded in Cicero's own rhetorical works, which identify the essential virtues of rhetoric as art (*ars*), genius (*ingenium*), and training (*exercitatio*).²⁴ These virtues enable the orator to captivate audiences and mold the minds of interlocutors, giving renewed vividness and power to the spoken word. By celebrating these virtues in Lucretius, Cicero exhibits a degree of flexibility in his engagement with Hellenic ideas, allowing himself to approve of the Greek-inspired poem insofar as it reflected both the Roman virtue of *labor* and the standards of good writing that he himself had set forth.

Like Cicero, Lucretius also allows for at least some disconnect between the form and content of his work. After all, Epicurus had “condemned poetry, above all Homeric poetry ... on account of its close connection with myth.”²⁵ Lucretius, however, seizes on the artistic possibilities of the epic hexameter to craft his master work. This decision is especially notable given that Lucretius continually asserts the truth of Epicurean doctrines in the course of the poem. And yet, he still transgresses a key Epicurean belief to spread its “gospel” truth, choosing a form that once appealed to the sensibilities of the aristocratic elite—such as his patron, Memmius—over the unadorned modes of treatise and epistle favored by Epicurus himself. Indeed, Lucretius explicitly states his aim to “sweeten” a bitter doctrine with “the honey of the Muses,”²⁶ invoking the very world of Homeric epic that would offend true Epicurean tastes. Lucretius thereby reveals himself to be selective in his endorsement of Epicurean doctrine, echoing Cicero in the fluidity of his interaction with Greek ideas and re-framing these ideas to help him reach his Roman audience.

²⁴ Cicero, *Auct. Ad Her.* 2.14-17.

²⁵ Conte, “Lucretius and Roman Epicureanism”, in *Latin Literature*, 157.

²⁶ Lucretius, *DRN*, 2.14-17.

In sum, the writings of both Cicero and Lucretius offer an important window into the reception of Epicurus and Epicurean ideas at Rome. The two differ in their interpretations of Epicurean doctrine; however, as I have aimed to demonstrate, a unifying thread links their work nonetheless: each situates Epicurus in the context of Roman virtues such as hard work (*labor*), endurance (*duritia*), and strength (*virtus*), crafting an argument about whether or not Epicurus could claim these values for his own and thus enter into the company of Roman heroes. Although they reach opposite conclusions, both writers ultimately re-frame and re-define Epicurean ideas to match their distinctive aims and agendas—whether it be Cicero caricaturing Piso as a “foreign” enemy corrupted by the allure of *luxuria* or Lucretius launching an appeal to the aristocratic elite in a form suitable to their tastes. Taken together, Cicero and Lucretius thus indicate the matter of Hellenization at Rome to involve far more than simply imitating or rejecting an unadulterated Greek “original.” Instead, each edits and adapts, revises and spins anew the narrative of Epicureanism at Rome to fit his own unique position in the context of the Late Republic.

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