Lucretius' Gigantomachy

1. Cicero's displeasure with Lucretius

Gaius Velleius speaks for the Epicureans in Cicero's *De natura deorum*. But Velleius might not be the object of Quintus Lucilius Balbus' indignation, when it comes Balbus' turn to present the Stoic conception of the gods. Balbus is particularly exercized by the Epicurean view that the world is the product of chance and formed out of the ballistics of infinite matter moving 'at random' through infinite void. To his mind the absurdity of this view of the world equals the absurdity of the supposition that the twenty-one letters of the Latin alphabet could be shaken up in a dice box and spell out the 18 books of Ennius' *Annales* as they tumble out. He doubts chance could even compose a single verse (*N.D.* II.93). He frets too about how atoms, which have none of the qualities of our world, could form a world, or a temple, portico, house, or city. He then produces the positive argument that will now occupy us. This comes from Aristotle's dialogue *On Philosophy*.[1]

This passage should be familiar to us as readers of Plato's *Republic* and its 'allegory' of the cave (VII.514a-517a) and the end of Book II of Lucretius' *De rerum natura*. Like Plato's Socrates, the speaker in Aristotle's dialogue invites us to imagine a subterranean civilization. The inhabitants of his cave are content with the beauty of their own world beneath the earth. Rumors of divinity have reached them, but they have never emerged into the light of day to see the sun and the heavens at night and the fixed and immutable courses of the heavenly bodies moving *in omni aeternitate*. Such manifest signs of order afford Aristotle's cave dwellers with their first conception of divinity.

Balbus — or shall we say Cicero? — goes on to give a domestic illustration of this transcendental meditation drawn from the cloud cover produced by an eruption of Mt. Aetna and the amazement that came with the epiphany of the sun after two days of darkness. His motive for adducing this illustration is to bring home the truth that familiarity breeds indifference. He then proclaims the glory of the heavens and their constellations (rendered on the globe of the Atlas of the Naples Museum) by citing verses from Aratus of Soli's *Phaenomena* in the translation of Cicero of Arpinum.

[1] Cicero is much occupied by this dialogue in his *De natura deorum*. He refers to it in I.33, 107; II.42-44, 51 and here (II.95-96 = fr. 13 Ross). Bywater argued convincingly that this citation from Aristotle in Cicero is much more extensive than has been supposed, (1877) 82-85.

But not before he reflects at some length on the coarsening effect of familiarity that robs us of our sense of wonder before the heavens.[2] Plato, Aristotle, Lucretius, and Cicero all speak of the numbing effect of familiarity. For Aristotle especially, wonder was the beginning of philosophy.[3] But, as we shall see, Lucretius invokes this familiarity breading indifference not to support an argument from design but to demonstrate the perishability not of any world in an infinite universe but of *this* world. Lucretius recalls this passage from Aristotle's *On Philosophy* at three distinct stages of the argument of his *De rerum natura*. All bear hard on the mortality of this world. The first stage comes at the end of Book II; the second in the preliminaries to Book V; and the last in Lucretius' final appeal to the wonder of the heavens in his genealogy of religion in Book V.

I think it is likely that Lucretius and not the bad company of Velleius' fellow Epicureans is the object of Cicero's indignation in this passage from the *De natura deorum*. Cicero mentions Lucretius by name only once. This in his tantalizing letter to his brother Quintus of 54 BC (*Q. fr.* II.9.3). But it has occasionally been appreciated that Cicero recognized the presence of Lucretius in his own dialogues, but by a 'loi du silence' does not name him.[4] The passage Cicero has in mind comes from the end of Book II of the *De rerum natura* (II.1023-1048). Here Lucretius has approached once again[5] and with great obliqueness an argument for the mortality of this world. In his grand style, he announces to his reader that a new theme is looming before his ears and startled eyes. To comfort his reader as he is suddenly confronted by the radical novelty of his subject, Lucretius employs an illustration long familiar from Plato and Aristotle. But he puts it to a very different purpose. His argument for the mortality of the world confronts his reader like the sudden epiphany of the heavens as they first appeared to humans. Such is the wonder (*novitas*, II.1040) of his new theme; but habit will dull all sense of wonder before this new argument, just as it has bread indifference to the wonders of the heavens.

This is startling. Lucretius' perversion of the teleologist's argument from design makes Aristotle the unwitting spokesman for the Epicurean conviction that 'the world is destructible, like an animal, like a plant' (Aet. II.4.10). In his attack on the Epicurean position and his illustration of the argument of design from Aristotle's *On Philosophy*, Cicero is remarkably attentive to the context of Lucretius' argument in Book II of the *De rerum natura* (*N.D.* II.93-96). Lucretius had just demonstrated that atoms share none of the sensuous qualities of this world; Balbus notes this view with scorn (*N.D.* II.93). Balbus also recalls the language by which Lucretius describes the formation of a world or, in the model he discovers in his own poem, of how a world

[2] *N.D.* II.96. Such reflections might have been a part of Aristotle's argument in *On Philosophy*; but they are also evidence for Cicero's knowledge of Lucretius' poem. The theme of familiarity breading indifference to the marvelous is taken up in Plin. *Nat.* VII.6 and Sen. *Nat.* VII.1-4.

[3] Notoriously in *Metaph.* I.2.982^{b}11-19.

[4] This is the argument of André (1974) for passages in the *De finibus*, a dialogue contemporary with the *De natura deorum*. The extreme of scepticism is that of Merrill (1911) 42, who after canvassing concordances between Cicero and Lucretius concludes 'I doubt very much whether Cicero ever read the poem.'

[5] As he had in considering the results of hypotheses contrary to his own argument or an infinite universe, I.1009-1020, and the conception of a stable earth in the middle of the universe, I.1052-1113.

of elements (meaning the letters of the Latin alphabet) can form words and a world of meaning. This model (stated in II.1005-1020) provokes Balbus' remarks about the *Annales* of Ennius. Chance could not produce even a single verse of Ennius' *Annales*: *quod nescio an ne in uno quidem versu possit tantum valere fortuna* (II.93). Then, the reflections Cicero offers on how familiarity breeds indifference to the splendor of the heavens match the reflections of Lucretius, although Cicero puts these to an Aristotelian end.

2. Lucretius' intellectual background: Aristotle's *On Philosophy*

There are three other passages in Book V of Lucretius that seem to recognize this noble passage from Aristotle's *On Philosophy* (V.91-103, 110-121 and 1204-1217). But I should now recognize a difficulty confronting my analysis of Lucretius' intellectual background. Cicero's displeasure with Lucretius is a proposition that might be accepted with some positivistic complaints. But Lucretius' use of the early Aristotle of the dialogue *On Philosophy* is more wonderful still and it raises once again the question of Lucretius' sources. These are very much a part of Lucretius' intellectual background. Acute investigations into Lucretius' arguments against the eternity of this world have forged a chain of dependency: of Theophrastus on Aristotle; of Epicurus on Theophrastus; and of Lucretius on Epicurus. This chain of dependency resembles the chain of inspiration Socrates describes in Plato's *Ion*. Like Socrates' festival crowd in relation to the rhapsode's Muses, Lucretius is seen as standing at three removes from the source that inspired his arguments against the eternity of the world. This concatenation of dependency is now associated with Ettore Bignone and his *L'Aristotele perduto e la formazione filosofica di Epicuro* (1936). For Bignone, clearly, Lucretius depended on Epicurus for his knowledge of the 'primo Aristotele' of *On Philosophy*.[6]

Bignone was quite alert — and justifiably so — to the reflection (or refraction) of the early Aristotle in Lucretius.[7] His study and others like it illustrate what I think of as the problem of transparency in the interpretation of Lucretius' poem. In our eagerness to recover the early Aristotle, the *Physical Opinions* of Theophrastus, and Books X-XII of Epicurus' *On Nature*, we are tempted to treat Lucretius as if he were a transparent medium and to look through his *De rerum natura* to sight the distant figures just visible in its background. I will focus on a single figure in the background of Lucretius' poem, the Aristotle of *On Philosophy,* in order to return our

[6] This is clear from the two chapters he devotes to Aristotle's *On Philosophy*, cf. Bignone (1936) vol. II, 1-102; in the next chapter, he acknowledges the importance for Epicurus of Theophrastus' staging of the debate over the eternity of the world, *ibid.* 103-187. A better appreciation of this relation between Epicurus and Theophrastus is assured by the studies of McDiarmid (1942) and Sedley (1997b). The best characterization of Aristotle's *On Philosophy* remains that of Jaeger (1923, English translation 1934) 124-166. The most recent full treatment of the dialogue is Untersteiner (1963).

[7] Bignone (1936) vol. II, 35-102 examines most of the Lucretian texts I refer to in this essay, but not Lucretius' polemical strategy in evoking the argument of the teleologist. All of these texts are associated by Reiche (1971) in a web of extraneous associations.

attention to the foreground of Lucretius' poem. The four passages in which Lucretius seems to evoke the original of the passage cited by Balbus in Cicero's *De natura deorum* look very different in the context of the *De rerum natura* than they do as texts excerpted as testimonia for the lost Aristotle.[8]

To see these passages more clearly in their context in Lucretius, we must return to Aristotle. The point of Aristotle's imagined cave-dwellers and their discovery of the world of the heavens depends for its effect on the studied contrast with Plato's allegory of the cave. Aristotle is more generous than was Plato to the dwellers in his subterranean city. Their houses are elegant and contain paintings and statues rather than the shadows of puppets, and some rumor of divinity has penetrated to them. In the *Republic*, Socrates was primarily interested in the cave as an illustration of our 'lack of education' (VII.514a); in *On Philosophy*, Aristotle is attempting to suggest how the spectacle of the heavens and their regular movements leads — or once led — to a conception of the divine. Lucretius does not speak of a cave, but his argument for the numbing effect of habit is the functional equivalent. Our sense of the wonder of the heavens can become dulled by the force of habit. It is the habit of the cave in both Plato and Aristotle that makes possible the wonder at the first sight of the heavens, and wonder, for both Aristotle and Lucretius, is the stimulus to philosophy.[9] Aristotle's illustration clearly derives from Plato, but Aristotle developes it by introducing other analogies. The general form of argument can be described as that of traces on the Rhodian shore.[10] Aristotle positions a viewer on top of Mt. Ida. Below him he can view the order of the Greek army as it advances. Such an ordered force (*kosmos*) suggests to the mind its commanders, known in Homer as κοσμήτορες λαῶν. A spectator from on shore would form the same conclusion about a ship moving smartly under sail; so too would a stranger as he first enters a great city.[11]

3. Lucretius' gigantomachy

There is another passage from Aristotle's *On Philosophy* that Lucretius seems to glance at with a polemical eye. This is Aristotle's protest (preserved in Philo) against the 'shocking impiety' of those who argue that the world had an origin and is perishable. These thinkers treat the visible gods, the sun, that is, the moon, the fixed stars and the planets, as if they were the products of human hands. Once, Aristotle quipped, he had feared for the security of his own house against the threat of winds,

[8] The procedure is familiar from Diels' *Doxographi graeci*. For Cicero of the *Tusc.* and *N.D.* and Aristotle, compare the columns in Bignone (1936) vol. I, 203-207.

[9] As we have seen, Cicero's reflections on the force of habit are similar to Lucretius'. Wonder is also clearly present in Lucretius: in II.1035 (*mirabile*); it explains the mind's need for understanding, 1044. In Book V the mortality of the world is called *res nova miraque menti* (97); and in the last passage which evokes Aristotle, *On Philosophy* fr. 13, the wonder the heavens inspire in early humans prompts inquiry into the nature of the universe and its mortality and the gods (1204-1217).

[10] As told for Aristippus, in Vitr. VI.1 and for Plato, in Cic. *Rep.* I.17.29. The theme is given an exhaustive study in Glacken (1962).

[11] In Clay (1983b) 243-244 I have argued that Lucretius has this illustration (which we have from Sextus) in mind (fr. 12b Ross) in the proem to Book II of the *De rerum natura* and suggested the motives for Cicero's displeasure with Lucretius.

violent storms, the passage of time and neglect; but now a greater fear hangs over his head — that inspired by those who by their arguments (τῷ λόγῳ) would destroy the entire universe.[12]

In Book V of his *De rerum natura*, Lucretius has moved his powerful siege works up against the *moenia mundi* in a last sustained assault. As does the Epicurean Velleius in Cicero's *De natura deorum*, Lucretius describes the world as a work of human hands and as destructible because it has been constructed.[13] He asks Memmius to contemplate the threefold world of Roman experience and makes a prophecy (V.95-96):

> una dies dabit exitio, multosque per annos
> sustentata ruet moles et machina mundi.

But he recognizes the religious scruples that would strongly oppose his argument against the eternity of the world and the divine masses that make it up, Caelum, Neptunus, and Tellus (or Terra). He is aware that his argument might strike his reader as an impious assault on heaven, like that of the Giants who had to pay for their terrible crime of marking what is immortal with mortal speech, and, like Aristotle of *On Philosophy*, he speaks of the philosophical piety requisite for treating such a theme (V.110-121).[14] Once again, the conceit of a philosophical Gigantomachy can be traced from Aristotle (where it is only implicit) back to Plato and the passage in the *Sophist* that describes the Titan struggle between the partisans of movement and flux and the Olympian preservers of stability and the unshakable foundation of the heavens.[15]

Lucretius recognizes the brave new world of Aristotle's *On Philosophy* one last time in the *De rerum natura*. He has now reached in his history of human civilization the promised account of the genealogy of religion (V.1204-1217).[16] And for a last time he lifts his reader's eyes to the heavens and the pure sky with its fixed and pulsating stars. But he speaks of us at present, not of primitive men far in the past (V.1204-1205):

> nam cum suspicimus magni caelestia mundi
> templa super stellisque micantibus aethera fixum.

In doing so, he reminds us pointedly of the language he had first used in Book II and his comment on the indifference bread by our gross familiarity with the splendor of the heavens (II.1038-1039):

> ... nemo fessus satiate videndi
> suspicere in caeli dignatur lucida templa.

[12] Aristotle *On Philosophy* fr. 18 Ross. Bignone (1936) vol. II, 74-83 had already made this connection clear. The connection between Aristotle's τῶν τὸν ἅπαντα κόσμον τῷ λόγῳ καθαιρούντων and Lucretius' *ratione sua disturbent moenia mundi* (V.119) is especially striking.

[13] Velleius in *N.D.* I.19, speaking against the world as the handiwork of Plato's demiurge of the *Timaeus*. The conception of the world a well ordered city surfaces in Aristotle *On Philosophy* fr. 13 Ross (Philo *Leg. Alleg.* III.97-99 and *De Praem. et Poen.* VII.41-43).

[14] Cf. Aristotle *On Philosophy* fr. 14 Ross (Sen. *Nat.* VII.30 and Plut. *Tranq.* 477c). Such piety had also been enjoined by Empedocles (DK 31 B 4 and DK 31 B 131, from the *Katharmoi*).

[15] *Sph.* 246a and 248c2. Bignone (1936) vol. II, 79-81 notes some of the uses of this conceit (Plato *Sph.* and *Lg.* III.701c; Plut. *De facie* 12.926d; *Adv. Col.* 1119b = fr. 558 Us.). Add Boethius *Consol.* III, Prose XII.69.

[16] The promise is made in V.73-75. A number of the testimonia for Aristotle's *On Philosophy* reflect his explanation of how humans arrived at a conception of the divine, frs. 12a and b in Ross especially.

In book V, Lucretius is describing early mankind, but he makes the anxieties inspired by the heavens contemporary. The spectacle of the heavens creates a sense of wonder that verges on anxiety. It inspires reflections which are neither Aristotelian nor Platonic. The thought of the course of the sun and moon does not instill in the mind a conception of the divine or a conception of the heavens as the handiwork of a designing god or gods. Rather it prompts anxiety at the thought of the enormous power of the gods and, in the absence of philosophy, the question of whether this world had a beginning and will have an end is left unresolved: *temptat enim dubiam mentem rationis egestas* (V.1211). The one point on which Aristotle and Lucretius seem to agree is that our sense of wonder at the sight of the heavens leads to philosophy.

These reflections are not meant to illustrate 'l'anti-Lucrèce chez Lucrèce'. I mean to call attention to a pattern in 'l'anti-finalisme de Lucrèce.' I have not inquired into Lucretius' sources — or source — for his evident knowledge of Aristotle's *On Philosophy*. What I mean to illustrate is Lucretius' keen awareness of the teleologist's argument for a divinely ordered and eternal world as this is evident in three large arguments of the *De rerum natura*. There are clear traces of design in this anti-teleological polemic. Lucretius has introduced his own arguments for the mortality of this world and for the genealogy of religion by evoking a vivid illustration of teleology from Aristotle's *On Philosophy*. So did Cicero a decade after Lucretius' death. But the difference between Lucretius of the *De rerum natura* and Balbus of the *De natura deorum* is that Lucretius had evoked Aristotle's magnificent conception of an eternal and closed world to set his own argument for the mortality of this world within an infinite universe in its polemical frame. He has moved, in the formulation of Piet Schrijvers, *per falsa ad vera*.[17] He uses the same polemical device when he evokes Empedocles' language describing the sheer difficulty of arriving at a conception of the divine to couch his argument for the mortality of this world in Book V.[18] And, when he evokes the splendid sight of the heavens for a last time in the poem (V.1204-1217), he subverts Aristotle's teleology in order to make his own Epicurean argument for a world which had a beginning and will have an end and has arisen *opera sine deum*.

[17] Schrijvers (1970) 41.
[18] V.91-103 and Empedocles DK 31 B 133.