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## IV

GORDON CAMPBELL

### ORACULAR COSMOLOGY IN LUCRETIUS

The Babylonian *Epic of Creation* (*Enuma Elish*) exhibits no worries about the authoritativeness of the story of creation that it tells, beginning confidently without referencing the source of the information. Since there could have been no witnesses except the gods to the events of creation this could be problematic. However, the *Enuma Elish* is a sacred text, recited in the temple at Babylon every year at the New Year Festival and so carries the authority of Marduk himself.

In early Greek cosmologies, however, we do find that writers are concerned to establish the source of their account. In the *Theogony* Hesiod tells us that near Mt. Helicon he met the Muses, daughters of Zeus he reminds us, and they gave him the power to sing of the future and the past, and of the family of the immortal gods. Of the Presocratics whose claims to authority have survived, Parmenides tells us that the daughters of the Sun took him to visit a goddess who unfolded the nature of the universe to him, and Empedocles also claims that his account is “from a god”. Plato in the *Timaeus* reacts against this tradition by calling his account of creation only “a likely story”. Lucretius, as an Epicurean, should not be able to claim any divine insight to aid him in his account of the nature of the universe; the gods do not communicate with mortals, and events that happened long ago can only be worked out by applying reason (*ratio*) to the traces (*uestigia*) they have left behind. The question of what epistemological status should be granted to events

in prehistory is controversial. We may be tempted to regard such events as *adêla physei* ("things unclear by their nature") and thus things that should be suitable for the method of multiple explanations, just as the celestial and terrestrial phenomena in Book Six. But Lucretius only admits multiple explanations of phenomena at one point in Book Five, when he says that fire could have come down to earth in two different ways. For the rest he is dogmatic and admits no alternatives. It seems that we can trace back the events of the past by the traces they have left.

It may come as a surprise that Lucretius speaks just as confidently of the creation and destruction of the world as do the Presocratics. He tells us he is uttering oracles more certain than those of the Pythian priestess, setting himself up as a rival in cosmological authority to the oracle of Apollo at Delphi. In this paper I trace the source of this oracular authority that he claims, examining how he is able to claim such prophetic powers, and how he establishes himself in the cosmological tradition. Perhaps surprisingly, there is a long tradition of the Epicureans claiming to speak with oracular authority about the universe. Any Epicurean it seems has access to oracular knowledge of the past, present and future of the world, since Epicurean cosmology gives exact knowledge of the nature of the universe, and armed with this we can speak with confidence about past and future events.

In particular I examine the tension between the way Epicurus is treated as an oracular authority by his followers, and the possibility offered by the doctrine that all Epicureans can discover the secrets of the universe for themselves, and thus free themselves from fear of the gods and of death.

## 1. Some Babylonian background

The *Enuma Elish* does not question the authenticity of its account of creation. It is a sacred text, and therefore authoritative.

Recited at the temple in Babylon at the New Year festival each year, it is part of a ceremony of cosmic renewal.

“When heaven above was not yet named  
Nor earth below pronounced by name,  
Apsu, the first one, their begetter  
And maker Tiamat, who bore them all,  
Had mixed their waters together,  
But had not formed pastures, nor discovered reed-beds;  
When yet no gods were manifest,  
Nor names pronounced, nor destinies decreed,  
Then gods were born within them.” (Trans. S. Dalley)

There are very many things that may be said about this passage, but for my purposes here I shall mention just a couple. First, as I say above, the account is dogmatic and admits of no doubt or questioning on the part of the reader or listener. The writer or singer clearly does not expect anyone in the audience to put up their hand and ask how these things can possibly be known. We are, after all, told quite explicitly that only the two divinities Apsu (the masculine sweet water principle) and Tiamat (the feminine salt water principle) existed in the beginning, and there were not yet any other gods, let alone humans. And anyway, as we read on we learn that Apsu is killed early on in the action, and that Tiamat is killed later in the final battle between the gods. Clearly the account is not given by them, but it is authorised by the New Year ceremony itself, as the poem is recited every year in order to legitimate, or re-legitimate, the rule of Marduk and the order of the world that he put in place. In the *Enuma Elish* Marduk does more work than his Greek counterpart Zeus. He not only grants the gods their honours and puts them in their stations but creates both the world itself and human beings to be slaves for the over-worked gods. The political structure of Babylon is clearly divinely ordained.<sup>1</sup>

My second point about this passage is that the literary mode adopted is ‘description by negation’. We are informed about

<sup>1</sup> See Stefan Maul’s chapter in this volume.



the time when “skies above were *not yet* named ... *nor* earth below ... *not* ... *nor* ... *no* gods ... *nor* names ... *nor* destinies” (emphasis added). This mode is very familiar from Greek and Roman accounts of both creation and prehistory, and also of far away peoples. The stress is on the difference between then and now, or us and them, and so the focus is on the here and now, and we can understand the early world or foreign peoples through the filter of what we have and know nowadays.<sup>2</sup> In the passage above the lack of pastures and reed beds shows clearly that the writer was aware of the geographical processes that had led to the formation of the land of Mesopotamia. In this way the account functions as an aetiology of the creation of what we see now, and, as any respectable cosmogony must do, it also ‘saves the appearances’. That is, the writer of cosmogonies and cosmologies must give an account that is not only in accordance with observed reality, but also must enable us to work backwards from what we see to otherwise unknowable events in the past or far away. In this way we get a verifiable account of creation: the world is the way we see it because of certain events in the past, events that cannot be accessed directly but that may be approached if we are ready to try to trace back from present realities.

## 2. Some Greek background

When we turn to the earliest Greek cosmogonic literature we can see a change. Hesiod clearly feels the need to explain the source of his account, and so he claims that his wisdom is divinely revealed, at *Theogony* 22-28:

“And once they taught Hesiod fine singing, as he tended his lambs below holy Helicon.  
This is what the goddesses said to me first, the Olympian Muses, daughters of Zeus the aegis-bearer:

<sup>2</sup> See DAVIES (1987) 265ff. and (1988) 15ff.

‘Shepherds that camp in the wild, disgraces, merest bellies: we know how to tell many lies that sound like truth, but we know to sing reality, when we will.’” (Trans. M.L. West)

There are differing views of what Hesiod is doing here. Jenny Strauss Clay argues that he is problematizing the truth value of his account and warning the reader or listener that they shouldn’t take his story at face value. After all, if the Muses can tell many lies that sound like truth how can we as mere mortals distinguish between the lies and the reality?<sup>3</sup> This is perfectly reasonable from a Homeric point of view, since Homer is clearly very interested in questions about the truth value of stories. But I suggest here that Hesiod is not clever in this way and that he is attempting to assert the truth value of his story about the origins of the gods and the world. There seems to be no other place in his poems where he problematizes the truth of his account, as far as I know.

Further, he tells us that the Muses gave him a scepter of laurel, a symbol of Apollonian kingly power, and a divine (*thespis*) voice. Later he tells us that singers come from Apollo and kings come from Zeus (*Theog.* 94ff.). The main function of kings that he outlines is to calm disputes with honeyed words and to make straight judgements. As Strauss Clay argues, Hesiod as a singer with his scepter seems to be assuming for himself some of this kingly power and function, and this becomes much clearer in the *Works and Days* where the making of straight judgements becomes more explicit (*Op.* 8-10):

“Zeus who thunders on high, who dwells in the highest mansions. O hearken as thou seest and hearest, and make judgements straight with righteousness, Lord; While I should like to tell Perses words of truth.” (Trans. M.L. West)

What may not have been noticed sufficiently is his claim that the Muses also granted him at least two parts of the sacred Apollonian threefold knowledge (*Theog.* 32):

<sup>3</sup> STRAUSS CLAY (2003).

“So that I should celebrate things of the future and things that were aforetime.” (Trans. M.L. West)

The Muses themselves have all three parts of the sacred three-fold knowledge, and it seems they may or may not grant it to mortals (*Theog.* 38-39):

“As they tell of what is and what shall be and what was aforetime, voices in unison.” (Trans. M.L. West)

We are familiar with this formula from the *Iliad*, where we are told that Calchas has been granted all three parts of the Apollonian knowledge (*Il.* 1, 68-71, emphasis added):

“Among them arose  
Calchas son of Thestor, far the best of bird-diviners,  
who knew *the things that were, and that were to be, and that had  
been before,*  
and who had guided the ships of the Achaeans to Ilios  
by his own prophetic powers which Phoebus Apollo had bestowed upon him.”  
(Trans. A.T. Murray)

We could problematize this claim by arguing that Calchas’ oracular insight was plainly foolish and wrong, and that the sacrifice of Iphigenia was a wicked deed that helped nobody. But I think in his claim to Apollonian insight Hesiod is simply saying that his account has divinely sanctioned truth, and that he is not trying to complicate the matter. He is not a ‘clever’ poet like Homer. It is surely in the interests of cosmological poets to assert the truth of their accounts rather than to throw doubt on them.

For further relevant Greek material, it is worth looking at Parmenides and Empedocles. They both claim divine inspiration for their stories about the universe. Parmenides tells us that the daughters of the Sun came to collect him in a chariot and took him to a goddess who took him in and taught the nature of the universe (Parmenides, fr. 28 B 1, 22-32 DK):

“And the goddess treated me kindly, and took my right hand in hers, and addressed me with these words: ‘Young man, you who

come to my house in the company of immortal charioteers with the mares which bear you, greetings. No ill fate has sent you to travel this road — far indeed does it lie from the steps of men — but right and justice. It is proper that you should learn all things, both the unshaken heart of well-rounded truth, and the opinions of mortals, in which there is no true reliance.” (Trans. G.S. Kirk / J. Raven / M. Schofield)

This is famously problematic, because the goddess teaches him both the way of seeming and the way of being, the point of the latter being to show that what we think of as reality — the world of growth, change, and decay — is just an illusion. Why does she bother if the phenomenal world is not real? And why does Parmenides bother?<sup>4</sup> It seems a sterile argument.

Empedocles similarly claims divine inspiration for his cosmology and also appropriates Parmenides’ chariot for his Muse Calliope (Empedocles, fr. 31 B 3 DK):

“But gods! turn aside their madness from my tongue  
and channel a pure stream from holy mouths.  
And you maiden Muse of the white arms, much remembering,  
I beseech you: what is right for ephemeral creatures to hear,  
send [to me], driving your well reined chariot from [the halls of]  
piety.” (Trans. B. Inwood)

Empedocles is a mouthpiece for the gods and Calliope, his Muse. It is worth noting that the prayer is only that she should send things fitting for mortal creatures to hear. We assume Empedocles has access to deeper, more esoteric knowledge that he is keeping to himself, and perhaps his pupil Pausanias. This becomes clearer in fragment 31 B 115 DK:<sup>5</sup>

“There is an oracle of necessity, ratified long ago by gods, eternal and sealed by broad oaths, that whenever one in error, from fear, (defiles) his own limbs, having by his error made false the oath he swore — daimons to whom life long-lasting is apportioned — he wanders from the blessed ones for three times countless years,

<sup>4</sup> See KIRK / RAVEN / SCHOFIELD (21983) 239-262.

<sup>5</sup> See GARANI (2007) for a fuller discussion of cosmological oaths in Empedocles and Lucretius.

being born throughout the time as all kinds of mortal forms, exchanging one hard way of life for another. For the force of air pursues him into the sea, and sea spits him out onto earth's surface, earth casts him into the rays of blazing sun, and sun into the eddies of air; one takes him from another, and all abhor him. I too am one of these, an exile from the gods and a wanderer, having put my trust in raving Strife." (Trans. M.R. Wright, with alterations)

It is not clear where the oracle of necessity comes from. It may simply be his way of saying that the fall of the daimon has to happen. And do the gods have a choice about whether to ratify the oracle? It is very enigmatic, but the point I want to emphasize here is Empedocles' appeal to a higher authority for his account. It is not just his opinion that the daimon must fall: it is destined by the oracle of necessity. The sin of the daimon is made clearer in the Strasbourg fragments (fr. d 5-6):

"Alas that merciless day did not destroy me sooner, before I devised ['for my lips' in 139 DK] with my claws terrible deeds for the sake of food." (Trans. A. Martin / O. Primavesi)

How the daimon can commit such a sin of slaughter and meat eating while in the company of the immortal gods is again obscure,<sup>6</sup> but on one reading it is destined to happen, and the daimon would not be in this world at all if he had not committed this sin. It can also be read as an account of cosmogony, as it seems to provide the answer to Aristotle's question about how the perfect stillness of the sphere can possibly initiate new action in the cosmic cycle. Strife enters the sphere through the sin of the daimon and blasts it apart, separating once more the four elements which had been conjoined and at rest in the sphere, thus beginning the endless cosmic cycle again (Aristot. *Phys.* 8, 1, 252a5-10):

"And it is just as fantastic to say things are so by nature and that one must believe that this is a principle, as it seems that Empedocles would say, i.e. that the alternating dominance and motive

<sup>6</sup> See OSBORNE (2005).

power of Love and Strife inhere in things by necessity and that they are at rest in the intervening time.” (Trans. B. Inwood)

Aristotle seems to take it that Empedocles’ “oracle of necessity” is simply a way of saying “it must happen”. I think he is mistaken; a power higher even than the immortal gods has given the oracle of necessity. The nature of that power is obscure but it seems to be beyond even Love and Strife, Empedocles’ two cosmic forces.

It may be worth comparing Anaxagoras here. He appeals to *Nous* (Mind) as a cosmic ordering force (fr. B 12 DK):

“And all things that were to be — those that were and those that are now and those that shall be — Mind arranged them all.” (Trans. G.S. Kirk / J. Raven / M. Schofield)

Again, we are not told where Mind comes from or if it is the mind of a particular god, but my point here is that he feels the need to appeal to some power or intelligence beyond our comprehension, rather than simply saying that the order of the cosmos is simply inevitable.

### 3. The ontological status of past, present, and future in Lucretius

There remains the question of what ontological status the past, present and future have in Epicureanism. Do they really exist, and if not how can we speak with any confidence about them? Again, just as with earlier Babylonian and Greek sources we are speaking of things we cannot have first-hand experience of, and so if we do not have some sort of divine inspiration like Calchas in the *Odyssey* this is a problem. Lucretius makes it clear that he believes time does not exist on its own but is only an ‘accident’ of matter (1, 459-463):<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For a much more in-depth analysis of this question see WARREN (2006). He argues that the Epicureans are not ‘presentists’ in that they do not deny the

*tempus item per se non est, sed rebus ab ipsis  
consequitur sensus, transactum quid sit in aevo,  
tum quae res instet, quid porro deinde sequatur;  
nec per se quemquam tempus sentire fatendumst  
semotum ab rerum motu placidaque quiete.*

“Time also exists not of itself, but from things themselves  
is derived the sense of what has been done in the past,  
then what thing is present with us, further what is to follow after.  
Nor may we admit that anyone has a sense of time by itself  
separated from the movement of things and their quiet calm.”  
(Trans. W.H.D. Rouse / M.F. Smith)

He goes on to say in the rest of this passage (1, 464-482) that we mustn’t think of the events of the Trojan War as ‘real’ in the sense that atoms and void are real, but only as accidents (*euenta*) of matter.

This is problematic because elsewhere he says that we can follow the *uestigia* (“traces”/ “footprints”) of the past (5, 1445-1447):

*nec multo priu’ sunt elementa reperta.  
propterea quid sit prius actum respicere aetas  
nostra nequit, nisi qua ratio uestigia monstrat.*

“Nor had letters been invented much before,  
So what happened before, our age is not able  
to look back on, unless reason shows the traces (*uestigia*).” (Trans.  
W.H.D. Rouse / M.F. Smith)

It seems that we can treat past events as real if we can examine the traces they have left in the present world.

However, the ontological status of the future is more problematic. Lucretius, *De rerum natura* 1, 459-463, although denying that time has any independent existence, seems to suggest that we can get a sense about *quid porro deinde sequatur* (“what may follow after”), and seems to draw parallels between the ontological status of past, present, and future, just as in Hesiod

existence of the past and future, and that the past, at least, does have some real existence for them.



and Homer (above). The subjunctive *sequatur* (“may follow”) is the only hint in the passage that the future is looser than the past and present. It seems so strange that Lucretius would admit that we can predict the future in some way, given the argument between the Epicureans and Stoics on just this point; whether the future can be predicted, and if it can, is it not a sign of predestination?<sup>8</sup> The position I am arbitrarily taking in this paper is that the past and future do have some sort of existence and can, within certain limits, be spoken about with some confidence.

#### 4. Lucretius on oracles

But to move on to my main argument, I would like to look at Lucretius’ claim that he is able to predict the future, and also to speak confidently about the creation of the world (Lucr. 5, 110-116):<sup>9</sup>

*qua prius adgrediar quam de re fundere fata  
sanctius et multo certa ratione magis quam  
Pythia quae tripode a Phoebi lauroque profatur,  
multa tibi expediam doctis solacia dictis,  
religione refrenatus ne forte rearis  
terras et solem et caelum, mare sidera lunam,  
corpore diuino debere aeterna manere.*

“But before I begin to utter oracles on this matter, more solemnly and with more certain reason than those which the Pythia declares from the tripod and laurel of Phoebus, I will expound to you many consolations in words of wisdom, lest by some chance bitted and bridled by superstition you think that earth and sun and sky, stars, and moon are of divine body and must abide for ever.” (Trans. W.H.D. Rouse / M.F. Smith)

<sup>8</sup> See FURLEY (1966) 13-14. For the sake of time and concision I am ducking many questions here and avoiding engaging with the serious studies on this topic. See further ASMIS (1984); ALLEN (2001).

<sup>9</sup> See further ERLER (2009).

Here the theme of prophecy becomes explicit: Lucretius's teachings are prophecies more trustworthy than those of the Delphic oracle. There are various levels on which this comparison works; on the face of it, as an Epicurean Lucretius would not regard the pronouncements of the Delphic oracle as having any truth value at all, other than accidentally,<sup>10</sup> and so, in this way, he would not be claiming very much for his doctrines. But in another way, given that the Delphic oracle was popularly regarded as the most important oracle in the world, Lucretius, with a certain irony, taps into popular superstition and appropriates it to his didactic purposes. In an almost opposite way, however, the contrast is between the certainty of Epicurus' 'oracular' pronouncements and the notoriously ambiguous and difficult to interpret prophecies of the Pythian priestess. Similarly, David Sedley reads an ironic contrast between religious oracles and "the philosopher's rational alternative": "On this reading, Lucretius' words distance him from approval of (literal) oracles as effectively as the way in which, for example, those who praise the 'university of life' distance themselves from approval of (literal) universities".<sup>11</sup> Again, Lucretius seeks to replace just such religious 'truths' as those uttered by the oracles with Epicurean truth, and so Epicurus' doctrines become more directly, and unironically, the new 'oracles'. Further, as Lucretius has already told us, Epicurus was a god (5, 8), his words are sacred teachings, and so may reasonably be regarded as oracular. In this way Lucretius really is the *prophetes* (both "interpreter" and "prophet"<sup>12</sup>) of Epicurus, just as the Pythia is of Apollo.

So Lucretius situates himself within the tradition of oracular cosmology. His oracles will be more certain and accurate than those of the Delphic oracle. It may also be worth looking here at his account of Empedocles' cosmological discoveries (1, 734-739):

<sup>10</sup> Cf. PLUT. *De Pyth. or.* 398-399; DIOG. OEN. fr. 23 Smith.

<sup>11</sup> SEDLEY (1998) 13, n. 59.

<sup>12</sup> *LSJ* s.v. I a3 and I a4.

*hic tamen et supra quos diximus inferiores  
partibus egregie multis multoque minores,  
quamquam multa bene ac diuinitus inuenientes  
ex adyto tamquam cordis responsa dedere  
sanctius et multo certa ratione magis quam  
Pythia quae tripodi a Phoebi lauroque profatur.*

“Nevertheless he [Empedocles] and those whom I mentioned before, men very much below him by many degrees and far less than he, although in making many excellent and divinely inspired discoveries (*multa bene ac diuinitus inuenientes*) they have given responses as it were from the holy place of the heart with more sanctity and far more certainty than the Pythia who speaks forth from Apollo’s tripod and laurel.” (Trans. W.H.D. Rouse / M.F. Smith)

Empedocles is presented as Lucretius’ forerunner in oracular cosmology. His discoveries similarly are divinely inspired and are more certain than the prophecies of the Delphic oracle. I am attempting here to build a picture of oracular cosmological heritage that goes far beyond just an admission of poetic heritage on Lucretius’ part.<sup>13</sup> Philosophy can grant us this oracular knowledge of the universe, and Lucretius acknowledges his philosophical debt to Empedocles, a divinely inspired forerunner. Lucretius’ main criticism of the Presocratics in his survey in Book One is that their fundamental elements were too ‘soft’ and impermanent. They were ‘wrong’ in that sense, but their project was correct. He implicitly compares them to the Giants who assailed Olympus. They were great and therein their fall was greater (1, 741).<sup>14</sup> They ultimately failed where Epicurus

<sup>13</sup> For the opposite argument see SEDLEY (1998) 21-34.

<sup>14</sup> As GALE (1994) 43 puts it: “Lucretius’ use of the myth is deliberately aimed to shock, by reversing its traditional moral implications”. The Epicureans are indeed engaged in a “Gigantic assault upon the heavens”, but this time it is the assault of reason and piety upon the superstitious and impious interpretation of the heavens as divine. Epicurus himself had made such an assault upon the heavens, but one that rescued humanity from religion rather than destroying the world, in his ‘flight of the mind’ in 1, 62-79 (see EDWARDS [1990] 465-466; GALE [1994] 43-45). Cf. HARDIE (1986) 210: “The points in common with the mythical Gigantomachy are as follows:

was successful. He ventured out beyond the flaming walls of the world and brought back the knowledge that we need to dispel our fear of the gods (1, 72-79):

*ergo uiuida uis animi peruicit, et extra  
processit longe flammantia moenia mundi  
atque omne immensum peragrauit mente animoque,  
unde refert nobis uictor quid possit oriri,  
quid nequeat, finita potestas denique cuique  
quanam sit ratione atque alte terminus haerens.*

“Therefore the lively power of his mind prevailed, and forth he marched beyond the flaming walls of the world, as he traversed the immeasurable universe in thought and imagination; whence victorious he returns bearing the prize, the knowledge of what can come into being, what can not, in a word, how each thing has its powers limited and its deep-set boundary mark.” (Trans. W.H.D. Rouse / M.F. Smith)

There is a great deal to say on this passage, but for my purposes here I just want to show that Lucretius considers that what might be considered esoteric knowledge about the universe restricted to the gods can be achieved through philosophical inquiry. Epicurus can proclaim on the nature of the universe since he has traversed it in his mind.<sup>15</sup>

To compare a philosophical doctrine with an oracle is quite common,<sup>16</sup> but Lucretius also has direct Epicurean authority for the comparison, since in *Vatican Sayings* 29 Epicurus himself says that he would rather employ the openness of a *physiologos*

1. The plan of ascending from earth (*terris*, 63; Earth is also the mother of the giants) to heaven (*caeli*, 64).
2. The intention of storming heaven by force (the ascent as *bellum*); here deliberately associated with the idea of destroying fortifications, *effringere portarum claustra*, 70f., although the gates are broken out of rather than assaulted from outside.
3. The need to face the weapons of the gods: 68f. “*Quem neque fama deum nec fulmina nec minitanti | murmure compressit caelum*. The thunderbolt is traditionally the means by which the giants are cast down.”

<sup>15</sup> For a full discussion of this passage see BUCHHEIT (2007). For an excellent discussion of the *alte terminus haerens* see ASMIS (2008).

<sup>16</sup> See WARREN (2002) 186; OBBINK (1996) 568-569.

and ‘give oracles’ even if he is not understood, than pander to popular opinion and so win the praise of the mob:

“In investigating nature I would prefer to speak openly and give oracles useful to all people, even if no one understands me, rather than to conform to popular opinion and so win the freely scattered by the mob.” (Trans. J.C.A. Gaskin with alterations)

Here we see the curious duality of oracles: both their certainty and their difficulty of interpretation. Philodemus also says that he and other Epicureans “uttered oracles” about the gods (*Piet.* 2044–2045 Obbink), and Cicero, picking up ironically on this Epicurean *topos*, criticizes Epicurus’ *Principal Sayings* as the work: *in quo breuiter comprehensis grauissimis sententiis quasi oracula edidisse, sapientiae dicitur* (*Fin.* 2, 20),<sup>17</sup> and in an epigram quoted by Diogenes Laertius (10, 12) Athenaeus says of Epicurus (perhaps with irony): “this [doctrine] the wise son of Neocles heard from the Muses or from the sacred tripods of the Pythia”.

In *Vatican Sayings* 10, the Epicurean doctrine is implicitly associated with the Delphic oracle:<sup>18</sup>

“Remember that as a mortal by nature and receiving a finite time you have ascended through natural philosophy to the infinite and have looked down upon ‘what is, will be, and was before’.” (Trans. J.C.A. Gaskin)

## 5. Lucretius and the *uates*

So far I have glanced at some Greek background to Lucretius’ claims to oracular powers, but it may also be worth looking here at something of the Roman context of such claims.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *Fin.* 2, 102, and *Nat. D.* 1, 66.

<sup>18</sup> As WARREN (2002) 185 comments: “Epicureanism thought it was able to claim this Pythian knowledge because its natural philosophy offered a method of comprehensive knowledge, of the infinity of atoms and void, of the infinite variety of combinations. Any Epicurean knows all of what was, is, and will be, just like the Homeric seer Calchas (cf. *Lucr.* 1, 72–77)”.

Early on in his first book Lucretius warns his addressee and pupil Memmius that he will have to face the terrible threats of the *uates*. He does not explain exactly who these people are but he does associate them with his poetic forerunner, and important poetic model, Ennius:<sup>19</sup>

*tutemet a nobis iam quouis tempore, uatum  
terri loquis uictus dictis, desciscere quaeres.  
quippe etenim quam multa tibi iam fingere possunt  
somnia, quae uitae rationes uertere possint  
fortunasque tuas omnis turbare timore!* (1, 102-106)

“You will yourself some day or other seek to fall away from us, overborne by the terrific utterances of the *uates*. Yes indeed, for how many dreams can they even now invent for you, enough to upset the principles of life and to confound all your fortunes with fear!” (Trans. W.H.D. Rouse / M.F. Smith)<sup>20</sup>

*ignoratur enim quae sit natura animai,  
nata sit an contra nascentibus insinuetur  
et simul intereat nobiscum morte dirempta  
an tenebras Orci uisat uastasque lacunas  
an pecudes alias diuinitus insinuet se,  
Ennius ut noster cecinit, qui primus amoeno  
detulit ex Helicone perenni fronde coronam,  
per gentis Italas hominum quae clara clueret.* (1, 112-119)

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *OLD* s.v. “of Italo-Celtic origin ... cf. Ir. *fáith* ‘bard’, Welsh *gwawd* ...  
1 A prophet, seer (regarded as the mouthpiece of the deity possessing him).  
b (w. gen. of the deity possessing him; w. gen of thing foretold). c (as using crude  
and primitive verse forms to deliver his prophecies; in quot., w. derogatory  
ref. to Naevius). d (transf.) an authoritative exponent, ‘oracle’”. Caesar says in  
*B. Gall.* 6, 14, 5-7 about the Druids: *in primis hoc uolunt persuadere non interire  
animas, sed ab aliis post mortem transire ad alios, atque hoc maxime ad uirtutem  
excitari putant metu mortis neglecto. Multa praeterea de sideribus atque eorum  
motu, de mundi ac terrarum magnitudine, de rerum natura, de deorum immortalium  
ui ac potestate disputant et iuuentuti tradunt* (“Among the first principles they  
want to teach is that souls do not die but cross over from persons to persons, and  
this they consider is a very great stimulus to military courage since the fear of  
death is put aside. Moreover they dispute about many things and hand them  
down to the youth, about the stars and their motions, about the size of the earth  
and the lands, *on the nature of the universe*, about the power and the ability of the  
immortal gods”); emphasis added.

<sup>20</sup> See GOLDSCHMIDT (2013) 56, n. 74.

“For there is ignorance what is the nature of the soul, whether it be born, or on the contrary finds its way into men at birth and whether it perishes together with us when broken up by death, or whether it visits the gloom of Orcus and his vasty chasms, or by divine ordinance finds its way into animals in our stead, as our own Ennius sang, who first brought down from lovely Helicon a crown with eternal leaf (*perenni fronde*) to win a glorious name (*quae clara clueret*) through the nations of Italian peoples.” (Trans. W.H.D. Rouse / M.F. Smith)

Then as the passage goes on Lucretius describes Ennius’ confused notions of the fate of the soul after death. The implicit argument is that it is inconsistent of Ennius to believe in both the transmigration of souls and the underworld at the same time. Elsewhere Lucretius assimilates himself to Epicurus as the first to win the Muses’ crown for teaching the Epicurean system in verse (1, 926-930 ≈ 4, 1-5), and also assimilates himself to Ennius who is also described as the first to bring down a crown of eternal leaf from Helicon for the Italian peoples (1, 117-119), and further, assimilates himself and Ennius implicitly to Empedocles by an extended pun on the latter’s name in the same passage (1, 118-119: *perenni fronde* ... | ... *clara clueret*), and all of them to Homer (1, 124-125: *semper florentis Homeri* | ... *speciem*), whose ghost, as Ennius says at *Ann.* 3 Skutsch, appeared to him in a dream and proceeded to teach him the nature of the universe (1, 126 *rerum naturam expandere dictis*).<sup>21</sup>

So Lucretius constructs a heritage at once poetic and philosophical; all of them are poets *On the Nature of the Universe*, Homer and Ennius are part of the same tradition as Empedocles and Lucretius, but Homer, especially, teaches a false picture of the nature of the universe. And notoriously Ennius claimed to be the reincarnation of Homer.<sup>22</sup> This makes Homer, Hesiod, Ennius and Lucretius all rival poets and revealers of the nature of the universe, but Hesiod and Ennius especially claim *vatic*

<sup>21</sup> See GALE (2001): An elaborate pun on *Empedos Kleos* (Empedocles).

<sup>22</sup> See AICHER (1989).



status as having received their knowledge either from the gods or from earlier *uates*, such as Homer.

So, as I see it, Lucretius is locating himself in a long tradition of *vatic* or divinely inspired wisdom, and as a rival *uates* to Homer and Ennius, but of course his problem is that he cannot have access to the wisdom of the gods except through natural philosophy. He cannot claim any Homeric or Ennian visitation as the basis of his knowledge of the universe.

## 6. Ennius, Naevius, Livius, Virgil, and the *uates* and Fauns

To understand something of this and how it works we need to go back deep into Latin verse, an area in which we are now guided by Nora Goldschmidt and her wonderful recent book *Shaggy Crowns: Ennius' Annales and Virgil's Aeneid*. Goldschmidt argues that, despite Lucretius' association of Ennius with the *uates* who issued terrifying utterances, Ennius himself was keen to distance himself from earlier Latin poets who had claimed vatic authority (*Ann.* 206-207 Skutsch):<sup>23</sup>

*scripsere alii rem  
uorsibus quos olim Faunei uatesque canebant*

“Others have written on the topic in verses which once the Fauns and seers used to sing.” (Trans. N. Goldschmidt)

According to Goldschmidt Lucretius in *De rerum natura* 1, 102-103 “implicitly slides him [Ennius] into the category of unreliable seers who are likely to entice his readers from the path of true philosophy, turning Ennius' criticism on his own head ...”:<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Cf. VARRO, *Ling.* 7, 36 (quoted from GOLDSCHMIDT [2013] 57): “*Fauni*: Divinities of the Latins ... Tradition has it that they were accustomed to speak [*fari*] the future in the so-called Saturnian verses in wooded spots, from which speaking they were called *Fauni*”.

<sup>24</sup> GOLDSCHMIDT (2013) 56, n. 74. Ennius goes against the earlier oracular vatic tradition of Naevius and Livius. Cf. *ibid.* 56: “In linking Naevius and Livius

*tutemet a nobis iam quouis tempore uatum  
terriiloquis uictus dictis desciscere quaeres.*

“You will yourself some day or other seek to fall away from us, overborne by the terrific utterances of priests.” (Trans. W.H.D. Rouse / M.F. Smith)

Lucretius, indulging in a deep archaism in *tutemet*, evokes not only Ennius but Naevius and Livius as well,<sup>25</sup> bundling them together as vatic poets, despite Ennius’ own distancing of his poetry from theirs (1, 102-103). Their work was old-fashioned and relied on some sort of divine inspiration from Fauns and the like. Ennius’ was modern and reliant only on rational sources. But as I say above, Ennius’ insistence that the soul can transmigrate between bodies is enough for Lucretius to put him into the category of *uates*.<sup>26</sup>

Goldschmidt goes on to compare Virgil’s self association with the *uates*, leap-frogging back in time over Ennius, the more to claim an even earlier antiquity and therefore authority for his account of pre-Roman history (*Georg.* 4, 392-393, of Proteus’ prophetic ability):<sup>27</sup>

*nouit namque omnia uates  
quae sint, quae fuerint, quae mox uentura trahuntur.*

“For the *uates* knows everything: what is, what has been, and what is yet to happen.” (Trans. N. Goldschmidt)

with the *Fauni* and *uates* of the past, chanting their *carmina* in a primitive metre before the arrival of real poems (Greek *poemata*) and a real poet (*poeta*) to sing them, Ennius consigned his precursors to the realm of pre-civilized verse”. See also FISHER (2014) 31-34 for discussion of the same material, concluding (34) that “a close examination of the evidence does not support the hypothesis of a total rupture with the Saturnian tradition”.

<sup>25</sup> OLD s.v. *tu* 2. Cf. GOLDSCHMIDT (2013) 56, n. 74: “Ennius’ scorn of primitive *uates* also influences a proemial link between the *uates* and ‘primitive’ superstition by Lucretius in the prologue to *De rerum natura* when he sums up the dangers of his philosophical rivals”.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. his notorious claim that he can remember being a peacock: *memini me fieri pauom* (*Ann.* 11 Skutsch).

<sup>27</sup> GOLDSCHMIDT (2013) 57-61.

Virgil here takes us way back into not only archaic Italian territory, but also into early Greek territory as I have laid out above.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, he plays a central role in rehabilitation of the image of the prophetic vatic poet in the Augustan period. I would like to suggest that Lucretius is somewhere in the middle, both rejecting Ennius' vatic abilities and also claiming the ancient glamour of the *uates* in order to speak of things that are impossible for ordinary humans to have direct access to.

### 7. Lucretius' account of cosmogony

Finally, I would like to look at Lucretius' account of cosmogony, and to try to explain how he is able to speak so dogmatically and with such confidence about things that no human can have direct access to (Lucr. 5, 416-431):

*sed quibus ille modis coniectus materiai  
fundarit terram et caelum pontique profunda,  
solis lunai cursus, ex ordine ponam.  
nam certe neque consilio primordia rerum.*

"But next in order I will describe in what ways  
that assemblage of matter established earth and sky  
and the ocean deeps, and the courses of the sun and  
moon." (Trans. W.H.D. Rouse / M.F. Smith)

My question here is how he could possibly know how the world was created, since there were no humans or even gods to witness it. He is quite dogmatic about the details of his account. There were no gods involved, no intelligent design, and the atoms just collided at random in the void over infinite time to create nearly infinite types of atomic combinations that led on to the

<sup>28</sup> As GOLDSCHMIDT (2013) 57 puts it: "In a thorough discussion of the idea of the *uates* in Augustan Rome, J.K. Newman showed how Augustan poets, beginning with Virgil and influenced by Varro's interpretation, reinvented the word *uates* from its scornful use in Ennius' *Annales* 7 proem and took it up as their own distinct title". Cf. NEWMAN (1967).

types of matter, worlds and creatures that we see today. It may be worth remembering here that Epicurus argues that there can be a large if not infinite shape of worlds, flat, triangular, or even, most ludicrously, spherical (*Ep. Hdt.* 88), and we may want to question how the same mechanism of world formation could possibly account for all of these different types of worlds.

Lucretius seems to be speaking of our world; a flat world like a pizza, created by a “strange storm, all kinds of beginnings gathered together into a mass” (5, 436-439). Then we get the traditional account of the separation of disparate elements, and the attraction of like elements to like. Earth elements being heaviest sank down to the lowest place, and as they coalesced squeezed out the lighter elements that went on to form sea, stars, sun and moon (5, 449-508). Our world is perhaps more like a layer cake than a pizza, the heavier parts sank down to the bottom while the lighter parts rise to the top. We can infer this from the signs we see around us. Lucretius frequently appeals to visual evidence for his arguments about the invisible processes of atomic motions.<sup>29</sup> I would suggest that Lucretius argues from the *uestigia* that we see around us; we can only infer that lighter objects rise and that heavier objects sink. This is not very scientific, I know, but I would suggest that in certain circumstances such as cosmogony there can be only one explanation of present and past phenomena. It may be telling that the only example of the Epicurean multiple explanations method in Book Five of *De rerum natura* concerns the origins of fire; either it was caused by lightning or by trees rubbing together. It doesn’t really matter how it happened, as long as the gods weren’t involved. In contrast, all other phenomena in the past that have led up to the world that we see around us can have only one origin. It may seem strange in Epicurean terms, but we seemed to be locked into a chain of causation, otherwise we could not speak confidently about the origins of our world.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. GARANI (2007) *passim*.

## 8. Conclusion

Of course, we have Epicurus' own oracular authority derived from his flight of the mind as he travelled through the universe. He was able to view "the whole universe in mind and spirit" (*omne immensum ... mente animoque*) and to bring back to us "what can come into being and what can not" (*quid possit oriri, quid nequeat*) and the "deep-set boundary mark" (*alte terminus haerens*) of what can and cannot be (Lucr. 1, 74-77).<sup>30</sup> He has surveyed all reality, past, present, and future. He has seen the origins of things and their ultimate conclusions. There can be no doubt allowed into the workings of the atomic world if we are to be able to speak confidently of the cosmos and its origins — this might seem strange to come to this conclusion when we have recently struggled with the theory of the swerve of atoms that allows potentiality into an otherwise deterministic system.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> See further ASMIS (2008).

<sup>31</sup> The best study of the swerve is MCCARTHY (2013).

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## DISCUSSION

*T. Fuhrer:* I don't think that we need to explain Lucretius' claim to make predictions about the future with a personal or individual inclination of the author. Can't he make this claim because the explanation of the 'world' as an atomistic construct and its 'genesis' by a mechanistic way presupposes a certain 'order' in what has 'happened' and is going to 'happen' in the future in the world? If so, could we say that Lucretius uses the word *mundus* not just as the conventional term for 'world', but with exactly the specific meaning of 'order'?

*G. Campbell:* A difficult question; certainly he is perfectly justified in predicting the future dissolution of the world since, just like any atomic compound, the world must be mortal. That's straightforward enough. But the truth value of statements about the past and future are very difficult for the Epicureans. They can seemingly gain some sort of oracular knowledge of both past and future through natural philosophy, but as I see it this throws them into the hands of their critics, the Stoics, who argue that if we can make accurate statements about the future then we must admit that the future is determined, which of course is anathema to the Epicureans, who invented the idea of the swerve of atoms in order to break such a chain of causation. The past is even more difficult. In my paper I have somewhat surprisingly (to me) come to the conclusion that past, present, and future are deterministically linked if we accept Lucretius' prophetic arguments. There should be more swerviness in the nature of the universe. But then how could any Epicurean speak confidently about past and future events? I'm not sure about any of this. *Mundus* certainly means 'order' as well as 'world', and of course Lucretius has a serious problem in explaining



that order can come from chaos without any plan or intelligent design. Seemingly it just happened.

*K. Schmidt:* The oracular elements in Lucretius' texts apparently stress the fact that cosmological knowledge has the quality of a hidden truth and can only be accessed through a seer. When compared with older cosmological traditions or approaches (e.g. the Presocratics), this element seems to be new. Can there any historical developments be named that served as driving forces for this specific feature of Lucretius' approach?

*G. Campbell:* It seems that cosmological knowledge is esoteric for Lucretius, and has to be handed down from an authority, namely Epicurus, but, paradoxically, I guess, there is a possibility that we can gain this knowledge for ourselves; as we progress through *De rerum natura* we get a sense that as we are taught that we are becoming wise, especially if we assimilate ourselves to the addressee Memmius. He is told in Book Five that he can work things out for himself without Lucretius' help. It seems that we can progress beyond doctrinal authority, and if we only learn the basics we can work things out for ourselves. Another paradox.

As for the earlier cosmologists I think Empedocles is Lucretius' main model, but Parmenides is also important. They both claim oracular authority for their cosmological doctrines. Parmenides says that he was taken in a chariot by the daughters of the Sun to a goddess who explained the nature of the universe to him. Empedocles has an even stronger truth claim in that he says that he is in fact a god and that he is only in this world as a fallen *daimon*. As a divine being he knows the workings of the cosmos, the cosmic cycle and the, seemingly parallel, journey of the soul. As he prepares to depart this world he imparts his teachings to us to aid us in our own cosmic journey. The impression we get from his poem is of him imparting esoteric knowledge to his pupil Pausanias, but of course this is a fiction and a stock feature of didactic poetry that we shouldn't take at face

value. Just like Lucretius he tells us that we can gain cosmological wisdom for ourselves, if only we can correct our 'faulty way of thinking'.

*K. Volk:* I am intrigued by the use of oracular language not only in Lucretius but, as you have shown, in the Epicurean tradition in general. My question concerns Cicero's polemical description of the *Kyriai Doxai* as quasi oracular. His point is obviously that these *breuiter comprehensae grauissimae sententiae* are just sound bites without philosophical argument — a jab at the typical Epicurean genre of the memorable maxim. Is this just Cicero poking his typical fun at the culturally and linguistically unrefined Epicureans — or is it already the Epicureans who, in labelling Epicurus' utterances 'oracles', are not only hinting at their supposedly divinely inspired status, but also referring to their compact linguistic form reminiscent of the one- or two-liners issued by actual oracles?

*G. Campbell:* There is a long tradition of criticism of the Epicureans as unlearned and unrefined, and I guess this feeds into Cicero's criticism. Lucretius hits this on the head with a baseball bat with his astonishing range and depth of learning and sophistication, but nevertheless Epicurus advises his followers to avoid the traditional educational curriculum and not to worry if they haven't been through the normal educational system, since Epicureanism provides a complete education in itself. Beyond that I think Cicero's Academic leanings would tend to prejudice him against a philosophy which you can just learn off as if it were a catechism; philosophy should be a matter of discussion: a live issue on every point. There is something cultish about Epicureanism, in that the followers of Epicurus tended to treat his utterances as sacred doctrines, reminiscent of the Pythagorean sect. But I also think that Epicurus and Lucretius are consciously in competition with divinely revealed wisdom. It may seem strange to us but may well have had more force in antiquity.

The literary aspect is interesting since the *Kyriai Doxai* are so epigrammatic, and indeed were carved in stone by Diogenes of Oinoanda. They are certainly reminiscent of oracular pronouncements. One problem of course is that oracles were so notoriously unreliable.

*R. Brague:* La difficulté de distinguer entre poète et prophète est effective pour nous, qui nous plaçons à un point de vue extérieur. Mais elle existe aussi, dans certains cas, pour les deux protagonistes. Elle se joue dans les deux directions. Certains de ceux que nous appellerions poètes prétendent à la dignité prophétique, comme al-Mutanabbi (X<sup>e</sup> siècle), dont le surnom signifie justement “celui qui pose au prophète”, sans parler des romantiques pour lesquels cette pose est une métaphore rarement prise au sérieux, même par eux-mêmes. En revanche, l’auteur du Coran insiste pour qu’on ne confonde pas son message d’avertisseur prophétique avec celui des poètes de son époque (Coran 69, 41).

*G. Campbell:* There are different ways of interpreting this problem. Some have said that Lucretius is simply debunking prophetic knowledge and authority by his use of oracular language and his assumption of the mantle of vatic authority, but as I see it he appropriates this oracular knowledge for his own purposes: Epicureanism can grant the same cosmological insight as that given by Apollo. I’m not qualified to comment on the Quran and the attitude of the Prophet about poets versus prophets. I can only guess that there were different attitudes about this seeming dichotomy at different times in different cultures.

*R. Brague:* La comparaison des capacités cognitives auxquelles prétend Hésiode avec celles des devins homériques révèle une curieuse différence. Alors que Calchas connaît ce qui fut, ce qui est et ce qui sera, Hésiode se contente, si l’on peut dire, du passé et de l’avenir (*Théogonie* 32). Le présent aurait-il cessé d’être intéressant ?

*G. Campbell:* Homer tells us that Apollo has granted Calchas knowledge of past, present, and future. I imagine that it is important for Calchas to know the present will and disposition of the gods in order to divine the solution to the Achaean fleet's inability to set sail for Troy. Hence the sacrifice of Iphigenia. It is strange that Hesiod only claims knowledge of past and future, grand as these claims are, and not of the present. I guess that he can speak of the present since he is living in it. He knows his own reality, although he often seems confused about why the gods seem so hostile to humans. Knowledge of past and future, on the other hand, can only be gained through divinely revealed wisdom. The rest of us mortals don't often meet the Muses while we are herding our goats under holy Helicon.

*R. Brague:* Pourquoi Lucrèce, lorsqu'il décrit la capacité du sage à tout contempler sans éprouver de trouble, choisit-il d'appeler cette attitude du nom de *pietas* (5, 1198) ? N'aurait-il pas pu lui donner le nom d'une autre qualité positive, comme *sapientia*, *uirtus*, etc.? On comprend qu'il refuse le nom de *pietas* à la superstition, qui justement se pare de ce terme flatteur. Mais pourquoi le conserver là où le comportement recommandé n'a rien de religieux ?

*G. Campbell:* Lucretius seems very radical and unorthodox in Epicurean terms in his views on traditional Roman religious ideas and practices. As has been shown, Epicurus himself encourages his pupils to engage in religious rites and ceremonies more than the average person in order to become more godlike by contemplating the divine nature, which is perfectly peaceful and the embodiment of *ataraxia*. Lucretius, on the other hand, is fiercely critical of Roman religion. One answer to your question may lie in Lucretius' desire to promote Epicureanism as a rival religion. As I say above Epicureanism has a strong cult-like feel, and can be considered as a religion in itself, with Epicurus as its prophet. Even though the Epicureans are materialists that doesn't mean they are not religious. It is well known that they

worshipped Apollo, and indeed Epicurus himself as a god. I think the early Christian tradition, especially Lactantius in the *Divine Institutes*, may well have given us a false impression of Epicurean religion. There is though still a question hanging over Lucretius' religious ideas. I see him as a devotee of Venus, a goddess who is real to him and whose worship is important not just for him but for the well being of the Roman people and the world.

*J. Strauss Clay:* I do have a question for you related to your presentation: you emphasized Lucretius' use of oracular language and its oddness for someone who doesn't believe in oracles. But what do you make of the full-fledged opening invocation to Venus, who, we find out, doesn't exist? And, even worse, most of the pleasures she offers turn out to be things to be avoided! The final act of stripping the cosmos of its charm is surely the ending plague.

*G. Campbell:* I think Venus does exist for Lucretius. Certainly we can see her in our mind's eye and this is proof of her existence. She is the pleasure of gods and men, and if we worship her correctly we can gain some of her attributes, particularly *ataraxia*. She arrives in Spring and calms the storms of March, instilling the desire for all creatures to reproduce. As far as I understand him Lucretius is a deeply religious writer and a devotee of Venus. Of course she has a dangerous side as Lucretius shows in Book Four in his diatribe against love, but without her we would not exist and the world would be a sterile place.

I know I'm trying to have it both ways here, but the Epicureans were mocked in antiquity for their religiosity and their devotion to religious ceremonies and sacrifices, when, according to them the gods couldn't hear their prayers. But at the same time Epicurean prayer was a reality and it's our problem to understand it. The hymn to Venus is a proper hymn in that it follows the proper hymnic format. First establish the nature of your god and specify their attributes, then make sure your

prayer is tied in closely to their attributes. Lucretius prays for her to grant peace for the Roman people, which is entirely consistent with her nature. Of course she can't do this directly, but if all people were to worship her properly, then there would be no more war. The plague has often been interpreted as an allegorical tale about the disastrous societal effects of false beliefs about the gods. The text as it stands ends in a fist fight over a funeral pyre. It is difficult to interpret. We begin in Love and end in Strife, and of course Empedocles is always present, but the question for both poets is about how we can avoid this outcome. Both are enigmatic on this point, but we can get some guidance from Diogenes of Oinoanda (fr. 56 Smith) in which he predicts a possible future golden age of peace and harmony when all people have become wise. I think that for both poets we have a choice of which god to worship and that this choice can affect the outcome not just of our own lives but of the whole human race. We don't necessarily have to end up fighting over a funeral pyre.