Why Not Do Science? On Virgil's Relation to Epicureanism in the *Georgics*

In the peroration to the second book of the *Georgics*, Virgil suggests that science – of the philosophical atomistic variety we are led to suppose – can make a person happy. But Virgil's poem is not scientific – certainly not when compared to Lucretius' poem. There has been extensive work on the extent to which Virgil was committed to the precepts of Epicureanism, and to which his poem is consistent with those precepts. For instance, Richard Jenkyns writes that 'the *Georgics*… are saturated in [Lucretius'] influence', but that 'insofar as he seeks for a salvation from the intrusions of this world, Virgil takes over part, but only part, of Lucretius vision.' (Jenkyns, 1998, pp. 211, 292)

Besides the peroration to the second *Georgic*, scholarship on Virgil's Epicureanism has focused on the account of the Corycian gardener in the fourth *Georgic*. Antonio La Penna rather strikingly sidesteps the question (La Penna, 1975), while W. Ralph Johnson and Jenny Strauss-Clay treat Virgil as an Epicurean, but with reservations (Johnson, 2004, p. 82 & Strauss-Clay, 1981, pp. 61-2). Christine Perkell takes Virgil's response to Epicureanism as it emerges from his account of the gardener (Perkell, 1981) and develops it eventually into an account of Virgil's despair of understanding, of the failure of science but also of poetry as an alternative (Perkell, 1989). Perkell's distinction, which seems to be rooted in the difference between and account of the world based on plural causes (Epicureans science) and mutually exclusive causes (Virgil) is unsatisfactory.

For Virgil's most pessimistic interpreters, his deployment of scientific thinking is part of a rhetorical strategy to show the futility of human enterprise – poetry, farming, the whole lot (Thomas, 1988, pp. 249 *ff*; Ross, 1987, *passim*). These writers also, in their way, sidestep the question of Epicureanism. It would seem, on their account, that Virgil is using Epicurean

precepts to a non-Epicurean end. But what are the philosophic roots, in that case, of Virgil's aims? Perkell's reading, I should suggest, raises similar questions. Jenkyns on the other hand seems to have offered a more helpful account – that Virgil share with the Epicureans some desire for escape, but that it might proceed from a different source. The aim of this paper will be to say something about the sources of Virgil's thought, and why they lead him to a certain appreciation of Epicurean precepts, but also to an eminently nonscientific poetic approach.

As Klinger suggested in 'Über das Lob des Landlebens in Virgil's *Georgica*' (Klinger, 1931), Virgil's concerns are not be those of a committed Epicurean (p. 174). In this paper then, I would like to say something about what the concerns of the poet and of the scientist are in Virgil's view and how they lead to different ways of living. To start, I will consider the animating concerns of Lucretius' poem as described by Virgil, and how ancient natural science addresses those concerns. I will then turn to Virgil's concerns – not fear of the gods and death, but above all, the effort to love the right thing – truth – and to arrive at that be the creation of beauty. One might say this makes Virgil more of a Platonist – if Platonism, in an odd way, opens the door to art (Kantorowicz, 1942, p. 321) – so to conclude I will reflect on Diotima's account of the love of beauty and of wisdom reported in the *Symposium* to clarify the motives of the literary artist – Virgil or Plato – in contrast to those of the scientific researcher.

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