

Atomism in the Aeneid: physics, politics, and cosmological disorder

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Review by

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Matthew Gorey's monograph addresses the nature and function of Lucretian intertextuality in Virgil's *Aeneid*. Three modes of interpretation, as he summarises in the *Introduction*, have vied for primacy: that Virgil's engagement is predominantly stylistic, and, as it were, content-free, an approach that in spite of some distinguished supporters it is hard if not impossible to accept after half a century (at the very least) of research on the fundamental role of intertextuality in the production of meaning; or that, almost at the opposite end of a hypothetical continuum, that it betrays strong pro-Epicurean sympathies, almost to the point of casting the *Aeneid*, or some substantial sections of it, as crypto-Epicurean (as advocated by the one systematic study hitherto devoted to the topic, by Viviane Mellinghoff-Bourgerie);^[1] or, finally, that most instances could be classified as instances of 're-mythologization', a category which has gained wide currency since Philip Hardie's *Cosmos and Imperium* (Oxford 1986). On this reading, Virgil would give space to Epicurean and

Lucretian concepts while at the same time imbuing them with a markedly different theological or scientific meaning, thus proving *in re* the errors of his (admired) predecessor's ways. While recognising the merits of the last of these approaches, Gorey opts to focus on instances where Virgil actually takes Lucretius' message on its own terms rather than subverting it, in order to show that his atomistic view of the universe is fundamentally flawed. The Epicurean view of the universe, which consists of an infinite number of atoms floating at random in a boundless void for time eternal, and obeying no authority, becomes for Virgil the image of a dystopic world with no hierarchies and no purpose, the very incarnation of a cosmic disorder which the *Aeneid*, with its strong teleological drive, aims to oppose and dispel.

Gorey develops his arguments in five compact chapters. He begins by discussing the anti-materialist polemical tradition, where Virgil could find authoritative precedents for his identification of atomism with chaos. His remarks on Cicero's metaphorical language, which suggests an analogy between the disorderly motion of the Epicurean atoms and contemporary language of political disturbance, are especially interesting: terms such as *temeritas*, *incursio* or *turba* (leading inexorably to *licentia*), which can be applied to atomic motion as much as to popular commotion, suggest the notion that Epicurean and Lucretian atomism is not just a wrong-headed philosophical system: it is also, potentially, an enemy of the State.

Chapter 2 is devoted to sections of the poem where atomistic *error* is (temporarily) associated with the Trojans and their vicissitudes, especially in the storm-scene in Book 1, where the winds, endowed with atomistic features, threaten order and teleology. The Trojans had already suffered in

a setting which eerily resembled an Epicurean world: their city, abandoned by the gods' is a "functional equivalent" (p. 71) of an Epicurean cosmos where gods are deprived of agency and events unfolds outside their control. Also, according to Gorey, Aeneas' moments of indecision, which on three occasions in the poems are signalled by the recurrent expression *nunc huc . . . nunc illuc*, are associated with atomistic randomness, which Aeneas must overcome if he is to accomplish his mission.

Gorey devotes his third chapter to the analysis of non-Trojan characters whose Epicurean allegiances or connotations have already been successfully studied, Dido, Mezentius, Turnus. He rightly eschews the notion that they may be "Epicurean" in any fundamental philosophical sense, but rather sees Dido, for instance, as an allegory for Epicurean lifestyle and ethics. This is largely convincing, although Dido's Carthage also respects gods as guarantors of order, hardly an Epicurean position. There are some fine observations here (as indeed elsewhere in the book), e.g. on the presentation of Dido's death as a form of atomic dissolution (p. 90) or, later (p. 101), on the philosophical implications of the innovative image of the "hollow cloud" (1.516 *nube caua*) with which Venus shields Aeneas from sight or out of which she creates a *Doppelgänger* which leads Turnus astray (10.636-44). Turnus is also at the centre of the following chapter, where the association of atomism with caprice, disorder and chaos is further explored through an analysis of some revealing details which Gorey teases out adroitly, especially in the description of Turnus throwing his javelin, an atomic compound which, traversing an atomistic *inane* (12.354), is contrasted with Turnus' sarcastic reference to

the proto-Roman custom of “measuring the land of Hesperia” (12.360 *Hesperiam metire iacens*), once his weapon has succeeded in slaughtering Eumedes.

The concluding fifth chapter brings together the various strands of analysis, reaffirming the view that “the specter of atomism” is rejected, but “in terms distinctly Lucretian”, “uninverted and independent” (p. 149), as a doctrine which is philosophically unacceptable, not least because it entails a subversion of the teleological drive which Virgil associates with the narrative and ideological momentum of the poem.

Gorey advances a thesis that will have to be taken seriously by scholars of both Lucretius and Virgil. We are left wondering, however, how watertight the boundaries between these different modes of appropriation he identifies actually are. Gorey makes a good case for the consistent association, in characters such as Turnus, of atomism with the negative force of disorder. In this respect, he would argue, we are dealing neither with an ideological identification *sous rature*, nor with a form of remythologization: Virgil takes Epicurean physics and its (metaphorical) implications seriously, on its own philosophical terms, but shows it to be mistaken and destructive. By further implication, however, such a neat assessment of rights and wrongs would also pertain, for instance, to Turnus as a character and his actions in the poem, except that here the terms of this polar opposition are more blurred, if not subverted, at crucial junctures. True, Turnus does embody atomistic chaos, and Aeneas is associated with a teleological drive to which his Italian counterpart is opposed; but in the final scene of the poem Aeneas’ ‘Stoic’ composure is shattered into pieces, his behaviour mirrors that of the anti-teleological

goddess par excellence, Juno, and readers' sympathies are inevitably mixed; indeed, as Gorey himself points out, the "troubling similarities between Aeneas [sic] and Turnus' respective uses of violence for political ends" renders the Trojan's victory "a qualified defeat of atomism" at best (p. 129). There is a constant attempt, one suspects, to keep the chaos of atomism and what it would entail for Rome's destiny at bay, just as Aeolus strives to contain the force of his unruly, 'atomistic' winds, but the attempt is fraught with uncertainty, its outcome forever in dispute. This does not necessarily make Virgil a crypto-Epicurean, but does complicate the picture of his engagement with that doctrine to a very considerable degree.

Overall, Gorey's book is a welcome contribution to a very important topic. As it develops a robust and challenging thesis, it offers readers a wealth of insightful observations which add perceptibly to our understanding of some crucial aspects of the *Aeneid*.

Notes

[1] *Les incertitudes de Virgile. Contributions épicuriennes à la théologie de l'Énéide*, Bruxelles 1990.