

"Epicureanism in Renaissance Thought and Art: Piero di Cosimo's Paintings on the Life of Early Man"

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Two major sources about Epicureanism were rediscovered in the early fifteenth century, Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* and Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, the latter undeniably one of the great works of Roman literature. Even the eloquence of Lucretius' poem, which was immediately recognised by most readers, failed to overcome the profound distaste that was generally felt towards Epicurean doctrine, above all towards the denial of the soul's immortality and the belief in pleasure as the highest good. Apart from that, there was a common stereotype current since antiquity that Epicureans lived low, bestial lives, addicted to the grossest indulgences: food, drink, and sex. One openly enthusiastic supporter of Epicureanism in the early fifteenth century was the relatively obscure humanist Cosma Raimondi, the author of a brief but warm *Defensio Epicuri contra Stoicos, Achademicos, et Peripateticos*, who despite much effort, many travels, and a sunny disposition, failed to find steady patronage and, still in his mid-thirties, hanged himself .

Whatever was said in private conversations, the surviving record is sparse: a few references to lost humanistic works, a few cautious discussions of Epicurus or Lucretius, a few literary works imitating or borrowing from Lucretius, and a group of paintings by Piero di Cosimo, which depict a brutal view of the early life of man, following Lucretius's account in Book V of *De Rerum Natura*. In contrast to the literary sources these unusual paintings are the most direct expressions of Epicurean thought from the Italian Renaissance. Giorgio Vasari, who was eleven years old when Piero

died, portrayed him as a wild eccentric in life as in art, who delighted the Florentine crowds with strange and macabre processional designs, let his garden grow unpruned, and ignored the civilities of polite living, for example eating only hard-boiled eggs which he cooked fifty at a time while he was boiling glue for his workshop. Some scholars associate such habits with a back-to-nature mentality inspired by Epicureanism. Vasari's account, together with modern assumptions about Italian Renaissance artists, raises low expectations for his education and intellectual ability. However, we must remember that Vasari as a biographer was inclined to paint with a broad brush, and his gusto for vivid and unified characterisations often compromised his accuracy. Piero's work shows him to have been a highly intelligent artist, who attained high mastery in adopting the Flemish method of painting in oil and extraordinary sophistication in absorbing Leonardo's innovations in movement, composition, and space. Like Leonardo, whose eccentricities were also well-known, Piero developed a fascination with nature and great skill in drawing animals. With so many artistic interests in common, they could well have shared others.

Alison Brown, in her 2001 paper, "Lucretius and the Epicureans in the Social and Political Context of Renaissance Florence", attempted to show that the extensiveness and depth of engagement with *De Rerum Natura* was greater than has been thought. Her survey has qualified, but by no means dispelled, the impression given by Aldus' preface to his 1500 edition of Lucretius, in which he justified the publication by the literary quality of the work [quia Epicureae sectae dogmata eleganter et docte mandavit carminibus, imitatus Empedoclen] and condemning the content, and the exclusion of the poem from school curricula by the Florentine synod, as "*opera lasciva et impia, quale est Lucretii poema, ubi animae mortalitatem totis viribus ostendere nititur*". In the face of this

unambiguous rejection of Epicureanism and the common view that *De Rerum Natura* was readable only for its style, we must pay attention to the fact that, between 1450 and 1500, over fifty surviving manuscript copies were made, as well as four printed editions - a clear indication that the poem was being read. However, Virgil enjoyed nineteen editions during roughly the same period. As Brown says, "So we are presented with an enigma, a text that multiplied fifty-fold in the course of the fifteenth century and yet whose readers and motives for reading Lucretius remain largely unknown."

Although it was just as hard to question Christian doctrine in Renaissance Florence as at any time before, and the rediscovered classics of antiquity were studied primarily for their usefulness in making people better Christians, there are traces of counter-trends. The Greek manuscript of Diogenes Laertius' *Lives* was brought to Florence in 1416, and a translation was finished and presented to Cosimo de' Medici in 1433. (His manuscript copy of *De Rerum Natura* was made after December 1429, while the translation was underway.) This could only have stimulated interest in Epicureanism, which was discussed in humanist works on virtue and pleasure, like Raimondi's *Defensio* (c. 1429), Bruni's *Isagogicon* (1424-1426), and Valla's *De Voluptate* (first version: 1431). Alberti, Ficino, and Poliziano also showed keen interest in Epicureanism and Lucretius, although they possessed benefices from the Church. On the other hand the translator of Diogenes Laertius's *Lives* prefaced his work with a justification based on the common interests of pagan and Christian philosophers, and Poggio Bracciolini voiced a warning to Antonio Panormita, the author of *Hermaphroditus*, that "the same license, you know, is not given to us Christians as was given to the poets of old who did not know God". Furthermore, Ficino, who wrote a commentary on Lucretius as well as a treatise *De Voluptate* in his youth, repented in his

maturity, when he had become a confirmed Platonist in the 1470's. In 1492 he affirmed that he had burnt these Epicurean works. Likewise Poliziano, after he had become a member of Lorenzo il Magnifico's Platonic circle, rejected "the impious theories of Lucretius, who had lost his reason." After that he confined his work on Lucretius to textual criticism.

The primary objection to Epicureanism, in addition to its exaltation of pleasure as the highest good, lay above all in its rejection of the soul's immortality, as stated by the Florentine synod in 1517. The prominent association of this doctrine with Epicureanism in the general consciousness is clear in Dante's description in the tenth canto of *Inferno* of the separate cemetery reserved for Epicurus and his followers, "*che l'anima col corpo morta fanno*", and, as Cristoforo Landino said in his commentary of 1481, "*Imperoché chi pone l'anima mortale toglie ogni fondamento al giusto vivere civile et alla vera religione*". Epicurus' mission was to relieve humanity of the burden of fear, but the fifteenth century Florentine humanist who looked to the wealthy and powerful for patronage and survived on ecclesiastical benefices, fear, above all the fear of hellfire, was a necessity for social order. This belief in the finality of death, echoing as it did a strain of popular wisdom [Frottola: ], had potentially dangerous political consequences.

Equally potent was the popular stereotype of Epicureans as gross sensualists, an idea summed up in Augustine's dictum [*Enarrationes in Psalmos* LXXIII.75], "[Epicurum] ipsi etiam philosophi porcum nominaverunt." Apologists, on the other hand, were able to defend Epicurus by stressing that by pleasure he meant not the gross pleasures of bed and table, but the frugal enjoyment of simple living and the noble joys of moral rectitude, including even the knowledge and love of God, a view eloquently expressed by Paolo Giustiniani [*Cogitationes quotidiane de amore Dei* LXI] and Erasmus [*De*

*contemptu mundi* (*Opera omnia*. I, 74)] in the the early sixteenth century.

It is surprising that Lucretius is not more often contextualised with Horace, who also carried a marked odour of Epicureanism for medieval and Renaissance readers. The biography of Pseudo-Acron, which stated that Horace was an Epicurean, was well-known in those times, and his light-hearted avowal of Epicureanism at the end of Epistles I.4 (ll. 15-16) is enshrined in one of the best-known tags from his work, all the more alluring to the Christian mind because of its likeness to Augustine's phrase:

*me pinguem et nitidum bene curata cute vises,  
cum ridere voles, Epicuri de grege porcum.*

Another of Horace's nuggets, his injunction to Leuconoe in Odes I.11: *carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero*) even came close to implying Epicurus' abhorrent denial of the after-life. However, Horace' distaste for consistent adherence to a sect put him in an entirely different category than Lucretius, whose work demanded literal confrontation, because it was, after all, an exposition of doctrine, as well as a recent rediscovery. Horace's playful renunciation of his Epicurean notions about the gods in *Odes* I. 34, furthermore, gave Renaissance commentators a chance to explain it away as a youthful aberration, which he abandoned in maturity for a more pious attitude. Landino, who published his pioneering commentary in 1482, had only to follow Porphyrio in this interpretation. His commentary, which attempted to come to terms with Horace's Epicureanism by qualifying them as much as possible, enjoyed numerous re-editions in the 1480s and 1490s, a period when discussion of Lucretius and Epicureanism was particularly lively. In 1492 it was joined by Antonio Mancinelli's much reprinted edition, which followed a similar course, marked by rationalisation and evasion, as Michael Roberts has shown [Roberts, Michael. "Interpreting Hedonism:

Renaissance Commentaries on Horace's Epicurean Odes." *Arethusa* 28 (1995):©289–307.].

In Florence the political order was in the hands of the Medici, who, as members of the merchant class, had no legitimate claim to power. They had seized and maintained control of the state entirely through ruthlessness and money. When Cosimo il Vecchio and his successors pursued philosophy and offered patronage to philosophers, it was Platonism they supported, since it tolerated, and could be made to support, the rule of a single enlightened ruler. By cultivating Platonism, they could make a claim to this enlightenment and through that to the legitimacy they lacked. Epicureanism, if approached directly as a system of thought, was, overall, diametrically opposed to Platonic doctrine, undercutting the basic principles of the Medicean establishment, not to mention the teaching of the Church in Rome. Hence, as a subversive philosophy in the eyes of Church and state, Epicureanism was appealing to the opponents of the Medici and enjoyed a public resurgence after their expulsion in 1494.

However, even though references to the recently discovered poem of Lucretius are not overabundant and are qualified by pious execrations of Epicurean doctrine, the appeal of his Latinity proved irresistible to the humanists, not to mention the power of Epicurean thought as a private guilty pleasure. Poggio, for example felt an attraction to Epicureanism even before his discovery of the famous manuscript [Letters..Garin, *Prosatori latini...*]. Cosimo il Vecchio commissioned a copy of Niccolo Niccoli's copy of Poggio's MS, which he kept in his library, and several Florentine humanists, it seems, became acquainted with the poem from this manuscript. For the humanists, with their predilection for language and style, it was not even difficult to assimilate Lucretius'

poem into Medicean orthodoxy. Furthermore there was also the tendency of even sophisticated and devoted students of literature to seize on the purple passage or the pithy aphorism, as humanistic quotations from the poem reveal.

The most famous translation of a passage of Lucretius into a picture is typical of this habit. The istoria of Botticelli's *Primavera* of is an elegant, even virtuosic conflation of several famous tags. Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* V.737ff. stands beside Horace Odes I.30 as the principal literary source. It remains debatable whether the primary source is Horace or Lucretius, and passages from Ovid's *Fasti* [195-202] and Seneca's *De beneficiis* [I.3.2-7] are also indispensable, as well as texts by Poliziano. The conjunction of two notably Epicurean poets, Lucretius and Horace, establishes an unambiguous Epicurean background for the picture. Furthermore all of these passages share an immediate sensual appeal, especially Lucretius' lively description of spring.

*it Ver et Venus et Veneris praenuntius ante  
pennatus graditur, Zephyri vestigia propter  
Flora quibus mater praespargens ante viai  
cuncta coloribus egregiis et odoribus opplet.*

Here, the poet's materialistic sensualism is contained in lyric expression heightened by its association with Horace's erotic song. In this context it is well insulated from the the dangers of his grander doctrinal utterances. Furthermore Lucretius is made to sing in chorus with other ancients, and their meanings are mediated by their translation into a narrative composition, which depends for its significance on the particular circumstances of its creation for a member of the Medici household. We may well reflect at this point how the Medici and the visitors to the "best room" of the palace on the Via Larga would have construed this very large panel painting in its plain white frame, hanging high above an elaborate hat-rack, radiating its

unmistakable Epicurean aura. If Epicurean texts could be rendered more palatable through interpretations like Landino's or even rationalised into harmony with Christian belief, the specifics of the occasion for the painting mediate its introduction into a household more noted for its Platonistic agenda. Even among the Medici, an Epicurean tenor would be appropriate for an occasion like a wedding or the coming-of-age of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco, as has been argued, and a Platonic level of interpretation is in any case by no means ruled out, especially considering Poliziano's apparent participation in the program.

The contrast is almost shocking between the admiring disengagement of Renaissance critics and poets and the directness of three panel paintings by Piero di Cosimo, which literally illustrate Lucretius' account of the life of early man in Book V, with one notable exception: Piero shows strange creatures of mixed nature: centaurs, fawns, and other mixed beings, in which Lucretius did not believe (V.878-924). The harsh realism of Piero's depiction of primitive civilisation is unique in medieval and Renaissance art. The human beings in these scenes are strange enough. In a hunting scene now in the Metropolitan Museum, dressed in skins, they hunt with bare hands or with clubs with the same blood-lust as their prey. In its companion also in the Met, the men, fawns and satyrs bring the hunt home to their women by the shore. On primitive boats the men and women enjoy recreation, while a tenderly amorous woman and centaur suggest that procreation was still freely mixed among species. The third painting, the *Forest Fire* in the Ashmolean, shows a settled state of existence between humans and beasts. As a forest fire rages in the distance, we see a profusion of familiar animals and birds along with a man-pig and a man-deer, as well as a cowherd, dressed in simple cloth garments, carrying a yoke and urging his cattle to safety. A fourth



painting, the *Battle of Lapiths and Centaurs*, closely based on Ovid's treatment in the *Metamorphoses*, now in the National Gallery, London, has been joined to the group by some scholars. Here the figures enjoy a more developed life, and the battle with the centaurs seems to show a parting of the ways between man and the mixed creatures. All of these panel paintings are the same height (71 cm), are painted in a similar palette of browns and greens and are consistent with a particular stage of development in Piero's handling of figures, landscapes, and composition. Their perspectival construction is also consistent; they were all intended to be viewed from a somewhat lower vantage point, as one would expect in this type of painting, a spalliera, intended as part of the decoration of a private room, built into the moulding at about shoulder height, as the name implies. They also show an interdependence of theme and composition that further reinforces the conclusion that they form a unified cycle.

If we view the paintings as a cycle of four scenes, they form a coherent group, culminating in the Lapiths and Centaurs with its dramatic mythological narration, more precise description, and more vivid palette. The *Forest Fire* and the hunt scenes are more anonymous, following Lucretius' presentation in Book V. It is possible to imagine these three by themselves, but not the two hunt scenes alone. The *Lapiths and Centaurs* is the longest of the panels at about 8 1/2 feet (or 260 cm), and the hunt scenes are around 5 1/2 feet wide (169 cm). Within their ornamental setting they could easily occupy the walls of a studiolo, just the sort of environment for such learned subjects. As a group, the paintings show three or possibly four stages in the development of civilisation. The most primitive phase is that of the Hunt, where men are hardly more developed than the animals they hunt. Its pendant probably shows more advanced stage, or possibly a more refined aspect of the same, in which humans build primitive vessels, engage in

socialised leisure activities, and show deference to women. The Forest Fire clearly shows a more advanced society, since the ox herd is dressed like a contemporary peasant and carries a well-made yoke. In the *Lapiths and Centaurs* there is yet a more advanced stage of development, one that is congruent with the age of classical myth, in which the institution of marriage has not only been established, but is celebrated with some luxury, including elegant textiles, objects, and food. This program appears plausible in the light of other works by Piero, in which he treats familiar and unfamiliar myths in the light of the development of civilisation, a euhemeristic view adopted much earlier by Giovanni Boccaccio in his mythological treatise, the *Genealogie Deorum Gentilium*.

Roger Fry first brought this cycle and its literal but free derivation from Lucretius into the limelight, when, in his review of the 1921 exhibition at the Burlington Fine Arts Club, he discussed the Forest Fire at length as the most brilliant work in the show and associated it with the New York hunt scenes and the *Lapiths and Centaurs* as a coherent cycle. Erwin Panofsky's famous lecture (published 1939), "The Early Life of Man in Two Cycles of Paintings by Piero di Cosimo" established these paintings yet further in the art historical repertory. For his part, Panofsky excluded the Lapiths and Centaurs from the cycle, considering that the introduction of myth and a more advanced stage of civilisation was alien to Piero's purpose. On the other hand, he added two paintings of different dimensions, painted on a different support. These are, as he argues two scenes from the life of Vulcan, his *Fall from Olympus to the island of Lemnos*, where he is discovered by nymphs (now in the Wadsworth Athenaeum, Hartford) and a scene of *Vulcan and Aeolus* at work in their smithy in a settlement of primitive humans, to whom they are teaching essential technological skills. Both of these paintings were painted in

oil on coarse herringbone canvas measuring approximately 5 x 5 3/4 feet. (155 x 174 cm). They are also stylistically quite different from the panels, fitting more comfortably in the 1480's than the period 1490 to 1505, to which the panels have been assigned by various scholars. (I personally prefer to date them around 1495.) Panofsky says nothing of the decorative context in which the pair would join the three panels. Also, the Vulcan paintings introduce the very mythological element to which he objects in the *Lapiths and Centaurs*, as well as a more advanced stage of development. Of course this does not rule out the possibility that they were earlier commissions by the same patron, who clearly must have had very particular interests, given his predilection for Lucretius and this anti-Platonic, unchristian view of human civilisation as the product of "the inborn talents and faculties of the race," as he says. Their source is a passage in Boccaccio's *Genealogie Deorum Gentilium* (XII.xxxvii), in which he not only tells the story of Vulcan's fall but described the early development of civilisation with a lengthy citation from Vitruvius' *proemium* to Book II of his *De Re Aedificatoria*. This work was lost in Boccaccio's time, and rediscovered by Poggio.

Knowing the patron of either of these cycles could possibly establish for us the intellectual context for these unusual paintings. Panofsky associated the panels with the paintings described very briefly by Vasari as "*diverse storie di figure piccole, né si può esprimere la diversità de le cose fantastiche che egli in tutte quelle si diletto dipignere, e di casamenti e d'animali e di abiti strumenti diversi, et altre fantasie che gli sovengono per essere storie di favole.*" which, he said, Piero painted for the wool merchant Francesco del Pugliese. Catherine Whistler, I believe, was right to reject this theory in favour of Tomaso Soderini, whose uncle Piero was *gonfaloniere* under the Republic and the addressee of Amerigo Vespucci's letter on his discoveries in America. It is known that

members of both families had intellectual interests sympathetic to Lucretius, and that the reports of explorers on the native peoples they encountered in their travels were often interpreted in the light of Lucretius' account of primitive man. Piero painted a cycle of paintings in a similar vein, the *Misfortunes of Silenus*, for Giovanni Vespucci. Francesco, who lived across the Arno where anti-Medicean sentiments flourished, was a pious man, a committed follower of Savonarola, who derided Epicurean doctrine and excoriated the Epicurean way of life. Furthermore, there is no mention of anything like Piero's *spalliere* in Francesco's extremely detailed wills. A Vespucci or a Soderini would be much more plausible as a patron than the devout wool merchant.

Piero di Cosimo is quite unique among Renaissance painters to have a single theme extending throughout his work. The idea of the primitive life of man and the origins of civilisation persists from the early Vulcan paintings to his late works about Prometheus. In some cases Piero treats the subject directly, and in others it colours his treatment of ancient myth. Although not all are known, he executed these works for a variety of patrons. Hence it is impossible to ignore his personal affinity, or conscious cultivation of these anthropological notions. Some scholars have made Piero conform to the common idea of the Renaissance artist and have assumed that he lacked the Latin and the intellectual preparation to read Lucretius and understand him. It is certainly unlikely that he cultivated his views in isolation, given the proliferation of study groups in Renaissance Florence, but it is equally clear that he developed the ideas expressed in these paintings as a thinking, self-conscious individual. Beyond the character of this body of work, there may also be some specific evidence of his intellectual interests and capabilities.

On the verso of a pen drawing in the Uffizi (P 7) by Piero of *St. Jerome in the*

*Wilderness* there are some sketches and inscriptions. A heavy crease shows that the sheet was once folded across its longer axis. On one side of this crease there are studies for a coat of arms. On the other there is a fine drawing of a putto with its arms raised over its head, certainly a study for one of the putti in the background of the Berlin Mars and Venus, a subject with Epicurean associations, mentioned in Marullo's Lucretian *Hymni Naturales* of the 1490s. Below it there is the Medici *impresa* "GLOVIUS", and to its right various calculations and pen trials, as well as two inscriptions written in different hands and in opposite directions, as if two people were facing each other at a table. One inscription, written in a wiry, somewhat clumsy hand, consists of "*Laborum dulce lenimen*", quoting Horace's famous invocation of his lyre in *Odes* I. xxxii, and the second, written in a confident and well-formed humanist hand, which is found on other drawings by Piero and is thought to be his own, quotes Horace's drinking song, *Odes* I. xviii, slightly reworded to form an independent statement: "*non aliter mordaces diffugiunt solitudines*". Here are two Horatian lines which may not directly refer to Epicurean doctrine, but which in their context reflect the popular view of Epicurean mores in their appeal to wine and song.

This conjures up a picture of Piero sitting across a table from one of his Epicurean friends, scribbling quotations from this eminently Epicurean poet on the back of a drawing. While his friend thinks music is the greatest pleasure, Piero prefers wine. Is it too much to interpret the stain extending across the entire sheet from Piero's direction as evidence of his high spirits on this occasion?