CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

ὑπῆρξέ τε ἐκ τοῦ ἐπὶ πλείστον τοῖς μετέπειτα ἐπικουρείς μηδ’ αὐτοῖς εἰπεῖν πω ἐναντίῳ ἀλλήλοις ἢ ἐπικουρός μηδὲν εἰς μηδὲν, ἀλλ᾿ ἐπικούρην ἀξίων

(Numenius, ap. Euseb., PE 14.5.3)

5.1. Nicomedia, May 1, 305 A.D. Diocletian of his own free will abdicates in the presence of the army, and withdraws as a private citizen to Salona (Lactantius, mort. pers. 19). Three years later, Herculius and Galerius try to convince him to reassume the office of emperor. His reaction to the proposal has been preserved in Aurelius Victor: “If only you could see at Salona the vegetables I have cultivated with my own hands, you would undoubtedly never have decided to make this attempt” (epit. 39,6), after which, one may presume, he resumed his life as a private citizen in perfect tranquillity.

Whether or not this anecdote has a historical basis, Diocletian’s dictum in any case calls to mind a whole cluster of ideas about the pleasures of sequestered otium, the simple life in the country, and the unending efforts that a political career inevitably presupposes. All of this, of course, does not make Diocletian’s decision an Epicurean one. Not everyone who prefers the pleasures of country life to the great troubles and dangers of politics is necessarily an Epicurean philosopher. This again raises the questions of what the typical characteristics of the Epicurean point of view are, of how persuasive it really was (from the very beginning up to Diocletian’s day and even later), and of the degree in which it was influenced by contemporary social and political circumstances. These questions will be discussed in the rest of this conclusion.

5.2. Epicurus’ advice to ‘live unnoticed’ has reached us without its direct context. The maxim λάθε βιώσας forms a self-contained unit which directly appeals to the mind of the readers as a well-formulated
advice about the best way of life. Yet this absence of any context can be particularly misleading, in that it may attribute to the Epicurean maxim an absoluteness which it definitely did not have. In order to reach a correct understanding of Epicurus’ advice, it has to be interpreted against the background of his philosophy which regards pleasure as the final end. An ‘unnoticed life’, then, is one of the means that contributes to this end. It implies an avoidance of participation in politics, a career as an orator and more generally of any action that is motivated by ambition and love of honour. As a general rule and for the same reasons such an ‘unnoticed life’ should come to an end in an ‘unnoticed death’ (λάθε ἀποθώμοσας).

5.2.1. That an ‘unnoticed life’ indeed yields far more pleasures than a brilliant political or rhetorical career is demonstrated by several arguments repeated time and again throughout the history of the school. First of all, Epicurus and his followers emphasise the importance of personal security, which may best be reached through a sequestered life (ἀσφάλεια ἔξις Ἱπυχίας). Withdrawal from public life enables the Epicurean to avoid enmities and passions such as hatred, envy, or contempt, all of which entail βλάβαι ἔξις ἀνθρώπων, and primarily directs his attention to the safer circle of neighbours and friends. In addition to the importance of personal security, there is also the limitation of desires. Ambition and love of honour or power fall under the category of unnatural and unnecessary desires that are hard to satisfy and are a constant source of anxieties and even dangers. That this is true clearly appears from the life of the famous statesmen of the past, who were often unhappy and unable to reach the pleasures of a tranquil life. The Epicurean will remember these lessons from history and cure himself of his vain desires. Finally, a political career considerably harms personal self-sufficiency, since the politician has to take into account the desires of his fellow citizens. The same holds true for the orator, whose persuasiveness and success partly depends on the preferences of his audience.

On the basis of all of these arguments, the Epicureans were convinced of the meaningfulness and usefulness of the maxim λάθε βιώσας. A careful calculus of pleasures and pains clearly shows that the choice for an ‘unnoticed life’ is usually the best alternative. It is important to underline indeed that this ideal of an ‘unnoticed life’ is not only based on largely negative, elenctic arguments. The Epicureans also advocated in very positive terms their own way of life, of which they were proud. Their lengthy attack on the negative consequences of a public life is