CHAPTER SIX

APPENDIX: AUGUSTAN POETRY

si liceat, nulli cognitus esse velim

(Ovid, Trist. 5.12.42)

6.1. Virgil

6.1.1. All authors discussed so far were confirmed Epicureans in that they fully subscribed to the doctrines of Epicurus.¹ Later followers such as Lucretius and Philodemus wrote in a different context, to be sure, and sometimes added their own accents, but they all shared basically the same loyalty towards their distinguished master. This undeniable loyalty towards Epicurus is far less clear in poets such as Virgil, Horace, or Ovid. Their poems are not the most evident place to look for references to the maxim λάητον ημίωνας. And yet, their sometimes close connection with Epicurean philosophy has intensively been studied,² and different passages from their poems have been related to the Epicurean ideal of an ‘unnoticed life’ and have even found their way into Usener’s collection of fragments. This is a more than sufficient reason to enter, albeit with a certain diffidence, the rich world of these great masters of Latin poetry.

A preliminary methodological remark is well in place here. In itself, the motif of an ‘unnoticed life’ is fairly general. It can occur in different contexts and can be connected with diverse themes. In poetry, several typical themes come fairly close to the ideal of an ‘unnoticed life’: the humble and frugal life of ordinary people (such as Philemon and Baucis for instance), the uncomplicated life in the primitive ages or in an aurea aetas, the bucolic way of life of simple-hearted shepherds and the simple existence of the modest farmer. It is clear that all of these themes can be connected to the motif of the ‘unnoticed life’. Often, such a connection is not directly made explicit, although sometimes it is.

¹ On the two possible meanings of the term ‘Epicurean’, see D.J. Furley (1978), 1.
In my view, all of these motifs are primarily rooted in an agelong poetical tradition rather than in an Epicurean one. Yet, as has been said above, many of these motifs have also been connected with Epicurean philosophy. Moreover, one should note that the thesis of an Epicurean influence on the Augustan poets has been defended by specialists of poetry and specialists of Epicureanism alike and should thus be taken seriously as a hypothesis by both groups alike. This observation leads to the basic question to be discussed in this appendix: to what extent can we find traces of the specific Epicurean ideal of λαθη βιωσας in poets such as Virgil, Horace, and Ovid?

This question is deliberately raised in a fairly restrictive (philosophical-technical) way. I do not look for general ‘philosophical’ doctrines that can as easily be associated with a kind of vulgarised Epicureanism (whatever that may be) as with a kind of simplified Stoicism or popularised Platonism (e.g. the praise of virtue, aurea mediocritas, etc.). Echoes of such doctrines can be found in abundance, but in my view, they have little, if any, cogency. I think it is only meaningful to speak about Epicurean influence on the poets on the basis of particular references which are specific enough to be recognised as typically Epicurean. In this respect, the ideal of λαθη βιωσας can provide an interesting test-case. The following analysis, which carefully takes into account a more strictly philosophical point of view, will show that there are only a few passages that can be regarded as evidence of Epicurean influence. Yet the conclusion of this appendix will not be entirely negative. In Horace, notably, will be found some passages which indeed show an unmistakably Epicurean influence.

6.1.2. Of the three poets mentioned above, Virgil undoubtedly has the closest relations to Epicureanism. His familiarity with Epicurean philosophy rests on a double foundation. First of all, it is beyond dispute that he was thoroughly familiar with Lucretius’ De rerum natura. This influence can indeed be found in many passages of his works, although it is fair to say that direct parallels between Virgil and Lucretius need not always imply that both authors also share the same philosophical view. Many borrowings are merely formal, and some can be understood as

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3 Already noted by Aulus Gellius, 1.21.7. An extensive list of parallels can be found in W.A. Merrill (1918); cf. also A.K. Michels (1944a) and G. Castelli (1966), (1967) and (1969).