INTRODUCTION
FROM EPICURUS TO LUCRETIUS

One of the passages on which recent Lucretian scholarship has shed much light is the ἀριστεία of Epicurus in Book One of De rerum natura.¹ The passage fashions Epicurus as an epic hero who engages religion in a Homeric duel on behalf of all humanity. His battle has a successful outcome—the reversal of the initial situation, in which human life was lying on the ground, oppressed by religion.

When man's life lay for all to see foully groveling upon the ground, crushed beneath the weight of Superstition, which displayed her head from the regions of heaven lowering over mortals with horrible aspect, a man of Greece was the first to uplift mortal eyes against her, the first to make stand against her; for neither fables of the gods could quell him, nor thunderbolts, nor heaven with menacing roar, but all the more they goaded the eager courage of his soul, so that he should desire, first of all men, to shatter the confining bars of nature's gates. Therefore the lively power of his mind prevailed, and forth he marched far beyond the

flaming walls of the world, as he traversed the immeasurable universe in thought and imagination; whence victorious he returns bearing his prize, the knowledge what can come into being, what can not, in a word, how each thing has its powers limited and its deep set boundary mark. Therefore Superstition is now in her turn cast down and trampled underfoot, whilst we by the victory are exalted high as heaven.2

But what kind of victoria is Epicurus'? The epic imagery in this passage presents his philosophical achievement as military heroism, translating the intellectual grandeur of the Greek philosopher to the system of values of Lucretius’ Roman upper-class readers.3 The whole passage is based on the presentation of philosophical argument in terms of the concept of war. Epicurus’ victory is an allegory, conveying an essentially novel message foiled in old and traditional literary motifs: the philosopher did not win owing to the strength of his hands, but owing to acris animi virtus (the eager courage of his soul) and vivida vis animi (the lively power of his mind); he performed his attack on the sky, the territory of the gods, not physically, in military armor, but mente animoque (in thought and imagination); the spoils he brought back with him are not material objects, but answers to the questions quid possit oriri, quid nequeat, finita potestas denique cuique quanam sit ratione atque alte terminus haerens (what can come into being, what can not, in a word, how each thing has its powers limited and its deep set boundary mark).

The praise of Epicurus as the savior of mankind is echoed in the preem to Book Five, where Lucretius compares the legacy of Epicurus to the mythological achievements of Heracles. In this passage the analogy between the philosopher and a military leader is partly corrected. The poet argues that Epicurus, the true liberator of humanity, has subdued and expelled anxieties from the human mind dictis, non armis (by his sayings, not by arms). These sayings (dicta) illuminate the real nature of the gods and the entire universe:

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\text{At nisi purgatumst pectus, quae proelia nobis}
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\[
\text{atque pericula tane ingratis insinuandum!}
\]
\[
\text{quantae tum scindunt hominem cuppedinis acres}
\]
\[
\text{sollicitum curae quantique perinde timores!}
\]
\[
\text{quidue superbia spinacita ac petulantia? quantas}
\]
\[
\text{efficiunt elades! quid luxus desidiaque?}
\]
\[
\text{haec igitur qui cuncta subegerit ex animoqve}
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2 All translations of DRV are M.F. Smith’s, with occasional minor changes. Other translations are mine.
3 Epicurus’ heroism might be Lucretius’ version of an Ennian exemplum uirtutis.