

miseratus iniquam ... casu concussus iniquo ... heu miserande puer, si qua fata aspera rumpas! Aeneas' first encounter is with Palinurus, doomed with his kind to wander disconsolate for the accident of not having had burial in the world above; his last is with Marcellus, doomed a thousand years before his birth to die on the threshold of manhood with his promise unfulfilled. The unhappiness of so many in the world of the dead, and the harshness of their lot, reflects the same condition of the living individuals in the rest of the story. It stands in permanent contrast with the benevolence of heaven towards the Roman state. And the tension between the modes of feeling thus contrasted, so important an element in this poem's power to move, finds in the sixth book its clearest and most concentrated expression.

V.S. Lectures, No. 86

THE CYCLE OF GROWTH AND DECAY IN LUCRETIUS AND VIRGIL

A lecture delivered to the Virgil Society

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by W. Liebeschuetz, Ph.D.

'The influence direct and indirect exercised by Lucretius on the thought, composition and even diction of the Georgics was perhaps stronger than that ever exercised before or since by one great poet on the work of another.' So Sellar wrote in his Roman poets of the Augustan Age.⁽¹⁾ The present paper⁽²⁾ is concerned to trace one aspect of this influence, to provide an outline of Lucretius' treatment of the cycle of growth and decline in organic and inorganic nature and to point out how Lucretius' handling of the theme has influenced Virgil in the Georgics.

For Lucretius the apparent solidity and stability of our world is deceptive. Underlying it there is the never ceasing movement of atoms in endless collisions, combinations and separations - resembling the battle of dust particles caught in a beam of light.⁽³⁾ The battle is eternal but the state of the contestants varies from time to time. At the beginning of the world the result was overwhelmingly constructive.⁽⁴⁾ Today construction and destruction are in equilibrium and the decay of some things is balanced by the growth of others.⁽⁵⁾ But the equilibrium remains precarious: sooner or later the destructive process will gain the upper hand and the whole world will be destroyed.⁽⁶⁾

On the atomic scale the cycle of growth and decay is invisible. Its reality must be proved by deductive argument and illustrated by images such as the strife of the elements⁽⁷⁾ which provide only imperfect analogies. But in the world of everyday life the cycle of growth, fruit bearing and death of animals and vegetation supplies a visible model of the cyclical process which can be made the basis of arguments about examples of the cycle which take place out of reach of the senses⁽⁸⁾ whether at atomic or at cosmic level or at extremes of time.⁽⁹⁾

Thus the famous passage beginning:

postremo pereunt imbres ubi eos pater aether
in gremium matris terrae praecipitavit(10)

not only presents us with a beautiful picture of the growth of new life in spring but also expounds an argument on the subject of the invisible processes of nature, namely that when objects seem to decay to nothing they do not simply disappear but are broken up into their atomic components which are promptly rearranged into new growth.

haud igitur penitus pereunt quaecumque videntur,
quando alid ex alio reficit natura nec ullam
rem gigni patitur nisi morte adiuta aliena.

This argument provides powerful support for the truth of the atomic theory and thus for the whole Epicurean view of a world developing and decaying without any intervention of gods.

Similarly analogies drawn with the organic cycle are used to support propositions of cosmogony.(11) Like a living thing the earth must pass through stages of growth, maturity and decay. Moreover it is argued that the earth, like a young woman, was once endowed with a high degree of fertility which it has since lost through the process of ageing.(12) It is also suggested that during the fertile period of its youth the earth perpetually enjoyed the mild weather which favours the annual growth of new life in Spring.(13) We see that use of the organic analogy enables Lucretius to explain the origin of large animals from inanimate matter in materialistic terms without the miraculous intervention of a divinity.

In the account of the history of the world a special place is occupied by the account of early man. He is shown to have been tougher and more animal-like but also closer to nature and therefore at least as happy as his more civilized descendants, who:

neque hilo
maiores interea capiunt dulcedini fructum
quam silvestre genus capiebat terrigenarum.(14)

The nature of the happiness of early man is summed up in a vivid picture.

Saepe itaque inter se prostrati in gramine molli
propter aquae rivum sub ramis arboris altae
non magis opibus iucunde corpora habebant
praesertim cum tempestas ridebat et anni
tempora pingebant viridantis floribus herbas.(15)

Lucretius was not content with this radiant evocation of a simple happiness. He amplifies its attractions by displaying them in juxtaposition with descriptions of the unsettling and fruitless pursuit of money, luxury or power as they are known in city-civilization and not least at Rome.(16)

These passages have an important function in the design of Lucretius' work. Nowhere in the De Rerum Natura does Lucretius provide systematic teaching as to

how the philosophy of Epicurus is to be applied to concrete problems of living and ethics. Only in his account of early man does Lucretius describe a way of life that fulfils his philosophical presuppositions for happy living, a way of life that satisfies man's natural needs without disturbing his peace of mind through the exaltation of unnatural needs and values.⁽¹⁷⁾ Of course Lucretius is not suggesting that his contemporaries should return to precisely the way of life of their primitive ancestors. He is merely drawing attention to certain conditions of human happiness which are permanently valid because they are rooted in human nature.

We have seen that analogies drawn from the organic cycle of growth and decay provide crucial support for Lucretius' Epicurean doctrines in the fields of atomic theory and cosmogony and hence indirectly of theology and ethics. The cycle also has a role in the formal organisation of the poem.⁽¹⁸⁾ The organisation of the material of Lucretius' poem seems to be governed in the first place by the requirements of a clear and logical exposition of the huge argument. But in detail the composition of the De Rerum Natura is often determined by literary objectives. Thus it has been shown⁽¹⁹⁾ that Lucretius has frequently organised his material in such a way as to mirror the co-existence of creative and destructive processes in nature.

Thus Lucretius' survey of human inventions is composed in such a way that inventions which are essentially constructive⁽²⁰⁾ are balanced by accounts of others which are largely destructive⁽²¹⁾ and even the constructive inventions are shown not only creating new satisfactions but also destroying old ones.⁽²²⁾ Similarly, in his exposition of Epicurean psychology Lucretius explains that 'images' make possible sensation, thought and sex, but also that these same 'images' cause delusions, of which the most dangerous is passionate love.⁽²³⁾ Some atoms can come together to produce life: others are fatal to life.⁽²⁴⁾ The verses describing how the world originated and developed without the intervention of the gods⁽²⁵⁾ are balanced by passages about its ageing and destruction.⁽²⁶⁾ The proof that the soul has birth is supplemented by proof that it has death.⁽²⁷⁾ All descriptions, whether of growth or of decline and destruction, are emotive as well as argumentative and the emotion sought by the poet is inevitably extreme. The harmony of the constructive phases is exaggerated: the horror of the destructive phases even more so.⁽²⁸⁾ But between them they achieve some sort of emotional balance.

This antithesis is reflected in the contrasting emotional tones of the proemia and concluding verses of four of the six books of the De Rerum Natura. In each one the book opens with a radiantly optimistic proemium to conclude, at best, on a note of calm resignation.⁽²⁹⁾ The contrast is strongest between the opening and conclusion of the whole poem. It opens with a radiant painting of spring and Venus with a subordinate description of Mars under control.⁽³⁰⁾ It finishes with a horrifying picture of the plague at Athens.⁽³¹⁾ The philosopher will consider the two together realising that the beauty of youth and spring is only made possible by death albeit that some of death's shapes are horrible.

For Lucretius the cycle of growth and decay provides a systematic foundation for his teaching that the gods do not interfere in the running of the world and that the soul does not survive death. This philosophical objective does not seem relevant to Virgil's Georgics.⁽³²⁾ Virgil appears to have renounced the cosmological theme for a subject of narrower scope.

felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas,
atque metus omnes et inexorabile fatum
subieci pedibus strepitumque Acherontis avari.
Fortunatus et ille deos qui novit agrestis.(33)

Virgil appears to be content to confine himself within the bounds of country life, to instruct country folk in rural skills and to make them aware of the blessings of their life. Nevertheless Virgil adopted for his own purposes certain of the great episodes of Lucretius' poem.

In the opening section of Book 1 of the Georgics Virgil adheres to the view that the world has deteriorated and is deteriorating.(34) A number of Lucretian echoes show that Virgil was consciously developing Lucretius' picture of the ageing earth.(35) But from the Lucretian premise he drew a totally un-Lucretian conclusion.

pater ipse colendi
haud facilem esse viam voluit, primusque per
artem movit agros, curis acuens mortalia corda.(36)

Jupiter made life more difficult for man in order to compel him to develop his faculties. Virgil goes on to show that great as are the dangers facing the farmer's livelihood the organisation of heaven and earth is such as to give advance warning of many natural hazards so that man can take precautions in time.(37) In short the world is providentially organised at least partly for the sake of man, not to make life enervatingly easy, but at any rate to give him a chance of a satisfying existence, if only he is ready to work and learn to use such aids as are provided for him.

From the same point of view, Virgil has developed Lucretius' descriptions of spring and of the youth of the world. In the famous 'hymn to spring' in Book II Virgil expresses the feeling, inspired by the renewal of life, that each spring constitutes a reenactment of the original spring of the world.

Non alios prima crescentis origine mundi
inluxisse dies aliumve habuisse tenorem
crediderim.(38)

The language combines reminiscences of Lucretius' description of the new world with reminiscences of his description of spring.(39) But where Lucretius has shown spring as a purely physical process Virgil reinvests it with mystery and intimations of the activity of supernatural powers.

nec res hunc tenerae possent perferre laborem,
si non tanta quies iret frigusque caloremque
inter, et exciperet caeli indulgentia terras.

Spring is one aspect of the providential order which makes it possible for the farmer's labour to bear fruit.(40)

But the youth of the world is only of passing significance in the Georgics. The 'Praise of the Farming Life' in the second book of the Georgics is profoundly influenced by Lucretius' treatment of early man. First of all, like Lucretius,

Virgil has not only described the farmers' happiness⁽⁴¹⁾ but also defined it negatively by picturing the striving for luxury, wealth and power of which the farmer is free.⁽⁴²⁾ Secondly the ideal of happiness is still close to that of Lucretius. It is seen essentially as the calm state of a mind which is untroubled by fear or unrealisable desires,⁽⁴³⁾ and content with simple satisfaction of natural needs and simple pleasures, symbolised by Virgil as by Lucretius, through images of relaxation in the shadow of a tree.⁽⁴⁴⁾ Finally, again like Lucretius, Virgil uses this model from the idealised early history of man to point out values which are relevant to contemporary society but which no realistic description could reveal in so unmixed a form.⁽⁴⁵⁾

But once again Virgil has not simply adopted Lucretius' ideal of the happy life. In the first place, of course, Virgil recommends an altogether different means of attaining happiness. It is to be found not by inquiring into 'the causes of things' but by strict attention to the exacting yet rewarding task of winning a living from the earth. The farmer's year with its regular succession of hard work, worship and occasional relaxation will mould a character immune to the temptation of wealth and power, and capable of achieving the happy life.⁽⁴⁶⁾

But this is not enough: Book III with its praise of the essentially individual happiness of the farmer, is followed in Book IV by an account of the society of the bees. The bees have qualities of citizenship developed to a degree which may seem grotesque to the modern reader,⁽⁴⁷⁾ but which is surely intended to be essentially exemplary. Such devotion to the community belongs only to life in its highest manifestations.

His quidam signis atque haec exempla secuti
esse apibus partem divinae mentis et haustus
aetherios dixere.⁽⁴⁸⁾

The lack of teaching on social duties was a standard charge brought against Epicureans.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Virgil has remedied this deficiency by a demonstration that social morality no less than the instinct for avoiding pain is part of the natural endowment of the highest form of life, and thus of man.

Virgil's indebtedness to Lucretius' treatment of the cycle of growth and decay is not limited to the re-use of themes torn from their context. While Virgil has no use for Lucretius' logical and coherent exposition of the workings of nature he has adopted important features of the poetic organisation of the De Rerum Natura. Thus he, too, has built one pattern of growth and decay into the emotional structure of his poem. Even in his most optimistic passages Virgil suggests the precariousness of human achievement and suggests that only the hardest work and utmost forethought will prevent disaster.⁽⁵⁰⁾ Also reminiscent of Lucretius' use of the theme is the way in which Virgil suggests a balanced assessment of the human condition through matching the effect of the pessimistic Books I and III against the optimistic Books II and IV.⁽⁵¹⁾

There are more tangible traces of the Lucretian pattern. Book III of the Georgics is composed around the life cycle, from birth to death, of the higher animals.⁽⁵²⁾ The first half of the book ends on a high note of warning of the dangers of the passion of love, like Lucretius' Book IV.⁽⁵³⁾ It ends with the account of the animal plague whose shock impact is obviously derived from that in the conclusion of Book VI of Lucretius. Virgil's account of beekeeping also is organised round the natural cycle. It begins with spring and the establishment

of the hive and ends with disease and death of the whole stock.⁽⁵⁴⁾ Finally, it is clearly not a coincidence that the Georgics as a whole, like the De Rerum Natura, open with a description of spring:

Vere novo gelidus canis cum montibus humor
liquitur et zephyro putris se glaeba resolvit⁽⁵⁵⁾

and conclude - or rather reach their highest emotional pitch - on the theme of death in the account of the parting of Orpheus and Eurydice.

Virgil's Georgics no less than Lucretius' De Rerum Natura are set against the background of the universal pattern of growth and decay. But this is only a symptom of the fact that the Georgics in spite of the narrow scope of their ostensible subject, have a universal theme. Book I treats man's relation with earth and the heavens. Book II deals with the plant world. Book III treats of man's dealings with the animal world and his own animal nature. Book IV is concerned with society among the bees and death of bees and men.⁽⁵⁶⁾ Virgil has written his own man-centred De Rerum Natura.

But it was impossible to write systematically about nature or man so soon after Lucretius without taking up an explicit attitude to Lucretius' two great terrors: the gods and death. Virgil took up both themes and his treatment of them can be seen as a highly critical development of the views of his predecessor. As we have seen, Virgil brought the gods back into the world. Jupiter has made the world and at least partly for man's sake. But the gods do little or nothing to interfere with the working of the great mechanism they have created. During the animal plague the gods are remote and unconcerned.⁽⁵⁷⁾ The weather signs are given a 'scientific' explanation.⁽⁵⁸⁾

Yet Virgil recommends worship and he does so in precisely the context in which Lucretius had tried to prove it irrelevant, to save crops from natural disasters.⁽⁵⁹⁾ The fact that Virgil holds a more or less rationalist view of the working of the world does not prevent him from advocating conscientious observation of the traditional practices of religion.⁽⁶⁰⁾ Far from feeling that religion imposes a crushing burden Virgil insists that the ritual adds variety and joy to the farmer's year. Moreover the verses advising what work may be done on festivals remind the reader of that characteristically Roman technique for alleviating the restrictiveness of religious prohibitions by casuistic arguments.⁽⁶¹⁾ The advice nona fugae melior, contraria furtis suggests that religio need not exclude humour.⁽⁶²⁾

The combination of belief in a purposeful world order governed by unchanging rules with adherence to traditional religion and the linking of the two commandments hoc metuens caeli mensis et sidera serva and in primis venerare deos⁽⁶³⁾ is undoubtedly Stoic. Indeed the way in which the farmer is obliged to fit his work into a schedule dictated by natural processes if he is to benefit rather than be ruined by them might be taken as a model of the Stoic view of the human condition: ducunt volentem fata nolentem trahunt.⁽⁶⁴⁾

But if the view is essentially Stoic it represents a form of Stoicism which like Epicureanism stresses the unity of all nature and refuses to exalt the spirit by opposing it to the body.⁽⁶⁵⁾ Man shares courage, passion, spirit, with some of the animals,⁽⁶⁷⁾ he shares social qualities with the bees. On the other hand the quality of pure intelligence is given little scope in the Georgics. The great inventions are made, as in Lucretius' poem, by trial and experience of

ordinary men, (68) not as in Posidonius through the exercise of intelligence by the wise. (69)

Stoic philosophers differed over the fate of the soul after death. (70) Virgil takes a step in the direction of the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. In the lines huc reddi ac resoluta referri/omnia nec morti esse locum, sed viva volare/sideris in numerum (71) he allows the possibility that after death the soul may survive death in the fiery zone of heaven, even if he leaves unclear whether it retains its individuality or mingles with the world soul. But this vague and cautiously expressed statement would seem to represent a hope rather than a belief.

More firmly stated consolation for the fact of death is provided by the thought that a man's family and nation will survive him and that his efforts can contribute to their survival.

Ergo ipsas quamvis angusti terminus aevi excipiat
at genus immortale manet mulosque per annos
stat fortuna domus, et avi numerantur avorum. (72)

Since for Virgil social preoccupations are part of man's nature this thought is a real consolation.

But these two passages do not represent Virgil's final comment on the theme of death in the Georgics. The poem ends with Virgil's own (73) version of the Aristaeus myth and the origin of the Bougonia, the process by which a swarm of bees is spontaneously generated from the decaying carcasses (74) of oxen. The explanation is of no use to the farmer: even if it were practicable it would not be economical. (75) But the Bougonia provides a vivid illustration of the growth of new life from the wreckage of old. It is likely that this is why Virgil has chosen to end his poem in this way. He is restating the lesson that Lucretius saw demonstrated in every spring.

haud igitur penitus pereunt quae cumque videntur
quando alid ex alio reficit natura nec ullam
rem gigni patitur nisi morte adiuta aliena.

Youth and beauty cannot be had without decay and death, and death should therefore be accepted calmly. (76)

This does not mean that Virgil's attitude to death is identical with that of Lucretius. In the first place, of course, not fear of death but the quest for a livelihood is shown to be the central preoccupation of man's life in the Georgics. For Virgil's outlook it is also significant that he has chosen to end his poem not with the triumph of death but with the contemplation of new life. But the fact of death remains tragic and the tragedy cannot be removed by logical argument. Virgil cannot follow Lucretius to his triumphant conclusion.

Nil igitur mors est ad nos neque pertinet hilum (77)

Such agony as that suffered by Orpheus and Eurydice is not a 'straw' and it cannot be avoided by any proof of the mortality of the soul no matter how cogent.

(Berlin 1959).

19. In the stimulating but a little overschematic paper of R. Minadeo, the Formal Design of De Rerum Natura, Arion IV (1965), 444-61.
20. 5, 1350-1457.
21. 5, 1241-1349.
22. 5, 1412-35; 1276-80; 1276-1280.
23. 4, 1058 ff.
24. Atoms of many kinds 2, 398-477; 589-99. Atoms hostile to life 6, 775-839; 1090 ad fin.
25. 2, 1105-1130; 5, 416-508.
26. 2, 1131-74; 5, 235-415.
27. 3, 425 ff; 670-823.
28. The extreme case: 5, 1308-49 (the use of animals in war). This is admitted to be unhistorical: 1340-41, but is nevertheless used to drive home the destructiveness of the inventions of discordia.
29. cf. R. Minadeo o.c. This contrast in tone is striking even though the book endings are not in other respects composed to balance the proemia.
30. I take spring and Venus to symbolize the constructive phase, Mars the destructive phase. The personifications make the picture more expressive but from the Epicurean point of view misleading. Similarly when Lucretius used the image of strife among the atoms - see above note 7, - he used an Empedoclean concept figuratively, without for a moment accepting its literal truth.
31. 6, 1138 ad fin.
32. Bibliography in R. D. Williams, Virgil, 14-22. Greece and Rome, New surveys in the Classics No. I.
33. Geor. 2, 490 ff.
34. Geor. 1, 121 ff; 199 ff.
35. cf. Lucr. 5, 207 and Geor. 1, 198; Lucr. 5, 209 and Geor. 1, 41; 45; Lucr. 5, 213 and Geor. 1, 197; Lucr. 2, 1158 and Geor. 1, 127.
36. Geor. 1, 121-4. P. Wilkinson, Virgil's Theodicy c.q. XIII (1963), 75-84.
37. Geor. 1, 231 ff. esp. 238, contrast Lucr. 5, 200.
Geor. 1, 351 ff. Aratus supplements Lucretius.
38. Geor. 2, 336-8.

39. cf. Geor. 2, 323-45 and Lucr. 1, 250-64; 5, 782-3; 787; 816-19; 925-6; 1214.
40. Geor. 2, 345 caeli indulgentia; see Richter o.c. on Geor. 1, 343.
41. Geor. 2, 467-474; 513-40.
42. Ibid. 461-66; 495-512. The implied criticism of contemporary society also recalls Lucr. 2, 11-13; 24-28; 34-38; 3, 59-86; 5, 1113-35.
43. Geor. 2, 467 at secura quies et nescia fallere vita;
ibid. 486 flumina amem silvasque inglorius;
ibid. 495 ff. illum non populi fasces non purpura regnum/flexit.
44. ibid. 470 mollesque sub arbore somni; 489
ingenti ramorum protegat umbra; cf. Lucr. 2, 30; 5, 1393.
45. I. S. Ryberg, T.A.P.A. LXXXIX (1958), 112-31.
P. Wilkinson o.c.
46. Geor. 2, 513 ff.
47. Brooks Otis, o.c. 184 ff.
48. Geor. 4, 219-21.
49. Eg. Cic. Rep. 1, 1 ff., Fin. 2, 60 ff. 74.
50. Eg. 2, 302 ff. (fire in the olive plantation), ibid. 539-40 war filled present recalled at end of golden age.
51. Brooks Otis o.c. 151 ff.
52. My paper Greece and Rome XII (1965), 64-77.
53. Geor. 3, 242-83.
54. Geor. 4, 51 ff; 235 ff. The bougonia takes place in spring 4,305 ff.
55. Geor. 1, 43-4.
56. On doctrine of hierarchy of living things.
Varro in Aug. CD 7, 23, 21 ff; Cic. Tusc. 1, 56;
Fin 5, 13-14; N.D. 2, 12-3.
57. Geor. 3, 525-8; 455-6; 486-93; 531-3.
58. Geor. 1, 415-23. Is this Stoic (Cic. Div. 1, 126 ff.) or anti-Stoic (ibid. 120)? cf. Richter o.c.

59. Geor. 1, 338-50. The description of the storm 313-34 contains much Lucretian material, cf. Merrill o.c., 222. Also its general character recalls Lucr. 1, 275 ff; 5, 1219 ff; 6, 246. Lucretius points out irrelevance of prayer in this situation 6,48 ff; 5, 1218 ff.
60. Geor. 2, 380 ff. On mixture of Greek and Roman rites Richter o.c. 238-41.
61. Geor. 1, 268 ff. Richter o.c. 155-6.
62. Geor. 1, 286. cf. Liv., 10, 42, 7.
63. Geor. 1, 335; 338.
64. Sen. ep. 107, 11.
65. E. Caird cited by C. Bailey, Phases in the religion of Ancient Rome (Oxford 1932), p.230.
66. Geor. 4, 221 deum namque ire per omnia/terrasque ...
67. See my o.c. n. 52 above.
68. Geor. 1, 133 ut varias usus meditando extunderet artis/paulatim;
ibid. 145 labor omnia vicit
improbis et duris urgens in rebus egestas.
ibid. 4, 326 mortalem honorem,
quem mihi vix frugum et pecorum custodia sollers
omnia temptanti extulerat.
cf. Lucr. 5, 1448 ad fin. illustrated by 5, 1240 ff; 1360 ff; 1379 ff.
69. Sen. ep. 90, 5 ff; cf. Cicero on philosophy: Tusc. 5, 5; De Or. 1, 3 and on human reason: Inv 1, 2; N.D. 2, 34.
70. F. Cumont, Afterlife in Roman Paganism, 1923, 13-14. Panaetius denied personal survival: Cic. Tusc. 1, 79.
71. Geor. 4, 225-7.
72. ibid. 206-9.
73. On this and the whole finale, see Klingner o.c, 196-39 = Virgil, 326-63.
74. Geor. 4, 295 ff; 440 ff.
75. Col. 9,14,6.
76. Lucr. 1, 262-4.

77. ibid., 3, 830.

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SOMETHING ODD ABOUT VIRGIL

A lecture delivered to the Virgil Society
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The recent revised edition of the late W. F. Jackson Knight's Virgil's Troy and Cumaean Gates under the comprehensive title of Vergil, Epic and Anthropology (1967) has been to me not only a sad reminder that fugit interea fugit irreparabile tempus, but of a time when I was much influenced by the exciting parallels observed between the religious beliefs of non-European cultures and the events of the second and sixth books of the Aeneid. Temes Savsap, the Malekulan underworld daemon appeared to have much in common with the Sibyl, while the journey of Aeneas had marked affinities with the Sumerian saga of Gilgamesh, or so it seemed to me. Later I was saddened to learn that not everyone was as sanguine as Jackson Knight, and that few scholars were prepared to set much store even by the revelations of Frazer's Golden Bough or the learned excursions of A. B. Cook on such fascinating topics as oak-kings and woodpeckers. When I put it to someone whose opinion I valued that there must be good reason why people were for ever prying into Virgil's psychic and religious background he said that he suspected that there was something odd about him. Well, is there anything odd about Virgil's poetry? And if there is, and of course not everyone would agree that there is, in what particular facet or feature does it lie? What in fact does one mean by venturing to call Virgil odd? What indeed would one mean by calling any poet odd, much less an epic poet of Virgil's stature? Few, I imagine, would wish to claim that there was anything particularly odd about Homer, apart, that is, from the Homeric question. Neither is there anything particularly queer about Hesiod, although Mr. West has drawn attention to some curious ellipses in the Theogony (M. L. West, Hesiod Theogony, 1966, 161-2) or in fact any of the major epic poets right down to Apollonius, and of course it would be odd if there were, for epic leans by definition towards orthodoxy and tradition. The Greek dramatists, it is true, may on occasion have treated odd themes, but this is not the same thing as claiming that there was anything odd about them, at least in the sense in which I intend to employ the term. The sole exception, of course, is Pindar whose curious mingling of sublimity with obliquity is at times reminiscent of Virgil. Coming down to Roman times no-one I suppose would be prepared to maintain that there was anything odd about Virgil's friend and contemporary Horace. Lucretius again may have been driven to despair and finally committed suicide, but there is singularly little that one would describe as odd about the De Rerum Natura. It is true that the end of the fourth book is sometimes regarded as unduly salacious, but hardly in any way strange. To go further back, Ennius is usually straightforward enough,