

BOOK REVIEW

Ennius Noster: Lucretius and the Annales. By JASON S. NETHERCUT. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. x + 260. Hardback, \$99.00. ISBN: 978-0-197-51769-7.

In this book, Nethercut examines the reception of Ennius' *Annales* in Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* (*DRN*). I commend Nethercut both for thinking about polemical allusion at the macro-scale and for several original, insightful readings. The book, however, is not without its problems.¹

In the introduction, Nethercut sets out his thesis squarely (2), arguing that Lucretius alludes to Ennius' *Annales* to dismantle the Ennian thought-world that privileges teleological history and the importance of the Romans within that history. Nethercut suggests that Lucretius polemically alludes to what we might call Ennian metaphysics because Ennius' vision of nature is incongruent with Epicurean truth. Nethercut homes in on five markers of Ennian style in Lucretius and argues that Lucretius creates "clusters" and "anti-clusters" (i.e., the absence of Ennian stylistic markers) of Ennianisms throughout the *DRN*. We are told that Lucretius clusters "when he wants us to read a passage with Ennius in mind" (10); similarly, anti-clusters are pregnant with meaning since the reader reflects on the absence of Ennianisms in anti-cluster passages.

In his first chapter, Nethercut confronts the wide-spread assumption that Republican epic poets developed their poetry with deference to Ennian aesthetic principles and that Lucretius' didactic poem follows this trend. He argues that scholars have been too quick to accept Friedrich Leo's pronouncements regarding the degree to which Republican epicists imitated Ennius and, thereafter, examines passages in which Roman Republican authors employ Ennianisms. Nethercut uncovers a tradition of *aemulatio* rather than of *imitatio*, observing that poets such as Accius, Furius and Cicero employ Ennianisms for the sake of, for example, parodying Ennius, capping Ennius and appropriating Ennius's ideological value, rather than for the sake of aping Ennius. This is an important chapter.

¹The length of this review requires that I be selective in the discussion that follows.

In his second chapter, Nethercut homes in on the manner in which Lucretius responds to Ennius as a “natural philosopher” (45). He builds argument on the presupposition that Lucretius titled his poem *De Rerum Natura* (45), but we do not know that Lucretius titled his poem thusly.² Following Conte, Nethercut reads *DRN* 1.66-67 in relation to *Il.* 17.166-167, but I do not think that one should do so;³ nor do I find his suggestion (50-53) that Lucretius constructs Epicurus at 1.72-74 as Odysseus-like compelling.⁴ Thereafter, Nethercut shows how Lucretius polemically alludes to Ennius’ cosmic triad (i.e., earth, sea and sky), divine machinery and other natural phenomena so as to deprecate the Ennian vision of *natura*. He shifts his focus in the final section of the chapter, arguing that Lucretius dismantles both Ennius’ positioning of Rome as being at the center of the cosmos and Ennius’ conceptualization of Rome as being in certain respects, coextensive with the cosmos.⁵ This chapter contains several thoughtful readings.

In his third chapter, Nethercut argues that “Lucretius alludes time and again to historical episodes and personalities in Ennius’ *Annales* that would appear to valorize Roman hegemony and exemplarity, only to strip them of whatever value these elements may have had in their Ennian context” (77), and he also submits that Lucretius has a “disdain for history” (79). In favor of the second argument, he cites 3.830-869. The Punic War is used in that passage, however, in relation to the so-called symmetry argument (used in relation to the idea that no-harm comes to the subject after death).⁶ Lucretius is making the argument that human experience, or rather non-experience, will be the same after death as it was before birth (cf. l. 840); thus, the passage provides no evidence that Lucretius has a

² For discussion, see Bailey, C., *Titi Lucreti Cari De Rerum Natura* (Oxford, 1947), 583.

³ The Greek *tlao* and Latin *audeo* are not here congruent. Homer/Glaucus is using *tlao* to denote forbearance whereas Lucretius uses *audeo* to denote boldness. Nor does Lucretius fashion Epicurus as a coward, the topic for which Glaucus reproaches Hector (Epicurus’ supposed doublet).

⁴ Odysseus was wandering unwillingly (*Od.* 1.1-2, 68-69). Nethercut, I think, should have positioned his interpretation of Epicurus in relation to competing readings of Epicurus in this passage (e.g., as a military campaigner [e.g., Brown, P. *Lucretius. De Rerum Natura* 1 (London, 1984), 57] and as a Promethean freedom fighter [e.g., O’Rourke, D. “Infinity, Enclosure and False Closure in Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*,” in D. O’Rourke (ed.) *Approaches to Lucretius: Traditions and Innovations in Reading the De Rerum Natura* (Cambridge, 2020) 103-123, at 108-109]).

⁵ Lucretius does not figure himself as a Fetial priest at 1.968-983 (contra Nethercut 72, 75); note *quis* (l. 969). Moreover, it is not obvious that Lucretius seeks to activate associations with a Fetial priest; cf., e.g., Bailey (fn. 2), 767 (whom Nethercut cites misleadingly). I think that Nethercut, in interpreting this passage, has been too quick to fall in line with the interpretation of others.

⁶ On the symmetry argument, see, e.g., Warren, J., *Facing Death: Epicurus and his Critics* (Oxford, 2004) 57-108.

“disdain for history.” Nor, I think, is Nethercut correct to say that Lucretius is making an argument “that the past does not affect the present” (86): it is a cornerstone of Epicurean doctrine that the past may powerfully affect the present, as pleasure, for example, may be taken in recollection of past events (Diogenes Laertius 10.22). Thereafter, Nethercut suggests that “[I]n Lucretius’ hands, Ennius’ Pyrrhus is primarily presented as an example of anti-Epicurean religiosity” (99). Having discussed Lucretius’ engagement with Ennius in the Anthropology, Nethercut concludes that Lucretius presents “his vision of the past as an alternative to the Ennian past” (106), and he provides an insightful discussion of warfare imagery. Nethercut concludes his chapter thoughtfully, suggesting that “It may be that Lucretius specifically targeted Ennius’ *Annales*... because the ideas that it contained about political *exempla* and the inevitability of Roman hegemony were particularly influential among the Roman elite of the first century BCE” (113). In this chapter, I found Nethercut’s arguments regarding Lucretius’ engagement with Ennius’ vision of Roman exceptionalism more compelling than his arguments regarding Lucretius’ relationship to history.

The final chapter is dedicated to poetics, and I think that its argument is unsound. Nethercut argues that Lucretius creates a “flaw” by doing Epicurean philosophy in poetic form. He cites Diogenes Laertius 10.121 in support of “Epicurus’ hostility to poetry” (115, fn1), but that passage does not provide evidence for Epicurus being hostile to poetry.⁷ He also suggests that the proem to Book 1, with Venus, is an instantiation of Lucretius’ “flaw;” but Venus serves as a metaphor at the beginning of the poem, as scholars have observed,⁸ and thus provides no flaw in Lucretius’ construction of Epicurean *physiologia*. Moreover, Nethercut develops a reading of l. 117-1.126, claiming that we need to reevaluate the claims that Lucretius makes about his relationship to Ennius and Homer therein (120). I note, however, that Lucretius makes no claim to a relationship between himself,

⁷ On Epicurus and poetry, see, with reference to further bibliography, O’Hara, J., *Inconsistency in Roman Epic: Studies in Catullus, Lucretius, Vergil, Ovid and Lucan* (Cambridge, 2007), 65; Morrison, A., “Arguing Over Text(s): Master-Texts vs. Intertexts in the Criticism of Lucretius,” in O’Rourke 2020 (fn. 4) 157-176, at 157-158.

⁸ e.g. Asmis, E., “Lucretius’ Venus and Stoic Zeus,” *Hermes* 110 (1982) 458-70, at 469; Erler, M., “Physics and Therapy: Meditative Elements in Lucretius’ *De rerum natura*,” in K. Algra, K. Koenen and P. Schrijvers, eds., *Lucretius and his Intellectual Background*, Amsterdam, 1997) 79-92, at 90. On the denotation(s) of Venus in the proem, see now Eckerman, C., “Venus, Empedocles, and Epicureanism: Polemical Allusion at Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura* 1.1-9,” *Eranoz*, forthcoming.

Ennius and Homer in the passage cited by Nethercut (please, dear reader, (re)read the passage for yourself); thus, we need not countenance the argument that Nethercut develops regarding supposed literary affiliation in that passage. Thereafter, he suggests that Lucretius attacks the concept of literary tradition as referenced in Ennius' use of the noun *cor*.⁹ The chapter closes with discussion of water imagery in the *DRN*, and Nethercut submits that Lucretius uses water to represent the literary tradition. Nethercut's reading of water as literary tradition, however, oversimplifies, I think, the complexity of water as a metapoetic metaphor in Greco-Roman poetics.¹⁰ Nethercut concludes the chapter by suggesting that Lucretius seeks "to eradicate the possibility of literary influence" (145); I am not persuaded that he does so.

CHRIS ECKERMAN

University of Oregon, eckerman@uoregon.edu

⁹ Nethercut asserts (131-133) that Lucretius places the *animus* within the *cor*, but this is not well argued. On this topic, see, e.g., Bailey (fn. 2), 848-849.

¹⁰ Water, for example, is regularly the song/poetry itself. Cf. Hubbard, T., *The Pindaric Mind: A Study of Logical Structure in Early Greek Poetry* (Leiden, 1985), 154-155.