Lucretius and *De Rerum Natura*: Appreciation and Appraisal

I The Man

Rome was the birthplace of Lucretius. This fact in itself is not surprising, but it becomes more significant when we reflect that very few of the immortals of Latin letters were Romans by birth. The Rome of Lucretius was that of the Republic. In the divisions of Latin literature the time of the Republic holds an important place, for during the centuries between 245 and 30 B.C. Roman letters had their beginnings, and progressed far enough to prove worthy to succeed if not supersede Greek literature, of the later period. Where Greek literature declined, Latin literature took the ascendant. Republican Latin bristles with the names of Ennius, father of Latin poetry; Cato, the eloquent censor, founder of Latin prose; Plautus and Terence, delighting their hearers with fully Latinized reproductions of later Greek comedy; Cicero, Rome’s greatest man of letters; Caesar, greatest of all her sons, rich in achievement with the sword and a writer of merit; Catullus, enchanting lyric poet of the inner shrine; not to mention Lucilius, the satirist, Horace’s fore-runner, and Varro the voluminous writer of Menippean satires and romance. In this galaxy shines Lucretius. His immediate contemporaries were Caesar, Catullus and Cicero, each one of whom has gained distinct recognition in a chosen field of letters. That Lucretius has failed to find the recognition he well deserves, may be due to these two facts, that his appeal is less universal than that of Catullus, for example, and his philosophy less acceptable than that which Cicero champions. To those to whom Lucretius has appealed he has shown himself as poet, as philosopher