VI.—Epicurean *Contubernium*

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Early persecutions and chronic ill-health are insufficient to account for the non-political or quietistic character of Epicurean doctrines. From the first there was an element of mystic fellowship in the school. The bond of union was love and the goal a new disposition amenable to a specific discipline. Communicants were required to receive and to administer correction with frankness, firmness and good humor. The Greek term *συνδιαγωγή* was rendered *contubernium* in silver Latin, earlier by *consuetudo*, *convictus*, or the like. Frequent mention by Cicero attests the familiarity of the idea. Tacitus employs the phrase *felix contubernium* of Vergil and his friends, which throws a new light on Augustan relationships.

In the Phaeacian episode of the *Odyssey* is a very hedonistic passage beginning:

> οὐ γὰρ ἐγώ γέ τί φημι τέλος χαριέστερον εἶναι
> ἢ ὅτ' εὐφροσύνη μὲν ἔχῃ κ.τ.λ. (9.5–11)

On this text, there is evidence to show, hinged one of the earliest controversies of Epicurus with his opponents.[1] He employed it to prove that pleasure was a *telos*. Since this was the ancient equivalent of quoting the Bible in support of evolution, a proceeding certain to be construed as offensive to conventional morality, it was inevitable that his school should be drawn into disrepute, incurring probably the customary charge of impiety. The consequence of this and other offences was the forced migration of the young sect to Lampsacus, presumably under pressure exerted by the Greek *censor morum*, the gymnasiarch.[2]

While the doctrines and practices of the school at this early date were no doubt imperfectly elaborated, it is certain that women were already being admitted to the fellowship. It was one of these, the well known hetaera Leontion, who,

[1] Recent discussion by Ettore Bignone, *L'Aristotele Perduto e la Formazione Filosofica di Epicuro* (La Nuova Italia, Firenze, 1936), I 291ff.

[2] Bignone, *op. cit.* II 112–143, esp. 116–121.

probably through her influence with Lamia, the notorious mistress of Demetrius Poliorcetes, seems to have secured toleration or protection for the school in Lampsacus.[3] To effect this end she made a journey and communicated the news of her success by letter; to enemies of Epicurus we are indebted for an excerpt from his reply.[4] He was also taunted, it seems, with owing his protection to a lady and replied, we may infer, in the words of *Ratae Sententiae* vi: "To feel secure from the attacks of men is a good according to Nature, no matter by whose agency one is able to obtain this protection."

While the admission of women, if nothing else, justifies us in assuming that the school was non-political in its teaching from the first, the expulsion from Mytilene must have strongly confirmed the founder in pursuing this policy. The procedure followed upon the subsequent removal to Athens makes this very plain. So far from essaying to teach in such haunts of the young men as the Academy or Lyceum, both of which were virtually public parks, Epicurus purchased a small garden in an inexpensive neighborhood, as may be inferred from the price, 80 minae, which was less than Gorgias charged for a single course of lessons.[5] As an adjunct to the garden a small house was acquired, which Cicero specifically mentions.[6] Moreover, the school deliberately secluded itself and the leaders made no public appearances. We are expressly informed that they remained practically unknown in Greece.[7] Possibly the painful experiences of the early years in Mytilene were taken much to heart.

The influence of circumstances, however, and the troubled character of the times are insufficient by themselves to account for the non-political teaching of Epicureanism. Moreover, the school was not merely non-political; from the very beginning there was something in it akin to the Pythagorean cult

[3] *Ib.* 134–143.

[4] Diog. *Vita* 5.

[5] Diog. *Vita* 10; Diodor. 12.53.2.

[6] *De Fin.* 1.20.65; cf. *N.D.* 1.120.

[7] Seneca *Ep.* 79.15f.

of friendship or even to Orphism. To illustrate: the young Timocrates, brother of Metrodorus, who deserted Epicurus while the school was still in Mytilene, wrote "that he had with difficulty escaped from that mystic fellowship." [8] In the disposition and mentality of the founder there was doubtless something that inclined him in this direction, and the factor of ill-health must be allowed exceptional weight. The family was not robust and the younger brothers were not long-lived. The malady of Epicurus himself was afterwards diagnosed as stone in the bladder, which renders all bodily movement extremely painful. Consequently he spent much of his life on a couch, which contrasts strangely with Aristotle's habit of walking back and forth while lecturing. The school of Epicurus was anything but peripatetic; it was rather a clinic, with the patient doing the demonstrating, fully aware of the power of suffering to elicit loyalty and sympathy. Ill-health was deliberately and skilfully capitalized.[9]

Proof of this is afforded by the fact that Epicurus never exacted fees after the fashion of the sophists but accepted contributions as tokens of gratitude for guidance in the path of wisdom.[10] Thus the possession of money was no more a requirement for admission than the lack of it was an obstacle. The prime requisite was a willingness to submit oneself to the voluntary discipline of the brotherhood, the bond of union being mutual affection, φιλία, which Roman writers narrowed materially by rendering it *amicitia*. The expectation was that the initiate would gain a new disposition, διάθεσις, amenable to correction by leaders and fellow-disciples.[11] This experience approximates to what Christians call conversion, just as the mystic common life resembles Christian fellowship. In this connection few will fail to recall the joyful farewell to the forum and the rhetoricians, voiced by Vergil in *Cata-*

[8] *Vita* 6: τὴν μυστικὴν ἐκείνην συνδιαγωγήν.

[9] Seneca, *Ep.* 20.9.

[10] Philodemus περὶ παρρησίας, fr. 55 and note. Olivieri, Teubner, 1914.

[11] Assumed throughout by Philodemus, *op. cit.*; DeWitt, *Cl. Phil.* xxxi (1936), 205–211.

lepton 5, who looks forward to the new life of peace and quiet in the school of the Epicurean Siro like a Christian neophyte forsaking the cares of the world for the joy of the knowledge of salvation. Moreover, none will fail to recall the truly evangelical zeal of Lucretius.

This fervor, however, is for disciples only. Epicurus himself, as becomes a founder, was less emotional, though fully aware of the value of association as distinct from instruction. According to a testimony preserved by Seneca he divided his adherents into three classes: (1) those who were capable of arriving at the truth without the help of others; (2) those who stood in need of instruction and made good followers; (3) those who did not require a leader so much as a driver.[12]

If this text were unsupported, it would be easy to fall into the error of failing to refer it to the Epicurean concept of fellowship. Fortunately we possess at least two documents which clearly define the nature of this fellowship and the way it functioned to exert pressure upon disciples. The first of these documents is the περὶ παρρησίας of Philodemus, which, by comparison with other Herculanean rolls, is well preserved. Since two articles on this topic have recently appeared in *Classical Philology*, interested readers may consult the same.[13] Here it will suffice to say that the system consisted in continuous correction of faults, conducted unsparingly but always with good humor and with a single-minded concern for the good of the person corrected. It may be added that one who knowingly allowed another to continue in a fault was considered to be no true friend.

The second document is No. 41 of the *Sententiae Vaticanae*, which, though the text is sound, has never yet been correctly translated nor recognized as a text bearing upon Epicurean *contubernium*. The reason for this, it is worth while to point out, is not only the fact that the passage is an excerpt from some unidentified treatise, and so rendered obscure by lack of context, but still more our inadequate understanding of

[12] Seneca, *Ep.* 52.3f; cf. 6.6.

[13] Vol. xxx (1935), 312–319; xxxi (1936), 205–211.

the practical ethics of the Epicureans. While the *Physics* and the *Canon* have received all the attention they deserve, the evidences for the *Ethics* are still imperfectly assembled and digested. Consequently, many of the extant sayings have been misconstrued even by so competent a scholar as Usener, whom subsequent investigators have followed with undue deference.

The statement in question may be translated as follows: "All at the same time we must laugh and practice our philosophy, applying it in our own households, taking advantage of our other intimacies to this end, and under no circumstances whatever falter in making our utterances consistent with the true philosophy." [14]

This injunction and the essay of Philodemus differ in this respect, that the former has application to lay members of the sect while the latter lays down specific procedures for resident members of a school. This is not the place to enlarge upon either, but it may be pointed out that the Epicurean ideal for the layman was manifestly a combination of *suavitas* or *comitas* with *severitas*. For this combination Cornelius Nepos makes a just claim in the case of Atticus,[15] and very little reflection will convince one that the ethics of Horace may be fairly and aptly described in similar terms. In one and the same ode he would combine frank reproof with kindly encomium.[16]

Since the topic of Roman Epicureanism has been broached, it may be mentioned that the use of the term *contubernium* to render *συνδιαγωγή* belongs to silver Latinity.[17] Under the Republic this word was restricted to denote the cohabitation of slaves and the use of common quarters by soldiers in service. It was possibly a specialized military usage, denoting the

[14] Bailey (*Epicurus*, Oxford, 1926) translates *οἰκειώμασι* 'faculties,' for which he quotes no parallel; *τοῖς λοιποῖς οἰκειώμασι* implies that 'intimacies of the household' must be read into *οἰκονομεῖν*.

[15] *Vita* 15.

[16] DeWitt, *Cl. Phil.* xxx (1935), 312–319.

[17] Suet. *Aug.* 89; *Tiber.* 14, 56.

quartering of a young soldier in the general's tent,[18] with a view to imparting knowledge of the art of war, that justified its transference to the sphere of ethics and philosophy.

In Cicero's Latinity various words of less specific import are employed to convey the same idea, such as *consuetudo*, *convictus*, and *vita communis*, and the recognition of this fact enables us to demonstrate that Roman laymen of Epicurean sympathies frequently played with the idea of ethical fellowship. For example, Cicero in 55 B.C., humoring the Epicurean Marcus Marius, writes: Quod si tam facilem populum haberem quam Aesopus habuit, libenter me hercule artem desinerem *tecumque et cum similibus nostri viverem.*[19]

Again, in 45 B.C. the Epicurean Lucius Lucceius, condoling with Cicero on the death of Tullia, makes a characteristic proposal: . . . gratia contendimus et rogando . . . ut istis te molestiis laxes et *ad convictum nostrum* redeas atque *ad consuetudinem vel nostram communem* vel tuam solius et propriam.[20] In reply to this, Cicero, humoring the writer as he had humored Marius, writes: Tecum vivere possem equidem et maxime vellem. Further along in the same letter he continues: omne tempus una fuissemus, neque me valetudo tua offenderet neque te maeror meus.[21] In these passages, in spite of the fact that he was only half-sincere, Cicero allows us to recognize that Epicureans continually thought of *contubernium*, and it may even be ventured as a suggestion that in the period immediately preceding the death of Tullia he came rather near to throwing in his lot with Epicureanism. There is one letter that can hardly be explained on any other hypothesis.[22] The death of Tullia, however, resulted in a violent revulsion of feeling, hinging primarily on the problem of the immortality of the soul. The consequence was that

[18] Sall. *Iug.* 64.4; Cic. *Planc.* 11.27; *Cael.* 30.73.

[19] *Ad Fam.* 7.1.4.

[20] *Ad. Fam.* 5.14.3.

[21] *Ib.* 5.15.2 and 5.

[22] In *ad Att.* 12.2, if βεβίωται is read with terminative force, the rest of the letter becomes a puzzle; it is better to supply εὖ in the Epicurean sense just as *bene* in Horace, *Od.* 3.29.42f: cui licet in diem dixisse, Vixi.

what literary leisure remained to him was spent in demolishing the philosophical foundations of Epicureanism.

It was in the years preceding Tullia's death that Cicero's intimacy with known Epicureans such as Hirtius and Pansa was at its peak. Among these was Publius Volumnius Eutrapelus, who, as his cognomen reminds us, like Papirius Paetus, followed the injunction "Laugh while you philosophize." To him Cicero wrote in 46 B.C.: Mihi enim iudicatum est . . . me totum in litteras abdere tecumque et cum ceteris earum studiosis *honestissimo otio perfrui.*[23] The interest of this phrase is partly in reminding us to what a degree the Latin *otium* had come to be colored by association with Epicurean ἀπονία and ἀταραξία. In many a passage of Horace the full meaning will be overlooked unless this association has been set up,[24] but the injection of the new significance into the old term had taken place well before his time.

One would do well to recall to mind Cicero's phrase *honestissimo otio perfrui* and then read the testimony of Probus concerning Vergil: Vixit pluribus annis *liberali in otio*, secutus Epicuri sectam, insigni concordia et familiaritate usus Quintili, Tuccae et Vari.[25] Alongside of this, in turn, one should place the statement of Cicero written in 45 B.C.: At vero Epicurus una in domo, et ea quidem angusta, quam magnos quantaque amoris conspiratione consentientes tenuit amicorum greges, *quod fit etiam nunc ab Epicureis.*[26] It is far from impossible that this statement is a specific reference to the withdrawal of Siro, whom Cicero knew well, and his school to Naples. Elsewhere we have proposed the hypothesis that the retirement of Vergil mentioned by Probus belongs to this time.[27] Now that we have demonstrated how frequent during this epoch was the thought of the non-political life in the fellowship of congenial friends, we hope that our hypothesis may seem definitely more plausible than before.

[23] *Ad Fam.* 7.33.2.

[24] Esp. *Od.* 2.16.

[25] *Vita*, Diehl, p. 43; Blummer, p. 73.

[26] *De Fin.* 1.20.65.

[27] Virgil's *Biographia Litteraria*, Macmillan, 1922, pp. 36–46.

Very welcome in this connection is a morsel of confirmatory evidence from Tacitus, who has the following to say in comparing the lives of poets and orators: Ac ne fortunam quidem vatum et *illud felix contubernium* comparare timuerim cum inquieta et anxia oratorum vita.[28] The force of this is illuminated by what follows at the interval of a single line: malo securum et quietum Vergilii secessum. The closeness of this sequence renders it manifest that Tacitus was not thinking of a solitary retirement on the part of the poet but of his withdrawal into a fellowship such as Probus specifies.

Tacitus stood close to the Augustans and he knew their secrets. The living tradition of that fruitful epoch was still vigorous and the written records unimpaired. It was easy for him to discern, because he was vitally interested, the magnitude of the debt that Vergil and Horace owed to the searching and unsparing criticism of their companions in the fellowship of letters. When he read of the "stark truthfulness" of Quintilius in the memorial ode of Horace,[29] this phrase would have seemed to him no vague encomium, but definite praise of that quality and habit of unsparing outspokenness to which Horace himself bears witness in the *Ars Poetica*.[30] Latin *veritas* is Epicurean παρρησία.

This concept of Epicurean *contubernium*, transferred to the literary life after the example of Tacitus, now renders feasible a new appraisal of the Augustans. Their circle may be defined as a hybrid product, carrying on a republican literary tradition with an organization and methodology borrowed from Epicurean ethics. The organization, though informal, was distinctly exclusive, as *Satire* 1.9 sets forth; the prerequisites of admission were virtually genius and honesty. Internally it was a true fellowship, a *felix contubernium*. Being restricted in numbers, its standards could be set exceptionally high, a fact which inevitably threw it into conflict with Spurius

[28] *Dialogus* 13.

[29] 1.24.7.

[30] 438–444.

Maecius Tarpa and the *Collegium Poetarum*, custodians of the long officially recognized tradition of letters.[31] From the standpoint of the *Collegium* the Augustans were outlaws with a rival and much envied organization of their own. This accounts in part for the feud between Horace and the schoolmasters and for an unbroken tradition of anti-Vergilianism down to the fourth century.[32]

[31] *Sat.* 1.10.37–39; *Ep.* 1.19.35–40.

[32] Collins, *The Interpretation of Vergil* (Blackwell, 1909), esp. p. 13 bottom, and 14.