

**Guido MILANESE (a cura di), *L'Epicuro di Bignone cent'anni dopo*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2023, 141 pp., ISBN 978-88-343-5147-5.**

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the “rediscovery” of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Italian scholars of antiquity, recognizing them as profound philosophers. This trend is evidenced by the reprinting of collected works or representative texts by influential figures, including – but not limited to – Carlo Diano, Diego Lanza, Gabriele Giannantoni, Giovanni Pugliese Carratelli, Giuseppe Rensi, Guido Calogero, and Mario Vegetti<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, various recent monographs or edited volumes reconstruct the philosophies of these Italian scholars, such as *La bandiera di Socrate* of Emidio Spinelli and Franco Trabattoni, *Momenti di filosofia italiana* by Federica Pazzelli and Francesco Verde, and *Le radici del passato* by the same Spinelli<sup>2</sup>. The collection of essays here under review can be read as another symptom of this process of “rediscovery” and provides valuable insights into Ettore Bignone (1879-1953), both as a philosopher and as a specialist of Epicureanism.

The title *L'Epicuro di Bignone cent'anni dopo* is explained by its editor Guido Milanese in the brief preface. In 1920, Ettore Bignone (from now on EB) published the volume *Epicuro*. This represented the first-ever translation with commentary of Epicurus' three major letters (*Herodotus*, *Pythocles*, *Menoceus*), the *Ratae sententiae*, the moral maxims found in the *Gnomologium Vaticanum Epicureum*, literary evidence on the life of the philosopher, and a selection of fragments from the collection of Hermann Usener's *Epicurea* (1887), with 70 new additions<sup>3</sup>, although it lacked a renovated edition of the Greek originals. In 2020, namely «cent'anni dopo» or *Un secolo dopo*, to echo Milanese's own contribution

---

<sup>1</sup> See for instance: A. Brancacci (a cura di), *Guido Calogero: Eros e dialettica in Platone*, Milano-Udine 2021; N. Emery (a cura di), *Giuseppe Rensi: Lineamenti di filosofia scettica*, Roma 2021; E. Spinelli, F. Verde (a cura di), *Gabriele Giannantoni: Che cosa ha veramente detto Socrate?*, Napoli 2022; F. Diano (a cura di), *Carlo Diano: Opere*, con contributi di M. Cacciari e S. Tagliagambe, Milano 2022; G. Ugolini (a cura di), *Diego Lanza: Nous e thanatos. Scritti su Anassagora e sulla filosofia antica*, Pistoia 2022; V. Damiani (a cura di), *Mario Vegetti: La medicina in Platone*, Pistoia 2023; F. Verde (a cura di), *Giovanni Pugliese Carratelli: Principii della filosofia greca. La nascita della filosofia*, Napoli 2023.

<sup>2</sup> E. Spinelli, F. Trabattoni (a cura di), *La bandiera di Socrate. Momenti di storiografia filosofica italiana nel Novecento*, Roma 2016; F. Pazzelli, F. Verde (a cura di), *Momenti di filosofia italiana*, Roma 2020 [ed. or. «Syzetesis» 7, 2020, 7-324]; E. Spinelli, *Le radici del passato. Giuseppe Rensi interprete degli scetticismi antichi*, Pisa 2021.

<sup>3</sup> H. Usener (ed.), *Epicurea*, Lipsiae 1887; E. Bignone (a cura di), *Epicuro: Opere, frammenti, testimonianze sulla sua vita*, Bari 1920.



to the collection which provides a useful summary of the early reception of the book (1-12), it was organized a seminar in Brescia to commemorate EB's scholarly achievement. This event featured Andrea Balbo, Giovanni Indelli, and Nicola Pace. The subsequent publication of its proceedings welcomed additional essays from Sonia Francisetti Brolin, Francesca Longo Auricchio, and Lisa Piazzzi.

It should be emphasized that this collection stands as the first and thus far only monographic study on EB's personality and activity. Even the 1959 book *Epicurea in memoriam Hectoris Bignone*<sup>4</sup> is more celebratory compilation of essays on antiquity rather than an in-depth analysis of the Italian scholar. Prior to Milanese's collection, only short articles had attempted to delve into the subject, conveniently cataloged in the final bibliography (127-140). Incidentally, a missed opportunity in this section is an updated inventory of EB's chronological contributions to Epicurus and Epicureanism, that would have replaced the previous survey by Maria Rosa Posani, or at least reprinted the references from the aforementioned celebratory compilation<sup>5</sup>. These lists are difficult to find and incomplete, as some contributors have noted (see especially Francisetti Brolin, 33 n. 1), making this update a scholarly *desideratum*.

While the title suggests a focus on the 1920 work *Epicuro*, this collection goes beyond it and offers a more comprehensive exploration of EB. Notably, among the seven contributions, only three (Milanese, Indelli, and Pace) directly address this book. The remaining four essays examine EB's roles as a Latinist, particularly his expertise in Lucretius (Balbo, Piazzzi); his contributions to the *Enciclopedia Italiana* from 1929 to 1937 (Francisetti Brolin); and his engagement with the Herculaneum papyri in the pivotal yet contentious book *L'Aristotele perduto e la formazione filosofica di Epicuro* of 1936 (Longo Auricchio)<sup>6</sup>. This multifaceted approach paints a nuanced portrait of EB as an individual deeply influenced by the prevailing ideology of his era, often bold in his reconstructions. Simultaneously, it portrays him as an original thinker with a profound grasp of even the most technical aspects of Epicureanism, as well as a scholar who proposes research hypotheses that are still carefully considered and evaluated.

<sup>4</sup> AA.VV., *Epicurea in memoriam Hectoris Bignone: miscellanea philologica*, Genova 1959.

<sup>5</sup> M. R. Posani, *Bibliografia di Ettore Bignone*, «A&R» 3, 1953, 171-176; AA.VV., *Epicurea in memoriam*, 25-27. Selective is also the bibliography published in the database [Aristarchus – Catalogus Philologorum Classicorum](#) (last consultation 29-11-2023).

<sup>6</sup> E. Bignone, *L'Aristotele perduto e la formazione filosofica di Epicuro*, con una prefazione di V. E. Alfieri, 2 voll., Firenze 1973<sup>2</sup> [Firenze 1936<sup>1</sup>].

It is worthwhile to commence with Franciseti Brolin's contribution (*Ettore Bignone e l'«Enciclopedia Italiana»: gli studi letterari tra filologia e ideologia*, 33-54). This essay provides a very insightful and accurate reconstruction of EB's ideological assumptions that influenced his scholarly work, as reflected by his 19 entries to the *Enciclopedia Italiana*<sup>7</sup>. Founded by Giovanni Gentile in 1925, it was born under the shadow of the Fascist government, whose intent was to glorify ancient Rome as the «patria nazionale» to be revived through a new political imperialism (36). Nonetheless, the *Enciclopedia Italiana* included contributions from numerous anti-fascist scholars of antiquity. Now, Franciseti Brolin's study (37-53) underlines that EB's association with Fascism appears not merely formal but authentic. A good example is provided by her notes on the 1934 entry on *Lucrezio*<sup>8</sup>. The Epicurean poet is portrayed as a «poeta vate», akin to Gabriele D'Annunzio *ante litteram*, and as a pure Roman spirit who dramated the philosophy of Epicurus poetically, aiming to morally elevate his readers and foster a religious understanding of nature (45-47 and 50-51). Therefore, these notes underscore «la piena adesione ai moduli stilistici e ideologici diffusi durante il regime fascista, specialmente in relazione alla religiosità» (46).

Different ideological constrains are also discerned by Balbo (*Ettore Bignone: la giovinezza, la formazione e l'attività come latinista*, 13-32), who appears to be behind the research of Franciseti Brolin<sup>9</sup>. The scholar offers a particularly intriguing observation: «il grande limite di Bignone risiede probabilmente in quella che è la sua caratteristica fondamentale, cioè l'approccio centrato su una visione umanistica e su un accostamento ai testi fortemente legato all'individuazione di elementi estetici» (25-26). Hence, EB is shaped not only by Fascism but also by the crepuscular-decadent aesthetics of the Italian *fin de siècle*, whose best incarnation is still his contemporary D'Annunzio (28). This perspective implies a belief in the absolute value of beauty and the idea that ancient authors, being intrinsically beautiful or perfect, can be likened to «grandi medaglioni» that can be read «senza costruire un tessuto di relazioni tra di essi» (29-31: 30).

---

<sup>7</sup> Cf. 54 for complete a list. Curiously, the entry on Epicurus was assigned to Guido Calogero ([https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/epicuro\\_%28Enciclopedia-Italiana%29/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/epicuro_%28Enciclopedia-Italiana%29/); last consultation 26-11-2023), who quotes EB's *Epicuro* of 1920.

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/lucrezio\\_\(Enciclopedia-Italiana\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/lucrezio_(Enciclopedia-Italiana)/).

<sup>9</sup> In the opening footnote of her contribution (33), she writes: «Rivolgo un sincero ringraziamento al prof. Andrea Balbo per avermi proposto di approfondire la figura di Ettore Bignone, fornendomi preziosi consigli durante la fase di scrittura».

While redirecting the readers to Balbo's comprehensive analysis of the implications of this approach, which focuses on the unfinished project of publication of a *Storia della letteratura latina*<sup>10</sup>, I draw attention to his insightful synthesis of EB's interpretation of Lucretius (31). The Epicurean poet is portrayed as an incarnation of pure Romanness, an ardent *defensor pacis*, and an authentic poetic genius «nutrito [...] di vero umanesimo», who belonged to his era yet transcended it.

Balbo's and Franciseti Brolin's essays caution readers about EB's ideological constraints, highlighting how these often led to frequent overinterpretations. In contrast, the remaining contributions in the collection also acknowledge similar limitations in his scholarship while simultaneously underscoring its merits.

Firstly, let us take another look at Milanese's essay, *Un secolo dopo*. After the summary of the reception of Ettore Bignone's *Epicuro*, the scholar intriguingly mentions the handwritten notes on Usener's *Epicurea* and Ernout-Robin's commentary to Lucretius' *De rerum natura*<sup>11</sup>. These *marginalia* serve as a clear indication that «Bignone preparava le sue a volte spericolate ricostruzioni con un minuzioso lavoro di analisi sui testi e sulle altrui interpretazioni» (12). Furthermore, they provide evidence of an "invisible work" on Epicurean literature that EB may have undertaken in anticipation of a second edition of his 1920 *Epicuro*, which was intended to include a Greek edition (8) but, unfortunately, was never concluded.

The two essays by Indelli (*I Papiri ercolanesi nell'«Epicuro» di Ettore Bignone*, 55-76) and Longo Auricchio (*Qualche noterella sull'«Aristotele perduto» e i testi ercolanesi*, 77-88) complement each other. Through a careful examination of selected quotations from the Herculaneum papyri in EB's major works, both scholars illustrate that EB was a proficient and smart reader of these ancient texts. His competence and familiarity become apparent, at the very least, from his work on the papyrological remains of Epicurus' letters and the fragmentary lost works beyond the 37

---

<sup>10</sup> Cf. 25-32 and E. Bignone, *Storia della letteratura latina. Vol. 1: Originalità e formazione dello spirito romano, l'epica e il teatro dell'età della repubblica* (Firenze 1942); *Vol. 2: La prosa romana sino all'età di Cesare. Lucilio, Lucrezio, Catullo* (Firenze 1945-1946); *Vol. 3: I "poetae novi", Cesare, Sallustio, Varrone Reatino, i minori prosatori dell'età di Cesare, M. Tullio Cicerone* (Firenze, 1950).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. 9-10 and A. Ernout, L. Robin (éds), *Lucrece: De rerum natura. Commentaire exégétique et critique*, précédé d'une trad. des *Lettres et Pensées d'Épicure*, Paris 1925<sup>2</sup>. Milanese synthesizes here the main results of his essay *Postillati epicurei di Ettore Bignone*, «Eikasmos» 23, 2012, 435-450.

books of the *Περὶ φύσεως*. EB grounded his study in the most recent editions or readings of the Herculaneum papyri by, among others, Siegfried Sudhaus, Theodor Gomperz, Wilhelm Crönert, and Usener himself. On occasion, he even seems to have consulted not just their drawings (*disegni*), but directly inspected their contents (76, 79). In this sense, Indelli and Longo Auricchio attenuate the harsh judgment of Achille Vogliano on EB's use of the Herculaneum papyri, which he qualified as extravagant or unscientific (75-76, 82). Far more variegated was the treatment of the aforementioned papyri containing Epicurus' masterpiece *Περὶ φύσεως*. In the *Epicuro* of 1920, EB does not translate or comment on the fragments published in Usener's *Epicurea*<sup>12</sup>, although he seemingly intended to include this material in his unrealized second edition (cf. Indelli, 75). In the *Aristotele perduto* of 1936, instead, he does consider the *Περὶ φύσεως*, as evidenced by his discussion of a passage from what he believed was book XII and another one from book XXVIII<sup>13</sup>. As Longo Auricchio notes at the beginning of her essay (77), this significant reassessment of Epicurus' masterpiece merits careful scrutiny.

Another intricate and highly technical source of Epicureanism is the fragmentary inscription engraved by the Epicurean Diogenes of Oenoanda onto the portico of his city in Lycia. In his study, Pace explores how EB argued that a selection of these fragments – namely, six Epicurean maxims without parallels in the collections of the *Ratae sententiae* and the *Gnomologium Vaticanum* – could be interpreted as additional evidence to Epicurus' lost works (*Ettore Bignone e Diogene da Enoanda*, 89-100). More precisely, the scholar proposed that these maxims may have belonged to a juvenile work of the philosopher, where he was still engaged in a debate with the Democritean Nausiphanes, as indicated by the presence of Democritus' words and concepts, such as εὐθυμία (fr. 68 B 3 DK). A noteworthy point highlighted in Pace's contribution is the evolution of this perspective from the *Epicuro* of 1920 to the *Aristotele perduto* of 1936. In the former work, EB published these maxims at the

---

<sup>12</sup> Usener, *Epicurea*, fr. 80, 84-88, 91. Bignone retains only a few remnants of Epicurus' *Περὶ φύσεως* that are found in external sources (cf. Bignone, *Epicuro*, 169, fr. 14-17 = Usener, *Epicurea*, fr. 75-76, 81, 92-93).

<sup>13</sup> E. Bignone, *L'Aristotele perduto*, vol. 1, 6 n. 9, and vol. 2, 76 n. 56. The alleged passage from book XII actually comes from book XI (*PHerc.* 1042/154). It aligns with fr. 26, 20 of G. Arrighetti (a cura di), *Epicuro: Opere*, Torino 1973<sup>2</sup>, 227. By converse, the most recent edition of the excerpt from book XXVIII (*PHerc.* 1479/1417) is fr. 13, col. VIII inf. by D. N. Sedley, *Epicurus, On Nature, Book XXVIII*, «Cronache Ercolanesi» 3, 1973, 5-83: 52.

end of the *Frammenti d'incerta sede* section, following Johann William or the editor of that time of Diogenes' inscription who labeled them as *Epicuri Sententiae*<sup>14</sup>, and provided a list of *loci paralleli* in the footnotes. Conversely, in the *Aristotele perduto*, he sought to reinforce Epicurus' authorship of the maxims and to exclude the possibility that they were written by Diogenes or other Epicureans. He employed ingenious historical-philosophical arguments that, however, do not always consider the margins of the stone letters<sup>15</sup>. Despite these shortcomings, Pace's final judgment is that EB «mostra nei confronti dei nuovi frammenti dell'epigrafe di Enoanda una apprezzabile attenzione e volontà di inserirli nella ricostruzione del pensiero di Epicuro, unite a una notevole perizia di filologo e studioso del pensiero antico» (99).

The final essay by Piazzì (*Il vate pensoso: Lucrezio negli scritti di Ettore Bignone*, 101-120) revisits the topic touched upon by Balbo and Franciscetti Brolin in the collection. She recognizes EB's ideological and aesthetic assumptions, which occasionally result in somewhat simplistic observations about Lucretius – such as an overly emphasized his “Romanness”, or the impressionistic comparisons with artists like Michelangelo (109-113). At the same time, Piazzì underscores the scholarly merits of EB's study. In particular, she emphasizes a crucial point. From a philosophical standpoint, EB served as the precursor to the perspective of Lucretius as an Epicurean “fundamentalist”, a view recently championed by David Sedley<sup>16</sup>. According to this interpretation, the *De rerum natura* faithfully upholds the original views of Epicurus, even in passages that appear to introduce elements not found in or contradicting the Greek philosopher. Aligned with the general research hypothesis of the *Aristotele perduto*, which posits that the philosopher developed his ideas while criticizing Aristotle's lost “exoteric” dialogues, EB argues that these passages either do not reflect Lucretius' own views but rather the Aristotelian theses he opposed, or they signify a later evolution of his master's philosophy. Even the poetry of the *De rerum natura* and what EB qualifies as its religious afflatus – particularly evident in the proems in praise of Epicurus – are not considered extraneous to Epicureanism, since this latter constituted (along with Stoicism) a “religion of the spirit” (114-116). The essay

<sup>14</sup> E. Bignone, *Epicuro*, fr. 103-113, 189-190 = J. William (ed.), *Diogenes Oenoandensis fragmenta*, Lipsiae 1907, fr. LVI-LXI, 54-56.

<sup>15</sup> E. Bignone, *L'Aristotele perduto*, I, 565-571.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. 101-109 and D. N. Sedley, *Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom*, Cambridge 1998.

ends with an examination of EB's more technically oriented philological proposals, encompassing textual emendations and the study of Lucretian reception. Piazzzi rightly considers these contributions as non-negligible advancements in the study of Epicurean thought (117-120).

In conclusion, this collection proves to be a valuable contribution to understanding EB in a dual capacity. On one hand, it underscores his comprehensive mastery of Epicureanism. Indeed, his comprehension of Epicurus was rooted in a meticulous understanding of even the most technical sources on Epicurean philosophy, such as the Herculaneum papyri and Diogenes of Oenoanda's inscription. On the other hand, it offers a balanced portrayal of both the limitations and merits of EB's scholarship, which should be considered concurrently when engaging with *Epicuro* and *Aristotele perduto*. Recognizing the ideological underpinnings that shape the methodology and criteria of these works will facilitate a nuanced appreciation of their positive outcomes and intelligent insights.

One hopes that this collection will stimulate further research initiatives. It would be interesting, for instance, to extend the analysis into EB's: (1) connections between Epicurus and the sophist Antiphon (briefly mentioned 68); (2) analysis of Zeno of Sidon in his entry for the *Enciclopedia italiana* (52-53) and, more extensively, of his pupil Philodemus as a philosopher, not just as a source on Epicurus; (3) perspectives on the "Epicureanism" of poets such as Vergil and Horace. More importantly, it may be timely to undertake a synthesis of EB's broader Epicurean scholarship, as well as to systematically reconstruct his philosophy and its ties to the Fascist ideology of the early twentieth century.

Enrico PIERGIACOMI