



June 1988

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### Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 24, no.2, June 1988, p.65-70

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## Lucretius on Poetry: III.1-13

by DAVID KONSTAN

THE PROEM to the third book of Lucretius' *De rerum natura* begins:

E tenebris tantis tam clarum extollere lumen  
qui primus potuisti inlustrans comoda vitae,  
te sequor, o Graiae gentis decus, inque tuis nunc  
ficta pedum pono pressis vestigia signis...<sup>1</sup>

"All commentators are in agreement in recognizing in *ficta* an archaic participle of *figo* ['plant,' 'fix'], equivalent to *fixa*, which is documented also by Varro (*De re rust.* III, 7, 4). This interpretation is corroborated by a very clear passage in Cicero, *Pro Sest.* 5, 13: *vestigia non pressa leviter . . . sed fixa* ['footprints not lightly impressed . . . but planted'], as well as by the idiomatic expression *figere vestigia* (Verg. *Aen.* VI, 159: *paribus curis vestigia figit* [(Achates), under like anxieties, planted his footprints]). Nevertheless, I do not think that one ought to dismiss a priori an interpretation that begins also from *ficta* taken as the past participle of *finco* ['form,' 'fashion'].<sup>2</sup> I had intended to write words very much like these, when I discovered that Ubaldo Pizzani, in a commentary on selected passages of Lucretius that he prepared together with Ettore Paratore, had anticipated me.<sup>3</sup> What remains is for me to reaffirm the position advanced by Pizzani, which does not seem to have had an influence on scholarship outside of Italy,<sup>3</sup> and to carry the argument, if I

1. The text is that of Cyril Bailey, *Titus Lucretius Cari De rerum natura libri sex* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1947). For the convenience of the reader, I supply Bailey's translation of verses 1-13, although the sense of the passage, or at least its nuances, is at issue in the present discussion: "Thou, who out of deep darkness didst first avail to raise a torch so clear, shedding light upon the true joys of life, 'tis thee I follow, thou glory of the Greek race, and in thy deepest prints firmly now I plant my footsteps, not in eager emulation, but rather for love, because I long to copy thee; for how could a swallow rival swans, or what might kids with trembling limbs accomplish in a race to compare with the stout strength of a horse? Thou art our father, the discoverer of truth, thou dost vouchsafe to us a father's precepts, and from thy pages, our hero, even as bees in flowery glades sip every plant, we in like manner browse on all thy sayings of gold, yea, of gold, and always most worthy of life for evermore."

2. Hector Paratore and Hucbaldus Pizzani, *Lucreti De rerum natura* (Rome: Ateneo, 1960), p. 275. That *ficta* derives from *finco* was in fact suggested earlier by Augustin Cartault in *La flexion dans Lucrèce* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1898), p. 117; the suggestion was rejected by William Augustus Merrill, *T. Lucreti Cari De rerum natura libri sex* (New York: American Book Co., 1907), ad loc., with copious citations from Latin literature.

3. Cf. E. J. Kenney, ed., *Lucretius De rerum natura Book III* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1971): "*ficta*: the original (and correct) form of *fixa*." Kenney translates: "I plant my own footsteps firmly in the prints that you have made," and comments: "the phrases *ficta vestigia* and *pressa signa* hardly differ in meaning, and this emphasizes the fidelity with which L. follows the tracks of his master." There is no

can, a little further, and in a somewhat different direction than that which he indicated.

Pizzani himself understands *ficta vestigia* as "footprints fashioned upon yours [i.e., Epicurus], in imitation of yours" ("orme plasmate sulle tue, ad imitazione delle tue"), i.e., that Lucretius is moulding his exposition to Epicurus' teachings. He observes that there is a certain awkwardness in the metaphor: "everyone leaves the prints he leaves, and cannot fashion them to his pleasure"; but allegory, he adds, frequently does violence to the literal sense. Pizzani concludes by remarking that elsewhere Lucretius uses *adfixus*, not *adfectus*, as the participle of *adfigo*.

We may begin by noting that the language in verse 4 is pregnant. The word *signum*, used here in the sense of footprints, broadly means "sign." In philosophical discourse, *signum* denotes a phenomenon or apparent thing that bears witness to the existence or nature of a non-evident thing.<sup>4</sup> If that sense is relevant here, then it would seem to suggest not the content of Epicurus' doctrine so much as his words, which signify or reveal the "dark matter" (*obscura res*, 1.933 = 4.8) or *adêla* ("non-evident things") that are his subject. In the signs, then, that the master had set down, Lucretius leaves traces (*vestigia*) that he has fashioned. On this reading, *ficta* would not necessarily mean "fashioned to," that is, adapted to the teachings of Epicurus, but would rather point to the way in which Lucretius' own words have been shaped or composed. In the metaphor of superimposing footprints on the signs planted by the founder, both terms refer to language.<sup>5</sup> The *ficta vestigia* are precisely Lucretius' poetry, fashioned according to his art.

If Lucretius is comparing his art to the writings of Epicurus (as opposed, that is, to Epicurean doctrine *per se*), then the following lines, in which Lucretius disclaims any desire to compete with the master, make a certain sense. For in what other way might Lucretius have imagined himself to be in rivalry with Epicurus? The popularizer of a doctrine is not in competition with its originator. There is no such self-deprecating defense in Philodemus, or on the part of the Epicurean spokesmen in Cicero's dialogues: expounding Epicureanism is in itself homage to

mention of a possible pun here in Jane Snyder, *Puns and Poetry in Lucretius' De rerum natura* (Amsterdam: Grüner, 1980), nor in Michael C. Stokes, "A Lucretian Paraphrase: III.1-30," in G. M. Kirkwood, ed., *Poetry and Poetics From Ancient Greece to the Renaissance: Studies in Honor of James Hutton* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 91-104. Diskin Clay, *Lucretius and Epicurus* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1983), cites the lines in his dedication but does not discuss them, though I think that the interpretation offered below is consistent with his understanding of the relationship between the poet and the philosopher.

4. Such, at least, is the usage of Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 2.100 ff., *Against the Mathematicians* 8.152 ff. For the Epicurean doctrine of signs, the crucial text is Philodemus' *On Signs* (or, perhaps, *On Phenomena and Sign-Inferences*), 2nd ed. by P. H. and E. A. De Lacy (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1978), though the state of the papyrus leaves room for considerable controversy. See, most recently, David Sedley, "On Signs," in J. Barnes, J. Brunschwig, M. F. Burnyeat, M. Schofield, eds., *Science and Speculation* (Cambridge and Paris, 1982), pp. 239-72, and Elizabeth Asmis, *Epicurus' Scientific Method* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 175-224. I do not believe that technical difficulties concerning Philodemus' usage affect my reading of *signa* as "signs" in Lucretius.

5. Dare I suggest that *pedum* here may also connote metrical feet?

Epicurus. We deny the urge to compete where competition is at least a possibility. For Lucretius, this was in his poetry, where he knew that he was breaking new ground and, in addition, was running counter to Epicurus' professed suspicions of the medium.<sup>6</sup>

Lucretius' pride in his achievement of casting Epicureanism into verse is unabashed. He tells us in Book I, and again in the proem to the fourth book, that he traverses paths of the Muses hitherto untrodden and, what is more, that he is capable of explaining dark and difficult matters (*obscura*, 1.922, cf. 1.933 = 4.8) in a way that is luminously clear (*clarius*, 1.921; *lucida carmina*, 1.933-34 = 4.8-9).<sup>7</sup> Lucretius' capacity to give brilliant expression to things that are obscure is analogous to Epicurus' own accomplishment of raising a bright beam (*clarum lumen*, 3.1) out of the darkness.<sup>8</sup> Ernout and Robin, in their commentary on Lucretius,<sup>9</sup> cite the poet's claim, *quod obscura de re tam lucida pango carmina* ("because on a dark matter I strike up luminous verses"), to illustrate the meaning of 3.1 – not very appositely, Pizzani remarks, since in the former passage "the *res obscura* is the very doctrine of Epicurus." But there is a pun here: the "dark matter" refers both to the difficulty of Epicurus' doctrines and to the essential invisibility of the atoms posited by Epicurean physics, and the cross-reference illustrates the way in which Lucretius' claims for his poetry can seem to be in competition with the achievement of Epicurus.

I am not suggesting that Lucretius is insincere in his profession of love as the motive for imitating Epicurus. I mean only to say that his humility is motivated. Lucretius defuses the possible rivalry by distinguishing his own accomplishment from that of Epicurus. He identifies Epicurus as the discoverer of the substance of the doctrine (*rerum inventor*, 3.9), the one who, like a father, supplies the rules of life (*patria praecepta*); he, the poet, feeds upon all the golden maxims (*aurea dicta*) inscribed within the pages (*chartis*) of the philosopher as bees lap at all the flowers in a meadow (*floriferis ut apes in saltibus omnia libant*, 3.11).

According to this last simile, Lucretius depends upon Epicurus for nourishment. But again, the image is revealing. The bee, too, is creative. Out of the nectar provided by the flowers, and by which their lives are maintained, the bees produce honey. Honey is not mentioned here, but it is a figure for Lucretius' poetry in the immediate sequel to his boast of

6. On Epicurus' attitude toward poetry, and the possibility that he was not so severe in his judgment of it as is usually supposed, see Francesco Giancotti, *Il preludio di Lucrezio e altri scritti lucreziani ed epicurei* (Messina and Florence: G. D'Anna, 1978), pp. 16-68.

7. On Lucretius' pride in his achievement, see Anne Amory, "*Obscura de re lucida carmina*: Science and Poetry in *De Rerum Natura*," *YCS*, 21 (1969), 147; Robert D. Brown, "Lucretius and Callimachus," *ICS*, 7 (1982), 80 (Lucretius' "exultant pride and individualism"). Pierre Boyancé, "Lucrèce et la poésie," *REA*, 49 (1947), 96, remarks that Lucretius' "aspiration à la clarté" is an essential characteristic of his art.

8. Or "in the darkness"; the preposition *e* before *tenebris* is a renaissance emendation for the manuscript reading *o*, which is convincingly defended by David West, *The Imagery and Poetry of Lucretius* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 79-80, and adopted by Kenney in his edition of Book III.

9. Alfred Ernout and Léon Robin, *Lucrèce: De rerum natura*, vol. 2 (Paris: Budé, 1962), ad loc.

bringing light to the obscure doctrine of Epicurus. He tells us that he also imbues it with the charm of poetry (*musaeo lepore*, 1.934 = 4.9), and then offers the famous comparison of his poetry to the honey with which doctors line the rim of a cup of bitter medicine so that children may accept the potion. Here the division of labor, so to speak, between Lucretius and Epicurus is clear: Epicurus provides the bitter substance or *ratio* (1.943, 948 = 4.18, 23; cf. 3.14), Lucretius the *mel*.

Poets, as Pizzani points out, were compared with bees as early as Plato's *Ion* (534A), where a play on the words *melittai*, "bees," and *melê*, "songs," is exploited. P. H. Schrijvers noted that the same pun was active in Lucretius as well. In the discussion of atomic shapes in Book II, Lucretius contrasts the smooth round atoms of honey with the hooked atoms of bitter absinth (the substance that provides the example of unpalatable medicine in the simile of the cup), and immediately afterwards contrasts the harsh screech of a saw with poetic song (*musaea mele*, 2.412; cf. *musaeo melle*, 1.947 = 4.22), which is composed of smooth elements.<sup>10</sup> Again in Book II, Lucretius argues that if the shapes of atoms were infinitely various, then there would be no limit to the excellence of perceptible things, and thus the taste of honey and the melodies of swans (*mellisque sapes et cycnea mele*, 2.504-05) would be surpassed.<sup>11</sup> I am inclined to think that paronomasia is at work also in Book IV, where Lucretius promises to expound the velocity of the simulacra in words that are sweet (*suavidicis*, 4.180) rather than many, just as the small melody (*canor*) of the swan is better (*melior*, 4.181) than the clamor of cranes.

This recalls us to the proem to Book III, where Epicurus is the swan, in comparison with which Lucretius professes to be a mere swallow (*hirundo*, 3.6). What is the meaning of the comparison here? The parallels cited by the commentators (Theocritus 5.136-37, Vergil *Eclogues* 8.55, 9.36: hoopoes, screech owls, or geese in competition with swans) all look to the melodiousness of the swan, as in Lucretius' example of the crane.<sup>12</sup> The problem with such an analogy in the present context is that it would have Lucretius expressing his diffidence before Epicurus in terms that call attention precisely to his own excellence, that is, the quality of his verse.

The swan song, however, was not celebrated solely for its beauty but also, at least by Plato (*Phaedo* 84E-85A), as a sign of the birds' prescience and their cheerfulness before death. Cicero, adapting the passage in his *Tusculan Disputations* (1.30.73), writes that Socrates admonishes all good and wise men to do "as the swans, who are sacred to Apollo not without reason, but because they seem to possess the art of prophecy from him, with which they foresee the good there is in death and die with a song

10. P. H. Schrijvers, *Horror ac divina voluptas: Études sur la poétique et la poésie de Lucrèce* (Amsterdam: A. M. Hakkert, 1970), pp. 35-37.

11. Lucretius mentions also the color of royal purple: is the ornamental epithet *Meliboea* (2.500) part of the wordplay?

12. See Brown (above, n. 7), pp. 83-84, on the Callimachean credentials of this last example.

and pleasure" (*cum cantu et voluptate*).<sup>13</sup> A philosophical bird that faces death with pleasure makes an apt analogy for Epicurus, who on this interpretation is commended here for wisdom rather than melodiousness.<sup>14</sup> This reading better fits the reference to the swallow, which is not noted for raucousness, like cranes, geese, hoopoes, or jays, but rather for its darting and twittering.<sup>15</sup> The contrast, then, may have to do less with sonorousness than with Lucretius' chirping and fluttering as compared to the sedate majesty of the master. We may compare the proem to Book II, where the wise man, still and secure, looks down upon the wandering, scrambling crowd below (7-13).

If this is so, then the second contrast, between kid goats on shaky legs and the power of a war horse (*fortis equi vis*, 3.8), develops the same idea. Lucretius is still wobbly in comparison with the secure authority of Epicurus. Both analogies suggest Epicurus' superiority in wisdom, where he is, as the following verses tell us, like a father.

Nevertheless, the mention of the swan may not be wholly innocent. There is, I think, at least an oblique allusion to the conventional beauty of its song, and thus to the domain in which Lucretius himself excels, that is, poetry. It is there, I suggest, as a kind of latent counter-image, such that Lucretius can hint at the domain of his own virtue, intimated also in the phrase *ficta vestigia* and in the simile of the bees, at the same moment that he affirms the philosophical superiority of Epicurus. This tension in the image, which captures the tension in Lucretius himself between filial reverence for the teachings of the master and a stout pride in his own achievement as a poet, squares with the disclaimer of a competitive ambition. For without some dimension of justifiable pride, the disclaimer would be empty, and thus truly arrogant, for it must imply at least a seeming equality between the disciple and the master.

With the image of the honeyed cup, Lucretius had represented the role of poetry as a kind of benign deception, by which children were fooled (*ludificetur*) and, albeit deceived, not cheated (*deceptaque non capiatur*, 1.941 = 4.16). This idea is echoed in the term *ficta*, with its connotation of "false" or "fictive." Here, however, poetry is not a sugar coating on the doctrine that reaches only so far as the lips<sup>16</sup> but a creative recasting that fills or covers the signs planted by Epicurus. In the same way, the reference to the bees in our passage suggests the transformation of inherited wisdom into a new and sweeter stuff. It is a strong claim for poetry, which refashions the message as it makes it clear.<sup>17</sup>

13. Cit. William Ellery Leonard and Stanley Barney Smith, *T. Lucreti Cari De rerum natura libri sex* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1942), ad 2.505.

14. Contrast Bailey, ad v. 6.

15. Cf. Aristophanes *Frogs* 93, 680, cit. Bailey. The swallow sounded to Greek ears like the gibberish of foreign languages (LSJ, s.v. *chelidôn*). Heinze suggested that Lucretius might be contrasting his barbarous Latin with Epicurus' Greek, but Bailey rejects this idea as "too far-fetched."

16. *Labrorum tenuis*, 1.940 = 4.15; for this phrase, cf. Giancotti (above, n. 7), pp. 52-54.

17. Amory (above, n. 7) interprets 1.934 = 4.9 to mean that "every detail, perhaps for him every word and letter, will have an aroma from the sweet honey of the Muses" (p. 154). Mayotte Bollack, *La raison*

I have been suggesting that the proem to Book III reveals a complex relation between Lucretius and Epicurus. Lucretius submits to the wisdom of the master but claims a large power for his poetry.<sup>18</sup> It is not surprising to discover such a tension in a poet who meditated on the virtue of his art, and it raises in a metaphorical way the problem of a poet's attitude to his source.<sup>19</sup> The proem is rather more nuanced than Paratore allows when he sees in it the "special, unique stamp of fanatical devotion that marks the Epicureans of every period in respect to the founder," and which he compares to the "fanatical tendency" of Marxists to swear by the words of their heroes (Paratore and Pizzani, p. 267).

Why should Lucretius evoke the fictive or formative power of verse in this proem? Perhaps the reason is that, in what follows, he will describe, not the tranquillity that Epicurean wisdom bestows but the almost religious thrill, the *divina voluptas atque horror*, that Epicurus' revelations arouse in him. He feels that he gazes over the entire universe and perceives the abode of the gods (3.18-24). The inspiration derives from Epicurus, but the visionary quality goes beyond the doctrine. To express it, Lucretius turned to a poetic source—the description of Olympus in Homer's *Odyssey* (6.42-46).<sup>20</sup>

de Lucrèce (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1978), p. 188, argues that the bitterness of Epicurean doctrine resides precisely in its obscurity and builds a case for the identity of the doctrine and its expression. Guido Bonelli, *I motivi profondi della poesia lucreziana* (Brussels: Collection Latomus #186, 1984), p. 13, states that "in Lucretius' poetry we find, not the thinking of Epicurus, but the feeling (*sentimento*) of Lucretius, which, to be sure, feeds upon Epicurean doctrine, but then transforms this doctrine according to its own imaginative requirements." I am less inclined than these critics to seek in Lucretius a fully explicit defense of the transformative and immanent power of poetry over doctrine.

18. His words seem to imply that Epicurus' golden sayings will achieve the eternal life that they deserve (3.13) because he pastures upon them.

19. Harold Bloom, in *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), p. 14, applies the Lucretian term *clinamen* to the tendency of a poet to misread creatively the model of a precursor. Bloom restricts his study to modern poetry, and to relations exclusively between poets, but his insights, properly adapted, apply also, I think, to Lucretius' relation to Epicurus. For a survey of opinions on Lucretius and Epicurus, see Bollack (above, n. 17), pp. 96-145.

20. For the contrast between the literary character of the praise of Epicurus in vv. 1-13 and the imagery of vv. 14 ff., see Bonelli (above, n. 17), p. 42. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the CAAS meeting, 26 September 1986. I wish to thank Michael Roberts of Wesleyan University for his helpful comments.