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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:

Etenebris tantis tam clarum extollere lumen
qui primus poruisti ilustrans commoda vitae,
tesequor,o Graiae gentis decus,inque tuis nunc
fictapedumpono pressis vestigia signis... .1

All commentators are in agreement in recognizing in ficta an archaic participle of fingo [‘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 prior interpretation that begins also from ficta taken as the past participle of fingo [‘form,’ ‘fashion’].” 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.2 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,3 and to carry the argument, if I...
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 adfictus, 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. 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 adélà ("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. 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: ex ponding Epicureanism is in itself homage to


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.6

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).7 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.8 Ernout and Robin, in their commentary on Lucretius,9 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 Gianozzi, Il preludio di Lucrezio e altri scritti lucretiani ed epicurei (Messina and Florence: G. D’Anna, 1978), pp. 16-68.
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 Kenten in his edition of Book III.
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 (musaeo mele, 2.412; cf. musaeo melle, 1.947 = 4.22), which is composed of smooth elements.10 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 sapores et cycnea mele, 2.504–05) would be surpassed.11 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.12 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

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.
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. 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. The contrast, then, may have to do less with sonorosity than with Lucretius' chirping and fluttering as compared to the sedate majesty of the master. We may compare the poem 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 dissembler 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 werefooed (ludijicetur) 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 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.

15. Cf. Aristophanes Frogs 93, 680, cit. Bailey. The swallow sounded to Greek ears like the gibberish of foreign languages (LSJ, s.v. chelidon). Heinze suggested that Lucretius might be contrasting his barbarous Latin with Epicurus' Greek, but Bailey rejects this idea as "too far-fetched."
16. Labrorum tenus, 1.946 = 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 Bolack, 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. 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. 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).20

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de Lucrée (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.