Lucretius’ Self-Positioning in the History of Roman Epicureanism

In Book 5, the *DRN*’s narrator asserts that he is either the very ‘first’ or, as I suggest here, among ‘the first’ to render (*vertere*) Greek Epicureanism into Latin: *denique natura haec rerum ratioque repertast / nuper, et hanc primus cum primis ipse repertus / nunc ego sum in patrias qui possim vertere voces* (335-337). Unanimously, commentators and translators (see bibliography) interpret the phrase *primus cum primis* at line 336 to mean “the very first,” taking *cum primis* as an intensifier of *primus* and providing *primus* with a temporal denotation. A comment by Reid is exemplary, “The phrase *cum primis*, as used by [Lucretius], has lost its literal sense, and means ‘particularly,’ ‘especially.’” The purpose of this talk is to suggest that the phrase *primus cum primis ipse repertus* means, “first [sc. person], myself discovered among [other] first [sc. people].” Following standard Latin grammar, *cum primis* should be understood as an ablative of accompaniment; it should be interpreted qualitatively, not temporally, and finally, itshould be taken with *repertus*, not *primus*. There is much at stake in the interpretation of the phrase, for the *opinio communis* is problematic in relation to our knowledge of early Epicureanism (Cicero says that G. Amafinius was the first to write on Epicureanism in Latin (*Tusc.* 4.6, *Fam.* 15.19.2)) and it, accordingly, makes of Lucretius a liar.

In this paper, I survey the Lucretian comparanda (1.130, 1.716, 2.536, 2.849, 5.621, 6.225, 6.260) for *cum primis*, and three important conclusions can be drawn. First, Lucretius has a noun either modify the phrase *cum primis* or be easily understood with the phrase. That is to say, the phrase has not ossified into an adverbial idiom (contra the *opinio communis*). Second, these examples show that Lucretius uses the *cum primis* phrase when he wants to specify one thing/person “among” (*cum*) other principal things/people. Third, the comparanda show that Lucretius uses the phrase *cum primis* qualitatively, not temporally. At 5.336, then, the sense should be that Lucretius stands out among leading figures in Roman Epicureanism, and *primus* means ‘distinguished’ as at Cic. *Brut*. 151.

In addition to Cicero’s testimony and the comparanda, meter and syntax further encourage a reappraisal of the phrase. Meter discourages us from taking *cum primis* as an intensifier with *primus*, since the caesura, falling after *primus*, separates *cum primis* from *primus* and conjoins it, as a sense unit, with *repertus*. Finally, what seems particularly provocative about 5.336 is the repetitive phrase *primus cum primis*, and the echo too seems to preclude the notion that *primus cum primis* ‘has lost its literal sense.’ Rather, the repetition invites us to consider the very words themselves and their relationship to each other. The functioning intensifier in the line is *ipse*, separating Lucretius from others and encouraging the reader to place Lucretius among his broader elite intellectual milieu (*cum primis*). If the argument put forth in this paper is accepted, Lucretius is vilified of being a liar, and the syntax and semantics of 5.336 are no longer anomalous in relation to Lucretius’ language used elsewhere.

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