Lucretius, Epicurus and Augustan Ideology

Epicurus looms large in Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*: he is not only the author’s Muse, but also the poem’s one and only truly heroic figure. In this paper, I examine the attributes and roles Lucretius ascribes to Epicurus. I demonstrate that these attributes and roles are distinctly Roman, and that they are designed to appeal to a Roman audience that is largely uncomfortable with philosophy in general and with Epicureans in particular. Furthermore, I show that the presentation of Epicurus bears a striking similarity to the later presentation of Augustus, especially as this emerges in the works of Vergil.

Lucretius presents Epicurus not only as a philosopher, but also as the performer of a series of important Roman social roles. In order to render his philosophy palatable to a Roman audience, Lucretius must remake the distinctly un-Roman figure of Epicurus into a person who could command the respect and deference of Lucretius’ own elite Roman audience. Thus Lucretius paints Epicurus in the glowing terms of Roman aristocratic honor**.** As both Barton (2001), and Lendon (1997), note, honor shines in the Roman imagination, and Lucretius contends that no one’s honor glows as brilliantly as Epicurus’. Epicurus is the shining figure (*inlustrans*), the *Graiae gentis decus* who is able to raise a *clarum lumen* out of the darkness (*DRN* 3.1-3). Placed in the company of figures such as Ancus Marcius and Scipio Africanus, both *triumphatores*, Epicurus’ glory shines such that *omnis restinxit, stellas exortus ut aetherius sol* (*DRN* 3.1043-4). Despite Lucretius’ own negative views towards politics and warfare, Epicurus is presented as a victorious general. Epicurus, through his *animi virtus*, breaks down the gates of nature (*naturae…portarum claustra*) and brings back the knowledge of what can and cannot exist (*quid posit oriri, quid nequeat*) as a *victor* in his own triumph (*DRN* 1.70-76).

Lucretius also presents Epicurus’ authority in distinctly Roman terms. Epicurus teaches not from the position of a philosopher, but rather as a father. Lucretius declares of Epicurus, *tu pater es*, and that Epicurus supplied the fatherly precepts (*patria praecepta*) (*DRN* 3.9-10). Likewise humans are as boys who fear without reason in the darkness, a situation that can only be remedied by the soothing teachings of fatherly Epicurus (*DRN* 6.35-42). In his role as *pater*, it is Epicurus whose divine mind causes the terrors of the mind to flee (*diffugiunt animi terrores*) (*DRN* 3.15-16). As both Saller (1994) and Roller (2001) note, the father-son relationship offered an opportunity for Romans to contextualize unequal relationships in a way that did not damage the honor of the subordinate party. Thus the figure of the *pater* allows Lucretius to present Epicurus as a teacher and an *exemplum* to elite Romans without compromising elite Roman aristocratic honor. Finally, Lucretius transforms Epicurus into a god, declaring his divinity outright (*deus ille fuit, deus*) and comparing his achievements to those of Ceres, Liber and Hercules (*DRN* 5.8, 5.13-54). As Buchheit (1971) has noted, in utilizing the image of a divine victorious general, Lucretius draws upon a deep tradition of Hellenistic encomium going back to Alexander the Great.

However, by superimposing the language of honor onto the figures of *pater, victor* and *deus*, Lucretius also anticipates the public image and program of Augustus. In carefully managing his public image, Augustus prized the title *pater patriae*, presented himself as a victorious general, and even a god, doing so through the distinctly Roman language of honor (cf. *RG* 1-4, 35, Suet. *Aug.* 53-58, and Dio 53.18.3). Lucretius’ influence on the evolution of this political program is evident in the works of Vergil. In describing Augustus in *Eclogue* 1, Vergil echoes Lucretius’ declaration of Epicurus’ divinity, and also mirrors Epicurus’ comparison to Liber and Hercules by comparing Augustus to these same characters in the *Aeneid* (*E.* 1.6, *Aen.* 6.792-807). In making Epicurus palatable to a Roman audience, Lucretius showed how to formulate leadership without damaging the pride of elite Romans: a lesson that Augustus’ own promoters were all too willing to learn.

Bibliography:

Barton, C. 2001. *Roman Honor: The fire in the bones*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Buchheit, V. 1971. “Epikurs Triumph des Geistes.” *Hermes* 99: 303-323.

Lendon, J. E. 1997. *Empire of Honor: The Art of Government in the Roman World*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Roller, M. W. 2001. *Constructing Autocracy*: *Aristocrats and Emperors in Julio-Claudian Rome*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Saller, R. 1994. *Patriarchy, property and death in the Roman family.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.