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Lee Fratantuono,
*A Reading of Lucretius’ De Rerum Natura.*


Although it is an independent work, this latest volume from the hands of Lee Fratantuono should feel familiar. Those acquainted with Fratantuono’s *Madness* volumes—that is, his readings of Virgil’s *Aeneid* (*Madness Unchained*, 2007), Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (*Madness Transformed*, 2011), and Lucan’s *Pharsalia* (*Madness Triumphant*, 2012)—will know what to expect here. Like those earlier works, this one is a lengthy prose *explication de texte* that closely follows the language and structure of the poem it studies, Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*. The volume offers many insightful observations, particularly with regard to textual criticism and Lucretius’ place in the Latin epic tradition, but it also suffers from occasional blindness. The bibliography omits such central works on Epicurean philosophy as A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley’s *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge, 1987), and this omission is symptomatic of the volume’s orientation: Fratantuono’s Lucretius is first and foremost a Roman poet and a forebear of Virgil; he is only secondarily a philosophical thinker and Epicurean missionary.

Fratantuono’s emphasis on Lucretius as a poet of Rome offers much of value, particularly given that the disciple of Epicurus has often been understood as standing apart from the broader tradition of Latin epic. Over the past thirty years, Philip Hardie and Monica Gale have done much to locate Lucretius in relation to later Latin literature, especially Virgil; and the strengths of Fratantuono’s commentary may be seen as continuing their work. (Gale, in particular, receives extensive attention in the volume. Her name appears scores of times in the notes on Lucretius’ fifth book, and her five entries in the bibliography are the most given to any scholar.) Fratantuono is thus at his most insightful in discussing the introduction of *Mavors* (19, on *De Rerum Natura* 1.29 ff.) within the opening of Lucretius’ poem. Observing that this archaic verbal form (*Mavors*) denotes “the great god of both war and Rome,” he comments:

Venus may be the mother of Aeneas, but Mars was the father of Romulus; deftly, the poet draws together the two foundational strands of Roman
mythological lore…. What Virgil would later describe in the *Aeneid*—namely the Julian descent from Venus to Aeneas to Iulus to the Caesar(s) of his own day—can be imagined as juxtaposed with the Romulan world of Mars. Lucretius, then, stands now between, now alongside Ennius and Virgil as a bond that joins together two poetic worlds.

Even if we do not all see hints at Ennius’ *Annales* and Virgil’s *Aeneid* in these lines, Fratantuono’s interpretation is clever. He gives the invocation of Venus and Mars at the beginning of *De Rerum Natura* a significance both literary historical and poetic: Lucretius stands at once chronologically between Ennius and Virgil as well as poetically alongside them in articulating a distinctive relationship to two foundational mythic figures at Rome. Those who would still leave Lucretius outside the mainstream of Latin epic must reckon with Fratantuono’s depiction of the Epicurean poet as crafting his work with the same tools as his most prominent precursor and greatest successor.

As noted at the outset, though, for all Fratantuono’s attention to Lucretius’ links with Virgil and Ennius, he is much more reticent about key philosophical influences upon *De Rerum Natura*. For instance, his remarks on the opening proem make no mention of what in recent times has become a scholarly piety: the invocation of Venus and Mars at the poem’s outset is a clear engagement with Empedocles’ cosmic principles of Love and Strife. Surely Fratantuono must be aware of this reading. His bibliography includes *inter alia* both David Sedley’s *Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom* and Myrto Garani’s *Empedocles Redivivus*, two recent works that have been central in re-establishing Empedocles’ importance for Lucretius. Yet for whatever reason no mention of Empedocles’ importance for Lucretius’ proem appears. To be fair, Empedocles does receive extensive discussion in the commentary (especially on pp. 44-47, on the moment when he appears by name at *De Rerum Natura* 1.716). By contrast with its easy movement between several Latin epics, though, *A Reading* is far less fluid in its observation of philosophical influence.

A similar problem arises in Fratantuono’s treatment of Lucretius’ famous “upside-down back-to-front” skeptic, the figure who appears as a negative foil of self-refutation at *De Rerum Natura* 4.469-77. While in his discussion Fratantuono notes the traditional Epicurean doctrine of the infallibility of sense impressions, he does not put the reader in a position to understand it thoroughly or well. Rather than alerting the reader to the rich collection of material in section sixteen of Long and Sedley (*The Hellenistic Philosophers*), a section that not only provides the
available philosophical material on sense perception in Epicurean thought but also attempts to expound the Epicurean position clearly and charitably, Fratantuono instead quickly asserts that Epicurean doctrine on sense perception “presents interpretive problems from which Lucretius will not be thought by many to extricate himself successfully” (250). This rapid dismissal is unfortunate, for even if we are not today Epicureans, their insistence on the value of sensory evidence for understanding the world likely constitutes one of their distinctive innovations over against the earlier atomist Democritus. In this same discussion, Fratantuono’s connection of Lucretius’ consideration of sense perception to Virgil’s Gates of Sleep in Aeneid six is of great value, but it should be married to more careful study of the Epicurean position.

None of this criticism, however, should be overstated. Even where he fails to direct his reader to the best aids for understanding Epicureanism, Fratantuono remains a charming guide. At one point in his preface, he asserts that his goal, if he should be thought to have one, “is to instill a deeper love for Lucretius in his readers, and along the way to raise questions and to offer avenues for further inquiry” (xi). Whatever its shortcomings, working with A Reading has certainly reminded me of why I love the Epicurean bard so much: it offers a variety of original insights and a useful bibliography, particularly on textual issues.

There are occasional errors, the majority of which are more annoying than substantive: e.g., it is G. D. Hadszits, with an “sz,” not G. Hadzits (69) or F. Hadzits (71); amabilis quicquam (17) should be amabile quicquam; Fama Deum (487) is from the hands of A. Gigandet, not A. Giesecke; Holmes and Shearin 2013 (11) should be Holmes and Shearin 2012 (487). This list is in no way comprehensive, but other errors are similarly trivial.

NECJ 43.2

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