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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Lucrezio. Le parole e le cose by I. Dionigi

Review by: V. J. Chr. Hunink

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I. DIONIGI, *Lucrezio. Le parole e le cose*. Bologna, Pàtron, 1988. 186 pp. Pr. L. 20.000.

In this book the author tries to show how the analogy between letters and words ('parole') on the one hand, and atoms and things ('cose') on the other, dominates the entire text of Lucretius, even up to the level of style. Even without his explicitly saying so, we would have recognised this as a study of a formal, structuralistic kind, of which the books of Deutsch and Friedländer are older examples, and Snyder, Classen and Schrijvers modern ones. Dionigi dismisses all other Lucretian studies as 'romantic', 'marxist' or 'linguistic', for which he shows various degrees of contempt.

The main idea of the book is stated in chapter one: *Modello grammatico e modello fisico*. Lucretius' correlation of linguistic structures

with structures of reality is deduced from only a few short sections in the poem, basically 2,1007-22 and 1,817-29, in which Lucretius compares the way letters form words, dependant on their combination, position and interaction, with the way things are formed from atoms. The idea is not from Lucretius himself, although it is definitely associated with the *De rerum natura* (henceforward abbreviated *DRN*), but it dates back to the early atomists and Plato. In addition, atomistic terminology is reflected in many technical terms of the ancient grammarians, including Varro's *declinatio* (*L.L.* 10,77), which corresponds to what Lucretius calls *clinamen*. This in turn induces the author to consider which model came first, the model of letters or the model of atoms. It comes as no surprise that after several pages, in which even Arabic calligraphy, Canetti and Borges figure as evidence, the model of letters is said to be primary, or in Dionigi's variation of Cato's words: *verba tene, res sequetur*. This theory of the primacy of the model of letters, and of the dependence of atomistic upon grammatical terminology provokes several interesting hypotheses: (1) verbal phenomena must be given priority even in literary criticism of Lucretius; (2) by assimilating *versus* and *res* Lucretius completely eliminates any dualism of philosophy and poetry; (3) by virtue of the visibility of letters the whole poem becomes highly visual in character; (4) the consistency of the poem's structure is also founded upon the Epicurean principle of *isonomia*; the equivalence of both structures involves a revalorization of reality and places everything on an equal footing: in *DRN* each thing is as poetical and important as every other.

Chapters two to five (*Lucrezio linguista; Isonomia stilistica; Per una lettura della poesia verbale di Lucrezio; Suono e forma, testo e cosmo: Lucr. 1,305s.*) each providing material for one or more of these hypotheses, predominantly analyze phenomena of language and style. They show how Lucretius' language is systematically used to compose what amounts to a cosmic construction: Dionigi gives many examples of various forms of repetition, ranging from Leoninic rhyme, alliteration, homoioteleuton, *figura etymologica* and *cacemphaton* to semantification of adjacent words. This includes a very useful survey of all cases of deliberate etymology in *DRN* (pp. 65-70). The process of repetition operative on all levels of *DRN* is labeled as "legge binaria" or "legge del due". This law, which can be discerned also in the construction of entire sections (as elaborated mainly in chapter four), is supposed to be based not

merely on rhetorical or didactical rules, but to result from the Epicurean principle of *isonomia*, the symmetry and mutual compensation of contrasts in the cosmos (cfr. *DRN* 2,569-580): thus all lexical elements appear to be spread over the whole text. Hence the "cattedrale verbale" and "trionfo della parola" (p. 87) which Dionigi admires so much, i.e. *DRN* as a structure similar to cosmic reality. Certainly, Dionigi has collected useful material (e.g. p. 48-58; 65-70 and 75-76). His main theory on the Epicurean analogy of language and cosmos is stimulating and does justice to Lucretius.

Every friend of *DRN* will welcome Dionigi's support for the idea that we must not assume a gap between philosophy and poetry, or between dull theoretical and beautiful poetical sections, as many classicists still do. But the idea of the analogy between letters and atoms is clearly expressed in just a few short sections in *DRN* (at the very most some 50 lines, as listed on p. 18). In the important section 5,1028ff, on the origins of language, not a trace of this theory can be found, and Dionigi is wisely silent about that. And, still worse, it leads to far-reaching conclusions on both the conception of reality (as founded on the model of letters) and the construction of *DRN*. Although the cover text comes up with the name of Foucault after only four lines, his name is mentioned only once in the book itself (p. 32; it is missing even in the bibliography), whereas it might have figured here among the authorities for this model of letters. It seems quite unfair to take the model for granted and keep its source out of reach for the reader. Because doubly lacking in solid foundations, the author's theories do not achieve the status of scientific analysis which he is so eager to attain. Would it not have been much better to write an essay instead of taking a scientific approach? Now we find plain ideas about a very clear text expressed in hardly more than verbose jargon, which puts a constant strain even upon the benevolent reader. As a sample I quote a remark on *DRN* 1,305-6 (p. 112): "La convergenza morfologica e sintattica si perfeziona con quella prosodica e stilistica: infatti i due sintagmi, con i participi isosillabici, omeoptotici e isoprosodici, sono accomunati anche dalla sinalefe aspra (*suspensae in/dispensae in*), preceduti dalla cesura pentemimere e seguiti da due emistichi ritmicamente identici (*suspensae in litore vestes/dispensae in sole serescunt*).". If we read "both parts of the sentence are highly similar in forms, position and rhythm" or simply "both parts of the sentence are very similar" we would know just as much. The phrase I quoted belongs to no less than 12 pages of complex analysis

on two extremely lucid and clear verses of *DRN* which seem to require no further explanation: *denique fluctifrago suspensae in litore vestes/uvescunt, eadem dispansae in sole serescunt* ('finally, clothes hung out on the coastline where the waves break, get wet, and these same clothes hung out in the sun get dry').

Another general objection is that the structure of Dionigi's book is a good deal less coherent than he professes of *DRN*. Three chapters have been published as papers, and do not seem to have undergone substantial revision for the book. This sometimes leads to unnecessary repetitions (e.g. on p. 117). The subdivision in chapters two to five is not lucid either: they deal mainly with language and style, but in part with matters of theme as well. Finally, a large appendix on the humanist Marullus as imitator of Lucretius does not have a particular function here, and seems to be included merely to fill out the book. And fill out it does, for it takes 35 pages, which include text and translation of Marullus' 58 lines epigram *Ad Iohannem Lascarem* with 14 densely printed pages of commentary. (If we also excluded the 30 pages of bibliography and indices in the book all in all a mere 110 pages of text would be left.)

Dionigi's text provokes discussion on several issues. I list only a few examples from the chapter on *DRN* 1, 305-6. After two and a half pages of exposition on the words *fluctifragus* and *dispansae* he concludes "Nonché non sorprendenti, *concinntas* e *hapax* sono alla base dei due versi in esame". To consider *hapax* as a constitutive element of a verse is plain nonsense. Then, *uvescunt* is taken without reserve as introduced by Lucretius into literature; *serescunt* is qualified "irripetibile" and "*hapax assoluto*"; *eadem* is said to reinforce the two verbs on a semantic level; *ves* in *vestes* is reproduced in *uvescunt*; *uvescunt* and *serescunt* result from a "gioco retorico e linguistico": I would prefer not to quote Lucretius' *alid ex alio clarescit* (*DRN* 1,1115) as Dionigi does (p. 118).

It is a pity to see how a book full of brilliance and enthusiasm, containing some very stimulating ideas, can be made almost inaccessible by its display of learning and its presenting speculation as sound theory, veiled in grandiloquent prose. Lucretius did not write a scientific treatise, but a poem. Dionigi may be said to have followed Lucretius in passionately 'creating reality through words' but why didn't he choose a different genre too?

6525 HT Nijmegen, Katholieke Universiteit

V. J. Chr. HUNINK