Roman Poets as Literary Historians

Some Aspects of *Imitatio*

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Literary history — like the history of any art — involves a special difficulty; it is that of reconciling a general scheme of development and a linear movement in time with the problem of the individual genius who creates new things. That has not been made easier in recent years when New Critics tried to expel the writer from the text, and then Deconstructionists called the very existence of the text into question. Yet literary history is fundamental to our studies, and this essay starts from the observation that every poet perforce indulges in literary history (sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly) in order to establish a position for himself in an already existing tradition. For originality matters, and always did.

The concept of *imitatio* was particularly useful to Roman poets as a tool for analyzing the relation of a writer to his predecessors. But the concept itself is complex and two aspects of it will be distinguished in what follows. First there is *imitatio exemplorum*, imitation of models; this tends to be focussed on questions of form and style. Second there

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is *imitatio vitae*, the Platonic and Aristotelian concept that art imitates reality, that it holds up a mirror to life; this tends to be focussed on content. Roughly speaking it could be said that the former aspect can be used to explain continuity and development, the latter to give an account of individual genius. That is, *imitatio exemplorum* can be used to estimate a writer’s position in the pre-existing tradition; *imitatio vitae* can estimate his originality. But that formulation is clearly faulty, and there is as much difficulty in keeping the two aspects of *imitatio* separate, as there is in maintaining a distinction between form and content. For ideas can come as readily from reading predecessors as they can from immediate personal experience, and the very dichotomy of form and content seems to be denied in the rhetorical practice of poets from Catullus to Horace (which did not, however, inhibit their use of the dichotomy when it was useful to them theoretically).³

The problem was made the more acute for early Roman poets by a particular circumstance that makes early Roman literature a fascinating area for study. Generally, if allowance is made for individual quirks of archaism or a special interest in imitating much earlier writers, each successive writer can to some extent define himself in terms of his relation to his immediate predecessors. That is true too of early Roman poets, but the situation was immensely complicated by the existence of a constant interference that distorted the system. Each Roman writer was forced to confront and interpret afresh for himself a long-existing and permanent body of highly sophisticated literature in Greek. In fact, the development of Roman literature can also be measured by the nature and the extent of the increase in Roman understanding of Greek literary culture (and that was one criterion that Cicero used in his *Brutus* as an index of progress in the history of oratory in Rome).

The analysis that follows will be partial and idiosyncratic: Pacuvius and Accius will regretfully be omitted, as will the *Odes* of Horace. But these — and many others — can easily be found a place in the scheme. My aim is not to be complete, but to explore a curious continuity in the attitudes of Roman poets from earliest times to the age of Augustus.

The strange origins of Roman literature and its Athena-like birth are vital factors in its history till the time of Ovid. In some ways the writers themselves are their own best historians. Most poets felt constrained to confront this situation explicitly as part of their own poetic activity; in a few it has to be sought in implications. But all of them

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³This is the general thesis of my *Figures of Thought in Roman Poetry* (Yale University Press 1980).
had to find their places in a gravitational field of a complexity quite unknown to any Greek. To them, as to any poet, originality was of prime importance. Although that could be defined slightly differently at different periods and in different genres, what was always needed was the establishment of a distance from predecessors that could accommodate the traditional and even the conventional but absolutely exclude anything approaching mere repetition or plagiarism.

I. The Early Poets

Two series of fragments of the *Annales* have been preserved in which Ennius confronted his own situation theoretically. The first is now only a mere patchwork of tiny fragments and comments by later writers. They come from what was an initiation-scene at the beginning of the epic in which Ennius had a dream on the mountain of the Muses. In the course of the dream Homer appeared and revealed that, after various metempsychoses, his own soul had now passed finally into Ennius' body. What is happening here is that Ennius is claiming explicitly to be *Homerus redivivus*, Homer returned to life: that is, he is not one of the Homeridae so frequently mocked by the poets of Alexandria, but in some sense the revered Homer himself. Thus he escapes Alexandrian criticism that was directed against imitations of Homer. The consequence is a further implicit claim: in this Latin epic on the history of Rome Ennius is doing with the Roman material what Homer would have done had he been a Roman. This establishes the proper generic connection which resides in certain aspects of the form, but it also leaves room for a claim to originality both in content and in the linguistic relationship of Latin with Greek.

The other fragments are from a second prooemium with which Ennius opened the seventh book (or the third triad) of the *Annales*. The text is uncertain in details, but the main ideas are clear (213-17 Vahlen):

\[
\text{scripsere alii rem}
\]
\[
\text{versibus quos olim Faunei vatesque caneant,}
\]
\[
\text{cum neque Musarum scopulos ....}
\]
\[
\text{...nec dicti studiosus quisquam erat ante hunc.}
\]
\[
\text{nos ausi reserare ....}
\]

Others have written history in meters that Fauns and oracle-mongers used to chant, since no one had yet scaled the rocks of the Muses or

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\textsuperscript{4}See O. Skutsch, *Studia Enniana* (London 1968), pp. 18-29, with further references.

\textsuperscript{5}Skutsch, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-34 and 119-29, with further references.
achieved real learning before me; it was I who unloosed the bars <of the gates to Parnassus>....

This is an outspoken and arrogant denial of any *imitatio* by Ennius of his Roman predecessors; they used Saturnian meter (not Homeric hexameters); they could make no claim to *φιλολογία* (*doctrina*); and they owed their inspiration to the Italic fountain goddesses, the Camenae, not to the Greek Muses. Cicero recognized that Ennius was here trying to deny any influence or merit to Naevius, and he made this blunt comment (*Brutus* 75-76):

Tamen illius, quem in vatibus et Faunis adnumerat Ennius, Bellum Poenicum quasi Myronis opus delectat. sit Ennius sane, ut est certe, perfectior; qui si illum, ut simulat, contemneret, non omnia bella persequens primum illud Punicum acerrimum bellum reliquisset. sed ipse dicit cur id faciat. 'Scripsere’, inquit, ‘alii rem vorsibus’ — et luculente quidem scriperunt, etiam si minus quam tu polite. nec vero tibi aliter videri debet, qui a Naevio vel sumpsisti multa, si fateris, vel, si negas, surripuisisti.

However the *Bellum Poenicum* of him [Naevius] whom Ennius reckons among oracle-mongers and Fauns gives the same pleasure as a work of <the sculptor> Myron. One may agree that Ennius is — as he certainly is — more polished. But if he really despised <Naevius> as he pretends, he would not, in recording the history of all the wars, have omitted that most bitter first Punic was. But he himself tells us why he does that. “Others,” he says “have written the history in verse” — and very well they wrote too, even if less smoothly than you. And you have no reason to think otherwise, since you either took many things from Naevius if you confess it, or you stole them if you deny it.

Cicero, the literary historian, was deeply offended by Ennius’ denial of a debt to a distinguished predecessor and he takes him to task severely, schoolmaster-fashion, in direct apostrophe. Ennius was clearly anxious to establish his originality against all Roman predecessors by claiming a debt only to Greeks. But Cicero saw, and had clear evidence for his perception, that *imitatio exemplorum* cannot be avoided by any writer and, even more important, that for a Roman poet that necessarily involves *imitatio* of Latin predecessors.

No fragment of Ennius’ dramatic poetry shows him reflecting on his own poetic activity. For that we turn to Plautus whose situation was different from that of Ennius in his epic poetry. He claimed specifically to be “translating” (*vortere*) Greek plays of the New Comedy. Yet that modest and apparently self-effacing claim is falsified both by the facts and by Plautus’ own words. There are two passages that are worth
special notice in this context. The first is in the *Bacchides* where the slave Chrysalus says (649-50):

> non mihi isti placent Parmenones, Syri,
> qui duas aut tres minas auferunt eris.

I have no interest in your Parmenoes and Syruses who steal merely two or three *minae* from their masters....

This is not only the characteristic boasting of a Plautine slave; it is also a self-conscious reference to the Greek models. Plautus himself is claiming superiority for his character Chrysalus over the ordinary run of slaves as they appear in Greek comedies. That claim to originality (a well-founded one) is made even more strikingly in *Mostellaria* 1149-51 where the following dialogue occurs:

> THEO. quid ego nunc faciam? TRAN. si amicus Diphilo aut Philemoni es, dicitio is quo pacto tuos te servos judificaverit: optumas frustrationes dederis in comoediis.

> THEOPROPIDES. What am I to do now? TRANIO. If you are friendly with Diphilus or Philemon, tell them how your slave made a fool out of you: you will be giving them excellent plots for their comedies.

Here the old man is in despair as he suddenly realizes how abject a fool he has been made by his own slave, and his rhetorical question expects either no answer or an answer quite different from what he gets. It is highly probable that the author of the Greek original of *Mostellaria* was Philemon. His contemporary and rival was Diphilus, and in the Greek play Philemon made a public hit at his rival in this dialogue. What Plautus has done, however, has been to convert that into a hit both at Diphilus and at the author of his own Greek model. This fantasy, which supposes both to be alive (though they were dead for more than half a century), is rightly put in the mouth of the slave Tranio. For Plautus’ originality in respect to his plays as against their Greek models is largely concentrated in the characters of his slaves. Here he claims superiority not only, as Philemon did, to Diphilus, but also to Philemon himself who ought, if Plautus is “translating,” to be reckoned the real author of the *Mostellaria*. Of course Plautus was not translating, but it is only in such unobtrusive ways that he allows his own pride in originality to appear.

However another splendid slave is given a finely ironic claim in *Pseudolus* 401-04:

> sed quasi poeta, tabulas quom cepit sibi,
> quaeque quod nusquam gentium est, reperit tamen,
> facit illud veri simile quod mendacium est,
nunc ego poeta fiam.

But as a poet, when he has taken up his note-pads, looks for what does not exist anywhere in the world, yet finds it and lends verisimilitude to what is a lie, now I shall become a poet.

Pseudolus has undertaken the apparently impossible double feat both of finding a very large sum of money at no notice and also of gaining the girl who has been sold by the pimp Ballio to a mercenary soldier. The difficulties are enormously increased by features that, because of their Roman character, can be shown to have been invented by Plautus. So what the slave has been set to do is also a figure for the problem the poet of this very play had in achieving originality; here that was solved by the invention of new material.

So Plautus establishes a claim to originality for himself in outdoing his Greek models, and he largely substantiates that claim by blending recognizably Roman elements into the basically Greek plot. Consequently *imitatio exemplorum* is only very partial for Plautus not only in style (where there is far more than the difference between Latin and Greek in question), but also in subject-matter. It is to be noted that, in the extant plays at any rate, there is no polemic against Roman predecessors, in spite of the fact that enough fragments of Naevius remain to show that Plautine *imitatio* of him was very considerable. The question of the threat posed by predecessors will become clearer in the case of Terence.

The prologues to Terence’s plays provide the first example of extended literary criticism by a Roman poet. They are cast in the form of a polemic against “a malevolent old poet” (*Andria* 6-7), Luscius Lanuvinus, who is represented as holding strongly to views that are rejected by Terence, and as having, from his own theoretical position, made explicit attacks against each of Terence’s plays. A number of points are of special interest. Terence openly asserts his relationship to specific Greek plays, even representing this relationship as “word for word translation” (*Adelphi* 11); yet he claims originality for himself, speaking of “fresh new comedies” (*de integro comoedias, Andria* 26; cf. *Heautontimorumenos* 4-6, 28-30).

But Terence also makes clear a close relationship to Roman predecessors, saying at *Andria* 18-21:

> qui quom hunc accusant, Naevium, Plautum, Ennium accusant quos hic noster auctores habet, quorum aemulari exoptat neglegentiam

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potius quam istorum obscuram diligentiam.

Those who accuse him [Terence] also accuse those whom our poet claims as his models — Naevius, Plautus, Ennius; he is more interested in emulating their carelessness than the pedantic carefulness of those critics of his.

The accusation supposed to have been made against Terence was of using plot-elements of two Greek comedies to make only one Latin play. The critic polemically designated this activity as "spoiling" (Andria 16, contaminari) plays, and asserted that it is to be condemned. Terence fully admits the charge but argues for imitatio exemplorum: he is merely imitating his Roman predecessors. But he expresses this in a very significant way by using the word aemulari; this echoes Hellenistic use of ζήλος and ζήλωσις,7 and Terence is claiming not just to be passively imitating but also improving on and even surpassing his revered predecessors in this respect (though he avoids challenging Plautus by re-working the same plays8).

The same accusation is faced in the prologue to Heautontimorumenos in a slightly different form (16-21):

16 nam quod rumores distulerunt malevoli
multas contaminasse Graecas dum facit
paucas Latinas: factum id esse hic non negat
neque se pigere et deinde facturum autumat.
20 habet bonorum exemplum quo exemplo sibi
licere facere quod illi fecerunt putat.

It is indeed true that malevolent critics have spread rumors to the effect that he [Terence] has spoiled many Greek plays in making a few in Latin; he does not deny that he has done this, but asserts that he has no regrets and that he will continue to do it. He follows the model of fine writers whose precedent he considers makes it legitimate for him to do what they have done.

The point of view here put into the mouth of Luscius Lanuvinus is that there is, as it were, a limited pool of material from which Roman comedies can be made; the pool is constituted by Greek plays, and previous use of a Greek play by a Roman poet renders that play unavailable to others. This principle is extended here to Greek plays that have supplied only a fraction of their thematic material. The theoretical assumption is that a Latin play is best if it is most faithfully translated.

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8Below, p. 218.
from a single play.

The prologue to the *Eunuchus* carries the argument further. It opens with a strong statement of the importance of realism. Then Luscius Lanuvinus is represented as having reshaped his attack on Terence. He has now accused Terence of plagiarism, on the ground that, in taking the characters of the parasite and the soldier from Menander's *Kolax*, he in fact took them from a play that had been "translated" not only by Naevius but also by Plautus. Here the underlying assumption is that plagiarism is only involved if a dramatist, in some sense, imitates a Roman, but not a Greek, predecessor.

Terence's immediate defense is that he did not know that either the *Kolax* or the *Eunuchus* had previously been translated into Latin. There is no reason to disbelieve this. The conditions of the production of plays at Rome in the early period were such that there could be no question of a complete — or indeed anything but a chaotically random — collection of texts by predecessors being available. Luscius Lanuvinus could easily have had the luck to hit on texts that had not been available to Terence.

But this was only an opening argument designed both to assert his own honesty and to condemn, by implication, the pedantic irrelevance (cf. *Andria* 21, *obscuram diligentiam*) of his critic. But it has this further significance. In the prologue to *Adelphi* Terence makes clear that the scene he has "translated word word" from the *Synapothenescontes* of Diphilus is the one scene in the play that Plautus omitted when he based his *Commorientes* on that same play of Diphilus. Terence was not interested — in fact carefully avoided — imitating and emulating Plautus' workmanship by challenging him where comparison was immediate. He imitated — and improved — Plautus' methods and dramatic practice.

Terence continues with a very interesting line of argument (35-41):

35 quod si personis isdem huic uti non licet
qui mage licet currentem servom scribere,
bonas matronas facere, meretrices malas,
[parasitum edacem, gloriosum militem,]
puerum supponi, falli per servom senem,
40 amare odisse suspicari? denique
nullum est iam dictum quod non dictum sit prius.

However if <our poet> is forbidden to make use of the same char-

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9This is considered below, p. 220.
acters, is it any more possible to portray a running slave, to create matrons that are good, whores that are bad, a parasite that is greedy, a soldier who is boastful, to show a child being substituted, an old man being tricked by a slave, love, hatred, suspicion...? In short, nothing whatever is said now that has not been said before.

Here Terence is making two important points. First, he is implicitly denying that there is any difference between *imitatio* of Greek models and of Roman models since both draw on exactly the same pool of material. Second, he is facing the essential problem of originality: the conditions of poetic composition are such that originality does not come, within a given genre, from the invention of new material, since the criticism that any particular thing has in fact been said before can always be shown to be plausibly grounded; originality can only come from the way in which the material is handled. That is the point of his criticism of Luscius Lanuvinus (*Eun. 7-8*): *qui bene vortendo et easdem scribendo male / ex Graecis bonis Latinas fecit non bonas* ("who made bad Latin plays out of good Greek plays by translating accurately and composing badly"); the playwright who claims to translate still has the opportunity for originality in using the material, and he must exercise that opportunity in order to avoid producing a dull inferior copy of the Greek. Hence, as Cicero was to make clear, *imitatio* of predecessors, whether Greek or Roman, is not only inevitable, it is desirable, and is a prime resource of the poet.

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If we look back over the literary criticism of these three poets, several features emerge. Because of the conspicuous difference created by the shift from Greek to Latin none of these poets felt threatened by the need for *imitatio exemplorum* so long as the predecessors were Greek, but both in Plautus and in Terence the idea of surpassing predecessors, whether Greek or Roman, is a key concept in establishing their own positions. Only Ennius felt threatened by Roman predecessors to such an extent that he felt obliged to deny their influence.

It is more significant that all three poets show strong awareness of the element of *imitatio vitae*, in the sense of experience, from wherever derived, re-interpreted and transposed into traditional literary forms that must be reckoned the common property of all.

Ennius took Roman historical experience and rethought it, looking at it through the eyes of Homer and of other Greek poets (especially tragedians). The short-lived invention of the *fabula praetexta* is a paradigm for this literary procedure of reshaping Roman material to
adapt it to a Greek literary form, and of bodying it out with actual Greek thematic material.

Plautus, following the lead of his Roman predecessors, recast the form of Greek New Comedy and blended Roman elements with Greek in such a way as to create a fantasy-world that is entirely the product of his own imagination, that exists neither in Athens nor in Rome, and that enables him to look at Romans (barbari) and Greeks from a new and unexpected point of view. His imitatio vitae thus creates a satisfying impression of originality.

Terence’s interest in realism as a critical principle is emphatically repeated in his prologues (Heaut. 30-32; Eun. 10-13; Phorm. 4-8). It is realism in the sense of truth to the realities of life and it is a direct expression of his own view of imitatio vitae. In his plays it appears clearly in his recasting of formal features that, though traditionally accepted on the stage, contradicted the realities of life: for instance, he frequently converts what was a monologue or soliloquy in his Greek model into dialogue, and, in general, he modifies the highly rhetorical style of Plautine dramatic dialogue in the direction of a truer representation of the way people actually speak in real life. It also appears in the consistency of his presentation of the Greek milieu, even in details that he himself invented and added to the play (like the character of Antipho in Eunuchus). In this respect he was conspicuously, if silently, correcting his Roman predecessors, especially Plautus. This presented him with an interesting opportunity that he skilfully exploited. Plautus felt free to make his characters, mostly his slaves but also his old men, use Greek every now and then. What Terence was able to do was to exploit the inherent tension between Greek action and Roman language, not in any spirit of Plautine burlesque (with Romans viewed as barbari), but in such a way that Roman elements are given an existence only on the linguistic level as “objective correlatives” and sometimes even as metaphors of emotions.10

II. Lucilius

The importance of Lucilius lies in his invention of a new literary genre whose basis purported aristocratically to be the personal experience of the individual. What gave value to this experience was not any intrinsic weight or importance that it possessed, but simply that it belonged uniquely and peculiarly to one single and distinct individual personality. The literary strategy of the satiric poet was to obliterate

10For some examples see Williams, Tradition and Originality in Roman Poetry (Oxford 1968), pp. 291-94.
any distinction between his poetic persona and that of the private individual. However this chaos of experience of all kinds had to be accommodated to expression in verse and for this purpose forms had to be devised. The closest analogy in earlier Roman literature was the fabula praetexta, but that had a ready-made form in the genre of Greek tragedy. There was, however, no possible Greek predecessor whose model could be followed for satire, and so Lucilius was forced to take note of Latin predecessors for form and style. The category of form in this case was wide and ranged from technical questions of meter to adaptations of what comes close to content, as, for instance, in the concilium deorum of Satire 1, in which Lucilius took over an epic theme that had been used by Ennius in imitation of Homer. Lucilius reacted to this necessity in two ways that are by now familiar. First, he attacked and criticized his Roman predecessors; the fragments give evidence of polemic against Ennius, Caecilius, Accius, Pacuvius, Plautus, and Terence.\(^{11}\) In this way he established himself as a poet against his predecessors, and in this respect he was consequently very like Ennius himself (the poet to whose technique he owed most). Second, he made a great point of appealing to Greek poetic theory (even to the extent of using Greek words) and especially to the influential pronouncements of Callimachus.\(^{12}\) This is analogous to Ennius’ appeal to Homer, and its implication is that Lucilius’ originality in subject-matter (his imitatio vitæ) is matched by his following Greek predecessors on problems of form and style — a claim that was designed to guarantee him immunity from Latin predecessors.

III. General Observations on the Early Period

First, there was a clear prejudice against confessing to imitatio of Latin predecessors; even Terence, who seems an exception in this respect, transformed his claim to belong closely to a tradition established by Latin dramatists into an assertion that he is surpassing his predecessors in the tradition. Furthermore, his claim to belong to a Latin tradition is conspicuously offset by his far greater faithfulness to the Greekness of his Greek models. Of course this prejudice was no more than a prejudice, since, as Terence no less than Cicero recognized, imitatio of Latin predecessors could not possibly be avoided.

Second, a strong distinction is made and maintained (if only implicitly) between imitatio exemplorum and imitatio vitæ. In the case of

\(^{11}\)For Accius and Ennius, Horace Sat. 1. 10. 51-55 (see below, p. 229); detailed references in the Index to Marx’s edition s.vv.

\(^{12}\)Details in M. Puelma Piwonka, Lucilius und Kallimachos (Frankfurt 1949) and
the former the exempla were actually, or were claimed to be Greek, and so the imitatio in Latin could only be in various ways partial and modified; it could be regarded as being concentrated more on form and style than on content. But imitatio vitae opened the path to freedom, for it might involve what could be represented as being purely Roman (as in the cases of Ennius and Lucilius) or Greek blended and transmuted with Roman elements (as in the case of Plautus), or, as with Terence, Greek improved and purified by a more attentive observation of real life as such.

Third, when these poets wished to establish their generic legitimacy and give (however rudimentary) a theoretical basis to their activity, they made appeal to Greek predecessors. This is particularly strange in the case of Lucilius, who had no Greek predecessors. Here again Terence is only an apparent exception, for his appeal to a Latin tradition is used polemically to legitimate a practice that ex hypothesi he could not find in his Greek models, and on every theoretical question he is obviously measuring his activity by the standards of Greek predecessors.

There is a general feature worth noticing that permeates every aspect of the problem in this period. This is the apparently universal respect for the excellence of Greek literary culture which is clear even in Plautus’ claim to surpass his Greek models. It is to this ingrained attitude that, for instance, Terence’s assertion (clearly false) that he is translating his Greek model "word for word" should be referred. It can be seen also, for example, in Plautus’ admiring, if comic, use of the adjective Atticus as a recommendation of quality. Originality could be won from imitatio of Greek models because a poet could be the first to do something or other in Latin; that claim is made by Ennius, Lævius, Lucretius, Virgil, Horace, Propertius, Manilius, Ovid, and Phaedrus. Of course the claim acquired in time the status of a commonplace but it remained at least a rhetorical means for a Latin poet to assert his originality. In time too the idea of "word for word" translation fell into disrepute, and Cicero could say (de finibus 3. 15): nec tamen exprimi verbum e verbo necesse erit, ut interpretes indiserti solent ("it will however be unnecessary to translate word for word, as unqualified translators do"); Horace endorsed this condemnation in Ars Poetica 133-34. But the respect for Greek culture can even be seen in a statement of Afranius. He was writing comedies that were explicitly Roman, were set in Italy, and could therefore have no Greek models. He says in the prologue to his Compitalia:

Italo Mariotti, Studi Luciliani (Firenze 1960).
fateor: sumpsi non ab illo modo, 
sed ut quisque habuit conveniret quod mihi 
quod me non posse melius facere credidi, 
etiam a Latino.

I agree that I did: I borrowed not only from him [Menander] but ac-
cording as any had anything to offer that suited me and that I 
thought I could not do better myself — even from a Latin poet.

Afranius freely confesses to borrowing from Greek poets for a purely 
Roman genre; that need occasion no great surprise. But he postpones 
to a climax his admission of the inconceivable act of borrowing even 
from a Latin poet. Humor and irony are used to underline the gravity 
of the confession.

IV. Catullus and his Successors

Catullus was clearly a beneficiary of Lucilius’ estate, the tradition 
of using private autobiographical material as a basis for poetic com- 
position; but, not surprisingly, Catullus gives no hint of such a debt. 
Instead, the three general attitudes found to be characteristic of the 
early poets are found in Catullus too. Not only does he acknowledge 
no debt to Roman predecessors (except indirectly, in occasional echoes, 
such as that between the opening of poem 64 and the prologue to 
Ennius’ Medea); he conducts vigorous polemic against poets whose 
debt to the tradition that derived from Ennius was conspicuous, pil- 
loried in the archetypal figure of Volusius (36, 95) who used history as 
his subject-matter. The Roman poets he approves are, by contrast, his 
own contemporaries and friends who shared a common point of view; 
not for nothing did Cicero refer to the whole group impatiently as New 
Poets. Their most conspicuous claim was to have broken with tradi-

Second, in his imitatio exemplorum his models were Greek poets, a 
relationship that he did not trouble to conceal. When he goes to the 
length of close translation, he subverts it strongly: in poem 51 by the 
self-mocking ironic final stanza added to Sappho’s poem; in the case of 
poem 66 by the introductory poem 65, apologizing and explaining that 
in his grievous personal situation translation was all he could do. In 
poem 64, where the material was Greek mythology, that traditional 
poetic resource has been modified not only by the highly individual, 
unpredictable, and even intrusive persona of the poet (in which respect

13 Ad Att. 7. 2. 1; Orator 161.
he had a model — to some extent — in the *Hymns* of Callimachus),
but also by the most unexpected reflections with which the poem ends
(384-408) on the contemporary political and social situation in Rome
and Italy. In general, however, his *imitatio vitae* was largely based on
every aspect of his own private life.

Third, Catullus’ theoretical reflection on poetic composition relies
heavily on the ideals especially of Callimachus, as in poem 95 where
contempt for Volusius who is in the tradition of Ennius is balanced by
Callimachean contempt for the inflated Antimachus, an imitator of
Homer; while approval is given to the epyllion *Zmyrna* of his close
friend Cinna. Catullus, for all that he claimed and wished to be
regarded as “new,” was nevertheless displaying very much the same
attitudes that the predecessors from whom he so anxiously wished to
dissociate himself had in their time displayed.

It is less surprising that the same set of attitudes should be clear
in Lucretius, though they are differently expressed. Unlike Catullus,
he mentions a revered predecessor (I. 116-26):

116 an pecudes alias divinitus insinuet se,
Ennius ut noster cecinit, qui primus amoeno
detulit ex Helicone perenni fronde coronam,
per gentes Italas hominum qua clara clueret;

120 etsi praeterea tamen esse Acherusia templaque
Ennius aeternis exponit versibus edens,
quo neque permaneant animae neque corpora nostra,
sed quaedam simulacra modis palloentia miris;
unde sibi exortam semper florentis Homeri

125 commemorat speciem lacrimas effundere salsas
coepisse et rerum naturam expandere dictis.

...or whether by divine direction it [our soul] is implanted in other
creatures, as our Ennius sang who was the first to bring down from
lovely Helicon a wreath of deathless leaves that would win shining
glory throughout the Italian clans of mankind; although besides that
he nevertheless explains, setting it out in eternal verse, that the re-
gions of Acheron exist but that neither our souls nor our bodies en-
dure to that point, only wondrously pallid images of them; and from
here he recalls that the ghost of ever-flourishing Homer rose before
him and began to pour forth salt tears and explain the nature of the
universe in speech.

The most superficial reading of Lucretius reveals his enormous debt to
Ennius. But here Ennius is firmly put in his place: he was indeed the

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14See Williams, *op. cit.* (above, note 10), pp. 700-06.
first great Roman poet and his fame is everlasting; however he belonged to a certain historical period and in his subject-matter he was not only wrong but also self-contradictory. The implication is clear that imitation of Ennius meant also correction of him, but Lucretius leaves the availability of Ennius for imitation as a mere implication and makes no attempt to criticize him other than in his opinions. But a relevant implication resides in what he goes on to say (136-45):

136 nec me animi fallit Graiorum obscura reperta
difficile inlustrare Latinis versibus esse,
multa novis verbis praeertim cum sit agendum
propter egestatem linguae et rerum novitatem;
140 sed tua me virtus tamen et sperata voluptas
suavis amicitiae quemvis efferre laborem
suadet et inducit noctes vigilare serenas
quaerentem dictis quibus et quo carmine demum
clara tuae possim praepandere lumina menti,
145 res quibus occultas penitus convisere possis.

Nor does it escape my mind that it is difficult to illumine the dark discoveries of the Greeks in Latin poetry, especially since much must be treated by means of neologisms because of the poverty of our tongue and the novelty of the subject-matter; yet nevertheless your excellence and the pleasure of the sweet friendship I long for persuade me to endure any effort and induce me to keep awake through quiet nights searching for the words and the poetry to spread a bright light before your mind so that you can see deeply into things that are hidden.

Here Lucretius claims originality for himself and his claim is based on the nature of his subject-matter; but the implication is also clear that no Latin predecessor can possibly help with the most serious problems. The real function of Ennius does not emerge till much later, and then only obliquely (I. 921-34):

921 nunc age quod superest cognosce et clarius audi.
nec me animi fallit quam sint obscura; sed acri
percussit thyrsus laudis spes magna meum cor
et simul incussit suavem mi in pectus amorem
925 Musarum, quo nunc instinctus mente vigenti
avia Pieridum peragro loca nullius ante
trita solo. iuvat integros accedere fontes
atque haurire, iuvatque novos decerpere flores
insignemque meo capiti petere inde coronam
930 unde prius nulli velarint tempora Musae;
primum quod magnis doceo de rebus et artis
religionum animum nodis exsolvere pergo,
deinde quod obscura de re tam lucida pango
carmina, musaeo contingens cuncta lepore.

Now come, get to understand what remains and hear it the more clearly. And it does not escape my mind how dark these things are; but a great hope of fame has spurred my heart with its penetrating goad and has simultaneously injected sweet love of the Muses into my soul. Now, inspired by that, with vigorous mind I traverse pathless regions of the Pierides, previously trodden by the foot of none. It is my pleasure to reach untouched springs and drink of them, and it is my pleasure to pluck completely new flowers and make a glorious crown for my head from them, from which the Muses have never wreathed the brow of any man previously: in the first place because I teach important things and I strive to free the mind from the tight knots of superstition; in the second place because I lay out such bright poetry on a dark subject, touching everything with the charm of the Muses.

The phrases here echo what he said in praise of Ennius, especially concerning the idea of being the first. But the emphasis is heavily on his own originality in the twin pictures of pathless regions never before trodden by anyone, and of a completely new crown presented by the Muses. What is remarkable here is that this originality is consistent with following Epicurus.\(^\text{15}\) The claim, here left implicit, is that Lucretius can, in the word used by Terence, rival Ennius in being the first in a new way of his own by doing something never done before. Lucretius' driving ambition for an immortal fame of his own is consistent with admiration for, and imitation of, Ennius. But the emphasis on things Greek is to be noticed. Even in style he cannot be much helped by Latin predecessors since it is only Greeks who have wrestled with these ideas before. Only two men are treated by Lucretius as gods, and both are Greeks. Epicurus is constantly so treated because of the originality and power of his thinking. But he wrote in prose and so could not be a model, other than in contributing to *imitatio vitae*, for Lucretius. The other Greek so treated was a poet, and he is given a laudation that is greater than Ennius'. The passage of no less than eighteen lines ends thus (l. 729-33):

\[
\begin{align*}
730 && \text{nil tamen hoc habuisse viro praeclarius in se} \\
\text{carmina quin etiam divini pectoris eius} \\
\text{vociferantur et exponunt praecclare reperta} \\
\text{ut vix humana videatur stirpe creatus.}
\end{align*}
\]

...yet <Sicily> clearly never possessed anything more glorious, anything more holy, anything more admired or more loved than this

\(^{15}\)Below, pp. 227-28
man. Moreover the poems of his godlike soul speak forth and ex-
pound his shining discoveries so that he seems hardly born of human
stock.

Empedocles is treated as the greatest of a whole series of Greeks; but
they were, for all their genius, basically wrong. In fact the praise of
Empedocles is subverted in the lines that follow on grounds of falsity in
his subject-matter, so that what remains eternal in him is his poetry, his
style, and in this respect he provided a model for Lucretius — a Greek,
not a Roman model. It is the second of the two bases for Lucretius' 
claim to immortal fame (933-34) that he employs poetry to carry and
recommend the doctrines of Epicurus (whose subject-matter is the first
basis, vv. 931-32, for Lucretius' fame), and in that effort his great
predecessor and model was Empedocles, who stood to Homer in a simi-
lar relation to that of Lucretius to Ennius. Once again the influence of
the Latin predecessor, Ennius, is played down in favor of the Greek
Empedocles, though this is done only very indirectly.

Here it is worth remarking that Lucretius' relation to Empedocles,
mediated by Ennius, is exemplified in a memorable phrase.16 Empedo-
cles in frag. 26 Wright (20 Diels) speaks of the uniting of the bodily
parts in life and their disintegration in death (5): πλάζεται ἄνδρον ἕκαστα
περὶ ῥηγμῖν βίοιο “(torn asunder) they wander, each
separately, about the shoreline of life.” Ennius (114 V) said of
Romulus τοὺς προδοκιστήν τοὺς ἐντεκνίσαν 
Oras ("you brought us forth
within the coasts of life": cf. 131 V). The phrase in 
Oras is used
no less than nine times by Lucretius.17

The relation with Ennius is expressed (I. 116-26) in terms of
Ennius' primacy in his own time. That idea of relativity (viz. that a
poet's achievement is to be judged in relation to his age) which Lucre-
tius uses to distance Ennius from himself is important for literary his-
tory and is used impressively by Cicero in his Brutus.18 It left Lucretius
free from a paralyzing sense of Ennius' greatness on the one hand and
of the necessity to denigrate him (as Ennius did his predecessors) on
the other.

Another concept is used by Lucretius to deal with his relation to
Epicurus. It is remarkable that in the passage quoted above (I. 921-34)
Lucretius speaks of his own originality in the figure of the pathless,
untrodden wilderness. Yet he can praise Epicurus in the prooemium to

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16For other parallels between Lucretius and Empedocles, see M. R. Wright, Emp-


17I. 22, 170, 179; II. 577, 617; V. 224, 781, 1389, 1455.

18Especially 292-300.
Book III, especially in vv. 3-6:

\[
\text{te sequor, o Graiae gentis decus, inque tuis nunc}
\text{ficta pedum pono pressis vestigia signis,}
\text{non ita certandi cupidus quam propter amorem}
\text{quod te imitari aveo.}
\]

It is you that I follow, O glory of the Greek race, and in the tracks that you have marked out I now plant my carefully placed footsteps, not so much desiring to rival you as because through love I am long-ing to imitate you.

He goes on to compare himself to a swallow (in relation to Epicurus’ swan) and then to a bee sipping from Epicurus’ pages. What is striking here is the explicit picture of following step by step and the equally explicit denial of \textit{aemulari} in favor of an \textit{imitari} that arises from inspiration (\textit{amor}). What allows this close imitation of Epicurus to exist side by side with a strong claim to originality is a clear-cut distinction between form and content, figured in the image of Lucretius as a doctor administering unpleasant medicine (the ideas) wrapped in sweet-tasting honey (the poetry). Epicurus is only relevant to \textit{imitatio vitae}, but that is so totally transformed by the poetic form that the \textit{imitatio exemplorum} is consistent with a claim to complete originality and primacy. The importance of the thematic material (I. 931-32) is independent of its origin in Epicurus, and the junction of it with the poetry (I. 933-34) creates the second element in Lucretius’ claim to originality; with Epicurus he did not need to strive for primacy (\textit{certare}), but as against a Latin predecessor he had to assert his own originality.

The same pattern can be seen in Horace’s \textit{Satires}. He had an acknowledged predecessor in Lucilius and he established himself by attacking his predecessor. He does this with tact and restraint, but explicitly. The attack on Lucilius’ style is undertaken in his own voice, but the attack on Lucilius’ tone and subject-matter is put into the mouths of anonymous readers who are also supposed to criticize Horace for adopting a similarly hostile tone towards his targets. In \textit{Satires} I. 4 Lucilius is approved for his outspoken attacks on vice (cf. \textit{Sat.} I. 10. 3-4), but he is criticized for his hasty and careless style (9-13); however the poet avoids this issue for the moment by agreeing not to consider whether satire is really poetry and by concentrating on an explanation and defense of its subject-matter. In \textit{Satires} I. 10 he comes back to the question of Lucilius’ style,\textsuperscript{19} treats satire as subject to the severe

\textsuperscript{19}This strategy is tactful, since it allows Horace to get in his brief but pungent criticism of Lucilius in \textit{Sat.} I. 4. His return to the problem is then motivated in \textit{Sat.} I. 10 by Horace’s assertion that someone has objected to his criticism of Lucilius’ style and that
standards by which poetry should be judged (7-19), and finds Lucilius seriously deficient. Here Horace uses the same argument from relativity as Lucretius. He points out that as he criticizes Lucilius, so Lucilius attacked his Latin predecessors, Accius and Ennius (53-55), and also that Lucilius was admirable by the standards of his own time but that, had he lived in Horace's, he would have changed much (64-71). The argument relieves the attack from self-serving meanness and arrogance.

That effect is also achieved by another stratagem. In Satires I. 10 Horace speaks of satire as being the one poetic genre that he could write, in which he is better than "Varro of Atax and certain others who tried it and failed," but he is inventore minor ("inferior to the inventor," 48). This statement is carefully insulated from the relativistic attack on Lucilius in 64-71. The theme is repeated twice in Satires II. I: at line 29 where the poet says nostrum melioris utroque, "better than either of us"; and at 74-75 quicquid sum ego, quamvis / infra Lucili censum ingeniumque, "of whatever account I am, although inferior both in income and in genius to Lucilius." The superiority of the inventor was what Lucretius could fully concede without threat to himself, since Epicurus was generically remote. But in each instance the Horatian admission of inferiority is modified — in I. 10. 48 by limiting it to the fact of generic invention itself; in II. 1. 74-75 by including income ironically with genius; and in II. 1. 29 by associating Trebatius also with the inferiority.

Another stratagem used by Lucretius is also made to work for Horace. This is the drawing of a very sharp distinction between style and content and so between imitatio exemplorum and imitatio vitae. This is done in Satires I. 4 in such a way as certainly to make clear the poet's attitude to Lucilius' stylistic shortcomings but yet to postpone to Satires I. 10 the detailed attack. That device enabled Horace to claim stylistic originality for himself by showing the deficiencies of his only real predecessor; the ideals of poetic composition that he asserts are his own, but they are also measured against the highest standards of his own age. It is the case with Horace, as it was with Lucretius, that only the junction of style and subject-matter — not either by itself — can constitute his real claim to originality and uniqueness. In imitatio vitae the nature of the genre allowed Horace to regard Lucilius as the exemplary predecessor but did not endanger his claim to originality. Since the genre was founded on personal experience, the subject-matter was ex hypothesi original. In fact Horace represents his own procedure as
founded, without any reference to Lucilius, on the moralizing of his own father (I. 4. 103-26) and on his consequent acquisition of a unique moral sense of his own, such that his satire becomes a natural extension of his own moral self-reflections. The satiric writer’s relation to his own writing is figured in Satires II. 1 as that of a man with faithful and intimate friends to whom he entrusts the secrets of his life in all its aspects (30-34); that is the model which Lucilius handed on to him.

The relationship with Lucilius is exemplary in Satires I. 5 where a sufficiency of fragments remains from Lucilius’ Iter Siculum to establish a close connection between it and Horace’s account of his journey to Brundisium in 37 B.C. Porphyrio (the third century commentator on Horace) says of this (on Sat. I. 5. 1):

Lucilio hac satyra aemulatur Horatius iter suum a Roma Brundesium usque describens, quod et ille in tertio libro fecit, primo a Roma Capuam usque et inde fretum Sicilense. 20

Here the commentator interprets the relationship as one of aemulatio, as if Horace were challenging and trying to surpass Lucilius; but the concept of aemulatio belongs in this form to a later age and has little relevance to what Horace does. Lucilius was the “inventor” of the genre, he gave it shape and form, and he defined (if only implicitly) its “rules” (leges). A particular journey possesses of necessity a structure and a series of typical features that makes it similar to any other journey. What Horace does in Satires I. 5 is to authenticate his own autobiographical presence in the poem as the narrator of experiences of his own, but he also structures his own experience on the pattern provided by Lucilius. This can be expressed in a general way in the form of a far-reaching distinction. It is to be drawn between imaginatively reliving and reshaping particular experiences (which can come from any source, including the books of predecessors) in accordance with the totality of one’s own experience (which can also include books); and, on the other hand, regarding experience as pre-existing in a given package in such a way that the problem becomes one not of reinterpretation, but of exercising ingenuity on giving the package a new shape in accordance with the rules of inventio. The latter attitude becomes characteristic of writers who followed Ovid and the procedure is then certainly one of explicit aemulatio, of taking what the earlier writer provides and of outdoing him by discovering potentialities in it that he failed to exploit. In the former, however, imitatio vitae and imitatio exemplorum become united in a single process, so that Horace can both imitate Lucilius but also substantiate the presentation of his own

unique experience of life. It was the same procedure that allowed Lucretius to follow Epicurus step by step and yet legitimate a claim to real originality. That too was the procedure of Horace in relation to Lucilius, and that was the true model for Samuel Johnson’s imitation of Satires 3 and 10 of Juvenal in London and The Vanity of Human Wishes.

There was also a third way in which Horace followed the pattern of imitatio set by early Roman poets: when he seeks theoretically to establish his own generic legitimacy he appeals to Greek writers. This is the true explanation of the extraordinary piece of literary history that opens Satires I. 4. There he claims that Lucilius was totally dependent on Eupolis, Cratinus and Aristophanes, the poets of Old Comedy, and they are emphatically designated as poetae. They can therefore constitute models of poetic excellence by which Lucilius can be measured and found wanting. But the topic is no sooner raised in Satires I. 4 than it is dropped by the poet’s agreeing to shelve the question whether satire is poetry or not. It is, however, taken up again in Satires I. 10, and, after a careful definition of the ideal style required for satire (7-15), the poet says (16-17):

illi scripta quibus comoedia prisca viris est
hoc stabant, hoc sunt imitandi.

It was on this that those men who wrote Old Comedy took their stand, it is for this that they must be imitated.

Great Greek predecessors must supply literary standards — for the age of Horace no less than for that of Lucilius; but one must no more use Greek words in Latin poems (as Lucilius did — 20-30) than one must go to the length of actually trying to write in Greek (as Horace once did — 31-35). That idea of Greeks supplying standards returns in the important passage where the concept of relativity is applied to Lucilius (64-67):

fuerit Lucilius, inquam,  
comis et urbanus, fuerit limiator idem  
quam rudis et Graecis intacti carminis auctor,  
quamque poetarum seniorum turba....

I most certainly concede that Lucilius was elegant and witty and far more polished than the composer of a rough poem untouched by Greek culture, in fact than the whole crew of earlier poets....

The literary distinction that Lucilius achieved was due to the fact that he carefully studied and adopted (as he claimed) the standards of Greek predecessors. But now Horace, while recognizing Lucilius’ virtues in terms of the time at which he lived, can apply the same
standards with more rigor and understanding. Cicero in his *Brutus* had used this concept of increasing acquaintance with Greek literary culture as a versatile and potent tool in analyzing development in Roman oratory.

For Virgil in his *Eclogues* there was no Latin predecessor and he had no need — indeed, clearly, unlike Catullus, no inclination — to attack or even criticize another poet (except perhaps for Maevius and Bavius, whoever they were). But, like Catullus, he gave loud acclaim to distinguished elder contemporaries, G. Asinius Pollio and G. Cornelius Gallus. Neither of them wrote poetry in the least generically related to pastoral, but in *Eclogue* 10 Virgil invented an ingenious way of defining the relation of pastoral to elegiac love-poetry by transposing Gallus to Arcadia, a venture that could then be shown poetically to be impossible.\(^{21}\) The *Georgics*, however, were different. Here Latin predecessors were probably confined to prose-writers, but Virgil draws emphatic attention to Lucretius. The subject-matter of the *De Rerum Natura* (as defined in *Georgics* II. 490-92) came within the scope of the secondary field of the *Georgics* and the poet establishes what amounts to a polemical position against Lucretius. He prays to the Muses whose devotee he is and by whom he is deeply inspired (II. 475-76; the language echoes that of Lucretius) to teach him the nature of the universe (477-82). But the depressing idea occurs to him that his own talents may be deficient for that undertaking (483-84); if so, may he be inspired (*amare*) by the beauties of the countryside, and, as he speaks, he feels the inspiration coming over him (485-89). Then, corresponding to the dichotomy he has set up between understanding the nature of the universe on the one hand and coming to know the countryside on the other, there comes the assertion of the felicity (*felix*) of the man who has achieved intellectual dominance over the human condition (490-92) and the good fortune (*fortunatus*) of him who has come to know the deities of the countryside (493-94). What is particularly interesting here is not only the wish to match the achievement of a Lucretius (and the sense that it may be beyond his powers),\(^{22}\) but also the implicit denial of Lucretius’ dichotomy between subject-matter and form, between the teachings of Epicurus and the poetic inspiration of the Muses. For Virgil the Muses are the source of both: that is, failure to understand the universe is a failure of poetry. That idea of the unity of form and content, such that alteration of the one necessarily involves adjustment of the other, can be seen to underlie the

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\(^{21}\)For this interpretation see Williams, *op. cit.* (above, note 3), pp. 231-36.

\(^{22}\)For details, *ibid.*, pp. 250-51.
This meant that for Virgil the distinction between *imitatio exemplorum* and *imitatio vitae* was artificial (in a way to be defined), and that view had important consequences. First, poetic inspiration was therefore a totality such that material from whatever source was transformed and became the absolute possession of the poet who used it. Second, the question whether a predecessor to whom a poet was indebted was Greek or Roman came to be of utter indifference. Third, the text of a predecessor could become active in the later text in such a way that it was not challenged by the later text but extended its scope. The artifice of distinguishing between *imitatio exemplorum* and *imitatio vitae* was transformed in all of Virgil’s poetry into a more creative distinction. All of his poetry can be seen to make use of a relationship between primary and secondary fields; this often seems to correspond to the relationship between the two types of *imitatio*, but that distinction tends to become unhelpful. It works quite well in the *Eclogues* where the primary field is usually constituted by specific reference to the poetry of Theocritus (though in *Eclogue* 10 it is the secondary field that is so constituted). However in the *Georgics* the primary field concerns the specified technical subject-matter of farming, while the secondary field embraces the human condition as such in all of its most far-reaching aspects. In the *Aeneid* the primary field is the announced subject-matter of the poet, the tale of what happened to one man in a period of less than a decade in the twelfth century; this field can certainly be regarded in part as related to the two epic texts of Homer. The secondary field concerns the whole panorama of Roman history and especially the period of the poem’s composition in the age of Augustus; this field can correspondingly be regarded as belonging more closely to *imitatio vitae*. In each case the secondary field is deliberately left incomplete; instead indexes to the proportionality of the two fields enable the reader to sense and reconstruct the secondary in imagination. Analogous techniques can be seen in a few poems of Catullus and in Propertius’ early work, and there may be something remotely similar to the technique of the *Eclogues* in the seventh *Idyll* of Theocritus. But essentially this was Virgil’s invention and it influenced some later work of Horace. However, Virgil’s work and much of Horace’s was being misinterpreted from a time soon after it was composed, because attitudes to literature underwent a radical change in the later age of Augustus.

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Yet in another way Virgil followed the pattern of his Latin predecessors. On the one hand he appealed to Greek predecessors to establish generic legitimacy, and on the other he claimed primacy in spite of their existence. In the *Eclogues* his predecessor was Theocritus, and he also makes clear allusion to Callimachus in the opening of *Eclogue* 6 where he also claims primacy for himself. However he is much more explicit in the *Georgics*. At II. 173-76 he says:

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salve, magna parens frugum, Saturnia tellus,
magna virum: tibi res antiquae laudis et arte
ingredior sanctos ausus recludere fontes,
Ascraeumque cano Romana per oppida carmen.
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Hail, great mother of harvests, land of Saturn, great mother of heroes: in your honor I begin on themes of ancient glory and on a skill, bold to open up springs of inspiration, and through Roman towns I sing a Hesiodic song.

Here a claim to primacy resides in the verb *recludere* and the language echoes Lucretius'; but Hesiod remains the acknowledged master. The claim to primacy is even more powerful in the prooemium to Book III (10-13 *primus...primus*...), but there the primacy is confined to Italy. The poet also expresses a longing for poetic fame which he can only achieve by avoiding the hackneyed themes of Greek mythology (3-9). A third passage (III. 289-93) alludes expressly to Lucretius:

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nec sum animi dubius verbis ea vincere magnum
quam sit et angustis hunc addere rebus honorem;
sed me Parnasi deserta per ardua dulcis
raptat amor: iuvat ire iugis, qua nulla priorum
Castaliam molli devertitur orbita clivo.
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But my mind is in no doubt how mighty a task it is to master these themes in words and add poetic distinction to narrow topics. But sweet inspiration (*amor*) compels me to traverse deserted heights of Parnassus; it is my delight to scale ridges where no path of a predecessor turns aside to Castalia by an easy slope.

The allusion to Lucretius is clear in the word for word imitation of that poet’s anxiety about his task. For Lucretius the difficulty lay in the obscurity of his subject-matter. But for Virgil it lies in giving distinction to humble material (sheep and goats), and here he relies for a moment on the Lucretian distinction between form and content that had previously been implicitly denied; here it was practically useful. The Greek predecessor, as in Lucretius, can here be ignored from this point of view where originality must come from the difficult and innovating conjunction of subject-matter and style. This was a fact about poetic originality that Terence had recognized.
Propertius, unlike Virgil but like Horace the satirist, had to contend with obvious Latin predecessors. Poets like Catullus and Cornelius Gallus could not be overlooked; Catullus invented the genre of love-elegy with poem 68 and Gallus developed it. Propertius does not criticize either poet in order to establish a place for himself. His technique is to write literary history in a novel way. In II. 34 he finds a place for himself in a tradition that he traces as starting with Varro of Atax, then Catullus, then Calvus, then Gallus, and finally Propertius (85-94). But he precedes this list with a detailed treatment of Virgil’s fame as poet of the Aeneid, the Eclogues, and the Georgics; this treatment (61-84) occupies more than twice the space devoted to elegiac love-poetry. This is a strange procedure, but its purpose (indeed it is the whole strategy of the passage in the poem) is certainly to define poets in terms of their subject-matter. This serves to limit Propertius’ indebtedness to his Latin predecessors to subject-matter. But, as with Horace, this means that his claim to originality is left unimpaired, since, ex hypothesi, the genre being based on the personal experiences of the poet, his imitatio vitae must be his own, however widened and conditioned by reading and structured by literary experience. In fact Propertius actually claims to surpass both Calvus and Catullus simply because the unhappiness of his situation, which is the basis of his poetry, makes Cynthia who is the cause of it the most notorious beauty in literature (II. 25. 1-4).

Consequently Propertius follows earlier Latin poets in making a strong distinction between imitatio exemplorum and imitatio vitae. That left him as free as his predecessors to appeal to Greek poets on questions of technique and generic legitimacy. The paradox emerges that his imitatio vitae is confined to Latin predecessors; but his imitatio exemplorum is focussed on Greeks like Callimachus and Philetas, especially the former (in II. 1. 40; II. 34. 32; III. 1. 1-6; IV. 1. 64) who from earlier times provided Roman poets with the doctrinal apparatus of poetic technique. But a curious difficulty emerged from this for Propertius in his later poetry. He there proposed for himself the highly un-Callimachean subject-matter of the history of Rome (IV. 1. 1-70). He confesses however (57-64):

moenia namque pio coner disponere versu:
ei mihi, quod nostro est parvus in ore sonus!

sed tamen exiguo quodcumque e pectore rivi

60 fluxerit, hoc patriae serviet omne meae.

Ennius hirsuta cingat sua dicta corona:
mi folia ex hedera porrige, Bacche, tua,
ut nostris tumefacta superbiat Umbria libris,

Umbria Romani patria Callimachi.
Indeed I am set on trying to align the walls <of Rome> in patriotic poetry — alas for me, only a tiny tonal range is mine! Nevertheless whatever the trickle that shall flow from my tiny breast, every drop of it shall be in the service of my country. Let Ennius wreath his poetry with a shaggy crown: allow me, Bacchus, leaves from your own ivy so that Umbria may lord it, swollen with pride over my books of poetry, Umbria the homeland of the Roman Callimachus.

But, however Callimachean Propertius is able to make his proposal sound by referring to aetiology, this formulation with its patriotic devotion, is alien to the Greek poet.24 That is underlined by the fact that the smallness of scale and tone, which were in earlier poems treated as ideal virtues, turn out in this context to be weaknesses. Indeed the poet is here being compelled to appeal to Callimachus not for doctrine on technique but on subject-matter, and when a Roman predecessor is to be named he can only be Ennius, the very poet who had to be rejected in the recusatio III. 3, where Propertius’ small voice made it impossible for him to follow Ennius. But here in IV. 1 he is rejecting the earlier erotic subject-matter (to which he clung in III. 3) and the only Latin predecessor he can now name is Ennius. The difficulty arose from the possibility that Callimachus could revere Homer but declare him off limits for contemporary poetic imitation; he was therefore able to pour scorn on the Homeridae and their followers. That still left him with Hesiod as an acceptable model. But, unlike the high esteem in which later Greeks held Homer, later Roman poets could only regard Ennius as primitive and rough and quite unsuitable as a model. Propertius was therefore forced to make the traditional distinction between form and content in order to criticize Ennius and refuse him as a model for style, while acknowledging his distinction in Lucretian terms and following him in subject-matter. Propertius had no one like Hesiod to substitute for Ennius, and so he is here compelled to present himself as the Roman Callimachus by the very odd procedure of making Ennius Callimachean.

V. Conclusion

What I have tried to show is that the extraordinary way in which Roman literature took its first origins compelled poets for a century and a half to devise a complex and flexible theory of imitatio that was capable of defining their relationship to, and maintaining a distance, not only from Greek models but, even more, from predecessors in their

own language. One important aspect of the subsequent development and history of Roman poetry down to and including the age of Augustus can therefore be analyzed in terms of continual adaptations of that basic theory of *imitatio*. The constraints on Roman poets, as each sought for himself an undisputed place in the tradition, and their responses to those constraints, remained very much the same from the beginnings down to the death of Horace in 8 B.C. Already by that time new conditions had begun to take shape, and the new genius of Ovid had been devising new responses to those new conditions; they were to dominate poetic activity for the following century and beyond.

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25 I have explored this change in *Change and Decline: Roman Literature in the Early Empire* (University of California Press 1978), especially chapters 2 and 5.