

Looking for a book recommendation

Post by “Joshua” of June 19, 2024 at 2:27 AM

The three books I can think of that are absent from your list are;

- *A Few Days in Athens* by Frances Wright, a fictional story set in the Garden
- *Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom* by David Sedley, an in depth exploration of how Lucretius interpreted Epicurus
- *The Sculpted Word* by Bernard Frischer, a study of Epicurean bronzes and marbles from the ancient world

I would also glance over the following essays/lectures/letters and see if they catch your eye;

- John Tyndall's [Belfast Address](#)
- An essay on Lucretius from George Santayana's [Three Philosophical Poets](#)
- Prof. Ian Johnston's [Lecture on Lucretius](#)
- Lucy Hutchinson's [Letter to the Earl of Anglesey](#), disavowing her very early translation of Lucretius

And it's sometimes fruitful to read the introductions to the various translations, even if you have no intention of reading the translation itself.

Quote

But Lucretius was not a mere poet, casting into graceful language the interesting results of thought. He was a real student both of nature and man, and from his stores of information we may learn not only his errors but the happy guesses and pregnant suggestions of ancient science. Thus, for instance, his doctrines of elemental atoms and images have a real relation to the more substantial theories of modern times. Moreover, the questions vitally affecting the position of man in the world, which are suggested or discussed by Lucretius, are parallel to questions which have risen into prominence in connection with the increasing study of nature. Most conspicuous among these, is the relation of physical inquiry to religious belief. Objections were urged against such inquiry in ancient times, on the ground of its impiety and unbelief. Just as there are found in modern times those who reprobate the audacity and insufficiency of reason, there were those in the time of Lucretius who denounced the inquiries into physical phenomena as dishonoring immortal things by mortal words.

The views of Lucretius on the nature and origin of life, the progressive advance of man from the rudest condition, by the exercise of his senses and accumulated experience, his denial of final causes, his resolution of all knowledge into the intimations of sense,

his materialism and consequent denial of immortality, and his utilitarianism in morals, all present striking parallels to the opinions of one of the great schools of modern thought, and one passage on the preservation and destruction of species looks like a faint poetic anticipation of a theory which has attracted much notice in the present day.

I can cite this example from Charles Frederick Johnson, published 11 years after Darwin's *Origin of Species*, when questions relating to teleology in nature were more urgent than they seem to us now. When Lucretius writes about the development of the eye and other organs, it's easy to gloss over what is really a full frontal assault against Aristotle. I probably wouldn't have picked up on that before reading this passage from Johnson.

Then there is this paragraph from [Cyril Bailey](#);

Quote

But it would be the greatest mistake to think of Lucretius or his master as the author of a mere polemic against religion. Still less is Epicurus justly represented—as has sometimes been the case—as patching together from various sources a crude piecemeal view of the world to combat superstition and afford a plausible basis for a moral theory of doubtful moral tendency. If there is one point that modern work at Epicureanism tends to reveal, it is that it was a serious philosophy, a consistent whole derived from a single starting-point and following step by step with logical precision. As such Lucretius had learnt it, and as such he intended to present it, and many of the difficulties which modern critics have found in his detail, many of the puerilities at which they have scoffed, are to be explained by the perfectly consistent and relentless application of his fundamental principles. He has seemed trivial or inconsistent or obscure to his critics, because they would not take him seriously enough.

So there is occasionally good fruit in these introductions (which are, I'll be the first to admit, just as often repetitive and tiresome). I don't have a favorite, but John Mason Good's is singularly bad.