

# Four Translations of "When Human Life...."

Post by "Cassius" of June 30, 2018 at 4:24 PM

I think these side-by-side Latin and alternate translations are helpful. Slight word changes can lead to significant changes in meaning, and translators tend to add or subtract words depending on their own view of what a passage "should" mean. Here is perhaps the most famous passage of all from Lucretius Book 1 -

Munro: "When human life to view lay foully prostrate upon earth crushed down under the weight of religion, who showed her head from the quarters of heaven with hideous aspect lowering upon mortals, a man of Greece ventured first to lift up his mortal eyes to her face and first to withstand her to her face. Him neither story of gods nor thunderbolts nor heaven with threatening roar could quell: they only chafed the more the eager courage of his soul, filling him with desire to be the first to burst the fast bars of nature's portals. Therefore the living force of his soul gained the day: on he passed far beyond the flaming walls of the world and traversed throughout in mind and spirit the immeasurable universe; whence he returns a conqueror to tell us what can, what cannot come into being; in short on what principle each thing has its powers defined, its deep-set boundary mark. Therefore religion is put underfoot and trampled upon in turn; us his victory brings level with heaven."

<p>T. LUCRETII LIB. I.</p> <p><i>Humana ante oculos fada cum vita jaceret In terris oppressa gravi sub Religione, Quae caput à caeli regionibus ostendebat, Horribili super aspectu mortalibus instans; Primum GRAVUS homo mortaleis tollere contra Est oculos ausus, primumque obistere contra: Quem nec fama Deum, nec fulmina, nec minitanti Murmure compressit Caelum, sed eo magis acrem Virtutem irratat animi, confringere ut ardua Naturae primus portarum claustra cupiret. Ergo virvida vis animi pervicit, &amp; extra Processit longe flammantia moenia Mundi; Atque omne immensum peragravit mente animoque: Unde refert nobis victor quid possit oriri, Quid nequeat; finita potestas denique quoique Quanam sit ratione, atque alte terminus haerens. Quare Religio pedibus subiecta vicissim Obteritur, nos exaequat victoria Caelo.</i></p>	<p><b>Browne 1743:</b> Indeed mankind, in wretched bondage held, lay groveling on the ground, galled with the yoke of what is called Religion; from the sky this tyrant shewed her head, and with grim looks hung over us poor mortals here below; until a man of Greece with steady eyes dared look her in the face, and first opposed her power. Him not the fame of Gods nor thunder's roar kept back, nor threatening tumults of the sky; but still the more they roused the active virtue of his aspiring soul, as he pressed forward first to break thro' Nature's scanty bounds. His mind's quick force prevailed; and so he passed by far the flaming limits of this world, and wander'd with his comprehensive soul o'er all the mighty space; from thence returned triumphant; told us what things may have a being, and what cannot; and how a finite power is fixed to each; a bound it cannot break; and so Religion, which we feared before, by him subdued, we tread upon in turn; his conquest makes us equal to the Gods.</p>	<p><b>Munro 1886:</b> When human life to view lay foully prostrate upon earth crushed down under the weight of religion, who showed her head from the quarters of heaven with hideous aspect lowering upon mortals, a man of Greece ventured first to lift up his mortal eyes to her face and first to withstand her to her face. Him neither story of gods nor thunderbolts nor heaven with threatening roar could quell: they only chafed the more the eager courage of his soul, filling him with desire to be the first to burst the fast bars of nature's portals. Therefore the living force of his soul gained the day: on he passed far beyond the flaming walls of the world and traversed throughout in mind and spirit the immeasurable universe; whence he returns a conqueror to tell us what can, what cannot come into being; in short on what principle each thing has its powers defined, its deep-set boundary mark. Therefore religion is put underfoot and trampled upon in turn; us his victory brings level with heaven.</p>	<p><b>Bailey 1936:</b> When the life of man lay foul to see and groveling upon the earth, crushed by the weight of religion, which showed her face from the realms of heaven, lowering upon mortals with dreadful mien, 'twas a man of Greece who dared first to raise his mortal eyes to meet her, and first to stand forth to meet her: him neither the stories of the gods nor thunderbolts checked, nor the sky with its revengeful roar, but all the more spurred the eager daring of his mind to yearn to be the first to burst through the close-set bolts upon the doors of nature. And so it was that the lively force of his mind won its way, and he passed on far beyond the fiery walls of the world, and in mind and spirit traversed the boundless whole; whence in victory he brings us tidings what can come to be and what cannot, yea and in what way each thing has its power limited, and its deepset boundary-stone. And so religion in revenge is cast beneath men's feet and trampled, and victory raises us to heaven.</p>	<p><b>Smith 2001:</b> When all could see that human life lay groveling ignominiously in the dust, crushed beneath the grinding weight of superstition, which from the celestial regions displayed its face, lowering over mortals with hideous scowl, the first who dared to lift mortal eyes to challenge it, the first who ventured to confront it boldly, was a Greek. This man neither the reputation of the gods nor thunderbolts nor heaven's menacing rumbles could daunt; rather all the more they roused the ardor of his courage and made him long to be the first to burst the bolts and bars of nature's gates. And so his mind's might and vigor prevailed, and on he marched far beyond the blazing battlements of the world, in thought and understanding journeying all through the measureless universe; and from this expedition he returns to us in triumph with his spoils—knowledge of what can arise and what cannot, and again by what law each thing has its scope restricted and its deeply implanted boundary stone. So now the situation is reversed: superstition is flung down and tram-</p>
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