

Threads of Epicureanism in Art and Literature

Post by “Joshua” of November 1, 2021 at 6:56 PM

Quote

I got the impression while I was scanning that this would be more of a curiosity than anything. He certainly didn't seem to have any great insights, just wanted to read the poem.

^This is reasonable appraisal, and I'm not certain I wholly disagree with it.

However, if I can be permitted to step out onto a limb or two, I do see a few features of interest.

First, this quote;

verses. Very excited about what he had read, he was effusive. I am delighted with him though sometimes he shows too much of the philosopher (& that too, of an obscure philosophy) & too little of the poet for my taste. Among the many dicta he sets forth are to be found the germ of a true philosophy than any other ancient, or at least any other Roman dreamed of. Inspired, he apparently attacked the text in earnest. On September 15, he disclosed that he read Lucretius every morning. He also apparently became more familiar with Lucretius's style and mannerisms, for on September 21 he wrote that

Is it not somewhat remarkable how closely this opinion maps onto Thomas Jefferson's? To wit:

Quote

I consider the genuine (not the imputed) doctrines of Epicurus as containing every thing rational in moral philosophy which Greece and Rome have left us.

Perhaps more than coincidence? I wonder when Jefferson's letters became public.

I also personally find it fascinating that he was a staggeringly voracious reader, with a clear and powerful intellect, who gave in his diary the impression of total devotion to the Confederate cause. Cassius has made the point elsewhere that there were Epicureans on both sides of the Roman civil war; it's unclear to me from these fragments how deep Caldwell's interest was in Epicurean philosophy, but he does represent an interesting, if uncertain, data point here.

Thoreau was one of the great abolitionists of the antebellum period; like Caldwell, he also kept a journal. Like Caldwell, he approached Lucretius in the Latin text.

But unlike Caldwell, he stopped reading after the first hundred lines—he had absorbed the image of Epicurus 'traversing the flaming ramparts of the world' and returning with a boon for mankind, but he curiously identifies him not as Epicurus, but as Prometheus!

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1289-threads-of-epicureanism-in-art-and-literature/?postID=14544#post14544>

This strikes me as hugely important—is there something about the Epicurean conception of justice (as not morally absolute) that appeals to the slaveholder, but repulses the abolitionist?

As I suggested, I'm out on limb.

And while [Don](#) was very helpful with his scans, I think he missed this one;

Friday, November 4, 1864

Finished [Lucretius](#): I am very much pleased with “De Rerum Natura;” I think it the finest of the latin poems, the grandest achievement of the Roman Muse. Well has Bulwer pronounced the eloquence of [Lucretius](#) “like ebony, at once dark and splendid.” His errors were those of his age, his greatness is his own. Many passages are obscured by the jargon of the school & the use of scientific or technical terms, but there is enough in the polished & melodious effusions of this preëminent Poet of the Garden, to constitute him henceforth one of my prime favorites. Wood was issued to-day, 1st time this week. Many rooms are as yet without stoves: Wood was withheld that we might be compelled to burn that which we were permitted to cut for ourselves a few weeks ago.

High praise here—but “Poet of the Garden”?

Caldwell *must* have read Cicero, and possibly even the Torquatus; he read Bulwer, who evidently wrote on the subject (put a pin in that thought...).

I begin to suspect that Mr. Caldwell knew rather more than his diary lets on.