

Notable Quotations and the Reception of Lucretius

Post by “Joshua” of June 16, 2023 at 9:26 PM

I was just listening to an unread book in my Audible library called *Long Live Latin* by Nicola Gardini. This is part of a review of that book, from the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, written by Will Boast.

Quote

A dead or “useless” language like Latin is not constantly shifting under your feet, asking you to change your habit of speech and thought every five minutes, or burning the ad man’s latest jingle into your brain. Latin can be more logical, less vividly debased. It can offer, Gardini tells us, both mental quiet and exuberance. “There’s something sacred about discovering Lucretius,” he says with no apparent irony. “It feels like stepping into heaven.”

Lucretius’s long poem, *De rerum natura* (“On the Nature of Things”), is an atheistic tract on the principles of atomism. In Lucretius, it isn’t ritual and superstition that delineates and describes the world but clearly reasoned thinking and discourse. It’s ultimately Lucretius’s “faith in words,” their attempt at the “reeducation of mankind,” that Gardini finds exalting. For Gardini, the promise of Latin is that getting to the root of words, understanding what they meant before they got into Italian or English or any other Romance language, is getting at what underlies and defines our vexing Western culture. “A word’s meaning is history itself,” Gardini says. “[I]t’s our responsibility and our privilege to live it.”

Nearly every chapter of Gardini's book focuses on one aspect of the Latin language by exploring it's use in a particular ancient author. He begins each author with an overview, and then follows with a choice selection of that author's vocabulary; just a few words and their etymology, their later use, and their influence on modern languages and thought.

After that he quotes several passages in Latin from the author's work and explains their importance.

The book was originally published in Italian, but was translated and read by Todd Portnowitz. His reading of the Latin seems good to my ear; slow enough for a novice to pick out the words, but still quite beautiful.

One of the words he chooses from Lucretius is *pietas*.

Lucretius, Book V, around line 1200;

Quote

nec pietas ullast velatum saepe videri
vertier ad lapidem atque omnis accedere ad aras
nec procumbere humi prostratum et pandere palmas
ante deum delubra nec aras sanguine multo
spargere quadrupedum nec votis nectere vota,
sed mage pacata posse omnia mente tueri.

Display More

Bailey;

Quote

Nor is it piety at all to be seen often with veiled head turning towards a stone, and to draw near to every altar, no, nor to lie prostrate on the ground with outstretched palms before the shrines of the gods, nor to sprinkle the altars with the streaming blood of beasts, nor to link vow to vow, but rather to be able to contemplate all things with a mind at rest.

1743;

Quote

Nor can there be any piety for a wretch with his head veiled, to be ever turning himself about towards a stone, to creep to every altar, to throw himself flat upon the ground, to spread his arms before the shrines of the gods, to sprinkle the altars abundantly with the blood of beasts, and to heap vows upon vows. To look upon things with an undisturbed mind, this is Piety.

Munro;

Quote

No act is it of piety to be often seen with veiled head to turn to a stone and approach every altar and fall prostrate on the ground and spread out the palms before the statues of the gods and sprinkle the altars with much blood of beasts and link vow on to vow, but rather to be able to look on all things with a mind at peace.

Leonard;

Quote

Nor, O man

Is thy true piety in this: with head

Under the veil, still to be seen to turn

Fronting a stone, and ever to approach

Unto all altars; nor so prone on earth

Forward to fall, to spread upturned palms

Before the shrines of gods, nor yet to dew

Altars with profuse blood of four-foot beasts,

Nor vows with vows to link. But rather this:

To look on all things with a master eye

And mind at peace.

Display More

Pietas, then, is not a synonym of *religio* but its true opposite. *Religio* is a kind of madness born of superstition; it is attended by fear, traffics in well-worn lies, and delights in obscurantism and servility. *Pietas* is the spirit of understanding born of inquiry; it brings peace, "reveals darkly hidden things", and delights in clarity and the health of the unburdened soul.

The presence of *mage* in the Latin is interesting. Leonard translates it as "master" from *magus*, which word also has the meaning of magician or sorcerer. The rest translate "*sed mage*" as "but rather", deriving *mage* from *magis*.

Perhaps the pun is Lucretius': that while there is nothing supernatural or superstitious in true piety, the study of nature through philosophy transforms life (in the words of Joseph Conrad) into "an enchanted state". A life, indeed, worthy of the gods.