

Authorship of the 1743 Prose Translation of Lucretius

Post by “Joshua” of July 14, 2024 at 12:53 PM

Odds and Ends from a Literary Life

And speaking of Thomas Creech, he crops up again in the *Oxford Handbook of Eighteenth Century Satire*;

Quote

"Creech typically translated Horace closely, but when he encountered an Epicurean passage, whether atheist or hedonist, he often acted as a commentator instead, repressing it, softening it, leaving it prominently in place, or even seeming to justify and explain it. We see a striking example in epistle 1.6. Meanwhile, the translation of the lyrics organized by William Oldisworth (1712-13) appeared with Horace's Latin on the facing page. The device was likely encouraged by the popularity of Dacier's edition, although Richard Fanshawe had one the same. Dunster, faced with the philosophy of the hexameter poems, often rendered literally some extremely heterodox passages; yet even he could sometimes shield them from full view in time-honoured ways."

A digital scan of Rev. Samuel Dunster's Last Will and Testament, dated 22nd October 1751, is in my possession, though I cannot at present find the link at the National Archive website (*The National Archives' reference PROB 11/810/394*). In any case, the [book](#) containing his biography by Raines also contains a text of this Will; one entry reads as follows:

Quote

To Mr. Joseph Haigh (my curate) all my MS. sermons, my new black gown and bands, and neck cloths, my Virgil and Horace, with my MS. notes in three volumes;

This work on Virgil is given the following shelf-mark at Chetham's Library:

A.4.29

DUNSTER, Samuel (1675-1754), Vicar of Rochdale

A dissertation on Virgil's first eclogue (Byrom collection).

21 pp.

He addressed the following letter to Dr. Byrom on another subject. The article is entitled (in Byrom's *Library Catalogue*, 4to, p. 247, note) "A Dissertation on Virgil's first Eclogue," wherein 'tis proved from authority, from reason, and from the absurdity of the contrary opinion, that Virgil's father, not Virgil himself, is there represented under the person of Tityrus. The critical remarks sent to Byrom extend to twenty-one pages in quarto, written in "a large bold hand," probably by Dunster's son from the Doctor's dictation. (*Remains of Byrom*, vol. i. part 2, p. 537, note.)

Rochdale, December 2nd, 1734.

Sir,—Though, like a truly Christian philosopher, you are continually entertaining yourself with speculations of the highest nature— with the first principles of things, the nature of the soul, the perfection of man, the supreme good, and how far it is

attainable by us poor mortals ; I have the pleasure of persuading myself that you will not be displeas'd at your being interrupted with some critical remarks on two of Virgil's Eclogues. The first, I grant, are of very little consideration, but then the last are of very great moment, and as such I recommend 'em.

But whatever they are, I desire you will by no means think that at this stage of life I concern myself much with things of this nature. I am willing sometimes, by way of amusement, to give a few hours to the reading of the Greek and Latin poets, to encourage my son in his present studies ; but what delight soever they formerly gave me,

Non eadem est ætas, non mens—

insomuch that now I am wholly taken up with the much more delightful and profitable enquiries :—

Qua ratione queam traducere leniter ævum
Ne me semper inops agitet vexetque cupido
Ne pavor, et rerum mediocriter utilium spes
Virtutem doctrina paret, naturane donet ?
Quid minuat curas, quid me mihi reddat amicum
Quid pure tranquillet ? honos an dulce lucellum
An secretum iter, et fallentis semita vitæ ?
Mequoties reficit gelidus Rochdalia rivus
Quid sentire putas ? quid credis, amice, precari ?
Sit mihi quod nunc est ; etiam minus ; et mihi vivam
Quod superest ævi, siquid superesse volunt Di.

(*Hor.* lib. i. ep. 18.)

You will much oblige me in making my compliments to Messieurs Byrom and the two young ladies, by whom I was treated, when I lately was among 'em, with such an open, undisguis'd civility, that it will always be thankfully remembered by,

Sir, your affectionate humble Servant,

S. DUNSTER.

(*Remains*, vol. i. part 2.)

This letter dated 1734 would seem to suggest that Dunster has given up any rigorous work in the field of classics, but the quoted epistle from Horace gives some insight into his ongoing pursuits. Here is a comment on that epistle from Mark Morford.

Quote

In the midst of everything you will read, and you will ask your teachers by what system you may pass your life gently. Ask whether desire (that always needs more) should trouble and disturb you; whether fear and hope for things that are not advantageous; whether philosophy or nature will give you virtue; what

will lessen anxiety, what will make you a friend to yourself, what will bring you simple tranquillity—whether it is public honours or the pleasure of profits or the secret way and the path of a life hidden from others. As for me, when I am refreshed by the cold stream of Digentia, which Mandela drinks, a village furrowed with cold, what do you think is my opinion, my friend, what do you believe is my prayer? “Let me keep what I have now, or even less, so that I can live out the rest of my life (if the gods wish me to live longer) for myself. Let me have a good supply of books and a year’s supply of food, and may I not float hanging on the hopes of an uncertain hour.” Well, it is enough to ask Jupiter for what he gives and takes away. He may grant me life, he may grant me wealth: I myself will provide a mind free from anxiety (aequum animum).

These beautiful and famous lines are the final expression of Horace’s ethics. Although they are only indirectly concerned with pleasure and although they suggest that prayer to the gods is efficacious, they are fundamentally Epicurean. They are based on the maxim, “live unobtrusively”, and they suggest the moderate enjoyment of moderate pleasures. Their goal is a life free from mental disturbance, the achievement of ataraxia that is as much Stoic as Epicurean. Finally, they suggest that happiness is ours to achieve through control of our will, whatever the gods may give, good or ill. Here Horace agrees with the Stoics, and this doctrine will prove to be the foundation of the ethics of Epictetus.

-The Roman Philosophers; from the Time of Cato the Censor to the Death of Marcus Aurelius by Mark Morford

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As [TauPhi](#) has alluded to in [another thread](#), Juvenal's [tenth satire](#) touches on similar themes. If Dunster is our translator of both Juvenal (1739) and Lucretius (1743), he would have been working on one or both of them at the the time of this letter (1734).

Only two things more remain to be said. Rev. Dunster's personal library went to auction in November of 1754 with the personal libraries of a handful of others. A catalogue in two volumes (I, [II](#)) was made available, and among the collections listed in Volume II were translations of Lucretius by Creech and Evelyn.

26384	Lucretius Carus of the Nature of Things, by Creech,	2 vol
	5s	1711
26385	_____ Epicurean Philosophy, in Verse,	1s 6d
26386	_____ The same, <i>stained</i> ,	1s
26387	_____ de Rerum Natura, by Evelyn,	1s
26388	_____ Epicurean Philosophy — Manilius of ancient Astronomy and Astrology;	3s 6d

It is impossible, of course, to know whether they belonged to Dunster or one of the others. A search of the collection also brings up several books ancient and modern on astronomy. In the 1743 edition of Lucretius, a series of footnotes in Book V on pages 171-175 provide an extensive explanation of the movement of the heavenly bodies.

Conclusion

I have tried to accumulate here all of the sources and citations that I have been sitting on for the better part of a year. The evidence, as the reader will observe, is inconclusive and circumstantial at best. However, I am going to propose on the basis of this inconclusive evidence that Reverend Samuel Dunster, D.D., Rector of Hartley and Gravesend, Prebendary at the Cathedrals of Salisbury and Lincoln, and Vicar of Rochdale, is a promising candidate for the anonymous translator of the 1743 translation of *De Rerum Natura*, printed for Daniel Brown, bookseller, at the sign of the Black Swan without Temple-Bar, London.

Finis