

Notable Quotations and the Reception of Lucretius

Post by “Joshua” of October 13, 2021 at 11:32 PM

Classical:

Marcus Tullius Cicero, Roman Statesman and Orator:

Quote

The poems of Lucretius are as you write: they exhibit many flashes of genius, and yet show great mastership.

Publius Vergilius Maro, Roman Poet:

Quote

Happy is he who has discovered the causes of things and has cast beneath his feet all fears, unavoidable fate, and the din of the devouring Underworld.

Publius Ovidius Naso, Roman Poet:

Quote

The verses of the sublime Lucretius will perish only when a single day shall consign the world to destruction.

Late Antiquity/Medieval

Lucius Caecilius Firmianus, called Lactantius; Roman Christian Writer, advisor to Constantine the Great:

Quote

"the most worthless of the poets"

Eusebius Sophronius Hieronymus, called St. Jerome:

Quote

The poet Titus Lucretius is born. He was later driven mad by a love philtre and, having composed between bouts of insanity several books (which Cicero afterwards

corrected), committed suicide at the age of 44.

Renaissance:

Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, French Essayist and Philosopher

Quote

'Tis to much purpose that the great poet Lucretius keeps such a clatter with his philosophy, when, behold! he goes mad with a love philtre. Is it to be imagined that an apoplexy will not stun Socrates as well as a porter? Some men have forgotten their own names by the violence of a disease; and a slight wound has turned the judgment of others topsy-turvy. Let him be as wise as he will, after all he is but a man; and than that what is there more frail, more miserable, or more nothing?

Quote

But, to pursue the business of this essay, I have always thought that, in poesy, Virgil, Lucretius, Catullus, and Horace by many degrees excel the rest.

Lucy Hutchison, Puritan Homemaker

Quote

"As by the study of these I grew in Light and Love, the little glory I had among some few of my intimate friends, for understanding this crabbed poet, became my shame, and I found I never understood him till I learnt to abhorre him, and dread a wanton dalliance with impious bookes. Then I reapd some profit by it, for it shewd me that sencelesse superstitions drive carnall reason into Atheisme, which though Policy restrains some from avowing so impudently as this Dog, yet vast is their number, who make it a specious pretext within themselves, to thinke religion is nothing at all but an invention to reduce the ignorant vulgar into order and Government."

Enlightenment:

19th Century:

James Clark Caldwell, Confederate Soldier writing in a Union War Prison in Ohio:

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.

John Tyndall, Irish Physicist;

Quote

Is there not a temptation to close to some extent with Lucretius, when he affirms that 'nature is seen to do all things spontaneously of herself without the meddling of the gods?' or with Bruno, when he declares that Matter is not 'that mere empty capacity which philosophers have pictured her to be, but the universal mother who wrings forth all things as the fruit of her own womb?' Believing as I do in the continuity of Nature, I cannot stop abruptly where our microscopes cease to be of use. Here the vision of the mind authoritatively supplements the vision of the eye. By an intellectual necessity I cross the boundary of the experimental evidence, and discern in that Matter which we, in our ignorance of its latent powers, and notwithstanding our professed reverence for its Creator, have hitherto covered with opprobrium, the promise and potency of all terrestrial Life.

20th Century to Present:

Albert Einstein, German-born Theoretical Physicist



FOREWORD^[1]

[1]

The work of Lucretius will work its magic on anyone who does not completely wrap himself in the spirit of our time and, in particular, occasionally feels like a spectator of the intellectual attitude of his contemporaries. One sees here how an independent man equipped with lively senses and reasoning, endowed with scientific and speculative curiosity, a man who has not even the faintest notion of the results of today's science that we are taught in childhood, before we can consciously, much less critically, confront them, imagines the world.

W. B. Yeats, Irish Poet:

Quote

"The finest description of sexual intercourse ever written."

Christopher Hitchens, Anglo-American Journalist, Polemicist, Public Intellectual

Quote

In January 1821, Thomas Jefferson wrote John Adams to "encourage a hope that the human mind will some day get back to the freedom it enjoyed 2000 years ago." This wish for a return to the era of philosophy would put Jefferson in the same period as Titus Lucretius Carus, thanks to whose six-volume poem De Rerum Naturum (On the Nature of Things) we have a distillation of the work of the first true materialists: Leucippus, Democritus, and Epicurus. These men concluded that the world was composed of atoms in perpetual motion, and Epicurus, in particular, went on to argue that the gods, if they existed, played no part in human affairs. It followed that events like thunderstorms were natural and not supernatural, that ceremonies of worship and propitiation were a waste of time, and that there was nothing to be feared in death.

Post by "Joshua" of October 13, 2021 at 11:33 PM

Edward Ernest Sikes: *Lucretius, Poet and Philosopher*

^book I just found the title of. I know nothing else

Post by "Cassius" of October 14, 2021 at 5:39 AM

Thank you for all that work Joshua!

Post by "Joshua" of October 14, 2021 at 12:32 PM

The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence, Alison Brown

^another book

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.

Post by "Joshua" of June 16, 2023 at 10:19 PM

And now with that understanding of piety vs religion in mind, we can look at Lucian of Samosata with fresh eyes:

Quote

My object, dear friend, in making this small selection from a great mass of material has been twofold. First, I was willing to oblige a friend and comrade who is for me the pattern of wisdom, sincerity, good humour, justice, tranquillity, and geniality. But secondly I was still more concerned (a preference which you will be very far from resenting) to strike a blow for Epicurus, that great man whose holiness and divinity of nature were not shams, who alone had and imparted true insight into the good, and who brought deliverance to all that consorted with him.

Post by “Godfrey” of June 17, 2023 at 12:33 AM

Thanks for that, [Joshua](#) ! That's one of my favorite passages from Lucretius; nice to have a reminder!