

Piero de Cosimo's Lucretius - Inspired Paintings

Post by "Joshua" of July 26, 2023 at 9:34 PM



Piero di Cosimo, *A Hunting Scene*, c. 1500

Text from the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#):

Quote

This picture and its companion (also in The Met's collection) reimagine the early history of humankind and are among the most singular works of the Renaissance. Their inspiration was the fifth book of *De Rerum Natura* by the Epicurean poet and philosopher Lucretius (ca. 99–55 B.C.). A manuscript of Lucretius's work was discovered in 1417 and published in Florence in 1471–73. Lucretius believed that the workings of the world can be accounted for by natural rather than divine causes, and he put forward a vision of the history of primitive humanity and the advent of civilization that was much discussed in Renaissance Florence—and beyond.

And so now,
in what remains, my train of argument
has now brought me to this point, where I must
set down an explanation how the world
is a mortal substance and was born,
how a collection of materials
established earth, heaven, sea, stars, sun,
and the moon's globe, then what living creatures
sprang from earth, as well as those never born
at any time, how the human race began
to employ among themselves various words
by giving names to things, and ways in which
that fear of gods slid into human hearts,
which preserves sacred places on earth's sphere—
shrines, lakes, groves, altars, images of gods.
...
They could not look toward the common good
and did not know how to make for themselves
any laws or customs. A man would take

whatever prize fortune might throw his way,
with each one trained to look out for himself
and get by on his own. And in the woods,
Venus would join bodies in sexual acts,
for each woman was either overwhelmed
by mutual lust, or by the violent force
and reckless passion of the man, or else
by some reward—acorns, or strawberries,
or fine pears. And trusting in the power
of their hands and feet, which was amazing,
they went after wild beasts in the forest
by throwing rocks and with large, heavy clubs.
They brought down many, but there were a few
they avoided in their hiding places.

...

And just in case, while dealing with these things,
you are perhaps quietly wondering,
it was lightning which first carried fire down
to mortal men on earth—with that all heat
from flames is generated. For we see
many things ignite and burn up when struck
by fire from heaven, once the bolt transmits
its heat. Then, too, when a tree with branches
is lashed by winds, sways back and forth, presses
and rubs the branches of another tree,

the violent force of rubbing brings out fire,
and while trunk and branches chafe each other,
sometimes the flaming heat of fire ignites.

Either of these two could have provided
fire to mortal men. And then sun taught them
to cook their food, using the heat of flames
to soften it, because out in the fields
they would see many objects getting soft
once beaten by sun's heat and lashing rays.



The Return from the Hunt, also at the Met.

Post by “Joshua” of July 26, 2023 at 9:35 PM

The above translation is from [Ian Johnston](#).

Post by “Cassius” of July 27, 2023 at 4:50 AM

Joshua I don't think we have these featured anywhere and we probably need a thread devoted to them specifically, so I will leave a cross-reference here but set up a separate thread. Thanks!

Moved from here:

Post

[**RE: July 26, 2023 - Wednesday Night Zoom Agenda - Vatican Sayings 14 & 15**](#)

Joshua posted a supplement on something we mentioned in this discussion, It deserves a thread of its own and is now here:

[epicureanfriends.com/thread/3225/](https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3225/)



Cassius

July 27, 2023 at 4:54 AM

Post by “Cassius” of July 27, 2023 at 5:03 AM

I do see we have this earlier reference, but it refers to a "Forest Fire"?

Post

Threads of Epicureanism in Art and Literature

*Note; If I have Cassius' permission, I wanted a place to simply **list** minor treatments of Epicurean characters, motifs, and themes in works by **Non-Epicureans**. The purpose is a simple reference; if you find something interesting, add it to the list. If something on the list merits attention and/or discussion, start a thread and we'll talk about it! Entries should include Author, Title, Year/Period, Brief Description of Relevance.*

Walter Pater; "Marius..."



Joshua

November 24, 2019 at 8:11 PM

Post by "Joshua" of July 27, 2023 at 8:04 AM

[epicureanfriends.com/wcf/attachment/3991/](https://www.epicureanfriends.com/wcf/attachment/3991/)

Yes, that's this one. All three have the forest fire as an important motif.

Post by "Pacatus" of July 27, 2023 at 1:35 PM

[Joshua](#): Thanks for that link to Ian Johnston's translation.

I have decided, to assuage my poetic embarrassment, to prioritize finishing Lucretius. I've started all over again from the beginning, using Frank Copley's translation (on Kindle); his loose blank verse seems to flow well (far better than Stallings' fourteeners) – and I really want to read the poem as a poem. Do you prefer Johnston's? (I'll try to do a running comparison – but really I just need to knuckle down and read the poem!)

I note that Johnston is very critical of prose translations, though he acknowledges some merit to Smith's work.)

Post by “Joshua” of July 27, 2023 at 1:50 PM

Good questions! I usually quote Johnston because it's easy to search for key-words and copy/paste. Perseus is a great resource but the chunks of text are often too small and it can be difficult to select text on mobile (although there are workarounds).

I also find Stallings to be a bit distracting, but some people are drawn to her style. My favorite verse translation is Rolfe Humphries, but he admits in his introduction that his focus was to capture the flavor of the poem rather than a literal rendition, which I think he succeeds at.

My best general advice for reading Lucretius is that contextualizing the poem can stave off boredom--we're so familiar with the idea that the earth is extremely old, that the universe is incomprehensibly large and ancient, that matter is made of little particles, that other worlds might potentially harbor life, and that nature is capable of sustaining a vacuum that reading about them in an old poem can seem rather dull. But if keep in mind how revolutionary these ideas really were, I think we can still capture a little bit of the magic.

Post by “Godfrey” of July 27, 2023 at 4:32 PM

I recently read Johnston's translation from a downloaded pdf (read it on the ReadEra app) and liked it; I also like the Melville translation. I agree that Stallings can get old. Haven't read the Copley translation but I'm curious how you like it as you proceed.

Some many translations, so little time! I, too, tend to compare various translations as I read a particular version.

Post by “Godfrey” of July 27, 2023 at 4:56 PM

Here's yet another introduction to the poem. It did have at least one point of interest in that it posits that the poem ended as intended, and gave a couple of reasons why the author thinks that.

[Lucretius | Poetry Foundation](#)

Post by “Pacatus” of July 27, 2023 at 5:58 PM

Great find [Godfrey](#)! (I was for some years a member of the Poetry Foundation – no great shakes that: you pay a membership fee and you’re a member! 😄)

Although the Foundation site does not appear to have Tennyson’s *Lucretius*, it can be found here: <https://allpoetry.com/poem/8473099-L...d-Lord-Tennyson>

Confession: I’ve never been really fond of epic poetry, as a matter of purely personal, ill-grounded prejudice – being mostly a lyric poet, I have never been able to sustain a poem of any real length. 😞 Nevertheless, I am trying to read *De Rerum Natura* as a poem more than as a philosophical treatise.