

BOOK REVIEW

Lucretius: The Nature of the Universe. Translated by G. B. COBBOLD. Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, Inc., 2016. Pp. xxxviii + 292. Paper, \$12.00. ISBN 978-0-86516-838-1.

Every translator of Lucretius' *De rerum natura* faces two major challenges. The first is to render an enjoyable translation that captures the beauty of the original composition, with all of its stylistic trappings and rhetorical devices, while remaining accessible to the reader. The second is to achieve this while doing justice to the philosophical content and argumentation of a Latin text that expounds doctrines originally expressed in Greek. Cobbold meets both of these challenges in a more or less satisfying manner by producing a translation that, while appealing in general to "anyone interested in Roman history and literature" (xxxiv), at times also conveys Lucretius' poetic charm and relentless, argumentative style. A large part of the volume's accessibility is due to its organization, which involves an introductory overview of Greek philosophical thought from Homer to Epicurus and includes a brief bibliography of relevant and recent scholarship. This is followed by the translation, which is broken down into easily digested sections with descriptive headings and is supplemented by an index of topics and glossary of proper names (271–289).

Aside from his opening qualification in Book 1 of Venus as "adored by gods, adored by men" (2) instead of as the ultimate source of *voluptas*, which is absolutely essential to Epicureanism and therefore emphasized in the original Latin, Cobbold offers an accurate translation of Lucretius' invocation to the goddess and description of her generative powers. The poet's alliterative wordplay shines through in various places, such as in the rendition of *pecudes persultant pabula laeta / et radipos tranant amnis* as "they prance and dance; they splash and dash in the rivers" (2). With regard to the famous Sacrifice of Iphigeneia passage (5), Cobbold conveys the striking pathos of the more complex original through his paratactic translation: "She kneels before him. She cannot speak. She is trembling." The introduction to Book 2 is likewise attractive and smooth, although the translation of *suave* as "the snug feeling" (45) strikes this reviewer as overly colloquial ("pleasant," which appears on the same page, is undoubtedly prefera-

ble). In the Magna Mater digression (66–67) readability meets creativity, as the translation of Lucretius' *ninguntque rosarum / floribus* as "a blizzard of rose petals" demonstrates.

The proem to Book 3 is of particular importance for this didactic epic, since it features the first instance of extended praise of Epicurus aside from that of Book 1. Cobbold effectively represents the antithesis between light and darkness, fear of eternal punishment and tranquility of mind in his translation (87), which captures the intense emotion of the original Latin though anaphora ("golden, golden words" for Lucretius' *aurea dicta, / aurea*) and, once again, simple syntax: "But of Hades and the underworld—no sign" (for *at contra nusquam apparent Acherusia templa*). The volume's organizational structure also accounts for the accessible presentation of Lucretius' explanation of underworld torture as a metaphor for real-life struggles (121–123), which proceeds paragraph by paragraph: "Tantalus . . . Tityos . . . Sisyphus . . . Danaus's beautiful daughters . . . Cerberus, and the Furies."

Cobbold's presentation of the introduction to Book 4, however, seems too far from the original in certain places: for instance, "the Muses will never cease to inspire me . . . because I am a poet" (127) is admittedly quite different from "I smear everything with the Muses' honey, and for good reason" (*musaeo contingens cuncta lepore. / id quoque enim non ab nulla ratione videtur*). His take on Lucretius' diatribe on sex is engaging and often faithful to the Latin, although the translation of *nequiquam divom numen sortisque fatigant* as "this kind of hocus pocus can only make the gods' patience wear thin" (169) would seem to imply that gods may become angry, which is of course impossible.

Book 5 opens with more praise of Epicurus, the interpretation of which again sacrifices accuracy for readability to some degree. In communicating Lucretius' answer to the rhetorical question "can anyone do justice to Epicurus' achievements?" Cobbold translates *nemo, ut opinor, erit mortali corpore cretus* as "I don't think so" (173) instead of something like "there will be no one, in my opinion, who is born of mortal composition." The development of mankind passage (205–224) features the usual liberties in translation mentioned above but without misrepresentation of the original: Lucretius' *cruentum sub pedibus* is expanded into "their bodies were left lying in pools of blood," whereas *circumredit* is cleverly and faithfully rendered as "be entangled in a net" (213). Finally, Cobbold's version of the Athenian plague passage at the end of Book 6 successfully expresses the clinical and disturbing details of Lucretius' famous account. One particularly striking example is "Their necks glistened with sweat. With difficulty they

hawked up phlegm in yellowish salty dribbles, from deep in their lungs" (266) for *sudorisque madens per collum splendidus umor, / tenuia sputa minuta, croci contacta colore / salsaque*.

In general, Cobbold's text fulfills its specific purpose of being accessible to the general public and very readable. Apart from some typos, the most distracting of which is perhaps the section heading "The gods are in a way involved" (where "in *no* way involved" was likely intended), the English reflects the sense of the original and is bolstered by visual aids appropriately derived from ancient works of art. This is clearly a translation that is not intended for scholars but for non-specialists and anyone interested in ancient literature, and as such it has some merit.

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