

BOOK REVIEW

The Lucretian Renaissance: Philology and the Afterlife of a Tradition. By GERARD PASSANNANTE. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011. Pp. 250. Hardcover, \$45.00/£29.00. ISBN 978-0-226-64849-1.

Targeting an audience interested in Lucretian reception and book history in the early modern period, *The Lucretian Renaissance* aims to “tie the history of materialism in the Renaissance to a history of literature and the material text” (4).

Drawing on Lucretius’ playful analogy of atoms as letters, Passannante sets out to narrate a history of *De rerum natura* (hereafter *DRN*) that performs this analogy in the literary imitation, transmission, and dissemination of the text, and thereby to demonstrate an interest in “materialism”. While clever and original, its usefulness is limited by the author’s frequent recourse to imaginative reconstruction that is then later turned into “fact”. A detailed example of this is presented below. The evidence that justifies Passannante’s approach only surfaces in the final chapter of the book when Pierre Gassendi (1592–1655) admits that he has taken Lucretius’ *DRN* apart to serve his own ends in reconstructing Epicurus’ philosophy (175–8).

The greatest asset of the book is its vast scope, which both draws attention to the importance of Lucretius’ *DRN* from its rediscovery by Poggio Bracciolini in 1417 to the early eighteenth century and provides sketches of major figures in Lucretian reception, such as Angelo Poliziano, Denys Lambin, Michel de Montaigne, Francis Bacon, Pierre Gassendi, and Isaac Newton, as well as of minor figures who serve to enliven the narrative. Passannante has a penchant for dramatic storytelling; his anecdotes are rich in visual metaphor and replete with irony.

After laying out the basic groundwork for a discussion of Renaissance *imitatio*, Chapter 1 explores the notion of indirect (or unintentional) transmission of Lucretius as “contagion” by focusing on plague narratives (both Virgil’s use of *DRN* 6 in *Georgics* 3 and Macrobius’ analysis of both authors in his *Saturnalia*). By dramatizing what he sees as attraction to and rejection of Lucretius (revisited in later chapters), Passannante unconvincingly argues that Lucretius’ philos-

ophy “contaminates” the thought of Petrarch and Poliziano through their use of Macrobius and Virgil. This and later discussions are hampered by Passannante’s lack of engagement with current scholarship on the Renaissance’s ambivalent response to *DRN*, especially the rhetorical distancing that scholars such as Valentina Proserpi (2007) have called a “dissimulatory code”.

Chapter 2 addresses *DRN*’s textual history and its physical reconstruction, passing briefly over Karl Lachmann and Giovan Battista Pio’s first commentary in 1511 to focus on Denys Lambin as an editor and commentator of Lucretius (1563–97) and on Michel de Montaigne as a sympathetic reader of the poet and his commentator. (Montaigne’s annotated text of Lambin’s edition resurfaced in 1987.) Conceding the importance of *DRN* for textual criticism, Passannante does not dwell on scholarly or methodological reasons for textual emendations. Instead he highlights the marginal play by Lambin and Montaigne of the passage at *DRN* 3.847–51, in which Lucretius dismisses the idea of the existence of the soul’s memory in its hypothetical reconstitution. In Lambin’s and Montaigne’s projection of themselves reassembled at a later time, Passannante sees a comparable analogy to the later “reconstruction” of *DRN*.

Chapter 3 claims to demonstrate how “the poetry of materialism” influenced the principles of modern science, technologies of transmission, and the idea of a continuity of knowledge by examining the works of Francis Bacon (1857–74). This chapter is full of elliptical logic and imaginative reconstructions. For example, imagining Bacon reading Montaigne: “One can almost imagine the text of ‘Des coches’ before Bacon’s eyes as he worked through the skeptic’s unsettling arguments about matter, colonialism, and the invention of printing. Bacon’s use of the word ‘cast,’ for example, as in ‘cast their seeds in the minds of others,’ recalls Florio’s translation of the passage misquoted from Cicero that we looked at earlier—a picture of textual history yielding to an Epicurean void” (134). Later, Passannante claims, “Bacon appears to be responding to Montaigne’s image of the void” (135). Chapter 4 asserts a concept of literary influence that is both “invisible and everywhere” by tracing Lucretian presence in the works of Edmund Spenser, Pierre Gassendi, and Henry More.

The epilogue is devoted to quotations of *DRN* in Isaac Newton’s classical scholia. Passannante argues that Newton’s inclusion of *clinamen* in a discussion of the rate of atoms falling through void is a meditation on innovation in the transmission of ideas. By elucidating natural philosophy through the language of mathematics, Newton emulates Lucretius.

While some classicists may be disappointed with the book's lack of substantive engagement with *DRN* itself, the value of Passannante's book lies in its narrative of problematic intersections between readers and a text whose controversial content aroused conflicting emotions. Under the guise of a thematic tie to *DRN*, Passannante raises important questions regarding literary allusion and influence. What is the nature of "influence" at these junctures: indirect/accidental transmission (Petrarch/Poliziano), "inspired" emendations (Lambin), deliberate misquoting (Montaigne), conscious fragmentation and recombination (Gassendi), and the most elusive of all: pervasive yet invisible influence (Spenser)? These questions are well worth further consideration.

There are a number of errors and oversights in the book that deserve mention: several incorrect entries both in the notes and in the bibliography; a number of misspellings of authors and figures (including Poggio Bracciolini); original text and translation do not always correspond; and a lack of adequate cross-referencing in the text and notes, especially as the author frequently refers to his earlier conclusions.

CAROLINE STARK

Ohio Wesleyan University, cgstark@owu.edu