

## BOOK REVIEW

*A Reading of Lucretius' De Rerum Natura*. By LEE FRATANTUONO. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015. Pp. xii + 510. Hardcover, \$140.00. ISBN 978-1-4985-1154-4.

Fratantuono's new book takes the form of a running commentary on the whole of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*. Unfortunately, this means that the author offers no central argument for the reader to evaluate. Specialists will nevertheless benefit from consulting this book, not least because Fratantuono often canvasses the range of scholarly opinions regarding points of contention in the *DRN* (e.g. on lines 44-49 of the first book, 20-21) and because his commentary on most sections of the poem includes footnotes with the most relevant bibliography published through 2014.

Fratantuono's *Lucretius* is divided into six chapters, one for each book of the *DRN*. Each chapter advances systematically through the book it treats, section by section. In this respect his new book is just like his earlier volumes on the *Aeneid*, *Metamorphoses*, and *Pharsalia*. Fratantuono offers many insightful comments here and there, though these are often disconnected from one another. Owing to this format, it is impossible for a review of this length to offer total coverage of what Fratantuono has to say about Lucretius. In what follows, then, I will highlight suggestions and themes to which Fratantuono frequently returns.

One of Fratantuono's more novel arguments is that Lucretius repeatedly introduces the concept of *pietas*, which at times the poet would seem implicitly to endorse, only to attack it at others. Such an attack is part of the more sustained criticism of *religio* in the poem. According to Fratantuono, Lucretius' *pietas* is founded on rigid reciprocity between gods and humans and between friends and family. Fratantuono sometimes suggests that Lucretius relies on this notion of *pietas* to support his criticisms of human irrationality, as he does, for instance, to prove that our earth was not the result of divine providence (323-324) or to lambaste the excessive religiosity of those smitten with love (292). But Fratantuono also suggests that Lucretius views *pietas* positively, at least when the poet highlights its absence in human society. So, for instance, the vinedresser at the end of *DRN* 2 laments the moral deterioration that attends the abandonment of *pietas* in

recent times (148–149) or the Athenian who stays with his afflicted family and friends in the face of certain death is described as *optimus* (467–473).

It would be unfair to conclude on this basis that Lucretius contradicts himself, though such a conclusion may present itself owing to Fratantuono's discursive presentation of the matter. More charitably, we may infer that Fratantuono's Lucretius values *pietas* primarily in human affairs, with the gods left to themselves in the *intermundia*. Even still, I think Fratantuono may be more optimistic about the presentation of *pietas* than is warranted. While Lucretius may very well think favorably of *pietas* in moderation, such *pietas* must always remain secondary to *ataraxia*; when *pietas* interferes with *ataraxia* it becomes a vice. Fratantuono does, ultimately, make room for this suggestion (472), but our final, perverse vision of *pietas* in the *DRN*, where relatives fight over corpses on the pyre, undermines, totally I think, any implicitly positive valence that Lucretius ascribes to *pietas* during the plague or elsewhere in the poem.

The particularly Roman identity that this fixation on *pietas* lends the *DRN* is also explored throughout the book; this identity is foregrounded most consistently in Fratantuono's discussions of how Lucretius' epic informed Vergil's *Aeneid*. In this respect, the reader will find valuable insights on the importance of Venus as a figure in both Lucretius and Vergil (e.g. 15–17, 19); comparison of the storms in the first books of both epics (p. 30); and excellent observations about how Anchises' psychological discourse retains an eminently Lucretian manner of exposition, even as it is emptied of Lucretian content (192, 196, 198, 249–250).

Given the time Fratantuono devotes to these matters, it is frustrating how elliptically he handles the influence of his vision of Lucretian *pietas* on the *Aeneid*. After all, if *pietas* is as central to the *DRN* as he maintains, how could it not be a primary point of reference for Vergil's *insignem pietate virum*? For example, Fratantuono frequently (and convincingly) suggests (10–11, 13, 378, 483) that we should connect the *pietas* exhibited by the Athenians during the plague with the *pietas* shown by Aeneas to Pallas at the end of the *Aeneid*. He never, however, makes clear exactly how we are meant to read this connection. Is the perverse attachment the Athenians show to the corpses of their friends reflected in the vengeance that Aeneas exacts from Turnus, a suppliant who himself invokes filial *pietas* to sanction the mercy he seeks? Or are we meant to read the end of the *Aeneid* as a variation on Hardie's remythologization: whereas Lucretius criticizes the *pietas* shown to corpses, Vergil insists on the need to honor our commitment to our friends, even when they have passed beyond the grave? The reader looking

for answers to questions like this—and Fratantuono’s insightful comments often raise them—will leave this book energized to work them out for himself.

This book is not free of infelicities; when they do occur, however, they are never major. Like his other volumes on Roman epic, Fratantuono’s *Reading of Lucretius* will repay those who read it from cover to cover. I imagine, though, that most will use it more as one would a reference or commentary.

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