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DE RERUM NATURA

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To
LASCELLES ABERCROMBIE

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PREFACE

I wish to thank Mr L. H. G. Greenwood for his great kindness in reading the whole translation with meticulous attention, and giving me the benefit of his ripe scholarship. I also wish to thank Mr Hugh Sykes Davies, who has not only helped me with detailed criticism and advice during the labour of revising the translation, but has given me most valuable assistance in preparing the textual notes, and has written the illuminating essay on Macaulay's *Marginalia* which stands at the end of the book. His sympathetic collaboration has greatly enriched my pleasure in the task, and the value of the work.

R. C. T.

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INTRODUCTION

The embryo of this translation of the *De Rerum Natura* was a version of the last two hundred and fifty lines of the third book, made by me twenty years ago, and published by the Omega Workshops. Afterwards from time to time I tried my hand at several other of the less severe sections of the poem, until at last, when only the more intractable parts remained, I felt that it would be poor-spirited not to complete the task in which I had found myself so pleasantly entangled almost against my will; so I set about it resolutely, and with much labour filled in the gaps.

Now that the work is finished, I can hardly expect a wide audience for it. Those who already know and love Lucretius will prefer to read him in his own magnificent hexameters; while few of those who do not yet know him will discover his full greatness and his austere charm under the disguise of my blank verse. But just as Lucretius, despite his ostensible apostolic fervour, must have written not so much to convert the profligate politician Memmius, nor to entertain the crowd of Rome's intellectual worldlings, but rather to please and express his own poetic soul, so a translator of Lucretius should find a sufficient reward in the labour itself, and in a more complete and intimate understanding of his poetry and thought than would otherwise be possible. His genius has often been enthusiastically praised; yet in general the praise has been confined to the more obviously poetic passages, such as the preludes to the first two books, or the discourses on the nothingness of death and the vanity of love at the end of the third and fourth books, and the history of mankind that forms the last half of the fifth. But this is to do Lucretius an injustice. His artistic mastery is as powerfully, though less attractively, displayed in the more didactic parts

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of his work. It is a narrow and arbitrary, but too common, conception of poetry, that would judge of it by the nature of its material, and would condemn as unpoetic the expression, however impassioned, of scientific and philosophical ideas. But above all, those more generally admired passages, admirable as they are by themselves, yet lose much of their grandeur if they are isolated from the expositions and discussions which they introduce, or out of which they grow. The poem is an organic unity. Readers who fail to comprehend it as such will have missed more than half its greatness. It matters little that Lucretius left his work in an unfinished state, and that there are various redundancies, loose ends, imperfect transitions, harshly or carelessly written sentences. Had he lived a few years longer, he would no doubt have remedied many of these defects. But at the worst they do not seriously impair the lucid progress of his exposition, or the splendour of his poetry, still less do they damage the imaginative scope and comprehensiveness of his vision of Nature.

The fundamental unity of the *De Rerum Natura* is no doubt to a large degree dependent upon the completeness and consistency of the Epicurean philosophy. It is now the fashion to depreciate the system of Epicurus as a mere eclectic patchwork clumsily pieced together out of the speculations of Democritus and other predecessors. But such views are hardly likely to be shared by those who are acquainted with the writings of Giussani, and with Mr Cyril Bailey's remarkable study of the Greek Atomists.¹ Into whatever absurdities his fearless logical honesty may have sometimes led Epicurus, at least, to quote Mr Santayana, "he sees the world as one great edifice, one great machine, all its parts reacting upon one another, and growing out of one another in obedience to a general pervasive process of life". It is true that Mr Santayana is here speaking of Lucretius, and not of Epicurus;

¹ *The Greek Atomists and Epicurus*, by Cyril Bailey, Clarendon Press, 1928. This book is of first-rate importance for all students of Epicurus and Lucretius.

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but in no single matter, either of principle or of detail, does the poet appear to have diverged from his master's teaching. It was accepted by him in its totality, with unquestioning faith, and a well-nigh religious dogmatism, as a truthful description of the nature of things, and consequently of the nature of mind. But though he contributed nothing of his own to the doctrine, he was able to transform its emotional quality, and so to turn the dull leaden prose of Epicurus into gleaming poetic gold. A passionate interest not only in the invisible substance and mechanism of Nature, but in the sensible world of changing appearance and illusion; a tragic sense of the beauty and transitoriness of created things; delighted contemplation of every form and phase of animal and human life; a noble impatience both of the blindness that will not recognize the limitations of mortal happiness, and of the superstitious fears and vicious follies that prevent men from enjoying it—all these qualities, meeting together in his imagination, flowered into a poetic eloquence of incomparable grandeur and intensity. There have been poets of a finer artistry, of a more genial wisdom, and of far more varied emotional experience; but none before or since, except Dante, and Leopardi at certain fortunate moments, have shown themselves masters of a style in which a great philosophical and scientific poem could be written.

If such be his view of the matter, it is evident that the task of a translator of Lucretius will be difficult, and in a sense impossible. None should know better than he that great poetry can never be adequately translated. Those who think that such a miracle has sometimes been performed, must either be ignorant of the original, or else deficient in poetic sensitiveness. Yet the attempt may perhaps be worth making upon a writer like Lucretius, whose material is intellectually and morally of universal interest. Much will depend upon the method. There have been almost as many theories of translation as there are ways of writing poetry. Each generation has had its own prejudices as to the amount of freedom or

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literalness that is permissible; and in aiming at scrupulous fidelity in word and phrase, I am no doubt instinctively conforming to the literary spirit of my own age. The too frequent failure of literal translators has generally not been caused by over-literalness, but by incapacity to take sufficient pains, or the lack of poetic mastery in their own language. Be that as it may, in the case of so precise a philosophical writer as Lucretius, it appears to me that it would be doing him a serious injustice to adopt any other mode of translation than that of rigorous verbal accuracy. Nor do I think that his poetry should suffer unduly by such a method, so long as a satisfactory metrical medium be chosen.

Ideally no doubt the hexameters of Lucretius should be translated line by line into English hexameters. But though Robert Bridges has shown that it is not impossible to write true English hexameters, yet such a verse form is at present too unfamiliar to be successfully used for a poem of great length. Moreover it is a metre so difficult to write in, and one that involves so many limitations of vocabulary and phrasing, that the result would be paraphrase rather than translation.

On the other hand any kind of rimed verse would be unsuitable. Rime not only makes accuracy of rendering needlessly difficult, but it brings with it all the familiar associations and conventions of English rimed poetry, which, however admirable in themselves, the reader of a translation from the classics should wish to forget. It is this more than anything else that makes the versions of Homer, Virgil and Lucretius by Pope and Dryden, for all their brilliant qualities, appear nothing less than intolerable travesties, devoid of almost everything that gives the original poems their greatness and individual charm.

Ten-syllabled blank verse, being the most familiar and universal of English verse-forms, is also unavoidably infected with poetical anglicisms; but these are far more varied than the mannerisms of rimed stanzas or couplets. Furthermore blank verse allows of the greatest possible freedom and

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diversity of movement and of phrasing. It has been used by Shakespeare and Milton, by the Georgian and Victorian poets, in so many ways for such different purposes, that it has become, if not “the stateliest measure ever moulded by the lips of men”, yet perhaps the subtlest and most plastic measure that ever moulded human speech. For these reasons I have chosen blank verse as the least inadequate instrument I could find for my purpose of presenting Lucretius to English readers with as little damage as possible to his thought and to his poetry.