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978-1-107-49765-8 - Lucretius Poet & Philosopher
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LUCRETIUS
POET & PHILOSOPHER

by

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*Fellow and President of
St John's College
Cambridge*



CAMBRIDGE
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS
1936

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107497658

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First published 1936

First paperback edition 2015

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-107-49765-8 Paperback

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PREFACE

DURING the past forty years of a fairly strenuous classical life, it has often occurred to me that Lucretius deserved a book to himself, as much as Catullus, Virgil and Horace, all of whom have more or less recently received the undivided attention of English scholarship. Lucretius alone has had to wait since 1909, when John Masson published a second volume on him as *Epicurean and Poet*. The present book has been planned—and, I hope, executed—on different lines. The reader will find that I have said comparatively little on the details of Atomism, ancient and modern, and have preferred to concentrate on the more human side of Lucretius as poet.¹ A knowledge of Epicurean atoms is easily accessible from the many books which deal with the subject, notably by Dr Cyril Bailey, to whose scholarly and sympathetic treatment of Epicurus I owe a great deal of gratitude, as will be apparent from frequent acknowledgement in my own work. In this I have mainly dealt with the actual achievements of Lucretius as poet—his attitude towards religion and ethics, his anthropology and social science,

¹ I have also omitted other subjects more or less germane to Lucretius, such as his influence later, on which see G. D. Hadzsits, *Lucretius and his Influence*, 1935.

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his view of human nature as dependent on the Nature of the Universe. For the sake of completeness, I have often found it necessary to “crib” from my own published books, which indeed were mainly conceived in the hope of a comprehensive work on the great Roman poet. To some extent, my model has been the old, but still invaluable study of Lucretius by Martha, whose *Poëme de Lucrèce* gladdened my undergraduate days.

A few words must be added on the subject of English verse-translations. Formerly, I tried various metres, to represent the *De Rerum Natura*, but am now convinced that, while no metre can do absolute justice to Lucretius, some, at least, of his characteristics can best be preserved in a free treatment of English “heroic” verse. Lucretius is, before all things, a traditionalist; and only the traditional metre used, in different ways, by Milton and Keats, Wordsworth and Coleridge—I ought to add Tennyson’s *Lucretius*—can satisfy the Anglo-Saxon ear. None the less, there is much to be said for the Spenserian stanza, which Mr Foxley has recently chosen with such decided success, in his fine translation of the poet.

Lucretius, again, is an archaist; but, in this respect, I have rarely ventured to follow him. Roman literature moved easily and naturally, in the words and forms of bygone generations; but, in English, a “Wardour Street” diction

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puzzles, if it does not annoy, the average modern reader.

In the Appendix, there will be found some versions of Wordsworth and Matthew Arnold into Lucretian hexameters. My apology for these is the reminder of a classical friend that Latin verse composition—otherwise largely demodé—is a form of criticism, even if there may be few to share my belief that both these poets (especially Wordsworth) have some points in common with Lucretius. Anyhow, the poet himself—as he tells us—wrote for his own Pleasure, as well as for that of others; and a critic, who tries to follow him *non passibus aequis*, may be pardoned for a few *opera*

conquisita diu, dulcique reperta labore.

It remains to acknowledge the assistance of my son, J. G. Sikes, of Jesus College, Cambridge, who has not only corrected the proofs, but has helped in making the Index of this book; and to the Staff of the University Press I am grateful for their care in its preparation.

E. E. S.

January 1936