

Didactic poetry is one of those great cultural institutions that has failed to survive into the modern era, squeezed out, on the one side, by science which took away its content and, on the other, by literary purists who were happy to see it go as not being a wholly original product of the author’s imagination. A standard literary encyclopaedia like *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English* contains entries for epic, tragedy, comedy, lyric, satire, pastoral and fable, but nothing for didactic despite the importance of the didactic tradition among English poets up until the redefinition of poetry by Romanticism and Modernism from the early nineteenth to the late twentieth centuries. Today the genre is likely to seem rather weird to students in that it has features that contradict the very essence of what has come to be regarded as poetic: its subject-matter is not personal but doctrinal; its tone is more rational than emotional; its structure is often argumentative. The modern poet eschews the role of lecturer.

All the more need, then, for a book like Gale’s which situates one of the greatest of all didactic poems, Lucretius’ *De rerum natura*, in the generic tradition within which it functioned both as a work of philosophy and a superlative poem. Gale, whose earlier books on Lucretius and on Virgil’s *Georgics* have established her as a leading authority on Roman didactic verse, has ably fulfilled the three stated aims of the Classical World Series to which this new book belongs: to be ‘concise yet informative and stimulating’. The difficulty of such a series, aimed at undergraduates and even advanced secondary students, is to strike the right intellectual note, avoiding on one side textbook simplification and on the other the sometimes intimidating conceptual and terminological discourse of modern academic criticism. Gale seems to me to get it just right.
The order of the chapters is logical. In the first Gale outlines the main features of Greek didactic verse from Hesiod to Aratus and Nikander and discusses the reasons Lucretius may have had for choosing this genre over the prose treatise. The subject of ch.2 is Epicurean philosophy, which is explained clearly and succinctly. In the third chapter we are shown what is known historically about Lucretius and Memmius his addressee and, more importantly, how the three way relationship between the ‘speaker’, the specific named addressee, and the reader, is managed and made to serve the purpose of philosophical instruction. Other Lucretian didactic techniques are also illustrated, notably the use of satire, of ‘epic’ similes, and of celebration of the greatness of the founding father of Epicureanism. Chapter 4 looks at the beginning and ending of the poem, the invocation of Venus in Book 1 and the description of plague in Book 6, and at some of the ways scholars have attempted to make sense of these key passages. Lucretius’ most important theme, ‘the evils of religion and superstition’ form the subject of ch.5, entitled ‘Fear of the Gods and Fear of Death’. In the last chapter Gale alerts her readers to Lucretius’ literary and cultural politics, to the way he distances himself from the outlook of earlier poets like Homer and Ennius, and to his rejection of contemporary Roman values that attributed such importance to political and military power. There is an ‘Afterword’ on Virgil’s Georgics and Ovid’s Ars amatoria as, in certain respects, responses to Lucretius’ achievement. Suggested study topics, an annotated reading list and an index fill out the rest of the book. Illustrations ranging from a portrait bust of Epicurus to a scene of diners in Dublin’s Epicurean Food Hall add just the right amount of visual honey to sweeten the textual medicine.

The only criticism one might make of this book is that because it is principally aimed at literary students it may be found inadequate by those whose interests are more narrowly philosophical and who desire to know more about Epicureanism and less about poetry. Perhaps Gale is right not to attempt to cater to all tastes, although a little more information on current issues in Epicurean studies might have been helpful even for those whose main interests are literary. A summary of recent work on Philodemus, for instance, would not have been out of place.
Philosophy students, however, may find the re-issue of Martin Ferguson-Smith’s translation of Lucretius (originally published in 1969 but out of print since 1972) better attuned to their particular needs. It has been improved and altered to fit the translator’s own revision of the Loeb text (1992) and has been further enhanced with an updated Introduction and footnotes plus a new index and suggestions for further reading. The translation itself is accurate and elegant, and a pleasure to read if one does not object to a little datedness in style. Because it is in prose it is less likely to be prescribed for courses where Lucretius’ poetry rather than Epicurus’ philosophy is to be the primary focus of attention. From a strictly literary point of view, the presentation of *De rerum natura* here fundamentally misrepresents the nature of the text by turning it into a prose treatise, precisely the form in which Lucretius chose not to write (on which see Gale, 5-7). This impression is strengthened by the translator’s addition of very detailed Headnotes to the beginning of each Book, which set out its structure as a neatly defined sequence of philosophical topics and sub-topics. This, no doubt, is helpful for identifying the philosophical argument, but can be charged with undervaluing the work’s rhetorical and emotional strategies and predisposing the reader to misapprehend the tradition into which it was designed to take its place and generate meaning.

The book will, nevertheless, be found to be a valuable aid by any student studying Lucretius in English, above all for its extensive and excellent footnotes, but also for its clear and comprehensive Introduction (though, as with Gale’s book, more might have been said about Philodemus) and its index (reliably keyed to the line numbers of the poem though not, unfortunately, also to the Introduction). A delightful prose translation of *De Rerum Natura* published in the new millennium but written on the isle of Foula in the Shetlands ‘by the light of a gaslight or candles’ (vi) has to be worthy of a place on every Lucretian or Epicurean scholar’s bookshelf.

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