Book Reviews

Ada Palmer


Ada Palmer’s book makes a fresh and distinctive contribution to the growing body of research on the early modern reception of Lucretius. It is based on a meticulous study of the production and reception of manuscripts and printed editions in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This approach offers a qualification and corrective to the claim in the North American subtitle of Stephen Greenblatt’s The Swerve: that through the recovery of the De rerum natura ‘the world became modern.’ That book, though described by Palmer as ‘lively and broad-reaching,’ had undoubted weaknesses, and these have provoked some extreme counterstatements: that Lucretius was widely read in the later Middle Ages; that he had nothing distinctive to contribute, since atomism was always well-known; that his atomism was so anti-empirical and poorly argued that it could not possibly have had any impact on the development of modern science. Palmer’s book is in no sense a response to Greenblatt’s, for it is based on a dissertation submitted before The Swerve appeared; but it comes now as a measured engagement in a turbulent field. Palmer acknowledges the genuine novelty of the De rerum natura without making overblown claims for its influence.

The first chapter addresses the poem’s larger philosophical polemic. Lucien Febvre celebratedly denied that the Renaissance had the intellectual tools necessary for atheism; what Palmer carefully shows is that Lucretius offered precisely such tools. As an index of what was particularly new in the recovery of Lucretius, she outlines what Lorenzo Valla had felt able to reconstruct of Epicureanism in his De Voluptate without access to the De rerum natura: his emphasis was still on the pursuit of pleasure. Readers confronting the doctrines directly through Lucretius found, on the contrary, strong resistance to sensual pleasures, together with an insistence on the need to understand a cosmos founded on atomic physics without any appeal to divine design. Palmer identifies six ‘proto-atheist’ theses: the development of the cosmos from an
unplanned and chaotic system, denial of Providence, denial of divine participation in the everyday functioning of the natural world, denial of miraculous intervention by the gods, denial that the gods hear or act on human prayer, and rejection of any afterlife. Palmer argues that the term ‘proto-’ is not teleological: some of these theses were compatible with theism, and some could be developed independently of others. She will go on to show that early modern readers were quite capable of assimilating some aspects of the poem to current orthodoxies and passing over others. Nevertheless, when taken together they form a system which permits a split between science and religion. She then discusses the distinctively Epicurean mode of scepticism, in the form of a ‘weak empiricism’, which, she argues, could offer a key bridge towards modern science. What she does not claim is that these arguments were immediately taken up: the reading process formed a ‘buffer’, slowing the potentially radical aspects of Lucretius’s influence.

Palmer proceeds to work successively through different stages of the text’s circulation. She begins with manuscripts and early printed editions and their annotations. One of the most striking facts is that half of the surviving manuscripts were on vellum: luxury items, many of them illustrated, with two bishops and two popes amongst their owners. These, then, were not covertly subversive productions: ownership of a Lucretius manuscript was a public declaration of prestige. Palmer gives a statistical breakdown of the types of annotation made in different formats of manuscript and printed editions. The bulk of these do not concern controversial theses but rather focus on basic matters: glossing words, working out scansion, cataloguing references. This brings home a basic and easily-neglected point: Lucretius is an exceedingly difficult writer, translating an already technical Epicurean Greek vocabulary into densely metaphorical, semi-archaic Latin verse, and early modern readers encountered texts that had yet to be cleared of innumerable errors. Lucretius was unlikely to have a widely subversive influence as long as it was so hard to work out what he was actually saying. Some readers effectively unread the poem to fit their own preconceptions, as with the illustrator who overrode Lucretius’s exposition of multiple explanations for celestial phenomena and offered illustrations in line with traditional authorities. The detailed exposition of atomic philosophy in books 2 and 3 received less attention than the more immediately colourful passages on love in book 4 and the plague in book 6. Only a small number of readers single out passages with ‘proto-atheist’ elements: notably Pomponio Leto, Marcello Adriani, and Niccolò Machiavelli.

Palmer then turns to the ways in which lives of the poet directed readers of successive manuscript and print versions. The vita were especially important, she argues, because of the humanist belief in a link between the virtue of a text