

Dryden's Translation of Lucretius

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D RYDEN'S TRANSLATION of Lucretius is considered by many scholars his most successful attempt in this genre.¹ Of the eight classical poets he rendered into English over a period of twenty years, Virgil or Ovid, or perhaps Homer, might be expected to call forth his best talents; but his affinity for Lucretius (as Dryden understood him), when added to the skill with which he applied his own theories of translation and the purpose for which the work was undertaken, can be credited with the excellence of this comparatively short and early work.

Dryden's intent was to make Lucretius pleasing to English readers, rather than to expound philosophy to them.² This design contributed greatly to the success of the translation, for it caused him to ignore the purely philosophical passages of *De rerum natura*—passages which in poetry can seldom survive the shift from one age and language to another. His aim also caused him to select what he calls "some parts . . . which had most affected me in the reading" (I, 251).³ The nature of these passages and their selection as material he liked and could approach with enthusiasm contribute to the attractive result. They deal with such subjects as the progress of love, the advantages of reason and moderation, and the inevitability of death—subjects which are general and timeless.

Dryden felt free to alter the original to a considerable degree in order to create English poetry which would give pleasure to his

¹John C. Collins, "John Dryden," *Essays and Studies* (London, 1895), pp. 53-54; T. S. Eliot, *John Dryden* (New York, 1932), p. 20; George R. Noyes, "Biographical Sketch," *The Poetical Works of John Dryden* (Boston, 1909), xxx; Mark Van Doren, *John Dryden: A Study of His Poetry* (New York, 1946), p. 97.

²"Preface to *Sylvae*," *Essays of John Dryden*, ed. W. P. Ker (Oxford, 1900), I, 264. Citations from Dryden's essays are to this edition.

³These parts are the invocation to Venus (I, 1-40), the praise of reason and moderation (II, 1-61), the discussion of death (III, 830-1094), the description of love (IV, 1052-1282), and the comparison between the helplessness of men and the self-sufficiency of animals (V, 222-234); *De rerum natura*, ed. Cyril Bailey (Oxford, 1947), I. Citations from Lucretius are to this edition; numbers refer to book and line; translations are my own. Unfortunately we do not know which of the many available editions of Lucretius Dryden used; cf. Joseph McG. Bottkol, "Dryden's Latin Scholarship," *MP*, XL (1943), 243.

readers. His theory of translation, as we shall see, allowed a good deal of latitude, but it did require that the translator closely follow the ideas of his author. If these ideas were primarily philosophical, the translator had relatively little freedom, as Dryden indicated in a criticism of Thomas Creech's translation: "The word, perish, used by Mr. Creech is a verb neuter; where Lucretius puts (perimit) which is active: a licence, which in translating a philosophical Poet, ought not to be taken, for some reasons, which I have not room to give."⁴ Since Dryden was not viewing the poem as a philosophical treatise, he "both added and omitted, and even sometimes boldly made such expositions . . . as no Dutch commentator will forgive" (I, 252). In fact, he specifically notes that he could take this liberty because of his intention: "He [Creech] follows him more closely than I have done, which became an interpreter of the whole poem: I take more liberty, because it best suited with my design, which was, to make him as pleasing as I could" (I, 264).

Dryden's assumption of "more liberty" to add, omit, and alter was particularly useful in translating Lucretius into heroic verse. By omitting, he was able to approximate the length of the original passage despite his shorter pentameter lines and his comparatively uninflected language. The 615 lines of Lucretius he translated into only 760 of English because of his liberty in cutting. For example, where Lucretius used three lines to indicate that the bereaved mourn—

at nos horrifico cinefactum te prope busto
insatiabiliter deflevimus, aeternumque
nulla dies nobis maerorem e pectore demet

(III, 906-908)

(But we wept insatiably for you as you were turned to ashes near us at the frightening place of burning, and no day shall take that unending grief away from our hearts)

—Dryden omitted the first two lines and translated the passage as, "No time shall dry our tears, nor drive thee from our mind" (III, 94).⁵ A few lines later in Lucretius' original, a group of toppers lament, "brevis hic est fructus homullis" (III, 914) or "brief is the

⁴Letter to an unidentified person, *The Letters of John Dryden*, ed. Charles E. Ward (Durham, N.C., 1942), p. 16.

⁵*The Poems of John Dryden*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford, 1958), I. Citations from Dryden's poems are to this edition; numbers refer to book and line.

enjoyment for us little men." Dryden rendered this complaint fairly literally, as "Short are the joys that humane Life can give" (III, 102), but omitted the next line of the lament: "iam fuerit neque post umquam revocare licebit;" or "soon it will be past, and we will never be permitted to call it back." Throughout, Dryden showed little hesitation in omitting lines which do not appreciably affect the main idea of the passages where they occur.

He was able, moreover, by adding phrases of his own, to fill out couplets and find rhymes to make his verses complete and harmonious. This translation contains 108 half lines which have no equivalent in the Latin text. Since 90 of these additions occur at the end of a line, it seems evident that he sometimes added to fill out a couplet. Yet these additions often give the couplets a pointedness which characterizes Dryden's best verse. For example, in the couplet, "O wretched man! in what a mist of Life, / Inclos'd with dangers and with noisie strife" (II, 16-17), Dryden's addition, "and with noisie strife," not only completes the couplet technically by providing the rhyme, but also gives the metaphor a new significance by adding an auditory image to the visual images of the first line and a half. In another couplet the second half of the first line is new: "They whine, and cry, let us make haste to live, / Short are the joys that humane Life can give" (III, 101-102). Here too the addition may deviate slightly from Lucretius, but it does produce a vivid couplet.

Some of the most effective couplets have a whole line added by Dryden. His translation contains 111 lines which have no basis in the Latin text. Undoubtedly the need to complete the couplet motivated many of these additions; but so expertly are they made that we are not aware the additions are intended to fill out the couplet. For example, in a sentence dealing with the inability of the dead to feel, where Lucretius concluded, "non si terra mari miscebitur et mare caelo" (III, 842), or "not even if earth be mixed with sea and sea with heaven," Dryden took this line as the beginning of the couplet: "Though Earth in Seas, and Seas in Heav'n were lost, / We shou'd not move, we only shou'd be tost" (III, 13-14). Not only does the added second line complete the couplet, but the antithesis of the added line points the idea sharply and is especially effective because it sums up the ideas developed in the previous several lines.

Dryden's basic theory, of which the liberty to add and omit is merely an extension, encouraged effective translation by taking into consideration the translator's language as well as the original author's ideas and language. He followed a middle course between metaphor, a word-for-word rendering which would have sacrificed the translator's language for the sake of the author's ideas and diction, and imitation, which sacrificed the original work by allowing the imitator to follow merely some ideas of the original, but not necessarily the words or sense of it. The aim of his middle way was to present the foreign author in English at his best and in his natural character. Consequently the translator had to keep his author's sense "sacred and inviolable," but he was allowed to amplify the original work.⁶

An examination of some of the amplifications shows that they often clarify an idea. Considering the possibility that at some future time a body might be formed of the same atoms which now compose our bodies, Lucretius concluded, "pertineat quicquam tamen ad nos id quoque factum, / interrupta semel cum sit repetentia nostri" (III, 850-851), that is, "It would not concern us at all, when once the remembrance of our former selves was destroyed." Dryden added two lines (indicated by *) which explain the meaning more fully:

- What gain to us wou'd all this bustle bring,
- * The new made man wou'd be another thing;
- When once an interrupting pause is made,
- * That individual Being is decay'd.

(III, 23-26)

The next two lines of Lucretius he also expanded: "et nunc nil ad nos de nobis attinet, ante / qui fuimus, <nil> iam de illis nos adficit angor;" or "And now we are not concerned about the selves which once we were; we are not affected by any anguish for them," which in his version becomes

- We, who are dead and gone, shall bear no part
- ½ * In all the pleasures, nor shall feel the smart,
- Which to that other Mortal shall accrew,
- * Whom of our Matter Time shall mould anew.

(III, 27-30)

⁶Ker, I, 237, 241-242.

Besides making Lucretius' point clearer, these added lines provide Dryden's passage with a continuity and smoothness essential to argumentative verse, which needs a certain looseness or repetition of expression so the mind can comprehend the intricacies of thought before the eye has passed on to the next section. If we look again at these added lines we find that they repeat the same idea; in fact, Lucretius successfully conveyed in four lines the ideas Dryden spread over eight. However, though the number of lines varies, the same length of time (about twenty seconds) is required to read each passage aloud. It seems likely, therefore, that some of Dryden's additions were necessary to compensate for the difference in time needed to read a Latin hexameter and an English pentameter.

Dryden was careful to choose, in this successful translation, subject matter and kinds of material congenial to his talents as an original poet. Over half of the translation consists of argumentative verse, a type of poetry he liked and wrote. During the decade when he translated Lucretius, all his important original poems were argumentative—*Religio Laici*, *The Hind and the Panther*, *Absalom and Achitophel*, *MacFlecknoe*, and *The Medal*. Furthermore, many of his plays contain scenes of disputation. In fact, in his favorite play, *All for Love*, the scene he defended most fully (the meeting of Cleopatra and Octavia) and the scene he liked best (the meeting of Antony and Ventidius) are both argumentative.⁷ Just as congenial to him as the argumentative selections from Lucretius was the passage on human love, which constitutes almost forty per cent of the translation. To some extent it is an argument against succumbing to love, and hence is argumentative poetry. Primarily, however, it is a vivid description of passion. Although he was no Lord Rochester, Dryden shared the Restoration taste for explicitly sexual poetry and drama (he contributed three erotic poems to the *Miscellany Poems* and five to *Sylvae*). Obviously this taste for erotic poetry motivated him to translate the passage on love, as he admits in the preface. After granting that there might be an objection, "and that of some moment," to the "obscenity of the subject; which is aggravated by the too lively and alluring delicacy of the verses," he asserts, "In the first place, without the least formality of an excuse, I own it pleased me" (I, 262).

⁷Ker, I, 192-193, 201.

This passage which pleased him Dryden treated with considerable latitude, a procedure he alludes to when he justifies his translating it into "this luscious English, for I will not give it a worse word." Here he maintains that he had to translate Lucretius "to the best advantage." Dryden probably has these lines on love in mind when he defends the general license he took in adding and omitting: "Perhaps, in such particular passages, I have thought that I discovered some beauty yet undiscovered by those pedants, which none but a poet could have found. . . . where I have enlarged them [the expressions in the original], I desire the false critics would not always think, that those thoughts are wholly mine, but that either they are secretly in the poet, or may be fairly deduced from him; or . . . that if he were living, and an Englishman, they are such as he would probably have written" (I, 252). Two passages will show how the changes Dryden made in order to present Lucretius "to the best advantage" and to develop "some beauty yet undiscovered by those pedants" resulted in distinctively English verse. Discussing the successful lover, Lucretius wrote:

in vultuque videt vestigia risus.
 Atque in amore mala haec proprio summeque secundo
 inveniuntur; in adverso vero atque inopi sunt,
 prendere quae possis oculorum lumine operto,
 innumerabilia.

(IV, 1140-44)

(He sees traces of laughter in her face. And these ills are found in love that is true and fully prosperous; but when love is crossed and hopeless there are ills which you might detect even with closed eyes, ills without number.)

Dryden omitted one line and added two whole lines and a half line in his translation:

And thinks he sees upon her cheeks the while,
 The dimpled tracks of some foregoing smile;
 * His raging Pulse beats thick, and his pent Spirits boyl.
 This is the product ev'n of prosp'rous Love,
 Think then what pangs disastrous passions prove!
 ½ * Innumerable Ills; disdain, despair,
 * With all the meager Family of Care

(IV, 121-127)

The first striking line of this passage, "The dimpled tracks of some foregoing smile," is developed from the two words "vestigia risus," "traces of laughter." The literal translation of "vestigia," "tracks," is considerably more concrete than the intended metaphorical meaning, "traces." The image is made even more concrete by the addition of "dimpled" and "foregoing," words Dryden might justify as "fairly deduced" from Lucretius. He would probably give the same explanation for the first added line, "His raging Pulse etc.," which stresses the anxiety present in successful love affairs so that the last three lines, dealing with unhappy love, will be realized as presenting even more intense annoyances. The last line and a half added, which specify and restate the idea of "mala innumerabilia," enable Dryden to introduce the vivid metaphor, "meager Family of Care," and to make the idea of innumerable ills more concrete.

Although the translation of abstract Latin words into concrete English terms is most prominent in passages dealing with love, it is found throughout Dryden's Lucretius. For example, discussing the thought of death, Lucretius said, "numquid ibi horribile apparet, num triste videtur / quicquam" (III, 976-977), asking the question, "Is there anything that seems horrible here, anything that looks gloomy?" Dryden omitted "gloomy" and stated the specific objects that evoke horror:

What horreur seest thou in that quiet state,
 What Bugbear dreams to fright thee after Fate?
 No Ghost, No Goblins, that still passage keep. . . .
 (III, 179-181)

He also changed the broad term "ibi"—"here"—to the more concrete "in that quiet state" to form a sharp contrast with the horrors of ghost and goblins, and thereby to stress the folly of fearing death. What makes these changes result in Dryden's best translation is not simply that they are changes from the language of Lucretius to language Dryden can handle effectively, but that they are determined by a principle whose application to Lucretius again accords with Dryden's talents as a poet.

His other fundamental principle of translation, complementing the theory that one must follow the sense of the original, is that the translator must preserve the "character" of the author being trans-

lated. The translator must understand not only his own and his poet's language, "but his particular turn of thoughts and expression, which are the characters that distinguish, and as it were individuate him from all other writers. When we are come thus far, 'tis time to look into ourselves, to conform our genius to his, to give his thought either the same turn, if our tongue will bear it, or, if not, to vary but the dress, not to alter or destroy the substance."⁸ When he examined Lucretius' genius, Dryden found the "distinguishing character" to be "a certain kind of noble pride, and positive assertion of his opinions. He is everywhere confident of his own reason, and assuming an absolute command. . . . This is that perpetual dictatorship, which is exercised by Lucretius. . . . All this, too, with so much scorn and indignation, as if he were assured of the triumph, before he entered into the lists. From this sublime and daring genius of his, it must of necessity come to pass, that his thoughts must be masculine, full of argumentation, and that sufficiently warm. From the same fiery temper proceeds the loftiness of his expressions, and the perpetual torrent of his verse, where the barrenness of his subject does not too much constrain the quickness of his fancy." In translating Lucretius, Dryden felt he had to put aside his "natural diffidence and scepticism for a while, to take up that dogmatical way of his" (I, 259-260). Despite this suggestion that the genius of Lucretius was quite different from his own, there is a great similarity between the character of Lucretius as envisaged by Dryden and the character Dryden himself assumes in his satires and gives to the heroes of his heroic plays. For example, consider these typical couplets:

"Vain man, thy hopes of Ferdinand are weak!
I hold thy chain too fast for him to break"
(*Conquest of Granada* II.i. 63-64)⁹

and

The *Jews* well knew their power: e'r *Saul* they Chose,
God was their King, and God they durst Depose.
(*Absalom and Achitophel*, ll. 417-418)

Scorn and indignation, masculine thoughts, warm argumentation, a kind of noble pride, and positive assertion of opinion—these

⁸Ker, I, 241.

⁹In *John Dryden* [Dramatic Works], ed. George Saintsbury (London, [1904?]).

phrases describe much of Dryden's verse as well as they do Lucretius'.

This long passage from the translation will illustrate the skill and the means Dryden used to preserve these characteristics of Lucretius:

Hoc etiam faciunt ubi discubere tenentque
 pocula saepe homines et inumbrant ora coronis,
 ex animo ut dicant "brevis hic est fructus homullis;
 iam fuerit neque post umquam revocare licebit."
 tamquam in morte mali cum primis hoc sit eorum,
 quod sitis exurat miseros atque arida torrat,
 aut aliae cujus desiderium insideat rei. (III, 912-918)

(This too men often do when they are lying down and holding their cups and shading their brows with garlands: they say from the heart, "Brief is this enjoyment for us little men; soon it will be past and we will never be permitted to call it back." As though in death this were to be foremost among their ills, that thirst would burn the wretches and parch them with its drought, or that a desire for any other thing would remain with them.)

Yet thus the fools, that would be thought the Wits,
 Disturb their mirth with melancholy fits,
 When healths go round, and kindly brimmers flow,
 Till the fresh Garlands on their foreheads glow,
 They whine, and cry, let us make haste to live,
 Short are the joys that humane Life can give.
 Eternal Preachers, that corrupt the draught,
 And pall the God that never thinks, with thought;
 Ideots with all that thought, to whom the worst
 Of death, is want of drink, and endless thirst,
 Or any fond desire as vain as these. (III, 97-107)

"Homines" or "men" have become not just "fools" but the worst kind of fools: those that would be thought the wits; and the folly of their conduct is further brought out in the next line by the contrast between mirth and melancholy fits. In Lucretius, they merely speak, "dicunt"; Dryden further discountenanced them by having them "whine, and cry" their remark. In Lucretius, their speech is only a lament; Dryden added an exhortation to immoderate activity. He explicitly castigated them in the two and a half added lines, "Eternal Preachers . . . all that thought." Lucretius said they speak

as *though* thirst were the worst evil of death. Dryden was more positive: in his version thirst *is* the worst evil. Where Lucretius temperately concluded that they speak as if in death there would abide a yearning for any thing, Dryden concluded with a classification of any other yearning as “fond” and with a judgment on their present desires as “vain.”

Another means of maintaining the author’s character is adherence to the turn of expressions in the original. Many of the rhetorical devices found in Lucretius are ones which Dryden was adept at using in his original verse.¹⁰ And some of the finest lines in this translation derive much of their excellence from his preservation of a rhetorical figure in the Latin line. For example, the antithesis in the second line of the couplet “For life is not confin’d to him or thee; / ’Tis giv’n to all for use; to none for Property” (III, 173-174), is an exact rendering of the same device in Lucretius: “vitaque mancipio nulli datur, omnibus usu” (III, 971). The paradox of Lucretius’ lines, “namque in eo spes est, unde est ardoris origo, / restingui quoque posse ab eodem corpore flammam” (IV, 1086-87), that is, “For there is hope in this, that the flame can be quenched at the same body which is the source of the heat,” is maintained and compressed in the line, “And sends him to his Foe to seek relief” (IV, 48).

In other passages, however, Dryden sometimes could not reproduce a rhetorical figure of the original. He omitted, for example, the balance of “quae mare navigerum, quae terras frugiferentis” (I, 3) and the paradox and chiasmus of “Mortalem vitam mors cum immortalis ademit” (III, 869). But to compensate for these losses, to present Lucretius “to the best advantage,” and to preserve his character in translation, Dryden often used Lucretian figures in passages which did not, in the Latin, contain these figures. For example, by using balance and antithesis Dryden changed the state-

¹⁰This similarity of rhetorical figures in the Latin and English poets is not surprising, for Dryden learned to write poetry at Westminster School, which, like other schools of the seventeenth century, required students to memorize figures of speech from the classics and to translate classical poetry into English verse (G. F. Russell Barker, *Memoir of Richard Busby* [London, 1895], p. 80). In the “Argument of the Third Satyr” of Persius, Dryden recalled this early training: “I remember I translated this Satyr, when I was a *Kings-Scholar* at *Westminster School*, for a *Thursday Nights Exercise*; and believe that it, and many other of my *Exercises* of this nature, in *English Verse*, are still in the Hands of my *Learned Master*, the Reverend Doctor *Busby*” (Kinsley, II, 758).

ment that "Homerus / sceptra potitus eadem aliis sopitu' quietest" (III, 1037-38), or "Homer, once wielder of scepters, now rests in the same sleep as other men" into "Where now is *Homer* who possess the Throne? / Th' immortal Work remains, the mortal Author's gone" (III, 253-254). Lucretius' statement that "cedit enim rerum novitate extrusa vetustas / semper" (III, 964-965) or "the old ever gives place, driven out by new things" came through as this balanced line: "New things to come, and old to pass away" (III, 166). Sometimes paradox was obtained by a close translation of a non-paradoxical line in Lucretius: "Hinc indignatur se mortalem esse creatum" (III, 884) or "Hence he bewails that he was created mortal" was translated "Then he repines that he was born to die" (III, 64).

Though necessarily not comprehensive, this study has suggested the major factors which, when taken together, give the translation its distinctive merit. Dryden chose the passages which were most congenial to him. These Lucretian passages have a subject matter, style, and tone akin to those of Dryden's original verse written in the same period. The license of his middle way between literal translation and imitation served him well at all times; but here the greater freedom he took, as a result of the recent Creech translation and of his own poetic perceptions of Lucretius, allowed him to fuse into one the merits of the translator and of the translated poet.