

Approaches to Teaching
World Literature

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**Approaches to Teaching
the Works of John Dryden**

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Teaching Dryden's Latin Translations: Lucretius, Vergil, and the Honeybee

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Erotic obsession and how to cope with it, the fact of death and the thirst for life, the delicate balance between human beings and their environment and all that threatens that balance—what student wouldn't be captivated by such concerns? Yet how many of us associate them with Dryden's poetry? Dryden, we all know, is a politically and socially engaged poet, and it's a challenge for us to teach his topical poetry to undergraduates far removed from the public issues and persons he addressed. The Great Fire and the Dutch Wars, the Exclusion Crisis and Popish Plot, Church of England ecclesiology in relation to Roman Catholicism and Protestant Dissent, royal bastards who are rebellious and promising satirists who die young—I admit that I've found all these concerns a hard sell, even at a liberal arts college named for King William and Queen Mary. But these are the concerns of *Annus Mirabilis*, *Absalom and Achitophel*, and "To the Memory of Mr. Oldham." Perhaps a more welcoming way to initiate students into Dryden's poetry is through his translations, which are perennially accessible and compelling.

Dryden's translations from Lucretius's *De rerum natura* (*Works* 3: 44–66; "On the Nature of Things")—which Dryden's California editors deem a "neglected masterpiece" (281)—offer therapeutic advice on how to deal not only with the fear of death but also with a maddening erotic attachment. This sexual perturbation is apt to be familiar to students of college age, but just in case it isn't, I typically introduce the story of Dido and Aeneas, which ends with Dido's suicidal rage against Aeneas for abandoning her, through book 4 of Dryden's translation of Vergil's *Aeneid* (5: 450–84) or through his "Dido to Aeneas," adapted from Ovid's "Epistles," or *Heroides* (1: 132–38). Another poem Dryden translated from the Latin is Vergil's *Georgics* (5: 137–266), a didactic poem on agriculture and the worth of poetic as well as manual labor but also on the sexual force that works through all things and on death, along with Eros, as a limitation of our purposeful activity. I focus my teaching of the *Georgics* on book 4, in which the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, the poet's failed attempt to bring his dead beloved back from the underworld, is framed by a story about bees: the hive, its collective death, and its ritual restoration in an act that rights the balance between man and the gods, man and the earth. Dryden found the *Georgics* to be "the best Poem of the best Poet," the masterpiece of Vergil's maturity (5: 137–38 [dedication to *Georgics*]); the same tribute might be paid to Dryden's English version of the poem.

As the table of contents of Keith Walker's Oxford World's Classics edition of Dryden (*Major Works*) makes clear, much of Dryden's poetic work lies in the translation or imitation of earlier poetry, Latin poetry in particular (Lucretius,

Ovid, Horace, Juvenal, Persius, Vergil). Dryden first theorized poetic translation in his preface to a translation of Ovid's *Epistles* (1680), in which he advocated paraphrase (or "translation with latitude") over metaphrase (strict translation) and imitation (taking undue license with the original) (*Works* 1: 114–19). In the last twenty years of his poetic career, Dryden would increasingly find his own poetic voices in the paraphrasing of other authors.

If we are inclined to think of literary translation as beneath the dignity of original composition, we entertain a view quite alien to Dryden's and to that of readers and critics, from the fourth earl of Roscommon (*An Essay on Translated Verse* [1685]) to Samuel Johnson (*Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* [1781]), who ranked verse translation highly. The translations of Dryden, as later of Alexander Pope, were considered to be among these authors' greatest achievements. I teach Dryden in an upper-level period course on British literature from 1660 to 1744, once "the age of Dryden and Pope," an era that comprises the great age of literary translation in English—if not its golden age (that title should go to the Tudor-Stuart Renaissance, which gave us Golding's Ovid and Chapman's Homer), then its incandescent silver age. Translation was taken seriously, as a way of engaging and Englishing a Greco-Roman literary corpus that was still held to be, in most regards, unequalled by the vernacular literatures of Europe. The translator's art, less expressive than interactive, forges connection and renewal, salvaging voices that would otherwise be lost, collaborating with the past in the interest of the future. The ethics of translation are well expressed by Catherine Talbot in a letter from the 1740s:

[A] faithful and elegant translator is a character of the highest virtue in the literary republic. It [translation] implies public spirit the most void of ostentation; a kind regard for the illiterate [i.e., those without Greek or Latin]; a love of our own native country, shown by enriching its language with valuable books; a just regard for merit of whatever country, by placing the merit of some valuable foreigners in the truest and fairest light. . . .¹

In various incarnations of this course I've taught most all of Dryden's Latin and Greek translations. All have their inherent charms, and each has the additional benefit of establishing the various genres so important to Restoration and eighteenth-century literature. Thus students who steep themselves in a sampling of epic through either Dryden's *First Book of Homer's Iliad* (7: 260–85; from *The Fables*) or selected books of his *Aeneis* (I sometimes do books 2 [Aeneas in Carthage recounts the Fall of Troy], 4 [Dido and Aeneas], and 6 [epic descent into the underworld]) are apt to have a much greater appreciation for the mock-epic elements found in "Mac Flecknoe" and Pope's *Dunciad*. Reading Dryden's imitations of Horace and Juvenal is a wonderful introduction to satire. From Juvenal I've used the misogynist sixth satire to start a conversation about gender politics that extends to Pope's "To a Lady" and the responses that it, and

Pope more generally, elicit from women authors (Mary Leapor, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, and Anne Ingram, Viscountess Irwin). Dryden's rollicking paraphrase of Juvenal's tenth satire (4: 144–203) may be profitably contrasted with Johnson's Christianized—and bowdlerized—version of the same, *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, in a conversation about changing literary and sexual mores between the Restoration and the mid-eighteenth century. A section on the verse epistle can commence with Dryden's paraphrase of Ovid's "Dido to Aeneas," a work that leads naturally to Rochester's "A Letter from Artemizia in the Town to Chloe in the Country" and to Pope's "Sappho to Phaon," "Eloisa to Abelard," or Horatian epistles. Pope's *Essay on Man* is illuminated by beginning one's teaching of philosophical verse, or the didactic poem, with Dryden's paraphrase of Lucretius's *De rerum natura*.

Students are susceptible to the charms of Dryden's Lucretius, not least because of the Latin poet's existential and erotic concerns: the meaning of life, atoms and the void, why death ought not to be feared, and finally—Dryden's favorite part of Lucretius, book 4—"the truest account of the disease [of erotic obsession] and its remedy" (3: 12 [preface to *Sylvae*]). Some students also like, as Dryden puts it, Lucretius's "noble pride, and positive assertion of his opinions" (10)—an antidote, perhaps, to modernist poetry, which asserts little or nothing. Lucretius offers a systematic poetic exposition of Epicurus's philosophy, though students may be surprised to learn that Epicurus was no epicure. Although he considered pleasure (*hēdonē*) the greatest good, his notion of it is best understood as the absence of pain: pleasure is unruffled tranquillity, composure, peace. Epicurus taught that three main things trouble the mind: fear of eternal punishment after death; in life, undue public ambition; and, finally, erotic attachment. Cupid's arrows were to be avoided at all costs. (Although counseling a male readership to avoid what we'd call falling in love, with either women or young men, Lucretius is all for marital, reproductive sex, and even offers advice—now valuable for entertainment purposes only—on the best sexual positions for conception.)

But if Lucretius advised against erotic desire, he also depicted it, as Dryden notes, in a "lively" and "alluring" manner (12). To follow Lucretius faithfully, Dryden avows he was bound "to turn him into . . . luscious *English*"; thus he reproduces the tension in Lucretius between condemning and sumptuously describing the coupling of lovers. Dryden claims but does not show that there is no satisfaction

when the Youthful pair more clossely joyn,
When hand in hands they lock, and thighs in thighs they twine
Just in the raging foam of full desire,
When both press on, both murmur, both expire,
They gripe, they squeeze, their humid tongues they dart,
As each wou'd force their way to t'others heart. . . . (4.71–76)

If Lucretius and Dryden after him truly wanted, on Epicurean principles, to wean us away from carnal thoughts, they could've done a better job than this. Yet the literary point to be made here is that, as in Pope's *Essay on Man*, the best didacticism is the most vexed didacticism.

Expiring in the above passage means "breathing out" (Johnson's *Dictionary*, def. 1) and also "dying," and *dying* is a traditional euphemism for "reaching orgasm"—but when it comes to accepting one's final expiration, Dryden gives personified Nature finely crafted lines on why not to fear annihilation. One reason is that Nature has nothing new left to give:

To please thee I have empti'd all my store,
I can invent, and can supply no more;
But run the round again, the round I ran before.
(3.138–40)

In my experience, students love that last triplet, and here, as throughout, Dryden's Lucretius abounds with good examples of sound imitating sense. In the triplet's final alexandrine we have both a circular line about circularity, built on the figures of polyptoton (the verb *to run* cast in different tenses) and anadiplosis (ending one phrase with the "round" that starts the next), and a plodding line about plodding on, its regular iambs extended across a greater length. Perhaps not all students enjoy mastering this technical appreciation of poetry, but a good many do, and Dryden (as later Pope) affords numerous such passages for them to linger over.

The last genre to which Dryden can introduce students is georgic, a crucial genre in eighteenth-century poetry, from Pope's *Windsor Forest* through William Wordsworth's *Michael*, but one that students are not apt to find immediately attractive. I draw them in by having them read and write on selections from Dryden's paraphrase of Vergil's *Georgics*. Vergil's poem follows naturally from Lucretius in that it is Epicurean and didactic. According to Vergil's learned speaker, the poet as gentleman farmer, understanding the nature of things is best, but a close second best is "[t]o lead a soft, secure, inglorious life" near "a winding Vally, and a lofty Wood" (2.689–91). But as with Lucretius, Vergil's didacticism is vexed: in tension with his ideal of tranquillity, book 3 of the *Georgics* introduces, along with advice on how to breed animals, a frank acknowledgment of the uncontrollable force of sexual desire. Eros stirs up competitive violence between animals as between human beings, and even between kings. Politically inclined teachers can note in Dryden's depiction of sexually competitive bulls (3.325–80) a sustained allusion to the conflict between King William III and the deposed King James II, who here "surveys the pleasing Kingdoms, once his own" (354).

My teaching of the *Georgics* focuses on book 4, which contrasts the erotic madness of men with the asexual calmness of bees ("No lust enervates their

Heroic Mind" [290]). Orpheus mourns for a dead love that cannot be brought back to life, and yet, in a strange turn, we are taught a mythic way to restore a lost hive. *Georgics* 4 begins with advice about raising bees but also with political observations about the hive, a commune under a king ("All is the States, the State provides for all" [229]). The second part of the book (lines 401–806) concerns the legendary beekeeper Aristaeus, whose hive suddenly dies in a seemingly inexplicable manner. Aristaeus eventually discovers the reason for his hive's demise: it is his punishment for the attempted rape of Eurydice, a chase that ended with her accidental death. He receives instruction in making a proper sin offering of eight cattle to the wood nymphs, and after nine days a new swarm of bees magically arises from the sacrificed animals (Vergil here offers a mythical account of the origin of the ancient practice of bugonia, aimed at generating bees from the corpses of oxen).

Why all this fuss about bees? It's a question urban and suburban students are apt to ask, and fortunately there's a good answer to it. In addition to producing honey, which was a foodstuff more consequential to Vergil's world and Dryden's than to our own (sugar and sucrose-surfeited) world, the European honeybee, introduced to North America four hundred years ago, serves a crucial role in our agriculture. Tomatoes, peppers, apples, pears, squash, and almonds are all bee-pollinated foods. Yet, as recent articles in the *New York Times* and *On Earth* attest, managed honeybees are approaching a state of crisis. Increasing cases of colony collapse disorder, or the sudden death of hives, has beekeepers, farmers, and environmentalists as alarmed as Aristaeus was about his loss (see Levy; Klinkenborg). For although our loss today is partly explainable and thus potentially reversible—it involves the diminishing of wild flowering plants through human overpopulation and overdevelopment—it is also partly unexplainable.

What, finally, does it mean that in Vergil bees can be regenerated while individual people cannot? In most recently teaching the *Georgics*, the essay questions I posed concerned poetry and its limited power to restore life—for human beings, for bees. I asked my students to consider the following quotation from Susan Stewart: "The cultural, or form-giving, work of poetry is to counter the oblivion of darkness . . . it is precisely in material ways that poetry is a force against effacement—not merely for individuals but for communities through time as well" (1–2). How does Stewart's reflection on the task of poetry relate to the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice? To what degree is Eurydice drawn out of the darkness—or not? This last question extends to the frames of poetic making and translational remaking: to what degree is Orpheus's task the same as Vergil's, and Vergil's the same as Dryden's? My students found these broad questions provocative, and the recent crop of essays I received in response to them was particularly good. Some students reflected on the ritual backgrounds of poetry. As one put it, "Vergil conceives that poetry is very much the ritualized act that Aristaeus's sacrifice of cattle is, a restoration of the natural order of things—an offering to quell desires, to assuage grief, to right wrongs" (Matthew Van Cura). Other students reflected on the collective life of bees. "It is the

task that defines the bee, not the bee the task," wrote Emily Fuhrman. Human beings have not only individual projects but sometimes fatal desires, such as Aristaeus's attempted rape of Eurydice and Orpheus's rash backward glance at her. "Human beings can easily ruin things forever because they are controlled by their whims, while bees think as a unit and are not slaves to their impulses" (Krystyna Lopez). My students generally don't stray far from liberal individualism; perhaps the most surprising thing about teaching Dryden's Vergil was to see this strain of selfless thinking inspired by Vergil's bees as well as the crisis of bees today—and perhaps, in part, by Dryden's pollinating art of translation.

NOTE

¹This letter, in which Talbot encourages Elizabeth Carter to translate Epictetus from the Greek, is quoted in Staves, *Literary History* 310–11.