

**BAY LEAVES:
TRANSLATIONS FROM
THE LATIN POETS**

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Bay Leaves: Translations from the Latin Poets by Goldwin Smith

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BY

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PREFACE.



THE translator of Latin poetry has the comfort of knowing that he is separated from his authors by no chasm of thought and sentiment, such as that which separates the translator from Homer, or even from Æschylus. The men are intellectually almost his contemporaries. Gibbon was right in thinking that no age would have suited him better than that of the Antonines, provided he had been, as he naturally took it for granted that he would, a wealthy gentleman and a philosophic Pagan, not a slave or a Christian. He and a cultivated Roman of that day, or of Cicero's day, would have thoroughly understood each other. Their views of life would have been pretty much the same, so would their religion, so would their mythology, for the literary men of the Georgian era had adopted the Pagan Pantheon, and Jupiter, Mars, Venus, and Diana were their divinities. Even the conventional worship of the Roman Emperor would have had something like a counterpart in the conventional reverence for "great George," and the political tempera-

ment of the philosophic Roman would have been in exact harmony with that of Hume and Gibbon. Horace Walpole might have heartily enjoyed a supper with Horatius Flaccus; he might even have supped well, though he would have politely passed the dormice. He and his host would have interchanged ideas with perfect ease. This affinity is largely due of course to the direct influence of classical education on the moderns; but it was also partly due, especially in the religious sphere, to a similarity in circumstances between the two epochs. Apart, therefore, from mere difficulties of construction or allusion, the translator may be sure that he knows what his author means. Lucretius is further removed from us than the poets of the Empire in forms of thought and in language as well as in date. But he is brought wonderfully near to our age by his Atomic and Epicurean philosophy and by the sentiment connected with it. Sometimes the likeness is startling.

The translations are free, and it is hardly possible that any but a free translation can be the semblance of an equivalent for the poetry of the original. A literal translation, as a rule, can only be a fetter-dance. The general thought, the tone, and choice expressions are all that a translator can usually hope to produce.

It can be hardly necessary to say anything about authors so well known. Familiar to all who would take up anything classical are Lucretius, the real didactic poet, who used his poetry as "honey on the rim" of the cup out

of which a generation, distracted with mad ambition and civil war, was to drink the medicinal draught of the Epicurean philosophy, and be at once beguiled of its woes and set free from the dark thralldom of superstition; Catullus with his Byronian mixture of sensibility and depravity; Tibullus, famed in his day like Shenstone and Tickell, about their fair equivalent, and the offspring of the same fashion of dallying with verse; Propertius, whose crabbed style and sad addiction to frigid mythology are sometimes relieved by passages of wonderful tenderness and beauty; Ovid, whose marvellous facility, vivacity, and—to use the word in its eighteenth century sense—wit, too often misemployed, appear in all his works, and who, though he had no more feeling than Pope, shows in the epistle of Dido to Æneas that he could, like the writer of *Eløisa to Abelard*, get up a fine tempest of literary passion; Horace, whom, for some occult reason, one loves the better the older one grows; Seneca, seeking under the Neronian Reign of Terror to make for himself an asylum of stoicism and suicide; Lucan, through whose early death, which left his work crude as well as incomplete, we have perhaps missed a great political epic, and who, in his best passages, rivals the writer of *Absalom and Achitophel*; Martial, the creator of the epigram, the mirror of the social habits of Imperial Rome, amidst whose heaps of rubbish and ordure are some better things and some pleasant pictures of Roman character and life; and the marvellous resurrec-