Lucretius and De Rerum Natura: appreciation and appraisal

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Lucretius and *De Rerum Natura:*
Appreciation and Appraisal

I The Man

Rome was the birthplace of Lucretius, This fact in itself is not surprising, but it becomes more significant when we reflect that very few of the immortals of Latin letters were Romans by birth. The Rome of Lucretius was that of the Republic. In the divisions of Latin literature the time of the Republic holds an important place, for during the centuries between 245 and 30 B. C. Roman letters had their beginnings, and progressed far enough to prove worthy to succeed if not supersede Greek literature, of the later period. Where Greek literature declined, Latin literature took the ascendant. Republican Latin bristles with the names of Ennius, father of Latin poetry; Cato, the eloquent censor, founder of Latin prose; Plautus and Terence, delighting their hearers with fully Latinized reproductions of later Greek comedy; Cicero, Rome’s greatest man of letters; Caesar, greatest of all her sons, rich in achievement with the sword and a writer of merit; Catullus, enchanting lyric poet of the inner shrine; not to mention Lucilius, the satirist, Horace’s fore-runner, and Varro the voluminous writer of Menippean satires and romance. In this galaxy shines Lucretius. His immediate contemporaries were Caesar, Catullus and Cicero, each one of whom has gained distinct recognition in a chosen field of letters. That Lucretius has failed to find the recognition he well deserves, may be due to these two facts, that his appeal is less universal than that of Catullus, for example, and his philosophy less acceptable than that which Cicero champions. To those to whom Lucretius has appealed he has shown himself as poet, as philosopher
and as teacher; his work may be read as poetry, as the textbook of a system of philosophy, or as a book of ethical teachings.

The controversy with regard to the exact date of the birth of Lucretius is fraught with difficulty. It is possible that the precise year may never be divulged by antiquity. But we have knowledge which leads us to state the limits of the poet's brief life within the years 98 and 55 B.C. A man's life may not be judged by his years, and certainly not by the mere limiting dates of his birth and death. In those brief 43 years of life how much may have happened to the man; how many changes must have passed over him. Often he must have reached a point in the path of his years where he paused to look about him, to take account of himself and of his place in the world. We can picture him as a boy, doubtless with attendant pedagogue threading the narrow streets of old Rome on his way to school. From knowledge of Roman topography and monuments we can name with certainty some of the principal buildings in the Forum Romanum past which he would walk. We can see him as a youth of twenty, serving in some military campaign, or voyaging to Athens, the center of the world's culture, to slake his thirst for philosophy. We catch a glimpse of the horror-stricken expression on his face as he is a witness of the bloody times of Sulla. At thirty this expression has hardened into a permanently sad and thoughtful mein which marriage does not dispel; his mate is unsympathetic or at least she fails to understand him. His life is evidently one of leisure; he is not dependent on a profession to gain his livelihood. Therefore his natural bent for study may be indulged. We see him poring over those «three-hundred scrolls»; we see him walking far away outside the old Servian walls out on the campus, over the Tiber, northward out toward Etruria - eastward along the Anio toward Tibur, alone, pondering, thoughtful, sad, yet with eye and ear ever alert to comprehend and appreciate the sights and voices of Nature. Then he returns from a stroll and passes down over the Capitoline and into the Forum and mingles among those pressing in many directions in eager haste, or he joins a group of those standing conversing on the happenings of the day, or he watches a triumphal car or funeral procession pass. He broods on both. Has this man no
friends? He has few. He has one whom he is trying to teach and guide, Memmius, who needs Lucretius, reveres him, looks up to him. Although this friend plays but an insignificant role in the *De Rerum Natura* simply that of some one to be taught, still the student of Lucretius gains a finer view of the relationship between these two the deeper he reads into the life of Lucretius as shown in his poem. Memmius may have been a fellow-student at Athens; both were of aristocratic lineage. Lucretius evidences his own noble birth by his every tone, by his fineness of touch; his full name, in itself, is one of the most aristocratic in all Latin, Titus of the Lucretian gens surnamed the Beloved. Memmius may have been the only soul whom Lucretius found congenial to his varying moods. Many a time they walked together; often they struggled into the deep problems facing them, as they now face us, the problems of life and death, gods and the life to come.

Suetonius may have written a life of Lucretius; none has come down to us. His life of Horace proves no more satisfying than the facts to be gleaned from Horace’s own poems. May not the parallel hold? From Lucretius’ great book, the *De Rerum Natura*, may we not see more of the real man, Lucretius, than we could gather from the mere facts of his life detailed by a chronicler? True, Horace, seemed to delight in talking of himself and appears to desire to show himself soul and body to his reader. With Lucretius such display can be only incidental and inadvertent. On the other hand the only account of his life, brief though it is, gives some information which one could not glean from a reading of the poem, and which no attempt to reconstruct the life of the poet would contain. In the continuation of the Chronicle of Eusebius by St. Jerome (1), the following is entered under the date 94 B.C.

«Titus Lucretius the poet is born. Afterwards, driven to madness by drinking a love-philtre, when, in the lucid intervals of his insanity, he had written several books which, later,

(1) Jerome: *an. Abr.* 1g23 (≈660/94): *Titus Lucretius poeta nascitur, qui postea amatorio poculo in furorem uersus, cum aliquot libros per intervalia insaniae conscripsisset quos postea Cicero emendavit, propria se manu interfecit anno aetatis xliii.*
Cicero edited, he died by his own hand in the forty-fourth year of his age.» This quotation is the starting point for a great controversy never quite satisfactorily settled; the four points usually discussed in this connection are: the date of the poet’s birth, the fact of his having gone mad, and the cause of his insanity, the editing of the poem by Cicero, and the date and cause of the poet’s death. The discrepancy in dates arose from the statement in Donatus’ life of Vergil, that Lucretius died on the day when Vergil assumed the toga virilis, the Ides of October, 55 B.C. (1). After various deductions, scholars have decided to name 98 B.C. as the approximate year of his birth. The dates, however, in Jerome’s account are the least important part of it. What challenges our attention is the love-philtre, the only trace of belief in witchcraft or superstition in the account. Each of the other points may be credible; that he was born in the year named, that he became insane, that he wrote several books which Cicero edited and that he took his own life in his forty-fourth year. The center of the controversy should be the story of the love-philtre — that is, the cause of his madness. As Lucretians we may not be agreed on the precise dates of his life — that is a matter of comparatively little importance, since the times of the poet are known within a few years; we may not be glad to learn that Lucretius became insane — we see no signs of madness in his poem, but we have no reason not to accept the fact of his insanity; we may not believe that Cicero edited the poem; we may not wish to believe it; it is, however, no special detriment to Lucretius or to his work that Cicero may have revised the work in part at least (2). But when we come to the cause of the poet’s madness we cannot accept the notion of the love-philtre and so rejecting this we begin to reject all except the fact that our poet wrote the books. How much better it would be, since we have as yet insufficient proof, to accept the account as a whole,

(1) Donatus, Vit. Verg. 6: initia aetatis Cremonae egit usque ad virilem togam, quam XV anno natali suo accepti idem illis consultibus iterum duobus quibus erat natus, euenique ut eo ipso die Lucretius poeta decederet.

(2) Cf. Cicero, ad Q. fratrem 11, g. 3: Lucreti poemata, ut scribis, ita sunt. multis luminibus ingenii, multae tamen et artis. Sed cum ueneris.
allowing for a slight error in the dates and regarding the love-philtre merely as an antique explanation of something otherwise unaccountable. For such a brooding soul as Lucretius to have lost his reason and to have taken his life is by no means extraordinary. In no way is the beauty or power of the poem diminished by the fact. Tennyson, in his masterly poem, *Lucretius*, has gathered up these several facts or traditions in a most attractive manner. The poem is the life of Lucretius in epitome. 

((Lucilia wedded to Lucretius found her master cold»), the opening verse, leads us immediately to the story of the love-philtre, indicating that the suspicions and the jealousies of a wife who fails to understand her husband form the basis for the legend of the brewing of the love-potion to win him back to her love. Following antique superstition, Tennyson makes the philtre act upon the man’s mind until the «broth tickling the brute-brain» within him breaks it down and plunges him into melancholy gloom and despair. Then, in the scenes following, in which his strange dreams are described, we see how his mind becomes less and less lucid ; his command of himself is less firm, until finally all self-control is lost to find relief only in self-destruction. While all of this given us by Tennyson may be true to the life of the Latin poet, it does not constitute the greater and deeper portion of the poem. Love for Epicurus on the part of his great pupil, Lucretius, is a commanding motif. Then too, there appear traces of the earnest longing and the love of humanity which are the springs of action underlying Lucretius’ own work. The dreadful times of Sulla are portrayed, as they should be, for the purpose of showing their effect upon the great Roman thinker. His exalted view of the Epicurean philosophy is clearly portrayed and is made to appear the ruling power of his life, as indeed it was. From the Roman poet’s own words the British poet has gathered material to exhibit the philosophy of life of the Epicurean:

*O ye gods,*
*I thought I lived securely as yourselves —*
*No lewdness, narrowing envy, monkey-spite,*
*No madness of ambition, avarice, none ;*
*No larger feast than under plane or pine*
With neighbors laid along the grass, to take
Only such cups as left us friendly-warm,
Affirming each his own philosophy —
Nothing to mar the sober majesties,
Of settled sweet Epicurean life. (1)

Here sounds the true note of Lucretian philosophy. The
gods of Epicureanism exist apart, outside this little world of
ours; they have no interest in it; they lead the life of the
Homeric happy gods upon Olympus, yet with none of their
faults. The Lucretian gods live securely — free from care,
free from unsavory amours, strangers to envy and spite. So
with the devotee of Lucretianism; for him, mad ambition sounds
no call; avarice, envy, spite have all vanished The gods envy
not, neither are they envied; man should not envy man. The
gods strive not to outwit and surpass each other; men should
live quiet lives, not striving to rise by another’s fall. The gods
care not for man. Why then should man care for the gods?
And again, why should man take an interest in other men, espe-
daily as that interest is more often self-interest than altruism?
Epicurean happiness is not «eat, drink and be merry, for to-mor-
row we die». It knows not luxury of the rich which crowds
out the poor. It teaches men to look for the simple pleasure,
with quiet congenial friends, each of whom has a right to his
own opinion, philosophy, religion or politics. The picture
which Lucretius paints and Tennyson interprets is ideal, Ely-
sian; it is the calm enjoyment of «sweet Epicurean life» which
the Roman poet longed for, sought for, failed to find. This
picture gives perhaps, best of all pictures the true Lucretius;
this was the life he wished to lead. Coupled with a desire
to lead the quiet life — free from care and trouble — was his
longing for the life of the student, the thinker. This life
Lucretius succeeded in leading. He apparently participated
as little as possible in turmoils of the state, military and poli-
tical. While he mingled with men but little, he was always

(1) Tennyson: Lucretius.
on the watch for opportunity to study their every change and whim; he strove to learn by insight how men thought and what they were thinking about. He came to the conclusion that men thought about religion. This seems to us, at first sight, hard to believe, in view of the political troubles of the closing years of the Roman commonwealth. Possibly, however, as in times of war, the bloodshed and carnage steadied, as well as saddened men’s minds and turned their thoughts to the more sobering problems of the whence and whither of mankind.

Thus, though we lack any extended biographical sketch of Lucretius, we can follow with much satisfaction the course of his life and career. From St. Jerome’s brief and somewhat incredible account, from Tennyson’s poem, surpassed only for insight, by the work of Lucretius himself, and lastly, from the De Rerum Natura in which the Roman poet and philosopher, without premeditation, shows his inmost soul, we can piece together the broken threads of the story of his interesting life.

Leaving out the story of the love-philtre, the reference to lucid intervals in an unsound mind and the editing of his books by Cicero — since these points in St. Jerome’s account have been so often contended — we may with courage assert that Titus Lucretius Carus lived in the times of Sulla, that he wrote a poem in six books, the De Rerum Natura, which sets forth the Epicurean doctrine, and that, owing to the ever brooding nature of his thought, his mind may at length have become impaired and, like Empedocles on Aetna, he may have merged himself with the elements (1).

The actual composition of the De Rerum Natura could not have occupied many years. It was the fruit of toilsome study, deep penetration and earnest thought. There is found in it nothing jejune; it is the work of a student in the best years of his productive powers; it is the gathering together of his life’s experience, and its completion may, without hesitation, be assigned to the closing decades of the poet’s life.

(1) Cf. Matthew Arnold: Empedocles on Etna (towards the close).
II The Times

Marius became consul for the sixth time, 100 years before the birth of Christ. The following year, 99 or 98, Lucretius was born, being thus three years younger than Caesar and Cicero’s junior by seven years. In the year 92 L. Cornelius Sulla, as propraetor, reinstated Ariobarzanes, the king of Cappadocia. The next year saw the death of M. Livius Drusus and the beginning of the Social War, as a result of his failure to procure enfranchisement for the Italians. As an outcome of Sulla’s brilliant achievements in this war and in the campaign against Jugurtha and the affair with the Cimbri, he was raised to the consulship in 88. The rivalry between the Marian and Sullan parties kept Rome in a continual state of turmoil, unrest and bloodshed, which was not terminated nor even lessened by the death of Marius in 86, but reached its most bloody culmination in the Sullan proscriptions. Scenes of murder and assassination which had brought Marius to his seventh consulship in 86, only to die a few days later, were reënacted with more than double the blood-thirstiness when Sulla had gained control of the government and had all Italy for his province, with an army fresh from Mithridatic victories upon which to rely. The reign of terror which he began can best be described by Tennyson’s line:

\[
\textit{the lust of blood} \\
\textit{That makes a steaming slaughter-house of Rome.} \quad (1)
\]

Sulla had lost his head because of continual victory; he was an absolute monarch in Rome, and having defeated the younger Marius and having cut to pieces the Samnite auxiliaries of the Marian party he began his dreadful proscription in 83 and took to himself the title Dictator for Life in the following year. His first list of the proscribed for murder contained eighty names. (He had already shown what he could do by having the Samnite

\footnote{Tennyson: \textit{Lucretius}.}
allies to the number of six thousand massacred at the Porta Collina. The second list came before the people had recovered from the effect of the first; they reeled with horror when they discovered that 220 names appeared on the second list. But this was not all. List after list containing over 200 names each appeared, until more than 4,000 Roman citizens had been put to death. Sulla was vindictive, brutal, inexorable, and it would seem, insatiable in his lust for the blood of his enemies, both real and imagined. Lucretius, a youth in his late teens was witness of these horrible deeds in Rome. Possibly his own father may have been one of the proscribed and murdered; we know nothing of his parents. The young men may have heard it reported in the Forum how Caius Metellus had pressed Sulla to inform the people beforehand whose heads were in danger. And Sulla’s first list of eighty names may have been scanned by the eyes of this eager thoughtful youth; he may have known by sight at least many of those prominent men. Young Lucretius may have been in the press when from the Rostrum, the unyielding tyrant told the people that there might be some names he had forgotten, but he should remember them at some early future date. Lucretius must have known the «mulberry-faced dictator)) for a monster then. But all this was soon to end with the death of Sulla early in 78. Lucretius was then twenty-one years of age. How could such events have failed to sadden his life, coming as they did during most impressionable years? His life was nearly half gone; he was to witness little that could remove or relieve his unhappy experiences of the political horrors of his native city. Wars at home and abroad followed with the rise of Pompey, Caesar and Cicero, revolts in Spain and among the gladiators, the subduing of piracy and the conquest of the East. In 63 Cicero carne to the consulship. The conspiracy of Catiline was discovered and those guilty received the punishment they deserved. The First Triumvirate: Pompey, Caesar and Crassus was formed in 60; the following year, Caesar began to mount to the pinnacle of his fame, being elected consul along with a much weaker man, Bibulus, whom he easily outclassed. In 58 Cicero is driven into exile; Caesar is waging war against the Helvetians and the Germans. The next year sees him victorious over the
Belgae; 56 is the year of the conference held by the triumviri at Luca. In 55, the year of Caesar’s crossing the Rhine and his first expedition into Britain; the year of the second consulship of Pompey and Crassus, Lucretius died.

Within the brief limits of forty-three years Lucretius had seen the Roman Commonwealth sink to its lowest depths of bloodshed; he had seen it rise, stagger to its feet and move tottering on. He was not destined by fate to live to see its fall. Lucretius knew not Caesar’s death, the striking-down, even by the hands of his friends, of the greatest man Rome gave to the world. Lucretius knew not Octavius, Antony, Cassius, Brutus, and the final denouement of civil strife at Actium and the beginnings of the Empire. Though Vergil was born in 70 and Horace in 65, Lucretius could not have known them; Catullus and Sallust born in 87 he may have known. Roman Literature to him meant Ennius, Naevius, Cato, Lucilius, Pacuvius, Accius, Plautus, Terence, Varro. Greek Literature was far richer for him than to us since he was able to avail himself of the original works of Empedocles, Democritus, Heraclitus, Anaxagoras and Epicurus, as well as those of the great poets, dramatists, and historians of the Periclean Age. In more than one instance Lucretius can be shown to have been an admirer of Homer. His acquaintance with Euripides and Aeschylus may be seen from his description of the sacrifice of Iphigenia; Thucydides is undoubtedly his source for the description of the Plague of Athens; Hippocrates was drawn upon for pathological details. In his turning for guidance to the Greeks of the best period and to his immediate Latin predecessors, Lucretius differs very widely from Catullus who obviously preferred the affect ed style of the Alexandrians. One his tempted next to ask what was the aspect of the city of Rome as Lucretius knew it. The old city of Servius Tullius had not begun to reach out beyond the wall and agger built by him. Life centered on the Capitoline and in the Forum; the Palatine, later the abode of the Caesars, still retained in view.

(1) De Rer. Nat. 1, vv. 84 ff.
(2) De Rer. Nat. vi, vv. 1138 ff
many traces of *Roma Quadrata*. In the Forum, on the site where was to stand the *Basilica lulia*, begun in the year 54 B.C., there still stood the row of *tabernae ueteres*; the Temple of Castor and Pollux had recently been restored (117) by L. Metellus Dalmaticus, and must have been one of the most striking landmarks. In 78 the Tabularium was begun by Lutatius Catulus; the Capitolium was destroyed by fire in 83. Outside the walls in the Campus Martius, Pompey the Great built the Temple of Minerva in 62. This Lucretius saw, in building and completed, and thus he was richer than we, since this temple as well as all the other «Pompeian buildings)) in the Campus have disappeared from view. He saw none of the great baths, the amphitheatres, the arches, basilicas and fora of the Emperors, which must have served, when at the height of their perfection, to make Rome easily the most gorgeous city the world has ever seen. The times of Marius, of Sulla, of Pompey, of Caesar, in short, the last century of the Republic forms the transitional stage in Roman buildings, the merging of the glorious Rome of the Commonwealth into the magnificent Rome of the Empire. It was that Rome which Lucretius knew

Roman Literature shows more than one noteworthy example of the influence of the times upon the writer, and the character of his work. Thus Persius and Juvenal proclaim that in the midst of the immoralities and abuses of their day, one cannot refrain from writing satire (1). Tacitus, likewise, shows on nearly every page that his work is tinged with the melancholy times through which he lived. It has been said that his view of the reign of Tiberius was perverted, if not exaggerated, by the unhappy experiences under Domitian. As a boy Tacitus witnessed the events of the bloody years 68-69 A. D. allayed at last only by the calming power of Vespasian. In Horace too, especially in his satires and in his patriotic odes, we find verses reechoing the evils of the present and fore-shadowing

(1) Cf. Persius i, 1, 1: *0 curas hominum, 0 quantum est in rebus inane*; and Juvenal 1, 1, 1: *Semper ego auditor tantum?* V. also: Houghton, H. P. *Lucretius as Satirist* (Proceedings of the Amer. Philol. Ass’n, vol. 43).
the dangers that lurk in the future. The Aeneid of Vergil was
the literary deification of Augustus and the natural outcome, in
the world of letters, of the brilliant and happy days of the
First Emperor. Propertius, Tibullus and Catullus give them-
selves to their readers in every verse; bitter personal experien-
ces of their youth are not shaken off in the course of their brief
lives. Periods of storm -and stress have produced able men of
letters among many nations. The best in Roman literature is
not all concentrated within the reign of Augustus; both before
and after his time, the breaking of the Republic and the decline
of the Empire gave to the Latin peoples and to the world lite-
rary productions deserving of high praise. Periods of luxury
and effete, living tend to produce a less virile literature, one in
which, like the Alexandrian for example, all is sacrificed to
stylistic effect, and a clever conceit, rather than a clear con-
ception of thought, rules the day.

There is none of this in Lucretius. His work is written
with a very definite purpose. Thought, clear and logical, holds
first place in his program, and takes precedence on all occa-
sions over rhetorical figure and heightened diction. The tinge
of sadness running through the entire poem is unmistakeable;
it is the natural effect of the troublous times through which the
great poet passed in his younger days. Sulla’s regime should
not however be given all the credit for the melancholy of his
nature, although the dread proscriptions came when Lucretius
was barely out of his teens. It was the continued state of anar-
chy or tyranny following the time of Sulla, with war and suffer-
ing in many parts of the commonwealth, upon which the poet
brooded and which was revolting to his sensitive nature. He was
a man of noble family, high ideals, refined characteristics; to
such a man the selfish despotism, popular restlessness and
depravity of the times were appalling. We can believe that
Lucretius was therefore tempted to sever all relations with the
political parties of his day, and to withdraw within himself
and find his solace in that never ending source of mental satis-
faction, study. The study of the works of Epicurus opened to
him, as he thought, the only door to surcease from the woes of
a crumbling world. He might have defended his position, if
need be, by saying that it was the part of a self-respecting
Roman aristocrat to forget, if possible, the awfulness of the situation, as the Republic plunged to its ruin, by any fair means whatsoever. In the study of Epicureanism Lucretius found those means.

To these times of confusion and suffering we owe the poem De Rerum Natura. For its author forgot the woes of his times in the midst of absorbing study; he forgot his own troubles through the unfailing means of keeping busy at a pet pursuit; but more than all he found in the course of his study of those three hundred scrolls the medium by which he might help to free deluded mankind from the fear of death, the fear of gods, the fear of eternal punishment. The difficulties which he finds at the beginning of his study, when he says:

nam ñeque nos agere hoc patriai tempore iniquo
possumus aequo animo nec Memmi clara propago
talibus in rebus communi deesse saluti. (!)

gradually disappear as he becomes more absorbed in his task. The very opening of the poem, however, reveals the poets hatred of war and his love of peace. Nothing could reveal this more vividly than his picture of the love of Venus and Mars. Venus may be said to be invoked at the beginning of the poem as goddess of Peace: soon she is contrasted with Mars, grim god of War. Such frequent references to Avar as:

effice ut interea fera moenera militiai
per maria ac terras omnis sopita quiescant (2)

show clearly that the dread times of warfare and bloody proscription are not far from the poet’s mind at the beginning of his work. The final appeal in the love scene of Venus and Mars reechoes this feeling:

funde petens placidam Romanis, incluta, pacem. (3)

(1) De Rer. Nat. 1, 41-43.
(3) Ibid. 40.
Peace for the Roman people, he craves. Lucretius begins his poem as the patriotic advocate of peace; his feeling may be prompted by a natural hatred of bloodshed, yet it seems more likely that the bloody times of the «mulberry faced dictator» are the more immediate cause. Several other direct references to war are scattered through the poem. Two are deserving of special notice.

At the opening of the second book Lucretius says:

\[\text{suae etiam belli certamina magna tueri}\]
\[\text{per campos instructa tua sine parte pericli. (1)}\]

Here sounds the note of the peril of the strife, from which the philosopher is freed; the scene of the battle itself is not sweet, but the knowledge that the beholder need have no share in the carnage.

And in Book V 999-1000 where he is speaking of the primitive days of man:

\[\text{at non multa uirum sub signis milia ducta}\]
\[\text{una dies dabat exitio}\]

Lucretius reveals again his dislike of war; here he contrasts the condition of his own times when one day would give over many thousands to destruction, with the peaceful days when the world was young. But of all the passages in the De Rerum Natura in which the poet reveals his hatred of war none is more striking than the following from the fifth book; it may be called the evolution of war:

«With copper they would stir up the billows of war and deal about wide-gaping wounds and seize cattle and lands; for everything defenceless and unarmed would readily yield to

\((t)\ Op. cit\ ii, 5-6.\)
those with arms in hand. Then by slow steps the sword of iron gained ground and the make of the copper sickle became a by-word; and with iron they began to plow through the earth's soil, and the struggles of wavering war were rendered equal. And the custom of mounting in arms on the back of a horse and guiding him with reins and showing prowess with the right hand is older than that of tempting the risks of war in a two-horsed chariot; and yoking a pair of horses is older than yoking four or mounting in arms scythed chariots. Next the Poeni taught the Lucanian kine with towered body, hideous of aspect, with snake-like hand, to endure the wounds of war and to disorder the mighty ranks of Mars. Thus sad discord begat one thing after another, to affright nations of men under arms, and every day made some addition to the terrors of war.»(1)

The times of Lucretius were the times of Marian and Sullan proscription and bloodshed; they were the times of the rise of Pompey and of his overthrow by Caesar; they were the times of the beginning of the fall of the Republic. Wisely Lucretius withdrew from the turmoil and wretchedness which those times created, to devote himself to calm quiet study and to the writing of his immortal poem.

Tennyson represents the great Roman as saying, among his last words:

........... «the Commonwealth, which breaks
As I am breaking now.»

Who shall say but that it may have been despair for Rome's destiny, even more than melancholy, that drove the proud aristocrat, by his own hand, to

........ pass,

Vanishing, atom and void, atom and void,
Into the unseen for ever.» (2)

(1)  *De Rer. Nat.* v., 1289-130/ (reading with Munro).
(2)  Tennyson: *Lucretius* (towards the close).
III  The Poem

Lucretius, as far as we know, left his message to the world in only one poem, the *De Rerum Natura*. Its title was not original with him, for there were at least two poems of the early Greek philosophers bearing the same title, «concerning the Universe» or the «Nature of Things». One of these poems by Epicurus was the immediate source of Lucretius’ work. From the time of Thales — the earliest of the Pre-Socratics—the Universe was the subject upon which all investigation centered. These earliest philosophers were, in fact, physicists and astronomers; they dealt only with the objective. They were concerned with seeking what were the movements of the heavenly bodies — if they had any movement — and what was the cause of such movements. Thales and his successors were striving to find an all-embracing element, a basis on which to build the structure of the Universe. Hence the outward manifestation of Nature was of the utmost interest to them. The progress from the purely objective, physical philosophy of the Pre-Socratics to the subjective philosophy of modern thought passes through several stages, covering many centuries. Even down to the time of Aristotle the physical and meteorological phenomena of our world were being investigated; even after Aristotle, the old-fashioned method of deciding upon a prime element or a few prime elements had not wholly passed away. Philosophical systems must still begin with two opposing, reciprocally conflicting elements. The development from Thales to Aristotle, and to the schools of Epicurus and Zeno the Stoic, which immediately succeeded the peripatetic school, indicated progress. Thales postulated *water* as his prime element; Anaximenes proposed *air*; Anaximander regards the *limitless* as a more appropriate designation; Parmenides holds up *number* as almost an element in last analysis; Empedocles advances further than any of his predecessors with his idea of conflict between *Infiniteness* and *Amity*. These he represents as in a way presiding over four elements, *earth, air, fire* and *water* which remain the chief elements until down to the introduction of chemistry. Heraclitus and Parmenides divide on the question
whether «all is at rest» or «all is in motion» and many centu-
ries have to elapse before it is proved that both are right. Nearer to a belief in a divine being, and the approach to sub-
jective ruling of the Universe, comes Anaxagoras with his belief in an over-mind which guides the formation and move-
ments of the elements. His doctrine of Homoeomeria — the doctrine of constituent elements — almost parallels the atomic theo-
ories of Leucippus and Democritus which are adopted later on by Epicurus, who accepts also Aristotle’s geocentric uni-
verse. Thus Epicurean «void and atom, atom and void» looms large. The storehouse to which he goes, through Epi-
curus, for material is rich and abundant. The Roman poet-philosopher has drawn upon it to the utmost. Possibly no one of the early schools has failed to influence him or at least to interest him, with the single exception of the school of Socrates and Plato. While we cannot believe that Lucretius was ignorant of Academic doctrines, still we are obliged to admit that his poem shows little or no traces of their influence. The three main lines of influence on the physical side of Epicureanism are, 1) the atomic theory of Leucippus, 2) the physical theories of Democritus and 3) the geocentric universe of Aristotle. Added to these are ethical or religious teachings so utterly diverse to those advanced by other previous theorists that we may regard them as the purely original portions of the system of Epicurus. To this we cannot prove that Lucretius added anything of his own; on the other hand we are justified in supposing that he may have incorporated several new ideas or novel presentations of Epicurean teaching in his great poem. Whether we accept it as wholly Epicurus or regard it as Epicurus-Lucretius we know that the work is a compendious survey—almost a text-book—of the physical and religious theories of the Epicurean school of philosophy. And yet it is more than this. Its range is much more far-reaching; it is not possible to keep it within the narrow bounds of one of the older philosophic sys-
tems. Several centuries had elapsed since Epicurus ceased to utter his dicta; Lucretius embodies the only erious rena-
scence of these doctrines. The system may well be called Lucretian.
Adverse critics of the poem have declared it unfinished. (The time is long past since this great didactic poem was carelessly and thoughtlessly classed as en epic.) Giussani (1) shows the systematic arrangement of the several books and the cleavages of the portions within the books so clearly, that later students may regard the poem as complete, as far as it has proceeded; though probably the poet, had he lived, might have continued to add to it further results of thought and study; and if anything in the way of adverse criticism can be made, it would be that, unfortunately for us, Lucretius had not had time to revise the work as a whole. Even in the face of that comment the careful reader finds comparatively little which he would wish altered. Wholesale tampering with text, such as that of Brieger and Giussani, has failed to do more than exhibit the marvelously penetrating powers of those scholars in higher text-criticism; their alterations have not improved the poem. The brilliant emendations of Lachmann and Munro, however, have added something to the finer appreciation of the work and its author (2).

The *De Rerum Natura* of Lucretius is a didactic poem in six books written in good Latin of the Republic in dactylic hexameters. Its subject is the Universe. It is dedicated to one Memmius by name, a friend, and like the author, a seacher after Truth. The dedication of the poem to Memmius has been regarded as of minor importance; little is known of the man, beyond the fact that he was apparently the author’s congenial and willing listener. While the subject is the Universe, a sub-title might have been added — an Interpretation of Epicurean philosophy, for such it is in reality. Although the author is engaged in setting forth clearly the theoretical side of the system, the book in its aim and final result is intensely practical. For Epicureanism is said to bring release from the sorrows which assail mankind, namely the fear of the gods, the fear of death, the fear of punishment after death. Practi-

(1) In his edition, and in his *Studi Lucretiani*.
(2) Bailey’s definitive edition (1947) places the cap-stone on Lucretian studies, with Ernout a «close second».
cal such a surcease from pervading sadness may prove to be, for the mind freed from its difficulties may pass its time in calmness, security and true enjoyment. Philosophy is divided by Lucretius into two parts — the inward knowledge or contemplation and the outward phenomenon, or recognition. That is another way of saying subjective and objective thought. By the comprehension, then, of Nature’s ways and by an appeal to our own reason, or, in other words, by looking without on Nature, and within on ourselves, we find our place in the Universe and we free ourselves from the three great pervading fears: gods, death and punishment. Lucretius starts from the principle that all mankind are kept in a continual state of anxiety by these three fears; man knows not at what moment the gods are planning his doom unforseen; the fear of death, man’s constant companion, looms above the fear of the gods so that even the most torture-marked life is to be preferred to death and the unknown beyond.

The six books of the De Rerum Natura group themselves very interestingly by twos. Thus books I and II may be called the Books of the Atomic Theory, since they treat almost exclusively of this doctrine of the Epicurean system; Books III and IV, the Books of the Soul and the Senses, since they treat of the doctrine of the soul’s mortality and the functions of the sense organs; Books V and VI are the Books of the World and Man, since they show the Epicurean doctrine of creation and the progress of men in civilization. Again a distinct cleavage is noticed at the close of Book III so that we may style the first three books of the poem the Statement of Epicurean Theory, in that it contains the most important teachings, those of the atoms and the soul; while the last three books form the Application of Epicurean Theory, to the Macrocosm, the Universe, and to the Microcosm, Man. Thus the six books form a complete whole, though we are not bound to believe that the sixth book was to have been the last.

The two opening books are inseparable and they, with the third give the reader, doubtless, the substance of the voluminous writings of Epicurus which are, with the exception of a few fragments, entirely lost. Book I deals with fundamental laws and the essence of things in general; the first postulate
is that there are some things the substance of whose being is eternal; this leads to the statement of the First and Second Laws of Nature; that *Nothing is produced from Nothing* (1), and *Nothing is reduced to Nothing*. These laws are followed by the statement of the two reciprocal and conflicting elements Body and Not-Body and the doctrine of the Not-Body or Void is developed and proved. No third possibility is permissible to the argument, nor conceivable. The first half of the book closes with an introduction to the principal laws and properties of Atoms or Bodies, namely their compactness, invisibility and hence indestructibility. (This part is taken up again in Book II.) Here it is, however, broken off—not interrupted—so that the great teacher may consider and refute the doctrines of Heraklitos, Empedocles and Anaxagoras. The last 200 verses of the book deal with the subject: the Universe is infinite. This able conclusion to a masterly book is not misplaced. Lucretius is pedagogically correct always; this portion of the book has a two-fold purpose, to allay a possible doubt in the mind of his pupil, Memmius, and to allure him to further contemplation of the bigness of the problems in hand. The prooemium to this book with its unexpected invocation of Venus and its matchless poetic beauty is, as it should be, the prooemium of the poem as a whole, and is wrought with the skill of a clever teacher and painstaking writer, while its poetic values are of the choicest and are contrived to entice the reader.

The Second Book is the Book of the Atoms *par excellence*. After a briefer introduction than at the opening of Book I, the poet arranges in systematic order the ten most important qualities and characteristics of the Atoms. Lucretius makes us feel that these atoms are living animisms; he treats of them almost personally; so excellent and lucid is his exposition at all times that we read as seeing the invisible, for in very truth we see these elusive atoms. Their qualities are these: First as to their motion; incessant motion; inconceivable velocity; ever-downward movement; a slight swerve from the perpendicular or the *clinamen*, by which through the empinging of atom on atom,

(1) *De Rer. Nat.* 1, 150.
aggregate on aggregate, masses, bodies, worlds, are produced; Second as to their form, there is an indefinite number of atomic forms; this number is not infinite however; there is an infinite number of atoms of each form; there are various but not unlimited combinations of atoms in the aggregates. Third, as to their lack of certain qualities; atoms have neither color, odor, sound, heat or sensation; all of these attributes found in bodies are derived from the proportion of void mingled in the interstices between the atoms which go to form a particular aggregate or mass. The peroration of the Second Book is fully as clever as that of the First. Its subject is: There are other worlds than ours; indeed there is an infinite number of them; they are perpetually forming and decaying. This cannot fail to rouse in the listener or reader the desire to continue this subject further. Lucretius feels that he must insist on a full realization of this fact before introducing Memmius to the unexpected Soul Theory which immediately follows. These two perorations of Books I and II, together with Book III as a whole, are the fore-runners to the Fifth Book, in which the Soul, Man, finds himself in his proper relation to an infinite Universe. Book III is divided into two distinct portions, the first leading into the second quite properly. The Book of the Soul opens with a striking proemium of 31 verses; the teacher then states his problem, the nature of the Soul, its composition, its functions. This portion of the book proceeds logically from the definitions of animus and anima, then through the corporeal nature and composition of both, to their functions and their inseparable connections with man’s body. Having impressed these fundamental facts on the mind of his hearer, Lucretius, with unparalleled boldness, establishes his second thesis; that the Soul is Mortal. This he defends by means of twenty-eight proofs covering several fields of varied research on the part of the poet and leading us to respect more than before his wide experience and penetrating thought. In the main, his proofs for the soul’s death with the body are pathological; one is tempted to indulge the belief that Lucretius actually studied medicine, as far as that science was developed in his time. We are led almost to lose sight of the fact that he is serving as interpreter for his own great teacher’s writings. The whole mass of proof — while it
contains instances of faulty logic — seems presented in a personal, convincing and authoritative way; style and choice of words add to the impression. The conclusion of this book is one of the ablest pleas for the quiet untroubled life, to be found in any language; it succeeds directly as the result of the points made in the two previous portions. Since the Nature and Composition of the Soul, its function and its connection with the body lead to the proofs of the soul’s mortality, the student of Epicureanism who accepts these will be led to see the Vanity of the Fear of Death. It is with this very important doctrine that Lucretius brings to a close this greatest of all his books. With the fear of death removed, this pupil may begin to lead the quiet, settled Epicurean life. At this point, Lucretius might have stopped; his cause has been ably defended. Epicureanism has been satisfactorily presented. The first three books of the De Rerum Natura, thus form a complete work in themselves. To the student of Lucretius the last three must always seem inferior to these first three books, not only in subject matter but in logical and poetical qualities — although portions of the fifth book prove its author capable of most sublime poetry.

Book IV seems to have been added for the purpose of further proof of the soul-theories. Sensation—touch—the final court of appeal for the Epicurean when he is trying to decide how he obtains his knowledge, must come in for further and more exact study. Thus the Fourth Book of the great poem deals with the senses. Lucretius must show that the senses may all be resolved into one, the sense of touch. In other words there are corporeal characteristics in the phenomena of sight, taste and hearing as there are in those of touch. To introduce this subject, like a wise teacher, he begins with the obvious and usually accepted method; makes his point, and then applies it to less obvious and usually unaccepted. His method is correct. Simulacra exist, he says. His pupil may ponder this until his teacher affirms, that simulacra in the sense of vision exist. This is acceptable to the pupil. The retina of the eye gives but the image of the object seen — a simulacrum of the object, not the object itself. Simulacra exist then, concludes Lucretius, in dealing with the phenomena of hearing, taste and smell. Nothing
is said of touch primarily since all senses are thereby — through the doctrine of simulacra — regarded as forms of the sense of touch. After a short prooemium of 25 verses the book may be divided into three portions; the first deals with the doctrine of simulacra, their existence, their qualities of thinness, rapidity of formation, velocity of motion; the second part deals with the phenomena of mental images and proceeds from the known images of the senses of vision to the less apparent images of the senses of hearing, taste and smell. The third portion deals no longer with the sense organs but seems to be a sort of unification of several functions of the body. One division of it is a digression on the antiteleological theory i.e. that each sense organ existed before its use was discovered and was not made for a special end or use. As Merrill puts it, «a use was found for them, but they were not made for their use». Three other divisions of this part of the book are: the relation of food to our bodily motion, a beginning in the science of dietetics; a study of sleep and dreams; and then the Satura Amoris. Here the Passion of Love is arraigned with all the scathing and lashing — and not a little of the audacity — of a Juvenal. The fourth book brings a turning point in the work; it is fairly well organized as far as through the portion dealing with the sense organs; but its concluding portion is marked by lack of revision and organization of material. The closing scene — Lucretius’ attack on Love — while virile in style and alluring in description, is out of place and detracts rather than adds to the strength of the book. In fact, the fourth book — with the possible exception of the sixth — is the least satisfying portion of the De Rerum Natura.

Book V displays systematic and logical organization. The subject first treated — after the prooemium of 54 verses — the decay of the world. Here the seven proofs of the world’s decay are logically stated by Lucretius, namely that no divine power was present at its formation and therefore no divine power can prevent its decay; secondly, that its elements are mortal, hence the whole will change, fade and decay; third, that its most apparently lasting substance, rock, decays; fourth, since fierce storms and earthquakes destroy so much land and people, a more violent cataclysm might destroy the whole world; sixth,
only that which has had no beginning and will have no end can withstand blows; in this too the world fails, therefore it is perishable; seventh, while balance of forces now prevails, anyone of the four prime elements of which the world is formed, gaining precedence, would destroy the whole. Having satisfied himself that the world is doomed to destruction, and that it therefore, likewise, had a beginning, Lucretius very properly now sets forth the Origin of the Worlds in the section immediately following. This leads him to discuss astronomical phenomena, especially the movement and nature of sun, moon and stars. But although the poet feels the necessity of entering upon these matters, his more imperative duty is to treat of man and his relation to the universe. On the earth, the usually accepted origins are known to Lucretius: first came vegetable life, then animal, then human. His ingenious account of the birth of man from wombs on the surface of Mother Earth is more fanciful than the reader would expect to find given by one who has been for the most part scientific. The best portion of the book is, however, the last, in which Lucretius with careful precision, traces the development of man and the beginnings of civilization. The order is brute-man, shelter and clothing of skins, speech, fire, social organization, religion, discovery of metals, warfare, invention of weaving, improved methods of agriculture, music, useful and ornamental arts. Thus the great thinker anticipates — as other great thinkers of antiquity have done — our modern theories of the development of our race, and he teaches the fine lesson for each individual who reads this portion of the poem, that it is a long distance from the brutish to the cultural. Man begins his life in the struggle for existence; the fittest survive and come to the merited enjoyment of the gifts of liberal culture.

Book VI like the Fourth Book of the poem is «strung on» rather than «periodic» in structure and subject matter. The proemium of the book contains g5 verses. The several sections of the book are as follows: meteoric phenomena, earthquakes, thunder and lightning, rainbows, clouds, — phenomena of the earth, tides, volcanoes, the Nile, the lake of Avernus, the magnet, pestilence; the whole closing with an account of the great Plague at Athens which shows marked Thucydidean
influence (i). This is an unexpected and unsatisfactory ending for the whole great work; the sixth book exhibits lack of revision, and while its organization is fairly clear, still the teacher has attempted too much. On the other hand some of his views on meteoric and geographic phenomena are extremely fanciful.

One finds Lucretius at his best in the first three books of this incomparable poem; of the latter three books the fifth alone claims unchallenged attention, since here again the poet appears in his most convincing manner.

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(1) Cf. Thucydides Book II, chapters 47-52 inclusive, which apparently Lucretius closely follows, according to Bailey (commentary ad loc.) He points out, however, that «it is impossible to read the two accounts without being conscious of a great difference». V. Bailey, vol. hi, p. 1723. Ernout, vol. 11, p. 318, writes: «Toutefois quelques passages semblent présenter l’influence des écrits hippocratiques, et il se peut que Lucrèce ait suivi quelque compilation d’un polygraphe». 
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