



DOCUMENT :

LUCRETIUS

George SANTAYANA

This is the second chapter of George Santayana's book *Three Philosophical Poets: Lucretius, Dante, and Goethe* (Harvard University, 1910). "Lucretius, Dante, and Goethe sum up the chief phases of European philosophy, — naturalism, supernaturalism, and romanticism: Ideal relation between philosophy and poetry." (Santayana). The electronic version of the book is available here: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/35612/35612-h/35612-h.htm>. These pages are reproduced in this journal for their high contribution to natural philosophy, wisdom, and aesthetics. [NDLR].

CONTENTS OF THE CHAPTER ON LUCRETIUS (established by Santayana): Development of Greek cosmology. Democritus. Epicurean moral sentiment. Changes inspired by it in the system of Democritus. Accidental alliance of materialism with hedonism. Imaginative value of naturalism. The Lucretian Venus, or the propitious movement in nature. The Lucretian Mars, or the destructive movement. Preponderant melancholy, and the reason for it. Materiality of the soul. The fear of death and the fear of life. Lucretius a true poet of nature. Comparison with Shelley and Wordsworth. Things he might have added consistently. Indefeasible worth of his insight and sentiment.

There is perhaps no important poem the antecedents of which can be traced so exhaustively as can those of the work of Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*. These antecedents, however, do not lie in the poet himself. If they did, we should not be able to trace them,

since we know nothing, or next to nothing, about Lucretius the man. In a chronicon, compiled by St. Jerome largely out of Suetonius, in which miscellaneous events are noted which occurred in each successive year, we read for the year 94 B.C.: “Titus Lucretius, poet, is born. After a love-philtre had turned him mad, and he had written, in the intervals of his insanity, several books which Cicero revised, he killed himself by his own hand in the forty-fourth year of his age.”

The love-philtre in this report sounds apocryphal; and the story of the madness and suicide attributes too edifying an end to an atheist and Epicurean not to be suspected. If anything lends colour to the story it is a certain consonance which we may feel between its tragic incidents and the genius of the poet as revealed in his work, where we find a strange scorn of love, a strange vehemence, and a high melancholy. It is by no means incredible that the author of such a poem should have been at some time the slave of a pathological passion, that his vehemence and inspiration should have passed into mania, and that he should have taken his own life. But the untrustworthy authority of St. Jerome cannot assure us whether what he repeats is a tradition founded on fact or an ingenious fiction.

Our ignorance of the life of Lucretius is not, I think, much to be regretted. His work preserves that part of him which he himself would have wished to preserve. Perfect conviction ignores itself, proclaiming the public truth. To reach this no doubt requires a peculiar genius which is called intelligence; for intelligence is quickness in seeing things as they are. But where intelligence is attained, the rest of a man, like the scaffolding to a finished building, becomes irrelevant. We do not wish it to intercept our view of the solid structure, which alone was intended by the artist – if he was building for others, and was not a coxcomb. It is his intellectual vision that the naturalist in particular wishes to hand down to posterity, not the shabby incidents that preceded that vision in his own person. These incidents, even if they were by chance interesting, could not be repeated in us; but the vision into which the thinker poured his faculties, and to which he devoted his vigils, is communicable to us also, and may become a part of ourselves.

Since Lucretius is thus identical for us with his poem, and is lost in his philosophy, the antecedents of Lucretius are simply the stages by which his conception of nature first shaped itself in the human mind. To retrace these stages is easy; some of them are only too familiar; yet the very triteness of the subject may blind us to the grandeur and audacity of the intellectual feat involved. A naturalistic conception of things is a great work of imagination, – greater, I think, than any dramatic or moral mythology: it is a conception fit to inspire great poetry, and in the end, perhaps, it will prove the only conception able to inspire it.

We are told of the old Xenophanes that he looked up into the round heaven and cried, “The All is One.” What is logically a truism may often be, imaginatively, a great discovery, because no one before may have thought of the obvious analogy which the truism registers. So, in this case, the unity of all things is logically an evident, if barren,

truth; for the most disparate and unrelated worlds would still be a multitude, and so an aggregate, and so, in some sense, a unity. Yet it was a great imaginative feat to cast the eye deliberately round the entire horizon, and to draw mentally the sum of all reality, discovering that reality makes such a sum, and may be called one; as any stone or animal, though composed of many parts, is yet called one in common parlance. It was doubtless some prehistoric man of genius, long before Xenophanes, who first applied in this way to all things together that notion of unity and wholeness which everybody had gained by observation of things singly, and who first ventured to speak of "the world." To do so is to set the problem for all natural philosophy, and in a certain measure to anticipate the solution of that problem; for it is to ask how things hang together, and to assume that they do hang together in one way or another.

To cry "The All is One," and to perceive that all things are in one landscape and form a system by their juxtaposition, is the rude beginning of wisdom in natural philosophy. But it is easy to go farther, and to see that things form a unity in a far deeper and more mysterious way. One of the first things, for instance, that impresses the poet, the man of feeling and reflection, is that these objects that people the world all pass away, and that the place there-of knows them no more. Yet, when they vanish, nothingness does not succeed; other things arise in their stead. Nature remains always young and whole in spite of death at work everywhere; and what takes the place of what continually disappears is often remarkably like it in character. Universal instability is not incompatible with a great monotony in things; so that while Heraclitus lamented that everything was in flux, Ecclesiastes, who was also entirely convinced of that truth, could lament that there was nothing new under the sun.

This double experience of mutation and recurrence, an experience at once sentimental and scientific, soon brought with it a very great thought, perhaps the greatest thought that mankind has ever hit upon, and which was the chief inspiration of Lucretius. It is that all we observe about us, and ourselves also, may be so many passing forms of a permanent substance. This substance, while remaining the same in quantity and in inward quality, is constantly redistributed; in its redistribution it forms those aggregates which we call things, and which we find constantly disappearing and reappearing. All things are dust, and to dust they return; a dust, however, eternally fertile, and destined to fall perpetually into new, and doubtless beautiful, forms. This notion of substance lends a much greater unity to the outspread world; it persuades us that all things pass into one another, and have a common ground from which they spring successively, and to which they return.

The spectacle of inexorable change, the triumph of time, or whatever we may call it, has always been a favourite theme for lyric and tragic poetry, and for religious meditation. To perceive universal mutation, to feel the vanity of life, has always been the beginning of seriousness. It is the condition for any beautiful, measured, or tender philosophy. Prior to that, everything is barbarous, both in morals and in poetry; for until then mankind has

not learned to renounce anything, has not outgrown the instinctive egotism and optimism of the young animal, and has not removed the centre of its being, or of its faith, from the will to the imagination.

To discover substance, then, is a great step in the life of reason, even if substance be conceived quite negatively as a term that serves merely to mark, by contrast, the unsubstantiality, the vanity, of all particular moments and things. That is the way in which Indian poetry and philosophy conceived substance. But the step taken by Greek physics, and by the poetry of Lucretius, passes beyond. Lucretius and the Greeks, in observing universal mutation and the vanity of life, conceived behind appearance a great intelligible process, an evolution in nature. The reality became interesting, as well as the illusion. Physics became scientific, which had previously been merely spectacular.

Here was a much richer theme for the poet and philosopher, who was launched upon the discovery of the ground and secret causes of this gay or melancholy flux. The understanding that enabled him to discover these causes did for the European what no Indian mystic, what no despiser of understanding anywhere, suffers himself to do; namely, to dominate, foretell, and transform this changing show with a virile, practical intelligence. The man who discovers the secret springs of appearances opens to contemplation a second positive world, the workshop and busy depths of nature, where a prodigious mechanism is continually supporting our life, and making ready for it from afar by the most exquisite adjustments. The march of this mechanism, while it produces life and often fosters it, yet as often makes it difficult and condemns it to extinction. This truth, which the conception of natural substance first makes intelligible, justifies the elegies which the poets of illusion and disillusion have always written upon human things. It is a truth with a melancholy side; but being a truth, it satisfies and exalts the rational mind, that craves truth as truth, whether it be sad or comforting, and wishes to pursue a possible, not an impossible, happiness.

So far, Greek science had made out that the world was one, that there was a substance, that this was a physical substance, distributed and moving in space. It was matter. The question remained, What is the precise nature of matter, and how does it produce the appearances we observe? The only answer that concerns us here is that given by Lucretius; an answer he accepted from Epicurus, his master in everything, who in turn had accepted it from Democritus. Now Democritus had made a notable advance over the systems that selected one obvious substance, like water, or collected all the obvious substances, as Anaxagoras had done, and tried to make, the world out of them. Democritus thought that the substance of everything ought not to have any of the qualities present in some things and absent in others; it ought to have only the qualities present in all things. It should be *merely* matter. Materiality, according to him, consisted of extension, figure, and solidity; in the thinnest ether, if we looked sharp enough, we should find nothing but particles possessing these properties. All other qualities of things were apparent only, and imputed to them by a convention of the mind. The mind was a born mythologist, and projected its feelings into their causes. Light, colour, taste, warmth,

beauty, excellence, were such imputed and conventional qualities; only space and matter were real. But empty space was no less real than matter. Consequently, although the atoms of matter never changed their form, real changes could take place in nature, because their position might change in a real space.

Unlike the useless substance of the Indians, the substance of Democritus could offer a calculable, ground for the flux of appearances; for this substance was distributed unequally in the void, and was constantly moving. Every appearance, however fleeting, corresponded to a precise configuration of substance; it arose with that configuration and perished with it. This substance, accordingly, was physical, not metaphysical. It was no dialectical term, but a scientific anticipation, a prophecy as to what an observer who should be properly equipped would discover in the interior of bodies. Materialism is not a system of metaphysics; it is a speculation in chemistry and physiology, to the effect that, if analysis could go deep enough, it would find that all substance was homogeneous, and that all motion was regular.

Though matter was homogeneous, the forms of the ultimate particles, according to Democritus, were various; and sundry combinations of them constituted the sundry objects in nature. Motion was not, as the vulgar (and Aristotle) supposed, unnatural, and produced magically by some moral cause; it had been eternal and was native to the atoms. On striking, they rebounded; and the mechanical currents or vortices which these contacts occasioned formed a multitude of stellar systems, called worlds, with which infinite space was studded.

Mechanism as to motion, atomism as to structure, materialism as to substance, that is the whole system of Democritus. It is as wonderful in its insight, in its sense for the ideal demands of method and understanding, as it is strange and audacious in its simplicity. Only the most convinced rationalist, the boldest prophet, could embrace it dogmatically; yet time has largely given it the proof. If Democritus could look down upon the present state of science, he would laugh, as he was in the habit of doing, partly at the confirmation we can furnish to portions of his philosophy, and partly at our stupidity that cannot guess the rest.

There are two maxims in Lucretius that suffice, even to this day, to distinguish a thinker who is a naturalist from one who is not. "Nothing," he says, "arises in the body in order that we may use it, but what arises brings forth its use."¹ This is that discarding of final causes on which all progress in science depends. The other maxim runs: "One thing will grow plain when compared with another: and blind night shall not obliterate the path for thee, before thou hast thoroughly scanned the ultimate things of nature; so much will

¹ Lucretius, IV. 834., 835.

things throw light on things.”² Nature is her own standard; and if she seems to us unnatural, there is no hope for our minds.

The ethics of Democritus, in so far as we may judge from scanty evidence, were merely descriptive or satirical. He was an aristocratic observer, a scorner of fools. Nature was laughing at us all; the wise man considered his fate and, by knowing it, raised himself in a measure above it. All living things pursued the greatest happiness they could see their way to; but they were marvellously short-sighted; and the business of the philosopher was to foresee and pursue the greatest happiness that was really possible. This, in so rough a world, was to be found chiefly in abstention and retrenchment. If you asked for little, it was more probable that the event would not disappoint you. It was important not to be a fool, but it was very hard.

The system of Democritus was adopted by Epicurus, but not because Epicurus had any keenness of scientific vision. On the contrary, Epicurus, the Herbert Spencer of antiquity, was in his natural philosophy an encyclopaedia of second-hand knowledge. Prolix and minute, vague and inconsistent, he gathered his scientific miscellany with an eye fixed not on nature, but on the exigencies of an inward faith, — a faith accepted on moral grounds, deemed necessary to salvation, and defended at all costs, with any available weapon. It is instructive that materialism should have been adopted at that juncture on the same irrelevant moral grounds on which it has usually been rejected.

Epicurus, strange as it may sound to those who have heard, with horror or envy, of wallowing in his sty, Epicurus was a saint. The ways of the world filled him with dismay. The Athens of his time, which some of us would give our eyes to see, retained all its splendour amid its political decay; but nothing there interested or pleased Epicurus. Theatres, porches, gymnasiums, and above all the agora, reeked, to his sense, with vanity and folly. Retired in his private garden, with a few friends and disciples, he sought the ways of peace; he lived abstemiously; he spoke gently; he gave alms to the poor; he preached against wealth, against ambition, against passion. He defended free-will because he wished to exercise it in withdrawing from the world, and in not swimming with the current. He denied the supernatural, since belief in it would have a disquieting influence on the mind, and render too many things compulsory and momentous. There was no future life: the art of living wisely must not be distorted by such wild imaginings.

All things happened in due course of nature; the gods were too remote and too happy, secluded like good Epicureans, to meddle with earthly things. Nothing ruffled what Wordsworth calls their “voluptuous unconcern.” Nevertheless, it was pleasant to frequent their temples. There, as in the spaces where they dwelt between the worlds, the gods were silent and beautiful, and wore the human form. Their statues, when an unhappy man gazed at them, reminded him of happiness; he was refreshed and weaned

² Ibid., I. 1115-18.

for a moment from the senseless tumult of human affairs. From those groves and hallowed sanctuaries the philosopher returned to his garden strengthened in his wisdom, happier in his isolation, more friendly and more indifferent to all the world. Thus the life of Epicurus, as St. Jerome bears witness, was “full of herbs, fruits, and abstinences.” There was a hush in it, as of bereavement. His was a philosophy of the decadence, a philosophy of negation, and of flight from the world.

Although science for its own sake could not interest so monkish a nature, yet science might be useful in buttressing the faith, or in removing objections to it. Epicurus therefore departed from the reserve of Socrates, and looked for a natural philosophy that might support his ethics. Of all the systems extant – and they were legion – he found that of Democritus the most helpful and edifying. Better than any other it would persuade men to renounce the madness that must be renounced and to enjoy the pleasures that may be enjoyed. But, since it was adopted on these external and pragmatic grounds, the system of Democritus did not need to be adopted entire. In fact, one change at least was imperative. The motion of the atoms must not be wholly regular and mechanical. Chance must be admitted, that Fate might be removed. Fate was a terrifying notion. It was spoken of by the people with superstitious unction. Chance was something humbler, more congenial to the man in the street. If only the atoms were allowed to deflect a little now and then from their courses, the future might remain unpredictable, and free-will might be saved. Therefore, Epicurus decreed that the atoms deflected, and fantastic arguments were added to show that this intrusion of chance would aid in the organization of nature; for the declension of the atoms, as it is called, would explain how the original parallel downpour of them might have yielded to vortices, and so to organized bodies. Let us pass on.

Materialism, like any system of natural philosophy, carries with it no commandments and no advice. It merely describes the world, including the aspirations and consciences of mortals, and refers all to a material ground. The materialist, being a man, will not fail to have preferences, and even a conscience, of his own; but his precepts and policy will express, not the logical implications of his science, but his human instincts, as inheritance and experience may have shaped them. Any system of ethics might accordingly coexist with materialism; for if materialism declares certain things (like immortality) to be impossible, it cannot declare them to be undesirable. Nevertheless, it is not likely that a man so constituted as to embrace materialism will be so constituted as to pursue things which he considers unattainable. There is therefore a psychological, though no logical, bond between materialism and a homely morality.

The materialist is primarily an observer; and he will probably be such in ethics also; that is, he will have no ethics, except the emotion produced upon him by the march of the world. If he is an *esprit fort* and really disinterested, he will love life; as we all love perfect vitality, or what strikes us as such, in gulls and porpoises. This, I think, is the ethical sentiment psychologically consonant with a vigorous materialism: sympathy with

the movement of things, interest in the rising wave, delight at the foam it bursts into, before it sinks again. Nature does not distinguish the better from the worse, but the lover of nature does. He calls better what, being analogous to his own life, enhances his vitality and probably possesses some vitality of its own. This is the ethical feeling of Spinoza, the greatest of modern naturalists in philosophy; and we shall see how Lucretius, in spite of his fidelity to the ascetic Epicurus, is carried by his poetic ecstasy in the same direction.

But mark the crux of this union: the materialist will love the life of nature when he loves his own life; but if he should hate his own life, how should the life of nature please him? Now Epicurus, for the most part, hated life. His moral system, called hedonism, recommends that sort of pleasure which has no excitement and no risk about it. This ideal is modest, and even chaste, but it is not vital. Epicurus was remarkable for his mercy, his friendliness, his utter horror of war, of sacrifice, of suffering. These are not sentiments that a genuine naturalist would be apt to share. Pity and repentance, Spinoza said, were vain and evil; what increased a man's power and his joy increased his goodness also. The naturalist will believe in a certain hardness, as Nietzsche did; he will incline to a certain scorn, as the laughter of Democritus was scornful. He will not count too scrupulously the cost of what he achieves; he will be an imperialist, rapt in the joy of achieving something. In a word, the moral hue of materialism in a formative age, or in an aggressive mind, would be aristocratic and imaginative; but in a decadent age, or in a soul that is renouncing everything, it would be, as in Epicurus, humanitarian and timidly sensual.

We have now before us the antecedents and components of Lucretius' poem on nature. There remains the genius of the poet himself. The greatest thing about this genius is its power of losing itself in its object, its impersonality. We seem to be reading not the poetry of a poet about things, but the poetry of things themselves. That things have their poetry, not because of what we make them symbols of, but because of their own movement and life, is what Lucretius proves once for all to mankind.

Of course, the poetry we see in nature is due to the emotion the spectacle produces in us; the life of nature might be as romantic and sublime as it chose, it would be dust and ashes to us if there were nothing sublime and romantic in ourselves to be stirred by it to sympathy. But our emotion may be ingenuous; it may be concerned with what nature really is and does, has been and will do for ever. It need not arise from a selfish preoccupation with what these immense realities involve for our own persons or may be used to suggest to our self-indulgent fancy. No, the poetry of nature may be discerned merely by the power of intuition which it awakens and the understanding which it employs. These faculties, more, I should say, than our moodiness or stuffy dreams, draw taut the strings of the soul, and bring out her full vitality and music. Naturalism is a philosophy of observation, and of an imagination that extends the observable; all the sights and sounds of nature enter into it, and lend it their directness, pungency, and coercive stress. At the same time, naturalism is an intellectual philosophy; it divines substance behind appearance, continuity behind change, law behind fortune. It therefore

attaches all those sights and sounds to a hidden background that connects and explains them. So understood, nature has depth as well as surface, force and necessity as well as sensuous variety. Before the sublimity of this insight, all forms of the pathetic fallacy seem cheap and artificial. Mythology, that to a childish mind is the only possible poetry, sounds like bad rhetoric in comparison. The naturalistic poet abandons fairy land, because he has discovered nature, history, the actual passions of man. His imagination has reached maturity; its pleasure is to dominate, not to play.

Poetic dominion over things as they are is seen best in Shakespeare for the ways of men, and in Lucretius for the ways of nature. Unapproachably vivid, relentless, direct in detail, he is unflinchingly grand and serious in his grouping of the facts. It is the truth that absorbs him and carries him along. He wishes us to be convinced and sobered by the fact, by the overwhelming evidence of thing after thing, raining down upon us, all bearing witness with one voice to the nature of the world.

Suppose, however, — and it is a tenable supposition, — that Lucretius is quite wrong in his science, and that there is no space, no substance, and no nature. His poem would then lose its pertinence to our lives and personal convictions; it would not lose its imaginative grandeur. We could still conceive a world composed as he describes. Fancy what emotions those who lived in such a world would have felt on the day when a Democritus or a Lucretius revealed to them their actual situation. How great the blindness or the madness dissipated, and how wonderful the vision gained! How clear the future, how intelligible the past, how marvellous the swarming atoms, in their unintentional, perpetual fertility! What the sky is to our eyes on a starry night, that every nook and cranny of nature would resemble, with here and there the tentative smile of life playing about those constellations. Surely that universe, for those who lived in it, would have had its poetry. It would have been the poetry of naturalism. Lucretius, thinking he lived in such a world, heard the music of it, and wrote it down.

And yet, when he set himself to make his poem out of the system of Epicurus, the greatness of that task seems to have overwhelmed him. He was to unfold for the first time, in sonorous but unwieldy Latin, the birth and nature of all things, as Greek subtlety had discerned them. He was to dispel superstition, to refute antagonists, to lay the sure foundations of science and of wisdom, to summon mankind compellingly from its cruel passions and follies to a life of simplicity and peace. He was himself combative and distracted enough — as it is often our troubles, more than our attainments, that determine our ideals. Yet in heralding the advent of human happiness, and in painting that of the gods, he was to attain his own, soaring upon the strong wings of his hexameters into an ecstasy of contemplation and enthusiasm. When it is so great an emotion to read these verses, what must it have been to compose them? Yet could he succeed? Could such great things fall to his lot? Yes, they might, if only the creative forces of nature, always infinite and always at hand, could pass into his brain and into his spirit; if only the seeds of corruption and madness, which were always coursing through the air, could be blown

back for a moment; and if the din of civil conflicts could be suspended while he thought and wrote. To a fortunate conjunction of atoms, a child owes his first being. To a propitious season and atmosphere, a poet owes his inspiration and his success. Conscious that his undertaking hangs upon these chance conjunctions, Lucretius begins by invoking the powers he is about to describe, that they may give him breath and genius enough to describe them. And at once these powers send him a happy inspiration, perhaps a happy reminiscence of Empedocles. There are two great perspectives which the moralist may distinguish in the universal drift of atoms, a creative movement, producing what the moralist values, and a destructive movement, abolishing the same. Lucretius knows very well that this distinction is moral only, or as people now say, subjective. No one else has pointed out so often and so clearly as he that nothing arises in this world not helped to life by the death of some other thing;³ so that the destructive movement creates and the creative movement destroys. Yet from the point of view of any particular life or interest, the distinction between a creative force and a destructive force is real and all-important. To make it is not to deny the mechanical structure of nature, but only to show how this mechanical structure is fruitful morally, how the outlying parts of it are friendly or hostile to me or to you, its local and living products.

This double colouring of things is supremely interesting to the philosopher; so much so that before his physical science has reached the mechanical stage, he will doubtless regard the double aspect which things present to him as a dual principle in these things themselves. So Empedocles had spoken of Love and Strife as two forces which respectively gathered and disrupted the elements, so as to carry on between them the Penelope's labour of the world, the one perpetually weaving fresh forms of life, and the other perpetually undoing them.⁴

It needed but a slight concession to traditional rhetoric in order to exchange these names, Love and Strife, which designated divine powers in Empedocles, into the names of Venus and Mars, which designated the same influences in Roman mythology. The Mars and Venus of Lucretius are not moral forces, incompatible with the mechanism of atoms; they are this mechanism itself, in so far as it now produces and now destroys life, or any precious enterprise, like this of Lucretius in composing his saving poem. Mars and Venus, linked in each other's arms, rule the universe together; nothing arises save by the death of some other thing. Yet when what arises is happier in itself, or more congenial to us, than what is destroyed, the poet says that Venus prevails, that she woos her captive lover to suspend his unprofitable raging. At such times it is spring on earth; the storms recede (I paraphrase the opening passage),⁵ the fields are covered with flowers, the

³ Lucretius, I. 264, 265.

⁴ An excellent expression of this view is put by Plato into the mouth of the physician Eryximachus in the *Symposium*, pp. 186-88.

⁵ Lucretius, I. 1-13.

sunshine floods the serene sky, and all the tribes of animals feel the mighty impulse of Venus in their hearts.

The corn ripens in the plains, and even the sea bears in safety the fleets that traverse it.

Not least, however, of these works of Venus is the Roman people. Never was the formative power of nature better illustrated than in the vitality of this race, which conquered so many other races, or than in its assimilative power, which civilized and pacified them. Legend had made Venus the mother of Aeneas, and Aeneas the progenitor of the Romans. Lucretius seizes on this happy accident and identifies the Venus of fable with the true Venus, the propitious power in all nature, of which Rome was indeed a crowning work. But the poet's work, also, if it is to be accomplished worthily, must look to the same propitious movement for its happy issue and for its power to persuade. Venus must be the patron of his art and philosophy. She must keep Memmius from the wars, that he may read, and be weaned from frivolous ambitions; and she must stop the tumult of constant sedition, that Lucretius may lend his undivided mind to the precepts of Epicurus, and his whole heart to a sublime friendship, which prompts him to devote to intense study all the watches of the starry night, plotting the course of each invisible atom, and mounting almost to the seat of the gods.⁶

This impersonation in the figure of Venus of whatever makes for life would not be legitimate — it would really contradict a mechanical view of nature — if it were not balanced by a figure representing the opposite tendency, the no less universal tendency towards death.

The Mars of the opening passage, subdued for a moment by the blandishments of love, is raging in all the rest of the poem in his irrepressible fury. These are the two sides of every transmutation, that in creating, one thing destroys another; and this transmutation being perpetual, — nothing being durable except the void, the atoms, and their motion, — it follows that the tendency towards death is, for any particular thing, the final and victorious tendency. The names of Venus and Mars, not being essential to the poet's thought, are allowed to drop out, and the actual processes they stand for are described nakedly; yet, if the poem had ever been finished, and Lucretius had wished to make the end chime with the beginning, and represent, as it were, one great cycle of the world, it is conceivable that he might have placed at the close a mythical passage to match that at the beginning; and we might have seen Mars aroused from his luxurious lethargy, reasserting his immortal nature, and rushing, firebrand in hand, from the palace of love to spread destruction throughout the universe, till all things should burn fiercely, and be consumed together. Yet not quite all; for the goddess herself would remain, more divine and desirable than ever in her averted beauty. Instinctively into her bosom the God of

⁶ Lucretius, I. 24, 28-30, 41-43, 140-44.

War would sink again, when weary and drunk with slaughter; and a new world would arise from the scattered atoms of the old.

These endless revolutions, taken in themselves, exactly balance; and I am not sure that, impartially considered, it is any sadder that new worlds should arise than that this world should always continue. Besides, nature cannot take from us more than she has given, and it would be captious and thankless in us to think of her as destructive only, or destructive essentially, after the unspeculative fashion of modern pessimists. She destroys to create, and creates to destroy, her interest (if we may express it so) being not in particular things, nor in their continuance, but solely in the movement that underlies them, in the flux of substance beneath. Life, however, belongs to form, and not to matter; or in the language of Lucretius, life is an *eventum*, a redundant ideal product or incidental aspect, involved in the equilibration of matter; as the throw of sixes is an *eventum*, a redundant ideal product or incidental aspect, occasionally involved in shaking a dice-box. Yet, as this throw makes the acme and best possible issue of a game of dice, so life is the acme and best possible issue of the dance of atoms; and it is from the point of view of this *eventum* that the whole process is viewed by us, and is judged. Not until that happy chance has taken place, do we exist morally, or can we reflect or judge at all. The philosopher is at the top of the wave, he is the foam in the rolling tempest; and as the wave must have risen before he bursts into being, all that he lives to witness is the fall of the wave. The decadence of all he lives by is the only prospect before him; his whole philosophy must be a prophecy of death. Of the life that may come after, when the atoms come together again, he can imagine nothing; the life he knows and shares, all that is life to him, is waning and almost spent.

Therefore Lucretius, who is nothing if not honest, is possessed by a profound melancholy. Vigorous and throbbing as are his pictures of spring, of love, of ambition, of budding culture, of intellectual victory, they pale before the vivid strokes with which he paints the approach of death – fatigue of the will, lassitude in pleasure, corruption and disintegration in society, the soil exhausted, the wild animals tamed or exterminated, poverty, pestilence, and famine at hand; and for the individual, almost at once, the final dissipation of the atoms of his soul, escaping from a relaxed body, to mingle and lose themselves in the universal flaw. Nothing comes out of nothing, nothing falls back into nothing, if we consider substance; but everything comes from nothing and falls back into nothing if we consider things – the objects of love and of experience. Time can make no impression on the void or on the atoms; nay, time is itself an *eventum* created by the motion of atoms in the void; but the triumph of time is absolute over persons, and nations, and worlds.⁷

In treating of the soul and of immortality Lucretius is an imperfect psychologist and an arbitrary moralist. His zeal to prove that the soul is mortal is inspired by the wish to dispel all fear of future punishments, and so to liberate the mind for the calm and tepid

⁷ Lucretius, II. 1139-41, 1148-49, 1164-74.

enjoyment of this world. There is something to be gained in this direction, undoubtedly, especially if tales about divine vengeance to come are used to sanction irrational practices, and to prevent poor people from improving their lot. At the same time, it is hardly fair to assume that hell is the only prospect which immortality could possibly open to any of us; and it is also unfair not to observe that the punishments which religious fables threaten the dead with are, for the most part, symbols for the actual degradation which evil-doing brings upon the living; so that the fear of hell is not more deterrent or repressive than experience of life would be if it were clearly brought before the mind.

There is another element in this polemic against immortality which, while highly interesting and characteristic of a decadent age, betrays a very one-sided and, at bottom, untenable ideal. This element is the fear of life. Epicurus had been a pure and tender moralist, but pusillanimous. He was so afraid of hurting and of being hurt, so afraid of running risks or tempting fortune, that he wished to prove that human life was a brief business, not subject to any great transformations, nor capable of any great achievements. He taught accordingly that the atoms had produced already all the animals they could produce, for though infinite in number the atoms were of few kinds. Consequently the possible sorts of being were finite and soon exhausted; this world, though on the eve of destruction, was of recent date. The worlds around it, or to be produced in future, could not afford anything essentially different. All the suns were much alike, and there was nothing new under them. We need not, then, fear the world; it is an explored and domestic scene, — a home, a little garden, six feet of earth for a man to stretch in. If people rage and make a great noise, it is not because there is much to win, or much to fear, but because people are mad. Let me not be mad, thought Epicurus; let me be reasonable, cultivating sentiments appropriate to a mortal who inhabits a world morally comfortable and small, and physically poor in its infinite monotony. The well-known lines of Fitzgerald echo this sentiment perfectly:

*A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,
A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread — and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness —
Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow!*

But what if the shadow of incalculable possibilities should fall across this sunny retreat? What if after death we should awake in a world to which the atomic philosophy might not in the least apply? Observe that this suggestion is not in the least opposed to any of the arguments by which science might prove the atomic theory to be correct. All that Epicurus taught about the universe now before us might be perfectly true of it; but what if to-morrow a new universe should have taken its place? The suggestion is doubtless gratuitous, and no busy man will be much troubled by it; yet when the heart is empty it fills itself with such attenuated dreams. The muffled pleasures of the wise man, as Epicurus conceived him, were really a provocation to supernaturalism. They left a great void; and before long supernaturalism — we shall see it in Dante — actually rushed

in to quicken the pulses of life with fresh hopes and illusions, or at least (what may seem better than nothing) with terrors and fanatical zeal. With such tendencies already afoot as the myths and dogmas of Plato had betrayed, it was imperative for Epicurus to banish anxiously all thought of what might follow death. To this end are all his arguments about the material nature of the soul and her incapacity to survive the body.

To say that the soul is material has a strange and barbarous sound to modern ears. We live after Descartes, who taught the world that the essence of the soul was consciousness; and to call consciousness material would be to talk of the blackness of white. But ancient usage gave the word soul a rather different meaning. The essence of the soul was not so much to be conscious as to govern the formation of the body, to warm, move, and guide it. And if we think of the soul exclusively in this light, it will not seem a paradox, it may even seem a truism, to say that the soul must be material. For how are we to conceive that preexisting consciousness should govern the formation of the body, move, warm, or guide it? A spirit capable of such a miracle would in any case not be human, but altogether divine. The soul that Lucretius calls material should not, then, be identified with consciousness, but with the ground of consciousness, which is at the same time the cause of life in the body. This he conceives to be a swarm of very small and volatile atoms, a sort of ether, resident in all living seeds, breathed in abundantly during life and breathed out at death.

Even if this theory were accepted, however, it would not prove the point which Lucretius has chiefly at heart, namely, that an after-life is impossible. The atoms of the soul are indestructible, like all atoms; and if consciousness were attached to the fortunes of a small group of them, or of one only (as Leibniz afterwards taught), consciousness would continue to exist after these atoms had escaped from the body and were shooting through new fields of space. Indeed, they might be the more aroused by that adventure, as a bee might find the sky or the garden more exciting than the hive. All that Lucretius urges about the divisibility of the soul, its diffused bodily seat, and the perils it would meet outside fails to remove the ominous possibility that troubles him.

To convince us that we perish at death he has to rely on vulgar experience and inherent probability: what changes is not indestructible; what begins, ends; mental growth, health, sanity, accompany the fortunes of the body as a whole (not demonstrably those of the soul-atoms); the passions are relevant to bodily life and to an earthly situation; we should not be ourselves under a different mask or in a new setting; we remember no previous existence if we had one, and so, in a future existence, we should not remember this. These reflections are impressive, and they are enforced by Lucretius with his usual vividness and smack of reality. Nothing is proved scientifically by such a deliverance, yet it is good philosophy and good poetry; it brings much experience together and passes a lofty judgment upon it. The artist has his eye on the model; he is painting death to the life.

If these considerations succeed in banishing the dread of an after-life, there remains the distress which many feel at the idea of extinction; and if we have ceased to fear death, like Hamlet, for the dreams that may come after it, we may still fear death instinctively, like a stuck pig. Against this instinctive horror of dying Lucretius has many brave arguments. Fools, he says to us, why do you fear what never can touch you? While you still live, death is absent; and when you are dead, you are so dead that you cannot know you are dead, nor regret it. You will be as much at ease as before you were born. Or is what troubles you the childish fear of being cold in the earth, or feeling its weight stifling you? But you will not be there; the atoms of your soul — themselves unconscious — will be dancing in some sunbeam far away, and you yourself will be nowhere; you will absolutely not exist. Death is by definition a state that excludes experience. If you fear it, you fear a word.

To all this, perhaps, Memmius, or some other recalcitrant reader, might retort that what he shrank from was not the metaphysical state of being dead, but the very real agony of dying. Dying is something ghastly, as being born is something ridiculous; and, even if no pain were involved in quitting or entering this world, we might still say what Dante's Francesca says of it: *Il modo ancor m' offende*, — “I shudder at the way of it.” Lucretius, for his part, makes no attempt to show that everything is as it should be; and if our way of coming into this life is ignoble, and our way of leaving it pitiful, that is no fault of his nor of his philosophy. If the fear of death were merely the fear of dying, it would be better dealt with by medicine than by argument. There is, or there might be, an art of dying well, of dying painlessly, willingly, and in season, — as in those noble partings which Attic gravestones depict, — especially if we were allowed, as Lucretius would allow us, to choose our own time.

But the radical fear of death, I venture to think, is something quite different. It is the love of life. Epicurus, who feared life, seems to have missed here the primordial and colossal force he was fighting against. Had he perceived that force, he would have been obliged to meet it in a more radical way, by an enveloping movement, as it were, and an attack from the rear. The love of life is not something rational, or founded on experience of life. It is something antecedent and spontaneous. It is that Venus Genetrix which covers the earth with its flora and fauna. It teaches every animal to seek its food and its mate, and to protect its offspring; as also to resist or fly from all injury to the body, and most of all from threatened death. It is the original impulse by which good is discriminated from evil, and hope from fear.

Nothing could be more futile, therefore, than to marshal arguments against that fear of death which is merely another name for the energy of life, or the tendency to self-preservation. Arguments involve premises, and these premises, in the given case, express some particular form of the love of life; whence it is impossible to conclude that death is in no degree evil and not at all to be feared. For what is most dreaded is not the agony of dying, nor yet the strange impossibility that when we do not exist we should suffer for not

existing. What is dreaded is the defeat of a present will directed upon life and its various undertakings. Such a present will cannot be argued away, but it may be weakened by contradictions arising within it, by the irony of experience, or by ascetic discipline. To introduce ascetic discipline, to bring out the irony of experience, to expose the self-contradictions of the will, would be the true means of mitigating the love of life; and if the love of life were extinguished, the fear of death, like smoke rising from that fire, would have vanished also.

Indeed, the force of the great passage against the fear of death, at the end of the third book of Lucretius, comes chiefly from the picture it draws of the madness of life. His philosophy deprecates covetousness, ambition, love, and religion; it takes a long step towards the surrender of life, by surrendering all in life that is ardent, on the ground that it is painful in the end and ignominious. To escape from it all is a great deliverance. And since genius must be ardent about something, Lucretius pours out his enthusiasm on Epicurus, who brought this deliverance and was the saviour of mankind. Yet this was only a beginning of salvation, and the same principles carried further would have delivered us from the Epicurean life and what it retained that was Greek and naturalistic: science, friendship, and the healthy pleasures of the body. Had it renounced these things also, Epicureanism would have become altogether ascetic, a thorough system of mortification, or the pursuit of death. To those who sincerely pursue death, death is no evil, but the highest good. No need in that case of elaborate arguments to prove that death should not be feared, because it is nothing; for in spite of being nothing – or rather because it is nothing – death can be loved by a fatigued and disillusioned spirit, just as in spite of being nothing – or rather because it is nothing – it must be hated and feared by every vigorous animal.

One more point, and I have done with this subject. Ancient culture was rhetorical. It abounded in ideas that are verbally plausible, and pass muster in a public speech, but that, if we stop to criticize them, prove at once to be inexcusably false. One of these rhetorical fallacies is the maxim that men cannot live for what they cannot witness. What does it matter to you, we may say in debate, what happened before you were born, or what may go on after you are buried? And the orator who puts such a challenge may carry the audience with him, and raise a laugh at the expense of human sincerity. Yet the very men who applaud are proud of their ancestors, care for the future of their children, and are very much interested in securing legally the execution of their last will and testament. What may go on after their death concerns them deeply, not because they expect to watch the event from hell or heaven, but because they are interested ideally in what that event shall be, although they are never to witness it. Lucretius himself, in his sympathy with nature, in his zeal for human enlightenment, in his tears for Iphigenia, long since dead, is not moved by the hope of observing, or the memory of having observed, what excites his emotion. He forgets himself. He sees the whole universe spread out in its true movement and proportions; he sees mankind freed from the

incubus of superstition, and from the havoc of passion. The vision kindles his enthusiasm, exalts his imagination, and swells his verse into unmistakable earnestness.

If we follow Lucretius, therefore, in narrowing the sum of our personal fortunes to one brief and partial glimpse of earth, we must not suppose that we need narrow at all the sphere of our moral interests. On the contrary, just in proportion as we despise superstitious terrors and sentimental hopes, and as our imagination becomes self-forgetful, we shall strengthen the direct and primitive concern which we feel in the world and in what may go on there, before us, after us, or beyond our ken. If, like Lucretius and every philosophical poet, we range over all time and all existence, we shall forget our own persons, as he did, and even wish them to be forgotten, if only the things we care for may subsist or arise. He who truly loves God, says Spinoza, cannot wish that God should love him in return. One who lives the life of the universe cannot be much concerned for his own. After all, the life of the universe is but the locus and extension of ours. The atoms that have once served to produce life remain fit to reproduce it; and although the body they might animate later would be a new one, and would have a somewhat different career, it would not, according to Lucretius, be of a totally new species; perhaps not more unlike ourselves than we are unlike one another, or than each of us is unlike himself at the various stages of his life.

The soul of nature, in the elements of it, is then, according to Lucretius, actually immortal; only the human individuality, the chance composition of those elements, is transitory; so that, if a man could care for what happens to other men, for what befell him when young or what may overtake him when old, he might perfectly well care, on the same imaginative principle, for what may go on in the world for ever. The finitude and injustice of his personal life would be broken down; the illusion of selfishness would be dissipated; and he might say to himself, I have imagination, and nothing that is real is alien to me.

The word nature has many senses; but if we preserve the one which etymology justifies, and which is the most philosophical as well, nature should mean the principle of birth or genesis, the universal mother, the great cause, or system of causes, that brings phenomena to light. If we take the word nature in this sense, it may be said that Lucretius, more than any other man, is the poet of nature. Of course, being an ancient, he is not particularly a poet of landscape. He runs deeper than that; he is a poet of the source of landscape, a poet of matter. A poet of landscape might try to suggest, by well-chosen words, the sensations of light, movement, and form which nature arouses in us; but in this attempt he would encounter the insuperable difficulty which Lessing long ago pointed out, and warned poets of: I mean the unfitness of language to render what is

spatial and material; its fitness to render only what, like language itself, is bodiless and flowing, — action, feeling, and thought.

It is noticeable, accordingly, that poets who are fascinated by pure sense and seek to write poems about it are called not impressionists, but symbolists; for in trying to render some absolute sensation they render rather the field of association in which that sensation lies, or the emotions and half-thoughts that shoot and play about it in their fancy. They become — against their will, perhaps — psychological poets, ringers of mental chimes, and listeners for the chance overtones of consciousness. Hence we call them symbolists, mixing perhaps some shade of disparagement in the term, as if they were symbolists of an empty, super-subtle, or fatuous sort. For they play with things luxuriously, making them symbols for their thoughts, instead of mending their thoughts intelligently, to render them symbols for things.

A poet might be a symbolist in another sense, — if he broke up nature, the object suggested by landscape to the mind, and reverted to the elements of landscape, not in order to associate these sensations lazily together, but in order to build out of them in fancy a different nature, a better world, than that which they reveal to reason. The elements of landscape, chosen, emphasized, and recombined for this purpose, would then be symbols for the ideal world they were made to suggest, and for the ideal life that might be led in that paradise. Shelley is a symbolic landscape poet in this sense. To Shelley, as Francis Thompson has said, nature was a toy-shop; his fancy took the materials of the landscape and wove them into a gossamer world, a bright ethereal habitation for new-born irresponsible spirits. Shelley was the musician of landscape; he traced out its unrealized suggestions; transformed the things he saw into the things he would fain have seen. In this idealization it was spirit that guided him, the bent of his wild and exquisite imagination, and he fancied sometimes that the grosser landscapes of earth were likewise the work of some half-spiritual stress, of some restlessly dreaming power. In this sense, earthly landscape seemed to him the symbol of the earth spirit, as the starlit crystal landscapes of his verse, with their pensive flowers, were symbols in which his own fevered spirit was expressed, images in which his passion rested.

Another sort of landscape poetry is to be found in Wordsworth, for whom the title of poet of nature might perhaps be claimed. To him the landscape is an influence. What he renders, beyond such pictorial touches as language is capable of, is the moral inspiration which the scene brings to him. This moral inspiration is not drawn at all from the real processes of nature which every landscape manifests in some aspect and for one moment. Such would have been the method of Lucretius; he would have passed imaginatively from the landscape to the sources of the landscape; he would have disclosed the poetry of matter, not of spirit. Wordsworth, on the contrary, dwells on adventitious human matters. He is no poet of genesis, evolution, and natural force in its myriad manifestations. Only a part of the cosmic process engages his interest, or touches his soul — the strengthening or chastening of human purposes by the influences of landscape. These influences are very real; for as food or wine keeps the animal heart

beating, or quickens it, so large spaces of calm sky, or mountains, or dells, or solitary stretches of water, expand the breast, disperse the obsessions that cramp a man's daily existence, and even if he be less contemplative and less virtuous than Wordsworth, make him, for the moment, a friend to all things, and a friend to himself.

Yet these influences are vague and for the most part fleeting. Wordsworth would hardly have felt them so distinctly and so constantly had he not found a further link to bind landscape to moral sentiment. Such a link exists. The landscape is the scene of human life. Every spot, every season, is associated with the sort of existence which falls to men in that environment. Landscape for Wordsworth's age and in his country was seldom without figures. At least, some visible trace of man guided the poet and set the key for his moral meditation. Country life was no less dear to Wordsworth than landscape was; it fitted into every picture; and while the march of things, as Lucretius conceived it, was not present to Wordsworth's imagination, the revolutions of society — the French Revolution, for instance — were constantly in his thoughts. In so far as he was a poet of human life, Wordsworth was truly a poet of nature. In so far, however, as he was a poet of landscape, he was still fundamentally a poet of human life, or merely of his personal experience. When he talked of nature he was generally moralizing, and altogether subject to the pathetic fallacy; but when he talked of man, or of himself, he was unfolding a part of nature, the upright human heart, and studying it in its truth.

Lucretius, a poet of universal nature, studied everything in its truth. Even moral life, though he felt it much more narrowly and coldly than Wordsworth did, was better understood and better sung by him for being seen in its natural setting. It is a fault of idealists to misrepresent idealism, because they do not view it as a part of the world. Idealism *is* a part, of the world, a small and dependent part of it. It is a small and dependent part even in the life of men. This fact is nothing against idealism taken as a moral energy, as a faculty of idealization and a habit of living in the familiar presence of an image of what would, in everything, be best. But it is the ruin of idealism taken as a view of the central and universal power in the world. For this reason Lucretius, who sees human life and human idealism in their natural setting, has a saner and maturer view of both than has Wordsworth, for all his greater refinement. Nature, for the Latin poet, is really nature. He loves and fears her, as she deserves to be loved and feared by her creatures. Whether it be a wind blowing, a torrent rushing, a lamb bleating, the magic of love, genius achieving its purpose, or a war, or a pestilence, Lucretius sees everything in its causes, and in its total career. One breath of lavish creation, one iron law of change, runs through the whole, making all things kin in their inmost elements and in their last end. Here is the touch of nature indeed, her largeness and eternity. Here is the true echo of the life of matter.

Any comprehensive picture of nature and destiny, if the picture be credited, must arouse emotion, and in a reflective and vivid mind must inspire poetry — for what is poetry but emotion, fixing and colouring the objects from which it springs? The sublime

poem of Lucretius, expounding the least poetical of philosophies, proves this point beyond a doubt. Yet Lucretius was far from exhausting the inspiration which a poet might draw from materialism. In the philosophy of Epicurus, even, which had but a sickly hold on materialism, there were two strains which Lucretius did not take up, and which are naturally rich in poetry, the strain of piety and the strain of friendship. It is usual and, in one sense, legitimate to speak of the Epicureans as atheists, since they denied providence and any government of God in the world. Yet they admitted the existence of gods, living in the quiet spaces between those celestial whirlpools which form the various worlds. To these gods they attributed the human form, and the serene life to which Epicurus aspired. Epicurus himself was so sincere in this belief, and so much affected by it, that he used to frequent the temples, keep the feasts of the gods, and often spend hours before their images in contemplation and prayer.

In this, as in much else, Epicurus was carrying out to its logical conclusion the rational and reforming essence of Hellenism. In Greek religion, as in all other religions, there was a background of vulgar superstition. Survivals and revivals of totem-worship, taboo, magic, ritual barter, and objectified rhetoric are to be found in it to the very end; yet if we consider in Greek religion its characteristic tendency, and what rendered it distinctively Greek, we see that it was its unprecedented ideality, disinterestedness, and aestheticism. To the Greek, in so far as he was a Greek, religion was an aspiration to grow like the gods by invoking their companionship, rehearsing their story, feeling vicariously the glow of their splendid prerogatives, and placing them, in the form of beautiful and very human statues, constantly before his eyes. This sympathetic interest in the immortals took the place, in the typical Greek mind, of any vivid hope of human immortality; perhaps it made such a hope seem superfluous and inappropriate. Mortality belonged to man, as immortality to the gods; and the one was the complement of the other. Imagine a poet who, to the freedom and simplicity of Homer, should have added the more reverent idealism of a later age; and what an inexhaustible fund of poetry might he not have found in this conception of the immortals leading a human life, without its sordid contrarieties and limitations, eternally young, and frank, and different!

Hints of such poetry are to be found in Plato, myths that present the ideal suggestions of human life in pictures. These he sometimes leaves general and pale, calling them ideas; but at other times he embodies them in deities, or in detailed imaginary constructions, like that of his *Republic*. This Platonic habit of mind might have been carried further by some franker and less reactionary poet than Plato was, or tended to become, as the years turned his wine into vinegar. But the whole world was then getting sour. Imagination flagged, or was diverted from the Greek into the Hebrew channel. Nevertheless, the hymns of modern poets to the ancient gods, and the irrepressible echoes of classic mythology in our literature, show how easy it would have been for the later ancients themselves, had they chosen, to make immortal poetry out of their dying superstitions. The denials of Epicurus do not exclude this ideal use of religion; on the contrary, by excluding all the other uses of it – the commercial, the

mock-scientific, and the selfish – they leave the moral interpretative aspect of religion standing alone, ready to the poet's hand, if any poet could be found pure and fertile enough to catch and to render it. Rationalized paganism might have had its Dante, a Dante who should have been the pupil not of Virgil and Aquinas, but of Homer and Plato. Lucretius was too literal, positivistic, and insistent for such a delicate task. He was a Roman. Moral mythology and ideal piety, though his philosophy had room for them, formed no part of his poetry.

What the other neglected theme, friendship, might have supplied, we may see in the tone of another Epicurean, the poet Horace. Friendship was highly honoured in all ancient states; and the Epicurean philosophy, in banishing so many traditional forms of sentiment, could only intensify the emphasis on friendship. It taught men that they were an accident in the universe, comrades afloat on the same raft together with no fate not common to them all, and no possible helpers but one another. Lucretius does speak, in a passage to which I have already referred,⁸ about the hope of sweet friendship that supports him in his labours; and elsewhere⁹ he repeats the Epicurean idyl about picnicking together on the green grass by a flowing brook; but the little word “together” is all he vouchsafes us to mark what must be the chief ingredient in such rural happiness.

Horace, usually so much slighter than Lucretius, is less cursory here. Not only does he strike much oftener the note of friendship, but his whole mind and temper breathe of friendliness and expected agreement. There is, in the very charm and artifice of his lines, a sort of confidential joy in tasting with the kindred few the sweet or pungent savour of human things. To be brief and gently ironical is to assume mutual intelligence; and to assume mutual intelligence is to believe in friendship. In Lucretius, on the other hand, zeal is mightier than sympathy, and scorn mightier than humour. Perhaps it would be asking too much of his uncompromising fervour that he should have unbent now and then and shown us in some detail what those pleasures of life may be which are without care and fear. Yet, if it was impossible for him not to be always serious and austere, he might at least have noted the melancholy of friendship – for friendship, where nature has made minds isolated and bodies mortal, is rich also in melancholy. This again we may find in Horace, where once or twice he lets the “something bitter” bubble up from the heart even of this flower, when he feels a vague need that survives satiety, and yearns perversely for the impossible.¹⁰ Poor Epicureans, when they could not learn, like their master, to be saints!

So far the decadent materialism of Epicurus might have carried a poet; but a materialist in our days might find many other poetic themes to weave into his system. To the picture which Lucretius sketches of primitive civilization, we might add the whole

⁸ Cf. page 67.

⁹ Lucretius, II. 99-33.

¹⁰ Horace, *Odes*, IV. 1.

history of mankind. To a consistent and vigorous materialism all personal and national dramas, with the beauties of all the arts, are no less natural and interesting than are flowers or animal bodies. The moral pageantry of this world, surveyed scientifically, is calculated wonderfully to strengthen and refine the philosophy of abstention suggested to Epicurus by the flux of material things and by the illusions of vulgar passion. Lucretius studies superstition, but only as an enemy; and the naturalistic poet should be the enemy of nothing. His animus blinds him to half the object, to its more beautiful half, and makes us distrust his version of the meaner half he is aware of. Seen in its totality, and surrounded by all the other products of human imagination, superstition is not only moving in itself, a capital subject for tragedy and for comedy, but it reinforces the materialistic way of thinking, and shows that it may be extended to the most complex and emotional spheres of existence. At the same time, a naturalism extended impartially over moral facts brings home a lesson of tolerance, scepticism, and independence which, without contradicting Epicurean principles, would very much enlarge and transform Epicurean sentiment. History would have opened to the Epicurean poet a new dimension of nature and a more varied spectacle of folly. His imagination would have been enriched and his maxims fortified.

The emotions which Lucretius associated with his atoms and void, with his religious denials and his abstentions from action, are emotions necessarily involved in life. They will exist in any case, though not necessarily associated with the doctrines by which this poet sought to clarify them. They will remain standing, whatever mechanism we put in the place of that which he believed in, — that is, if we are serious, and not trying to escape from the facts rather than to explain them. If the ideas embodied in a philosophy represent a comprehensive survey of the facts, and a mature sentiment in the presence of them, any new ideas adopted instead will have to acquire the same values, and nothing will be changed morally except the language or euphony of the mind.

Of course one theory of the world must be true and the rest false, at least if the categories of any theory are applicable to reality; but the true theory like the false resides in imagination, and the truth of it which the poet grasps is its truth to life. If there are no atoms, at least there must be habits of nature, or laws of evolution, or dialectics of progress, or decrees of providence, or intrusions of chance; and before these equally external and groundless powers we must bow, as Lucretius bowed to his atoms. It will always be important and inevitable to recognize *something* external, something that generates or surrounds us; and perhaps the only difference between materialism and other systems in this respect is that materialism has studied more scrupulously the detail and method of our dependence.

Similarly, even if Lucretius was wrong, and the soul is immortal, it is nevertheless steadily changing its interests and its possessions. Our lives are mortal if our soul is not; and the sentiment which reconciled Lucretius to death is as much needed if we are to face many deaths, as if we are to face only one. The gradual losing of what we have been and are, Emerson says:

*This losing is true dying;
This is lordly man's down-lying,
This his slow but sure reclining;
Star by star his world resigning.*

The maxim of Lucretius, that nothing arises save by the death of something else, meets us still in our crawling immortality. And his art of accepting and enjoying what the conditions of our being afford also has a perennial application. Dante, the poet of faith, will tell us that we must find our peace in the will that gives us our limited portion. Goethe, the poet of romantic experience, will tell us that we must renounce, renounce perpetually. Thus wisdom clothes the same moral truths in many cosmic parables. The doctrines of philosophers disagree where they are literal and arbitrary, — mere guesses about the unknown; but they agree or complete one another where they are expressive or symbolic, thoughts wrung by experience from the hearts of poets. Then all philosophies alike are ways of meeting and recording the same flux of images, the same vicissitudes of good and evil, which will visit all generations, while man is man.

* * *