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Lucretius; and his Relation to Modern Thought.

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Lavorius and his Relation to Modern Thought

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Lucretius, though living before the Latin language and literature had reached their culminating point of richness, melody, and power, was yet, in many respects, the greatest of Roman writers. Of the history of no ancient poet except Homer is so little certainly known.

Jerome says that he was rendered insane by the administration of a love philter; that in the intervals of sanity, he wrote several books, and that he died, by his own hand, in the forty-fourth year of his age.

Donati mentions, in his life of Virgil, that Lucretius died on the day that Virgil received the toga virilis, which we know was in 90 B.C.

This would give the date of his birth at 99 or 98 B.C. Thus it will be seen that he lived through the
fearful horrors of the civil war and died when the
terrorists of the first triumvirate was at its height.
The birthplace is unknown, but, from allusions
in his poem, it is quite probable that he was
born in Rome. He was a member of the
Lucretian gene, one of the oldest and most
nautical families of the ancient Roman nobility.
Lucretius was both a poet and a
philosopher, and his fame rested entirely upon one
work, "De Rerum Natura," a work characterized by great
strength, consistancy, and continuity of thought.
His place among writers is unique. "No
one else combines in the same degree the con-
templative enthusiasm of a philosopher, the purpose
of a reformer and moral teacher, and the
profound patience and power of beauty of a great
poet." In the absence of definite records, we
are compelled to form our conceptions of Lucretius' character from his work. But this task has been rendered comparatively easy, because his personal force is so remarkable and so vividly impressed on his poems.

In personal character and strength of understanding, he was a Roman of the Romans. His genius was of the highest order. For profound insight into nature, for loftiness of conception, for the power of sustained and intense thought, he is unsurpassed by none, and equalled by few if any. The genius of Lucretius, as of all the greatest poets, does not reveal itself as any mere isolated or exceptional faculty, but as the impregnated and imaginative movement of his whole moral and intellectual being. That he was no pullow recluse, but of a kindly and genial
nature is attired by numerous verse in his great poem, and his retirement is but the recoil of a sensitive and humane spirit from the honors and vice and corruption of the then Roman world.

The nobleness of mind and superiority to envy and jealousy is evident from his enthusiastic admiration for genius and his loving praise of great writers.

But with all his admiration of the genius of others, he combined a strong sense of his own power. "He is fully alive to the importance and difficulty of his task, and proudly conscious of his ability to cope with it. It is perhaps not too much to say that there is no whole in any literature that produces a profounder impression of sincerity. No writer shows a purer scorn of all mere rhetoric and exaggeration." Lucretius' earnestness is apparent to the most careless reader.
His first and great object is to show his suffering and miserable fellow-men the true path to a quiet and peaceful life; to this, the elucidation of truth, style, language, poetical form—everything in short—is made subordinate. By no Stoic could the doctrine of independence of the world and of the superiority of simplicity over show and luxury be more forcibly and consistently inculcated.

No one chose finer courage, not marred by irreverence, in confronting the great problems of human destiny, or greater strength in triumphing over human weakness. No one chose a truer humanity and a more tender sympathy with natural sorrow. On reverence for the sanctity of human affections, Virgil alone is his equal. For a poet the subject selected by Lucretius, is most unfortunate. The exposition of
A scientific system is, last of all, calculated to furnish a field for the display of poetic genius. That he succeeded in profiting to the whole poem a freshness and charm, so that the reader never weariness, no matter how ploy the thought, prove him to have been a true poet. But although the greater part of the poem is the purest prose, arranged in metrical form, yet there are many verse and prose, that are poetry of the highest type. The invocation to Venus, at the opening of the first book, is as fine verse as that of Virgil. How near to modern prose seem the lines:

Things seem to die, but die not. The spring show'res
Die on the bosom of the motherly earth,
But rise again in fruit, and leaves, and flower,
And every death is nothing but a birth.

Though we dare not give to them the same high and
noble interpretation that we give to our own poets.

"There is no death! What seems so is transition.

The famous description of Sicily is as fresh
and beautiful and full of the rights and bounds of
nature as though written by Wordsworth:

"Chief of these

On he of Agrigent, Empedocles.

Him in its Three-shored Sounds that ride of yore
Beared, which the wild Ionian water labors,
Round curving bays and headlands, evermore
Splashing the foam up out of its green wave.
Here shone the racing sea withhold the shore
Of Italy, and here Charybdis savages;
And here shone rumbling Eltan, snow, and strain
For strength to lighten at the shelf again."
Fair in that land, and all men hold it fair;
The gods who guard its soil are fierce and free;
And all rich things, and gladsome things, are there:
Yet nothing ever was there, nor shall be,
More glorious than this great philosopher—
More holy, marvellous, and dear than he.
How instinct with the freeness and beauty of morning are these lines, and what an observant eye
must have been his who wrote them:

"Then first the morning sprinkles earth with light,
And in the forest loud heart everywhere
The birds awake and with fluttering flight
Pour out their flouting, on the knower's air."

Or these:

"Thus when we see the low red morning break
Along the grasses rough and gemmed with dew,
Dove in gray mist go up from off the lake,"
And from the clear perennial river too,
And even at truce the very meadow poen
From their green track to break a silver stream.
Or he tells me how the cloud
Dyes all the landscape with their winged light,
And with a rapid quivering flashes out
The pailing storm;

And

"The mighty Thunderbolt
Gore through the walls of houses like a snout."

His description of the plague at Athens, with
Which the poem closes, is one of the finest passages
ever written. No poet ever attempted anything
more difficult and no one ever succeeded more
admirably. Indeed the may well say,

"Wiltz shall be the adventurous hand that brings
A crown for mine own bone, from places where
The muse has designed to grant a crown for none
Save for my favored browe and mine alone.

His style is pure, simple, passionate,
full of majesty and pathos, and of a nervous strength
that sometimes amounts to harshness. His meter
is often defective, and he complains again and
again of the inadequacy of the Latin tongue to the
needs of his verse. "Many passages, for vigor of
conception, and splendor of diction, will bear a
comparison with the best efforts of The poets of any
cage or country."

But the chief object of Lucrèce was
not to render the Latin language more flexible and
musical, not to write a great poem, but to set forth,
clearly and pithily, the Epicurean philosophy, to
liberate men from the fears of the gods and the
tensors of death. And it is the relation of the scientific system of Lecretien to the speculative philosophy of the present that gives him the greatest interest for us. Not that he can be called the forerunner of the advanced scientific hypotheses of modern times; but it is in his form that we find the most complete account of the attempts of the ancients to explain the nature of things. His bold and fearless manner produce a powerful effect upon the reader, and his firm grasp of speculative ideas, and the closeness and clearness of his reasoning are remarkable, not surpassed, perhaps, by any thinker of modern times. But if Lecretien cannot be regarded as anticipating the speculative philosophy of the present, much less can we estimate his teachings by the refined and exalted ideas of a philosophy
purified by faith. We do him still greater injustice if we fail to recognize the gross superstitions and corrupting influences of the prevalent religious ideas of his time. When so considered, we shall find that the supposed orthodoxy of Lecreetius proceeds from a more deeply reverential spirit than that of the majority of his time.

With this caution, against a hasty and harsh judgment of a mind too thoughtful, too true to itself, to accept the false and juvenile forms of the degenerated Roman mythology, let us see what is the relation of the thought of Lecreetius to that of our own day. To do this let us first summarize, briefly, the doctrine set forth in "Do Rerum Nature.

The form opens with an invocation to Venus, a prayer that the goddess will give peace to
The earth, for men cannot pursue the study of nature in such untroubled times; and the announcement of his aim, namely, to free men's minds from fear of the gods and of death, to inquire into the nature not only of physical things, but into the nature of the soul itself. Then follows the reason, a reason which he reiterates again and again. "This terror and darkness of the mind, therefore, it is not the rage of the sun, nor the bright shafts of day that must dispel, but reason and the contemplation of nature." He proceeds to prove his fundamental propositions, that nothing can be created from nothing. For if things can be produced from nothing, there is no need of seed, time is not requisite, nourishment is unnecessary, improvement and definite size impossible. Conversely, nothing can be reduced to nothing, else things bright and
duly dissolve, nor would varying forces be re-
quired for their annihilation. Of things are
destroyed, how can we account for the renewal of
life and growth? The rain disappears but the
fields are covered with verdure. Many bodies
exist which we cannot see, but which, none the less, are
corporeal substance; for nothing except body can
touch and be touched. Nature consists of two
parts: bodily substance, and vacant space; whatever
lives there it is, is paid to be necessary adjunct or ac-
cident. For if the universe were filled with
matter there would be no movement, and if all
bodies did not contain void they would have the
same weight. The universe is infinite, no part
being fundamentally lower; and contains an
infinite number of atoms — bodies of infinitesimal
die, of definite form, of infinite hardness, and
eternal. From these atoms, all things, whatever they may be, are created. The book closes with an implied denial of the theory that bodies tend to a common center.

The second book is devoted to the discussion of the motions, nature, and combinations of atoms. He begins by saying that the first primordial atoms of things are moved of themselves.

Originally atoms were falling downward in straight lines, with an inconceivable velocity, though the boundless regime of space. No atom could overtake another because all bodies fall equally in a void, so he conceives, at some point in their downward flight, the atoms proceed the slightest amount from the right line. On this way collision between them was produced, and in a short time the atoms were flying hither and thither
in the utmost confusion. In many cases they became entangled with one another and from these entanglements the whole universe has been gradually formed. The atoms of bodies, however, continue their motions through not able to escape from their environments. These is that within a body capable of resisting force from without, this is the preserve of the primordial atoms, and this alone constitutes the freedom of will. 

Atoms vary in form and size. Else how could one thing differ from another? Pleasant tastes are composed of smooth round atoms; bitter substances rough and hooked atoms; the atoms of sour tastes have small protruding angles. Dense bodies are composed of atoms intricately locked together; subtle substance, air, air, heat, so, of very small smooth round atoms slightly attached. The shapes
Atoms are finite but the number of each shape is infinite. No substance is simple; and the more properties and attributes any body possesses, the more kinds of atoms enter into its composition. Atoms are colorless and without form. It is their size and form and combination that is important. The books close with the bold conjecture that in the immensity of space there are probably many worlds such as ours, which, as ours, the limits of existence await.

The third book treats of the nature of the mind and soul. He considers the soul to be as much a part of a man as his hand or head. The mind is extremely subtle and is composed of very minute atoms, and exquisitely rounded that they may move by a slight impulse. It is the highest and guiding part of man.
situated in the breast. It forms one substance with the soul which is diffused throughout the body. The mind willed, the soul carries this impulse to all parts of the body; and then the body responds. Therefore, he argues, the mind and soul are corporeal, for nothing but body can touch body. The substance of the mind and soul is compound, consisting of aura, heat, air, and a fourth nameless substance than which nothing can be more subtle or active. These follow a great many arguments to prove the mortality of the soul, some of which are identical with those advanced today. From these he concludes that the gate of death is not shut against the mind and soul. This being true, the present is all to me. We have here our heaven or hell just as we choose. Eternal death awaits all at last.
The fourth book contains the theories of Lucretius concerning vision, taste, and sensation. He considered the senses the direct source of knowledge. Unless the senses be true, all reasoning is false. Vision is produced by extremely delicate particles which produce images. These images are thrown off from bodies in all directions, and, striking against the eyes, they produce the sensation of vision. These images are shattered on striking stones, they pass through thin garments, and are reflected by mirrors. We are enabled to tell distance by the amount of air that brushes before the eyes as the image approaches.

Images appear behind the mirror because of two currents of air, one caused by the impinging of the image on the mirror, the other by its rebounding from the surface. Decide the images thrown.
off from objects, there are others formed spontaneously in the air. The penetration of these through the body and their contact with the mind produce dreams. Voice and sound are corporeal, for the voice abrades the throat, and much speaking wears the body, because part of its substance is taken away.

Taste must penetrate the tongue and come in contact with the sense. The same may be said of odors but they are composed of larger atoms, they move slowly and are soon dissipated. The members of the body were not formed for use; but, after creation, they were found to be useful. Motion, lucrative thinker, is caused by the mind willing to imitate images.

Sleep is caused by the partial expulsion of the soul from the body and its withdrawal toward the mind. During sleep it regains its normal position and resumes its sway over the body.
The fifth book declare that the gods did not make the earth, for, what cause did they have, and whence was the model or idea for it? If they made it, why is it so imperfect, so wasteful, so unpleasant? No, it was formed by the gradual congegation and condensation of atoms; and it will decay and pass away as we see all things else do. It was a long time in formation but its historic period began but recently. The first thing to appear after the earth was vegetation, next came the tribe of animals, and lastly man sprang forth from the bosom of the earth. Not all creatures produced, however, continued to exist, and those who do live either prey for courage, or activity preserved and defended. Men lived for a long time like the animals and would, finally, have been exterminated, had not
The rudiments of civilization sprang up among them. The formation of language began; the lightning brought fire; the metals were discovered; cities built; and governments instituted. Time has brought all improvements and inventions.

The sixth book is devoted to the explanation of various phenomena; namely, thunder and lightning; earthquakes; volcanoes; the rise of the Nile; and magnetism. Rather, we should say the book is devoted to suggesting causes for these phenomena, for Lucertius usually brings forward several probable causes and leaves the reader to take his choice. Not unfrequently, he suggests the true cause; but he never intimates which one of his suggestions he regards as the most probable. The poem closes with a striking and vivid account of the great plague at Athens.
The philosophy of Lucretius readily divides itself into two parts: physics and psychology, with a chapter on the rise of civilization, while scattered throughout the entire poem, are the moral lessons he would inculcate.

The physics of Lucretius has been much ridiculed—and in many respects it is, in the light of modern investigation, and discovery, radically false and now ludicrous. Yet, when we consider the state of physical science in his time and his opportunities for testing his theories, and contrast them with them, the wealth of abraded thought, the faculty for making intricate and delicate experiments, the unnumbered inventions which multiply a thousand fold the unaided powers of the interrogator of nature, today, the vast world of marvellous and unthought of truth revealed to him by these means—when we
consider all these things, we are forced to admit that the system of Lucretius is wonderfully near to what we, today, call Truth; and, that it shows a strength of understanding, a breadth of thought, a keen insight into the very essence of things, for which we shall look in vain among modern thinkers.

True, he says that atoms fall ever downward, but he also says that there is no up nor down in infinite space; so we may fairly say that the error is rather of the language than of the thought. His definition of atom is, with the exception of the single atom of fire, identical with that of our own times. We substitute for various forms, the theory of universal attraction, which Lucretius found impossible of belief. His theory of the formation of the polar wind, is not so far removed from the modern nebular hypothesis—one of the most brilliant
and daring hypotheses ever advanced for the
precedence of man. He was far from the truth
in his distribution of the parts of the universe.

On harmony with the teaching of his time he
placed the earth in the center, around which the sun
and moon revolved; the stars, he thought, were the
outermost of her circling attendants. The
statements concerning the distance of the sun and
moon, and of their pipes, are absurd. He concept
of the boundlessness of space and of the relative size
of our universe were singularly inadequate, while
that of its absolute size was remarkably deficient.

He had no idea of the propagation of force inde-
dependent of matter, he knew nothing of the modern
theory of vibrations, and modulations, so important
to the modern physicist, and his explanation of
physical phenomena is, in consequence, grossly in-

accurate. One of the most noticeable peculiarities of Lucrèce is his love of the truth and, at the same time, his remoteness from it. For instance, he denies to atoms the property of color and distinctly says that color resides in the air. Yet in his explanation, he makes it a material body, or image, as he calls it, which by a physical contact with the eye produces a sensation which we call color. Examples might be multiplied but this will suffice.

His account of the appearance of life upon the earth presents the same singular accord with and the same wide difference from modern materialistic views. His Theory is the older, more striking, and, may we say, more in accord with the dignity of life. He thinks that the atoms necessary for the formation of animals existed in
The present Darwinian theory would develop all living from a few simple protoplasmic masses; and maintains that all the different orders of plants and animals, even man himself, have sprung from these by a long process of differentiation and selection.

Evolution, on the other hand, imagines that when the earth was warmed by the sun and watered by the showers, vegetation sprang up, then animals, of many more kinds than now exist; and lastly men sprang from the ground. Those plants and animals that exist today do so by the law of the survival of the fittest.

But he distinctly avers, that, had not men begun to be civilized, they would now have been exterminated by wild beasts. Man, to

Evolution, was always man, however barbarous
he may have been, and we may well believe that the
triumphant Roman, who had so just, and vivid
realization of the nobility of human life, would
have recoiled indignantly from the materialistic
view of the present. The account of the rise of
civilization is just, and rational; and, as far
as investigation can confirm it, accurate, and
valuable.

Lucretius considered the senses to
be the primary source of all our knowledge,
and very forcibly argues, that he, who denies
the reality of the knowledge so gained, puts himself
off from all possibility of ever knowing anything.
If the evidence of the senses be not true,
then is all reasoning false.

The attempt of
Lucretius to prove the mortality of the foul did not
have the same significance for that age, that it
The immortality of the soul was not a well-defined tenet of the Roman faith. It had nothing of the majesty and exaltation with which it is now invested. Indeed, the opposite was nearer the Roman notion. To deny it, then, was not to forfeit a holy and happy life, but to avoid possible torture or at least a colorless and aimless existence. It may be well to pay that Lucretius, does not prove that the soul is mortal; but, it seems to me, he succeeds, as well as modern sceptical writers.

Happiness, Lucretius considered the chief aim of life. But happiness is not the brief joy of the epicure, not the gratification of ambition, vanity, and folly. Happiness, to Lucretius, consisted in a quiet contemplation of life, far removed from the strife and turmoil of
Business and politics, not seeking wealth, but contented with little, and always striving for the improvement of the mind and the ennobling of character.

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