

**LUCRETIUS ON LIFE AND
DEATH: IN THE METRE OF
OMAR KHAYYÁM**

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Lucretius on Life and Death: In the Metre of Omar Khayyám by W. H. Mallock

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ON
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IN THE METRE OF OMAR KHAYYÂM
TO WHICH ARE APPENDED PARALLEL PASSAGES
FROM THE ORIGINAL

BY
W. H. MALLOCK

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PREFACE

Few philosophical poems in the English language have been more widely read than the poem in which the genius of FitzGerald has introduced us to that of the Persian, Omar Khayyám. More critics than one have remarked on the curious likeness between the philosophy of Omar and that of the Roman, Lucretius, who also, like the Persian, expressed his philosophy in verse. The difference, however, between the two is not less curious than the likeness; and it occurred to me that it would be a not uninteresting experiment to render parts of Lucretius into the stanza employed by Omar—or rather the English equivalent with which FitzGerald has made us familiar—in order that, by thus reducing

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them to a common literary denominator, a comparison between them might be more readily made.

The philosophy of Lucretius, however, has, like that of Omar, an interest for us in the present day which is far more than literary. Like Omar, he deals with that precise train of reflection which scientific knowledge, as distinct from the assumptions of faith, tends to rouse in the minds of all who think ; and the intellectual position of Lucretius was, in many ways, even nearer than Omar's to that of the modern world. Lucretius was, so far as the knowledge of his time would allow him to be, as completely and as consciously a scientific man and a physicist as Darwin, or Huxley, or any of our contemporary evolutionists. Indeed his doctrines, allowing for certain inevitable differences, are astonishingly similar to theirs ; and his general conception of the conclusions to which all science is tending may be said to be absolutely identical. He disclaimed the character

of an original thinker or discoverer, representing himself merely as a disciple of his great master, Epicurus ; but he made the philosophy of his master altogether his own, and as such we may here speak of it.

His main object as a physicist was to show, by physical reasoning, that life and matter are parts of the same order of things, and that the soul of man results from the same general process as that which results in all other sensible phenomena—in the body of man, in the flowers, the seas, the mountains, in the whole frame of the earth, and in all the suns and stars. Earth and the system to which it belongs he regarded as but an infinitesimal portion of a universe of similar systems which are scattered through endless space, and have always been forming themselves, persisting, and then again decomposing, for all time—if that can be called time which is endless. The whole of this limitless universe, “which decomposes but to recompose,” con-

sists, he maintained, of atoms aggregated in various forms ; and beyond space, and atoms, and the laws in accordance with which the atoms act, nothing exists, has existed, or ever can exist ; consciousness, life, soul, whether in man or animals, being merely an atomic tissue of an exceptionally subtle kind.

The worlds, and in particular the earth and all the things belonging to it, have come to be what they are by a process of natural selection. The atoms throughout infinite time make an infinite variety of combinations ; but those alone have persisted which were fit to persist, the others resolving presently into their component parts. Animals and men are the result of the same process. They represent the forms of life that alone have been fit to live, out of innumerable forms that have appeared, and have perished because they have been not fit. Man's senses were not designed for him in order that he might put