

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

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649025237

Lucretius on Life and Death, in the Metre of Omar Khayyám by W. H. Mallock

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.  
Cover @ 2017

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**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

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 recombine,” 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



them to their uses ; but because he has them, and can use them, and can maintain his life in consequence, the human race remains.

The methods by which Lucretius endeavours to support these conclusions are essentially the same as those of the modern physicist. He endeavours to support them by reasoning from the known and the observable to the unknown. He takes the most familiar phenomena of nature, and of daily and domestic life—such as the smell of a lamp when extinguished, the dancing of motes in a sunbeam, the appearance of maggots in carrion—and seeks to show that all the mysteries of the cosmos are explicable by reference to a sequence of such cause and effect as every day we can verify by the evidence of our own senses. The narrow limits of his knowledge prevented him from imparting to his system anything which resembles the actuality of modern science. In advancing from the

known to the unknown, the scientific thinker of to-day plants each successive footstep on some discovery of what actually is—testing his discoveries by a series of minute experiments. Lucretius, as soon as he passed beyond the region of ordinary observation, had to content himself with what, reasoning by rude analogy, ordinary observation suggested to him as things that might be.

In its details, therefore, his science is not science at all; as the reader, who cares to do so, may very easily see by studying his highly curious and fantastic theory of vision. But though in its details his doctrine has little more reality than a dream, it approaches, in its premises, the latest theories of to-day; and its practical conclusion, so far as human life is concerned, is identical with that of the latest scientific philosophy. This conclusion is that all conscious life comes into existence with the body, and disappears with its dissolution; that it is not the miraculous creation of any deity, or deities; and that

if any deities exist, they emerge from the nature of things, just as man does, and have no concern with his actions. It is doubtful whether Lucretius believed in their existence at all. In any case he regarded them as an essentially negligible quantity ; and even should they be aware of man's existence whilst he lived, man, death being the end of him, passes wholly beyond their ken. There is no knowledge in the grave. There is no other life but this. Such was the sum and substance of the message of Lucretius to his contemporaries.

This is a doctrine which, willingly or unwillingly, many philosophers have taught besides Lucretius. But other philosophers have, as a rule, taught it either as a doctrine of sadness and despair, or as an inducement to voluptuous licence. Omar presents it to us as both. He is alternately possessed by the tragedy of the inevitable end, and by the desire to wring from existence every pleasure that it can yield us, before the