

## TENNYSON'S "LUCRETIUS": an Interpretation

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"Lucretius" (1868) is one of Tennyson's most complex and concentrated poems. Since it is based on Lucretius' great poem, *De Rerum Natura* (On the Nature of Things; published about 55 B.C.), it has initial interest as a critical commentary on the Latin poem. How skilfully Tennyson adapted passages from *De Rerum Natura* is evident from the notes to this poem in the recent edition of Tennyson's poetry by Christopher Ricks.

Lucretius was a Roman poet and materialistic philosopher, about whose life authoritative information is entirely lacking. Our sole information concerning his life is found in the brief summary of Jerome written more than four centuries after the poet's work. According to this account the poet was born in 95 B.C.; he became mad in consequence of the administration of a love-potion; and after composing several books in his lucid intervals, he died by his own hand in the forty-fourth year of his age. The violently dramatic situation of Tennyson's "Lucretius" is derived from this traditional tale that the Roman philosopher-poet committed suicide, having been driven mad by a love-potion given him by his wife.

Lucretius' philosophical poem, which Tennyson summarizes faithfully, is a didactic poem in Epicurean philosophy in six books, whose chief aim is to free men from superstition, to accustom them to the idea of complete annihilation at death, and rid them of the idea of divine interference. Gods there are, Lucretius reasons, being a little higher than mortals, but, to them, too, death and corruption come, bringing total eclipse, while, regarding mortal concerns, they live in supreme contempt. Throughout the whole universe, he argues, the atom alone is eternal and incorruptible. These theories are expounded by Lucretius with a passionate eloquence, fervour and power that are quite unparalleled in Latin literature. Tennyson's "Lucretius" is both an appreciation of *De Rerum Natura* and an indictment of the materialistic philosophy which that work so memorably expounded.

Except for the opening, to line 25, and the closing seven lines, the poem is a dramatic soliloquy presenting Lucretius' meditation that leads to suicide. The opening portion has often been charged with prosiness or tameness, but if we may assume it to be the stage-direction for the internal drama to be unfolded soon, we can partly get rid of such a charge. Indeed, this part is Tennyson's own direction as to how the following soliloquy is to be read.

Lucilia, married to Lucretius, finds his husband cold.

for when the morning flush  
Of passion and the first embrace had died  
Between them, tho' he loved her none the less,  
Yet often when the woman heard his foot

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Return from pacings in the field, and ran  
 To greet him with a kiss, the master took  
 Small notice, or austerely, for—his mind  
 Half buried in some weightier argument,  
 Or fancy-borne perhaps upon the rise  
 And long roll of the hexameter—he past  
 To turn and ponder those three hundred scrolls  
 Left by the Teacher, whom he held divine.

Here is suggested the dichotomy in a philosophy of thought and a life of feeling; natural human passion represented by his wife is more or less negated by Lucretius the philosopher. True to her female instinct Lucilia can only believe she has a rival. To win him back, she mixes with his drink the love-potion which is said to have "power / To lead an errant passion home again."

And this destroy'd him; for the wicked broth  
 Confused the chemic labour of the blood,  
 And tickling the brute brain within the man's  
 Made havoc among those tender cells, and check'd  
 His power to shape.

Tennyson here gives a physical explanation of the effect of the philtre, but the image of the brute brain "tickled," an image of touch, foreshadows the sensuality which is to attack Lucretius. It is important to remember, however, that the philtre he is given does not change his fundamental nature, or introduce an alien power, but it merely loosens the indigenous passions he would restrain. The self-loathing which results destroys his confidence in his "power to shape," that is, his creative powers. The main portion of the poem presents his vain effort to regain self-confidence or control.

After a night of storm, which symbolizes his own fierce abandon, Lucretius wakes on a calm morning and rehearses three evil dreams experienced during the night. His first dream presents a horrible and exaggerated vision of the atomistic universe which his own philosophy had predicated. In this dream the meaninglessness of the universal flux is emphasized:

it seem'd  
 A void was made in Nature; all her bonds  
 Crack'd; and I saw the flaring atom-streams  
 And torrents of her myriad universe,  
 Ruining along the illimitable inane,  
 Fly on to clash together again, and make  
 Another and another frame of things  
 For ever.

Terrible as this dream is, he acknowledges it his:

That was mine, my dream, I knew it—  
 Of and belonging to me,

for it is his theory about dreams that we continue in them our waking life, since we recollect

only the “dreams that come / Just ere the waking.” Thus attaching the first dream to a recognizable system, he subdues it.

But the second dream shakes his belief. He had expected “dragon warriors” to spring from the blood-drenched earth, parallel to the civil war which, waking, he had expected to answer the dictator Sulla’s tyranny. Instead there had arisen

girls, Hetairai, curious in their art,  
Hired animalisms, vile as those that made  
The mulberry-faced Dictator’s orgies worse  
Than aught they fable of the quiet Gods.

These harlots pressed closer and closer to him till he “yell’d again / Half-suffocated.” The undignified “yell’d” is a word we least associate with the calm Lucretius, and thus an index of the terror at the as yet unexampled mutiny of his mind. Yet, worse was to follow.

Lucretius then dreams of the naked loveliness of Helen of Troy.

Then, then, from utter gloom stood out the breasts,  
The breasts of Helen, and hoveringly a sword  
Now over and now under, now direct,  
Pointed itself to pierce, but sank down shamed  
At all that beauty; and as I stared, a fire,  
The fire that left a roofless Ilion,  
Shot out of them, and scorch’d me that I woke.

Helen of Troy, the most beautiful of women, might be interpreted as representing irresponsible physical beauty. Against her the sword—perhaps standing for masculine power or cold reason or intellect—is impotent. Helen’s power is sufficient to destroy the city of Troy and Lucretius himself.

The three dreams, especially the last two dreams, have caused the philosopher’s loss of intellectual control, and have been in a sense “revenge” on his system of thought and his exaltation of reason over passion. He now suspects that Venus, as symbol of the erotic instinct, may be avenging his neglect of her. But this he tries to repudiate. If Venus be of

those who, far aloof  
From envy, hate and pity, and spite and scorn,  
Live the great life which all our greatest fain  
Would follow, centred in eternal calm

she cannot be revenging herself on him, he argues. But in the same breath he appeals to the goddess, in apparent refutation of the above concept of her:

if thou canst, O Goddess, like ourselves  
Touch, and be touched, then would I cry to thee  
To kiss thy Mavors [=Mars], roll thy tender arms  
Round him, and keep him from the lust of blood  
That makes a steaming slaughter-house of Rome.

Immediately, however, he realizes that he has made an error in invoking Venus as goddess of sexual love. Next, to Venus as instigator of sexual license he opposes the more abstract

concept of the goddess in her guise of Venus Genetrix. He remembers that he used to invoke that popular name of Venus to "shadow forth"

The all-generating powers and genial heat  
Of Nature, when she strikes thro' the thick blood  
Of cattle, and light is large, and lambs are glad  
Nosing the mother's udder, and the bird  
Makes his heart voice amid the blaze of flowers.

It is significant here that Lucretius' true concern with Venus is only as the goddess of procreation among the lower animals: he seems afraid to recognize the human act.

Now the thought of suicide presents itself, already hinted (l. 59) after the second dream: "if I go *my* work is left / Unfinished—if I go. For only by taking his own life can he achieve the divine calm of the immortal gods. But are the gods really immortal ?

If all be atoms, how then should the Gods  
Being atomic not be dissoluble,  
Not follow the great law ?

he wonders. He meant to explain that in his poem. Meant ? How he can explain, now that his "faculties are lamed" ?

He, then, looks at the sun, another of the gods, Apollo, and becomes incoherent, lyrical, and bitter by turns. The sun is of no help to Lucretius in resolving his dilemma; for

me, altho' his fire is on my face  
Blinding, he sees not, nor at all can tell  
Whether I mean this day to end myself,  
Or lend an ear to Plato where he says,  
That men like soldiers may not quit the post  
Allotted by the Gods.

But a man who believed that the gods cared nothing for men would be released from the obligation to serve them, and could remove himself from the world of human ills. He concludes, recalling the voluptuous riot of his dreams, that the "worst disease of all" is this torment of obscenity:

These prodigies of myriad nakednesses,  
And twisted shapes of lust, unspeakable,  
Abominable, strangers at my hearth  
Not welcome, harpies miring every dish,  
The phantom husks of something foully done,  
And fleeting thro' the boundless universe,  
And blasting the long quiet of my breast  
With animal heat and dire insanity.

Yet, even this disquiet is transmuted from an emotional to an intellectual question: Why is the mind subject to such disorders ? asks Lucretius. Does it love erotic titillation ? Or is it temporarily overborne by the sheer multitude of shameful images ? That primacy of the mind in which he has always trusted is threatened.

He seeks to recompose himself, and to fling this "horror" off him again, taking example

by "Nature that can smile, / Balmier and nobler from her bath of storm." He recalls the myth in which Numa, the legendary second king of Rome, snared two nature gods, Picus and Faunus, to extort from them the secrets of wisdom and law which later made them great, much as Lucretius himself would have longed to do through the exercise of his intellect, and laughs at the unknown "he" who first fashioned the superstitious tale that created these "rustic Gods." But he finds more to laugh at in himself, for (in his drugged, half-deranged state of mind) he sees in disturbances in the wood visions of "Nymph and Faun." A satyr and an oread, creatures of his dream, now break in upon him fully awake. At first his sympathy goes out to the oread as she flees her brutish pursuer, though the terms used to describe her figure,

slippery sides  
And rosy knees and supple roundedness  
And budded bosom-peaks

are a measure of Lucretius' fascination. When she is about to fling herself upon him, he cries in his dismay, "Catch her, goat-foot!" Immediately regretting this perfidiousness of his mind, this vicarious participation in the act of rape, he amends his words: "nay, / Hide, hide them, million-myrtled wilderness." In the next instant, examining his suspect desires, he seeks to disengage himself from the whole act:

do I wish—  
What?—that the bush were leafless? or to whelm  
All of them in one massacre?

This self-questioning, a pitiable attempt to exempt himself from the scene, avails him nothing, for neither voyeurism nor rage will accord with "the sober majesties / Of settled, sweet, Epicurean life." Recognition that man is allied to the satyr destroys for Lucretius the hope of ever attaining the calm security of the gods: for

now it seems some unseen monster lays  
His vast and filthy hands upon my will,  
Wrenching it backward into his, and spoils  
My bliss in being;

The beautiful clarity and order of the Lucretian world falls back into chaos at the touch of bestiality over which rationality has no control.

Fully convinced now that he can rely on nothing, least of all his own mind, Lucretius falls into a weary pathos. Logic is replaced by word-play.

I often grew  
Tired of so much within our little life,  
Or of so little in our little life—  
Poor little life that toddles half an hour  
Crown'd with a flower or two, and there an end—

Or he argues from merely rhetorical syllogism: "Why should I, beastlike as I find myself, / Not manlike end myself?" Why should he subject himself to the humiliation of Roman triumph, he whose name is one with that of Lucretia

Whose death-blow struck the dateless doom of kings,  
 .....  
 And from it sprang the Commonwealth, which breaks  
 As I am breaking now !

The end of the Roman Republic both symbolizes and is symbolized by the downfall of Lucretius.

Having decided what he would do, he invites Nature to re-combine the atoms of his body to form whatever she wishes, as beast, bird, fish, flower, or once more man. But man himself may not have long on this earth before all things break down and atoms pass into the void. Let the inevitable dissolution come, destroy both him and his work, so that he may win at once

Passionless bride, divine Tranquility  
 which he confuses with death——

thus

I woo thee roughly, for thou carest not  
 How roughly men may woo thee so they win——

He stabs himself and his wife grieves over him, crying out upon herself as "having fail'd in duty to him." He answers,

"Care not thou !

The duty? What is duty? Fare thee well!"

The last line of this poem presents acutely the inadequacy of the Lucretian philosophy: its inability to answer the question, "What is duty?" The man or society who can find no answer to that question must perish. Lust and the urge for power are the chained beasts that are released when man attempts to live by reason alone. Reason and intellect are too frail to hold the emotions in check without the acknowledgement of the gods and the sense of duty which this acknowledgement involves.

The tragic irony of Lucretius' end is that of the philosopher who attempted to live according to reason alone, who aspired to the calm detachment of the gods, and was destroyed by the basest of physical passions. The poet-philosopher should have made room in his philosophy of self-control for the passions that link us to the beasts and the worship that unites us with the gods. Perhaps Tennyson sought to state that materialism and scientific philosophy leave man but a brute in a meaningless world and do not provide values that make life worth living. "Lucretius" rests on the faith of the idealist that man is sustained as man only by his intuition of an order of values that transcends reason. So considered, this poem may be regarded as treating one of the major themes of Tennyson's work.

"Lucretius" has also a topical interest. When Tennyson read the poem aloud to his friends, he is said to have paused at the description of the oread's "budded bosom-peaks" to remark, "What a mess little Swinburne would have made of this!" But according to Hallam Tennyson's *Memoir* of his father, it was written as early as the autumn of 1865, before most of the so-called "aesthetic poetry", perhaps before the appearance of Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* (1866). Though it may be directed in part against some new aesthetic tendencies becoming apparent by 1865, "Lucretius" cannot have been written as a direct answer to Swinburne. Be that as it may, some of the erotic touches in the poem is a testimony that Tennyson could be sensual if he willed it.