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A Melancholy Science?:
On Bergson's Appreciation of Lucretius

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Introduction

Some significant receptions of Epicurean philosophy take place in nineteenth century European thought. For Marx, writing in the 1840s, and in defiance of Hegel's negative assessment, Epicurus is the 'greatest representative of the Greek enlightenment',¹ whilst for Jean-Marie Guyau, writing in the 1870s, Epicurus is the original free spirit, 'Still today it is the spirit of old Epicurus who, combined with new doctrines, works away at and undermines Christianity.'² For Nietzsche, Epicurus is one of the greatest human beings to have graced the earth and the inventor of 'heroic-idyllic philosophizing'.³ Here my focus is on the reading of Epicureanism to be found in Bergson's commentary on Lucretius's remarkable poem, *De Rerum Natura*. For Bergson the task Lucretius sets himself is a 'pioneering one', one that will serve humanity, in particular making the Romans aware of previously unknown or misunderstood truths. In order to demonstrate these truths with precision it was necessary for Lucretius to be acquainted with Greek philosophy, and especially the teaching of Epicurus.

In what follows I propose to highlight some of the central features of Bergson's commentary of Lucretius's text, *De Rerum Natura*. Bergson's commentary is interesting to us for a number of reasons: (a) it's interesting that Bergson, typically represented as part of a

¹ Karl Marx, 'Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature' in K. Marx & F. Engels, *Collected Works: Volume One 183-43* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), 73.

² Jean-Marie Guyau, *La Morale D'Epicure* (Paris: Librairie Gerner Baillière, 1878), 280.

³ F. Nietzsche, *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, trans. Gary Handwerk (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), section 295.

French spiritualist tradition, should embark on this encounter with Epicurean materialism and atomism at the beginning of his philosophical career; (b) he encounters Lucretius in a way that I think resonates with any reader coming to Lucretius's text for the first time: there is the clear recognition of the brilliance of the text as well as of the tremendous challenges it presents to us as mortal subjects; (c) in recent years, and largely through the work of Pierre Hadot, there has been a great deal of interest in the idea of 'philosophy as a way of life', and we find such a conception of philosophy at work in Bergson's appreciation of Lucretius. Bergson makes us aware of the offensive character of the text, noting that Christians and pagans agreed in leaving his teaching aside: the pagans could not cite him as an authority since, as a poet, he had spoken out violently against their gods, whilst in excluding the supernatural from the universe and denying any divine intervention in human affairs he caused offence to Christians. It's largely with advances in modern science, and on account of a growth in our enlightenment sensibilities, that we moderns can come to a renewed appreciation of the text and its main ideas. Nevertheless Lucretius's continues to pose a challenge to us: we have to accept that the universe not only is not the work of the gods but it is also not in any way made for us; that it has been shaped haphazardly by the coming together of atoms, and that all things, including earth, are destined to disappear. What is the function of philosophy and the aim of wisdom in the face of our insights into the nature of the universe? For Bergson, the science of Lucretius is fundamentally a melancholic one, and in what follows I want to show why he holds to this view in his reading of, and encounter with, the text. Indeed, it's only the French text that makes it clear that Bergson conceives the poem as 'profoundly melancholic' (*mélancolie profonde*) since the English translation from 1959 alters the order of the original text, and it's the point about melancholy that the text begins with and indicates that this is Bergson's main concern in his commentary. This opening of Bergson's commentary does not appear in the expurgated English edition until well into the

translation (Introduction 1. La Poésie de Lucrèce', p. II; trans. 1959: 44). For Bergson the teaching is 'sad and disheartening' since it raises the fundamental question, 'why persist in living?' if life is nothing more than a treadmill that leads nowhere and desire never finds a fulfilment. Moreover, pleasures are deceptive and no joy is untainted, and all striving is in vain.

I

Let me begin with citing some lines from the work itself. I cite from the opening of book two:

What joy it is, when out at sea the stormwinds are lashing the waters, to gaze from the shore at the heavy stress some other man is enduring! Not that anyone's afflictions are in themselves a source of delight; but to realize from what troubles you yourselves are free is joy indeed. What joy, again, to watch opposing hosts marshalled on the field of battle when you yourself have no part in their peril! But this is the greatest joy of all: to possess a quiet sanctuary, stoutly fortified in the teaching of the wise, and to gaze down from that elevation on others wandering aimlessly in search of a way of life, pitting their wits one against another, disputing for precedence, struggling night and day with unstinted effort to scale the pinnacles of wealth and power. O joyless hearts of men! O minds without vision! How dark and dangerous the life in which this tiny span is lived away! Do you not see that nature is barking for two things only, a body free from pain, a mind released from worry and fear for the enjoyment of pleasurable sensations? (*On the Nature of the Universe* II: 1-19).

In these lines Lucretius is being faithful to the core tenets of Epicurean teaching. Philosophy for Lucretius is about attaining an elevated perspective on existence and providing human beings with a special kind of joy. The immediate object is pleasurable sensations of a stable and modest kind and the ultimate object is ataraxia or tranquillity and imperturbability. Later in the book Lucretius will define philosophy as a 'rule of life' (V: 10), the aim of which is to rescue life from existence lived in 'a stormy sea', 'so black a

night', and hence to learn how to live well (ibid.). Lucretius makes it clear that the superior mode of existence attained is a modest existence, one enjoyed with a tranquil mind (V: 1119).

For Lucretius, the object of philosophy is the cultivation of health and he speaks of philosophy as a form of treatment that can be administered (IV: 22); it is a therapeutics, one that has specific illnesses and afflictions to cure, notably the fear of the active gods and the fear of death as well as the whole realm of superstition. Lucretius thinks that his Roman brethren suffer from what he calls the 'dead weight' of superstition and are haunted by the fear of eternal punishments after death. A thoroughgoing and clear-sighted program of naturalism is needed in order to emancipate the mind from subjection to fear and superstition. Several occasions in the book Lucretius provides the following lines as a refrain of learning:

The dread and darkness of the mind cannot be dispelled by the sunbeams, the shining shafts of day, but only by an understanding of the outward forms and inner workings of nature (II: 59-62; see also III: 91-94).

We are not to ask of the universe 'what does it mean?', since it means nothing, there is only the dance of the eternal return of atoms and the void; rather, we are to ask, 'how does it work?' Lucretius writes in book five of his text:

So many atoms, clashing together in so many ways as they are swept along through infinite time by their own weight, have come together in every possible way and realized everything that could be formed by their combinations (V: 186-190).

True piety for Lucretius, as an Epicurean, consists in the serene contemplation of such a universe (V: 1203).

His philosophy is one of immanence: nature is a self-producing positive power, eternally self-creating and self-destroying; the elements postulated at the base of nature work bottom up, in which the diverse products of nature are generated rather than assumed as already given (Johnson 2014: 73). The immanence at work is a radical one for it means that no ‘divine power’ has created the universe (II: 181); that there is no ‘divine plan’ (V: 81); and that, I quote:

...our world has been made by nature through the spontaneous and casual collision and the multifarious, accidental, random, and purposeless congregation and coalescence of atoms whose suddenly formed combinations could serve on each occasion as the starting point of substantial fabrics – earth and sea and sky and the race of living creatures. On every ground, therefore, you must admit that there exist elsewhere other clusters of matter similar to this one which the ether clasps in ardent embrace (II: 1058-66).

We can note the influence of Epicurus on Lucretius: virtue is related to pleasure and this pleasure consists in peace of mind, being the privilege of the sage. Epicurus has understood that human beings have materially everything they need to live and more, and yet humankind brings suffering upon itself, enslaving itself to superstition, fear, and desire or the ‘deplorable lust for life’, as Lucretius calls it. We could reflect here on the various paeans to Epicurus that structure the text, in which Epicurus is presented as a noble saviour-like figure freeing human beings from the inauthentic life – excessive pride, lust, aggression, self-indulgence, and indolence – and inspiring them to a new way of life, including an ethics of refined egoism, as Nietzsche calls it, and the cultivation of the self (see especially the opening of book six, the final book of the text).

Let me stress once again the naturalism informing the ethical doctrine: it rids philosophy of supernatural explanations with its scientific principles of nothing springing from nothing and nothing ever being destroyed. The emphasis all the time is explaining

phenomena through natural causes, so lightning is to be explained in such terms and not as a divine warning. Nothing springs from nothing since for anything to be created there is required specific germs, a set of conditions, and time. As noted, the teaching has radical aspects: for example, the soul is nothing more than matter and is subject to death since it is made of subtle atoms scattered throughout the body, and is therefore as material as the body and without which it cannot exist. Death is radical in its finality and Lucretius is uncompromising in his account of this: it denotes the end of our existence and yet is not to be feared for the reasons that Epicurus has provided and that Lucretius rehearses in dramatic fashion in the denouement to book three of the text.

Such is the stark realism of his words on death that Nietzsche called the poet 'sombre Lucretius'. Life is mortal, and death is immortal, says Lucretius. To none is life given on freehold, but to all on lease. But we have nothing to fear from death there is nothing sensory to experience: 'One who no longer is cannot suffer, or differ in any way from one who has never been born, when once this mortal life has been usurped by death the immortal' (III: 868-871). And yet human beings do live in bondage to the fear of death and on account of this fear, 'the life of misguided mortals becomes a Hell on earth' (III: 1023-4).

As far as the ethical task is concerned, the aim is to raise ourselves to serene regions for whoever complains of the nature of the universe and their existence in it, gritting their teeth, is ignorant of the true nature of things. We need, therefore, to resign ourselves to certain facts:

- a) That the body of necessity must waste away.
- b) That old age is forced to succeed youth by an eternal law.
- c) That beings necessarily reproduce at the expense of other beings.
- d) That the movement of atoms is eternal and the formation of new worlds continues eternally.
- e) We do not need to marvel at the creation of life since the laws of matter are all that is needed to explain everything.

- f) Finally, that humankind is not separate from nature and is not in any way a special case or exception to the laws of material existence. It is destined to perish since, as a result of the movement of atoms, everything will one day disintegrate. The atoms, converted into dust, will be drawn together again, and new combinations of atoms will produce new worlds, and on it will go throughout eternity.

Nietzsche, as I have noted, refers to the poet as the ‘sombre Lucretius’, and Bergson holds that he produces a melancholic philosophy of nature and of life; indeed, for Bergson this is where Lucretius departs from his great master, Epicurus. Let me now turn to Bergson’s commentary.

II

Bergson’s encounter with the text is of a specific kind. For example, at the start of his commentary he makes it clear that he does not propose to refute a philosophical system, such as we find in Epicurean teaching, but to understand the system: what are its main claims? How does it argue for them? What are its achievements? And what philosophical challenge does it present to us? He proposes to read the poem as a whole and not just focus on the descriptive passages since, he argues, the most gripping passages of the poem, such as the depiction of the life of primitive humans, the effects of lightning, and plague of Athens, are there to try and make us comprehend a significant philosophical principle. Right at the beginning of the commentary he notes the fundamental dimension of Epicurean teaching (and that also had such an effect on other nineteenth century readers such as Nietzsche), namely, to liberate the human mind that is plagued by fear and superstition: ‘religion, guilty of many crimes, has kept mankind in constant dread of death’ (p. 14). In short, Epicurean teaching has an essentially practical function, its chief aim being that of restoring calm to the human mind. Bergson stresses here the inspiration of Epicurus on Lucretius, in which virtue is

related to pleasure and in which pleasure consists of peace of mind and is the privilege of the sage. Epicurus has understood that the human has materially everything it needs to live and more and yet it brings suffering upon itself, being enslaved by desire, superstition, and fear. Epicurus teaches that our happiness depends not on external things but on our state of mind. Second, Bergson notes the naturalistic character of the teaching: it rids philosophy of supernatural explanations with its key 'scientific' principles of nothing springing from nothing and nothing ever being destroyed (principles first brought to light, Bergson notes, by Democritus and who, incidentally, the early Nietzsche regards as 'the freest human being that has ever lived'). In Lucretius the emphasis all the time is to explain things in terms of natural causes, so lightning is to be explained in such terms and not as a divine warning. So, the Epicurean achievement, so amply displayed in DRN, is to attempt a scientific explanation of the workings of universe: 'What proves that nothing springs from nothing is that anything, to be created, requires a specific germ, set of conditions, and time' (pp. 14-15). Bergson describes Lucretius's theory of atoms as 'one of the most beautiful creations of antiquity' (p. 15). Later in the commentary he will describe atomism as a 'profound philosophical system' in which the best explanation of the universe is the simplest one (p. 65). Moreover, the system of Democritus, who invents atomism, is 'perhaps the most perfect expression of materialism' (p. 69). Epicurus adopts and modifies the atomic theory, and here Bergson notes both Epicurus's 'abysmal ignorance of scientific things' and 'the originality of his approach'. In the hands of Epicurus the aim of philosophy is not, strictly speaking to instruct human beings but to soothe them (p. 72). Bergson also notes that for Lucretius, Epicurus was not just a sage but the 'matchless sage and great benefactor of mankind' (p. 76). More than this Epicurus is a god for Lucretius with his 'sublime discoveries' (p. 77).

Bergson notes that each of the six books that make up the poem feature a remark or observation about philosophy in general or about Lucretius's particular aim. Book two, in

particular, he notes, commences with ‘a magnificent eulogy of philosophy’. Book I, he notes, contains the essence of Epicurean materialism and of atomism, and Bergson discusses the main claims Lucretius makes about atoms, such as that they move at infinite speed, and that their movement is eternal, and so on. What especially interests Bergson is the attribution by Lucretius of an occasional slight variation in the movement of atoms, or the ‘imperceptible and unpredictable trait he called *clinamen*’ (p. 17). This deviation is to be regarded as a capricious trait of atoms. Similar to Marx, Bergson highlights the fact that this grants a degree of freedom to human existence, so, in short, our existence is not completely mechanically governed and determined; we are not, Bergson adds, completely passive (p. 76). This aspect of the teaching is of crucial significance to Bergson who in a few years time will write his great first book on time and freedom, and principles of freedom, novelty and creativity will assume a tremendous importance in his subsequent books such as *Matter and Memory* and *Creative Evolution*. Bergson ends his initial treatment of the poem by noting the tremendous challenge of the ideas presented in it: the gods, though they exist, do not interfere in any with the things in this world and therefore it is childish to live in fear of them; and, second, all living things are subject to growth and eventually disappearance, and here Bergson notes the poignancy of Lucretius’s insights – the same is true of our planet earth (which is a ‘living being’ for Lucretius, notes Bergson), as this too will one day fall to dust.

The next main idea of the text Bergson treats next, and treats extensively throughout the commentary, is Lucretius on death. He notes the salient features of the teaching: that the soul is nothing more than matter and therefore this soul is subject to death since it is made up of subtle atoms scattered throughout the body and is, therefore, as material as the body. Death is radical and Lucretius is uncompromising in his account of this: it denotes the end of everything, and yet, it is not to be feared and for all the reasons Epicurus has given us and that Lucretius rehearses in dramatic fashion towards the close of book three of the text. Life

is mortal and death is immortal, says Lucretius. To none is life given as freehold but to all on lease: 'Rest assured', he writes, that we have nothing to fear in death. One who no longer is cannot suffer, or differ in any way from one who has never been born, when once this mortal life has been usurped by the death the immortal' (Penguin, edition, p. 88, lines 866-70). And yet human beings do live in fear of death and on account of this fear, 'the life of misguided mortals becomes a Hell on earth' (p. 91, lines 1023-4). Indeed, Bergson goes on to note that Lucretius was not able to completely destroy belief in the immortality of the soul since this belief is stronger than his philosophical arguments. What Lucretius does develop though, Bergson says, is an insight into one of the sources of the belief in the immortality of the soul, namely, 'the instinctive tendency which every living being has to perpetuate itself indefinitely in time' (p. 19). Ultimately, Bergson locates in Lucretius's text a melancholy science or teaching, and he rightly draws our attention to the remarkable and emphatic ending of book three of the text: 'Life is nothing more than constant movement that leads nowhere, that desire to never fulfilled', and so on (p. 20). Indeed, in the text, at the very close of book three, Lucretius speaks of the lust for life as 'deplorable' since it 'holds us trembling in bondages to uncertainties and dangers' and the 'unquenchable thirst for life keeps us always on the gasp' (Penguin edition, p. 95, line 1084). As a way of indicating the noble way to face one's demise and inevitable death, Lucretius hold up the lives of Democritus and Epicurus as examples: the former approached ripe age by making 'a willing sacrifice to death' with his unbowed head, whilst the latter, 'the master himself', endured intense pain in his final days and yet only looked back with pleasure on his life and friendships.

Here we may wish to note a comparison with Nietzsche and his attempt to develop a gay or joyful science. In the book that bears this name, which he published in 1882, there is a paean to Epicurus who, notes Nietzsche, takes a voluptuous delight in existence and in full recognition of its essentially transient character (see especially *The Gay Science*, aphorism

45). However, what kind of ‘joy’ does Nietzsche’s gay or joyful science refer to and name? It certainly seems to share in some of the sublime or elevated quality of the Lucretian perspective on the world and existence. Let us note that Nietzsche’s attempt at joyful thinking is not without its melancholic character: in an earlier text from 1878, *Human, all too Human*, he had written of the ‘sorrow of knowledge’ and, referring to Byron’s *Manfred*, argued that the ‘tree of knowledge’ and the ‘tree of life’ do not coincide. Nevertheless, as far as I know Nietzsche writes only in praise of Epicurus, not Lucretius, and there may be an important difference between the two. Bergson certainly thinks there is, and I shall provide insight into this in my concluding thoughts.

I now wish to comment on how Bergson construes what we might call Lucretius’s modernity. For him this consists in two things: the first is the attempt to account for the origin of the first living beings; the second is to develop insight into the adaptation of their organs to their needs. Regarding the first point, Bergson notes that an adequate explanation defeated Lucretius – he falls back, he says, on a myth, namely that all living things spring from the earth as the mother of all things - and goes on to explain the appearance of the first living organisms. Regarding the second point, Bergson thinks that Lucretius’s answer anticipates that provided by Darwin. I quote:

Of a multitude of living organisms that spring up haphazardly, the only ones to survive are those capable of providing for their needs and adapting themselves to their environment. In these beautiful descriptive passages Lucretius’s imagination is given full reign. Latin literature offers nothing superior to the last half of Book V (pp. 22-3).

What can be said of the birth of living beings, including the human, is that it was due to chance. The human is not different to the rest of the animal kingdom in this regard, being weaker than other animals, the human has evolved slowly and painfully through a struggle

that has involved intelligence and will, resulting in a social order and civilization. Bergson departs from Lucretius here, attributing to the human an ethical superiority: 'The more humble our origin, the more praise we deserve for becoming what we are' (p. 23). This remains a feature of Bergson's thinking throughout his intellectual life: the human being is the animal that has the chance to break out of animal closure and, as Deleuze puts it in his *Bergsonism* of 1996, 'scrambling the different planes of Nature'. One could also look at what Bergson says in his last text of 1932 on 'the two sources of morality and religion' about the human and its creative embodiment and expression of the original *natura naturans*.

A specific feature of Bergson's interpretation of Lucretius – which stands in contrast to Deleuze's much later appreciation of Lucretius – is the emphasis I have already alluded to on the melancholy character of DRN. Bergson thinks melancholy pervades the book and is, along with the sublime, its most striking feature: the teaching is 'sad and disheartening' since it raises the fundamental question, 'why persist in living?' if life is nothing more than a treadmill that leads nowhere and desire never finds a fulfilment. Moreover, pleasures are deceptive and no joy is untainted, and all striving is in vain. Now this sounds a lot like Schopenhauer, but his doctrine is nowhere mentioned in the text: 'we spend the best part of our lives in pursuing vain honours or in cultivating land that is barren and indifferent to our toil. Then comes senescence and with it the childish fear of death' (p. 45). We are tortured by our visions of death, in which all hope and joy disappear. Although death is the end of everything and deprives us of the comforts of life, it at the same time delivers us from our need of them and the sufferings that always accompany them. Thus, why should we not gain consolation from the thought that all this will end for us when our lives end? This, says, Bergson, 'is the conviction of the sage and the conclusion of the philosopher' (p. 46). Knowledge, then, for Lucretius serves to show us that we count for practically nothing in the universe since we are but a fortuitous combination of elements and where we decay just like

all bodies do. Bergson notes that there is a certain joy to be had from the materialist philosophy: this is the joy of the sage who imbued with 'great truth' calmly awaits a death that, he well knows, reduces him to nothingness: 'he possesses supreme knowledge' and yet at the same time savours the sweetest joys that a human is privileged to experience.

Bergson inquires into the sources of Lucretius's melancholy and notes that the spectacle of civil strife had an enormous impact on his thinking; from a young age Lucretius witnessed bloody struggles, for example, those arising from the rivalry between Marius and Sylla and that can be seen as a prelude to the violent upheavals that cast a dark shadow over the Roman republic. Bergson notes that the first lines of the poem are a prayer to Venus. It is no surprise, Bergson thinks, that Lucretius should extol the virtues of philosophy, which affords peace and sanity of mind, compared to the vanities of the pursuit of power and wealth. Lucretius attacks those who are full of ambition and intrigue, and Bergson cites him: 'Let them sweat and bleed in the narrow road where their ambition writhes....' (p. 47). Bergson notes that, like his great mentor, Lucretius stood apart from public affairs and public life. However, he maintains that Lucretius's melancholy is not simply a result of his alienation from the world or the time he inhabited. In addition, he does not think that Lucretius reduces philosophy to being little more than a means of consolation. Knowledge is not simply a refuge or a consolation in terms of strife; rather, it is 'the object of life itself'; wars and disasters are ills because they divert the attention of humans from the only noble preoccupations worthy of the mind. Philosophy is noble, says Bergson, because it frees us from social ambition and competition. As a philosopher Lucretius liberates himself from indignation and anger; he feels only pity for those who fail to see where genuine happiness lies and thus unknowingly afflict great harm on themselves.

I have mentioned that Bergson is interested in Lucretius's thinking on the clinamen or the swerve, since it seems to grant a degree of freedom to human existence. However,

Bergson also notes the deterministic character of Lucretius's materialism. He notes that Lucretius is a thinker with an abiding love of nature and who observes it closely. We need to be enlightened by a 'great truth' according to Lucretian teaching: behind the smiling and picturesque face of nature and beyond the infinitely diverse phenomena that constantly change, we discover pre-established, unchangeable laws, ones that work uniformly and constantly, yielding predetermined effects. This means, of course, that nothing in the workings of the universe is fortuitous and that there is no place for nonconformity: 'everywhere there are collective or compensatory forces, mechanically linked causes and effects. A number of invariable elements have existed throughout eternity; the inexorable laws of nature determine how they combine and separate; these laws are rigidly prescribed and adhered to' (p. 50). Bergson thus sees as the dominant feature of Lucretius's poem this stress on events being mathematically predictable, 'for they are the inevitable consequence of what has preceded' (ibid.). For Lucretius, then, at least on Bergson's reading, nature is bound by a contract with each phenomenon being mathematically predetermined and predictable. Ultimately for Bergson recognition of this is the main source of the melancholy of Lucretius. He argues that the concept of the rigidity of natural laws 'obsesses and saddens the poet'. Let me quote Bergson at some length:

Unable to see anything in the universe except cumulative or compensatory forces and convinced that whatever is results naturally and inevitably from whatever has been, Lucretius takes pity on the human race. Man stands helpless in the face of blind, unchanging forces that are and will continue throughout eternity to be at work. Man is the accidental product of a wretched combination of atoms brought temporarily together by inexorable natural laws and destined eventually to be torn apart by the same forces. Does he have a purpose in the universe? We think that matter was made for us, as if we were not subjected to its selfsame laws. We think that friendly or jealous gods protect or persecute us, as if unpredictable alien forces could intervene in nature, or as if we were not borne along in the all—embracing stream by inexorable laws of matter. This is the source of Lucretius' melancholy and of his compassion for mankind (pp. 51-2).

One might say, then, that the ethical or existential task, at least as far as philosophy is concerned, is for us to raise ourselves to serene regions for whoever complains of the nature of the universe and their existence in it, gritting their teeth, is ignorant of the true nature of things. We need, then, to resign ourselves to certain facts: that the body must of necessity waste away, that old age is forced by an eternal law to succeed youth, and that beings necessarily reproduce at the expense of other beings, and so on.

What of Lucretius's achievements as an observer of nature, and what are the weaknesses in his approach? Bergson notes that in the poem the role of science is just as important as the role of philosophy. He notes several shortcomings though in his approach to nature and in his physics. The poet, he claims failed to liberate his mind completely from mythological notions and occasionally he falls back on the pagan notion that nature is animate and personal: 'He would of course condemn a theory which suggests the earth is an animate being; yet we cannot fail to note that he repeatedly compares the earth to the human body' (pp. 55-6). For Bergson many of the weaknesses in Lucretius's approach to nature stem from his reliance on Epicurus who, he says, paid little attention to the science of physics, and he was always ready to adopt the first explanation offered so long as it did not involve the supernatural: 'In astronomy especially the philosopher showed his utter contempt for pure science. According to him, the sun is approximately as large as it looks...' (pp. 56-7). This criticism does not prevent Bergson from appreciating that Lucretius's poem hits upon 'astounding truths', one that modern science has confirmed on the basis of controlled experiments. The problem with Lucretius's attempt at science is that although it contains observations and advances hypotheses there is no attempt at proper experimentation. What Lucretius lacks is not genius but rigorous technique. Bergson writes: 'Proof of this is his

penetrating insight into the mechanism of the universe; it was he who first appreciated fully the principle that underlies modern science: nothing is ever created or destroyed' (p. 63).

Bergson's commentary ends with an appreciation of the main challenges presented by Lucretius's materialism and naturalism. The movement of atoms is eternal and the formation of new worlds will continue eternally. The earth has been formed relatively recently, engendering plants and then animals. We do not need to marvel at the creation of life or living beings since the laws of matter can explain everything. Humankind is not separate from nature and certainly not a special case or exception to the laws of material existence; it is destined to perish since as a result of the movement of atoms everything will one day disintegrate: 'the atoms, converted into dust, will be drawn together again; new combinations of atoms will produce new worlds; and so it goes, throughout eternity' (p. 75). Bergson notes the 'eternal recurrence' aspect of the doctrine (not that we, as humans, have any consciousness of this since, as Lucretius points out, we lack the memory of our previous existences): '...atoms, which are constantly moving about, uniting and disuniting, will naturally yield every possible combination during the infinite course of the centuries' (p. 74).⁴

Concluding Thoughts

In spite of his reliance on Epicurus's teaching, including the science and the ethics, Bergson sees Lucretius as 'singularly original' (p. 77). He is original in his conception of the nature

⁴ Lucretius himself writes: 'We who are now are not concerned with ourselves in any previous existence: the sufferings of those selves do not touch us. When you look at the immeasurable extent of time gone by and the multiform movements of matter, you will readily credit that these same atoms that compose us now must many a time before have entered into the selfsame combinations as now. But our mind cannot recall this to remembrance. For between then and now is interposed a break in life, and all the atomic motions have been wandering far astray from sentience' (DRN, p. 88 Penguin edition, lines 852-62).

of things and in his conception of human nature. For Bergson, Lucretius differs from Epicurus in being an enthusiastic observer of nature, showing a gift for its picturesque aspect (its 'fleeting, transitional variations'). Moreover, he appreciates simultaneously both the pattern of nature that appeals to the geometrician and that of the artist: he admires the beauty of nature and understands it, but this does not stop him from analyzing it and breaking it apart anatomically into fibres and cells. This ability on the part of Lucretius to grasp the two-sided character of things is for Bergson the source of the originality of his poetry and his philosophy. For Bergson, Lucretius is not like Democritus: he does not depict collections of atoms in their stark nakedness but decks them out in natural or in fancied colours. Moreover, his descriptions of the universe are not cold but 'imbued with an oratorical fervour that stimulates and sways' (p. 80). Indeed, Bergson speculates that Lucretius would not have written his text if he had seen in Epicureanism little more than a dry and self-centred doctrine, 'contrived for the purpose of bringing to man the calm placidity of the beast and ridding him of his most noble anxieties' (pp. 80-1).

Lucretius differs from Epicurus in as much as Epicurus did not study nature or physical phenomena simply for the purpose of increasing knowledge and instructing his followers in the nature of things. Bergson notes that Epicurus disdainfully rejects the idea that we acquire and enjoy knowledge for its own sake; rather, the whole purpose of knowledge is to banish gods from nature and defeat superstition. Bergson even goes so far as arguing that the Epicurean doctrine leads, in fact, to futility in the study of any question that is not directly linked to everyday life and the attainment of happiness or peace of mind. Here Bergson echoes a criticism of Epicurean doctrine that, as far as I know, goes back to Francis Bacon (Marx has an interesting take on this issue too in his doctoral dissertation). For Bergson we cannot ignore the fact that the theory of atoms offers a poetic conception of the universe. What he means by this is that it cannot but have a deep impact on our imaginations,

in which nature takes on a new majesty, and with every description pointing to an eternal truth. Bergson well appreciates the sublime quality of Epicureanism, especially as we find it articulated in Lucretius's text.

Finally, what do we make of Bergson's claim that Lucretius's materialism is fundamentally melancholic? For Bergson this is where Lucretius departs from Epicurus. The doctrine of Epicurus, he argues, excludes melancholy and sadness as these would only continue to trouble the mind when the whole point of practising philosophy as a way of life is to attain a state of undisturbed serenity or what Bergson describes as a 'placid state of joyfulness' that may not be intense but is nevertheless permanent. Lucretius draws different conclusions from the theory of the atom according to Bergson. We are subject to rigid natural laws so why work or take pains to accomplish anything? Why struggle or complain?: 'We are victims of a common law, and nature shows little concern over us' (p. 82). As Bergson notes, the poem ends with a frightful description of the plague of Athens during the Peloponnesian War (and borrowed from Thucydides), and that stands in marked contrast to the poem's opening celebration of life. For Bergson, Lucretius succeeds in painting an 'awesome picture' of the nature of the universe and one that fills our mind with dread. One fairly recent extensive interpretation of DRN by David Sedley argues that the closing description of the plague must contain some message for us as the readers of the poem. In short, have readers really learnt their Epicureanism? That is, do we know how to remain serene in the face of severe and even terminal physical suffering? According to Sedley, Lucretius has dealt with three of the four Epicurean remedies in the book before the plague description – God presents no fears, death no worries, the good is readily attainable – but not the fourth one that the terrible is endurable. This, he thinks, is what the closing description of the book is meant to do: if we have not learnt the ultimate lesson and attained philosophical

serenity over the most intense physical pain and suffering, then we cannot face the nature of the universe with truly Epicurean equanimity.⁵

As I have noted, Bergson's reading of DRN has Schopenhauerian echoes, echoing Schopenhauer's deep-rooted pessimism, his depiction of the world as will (or the lust for life) that fills us with dread, and even something of his ethics of compassion. In final conclusion, we might ask: has Bergson got Lucretius's tone right? Are other readings of Lucretius possible? What of the Epicureanism we find, for example, in Nietzsche's middle period texts such as *The Joyful Science*? And what of Deleuze's 1960s reading of Lucretius that concludes by claiming that naturalism exists to *defeat* sadness. He writes: 'From Lucretius to Nietzsche, the same end is pursued and attained. Naturalism makes of thought and sensibility an affirmation' (*The Logic of Sense*, p. 279). According to Alain Badiou, it is Bergson who is Deleuze's real master, and not Spinoza or Nietzsche. However, one area of philosophical inquiry where Deleuze appears to show an intellectual independence from Bergson is in his interpretation of Lucretius.

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⁵ See David Sedley, *Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 160-5.

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