



LIFE AND LETTERS

Edited by Desmond MacCarthy

BUYING CHRISTMAS BOOKS

by
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HOPE MIRRLEES

BEDSIDE BOOKS

Above all, they must not be dull. Dullness (*pace* Pope) is *not* a soporific. If it were, it would have its uses, and serious modern novels might live as lullabies. But dullness *per se* has never yet put any one to sleep, and when we nod in church, the poppies tangled in garnered piety are the cause and not the parson's homily, and if Jeremy Taylor himself were preaching on Christmas Day, and his text was *Nevertheless the Dimness*, we should not be a wink less drowsy. Even a detective story is more soothing than a dull book. *Suave mari*—a detective story may sometimes be read in bed. To extract the last drop of sweetness from this delightful hour, we must be conscious of our bed as well as of our book, and a detective story emphasizes the conceit that our bed is a hare's form, a warm secret refuge from hunters and hounds—while outside our sanctuary there is terror and flight and the surging enemy, mute and terrible.

Suave, mari magno turbantibus aequora ventis,
E terra magnum alterius spectare laborem.¹

These lines make it easy to fancy that Lucretius as well as we felt the charm of lying in bed, awake but not wakeful . . . in a cave in the cliffs where shipwrecked mariners have lighted a fire and are returning thanks to Neptune for their great deliverance, and the sea roaring outside is the 'splendour and smoke and din of Rome'. Or, per-

¹ It is sweet when on the great sea the winds trouble its waters, to behold from land another's deep distress.

haps, the sound of the sea was made out of country noises—the souging of the wind in the trees, the hooting of owls; noises that drown the sound of Time and enable us, as we listen to them, to be lying in bed in the reign of Rameses II, or of Cryus the Great, or of Hiram, King of Tyre. They are the sounds to which we like best to think of Lucretius falling asleep; for those of us who are lovers of the *De Rerum Natura* are *ipso facto* lovers of Lucretius the man, and welcome any foreshortening of the centuries between us. No shadow of Virgil falls across the *Aeneid* (according to the medieval legend he was a wizard, and a wizard cannot cast a shadow), but the *De Rerum Natura* is charged with Lucretius, and we are frequently brought into so sharp and intimate a contact with him that it resembles an electric shock. For instance, we can be as certain as of our own existence that, in one of the last twenty Aprils of the Republic, a man in a toga, called Titus Lucretius Carus, stood gazing intently at an Italian landscape. In the distance, what his *eyes* saw was a motionless spot of white on a green hill, but his brain told him that it was dew-drawn sheep nibbling their way across the happy pasture, and lambs frisking in the sun. Then out came his tablets, and he made a note for a possible simile to illustrate the thesis ‘though the first-beginnings of all things are in motion, yet the sum is seen to rest in supreme repose’. It might also be a simile of the contrast between the past, as it appears to us, and as it really was. And when the past happens to be the inner life of an infinitely great poet who lived very long ago, how can we have the presumption to hope that it will not be white, and motionless, and very distant? And yet—a grace far, far beyond our deserts—here is the print of a human foot on ‘the pathless haunts of the Pierides’.

So we can be sure that Lucretius lay in bed and read . . . Epicurus, I suppose. But we must not compare the bed of the superb Lucretius to a hare's form. Rather (on the nights when Vulcan had turned the key on Venus), it was the *intermundia*, the windless abode of the Epicurean gods—an easy metamorphosis for a bed, and Tennyson's paraphrase of *intermundia*, 'the lucid interspace of world and world', might, out of its context, serve as a description of the hour between waking and sleeping.

Apparet divum numen sedesque quietae
 Quas neque concutiunt venti nec nubila nimbis
 Aspergunt neque nix acri concreta pruina
 Cana cadens violat semperque innubilis aether
 Integit, et large diffuso lumine rident.¹

Great magnanimous Lucretius! While he lived, his sojourns in that place were infrequent and of short duration; but now . . . *inmortali aevo summa cum pace fruatur*, may he enjoy his immortality with perfect peace.

But it is not for us to fall asleep on the knees of the gods; and conceits are not the only opiate—for instance, there is music. Let our book, then, have some of the qualities of music. But they must be the qualities that music has for the unmusical, what we want are dreams, and sound without sense. It is the *Iliad* of all books that is the most like music. It is also of all books the most melancholy, and Lamb has shown us that a poetical melancholy is a seemly mood on which to fall asleep. Here is the quintessential perfume of the sensitive plant of all

¹ The divinity of the gods is revealed and their tranquil abodes, which neither winds do shake nor clouds drench with rains nor snow congealed by sharp frosts harms with hoary fall; an ever-cloudless ether o'er-canopies them, and they laugh with light shed largely round.

the solar systems; a perfume lost in space among gorgeous insensate suns. The terrible war-cries of Ajax and Hector, the clash of bronze swords, the voices of the slayer and the slain, die away into an exquisitely melodious, infinitely melancholy echo. And one asks—as Homer, perhaps, means one should—What does it matter, the waste of all this chivalry and high endeavour and eloquence and rage and love? And the answer seems to be: It matters no more than when ‘reapers over against each other drive their swaths through a rich man’s field of wheat or barley’.

It may be that this musical melancholy is partly due to Homer’s way of showing us the action through a prism, one of the facets of which is the future. At times the story seems to be happening as we read. And then he suddenly pulls us up and reminds us that really it all happened very long ago, that we have heard it all hundreds of times before, and know the end as well as he.¹ Hence, like the God of Molina the Jesuit, we view the human drama with *scientia media*, knowledge of what is going to happen. This is not the same as the famous tragic irony of Sophocles, which springs from the contrast between the *scientia media* of the spectator and the blindness to futurity of the characters themselves. In the *Iliad* it is not only we, the spectators, who have *scientia media*; there are moments when the heroes have it also. The two great protagonists, Hector and Achilles, are aware: Hector, that Troy is doomed to fall, and his wife to be sold into captivity; Achilles, that ‘he must perish in deep-soiled Troy, far from his native land’. But the *scientia media* of Hector and Achilles is not the same as that expounded by Molina. Molina invented the conception to reconcile

¹ Cf., for instance, Bk. XII, 10 *seq.*

God's omniscience with man's free-will. It is the focus of two eyes looking through different lenses; but the eyes do not belong to the same person—one is God's, the other is man's. Hector and Achilles, however, do not share their optic glass with God, and it is in their own vision that prescience is adjusted to free-will. Achilles has the choice of two alternatives, either to continue fighting the Trojans and to have as his reward death but imperishable fame; or else to sail back to Thessaly and have a long life, but an inglorious one. And he knows from the outset what his choice will be, for in Book I he begins his prayer to Thetis:

Mother, seeing thou did'st bear me to so brief a span
of life.

But this prescience does not affect his actions, nor does it result in fatalism, for it is not merely a conviction based on a knowledge of his own character, it is *scientia media*—a sudden focussing of two divergent points of view. It is the same with Hector. His knowledge of futurity does not prevent him from doing his best to beat the Greeks. And there are even moments when he forgets what he has seen through *scientia media*, for in Book VIII he prays 'with *good hope* to Zeus and all the gods to drive from hence these dogs borne onward by the fates'.

Through *scientia media* there are moments when the *Iliad* has a fourth dimension. Thebes was built by music; but one of the walls of Ilium is music.

But we have decided that our bedside-book must be music for the unmusical. To the musical great music is rarely soothing. And some of us cannot lie still under great poetry.

‘Even as when in heaven the stars about the bright moon shine clear to see, when the air is windless and all the peaks appear and the tall headlands and glades, and from heaven breaketh open the infinite air and all stars are seen, and the shepherd’s heart is glad.’

Oh that shepherd in the Homeric similes! He is like the little human figures in a Corot. As Corot’s figures turn a landscape into poetry, so Homer’s shepherd turns it into music, as if we heard his flute.

Then the great scene in the last book, when Priam comes as a suppliant to Achilles and conjures him to remember his own father and to be merciful:

Then Priam spoke, and entreated him saying: ‘Bethink thee, god-like Achilles, of thy father that is of like years with me, on the grievous pathway of old age. Him, it may be the dwellers round about him are entreating evilly, nor is there any to ward from him ruin and bane. Nevertheless, while he hears of thee as yet alive he rejoices in his heart, and hopes, withal, day after day that he shall see his dear son returning from Troy-land. But I, I am utterly unblest, since I begat sons the best men in wide Troy-land, but declare unto thee that none of them is left. . . . Now of the greater part had impetuous Ares unstrung the knees, and he who was yet left and guarded city and men, him slewest thou but now as he fought for his country, even Hector. For his sake come I unto the ships of the Achaians, that I may win him back from thee, and I bring with me untold ransom. Yea, fear thou the gods, Achilles, and have compassion on me, even me, bethinking thee of thy father—Lo, I am yet more piteous than he, and have braved what none other man on

earth has braved before, to stretch forth my hand toward the face of the slayer of my sons.'

Thus spake he, and stirred within Achilles desire to make lament for his father. And he touched the old man's hand and gently moved him back. And as they both bethought them of their dead, so Priam for man-slaying Hector wept sore, as he was fallen before Achilles's feet, and Achilles wept for his own father, and now again for Patroclus, and their moan went up throughout the house.

The Black Prince, when his prisoner, the King of France, sat down to meat, waited on him himself—a *beau geste* which has caught the fancy of history. But here is something infinitely more moving than the conventions of chivalry. They are only a passing fashion; but the great moments when the grief for youth cut off in its flower and for old age left with none to tend it, and the grief for old age falling asleep and leaving youth with none to counsel it, and the grief for our friends who are beneath the earth are merged into one great movement of self-pity, so wide that it embraces our enemies, and Priam and Peleus, and Hector and Patroclus, and we ourselves, are blurred into one person—these moments are not of yesterday nor of to-day. And yet they are but moments, gone in a flash. It is only by great music that they are caught and prolonged. And wise Achilles, old Cheiron's pupil, knew their fragility, so he ordered his servants to cover the body of Hector, lest at the sight of it both Priam's wrath and his own should spring up afresh.

No more than when 'reapers drive their swaths through a rich man's field of wheat or barley' . . . Is a great poet, then, a cheat, whose scales have false weights?

But see! The sensitive plant is drinking the sun. We have read all night.

We have discovered, then, that our book must be like music, but not music of a shattering beauty. What about *The Anatomy of Melancholy*? The A-na-tomy of Me-lan-choly. The syllables are made of poppy and mandragora. Here is music for the unmusical—a volume of sound, a tissue of dreams. *Facta est inmensi copia mundi*, the cornucopia of the world is spilt at our feet—*stars, suns, moons, metals, sweet-smelling flowers*, like starfish strewing the Christ Church lawn round the kind old conjurer of melancholy; a daintier litter than the carcasses of anatomized beasts that surrounded the other Democritus—Burton's toy and Lucretius's master¹—in *his* search for a cure for melancholy; but, as drugs, probably no more efficacious. It would, indeed, be a stubborn melancholy that would not melt at a glimpse of the great bird Ruck. But the other remedies in Burton's pharmacopoeia—Indian pictures made of feathers, for instance—set us wondering if he realized the gravity of the complaint for which he was prescribing. But this is unfair. Burton belongs to the school of leeches who hold that every flower upon the daedal earth secretes a juice that will heal melancholy, if only we can extract it. The other school turn the cold shoulder to Pandora, for they know that, in spite of her bedizening, her womb is the very nursery of the seeds of melancholy. All the same, one cannot help suspecting that Burton himself had never suffered from anything more serious than the medieval *accidia*, that

¹ Democritus of Abdera, popularly known as the 'Laughing Philosopher', with whom, by writing under the pseudonym of 'Democritus Junior', Burton associated himself, was the discoverer of the atomic theory, and hence, by way of Epicurus, the moulder of Lucretius's thought.

intermittent irascibility and impatience of the tune to which one's life is set, which was found chiefly among monks and clerks, and, to this day, I am told, affects the atmosphere of the common-rooms of Oxford and Cambridge. For one thing, Burton was, relatively speaking, pure. As he writes of the protean twists of lust, of the madness it engenders, of all the spells and charms it has by heart, and of all its lovely masks, his slick pen never sputters. It is true he writes with a certain complacency. But it is the complacency of the collector pinning yet another specimen caught in Ovid or Petronius into his box of butterflies. Maps move him much more than women's looks. And, except for an occasional dig at the knights of Cupid, foolish young gallants whose only art is to wear their clothes with a good grace (Burton, it must be remembered, was a Fellow of Christ Church); he writes without indignation. Temperament—the hallmark (hell-mark) of Lucretius and St. Augustine and Donne and Baudelaire—some tragic discord between the spirit and the flesh, which gives to style the great Roman quality of *gravitas*, and which makes nobler literature than ever harmony does, had never tortured Burton.

There is a legend to the effect that Lucretius was given a love philtre which caused recurrent fits of madness, and that in his lucid intervals he wrote the *De Rerum Natura*. Perhaps this is an allegory rather than a legend. Lucretius maintains that the only cause of melancholy is the fear of the gods, and its corollary, the fear of death. If a man will apply to this poison the antidote of sovereign reason, he will recognize the operation of Law in Nature, and, knowing that everything has a natural cause, will attain to the supreme happiness of being able to look at all things with a mind at peace—at the way of an eagle in the air, at the

way of a serpent upon a rock, at the way of a ship in the midst of the sea. But could Lucretius look with a mind at peace at the way of a man with a maid? If you think he could, then re-read his description of Mavors in the lap of Venus.

Burton had read Lucretius, and sometimes quotes from him. But never has one great imagination been less influenced by another, for the Sirens were the only fabulous birds in all the mythologies of the world against whose song he had waxed his ears. The song of the Sirens, Jane Harrison tells us, is true knowledge. And yet, once, in the splendid antithetical passage where he swings between Democritus and Heraclitus in alternate laughter and tears over the follies and woes of superstition, pity and indignation have made his voice so resonant that we can almost fancy it will vibrate back through the centuries and reach the ears of Lucretius. But this is not Burton's usual voice—and why should it be? We go to him for exquisite fantastic entertainment—sea-shells gathered on inland mountains and mandrake wine. But Lucretius and he have one strand in their imagination that is the same. Each is haunted, as Pindar was before them, by gold and purple—as symbols, and for their own sake. Peacocks, potentates, pageants, gold of Ophir, Tyrian coverlets—it is the *lustre* of the earth, the *glamour* of pomp and power. But to Burton they are cures for melancholy, while Lucretius holds that they cannot even benefit our bodies, how much less, then, our minds.

But why pit old Burton against Lucretius? As Lucretius said of himself, in relation to Epicurus:

Why need the swallow contend with swans?

And we, in our turn, will not make an eagle contend

with a . . . what shall we say? I was once driving in an omnibus along one of the interminable semi-rural roads of Hampstead, drowned in melancholy . . . no, it cannot have been melancholy, it must have been *accidia*, for it was suddenly exorcised by a voice; and Odysseus himself can never have turned a deaf ear to a stranger and more amusing one. With a jerk of delight I came to my senses. The conductor and grown-up passengers were smiling indulgently, the children were jogging up and down in their seats with glee. And the source of all this pleasure was the owner of the amusing voice—a green crimson-flecked parrot whom an old lady was carrying in a Sheraton cage. His expression as he contemplated us, his head a little on one side, was humorous and full of meaning. All the same, I had a disconcerting feeling that the creature's expression had really nothing to do with his reactions; that he was wearing, in fact, a comic mask; and from my previous acquaintance with parrots, I was aware that, could I have looked up at him from below, an hiatus would have revealed the clumsy adjustment of the false nose. And that completely spherical eye—a circle of tangerine round an olive-green iris, a gaudy target at a Lilliputian fair, with the pupil for the bull's-eye—could it be a *real* organ of sight? But suddenly the iris started quivering and vibrating, and the pupil began slowly to expand, so that the very process of seeing was made visible. I thought of the terrible stylized Eye painted on the heavens. Just like that must it suddenly have quivered and vibrated, on the First Day, when it saw that the light was good. But who could guess the parrot's thoughts, as he contemplated us out of that spherical eye? Was he wondering if the cherries on our lips would be worth the pecking, or the flowers stamped on our muslins? And then I nearly squealed with

pleasure, and I could not help feeling flattered, although I knew it was only mimicry of the most engaging trick of Fido or Dash (what a dominant personality, so to impress his *cachet* on his surroundings as to turn our jumpers into sprigged muslins, our pekinese into Dash, the spaniel!)—through the bars of his cage he offered me his horny three-pronged claw. Yes, I had nearly forgotten his cage, but it was very important. He was a parrot in a Sheraton cage (a prettier cage than Christ Church), and that made him different from an ordinary parrot, and embossed him into a bas-relief slightly above the level of Nature, so that, instead of a bird, he was a thaumaturgical toy—a Punch and Judy straight from Fairyland; or, rather, from the country that marches with Fairyland, where works of art grow petals and feathers, and birds and flowers are Indian pictures, and where Oxford dons are ‘fantastic old great men’.

But my simile is growing Homeric. We must not forget that we are in bed, and the Sheraton cage is covered up for the night with a crimson cloth, and Burton is lulling us to sleep. Do not fear to be distracted by too great a diversity, or cloyed by a surfeit of erudition. The old man, in spite of his innocence, has dabbled in the black arts, and he binds with his spells popes and pornographers and geographers and Fathers till they are as ‘besotted as birds with henbane’, and dance to his piping. And though the words belong to Aeneas Silvius, or Levinus Lemnius, or Ovidius Naso, the voice is always Burton’s. Under all the extravagance and outlandishness there flows something as peaceful and familiar and English as his own Leicestershire river.

But this is still and quiet: and if so the *reader* catch

no Fish, yet he hath a wholesome walk to the brook side, pleasant shade by the sweet silver streams; he hath good air, and sweet smells of fine fresh meadow flowers, he hears the melodious harmony of birds, he sees the swans, herons, ducks, water-hens, coots, and many other fowl, with their brood, which he thinketh better than the noise of hounds, or blast of horns, and all the sport they can make.

Better than the noise of hounds or blast of horns! We are back, then, in our hare's form. Put out the light.