XII. Death and Two Poets

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In his last book, *Lux Perpetua*, F. Cumont presents, with characteristic learning and understanding, the full range of Roman beliefs about death and the after-life. In the introduction he makes the wise observation: "De cette vaste matière, je ne pourrai, en quelques chapitres, esquisser que les grands contours, nécessairement approximatifs. Il est toujours imprudent, j'en ai conscience, de hasarder des généralisations morales: elles se trouvent toujours fausses par quelque endroit, mais surtout il est scabreux de vouloir definir en peu de mots l'infinie variété des dispositions individuelles et rien n'est plus soustrait à l'observation historique que ces convictions intimes que parfois on ne dérobe même à ses proches." Such a warning might well make one hesitate to probe the "convictions intimes" of ancient writers, but to the student of literature the temptation to investigate the thoughts and feelings of his authors, even those of which they themselves may have been unaware, is irresistible. Cumont's words at once call to mind two very different Roman poets in whose writings death plays a prominent part, Lucretius and Propertius. Their conscious, rational beliefs about death are obvious enough, and, at least in the case of Lucretius, have been fully studied. Their emotional reactions to the fact of death, however, and the influence of these reactions on their lives have not been so closely scrutinised. What these were may often be discovered by examining the words and images that they use to describe death and the ideas that they associate with it. Because each reader will respond to and interpret such material in the light of his own tastes and disposition, it is only fair to admit that such a study will perforce be highly subjective. But then, so is poetry.

Lucretius

The first thing that characterizes Lucretius' treatment of death is the scope of his discussion. Death to him is not merely a human but a universal phenomenon. In the material universe only atoms and void, *summa summarum*, and perhaps the gods are indestructi-

ble. All those combinations of atoms which form the visible and tangible world are subject to change and this change is death (1.670–71):

> nam quodcumque suis mutatum finibus exit,
> continuo hoc mors est illius quod fuit ante.

But from this death comes life, nor without death could there be birth (1.262–64):

> haud igitur penitus pereunt quaecumque videntur
> quando alid ex alio reficit natura nec ullam
> rem gigni patitur nisi morte adiuta aliena.

The idea of the cycle thus produced exhilarates Lucretius and produces some of his best poetry. He does not accept this law of nature with resignation but welcomes it with joy.

Since, however, Lucretius is a human being writing for his fellow men he is forced to consider death in its more limited aspect, as it affects human life. His avowed purpose in discussing it is to free men from the fear of death that is imposed on them by belief in an after life. For this purpose he writes the last part of Book III, presenting a variety of arguments to prove that human death is nothingness, more free of care than any sleep. This passage is described by Bailey as a hymn of triumph,[1] a phrase reminiscent of Epicurus' advice that we should leave life shouting a triumph song that we have lived well. Triumph, however, is not the characteristic note of this discussion, but rather a dignified, often moving, presentation of a logical argument. After the first speech put in the mouth of Nature, Lucretius asks (3.950–51):

> quid respondemus nisi iustam intendere litem
> naturam et veram verbis exponere causam?

and after the second speech adds (3.963)

> iure, ut opinor, agat, iure increpet inciletque.

The only places in this section that rise above the quiet level of logical argument are in the description of the Punic Wars, the eloquent pleas of the opposition, and the passage in which Lucretius recites the list of heroic figures who have yielded to death.

It has often been said that in spite of his protestations Lucretius

[1] C. Bailey, *Titi Lucretii Cari De Rerum Natura* (Oxford 1947) 1.31.

was still, unconsciously, afraid of death. If this were so one would expect him to betray the fact in the way he speaks of death, in the words and images with which he describes it. A study of the adjectives that he associates with death produces some results interesting in paucity. In the sixty uses of the word *mors* that I have collected in the *De rerum natura*, only five have modifying adjectives, and of these adjectives only two are of a general nature. Specific cases of death are described as *immatura* (5.221), *aliena* (1.264) and *turpis malaque* (6.1241). The two general adjectives are *immortalis* and *aeterna* (3.869, 1091). Only once is there an image in which *mors* is used (3.959):

et nec opinanti mors ad caput adstitit. . . .

There are thirty-three examples of the use of *letum* and with these only one adjective is used, *gelidum*. This is, however, compensated for by a number of images in which *letum* occurs in the genitive. Here death is depicted as a door (*limina leti, ianua leti, portae leti*) or as a region (*viae leti, vada leti, Tartara leti*). A variation of the first presents death as a mouth (*dentes leti*). The door and mouth are combined with devastating effect in one of those rare passages in which Lucretius' powers of visualization give an image of the abstract rather than a picture of the concrete (5.373–75):

haud igitur leti praeclusa est ianua caelo
nec soli terraeque nec altis aequoris undis
sed patet immani et vasto respectet hiatu.

Certain qualities are attributed to *letum* (*tactus, motus dominans, secura quies, frigus*) and there is one reference to the *lex leti*. It is perhaps worth noting that, while both human beings and natural objects are depicted as passing the door of death, the more terrifying picture of the mouth of death is reserved in one case for atoms, in the other for the earth, sky, and sea.

A suppressed fear of death might also betray itself in the use of synonyms. In Book III most of these fall into two classes, those which describe the death of the body, and those which refer to the death of the mind or identity, a distinction of which Lucretius would probably disapprove, since for him they would be identical. The former for the most part emphasize the separation of the body and soul into their component parts, as for instance *corporis et animae discidium* (3.838–39) or *distractast animi natura animaeque potestas*

(3.844). When the atoms whose motions produce sense break up their combinations, there comes the *pausa vitai* (3.860). In one discussion of this phenomenon Lucretius uses the phrase *frigida vitai pausa* (3.930), which taken by itself might be an expression of dread, but read in context seems merely to be a reference to the fact, noted frequently by Lucretius, that cold is one of the first characteristics of death and is caused by the loss of the element of heat in the soul (3.214–15, 398–401, 526–30). In the second class of synonyms death is described frequently as peaceful sleep, and once or twice as the loss of self-consciousness: *interrupta semel cum repetentia nostri* (3.851), *nec desiderium nostri nos adficit ullum* (3.922). In the rhetorical description of the great men who have died, a need for variety of expression produces some poetic synonyms for dying, *lumina reliquit* (3.1025), *lumine adempto animam profudit* (3.1033), *ossa dedit terrae* (3.1035), *leto caput obvius obtulit* (3.1041), *obit decurso lumine vitae* (3.1042), but these produce an effect of pathos rather than fear. The passage contains several quotations from Ennius, of which *lumina reliquit* is one, and some of the other synonyms may derive from the same source.

The images of the door and the mouth are obviously taken from mythological tradition, but it is interesting that Lucretius never uses a static image such as *domus Plutonia*, but always one which implies transition. Since he believes that death is merely change and not a terminus, such a choice of image would be natural. (*Vada leti* and *Tartara leti* might seem static, but in the first case the image is obviously suggested by the context of the storm at sea, and the second is put in the mouth of a man whom Lucretius is contradicting.)

Lucretius' phraseology, then, does not betray in him any suppressed fear of death for himself. It seems to me rather that he was both awed and attracted by his own picture of death, a point of view which will be easier to understand if we consider what Lucretius enjoyed and wanted in life.

The picture of Lucretius as a recluse may have been overdrawn, but it is still quite clear that he is one of those people who find their greatest pleasure within themselves, not in the company of others.[2] He betrays no need of human contact except for his initial reference

[2] Cf. P. Giuffrida, *L'epicureismo nella letteratura latina nel I sec. av. Cristo* (Torino 1940–50) 2.82: "Il De Rerum Natura è un colloquio intimo e appassionato del poetà con se stesso."

to the *sperata voluptas suavis amicitiae* (1.140–41) in his address to Memmius, and from the way in which Memmius disappears from his thoughts one is inclined to consider this little more than a polite remark.[3] That he understood human nature from observation of others and of himself is also clear, but there is little indication that he found anything in it that appealed to him except as a subject of study. Impersonal as he is, he does however occasionally give us a glimpse of the things that he really enjoys. One thinks first perhaps of the twice-repeated passage in which he describes how the hope of fame has smitten him with love of the Muses, and how he seeks new paths of inspiration to win a crown such as no one has worn before him (1.921–30; 4.1–5). Elsewhere he describes the pleasure he takes in writing as *dulcis labor* (3.419), and he tells us indirectly how much he enjoyed the combined effort of study and composition when he describes his own characteristic dreams (4.969–70):

> nos agere hoc autem et naturam quaerere rerum
> semper et inventam patriis exponere chartis

and then adds that in explaining dreams *magni refert studium atque voluptas* (4.984). One is reminded of his address to Memmius with its description of how he works through the peaceful nights (1.142). He derives pleasure also from his sense of philosophical understanding (2.7–10):

> sed nil dulcius est bene quam munita tenere
> edita doctrina sapientum templa serena,
> despicere unde queas alios passimque videre
> errare atque viam palantes quaerere vitae.

But he is raised to ecstasy by Epicurus' description of the universe, that view of all nature which he hoped to present to his reader. Book III begins with the praise of Epicurus and Lucretius' desire to imitate him, and goes on to explain why he admires him so much. The words of Epicurus free him from fear, and give him a vision of the whole infinite universe (3.16–17):

> moenia mundi
> discedunt, totum video per inane geri res.

He sees the home of the gods in their eternal peace, no trace of Acheron. Even the earth does not interfere with his view of what is

[3] For a different point of view see P. Boyancé, "Lucrèce et son disciple," *REA* 52 (1950) 212–33.

going on beneath his feet, a curious touch which is really unnecessary after what he has already said but increases the sense of the utter freedom he enjoys. And at this complete revelation of all nature he is seized by *quaedam divina voluptas atque horror* (3.28–29). As we might have guessed from many passages we see that this *horror* is a sensation that is essential to Lucretius' most intense enjoyment, and that he finds *divina voluptas* in the imaginative escape into a limitless universe.[4] He was obviously fascinated by all the phenomena of this world, which he describes with such loving detail and with gorgeous amplitude. It must have been maddening for him at times, as he thought of the reality which underlay the phenomena, the atoms and the void in their constant interplay, that, strain as he might, he could never really see or touch it, that he must live as it were blindfold amid wonders. Only by his imagination could he escape from the world of surface appearances into the true reality. It was this very escape which he attributes to Epicurus (1.72–74):

> et extra
> processit longe flammantia moenia mundi
> atque omne immensum peragravit mente animoque.

And that this is what he longed for for himself is shown elsewhere (2.1044–47):

> quaerit enim rationem animus, cum summa loci sit
> infinita foris haec extra moenia mundi,
> quid sit ibi porro quo prospicere usque velit mens
> atque animi iactus liber quo pervolet ipse.

It is clear from his constant and impressive references to the things which are infinite and eternal that Lucretius was fascinated by the concepts of infinity and eternity, and that only here, *extra moenia mundi*, could he find them. And yet it must have dawned on him that there is one point in this mortal world through which eternity breaks in. Change is the law of nature for all things that man can know by observation, and change is death. But if the basic matter

[4] For an evaluation of the importance of the concept of infinity in the Epicurean system, see C. J. Keyser, "The Role of the Concept of Infinity in the Work of Lucretius," *Bull. Amer. Math. Soc.* 24 (1917–18) 321–27. Keyser concludes: "The mere correctness of the Lucretian concept of infinity by no means accounts for the immense role of the concept in the author's work. The secret lies in the fact that the concept so powerfully stimulated the imagination of a great thinker and poet as to cause him to express in immortal form a body of ideas which he had acquired from the then still extant works of Epicurus. . . ."

of the universe is eternal, so are the changes through which it passes, and therefore death is eternal (3.1091):

> proinde licet quot vis vivendo condere saecla;
> mors aeterna tamen nilo minus illa manebit.

The element in Lucretius' feeling about death which has sometimes been interpreted as suppressed fear is actually the same *horror* that is part of the divine *voluptas* he experiences in the contemplation of the infinite and eternal *maiestas cognita rerum.* What leads us astray in our interpretation of this feeling is a failure to recognize that Lucretius' temperament belongs to that rather small class which experiences its highest pleasure in an overwhelming sense of awe, such as would in most people produce merely terror. Most people looking at the sky at night are inclined to shudder at the thought of the unthinkable emptiness between the stars, and to turn away from it.[5] The Lucretian type shudders — and loses itself in infinite space. Just so, most people contemplating what follows

> mortalem vitam mors cum immortalis ademit

tend to shudder and turn away, but Lucretius feels in the eternity of death the same fascination that he feels in the eternity and infinity of the universe. Death has for him, however, the added fascination that only through its gateway can he reach the eternal, and that to do so is his inescapable destiny. He is, of course, aware that he will reach the eternal infinite which he loves only at the expense of his own identity, and will not know that he has done so, but while he is in his mood of exaltation, his mind soaring through space, or glorying in the cycle of life and death, he forgets this condition.

But Lucretius is, as Regenbogen has pointed out so vividly,[6] a man of contradictions. Towards many subjects he has two points of view, two moods which oppose each other. It is not that he endeavors unsuccessfully to suppress an "anti-Lucrèce," or that he shifts gradually from optimism to pessimism during the course of his writing, but rather that he writes now in one mood and now in

[5] Cumont in a very interesting passage (*Lux Perpetua* [Paris 1949] 6–8) observes that this terror of the infinite is a modern feeling which did not trouble the ancient world, but he argues that the ancient concept of the size of the universe was not on the same scale as ours. To this generalization I would regard Lucretius as an exception.

[6] O. Regenbogen, *Lukrez: Seine Gestalt in seinem Gedicht* (Leipzig 1932).

the other. I have described the mood of exaltation in which he finds *voluptas* in his vision of the infinite universe, and in which death wears for him the majesty of nature. His opposite mood of black depression is less evident in his work because it would far more often have inhibited him from writing than have inspired him. It does crop out, for example, at the end of Book III, where a large part of his argument against the popular fear of death has been aimed at the human reluctance to admit the necessity of abandoning one's identity. He asks at last why a man should be averse to death when he is already half-dead — because he wastes most of his time and is beset with cares and fears — but does not know what is the trouble with him. Then comes the famous passage on *taedium vitae*, that restless discontent which produces fruitless activity. At the end he explains its cause (3.1068–70):

> hoc se quisque modo fugit, at quem scilicet, ut fit,
> effugere haud potis est, ingratis haeret et odit
> propterea, morbi quia causam non tenet aeger.

Man seeks to escape himself, but as he cannot, clings to himself and hates himself, because he does not realize what he is trying to escape. The cure for this illness is the study of nature, since it is man's condition through all eternity that is at stake and that he should try to understand (3.1071–75):

> iam rebus quisque relictis
> naturam primum studeat cognoscere rerum,
> temporis aeterni quoniam, non unius horae,
> ambigitur status, in quo sit mortalis omnis
> aetas, post mortem quae restat cumque, manenda.

For Lucretius the contemplation of the eternity of nature reduces man's span of life to such minute proportions that its troubles become invisible. But in this mood the idea of eternity does not exhilarate him. His *taedium vitae* seems to grow so vast that it includes even the eternal. Going off on a slightly different tangent, he asks (3.1077) why should we want to live,

> quae mala nos subigit vitai tanta cupido?

Die we must, and, in any case, life is always the same. There can be no new pleasure though we search thirstily for it. Life is uncertain, and no matter how long we live we cannot subtract anything from the time we shall be dead. The eternity of death awaits every

man. In this mood of weariness and depression death offers to Lucretius an escape from the monotony of life, just as in his mood of exaltation the contemplation of infinity gives him an escape from the limitations of his body. But, while in exaltation he forgets himself briefly, in depression he is painfully aware of himself, of his limitations and his slavery to the *dira cupido* for a life that he finds futile. Now he recognizes his desire to escape from himself and realizes that the gate to freedom is that *mors aeterna* where the *desiderium nostri* will be forgotten in the sleep which nothing can penetrate.

It is curious that in both moods, different as they are, the desire for escape is the dominant element. The difference is that in the mood of exaltation he revels in freedom achieved, without apparently being aware that he has escaped from anything, while in the mood of depression he knows exactly what he wants to escape, but can see no way out but death.

If this very subjective analysis of Lucretius' thought is correct, it gives us possible explanations of two problems frequently discussed by writers on his life. First, what appeal did Epicurean philosophy have for Lucretius? Certainly not its ethical content alone, nor, one suspects in spite of all his protestations, its offered peace of mind. I very much doubt whether, if by a miracle he had achieved *ataraxia*, he would have been content with it.

Else, in a short article on Lucretius' conversion to Epicureanism, has pointed out that it was rooted in the vision of the infinite which Epicurus' words inspired in him, but adds that "The revelation of infinite space has no intensity in itself; it can gain intensity only by contrast with what preceded it."[7] He argues that what had preceded the vision was fear, of death and of the gods, and adds that Lucretius would not have fought them so relentlessly if he had not known their torments himself. I have explained why I do not believe that Lucretius was afraid of death. I am also inclined to believe that the type of mind which would have been afraid of death and the gods would have been equally terrified by the immensity in which Lucretius revelled. The happy Epicureans whom Cicero depicts do not talk about infinite space. I agree with Else that the vision of the universe was what converted Lucretius, but I would attribute its intensity to another cause. After all the most important fact

[7] G. Else, "Moenia Mundi," *CW* 37 (1943–44) 136–37.

about Lucretius, which we sometimes tend to forget in analyzing his thinking, is that he was primarily not a philosopher but a poet. His most intense emotion would, one would suppose, be connected with his poetry. A good deal of attention has been devoted of recent years to the problem of the Epicurean attitude towards poetry.[8] Related to this is the question of whether Lucretius was a poet before he was an Epicurean and became a convert in the process of writing the *De rerum natura*, or whether on the other hand he was a convinced Epicurean who, for reasons of his own, chose to present his beliefs in poetry. Much learned argument has been devoted to these problems, but the fact remains that a man does not become a good poet by wishing. It is inconceivable that the poetry of the *De rerum natura* could have been the maiden effort of a man inspired only by the desire to expound Epicureanism in a suitable medium. Poets write not because they wish to, but because they must. Men who decide to write poetry without being driven to it produce verse like Cicero's or the dutiful efforts of Poets Laureate. Moreover the skill with which Lucretius handles the hexameter argues long practice. Since, however, we hear nothing of earlier work we must assume either that it attracted little attention or, what is more probable, that he was not sufficiently satisfied with it to present it to the reading public. I would hazard a guess that it followed the conventions of the period, and that Lucretius did not find a subject which released the full power of his genius until he read the dry pages of Epicurus. Exactly how and why these touched the secret spring of his imagination is a question not likely to be answered. The creative process that builds beauty out of drab matter can be observed but not explained. All we can say is that in Epicureanism Lucretius came upon a world in which he could lose himself and find his genius. He did not say to himself "This is a good topic. I will write on it." He saw a vision and the vision drew the poetry out of him.

But did the vision last? Else has compared Lucretius' conversion to other examples of the same experience which we know did last. But these are naturally the ones of which we hear. More frequently

[8] Regenbogen (above, note 6); Giuffrida (above, note 2); P. Boyancé, "Lucrèce et la poésie," *REA* 49 (1947) 88–102; K. Büchner-J. B. Hofmann, *Lateinische Literatur und Sprache in der Forschung seit 1937* (Bern 1951) 57–59; K. Büchner, "Die Proömien des Lukrez," *ClMed* 13 (1952) 159–235; J. Waszink, "Lucretius and Poetry," *Mededeelingen d. kon. Nederlandse Akad. v. Wetenschappen*, Afd. Letterkunde, N.R. 17.8 (1954) 243–57.

one must suppose the glory and the dream fade into the light of common day. Did this happen to Lucretius? Perelli has suggested that Lucretius' attitude, especially towards Nature, shifts gradually from optimism to pessimism, from the picture of a beneficent Nature to one in which she appears as "Natura Matrigna."[9] He attributes this to a failure of the poet's conviction in his Epicurean principles. The argument has however two weaknesses. In the first place Perelli holds that Lucretius wrote his books in the order 1, 2, 4, 3, 5, 6, partly on the grounds that this provides "un netto sviluppo ideale e poetico." Recent studies of Lucretius' order of composition, however, make one hesitate to accept interpretations of his thought based on a definitive order of the books.[10] In the second place, Perelli seems to assume that ideas which appear depressing to him would have depressed Lucretius, without making any allowance for the poet's individual point of view, or for the classical point of view in general. I find it difficult to see a steady progression towards pessimism through Lucretius' work as a whole, or any gradual failure in his devotion to Epicurean principles. What does seem obvious is that Lucretius' mood shifts constantly, not so much from optimism to pessimism, as from exaltation to depression. It would seem to me that, as he wrote, the vision which inspired him often faded and left him exhausted and depressed until he could recapture it. Over and over again the intensity with which he writes flags, only to revive as the vision comes back. The tragedy which overtook him was that in the end it no longer came back. Most people during the course of their lives have the same experience to a greater or lesser degree, as they find their imaginations or emotional reactions, or even their physical powers, becoming blunted, but most of them accept it as a necessary evil, or even as a positive relief. Lucretius, who seems to have had few of the ordinary compensations of life, would have suffered the more intensely when he lost his ability to recapture his exaltation, just as his exaltation itself had been the more intense.[11]

[9] L. Perelli, "Il piano originario del poema lucreziano alla luce del suo svolgimento ideale," *RFIC* 75 (1947) 18–43.

[10] For the history, bibliography and present status of this problem see H. Diller, "Die Prooemien des Lukrez und die Entstehung des Lukrezischen Gedichts," *Studi Ital. Fil. Class.* 25 (1951) 5–30.

[11] For an interesting discussion of Lucretius' character in technical psychiatric terms see Dr. J. B. Logre, *L'Anxiété de Lucrèce* (Paris 1946). For a comment on Logre, see P. E. Lortie, "Crainte anxieuse des enfers chez Lucrèce: Prolegomènes," *Phoenix* 8 (1954) 47–63.

It is possible that we have here the answer to the second problem which has puzzled students of Lucretius' life. If the tradition of his suicide is correct, why did he do it? I would suggest that when he lost the capacity to escape from himself and from the monotony of the known world, by recapturing his vision of eternity and infinity, he fell victim to the reasonableness of his own arguments and took the only path left to him.

Propertius

Propertius may not allude to death more often than other Roman poets, but he has a way of doing it which gives one the impression that he does. It is perhaps his fondness for the theme and the way in which he treats it that has led to the common judgment that Propertius brooded morbidly on death, and feared it.[12] And yet the very frequency and directness of his allusions suggest that this judgment is too hasty.[13] In an age which is very aware of the problems of psychology, it takes no great knowledge to realize that people in general do not discuss openly the things of which they are afraid. They tend rather to push them to the back of their minds and to betray their fears indirectly or unconsciously. Instead of assuming therefore that Propertius' references to death indicate a morbid strain, let us, before coming to a decision, consider how he treats the subject.

In the first place, we may note that Propertius refers to death almost always as a particular event, not as a general law of nature which could in any way influence his thought or conduct. We may further note that, just as he very rarely refers to his own old age, so he rarely refers to his own death as coming in what one might call a normal manner. In his frequent allusions to it, he almost invariably attributes it to some violent or dramatic cause, such as shipwreck, suicide, murder, or the pains of love. Moreover, he never protests against his own death, or indulges in any melancholy self-pity, of the type that Tibullus loves. Even in the poem in which he orders his funeral he seems more interested in Cynthia than in himself, and, far from protesting against his death, expresses a wish that he had died in the cradle (2.13.43 f.). He comes closest to

[12] e.g., J. P. Postgate, *Select Elegies of Propertius* (London 1881) xxxvi; W. Y. Sellar, *Roman Poets of the Augustan Age: Horace and the Elegiac Poets* (Oxford 1899) 313–17; E. H. Haight, *Romance in the Latin Elegaic Poets* (New York 1932) 98–101; J. W. Duff, *Literary History of Rome*[2] (London 1953) 416 f.

[13] An example of such hasty judgment may be found in my "Note on Propertius 1.22," *CP* 35 (1940) 297–300.

self-pity when he thinks that Cynthia's treatment will be the end of him; but his mood is more savage than pathetic (2.8.17–20):

> sic igitur prima moriere aetate, Properti?
> sed morere; interitu gaudeat illa tuo,
> exagitet nostros Manes, sectetur et umbras,
> insultetque rogis, calcet et ossa mea.

He winds up by threatening to kill her with the same weapon as himself.

Propertius very frequently makes this association between his love and his death, in one way or another. In a milder mood he invites the Amores to kill him with their arrows because his mistress is unfaithful (2.9.37–39). He remarks that lovers are prone to sudden collapse (2.4.13–14):

> ambulat — et subito mirantur funus amici.
> sic est incautum, quidquid habetur amor.

But he explains that the lover can at least be sure of the cause of his own death (2.27.11–12):

> solus amans novit, quando periturus et a qua
> morte, neque hic Boreae flabra neque arma timet.

Occasionally he anticipates dying with Cynthia. When she is ill he will not survive her (2.28.42), or, if she insists on taking a sea voyage, he will face shipwreck and drowning with her, remarking cheerfully, in a manner perhaps intended to change her plans (2.26.43),

> certe isdem nudi pariter iactabimur oris.

Several times he suggests that death would be desirable. If she will mourn at his grave, for example (3.16.22 f.), if he can take his rival with him (2.9.52), or if he is to lose Cynthia (2.34.13), he will be glad to die. This general attitude he sums up: *laus in amore mori* (2.1.47). Luckily no one seems to have taken him at his word, and we find that later he has a different point of view. When he decides to give Cynthia up and cure himself by travel and the study of philosophy he concludes (3.21.31–34):

> aut spatia annorum, aut longa intervalla profundi
> lenibunt tacito vulnera nostra sinu:
> seu moriar, fato, non turpi fractus amore;
> atque erit illa mihi mortis honesta dies.

"Men have died and worms have eaten them, but not for love."

What is Propertius' picture of the after life? Like most Roman poets, for himself he hopes for remembrance, and for fame (1.7.21–26; 2.13.35–38; 3.1.35–38). It is interesting, however, that the best lines which he wrote on this theme do not claim his own glory directly but prophesy glory for his mistress, conferred upon her by his poems (3.2.25–26). In his elegy on the death of Marcellus he subscribes to the popular theory of astral immortality for the great (3.18.33 f.). In his long poem on the death of Cornelia, she is depicted in a conventional Hades with the usual personnel of judges, Furies and sinners, but the concluding lines suggest that after judgment she too will reach the heavens (4.11.101). Considering the frequency of his references to death and his predilection for mythology, it is remarkable how few descriptions of Hades Propertius gives us. Even in the poem on Marcellus there are only two brief descriptions, neither of them as vivid as he could have made them if he had wanted to (3.18.9 f., 23 f.). Cynthia's ghost describes to him at some length the heroines of mythology with whom she associates in Hades (4.7.55–70) and explains the rules for the return of ghosts to the upper world (89–92). He gives us a picture of a lover sitting on the banks of the Styx (2.27.13 f.) and portrays Cynthia and himself sailing to the infernal lakes (2.28.39–40). There are occasional brief references to the inhabitants of Hades (1.19.13 f.; 2.1.37, 13.26; 3.19.27) and once he enumerates the lovely women whom the greedy fire has taken (2.28.49–56). His most detailed references curiously enough do not occur apropos of the theme of death but in some other connection. He describes the man who could cure him of his love as being able to help Tantalus, the Danaids, and Prometheus in their sufferings (2.1.65–70). He compares unhappy lovers to Sisyphus (2.17.5–8), or suggests that he may suffer the torments of Hades if he misunderstands his mistress (2.20.29–32). In a poem on the peaceful poet he comments on the folly of greed and refers to the great men who have been brought low by death (3.5.13–18), and in the same poem, when he is discussing the interests which he expects to have in old age, he raises the philosophical problem of whether the fabled creatures of Hades, carefully listed, really exist. It is perhaps indicative of Propertius' own point of view that in these mythological allusions his interest concentrates on the persons involved and not on the atmosphere of Hades. There is none of the gloom or chill that are, for example, characteristic of Horace's references to the underworld. Only in

the poem on Cornelia, which follows strictly conventional lines, do we find such phrases as *ianua nigra, fuscae deus aulae, lurida porta.*

The fact is that Propertius has a considerable interest in the dead, but not as they may exist elsewhere. He is interested in them in their relation to the living, whose activities he expects them to follow, and he assumes that they will preserve the emotions of their lifetimes. In other words, he appears to have had a lively belief in ghosts.[14] He himself expects to love his mistress after his death (1.19.11–12):

> illic quicquid ero, semper tua dicar imago:
> traicit et fati litora magnus amor,

and warns that he will be watching her from the grave (2.13.41–42):

> interea cave sis nos aspernata sepultos:
> non nihil ad verum conscia terra sapit.

Although he tells her that he will not be able to speak to her (2.13. 57–58),

> sed frustra mutos revocabis Cynthia, Manes:
> nam mea qui poterunt ossa minuta loqui?

elsewhere he pictures a lover returning from Hades at the call of his mistress (2.27.13–16):

> iam licet et Stygia sedeat sub harundine remex,
> cernat et infernae tristia vela ratis:
> si modo clamantis revocaverit aura puellae,
> concessum nulla lege redibit iter.

His most vivid ghost is of course Cynthia herself, who appears to him and berates him exactly as she did in life (4.7).

The same poem is also a striking example of the most characteristic element in Propertius' picture of death, his concentration on its physical aspects. Anyone who has once read this poem cannot forget the horrible picture of Cynthia's appearance. The fire of the funeral pyre has charred her dress to her side and gnawed the jewel in her ring, her lips are shrivelled by the waters of Lethe, and, when she shakes her fist at him in her rage, the frail bones rattle. Pro-

[14] It might be maintained that the passages on which I base this statement are merely examples of literary convention, but the modern reader too often falls back on this explanation of the occurrence in ancient writers of ideas which he cannot accept. The man who did not believe in ghosts was the exception in the ancient world, as he has been everywhere until comparatively recent times. Cf. Cumont (above, note 5) 1–108.

pertius' habit of associating the spirits of the dead with their remains as though their bones and ashes retained some perception or vitality (cf. 1.19.6, 18; 2.13.42, 57 f.; 4.5.3 f.; 11.20, 37, 74) comes out in Cynthia's last words to him, one of the most macabre passages he ever wrote (4.7.93–94):

nunc te possideant aliae: mox sola tenebo;
mecum eris et mixtis ossibus ossa teram.

After reading this one would really prefer to agree that

The grave's a fine and private place
But none I think do there embrace.

Propertius' constant use of bones, ashes, and dust as synonyms for the dead is not always untender. When he describes his fear that he will die before Cynthia he assures her (1.19.5–6):

non adeo leviter noster puer haesit ocellis
ut meus oblito pulvis amore vacet,

and (17–18)

quamvis te longae remorentur fata senectae,
cara tamen lacrimis ossa futura meis.

Associated with this interest in the physical representation of the dead is Propertius' interest in the actual process of dying and in the subsequent fate of the body. This is indicated sometimes by a single vivid touch, sometimes by a more detailed description. He has, for instance, several references to drowning. 1.17 is a somewhat conventional treatment of his own possible death at sea, but when in another poem he anticipates that he and Cynthia will both be drowned, he gives us in a few words a distressingly clear picture of their corpses which, for all its sang-froid, loses nothing of its effect (2.26.43):

certe isdem nudi pariter iactabimur oris.

The perennial horror of naval warfare flashes out in his reference to the bones of the men who were lost at Actium, tossed forever in the sea (2.15.44):

nec nostra Actiacum verteret ossa mare.

His dream of Cynthia drowning is much decorated with mythological allusion, but even this cannot destroy the picture of her weary

hands and her hair heavy with water weighing down her head (2.26. 1–4). His most realistic and haunting picture of such a death is however achieved in 3.7. This poem is often referred to as a lament for Paetus drowned at sea, but it is really a discussion of the lengths to which avarice drives men. It might well be described as essentially a satire in which the elegiac form and convention have required that the illustrative material should be emphasized and personalized, but have not eliminated the more brutal turn of phrase that is to be expected in satire. The satirical method is suggested in the lines introducing Paetus, which begin with a lofty touch of epic phraseology and turn to a shockingly blunt description of his fate (3.7.5–8):

> tu Paetum ad Pharios tendentem lintea portus
> obruis insano terque quaterque mari.
> nam dum te sequitur, primo miser excidit aevo,
> et nova longinquis piscibus esca natat.

As the poem continues we are spared nothing, from the birds standing over Paetus' corpse to the black water which chokes him in the dark, as he tears his finger nails clutching at a floating log. Even the artificiality of his dying words is forgotten when a wave slaps him in the mouth. An equally horrifying passage is Propertius' description of the death of the old *lena* (4.5.67–70):

> vidi ego rugoso tussim concrescere collo,
> sputaque per dentes ire cruenta cavos,
> atque animam tegetes putrem exspirare paternas:
> horruit algenti pergula curta foco.

But he can also produce a macabre effect with very little detail, or by indirection. When he threatens to kill both his mistress and himself, he does not tell us explicitly how he proposes to do it, but one line gives us a vivid tableau (2.8.26):

> hoc eodem ferro stillet uterque cruor.

In three words he gives us a revolting picture of the death of Dirce, after she has been tied to the bull: *prata cruentantur Zethi* (3.15.41). In the poem in which the dying soldier speaks to his fleeing and terrified comrade, there is not a word of description other than the reference to the *turgentia lumina* of the latter, and yet every reader must surely visualize the whole scene at once (1.21).

The fire of the funeral pyre also gives Propertius an opportunity

to exercise his powers of description. He often speaks of the flames (2.13.31; 4.11.10, 46; 2.28.56; 3.18.20), sometimes as a synonym for death as do other writers, but twice he gives us a picture of the actual effect of the fire, which derives its full force from a contrast with beauty that has been marred. One of these pictures, which occurs in the poem on Cynthia's ghost, we have already discussed (4.7). The other is in some ways more appalling, dealing as it does with living bodies willingly exposed to fire. In a satirical discussion of the avarice of woman he cites as a good example the widows of India who vie with each other for the honor of throwing themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres and concludes (3.13.21–22):

ardent victrices, et flammae pectora praebent,
imponuntque suis ora perusta viris.

In proportion to his allusions to death, Propertius makes very few generalizations about it. In the poem on Marcellus, which sounds very much as though he had written it from a sense of propriety, there are a few lines on the theme that "the paths of glory lead but to the grave," which suggest that, being bored with the topic, he had borrowed a few thoughts from Horace (3.18.22–24):

est mala sed cunctis ista terenda via est;
exoranda canis tria sunt latrantia colla,
scandenda est torvi publica cumba senis.

The accumulation of gerundives is particularly Horatian. In another passage which suggests Horace he comments on the fact that one cannot take wealth beyond the grave and recommends the enjoyment of life while it lasts, concluding (3.5.18)

optima mors, carpta[15] quae venit apta die.

He makes one generalization in a context more characteristic of himself. When he prays that Cynthia may recover from her illness, he admits that all, even the beautiful, must die (2.28.58):

longius aut propius mors sua quemque manet.

From what we have seen it becomes clear that to Propertius death is a very personal matter. He is not given to considering its nature, like Lucretius, nor its implications. He does not seem to

[15] I have here accepted, as a conscious echo of Horace, Baehrens' emendation of the *MSS* reading, *parca*. The frequent Horatian parallels in the poems of Book III suggest that Propertius had been impressed by the recently published *Odes*.

think of it as an inevitable doom towards which the human race moves, or as a shadow cast over life. The thought of death always comes to him in relation to a particular situation or person, himself or some one else, and is especially related to his thoughts of love. He never develops a train of thought from death in the abstract to a personal application, nor does he find suggestions of death in the natural world around him, as Horace, for example, does in the succession of the seasons. Perhaps one is wrong to use the word "thought" at all to describe Propertius' relation to death, for in itself it presents no problems to him. He accepts it as a simple physical fact, the end of all the sensuous beauty that meant so much to him, but not of his own personality, which he could not imagine ceasing to exist. His attitude is perhaps best seen in a poem that is remarkable for the way in which Propertius' characteristic concentration on physical experience produces a radical change in mood. 2.15 opens with a joyously sensual description of the night which he has just spent with his mistress, but the picture of her youthful beauty suggests its own mortality, and he urges that they make the most of their time (2.15.23–24):

dum nos fata sinunt, oculos satiemus amore;
nox tibi longa venit, nec reditura dies.

But even so he refuses to admit that death can end love (2.15.29–30, 36):

errat qui finem vesani quaerit amoris:
verus amor nullum novit habere modum.
. . . . . .
huius ero vivus, mortuus huius ero.

He suggests that he may even become immortal if she grants such nights again. The mention of immortality apparently brings to his mind the claims of future godhead being made for Augustus, for he continues by saying that if all men lived as he himself does, there would be no wars, nothing like Actium, and Rome would not mourn her own triumphs. This is, however, an incidental reflection, and he comes back to his main theme (2.15.49–50):

tu modo, dum lucet, fructum ne desere vitae.
omnia si dederis oscula, pauca dabis.

The *fructus vitae* is the life of the senses, and Propertius' reaction to his recognition of its ephemeral nature is clear in the haunting simile

which follows. He takes the age-old comparison of the generations of man to the leaves of the forest, and gives it a completely personal and contemporary twist. The lovers for all their vitality may die tomorrow, like the leaves that drop from the drying wreaths and float in the cups of wine, the very symbol of withered joy.

In this poem lies the clue to Propertius' treatment of death and especially of his emphasis on its physical aspects, which has led to the accusation that he is morbid. As one reads Propertius one becomes aware that to a very marked degree he apprehends the world in which he moves primarily through his senses and only secondarily by his mind. Not only in his love poems but in everything that he writes there is an awareness of sight, sound, and touch more immediate and more intimate than in any other Roman poet. Because of the acuteness of his sensuous perceptions, he thinks of death, not as the extinction of his personality, but as the loss of his body by which he has communicated with life. Naturally then he represents it in physical terms. This is no morbidity but an expression of his intense vitality.