

George Santayana's Essay on Lucretius (1910)

Post by “Joshua” of August 12, 2020 at 1:00 PM

[link](#)

I've been reading this essay diligently of late, and have borrowed a passage for use in the most recent recording for EpicureaPoetica (which, by the way, I hope to publish this afternoon).

Santayana was a Spanish-American philosopher of a Platonist bent, and his depiction of Epicurus won't win him any friends here. He slightly echoes Nietzsche in this regard. Nevertheless, I think him a deft and engaging critic of Lucretius, whom he does hold in high esteem. Those who have a good foundation in the core texts—of Epicurus, of Lucretius, of Frances Wright, and of DeWitt—will be well-served by reading it.

My intention in the coming days is to draft an outline of the essay, so if you'd prefer to save some time you can wait for that instead. A straight recording of the essay may follow. He doesn't mention Tennyson's poem, but he has shed new light on Tennyson's approach to Lucretius, by outlining his own.

Post by “Cassius” of August 12, 2020 at 1:47 PM

What an amazing coincidence that you would post this today. I woke up at 5:00 am today thinking about the phrase "those who don't remember the past are condemned to repeat it" and of wikipedia took me to Santayana. I really knew next to nothing about him but his name before this morning. I did not get time to track down the Lucretius article so that link saved me a lot of time. I am less than half way through reading it now but I see the general direction.

OK Joshua -- I know what we are up against. It is very unflattering to look at a Nietzsche or a Santayana and say that we / Cassius / Joshua are "smarter" than they are, or that "they got Epicurus wrong and we get him right" --- but on the latter point that is exactly what I conclude. We're certainly not as "smart" or as "artistic" as they were, but there was something about them that caused them to look at Epicurus and arrive at SUCH a different conclusion than did a THomas Jefferson or a Frances Wright, and while I don't hold my own abilities up to theirs, I do hold up Jefferson and Wright as being as intelligent as a Nietzsche or a Santayana.

Because this is just totally wrong-headed (from Santayana):

Quote

Now Epicurus, for the most part, hated life. His moral system, called hedonism, recommends that sort of pleasure which has no excitement and no risk about it. This ideal is modest, and even chaste, but it is not vital.

Epicurus was remarkable for his mercy, his friendliness, his utter horror of war, of sacrifice, of suffering. These are not sentiments that a genuine naturalist would be apt to share. Pity and repentance, Spinoza said, were vain and evil; what increased a man's power and his joy increased his goodness also. The naturalist will believe in a certain hardness, as Nietzsche did; he will incline to a certain scorn, as the laughter of Democritus was scornful. He will not count too scrupulously the cost of what he achieves; he will be an imperialist, rapt in the joy of achieving something. In a word, the moral hue of materialism in a formative age, or in an aggressive mind, would be aristocratic and imaginative; but in a decadent age, or in a soul that is renouncing everything, it would be, as in Epicurus, humanitarian and timidly sensual.

I am going out of order, but this is basically the Nietzschean critique, calling Epicurus a philosopher of "bereavement," of "abstinence," of "withdrawal" -

Quote

Retired in his private garden, with a few friends and disciples, he sought the ways of peace; he lived abstemiously; he spoke gently; he gave alms to the poor; he preached against wealth, against ambition, against passion. He defended free-will because he wished to exercise it in withdrawing from the world, and in not swimming with the current. He denied the supernatural, since belief in it would have a disquieting influence on the mind, and render too many things compulsory and momentous. There was no future life: the art of living wisely must not be distorted by such wild imaginings.

All things happened in due course of nature; the gods were too remote and too happy, secluded like good Epicureans, to meddle with earthly things. Nothing ruffled what Wordsworth calls their "voluptuous unconcern." Nevertheless, it was pleasant to frequent their temples. There, as in the spaces where they dwelt between the worlds, the gods were silent and beautiful, and wore the human form. Their statues, when an unhappy man gazed at them, reminded him of happiness; he was refreshed and weaned for a moment from the senseless tumult of human affairs. From those groves and hallowed sanctuaries the philosopher returned to his garden strengthened in his wisdom, happier in his isolation, more friendly and more indifferent to all the world. Thus the life of Epicurus, as St. Jerome bears witness, was "full of herbs, fruits, and

abstinences." There was a hush in it, as of bereavement. His was a philosophy of the decadence, a philosophy of negation, and of flight from the world.

And the clear drift is that Santayana is accusing Epicurus of starting with his own defeated attitude toward life and simply gravitating toward atomism because that was the theory easiest to mold to his fore-chosen conclusion of the worthlessness of life.

Quote

Although science for its own sake could not interest so monkish a nature, yet science might be useful in buttressing the faith, or in removing objections to it. Epicurus therefore departed from the reserve of Socrates, and looked for a natural philosophy that might support his ethics.

All of this is just SO wrong-headed, and says a lot more about Santayana than it does about anything else.

But Joshua this is great material to wrestle with because these ARE the central issues that determine whether Epicurus should be considered as invaluable or the height of worthlessness.

Post by "Godfrey" of August 12, 2020 at 2:25 PM

Quote

...his depiction of Epicurus won't win him any friends here.

That would be me. I read this essay a few months ago and was extremely put off by it. That being said, I'm interested to hear your take on it Joshua.

Post by "Cassius" of August 12, 2020 at 2:33 PM

Did you read the whole thing Godfrey? Not sure I am going to be able to finish it myself. However I do think that his attitude is reflective of the majority view, which is why I personally am at war with the majority view. Santayana just seems to be more forthright in stating it in the open, but I do see this attitude as the root of the whole "absence of pain" orientation.

Very few people, in my view, spend so much time talking about "absence of pain" unless they too have at root a very dark view of life. And I do NOT put Epicurus or any ancient Epicurean I am aware of in that category. My view is that it took the corruption of Judaism/Christianity to really get people moving in that direction, although at least some of the Stoics apparently were in tune with the same view.

In order to respond headlong I think it is really going to be necessary to just lay it on the line that the depravity being discussed is in the minds of these "poets" who criticize Epicurus as decadent, not in Epicurean philosophy itself. They are projecting their own sickness / depravity and are able to make a reasonable-sounding case only because the texts are left in such a fragmentary condition.

Post by "Godfrey" of August 12, 2020 at 6:19 PM

Yes I made it through the whole thing. I kept expecting it to get better but it never did. 😊

I'd suggest bailing on reading it and wait for what Joshua has to say. I imagine he'll be able to discover some nuance in the piece, at least more than I could!

Post by "Cassius" of August 12, 2020 at 7:00 PM

I bet I will wish I had followed your suggestion, Godfrey. I will read a little further:

THIS is so much like I read in Nietzsche, and it is just utterly cynical, depressing, acidic - and infuriating:

Quote

There is another element in this polemic against immortality which, while highly interesting and characteristic of a decadent age, betrays a very one-sided and, at bottom, untenable ideal. This element is the fear of life. Epicurus had been a pure and tender moralist, but pusillanimous. He was so afraid of hurting and of being hurt, so afraid of running risks or tempting fortune, that he wished to prove that human life was a brief business, not subject to any great transformations, nor capable of any great achievements. He taught accordingly that the atoms had produced already all the animals they could produce, for though infinite in number the atoms were of few kinds. Consequently the possible sorts of being were finite and soon exhausted; this world,

though on the eve of destruction, was of recent date. The worlds around it, or to be produced in future, could not afford anything essentially different. All the suns were much alike, and there was nothing new under them. We need not, then, fear the world; it is an explored and domestic scene, — a home, a little garden, six feet of earth for a man to stretch in. If people rage and make a great noise, it is not because there is much to win, or much to fear, but because people are mad. Let me not be mad, thought Epicurus; let me be reasonable, cultivating sentiments appropriate to a mortal who inhabits a world morally comfortable and small, and physically poor in its infinite monotony.

/aside -

OH - I also want to note that I just now realized that this transcript of Santayana is on [Peter St Andre's page](#). I have a lot of respect for him but I don't really know where, in the end, he comes down....

/ end of aside

OK - Every bit of this is just so clearly revealing that it is SANTAYANA's personality to be so "sensitive" that he cannot seem to think of humanity except for its "ghastly" and "ridiculous" aspects..... I remember a long time ago that [Elayne](#) made a comment about being overly "emotive" and that is exactly what comes to my mind now -- I will have to see if I can find her comment or ask her....

Quote

To all this, perhaps, Memmius, or some other recalcitrant reader, might retort that what he shrank from was not the metaphysical state of being dead, but the very real agony of dying. Dying is something ghastly, as being born is something ridiculous; and, even if no pain were involved in quitting or entering this world, we might still say what Dante's Francesca says of it: *Il modo ancor m' offende*, — "I shudder at the way of it." Lucretius, for his part, makes no attempt to show that everything is as it should be; and if our way of coming into this life is ignoble, and our way of leaving it pitiful, that is no fault of his nor of his philosophy.

So Santayana, the master of overemotive sappiness, says that EPICURUS is the one who "feared life" and "missed" the point? I suppose this is just the Nietzsche argument amplified by an eloquent voice:

Quote

But the radical fear of death, I venture to think, is something quite different. It is the love of life. Epicurus, who feared life, seems to have missed here the primordial and colossal force he was fighting against. Had he perceived that force, he would have been obliged to meet it in a more radical way, by an enveloping movement, as it were, and an attack from the rear. The love of life is not something rational, or founded on experience of life. It is something antecedent and spontaneous. It is that Venus Genetrix which covers the earth with its flora and fauna. It teaches every animal to seek its food and its mate, and to protect its offspring; as also to resist or fly from all injury to the body, and most of all from threatened death. It is the original impulse by which good is discriminated from evil, and hope from fear.

OK so THIS is the concluding paragraph?

Quote

The maxim of Lucretius, that nothing arises save by the death of something else, meets us still in our crawling immortality. And his art of accepting and enjoying what the conditions of our being afford also has a perennial application. Dante, the poet of faith, will tell us that we must find our peace in the will that gives us our limited portion. Goethe, the poet of romantic experience, will tell us that we must renounce, renounce perpetually. Thus wisdom clothes the same moral truths in many cosmic parables. The doctrines of philosophers disagree where they are literal and arbitrary, — mere guesses about the unknown; but they agree or complete one another where they are expressive or symbolic, thoughts wrung by experience from the hearts of poets. Then all philosophies alike are ways of meeting and recording the same flux of images, the same vicissitudes of good and evil, which will visit all generations, while man is man.

There's so much that is important in dissecting and understanding this attitude of Santayana, but I find it so - i'll use the word "acidic" or "corrosive" this time. I'm concluding that what I referenced above as Elayne's over-emotiveness" is near the heart of the issue. It may be that what we're dealing with here is a deep emotional trait that is simply so foreign to the "love of life" attitude that it just can't be fully experienced, much less understood, but someone who doesn't have it. Maybe in the end there are "Epicurean" characters and "Stoic" characters, and all the communication and work to understand in the end cannot bridge them.

Temporarily I will summarize that maybe the issue here is "feeling emotion for the sake of feeling emotion" which I do not think is at all the same as "feeling for the sake of pleasure." Or maybe it is actually a kind of hyper-rationalization of emotion from someone who (in my view at least) doesn't even feel emotion in the same way as I am familiar with -- it is almost as if this is written by a computer that is trying to understand the point of emotion -- which knows that it

"should" understand emotion, but at some point in the end just doesn't "connect" in the same way that I believe I do with mine.

I see a probably unbridgeable divide here, but I also think I see a subject that is hugely productive to explore, as it probably explains a great many things about why some people just in the end "can't get along."

Edit: In searching I can't find where Elayne used the word "emotive" here. Maybe it was on Facebook, or maybe it was as somewhat different word, but I am almost certain that was the sense that she was describing. Whether that applies here is another question, but for now that's the best way I can summarize what I am thinking..

Post by "Don" of August 12, 2020 at 8:16 PM

I did a word search for "Epicurus" and skimmed those sections. It seems like Santayana just took the worst stereotypes of Epicurus and ran with that. I see a couple of his points that could be refuted by one or two PDs or Vatican Sayings. Just seems like sloppy scholarship.

Post by "Cassius" of August 12, 2020 at 9:38 PM

Thank you for weighing in Don. The document is not easy reading. Santayana is obviously a brilliant man, and what i am reading strikes me as a long-form extrapolation of arguments made by the later Nietzsche in considering Epicurus a "decadent." That's why I made my initial comment about being wary of suggesting that I or any of us are "smarter" than Santayana or Nietzsche. I don't think what we're talking about is a division by levels of intelligence.

I think this goes much deeper than scholarship issues. The Dewitt non-depressive interpretation of Epicurus is not rocket science -- neither Jefferson nor Wright display it. There's something much deeper here. What Dewitt (just to use one example) could see, Nietzsche and Santayana certainly could have seen as well -- there is an explanation for why they didn't, and that's what I want to understand, or at least come up with a working theory.

Depending on what was really going on in Epicurus' criticism of "poetry," that might be one part of the answer. Maybe there is something about a personality which is so taken by "flights of fancy" that makes such a character inhospitable to seeing Epicurus in a positive way.

Post by “Don” of August 12, 2020 at 10:38 PM

You make very good points, [Cassius](#) ! I believe I was a little too cavalier in my assessment.

As to your mention of poetry, I just posted in the "arts" threads a paper I discovered that addresses Epicurus's views on the arts. I think the author makes some strong points.

Post by “Cassius” of August 13, 2020 at 7:08 AM

After reading that article Don I agree it is very relevant and helpful, [so here is a direct link to that thread](#). As I say in my comment there I don't care for the title or for the part discussing modern viewpoints, but the part on Epicurus/Lucretius contains several very helpful observations.

Post by “Cassius” of August 13, 2020 at 9:09 AM

Seems appropriate to say this: Joshua I hope that the critical comments on this thread don't amount to a turn-off to you toward proceeding with your podcast on this or other works. I suppose someone could say that "commenting on poetry" might be the very original purpose of the podcast, and some of these comments would seem to argue against doing that.

But I would think that the purpose point you were pursuing was to advance the understanding of Epicurus by critical review of the poetry, and diagnosing the good parts from the bad parts in the poetry, and that seems to me to be a very worthy goal especially in our current modern world context. The poets have largely "won" and this Santayana negative view of Epicurus is supreme in most corners. What might have been "ignorable" in the past is probably a necessity to confront today before we can go any further in the "positive" understanding or promotion of Epicurus

For example if you did nothing further but explore and attempt to diagnose how and why Santayana thought that Epicurus "feared" and "hated" life, then that would be a highly worthwhile objective.

[Don](#) and [Godfrey](#) what do you think about this?

Post by “Don” of August 13, 2020 at 11:54 AM

If [Joshua](#) gets pleasure from the work, that's what's most important!

[Cassius](#) , you do raise good points about discovered the how and why different modern (in the widest sense) authors have such divergent views of Epicurus: DeWitt/Jefferson/Wright vs Santayana/Nietzsche/ad nauseum. And there seems to be historical precedent for "setting the record straight" even during Epicurus's lifetime.

I did find that paper I found interesting because it does seem to highlight the need to take pleasure in the arts without analyzing them too much. However, if our enjoyment can be enhanced or enriched by a deeper understanding by someone's labors, I don't see a conflict (at least as I write this 😊)

Post by “Joshua” of August 13, 2020 at 1:21 PM

I'll try to reply thoroughly to all of these comments when I get the time, but I'll sketch an outline of my thoughts here as they come to me.

First, of course, I dismiss his portrayal of Epicurus. We have the benefit of DeWitt, and Santayana did not. That doesn't excuse what Don calls sloppy scholarship, but his position was *de rigueur* for the time. But I'm certainly not here to make excuses for him!

It's his insight into Lucretius that is for me worthwhile. Not Lucretius as an Epicurean, perhaps, but Lucretius as a materialist, and, above all, as a poet of nature.

His exploration of the Venus/Mars diad, as a representation of the ongoing atomic cycle of emergence and dissolution, is illustrative of what I mean. I think that we all appreciate the significance of Venus as an enduring metaphor for the fertility of atomic "re-creation", but how much of our time do we give to its corrolary? Santayana makes an interesting proposition; assuming that Lucretius' poem is truly unfinished, did he plan to cap it off with an elegy for creation and a final balancing hymn to Mars? I can't say—and it may be that in ending the poem with the plague in Athens, Lucretius really did end the poem with Mars triumphant, and Venus, for a time, brought low. I know that I, for one, will be enriched by Santayana's explication on these lines when I again read Lucretius.

I do think that Santayana gets something really wrong in all of this—

Quote

Life, however, belongs to form, and not to matter; or in the language of Lucretius, life is an eventum, a redundant ideal product or incidental aspect, involved in the equilibration of matter; as the throw of sixes is an eventum, a redundant ideal product or incidental aspect, occasionally involved in shaking a dice-box. Yet, as this throw makes the acme and best possible issue of a game of dice, so life is the acme and best possible issue of the dance of atoms; and it is from the point of view of this eventum that the whole process is viewed by us, and is judged.

How Santayana can write these words, and also hold that Lucretius despised life, is beyond me. And this is another aspect of Lucretius; it is too easy to miss the forest for the trees. As with Lucretius' love of pleasure, so it is with his love of life: the poem itself—the colossal and imaginative sweep of his art—is the best evidence there is for his zest and zeal. His whole poem, in form and finish, is better evidence even than the arguments it contains. How could anyone who really despised life dedicate his small hours to the crafting of 7,000 lines of verse, of unsurpassed beauty and grandeur?

But here again Santayana had the poor fortune to write in that long darkness, before DeWitt arose to shed his light; pleasure, DeWitt says in correction, is the telos. The summum bonum is life itself.

And yet there is more still to admire in Santayana's essay. In general, the further he gets from the subject of Epicurus, the more useful his analysis. His examination of Lucretius as a poet of nature is of a high order. His contrast of Lucretius with Shakespeare, Shelley, and Wordsworth is full of insight.

His contrast of Lucretius with Horace on the subject of friendship is noteworthy as well.

Anyway, when I finally get around to editing and publishing the next episode some of this will get a little clearer.

Post by “Cassius” of August 13, 2020 at 1:31 PM

You make excellent points Joshua and sounds to me that you are on a good path. I agree that the parts that you are talking about contain useful observations that are well worth discussing and exploring.

However even though I am someone who people probably think aspires to be the Archbishop of the Church of DeWitt, even I would shy away from giving him as much credit as you may be

implying in what you wrote above 😊

I think the reason I embrace DeWitt's work so enthusiastically is that in part so much of what he says is just a "common sense" interpretation of Epicurus. I don't know that DeWitt himself saw himself as possessing extraordinary insight -- he certainly know that he was in the minority facing a difficult majority, but I don't think he thought that he was blessed with any peculiar insight that ought not to have been fairly obvious to any intelligent person who reads the text rather than relying on the commentaries.

So I do think that there is something much more extensive here than just that we have had access to DeWitt. There is a lot to think about here so it's great that you are working on it!

Post by “Godfrey” of August 13, 2020 at 2:18 PM

It's been a while and I don't recall the details of the Santayana essay. What's interesting to me in this discussion is the connection between excellent scholarship in some aspects of the essay combined with the total dismissal of Epicurus in other parts. It seems as though one devoted to excelling in scholarship just can't comprehend or stomach the ultimate simplicity and obviousness of Epicurus' insights.

Of course part of Epicurus' project was to show the futility of over-reliance on the intellect. So the intellectual probably feels compelled to demean and discredit Epicurus. The tragedy, to me, is how over the millennia those who make a fancy argument can blind so many to basic truths.

Post by “Joshua” of August 13, 2020 at 2:49 PM

It may have been common sense (although I confess to disliking that term!), but consider that Frances Wright was the *only* writer whose work survives between antiquity and DeWitt—that is to say, for nearly 2,000 years—to have attempted publicly to redeem Epicurus' whole system and reputation, on his own genuine terms.

One other thing I should mention; Santayana's essay was one out of three in a book called *Three Philosophical Poets*. I haven't read the other two, but here is the description from the Doubleday edition published 1953;

Quote

One of the world's most renowned and provocative thinkers discusses Lucretius, the materialist; Dante, the supernaturalist; and Goethe, the romanticist; and thereby introduces the three dominant systems of Western philosophy--the sources of our major speculative traditions. This work serves the newcomer to the history of philosophy as an admirable introduction to the field, and for the more advanced reader it is a most concise and meaningful interpretation of these three great philosophical poets.

Santayana was himself a materialist, in spite of his Platonism, and is generally considered to have given Lucretius the most favorable review of the three. Lucretius was a supreme poet, and a materialist—but also an Epicurean. Santayana was an admirer of good poetry, as well as a materialist; but his other views were incompatible with Epicureanism. Cassius mentions 'something more extensive' going on, and I think it's partially this—the narcissism of small differences. Santayana exposes himself to this diagnosis explicitly, by suggesting that a materialist who was not an Epicurean would have opened up richer fields for poetic exploration than Lucretius was willing or able to pursue.

And the capstone of all this seeming paradox? A quote from one of Santayana's novels, from a character that critic's call his "alter-ego";

Quote

I have the Epicurean contentment, which is not far removed from asceticism.

Oliver Wendell Holmes was a great admirer of Santayana, but sums him up thus;

Quote

He has a patronizing tone—as of one who saw through himself but didn't expect others to.

He stands with Nietzsche in a place of eminence, in the Rogue's gallery of Epicurus' detractors—and for that reason alone is worth reading.

Post by “Cassius” of August 13, 2020 at 3:06 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

It seems as though one devoted to excelling in scholarship just can't comprehend or stomach the ultimate simplicity and obviousness of Epicurus' insights.

There is a statement in *A Few Days in Athens* to Very similar effect:

"It might seem strange," said Metrodorus, "that the pedantry of Aristotle should find so many imitators, and his dark sayings so many believers, in a city, too, now graced and enlightened by the simple language, and simple doctrines of an Epicurus. — But the language of truth is too simple for inexperienced ears. We start in search of knowledge, like the demigods of old in search of adventure, prepared to encounter giants, to scale mountains, to pierce into Tartarean gulfs, and to carry off our prize from the grip of some dark enchanter, invulnerable to all save to charmed weapons and deity-gifted assailants. To find none of all these things, but, in their stead, a smooth road through a pleasant country, with a familiar guide to direct our curiosity, and point out the beauties of the landscape, disappoints us of all exploit and all notoriety; and our vanity turns but too often from the fair and open champaigne, into error's dark labyrinths, where we mistake mystery for wisdom, pedantry for knowledge, and prejudice for virtue."

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

Of course part of Epicurus' project was to show the futility of over-reliance on the intellect. So the intellectual probably feels compelled to demean and discredit Epicurus. The tragedy, to me, is how over the millennia those who make a fancy argument can blind so many to basic truths.

Yes I agree. The words "intellect" and "intellectual" may or may not be overbroad here, but I agree with the general thrust.

[Quote from JJElbert](#)

—the narcissism of small differences.

YES I do think that is a good way to look at it. People get wedded to their own particular perspective in strange ways.

Post by "Cassius" of August 13, 2020 at 3:08 PM

[Quote from JJElbert](#)

consider that Frances Wright was the only writer whose work survives between antiquity and DeWitt—that is to say, for nearly 2,000 years—to have attempted publicly to redeem Epicurus' whole system and reputation, on his own genuine terms.

This is an important point too. Sometimes I think the letter to Cosma Raimondi qualifies, and also that work (forget the name at the moment) by Lorenzo Valli (sp?) but you're right that Wright stands much more clearly in this category.

Post by “Cassius” of August 13, 2020 at 3:11 PM

I was referring to Lorenzo Valla's ["On The True and The False Good"](#), which probably needs a place of its own here - I will add it

Added to the forum now at this link: [On Pleasure / On The True and The False Good - Lorenzo Valla](#)

Post by “Joshua” of August 13, 2020 at 3:32 PM

Something I'm curious about; do we know when Thomas Jefferson's letter to William Short first became widely available? The National Archives didn't attempt a definitive collection of his papers until 1943.

Post by “Cassius” of August 13, 2020 at 4:44 PM

Excellent question. I have a feeling that question is best answered by our resident research expert, [Don](#) !

Post by “Don” of August 13, 2020 at 6:20 PM

LOL. I tried to look today briefly at work (It's a reference question, right?) Nothing yet but stay tuned.

Post by “Don” of August 13, 2020 at 7:08 PM

[Papers of Thomas Jefferson](#)

Quote

The Papers of Thomas Jefferson is the definitive edition of the papers of the author of the Declaration of Independence, our nation’s third president. **Begun in 1943 as the first modern historical documentary edition**, the project includes not only the letters Jefferson wrote but also those he received. Julian P. Boyd, librarian, scholar of the Declaration of Independence, and first editor, designed an edition that would provide accurate texts with accompanying historical context. With the **publication of the first volume in 1950** and the **first volume of the Retirement Series in 2004**, these volumes print, summarize, note, or otherwise account for virtually every document Jefferson wrote and received. Today, the project continues publishing at least two volumes a year...

But I realize this doesn't answer our question. The only thing this does is tell us when they seem to have been collected and disseminated in a "modern" context. Still looking...

Post by “Cassius” of August 13, 2020 at 7:29 PM

Why am I thinking that I remember somewhere that when Jefferson died he was in terrible financial condition, so perhaps his papers were auctioned off pretty early and therefore might also have been published fairly early too..... But I haven't had a chance to look into it yet either. Probably one of these editions has an introduction that explains the history.

Post by “Don” of August 13, 2020 at 8:40 PM

Okay, this may be significant [from Wikipedia](#):

Quote

The [Papers of Thomas Jefferson] grew out of a plan developed in 1943 by Julian P. Boyd, the chief librarian of Princeton University, a scholar of the drafting of the Declaration of Independence, and the historian of the Thomas Jefferson Bicentennial Commission. The Commission tasked Boyd with studying whether or not a comprehensive collection of Jefferson's papers would be feasible. **Prior to this less than 20% of Jefferson's papers had been published in any format** and what had been published had been highly selective and thinly or poorly annotated.

So that begins to address collections of his papers.

[This from Monticello](#) also leads me to believe the private letters written in retirement were not in wide circulation.

Quote

Two-thirds of the documents written by Jefferson are being published for the first time [in 2004], and the figure for letters he received is even higher.

And this [additional info from Monticello summarizes the editions of Jefferson's writings back to the early 1800s](#).

And finally, it looks like the 1819 Epicureanism letter to short was published in 1905:

Text: The Writings of Thomas Jefferson (ed. A. A. Lipscome and A. E. Bergh) Volume XV (Washington DC: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association 1905) pp. 219-224. ([See footnote here.](#))

Post by “Joshua” of August 13, 2020 at 10:41 PM

You are correct about his penury, Cassius—I recently read a book called *Measuring America* in which Jefferson figured prominently—but it was his personal library that he sold to Congress. The British had just burned the capital in the War of 1812, including the Library of Congress, and Jefferson's private collection was the largest in North America. It seemed like a perfect match—except that many in Congress grumbled at the deal, complaining that many of Jefferson's books were far too irreligious, far too politically radical (he was highly sympathetic to

the bloodsoaked revolution in France), and far too unreadable; a high percentage of them were not in English. 😊 In fact, at least five of these books were copies of Lucretius, in Latin.

I don't think his letters would have been included in this sale, however.

Post by “Don” of August 14, 2020 at 7:48 AM

[Joshua](#) is absolutely right. It was just Jefferson's library that he offered for sale to Congress. [Here's an online exhibit about that process from the Library of Congress site.](#)

I also added some edits with more info about his papers and letters in my previous post above.

As a side note: The Library of Congress is one of my favorite places in DC. The history, the architecture, the collections! If you've never been there - and IF we ever get to travel again - you owe it to yourself to visit if you're in DC. And the bar to get a Reader's Card is low, and that gets you into the actual Reading Room and collections.

Post by “Cassius” of August 14, 2020 at 8:06 AM

I wonder if it is possible that the jefferson-adams letters were published earlier. Although not as explicit as the William Short letter, there is some very Epicurean material in those, particularly these two:

- [Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, July 5, 1814](#) Here Jefferson denounces Plato (labeling *The Republic* as full of “whimsies, puerilities, and unintelligible jargon”) and stating of the Platonisms grafted into Christian theology that “nonsense can never be explained.”

- [Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, August 15, 1820](#) Here Jefferson complains to Adams about Christian theology and states that “To talk of *immaterial* existences is to talk of *nothings*. To say that the human soul, angels, god, are immaterial, is to say they are *nothings*, or that there is no god, no angels, no soul. I cannot reason otherwise.”

Post by “Elayne” of August 16, 2020 at 9:35 AM

[Cassius](#) I think you are remembering when I teasingly said Nietzsche was being "emo"-- which is not just emotive but over the top weepy and introspective pop music. And somebody got mad at me for being disrespectful to Nietzsche. Lol!

Post by "Cassius" of August 17, 2020 at 12:23 PM

That is exactly what I was remembering Elayne -- thank you!