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## The QUARREL between POETRY and PHILOSOPHY

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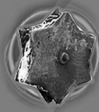
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*An Unpolitical Political Philosophy?  
Some Remarks on Leo Strauss'  
«Notes on Lucretius»<sup>1</sup>*

Marco Menon

Abstract

*In the first part of this paper, I tackle the problem represented by Leo Strauss' commentary on Lucretius' poem De Rerum Natura. Therefore, I try to demonstrate how it is possible to understand Epicurean poetry as political philosophy, that is, as political action on behalf of philosophy. Poetry acts as some kind of mediator between the city and philosophy, that is, by sweetening the repulsive truth concerning the nature of things. Lucretius' poem introduces therefore young readers to the philosophical way of life; at the same time, the Epicurean teaching may attract unjust and powerful men by promising them liberation from the terrors of religion. In the last paragraph, I concentrate on the peculiar knowledge of man's soul gained by poetic wisdom.*

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Prof. Heinrich Meier, the Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung, Prof. Raimondo Cubeddu, Dr. Ryan Scheerlinck, Marco Lass, the editors of Odradek, and the anonymous reader, for their precious help and invaluable support.

## 1. The Problem of Lucretius

In Leo Strauss' work, there are primarily two writings which are commonly identified as the comprehensive treatment of the quarrel between philosophy and poetry: *The City and Man*, more precisely the pages addressing Books II and X of Plato's *Republic*, and *Socrates and Aristophanes*, where the same controversy is examined addressing the comedies of Aristophanes.

In Strauss' mature writings there are other places where not so much the quarrel as the relationship between philosophy and poetry, in a broader sense, is at least touched upon. Halevi is considered a poet (who writes in defense of the Jewish faith) in the essay *The Law of Reason in the Kuzari*<sup>1</sup>; Machiavelli appears as a comedian in Strauss' brief reading of *La Mandragola*<sup>2</sup>. However, the most striking example of a Straussian commentary on a poetic work, besides *Socrates and Aristophanes*, is represented by Chapter 5 of the work *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*. This chapter features the title *Notes on Lucretius*.

Strauss' interest in Lucretius dates back to the 1920's, as evidenced by the recurring references to

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1 Cfr. Strauss L. (1952), p. 104.

2 Cfr. Strauss L. (1958), pp. 284-85.

the poet in *Die Religionskritik Spinozas*, which was written between 1925 and 1928. A more intense confrontation, especially after the rediscovery of the art of writing, can be traced back at least to the end of the 1940's, as far as we can conclude from the correspondence with Voegelin and Klein<sup>3</sup>.

In those days, Strauss considered the work of the Roman poet as

the purest and most glorious expression of the attitude that elicits consolation from the utterly hopeless truth, on the basis of its being only the truth – there is no idea of the use of the hopeless, godless truth for some special social purpose, as is almost always the case with other fashions and trends; nor is there any aestheticism or sentimentality<sup>4</sup>.

The *De Rerum Natura* also plays a role of some importance in the reconstruction presented in *Natural Right and History*, where it is defined as «the greatest document of philosophic conventionalism»<sup>5</sup>.

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3 Strauss had apparently been working on the *De Rerum Natura* for almost twenty years, from 1949 until 1968: cfr. Lastra A. (2000), p. 163. To my knowledge, Antonio Lastra is the only scholar who faced in detail the issue of the relationship between Leo Strauss and Lucretius (see in particular *ivi*, pp. 225-232). The real, esoteric importance of Lucretius for Strauss would be such as to make Lastra assert that «Lucrecio es, en realidad, el Reimarus de Strauss» (*ivi*, p. 227). On Strauss' Lucretius, see as well Cubeddu R. (2014), p. 248 n4.

4 Strauss L., Voegelin E. (1993), p. 62.

5 Strauss L. (1953), p. 111. See *ivi*, p. 93: «The discovery of nature or of the fundamental distinction between nature and convention is the necessary condition for the emergence of the idea of natural right. But it is not its sufficient condition: all right might be conventional. This is the theme of the basic controversy in political philosophy: Is there any natural right? It seems

We must therefore ask ourselves in which respect Lucretius' philosophical poem is considered in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*. In this work, it occupies the longest chapter and, at the same time, the center together with *How to Begin to Study The Guide of the Perplexed*<sup>6</sup>. In this regard, the brief *Preface to Liberalism* may be enlightening.

In the first place, Strauss articulates the political difference between conservatives and liberals, that is, between conservatives and progressivists. Therefore, he introduces the distinction between liberal education and political liberalism and, thus, demonstrates how liberal education and political conservatism fight on the same side against the progressivists.

Finally, he explains the contents of his book. *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* is dedicated to the confrontation between liberal education and political liberalism (cfr. the subject of Chapters 1, 2, 3 with the Chapters 8, 9, 10), but its core concerns the art of writing (Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7)<sup>7</sup>. In these four central chapters, dedicated to Plato's *Minos*, Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, Maimonides' *Guide*

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that the answer which prevailed prior to Socrates was the negative one, i.e., the view which we have called 'conventionalism'».

6 We are tempted to suggest that if we count the *Preface* as a chapter, *Notes on Lucretius* is the center of the book. In turn, *Notes on Lucretius* consists of seven parts; the fourth is dedicated to the only book in which the poet addresses Epicurus: «The peak is in the center», Strauss L. (1968), p. 104.

7 *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* has been classified as Strauss' most exoteric book: cfr. Lastra A. (2000), pp. 19, 225n193.



of the *Perplexed*, and Marsilius of Padua's *Defensor Pacis*, Strauss illustrates «the liberalism of pre-modern thinkers by elucidating some examples of their art of writing»<sup>8</sup>.

On this basis we may assume that the *De Rerum Natura* is considered as an example of the art of writing of pre-modern thinkers and as an example of liberalism understood as liberal education. However, this would lead us to the further conclusion, according to which Strauss is presenting to his readers «the fundamental difference between classical and modern political philosophy»<sup>9</sup>. The *De Rerum Natura* would then be a work of political philosophy. But in which sense can this poem be considered a work of proper political philosophy? In the following remarks, I will try to articulate this problem and find a possible answer to this question.

## 2. The Two Meanings of Political Philosophy

Lucretius' poem is not traditionally recognized as a work of political philosophy similar to Plato's *Republic*, to use a paradigmatic example.

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<sup>8</sup> Strauss L. (1968), p. X. *Notes on Lucretius* is the only chapter out of this subsection to deserve a brief introduction. It seems that such a study should be somehow justified in a context such as that of *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

Hobbes worried that his *Leviathan* could remind the reader of the *Politeia*, certainly not of the *De Rerum Natura*<sup>10</sup>. Is it possible to talk about political philosophy, taking one's bearings from the fact that the *De Rerum Natura* is the fundamental document of philosophical conventionalism? The answer is in the negative, for philosophical conventionalism is not yet political philosophy: it belongs to the so-called anti-idealist tradition, which «was not political», nor «public spirited»<sup>11</sup>.

In order for a philosophical work to be considered *political*, it is not enough that it discusses issues such as the nature of political things, justice, the right way of life and the relationship between the individual and society, just as philosophical conventionalism does. To become political, at least following the way Hobbes understood political philosophy, philosophy should «preserve the orientation of statemen while enlarging their views»<sup>12</sup>.

To see if, and to what extent Strauss may agree with Hobbes, we must turn to *What is Political Philosophy?*. There, Strauss distinguishes between two meanings, the ordinary one and the profound one, of political philosophy. The first definition corresponds to the political philosophy recognized as such by Hobbes, a definition according to which

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10 Cfr. Strauss L. (1953), p. 168.

11 *Ibidem*.

12 *Ibidem*.

the *De Rerum Natura* cannot be understood as a work of political philosophy:

In the expression ‘political philosophy’, ‘philosophy’ indicates the manner of treatment: a treatment which both goes to the roots and is comprehensive; ‘political’ indicates both the subject matter and the function: political philosophy deals with political matters in a manner that is meant to be relevant for political life; therefore its subject must be identical with the goal, the ultimate goal of political action [...]. Political philosophy is the attempt truly to know both the nature of political things and the right, or the good, political order<sup>13</sup>.

Lucretius’ poem would be only «a poetic exposition of Epicurean philosophy»<sup>14</sup>, not aimed at the ultimate goal of political life, i.e., the pursuit of the common good: it is in this sense that this work lacks public spiritedness. Lucretius fails to raise «the guiding question» of classical political philosophy, «the question of the best political order»<sup>15</sup>. However, the possibility still remains of considering the *De Rerum Natura* as a work of political philosophy. We must refer to the complementary definition of political philosophy that Strauss introduces in his essay *On Classical Political Philosophy*:

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<sup>13</sup> Strauss L. (1959), pp. 10, 12.

<sup>14</sup> Strauss L. (1968), p. 76.

<sup>15</sup> Strauss L. (1959), p. 79.

I say, ‘political philosophy’ means primarily not the philosophic treatment of politics, but the political, or popular, treatment of philosophy, or the political introduction to philosophy – the attempt to lead the qualified citizens, or rather their qualified sons, from the political life to the philosophic life. This deeper meaning of ‘political philosophy’ tallies well with its ordinary meaning, for in both cases ‘political philosophy’ culminates in the praise of the philosophic life<sup>16</sup>.

Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*, as poetic presentation of Epicurus’ philosophy, can therefore tentatively be classified as a peculiar kind of popular treatment of philosophy.

But we cannot leave it at that. The poem is also an introduction to the philosophical way of life, as Strauss explicitly maintains in the opening of his essay: «The poet leads his reader toward Epicureanism; he makes him ascend to Epicureanism. [...] Memmius, a Roman of noble descent [...] is to ascend from being a Roman to being an Epicurean»<sup>17</sup>.

This introduction to the philosophical way of life takes on a paradigmatic character: what could be more political than belonging to the nobility of the most political community ever?<sup>18</sup> The ascent

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<sup>16</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 93–94.

<sup>17</sup> Strauss L. (1968), p. 76.

<sup>18</sup> Cfr. Strauss L. (1958), p. 118.

of Memmius is, then, the ascent from the political life *par excellence* (being a Roman citizen of noble descent) to the unpolitical life *par excellence*, i.e., Epicureanism (or the philosophical life). So far, Lucretius' poem seems to deserve to be classified as a work of political philosophy, that is, of political philosophy understood as both a popular presentation of philosophy and an introduction to the philosophical way of life.

### 3. The Politics of Friendship of the Philosophic Poet

At a superficial glance, one would be tempted to say that Lucretius replaces the discussion of the good political order with poetry. We may, therefore, suggest a further distinction in the meaning of popular presentation, a distinction we have already hinted at. Philosophy can be presented to the non-philosophers by means of utility or beauty.

Therefore, the philosophical way of life could be presented before the tribunal of the city in a political way, i.e. discussing the fundamental political problem, or in a poetical way. Lucretius becomes a mediator between Rome and Epicurus by means of poetry. But how can he be effective without addressing the issue of the best political

order, that is, the question of justice? We must ask if it is possible to conceive of a political philosophy which is ‘only’ an introduction to the philosophical way of life, and not, at the same time, a philosophical inquiry into the best political order. Does the concept of political philosophy necessarily include, at the same time, both aspects: the ordinary and the profound? Are the two meanings, or aspects, of political philosophy distinguishable but not separable? Is an introduction to the philosophical way of life therefore popular precisely because it is *political*, i.e., precisely by being a discussion of the best political order or by assuming the perspective of the politician?<sup>19</sup>

In other words, if every presentation, or public defense, of philosophy is some kind of political action in the name of philosophy<sup>20</sup>, can we conceive of a political philosophy in the full sense that is not public spirited? Does it make sense to talk about an *unpolitical* political philosophy?

Let us therefore consider, for the sake of argument, Lucretius’ poetic action from the perspective of public-spirited political philosophy, in order to ferret out the nature of his popular approach<sup>21</sup>. With the question regarding the best

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19 Cfr. Strauss L. (1945), p. 358.

20 Cfr. Strauss L. (1959), p. 126.

21 It seems helpful, at this point, to recollect the major differences between Plato and Lucretius in order to identify the peculiar character of Lucretius’ philosophical action. Socrates and Plato were, respectively, teacher and disciple;

regime, classical political philosophy culminates in the praise of the philosopher: all evils will disappear from the city if philosophers become kings<sup>22</sup>. That is to say that the philosopher, or the study of philosophy, is of utmost importance for the well-being of the city, or that the philosopher, far from abandoning himself to a harmful idleness, is the best of citizens, the true statesman.

Now, this argument does nothing but defend the philosophical way of life in the terms required by the political life. It answers the question ‘Why is philosophy good for life?’ And since human life means living together, this question amounts to ‘Why is philosophy good for political life?’<sup>23</sup> Let us try to raise the same question referring to the case of Lucretius. Why should Memmius, the descendant of a noble Roman family, deal with Epicureanism?

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between Lucretius and Epicurus there was no human relationship. Moreover, Socrates wrote nothing; Epicurus, on the contrary, did. Indeed, Epicurus himself would have provided a popular, that is, poetical, presentation of his teaching by introducing his peculiar theology, as Strauss himself seems to concede (see Strauss L. [1968], p. 134; on the condemnation of poetry by Epicurus, see Lienhard J. [1969]). Also, and this is perhaps the crucial point, the fundamental events to which Plato responds with his work are Socrates’ trial, conviction and death. Nothing comparable happened to Epicurus. On the contrary, and to the amazement of Augustine, Epicurus was tolerated in Athens, perhaps because he carefully paid lip-service to the fundamental religious views of his time (cfr. Colman J. [2012], pp. 12, 135; on the same issue, cfr. also Summers K. [1995], in particular see pp. 45-46, and Nichols J. [1976], p. 155n97). To put it differently: to an event of unsurpassed importance in the history of philosophy, Plato replied with the invention of political philosophy, that is, taming poetry in order to make it ministerial poetry in defense of the philosophical life (cfr. Strauss L. [1966], p. 314).

<sup>22</sup> Cfr. Strauss L. (1964), p. 122.

<sup>23</sup> Cfr. Strauss L. (1959), pp. 92-93; Strauss L. (1945), p. 366.

Why should Memmius have an interest in the nature of things?

Asking oneself why a Roman citizen should care for philosophy is equivalent to the aforementioned question ‘How can philosophy be good for a Roman citizen?’<sup>24</sup> The issue is highly problematic because Epicureanism’s great contribution to human life is supposed to amount to, according to Lucretius, the liberation from the terrors of religion.

How is it possible that the denial of the gods of the city may be good for the city? The denial of the gods of the city is an act of impiety, or a crime<sup>25</sup>. We are therefore puzzled by the fact that Lucretius’ presentation of philosophy openly dismisses the defensive character of political philosophy in its deeper meaning.

For, as Strauss writes, such a defense consists «in satisfying the city that the philosophers are not atheists, that they do not desecrate everything sacred to the city, that they reverence what the city reverences»<sup>26</sup>.

Lucretius’ counterargument amounts to showing that religion has committed more crimes than unbelief has done. But this means that even unbelief has committed some crimes. Yet, even if the difference amounted to nothing, there is still a decisive aspect

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<sup>24</sup> Cfr. Strauss L. (1968), p. 78.

<sup>25</sup> Cfr. Strauss L. (1939), pp. 531-32, 534.

<sup>26</sup> Strauss L. (1959), p. 126.



of belief that should be considered: «Whatever may be true of the crimes caused by religion, its terrors seriously endanger Memmius' *happiness*»<sup>27</sup>.

Strauss begins to shed light on the intention of Lucretius' public action by wondering why the poet needs to worry about Memmius' happiness:

He is induced to undergo the labor by the worth of Memmius and the prospect of friendship with him: friendship in the true sense requires that the friends think alike about the weightiest things. The poetic presentation serves the purpose of enlightening Memmius so that he can grasp thoroughly what otherwise would remain deeply hidden<sup>28</sup>.

Lucretius wants to obtain Memmius' friendship<sup>29</sup> by enabling him to overcome the terrors of religion. He does so by teaching Memmius the nature of things. By attempting to convert a Roman citizen of noble ancestry to Epicureanism, the poet is acting upon his self-interest, that is, on his desire to be freed from the fear of the gods. His poem is meant to be beneficent; it is not meant to foster justice, nor piety<sup>30</sup>.

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27 Strauss L. (1968), p. 79, italics not in the original.

28 Strauss L. (1968), p. 80.

29 On the friendship between Lucretius and Memmius, see Barker Stearns J. (1931); Allen W. (1938).

30 It does not seem of secondary importance to note that, as Cook maintains (1994), p. 213, «Lucretius does not use the noun *iustitia* at all». Cfr. Nichols J. (1976), p. 14.

#### 4. Lucretius' Vulgar and Philosophical Addressees

In the first place, we must ask in which sense Epicureanism can be helpful to non-philosophers, that is, to men like Memmius. In the context of the argument with which Lucretius intends to dispel the terrors of Hades by showing the true nature of the soul, we learn that Memmius «seems to be more threatened by fear of hell than by fear of the gods as such»<sup>31</sup>.

We are then referred by the footnote back to a previous passage where, shortly after having explained that Lucretius' intention in writing the *De Rerum Natura* may have been the wish to become a friend of Memmius, Strauss writes that precisely those who do not grasp the discoveries of the Greeks «live in darkness and are gripped by fear of what might happen to them after death»<sup>32</sup>.

By commenting Book IV, Strauss tells us something about the specific function or usefulness of religion: Lucretius admits that criminals have religious fears<sup>33</sup>, and in doing so, he confirms that by freeing men from religion, the philosopher would deprive the city of something useful.

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31 Strauss L. (1968), p. 105.

32 *Ivi*, p. 80.

33 Cfr. *ivi*, pp. 105, 127.

The reply to this objection deepens the problem even more: according to Strauss, Lucretius maintains that

the primary phenomenon is not the fear of hell, but the fear of death, and that crimes which seem to be a cause of the fear of hell are in fact a consequence of the fear of death [...] by freeing men from the fear of death, one does not emancipate crime from a powerful restraint; one rather contributes to the abolition of crime<sup>34</sup>.

The liberation from the fear of death is therefore the real goal of this initiation into philosophy; deliverance from the terrors of religion would therefore be only a preliminary stage of a more demanding conversion. However, since it appears very unlikely that all human beings are capable of converting to philosophy, religion will continue to have its comforting (and, at the same time, terrifying) effect.

In fact, even if we, non-philosophers, might apprehend that the soul is mortal, we fear death nonetheless. Such an aversion is due to an illusion: «The delusion is said to consist in our believing that we are still alive and feeling while we no longer are. We can be as little affected by what happens after our death as we were affected by what happened

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<sup>34</sup> *Ivi*, p. 105.

before we were born»<sup>35</sup>. Surely the fear of the gods owes its full power to the fear of hell. If so, it is perfectly reasonable that Memmius would be more afraid of hell than of the gods as such.

However, it became evident that «not the fear of hell, but the fear of death is the enemy of our happiness». The fear of hell is less common than the fear of death because in fact «the fear of hell threatens, not man as man, but the unjust»<sup>36</sup>.

We may conclude, therefore, that Memmius would be an unjust man who fears the terrors of hell and that Lucretius, cunningly, offers his doctrine of liberation to this corrupt but powerful man in exchange for his friendship<sup>37</sup>.

On the other hand, why should a man like Lucretius long for the friendship of Memmius?<sup>38</sup> Is this politics of friendship dictated by Lucretius' political wisdom, a political strategy that seeks the alliance of an influential Roman citizen? We must pay attention to the fact that there is no guarantee that Memmius will be really able to appreciate Lucretius' teaching. Therefore, Lucretius' intention cannot be reduced to the mere attempt to win Memmius' friendship. The *De Rerum Natura* is meant to be accessible at least to anyone who knows Latin.

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<sup>35</sup> *Ivi*, p. 110.

<sup>36</sup> *Ivi*, p. 111.

<sup>37</sup> Cfr. *ivi*, p. 131.

<sup>38</sup> Cfr. Strauss L. (2000), p. 85.

The poet addresses *de facto* an indefinite multitude of readers. But it is unlikely that such a multitude would succeed where a man of wit the like of Memmius might fail. Yet for a moment Lucretius makes us believe that reason is so equitably distributed among human beings that it can eventually be capable of freeing anyone who is not a brute from the terrors of religion<sup>39</sup>. But can we really assume that Lucretius abstracts from the fundamental difference between human beings, according to which «training or education can make some men equally refined; it cannot eradicate the fundamental, natural diversity or inequality»?<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps, by addressing such a multitude of potential readers, Lucretius may reveal a different and higher ambition: converting young potential philosophers to the philosophical way of life. We may surmise that Lucretius would care for the puppies of his race<sup>41</sup>. From this perspective, the promise of gratitude and honor accorded to the poet by gifted and clever young readers would reasonably explain the hope that animates the poet in composing his work: «he is the first to write a poem openly devoted to the liberation of the mind from the bonds of religion, and he wishes to be the first; he is spurred by a great hope of praise»<sup>42</sup>.

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39 See *De Rerum Natura* III, v. 322, ed. Bailey C. (1947); cfr. Colman J. (2012), p. 67.

40 Strauss L. (1968), p. 107. Cfr. Strauss L. (1966), p. 49.

41 Cfr. Strauss L. (1952), p. 36.

42 Strauss L. (1968), p. 91.

The real reason for writing such a poem seems to be that Lucretius longs for the praise of the philosophers of the future who would eventually look at him as he looked at Epicurus<sup>43</sup>. Therefore, Lucretius' intention would be twofold: he «attempts to propagate Epicurean philosophy in Rome» by means of poetry, and at the same time, he is looking for solid political support in the Capitoline nobility. For «even a philosopher who does not care for the city is in need of support or protection by politically active and powerful men»<sup>44</sup>. Memmius, the potential Epicurean addressed directly by the poet, may be attracted by Epicureanism because «he suffers from the terrors of religion»<sup>45</sup>. He would seem to have no actual theoretical interest in this doctrine<sup>46</sup>.

At this point we may even surmise that, should ever Memmius prove to be a potential philosopher, this fact would not necessarily turn out to be advantageous to Lucretius<sup>47</sup>. On the other hand, we cannot ascertain whether he is really witted to the

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43 Cfr. *ivi*, pp. 84, 92. See Strauss L. (2000), p. 90; see also Nichols J. (1976), pp. 41-45.

44 Strauss L. (1968), p. 107.

45 *Ivi*, p. 84.

46 On the hardly philosophical character of Memmius, see Roller D. (1970), especially p. 247. On the contrary, Allen W. (1938), p. 178, maintains on the basis of Cicero's letter *Ad fam.* xiii, that Memmius showed a real interest in philosophy: «Understanding of this section of Cicero's letter demonstrates the folly of thinking that Lucretius was trying to convert Memmius to philosophy. He was already practically an Epicurean».

47 Cfr. Strauss L. (1968), p. 94, with Nichols J. (1976), pp. 62, 64. On a change concerning the poet's attitude addressing the potential Epicurean Memmius, see Townend G. B. (1978) as well as Townend G.B. (1979).

point of being a good reader of Lucretius' poem or not<sup>48</sup>. The Roman nobleman would, in any case, belong to one of the two classes of the addressees of the *De Rerum Natura*: those who believe they want to be freed from the fear of religion and those who simply want to see things as they are<sup>49</sup>.

## 5. The Fear of the Gods and a More Fundamental Fear

As tempting as the liberation from the terrors of hell may appear in the eyes of the unjust Memmius, the teaching offered by Lucretius cannot be presented except in poetic form.

The philosophical teaching is so repellent in the eyes of the vulgar that Lucretius needs to sweeten it with poetry<sup>50</sup>. «A special effort is needed to counteract the first appearance of the truth. This special effort is beyond the power of philosophy; it is the proper work of poetry»<sup>51</sup>.

Lucretius must deceive Memmius, «by adding something to the doctrine which he expounds, something which is alien to the doctrine and which

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48 Cfr. Strauss L. (1968), p. 107.

49 Cfr. Strauss L. (1959), p. 94.

50 Cfr. Nichols J. (1976), pp. 35-39.

51 Strauss L. (1968), p. 83.

is meant to conceal the sad, repulsive, and horrible character of the doctrine»<sup>52</sup>.

Which means that religion, with all its terrors, still remains more attractive than the unadorned knowledge of the nature of things. But why? To answer this question one must understand that deep human need to which religion responds and compare the life of men before the emergence of philosophy with their way of life after the emergence of philosophy.

In the beginning, men lived like brutes and had neither laws nor arts nor language, i.e. they lived without *techne*, *nomos*, and *logos*. They feared death because they were attached to the sweetness of life, not because they were afraid of something that could happen to their souls after death.

Neither did they even contemplate the possibility that the Earth could disintegrate. This thought came to their mind only after they developed civilization: that is, only after the emergence of *techne*, *nomos*, and *logos*<sup>53</sup>. Here religion steps in:

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<sup>52</sup> *Ivi*, p. 84.

<sup>53</sup> On religion and the fear of death in Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, see Sasso G. (1979), pp. 241-67, in particular pp. 243-44: «in Lucrezio la genesi della *religio* non coincide in alcun modo con l'uscita dallo stato di natura, né la determina. L'uscita dallo stato di natura coincide con il frutto del primo, lento progredire dell'umanità; e a determinarne il momento supremo stanno ragioni per intero utilitarie, non religiose. [...] il brivido della *religio* essi l'avvertirono solo quando nei loro animi cominciò ad insinuarsi il sospetto che non per cause contingenti e specifiche, ma in assoluto, la loro vita era minacciata dalla morte».



There is only one protection against the fear that the walls of the world will someday crumble: the will of gods. Religion thus serves as a refuge from the fear of the end or the death of the world; it has its roots in man's attachment to the world. [...] The recourse to the gods of religion and the fear of them is already a remedy for a more fundamental pain: the pain stemming from the divination that the lovable is not sempiternal or that the sempiternal is not lovable. Philosophy transforms the divination into a certainty<sup>54</sup>.

Philosophy implies total detachment from what men love; it implies a departure from the greatest love that causes the greatest pain: the pain of death, the pain for the end of what one loves.

A detachment which is attached to the truth, however, is not self-forgetting. This 'attachment to detachment' faces calmly and firmly the nature of things and the destiny of human life. Therefore, religion seems to be some kind of comforting illusion, in the face of which the philosophical attitude, if interpreted in moral terms, seems to be rather a display of courage and imperturbable manliness.

The philosopher appears to have the courage to look at reality without telling himself sweetening lies<sup>55</sup>. Indeed, the philosopher, transcending what

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<sup>54</sup> Strauss L. (1968), p. 85.

<sup>55</sup> On the didactic paternalism implied in this philosophical rhetorical strategy, in particular as the poet addresses the childish and fearful reader, see Mitsis P.

is first for us in order to look only at what is first by nature<sup>56</sup>, overcomes that attachment and those illusory expectations placed in human affairs. He overcomes the fear of hell as well as the fear of the disintegration of mixed bodies. Only simple bodies are real, unbreakable and eternal<sup>57</sup>. Only by ascending to the knowledge of the nature of things is it possible to look at human affairs from the proper perspective.

The philosopher learns to evaluate wisely vain things as «slavery and freedom, poverty and wealth, war and peace»<sup>58</sup>; he understands the anxiety of those who are fighting against each other for power's sake as one way by which a man runs away from himself, as an escape from the godless and hopeless truth, or as an escape from facing «his condition in eternity – the 'eternal death' from which he cannot escape and from which he foolishly attempts to escape»<sup>59</sup>. Religion, then, is nothing but «a human invention which serves the purpose of counteracting the indifference of the whole to man's moral and political needs»<sup>60</sup>. Since most men cannot lead a philosophical way of life, religion seems a phenomenon belonging to the human condition<sup>61</sup>:

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(1993).

56 Cfr. Strauss L. (1964), pp. 239-40.

57 Cfr. Strauss L. (1968), p. 89 with Strauss L. (1966), p. 15.

58 Strauss L. (1968), p. 89.

59 *Ivi*, p. 112; cfr. *ivi*, p. 94.

60 *Ivi*, p. 100.

61 Cfr. *ivi*, p. 128.

It is fear for the world, that is, for this world, for everything that is a man's own or his nation's own, which gives rise to the belief in gods and therewith also to the fear of the gods; the fear of gods is not the fundamental fear. The fundamental fear gives rise in the first place to fear of that very fear, to fear of the most terrible truth. The poet, having exposed himself to the fear of the terrible truth, can calmly face that truth<sup>62</sup>.

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62 *Ivi*, p. 135. - We must pay attention to the fact that the fear of death, i.e., of the end of the world, is not the only root of religion. If the first root can be expressed by the formula *timor fecit deos*, the second can be expressed by the formula *amor fecit deos* (cfr. Meier H. [2003], p. 81; Meier H. [2004], pp. 338-39). But we are not dealing, in this last case, with love understood as attachment to life, or even simply as love for life that accordingly makes us fear the end of the world or the end of life. By love, Strauss means in this context sexual love, or *eros*. This love, personified by Venus, «so far from being divine, is a great threat to our happiness, although perhaps not as great a threat as fear of death. [...] both fear and love are roots of the belief in gods. [venereal desire] is as natural as the fear of death. [...] Philosophy counteracts love as it counteracts fear. There is no link between philosophy and *eros* (Strauss L. [1968], pp. 118-19)». This statement is very important because it makes us understand that *eros* is understood as exclusive attraction to a human being, that is, as sexual love, which has no connection of any sort with the philosophical way of life, and, therefore, which is counteracted as the fear of death (cfr. Strauss L. [1966], p. 48). Lucretius suggests separating the simple sexual pleasure from love, or putting erotic desire in a situation where it can do no harm to the serenity of the philosophical way of life, resorting to specific, liberating actions and thoughts. But in what sense is sexual desire a root of the belief in the gods? The physiological explanation of Lucretius traced the vision of beautiful *simulacra* in dreams to the activity of sex instincts during sleep (cfr. Strauss L. [1968], pp. 118-19). Even in this circumstance, the fear of death appears to play an important role: these *simulacra* satisfy the human desire for «never-aging and never-perishing thinking beings of indescribable splendor», (Strauss L. [1966], pp. 82-83) that is, by outshining the finite human beings destined to age and die. Only in the imagined or dreamed beauty of the gods can human *eros* find the satisfaction it craves (cfr. Nichols J. [1976], pp. 99-100).

## 6. An Unpolitical Enlightenment

There is no doubt that, notwithstanding the poetical sweetening, by introducing the Epicurean teaching in Rome, Lucretius played a dangerous game with the authoritative opinions of the city, the opinions regarding the gods that give meaning to traditional religion and worship<sup>63</sup>.

Undeniably, religion plays a major role as a political stabilizer<sup>64</sup>. As Strauss underlines, religious belief can «act as a restraint», and there is no doubt that it «is of a utility which is not altogether negligible»<sup>65</sup>.

Strauss raises the legitimate question «as to how the unphilosophic multitude will conduct itself if it ceases to believe in gods who punish lack of patriotism and filial piety»<sup>66</sup>. But as we have seen, freedom from religion seems to be unlikely, at least for non-philosophers.

Paradoxically, the necessary and sufficient condition to get rid of the terrors of religion is so repulsive that the truth about the gods can be pronounced in public.

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63 On the implications of the fundamental theologumenon (*De Rerum Natura*, I, vv. 44-49, ed. Bailey C. [1947]), see Summers K. (1995), pp. 44-45, 54-57; Strauss L. (1968), p. 131; Strauss L. (1979), p. 117; Meier H. (2006), p. 153; Meier H. (2013), pp. 99-100.

64 Cfr. Strauss L. (1958), pp. 225-231.

65 Strauss L. (1968), p. 127. See in addition *ivi*, pp. 111, 131.

66 *Ivi*, p. 100.

The incapability of the multitude to live according to the truth appears thus to balance the boldness of Lucretius' teaching<sup>67</sup>.

By revealing the nature of things and the truth about the gods, Lucretius' poetic politics seems then to anticipate modern Enlightenment<sup>68</sup>. Modern natural science, through the political philosophy of Hobbes and Bacon, became a political weapon against the religious authority and the Christian tradition<sup>69</sup>.

Modern political philosophy aimed at the emancipation of politics from superstition or religion<sup>70</sup>. Certainly, the way Lucretius reveals the nature of things, so to speak, offering freedom from religion in exchange for friendship may seem an anticipation of the political strategy of the Illuminists. Yet the decisive difference remains in the non-political character of this teaching<sup>71</sup>. Whereas the moderns conceived a political doctrine aimed at the establishment of a peaceful political order «whose

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67 Cfr. Roecklein R. (2012), pp. 109-110.

68 In the *Preface*, Strauss reproduces Kant's opinion, according to which Epicureanism would be «identical with the spirit of modern natural science prior to the subjection of that science to the critique of pure reason», Strauss L. (1968), p. x. I guess Strauss is referring to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, A466/B494, A854/B882, see Kant I. (1998), pp. 498, 703. On Kant and Epicurus, see Banham G., Schulting D., Hems N. (eds) (2012), pp. 127-28.

69 The spirit of modern natural science reminds one of *Natural Right and History's* part on Hobbes, whose original title was *On the Spirit of Hobbes's Political Philosophy*. The *spirit* must be distinguished from the *basis*, as shown by the title of Strauss' last word on the English philosopher: *On the Basis of Hobbes's Political Philosophy*.

70 Cfr. Strauss L. (1952), pp. 33-34; Strauss L. (1958), p. 231; Strauss L. (1968), pp. 254-57.

71 Cfr. Strauss L. (1953), pp. 167-68.

actualization is probable, if not certain, or does not depend on chance»<sup>72</sup>, Lucretius did not provide any teaching on good political order. He seems to care only about obtaining personal political support and about the philosophers of the future.

In other words, the absence of a political teaching reveals the political thought of Strauss' Lucretius. He does not think for a moment of «rebellion or conquest: misery is as necessary to human life as happiness»<sup>73</sup>. For it is impossible to improve the existing political communities; it is an irrational belief which fosters the hope in a general progress of mankind towards happiness<sup>74</sup>. It is for this reason that

Lucretius' 'political philosophy' is only an account of the coming into being of political society; it does not deal with the question of the best regime: no regime deserves to be called good; philosophy cannot transform, or contribute toward transforming, political society<sup>75</sup>.

When Strauss speaks of Lucretius' 'political philosophy' and says that it is *only* an account of the coming into being of the city, he is considering 'political philosophy' in its *ordinary* sense, and in this

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<sup>72</sup> *Ivi*, p. 191.

<sup>73</sup> Strauss L. (1968), p. 96. Cfr. Strauss L. (1964), p. 42 with Nichols J. (1976), pp. 183ff.

<sup>74</sup> Cfr. Strauss L. (1968), p. 131.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibidem*.

sense he contrasts the mere account of the coming into being of the political society with the question of the best regime. So far, as said above, Lucretius' teaching cannot be seen as proper political philosophy in the *ordinary* sense of the term<sup>76</sup>.

Nonetheless, the unpolitical character of Lucretius' poem is due to his political wisdom, that is, to his knowledge of the hopeless limits of politics. Politics cannot offer «*the* solution to *the* human problem, the problem of happiness»<sup>77</sup>.

## 7. The Political Wisdom of the Poet

By addressing the Straussian reading of the *De Rerum Natura*, we abstracted from what is traditionally held to be the most important component of Lucretius' teaching, his atomist doctrine. Such

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<sup>76</sup> Lucretius agrees with Plato in considering the establishment of the best regime as practically impossible. The difference between the two is that the latter shows the impossibility of the best regime by discussing the very issue of the best regime, assuming, for this purpose, the perspective of the good citizen or the good politician. Lucretius, on the other hand, seems to insist on the natural 'psychological' obstacles that prevent the many from converting to the philosophical way life. In both cases, and this seems to be an important aspect of the argument, both Plato's Socrates and Lucretius' Epicurus present a justice, or a happiness, which remains absolutely inaccessible to the multitude: cfr. Strauss L. (1964), p. 127. On the other hand, for a thoroughly political interpretation of Lucretius' enterprise, see Roeklein R. (2012), pp. 91-113: Lucretius' political Epicureanism would have paved the way to Machiavelli's modern founding; see as well Nichols J. (1976), pp. 13-24, and Schiesaro A. (2007), especially pp. 54, 57-58. On the relationship between Strauss' Machiavelli and Strauss' Lucretius, see Cubeddu R., Perfetti S. (2014).

<sup>77</sup> Strauss L. (1996), p. 204.

an approach, however, served to highlight how that philosophical poem must be understood in terms of a policy aimed at the presentation of, and the introduction to, the philosophical way of life.

The art which Lucretius used to conduct his philosophical politics is not *politike technē*, but *poietike technē*<sup>78</sup>. As a poet, Lucretius possesses a kind of knowledge which transcends the mere naturalistic knowledge possessed by the *physikos*, or the pure theoretician<sup>79</sup>. In an early phase of his argument, Strauss assumed, as it is traditionally held to be true, that Epicurus sacrificed poetry for the sake of pure *theoria*. This would mean that Epicurus lacked that «deep understanding of the feelings which obstruct the acceptance of the true doctrine by most men»<sup>80</sup>.

For the sake of argument, we will assume the figure of the pure theorist (of whom Epicurus seems almost a good representative) as an alternative to the poet-philosopher. In the first place, it is easy to see how both the philosophical poet and political philosopher are to be distinguished from the pure theorist: by their ability to understand the non-philosophers and to defend the philosophical way of life in public. But while Platonic political philosophy seems to mediate between the philosopher and the city, on the other hand, «poetry is the link or the

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78 Cfr. Cook A. (1994), p. 214.

79 Cfr. Strauss L. (1966), p. 49 n26.

80 Strauss L. (1968), p. 92; cfr. *ivi*, p. 83. On the same argument, cfr. Cook A. (1994).



mediation between religion and philosophy»<sup>81</sup>. We might add that, while the pure theorist considers the non-philosophers as absolutely unworthy of his attention, the political philosopher takes them seriously as fellow-citizens, and the philosophical poet takes them seriously especially as, *si parva licet*, men of religious convictions.

In the case of Lucretius, it is indeed religious opinions, rather than political opinions, which are to be rationally cross-examined. These opinions are, in fact, the starting point to demonstrate most clearly the difference between the philosopher and the non-philosopher. Thanks to the *poietike technē*, which, as such, is an imitation of man's life within its tragicomic (that is, merely human as opposed to philosophical) dimension, the philosophical poet can take his bearings from what is first for us to ascend to what is first in itself:

Religion [...] has its roots in man's attachment to the world. [...] Poetry [...] is, like religion, rooted in that attachment, but unlike religion, it can be put into service of detachment. Because poetry is rooted in the prephilosophic attachment, because it enhances and deepens that attachment, the philosophic poet is the perfect mediator between the attachment to the world and the attachment to the detachment from the world<sup>82</sup>.

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81 Strauss L. (1968), p. 84.

82 *Ivi*, p. 85.

A pure theory of nature, such as the atomist doctrine, would not suffice in order to publicly present the philosophical way of life. A purely theoretical debunking of religious beliefs would expose the philosopher to the risks of incomprehension or suspect. Nor would, to tell the truth, the mere beauty of the verses be sufficient.

The real difference between the pure theorist and the philosophical poet lies in the knowledge achieved by imitating human life, that is, by understanding the soul of man, his desires and fears: the fear of death and the love of beauty<sup>83</sup>.

[T]he poet possesses insights which Epicurus may have lacked, above all the understanding of men's attachment to the world and what this implies. [...] by presenting the true and final philosophic teaching poetically, Lucretius may be said to surpass Epicurus; the Lucretian presentation of the truth is superior to the Epicurean presentation<sup>84</sup>.

Acting upon the deeply rooted needs of man, the philosophical poet is able to present Epicurus' philosophical teaching as a liberation from those fears and desires, although this would mean transcending the mere human life, i.e., converting to philosophy. In other words, the philosophical way of life is presented as true happiness, that is, as the solution

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83 Cfr. Nichols J. (1976), p. 41; Roecklein R. (2012), pp. 91-92.

84 Strauss L. (1968), p. 134.

to the problem which keeps political life in motion, without being a possible solution to the majority.

Between the lines, the *De Rerum Natura* shows that human life on earth is the true and only hell<sup>85</sup>, although the philosophical detachment is meant to appear to the non-philosopher as a kind of lunatic asceticism. Lucretius, as it were, reproduces the Platonic self-reflecting movement which overcomes the abstraction implied in the ‘pre-Socratic’ stage of philosophical development. It is, perhaps, the greatest case of a non-public spirited political action on behalf of philosophy.

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<sup>85</sup> *Ivi*, p. 112.

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