

**“At nisi purgatumst pectus . . .”:
Lucretius, Ateleology, and the End of History**

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“At nisi purgatumst pectus...”

“Only a god can save us.”

—Martin Heidegger

The Lucretian project in *De Rerum Natura* is indisputably radical. Premised upon a reductionist cosmology in which the entire universe (Latin, *omnia*) and all phenomena within it are nothing more than “bodies and void” (*corpora et inane*), Lucretius commences a systematic deconstruction of religion, the gods, the immortality of the soul, the afterlife, and other dogmatic institutions that disturb the Epicurean pursuit of *ataraxia* (tranquility, imperturbability). More particularly, the *De Rerum Natura* seems to culminate in a comparable dismantling of the validity of civic and political structures—a shocking conclusion for both his late Republican contemporaries and for modern readers encountering his work anew. Indeed, it is typical of Epicurean and Lucretian teaching to insist upon withdrawal of the philosopher from political life and interaction, from that worthless pursuit for “worthless men,” as political involvement can only disrupt tranquility without substantially improving the human condition (quite the opposite, in fact: politics is deemed deleterious to the human condition).¹ Epicureanism, if it is not explicitly hostile to political philosophy, seems “peculiarly unpolitical.”² At best, the status of politics within Lucretius is ambiguous. Insofar as Lucretius is faithful to the dictates of his teacher Epicurus, the intellectual hero of epic proportions who “pierces beyond the flaming walls of the world” (1.62-79)³ in several proems, it is surely possible to conclude that Lucretius eschews all political structures in favor of a political apocalypse culminating in the apolitical

¹Cicero, *De Re Publica*, 1.4-6, 9.

²James H. Nichols, *Epicurean Political Philosophy: The De Rerum Natura of Lucretius* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), 13.

³All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

“Epicurean garden.”⁴ In other words, Lucretius seems to favor the destruction of politics. Such unspecific and tentative hypotheses, mere unaltered transplants from the writings of another philosopher, are not especially instructive, however, particularly since Lucretius seldom speculates regarding an “ideal” (a)political state or even futurity in general in his poetry. As such, a tension between politics and the Epicurean life of philosophical withdrawal exists in the *De Rerum Natura*, for, as shall be seen, the provisional order established by political structures seems to be necessary for the philosophic life. Grafting Epicurus’ own more realistic political moments onto Lucretius’ obvious distaste for ordinary political mechanisms, Donald Fowler posits that Lucretius begrudgingly consents to the presence of a limited monarch who can establish this necessary minimum of order while minimizing the turbulence engendered by mass political movements.⁵ Similarly, Leo Strauss and his students mold Lucretius, much like Machiavelli, into a revolutionary philosopher who conceals a proto-liberal conciliation with a political order possessing the capacity to preserve the philosophic pursuits even without understanding them (hence, Memmius is to Lucretius as Lorenzo di Piero de’Medici is to Machiavelli).⁶ Politics in such a reading remains a necessary evil; the Epicurean garden is no more than an ephemeral “city in speech.” Neither of these readings is a satisfactory assessment of the status of politics in Lucretius’ writing. To diminish Lucretius to the status of negating radical or, perhaps worse, to a cunning manipulator of the status quo is to neglect his deepest

⁴The Epicurean garden is surely the inspiration for Karl Marx’s sparse and cryptic references to the post-capitalist paradise in which a man might “do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as [he has] a mind.” Marx and Engels, *German Ideology* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), 292. It should also be noted that Marx’s doctoral dissertation, entitled somewhat blandly “The Difference between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature,” contains, particularly in its appendices, incipient capsules of prototypically Marxian assessments of religion and politics with reference to both Epicurus and Lucretius. See *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1902). Nonetheless, Marx was no Lucretian, and Lucretius was no modern.

⁵D. P. Fowler, “Lucretius and Politics” in *Philosophia Togata*, ed. M. Griffin and J. Barnes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 408.

⁶See Leo Strauss, “Notes on Lucretius” in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); Nichols, *Epicurean Political Philosophy*; and John Colman, “Lucretius on Religion,” *Perspectives on Political Science* 38 (2009):228-39.

concerns and his enduring political teaching. Lucretius' first commitment is to the freedom that he posits as a fundamental aspect not only of his cosmology, but of the human experience itself as a part of that cosmology. To that end, his work of destruction in *De Rerum Natura* is merely a prelude to his construction of an affirmative political project, a politics that preserves freedom from dogma, freedom from the eschatological impulse of truly radical politics, and, most importantly, as a consequence of the former projects, freedom *for* philosophy.

Reduction, Destruction, and the Roman Predicament: Freedom from Dogma

As Strauss notes, in the six books of *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius makes his reader “ascend to Epicureanism.”⁷ The work serves as an “apprenticeship in philosophy,” as a “protreptic and psychagogic task” (1.81).⁸ This ascent to Epicureanism, to, more broadly, the philosophic life commences with a radical descent, a radical deconstruction and destruction. In one of many similar proclamations, Lucretius promises that his poem will “hurl down” from her throne and “trample” superstition (*religio*) (1.78-9). By demonstrating “the manner in which everything is done without the works of the gods” (1.159), we (Lucretius *and* his readers) “will be exalted to heaven by the victory” (1.79). The route by which this glorious conquest will proceed descends to the modest and unseen roots of all things visible. Nature, according to Lucretius' Epicurean atomism, “subsists therefore by means of bodies unseen” (1.378). Indeed, the composition of the cosmos he reduces exclusively to “bodies and void,” atoms and the spaces between them. These atoms of various shapes and properties (*conjuncta*) are in unceasing, unpredictable motion. The cosmos is founded upon invisible chaos. Roiling in the midst of atomic anarchy, falling through the infinite universe, atoms can (and do) contract to bond

⁷Strauss, “Notes on Lucretius,” 76.

⁸Nichols, *Epicurean Political Philosophy*, 35.

together. These contracted bonds occur according to *foedera*, (“treaties”)⁹ in *concilia* (unions, combinations) that “create” the multifarious objects and phenomena human beings perceive via their physical senses. Stated otherwise, the infinite diversity of phenomena of which the perceptual cosmos is composed are a mere *epiphenomenon* of the continual flux of atoms hurtling through the endless void, combining, dissolving, and recombining in chaotic fashion. All phenomena, anything sensible or perceivable by the human senses and mind, are combinations of otherwise invisible atoms; thus, there must be space or “void” between the irreducible atoms of which any given phenomenon is composed.¹⁰ Crucially, then, anything “which is rent and divided into other parts naturally refuses to be itself eternal” (3.640-1). This symmetrical argument of double-bounded finitude proposes that anything which can be constituted can and will in turn be deconstituted. Matter itself, atoms themselves are eternal, but *concilia* are not, infused as they are with void (1.511-19). All phenomena come to pass. The “balance between birth and death is due to the war which the atoms carry on with one another from infinite time.”¹¹

This reductionism seems to serve as the foundation for Lucretius’ ethical and political theories and for the “comfort” offered by philosophical Epicureanism, as shall be demonstrated.¹² It is the fundamental tenet of his cosmology and the necessary premise for his philosophy of history and politics. From his assertions regarding atoms and their fluctuating combinations, Lucretius constructs a structural philosophy of all that is. In contrast to the

⁹See Elizabeth Asmis, “Lucretius’ New World Order: Making a Pact with Nature,” *Classical Quarterly* 58:1 (2008): 141-57.

¹⁰Though *everything* is body and void, though everything is physical for Lucretius, the constellation of phenomena extends beyond objects that are “tangible” in the typical sense: even visible and mental “images” are *concilia* of atoms. Literally *all* sensible and cognizable phenomena are “atomic” in the Lucretian cosmos.

¹¹Strauss, “Notes on Lucretius,” 98.

¹²For a detailed analysis of Lucretius’ philosophical reductionism, see D. P. Fowler, “What Sort of a Reductionist was Epicurus? The Case of the Swerve” in *Lucretius on Atomic Motion: A Commentary on DRN Book Two, Lines 1-332* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 228-43.

providential determinism of the Stoics, Lucretius posits that atoms, falling through an infinite void, are able to combine due to a peculiar “swerve” (*clinamen*) unique to each; thus, various atoms, each swerving through different trajectories, collide and combine in their ephemeral *concilia*. This, for Lucretius, is the origin of free will (2.216-24). However, the dubious nature of this proof, amongst others, reveals that his physics are not, in fact, the “essential predicate of his ethical theories.”¹³ Rather, it is clear that Lucretius commences his work with a clear ethical and eudaimonic end in mind for which his physical hypotheses serve only as rational justifications or, more appropriately, stimulations to questioning. Accordingly, a significant portion of Book III is expended in lengthy proofs of the soul’s mortality (3.417-829). His (in)famous diatribe against erotic love dispels the romantic fantasies enveloping what is, in reality, yet another mere physical process (4.1058-1287). The gods are the delusional product of imagination, insists Lucretius, reiterating what was once an anthropological trope: that man concocts religion to justify the mystery and “mighty causes” of natural processes he is not capable of understanding (5.1161-1203). All phenomena are, again, physical, leaving no space in the Lucretian cosmos for supernatural intervention. Thereby, Lucretius engages in a radically deconstructive project, calling into question the gods (cf. 5.146-155), the afterlife, the immortality of the soul, and other doxastic fundamentals of the established order, the “walls of the world” (1.1102).

All such “proofs” and arguments aim at liberation, at freedom. But to what sort of freedom does Lucretius subscribe? Throughout his work, Lucretius sets himself in opposition at

¹³The logical validity or coherence of Lucretius’ procession from atomic swerve to free human volition is obviously suspect for meticulous students of physics. Suffice to say that the idea was also popular with eighteenth century philosophers, who did much to clarify the theory. Schopenhauer, for instance, “agrees with Epicurus in supposing Will to exist in every form of Matter, and in associating Will with the origin of Force.” See John Mason, *Lucretius: Epicurean and Poet* (London: John Murray, 1907), 228. cf. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation, In Two Volumes* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1966).

all points of conjunction to the late Republican milieu.¹⁴ The freedom, thus, to which he is oriented does not correspond to those conceptions typical in Rome: it is not “primarily the legal status opposed to slavery,” nor the absence of foreign despotism, nor the capacity of senators to speak without hindrance, nor, despite presumptions of Epicurean hedonism, is it the decidedly un-Roman autonomy from behavioral restraints, nor, finally, is it the quintessentially Roman because quintessentially Ciceronian idea that freedom is equivalent to slavery or bondage to the laws, the fruitful and necessary tension between *auctoritas* and *libertas*.¹⁵ For Lucretius, freedom is apolitical—but for that very reason inextricably bound with the fate of the political. Sallust, in his account of the Catiline conspiracy, remarks that his desire is for the mind (*animus*) to be free “from hope, fear, and the divisions of the republic.”¹⁶ This is the sort of freedom to which Lucretius directs his project. As shall be seen, Lucretius’ *opus* seeks to impel *individual* transfiguration rather than the transfiguration of the world and the political framework; yet, as the statement of Sallust discloses, the fates of the personal and the political are linked. In short, the freedom Lucretius seeks to have his readers achieve through a participatory experience in his poetic work is an intellectual freedom, a liberation from the superstitious shackles, “from hope, fear,” and political strife, that bind the intellect and foreclose the questioning characteristic of philosophy. “The fear of Acheron . . . leaves no delight fluid and pure” (3.37-40). The intellectual constrictures engendered by the fear of death, of the gods, of kings plunge the soul

¹⁴See, e.g., J. L. Penwill, “Image, Ideology, and Action in Cicero and Lucretius,” *Ramus* 23 (1994), 68-91.

¹⁵See P. A. Brunt, “*Libertas* in the Republic” in *The Fall of the Roman Republic and Related Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 283-349. Cicero, *Pro Cluentio*, 53: “And so we are all slaves of the law in order that we can be free.” Without laws, Cicero opines, Athenian life would have resembled that of wild beasts. Moreover, he favors, in concert with his Greek forebears, “geometric equality”: the enjoyment of rights and liberties proportionate to one’s excellence. cf. Fritz Schulz, *Principles of Roman Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), chap. 8. In short, for Cicero—evident in his *De Re Publica* and *De Officiis*—law “is the mark of the divine intelligence on all things,” the “essence of nature,” the scaffolding that gives shape and purpose to human life. It is no less than the medium through which man shares in divine wisdom. cf. Neal Wood, *Cicero’s Social and Political Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 70.

¹⁶Sallust, *Conspiracy of Catiline*, 4.22.

into fear and inaction. As such, political liberation, the elevation of the leisured citizen over his slave, is meaningless in the absence of a liberated mind; kings as well as servants are gripped by the fear Lucretius exposes regardless of their political rights. Thus, Lucretius announces that “it is necessary for this terror of the mind (*animus*, as distinct from *anima* or “spirit”) and this darkness to be dispelled” by reason (2.59). He will “proceed to unloose the mind from the close knots of superstition” (4.6-7). The philosophical skeptic “is free from the laws of dogmatic systems,” his terror “dispelled . . . by nature coming to sight and being penetrated.”¹⁷

Questions of textual intention are of necessity enshrouded by uncertainty, but it is incumbent upon the reader of *De Rerum Natura* to illuminate the circumstances that inform the Lucretian consciousness. Of Lucretius himself we know nothing.¹⁸ Of his perilous times we know much. Insight into the relevant shape of the latter can reveal why Lucretius penned an evangelical poem that is at once supremely radical and yet, in some respects, a mere reiteration of the tenets of a philosophy familiar to any Roman student of Greek philosophy (as almost every educated Roman was). To these times Lucretius is offering a response and, in so doing, authoring a work for all times. His ambition is, in other words, twofold: “both to be involved . . . in the anxieties of a troubled age, and to teach eternal truths” with “transhistorical validity,” to “make sense of Rome’s stormy politics, rooted in the structural malaise of a society which has long since lost any sense of ‘what Nature barks for’ and of the natural *aequum* which in a distant

¹⁷Brunt, “*Libertas* in the Republic,” 313; Strauss, “Notes on Lucretius,” 106.

¹⁸See, for instance, a representative study of Lucretius, which notes that “we are, therefore, in ignorance and are likely to remain in the dark about Lucretius’ birthplace, his social status, his place of residence, his activities, political, military, or otherwise, his private life, his personal appearance.” George Depue Hadzits, *Lucretius and His Influence* (New York: Longman, Green, and Co., 1935), 4. The only specific biographical detail that can be affixed to the name Lucretius is an apocryphal and dubious anecdote promulgated by St. Jerome attesting that Lucretius was rendered insane by a love-philtre administered by his wife. Assuming the anecdote to be false, it serves the function of enabling the Church to cast a decidedly atheistic, impious poem as the mere product of insane ravings (a claim bolstered by speculation that Lucretius’ work was left unfinished and unedited). It is not the place of this humble reader to comment upon the polish or completion of the *De Rerum Natura*. Whoever Lucretius was, he is, for us, “identical with his poem.” George Santayana, *Three Philosophical Poets: Lucretius, Dante, Goethe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1947), 20. The text, then, is even more an event to be recreated, for it is the glimpse—and the only glimpse—we have of the structure of Lucretius’ consciousness.

past allowed communities to lead a carefree life.”¹⁹ As an address to a particular time, *De Rerum Natura*—and Book V in particular—is undoubtedly a political utterance, a status that is an alleged “commonplace of modern scholarship.”²⁰ In his poem, readers are privy to a glimpse of Lucretius’ consciousness of cosmological order as embodied in the Roman ecumenic empire.

In short, the life of Lucretius is contemporary with the “greatest crisis in the history of Rome,” marked by a “decay of the national character” and compounded by the increasing evisceration of the Roman institutions of government and popular virtue.²¹ In these decades prior to the Augustan ascendance and supposed transfigurative restoration of Rome, Catullus, corroborating the gravity of the Roman geopolitical crisis, attests to the “the emptiness of the civic vocabulary and the inherent corruption of politics.”²² Cicero, describing the misdeeds of Sulla, intones that “the horror of those awful times is so burned into our country that it appears as if not merely men, but even brutes, could not endure the thought of their returning.”²³ Lucretius writes in the midst of a chaotic moment in Roman history: on the one hand, he is witness to the dusk of the Republic as it is afflicted by a tremendous secular (but observable) political, military, and cultural crisis in the establishment of the Augustan *pax*; on the other hand, Rome is the site of such intellectual disturbances as Hellenization and other trends that challenge the Roman conventions of the *mos maiorum*—the traditional ways and values of *mos seniorum*, *auctoritas*, *honores*, *pietas*, *classis*, *virtus*, and, above all, service to the *imperium*, the participatory

¹⁹Alessandro Schiesaro, “Lucretius and Roman Politics and History” in *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*, eds. Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 41.

²⁰Fowler, “Lucretius and Politics,” 399.

²¹Mason, *Lucretius: Epicurean and Poet*, 1-9.

²²J. D. Minyard, *Lucretius and the Late Republic* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1985), 24. cf. Catullus, “Poem 29.” cf. Monica Gale, *Lucretius: De Rerum Natura V* (London: Aris & Phillips, 2009), 2: “The denunciation of contemporary society as decadent and morally bankrupt” in Lucretius “can be readily paralleled from the writings of Cicero, Sallust, and others.” Moreover, she suggests that Lucretius finds the root of some Roman discord in the dissipation and *ennui* of its aristocracy, calling into question certain claims that Lucretius wished to appease and appeal only to aristocratic readers.

²³Cicero, *In Catilinam*, 1.20, as cited in Mason, *Lucretius: Epicurean and Poet*, 5.

experience of the established communal structures of the *civitas* from which knowledge and meaningful existence is derived—in favor of an intellectual vacuum in which one is granted the freedom to choose one’s own *Weltanschauung*.²⁴ It is a time of dislocation and alienation. The late Republican consciousness is an image being discarded much like the later shattering of the medieval consensus.

Of course, Book V is the epicenter of Lucretius’ political ruminations in *De Rerum Natura*.²⁵ Recounting the evolution of the cosmos and life on earth (from plants through animals to man himself) and, more particularly, of “civilizational growth from the stone age through the metal age to the highest perfection (*ad summum cacumen*, 5.1457) in the present.”²⁶ “There is no doubt,” claims Eric Voegelin, that the convulsions of the late Republic and the “wars of the Ecumenic Age”—the expansion of the Roman *milieu* into a paradigmatic world-embracing consciousness for universal humanity, for the entire race—are “the context in which the story of the ages is to be read,” particularly since this narrative is immediately succeeded “by a long and vivid account of the improvements in slaughtering people made in the Punic Wars” (5.1297-1349).²⁷ Like Plato in the *Laws* and even Hesiod, “Lucretius can admire the relentlessly

²⁴Ibid., 1-8.

²⁵It may be salutary to observe that Lucretius acknowledges that “political society makes certain demands on us,” rendering ethics “naturally political.” Epicurus himself devotes more of his fragmentary *Principle Opinions* to “the just than to any other topic,” and the length of Lucretius’ own Book V “indicates the importance of man and society” or, better, man *in* society. As such, the *De Rerum Natura* has a “political character.” Nichols, *Epicurean Political Philosophy*, 16.

²⁶This assessment, as shall be demonstrated, is obviously infused with great skepticism, and the reader must not glean from this evolutionary narrative a Lucretius who is yet another philosopher of perpetual progress. If progress (as distinct from a linear but non-teleological conception of historico-temporal motion) is to be found at all in the work of Lucretius, it is at least double-edged: an increase in the capacity to structure communities and achieve collective goals is matched by an increase in the capacity to disintegrate communities and destroy life.

²⁷Eric Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age, Order and History* vol. 4 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 307. The *ecumene*, the embracing consciousness of “universal mankind” can be defined as follows: “Universal mankind is not a society existing in the world, but a symbol which indicates man’s consciousness of participating, in his earthly existence, in the mystery of a reality that moves toward its transfiguration. Universal mankind is an eschatological index . . . A scattering of societies, belonging to the same biological type, thus is discovered to be one mankind with one history, by virtue of participation in the same flux of divine presence.” Ibid., 305.

inventive mind of man and the history of civilizational growth without losing his sensitiveness for the questionable character of a process which culminates, in his *own experience*, both in the philosopher's meditation on the *natura rerum* and in the concupiscential atrocities of the imperial wars" [emphasis mine].²⁸ On the one hand, the "darkness of *discordia tristis*," of the occlusions of both the Roman intellect and the Roman republic, "does not impair his spiritualist's understanding of this condition as the universally human in history" and of his experience of the *universal* divine presence in his appeal to "*alma Venus*," paradoxically the mother exclusively of Aeneas and Rome and of an Epicurean text addressed (arguably) to universal man.²⁹ Meanwhile, "the habitat of man has become the open field of the imperial drive; and the divine mystery that had surrounded the limited territory and its people has become luminous as the divine presence in a transfiguring process in which all men at all times and all places participate." Ecumenicism, itself a revolutionary experience, has superseded all existing cosmologies and parochialisms. In other words, the historical moment in which Lucretius finds himself is characterized by savage wars wrought by human concupiscence, resulting in the destruction of the traditional structures of human order, of the very walls of the world. Yet this moment, by calling into question Roman exclusivity, has provided an opening to philosophical *ec-stasis* and to a renewed questioning of the foundations, the *primordia* of the cosmos.

It is clear, then, that both politics and philosophy are in crisis in late Republican Rome. This crisis informs the structure of the Lucretian consciousness. This crumbling Roman image is, then, what Lucretius explicitly and forcibly rejects along with the philosophical precepts attendant to traditional and Stoical metaphysics. Indeed, the Epicureanism he proffers

²⁸Ibid., 308.

²⁹Ibid.

“involve[s] a total rejection of the Roman way.”³⁰ In doing so, he rejects *all* preconceived institutional structures and paradigms.³¹ “The developed form of society, as man has swerved more from clear understanding because of successive layers of false interpretation and intervening institutions, has perpetuated and multiplied the ways in which truth is concealed from him.”³² Lucretius thus posits as his task to peel away these layers, these ossified fossilizations of error and the sclerotic chains binding the intellect. The convulsions of Rome, then, imbue in Lucretius a consciousness of the provisionality and temporality of all political arrangements. His physics can be conceived as a mechanism for justifying and explaining the problems endemic to all existing human arrangements. In (Epicurean) philosophy, calm can be found. Accordingly, to return to Book I, all visible phenomena—including political structures—are merely the ephemeral accidents (*eventa*) of temporary *concilia* of atoms. Even the Roman Empire itself is bound to dissolve. Even the “world-shattering” events of the Punic War, threatening “the whole fabric of the world,” is inconsequential (3.832ff). This conclusion, indeed, is the very purpose for his atomic theory. As Lucretius claims, wars such as the one that “subdued the Trojan race” or tragedies such as the “rape of the daughter of Tyndarus” are mere accidents borne of the unending invisible atomic flux. Even time itself is merely a perceptual event. Above all, such *eventa* are not rooted in the fixed *natura rerum* (1.449-82). It seems that the destructive impulse of the *De Rerum Natura* culminates in the evisceration of meaning itself from all that orders and grants substance to human existence. Yet it is not passive nihilism but *active* nihilism in which Lucretius engages.³³ He is attempting to “disrupt emotional attachment

³⁰Minyard, *Lucretius and the Late Republic*, 30.

³¹We must thus discard notions that Lucretius sought solely to reform *Roman* civic life, as Minyard claims on *Ibid.*, 46. Rather, he seeks a reform of human life generally.

³²*Ibid.*, 65.

³³See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, Inc., 1968), for the crucial and fruitful distinction between active and passive varieties of nihilism. The former is a work of creation.

to the old order” for a particular reason.³⁴ The Lucretian project is not solely destructive.³⁵ His radicalism and destruction merely serve as the prelude to a constructive project. Encapsulated in these phenomenologico-hermeneutical inquiries into his consciousness is the opening of a way to Lucretian politics. The question, then, is what sort of politics is engendered by this liberating cosmological destruction and by this consciousness. In the absence or inadequacy of the late Republican political order (and indeed of all existing political order), what sort of politics can affirm or at least provide space for the intellectual freedom Lucretius seeks?

Ateleology and History: Freedom from Teleological Politics

Having exposed the decrepit foundations of the late Roman *ecumene*, Lucretius commences his project of replacement and reconstruction. He does not leave the disorienting theoretical vacuum he has created empty. In short, the project of Lucretius is a “radical recapitulation of civic order” via his philosophic system.³⁶ Book V (as acknowledged by Voegelin and others) contains his most explicit formulation of political reconstruction. It is indeed curious, then, that Lucretius eagerly foregrounds within the first lines after the proemic paean to Epicurus in Book V an argument for the mortality of the world itself: “I must show that the body of which the world consists must be conducted to death and also has had birth” (5.65-6). Among other “proofs” (*ratio potius*), Lucretius demonstrates that “the whole world is able to collapse with a horrid crash” by noting the *birth* of the world (5.108-9).³⁷ Matter, as we have seen, is eternal, without birth and without death. Any visible *concilia* of atoms, however, is inherently unstable, having tentatively fused together but being infused with void and subject to

³⁴Minyard, *Lucretius and the Late Republic*, 68.

³⁵We need not wait for Virgil “to redeem all these devastated categories from Lucretius.” Minyard, *Lucretius and the Late Republic*, 79.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 40.

³⁷For example, Lucretius notes legends of global floods to reveal that the earth is perpetually unstable and thus ultimately subject to destruction (5.338-50). This “meteorological violence is a foretaste of the final dissolution of the ordered world.” Hardie, *Cosmos and Imperium*, 190.

spontaneous dismantlement at any moment. The world itself, Lucretius demonstrates, was born, and accordingly so too will it pass away. Its “three textures” (earth, sky, and sea), the whole “mighty system of the world, sustained through many years,” shall “one day give over to destruction” (5.94-6); “therefore, when I see the great members and parts of the world consumed and reborn, I may be certain that heaven and earth also had a time of beginning and will have their destruction” (5.243-7). Providing examples of various familiar *concordia*, Lucretius observes that all are eventually dissolved: “Do you not discern that even stones are conquered by time, that tall turrets fall and rocks decay, that temples and images of the gods wear out and crumble, nor can the holy divinity carry forward the bounds of fate or strive against the treaties of nature? Again, do we not see the monuments of men collapse?” Like stones, turrets, and other finite artifices, the whole world, he concludes, “consists of a body subject to birth and death” (5.306-23). Indeed, “the door of death is therefore not precluded for heaven, nor for the sun and earth and the deep waters of the sea, but stands hideously empty and watching them with a vast opening” (5.373-5).³⁸ Not only is the soul (among other dogmatic assumptions of received wisdom) subject to destruction, but the world itself must dissolve into its constituent atoms. Virgil vainly prophesies the Golden Age of Augustus in his Fourth Eclogue. The *De Rerum Natura* posits a “framework and context” of atomic flux “that on the one hand makes [the world] possible, and on the other threatens and destroys it.”³⁹ If the mortality of the soul is supposed to serve as a comforting proposition, dispelling fear of death and Hades, the doctrine of the world’s mortality is neither “gratifying” nor “pleasing,” as Leo Strauss notes.⁴⁰ On the contrary, this

³⁸Though it should be noted that Lucretius assuages immediate desperation by assuring readers that the world is not far removed from its origin and thus *is* far removed from its destruction (5.330-1). Hardie claims, with others, that Lucretius poses ultimate destruction as a matter that should not concern anyone, leastwise the Epicurean sage, but Lucretius is ultimately left insisting that the world will not collapse in the *immediate* future as his only tactic to comfort his distraught readers. Hardie, “Lucretius and the *Aeneid*,” 187-8.

³⁹Nichols, *Epicurean Political Philosophy*, 161.

⁴⁰Strauss, *Notes on Lucretius*, 121, 96.

atomistic proposition is perhaps “the most bitter or sad of all doctrines.”⁴¹ Lucretius “destroys our importance.”⁴² It is perhaps for this reason that Lucretius palliates his cup of *absinthii* with the palatable “honey” of poetry (4.16). In short, the earth itself proves to be a mere *eventum* no more privileged than any other. What, then, is to prevent life itself, as George Santayana, an admiring reader of Lucretius, inquires, from being a similar meaningless flash of conjoined atoms?⁴³ How does Lucretius claim to proffer lasting happiness if his doctrines are so horrific?

More particularly, why does Lucretius position his argument for global destruction prior to his famous account of political evolution? After recounting the origin of the world, the sun, and the heavenly bodies, after explicating the evolution of plants, animals, and finally of human life itself, Lucretius constructs in historical outline the process by which humans both ennobled and debased themselves in political congregation. In the fashion of a proto-social contractarian, Lucretius begins his phenomenology of human history with a primitivistic state of nature suffused momentarily with the sort of romantic nostalgia that permeates the younger Marx’s works: “And the race of men was much hardier then in the land” (5.925-42). While they exemplified Rousseau’s self-sufficient noble savage, they were yet unable to “attend to the common good,” being ignorant of how to govern their relations either by “customs or laws” (5.958-61). Still, there were no wars and no starvation. Yet, in a pattern common to his historical narrative, all that is pleasant is tainted by pain: primitive man lived in constant fear of wild beasts (5.990-1010).

Whatever might have been golden about Lucretius’ primitive epoch is soon dispelled by the introduction of fire and shelter, inventions designed to dispel the dangers of primitive life but

⁴¹Ibid., 91.

⁴²Strauss, “Notes on Lucretius,” 103. cf. 3.972-3: “Look back also and see how the ages of eternal time past before our birth have been to us nothing.”

⁴³Santayana, *Three Philosophical Poets*, 44.

also events that signaled the time when the “human race first began to be soft,” enervated by the conveniences of civilization.⁴⁴ Simultaneously, however, Lucretius notes two fundamental alterations in the human condition that are crucial for his own political vision. First, man began to conceive of his need for other humans, for the bonds of community (due in part to his incipient “softness”); thus, neighbors “began to join in friendship amongst themselves” to serve collective purposes and to satisfy their desire neither to wound nor to suffer (5.1011-20).⁴⁵ Second, mankind, “when stammering,” stumbled toward the development of *language*. Rooted primordially in “utility,” in the need to name, confront, and appropriate the phenomena of nature, language comes to serve the community by establishing unanimity and concord: all could then express agreement on the proposition that it was right “to pity the feeble” and to maintain the legitimacy of the “treaty” (*foedera*)—otherwise “the race of man would then have been wholly destroyed” (5.1011-28).

The birth of communal bonds and language permit the further evolution of political arrangement. For Lucretius, the departure from this early but fragile political consensus is problematic. Kings—the strongest of men—“began to found cities and build themselves citadels for their own refuge.” Rather than virtue or wisdom, they begin to honor “virility,” “ingenuity,” and “beauty,” and to reward such superficialities with recently-discovered “gold” and “wealth.”

⁴⁴While the consequences of the discovery of fire are indeed Promethean, it is significant for Lucretius that the source of fire is neither divine nor revelatory. It is the consequence of nothing other than human ingenuity or, alternatively, the chance striking of lightning upon dry wood. In either case, Lucretius is concerned to demystify all natural phenomena, no matter how marvelous, from the circuits of celestial bodies to the fabulous eruptions of Aetna. For Lucretius’ troubled but important relationship with this and other mythopoetic memes, see Gordon Campbell, “Lucretius and the Memes of Prehistory,” *Leeds International Classical Studies* (2002), 1-32. For an exploration of the possibilities of human creativity in the *De Rerum Natura*, see Brooke Holmes, “Daedala Lingua: Crafted Speech in *De Rerum Natura*,” *American Journal of Philology* 126:4 (2005): 527-85. It is also worth noting that humanity’s newfound “softness” is, like most other elements of Lucretius’ mythopoesis, infused with good and bad intermingled: while it made him weaker, softness enabled empathy, pity, and the salutary bonds of community.

⁴⁵One must resist the temptation here to deem this phenomenon a social contract. While it evinces aspects of the contractarian tradition so popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Lucretius establishes the bonds of community on friendship, not contract. Moreover, prepolitical society cannot be deemed a state of nature precisely because man remains ignorant of nature while he is in it. See Nichols, *Epicurean Political Philosophy*, 137.

Recognizing the currency borne by wealth and power in human relations, “men desired themselves to be famous and powerful, that their fortunes might stand on a stable foundation.”⁴⁶ In the midst of these chaotic developments, Lucretius takes care to advise that “if one should govern his life by true reason, the greatest riches of a man are to live with little and a tranquil mind” (5.1105-1135). In other words, wealth, power, and fame are all things that compromise the tranquility of the contented mind; Lucretius has concealed in this passage the necessity and priority of the philosophic life. Naturally, however, the ambitious lust for power and wealth compels the slaughter of kings by the “vulgus” as the “pristine majesty of thrones and proud scepters lay overthrown” (5.1136-7). So “things came to the uttermost dregs of confusion, when each man sought for himself dominion and exaltation,” when “each man did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:6).

Lucretius claims that there were some—their specific identities are unclear—who propose a Ciceronian panacea for this state of chaos, for “the human race” was “weary from enmities.” These figures “teach [them] to create magistrates and to constitute laws, that they might be willing to use statutes.” Compelling agreement and obedience to such laws was uncontroversial, imbued both by the aforesaid exhaustion from strife and, more significantly, by the “fear of punishment,” for “it is not easy to pass a placid and peaceful life for him who violates by his deeds the treaty of common peace” (5.1138-55). Law, thus, is rooted in and is a progenitor of fear. Accompanying the construction of law is religion, rooted in man’s imagination of beings preeminent in happiness (while man languishes in a defective world) and of causes for the mysterious phenomena of the cosmos. Of course, religion concludes also in

⁴⁶See Sallust’s *Conspiracy of Catiline*, 1-2, in which ambition, pride, and covetousness likewise play a formative role in the evolution of political community. See also Seneca’s *Epistulae Morales* 90, in which the pastoral prepolitical epoch was interrupted by the convulsions engendered by avarice; and yet philosophy is also borne of this painful progress.

“fear and piety” (5.1161-1203). Politics itself becomes an endeavor to please the gods (5.1222-5). Meanwhile (including the aforementioned excursus on the invention of weapons and the Punic Wars), men develop iron implements, enabling weaponry and war; “thus dark discord prepared one thing after another, to be frightful in arms for the nations of men, and added increase in terrors to war each day” (5.1293-307). All such things conspired (and continue to conspire) to disrupt the peace of human life.

Yet, concurrently, men “attempt cultivating their delightful plots,” rejoicing in the pacific agrarian life (5.1367-8). Music and the arts engender “mirth” and “sweet peals of laughter” (5.1403-4). And yet this too is a seed of discordant fear, for the taste for novelty and goods concludes in man laboring “always in vain and to no purpose, consuming his days in empty cares,” not knowing the “limits of possession” and the causes of “true pleasure.” The seemingly “permanent delights” of the newest art or possession give way to the incandescence of the next innovation, spoiling one’s delight with envy (5.1408-35). This too, Lucretius echoes with the teacher of Ecclesiastes, is vanity.

It would appear that history chronicles simultaneously, on the one hand, the evolutionary progress of human arrangements and the gradual perfection of human society and, on the other, the gradual descent of humanity into discord and strife.⁴⁷ At the same time that it is a narrative of triumph, creation, and order, the history of politics is the history of fear, destruction, and disorder. The instruments of regress attend progress. How do we assess the Lucretian political teaching, then? Lucretius has already provided the mechanism to foreclose even the possibility

⁴⁷See Gale, *Lucretius: De Rerum Natura V*, 176: “The poet draws here on two mutually opposed traditions concerning human prehistory: mythological accounts (most notably that of Hesiod, *Works and Days* 109-20) according to which primitive human beings inhabited an earthly paradise during the era known as the Golden Age, subsequently passing through a series of ages marked by moral degeneracy and increasing violence and injustice to the present, Iron Age; and the rationalist, predominantly progressivist theories of technological development associated particularly with the fifth-century philosophers Xenophanes and Democritus . . . Lucretius, however, combines the two traditions in such a way as to depict human prehistory in terms *neither* of progress *nor* of decline.” At best, the good is mingled with the bad; no firm verdict upon the normative qualities of history can be assessed.

of teleological contentions: the world and all that is in it, including all political structures, is mortal, a mere *concordia* of atoms no less fragile than any other. If the *De Rerum Natura* is eschatological, it is only so in the most rudimentary sense: the world will end, it tends quite simply toward its own destruction.⁴⁸ But there is emphatically no teleology to be found here, no particular fulfillment or consummation. History and thus politics is, for Lucretius, utterly ateleological. This conclusion, as seen above, is rooted in the primordial foundations of his cosmological inquiry. Anything that is “made” is made for no particular purpose—certainly not for men or for gods—and is certain to crumble; even the (possibly infinite) worlds hurtling through the cosmos are destined to a purposeless destruction (2.1048-89, 5.235-46, 5.195-234). Indeed, nothing, not even the soul, survives the dissolution of atomic *concordia*. How much less durable are the institutions we fashion for the preservation of temporal wealth and power, then. As Lucretius reveals in Book V, any artifice, structure, or even civilization is always already in decay from the moment of its generation; evolution of all kinds is “non-teleological, unpredictable, and ambivalent” (cf. 2.1150-74, 5.826-7).⁴⁹ In general terms, the pattern of life and death, growth and decay, is not teleological.⁵⁰ Thus, “Rome’s preeminence must by definition be transient: neither its destiny nor that of the world is in the providential hands of a

⁴⁸See David J. Furley, “Lucretius the Epicurean: On the History of Man” in *Lucretius*, ed. Monica Gale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 164-5: “man is apt to pick up from nature”—incorrectly—“a line of progress, without picking up the realization that the line has an end, or, to change the metaphor, that although one may continue along the same path, at a certain point one ceases to climb and starts going downhill . . . We can conclude at once that the question so often posed about Lucretius’ history of civilization, ‘primitivist or progressivist?’ is quite beside the point. It could hardly be, for him, either a matter of ‘natural’ decline from a primitive golden age, or of a progression to higher and higher levels of prosperity and happiness. What we would expect, rather, is a step-by-step account of the growth of civilization with a mainly negative emphasis.” Lucretius understands the *limits* of progress, politics, and history.

⁴⁹Schiesaro, “Lucretius and Roman Politics and History,” 43.

⁵⁰Alessandro Schiesaro, “The Palingenesis of *De Rerum Natura*” in *Lucretius 4.1-25 and the Proems of the De Rerum Natura*, *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* (1995), 93.

divine agent”; destruction inevitably awaits “man’s political structures,” all kings and kingdoms.⁵¹

Previously, politics had been conceived as a teleological project, an affirmative human institution structuring communities in such a way that a “common good,” or at least the good of some group or individual, could be recognized and realized. According to Cicero, for example, humans congregate in community primarily as a result of an intrinsic urge rooted in the natural law to socialize and achieve common ends.⁵² Whether the *teloi* of politics be benevolent, benign, or destructive, teleological politics is a “technology” for the coercive and necessarily oppressive ordering of human beings in pursuit of some end. Successful ordering and achievement of this end demands the binding of the mind to a particular set of dogma and intellectual arrangements that are not susceptible to question. Necessarily, because the universe is infinite (according to Lucretius), the construction of this dogma involves a distortion and compaction of reality, a totalizing and thus violent systematization of cosmological processes. Teleological politics demands the prohibition of questioning in defense of the ideological construct of orthodoxy necessary for the preservation of the regime and the sanctity of the *eschaton*.⁵³ Indeed, “kings have a vested interest” in promoting and sustaining certain beliefs, regardless of their resemblance to the true *rerum natura*, especially “the belief that one god controls the universe” and thus ordain and sustain the thrones of kings⁵⁴ For Lucretius, however, laws, while a “natural” development of the evolutionary permutations of history, are not intrinsically “just”

⁵¹Schiesaro, “Lucretius and Roman Politics and History,” 42, 53. cf. Duncan Kennedy, “Making a Text of the Universe: Perspectives on Discursive Order in the *De Rerum Natura* of Lucretius,” 384.

⁵²Cicero, *De Re Publica*, 1.39.

⁵³See Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2005).

⁵⁴J. L. Penwill, “Image, Ideology, and Action in Cicero and Lucretius,” 74. One can see, then, that Lucretius deftly “strikes at” the connection between religion in politics in the enslavement of the human intellect. Schiesaro, “Lucretius and Roman Politics and History,” 52.

(indeed, they are more likely to be unjust if one takes justice in the Aristotelian sense of “equality”), and they do not further a teleological project.⁵⁵

What Lucretius has done in calling into question all tenets of this orthodoxy is to deprive politics of its metaphysical foundation and thus of its “metaphysical sanction,” resulting in the conclusion that “any constitutional form is nothing more than a purely historical, practical set of arrangements sanctioned on the basis of its ability to foster the attainment of *voluptas*.”⁵⁶ Cicero curmudgeonly insists that the Epicurean conception of history will result in the destruction of an affirmative political order erected upon a metaphysical, teleological platform, for the “attainment of *voluptas* is a fundamentally private pursuit, which demands of society no more than the removal of obstacles such as anarchy or violence.”⁵⁷ The ramifications of this observation remain to be seen, but what is of immediate importance is that Lucretius prepares the ground for an escape from the “ideological maze” that constructs and constricts our social world by turning our gaze toward the *rerum natura* themselves, the locus of truth. Accordingly, “politicians who see themselves as future history are at best dangerously deluded.”⁵⁸ By stripping first the cosmos, then history, and finally politics itself of teleological purpose, Lucretius liberates mankind from the eschatological *agon* of contemporary political pursuits, of ambitious politics, of politics to some historical end, consummation, or apocalypse. In his abandonment of teleology, he permits us to abandon ourselves to the world.

The Lucretian philosophy of history is encapsulated in his bifurcated depiction of Athens. At the beginning of Book VI, Athens is portrayed as the paradisiacal Eden of Pericles’ “Funeral Oration,” the seat of all human arts, culture, and achievement, the “bestower of life,” the

⁵⁵Schiesaro, “Lucretius and Roman Politics and History,” 47.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 49.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 51.

⁵⁸Penwill, “Image, Ideology, and Action in Cicero and Lucretius,” 81-3.

consummation of historical progress, and the progenitor of “the highest pinnacle of the arts” (*artibus ad summum*) (6.2-3; 5.1457). Infamously, however, the *De Rerum Natura* concludes abruptly with a grotesque description, in sadistic and nauseating detail, of the plague that devastates Athens immediately after its Periclean apogee (6.1138-1286). Even the glory of Athens is eclipsed by the ineluctable flux of atoms and void. As Strauss observes, “the last Book of the poem is the only one that begins and ends with ‘Athens’”; the words succeeding the first reference demonstrate Athens’ greatness, “and the end shows Athens’ misery.”⁵⁹ Even Athens is a purposeless *concilia* of atoms, susceptible to its inevitable and cataclysmic destruction. The world will not culminate in an eschatological apocalypse. Lucretian history offers no *Gotterdammerung*, no consummation of history (as distinct from a final and universal cataclysm)—but it will, nonetheless, end, whether with a bang or a whimper.⁶⁰ Neither Rome nor Athens can advance the engines of history or contribute to the salvation of universal humanity. Indeed, to do so is a fundamentally dangerous pursuit. The “old account of reality” is unacceptable, for it concludes in misery.⁶¹ In other words, the *De Rerum Natura* may be perceived as the abolition of politics as conventionally understood; therein is a clearing discovered for true freedom.

***Aporia* , Openness, and the Late Modern Predicament: Freedom for Philosophy**

Even so, the *De Rerum Natura* is a “poem about salvation,” and it is an inescapably political work.⁶² Yet, thus far, Lucretius has only provided for us a definitive statement of what politics is *not* or ought not be. What kind of politics results from Lucretius’ systematic deconstruction of doxographic orthodoxy? If the temporally teleological connotations of the

⁵⁹Strauss, “Notes on Lucretius,” 81.

⁶⁰Hardie, *Cosmos and Imperium*, 191.

⁶¹Minyard, *Lucretius and the Late Republic*, 68.

⁶²Hardie, “Lucretius and the *Aeneid*,” 158.

term may be bracketed, what is the “purpose” of politics for Lucretius? Having denuded politics of legitimate purposive intentions and ends, what is the status of politics in the *De Rerum Natura*? Cognizant that the life of *voluptas* is the best life for the human being according to Epicurean teaching, what is the relation of politics to this life? To what end does Lucretius so vigorously “expose the defects of the world” and traditional accounts of reality?⁶³ How ought humans to comport themselves in the purposeless universe Lucretius has constructed?

Of course, divergent answers to this inquiry have been proposed. Some readers, including Donald Fowler, are careful to contextualize Lucretius within the bounded horizon provided by his predecessor Epicurus. “The essence of [Epicurus’] position is well known”: avoid participation in politics and “live unseen.”⁶⁴ Politics, after all, is rooted in the fear of death, envy, and despair. Yet, such a maxim, if applied universally, would be untenable. If all men withdrew from political association, humans would revert to the life of beasts, to the fearful existence of prepolitical society as witnessed in Book V.⁶⁵ Therefore, Fowler proposes that Epicurus—and thus, logically, his disciples—prefer a proto-liberal monarch who is able to establish and maintain a social contract that serves as a “refuge” from the convulsions and privations of the “state of nature.”⁶⁶ “What matters for Epicureans,” Fowler correctly insists, “is the chance to lead a quiet life.” Necessarily, then, the social contract possesses a certain “utility”: while “the world will one day fall apart, the political institutions of Rome are better than anarchy.” They are undoubtedly “imperfect,” and the wise man will still avoid involvement within them “unless he has to” inject himself into political affairs (whatever that might mean),

⁶³Mason, *Lucretius: Epicurean and Poet*, 367.

⁶⁴Fowler, “Lucretius and Politics,” 400.

⁶⁵See Furley, “Lucretius the Epicurean,” 170: “I submit that this”—the proposition of Lucretius (or Epicurus for that matter) as a “primitivist,” as one who longs nostalgically for the “golden” prepolitical age—“is exaggerated nonsense. It is both ludicrous and unnecessary to think that Lucretius commends to us a life without clothes, houses, fire—or poetry; or that he wants us to return, as to a lost ideal, to fighting for our lives, in constant fear (*paventes*), against wild beasts.”

⁶⁶Fowler, “Lucretius and Politics,” 408-25. Hobbes’s affection for Lucretius should thus be justified.

but they are nonetheless “instruments for attaining this end” of the undisturbed Epicurean life of contemplation. To corroborate this claim and his wholesale imposition of the views of Epicurus upon Lucretius, Fowler suggests that the quasi-republican manner in which atoms “contract together” via *foedera* evokes a “favorable view of the cohesive force of social institutions,” regardless of their danger to human life and happiness.⁶⁷ Politics is a provisional arrangement designed merely to preserve the barest rudiments of order. The walls of the world (*moenia mundi*), after all, must be preserved. In other words, what Lucretius implicitly suggests is the necessity for a “minimalist arrangement” to “guarantee stability and order.”⁶⁸

Leo Strauss and his disciples extend such logic much farther, simultaneously and appropriately broaching Lucretius’ primordial philosophical commitments. Strauss commences from the premise that the “most important purpose” of the *De Rerum Natura* is to “liberate men from religion,” from the dogmatic foundations of the “city.”⁶⁹ “Reason alone,” Strauss notes of Lucretius, and “the study of nature can give man tranquility of mind”; they are the “sole sources of happiness” (2.14-61).⁷⁰ Philosophy “is the most important constituent element of human happiness” for Lucretius.⁷¹ As Shadia Drury observes, Lucretius is regarded by Strauss as a “conventionalist” philosopher, as one who foregrounds the philosophical life as the best life.⁷² On the other hand, while for Lucretius religion is the font of pain and terror, it is, Strauss claims, simultaneously “a refuge from the fear of the end or the death of the world” that is so prominent in the Lucretian philosophy of history. Philosophy, then, which *must* posit just such a cataclysm and which *must* acknowledge the default or absence of the *entia perfectissima* (perfect beings), is

⁶⁷Ibid., 425-31.

⁶⁸Schiesaro, “Lucretius and Roman Politics and History,” 45-9.

⁶⁹Strauss, “Notes on Lucretius,” 82.

⁷⁰Ibid., 94.

⁷¹Nichols, *Epicurean Political Philosophy*, 21.

⁷²Shadia B. Drury, “Leo Strauss’s Classic Natural Right Teaching,” *Political Theory* 15 (1987), 301.

“productive of the deepest pain.”⁷³ For that reason, Lucretius is allegedly “certain that religious fear will induce” Memmius in particular and the *vulgus* in general “to try to turn [their] back[s] on the truth even after [they have] listened to it.”⁷⁴ In short, the “average” citizen cannot conceive of or bear a “world without limits, without walls,” and, indeed, the city *must* have walls in order to maintain some semblance of political order. “Finiteness is reassuring” when confronted with the specter of an indifferent cosmos.⁷⁵ For Lucretius, we do in fact dwell in an “unwalled city,” in a universe that is “boundless and infinite, both in space in time,” governed by “immutable” laws of nature that dictate destruction for all things, and it is Epicurus who so heroically pierced beyond these “flaming” constructed walls by which we maintain the comfort of illusionary finitude in the first place.⁷⁶ The world, moreover, is defective and “naturally deficient,” but these recognitions do “not induce Lucretius for a moment to think of a rebellion or conquest.”⁷⁷ The “masses” are not amenable to the discomfort offered by philosophy, and, more importantly, they should not be offered even the opportunity to taste the liberating fruits of philosophy lest the city itself dissolve into chaos (if there is no God, anything is possible). Indeed, “training or education can make some men equally refined,” but—repeating a Straussian trope—“it cannot eradicate the fundamental, natural diversity or inequality” of intellectual capacity that precludes most individuals from engaging in contemplation of the true *rerum natura*. The masses need a city, and the philosopher himself who “does not care for the city,” as the Epicurean philosopher supposedly does not, “is in need of support or protection by politically active and powerful men” such as Memmius lest chaos overtake the human race and foreclose

⁷³Strauss, “Notes on Lucretius,” 85, 130, 122.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 74-9.

⁷⁵Nichols, *Epicurean Political Philosophy*, 115. 164.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 115; Schiesaro, “The Palingenesis of *De Rerum Natura*,” 82.

⁷⁷Lucretius, “Notes on Lucretius,” 92-6.

the possibility of the leisured philosophical life.⁷⁸ Covertly, then, Lucretius sanctions the necessity of both politics and religion as a palliative for the disordered, tremulous soul. There is, thus, a “fundamental opposition between philosophy on the one hand and religion and politics on the other”—and yet both must maintain a tensional accommodation to one another.⁷⁹ Lucretius allegedly does not believe that Memmius will be “converted,” nor does his philosophy concern itself with the “best regime,” for “philosophy cannot transform, or contribute to transforming, political society.”⁸⁰ Even if it could, Lucretius’ hypothetical ideal regime would be no less a “city in speech” alone than Plato’s Callipolis.⁸¹ His implicit desire, as Fowler claims, is for the limited regime of “stable laws” that will preserve order but leave untouched the liberty of the philosopher to do and question as he pleases.⁸² His political teaching, then, is one of an accommodation to imperfect, fear-inducing politics, an accommodation that is almost conspiratorial.

In short, a consensus emerges from academic readers of Lucretius. On the one hand, Lucretian cosmological symbolism demands a world free from politics, for politics is a prime source of fear and unrest, of the disordered soul, founded upon a fundamental occlusion of the true structure of reality. On the other hand, a minimum of political order seems to be essential, given the predisposition of humanity to anarchical behavior, to preserve a world in which

⁷⁸Ibid., 107. cf. Nichols, *Epicurean Political Philosophy*, 159 and 45, where it is noted that Memmius is an intensely political figure. Indeed, Memmius is, oddly enough, only addressed a few times in the approximately 7000 lines of the *De Rerum Natura*, one of which invocations occurs significantly, after a protracted hiatus, at 5.865-70. The passage references “protection,” and lions are, perhaps significantly, described with the Latin term “virtus.” This passage is potentially political, perhaps implying, a Straussian would claim, that some people—namely, philosophers—need protection from political figures possessed of the “virtus” necessary to rule. See Strauss’s famous interpretation of Machiavelli for an elucidation of this argument: “Machiavelli’s Intention: The Prince,” *The American Political Science Review* 51:1 (1957): 13-40.

⁷⁹Ibid., 167.

⁸⁰Strauss, “Notes on Lucretius,” 131.

⁸¹In the disciplinary journals of political science, most direct references to Lucretius emerge from engagement with Leo Strauss’s preexisting engagement of Lucretius. See, for instance, in addition to the works cited above, Clark A. Merrill, “Leo Strauss’s Indictment of Christian Philosophy,” *The Review of Politics* 62 (200): 77-105

⁸²Nichols, *Epicurean Political Philosophy*, 145-7.

ataraxia is even possible. Thus, Lucretius purportedly concludes with an inversion of Socrates: the ideal republic is to have no republic at all. Given the nature of humanity, however, Lucretius concludes that the “ideal” (i.e., best possible) regime is the proscribed, inactive regime which provides the most latitude for Epicurean *ataraxia* while also providing enough order such that chaos does not result, precluding the leisurely contemplation necessary for philosophy. Chaos, it is evident, is possible at each extreme. The paradox Lucretius apparently constructs is that the philosophic life is impossible in political community, and yet it depends upon political life for its subsistence. Ultimately, then, Lucretius is, according to many readers, a proto-republican clandestinely in favor of a small government (preferably monarchical in structure) that preserves civic virtue while providing space for philosophy and intellectual liberty.

This is a misconception that must be dispelled. While Strauss is correct in acknowledging the priority of the philosophic life for Lucretius, both Fowler and Strauss fail to unconceal the affirmative nature of the political teaching embedded in Lucretius’ poetry. While Lucretius does, admittedly, express some concern “lest the walls of the world suddenly be destroyed and flee apart,” this does not imply that he thus condones the present political order (1.1102-10). In scrutinizing the hostility of Epicurean philosophy to politics-qua-Rome, such scholars fail to appreciate that Lucretius does not, in fact, erect an opposition between philosophy and politics-qua-politics. Near the conclusion of Book V, Lucretius, in a passage riddled uncoincidentally with Hellenisms, offers a flavor of the true culmination of human development in the “active mind” (*impigrae mentis*) which both “time” and “reason elevate into the midst of light,” for men “saw one thing after another emerge into clarity in their minds” (5.1448-57). More particularly, Lucretius is a eudaimonic philosopher: he posits a best life and is concerned to specify the manner by which such a life can be achieved, to show “man the right

way to live,” to realize his “passionate concern to set wretched and benighted mankind on the right path” by “establishing the correct relationship to nature.”⁸³ Only then “will man overcome his discontent,” which “is the result of the vain pursuits of war, wealth, and political success.”⁸⁴ Insofar as this is the case, the *De Rerum Natura* is an ethical, philosophical tract, not a physical (or even physicalist) project: “ethics takes precedence over physics” in its pages.⁸⁵

The *De Rerum Natura* is indeed a soteriological text. Romans—and we are all Romans in his sense—require salvation from their insoluble predicament. Lucretius is accordingly a post-lapsarian poet, addressing a humanity that has fallen into fear and ignorance and requires redemption. Human beings are closed to questioning and the true experience of the cosmos and the divine, lacking the “placid heart” necessary to *receive* the “images” (*simulacra*) carried to the mind from the “holy bodies” of the gods. “What quality of life follows thence it is permitted to see”: a life of boredom, of fear, a life of lost wonder (6.73-8). Such a life is “ignorant,” “compelling” men to “confer things to the dominion of the gods, and to concede to them kingship” (6.54-5). Within the Roman predicament, the “primary experience of man’s existence in the cosmos had dissociated into the opacity of concupiscential expansion and the luminosity of

⁸³cf. Keimpe Algra, “The Mechanism of Social Appropriation and Its Role in Hellenistic Ethics” in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* vol. 25, ed. David Sedley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003): “Hellenistic philosophers did not turn away from thinking about society or the social aspects of the good life. They designed theories to show that, how, and why people want to live together and care for others . . . the Stoics and Epicureans may have had little to say about the relative merits or demerits of certain constitutions, but all the same they did reflect on what might be termed the basic rationale of society, and on the roles of law, justice, and utility within it. . . . Indeed, Stoics and Epicureans alike attempted to ground their ethics—including their theories of justice and friendship (*philia*)—in explicit first principles which they thought should govern the good life of the individual.” Algra continues by summarizing adeptly Epicurean conceptions of friendship.

⁸⁴Hardie, “Lucretius and the *Aeneid*,” 158. cf. Nichols, 15: “Epicureanism is more than a doctrine of atomic physics . . . but a philosophy of man and science.” See also Benjamin Farrington, “Form and Purpose in the *De Rerum Natura*” in *Lucretius*, ed. Donald Reynolds Dudley (London, 1965), 20.

⁸⁵Nichols, *Epicurean Political Philosophy*, 15. It is simply not the case that his ethical principles can be validated only “by the construction of a system of physics which radically removes any opportunity for the cultivation of false standards of behavior.” Hardie, “Lucretius and the *Aeneid*,” 171. cf. Amy Olberding, “‘The Feel of Not to Feel it’: Lucretius’ Remedy for Death Anxiety,” *Philosophy of Literature* 29 (2005), 128: His systematic physics is somewhat irrelevant, for his is “less a rational peace founded on understanding physics than it is a willed peace defended with reason.”

spiritual consciousness” such as that experienced by Lucretius himself.⁸⁶ “But if we see these things”—the opaque structures of empire divorced from the life of philosophical consciousness—“to be ridiculous and full of mockery, if men fear neither the sound of arms nor of wild weapons, if they boldly turn among kings and the power of kings, if they revere neither gold nor the clear splendor of purple vestments, why do you doubt that this power is due wholly to reason,” for “life labors in darkness” (2.47-54). Once the concupiscential, violent constructs that sustain an oppressive city are exposed, “at once each [will] relinquish his concerns and first study to understand the nature of things” (3.1071-2). The transcendence that comes with such a recognition, that the *eventa* of history are mere collisions of atoms, brings calm, seeming “to consist of a brightness upon a plain” as viewed from a mountain precipice (2.331-2). This tranquil contemplation (the word detachment will be avoided) is rooted in aleatory chaos.

Thus, what Lucretius ultimately pleads for is a life of *openness*. While “the delight in, and fascination with, ‘the cosmic show,’ by which the natural world . . . becomes an object of wonder, and even veneration,” sustained “a whole range of theological and teleological models of the universe,” Lucretius “empties this model of its religious content”—his project of destruction—“and *refills* it with Epicurean truth” [emphasis mine].⁸⁷ In his negative “destruction of the traditional theologies,” “reversal of values,” “assault on heaven,” “destruction of the world . . . before the onslaught of Epicurean *ratio*,” in “releasing men’s minds from superstitious fear,” Lucretius prepares a positive ground for the best life, a life of openness and wonder.⁸⁸ While “proving that the human race is everywhere in error,” Epicurus, enthuses Lucretius, “exposed what is the highest good to which we all tend, who pointed the way, and demonstrated the road straight and narrow by which we might be able to run thither to the right thing” (6.26-42). For

⁸⁶Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 307.

⁸⁷Hardie, “Lucretius and the *Aeneid*,” 171.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 171-88.

this, “the reason and aspect of heaven must be understood” (6.83). Yet, in dispelling the fearful wonder (*mirari multa relinquas*) before the heavens, Lucretius himself does not jeopardize his openness, does not cease to wonder altogether (6.650-4). Indeed, the life of philosophy is a life of wonder. Lucretius marvels that, when reposing before the aspect of the cosmos, “at that moment, a sort of divine delight and a horror seizes me” (3.28-9). For Lucretius, the cosmos “is a world of sensuous delight in which we see ‘the multitude of shells painting the lap of the earth, where with soft waves the sea beats on the thirsty sand of the curving shore’” (2.374-6).⁸⁹ It is a world “steeped in laughing grace”—that is, the very existence of the cosmos is, for the transient human being, utterly gratuitous—in which Lucretius seems appropriately to delight in cosmological phenomena, “to feast upon nature with the gratitude and wonder of one who finds her beauty an abundant source of joy” rather than the terror it often engenders.⁹⁰ The poem quite literally “makes possible the ability to contemplate everything and anything with a mind that has found its peace.”⁹¹ Participating in the poem, comporting oneself with a posture of openness to the textual event of the *De Rerum Natura* is to participate in openness to reality in a fashion that is almost sacramental.⁹² In keeping with the maxim of classical philosophy, philosophical inquiry is rooted in wonder. Rome has lost the sense of wonder before the *rerum natura*, instead intentionally occluding it with the “false consciousness” of its *communis salus*, its “Caesarian cancer.”⁹³

For Lucretius, the best life, then, is one of openness to questioning, regardless of the opaque and seemingly comforting structures erected to occlude the true nature of the cosmos. To engender this openness, he reduces his readers to a state of *aporia*. Like a Socratic gadfly

⁸⁹Quoted in and translated by Olberding, “The Feel of Not to Feel It,” 116.

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹Ibid., 123.

⁹²Schiesaro, “Palingenesis,” 89.

⁹³Minyard, *Lucretius and the Late Republic*, 69, 76.

(indeed, perhaps Lucretius could be identified as the Roman equivalent to Socrates), Lucretius urges us to “contemplate the bewildering consequences of infinity and all its implications,” to call into question everything, from personal identity to the gods.⁹⁴ Lucretius leaves his readers perplexed and wondering; in other words, he leaves them in the comportment of a philosopher. The horizontal consciousness of ecumenic empire was both “darkened” and confused by the collision of innumerable parochial horizons melding into “universal humanity” and occluded by gods, civic virtues, war, and politics. Lucretius subjects all such things to the status of question. “Unless the mind is purged” from such illusions and occlusions, it shall not be free (5.43). Neither “treasures,” nor “nobility nor the glory of royalty” are of any “profit” to the mind” (2.37-9). Unlike many contemporary political philosophers, Lucretius begins with a cosmological inquiry. Wresting religion’s stranglehold upon the truth, Lucretius commences a genuine *quest* for truth, for the whole, from a position of openness, venturing back to primordial, pre-Socratic inquiries that had been obfuscated by the systematic constructions of imperial concupiscence and teleological politics. Conscious of his epoch of great temporal turmoil, reducing the cosmos to matter and void, Lucretius composes an Epicurean philosophico-praxis in which events are only ephemeral or even imagined, the chance encounter of various bodies colliding in an endless void. It is a cosmos devoid of eschatological promises. Demystifying, demythologizing, Lucretius leaves us in an aporetic state.⁹⁵

This aporetic condition, utterly opposed to the established, confident consciousness of the Roman citizen, is representative of the correct relation to nature. Only this correct relation will overcome human discontent due to war, wealth, and politics. Lucretius is thus diagnostic of the pathological consciousness of the ecumenic empire. In destroying the errant consciousness of

⁹⁴Schiesaro, “Palingenesis,” 101.

⁹⁵Kennedy, “Making a Text of the Universe,” 395.

Rome, he is also, thus, engaged in an exercise of replacement. He seeks to rejoin the bifurcated imperial consciousness, harmonizing philosophic openness and political life. He engages in nothing short of a new intellectual founding of Rome. Yet, his founding does not, like those of his predecessors, distort reality. He is no gnostic and dogmatic ideologue replacing the occlusions of *vera rerum natura* with his own false construct.⁹⁶ While he accepts the deficiencies of the world, he more importantly accepts and rejoices in the givenness of the world without the pathological impulse to “restore” and transform it. Lucretius counsels throughout his work that we must accept the world upon its own grounds. He wishes only to disabuse his readers of the notion that the cosmos is mysterious and imbued with supernatural power, to disorient and destructure us by posing for us the possibility that the cosmos is governed by invisible but not mysterious bodies; the universe rather lies open to investigation if one is open to its givenness. Then and only then may “you realize, finally, that nature of which you are a part.”⁹⁷

This is the shape of the philosophic life proposed by Lucretius. Thus, the course of history reaches its *telos* in the emergence of the proper Lucretian consciousness—in this sense history *is*, in fact, teleological—but what is rendered luminous is the *telos* of the individual, not that of the collectivity or of provisional politics. In the pages of the *De Rerum Natura*, the injunction to “live fully” (*plenus vitae conviva*) without fear and with tranquility “shines forth as an ethical ideal.”⁹⁸ While death is literally nothing to us (3.830-1), life is then “everything to us.”⁹⁹ Indeed, Lucretius, “spurred” by the “brevity of human life,” believes firmly in the

⁹⁶This should be obvious from the fact that Lucretius presents multiple explanations for various cosmic phenomena. He does not, in other words, wish to impose his own narrow systematic vision of cosmological operations upon the universe. One need not accept each of his hypotheses and propositions for his project to achieve its stated goals. See, e.g., 5.509ff.

⁹⁷Penwill, “Image, Ideology,” 84.

⁹⁸Hadzits, *Lucretius and His Influence*, 144.

⁹⁹Asmis, “Lucretius’ New World Order,” 152.

capacity of philosophy to “ameliorate human conditions,” but his project is to “mould the *individual* life,” not the collective life.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, while openness to the truth of cosmic order is a transfigurative experience, Lucretius speaks of an individual transfiguration or conversion, not a transfiguration of the world through the coercive mechanisms of politics, through the desperate pursuit of the millennial politics of an ideal regime. For Lucretius, “clearly what is needed is not constitutional reform, but philosophical conversion.”¹⁰¹ In such an intellectual, private conversion, Lucretius leaves his readers free from the fear engendered by dogmatic constructs and from the progressive eschatological angst of political pursuits. Salvation cannot be instantiated by politics, or at least by the current regime; it must occur in the individual soul.

But what, finally, does this entail for the actual political milieu in which Lucretius and his readers (including his contemporary readers) find themselves? Surely the Roman ecumenic empire militates against such a life. Are we left with withdrawal as the lasting component of the *De Rerum Natura*'s political teaching? While certainly the “*De Rerum Natura* is made to emerge from the ruin of civil order,” from the “errors and evil inherent in that order” which are the “seeds of its own destruction,” is it at last true that this remedy is utterly “non-civic”?¹⁰² What is the fate of the political? It is true that “it was out of an ancient belief in divine providence”—that false and terrifying specter maintained still by the Stoics—“that the whole institution of Roman” politics had grown.” It is furthermore true that “the natural is sharply set over against the conventional” for Lucretius, that “the simple life [of philosophy] is contrasted with the complexities, the fallacies, the charms, even, and the allurements of wealth and power,” with the “avarice and blind lust for honor” that are so typical of Roman life (3.59-64).¹⁰³ Politics

¹⁰⁰Hadzits, *Lucretius and His Influence*, 159.

¹⁰¹Schiesaro, “Lucretius and Roman Politics and History,” 54.

¹⁰²Minyard, *Lucretius and the Late Republic*, 36.

¹⁰³Hadzits, *Lucretius and His Influence*, 110, 128.

is apparently productive of nothing other than pain. It is true, finally, that “the Epicureans . . . believe that no wise man will engage in politics,” for it is an unpleasant activity leaving insufficient “leisure for the pursuit of philosophy.”¹⁰⁴

But to leave the status of politics in disgrace is to ignore Lucretius’ exceedingly positive vision of Epicurean politics. It is difficult to disentangle the complex myth Lucretius weaves in Book V. Nonetheless, a number of generative principles and pregnant concepts can be extricated from these passages which, when examined in a constellation, offer a vision of Lucretian politics. Crudely, the interpretive tactic towards this end could be portrayed as an attempt to categorize what Lucretius regards as “good” and salutary in the evolution of political order and what he regards as harmful and destabilizing. Above all, the *fact* of politics itself is not deleterious for Lucretius; only the particular forms it has assumed and the motives which impel its further development are problematic. Of course, along with political community evolve such things as weapons, war, ambition, and an inability to attend to the common good (because concupiscence and the fear of death supersede virtue), culminating in a foreclosing of *ataraxia* and pleasure. Yet, it has also been observed that the development of politics is accompanied by the generation of friendship, the bonds of communal order (law), and, most importantly, language, that without which philosophy, poetry, and understanding openness to the cosmos would be impossible. Indeed, while politics as practiced is exploitative and destructive, endangering the very things that are salubrious in political community, it is a necessary condition for the philosophical life, for the *best* life. History, then, is actually progressive, though it tends to no particular *telos* (the Romans await a god who will never come). As Nichols observes, “the possibility of philosophy depends on developments of political society in two ways: first, for the

¹⁰⁴J. Jackson Barlow, “The Education of the Statesman in Cicero’s *De Republica*,” *Polity* 19 (1987), 357. cf. Cicero, *De Republica*, 1.4.4-9.

material conditions of abundance that make leisure possible . . . and second, for a progress in men's speech and reasoning."¹⁰⁵ It is evident, then, that Lucretius has no wish to revert back to some prepolitical condition, nor does he wish to abolish political community altogether. Politics is potentially an affirmative good necessary for human flourishing.

Though, again, Lucretius does not prescribe an ideal regime in his poem, hints of the Epicurean political vision are found in extant commentary on Epicureanism. Moreover, though he is not given to speculation on political ideals, hints of Lucretius' own political theory are indeed embedded in what has come before. It is well known that, in 306-5 B.C., Epicurus established his famous "garden," his academy where the "life of blessed tranquility, of imperturbability with a body free from pain and life free from care," a life of happiness, wisdom, and virtue were pursued in a community of *friendship*.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, the central place occupied by friendship in the Epicurean garden is well-noted; there is no reason to suspect that Lucretius diverges from his mentor on this point.¹⁰⁷ Dioegenes Laertius stresses that Epicurean friendship is "constituted on the basis of a community of those who live a life full of pleasures."¹⁰⁸ Diogenes of Oenoanda suggestively speculates upon a world in which all have "converted" to Epicureanism:

. . . then truly the life of the gods will pass to men. For all things will be full of justice and mutual love, and there will come to be no need of fortifications or laws and all the things which we contrive on account of one another . . . And such activities will interrupt the study of philosophy for needful purposes.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵Nichols, *Epicurean Political Philosophy*, 156.

¹⁰⁶Hadzits, *Lucretius and His Influence*, 8-11. cf. Epicurus no. 27, 11, 5 of Curiai Doxai.

¹⁰⁷David Konstan, *Friendship in the Classical World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 109.

¹⁰⁸Dioegenes Laertius, frag. 10.120, as quoted and translated in Algra, "Social Appropriation," 276. Algra notes that, for Epicurus at least, "the pleasure at issue is . . . a *common* pleasure." Ibid., 282.

¹⁰⁹Cited in A. A. Long, "Pleasure and Social Utility: The Virtues of Being Epicurean," *From Epicurus to Epictetus* 25 (2006), 178-202.

It is not unreasonable to suppose that Lucretius himself shares these visions, valuing as he does friendship, community, and philosophy. Ostensibly, however, this pleasant construct represents an ideal regime that must exist purely ideally. But must this be so? Is it true that, as the Straussians claim, Lucretius only wishes to solicit the good favor of a politician who can merely restrain the excesses of the *vulgus*, who are not susceptible to conversion? This too is implausible. “The final goal of the poem is the construction of an ethic valid for all mankind.”¹¹⁰ The *De Rerum Natura* is an evangelical tract; Lucretius writes in order that its gospel might spread to the ends of the earth. He certainly does not wish to bolster the established order so that he and a chosen few can withdraw into contemplative solitude. He does not engage in a mere attempt to garner powerful friends in the existing institutional arrangement—in the survival of which he would then have an interest. Strauss is incorrect when he proclaims that the “Epicurean sage has little incentive to charity.”¹¹¹

Of course, “the problem begins with the Epicurean repudiation of public life accompanied by a retreat into a small group of friends who cultivate tranquility.”¹¹² The Epicurean garden, however, while it is withdrawn from politics as typically practiced, is not apolitical. Politics as seen in Book V has ostensibly progressed to a juncture at which political order itself can enable a withdrawal from politics as typically practiced. There is, then, a tension between politics and their own consummation/destruction, between participation and withdrawal. But this does not mean the “garden” has been foreclosed from the realm of possibility. Lucretian politics are only apolitical if the concupiscential ecumene of Rome is taken as the standard of “politics.” In reality, politics has evolved such that political relationships can be forged in

¹¹⁰Hardie, “Lucretius and the *Aeneid*,” 171.

¹¹¹Strauss, “Notes on Lucretius,” 131.

¹¹²Reid Barbour, “Moral and Political Philosophy: Readings of Lucretius from Virgil to Voltaire” in *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*, eds. Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 149.

friendship, which is, to Aristotle, the foundation of politics itself.¹¹³ Martha Nussbaum, commenting on Lucretius' infamous diatribe against erotic love, argues that Lucretius "reminds the reader that, unlike other natural beings, he lives in society, and that society is very important to his happiness."¹¹⁴ Indeed, contentions that Lucretius agitates for political and social detachment are misguided. The love characteristic of friendship conduces toward the "softening" of the human race and is a "necessary precondition of promises and contracts, of community, of law," a necessary precondition, in fact, "for a full flourishing human life."¹¹⁵ While Nussbaum ultimately concludes that Lucretius does not extend his ruminations upon love far enough, his argument for political community is, in its logical structure, not different from Aristotle's: as was evident in the *De Rerum Natura* Book V, human beings originally congregated in rudimentary communities (households and villages) for the purposes of satiating the biological necessities of mere life. But Lucretius obviously believes that politics has evolved such that we might congregate in the community of friendship for the *good* life of philosophic contemplation.¹¹⁶ It is indeed out of "the expected delight of sweet friendship" toward Memmius in particular and, given the universal aims of the text, toward humanity in general, that Lucretius writes the *De Rerum Natura* in the first place (1.140-1).¹¹⁷

Thus, far from being a mere "city in speech," the Epicurean garden is a real and viable pattern for life. While it is a quietistic (perhaps even monastic) acceptance of history, it is certainly no accommodation to history; Lucretius seeks not to overthrow the king but to impel

¹¹³Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, XIII-IX.

¹¹⁴Martha Nussbaum, "Beyond Obsession and Disgust: Lucretius on the Therapy of Love" in *The Therapy of Desire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 147-8.

¹¹⁵Ibid., 162.

¹¹⁶Ibid., 191.

¹¹⁷Not that Lucretius believes that it is possible to be friends with all human beings or, worse, that it is possible to befriend an abstract concept signified by "humanity." Like Aristotle, he is not likely to believe that it is possible for any person to maintain more than a few truly meaningful friendships. He does believe, however, that it is possible for all human beings to invest in relationships of *philia*.

his gradual obsolescence in the life of the Epicurean. Lucretius seeks not collaborationists with the current political arrangement, and he certainly does not subscribe to a prototypical permutation of Rorty's "ironist republic" in which all consent to support a regime that is founded on principles known to be illusionary.¹¹⁸ On the other hand, he certainly does not agitate for a revolutionary politics that seeks the subversion and forcible recapitulation of the established order, though it be deficient and defective.

Rather, like the Benedictine monks who retreated quietly into their monasteries to preserve learning and a life of holy contemplation as the remains of the Roman empire collapsed around them, Lucretius, as the remains of the Roman republic collapse around him, implies that an Epicurean politics suggests a peaceful withdrawal from the "false consciousness" imbued by concupiscential imperial politics to preserve, in concert with friends, openness to questioning and a politics attuned to the true order of the *rerum natura*. This too is political. This is a politics that can provide true freedom *for* philosophy. Freeing us from the boundaries that constrict our intellects, he constrains us within the proper boundaries of nature. Lucretius has "left us a most precious heritage of freedom—the freedom of reason to explore the uttermost."¹¹⁹ As such, his pursuit is more religious than that of the most pious Roman. Dogma is closedness to questioning; his project is to establish openness. His "Benedictine solution" proposes not only that we cannot regress to a prepolitical Acadia but that we also ought not force the engines of history forward toward some predetermined *eschaton*. Rather, we, equipped with a free will that is rooted in the very fabric of the cosmos, ought intend a politics of presentism and localism that enables untrammelled transfiguration of ourselves, not of the world.¹²⁰ In the *De Rerum Natura*,

¹¹⁸See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

¹¹⁹Hadzits, *Lucretius and His Influence*, 366.

¹²⁰On the question of localism, see Michael Serres, *The Birth of Physics* (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000), 185: "The ethics of the Garden, it will come as no surprise, is essentially an ethics of the local. The Garden is

Lucretius outlines a *way of being* that can only occur in community, in existential communities that we ourselves must construct and enliven, populated according as others too recognize the liberation Lucretian philosophy promises from dogma, from eschatological politics, and *for* the truly good life.

Conclusion:

Addressed to the Roman predicament, to the crimes and occlusions of a vast empire, Lucretius speaks to us as well. Lucretius proposes a universe that is ultimately purposeless and mechanistic. Moreover, he writes in an epoch characterized above all by the “darkening of the world,” by the cataclysmic collapse of all horizons, leaving his readers adrift and disoriented.¹²¹ Accordingly, he “elaborates a fundamentally different response to man’s situation in an infinite purposeless nature” than that provided by the Stoics who posit a determined, purposeful universe that does not comport with the consciousness of a cosmos in collapse.¹²² But we late moderns too “are heirs of a religion that depreciates the heavens,” of “centuries of materialist physical science” that promises no happiness except physical comfort.¹²³ We possess a desolate philosophy to accompany a desolate metaphysics and a desolate, meaningless physics. We find ourselves contingently thrown into a hollow and disoriented universe. The corpus of modern philosophy resembles in substance the Stoicism which Nietzsche excoriates in *Beyond Good and Evil*:

‘According to nature’ you want to *live*? O you noble Stoics, what deceptive words these are! Imagine being like nature, wasteful beyond measure, indifferent beyond measure, without purposes and consideration, without mercy and justice, fertile and desolate and uncertain at the same time; imagine indifference itself as a power— how

a place, it is a small place, in which are concerned with the small and the near, of boundaries and proximity, where everything necessary is within reach, in which everything natural flourishes and is born.”

¹²¹Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Gadamer on Strauss: an Interview,” *Interpretation* 12:1 (1984), 9.

¹²²Nichols, *Epicurean Political Philosophy*, 23.

¹²³*Ibid.*, 120.

could you live according to this indifference? Living—is that not precisely wanting to be other than this nature?¹²⁴

Like Stoicism, modern philosophy fails to offer true consolation to humanity. Devoid of authentic comfort, afflicted by boredom, equally oppressed by a dogmatic ecumenic orthodoxy, we indulge too in political ideologies and demand a political construct that can reconfigure nature (human and otherwise) so that it is more palatable and that can, perhaps, hasten the arrival of the *eschaton*. We are closed to questioning and to the philosophical life. Thus, we require a political realm where questioning is permitted. Lucretius, as has been demonstrated, offers such an exit.

While it is perhaps true, as Eric Voegelin notes, that Lucretius is not cognizant of the true luminosity of the metaxic structure of existence (perhaps gods are not mere phantasms; man is conscious of his proximate status between life and death, mortal and immortal, human and divine, of the tension between apeirontic depth and noetic height; in this sense, his consciousness of the cosmos is vitiated in comparison with that of Plato), and while he may “tear the veil” too entirely, stripping the cosmos of anything other than corporeality, afflicted by a too-eager desire to explain *everything*, Lucretius’ experience of the phenomenal cosmos leads him, as it does the late moderns, to the consciousness of a cosmos that has been defaulted by God, in which the presence and participation of the divine have been voided or obscured.¹²⁵ “Still,” for Lucretius, “the dreariness of human discord is not the ultimate determinant in the history of mankind.”¹²⁶ Like Samuel Beckett and Shakespeare before him, Lucretius suggests that life is a play on a stage signifying nothing, awaiting a god never to arrive. This is, to his mind, a teaching at once bitter and salutary. It is the crisis of modern philosophy.

¹²⁴Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, aphorism 9, William Kauffman, trans. (New York, 1966).

¹²⁵Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 308.

¹²⁶*Ibid.*, 307.

But in place of desperation and alienation, Lucretius proposes that the world is pure gift (whether or not there is a giver). In a world preoccupied with political and imperial ambitions, Lucretius emerges to recover the virtues of the contemplative life, of a “presentism” that rejoices in the world as given, in a community of real engagement without the impulse to distort both nature and humanity. Lucretius emerges from his poem in a moment of near-divine cosmic clarity. Politically, its consequences entail an avoidance of systematic eschatological pathologies, of excessive entanglement in political conflagrations. We must rather engage in a political society (and, indeed, a religion) in which we maintain a posture of openness to the true nature of cosmos and the gods, not occluding our mental capacities and the universe with intentional misinterpretations of natural phenomena. The world will pass away and, as Socrates counsels, no man can know what awaits after death; thus *our* world and *this* life is the only one that matters to us.¹²⁷ Lucretius counsels us to engage in appropriate political communities such that this life and existence itself is rendered truly *good*, that we might *perceive* reality accurately rather than distort it. Regardless of his faults, Lucretius reopens questioning of the sclerotic and ossified structures that bind our deficient world together. If Rome needed scientific inquiry to open questioning, perhaps the god, the concealing *religio* of our time is, conversely, science itself, the cult of the expert whose fearful dictates we accept without question and whose words suffice to undergird an inhuman and inhumane but omnipotent and omniscient technical political structure. Man, after all, “matures when he stops believing that politics”—or, indeed, any human artifice—“can solve his problems.”¹²⁸ In any case, it is for us to accept the counsel of Lucretius, to be individually transfigured by openness and aporia, to share the “good news” of philosophy by preserving philosophico-political community. Thus, Lucretius is at once radical

¹²⁷See Plato, *The Apology of Socrates*.

¹²⁸Nicolas Gomez Davila, *Escolios a un Texto Implicito: Seleccion* (Villegas Editores, 2005), 248.

and conservative, destructive and constructive. Perhaps, then, mankind still “waits for Epicurus and his truth.”¹²⁹

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¹²⁹Minyard, *Lucretius and the Late Republic*, 61.

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