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Reversing the Invention of *religio*

Lucretius' first Eulogy of Epicurus (*DRN* 1.62-79) and the Sisyphus-Fragment (D.-K. 88b25)

ABSTRACT: This article provides an intertextual analysis of *DRN* 1.62-79, showing that the so-called Sisyphus-fragment (D.-K. 88B25), which represents a *summa* of ancient atheism, is a crucial model for Lucretius' first eulogy of Epicurus, both at a macro and at a micro scale. Respecting Epicurus' caveat against atheism, Lucretius manipulates the Sisyphus-fragment and uses it as a *pars destruens* against ancient religious beliefs and Roman public religion, in order to make space for a new Epicurean theology. Therefore, the aim of the poet is to take advantage of the revolutionary aura and evocative power of the fragment for his own purposes. This interpretation also supports Gigante's hypothesis of Lucretius' direct dependence on the Sisyphus-fragment in the section of the *DRN* devoted to the origin of religion (5.1161-1240). Lucretius' subtle operation is understood by Cicero, who polemically alludes to it in his refutation of Epicurean theology in *Nat. deor.* 1.117-118.

SOMMARIO: Questo articolo svolge un'analisi intertestuale di *DRN* 1.62-79, mostrando che il primo elogio di Epicuro è profondamente influenzato, sotto i profili formale e strutturale, dal celebre frammento del *Sisifo* (D.-K. 88B25), una pietra miliare dell'ateismo antico. Senza tradire la condanna dell'ateismo da parte di Epicuro, Lucrezio riprende e manipola il frammento del *Sisifo*: esso viene infatti usato come *pars destruens* contro la religione tradizionale, così da aprire le porte a una nuova teologia epicurea. Lo scopo di Lucrezio è dunque quello di sfruttare per i propri fini l'aura 'rivoluzionaria' e il potere evocativo del frammento. Questa lettura fornisce un importante supporto alle tesi di Gigante, secondo il quale il frammento influenza anche la sezione del quinto libro dedicata alla nascita della *religio* (*DRN* 5.1161-1240). La sottile operazione lucreziana è ben compresa da Cicerone, che vi allude polemicamente nella sua confutazione della teologia epicurea in *Nat. deor.* 1.117-118.

KEYWORDS: Lucretius; Epicurus; Sisyphus; Critias; Atheism

1. INTRODUCTION

Lucretius' first eulogy of Epicurus (*DRN* 1.62-79) effectively blends distinct literary traditions.¹ On the one hand, this passage reproduces the motif of 'the flight of the mind through the universe', which may be traced back to archaic Greek poetry and, after Plato and Aristotle's reformulations, became commonplace in Hellenistic philosophy.² Buchheit has proven that also the Epicureans took advantage of this motif in

1. For a thorough study of this passage cf. Edwards 1990: 465-469 and Harrison 2016: 38-40.
2. Cf. Jones 1926: 97-113; Buchheit 1971: 303-323 and Sedley 2018: 155-160.



order to celebrate the intellectual achievements of their master.³ On the other hand, Lucretius' encomium is imbued with formulas and themes which clearly derive from other Greek literary models. As Conte points out, the first part of this section is shaped as an epic duel, counterposing the Greek hero to his horrific enemy (*religio*). Evident Homeric reminiscences can be found in vv. 66-67, as they recall the description of a duel in *Iliad* 17.166-168.⁴ Degl'Innocenti Pierini's detailed investigation of Lucretius' "sottile trama allusiva" in this passage shows that also the portrait of *religio* points to specific literary sources and, consequently, cannot be defined as a vague personification.⁵ The poet echoes Homer's representation of Ἔρις as a nightmarish monster "whose head touched the heavens" (*Il.* 4.440).⁶ Even the poet's definition of *religio* as *gravis* (l. 63) probably mirrors Homer's epithet βαρεῖα, referring to Ἔρις.⁷

Following Conte and Degl'Innocenti Pierini's interpretative method, this paper will enrich the intertextual analysis of *DRN* 1.62-79, revealing another model for Lucretius' eulogy of Epicurus. The investigation of the remarkable similarities in both form and content between *DRN* 1.62-79 and the so-called Sisyphus-fragment (D.-K. 88B25) will show that the Latin poet deliberately reverses – for his own ends – the account on the origin of religion reported in this fragment.⁸

2. THE SISYPHUS-FRAGMENT AND ITS RECEPTION

There was a time when the life of mankind was without order, and like that of the beasts, and subservient to brute force; when there was neither any reward for the good nor, in turn, any punishment for the wicked. Then it was in fact (or so I believe) that mankind laid down laws of a punitive kind in order that justice might be established as tyrant [...] and keep violent wrong-doing enslaved; and there was punishment for whosoever kept on doing wrong. Then, when, naturally enough, the laws began to prevent them from doing [wrongful] deeds by open force, but they continued to do so covertly, then at last it was, I think, that some ingenious and cunning man first invented fear of the gods for the benefit of mankind, so that the wicked might have some object of terror, even if it was in secret that they acted or spoke or thought anything. From this motive, then, he introduced religion, alleging that there exists a god who flourishes in eternal life, hearing and seeing in his mind, thinking and noting these things and displaying a divine nature, and who would hear everything spoken among men and would be able to see everything they did. For [he said] if you silently plot some evil plan, this will

3. Cf. Buchheit 1971 and Fowler 2002: 50-52.

4. Conte 1966: 356. Cf. Hom. *Il.* 17.166-167: οὐκ ἐτάλασσας / στήμεναι ἅντα κατ' ὅσσε ἰδών, and *DRN* 1.66-67: *tollere contra / est oculos ausus primusque obsistere contra.*

5. Degl'Innocenti Pierini 1980: 251-257.

6. Cf. Hom. *Il.* 4.440: [Ἔρις] οὐρανῶ ἐστήριξε κάρη καὶ ἐπὶ χθονὶ βαίνει, and *DRN* 1.64-65: [*religio*] *caput a caeli regionibus ostendebat / horribili super aspectu mortalibus instans.*

7. Cf. e.g. Hom. *Il.* 20.55 and 21.385.

8. I would like to thank Giancarlo Mazzoli, Francesco Verde and two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments, which helped me to improve the manuscript.

not escape the notice of the gods, since the power of thought is present [in them]. By telling such lies as these he introduced [to mankind] the most pleasant of instructions, concealing the truth with his false story. He mentioned such an abode for the god's dwelling-place as would be most likely to strike fear in mankind, a place he recognised as the source for mankind's fears as well as for the benefits that its miserable existence enjoys: [both come] from the sphere that encircles the sky above, where he saw that there were flashes of lightning and fearful rumblings of thunder and the flash of heaven's stars, the fair painted toy of the wise craftsman Time. From this region comes the star's bright mass, and from it the dripping rain-storm proceeds down to earth. Such were the fears wherewith he encircled mankind, and by their means this inventor of religion produced a fine lodging for the deity in an appropriate region and quenched the fire of lawlessness by the imposition of laws [...]. So it was, I think, that some man first persuaded mortals to believe in the race of the gods.⁹

The so-called Sisyphus-fragment (D.-K. 88B25) is a 42-lines fragment on the origin of religion and represents one of the most relevant documents in the history of ancient atheism.¹⁰ Sextus Empiricus (*Adv. math.* 9.54) ascribes it to Critias, defined as an atheist. On the contrary, according to the doxographer Aëtius (*Plac.* 1.7.2 = [Plut.] *Mor.* 880E-F), the author of the fragment is Euripides, who is known to have written a satyr play called *Sisyphus*.¹¹ As stressed by Whitmarsh, the fragment displays a series of Presocratic and sophistic tropes and themes that perfectly match the “late fifth-century vogue for merging high-powered philosophical ideas with mythological drama”; nevertheless, “we have no external information relating to context, tenor, genre or date” of

9. Translation and critical text by Davies 1989: 18: ἦν χρόνος, ὅτ' ἦν ἄτακτος ἀνθρώπων βίος / καὶ θηρώδης ἰσχὺς θ' ὑπέρτης, / ὅτ' οὐδὲν ἄθλον οὔτε τοῖς ἐσθλοῖσιν ἦν / οὔτ' αὖ κόλασμα τοῖς κακοῖς ἐγίνετο. / κάπειτά μοι δοκοῦσιν ἄνθρωποι νόμους / θέσθαι κολαστάς, ἵνα δίκη τύραννος ἦ / <...> τήν θ' ὕβριν δούλην ἔχη / ἐζημιούτο δ' εἴ τις ἐξαμαρτάνοι. / ἔπειτ' ἐπειδὴ τὰμφορὰ μὲν οἱ νόμοι / ἀπειργον αὐτοὺς ἔργα μὴ πράσσειν βία, / λάθρα δ' ἔπρασσον, τηνικαῦτά μοι δοκεῖ / <πρῶτον> πυκνός τις καὶ σοφὸς γνώμη ἀνήρ / <θεῶν> δέος θνητοῖσιν ἐξευρεῖν, ὅπως / εἴη τι δεῖμα τοῖς κακοῖσι, κὰν λάθρα / πράσσωσιν ἢ λέγωσιν ἢ φρονῶσί <τι>. / ἐντεῦθεν οὖν τὸ θεῖον εἰσηγήσατο, / ὡς ἔστι δαίμων ἀφθίτῳ θάλλων βίῳ, / νόῳ τ' ἀκούων καὶ βλέπων, φρονῶν τε καὶ / προσέχων τε ταῦτα, καὶ φύσιν θεῖαν φορῶν, / ὃς πᾶν {μὲν} τὸ λεχθὲν ἐν βροτοῖς ἀκού<σ>εται, / <τὸ> δρώμενον δὲ πᾶν ἰδεῖν δυνήσεται. / ἐὰν δὲ σὺν σιγῇ τι βουλευῆς κακόν, / τοῦτ' οὐχὶ λήσει τοὺς θεοὺς· τὸ γὰρ φρονοῦν / ἔνεστι. τ<οιοῦτ>ους τοὺς λόγους λέγων / διδαγμάτων ἠδιστον εἰσηγήσατο, / ψευδεῖ καλύψας τὴν ἀλήθειαν λόγῳ. / <ν>αίει<ν> δ' ἔφασκε τοὺς θεοὺς ἐνταῦθ', ἵνα / μάλιστα' ἂν ἐξέπληξεν ἀνθρώπους ἴστων, / ὅθεν περ ἔγνω τοὺς φόβους ὄντας βροτοῖς / καὶ τὰς ὀνήσεις τῷ ταλαιπώρῳ βίῳ, / ἐκ τῆς ὑπερθε περιφορᾶς, ἵν' ἀστραπᾶς / κατεῖδεν οὔσας, δεινὰ δὲ κτυπήματα / βροντῆς, τὸ τ' ἀστερωπὸν οὐρανοῦ δέμας, / Χρόνου καλὸν ποικίλημα, τέκτονος σοφοῦ, / ὅθεν τε λαμπρὸς ἀστέρως στείχει μύδρος, / ὃ θ' ὑγρὸς εἰς γῆν ὄμβρος ἐκπορεύεται. / τοίους δὲ περιέστησεν ἀνθρώποις φόβους, / δι' οὓς καλῶς τε τῷ λόγῳ κατάκισεν / τὸν δαίμον' οὗτος κὰν πρέποντι χωρίῳ, / τὴν ἀνομίαν τε τοῖς νόμοις κατέσβεσεν. <...> οὕτω δὲ πρῶτον οἶμαι πείσαι τινα / θνητοὺς νομίζειν δαιμόνων εἶναι γένος.

10. As for ancient atheism, cf. Bremmer 2006 and Whitmarsh 2015.

11. According to Aëtius, Euripides “introduced Sisyphus, champion of this [atheistic] view, to act as a spokesman for his thought”. For Aëtius' passage, cf. Runia 2010: 354-357.

this drama.¹² It seems more plausible to suppose that the play, initially ascribed to Critias, was later attributed to the more famous Euripides, who was generally considered as an original thinker, under the suspicion of atheism.¹³ As for the literary genre of this text, the satyr play hypothesis, which goes back to Wilamowitz, has not received any decisive confirmation by modern stylistic and metrical studies: therefore, “there are no decisive signs that the play is satyric rather than tragic: no satyrs, no low humour or parody. It is not impossible, but nothing in the fragment necessitates that conclusion, or even makes it probable”.¹⁴

Leaving aside the long-debated questions of authorship and genre, one reason for the importance of the fragment lies in its *Fortleben*. The quotations from Aëtius and Sextus Empiricus demonstrate that the fragment was soon regarded as an ideal *summa* of the ancient atheism and, consequently, became commonplace in late-Hellenistic philosophical debates. For example, “vestigial echoes of the Sisyphus account”¹⁵ are found in ll. 539-540 and 1185-1217 of Philodemus’ *On Piety*. But the Epicurean interest in this fragment runs deep: as shown by Cropp,¹⁶ “possibly, it was already quoted in isolation in Epicurus’ time as an example of Critias’ atheism”. In fact, according to the above-mentioned testimony preserved by Philodemus,¹⁷ Epicurus “reproached for their complete madness those who eliminate the divine from existing things”, *in primis* Prodicus, Diagoras, and Critias.¹⁸ As the Sisyphus-fragment was quoted later as the main proof for Critias’ atheism, “it is reasonable to infer that it was Epicurus’ evidence as well”.¹⁹

In a short article published in 1957,²⁰ Marcello Gigante advanced the intriguing hypothesis that the Sisyphus-fragment is quoted and rephrased by Lucretius in the section devoted to the history of religion within his *Kulturgeschichte* (*DRN* 5.1161-1240). Let us consider *DRN* 5.1185-1193:

Nor were they able to understand what caused this to happen. Therefore, they took refuge in handing everything over to the gods, and supposing that everything was controlled by their will. They located the dwelling and precincts of the gods in the sky, because the night and the moon can be seen to revolve through the sky, the moon, daylight and night, and night’s solemn constellations, the night-wandering

12. Whitmarsh 2014: 110-115.

13. Winiarczyk 1987; Runia 2010: 354.

14. Whitmarsh 2014: 110-115.

15. Bremmer 2016: 16-17.

16. Cropp 2020: 248-249.

17. *On Piety*, ll. 519-530 Obbink 1996 (523-530 = Epicurus, Περὶ φύσεως fr. 27(2) Arrighetti).

18. As for the later codification of the doxographical catalogue of alleged atheists by Cleitomachus of Carthage (late-second century BC) cf. Winiarczyk 1976: 32-46 and Obbink 1989: 217.

19. Cropp 2020: 249. As for Sedley’s proposal that Theophrastus could have been Epicurus’ source, cf. Sedley 2013: 329-348.

20. Gigante 1957: 97-98.

fires of heaven and flying flames, clouds, sun, rain, snow, winds, lightning, hail, rapid roars and huge threatening rumblings.²¹

Lucretius points out that prehistoric men took refuge in the idea of omnipotent gods with the aim of escaping the anguish that comes from the ignorance of those natural events and portents that take place in the celestial vault. This account displays many similarities with the Sisyphus-fragment: first of all, the representation of religion as a human invention, but also the emphasis on the heavenly location of the divinity, connected with every celestial phenomenon. As for other remarkable similarities between *DRN* 5.1161-1240 and the fragment, note that Lucretius similarly underscores the tyrannical rule of the Olympian gods (v. 1209: *deum immensa potestas*), describing the traditional religion as a source of fear that fosters our sense of guilt (e.g., v. 1165: *est mortalibus insitus horror*; vv. 1222-1225: *populi gentesque tremunt... / nequid ob admisum foede dictumve superbe / poenarum grave sit solvendi tempus adactum*).²²

However, Gigante's notion of Lucretius' direct dependence on the Sisyphus-fragment has not received universal consensus among scholars. For example, Malcolm Davies argues that it is "certainly far likelier"²³ that Lucretius' account here derives from Democritus (D.-K. A75 = Sext. Emp. *Adv. math.* 9.24), as suggested also by Henrichs.²⁴ The analysis that will be developed in the following chapters will reinforce the hypothesis of Lucretius' reliance on the Sisyphus-fragment in *DRN* 5.1161-1240, clarifying the aim of this quotation.²⁵

3. THESISYPHUS-FRAGMENT AND *DRN* 1.62-79

The fifth book is not the only section of the *De rerum natura* which seems strongly indebted to D.-K. 88B25. As mentioned before, the shadow of Sisyphus looms over one of the most famous passages of Lucretius' poem, i.e., the first eulogy of Epicurus (*DRN* 1.62-79):

When human life to view lay foully prostrate upon earth crushed down under the weight of religion, who shewed her head from the quarters of heaven with hideous

21. *Nec poterant quibus id fieret cognoscere causis. / Ergo perfugium sibi habebant omnia divis / tradere et illorum nutu facere omnia flecti. / In caeloque deum sedis et templa locarunt, / per caelum volvi quia nox et luna videtur, / luna dies et nox et noctis signa severa / noctivagaeque faces caeli flammaeque volantes, / nubila sol imbres nix venti fulmina grando / et rapidi fremitus et murmura magna minarum.* Translation by Gale 2009, *ad loc.* The *DRN* text is from Bailey's edition (Bailey 1947) unless otherwise specified.

22. Another similarity between the Sisyphus fragment and Book 5 of Lucretius' poem is the expression *vita more ferarum* (5.932) which recalls the expression ἀνθρώπων βίος... θηριώδης ἰσχύος θ' ὑπέρετης (vv. 1-2), as they are both referred to the bestial condition of prehistoric humankind. On this expression, cf. Campbell 2003: 139, 339.

23. Davies 1989: 22 n. 37.

24. Henrichs 1975: 104 n. 50.

25. In any case, nothing prevents us from looking at both the Sisyphus and Democritus' fragment as possible sources for the *De rerum natura*. As we have seen, Lucretius usually blends distinct models into a single passage, thus evoking different literary traditions.

aspect lowering upon mortals, a man of Greek first ventured to lift up his mortal eyes to her face and first to withstand her to her face. Him neither story of gods nor thunderbolts nor heaven with threatening roar could quell, but only stirred up the more the eager courage of his soul, filling him with desire to be the first to burst the fast bars of nature's portals. Therefore, the living force of his soul gained the day: on he passed far beyond the flaming walls of the world and traversed throughout in mind and spirit the immeasurable universe; whence he returns a conqueror to tell us what can, what cannot come into being; in short, on what principle each thing has its power defined, its deepset boundary mark. Therefore religion is put under foot and trampled upon in turn; us his victory brings level with heaven.²⁶

A thorough comparison between these lines and the Sisyphus-fragment brings to light remarkable similarities, both at a macro and at a micro scale. To begin with the general structure, in both texts the account is represented as a myth that happens outside common historical time (cf. the opening formula of the fragment, ἦν χρόνος, ὅτ' ἦν, and Lucretius' use of the past tense in the first lines, *cum... iaceret*) but whose consequences extend to the present time. Moreover, they both develop a similar sequence:

1. The preliminary condition of slavery for humankind.
2. The sudden epiphany of a savior who rescues humankind, thanks to his *logos*.
3. The portrait of the savior according to the πρώτος εὐρετής motif.
4. The representation of the savior as a bringer of law.
5. The definition of religion as a deceiving myth.
6. The picture of the Olympian gods as omnipotent entities living in the sky.
7. The emphasis on those celestial phenomena that are source of wonder and terror.
8. The final overturn of the opening scenario.

One could explain these striking similarities by postulating that the same rhetorical scheme (the πρώτος εὐρετής motif) underlies both texts, thus excluding the direct influence of the Greek fragment on the Latin poem. However, the *De rerum natura* passage and the Sisyphus-fragment also display precise textual similarities that cannot be so easily ruled out. Let us consider some specific cases:

ἄνθρωπων βίος (v. 1)
humana vita (v. 1)

26. *Humana ante oculos foede cum vita iaceret / in terris oppressa gravi sub religione / quae caput a caeli regionibus ostendebat / horribili super aspectu mortalibus instans, / primum Graius homo mortalis tollere contra / est oculos ausus primusque obsistere contra, / quem neque fama deum nec fulmina nec minitanti / murmure compressit caelum, sed eo magis acrem / irrat animi uirtutem, effringere ut arta / naturae primus portarum claustra cupiret. / Ergo vivida vis animi pervicit, et extra / processit longe flammantia moenia mundi / atque omne immensum peragravit mente animoque, / unde refert nobis victor quid possit oriri, / quid nequeat, finita potestas denique cuique / quanquam sit ratione atque alte terminus haerens. / Quare religio pedibus subiecta vicissim / obtertur, nos exaequat victoria caelo.* Translation by Munro 1864 *ad loc.*

In the opening lines both poets use the same formula concerning the condition of humankind.

ὑπηρετής (v. 2)
foede cum... iaceret / in terris oppressa (vv. 62-63)

In both texts humankind is described as a slave under the rule of a cruel tyrant. Note that the slave/tyrant dichotomy also appears in vv. 6-7 of the fragment (δίκη τύραννος... τήν θ' ὕβριν δούλην) as well as in Book 5 of the *De rerum natura* (5.87: *dominos acris*; 1239-1240: *potestates magnas mirasque relinquunt / in rebus viris diuum, quae cuncta gubernent*).

πρῶτον (v. 12)
primum (v. 66)

In both texts the epiphany of the savior is introduced by the same adverb, placed in the same position, at the beginning of the line.

τις... ἀνὴρ (v. 12)
Graius homo (v. 66)

The adverb *πρῶτον/primum* is immediately followed by the description of the savior, who is not called by name but generically defined as 'a man'. Note that the model of the fragment could account for Lucretius' enigmatic designation of Epicurus as *Graius homo*, which has long puzzled Lucretian scholars.²⁷

πυκνός τις καὶ σοφὸς γνώμην ἀνὴρ (v. 12)
acrem / animi virtutem... vivida vis animi (vv. 69-72)

The savior is portrayed as a wise man whose greatness lies in the power and range of the intellect, which allows him to discover the solution to the problem.

θνητοῖσιν (v. 13)
mortalibus (v. 65)

Both poets take advantage of the poetic definition of human beings as 'mortals'.

τούσδε τοὺς λόγους λέγων (v. 24)
 ναίειν δ' ἔφασκε τοὺς θεοὺς (v. 27)
fama deum (v. 68)

According to both poets, traditional religion is only a deceiving tale. There is an etymological and thematic connection between the Greek ἔφασκε τοὺς θεοὺς and the Latin formula *fama deum*, via the common root of the verbs φάναλ/*fari*, which mean 'to speak'.²⁸

27. Cf., e.g., Edelstein 1940: 78-90, who thinks that the vague expression does not refer to Epicurus, but to early Greek philosophers in general. As confirmed by Nethercut 2021: 51-52, another important literary model for Lucretius here is Empedocles' eulogy of Pythagoras (D.-K. 31B129), where we find again the expression τις... ἀνὴρ (v. 1), referring to Pythagoras.

28. Cf. Fenster-Smail 2003: 11: "The etymology of Latin *fama* has classical forebears and deep Indoeuropean roots. According to historical linguists, *fama* is a suffixed form of the

ἐκ τῆς ὑπερθε περιφορᾶς... τό τ' ἀστερωπὸν οὐρανοῦ δέμας (vv. 31-33)
caput a caeli regionibus ostendebat... compressit caelum (vv. 64-69)

Both authors point out that the gods inhabit the celestial regions, that hang over the human realm.

θεῶν δέος θνητοῖσιν ἐξευρεῖν, ὅπως / εἴη τι δεῖμα τοῖς κακοῖσι (vv. 13-14)
 μάλιστ' ἂν ἐξέπληξεν ἀνθρώπους... / ὄθεν περ ἔγνω τοὺς φόβους ὄντας βροτοῖς
 (vv. 28-29)
horribili super aspectu mortalibus instans (v. 65)

Both authors stress that fear is the essence of traditional religion, i.e., the secret component that prevents the rebellion of humankind (cf. *DRN* 5.1165: *est mortalibus insitus horror*).

ἀστραπάς / κατεῖδεν οὔσας, δεινὰ δὲ κτυπήματα / βροντῆς (vv. 31-33)
nec fulmina nec minitanti / murmure... caelum (vv. 68-69)

Both authors focus on violent meteorological phenomena (lightning and thunder) and highlight the frightening power of sound (δεινὰ δὲ κτυπήματα; *minitanti / murmure*, with also a similar enjambement). Interestingly, there is a clear intra-textual connection between the expression *minitanti murmure* in *DRN* 1.68-69 and the analogous expression *rapidi fremitus et murmura magna minarum* in *DRN* 5.1193. This provides an important confirmation of the idea that Lucretius rephrases D.-K. 88B25 both in Book 1 and in Book 5, refuting Davies' objections to Gigante's theory. In fact, unlike the Sisyphus-fragment, Democritus' fragment D.-K. A75 does not mention the sound of thunder as a source of terror.

τὴν ἀνομίαν τε τοῖς νόμοις κατέσβεσεν (v. 40)
religio pedibus subiecta vicissim / obteritur, nos exaequat victoria caelo (vv. 78-79)

In both accounts, the closing lines underline the complete overturning of the opening picture.²⁹ In the Greek fragment, the absence of rules is substituted for by the triumph of laws. In the *De rerum natura*, the tyranny of *religio* is overthrown and the former slaves become rulers, thanks to the natural laws discovered by Epicurus (vv. 75-77)³⁰.

4. WHY THE SISYPHUS-FRAGMENT? THE AIM OF LUCRETIUS

As we have seen above, thanks to Philodemus' testimony we know that Epicurus probably quoted (or alluded to) the Sisyphus-fragment in his treatise *On nature* in order to condemn the "complete madness" of the atheists. *Prima facie*, it is difficult not to consider Lucretius' ambiguous – almost defiant – choice to rephrase the fragment

Indoeuropean root word *bha* (Latin *fari*, Greek φάναι), meaning 'to speak', especially in a public sense".

29. Also note the potential correspondence between the Latin verb *sub-icio* (v. 68) and the Greek κατα-σβέννυμι (v. 40).

30. Cf. Galzerano 2019: 88, where the author demonstrates the coincidence between Lucretius' *finita potestas* and *terminus alte haerens* (1.75-77 and 2.1087-1089) and the Greek commonplace concept of φύσεως νόμοι.

within the first eulogy devoted to his master. Is it inevitable, then, to label the Latin poet a heterodox thinker, going against his master's caveat and exposing himself to a charge of atheism? Though fascinating, this view is misleading. As Philip Hardie puts it, "Lucretius is an efficient predator, who digests those parts of his victim which are beneficial to his system and ostentatiously rejects the indigestible".³¹ A careful reading of Lucretius' own words will show that Hardie's statement is valid also for the poet's reinterpretation of the Greek fragment.

As recently demonstrated,³² *DRN* 1.62-79 should be studied along with the eulogy of Epicurus at the beginning of Book 3 (*DRN* 3.1-30). These passages are complementary, because they probably derive from the same hymnic model, praising the flight of Epicurus' mind through the universe.³³ In 3.18-24 (*apparet divum numen sedesque quietae...*) Lucretius reveals the ultimate object of his master's spiritual journey: the contemplation of the divine *intermundia*, where the Epicurean gods dwell in eternal peace, offering a paradigm of ataractic serenity to humankind.³⁴ Therefore, the result of Epicurus' revolt is not a godless universe. The aim of the poet is to substitute the commonplace picture of a providential and omnipotent divinity (*cuncta gubernans*, to use Lucretius' own words in 5.404) with an Epicurean pantheon of reassuring non-providential gods.³⁵ This also implies a radical redefinition of traditional moral values, starting with *pietas*, the keystone of the Latin *mos maiorum*.³⁶

However, in order to enable his readers to reach this new worldview (2.1024-1025: *tibi vehementer nova res molitur ad auris / accidere et nova se species ostendere rerum*), Lucretius must employ poetry to unmask the ancient myths and biases concerning traditional religion. It is here that the Sisyphus-fragment proves useful. The poet takes advantage of the revolutionary aura and evocative power of the fragment and uses it to his advantage, as a *pars destruens* against ancient religious beliefs. The reference to the manifesto of Greek atheism is in fact consistent with Lucretius' well-known strategy: reversing the traditional Gigantomachic imagery used by the defenders of providentialism to depict Epicurus and the materialist thinkers as victorious Giants who overthrow the Olympic gods.³⁷

31. Hardie 1986: 18.

32. Cf. Galzerano 2019: 29-34, 99-101.

33. For the long-standing interpretation of Epicurus and Lucretius as secret atheists, cf. Whitmarsh 2015: 114-120.

34. In this section the poet acts again as an "efficient predator", as he provides his description of the *intermundia* by adapting a famous Homeric passage concerning the traditional Olympic gods (*Od.* 6.42-45).

35. However, Lucretius does not keep his promise to provide a detailed explanation of Epicurean theology (cf. *DRN* 5.155). As for an introduction to Epicurean theology, cf. Piergiacomini 2017.

36. Cf. *DRN* 5.1198-1203: *nec pietas ullast velatum saepe videri / vertier ad lapidem atque omnis accedere ad aras / nec procumbere humi prostratum et pandere palmas / ante deum delubra nec aras sanguine multo / spargere quadrupedum nec votis nectere vota, / sed mage pacata posse omnia mente tueri.*

37. Cf., e.g., *DRN* 1.722-725 (Empedocles as Typhoeus) and 5.114-121 (the Epicureans as Giants). For the use of Gigantomachic imagery in the philosophical debate, cf. Galzerano

Lucretius' use of the Sisyphus-fragment as a subtext in his eulogy of Epicurus does not imply the acceptance of its message: it is, rather, a shrewd manipulation, aimed at equating traditional religion with superstition.³⁸ In fact, despite the structural and formal similarities between the two passages, *DRN* 1.62-79 ideologically overturns the account of the Greek text. Whereas the action of the *πυκνὸς ἀνὴρ* consists in spreading a reassuring theological lie to prevent humans from committing crimes (vv. 25-26: *διδασκάλων ἠδιστον εἰσηγήσατο / ψευδεῖ καλύψας τὴν ἀλήθειαν λόγῳ*), the revolution of the *Gravius homo* consists in exposing that lie, revealing the true nature of universe.³⁹ The religious myth is thus demystified as mere superstition, and people can finally observe the sky without fear (cf. 1.66-67: *tollere contra... oculos*).

Concerning Lucretius' use of D.-K. 88B25 as a *pars destruens* against traditional religion, there is one more consideration to be taken into account. Recent studies have shed more light on a crucial aspect of the Sisyphus-fragment, i.e., the identity of the astute man who introduces religion to maintain social order. According to Whitmarsh, who has scrutinized the language of the fragment, the "shrewd man is in fact (a reading of) Hesiod": not only does Sisyphus quote Hesiod, "he seems even to slide into his narrative persona".⁴⁰ This aspect perfectly matches the traditional representation of two poets – Homer and Hesiod – as the 'fathers' of Greek religion. In fact, as reported by Herodotus (2.53): "Homer and Hesiod are the poets who wrote our theogonies and described the gods for us, giving them all their appropriate titles, duties and powers". In particular, the latter has provided the earliest and fullest version of providentialism in his *Theogony* and *Works and Days*.

As a careful reader of the Sisyphus-fragment, Lucretius seems acutely aware of this crucial aspect. In fact, he identifies the frightening myths of the *vates* (vv. 102-103: *vatum terriloqua dicta*) as the core of public religion (cf. the *iunctura religionibus atque minis... vatum* in v. 109).⁴¹ The list of *vates* includes not only priests and diviners, but also poets, as they create myths and lies concerning religion. In particular, the expression in vv. 104-105 (*quam multa tibi iam fingere possunt / somnia quae vitae rationes vertere possint*) evidently refers to poets, because "Latin poets regularly use the verb *fingere*

2019: 118-122.

38. Note that the wordplay in v. 65 (*horribili super aspectu mortalibus instans*) probably implies the *religio/superstitio* equation, as acknowledged by Servius *ad Aen.* 8.187. On this passage, cf. Santangelo 2013: 45 and 170-173: "*Religio* is the factor of oppression. The word is often translated as 'superstition' here but it is not the best solution. [...] in this context *religio* means 'public religion'".

39. Therefore, both Lucretius and the author of the Sisyphus-fragment conceive of traditional religion as nothing more than a human invention. Their views diverge on the advantages of this creation. Whereas the Greek poet underlines the social and political utility of religion, Lucretius argues that it will inevitably give rise to criminal and impious deeds (e.g., the sacrifice of Iphigenia, *DRN* 1.80-101).

40. Whitmarsh 2014: 118-120, with reference to Hes. *Erg.* 17-24, 252-254, 258-260, 267-269.

41. On this passage cf. Santangelo 2013: 170-173, who, however, is not convinced that Latin poets are Lucretius' main polemical target.

as a synonym for writing poetry”.⁴² Moreover, the expression *fingere somnia* alludes to the dream episode in Ennius’ *Annales* (3: *visus Homerus adesse poeta*), where the greatest Latin *vates* figures himself as Homer’s rightful heir and confirms the existence of hell (and, therefore, of life after death).⁴³

The Epicurean poet thus manipulates the Ennian model in a way which exactly reproduces Sisyphus’ treatment of Hesiod. Not only does Lucretius quote Ennius, but he almost slides into his narrative persona, presenting himself as a new kind of epic poet, who subverts traditional religion. If we take this into account, it is not surprising that most of the above-mentioned *iuncturae* used by Lucretius to quote (or allude to) the Greek fragment are taken from Ennius’ works. The expression *humana vita* in *DRN* 1.62 can be found in Enn. *Trag.* 312 (*ubi remissa humana vita corpus requiescat malis*); similarly, the expression *Graius homo* in *DRN* 1.66 recalls Enn. *Ann.* 165 (*navos repertus homo, Graio patre, Graius homo, rex*).⁴⁴ Moreover, Lucretius seems to extend his criticism to Ennius’ later epigones. The expression *minitanti murmure* in *DRN* 1.68-69 (which probably stands for the δεινὰ δὲ κτυπήματα / βροντῆς in the Sisyphus-fragment) is in fact taken from Cic. *Arat. phaen.* fragm. max. 71 (*nec metuunt canos minitanti murmure fluctus*). As demonstrated by Gee, in Lucretius’ eyes Cicero’s *Aratea* represented both a model and an object of polemical engagement, due to its powerful defense of divine providence.⁴⁵

Interestingly, Cicero is also the first reader of the *DRN* who seems aware of Lucretius’ subtle manipulation of the Sisyphus-fragment and tries to unmask it.⁴⁶ Let us consider his later treatise *De natura deorum* (1.117-118):

As for freedom from superstition, which is the favourite boast of your school, that is easy to attain when you have deprived the gods of all power; unless perchance you think that it was possible for Diagoras or Theodorus to be superstitious, who denied the existence of the gods altogether. For my part, I don’t see how it was possible even for Protagoras, who was not certain either that the gods exist or that they do not. For the doctrines of all these thinkers abolish not only superstition, which implies a groundless fear of the gods, but also religion, which consists in piously worshipping them. Take again those who have asserted that the entire notion of the immortal gods is a fiction invented by wise men in the interest of

42. Mazzoni 2010: 110-112.

43. *DRN* 1.120-126: *esse Acherusia templa / Ennius aeternis exponit versibus edens / quo neque permaneant animae neque corpora nostra, / sed quaedam simulacra modis pallentia miris; / unde sibi exortam semper florentis Homeri / commemorat speciem lacrimas effundere salsas / coepisse et rerum naturam expandere dictis*. For the influence of Ennius’ *Annales* on the *DRN* cf. Nethercut 2021.

44. Cf. Nethercut 2021: 49-72 who shows that Lucretius’ aim here (in response to Enn. *Ann.* 165) is to figure Epicurus “as a latter-day Pyrrhus”, as well as to depict himself “as a latter-day Ennius, now providing a ‘narrative’ of Epicurus” (70).

45. Cf. Gee 2013: 74-76, who focuses on the expression *minitanti murmure*, which Lucretius borrows from Cicero. On Lucretius’ polemical engagement against Cicero’s *Aratea*, cf. Galzerano 2019: 122-125.

46. As for the influence of Lucretius on Cicero’s later dialogues, cf. Pizzani 1984: 173-188.

the state, to the end that those whom reason was powerless to control might be led in the path of duty by religion; surely this view was absolutely and entirely destructive of religion.⁴⁷

After mentioning the famous atheists Diagoras and Theodorus, Cicero illustrates the notion of religion as an *instrumentum regni*, created by shrewd men in the interest of the state. It is very probable that the writer is referring to the *Kulturgeschichte* in the Sisyphus account, which was generally considered to be the *summa* of ancient atheism and, consequently, properly completes the aforementioned list of atheists. However, Epicureans – not atheists – are the main polemical target here. In fact, according to Cicero, while they boast about Epicurus' victory over superstition and introduce a non-providential theology, they end up removing any belief in the existence of the gods. To sum up, Cicero uses the Sisyphus-fragment to demonstrate that Epicureanism eradicates every form of religious faith, thus eliminating even the core values of Roman society. In doing so, he utterly reverses Lucretius' literary operation, aimed at substituting the ancient *religio* (identified as superstition) with a new non-providential theology. It is therefore clear that *Nat. deor.* 1.117-118 is conceived of as an answer to *DRN* 1.62-79. This statement is also confirmed by the presence of *iuncturae* and expressions that plainly echo Lucretius' poem, such as *timor inanis deorum* (cf. *DRN*. 3.982: *divum metus inanis*), *omnem religionem funditus sustulerunt* (cf. *DRN* 3.37-38: *metus ille... / funditus humanam qui vitam turbat ab imo*) and *vim deorum* (cf. *DRN* 6.71: *summa deum vis*).

5. CONCLUSION

In the previous sections I examined Lucretius' subtle manipulation of the Sisyphus-fragment, aimed at dismissing traditional religion as a disquieting form of superstition in order to make space for a new non-providential theology, whose ataractic gods serve as perfect ethical paradigm for humankind. This operation is typically Lucretian and does not imply a betrayal of Epicurus. Rather, it reveals the poet's nature as an "efficient predator", experienced in integrating non-Epicurean passages into an Epicurean poem. Let us not forget that, in the same passage, Lucretius also takes advantage of other non-Epicurean subtexts, such as Homer, to create the first eulogy of his master.⁴⁸ This analysis confirms Conte and Degli Innocenti Pierini's definition of *DRN* 1.62-79 as a complex passage, characterized by a "sottile trama allusiva". At the same time, the

47. Cic. *Nat. deor.* 1.117-118: *nam superstitione, quod gloriari soletis, facile est liberare, cum sustuleris omnem vim deorum. Nisi forte Diagoram aut Theodorum, qui omnino deos esse negabant, censes superstitiosos esse potuisse; ego ne Protagoram quidem, cui neutrum licuerit, nec esse deos nec non esse. Horum enim sententiae omnium non modo superstitionem tollunt, in qua inest timor inanis deorum, sed etiam religionem, quae deorum cultu pio continetur. Quid i, qui dixerunt totam de dis immortalibus opinionem fictam esse ab hominibus sapientibus rei publicae causa, ut, quos ratio non posset, eos ad officium religio duceret, nonne omnem religionem funditus sustulerunt?* English translation by Rackham 1967, *ad loc.*

48. *DRN* 3.18-24 provide another useful benchmark: Lucretius depicts the divine *intermundia* rephrasing a renowned Homeric passage concerning the Olympian gods (*Od.* 6.42-46).

clear intra-textual connections between this passage and Lucretius' history of religion (e.g., the emphasis on heaven's threatening roar in *DRN* 1.68-69 and *DRN* 5.1193) strengthen Gigante's idea that the Greek fragment should be included among the literary sources for Book 5.⁴⁹

This does not imply ideological continuity between the Greek author and Lucretius. Both in Book 1 and in Book 5 Epicurus plays the role of an anti-Sisyphus, who unmasks the 'sweet lie' divulged by the πυκνὸς ἀνὴρ of the fragment, because it turned out to be a source of conflict and violence (1.101: *tantum religio potuit suadere malorum*). The subversion of the traditional association between religion and νόμος is thus achieved. Lucretius' *gravis religio*, the Latin translation of Homer's βαρεῖα Ἔρις, is transformed into a global calamity, which symbolically recalls Empedocles' Νεῖκος (Discord), the cosmic force that cyclically throws the world into chaos.⁵⁰ According to Empedocles, the power of Νεῖκος can be stopped only by its counterpart, the cosmic force of Φιλία (Love).⁵¹ It is significant that in the "Empedoclean opening" of Book 1, the hymn to Venus, Lucretius identifies Venus/Φιλία with pleasure (*voluptas*), the core principle of Epicurean ethics, which allows men to reach the blessed existence of the detached gods in the *intermundia*.⁵² The result of Epicurus' revolt is anything but a godless universe.

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49. Again, Lucretius' use of the Sisyphus-fragment as a subtext in this passage does not imply the acceptance of its message. The Greek poet ascribes the invention of religion to political reasons (the *instrumentum regni* argument) focusing on its social impact, whereas Epicurus explores the epistemic dimension of religion, arguing that it derives from ignorance of the causes of natural phenomena (cf., e.g., *KD* 11-13). Consequently, Lucretius emphasizes the moral significance of religion, presenting Epicurus' atomistic physics as the antidote to the irrational fears that superstition fosters (cf. *DRN* 1.104-111; 5.73-90; 5.1211-1240).

50. Cf. Degl'Innocenti Pierini 1980: 255-257.

51. As for Empedocles' influence on the *DRN*, cf. Garani 2007. As for Lucretius' Empedoclean opening, cf. Sedley 1998: 1-34. As for Empedocles' cosmic cycle, cf. Galzerano 2019: 2-3, 289-302.

52. As for the deification of Epicurus and following Epicurean masters, cf. Beretta-Citti-Iannucci 2014.

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