

## THE *ANTI-LUCRETIVS* OF CARDINAL POLIGNAC

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In 1962 Cosmo A. Gordon published his bibliography of Lucretius. Under a section entitled "imitators of Lucretius," he cites an eighteenth century Latin poem by Cardinal Melchior de Polignac, entitled *Anti-Lucretius*.<sup>1</sup> This is a poem of surprising beauty, of epic character in length, purpose and breadth of content, modelled on one of the greatest of Classical poems, yet it is little known, virtually nothing has been written on it in English, nor has any translation into English been attempted. Its author was a man as unique and fascinating as the work he wrote.<sup>2</sup>

Cardinal Polignac was born in 1661 on the ancestral estate at Puy-en-Velay in Southern France, and, although as an infant, as his biographers invariably point out with quaint selectivity, he was abandoned overnight on a dung heap by an unscrupulous nurse and might easily have ended his career right there, he went on to become the

<sup>1</sup> Cosmo A. Gordon, *A Bibliography of Lucretius* (London 1962) 297-300. All quotations from the *Anti-Lucretius* in this paper are taken from an edition in two volumes published by M. M. Rey at Amsterdam in 1748, the year after the first edition by H.-L. and J. Guérin at Paris. This edition, which is not listed by Gordon nor by the Library of Congress, is from the Hoose Library of Philosophy, University of Southern California. It gives the full title of the work (*Anti-Lucretius sive de Deo et Natura*), the dedication to Pope Benedict XIV by Abbé de Rothelin, the original preface by Lebeau, and an elegiac tribute to the Cardinal, written especially for this edition by Ger. Nicolaus Heerkins. I wish to thank Mr. Wallace Nethery, Librarian of the Hoose Library, for his kindness in loaning this rare edition to me for an extensive period of study.

<sup>2</sup> Aside from the preface by Lebeau to the edition of the poem cited in footnote one, the main sources from which information for the Cardinal's life have been drawn are: Hedwidge de Polignac, *Les Polignac* (Paris 1960); Chrysostôme Faucher, *Histoire du Cardinal de Polignac*, 2 vols. (Paris 1780); M. M. Chérueil et Ad. Regnier fils (eds.), *Memoires du duc de Saint-Simon* (Paris 1881); Theodore Besterman (ed.), *Voltaire's Correspondence*, vols. 1-107 (Genève 1953-65).

greatest scion of the house of Auvergne and a Cardinal-statesman under Louis XIV. Described by his Jesuit mentors at Paris as "too quick, too brilliant," he was a figure of contradiction. He espoused Cartesianism at a time when the philosophy of Descartes was proscribed by his Church and condemned by his government, yet he was an honored member of the French Academy and a defender of the doctrine of Tradition in the Church. He was a theologian and scientist; a voice of reform in the Church, yet, according to one authority, "the virtuoso of absenteeism," having not once set foot in his own diocese of Auch to which he held title for fifteen years. In a long life he served kings and popes, walking the thin line between devotion to God and country, lived elegantly at the Court, and for a brief span seemed likely to become a second Richelieu to the French throne. He was an antiquarian who unearthed the villa of Marius at Frascati and amassed a collection of Greek and Roman statuary so great it took a king to buy it after his death. Most contradictory of all, in the midst of such a life, he wrote a Latin epic of nearly 12,000 lines in refutation of Lucretius, yet refused to publish it.

From his earliest years Polignac was marked for the Church. As a young boy he was sent to the Jesuit college of Clermont at Paris and then on to Harcourt for philosophy, where he adopted a disturbing preference for Descartes over Aristotle against the opposition of both his teachers and his Church.<sup>3</sup> Cartesianism was approaching its heyday in France at this time, although official opposition was strong, and Polignac embraced it as a daughter with life-long devotion. Its tenets, especially as furthered by his contemporary and friend, Malebranche, dominated his thinking throughout his life. At the same time, however, he remained a loyal Christian and combined open-mindedness in philosophy with traditionalism in the Church. While

<sup>3</sup> In 1663, while Descartes was still living, his works were placed on the Roman Index of prohibited books *donec corrigantur*. Thereafter official opposition in France was widespread. In 1669 candidates for doctorates were obliged to defend anti-Cartesian theses at the Sorbonne, and in 1671 the archbishop of Paris forbade the teaching of Descartes' opinions. Even so, his doctrines spread among the society of Paris, to the royal court, and even among the clergy and Church hierarchy; and there were enthusiastic followers (Cartesians) at the Universities of Utrecht and Leyden in Holland, where Descartes lived and published, and at the University of Paris; see "Cartesianism," *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 3 (New York 1967) 157-59, for a general summary of the movement and the official Church reaction to it.

still a young student he wrote a thesis on Descartes so brilliant, yet so fair, that it won the esteem even of the Aristotelians. Thereafter he took theology at the Sorbonne and at the age of twenty-four found himself a cleric at the Court of Louis XIV.

The influence of his mother, a woman of high station and intrigue at the Court, and his own youthful brilliance embarked him on a career as political as religious, and for a brief while the path of Richelieu appeared his to follow. Of him the king remarked: "Je viens d'entretenir un homme et un jeune homme, qui m'a toujours contredit, sans que j'aie pu me fâcher un moment." At 32 he was the French ambassador extraordinaire to Poland, where he conducted himself, according to his enemies, more like the Prime Minister of Poland than an ambassador from France. But he had not the iron pragmatism of Richelieu, and, moreover, it was Louis XIV who inherited Richelieu's power and no cardinal. His career ended abruptly when the Polish king died and he became entangled in the intrigues of the Polish nobility for succession. When the maneuvering became expensive, Louis XIV (always strongly motivated where money was concerned) withdrew his support from the young ambassador and retired him in disgrace and financial ruin to the monastery of Bonport. The disgrace he could overcome, but the disaster to his finances plagued him for the rest of his life.

Four studious years later he was back at Versailles, where the king again made use of his superb diplomacy in matters both religious and political. He was sent to Rome as auditor of the Rota in 1706; in 1710 to the Congress of Gertruydenberg and the embarrassing (for France) peace talks with Holland; and three years later to the more successful Council of Utrecht. In 1712 he secured—also from the king—the red hat of cardinalship.

As a cardinal and priest (he became a priest only 12 years after becoming a cardinal), Polignac continued a mixed religious, political and social way of life. He had met his first pope as a prelate of 28. It was Alexander VIII, whose election he had witnessed as assistant to Cardinal de Bouillon and who had dubbed him "the seducer" for his eloquence in debating (in Latin as fluently as in French) the Gallican Articles of 1682 and the controversial matter of regalia. Thereafter, throughout a long life he remained, if not quite the seducer, at least the

friend and confidant of six successive popes, while at the same time representing and fostering to them the affairs of France.

But whether in Rome or at the Court he lived elegantly and always beyond his means. More than once friends admonished him to balance his finances, but these remained precarious all his life. He left so many creditors at Rome that he was afraid to return for the election of Benedict XIII, and the expense of five black carriages for mourning the King of Spain caused him to jest, only slightly: "Ambassadeur de-çà de-là, sans patrimoine, presque sans bénéfice." His collection of marble furniture and rare jasper, of ancient statuary, and paintings by Titian, Correggio, Van Dyck, Raphael, da Vinci and Michelangelo was envied throughout Europe, and when a love of Antiquity led him to dabble in archaeology, he uncovered the villa of the Roman dictator Marius near Frascati and carted much of that away to add to his collection.<sup>4</sup> He said that if he were in authority over Rome he would divert the flow of the Tiber for five days in order to recover all of the art and trophies thrown into it during the upheavals of Rome's long history, and in accordance with this scheme he began to buy and level land near Rome—to the consternation, no doubt, of his creditors. He was the subject of art too: busts and portraits by Poerson, Coysevox and Bouchardon. Most agree with the splendid portrait by Rigaux, now in the Louvre, which shows him robed and seated, with a large book held upright on his knee. The flowing white hair, high forehead and Roman nose show the aloof, proud mien of a man who was civil and refined, but not to be offended. The hands are large, but

<sup>4</sup> When Frederick II bought the collection after Polignac's death, Voltaire wrote jokingly to him:

Roi très sage, voilà donc comme  
 Vous avez, pour vingt mille écus,  
 Tout le salon de Marius!  
 Mais pour ces antiques vertus  
 Qu' on ne rapporte plus de Rome,  
 Le don de penser toujours bien,  
 D'agir en prince et vivre en homme  
 Tout cela ne vous coûte rien.

To which Frederick replied: "Le cardinal de Polignac qui pouvait vous posséder, avait donc grand tort de remasser tous ces bustes; mais moi qui n' ai pas cet honneur là, il me faut vos écrits dans ma bibliothèque, et ces antiques dans ma galerie." Besterman (above. note 2) vol. 12, letters 2508 and 2513.

delicate, and the dominant impression is of intelligence and detachment, free of sensuality.

The years under Louis XV were happiest for the Cardinal, for with the death of Louis XIV the pious austerity of Mme de Maintenant came to an end and was succeeded by the more open sensuality of the court of Louis XV. There was, to be sure, another brief period of exile for him (to his own monastery at Anchin, which he had never seen before) at the time Louis XV ascended to the throne, for his association with the Duke and Duchess of Main during the minority of that king had led him to take part in the intrigues of Cellemare, but he was recalled three years later and made Minister of France to Pope Benedict XIII for eight years. All political ambition now allayed, he lived amid friends and honors. He succeeded Bossuet to the French Academy and was made an honorary member of the Academies of Sciences and Belles Lettres. Without overly compromising his religion he played well the courtier at Court, mingling superbly with such luminaries as Mme de Pompadour, Voltaire, Laval, Fontenelle and Villars. When comedy and wit flagged he entertained with passages from the *Anti-Lucretius*, his long poem-in-the-making. Mme de Sévigné has summarized him well:

C'est un des hommes du monde dont l'esprit me paraît le plus agréable; il sait tout, il parle de tout, il a toute la douceur, la vivacité, la complaisance, qu'on peut souhaiter dans le commerce.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed the brilliance and reknown of his wit has come near to eclipsing his memory in other respects, and to many he is known mostly for numerous witticisms. At the Congress of Gertruydenberg where France bargained from humiliating weakness, he endured the heavy demands of the Dutch, but not their insolence: "On voit bien," he said, "que vous n'êtes pas accoutumés à vaincre." Three years later at the Council of Utrecht their situations were reversed and he scorned their impotent demands that he leave: "Non, messieurs, nous ne sortirons pas d'ici, nous traiterons chez vous, de vous, et sans vous." Most famous is the light-hearted sarcasm he responded to Louis XIV, when the king, showing off the royal gardens at Marly, suggested they

<sup>5</sup> Michaud (ed.), "Polignac," *Biographie Universelle ancienne et moderne* new ed. 33 (Paris 1854) 619.

go in from the rain; "Ce n'est rien, Sire," said Polignac, "la pluie de Marly ne mouille point."

But pervasive to his own life and to his fame in the mind of the student is the strange *Anti-Lucretius* itself. It was his grand endeavor, his constant interest and companion, upon which he labored for more than forty years. It enlarged gradually to nearly 12,000 lines, half again as long as the poem of his adversary. It is a curious work and those who read it today must also be a curious and minority group. I can imagine admirers of the great Lucretius, aroused by the bold title, come seeking to know who would dare take issue with their hero—and at such length. There would be others too, who, like myself, have a warm interest for those lesser men who imitate great writers, for love or rivalry, or who begin to write where others leave off, or who try to finish finished works, like the precocious Maphaeus Vegius and his *Thirteenth Book of the Aeneid*. And if anyone enjoys reading smooth, often beautiful, Latin hexameters on a broad scale of philosophical and scientific subjects enlivened by little simile-pictures of nature and mythology, this is a book for him too.

The idea for the work came to Polignac during his return to monastic exile from his brief political venture in Poland. In Holland, on his return, he had met and had several discussions on the subject of religion with the French scholar, Pierre Bayle. They had disagreed sharply, for Bayle was not only a Protestant (twice in fact: Calvinist to Catholic to Calvinist), but a militant sceptic, and Polignac noted that for authority at each step in his argument he quoted Lucretius. Lucretius, as the world of that time had relearned, was the Latin spokesman for Epicurus, the ancient Greek materialist who had assimilated the atomistic physics of Leucippus and Democritus. Atomism, according to the Epicureans, gave man the power to attain happiness by freeing him from fear of the gods and of punishment in the hereafter. It did this, they said, by explaining reality without the intervention of Mind: matter without mind, a universe of invisible, indivisible, indestructible atoms of varied shapes and sizes, engaged in endless mechanical, accidental growth and decay, without need of divine causality or any concern of the gods for man.

Scarcely a generation before Polignac, the French philosopher Pierre Gassendi (1592–1655) had attempted a revival of Epicurean

atomism.<sup>6</sup> A devout Catholic and priest, he was attracted to Epicurus by a desire to create a mechanistic philosophy that would match the mechanical solutions which Galileo, Mersenne, Descartes and other scientists of his day were achieving in the field of physics and by an intent to unseat the theories of Aristotle then reigning unchallenged in the universities. By dissociating himself from Epicurus on theological questions, i.e., by retaining an incorporeal soul for man and God as the creator of both matter and void, Gassendi hoped to present in the light of seventeenth century speculation an account of Epicurean atomism compatible with the reason and conscience of his contemporaries. Although he took from Epicurus and Lucretius the guiding principles of his philosophy—a confident reliance on experience and a bold application of the atomic theory of matter—in specifics he often differed from or went beyond them. Not only were matter and void for him not eternal nor infinite as with Epicurus, but created by God, but to the basic Epicurean characteristics of atoms he added a vital new one, namely, spontaneous motion. Endowed with this self-motion (atomic dynamism), Gassendi's universe became only semi-mechanical and, in fact, verged on animism.

In the matter of life also he went beyond Epicurus by giving to brutes imagination arising from a corporeal soul as well as intellect to man from a soul that was incorporeal. And although the morality of his system retained as its *summum bonum* the Epicurean concept of "pleasure" (properly understood, of course, as tranquillity of mind and health of body attained through virtue), free will was upheld, not as the product of a curved Epicurean fall of atoms (a still fatalistic conception to Gassendi), but as a "faculty of the soul."

But while Gassendi's innovations may have made Epicureanism more compatible with Christianity, it was far from compatible with the world Descartes was devising at that same time, a world of unbroken contiguous matter, composed of particles infinitely divisible, devoid of and forever separate from consciousness, and discovered by mind under the direct supervision of God without any need or regard

<sup>6</sup> For an excellent treatment of the system of Gassendi upon which this summary was based see: J. S. Spink, *French Free-Thought from Gassendi to Voltaire* (London 1960) chps. 1,6,7,8; also, Meyrick Carre, "Pierre Gassendi and the New Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33 (1958) 112-20.

for sense experience. And since Polignac was no less devout a Cartesian than Catholic he attacked Gassendi equally with Epicurus and Lucretius. For him, Epicureanism under any guise was a materialistic philosophy diametrically opposed to the dualistic Mind-ordered universe of the Cartesians.

Polignac reread Lucretius and determined to refute this "high-priest of atheists," while at the same time ascertaining the true nature of God, the soul and the universe:

Magnum opus aggredior, Quinti, de Numine summo  
Dicturus. (1.1-2)

Quintus is the imaginary person the Cardinal addresses throughout the poem, the atheistic foil "whom impetuous youth is bearing away unawares" through the guile of Pleasure and whom Religion and True Reason must save. After invoking the assistance of both the Muses and Divine Wisdom and urging Quintus to attend impartially, the author commences to dispute the doctrine that pleasure, rather than religion and reason, is the source of truth and happiness.

Anyone familiar with Epicurean ethics (its unique understanding of pleasure) and with the temperate life of its originator must be startled at the invective heaped upon both Epicurus and his sect by Polignac throughout his poem, and particularly in this first section on pleasure. Epicurus is "malicious," "noxious," "deceitful," one who "joys in evil, even commends it, if free from fear or sorrow"—*scelus ipsum diligit, imo / commendat si forte metu aut moerore vacabit* (1.510-11). Lucretius is "mad," "arrogant," "a sham prophet," "the herald of pleasure," who "exults to sing his seeds with full-blown cheeks"—*plenis cantabat ovans sua semina buccis* (4.14). Together they are synonyms of lust, violence and anarchy, almost the incarnations of error and corruption, and upon them and their following the Cardinal appends the epithet that Horace spoke jokingly of himself, but which became ever after a catchword with the enemies of Epicurus: *Epicuri de grege porci*—"swine from the herd of Epicurus."<sup>7</sup>

It is not a question of the Cardinal's not having read Lucretius correctly nor of misunderstanding what he said; he simply did not believe him. To him Epicurus and his poet-disciple were hypocrites, who rejoiced in their work of impiety. There is bias here no

<sup>7</sup> Pol. 5.1381; 6.1204; Horace, *Epistles* 1.4.16.



doubt, but bias notwithstanding, his attack is one further instance of the ease with which the Epicurean philosophy has always assumed the reputation of sensuality through imagination unleashed by the key word of its ethics, "pleasure." By the time of his seventeenth century revival the virtuous Epicurus and his troop had already suffered almost 2,000 years of calumny and it is ironical that upon Gassendi himself, who tried to vindicate the character of his master while living as austere himself, there was gradually foisted a reputation for debauchery fully as villainous as unjust.

But we must concede to Polignac's attack more logical grounds besides, which he takes pains to show. Certainly many of Epicurus' followers did not live up to his high standards of morality; and, Polignac argues, without fear of religion or of God, with no higher law to restrain her, "a law unto herself," to what crimes would Pleasure not incite men? Moreover, the Epicurean pursuit of contentment, carried to its logical conclusion, is inherently selfish and anti-social, as Epicurus himself warned against. Polignac saw this, as had others before him:

Omnia namque ad se referens, se cogitat unum  
Vivere, cum vivat multis e millibus unus:  
Centrum se mundi, rerum caput, atque Tyrannum  
Fingit; et ipse suo, quae non sunt subdita, subdit  
Imperio; pariterque volens et peccat et errat. (1.778-82)

The reasoning of Epicurus and Lucretius, the Cardinal saw, is flawed with contradictions. They seek pleasure through virtue, but make pleasure the rule of virtue (1.493). Or, if reason is to be the arbiter of pleasure, why then, he asks, is reason herself made "the child of chance"—*filia Fortunae Ratio est* (1.555), the product of swerving atoms deflected by pure accident?

Equally startling may be the fact that Polignac regarded Epicurus and Lucretius as atheists; but, although he knew of and scoffed at their gods, he knew also that a system of such gods—composed themselves of atoms (the real *causas per se stantes*) and without any participation in creation or directing power over it—is in essence atheistic, as is every materialist philosophy.

Subsequent books dispute other teachings of Epicurus. To Epicurus' doctrine of eternal and uncreated matter and void Polignac

opposes Cartesian solid space. Void does not exist: "atoms, though free to move, reside in a world that is full" (2.236-38). He denies Epicurean need of empty space for movement, substituting in its place a Cartesian "ether" of finest particles filtered throughout the whole of creation, which yields easy passage to the heavier matter as water yields to rocks and air to water (2.768-77). He denies, as did Gassendi, infinite number to atoms, as well as immortality and singleness. Matter is infinitely divisible, he says, for with matter as in mathematics "there is no line that cannot be divided into equal parts" (3.795-96). Book Four refutes Epicurus' doctrine of the "swerve of atoms," devised to explain creation and to provide a basis for free will in man. But, argues Polignac, the swerve itself is governed by chance. In Book Five he gives a Cartesian reply to Epicurus' proofs for the mortality of the soul: as a harpist to his harp, says Polignac, so mind (the Cartesian synonym for soul) is attached *to*, not *of*, matter (5.743-57).

One of the most vexing, if popular, philosophical and scientific questions of the seventeenth century, discussed in the salons as well as in the universities of Europe, concerned the nature of animals—whether they had understanding, feeling, and soul, and, if so, what bearing this had on the nature and status of man. Everyone, it seemed, had an opinion. Grant them souls by which to feel and you were faced with "thinking animals" or "immortal brutes," any real distinction between man and animals was erased or the justice of God was impugned. On the other hand to allow them a material soul (albeit of fine fiery particles, as did Gassendi) was to beg the question and leave unsolved how sentient matter could evolve from insensate atoms. The Cartesians, insisting upon the complete incompatibility of matter and consciousness and denying animals a spiritual soul, rendered them unconscious machines, mere automatons, more complicated than a clock but no different.<sup>8</sup>

Polignac is more cautious on the question. He doubts, but does not rule out, the possibility that animals have souls like men—less, as great, or even superior. Otherwise they are automata. One thing he is certain of however: to equate, if necessary, men and animals in the matter of soul would not be to lessen the nobility of man nor the glory

<sup>8</sup> Spink (above, note 6) 227-34.

of God, nor would it be to make men die forever, as Lucretius would have it, but to make animals immortal (6.310-14).

An equally vexing problem, especially for a materialistic philosophy lacking Divine Providence nor admitting teleological or other directing forces, is the question of the generation of animals and the maintenance of separate species. It all seems too orderly and precise for mere chance. Lucretius attempted a solution; and though he succeeded in producing one of the more grotesque passages of literature<sup>9</sup> and even hit upon the principles of evolution and the survival of the fittest, he did little to solve the actual mystery of it all. A Mind-oriented system such as the Cartesians proposed had an easier time of it as far as the ultimate explanation went (and Polignac mocks Lucretius' stumbling, fortuitous pageant of primeval evolution); but explaining the more immediate laws and physical processes of generation left the Cartesians equally at a loss. Near the close of the seventeenth century, however, the discovery by Hartsoeker of living germs in the sperm of male animals upset everyone's theories of reproduction. Swammerdam rallied with an hypothesis called the "emboîtement des germes," which postulated that the complete animal was contained ready-formed in every sperm; which tiny animal in turn contained in its sperm its own progeny ready-formed, and so on presumably for as many generations as the species was meant to last. The Cartesian Malebranche, a close friend of Polignac and frequent consultant to his poem, accepted this theory, and, no doubt through his influence, it appears at length in Book Seven of the *Anti-Lucretius*: "Thus the entire race of man was an infinitesimal part of the first man"—*Sic hominum genus omne hominis tenuissima primi / Pars fuit* (7.1006-7).

The discovery of living sperm was the result of the recent invention of the microscope by the Dutchman Leeuwenhoek, and Polignac pays full and wondrous tribute to the man and his invention. "An eye of eyes"—*oculorum oculus* (7.1034), he calls it; "The tiniest thing you put under it appears at once large, and displays its inmost self" (7.1028-29) For the Cardinal, looking through this microscope, it was as if the inmost parts of matter, those *praecordia rerum* that atomists had hitherto only dreamed of, lay suddenly bare, not to his mind, but to his very sight—a world within a world. "Not now," he

<sup>9</sup> *De rerum natura* 5.772-924.

exclaims, "before the entrance or at the threshold do we stand; now it is ours to enter the inmost chambers of the house. . . . to contemplate the very footprints of Eternal Mind imposed on matter, as in a mirror" (7.1038-43). He warns Quintus not to be frightened by "the thing"—*prodigium*.

Book Eight is a splendid and prideful exposition, remarkable even from our own vantage today, of the state of astronomical learning in the early eighteenth century, as Polignac rallies the new theories of Kepler in support of Copernicus to abolish the earth-centered universe of Ptolemy. The sun *does* whirl in the center, he tells us, and the planets whirl their perihelia and aphelia around it. The earth inclines on its axis to produce the seasons, and its wobble causes a 26,000 year circling of the polar stars. Throughout this book the reader marvels how strong and rare to his vocation is the Cardinal's love of science. He knows the history of science as well as its latest theories and theorists. He laments how long the ancient theories of Aristarchus and Philolaus lay unheeded; he calls Galileo "the glory of his Etruscan race, the first to bear himself to the stars by the slender reed"—*Etruscae / Gentis honos, canna primus qui se intulit astris* (8.51-52). He pictures Tycho Brahe in his island palace of Uraniborg, lauds Huygens' discovery of the rings of Saturn and Cassini for revealing four of its moons. But his highest praise is reserved for Kepler: "the genius of Nature, the glory of his country and of Cartesianism in our age"—*Naturae genium, Patriae decus, ac decus aevi / Cartesium nostri* (8.56-57). Love of truth led Polignac to uphold these revolutionary truths in the face of contemporary ignorance and scepticism; and they in turn inspired in him a further love. For if, he concludes with rising emotion, the skill to discover these wonders is great, how much greater is the skill to have made them. And what foul insanity to discredit that Artificer: *O pudor! O miserae vecors insania gentis!* (8.1288).

There are, however, instances in the poem when we see the Cardinal in depth beyond his understanding. We could smile, for instance, when he rejects his friend Newton's "new theory" of the universal attraction of matter to explain weight (*magicis totum dedit artibus Orbem*, he complains, 4.934) and his insistence on void to explain movement, did not this rejection evidence how slow to any age is the prevalence of truth over age-old error. But if the Cardinal failed to appreciate Newton's theory of gravity, he was nonetheless high in

praise of his genius and endorsed fully his theory of colors, even against the teaching of his own Cartesian school. Almost alone in France he championed it against learned critics by public demonstration. Newton thanked him in a gracious letter and added that he would have died of longing if he had not gotten to read the *Anti-Lucretius*, so sought after by all of Europe.<sup>10</sup>

Newton was not the only great that Polignac attacked. The breadth of his learning and interest is most evident as he frequently diverts his attack from Epicurus and Lucretius to sally forth against ancient or contemporary foes: Hobbes, for his social contract theory of justice (1.593-607); Spinoza, for his identification of God with Nature ("Like calling the house the man who built it"—*tamquam esset domus ipsa domum qui condidit* 3.809), his theory of eternal motion (5.82-86), and for equating mind and body; Locke, for his belief in the permanence of space; and Gassendi, for reviving and defending Epicureanism in the first place. Among the ancients, Anaxagoras is criticized for his theory of *homoeomeria* (3.1018-46); Democritus, for endowing atoms with thought; Aristippus, for his emphasis on positive pleasure (1.164-82); and even Aristotle, a frequent target of Cartesian teaching, is attacked for his theory of Form as the directing principle of material substance (7.154-200).

But much as Polignac detested the philosophy of Lucretius, he fell captive, as have so many before and since, to the genius of his poetry. Philosophically he must call him "mad" and his song "deadly," but poetically he echoes Lucretius' own self-praise (1.927-34) and says:

Lauro insignire Poetam  
Quis dubitet? Primus viridantes ipse coronas  
Imponam capiti, et meritas pro carmine laudes  
Ante alios dicam. . . . (5.52-55)

For his own poem he adopts much of Lucretius' vocabulary, and particularly, as we would expect, the numerous technical terms and their poetic variations that Lucretius assumed or invented to discuss "space" (*spatium, vacuum, inane*) and "place" (*arcuos Mundi recessus, penetralia rerum*), "atoms" (*atomi, semina, corpuscula, exordia prima*) and their movements (*glomeretur, torpebant, conrescere, gigni, vagarentur*). He borrowed too many of those great compound and manufactured words (*sapientipotentis, tonitralia*) and some of the numerous archaisms

<sup>10</sup> Lebeau, preface to *Anti-Luc.* (above, note 1) xviii.

(old words: *olli* for *illi*, *potis est* for *potest*, the ablative *qui*, the passive infinitives in *-ier*; old spellings: *vorticibus* for *verticibus*, *soboles* for *suboles*; nouns of mixed declension: *materia(es)* that give such dignity and strength to Lucretius' poem. Other prominent archaisms of Lucretius he omitted as perhaps too obscure for his readers (the genitival declensional endings *-ai* for *-ae*, *-om* and *-um* for *-orum*); rather he retained many of the late Latin spellings of his own day (*caespite* for *caespite*, *coniux* for *coniunx*, *seclorum* for *saeculorum*). His hexameters compare favorably with those of Lucretius in respect to meter. They are as free to end in monosyllabic words and show about the same frequency of elisions, but have slightly fewer spondees so that they run somewhat more quickly, but with consequent loss of energy.

Above all Polignac imitated those poetic and rhetorical elements that Lucretius employed to make his hard truths palatable to the non-philosophical Roman reader: alliteration, anaphora, asyndeton, chiasmus, hendiadys, the other figures of speech, and, in particular, the forceful use of metaphor and simile. This was the "honey-coating" that Lucretius described to his patron Memmius in the famous simile of the medicine and the little boys (1.921-50). Polignac has this passage in mind when he too forewarns his reader of the task of making pleasant the subject of his song. Carefully, perhaps too obviously, he varies the phrasing and the simile:

Ne te, quaeso, viae capiant mala taedia longae.  
 Sunt rigidi, fateor, trito sine tramite montes,  
 Sunt durae cautes, ac spinis horrida passim  
 Virgulta, et fossae juga per salebrosa profundae:  
 Macte animo tamen interea dum alludere conor,  
 Deffessamque tibi rerum asperitate molesta,  
 Non injucundo solari carmine mentem.  
 Haud secus in sylvis, ac frondes inter opacas  
 Ingenitum carmen modulatur musicus ales,  
 Dum fovet implumes foetus placidissima conjux:  
 Nam ramo nunc ille sedens, nunc praepete penna  
 Huc illuc circumvolitans, noctesque diesque  
 Invigilat custos; liquida tum voce canorus  
 Personat omne nemus: molli haec abscondita nido  
 Suaves aure bibit numeros, oblita laboris;  
 Et vix assiduae sentit fastidia curae. (3.42-57)

Thus, like its model, the Cardinal's poem abounds in imagery and poetic illustration. The microscopic atoms "swim in their infinite void"—*infinitoque natantes / in Nihilo* (3.63–64) and "mass together in a company"—*cohors glomeretur corpus in unum* (3.71); at times they "grow sluggish and lie unfruitful in heavy sleep"—*Torpebant, somnoque gravi infecunda jacebant* (3.84).

Moreover, as Lucretius was famous for his splendid retelling of ancient myths in which he did not believe and which he took pains to indicate were part of the religion he was resolved to destroy, so also the Cardinal, with equal disbelief, made use of them. Mythology delights, he said, and need not hinder truth. The gods and demi-gods can be thought of as symbols of natural phenomena. Thus he speaks of "the consuming abyss of Erebus and the Plutonian realms" (3.100), and of dawn when "Aurora sprinkles the glistening sky with early light and dissolves the sweet soft shadows" (3.4–6). Mythology fitted in with the pagan thought he was attacking and he felt that he could at times better manifest the folly of that thought by the fiction of its own fable. So he compares desire to Orpheus in its power to move (4.32–44) and the sad consequences of lust are made clear through a beautiful retelling of the myth of Theseus and Ariadne (1.317–40). One tale in particular, the sacrifice of Iphigenia by her own father to the goddess Artemis, was used by Lucretius with great effect against religion (1.80–101). It represented for him, in the words of William E. Leonard,<sup>11</sup> "the one supreme blasphemy against life in the name of religion," and he concludes his account of the story with the words: *Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum*—"Such awful crimes religion instigates" (1.101). We would expect Polignac to answer this charge and he does. In Lucretius' own words he says: *Effera tantum igitur potuit suadere malorum / Impietas, non Relligio*—"Therefore the savage instigator of such awful crimes is Irreligion, not Religion" (1.834–35), and he goes on to implicate Epicurus himself in the murder by arguing that the great crime would never have occurred in the first place if the impiety of Agamemnon had not been occasioned by the lust of Paris for Helen brought about by desire for pleasure. Hence, shame to Epicurus for his unholy philosophy.

But Lucretius was the enemy, to be read for refutation, albeit with

<sup>11</sup> William Leonard and Stanley Smith (eds.), *De rerum natura*. (Madison 1942) 75.

admiration; and although much of the Cardinal's imagery and vocabulary was adopted from Lucretius, it was Virgil that he read with love for inspiration, and it was Virgil more than Lucretius who influenced his style and imagery. The "crowded troop of followers"—*stipante caterva* (5.23) that Polignac bids Lucretius forsake echoes the hunting retinue of Dido in *Aen.* 4.136. Both the words and their position at the end of the verse are the same in each poet. And the splendid personification of Religion in Book Four, vanquished, with hands bound behind her back—*moesta sequebatur manibus post terga revinctis / Relligio* (4.20–21)—parallels none of the numerous attacks on religion in Lucretius so much as the description of Sinon, the perjured prisoner of *Aen.* 2.57, in similar situation: *ecce, manus iuvenum interea post terga revinctum*. Again, the pertinent words occupy the same position in the verse (showing also something of the formulaic manner by which Polignac, like Virgil, perfected his verse<sup>12</sup>). The Cardinal praises the astronomers Huygens and Cassini in words that Virgil used to praise Aeneas: *fama super aethera noti* (Pol. 8.65; *Aen.* 1.379); we see again in the Cardinal's poem such familiar Virgilian phrases as "the guile of Sinon"—*arte Sinonis* (Pol. 1.187; *Aen.* 2.195) and *mirabile dictu* (Pol. 4.1070; Virgil, *passim*). And once again our mortal race, like Aeneas and Ascanius of old, "feeds upon air"—*vescimus aura* (Pol. 1.152; *Aen.* 1.546; 3.339). Many further examples could be cited. Suffice it to say that the Cardinal's acquaintance with Virgil was complete and his use of him must have been almost unconscious and formulaic. Certain favorite words of Virgil, such as *ingruit*, not only occur in the Cardinal's poem, but in the same position in the verse in which they are found invariably in Virgil. It is no wonder then that his own dying words were a paraphrase of a verse Virgil put into the mouth of the dying Dido:

quaesivit strato requiem, ingemuitque negata.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Virgil, although composing in writing, not orally, makes extensive use of formulaic expressions and patterns (in addition to repeating whole lines): for example, he employs the verb *constituo*, in all of its inflections, every time but once at the beginning of a verse; the infinitive *volvere* always comprises the fifth foot of a verse; and the noun *caterva*, in all of its cases, is used seventeen times (including twice in the *Ciris*) and always at the end of a line, exactly as the Cardinal has done in the example cited. Many further examples of this can be found.

<sup>13</sup> Lebeau, preface to *Anti-Luc.* (above, note 1) xix; cf. *Aen.* 4.692.



Echoes of other writers are also present in the poem. An expletive, *apage* (9.937), comes from the Roman comedies of Plautus and Terence; the self-deprecating remark of Horace became, as we saw above, a taunt against Epicureans in general; and much of the sea and storm imagery of a passage in Book Five (58-63) is reminiscent of Horace's third ode (to Virgil) of Book One. The description of a sick man writhing on his couch (1.1047 ff.) recalls the last lines of Dante's *Purgatorio*, canto 6, a poem that Polignac admired greatly.

But the Cardinal's own poetic eye was keen and sure and the beautiful mountain simile opening Book Four was surely suggested by his boyhood among the mountains of Auvergne and by his frequent crossings to Rome over the towering Alps. Mountains, in fact, are a frequent image in his poem. How well he understood their majesty and inspiration for human life and how well he adapts their image to his theme and even to their own mention here almost mid-way in his poem;

Ac veluti medio jam sessus monte viator,  
 Saxosum per iter postquam ereptavit, in alta  
 Tandem rupe sedens vultum sudore madentem  
 Tergit, et ascensu labefactos recreat artus:  
 Tum rigidas cautes et quae juga vicit anhelans  
 Cernere amat, relegitque oculis vestigia laetis:  
 Surgit mox, avidus summum exsuperare cacumen,  
 Quique viae superest labor, hunc animosior implet.  
 Abdita Materiae sic nos penetralia tandem  
 Emensos, juvat ire, novosque accingier ausus. (4.1-10)

Many other such passages occur throughout the poem, his own creative sweetening of philosophy and religion not unworthy of his model.

But perhaps Polignac most equals Lucretius (and which might please him most) in possessing that trait which Leonard<sup>14</sup> has called one of the hallmarks of the great Classical Greek writers, that is, inner compulsion. His theme chose him, he did not choose it. Epicureanism overwhelmed the soul of Lucretius like the voice of God; Cartesianism imbued the young soul of Polignac with equal fervor.

<sup>14</sup> Leonard and Smith (above, note 11) 27.

As Lucretius set out with consuming passion to save the world from religion, so Polignac found his life-long task to save religion from Lucretius. Both spent a life-time at one labor and one poem.

The intensity of Lucretius' passion has lent credence to the story of his insanity and suicide. The passion of Polignac is hardly so fierce or high-handed, but nonetheless strong, and on occasion eloquently denunciatory, sarcastic or bitter. "Begin now, false Epicurus," he cries, after what he considers a telling refutation, "to assume your real self. Take off your mask of lies"—*Incipe nunc adeo, fallax Epicure, videri / Qualis es, ac tandem mentitos exue vultus* (1.556-57). And again, "Go now and cloak your sin in unassuming words"—*I nunc, et vitium verbis obvolve modestis* (1.470). We find him moved by exasperation as well as contempt in challenging the Epicurean belief in the mortality of the soul: "What love of nothingness! What madness"—*Tantus amor nihili! Tanta est vecordia* (5.1047); and in mocking Lucretius' chance-directed evolution of the world and mankind he exclaims: "Now your fable fails you and you die"—*Hic te tua fabula fallit, / Et jugulat* (7.120-21). On the lighter side, his delight in introducing ether as the key to his explanation of weight and motion is contagious and his poetry almost Aristophanic:

Salve Elementorum pars subtilissima, summae  
Dexteritatis opus, summi simul instrumentum  
Artificis; gaudens humanos fallere sensus,  
Ut fabri manus ipsa, et sola mente videri:  
Materiae flos et sanguis, diffusus in omnes  
Corporis immensi venas: Tu filia primum,  
Nunc genitrix motus: Tu cunctis didita membris  
Vasto vivere das, animalis spiritus, Orbi. (4.546-53)

There was no lack of material and the Cardinal worked on the poem continually and everywhere, amid noise and crowds, even in his carriage while travelling. As the work grew its design also enlarged. After completing a poem of ten books against atheistic materialism, he had in mind an attack in two books against Deism, and the end of the poem shows him bending his course to this new task and even promising a further treatment against idolatry. For he lived the controversies he wrote about and his poem, as it were, was also a living, organic thing.

Often he would recite his verses to various intellectual companies for

their enjoyment and criticism. He revised and added; his fame spread. It was considered a mark of sophistication to know his poem and many verses escaped him through the quick memories of hearers and were published separately or appeared as choice gems in their own works.<sup>15</sup> At the Court, Louis XIV memorized passages; while across the Alps, Pope Clement II sought a recitation. When he got it, he marvelled at the poem's eloquence, less at its Cartesianism. Voltaire lauded the Cardinal in his *Le Temple du Goût*:

Le cardinal, oracle de la France  
 . . . . .  
 En vers latins fait parler la sagesse,  
 Réunissant Virgile avec Platon  
 Vangeur du ciel et vainqueur de Lucrèce.<sup>16</sup>

In this saucy mélange of verse and prose, of flattery, satire and libel, that drew upon Voltaire abuse and difficulties of every kind, it is the Cardinal who is chosen to guide Voltaire along the allegorical paths through the Empire of the God of Taste. Once inside the temple an amusing scene takes place. Polignac comes face to face with his arch-enemy Lucretius, who is seated near Leibnitz (apparently more for the reason that Leibnitz wrote tolerably good Latin verse than because they were both philosophers). The ancient poet immediately blushes upon seeing the Cardinal, melts at the sound of his voice, rushes up and declares his guilt, his blindness, his idolatry of Epicurus, and concludes with dubious contrition:

Tu m'as vaincu: je cède; et l'âme est immortelle,  
 Aussi bien que ton nom, mes écrits et tes vers.<sup>17</sup>

That Lucretius should yield so easily!

<sup>15</sup> For example, the first edition of Voltaire's *Le Temple du Goût* was published (1733) fourteen years before the publication of the *Anti-Lucretius*. The first annotation to its opening lines, after mentioning the Cardinal's poem, says: "Tous les gens de lettres connoissent ces beaux vers, qui sont au commencement:

Pieridum si forte lepos austera canenti  
 Deficit, eloquio victi, re vincimus ipsa, etc . . .

At that time the Cardinal may well have intended these verses to mark the opening of his poem. Now, however, slightly modified, they are lines 78 and 79 of the published edition. Voltaire, *Le Temple du Goût*, ed. by E. Carcassone (Paris 1938) 63.

<sup>16</sup> Carcassone (above, note 15) 111.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 127.

But as the work grew, so did the Cardinal's reluctance to publish, despite the urging of friends. There were critics. Voltaire himself came to criticize the work and eventually, (though happily not until after the Cardinal's death) recanted his praise and, with equal excess, condemned the poem as a feeble work. The difficulty was not entirely that of Polignac. During the long creation of the poem the attitude of the scholarly world towards the purely rationalist philosophy of Descartes had changed. By the advent of the eighteenth century Cartesianism was in decline and Newtonian physics and Lockean empiricism were ascendant.<sup>18</sup> The Cardinal himself, to the credit of his sincere love of truth, realized that some of his positions were tenuous, others obsolete and incapable of vanquishing Lucretian materialism.<sup>19</sup>

Death intervened. And the effects of begetting a work over so long a period of time, under such varied circumstances of place and station, subject constantly to revision and addition through ripening thought and the criticism of friends and scholars, left it strangely marred and disfigured when death approached. Then there was no time to revise or recall the extended fragments, and Polignac handed over his manuscripts to his friend Abbé de Rothelin to publish or not as he chose. This young cleric collected the scattered members, edited and emended. Of the Ninth Book, where the author intended, like Dante, to lead the reader to the bowels of the earth and sea and show him even there the hand of the Creator, Rothelin found only the first twenty-five lines; of the concluding Tenth Book, he found all but the beginning. Together they comprise Book Nine of the final edition. Then Rothelin himself died and the book became twice posthumous.

Time has brought about a less favorable, but perhaps more accurate, judgment of the poem as an apologia of religion; but its value as an

<sup>18</sup> It is significant that no work of Descartes was printed in France between 1724 and 1824: *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (above, note 3) 159.

<sup>19</sup> In particular, his denial of space and some of his theories in Book Three on the nature of atoms were not being borne out. He himself had never felt secure in the theory of weight he put forth in Book Four. The most he ever claimed for it was that it was superior to that of Epicurus. On the other hand it can be said that his arguments against an infinite number of atoms (i.e., an infinite universe) and for the infinite divisibility of matter are still seriously proposed today.

imitation of and commentary on the great poem of Lucretius and its interest as a broad and pleasant exposition of eighteenth century thought in science, philosophy and religion and of one prominent man's part in it and his reaction to it and to the men who made it, in part makes up for this. Equally redeeming is the interest the poem revives in the Cardinal's own life. A comparison with Cicero seems natural. He was a loveable man, mixed largely of all the contradictory elements that make men warm and human: brilliant, but not profound; good, but not saintly; worldly, with refinement; often weak, sometimes unwise, in frequent debt and exile; he was witty, charming, eloquent; a gifted lover of literature and poesis; above all human, with a heart born for friendship and human intercourse, and a sincere love for God, Church and Country—in that order, he would hope. He was, again like Cicero, a man of vast acquaintance with the great of his own day and he too played a high, if sometimes unsuccessful, role in the affairs of his time. That time is gone and he with it; the poem remains—a monument to him and his age and a credit to the Latin tradition and to its vitality eighteen centuries after Lucretius.