Esoteric Philosophy in Rome

by

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Defense Date: July 20, 2024

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Classical Studies in The Graduate School of Duke University
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates esoteric philosophy (the deliberate concealment of philosophical positions) in Rome. It does so through case studies of three Roman philosophers: Cicero, Lucretius, and Plutarch. Until now, there has not been a full-length general study of esoteric philosophy in Greco-Roman antiquity. The presence or absence, however, of deliberate concealment in philosophical texts greatly determines how one should read them. In arguing that Roman philosophers were aware of this phenomenon and practiced it themselves, this dissertation thus suggests a new way of reading Roman philosophy. First, a new typology of esoteric philosophy creates a framework for interpreting the discourse around and practice of esotericism. Prominent reasons for esotericism include reflections on ontology and epistemology as well as pedagogical and political motives (e.g., avoiding persecution or critiquing the powerful). The study begins with an argument that esoteric philosophy is thematic in Cicero's *De natura deorum* and key in resolving central interpretative questions about the dialogue. Then, an assessment of esoteric philosophy in Lucretius' *De rerum natura* reveals a contemporary perspective on the topic rooted in a different genre and in the Epicurean rather than Platonic philosophic tradition. The final chapters treat Plutarch's *De audiendis poetis*, a work which lays bare the nexus between philosophy, poetry, and esotericism. This study offers esoteric readings of these philosophers by taking their own statements on esotericism as the starting point for interpretation as a control against anachronism. The interpretations also situate esoteric philosophy in aspects of philosophy particular to the Roman context, including its tenuous status as a Greek import, tension with Roman religion, relationship to Roman oratory, and response to the political pressures of the Late Republic and Principate. The methods and results of this dissertation may serve as the basis for future research into esoteric philosophy in other philosophers in antiquity and beyond.

Contents

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I am deeply grateful to the other members of my committee for assisting me in numerous ways. Through many conversations Michael Davis challenged me to rethink completely the concept of esoteric philosophy that I initially had. Michael Gillespie helped me become a better writer, and also initiated me into the mysteries of Hegelian dialectic—a rare combination. Through his extreme care in reading drafts and incisive questions during oral defenses, José González inspired me to pursue a higher standard of scholarly rigor. Finally, William Johnson read seven Platonic dialogues with me, which formed part of the initial impetus for this topic. Outside of the committee, I thank Gernot Michael Müller for discussions which sharpened my framing of certain issues, and Kristoffel Demoen for carefully commenting on Chapters 6 and 7.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Esoteric Philosophy in Rome and Why It Matters

The story goes that around 500 BCE Heraclitus deliberately made his *On Nature* more obscure when he dedicated it to the temple of Artemis which stood near his native Ephesus (DL 9.6).[1] He thus went against all the advice that any editor or writing coach would give today. That an ancient Greek biographer found the story plausible shows the difference between our own conception of philosophy and good writing and that of antiquity. One might think that surely the ancient Romans, with all their practicality, would not have been in favor of deliberately concealing philosophical views along the lines of Heraclitus. And yet, a little under a half millennium later Cicero writes in his *De finibus* that speaking in such a way that one is not understood "happens without reproach … if … you should do this on purpose, like Heraclitus" (2.15).[2]

In this dissertation I investigate precisely this phenomenon: the deliberate concealment of philosophic views, which I call "esoteric philosophy," as it manifests itself in Rome. I argue that esoteric philosophy was pervasive in Roman philosophy and that gaining an awareness of it allows us to understand better the way Roman authors wrote. To that end, I provide in-depth interpretations of three major Roman philosophers (Cicero, Lucretius, and Plutarch) as case

[1] Unless otherwise noted, I follow throughout the abbreviations of the *Diccionario Griego-Español* for Greek authors and those of the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* for Latin authors. Those of Plutarch's works come from Schmidt et al. 2020, xiv-xviii. All translations are mine, with two exceptions both in Appendix A (those of Al-Farabi and Schleiermacher). I list the critical editions I use (unless otherwise noted) for Greek and Latin texts in the Works Cited section. When quoting from texts for which editions are not listed, I use the Greek text of the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* and the Latin text of the Packard Humanities Institute.

[2] The full quotation from Cicero's dramatic persona is as follows*: Quod* [sc. *si quis ita loquitur ut non intellegatur*] *duobus modis sine reprehensione fit, si aut de industria facias, ut Heraclitus, 'cognomento qui* σκοτεινός *perhibetur, quia de natura nimis obscure memoravit', aut cum rerum obscuritas, non verborum, facit ut non intellegatur oratio, qualis est in Timaeo Platonis* ("This [i.e., if someone speaks in such a way that he or she is not understood] happens in two ways without reproach: either if you should do this on purpose, like Heraclitus, 'who is called by the name "the obscure," because he spoke too obscurely about nature,' or when the obscurity of things, not of words, brings it about that a speech is not understood, of which sort is [the speech] in Plato's *Timaeus*").

studies. In Chapters 1-3, I analyze the way Cicero (106-43 BCE) discusses and practices esotericism in his philosophic dialogue *De natura deorum*, situating the work in the rest of his corpus of philosophical and rhetorical works.[3] Then in Chapter 4 I turn to Cicero's contemporary, Lucretius (c. 99-55 BCE), to see how esotericism informs his philosophic poem *De rerum natura*.[4] Finally, in Chapters 5-7, I analyze Plutarch's (c. 49/50-120 CE) treatise on poetry, *De audiendis poetis*, to bring out the nexus between esotericism, philosophy, and poetry that was already present, if less explicitly, in Cicero and Lucretius.[5] As in the case of Cicero, here I also situate Plutarch's work against the backdrop of other illuminating statements about esotericism elsewhere in his corpus. Together, these chapters comprise the first full-length general treatment of esoteric philosophy in Greco-Roman antiquity.

Esotericism goes far beyond a mere curiosity of style. Today, a commonsense view of philosophy is that philosophers seek the truth and try to communicate it as clearly as possible. My claim that ancient philosophers deliberately concealed their views challenges this notion about philosophy. Insofar as we are interested in what philosophy is, we must investigate it in all its historical manifestations. Otherwise, we risk not only mistaking the contemporary understanding of philosophy for the only possibility for philosophy simply, but also anachronistically retrojecting that understanding back onto other historical periods. What philosophy is or can be is at stake in investigating esoteric philosophy in antiquity. Whether this dissertation makes some small contribution to these big questions will be for the reader to decide.

Now, if esotericism were merely a matter of presenting the results of philosophy in an indirect way or keeping it as a secret, one could construe it as not central to what philosophy is

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[3] For Cicero's dates see, e.g., Rawson 1983.
[4] Smith (in Rouse 1992, x-xi) gives the basic information for Lucretius' dates. Hutchinson's (2001) proposal of 49 or later for publication of the poem (and hence Lucretius' death) against the traditional dating has not found much support in subsequent scholarship (see, e.g., Butterfield 2013, 1 n. 2).
[5] See Titchener and Zadorojnyi 2023, 4 with scholarship cited for Plutarch's dates.

but only as a result of extraneous circumstances. But we will see that for ontological, epistemological, and psychological reasons, the Roman philosophers in question did not hold that philosophy properly understood could ever be communicated directly apart from an esoteric presentation. Therefore, esotericism for them is part of the nature of philosophy.

Even if one is not interested in what philosophy is, or does not think the answer to that question can be known, esotericism is important for the history of philosophy, and thus for history simply. If ancient philosophers wrote esoterically, we had better take that fact into account in interpreting them. For example, I argue that part of esotericism is paying lip service to reigning orthodoxies on one level of the text, the exoteric level, while challenging those orthodoxies more subtly on the esoteric level. If we ignore this aspect of philosophic texts, we risk mistaking the lip service for the genuine view of the philosopher under examination. Thus the question of esoteric philosophy changes how we read ancient philosophy.

Given the widespread knowledge of philosophy among writers of other genres in Greece and especially in Rome, esoteric philosophy also sheds light on ancient literature more broadly. Furthermore, some prominent philosophers, like Cicero, also played major roles in political life which would shape history. Understanding the thought of historical actors is required for understanding their actions. Therefore, appreciating the role esoteric philosophy plays in their thought also illuminates their actions, and thus our understanding of history.

Ancient philosophy is of course very influential on later philosophy. Appreciating ancient esoteric philosophy thus allows us to see how later philosophy might be esoteric and how that esotericism might draw on ancient philosophy. One might deny esoteric philosophy's existence simply or deny its existence in antiquity but admit its existence in the Middle Ages and/or modernity. In the first case, being persuaded that esotericism existed in antiquity might allow one to see it in later periods as well. In the second case, being persuaded that esotericism existed in antiquity might shed light on one's understanding of esotericism in the Middle Ages and/or

modernity. Determining the existence of esoteric philosophy in antiquity is thus important for understanding not only ancient philosophy, but also later philosophy.

Though this dissertation has implications for esoteric philosophy in Greco-Roman antiquity more generally, I focus on esoteric philosophy in Rome. To the extent that scholars have already investigated ancient esoteric philosophy, they have done so more with reference to Greek authors, especially in the Platonic tradition. In the generally understudied domain of ancient esotericism, then, there is even more to be gained by studying esotericism in Roman philosophers. Esoteric philosophy also takes on a different and illuminating aspect in the Roman context. The political hostility to philosophy was one of the original reasons for esoteric philosophy in Greece. In Rome, philosophy had an even more tenuous status because it was a Greek import. Philosophy was not just in tension with politics, but also un-Roman or even anti-Roman. Thus the same need for esoteric philosophy became even sharper in Rome.

The Late Roman Republic was also the first time that a non-Greek people were deeply shaped by and tried to come to terms with Greek philosophy.[6] Romans like Cicero and Lucretius tried to recover the original sense of philosophy. In trying to begin philosophizing, they had to go back to another beginning, already far removed in time, performed by a different people in a different language. For this reason, Roman philosophy is a precedent for our own situation in trying to recover the Greek and Roman beginning of philosophy. Roman philosophy shows the barriers to and potential solutions for recovering philosophy. Insofar as the Romans were at a great remove from the origins of Greek philosophy, they also had to state some things more openly than the Greeks did, which were perhaps more self-explanatory for the Greeks. This is one of the reasons, I think, that there is much more explicit discussion of esotericism in Cicero than in

[6] I see this as distinct from the spread of Greek philosophy beyond Greece during the Hellenistic period because the language employed for Greek philosophy was still Greek in, say, Alexandria.

Plato. The entire phenomenon of esoteric philosophy might emerge more clearly in Roman philosophy and thus serve as a guideline for Greek philosophy as well.

This dissertation aims to contribute to the more general resurgence of the study of Roman philosophy which takes Roman authors as seriously as their Greek counterparts.[7] Taking Roman philosophy seriously means two things: 1) Romans are capable of understanding Greek philosophy in all its depth; 2) but we also need to situate philosophy in its Roman context. The second point shows the originality of Roman philosophy, rather than its being a rigid imitation of Greek philosophy. Roman philosophers cannot be understood without their historical, political, social, and above all linguistic context, but their thought is not restricted or determined by this context.

Though I focus on esoteric philosophy in Rome, the concepts, methods, and results of this dissertation can be fruitfully applied by other scholars to investigations of esotericism in other authors in antiquity and later periods. This holds even if one should disagree with the particulars of my interpretations of these three Roman philosophers.

I also want to note that, though it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to discuss the point adequately, the concept of esotericism also sheds light on contemporary questions of censorship and free speech. Recovering the notion of a manner of communication between self-imposed silence and outright frank speech could, in further research, clarify how authors might still communicate their thought even in the face of banned or controversial subject matters.

1.2 The Selection of Sources

Studying three authors allows for a general statement about esoteric philosophy in Rome, while still leaving room for a detailed examination of their writings. As will become apparent

[7] See landmark volumes like Barnes and Griffin 1989, Barnes and Griffin 1997, and Sharples and Sorabji 2007, and now Müller and Zini 2018 and Garani et al. 2023.

from the literature review below (1.4), this strikes a balance between the overly specific interpretations of single authors and the overly general surveys which constitute the prior discussions of ancient esoteric philosophy. However good they might be, works arguing for esoteric philosophy based on the interpretation of a single author or text run into the problem that other scholars will always dispute single interpretations. In this case the persuasiveness of the whole concept of ancient esotericism stands or falls based on the strength of the interpretation of, say, one Platonic dialogue. While interpreting three authors together does not preclude disagreements about interpretations, the results of a broader comparative approach, such as I offer, mitigate this problem by showing common features about esoteric philosophy across multiple authors and time periods. This gives a more persuasive account of the phenomenon, in that it is not rooted in the idiosyncrasies of one particular author and less so in those of one particular interpretation.

The other extreme avoided is the broad survey that indeed collects many passages relating to esotericism across a very large span of ancient authors, but leaves little room for in-depth interpretation. Such broad surveys are foundational as evidence for the existence of esoteric philosophy, but do not say enough about what it is. By its nature esoteric writing is elusive, and thus interpretative work about it requires much care. We do need detailed interpretations of particular authors and texts to say something meaningful about ancient esotericism.

For these reasons, I conduct case studies of three philosophers. In dedicating roughly a third of the dissertation to each particular text, I have enough space to carry out the kind of interpretation necessary for treating esoteric philosophy. Together, the thirds are more than the sum of their parts by providing conclusions drawn from the same methods and concepts, which would not be the case if one drew together three monographs by different scholars that touched on esotericism.

The next question is why choose these three authors in particular. Cicero, Lucretius, and Plutarch make esotericism more visible than most other Roman philosophers and have significant connections among one another, yielding a more meaningful interpretation when taken together. They are also three very influential writers.

Cicero and Plutarch, for their part, also make so many explicit statements about esotericism that they provide a good baseline level of plausibility for the existence of the phenomenon. They also pair these explicit statements, I argue, with a thematic treatment of esotericism in particular works: *De natura deorum* (henceforth *DND*) and *How the Young Man Should Listen to Poems* (Πῶς δεῖ τὸν νέον ποιημάτων ἀκούειν; henceforth *De audiendis*) respectively. This allows for the sort of detailed interpretation necessary for the subject matter, while treating authors whose awareness of esoteric philosophy is beyond reasonable doubt. The common Platonic orientation of Cicero and Plutarch, along with their deep knowledge of and engagement with the Hellenistic schools, also produces many noteworthy parallels.

As part of their treatment of Hellenistic philosophy, Cicero and Plutarch link Epicureanism to esotericism, both in *DND* and *De audiendis* and elsewhere in their corpora. This brings me to my inclusion of Lucretius. There is evidence both external to Lucretius, like that in Cicero and Plutarch, and internal to his poem that makes an esoteric reading of *De rerum natura* (henceforth *DRN*) a worthwhile enterprise. I will treat the evidence in more detail below (5.1), but for now I note that Lucretius' contemporary Cicero both read and admired *DRN* and engaged with the connection between Epicureanism and esotericism in several of his works as part of his critique of Epicureanism. Turning from Cicero to Lucretius thus allows us to judge whether Cicero was right about Epicureanism and esotericism and to see what esotericism looks like from the perspective of an Epicurean rather than a critic of Epicureanism. The treatment, furthermore, of a non-Platonic philosopher's esotericism indicates the pervasiveness of the phenomenon

beyond a particular school. Plutarch's discussion of Epicureanism together with esotericism provides a further connection back to the prior sections on Cicero and Lucretius.

While Lucretius does not speak as explicitly about esoteric philosophy as Cicero and Plutarch, I argue that his statements about the function of his own poetry and how his poetry should be read provide a window into his esoteric writing. This has a similar function to how Cicero's and Plutarch's explicit descriptions of esoteric philosophy provide a metacommentary on their own writerly practices, though it is more self-referential in the case of Lucretius.

It is also fruitful to treat Cicero, Lucretius, and Plutarch together because they all make poetry an important part of their discussion of esoteric philosophy. A poet himself, Cicero discusses the hidden philosophic content of poetry in *DND* and links poetic myth and esotericism. The relationship between philosophy and poetry is an obvious question when studying Lucretius, as he is a philosophic poet, and his famous comparison of his philosophy and poetry to wormwood concealed by honey raises the question of esotericism. Finally, Plutarch makes the nexus between philosophy, poetry, and esotericism a key theme of *De audiendis*.

Cicero and Lucretius brought philosophy into Latin in prose and poetry respectively, and were largely responsible for determining the Latin vocabulary used to "translate" Greek philosophic terms.[8] Both were also otherwise hugely influential in their respective genres. Alongside and in opposition to Caesar, Cicero determined the course of all subsequent Latin prose. Those who adopted a different style, such as Seneca the Younger, did so in conscious opposition to him.[9] Cicero's enduring influence can be seen in late antiquity by the fact that for Augustine[10] and Jerome (*Epist.* 22) being a Ciceronian or being a Christian seem to have been the

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[8] For Cicero see, e.g., Lévy 2021. See also Plu. *Cic*. 40.2. For Lucretius, see, e.g., Sedley 1998, 35-59 (containing comparison and contrast with Cicero at 36-37 (citing *Ac*. 1.24-26) and 43-44), as well as Taylor 2020, 1-14. This is also Lucretius' own claim (1.136-139). Note that all citations of Lucretius refer to the line numbers in Bailey's (1947) edition as he constitutes the text, i.e., in the case of transpositions I cite Bailey's new line numbers rather than the numbering originally derived from the MSS.

[9] See Conte 1994, 415-416.

[10] See Bouton-Touboulic 2021, 252-253.

two main meaningful intellectual alternatives, even if Lactantius had through his eloquence emerged before as a "Christian Cicero" (*Ciceronem … Christianum*) as Pico della Mirandola would later call him.[11] Lucretius, for his part, was a touchstone for Augustan poetry, especially that of Vergil, and beyond. Observing esotericism at the start of Latin philosophy in both prose and poetry is a precondition for tracing its later influence.

Cicero and Lucretius linked esotericism to philosophy in very different ways in the media of the philosophic dialogue or treatise and the didactic hexameter poem respectively. Given their radically opposed philosophic orientations along with their different presentations of philosophy, it is tempting to speak of "a certain ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry" being opened up again at the start of Latin philosophy.[12] It may be necessary to navigate such a quarrel whenever a serious effort is made to renew philosophy. In any case, Plutarch sets out to adjudicate the quarrel between philosophy and poetry in relation to esotericism in *De audiendis*,[13] making him a sort of arbiter between the positions of Cicero and Lucretius.

The relationship between poetry and esoteric philosophy is also an illuminating conceptual problem. Poetry as another kind of indirect speech forces us to define esotericism more precisely. Preliminarily, I state the similarity and difference between the two as follows: poetry brings to the fore the ambiguous character of all speech that makes it require interpretation, but esoteric philosophy combines an awareness of the ambiguous character of speech with deliberate concealment. I argue that Lucretius is an esoteric poet, but not all poets are esoteric. Poets and prose writers can both be esoteric philosophers, if they practice deliberate concealment based on an awareness of the ambiguous character of speech. In *Alcibiades II*, Socrates makes a wonderful statement to this effect:

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[11] See Kendeffy 2015, 56 n. 2.
[12] Pl. *R.* 607b5-6: … παλαιὰ μέν τις διαφορὰ φιλοσοφίᾳ τε καὶ ποιητικῇ …
[13] Cf. Várzeas 2019, 79: "In this work, Plutarch seeks to solve the 'old quarrel between poetry and philosophy' ..."

> ἀλλ᾽ αἰνίττεται, ὦ βέλτιστε, καὶ οὗτος καὶ ἄλλοι δὲ ποιηταὶ σχεδόν τι πάντες. ἔστιν τε γὰρ φύσει ποιητικὴ ἡ σύμπασα αἰνιγματώδης καὶ οὐ τοῦ προστύχοντος ἀνδρὸς γνωρίσαι· ἔτι τε πρὸς τῷ φύσει τοιαύτη εἶναι, ὅταν λάβηται ἀνδρὸς φθονεροῦ τε καὶ μὴ βουλομένου ἡμῖν ἐνδείκνυσθαι ἀλλ᾽ ἀποκρύπτεσθαι ὅτι μάλιστα τὴν αὑτοῦ σοφίαν, ὑπερφυῶς δὴ τὸ χρῆμα ὡς δύσγνωστον φαίνεται, ὅτι ποτὲ νοοῦσιν ἕκαστος αὐτῶν.
>
> But, best one, both this [i.e., Homer] and also just about all the other poets make riddles. For the art of poetry is both by nature altogether riddling and it does not belong to some chance man to comprehend [it]; and, further, in addition to its being of this sort by nature, when it [i.e., the art of poetry] takes hold of a man who is jealous and does not wish to display his wisdom to us, but [instead wishes] to conceal it as much as possible, indeed how exceedingly does this thing appear difficult to comprehend, [namely] whatever each of them [i.e., the poets] has in mind. (147b7-c5)

Socrates shows the distinction between the riddling nature of poetry and poets who combine this with deliberate concealment. The first is descriptive, and the second is prescriptive (from an esoteric perspective). I would extend Socrates' description of the esoteric poet to the esoteric philosopher simply.

The linkage of esotericism and poetry connects to another common theme in Cicero, Lucretius, and Plutarch, that of theology and esotericism. In different ways, the three treat the implications for esotericism of the relationship between what Varro calls the mythical theology of the poets, the natural theology of the philosophers, and the civil or political theology of the city (*R. D.* fr. 7 Cardauns = Aug. *C. D.* 6.5). One of the key questions in my analysis will be the relationship between the gods fashioned by the poets and those held to exist by the philosophers. Can the gods of the poets, which influence greatly the gods of the city—those of traditional cult––be discarded as an exoteric means of controlling the people while the philosophers keep their natural theology as an esoteric secret? Or is there an intrinsic connection between the three theologies (i.e., the gods of the poets, philosophers, and city) because the gods of the city represent the most authoritative opinions of the city and, as is well known, Socratic philosophy always starts from opinion to reach the truth, while the gods of the poets may have been fashioned through something like philosophic reflection? In the latter case, the esoteric would be bound with the exoteric because the starting point for philosophy would be the everyday

assumptions about the divine—the civil theology—and the poets would be teachers of the philosophers and the city rather than the creators of mere fictions.

Cicero, Lucretius, and Plutarch address these questions in different ways. Cicero's whole dialogue, *DND*, of course treats the nature of the gods, so we have to ask why he integrates a thematic treatment of esotericism into his theological dialogue. Lucretius' most obvious esotericism has to do with his presentation of the gods of the poets, like Venus, as if they were real only to undercut them in favor the philosophic gods of Epicurus. Plutarch, likewise, presents Homer as putting forward poetic gods as a screen for natural theology. How these presentations of different types of gods relate to the questions discussed in the previous paragraph requires considerable unpacking. For the moment, I merely signal the connection between esotericism and theology as a meaningful commonality among these philosophers.

I also identify more particular views about esotericism shared by them. For example, all three take one important function of esotericism to be to preserve the free judgment (*iudicium*; κρίσις) of the reader: deliberate concealment of the author's view keeps the reader thinking on his or her own. Broader themes like esotericism and theology and particular common features like this across different authors show significant features of the phenomenon.

Because I treat esoteric philosophy in Rome, one might despite the reasons given still wonder about the inclusion of Plutarch, since he is a native Greek writing in Greek. But Plutarch was a Roman citizen who spent time in Rome, learned a good deal of Latin, and was deeply concerned with the relationship between Rome and his conquered native Greece, as his *Parallel Lives* show.[14] John Scheid even goes so far as to say that Plutarch "was Roman."[15]

Plutarch's status as an elite Greek living under the Roman empire shows a different aspect of esoteric philosophy in Rome than that provided by the two authors of the Late Republic

[14] See, e.g., Russell 1973, 7-11.
[15] Scheid 2012, 7: "Mestrius Plutarchos, notre Plutarque (40/50-110/125 de n. è) était romain."

I treat. Despite his leading roles in his local Chaeronea and as priest of Delphi as well as his connections to prominent Romans from the capital, Plutarch was well aware of the problem of living under tyranny in general and the even more tenuous status of being Greek under Roman rule. This can be seen from his admiration for those like Cicero who tried to preserve the Republic—he even compares Cicero to Plato's philosopher kings (*Comp. Dem. et Cic.* 3.3; cf. *Cic*. 2.3; 24.4-7)—and from his focus on the cruelty of the Roman emperors stretching back to Augustus (e.g., *De gar*. 508b; cf. *Cic*. 20.4-7). With his Platonic training, Plutarch no doubt saw that he was living in a time when the cycle of regimes had indeed shifted from the Roman mixed regime, which contained important democratic elements, to tyranny (cf. his *De unius in re publica dominatione, populari statu, et paucorum imperio* as well as *Cic*. 40.1). Plutarch's considerations around esotericism, then, include a reflection on the difficulty of speaking openly under a tyranny as well as Greece's unique status as still being the center of education (παιδεία) for elite Romans. Plutarch in representing himself as the collector and interpreter of prior Greek education was in a position to influence the Roman masters. Overall, my inclusion of Plutarch not only shows the enduring importance of esotericism in Rome as well as its presence in an author writing in Greek, but also someone living under the circumstances that Cicero tried to prevent.

Plutarch likely read Cicero and potentially Lucretius as well. In any case, he had a deep knowledge of Epicureanism, with access to more sources than we are ever likely to possess, and this knowledge informed his serious engagement with Epicureanism, including in *De audiendis*. There are thus several important continuities between him and Cicero and Lucretius.

Plutarch's writings were an instant classic even in antiquity, and he exerted an enormous influence among later authors both as a philosopher and as a historian. He shaped writers as

diverse as Shakespeare, Montaigne, Rousseau, Lessing, and Nietzsche, to name only a few.[16] The denigration of his bona fides as a philosopher is only a relatively recent phenomenon (beginning a few centuries ago),[17] one which has only started to be corrected in the past few decades. The rehabilitation of Plutarch as a philosopher is still lagging considerably behind that of Cicero. Be that as it may, showing Plutarch as an esoteric philosopher would, as in the case of Cicero and Lucretius, unlock new potentials for the study of the reception of this towering figure in addition to our study of him in his own right.

1.3 Methods and Concepts

With the sources for this study in view, I will explain the methods and concepts I will use to analyze them. First, a treatment of the meaning of esoteric philosophy with reference to two general conceptions of it will clarify how I use the term in relation to ancient and modern usages. Second, I will lay out a new typology of esoteric philosophy that I employ throughout the dissertation, which builds on but is distinct from and more comprehensive than prior typologies. Finally, I will outline some principles of interpretation beyond the application of my new typology.

1.3.1 The Meaning of Esoteric Philosophy

I broadly define esoteric philosophy as the deliberate concealment of philosophical positions. Interpreting ancient philosophy with reference to esotericism was once a common

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[16] See Russell's (1973, 144-163) valuable overview of Plutarch's influence. See also Liebert 2016, ix-xi with scholarship cited for his influence on Montaigne, Rousseau, and others, Benediktson 1987 for Plutarch and Lessing (who uses Plutarch for the epigraph to his *Laocoön*), and Ingenkamp 1988 for Plutarch and Nietzsche.

[17] See Titchener and Zadorojnyi 2023, 7: "Plutarch's texts were not just popular among the educated class – they were essential; their impact was enormous and long-lasting. The downturn happened around the middle of the nineteenth century, when scholars of antiquity stopped seeing Plutarch as a reliable informant, while for the wider reading public his moralism and the whole discursive mentality felt increasingly alien and outdated." Though Plutarch is deeply concerned with morality, "moralism" does not adequately capture the breadth and depth of his philosophy and why it was previously admired.

practice. For example, Cicero's *DND* was the object of esoteric interpretation in antiquity by Augustine (*C. D.* 5.9) and by Enlightenment philosophers such as David Hume, both of whom read *DND* as revealing Cicero's esoteric atheism through his covert agreement with Cotta, one of the main speakers in the dialogue.[18]

Before setting out further my own analysis of esotericism, it is useful to distinguish between two general concepts of the phenomenon. The first, based on the ancient usage of the terms "esoteric" and "exoteric," refers to separate classes of written or spoken discourses. Aristotle was the first we know of to use the adjective ἐξωτερικός ("exoteric" or "exterior") (e.g., *EN* 1102a26-27; *Pol.* 1278b31-32), referring to some distinction among types of his writings. There is much scholarly debate over what the difference is between the treatises we possess and what Aristotle refers to as the exoteric writings.[19] Robert Sharples, at least, takes the difference between the exoteric and other writings to involve a distinction between what he published and what he did not publish.[20] It is beyond the scope of my argument to enter into this debate, but it is clear that for Aristotle "exoteric" refers to a class of writings (such as his lost dialogues) separate from another class. While not settling anything about the nature of Aristotle's writings, later authors including Cicero indicate a difference in content as well as presentation between the exoteric writings and the treatises (*Fin.* 5.12; cf., e.g., Plu. *Alex.* 7.5.9; Gell. 20.5). This shows more about what these later writers thought about secretive philosophical practices than was necessarily the case for Aristotle. The first recorded instances of the adjective ἐσωτερικός

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[18] See Szczekalla 1988, 86-87 on Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. See also Rousseau 1959-1995 [1751], III.46: "… et que dirons-nous de la distinction des deux doctrines si avidement reçuë de tous les Philosophes, et par laquelle ils professoient en secret des sentiments contraires à ceux qu'ils enseignoient publiquement? … Les Philosophes se trouverent si bien de cette méthode, qu'elle répandit rapidement dans la Grece, et de-là dans Rome ; comme on le voit par les ouvrages de Ciceron, qui se moquoit avec ses amis des Dieux immortels, qu'il attestoit avec tant d'emphase sur la Tribune aux harangues." I will explain in detail the interpretative problems of Cicero's relationship to the views expressed in *DND* by his character Cotta below (Chapters 1-3).

[19] Bos (1989, 87-152) provides a detailed survey of the scholarly debate, though I do not endorse his conclusions about the question (see DeFilippo 1991 for a critique thereof).

[20] Sharples 2007, 505.

("esoteric" or "interior"), in Galen (*De plac*. 3.4.12) and then Lucian (*Vit. auct*. 25), also seem to refer to separate discourses.

The ancient terminology of "esoteric" and "exoteric" referring to separate teachings contrasts with a second concept of esotericism according to which concealment occurs on a textual level. In this latter case, esoteric and potentially also exoteric levels are in the same text as opposed to being divided into separate texts or oral discourses. Nicholas Banner explains this concept as follows: "… [esotericism] may refer to a doctrine or doctrines whose form – be it a riddle, an allegory, or another oblique and obscure form of discourse, such as any number of Pythagorean 'secret' doctrines expressed as 'symbols' – is understood as hiding it in plain sight."[21] He also notes that this version of esotericism is much more common in antiquity than separate classes of writing like those of Aristotle. As some of Banner's terms already indicate, there are a wide range of Greek and Latin words used to refer to methods of esotericism in one speech or text, such as riddles, obscurity, ambiguity, hidden or veiled speech, indirect indication (ἔμφασις), and many more.[22] Macrobius, for example, calls the copresence of poetic fictions and philosophic truths in a text a "double teaching" (*gemina doctrina*, *In Somn. Scip*. 1.9.8 ad *A*. 6.640).[23] Thus while the terminology might differ, the type of esotericism Banner explains is grounded in ancient thought. Though focusing more on Banner's type, I will refer to both concepts of esotericism, since Cicero, Lucretius, and Plutarch treat both.

1.3.2 A New Typology of Ancient Esoteric Philosophy

In contrast to prior scholars who have treated esoteric philosophy, whom I will discuss further below (1.3.2.5), I create a fourfold division of major categories or ways of understanding

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[21] Banner 2018, 22.
[22] See Casel's index (1919, 159-166) for a convenient list.
[23] This term may have inspired Enlightenment thinkers like Samuel Formey (2013) to use the term "double doctrine" about ancient esotericism. See also Iambl. *Comm*. *Math*. 76 (cited at Casel 1919, 57-58) on the "two forms of Italian philosophy" (Δύο … τῆς Ἰταλικῆς φιλοσοφίας εἴδη).

esotericism which then have subcategories. Without such distinctions, scholars risk comparing what is actually incomparable. In constructing my typology, I adhere to the principle that there must be some ancient discussion of each type in order to avoid anachronism.

I will outline the four main categories and give examples of the subcategories. The four major categories are cause, motive, content, and method. Cause refers to the philosophical commitments which lead a philosopher to think it is necessary to practice esotericism. Examples of types of cause are various ontological or epistemological commitments a philosopher may hold. Motive is the aim for the sake of which a philosopher practices esotericism. Examples of this are protecting oneself from persecution or pedagogical concerns regarding one's readership. Content is the object of esotericism or that which the philosopher conceals. The main types relating to content are hiding dogmas and, by contrast, concealing the radical character of a more skeptical inquiry. Finally, method is the way or the form in which a philosopher conceals the content. Examples of method are hints, ambiguity, allegory, or putting forward a public exoteric doctrine at odds with the concealed content. The four major categories influence one another. For example, epistemological commitments would favor particular methods of communication (e.g., a writer skeptical about the possibility of direct instruction might favor the dialogue form over the treatise). The conceptual advantage of my typology is that it not only avoids comparing across categories, but also that it takes into account the full variety of ancient esotericism. Indeed, all the major categories and most of the subcategories are present in Cicero, Lucretius, and Plutarch alone.

Before discussing each of these four categories in more detail and providing ancient examples for them, I will expand them into a full conceptual map of esotericism. This way, we will be able to see how each part of esotericism fits into the whole as we proceed. The full conceptual map (typology) is as follows:

I. Cause

1. Ontological esotericism
2. Epistemological esotericism
3. Psychological esotericism

II. Motive

1. Self-defensive esotericism
2. Other-regarding esotericism
3. Philosophic pedagogical esotericism
4. Political pedagogical esotericism
5. Enlightenment esotericism
6. Probative esotericism
7. Control-based esotericism
8. Sectarian esotericism
9. Protreptic esotericism

III. Content

1. Skeptical esotericism
2. Dogmatic esotericism
3. Other propositional content

IV. Method

1. Not writing at all
2. Writing as purely exoteric misdirection
3. Writing to hint at a dogma
4. Writing dialogically or in an equivalent way
5. Allegorical esotericism
6. Ambiguity

7. Symbolic speech

While any typology must remain provisional, mine will at least permit the reader to follow my use of terms throughout the study even as I show the interconnection of such terms. Moreover, this typology provides a framework for future studies of esotericism. Others can add more subcategories to those I identify, which are surely not exhaustive, under the four main categories.

1.3.2.1 Cause

Ontological, epistemological, and psychological esotericism all fall under the heading of "cause."[24] If a philosopher thinks that the character of being, knowledge, or the soul (or some combination of these) entails esoteric writing, then these are necessary causes for esotericism. Proper writing will necessarily be esoteric. To define these three types further, ontological esotericism refers to esoteric writing based on the hidden character of being which leads to concealment in writing; epistemological esotericism refers to esoteric writing which is grounded in what the author takes to be the limits of human knowledge and thus communicative capacities (knowledge and communication are both grounded in *logos*, as shown by its translation as both "reason" and "speech"); psychological esotericism, finally, refers to beliefs about the soul or self as indeterminate and thus entailing concealment from the self in addition to others while one communicates. These three types are also necessarily interrelated: insofar as being only shows itself through how it appears to and is apprehended by the recipient,[25] ontology and epistemology are connected. And the soul is that which knows, so psychology is connected to epistemology and thus also ontology. A key feature across these types of esotericism is that the truth is not able to be spoken directly or is in some sense ineffable. However, this does not mean there is no truth or

[24] These types of esotericism are less intuitive so I spend more time on providing examples for them than for the other categories, where bare citations will for the most part suffice. I will return to many of the passages only briefly cited or discussed at more length below.
[25] Cf. Davis 2023, 208.

that meaningful communication is not possible. Esoteric writing needs to reveal in addition to concealing for it to be esoteric.[26]

As stated, ontological esotericism indicates that the hidden character of reality results in a hidden way of communicating. An example of this is the distinction between "the obscurity of things" (*rerum obscuritas*) and "obscurity in words" (*verborum obscuritas*) that Cicero draws. In a passage from *De finibus* cited above (Section 1.1), Marcus contrasts Heraclitus' deliberate obscurity with a different type "when the obscurity of things, not of words, brings it about that a speech is not understood, of which sort is [the speech] in Plato's *Timaeus*" (2.15).[27] Here Cicero asserts that the obscurity inherent in things makes speech obscure. That is ontological esotericism. Obscurity could be generated only from words, but in Plato's *Timaeus* the obscurity of "things" (presumably just things that are, like ὄντα) generates the obscurity in words.[28]

In *De oratore*, Cicero likewise gives an example about the "obscurity of things": "Who is unaware in how great an obscurity of things [and] in how hidden an art and one which is manifold and subtle those who are called mathematicians are involved?" (1.10).[29] The technical difficulty of some writings, like those on mathematics, results from the hidden character of things.

In the *Academica*,[30] Marcus ties the "obscurity of things" to Socratic knowledge of ignorance and the even more radical suspension of judgment of the skeptical Academy:

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[26] In discussing the types of cause-based esotericism, I privilege what I take to be the interpretations of being, knowledge, and soul by at least some of the philosophers I examine. Different interpretations of these three items would result in very different forms of esotericism. For example, a dogmatic philosopher who took *logos* to be powerful enough to fully articulate being might not of necessity be esoteric, but if his or her esotericism, if present, were related to a dogmatic commitment (like the system's containing dangerous truths or being too difficult for most people) then that would still be a cause. The cause of esotericism is what the writer takes to be true, not any one truth.

[27] *… cum rerum obscuritas, non verborum, facit ut non intellegatur oratio, qualis est in Timaeo Platonis*. I use "Marcus" to indicate the Cicero character in dialogues other than *DND* with Atkins 2013a, 157.

[28] Cicero suggests that the speech of Timaeus in the *Timaeus* exhibits ontological esotericism. This is confirmed by Timaeus' own remarks (which Cicero translated) about the character of his speech in relation to the visible universe's being an image of an original and his own speech's being an image about the universe (29b3-d3).

[29] *Quis ignorat ii qui mathematici vocantur quanta in obscuritate rerum quam recondita in arte et multiplici subtilique versentur?*

[30] Throughout, I refer to the surviving portions of Cicero's final edition of the work as the *Academica* (*Ac*.) and the extant first edition of the second book as the *Lucullus* (*Luc*.). When not citing a particular part of the work, I refer to the project as a whole as the *Academica*. See Reinhardt 2023b, clxvi-clxxii.

> Tum ego, 'Cum Zenone', inquam, 'ut accepimus Arcesilas sibi omne certamen instituit, non pertinacia aut studio vincendi ut quidem mihi videtur, sed earum rerum obscuritate, quae ad confessionem ignorationis adduxerant Socratem et [vel ut] iam ante Socratem Democritum Anaxagoram Empedoclem omnes paene veteres, qui nihil cognosci nihil percipi nihil sciri posse dixerunt, angustos sensus imbecillos animos brevia curricula vitae et, ut Democritus, in profundo veritatem esse demersam, opinionibus et institutis omnia teneri, nihil veritati relinqui, deinceps omnia tenebris circumfusa esse dixerunt. Itaque Arcesilas negabat esse quicquam quod sciri posset, ne illud quidem ipsum quod Socrates sibi reliquisset …'
>
> Then I said, 'When Arcesilas, as we have heard, undertook his whole struggle with Zeno, [he did so] not because of obstinacy or a desire to win, as it seems to me at least, but because of the obscurity of these things which led Socrates and already before Socrates Democritus, Anaxagoras, Empedocles, [and] almost all the ancients to a profession of ignorance, who said that nothing is able to be recognized, nothing comprehended, nothing known, [and that] the senses are narrowly constrained, that minds are weak, [and] that the span of life is short and, like Democritus, that the truth is submerged in the depths, [and] that everything is held by opinions and conventions, [but] nothing is left for truth, and in turn that all things are surrounded by shadows. Thus Arcesilas denied that there is anything that could be known, not even that which Socrates had left himself …' (1.44-45)

In this passage Cicero uses the "obscurity of things" (*rerum obscuritate*) as a cause (ablative of cause) to explain what led to Socrates' (and others') knowledge of ignorance, and Arcesilas' further step of denying even knowledge of ignorance.[31] Regardless of the difference between Socrates and Arcesilas (and Cicero's connection of Socrates back to the pre-Socratics), Cicero ties ontological esotericism to epistemological esotericism. There is an obscurity of things which entails setting limits on knowing.[32] In the *Tusculans* (5.11) and *DND* (1.10-12) Socrates is said to conceal his views and thus practice esotericism, and in the latter dialogue Cicero connects this concealment to skeptical epistemology.

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[31] The end of the passage quoted clearly refers to Socrates' knowledge of ignorance. This is also the interpretation of the text of the MSS that Reinhardt groups under Γ, where there is also "so that he knew that he knew nothing" (*ut nihil scire se sciret*) following the ending of the passage quoted. See ibid., ad loc.

[32] A Greek precedent is a discussion in the Platonic *Seventh Letter* (341b7-e3) which indicates esotericism not for the sake of secrecy but because of the character of understanding. Below we will that Plutarch follows this passage (6.3; 7.2). Even though scholars now lean towards accepting the letter's authenticity, its authenticity is not so relevant here because the ancients (including Cicero, see McConnell 2014, 62-114, 196 n. 5) held it to be by Plato. If it is not genuine, it was written by a Platonist so familiar with Plato's teachings and style that he could pass as Plato. Note also that, according to the *Seventh Letter,* when we try to understand things "the weakness of speeches" (τὸ τῶν λόγων ἀσθενές) makes it so that we blur the qualities of a thing and its being (342e2-343a1). The weakness of speech makes it so we cannot express things perfectly. See further Tigerstedt 1977, 76; Lamberton 1995, 151.

Also in the *Tusculans*, Cicero gives an example of psychological esotericism by presenting the impossibility of the soul's knowing itself directly. M., Cicero's avatar in the dialogue, discusses the *Phaedo* as Plato's book "on the soul" (*de animo*, 1.24-25) as if he accepts that philosophy as the practice of dying and being dead (Pl. *Phd*. 64a6)—or as he puts it "the careful preparation for death" (*commentatio mortis*, 1.75)—indicated a straightforward acceptance of the tenets of orthodox Platonism of the ideas and the immortality of the soul, making the pure knowledge which comes after death and death itself purely good. But after seeming to affirm the goodness of life after death, he says:

> nec vero de hoc quisquam dubitare posset, nisi idem nobis accideret diligenter de animo cogitantibus, quod is saepe usu venit, qui [cum] acriter oculis deficientem solem intuerentur, ut aspectum omnino amitterent; sic mentis acies se ipsa intuens non numquam hebescit, ob eamque causam contemplandi diligentiam amittimus. itaque dubitans circumspectans haesitans, multa adversa reverens tamquam in rate in mari inmenso nostra vehitur oratio.
>
> But nor could anyone be uncertain about this [i.e., the goodness of life after death], if the same thing did not happen to us as we carefully think about the soul which often happens to those who look keenly with their eyes at an eclipsed sun, with the result that they lose their sight altogether; thus the sight of the mind itself looking at itself sometimes grows dull, and for the same reason we lose our care in contemplating. Thus our speech, being uncertain, looking about [with care], [and] hesitating is borne as if on a raft in a boundless sea fearing many unfavorable things. (1.73)

The soul is particularly difficult to know because when the soul tries to look directly at itself it risks blinding itself and thus knowing nothing at all.[33] The fact that we do not know our own soul perfectly throws into question the character of the immortality of the soul. Because of the need for the soul to look at itself indirectly, Platonism as a dogma becomes questionable and M.'s "speech" (*oratio*) takes on a different character.[34] The indeterminacy of the soul makes it so that speech about the soul proceeds in an indirect and cautious way. The *Tusculans* (like the *Phaedo*) in being a speech about soul proceeds in an indirect way (see again 5.11). This is psychological

[33] Cicero models this passage on Socrates' discussion of his "second sailing" (τὸν δεύτερον πλοῦν, 99c9-d1) in the *Phaedo*, where looking at the truth directly risks blinding the soul (99e2).
[34] Consider also how the beginning of *DND* links knowledge of the soul with looking at the gods (1.1).

esotericism. Not knowing the soul which is what knows being is part of the concealment of being.[35]

These passages show examples of ontological, epistemological, and psychological esotericism in ancient authors, confirming that these are reasonable categories to work with under the heading of "cause."

1.3.2.2 Motive

Cause partly determines motive, since philosophical commitments determine what a philosopher thinks are possible and desirable actions. So a philosopher will only have motives for aims that he or she takes causes to allow. However, motives also depend on the particular political and historical circumstances under which a philosopher is operating. Two philosophers with the exact same philosophical commitments may have very different motives for esotericism depending on the circumstances.

Let's start with four types of motive: avoiding harm to self, avoiding harm to others, pedagogical reasons, and the desire to change politics by disseminating knowledge.[36] Let us call the first three "self-defensive esotericism," "other-regarding esotericism," and "pedagogical esotericism" respectively. The first protects the philosopher from persecution from the city[37] and the second tries to keep philosophy's dangerous truths from destabilizing the traditional religion on which the city is based through "noble lies."[38] I will take up the third type below.

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[35] Consider this also in the context of Plato's *Alcibiades I*. Socrates connects the question of the self itself with the Delphic injunction "know yourself" (γνῶθι σαυτόν, 124a8b1) (128e10-129b3). Socrates reveals "the self itself" (ἀυτὸ ταὐτό) as an object of inquiry, as a question (129b1). By finding the self itself, perhaps he and Alcibiades could find "whatever we ourselves are" (τί ποτ᾽ ἐσμὲν αὐτοί, 129b2). Thus without knowing the self itself it is impossible to know what we are or to have self-knowledge. Since this is a question it reveals our ignorance and thus the indeterminacy of the self to the self. Cf. Heidegger, *Being and Time* (2006 [1927], 15): "Das Dasein ist zwar ontisch nicht nur nahe oder gar das nächste – wir *sind* es sogar je selbst. Trotzdem oder gerade deshalb ist es ontologisch das Fernste." Emphasis is original.

[36] See below (1.3.2.5) for how these four are drawn from Melzer 2014.

[37] Cic. *DND* 1.63, 85-86, 122-124; 3.3; Plu. *Nic*. 23.3-5; *Non posse* 1102a-d.

[38] Cic. *DND* 1.61.

As for the fourth, it would be irrelevant (although still interesting) if it were peculiar to modern philosophy, as some scholars hold.[39] But there are likely some ancient equivalents. One might be Plato's portrayal of Protagoras as a thinker who practices esotericism while aiming at a democratic enlightenment (cf. *Prt*. 318a6-9; 318d5-319a7; 323c5-324d).[40] As for a general belief that philosophy could control politics, we might also think of Aristotle's report of Hippodamus' attempt to unite science and politics (*Pol*. 1267b23-1268a15), the fragment of Empedocles relating to controlling the weather (DK 31 B 111), and Xenophon's Socrates' investigation of whether knowledge of cause also allows for mastery of nature (*Mem*. 1.1.15). As for authors treated in this dissertation, Lucretius, by disseminating Epicureanism as widely as possible while also partially concealing it through his use of traditional religion, might be thought to have some sort of enlightenment project linked to esotericism.[41] I will address this possibility further below (5.1; 5.2.3). So, while noting obvious differences with modern esoteric philosophers given the greater technological capacities and ambitions of modernity for conquering nature, I term the ancient counterpart "enlightenment esotericism." Esotericism is just a stopgap on the way to enlightenment.

There are, however, more motives than these four. I also add "probative esotericism" which uses concealment in order to test whether students are ready or capable of moving to a higher level of teaching.[42] Furthermore, in addition to pedagogy aimed at genuine philosophic instruction there can be another type of pedagogy which is more aimed at politics than philosophy. For instance, Socrates may tutor figures like Alcibiades in the hopes of ameliorating

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[39] See ibid., 92.
[40] See Farrington 1939, 119: "The kernel of [Protagoras'] thought is his realization of the interpenetration of science and politics, and he chose to make himself a vehicle of enlightenment." See further Farrar 1988, 77 on Protagoras and democracy.
[41] Adler (2003, 53-76) puts forward this view quite forcefully. Minyard (1985, 43-46) also treats Lucretian enlightenment and its political ramifications, but not concealment as part of that project.
[42] See Gell. 20.5; SE *P*. 1.234; Porph. *VP* 13. See also Cic. *DND* 3.77 which also overlaps with other-regarding esotericism. Casel (1919, 52-55) collects further passages pertaining to probative esotericism (my term, not his).

politics,[43] just as Plato teaches Dion and Aristotle tutors Alexander. It may not always be possible to distinguish a philosophical from a political motive, but I term "philosophical pedagogical esotericism" as esotericism which is for the benefit of potential philosophers[44] as distinct from "political pedagogical esotericism" which might involve concealment but teaches for the sake of shaping potential public men or gentlemen.[45] This is political without aiming at the general diffusion of philosophy like enlightenment esotericism.[46] There is also the motive of esotericism for the sake of retaining political power.[47] I term this "control-based esotericism." A related form is the more arbitrary desire to create an in-group through esotericism without a definite motive other than (potentially) the creation of group cohesion or prestige.[48] I call this "sectarian esotericism." Finally, "protreptic esotericism" is the use of obscurity or other forms of esotericism to attract students who want to understand the obscure writing better. Lucretius ascribes this to Heraclitus' obscurity (1.638-644) and, as I argue below, the pleasant features in Lucretius' own text serve to attract readers even though they are not strictly true. Plutarch makes a very similar point in *De audiendis* about Homer as an esoteric poet (see also *De gar*. 510e). We might also think of the story of the Arcadian woman Axiothea who after reading some of the *Republic* went to the Academy disguised as a man and the Corinthian farmer who read Plato's *Gorgias* and then went straight to join Plato at the Academy as well (Themist. *Or*. 23.295c-d). Presumably, the texts did not spell everything out to their satisfaction but sparked the desire to learn more for themselves.

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[43] Indeed, in Plato's *Gorgias* (521d6-8) and *Apology of Socrates* (30e1-31c3) Socrates claims to practice a "political art" (τῇ … πολιτικῇ τέχνῃ) or benefit politics in some way, suggesting that his philosophy somehow moderates politics.
[44] Cic. *DND* 1.10; *Tusc*. 5.11; Lucr. 1.329-417. Pedagogical esotericism plays a large role in Plutarch's *De audiendis* as well.
[45] Xenophon mentions Socrates' keeping Glaucon from entering politics at Plato's request (*Mem*. 3.6.1-2). Socrates attempts to do something similar with Alcibiades in *Alcibiades I*.
[46] Consider also Cicero's claim that his philosophical writings replaced his speeches in the public assembly (*Div*. 2.7).
[47] An excellent example is Cic. *De orat*. 1.186. Consider also Hdt. 1.99-100.
[48] See, e.g., Pl. *Tht*. 152c8-10; 179d4-180e5; *Sph*. 243a6-b1; Cic. *DND* 1.74; DL 8.15. This apparently arbitrary type of secrecy seems analogous to that of mystery cults or other secret societies.

To sum up, we have the following motives of esotericism, reproduced from above:

1. Self-defensive esotericism
2. Other-regarding esotericism
3. Philosophic pedagogical esotericism
4. Political pedagogical esotericism
5. Enlightenment esotericism
6. Probative esotericism
7. Control-based esotericism
8. Sectarian esotericism
9. Protreptic esotericism

Several of these (at least 1-4, 6, 9 and possibly 8)[49] are compatible with the cause-based forms of esotericism I already described, and yet these motives can exist based on other causal grounds.

1.3.2.3 Content

If cause is the most fundamental reason for practicing esotericism and motive is the aim or end for the sake of which one practices esotericism, content is the object of esotericism or that which the philosopher conceals. Cause directly determines content because philosophical commitments determine the philosophical views which would be concealed. However, cause and content are not identical because cause refers to what the philosopher takes to be necessary reasons for concealment while content is the object of the concealment which results from the reasons.

[49] The eighth is questionably compatible because, if the goal were to induce the desire to seek the truth, the creation of a sort of "club" would seem arbitrary and perhaps block access to inquiry to many who are outside of the club. But perhaps forming a club could be a means to ensuring that such questioning remains undisturbed, and thus a means for the motive of self-defensive esotericism.

There is a clear division between inducing a "turnaround" (to use Platonic language, περιάγειν, Pl. *R*. 515c7; περιαγωγή, 518d4, e4; 521c6) or questioning and concealing a dogma that could be stated propositionally. The turnaround or questioning can be said to be concealed because that activity could be seen as just as subversive as a dogma which is opposed to that of the city, because it also calls into question the dogma of the city (see Pl. *Plt*. 299b2-c6). I term the first "skeptical esotericism"[50] and the latter "dogmatic esotericism."

It is easy to understand what dogmatic esotericism looks like. One hides a systematic teaching. Skeptical esotericism is however less intuitive. What exactly is being hidden, if hiding is an essential part of esotericism? It is the radical character of the investigation itself. For example, philosophers like Plato often use traditional religious language to describe philosophy (see, e.g., *Tht*. 156a3; *Phd*. 69c3-9; *Phdr*. 249c7; *Prt*. 316d6). This may make Plato's investigation seem less at odds with traditional religion than it is without his necessarily concealing a dogmatic theology. For Cicero, skeptical esotericism is easier to discern in his Platonic dialogues of the 50s where he may put forward philosophic positions in a more dogmatic form than he actually holds to be the case, thus concealing the radical character of his investigation.[51] And yet even in the Academic dialogues of the 40s there are moments where Cicero may present a problem as settled which he really wants the reader to think carefully about. For instance, the *Tusculans* could seem like a dialogue presenting a dogmatic, Stoicizing account of the soul when in fact M. presents these doctrines only in order to refute the propositions he is arguing against while not revealing his own opinion (see 1.8; 5.11). The question about the soul

[50] I use the word "skeptical" with reference to the verb σκέπτομαι ("examine") to indicate the process of inquiry as defined by seeking and questioning. This is distinct from the radical doubt of "skepticism," though the two are of course related.

[51] Consider, for example, the fact that the account of natural law in *De legibus* Book 1 is predicated on Atticus the Epicurean's acceptance of divine providence (21). Whether the gods care for humans, as *DND* reveals, is actually a question which requires careful consideration. *De legibus* hints that this is indeed a question which needs to be considered, but this is not explicitly carried out in the dialogue.

suddenly seems much more open-ended. I will treat this type of esotericism as manifest in *DND* below (see Section 2.3).

A third type of content is a propositional statement not necessarily related to dogmatic philosophy (i.e., any normal secret, or concealed opinion).[52] For example, while Caesar is still alive Cicero intimates but does not say in his published writings that "Caesar is a tyrant." Even if such statements are not about philosophy, this type of concealment is still esoteric philosophy when in a philosophic context. Furthermore, such statements may also be grounded in philosophy (e.g., Plato's analysis of tyranny in *Republic* 8-9 as a theoretical framework for criticizing Caesar's rule). This type of concealment is evident in Plutarch as well.

1.3.2.4 Method

The method, broadly defined as the way of writing (or choosing not to write like Socrates and, as tradition has it, Pythagoras),[53] is determined by the interplay of the types within the prior three larger categories. In terms of content, someone practicing dogmatic esotericism could simply hint at a propositional statement or philosophical system, if he or she wanted to reveal it,[54] or just write in such a way that would throw readers completely off from the dogma,[55] which might instead be revealed only orally. For skeptical esotericism, by contrast, the indirect form of expression will be intrinsically related to the content. For instance, the dialogue form is apt for creating a dialogue with the reader and thus inducing the experience of the turnaround, the sudden realization in the soul of the reader.

We might further distinguish between a method based only on cause-based esotericism and one that also more heavily factors in pedagogy. Two writers who both have the same views

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[52] See Lessing's description of "secrets" (*Heimlichkeiten*) vs. "the secret" (*das Geheimnis*), discussed in Appendix A.
[53] See also Pl. *Ep*. 2.314a-c (quoted at Casel 1919, 37); Cic. *Ac*. 1.2.
[54] Cic. *DND* 1.85-86.
[55] Cic. *DND* 1.115; Plu. *Non posse* 1102a-d.

about the hiddenness of being, knowledge, and soul could put different emphasis on philosophic pedagogy. One could write in a necessarily obscure fashion that would indeed take into account the hiddenness of things, while another could also do that but while making more concessions to a beginning student. Many of Plato's dialogues could be read with enjoyment by anyone, but, as Cicero says about Aristotle's *Topics* (*Top*. 3), the obscurity of Aristotle's treatises seems to repel beginners.

Although there will be a variety of historically contingent factors which will affect how the writer navigates self-defense, protection of others, and other motives, these seem less tied to the method as cause and content, unless the historical factors are the only reason for esotericism (like atheism's being unacceptable). Otherwise, there may be comparable methods of paying lip service to orthodoxy while at the same time conveying the desired content unrelated to contingencies.

There is an important historical element to the method of esoteric writing, though, if philosophers consider the current challenges to philosophical thought based on prior historical developments. For instance, Plato approaches philosophic questions more or less directly while Cicero has to turn to the history of philosophy because of the dogmatic accrescences that came after Plato. He needs to use the dogmatic schools as a starting point from which to direct readers to the philosophic questions. Thus his dialogues feature much more formal doxography than Plato's (though doxography of the pre-Socratics is not absent in Plato), which is a methodological choice.

There are two particular methods of esotericism that seem like tools that could cut across esoteric writing based on the previous three categories of content. One is writing allegorically. Depending on how this is done, it could be used to communicate the content of dogmatic

esotericism[56] or to direct the reader's mind towards a thing for which there is not a proper word[57] which would fit better with skeptical esotericism (the teaching is not directly sayable). The next method is the use of deliberate ambiguity especially through deliberate contradiction.[58] Like allegory, this method could direct readers towards a dogma or simply induce further questioning.

Also related to allegory and ambiguity is symbolic speech, which makes use of nonliteral language to indicate something indirectly. For example, one might speak about a natural element with a god's name, like if one said "Hephaestus" to mean "fire."[59] This is a type of ambiguity, but not one generated through contradiction, and differs from allegory in that allegory is, per Cicero, a "continuous" metaphor (*in continuate verborum*, *De orat*. 3.166-167; see also *Orat*. 94) whereas symbolic speech is restricted to single words. Etymology is often used to create a bridge between a word's common and less evident meanings.[60]

There are innumerable methods of esotericism, but the ones I discussed and listed already in my general typology seem to be the most salient:

1. Not writing at all
2. Writing as purely exoteric misdirection
3. Writing to hint at a dogma
4. Writing dialogically or in an equivalent way
5. Allegorical esotericism
6. Ambiguity
7. Symbolic speech

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[56] Pl. *Tht*. 152d5-9; Cic. *DND* 2.63-72.
[57] Cic. *De orat*. 3.155, 166-167.
[58] E.g., Cic. *De orat*. 1.140; 2.110-111, 253; Plu. *De audiendis* 20c-21d.
[59] See Cic. *DND* 2.60; Lucr. 2.655-660; 3.133-135; Plu. *De audiendis* 23a-b; cf. *De Is. et Os*. 370e-f.
[60] Cic. *DND* 2.64-69.

Some of these may seem to recapitulate the difference in content between skeptical and dogmatic esotericism, but different methods of inducing questioning or hinting at dogmas may be employed. Thus it seems prudent to retain a distinction between content and method.

1.3.2.5 Prior Typologies

The prior typologies of esoteric philosophy which have contributed most to my own typology are those of Seth Benardete, Moshe Halbertal, and Arthur Melzer. Benardete's typology informs my treatment of cause. He distinguishes between "metaphysical esotericism" and "political esotericism." Metaphysical esotericism "says that it is in the nature of things that things are hidden" and "sets out to disclose things in their hiddenness and show the reality of what appears." As becomes clear over the course of his essay, interrelated ontological, epistemological, and psychological factors underly metaphysical esotericism. These correspond to my three categories of cause.

For Benardete, political esotericism says that hiddenness is not fundamental, but "that it is in the nature of the city as now constituted that this is so." It thus "proposes enlightenment, the lighting up of things until nothing and no one are in the dark." This corresponds to what I term "enlightenment esotericism" under motive. Whereas for metaphysical esotericism there is a permanent hiddenness which prevents enlightenment—meaning that the political reasons for esotericism, like persecution, will also be permanent due to opinion, not knowledge, controlling political life—, for political or enlightenment esotericism these political concerns would vanish along with the need for esotericism once enlightenment is achieved. This is why Benardete indicates a connection between his two types: "The first kind necessarily includes the second, the second necessarily denies the first."[61]

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[61] Benardete 2000d, 409. Cf. Casel 1919, 46-47: *Colitur igitur silentium, at non mysticum, sed, ut ita dicam, politicum; neque enim reverentia numinis* (θεῶν σέβας), *sed utilitas rei publicae reticentiam flagitat* ("Silence, then, is cultivated,

Halbertal makes a tripartite division of esotericism into the "internal," the "instrumental," and the "essential." The internal corresponds to what I call the psychological. The self can only exist insofar as it is concealed and thus separated from everything else.[62] Here, Halbertal focuses on the importance of shame as an example of the concealment of the self.[63] Unlike Benardete, he does not connect the concealment of the soul or the self to ontology and epistemology, which are rather the province of "essential" esotericism for Halbertal.[64] This type of esotericism can be summed up by saying that it "claims that truth is ineffable." Now, if truth is ineffable it raises the problem of esotericism "vanishing" truth altogether.[65] Halbertal raises this perplexity or "paradox" with great acuity, but I believe that one could counter with Lessing's assertion that communication is still possible even if one cannot transmit a concept with perfect clarity,[66] or Benardete's point that the necessary distortion of communication while creating improper understanding is the necessary starting point for proper understanding.[67] In any case, Halbertal recognizes this extremely important non-political aspect of esotericism while not connecting it to psychology—which may be the reason for his not connecting "essential" esotericism with the "instrumental," whereas Benardete connects the metaphysical and the political.

The "instrumental" type for Halbertal centers around avoiding harm to oneself or society.[68] This encompasses some of my categories of motive, and seems to be akin to Benardete's political esotericism on political esotericism's own premise that there is no inescapable metaphysical reason for esotericism. Halbertal correctly sees the political motives for

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but not a mystical one, but, so to speak, a political one; for reverence of divinity (θεῶν σέβας) does not demand keeping silent, but the utility of the republic").

[62] Halbertal 2007, 142.

[63] This parallels what Nietzsche says about esotericism, though Halbertal does not mention him in this context (see Appendix A).

[64] Ibid., 155.

[65] Ibid., 157.

[66] See Appendix A.

[67] Benardete 2000d, 413. He discusses the problem of ineffability at ibid., 409.

[68] Halbertal 2007, 149.

esotericism (if apart from their metaphysical grounding) but also leaves out several motives for esotericism, such as pedagogy, which I include. Note that Halbertal states that his typology of esotericism is universal rather than merely historical: it is revealed through the historical period he studies (Jewish medieval philosophy) without being limited to it.[69]

Halbertal thus recognizes and elucidates key facets of esotericism without showing their interconnection. In turning to Melzer's typology, we see that, while mentioning many of the aspects of esotericism I have discussed, he focuses on what I call "motive." He does, however, include more types of motive than Halbertal. Melzer distinguishes "four primary kinds of philosophical esotericism." He calls esotericism to protect oneself "*defensive*" esotericism and protecting others "*protective*" esotericism. These avoid an "evil" of harm to either the philosopher or others, while the two other forms aim at a "good." These are "*political* and *pedagogical* esotericism."[70] The former aims to change political life while the latter aims at educating. I would argue that all four of these are forms of motive. They explain the particular aim for writing esoterically rather than being based in some belief about nature or being, as is, by contrast, the case for Benardete's metaphysical esotericism or Halbertal's essential esotericism. Melzer's four forms of motive correspond to the first four types of esotericism I listed under the category of motive above.

In giving his typology Melzer does, however, distinguish between "*motive*" and "*form*" (what I call "method").[71] Melzer, furthermore, does briefly discuss esotericism with reference to nature or being within his treatment of pedagogical esotericism:

> [The skeptic Socrates] experiences the whole as neither perfectly transparent nor perfectly opaque, but elusive and alluring. And this experience derives not simply from the limitations of human reason but from the character of the world: hiddenness is a property of being itself. Nature is esoteric. Now, if this is the case, then the puzzle-quality

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[69] Ibid., 155.
[70] Melzer 2014, 4. Emphasis is original.
[71] Ibid. Emphasis is original.

> of an esoteric text would not be artificial and obstructive of philosophy but rather natural and necessary, being an accurate imitation of reality.[72]

Melzer thus affirms that epistemological esotericism is indeed connected to ontological esotericism. He agrees with Benardete that esoteric texts are esoteric because they imitate an esoteric world.[73] Esoteric writing is both necessary insofar as it imitates necessary features of the world and a deliberate choice by the writer who recognizes such features. Melzer treats this reason for esotericism in the space of a few pages, and thus leaves much room to build on his brief but insightful exposition of it. Melzer, then, focuses on what at first might seem like purely instrumental reasons for esotericism, but also acknowledges that "form" differs from motive and that there are causes in nature which, when recognized, would necessitate esoteric writing.

1.3.2.6 Conclusion

Drawing on prior scholarship, in this section I have offered a new paradigm for understanding ancient esoteric philosophy. I use the four overarching categories of cause, motive, content, and method to provide a more comprehensive account of the different ways ancient authors discussed and practiced esotericism. In the following sections of my dissertation, these categories and their subcategories will allow us to track which types of esotericism are more prominent in the authors in question. In this way, we will see ancient esoteric philosophy in all its intricacy while still maintaining stable definitions to describe instances of esotericism across different authors. Future research into esotericism can employ my conceptual framework to investigate authors and eras outside the scope of my dissertation.

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[72] Ibid., 234.

[73] See further ibid., 233: "More generally, if the world is composed of appearance and reality, of a surface and a depth, then a book that consciously imitates that structure might best prepare one for comprehending the world." Melzer cites Benardete on metaphysical esotericism in support of his interpretation of Leo Strauss' following Martin Heidegger with reference to the hiddenness of being (ibid., 399 n. 55). See further Appendix A for Heidegger and Strauss in relation to esotericism.

1.3.3 My Method

In approaching the texts in this dissertation, I use explicit statements by the authors in question about esotericism to draw out formal characteristics of their descriptions of esotericism based on the typology just described. Seeing how they understand esotericism is the first step in then attempting to read them as esoteric writers in their own right. Their descriptions of esotericism function as a metacommentary on their own ways of writing.

Naturally, in interpreting these texts I have to deal with many topics that are not immediately related to esoteric philosophy. In other areas, too, I aim to use the authors' own terminology and ways of thinking as the starting point of investigation, rather than anachronistically importing concepts and theories invented much later than antiquity (as would, e.g., an existentialist reading of Catullus). This is an aspiration, and there are likely many ways in which I overlook how my interpretation might be limited by my particular situation. But beginning with a later theory as the starting point rather than the text itself seems to guarantee that the approach will be arbitrary and that the text will not be understood properly.

1.4 The State of the Question

Here I will review scholarship dedicated to Greco-Roman esoteric philosophy, scholarship on esoteric philosophy generally speaking, and finally scholarship that, while not treating it directly, contributes to our understanding of ancient esoteric philosophy. I will treat the literature on Cicero, Lucretius, and Plutarch in particular in the chapters on them.

This dissertation is the first full-length study of esoteric philosophy in Rome. Though there is one possible exception, written in Latin over one hundred years ago by the German theologian Odo Casel,[74] my dissertation also has a claim to be the first full-length study of

[74] Casel 1919.

esoteric philosophy in Greco-Roman antiquity tout court. Casel's dissertation, *De philosophorum Graecorum silentio mystico*, treats Greek philosophy exclusively, while I treat authors writing in both Latin and Greek (if in the context of Roman philosophy). While providing invaluable testimony for esoteric philosophy, Casel's study consists mostly of a collection of pertinent passages, though his interspersed interpretations are very judicious and valuable. Thus, because of the nature of his project, he does not provide the sort of in-depth interpretations of individual texts alongside his proof for Greek philosophers' awareness and practice of esotericism. Such extended interpretations, however, are necessary in order to show more fully the contours of ancient esoteric philosophy. In contrast to Casel's dissertation, I focus on Roman rather than Greek philosophy (while still including one author writing in Greek) and pair an analysis of explicit statements showing awareness of esotericism with three in-depth case studies.

Yet Casel's work is foundational. He shows well how the secrecy of the Eleusinian and Orphic mysteries influenced Pythagorean secrecy around their philosophical doctrines, and then how later philosophers took over the vocabulary, if not the mysticism, of mystery cults in order to practice philosophic esotericism.[75] His statements about Plato's esotericism are particularly instructive in that he asserts that Plato was the first to separate completely philosophic secrecy from traditional religion, even if much of the vocabulary remained the same. He writes:

> Although after Pythagoras all philosophers up to *Plato* neglected mystical matters, this supreme man did not hesitate to adapt several elements of mystical religion to his teaching, a matter in which he followed especially the Orphics or rather the Pythagoreans. But the mystical matters and terms of which Plato makes use already take on a new meaning. For those who come into possession of true wisdom are called 'priests of the mysteries' and 'pure.' But those who approach the source of wisdom must not first be purified with superstitious rites and sacrifices. Rather, certain rules ought to be kept by those desirous of the truth. For, also, all are not suited to embrace it [i.e., knowledge]. And for this reason those who on account of the dullness of their mind are incapable of obtaining the truth are repelled from the threshold of philosophy.[76]

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[75] Ibid., 28-35.

[76] Ibid., 35-36: *Cum post Pythagoram omnes philosophi usque ad* Platonem *rem mysticam neglegerent, summus hic vir elementa nonnulla religionis mysticae ad doctrinam suam accomodare non dubitavit, qua in re Orphicos imprimis vel potius Pythagoreos sequebatur. Sed res et voces mysticae, quas Plato usurpat, novam iam significationem induunt.*

Casel draws out the key difference between Plato's esotericism and that of the Orphics and Pythagoreans at the end of his treatment of Plato:

> Therefore, Plato approved of a certain type of silence. But, whereas the Orphics' practice of being silent did not depart from the law of the mysteries and Pythagorean caution remained linked by tight bonds to mystical silence, it is clear that silence in Plato has now been entirely separated from its mystical basis, that is, Plato's silence is now absolutely *philosophic* and it does not retain any connection with the superstitions of worship.[77]

Casel is also attentive to esoteric speech, which does reveal the truth, as opposed to simply keeping silence before outsiders: "Therefore, Plato not only enjoins silence, but also uses covered speech to hide higher and divine things from the profane."[78] With the example of his treatment of Plato, we see that Casel is indeed describing esotericism also on the level of the text, which is my primary focus. Though he usually uses words other than "exoteric" and "esoteric"—which are however not absent[79]—he is describing the same concept. And it is important that for Casel Plato's esotericism is properly philosophic. Plato does apply esotericism to theological questions, but Plato's understanding of the divine has completely changed from that of the mystery cults which served as a model for the practices and language of secrecy. Casel suggests that Plato's motive for practicing esotericism was to keep those not suited for the truth away from it.

In stretching from the Eleusinian mysteries to Neoplatonic esotericism, Casel's study is indeed the most important precedent for the study of ancient esotericism. Influenced by Casel, Banner,[80] whose definition of textual esotericism I adduced above (1.3.1), also provides a

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'Mystae' enim et 'puri' vocantur, qui verae sapientiae compotes fiunt. At ritibus superstitiosis et sacrificiis prius lustrandi non sunt, qui scientiae fontem adeunt; sed certae leges a veri cupidis serventur oportet. Neque enim omnes idonei sunt, qui illam amplectantur; ideoque a limine philosophiae arcentur, qui ob mentis hebetudinem veri incapaces sunt. Emphasis is original. Cf. the claim of Cicero's Scipio that Plato combined the way of Socrates (political philosophy and charming speech) with the way of Pythagoras (obscurity and the study of nature) (*Rep*. 1.16).

[77] Ibid., 39-40: *Plato igitur speciem quandam silentii commendavit. At cum Orphicorum silendi disciplina mysteriorum legem non excesserit et Pythagorica reticentia cum mystico silentio artis vinculis coniuncta manserit, apud Platonem silentium iam plane a fundamento mystico separatum esse apparet, id est: silentium Platonis iam prorsus est* philosophicum *neque ullam cum superstitionibus cultus societatem retinet*. Emphasis is original.

[78] Ibid., 37: *Plato igitur non solum silentium imperat, sed etiam sermone tecto utitur, ut res sublimiores et divinas profanis occultet.*

[79] See, e.g., ibid., 34.

[80] See the use of Casel's book title as the title of Chapter 1 (Banner 2018, 19). Banner states his overlap and disagreement with Casel at ibid., 241.

valuable survey of philosophic "silence" from the pre-Socratics on, focusing mostly on Plato, Middle Platonism, and Platonism in late antiquity.[81] This is in the service of his interpretation of Plotinus' "philosophic silence" or esotericism (a term Banner also often uses). So, Banner also provides a significant, if somewhat brief, general treatment of esoteric philosophy before turning to his main project of interpreting the esotericism of one author. Also in the orbit of studies of Platonism, Robert Lamberton provides a short treatment of esotericism from Plato to the Neoplatonists (again only in Greek authors).[82] While two of the three authors of my study (Cicero and Plutarch) are deeply indebted to Plato, my treatment differs from those of Banner and Lamberton not only through in-depth interpretation of multiple authors and inclusion of Latin authors, but also in that my focus is not on the Neoplatonists, whose esotericism receives by far more attention in scholarly literature than that of other periods of Platonism[83] (except, perhaps, Plato himself),[84] or that of other schools.

To other general treatments dedicated to the ancient world we must add the Irish Enlightenment philosopher John Toland's "Clidophorus," a 39-page section of his *Tetradymus*.[85] "Clidophorus" includes discussions of esotericism in ancient Egyptian religion, Zoroastrianism,

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[81] Ibid., 47-83. He includes a brief two-page treatment of Plutarch, to which I will return below (6.3).
[82] Lamberton 1995.
[83] See, e.g., Coulter 1976; Poster 1997, 220. See also, e.g., Porph. *VP* 13, 18-20; Sallust. 3.4; Iul. *Or*. 7.3-4, 10-11.
[84] Studies of Plato's esotericism may be divided into those focusing on his alleged oral esoteric teaching and those focusing on esotericism on the level of the text. The most prominent relatively recent proponents of Plato's oral esotericism are the members of the so-called "Tübingen school" (e.g., Krämer 1959; Gaiser 1968; Reale 1998, 117-119). Their great predecessor is Tennemann (1792-1795). For critiques of those focusing on the oral esoteric teaching see Tigerstedt 1977, 63-91 and Gonzalez 1995, 7-8. Bröcker (1964, 9) provides a concise criticism even granting that the reports of Plato's oral teachings were accurate: "… man sollte sich doch davor hüten, ein Gedanken-Experiment des alten Plato für das Fundament seiner ganzen Philosophie zu halten." Those focusing on Plato's esotericism on the level of the text belong primarily to the Straussian school of interpretation (those influenced by Strauss, for Plato especially Strauss 1964). See, e.g., Lampert (2010; 2021), who treats esotericism in Plato more explicitly than most Straussian interpreters, something he ascribes to his ultimate adherence to Nietzsche (2010, 15-16; 2021, 5, 221-226) above Strauss, which is admittedly not true for most Straussians. The interpretation of Plato's esotericism on the level of the text has an important forerunner in Schleiermacher (who rejects the oral esoteric theory for Plato). He says (2016 [1804], 32), "Und so wäre dieses die einzige Bedeutung, in welcher man hier von einem Esoterischen und Exoterischen reden könnte, so nämlich, daß dieses nur eine Beschaffenheit des Lesers anzeigte, je nachdem er sich zu einem wahren Hörer des Inneren erhebt oder nicht …" I return to Schleiermacher in Appendix A. See further Miller 2004, 132 n. 60, 137 n. 11 on the issue of oral vs. written esotericism in Plato.
[85] Toland 1720.

and the New Testament, so it cannot be said to treat Greece and Rome exclusively. But it contains many useful passages and is remarkable for its claim that esotericism and exotericism characterized all of ancient philosophy.

These works are the most notable prior treatments of Greco-Roman esoteric philosophy that aim at some level of generality. But there are other works which treat esoteric philosophy generally without being restricted to antiquity. The most comprehensive such general work is Melzer's *Philosophy Between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing*,[86] where Melzer develops his typology discussed above (1.3.2.5). Building on Leo Strauss' influential research on esotericism,[87] Melzer's book ranges from ancient times to the present day and provides extensive testimonial evidence from Europe and the Middle East in antiquity, the Middle Ages, and modernity (broadly speaking in the work of philosophers in traditions influenced by Greece and Rome) to prove the existence of the phenomenon in each epoch.[88] Melzer's book is particularly useful for those having trouble overcoming initial skepticism about esoteric philosophy, especially his discussion of philosophers who admit to writing esoterically themselves (e.g., Diderot and Rousseau).[89] The online appendix to the work which collects even more testimonia is also indispensable.[90]

Melzer's book presents the case for esotericism across a span of almost 2,500 years. He does not neglect antiquity by any means, and he acknowledges that what he calls "classical esotericism" is actually esotericism in its "fullest" sense.[91] Yet, because of the scope of his work he necessarily spends much time analyzing medieval and modern philosophy (as well as drawing

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[86] Melzer 2014. For general articles and chapters on esotericism see Bagley 1992, Rosen 1999, and Crosson 2005. Bagley treats the ancient world briefly while about half of Rosen's and Crosson's pieces are devoted to antiquity.
[87] For his most general statements on esotericism see Strauss 1952; Strauss 1959c; Strauss 1986 [1939]. Lampert (2009) surveys Strauss' discovery of esotericism. See Appendix A for my discussion of Strauss.
[88] Melzer 2014, 11-52.
[89] Ibid., 15-16.
[90] https://press.uchicago.edu/sites/melzer/index.html
[91] Melzer 2014, 91. For him "classical esotericism" includes ancient and medieval esotericism. Melzer (ibid., 18) also speaks of "the central importance of the classics in the history of esotericism," here focusing on the ancients.

comparisons from Semitic religious traditions) alongside that of Greco-Roman antiquity. He also diagnoses the historical-philosophic conditions of late modernity which have led to contemporary forgetfulness and denial of esotericism. Because of this range, he does not reach the extent of analysis either for antiquity or for individual authors which my dissertation aims to provide. Moreover, Melzer himself notes, "It is also possible, of course, to follow an intermediate course between these two approaches [i.e., his own and that of studies of individual authors] and focus on the history of esotericism within a limited historical period." He then lists exceptional examples of this approach for medieval Jewish philosophy, the Late Renaissance, and Early Modern Europe, but none for antiquity.[92] Melzer thus acknowledges the importance of a properly executed study of esotericism in Greco-Roman antiquity, which I hope to provide.

Finally, there are some exceptional works within the field of Classics which do not use the term esotericism but contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon in question in a general way. I divide these between works which elucidate the historical conditions leading to persecution of and hostility to philosophers, but which stop short of considering how philosophers might evade such persecution and mitigate such hostility, and works which address indirect rhetorical strategies. In the former category falls research by scholars such as Eudore Derenne, E. R. Dodds, and Richard Janko who have shown the limits imposed on free thought in Athens by impiety charges against philosophers, stemming from impiety laws such as that of Diopeithes (late 430s BCE).[93] Although these scholars show that Athens of the 5th and 4th centuries BCE was neither "enlightened" nor committed to the free exchange of ideas and rather persecuted freethinkers, they do not take the additional step of considering how philosophers might have reacted to such persecution by veiling their thought. Moreover, they focus exclusively on persecution of philosophers in Athens. David Sedley's treatment of Epicurus' way of writing,

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[92] Ibid., 369 n. 5.
[93] Derenne 1930; Dodds 1951, 189; Janko 2006; Janko 2020. See also Clay 2003 and Blank 2019.

however, in the context of what he calls "the atheist underground" of Classical Athens, exceptionally does combine these historical considerations with an argument about a philosopher's response.[94]

Scholars of Roman literature and history note in passing a similar phenomenon in Rome. For example Gian Biagio Conte writes of the Middle Republic:

> The enlightened elements of Greek culture may have been for Cato [the Elder] a corrosive agent working upon the ethical-political basis of the Republic and the aristocratic regime. These concerns probably explain the successive expulsions of Greek philosophers and intellectuals from Rome, beginning perhaps in 173 [BCE].[95]

Without entering into the scholarly controversies around the historical episode, it is also worth noting that, not long before the expulsions of philosophers from Rome, in 181 BCE writings ascribed to Numa were discovered in Rome, and then burned because of—so it seems—their philosophical content which stood in tension with Roman religion.[96] Pliny the Elder quotes or paraphrases the historian Cassius Hemina, who was alive at the time: "… and these [books] were burned by the praetor Quintus Petilius because they were writings of philosophy" (*Nat.* 13.86 = *FRHist* 6 F 35).[97] Even much later, in 44 BCE, Cicero could write, "… I fear lest the name of philosophy be hated by certain good men …" (… *vereor ne quibusdam bonis viris philosophiae nomen sit invisum* …, *Off.* 2.2).[98] The historical conditions in Greece and Rome which led to persecution of and hostility to philosophers are, then, well known to classicists. For Rome in

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[94] Sedley 2011, 29, 43 n. 38, 48-52; Sedley 2014.
[95] Conte 1994, 89. See also Scullard 2010, 9-10: "Law, engineering and architecture demanded logical thought, but metaphysical speculation was alien to their traditional ways of thinking. It might even endanger their *mos maiorum*. Thus they were repelled by the scepticism of the New Academics and the emphasis that Epicurus gave to pleasure, albeit pleasure of the intellect; consequently they expelled some Greek philosophers from Rome in 173 and again in 161 [BCE]."
[96] See Beck 2018 for an overview.
[97] … *eosque combustos a Q. Petilio praetore, quia philosophiae scripta essent.*
[98] I recognize that there was likely less personal danger for challenging traditional religion by the mid-first century BCE, but that does not necessarily mean that general hostility to philosophy did not still alter the way philosophers communicated (see further 4.2.1 below).

particular, others also bring forth the pervasive cultural elements of secrecy in Roman religion and jurisprudence,[99] making it more plausible for Roman philosophers to be secretive too.

This brings us to the second class of works, those that treat how ancient authors might practice evasion in their texts. I single out two pieces, one an article and one a book-chapter, which deal with the question in general terms. Frederick Ahl treats the rhetoric of indirect communication in Greece and Rome, but he focuses on how this applies to classical poets rather than philosophers.[100] Yet, in line with my aims, he does situate such indirect communication in its historical-political context. The second is Ineke Sluiter's research on the concept of obscurity in ancient scholarship.[101] Again, the focus is not on philosophers' hiding their thoughts per se, but rather on the exegetical discourse about obscurity, which is nonetheless extremely relevant. Moreover, Sluiter does not engage with political contexts and pressures that led to authors' obscurity.

Finally, in an article that falls somewhat outside these categories, Klaus Döring traces a common theory through the Sisyphus fragment (DK 88 B 25), Plato, Polybius, and Cicero to the effect that fear induced by religious teachings, which are known by statesmen to be false, should be used as a means of government.[102] Without using such language, he shows these philosophers' theoretical basis for exoteric religious doctrines. He does not, however, consider the logical counterpart to this theory, a corresponding genuine philosophic activity which must be kept hidden to avoid undermining a given religious doctrine.

Prior scholarship has adduced much historical, textual, and philosophical evidence to support the idea that ancient philosophers practiced esotericism—and well outside the confines of

[99] Linderski 1985; Moatti 2015, 98-99, 109, 195.
[100] Ahl 1984.
[101] Sluiter 2016.
[102] Döring 1978. My treatment of Cicero addresses these connections (see 4.2.2).

mysticism or Neoplatonism. We are now, then, ready to turn to my argument about esoteric philosophy in Rome.

1.5 Summary of Chapters

Chapters 1-3 are on Cicero's *DND*, Chapter 4 is on Lucretius' *DRN*, and Chapters 5-7 are on Plutarch's *De audiendis*. I have dedicated more chapters to Cicero and Plutarch in part because of their large corpora, which include statements about esotericism outside of the particular works in question. Thus I have introductory chapters (Chapters 1 and 5) for both of the groups of chapters on Cicero and Plutarch, which address broader interpretative questions and the relationship between the works to be studied and other works. But the chapter on Lucretius is longer than most of the other chapters, and an appendix clarifies some features of Lucretius' poem as well. So I hope I have not given Lucretius short shrift.

The chapters on Cicero lead up to one ultimate end: an interpretation of the end of Cicero's *DND* that uses the presence of esotericism throughout the work to explain Cicero's judgment in favor of his character Balbus' Stoic theology there.

Chapter 1 introduces the connection between Cicero and esoteric philosophy, both generally and in relation to *DND*. First I lay out the dual but interrelated sources for his esotericism: Greek philosophy and Roman oratory. I situate these two sources in Cicero's "translation" of Greek philosophy into Latin, especially in the political language used for philosophic terms and how this relates to the political crisis of Cicero's time. Then I compare and contrast Cicero's esoteric writing in his Platonic dialogues of the 50s, especially *De oratore*, with his esoteric mode of writing in the Academic dialogues of the 40s.

After showing the broad contours of Cicero's esotericism, I turn to a summary of and important preliminary considerations for my argument about esotericism in *DND*, with special attention to the literary aspects of the dialogue and connections to *De legibus*. Next, given the

density of descriptions and types of esotericism in *DND*, I provide a summary of the results about esotericism drawn from my interpretation. This allows for a formal comparison in terms of my typology between the esotericism described and practiced by Cicero himself and that of his characters in the dialogue. Finally, I review prior scholarship that relates to esotericism in Cicero.

Chapter 2 forms the first step in my argument about the end of the dialogue. It contains a detailed analysis of Cotta's argument in Book 1 that Epicurus is an esoteric atheist. On Cotta's account, Epicurus hides his atheism to avoid impiety charges in Athens. Cotta's Epicurus uses ambiguity in his writings to signal his atheism and writes exoteric books promoting the view that he is not an atheist. In the first part of the chapter, I examine Cotta's argument in the context of his rhetorical strategies in arguing against Velleius' Epicurean theology. Then I compare Cotta's argument with several other statements about Epicureanism and esotericism elsewhere in Cicero's corpus. This shows that Epicurean esotericism, even beyond esotericism around theology, is an abiding concern for Cicero and not merely an isolated rhetorical tactic in Cotta's speech. This chapter provides an extensive example of Cicero's awareness of esoteric philosophy, and Cotta's argument about Epicurus will be key for seeing why Cicero ultimately sides with Balbus instead of Cotta.

In Chapter 3 I make my argument about the end of the dialogue. Cotta turns out to be too similar to Epicurus as Cotta himself describes him, whereas Balbus' theology leaves room for virtue in politics while still providing a way back to genuine philosophy, that of Plato. Because Cicero does not believe Balbus' theology to be true to the letter, his endorsement of it is an example of esotericism.

First I draw out Cotta's own theological views based on both of his speeches: his speech countering Velleius' Epicurean theology in Book 1 and his speech against Balbus' Stoic theology in Book 3. I argue that Cotta is in fact an esoteric agnostic. Moreover, he conceals and subtly indicates his true theological position using many of the same methods he ascribes to Epicurus.

Again like Epicurus, Cotta turns out to be a conventionalist, meaning that he holds all Roman laws and religious practices to be the arbitrary products of convention, rather than nature. Laws and religion, for him, must be upheld as a sort of noble lie for the sake of political stability. This contrasts with a view common to Cicero's *De legibus* and Balbus' theology, that the Roman mixed regime, including its religion, is founded according to the injunctions of nature. These are the reasons why Cicero rejects Cotta in favor of Balbus. The positive reasons for favoring Balbus are divided into the questions of why Young Cicero (the character in the dramatic dialogue) and why Cicero (the author) favor Balbus. Young Cicero favors Balbus because of his affinity with Balbus around poetry and Stoicism. Cicero the author favors Balbus to provide a new myth of Stoic theology which he believes will be salutary for Roman politics, even while it contains an image of the truth of philosophy.

Even though Lucretius composed his *DRN* likely about a decade before Cicero published his *DND*, I turn from Cicero to Lucretius rather than vice versa because Cicero's discussion of esoteric Epicureanism and his criticism of the school set the stage for my reading of Lucretius. Accordingly, at the start of Chapter 4 I make a case for why we should consider an esoteric reading of Lucretius to be worthwhile based on the evidence from Cicero (as well as other external evidence), prior scholarship on Epicurean esotericism, and a preliminary treatment of *DRN* itself. After my exposition of Cicero's treatment of Epicurean esotericism in *DND* and elsewhere in his corpus alongside his denunciation of Epicureanism, treating Lucretius' *DND* provides insight into esoteric Epicureanism from the perspective of an Epicurean rather than one of its critics.

In the bulk of the chapter, I argue that esotericism is central to Lucretius' poem and his understanding of the nature of things. I do so through a treatment of the cause, motives, content, and methods of Lucretius' esotericism, in line with my typology. First, I examine passages where Lucretius indicates his manner of writing and gives advice on how one should read his poem,

especially in his apostrophes to his addressee Memmius. This shows both his motive of pedagogical esotericism and his method of indicating his esoteric content through subtle repetitions. Using Lucretius' own advice about how to read his poem, I give two examples of the content of Lucretius' esotericism revealed by the application of these methods. Lucretius esoterically indicates the criminal character of philosophy and his own independence and even superiority to Epicurus. He hides the criminal character of philosophy for the motives of self-protection and only indirectly reveals his argument about Epicurus for pedagogical and protreptic motives. Lucretius' indirect indication of the relationship of philosophy to politics and his views on Epicurus relate to interpretative questions which are central to the poem, and provide a basis for future esoteric readings of the work. I close with a consideration of how Lucretius' ontology as cause relates to his esotericism in light of the preceding arguments.

In Chapters 5-7 I turn to Plutarch in order to reveal the profound meditation on the connection between philosophy, poetry, and esotericism in his *De audiendis*. Chapter 5 serves as an introduction to Plutarch and esoteric philosophy. There I survey passages from other works in both the *Moralia* and the *Lives* where Plutarch explicitly discusses esoteric philosophy. In these passages Plutarch ascribes esotericism to philosophers such as Anaxagoras, Plato, Aristotle, and Epicurus. He also describes important features of esoteric philosophy, for example causes rooted in ontology and epistemology and motives relating to self-protection in the face of persecution. He treats motives of self-protection in both Greek and Roman contexts, i.e., fear of impiety trials in Classical Athens and fear of offending Roman masters respectively, that lead to concealing religious and/or political heterodoxy. Chapter 5 shows Plutarch's awareness of and interest in esoteric philosophy to prepare for a consideration of his most extensive statement on esotericism, that of *De audiendis*.

In Chapter 6 I begin my interpretation of *De audiendis* in earnest. First, I briefly show how esotericism clarifies the thematic movement of the fourteen chapters of the treatise. With the

structure and motion of the entire work in view, I turn to a detailed examination of the first chapter of *De audiendis*. There Plutarch sets forth nine images concerning the relationship between philosophy and poetry. I show what these images bring out about the status of esotericism as inextricably connected to philosophy and poetry, and I consider how Plutarch's use of images brings his own treatise into an indeterminate relationship with the nexus of philosophy, poetry, and esotericism. We begin to see how Plutarch's poetic way of writing reveals his esotericism.

Building on the preceding account of Plutarch's general statement on esoteric philosophy and poetry, Chapter 7 shows Plutarch's portrait of Homer as an esoteric philosopher-poet in the treatise. We see a particular application of his general views on esotericism. Homer's motives are primarily pedagogical: he conceals philosophic truths behind an entertaining façade in order to draw readers in with his pleasant poetry, and to make readers exercise their own judgment. He has a number of methods that all fall under his general use of myth (as both "plot" and "fantastic tale") to conceal philosophy. Prominent methods include indirectly revealing his judgment about characters or plot, creating ambiguity through deliberate contradiction, and using symbolic speech. The most important piece of content is the nature of the gods: Homer reveals a philosophic theology behind the poetic portrayal of the gods that is most evident on a first reading. He also indirectly indicates the superiority of Odysseus to other heroes, who, like Homer himself, is an esoteric philosopher-poet.

Plutarch's description of Homer's esotericism allows us to investigate further Plutarch's own esoteric writing. For example, in Plutarch's discussion of ambiguous speech in poetry, he uses ambiguity himself to great effect. And, just as the poets use deliberate contradictions to encourage reflection in the reader, Plutarch creates a deliberate contradiction around Epicurus in the treatise: he blames him in the beginning for his critique of poetry but then praises him at the end for aligning with the philosophic truths that at least some poetry communicates. Thus, I close

with a consideration of the meaning of this deliberate contradiction as a form of esotericism in *De audiendis*.

My study ends with two appendices. In Appendix A I conduct a conceptual inquiry into esoteric philosophy by looking at select analyses of esotericism in the history of philosophy. Here I aim to show how philosophers, mostly in the German tradition, have treated the metaphysical and political poles of esoteric philosophy both in isolation from one another and in their interconnection. This indicates the historical background for the typological analysis I presented in this introduction. In providing examples of modern philosophers' awareness of esotericism, Appendix A may also help overcome skepticism around esotericism present in Anglophone academia.[103]

In Appendix B I return to Lucretius' *DRN* to treat an understudied but fundamental question for Lucretius' poem: What is a "thing" (*res*)? Without answering this question we cannot know the subject matter of his poem *On the Nature of Things*. Furthermore, the status of things for Lucretius is also inextricably linked to the ontological foundations of his esotericism. If Lucretius' poem is a simulacrum of nature itself, and if investigating nature means seeing the invisible behind the visible, and if it turns out that arguments are themselves things, Lucretius' investigation of the nature of things would contain an analysis of the esoteric character of his own arguments. In the appendix, then, I sort through several valences of the word *res* in the poem to show Lucretius' deliberate juxtaposition of its meanings. I address this question separately from my treatment of *DRN* in Chapter 4 because, while it is related to my argument there, such lexical analysis would have been overly digressive in the course of the chapter.

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[103] Cf. Rosen 1987, 113-114.

2. Chapter 1: Cicero, Esotericism, and the Founding of Latin Philosophic Prose

2.1 Cicero and the Sources of Roman Esotericism

My remarks in this chapter serve as a general introduction to Cicero and esotericism as well as to the following two chapters on Cicero's *DND*, which form a pair. Together, they investigate how the theme of esotericism in the work both provides the key to understanding the dialogue and provides a prominent example of esoteric philosophy in Rome. The thesis to which the chapters on Cicero build is the following: esotericism clarifies the much-debated ending of *DND*, where Cicero endorses the Stoic speaker Balbus' theology from Book 2 rather than, as many would expect, the views of his fellow Academic skeptic Cotta. Although he argues that Epicurus is an esoteric atheist in Book 1, Cotta turns out to hold views that are quite similar to those of Epicurus as Cotta himself presents them. For reasons that I will explain later in this chapter, it is this similarity that leads Cicero to favor Balbus' theology. This judgment, furthermore, is in itself esoteric as Cicero does not believe his theology to be true to the letter. I will return to a more detailed outline of my argument below.

I already addressed my choice to include Cicero in this project in the introduction to the dissertation. Cicero introduced philosophy into Latin prose and exerted great influence directly or indirectly on all subsequent philosophy in Latin in antiquity and beyond. It is, then, of great interest to recognize that Cicero was aware of and practiced esoteric philosophy. Otherwise, we miss how later authors might have drawn on him for their own descriptions and practice of esoteric philosophy: either we might miss their esotericism completely or, even if we see it, we would overlook the fact that it extends back to the origins of Roman philosophy.

As has also been made clear from the examples provided for my typology, Cicero is especially illuminating for esoteric philosophy in Rome because of its recurrence throughout his philosophical and rhetorical corpus. As we saw, in *De finibus* Marcus approves of two types of

obscurity: that which is intentional and that which results from the obscurity of the subject matter (2.15). Cicero also openly says that he will hide his own opinion on philosophical subjects after the model of Socrates (*DND* 1.10-12; *Tusc*. 5.11). The chapters which follow will investigate these and several other descriptions of esotericism in *DND* and other works as a way of approaching the question of Cicero's practice of esotericism.

There are two sources of Cicero's esotericism: Greek philosophy and Roman oratory, including Cicero's training and experience in Roman courts and deliberative assemblies. Esotericism both is part of a philosophic tradition and comprises specific techniques. These two sources cannot be entirely disentangled from one another, because of the influence of Greek philosophy on the Greek rhetorical tradition, in which Roman orators received extensive training.[1] Nevertheless, oratory in Rome of course had its own set of practices and Latin vocabulary which were distinct from the Greek context. Cicero integrated and adapted the language of Roman oratory into his exposition and creation of philosophy. This is not to say that he was fundamentally shaped, determined, or limited by his Roman context in a way that prevented him from understanding Greek philosophy in all its originality. Rather, he wrote for a Roman audience and deliberately cast philosophy in a way that would be (initially) familiar to them.

Cicero's *De oratore* shows the confluence of Greek philosophy and Roman oratory in Cicero's exposition of esotericism rather beautifully. As Jed Atkins and I have argued, *De oratore* constitutes an extensive engagement with Plato on the subject of esoteric philosophic writing.[2] In

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[1] See, e.g., *Orat*. 12: *Ego autem et me saepe nova videri dicere intellego, cum pervetera dicam sed inaudita plerisque, et fateor me oratorem, si modo sim aut etiam quicumque sim, non ex rhetorum officinis sed ex Academiae spatiis exstitisse; illa enim sunt curricula multiplicium variorumque sermonum, in quibus Platonis primum sunt impressa vestigia* ("But I both understand that I often seem to say new things, when [in fact] I say things that are old but unheard of by most, and I confess that I stood forth as an orator, if only I am one or even whatever [sort] I am, not from the workshops of the rhetoricians but from the paths of the Academy; for those are the courses of the many-leveled and varied speeches, in which Plato's tracks were first imprinted").

[2] Atkins and Trotz-Liboff forthcoming.

De oratore Cicero looks to Plato's *Phaedrus* to explore the problem of how writing can overcome its weakness of saying the same thing to everyone and not adapting itself to the needs of a particular situation. *De oratore* presents a reading of the *Phaedrus* which outlines several components of a Platonic, esoteric art of writing, whereby an author can through ambiguity address and persuade different types of readers differently. Cicero also implements this art of writing around a central ambiguity generated through a contradiction about what is required of a perfect orator, the main subject of the dialogue. In moving from one of these two contradictory views to the other over the course of the dialogue, different interlocutors react differently, modelling how different readers might react to the work itself. The contradiction leads some readers down the path of philosophy, serving a didactic function, while it disarms potentially dangerous readers from harnessing the power of oratory for ends destructive to the republic. We conclude that this Platonic art of writing is most evident in the dialogues of the 50s because of the similarity in form to Platonic dialogues, and especially so in *De oratore*.

Needless to say, the bulk of *De oratore* is also concerned with the abilities a perfect Roman orator needs to possess, and contains specific advice for rhetorical success. *De oratore*, we argue, also deals with esotericism insofar as it focuses on oratory as not concerned with the truth (see 1.44; 2.30, 241; 3.92). In deceiving in order to persuade, oratory is essentially esoteric. Indeed, the Roman orator must conceal his Greek learning—rhetorical as much as literary and philosophical—since Greek learning is hated by the crowd and many of the nobles (2.4, 153).

Even beyond *De oratore*, there are many other specific examples of rhetorical techniques that involve deliberate deceit and concealment. Just think about Cicero's advice for speaking before the "unlearned" (*indocti*) (e.g., *Part*. 92).[3] It is revealing that in *De finibus* Marcus says that his discussion of Stoicism in *Pro Murena* (60-66) was "before the inexperienced" (*apud*

[3] I will also treat an important example from *De inventione* (1.20-24) below (4.2.1).

imperitos) and that "some was granted also for the sake of victory, [but] now I must argue more subtly" (*aliquid etiam coronae datum. nunc agendum est subtilius*, *Fin.* 4.74). When an orator does on rare occasions speak about philosophy in public, he must simplify things because his audience is unlearned. It is an exoteric treatment of philosophy, while its subtleties are reserved for private discussion or written dialogues.

Furthermore, much of the Latin vocabulary Cicero uses to "translate" Greek philosophy stems from Roman forensic oratory. *Res*, *causa*, *iudicium*, *sententia*, *quaestio* and many more key philosophic terms have double meanings. *Res* is both a "thing" and a court "case" (thus *reus* is the word for "defendant"). *Res* translates both "beings" (ὄντα) and "matters of interest" (πράγματα). *Causa* is both a "cause" and a "trial" (note the double meaning of αἰτία in Greek as "cause" and "guilt"). *Iudicium* is both the faculty of reaching a decision or judgment (for the Greek technical term κριτήριον, see *Luc*. 28; *Fin.* 1.64) and the "sentence," or again the trial itself. *Sententia* is an "opinion" (δόξα) or "intention" (διάνοια) but also a "vote" in the senate (note the political use of δοκεῖ in Greek councils: "it is resolved") or a "political position" (see *Div*. 2.7). *Quaestio* is both a philosophical "question" (ζήτημα) and again the trial itself, but more specifically the "investigation" or "criminal inquiry" within the trial, even "examination by torture" of a slave. Philosophy can be painful.[4]

These double meanings are not merely byproducts of the necessity of Cicero's choice of already existing words for philosophical concepts. Rather, in setting up philosophical questions he deliberately exploits these ambiguities to create a political starting point for philosophy.[5] This "double-speak," to borrow Ingo Gildenhard's application of the term to Cicero, pervades the proem to *DND* and recurs in Cicero's other philosophical and rhetorical writings (see especially

[4] Much of this paragraph draws on entries in Lewis and Short.
[5] Cf. Minyard 1985, 30-31.

the proem to *Tusculans* 1).[6] He casts the philosophic issue of the question of the nature of the gods as if it were a court case.[7] Cicero follows Plato in showing a political understanding of philosophy as the necessary starting point for the most metaphysical of questions. The deliberate ambiguity of political and philosophical terms is in itself a form of esotericism, in addition to further elucidating the twin sources of Greek philosophy and Roman oratory for Cicero's esotericism.

Casting philosophy in political terms was facilitated by the similarity Cicero saw between the Academic skeptical method of arguing on either side of an issue and the exercise in rhetorical training of arguing on either side of a fictional case. The phrase "on either side of the issue" (*in utramque partem*) originally had this forensic connotation (see, e.g., *Inv*. 2.45; cf. *Tusc*. 2.9). When transformed into a philosophic dialogue, the principle of arguing on either side of an issue also conceals the author's own view about the question, as Cicero explicitly says (*DND* 1.10-14).

In sum, Plato's teaching about esotericism in the *Phaedrus*[8] and other dialogues alongside rhetorical theory and practice informed Cicero's use of esotericism. The tenuous status of Greek learning in general and philosophy in particular in Rome also makes esotericism all the more necessary. "For philosophy is content with few judges, since it itself [i.e., philosophy] deliberately flees the crowd and is both suspect and hateful to it itself [i.e., the crowd], with the result that … if someone should wish to blame philosophy as a whole, he would be able to do this with the people consenting …" (*Tusc*. 2.4; see also 3.1).[9]

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[6] For Gildenhard (2007, 90), the proems of the *Tusculans*, especially that of Book 1, "contain programmatic political double-speak at the expense of Caesar."
[7] See, e.g., *res*, *DND* 1.1; *quaestio*, 1; *sententiae*, 1; *causa*, 1; *defendere*, 1; *dissensione* (*bis*), 2; *rem causamque*, 2; *diiudicatur*, 2; *censerent*, 3; *patrocinium*, 6; *iudicium*, 10; *praeiudicata*, 10; *adsentiendi*, 12; *convocandi*, 13; *iudicent*, 13; *ut adsint cognoscant animadvertant*, 14.
[8] Cf. Trotz-Liboff 2023b, 402-406.
[9] *est enim philosophia paucis contenta iudicibus, multitudinem consulto ipsa fugiens eique ipsi et suspecta et invisa, ut, vel si quis universam velit vituperare, secondo id populo facere possit* … Cf. X. *Mem*. 1.1.31.

While Cicero's imitation of Plato's esotericism is most evident in his Platonic dialogues of the 50s, in his later work Cicero maintains an esoteric approach rooted in Plato's thought in a non-Platonic form. Indeed, his dialogues of the 40s are in a sense more baffling than Plato's. The continuous (as opposed to dialogic) opposing speeches almost completely obscure Cicero's intention, as was his stated goal (*DND* 1.10). The twists and turns of a conversation or even an unusual juxtaposition of words, which are so revealing in Plato, are absent. The Ciceronian period subsumes the individual words which, though carefully placed, are subordinate to the whole. This heightens the sense that the reader has no foothold within the running stream of doxography and opposing counterargument. Every individual passage appears perfectly clear, to the point of almost explaining the self-explanatory, but taken together the purpose of these lucid speeches appears impossible to grasp. Cicero already occluded his intention and practiced esotericism in the 50s by speaking through interlocutors rather than in his own voice and practicing the Platonic art of writing discussed above, but in the 40s he deepens his esotericism through the switch to opposing speeches. The starting point for understanding Cicero's philosophic writings (which includes the rhetorical writings, see *Div*. 2.4) is appreciating this strangeness, this almost impenetrable veil around his thought—in a word, his philosophic esotericism.

2.2 Esotericism, De natura deorum, and the Argument of Chapters 2 and 3

Of Cicero's philosophical and rhetorical writings, *DND* not only contains mentions of the widest variety of kinds of esotericism, as I started to show when laying out my typology above, but also has esotericism as an integral element of its argument.

Cicero's *DND* addresses a fundamental question of human life: whether the gods care for us or not. Written in 45 BCE, the dialogue's deceptively simple structure makes it very difficult to determine Cicero's answer to this question. After a preface in his own voice (1.1-14), Cicero introduces a conversation which took place between 77 and 75 as particularly apt for elucidating

the question on the nature of the gods.[10] He narrates his meeting with three Roman senators then: Velleius the Epicurean, Balbus the Stoic, and Cotta the Academic skeptic. After a brief introductory interlude (1.15-17), Velleius gives an exposition of Epicurean theology (1.18-56) and then Cotta refutes him (1.57-124), after which Balbus gives an exposition of Stoic theology (2.4-168), and Cotta refutes him as well (3.5-93). Then in the very last sentence of the work, Cicero says that at the time of the conversation he favored Balbus' Stoic theology over Cotta's critique of it without explaining why (3.95). To make matters more complicated, Cicero highlights his and Cotta's shared adherence to the skeptical New Academy in the work (1.11-12, 17). Cicero surprisingly disagrees with his own philosophic school in favor of the Stoics despite the elaborate defense of Academic epistemology against that of the Stoics in the *Academica* and the devastating critiques of Stoicism in *De finibus* and *De divinatione*, not to mention in Book 3 of *DND* itself. By offering his own view on the matter he also appears to contradict his warning in the preface about the dangers of philosophic authority's undermining the potential for independent reflection (1.10).

While the last sentence of the work has thus proven to have generated the most obscurity for commentators, in the dialogue's first sentence Cicero openly points to the problem of obscurity by qualifying the question about the nature of the gods as "very obscure" (*perobscura*, 1.1). In these chapters, I will clarify the obscure ending of the work by taking into account esotericism as a major theme in the work. Cicero's sustained focus in *DND* on esotericism allows me to propose a new solution to the preference for Balbus at the end of the work, the central interpretative challenge of the dialogue. In so doing I also analyze the political function of *DND* as a dialogue that Cicero wrote under Caesar's dictatorship. Only after Caesar's assassination would Cicero announce that his philosophic writings served a political purpose (*Div*. 2.7; cf. Plu.

[10] See Müller 2022, 147 n. 2, 149 n. 9 with scholarship cited for the date of composition of *DND* and the dramatic date of the conversation in the work.

Cic. 40.1). But already in *DND*, Cicero connects his withdrawal from politics and philosophic activity to Caesar's political power (1.7). The obscurity of philosophical esotericism operates on levels relating to both the difficulties inherent to theology and the danger of speaking out under tyranny.

Previous commentators have held Cicero's judgment at the end to be a genuine preference for Balbus' Stoic theology, or a covert agreement with Cotta, or a way of balancing out Cotta's critique of Balbus without agreeing with either.[11] The temptation to make Cicero agree with the Academic interlocutor against the letter of the text has a long history, beginning with Augustine (*C. D*. 5.9), and could seem attractive given Cicero's adherence to the New Academy.[12] Probably because of this powerful tradition of taking Cotta to be Cicero's hidden mouthpiece,[13] most recent interpretations that argue for a genuine preference for Balbus focus much more on the question "Why not Cotta?" than the other necessary question "Why Balbus?"[14]

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[11] For extensive reviews of the state of the question see Lévy 1992, 557-560, Fott 2012, 155-158, and Diez 2021, 148-156.

[12] Mandel (1983-1984) puts forward a version of this interpretation very forcefully.

[13] See Atkins 2013a, 33-42 for problems with the mouthpiece theory as applied to Ciceronian dialogue, with a focus on *De re publica*. Müller (2022, 149-150) articulates this point with reference to *DND*.

[14] I will review efforts to answer the former question in more detail below (4.2). Explanations of "Why Balbus?" referring to the content of his speech are indeed scant. DeFilippo (2000, 185) only mentions "Stoic teleology" as what Cicero actually approves of in Balbus' speech. Similarly, Fott (2012, 175) links Cicero's endorsement of Balbus mostly to his critique of Cotta. The only specific element of Balbus' account he identifies which might appeal to Cicero is the "the existence of a divinity or divinities" but he acknowledges that we may never know the reason for the endorsement. Wynne (2019, 265), while linking the judgment to his interpretation of Balbus' speech, still restricts the actual content leading to the judgment to "Balbus' argument that Stoic theology is adequate to render Roman religion pious." The main reason for the judgment is rather to model proper Academic evaluation of arguments "in order to encourage us to think for ourselves" (ibid., 270). Tarán's (1987, 19-21) attempt to explain the endorsement is more extensive and focuses more on what parts of Stoic doctrine (the *e consensu omnium* ("from the agreement of all") argument and the argument from design) might appeal to Cicero. However, his account is vitiated by the fact that he takes Cicero's statement at 1.2 to be an unproblematic endorsement of the *e consensu omnium* argument (but note Cicero's wavering between the first and third persons there). Furthermore, Tarán takes passages from other works (like *Tusc*. 1.30, 36) to provide direct access to Cicero's actual positions as a basis for his accepting certain Stoic doctrines, ignoring the fact that in the *Tusculans* M. follows the Academic practice of arguing against a proposition while never revealing one's own opinion (see 1.8; 5.11 with McConnell 2021, 150-151). Finally, Tarán (1987, 21) ultimately does not think that Cicero's agreement with the Stoics is the reason for the endorsement: "Cicero's agreement with some of the doctrines of the Stoics would not be sufficient reason, however, for supposing that he could have taken Balbus' part. For … Cicero did not accept many fundamental Stoic doctrines." This leaves the issue rather cloudy. Leonhardt (1999, 63) also claims that Cicero must find something correct in the content of Balbus' speech for the judgment to make sense, but does not explain what that might be. Woolf (2022, 140) adds that the judgement may have been influenced by Balbus' request that Cotta argue also in favor of his position in addition to offering refutations (2.168), which for Woolf is the type of Academic practice Cicero prefers. This is in addition to Cicero's supporting the "content of Balbus' speech" but Woolf does not specify what content he supports.

In what follows, I support the interpretation that treats the final sentence as a genuine break with Cotta in favor of Balbus. However, there are three elements which distinguish my argument from prior attempts to understand the end of the work. First, I investigate to a much greater extent than prior interpretations the crucial question "Why Balbus?" while also offering my own original elaboration of the "Why not Cotta?" question. Second, my interpretation pays attention to a further subtlety passed over by prior analyses of the preference for Balbus. The Cicero who agrees with Balbus is the twenty-nine to thirty-one-year-old who took part in the conversation back in 77, 76, or 75 rather than the sixty-one-year-old man narrating the dialogue in 45.[15] He is like a character of the narrator Cicero, and thus I will call him "Young Cicero" to distinguish him from the narrator or author.[16] We must, then, attend to two sides of the question "Why Balbus?": first, why Young Cicero agrees with Balbus and, second, why Cicero the author makes Young Cicero agree with Balbus. Third and finally, as indicated above, bringing to light the understudied theme of philosophic esotericism in the work is an integral part of my interpretation.

The connection between the first and second elements of my interpretation requires some preliminary elaboration here. The use of Young Cicero may to some extent be part of a semi-fictionalized philosophical autobiography (cf. *Fin*. 5.1-8), but rather than representing a one-to-one correspondence to a historical Young Cicero this character is a device for Cicero to lessen the authority of his final judgment. Authority is enacted in different ways in different dialogues. While we must surely still differentiate a mature "Marcus" as a character from the author Cicero in dialogues where his character has a central role, his presence still lends great authority to arguments (cf. *Q. fr*. 3.5.1). This is especially the case in *De legibus*,[17] where he makes positive

[15] See Brittain and Osorio 2021, 31.
[16] Following Woolf 2022, 129. See Reinhardt 2021, 103-105 for further ways of distinguishing different "Ciceros."
[17] See again Atkins 2013a, 157.

arguments rather than performing Academic refutation as in *De finibus* and *De divinatione*. In *DND*, Cicero's youth at the time of the dialogue allows the Young Cicero character to take a backseat role in the discussion out of deference to his older, senatorial interlocutors.[18] The wording, moreover, of the final sentence shows that the preference for Balbus is both qualified and matches the criteria for an Academic skeptic at least provisionally to accept persuasive arguments.[19] His age at the dramatic date and the skeptical cast of the judgment thus allow Cicero to avoid contravening his aim to preserve the reader's freedom of judgment (1.10).[20] And yet, however qualified, a judgment is still a judgment, and here one which at least some readers may take very seriously. We must, then, think through not only how the judgment is consistent with Cicero's Academic epistemology, but also what particular arguments in Balbus' exposition are persuasive to Young Cicero and appeal to Cicero enough to endorse it.[21]

In short, I claim that Cicero has Young Cicero favor Balbus in order to propagate a revised version of Stoic theology that will function as a new myth for Rome in a time of crisis. This engagement with Stoicism is consistent with Cicero's prior positive but qualified use of Stoicism alongside Platonic philosophy in *De legibus*. There he successfully combined drawing on philosophic authority and maintaining his Academic stance towards evaluating arguments,[22] even if the legislating mode of the dialogue left less room for open-ended reflection on the part of the reader than in this later dialogue. In *DND*, such a myth is both politically salutary as it offers philosophic grounding for resisting the rise of tyranny and philosophically salutary as it provides a way back to genuine philosophy, which for Cicero is Platonic. The conjunction of myth and

[18] Müller 2022, 148.
[19] See, e.g., Tarán 1987, 19.
[20] See Wynne 2019, 270-271, Diez 2021, 156-159, and Woolf 2022, 140 n. 25.
[21] Consider how Diez (2021, 161-162) recently interprets the end of the work without any discussion of the particular content of Balbus' speech that might lead to the judgment.
[22] Atkins 2013a, 184-185.

philosophy is a form of esotericism which also derives from Plato, who is, as explained above, one of Cicero's main models for esotericism.

In Chapter 2, I treat in detail a preliminary but fundamental point for my argument about esotericism in *DND*: the esoteric atheism Cotta ascribes to Epicurus in Book 1. This allows us to see an extensive description of esotericism by Cicero through Cotta, which I situate in Cicero's treatment of esotericism in relation to Epicureanism elsewhere in his corpus. This corroborates the importance of the phenomenon for Cicero. My interpretation of Cotta's characterization of Epicurus forms the basis for my argument about Cicero's break with Cotta at the end of the dialogue that I treat in Chapter 3. Chapter 3 divides into three parts. First, I treat the "Why not Cotta?" question. While Cotta critiques Epicurus as an esoteric atheist, as explained in Chapter 2, Cotta with his conventionalism and esoteric agnosticism ends up being too similar to Epicurus as he himself portrays him. Second, I explain the "Why Balbus?" question from the perspective of Young Cicero. Their agreement is grounded in Cicero's hitherto unexplored characterization of Young Cicero as a young poet interested in Stoicism. Finally, I turn to the "Why Balbus?" question from the perspective of Cicero the author. In following Varro's tripartite theology, Balbus' theology overlaps with Cicero's treatment of natural law in *De legibus* by combining Stoic natural law with Platonism. Cicero, furthermore, presents Balbus' Stoicism as a mythical image of the truth or "likely story" which however preserves Platonic philosophy.

2.3 Summary of Results

I will now present my findings outlined above more systematically to make clear what we learn about esotericism and each interlocutor in *DND*, including what kinds of esotericism surface in relation to my typology for each interlocutor and for Cicero as the author. The summary here will be substantiated by the arguments that follow in the body of the chapters. Esotericism directly elucidates Cicero's preface in his own voice along with his final judgment, Cotta's

speeches in both Books 1 and 3, and Balbus' speech in Book 2. Esotericism relates less directly to Velleius' speech in Book 1, but it is still colored by it through Cotta's speeches, primarily that of Book 1.

For Cicero the author, as opposed to Young Cicero the character, we can discern the following categories of esotericism in *DND*. The cause is his skeptical epistemology according to which nothing can be known for certain. This he stresses while discussing his adherence to the New Academy (1.11-12) and is reflected in the aforementioned obscurity of the question about the nature of the gods (1.1). Because perfect knowledge is unattainable for Cicero himself insofar as he is a skeptic, he cannot transmit it directly. Hence the need to write esoterically.

Cicero has a wide range of interrelated motives for esotericism. It is self-defensive for two reasons: he conceals his own view about the gods to avoid general hatred and he critiques Caesar indirectly in order to avoid offending the ruling tyrant. His esotericism is also other-regarding, since his institution of a revised Stoic theology as a myth for Rome is aimed at improving political life in Rome broadly speaking, while not holding the myth to be true to the letter. He also conceals his views for a philosophic-pedagogical motive, as he says explicitly (1.10). While philosophic pedagogical esotericism aims at benefiting potential philosophers, political pedagogical esotericism tries to shape individuals for public life. This latter motive differs from other-regarding esotericism insofar as it is not a general (alleged) benefit to society like preserving a version of divine providence through Stoicism, but a training in moral virtue done through philosophical means. I do not have as sure a proof for this motive, but I believe that the address to Brutus (1.1) and Cicero's more moralizing mode in other works, such as *De officiis*, betray a desire to influence leading men in society through a philosophic teaching which differs from—or is a watered-down version of—Cicero's actual views, and hence is esoteric.[23]

[23] Cf. Tsounis 2023.

Finally, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Cicero has control-based esotericism as a motive as well, i.e., a self-interested esotericism for the sake of retaining political power. He highlights his position as an augur (1.14) and in *De legibus* and *De divinatione* Marcus admits that augurs rightly deceive the public to exercise political control (*Leg*. 2.31-33; *Div*. 2.28, 43, 70-71, 74-75).[24] How sinister this sounds will depend on one's overall view of Cicero's political motives. I do not pass any positive or negative judgment here. I only note that Cicero is part of the ruling class in Rome and seems to admit to concealing his true views about religion in public while exercising immense authority as a priest in this most prestigious college. (Of course, this type of esotericism would have been more relevant before Caesar's ascendancy and when Cicero had more direct political influence generally.) Cicero's control-based esotericism differs from his other-regarding esotericism both because the beneficiary in each case differs and in that, while both types of esotericism attempt to influence religious belief, the latter is much less related to Cicero's actual position in Roman society.

There are two key aspects of the content of Cicero's esotericism. First is his esoteric critique of Caesar as a tyrant. Such content actually could be communicated openly in a propositional statement ("Caesar is a tyrant") if the political conditions were different, as is shown by Cicero's open affirmation that Caesar was a tyrant after his death (*Div*. 2.6-7; *Off*. 1.26; 3.84-85).[25] This is a sort of ad hoc esotericism related to accidental circumstances (though the nature of philosophy is for it always to be in tension with politics), and thus less fundamental than the other kind of content I will now describe.

The main content of Cicero's esotericism is what I described as "skeptical esotericism" above (1.3.2.3). What he conceals is how radical the questioning is that he wishes to instill in his

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[24] It is clear already in *De legibus* that deception is involved because Marcus says that the science of augury has been lost by his time (2.33; cf. *DND* 2.9; *Div*. 1.28, 105; *Sen*. 11), meaning that he and other augurs do not believe they are interpreting the will of the gods and thus are only pretending to do so.
[25] See also Gildenhard 2006 and Lefèvre 2008, 225-238.

readers by inducing *aporia* (to anticipate one of his methods). As I also touched on in the prior section, in *DND* this is related to the fact that at least two questions that are central to the investigation are almost completely suppressed. First, the question of whether the gods exist must be settled before inquiring into their nature (e.g., 2.3) and, second, the question of what nature is must also be settled before inquiring into their nature. As for the question of the gods' existence, that Cicero dismisses atheists without a hearing (see 1.2) makes it seem as if atheism, one of two possible answers about the gods' existence, is not even a possibility worth investigating. And yet Cotta's theory of Epicurus' esoteric atheism makes the whole opposition between Epicureanism and Stoicism one of atheism as opposed to theism rather than lack of the gods' care as opposed to providence (see also 1.61), the latter opposition being the way Cicero explicitly casts the question (1.3-4). Atheism entails lack of divine care, but theism could allow for divine care or not. Thus Cicero seems to jump past the more basic question to address what the correct type of theism is, when in fact atheism, even if ultimately rejected, becomes a position that needs to be reckoned with in the dialogue. The reader has to come to the conclusion on his or her own that the question of the gods' existence requires careful consideration.

Cicero shows the second question, What is nature?, to be a serious problem only in passing during Balbus' speech (2.81-82). But the difference of opinion about the meaning of nature is not settled there by Balbus' dogmatic assertion of his definition of nature over and against the other definitions he mentions, or in Balbus' earlier definition of nature (2.29-30). The importance of nature in the dialogue generally is shown by the fact that no other Ciceronian work includes "nature" in its title. Since the work that would have included Cicero's partial translation of the *Timaeus* was left unfinished at his death, *DND* remains his most direct statement on physics.[26] It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to settle the problem of nature in *DND*, but it,

[26] See *Tim*. 1-2 for Cicero's planned focus on physics in this unfinished work.

along with the question of whether the gods exist, provides an example of the type of questions that are not seriously discussed on the surface but which Cicero wants us to think about.[27]

Finally, we come to Cicero's method for communicating his esoteric content. In general, he uses the dialogue form in which other characters speak to conceal his own view, here in the specific form of arguments on either side of the issue in conformity with the practices of the New Academy. But he also uses ambiguity in his own voice in the preface to communicate his esoteric critique of Caesar. In relation to the final judgment in favor of the modified Stoic theology, Cicero employs two methods. One is a contradiction, a type of ambiguity, insofar as his adherence to Academic skepticism sits uneasily with his endorsement of the Stoic speaker. Another is allegorical esotericism, insofar as the myth of Stoic theology leads back to Platonic philosophy. It will be important to keep it mind, though, that this is the type of allegory which moves the mind in a way that normal arguments could not, rather than the sort of dogmatic allegory in which a philosophic dogma is encoded in a myth. Consider, for example, the difference between the following two uses of myth. In one, the actions of traditional gods or heroes represent physical processes, like the interaction of different elements. In effect, once one has the "key" to the allegory of the myth, one could perform a mechanical translation of the myth into a rational account. I could say "Achilles and Agamemnon do not get along" and then explain that "Achilles" means "fire" and "Agamemnon" "water" as an allegory for the interaction of the elements of fire and water. In another use of myth, the myth could still go beyond what it is superficially about (say, the particular actions of certain gods, or the transmigration of the soul) in order to foster philosophic reflection about theology or the soul. But it would not have a "code" where one mythical thing stands in perfectly for one "rational" thing. Rather, the mythical form is necessary for communicating the truth rather than being an extraneous wrapping. Casel usefully

[27] Perhaps the fact that the investigation must proceed despite our ignorance about these two fundamental questions—and in a sense an answer to both is assumed at the outset—shows something about the character of philosophic inquiry.

contrasts these two types, also calling the first "allegory" but the second simply "myth." For him, Platonic myth is a type of silence where the mythical form is inextricable from the content: it leads to a higher understanding but there is a part of myth which always escapes a purely rational account and thus cannot be translated into argument. For Stoic allegory, by contrast, the mythical form has nothing to do with the content, is able to removed, and is thus purely instrumental.[28]

Overall for Cicero, we can see the preface signaling a wide array of kinds of esotericism in Cicero's own voice that will be key throughout the dialogue and resonate with the esotericism described and/or practiced by other speakers.

Esotericism is important for Cotta's speeches in Books 1 and 3 in two ways. First, he describes extensively a kind of esotericism which he attributes to Epicurus. Second, he endorses and practices a version of esotericism of his own. The esotericism of Cotta's Epicurus can be described as follows. His motive of concealing his atheism is self-defensive, to avoid persecution

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[28] After introducing Stoic allegory's aim of persuading the unlearned populus, Casel (1919, 45) writes: *Ideo forma fabulosa non ex natura rei narratae exsurgit, sed extrinsecus pro fingentium libidine adiuncta est* πρὸς τὴν πειθὼ τῶν πολλῶν καὶ πρὸς τὴν εἰς τοὺς νόμους καὶ τὸ συμφέρον χρῆσιν, *ut Aristotelis verba iterum afferam* [*Metaph*. 1074b4-5]. *Haec causa est, cur Heraclitus philosophicum fabularum nucleum plane a tegumento mythico separet. Forma enim fabulosa viro Stoico nihil est nisi vestis doctrinae certae et definitae superaddita, quam qui semel sustulerit, iam nudam veritatem intuebitur. Ei vero qui Platone duce recta ratione mythos perscrutatus fuerit, etiamsi ad altiorem cognitionem pervenerit, pars tamen semper restabit, quae rationi non pateat. Ideo iure mythi dicuntur simul tegere et patefacere (sicut vestis corporis lineamenta partim tegit partim demonstrat), quin magis tegere quam patefacere, et quodammodo* silentium observare. *At qui Stoica ratione omnes mythos interpretari voluerit ita, ut nihil iam, quod rationi pervium non sit, relinquatur, mysticam fabularum vim plane attenuabit et destruet. Garrula haec allegoria nihil cum silentio mystico commune habet, sed ei omnino contraria est. Allegoria mythum destruit. Ideo nil mirum etiam illos sapientes, qui mythos ut ineptos et philosophia indignos aversarentur, interdum allegoria usos esse; Platonem vero qui mythicum sermonem amplecteretur et magni aestimaret, interpretationem allegoricam improbasse* (*Phaedr*. 229 C. *Resp*. 378 D) ("For this reason the mythical form arises not from the nature of the matter which has been recounted, but has been added from the outside according to the caprice of those inventing [the myth] 'for the persuasion of the many and for utility with respect to laws and the expedient,' to quote Aristotle's words again [*Metaph*. 1074b4-5]. This is the reason why Heraclitus [the Homeric commentator] completely separates the core of myths from their mythical covering. For the mythical form for this Stoic man is nothing other than the clothing, which has been added on in addition, of a certain and defined teaching, [and] as soon as one has removed this, one will see right away the naked truth. But for the one who has properly examined myths under Plato's guidance, even if he comes to a higher understanding, a part [of the myth] nevertheless will always remain which does not lay open to reason. For this reason myths are rightly said at once to conceal and reveal (just as clothing in part conceals the contours of the body [and] in part shows them), but in fact [myths are rightly said] to conceal more than reveal, and in some way *heed silence*. But he who wishes to interpret all myths in the manner of the Stoics such that there is nothing left which is not accessible to reason, this man completely weakens and destroys the mystical power of myths. This loquacious allegory has nothing in common with mystical silence, but is altogether opposed to it. Allegory destroys myth. For this reason it is no wonder that those wise men, who shunned myths as foolish and unworthy of philosophy, sometimes made use of allegory; but [it is no wonder that] Plato, who embraced mythical speech and thought highly of it, disapproved of allegorical interpretation (*Phdr*. 229c; *R*. 378d)"). Emphasis is original. See also ibid., 40.

from Athens. It is also other-regarding in the sense that he wants to protect his disciples as well. The content of his esotericism is a dogmatic propositional statement ("the gods do not exist"). His method for concealing this content and revealing it indirectly is the use of ambiguity. He also feigns religious belief in his actions and writings (sometimes overlapping with his use of ambiguity, sometimes in ways that are purely for misdirection—i.e., just creating the impression of being religious without any ambiguity embedded). Insofar as a cause emerges, it would be Epicurus' dogmatic epistemology ("all sense perceptions are true").[29] There cannot be a dogma that one conceals without the belief that a great level of knowledge is indeed possible. Thus, while some of the motives and methods overlap with those of Cicero, the content and cause are diametrically opposed to Cicero's.

As for Cotta's own esotericism, its cause is his strict adherence to the radical skepticism of the New Academy. Insofar as he cannot know anything for certain, enlightenment in politics is impossible and thus tradition must simply be affirmed. Where he differs from Cicero is that he engages less directly with Plato and by arguing only against rather than for positions seems incapable of formulating a positive philosophic teaching. His motives are self-defensive, other-regarding, and control-based. He does not want his agnostic position to be widely known, as it might endanger his political standing. His esotericism is other-regarding because he genuinely believes that maintaining traditional religion will be beneficial for society, even though it is for him a complete falsehood. However, given his ruling position as pontifex maximus, his motives also shade into control-based esotericism. The content of his esotericism can be summed up in two propositional statements: "I do not know whether the gods exist" and "traditional religion is a noble lie." While Cotta is a radical skeptic, the content of his esotericism makes him seem strangely dogmatic. His methods include not writing philosophy at all (cf. *Ac*. 1.2) and using

[29] SE *M*. 8.63 = 253 Usener: … πάντα τὰ αἰσθητὰ εἶναι ἀληθῆ … See also, e.g., DL 10.32; Epicur. *Herod*. 63; Lucr. 4.469-521. See further Vogt 2016 and Warren 2019.

ambiguity orally to hint at his true views. The preceding description of Cotta's esotericism derives from his explicit endorsement of certain views about the origin of religion and its role in society, from his views on the responsibility of philosophers in relation to these considerations, and from my own interpretation of his esoteric position. Esotericism is a structuring principle for Cotta's speeches in Books 1 and 3, and thus sheds further light on major portions of the dialogue.

Finally, Balbus does not practice esotericism himself but he does describe it.[30] For him, ancient poets were esoteric Stoic philosophers. The cause is, as in the case of Epicurus, a dogmatic epistemology. Thus, the content is also dogmatic, namely Stoic theology. The method is allegory, encoding Stoic physics in traditional myths. It is unclear what the motive is for the esotericism Balbus ascribes to ancient poets. One conjecture is that they wished to influence politics indirectly by disseminating their doctrine into popular poetry and, in the case of legislators, by putting philosophic principles into the very foundation of society. But Balbus never says this. Thus, in addition to its presence in Books 1 and 3, esotericism is important in Book 2 since Balbus also focuses on esoteric composition (by the poets) and the esoteric reading (allegoresis) required to recover their wisdom. Velleius, by contrast, never mentions esotericism himself, but at times it seems as if Cotta implies he is practicing esotericism like his master Epicurus. There is also no clear indication that Young Cicero practices esotericism himself, and he does not mention esotericism. It is, however, worth speculating what his motives were for translating Aratus and what his status as a philosophic poet means in light of Balbus' description of the esotericism of philosophic poets. Did his translation and dissemination of Aratus somehow constitute an esoteric dissemination of Stoic philosophy?

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[30] See the remark of Cato in *De finibus* about the Stoics: *Obscura, inquit, quaedam esse confiteor, nec tamen ab illis ita dicuntur de industria, sed inest in rebus ipsis obscuritas* ("'I admit,' he said, 'that certain things [of the Stoics] are obscure. And yet [these things] are not said by them in this way on purpose, but there is obscurity in the things themselves,'" 4.2). See also Sen. *Epist*. 95.60-64 (the end of which is cited at Casel 1919, 14; cf. 48 n. 2).

I have provided a summary of my results, not an argument for them. The summary shows preliminarily what work esotericism does (or does not do) for Cicero as the author and each of his characters. I did not even include the full variety of esotericism as it emerges in *DND* (there are more in my typology above) because sometimes types of esotericism are mentioned which are extraneous to the esotericism of the different speakers. But in abstraction from the action of the dialogue this formal characterization and comparison of the esotericism of Cicero, Cotta's Epicurus, Cotta, and Balbus indicate what the dialogue shows about esotericism in a different way than the interpretation that will soon follow.

2.4 The State of the Question for Cicero's Esotericism

My dissertation is one of the first scholarly works to make an extensive case for Cicero's esotericism. While Augustine and Enlightenment philosophers considered Cicero to be an esoteric philosopher, very few modern scholars explicitly consider this possibility for Cicero in general, and even fewer for *DND*.

In works like *Contra Academicos* (3.37-42), Augustine claims that Cicero and earlier Academic skeptics were in fact esoteric dogmatic Platonists.[31] And, as mentioned above (2.2), in *De civitate dei* Augustine also claims that in *DND* Cicero esoterically reveals his atheism by having Cotta deny the existence of a divine nature and conceals his true agreement with Cotta through his stated preference for Balbus at the end. Toland follows Augustine regarding the general esotericism of Cicero and the Academic skeptics, without reference to *DND*.[32] On a convincing interpretation of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Hume like Augustine reads *DND* as revealing Cicero's esoteric atheism through his covert agreement with Cotta.[33] Rousseau's remarks on Cicero's feigned belief in traditional religion, while not

[31] See Bouton-Touboulic 2021, 263-265.
[32] Toland 1720, 77; but see 91-92.
[33] See again Szczekalla 1988, 86-87.

mentioning *DND*, seem to agree with the interpretation of the dialogue put forward by Augustine and Hume.[34] I agree with these philosophers that Cicero is esoteric, but disagree as to the content of his esotericism.

As for Classical scholars, few advance an esoteric reading of Cicero. William H. F. Altman argues for a version of pedagogical esotericism in Cicero ("the esotericism required for maieutic pedagogy") deriving ultimately from the *Theaetetus* and inspired to some degree by Augustine's esoteric reading of Cicero's *Academica* in the *Contra Academicos*.[35] This claim about Cicero is related to Altman's overall project of interpreting Cicero as concealing his true Platonism through the *dramatis persona* of a skeptical "Cicero."[36] Thus, Altman is an important predecessor in terms of discussing Cicero's esotericism generally. And yet, though he sees a sharper difference between Cicero the character and Cicero the author than most scholars, Altman's version of Cicero's esotericism does not deviate so greatly from the view of many scholars insofar as they rightly insist on a distinction between the views of Cicero the author and his characters, including the Cicero character.[37] Thus many scholars' interpretations do approach something like an esoteric reading of Cicero in being sensitive to the literary character of his works.

Altman is also the only scholar, so far as I know, who offers an esoteric interpretation of *DND*, though we come to very different conclusions.[38] Furthermore, he focuses only on pedagogical esotericism in *DND* and does not go through the wide variety of kinds of esotericism in the dialogue, as I do. Aside from Altman, Walter Nicgorski in passing allows for the possibility

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[34] See again Rousseau 1959-1995 [1751], III.46.
[35] Altman 2016, 77.
[36] Ibid., xix.
[37] See again, e.g., Atkins 2013a, 33-42 and Reinhardt 2021, 103-105.
[38] Altman 2016, 159-178. See ibid., xxv: "Since *De natura deorum* contains Cicero's canonical statement on the pedagogical advantages of the deliberate concealment of the author's own views, chapter 6 ('*Phaedo* and *Timaeus* in *De natura deorum*') will consider Cicero's nuanced approach to Plato's own use of concealment with respect to cosmology …"

of esotericism, but not with specific reference to *DND*.[39] Apart from my own forthcoming contribution with Jed Atkins,[40] Altman and Nicgorski are thus the only recent Ciceronian scholars who explicitly discuss esotericism in Cicero in a way that lends credence to its existence,[41] as distinguished from those who discuss Augustine's esoteric theory about Cicero in order to dismiss it and J. P. F. Wynne who argues briefly against esotericism in *DND* and *De divinatione*.[42]

Arthur Stanley Pease presents an earlier exception to the normal silence about esotericism in *DND*. He remarks on esotericism in the dialogue with reference to isolated passages in his running commentary on the work. For example, he writes the following about an important statement of Cotta's on the difference between doubting the gods' existence in public and private (1.61):

> If it is to be asked why Cicero should represent as esoteric and unsuited to popular knowledge the views which Cotta is about to express, or else, if they were esoteric, why Cotta should here be described as publicizing them (cf. *Ac*. 1, 2: *intemperantis enim arbitror esse scribere quod occultari velit* ['For I believe that it belongs to the immoderate man to write what he wishes to be hidden']), it may be replied that such phrases merely entice the reader by that fascination of the illicit which has so often been the strongest appeal of heterodoxy.[43]

Thus Pease attributes protreptic esotericism to Cicero's Cotta. There are more motives at play than just this, as I will argue below (4.2), but what is important to note is that here and elsewhere Pease takes the existence of esoteric and exoteric philosophy in antiquity for granted,[44] in the sense of different private and public teachings in addition to that of different bodies of writing. But given the commentary format, Pease does not provide a full exposition of esotericism in *DND*. Like Pease, Olof Gigon and Laila Straume-Zimmermann are unusually well attuned to

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[39] Nicgorski 2016, 93 n. 70.
[40] Atkins and Trotz-Liboff forthcoming.
[41] Melzer (2014, 18-19) also makes the claim in passing in the context of his larger survey of esoteric philosophy.
[42] Wynne 2019, 255.
[43] Pease 1955-1958, ad 1.61 (in entry on *si in contione*).
[44] See, e.g., ibid., ad 1.49 (in entry on *quivis … possit agnoscere*) and ad 1.74 (spanning pages 388-390).

esotericism in the dialogue in their commentary, but again like Pease only note it in passing.[45] Despite calling attention to its presence in the dialogue, neither Pease nor Gigon and Straume-Zimmermann attempt an esoteric interpretation of *DND*.

Although only a few scholars discuss esotericism explicitly, numerous scholars do focus on what I call pedagogical esotericism, but using different language, when they talk about Cicero's withholding his own opinion through the skeptical method of arguing on either side of issue in *DND*.[46] As in the case of distinguishing the views of author and character, then, many scholars see what I am calling esotericism in Cicero. But they do not integrate what they observe about the particular motive of pedagogical esotericism into the broader phenomenon of deliberate concealment of philosophical views in *DND* and Cicero's corpus, let alone in Roman philosophy more generally.

In advancing an extensive esoteric reading of *DND* and making the case for esotericism in Cicero more broadly, the following two chapters offer a new interpretative framework for Cicero and shed light on Roman philosophy beyond Cicero.

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[45] See, e.g., Gigon and Straume-Zimmermann 1996, ad Cotta's statement apud Lact. *Inst*. 2.3.2: "Da zeichnet sich ein Gegensatz zwischen esoterischem und exoterischem Verhalten ab, der mit dem in 3,5-7 dargelegten Gegensatz zwar nicht identisch ist, aber ihm doch nahe kommt."
[46] See, e.g., Wynne 2019, 41, 44 and Brittain and Osorio 2021, 29-30.

3. Chapter 2: The Esotericism of Epicurus in Cicero's *De natura deorum*

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I argue that Cotta presents a systematic account of Epicurus as an esoteric atheist as part of his argument against Epicurean theology. Epicurus, Cotta says, conceals his true atheism to avoid charges of impiety by the Athenian demos by creating a theology which he does not believe in at all, going so far as to write books as exoteric works purely to promote this protective screen around himself and his followers.[1] Moreover, Epicurus supposedly encodes ambiguity into works such as his *Kuriai doxai* (*KD*) in order to let careful readers discern his atheism.

This theory of Cotta's, furthermore, is not strictly necessary for his refutation of Velleius. Although it does serve the rhetorical function of asserting that Epicurus' theology is so incoherent that it can only be explicable as a mask for his atheism, his speech is already far longer than that of Velleius and even without the theory contains a withering exposé of the alleged incoherence of Epicurean theology. The theory's apparently superfluous character and the emphasis Cotta nevertheless puts on it make us ask why Cicero chooses to have Cotta thematize Epicurus' esotericism outside of the formal constraints of an Academic refutation.[2]

Accusations of atheism against Epicurus were ubiquitous from antiquity down to almost the present day. For Dirk Obbink, Epicurus' atheism is a myth. The origins of the idea arose from the polemical distortions of his school's opponents (Carneades could be the first to put forward the accusation) and eventually became a commonplace, a further weapon in the arsenal of those who wished to attack Epicurus for his hedonism and anti-providential and anti-teleological

[1] Marcus presents a version of this thesis in *De divinatione* (2.39-40).
[2] See Fott 2012, 169 ad *Div*. 1.8: "… Cicero does not claim that Cotta's entire purpose is refutation." See also ibid., 168.

atomistic physics.[3] Yet, in an influential interpretation of Epicurus' theology, Sedley argues that Epicurus does not believe the gods to be "biologically immortal beings" (what Sedley calls the "realist" as opposed to the "idealist" position) but only exist as images (like those of centaurs) deriving only from an innate human disposition to form a conception of blessed beings (this part is unique to images of the gods).[4] Sedley comes close to making precisely Cotta's argument by asserting that Epicurus presented his view of the gods as if they actually existed (as if he were a "realist") to avoid charges of atheism.[5] It is beyond the scope of this chapter to adjudicate between the idealist and realist interpretations of Epicurean theology.[6] Since, however, Cotta's interpretation of Epicurus has a close parallel in a contemporary interpretation of Epicurus by a leading scholar of Hellenistic philosophy, we should not dismiss it too quickly as a deliberate distortion even if cast in the rhetoric of invective.

Scholars who write on *DND* have not investigated why Cicero through Cotta inserts this extended exposition of Epicurus' esoteric atheism in the context of the work as a whole. Such an investigation is however necessary to appreciate the even broader thematization of esoteric and exoteric philosophy throughout the work, which extends far beyond Epicurus and his alleged motives for practicing esotericism. My analysis, then, of Epicurus' esoteric atheism as presented by Cotta serves the larger goal of elucidating the importance of esotericism in *DND* and builds the first step of my argument about esotericism and the end of the dialogue.

3.2 A Parallel Accusation: Arcesilas' Esoteric Dogmatism

An already established parallel accusation of esotericism between Hellenistic schools mirrors that of Cotta against Epicurus, rendering my reading of Cotta's accusation more

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[3] Obbink 1989.
[4] See again Sedley 2011, 29, 43 n. 38, 48-49. The thesis is first put forward in Long and Sedley 1987, 144-149.
[5] Sedley 2011, 50-52. See further Atkins 2020, 38-39 for the implications of Sedley's argument and potential parallels regarding Lucretius and atheism.
[6] See Konstan 2011 for a statement of the realist position contra Sedley.

plausible. Carlos Lévy traces the origins of a (for him specious) theory that Arcesilas, the one first responsible for the Academy's skeptical turn, actually used skepticism as an exoteric screen while maintaining the dogmatism of the Old Academy as a secret, esoteric teaching that he revealed only to select disciples.[7] The motive, according to the accusation, would be probative esotericism for a dogmatic content.

The theory originated with unknown opponents of the skeptical Academy in the generations after Arcesilas (his contemporaries Aristo and Timon limited their attacks to his unoriginality and his incoherence) and was also taken up by Diocles of Cnidus;[8] it endured down to Augustine, as mentioned above (2.2), and thence to a few contemporary scholars.[9] There are a few other relevant pieces of testimony for the theory,[10] but I will discuss only the most important passage, from Sextus Empiricus (*P*. 1.234),[11] to show what the theory entailed.

Sextus says the following about Arcesilas:

> εἰ δὲ δεῖ καὶ τοῖς περὶ αὐτοῦ λεγομένοις πιστεύειν, φασὶν ὅτι κατὰ μὲν τὸ πρόχειρον Πυρρώνειος ἐφαίνετο εἶναι, κατὰ δὲ τὴν ἀλήθειαν δογματικὸς ἦν· καὶ ἐπεὶ τῶν ἑταίρων ἀπόπειραν ἐλάμβανε διὰ τῆς ἀπορητικῆς, εἰ εὐφυῶς ἔχουσι πρὸς τὴν ἀνάληψιν τῶν Πλατωνικῶν δογμάτων, δόξαι αὐτὸν ἀπορητικὸν εἶναι, τοῖς μέντοι γε εὐφυέσι τῶν ἑταίρων τὰ Πλάτωνος παρεγχειρεῖν. ἔνθεν καὶ τὸν Ἀρίστωνα εἰπεῖν περὶ αὐτοῦ 'πρόσθε Πλάτων, ὄπιθεν Πύρρων, μέσσος Διόδωρος,' διὰ τὸ προσχρῆσθαι τῇ διαλεκτικῇ τῇ κατὰ τὸν Διόδωρον, εἶναι δὲ ἄντικρυς Πλατωνικόν.
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> But if it is necessary to trust even the things said about him [i.e., Arcesilas], they say that externally he appeared to be a Pyrrhonian, but in truth he was a dogmatist; and since he made trial of his comrades through his aporetic art [in order to see] whether they were naturally suited for the acquisition of Platonic doctrines, he seemed to be aporetic, and yet as a matter of fact entrusted Plato's teachings to those of his comrades who were naturally suited [for them]. For this reason they say that Aristo also said about him, 'Plato in front, Pyrrho in back, Diodorus in the middle,'[12] on account of the fact that he also used dialectics in line with Diodorus, but was totally Platonic. *(P*. 1.234)

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[7] Lévy 1978, 336.
[8] Ibid., 339-340.
[9] See again Aug. *Acad*. 3.37-42, cited at ibid., 344-345.
[10] Numen. fr. 25 Des Places = Eus. *PE* 14.5; Numen. fr. 27 Des Places = Eus. *PE* 14.8 (cited at Lévy 1978, 338-340).
[11] Cited at ibid., 337 n. 3.
[12] An adaptation of *Il*. 6.181 on the chimaera.

What is relevant for us here is that Sextus reports a theory according to which Arcesilas withheld his dogmatism and through his "aporetic art" (i.e., skeptical refutation) both made it seem like he was not a dogmatist and tested which students were suited to receive the hidden teaching.[13] The theory was likely contemporaneous with the generations following Arcesilas but still during the floruit of the skeptical Academy when the school would still have opposition from those like the Stoics.

Such accusations of esotericism (against both Arcesilas and Epicurus) only make sense if esotericism was a real phenomenon, just as the accusation of atheism only makes sense if there were actually atheists (like Diagoras, Prodicus, Critias, and the rest).[14] Esotericism was not only real, but also a well-known phenomenon, since it was actually more plausible to some than the shocking skepticism of Arcesilas or the unusual theology of Epicurus. Finally, this attack on Arcesilas likely predates the conversation of *DND*. If, then, Cotta is familiar with this line of attack on Arcesilas, the founder of his own school, which was levelled at him most likely by dogmatists, could he be turning the tables against the dogmatists by levelling the charge of esotericism against them instead? We can never know the answer to this speculative question, but this parallel accusation establishes a precedent for my reading of Cotta on Epicurus.

3.3 Cotta's Contradiction on Epicurus' Esoteric Atheism and Potential Solutions

Cotta's account of Epicurus' esoteric atheism contains a peculiarity. He first attributes the theory to others while denying it in his own name (1.85-86), but at the end of his speech he affirms the theory in his own name on the authority of Posidonius (1.123) and emphatically repeats his affirmation at the beginning of Book 3 (3.3). Older scholarship explains this apparent

[13] Porphyry also describes Pythagoras as testing students' natures in order to determine who is suited to receive his teaching (*VP* 13), a parallel example of the motive of probative esotericism.
[14] See, e.g., Henrichs 1978 on Prodicus' atheism.

contradiction between 1.85 and 1.123 as signaling Cicero's use of two different sources in the two passages, explicitly Book 5 of Posidonius' Περὶ θεῶν for 1.123 and likely a different Academic source at 1.85.[15] And yet, Cicero scholarship has now advanced beyond what Wynne terms "the *single source hypothesis*" which he characterizes as the view "that in most or all of his dialogues, for long stretches of prose and perhaps in whole speeches or even books, Cicero followed and translated a single source closely, making changes only where needed in order to retain a Roman setting."[16]

Thus, for this and other contradictions in Cicero's works it is better to look for Cicero's reasons for deliberately including the contradiction rather than assuming a blind dependence on his sources.[17] In one of the two passages, then, Cotta conceals the actual view he wishes to communicate to his interlocutors:[18] contradiction as a type of ambiguity is a method of esotericism. On this assumption, the following represent some important interpretive possibilities. Gigon and Straume-Zimmermann as well as Wynne take the accusation of atheism to be a mere rhetorical flourish at the end of his speech, with the statement at 1.85 representing his actual view.[19] Obbink and Andrew R. Dyck, however, take 1.85 to be the rhetorical passage, with the accusation of atheism being Cotta's genuine view.[20] Dyck's point is important, that the premise

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[15] E.g., Pease 1955-1958, ad 1.85. Gigon and Straume-Zimmerman (1996, ad 1.85) without necessarily affirming Cicero's being determined by a given source, signal that the thesis Cotta follows at 1.85 is likely that of Carneades, who also characterizes Epicurus as excessively pious (as Cotta does at 1.85-86) rather than as an atheist.

[16] Wynne 2019, 19. Emphasis is original. The hypothesis is dismissed already by Görler (1974, 9-10), but Wynne (2019, 18-28) offers a cogent refutation of it, including one of its ancillary theses used to explain Cicero's recourse to blind reliance on a Greek source, namely his haste in composing the dialogues of the 40s, which could also be used to attribute sloppy contradictions to Cicero. Rather, when Cicero draws on prior philosophic works he creatively refashions them for his own dramatic and philosophic purposes, and when borrowing a phrase or line of argument he would integrate it into the whole of his work (see also Harder 1971 [1929], 27; Begemann 2012, 21). This, I might add, resembles the practice of a Roman poet, who might allude to and even imitate for long stretches prior Greek and Latin poetry while maintaining his creative and intellectual originality (as Cicero surely did in his own poetry as well).

[17] See Atkins and Trotz-Liboff forthcoming on deliberate contradiction in Cicero. Görler (1974, 9) puts great emphasis on contradiction as an interpretative problem in Cicero.

[18] Cicero follows the law of non-contradiction (*Fat.* 37). Cf. *DND* 1.70 and *Fat.* 19 with Begemann 2012, 115.

[19] Gigon and Straume-Zimmerman 1996, ad 1.123; Wynne 2019, 83 n. 1.

[20] Obbink 1989, 209 n. 70 ad 1.85: "Cotta here accepts that Epicurus meant what he said about the gods, which *may* indicate a source different from 123, but Academic method certainly allows argumentation from one's opponent's premises …" (emphasis is original); Dyck 2003, ad 1.85: "The accusation of crypto-atheism was hinted at in §71 and will resurface at §§121b-124."

that Epicurean theology is so ridiculous that it cannot be Epicurus' actual view is already latent in Cotta's speech. Furthermore, as Obbink points out, Cotta often claims that Epicurean physics and theology implicitly remove the gods anyway (1.87ff., 115).[21] It is plausible, then, that, as Obbink says, at 1.85 Cotta argues from the Epicureans' own premise that the gods are real in order to show the incoherence of their position, but his own view comes out at the end of his speech (which was implicit throughout anyway, before and after 1.85). This would have the function of persuading both those who hold Epicurus to have a genuine theology and those who think him to be an esoteric atheist that his position is contemptible (incoherence on the one hand, cowardice and impiety on the other). Cotta, furthermore, wishes his interlocutors to accept esoteric atheism as his final view on the subject, as is clear from his repetition of the thesis at 3.3, an important detail all these scholars omit in their analysis of the relationship between 1.85 and 1.123.[22] Therefore, Cotta argues for Epicurus' esoteric atheism rather than his theism.[23] He reveals this accusation gradually over the course of his speech.[24] The following more detailed analysis of these passages will corroborate this interpretation.

3.4 Cotta's Theory of Epicurus' Esoteric Atheism

The first passage relating to the theory, 1.85-86, comes at the end of Cotta's refutation of the anthropomorphism Velleius attributed to the gods (76ff., 46-48 in Velleius' speech). Cotta says:

> Si igitur nec humano <visu>,[25] quod docui, nec tali aliquo, quod tibi ita persuasum est, quid dubitas negare deos esse? non audes. sapienter id quidem, etsi hoc loco non populum metuis sed ipsos deos. novi ego Epicureos omnia sigilla venerantes. Quamquam

[21] Obbink 1989, 209.
[22] See Wynne 2019, 83 n. 1: "*At one point*, Cotta agrees with Posidonius in doubting the sincerity Epicurus' theism." Emphasis is mine. This is not quite accurate, since he states the thesis twice rather than once (1.123; 3.3). Perhaps Wynne instead means "[a]t one point" in Cotta's speech in Book 1, but he still never discusses 3.3 in his book.
[23] Begemann (2012, 102), following Görler (1974, 45), emphasizes the apparent atheism of the Epicureans as Cotta's target.
[24] See Fott 2012, 162.
[25] Following the reading of Aldus Manutius, accepted by Dyck (2003), the easiest emendation of *usu* of the *deteriores* (see Pease 1955-1958, ad loc.).

> video non nullis videri Epicurum, ne in offensionem Atheniensium caderet, verbis reliquisse deos re sustulisse. itaque in illis selectis eius brevibusque sententiis, quas appellatis κυρίας δόξας, haec ut opinor prima sententia est: 'quod beatum et inmortale est id nec habet nec exhibet cuiquam negotium'; in hac ita exposita sententia sunt qui existiment, quod ille inscitia plane loquendi fecerit, fecisse consulto: de homine minime vafro male existimant. dubium est enim utrum dicat aliquid esse beatum et inmortale an si quod sit id esse tale. non animadvertunt hic eum ambigue locutum esse, sed multis aliis locis et illum et Metrodorum tam aperte quam paulo ante te.
>
> If, then, the gods are neither of human appearance, as I have shown, nor of some such appearance [i.e., like the celestial gods mentioned at 1.84], that which you are persuaded of in this way, why do you hesitate to deny that the gods exist? You do not dare to. And this [you do] wisely, even if on this topic you do not fear the people but the gods themselves. I know of Epicureans who worship all [kinds of] figurines. I see, however, that to some Epicurus seems to have let the gods remain in words but to have abolished them in point of fact lest he incur the offense of the Athenians. And thus in those curated and short maxims of his, which you call *Kuriai doxai*, the following, I suppose, is the first maxim: 'that which is blessed and immortal, this thing neither has trouble nor provides it to another'; there are those who judge that in this maxim thus set forth he did on purpose that which he did out of lack of skill in speaking clearly: they judge poorly about [or 'think poorly of'] a man who is not at all subtle. For it is uncertain whether he says that there is something blessed and immortal or he says that if there is something [blessed and immortal] it is of this sort. They do not notice that here he has spoken ambiguously, but that in many other passages both he and Metrodorus spoke as openly as you did just a little while ago. (1.85-86)

Cotta asserts that because he has shown that it is impossible for the gods to have human form and because Velleius does not think they can have any other form, Velleius has no reason to hesitate to deny the gods' existence. He simply does not dare to do so (*non audes*). Cotta already implies that Velleius and the Epicureans refrain from denying the existence of the gods out of fear, but then pivots to saying that this is because of their excessively superstitious fear of the gods rather than their fear of the people's reaction to their impiety. Cotta then explains the view of others, that he almost affirmed himself, according to which Epicurus only spoke about the gods to avoid arousing the Athenians' hatred. This, as noted, turns out to be the view of Posidonius (1.123).

The phrase "into the hatred of the Athenians" (*in offensionem <u>Atheniensium</u>*) creates an important connection to an earlier passage in Book 1 (cf. also *Q. Fr.* 3.5.2), where Cotta explains how the impiety trial of Protagoras for his agnosticism, resulting in his exile from Athens and the burning of his works in the popular assembly "at the decree of the Athenians" (*<u>Atheniensium</u>*

iussu), made "many more hesitant to express this opinion [i.e., atheism], since as a matter of fact not even doubt [about the gods] had been able to escape punishment" (1.63).[26] Cotta draws this conclusion about the effects of Protagoras' impiety trial in his own name (*equidem existimo*, 63). The presentation, then, at 1.85 of Epicurus' concealed atheism places him among the "many" who feared openly professing their atheism in Athens following Protagoras' trial, i.e., those who practiced esotericism for self-defense.[27] Cotta's use of the same verb for the hidden atheism of Epicurus as that for the open atheism of Diagoras and Theodorus corroborates that the hidden position is indeed outright atheism (*deos re sustullisse*, 85 vs. *aperte deorum naturam sustulerunt*, 63).

But this fear did not silence him completely, for, according to the theory that for the moment Cotta foists on others, Epicurus wrote *KD* 1 ambiguously to communicate his true atheism to those who could discern it. Cotta's Latin translates the Greek from the opening clause of the maxim: Τὸ μακάριον καὶ ἄφθαρτον οὔτε αὐτὸ πράγματα ἔχει οὔτε ἄλλῳ παρέχει … ("The blessed and the indestructible neither has trouble [or 'matters of care'] itself nor provides it to another"). The argument is that the maxim could be read as a conditional rather than a declarative sentence: "if there is something blessed and indestructible/immortal, then it neither has trouble itself nor provides it to another." Then the following would be left unexpressed: "but there is

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[26] *… tardioris ad hanc sententiam profitendam multos esse factos, quippe cum poenam ne dubitatio quidem effugere potuisset*.

[27] Cotta's remark that Protagoras was "perhaps the greatest sophist of that time" (*sophistes temporibus illis vel maximus*, 1.63) serves to show just how dangerous doubting or denying the existence of the gods was (see Sedley 2014): even a respected sophist like Protagoras, who associated with and offered lessons to the toast of Athenian elite society, as depicted in Plato's *Protagoras*, and who was even entrusted with drafting the law code of the Athenian colony Thurii (DL 9.50), could not escape persecution once he revealed his position on theology. The implication is that those of lesser stature would have to be extremely careful about denying the existence of the gods. See also Pease 1955-1958, ad loc.: "[F]rom the social and political aspects of religion, as guaranteeing the sanctity of oaths and hence the stability of society, agnosticism would appear only a degree less subversive than would actual atheism." Even if one doubts the historicity of Protagoras' impiety trial (see Dover 1976), which is widely accepted as in fact taking place c. 416 (see Derenne 1930, 45-55; Dodds 1951, 189; McDowell 1978, 201), what matters is that Cicero and others think that it took place. Note that the date of 416 would coincide with the impiety trials surrounding the profanation of the Eleusinian mysteries and the mutilation of the herms (see Th. 6.27; Andoc. *Myst*.; Furley 1996) as well as the dramatic date of the *Symposium* (Nails 2002, 314-315) and the launching of the Sicilian Expedition (Th. 6.1).

nothing that is blessed and indestructible/immortal." Cotta's translation into Latin makes his position easier to argue. His translation "that which is blessed and immortal, this thing neither has trouble nor provides it to another" turns the substantive neuter singular adjectives τὸ μακάριον καὶ ἄφθαρτον into a relative clause: *quod beatum et inmortale est* … This makes it easier to claim that it could be read as a conditional clause because Latin (and Greek) generalizing relative clauses often take on the form and virtual meaning of a conditional.[28] Nevertheless, even on the basis of the Greek alone one could argue that Epicurus could have disambiguated his point by creating a complete syllogism such as the following: "The gods exist, and they are blessed and indestructible. But the blessed and indestructible neither has trouble itself nor provides it to another. Therefore, the gods neither have trouble themselves nor provide it to another."

One might object that, as a maxim to be learned by heart, Epicurus would not have wanted a perfect syllogism but a memorable pithy phrase (see *Fin*. 2.20) and that in any case even what could appear syllogistic in Epicurus' writings operates under a different mode of demonstration.[29] But this is not Cotta's objection, for he affirms that Epicurus "spoke ambiguously here" as opposed to other passages where his meaning was clear. He here attributes the ambiguity to Epicurus' supposed ignorance of dialectics and formal logic (see also 1.89; *Luc*. 97; *Ac*. 1.5; *Fin*. 1.22; 2.26; but cf. *Div*. 2.103). The interpretation of *KD* 1 nevertheless shows something important about what Cotta and others take one method of philosophic esoteric writing to be. A philosopher writes a statement with deliberate ambiguity. The most obvious meaning conforms with dominant and acceptable views, such as the gods' existence, while a less obvious but still plausible meaning betrays a heterodox and subversive message and, in the case of atheism, one that could cause the author to run afoul of the regime, even to the point of losing his

[28] See Allen and Greenough 2006, § 519: "A clause introduced by a Relative Pronoun or a Relative Adverb may express a condition and take any of the constructions of Protasis … The relative in this construction is always indefinite in *meaning*, and very often in *form*." Emphasis is original. See further Kühner-Stegmann 1971, II.430-431.
[29] See Clay 1983, 70.

or her life. This deliberate use of ambiguity fits with Cicero's extensive analysis elsewhere of ambiguity and the problem it poses for interpretation.[30]

According to Cotta, Epicurus also puts forward an exoteric theology in addition to hiding his atheism.[31] Before arguing for Epicurus' esoteric atheism in his own name at 1.123, Cotta elaborates on Epicurus' methods of promoting this exoteric teaching (while further insinuating that Epicurean theology and physics amounts to atheism in any case, see 87-88, 105, 109-110): Epicurus composed whole works only to seem more pious than he was and, given Cotta's later acceptance of the esoteric atheism theory, to put forward a theology to mask his atheism. After his arguments against the immortality and the happiness of Epicurean gods, Cotta imagines an Epicurean objection and gives his response:

> 'At etiam de sanctitate de pietate adversus deos libros scripsit Epicurus.' At quo modo in his loquitur: ut <Ti.> Coruncanium aut P. Scaevolam pontifices maximos te audire dicas, non eum qui sustulerit omnem funditus religionem nec manibus ut Xerses sed rationibus deorum inmortalium templa et aras everterit. quid est cur deos ab hominibus colendos dicas, cum dei non modo homines non colant sed omnino nihil curent nihil agant?
>
> 'But Epicurus also wrote books concerning holiness [and] piety towards the gods.' But how does he speak in these books? In such a way that you would say you are listening to the *pontifices maximi* Tiberius Coruncanius and Publius Scaevola, not he who completely destroyed all religion, and who not with his hands like Xerxes but with arguments overturned the temples and altars of the immortal gods. For what reason do you say that the gods must be worshipped by humans, when the gods not only do not cherish humans, but do not in any way care for anything [or] do anything? (1.115)

For Cotta, Epicureans use works such as Epicurus' *On Holiness* (attested along with *On the Gods* at DL 10.27) to claim that Epicurus was a pious theist. But, Cotta counters, Epicurus actually

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[30] See *Inv*. 1.17-18; 2.116-120; *De orat*. 1.140; 2.110-111, 253; *Part*. 108, 132-139; *Brut*. 152-153; *Orat*. 121; *Div*. 2.115; *Top*. 96. See further Atkins and Trotz-Liboff forthcoming. Ambiguity as a method of esoteric writing finds a parallel in deliberate obscurity. While Cotta here attributes the ambiguity to Epicurus' "lack of skill in speaking clearly" (*inscitia plane loquendi*), those who advance the theory say that "he did it on purpose" (*fecisse consulto*). The use of the adverb *consulto* here of Epicurus' deliberate concealment of his meaning links Epicurus' ambiguity to the famous deliberate obscurity of Heraclitus (see *consulto* of Heraclitus, at 1.74). See further 3.35; *Fin*. 2.15; Arist. *Rh*. 1407b11-18; DL 9.6). In *De inventione* Cicero explicitly links ambiguity and obscurity (2.116).

[31] I am not the first to use the esoteric/exoteric distinction in describing this view of Epicurus. The first editors of Philodemus' *De pietate* in 1810 said, "The atheism of the Epicureans seems not to have been questioned by any men of learning, though *their exoteric doctrines* were so well disguised as not to offend the multitude." Emphasis is mine. Quoted at Obbink 1989, 187 n. 2. In 1810 these editors seemed to take the esoteric/exoteric distinction for granted.

affects religious language so as to sound like a high priest in these works when in reality he has destroyed religion with his arguments.[32] Presumably, such works filled with adoration of the gods would make it even harder to charge Epicurus with impiety or atheism. But even here, before agreeing with Posidonius, Cotta implies that Epicurus not only destroys traditional religion, but is an atheist. He does so by his use of *sustulerit* ("destroyed") the same verb of the open atheists at 1.63 and of the atheism attributed to Epicurus by others at 1.85.[33]

At the end of Book 1 Cotta links this presentation of Epicurus' exoteric writings to his first open acceptance of the esoteric atheism theory he discussed at 1.85-86. He remarks:

> Quod ni ita sit, quid veneramur quid precamur deos, cur sacris pontifices cur auspiciis augures praesunt, quid optamus a deis inmortalibus quid vovemus? 'At etiam liber est Epicuri de sanctitate.' Ludimur ab homine non tam faceto quam ad scribendi licentiam libero. quae enim potest esse sanctitas si dii humana non curant, quae autem animans natura nihil curans? Verius est igitur nimirum illud quod familiaris omnium nostrum Posidonius disseruit in libro quinto de natura deorum, nullos esse deos Epicuro videri, quaeque is de deis inmortalibus dixerit invidiae detestandae gratia dixisse; neque enim tam disipiens fuisset ut homunculi similem deum fingeret, liniamentis dumtaxat extremis non habitu solido, membris hominis praeditum omnibus usu membrorum ne minimo quidem, exilem quendam et perlucidum, nihil cuiquam tribuentem nihil gratificantem, omnino nihil curantem nihil agentem. quae natura primum nulla esse potest, idque videns Epicurus re tollit oratione relinquit deos; deinde si maxime talis est deus ut nulla gratia nulla hominum caritate teneatur, valeat – quid enim dicam 'propitius sit'; esse enim propitius potest nemini, quoniam ut dicitis omnis in inbecillitate est et gratia et caritas.
>
> Unless this is so [that the gods cherish each other and provide for humans], why do we worship the gods? Why do we pray to them? Why do the *pontifices* oversee rites? Why do the augurs oversee auspices? What do we desire from the gods? What do we dedicate to them? 'But there is also a book by Epicurus *On Holiness*.' We are made the sport of a man who is not so much witty as licentious with regards to his boldness in writing. For what holiness can there be if the gods do not care for human affairs, and what living nature can there be which cares for nothing? It is, therefore, doubtless truer that which Posidonius, a friend to us all, argued in Book 5 of his *De natura deorum*, that no gods seemed to exist to Epicurus, and that what he said about the immortal gods he said for the sake of warding off hatred; for nor could there have been someone so stupid as to fashion a god similar to a wretched human, a god who was endowed only with an external silhouette but not with a solid condition, endowed with all the limbs of a human but not

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[32] Cf. Mandel 1983-1984, 86 on Roman authors' use of pious language while not necessarily being religious.
[33] Gigon and Straume-Zimmermann (1996, ad loc.) also interpret this passage to argue for Epicurus' deliberately concealed atheism, but I disagree with their claim that Cotta has "forgotten" what he said at 1.85-86: "Es soll einfach gezeigt werden, daß Epikur ein reiner Atheist war, aber nicht wagte, dies öffentlich einzugestehen; die Ausführungen I,85-86 scheinen vergessen zu sein."

> even the least use of limbs, a certain slight and translucent god, one who bestows nothing on anyone, one who grants no favors, caring for nothing at all [and] doing nothing. First of all, there can be no nature such as this, and because Epicurus sees this, he abolishes the gods in point of fact but leaves them in speech. Then, if granting there is a god of such a sort that he is held by no favor or affection of humans, goodbye to him! For why should I say 'let him be favorable'? For he cannot be favorable to anybody, since, as you say, both all favor and affection is a sign of weakness. (1.122-124)

Cotta outlines how a view of uncaring gods would render traditional Roman cult meaningless, including the offices of pontifex and augur to which he and Cicero were elected respectively. Then he returns to the Epicurean objection involving Epicurus' religious works. For Cotta, Epicurus' "boldness in writing" (*scribendi licentiam*) consists in writing a work *On Holiness*, when he well knows that holiness by its (implicitly Stoic) definition (cf. 2.153) makes no sense if the gods do not care, and in expecting his readers to be deceived into believing that this is his actual position.[34] His boldness consists in writing books in the exoteric manner described at 1.115.

This incoherence regarding holiness leads Cotta into his open acceptance of Posidonius' theory, which contains the most explicit statement of Epicurus' esoteric atheism yet and a concise summary of the reasons given for Epicurus' concealment at 1.85. The vague "some people" (*non nullis*) at 1.85 is now specified as Posidonius. At 1.85 Cotta also placed the interpretation of the ambiguity of *KD* 1 (1.85-86) alongside the accusation of esoteric atheism, as a sort of explanation (*itaque*) of how Epicurus proceeded in his writings given his atheist commitments. Given Cotta's endorsement of the esoteric atheist theory it seems likely that he also endorses the interpretation of *KD* 1 and Epicurus' manner of writing too, especially because of the intervening attribution of exoteric religious writing to Epicurus in Cotta's own name (1.115, 122).

[34] ὁσιότης, the word *sanctitas* translates for Epicurus' book title is defined as "justice towards gods" (δικαιοσύνη … πρὸς θεούς) by the Stoics (*SVF* II 1017 = SE *M*. 9.124, cited at Wynne 2019, 279). See also Pl. *Euthphr*. 12e5-8. It does not make sense to speak of being just towards a god who neither notices any human actions nor is affected by them.

Now, Cotta adduces as evidence for Posidonius' theory the incoherence of Epicurus' anthropomorphic gods, who do not care for humans. Cotta suggests that the incoherence of his theology does not result from Epicurus' stupidity (*nec tam insipiens fuisset*) or sloppy argumentation (*inscitia plane loquendi*, 1.85). Rather, Epicurus works under the constraints of his atomistic physics and his hedonistic ethics to create these exoteric gods. Their immortality must be explained in a world where everything else comes to be and perishes through the constant random combination and separation of atoms and, as perfectly happy, the gods must exemplify Epicurus' hedonistic ethics by not caring for one another or for themselves while experiencing maximal pleasure. And, on the theory of esoteric atheism, Epicurus presumably fashioned the gods in human form to make his theology more compatible with traditional religious cult. The result is a ridiculous impossibility (cf. 71), but it is not clear that Cotta thinks Epicurus could have done a better job at fashioning an exoteric theology given the constraints he was under. It certainly would have been easier for Velleius to admit ignorance about the exact functioning of this theology (84), but the answer to Cotta's repeated question "Why do you not deny that the gods exist?" (85; see also 88) is, Cotta suggests, that it is simply too dangerous.[35] Epicurus sees the incoherence (*idque videns Epicurus*) but still lets the gods remain in his speech.

The final sentence of Cotta's speech (and thus of Book 1) quoted above could at first appear to be yet another reversal by Cotta on the status of Epicurus' atheism. Why does he suddenly start to argue against Epicurean theology as if Epicurus did hold these gods to be real? The phrasing of the sentence, however, indicates that he still holds Epicurus to be an atheist, but is granting for the sake of argument that, even if Epicurus' gods do exist, humans could completely ignore them and thus it would be as if they did not exist.[36] Such concessions to a

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[35] See Altman 2016, 165 ad 1.123: "… [Velleius'] master's atheism, Cotta has suggested through Posidonius, is both deliberate and political …"

[36] See Pease's (1955-1958, ad loc.) paraphrase: "i.e., granted for the sake of argument that the god is ever so much (*maxime*) of the sort that Epicurus describes, then good-bye to him."

differing viewpoint, furthermore, support an important argumentative function, as indicated above. Cotta offers persuasive arguments against Epicurean theology regardless of one's views on Epicurus' esoteric atheism. He argues against the value of both the esoteric and the exoteric teachings.[37]

Cotta's emphasis on Epicurus' esoteric atheism finds confirmation in his repetition of the theory at the beginning of Book 3. As discussed above, scholars are left in a quandary as to which statement should be taken more seriously between 1.85 and 1.123. Even on the evidence of Book 1 alone Cotta's denial of the theory at 1.85 seems like an anomaly given his persistent insinuations of the atheistic implications of Epicurean physics, his theory of Epicurus' exoteric religious writing, and agreement with the theory at the end of the book. But Cotta's following statement in response to Velleius' query as to why Cotta will deal with Balbus differently from him leaves little doubt that Epicurus' esoteric atheism is Cotta's final word on the subject:

> Quia mihi videtur Epicurus vester de dis immortalibus non magnopere pugnare: tantum modo negare deos esse non audet, ne quid invidiae subeat aut criminis; cum vero deos nihil agere nihil curare confirmat, membrisque humanis esse praeditos sed eorum membrorum usum nullum habere, ludere videtur satisque putare si dixerit esse quandam beatam naturam et aeternam.
>
> Because your Epicurus seems to me not to put up much of a fight about the immortal gods: he only does not dare to deny that there are gods, lest he suffer any hatred or accusation; when, however, he affirms that the gods do nothing [and] care for nothing, and that they are endowed with human limbs but have no use for these limbs, he seems to make sport of us and to think that it is enough if he has said that there is some blessed and eternal nature. (3.3)

Most of this statement repeats Cotta's earlier arguments about Epicurus' esoteric atheism, but he adds a significant detail. Whereas he repeats from 1.123 Epicurus' goal of avoiding hatred (*invidia*) through his procedure (cf. 1.13), he adds that he also wishes to avoid a formal

[37] There is a parallel in the case of the Academic speaker of the *Tusculans*: M. makes the case against the fear of death on the hypotheses of both the immortality and the mortality of the soul in order to persuade his interlocutor regardless of the interlocutor's ultimate conviction on this related but highly controversial matter (1.78, 117-119).

accusation (*crimen*), doubtless for impiety, much like that which befell Protagoras (1.63) and, of course, Socrates (3.82; *Tusc*. 1.97) at the hands of the Athenians.[38]

To sum up, Epicurus has two methods to avoid hatred and religious prosecution according to Cotta. One is to write ambiguous statements like that at *KD* 1, and the other is to compose exoteric works that exist purely to promote this exoteric view of himself. Cotta's theory finds another parallel in Cicero's works. As mentioned above (1.3.1), his Marcus elsewhere says that Aristotle's and other Peripatetics' "exoteric" books (ἐξωτερικόν) are "written in a popular manner" (*populariter scriptum*) and may contain teachings differing from those of his esoteric works: because of these "two kinds of books" (*duo genera librorum*) the Peripatetics "do not always seem to say the same thing" (*non semper idem dicere videntur*) about the *summum bonum* (*Fin*. 5.12; cf. *Att*. 4.16.2).[39]

Cotta provides an extended discussion of another philosopher's esotericism. Epicureans were persecuted for their hedonism and, at least in the case of Philodemus, for impiety.[40] In fact, Cicero elsewhere suggests that Epicureans should—or even already do—maintain an esoteric/exoteric distinction regarding their hedonistic ethics and concomitant attitude towards political life. Epicurean esotericism extends beyond theological problems. A brief survey of three statements to this effect in chronological order will show that Epicurus' esoteric atheism points to the broader significance of the linkage of esotericism and Epicureanism for Cicero's thought.

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[38] In his *De pietate*, Philodemus denies Epicurus' atheism (e.g., col. 17 Obbink) but does contrast Epicurus and Socrates: both had heterodox views about the divine but Epicurus avoided giving offense to the Athenians while Socrates did not (cols. 53-56, 58). See further Blank 2019, 84-85.

[39] Note that here I am not offering any judgment on the difference between Aristotle's exoteric dialogues and his esoteric treatises, but only about how Cicero presents them. For Cicero's own use of "popular" writing see *Leg*. 1.19; *Parad*. 4; *Off*. 2.35.

[40] See Obbink 1989, 204; Sedley 2011, 50 n. 59.

3.5 Cicero on Epicurean Esotericism in His Other Works

First, in *De oratore* Crassus tells his interlocutors (among whom is Cotta as a young man):

> … tantumque eos admoneamus, ut illud, etiam si est verissimum, tacitum tamen tamquam mysterium teneant, quod negant versari in re publica esse sapientis. nam si hoc nobis atque optimo cuique persuaserint, non poterunt ipsi esse, id quod maxime cupiunt, otiosi.
>
> … but let us only warn them [i.e., the Epicureans], that they should however keep this teaching silent just like a mystery, even if it is most true, namely the fact that they deny that it belongs to the wise man to take part in politics. For if they persuade us and the best citizens of this, they themselves will not be able to be at leisure, that which they desire most of all. (*De orat.* 3.64)[41]

And then in *De legibus*, Marcus says of the Epicureans:

> Sibi autem indulgentes et corpori deservientes, atque omnia quae sequantur in vita quaeque fugiant voluptatibus et doloribus ponderantes, etiamsi vera dicunt (nihil enim opus est hoc loco litibus), in hortulis suis iubeamus dicere atque ab omni societate reipublicae, cuius partem nec norunt ullam neque umquam nosse voluerunt, paulisper facessant rogemus.
>
> As for those who delight themselves and are subject to their bodies, and who weigh out by pleasure and pain everything they pursue and flee in life, even if they speak the truth (for there is no need for disputes at this point), let us bid them say all of this in their little gardens and let them retire for a little while from all association with the republic, of which they neither know anything[42] nor ever wished to know anything. (*Leg*. 1.39)

And finally in *De finibus* Marcus tells the Epicurean Torquatus:

> Dic in conventu te omnia facere ne doleas … Eamne rationem igitur sequere qua tecum ipse et cum tuis utare, profiteri et in medium proferre non audeas? At vero illa quae Peripatetici, quae Stoici dicunt, semper tibi in ore sunt in iudiciis, in senatu … Vide igitur ne non debeas verbis nostris uti, sententiis tuis. Quod si vultum tibi, si incessum fingeres quo gravior viderere, non esses tui similis: verba tu fingas et ea dicas quae non sentias? aut etiam, ut vestitum sic sententiam habeas aliam domesticam, aliam forensem, ut in fronte ostentatio sit, intus veritas occultetur?
>
> [Go on,] declare in an assembly that you do everything lest you feel pain … Do you, then, follow this doctrine which you yourself make use of with yourself and with your friends, but which you do not dare bring out into the open? But certainly those words which the Peripatetics, those words which the Stoics utter, are always on your lips during

[41] See Atkins and Trotz-Liboff forthcoming for further analysis of this passage.
[42] See *TLL*, s.v. *pars*, II.A.c.β.

> trials and in the senate … See to it, then, that you are not obliged to use our words, but your thoughts. But if you were to simulate your countenance or your gait in order that you might seem more dignified, you would not be similar to yourself. Would you alter your words and say that which you do not think? Or also, like an article of clothing, thus would you have one way of thinking at home, and another in the forum, with the result that on the outside there is a deceitful show, but on the inside the truth is hidden? (*Fin*. 2.76-77)

Preceding the first passage from *De oratore*, Crassus identifies the Epicureans by their "defense of pleasure" (*patrocinium voluptatis*, 3.63), but the focus on what needs to be kept secret is the teaching that the wise man will not take part in politics. Epicurean withdrawal from politics, however, stems from the view that involvement in politics spoils "freedom from mental disturbance" (ἀταραξία) which is necessary for pleasure as defined by the absence of pain, and so stems from Epicurean hedonism (see Epicur. *Men*. 127-132; Lucr. 5.1117-1135; *Fin*. 1.37-39).

In the second passage, from *De legibus*, the doctrine of pleasure itself and the hedonist calculus it entails must be kept secret. Whereas in the first passage the teaching about political withdrawal was the secret, here Marcus actually recommends political withdrawal for the Epicureans. In addition to treating the problem of their self-serving hedonism, this recommendation presumably also aims at mitigating the deleterious effects of their conventionalism, which, as Marcus argues extensively in *De legibus* Book 1, opposes the natural basis of law (*lex*) and right (*ius*) and removes virtue from politics, leaving in its place an empty simulacrum (1.31-32, 40-52).[43] In these two passages, key elements of Epicurean philosophy which scholars today agree to be actual Epicurean teachings are what must be kept secret.[44]

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[43] From the sophists Epicurus inherited conventionalism as a significant element of his thought and Epicureanism was the Hellenistic school which upheld the mantle of this doctrine down to Cicero's day and beyond (see Farrington 1939, 94; Strauss 1953, 109-113; Long 2018, 104-108; cf. Sedley 2014, 342-346). Epicurus' conventionalism is evident in *KD* 31-38 (see also Lucr. 5.1023). *KD* 33 is particularly instructive: Οὐκ ἦν τι καθ᾽ ἑαυτὸ δικαιοσύνη, ἀλλ᾽ ἐν ταῖς μετ᾽ ἀλλήλων συστροφαῖς καθ᾽ ὁπηλίκους δή ποτε ἀεὶ τόπους συνθήκη τις ὑπὲρ τοῦ μὴ βλάπτειν μηδὲ βλάπτεσθαι ("There is not in any way justice in itself, but it is some compact in meetings with one another at places of any size at all [and] at all times for the sake of not harming and not being harmed"). As Guthrie notes (1971, 136), συνθήκη ("compact") is a keyword for sophistic conventionalism, so its use in this maxim creates a strong link back to the sophists. In addition to the passage from *De legibus* already cited, Cicero shows his awareness of Epicurean conventionalism in *De finibus* (2.69-77) and the *Lucullus* (139-140).

[44] In the *Tusculans*, Cicero says that, while the philosophers inspired by Socrates kept silent, the Epicurean C. Amafinius revealed his philosophy to all by writing in Latin (4.6). Epicureans may need to become esoteric again.

In the third and final passage, from *De finibus*, Marcus argues that Roman Epicureans actually already do by necessity practice a sort of esotericism and exotericism insofar as they participate in political life. They cannot openly declare their hedonism (*non audeas* parallels *non audes* at *DND* 1.85), and by extension their reduction of everything to calculations about self-interest[45] (made explicit in what my first ellipsis passes over).[46] As Romans, in public they must employ the terms used by Peripatetics and Stoics, such as "duty" (*officium*), "the morally right" (*honesta*), and the need to die for the republic (*mori pro patria*) (see the list passed over by my second ellipsis). This analysis of actual Epicurean practice, furthermore, is quite an explicit statement on the esotericism/exotericism distinction. For the Epicureans Marcus says there is one "way of thinking" (*sententia*) at home and one in the forum.[47] "At home" must also include conversations with other Epicureans or in an Epicurean school (or at the least with another philosophically-minded individual). That is when one could express Epicurean sentiments safely to another capable of understanding them. This aligns with the most literal and straightforward definition of oral esotericism and exotericism: Epicureans say one thing in private and one thing in public: "on the outside there is a deceitful show, but on the inside the truth is hidden." Marcus seems to disapprove of this type of esotericism, for reasons we will soon see.

These three passages show that the theory of esoteric atheism presents a systematic investigation of a phenomenon Cicero repeatedly ascribes to the Epicureans throughout his philosophical and rhetorical oeuvre. The *De oratore* and *De legibus* passages suggest that if a

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[45] See also Cicero's letter to Trebatius in February of 53 about the latter's Epicureanism: *sed quonam modo ius civile defendes cum omnia tua causa facias, non civium?* ("But how in the world will you defend the civil law when you do everything for your own sake, [and] not for the sake of the citizens?", *Fam*. 7.12). Cited at Minyard 1985, 32 n. 17.
[46] Cf. Henry Sidgwick, from *The Methods of Ethics* (quoted at Parfit 2011, xxxviii): "Thus the Utilitarian conclusion, carefully stated, would seem to be this: that the opinion that secrecy may render an action right which would not otherwise be so should itself be kept comparatively secret; and similarly it seems expedient that the doctrine that esoteric morality is expedient should itself be kept esoteric."
[47] The Stoics face an almost identical problem, even if their words are more in line with Roman ideals. See *Fin*. 4.22: *Quae est igitur ista philosophia quae communi more in foro loquitur, in libellis suo?* ("What then is that philosophy which speaks by common custom in the forum, [but] by its own custom in books?")

philosophic school promotes hedonism and withdrawal from political life, even if such views are true (*etiam si est verissimum*; *etiamsi vera dicunt*), such philosophers should not spread them because they will damage both the republic and the philosophers themselves (i.e., a recommendation for other-regarding and self-defensive esotericism): political instability will ruin political life and the calm Epicureans require to philosophize. The question of truth is bracketed and the focus is on the salutary or pernicious effects philosophic doctrines can have on a political community and the philosophers themselves. In the final passage, from *De finibus*, Marcus also indicates a problem if the Epicureans do not merely go into retirement and conceal their doctrines, but also remain in public life and are compelled to utter opinions contrary to their true convictions.[48] Marcus disapproves of this form of esotericism because it would mean that some Roman politicians do not serve public utility, but their own good, and because of their dissimulation it will be impossible to tell the genuine politicians apart from the fake. Perhaps Epicurean politicians' intellectual sophistication will make them even harder to tell apart from an average power-seeker (Caesar's Epicurean sympathies come to mind, cf. Sal. *Cat*. 51.20).[49] This dissimulation no longer concerns personal or public safety, but serves personal gain. Thus it forms a sharp contrast in most respects with the esotericism practiced by Cicero in *DND*.

3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown that Epicurus' esoteric atheism forms a key part of Cotta's response to Velleius. Cotta's version of Epicurus' esoteric atheism has a dogmatic propositional statement ("the gods do not exist") as its content, and so the method can be to use ambiguity to hint at the propositional statement as well as feigned religious language to hide it. His motive is to

[48] Cf. Begemann 2012, 102-103 on Velleius' involvement in politics.
[49] Begemann (ibid., 133) explains that Cicero must reject Epicureanism because it sets the individual ahead of the community, seeing the example of Caesar in his time. See further Minyard 1985, 17-22 and Volk 2022, 75-78. See also Cic. *Pis*. 68-72. The existence of "the Epicurean tyrant Aristion (88-86 [BCE])" (Sedley 1998, 62) shows that in practice Epicurean tyranny is possible.

avoid persecution for himself and his followers (self-defensive and other-regarding esotericism). Bringing out Cotta's interpretation of Epicurus serves two purposes for my argument: first, Cotta's Epicurus helps confirm the importance of esotericism for Cicero generally, especially given the parallel treatment of Epicurean esotericism in other works; second, seeing how Cotta critiques Epicurus will allow us to understand Cotta's own position better, and the problems Cicero sees in it which leads him to favor Balbus at the end of the work.

4. Chapter 3: Philosophic Esotericism and the End of Cicero's *De natura deorum*

4.1 Introduction

With Cotta's theory of Epicurus' esoteric atheism in view, we can begin interpreting the end of the dialogue. As explained above (2.2), this takes the form of answering two question: "Why not Cotta?" and "Why Balbus?" The answers to these two questions depend on the different views on esotericism that the two speakers have and how they relate to Cicero's own esotericism. Cotta's esotericism ends up being too similar to that of Epicurus, since he is an esoteric agnostic and, like Epicurus, views all political institutions, including traditional religion, to be complete falsehoods instituted only to maintain political order. Yet, again like Epicurus, he feigns religious belief. Balbus, by contrast, believes that political institutions, though potentially containing an exoteric component, are founded on philosophic principles. This is closer to Cicero's own view, and he also supports Balbus' position because it leaves room for virtue in political life and hence maintenance of the regime better than Cotta's version of esotericism.

These differences relate to views by Cotta, Balbus, and Cicero on what we might call "civil religion." Rousseau coins the term "*la religion civile*" in his *Social Contract* (4.8) for the use of religion for political stability apart from its truth status.[1] As Atkins notes, Rousseau reinstates the notion familiar from Varro of a "civil theology" (*theologia civilis*), to which I will return below (4.3.2).[2] In what follows I will use "civil religion" as a broader term for religion which supports a regime and "civil theology" in the more restricted sense of the tripartite theology expounded by Varro and other ancient authors. Civil religion relates to esoteric philosophy because, unless the public religion is identical to philosophers' theological views,

[1] See Rousseau 1959-1995 [1762], III.460.
[2] Atkins 2017, 136.

philosophers must hide their views in order not to endanger civil religion (i.e., other-regarding and/or control-based esotericism).

4.2 "Why Not Cotta?": The Problem of Cotta's Esoteric Agnosticism and Conventionalism

4.2.1 Introductory Overview

I summarize Cotta's position against Velleius and Balbus as follows: the Epicurean and Stoic attempts to construct a rationalized theology which can still support Roman religion are internally inconsistent and thus weaken Roman religion rather than strengthen it.[3] Cotta's attack on reason (*ratio*) itself in Book 3 (3.67ff.; cf. 63) shows that reason is too weak to replace religion with a rationalized theology (and reason is an evil rather than a good). Traditional religion, therefore, must simply be affirmed on the basis of authority rather than philosophic argument (see 9). Thus, the Epicureans and especially the Stoics are mistaken in thinking they can salvage Roman religion through their systems—they actually destroy it by exposing not only their own philosophical incoherence but also the illogical character of traditional religion itself.

This analysis of Cotta's position largely agrees with that of Joseph DeFilippo.[4] Where I disagree is that I think Cotta's profession of agnosticism in parallel to that of Protagoras (1.61) is genuine, and that his other statements about his own blind belief in traditional religion (1.62; 3.5-6, 10, 16) despite his awareness of the philosophic impossibilities of traditional religion—what DeFilippo likens to modern "fideism"[5]—constitute a screen. Rather, if we treat Cotta as philosophically serious, since philosophy is a way of life (1.7), Cotta's philosophical convictions would inform his beliefs. We should take his explanations of the conventional origins of

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[3] See 3.10: *Adfers haec omnia argumenta cur dii sint, remque mea sententia minime dubiam argumentando dubiam facis* … ("You bring to bear all these arguments why the gods exist, and in my opinion you make a matter, which is least of all doubtful, doubtful by arguing …").
[4] See especially DeFilippo 2000, 178.
[5] Ibid., 181. Wynne (2019, 118-119) also argues that Cotta is a "theist."

traditional religion (paralleling sophistic theories) (1.77, 118), his elaborate explanations of the incoherence of traditional religion (see 1.72-89, 90-91, 94-99; 3.39, 43-52, 61; cf. 3.60), and even an argument for the inexistence of the gods (3.29-34 with SE *M*. 9.180-181)—all of which are not strictly necessary for his refutations—as a genuine sign of the Academic equipollence of arguments leading to suspending judgment on a philosophical question.[6]

Cotta's statements to the contrary, that he believes in traditional religion despite its lack of philosophic justification represent a rhetorical maneuver to deal with the danger of professing agnosticism or atheism that he explicitly discusses in the case of Protagoras and Epicurus.[7] Indeed, David Fott points out ambiguities in all of Cotta's apparent affirmations of the gods' existence based on his acceptance of Roman religion.[8] For example, right after his statement of agnosticism Cotta uses *placet … mihi* ("it is pleasing/agreeable to me") to assert the gods' existence (1.62). *Placet* can also mean "I accept that," but Cotta chooses a rather ambiguous way of endorsing their existence. Given his recognition of the political use of traditional religion, it

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[6] I will discuss most of the passages cited here in more depth below along with relevant scholarship.

[7] What danger Cotta might have faced for openly professing heterodox religious views? It is unlikely that he would have risked an impiety trial such as those which faced philosophers in Classical Athens (see again Derenne 1930 and Janko 2020). However, there was a tradition of hostility to philosophy in Rome as well, as evidenced by the expulsions of the philosophers in 173 and 161 BCE (see again Scullard 2010, 9-10). It is also important to note that the dramatic date of *DND* between 77 and 75 is at least twenty years prior to the publication of Cicero's *De oratore* in 55 and Lucretius' *DRN* in 54 following the poet's death likely in 55, showing then at least some degree of acceptance of Latin philosophy among the elite (Amafinius' Latin Epicurean writings are the only ones surely composed well before Cicero's and Lucretius' works; see Gilbert 2015, 41-52). It is hard to know what the general attitude towards philosophy was in Rome between 77 and 75, but we can gather a few hints at least about how Cicero portrays the situation. In *De inventione*, which Cicero likely wrote in the mid-80s (see Reinhardt 2021, 105), Cicero reports the common opinion that philosophers are atheists (1.46) and that "many think that philosophy is in no way beneficial, most also that it does harm" (… *multi nihil prodesse philosophiam, plerique etiam obesse arbitrantur* …, 65). In *De oratore*, set in 91, Cicero also has Crassus and Antonius be very reticent about revealing their Greek learning, and especially their knowledge of philosophy (2.4, 153). As mentioned above (1.4), as late as 44 Cicero could write, "... I fear lest the name of philosophy be hated by certain good men ..." (*vereor ne quibusdam bonis viris philosophiae nomen sit invisum*, *Off*. 2.2). In short, in the turbulent situation of the power vacuum after Sulla's retirement in 79 and death in 78 (see Scullard 2010, 71-76), combined with the view that philosophers opposed religion and general hostility to philosophy, Cotta may have had good reason to be careful even among friends about revealing heterodox religious views which could be used against him by political enemies. This is especially so because of his office of pontifex maximus, which would make such statements even less socially acceptable if made public (cf. *DND* 2.168), not to mention his desire to maintain the false teachings of traditional religion which requires concealing his own view. Finally, all the other interlocutors of *De oratore* were killed during political unrest (3.9-11), which may have served as a warning for Cotta to be especially cautious.

[8] Fott 2012, 161, 163-165.

may just be pleasing for him (or "decided/resolved"—a decisively political valence of *placere*, e.g., *Phil.* 2.12; 3.39) that the community should hold the gods to exist.

Now, Cotta denies giving his own view on the gods at 3.64. To communicate a heterodox opinion, however, by stating it once even while denying that one will say it is a common rhetorical practice. The author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* writes: "Likewise if we deny that we are going to speak about our opponents or about something, even so we will say it covertly by a parenthetical remark" (1.9).[9] Demetrius (289, 294) and Quintilian (9.2.66) treat a related form of indirect speech, stressing that one must say dangerous things indirectly to a tyrant or someone else who could cause one harm.[10] Cotta applies the principle of speaking indirectly when it is not safe to do so directly to the risky subject of the gods.[11] He reveals his agnosticism openly at 1.61 but covers it over with apparently contradictory statements. Cotta's use of these rhetorical devices to conceal and signal his esoteric agnosticism provide another indication of the rhetorical tradition as a source for Cicero's understanding of esotericism.

Indeed, Cicero's own *De inventione* treats related rhetorical techniques. Take for example his advice on "insinuation" or "ingratiation" (*insinuatio*) which is part of what forms a proem. He defines *insinuatio* as follows: "Insinuation is a speech entering in a hidden way into the mind of the listener by means of a certain dissimulation and indirect procedure" (1.20).[12] Cicero goes on to explain that this technique must be used when the listener is hostile and likely to be "offended" (*offenditur*, 23). (This parallels the language around Epicurus' fear of incurring the offense of the Athenians.) First, "you [ought] also to hide that you are going to defend that which you have decided to defend" (24).[13] And even closer to the advice from the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* is the

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[9] *Item si negabimus nos de adversariis aut de aliqua re dicturos, et tamen occulte dicemus interiectione verborum.*
[10] See Ahl 1984, 186-187, 189.
[11] Cf. Woolf 2022, 132: "[Cotta] is consistently portrayed also as a master of the subtle arts of deflection." Velleius also calls Cotta a "rhetorician" (*rhetore*, 2.1) in response to Cotta's speech against his position.
[12] *insinuatio est oratio quadam dissimulatione et circumitione obscure subiens auditoris animum*.
[13] … *et dissimulare* [sc. *oportet*] *te id defensurum, quod existimeris* …

passage where Cicero advises the following once one has properly dissimulated one's object and calmed the anger of the listener:

> … deinde, cum lenieris eum, qui audiet, demonstrare [sc. *oportet*], nihil eorum ad te pertinere et negare quicquam de adversariis esse dicturum, neque hoc neque illud, ut neque aperte laedas eos, qui diliguntur, et tamen id obscure faciens, quoad possis, alienes ab eis auditorum voluntatem …
>
> … then, when you have calmed the one who will listen, [you ought] to demonstrate that that none of these things apply to you [i.e., the offensive things] and [you ought] to deny that you are going to say anything about your opponents, either this or that, so that you also do not openly injure those who are well liked, and so that, by nevertheless doing this in a hidden way, as much as you are able, you take away the goodwill of the audience from them … (1.24)

These passages and others show that Cicero and his Cotta are well aware of the rhetorical devices one ought to use to avoid incurring offense while still covertly communicating something.[14]

Cotta's position on the relationship between philosophy and traditional religion leads Cicero to reject him. Cicero disagrees with Cotta and endorses Balbus because he sees Cotta as too similar to Protagoras and Epicurus.[15] Cotta follows Protagoras' agnosticism (1.61 vs. 29, 63)[16] and his skepticism makes him unquestioningly accept tradition like Epicurus (cf. SE *M*. 9.49). Moreover, Cotta tries to hide his agnosticism using similar methods to those that he himself criticizes in Epicurus. Finally, his adherence to tradition as separate from philosophy also leads

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[14] See also Cicero's advice for brevity in the *narratio* ("exposition"): it will not be too long "if it is said in such a way that sometimes from that which has been said that which has not been said is understood; and if not only that which hurts [the case], but also that which neither hurts nor helps will be passed over" (… *si ita dicetur, ut nonnumquam ex eo, quod dictum est, id, quod non est dictum, intellegatur; et si non modo id, quod obest, verum etiam id, quod nec obest nec adiuvat, praeteribitur* …, *Inv*. 1.28).

[15] By contrast, DeFilippo (2000, 185-186) attributes Cicero's break with Cotta to a dogmatic cast to Cicero's skepticism, as opposed to Cotta's greater consistency with Academic skepticism. Taking a different view, Fott (2012, 174-175, *passim*) argues that Cotta is less rather than more consistent with Academic skepticism than Cicero (or at least less than Marcus in *De divinatione*). Focusing on *DND*, Woolf (2022, 141, *passim*) also takes Cicero to present a preferable version of Academic skepticism to that of Cotta, that of arguing for and against positions rather than just arguing against, which results in being more open to seeking the truth. Along similar lines see Diez 2021, 158 and Müller 2022, 167 n. 64.

[16] Plato characterizes Protagoras himself as esoteric (see *Prt*. 316b3-c4; 316c5-317c5; *Tht*. 152c8-10; 155e7-156a1). It is good to remember that Cicero translated Plato's *Protagoras* into Latin either sometime after writing *De finibus* (45), i.e., right around the time he was composing *DND*, or perhaps in his youth (see Wynne 2019, 33 n. 86). Alfonsi (1951, 90-92) details important parallels to the *Protagoras* in the opening of the *Brutus* (46) and the *Lucullus* (45), so in any case Cicero was thinking about the *Protagoras* around the time of the composition of *DND*.

him to uphold civil religion as an exoteric invention for political utility, again like Epicurus.[17] Velleius' final agreement with Cotta also confirms the general overlap with Epicureanism in Cotta's thought (3.95).[18] While the content of Cotta's esotericism is skeptical agnosticism rather than dogmatism, his methods of indirection and supporting an exoteric public teaching which he believes to be false are common to Epicurus' esotericism.

For Cotta, then, traditional religion is completely divorced from philosophy and natural law. This differs greatly from Cicero's view on philosophy, natural law, and civil religion in *De legibus*, to which we will turn after examining further the evidence about Cotta. For Cicero, civil religion is linked to philosophic inquiry, not separated from it.

4.2.2 Detailed Examination of the Evidence

I will now examine more closely passages which fill in the preceding sketch of Cotta's esotericism. First is Cotta's striking alignment of himself with Protagoras' agnosticism. Cotta responds to Velleius' argument *e consensu omnium* ("from the agreement of all") (1.43-44) that the gods exist:

> Quaeritur primum in ea quaestione quae est de natura deorum, sintne dei necne sint. 'Difficile est negare.' Credo si in contione quaeratur, sed in huius modi sermone et in consessu <familiari> facillimum. itaque ego ipse pontifex, qui caerimonias religionesque publicas sanctissime tuendas arbitror, is hoc quod primum est, esse deos, persuaderi mihi non opinione solum sed etiam ad veritatem plane velim. multa enim occurrunt quae conturbent, ut interdum nulli esse videantur.
>
> It is asked first in this investigation, which is about the nature of the gods, whether the gods exist or not. 'It is difficult to deny it.' I think so, if it should be asked in a popular assembly, but in a conversation of this type and in a friendly gathering it is very easy [to deny that the gods exist]. Therefore I myself, a *pontifex*, who believes that the ceremonies and public religious practices must be preserved in a most august way, would surely like

[17] See Trotz-Liboff 2023a, 424-426 with scholarship cited for the Epicurean view on the benefits of traditional religion, and also below on Lucretius (5.3.2). For Epicurean conventionalism see above (3.5).
[18] See Gigon and Straume-Zimmermann 1996, ad loc.: "… ist deutlich … daß ihn [i.e., Cicero] die Parallelität der akademischen und der epikureischen Polemik gegen die Stoa stört." See also Lévy 1992, 564 for more potential parallels between Cotta and Epicureanism. There is a related connection between Epicureanism and the New Academy in *De legibus*: Marcus groups the two schools together against all the rest of the philosophers regarding their problematic arguments about the divine (1.38-39).

> to be persuaded of this first point, that there are gods, not only by opinion but also according to the truth. For many [arguments] present themselves which disturb [me] with the result that sometimes [the gods] seem to be nonexistent. (1.61)

Cotta argues that Velleius goes too quickly from the argument for the existence of the gods to discussing their nature. The second question presupposes an answer to the first, as discussed above (Section 2.3).

Cotta points out that one must speak differently in a popular assembly (*in contione*) than in a friendly conversation. It is difficult to deny the existence of the gods in a popular assembly, presumably because the speaker does not wish either to incur danger to himself or to destabilize the belief of the people in the gods and thus the foundation of political life.[19] However, in Cotta's conversation with Velleius, Balbus, and Young Cicero—that is, in private with friends—it is the easiest thing in the world to do (cf. *Div*. 2.28). He need only point to counterexamples to Velleius' claim that everyone believes in the gods' existence. Cotta himself is a counterexample: despite being a pontifex maximus he doubts whether they exist.[20] Cotta thus affirms the esoteric/exoteric distinction on two points. First, one can only express doubts about the gods in private, while in public one must affirm their existence. Relatedly, as a pontifex Cotta defends traditional religion even though he doubts its basis in any truth. Cotta makes a parallel statement in Book 3: "Those [matters] are not to be argued about in public, lest such an argument annihilate religious practices which are publicly accepted" (apud Lact. *Inst*. 2.3.2; see also Var. *R. D*. fr. 8 = Aug. *C. D*. 6.5; fr. 21 = Aug. *C. D*. 4.31).[21] Here we observe some of Cotta's motives and methods of esotericism. One of his motives is self-defensive, since he wants to protect himself by

[19] See Wynne 2019, 52-56 for an argument that belief does play an important role in the debate about religion in *DND*, vs. the commonly held view that Roman religion is orthopractic and thus that belief plays no important role in it.
[20] Cf. Dyck 2003, ad loc.: "… here Cotta is speaking as an agnostic, not a probabilist, and therefore raises the bar of proof for the dogmatist as high as possible …"
[21] *non esse illa vulgo disputanda, ne susceptas publice religiones disputatio talis exstinguat*. See also Woolf 2015, 44.

not doubting the gods' existence in public, but this secrecy is simultaneously other-regarding, since it prevents others from being harmed by this dangerous truth.[22]

Cotta goes out of his way to express his esoteric agnosticism. Why not just be content with Protagoras, Diagoras of Melos, and Theodorus of Cyrene—thought to be card-carrying agnostics and atheists—as his counterexamples, which he soon provides anyway (1.63; cf. 2)? Cotta, moreover, draws an explicit, and again unnecessary, parallel between his agnosticism and that of Protagoras. In a passage discussed above, Cotta explains how Protagoras' agnosticism led to his exile and his books' being burned in the popular assembly (*in contione*, 63). But it is not just their mutual doubt about the gods that Cotta highlights: in the space of the equivalent of one Teubner page, Cotta calls attention to the fact that both he and Protagoras navigate the popular assembly by using the exact same phrasing (*in contione*) about both of them. Cotta must be careful not to question the existence of the gods in the popular assembly, as Protagoras' questioning the existence of the gods led to his books' being burned in the popular assembly. As explained above (Section 3.4), Cotta argues that Protagoras' fate was a lesson in the necessity of esotericism for atheists such as Epicurus. Could it not have been a lesson for fellow agnostics like Cotta himself? Cotta now knows what can and cannot be said about the gods in a popular assembly.

One reason Cotta might draw this parallel between himself and Protagoras, despite his own excoriation of Epicurus' atheism and the link between Protagoras and Epicurus he makes, is that it is part of his overall aim to show Velleius and Balbus the incoherence of Roman religion and the necessity of an esoteric approach to traditional theology, rather than their strategy of rationalized theology. On the authorial level, Cicero indicates these parallels between Cotta and Protagoras in line with the critique of Cotta I argue he makes.

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[22] See above (1.5) for how this can also shade into control-based esotericism.

Places where Cotta shows the incoherence of traditional religion, rather than of Epicureanism or Stoicism which are his nominal targets, confirm his overall strategy. Cotta says that the Epicureans' assumption that the gods have an anthropomorphic form stems from "total inventions which are scarcely worthy of the gossip of little old women" (1.94).[23] For Cicero, old women are proverbially superstitious (see *Div*. 1.7). Cotta attacks in the most denigrating possible terms the cornerstone of Roman religion, the anthropomorphic deities as distinct from the aniconic deities of, for example, Persia (see *Leg*. 2.26). Indeed, Cotta's reply to Velleius in which he shows the total absurdity of the anthropomorphic gods (1.72-89, 90-91, 94-99) is inordinately long relative to Velleius' brief exposition of the topic (46-48). The exhaustive critique of anthropomorphic gods undermines Roman traditional religion in addition to showing the incoherence of Epicurean theology, which Cotta holds to be an exoteric screen anyway. Cotta's message to Epicureans is: do not try to salvage this absurd element of traditional theology. Cotta in his reply to Balbus likewise casts doubt on hero cult (3.39), conducts a "reductio ad absurdum" [24] of the gods of traditional cult and myth (43-52), argues that the views of the "theologians" (*theologi*; likely Euhemerus and Prodicus here, cf. 1.118-119)—that the traditional gods were actually just mortals who died—could be true but must be suppressed (3.53-60),[25] and denies the existence of gods who are personifications of things like the virtues (61), another element of traditional Roman cult. In all these instances, Cotta could have refuted Epicureanism and Stoicism purely on internal grounds, rather than denigrating traditional Roman religion.

One passage, 3.29-34, is particularly striking, which Pease characterizes as an "insertion in the discussion of the nature of the gods of arguments directed against their very existence."[26]

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[23] … *tota commenticia, vix digna lucubratione anicularum*.
[24] Gigon and Straume-Zimmermann 1996, ad 3.43.
[25] At the start of the passage Cotta speaks as if this view were false (3.53) but by the end the theologians must be resisted only "lest religious scruples be disturbed" (*ne perturbentur religiones*, 60).
[26] Pease 1955-1958, ad 3.29.

Cotta uses an argument from Carneades (29) to argue that the gods do not exist rather than showing the incoherence of the Stoic position he is in the process of refuting. This seems to be one of the arguments that "disturb" Cotta resulting in his agnosticism (1.61).[27] The argument's tight logical structure is shown by Gigon and Straume-Zimmermann,[28] but its most basic elements suffice here: 1) every body is destructible; 2) animals are composed of bodies; 3) "therefore no animal is eternal" (*nullum igitur animal est sempiternum*, 3.34). Cotta suppresses the final two steps of the proof, which would be: 4) gods are animals; 5) therefore there are no eternal gods. These last two steps are completed in a parallel passage in Sextus Empiricus (*M*. 9.180-181)[29]—and note that Lucretius states Cotta's third step openly (2.919). Cotta's argument here does not correspond to any argument of Balbus' in need of refutation. In arguing against the existence of any gods whatsoever Cotta also casts further doubt on traditional Roman religion.[30] Cotta provides arguments that could lead others to suspend judgment about the existence of the gods as he does, which would lead them to agnosticism and to renounce any attempt at rational theology or a rational defense of traditional religion.

What are the origins of traditional religion for Cotta, if it has no basis in reality? He once suggests in his own name that anthropomorphic gods were invented by the wise to make humans behave better (1.77) and once reports the view the gods as a whole were invented by the wise for the same reason of encouraging good moral behavior (118). As commentators frequently note,[31] these ideas resemble those of the atheist, sophistic Sisyphus fragment (DK 88 B 25) and Polybius (6.56.6-15). In *De pietate*, Philodemus seems to associate skeptics themselves with such practices

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[27] See Wynne 2019, 174-179 on a parallel use of arguments that should result in atheism to counter Stoicism by Cotta at 3.43-52.
[28] Gigon and Straume-Zimmermann 1996, ad loc.
[29] See Pease 1955-1958, ad 3.34: "In Sextus Empiricus (*Adv. Phys.* 1, 137-166) many forms of this argument are amassed, regularly leading to the conclusion that God is perishable, therefore a contradiction to our postulates of deity, and hence non-existent. Cicero omits the last conclusion."
[30] Compare this argument for atheism with Cotta's story of Diagoras the famous atheist's good fortune near the very end of the work (3.89).
[31] See, e.g., Pease 1955-1958, ad loc.

(cols. 73-75), which would go even further than Sextus Empiricus' claim that skeptics assert the gods' existence in accordance with custom for the sake of safety even though they actually question their existence (*M*. 9.49).[32] The use of the gods and religion purely as an instrumental political tool also parallels the views that emerge in Cotta's portrait of Epicurus, in that both Cotta and Cotta's Epicurus are either agnostic or atheist and give conventionalist accounts about the origin of the gods. We will return to the parallels with the Sisyphus fragment and Polybius after looking more closely at the passages from *DND*.

As part of his refutation of anthropomorphic gods, Cotta asks Velleius:

> <Primum> omnium quis tam caecus in contemplandis rebus umquam fuit, ut non videret species istas hominum conlatas in deos aut consilio quodam sapientium, quo facilius animos imperitorum ad deorum cultum a vitae pravitate converterent, aut superstitione, ut essent simulacra quae venerantes deos ipsos se adire crederent.
>
> First of all, who was ever so blind in observing things, that he did not see that those [silly] shapes of humans were ascribed to the gods either by some plan of the wise, in order that they might more easily turn the souls of the unlearned away from the baseness of their lives to the worship of the gods, or by superstition, with the result that there were images which, as they worshipped them, they thought they approached as the gods themselves? (1.77)

Though admitting that superstition is a possible cause of the invention of anthropomorphic gods, Cotta focuses on the possibility that it was a plan of the wise (*sapientium*) to devise them as a sort of noble lie to save humans from baseness (cf. *Rep*. 1.56). As we have seen, Cotta elsewhere insists that religious practices must remain in place even if one doubts their grounding in the truth of the gods' existence (1.61) and he later asserts that the religion established by Romulus and Numa is the "foundation of [the Roman] polity" (*fundamenta … nostrae civitatis*, 3.5; cf. 1.3-4). Cotta sees religion as the foundation of Roman political life—as indeed it was—so he may be sympathetic to the notion that the anthropomorphic gods he regards as a fiction, but part of the

[32] See ἐπισχεῖν (*Piet*. col. 73) and τὴ[ν ἐ]ποχήν (col. 74), which indicate the suspension of judgment made famous by the New Academy.

religion he holds to be so important, were invented as means of promoting moral behavior and hence preserving Rome.

Cotta later reports an even more radical view, that the gods were pure inventions rather than merely having anthropomorphic qualities ascribed to them. He says: "What about those who declared that the whole opinion about the immortal gods was invented by wise men for the sake of the republic, in order that religion could guide those to duty whom reason could not—did they not completely abolish all religion?" (1.118; cf. *Rep*. 2.4).[33] Again, the wise (*sapientibus*) craft the gods to induce those, for whom reason or philosophy cannot guarantee good behavior, to do their duty for the city. Now, it is ambiguous whether Cotta means that these men abolished (*sustulerunt*) religion because their theory implies that the gods do not exist (Cotta also uses the verb *tollere* for atheism elsewhere, 63, 85), and so abolishes any reason for religion within their philosophical system, or whether he means that they abolished religion because they "declared" (*dixerunt*) this theory openly and thus risked lowering the credibility of traditional religion, which we saw was a concern for Cotta (61; and apud Lact. *Inst*. 2.3.2). Also, if Cotta is willing to entertain the possibility that anthropomorphic gods were invented for political stability by the wise (1.77), is it so different to posit that the gods in general were invented by the wise for the same reason given his own doubts about the gods' existence (61)?

Both versions of the theory (77, 118) imply an esoteric/exoteric distinction. The wise kept the secret about either the gods' nonanthropomorphic nature or their outright nonexistence to themselves, while they propagated a noble lie about either the gods' anthropomorphism or their existence to "the unlearned" (*imperitos*, 77) or those "whom reason could not lead" (118), i.e., the unphilosophic many.

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[33] *Quid i qui dixerunt totam de dis inmortalibus opinionem fictam esse ab hominibus sapientibus rei publicae causa, ut quos ratio non posset eos ad officium religio duceret, nonne omnem religionem funditus sustulerunt?*

The sophistic source of this view about the origin of the gods shows further the atheistic character of this theory and the esoteric/exoteric distinction involved. The "Sisyphus fragment" (DK 88 B 25), known in this way because its speaker is Sisyphus, is in iambic trimeter and from the late 5th century BCE. Sextus Empiricus and Aëtius attribute it to Critias and Euripides respectively (*M*. 9.54; *Placit*. 1.7.2). Of these two possibilities, Critias is far likelier and is the current scholarly consensus. However, Sedley has raised the intriguing possibility that the original play was not performed but "circulated anonymously" because of the dangers of openly professing atheism and then later attributed to Critias and Euripides, to the former because of his bad reputation as a tyrant and to the latter for his reputation as an atheist.[34] The authorship of the play is not as important here as the undisputed fact that it reflects sophistic theories.

In the fragment, Sisyphus explains the origin of laws (νόμοι) as a mechanism to prevent humans from the bestial and violent condition of life which had prevailed: the fear of punishment would keep humans from their outrageous behavior (1-8). But although the laws prevented wrongdoing in public, human beings continued their injustice in secret (9-11). Sisyphus then explains the crucial solution to this problem as follows:

> … τηνικαῦτά μοι δοκεῖ
> <πρῶτον> πυκνός τις καὶ σοφὸς γνώμην ἀνήρ [γνῶναι]
> <θεῶν> δέος θνητοῖσιν ἐξευρεῖν, ὅπως
> εἴη τι δεῖμα τοῖς κακοῖσι, κἂν λάθραι
> πράσσωσιν ἢ λέγωσιν ἢ φρονῶσί <τι>.
> ἐντεῦθεν οὖν τὸ θεῖον εἰσηγήσατο,
> ὡς ἔστι δαίμων ἀφθίτωι θάλλων βίωι,
> νόωι τ' ἀκούων καὶ βλέπων, φρονῶν τ' ἄγαν
> προσέχων τε ταῦτα, καὶ φύσιν θείαν φορῶν,
> ὃς πᾶν τὸ λεχθὲν ἐν βροτοῖς ἀκούσεται,
> <τὸ> δρώμενον δὲ πᾶν ἰδεῖν δυνήσεται.
> ἐὰν δὲ σὺν σιγῆι τι βουλεύηις κακόν,
> τοῦτ' οὐχὶ λήσει τοὺς θεούς· τὸ γὰρ φρονοῦν
> <ἄγαν> ἔνεστι. τούσδε τοὺς λόγους λέγων

[34] Sedley 2014, 335-336. Sedley surveys the state of the question for the authorship of the fragment there too. I wish to thank Filippo Righi for further explaining the state of the question to me *per litteras*, including why Critias is more likely to be the author than Euripides.

διδαγμάτων ἥδιστον εἰσηγήσατο
ψευδεῖ καλύψας τὴν ἀλήθειαν λόγωι.

> … at that time it seems to me that first some man, shrewd and wise in his judgment, invented the fear of the gods for mortals, in order that there might be some terror for bad men, even if they do, say, or think something in secret. Well, next he introduced the divine, [saying] 'there is a divinity who abounds in imperishable life, and who both hears and sees with mind, possessing thought in excess, attending to these things [i.e., people's wrongdoings?], and bearing a divine nature, who will hear what is said among mortals, and will be able to see everything done as well. And if you contrive some evil in silence, this will not escape the notice of the gods, for thought is exceedingly present in them.' In uttering these speeches he introduced the most pleasant of lessons, having concealed the truth with a false speech. (11-26)

Sisyphus then explains how the invention of these omniscient gods instilled fear and good behavior in greater detail (27-40) and sums up his point by saying, "and in this way I think that someone first persuaded mortals to believe that there was a race of divinities" (41-42).[35] Just as the atheists in Plato's *Laws* claim the gods are created by *nomos* rather than nature (889e3-9; cf. *Tusc*. 1.30),[36] Sisyphus claims the gods are part of *nomos* as established by a wise culture hero.[37] The account of the gods is a "false speech" (ψευδεῖ … λόγωι) but beneficial for humans. The gods and the fear they inspire are an exoteric invention to promote good behavior via civil religion, an example of other-regarding esotericism. The esoteric component of the culture hero's introduction of the gods is, furthermore, shown by his also having "concealed the truth" (καλύψας τὴν ἀλήθειαν) through this false speech.

Sisyphus points to a "wise man" (σοφὸς … ἀνήρ) who figured out that fear of the gods could solve the problem of laws' inability to regulate unobserved behavior and thoughts. This parallels Cotta's attribution of the invention of the gods to the wise (1.77, 118). Cotta's remarks become clearer as we observe how, on this sophistic theory, fear (δέος or δεῖμα) of the gods functions to benefit society. People think they will be punished by the gods if they say, do, or

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[35] Οὕτω δὲ πρῶτον οἴομαι πεῖσαί τινα | θνητοὺς νομίζειν δαιμόνων εἶναι γένος.
[36] Consider also *Lg*. 681a7-d5 in this connection.
[37] See ibid., 341 for the link between the Sisyphus fragment and the *Laws* passage (889e3-9).

think wicked things. They think that they are surveilled constantly, and their belief in these gods which the wise man propagated for this purpose is the only thing, along with other customs, that prevents society from degrading again into outrageous violence. The wise man's stories, furthermore, are most pleasant even as they teach this grim fear about the gods. This must be the pleasure of poetry, which contains the myths about the gods (cf. Str. 1.2.8).[38] Indeed Cotta says the following about the anthropomorphic character of the gods: "But the poets, painters, and artisans increased these very things [i.e., the gods' anthropomorphic character]; for it was not easy to preserve the gods as doing and contriving something by the imitation of other shapes" (1.77).[39]

It is unclear to whom Cotta refers when he reports the theory at 1.118. Cicero may have gotten the theory via Polybius, whom he read carefully and who influenced Cicero's account of the Roman mixed regime in *De re publica* (cf. *Rep*. 2.27; *Off*. 3.113). In Book 6 of his *Histories*, Polybius discusses the remarkable power of superstition (δεισιδαιμονία) in the Roman regime:

> ἐμοί γε μὴν δοκοῦσι τοῦ πλήθους χάριν τοῦτο πεποιηκέναι. εἰ μὲν γὰρ ἦν σοφῶν ἀνδρῶν πολίτευμα συναγαγεῖν, ἴσως οὐδὲν ἦν ἀναγκαῖος ὁ τοιοῦτος τρόπος· ἐπεὶ δὲ πᾶν πλῆθός ἐστιν ἐλαφρὸν καὶ πλῆρες ἐπιθυμιῶν παρανόμων, ὀργῆς ἀλόγου, θυμοῦ βιαίου, λείπεται τοῖς ἀδήλοις φόβοις καὶ τῇ τοιαύτῃ τραγῳδίᾳ τὰ πλήθη συνέχειν. διόπερ οἱ παλαιοὶ δοκοῦσί μοι τὰς περὶ θεῶν ἐννοίας καὶ τὰς ὑπὲρ τῶν ἐν Ἅιδου διαλήψεις οὐκ εἰκῇ καὶ ὡς ἔτυχεν εἰς τὰ πλήθη παρεισαγαγεῖν, πολὺ δὲ μᾶλλον οἱ νῦν εἰκῇ καὶ ἀλόγως ἐκβάλλειν αὐτά.
>
> To me, indeed, they seem to have done (πεποιηκέναι) this [i.e., suffused private and public affairs with superstition] for the sake of [or 'on account of'] the multitude. For if it were possible to draw together a regime of wise men, perhaps this sort of way would not have been necessary at all; but since every multitude is flighty and filled with lawless desires, irrational passion, and violent spirit, what is left [to do] is to contain the multitudes with invisible fears and tragedy of this sort. For just this reason it seems to me that the ancients introduced to the multitudes notions about the gods and opinions concerning the things in Hades not at random and as it happened, but much more that men now cast them aside at random and irrationally. (6.56.9-12)

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[38] See also my discussion of Plutarch below (especially 7.2 and 8.2).

[39] *auxerunt haec eadem poetae pictores opifices; erat enim non facile agentis aliquid et molientes deos in aliarum formarum imitatione servare*.

Aside from the obvious connections concerning the invention of religion for political control and stability, this passage shares other important elements with the Sisyphus fragment and Cotta's remarks.[40] Again there is emphasis on the "wise" (σοφοί) who are not in need of religion, who in the Sisyphus fragment and for Cotta are the ones manipulating the others through religion. Polybius' "ancients" are likely those whom he considers wise. If everyone had the foresight to see the value of superstition and seek to institute it, they would hardly need such control for themselves. Like Sisyphus and Cotta, Polybius also attributes the invention of the gods to the poets by using the word "tragedy" (τραγῳδίᾳ) in conjunction with the institution of such fears.[41] Furthermore, Cotta reports the view that the opinion was invented "for the sake of the republic" (*rei publicae causa*, 1.118) a catch-phrase in Cicero, similar to our "*raison d'état*," often used for the manipulation of religion for the benefit of the city (see *Div*. 2.28, 74),[42] whereas Polybius uses the phrase "for the sake of/on account of the multitude" (τοῦ πλήθους χάριν). In *DND* 1.118, therefore, when discussing the invention of aspects of religion for political control and stability Cicero through Cotta repeats near verbatim Polybius' language for the same idea.

As noted above (Section 2.2), it may be tempting to align Cotta and Cicero given some of their similar characteristics.[43] Both occupy important religious roles as pontifex maximus (1.61) and augur (14) respectively, and both declare their allegiance to the skeptical New Academy (1, 6, 11-12, 15-17). However, as I have argued, Cotta presents a conventionalist account of civil religion in his attempt to show Velleius and Balbus that Roman traditional religion is, while useful, completely incoherent and irrational. This is part of his broader strategy to demonstrate that Epicureanism and Stoicism are internally inconsistent and (especially in the case of Stoicism)

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[40] Scholars who connect this passage to the Sisyphus fragment include Walbank 1957, ad loc.; Kahn 1997, 262 n. 24; Weil and Nicolet 2003, ad loc. Döring (1978, 54) connects both passages to Cicero with reference to *De legibus* and *DND*.
[41] Cf. Casel 1919, 8.
[42] Cf. Müller 2022, 163 n. 54.
[43] See Begemann 2012, 104 for parallels. See again Fott 2012, 174-175 for differences.

unable to salvage the irrational elements of Roman religion through a philosophic theology. It is better to support traditional religion on its authority (*auctoritas*) alone rather than through reason (*ratio*) (cf. 1.10). Yet, this position is unacceptable to Cicero because it actually approximates most closely Protagoras' agnosticism, Epicurus' feigned piety, and sophistic and Epicurean conventionalism. Mere support for tradition qua tradition leaves no room to modify civil religion in light of philosophic principles and to adapt it to fit the Roman mixed regime better. Furthermore, a conventionalist account of religion and justice leaves Roman law open to the attack that it is arbitrary and thus no better than any other set of laws and destroys the basis for virtue in political life (see again *Leg*. 1.31-32, 40-52). In short, Cotta himself embraces a version of dogmatic esotericism—if for his own reasons as an elite Roman—which he critiques in Epicurus. While their content varies between agnosticism and atheism, they share the hidden propositional statement "Roman traditional religion is a sheer falsehood." For this reason Cicero presents his younger self as endorsing Balbus' presentation of Stoicism against Cotta's critique (3.95). We may now examine what elements of Balbus' account lead Cicero to find it to be a valid alternative, even if only as an image of the truth.

4.3 "Why Balbus?" for Young Cicero and the Judgment's Philosophic Context

4.3.1 Introduction

The disagreement about civil religion raises the question of esotericism. As noted, putting forward a public doctrine that is either completely different from or not identical to one's own convictions necessitates holding views that must be concealed to maintain the public doctrine. A given type of esotericism determines the relationship between private philosophy and public religion. All of this will be at play as we now shift from the question "Why not Cotta?" to the question "Why Balbus?"

4.3.2 Varro and *De legibus*: Tripartite Theology and Natural Law

To contextualize the agreement with Balbus it will, then, be useful first to survey some relevant views on civil religion in the thought of Varro, Cicero's contemporary, and in Cicero's own *De legibus*. Varro was trained by the Stoic antiquarian L. Aelius Stilo and Antiochus (see *Ac*. 1.7-8), the Platonist teacher of Cicero famous for striving to unite the teachings of the Stoa and the Old Academy. Varro, for whom Cicero had much sympathy, wrote the *Antiquitates rerum humanarum ac divinarum* in which he attempted to make the Romans feel at home again in their own city by giving them an archaeology of Roman institutions (see *Ac*. 1.9; Var. *R. D.* fr. 4 = Aug. *C. D.* 6.3). He completed the first part, the *Res humanae*, in 56 and the second part, the *Res divinae*, between 48 and 46, that is, soon before Cicero's composition of *DND*.[44]

Varro's views on civil religion emerge from a tripartite theology he expounds:[45]

> *tria genera theologiae … esse, id est rationis, quae de diis explicatur, eorumque unum mythicon appellari, alterum physicon, tertium civile. …* Mythicon appellant, quo maxime utuntur poetae; physicon, quo philosophi; civile, quo populi.
>
> *There are three kinds of theology (that is, of an account, which is given about the gods) and of these one is called the mythical* [Greek word], *the second the natural* [Greek word], *the third the civil* [Latin word] ... They call the mythical that which the poets use most of all; the natural, that which philosophers [use most of all]; the civil, that which peoples [use most of all]. (*R. D*. fr. 7 = Aug. *C. D.* 6.5)[46]

Varro censures poetic theology in what follows of fragment 7, but fragment 11 (= Aug. *C. D*. 6.6) shows that it greatly influences civil theology, presumably via tragic and comic performances in the theaters as part of civic festivals (see fr. 10 = Aug. *C. D*. 6.5). Poetic theology is even responsible for the attribution of male and female sexes to gods, their couplings, and the belief

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[44] See Moatti 2015, 95 n. 3 for the dating of the *Antiquitates*.
[45] Stroh (2022, 27-31) affirms the general relevance of the tripartite theology and Varro's formulation of it for *DND*.
[46] I have distinguished Augustine's citations of Varro in indirect discourse from the citations in direct discourse by putting the former in italics. The ellipses are those of Cardauns (1976) and indicate a word of Augustine's like *inquit* ("he says") used to introduce a direct or indirect quotation of Varro.

that gods generated humans as well (see fr. 19 = Aug. *C. D.* 4.32). These beliefs are central tenets of civil theology.

Natural theology also influences civil theology. On Peter Van Nuffelen's convincing reading of Varro's *Res divinae*, for Varro civil theology is actually an image of the truth of natural theology established by philosophic ancients.[47] The three theologies are interconnected, and thus the exoteric level of civil theology and the esoteric level of natural theology are connected to each other rather than disjoined as in the esotericism of Epicurus and Cotta.[48]

The tripartite theology originated with the Stoics. Varro uses Greek words and Greek doxographers attribute the tripartite theology to the Stoics without reference to Varro (see *SVF* II 1009).[49] Accordingly, the view of civil religion of the tripartite theology differs from Cotta's presentation of civil religion and bears important similarities with that of Balbus.

Cicero's *De legibus* also presents civil religion as connected to philosophic inquiry. Marcus first develops a Stoicizing account of natural law in Book 1 before laying out his religious law code in Book 2. He claims that the religious law code, which forms the basis for "religion useful to polities" (*religionem utilem civitatibus*, 2.26), rests on the foundations of the natural law of Book 1 (2.11-16). While Marcus couches his discussion of natural law in Stoic definitions of law and justice (1.23), he ultimately follows Plato's *Laws* in crafting his civil religion.[50] The religious laws of Book 2 express the demands of natural law in a diluted form. Nature is still the model or standard which the particular laws of the mixed regime strive to instantiate, but given the limits of what can be achieved in political life due to the particular circumstances of Rome and the importance of tradition alongside reason, Marcus' law code falls short of the pure

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[47] Van Nuffelen 2010.
[48] Fragments attesting to exotericism and esotericism are: 8 = Aug. *C. D.* 6.5; 11 = Aug. *C. D.* 6.6; 12 = Aug. *C. D.* 4.31; 20 = Aug. *C. D.* 3.4; 21 = Aug. *C. D.* 4.31. Toland (1720, 92-93) and Casel (1919, 46-47) connect the tripartite theology to esoteric philosophy.
[49] Cardauns (1976, 140) provides an invaluable table of terms for the tripartite theology used by various authors.
[50] Here I follow the interpretation of *De legibus* of Atkins 2013a, 201-217.

injunctions of natural law even while imitating them as best as possible. The customs, laws, or conventions of the city are not mere fictions, but are designed according to philosophic reflection on the character of nature, both generally and as human nature.

Particular elements of Marcus' civil religion indebted to Plato's *Laws* are the following: Marcus' preludes have the same goal as in the *Laws* of promoting virtue and happiness in the citizens (2.11); Marcus emphasizes the "necessary" (*necessarium*) as a product of the oldest and best (3.29 with 2.40); and civil religion is fitted to the regime-type, here Rome's mixed constitution (2.23, 30-33).[51] For Marcus, the philosophic statesman can modify tradition because the oldest is not always the same as the best. Though in more fundamental agreement with Plato, as we might expect given the explicit model of the *Laws* for *De legibus* (e.g., 1.15), Cicero nonetheless chooses to make Stoicism the vehicle for Platonic philosophy in the dialogue. As we will see further below, this is likely because he sees Stoicism as a certain elaboration of Plato, but one that is not entirely salutary. Varro too engages with Plato against the backdrop of his Stoicizing theory of the tripartite theology (see fr. 25 = Tert. *Nat*. 2.4.1 vs. *Cra*. 387c7-d6; fr. 29 = Serv. *in A*. 6.307; fr. 206 = Aug. *C*. *D*. 7.28).[52] Varro and *De legibus*, then, present a mixture of Stoicism and Plato in an account of civil religion which does not create a strict separation between its exoteric and esoteric levels. Allowing for a different type of access to the content means that the method of esotericism will also differ from that of Cotta and Cotta's Epicurus.

4.3.3 Young Cicero and Balbus on Poetry and Philosophy

We may now turn to the end of *DND* itself. Cicero as narrator describes how the conversation finally ended: "When these things had been said, we departed in such a way that

[51] See Atkins 2017, 171-174 for these passages and the parallels they create to Plato's *Laws*.
[52] Antiochus, the Platonist famous for striving to unite the teachings of the Stoa and the Old Academy, taught both Cicero and Varro (*Ac*. 1.13). In addition to Antiochus, Stoics such as Posidonius and Panaetius (both of course influential on Cicero: see, e.g., *Fin*. 1.6; *DND* 1.7, 123; *Off*. 2.60) drew on both the early Stoa and Plato.

Cotta's argument seemed to be truer to Velleius, [and] to me Balbus' argument seemed to be more inclined towards a likeness of the truth" (3.95).[53] As we will see, the aspects of Balbus' speech that Cicero thinks are valuable in some sense, if not always strictly true, are the following: his interweaving of philosophy and poetry, his adoption of the tripartite theology by which civil religion is not separated from philosophic inquiry, and his related estimation of poets as proto-philosophers who also influenced civil religion. Balbus is the only speaker who explicitly draws on Plato for his system (2.32). As in *De legibus*, Stoicism is a vehicle for a deep engagement with Plato on the part of Cicero.

Balbus is the most poetic of the three main speakers and Young Cicero is the only poet present. Balbus uses Young Cicero's translation of Aratus' *Phaenomena* as part of his argument for the gods' providential care for the world, here as manifested by the orderly nature of the fixed stars forming constellations (2.104-114). Balbus' use of the translation not only reveals important aspects of Balbus' argumentative strategy and aligns with Stoic uses of poetry,[54] but also represents the only moment in the entire dialogue in which Young Cicero plays a role in the conversation between his entry (1.17) and his final judgment in favor of Balbus (3.95).[55] It is therefore a key moment for understanding Young Cicero's final preference for Balbus.

Balbus introduces Young Cicero's translation in the following way:

> 'Sequitur stellarum inerrantium maxima multitudo, quarum ita descripta distinctio est, ut ex notarum figurarum similitudine nomina invenerint.' Atque hoc loco me intuens 'Utar' inquit 'carminibus Arateis, quae a te admodum adulescentulo conversa ita me delectant quia Latina sunt, ut multa ex is memoria teneam.'
>
> 'There follows a very great number of stars which do not wander, the distinction of which has been described in such a way that they have found names from a likeness to familiar shapes.' And at this point, he looked at me and said, 'I will use the poems of Aratus, the

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[53] *Haec cum essent dicta, ita discessimus, ut Velleio Cottae disputatio verior, mihi Balbi ad veritatis similitudinem videretur esse propensior*.
[54] Čulík-Baird 2018, 646-648, *passim*.
[55] Altman (2016, 173-174) notes the philosophic significance of Balbus' reliance on Cicero's translation, and the importance of Cicero's young age at the time of the translation, but does not discuss what it could mean for Young Cicero's preference for Balbus' speech.

> ones which have been translated by you when you were very much a youth, which delight me because they are in Latin so much that I have memorized many of them.' (2.104)

Balbus, Velleius, and Cotta completely ignore Young Cicero throughout *DND* during their disputations except for this one remark by Balbus. Cicero through Balbus characterizes Young Cicero as a poet as well as an Academic skeptic. Balbus highlights Young Cicero (and the historical Cicero) as having disseminated Aratus' Stoic cosmological poetry to Romans through this Latin translation. Balbus appreciates Young Cicero's literary activities and Young Cicero is already deeply interested in Stoicism. This foreshadows his agreement with Balbus at the end of the dialogue, and parallels Cicero the author's creative use of Stoicism in numerous works.[56] As I will argue below, Cicero the author uses Stoicism poetically as part of his engagement with Plato.

4.4 "Why Balbus?" for Cicero

4.4.1 Poetry, Philosophy, and the Tripartite Theology

I will now also include Cicero in addition to Young Cicero in the "Why Balbus?" question. Balbus' engagement with the tripartite theology familiar from Varro forms another connection to Cicero's thought and thereby links poetry and philosophy in a way likely favored by Young Cicero and Cicero. Karl Reinhardt notes in passing that the tripartite theology is present in Balbus' classification of the gods.[57] The heavenly bodies ruled by the active intellect represent the natural theology accepted by the (Stoic) philosophers (2.45-60), the cult to the gods in the city established by the wise Greeks and Romans reflects the civil theology of the legislators and priests (60-62), and the myths of the poets that established anthropomorphic gods along with

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[56] Woolf (2022, 144) hesitatingly suggests that Young Cicero may have favored Balbus in the end because he was flattered by Balbus' use of his translations. This overlaps with my argument, but Woolf does not mention that Aratus is a Stoic poet, that Balbus focuses on the philosophic character of poetry, as I discuss below (4.3.3; 4.4.1), or that Velleius and Cotta by contrast lack any interest in poetry. These elements indicate a genuine affinity between Balbus and Young Cicero compatible with the final judgment rather than its resulting from flattery.

[57] Reinhardt 1926, 121 n. 1. See Pease 1955-1958, ad 2.60 for other scholars who see the tripartite theology here as well.

the battles and generations of the gods transmit the mythical theology of the poets (63-72). The presence of the tripartite theology in Balbus' account is unsurprising given Varro's exposition of it just prior to the composition of *DND* and its Stoic origin. In what follows I will elaborate on Reinhardt's insight to provide my own interpretation of Balbus' use of the tripartite theology.

The tripartite theology offers a differing account of civil religion from the conventionalist understanding of it because, as explained above, in the tripartite theology both natural and poetic theology influence civil theology. The connection between civil and natural theologies in Balbus' account also parallels the linkage between civil religion and philosophy Marcus sets out in *De legibus*, which I also sketched above. Both Balbus and Marcus of *De legibus* reject a view of civil religion as a false public doctrine which is strictly separated from philosophy.

Let's take a closer look at some elements of Balbus' use of the tripartite theology. In his natural theology of the heavenly bodies and world-soul, Balbus cites Plato on the soul and thus makes him stand behind the Stoics' teleological cosmology. He casts him as an authority by calling him "Plato, as it were, a certain god of the philosophers" (*Platonem quasi quendam deum philosophorum*, 2.32).[58] His language also reminds of Socrates' argument for the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedrus* (245c5-8).[59] Balbus, then, takes one Platonic passage out of its dramatic and rhetorical context to make Plato a dogmatic authority for his teleological account (cf. *Div*. 1.62), when in fact Plato's Socrates elsewhere renounces the possibility of articulating a teleological cosmology (*Phd*. 97b8-99d2; cf. *Tusc*. 1.73). Cicero thus portrays Stoicism as a way back to Plato, however distorted or dogmatic a version of Plato is presented. As opposed to

[58] Balbus' appellation of Plato recalls Cicero's own title for the philosopher as "that god of ours Plato" (*deus ille noster Plato*, *Att*. 4.16.3).
[59] Cicero translates this passage into Latin in two other works (*Rep*. 6.31; *Tusc*. 1.53). See ibid., ad loc. Balbus focuses on a divine type of motion of that which moves itself as opposed to that of something moving something else as composing the world-soul.

Balbus, Velleius sharply critiques Plato (1.18-21, 39) and Cotta merely cries over Socrates' death as he reads the *Phaedo* (3.82).

After describing the astral divinities of natural theology (2.39-60), Balbus transitions to the civic and poetic theologies. He begins the civic theology as follows: "But many other natures of the gods because of their great benefits have, not without reason, been established and named by both the wisest men of Greece and our ancestors. For whatever bore a great benefit to humankind, they judged that it happened not without divine benevolence towards human beings" (60).[60] Balbus means the practice of calling grain "Ceres" and wine "Liber" (Bacchus), and the related establishment of cults to deities like Trust (Fides) and Virtue (Virtus) (60-62). Balbus attributes the creation of this aspect of civil theology to "the wisest men" (*sapientissimis*) in Greece. Balbus agrees with Cotta in attributing the creation of civil theology to the wise of old (1.77, 118), but unlike Cotta he believes that the ancients did this "not without reason" (*non sine causa*). Balbus never says that this class of gods actually exists, but the reason which led the Greeks and Romans to institute their worship is the intuition of a notion shared by Stoicism that the gods are beneficent to humans.[61] The creation of civil theology is connected to the truth, whereas for Cotta it is a purely instrumental invention. Balbus' civil theology is both useful and in a sense true, an unsurprising fact given the Stoic equation of the useful and the true.[62]

Balbus continues the civil theology as follows: "But the life and common custom of humans has undertaken to raise up men outstanding in their good deeds into the heavens because

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[60] *Multae autem aliae naturae deorum ex magnis beneficiis eorum non sine causa et a Graeciae sapientissimis et a maioribus nostris constitutae nominataeque sunt. quicquid enim magnam utilitatem generi adferret humano, id non sine divina bonitate erga homines fieri arbitrabantur*.

[61] See Wynne 2019, 144.

[62] At 2.70 Balbus speaks of "natural things that are discovered well and usefully" (*physicis rebus bene atque utiliter inventis*). Those who discover the truth of nature discover useful things (see also 154-162). The question remains for both Balbus and Cotta who the wise proto-philosophers were. Traditionally the wise were lawgivers, like the seven sages, or the poets (see *Tusc*. 5.7). Civil theology raises the question of poetry as distinguished from philosophy, or whether there really is such a distinction (see Benardete 1997, xi-xiv).

of their renown and favor" (2.62).[63] What first looks like it could be only a matter of custom turns out to be fact for Balbus: "Since the souls of these men remained [after death] and enjoyed eternity, they have correctly been held as gods, since they were both the best and eternal" (62).[64] But Wynne notes the following restriction: "The person in question must be the best (i.e. a sage) and eternal in soul. Since the Stoics have very high standards for sagehood, Balbus quietly leaves it open to a Stoic to deny on further analysis that the heroes in question were sages."[65] Again, civil theology in establishing hero cult reflects an important Stoic doctrine, that some humans (perfect sages) approach godhood and that the human soul shares in the divine (see *Leg*. 1.22-23). This is despite the fact that Balbus later denies gods' anthropomorphism and intercourse with humans (2.63ff.), so heroes could not literally be descended from the divine. Civil theology for him is not strictly true but reflects the truth.

In the poetic theology proper Balbus explicitly states that the poets of old were philosophers. He says: "From still another doctrine—and a natural one at that—flowed a great gaggle of gods, who, garbed in human form, furnished myths for the poets, but filled humans' life with every [sort of] superstition" (63).[66] About the castration of Caelum/Uranus by Saturn/Kronus, Balbus notes that "a natural doctrine which is not unrefined was enclosed in impious myths" (*physica ratio non inelegans inclusa est in impias fabulas*, 64). The philosophers of old decided to use myths to communicate their knowledge of nature as "encoded physics," to use Wynne's term.[67] Allegoresis and etymology are required to recover the physical doctrines the poets communicated, and Balbus will use these interpretative strategies to show how the traditional myths conform with Stoic physics (63-69). In other words, allegory and etymology

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[63] *Suscepit autem vita hominum consuetudoque communis ut beneficiis excellentis viros in caelum fama ac voluntate tollerent.*
[64] *quorum cum remanerent animi atque aeternitate fruerentur, rite di sunt habiti, cum et optimi essent et aeterni*.
[65] Wynne 2019, 152.
[66] *Alia quoque ex ratione et quidem physica magna fluxit multitudo deorum, qui induti specie humana fabulas poetis suppeditaverunt, hominum autem vitam superstitione omni referserunt*.
[67] Ibid., 157.

were the poets' methods of writing esoterically and esoteric reading is required to understand their meaning.[68] Van Nuffelen's statement about Varro's philosophical allegory applies here too:

> So even though religion may contain the same truth as philosophy, the latter discipline is essential for finding the wisdom hidden in religion. Thus, the priority of philosophy, not only theoretical but also historical, grounds the allegory: the knowledge that allegory retrieves from figurative images was originally 'hidden' there by wise philosophers (the *antiqui*), but philosophy is also needed to come to a correct allegory. It takes wisdom to decode primitive wisdom.[69]

Here Balbus mentions Homer by name as one such esoteric poet and implies Hesiod as well by mentioning the Gigantomachy (70; cf. *Rep*. 1.56).[70] While Balbus follows a tradition of Stoic allegoresis and etymology,[71] Plato's Socrates also reads Homer as presenting a philosophic allegory, making him a proto-Heraclitean partisan of flux (*Tht*. 152e5-9 on *Il*. 14.302).[72] Both Balbus and Socrates make the seemingly implausible claim that Homer used myth to conceal his philosophic doctrine, which turned out to agree with that of later philosophers (perhaps they learned it from him).

For Balbus the three types of theology are not neatly separated from one another, a point Varro makes explicit (fr. 11 = Aug. *C. D*. 6.6). Rather, natural theology directly influences poetic theology. Furthermore, by establishing anthropomorphism and other human elements of the gods (2.70), poetic theology also influences civil theology given the presence of these elements in traditional cult. Thus, natural theology influences civil theology via poetic theology.

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[68] For Most (2016, 56), allegoresis and etymology through their interpretative act "take an exoteric knowledge that is widespread and they transform it into an esoteric knowledge that is the exclusive property of a privileged elite." See also Casel 1919, 44: *Qui hac fabularum interpretatione allegorica usi sunt, cum in nominibus deorum ac fabulis veterum inclusas esse quasdam doctrinas contendant, occultationem aliquam mysticam agnoscere videntur, qua antiqui poetae vel sacerdotes placita sua texerint* ("Those who made use of this allegorical interpretation of myths, since they affirm that certain teachings were enclosed in the names of the gods and the myths of the ancients, seem to recognize some mystical concealment by which ancient poets or priests hid their doctrines").
[69] Van Nuffelen 2010, 175.
[70] The poets in general show the gods as having "all things transferred to the likeness of human weakness" (*omniaque traducta ad similitudinem inbecillitatis humanae*, 2.70) such as their shapes, ages, marriages, desires, despair, and wrath. Homer and Hesiod are surely responsible for showing such things (see Hdt. 2.53).
[71] See Buffière 1956, 137-154.
[72] This is the Homer to whose poetry Socrates attributes "underlying meanings" (ὑπονοίαις) in the *Republic* at variance with their apparently impious mythic surfaces (378d3-e1; cf. X. *Smp*. 3.6). Socrates' not admitting these myths of Homer into the city does not mean that he argues against the presence of underlying meanings in Homer's poetry.

For Cicero, Balbus is on the right track. Because the three theologies cannot be neatly separated, the civil and poetic theologies can also teach philosophers about philosophy given their philosophic elements. Indeed, the project of *De legibus* is predicated on the link between civil and natural theologies, as mentioned above, and Cicero's own role as a poet and the question of the relationship between history and poetry feature prominently at the start of that work (1.1-5; see also *Div*. 1.17-22).

Balbus points to an exaggerated version of paths of inquiry that are important to Cicero. For Cicero there were philosophers before Pythagoras invented the word "philosophy" (*Tusc*. 5.6-9). Homer transmits the wisdom of the heroic age (*Tusc*. 5.7; see also *Fin*. 5.49) and his status as an orator (*Brut*. 40) ranges him among the "political philosophers" (*politici philosophi, De orat*. 3.109).[73] But Cicero never claims to uncover the exact details of a current philosophic system in the writings of an old poet. In fact, he may well agree with Velleius' critique of Chrysippus' allegorical practices, that his allegories anachronistically state that the old poets were Stoics (1.41).[74] In parallel to Velleius' attack on Stoic allegory, Cotta says of Stoic etymology, "since you think that Neptune is named from 'swimming' (*nando*), there will be no name which you would not be able to explain whence it is derived on the basis of a single letter" (3.62).[75] The allegories absurdly state that the old poets were Stoics, whose theology the poets would never have dreamed of, and the Stoics' etymologies force explanations of words' origins on a tenuous basis.

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[73] Socrates' institution of political philosophy (*Tusc*. 5.10-11) would, then, be a recovery of what the poets were already doing.

[74] … *in secondo autem libro volt Orphei Musaei Hesiodi Homerique fabellas accommodare ad ea quae ipse primo libro de deis inmortalibus dixerit, ut etiam veterrimi poetae, qui haec ne suspicati quidem sint, Stoici fuisse videantur* ("… but in Book 2 [of his *On the Nature of the Gods*] he wants to accommodate the myths of Orpheus, Musaeus, Hesiod, and Homer to those things which he himself said in Book 1 about the immortal gods, in order that even very old poets, who did not even suspect these things, may also seem to have been Stoics").

[75] … *quoniam Neptunum a nando appellatum putas, nullum erit nomen quod non possis una littera explicare unde ductum sit* …

Cicero, like Plato, is well aware of how allegory and especially etymology can be forced to serve one's philosophic purpose. M. jokingly recognizes the playful character of forced etymologies that make everything fit Stoicism (*Tusc*. 3.18). This recalls Socrates' admission in the *Cratylus* that etymologies can be manipulated to match whatever one wants to prove (437a2-c8), in that dialogue mostly that those who created language were proto-Heracliteans. These moments undercut the seemingly dogmatic assertations that etymology proves that the poets were proto-Stoics in *DND* and that Homer was a proto-Heraclitean in the *Theaetetus*.

Cicero nonetheless recognizes the power of allegory without such dogmatic commitments. He defines allegory as continuous metaphor in *De oratore* (3.166-167) and *Orator* (94). He even says in a letter to Atticus that he will write allegorically about politics (*Att*. 2.20.3). Metaphor can show what one means better than a proper word (*De orat*. 3.155) because metaphor "is applied to the senses themselves, especially that of the eyes" and "just about put[s] those things in the sight of the soul, which we cannot discern and see" (160-161).[76] Allegory as continuous metaphor can still present things better than they could be presented directly because they move the reader in a different way.[77] Maybe what the author envisions cannot be transmitted but by this indirect process on the part of the reader. This is a type of esotericism without dogmatic content, and its method is grounded in the nature of speech and communication.

4.4.2 Cicero's Myth of Stoicism and Platonic Esotericism

4.4.2.1 Introduction

We have now seen the elements of Balbus' theology which could be appealing to Cicero and the dramatic link between Balbus and Young Cicero through Balbus' use of the Aratus

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[76] … *ad sensus ipsos admovetur, maxime oculorum* …; … *quae paene ponunt in conspectu animi, quae cernere et videre non possumus*.

[77] Cf. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 4.1212 (1960 [1921], 33): "Was gezeigt werden *kann*, *kann* nicht gesagt werden." Emphasis is original. See also Pl. *Ly*. 206c4-7.

translation. Now I will pursue the question of why Cicero sees Balbus' Stoicism only as a mythical image of the truth which however preserves Platonic philosophy.

Cicero endorses Stoicism in such a way that the exoteric and esoteric levels are not strictly separated, as they are for Epicurus and Cotta. Epicureanism and Stoicism have become the new religions of the elite as an age of tyranny dawns on Rome inaugurated by Caesar's rule (1.7).[78] For Cicero Stoicism is the less destructive option given its support of traditional religion and virtue, but in its original form its doctrine of fate imposes a tyranny on peoples' minds to match political tyranny. Cicero, then, uses Stoicism in a modified form where the doctrine of fate is suppressed to allow for human freedom. He transforms it poetically into a new myth for Rome which can preserve genuine philosophy while still instilling a salutary ethical teaching. He sees Stoicism as a dogmatic offshoot of Platonic philosophy, and so for him the school still contains the roots of Socratic questioning visible in Plato. In line with his creative use of Stoicism in his other works, and his power of shaping readers' conception of Stoicism through his introduction of philosophy to Rome in Latin for the first time, Cicero embarks on a poetic project which will be esoteric in a number of senses. It has the motives of protecting philosophers from tyrannical rule, protecting politics through a moralizing theological doctrine, and teaching through ambiguity. The method of a philosophic myth is akin to allegory, in the broader context of Cicero's dialogic method which conceals his own views.[79] Grounded in the ultimate cause of Cicero's skeptical epistemology, the content is the skeptical inquiry Cicero associates with Socrates and Plato which preserves the possibility for freedom of thought even as political freedom vanishes along with the Republic.

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[78] See Wynne 2019, 56 n. 12: "*DND* shows us how educated Romans of the Late Republic could adopt philosophical schools (or other schemes of thought, perhaps) and *privately interpret* their *public* religious actions in a way that these might give them a similar sort of fulfillment [i.e., similar to identifying with Christianity or Buddhism today]." Emphasis is original.

[79] Consider Hume 1947 [1779], 127: "There are some subjects, however, to which dialogue-writing is peculiarly adapted, and where it is still preferable to *the direct and simple method of composition*." Emphasis is mine.

First, I sketch some relevant Platonic views of myth in relation to esoteric philosophy and Cicero's view that Zeno and the school he founded represent a dogmatic form of Platonism. Other scholars' explorations of Cicero as a mythmaker then corroborate my reading of Cicero as using Stoicism as a philosophic myth. Finally, I turn to the preface of *DND*, the only place in the work where Cicero speaks in his own voice, to see further how and why Cicero modifies Stoicism through a dialectical engagement with Epicureanism to create a new philosophic myth for Rome.

4.4.2.2 Myth, Philosophy, and Esotericism in Plato: A Sketch

As will be argued below, the clearest indication of Cicero's characterization of Balbus' Stoic theology as a myth is that Young Cicero's judgment of Balbus' speech relates Balbus' Stoicism to a "likeness of the truth" (*veritatis similitudinem*, 3.95). This phrase creates links to Platonic myth. It is unsurprising that a "likeness of the truth" should evoke poetic myth. After all, when Homer's Odysseus assumes the role of storyteller to deceive Penelope, "He feigned many false things by speaking [them as] similar to true ones" (Ἴσκε ψεύδεα πολλὰ λέγων ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα, *Od*. 19.203). Hesiod's Muses who tell him the mythical account of the gods use nearly identical language: "We know how to say many false things similar to true ones" (ἴδμεν ψεύδεα πολλὰ λέγειν ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα, *Th*. 27). For these two paradigmatic poets, whose importance for Balbus and Cicero we saw above, myth and poetry contain things "similar to the truth" (ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα). Already in the preface, Cicero says that it is "similar to what is true" (*veri simile*) that "the gods exist" (*deos esse*) (1.2). There is something poetic about the existence of the gods.

Poetic myth[80] was already a vehicle for esoteric philosophy in Plato, whom Panaetius calls "the Homer of the philosophers" (*Homerum philosophorum*, *Tusc*. 1.79).[81] For Protagoras in

[80] Fowler (2011, 49-50) notes the close connection between poetry and myth in Plato with reference to *Phd*. 61b4: "In the same place, as in many others in Plato, there is a strong association between myth and poetry: myths are what poets tell; and this class of stories in Greek society is nearly coterminous with 'the Greek myths', in our terms."
[81] See Morgan 2000, 132-281 for a general discussion of Platonic myth. A difficulty in interpreting Plato's myths and his characters' discussions of the divine is the difference in content across dialogues. As Cicero has Velleius say, "now,

the *Protagoras* and Socrates in the *Theaetetus* poets conceal philosophy in their poetry (*Prt*. 316d6-7; *Tht*. 152e4-9). Elsewhere in the *Theaetetus*, Socrates makes clear that poetry is the very means of concealment: Homer is one of "the ancients hiding [the doctrine of flux] from the many with poetry" (τῶν ἀρχαίων μετὰ ποιήσεως ἐπικρυπτομένων τοὺς πολλούς, 180c8-d2; see again *Alc*. *II* 147b7-c5). While poetry here implies myth, the Eleatic Stranger makes the connection between myth and esotericism even more explicit in the *Sophist*. He introduces the views on being of Parmenides, Xenophanes, Heraclitus, and Empedocles by saying, "Each one seems to me to tell us some myth (μῦθόν) as if we were children" (242c8-9; cf. *Ti*. 22a4-b8).[82] After summarizing their views, the Eleatic Stranger offers the critique "that they looked down on and thought little of us, the many, too much; for after in no way taking thought to whether we follow them as they speak or whether we are left behind, each one completes his own [business]" (243a6-b1; see also *Prm*. 128b3-6).[83] Like poets, philosophers use myth as a means of esotericism.

The preceding description of esoteric myth makes it seem akin to dogmatic esotericism, or the concealment of a hidden teaching. The philosopher uses myth as a sort of code to communicate something to those in an inner circle. We have already seen, however, Plato's (and Cicero's) awareness of the limits of dogmatic allegory and etymology for esotericism. Similarly, Socrates' discussion of myth in *Republic* Books 2-3 suggests that there is a type of myth where

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it is a lengthy task to speak about Plato's inconsistency" (*Iam de Platonis inconstantia longum est dicere* …) because of the contradictory notions of the divine he puts forth in the *Timeaus* as opposed to the *Laws* (1.30; cf. *Tusc*. 2.5).

[82] Μῦθόν τινα ἕκαστος φαίνεταί μοι διηγεῖσθαι παισὶν ὡς οὖσιν ἡμῖν … The ὡς here does not introduce an explanatory participle which would yield the translation "on the grounds that we were children," since each one of the philosophers is telling a myth, not just Parmenides who actually instructed the Eleatic Stranger and others when they were children (*Sph*. 237a5).

[83] Ὅτι λίαν τῶν πολλῶν ἡμῶν ὑπερίδοντες ὠλιγώρησαν· οὐδὲν γὰρ φροντίσαντες εἴτ' ἐπακολουθοῦμεν αὐτοῖς λέγουσιν εἴτε ἀπολειπόμεθα, περαίνουσι τὸ σφέτερον αὐτῶν ἕκαστοι. See Manasse 1937, 11 ad loc.: "Es ist ein *esoterisches* Wissen, das auf die Zustimmung der Menger, d. h. aber auch jedes Einzelnen verzichtet, darum nicht nachprüfbar ist." Emphasis is mine. Benardete (1984, ad loc.) also adduces Arist. *Metaph*. 1000a9-15 as a parallel (see in particular ἡμῶν δ᾽ ὠλιγώρησαν).

the esoteric and exoteric levels are connected, where there is not just pure fiction. Socrates has the following exchange with Adeimantus concerning education in the city they are constructing:

> Λόγων δὲ διττὸν εἶδος, τὸ μὲν ἀληθές, ψεῦδος δ' ἕτερον;
> Ναί.
> Παιδευτέον δ' ἐν ἀμφοτέροις, πρότερον δ' ἐν τοῖς ψευδέσιν;
> Οὐ μανθάνω, ἔφη, πῶς λέγεις.
> Οὐ μανθάνεις, ἦν δ' ἐγώ, ὅτι πρῶτον τοῖς παιδίοις μύθους λέγομεν; τοῦτο δέ που ὡς τὸ ὅλον εἰπεῖν ψεῦδος, ἔνι δὲ καὶ ἀληθῆ.
>
> [Soc.:] 'And of speeches there is a double form, one that is true, but the other that is a falsehood?'
> [Ad.:] 'Yes.'
> [Soc.:] 'And one must educate in both [of these speeches], but first in the false [or "in falsehoods"]?'
> [Ad.:] 'I do not understand,' he said, 'how you mean.'
> [Soc.:] 'You do not understand,' I said, 'that first we tell myths to small children? And this [i.e., myth], I suppose, to speak generally, is a falsehood, but there are also true things in [myth].' (376e11-377a6)

Myths are on the whole false, but contain true things (cf. *Lg*. 680d1-5; 682a1-5). This is significant for Socrates' later introduction of the noble lie, which he says is well known to the poets (*R*. 414b8-c7). The lie or falsehood has two parts: 1) that the citizens are born from the earth as their mother, and hence are related to one another, and raised under the earth (ὑπὸ γῆς), and 2), adapting Hesiod's different ages (*Op*. 109-201), that the god forms the soul of each with a different type of metal determining what function each will perform in the city (414d1-415c7). Socrates calls this a myth (τοῦ μύθου, 415a2).

Socrates' account of the noble lie brings together a number of relevant elements for the relationship between esotericism and civil religion. The noble lie is part of a civil religion,[84] explaining the citizens' relationship to a god who created them in the earth. It grounds both the later communization of women and children (457c10-d3) by making the city into one family and the tripartite class structure of the city, which are crucial elements in the city. It is also connected

[84] Cf. Pl. *Ti*. 28c3-5: τὸν μὲν οὖν ποιητὴν καὶ πατέρα τοῦδε τοῦ παντὸς εὑρεῖν τε ἔργον καὶ εὑρόντα εἰς πάντας ἀδύνατον λέγειν… ("It is both a [great] task to find the maker and father of this whole and, if one has found him, it is impossible to tell of him to all…"). See also Cicero's translation of this.

to poetry, namely that of Hesiod. In Varro's terms, poetic theology influences civil theology. Socrates' conversation with Adeimantus cited above, moreover, suggests that there are somehow true things in this myth grounding the civil religion of the city—it is a lie like the truth. The types of metals correspond to the truth of different natural abilities: in being assigned to a different function in the city the citizens receive "the honor befitting their nature" (τὴν τῇ φύσει προσήκουσαν τιμήν, 415c1-2). But how could there be truth in the statement that the citizens are born and raised under the earth? Socrates' image (ἀπείκασον) of the Cave is also "about both education and lack of education" (παιδείας τε πέρι καὶ ἀπαιδευσίας) and he describes people "in a cave-like dwelling under the earth" (ἐν καταγείῳ οἰκήσει σπηλαιώδει, 514a1-3). According to this image, we are all born and educated under the earth in the Cave. The founding myth of the city points towards what many readers take to be a crucial philosophic teaching of the *Republic*.

Myth, like (or as) poetry,[85] is persuasive[86]—indeed, using the likely (εἰκός) is one way of thinking about rhetoric[87]—, but it also provides access to philosophy if you dig beneath the surface. Aristotle provides a thought-provoking analysis of the relationship between philosophy and myth in his interpretation of Socrates' statement that philosophy begins in wonder (*Tht.* 155d2-5).[88] In the *Metaphysics* Aristotle says, "And the one who is in *aporia* and wonders thinks that he does not know (and therefore also the lover of myth is somehow a philosopher (καὶ ὁ φιλόμυθος φιλόσοφός πώς ἐστιν); for myth is composed of wonderous things) …" (982b17-19).[89] Myth leads to philosophy in that myth engenders wonder which is the beginning of philosophy. Aristotle's statement can function as a guide to interpreting the philosophic character of Platonic

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[85] See Pl. *Grg*. 502d2-3; *Phdr* 277e8-278a1; Cic. *De orat*. 1.70, 128; 3.27.
[86] See πεῖσαι δὲ συχνῆς πειθοῦς, *R*. 414c7; πεισθεῖεν, 415c7; Καὶ οὕτως, ὦ Γλαύκων, μῦθος ἐσώθη καὶ οὐκ ἀπώλετο, καὶ ἡμᾶς ἂν σώσειεν, ἂν πειθώμεθα αὐτῷ …, 621b8-c1.
[87] *Phdr*. 267a6-7; Arist. *Rh*. 1357a32; cf. 1355a14-15. The connection of εἰκός to myth is the εἰκὼς μῦθος of the *Timaeus* (see further 4.4.2.4 below).
[88] Socrates grounds this assertion in a mythical genealogy of Thauma as being born from Iris, based on Hesiod (*Th.* 237-268).
[89] ὁ δ' ἀπορῶν καὶ θαυμάζων οἴεται ἀγνοεῖν (διὸ καὶ ὁ φιλόμυθος φιλόσοφός πώς ἐστιν· ὁ γὰρ μῦθος σύγκειται ἐκ θαυμασίων) …

and Ciceronian myth and seeing why they are lovers of myth.[90] Myth provides the salutary persuasion necessary for civil religion, but the wonderful contradictions within a myth lead to philosophic questioning.[91] There is concealment, but of questioning rather than a propositional statement. A remark of Socrates' in the *Republic* also points to the mythical status of the very conversation he is narrating: "Come, then, just like men telling myths in a myth (ἐν μύθῳ μυθολογοῦντές) and being at leisure let us educate the men in speech" (376d9-19; cf. *Ti*. 26c7-8).[92] Dialogues as stories (μῦθοι) certainly induce wonder.

Like Plato, Cicero both in *DND* and elsewhere makes myth (*fabula*) the province of poets (*Leg*. 1.4-5; *Fin*. 1.7; *Tusc*. 4.70; *DND* 2.63; 3.77; *Div*. 1.40). As we have seen, Cicero highlights Young Cicero's poetic activity in *DND*, and Cicero as poet is also very prominent in other dialogues (*Leg*. 1.1-5; *Div*. 1.17-22). It is reasonable, then, that Cicero the poet should be involved in the creation of myth, and Cicero's composition of mimetic dialogues constitutes a type of poetry just as much as Plato's dialogues do.[93]

The linkage between poetic myth and esoteric philosophy appears already in Plato. If Cicero uses Stoicism as a myth which still engenders philosophic reflection, he would thus follow the precedent of Platonic esotericism. Just as Young Cicero forms his alliance with Balbus on the basis of Stoic poetry, Cicero uses Stoicism as a new poetic myth.

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[90] See Clay 2007 for a sustained reflection on the meaning of this Aristotelian passage for understanding Plato's mythmaking.

[91] Aristotle says that traditional myths were used to persuade the many and uphold the laws, but that they contained the important truth that the primary substances are divine (*Metaph*. 1074b1-14).

[92] ἴθι οὖν, ὥσπερ ἐν μύθῳ μυθολογοῦντές τε καὶ σχολὴν ἄγοντες λόγῳ παιδεύωμεν τοὺς ἄνδρας. Because Socrates narrates the dialogue he could be modifying or inventing details of the conversation from the prior day to communicate to whomever he narrates. In this case, he may be conveying that dialogue is a form of myth.

[93] For Benardete (2012c, 285) "*De legibus* is a poem about law …" As Klein (1965, 3) notes, Aristotle sees clearly that, being mimetic, Socratic dialogues are poetry, akin to the mimes of Sophron (*Po*. 1447b10-11).

4.4.2.3 Cicero on Plato and the Stoics

For Cicero Stoicism descends from Platonic philosophy. As already discussed, in *De legibus* Cicero fuses Stoic and Platonic teachings, and in *DND* Balbus' positive stance towards Plato and the poets points to Cicero's use of Platonic myth. Cicero, furthermore, elsewhere closely aligns Zeno with Plato's Old Academy. In *DND*, Cotta repeats Cicero's teacher Antiochus' thesis that the Stoics only differ from the Peripatetics on points of vocabulary rather than substance (1.16; see also *Fin.* 3.10; 4.2), but in the *Academica* Varro, who follows Antiochus, notes that Aristotle as a student of Plato is also numbered among those of the Old Academy (*Ac*. 1.17-18). Indeed, Zeno was a student of the third Academic scholarch Polemo (*Ac*. 1.34; *Fin*. 4.3) and engaged deeply with the writings of Plato himself, especially the *Republic* and *Laws*, in his own writings.[94] Cicero in his own voice draws together Socrates, the Socratics, the Old Academy, the Peripatetics, and Zeno and the Stoics in the preface to *De divinatione* (1.5). The Cynic Crates also influenced Zeno (cf. *Off*. 1.128), but Antisthenes, the founder of Cynicism, was himself a student of Socrates (*De orat.* 3.62).

Zeno and the Stoics, then, have a version of Plato's philosophy, if one that is badly distorted and brought to an unhealthy extreme (see *De orat*. 3.65-66; *Fin*. 4.21-22), at the core of their own thinking. Epicurus, by contrast, follows Democritus' atomistic physics most of all (*Ac*. 1.6; *Fin*. 1.18, 28; 4.13; *Tusc*. 1.82; *DND* 1.73, 120; 2.76; *Fat*. 46). Stoicism has the potential to preserve Platonic philosophy in a way that Epicureanism does not. This makes Stoicism the more salutary choice for Cicero, despite its flaws. It is an image of Plato's philosophy, and thus a worthy mythical vehicle for Cicero's engagement with Plato.

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[94] See Atkins 2015. Of course, the *Academica* places the Stoics firmly in the camp of the dogmatic Old Academy as opposed to the skeptical New Academy in the debate around Stoic *katalēpsis* and Academic suspension of judgment (see, e.g., *Ac*. 1.43).

4.4.2.4 Cicero the Mythmaker, Modified Stoicism, and the End of *De natura deorum*

Now, Cicero's mythmaking is most evident from his *Somnium Scipionis* (The Dream of Scipio) at the end of *De re publica* (6.12-33), which adapts both Plato's Myth of Er and the Image of the Cave from the *Republic*.[95] The *Somnium* shows that Cicero follows Plato's practice of using myth in the service of philosophical reflection. But Cicero's use of myth extends beyond the categories of what one might normally think of as myth. Elisabeth Asmis has applied the epithet "*Mythologus*" to Cicero regarding Cicero's treatment of the founders of Rome in *De re publica*. Significantly, for her there do not have to be fantastic elements for a story to qualify as myth (in fact, the myth of the founders is a rationalized history). Other elements Asmis identifies in Ciceronian myth will find important parallels in what I argue is Cicero's mythical use of Stoicism: the selection and omission of key details, the connection rather than disjunction between myth and truth, the telegraphing of myth as myth, and dialogic composition itself as a form of mythmaking.[96]

Cast in terms appropriate for an Academic skeptic to pass judgment, as discussed above (Section 2.2), the final words of *DND* also reveal the mythic quality of Cicero's presentation of Stoicism. Cicero describes Young Cicero's judgment at the end of the conversation (the words are Cicero's, but the judgment is Young Cicero's): "… Balbus' argument seemed to be more inclined towards a likeness of the truth" (… *Balbi* [sc. *disputatio*] *ad veritatis similitudinem videretur esse propensior*, 3.95). In interpreting this final sentence, Altman builds on Sedley's observation that in Cicero's roughly contemporaneous translation of Plato's *Timaeus* the Latin *similitudo veri* ("likeness of the truth") translates Plato's use of εἰκών ("image") and εἰκώς ("being like") from *Timaeus* 29b-d.[97] Altman suggests that we can thus connect the use of the

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[95] See Atkins 2013a, 76.
[96] Asmis 2014, 24, 28-29, 32-33, 36.
[97] Sedley 2013, 202. In light of the εἰκὼς μῦθος of the *Timaeus*, Cicero may have revised his definition of a *fabula* ("myth") in his youthful *De inventione*: "a myth is that in which neither true things nor things like the truth are

phrase *veritatis similitudo* ("likeness of the truth") at the end of *DND* to Timaeus' assertion in the *Timaeus* that his cosmology can only be a "likely story/myth" (τὸν εἰκότα μῦθον, 29d2).[98] Balbus' Stoic cosmology is only a "likely story." I find Altman's observation persuasive, especially given another detail of Cicero's translation of the *Timaeus* not noted by Sedley or Altman. In the same passage (29b-d), Cicero translates the topic περὶ θεῶν ("about the gods," 29c4),[99] that about which Timaeus says a speech can only approach an image or a likeness, as "*de deorum natura*" ("on the nature of the gods"), a version of the title of *DND* employed also at *DND* 1.91. It would be apparent to a reader of Cicero's philosophic writings that Timaeus' speech in the Latin version treats the same subject as that of *DND*. Moreover, there are many content-related parallels between Balbus' speech and the *Timaeus*,[100] including even a passage borrowed directly from Cicero's *Timaeus* translation (2.47 vs. *Tim*. 17 from Pl. *Ti*. 33a-b),[101] which would make the reader think of it as a "likely story."[102]

Cicero's modification of Stoicism from its orthodox form confirms its mythical status in *DND*. In particular, as Elisabeth Begemann convincingly argues, Cicero suppresses the Stoic doctrine of fate as being superior even to the gods in Balbus' speech.[103] This is to preserve human freedom because a belief in deterministic fate would prevent Romans from acting on a belief in their free will which is so important for republican political institutions.[104] Fate is a doctrine of

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contained ..." (*fabula est, in qua nec verae nec veri similes res continentur*, 1.27). Consider also Cicero's use of the word *imago* ("image") with reference to Plato already in *De re publica* (2.52 with Atkins 2013a, 64 n. 49).

[98] Altman 2016, 171, 176-177. Altman does not make this connection as explicit as my summary does, but I believe this is his point.

[99] περὶ θεῶν follows the accentuation and punctuation of Giomini (1975), since he brackets the preceding ὦ Σώκρατες, πολλὰ πολλῶν of Burnet's text because it is omitted in Cicero's translation. In Burnet's text θεῶν is in apposition with πολλῶν, with πέρι as a postpositive preposition, so the genitive case of θεῶν is still determined by πέρι.

[100] Particularly concerning astronomy and human anatomy. See, e.g., Pease 1955-1958 ad 2.136 and Wynne 2019, 142 n. 35 ad 2.49.

[101] Sedley 2013, 189-193.

[102] Lévy (1992, 572-573) also sees the *Timaeus* as deeply important for *DND*, but focuses on how Cotta recognizes the limits of certainty of theology in line with the *Timaeus* as opposed to Stoic dogmatic theology.

[103] Begemann 2012, 121, 127-130.

[104] Begemann 2021, 140.

tyranny.[105] Cicero restricts the critique—and indeed any serious discussion—of the Stoic teaching about fate to Balbus' opponents, Velleius and Cotta. Cicero recognizes the problem of fate for human freedom and thus makes Balbus present a purified version of Stoicism. He retains the providential gods that are so important for human life and politics without the concomitant despair arising from inexorable fate.[106] It is this version of Stoicism, not the one with the standard doctrine of fate, that Young Cicero endorses and that Cicero propagates to his Latin-reading audience.[107]

Cicero uses Velleius and Cotta, who form an Epicurean-Academic alliance at the end of the work (3.95), to expose the problems of dogmatic Stoicism and moderate its doctrine of fate. As Cicero says in the first sentence, the question about the nature of the gods is "necessary for moderating religion" (*ad moderandam religionem necessaria*, 1.1) and Epicureanism and Stoicism present the two fundamental alternatives for religion in Cicero's time: gods who care not at all and gods who care too much (3-5). Cicero later states in *De divinatione* the problem of either rejecting or accepting Stoics (on divination) completely: "… for there is a danger that either, if these matters are neglected, we be liable to an impious offense or, if they are taken up, liable to an old woman's superstition" (1.7; cf. Plu. *De sup*. 164b).[108] This is the problem of too little credulity in the gods and too much. It is, therefore, plausible that Cicero's use of the

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[105] Cf. Hegel 1973 [1807], 157-158: "Der Eigensinn ist die Freiheit, die eine Einzelheit sich befestigt und *innerhalb* der Knechtschaft steht, der Stoizismus aber die Freiheit, welche unmittelbar immer aus ihr her und in die *reine Allgemeinheit* des Gedankens zurückkommt [und] als allgemeine Form des Weltgeistes nur in der Zeit einer allgemeinen Furcht und Knechtschaft, aber auch einer allgemeinen Bildung auftreten konnte, welche das Bilden bis zum Denken gesteigert hatte." Emphasis is original. Consider also Nietzsche's (1999 [1886], V.22) statement in *Beyond Good and Evil*, § 9 that "Stoicismus ist Selbst-Tyrannei" and its context.

[106] Müller (2022, 168-169) sees the agreement with Balbus as consistent with Cicero's approval of Panaetius, drawing mostly on *De divinatione*. For him, the approval of Panaetius is based on Panaetius' modification of dogmatic Stoicism which retains the gods without relying on divination as proof for the gods' existence, and his thought's being more compatible with Academic skepticism than that of other Stoics. Though focusing on different evidence, Müller's argument overlaps with mine in that we both see Cicero as finding aspects of Stoicism useful while critiquing orthodox Stoicism.

[107] Cicero also modifies key aspects of Stoicism in *De legibus* and *De officiis*: in the former he links Stoic natural law to the views on nature in Plato's *Laws*, and in the latter he loosens the strict moral requirements of the sage in order to give a moral teaching for everyone (2.35).

[108] *… est enim periculum, ne aut neglectis iis inpia fraude aut susceptis anili superstitione obligemur*.

Epicurean-Academic critique of Stoicism to create a modified Stoicism leads to a moderation in religion, the stated aim of the question on the nature of the gods.

The end of Velleius' critique of orthodox Stoicism shows well the alignment of fate with tyranny:

> itaque inposuistis in cervicibus nostris sempiternum dominum, quem dies et noctes timeremus. quis non timeat omnia providentem et cogitantem et animadvertentem et omnia ad se pertinere putantem curiosum et plenum negotii deum? Hinc vobis extitit primum illa fatalis necessitas, quam εἱμαρμένην dicitis, ut quicquid accidat id ex aeterna veritate causarumque continuitate fluxisse dicatis.
>
> And thus you have placed on our necks an eternal master, for us to fear day and night. For who would not fear a god who foresees, considers, and notices [or 'punishes'] all things, and thinks that all things concern him—this nosy busybody of a god? Hence for you there first arose that [famous] necessity of fate, which you call *heimarmenē*, with the result that you assert that everything which happens stemmed from an eternal truth and linkage of causes. (1.54-55)

Velleius characterizes the Stoics as placing an eternal master over humankind through an identification of the Stoic god with fate—making humankind into slaves.[109] As Begemann points out, Balbus in *DND* (like Quintus in *De divinatione*, see 1.125) never identifies the providential gods with fate. And yet, Velleius' identification of god and fate as well as his definition of fate as a causal nexus accurately portray Stoic doctrine.[110] Thus Cicero modifies and moderates the Stoic doctrine to suppress this problem of fate, using the criticism of Epicureanism, in line with the stated aim of his preface.[111]

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[109] Velleius seems to follow Epicurus in characterizing a doctrine of fate as imposing a master, but Epicurus recognizes that the gods of the poets allow a greater degree of freedom than the doctrine of fate (*Men.* 133-135). See also Lucr. 2.1090-1092, which I will discuss further below (5.2.2).

[110] See Begemann 2012, 110 ad loc.: "Während Cicero damit durch den Mund des Epikureers die stoische Lehrmeinung *durchaus korrekt wiedergibt* …" Emphasis is mine.

[111] In Book 3, Cotta makes a similar point, in keeping with his frequent alignment with Epicurean arguments: *saepe autem ne utile quidem est scire quid futurum sit; miserum est enim nihil proficientem angi nec habere ne spei quidem extremum et tamen commune solacium* ("Moreover, it is often not even useful to know what will happen; for it is wretched for one accomplishing nothing to be aggrieved and not even to have the final but nevertheless common consolation of hope," 3.14).

4.4.2.5 Esotericism and the Preface to *De natura deorum*

In fact, Cicero also presents himself as striking a middle ground between Epicureanism and Stoicism in the preface. He depicts himself as embodying Epicurean leisure (*otium*/ἀταραξία)[112] in a withdrawal from politics which remains political and notes the power of Stoicism for politics (cf. 1.3-4), while already implicitly modifying the teaching of Stoic fate. In the preface, furthermore, Cicero presents following Plato as the means of preserving one's own freedom in connection with his choice to practice the pedagogical esotericism of concealing his own views (10-12).

Cicero explains his reasons for his philosophic project of the 40s:

> Nam cum otio langueremus et is esset rei publicae status ut eam unius consilio atque cura gubernari necesse esset, primum ipsius rei publicae causa philosophiam nostris hominibus explicandam putavi, magni existimans interesse ad decus et ad laudem civitatis res tam gravis tamque praeclaras Latinis etiam litteris contineri.
>
> For since we wasted away in leisure and the regime-type was such that it was necessary for it to be directed by the design and care of one man, first I thought that for the sake of the republic itself philosophy must be explained to our people, thinking that it mattered greatly for the adornment and praise of the polity that matters so weighty and so illustrious be contained also by Latin letters. (1.7)

Cicero casts his leisure in terms which Cotta will later use for the ideal leisure of the Epicurean gods: "For I in no way put up a fight about the blessed life, which you do not think even in the case of a god exists unless he completely wastes away in leisure (*otio langueat*)" (67).[113] Cicero had to be at Epicurean leisure (a withdrawal from politics) because the regime-type (*rei publicae status*)[114] had changed from the mixed regime that had existed for nearly five-hundred years to a tyranny under Caesar's rule (see also *Div*. 2.6-7; *Off*. 1.26; 3.84-85).[115] The danger caused by ill will (*invidia*) also creates a link between Cicero and Epicurus. In the two passages where Cotta

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[112] See *Rep*. 1.1 with Mader 1992, 49-52 for *otium* as Epicurean ἀταραξία. See again *De orat*. 3.64 (*otiosi*).
[113] *nam de vita beata nihil repugno, quam tu ne in deo quidem esse censes nisi plane otio langueat*. See also Auvray-Assayas 2022, 118 for the parallel between Cicero and the Epicurean Velleius created by the grammar of the work's final sentence (3.95).
[114] See Atkins 2013b, 19 for this meaning of *rei publicae status*.
[115] See also Gildenhard 2007, 67.

endorses the theory of Epicurus' esoteric atheism, he says that Epicurus hides his atheism to avoid *invidia* (1.123; 3.3). But in the preface Cicero justifies his procedure of reporting others' opinions on the nature of the gods rather than his own because of the same dangers. For he says, "But now, to free myself from all ill will (*invidia*), I will bring out into the open the thoughts of the philosophers on the nature of the gods" (1.13).[116] While at leisure like Epicurus, Cicero faces the same dangers of *invidia* as Epicurus for openly expressing his own views about the gods (cf. the discussion of φθόνος at Pl. *Prt.* 316d2). Self-protection is a motive for esotericism common to both Epicurus and Cicero.[117]

The difference, however, between Epicurus and Cicero comes to light from Cicero's commitment to political life. Even as Cicero presents himself as engaging in Epicurean *otium* he does so "for the sake of the republic" (*rei publicae causa*). As argued above (4.2.2), *rei publicae causa* is a catch-phrase in Cicero for something that is done for political utility, a *raison d'état*, and is connected with an exoteric use of religion. Cicero's *otium* allows him to engage in politics even while shut out of politics—his philosophic writings are now performing the same function as that of law and civil religion (e.g., *Leg*. 2.14; *Div*. 2.28, 74).[118] Cicero had just said that he concealed his philosophic activity his whole political career: "when we seemed to least, then we were philosophizing the most" (*cum minime videbamur tum maxime philosophabamur*, 1.6) and

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[116] *Sed iam, ut omni me invidia liberem, ponam in medio sententias philosophorum de natura deorum.*

[117] See again *invisum* ("hated") of philosophy (*Off*. 2.2), which is formed from the same verb (*invidere*) as *invidia*. Philosophy itself is suspect, but especially philosophy concerning religion which is the foundation of political life, something Cicero has to be attentive to given his station as augur (*DND* 1.14). Cicero does make his character take a more active role in such discussions in *De divinatione*, but only on the literary conceit that it is a private conversation with his brother: "… but we are alone; it is allowed to search out the truth without ill will (*invidia*) …" (… *sed soli sumus; licet verum exquirere sine invidia* …, 2.28). Of course, Cicero publishes the conversation and thus allows the arguments to be associated with himself to some degree, but scholars have convincingly read his character as aiming to get rid of superstition, not religion or the gods (see 2.148-149 with Fott 2012, 172-173 and Wynne 2019, 254). This is a less radical argument than I claim Cotta's to be and set over thirty years later, so there is no inconsistency between seeing Cotta as hesitant to reveal his agnosticism and Cicero publishing Marcus' critique of divination in *De divinatione*. Cicero also wrote this latter dialogue in already changed political circumstances, and the more open critique of divination than in previous writings (*Leg*. 2.32-33) may be due to the exploitation of religion and divination by Caesar and others (Lévy 1992, 584-585).

[118] This corroborates, then, my argument that the myth of Stoicism in *DND*, of course contained in Cicero's writings, functions in a way analogous to civil religion.

once Caesar has been assassinated Cicero declares in *De divinatione*, "in our books we pronounced our judgment, we delivered a speech in a popular assembly, we thought that philosophy was our replacement for administration of the republic" (2.7).[119] When Cicero was engaged in politics his political activity masked his philosophizing, and when he retired from politics his philosophizing masked his political activity. Cicero combines Epicurean *otium* and the Stoic dedication to the fatherland (see *Fin.* 2.76).

The passage on leisure (*DND* 1.7) also flags the problematic link between Stoicism and tyranny, as Velleius would later do more openly. The language describing Caesar's rule evokes the rule of the Stoic gods found earlier in the preface itself **(***consilio atque cura* vs. *curatione*, 2; *consuli*, 4). Cicero also uses the language of kingship for Stoic rule in these earlier passages (*regantur*, 2; *regi*, 4;[120] cf. *regere*, Lucr. 2.1095). Cicero brings the rule of Caesar into parallel with the cosmic tyranny of orthodox Stoicism. In a universal empire the subjects withdraw into Epicurean *otium* while the ruler becomes like a Stoic all-seeing god.[121] Cicero strives to strike a balance between these two, and his writing aims at preserving a degree of freedom even under tyranny.

The phrase at 1.7 "it was necessary" (*necesse esset*) of Caesar's rule also contains an important ambiguity. In one sense it could be read as a concession to Caesar's rule. Monarchy was a necessary expedient of the times, as it had been earlier in Rome with the institution of the dictatorship. But it also carries the valence of "it was necessary" as opposed to a free choice—his rule was an imposition of necessity as opposed to the freedom which had previously prevailed.

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[119] *in libris enim sententiam dicebamus, contionabamur, philosophiam nobis pro rei publicae procuratione substitutam putabamus*. Cicero's books navigate the popular assembly (*contio*) like Cotta and Protagoras (*DND* 1.61-63).
[120] The latter, the present passive infinitive of the verb *regere* ("rule") is also identical in spelling and pronunciation to the dative singular of the noun *rex* ("king").
[121] In fact, both those withdrawing from politics and those wishing to be kings share the same longing for absolute freedom which is opposed to republican freedom (*Off.* 1.69-71). See Young 2018, 389, 393 on the need to avoid absolute freedom and absolute slavery in Plato's *Laws* and the connection this creates with republican freedom. The idea of the need to strike a mean between anarchy and tyranny goes back much earlier than Plato (see, e.g., A. *Eu.* 696).

Velleius actually speaks of "the necessity of fate" (*fatalis necessitas,* 55) in the passage cited above. Cicero equates Caesar's rule with the tyranny of fate. The subtle use of ambiguous language at 1.7, along with the problems identified with fate, amounts to an esoteric critique of Caesar's subversion of republican political institutions.

In contrast to the tyranny of fate, Cicero presents the tradition of Platonic philosophy as preserving freedom as opposed to necessity. In the opening dramatic interlude following directly on the preface, Young Cicero responds to Velleius' accusation that he will be a biased supporter of Cotta: "But I do not want you to think that I have come as a helper to this man, but rather as a listener, and a fair one at that, who possesses free judgment (*libero iudicio*), one who is not bound by that sort of necessity (*necessitate*) so that I must, like it or not, guard a certain opinion (*sententia*)" (17; cf. *Tusc*. 2.5; 4.7; *Off*. 3.20).[122] Being part of Plato's Academy means preserving freedom of judgment (*libero iudicio*) as opposed to being bound to necessity in thought, as the dogmatic Epicureans and Stoics are.[123] Cicero in his own voice in the preface had already underscored the importance of preserving one's judgment instead of following authority (1.10), and linked to Socrates this practice of "arguing against everything and not judging any matter openly" (*contra omnia disserendi nullamque rem aperte iudicandi,* 11). This practice underlies Cicero's method of presenting the views of others rather than his own on the gods in the dialogue itself (13). Cicero practices pedagogical esotericism in line with Socrates to preserve his readers' freedom even as they submit to the necessity of Caesar's tyranny.[124]

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[122] *… tu autem nolo existimes me adiutorem huic venisse sed auditorem, et quidem aecum, libero iudicio, nulla eius modi adstrictum necessitate, ut mihi velim nolim sit certa quaedam tuenda sententia*.
[123] Shown too by Atticus' question to Marcus in *De legibus*: *Et scilicet tua libertas disserendi amissa est, aut tu is es qui in disputando non tuum iudicium sequare, sed auctoritati aliorum pareas?* ("And, to be sure, your freedom in discussing has been lost, or are you the one who in arguing does not follow your judgment, but obeys the authority of others?", 1.36). Atticus wonders why Marcus abandons his Academic freedom to expound Stoic dogma.
[124] Freedom of judgment is of course a key concept in Academic skeptic epistemology, but the language of freedom (*libertas*) would always carry marked political connotations for Romans, as would words like "authority" (*auctoritas*).

In his explanation of following the skeptical New Academy, Cicero points his readers to his *Academica* for a full account (11). Thus the *Academica* is the only other philosophic work of his mentioned in *DND* aside from the Aratus translation. In the *Academica*, Marcus makes clear that the practice Cicero attributes to Socrates in the *DND* preface is that of Plato's Socrates (see also *Tusc*. 5.11), since Plato practices the famous "disputation on either side of an issue" (*disputatio in utramque partem*) present in many of Cicero's dialogues of the 40s, and of course in *DND*. He says: "They call this the New Academy, which seems to me to be the Old, if at least we count Plato [among those] of that Old [Academy], in whose books nothing is affirmed and many things are argued on either side (*in utramque partem*), [and] a question is raised about everything [but] nothing certain is said …" (*Ac*. 1.46).[125] Plato instituted the practice of deliberately concealing his own view from his reader and Cicero affirms that the Academic dialogues of the 40s continue Plato's practice of pedagogical esotericism.[126] Following Plato, furthermore, allows one to preserve one's freedom and to "moderate religion" (1.1) by finding a mean between Epicureanism and Stoicism.

As I have argued, Stoicism represents a new type of myth about the divine in the form of a modified Stoicism stripped of the doctrine of fate. This is a form of esotericism, in that Cicero does not believe Balbus' speech to be true to the letter, but, like poetic theology, his new myth is not disconnected from the truth but rather an image of the truth. There is another indication of how Cicero pairs his modified Epicurean *otium* with a refined version of Stoicism in the preface as part of the institution of this myth. Before he launches into his defense of his Academic

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[125] *Hanc Academiam novam appellant, quae mihi vetus videtur, si quidem Platonem ex illa vetere numeramus, cuius in libris nihil affirmatur et in utramque partem multa disseruntur; de omnibus quaeritur nihil certi dicitur …*
[126] Cf. *Fam*. 9.22.4: *… ego servo et servabo (sic enim adsuevi) Platonis verecundiam. itaque tectis verbis ea ad te scripsi quae apertissimis agunt Stoici* ("… I preserve and will preserve (for thus I have become accustomed) Plato's modesty. Therefore I wrote those things to you with covered words which the Stoics treat with the most open words").

concealment, Cicero makes a general remark about philosophy and its benefits in a time of great calamity:

> ea vero ipsa nulla ratione melius frui potui quam si me non modo ad legendos libros sed etiam ad totam philosophiam pertractandam dedissem. omnis autem eius partes atque omnia membra tum facillume noscuntur, cum totae quaestiones scribendo explicantur; est enim admirabilis quaedam continuatio seriesque rerum, ut alia ex alia nexa et omnes inter se aptae conligataeque videantur.
>
> But in fact I could not by any method better take advantage of this very thing [i.e., philosophy as a relief from evils] than by dedicating myself not only to reading books but also to treating all of philosophy. All of its parts, moreover, and all of its limbs are most easily discerned at that time when all questions are laid out by writing; for there is a certain wonderful connection and linkage of things, so that one thing seems [to be] bound to another and all seem [to be] fitted and connected among themselves. (1.9; cf. *Leg*. 1.52; *Tusc*. 2.1)

One cannot bear the full fruits of philosophy just by reading books. Rather, one has to treat all of philosophy by himself or herself to see how every single question (*quaestio*) is bound to every other question. The question about the nature of the gods is linked to the whole of philosophy and every question contained in it. But there is an oddity in Cicero's presentation: "Cicero here describes philosophy in terms suggestive of those elsewhere used for the Stoic concept of *fatum*."[127] This is true. For instance, Quintus says in *De divinatione*, "I call fate that which the Greeks call *heimarmenē*, that is, an order and linkage (*seriemque*) of causes, since cause bound to cause (*causae causa nexa*) produces a thing (*rem*) out of itself" (1.125; cf. Lucr. 2.251-255).[128] At first blush, Cicero seems to be affirming the enslaving capacity of fate and determinism in the very province of philosophy where it is most important to preserve freedom. But Cicero makes a crucial modification to the orthodox Stoic definition of fate by replacing "a linkage of causes" (*seriemque causarum*) with "a linkage of things" (*seriesque rerum*; cf. *series longissima rerum*, Verg. *A*. 1.641). Things are connected (*nexa*) to one another rather than causes, and this is what

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[127] Pease 1955-1958, ad loc.
[128] *fatum autem id appello, quod Graeci* εἱμαρμένην, *id est ordinem seriemque causarum, cum causae causa nexa rem ex sese gignat*. Cited by Pease (ibid.), who also adduces *DND* 1.55.

characterizes the interconnection of all philosophic questions to one another rather than an infinite string of causes. Philosophy is not dependent on causality and thus retains its freedom. A fragment of *De fato* preserved by Servius (*in A.* 3.376) again shows Cicero's modification: "This is the definition of fate according to Tullius, who says, 'fate is a connection of things (*conexio rerum*) holding itself together mutually for eternity, which is varied according to order and law, but nevertheless in such a way that the variety itself possesses eternity.'"[129] In his treatise on fate, Cicero again replaces "causes" with "things" (*rerum*) as that through the interconnection of which everything is structured. Already in the preface, then, Cicero characterizes his own understanding of philosophy as a modified presentation of Stoicism which involves a suppression of fate.

4.4.3 Conclusion

Young Cicero endorses Balbus because Roman traditional religion as an image for philosophic inquiry is closer to Cicero's own view of civil religion, as opposed to the conventional account of the Epicureans and Cotta. At the same time, Cicero uses Stoicism itself as an image of the truth to establish a new civil religion for Rome. Myth as a poetic vehicle for philosophy is ultimately a Platonic practice. Since Stoicism for the elite replaces traditional religion to become one of the most viable religions of Cicero's time, and proves to be the most salutary option, it is the vehicle Cicero chooses for a new myth-making project. Caesar conducts a political founding by establishing tyranny in Rome, but Cicero conducts a philosophic founding by creating a Latin republic of letters (see *Fam*. 9.2.5; cf. *Amic*. 28)[130] which will preserve the philosophic freedom provided by Plato even under conditions of political slavery. This type of esotericism responds to the exigencies of political life, thus encompassing the motive of personal safety characteristic also of Epicurus' and Cotta's esotericism, but differs in that its content is not

[129] *definitio fati secundum Tullium, qui ait, fatum est conexio rerum per aeternitatem se invicem tenens, quae sub ordine et lege variatur, ita tamen ut ipsa varietas habeat aeternitatem*. Cited at Wynne 2019, 47 n. 111.
[130] *Fam*. 9.2.5 is cited at Altman 2016, xxxi n. 74.

dogmatism or resigned agnosticism but the skeptical act of questioning itself which ensures freedom. Cicero uses Stoicism to keep the possibility of providential gods and virtue alive, but shows the teaching in all its tensions—the revealing contradictions in a myth—to lead readers back to Plato.

4.5 General Conclusion

These three chapters have presented Cicero's use of esotericism in *DND* and shown how it allows for a new interpretation of the dialogue. After the introduction to Cicero's esotericism in Chapter 1, in Chapter 2 I analyzed the pervasive topic of esotericism in Cotta's reply to Velleius in Book 1. His whole argument leads up to the claim at the end of the book (1.123), which he repeats at the beginning of Book 3 (3.3), that Epicurus is an esoteric atheist. Epicurus neither believes that the gods of traditional religion exist, as everyone admits about him, nor puts forward his own theology in earnest. Epicurus advances his theology to avoid persecution for being an atheist, just as he feigns piety towards the traditional gods for the same reason. He reveals his atheism through ambiguity in his writings and writes wholly exoteric works to convince others of his piety. Cotta's argument constitutes significant evidence of Cicero's awareness and interest in esotericism as a phenomenon, finding parallels also related to Epicureanism in several other works in Cicero's corpus.

Seeing the esotericism of Cotta's Epicurus provides the first step in understanding the end of the dialogue, the subject of Chapter 3. Cotta's Epicurus is a conventionalist, meaning that, while he hides his esoteric atheism, he holds all of traditional religion, including the traditional gods, to be a product of custom completely divorced from the truth that he expounds to his followers. The question of the end of the dialogue is why Cicero endorses Balbus' Stoic theology against his fellow Academic skeptic Cotta's critique of Balbus. Uncovering Epicurus' conventionalism and esoteric atheism sheds light on Cotta's own theological position which

emerges indirectly through his speeches against Velleius and Balbus. Cotta's speeches contain arguments about traditional religion and indications of his own theological views which are, strictly speaking, unnecessary for his refutations. Cotta indicates his position indirectly both by misdirection and by claiming only to refute his interlocutors, distancing himself from any statements he makes. This is in a way comparable to Cicero's own distancing of himself from the speeches of his characters as opposed to what he might say in his own name. What emerges from Cotta's speeches is that he agrees with Epicurus about the conventional status of tradition. As for the question of whether any gods exist, he is an esoteric agnostic rather than an esoteric atheist.

As is evident from Cicero's vigorous opposition to the Epicureans throughout his philosophical and rhetorical writings, Cicero sees a great danger in Epicureanism for healthy politics. Thus he disagrees with Cotta not just because of his similarity with Epicurus as Cotta himself describes him, but also because Cicero takes natural law rather than just convention (the claim of Cotta and Epicurus) to play a significant role in politics. As I outlined above based on *De legibus*, for Cicero the Roman mixed regime, whether by accident or by art, instantiates the injunctions of nature,[131] even if in a diluted form (see again *Leg*. 2.11-16; cf. also *Rep*. 2.22 with 1.69-70; 2.57). Because traditional religion falls under the province of political institutions (see again *Leg*. 2.26), traditional religion as much as Roman customs is connected to nature rather than divorced from it. In arguing that political life can be measured against the standards of nature, and thus that politics admits of judgments of better and worse on a rational basis (cf. *Rep*. 2.52), Cicero is not a conventionalist. For him, Cotta ultimately upholds traditional religion and politics on as irrational a basis as those who would reject them.

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[131] Cf. *Leg*. 1.18: … *lex est ratio summa insita in natura, quae iubet ea quae facienda sunt, prohibetque contraria* ("… law is the highest reason inherent in nature, which orders those things which must be done and forbids the opposite"). See also 2.8.

Thus we come to why Cicero endorses Balbus in addition to rejecting Cotta. We have to distinguish between Young Cicero who agreed with Balbus at the dramatic date of the dialogue (between 77 and 75) and the author Cicero who in 45 made Young Cicero agree with Balbus. Young Cicero has a kinship with Balbus through his interest in Stoicism and the connection between philosophy and poetry. Cicero characterizes Young Cicero in this way by having Balbus call attention to Young Cicero's translation of the Stoic astronomical poem of Aratus, the *Phaenomena*, which Balbus uses as a central ingredient of his argument in Book 2. Book 2 thus prepares us for Young Cicero's agreement with Balbus at the end of the dialogue.

Cicero has Young Cicero do this because of his critique of Cotta and because he views Balbus' version of Stoicism, which suppresses the doctrine of fate, to be politically salutary and connected to genuine philosophy. Whereas Cotta and his Epicurus treat tradition as entirely untrue and only valuable to preserve stability in society, Balbus argues that philosophic poets and statesmen esoterically embedded truths about nature in the foundations of Roman political life. This parallels to a great degree Cicero's argument about natural law in *De legibus*. Balbus' argument is part of his application of the Stoic doctrine of the tripartite theology in his speech, which also resonates with the description of civil religion in its relationship to philosophy in *De legibus*. The parallel between Balbus' version of Stoicism and *De legibus* becomes even stronger through the fact that both Balbus and Cicero present Plato as the ultimate authority who stands behind Stoicism. The status of nature in relation to politics is thus a positive reason for Cicero's support for Balbus while also providing a basis for critiquing Cotta.

Because of Cicero's genuine sympathy with the views expounded by his creature Balbus, he makes Young Cicero endorse Balbus' theology at the end of the work. Cicero does not believe his theology to be true to the letter, but it both is salutary for Roman politics in retaining providential gods, virtue, and engagement in politics (all of which are lacking in the Epicurean alternative) and mirrors Cicero's own belief that esoteric philosophy and exoteric custom cannot

be neatly separated from one another. As Roman tradition is itself an image of the truth, Cicero aims to establish this revised Stoic theology as a new myth for Rome in a time of tyranny and crisis, a myth which can, however, still foster genuine philosophic reflection both in Cicero's day and for all time. These two interconnected aims parallel two types of esotericism Cicero indicates in his preface: his esoteric critique of Caesar and the pedagogical esotericism of his dialogues which encourage freedom of thought in his readers.

In uncovering the importance of esotericism, this interpretation of *DND* has major implications for the study of Cicero's philosophy more generally. Once the esoteric/exoteric distinction comes into view along with the whole range of the causes, motives, content, and methods for esotericism, we can pose questions about Cicero's philosophy with greater clarity and accuracy. For example, one might ask whether the Stoicizing morality championed in *De officiis* is not an exoteric doctrine, since it seemingly takes the equation of the morally right (*honestum*/τὸ καλόν) with the good (*bonum*/τἀγαθόν) for granted (see 1.67; 3.11-12, 35; cf. 1.15), a position which is subject to harsh criticism in *De finibus* (see, e.g., 4.43, 46, 48-52, 78). Or take the rich scholarly discussion which is still developing around both Cicero's use of literary personae as distinct from his own position and the Academic skeptic method of arguing on either side of an issue to preserve the listener or reader's freedom of judgment. Why one character voices one thing while Cicero voices another takes on a new dimension once one considers esotericism, and we saw that the Academic method ends up being a means for pedagogical esotericism which can be fruitfully compared to other methods of and motives for esotericism. Looking at esotericism in relation to the literary form of the dialogues and Academic methods could lead us to ask whether other counter speeches, like those of Cotta, also esoterically articulate positive positions, and what function this would serve in a given work.

We could, moreover, ask what implications there are for an esoteric way of writing made necessary by the tension between philosophy and politics in general and Caesar's tyranny in

particular, as made especially clear in the prefaces to the *Tusculans*. Scholars of Cicero already admit the need for Cicero to express himself indirectly based on political pressures. Why not integrate this observation into the broader discourse around esotericism throughout his corpus? As a final example of a type of question, which stays in the political sphere, one might ask what esotericism and exotericism reveal about Cicero's activities as an orator and an augur, given his admission of the necessity of lying as an orator and manipulating the public through his religious office. Conversely, how do Cicero's own recommendations for dissimulation in *De inventione* and other works shed light on the rhetorical techniques employed for esotericism in Cicero's philosophic and rhetorical works?

These are but a few examples of what could be achieved by combining the valuable work of prior scholarship with an awareness of esotericism in Cicero. This endeavor would not consist in merely cloaking familiar issues of Ciceronian scholarship in a new set of terms, for Cicero and his characters explicitly discuss and heavily thematize the deliberate concealment of philosophical views. Thus familiar questions take on a new aspect and become more attuned to the very categories with which Cicero himself was thinking. Seemingly disparate aspects of Cicero's thought, like particular rhetorical techniques for dissimulation, Academic method, and "eclectic" use of different philosophic schools would need to be treated differently if they all fell, at least in part, under the rubric of esotericism. Familiar questions do not remain the same if they are shown to be connected by the same phenomenon. We can now ask new questions. For example, does a position make more sense as exoteric rather than Cicero's genuine position? Does the distinction between the exoteric and esoteric save Cicero from blatant contradictions or inconsistencies? What are the exoteric and esoteric parts of a given work, or is a whole work exoteric? How do the exoteric components of a work fit with the political exigencies of the time of composition? We have to be careful in answering such questions, so that we do not arbitrarily write off any part of Cicero's thought that we either do not like or do not find philosophically

adequate as exoteric. This is why we must integrate such interpretation into the explicit statements about esotericism of Cicero (or of his characters), as I have tried to do. Finally, esoteric reading leaves room for a more satisfactory philosophic message when the exoteric level seems to be a mere political expedient. In short, we can preserve Cicero's aims as a statesman without reducing his philosophic writings to a mere political tool devoid of valuable philosophical content. We do not have to choose between Cicero the man and Cicero the philosopher.[132]

In showing the role esotericism plays for Cicero in *DND* and beyond, these chapters demonstrate the importance of esoteric philosophy in Rome. Cicero's influence in antiquity and throughout the history of philosophy cannot be understated. More recently, scholars have once again begun treating him as a philosopher worthy of considering in his own right and whose positions can be set against those of the other great figures in the history of philosophy and debates in contemporary philosophy.[133] As I have argued, the philosopher who could rightly be called the founder of Latin philosophy takes esotericism to be a central part of philosophy itself. In reconsidering the origin of Latin philosophy, we would be able also to consider its history in a new light. The writing of history is not accurate if it misconstrues the thought of the actors who shaped it.

In the following chapter on Lucretius, we turn to a contemporary of Cicero's with the hope of seeing esotericism from the perspective of an Epicurean rather than from the perspective of one of Epicureanism's greatest opponents. In a sense, Lucretius presents the response of an esoteric conventionalist to Cicero's charge against Epicureanism and Cotta. While Lucretius'

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[132] Given the extraordinary amount of information we possess about Cicero's life from his letters (and other sources), future research into esotericism in Cicero can further contextualize his esotericism in light of his correspondence, which aside from a few exceptions was beyond the scope of my argument. With Cicero we are in a rare position when it comes to an ancient author of being able to take into account a wide variety of circumstances and motives surrounding philosophic works, including in most cases their dates and thus also the order of composition.
[133] See Bénatouïl 2021 for an overview of Cicero's influence and his now once again appreciated philosophical bona fides.

thought and manner of writing differ fundamentally from and with those of Cicero, the two share many overlapping ideas concerning the relationship between philosophy and esotericism. The importance Cicero places on the role of poetry in esotericism is reflected in the esotericism of this great poet.

5. Chapter 4: Esotericism and the Nature of Things: Lucretius' *De rerum natura*

5.1 Introduction: Why Read Lucretius Esoterically?

In the 18th century, Lucretius' *DRN* was celebrated or reviled as a poem of enlightenment.[1] Lucretius writes a brilliant song about an obscure thing (1.933-934 = 4.8-9), whereas the original discoveries of the Greeks as manifest in their writings were obscure in addition to the obscurity of their subject matter (1.136, 922; cf. 635-644, 731-732). If it is a poem of enlightenment, why would it also be esoteric? I contend that, precisely because Lucretius attempts to spread Greek philosophy more widely in Rome than ever before, he must exercise care in his writing. Enlightenment entails esotericism because it runs up against the Roman suspicion of Greek philosophy and of Greek learning which is in some ways even stronger than the suspicion of philosophy in general that existed in Greece.[2] Philosophy in Rome is not only strange, but also foreign. As something un-Roman it is a threat to Rome.[3] Cicero's dialogues take place in private, which is not always the case for Plato's.

Lucretius wishes to spread through the attractive medium of his poetry not just any old Greek philosophy, but the Greek teaching of Epicureanism which undermines most obviously the belief in providential gods, emphasis on the utmost importance of traditional virtue, and the resolve to participate in politics.[4] These interconnected beliefs are central, in the eyes of

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[1] See Haskell 2007, 195-200. More recently Minyard (1985, 43), for example, speaks of "the poem's goal of enlightenment."

[2] Cf. Sedley 1998, 57: "… Greekness for [Lucretius] frequently symbolises the culturally remote, the morally dangerous, and the philosophically obscure."

[3] See, e.g., Minyard 1985, 4-5 for a distinction between much earlier Greek influence in Rome and the threat it eventually posed to the established order in the Late Republic.

[4] While virtue is not absent from Epicurean ethics, all virtues are subordinate to obtaining pleasure already in Epicurus (see 504-522 Usener). Unlike Cicero's Torquatus, who again argues that the virtues are subordinate to pleasure (*Fin.* 1.34-35, 42-54), Lucretius does not show how the cardinal virtues fit into his teaching, let alone traditional political virtue. Indeed, he only uses the noun *virtus* six times in the poem. When he does speak of virtue, first it is Epicurus' intellectual virtue (1.70) in opposing traditional religion (see also ibid., 40-41), and then Memmius' political virtue (140), presumably linked to his dedication to the republic (41-43). Later Lucretius' speaks of those who are encouraged by the Great Mother to defend their fatherland with their virtue (seemingly close to "martial prowess" in this case)

traditional Romans, to the stability of the Roman mixed regime, and could be reconciled with other prominent Greek schools like Stoicism and Academic skepticism, even if important tensions remained. Not only is an Epicurean poem un-Roman, but it is potentially anti-Roman.

For this reason, Lucretius must take care to present his teaching in a way which seems as consonant as possible with Rome and which seems to be a benefit rather than a threat to Rome. This will necessarily entail distortions and accommodations to his Roman readers, but Lucretius wishes at least some readers to receive as much of the truth as he can communicate, including the truth about philosophy's relationship to political life. Thus, one of the important pieces of content Lucretius communicates esoterically is the dangerous character of philosophy itself.

What kind of enlightenment is it, then, if Lucretius does not wish everything to be apparent to everyone? He certainly wishes to spread some aspects of Epicureanism as widely as possible. These include the doctrine that the only eternal and immortal things are atoms, void, and the limitless whole as well as the teaching about the highest good as pleasure understood as the absence of pain, which can be achieved through a belief in the removal of the gods from our world and their lack of interest in our affairs and through our own withdrawal from political life. And yet, I will argue that he wants at least some readers to scrutinize at least some of these tenets more carefully. Even if Lucretius holds these aspects of Epicureanism to be entirely true, will all readers reach these conclusions by the same reasoning and in the same depth as Lucretius himself? If that is not so, would it not be more appropriate to speak of indoctrination rather than enlightenment?[5]

(2.642). Lucretius certainly undermines political virtue by recommending withdrawal from politics and arguing against the truth of traditional religion. The remaining three instances comes in Book 5, twice of wild animals' savagery which guarantees their survival (5.858, 863) and once of the boldness of prepolitical humans in fighting wild beasts (966). The only virtue for which Lucretius leaves room seems to be wisdom (*sapientia*, 10).

[5] See Adler 2003, 74-76.

Finally, it is helpful to return to a passage on obscurity from Cicero's *De finibus*, discussed above (1.1; 1.3.2.1; 2.1). One of the types of obscurity Marcus allows for is "when the obscurity of things, not of words, brings it about that a speech is not understood, of what sort is [the speech] in Plato's *Timaeus*" (*cum rerum obscuritas, non verborum, facit ut non intellegatur oratio, qualis est in Timaeo Platonis*, 2.15). Lucretius admits that he is speaking about an obscure thing (*obscura de re*, 1.933 = 4.8). Is it ever possible to remove entirely the obscurity in speech which results from the obscurity in things, or can a song treating an obscure thing ever be perfectly clear?[6] Lucretius' esotericism is not only deliberate, another type which both Lucretius (1.635-644) and Cicero (*Fin.* 2.15) apply to Heraclitus (again with Cicero's approval), but also results from the hiddenness of things, especially since Lucretius claims that his poem is a simulacrum of nature itself.[7]

The tenuous status of Greek philosophy in Rome and Lucretius' ambitions to spread it as widely as possible entail Lucretius' use of esotericism. It is hard to gauge how wide Lucretius' readership would have been, but this beautiful poem that challenged Ennius and that Vergil in turn felt the need to challenge seems to have had a wide audience even beyond the elite.[8] Lucretius and Cicero stand at the start of Roman philosophy. This chapter shows how Lucretius fits into this story. If both he and Cicero prove to be esoteric philosophers, we must rethink the character of philosophy in Rome.

In what remains of this introduction I will present further preliminary reasons to think that an esoteric reading of Lucretius is a worthwhile enterprise. In the next section (5.2) I will consider remarks of Lucretius which point to his method of esotericism. These include both his

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[6] Note too that in Lucretius "bright" (*clarus*, *praeclarus*) does not necessarily mean that what the adjective refers to is also true (e.g., 1.119, 639, 729-732).

[7] See Noller 2019, 25-28, 55-59 with scholarship cited, especially Thury 1987. Cf. Clay 1983, 296 n. 125: "And in a sense, Lucretius' poem itself imitates the processes of nature in which one thing springs up from another, *alid ex alio* (1.263); cf. 3.970; 5.1456; 1.407; and the passage that closes this chapter." See also Sallmann 1962, 146: "Die Natur ist das, was an den Dingen noch verborgen ist und erkannt werden muß (IV 385)."

[8] Eventually, the first word or words of the poem were written on walls in Herculaneum and Pompeii (Clay 1983, 82).

characterization of the art of writing in connection with its application to his own poem as an artifact and his recommendations to Memmius and his other readers about how to read that artifact. In the final section (5.3) I turn to some aspects of the content of Lucretius' esotericism, which is reached following Lucretius' indications about his method. Here I focus on Lucretius' indirect revelation of the dangerous and even criminal character of philosophy and thus of his own enterprise and signals of his independence from and even superiority to his master Epicurus.

Now I will present three preliminary reasons why an esoteric reading of Lucretius is legitimate to undertake. First, I will focus on external evidence about esotericism in Epicureanism that lends plausibility to this approach. Second, I will touch on some evidence internal to *DRN* that prima facie makes my endeavor worthwhile based on some widely accepted views about the poem. Third, I will consider how a justification of an esoteric reading is always also through the strength of the interpretation itself, since the method of esoteric writing is inseparable from its content.

In Chapter 2, I showed that Cotta's speech in *DND* Book 1 largely consists in an investigation of the motive, method, and content of Epicurus' esotericism. In order to avoid religious persecution, Epicurus feigned a belief in the gods and used ambiguity and a screen of pious language to conceal his atheism. While scholars like Obbink and David Konstan forcefully argue against this interpretation of Epicurus' theology,[9] Sedley, as mentioned above (3.1), argues not only that the gods are merely thought constructs akin to centaurs for Epicurus[10] but also grounds Epicurus' positive assertions about theology in his fear of impiety trials in the broader context of what Sedley elsewhere terms the "atheist underground" in Athens.[11] So, while Cotta's

[9] Obbink 1989; Konstan 2011.
[10] See again Sedley 2011, 29, 43 n. 38, 48-49. Sedley (1998, 66 n. 28) claims that Epicurus' original theology is preserved in Lucretius (5.1161-1225) but that Lucretius only unwittingly copies it from his source while still maintaining the existence of the gods.
[11] See again Sedley 2011, 50-52; Sedley 2014.

argument about Epicurus' esoteric atheism is clearly polemical and cannot simply be taken as evidence, it could still contain some truth about esotericism in the Epicurean tradition if Sedley is correct.

We can think through the same issue with the broader context of Cicero's rhetorical and philosophical corpus in mind. We know from Cicero's famous letter to Quintus from February of 54 that he read and admired Lucretius' *DRN* (*Q. fr.* 2.10.3). Could Cicero's philosophic production, at least beginning with *De re publica* in 54 if not *De oratore* in 55, which often takes up Epicureanism, not at least in part been informed by his reading and understanding of *DRN*?[12] In my interpretation of Cicero I also discussed passages from *De oratore*, *De legibus*, and *De finibus* which treat Epicurean esotericism with reference not to esoteric atheism, but rather to the Epicurean teachings of the withdrawal from political life in the first case and hedonism in the latter two dialogues (see Section 3.5). Lucretius' contemporary Cicero thus links Epicureanism to esotericism in four of his major works.[13] The range of topics also suggests something beyond a particular polemic about Epicurus on the gods. Even if Cotta's point is a polemical distortion and Sedley is not right about Epicurus, the notion of Epicurean esotericism has currency. It is thus worthwhile to read the only contemporary Roman Epicurean text to which we have access to see whether Cicero's points are reflected there. This exercise is all the more interesting if we

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[12] See, e.g., Gatzemeier 2013, 31-41 and Zetzel 2022, 176 with scholarship cited. See also Auvray-Assayas 2021, 125 n. 26.

[13] Consider also the critique of Epicureanism and its effect on politics in *In Pisonem* (delivered in 55, the year prior to his letter about Lucretius; see Nisbet 1961, v): the greatest critique that Cicero levels against Philodemus is that he did not take into account Piso's likely misunderstanding of Epicureanism as a license for excessive pleasure and his own difficult position as a philosopher in restraining a Roman *imperator* (68-72). Epicureanism is dangerous even if understood correctly, but all the more so if misunderstood by someone like Piso. Thus Cicero recommends esotericism on the part of Epicureans in his rhetorical and philosophical works, as I discussed above (3.5). Perhaps Cicero would have levelled a similar critique against Lucretius as he does against Philodemus, especially since he notes that Philodemus is both an Epicurean philosopher and a poet (70): Lucretius should have taken into account the potentially dangerous effects of Epicureanism on Rome and its leading men both when understood properly and when misunderstood. In general, philosophers on this view should consider the effect they have on their students in addition to the content of their teaching (see *DND* 3.77). For the identification of the unnamed Greek Epicurean philosopher and poet in *In Pisonem* with Philodemus see ibid., 183-186. See also Wynne 2019, 26-28 for a judicious appraisal of Cicero's use of Philodemus' *De pietate* in composing Velleius' speech in *DND*.

remember not only that Cicero read Lucretius, but that Lucretius imitated Cicero's poetry, particularly his *Aratea*.[14] These men knew each other's works.

There is other tantalizing testimony around esotericism from another Epicurean contemporary of Lucretius and Cicero, who was a personal acquaintance of the latter at least: Philodemus (Cic. *Pis*. 68; *Fin*. 2.118). In his *De pietate*, Philodemus often touches on concerns related to esotericism because he often addresses opponents of Epicureanism's claims about Epicurus' alleged esoteric atheism. While Philodemus never says that Epicurus or Epicureans are esoteric, he does discuss the phenomenon in the case of other philosophers. Especially striking is a group which seems to feign belief in traditional religion by participating in traditional rites, of whom Philodemus says, "[this] is just what some humans do while they conceal the tenets held by the followers of Epicurus" ([ἅπερ τῶν] ἀνθρώπων ἔ[νιοι πράτ]τουσιν ἀποκρυ[πτό]μενοι τὰ δοκο[ῦντα] τοῖς περὶ τὸν Ἐπ[ίκου]ρον, col. 65 Obbink). Apparently there was, in Philodemus' view, a group who agreed with the Epicureans but concealed this fact. Contemporary scholars agree with Philodemus (see, e.g., cols. 20, 26-31, 51, 62) that Epicurus also participated in traditional cult and had his followers do so as well, which would seem to conceal the tension between traditional religion and his philosophy.[15]

Earlier in the treatise, Philodemus discusses at more length (at least in the extant text) philosophers who promote traditional religion for the stability of society but hide their true theological beliefs which contradict traditional religion both to preserve traditional religion and to protect themselves (cols. 41-43). After describing the view that society breaks down without a belief in omniscient and punishing gods, Philodemus writes: "Thus it happened to be safer to keep silent. And, accordingly, the just ones of the theologians and philosophers did these things.

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[14] See Bailey 1947, 30.
[15] See Clay 1986 and Obbink 1989. See also my discussion of Epicurus' engagement with traditional cult and its relationship to esotericism in my treatment of Cicero above (3.4), and below (5.3.2).

For the truth did not escape their notice, but ..." (δι᾽ ὃ σιωπᾶν ἀσφαλέστερον ἐ[τύγ]χαν[εν.] ταῦτα [δ᾽ ἐπομ]ένως ἐποίο[υν οἱ δί]καιοι τῶν [θεολ]όγων καὶ φιλοσόφων· οὐ γὰρ ἐλά[νθα]νεν τἀληθὲς αὐτούς, ἀλλά ..., col. 42). And then Philodemus explains how they preferred to propagate traditional myths. Where this differs from other accounts of the invention of traditional religion as a political instrument, as found in the Sisyphus fragment, Polybius, Cicero, and elsewhere (see my discussion at 4.2.2 above), is that Philodemus specifies that philosophers propagating traditional religion also must conceal their true views about the gods. They needed to "keep silent" (σιωπᾶν) even though they knew "the truth" (τἀληθές). Though Philodemus does not attribute esotericism to Epicureans, it is remarkable that an Epicurean contemporary of Lucretius' discusses the phenomenon in these passages and elsewhere in the treatise.

Finally, the reports of persecution and expulsion of Epicureans for their hedonism in both Greece at various times and Rome in the mid-second century BCE—and even Philodemus may have been exiled from Himera for a religious offense—suggest concrete political opposition to Epicureans.[16] Prior tensions between Epicureans and their political communities may have influenced how a Roman would introduce Epicureanism to Rome.

To be sure, the evidence from Cicero which I have discussed in detail in the prior section (alongside that from other quarters) does not prove anything about Lucretius. Though external evidence increases the plausibility for an ancient reader that an Epicurean poet would practice esotericism, it is possible for Cicero to attribute esotericism to the Epicureans without Lucretius' being esoteric at all. That is why the poem itself, of course, needs to have some features which justify an esoteric approach to the text and corroborate external evidence.

Lucretius' famous comparison of his mixture of poetry and philosophy to that of honey and wormwood implies concealment: the boy does not know he has downed the wormwood until

[16] See again Obbink 1989, 204; Sedley 2011, 50 n. 59.

it is too late (1.936-942 = 4.11-17). Lucretius explains the comparison, differing only from 4.18-25 in the last line,[17] as follows:

> sic ego nunc, quoniam haec ratio plerumque videtur
> tristior esse quibus non est tractata, retroque
> vulgus abhorret ab hac, volui tibi suaviloquenti
> carmine Pierio rationem exponere nostram
> et quasi musaeo dulci contingere melle,
> si tibi forte animum tali ratione tenere
> versibus in nostris possem, dum perspicis omnem
> naturam rerum qua constet compta figura.
>
> ... thus now, since this doctrine (*haec ratio*) often seems to be rather bitter to those by whom it has not been employed, and the crowd shrinks away from it, I wanted to lay out our doctrine (*rationem ... nostram*) with sweet-speaking Pierian song, and touch it [i.e., the doctrine], as it were, with the sweet honey of the muses, if by chance in such a way (*tali ratione*) I might be able to take hold of your mind in our verses, until you perceive in what form the whole nature of things stands arranged. (1.943-950)

Diskin Clay and others have already explained in what this concealment consists with reference to the traditional gods. For example, Venus appears to be a goddess in the proem to Book 1 but is later revealed to be just a personification of pleasure in Book 4.[18] Thus it is clear that Lucretius through his poetic medium practices some form of concealment.[19] Esotericism as the deliberate concealment of philosophical views thus seems apt as an interpretative method given Lucretius' own statement on the function of his poetry in relation to philosophy. I will return to this famous passage below (5.2.3).

If Lucretius is willing to conceal some things at least temporarily in his poem, it is worth considering other possible instances of concealment. Furthermore, part of Lucretius' discussion

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[17] See Clay 1983, 184.
[18] See Trotz-Liboff 2023a, 428-429 with scholarship cited. The connection of Venus to the honey and wormwood passage is strengthened by the link between the crowd (*vulgus*) and Venus created at 4.1071 through the epithet *vulgivaga* ("wide-wandering"). See also the use of *pervulgarit* of the fear of the gods (5.1162) and *divulgata* (6.8) of Epicurus' fame.
[19] Cf. Sedley 1998, 16: "… what can have impelled Lucretius to start out so misleadingly, undermining exactly that attitude to the gods that the rest of the poem will so energetically promote?"

of Heraclitus' obscurity[20] and his critique thereof is unexpectedly illuminating for Lucretius' own poetic activity. There he explains Heraclitus' popularity as follows:

> omnia enim stolidi magis admirantur amantque,
> inversis quae sub verbis latitantia cernunt,
> veraque constituunt quae belle tangere possunt
> auris et lepido quae sunt fucata sonore.
>
> For fools wonder at and love all the more all things, which they perceive hidden beneath words turned upside down, and they establish as true those things which can beautifully touch the ears and which have been tricked out with a charming sound. (1.641-644)

In Lucretius' passage on his own poetry, he uses the verb *contingere* ("touch with"), a compound of *tangere* ("touch"), twice of his own activity (1.934, 947 = 4.9, 22) and once in the comparison to honey and wormwood (1.938 = 4.13; cf. 2.660). In the same line as the first usage, Lucretius also uses the noun *lepos*, "charm," (1.934 = 4.9), from which *lepidus* ("charming") of Heraclitus derives (1.644).[21] Lucretius also used *lepos* quite prominently of his own words in his invocation to Venus (28). Finally, Lucretius focuses on his poetry's reaching Memmius' "ears" in parallel to the passage on Heraclitus (*auris*, 417; 2.1024). Thus the attack on the allure of Heraclitus' writing strangely echoes Lucretius' characterization of his own poetry.[22] Lucretius calls attention to the fact that many "fools" will admire and love his poetry because of its delightful effect on their ears, rather than because they have thought through his claims about the nature of things. While Lucretius certainly sets up a contrast between himself and Heraclitus, who is "famous/bright on account of his obscure tongue" (*clarus ob obscuram linguam*, 1.639), perhaps Lucretius' calling attention to obscure speech here as well as the strange parallel to the effects of his own poetry

[20] Cf. Piazzi 2005, 31-33.
[21] Ernout and Meillet 2001, s.v. *lepos*. Cf. Piazzi 2005, 10-11: "Tale riflessione sullo stile di Eraclito è stata posta in relazione con le dichiarazioni di poetica di Lucrezio, il quale rivendica per sé gli stessi mezzi retorici che critica in Eraclito (il *lepos* che rende gradevole l'esposizione di una verità complessa), ponendoli però al servizio di una teoria vera."
[22] See also Clay 1983, 295 n. 111.

contribute to the viability of an esoteric reading of his poem.[23] Perhaps poetry also makes things dark in addition to bringing light (cf. 2.600-603; see again Pl. *Alc*. *II* 147b7-c5).[24]

These passages can only serve as bare indications that concealment and obscurity are in some way important for Lucretius. The persuasiveness of my claim about Lucretius' esotericism can only be borne out by the arguments which follow. This is because it is impossible to claim that a certain form or method of esotericism is being employed without also considering what is actually concealed. The *how* is always together with the *what*. Thus, throughout the rest of this chapter I will constantly be strengthening the case for the plausibility of an esoteric reading of Lucretius, but I will not belabor the point and distract from my individual arguments by constantly saying "and this is another reason why Lucretius is esoteric."

5.2 Lucretius' Art of Writing and His Instructions for an Art of Reading

In this section, I bring out Lucretius' emphasis on the creation of his own poem through art and how this relates to interpreting his work. In particular, I discuss what this means for his analogy of the letters in his poem to the elements of the universe. After treating Lucretius' art of writing, I turn to his comments which shed light on the corresponding method of reading required to understand his poem.

5.2.1 Lucretius on the Art of Writing

As I discuss further below (5.3.1; 5.3.3), Lucretius takes poetry, philosophy, and writing to be arts and situates them in the development of the arts. Here I consider Lucretius' portrayal of himself as a careful *writer* of poetry who creates a meticulously wrought artifact as a first indication of Lucretius' method of esotericism. Lucretius more than many other poets calls our

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[23] Lucretius also speaks of his own "tongue" (*lingua*) at 1.413.
[24] See my discussion of the relationship between poetry, myth, and esotericism with reference to Cicero in Chapter 3 above. As we will see in the interpretation of Plutarch to come, for him poetry is explicitly bound up with esotericism.

attention to his poem as being written. In the beginning of the poem, rather than saying "sing to me" to a goddess or "I sing," he tells Venus, "... I strive for you to be my companion while writing verses which I try to compose about the nature of things for our Memmius ..." (... *te sociam studeo scribendis versibus esse | quos ego de rerum natura pangere conor | Memmiadae nostro* ..., 1.24-26). Lucretius here does not present his poem as an inspired song (but cf. 922-930) which is learned by memory and performed by rhapsodes, but rather as the product of much toil on his part.[25] He creates a poem which he then sends to Memmius. Even Vergil's addressing the *Georgics* to Maecenas (1.2), for example, does not self-consciously evoke the composition of a written work which would then show up on the addressee's doorstep.[26] That Lucretius presents the activity of Ennius and other poets as one of "singing" (*cecinit*, 1.117; *cecinere*, 2.600; 5.327, 405; 6.754) makes Lucretius' focus on his own poem as written rather than sung all the more remarkable. The few times Lucretius himself bursts out into song (*canamus*, 5.509; *canenda*, 6.84) again serve to underscore that writing is the usual mode of communication.[27]

Indeed, Lucretius returns at multiple points in the poem to the scene of his composition of the poem, which he paints as a laborious (though still enjoyable) enterprise. Early in the poem he writes:

> Nec me animi fallit Graiorum obscura reperta
> difficile inlustrare Latinis versibus esse,
> multa novis verbis praesertim cum sit agendum
> propter egestatem linguae et rerum novitatem;
> sed tua me virtus tamen et sperata voluptas
> suavis amicitiae quemvis efferre laborem
> suadet et inducit noctes vigilare serenas
> quaerentem dictis quibus et quo carmine demum
> clara tuae possim praepandere lumina menti,
> res quibus occultas penitus convisere possis.

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[25] Lucretius will eventually invoke the muse of epic Calliope (6.92-95) as a replacement for Venus (6.94-95 vs. 1.1, 16), but it is unclear exactly what assistance she is to give Lucretius in showing him to the finish line.
[26] But, outside of epic, see the focus on writing in Catullus (22.15-16; 50.4; cf. 28.9-13).
[27] Strauss (1968, 124-125) treats these last two passages, but without contrasting singing with writing.

> And it does not deceive me in my mind that it is difficult to illuminate the dark findings of the Greeks with Latin verses, since I must deal with many things with new words on account of the poverty of [our] language and the novelty of [these] things; but nevertheless your virtue and the hoped for pleasure of your delightful friendship persuades me to endure any labor and leads me to stay awake during quiet nights, as I seek with which words and at last with which song[28] I could be able to open up the bright lights for your mind, with which you could be able to see hidden things completely. (1.136-145)[29]

Lucretius emphasizes the difficulty of his task and the labor (*labor*) which results from it. He has to stay up all night searching for the right way to communicate his teaching to Memmius. Lucretius later tells Memmius, "Now come, perceive the words sought out by my sweet labor" (*Nunc age dicta meo dulci quasita labore | percipe*, 2.730-731; cf. 5.5). Lucretius presents his toil as enjoyable, but it is toil nonetheless. Indeed *labor* is usually a negative thing in the poem (e.g., 2.2, 12, 1160-1174; cf. Verg. *G*. 1.145-146, 197-198; 2.39; 3.66-68).[30]

Lucretius works so hard on his poem that he not only stays up all night writing, but cannot stop even after he falls asleep and enters the world of dreams (4.969-970; cf. 2.12-13). Through these passages, Lucretius creates an intimate portrait of himself, the *doctus poeta* (cf. 2.600),[31] toiling to create a written artifact. The focus on his work as a product of the highest art, the art of poetic-philosophic writing, induces us all the more to investigate the details of the work, such as repetitions of verses and the use of particular words, as features of esoteric writing.

The sustained comparison of the letters of his poem to atoms supports this notion. Lucretius calls attention to the character of his work as written, as letters (*elementa*) on the page.[32] Just as the same letters make up different words and verses, the same limited set of types

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[28] This distinction suggests that there is a difference between the words Lucretius chooses and the character of the poem or song which results from them. Cf. Pl. *Phdr*. 228d1-3; 234c6-7. See also Minyard 1985, 41.
[29] Note again that here and in a parallel passage (1.922) and at several other points in the poem (see especially 1.265-328, 408-409), Lucretius focuses on the obscurity, hiddenness, and invisibility of his subject matter.
[30] In particular, the harshness and inhospitable character of the world to human beings means that often "things sought out with great labor" (*magno quasita labore*, 5.213) are destroyed and go to waste. *Labor* is precisely what the gods are thought not to have (5.1182). Is Lucretius' *labor*, his activity of writing poetry, then compatible with "living a life worthy of the gods" (*dignam dis degere vitam*, 3.322)?
[31] See Kenney 1970.
[32] Like *elementum*, in Greek στοιχεῖον means both "element" and "letter."

of atoms make up all things. The same letters in different orders make up different words and verses. The focus on a verse as a unit also invites speculation on the meaning of the same verse used multiple times in different ways.[33] Indeed Lucretius repeats many of the same verses in describing the analogy between letters and atoms in different orders and of course in different positions or contexts in the poem (1.196-197, 823-827, 912-914; 2.688-699, 1013-1022; cf. 2.883-885). Lucretius invites us to examine how his use of repetition makes up different "things" out of the same elements. "Things" (*res*) can also mean "arguments" (e.g., 1.833, 858; 3.35).[34]

Two of the passages where he focuses on the analogy are adjacent to two further parallel passages that exemplify Lucretius' shuffling of words and show his art of writing. The first adjacent passage precedes the first use of the analogy (1.184-191) and the second passage follows the fourth use of the analogy (2.707-710).

As parts of his argument that nothing comes from nothing (1.149-214), Lucretius points out that the time necessary for things to grow shows that nothing comes from nothing (184-191) and then that the fact that things require nourishment from other things shows that there are common bodies or beginnings to things, like letters in words (192-198). He writes:

> nec porro augendis rebus spatio foret usus
> seminis ad coitum, si e nilo crescere possent.
> nam fierent iuvenes subito ex infantibu' parvis
> e terraque exorta repente arbusta salirent.
> quorum nil fieri manifestum est, omnia quando
> paulatim crescunt, ut par est semine certo
> crescentesque genus servant; ut noscere possis
> quidque sua de materia grandescere alique.
> huc accedit uti sine certis imbribus anni
> laetificos nequeat fetus submittere tellus
> nec porro secreta cibo natura animantum
> propagare genus possit vitamque tueri;
> ut potius multis communia corpora rebus
> multa putes esse, ut verbis elementa videmus,
> quam sine principiis ullam rem exsistere posse.

[33] See Piazzi 2005, ad 1.823: "Dunque, non solo c'è analogia tra *verba* e *res*, ma anche tra *versus* e *res*."
[34] See further Appendix B.

> Nor further would there be need of a space of time for the coming together of seed for things to increase, if things were able to grow from nothing. For young men would immediately come to be out of little babies and trees having sprung from the earth would rise immediately. It is apparent that none of these things happen, since all things grow little by little, as is right, and since they grow from a certain seed they preserve their kind, with the result that you can recognize that each thing grows big and is nourished from its material. In addition to this, without certain rains of the year the earth is unable to send forth young plants which bring joy nor, furthermore, removed from food can the nature of animals generate further its kind and preserve their life. As a result you should think that there are many bodies common to many things, as we see letters are for words, rather than that anything can emerge without beginnings. (1.184-198)

The parallel passage comes during Lucretius' discussion of the qualities of the atoms:

> quin etiam passim nostris in versibus ipsis
> multa elementa vides multis communia verbis,
> cum tamen inter se versus ac verba necesse est
> confiteare alia ex aliis constare elementis;
> non quo multa parum communis littera currat
> aut nulla inter se duo sint ex omnibus isdem,
> sed quia non vulgo paria omnibus omnia constant.
> sic aliis in rebus item, communia multa
> multarum rerum cum sint primordia, verum
> dissimili tamen inter se consistere summa
> possunt; ut merito ex aliis constare feratur
> humanum genus et fruges arbustaque laeta.
> ...
> quorum nil fieri manifestum est, omnia quando
> seminibus certis certa genetrice creata
> conservare genus crescentia posse videmus.
> scilicet id certa fieri ratione necessust.
> nam sua cuique cibis ex omnibus intus in artus
> corpora discedunt conexaque convenientis
> efficiunt motus.

> Moreover, you see that in our verses themselves there are everywhere many letters which are common to many words, although it is necessary for you to admit that in relation to each other different verses and words consist of different letters, not because a letter not common enough runs through many words nor because there are no two words made out of all the same letters between them, but because in general all words are not equally made of all letters. Thus although in different things there are likewise many common beginnings of many things, nevertheless they are able to consist in wholes which are unlike with respect to each other. As a result it is deservedly said that the human race, crops, and glad trees are composed of different things ... It is apparent that none of these things happen, since we see that all things, since they are created from certain seeds with a certain mother, are able to preserve their kind as they grow. Of course it is necessary that this happen in a certain way (*certa ... ratione*). For out of all foods their bodies [i.e.,

> of the foods] depart deep into the joints and when joined together make harmonious motions. (2.688-699, 707-713)[35]

As the underlined words show, the latter part of the passage (2.707-710) is a veritable pastiche of 1.184-191.[36] The tie between the passages is made particularly strong by the verbatim repetition of line 1.188 at 2.707 (*quorum nil manifestum est, omnia quando*), the only two times this verse is used in the poem. What is significant about these verbal parallels, if so-called "intratextuality" in ancient poetry is a regular object of study?[37] The fact that Lucretius enacts the reordering of words and verses right next to two passages where he discusses this possibility is remarkable. Indeed, taken together, 2.688-699 on the letter and element analogy and 2.707-710 which reshuffles the words from the earlier passage present two different models for repetition in *DRN*. For the first three lines on the analogy (2.688-690) repeat verbatim part of the second time when Lucretius employs the analogy in the poem (1.823-826). Through his description of reordering letters, words, and verses next to his enactment of it, Lucretius gives us a picture of himself in his study carefully splicing earlier words and verses and grafting them onto a new context. All of this is to say that Lucretius presents his work as eminently *written* and invites us to imagine the effort and art (*multae tamen artis*, Cic. *Q. fr.* 2.10.3) that went into the poem's creation. And when we think more closely about in what this art consists, it seems to involve the careful relation of one passage to several others and the implication of what these relations indicate—the sort of connections I will investigate below. The art of writing he describes implies the need for an art of reading, an esoteric art of reading.

The terms of the analogy between letters and atoms entails as much. Lucretius aims to move from the visible world of the phenomena accessed by the senses (see especially 4.469-521)

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[35] In the part passed over Lucretius explains the impossibility of all things being joined together, resulting in monsters like the Chimaera.
[36] It also has parallels to some verses preceding 1.184-191, such as *seminibus certis* (2.708) vs. *seminibus … certis* (1.169) and *certa genetrice* (2.708) vs. *mater ... certa* (1.168).
[37] See, e.g., Sharrock 2000.

to the invisible atoms.[38] The one thing most needful is a recovery of "the looks and account of nature" (*naturae species ratioque*, 1.148), combining the visible and the invisible. Thus, by analogy, his poem also contains a visible surface which leads to something hidden.[39]

5.2.2 Lucretius on the Art of Reading

Now that we have seen the focus Lucretius puts on his own art of writing, we can look at some of Lucretius' statements which instruct Memmius and us about how to read his poem. I argue that these passages again indicate the need for an esoteric reading of *DRN*, and further show motives (like pedagogy) and causes (the hiddenness of things) for esotericism alongside Lucretius' method. A passage perhaps second only in importance to the honey and wormwood comparison comes in an address to Memmius at the end of Lucretius' proof of the existence of the void (1.329-417). He says:

> Quapropter, quamvis causando multa moreris,
> esse in rebus inane tamen fateare necessest.
> multaque praeterea tibi possum commemorando
> argumenta fidem dictis corradere nostris.
> verum animo satis haec vestigia parva sagaci
> sunt per quae possis cognoscere cetera tute.
> namque canes ut montivagae persaepe ferarum[40]
> naribus inveniunt intectas fronde quietes,
> cum semel institerunt vestigia certa viai,
> sic alid ex alio per te tute ipse videre
> talibus in rebus poteris caecasque latebras
> insinuare omnis et verum protrahere inde.
> quod si pigraris paulumve recesseris ab re,
> hoc tibi de plano possum promittere, Memmi:
> usque adeo largos haustus e fontibu' magnis[41]
> lingua meo suavis diti de pectore fundet,[42]

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[38] See Schrijvers 1978.
[39] See also Clay 1983, 47-48.
[40] I read the correction of OQ's *ferare* to *ferarum* in O rather than the correction of *ferare* to *ferai* in Q, following, e.g., Bailey's (1921) earlier text and Deufert 2019. Deufert (2010, 62-64) elsewhere persuasively makes the case for *ferarum*.
[41] Cf. *fontis* (1.927 = 4.2).
[42] Cf. *fundere* (5.110) also of Lucretius' own speech. Lucretius asks Venus both to "pour out" (*funde*, 1.40) words which will persuade Mars to bring peace to Rome even as she is "poured around" him (*circumfusa*, 39). If "pouring" stands in for persuasive poetic speech, Venus both actively persuades and passively is poured out as a part of Lucretius' own poetry.

ut verear ne tarda prius per membra senectus
serpat et in nobis vitai claustra resolvat,
quam tibi de quavis una re versibus omnis
argumentorum sit copia missa per auris.

> Therefore, although you delay by making many arguments, nevertheless it is necessary for you to admit that there is void in things (*in rebus inane*). I am, furthermore, able to scrape together trust for our words by calling to mind for you many arguments. But for your keen mind these little tracks are enough for you to be able to understand the rest through them. For just as mountain-roving dogs very often find the leaf-covered lairs of beasts with their noses, as soon as they have pursued the certain tracks of their path, thus in such things (*talibus in rebus*) out of one thing you yourself through yourself will be able to see another and steal into all invisible hiding holes and drag the truth out from there. But if you become lazy or draw back a little from the task (*ab re*), I can promise this easily to you, Memmius: from my rich breast my delightful tongue will pour out draughts so large from great springs that I fear lest old age creep through our slow limbs and loosen the bonds of life in us before the whole abundance of arguments about any one thing (*de quavis una re*) has been sent through your ears with my verses. (1.398-417)[43]

Lucretius tells Memmius that he will not reveal everything to him, but that Memmius must use what Lucretius tells him to think through the matter to its conclusion. Lucretius uses the term *vestigia* ("tracks") both outside and inside the simile which compares Memmius to a dog searching for quarry (1.402, 406). *Vestigia* thus strangely breaks the usual logic of a simile, as does the fact that Memmius will try to drag the truth from "hiding holes" (*latebras*; cf. Gell. 17.9.2)—Memmius does metaphorically the action he performs in the simile.[44] The use of the word *vestigia*, which Lucretius also uses of his own following in the tracks of Epicurus (3.4; 5.55),[45] sets up the following proportion: Lucretius is to Memmius as Epicurus is to Lucretius.[46] In the logic of the simile, Lucretius is Memmius' master,[47] directing him after the quarry of the truth (cf. Pl. *Sph*. 235a10-b3; *Prm*. 128b8-c2; *Lg*. 654e2-3). Lucretius seems to place Memmius in

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[43] Note the focus on different senses in this passage: smell (*naribus*), sight (*videre*), taste (*lingua*), and hearing (*per auris*). This follows on Lucretius' focus on the different senses in his preceding arguments. Touch is missing here, though it is of central importance as "the common sense" (*communis ... sensus*, 1.422-423).
[44] See Schrijvers' (1978, 83) remark on a different instance of this in Lucretius: "Là, l'équivalence ... a l'air de ne plus jouer le rôle d'analogie, mais d'être devenue une identité ..."
[45] See further below (5.3.3).
[46] Cf. Clay 1983, 39-40.
[47] Cf. the (oft-repeated) *docui* (1.265) with *docuerunt* (5.1303) and *cum doctoribus armatis saevisque magistris* (5.1311).

an entirely subordinate position. He tells him to stop protesting, since he will defeat him in an endless stream of arguments. But at the same time, he urges him to maintain independence of thought. He needs to follow the tracks to the truth on his own. No one can do this for him. Thus Lucretius indicates that he practices pedagogical esotericism, much in the same way as Cicero does (see again *DND* 1.10-12; *Tusc*. 5.11). Lucretius does not want to tell Memmius everything, but this is also tied to the hidden character of the truth he indicates here. The hiding places of the truth are "blind" (*caecas*) just like the "blind" or invisible bodies (*corpora caeca*, 1.278, 295), to the existence of which Lucretius dedicates the section prior to the one on the void (265-328). No matter how bright Lucretius' song is, the obscurity of the subject matter may mean that we and Memmius must reach for the light on our own, thinking through the problems ourselves and seeing "one thing from another" (407; cf. 5.1456). At the end of the *Orator*, Cicero urges Brutus to exercise his own judgment (*iudicium*) about his case for the best orator (237-238). Cicero explains how he follows what is like the truth, "since by contrast that famous truth itself hides in obscurity" (*cum ipsum illud verum tamen in occulto <u>lateret</u>*, 238). Lucretius' hiding places (*latebrae*) contain the verb Cicero here uses of the truth, *latere*.

Through his promise of a potential deluge of arguments, which he however leaves out of the poem, Lucretius thus indicates that Memmius and other readers will have to do work on their own to complete what Lucretius is telling them. Some things will be visible only by faint tracks (see also 2.123-124): Lucretius is holding back and will communicate only some things openly as part of his task of educating Memmius. This manner of proceeding both enables independence of thought and responds to the obscurity of the subject matter. We will now see how the very end of Book 1 confirms the active role that Memmius and the reader have to take in searching for the truth, and how a passage in Book 2 shows Lucretius' concern, like that of Cicero, with developing the free judgment of his addressee.

In the coda to Book 1, Lucretius develops his earlier injunction to Memmius just discussed (1.398-417). He writes:

> Haec sic pernosces parva perductus opella;
> namque alid ex alio clarescet nec tibi caeca
> nox iter eripiet quin ultima naturai
> pervideas: ita res accendent lumina rebus.
>
> Thus led thoroughly by my little work you will know thoroughly these things. For one thing becomes clear from another and the dark night (*caeca nox*) will not snatch the road away from you so that you cannot see thoroughly the final reaches of nature: thus things will kindle lights for things. (1.1114-1117; cf. 2.478-479, 522-523)

Memmius will be led by Lucretius' little work to know the nature of things. The work itself does not explain everything, and Lucretius indicates the active engagement he expects from the reader, who has to proceed by observing the connections among the things themselves (see again Cic. *DND* 1.9, end). Lucretius seems to expect even more from Memmius towards the end of Book 2:

> Nunc animum nobis adhibe veram ad rationem.
> nam tibi vementer nova res molitur ad auris[48]
> accidere et nova se species ostendere rerum.
> sed neque tam facilis res ulla est quin ea primum
> difficilis magis ad credendum constet, itemque
> nil adeo magnum neque tam mirabile quicquam
> quod non paulatim minuant mirarier omnes.
> principio caeli clarum purumque colorem,
> quaeque in se cohibet, palantia sidera passim,
> lunamque et solis praeclara luce nitorem;
> omnia quae nunc si primum mortalibus essent,
> ex improviso si sint obiecta repente,
> quid magis his rebus poterat mirabile dici
> aut minus ante quod auderent fore credere gentes?
> nil, ut opinor: ita haec species miranda fuisset;
> quam tibi iam nemo, fessus satiate videndi,
> suspicere in caeli dignatur lucida templa.[49]
> desine quapropter novitate exterritus ipsa
> exspuere ex animo rationem, sed magis acri
> iudicio perpende et, si tibi vera videntur,
> dede manus, aut, si falsum est, accingere contra.
> quaerit enim rationem animus, cum summa loci sit
> infinita foris haec extra moenia mundi,

[48] Cf. *per auris* (1.417).
[49] Here I modify Bailey's punctuation to show *quam* as a relative pronoun with *species* rather than as an exclamatory adverb (see Bailey 1947, ad 2.1038).

quid sit ibi porro quo prospicere usque velit mens
atque animi iactus[50] liber quo pervolet ipse.

> Now please apply your mind to the true doctrine. For an exceedingly new thing endeavors to reach your ears and a new appearance of things endeavors to show itself. But there is also not anything so easy that it is not at first more difficult to believe, and likewise nothing is so great nor is anything so wonderful at which all do not little by little decrease their wonder. First of all, [take] the clear and pure color of the sky, and what the sky contains in itself, the stars wandering in all directions, and the moon and the shining of the sun's bright light—if all these things existed for the first time now for mortals, if suddenly they were cast forward unexpectedly, what would have been able to be spoken of as more wonderful than these things or what, beforehand, would peoples have dared to believe would come to be less than them? Nothing, as I think. So [much] would this appearance have been something to be marveled at. Now, you know, no one, tired by an excess of seeing it, deigns to look up at this [appearance], into the dazzling regions of the sky. For this reason, stop spitting out the teaching from your mind, since you are terrified by its very newness, but rather weigh it with keen judgment and, if things appear true to you, then yield, or, if it is false, gird yourself against [the teaching]. For the mind seeks a reason—since the boundless whole of space is outside, beyond these walls of the world—what, further, it is there, up to what point the mind wishes to see and to where the free casting of the mind itself can fly. (2.1023-1047)

Towards the end of the passage, Lucretius tells Memmius that he will have to use his judgment (*iudicium*) to decide whether what Lucretius says is true. Whereas in his comparison of Memmius to a dog in Book 1 he stresses that Memmius must follow him in order to come to the truth on his own, here Lucretius focuses on the need for Memmius to exercise free judgment, speaking of the "free casting of the mind" (*animi iactus liber*, 2.1047) which is required to discover the infinite universe beyond the walls of the world (cf. 2.251-293). As a dog, Memmius was in a sense enslaved to Lucretius, whereas here he is liberated and free. Over the course of the first two books, which contain the core teachings about the being and motion of the atoms, Lucretius suggests a potential emancipation for Memmius and other readers.[51] But this emancipation consists first in submitting to Lucretius' authority, in a sense trusting that what he says is valuable

[50] It is *tactus* in all MSS. In this case, since everything is bodily, would it be perceived by the "touch" of the mind? But Bailey assures us (ibid., ad loc.) that *animi iactus* renders Epicurus' ἐπιβολὴ τῆς διανοίας.
[51] The "training" of the reader occurs most explicitly in the first two books, culminating in this emancipation at the end of Book 2. The comparison between letters and atoms also occurs only in in the first two books. Lucretius seems to give instructions on esoteric reading in the first two books which then have to be carried out over the rest of the poem. Readers who do not pick up on this in time will be sent down a more dogmatic path in the remaining four books.

(see *studio ... fideli*, 1.52; *fidem*, 401), in order to become a free thinker.[52] In fact, as I will discuss further below (5.3.3), this is very much like Lucretius' own relationship to Epicurus—the inspiration of a master is necessary to achieve a greatness that is ultimately independent from and in some respects superior to that of the master (think about Plato's relationship to Socrates). Clay remarks, "Epicureanism involved both a period of service to the true philosophy and an ultimate freedom," citing Epicurus' dictum preserved by Seneca, "You ought to be a slave to philosophy, so that you may obtain true freedom" (*Philosophiae servias opportet, ut tibi contingat vera libertas*, Sen. *Ep*. 8.7 = 199 Usener).[53]

Though drawing inspiration from different philosophical traditions, both Lucretius and Cicero want to preserve the reader's freedom of judgment. I already discussed this in the case of Cicero, who in *DND* hides his views so that the reader can preserve his or her "judgment" (*iudicium*, 1.10) and whose avatar Young Cicero insists on "free judgment" as essential for Academic skepticism (*libero iudicio*, 1.17). Lucretius and Cicero are both Romans writing for Romans. Freedom is not just a category in opposition to the enslaved population, for free Romans can also become slaves if republicanism becomes tyranny. Lucretius, like Cicero, appeals to his readers' desire for political freedom in a time of instability through the language of *libertas* to indicate that true freedom comes from philosophical freedom.[54] Like Cicero, he indicates that he practices pedagogical esotericism which requires the reader to exercise free judgment in evaluating his arguments and following up on the tracks he leaves. Unlike for Cicero, this freedom may ultimately not be connected to political freedom, since a withdrawal from politics is recommended independent of any regime type and certainly would not encourage active resistance to a change of regime.

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[52] See Benardete 2000c, 243.
[53] Clay 1983, 31, 293 n. 79.
[54] Cf., e.g., Minyard 1985, Schiesaro 2007, Atkins 2018, 96-102, and Noller 2019, 22-23 with scholarship cited on Lucretius' engagement with Roman politics in his poem.

As in Philodemus, Cicero (through Velleius), and Epicurus himself,[55] Lucretius applies the language of political freedom and slavery to a psychology which analyzes the problem of believing in gods as "arrogant masters" (*dominis ... superbis*, 2.1091;[56] see also *dominos acris*, 5.87; 6.63). Such a belief fills one's life with care, since one believes oneself to be the plaything of capricious, cruel, and all-powerful masters. If this false belief about the gods spoils one's ἀταραξία, is it not possible that Lucretius would also admit that the sure knowledge that one *is* dominated by capricious, cruel, and all-powerful masters in the human political sphere would be sufficient to spoil ἀταραξία? Would it not be preferable to live in a regime without actual arrogant masters, and does the advent of law not release human beings from the threat of arbitrary violence at each other's hands (see 5.1136-1160)?[57] And if the gods are part of the law (i.e., if they are instituted by convention), does not, perhaps, the belief in the gods as arrogant masters actually do away with actual arrogant masters?[58] The fear of the gods would make humans humble rather than arrogant. If philosophy is only possible in political society after the arts have reached their peak, is there not a threat to philosophy if political society degenerates into something which resembles the prepolitical rule of one by force? The question ultimately is whether Lucretius' poem is truly powerful enough to get rid of human "arrogance" (*superbia*) "through words, not weapons" (*dictis, non armis*) (5.46-50). Can his poem change politics for the better or is the fear of the gods as instituted by the city still necessary?[59]

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[55] δεινοὺς ... τυράννους, Phld. *Piet*. col. 71; *sempiternum dominum*, Cic. *DND* 1.54; δεσπότιν, ἀδέσποτον, Epicur. *Men*. 133.
[56] Here nature becomes "free" without such gods (*natura ... libera*, 2.1090-1091).
[57] Consider *docuere* (5.1143) of the creation of offices and laws in relation to Lucretius' own activity.
[58] See further below on the relationship between gods and law (5.3.2).
[59] I return to these questions below after taking more evidence into consideration.

5.2.3 Honey and Wormwood, Novelty, and Esotericism

While in the addresses to Memmius just discussed (1.398-417; 2.1023-1047) Lucretius indicates the manner of esoteric reading required to understand his work, in the honey and wormwood passage Lucretius shifts the perspective to his manner of esoteric writing.[60] Strauss argues that there are important structural parallels between the passage on novelty (2.1023-1047) and the honey and wormwood passage: both come towards the end of Book 2 and 1 respectively before discussions of infinity. But there are also important differences: the honey and wormwood passage focuses on the novelty of Lucretius' enterprise (1.921-930), whereas the later passage focuses on the "novelty of the doctrine" itself as something "repulsive" and "frightening" because it is new. "He creates the impression that the doctrine to be expounded can be repulsive only because it is new or as long as it is new, or that it is not in itself repulsive."[61]

I will elaborate on this interpretation. In the honey and wormwood passage, newness is exciting: "it is pleasing to pluck new flowers" (*iuvatque novos decerpere flores*, 1.928 = 4.3). But in the later passage, Lucretius indicates that newness is actually terrifying: "For this reason, stop spitting out the teaching from your mind, since you are terrified by its very newness" (*desine quapropter novitate exterritus ipsa | exspuere ex animo rationem*, 2.1041-1042). Lucretius had already warned Memmius about the difficulty created because of the need to use "new words" (*novis verbis*) on account of "the newness of things" (*rerum novitatem*, 1.137-139). In the passage on novelty proper Lucretius uses the expression "a new thing" (*res nova*, 2.1024). It is understandable that Memmius is terrified, since the phrase "new things" (*res novae*) means political revolution (e.g., Caes. *Civ*. 1.18.3; 5.6.1; Cic. *Agr*. 2.91; Sal. *Cat*. 37.1). While in some cases "new things" can be attractive (see *novis ... rebus*, Lucr. 5.1106, 1412-1429) they can also

[60] As was the case for the letters and atoms analogy discussed above (5.2.1). I treat the honey and wormwood passage here alongside the passages on reading because of important parallels between them.
[61] Strauss 1968, 102-103.

be terrifying (*rerum ... novarum*, 6.646) or harmful (*novitate*, 2.970; 3.151).[62] Lucretius uses the language of political revolution to describe the content of his doctrine to Memmius.[63] Memmius is terrified because Lucretius' doctrine seems to imply a revolution of the Roman regime, which is clearly connected to his concern that it constitutes an impious crime, which I discuss further below (5.3.1). In speaking about the bliss of the gods, Lucretius tells Memmius:

> quidve novi potuit tanto post ante quietos
> inlicere ut cuperent vitam mutare priorem?
> nam gaudere rebus novis debere videtur
> cui veteres obsunt; sed cui nil accidit aegri
> tempore in anteacto, cum pulchre degeret aevum,
> quid potuit novitatis amorem accendere tali?
>
> Or what new thing could have later enticed those who before were calm so much that they should desire to change their earlier life? For he, for whom old things present a problem, seems to ought to delight in new things [= revolution]; but for such a man for whom nothing wretched happened in past time, since he led his life beautifully, what would have been able to kindle a love of newness? (5.168-173)

In addition to the phrase "new things" or "revolution" here (*rebus novis*), the use of the verb "desire" (*cuperent*) makes the association even stronger, since the phrase "desirous of revolution" (*cupidus rerum novarum*) is a standard phrase using the adjectival form of this verb (*cupire*) to indicate one inciting revolution (see the passages cited for *res novae* as "revolution" above). Lucretius states the character of newness and desire for revolution generally, even though he is talking about the gods. People unhappy with the prior state of affairs would wish for a change. The gods are perfectly happy, but unhappy humans would wish for a change. This is why they would want a "revolution" offered by Lucretius' novel doctrine.[64]

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[62] At 6.646 *rerum* should be taken ἀπὸ κοινοῦ with *natura* and *novarum* (see Bailey 1947, ad loc.).
[63] Adler (2003, 47) speaks of Roman Epicureanism as "an utterly novel truth about the nature of human things and therewith an utterly novel political doctrine." On Lucr. 1.136-145 Minyard (1985, 43) writes, "The political connotations of 'novis' and 'novitatem' could not be avoided in a language in which *novus homo* and *novae res* and *novae tabellae* were terms of such power or in an age when conspiracy and revolution were the air of political life." See further Ojeman 1959, 32.
[64] They might wish to overthrow the current political system which relies on the fear inspired by religion, i.e., they would want revolution because "old things present a problem" to all human beings as human beings according to Lucretius' teaching.

Novelty is both exciting and terrifying. But in the passage on novelty, Lucretius specifies that not only novelty, but also greatness fades. He no longer speaks about "new things" or "great things" ("I teach about great things," *magnis doceo de rebus*, 1.931 vs. "nothing is so great," *nil adeo magnum*, 2.1028; cf. 2.123-124). They only seem new and great at first, but even states founded by revolution make that revolution into the very source for tradition or the stabilizing effects of the old. In the honey and wormwood passage the fact that the "crowd" (*vulgus*) recoils seems to indicate that the doctrine is simply bitter, but even there Lucretius specifies that it "*seems* to be rather bitter to those by whom it has not been employed" (*videtur* | *tristior esse quibus non est tractata*, 1.943-945 = 4.18-20). This is exactly his point in the novelty passage, that the doctrine is not in itself terrifying but only because of its novelty, which is not inherent to it but fades over time.

Is part of the honey to make what is not in itself new and great seem new and great? Or is it, rather, making the new seem exciting rather than terrifying, i.e., making philosophy seem pious rather than impious and criminal? Novelty fading could either be comforting: "philosophy is not really revolution" (see again Cic. *Orat*. 12) or terrifying: "you'll get used to revolution after it happens." Lucretius shows his own novelty wearing off by repeating the honey and wormwood passage, which begins by celebrating his novelty, at the beginning of Book 4 (4.1-25). It is not as exciting the second time around.[65]

As mentioned above (5.1), the comparison of poetry and philosophy to honey and wormwood is an explicit admission of concealment and deception, and hence esotericism. Poetry hides philosophy. The most obvious instance of this is Lucretius' use of traditional gods, who entice but whose divinity is then undermined. But the passage on novelty in asserting that nothing is really new and great, or that the truth Lucretius teaches is not bitter in itself, shows the image

[65] Cf. Farrell 2008, 6-7 on the repetition with scholarship cited.

of honey and wormwood as an image: through the comparison Lucretius exaggerates the extent to which his teaching is both exciting and bitter, so the passage may be an instance of "honey" in its own right by misrepresenting the character of the truth.[66] In the end, the truth is the same truth that there has always been.

In the honey and wormwood passage, then, Lucretius makes it seem as if it is primarily his poetic project which is novel (1.926-934 = 4.1-9) and as if his doctrine is repulsive because it is bitter, rather than novel (1.943-945 = 4.18-20). In the novelty passage, it is the doctrine itself which, at least at first, is novel (2.1023-1025), not just Lucretius' poetic presentation of it. In the honey and wormwood passage, new poetry is exciting, whereas in the novelty passage the doctrine as new is terrifying. Thus in the honey and wormwood passage Lucretius suppresses the revolutionary character of the doctrine itself by focusing on the exciting—and hence protreptic—novelty of his poetry. It is more acceptable for the doctrine to be bitter because unpalatable in itself rather than unpalatable because revolutionary and counter to Roman politics, so Lucretius presents the point about bitterness first and then again prominently in the proem to Book 4. He reserves the revolutionary character of the doctrine for the novelty passage. That he explains in the novelty passage that his doctrine is only at first new does not necessarily, as I said, lessen the terror inspired by the revolutionary teaching. If it were in itself bitter, that would be an insurmountable barrier to spreading it to any and all, and it would remain of negligible importance for politics. But if it only seems new and bitter at first, it could in principle gain widespread acceptance (see also 3.307-322).

Lucretius states the honey and wormwood comparison as follows, after explaining his work's novelty:

id quoque enim non ab nulla ratione videtur;

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[66] Cf. Clay 1983, 46: "In some sense, his poetry itself is a deception, an attractive coating over a grim but healing message. But it remains to ask if Lucretius' presentation of his philosophical poem is not itself a deception in its suggestion that its surface has the look of Calliope's cosmetics rather than revealing the nature of things."

> sed veluti pueris absinthia taetra medentes
> cum dare conantur,[67] prius oras pocula circum
> contingunt mellis dulci flavoque liquore,
> ut puerorum aetas inprovida ludificetur
> labrorum tenus, interea perpotet amarum
> absinthi laticem deceptaque non capiatur,
> sed potius tali pacto recreata valescat;
> sic ego nunc ...
>
> For this also seems to be not from no reason (*ratione*); but just as doctors, when they try to give repulsive wormwood to boys, first touch around the cups on the rims with the sweet and yellow liquid of honey, in order that the boys in their unsuspecting age [lit. 'the unsuspecting age of the boys'] may drink down the bitter draught of the wormwood, and in order that, though deceived, they may not be misled, but rather in this way having been restored grow strong, thus I now... (1.935-943 = 4.10-18)[68]

Lucretius claims to deceive his readers for their own benefit—is that not the definition of a noble lie? Here Lucretius is like Memmius' doctor whereas before he was his master (1.398-417). But if Lucretius is to emancipate Memmius and other readers, he cannot simply deceive them through his poetry.[69] They need to learn to recognize his esotericism in order to think through the issues themselves. After all, they are not children, but adults. Lucretius here puts us on guard about the fact that we have to look out for the deception of poetry which conceals philosophy. As already pointed out, this passage itself seems to be laced with honey insofar as it makes the teaching seem sad in itself rather than because of its terrifying novelty. Again this passage prepares a split in the audience of those who recognize the honey and those who do not.[70]

A later passage adds further nuance to the comparison of honey to poetry. Lucretius argues that there are a limited number of atomic shapes because otherwise certain atoms would be of tremendous size, which is not the case (2.478-499). Another consequence of an unlimited

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[67] Cf. Lucretius' use of *conor* ("I try") of himself while composing the poem (1.25)
[68] I translate and discuss the parts preceding and following this elsewhere (see 5.1 above and 5.3.3 below). Cf. Pl. *Lg*. 659e5-660a3. See also a remarkable parallel at Cic. *DND* 1.20: *hunc censes primis ut dicitur labris gustasse physiologiam id est naturae rationem, qui quicquam quod ortum sit putet aeternum esse posse?* ("Do you think the one who believes that what has come to be can be eternal has tasted physiology, that is, an account of nature, with [even] the edge of his lips, as the saying goes?").
[69] See Adler 2003, 67.
[70] See Clay 1983, 47-48.

number of atomic shapes would be that there would always be new qualities, such as colors, that would surpass the most fantastic ones which already exist (500-503). Here are two examples he gives of what would happen if there were infinite atomic shapes:

> et contemptus odor smyrnae mellisque sapores [sc. *iacerent*],
> et cycnea mele Phoebeaque daedala chordis
> carmina consimili ratione oppressa silerent …
>
> ... and the smell of myrrh [would lie] held in contempt and the taste of honey, and the swan songs and the strains of Apollo, elaborate in their plucking, would, overpowered in a similar way, fall silent … (2.504-506)

Lucretius puns on "honey" (*mellis*) and "songs" or "tunes" (*mele*) here (a subtlety which, to my knowledge, prior scholarship has not mentioned).[71] *Mele*, a Latin transliteration of the Greek plural μέλη of μέλος, just a few words after *mellis* is already quite similar sounding, and it is only one letter away from being written identically to the ablative singular of "honey" (*melle*), though the final *-e* of *mele* is long while it is short in *melle* (a form used in the honey and wormwood passage itself, *musaeo dulci ... melle*, 1.947).[72] Here honey blends into the song, and the pun is made even clearer by the fact that Lucretius spoke of "songs of the muses" (*musaea mele*, 2.412) not long before this passage and right after a discussion of "honey" (*mellis*, 398). This passage links back to "the sweet honey of the muses" at 1.947, creating a nexus between the three passages and thus strengthening the association of *mele* ("songs") with *melle* ("honey").

The pun itself shows the sort of details that comprise the "honey" and which I will investigate. As the discussion of the letter and atom analogy already indicated, Lucretius creates striking verbal parallels which show what he wants to communicate indirectly. The fact that these are "swan songs" is also highly significant, given Lucretius' comparison of Epicurus and himself

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[71] Friedländer (1941, 22-23, 25) mentions the pleasing liquid sounds of *mellis* (2.398), *mele* (2.412), and *melle* (1.947 = 4.13) but does not connect *mellis*/*melle* with *mele* directly or treat the passage where Lucretius puts them together (2.504-505).

[72] Perhaps, then, when a reader comes to this line again (4.22) the pun from 2.504-505 would again be apparent, the "honey of the muses" also reading as "the song of the muses" (though of course the cases do not match).

to swans later in the poem (see 5.3.3 below). Though it is beyond the scope of this section, an adequate interpretation of the meaning of Lucretius' poetry in relation to his philosophy expressed in the honey and wormwood passage would take into account not only this pun, but also the remaining passages in the work which deal with honey, wormwood, the sweet, and the bitter. Such recurrences of the terms of this key passage would revise the initial presentation of the connection between poetry and philosophy.[73]

In this section I examined passages where Lucretius indicates how Memmius and his other readers have to read his poem esoterically. In alignment with his pedagogical motive of concealment, Lucretius adumbrates his method of leaving certain "tracks" for his readers in order to preserve their freedom of judgment and to reveal only certain things to certain readers. This is in addition to his most obvious statement on esotericism, just discussed, concerning the concealment of philosophic positions through poetry. Lucretius' emphasis on his poem as a carefully wrought, written artifact further indicates the connection between his advice on reading his poem and his manner of writing. With Lucretius' method of esotericism in view, we can now examine select examples of the content of his esotericism.

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[73] Lucretius pairs honey and wormwood again in his discussion of the relationship between atomic shapes and sense perception (2.398-407), using language similar to the honey and wormwood passage (*mellis ... liquores*, 398; *tractentur*, 399; *taetra absinthi natura*, 400; *tangere*, 403; *amara*, 404). This shows the physiology of the sweet and bitter, and Lucretius soon comes also to the atomic composition of bitter liquids, which would include the wormwood drink (464-477). Next, Lucretius is a bee who feeds on Epicurus' honey rather than producing his own (3.11-13). Again regarding atomic shape, Lucretius mentions "the nature of honey" (*mellis ... natura*, 191; see also *latices*, 192). Though not about honey and wormwood, Lucretius discusses the healing power of "medicine" (*medicina*, 510-512 vs. *medentes*, 1.936 = 4.11; cf. 6.1226; cf. the ambivalence of φάρμακον in Greek). If a dead body could still sense, it would not be pleasant to suffocate in honey (3.891). The sweet has become rather sad. Honey is likewise just as enticing as dead bodies, depending on the animal doing the sensing (4.678-680). Indeed Lucretius has just told us that the bitter is actually a part of the taste of honey while discussing the onset of disease (658-672). So many evils await the "boy" (*puer*) in our hostile world that babies rightly cry at being brought into it (5.222-227; see also 2.576-580). The world is full of disease, so we cannot avoid the "bitter" (*tristia*) (6.769-780). Even the one mixing wormwood (*absinthia*) senses its bitterness (*tangit amaror*, 929-930), so the doctor would be affected by it in addition to the boy (i.e., Lucretius in addition to us). One of the effects of the Athenian plague is infection of the genitals (*partis genitalis corporis ipsas*) resulting in self-castration (1206-1209). At the beginning of the poem Lucretius says that the principles are "generating bodies" (*genitalia corpora*, 1.58). The sweetness of Venus, who causes all races to propagate (see *genetrix*, 1.1, *genus*, 4, *genitabilis*, 11, *generatim*, 20), with which the atoms themselves seemed to be imbued has indeed by the end become something quite sad.

5.3 The Criminality of Philosophy and Lucretius' Challenge to Epicurus

In treating the content of Lucretius' esotericism, I do not aim to be exhaustive. Instead, I make the case for two important examples of esotericism in the poem that have ramifications for key interpretative questions and lay the groundwork for future esoteric readings of Lucretius. First I will claim that Lucretius indirectly reveals the criminality of philosophy, which he cannot reveal openly but is important to communicate to some readers. The criminality of philosophy is intimately related to central interpretative questions of the poem, such as Lucretius' attitude towards traditional religion and Roman politics. He cannot reveal philosophy's criminal character openly because the true extent of the tension between philosophy and Roman politics, beyond even what a Roman hostile to philosophy might think, would be too scandalous. My second claim is that Lucretius indicates esoterically his independence from and superiority to Epicurus. Here I focus on Lucretius' literary presentation of himself in relation to Epicurus, rather than on how the content of Lucretius' teaching differs substantially from that of Epicurus. Instead, his literary indications of his position towards Epicurus render more convincing past and future readings which would seek to show Lucretius' esoteric communication of substantial disagreements with Epicurus' philosophy.[74]

5.3.1 The Criminality of Philosophy

In the honey and wormwood passage, Lucretius indicates the relationship of philosophy to the political community through his mention of the resistance of the "crowd" (*vulgus*, 1.945 = 4.20) to his doctrine (cf. Cic. *Tusc*. 2.3-4).[75] The fact that Epicurean philosophy challenges

[74] See e.g., Atkins 2020, 49-54 on Lucretius on the limits of Epicurean theology, which also carry important ethical implications surrounding the invulnerability of the sage and hence the potential for perfect happiness through philosophy.

[75] See also Epicur. *KD* 14: ... εἰλικρινεστάτη γίνεται ἡ ἐκ τῆς ἡσυχίας καὶ ἐκχωρήσεως τῶν πολλῶν ἀσφάλεια ("... the safety from calm and withdrawal from the many becomes the most pure [safety]"); fr. 43 Bailey (cited at Pease 1955-1958, ad *DND* 1.49): οὐδέποτε ὠρέχθην τοῖς πόλλοις ἀρέσκειν. ἃ μὲν γὰρ ἐκείνοις ἤρεσκεν οὐκ ἔμαθον· ἃ δὲ ἤδειν

Roman tradition—both the traditional religion which underlies the political community and involvement in the political community—makes it so that there is a great resistance to Epicureanism, which Lucretius himself acknowledges. He will not only acknowledge such resistance, but also present his philosophy as criminal (as I already began to indicate through my discussion of philosophic novelty and revolution above) because he recognizes that traditional religion is actually beneficial for political life. He must reveal both the criminality of philosophy and the benefits of religion esoterically.

After invoking Venus and explaining the nature of the gods (1.1-49),[76] Lucretius tells Memmius:

> quod superest, vacuas auris <animumque sagacem>
> semotum a curis adhibe veram ad rationem,
> ne mea dona tibi studio disposta fideli,
> intellecta prius quam sint, contempta relinquas.
>
> As for what remains, apply empty ears and a keen mind which is removed from cares to the true doctrine, lest you leave behind my gifts in disdain which have been arranged (*disposta*) for you with faithful zeal, before they have been understood. (1.50-53)

As Clay points out,[77] these verses show that from the outset Lucretius assumes that there will be resistance to his teaching from a typical Roman reader. Something else emerges too if we compare these verses to a later passage in Book 2 where Lucretius comments on the Greek poets' account of the rites of the Great Mother: "Although these things are reported after being arranged well and excellently, nevertheless they have been removed far away from the true doctrine" (*quae bene et eximie quamvis disposta ferantur, | longe sunt tamen a vera ratione repulsa,* 2.644-645; cf. 1.880).[78] Since Lucretius here cautions that poetry arranged (*disposta*) well and excellently

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ἐγώ, μακρὰν ἦν τῆς ἐκείνων αἰσθήσεως ("I never strove to please the many. For what was pleasing to them I did not learn, but what I knew was far beyond their perception"). See also Phld. *Piet*. col. 54.

[76] I preserve 1.44-49 from the MSS with, e.g., Clay 1983, 93-95 and Sedley 1998, 15-16, 26-27.

[77] Clay 1983, 19.

[78] *Bene* often carries the connotation of "well, but not necessarily truly" in Lucretius (e.g., 1.736; 6.419; cf. 1.127; 2.7; 5.52; cf. Sal. *Cat*. 52.13).

does not necessarily correspond to the true doctrine, what are we to think of his use of the same word, *disposta*, for the way his own gifts are arranged in relation to the true doctrine (1.50-53)?

> Soon after his plea to Memmius not to scorn his doctrine, he tells him,
>
> Illud in his rebus vereor, ne forte rearis
> impia te rationis inire elementa viamque
> indugredi sceleris. quod contra saepius illa
> religio peperit scelerosa atque impia facta.
>
> In these matters (*in his rebus*) I fear this, [namely] lest you by chance think that you are going into the beginnings of an impious doctrine [lit. 'the impious beginnings of a doctrine'] and are entering the path of crime. But on the contrary religion has more often brought forth criminal and impious deeds. (1.80-83)

Lucretius is concerned that his preceding description of a mortal "Greek man" (*Graius homo*, 66), i.e., Epicurus, who rose up in victory against religion (62-79) would startle Memmius and make him think that Lucretius' teaching is impious and criminal. Lucretius does not deny this, but rather says that religion "more often" (*saepius*) led to crime and impiety.[79] The comparative implies that there is some level of frequency of impious and criminal deeds brought forth by Lucretius' teaching (see again Cic. *DND* 3.3). What is beyond a doubt, though, is that an ordinary Roman would view Lucretius' account of Epicureanism as not only impious, but—as a result of this impiety—as a crime (*scelus*), an affront against the political community. This is especially so because Lucretius seems to abandon Rome in favor of a Greek.[80]

Though Lucretius is quick to turn our attention to the dangers of religion through the story of the sacrifice of Iphigeneia (1.84-101), it is remarkable that he admits very early on in the poem that for an ordinary Roman the doctrine he expounds would not just be unsettling or unpalatable, but have the air of a serious crime and threat to the republic.

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[79] See also Minyard 1985, 37 ad loc.: "[Lucretius] could simply deny this potential allegation, but he does not."
[80] Sedley (1998, 57 n. 73), following Farrell (1991, 34 n. 17), remarks, "… *Graius homo* echoes Ennius' application of the same phrase to Pyrrhus, thus implicitly bracketing Epicurus and Pyrrhus as formidable Greek invaders of Italy."

One might ask how Lucretius is concealing the criminality of philosophy given this open statement about it towards the start of the poem. I argue that Lucretius hides this open statement in plain sight through the following attack on religion. The reader may gloss over the full meaning of the original statement on a first reading, since Lucretius *seems* to deny the truth of the claim about the criminality of philosophy and quickly turns to how philosophy is in fact a remedy for the ills of religion. Only after the reader comes to later passages, mostly in Book 5, that refer back to this original passage does its meaning become clear. This interpretation parallels Clay's argument about Lucretius' use of the rhetorical figure of *sustentatio* ("suspension"; citing Quint. 9.2.22-24; 10.1.21-22), by which the speaker mentions something early on but only fully explains it later, in relation to Lucretius' anticipation of the open treatment of the destruction of the world (5.91-100) in his earlier treatment of infinity at the end of Book 2 (2.1023-1174).[81] Clay puts it as follows: "Lucretius also displays a technique of presentation by which he announces—with some degree of reticence—a theme that will be more fully and openly developed."[82] This is what he does with the problem of crime (*scelus*) as well.

I will quote the second passage Clay cites from Quintilian in full, for it also pertains to esoteric writing generally (viz., the method of hinting); again we observe the role oratory plays in esoteric philosophy in Rome:

> Ac diu non nisi optimus quisque et qui credentem sibi minime fallat legendus est, sed diligenter ac paene ad scribendi sollicitudinem nec per partes modo scrutanda omnia, sed perlectus liber utique ex integro resumendus, praecipueque oratio, cuius uirtutes frequenter ex industria quoque occultantur. Saepe enim praeparat dissimulat insidiatur orator, eaque in prima parte actionis dicit quae sunt in summa profutura; itaque suo loco minus placent, adhuc nobis quare dicta sint ignorantibus, ideoque erunt cognitis omnibus repetenda.
>
> And for a long time none except the best authors and those who deceive least of all the reader who trusts in them are to be read, but all [of the work] must be examined attentively and almost with the care involved in writing, not only in parts [of the work], but when it has been read through the book must be taken up again as if completely anew,

[81] Clay 1983, 242-243, 340 n. 195.
[82] Clay 2000, 269.

> and especially a speech whose virtues are also often hidden on purpose. For the orator often prepares, conceals, [and] leaves a trap, and says in the first part of the case the things which are going to be beneficial [for him] in the end; and thus they are less pleasing in their place [in the speech], since we are still ignorant as to why they have been said, and for this reason, once all [parts of the speech] are known, [these passages] will have to be sought out again. (10.1.21-22)

Lucretius has, as it were, laid a trap with his mention of crime (*scelus*) in passing in the proem to Book 1, or planted the seed in our mind that he actually does think philosophy is criminal, which he will only develop further much later on. The original passage becomes clearer only once what comes later has come into view. Remarkably, in the first passage that Clay cites, Quintilian gives the example of Cicero in *In Verrem* leading gradually up to something wicked about Verres through this figure of speech: "Then, after he had kept the minds of the jurors in suspense for a long time, he added something which was much more wicked" (9.2.22).[83] Lucretius leads up to the full wickedness of philosophy in the same way, and only the careful reader can discern this technique. Romans may be hostile to philosophy, but Lucretius at first assuages this hostility only to reveal the true depths of philosophy's *scelus* later, which in turn shows how open he actually was about it in Book 1.[84]

What sort of danger a *scelus* can represent for the Roman Republic comes out, for example, from Sallust's treatment of the Catilinarian Conspiracy. At the end of his proem, he writes: "Thus concerning the conspiracy of Catiline I will complete my account briefly, as truthfully as I am able. For I judge that this villainy is worth remembering chiefly because of the novelty of the crime (*sceleris*) and its danger" (*Cat.* 4.3).[85] Later, Sallust pairs a mention of Catiline's crime (*sceleris sui*) with a discussion of an oath of the conspiracy involving

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[83] *deinde, cum diu suspendisset iudicum animos, subiecit quod multo esset improbius.*
[84] Consider also Lucretius' indication in the first line of the poem (1.1) that Venus is not a goddess but rather pleasure (*voluptas*) understood physiologically. One can only understand this indication on a second reading after reaching a much later passage in the poem (4.1058) where the equation of the goddess with pleasure is made explicit (see Trotz-Liboff 2023a, 428 with scholarship cited).
[85] *Igitur de Catilinae coniuratione quam verissume potero paucis absolvam; nam id facinus in primis ego memorabile existumo sceleris atque periculi novitate.*

cannibalism and human sacrifice, a sort of crime perhaps on par with the sacrifice of Iphigeneia (22.1). This comparison with Sallust serves to show that Lucretius, in subtly calling attention to the perception of his teaching as a *scelus*, not only indicates an isolated misdeed of an individual, but also a potential threat to the very stability of the republic, like that resulting from a conspiracy. Could Roman Epicureans be thought of as forming a conspiracy in the sense of becoming "nearly another people" like the impious Bacchants of 186 BCE (*alterum ... prope populum*, Liv. 39.13.13-14)?[86]

Lucretius' emphasis on the apparent criminality of his teaching becomes more evident in a number of other passages, especially in Books 5 and 6. After laying out his plan to give an account of the mortality of the world (5.55-109), Lucretius makes another aside to assuage Memmius' fear of impiety:

> Qua prius aggrediar quam de re fundere fata
> sanctius et multo certa ratione magis quam
> Pythia quae tripode a Phoebi lauroque profatur,
> multa tibi expediam doctis solacia dictis;
> religione refrenatus ne forte rearis
> terras et solem et caelum, mare sidera lunam,
> corpore divino debere aeterna manere,
> proptereaque putes ritu par esse Gigantum
> pendere eos poenas immani pro scelere omnis
> qui ratione sua disturbent moenia mundi
> praeclarumque velint caeli restinguere solem
> immortalia mortali sermone notantes ...
>
> Before I begin to pour out oracles more sacredly and in a much more certain way (*multo certa ratione magis*) about this matter (*re*) than the Pythia who prophecies from the tripod and laurel of Phoebus [Apollo], I will bring forward many comforts for you with my learned words, lest by chance held back by religion you think that the earth, the sun, the sky, the sea, the stars, and the moon must remain eternal by their divine body, and lest for this reason you think it is proper that, just like the giants, all those who by their doctrine (*ratione sua*) destroy the walls of the world and who wish to snuff out the illustrious sun of the sky by marking immortal things with a speech [alleging they are] mortal must pay the penalty for their monstrous crime ... (5.110-121)

[86] See Atkins 2018, 145-146.

Here Lucretius repeats verses 5.111-112 verbatim from 1.738-739. In the earlier passage Lucretius states that Empedocles and the other philosophers discussed before speak more truly than the oracle of Apollo, while now Lucretius takes this privilege for his own (cf. χρησμῳδεῖν, Epicur. *Sent. Vat.* 29; οἷς ἐχρησμῳ[ι]δήσαμεν περὶ θεῶν, Phld. *Piet.* col. 71).[87] In the earlier passage Lucretius follows these verses by explaining how these great thinkers took a great fall because they made disastrous errors regarding the principles of things (1.740-741). Their challenge to Apollo might be perceived as a form of hubris, which resulted in their ruin. Here in Book 5 Lucretius thus seems to address how he can challenge Apollo and not suffer the fate of the outrageous giants, much as Epicurus rose up against the gods and was victorious (1.62-79).

Lucretius also connects 5.110-121 to the early discussion of crime in Book 1 through the repetition of the phrase *ne forte rearis* ("lest by chance you think," 1.80; 5.114), occurring both times at the end of the verse and representing the only two instances of the phrase in the poem. As in the very same early passage (1.82), Lucretius here again is worried that Memmius will take his philosophic activity to consist in a crime (*scelere*, 5.118)—here one that results in paying a penalty like the giants did.[88] Thus here in Book 5 Lucretius makes us return to his original mention of criminality in the proem to Book 1, which he rendered less offensive through his subsequent blame of religion.

Here in Book 5 he casts Memmius not so much as worried for himself, but rather as thinking that "it is proper" (*par esse*, 5.117; cf. 2.125) for Lucretius and others who deny the immortality of the world to pay a penalty. *Par*, "equal," carries the notion of justice, that which

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[87] See further Clay 1983, 49-52 and Sedley 1998, 13 n. 59. See also Piazzi 2005, 38: "La solennità e ieraticità oracolari di Eraclito non potevano non esercitare un qualche fascino su un poeta che vedeva nell'arcaismo un ingrediente del sublime."

[88] Note that another prominent use of the word *scelus* ("crime") comes when Lucretius speaks of "associates in crime" (*socios scelerum*, 3.61), of those who wish to find stability in life by amassing wealth. The word *socius* ("associate") was used previously of Lucretius' relationship to Venus (*sociam*, 1.24). Lucretius does not use the word in between these two passages and it only surfaces two other times in the poem (5.1326, 1443). Does Lucretius want Venus to be his partner in crime for his philosophic project? He would use the traditional gods in the service of philosophy which is criminal precisely because it overturns the traditional gods.

makes things equal again after a transgression—"'equal' is that which is fair for all" (*par est, quod in omnes aequabile est*, Cic. *Inv*. 2.67, Lewis and Short). Anyone who believes that the world is eternal and divine, which would include not only those following traditional religion but also philosophers of other schools, would consider it a political offense to argue for the mortality of the world. Thus Lucretius must offer "many comforts" (*multa ... solacia*, 5.113) while making this argument. He knows that he must make his philosophy seem less transgressive than it first appears. Navigating the criminality of philosophy is a powerful motive for esotericism.

Soon after this passage, Lucretius again turns to a defense of his teaching. This time, he focuses more on how it will appear to be a religious rather than political offense, though of course these two notions are closely linked. He writes:

> Dicere porro hominum causa voluisse parare
> praeclaram mundi naturam proptereaque
> allaudabile opus divum laudare decere
> aeternumque putare atque immortale futurum
> nec fas esse, deum quod sit ratione vetusta
> gentibus humanis fundatum perpetuo aevo,
> sollicitare suis ulla vi ex sedibus umquam
> nec verbis vexare et ab imo evertere summa,
> cetera de genere hoc adfingere et addere, Memmi,
> desiperest.
>
> Furthermore, it is foolish to say that [the gods] wanted to prepare the illustrious nature of the world for the sake of human beings and that for this reason it is proper to praise the praiseworthy work of the gods and that [it is proper] to think that [their work] will be eternal and immortal; [and it is foolish to say] that it is also not religiously permissible ever to disturb from its seats with any force that which has been established for all time by the ancient plan (*ratione vetusta*) of the gods for human nations, nor [is it religiously permissible] to harass [this] with words and turn the heights upside down,[89] and [it is foolish] to make up and add other things of this sort, Memmius. (5.156-165)

Lucretius here addresses the further accusation that it is a religious offense (*nec fas esse*, 5.160) to argue against the immortality of the world, since the gods created it for the sake of human

[89] See Bailey 1947, ad loc.

beings.[90] Of course, Lucretius argues that this view is false, but in two passages appearing close together (5.110-121, 156-165) he calls attention to the fact that his doctrine appears criminal and impious, the content of the original accusation stated in passing at 1.80-83.[91] Through the rhetorical device of "suspension" (*sustentatio*), Lucretius develops at much greater length in Book 5 the accusation of crime and impiety which he only briefly touched on in Book 1.

There is also evidence that, because of humans' wish that their world be eternal, Lucretius understands that his doctrine also provokes a deep-seated fear in them, which is also likely at the root of the accusations of crime and impiety. In his later discussion of earthquakes, Lucretius says, "And they fear to believe (*metuunt ... credere*) that a certain destructive time and ruin await the nature of the great world, although they see such a great mass of earth weigh down on them!" (6.565-567).[92] Even other natural philosophers (the Heracliteans) fear a central element of Lucretius' teaching, the void: "But because they see many things contrary to themselves [i.e., to their teaching], they are sheepish and avoid (*fugitant*) leaving pure void in things: as long as they fear the steep things (*ardua dum metuunt*),[93] they lose the true path [lit. 'the true things of the way'] ..." (1.657-659).[94] Lucretius' assault on the traditional gods and the eternal world they are said to have created, along with the atomistic doctrine which underlies this attack, not only fits the formal charges of crime and impiety but also awaken a profound fear in philosophers and

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[90] Cf. Cic. *Leg*. 2.16: *Cumque omnia quae rationem habent praestent eis quae sint rationis expertia, nefasque sit dicere ullam rem praestare naturae omnium rerum, rationem inesse in ea confitendum est* ("And since all things which possess reason are superior to those which lack reason, and since it is a religious offense to say that anything is superior to the nature of all things, it is necessary to admit that reason is in it [i.e., the nature of all things]").

[91] Strauss (1968, 121) notes that at 5.110-121 as opposed to 1.80-83 and its sequel Lucretius does not adduce an example of crimes caused by religion after the accusations against his doctrine that he addresses.

[92] *et metuunt magni naturam credere mundi | exitiale aliquod tempus clademque manere, | cum videant tantam terrarum incumbere molem!* See ibid., 135.

[93] Cf. one of Cicero's favorite quotations from tragedy: *oderint, dum metuant* ("let them hate [me], as long as they fear [me]," *Sest*. 102; *Phil*. 1.34; *Off*. 1.97).

[94] *sed quia multa sibi cernunt contraria, <mussant> | et fugitant in rebus inane relinquere purum*: | *ardua dum metuunt, amittunt vera viai* ... Here for the corrupt *muse* of O I tentatively read <*mussant*>, the correction of l 31 and the three other humanist manuscripts that Deufert (2019, xlviii) lists as descending from the lost φ. I follow Deufert's (ibid., ad loc.) punctuation in adopting the correction, about which see Deufert 2018, ad loc. Cf. also Bailey 1947, ad loc. for potential problems with this reading.

non-philosophers alike. The mortality of the world is a transgressive idea for his readers both qua Romans and qua humans.[95]

In the passages examined, though, Lucretius only says that others would accuse him of crime and impiety. Yet, another passage treating the relationship between religion and crime provides evidence that Lucretius ultimately acknowledges the truth of these charges. After Lucretius explains that the old authority of kings was trampled on "under the feet of the crowd" (*sub pedibus vulgi*, 5.1139) and laws were created to restrain the exercise of force (1136-1150), he writes:

> inde metus maculat poenarum praemia vitae.
> circumretit enim vis atque iniuria quemque
> atque, unde exortast, ad eum plerumque revertit,
> nec facilest placidam ac pacatam degere vitam
> qui violat factis communia foedera pacis.
> etsi fallit enim divum genus humanumque,
> perpetuo tamen id fore clam diffidere debet ...
>
> Hence fear of punishment stains the prizes of life. For force and wrong ensnares each person and they often return to him, from whom they arose, nor is it easy to lead a calm and peaceful life for him who breaks the common bonds of peace with his deeds. For even if he escapes the notice of the race of gods and [the race of] human beings, nevertheless he must distrust that it will forever be secret ... (5.1151-1157)[96]

Especially given parallel passages I will soon investigate, it is shocking that Lucretius should call the crimes which are restrained by law—and law includes religion, as the mention of the gods here shows[97]—"the prizes of life" (*praemia vitae*, 1151). One persuasive explanation is that "the prizes of life" are actually the fruits of philosophy.[98] Lucretius would not otherwise call the results of criminal deeds, which he usually excoriates, something positive unless he were

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[95] See Atkins 2020, 41 on this distinction for Lucretius.
[96] Cf. the conceptual and linguistic coincidence of the last line with Cic. *Fin*. 1.50 *numquam tamen id confidet fore semper occultum* ("nevertheless he never trusts that it will always be hidden"). See also Epicur. *KD* 35, especially the usage of λάθρα and πιστεύειν ὅτι λήσει, and εἰ μὴ λήσει in *KD* 34. See also Epicur. *Sent. Vat*. 7, which shows that "difficult" is not the same as "impossible" (cf. Strauss 1968, 127, 138 n. 82). See further Phld. *Piet*. col. 77 (πίστιν). In general, the Epicurean dictum "live unnoticed" (λάθε βιώσας) is important here (see 551 Usener).
[97] See Adler 2003, 322 n. 44.
[98] See Strauss 1968, 127.

speaking about a particular type of crime which is identical to the best possible human life, that of the philosopher (cf. Epicur. *Sent. Vat*. 27). Thus he alludes back to Memmius' worry that he is being set down the path of crime (*sceleris*, 1.80-82; *scelere*, 5.114-121).

Here it is fear of punishment (*poenae*) which spoils the prizes of life, whereas in Lucretius' comparison to the giants it was punishment (*poenae*) which Memmius might have thought those sharing Lucretius' teaching would deserve (5.117). Again in Book 5, Lucretius praises Epicurus for being the one "who left behind for us such prizes (*praemia*) born from his breast and [long] sought out" (4-5).[99] Epicurean philosophy represents the greatest "prizes" so it is no surprise that Lucretius should later regret that "the prizes of life" are spoiled by law: philosophy comes into conflict with the law and the traditional religion it establishes. Thus philosophers have to worry about being punished for philosophizing.

The closing passage of Book 5 makes clear that the arts, of which the highest are (Epicurus') philosophy and (Lucretius') poetry, are "the prizes of life":

> Navigia atque agri culturas moenia leges
> arma vias vestes <et> cetera de genere horum,
> praemia, delicias quoque vitae funditus omnis,
> carmina picturas, et daedala signa polita
> usus et impigrae simul experientia mentis
> paulatim docuit pedetemptim progredientis.
> sic unumquicquid paulatim protrahit aetas
> in medium ratioque in luminis erigit oras.
> namque alid ex alio clarescere corde videbant,
> artibus ad summum donec venere cacumen.[100]
>
> Practice and the trial of alert mind taught them little by little, as they advanced step by step, [about] ships, agriculture, walls, laws, weapons, roads, clothes, and other things of this kind, the prizes (*praemia*), also all the delights altogether of life (*vitae*), [namely] songs, paintings, and elaborate [and] refined statues. Thus little by little time brings each thing into the open and reason (*ratioque*) raises it into the shores of light. For truly they saw in their heart one thing become clear from another, until they came to the highest peak of the arts. (5.1448-1457)

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[99] *.... qui talia nobis | pectore parta suo quaesita<que> praemia liquit?*
[100] Cf. 2.1130.

Here the "prizes" (*praemia*), although not modified by *vitae* ("of life"), appear in the same line as the genitive and are closely linked to the "delights of life" (*delicias vitae*), which are perhaps in apposition to the prizes. Both the prizes and the delights are arts that go beyond sheer necessity, those which we might call the fine arts. Most importantly he lists songs or poetry (*carmina*) among the prizes, the origin of which he treated at length while explaining the development of the arts (5.1379-1411; see also 4.577-594). Thus, only a few hundred lines after explaining how law and religion stain the prizes of life he specifies that poetry, i.e., his own activity, is one of the prizes. Presumably, poetry does not come into conflict with the law unless it is philosophical, but the combination of poetry and philosophy in cloaking philosophy in traditional garb also makes the conflict less visible, as is the case in *DRN*, even as it paradoxically also runs a greater risk by communicating philosophy to a wider audience.

Epicurus' philosophic discoveries were only possible in Athens after the arts had reached their peak, as Lucretius informs us in the sequel, the proem to Book 6 (6.9-13). Epicurean philosophy must, then, be situated in the progress of the arts Lucretius described in Book 5. An even clearer sign of this, and that Lucretius' poetic exposition of Epicurus' philosophy is an even further development of the arts, comes earlier in Book 5 when Lucretius argues for the "newness" (*novitatem*) of the world (5.330-331), in contradiction to his earlier claim that the world is old and crumbling (2.1105-1174; especially 1150-1152).[101] In Book 5 Lucretius writes:

> quare etiam quaedam nunc artes expoliuntur,
> nunc etiam augescunt; nunc addita navigiis sunt
> multa, modo organici melicos peperere sonores.
> denique natura haec rerum ratioque repertast
> nuper, et hanc primus cum primis ipse repertus
> nunc ego sum in patrias qui possim vertere voces.
>
> Thus even now certain arts are being refined, even now some are growing; now many things have been added to ships, recently musicians brought forth melodious tones. Moreover, this nature and teaching of things has recently been discovered (*repertast*), and

[101] See ibid., 124.

> I have now been discovered (*repertus*) as the first among the first who is able to convert it into the language of the fatherland. (5.332-337)

Epicurean philosophy (the *ratio* here) and Lucretius' philosophic poetry are the culmination of the development of the arts and thus "prizes of life."[102] Whereas here the arts "are being refined" (*expoliuntur*), towards the end of the proem to Book 6 Lucretius speaks of his "refined verses" (*politis | versibus*, 6.82-83; cf. *politos ... quosdam*, 3.307-308).[103] The perfect passive participle as opposed to the earlier present passive indicative of the same verb shows Lucretius' poem as the *completion* of the process of the refinement of the arts.[104]

Just as Lucretius calls Epicurus' discoveries "prizes" (5.4-5) at the beginning of the book and poetry generally "prizes" at the end of the book (1450-1451), we must understand Epicurean philosophy and Lucretian poetry to underly the "prizes of life" which risk being spoiled by law, religion, and its punishments. Adherents of Epicureanism, and especially someone like Lucretius who would try to propagate it widely, are grouped with criminals because they challenge the civil religion which underlies the regime. Now, if it were true that religion was simply the evil it appears to be in Book 1, Lucretius could argue that his activity is not in fact rightly called criminal, even though all would accuse him of that. But, in addition to the esoteric indication that his philosophy is viewed as criminal, there is a second esoteric revelation that religion is in fact beneficial for politics.

5.3.2 Lucretius' Methods for Masking the Criminality of Philosophy

The argument that Lucretius reveals the more salutary character of religion over the course of the work has already been made extensively,[105] so I will limit myself to a brief survey

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[102] See Clay 1983, 52-53.
[103] See also *daedala signa polita* ("the elaborate [and] refined statues," 5.1451) in the context of the peak of the arts just discussed, but note that *polita* is Isaac Vossius's correction for OQ's *polito* (Deufert 2019, ad loc.).
[104] Below I will return to these passages, together with others, to show how Lucretius signals his superiority to Epicurus (5.3.3).
[105] See Atkins 2020, 42 on Strauss 1968.

of the evidence for this point. First of all the rites of the Great Mother induce a fear in the "crowd" (*vulgus*) that is not unambiguously negative (see especially 2.622-625).[106] In the next book Lucretius presents criminals as especially afraid of the gods (3.48-54), though of course one will object that it is the fear of death stemming from punishing gods and Hades that made them criminals in the first place (63-64, 79-86).[107] It is, however, again in Books 5 and 6 that the strongest evidence appears. I already noted that Lucretius presents part of the restraint of law as consisting in the fear of being discovered by the gods (5.1156), since the gods are established by law or custom, and Lucretius develops this idea shortly thereafter. Peoples and kings are afraid that they will have to pay a penalty to the gods if they have done something disgraceful or said something haughty (1222-1225). Rather than being driven to crime by the fear of the gods, mortals despise themselves and entrust everything to the will of the gods (1238-1240; 6.50-55). The only negative thing about religion at this point is that fear is not a pleasant emotion to feel. But as for the good of society, Lucretius seems to indicate, religion and the fear of the gods do not create criminals but, as part of the law which restrains the wanton exercise of force, make human beings humble and less likely to commit crimes (cf. again Plb. 6.56.9-12). Indeed, as opposed to Book 3, Lucretius does not mention any crimes which result from the fear of the gods in Books 5 and 6.[108]

Though Lucretius argues against the theodicy of thunderbolts, he does make clear that the normal understanding of them is that they indicate Jupiter's punishment of the wicked (6.390-395). It is Lucretius who weakens the belief that lightning strikes the wicked. In the section on the plague, Lucretius leaves out the crucial point from Thucydides that the fear of the gods is the

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[106] The last line is particularly interesting: *munificat tacita mortalis muta salute* ("speechless she bestows on mortals a silent wish for welfare").
[107] The claim that religion creates criminals early in Book 3 may, however, be just another way of making philosophy initially seem less criminal by contrast, as is the case with the sacrifice of Iphigeneia (1.84-101).
[108] See Strauss 1968, 131.

normal restraint on humans that is weakened during the plague: "And no fear of gods or law of humans was holding them back ..." (θεῶν δὲ φόβος ἢ ἀνθρώπων νόμος οὐδεὶς ἀπεῖργε ..., Th. 2.53.4; but cf. Lucr. 6.1276-1277, 1280-1281, 1285-1286). But this linkage of religion to the law and the restraint that the fear of the gods normally exercises are theses that Lucretius tacitly develops over the course of the work.

Lucretius gradually and indirectly reveals the salutary character of religion as a means of indirectly revealing the criminal character of philosophy. Lucretius indicates that he has publicly undermined something beneficial to society, i.e., religion, and thus shows in deed how philosophy stands in tension with both politics and religion. Lucretius cannot at the beginning of the work declare that philosophy is criminal. In line with my argument above about the technique of "suspension" (*sustentatio*), this is why he starts by arguing that religion rather than philosophy is criminal—a shocking claim for any Roman—, but this turns out to be just a provisional position which serves to deflect attention away from the potential dangers of philosophy onto those of traditional religion. The criminality of philosophy and the benefits of religion form important aspects of the content of Lucretius' esotericism.

In addition to making religion seem more criminal than philosophy, Lucretius employs another method of esotericism, one which is familiar from Cotta's description of Epicurus' esoteric atheism analyzed above (Section 3.4). Beyond his use of the traditional gods in his poetry, which makes Lucretius seem less opposed to the tenets of traditional religion than he is, Lucretius appropriates the language of traditional religion for his own poetic and philosophic activity for the same reason. He couches his poetic activity in the language of mystery cult initiation (1.921-930),[109] sets up Epicurus as if he were a god among (if superior to) traditional gods (5.7-21), and describes his own reaction to Epicurus as one of *horror* (3.28-30), an awe that

[109] See Trotz-Liboff 2023a, 430 with scholarship cited.

Lucretius later shows has markedly religious connotations (3.291; 5.1165; see also 2.609). Epicurus himself speaks of the one "initiated" into his philosophical teaching (τῷ τετελεσιουργημένῳ, *Herod*. 36; see again *Sent*. *Vat*. 29).[110] Finally, Lucretius' appropriation of the hymnic form in his proems further creates the impression of conformity with traditional religion.[111] In short, even when not applied to content that fits with traditional religion, using the vocabulary, imagery, and literary forms familiar to traditional religion makes an unorthodox philosophic project seem less transgressive.[112]

A more positive view of the value of traditional religion and cult for political communities may not be such a surprising or controversial opinion to ascribe to Lucretius. It is, after all, the case that Epicurus recommended participation in traditional cult to his followers.[113] In Book 6 Lucretius still speaks of approaching the shrines of the gods (6.75). Of course, a belief in the overall benefits of religion for society and the practical recommendation for Epicureans to participate in traditional cult to avoid conflict with the city are two distinct notions. But this clear acceptance of traditional cult by Epicurus at least to some degree lends plausibility to a more positive assessment of the role of religion in society at large, even though its tenets are false and at variance with Epicurean theology.

To restate the preceding argument more analytically, the problem resulting from the criminality of philosophy which Lucretius explores ultimately stems from Epicurus' teaching about justice. Not only is justice nothing in itself and only a product of convention (*KD* 31-38), but, as Plutarch succinctly puts it, "… Epicurus does not think that it is necessary to abstain from injustice for any other reason than the fear of punishments" (… οὐ γὰρ Ἐπίκουρος ἄλλῳ τινὶ τῆς

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[110] See also Phld. *Piet*. cols. 20, 28.
[111] See Farrell 2008, 2: "... the fact that Lucretius uses the hymnic form at all in a poem dedicated to convincing the reader that traditional religious beliefs are mistaken is remarkable and has occasioned much discussion."
[112] See also Phld. *Piet*. col. 29.
[113] See Trotz-Liboff 2023a, 424-425 with scholarship cited. See also Phld. *Piet*. cols. 26-27.

ἀδικίας οἴεται δεῖν ἀπείργειν ἢ φόβῳ κολάσεων, *Non posse* 1104b = 534 Usener).[114] The fear of punishment spoils ἀταραξία, so one must not be unjust (see also *KD* 34). This is reasonable advice for someone who is not a philosopher. But Epicurean theology evidently runs counter to the gods of Greek and Roman traditional religion. And *nomos* for the Greeks or laws (*leges*) and the *mos maiorum* for the Romans enjoin a set of religious practices and imply a certain view of the gods (e.g., they are providential and punish the wicked).[115] This is what Varro calls *theologia civilis* or civil theology (see 4.3.2 above). Thus the Epicurean philosopher is in a position of knowing that fear of punishment for injustice is an evil while necessarily committing injustice (i.e., being at variance with the regime, since injustice like justice is only established as a matter of convention) insofar as he or she philosophizes. The very precondition for knowing that injustice is to be avoided because of the fear it engenders is to commit injustice. The best one can do, then, is to mitigate the fear of being punished for the injustice of philosophizing as much as possible through esotericism while still continuing to philosophize and encouraging others to do so (cf. X. *Mem*. 1.1.14, beginning). Lucretius needs to reveal the criminality of philosophy to some readers in order to communicate the genuine character of the relationship between philosophy and (Roman) politics. But because of that criminal character of philosophy he must communicate the genuine character of that relationship esoterically. Hence, he initially inverts the actual relationship of religion and philosophy to politics which he later reveals: at first religion seems criminal and philosophy salutary while later he indicates the reverse to be true.

5.3.3 Lucretius' Challenge to Epicurus

While Lucretius may agree with Epicurus on the value of traditional religion and the status of justice, Lucretius also esoterically communicates his ultimate independence from and

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[114] Cf. Deleuze 1969, 315-316.
[115] Cf. Minyard 1985, 8-10, and 12 n. 7 for a survey of previous literature. See also Pl. *Min*. 315a2-3 and Cic. *Tusc*. 3.3.

even superiority to Epicurus. This independence and superiority signal not just a desire to fulfil his love of praise by raising himself above the heights of his titanic master, but could also indicate substantial differences with Epicurus which are beyond the scope of this study to consider fully.

One of the main reasons for Lucretius' independence from and superiority to Epicurus is the most obvious: Lucretius combines poetry and philosophy while Epicurus does not. This could seem to be a superficial difference, or indeed a sign of Lucretius' inferiority to Epicurus—one might say that Lucretius is inferior because he merely rendered in a different medium, without discovering himself, the masterful teaching of Epicurus. But his choice to use poetry to overcome the resistance of his Roman readers to Epicurus' doctrine shows a different view of the relationship between passion and reason in the soul, as well as human beings' attachment to the world of everyday opinion and common sense.[116] Thus Lucretius' understanding of nature would differ in content as well as in the form of its presentation from Epicurus' understanding.[117] So, Lucretius' use of poetry is already a sign of an important difference between the two regarding their philosophical views, which could be the impetus for further investigations into differences on points of content. As we will soon see, Lucretius portrays himself as combining the virtues of Epicurus and Ennius (and the best of the pre-Socratics) as a way of signaling his superiority through his combination of philosophy and poetry.[118]

Insofar as I take Lucretius to be challenging Epicurus not only on the literary but also on the philosophic level, I disagree with Sedley's view that Lucretius is a "fundamentalist" because he strictly follows Epicurus' *On Nature* and no other source for his philosophical positions.[119] I focus more on the literary presentation of Epicurus as a basis for my argument rather than the

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[116] Cf. Strauss 1968, 84-85.
[117] See Adler 2003, 66-67, 74; cf. xvi.
[118] Homer, whom Lucretius mentions by name (1.124; 3.1037) and who gives his own account of "the nature of things" (*rerum naturam*, 1.126), is another key object of *imitatio*/*aemulatio* in the poem (see Aicher 1991-1992 and Adler 2003, 55-63).
[119] See Sedley 1998, 71-72.

question of Lucretius' sources, a full consideration of which is beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is worth recalling Clay's critique of Sedley's position: Clay accuses Sedley of a circular argument to establish his thesis, since Sedley uses *DRN* to reconstruct *On Nature* and then uses the reconstructed *On Nature* to reveal Lucretius as a fundamentalist.[120] Furthermore, as I argued above (5.2.2), Lucretius encourages Memmius and us to preserve our freedom of judgment (2.1023-1047), i.e., an independence of thought from any authority (Sedley does not treat this passage in his book). It is hard to reconcile Lucretius' philosophical emancipation of Memmius and his readers with a fundamentalist's adherence to Epicurus' doctrines.

Lucretius declares his own emancipation of himself from his master mostly through the subtle reapplication or modification of words and descriptions of Epicurus (and others) to himself in other contexts. This method used to communicate the content—namely Lucretius' alleged independence and superiority—, which consists in the careful reuse of words, should be familiar from the discussion of Lucretius' art of writing above (5.2.1). Strauss notes an example of the application of this method: "In the proem to Book III, Lucretius had compared himself to a swallow and Epicurus to a swan [3.6-7]. From now on he compares himself to a swan (IV 181, 910)."[121] Lucretius' elevation from swallow to swan is paired with Epicurus' demotion from god to man (see 1.66; 5.8, 19, 51; 6.5).[122] One might object that we should not attach so much significance to subtle subversions of earlier praise. Maybe Lucretius just thought a swan comparison was fitting for himself later as well? But I find it hard to imagine that he could forget his own proem to Book 3 and not think through the implications of applying a symbol of Epicurus' superiority to himself to himself at a later point in the poem. This is a particularly prominent example, which finds parallels in the instances that I will now discuss.

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[120] Clay 2000, 267.
[121] Strauss 1968, 113. Sedley (1998, 140-141) makes a similar point, but only about "literary superiority," without citing Strauss. See also 2.824 on the swan, and 4.547-548 if Lachmann's conjecture is right.
[122] Strauss 1968, 133; see also Adler 2003, 60.

Returning to 5.332-337, where Lucretius situates himself and Epicurus in the development of the arts, we observe two indications of Lucretius' challenge to Epicurus. Lucretius often makes lists the items of which ascend in order of rank. 5.1281-1447 begins with the arts of war and ends with poetry and philosophy (*ratio*).[123] 3.1024-1044, furthermore, goes through men with knowledge of war (1024-1035), the inventors of doctrines and charms (1036), which seems to introduce the final two categories, the poets and especially Homer (1037-1038), and finally the atomist philosophers Democritus and Epicurus (1039-1044). It begins with war and ends with philosophy just like 5.1281-1447. Now, 5.1448-1457 begins a new list of arts, going from ships, agriculture, walls, laws, weapons, roads, clothes, and other practical things of this sort (1448-1449) to poetry and other fine arts (1450-1451), and like 5.1281-1447 places *ratio* last (1455).[124] Back in our passage, 5.332-337, Lucretius as in 5.1448-1457 goes from ships as representing the practical (333), to music and poetry (334), and then to Epicurus' discovery and teaching of the nature of things (335), but the list *ends* with a new item not present in the other lists after philosophy: Lucretius' presentation of Epicurus' philosophy for the first time in Latin poetry (336-337).[125]

Another detail indicates that Lucretius' placement of himself after Epicurus signals *DRN* not only as a temporal culmination but also as superior in order of rank vis-à-vis Epicurus' philosophic production. Lucretius says that he is "the first among the first" (*primus cum primis*) to put Epicurus' discovery "into the language of the fatherland" (*in patrias ... voces*, 5.336-337). Compare this passage with Lucretius' apostrophe to Epicurus in the proem of Book 3:

> tu pater es, rerum inventor, tu patria nobis
> suppeditas praecepta, tuisque ex, inclute, chartis,
> floriferis ut apes in saltibus omnia libant,

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[123] Passing through weaving, agriculture and arboriculture, music, astronomy, fortifications, sailing, and writing.
[124] It is true, though, that here and at 5.1447 *ratio* is not identified so clearly as an art. But as I noted above (5.3.1) Epicurus' philosophy is clearly an art at 5.332-337 and at the beginning of Book 6.
[125] Strauss (1968, 132-133, 139 n. 94), I believe, adumbrates my argument in this paragraph, but he does not make the argument explicit.

> omnia nos itidem depascimur aurea dicta,
> aurea, perpetua semper dignissima vita.
>
> You are the father, the discoverer of things; you supply fatherly precepts to us, and from your scrolls—renowned one—as bees sip all things in flower-bearing pastures, likewise we feed on all your golden words, golden [indeed], and always most worthy of continual life. (3.9-13)

Whereas in the proem to Book 3 Epicurus is the father who supplies fatherly teachings from his scrolls, Lucretius appropriates the adjective *patrius*, "fatherly," for his own project at 5.336-337 at the same time as he lists himself after Epicurus in the ranking of the arts. While at 5.336-337 *patrius* means "of the fatherland" in the sense of "Latin" as opposed to Greek, a parallel passage in Lucretius' discussion of dreams bears an even greater resemblance to 3.9-13. Lucretius explains how he works so hard on his poem that he even continues this activity in his dreams: "But we [seem] to do this and always to seek the nature of things and when it has been discovered to lay it out in fatherly scrolls" (*nos* [sc. *videmur*] *agere hoc autem et naturam quaerere rerum | semper et inventam patriis exponere chartis*, 4.969-970; cf. 1.140-145).[126] Lucretius plays on the ambiguity of *patrius* as meaning either "fatherly" in the sense of 3.9-13 or "of the fatherland" (i.e., "Latin") as at 5.336-337. Lucretius, while certainly meaning that he is expounding Epicurus' Greek doctrine in Latin verse, also applies the notion of "fatherly," proper to the master, to himself, which appropriation is all the more apparent by *chartis*' ("scrolls") being modified by that adjective at 4.970, the very word used of Epicurus' writings followed by Lucretius' address to him as a father (3.9-10).[127] Lucretius says he follows in Epicurus' tracks (*vestigia*, 3.4; 5.55) but, as discussed above (5.2.2), Memmius is like a dog who follows up on his tracks (*vestigia*, 1.402, 406), and Lucretius goes where no one has gone before (1.926-930 = 4.1-5).[128] In the

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[126] This passage also shows that Lucretius is not simply the passive recipient of Epicurus' teaching. Rather he is seeking out the nature of things for himself. See ibid., 116: "... it looks as if the poet himself were listening to his own instruction or as if he were still learning while teaching."
[127] One wonders, then, whether the much-discussed "poverty of the fatherly tongue" (*patrii sermonis egestas*, 1.832; 3.260) is also a veiled critique of Epicurus in addition to being a comment on Latin's ability to communicate philosophy. See also in this connection 5.1168 vs 1.136-137, as well as 5.1211.
[128] See Clay 1983, 9.

proem to Book 3 Lucretius is like a hare who is useless in a race (*in cursu*) against a horse (Epicurus) (3.7-8), but in the proem to Book 6 Lucretius, like Parmenides,[129] mounts a chariot (*currum*, 6.47) and is born racing (*currenti*) as a victor to the finish line (92-93).[130] Lucretius outstrips Epicurus and takes on his status of a father giving out fatherly precepts from scrolls.

As he transitions from his argument against Anaxagorean homoeomeria to the honey and wormwood comparison, Lucretius celebrates the novelty of his poetic-philosophic enterprise:

> Nunc age quod superest cognosce et clarius audi.
> nec me animi fallit quam sint obscura; sed acri
> percussit thyrso laudis spes magna meum cor
> et simul incussit suavem mi in pectus amorem
> musarum, quo nunc instinctus mente vigenti
> avia Pieridum peragro loca nullius ante
> trita solo. iuvat integros accedere fontis
> atque haurire, iuvatque novos decerpere flores
> insignemque meo capiti petere inde coronam,
> unde prius nulli velarint tempora musae ...
>
> Come now, understand and hear more clearly what remains. And it does not deceive me in my mind how obscure these things are; but the great love of praise has struck (*percussit*) my heart with the piercing thyrsus and at the same time has driven (*incussit*) the pleasant love of the muses into my breast. Impelled now by this love in my flourishing mind, I rove the pathless quarters of the Pierides, which have been tread on by the foot of no one before. It is pleasing to approach the virgin springs and to drink deep, and it is pleasing to pluck new flowers and seek from there an illustrious crown for my head, from where the muses have covered the brows of no one before ... (1.921-930)

Just as Lucretius eventually rises to "first among the first" (*primus cum primis*, 5.336), whereas before he claimed that Epicurus and Ennius were "first" (*primus*) in their respective domains (1.67, 71, 117; cf. 638), in the passage just quoted Lucretius appropriates much language he had earlier applied to Epicurus and Ennius.

When Lucretius first introduces Epicurus and his achievements (1.62-79), he says that the reputation of the gods, along with the terrifying phenomena of the sky, "all the more spurs on the sharp virtue of his mind" (*eo magis acrem | irritat animi virtutem*, 69-70). In the later passage of

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[129] Cf. Rumpf 2005.
[130] See also *praescripta* (6.92) vs. *praecepta* (3.10).

Book 1, Lucretius in describing his own activity again uses the adjective *acer* ("sharp" or "piercing") of himself and *animus* of himself, in the same case and number as of Epicurus, in a single line (922). Epicurus, moreover, "traversed the boundless whole in his mind and soul" (*omne immensum peragravit mente animoque*, 74), whereas Lucretius in two successive lines also speaks of his "mind" (*mens*), again in the same case as of Epicurus, before using the same verb for "traverse" (*peragrare*) of himself (925-926).[131] Epicurus did not traverse everything, since Lucretius traverses places "not tread on by the foot of anyone before" (926-927). Thus Lucretius applies to himself the terms with which he praises Epicurus earlier in Book 1, as he explicitly announces his "great hope of praise" (*laudis spes magna*, 923).[132] Perhaps this is why he speaks of "making up praises" of Epicurus later on in the work (*fingere laudes*, 5.3).[133]

As for Ennius, the appropriation is even starker. Lucretius introduces Ennius following his description of the transmigration of souls or metempsychosis (1.116):

> Ennius ut noster cecinit qui primus amoeno
> detulit ex Helicone perenni fronde coronam,
> per gentis Italas hominum quae clara clueret ...
>
> … as our Ennius sang who first brought down from delightful Helicon a crown of perpetual foliage, which carries bright renown throughout the Italian peoples of humankind ... (1.117-119)

Here Lucretius says that Ennius was the first to receive the crown (*corona*) from Helicon, but in the later passage from Book 1 Lucretius receives a crown (*corona*) from the muses with which they graced no one before (929-930). While Ennius' crown is "bright" or "famous" (*clara*) throughout the peoples of Italy, Lucretius urges Memmius to hear "more clearly" (*clarius*, 921)

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[131] Cf. Schrijvers 1970, 19; Clay 1983, 41-43.
[132] Note also that Lucretius later focuses on Epicurus' heart (*corde*, 6.5) whereas in this passage he focuses on his own heart (*cor*, 1.923).
[133] Lucretius usually uses the verb *fingere* in a negative sense, in the context of inventing something that is false (e.g., 1.104, 842; 2.58, 175; 5.164). Of those who claim they know that the soul is mortal without a solid basis, Lucretius says, ... *hinc licet advertas animum magis omnia laudis | iactari causa quam quod res ipsa probetur* ("... hence it is possible for you to notice that all these things are thrown forth more for the sake of praise than because the matter itself is proven," 3.46-47).

"because [he] compose[s] such brilliant songs about an obscure thing" (*quod obscura de re tam lucida pango* | *carmina*, 933-934). In the last book, as Lucretius describes his imminent victory in the race, he repeats his desire for "a crown with illustrious praise" (*insigni ... cum laude coronam*, 6.95). At the end of the proem to Book 6, then, Lucretius again shows his superiority to both Epicurus, whom he defeats or at least challenges in a race, and Ennius, from whom he takes the crown.

Epicurus imparts a powerful doctrine, but his presentation of it lacks the charm of poetry. Ennius makes use of wonderful poetry for a philosophic doctrine (the transmigration of souls), but his teaching is false (1.116-119). Lucretius thus combines the powerful doctrine of Epicurus with the wonderful poetry of Ennius, as is shown by his numerous and well-documented imitations of Ennius throughout the poem,[134] which may even extend to his choice of six books for the *DRN* and be part of the poem's internal structure.[135] By combining the best of Epicurus and Ennius, Lucretius crucially indicates his superiority to Epicurus. His portrayal of Epicurus as a teacher whom he eventually overcomes allows us also to consider how he might question what he presents as Epicurus' teaching. By showing himself as in general independent from and superior to Epicurus through these literary indications, Lucretius encourages us to consider the particular points of philosophic content regarding which he disagrees with him as well.

This section has provided two examples of Lucretius' esotericism: his esoteric indication of the criminality of philosophy and his independence from and superiority to Epicurus. Lucretius can fruitfully be read as an esoteric writer, and these examples provide a further basis for future esoteric readings of his poem.

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[134] See Harrison 2002; Lévi 2008; Nethercut 2021.
[135] See Farrell 2008, 3-5.

5.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I argued that esotericism is an important feature of Lucretius' *DRN*. Lucretius shows this by indicating a subtle art of writing that requires a corresponding art of reading. He calls attention to the character of his poem as a carefully wrought written artifact in which repetitions of words and verses create another layer of meaning on top of the explicit argument. This careful use of repetition in different contexts, which forces us to reconsider the meaning of the original word, verse, or argument in its original context, is a key element of Lucretius' method of esotericism. He further signals the esoteric aspect of his poem through advice on reading that matches his way of writing. Lucretius explicitly says that he will not reveal everything to us and Memmius and that the reader will have to follow up on the tracks he leaves and use his or her own judgment. We both have to fill in what is only implied by repetitions and interpret what it means for necessary arguments to be left out. In terms of my typology, the method consists in the ambiguity resulting from repetitions and omissions, something that approximates the difficulties in discerning an author's view directly that a dialogue facilitates. Together with his method, there emerges, then, a powerful pedagogical motive for esotericism in *DRN*. Lucretius deliberately leaves gaps in what could at first appear to be a monumental didactic edifice of orthodox Epicureanism to leave room for genuine discovery on the part of the reader.

As for the content of Lucretius' esotericism, out of a vast range of possibilities I provided two examples that could be treated within the scope of a single chapter: Lucretius' esoteric indication of the criminality of philosophy and of his challenge to his master Epicurus. There is no "true" justice by itself apart from the definition of it provided by a given political community, in this case that of the Roman Republic. A reinterpretation of justice which departs from the conventional definition, and which would thus save philosophy from the charge of injustice, is incoherent on the principles of Epicurean political philosophy. Justice requires following the law, including religious laws, so philosophy in establishing its own theology or questioning traditional

theology is unavoidably unjust. Lucretius cannot admit this openly, and thus we observe other motives for Lucretius' esotericism, those of self-defense for himself and other-regarding esotericism for other Epicureans. He makes his teaching seem less counter to Roman tradition than it is by charging traditional religion with crime at the beginning, a position he subtly undermines over the course of the poem and replaces with the salutary effects of religion on politics and the criminality of philosophy.

What might be the motive for only indirectly signaling his challenge to Epicurus? Beginning to philosophize requires a model for the philosophic life, even if it turns out to be one which is overly idealized and in fact unattainable. Lucretius has to put forward a poetic image of Epicurus as the perfect sage who saved humankind from ignorance to move the reader to pursue the philosophic life.[136] Lucretius then esoterically undermines Epicurus in favor of himself to move the reader from Epicurus to himself as a preparation for the reader to become independent even from Lucretius himself or any authority. Lucretius' exoteric image of Epicurus is thus a protreptic element of his esotericism.

As I argued, Lucretius reveals these important pieces of esoteric content through the method of esotericism he indicates, especially careful repetition in different contexts. I applied Lucretius' own description of his way of writing and his recommendations for reading him to my esoteric reading of Lucretius.

The cause of Lucretius' esotericism—i.e., the epistemological and ontological views which lead him to practice esotericism—lies in the obscurity of his subject matter. Even though "things" might seem perfectly apparent to us, Lucretius makes it clear that their nature is hidden in the invisible world of the atoms which make them up. We can attempt to give an account for the nature of things but the speech we produce never perfectly captures or reproduces the

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[136] Cf. Adler 2003, 60 and Atkins 2020, 53-54.

fundamental hiddenness of things. Beyond the explicit assertions about the hiddenness of things examined above (5.2.2), we might also think about the necessary recourse to multiple causes of visible phenomena by Lucretius (5.526-533; 6.703-711; cf. 4.500-506), which seems to cast doubt on the possibility of absolute certainty about nature.[137]

Through the analogy of the elements which make up the world to the letters which make up his poem, Lucretius indicates that his poem is an image or simulacrum of the world. We need to read the poem in a similar (if not exactly the same) way as we interpret the world, which involves going from visible to invisible, surface to depth. In addition, he also indicates that "things" are not only visible objects of sense perception which are composed of atoms and void, but also the whole subject matter of his poem and the arguments in the poem about that subject matter. This is indicated through his use of the word *res* throughout the poem.[138] In describing the nature of things he is also describing the nature of arguments, and thus the nature of his own communication throughout the poem. The nature of arguments as things is not immediately visible. There is a necessarily esoteric character to proper philosophic argumentation insofar as arguments are meaningless unless the reader performs an action to attempt to reproduce the philosopher's intention. The reader has to account for the invisible intention, that which made the arguments, just like we have to try to give a causal account based on the invisible atoms.[139]

The difference between a creation through thought and creation through the random collision of atoms shows that the image that *DRN* is of the world is not an accurate image. As a product of art, the poem contains a teleology that Lucretius explicitly denies is present in the world.[140] The poem is a distorted image of the world. But is not a distorted image better training

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[137] Cf. Epicur. *Herod*. 78-80.
[138] See Appendix B.
[139] Lucretius' terms for the atoms (*semina*, *genitalia corpora*, *corpora prima*, *principia*, *primordia*, *exordia*, *materies*, *corpuscula*, and *elementa*) almost always stress the atoms' collective role in the creation of things (their causal role) rather than their static existence as single units (see Noller 2019, 23-24 with scholarship cited). See also Schrijvers 1978, 80. Lucretius lists many of these terms for the first time at 1.55-61 (see Sedley 1998, 38-39).
[140] Cf. Schrijvers 1978, 85-87; Schiesaro 1994, 82.

for interpreting the (apparently) distorted images of the world which we encounter every day in the world (see, e.g., 4.269-323, 353-363, 387-468) than an accurate image could be? The images we receive through sense perception are always determined by our perspective—hence there is a false impression of teleology, as if everything were made for us, with which we start when interpreting the world. The movement from teleological interpretation to more abstract interpretation, from the subjective to the objective, is facilitated by the strict teleology Lucretius introduces into his poem's design. The distortion of the image provided by the poem mirrors the distortion we face in everyday life and thinking generally.

The esoteric character of Lucretius' writing has significant historical implications. Though operating in a very different philosophic tradition, Lucretius joins Cicero (and Varro) in making esotericism a central element of philosophy as it is introduced into the Latin language in the Late Republic. Recognizing esotericism at the start of Latin philosophy and Roman philosophy more broadly is a precondition for seeing its influence on the authors of prose and poetry who followed in Cicero's and Lucretius' footsteps.

Since Lucretius writes esoterically, Cicero is at least in some sense justified in arguing that esotericism is an important aspect of the Epicurean tradition. However harsh a critic Cicero may be of the Epicureans, there are many points of overlap in the esotericism of Lucretius and Cicero. We saw how Lucretius like Cicero is concerned with practicing a type of pedagogical esotericism to allow the reader to preserve freedom of judgment (*iudicium*). Both of them, moreover, focus on the hiddenness of the truth as informing their manner of philosophic investigation. There is a final parallel which I have not yet had occasion to mention. Just as Cicero treats allegory as a type of esotericism poets employ to hide philosophy (see 4.4.1 above), Lucretius not only claims that Ennius and Homer are in fact philosophers (1.116-126), but also that ancient Greek poets communicated a physical doctrine through traditional myth (2.600-603; cf. 5.380-415). This type of allegory is related to Lucretius' qualified approval of using the

traditional gods' names improperly for their attributes or inventions (2.655-660) and his own adoption of this technique, alongside his use of traditional gods like Venus though arguing against their existence.[141] Despite these points of overlap, important differences remain. Cicero is much more concerned than Lucretius is with using esotericism to maintain the stability of Roman politics, for example through the salutary aspects of the modified Stoic theology he endorses at the end of *DND*.[142]

The focus on the nexus created between poetry, philosophy, and esotericism not only connects Cicero and Lucretius, but also plays a major role in Plutarch's *De audiendis*, to which we will soon turn. While Cicero experimented with disseminating philosophy through poetry in his *Aratea*, he ultimately settled on the philosophic prose dialogue and treatise as his preferred mode of philosophizing (though at times incorporating his *Aratea* into his prose, as in *DND* and *De divinatione*). Cicero's dialogues are poetic in the sense of being mimetic, but Lucretius' hexameters place him directly in the poetic tradition of Homer, Empedocles, Callimachus, and Ennius, to name his most important predecessors. While both being esoteric, Lucretius and Cicero use radically different forms of communicating philosophy in addition to their nominal adherence to different philosophic schools. They both treat the relationship between philosophy and poetry, but Plutarch makes this topic even more thematic and links it inextricably to the question of esotericism. About a century and a half after Lucretius' and Cicero's introduction of philosophy to Rome, Plutarch shows the abiding importance of esoteric philosophy well into the Principate. While Homer lurked in the background of the treatment of philosophy, poetry, and esotericism in Cicero and Lucretius, Plutarch will bring him to the fore.

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[141] See again Trotz-Liboff 2023a, 428-429 with scholarship cited.
[142] I leave it as an open question whether Lucretius wanted to overthrow the Roman political order through a kind of exoteric enlightenment teaching or was indifferent to the regime type.

6. Chapter 5: Plutarch, Esotericism, and the Quarrel Between Philosophy and Poetry

6.1 Cicero, Lucretius, and Plutarch

At the end of the Republic and the beginning of philosophy in Latin, Cicero and Lucretius had two very different solutions concerning the relationship between philosophy and politics. For both esotericism was central, but Cicero gave a philosophic account of poetry from the perspective of the statesman and Lucretius gave a poetic account of philosophy from the perspective of the philosopher. Cicero focused on how the statesman can use philosophic poetry to improve and maintain the regime. Just as poetry and music are central to the account of how philosophic law should be disseminated in his *De legibus* (see, e.g., 2.38-39, 59; cf. 1.1-5), Cicero practices a political type of poetry in creating his myth of Stoicism in *DND*. Lucretius, by contrast, brought forth poetry which openly challenged the regime. He revealed more openly than Cicero the lawless or even criminal character of philosophy. He openly sought to undermine traditional religion and the basis of political life, but used poetry both to conceal and to indicate for a few readers the even more radical threat of philosophy to politics. For both, poetry went hand in hand with esoteric philosophy, since poetry conceals philosophy. But in being antinomian—in at least seeming to ground philosophy in something completely at odds with politics—Lucretius seems to have taken the side of poetry against philosophy. Poetry masquerades as the anti-conventional par excellence while necessarily seeking the applause of the many.[1] Cicero, in bringing forth philosophy from the ordinary understanding of political life—and from the political crisis in which Rome actually found itself—could be thought to take the side of philosophy while utterly subordinating poetry to philosophy's aims.

[1] See Davis 2020, 4.

Living in the "nightmare" that Cicero sought to avoid, Rome's *imperium sine fine*—an empire without end in which the distinction between freedom and slavery had utterly collapsed–[2]–Plutarch writing from the perspective of the conquered reopens the quarrel between philosophy and poetry in his *De audiendis*. Like Cicero and Lucretius, in this work Plutarch indicates the centrality of esotericism for the question of the relationship between philosophy and poetry. But Plutarch makes this nexus thematic to an even greater degree, and shows that esotericism is constituted by the necessary unity of philosophy and poetry. One does not combine them after the fact, as if the two could exist independently of one another and then be mixed, one in the service of the other. In bringing out this original unity more explicitly than Cicero and Lucretius, Plutarch helps us see that this view of esotericism, philosophy, and poetry held for Cicero and Lucretius as well, if in their own ways. In his characterization of allegory, defined as continuous metaphor, as a necessity for thought, Cicero indicates that indirect communication in its poetic valence is a necessity for philosophy itself. Lucretius, in showing his arguments to belong to the things (*res*) of the world as much as anything else, and in showing the simultaneous clarity and opacity of all things, agrees that the things which are first for us are both the obstacle and the way to the things which are first simply. Lucretius' constant appeal to our ordinary understanding of the world, and to the passions of the soul of fear, love, and hope, turns out to be not an adventitious poetic ingredient which manipulates the irrational in service of the rational—an exoteric, if protreptic, cloak of the poetic around the philosophic—but rather as an integral part of thinking itself. Lucretius aims to understand the nature of things. He investigates the invisible atoms for the sake of the things which make up the world, not the things for the sake of the atoms.[3] This is why he moves from the atoms (Books 1 and 2) to the soul which understands them (Books 3 and 4) to the

[2] See Benardete 2000e, 107-109.
[3] Cf. Gadamer 1999, 122.

world itself (Books 5 and 6).[4] Beginning from and arriving at the things shows the necessarily indirect and esoteric character of Lucretius' enterprise.[5]

As already mentioned (see 1.2 above), Plutarch esteemed Cicero highly and likely read at least some of his writings.[6] He does not spare criticism of him in his *Life of Cicero* (e.g., 24.1), despite an overall positive portrait, but his admiration for him comes out most clearly in his *Comparison of Demosthenes and Cicero*, where Demosthenes comes off rather badly by comparison (3.4-7) and Cicero is elevated to the status of philosopher king (3.3-4). Plutarch notes Cicero's early success as a poet, and even that Cicero at one point was considered the best poet in addition to the best orator in Rome,[7] but he ascribes to Cicero himself a belief in the supremacy of philosophy to all his other activities. Despite Cicero's appeal to the many through oratory and reliance on their opinion (32.5, 7), Plutarch writes: "And yet often he himself thought it right that his friends call him not an orator, but a philosopher; for he had chosen philosophy as his activity, but he used rhetoric as an instrument while engaged in politics out of necessity" (32.6).[8] For Plutarch, Cicero was, despite significant flaws, a philosopher who opposed the degeneration of Roman politics.

Plutarch never mentions Lucretius, but Jacques Boulogne argues that Plutarch read him.[9] Boulogne's examples of linguistic parallels are thought provoking, but we cannot be sure about the connection between the two authors. In any case, my aim is not to try to trace the influence of

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[4] Lucretius further structures his work by alternating between being and motion. Book 1 focuses on the being of the atoms, while Book 2 deals with their motion. In Book 3 Lucretius describes the being of the soul (an analysis of its parts) while in Book 4 he shows the motion of the soul through perception. Books 5 and 6 do not admit of as neat of a division: roughly, he speaks of the origin of the universe (its motion in time) in Book 5 and its being in Book 6 (as it is now), but accounts of its being also crop up in Book 5 (see especially 5.509-779).
[5] See Appendix B.
[6] See, e.g., his quoting from *Pro Plancio* (*Cic*. 6.3) and mentioning the content of the *Lucullus* and *Brutus* (*Cic*. 24.4-7). Of course, there is the possibility of an intermediate source for Plutarch's knowledge of these works.
[7] *Cic.* 2.4: προϊὼν δὲ τῷ χρόνῳ καὶ ποικιλώτερον ἁπτόμενος τῆς περὶ ταῦτα μούσης, ἔδοξεν οὐ μόνον ῥήτωρ, ἀλλὰ καὶ ποιητὴς ἄριστος εἶναι Ῥωμαίων ("As he advanced in age and took hold of the muse around these things [i.e., poems] in a more varied way, he seemed to be not only the best orator of the Romans, but also the best poet").
[8] καίτοι πολλάκις αὐτὸς ἠξίου τοὺς φίλους μὴ ῥήτορα καλεῖν αὐτόν, ἀλλὰ φιλόσοφον· φιλοσοφίαν γὰρ ὡς ἔργον ᾑρῆσθαι, ῥητορικῇ δ' ὀργάνῳ χρῆσθαι πολιτευόμενος ἐπὶ τὰς χρείας.
[9] Boulogne 2003, 14-16.

Cicero and Lucretius on Plutarch directly, but rather to compare the three based on their treatment of common themes related to esotericism. In addition to his own philosophic project, Plutarch's extensive knowledge of prior philosophy, and especially in this case of the Platonic and Epicurean traditions, forms the basis for my many points of comparison.[10]

6.2 Overview

In this chapter, I introduce the connection between Plutarch and esoteric philosophy through a survey of explicit statements of his about the esotericism of various philosophers. Then I consider prior scholarly treatments of Plutarch's esotericism, both in general and in relation to *De audiendis*.

In the two chapters that follow, I investigate how Plutarch's *De audiendis* discloses important features of esotericism. First, in Chapter 6, I conduct two analyses related to structure. I examine the structure and thematic motion of *De audiendis* as a whole to bring out the centrality of esotericism for Plutarch's discussion of philosophy and poetry. Then I turn to an in-depth interpretation of the first chapter of the work, which contains a crucial articulation of the relationship between philosophy and poetry through a series of nine images. Interpreting the first chapter is necessary for understanding the work as a whole, and shows Plutarch's own poetic way of proceeding through images and the role esotericism plays in his argument.

In Chapter 7 I turn to a more formal analysis of the causes, motives, content, and methods for esotericism as they emerge in Plutarch's treatment of Homer as a philosophic poet over the course of his treatise. By seeing Plutarch's esoteric view of Homer, we can also better understand Plutarch's interpretation of particular aspects of Homer's epics, such as (per Plutarch) Homer's praise of Odysseus above other heroes. Here we will see many similarities with the ways Cicero

[10] See, e.g., Kechagia 2011 for Plutarch's prowess as a historian of philosophy.

and Lucretius fit with these categories of esotericism, particularly concerning the relationship between theology and esotericism for Plutarch's Homer. His treatment of the traditional gods leads to the theology of the philosophers. Overall, Plutarch combines Cicero's concern for the maintenance of salutary views about virtue and providence with Lucretius' emphasis on the bitterness of philosophic truth. This combination is reflected in Plutarch's praise and deep engagement not only with Plato, as one might expect, but also in the conspicuous position in which he puts Epicurus at the end of his treatise. Some of the deepest truths that poetry contains about death and pleasure are those of the "garden god."[11] Thus I close the chapter with considerations on the meaning of Plutarch's combination of Plato and Epicurus, the respective masters of Cicero and Lucretius.

6.3 Why Read Plutarch Esoterically?

Before beginning to interpret the treatise, I will present some passages from elsewhere in Plutarch's corpus that further justify an esoteric approach to *De audiendis*. Plutarch explicitly ascribes esotericism to philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, and Epicurus, which shows Plutarch's awareness of the phenomenon. That he discusses their deliberate concealment in their writings indicates Plutarch's concern with esotericism on the level of the text in addition to oral esotericism.

In *De Iside et Osiride* Plutarch claims that Plato wrote about the two principles of good and evil esoterically in the *Timaeus,* but later revealed them openly in the *Laws*:

> … Πλάτων δὲ πολλαχοῦ μὲν οἷον ἐπηλυγαζόμενος καὶ παρακαλυπτόμενος τῶν ἐναντίων ἀρχῶν τὴν μὲν ταὐτὸν ὀνομάζει, τὴν δὲ θάτερον [*Tim.* 35a]·[12] ἐν δὲ τοῖς Νόμοις [869dff.] ἤδη πρεσβύτερος ὢν οὐ δι᾽ αἰνιγμῶν οὐδὲ συμβολικῶς, ἀλλὰ κυρίοις ὀνόμασιν οὐ μιᾷ ψυχῇ φησι κινεῖσθαι τὸν κόσμον, ἀλλὰ πλείοσιν ἴσως δυεῖν δὲ πάντως οὐκ ἐλάττοσιν· ὧν τὴν μὲν ἀγαθουργὸν εἶναι, τὴν δ᾽ ἐναντίαν ταύτῃ καὶ τῶν ἐναντίων δημιουργόν …

[11] As Nietzsche (1999 [1886], V.21) terms Epicurus in *Beyond Good and Evil*, § 7. See also his contrast between Epicurus and Plato there.
[12] In general, I follow the in-text citations of the Teubner for Plutarch's references or quotations of other works, including for the numbering of fragments.

> … but Plato in many places by as it were concealing himself and using veiled speech names one of the opposing principles 'the same,' and the other [of them] 'the other' [*Tim*. 35a]. But in the *Laws* [869dff.], when he is by then older, he says not through riddles nor symbolically, but with proper names that the cosmos is not moved by one soul, but by more—perhaps by two but on the whole not less [than two]. Of these two souls he says that one is the maker of good, but the one opposite to this one is the craftsman also of opposite things … (370e-f)

In his brief discussion of Plutarch's esotericism, Banner discusses this passage in the context of his broader argument about Plotinus:

> Plato, then, used veiled language in some of his works, but in his later period spoke plainly. Note how Plutarch, wishing to find in Plato a dualist cosmology and able to find such a doctrine in the *Laws* without too much difficulty, reads the *Laws* as a straightforward work, but reads earlier Platonic writings, in which greater interpretative pains are needed to descry such a cosmology, as written esoterically. Reading Plato as an esotericist enables Plutarch to find his dualist doctrine in Plato as a whole … But the fact that Plutarch feels no need to specify a motive or otherwise justify his claims is a sign that Plato's name was already associated with esoteric writing in Plutarch's late first century milieu … [Plato] is most definitely hiding his meaning in such a way that only the members of the philosophic elite will be able to recover it.[13]

As Banner explains, Plutarch finds an esoteric manner of writing in Plato, his greatest philosophic influence. Plutarch explains Plato's method for esoteric communication as the use of riddles and symbolic language. Riddles evoke obscurity and contradiction, while symbolic language, in being opposed to "proper" terms, indicates metaphorical speech. Here this is the use of the "the same" and "the other" to indicate the two souls as cosmological principles of good and evil. As should be expected for a follower of Plato, Plutarch does not blame Plato in any way for doing this. Thus we should be open to the possibility that Plutarch himself followed Plato in writing esoterically.

Plutarch's interest in esotericism extends beyond this one passage and beyond just Plato. Later in *De Iside et Osiride*, Plutarch explains that the robes of Isis, in representing the realm of becoming available to sense perception, are "varied" (ποικίλαι) and admit of opposites, like light and dark. Osiris' robes by contrast are simple and only like the light, since they represent being

[13] Banner 2018, 76.

and the intelligible (382c). Then Plutarch uses the robes of Osiris and Isis as an analogy for esoteric philosophy in Plato and Aristotle:

> ὅθεν ἅπαξ ταύτην ἀναλαβόντες ἀποτίθενται καὶ φυλάττουσιν ἀόρατον καὶ ἄψαυστον, ταῖς δ' Ἰσιακαῖς χρῶνται πολλάκις. ἐν χρήσει γὰρ τὰ αἰσθητὰ καὶ πρόχειρα ὄντα πολλὰς ἀναπτύξεις καὶ θέας αὑτῶν ἄλλοτ' ἄλλως ἀμειβομένων δίδωσιν· ἡ δὲ τοῦ νοητοῦ καὶ εἰλικρινοῦς καὶ ἁπλοῦ νόησις ὥσπερ ἀστραπὴ διαλάμψασα τῆς ψυχῆς ἅπαξ ποτὲ θιγεῖν καὶ προσιδεῖν παρέσχε. διὸ καὶ Πλάτων [*Smp*. 210a] καὶ Ἀριστοτέλης ἐποπτικὸν τοῦτο τὸ μέρος τῆς φιλοσοφίας καλοῦσιν, καθ' ὅσον οἱ τὰ δοξαστὰ καὶ μικτὰ καὶ παντοδαπὰ ταῦτα παραμειψάμενοι τῷ λόγῳ πρὸς τὸ πρῶτον ἐκεῖνο καὶ ἁπλοῦν καὶ ἄυλον ἐξάλλονται καὶ θιγόντες ἀληθῶς τῆς περὶ αὐτὸ καθαρᾶς ἀληθείας οἷον ἐν τελετῇ τέλος ἔχειν φιλοσοφίας νομίζουσι.
>
> Hence after taking this one [i.e., the robe of Osiris] out once [the Egyptian priests] store it away and guard it not to be seen and not to be touched, but they use the robes of Isis often. For the perceptible things, since they are in use and ready at hand, grant many exhibitions and spectacles of themselves as they change in different ways at different times; but the soul's intellection of the intelligible, pure, and simple, after shining forth like a flash of lightning, allows one to touch and see it at some time [only] once. For this reason both Plato [*Smp*. 210a] and Aristotle call this part of their philosophy epoptic, to the extent that those who go beyond these things—the things that are opined, mixed, and of all sorts—through reason towards that first, simple, and immaterial thing leap forth and by truly touching the pure truth around this [i.e., the intelligible] believe that they hold the [utmost] end of philosophy as if in an initiation. (382d-e)

Plutarch compares three things here: the robes of Isis and Osiris are like the realms of becoming/perception and being/intellection, on which Plato and Aristotle model two parts of their philosophy. They have an "epoptic" part of their philosophy—"epoptic" means "secret" or what is "looked upon" (from ἐφοράω) only by an initiate in a mystery cult—, the esoteric part which corresponds to the realm of being and intellection. Thus the other part which Plutarch here leaves unnamed would be the exoteric part corresponding to the realm of becoming and perception, and the robes of Isis. In a reference to Plato's *Seventh Letter* (341b7-d2) Plutarch explains that the esotericism of Plato and Aristotle is based on their ontology and epistemology. Their philosophy is esoteric because an account of being cannot be articulated and transmitted directly, but only leaps forth like a flash of lightning in the soul of the individual. Plutarch continues the analogy with mystery cults by playing on this as the "end" (τέλος) of philosophy "as if in an initiation" (οἷον ἐν τελετῇ). Here we see some of the causes for esotericism—ontological and

epistemological—, whereas Plutarch focused on the methods in the earlier passage from *De Iside et Osiride*. The extension of esotericism to Aristotle as well shows the pervasiveness of the phenomenon among prior philosophers in Plutarch's view.

These two passages would have to be interpreted in light of the aims of *De Iside et Osiride* as a whole for us to understand Plutarch's description of esotericism here,[14] but they clearly show Plutarch's awareness of esoteric writing, as well as some of its causes and the methods employed for it.

Plutarch enters into more detail about Aristotle's esotericism in his *Life of Alexander*. After introducing Alexander's tutelage by Aristotle (7.1-4), Plutarch recounts a story about Alexander's reaction to Aristotle's publication of some esoteric writings (apparently the *Physics*), including a letter of Alexander to Aristotle. While the letter is held to be inauthentic and the story likely a later fabrication,[15] what matters here is Plutarch's awareness and understanding of esotericism that the passage shows. Plutarch writes:

> ἔοικε δ' Ἀλέξανδρος οὐ μόνον τὸν ἠθικὸν καὶ πολιτικὸν παραλαβεῖν λόγον, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῶν ἀπορρήτων καὶ βαθυτέρων διδασκαλιῶν, ἃς οἱ ἄνδρες ἰδίως ἀκροατικὰς καὶ ἐποπτικὰς προσαγορεύοντες οὐκ ἐξέφερον εἰς πολλούς, μετασχεῖν. ἤδη γὰρ εἰς Ἀσίαν διαβεβηκώς, καὶ πυθόμενος λόγους τινὰς ἐν βιβλίοις περὶ τούτων ὑπ' Ἀριστοτέλους ἐκδεδόσθαι, γράφει πρὸς αὐτὸν ὑπὲρ φιλοσοφίας παρρησιαζόμενος ἐπιστολήν, ἧς ἀντίγραφόν ἐστιν· 'Ἀλέξανδρος Ἀριστοτέλει εὖ πράττειν. οὐκ ὀρθῶς ἐποίησας ἐκδοὺς τοὺς ἀκροατικοὺς τῶν λόγων· τίνι γὰρ δὴ διοίσομεν ἡμεῖς τῶν ἄλλων, εἰ καθ' οὓς ἐπαιδεύθημεν λόγους, οὗτοι πάντων ἔσονται κοινοί; ἐγὼ δὲ βουλοίμην ἂν ταῖς περὶ τὰ ἄριστα ἐμπειρίαις ἢ ταῖς δυνάμεσι διαφέρειν. ἔρρωσο.' ταύτην μὲν οὖν τὴν φιλοτιμίαν αὐτοῦ παραμυθούμενος Ἀριστοτέλης ἀπολογεῖται περὶ τῶν λόγων ἐκείνων, ὡς καὶ ἐκδεδομένων καὶ μὴ

[14] For example, Plutarch has the rhetorical aim of moving his female addressee Clea, who is a follower of Isis, away from superstition (δεισιδαιμονία, 355d) to a philosophical understanding of the divine. The pervasive philosophical allegory of traditional myths—those of Isis and Osiris along with other Egyptian myths—which explains how they contain Platonic philosophy might be a way of speaking in a manner initially appealing to his addressee to move her from religion to philosophy. Clea would be a stand-in for all of Plutarch's superstitious readers. Plutarch never says that he himself is a follower of Isis. He is, rather, a priest of Apollo. Even so, knowing the beings is a holier activity than any work in a temple (351e). The religious context of the work might lead Plutarch to cast the esotericism of Plato and Aristotle in religious terms.

[15] See Pépin 1984, 27-28 for this passage and the question of the letter's dating and authenticity (cited at Banner 2018, 77). While I do not doubt the likelihood of the letter's being a later forgery, I find Pépin's central evidence for its inauthenticity odd, namely that the letter anachronistically uses religious language for philosophic secrecy. After all, Plato himself often appropriates religious language around initiation and mystery cult for philosophy (see again, e.g., *Tht.* 156a3; *Phd.* 69c3-9; *Phdr.* 249c7; *Prt.* 316d6) including the adjective ἀπόρρητος ("not to be spoken of") used by Plutarch in his introduction to the letter (*Tht.* 152c10).

> ἐκδεδομένων. ἀληθῶς γὰρ ἡ περὶ τὰ φυσικὰ πραγματεία, πρὸς διδασκαλίαν καὶ μάθησιν οὐδὲν ἔχουσα χρήσιμον, ὑπόδειγμα τοῖς πεπαιδευμένοις ἀπ᾽ ἀρχῆς γέγραπται.
>
> And it is likely that Alexander took hold of not only the ethical and political speech [of Aristotle], but also had a share in his secret and deeper teachings, which the men [i.e., the Peripatetics], calling them privately 'acroatic' and 'epoptic,' did not bring out to the many. For, after he had already crossed into Asia, when he also learned that some speeches about these things had been published by Aristotle in books, he wrote a letter to him using frank speech about philosophy, of which [the following] is a copy: 'Alexander bids Aristotle farewell. You did not act correctly by publishing the acroatic ones of the speeches. For in what, indeed, will we surpass the others, if these speeches with which we were educated will be common to all? But I would want to surpass [them] in experience with the best things rather than in power. Farewell.' So Aristotle soothed his love of honor and made a defense about those speeches, on the grounds that they were both published and not published. For truly the treatise about the natural things [i.e., the *Physics*], since it does not have anything useful with respect to teaching and learning, has been written as a reminder for those who have been educated from the beginning. (7.5-9)

Here Plutarch uses the same term, "epoptic," for Aristotle's esoteric teaching as he does for Plato and Aristotle in the second passage from *De Iside et Osiride* (382d-e). According to Plutarch, Alexander seems to misunderstand the nature of esoteric writing. He thinks that if published it will not be esoteric anymore. But Aristotle assures him that the esoteric writings are "both published and not published" (καὶ ἐκδεδομένων καὶ μὴ ἐκδεδομένων) because only his students with the proper education will be able to understand the writings. This means that esotericism functions not only by separating writings into the classes of esoteric and exoteric (see *Adv*. *Col*. 1115b-c), but also within the esoteric text itself.[16] Because Plutarch himself admires Aristotle's treatises, I would guess that he takes those for whom the treatise might become intelligible, "those who have been educated from the beginning" (τοῖς πεπαιδευμένοις ἀπ᾽ ἀρχῆς), to extend beyond Aristotle's immediate students to learned individuals such as himself. Why else would Aristotle publish them beyond his inner circle? The educated in the future will also be able to reach the esoteric level of his esoteric treatises. And if we put this passage together with the one about Plato and Aristotle's epoptic teaching from *De Iside et Osiride*, the point is that

[16] See also Melzer 2014, 33-34.

understanding about the highest things comes to be in the soul of the learner like a flash of lightning. It is impossible to "publish" such knowledge to anyone directly, for one must arrive there on one's own. This notion might be reflected in another detail of the passage: Alexander, funnily enough, uses frank speech (παρρησιαζόμενος) to admonish Aristotle for not following esotericism strictly enough. He thinks that esotericism is either speaking frankly or not, and does not take into account its ontological and epistemological causes. In fact, Aristotle writes the treatises in an esoteric way in accordance with his awareness of the nature of human understanding.

It is useful to look at Aulus Gellius' parallel account of the exchange between Aristotle and Alexander (20.5), since he elaborates on some of Aristotle's motives for esotericism. Gellius explains that Aristotle teaches about rhetoric and politics in his exoteric works, but about nature and dialectic in his acroatic works (20.5.1-3). Gellius adds that Aristotle also divided his lectures in two, allowing only his close students into his esoteric lectures, while opening up his exoteric lectures to all young men:

> Huic disciplinae, quam dixi, ἀκροατικῇ tempus exercendae dabat in Lycio matutinum nec ad eam quemquam temere admittebat, nisi quorum ante ingenium et eruditionis elementa atque in discendo studium laboremque explorasset. Illas vero exotericas auditiones exercitiumque dicendi eodem in loco vesperi faciebat easque vulgo iuvenibus sine dilectu praebebat, atque eum δειλινὸν περίπατον appellabat, illum alterum supra ἑωθινόν; utroque enim tempore ambulans disserebat. Libros quoque suos, earum omnium rerum conmentarios, seorsum divisit, ut alii 'exoterici' dicerentur, partim 'acroatici.'
>
> Aristotle would dedicate the morning time in the Lyceum for this acroatic teaching, which I mentioned, nor would he rashly admit anyone to it, unless he had ascertained previously their talent and beginnings of their instruction, as well as their zeal and industry in learning. But he would do the exoteric lectures and practice in speaking in the same place in the evening and these he would offer publicly to the young without selection, and he called the latter his *deilinon peripaton* ['evening walk'] but the former––the other one mentioned above—his *eōthinon* [sc. *peripaton*] ['morning walk']. For at both times he discoursed while walking. He also separately divided his books, his commentaries on all these things, such that some were called 'exoteric,' [but] others were called 'acroatic.' (20.5.4-5)

Writing not long after Plutarch, Gellius finds it plausible that Aristotle would practice probative esotericism. He would only give his esoteric lectures to those potential students who had the right

nature, training, and discipline in studying. Aristotle only wants the best students for some part of his teaching, and this is perhaps based on the recognition that philosophy can actually harm students not suited for it (see again Cic. *DND* 3.77). Gellius then goes on to recount Alexander's objection to Aristotle's publication familiar from Plutarch (20.5.7-12).

Plutarch's story about Aristotle and Alexander confirms that esotericism for him also operates on the hermeneutical level of the text. It is not just withholding a teaching orally or dividing works into different classes of writings. The parallel passage in Gellius suggests that imperial authors might have understood Aristotle's esotericism to have pedagogical motives as well.

Other passages indicate that Plutarch is also well aware of political motives for esotericism, especially self-defense in the face of religious and political persecution. This emerges from his discussion of impiety trials in Classical Athens in his *Life of Nicias* and the problems of living under tyrannical conditions in the Roman empire in his *De garrulitate* and *De praeceptis gerendae reipublicae*.

In the *Life of Nicias*, Plutarch explains why the lunar eclipse during the Sicilian Expedition on August 27, 413 BCE (see Th. 7.50.4)[17] caused so much terror to Nicias and prevented him from retreating on religious grounds:

> ὁ γὰρ πρῶτος σαφέστατόν τε πάντων καὶ θαρραλεώτατον περὶ σελήνης καταυγασμῶν καὶ σκιᾶς λόγον εἰς γραφὴν καταθέμενος Ἀναξαγόρας οὔτ' αὐτὸς ἦν παλαιὸς οὔθ' ὁ λόγος ἔνδοξος, ἀλλ' ἀπόρρητος ἔτι καὶ δι' ὀλίγων καὶ μετ' εὐλαβείας τινὸς ἢ πίστεως βαδίζων. οὐ γὰρ ἠνείχοντο τοὺς φυσικοὺς καὶ μετεωρολέσχας τότε καλουμένους, ὡς εἰς αἰτίας ἀλόγους καὶ δυνάμεις ἀπρονοήτους καὶ κατηναγκασμένα πάθη διατρίβοντας τὸ θεῖον, ἀλλὰ καὶ Πρωταγόρας ἔφυγε, καὶ Ἀναξαγόραν εἱρχθέντα μόλις περιεποιήσατο Περικλῆς, καὶ Σωκράτης, οὐδὲν αὐτῷ τῶν γε τοιούτων προσῆκον, ὅμως ἀπώλετο διὰ φιλοσοφίαν. ὀψὲ δ' ἡ Πλάτωνος ἐκλάμψασα δόξα διὰ τὸν βίον τοῦ ἀνδρός, καὶ ὅτι ταῖς θείαις καὶ κυριωτέραις ἀρχαῖς ὑπέταξε τὰς φυσικὰς ἀνάγκας, ἀφεῖλε τὴν τῶν λόγων τούτων διαβολὴν καὶ τοῖς μαθήμασιν εἰς ἅπαντας ὁδὸν ἐνέδωκεν.
>
> For Anaxagoras, the first to put into writing a speech that was both clearest and boldest of all about the shining and shadow of the moon, was neither himself ancient nor was his

[17] See further Stephenson and Fatoohi 2001, 249.

> speech held in esteem, but as a secret still it proceeded through little [indications] and with some caution or trust. For [the Athenians] did not tolerate the ones who were then called natural philosophers and prattlers about the heavens, on the grounds that they dissolved the divine into irrational causes, powers lacking providence, and passions brought on by necessity, but even Protagoras went into exile, and Pericles barely saved Anaxagoras when he was in prison, and Socrates, although none of the things of this sort at least [i.e., natural philosophy] were a concern for him, nevertheless died because of his philosophy. But at length the reputation of Plato shone forth on account of the man's life and because he subordinated natural necessities to divine and more authoritative principles, and he removed the slander against these teachings and provided a path to learnings for all. (23.3-5)

This passage is about the reputation (δόξα) of philosophy, and how it went from being not in good repute (οὐκ ἔνδοξος) in the time of Anaxagoras, Protagoras, and Socrates to being a point of renown (δόξα) in the time of Plato. Since the Athenians did not tolerate natural philosophers because they saw that they did away with the divine, Anaxagoras expressed his account of celestial phenomena esoterically. Because of his esotericism and the general hatred of philosophy, this meant that his account of the eclipse did not spread widely enough to prevent disaster in Sicily.

Anaxagoras' motive for esotericism is self-defensive, and Plutarch specifies his methods. He wrote through brief indications (δι᾽ ὀλίγων), apparently some form of compact or ambiguous expression, and with some caution or trust (μετ᾽ εὐλαβείας τινὸς ἢ πίστεως). It seems as if he avoided undermining the divine openly as a matter of caution, and perhaps trust refers to his hope that his reader would draw the proper conclusions from what he was saying. The word Plutarch uses for "caution" (εὐλάβεια) was already a byword for esoteric philosophy for self-defense in Plato (see, e.g., *Prt*. 316d1; 317b5).[18] His adjective for "secret" or "unspeakable" (ἀπόρρητος) is the same as that which he uses about Aristotle in the passage from the *Life of Alexander* just discussed (7.5). Although, as noted, the word has connotations of religion and mystery cult, in the *Life of Nicias* Plutarch clearly uses it just to mean something kept secret for prudential reasons.

[18] See also *Ep*. 2.314a-c (quoted at Casel 1919, 37).

As we will soon see, this usage in Plutarch extends to secrets about politics that have nothing to do with philosophy or religion.

It is indisputable that here Plutarch ascribes esoteric writing to Anaxagoras as a response to the threat of impiety trials in Classical Athens, which befell not only Anaxagoras, but also Protagoras (at least according to Plutarch) and Socrates. What is more ambiguous is Plato's response to his teacher's execution and impiety trials facing others. Plutarch leaves it unclear whether Plato genuinely solved the conflict between traditional religion and natural philosophy by subordinating the investigation of nature to divine principles, with the result that philosophy was no longer (or at least less) suspect, or whether Plato merely feigned this solution of the conflict to avoid the fate of Socrates (self-defensive esotericism) and to allow others to study philosophy with more safety in the future (other-regarding esotericism). The latter possibility is advocated by Melzer, following Montesquieu,[19] and, I add, would fit with Plutarch's ascription of esotericism to Plato in the passages examined above, though with the added explanation of self-defensive and other-regarding motives.

One might compare this sort of exoteric use of religion to Plutarch's description of Numa in his *Life of Numa*. Numa, though a Pythagorean philosopher, used superstition (δεισιδαιμονία) to temper the Roman people (8.1-6; cf. *De genio Socr*. 579f-580b; see also Liv. 1.19.4-5), something Plutarch relates to Plato's political philosophy (8.1). And Plutarch ascribes to Numa a "secret" (ἀπόρρητον) meaning of religious rites, just as the Pythagoreans "hid the meaning of each [rite] before the many" (ἑκάστου τὴν διάνοιαν ἀπεκρύπτοντο πρὸς τοὺς πολλούς, 14.3).[20]

Luckily, my assertion about Plutarch's awareness of esotericism does not stand or fall on our interpretation of his description of Plato's securing a good reputation for philosophy, because

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[19] Melzer 2014, 155-156. See also Benardete 2000d, 407.
[20] See further Liebert 2016, 163-184. See also Plutarch's description of the tyrant Cylon's burning the Pythagorean assembly house (*De genio Soc*. 583a) and further the scholia vetera ad Pl. *Phd*. 61d.

Plutarch ascribes esotericism to Anaxagoras in this very passage in the *Life of Nicias,* and to Plato and Aristotle in the passages discussed above.

The discussion of Anaxagoras shows Plutarch's awareness of political and religious pressures which could lead to esotericism. This is also how he characterizes Epicurus' esotericism in the context of a discussion of superstition and divine worship in *Non posse suaviter vivi secundum Epicurum*:

> οὐ γὰρ οἴνου πλῆθος οὐδ' ὄπτησις κρεῶν τὸ εὐφραῖνόν ἐστιν ἐν ταῖς ἑορταῖς, ἀλλ' ἐλπὶς ἀγαθὴ καὶ δόξα τοῦ παρεῖναι τὸν θεὸν εὐμενῆ καὶ δέχεσθαι τὰ γινόμενα κεχαρισμένως. αὐλὸν μὲν γὰρ ἐνίων ἑορτῶν καὶ στέφανον ἀφαιροῦμεν, θεοῦ δὲ θυσίᾳ μὴ παρόντος πρὸς ἱερῶν ἀποδοχὴν ἄθεόν ἐστι καὶ ἀνέορταστον καὶ ἀνενθουσίαστον τὸ λειπόμενον· μᾶλλον δὲ <τὸ> ὅλον ἀτερπὲς αὐτῷ καὶ λυπηρόν· ὑποκρίνεται γὰρ εὐχὰς καὶ προσκυνήσεις οὐθὲν δεόμενος διὰ φόβον τῶν πολλῶν καὶ φθέγγεται φωνὰς ἐναντίας οἷς φιλοσοφεῖ· καὶ θύων μὲν ὡς μαγείρῳ παρέστηκε τῷ ἱερεῖ σφάττοντι, θύσας δ' ἄπεισι λέγων τὸ Μενάνδρειον [fr. 750]
> 'ἔθυον οὐ προσέχουσιν οὐδέν μοι θεοῖς'·
> οὕτως γὰρ Ἐπίκουρος οἴεται δεῖν σχηματίζεσθαι καὶ μὴ καταφρονεῖν μηδ' ἀπεχθάνεσθαι τοῖς πολλοῖς, οἷς χαίρουσιν ἕτεροι πράττοντες,[21] αὐτοὺς δυσχεραίνοντας·
> 'πᾶν γὰρ ἀναγκαῖον πρᾶγμ' ὀδυνηρὸν ἔφυ'
> κατὰ τὸν Εὔηνον [fr. 8]. ᾗ καὶ τοὺς δεισιδαίμονας οὐ χαίροντας ἀλλὰ φοβουμένους οἴονται θυσίαις καὶ τελεταῖς ὁμιλεῖν, μηθὲν ἐκείνων αὐτοὶ διαφέροντες, εἴ γε δὴ διὰ φόβον τὰ αὐτὰ δρῶσιν, οὐδ' ἐλπίδος χρηστῆς ὅσον ἐκεῖνοι μεταλαγχάνοντες, ἀλλὰ μόνον δεδιότες καὶ ταραττόμενοι μὴ φανεροὶ γένωνται τοὺς πολλοὺς παραλογιζόμενοι καὶ φενακίζοντες· ἐφ' οὓς καὶ τὰ περὶ θεῶν καὶ ὁσιότητος αὐτοῖς βιβλία συντέτακται, 'ἑλικτὰ καὶ οὐδὲν ὑγιὲς ἀλλὰ πᾶν πέριξ' [E. *Andr*. 448] ἐπαμπεχομένοις καὶ ἀποκρυπτομένοις διὰ φόβον ἃς ἔχουσι δόξας.
>
> For what brings cheer in festivals is not the great quantity of wine nor the roasting of meats, but it is the good hope and opinion that the god is present as one who is well disposed and receives [the sacrifices] which are happening with grace. For [if] we take away the aulos and the crown from some festivals, but the god is not present at the sacrifice for the approval of the offerings, what remains is godless (ἄθεόν), unbecoming of a festival, and without [divine] inspiration. Much the more the whole thing is without joy and is painful for him [i.e., the one who does not believe a god is present or cares]. For he simulates [like an actor] prayers and adorations on account of his fear of the many, although he is asking [the god] for nothing, and he utters words which are opposite to those with which he philosophizes. And as he sacrifices he stands by the priest who is killing the victim as if the priest were a butcher, but after making the sacrifice he leaves saying the line of Menander [fr. 750]
> 'I was sacrificing to gods who were paying no attention to me at all.'

[21] I read πράττοντες of the MSS with Einarson and De Lacy (1967) in the Loeb, who reject Usener's (1887, 103) emendation of πράττοντας, adopted by Pohlenz in the Teubner, but keep Usener's emendation of αὐτοὶ δυσχεραίνοντες to αὐτοὺς δυχεραίνοντας.

> For in this way Epicurus thinks that it is necessary to put on a show and not to look down on or become hateful to the many by scorning the things which others rejoice in doing. 'For every necessary matter is by nature painful'
> according to Evenus [fr. 8]. For in the way that they think also the superstitious attend to sacrifices and initiations while not rejoicing but being fearful, they [attend to sacrifices and initiations] themselves [i.e., the Epicureans] in no way differing from them [i.e., the superstitious], if indeed they do these same things on account of fear, while not even having a share of good hope to the extent that they [i.e., the superstitious] do, but only fearing and being disturbed lest it become apparent that they mislead and cheat the many, for whom also the books about the gods and holiness have been composed by them, by wrapping [the books] up 'all twisted and nothing healthy, but all circuitous' [E. *Andr*. 448] and concealing out of fear the opinions they have. (1102a-d)

As part of his critique of the fearful state of mind (and hence lack of pleasure) of the Epicureans while they participate in traditional cult, Plutarch makes an argument about Epicurean esotericism here. The Epicureans fear the many on account of impiety trials, as we saw above with Anaxagoras. He thus ranges Epicurus' esotericism alongside not only that of Anaxagoras, but also that of Plato and Aristotle. Though he might suggest that Epicurus is an atheist through his use of the word ἄθεος, Plutarch focuses on the esotericism necessary for Epicureans even if their own theology is not just a screen, for there is a discrepancy between their belief about the gods' not caring and their taking part in sacrifice. The Epicureans' fear of the many parallels Cotta's argument about Epicurus' reasons for his esoteric atheism in *DND* (1.123; 3.3)[22] as well as Cotta's claim that Epicurus' theological writings were exoteric (1.115). Plutarch suggests in addition that his works on the gods might also reveal an esoteric view, since they all are twisted and wrapped up like a cipher.[23] Like Cicero, Plutarch attributes esotericism to Epicurus and his followers, creating another important connection to my treatment of Lucretius above.

While impiety trials were things mostly of the distant past, other political dangers remained in Plutarch's time. This emerges very clearly in Plutarch's *De garrulitate*, which,

[22] Usener (1887, 103) notes the parallel to *DND* 1.123.
[23] See Einarson and De Lacy 1967, ad loc.

though nominally a treatise about talkativeness, by blaming talkativeness ends up turning primarily into a praise of silence.

One of the main points of *De garrulitate* comes out in a line of Sophocles Plutarch cites: "Child, be quiet. Silence has many beautiful things" (ὦ παῖ, σιώπα· πόλλ᾽ ἔχει σιγὴ καλά, fr. 78 at 502e). Plutarch presents many aspects of silence in the treatise and uses the words ἄρρητος and ἀπόρρητος (both meaning "not to be spoken," i.e., "secret") extremely frequently. Plutarch does at times associate secrecy with religion and mystery cults (504a; 505e-f; 510e) and he also mentions philosophers advocating for silence (e.g., 503f-504a; 510e-511c; 512f). But the main focus in the treatise is on the political advantages of silence. For example, Plutarch writes:

> Τῶν δ᾽ ἄλλων παθῶν καὶ νοσημάτων τὰ μέν ἐστιν ἐπικίνδυνα τὰ δὲ μισητὰ τὰ δὲ καταγέλαστα, τῇ δ᾽ ἀδολεσχίᾳ πάντα συμβέβηκε· χλευάζονται μὲν γὰρ ἐν ταῖς κοιναῖς διηγήσεσι, μισοῦνται δὲ διὰ τὰς τῶν κακῶν προσαγγελίας, κινδυνεύουσι δὲ τῶν ἀπορρήτων μὴ κρατοῦντες.
>
> And of all the other passions and sicknesses some are dangerous, some are hated, and some are ridiculous, but all [these] have come together for talkativeness. For [the talkative] are scorned in common discussions, they are hated because of their announcements of evil [tidings], and they cause danger by not mastering secrets (τῶν ἀπορρήτων). (504f)

There is a danger to the political community of revealing state secrets and to oneself for offending those in power. An example of the latter is a certain Fulvius who reveals a secret about Augustus, which through his wife gets back to Augustus. So the two commit suicide once they learn that Augustus knows of his lack of discretion: "'Caesar learned, he said, 'that I did not keep the secret silent; and because of this I am going to kill myself'" ('ἔγνωκεν᾽ ἔφη 'Καῖσαρ, ὅτι τὸ ἀπόρρητον οὐκ ἐσιώπησα· καὶ διὰ τοῦτο μέλλω ἀναιρεῖν ἐμαυτόν,' 508b).

The importance of this and countless other grim stories, which Plutarch recounts with rather dark humor, is that in imperial Rome, as in early Greek tyrannies, one can lose his or her life by running afoul of the most powerful, even for something rather trivial. Not only individuals in Rome need to be careful of their position, but also conquered provinces like Greece. In his *Praecepta gerendae reipublicae,* Plutarch says that a Greek leader should remember his place:

> ἀλλὰ κἀκεῖνο [sc. δεῖ] λέγειν πρὸς ἑαυτόν, ‘ἀρχόμενος ἄρχεις, ὑποτεταγμένης πόλεως ἀνθυπάτοις, ἐπιτρόποις Καίσαρος· “οὐ ταῦτα λόγχη πεδιάς,” [S. *Tr*. 1058] οὐδ’ αἱ παλαιαὶ Σάρδεις οὐδ’ ἡ Λυδῶν ἐκείνη δύναμις’· εὐσταλεστέραν δεῖ τὴν χλαμύδα ποιεῖν, καὶ βλέπειν ἀπὸ τοῦ στρατηγίου πρὸς τὸ βῆμα, καὶ τῷ στεφάνῳ μὴ πολὺ φρονεῖν μηδὲ πιστεύειν, ὁρῶντα τοὺς καλτίους ἐπάνω τῆς κεφαλῆς· ἀλλὰ μιμεῖσθαι τοὺς ὑποκριτάς, πάθος μὲν ἴδιον καὶ ἦθος καὶ ἀξίωμα τῷ ἀγῶνι προστιθέντας, τοῦ δ’ ὑποβολέως ἀκούοντας καὶ μὴ παρεκβαίνοντας τοὺς ῥυθμοὺς καὶ τὰ μέτρα τῆς διδομένης ἐξουσίας ὑπὸ τῶν κρατούντων. ἡ γὰρ ἔκπτωσις οὐ φέρει συριγμὸν οὐδὲ χλευασμὸν οὐδὲ κλωγμόν, ἀλλὰ πολλοῖς μὲν ἐπέβη
> ‘δεινὸς κολαστὴς πέλεκυς αὐχένος τομεύς,’ [*Trag*. *adesp*. fr. 412]
> ὡς τοῖς περὶ Παρδάλαν τὸν ὑμέτερον ἐκλαθομένοις τῶν ὅρων· …
>
> But he must say this to himself as well: ‘You rule while being ruled, since the city has been made subordinate to the proconsuls, Caesar’s procurators. “These are not the spearmen of the plain,” [S. *Tr*. 1058] nor ancient Sardis nor that power of the Lydians.’ It is necessary to make your military cloak neater, and to look away from the general’s tent to the speaker’s platform, and not to be too proud in or trust in your crown, since you see [Roman] boots above your head. But it is necessary to imitate actors, who apply their own passion, character, and rank to the contest, but who keep listening to the prompter and do not step outside of the rhythms and meters which belong to the freedom granted by those in power. For error [i.e., in ruling] does not yield hissing, mockery, or hooting [i.e., as in the theater], but for many there came upon them
> ‘the axe which cuts the neck, a terrible punisher’ [*Trag*. *adesp*. fr. 412],
> like the associates of your friend Pardalas who forgot their boundaries … (813e-f)

In this passage, Plutarch reminds his Greek readers that however high they might climb, their freedom extends only as far as the Roman administrators allow and that they risk their lives for overstepping their bounds. Nevertheless, they still are able to make meaningful decisions as long as they outwardly conform to the Romans’ expectations for them, just like actors whose freedom becomes manifest in the necessity put upon them.[24]

De garrulitate and *Praecepta gerendae reipublicae* show the importance of esotericism for those living in Rome’s universal empire in which universal peace is only brought through universal slavery (see also *Praec*. *ger*. *reip*. 824c). This will not be the focus of *De audiendis*, but it will be present obliquely through Plutarch’s Roman addressee in the treatise.

This overview of passages on esotericism in Plutarch shows that he explicitly ascribes esotericism to philosophers like Anaxagoras, Plato, Aristotle, and Epicurus. In some cases the

[24] Cf. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, § 188.

motive is rather clear, like that of self-defense for Anaxagoras, Epicurus, and possibly Plato. Plutarch also indicates some methods of esoteric writing, such as Anaxagoras' cautious use of riddles, writing symbolically through metaphorical language in the case of Plato, writing treatises which will be hard to understand for outsiders in the case of Aristotle, and pretending to believe in gods in the case of Epicurus.

Bracketing the question of the historical accuracy of any of Plutarch's claims, we see that in his view esoteric philosophy was a widespread phenomenon among prominent philosophers, including those he highly esteems. The political and religious pressure he sees on philosophers finds a parallel in the difficulty of speaking out under tyranny. We observe this in the more narrowly political type of esotericism on display in writings like *De garrulitate* and *Praecepta gerendae reipublicae*. This allows us to think through what esotericism means for a Greek writing under Roman rule.

Overall, the examples which I have discussed render plausible an esoteric reading of Plutarch's *De audiendis*. It is striking that Plutarch scatters these explicit discussions of philosophic esotericism throughout his corpus, but only decides to give a thematic treatment of esotericism in his work on poetry. This makes us consider what the intrinsic connection is between poetry, philosophy, and esotericism which informs this choice.

6.4 The State of the Question for Plutarch's Esotericism

What remains to do before I begin interpreting *De audiendis* is to consider prior scholarship which has treated esotericism in Plutarch. There are not many scholars who have done so, and only one has touched on esotericism in the case of *De audiendis* in particular. I already discussed Banner's brief, two-page treatment of esotericism in Plutarch, so I will leave his argument aside here. Providing a much earlier example, Toland does mention Plutarch in his treatise on philosophic esotericism, but only in passing and more as a source for other

philosophers and religious practices than in his own right.[25] Casel provides an invaluable survey of passages in Plutarch dealing with esotericism in relation to both the mysteries and philosophy.[26] This serves as a useful supplement to the passages I treated above, especially his discussion of Plutarch on Pythagorean silence.[27] Yet, as discussed above (1.4), Casel's treatment takes the form of a concatenation of passages with interspersed interpretation. While a rich resource, Casel's discussion is rather brief and does not provide an extensive interpretation of the importance of esotericism for one of Plutarch's works, as I do. Casel concludes that Plutarch both is aware of and practices philosophic esotericism, but that he reunites philosophic esotericism with mysticism, a connection which Casel argues had been severed for the first time by Plato:

> To sum up briefly, Plutarch both knows and himself observes mystical silence. This silence concerns both matters which are properly mystical and theological teachings. This second philosophical type of silence is often contained in mythical and symbolic speech. The reason for this [silence] is the hidden account and grandeur of divine things. The sacred rites of the Egyptians also serve as an example of sacred silence and riddling speech.
>
> Plutarch's philosophical silence has been linked by such a tight bond with the teaching of the mysteries that sometimes, when things having to be concealed with silence or a symbolic form rely on the authority of the mysteries, [Plutarch's philosophical silence] is very nearly confused with it [i.e., the teaching of the mysteries]. Therefore, philosophic silence, which we saw to be more and more separated from the mystical teaching and to become independent, now seems somehow to return to it [i.e., the mystical teaching].
>
> For this reason, Plutarch has departed from the silence that Plato preserved, with whom he agrees in several other matters.[28]

Casel's recognition of Plutarch's awareness and practice of esotericism is an important precedent for my chapter. Yet, Casel also argues that philosophic esotericism is intimately linked with the

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[25] Toland 1720, 70-71, 74, 90, 92-93.
[26] Casel 1919, 86-93.
[27] Ibid., 86-87.
[28] Ibid., 92-93: *Ut paucis comprehendamus, Plutarchus silentium mysticum et novit et ipse observat. Quod silentium et ad res proprie mysticas et ad doctrinas theologicas pertinet. Alterum hoc silendi genus philosophicum sermone fabuloso et symbolico plerumque continetur. Causa eius est rerum divinarum ratio occulta et maiestas. Exemplo silentii sacri et sermonis aenigmatici sunt etiam sacra Aegyptia.*

Silentium Plutarchi philosophicum tam arto vinculo cum mysteriorum disciplina colligatum est, ut interdum, quando res silentio vel forma symbolica tegendae mysteriorum auctoritate fulciuntur, tantum non cum illa confundatur. Silentium igitur philosophicum, quod magis magisque a disciplina mystica separari et sui iuris fieri observavimus, iam ad illam quodammodo reverti videtur.

Hac re Plutarchus a silentio, quale Plato servabat, recessit, quocum in nonnullis aliis concordat.

silence of mystery cults in Plutarch. While this is an understandable conclusion based on the evidence he surveys, my interpretation of *De audiendis* yields a different view of esotericism in Plutarch, one that is not (or at least not in this work) inextricably bound to mysticism. This difference with Casel's interpretation has already emerged through my discussion of the political rather than religious motives for esotericism that I sketched above. In his impressive collection of passages, furthermore, Casel never cites or mentions *De audiendis*, even in his discussion of Plutarch on Stoic allegoresis in relation to esotericism,[29] despite the fact that Plutarch criticizes Stoic allegoresis in *De audiendis* (19e20-f28).[30] Thus my interpretation will yield a different portrait of Plutarch's esotericism than the one Casel draws.

Of contemporary interpreters of Plutarch, Philip Hardie is the most attuned to the question of esotericism in Plutarch, though he prefers terms like "concealment" and "secrecy." In his survey of Plutarch on myth, Hardie focuses on concealment and secrecy in a broad range of Plutarch's works,[31] and even briefly touches on how the interpretation of poetry and myth in *De audiendis* involves uncovering concealed philosophy.[32] Other scholars note that poetry is philosophy in disguise in *De audiendis*,[33] but they do not take the next step of considering the corresponding deliberate concealment of philosophy on the part of the author who wrote the poetry.

In sum, a few accomplished scholars have seen the importance of esotericism in Plutarch. I extend and supplement their research in order to provide for the first time a detailed treatment of how esotericism plays out in a single work of Plutarch's. Furthermore, in contrast to prior

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[29] Ibid., 88-91.
[30] Numbers following the letter in citations of Plutarch's *De audiendis* indicate the line numbers on the appropriate Teubner page.
[31] E.g., Hardie 1992, 4745, 4746-4749, 4751, 4753-4754. See also Hardie 1996, 124-125, 133-135.
[32] Hardie 1992, 4746, 4779, 4783-4784.
[33] E.g., von Reutern 1933, 62; Bréchet 1999, 239.

research, I consider Plutarch's esotericism within the broader phenomenon of esoteric philosophy in Rome.

7. Chapter 6: The Structure and Opening of Plutarch's *De audiendis poetis*

7.1 Introduction: Esotericism and the Structure of the Treatise

Despite explicitly discussing esoteric philosophy in the passages already discussed, in his exegetical treatises on Plato, *De animae procreatione in Timaeo* and *Quaestiones Platonicae*, Plutarch does not treat esoteric philosophy. Rather, he saves his treatment of esotericism for his treatise on the relationship between philosophy and poetry, *De audiendis*. We will have to consider why Plutarch feels he cannot discuss esotericism directly, but must pair its analysis with his explication of poetry.

Modern editors divide *De audiendis* into fourteen chapters. While these divisions do not go back to Plutarch, they are based on clear transitional devices from topic to topic, such as the use of transitional particles. I will, then, follow other scholars in treating the chapters as the large building blocks out of which the work is composed. Plutarch opens *De audiendis* with three theoretical chapters treating the general reasons for the need to combine poetry and philosophy (Chapter 1), the inherently deceitful character of poetry (Chapter 2), and the nature of poetry as mimesis (Chapter 3). What seems unphilosophical (poetry) is more attractive that what is openly philosophical (Chapter 1). The concealment of philosophy involves deception (Chapter 2). The deception of poetry proceeds through mimesis (Chapter 3). But since esotericism necessarily involves revelation in addition to concealment, in Chapter 4 Plutarch turns to a discussion of how the poets (especially Homer) reveal the truth through the lies. The poet reveals his true opinion about the characters in the work and the true nature of the gods through an indirect indication (ἐμφάσεις, 19a7) or through deliberate self-contradiction (ὑπεναντιώσεις πρὸς αὑτούς, 20c30).

"And in Homer the kind of teaching of this sort is silent ..." (19e18-19).[1] While Chapter 4 focuses on indirect communication through offhand comments, the plot itself, and the contrast between contradictory passages, in Chapters 5 and 6 Plutarch moves to the smallest units of meaning, words and in particular nouns (ὀνόματα). Chapter 5 offers a general explanation of how every single word must be taken into account in interpreting a poet. We might say that every word contributes to the end (τέλος) of a work,[2] or that the work operates under logographic necessity (cf. Pl. *Phdr* 264b7-c5; Arist. *Po*. 1450b34-1451a15, 32-35). Chapter 6, operating in the mode of Plato's *Cratylus*, advises on the interpretation of ambiguous words, with an emphasis on the gods' names. While in Chapter 4 ambiguity or lying operates on the larger levels of plot and contradiction, Chapter 6 shows that all speech down to the smallest unit contains ambiguities or of necessity both lies and tells the truth. The defining characteristic of poetry as lies like the truth (Chapter 2; *Bellone an pace* 347e) turns out to be a defining characteristic of all language.

While an admixture of truth and lies inheres in speech, the copresence of good and evil in the world means that accurate imitation of the world displays this mixture. Perhaps this parallel explains why Plutarch turns from the ambiguous character of speech in Chapter 6 to the ambiguous character of the world in Chapter 7: a return to the discussion of mimesis, which

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[1] παρὰ δ' Ὁμήρῳ σιωπώμενόν ἐστι τὸ τοιοῦτο γένος τῆς διδασκαλίας ... In explaining σιωπώμενον ("silent" or "kept silent") here, Hunter and Russell (2011, ad loc.) refer to Nünlist's (2009, 157-173) discussion of ancient critics' way of speaking about what Homer keeps tacit or implicit in his text, like unstated events seen to be necessary for a coherent plot, with the phrase κατὰ τὸ σιωπώμενον, glossed by Nünlist as "'in silence, tacitly' ≈ 'implicitly'" (ibid., 157). Hunter and Russell thus make it seem as if Plutarch's remark about Homer's silent teaching can simply be explained with reference to this similar term in the scholia, even though Nünlist himself does not cite Plutarch in this context. I do not deny that Plutarch is aware of this usage as found in Homeric criticism and may be playing on it, but it is important to note the differences too. First, Plutarch does not use κατά ("according to") with the substantive use of the participle τὸ σιωπώμενον ("what is kept silent"), but rather makes the participle modify γένος, the "kind" of "teaching" (διδασκαλίας). A *TLG* search of the full corpus reveals no instance in which the set phrase κατὰ τὸ σιωπώμενον is used to describe a teaching as silent, i.e., how Plutarch uses the participle. This fits with the fact that the examples Nünlist discusses have to do with *events or details* that are left implicit, though they seem necessary to the critic to understand the plot, whereas for Plutarch the silent kind of teaching allows for the proper understanding of Homer's evaluation about his characters, and not of particular deeds or "facts" that are missing in the text. Thus, especially given the context of Plutarch's focus on the necessary lying in poetry which conceals philosophy, I take Plutarch's discussion of Homer's silent teaching to be properly esoteric and not reducible to the technical use of the participle in the scholia. At the same time, I would not rule out that the scholiasts are themselves interpreting esoterically by positing deliberate withholding of certain information on the part of the author, but that question is beyond the scope of this dissertation.
[2] Cf. Plu. *De comm. not*. 1065e-f with Lather 2017, 342-343.

unlike Chapter 3 omits the beauty of mimesis, focuses on its reproduction of good and evil and the varied fortunes of poetic characters (cf. Pl. *Lg*. 667c10-668b7). The necessary mixture of good and evil in poetry and the world means that even Homer's heroes are flawed (Chapter 8), and we must remember that in order to preserve our freedom of judgment (τὴν κρίσιν, 26b11). This involves separating the good from the bad in our own imitation or mimesis of the heroes, even Plutarch's heroes Plato and Aristotle (ἀπομιμούμενοι, 26b11-12).[3]

In Chapters 4-8 the poets' presentation of the base was based on their concealment of something else or their indication of their disapproval of the base, but in Chapter 9 Plutarch tells us that this procedure is only justified if the subject (ὑποκείμενον) of the poetry has a *logos*, which will only be the case if it is good (χρηστόν) (28b9-10).[4] In other words one should not look for concealment in all poetry[5] but only in poets such as Homer who offer indications of their concealment and that something good lies under the entertaining façade, that the beautiful is not separated from the good.

The introduction of the distinction between good and evil as central to mimesis in Chapter 7, along with the corresponding flaws of Homer's heroes in Chapter 8, also determines the course of the rest of the treatise. In Chapter 9, Plutarch not only indicates when esoteric reading should be applied to a poem, but also switches from focusing on avoiding the harm of poetry, which was the subject up to Chapter 9, to focusing on benefiting from poetry. Accordingly, in the four chapters following Chapter 8, Chapters 9-12, Plutarch explains how one can benefit morally from the good components of poetry. Finally, at the end of the treatise, in

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[3] Consider also Plu. fr. 186 Sandbach cited at D'Ippolito 2010, 90-91. See Bréchet 1999, 226-227 for the central importance of Plato and Aristotle in *De audiendis*.
[4] See also Heirman 1972, 8; Teixeira 1991, 315.
[5] Nünlist (2009, 160) describes how for the ancient scholar Zenodorus the interpretative device of explaining difficulties in the text as resulting from the poet speaking κατὰ τὸ σιωπώμενον ("according to what is kept silent" or "implicitly"), the term I just contrasted with Plutarch's characterization of Homer's silent teaching, should only be used it certain instances: "... the principle must not be used at random."

Chapters 13 and 14 Plutarch indicates how poetry not only supports morality, but also contains the highest truths of philosophy.

Preliminarily we can state the problem of the movement of the treatise as follows: in a work suffused with the teachings of Plutarch's heroes Plato and Aristotle, Plutarch injects the overly rigid but salutary morality of the Stoics in the central chapters,[6] but closes his work by indicating that poetry is properly the preparation for—among other teachings—the dour wisdom of Epicurus that death is nothing to us and that happiness consists in the absence of pain (37a3-8). These teachings seem to contradict the goodness of moral virtue and providential gods which Plutarch was concerned earlier in promoting. The closing praise of Epicurus runs roughshod over the opening blame of Epicurus' rejection of poetry (15d4-9). The end of *De audiendis* is as shocking as the end of Cicero's *DND*.

In this and the following chapter I aim to show that Plutarch's investigation of poetry and philosophy involves an in-depth reflection on esotericism. As in prior chapters, this entails considering both esoteric reading and esoteric writing on the part of the author. The former allows for an appreciation of particular techniques known to the author and justifies an investigation into the latter. In *De audiendis*, Plutarch presents a sustained reading of Homer as an esoteric writer, which will be the subject of the following chapter. Not enough attention has been paid to the mode of Homer's writing implied by Plutarch's method of reading. Plutarch does not present his manner of reading as forcing an arbitrary moralistic reading on the text, as some of his interpreters claim, but rather of uncovering the intention (γνώμη, see 27a5) of the author. This reveals what Plutarch takes esoteric writing to be.

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[6] See, e.g., the definition of virtue Plutarch that provides in the treatise: … τῆς ἀρίστης καὶ θειοτάτης ἕξεως ἐν ἡμῖν, ἣν ὀρθότητα λόγου καὶ ἀκρότητα λογικῆς φύσεως καὶ διάθεσιν ὁμολογουμένην ψυχῆς νοοῦμεν ("… the best and most divine state in us, which we think of as the correctness of reason and the peak of rational nature and a disposition in agreement [with itself] of the soul," 24d4-5). See Hunter and Russell 2011, ad loc. for the echoes of Stoic definitions of virtue here, even while Plutarch's language does not preclude substantive agreement on his part with Middle Platonists on virtue. See also Blank 2011, 259 on parts of Chapter 11: "… Plutarch gives examples clearly designed to implicate Stoic ethical views …"

Because Plutarch's reading of Homer relies on his explanation of the union of philosophy and poetry, the present chapter will undertake a close analysis of Chapter 1 of *De audiendis* to prepare for the next chapter of the dissertation. Chapter 1 of the treatise puts forward nine interrelated images about philosophy and poetry which indirectly induce reflection on the issue. Chapter 1, then, provides an occasion to begin examining Plutarch's own mode of writing as he presents the connection of philosophy, poetry, and esotericism. His dense use of imagery betrays a poetic way of writing and, along with poetic citation which will feature so prominently in the work, constitutes a dialogic element in the treatise.[7] We will thus also have the opportunity to consider the difference between esoteric writing in a dialogue, as was the case in *DND*, and esoteric writing in a treatise. Both of these of course contrast too with the manner of esoteric writing employed in Lucretius' didactic hexameter poem.

In the following chapter, after a brief treatment of the lies and mimesis in poetry (Chapters 2-3), I will turn to my interpretation of Plutarch's Homer. With Plutarch's manner of reading in mind, I will then close with broader considerations about the work, namely Plutarch's treatment of Stoicism and Epicureanism. As already noted, Plutarch makes use of Stoic morality––and at times endorses Stoic hermeneutics[8]—but chooses to end his treatise with Epicurus. Thus, as in *DND*, we observe a complex use of the Hellenistic schools by a follower of Plato and, again as in Cicero's work, a surprising ending. Accounting for the ending of *De audiendis* will require considering again Plutarch's mode of writing and how he employs esotericism.

7.2 The Beginning of De audiendis poetis

Let's start again at the beginning of the treatise, which contains most of the issues discussed above *in nuce*. The opening justification for the conjunction of poetry and philosophy

[7] See Lather 2017, 343-344, *passim* on quotations of poetry's being a poetic element of Plutarch's philosophy.
[8] See Blank 2011.

proceeds through a series of elaborate images, which, when tracked, show Plutarch's own application of the poetic in the service of the philosophic. (Following François Furhmann, I take Plutarch's images to include comparisons and metaphors.[9]) We will also see how Plutarch's choice of a Roman addressee situates the question of philosophy, poetry, and esotericism in the relationship between Greece and Rome. While the young man is the reader to be trained by the teacher, Plutarch teaches his addressee and us his readers. Just as the notional teacher of the young man stands to the young man, so stands Plutarch to the notional teacher. Plutarch's images makes his own text indeterminate in relation to the two main ingredients to be mixed, poetry and philosophy.[10] It appears as a *tertium quid* which, like esotericism, somehow unites poetry and philosophy without being identical with either of them.

The first chapter also shows for the first time how Plutarch uses poetic citations, especially those of Homer, in conjunction with references to philosophers (here Plato and Epicurus). Chapter 1, which spans about three Teubner pages, may be outlined as follows:

1. An elaborate comparison between food, drink, poetry, and philosophy (14d1-f16)
2. The analogy between city and individual (14f16-15a7)
3. Plutarch's description of his work (15a7-b14)
4. The benefits and dangers of poetry (15b15-d3)
5. The need to mix poetry and philosophy rather than abolishing poetry (15d3-16a7)

Parts 1 and 2 begin with a profusion of Plutarch's own imagery, but not citations of verse, before he describes his treatise in Part 3. In Parts 4 and 5, however, Plutarch continues his dense use of imagery but mixes it with his first poetic citations. As his images already present an implicit mixture of poetry and philosophy, in the latter part of the chapter the mixture of Plutarch's

[9] Furhmann 1964, 8-10.
[10] Cf. Bréchet 1999, 240: "Poésie mêlée de philosophie ou philosophie mêlée de poésie, le mélange ne change guère !"

philosophy and poetic citations already indicates Plutarch's explicit answer to the problem of poetry and philosophy which only comes at the end of Part 5: the necessity of such mixture.

Plutarch begins the treatise as follows:

> Εἰ μέν, ὡς Φιλόξενος ὁ ποιητὴς ἔλεγεν, ὦ Μάρκε Σηδάτιε, τῶν κρεῶν τὰ μὴ κρέα ἥδιστά ἐστι καὶ τῶν ἰχθύων οἱ μὴ ἰχθύες, ἐκείνοις ἀποφαίνεσθαι παρῶμεν οἷς ὁ Κάτων ἔφη τῆς καρδίας τὴν ὑπερῴαν εὐαισθητοτέραν ὑπάρχειν. ὅτι δὲ τῶν ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ λεγομένων οἱ σφόδρα νέοι τοῖς μὴ δοκοῦσι φιλοσόφως μηδ' ἀπὸ σπουδῆς λέγεσθαι χαίρουσι μᾶλλον καὶ παρέχουσιν ὑπηκόους ἑαυτοὺς καὶ χειροήθεις, δῆλόν ἐστιν ἡμῖν.
>
> If, as Philoxenus the poet said, Marcus Sedatius, the not-meats are the sweetest/most pleasant of meats and the not-fish are the sweetest/most pleasant of fish, let us allow those men to declare [it], for whom Cato said that the palate existed as more perceptive than the heart. But that of the things that are said in philosophy the very young rejoice more at, and provide themselves as obedient and manageable to, those things which do not seem to be said philosophically or in seriousness, it is clear to us. (14d1-e7)

First we will see what this opening comparison tells us about the relationship between philosophy and poetry. Then we will see how the pairing of the saying of the Greek poet Philoxenus with that of the Roman Cato, alongside the Greek Plutarch's address to the Roman Marcus Sedatius, situates the treatise in the relationship between Greece and Rome.

Commentators explain that "the not-meats" (τὰ μὴ κρέα) could be waterfowl and "the not-fish" (οἱ μὴ ἰχθύες) could be fish which have the texture of meat,[11] or perhaps Philoxenus refers to dishes which generally seem to be like something they are not; or the quip is supposed to be enigmatic.[12] Regardless of any specific type of meat or fish or dish, in a treatise about poetry I take the point to be that that which seems to be something but is not (and hence disguises what it actually is) is more pleasant than the actual thing without disguise. What is not meat or fish is more pleasant than meat or fish. The image, what is meat or fish but appears not to be,[13] is more pleasant than the original (undisguised meat or fish). This shows the full meaning of the image (a

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[11] von Reutern 1933, ad loc., following Petter and Wyttenbach.
[12] For the last two options see Valgiglio 1973, ad loc. and Hunter and Russell 2011, ad loc. Heirman (1972, 18) takes the "meaning as food prepared in such a way that its original form is not [sic] longer recognizable" according to Plutarch's interpretation of the quip.
[13] Or perhaps what appears to be meat or fish but is not. My argument does not depend on the precise referent of "not-meat" and "not-fish."

comparison set up by a μέν … δέ construction linking the two sentences). The things said in philosophy which do not seem (μὴ δοκοῦσι) like philosophy are more attractive to the young than philosophy simply, just as the meats and fish which do not seem to be meats and fish are more pleasant than meat or fish simply. As Plutarch will soon make clear, poetry with a philosophic content is philosophy which does not seem to be philosophy. It is the character of poetry generally to make an image which seems like the original, but is not the original.[14] In this case, however, poetry which consists in the making of images is itself the image for philosophy. The use of δοκέω, furthermore, confirms that the issue is one of seeming and being: the seeming of poetry hides its being as philosophy. So we have the ontological (cf. 17d12-e27) and epistemological problem of discerning the difference between appearance and being. What is remarkable too is that poetry as one of the things said in (ἐν) philosophy is part of philosophy, rather than an extraneous cloak to philosophy. Plutarch later reveals that philosophy and poetry accomplish the same thing, but through different means (19b22-c25).

Just as philosophy concealed in poetry is more attractive than philosophy simply, Plutarch begins his philosophical treatise with the comparison of philosophy as meat and fish and poetry as not-meat and not-fish. The use of metaphor, a form of comparison, is proper to poetry (see 25b10), so Plutarch already disguises his philosophy with poetry. As Lucretius uses honey to make his philosophy less bitter (1.935-947 = 4.11-22),[15] Plutarch sweetens his philosophy with poetic images (he later explicitly compares poetry to honey, 32e22-26).[16] The nine images which appear in Chapter 1 alone constitute about a third of the total images throughout the treatise (most of which are far less extensive than the ones in Chapter 1). By beginning his treatise with

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[14] Plutarch emphasizes the imagistic character of poetry by defining it in relation to painting: ... [sc. ἡ ποιητικὴ] μιμητικὴ τέχνη καὶ δύναμίς ἐστιν ἀντίστροφος τῇ ζωγραφίᾳ ("... [poetry] is a mimetic art and power counterpart to painting," 17f29-1). See Davis 2023, 209-211 on the difficulties of translating the adjective ἀντίστροφος.
[15] Hunter and Russell (2011, ad loc.) draw this comparison.
[16] Cf. Lather 2017, 325. Grossel (2010-2011, 109) says of the images and poetic quotations in Chapter 1, "Il se réalise une sorte de contamination du discours philosophique par la parole poétique ..."

Philoxenus' quip, which Plutarch says should be left to the consideration of gourmands—and so makes it worthless without Plutarch's comparison to philosophy—Plutarch begins his treatise with a joke. He thus makes his first sentence fit the second criterion for attractive philosophy, that it should not seem to be said in seriousness (ἀπὸ σπουδῆς). Plutarch's philosophy does not seem to be said philosophically or in seriousness. Philosophy which appears not to be philosophy represents a powerful form of esotericism.

While claiming that he is speaking of "the very young" (οἱ σφόδρα νέοι) Plutarch uses the charms on his readers which he asks his reader to employ on the very young. While surely giving advice on education of the young, that didactic premise may also be a polite way of avoiding admitting that he is instructing his reader directly.[17] In any case, what seems not to be philosophic or serious makes the very young "obedient and manageable" (ὑπηκόους ... καὶ χειροήθεις). These adjectives literally mean "listening under" (ὑπο- + ηκόος < ἀκούω) and "accustomed to the hand" (χεῖρ + ηθης < ἦθος). The treatise is called *How the Young Man Should Listen* (ἀκούειν) *to Poems*.[18] Philosophy which does not seem to be philosophy makes the young man listen under the authority of the poet. Poetry forms the character (ἦθος) of the reader by its imitation of characters (ἤθη) (26a3; 28e15-16).[19] So making the reader "listen under" puts his character in the hands of the writer.

In the first sentence, Plutarch juxtaposes the decadent, gourmand Greek Philoxenus, likely a late 5th or early 4th century dithyrambic poet, with the "stern," moral Roman Cato the

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[17] See Schlemm 1893, 8 (cited at Van der Stockt 1992, 39 n. 64): *Neque solum adulescentibus sed omnibus ita poetas esse tractandos Plutarcho persuasum fuisse cum ex aliis scriptis tum ex hac commentatione potest effici. Saepissime enim sine ullo praecipuo adulescentium respectu profert ut in capp. IV, V, VI init., ita ut ea non solum ab adulescentibus sed ab omnibus respici eum voluisse putandum sit* ("And it can be shown both from other writings and this treatise that Plutarch was persuaded that the poets were to be handled in this way not only by young men but by all. For very often without any special consideration for young men he brings forth quotations, as in Chapters 4, 5, and the beginning of 6, in such a way that one ought to think that he wanted not only young men but all to take heed"). See also Halliwell 2002, 299 and Van Hoof 2010, 6 n. 26.

[18] Against most other commentators, Bréchet (2007, 105-106) argues that "listening" (ἀκούειν) in the treatise cannot be reduced to reading, studying, or interpreting.

[19] Cf. Grossel 2010-2011, 108.

Elder.[20] Cato rejects what Philoxenus the poet represents. Stern Rome rejects decadent Greece. Just as the Greek Philoxenus is paired with the Roman Cato, Plutarch pairs himself, a Greek, with his Roman addressee Marcus Sedatius. While Cato rejects the Greek Philoxenus, Plutarch attempts to get Marcus Sedatius to read his Greek treatise. Rome which captured Greece is now captured by Greece (Hor. *Epist*. 2.1.156-157). Plutarch in writing to his Roman reader advises him on how to deal with the dangers of Greek poetry (signaled by the decadent Philoxenus) now that Romans look to Greece for education. Rome needs Plutarch as its educator rather than Philoxenus. Poets wrote dithyrambs to celebrate Dionysus, the god of wine, but Plutarch will advocate the mixture of poetry and philosophy on the analogy of the mixture of wine with water (15e17-f23). Plutarch charges himself with forming the character of both Romans and Greeks, if they listen to him.

Next Plutarch justifies (γάρ) his opening two sentences with the examples of Heraclides Ponticus' *Abaris* and Aristo of Chios' *Lycon* as exciting the young just like Aesop's fables and poetic plots (14e8-11). Heraclides and Aristo mix doctrines about the soul with mythology (μυθολογίᾳ).[21] The *Abaris* was a dialogue, but we do not know anything about Aristo's *Lycon*. In any case, Plutarch says that philosophic dialogues are more like poetry, especially when they use myth. The mention of Aesop's fables alongside philosophic dialogue should remind of Socrates' conversion of Aesop's fables into poetry in the *Phaedo* (60c8-61c1), which Plutarch will soon mention (15b22-26), especially since the *Phaedo* had the alternate title in antiquity *On the Soul* (Περὶ ψυχῆς) and contains a Platonic myth involving the soul (108d4-114d7). Plato on this criterion is a poetic philosopher.[22]

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[20] See Hunter and Russell 2011, ad loc.
[21] I follow von Reutern 1933, Hunter and Russell 2011, and many others in reading the corrector of α's insertion of <ἀλλά> after ὑποθέσεις (14e8-9) rather than <ἀλλὰ καί> before τὰ περί (14e10), the correction of G^2, X^3, and V.
[22] Bréchet (1999, 240) says that the mention of doctrines about the soul mixed with mythology is an "allusion à peine voilée aux mythes platoniciens."

Plutarch draws the following conclusion from his discussion thus far in the form of two more images one after the other:

> διὸ δεῖ μὴ μόνον ἐν ταῖς περὶ ἐδωδὴν καὶ πόσιν ἡδοναῖς διαφυλάττειν εὐσχημονοῦντας αὐτούς, ἔτι δὲ μᾶλλον ἐν ταῖς ἀκροάσεσιν καὶ ἀναγνώσεσιν ἐθίζειν, ὥσπερ ὄψῳ χρωμένους μετρίως τῷ τέρποντι, τὸ χρήσιμον ἀπ᾽ αὐτοῦ καὶ τὸ σωτήριον διώκειν. οὔτε γὰρ πόλιν αἱ κεκλεισμέναι πύλαι τηροῦσιν ἀνάλωτον, ἂν διὰ μιᾶς παραδέξηται τοὺς πολεμίους, οὔτε νέον αἱ περὶ τὰς ἄλλας ἡδονὰς ἐγκράτειαι σῴζουσιν, ἂν τῇ δι᾽ ἀκοῆς λάθῃ προέμενος αὐτόν, ἀλλ᾽ ὅσον μᾶλλον αὕτη τοῦ φρονεῖν καὶ λογίζεσθαι πεφυκότος ἅπτεται, <τοσοῦτο>[23] μᾶλλον ἀμεληθεῖσα βλάπτει καὶ διαφθείρει τὸν παραδεξάμενον.
>
> Therefore it is necessary to keep them [i.e., the young men] behaving with decorum not only in the pleasures concerning eating and drinking, but still even more in lectures and readings [it is necessary] to accustom them, just as if they were using delightful relish moderately, to pursue the profitable and preserving from it [i.e., from lectures and readings]. For neither do closed gates guard a city as impregnable, if through one gate it admits the enemies, nor do [forms of] self-control concerning the other pleasures save a young man, if it escapes his notice that he betrayed himself through hearing, but as much the more this [i.e., the pleasure of listening] fastens upon one who is a natural at thinking and calculating,[24] so much the more, if it has not been attended to, it harms and destroys the one who has received it. (14e11-15a3)

Pleasures in eating and drinking are like those of listening and reading,[25] and the explicit simile (ὥσπερ) comes between the moderate use of relish and pursuing the profitable and useful in listening and reading. Plutarch stays within the realm of eating and drinking from the first image, but he already transforms the implicit relationship between poetry and philosophy. Poetry is like the relish (see τῷ τέρποντι, 15d8) and philosophy is like the main dish upon which the relish is put. Poetry makes it easier to consume philosophy but if one does not use it moderately—if the relish of poetry overwhelms the bread of philosophy—it is unhealthy. Whereas in the first image philosophy was mistaken for poetry (the meat or fish did not seem to be meat or fish), here the relish does not masquerade as the main dish but is a clearly differentiated addition to it. While one reading poetic philosophy might not recognize its philosophical character, like one tasting a

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[23] The conjecture of Gärtner in the revised Teubner edition.
[24] I take τοῦ φρονεῖν καὶ λογίζεσθαι πεφυκότος to refer to a type of person (masculine substantive participle) rather than a part of the soul (neuter substantive participle) because Plutarch will soon make a similar argument regarding a particular person's nature (15b11-14) and a certain type of people (15c26-27).
[25] Cf. Grossel 2010-2011, 106.

seabird might take it for a fish, the reader of Plutarch's treatise is now being placed in the position of being able to recognize the difference between poetry and philosophy. The image of poetry becomes recognizable as an image, just as relish may completely conceal a main dish but becomes apparent as relish once one starts eating.

In the third image Plutarch switches from what is being consumed (poetry and philosophy) to what is doing the consuming. Plutarch follows the Platonic precedent of drawing an analogy between the city and the individual.[26] The enemies of the city are like the pleasures enticing the young man, and the gates of the city are like his self-control in relation to different pleasures. Poetry which produces pleasure is, then, implicitly likened to a foreign city which sends the enemies. The comparison between the city and the young man also makes us wonder about the effect of poetry in the city in addition to the individual or soul, which of course was Plato's concern in the *Republic* and *Laws*. As we saw from the first sentence, Rome was the city having to deal with the encroachment of foreign, Greek learning. But Plutarch now indicates that the one gate which perhaps should have been kept shut is already open: it is "perhaps neither possible nor useful to keep away from poems" (οὔτ᾽ ἴσως δυνατόν ἐστιν οὔτ᾽ ὠφέλιμον ποιημάτων ἀπείργειν) a young man the age of Plutarch's son Soclarus and Sedatius' son Cleander (15a3-5). Greek poetry has long since penetrated Rome, and the Roman Sedatius—who is perhaps a Romanized Greek,[27] which would show even better the inextricable connection of Greece and Rome, just as Plutarch received the name L. Mestrius Plutarchus when he became a Roman citizen[28]—has a son called by the Greek name Cleander.[29] The sons of all Romans are

[26] See Zadorojinyi 2002, 301.
[27] Part of the confusion is due to the fact that Sedatius (Σηδάτιε) is an emendation of the universally rejected σήδαπε of the MSS. It has also been emended as Sedatus (Σήδατε). See further ibid., 304 and Philippon 1987, 67-68.
[28] See Russell 1973, 7-8.
[29] Plutarch's son's name "Soclarus" means "safe inheritance" (from σῶς and κλῆρος) while Cleander means "renowned man" (from κλέος and ἀνήρ). Does this thus indicate that it is safer to be the client province Greece rather than imperial Rome with its desire for limitless glory (κλέος)? Greece may have lost its freedom, but it still has a coherent identity.

faced with the influence of Greek writings, but the question is how Rome and its citizens will read them.

In the wake of these three images, Plutarch describes his own treatise and introduces yet another image:

> ἃ δ' οὖν ἐμοὶ περὶ ποιημάτων εἰπόντι πρῴην ἐπῆλθε νῦν πρὸς σὲ πέμψαι γεγραμμένα, δίελθε· κἂν δοκῇ σοι μηδὲν εἶναι φαυλότερα τῶν ἀμεθύστων καλουμένων, ἅ τινες ἐν τοῖς πότοις περιάπτονται καὶ προλαμβάνουσι, μεταδίδου τῷ Κλεάνδρῳ καὶ προκαταλάμβανε τὴν φύσιν αὐτοῦ διὰ τὸ μηδαμοῦ νωθρὸν ἀλλὰ πανταχοῦ σφοδρὸν καὶ δεδορκὸς εὐαγωγοτέραν ὑπὸ τῶν τοιούτων οὖσαν.
>
> And so, go through the things about poems which, after I had said them yesterday, it occurred to me now to send to you written down; and, if they [i.e., my writings] seem to you to be in no way more paltry than so-called amethysts, which some people put around in their drinks and take in advance, share them with Cleander and take hold of his nature in advance since it is more easily led by things of this sort on account of [its element which is] in no way lazy but in all cases robust and watchful. (15a7-b14)

Plutarch draws a contrast between speech (εἰπόντι) and writing (γεγραμμένα), which should evoke the *Phaedrus* (274c5-278d1) given his focus on the *pharmakon* a few sentences later (15c22). Then he compares (through the comparative adjective φαυλότερα) his treatise to amethysts and poetry to wine. Formed with an alpha privative and from the verb μεθύω ("be drunk with wine"), amethysts are either stones put in drinks or herbs eaten in advance used to prevent drunkenness.[30] People "fasten around" (περιάπτονται) amethysts on their drinks while the pleasure from listening "fastens" (ἅπτεται, 15a2) especially on those with good natures. Through this verbal parallel to the dangers of poetry, Plutarch makes his treatise take on the character of poetry. This likeness between the consumption of poetry and the consumption of Plutarch's treatise is furthered by the ambiguity of Cleander's nature's being "more easily led by things of this sort" (εὐαγωγοτέραν ὑπὸ τῶν τοιούτων). Does Plutarch mean that Cleander will more easily than others be led by his treatise, or that he is more susceptible to poetry and thus has more need

[30] See Hunter and Russell 2011, ad loc.

of the treatise?[31] The focus in both passages on nature (πεφυκότος, 15a2 vs. φύσιν, 15b12) reinforces the connection. Is Plutarch's treatise more like the enticing poetry or more like philosophy? With its likeness to an amethyst, Plutarch's treatise is a third element—a *pharmakon*—different from either the wine of poetry or the water of philosophy which are to be mixed together (15e17-f23).

Plutarch thus far continuously destabilizes our understanding of the relationship between philosophy, poetry, and *De audiendis* itself through these first four images in Chapter 1. If a metaphor is supposed to clarify the tenor through a vehicle which expresses the tenor better than the tenor could alone, Plutarch unmoors the referents to which the images are supposed to refer. The images have the effect of turning what is supposed to be one thing into a composite: poetry is not-meat/fish, relish, an enemy at the gates, and wine all at once (cf. Pl. *Lg*. 693b5-c5). As if this were not difficult enough already, Plutarch introduces two more images for poetry immediately after his description of his treatise:

> 'Πουλύποδος κεφαλῇ ἔνι μὲν κακὸν ἐν δὲ καὶ ἐσθλόν,' ὅτι βρωθῆναι μέν ἐστιν ἥδιστος, δυσόνειρον δ' ὕπνον ποιεῖ, φαντασίας ταραχώδεις καὶ ἀλλοκότους δεχόμενον, ὡς λέγουσιν. οὕτω δὴ καὶ ποιητικῇ πολὺ μὲν τὸ ἡδὺ καὶ τρόφιμον νέου ψυχῆς ἔνεστιν, οὐκ ἔλαττον δὲ τὸ ταρακτικὸν καὶ παράφορον, ἂν μὴ τυγχάνῃ παιδαγωγίας ὀρθῆς ἡ ἀκρόασις. οὐ γὰρ μόνον ὡς ἔοικε περὶ τῆς Αἰγυπτίων χώρας ἀλλὰ καὶ περὶ τῆς ποιητικῆς ἔστιν εἰπεῖν ὅτι [*Od*. 4.230] 'φάρμακα πολλὰ μὲν ἐσθλὰ μεμιγμένα πολλὰ δὲ λυγρά' τοῖς χρωμένοις ἀναδίδωσιν. [*Il*. 14.216-217]
> 'ἔνθ' ἔνι μὲν φιλότης, ἐν δ' ἵμερος, ἐν δ' ὀαριστὺς
> πάρφασις, ἥ τ' ἔκλεψε νόον πύκα περ φρονεόντων.'
> οὐ γὰρ ἅπτεται τὸ ἀπατηλὸν αὐτῆς ἀβελτέρων κομιδῇ καὶ ἀνοήτων.
>
> 'In the octopus' head there is bad but also good' because it is sweetest/most pleasant to eat, but it causes sleep with bad dreams, [sleep which] admits disturbing and strange images, as they say. Thus indeed there is much of the sweet and the nourishing for the soul of the young man in poetry, but there is not less of the disturbing and misleading, if the listening does not obtain correct training. For not only, as is likely, about the land of the Egyptians but also about poetry is it possible to say that it gives forth [*Od*. 4.230] 'many good drugs but many baneful ones [all] mixed [together]' for those who make use of it. [*Il*. 14.216-217]

[31] Despite the ambiguity, according to Plutarch's argument the more intelligent will be influenced more easily both by poetry and philosophy. See Lather 2017, 326.

> ‘There is love in it, and desire, and deceitful persuasion, which cheats the mind even of those who think shrewdly.’
> For the deceitful [element] of it does not fasten on those who are altogether stupid and thoughtless. (15b15-c27)

Just as the head of an octopus is very pleasant, but causes bad dreams in sleep, so too (οὕτω) in poetry there is what is pleasant and nourishing, but it can be disturbing without good education. In the *Quaestiones convivales*, the octopus’ head also appears as a food which causes bad dreams, with the additional information that “those requiring divination through dreams” (τοὺς δεομένους τῆς διὰ τῶν ὀνείρων μαντικῆς) should abstain from it (734e-f).[32] Perhaps the comparison of poetry to the octopus’ head, then, indicates that, as the head blocks access to the divine through divination, poetry can lead to inaccurate understandings of the divine, as Plutarch will argue later (16d1-18b18). In any case, Plutarch stays with the culinary imagery from images 1, 2, and 4. It is odd here, though, that while training or education (παιδαγωγία) can preserve the beneficial elements of poetry while guarding against the detrimental aspects of it, Plutarch does not mention a cure (*pharmakon*) for the bad dreams caused by the octopus’ head. Perhaps the only way to do so is to avoid eating the head? As Richard Hunter and Donald Russell point out,[33] the 3rd century BCE comic poet Machon wrote about Philoxenus’ dining on an octopus:

> Ὑπερβολῇ λέγουσι τὸν Φιλόξενον
> τῶν διθυράμβων τὸν ποιητὴν γεγονέναι
> ὀψοφάγον. εἶτα πουλύποδα πηχῶν δυεῖν
> ἐν ταῖς Συρακούσαις ποτ’ αὐτὸν ἀγοράσαι
> καὶ σκευάσαντα καταφαγεῖν ὅλον σχεδόν
> πλὴν τῆς κεφαλῆς, ἁλόντα δ’ ὑπὸ δυσπεψίας
> κακῶς ἔχειν σφόδρ’· …
>
> They say that Philoxenus the poet of dithyrambs was excessively an eater of delicacies/relish. And so [they say] that he once bought in Syracuse an octopus two cubits long and, after preparing it, nearly ate up the whole thing except for the head, but when he was seized by indigestion, he was very much in a bad state … (fr. 9.64-70)

[32] Parallel passage adduced by Hunter and Russell (2011, ad loc.).
[33] Ibid., ad 14d.

This passage confirms that an octopus would be counted as relish (ὄψον) since Philoxenus is an eater of relish (ὀψοφάγος), an example of which is his eating an octopus. So this image connects back to the second image of poetry as relish. It is also striking that he eats the entire octopus except for the head, just the part of the octopus the anonymous hexameter, which begins the passage quoted above and is the first poetry cited in *De audiendis*, focuses on. If Plutarch had the story about Philoxenus from Machon in mind, he might indicate that even one who avoids the head but eats the entire body could become sick like Philoxenus. What is the body of the octopus? Philosophy? The copresence of good and evil in the octopus' head, at least, mirrors the necessary copresence of good and evil in poetry as an imitation of good and evil in the world.

Plutarch pairs the anonymous hexameter with citations of Homer's two epics, first the *Odyssey* then the *Iliad*, in yet another image about poetry. He makes a comparison between the land of the Egyptians and poetry, in that both contain good and bad drugs. Before the verse cited from the *Odyssey*, Homer says that Helen "cast a drug into the wine" (εἰς οἶνον βάλε φάρμακον, 4.220) of those gathered together for Telemachus' visit to Sparta.[34] Plutarch's own treatise already was designed to lessen the effects of poetry like an amethyst lessens the effect of wine, functioning like a drug (as noted, amethyst can also refer to an herb to be consumed in addition to the stone). Now the citation from the *Odyssey* links the *pharmakon* to wine. This strengthens the connection between Plutarch's own treatise and the *pharmakon*, but also to poetry since poetry is what produces *pharmaka* rather than philosophy. Like philosophy, Plutarch's treatise moderates poetry but, like poetry, it is a *pharmakon*. The linkage of writing (poetry) to the *pharmakon* in an Egyptian context of course recalls the story of Theuth's invention of the *pharmakon* of writing in Egypt from the *Phaedrus* (274c5-275b2).[35]

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[34] Plutarch also quotes from *Odyssey* 4 at 22b25-26 (4.197-198), 22d19-20 (4.318), and 25a28 (4.93).
[35] I argue elsewhere that the *Phaedrus* passage refers to this passage in Homer (Trotz-Liboff 2023b, 399-400).

The citation of the *Iliad* comes from Aphrodite's description of her love potion (cestus) for Hera to use on Zeus. This is part of the "Deception of Zeus" episode (Διὸς ἀπατή) which was a problematic part of Homer's poetry, since it depicted base behavior among the gods. Later, Plutarch returns to this episode to reject an allegorical interpretation of it while proposing an acceptable moral interpretation, calling the potion a *pharmakon* (19f25-28; 20a12-b19). Through the Deception of Zeus Plutarch explains that the deceptive part of poetry (τὸ ἀπατηλόν) fastens on (ἅπτεται) especially those with some intelligence. Plutarch here first introduces the idea of deception in poetry, though it was already present to some degree in the notion that poetry pretends not to be philosophy. In any case, he now indicates that poetry is esoteric insofar as it is deceptive. His reuse of the verb ἅπτω in the middle voice ("fasten on") of the deceptive part of poetry connects back to his prior two uses of the verb, first of the power of listening (15a2) and second of the amethyst to which he compares his own treatise (15b10). Plutarch surprisingly reinforces the connection between his own treatise and poetry, which is now explicitly deceptive.

The deceptive or lying nature of poetry will be the subject of Chapter 2, but Plutarch expands on it here with two quotes from Simonides and Gorgias. Simonides explains that he does not deceive the Thessalians like he does all others because they are too ignorant to be deceived (15c27-d1). Then Plutarch writes, "And Gorgias called tragedy deceit, by which both the one who has deceived is more just than the one who has not deceived and the one who has been deceived is wiser than the one who has not been deceived" (15d1-4 = DK 82 B 23; cited also at *Bellone an pace* 348c).[36] Gorgias enters naturally after the citation from the *Odyssey* about Helen given his *Helen*,[37] and in the *Helen* Gorgias also connects poetry, rhetoric, and deceit (DK 82 B 11.12-14). One might also think of the connection between justice and lying in Plato's *Hippias Minor*

[36] Γοργίας δὲ τὴν τραγῳδίαν εἶπεν ἀπάτην, ἣν ὅ τ' ἀπατήσας δικαιότερος τοῦ μὴ ἀπατήσαντος, καὶ ὁ ἀπατηθεὶς σοφώτερος τοῦ μὴ ἀπατηθέντος.
[37] Hunter and Russell 2011, ad loc.

(375d7-376a7). At any rate, Plutarch does not censure deceit as unjust, but rather reports with apparent approval Gorgias' remark that the tragic poet is just in deceiving his audience. In *De gloria Atheniensium* (*Bellone an pace clariores fuerint Athenienses*), Plutarch says that the person deceived is wiser, "for what is not imperceptive is easily caught by the pleasure of speeches" (εὐάλωτον γὰρ ὑφ' ἡδονῆς λόγων τὸ μὴ ἀναίσθητον, 348c). This conforms with what Plutarch has been saying in *De audiendis* about the intelligent young men's being more susceptible to poetry (and his own treatise). Here, though, Plutarch does not gloss "wiser" and generally takes a more positive view of poetry than he does in *De gloria Atheniensium*.[38] Since he takes the poets, especially Homer, to be teachers, could it be the case that he means poets actually make the reader wiser through the necessary deceit of poetry? The one who either does not allow himself or is not perceptive enough to be deceived cannot profit from the poet's teaching.

In that justice and wisdom are tied up with poetry, Plutarch in a sense has already answered the crucial question he now poses about poetry: whether the teachers should stop up the ears of the young with wax like (ὥσπερ) Odysseus' crew when passing the sirens, sailing away from poetry on "the little Epicurean boat" (τὸ Ἐπικούρειον ἀκάτιον), or preserve them "by standing up and binding their judgment with some right reason" (ὀρθῷ τινι λογισμῷ παριστάντες καὶ καταδέοντες τὴν κρίσιν) (15d3-9). Of course an allusion to the episode of the sirens (*Od.* 12.47-48, 165-200),[39] this passage compares[40] Odysseus' orders for his crew members to stop up their ears to Epicurus' command to his students to avoid poetry. Odysseus is the one doing the commanding, but Plutarch proposes "binding judgment" to the mast rather stopping up students'

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[38] This discrepancy may be explained by the fact that in *De gloria Atheniensium* Plutarch treats poetry from the perspective of the city, while in *De audiendis* he treats poetry from the perspective of philosophy. Or, as Bréchet (1999, 226) puts it, in *De gloria Atheniensium* "l'objectif est ... de dévaluer l'art par rapport à l'action."
[39] See Freer 2019, 80-81 on Epicurus' injunction to Pythocles which seems to liken poetry to the sirens (DL 10.6).
[40] The comparison turns into a metaphor: there is an explicit likeness to the Ithacan crewmembers (ὥσπερ) but the young men would flee poetry on the Epicurean boat, which stands in directly for philosophy devoid of poetry without an explicit comparison being drawn.

ears.[41] So Odysseus is at once the teacher and κρίσις bound to the mast. We might take Homer as the teacher instead since he arranges the scene, even if Odysseus narrates it. The sirens, who represent poetry, offer knowledge (εἰδώς, 12.188, ἴδμεν, 189, 191), so poetry is the way to knowledge even as it presents dangers. If Epicurus is like Odysseus in preventing his charges from hearing poetry, implicitly he too hears the sirens himself and yet deprives others of the opportunity to do so. Plutarch says everyone should get to be like Odysseus rather than his crew, following Homer in showing that poetry is the way to philosophy.

Plutarch has introduced Epicurus as a teacher alongside Homer. Although he will soon reject Epicurus' suggestion to remove poetry from education, the implicit parallel between Epicurus and Odysseus puts Epicurus in a better light than we might expect, since Plutarch will go on to praise Odysseus as a paradigm of wisdom. In what follows, however, Plutarch introduces Plato as the true partner to Homer, the ideal teachers. Rather than seeing himself as forcing Homer to be like Plato,[42] Plutarch may have held the similarity between the two to be due to Homer's instruction of Plato. Plutarch's contemporary Dio Chrysostom has this to say about Homer and (Plato's) Socrates: "But I think this at least is clear to many—whoever is experienced with both men—that Socrates *in truth* is the student of Homer, not, as some say, of Archelaus" (*Or*. 55.3).[43]

In the prior two images, the sixth and seventh of Chapter 1, Plutarch likens poetry to two foreign sources of wisdom, Egypt and the sirens. Egypt for Herodotus provided the material from which Homer and Hesiod created the Greek gods (2.53), for Plato was the repository of ancient

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[41] As mentioned above (7.1), Plutarch later emphasizes the need to preserve free judgment (κρίσιν, 26b11). In conjunction with this passage, Plutarch suggests that judgment needs to be bound in order to be free, i.e., freedom entails a sort of necessity.

[42] As, e.g., Várzeas (2019, 84-85) supposes. See also Bréchet 1999, 210: "... Plutarque n'hésite pas à recommander de falsifier le texte pour que les vers entachés d'impiété remportent la palme de la moralité !"

[43] Ἀλλὰ τοῦτό γε οἶμαι πολλοῖς εἶναι σαφές, ὅστις ἔμπειρος ἀμφοῖν τοῖν ἀνδροῖν, ὅτι Σωκράτης τό γε ἀληθὲς Ὁμήρου μαθητὴς γέγονεν, οὐχ ὥσπερ ἔνιοί φασιν Ἀρχελάου. Cf. Max. Tyr. 26.3: ἐκείνης τῆς ᾠδῆς θρέμμα ἦν Πλάτων ("Plato was a nursling of that song [of Homer's]").

wisdom (e.g., *Phdr*. 274c5-275b2; *Ti*. 21e1-25d6), and for Plutarch contains myths which conceal Platonic philosophy (see, e.g., *De Is. et Os*. 354d-e; 373e; 374c-d). But Egypt was also a place in myth where travelers like Menelaus (and on some accounts Helen) could get waylaid (*Od*. 4.351-592; Hdt. 2.112-118; E. *Hel*.). The double attraction and danger of Egypt recalls those of the sirens. Poetry as foreign, enticing, and dangerous is fitting given the contrast Plutarch drew at the beginning of the treatise between the Greek Philoxenus, "the lover of the foreign," and the stern Cato. For Romans, Greek poetry (and philosophy) are foreign sources of wisdom which promise great rewards but could also lead to great danger. Plutarch's task in *De audiendis* is to show a safe course through Greek waters to his Roman readers.

After these two images which focus on the local, Plutarch mixes citations from Homer and Plato. These serve to return us to the realm of food and drink through an image of wine and water which affirms the need to mix poetry and philosophy. He writes:

> [*Il*. 6.130] 'οὐδὲ γὰρ οὐδὲ Δρύαντος υἱὸς κρατερὸς Λυκόοργος' ὑγιαίνοντα νοῦν εἶχεν, ὅτι πολλῶν μεθυσκομένων καὶ παροινούντων τὰς ἀμπέλους περιιὼν ἐξέκοπτεν ἀντὶ τοῦ τὰς κρήνας ἐγγυτέρω προσαγαγεῖν καὶ 'μαινόμενον' θεόν, ὥς φησιν ὁ Πλάτων [*Lg*. 773d1-2], 'ἑτέρῳ θεῷ νήφοντι κολαζόμενον' σωφρονίζειν. ἀφαιρεῖ γὰρ ἡ κρᾶσις τοῦ οἴνου τὸ βλάπτον, οὐ συναναιροῦσα τὸ χρήσιμον. μηδ' ἡμεῖς οὖν τὴν ποιητικὴν ἡμερίδα τῶν Μουσῶν ἐκκόπτωμεν μηδ' ἀφανίζωμεν, ἀλλ' ὅπου μὲν ὑφ' ἡδονῆς ἀκράτου πρὸς δόξαν αὐθάδως θρασυνόμενον ἐξυβρίζει καὶ ὑλομανεῖ τὸ μυθῶδες αὐτῆς καὶ θεατρικόν, ἐπιλαμβανόμενοι κολούωμεν καὶ πιέζωμεν· ὅπου δ' ἅπτεταί τινος μούσης τῇ χάριτι καὶ τὸ γλυκὺ τοῦ λόγου καὶ ἀγωγὸν οὐκ ἄκαρπόν ἐστιν οὐδὲ κενόν, ἐνταῦθα φιλοσοφίαν εἰσάγωμεν καὶ καταμιγνύωμεν.
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> [*Il*. 6.140] 'For nor did Lycurgus, the powerful son of Dryas,' have a healthy mind, since when many were drunk and being hubristic with wine, he went around and cut away the vines instead of leading the springs closer and making moderate the 'raging' god, as Plato says [*Lg*. 773d1-2], 'being checked by the other sober god.' For the mixture of the wine takes away what is harmful, while not destroying what is useful together with it. And so let us not cut away the poetic vine of the Muses and let us not do away with it, but where under [the influence of] unmixed pleasure, being stubbornly emboldened towards glory, the mythical and dramatic [part] of it commits outrage and runs rampant, taking hold of it let us restrain and stifle it; but where with its grace it fastens upon some muse and the sweet and leading [part] of its speech is not fruitless or empty, there let us lead in philosophy and mix it in. (15d10-f23)

Poetry is now like the wine-bearing vine, and philosophy like the water from the springs to be mixed with wine. Plutarch introduces this comparison through a reading of Diomedes' speech to

Glaucus about Lycurgus which takes Lycurgus' fight against Dionysus allegorically as a fight against wine, and Thetis to mean water (*Il.* 6.130-137). Plutarch seems to take the passage from the *Laws*[44] as already interpreting Homer's passage in this way.[45] In Plato's text 'raging' (μαινόμενος) modifies wine rather than Dionysus, as in the *Iliad* (6.132). The transference of a god's name to one of his or her powers is a poetic technique Plutarch later describes at length (23a15-c12), and for him allows for an acceptable way of understanding poetry as opposed to the elaborate allegoresis characteristic of the Stoics (19e20-f28).

Plutarch puts Plato on an equal plane with Homer, as an authority to be cited in describing the relationship between philosophy and poetry. Like wine, poetry is useful and its bad effects can be moderated by mixing in philosophy. This is under the condition that it is "not fruitless" (οὐκ ἄκαρπόν), which foreshadows a later image according to which the benefit of poetry is like a "fruit" (καρπός) which "is hidden" (ἀποκρύπτεται) amidst the leaves and twigs of the vine and "escapes notice by being covered in shade" (λανθάνει κατασκιαζόμενος) (28d10-e12). Poetry conceals its philosophical fruit, and much of Plutarch's treatise will be dedicated to explaining how to extract that fruit. Here, poetry is not fruitless when it "fastens upon some muse" (ἅπτεταί τινος μούσης). Plutarch uses ἅπτω for the fourth time in Chapter 1. It seems like the negative potential for poetry to fasten upon the youth who possesses a good nature and the positive potential for Plutarch's treatise as amethyst to counteract that effect comes when the pleasant part of poetry remains connected to the divine Muses. The injunction to mix philosophy into poetry like water into wine under the right conditions means that one starts with poetry and adds philosophy, whereas according to the image of philosophy as relish it seemed like poetry rather than philosophy was the adventitious ingredient.

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[44] This is one of only two direct quotations of Plato in *De audiendis*, the other, of the *Third Letter* (315c), being at the end of the work (36c14-15).
[45] See Hunter and Russell 2011, ad loc.

In the ninth and final image of Chapter 1, Plutarch immediately complicates the prior image by now comparing the speeches of philosophy to the mandragora plant rather than water, while poetry remains the vine and wine: "For just as the mandragora by growing alongside the vines and spreading its power to the wine makes the tiring effects more gentle for those drinking, so too does poetry by receiving speeches from philosophy mixed with its mythical element provide learning which is light and agreeable to the young" (15f23-28).[46] This image is an explanation (γάρ) of the last image, but it contradicts that image by changing the terms of comparison.

The mandragora plant grows alongside the vine and changes the effect of wine. Hunter and Russell liken its effects to those of the amethyst.[47] Again as in the prior image the starting point is poetry, which, as the grammatical subject, then receives the speeches of philosophy. It is already poetry's goal to teach, but philosophy allows it to do it better. Poetry is like wine in both this image and back in the fourth image of the amethyst. But whereas Plutarch's own treatise before mellowed the effects of wine, here philosophy as the mandragora performs the same function. We saw above how Plutarch's treatise resembled poetry in that both were likened to a kind of *pharmakon*, but the mandragora image now make Plutarch's treatise as amethyst resemble philosophy as mandragora. Plutarch thus presents his treatise as indeterminate on the spectrum of poetry and philosophy on the level of the images of Chapter 1.

Six out of nine of the images have to do with eating and drinking. Poetry is compared to the products of nature, so the poet is put on the level of nature. The analogy between art and nature, τέχνη and φύσις, is prominent in Aristotle (see *Ph*. 193a31-36; 194a21-b9) and in the

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[46] ὥσπερ γὰρ ὁ μανδραγόρας ταῖς ἀμπέλοις παραφυόμενος καὶ διαδιδοὺς τὴν δύναμιν εἰς τὸν οἶνον μαλακωτέραν ποιεῖ τὴν καταφορὰν τοῖς πίνουσιν, οὕτω τοὺς λόγους ἡ ποίησις ἐκ φιλοσοφίας ἀναλαμβάνουσα μιγνυμένους πρὸς τὸ μυθῶδες ἐλαφρὰν καὶ προσφιλῆ παρέχει τοῖς νέοις τὴν μάθησιν. I follow Hunter and Russell 2011 in not reading a second conjectural participle after ἀναλαμβάνουσα (like Paton's <καὶ προσφέρουσα> in the Teubner).
[47] Ibid., ad loc.

Timaeus the demiurge is called a poet (ποιητήν, 28c3; cf. δημιουργός, *De audiendis* 16c24; ποιητὴς καὶ πατὴρ δημιουργός, *De facie* 972b).[48] φύσις is the most complete form of ποίησις, in that its principle of creation is self-contained,[49] but this means that poetry imitates nature, that a poem is a simulacrum of the world through which we better understand the world.[50] Plutarch presents philosophy as equally natural, and in describing the world philosophy may be just as mimetic as poetry. Indeed, the density of images in Chapter 1 would make it hard to distinguish Plutarch's work from poetry, if the difference between philosophy and poetry did not reside in the absence or presence of meter (cf. Arist. *Po*. 1447b9-20; 1451b1-2, 27-28). Plutarch's prose is, though, highly rhythmic.[51]

The final image stresses the need to connect the speeches (τοὺς λόγους) of philosophy with the mythical element (τὸ μυθῶδες) of poetry. Plutarch will soon highlight the lying inherent to poetry (15c23-27) and elsewhere says that "myth wants to be a false speech which resembles a true speech" (ὁ δὲ μῦθος εἶναι βούλεται λόγος ψευδὴς ἐοικὼς ἀληθινῷ, *Bellone an pace* 348a; cf. Pl. *Min*. 315a2-3; *Ti*. 29d2). The necessary mixture of poetry and philosophy, of *muthos* and *logos*, amounts to the assertion that lying must be built into philosophy, that philosophy must be esoteric. A question which requires further elaboration is whether Plutarch sees *muthos* and *logos* as two elements which could ever exist separately from one another or whether they are always intrinsically bound to one another and only appear separate after analysis. Plutarch had mentioned the "sweet and leading [part] of the speech" (τὸ γλυκὺ τοῦ λόγου καὶ ἀγωγόν) of poetry (15f21), and redeemable philosophic poetry is marked by having a *logos* (28b15-16; see also 34b5-c12), so in poetry at least *logos* and *muthos* are already mixed. Poetry as pure *muthos* seems to be ruled

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[48] See Lather 2017, 339 on Plutarch's *De sera numinis vindicta*: "... Plutarch thus hones in on *technē* as a way to explain the nature of the universe as well as the kind of product at which human *technē* should aim ..."
[49] See Heidegger's (1954a [1953], 15) discussion in *The Question Concerning Technology*.
[50] Cf. Bréchet 1999, 215: "Dans le *De audiendis poetis*, à la vision technique de la *technè* correspond une présentation technique de la *mimèsis*."
[51] See Hutchinson 2018.

out, but is there a pure *logos* of philosophy—the water before it is mixed with wine? At the end of his companion piece to *De audiendis, De audiendo*,[52] in language that resembles that of a famous passage from Plato's *Seventh Letter* (341b7-d2) Plutarch makes a general statement about learning and *logos*:

> ... τοὺς δ' ἀργοὺς ἐκείνους παρακαλῶμεν, ὅταν τὰ κεφάλαια τῇ νοήσει περιλάβωσιν, αὐτοὺς δι' αὑτῶν τὰ λοιπὰ συντιθέναι, καὶ τῇ μνήμῃ χειραγωγεῖν τὴν εὕρεσιν, καὶ τὸν ἀλλότριον λόγον οἷον ἀρχὴν καὶ σπέρμα λαβόντας ἐκτρέφειν καὶ αὔξειν. οὐ γὰρ ὡς ἀγγεῖον ὁ νοῦς ἀποπληρώσεως ἀλλ' ὑπεκκαύματος μόνον ὥσπερ ὕλη δεῖται, ὁρμὴν ἐμποιοῦντος εὑρετικὴν καὶ ὄρεξιν ἐπὶ τὴν ἀλήθειαν. ὥσπερ οὖν εἴ τις ἐκ γειτόνων πυρὸς δεόμενος, εἶτα πολὺ καὶ λαμπρὸν εὑρὼν αὐτοῦ καταμένοι διὰ τέλους θαλπόμενος, οὕτως εἴ τις ἥκων λόγου μεταλαβεῖν πρὸς ἄλλον οὐκ οἴεται δεῖν φῶς οἰκεῖον ἐξάπτειν καὶ νοῦν ἴδιον, ἀλλὰ χαίρων τῇ ἀκροάσει κάθηται θελγόμενος, οἷον ἔρευθος ἕλκει καὶ γάνωμα τὴν δόξαν ἀπὸ τῶν λόγων, τὸν δ' ἐντὸς εὐρῶτα τῆς ψυχῆς καὶ ζόφον οὐκ ἐκτεθέρμαγκεν οὐδ' ἐξέωκε διὰ φιλοσοφίας.
>
> ... and let us enjoin those lazy ones, whenever they grasp the chief points in thought, to themselves put together the rest through themselves,[53] and to guide the discovery by memory, and after taking the speech of another to nurse and grow it like a beginning and a seed. For not like a vessel does the mind need filling, but like timber it only needs fuel, which makes in it an impulse of discovery and desire for the truth. Just as, then, if someone while in need of fire from neighbors, after finding a great and brilliant fire, next should remain there to the end growing warm, thus if one after arriving to another to partake of a speech does not think that it is necessary to spark his private flame and his own mind, but rejoicing at the lecture sits enchanted, he drags opinion from the speeches like a flush and brilliance, but he has not warmed or caused to seethe the decay and gloom within his soul through philosophy. (48b-c)

Logos is not like water poured from vessel to vessel, which remains intact and the same. Rather, it is like a beginning (ἀρχή), a living seed or spark of fire which grows and is transformed when taken up by another. I believe Plutarch writes in the way he does in order to set on fire the mind of the other. His profuse prose, rampant with rhythm, abundant in images, and abounding in elaborate periods,[54] is designed to make us think through the subject ourselves. A drier style would better fit the belief that *logos* is pure enough to accomplish everything on its own. Images function like myth, which, as the rainbow leads the eye up to the clouds, "is the impression of

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[52] See García López 1984, 411 for the connection between the two treatises.
[53] See again Lucr. 1.407.
[54] See Yaginuma 1992.

some speech reflecting thought back to other things" (λόγου τινὸς ἔμφασίς ἐστιν ἀνακλῶντος ἐπ᾽ ἄλλα τὴν διάνοιαν, *De Is. et Os*. 358f-359a). By the way of writing we have observed in Chapter 1, by which Plutarch makes the use of images central to his account of the relationship between philosophy and poetry, Plutarch seems to provide an answer to the question of whether *logos* can exist on its own: philosophy necessarily involves poetry—*logos* necessarily involves *muthos*.[55] In *De audiendo*, the *logos* of the other "makes in" (ἐμποιοῦντος) the other an impulse and desire. Speech is poetic in the soul of the listener, and in his *Quaestiones Platonicae* Plutarch twice likens *logos* to the *pharmakon* (999f; 1009f; cf. *De audiendis* 34b5-c12). Such considerations may be on the way to understanding the "cause" (in the terms of my typology) of Plutarch as an esoteric writer.

> After his final image, Plutarch ends Chapter 1 as follows:
>
> ὅθεν οὐ φευκτέον ἐστὶ τὰ ποιήματα τοῖς φιλοσοφεῖν μέλλουσιν, ἀλλ᾽ ἐν ποιήμασι προφιλοσοφητέον ἐθιζομένους ἐν τῷ τέρποντι τὸ χρήσιμον ζητεῖν καὶ ἀγαπᾶν· εἰ δὲ μή, διαμάχεσθαι καὶ δυσχεραίνειν. ἀρχὴ γὰρ αὕτη παιδεύσεως, [S. fr. 747]
> ‘ἔργου δὲ παντὸς ἥν τις ἄρχηται καλῶς,
> καὶ τὰς τελευτὰς εἰκός ἐσθ᾽ οὕτως ἔχειν’
> κατὰ τὸν Σοφοκλέα.
>
> Hence the ones who are going to philosophize must not flee poems, but they must philosophize in advance in the poems becoming accustomed to seek and love the profitable in the delightful; if [there is] not [the profitable there], [becoming accustomed] to fight against and scorn them. For this is the beginning of education, [S. fr. 747]
> ‘and if one begins each deed beautifully, it is likely that also the endings will be thus’
> according to Sophocles. (15f28-16a7)

Poetry must become an integral part of philosophizing. Through the citation of Sophocles, Plutarch affirms that a beautiful beginning leads to a beautiful end (cf. Arist. *Ph*. 194a28-33; *Po*. 1450b26-27).[56] The end is contained in the beginning and indeed determines growth from the beginning. This is the end of the beginning of Plutarch's work, which he made particularly

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[55] See also *De virtute morali* 451c-d where Plutarch says *logos* must be mixed with *pathos*, using the image of water and wine in a similar way as in the eighth image of *De audiendis*.
[56] Beauty will play a great role in Chapter 3 on mimesis.

beautiful through its nine images. Does Plutarch then mean that the beautiful beginning of *De audiendis* will ensure its beautiful end?

Over just three pages, Plutarch has made a grand statement on the relationship between philosophy and poetry. While other portions of the treatise focus more directly on esotericism—in particular Plutarch's reading of Homer—tracking Plutarch's treatment of the relationship between philosophy and poetry is necessary in discerning the relationship between philosophy, poetry, and esotericism. Preliminarily, his poetic use of images in what is nominally a philosophic treatise filters what he takes to be the connection between philosophy and poetry through what amounts to a hall of mirrors. The merging of poetry and philosophy somehow constitutes esotericism. The example of Chapter 1 shows argument being combined with image-making, an indirect form of communication. It is not just *what* is being said, but also *how*. And these two cannot be cleanly separated. It seems obvious that poetry has to do with the *how*, i.e., the language itself, in all of its details, that is used to communicate. In esoteric philosophy the *how* also counts as much as the *what*—the method as much as the content—, and the two are intimately connected. Thus we see the union or unity of poetry and philosophy in esotericism.

Below I will pursue Plutarch's esoteric reading of Homer to see what esotericism as the linkage between philosophy and poetry may mean for Plutarch's own writerly practices. Plutarch's Homer is a philosophic poet who knows the truth about the gods and human virtue but chooses to teach in an indirect way. His esotericism will thus be an important example of the triangulation of poetry, philosophy, and esotericism.

8. Chapter 7: Plutarch's Homer: Esoteric Reading and Writing

8.1 Introduction

Plutarch's Homer, whom for convenience I will refer to simply as "Homer" unless the context demands further specification, represents a specific instantiation of the general combination of poetry and philosophy discussed in Chapter 1 of *De audiendis*. Homer shows how poetry and philosophy are actually combined, and Plutarch reads him as an esoteric writer.

Homer is the hero of *De audiendis*. By my count there are 200 poetic quotations in the work.[1] Leo J. R. Heirman counts 110 from Homer, with 83 from the *Iliad* and 27 from the *Odyssey*. Compared with the total of 1,840 quotations in Plutarch's entire corpus of Homer and other key authors, the same authors are quoted 173 times in *De audiendis*, about a tenth of the total. Heirman thus divides the total count of Homeric quotations by ten as "a standard of comparison" and finds that Homer is cited 1.7 times more frequently in *De audiendis* than is expected, and "that the relation between the importance of the Iliad [sic] and the Odyssea [sic] as a source of quotations grows from 2 : 1 in all the works to 3 : 1 in this little book."[2] Homer is cited almost twice as often as normal and accounts for 55% of the poetic quotations in the work. His *Iliad* takes center stage. Perhaps even more striking is Heirman's further finding that Plato is quoted only five times in *De audiendis* (I only count two explicit verbatim quotations, at 15e13-14 and 36c14-15), which is a staggeringly low 8% of the expected average from the total 650 quotations of Plato in the corpus. Homer and Plato are almost equally represented in the corpus but Plutarch emphasizes Homer and suppresses Plato in *De audiendis*.[3]

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[1] Heirman (1972, 37) counts 210. The difference is likely due to how many implicit quotations are counted. Heirman's (ibid., 30) number of 240 elsewhere seems to include quotations of prose as well as poetry.
[2] Ibid., 31-32.
[3] Ibid., 31, 33. The obvious reason for this is that this is a work on poetry, but Plutarch could, for example, have quoted from Plato more often as a point of comparison with what he takes to be the teaching of the Homer.

In what follows, I will endeavor to extract Homer's manner of writing implied by Plutarch's reading of him. This has not been previously attempted, likely because scholars see Plutarch as forcing his philosophy on Homer.[4] Thus they privilege Plutarch's description of his reading and even more his teaching over what sort of writing Homer's poems would have to be for his reading to make sense on its own terms.

I argue that Plutarch presents Homer as an esoteric writer, who conceals philosophy in poetry without resorting to allegory. I will explain Homer's esotericism with reference to my fourfold typology of cause, motive, content, and method. Plutarch himself is explicit about Homer's motive, content, and method and elaborates on a wide variety of methods of his esotericism in particular.

Cause, since it entails discerning a philosopher's deepest commitments, may be better to discuss at the end rather than the beginning. I already noted that the inextricability of *muthos* and *logos* may point to a cause of esotericism in Plutarch. Tentatively I will now suggest too that it is due to skepticism ("epistemological esotericism")—and in particular a lack of knowledge of what occurs after death—, a fundamental tension between philosophy and politics that necessitates the use of esoteric philosophy in the form of poetry, and finally a doctrine of the soul ("psychological esotericism") according to which passion is inextricably bound with reason. As noted, Plutarch does not assign a specific cause for Homer's esotericism, so my discussion of cause will have to be based to a greater degree than for the other categories on the philosophical commitments of Plutarch, rather than those of Homer, and it will come after my discussion of motive, method, and content.

It is clear, though, that Homer has primarily pedagogical motives for his esotericism. He also has the motive of entertainment or amazement, but this is subsidiary to the goal of teaching.

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[4] E.g., Philippon 1987, 70-71.

People read his poems because they are delightful, and he would not be able to teach them if they did not read him in the first place. Homer is also sensitive to the dangerous character of the truth, so in certain cases he also practices esotericism to shield the many from the debilitating character of the truth, especially about the power of fortune as opposed to that of the gods.

Homer employs the methods of mythic exposition, indirect indication, deliberate contradiction, ambiguity, and suppression of logical implications of a statement, to name only a few of the most prominent techniques. These fall under the general heading of obscurity. We will also see how the prepositional prefix ὑπο- ("under") signals Homer's method of esotericism and hence the method of esoteric reading required to understand him.

Discussing the content of Homer's esotericism is an opportunity to reflect on what Plutarch sees as Homer's teaching overall and how Plutarch uses quotations of Homer as an esoteric way of writing in the course of his esoteric reading of Homer. Overall, the content of Homer's esotericism or his teaching concerns the nature of the gods and human virtue. Homer teaches this through his indirect indications, contradictions, etc. in relation to specific passages. He elaborates his theology and ethics by what he tells us about specific gods and by praise and blame of specific heroes. Some important results are that Homer has a proto-Epicurean/Platonic theology in which the gods are not troubled by the passions, though they or some impersonal force may carry out some version of theodicy.[5] All the heroes and the (falsely portrayed) gods have great flaws, except for Odysseus who is both a deceiver and a paradigm for wisdom. Odysseus thus models esoteric philosophy.[6]

By synthesizing the esotericism of Plutarch's Homer, we will be better prepared to judge whether Plutarch's esotericism is like that of Homer, or whether it differs. This will be tied to the

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[5] Cf. ibid., 76: "... et Épicure, enfin, est appelé pour confirmer des opinions très platoniciennes sur le bonheur, la mort et les tyrans."

[6] Plutarch's Homer, moreover, indirectly teaches about the meaning of Greekness through his portrayal of the differing behavior of the Achaean and Trojan armies (29d10-30a8).

analysis of the final chapter of the work in the final section of this chapter (8.7), where Plutarch concludes with the wisdom of Epicurus which he identifies with tragedy rather than Homeric epic. Homer, Plato, Epicurus, tragic wisdom, and to some extent the Stoics appear as competing voices in a dialogue Plutarch instantiates which, along with his imagery, makes it difficult but not impossible to descry his meaning.

8.2 Plutarch on Poetry, Deceit, and Delight

Chapter 2 begins as follows:

> Πρῶτον οὖν εἰσάγωμεν εἰς τὰ ποιήματα τὸν νέον μηδὲν οὕτω μεμελετημένον ἔχοντα[7] καὶ πρόχειρον ὡς τὸ ‘πολλὰ ψεύδονται ἀοιδοὶ’ τὰ μὲν ἑκόντες τὰ δ’ ἄκοντες. ἑκόντες μέν, ὅτι πρὸς ἡδονὴν ἀκοῆς καὶ χάριν, ἣν οἱ πλεῖστοι διώκουσιν, αὐστηροτέραν ἡγοῦνται τὴν ἀλήθειαν τοῦ ψεύδους. ἡ μὲν γὰρ ἔργῳ γιγνομένη, κἂν ἀτερπὲς ἔχῃ τὸ τέλος, οὐκ ἐξίσταται· τὸ δὲ πλαττόμενον λόγῳ ῥᾷστα περιχωρεῖ καὶ τρέπεται πρὸς τὸ ἥδιον ἐκ τοῦ λυποῦντος.
>
> First let us lead the young man to poems having nothing so cared for and ready at hand as the [saying] ‘bards lie a lot,’ sometimes willingly, but sometimes unwillingly. [They lie] willingly because they believe that truth is more bitter than falsehood in regards to the pleasure and grace of hearing, which most pursue. For the truth which happens in deed, even if it has an end [which is] without delight, does not change [from its course]; but what is fashioned in speech can go around and turn towards what is pleasant out of what causes pain. (16a8-b15)

Plutarch wants the young man to have the expression “bards lie a lot” “ready at hand” (πρόχειρον). The young man must have this ready at hand so he can be manageable or “accustomed to the hand” (χειροήθεις,14e7). “Bards lie a lot” is an expression attested in two prior works, the spurious *On Justice* attributed to Plato (374b1) and in Book Alpha of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (983a3-4). Aristotle just prior to that passage discusses the common element of wonder in both myth and philosophy (982b17-19) and then uses the expression to argue against

[7] I read the insertion of τὸν νέον of X^3 and C^2 and ἔχοντα of all MSS with Valgiglio 1973 and Hunter and Russell 2011. As von Reutern (1933, ad loc.) notes, “Die Einsetzung des Plurals ἔχοντα<ς> durch Pat. ist nicht unbedingt nötig.”

the view of the poets that the divine is envious of extraordinary human beings (983a2-3). Plutarch will also focus on the lies told about the divine by poets, including Homer.

Whereas Plutarch here says that falsehood is more fitting for pleasure (ἡδονήν), in the *Poetics* Aristotle, as in the *Metaphysics*, touches on the wondrous and poetry, saying, "and the wondrous is pleasant" (τὸ δὲ θαυμαστὸν ἡδύ, 1460a17). "And Homer," Aristotle continues, "has taught also the others how it is necessary for them to speak lies" (δεδίδαχεν δὲ μάλιστα Ὅμηρος καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους ψευδῆ λέγειν ὡς δεῖ, 1460a18-19). Plutarch says Homer has a silent teaching (19e18-19) while Aristotle says that he taught the others—he does not specify that he means the other poets—how to lie in the right way. Homer teaches esoterically about esotericism.

Homer of course was already the educator of Greece for Plato (*R*. 606e2) and Aristotle and Plutarch delve into his teaching. Plutarch specifies that the poets lie both willingly and unwillingly, a distinction which again recalls Plato's *Hippias Minor* as well as the passage from *On Justice*, the spurious Platonic work which contains the expression which should be ready at hand (373e10-374a7; 375d1-10). Lying willingly (while also conveying the truth or promoting some action) is the definition of esotericism. Poets lie willingly because truth is more bitter (αὐστηροτέραν) than lies. This resembles what Lucretius also says (see further 5.2.3 above): "this doctrine often seems to be rather bitter to those by whom it has not been employed, and the crowd shrinks away from it" (1.943-945 = 4.18-20).[8] The crowd (*vulgus*) or for Plutarch "most people" (οἱ πλεῖστοι) want what is pleasant or sweet rather than what is true. In the *Republic*, Socrates dismisses the perfect poet who is "sacred and wondrous and pleasant" (ἱερὸν καὶ θαυμαστὸν καὶ ἡδύν, 398a4-5) and enjoins his companions to make use of "a more bitter and more unpleasant poet" (τῷ αὐστηροτέρῳ καὶ ἀηδεστέρῳ ποιητῇ, 398a8-b1) in their city. Poetry with the sweet

[8] *... haec ratio plerumque videtur | tristior esse quibus non est tractata, retroque | vulgus abhorret ab hac ...*

prepares for the bitter, and as we will see below (8.7), in *De audiendis* Chapter 14 is considerably more bitter than Chapter 1.[9]

What is fashioned in speech (τὸ πλαττόμενον λόγῳ) is more pleasant than the truth which happens in deed. What is fashioned in speech is myth (see 20c24-25) as both "story" in the sense of plot and false stories (how we use the word "myth") about the gods and Hades. The end that is either pleasant or unpleasant clearly indicates myth as story or plot (see 16b16-18; Arist. *Po*. 1450a4-5). Socrates, by contrast, "mixed the myths of Aesop with epic [poetry], on the grounds that poetry does not exist for which falsehood does not exist in addition. For we know of sacrifices without dancing and the aulos, but we do not know of poetry that is without myth and falsehood" (20c25-27).[10] Here myth indicates fantastic stories, as is the case when Homer and other poets willingly tell lies about the existence of Hades (16e22-f28; 17b18-c30) and the gods (Chapter 4). *Muthos* as plot and myth is a key ingredient in the esotericism of Plutarch's Homer.[11]

Overall, Chapter 2 explains the connection between deceit and delight indicated in Chapter 1. Poetry always contains lies, but it makes a difference whether the poet lies willingly or unwillingly. Homer may get it wrong and lie unwillingly sometimes (17a10-b18), but as the greatest poet he will have the most willing lies. As Socrates says in *Alcibiades II*, poetry is by nature riddling, but it becomes excessively difficult to understand when the poet wishes to hide his wisdom (147b7-c5). All poetry lies, but some poets also lie deliberately to hide their wisdom. Plutarch takes Homer to be a poet of this sort par excellence. With the general contours of the

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[9] Cf. Philippon 1987, 72: "... et l'on verrait, par exemple, les moyens de justifier certaines immoralités (22 A-25 B et 27 A-27 E) dans la seconde partie plutôt que dans la première."

[10] τοὺς δ' Αἰσώπου μύθους ἔπεσιν ἐνέμειξεν, ὡς ποίησιν οὐκ οὖσαν ᾗ ψεῦδος μὴ πρόσεστι. θυσίας μὲν γὰρ ἀχόρους καὶ ἀναύλους ἴσμεν, οὐκ ἴσμεν δ' ἄμυθον οὐδ' ἀψευδῆ ποίησιν. Plutarch seems to mean that falsehood can exist in prose or poetry, since Aesop's myths were still false before Socrates turned them into poetry. So poetry consists at least of falsehood and meter.

[11] See also Hardie 1992, 4744-4745 on the connection between myths and riddles in Plutarch and Plato.

connection between esotericism and poetry in view, we may now turn to a detailed investigation of Homer's esotericism.

8.3 Motive

We have already seen that Homer's motive for writing esoterically is pedagogical. He has a hidden teaching, and in an act of justice the deceit of poetry makes others wiser (15d1-3). And we have also already observed that, subsidiary to this, one of his most important motives for lying is delight and pleasure (14d3-e7; 16a10-12). Plutarch explains further in Chapter 2, "But just as in paintings the color of the stroke is more moving on account of flesh-colored pigment and deceit, thus in poems falsehood mixed with persuasion amazes (ἐκπλήττει) and is loved more than elaboration around meter and diction without myth and fashioning" (16b18-22).[12] Amazement (ἔκπληξις), like Aristotle's wonder, is a central goal of poetic composition.

Amazement is necessary for teaching not only because it gets the young man reading in the first place but because wonder is also the beginning of philosophy. Poetry trains you in amazement, in thinking through contradictions, so you are able to handle the amazement of philosophy. In Chapter 14, the final chapter of the treatise, Plutarch says, "when the young men hear the [words] of the philosophers that are disconsonant with these things [i.e., popular opinion], first amazement (ἔκπληξις), disturbance, and astonishment takes hold of them, [and] they do not admit them nor withstand them ..." (36e12-14).[13] I will return to this crucial passage below and the image which follows it (8.4.2), but for now we see that the amazement of poetry has turned into the amazement of philosophy. The amazement of poetry is pleasant, but the young men cannot withstand the amazement of philosophy without the amazement of poetry. The noun

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[12] ἀλλ' ὥσπερ ἐν γραφαῖς κινητικώτερόν ἐστι χρῶμα γραμμῆς διὰ τὸ ἀνδρείκελον καὶ ἀπατηλόν, οὕτως ἐν ποιήμασι μεμιγμένον πιθανότητι ψεῦδος ἐκπλήττει καὶ ἀγαπᾶται μᾶλλον τῆς ἀμύθου καὶ ἀπλάστου περὶ μέτρον καὶ λέξιν κατασκευῆς.

[13] οἷς ἀντίφωνα τὰ τῶν φιλοσόφων ἀκούοντας αὐτοὺς τὸ πρῶτον ἔκπληξις ἴσχει καὶ ταραχὴ καὶ θάμβος, οὐ προσιεμένους οὐδ' ὑπομένοντας ... Cf. προέμενος (15a1).

ἔκπληξις is proper to descriptions of poetry rather than philosophy so, as Heirman aptly notes, "The use of ἔκπληξις is here in itself an ἔκπληξις."[14] Plutarch shows what amazement is by providing an example of it. By the end of the treatise the young man should be able to withstand or "remain under" (ὑπομένοντας) the amazement of philosophy after being schooled in the amazement of poetry (cf. Arist. *Po*. 1454a4). This shows why the motive of delight, pleasure, or amazement is not extrinsic to the motive of teaching, but rather shows the continuity as well as the difference in poetic and philosophic thinking. Poetic and philosophic amazement are two species of the same kind, and poetic amazement trains one for philosophic amazement. And yet, when one reaches philosophic amazement one does not leave behind poetic amazement, but thereby better understands its depth. Homer the entertainer and Homer the teacher are one and the same.[15]

Homer's final motive is other-regarding esotericism. Plutarch explains why poets, including Homer, use Zeus' name to mean fate or chance (23c13-14). Plutarch focuses on examples from Hesiod for chance (23e3-24a19), but his use of the plural in the following passage seems to suggest his inclusion of Homer:

> οὔπω γὰρ αὐτὸ τοὔνομα τῆς τύχης λέγοντες, εἰδότες δὲ τὴν τῆς ἀτάκτως καὶ ἀορίστως περιφερομένης αἰτίας δύναμιν ἰσχυρὰν καὶ ἀφύλακτον οὖσαν ἀνθρωπίνῳ λογισμῷ τοῖς τῶν θεῶν ὀνόμασιν ἐξέφραζον, ὥσπερ ἡμεῖς καὶ πράγματα καὶ ἤθη καὶ νὴ Δία καὶ λόγους καὶ ἄνδρας εἰώθαμεν δαιμονίους καὶ θείους προσαγορεύειν.
>
> For not yet saying the name itself of chance, but because they knew that the power of a cause that wandered around without order or bounds was mighty and unable to be guarded against by human calculation, they explained it with the names of the gods, just as we are accustomed to address deeds, characters, and—by Zeus!—speeches and men as demonic and divine. (24a19-24)

[14] Heirman 1972, ad loc.
[15] Cf. Bréchet 1999, 215.

The poets avoid using the word "chance" (τύχη) because of the debilitating effects this doctrine has on human minds.[16] They thus replace the word "chance" with personified gods to conceal the doctrine of chance which, like that of fate, can threaten a belief in human freedom.[17] Pure randomness or chaos leaves as little room for human action as pure determinism, since action presupposes a degree of intelligibility in the relationship between cause and effect.[18] In the *Epistle to Menoeceus* Epicurus, after discussing chance, similarly explains the problem of fate for humans and the preferability of the false myths of the gods: "… since it would be better to follow the myth about the gods than to be enslaved to the destiny of the natural philosophers; for the one traces out the hope of moving the gods by entreaty by honoring them, but the other contains a necessity beyond entreaty …" (134).[19] Like Cicero in *DND*, for Plutarch the poets see that the gods imbue human life with freedom.[20] The psychological and political effects of the doctrines of chance and fate must be taken into account in addition to their truth status. Homer and the other poets present the gods as causes rather than chance and fate in order to conceal a dangerous truth from humans. Homer presents a salutary exoteric teaching or noble lie for those who will not discern his esoteric teaching. That Plutarch swears an oath to Zeus while describing how humans falsely call speeches (*logoi*) demonic or divine implies that Zeus cares about the *logoi*, when Plutarch's point is just the opposite. An oath is an example of ascribing to the divine what is actually chance.[21]

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[16] Hunter and Russell (2011, ad loc.) note: "[I]t was familiar from at least the Hellenistic period that the word τύχη did not appear in the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*."
[17] But see Arist. *Po.* 1452a4-11 on the connection between wonder and chance.
[18] See Davis 1992, 56-57.
[19] … ἐπεὶ κρεῖττον ἦν τῷ περὶ θεῶν μύθῳ κατακολουθεῖν ἢ τῇ τῶν φυσικῶν εἱμαρμένῃ δουλεύειν· ὃ μὲν γὰρ ἐλπίδα παραιτήσεως ὑπογράφει θεῶν διὰ τιμῆς, ἡ δὲ ἀπαραίτητον ἔχει τὴν ἀνάγκην … Translation from Trotz-Liboff 2023a, 425 n. 68.
[20] As I suggested above (5.2.2), Lucretius may hold that believing in active gods, tyrannical though they might be, humbles proud humans and thus acts as a deterrent against tyranny and the loss of freedom.
[21] See D'Ippolito 2010, 103 for other aspects of this and other interjections in Plutarch's prose.

8.4 Method

8.4.1 Overview: Philosophy and Poetry

In order to reach his goals of instruction, delight, and protection, Homer employ a variety of methods. The method is the *way* (μέθ-οδος) or the *how* (πῶς) or the *form* (εἶδος) of esotericism. Plutarch's statement on the identical aim of poetry and philosophy but the difference of their way during his discussion of Homer will prepare for an analysis of Homer's way: "Philosophers at any rate use models (παραδείγμασι), admonishing and educating from subjects (ἐξ ὑποκειμένων), but poets do these things by fashioning the events (τὰ πράγματα) and telling myths (μυθολογοῦντες) themselves" (20b22-c25).[22] Philosophers and poets do the same thing;[23] they have the same aim but employ different methods.[24] The motive is admonishing and educating—so, pedagogical. But philosophers use models (παραδείγματα), "things shown against" (< παρά + δείκνυμι),[25] from real subjects,[26] while poets accomplish the same aim by inventing deeds and telling myths—by lying. Georg von Reutern provides an explanation that shows how the way of poetry is much more indirect than the way of philosophy:

> Indeed, poetry is for him [i.e., Plutarch] philosophy. The difference is of a more formal kind: philosophy speaks of facts and employs examples from the world of what is

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[22] οἱ γοῦν φιλόσοφοι παραδείγμασι χρῶνται, νουθετοῦντες καὶ παιδεύοντες ἐξ ὑποκειμένων, οἱ δὲ ποιηταὶ ταῦτα ποιοῦσι πλάττοντες αὐτοὶ πράγματα καὶ μυθολογοῦντες. Cf. Arist. *Rh*. 1393a27-30 (cited at Demoen 1997, 129 n. 11): παραδειγμάτων δὲ εἴδη δύο· ἓν μὲν γάρ ἐστιν παραδείγματος εἶδος τὸ λέγειν πράγματα προγενομένα, ἓν δὲ τὸ αὐτὸν ποιεῖν ("and there are two types of examples: for to tell events that have happened before is one type, but another is to make [the events] oneself").

[23] This point would be further strengthened if we read Hartman's emendation, adopted by Hunter and Russell (2011), of ταὐτά ("the same things") for ταῦτα ("these things"). See also Bréchet 1999, 240: "Dans notre traité, d'ailleurs, Plutarque n'oppose pas le poète et le philosophe : tous deux disent la même chose, mais à leur manière."

[24] See Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, § 3 (1999 [1873], I.817): "Was hier der Vers für den Dichter ist, ist für den Philosophen das dialektische Denken: nach ihm greift er, um sich seine Verzauberung festzuhalten, um sie zu petrificieren. Und wie für den Dramatiker Wort und Vers nur das Stammeln in einer fremden Sprache sind, um in ihr zu sagen, was er lebte und schaute, so ist der Ausdruck jeder tiefen philosophischen Intuition durch Dialektik und wissenschaftliches Reflektieren zwar einerseits das einzige Mittel, um das Geschaute mitzutheilen, aber ein kümmerliches Mittel, ja im Grunde eine metaphorische, ganz und gar ungetreue Übertragung in eine verschiedene Sphäre und Sprache."

[25] See Bréchet 2007, 103.

[26] See Heirman 1972, ad 18b17: "Τὸ ὑποκείμενον is the subject of which art produces a likeness ... Τὸ ὑποκείμενον is 'the unrepresented,' the basis of all representation." Emphasis is original. The subject is what lies under, and hence what is unseen. It is the original to which the copy points. As the invisible to which the visible tries to lead, it is esoteric.

> available or of what has happened; poetry wants [to do] the same thing; it teaches with examples, only that here the examples take up, as it were, a larger—indeed almost the entire—space and that *the teaching is not communicated directly, but must be found at the depths*. The passage, in which we find ourselves, indeed stands under the heading σιωπώμενον γένος τῆς διδασκαλίας ['the silent kind of instruction']. The latent meaning reveals itself to the one who has an eye for the regularity of what happens.[27]

Thus we see the distinction between poetry and philosophy all but collapse. Poetry is philosophy, but its methods differ. The difference between poetry and philosophy concerns the method, the form. Poetry uses myth and lies to do what philosophy does. But we discussed above Plutarch's description of philosophers like Heraclides Ponticus who use myth, and saw how Plato the mythmaker lurks behind that example. And indeed Plutarch the mythmaker shows that Plutarch himself is that kind of philosopher (e.g., *De genio Socr*. 589f-592e). If the way of philosophy disguised as poetry is inventing events and telling myths, philosophic dialogues which contain invented dramatic circumstances, their own plots, and myths fit Plutarch's description of the method of poetry. And, as von Reutern argues, the prevalence of examples and myth rather than explicit argument means that the argument is implicit. The reader who is attentive to the action is able to discern the argument. While describing Homer's indirect indications and silent teaching, Plutarch writes, "It is indeed possible to catch sight of these assertions and opinions of the speeches for everyone who pays attention (παντὸς ... τοῦ προσέχοντος) ..." (19d13-14).[28] The right kind of reader can understand esoteric writing.

In the final two chapters of the treatise Plutarch further breaks down the distinction between poetry and philosophy. Plutarch speaks of a model or example (παράδειγμα) in Homer

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[27] von Reutern 1933, 24: "Die Dichtung ist ja für ihn Philosophie. Der Unterschied ist mehr äußerlicher Art: die Philosophie spricht von Gegebenheiten und verwendet Beispiele aus der Welt des Vorhandenen oder Geschehenen; die Dichtung will dasselbe; sie lehrt an Beispielen, nur daß hier die Beispiele gleichsam einen größeren, ja fast den ganzen Raum einnehmen und daß *die Lehre nicht ausdrücklich mitgeteilt wird, sondern auf dem Grunde gefunden werden muß*. Der Abschnitt, in dem wir uns befinden, steht ja unter dem Thema σιωπώμενον γένος τῆς διδασκαλίας. Der latente Sinn erschließt sich demjenigen, der einen Blick für die Gesetzmäßigkeit des Geschehens hat." Emphasis is mine. See also Teixeira 1991, 313-314: "Encore faut-il acquérir l'art de lire un poème, car tout ce qui y est dit n'est pas perceptible à première vue."

[28] αὗται μὲν οὖν αἱ τῶν λόγων ἀποφάσεις καὶ δόξαι παντός εἰσι κατιδεῖν τοῦ προσέχοντος ...

(35a14), but in the passage just discussed models (παραδείγματα) were proper to philosophy rather than poetry. Then at the beginning of Chapter 14 Plutarch gives great credit to the poets by stating that they invent or find (τὴν εὕρεσιν; cf. εὕρωμεν, 35e9) what should be enlarged with philosophic demonstrations (ἀποδείξεσι) (35e10-11). But then he calls passages of the poets a "demonstration" (ἀπόδειξις) of what the philosophers say about external goods and virtue (36d1-2). The poets have the same capacity to build on and demonstrate from the "material" of the philosophers as the philosophers do for the poets. Both philosophers and poets use examples or things shown against (παρα-δείγματα) for de-monstrations or showings from (ἀπο-δείξεις).[29] There seems to be an indeterminacy in the temporal priority of example and demonstration. Is the general principle stated and then an example is adduced as proof? Or is the example given and then one gives a demonstration of what it means? This seems to be the difference from going down from the first principles and up to them (see Pl. *R*. 509d-511e and Arist. *Top*. 101a-b).[30] Moreover, this blurring of example and demonstration shows that the example as the *how* that Plutarch adduces is also the *what* which the poets and philosophers show. The *how* and the *what* or the form and the content may become inseparable from one another.[31] An example, a sample or what is taken out (< *eximere*), in its irreducible particularity that is also exemplary or paradigmatic shows the connection between the particular and the universal.[32]

Surely the commonsense view that there is a difference between poetry and philosophy must hold, since some poets are not philosophic. It is true that there is less explicit argumentation in poetry. Plutarch's Homer, though, is a philosopher and, with these general reflections on the method of esotericism in view, we can pursue the particular methods Homer employs.

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[29] Indeed, Aristotle himself says that one ought to use "examples … as demonstrations" (τοῖς παραδείγμασιν … ὡς ἀποδείξεσιν, *Rh*. 1394a9-10) when enthymemes are not available (cited at Demoen 1996, 134 n. 27). Even apart from the blurring of the domains of poets and philosophers of example and demonstration, example and demonstration are closely linked.
[30] These passages are cited in this connection at Davis 2023, 222 n. 10. See also Demoen 1996, 133-134.
[31] See Davis 1992, 17-24. Cf. Klein 1968, 3.
[32] See Davis 2023, 215, 220.

The overarching method of Homer's silent kind of teaching is the creation of "obscurity of judgment" (ἀσάφεια τῆς γνώμης, 27a4-5; cf. τῇ δὲ γνώμῃ σαφεστέρα, Max. Tyr. 4.1). Homer makes it unclear what he thinks about a particular thing. As out of fashion as it might seem in contemporary literary studies to speak of authorial intent, Plutarch suggests that we as readers must try to uncover Homer's intention.[33] That the issue of authorial intent is very much in play in *De audiendis* is clear from Plutarch's mention of "the same intention/thought" (τὴν αὐτὴν ... διάνοιαν, 36a22-23) between certain poets and philosophers. Another way of putting this is to speak of Homer's "judgment" or "choice" (κρίσις), which he sometimes reveals more openly through narration following a character's speech (19c29). Homer reveals his judgment in order to train his readers to bind their judgment with reason to preserve freedom of judgment (see again 15d3-9; 26b11).[34] Plutarch ascribes an intention to the poets and philosophers he interprets, rather than presenting himself as merely using them for his own purposes. An intention implies a deliberate method of writing.[35] This gives us license to inquire into Plutarch's intention too, for he may write as he reads.[36]

We have already seen that myth itself is a form of esoteric expression that makes the argument implicit and so harder to discern. Poets use myth in order to teach.[37] What remains to be seen, then, is how Homer uses myth, understood both as plot and fabulous stories, to communicate his intention indirectly.

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[33] Cf. Nünlist 2009, 161: "... in the case of the σιωπώμενον the reader is requested to fill in the gap by himself."
[34] Cf. Heirman 1972, ad 19c29: "By paying attention the reader learns to use his κρίσις, first becoming aware of the fact that the poet himself very often shows his own judgment, and then studying this and doing likewise."
[35] See Philippon 1987, 79: "Jamais non plus il ne présente les poètes comme des inspirés à peine responsables des vers qu'ils produisent : il les montre au contraire très conscients de ce qu'ils écrivent ..." See also Bréchet 1999, 213-214, 221.
[36] Cf. Clay 1991, 263.
[37] See von Reutern 1933, 23: "Also der Mythos als Ganzes zeigt die Krisis des Dichters und damit das, was er uns lehrt."

8.4.2 *Emphasis*

Emphasis, an indirect indication or hint, is the first major method of esotericism Plutarch ascribes to Homer (Chapter 4; returned to in Chapter 13). He writes, "And in these matters one must pay attention (προσεκτέον) to whether the poet himself gives some indirect indications (ἐμφάσεις) against the things said [by the characters], as being disgusting to him" (19a6-8).[38] After giving an example of Menander's indicating his judgment in his own person very explicitly in the prologue, Plutarch says, "But Homer has made use of this kind best; for indeed of the things said he slanders in advance the base and praises in advance the [usefully] good" (19a14-b16).[39] As will become clear, Homer's excellence in his use of *emphasis* consists in presenting his judgment indirectly through the subtle use of narration and adverbs surrounding a character's speech.[40]

Emphasis is a noun formed from ἐμφαίνομαι ("appear in").[41] Literally, then, *emphasis* means an "appearance in" or "reflection." Indeed, in a passage discussed above (6.3) Plutarch uses it to mean "reflection" (*De Is. et Os*. 358f-359a). Ahl notes that, as a rhetorical figure, *emphasis* as indirect indication is also paired with the verb ἐμφαίνομαι, and he says, "*Emphasis*, though we may translate it as something like 'double entendre,' makes clear what double entendre does not: that the additional meanings are put there for the reader or listener to find. They do not occur accidentally."[42]

Emphasis is what appears in speech. It is evident or apparent, but one must pay attention (προσεκτέον) in order to see it. One might liken this simultaneous concealment and revelation to

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[38] Ἐν δὲ τούτοις εὖ μάλα προσεκτέον εἴ τινας ὁ ποιητὴς αὐτὸς ἐμφάσεις δίδωσι κατὰ τῶν λεγομένων ὡς δυσχεραινομένων ὑπ᾽ αὐτοῦ. Cf. Iambl. *VP* 20, 103-105 (cited at Casel 1919, 58-60).
[39] ἄριστα δ᾽ Ὅμηρος τῷ γένει τούτῳ κέχρηται· καὶ γὰρ προδιαβάλλει τὰ φαῦλα καὶ προσυνίστησι τὰ χρηστὰ τῶν λεγομένων.
[40] See Valgiglio 1973, 120 ad 19a7-8: "[L]a riprovazione del passo poetico potrà farsi col conforto di due prove: *il tacito giudizio negativo del poeta* e la falsità morale del quadro ..." Emphasis is mine.
[41] Chantraine 1999, s.v. φαίνω.
[42] Ahl 1984, 176-177. See my discussion above (4.2) of Cotta's indirect indication or *emphasis* of his agnosticism in *DND*.

an image which appears in water. Some will see the water as water while others will notice an image reflected there. Both look at the same thing but see different things there. Accounting for *emphasis* is like a phenomenology of poetry.

As a reflection, *emphasis* in Chapter 4 connects back to Chapter 3 on mimesis. Reflection as a reproduction is a kind of imitation—indeed in *Republic* 10 Socrates represents the mimesis of poets through the image of a person holding up a mirror to the world (596c4-e7). *Emphasis* is an imitation, but it reflects what Homer thinks is true amidst the lies of the poem. Related is an image that Plutarch employs to clarify the amazement of philosophy discussed above (8.3). The young cannot withstand philosophy "unless, just as those who are going to see the sun from much darkness, they have become accustomed to look straight at without pain and not flee things of this sort [by looking at them] in, as it were, a bastard light, which has a gentle ray of truth mixed with myths" (36e15-18).[43] The "bastard light" means the reflection of the sunlight in the moon.[44] The truth is the pure light but we become accustomed to tolerating it out of the darkness of opinion by seeing its reflection in myth.

This image has at least three important Platonic parallels: the image of the Cave in the *Republic*,[45] the image of the divided line in the same dialogue, and Socrates' description of the second sailing as the search for the beings in speeches in the *Phaedo*. The one who leaves the Cave, the realm of opinion, is at first blinded by the light of truth (515c4-516b7) and the lowest section of the divided line deals with images, including "appearances in waters" (τὰ ἐν τοῖς ὕδασι φαντάσματα) (509e1-510a1; cf. 516a6-8). Plutarch dedicates the third question of his *Quaestiones Platonicae* to the divided line. He writes there:

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[43] ... ἂν μὴ καθάπερ ἐκ σκότους πολλοῦ μέλλοντες ἥλιον ὁρᾶν ἐθισθῶσιν καθάπερ ἐν νόθῳ φωτὶ κεκραμένης μύθοις ἀληθείας αὐγὴν ἔχοντι μαλθακὴν ἀλύπως διαβλέπειν τὰ τοιαῦτα καὶ μὴ φεύγειν. Cf. Lather's (2017, 329-330) treatment of this passage.
[44] Hunter and Russell (2011, ad loc.) adduce Lucr. 5.575 (*notho ... lumine*, "bastard light") as a parallel.
[45] See von Reutern 1933, 99-100; Bréchet 1999, 242; Blank 2011, 243.

> ἔτι, καθάπερ αὐτῶν τῶν αἰσθητῶν ἕκαστον εἰκόνας ἔχει πλείους καὶ σκιὰς καὶ εἴδωλα καὶ ὅλως ἀφ' ἑνὸς παραδείγματος πάμπολλα μιμήματα γίγνεσθαι καὶ φύσει καὶ τέχνῃ δυνατόν ἐστιν, οὕτως ἀνάγκη τὰ ἐνταῦθα τῶν ἐκεῖ πλήθει διαφέρειν κατὰ τὸν Πλάτωνα παραδείγματα καὶ ἰδέας τὰ νοητὰ τῶν αἰσθητῶν ὥσπερ εἰκόνων ἢ ἐμφάσεων ὑποτιθέμενον.
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> Further, just as each of the perceptibles themselves has more images, shadows, and likenesses, and in general it is possible for very many imitations to come to be both by nature and art from one model (παραδείγματος), so too is it necessary that the things here [i.e., in the perceptible realm] surpass in number the things there [i.e., in the imperceptible realm] according to Plato, who hypothesizes that the things grasped by mind are the models and forms (παραδείγματα καὶ ἰδέας) of the perceptibles just like images or reflections (ἐμφάσεων). (1001e)

Plutarch here uses the word *emphasis* (cf. ἐμφαινομένων, 1002a) to mean "reflection," a noun not used in the *Republic* passage or elsewhere in Plato, while making it clear that reflections are imitations (μιμήματα) of an original. Thus we see the connection between *emphasis*, the light in water as reflected truth, and Plato's divided line for Plutarch. Linkage of *emphasis* to mimesis in this passage also confirms the linkage between Chapter 3 on mimesis and Chapter 4 on *emphasis* in *De audiendis*.

In the *Phaedo* Socrates explains that he stopped looking at the beings directly because he was afraid he would suffer what those do who look directly at the eclipsed sun (99d4-6): "For I suppose some are corrupted with respect to their eyes, unless they look at the image (τὴν εἰκόνα) of it [i.e., the sun] in water or something of this sort" (99d7-e1).[46] Then by analogy of worrying that his soul would become blind by looking at matters (πράγματα) directly, he decided (ἔδοξε) "that it was necessary after taking refuge in speeches (εἰς τοὺς λόγους) to look at the truth of the beings in them" (99e4-6).[47] This passage parallels the need to look at truth (ἀλήθεια) in a reflection because of the difficulty of looking at it directly, on the analogy of looking directly at sunlight. Socrates mentions the reflection in water, as in the two passages cited from the *Republic*, but he adds "or in something of this sort." While the moon does not reflect an image of

[46] διαφθείρονται γάρ που ἔνιοι τὰ ὄμματα, ἐὰν μὴ ἐν ὕδατι ἤ τινι τοιούτῳ σκοπῶνται τὴν εἰκόνα αὐτοῦ.
[47] ... χρῆναι εἰς τοὺς λόγους καταφυγόντα ἐν ἐκείνοις σκοπεῖν τῶν ὄντων τὴν ἀλήθειαν.

particular things like water or a mirror could, it does reflect the sunlight on its own and so is an intriguing way of satisfying Socrates' requirements in the context of the analogy. In any case, Plutarch seems to suggest the need to mix truth with myth as Socrates looks for the truth of the beings in speeches. Common to both accounts is the emphasis on opinion. For Plutarch the many care about "money and opinion/renown" (χρημάτων καὶ δόξης, 36e12) while Socrates links his project of seeing the truth of the beings in speeches to opinion through his use of the verb δοκεῖ (99e4). Starting from myth or speeches means starting from opinion (δόξα).

In drawing connections to these Platonic passages, we confirm that the "appearing in" of *emphasis* involves the ontological operation of extracting the truth or being from appearance. Hesiod's Muses say both the truth and lies like the truth (*Th*. 27-28; cf. *Op*. 10; B. 3.85) and for Plutarch poets do reveal the truth amidst the lies.

The clearest way that Homer practices *emphasis* is by juxtaposing a character's speech with a comment of his which precedes or follows it and gives an indication of what he thinks. This *emphasis* about a speech contrasts with *emphasis* about a deed and *emphasis* through the plot itself. For this first type of *emphasis,* Plutarch adduces seven poetic examples. After the initial use of Menander's *Thais,* the remaining quotations come from Homer (six from the *Iliad* and one from the *Odyssey*) (19a8-d4). From this group of quotations we begin to see the broader interpretation of Homer's epics that emerges in *De audiendis*. Menander blames Thais, while Homer blames all the characters mentioned here (including Agamemnon, Achilles, Ares, Aphrodite, Hector, Pandarus, and possibly Athena), except for Odysseus, whom he praises. Throughout *De audiendis* Homer uniquely comes out nearly unscathed among the poets (see again the exception at 17a10-b18) and Odysseus comes out unscathed among all the other heroes and even some of the gods.

In the prologue of Menander's *Thais*, named after a character who is like a female Odysseus,[48] Menander in his own name blames Thais for her boldness, persuasion, and deceit (θρασεῖαν ... πιθανήν ... προσποιουμένην, 19a11-12 = fr. 217). These attributes create a link to the persuasive lies of poetry in Chapter 2 (see especially μεμειγμένον πιθανοτήτι ψεῦδος, 16b20; πιθανὸς ... ψευδῶν δημιουργός, 16c24; ἐξαπατῶσα προσποιῇ, 16d12). Menander seems to blame Thais the female Odysseus for embodying the deception of poetry. But these are the very attributes for which Homer praises Odysseus. As Aristotle intimates, Homer understands the deceptive character of poetry, which he (per my reading of *De audiendis*, at least) indicates through his praise of Odysseus' deception and, as we will also see, by putting Odysseus at the rank of poet, philosopher, and even legislator: "And Homer is worthy of being praised both in respects to many other things and in particular because he alone of the poets is not ignorant of what it is necessary for him to do (ποιεῖν). For it is necessary that the poet himself speak the least; for he is not in respect to these things [i.e., what he says himself] an imitator" (*Po*. 1460a5-8; cf. Pl. *R*. 393c11-d2; *Chrm*. 163b1-2).[49] Imitation is self-concealment, so Homer reveals himself most clearly when he uses narration. For Plutarch, Homer's view of Odysseus and deception comes out in his first two examples of Homer's *emphasis*.

The first (19b17) is *Odyssey* 6.148, Homer's introduction of Odysseus' first speech to Nausicaa on Phaeacia. Odysseus "immediately spoke a gentle and crafty word" to her (αὐτίκα μειλίχιον καὶ κερδαλέον φάτο μῦθον). Before doing so he ponders whether clasping her knees as a suppliant or just speaking words at a distance would be more profitable (κέρδιον) (6.141-147). Then in the speech itself Odysseus wonders whether Nausicaa is a goddess (149-150), whereas

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[48] Hunter and Russell 2011, ad loc.

[49] Ὅμηρος δὲ ἄλλα τε πολλὰ ἄξιος ἐπαινεῖσθαι καὶ δὴ καὶ ὅτι μόνος τῶν ποιητῶν οὐκ ἀγνοεῖ ὃ δεῖ ποιεῖν αὐτόν. αὐτὸν γὰρ δεῖ τὸν ποιητὴν ἐλάχιστα λέγειν· οὐ γάρ ἐστι κατὰ ταῦτα μιμητής. Cf. bT schol. ad *Il*. 1.449a (Porph.): ... οὐ γὰρ μόνον, τί εἴπῃ, ἀλλὰ καὶ τί μὴ εἴπῃ, ἐφρόντισεν ("for he considered not only what he should say, but also what he should not say"). Cited at Nünlist 2009, 164-165.

Homer when narrating Odysseus' reaction to seeing her just calls her a girl (κούρην, 142). Homer calls Odysseus' speech crafty in the line Plutarch cites and Homer emphasizes his pondering the best option for approaching Nausicaa rather than making him address her without prior reflection. Odysseus' likening her to a goddess seems like a strategy to win her favor, and we cannot be sure his story about visiting the altar of Apollo on Delos, which he uses to flatter her, is true (162-167).

The second (19b19) is *Iliad* 2.189, where Homer again praises Odysseus and introduces his speech to the kings as he restrains the Achaean troops after Agamemnon's test of them: "and he restrained him [i.e., a king] with gentle words, standing nearby" (τὸν δ' ἀγανοῖς ἐπέεσιν ἐρητύσασκε παραστάς). In what follows Homer explains that, while Odysseus would address the kings in persuasive words, he would strike common soldiers with Agamemnon's scepter and speak more harshly (198-206). While Agamemnon's test of the army is shown to be inept—everyone rushes to leave when he tells them this is his plan—Odysseus keeps the army in check and speaks differently to different people.[50]

Plutarch's most obvious point is that by using adjectives like "gentle" (μειλίχιος or ἀγανός) and "profitable" (κερδαλέος) of Odysseus' speech Homer somewhat indirectly positively colors the reader's or listener's understanding of the speech. Homer does not say "Odysseus is crafty, wise, and effective" but makes us infer his opinion of him through what could seem like "objective" descriptions of the speech. But by praising crafty Odysseus who speaks lies like the truth (see again *Bellone an pace* 347e quoting *Od*. 19.203) Homer reveals himself as a different sort of poet from Menander who blames Thais for this. And Plutarch by setting up Homer as the best poet, and as one who practices esotericism, indicates his positive view of esotericism by showing Homer's praise of esotericism.

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[50] See Benardete 2000a, 31-32. As Benardete notes, Xenophon says that Socrates follows Odysseus in being a "safe speaker" (ἀσφαλῆ ῥήτορα, *Mem*. 4.6.15) and cites this passage from *Iliad* 2 (*Mem*. 1.2.58).

Homer's praise of Odysseus is, as I said, heightened by the blame of other central characters of the epics in this section. Perhaps most saliently, Plutarch reports Homer's *emphasis* against Achilles for speaking harshly to Agamemnon in front of the other men and for maltreating Hector's corpse (19c28-31 = *Il*. 1.225, 223-224; 19c3-4 = *Il*. 23.24-25). And yet Agamemnon is also at fault both implicitly in his poor handling of the army in *Iliad* 2 and then again in his treatment of Chryses (19b24-25 = *Il*. 1.24-24). So we learn that in the contest between Achilles and Odysseus (cf. 24b4-5 = *Od*. 8.81-82), familiar from its thematization in Plato's *Hippias Minor* (e.g., 363a6-c3), Plutarch has Homer come down on the side of Odysseus as the superior hero. Moreover, as many other quotations in *De audiendis* confirm (especially at 26c25-e17), Plutarch has a nuanced reading of the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon, since he presents both as being partially in the right and partially at fault. (Of course, how one interprets the quarrel has great implications for the meaning of Achilles' withdrawal and thus the plot of the *Iliad*.) In all the examples thus far Homer uses the method of coloring a character's speech through his narrative either beforehand or afterwards.

Closely linked to the examples of *emphasis* about speeches are three quotations of Homer (19d7-12) having to do with *emphasis* about deeds (πραττομένοις, 19d6). These come in the form of what we learn about the deed from what is said either by others in the poem or by Homer himself, in much the same way as *emphasis* about speeches.

When Homer's *emphasis* recurs in Chapter 13 (34e3-35c15) it is closely related to the types discussed so far. It is based on the subtle use of epithets by the characters when they address one another. Their praise and blame of one another indicate that they think that praise and blame should depend on things depending on human power, rather than chance (35a14-17;

35c13-15). For Plutarch Homer's epithets are endowed with meaning depending on the context rather than merely being traditional or for the sake of meter.[51]

Finally, if we return to Chapter 4, there is *emphasis* through the plot itself: "and [the poets] provide other lessons from the events themselves ..." (ἑτέρας δ᾽ ἐκ τῶν πραγμάτων αὐτῶν παρέχουσι μαθήσεις ..., 19d14-e15). Plutarch draws a contrast here between the way plot teaches in tragedy, with an example from Euripides—in tragedy the poet never speaks so the *emphasis* of course must come only from the plot—, and Homer's silent way of teaching (19e15-19), discussed above (7.1). An epic poet who has the opportunity to be perfectly explicit in rendering judgment in his own voice in narration but chooses not to do so has a silent teaching. Teaching with plot itself, even as it is a subdivision of teaching through myth, seems to be the purest example of teaching through myth. Plutarch contrasts this aspect of Homer's esotericism with the allegorical reading of Homer characteristic of Stoic interpretation. He writes of the silent teaching:

> ... ἔχει δ᾽ ἀναθεώρησιν ὠφέλιμον ἐπὶ τῶν διαβεβλημένων μάλιστα μύθων, οὓς ταῖς πάλαι μὲν ὑπονοίαις ἀλληγορίαις δὲ νῦν λεγομέναις παραβιαζόμενοι καὶ διαστρέφοντες ἔνιοι μοιχευομένην φασὶν Ἀφροδίτην ὑπ᾽ Ἄρεος μηνύειν Ἥλιον, ὅτι τῷ τῆς Ἀφροδίτης ἀστέρι συνελθὼν ὁ τοῦ Ἄρεος μοιχικὰς ἀποτελεῖ γενέσεις, Ἡλίου δ᾽ ἐπαναφερομένου καὶ καταλαμβάνοντος οὐ λανθάνουσιν.
>
> ... but it provides an opportunity for contemplation (ἀναθεώρησιν) which is useful in the case of the most slandered myths, by doing violence to which and turning them about with what was of old called 'underlying meanings' (ὑπονοίαις) but now called 'allegories' (ἀλληγορίαις) some say that the Sun reveals Aphrodite being debauched by Ares because the star of Ares, when it has come together with the star of Aphrodite, brings about adulterous births, but the adulterous births do not escape notice when the Sun has risen and overtakes them. (19e19-f25)

While tragedy, "a wondrous thing heard and seen" (θαυμαστὸν ἀκρόαμα καὶ θέαμα, *Bellone an pace* 348c), by being on the stage provides literal spectatorship or contemplation (θεωρία) of the plot, epic reaches its audience only through the sense of hearing. But by saying that Homer's

[51] See Lather 2017, 336ff. for an analysis of Plutarch's philosophic appropriation of a Pindaric epithet.

teaching in this regard is silent Plutarch seems to say that it is not only invisible but also imperceptible. And yet it provides an opportunity for contemplation (ἀναθεώρησις) which, since epic is surely invisible, must mean contemplation for the mind.[52] Contemplation points to the purely philosophical as transcending any practical aims of teaching.

Plutarch opposes the allegorical interpretations because they import an external explanation "as if the poet did not give the solutions himself" (ὥσπερ οὐκ αὐτοῦ τὰς λύσεις τοῦ ποιητοῦ διδόντος, 19f29; cf. Arist. *Po*. 1454a37-b1). Plutarch here foreshadows Porphyry's later injunction to "interpret Homer from Homer" (Ὅμηρον ἐξ Ὁμήρου σαφηνίζειν, *Quaest. Hom.* 1.56). Plutarch indicates that an author provides everything necessary to interpret the problems presented in a text, which is perhaps why von Reutern believes that Plutarch also must be understood from Plutarch, instead of relying primarily on source criticism ("Plutarch aus Plutarch heraus zu verstehen").[53]

The rejection of allegory, though it had a venerable tradition stretching back perhaps even before the Classical period,[54] is important because allegory represents an alternate form of esotericism, as we saw in the case of Balbus' Stoic theology in *DND* 2. And yet Plutarch writes and reads esoterically while rejecting allegory.[55] Like Cicero, Plutarch is interested in the philosophic value of poetry which involves reading myth esoterically, but not as a full-blown allegory. Plutarch attacks the implausible elements of physical allegory that we too find

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[52] In his *De animae procreatione in Timaeo*, Plutarch reports an interpretation of the *Timaeus* (which he ultimately combats) according to which Plato only presented the soul as generated rather than eternal "for the sake of contemplation" (θεωρίας ἕνεκα, 1013a) even though he knew it was not true. Plato put the atemporal in time to show the "powers" (δυνάμεις) of the soul. Cf. Plutarch's use of the phrase "for the sake of practice" (ἕνεκα γυμνασίας, 1022c) of his own activity in the same work.
[53] von Reutern 1933, vi.
[54] See Primavesi 2005.
[55] Plutarch does practice extensive allegorical interpretation in *De Iside et Osiride*, but this is allegory of traditional myths rather than of poetry, i.e., not allegory applied to interpreting a particular text.

incredible (see Lucr. 2.600-660 as well). And so Plutarch's esotericism may be a more plausible interpretative stance than Neoplatonic esotericism which is based on such allegory.[56]

Plutarch contrasts the allegorical reading of the adultery of Ares and Aphrodite cited above with his own reading, which explains how Homer teaches indirectly through plot:

> ἐν μὲν γὰρ τοῖς περὶ τῆς Ἀφροδίτης διδάσκει τοὺς προσέχοντας, ὅτι μουσικὴ φαύλη καὶ ᾄσματα πονηρὰ καὶ λόγοι μοχθηρὰς ὑποθέσεις λαμβάνοντες ἀκόλαστα ποιοῦσιν ἤθη καὶ βίους ἀνάνδρους καὶ ἀνθρώπους τρυφὴν καὶ μαλακίαν καὶ γυναικοκρασίαν ἀγαπῶντας [*Od*. 8.249]
> 'εἵματά τ' ἐξημοιβὰ λοετρά τε θερμὰ καὶ εὐνάς.'
> διὸ καὶ τὸν Ὀδυσσέα τῷ κιθαρῳδῷ προστάττοντα πεποίηκεν [*Od*. 8.492]
> 'ἀλλ' ἄγε δὴ μετάβηθι καὶ ἵππου κόσμον ἄεισον',
> καλῶς ὑφηγούμενος τὸ παρὰ τῶν φρονίμων καὶ νοῦν ἐχόντων χρῆναι λαμβάνειν τοὺς μουσικοὺς καὶ ποιητικοὺς τὰς ὑποθέσεις.
>
> For in the [verses] about Aphrodite he teaches those who pay attention that paltry music and base songs and speeches which take on wicked plots make (ποιοῦσιν) habits unrestrained and lives unmanly and humans who delight in delicacy, softness, and the rule of women [*Od*. 8.249]
> 'and changes of clothes and warm baths and beds.'
> Therefore he has made (πεποίηκεν) also Odysseus giving orders to the citharode [*Od*. 8.492],
> 'but come indeed and change [the song] and sing of the adornment of the horse,'
> beautifully explaining indirectly (ὑφηγούμενος) the fact that musical and poetic men should take their plots from those who are prudent and have sense. (19f28-20a12)

Homer teaches certain readers, the ones who pay attention, what he means to indicate through *muthos*, both as myth (the Ares and Aphrodite episode) and plot (the singing of the episode). The solution involves recognizing that context always matters (cf. *Non posse* 1086c-d). Demodocus the Phaeacian bard, not Homer, sings this myth. Homer, furthermore, indicates a connection between music, poetry, and politics by pairing a licentious song with the Phaeacians' soft ways. Indeed, the Phaeacians who are isolated and supported by the patronage of Poseidon (cf. 7.56-57; 13.130) have no use for warfare, a point Nausicaa mentions in a rather unfavorable description of at least some of the Phaeacian men (6.270-275). Plutarch claims that Homer provides a unified

[56] See Casel 1919, 121-124, 132-134 and Lamberton 1986 (the connection to esotericism is particular clear at, e.g., 173, 185-188).

picture of the Phaeacians through the habit-forming poetry they enjoy and their consequent way of life.[57] This connects back to Plutarch's comparison between the city and the individual in Chapter 1, which indicates that poetry forms the city as much as each individual soul. Plutarch shows that Homer was well aware of that.

Homer puts Odysseus in the position of the legislator by having him direct the subject of Demodocus' song. Odysseus requests that Demodocus sing of the Trojan horse, which Odysseus himself devised (8.494). Odysseus is one of the prudent and sensible men who set the plots of poetry. Again we see Homer's praise of Odysseus, which goes so far as to put him in a similar position to Homer himself, in that he sets the plots to be sung.[58]

The licentious song is explained by its being sung by Demodocus to the licentious Phaeacians,[59] and the episode as a whole reveals both more about the Phaeacians and in general the importance of poetry and music in politics. Finally, it shows Odysseus' special position in Homer's epics. Homer provides *emphasis* through the plot itself—as opposed to simply providing a comment about a speech or deed—both by making us weigh the words spoken in relation to the particular speaker, and by inducing us to compare the particular speaker and speech with the context of the speech. If we keep extrapolating we arrive at a general teaching about poetry, i.e., its importance for politics. Plutarch's interpretation of Homer is of course contestable,[60] but it hews to the internal logic of the poem rather than importing foreign elements that only appear in the physics of philosophers living much after Homer. Is it inconceivable that an archaic Greek

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[57] *Pace* Philippon 1987, 78: "Plutarque est muet sur l'utilité politique et civique de la poésie, principale préoccupation de Platon."
[58] Of course, Odysseus uniquely takes over Homer's song in *Odyssey* 9-12.
[59] That Demodocus' name means "renowned among the people/crowd (δῆμος)" would fit the vulgar character of his song. See Adler 2003, 55.
[60] See Hunter and Russell 2011, ad 20a on Plutarch's omission of Odysseus' pleasure at the song about Aphrodite and Ares (8.367-368).

wanted to cast different characters, peoples, and their ways (cf. *Od*. 1.3) in a more or less favorable light in order to teach about different forms of human life?

8.4.3 ὑπο-

During his discussion of *emphasis* Plutarch's use of two words, ὑπόνοια ("underlying thought/meaning") and ὑφηγούμενος ("explaining indirectly"), points to an important and pervasive feature of *De audiendis*. By repeatedly using the prepositional prefix ὑπο- (literally "under") with verbs and nouns of saying, hearing, showing, thinking, and more,[61] Plutarch indicates that the poet's education of the reader proceeds indirectly. Given the concealment implied by such indirection, the reader must interpret the poet esoterically. This feature of the text corroborates my argument that Plutarch is not only describing the right way to read Homer, but shows that his Homer is esoteric.

Now, Plutarch rejects the recourse to ὑπόνοια, which he equates with allegory, to interpret the scandalous myths in Homer. We have already seen the alternative way of interpreting he proposes. ὑπόνοια is, however, the word that Socrates uses in both Plato (*R*. 378d3-e1) and Xenophon (*Smp*. 3.6) to attribute hidden meanings to Homer's epics. It is different to say that Homer writes using allegory and to claim that he makes use of underlying meanings and speaks indirectly or, as we would say, *sotto voce*. Plutarch may introduce the idea of ὑπόνοια, which in the form employed by the Stoics and others practicing allegoresis is wrong, to call attention to his own interpretation of Homer's speaking "under" to the reader. Indeed, the second word with the prefix in the passage on ὑπόνοια, ὑφηγούμενος ("explaining under/indirectly"),

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[61] The following words with the prefix show the pervasiveness of it in the text, though they have varying degrees of relevance for esotericism: ὑπειπών, 19c29; ὑπονοίαις, 19e20; ὑφηγούμενος, 20a10; ὑποκειμένων, 20c24; ὑπεναντώσεις, 20c30; ὑπενεγκεῖν, 21a3; ὑπομνηστέον, 21e21; ὑποψίας, 22c5; ὑπακοῦσαι, 23c9; ὑποδείκνυσιν, 23d25; ὑπομνηστέον, 25b12; ὑπόθεσιν, 25b14; ὑποκειμένας, 25b15; ὑποδεικνύοντες, 27e16; ὑπομιμνήσκωμεν, 30d8; ὑποδεικνύειν, 31a5; ὑποδεικνύειν, 32b22; ὑποψίας, 32e25; ὑποφωνήσεσι, 33d16-17; ὑφορῶνται, 34b21; ὑπέδειξεν, 34b23; ὑπακουστέον, 34b4; ὑπομιμνήσκει, 35a14; ὑποδεικτέον, 36a17. Bréchet (2007, 121) calls *De audiendis* "un traité où Plutarque multiplie les composés en ὑπο-."

modifies Homer in Plutarch's explanation of how we are to interpret the relationship between Demodocus' song about Aphrodite and Ares and the Phaeacians' luxurious customs, discussed above (20a10-12). Homer does speak indirectly: he does have an underlying thought (ὑπόνοια) which does not, however, extend to speaking about what is utterly other (ἀλλ-ηγορία).

There is only space to discuss a few of the other examples of Plutarch's use of the prefix, so I will focus on those that are indisputable and show the mutual need for esotericism on the part of both the writer and the reader. In Chapter 7, where Plutarch discusses Homer's and other poets' ambiguous use of words, Plutarch says (of Sophocles) that when he uses the name Ares "it is possible to hear under/indirectly 'war'" (τὸν πόλεμον ἔστιν ὑπακοῦσαι, 23c9). And then, this time of Homer himself, by Zeus' name Homer "correctly shows under/indirectly the necessity of events" (τὴν τῶν πραγμάτων ἀνάγκην ὀρθῶς ὑποδείκνυσιν, 23d24-25). The reader must "hear under/indirectly" (ὑπακοῦσαι) what the poet "shows under/indirectly" (ὑποδείκνυσιν). In the first instance, Hunter and Russell are forced to admit that ὑπακοῦσαι means "'to understand' something not made explicit,"[62] whereas they usually prefer any other possible interpretation of words with the ὑπο- prefix even against the more obvious meaning.[63] The fact that these words which carry the obvious meaning of "say/show/etc. under/indirectly" can also be interpreted in a banal way that avoids the problem of esotericism shows that Plutarch's use of the prefix is also esoteric. Only those who "pay attention" will notice the theme of the prefix and see Plutarch's emphasis on esoteric writing and reading throughout the work. To my mind, the fact that the whole context in the treatise is the lying character of poetry, deliberate deception, *emphasis*, Homer's silent teaching, deliberate contradiction, obscurity of judgment, the ambiguity of words, and so forth makes it odd to insist wherever possible that Plutarch does not intend ὑπο- to indicate

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[62] Hunter and Russell 2011, ad loc.
[63] As is the case for ὑποδείκνυσιν in the passage just discussed where Homer says Zeus but means necessity: "ὑποδείκνυσιν need not carry a sense of 'slyly indicating, hinting', as the prefix might suggest; cf. 27e, 31a of the teacher's indications to a pupil" (ibid., ad 23d). See also their explanation of ὑπειπών (ibid., ad 19c).

indirection. Showing the valence of indirection is a perfectly defensible way of translating words like ὑπεῖπον, with a prime example coming from the interpretation of poetry in Plato's *Protagoras* (343e6).[64] Plutarch's use of ὑπόνοια to mean allegory, indeed, confirms beyond doubt his awareness of this valence of the preposition.

ὑπο-, "under" as expressing both concealment and subordination to authority, is reflected in the beginning and the end of the treatise. We saw above (7.2) that at the beginning Plutarch says that philosophy which seems like poetry makes the young "obedient" or "listening under" (ὑπηκόους, 14e7), but in the last sentence of the work Plutarch wants the young man "to be sent forth by/under the influence of poetry to philosophy" (ἵνα ... ὑπὸ ποιητικῆς ἐπὶ φιλοσοφίαν προπέμπηται, 36a10-b12).[65] The exoteric ὑπο- as exerting influence can be transformed into the esoteric ὑπο- of the underlying meaning when the reader becomes free enough to think by himself or herself, which only happens after submitting to the writer.[66]

8.4.4 Deliberate Self-Contradiction and Homeric Theology

Plutarch continues to discuss Homer's means of esotericism in Chapter 4. The use of ὑπο- is a subtext to these very explicit discussions of Homer's method. The next main method of esotericism is deliberate self-contradiction. One should compare this with Cicero's discussion of deliberate self-contradiction in the context of his esoteric art of writing in *De oratore*, and his use of it in *DND*.[67] As we will see further below (8.7), deliberate contradiction will be an important

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[64] See LSJ, s.v. 4.
[65] ὑπό is here and elsewhere in the treatise also highlighted through the contrast with other adjacent prepositions and prepositional prefixes, here ἐπί and προ-.
[66] See again Benardete 2000c, 243.
[67] See Atkins and Trotz-Liboff forthcoming, and the discussion of Cotta in *DND* above (4.2). In one of the earliest extant treatments of Homer, furthermore, Herodotus claims that Homer deliberately contradicts himself about whether Helen stayed in Egypt. This was Homer's means of concealing and revealing his knowledge of the truth of Helen's stay: Ἑλένης μὲν ταύτην ἄπιξιν παρὰ Πρωτέα ἔλεγον οἱ ἱρέες γενέσθαι· δοκέει δέ μοι καὶ Ὅμηρος τὸν λόγον τοῦτον πυθέσθαι· ἀλλ' οὐ γὰρ ὁμοίως ἐς τὴν ἐποποιίην εὐπρεπὴς ἦν τῷ ἑτέρῳ τῷ περ ἐχρήσατο, ἑκὼν μετῆκε αὐτόν, δηλώσας ὡς καὶ τοῦτον ἐπίσταιτο τὸν λόγον ("The priests said that Helen's arrival to Proteus did happen; but also Homer seems to me to have learned of this account, but, since it was not similarly fitting for epic poetry as the one that he indeed did made use of, willingly he left it out, although he showed that he knew also this account," 2.116.1). Homer willingly

method to consider in Plutarch's own esotericism, since he blames Epicurus in the first chapter but praises him in the final chapter. I also note that the term for such contradiction, ὑπεναντίωσις, itself uses the ὑπο- prepositional prefix, indicating that Homer reveals the contradiction indirectly. Plutarch could have used ἐναντίωσις (a word found in Plato and Aristotle) alone to mean "contradiction," but chose to change its valence with ὑπο-.

Plutarch introduces the deliberate contradictions in poetry through the following image:

> ὁ μὲν οὖν Μελάνθιος εἴτε παίζων εἴτε σπουδάζων ἔλεγε διασῴζεσθαι τὴν Ἀθηναίων πόλιν ὑπὸ τῆς τῶν ῥητόρων διχοστασίας καὶ ταραχῆς· οὐ γὰρ ἀποκλίνειν ἅπαντας εἰς τὸν αὐτὸν τοῖχον, ἀλλὰ γίνεσθαί τινα τοῦ βλάπτοντος ἀνθολκὴν ἐν τῇ διαφορᾷ τῶν πολιτευομένων. αἱ δὲ τῶν ποιητῶν ὑπεναντιώσεις πρὸς αὐτοὺς ἀνταναφέρουσαι τὴν πίστιν οὐκ ἐῶσιν ἰσχυρὰν ῥοπὴν γενέσθαι πρὸς τὸ βλάπτον.
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> So, Melanthius, either joking or being serious, said that the city of the Athenians was preserved through the dissension and disturbance of the orators; for all did not turn aside to the same side [of the ship], but there was some counterbalance to what was harmful in the quarrel of those taking part in politics. And the contradictions with themselves of the poets, which bring back trust in turn, do not allow a strong weight to come to be towards what is harmful. (20c25-31)

The Athenian orators in always contradicting each other, that is, in providing an argument on either side of an issue, balanced each other out. There was always someone contradicting someone who was proposing something harmful. Plutarch compares this to the way poets contradict themselves. In so doing he provides another comparison between the city and the soul. The speeches of the orators have a balancing effect on the city, while those of poetry do the same for the soul. Plutarch's point has something in common with the Academic skeptics' use of argument on either side of an issue to preserve freedom of judgment (at least for Cicero, *disputatio in utramque partem* is both a judicial and philosophical term; see again *Inv*. 2.45). If a poet (or philosopher) contradicts himself or herself, the harmful statement cannot be allowed to stand unexamined as a result of the reader's having to consider which of the two statements is

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(ἑκών) lies in his poetry but makes sure that his readers can see the lie. The contradiction calls attention to this. See further Rosen 1963, 204.

true. This explains how the contradiction counterbalances the bad, but why not just present the good statement on its own? For one, the false statement is necessary to produce amazement (ἔκπληξιν, 20f28) which leads to philosophic thinking (see 8.3 above). Relatedly, if the truth were presented on its own (assuming this were possible), the authority of the writer would prevent the reader from thinking philosophically (as I argued was the reason for Cicero's pedagogical esotericism, and in a similar way for that of Lucretius). Thus, as we will see, Homer contradicts himself about matters of cardinal importance, like the existence of Hades and the nature of the gods, but this method of contradiction ultimately has a pedagogical motive.

Plutarch first treats contradictions that occur in the same passage, a type of contradiction which is easily resolved (λύσεις ... προδήλους, 20d12). The examples are not from Homer, so I will pass over this type. But when the solution is less clear for something said strangely (ὅσα δ᾽ εἴρηται μὲν ἀτόπως εὐθὺς δ᾽ οὐ λέλυται, 20d14) the contradiction occurs between different passages, and here he includes Homer in his examples. This fits with Homer᾽s being even more indirect than other poets.

In some passages, Homer presents the gods acting like humans and behaving badly, examples of which we have already seen in the *emphasis* section of Chapter 4. Here he mentions "the Homeric throwing of the gods by one another and their wounding by human beings and their quarrels and their ill-temper" (τὰς Ὁμηρικὰς τῶν θεῶν ῥίψεις ὑπ᾽ ἀλλήλων καὶ τρώσεις ὑπ᾽ ἀνθρώπων καὶ διαφορὰς καὶ χαλεπότητας, 20e18-19). But in other passages, Homer contradicts this base portrayal of the gods by showing the true nature of the divine as blessed beings living without care:

> καὶ νοεῖς νὴ Δία καὶ λέγεις κρεῖττον ἀλλαχόθι καὶ βέλτιον τὰ τοιαῦτα [*Il*. 6.138] 'θεοὶ ῥεῖα ζώοντες' καὶ [*Od*. 6.46]
> 'τῷ ἔνι τέρπονται μάκαρες θεοὶ ἤματα πάντα'
> καὶ [*Il*. 24.525-526]
> 'ὣς γὰρ ἐπεκλώσαντο θεοὶ δειλοῖσι βροτοῖσι,
> ζώειν ἀχνυμένοις· αὐτοὶ δέ τ᾽ ἀκηδέες εἰσίν.'
> αὗται γάρ εἰσιν ὑγιαίνουσαι περὶ θεῶν δόξαι καὶ ἀληθεῖς, ἐκεῖνα δὲ πέπλασται πρὸς ἔκπληξιν ἀνθρώπων.

> And—by Zeus!— you both think and speak things of this sort in a superior and better way elsewhere, [like] [*Il*. 6.138] 'the gods living easily' and [*Od*. 6.46]
> 'in this place [i.e., Olympus] the blessed gods live in enjoyment everyday'
> and [*Il*. 24.525-526]
> 'for thus did the gods ordain as destiny for wretched mortals, that they live being aggrieved; but they [i.e., the gods] themselves are without care.'
> For these are healthy and true beliefs about the gods, but those [i.e., about the gods' bad behavior] have been fashioned with a view to the amazement of humans. (20e21-f28)

Plutarch's use of νοεῖς ("you think") connects to his treatment of discovering the poet's intention (διάνοια or γνώμη). Homer reveals his true intention about the divine nature in the verses cited here from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, but most of the time he presents the gods as if they behaved like humans for amazement (see again 16b20). Homer uses amazement to attract readers to reveal subsequently the philosophic truth. Still, most readers will have the impression that the gods are like humans, but some who notice the contradiction will gain a different view of the gods. Plutarch explains further how contradiction functions: "So, this sort of juxtaposition and consideration (κατανόησις) of the opposites will do (ποιήσει) one of two things, either it will lead aside towards the better or it will keep trust away also from the worse" (21c9-d11).[68] The fact that the worse view about the gods is contradicted prevents careful readers from accepting it without reservation. There is a disjunction between gaining the better view and avoiding the worse view. Perhaps many readers will be confused enough by the poem not to adopt the worse view but only few will actually understand the better view.[69]

The T-scholion on one of the verses quoted by Plutarch (*Il*. 24.526)[70] shows how Plutarch's interpretation of Homer's theology overlaps with Epicurean theology:

> <αὐτοὶ δέ τ'> ἀκηδέες <εἰσί>: νῦν τὸ φύσει θεῖόν φησι, τοὺς δὲ ποιητικοὺς λυπουμένους εἰσάγει. καὶ Ἐπίκουρος ἐντεῦθέν φησιν ὅτι [*KD* 1] 'τὸ ἀθάνατον καὶ ἄφθαρτον οὔτ' αὐτὸ

[68] δυεῖν οὖν θάτερον ἡ τοιαύτη τῶν ἐναντίων ποιήσει παράθεσις καὶ κατανόησις, ἢ παράξει πρὸς τὸ βέλτιον ἢ καὶ τοῦ χείρονος ἀποστήσει τὴν πίστιν.
[69] Plutarch's use of the phrase "one of two" (δυεῖν ... θάτερον) about the results of interpreting contradictions in a sense reflects the problem of contradiction, since between two contradictory statements only one can be true.
[70] Adduced by Hunter and Russell (2011, ad loc.).

> πρᾶγμ᾽ ἔχει οὔτ᾽ ἄλλοις παρέχει· διὸ οὔτε ὀργαῖς οὔτε λύπαις συνέχεται.᾽ δηλοῖ δὲ καὶ τὸ ἀθεράπευτον.[71]
>
> <but they themselves are> without care: now he speaks about the divine by nature, but he leads the poetic gods in as being in pain. And hence Epicurus says that [*KD* 1] 'The deathless and the indestructible neither has a matter of concern itself nor provides it to others; therefore it is neither possessed by anger or pain.' And ['without care'] means also what is not moved by entreaty.

Gods who do not care for mortals would of course do away with much of traditional cult. While Plutarch's interpretation of *Iliad* 24.256 does echo the Epicurean interpretation of Homer by the scholiast, Plutarch is careful to retain the providence of the gods for humans, especially their punishment of the wicked. Indeed, Plutarch in the next chapter returns to *Iliad* 24.526 and its preceding verse, where Homer says that the gods ordained woe for wretched mortals, alongside *Odyssey* 4.197-198, to make the following point: "For [Homer] did not say simply that a painful life was ordained also for all humans, but for the senseless and the thoughtless, whom he is accustomed to address as 'worthless' (δειλούς) and 'pitiful' (ὀιζυρούς) since they are wretched (δειλαίους) and lamentable (οἰκτρούς) because of their baseness" (22b1-c4).[72] This appears to be a form of divine providence, but as manifested through a natural necessity whereby the base are punished for their baseness through their baseness itself (see also 23d23-e29; 23f10-13), much as Xenophon's Socrates claims that incest is naturally punished through defective offspring (*Mem*. 4.4.19-25).

Another tension arises with Epicurean theology from the fact that in the whole verse (and what follows), of which only a phrase is quoted at 20e21-f28, Homer has Diomedes say, "then the gods who live easily became angry at him [i.e., Lycurgus], and the child of Kronos made him blind ..." (τῷ μὲν ἔπειτ᾽ ὀδύσαντο θεοὶ ῥεῖα ζώοντες, | καί μιν τυφλὸν ἔθηκε Κρόνου πάϊς, *Il*.

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[71] Note the differences in the reading of the scholiast from that of most other sources for *KD* 1: ἀθάνατον for μακάριον, the singular πρᾶγμ᾽ for the plural πράγματα, and the plural ἄλλοις for the singular ἄλλῳ (see Usener's (1887) apparatus).

[72] οὐ γὰρ ἁπλῶς εἶπε καὶ πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποις ὑπὸ θεῶν ἐπικεκλῶσθαι λυπηρὸν βίον, ἀλλὰ τοῖς ἄφροσι καὶ ἀνοήτοις, οὓς δειλαίους καὶ οἰκτροὺς διὰ μοχθηρίαν ὄντας εἴωθε 'δειλοὺς' καὶ 'ὀιζυροὺς' προσαγορεύειν.

6.138-139).[73] Now, one could explain away the contradiction between gods who are angry and who live easily here, and then in *Iliad* 24 between gods who devise woe and who are without care, by saying that Diomedes and Achilles respectively are not simply the mouthpieces of Homer. They understand the divine nature correctly insofar as they see the gods as happy and without care, but misattribute direct intervention in human affairs to the gods. Or, perhaps Plutarch suggests that the gods who are without cares still do not become angry as per the first *Kuria doxa*, but do maintain a providential care for humans without becoming disturbed themselves.

Whatever Plutarch is envisioning here, in some sense he takes Homer's true theology to be like a modified Epicurean theology. The gods are happy and without care, and do not act like human beings, but unlike the Epicurean gods they still have some form of providence, including, importantly, punishment. Plutarch, however, emphasizes that Hades does not exist (see again 16e22-f28; 17b18-c30), so punishment can only go so far. Homer certainly provides an exoteric teaching about punishment and about Hades (see *Odyssey* 9 and 24) and often treats the gods as behaving like humans, but reveals their true nature in passing.

8.4.5 Plutarch and the Tripartite Theology

The T-scholiast's remark forms another important connection to Plutarch's thought. The scholiast distinguishes between "the divine by nature" (τὸ φύσει θεῖον) and "the poetic [gods]" (τοὺς ποιητικούς). This recalls the natural and poetic theologies of the tripartite theology discussed above in the case of *DND* (4.3.2; 4.4.1). The scholiast claims that Homer is using both natural and poetic theologies. Plutarch's reading of Homer may well also draw on the tripartite

[73] Grossel (2010-2011, 110) gives an example in another work of how Plutarch clearly is aware of and employs the context of the quotation beyond the verse or words cited.

theology, which he discusses explicitly and with the authority of his own *dramatis persona* in the *Amatorius*:[74]

> Ὃ τοίνυν ἐν ἀρχῇ καιρὸν εἶχε ῥηθῆναι μᾶλλον, οὐδὲ νῦν ‘ὅτι νῦν ἦλθεν ἐπὶ στόμα’ κατ’ Αἰσχύλον [fr. 351], ἄρρητον ἐάσειν μοι δοκῶ· καὶ γάρ ἐστι παμμέγεθες. ἴσως μὲν γάρ, ὦ ἑταῖρε, καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἁπάντων, ὅσα μὴ δι’ αἰσθήσεως ἡμῖν εἰς ἔννοιαν ἥκει, τὰ μὲν μύθῳ τὰ δὲ νόμῳ τὰ δὲ λόγῳ πίστιν ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἔσχηκε· τῆς δ’ οὖν περὶ θεῶν δόξης καὶ παντάπασιν ἡγεμόνες καὶ διδάσκαλοι γεγόνασιν ἡμῖν οἵ τε ποιηταὶ καὶ οἱ νομοθέται καὶ τρίτον οἱ φιλόσοφοι, τὸ μὲν [οὖν] εἶναι θεοὺς ὁμοίως τιθέμενοι, πλήθους δὲ πέρι καὶ τάξεως αὐτῶν οὐσίας τε καὶ δυνάμεως μεγάλα διαφερόμενοι πρὸς ἀλλήλους. ἐκεῖνοι μὲν γὰρ οἱ τῶν φιλοσόφων [Pi. fr. 143]
>
> ‘ἄνοσοι καὶ ἀγήραοι
> πόνων τ’ ἄπειροι, βαρυβόαν
> πορθμὸν πεφευγότες Ἀχέροντος·’
>
> ὅθεν <οὐ> προσίενται ποιητικὰς Ἔριδας οὐ Λιτάς, οὐ<δὲ> Δεῖμον οὐδὲ Φόβον ἐθέλουσι θεοὺς εἶναι <καὶ> παῖδας Ἄρεος ὁμολογεῖν· μάχονται δὲ περὶ πολλῶν καὶ τοῖς νομοθέταις, ὥσπερ Ξενοφάνης [DK 21 A 13] Αἰγυπτίους ἐκέλευσε τὸν Ὄσιριν, εἰ θνητὸν νομίζουσι, μὴ τιμᾶν ὡς θεόν, εἰ δὲ θεὸν ἡγοῦνται, μὴ θρηνεῖν. αὖθις δὲ ποιηταὶ καὶ νομοθέται, φιλοσόφων ἰδέας τινὰς καὶ ἀριθμοὺς μονάδας τε καὶ πνεύματα θεοὺς ποιουμένων, οὔτ’ ἀκούειν ὑπομένουσιν οὔτε συνιέναι δύνανται. πολλὴν δ’ ὅλως ἀνωμαλίαν ἔχουσιν αἱ δόξαι καὶ διαφοράν. ὥσπερ οὖν ἦσάν ποτε τρεῖς στάσεις Ἀθήνησι, Παράλων Ἐπακρίων Πεδιέων, χαλεπῶς ἔχουσαι καὶ διαφερόμεναι πρὸς ἀλλήλας, ἔπειτα δὲ πάντες ἐν ταὐτῷ γενόμενοι καὶ τὰς ψήφους λαβόντες ἤνεγκαν πάσας Σόλωνι καὶ τοῦτον εἵλοντο κοινῇ διαλλακτὴν καὶ ἄρχοντα καὶ νομοθέτην, ὃς ἔδοξε τῆς ἀρετῆς ἔχειν ἀδηρίτως τὸ πρωτεῖον, οὕτως αἱ τρεῖς στάσεις αἱ περὶ θεῶν, διχοφρονοῦσαι καὶ ψῆφον ἄλλην ἄλλη φέρουσαι καὶ μὴ δεχόμεναι ῥᾳδίως τὸν ἐξ ἑτέρας, περὶ ἑνὸς βεβαίως ὁμογνωμονοῦσι καὶ κοινῇ τὸν Ἔρωτα συνεγγράφουσιν εἰς θεοὺς ποιητῶν οἱ κράτιστοι καὶ νομοθετῶν καὶ φιλοσόφων ‘ἀθρόᾳ φωνᾷ μέγ’ ἐπαινέοντες’ ὥσπερ ἔφη τὸν Πιττακὸν ὁ Ἀλκαῖος αἱρεῖσθαι τοὺς Μυτιληναίους τύραννον.
>
> Well, that which would have been more opportune to have been said at the beginning, not even now ‘since it came to my mouth,’ as Aeschylus says [fr. 351], do I think that I will leave it unsaid (ἄρρητον); for as a matter of fact it is something of great magnitude. For perhaps, comrade, also of all the other things, however many have come to us not through perception to our comprehension (ἔννοιαν)—some by myth (μύθῳ), others by law (νόμῳ), and others by speech (λόγῳ)—have obtained trust from the beginning; but what matters is that concerning the opinion about the gods the poets, the lawgivers, and third the philosophers have in every way become for us leaders and teachers, similarly positing the fact that gods exist, but about their number and arrangement, and substance and power, being greatly at variance with one another. For those [gods] of the philosophers are [Pi. fr. 143]
>
> ‘without disease and without age and inexperienced in toils, having fled the heavy-sounding straight of Acheron;’
>
> hence they do not admit the poetic Strifes or Prayers, nor are they willing to agree that Terror and Fear are gods and children of Ares; and they fight about many things also with the lawgivers, just as Xenophanes [DK 21 A 13] bade the Egyptians not to honor Osiris

[74] See Hardie 1992, 4760.

> as a god, if they think he is mortal, and if they consider him [to be] a god, not to lament [at his death]. And in turn the poets and the lawgivers neither endure listening to nor are they able to understand the philosophers when they make some ideas and monadic numbers and winds gods. And in general the opinions have much inconsistency and difference. So, just as there were once three factions at Athens—the Crew of the Paralos, Those on the Heights, and Those on the Plains—which were harsh towards and at variance with one another, but then all of them, after coming to be in the same place, both cast their votes for Solon and chose him in common as their mediator, ruler, and lawgiver, who seemed to have indisputably the first place in virtue, so the three factions about the gods, which were of two minds and each bearing a different vote and not receiving easily the god from the other [faction], about one thing securely have the same judgment and the most powerful of the poets, lawgivers, and philosophers in common enroll Eros among the gods 'greatly praising him with a single voice' just as Alcaeus said the Mytileneans chose Pittacus as their tyrant. (763b-e)

This passage stands at the close of a long speech on Eros by Plutarch, in the dialogue on Eros narrated by his son Autoboulus and dramatically set around the time of Plutarch's wedding. The treatment of the tripartite theology, then, is particularly marked not only by the authority of the speaker but also by its position in the speech.

As I argued above with reference to Cicero, the tripartite theology plays an important role in the esoteric/exoteric distinction. Both Cicero and Plutarch adapt the Stoic doctrine of the tripartite theology for Platonic ends, while also engaging with Epicurean theology. Likewise, they both reject strict allegory as that which bridges the esoteric and the exoteric on the level of interpretation, but leave room for the metaphorical and symbolic as an important mode of indirect communication. Plutarch's decision not to leave the doctrine ἄρρητον ("unsaid" or "secret") also associates the language of esotericism with the tripartite theology.

If we return to Plutarch's interpretation of Homer in *De audiendis* with this passage from the *Amatorius* in mind, we can say that Plutarch's Homer presents the mythical theology of the poets as the exoteric teaching and the natural theology of the philosophers as the esoteric teaching (this is also the claim of the T-scholiast). The different theologies are operative within the same text rather than only being produced by different groups.

That the poets possess and communicate natural theology in addition to poetic theology is also brought out in the *Amatorius* passage by the fact that Pindar, a poet, is quoted as the prime

example of natural theology rather than a philosopher. The next example adduced is Xenophanes who, while he is today grouped with the pre-Socratics, also wrote in verse and may not have seemed qualitatively different from poets like Hesiod who also attempted to give an account of the universe. Poets are paradoxically adduced as the philosophers in a passage that aims at showing the quarrel between philosophers on the one hand and poets and lawgivers on the other.

In the context of Chapter 1 of *De audiendis*, I raised the question of whether *muthos* and *logos* are separate ingredients to be mixed together[75] or whether they can never really exist separately (see 7.2 above). This question recurs in the *Amatorius* passage, since Plutarch says there that everything that is intelligible rather than perceptual (ὅσα μὴ δι' αἰσθήσεως ἡμῖν εἰς ἔννοιαν ἥκει) may come to be known through *muthos*, *nomos*, and *logos*. That Plutarch puts *muthos* and *nomos* in the same cognitive domain as *logos* makes us wonder whether the teachings of *muthos* and *nomos* are simply false as opposed to a simply true *logos*, or whether the three merely access the truth in different ways (cf. *De Pyth. or*. 407e-408e[76] and again *De Is. et Os*. 358f-359a).[77] What is at stake in this question is whether Homer presents a hidden teaching entirely at odds with poetic theology, which would be a different form of esotericism from that which I ascribed to Cicero's Balbus and Cicero himself in *DND*, or whether there is some intrinsic connection between poetic theology and natural theology. This latter option, which would mean that the exoteric is connected to the esoteric, would make Homer's method more like that of Balbus and Cicero. Put simply, do the poets transmit natural theology only qua philosophers disguised as poets, or is there a way in which elaborating poetic theology is indispensable for natural theology? Decisive, then, is also the role in which ordinary opinion would play in elaborating natural theology. Plutarch speaks of the *doxa* about the gods, and the

[75] As, e.g., Lather (2017, 329, 346) seems to take Plutarch to mean.
[76] Cited at ibid., 343.
[77] Cf. Heirman 1972, 7-8.

doxai of these three groups. Arriving at the proper understanding of the tripartite theology involves a comparison of opinions.

Indeed, the fact that poetry is the authority for the tripartite theology and that the whole passage is cast in a political simile may indicate that one must use the poetic and the political not only as a handmaid to but also as the way towards philosophy. This is reflected in the language of the beginning (ἀρχή) in the *Amatorius*, which raises the question of the proper starting point for philosophy.

The political simile about faction (στάσις) that Plutarch employs skews in some way the understanding of the tripartite theology towards one part of the tripartite theology, the political theology which relies on *nomos*. The language of "quarrel" or "difference" (διαφοράν; διαφερόμεναι) also recalls the quarrel or difference (διαφορά, 607b5-6) between philosophy and poetry in the *Republic* (see also my discussion at 1.2 above). Here it is a quarrel between poetry allied with law and the city on the one hand against philosophy on the other. Furthermore, Solon and Eros are appointed as *nomo-thetai—nomos* wins in the end by establishing the relationship between myth, law, and philosophy.

The alliance of the three theologies around Eros may superficially cover over the danger of poetry and politics to philosophy (whereas in the *Symposium*, Plutarch's Platonic model, the whole point is that Eros has *not* been praised or honored properly (177a5-d5), and Socrates has a very different theology of Eros from the poets Aristophanes and Agathon). But Plutarch does admit that poets and lawgivers are not able to withstand listening to the philosophers, which points to the persecution of philosophers and the tension between philosophy and politics. This is a theme Plutarch develops more explicitly in his *Life of Nicias* (23.3-5), as discussed above (6.3), and which is also a central point at the end of *De audiendis*: philosophy is too jarring for one accustomed to the normal opinions of the one's family, teachers, etc. (36d5-e18). Hence the need for philosophic poetry as a mediator between law or custom (*nomos*) and philosophy. The end of

De audiendis uses the same word as the *Amatorius* passage for the inability to withstand philosophy by those trapped in convention (ὑπομένοντας, 36e13 vs. ὑπομένουσιν, *Amatorius* 763d). The motive of esotericism is not only pedagogical but also due to the need for the philosopher to protect himself or herself along with his or her students from persecution. (And it is probably safer or less jarring for Plutarch to quote Xenophanes' critique of Egyptian *nomos* rather than a critique of Greek or Roman *nomos*.)[78]

Plutarch's treatment of Homer's presentation of esoteric and exoteric theologies, along with the connection of this to the tripartite theology that he discusses in the *Amatorius*, forms an important parallel to Cicero's use of esotericism in *DND*, despite their different emphases. While Plutarch may have read Cicero, these similarities are better explained by the pervasive awareness of esoteric philosophy by Greco-Roman philosophers and these two philosophers' deep engagement with Plato while also navigating the debates of the Hellenistic schools.

8.4.6 Homer's Divine Symbolism and Plutarch's Ambiguity

There is one more method of Homer's esoteric theology which still requires discussion: his use of divine symbolism (especially through homonymy) by which he sometimes uses a god's name to indicate a god's power rather than the divinity itself.[79] In the context of his larger discussion of the ambiguity of words in Chapter 6, Plutarch writes:

> ταύτην δὴ τὴν διαίρεσιν καὶ διάκρισιν τῶν ὀνομάτων ἐν τοῖς μείζοσι καὶ σπουδαιοτέροις παραφυλάττοντες ἀπὸ τῶν θεῶν ἀρχώμεθα διδάσκειν τοὺς νέους ὅτι χρῶνται τοῖς τῶν θεῶν ὀνόμασιν οἱ ποιηταὶ ποτὲ μὲν αὐτῶν ἐκείνων ἐφαπτόμενοι τῇ ἐννοίᾳ, ποτὲ δὲ δυνάμεις τινὰς ὧν οἱ θεοὶ δοτῆρές εἰσι καὶ καθηγεμόνες ὁμωνύμως προσαγορεύοντες.
>
> Indeed, while preserving this division and separation of names in the greater and more serious things let us begin (ἀρχώμεθα) from the gods to teach the young that the poets use

[78] In *De superstitione*, Plutarch quotes Xenophanes to the same effect with approval (171d-e), whereas in *De Iside et Osiride* he defends the Egyptians against Xenophanes' reproach (379b-c).
[79] This is also one of Lucretius' methods of esotericism with respect to theology (2.655-660). See further above (5.4). For the examples in *De audiendis* we might today use the term "metonymy" because the attribute stands in for that to which the attribute belongs, but Plutarch, as we will see, uses the term "homonymy" to indicate that the name is the same, but indicates different things.

> the names of the gods sometimes while grasping them [i.e., the gods] themselves with their comprehension, but sometimes calling by homonymy some powers of which the gods are givers and leaders. (23a15-21)

In teaching about ambiguity of gods' names as an aspect of Homer's esotericism, Plutarch's thought connects to two Platonic dialogues in particular: the *Phaedrus* and the *Cratylus.* In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates presents philosophy as the practice of division and collection which together make up dialectics (266b3-c1).[80] Immediately before, when he discusses the relationship between his two speeches on Eros, Socrates makes it clear that collecting the particular into one defined idea (ἰδέαν) is the way of teaching (διδάσκειν, 265d3-5) while dividing by forms (εἴδη) is the way of discovery (ἐφευρών, 266a7).[81] The proper path of philosophy must combine collection and division, that is, teaching and discovery. Socrates' two speeches, the first which followed the way of teaching and the second which followed the way of discovery turn out to make up one whole (265e3-4). This duality is embodied in Socrates' definition of a name in the *Cratylus*: "A name, then is some instrument which teaches (διδασκαλικόν) and divides (διακριτικόν) substance just like a comb [divides] a web" (388b13-c1).[82] Language both communicates (collecting/teaching) and articulates (dividing/discovering).[83]

Here in *De audiendis*, Plutarch claims to teach (διδάσκειν) the young about the division and separation of names (τὴν διαίρεσιν καὶ διάκρισιν τῶν ὀνομάτων). We discriminate names and names discriminate between the beings. The pairing of the noun "division" (διάκρισιν) with "names" (ὀνομάτων) strongly recalls a name (Ὄνομα) as being "dividing" (διακριτικόν) in the *Cratylus*. Plutarch claims, then, to combine the way of teaching with the way of discovery. The

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[80] For philosophy, division, and collection in Cicero see *De orat*. 1.188-191; cf. *Brut*. 302.
[81] On one reading of the *Republic*, positing a stable form from which one derives the particulars deductively involves the language of ἰδέαι while searching zetetically among the particulars to go up towards a form which one never completely reaches involves the language of εἴδη. The first is teaching while the second is discovery. See Davis 2018, 103, 119-120.
[82] Ὄνομα ἄρα διδασκαλικόν τί ἐστιν ὄργανον καὶ διακριτικὸν τῆς οὐσίας ὥσπερ κερκὶς ὑφάσματος.
[83] Benardete (1991, 121, 179-181) reveals the nexus of ideas just discussed. See further Benardete 2000b, 151-152 and Benardete 2012b, 186.

grammarians, who seem to remind of the philologists (φιλόλογον) (see 22c5-12 at the beginning of Chapter 6), are the ones who teach (ὡς οἱ γραμματικοὶ διδάσκουσιν, 22f8). By both teaching and discovering Plutarch combines the way of philology with the way of philosophy with respect to the analysis of names.[84] Plutarch does the two things Socrates claims a name does in his own treatment of names. Plutarch reinforces the connection to the *Cratylus* by stressing the importance of beginning from the gods' names (ἀπὸ τῶν θεῶν ἀρχώμεθα διδάσκειν, 23a17-18) as does Socrates (Ἆρ᾽ οὖν οὐ δίκαιον ἀπὸ τῶν θεῶν ἄρχεσθαι, *Cra*. 397a4-6).[85] Carlo Delle Donne argues for another parallel to the *Cratylus* at 31d-f in the treatise in the context of a broader appraisal of the role of the *Cratylus* in Plutarch's thought.[86] This, along with yet another connection to the *Cratylus* in *De audiendis* that other scholars have already noticed (see below), makes the allusions to the *Cratylus* I have identified even more plausible.

Plutarch puts on the purely didactic mask of the teacher in order to be indirectly zetetic.[87] This is how he pretends to teach about educating the young while educating us. In this section, as we will see, this is reflected by his teaching about ambiguity while employing ambiguity. Plutarch's own ambiguity deliberately undermines what he presents as a purely stable and straightforward account of deciphering Homer and other poets' ambiguity.[88]

After introducing this dual aspect of Platonic dialectics in the opening participial phrase and main verb of 23a15-21, in the indirect statement he distinguishes between two ways the poets use the gods' names: either they refer to "the gods themselves" (αὐτῶν ἐκείνων)[89] or their

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[84] Recall that poetry for Plutarch comes very close to philosophy in allowing for discovery (see again 35e9-11).
[85] To my knowledge, others do not mention this clear allusion to the *Cratylus* or the parallel regarding the definition of a name (ὄνομα). For example, major works on *De audiendis* and Plutarch, such as the following, do not note these parallels: Babbitt 1927; von Reutern 1933; Helmbold and O'Neil 1959; Heirman 1972; Valgiglio 1973; Philippon 1987; Van der Stockt 1992; Hunter and Russell 2011.
[86] Delle Donne 2023, 6-8. Note that irony forms an important part of the connection Delle Donne draws.
[87] Cf. the discussion of Lucretius above.
[88] Plutarch's discussing ambiguity directly is didactic, but showing it through ambiguity of words like δύναμις (see below) in his own text is zetetic. One posits stable things and shows how the particulars fit in, while the other just shows the particular meanings through varied uses of the word and then allows the reader to figure out what is going on.
[89] See also αὐτοὺς τοὺς θεούς, 23b6; τὸν θεὸν αὐτόν, 23d19.

"powers" (δυνάμεις). This at first seems like a straightforward distinction.[90] "Hephaestus" can either means the limping god or fire (23a21-b3). But what are "the gods themselves" or "the god himself"?[91] What does this mean, especially if Plutarch is at pains to show us that Homer knows that the gods are not the poetic gods of myth? They are not like humans. The phrase "the gods themselves" implies that we could arrive at a perfectly articulated account of the gods, a theology that would perfectly incapsulate the divine with no gap between reference and referent. Speech and thinking (νοεῖν)—*logos* can mean both—would be the same as being, as per Parmenides (DK 28 B 3), rather than speech being an instrument which teaches about and divides being (οὐσία), and hence is not identical to it.

In fact, the difficulty of arriving at "the gods themselves" shows a more general problem of speech. Even the ordinary nouns the ambiguity of which Plutarch attempts to clarify present difficulties in arriving at "the name itself" (αὐτὸ τοὔνομα, 24a19). For the example of οἶκος' sometimes meaning "house" (οἰκία) and sometimes meaning "property" (οὐσία) (22d18-20) runs into the problem that "property" is already a nonliteral meaning of the noun formed from εἰμί ("be"), οὐσία ("substance" or "being"). Each definition of a noun involves another noun, and every proper meaning of a word turns out to be an improper meaning of an earlier "proper" meaning (κυρίως ὀνομάζεσθαι, 24b8-9) which was itself improper.[92] There is an infinite regress of meaning unless we have some way of arriving at a stable beginning (ἀρχή) (cf. Pl. *Cra.* 424c5-425b3). Just as the distinction between an improper (homonymic, metonymic, metaphorical, catachretic) use and proper use of a god's name breaks down, we have the same problem with every noun or name—is there really something that is said "simply" rather than "in many ways"

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[90] Cf. Heirman 1972, 13.
[91] Cf. Strauss 1964, 241.
[92] Cf. Hardie 1992, 4746-4747 on "proper (κύριος) and metaphorical usages" in Plutarch in relation to concealment. The difference between proper and improper usage is also key in Plutarch's description of Plato's esotericism (*De Is. et Os*. 370e-f), discussed above (6.3). Cf. Lucretius on proper meanings (3.133-135).

(τῶν ἁπλῶς ἢ τῶν πολλαχῶς λεγομένων, 22b16-17)? And yet both Plato's Socrates and Plutarch see that somehow beginning with the gods (ἀρχώμεθα; ἄρχεσθαι) is the most stable beginning in speech, the right starting point in dialectics. Speaking about the gods is intimately tied to a fundamental ambiguity in speech, and hence theology in *DND*, *DRN*, and *De audiendis* leads most directly to esotericism.

Although there is ambiguity in the poets, Plutarch again stresses here that we have to search for their "intention" (ἔννοιαν, 23a19; cf. νοοῦντες, 22d16) in their use of names. Though it may be impossible to give a perfect account of a poet's meaning or a perfect definition of a name, we must make the effort of positing an intention about which we try to teach if we are ever to discover something in our readings. To get anywhere, we have to try to get to the simple (ἁπλῶς) from the potential manifold (πολλαχῶς) in speech.

In beginning from the gods (ἀρχώμεθα) the gods are the beginning (ἀρχή) even for philosophical understanding. We are oriented by δόξα, which is most importantly about the gods (see again τῆς ... περὶ θεῶν δόξης, *Amatorius* 763c; cf. Pl. *Cra*. 425b8-c7).[93] The opinion about the gods grounds the individual in relation to the city, where opinion reigns supreme ("custom is king of all").[94] This could explain the necessary connection between poetic and natural theologies, both of which emerge from the city (the *nomos* of civil theology)—in the *Cratylus* Socrates says it is "just" (δίκαιον) to begin from the gods (397a4-6; see also *Lg*. 624a3). Justice which is of course political determines the beginning of philosophical investigation.

It is remarkable that, just a few sentences before Plutarch distinguishes between the gods themselves and their "powers" (δυνάμεις, 23a20), he uses the word δύναμις in a different sense to mean "meaning": "the names ... take a different meaning for different [underlying matters]" (τῶν

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[93] Cf. Bréchet 1999, 214-215.
[94] … νόμον πάντων βασιλέα … εἶναι …, Hdt. 2.38 (quoting Pindar). See also Pl. *Grg*. 484b1-c3; *Min*. 317c5-6; *Lg*. 690b7-c3.

ὀνομάτων ... ἄλλην πρὸς ἄλλα δύναμιν λαμβονόντων, 22f7-9).[95] This is the teaching of the grammarians, that words have different meanings depending on the context. But by using the word δύναμις to mean "meaning" in one sentence and "power" in another sentence (the Latin *vis* has this dual meaning as well)[96] while talking about the ambiguity of meaning Plutarch makes even the word which means "meaning" ambiguous. Not long afterwards, Plutarch again uses δύναμις, but in the sense of "the power of fate" (τῇ τῆς τύχης δυνάμει, 23e7)—which seems qualitatively different from a god's power—then as the psychological effect of fate on human reasoning (24a20), and finally with yet a different meaning as political power (24c20-21 *bis*; 24e14). All of these meanings of δύναμις occur in Chapter 6 alone, the chapter which focuses on the ambiguity of language (Daniel Wyttenbach lists almost two pages of varied uses of the word in his *Lexicon Plutarcheum*).[97]

This is by no means Plutarch's only use of ambiguous terms in interesting ways,[98] but the ambiguity of δύναμις in Chapter 6 shows especially well how Plutarch practices a method of esotericism he also ascribes to Homer and other poets. As I showed above (3.4), ambiguity is also a method of esotericism which Cotta attributes to Epicurus in his first *Kuria doxa* in *DND* and, as also mentioned, Cicero discusses and exploits ambiguity in many instances, especially in *De oratore*. Amy Lather explains how Plutarch himself becomes poetic by using poetic citations and adopting poetic terminology;[99] Plutarch's imitation of poetic ambiguity can likewise represent another way that Plutarch becomes poetic as part of his philosophical project. I discussed above (8.4.2) examples of Homer's method of ambiguity ("Zeus" sometimes means the god, and sometimes "chance" or "fate"). I dwell on Plutarch's ambiguity here as a way to begin

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[95] Recall that Plutarch calls poetry itself "a mimetic art and power" (μιμητικὴ τέχνη καὶ δύναμις, 17f29-1).
[96] δύναμις as "meaning" is passive (what we understand) while δύναμις as "power" is active (what the god does).
[97] See Wyttenbach 1962 [1830], s.v. For example, it is also common for it to mean an actual army ("*Exercitus, copiæ*") rather than a notional "power."
[98] See the example of ἔκπληξις ("amazement") above (8.3).
[99] See again Lather 2017, 343-344, *passim*

elaborating on how his esoteric reading of Homer's poetry also implies an esoteric way of writing. His use of ambiguity fits with a comparison in *De audiendis* discussed above (7.2): in Chapter 1 Plutarch makes his treatise take on the character of poetry in addition to philosophy by comparing it to an "amethyst" (see my discussion of the linguistic connections in that context). In the beginning of his work Plutarch warns us that *De audiendis* will occupy an indeterminate position between philosophy and poetry. Through his use of ambiguous language on the model of Homer's esotericism we see how that plays out. As we saw at length, his use of images, which is proper to poetry, is yet another way he assimilates his treatise to poetry.

Chapter 6 focuses on ambiguity in the smallest units of meaning, while Chapter 4 on *emphasis*, as we saw above (8.4.2), focuses on ambiguity created by contradiction on the larger level of plot. I will show in a later section how Plutarch also exploits the method of contradiction on the macrolevel of his treatise (8.7).

The infinite regress of meanings, ambiguity, and the difficulty of arriving at a precise definition of "the gods themselves" sheds light on features of language that belong to language as such. Poetry and esoteric philosophy employ the lies which lie in all speech deliberately. This is what separates the interpretation required of all speech from interpretation required for esoteric speech.

Chapter 5 stresses the teleology of writing, or logographic necessity. Every part of a writing has to aim at an overarching good. Chapter 6 moves to the discussion of ambiguity, which we saw involved dialectics as the process of collection and division, teaching and discovery (the didactic and the zetetic), communication and articulation, synthesis and analysis. Dialectics separates the good from the bad (X. *Mem*. 4.5.11), so is needed for discerning the teleology of writing. This prepares for Chapter 7, where Plutarch reintroduces mimesis but this time with reference to good and evil rather than beauty. The focus on discerning good and evil continues through Chapter 11. Interpretation of ambiguity in the text is training in the interpretation of

ambiguity of the world, of which the text is a simulacrum (see 5.4 on Lucretius above; cf. again Pl. *Ti*. 29b3-d3). Homer provides a training in dialectics by showing us ambiguous instances of good and evil in his poems which allow us to interpret good and evil in the world.[100]

Anchored in the way of ambiguity is, finally, Homer's Cratylean pun of divinity with prepositional speech. In Chapter 6 Plutarch gives two forms of the genitive of Zeus' name (τῷ τοῦ Διὸς καὶ Ζηνὸς ὀνόματι, 23b14). Hunter and Russell comment: "[Plutarch] gives both genitive forms, not just because of the importance of this particular case, but perhaps also to recall the significance of etymologizing these forms and especially the discussion at Plato, *Cratylus* 396a-b."[101] Unlike Hunter and Russell, Paton in the Teubner without noting it in the apparatus even changes the regular accentuation of the accusative (usually τὸν Δία) to τὸν Διά, perhaps to bring out this pun (23d20), i.e., the similarity explained in the *Cratylus* passage between one version of "Zeus" in the oblique cases (Διός, Διί, Δία) and the preposition meaning "through" (διά). Commentators, however, do not note that the pun resurfaces in the text of Homer himself that Plutarch cites (24b4-5 = *Od*. 8.81-82): "For then indeed the beginning (ἀρχή) of misery was put into motion for the Trojans and Danaeans through (διά) the plans of great Zeus (Διός)."[102] This is especially clear given the recent reference to the *Cratylus* pointed out by Hunter and Russell and because Plutarch's point is that in this passage "Zeus" does not denote the god but something else (24b6-7). Zeus as cause points to the beginning of trouble (here the quarrel between Achilles and Odysseus, see 8.4.2 above) but the beginning of trouble is also the beginning of Demodocus' song; and the "plans of great Zeus" of course recall "the plan of Zeus" (Διὸς ... βουλή) of the *Iliad* proem cited by Plutarch just prior (24d21-22 = *Il*. 1.3-4). Like Demodocus (whose interaction with Odysseus I discussed above, also at 8.4.2), Homer begins

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[100] Cf. Bréchet 1999, 242: "Savoir percer l'enveloppe de la fiction pour extraire des poèmes les idées profitables n'est pas si éloigné de l'attitude du philosophe qui dépasse les apparences sensibles pour accéder à l'intelligible."
[101] Hunter and Russell 2011, ad 23c.
[102] τότε γάρ ῥα κυλίνδετο πήματος ἀρχή | Τρωσί τε καὶ Δαναοῖσι Διὸς μεγάλου διὰ βουλάς

from the gods. Plutarch and Plato's Socrates also begin from the gods in their philosophic discussion of names. Poetry and philosophy both start from the gods but reach different conclusions. As Heidegger says in his *Nietzsche*, for there to be a quarrel between philosophy and poetry the two have to be on the same path initially.[103] This path is esotericism.

The orientation towards the gods in political life necessitates an investigation of the gods, i.e., what their names *mean*, what they refer to. This is first philosophy (Hesiod's starting point)––the question "What is god?" The gods of the city and the gods of the poets give rise to ontology out of everyday experience: our relationship to the gods and the city. The gods' names lead to dialectic no less in Hesiod than in Plutarch, for Hesiod speaks of the collection (sexual intercourse) and division (birth) of the discrete entities which make up the cosmos (see also Hesiod's pun on Zeus and διά, *Op*. 2-3).[104]

The verbal equation between a god and a god's power is per Plutarch homonymic. This creates another parallel to Cicero's discussion of theology at *DND* 2.60[105] and Lucretius' practice of divine symbolism (adopted too by Vergil).[106] So, the three Roman philosophers I treat in this dissertation tie the homonymic, metonymic, or symbolic use of the gods' names to their discussion of esotericism. Divine symbolism is a species of ambiguity which is a species of esotericism.

8.4.7 Suppressed Logical Consequences

There is a final method of poets' esotericism which, though not Homeric, is important to consider. Found in the last chapter of *De audiendis*, it also connects to my discussion of the end

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[103] Heidegger 1961, I.220-221. See also Max. Tyr. 4.1 on poetry and philosophy: χρῆμα διττὸν μὲν κατὰ τὸ ὄνομα, ἁπλοῦν δὲ κατὰ τὴν οὐσίαν... ("a thing which is double with respect to its name, but simple with respect to its substance...").
[104] Noted by Hunter and Russell (2011, ad 23c).
[105] Adduced at ibid., ad 23a.
[106] See Trotz-Liboff 2023a, 423-434 for this aspect of Lucretius and Vergil.

of the work. Plutarch pairs a quotation of Aeschylus with one of Epicurus (36b1-9). I will draw out the full implication of this parallel in a later section (8.7). Here what matters is the method of poetic esotericism implied by Plutarch's analysis. While Aeschylus says that great toil or pain does not last long (fr. 352), Epicurus says great toil or pain does not last long and long lasting ones are not great (= 447 Usener). Plutarch comments: "Of these Aeschylus said one clearly, but the other is a consequence (παρακείμενόν) of what has been said; for if a great and intense pain does not endure (παραμένει), the pain which endures (ὁ παραμένων) is not great or difficult to bear" (36b6-9).[107] What is implicit as a consequence to what is said is necessarily unsaid; but if it is deliberately implied it is esoteric. Both what lies adjacent (τὸ παρακείμενον) and what lies under (τὸ ὑποκείμενον, see 18b17; 18b21; 20b23-24; 22f8; 25b15; 28b10) are not immediately visible. What is a consequence (παρακείμενον) is in some way parallel to a pain that lasts (παραμένει; παραμένων). The consequence and pain are results of some prior experience that last but are unseen.[108]

On Plutarch's analysis, poets provide philosophical statements without spelling out the consequences, without providing the steps in a syllogism. This may be the role of maxims (γνώμαι) in poetry.[109] They are deep but require interpretation. As Heraclitus says of Apollo's Delphic Oracle, the poet "neither says nor conceals but indicates" (... οὔτε λέγει οὔτε κρύπτει ἀλλὰ σημαίνει, DK 22 B 93).[110] Poetry provides the starting point for philosophic thought without working out all the consequences. Sometimes this is the impression one receives from reading Plutarch. He provides interesting statements but rarely a rigorous logical proof. We are left to figure out the unsaid consequence, the παρακείμενον, ourselves.

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[107] ὧν τὸ μὲν εἴρηκεν ὁ Αἰσχύλος ἐναργῶς, τὸ δὲ τῷ εἰρημένῳ παρακείμενόν ἐστιν· εἰ γὰρ ὁ μέγας καὶ σύντονος οὐ παραμένει πόνος, οὐκ ἔστι μέγας ὁ παραμένων οὐδὲ δυσκαρτέρητος.
[108] The philosopher employs models (παραδείγματα, 20b22-c25) and shows the consequence (παρακείμενον).
[109] See Bréchet 2007, 113-115.
[110] Cited by Plutarch at *De Pyth. or*. 404d, as noted by Hardie (1992, 4748 n. 22).

8.4.8 Summary of Homer's Methods of Esotericism

Plutarch ascribes a variety of methods of esotericism to Homer and other poets in *De audiendis*. Homer is the master of esoteric expression through his "silent kind of teaching" (σιωπώμενόν ... γένος τῆς διδασκαλίας, 19e18-19). His overarching method of esotericism is exposition of philosophy through myth, understood as both plot and fabulous story. Communicating through myth creates an "obscurity of judgment" (ἀσάφεια τῆς γνώμης, 27a4-5) in many cases. While what Homer thinks about characters' conduct in initially unclear, he reveals his judgment indirectly through *emphasis*, an indirect indication about speech or deed. Homer can subtly reveal what he thinks either through the offhand use of an adverb or other remark before or after a character's speech or through the plot itself. He can also do so not in the narration but by having characters use revealing epithets when they address other characters.

Another way of creating and resolving ambiguity is through deliberate contradiction. For example, Homer presents different versions of the gods in different parts of his poems. Usually, they behave like vicious humans but sometimes he treats them more in line with Platonic and Epicurean theology: they are not under the sway of the passions and live happily (Platonic and Epicurean) even if they do enforce justice in the world (Platonic). Speaking in line with the tripartite theology expounded in the *Amatorius*, we can say Homer sometimes exoterically reveals the mythical gods of the poets and sometimes esoterically reveals the natural gods of the philosophers. But Plutarch is careful to show that even the philosophers must begin with the gods of the city and the poets in their investigations.

Homer can speak ambiguously in this way through larger units like the gods' vicious actions in some parts of the poem as opposed to his descriptions of their bliss elsewhere, but he also uses their names ambiguously as part of his esotericism. Thus "Zeus" refers sometimes to the god and sometimes to chance depending on the context, and "Hephaestus" sometimes means the god and sometimes fire. In this way, Homer puts homonymy and symbolism in the service of

esoteric philosophy. It is also important to remember that for Plutarch's Homer Hades does not exist, even though he presents it exoterically as real.

In observing the methods of esotericism Plutarch ascribes to Homer, we gain a non-arbitrary starting point for considering Plutarch's own potential methods of esotericism. Awareness and approval of particular methods of esotericism by a philosopher at least make it plausible that the philosopher practices those methods, especially if there is additional evidence to corroborate it. I dwelled on Plutarch's use of ambiguous language during his discussion of ambiguity through a case study of the word δύναμις, as well as other ways in which he adopts poetic practices such as his use of imagery. He also makes his treatise more poetic through his citations and self-contradictions. Because Plutarch ascribes concealment of philosophic positions to Homer and the poets, showing himself to be poetic may be a subtle indication of his own esotericism. For the moment, the contours of Plutarch's own esotericism remain at the level of conjecture. Only an analysis of the structure and motion of *De audiendis*, which I will sketch below (8.7), can determine how exactly he practices esotericism.[111]

8.5 Content

We have now seen both the motives and the methods of Homer's esotericism. He employs the various methods just described primarily for the sake of pedagogical esotericism. The motive of entertainment is a secondary purpose in the service of teaching. More rarely he also practices other-regarding esotericism, when he shields readers' minds from the debilitating doctrine of chance by concealing it with Zeus' name.

We are now in a position to survey again the content of Homer's esotericism as opposed to his motives and methods. Because the content often emerged over the course of the discussion

[111] Cf. Bréchet 1999, 226: "Il faut donc considérer le traité dans son mouvement, qui dépend étroitement de l'ambition pédagogique de Plutarque."

of his motives and methods, my discussion will take the form of summary and analysis rather than a detailed reconsideration of the passages in question.

The content—the *what* or the teaching—of Homer's esotericism on the highest level is that the gods as he normally portrays them in his poems do not correspond to what he takes to be the divine. As we have seen, the natural theology of the philosophers is what he conceals: the gods are blessed and free from care, but they do enforce justice. Furthermore, Hades for him does not actually exist. While this may sound like an allegorical method of esotericism, it is not. For when Homer presents stories about the gods in which they deviate from the standards of the divine that he sets, he does not create an elaborate physical allegory (see again 19e18-20b19). Rather, when the gods behave like humans they teach lessons about human virtue and vice, and the proper relationship of poetry to the political community. He reveals the true divine nature through contradiction and ambiguous speech, rather than through allegory. The Homeric gods thus show the reader indirectly both lessons in ethics and the true nature of the divine. The poetic gods who have the ability to pursue their desires without the normal restraints of mortality show humans' longing for immortality, which is what the heroes as intermediates between humans and gods represent.

As also discussed, through his indirect praise and blame of different heroes and (poetic) gods, Homer indicates that Odysseus rather than Achilles or any of the others is the peak of human virtue. And Homer presents Odysseus' virtue as the pursuit of wisdom coupled with both an ability to deceive others and knowledge of the proper use of poetry.[112] Odysseus combines and shows the interrelation between philosophy, poetry, and legislation (*logos*, *muthos*, and *nomos*). Just as *De audiendis* triangulates philosophy, poetry, and esotericism, the figure of Odysseus as

[112] Notice how Plutarch says that poetry makes use of "the element of many ways" (τῷ πολυτρόπῳ, 25c28), the word which Homer uses to describe Odysseus in the first line of the *Odyssey*.

an esoteric philosopher-poet embodies what Homer takes to be most important.[113] And, of course, since this has been Plutarch's Homer all along, it shows what Plutarch takes to be most important at least on the poetic understanding of things. Plutarch's Homer teaches the difference between poetic and philosophic theology and also why one needs to orient one's understanding around poetry as a path to philosophy.

Now, I have discussed many particular items of content. But there is still the broader question of the two main categories of content in my typology: skeptical esotericism and dogmatic esotericism. Does Homer merely conceal a dogmatic content, like a fully worked out natural theology, or is what is concealed really a more radical understanding of the limits of human knowledge and the skeptical inquiry Homer wishes us to undertake? This line of questioning leads back to the question of cause, the philosophic commitments which ultimately determine the reason for practicing esotericism and which influence the other categories of motive, method, and content as well.

8.6 Cause

As I noted at the start of this section, it is hard to determine Homer's epistemological and ontological commitments, since Plutarch does not discuss these in the same degree of detail as the motive, method, and content of his esotericism.[114] For this reason, I will tentatively discuss a few aspects of "cause" that are not ascribed to Homer but emerge from Plutarch's discussion. These are skepticism about the most important things,[115] especially what happens after death, and a tension between philosophy and politics which finds a resolution in either esoteric philosophy or poetry. Additionally, Plutarch's understanding of the soul, as evident in *De virtute morali* where

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[113] Cf. Nünlist 2009, 170.
[114] But cf. the assertion in Plato that Homer conceals the ontological doctrine of flux (see again *Tht*. 152e5-9).
[115] Hardie (1992, 4753-4754) pays attention to the epistemological dimensions of esotericism in Plutarch as distinct from the political ones with great clarity, but, as noted, prefers the term "secrecy."

reason and passion are inextricably connected, provides another explanation for esoteric philosophy and the union of philosophy and poetry.

In response to passages in which Homeric and tragic characters lament their death as something pitiable or terrible because of Hades (17c1-d12), Plutarch cautions that neither the poets nor the philosophers know about these things accurately:

> πρὸς ταῦτα δὴ πάλιν παρασκευάζωμεν εὐθὺς ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἔχειν ἔναυλον ὅτι ποιητικῇ μὲν οὐ πάνυ μέλον ἐστὶ τῆς ἀληθείας, ἡ δὲ περὶ ταῦτ᾽ ἀλήθεια καὶ τοῖς μηδὲν ἄλλο πεποιημένοις ἔργον ἢ γνῶσιν καὶ μάθησιν τοῦ ὄντος εὖ μάλα δυσθήρατός ἐστι καὶ δύσληπτος, ὡς ὁμολογοῦσιν αὐτοί. καὶ τὰ Ἐμπεδοκλέους ἔστω πρόχειρα ταυτί [DK 31 B 2.7-8]
> ‘οὕτως οὔτ᾽ ἐπιδερκτὰ τάδ᾽ ἀνδράσιν οὔτ᾽ ἐπακουστά
> οὔτε νόῳ περιληπτά’
> καὶ τὰ Ξενοφάνους [DK 21 B 34.1-2]
> ‘καὶ τὸ μὲν οὖν σαφὲς οὔτις ἀνὴρ γένετ᾽ οὐδέ τις ἔσται
> εἰδὼς ἀμφὶ θεῶν τε καὶ ἅσσα λέγω περὶ πάντων’
> καὶ νὴ Δία τὰ Σωκράτους ἐξομνυμένου παρὰ Πλάτωνι τὴν περὶ τούτων γνῶσιν. ἧττον γὰρ ὡς εἰδόσι τι περὶ τούτων προσέξουσι τοῖς ποιηταῖς ἐν οἷς τοὺς φιλοσόφους ἰλιγγιῶντας ὁρῶσιν.
>
> Against these very views [i.e., about death] let us prepare [the young] straight from the beginning (ἐξ ἀρχῆς) to have ringing in their ears like an aulos the fact that the truth is not altogether a concern for poetry, and that the truth concerning these things is very much difficult to hunt and catch hold of even for those who have made (πεποιημένοις) their activity nothing other than the cognition and learning of being (τοῦ ὄντος), as they themselves agree. And let the following words of Empedocles be ready at hand [DK 31 B 2.7-8]
> ‘thus these things are not able to be seen, nor able to be heard, nor able to be comprehended through mind by men’
> and those of Xenophanes [DK 21 B 34.1-2]
> ‘And neither was there a man nor will there be one who knows clearly about the gods and about all things, however many I speak about’
> and—by Zeus!—the words of Socrates in Plato as he denies by oath knowledge about these things. For [if these words are ready at hand] the young will pay attention less to the poets as ones who know something about the things in which they see that the philosophers become dizzy. (17d12-e27)

Plutarch the "moralist" here remarks that philosophers do nothing else than study being (τοῦ ὄντος). Ontology is the true domain of philosophy, but the truth about being is extremely difficult to grasp.[116]

The quotation of Xenophanes includes the gods alongside Hades as that about which it is impossible to know with absolute clarity. The difficulty is created by the fact that poets do not care exclusively about the truth and that the subject matter is very difficult. There is a problem that, whereas the philosophers admit their ignorance about the gods and Hades, Homer's esoteric teaching seems to be a positive argument about the nonexistence of Hades and a certain teaching about the gods. Homer presents a nuanced esoteric teaching, but does the passage just cited point to Homer's overconfidence in his knowledge, as opposed to the avowed ignorance of Empedocles, Xenophanes, and Plato's Socrates? Does Plutarch simply agree with Homer, or is Homer merely the best and most powerful of the poets, but still a philosophic poet rather than what is truly best, a poetic philosopher? Does Homer make the mistake of thinking that poetry has the power to bridge the divide between philosophy and politics?

Plutarch swears an oath by Zeus (νὴ Δία) as he describes Socrates' denying by oath (ἐξομνυμένου) that he knows about Hades and the gods. As Plutarch humorously pairs his oath to Zeus with his argument that speeches cannot be divine (see 8.3 above), here he humorously acts as if he knows Zeus cares about what he is saying even as he insists on Socrates' and other philosophers' avowed ignorance about the nature of the gods.[117]

In the first of his *Quaestiones Platonicae*, Plutarch expands on Socrates' skepticism. Socrates refutes others while never declaring his own view (ἑτέρους ἐλέγχων τῷ μηδὲν

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[116] Cf. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* ("Von den Hinterweltlern"; 1999 [1883], IV.36): "Wahrlich, schwer zu beweisen ist alles Sein und schwer zum Reden zu bringen. Sagt mir, ihr Brüder, ist nicht das Wunderlichste aller Dinge noch am besten bewiesen?"

[117] In this section note also the repetition of the verb προσέχω ("pay attention") which will later signal the careful reader who would understand the poet's message (προσέξουσι, 17e26 vs. τοῦ ... προσέχοντος, 19d14).

ἀποφαίνεσθαι, 999e). Like Cicero and Cicero's Socrates, Plutarch's Socrates conceals his own view as part of a skeptical investigation of the truth. Soon after, Plutarch contrasts Socrates with the sophists and other philosophers who only favor their own view rather than conducting their inquiry through an investigation of others:

> καὶ γὰρ οἱ τῶν Ἑλλήνων στρατηγοὶ τὴν περὶ τῶν ἀριστείων ψῆφον φέροντες αὑτοὺς ἀρίστους ἔκριναν ἅπαντες· καὶ τῶν φιλοσόφων οὐδεὶς ἔστιν, ὃς οὐ τοῦτο πέπονθε δίχα τῶν ὥσπερ Σωκράτης ὁμολογούντων μηδὲν ἴδιον λέγειν· οὗτοι δὲ καθαροὺς μόνοι καὶ ἀδεκάστους τῆς ἀληθείας παρέχουσιν ἑαυτοὺς δικαστάς.
>
> For indeed the generals of the Greeks while bearing a vote about the rewards of prowess all judged themselves to be best; also of the philosophers there is no one who has not suffered this apart from those like Socrates who agree that they say nothing of their own. And these philosophers alone provide themselves as pure and impartial judges of the truth. (1000b)

This is a powerful statement because Plutarch says that only philosophers like Socrates who claim nothing of their own are "pure and impartial judges of the truth." It is hard to say that Plutarch would look upon any philosopher positively, including himself, were he not a pure and impartial judge of the truth. Plutarch affirms here that only skeptical and maieutic philosophy, which teaches nothing but engenders the beginnings of *aporia* (οὐδὲν ἐδίδασκε Σωκράτης, ἀλλ' ἐνδιδοὺς ἀρχὰς ἀποριῶν, 1000e), is the only genuine philosophy. It would be a tall order to prove that this is indeed what Plutarch accomplishes throughout his corpus, even in seemingly dogmatic works, though there is a scholarly movement which puts skepticism at the core of Plutarch's thought.[118] But this description of genuine philosophy is a thought-provoking challenge to those who see Plutarch as a rigid "moralist." Furthermore, given the emphasis on skepticism in *De audiendis* we just saw (17d12-e27),[119] what are we to make of Plutarch's claim that he himself teaches (ἀρχώμεθα διδάσκειν, 23a15-21) and his claim that Homer is a teacher, since this is just

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[118] See, e.g., Babut 1988; Warren 2002; Bonazzi 2016. That it would require much effort to prove that Plutarch practices genuine philosophy (by his definition of it in the *Quaestiones Platonicae*) by engendering *aporia* throughout his corpus does not necessarily mean that this characterization of his corpus is not accurate.
[119] Cf. Bréchet 1999, 213: "La métaphysique est en effet la grande absente du traité."

what he denies genuine philosophy does (οὐδὲν ἐδίδασκε Σωκράτης)? I suggested above that, like Plato, Plutarch puts in motion a didactic program which really has a skeptical or zetetic outcome (see 8.4.6). Questions about the relationship between poetry and philosophy, between passion and reason, are not resolved but shown in their profundity. Perhaps, then, Plutarch breaks with his Homer insofar as his Homer still practices dogmatic esotericism while Plutarch practices skeptical esotericism. Homer is indeed not perfect for Plutarch, even if he is the best of the poets and reveals valuable methods of esotericism, and even Plato does not escape criticism (see again 17a10-b18; 26b11-12). The radical approach to philosophy requires independence even from the greatest of masters.[120]

Skeptical esotericism also entails a political consequence: the conflict between philosophy and politics. For skepticism involves questioning the opinions of the city. Seen from the perspective of the city, philosophy is destabilizing and dangerous. Plutarch makes this point explicit towards the very end of *De audiendis* in Chapter 14 in a passage touched on above (8.3):

> ... ἔτι δὲ προανοίγει καὶ προκινεῖ τὴν τοῦ νέου ψυχὴν τοῖς ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ λόγοις. ἔρχεται γὰρ οὐκ ἄγευστος αὐτῶν παντάπασιν οὐδ' ἀνήκοος, οὐδ' ἀκρίτως ἀνάπλεως ὧν ἤκουε τῆς μητρὸς ἀεὶ καὶ τίτθης καὶ νὴ Δία τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ παιδαγωγοῦ, τοὺς πλουσίους εὐδαιμονιζόντων καὶ σεβομένων, φριττόντων δὲ τὸν θάνατον καὶ τὸν πόνον, ἄζηλον δὲ καὶ τὴν ἀρετὴν καὶ τὸ μηδὲν ἄνευ χρημάτων καὶ δόξης ἀγόντων. οἷς ἀντίφωνα τὰ τῶν φιλοσόφων ἀκούοντας αὐτοὺς τὸ πρῶτον ἔκπληξις ἴσχει καὶ ταραχὴ καὶ θάμβος, οὐ προσιεμένους οὐδ' ὑπομένοντας ....
>
> ... and, further, [poetry] opens up and moves in advance the soul of the young man with speeches in philosophy. For the young man arrives [to philosophy] not without having tasted them [i.e., the speeches in philosophy] nor without having heard them, nor uncritically filled up with the words he always was hearing from his mother and his nurse and—by Zeus!—his father and *paidagōgos*, people who were counting as blessed and revering the rich, and shivering before death and pain, and considering as useless both virtue and anything [else] not involving money and renown. When the young men hear the [words] of the philosophers that are disconsonant with these things [i.e., popular opinion], first amazement, disturbance, and astonishment takes hold of them, [and] they do not admit them nor withstand them ... (36d5-e14; cf. Cic. *Tusc*. 3.2-3)

[120] See also my discussion of Lucretius in relation to Epicurus above (5.3.3).

Plutarch focuses on the psychological problems of the clash between philosophy and opinion. It matters in what state "the soul of the young man" (τὴν τοῦ νέου ψυχήν) is when he first encounters philosophy. Without the proper appreciation of the philosophy concealed in poetry, the views of the philosophers which contradict those of his family are shocking. Poetry, if properly studied, has an effect on the soul which makes it more receptive to philosophy. Now, Plutarch admits here that philosophy will set the young man at variance with his family because he will no longer agree with his mother and father about the things that are most valuable in life. One need only to think of Pheidippides' beating his father and threatening to beat his mother in Aristophanes' *Clouds* (1321-1326, 1443) and the execution of Socrates for corrupting the youth to understand why this would be a problem for the political community.[121] Poetry thus performs a dual function. It both prepares the young for philosophy and conceals the poetic philosopher from charges of corrupting the youth. The tension between philosophy and politics, which we also observed in the *Amatorius,* is another cause of esotericism and introduces the motive of avoiding persecution.[122]

The treatment of the soul in the passage just cited connects to Plutarch's earlier Platonic analogy between the soul and the city. It also causes us to think about how Plutarch's view of psychology influences his presentation of esotericism, philosophy, and poetry. For scholars like von Reutern and Christophe Bréchet, Plutarch's teaching about the soul in *De virtute morali* illuminates the relationship between poetry and philosophy in *De audiendis.*[123] *De virtute morali* 443d suggests the following proportion: *pathos* : *logos* :: poetry : philosophy. Not only does one

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[121] Bréchet (ibid., 242) comments on the passage from *De audiendis* just cited: "La philosophie sans poésie peut donc avoir sur l'homme des effets aussi funestes que la poésie sans la philosophie !"

[122] Indeed it may be a cause of Homer's esotericism: he imparts a philosophic teaching without appearing to be a philosopher and subjecting himself to reproach. One wonders whether Plutarch's "moralizing" is his own way of making himself more acceptable to dominant opinion. Epicurus' immoral wisdom at the end—to which we will soon turn—is very different from the Stoicizing account of virtue in the bulk of the treatise.

[123] von Reutern 1933, 51: "So werden wir mit Recht vornehmlich aus dieser Schrift [i.e., *De virtute morali*] die psychologischen Grundlagen für Plutarchs Bewertung der Dichtkunst zu gewinnen trachten." See Bréchet 1999, 235-236. Plutarch also compares the soul and city in *De virtute morali* (445d).

need to use music and poetry to influence the irrational part of the soul of those who have not reached the heights of philosophy (see 441d-e),[124] but one should never attempt (like the Stoics) to enervate and cut out passion from the soul (οὐκ ἐκνευρίσας οὐδ᾽ ἐκτεμών, 451d; cf. διὸ καὶ νεῦρα τῆς ψυχῆς τὸν θυμὸν ὁ Πλάτων προσεῖπεν [*R.* 411b3], 449f). Accordingly, Plutarch remarks towards the end of the treatise: "... after the passions have been completely removed, if this is even possible, in many things *logos* is lazier and more dull, just like a pilot when the wind fails" (452b).[125] With this statement transposed through our proportion back onto *De audiendis*, if poetry is completely removed philosophy becomes weak. Poetry is not just a propaedeutic to philosophy but an integral part of philosophy. After showing the ultimate connection between imitation and mythmaking in *De audiendis*, Bréchet remarks, "Plutarch separated—as was without doubt the case in the educational curriculum—some elements for convenience, but while being careful to reunite them later."[126] We can say the same thing about poetry and philosophy: Plutarch presents them as separate only to reveal their original interconnection.[127] Plutarch thus reveals the psychological grounds (the "cause" of "psychological esotericism") for esoteric philosophy in the treatise.

So, there are three potential causes of esotericism presented in *De audiendis*: skepticism, the tension between philosophy and politics, and the relationship between reason and passion in the soul. Because it is not possible to equate uncritically Plutarch and Plutarch's Homer, we cannot say for certain whether these causes determine the motives, methods, and content of Homer's esotericism. However, the psychological esotericism just discussed does fit with Homer's preeminently pedagogical motives for esotericism. Homer appeals to our desire for

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[124] Cited at von Reutern 1933, 51 and Bréchet 1999, 235-236

[125] ... τῶν δὲ παθῶν παντάπασιν ἀναιρεθέντων, εἰ καὶ δυνατόν ἐστιν, ἐν πολλοῖς ἀργότερος ὁ λόγος καὶ ἀμβλύτερος, ὥσπερ κυβερνήτης πνεύματος ἐπιλείποντος. For the Stoics *pathos* actually is a *logos* (*De virt. mor*. 441c-d), while for Plutarch *logos* and *pathos* are inextricably connected.

[126] Ibid., 229: "Plutarque a séparé – comme c'était sans doute le cas dans le cursus scolaire – des éléments par commodité, mais en veillant à les réunir ensuite."

[127] See Hardie 1992, 4747: "... μῦθος is now a metamorphosis of λόγος, inseparable as reflection from its original."

pleasure through his attractive poetry to teach us philosophy, revealing a belief in the link between passion and reason. The motive, furthermore, of avoiding persecution also flows from the tension between philosophy and politics. The fourfold typology I develop in this dissertation has allowed for an appraisal of the role of esoteric philosophy in *De audiendis*.

8.7 Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I will provide a tentative solution to a problem I have already had occasion to mention: the deliberate contradiction created by Plutarch's critique of Epicurus for rejecting poetry at the beginning of the treatise and his implicit praise of Epicurus as providing the truth to which poetry leads at the end of the treatise. As shown above, deliberate contradiction is a method of esotericism that Plutarch ascribes to Homer. Now we will see how he uses it himself.

Furthermore, this contradiction is central to the interpretation of *De audiendis* as a whole, for it deals with what the content of poetry's esoteric philosophy is, and answering the question of why the treatise ends the way it does in light of the beginning provides a glimpse into the whole motion and intention of the work.

The praise of Epicurus brings out the problem of the relationship between the good and the beautiful, τἀγαθόν and τὸ καλόν. Plutarch already thematized the good and the beautiful by focusing on mimesis in relation to the beautiful in Chapter 3 and mimesis in relation to the good in Chapter 7. He also warns us in Chapter 9 only to apply an esoteric reading to poetry if the good (χρηστόν) is discernable behind the beautiful (28b9-10).

For Epicurus, the highest good is pleasure understood as the absence of pain. With amazing restraint given the centrality of this doctrine for Epicurus, Lucretius only mentions the highest good (*bonum summum*) as revealed by Epicurus once in his entire poem (6.26). There he does not state that it is pleasure but rather alludes to this equation on a few other occasions in the

poem (2.16-22, 963-966; 5.1430-1435; cf. 4.1073-1120). With pleasure as the highest good, the beautiful is emphatically not identical with the good. Not only is the good not the beautiful, but the Epicurean teaching about the good is bitter, or even ugly. This is why Lucretius moves from the beautiful but false portrait of Venus at the beginning of the poem to the ugly truth of the plague at the end of the poem. The ugly (*turpe*/τὸ αἰσχρόν) is the opposite of the beautiful.[128] In undermining most of our beautiful beliefs, the ugly truth is also dangerous for most. The true human good, which comes through philosophy, undermines what is most dear to us. Any striving after the καλόν, understood both as the beautiful (the object of *eros*) or the noble (or the morally right, the object of *thumos*), actually undermines our true good. Such a situation is justly called tragic,[129] for in pursuing the beautiful or noble as an aim external to ourselves, for the sake of something beyond ourselves, we would experience the lack of a coincidence with our own good.[130] Praxis oriented by the beautiful and theory oriented by the good would be forever at odds with each other, and render political life incoherent.

This tragic, Epicurean presentation of human life is diametrically opposed to the philosophy of the Stoics, whose system hinges on the strict identification of the good and the beautiful. The highest good *is* τὸ καλόν (see, e.g., Cic. *Parad*. 6-15). The καλόν as the beautiful manifests itself as the good for them, as Balbus' speech shows in *DND*, insofar as the beautiful cosmos reveals a teleology which tends after the good (e.g., 2.15-18, 47, 58, 98, 100, 104, 155; cf. Lucr. 2.1030-1039; 5.1110-1116, 1172-1176). There is a perfect coincidence between the beautiful (*pulcher*/καλός) cosmos and the identification of the good with the morally right

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[128] The connection between pleasure and the ugly or shameful is brought out by the fact that by common opinion the single-minded pursuit of pleasure is shameful. Sexual intercourse occurs in private (see Pl. *Hp. Mai*. 299a3-6). As Nietzsche says (*The Greek State*; 1999 [1871], I.767), shame is the result of our awareness that we are the products of forces beyond our control (desire).
[129] Consider also Lucretius' presentation of the arts in Book 5 in relation to that of *Prometheus Bound*.
[130] Hence Lucretius' linkage of love with the bad via pain (4.1063-1067; cf. 1.924; 3.5).

(*honestum*/τὸ καλόν). The wise man discovers the *logos* which runs through both the cosmos and the human soul, and which shows him the beautiful in its dual aspect (cf. Cic. *Leg*. 1.18-19).

Stoicism denies the possibility of tragedy. The only good is virtue, the only evil is vice. And these are entirely dependent on the proper exercise of reason, not on any external circumstance. Thus anything that might happen to one that would typically be the subject of tragedy would not actually be viewed as bad (see, e.g., Cic. *Parad*. 16-19).[131] Perhaps it is no accident that the early Stoa even viewed incest, the dissolution of the family and the political à la Oedipus, as a matter of indifference—such prohibitions were according to convention and not nature.[132] In viewing normal human life from such Olympic heights, the Stoic distance to custom takes on a comic perspective. One can only laugh at life if one has a sufficient distance from it, and is not always bound up in it, as a tragic hero is. Jerry Seinfeld's detached grin is a mask for Nietzsche's Apollo, before whom life is transformed into a work of art.[133]

Plato's *Philebus* adjudicates the claims of pleasure and thought, of Epicureanism and Stoicism, *avant la lettre*. It provides a more comprehensive argument for both positions than either school would (at least at their most dogmatic moments) and shows each school's weakness more thoroughly than opposing schools would. Plato's solution involves "the whole tragedy and comedy of life" (τῇ τοῦ βίου συμπάσῃ τραγῳδίᾳ καὶ κωμῳδίᾳ, 50b3)—the tragic view of life is not simply wrong but is comprehended by a wider vision of life that encompasses comedy. Philosophy is not tragic because it retains, viz., is grounded in, *eros*.

Plutarch treats this problem in the following way. The whole treatise is about the proper relationship between poetry and philosophy. At the beginning of the treatise (Chapter 1), Plutarch

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[131] Consider the extreme claim that he sage is happy even while being burned alive (see *SVF* III 586 cited at Brouwer 2014, 90 n. 127).
[132] See Hook 2005, 33-34.
[133] See Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, § 3. Consider also Cicero's use of Roman comedy to begin his investigation into the nature of the gods in *DND* (1.13-14).

identifies pleasure with poetry, while the truth of philosophy is "more bitter" (αὐστηροτέραν, 16a10-11). The problem is that Epicurus makes philosophy *entirely* the pursuit of pleasure, but he rejects poetry (Chapter 1; 15d3-9) which is linked to pleasure. But then, at the end of the treatise, Plutarch establishes a link between poetry and Epicurus by making poetry contain the truths of Epicurean philosophy.[134] But there is an important detail in Chapter 14. Whereas many different genres of poetry are shown to agree with Plato, from epic (Homer and Hesiod, 36a17-b1), to tragedy (Thespis and Euripides, 36b9-c15, c19-d3), to lyric (Bacchylides, 36c15-19), Plutarch only ever chooses tragic poetry as showing the truths of Epicurean philosophy (36b1-9; 36e18-37a8).[135] Epicureanism is tragic. Homer who was the poet par excellence throughout the treatise, along with other poets, shows the manifold of human life. Epic, it seems, in spawning both tragedy and comedy aligns more with Plato's "tragedy and comedy of life" than tragedy alone. And yet Epicurus cannot simply be dismissed: tragedy contains something essential.

It seems as if Plutarch dismisses Epicurus in Chapter 1, as we would expect from his polemics against Epicureanism elsewhere. Indeed dismissing Epicurus accords with his development of a Stoicizing morality as the edifying teaching of poetry in the bulk of the treatise: the identification of the beautiful and the good. But Epicurus comes back with a vengeance at the end of the treatise. The Epicurean teachings to which tragic poetry leads, which Plutarch emphatically places at the very end of the treatise (Plato has now dropped out entirely), are indeed dour: there is no life after death and the highest good is pleasure defined as the absence of

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[134] Blank (2011, 238) recognizes the connection and difference between these two statements on Epicurus: "… Plutarch opens in *De audiendis poetis* with a dig, not at Plato, but at Epicurus (15 D) … The book also closes with a glance at Epicurus, this time more ironic (14, 36 F) …" Blank seems to wish to resolve the contradiction by claiming that the more positive statement at the end is "ironic" and so not a serious praise of Epicurus. Blank goes so far as to claim that the first and last chapters constitute "an introductory and a concluding chapter which target Epicurus" (ibid., 239). Blank thus seems to take the final mention of Epicurus as an ironic attack on Epicurus the function of which is to match the open attack at the beginning, but he still does not make clear how the praise of Epicurus at the end is actually an attack on Epicurus or, more broadly, what purpose ending the entire treatise with the (if, on his reading, ironic) claim that poetry in fact leads to the truth of Epicurean philosophy. Would Plutarch risk instilling a positive view of Epicurus among at least some readers who would not recognize the (alleged) irony simply to achieve a sort of symmetry with the beginning of the treatise?

[135] Note also the discussion of tragedy immediately preceding the initial blame of Epicurus (15d1-3).

pain.[136] The entire morality encouraged throughout the treatise—the goodness of moral virtue with perhaps the promise of even further rewards in the afterlife—is pulled out from under our feet.

Plutarch even equates the Epicurean view with Euripides' claim that it is better to be dead than to be alive (36e20-f22 = E. fr. 449.2-4; cf. Lucr. 3.931-951; 5.222-227).[137] Epicureanism is overly poetic even as it tries to reject poetry. Human life is a sickness that must be cured with philosophy or death (Lucretius is like a doctor). The lack of detachment of Epicureanism in the face of the needs of life makes it like tragic poetry. Plutarch brings back the serious claim of Epicureanism at the end of the treatise to show that we need to mix Epicureanism and Stoicism, just as we need to mix poetry and philosophy, to restore their original unity which was visible in Plato.

Plutarch has to hide the darker side of philosophy at the beginning of the treatise, like Lucretius. Thus he puts the critique of Epicurus at the beginning. We need to take morality seriously before going beyond it or considering alternatives. Even while denying the Stoic *identification* of the good and the beautiful, Plutarch also avoids their strict *separation* in Epicureanism. The good and the beautiful are connected with each other but are not the same.

This is also Cicero's view as revealed in the first sentence of *DND*:

> Cum multae res in philosophia nequaquam satis adhuc explicatae sint, tum perdifficilis, Brute, quod tu minime ignoras, et perobscura quaestio est de natura deorum, quae et ad cognitionem animi pulcherrima est et ad moderandam religionem necessaria.
>
> Not only have many things in philosophy in no way yet been explained sufficiently, but also the question about the nature of the gods is very difficult, Brutus,—something which

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[136] The sustained focus also on wealth (πλοῦτος) in the final chapter (36c16-18; 36c26-d3, e12; 37e4-5) could seem somewhat extraneous or adventitious until one realizes that Ploutos is another name for Hades. This is confirmed by Plutarch's quotation of Euripides in the prior chapter to the effect that Ploutos could not be a god because wealth is not good in itself, which calls attention to Ploutos as a name for Hades (34d25-e26 = E. fr. 20). Chapter 14 culminates in an argument against the evils of death (Ploutos) and against wealth (*ploutos*) because of the limits of nature for pleasure. There is a limit to pain because there is no Hades and the natural limit of pleasure limits the power of wealth. The absence of Hades or any afterlife is also a limit on desire because it shows that one cannot become immortal. The limits of pleasure limit wealth and the desire for Hades (the permanent extension of pleasure through immortality).

[137] But see also Epicur. *Men.* 126-127.

> you are unaware of least of all—and it is very obscure, a question which is both most beautiful for the understanding of the soul and necessary for moderating religion. (1.1)

In the phrase "most beautiful for the understanding of the soul" (*ad cognitionem animi pulcherrima*) Cicero leaves it perfectly ambiguous whether "of the soul" (*animi*) is a subjective or objective genitive. Is the question about the nature of the gods most beautiful *for the soul to contemplate* (subjective) or most beautiful *in order to understand the soul* (objective)? (The ambiguity is underscored by the unambiguous gerundive *ad moderandam religionem* used right after.) Commentators try to force it to be one or the other,[138] but I think that we need to hold the subjective and objective senses together.[139] It is most beautiful for the soul to investigate the nature of the gods *and* this investigation leads to the soul's understanding itself. On one reading of Aristotle, "soul is what goes out of itself for the sake of itself."[140] Theology is necessary for self-knowledge. The soul which looks directly at itself blinds itself (*Tusc*. 1.73; cf. 3.1-3). Theology is necessary for the investigation of the soul and vice versa, "For psychology is from now on once again the path to the fundamental problems."[141]

In addition to being most beautiful for understanding the soul or the soul's understanding, the question about the nature of the gods "is necessary for moderating religion." This is because if one thinks the gods care too much and is wrong then one falls victim to the worst superstition (Stoicism), but if one thinks the gods do not care at all and is wrong then one incurs the greatest impiety (Epicureanism). Already from the start of the work there seems to be an awareness of the problem of the two extremes of these systems and the need to "moderate" them, i.e., to find a mean between them rather than simply selecting one option or another as a solution. It is the

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[138] E.g., Wynne (2019, 50 n. 1) takes *animi* as subjective while Begemann (2012, 101) and Auvray-Assayas (2021, 133) take it as objective.
[139] Preserving this ambiguity is related to the question about the nature of the gods as "very obscure" (*perobscura*). By explicitly calling the question obscure and introducing this ambiguity as part of the question, Cicero announces esotericism as a theme of the work in its first sentence.
[140] Davis 2011, 225.
[141] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, § 23 (1999 [1886], V.39): "Denn Psychologie ist nunmehr wieder der Weg zu den Grundproblemen." Cf. § 20.

question itself, not the answer, which is necessary for moderating religion. As one restoration of the corrupt text of the second sentence goes, "the beginning of philosophy is ignorance" (*principium philosophiae esse <in>scientiam*).[142] Perhaps the perplexity about the gods which the expositions and critiques of Epicureanism and Stoicism expose both shows something about the soul and moderates religion (*et … et*). The understanding of the soul and moderating religion correspond to theory and practice: in the first sentence Cicero affirms the link rather than the separation of theory (aiming at the good) and practice (aiming at morality).

The beautiful and the necessary are the two aspects of the question about the nature of the gods. The καλόν as *pulchrum* points to an erotic longing which transcends the law, something like complete freedom from the law in pursuing the beautiful, while the necessary, the *necessarium* or ἀναγκαῖον,[143] carries the political connotation of obedience to the law or the circumstances. Somehow the question about the nature of the gods contains both the erotic striving for beauty and the necessity of political life, the life of pleasure and the life of morality, which may be reflected in the poets' gods' both pursuing objects of love and pleasure, with abandon and complete ability to satisfy their desires, and their role as lawgivers, "culture heroes," and ultimately the source of morality in the city. As Socrates says in the *Philebus*, neither pleasure nor thought (φρόνησις or *prudentia*) are choiceworthy without the other (20e1-21e4). It seems like the opening sentence of *DND* says as much for the aims of Epicureanism and Stoicism.[144]

The very ambiguity of *ad cognitionem animi pulcherrima* reflects the beauty and difficulty of arriving at the soul or for the soul to understand, while in *ad moderandam religionem necessaria* the single possible grammatical construal (as opposed to the ambiguity of *ad*

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[142] See Pease 1955-1958, ad loc.
[143] See, e.g., Cicero's translation of Plato's ἐξ ἀνάγκης (*Ti*. 42a3-4) with *necessitate* (*Tim*. 44) in his rendering of the *Timaeus*.
[144] But cf. Epicur. *Men*. 132 with 122.

cognitionem animi) reflects the necessity under discussion. In the first case we have the freedom to choose the meaning of the case, while in the second the interpretation is necessarily predetermined.

Cicero's preface indicates why the discussion of esotericism has to be linked to the question of the gods. To think one knows the gods directly either throws one into Epicureanism or Stoicism, and the impoverished type of esotericism associated with each, that of the hidden teaching, but to think through both options at the same time leaves one in the moderate position of Plato and his esotericism, which seems to preserve the playful in his use of ambiguity and his discussions of the divine, where one can never be sure when the fun stops.

9. Conclusion

Studying Cicero, Lucretius, and Plutarch together has brought forth a general treatment of esoteric philosophy in Rome. Not only do these philosophers provide countless examples about the existence of esoteric philosophy in Rome, but reading their works shows esoteric philosophy in practice. On the one hand, their relationship to religious and political authorities is an important factor in their motives for esotericism. On the other hand, philosophic reflection on the nature of being, knowledge, and soul is a deep cause for their esoteric writing. In line with these philosophic reflections, furthermore, Cicero, Lucretius, and Plutarch write with pedagogical motives in mind. These causes and motives inform their method of writing, and the content which they conceal.

I began with a treatment of esotericism in Cicero's *DND*. After introducing esotericism in Cicero more broadly, I argued that esotericism is a structuring element of the entire work that explains the work's ending. First we saw that Cotta's characterization of Epicurus as an esoteric atheist is an integral part of his response to Velleius in Book 1. For Cotta, Epicurus communicates his atheism only indirectly because he fears impiety trials, given the precedent of trials like those of Protagoras and Socrates, whom Cotta explicitly names. Epicurus reveals his esoteric atheism through ambiguity in his first *Kuria doxa* and through the unstated implications of his physics. He hides his atheism by participating in traditional cult along with his followers and writing exoteric books in which he professes to expound his own theology. He also often uses religious-sounding language. Remarkably, Cotta's analysis of Epicurus closely resembles that of David Sedley, a leading scholar of Hellenistic philosophy. After laying out Cotta's argument about Epicurus, I situated it in Cicero's broader connection of esotericism and Epicureanism in several of his other works (*De oratore*, *De legibus*, and *De finibus*). Cicero's discussion of Epicurean esotericism extends beyond theology to central ethical and political teachings of the school (i.e., pleasure,

defined as the absence of pain, as the highest good and the wise man's withdrawal from political life).

Cotta's argument about Epicurus' esoteric atheism provides the first step in understanding why Cicero sides with Balbus' Stoic theology at the end of the treatise rather than with Cotta's critique of it. Cotta turns out to be too similar to Epicurus as Cotta himself presents him. Cotta is an esoteric agnostic who, like Epicurus, feigns a belief in the gods. Like Epicurus, he thinks that traditional religion is a sham, but as pontifex maximus he insists that traditional Roman religion must be upheld to maintain political stability. In practicing a form of esotericism that ultimately indicates the completely arbitrary basis of the mixed regime of the Roman Republic, for Cicero the position of traditionalists like Cotta ultimately is an insufficient solution for maintaining the republic against the threat of tyrants and strongmen. This is why Cicero sides with Balbus' Stoic theology, which maintains the providential gods, a connection between nature and the Roman mixed regime, and the primacy of virtue for the good life. As we saw, this vision of politics shares many features with that of Cicero's *De legibus*. But ultimately this theology is an esoteric myth. Cicero as author suppresses the Stoic doctrine of fate in Balbus' presentation to leave room for human freedom, which is key for maintaining the republic. Balbus' modified Stoic theology is ultimately an image of the truth that is salutary for politics and leads back to genuine Platonic philosophy. Cicero's version of esotericism practiced by endorsing the myth differs from that of Cotta and his Epicurus in that the esoteric and exoteric levels are connected to one another rather than radically disjoined. An image of the truth is not a complete falsehood. This type of esotericism parallels that of the philosophic poets described in Balbus' speech, and the political motives for it become evident in Cicero's esoteric critique of Caesar's tyranny in his preface. Also in the preface, Cicero makes explicit his motive of pedagogical esotericism, in line with the practices of the skeptical New Academy and ultimately with Plato.

Uncovering Cicero's sustained interest in the link between esotericism and Epicureanism provided an occasion to examine the esotericism of Lucretius, the Epicurean poet whom Cicero read and admired in 55 as he was embarking on his own philosophical project that would occupy him until his political assassination in 43. Cicero presents Epicureanism as a great danger to the republic, insofar as its hedonism undermines a commitment to political life, and its conventionalism insists that there is no meaningful distinction between regime types, no order of rank of the political orders structuring human life. Cicero links a specific type of Epicurean esotericism to his critique of the school. Thus, in analyzing esotericism in Lucretius' *DRN*, I aimed to provide the Epicurean presentation of esotericism in its own right rather than from the perspective of one of the school's greatest critics.

On my reading of Lucretius, esotericism illuminates central features of his poem. Unlike most other ancient poets, Lucretius deliberately calls attention to his poem as a written artifact. He highlights the art of writing that went into the poem's creation. He thematizes the status of the poem as an artifact in his comparison of the letters of the poem to the atoms composing the world. In rephrasing his comparison of the poem to the world several times in the poem, he gives examples of the careful shifting of words and verses in different positions, like different positions and combinations of atoms composing different things. He thus indicates that an important element of his art of writing is the careful repetition of different words and verses in different positions and variations over the course of the poem. His description of his art of writing suggests a corresponding art of reading, and the fact that for him studying nature means going from the visible to the hidden suggests an esoteric art of reading on the analogy of his poem to the world.

This esoteric art of reading finds confirmation in Lucretius' instructions to Memmius about how he should receive Lucretius' arguments. In particular, he tells Memmius that he is not providing him with all the arguments, and that Memmius will have to follow the tracks that Lucretius has set out for him. Thus, Lucretius practices a pedagogical esotericism not unlike that

which Cicero outlines in the preface to *DND*. Lucretius pairs his description of the type of reading Memmius (and us) have to perform with statements on the hiddenness of nature, indicating that his esotericism is also grounded in the obscurity of his subject matter. Again paralleling Cicero, Lucretius indicates that his esotericism is not only pedagogical, but also grounded in the fact that the hiddenness of nature makes it so that the truth about it cannot be directly articulated in speech.

Having analyzed Lucretius' method of esotericism and the corresponding way he says he wants to be read, I applied Lucretius' own recommendations to uncover examples of the content of his esotericism, which, though not exhaustive, connect to central issues of Lucretian interpretation. The examples of esoteric content concern Lucretius' view of the relationship of philosophy and politics, the status of traditional Roman religion, and his relationship to Epicurus.

Lucretius esoterically reveals that philosophy is criminal. Because justice on the Epicurean view is whatever the city says it is, philosophy is criminal by departing from the traditional gods which underly the city. And Lucretius indicates that in fact traditional religion is useful for the stability of society, thus making philosophy not only unjust, but also a genuine threat to the Roman regime. Lucretius hides this view by claiming most prominently at the beginning of the poem that the crimes of religion are greater than the crimes of philosophy, and thus that abolishing traditional religion would be a benefit rather than a harm to society, and hence that philosophy is not criminal. Lucretius cannot openly admit that he and other Epicureans are criminals. But he wants to communicate the truth, in all its bitterness, to some readers. Hence he communicates this teaching esoterically.

Lucretius also signals his independence from and superiority to Epicurus through careful repetitions which show him appropriating his praise of his master for himself. Part of Lucretius' claim to outstrip Epicurus is his uniting philosophy and poetry, which indicates a superior understanding of the human soul. While not entering into the immense question, long vexing

Lucretian scholarship, of what Lucretius' substantial differences with Epicurus' original teaching are, I showed Lucretius' esoteric challenge to Epicurus through his literary devices. This can serve as a basis for those wishing to investigate Lucretius' esotericism more in relation to points of philosophic difference with Epicurus. Lucretius' praises Epicurus while undermining him esoterically in part as a form of protreptic esotericism. He turns his readers to philosophy through the ennobling image of philosophy provided by the heroic figure of Epicurus.[1]

Together, Cicero and Lucretius show the intimate relationship between esotericism and philosophy at the start of Latin philosophy.

Writing about a century and a half after Cicero and Lucretius, Plutarch provides an example of esoteric philosophy in a Roman world transformed by the fall of the Roman Republic. Plutarch gives many indications of his interest in esoteric philosophy throughout his corpus, including for reasons of persecution, but he makes esotericism thematic in his *De audiendis*.

Although he indicates the pressures of being a Greek under Roman rule and the need for esotericism generally under the Principate in works such as *De garrulitate* and *De praeceptis reipublicae gerendae,* Plutarch may seem to stray far from the imperial context in which he lived in *De audiendis*. Accordingly, my interpretation did not focus on this aspect of Plutarch's esotericism as much as other aspects. However, as I argued in Chapter 6, Plutarch's choice of a Roman addressee has important implications for the work as a whole. I will restate and elaborate on this point here, so we can see how not only Cicero and Lucretius, but also Plutarch, treat esotericism in their respective political contexts.

In the first sentence of the treatise, Plutarch pairs a contrast between the Greek poet Philoxenus and the Roman statesman Cato the Elder with his address to the Roman Marcus Sedatius. Philoxenus was a famous gourmand, while Cato rebukes gourmands who have a more

[1] Cf. Minyard 1985, 38 and Adler 2003, 58-61.

perceptive palate than heart—i.e., those who care for bodily pleasure above all (14d1-4). From the very start of the work, then, Plutarch sets up a nexus of contrasts and associations between Greece and Rome, thus causing the reader to reflect on the status of a Greek writing to a Roman under Roman rule. Plutarch links poetry not only to Greece, but also to decadence. Cato represents the old Roman morality that fell prey to the influence of foreign Greece. There was a double political problem arising from the relationship between Rome and Greece. Rome in Plutarch's time had to reckon with the longstanding influence of Greek literature and philosophy. Some would even argue that the influence of Greek thinking on Romans led to the erosion of Roman customs and morality that contributed to the overthrow of the old republican political order, as I had a chance to discuss in my treatment of Cicero and Lucretius. Rome had the political problem of how to make the best of the unavoidable influence of captured Greece. Greece, by contrast, had the political problem of protecting itself under Roman rule and at the same time of properly exercising influence on Rome. Thus, while Plutarch shows Cato rejecting wholesale the decadence which Philoxenus stands for—Rome rejects (or once rejected) Greek learning—, Plutarch sets himself the task of gaining a hearing before the Romans for Greek education (παιδεία) in the form of both poetry and philosophy. Plutarch, the Greek, portrays himself as a salutary teacher of poetry to the Roman Sedatius and, not only that, but as the one who can ensure that Sedatius' son (standing in for the sons of the Romans) is not damaged or turned toward vice but in fact benefited or made more virtuous by Greek education (15a3-b14).[2] Plutarch and Sedatius replace Philoxenus and Cato as representing the notional relationship between Greece and Rome. In making the case for poetry, Plutarch in fact makes the case that Greece can and should be allowed to remain the educator of Rome.

[2] Since Greek education is heterogenous, Plutarch advocates for the right Greek learning as opposed to its dangerous alternatives. The Romans will of necessity be influenced by Greek education, but the question is by which Greek education.

Plutarch has to explain why poetry, which is indeed pleasant, does not necessarily lead to the decadence of Philoxenus. His key point is that some poetry at least teaches philosophy esoterically, and pleasure is necessary for this aim. Plutarch thus associates esoteric reading and writing with Greek learning. Plutarch is another Greek who takes up the task of educating the Romans by explaining the esoteric meaning of Greek poets. He indicates that he may have to be read in the same way as the poets, i.e., Plutarch's own esoteric way of proceeding in this treatise may also have to do with his status as a Greek. Greece cannot openly rule the Romans—neither the Greeks nor the Romans could ever publicly admit that Greece rules. But insofar as education is central to politics, Plutarch and others like him could indirectly influence Rome through their writings. This hypothesis of a political ground for esotericism in *De audiendis* would require further investigation, taking as its starting point the philosophical reasons for esotericism that I focused more on above, and to which I will now return.

As I argued, Plutarch indicates that the necessary mixture of poetry and philosophy constitutes esoteric philosophy. Through a detailed analysis of the first chapter of his treatise, I showed how Plutarch through nine images brings out this necessary mixture. Plutarch reveals his own poetic way of writing through these images, and makes the relationship of his own treatise to poetry and philosophy indeterminate. Then, I turned to an extensive treatment of Plutarch's portrait of Homer as an esoteric philosopher-poet. As with Cicero and Lucretius, Plutarch's explicit description of esoteric philosophy serves as a basis for my reading of him as an esoteric writer. In particular, I took up how Plutarch uses ambiguity as a method of esotericism in line with his esoteric reading of Homer. I gave examples on the smallest level, that of the word, and on the large level of the whole work. On the small level, Plutarch makes use of ambiguous words to philosophic effect in his very description of ambiguous words in philosophic poetry. On the large level, he creates ambiguity through deliberate contradiction—another method he ascribes to poets—by blaming Epicurus at the start of the treatise and praising him at the end. This raises the

question of Epicureanism in relation to other philosophers and schools in the treatise, especially Plato and the Stoa. I conclude that, despite its flaws, Plutarch sees an important teaching in Epicureanism that he can only reveal after the more edifying, Stoic portions of the treatise. Ultimately, the bitter truth of Epicureanism must be moderated with Stoicism's preservation of morality—the unity of which positions points back to Plato. In many ways, Plutarch's closing with a surprising praise of Epicurus functions in a similar way to the surprising end of Cicero's *DND* where he favors a version of Stoic theology. Lucretius' own deviations from his master, furthermore, indicate his own moderation of orthodoxy, if in a different way. But the need to compare the beginning and the end of the work to grasp its full intention is common to all three authors I have treated.

These three Roman philosophers treat esoteric philosophy together with poetry. What it means for esotericism to be linked to poetry is that the deepest part of esotericism is what the writer is doing or making (ποιεῖν) on the level of language. This may involve writing carefully, using hints, contradictions, and so on, but what is really salient is that the writer is performing (ποιεῖν) an action on the reader. The reader experiences or suffers something through the writing, whereby he or she reproduces the original experience of the author. Insofar as it is intentional, this reproduction of experience, which leads to a reproduction of a train of thought, is truly esoteric philosophy. And this suffering with its concomitant thinking can only be induced through the poetic use of language (i.e., not merely hinting at something that could be revealed directly). To take a simple example, in the last sentence of *De audiendis* Plutarch uses the prepositional prefixes and prepositions προ-, ἀνα-, προ-, προ-, ὑπό, ἐπί, and προ- (37a8-b2). We observe a preponderance of προ- ("before") that links all of the words sharing the prepositional prefix and at the same times highlights as distinct the other three prepositions or prepositional prefixes. This creates an effect, which shades the explicit meaning of his final sentence, that poetry should be a conduit to philosophy. There is now an action which changes the argument, and Plutarch shows

us poetry in philosophy rather than as a means to philosophy, for merely stating "προ- is important" or "he uses προ- many times here" is emphatically different from what the reader experiences. Esotericism is an aspect of language which ultimately has a rational result but which partially escapes language and thus cannot be reproduced in it directly.

Cicero, Lucretius, and Plutarch show many other common features of esoteric philosophy, despite their different approaches. We saw, for example, a common concern with the relationship between theology and esotericism, pedagogical concerns for their readership, and attention to the danger of offending those in power. Such commonalities indicate the contours of esoteric philosophy in Rome broadly speaking.

The connection between Epicureanism and esotericism is another thread which runs between the three authors. Cicero makes Epicureanism his bête noire throughout his philosophical and rhetorical corpus. But an important yet understudied component of his attack against the school is that Epicureans practice a form of esotericism of which he disapproves. This manifests itself in *DND* in Cotta's argument that Epicurus is an esoteric atheist. Plutarch makes a very similar argument in his own name about Epicurus in *Non posse suaviter vivi secundum Epicurum*. And yet he also makes Epicurus an important part of his *De audiendis* in a way that is not altogether negative by emphasizing tragic poetry's concealing the truth of Epicureanism. Plutarch makes Epicureanism the esoteric content of tragic poetry and practices esotericism through his contradictory blame of Epicurus at the start of the work and his more positive portrayal of him at the end. In suppressing the Stoic doctrine of fate, Cicero too seems to agree with some views he puts in the mouth of the Epicurean Velleius about Stoicism. Moreover, in the proem he surprisingly applies to himself some of the language he uses of Epicurus later in the work. Thus, both Cicero and Plutarch, despite their critiques of Epicureanism and Epicurean esotericism, still integrate Epicureanism into their own esoteric projects. Since both are followers

of Plato, perhaps they are inclined to see some truth in all opinions—even those of their adversaries whom they consider dangerous.

With Lucretius, by contrast, we see Epicurean esotericism in action. It is remarkable that these philosophers from very different schools all practice esotericism, especially Cicero and Lucretius who lived in the same time and place. This suggests a pervasiveness of esotericism in Roman philosophy, and a degree of correctness in the assertions of Cicero and Plutarch about Epicurean esotericism. While Lucretius' esotericism may in the end resemble that of Cicero and Plutarch in many respects—and while it may free him from a dogmatic commitment to Epicurus' teaching—, by omitting an analysis of the best regime from his account of political life and forcing us to stare into the void—by forcing us to contemplate the impermanence of all things and the lack of meaning in the world outside of our own pleasure—Lucretius nevertheless seems to offer a fundamentally different view of the world than that offered by Cicero and Plutarch. Cicero and Plutarch on the one hand and Lucretius on the other present the fundamental alternatives of Platonic and Epicurean philosophy in Rome. Insofar as Epicureanism resembles to a much greater degree than Platonism the views of modern philosophy (while of course not being identical to modern philosophy), the tension between Platonism and Epicureanism with regard to esotericism—a tension which only becomes fully visible when followers of Plato react to Epicureanism—may teach us something about the difference or quarrel between the ancients and the moderns.

With their many explicit discussions of esoteric philosophy, and their connecting it back to Greek predecessors like Plato and Epicurus, these three authors provide a basis for future study of esoteric philosophy in Rome and thus a new way of reading Roman philosophy. Cicero and Lucretius allow us to think not only about how other authors of the Late Republic might navigate the collapse of the previous political system and what role, if any, esotericism plays in their writings, but also about how later authors might draw on the esotericism of these two. Plutarch

offers a model of how other imperial authors sensitive to the political pressures of their time might also communicate esoterically (Seneca the Younger and Tacitus come to mind—consider in particular *De tranquillitate animi* and *Dialogus de oratoribus* respectively).

I hope to have contributed something to the understanding of these three authors in their own right, while also opening up a dialogue in Classics and related fields about how an awareness of esotericism changes our approach to reading ancient philosophy. Studies of ancient philosophy have become increasingly sensitive to the literary and rhetorical character of philosophic works (e.g., the difference between dialogue and treatise as well as rhetorical needs relating to the political context). Esoteric readings of ancient philosophy are compatible with these new approaches, but take them to another level, one which I argue is more faithful to the ancient writers' own understanding, since they explicitly discuss the wide range and many aspects of esotericism I laid out in my typology. Thus I hope that my enterprise has been an effort in recovery rather than innovation, and that, if it is permitted to compare small with great, I may say with Cicero, "I understand that I often seem to say new things, when I say things that are very old but unheard of by most" (… *me saepe nova videri dicere intellego, cum pervetera dicam, sed inaudita plerisque* …, *Orat.* 12).

Appendix A: A Conceptual Inquiry Into Esoteric Philosophy

The purpose of this appendix is to provide select historical examples of philosophic interpretations of esotericism. In particular, it deals with the problem of interpreting esotericism as either purely metaphysical or purely political, and how ultimately these two aspects of esotericism must be united.[1]

Esotericism as concealment risks devolving into an assertion that all language requires interpretation. All interpretation presupposes a depth which must be uncovered under the surface (even if it is just the interpreter's psyche read into the text). In this case, the concept of an esoteric text becomes meaningless, for it would apply to every text. It would not characterize a particular way of writing and reading, and it would not be philosophical. By contrast, a particularly persuasive view of esotericism is that it is bound up in politics. You hide what you are afraid to say. But this too is empty. We all have secrets, or at a more everyday level follow procedures of politeness and decorum. Esoteric philosophy would just be one item among many that we discretely reveal and conceal. Esotericism would not be philosophical, but a tool relating to philosophy among many, alongside if in tension with the printing press.

And yet, these two interpretations of esotericism point towards important features of the phenomenon that cannot be ignored. It is necessary to do justice to these two extremes (esotericism as purely internal or esoteric as interpretation and esotericism as purely external or exoteric as political) while avoiding the pitfalls of each which would lead us to concur with the philosophic and scholarly majority consensus that esotericism as a concept belongs either in the wastebin or at best in a cabinet of historical curiosities.

Esotericism as interpretation is purely necessary—we cannot do without it—while esotericism as politics is purely free, the calculated choice of a writer given the political

[1] See again Benardete 2000d, 409.

circumstances. And yet the former would deny the act of the will in writing and reading, and the latter would pretend that a writer could avoid being in some way determined by the very necessity which leads to the free choice of esoteric writing. The tension between esotericism as both freedom and necessity and the recognition that it cannot be either but always both leads to a consideration of the ground on which metaphysical and political esotericism might both stand.

There is a tradition which views ancient esotericism as primarily concerned with prudence or politics, rather than something necessary in being, knowledge, or soul. Al-Farabi on the surface at least—I do not conjecture about his own esoteric project—says most explicitly that Plato's esoteric manner of writing is due to prudential or political considerations (*Summary of Plato's Laws*, Introduction, § 2).[2] For Al-Farabi, Plato can speak "openly and clearly" about what he conceals, but he makes it extremely difficult to know when he is speaking openly and clearly.[3] In discussing the ancient use of religion as a "noble lie" or instrument for politics, Machiavelli and Rousseau also at least give to understand that they view ancient esotericism as having a hidden teaching which could be said but is not.[4] This is also how Toland and Formey characterize the esoteric and exoteric teachings of the ancients, both oral and written.[5] The political interpretation of esotericism has a long history and thus is particularly potent.

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[2] In Butterworth 2001. See also Al-Farabi, *The Philosophy of Plato*, §§ 29-30, 36-38 (Mahdi 2002).
[3] Trans. Butterworth 2001. In this Al-Farabi overlaps more with Numenius' interpretation of Plato's political esotericism (fr. 23 Des Places = Eus. *PE* 13.5) than with that of the allegorically-minded Neoplatonists (see again Casel 1919, 121-124, 132-134 and Lamberton 1986, 173, 185-188).
[4] See *Discourses on Livy* 1.14 (Machiavelli 1971 [1531], 50): "… quando la ragione mostrava loro una cosa doversi fare, non ostante che gli auspicii fossero avversi, la facevano in ogni modo; ma rivoltavanla con termini e modi tanto attamente, che non paresse che la facessino con dispregio della religione" ("… when reason demonstrated to them that a thing had to be done, although the auspices were not propitious, [the Romans] nevertheless accomplished it; but they turned the matter upside down with phrases and methods in such an appropriate way that it did not appear that they accomplished it with contempt for religion"); *Social Contract* 4.8 (Rousseau 1959-1995 [1762], III.468): "Cesar, plaidant pour Catilina, tachoit d'établir le dogme de la mortalité de l'ame; Caton et Ciceron pour le refuter ne s'amuserent point à philosopher : ils se contenterent de montrer que Cesar parloit en mauvais Citoyen et avançoit une doctrine pernicieuse à l'Etat. En effet voilà dequoi devoit juger le Sénat de Rome, et non d'une question de théologie" ("Caesar, arguing in defense of Catiline, endeavored to establish the doctrine of the mortality of the soul; Cato and Cicero did not muck around with philosophizing in order to refute him: they limited themselves to demonstrating that Caesar spoke like a bad citizen and promoted a teaching that was dangerous for the state. Indeed, this is what Rome's senate had to make a judgment about, and not a question of theology").
[5] Toland 1720; Formey 2013.

But political circumstances change, and things that once needed to be hidden can now be revealed. Esoteric philosophy thus could seem historically contingent, even more so because it seems to have vanished today. A little after Toland, Formey, and Rousseau, however, Lessing expounded a different version of esotericism—on Leo Strauss' hypothesis that his dialogue on Freemasonry, *Ernst and Falk: A Dialogue for Freemasons*, actually comments on esotericism.[6] Falk says, "Freemasonry is nothing arbitrary, nothing superfluous, but something necessary, which is grounded in the essence of human beings and civil society" (First Dialogue, p. 12).[7] What the Freemasons hide is "[s]omething that even they, who know it, cannot say" (ibid.).[8] Ernst objects that a concept or definition (*Begriff*) can be expressed in words (ibid.).[9] Falk responds, "Not always; and often at least not in such a way that the others through the words perfectly receive the exact same concept which I have in the matter" (12-13).[10] Language does not proceed directly. Even if one person has a concept it will not be transmitted perfectly clearly to the other. What is hidden cannot be said directly. To work against the necessary evil of even the most happy citizen, the best one can do is "[a]t most, [to] induce this sensation in a human being from afar, foster its sprouting, replant its growths, weed, [and] trim" (Third Dialogue, 31).[11] To use Platonic language, Falk suggests that you teach by inducing a turnaround, "when one, while using the dialectical art, after taking a fitting soul, plants and sows speeches along with knowledge" (*Phdr*. 276e5-7).[12] Lessing points out that even if language cannot proceed directly,

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[6] Strauss 1986 [1939].
[7] "Die Freimaurerei ist nichts Willkürliches, nichts Entbehrliches: sondern etwas Notwendiges, das in dem Wesen des Menschen und der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft gegründet ist." I use the text and pagination of *Ernst and Falk* of Lessing 1968 [1778].
[8] "Etwas, das selbst die, die es Wissen, nicht sagen können."
[9] Ernst, to the meaning of whose name Lessing calls attention ("serious," "earnest," or "straightforward") (First Dialogue, 15), initially thinks that you can always communicate straightforwardly (*ernst*).
[10] "Nicht immer; und oft wenigstens nicht so, daß andre durch die Worte vollkommen ebendenselben Begriff bekommen, den ich dabei habe."
[11] "Höchstens diese Empfindung in dem Menschen von weiten veranlassen, ihr Aufkeimen begünstigen, ihre Pflanzen versetzen, bejäten, beblatten …"
[12] … ὅταν τῇ διαλεκτικῇ τέχνῃ χρώμενος, λαβὼν ψυχὴν προσήκουσαν, φυτεύῃ τε καὶ σπείρῃ μετ᾽ ἐπιστήμης λόγους. See also NT Luke 8.1-20.

that does not mean we cannot communicate. We must rather communicate with an awareness that language does not proceed directly. He knows that speech always requires interpretation, but that does not mean there is only interpretation and nothing "objective."

Lessing is also aware not only of the critique that interpretation is just arbitrary interpretation (Third Dialogue, 33), but also of the tendency to reduce esotericism to political esotericism. He has Falk say:

> One has for long enough accounted for the secret (*das Geheimnis*) with things that are hidden (*Heimlichkeiten*) … The secret of Freemasonry, as I already told you, is that which the Freemason *cannot* bring over his lips, even if it were possible that he *wanted* to. Things that are hidden, however, are things that indeed allow themselves to be said, and that one only at certain times, in certain countries partly out of jealousy concealed, partly out of fear suppressed, partly out of prudence kept quiet. (Fifth Dialogue, 41)[13]

The contrast between the secret (*das Geheimnis*) and secrets or things that are hidden (*Heimlichkeiten*) is the difference between esotericism as always necessary and esotericism as purely political with which we began. The first exists always, and the second is accidental. Lessing gives to understand that there is both necessary and political esotericism, while arguing that the secret that cannot be said is more fundamentally hidden than what one hides accidentally out of jealousy, fear, or prudence. Even if he is somehow just talking about the historical institution of Freemasonry—which seems highly unlikely ("Freemasonry always existed," First Dialogue, 12)[14]—at least he is interesting to think with about secrecy. But there is good reason to think he means esotericism, given his interpretation of Aulus Gellius (20.5) and his remarks about "exoteric" noble lies in Leibniz and Plato.[15]

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[13] "Man hat lange genug aus Heimlichkeiten das Geheimnis gemacht … Das Geheimnis der Freimaurerei, wie ich dir schon gesagt habe, ist das, was der Freimaurer *nicht* über seine Lippen bringen *kann*, wenn es auch möglich wäre, daß er es *wollte*. Aber Heimlichkeiten sind Dinge, die sich wohl sagen lassen, und die man nur zu gewissen Zeiten, in gewissen Ländern, teils aus Neid verhehlte, teils aus Furcht verbiß, teils aus Klugheit verschwieg." Emphasis is original throughout Appendix A unless otherwise noted.

[14] "Die Freimaurerei war immer."

[15] See Strauss 1986 [1939], 53-54, 57 n. 27. See above (6.3) for my discussion of the passage of Aulus Gellius.

Lessing seems to connect necessary and political esotericism by affirming that even the best regime would be defective (Second Dialogue, 21-22). Does he mean that the epistemological limits which limit the power of communication also limit the ability to achieve a perfect society, and hence the need for political esotericism?

Lessing's much younger contemporary Schleiermacher attributes an indirect way of communication to Plato in line with Lessing's characterization of indirect communication in general. For Schleiermacher in his *Introduction to the Dialogues of Plato*, Plato writes in the way he does for the following reason, which is worth quoting in full:

> [Plato aims] to guide each investigation and to design it, from the very beginning, in such a way as to compel the reader either to produce inwardly, on his own, the intended thought or to yield, in a most definite manner, to the feeling of having found nothing and understood nothing. For this purpose it is required that the result of the investigation be not simply stated and put down in so many words … but that the reader's soul be constrained to search for the result and be set on the way on which it can find what it seeks. The first is done by awakening in the soul of the reader the awareness of its own state of ignorance, an awareness so clear that the soul cannot possibly wish to remain in that state. The second is done either by weaving a riddle out of contradictions, a riddle the only possible solution of which lies in the intended thought, and by often injecting, in a seemingly most strange and casual manner, one hint or another, which only he who is really and spontaneously engaged in searching notices and understands; or by covering the primary investigation with another one, but not as if that other one were a veil (*Schleier*), but as if it were naturally grown skin (*Haut*): this other investigation hides from the inattentive reader, and only from him, the very thing which is meant to be observed or to be found, while the attentive reader's ability to perceive the intrinsic connection between the two investigations is sharpened and enhanced.[16]

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[16] Quoted and translated at Klein 1965, 7 n. 23 (insertions of original German are mine): "… jede Untersuchung von Anfang an so zu führen und darauf zu berechnen, dass der Leser entweder zur eigenen inneren Erzeugung des beabsichtigten Gedankens, oder dazu gezwungen werde, dass er sich dem Gefühle, nichts gefunden und nichts verstanden zu haben, auf das allerbestimmteste übergehen muss. Hierzu nun wird erfordert, dass das Ende der Untersuchung nicht geradezu ausgesprochen und wörtlich niedergelegt werde …, dass die Seele aber in die Notwendigkeit gesetzt werde, es zu suchen, und auf den Weg geleitet, wo sie es finden kann. Das erste geschieht, indem sie über ihren Zustand des Nichtwissens zu so klarem Bewusstsein gebracht wird, dass sie unmöglich gutwillig darin bleiben kann. Das andere, indem entweder aus Widersprüchen ein Räthsel geflochten wird, zu welchem der beabsichtigte Gedanke die einzig mögliche Lösung ist, und oft auf ganz fremdscheinende zufällige Art manche Andeutung hingeworfen, die nur derjenige findet und versteht, der wirklich und selbstthätig sucht. Oder die eigentliche Untersuchung wird mit einer andern, nicht wie mit einem Schleier, sondern wie mit einer angewachsenen Haut überkleidet, welche dem Unaufmerksamen, aber auch nur diesem, dasjenige verdeckt, was eigentlich soll beobachtet oder gefunden werden, dem Aufmerksamen aber nur noch den Sinn für den inneren Zusammenhang schärft und läutert." The passage cited can be found in Schleiermacher 2016 [1804], 31-32.

In this remarkable passage, Schleiermacher, a founder of modern Platonic studies, attributes to Plato's manner of writing a process of revealing and concealing. While stopping short of saying with Lessing's Falk that the truth cannot be said at all, Schleiermacher does say that it would be in a sense pointless to blurt it out. The student will not get it unless he or she arrives there on his or her own. And Plato's indirect way of writing serves to facilitate this experience, to reproduce the experience of thinking in the student that leads to the truth rather than trying to communicate the truth directly. Schleiermacher, even as he argues against the esoteric/exoteric distinction in Plato,[17] characterizes Plato's dialogues as proceeding in an esoteric way, but for pedagogical reasons (and these may be grounded in the necessary reason that this is how we understand). Schleiermacher likewise distinguishes between two groups of readers, but these are no longer the members of an in-group as opposed to outsiders, but rather "attentive" readers and "inattentive" readers.[18] You do not need to have been personally initiated into the Academy to understand the dialogues (vs. Tennemann and the Tübingen school),[19] just as I would wager Aristotle hoped even those who had not heard his lectures could understand his esoteric works if they worked at it.

Lessing and Schleiermacher join to the political interpretation of ancient esotericism considerations about the character of communication necessitating esoteric speech and pedagogical responses to these considerations. The next philosopher to treat both the necessary and political forms of esotericism is Nietzsche. Nietzsche, like the Enlightenment thinkers, explicitly specifies that the esoteric and exoteric distinction occurs within individual texts rather than between classes of writings. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche exhibits his (rare for the 19th century) awareness of ancient esoteric philosophy:

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[17] Strauss 1986 [1939], 55-57.
[18] See again Schleiermacher 2016 [1804], 32, where he uses "esoteric" and "exoteric" in relation to the capacities of different types of readers.
[19] See Nietzsche's (1994 [1871-1872], 9-13; KGA II 4) critical comparison of Tennemann and Schleiermacher in his lectures entitled *Introduction to the Study of the Platonic Dialogues*.

> Our highest insights must—and should!—sound like follies, at times like crimes, when they come in an unallowed way to the ears of those who are not of the [right] kind and predetermined for them. The exoteric and the esoteric, as one formerly distinguished among philosophers, among the Indians,[20] as among the Greeks, Persians, and Muslims, in short everywhere where one believed in rank-ordering and *not* in equality and equal rights,—and the separation is made from one another not so much on account of the fact that the exoteric [man] stands outside and sees, evaluates, [and] measures from the outside and not the inside: the more essential thing is that he sees things from below upwards,—but the esoteric [man] *from above downwards*! There are heights of the soul, seen from which even tragedy stops working tragically … (§ 30)[21]

Esoteric philosophy comes to light exoterically as charlatanry or sophistry, which verges on the criminal. Esoteric philosophy is both the cause of persecution and a response to persecution. Esoteric philosophy is a way of being rather than a way of reading. The right response to a text seems to come, as it were, automatically. Nietzsche attributes the exoteric and esoteric distinction quasi-universally to philosophers. If we take the belief in "equality and equal rights" to apply to the Classical Liberalism of the Enlightenment democratic project (see Preface, end; cf. § 44), philosophy in nearly all societies and times would practice esotericism. It seems as if the democratic Enlightenment caused the world to forget about esotericism, even though its founders were well aware of it.[22]

Nietzsche goes on to correct our commonsense assumption that the exoteric reader sees the outside while the esoteric reader sees the inside. In fact, they see the same thing but from different perspectives, from below and from above. From above, the text becomes visible as a whole, but from below this would not be possible—one is within the text rather than seeing down into it. As Stanley Rosen notes on this passage, "From the standpoint of the esotericist, who sees

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[20] See Carey 2007 for esoteric and exoteric philosophy among Indian philosophers.
[21] Nietzsche 1999 [1886], V.48: "Unsre höchsten Einsichten müssen — und sollen! — wie Thorheiten, unter Umständen wie Verbrechen klingen, wenn sie unerlaubter Weise Denen zu Ohren kommen, welche nicht dafür geartet und vorbestimmt sind. Das Exoterische und das Esoterische, wie man ehedem unter Philosophen unterschied, bei Indern, wie bei Griechen, Persern und Muselmännern, kurz überall, wo man eine Rangordnung und *nicht* an Gleichheit und gleiche Rechte glaubte, — das hebt sich nicht sowohl dadurch von einander ab, dass der Exoteriker draussen steht und von aussen her, nicht von innen her, sieht, schätzt, misst, urtheilt: das Wesentlichere ist, dass er von Unten hinauf die Dinge sieht, — der Esoteriker aber *von Oben herab*! Es giebt Höhen der Seele, von wo aus gesehen selbst die Tragödie aufhört, tragisch zu wirken …"
[22] See Melzer 2014, 95-124.

from above downward, life is visible as within, and so defined by, illusion …"[23] The esoteric reader sees a text or the world as an image. Life is not illusion but in illusion,[24] so there is access beyond the image. At the same time, the pessimism of tragedy is overcome by being viewed aesthetically from above rather than from within. This is the difference from being a spectator to tragedy and being in a tragedy.[25] Thus esoteric philosophy overcomes the tragic separation of the good and the beautiful.[26]

That the esoteric and exoteric readers look at the exact same thing but from different perspectives means not so much that there is a surface and a concealed depth, but that the surface viewed in a certain way discloses something or comes to light as a whole. As Schleiermacher puts it, the exoteric is less like a veil and more like a skin. "… every skin (*Haut*), reveals something, but *conceals* even more" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, § 32).[27] The esoteric and exoteric are intrinsically connected rather than separated. Nietzsche makes it clear that he is not discussing different books and speeches for different audiences: "What serves as nourishment or refreshment for the higher kind of human beings must be almost poison for a very different and humbler kind" (§ 30).[28] And this occurs in writing, for "[t]here are books, which have a reversed value for soul and health, according to whether the lower soul, the lower form of life or by contrast the higher and more violent [soul or form of life] makes use of them …" (§ 30).[29] The very same books have different effects on different kinds of readers. Given Nietzsche's mention of "*Plato's* concealment and sphynx-nature" two aphorisms prior (§ 28)[30]—which, by the way, overcomes

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[23] Rosen 1999, 6.
[24] Ibid.
[25] See Davis 2020, 3-4.
[26] Seeing the reality connected to a beautiful image links the beautiful to the good (see Benardete 2012a, 154).
[27] Nietzsche 1999 [1886], V.51: "… jede Haut, Etwas verräth, aber noch mehr *verbirgt*?"
[28] Ibid., V.48. "Was der höheren Art von Menschen zur Nahrung oder zur Labsal dient, muss einer sehr unterschiedlichen und geringeren Art beinahe Gift sein."
[29] Ibid., V.49: "Es giebt Bücher, welche für Seele und Gesundheit einen umgekehrten Werth haben, je nachdem die niedere Seele, die niedrigere Lebenskraft oder aber die höhere und gewaltigere sich ihrer bedienen …"
[30] Ibid., V.47: "… *Plato's* Verborgenheit und Sphinx-Natur …"

the tragic through Aristophanes—and his mention of the esoteric/exoteric distinction among the Greeks, Nietzsche may hold Plato's books to be of such a sort.

So far Nietzsche has combined the Enlightenment philosophers' terms "esoteric" and "exoteric" as applying to the same works with Schleiermacher's observations about the intrinsic connection rather than disjunction between the esoteric and the exoteric. He has, furthermore, alluded to the political aspect of esotericism by saying that it comes to light as folly and crime. Nietzsche had previously been more explicit about the dangers of martyrdom for philosophy, naming the forced isolation of Spinoza and Giordano Bruno, and reminding of Socrates' martyrdom for philosophy (§ 25). Nietzsche further integrates into these conceptions of esotericism the unavoidability of esotericism from Lessing, whom he praises (§ 28), and extends this necessary character of esotericism from our relationship with others to the self in relation to the self. Concealment of the self to the self is necessary to constitute the self. Later, he will also bring out the other side of political esotericism—the use of religion for politics—in addition to the danger of persecution.

Nietzsche connects surface and depth: "Everything that is deep loves a mask …" (§ 40).[31] He elsewhere writes:

> One should honor *shame* better, with which nature has hidden itself behind riddles and motley uncertainties. Perhaps truth is a woman who has reasons (*Gründe*) not to let her depths (*Gründe*) be seen? Perhaps her name is, to speak Greek, Baubo?[32] … Oh these Greeks! They were well versed in *living* in this way: for this it is necessary to remain bravely on the surface, the fold, the skin (*Haut*), to worship appearance, to believe in shapes, sounds, words, in the whole Olympus of appearance! These Greeks were superficial—*out of depth*! (*The Gay Science*, Preface to the Second Edition, § 4)[33]

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[31] Ibid., V.57: "Alles, was tief ist, liebt die Maske …"

[32] The name of the old woman in Greek mythology who exposes herself to Demeter to make her laugh and forget about the disappearance of her daughter (see *Kl. Pauly*, s.v.).

[33] Nietzsche 1999 [1887], III.352: "Man sollte die *Scham* besser in Ehren halten, mit der sich die Natur hinter Räthsel und bunte Ungewissheiten versteckt hat. Vielleicht ist die Wahrheit ein Weib, das Gründe hat, ihre Gründe nicht sehn zu lassen? Vielleicht ist ihr Name, griechisch zu reden, Baubo?… Oh diese Griechen! Sie verstanden sich darauf, zu *leben*: dazu thut Noth, tapfer bei der Oberfläche, der Falte, der Haut stehen zu bleiben, den Schein anzubeten, an Formen, an Töne, an Worte, an den ganzen Olymp des Scheins zu glauben! Diese Griechen waren oberflächlich — *aus Tiefe*!" Ellipsis is original.

Being deep requires being superficial. Esotericism is not a tool but a necessity. Shame is both the impetus for us to conceal ourselves from ourselves[34] and an image for truth or nature that is fundamentally hidden. We are concealed from ourselves just as nature is concealed from us. "Many are well versed in tarnishing and abusing their own memory, in order to have revenge against at least this sole confidant;—shame is inventive" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, § 40).[35] The esoteric person wants to present a mask to others, but also realizes that the mask is unavoidable, both for himself or herself and for others:

> Such a concealer, who out of instinct uses speaking for keeping silent and withholding (*zum Schweigen und Verschweigen*) and is inexhaustible in flight from communicating, *wants* this and requires this, that in his place a mask of him wanders around in the hearts and heads of his friends; and, supposing he does not want this, thus one day his eyes will open up to the fact that there is nevertheless a mask of him there,—and that it is good in this way. Every deep mind needs a mask: what is more, around every deep mind a mask grows continuously, thanks to the constantly false, that is, *flat* interpretation of every word, every step, every sign of life that he gives.— (§ 40)[36]

Like Lessing's Falk, Nietzsche recognizes that, though one can will concealment, concealment is also unavoidable. He adds that this extends from others also to oneself. Everyone as a self has to conceal his or her self from his or her self to remain a self, but the esoteric philosopher makes this necessary practice deliberate. "The few conceal from the many what the many conceal from themselves … Thinking is *as such* concealment: to be is to dissimulate."[37]

We are in danger of running up against the extreme of esotericism as intrinsic concealment which always requires interpretation—the opposite end from political esotericism

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[34] See again Halbertal 2007, 142-146 on the connection between shame and esotericism without reference to Nietzsche.
[35] Nietzsche 1999 [1886], V.58: "Mancher versteht sich darauf, das eigne Gedächtniss zu trüben und zu misshandeln, um wenigstens an diesem einzigen Mitwisser seine Rache zu haben: — die Scham ist erfinderisch."
[36] Ibid.: "Ein solcher Verborgener, der aus Instinkt das Reden zum Schweigen und Verschweigen braucht und unerschöpflich ist in der Ausflucht vor Mittheilung, *will* es und fördert es, dass eine Maske von ihm an seiner Statt in den Herzen und Köpfen seiner Freunde herum wandelt; und gesetzt, er will es nicht, so werden ihm eines Tages die Augen darüber aufgehn, dass es trotzdem dort eine Maske von ihm giebt, — und dass es gut so ist. Jeder tiefe Geist braucht eine Maske: mehr noch, um jeden tiefen Geist wächst fortwährend eine Maske, Dank der beständig falschen, nämlich *flachen* Auslegung jedes Wortes, jedes Schrittes, jedes Lebens-Zeichens, das er giebt. —"
[37] Rosen 1999, 5. See also ibid., 8: "What Homer actually shows is that the lying and deception of the gods is a poetic representation of the intrinsic structure of human experience."

which by making concealment a mere means separates it from philosophy. But, crucially, Nietzsche's concealer wills concealment from others, practicing esotericism deliberately in addition to recognizing, presumably as Nietzsche does, the unavoidability of concealment. Deliberate concealment is still required for esoteric texts to be esoteric. A newspaper article requires interpretation but cannot disclose itself as a beautiful whole.

Nietzsche further emphasizes the deliberate character of esotericism when he moves to the political use of religion by philosophers:

> The philosopher, as *we* understand him, we free spirits—, as the human being of the most extensive responsibility, who has [on] his conscience the entire development of the human being: this philosopher will make use of religions for his tasks of breeding and education, as he will make use of the political and economic conditions on each occasion. (§ 61)[38]

And further: "… it comes always at an expensive and terrible cost, when religions prevail *not* as means of breeding and education in the hand of the philosopher, but on their own accord as *sovereign*, when they themselves want to be final ends and not means alongside other means" (§ 62).[39] This is the more narrowly political "exoteric" use of religion, the use of (ig)noble lies (cf. § 105) to control others.[40] However we might interpret these passages of *Beyond Good and Evil*, it is clear Nietzsche recognizes esotericism both as a necessity and as a free choice. Furthermore, in his lectures *Presentation of Ancient Rhetoric* Nietzsche argues on the basis of *Republic* 376e and 389b that Platonic myth functions to persuade and gives the noble lie (414b) as an example.[41]

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[38] Nietzsche 1999 [1886], V.79: "Der Philosoph, wie *wir* ihn verstehen, wir freien Geister —, als der Mensch der umfänglichsten Verantwortlichkeit, der das Gewissen für die Gesammt-Entwicklung des Menschen hat: dieser Philosoph wird sich der Religionen zu seinem Züchtungs- und Erziehungswerke bedienen, wie er sich der jeweiligen politischen und wirthschaftlichen Zustände bedienen wird."

[39] Ibid., V.81: "… es bezahlt sich immer theuer und fürchterlich, wenn Religionen *nicht* als Züchtungs- und Erziehungsmittel in der Hand des Philosophen, sondern von sich aus und *souverän* walten, wenn sie selber letzte Zwecke und nicht Mittel neben anderen Mitteln sein wollen."

[40] See further *Genealogy of Morals*, 3.10.

[41] Nietzsche 1994 [1874] , 418-419; KGA II 4. See in particular ibid., 418: "Der *mythische* Bestandtheil der Dialoge ist der rhetorische: der Mythus hat das Wahrscheinliche zum Inhalt: also nicht den Zweck zu belehren, sondern nur δόξα bei den Zuhöhern zu erregen, also zu πείθειν. Die Mythen gehören zur παγκάλη παιδιά: die rhetorischen ebenso wie die schriftl. Compositionen sind nur zum Vergnügen angefertigt. Die Wahrheit läßt sich weder in schriftl. noch in rhetorischer Form aussprechen … [Platon] tadelt Homer und Hesiod nicht deshalb daß sie gelogen, sondern daß sie es nicht in der rechten Weise gethan" ("The *mythical* component of the dialogues is the rhetorical component: myth has

There is a gap between Nietzsche and Leo Strauss in the explicit discussion of philosophic esotericism.[42] But Martin Heidegger—who dedicated much energy to interpreting Nietzsche and who was a teacher of Strauss—appears as a necessary stop on the way between Nietzsche and Strauss.

Heidegger is well aware of the danger of political life to the philosopher which might cause a philosopher to practice concealment, but he is much more interested in concealment as a necessary aspect of our pursuit of the fundamental philosophic question "What is being?" If compared to the passage from *The Gay Science* cited above, Heidegger follows Nietzsche in asserting that the necessity of concealment arises from the hiddenness of nature or being: "nature loves to hide" (φύσις κρύπτεσθαι φιλεῖ, Heraclit., DK 22 B 123).[43]

Michael Gillespie contrasts Heidegger's hermeneutics with esoteric philosophy (also with reference to potential similarities to Plato): Heidegger reveals in a concealed text "not what was thought but what was left unthought, not the intention of the author but the intention of Being itself …"[44] Rosen and Halbertal take a slightly different approach and connect Heidegger directly to esotericism, if of a special variety (although the difference in emphasis may just be due to a different definition of esotericism). Rosen contrasts "intentional concealment" with a second type of esotericism: "The second form [of esotericism] is a reflection in human speech of the intrinsic deceptiveness of Becoming. This form underlies Heidegger's doctrine of the concealment of

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the likely as its content: thus [it has] not the aim of teaching, but of awakening only δόξα ['opinion'] in listeners, thus to πείθειν ['persuade']. The myths belong to παγκάλη παιδιά ['most beautiful play']: the rhetorical just as much as the written compositions are prepared only for amusement. The truth is not able to be pronounced either in written or in rhetorical form … [Plato] blames Homer and Hesiod not on account of the fact that they lied, but on account of the fact that they did not do it in the right way").

[42] See Rosen 1999, 1: "The most extensive discussion of esoteric writing before Strauss's may be found in Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*." Casel's (1919) work on esoteric philosophy is an exception to this statement (see my discussion at 1.4 above), but unfortunately his research does not seem to have had the influence on the study of ancient philosophy it deserves.

[43] See Heidegger 1988 [1931-1932], 93. See Rosen 1993, xiv-xv for φύσις ("nature") as the Greek equivalent of Heidegger's *Sein* ("being") rather than forms of εἰμί ("be"). Casel (1919, 34) attributes Heraclitus' obscurity to his views about the hiddenness of nature, not intentional obscurity, thus disagreeing with Marcus' judgment in *De finibus* (2.15) and other ancient interpretations.

[44] Gillespie 1984, 167. See further ibid., 166-172.

Being by the productions of the Being-process or, in slightly different terms, of the interplay between presence and absence."[45] Halbertal attributes esotericism to Heidegger for much the same reason, using him as a main example for this type of esotericism ("essential" esotericism in Halbertal's terms).[46] It is reasonable, then, to look at Heidegger to see what he might tell us about esotericism.

First, let us notice that Heidegger was well aware of the problem persecution poses for philosophy that would animate Strauss' reflections on esotericism—and he noticed this in Plato. In Heidegger's published *Plato's Doctrine of Truth* he only touches briefly on the death of the philosopher who returns to the Cave and that of Socrates himself.[47] Heidegger elaborates on this topic in his lectures (*On the Essence of Truth*) on the image of the Cave. "The philosopher as the freer of the shackled ones exposes himself to the fate of death in the Cave; it is good to note: [to the fate] of death *in the Cave* and by the Cave-dwellers who are not masters of themselves. Plato obviously wishes to remind of the death of Socrates."[48] In response to the problem that philosophers are no longer killed in his time (i.e., for the simple fact of being philosophers), Heidegger leaves open the question of whether there are actually any philosophers to focus on the fact that a less literal version of death awaits all philosophers insofar as they come into contact with society:

> The philosopher is exposed to death in the Cave, that means: authentic (*eigentliche*) philosophizing is powerless in the realm of the ruling taken-for-grantedness (*Selbstverständlichkeit*); only insofar as this itself [i.e., the ruling taken-for-grantedness] changes can philosophy address it. This fate would be today, provided there should be philosophers, more threatening than ever.[49]

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[45] Rosen 1999, 2.
[46] Halbertal 2007, 155-156.
[47] Heidegger 2004 [1931/32, 1940], 222-223.
[48] Heidegger 1988 [1931-1932], 83: "Der Philosoph als Befreier der Gefesselten setzt sich dem Schicksal des Todes in der Höhle aus; wohl zu beachten: des Todes *in der Höhle* und durch die ihrer selbst nicht mächtigen Höhlenbewohner. Platon will offensichtlich an den Tod des Sokrates erinnern."
[49] Ibid., 84: "Der Philosoph ist dem Tode in der Höhle ausgesetzt, das besagt: das eigentliche Philosophieren ist machtlos innerhalb des Bereichs der herrschenden Selbstverständlichkeit; nur soweit diese selbst sich wandelt, kann Philosophie ansprechen. Dieses Schicksal wäre heute, falls es Philosophen gäbe, drohender denn je."

This is because if a philosopher tries to become a public intellectual the "they" (*man*) will appropriate him and make him just another novelty that can be discarded at will and brought to the same level as everything else.[50] "The philosopher would thus be killed completely silently,—he would be made not harmful and not dangerous. While alive he would die his death in the Cave,—and he would have to tolerate it; he would misunderstand himself and his task, should he wish to retreat out of the Cave."[51] The philosopher must stay in the Cave in order to free the others—the philosopher must free the others because he shares the being of those he wishes to free. But in the Cave the philosopher cannot be ironic (like Socrates): "He would also not even be allowed to retreat to an ironic superiority, for even so he would take part himself in his own (*eigenen*) poisoning. Then and only then, when he could become master even of such ironic superiority, could he *genuinely* (*echt*) die his unstoppable death in the Cave."[52]

To summarize, Heidegger views the Cave as the political realm in any time or place. The philosopher who must descend into it inevitably faces the danger of death. This could be a death of the body ("Today indeed poison and weapons are ready for killing"),[53] like that of Socrates, but an even worse death is when the city neutralizes the philosopher. That Athens killed Socrates showed that the Athenians at least took philosophy seriously as a threat,[54] whereas now philosophy merely becomes another part of what Heidegger elsewhere calls "average everydayness" (*die durchschnittliche Alltäglichkeit*, *Being and Time*, pp. 188-189).[55] This is the

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[50] Ibid., 84-85.
[51] Ibid., 85: "Der Philosoph würde so ganz stillschweigend umgebracht, – unschädlich und ungefährlich gemacht. Lebend stürbe er seinen Tod in der Höhle, – und er müßte ihn ertragen; er würde sich und seine Aufgabe mißverstehen, wollte er sich aus der Höhle zurückziehen."
[52] Ibid.: "Er dürfte sich auch nicht einmal auf eine ironische Überlegenheit zurückziehen, denn auch so beteiligte er sich selbst noch an seiner eigenen Vergiftung. Nur und erst, wenn er sogar solcher ironischen Überlegenheit Herr werden könnte, vermöchte er den unaufhaltsamen Tod in der Höhle *echt* zu sterben." One wonders whether Heidegger also has in mind Socrates' characterization of philosophy in the *Phaedo* as the practice of "dying and being dead" (ἀποθνήσκειν τε καὶ τεθνάναι, 64a6).
[53] Ibid.: "Heute sind zwar Gift und Waffen zum Töten bereit …"
[54] See Brann 2004, 58.
[55] In this and the following paragraphs on Heidegger in-text citations will refer to the page numbers of *Being and Time* (Heidegger 2006 [1927]).

transformation of philosophers into "more or less good sophists," members of "the Kant-*Society*" rather than philosophers like Kant.[56] Heidegger contemplates the reaction of something like esoteric philosophy—a philosopher using irony to remain superior, to protect himself from physical or metaphorical death, but he rejects this because "[b]eing free, being a freer is acting along in the history of those who belong to us relative to being."[57] In other words, mere retreat from the deleterious effects of political life is not true to the political nature of the philosopher: being-there (*Dasein*) is always being-there-with (*Mitdasein*).[58] Being free is not complete freedom or detachment from politics, but submitting to the necessity of politics (cf. *Beyond Good and Evil*, § 41). For the Greeks freedom was submission to the law.

Heidegger thus shows his awareness of the danger to philosophers which could give rise to the ironic response of political esotericism, but rejects this narrowly political interpretation of esotericism as philosophically inadequate. A cursory reading of Heidegger's account of phenomenology in *Being and Time* (27-39) shows how central he views the necessary rather than political form of esotericism to all understanding, including understanding his own manner of writing.

Phenomenology is by definition a *logos* about the *phainomena*.[59] A *phainomenon* is that which lets itself be shown. *Logos* is talk. Phenomenology is talking about that which lets itself be shown. That which lets itself be shown must first be concealed in order to be shown. So phenomenology needs to bring forth what is concealed. But *logos* or talk turns out to be just another word for letting something be shown (*apophainesthai*). What is said (*legomenon*) is that which lets itself be shown (*phainomenon*), so the distinction between *logos* and *phainomenon*

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[56] Heidegger 1988 [1931-1932], 85-86: "… mehr oder minder gute Sophisten …"; "… die Kant-*Gesellschaft* …"
[57] Ibid., 85: "Freisein, Befreier-sein ist Mithandeln in der Geschichte derer, die seinsmäßig uns zugehören."
[58] See Davis 1999, 7: "… we cannot understand our own being in the world apart from *Mitdasein* – being with others … For Aristotle, man is both a political and rational animal, and the two are somehow the same."
[59] It what follows I draw heavily on—while surely not adequately capturing—Davis' not at all cursory account of this section of *Being and Time* (ibid., 20-27).

breaks down. Speeches are one of the things that let themselves be shown. Speeches are concealed things which let themselves be shown. Therefore, as Socrates turns from looking at the beings (*ta onta*) directly to looking at the beings in speeches (Pl. *Phd*. 99d4-e6), phenomenology includes bringing forth what is concealed in speeches. It is logophenomic. Heidegger's *Being and Time* is of course composed of speeches. Therefore one must practice phenomenology in order to bring forth what is concealed in Heidegger's speeches. This might explain the movement in this section from an account of phenomenology to an account of hermeneutics as translation, to a discussion of Heidegger's own manner of writing (37-39).

> With respect to the disjointedness [or 'shapelessness' or 'clunkiness'] and 'lack of beauty' (*das Ungefüge und das »Unschöne«*) of the expression within the following analyses the remark may be attached (*angefügt*): it is one thing to report about *being* (*Seiendes*) by narrating, another thing to grasp being (*Seiendes*) in its *being* (*Sein*). For the latter task not only are words for the most part missing, but above all the 'grammar.' (38-39)[60]

Heidegger points out the difficulty of understanding his writing. But this is a necessary feature not only of all speech, but particularly of his speech since he talks about being (*Sein*), a field that he quotes Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* to characterize as one "where 'the thing itself is deeply shrouded'" (26).[61] The obscurity of being makes Heidegger's speech obscure. "[H]ermeneutic as the interpretation of the being of *Dasein*" (37-38) will be clunky as it translates the language of being to the German language.[62] Grammar differs from language to language. But even as he characterizes the obscurity of his speech by disjointedness and ugliness, he does something rather beautiful. He contrasts "disjointedness" (*das Ungefüge*) with his own act of joining (*angefügt*) a remark about his way of writing. Both of these words are from the verb *fügen* ("to join") but the first is negated by the prefix *un-* while the latter is modified by the prepositional prefix *an-*. Both

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[60] "Mit Rücksicht auf das Ungefüge und »Unschöne« des Ausdrucks innerhalb der folgenden Analysen darf die Bemerkung angefügt werden: ein anderes ist es, über *Seiendes* erzählend zu berichten, ein anderes, Seiendes in seinem *Sein* zu fassen. Für die letztgenannte Aufgabe fehlen nicht nur meist die Worte, sondern vor allem die »Grammatik«."
[61] "… wo »die Sache selbst tief eingehüllt ist« …"
[62] "… die Hermeneutik als Auslegung des Seins des Daseins …"

have, furthermore, the infix *-ge-* immediately before the form of *fügen*. By observing the connection between the words we see the join (of the root verb) amidst the disjointedness (of the differing prefixes). Heidegger's deliberate use of language reveals even as it complicates or conceals by adding another layer of meaning on top of his explicit discussion. We need to give an account (*logos*) of what shows itself (*phainomenon*) as we read his text. To give an adequate account of concealment and revelation in *Being and Time* one would have not only to analyze the different valences of *phainomenon* and *logos*, but also the three forms of concealment or covering over (*Verdeckung*) as hiddenness (*Verborgenheit*), burial (*Verschüttung*), and disguising or misplacing (*Verstellung*) (36).

In addition to being aware of and rejecting political esotericism, Heidegger adumbrates a form of esotericism rooted in the concealed character of being which nevertheless leaves room for the writer who is aware of such concealment to write in a way that befits the subject matter.[63]

Maybe it is, then, no coincidence that Strauss was both a student of Heidegger's and made the concealment of philosophic esotericism one of the major themes of his philosophic and scholarly activity. It is undeniable that Strauss is responsible for reintroducing "esotericism" as a term into philosophical and scholarly discourse as separate from esotericism in the sense of mysticism.[64] Halbertal, who is very critical of Strauss, admits his importance: "The inherent contradictions in the esoteric project reveal a far more complex picture of this phenomenon, both historically and conceptually, than what Leo Strauss had in mind *when he initiated the study of esotericism*."[65] Studying esotericism is inextricably associated with Strauss' work. It is necessary, then, to see where he fits into the spectrum of necessary and political esotericism we have been investigating.

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[63] Cf. Davis 2020, 4: "… if images always lie, if *logos* is always musical, one can either be aware or unaware of this fact." The faculty of recognizing an image as an image is εἰκασία (see Klein 1965, 112-125).
[64] See Strauss 1945, 362, 373 n. 42; Strauss 1952, 111 n. 46.
[65] Halbertal 2007, 162. Emphasis is mine.

In his two authorized publications which deal directly with esotericism and his one posthumous publication on the topic Strauss always focuses on the political aspect of esotericism, as the title of his book *Persecution and the Art of Writing* shows. There are numerous statements both in this book and his response to critics in "On a Forgotten Kind of Writing"[66]—as well as in his posthumous "Exoteric Teaching"[67]—which make it seem as if Strauss views esotericism merely as a matter of prudence, if one grounded in a perennial necessity caused by the clash between politics or religion and philosophy. He speaks, moreover, as if the unphilosophic many receive a public exoteric teaching, while philosophic readers receive the truth simply. He speaks as if philosophy were the same as wisdom, and wisdom moreover admitted of direct communication.

Consider the following statement from *Persecution*:

> Persecution, then, gives rise to a peculiar technique of writing, and therewith to a peculiar type of literature, in which the truth about all crucial things is presented exclusively between the lines. That literature is addressed, not to all readers, but to the trustworthy and intelligent readers only.[68]

The esoteric writing does indeed communicate truth, but the need to do so indirectly is driven by persecution rather than any fundamental character of being. Strauss summarizes later in the chapter:

> An exoteric book contains then two teachings: a popular teaching of an edifying character, which is in the foreground; and philosophic teaching concerning the most important subject, which is indicated only between the lines. This is not to deny that some great writers might have stated certain important truths quite openly by using as mouthpiece some disreputable character: they would thus show how much they disapproved of pronouncing the truths in question.[69]

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[66] Strauss 1959c.
[67] Strauss 1986 [1939].
[68] Strauss 1952, 24.
[69] Ibid., 36.

Strauss here agrees with the passage from Al-Farabi I cited above, which Strauss discusses in another essay,[70] to the effect that truth can be communicated if in an unexpected place. And if we turn to "On a Forgotten Kind of Writing" where Strauss restates his position very succinctly, he says the following about those who recognize the tension between philosophy and society:

> They will distinguish between the true teaching as the esoteric teaching and the socially useful teaching as the exoteric teaching; whereas the exoteric teaching is meant to be easily accessible to every reader, the esoteric teaching discloses itself only to very careful and well-trained readers after long and concentrated study.[71]

And then even in his posthumous "Exoteric Teaching," he writes, "And there is a difference not of degree but of kind between truth and lie or untruth. And what holds true of the difference between truth and lies holds equally true of the difference between exoteric and esoteric teaching; for Plato's exoteric teaching is identical with his 'noble lies.'"[72] The exoteric and esoteric teachings are completely separated. There is simply a truth that the esoteric teaching reveals. When we look for an example of such a concealed truth provided by Strauss, a ready example in *Persecution* is his assertion that Al-Farabi indirectly presents his disbelief in the immortality of the soul.[73] Hidden truths such as "the soul is mortal" could be revealed propositionally.

With these characterizations of esotericism, it risks simply becoming that of Heidegger's "ironic" philosopher who conceals to avoid being killed. The difference between ancient and modern esotericism (as Strauss himself characterizes the latter) would only be that the moderns believe that they can remove the political conditions which cause persecution, while the ancients do not think this is possible.[74] Strauss himself is responsible for a narrowly political interpretation of esotericism based on his writings.[75]

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[70] Strauss 1959b, 135-137.
[71] Strauss 1959c, 222.
[72] Strauss 1986 [1939], 56-57.
[73] Strauss 1952, 13-15. See further Strauss 1945, 371-377.
[74] Strauss 1952, 33-35.
[75] Cf. Casel 1919, 69.

But what if Strauss himself wrote esoterically, as numerous commentators now believe? If he agrees with his characterization of the ancients that esotericism can never be dispensed with, would he not be at odds with this belief if he dispensed with esotericism? If he did write esoterically, then by his own characterization his description of esotericism would be exoteric.[76] What is "accessible to every reader" in *Persecution* is the exoteric teaching: and this seems to be the characterization of esotericism that I have just been describing, that propositional truths are concealed merely to avoid persecution.[77] This is obviously not the place to apply the interpretative criteria for esoteric reading back onto *Persecution* to see what that book might say "between the lines." However, both some details of *Persecution* and "Exoteric Teaching"—as well as Strauss' more skeptical characterization of philosophy elsewhere—at least make it plausible that he agrees with Lessing, Nietzsche, and Heidegger that what is most fundamental cannot be simply revealed.

> [The ancients] were convinced that philosophy as such was suspect to, and hated by, the majority of men. *Even if they had nothing to fear from any particular political quarter*, those who started from that assumption would have been driven to the conclusion that public communication of the philosophic or scientific truth was *impossible* or undesirable, not only for the time being but for all times.[78]

In passing, Strauss notes that even if there were no fear of persecution, ancient philosophers would not reveal the truth. They would conclude that this is "impossible or undesirable." The disjunction of "impossible" and "undesirable" means that these are two different things. It is not just impossible because any reasonable person would see this as undesirable. Strauss thus indicates that the ancients did not think it was possible to communicate philosophic truth openly–

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[76] Cf. Rosen 1987, 115-116.
[77] And this is the teaching of the book that has been most influential among both Strauss' followers and critics for their understanding of his views on esotericism.
[78] Strauss 1952, 34. Emphasis is mine.

–not just that the "majority" would not understand it or react poorly to it.[79] The assumption about the hostility to philosophy is separate from this "conclusion" even if it leads to it.

Likewise, in "Exoteric Teaching," in support of his characterization of the requirements of Lessing's Freemason as being that "a man must know truths which ought better to be concealed," Strauss quotes Lessing's Falk without translating or commenting further on the passage: "The wise man *can* not say, that which he better keeps silent."[80] In the body of his text Strauss glosses over the difference between the "ought" and the "can" between which Falk distinguishes. Strauss also does not even cite the even more explicit passages to this effect from *Ernst and Falk* that I discussed above. And yet Lessing is of cardinal important for Strauss, of whom he says, "… Lessing had said everything I had found out about the distinction between exoteric and esoteric speech and its grounds."[81] Strauss studied both *Ernst and Falk* and Lessing's other writings very thoroughly, and yet even on a cursory reading one sees in *Ernst and Falk* the impossibility of direct communication as contrasted with purely prudential reasons.[82]

Finally, there are numerous passages of Strauss' which make it seem as if he does not think one could grasp the truth completely and communicate it propositionally, as his characterization of esoteric philosophy makes it seem to be the case. Consider the following passage from *The City and Man*:

> Plato's work consists of many dialogues because it imitates the manyness, the variety, the heterogeneity of being. The many dialogues form a *kosmos* which mysteriously imitates the mysterious *kosmos*. The Platonic *kosmos* imitates or reproduces its model in order to awaken us to the mystery of the model and assist us in articulating that mystery.[83]

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[79] See also Strauss 1983, 175: "… we cannot help being reminded of what Plato says or intimates regarding the 'weakness of the *logos*' and regarding the unsayable and a fortiori unwritable character of the truth (*Ep*. VII 341c-d, 342e-343a): the purity of the mind as Plato conceives of it, does not necessarily establish the strength of the *logos*"; Strauss 1959a, 38-39: "Knowledge of ignorance is not ignorance. It is knowledge of the elusive character of the truth, of the whole. Socrates, then, viewed man in the light of the mysterious character of the whole."
[80] Strauss 1986 [1939], 52 n. 4. The text Strauss cites is the same as that of Lessing 1968 [1778], 20: "Der Weise *kann* nicht sagen, was er besser verschweigt" (Second Dialogue).
[81] Strauss 1997 [1970], 462. Cited at Velkley 2011, 177 n. 3.
[82] Strauss was also a great student of Nietzsche, so he would be more than familiar with the passages on esotericism that I adduced from Nietzsche. See his citation of *Beyond Good and Evil*, § 30 at Strauss 1983, 178.
[83] Strauss 1964, 61-62.

Richard Velkley interprets passages like this to mean that Strauss follows Heidegger in characterizing being as fundamentally mysterious, even if he disagrees with Heidegger on the proper method of uncovering being.[84] In this regard one might also consider how Strauss reads the account of the ideas in the *Republic* as not being a sign of the philosopher's perfect knowledge but rather as a great problem, one which points to the connection rather than separation between traditional Greek religion and Platonic philosophy.[85] I leave the task of interpreting Strauss to others. But it is sufficiently clear that, on the one hand, his account of esotericism makes it seem as if wisdom and its direct communication were possible, while, on the other hand, philosophy clearly is for Strauss distinct from wisdom and characterized by seeking for wisdom. And this would preclude a perfectly articulated grasp of the truth, but without denying that we can make progress in understanding the "mysterious *kosmos*" through philosophy. Heidegger is more aware of the political aspects of esotericism and Strauss more attuned to the metaphysical aspects of esotericism than may be commonly recognized.

In his early work *Philosophy and Law: Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors,* Strauss makes the connection between metaphysics and esotericism explicit in the context of a contrast between Maimonides and Judah Halevi:

> Maimonides had made it into a principle for himself to present the teachings of metaphysics not in a clear order and continuously, but rather in different passages of his work and mixed with other subjects; it was not only the prohibition (against the public transmission of the secrets of the Torah) pronounced in the Law that induced him to this renunciation of transparency of presentation, but it was also and above all the necessity of the subject matter: the subject of metaphysics is not at all times and not uninterruptedly available to one's sight like the subjects of the other sciences, which hence can be presented methodically and transparently; but rather, it [i.e., the subject of metaphysics] now shows itself, now retreats from sight; for this reason the only appropriate way to speak about God is speech in likenesses and riddles, and for this reason the renunciation of likenesses and riddles, which is necessary for a scientific treatise, has as a consequence that the speech becomes dark and succinct. The manner of communication proper to

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[84] Velkley 2011, 3-9.

[85] Strauss 1964, 118-121. See also Strauss 1959a, 39: "We may say that he [i.e., Socrates] viewed man in the light of the unchangeable ideas, i.e., of the fundamental and permanent problems." Cf. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §§ 20 and 23.

> metaphysics—esoteric communication—is grounded in the insufficiency of man for the knowledge of God.[86]

The political reasons for esotericism are indeed important, but the main reason is metaphysical. Esoteric communication is proper to metaphysics not only because metaphysics comes into conflict with the Law, but because metaphysics simply cannot be communicated in the same way as other subject matters.

[86] Strauss 2013 [1935], 82: "Maimuni hatte es sich zum Prinzip gemacht, die Lehren der Metaphysik nicht in klarer Ordnung und zusammenhängend, sondern an verschiedenen Stellen seines Werkes und vermengt mit anderen Gegenständen vorzutragen; zu diesem Verzicht auf Durchsichtigkeit der Darstellung hatte ihn nicht nur das im Gesetz ausgesprochene Verbot (der öffentlichen Mitteilung der Geheimnisse der Tora) veranlaßt, sondern auch und vor allem die sachliche Notwendigkeit: der Gegenstand der Metaphysik ist nicht jederzeit und nicht ununterbrochen dem Blick zugänglich wie die Gegenstände der anderen Wissenschaften, welche daher methodisch und durchsichtig dargestellt werden können; sondern bald zeigt er sich, bald entzieht er sich dem Blick; darum ist die allein gemäße Art, von Gott zu sprechen, die Rede in Gleichnissen und Rätseln, und darum hat der für eine wissenschaftliche Abhandlung notwendige Verzicht auf Gleichnisse und Rätsel zur Folge, daß die Rede dunkel und kurz wird. In der Insuffizienz des Menschen zur Erkenntnis Gottes ist die der Metaphysik eigentümliche Weise der Mitteilung, die esoterische Mitteilung, begründet." Cf. Strauss 1952, 57-58, 78.

Appendix B: What Is a Thing?

I have already discussed Lucretius' emphasis on the hiddenness of nature and gestured at consequences of that view for an esoteric reading of *DRN*. In this appendix, I investigate a concrete example of how the difficulty of accessing nature directly manifests itself in Lucretius' mode of communicating. Lucretius aims to recover the *naturae species ratioque* (1.148), the looks and account of nature. *Ratio* is the Latin equivalent of λόγος, and Lucretius follows Epicurus in providing a *phusio-logia*.[1] But the question is: *how* does the hidden aspect of nature that follows from its appearance (*species*) manifest itself in speech (*ratio*), in Lucretius' *logos* about nature?

Previous scholarship has done well[2] to bring out the precise meaning of *natura* in the title *De rerum natura* (or at least Lucretius' explicit theme, if titles were not so important at this time).[3] At least in the proem to Book 1, a key meaning of *natura* is "birth" or "origin." The word is formed from the future active participle of the verb *nasci* ("be born"), and the entire proem focuses on generation. So *De rerum natura* may properly be rendered as *On the Birth of Things*. But what of the "things," the *res*, that constitute the other meaningful part of the title? What is a thing for Lucretius? Here scholarship has for the most part failed to give a precise account.[4] The

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[1] Cf. Sedley 1998, 37.
[2] See Sallmann 1962; Clay 1983, 83-86; Noller 2019, 9-10.
[3] See Clay 1983, 82-83.
[4] Ojeman's (1959, 29, *passim*) very brief but insightful treatment is an important exception, dividing the meaning of *res* into: "(1) composite things, made up of matter and void; (2) periphrases with special technical meanings, for example, *natura rerum*, *summa rerum*; and (3) the comfortably indefinite 'things' which can run the gamut of ideas, such as truth, reality, the subject at hand." I will signal my overlap and divergence with Ojeman below, but overall she sees the varied use of *res* as a highly successful poetic achievement in rendering Greek into Latin verse (ibid., 32), rather than as a key part of Lucretius' own philosophical investigation as distinguished from that of Epicurus. Ojeman also provides valuable summaries of previous scholars' views on the meaning of *res*. See also Piazzi 2005, ad 1.858 on different meanings of *res*, citing Ojeman. While not investigating the different ways in which Lucretius uses *res*, Taylor (2020, 143) does point to Lucretius' calling our attention to the word. Lucretius at one points says that in his dreams he "seek[s] the nature of things" (*naturam quaerere rerum*, 4.969). Taylor sees an etymological play on words here: "A glance at the contemporary etymological tradition provides an additional level of significance: while *quaerere* is not in fact a compound verb, it was considered by Varro (*L*. 6.79) so to be: *ipsum quaerere ab eo quod quae res ut reciperetur datur opera* ('*quaerere* itself is named from the fact that effort is expended to see that *quae res* ["what thing"] be got back'). An etymological link, then, is implied between the act of philosophical inquiry (*quaerere*) and its subject matter (*res*)." This playing on *res* with *quaerere* might further justify looking into Lucretius' different usages of the word.

"things," when discussed, are usually taken only to be objects of perception formed by the atoms and void.[5] While undoubtedly true, this definition fits only one way in which Lucretius uses the word. Given the central importance of *res* for his poem, and the quasi-technical usage[6] when it does mean "objects of perception formed by the atoms and void," other usages of the word that extend to the invisible must be taken into account (for example, when *res* refer to the subject matter of the poem and its arguments). In order to understand what Lucretius means by "the nature of things" we must understand what he means by "things."[7]

This is not merely an enterprise in semantics, because investigating the status of *res* lets us see how nature shows up in speech. The manifold meaning of *res*, similar to the English "thing" but covering an even wider terrain, in referring to so many divergent objects—from shoes to political affairs, from deeds to arguments—makes thematic and more visible the function of language in grouping divergent "things" into an apparently stable category.

The wide range of things that are a concern to us in some way shows something about reality even as it is warped by our individual concerns and interests in the world. How do we understand objectively even as we are always being skewed by self-interest? This is brought out by the fact that *res* renders both the ὄντα, the beings, and the πράγματα, the things that are a concern for us, the things that we have to deal with (< πράσσω, "do"). In discussing Lucretius' usage of *natura*, scholars have already pointed out how his title or theme has a different meaning

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Consider also verses like the following: *Illud in his rebus vereor, ne forte rearis* ("In these matters I fear this, [namely] lest you by chance think …, 1.80). Lucretius pairs *res* and *reri* ("think") at 1.714 as well. Forcellini and *Harper's Latin Dictionary* have suggested a link between *res* and speaking, if not thinking, by suggesting an etymology from ῥῆμα ("word"), derived from ῥέω ("flow") (see Ojeman 1959, 29 with citations; cf. Heidegger 1954b [1950], 167-170). But the major Latin etymological dictionaries now do not endorse this etymology.

[5] E.g., Minyard 1985, 41; Noller 2019, 9-12.

[6] Cf. Minyard 1985, 45 and Sedley 1998, 35-36, 46. Ojeman (1959, 29) writes, "With by far the greatest frequency the word *res* is used in its *technical* sense, to express composite, created things, things made up of matter and void." Emphasis is mine.

[7] While I had already been aware of the importance of this question, I am grateful to Daniel Orr for helping me see the value of studying comprehensively Lucretius' different uses of the word.

from the phrase Περὶ φύσεως, *On Nature*, which it ostensibly translates.[8] We already know that *De rerum natura* cannot be reduced to a rote translation, with his insertion of "things" just showing the way that Latin as opposed to Greek works. Lucretius is extremely conscious of the difficulties of rendering Greek philosophy in the Latin language. Thus, when Epicurus speaks about "the nature of the beings" (τῆς τῶν ὄντων φύσεως, *Herod*. 45), we must recognize that not only does "nature" have a different meaning for the two authors, at least some of the time, but that *res* has a much wider meaning than ὄντα.[9] The beings as simply out there with no reference to human concerns—this seems to be what is most hidden in nature (one might translate Epicurus' phrase as "the essence of the beings"). The *res*, by contrast, are in some ways immediately manifest, both in the sense of visible objects and our "business" or an argument we read in the poem—these things are much more ready at hand than the "beings," even though the things' nature still is not clear and requires much interpretation. *Res* as πράγματα, things that are a concern for us, are the starting point, even though philosophy wants to reach *res* as ὄντα, things that simply are. The language of *res* in concealing the difference and showing the connection between the things and the beings is thus both the obstacle and the way towards moving from the subjective to the objective. This movement constitutes metaphysical esotericism—the hiddenness of the beings behind the things (πράγματα) which are however only accessible through the things. In what follows I will investigate how Lucretius' use of *res* both shows metaphysical esotericism in letting different things shine through a single word—not accidentally but through careful writing—and clarifies the theme of his poem.

An important caveat before proceeding: sorting the different translations of *res* in English that are necessary for the Latin to make sense in English is at best a heuristic device. The

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[8] My point still holds even if *De rerum natura* renders Empedocles' Περὶ φύσεως τῶν ὄντων per Sedley (1998, 21-22) instead of Epicurus' Περὶ φύσεως.
[9] In fact, on the orthodox account, the *res* cannot be beings—they have no actual existence. Only the atoms and void actually "are" (1.418-482).

different categories which result cannot be a stable or final set of meanings of *res* that neatly divide the different sets of referents of the word. This would merely push the problem of the word *res* onto a set of other problems further removed from Lucretius' thought: what is an "affair" or "subject matter" or "argument" or "history"? The English terms used to render *res* would then themselves require definitions, and those definitions would use other words which in turn require more definitions, and so *ad infinitum*. In the end *res* is one word that is somehow united, and the different English renderings may represent a continuum of meaning more than discrete categories (the word always "means" something slightly different depending on the context). Though an imperfect procedure, examining the different translations of *res* that present themselves on each occasion is still the only starting point for understanding the Latin word. And, after all, the different categories an English speaker would intuitively use may overlap with the phenomena as they presented themselves to Lucretius and which he chose to group together under the heading of *res*. I will, nevertheless, speak of different "meanings" of *res* as a shorthand for "translations into English of *res* which make sense in English in a given context."

In the limited scope of this appendix, I conduct an "analytic" presentation of the different senses in which Lucretius uses *res*, restricting myself mostly to Books 1 and 2. A detailed examination of particular passages is an aim of future research. The primary usage of *res*, and the only one meaningfully discussed in scholarship, is that of visible objects, both inanimate and inanimate, all of which are created out of atoms and void. This includes "things" like shoes, apples, trees,[10] mountains, and rivers, but *res* in this sense are also—and this is a difference with English usage—human beings and other living organisms. These types of "things" might seem to be the most straightforward usage of the word, but there is of course the problem of how things in the world become discrete from one another ("finally, before the eyes a thing seems to limit a

[10] Cf. Strauss 1968, 136 n. 16.

thing," *postremo ante oculos res rem finire videtur*, 1.998). Are visible things actually different or is it just an operation of thought that creates the difference, or is it some middle ground between these extremes? We see only color (*simulacra*), yet separate different "things" out from the image presented to our eyes. Nevertheless, this distinction of visible things is the most obvious and incontestable for everyday experience.

Lucretius also uses *res* to mean "possessions" or "wealth" (1.728; 2.13, 50). This is still visible but tied up with the abstract power which results from *res*. It is not merely a pile of shiny metal but coins which are given their power through convention (νόμισμα). *Res* as "possessions" or "wealth" (cf. our "real estate") are bound up with the meaning with which we endow things. It is not a tree but *my* tree.

Next in order of nearness to common usage is *res* as "affairs" or "business" (1.27, 43, 46; 2.648).[11] This shows clearly the connection between *res* and one's own "interest." This is what one has "to do" ("affair" is from the French *à faire*).[12] In Latin, this usage is clear in the term *res publica*—the political realm in which all citizens have an interest, in which they all must exercise their care. However, Lucretius never speaks of the *res publica* (but cf. *imperio regere res velle*, 5.1130),[13] in keeping with his lack of interest in the different regime types. He prefers the term "fatherland" (*patria*) which is indifferent to the type of regime (e.g., 1.41).

Once something has been done it is no longer an affair or business but a "deed" (1.459, 461; 2.290). This is why in Latin generally and in Lucretius "the things done" (*res gestae*) mean "history" or the object of historical inquiry (1.478). In Lucretius this valence is also clear from the phrase "the deeds of Venus" to mean "sexual intercourse" (*res per Veneris*, 2.173; *per Veneris*

[11] See also Ojeman 1959, 32.
[12] Note that in Italian *affari*, like the French *affaires*, means both "affairs" and "things" or "possessions."
[13] See also ibid., ad 5.1141.

res, 2.437; cf. the Greek "the things of Aphrodite" τὰ ἀφροδίσια (see also Pl. *Phlb*. 12b7-9) and ἔργα πολυχρύσου Ἀφροδίτης, "the deeds of golden Aphrodite," Hes. *Op*. 521; *h. Ven*. 1).

Now, things that must be done, things that are a concern, become what one talks about, i.e., the subject matter. This is another common usage in Lucretius. He uses *res* to talk about the things that he is talking about.[14] They are no longer "affairs" or "business" but "matters" or "subject matter" or "topics."[15] This is where the usage of *res* approaches perhaps most closely the "beings" (ὄντα). Insofar as Lucretius wants to reach the truth, difficult though it may be, that is his "subject matter." Thus he can speak of "hidden things" (*res … occultas*, 1.145) and his whole theme is "about an obscure thing" (*obscura de re*, 1.933 = 4.8). This usage explicitly contradicts the base meaning of *res* as a visible object,[16] but the preceding meanings of *res* as "affair" or "deed" already represented a contradiction, in referring to something only visible to the mind.

As "subject matter" Lucretius can speak of the atoms and void as "two things" (*duabus ... rebus*, 1.419-420; *duabus | rebus*, 449-450; *duarum ... rerum*, 503-504).[17] At first it seems amazing that while Lucretius insists that the atoms themselves are never *res*[18] (rather, the *res* are created from atoms and void—but cf. 2.892) he nevertheless calls the atoms a *res* here. But this difficulty is resolved when we see that the atoms collectively, not individually, form a *res* by being a concept, a single object of thought (which nevertheless possesses a nature, as shown in these passages). The same is valid for the void, which is usually defined as that "in which all

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[14] See also ibid.
[15] 1.80, 139, 331 (paired with quasi-technical use of *res*, 330, 333), 370 (paired with quasi-technical use, 369), 408, 416, 931, 933, 1052; 2.184 (paired with quasi-technical use, 185), 216, 308 (paired with quasi-technical use, 307, 309), 581, 891 (paired with vague use, 892). Juxtaposing different meanings of *res* in the quasi-technical exposition of *res* as "objects of perception formed by atoms and void" with uses that have to depart from this meaning calls attention to Lucretius' procedure (cf. ibid., 29 and Piazzi 2005, ad 1.858).
[16] Lucretius stresses the visibility of *res* at, e.g., 1.218, 292, 322, 346, 359 (*bis*), 562, 915, 998; 2.68, 233, 236, 418, 503, 787, 826, 1133, 1142.
[17] Cf. Ojeman 1959, 29.
[18] One of Lucretius' main critiques of the pre-Socratics consists in his charge that they make *res* rather than atoms make up *res* (see 1.690-692, 743-744, 763-766, 864-866, 876-877, 894; cf. 847-856).

things are borne" (*res in quo quaeque geruntur*, 1.505), i.e., the complete absence of things. And yet, the void is a "thing" just as much as that which is borne in it.[19]

The subject matter or what is being talked about becomes a matter of concern in its own right, since we think about how an argument is going, or how we can make an argument better. This is why *res* takes on the meaning of "argument" in addition to the subject matter *of* the argument.[20] *Res* encompasses both the speech and what the speech is about. Just as a "treatise" or "tract" comes from the Latin for "handle" (*tractare*), in Greek the word for a treatise comes from πρᾶγμα, it is a πραγματεία (LSJ, III). The argument itself is very much bound up in things insofar as they are a concern for us, and Lucretius uses *res* to refer to preceding arguments. A striking example is Lucretius' summary of Books 1 and 2 and his transition to the subject of Book 3:

> Et quoniam docui, cunctarum exordia rerum
> qualia sint et quam variis distantia formis
> sponte sua volitant aeterno percita motu
> quove modo possint res ex his quaequae creari
> hasce secundum res animi natura videtur
> atque animae claranda meis iam versibus esse …
>
> And since I taught of what sort the beginnings of all things are and differing in how many shapes they fly of their own accord stirred by eternal motion and in what way all things are able to be created from these [beginnings], after these things the nature of the mind and the soul seems to have to be illuminated by my verses now … (3.31-36)

In this passage Lucretius uses *res* twice in the quasi-technical sense of objects formed by atoms (3.31, 34), but in the verse immediately after the second use he refers to his prior arguments as "these things" (*hasce … res*, 35). Lucretius' arguments in Books 1 and 2 are also "things."

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[19] Cf. Diderot 2013, 780: "Mais qu'est-ce que le vuide? est-ce une qualité? est-ce une chose? Ce n'est point une qualité. Mais si c'est une chose, c'est donc une chose corporelle? il n'en faut pas douter. Cette chose uniforme, homogene, immense, éternelle, traverse tous les corps sans les altérer, les détermine, marque leurs limites, & les y contient." I agree with Diderot that the void is a thing, but not that it is bodily (except insofar as thoughts are produced by atoms).
[20] 1.833 (paired with quasi-technical use, 834), 858 (paired with quasi-technical use, 857); 2.478 (paired with quasi-technical use, 479), 522 (paired with quasi-technical use, 523), 1024, 1026 (neutral use at 1025 between this and the prior example). See also Ojeman 1959, 32.

When an argument is or seems to be settled, the result becomes a "fact." Thus Lucretius can say "on account of which things" (*quas ob res*, 1.155)[21] to show the consequence of something he has already proven (in a standard Latin idiom). But even outside of this formula *res* often means a clear "fact."[22] *Res* as arguments establish *res* as facts.

Some other notable uses of *res* which show its surprising range are when it means the qualities of atoms (2.841) and when *res* as much as the "images of things" (*rerum simulacra*) move the mind (4.722 vs. 724). At one point *res* even refers to "words" rather than that to which words refer (2.1018).[23] Perhaps most shocking, Lucretius also refers to the beloved as a *res* (4.1089; cf. 3.58).

Lucretius deliberately juxtaposes these different meanings of *res* to make us think about the status of "things." Insofar as Lucretius speaks *de rerum natura*, he must give an account of the origin of all the "things" in the senses I just went through, including the origin of *res* as his own arguments (hence the account of the origin of poetry and philosophy within the development of civilization and the arts). *De rerum natura* also means *On the Emergence of Arguments*. Insofar as Lucretius' subject is the possibility of communication itself, he deals with the problem of esotericism.

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[21] And, much more frequently, with *quare*. See also ibid.
[22] 1.803 (paired with quasi-technical use, 804), 893; 2.112, 565 (immediately followed by two instances of quasi-technical use, 566, 567), 1050.
[23] Cf. Piazzi 2005, 23 (but ad 1.828-829): "… i *verba* … sono essi stessi delle *res* (e non il contrario)."

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Biography

Leo Trotz-Liboff received a BA in Classics at Middlebury College in 2017, graduating *summa cum laude* with departmental honors and becoming a member of Phi Beta Kappa. As an undergraduate he also studied philosophy at the Panthéon-Sorbonne University (Paris 1) for a semester.

Next, Leo received an MSt in Greek and Latin Languages and Literature at the University of Oxford (Corpus Christi College) in 2018, where he was an active member of the Oxford Latinitas Society.

Leo entered the PhD program at Duke University in the fall of 2018. During his time there he served as Instructor of Record for two semesters (Elementary Ancient Greek) and Teaching Assistant for four semesters (Roman History, Democracy: Ancient and Modern, and Elementary Ancient Greek). At Duke Leo also completed the Certificate in College Teaching program and was a Preparing Future Faculty Fellow (2022-2023).

Leo's dissertation research received generous financial support from two competitive Summer Research Fellowships (2022; 2023) and the Ottis Green Fellowship (2023-2024). Outside of Duke, he was awarded a research grant and residency at the Fondation Hardt in Vandœvres, Switzerland (September 2023), where he wrote portions of what would become Chapter 7. He also held a Fulbright Germany Research Award as Graduate Fellow in the Department of Greek and Latin Philology at the University of Bonn (2023-2024), where he is now employed as a Postdoctoral Research Fellow.

Leo has published peer-reviewed articles on Plato and Vergil in *Polis: The Journal for Ancient Greek and Roman Political Thought* and *The Classical Journal* respectively.