

Visitors from beyond the Grave

Ghosts in World Literature

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THE ATOMISTIC DENIAL OF GHOSTS: FROM DEMOCRITUS TO LUCRETIUS¹

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ABSTRACT: This chapter discusses the atomistic premises against the existence of ghosts. According to the traditional Graeco-Roman religion and other philosophical doctrines, such as the Pythagorean, the Platonic, and the Stoic, ghosts do exist and serve as *medium* between the living world and the afterlife. Against this widespread belief, the first Atomists, Leucippus and Democritus, and their followers, Epicurus and Lucretius, argued that ghosts are not the dead who return from beyond, but physical and material emissions (*simulacra*) of people which persisted in the outside world and sometimes inside the mind, having been previously printed on it. This interpretation fits into the broader context of their philosophical system, which aims at delivering men from fear of the gods, of death and of the afterlife, with the eudemonistic purpose of achieving emotional peace.

KEYWORDS: Atomists, *simulacra*, Leucippus, Democritus, Epicurus, Lucretius.

THE GHOSTS IN THE FIRST ATOMISTS, LEUCIPPUS AND DEMOCRITUS

According to an account transmitted by Lucian in his *Philopseudes* 32, Democritus, father of Atomism, spent several nights beside a grave, whether to be quiet or to carry out any (para)psychic inquiry is not known. Some youths, disguised as ghosts, tried to scare him, but the philosopher of Abdera, undaunted, told them to stop fooling around². Here is the passage:

“Νῆ Δί”, ἦν δ’ ἐγώ, “μάλα θαυμαστὸν ἄνδρα τὸν Ἀβδηρόθεν ἐκείνον Δημόκριτον, ὃς οὕτως ἄρα ἐπέπειστο μὴδὲν οἶόν τε εἶναι συστῆναι τοιοῦτον ὥστε, ἐπειδὴ καθεῖρξας ἑαυτὸν εἰς μνήμα ἔξω πυλῶν ἐνταῦθα διετέλει γράφων καὶ συντάττων καὶ νύκτωρ καὶ μεθ’ ἡμέραν, καὶ τινες τῶν νεανίσκων ἐρεσχελεῖν αὐτὸν βουλόμενοι καὶ δειματοῦν στείλαμενοι νεκρικῶς ἐσθῆτι μελαίνῃ καὶ προσωπεῖοις εἰς τὰ κρανία μεμιμημένοις περιστάντες αὐτὸν περιεχόρευον ὑπὸ πυκνῇ τῇ βάσει ἀναπηδῶντες, ὁ δὲ οὔτε ἔδεισεν τὴν προσποίησιν αὐτῶν οὔτε ὄλωσ ἀνέβλεψεν πρὸς αὐτούς, ἀλλὰ μεταξὺ γράφων, “Παύσασθε”, ἔφη, “παίζοντες”. οὕτω βεβαίῳ ἐπίστευε μὴδὲν εἶναι τὰς ψυχὰς ἔτι ἔξω γενομένας τῶν σωματῶν”.

¹ I am grateful to the two referees for their critical suggestions.

² Cf. Felton 1999a: 15.

“Yes, by Zeus”, I said, “a truly remarkable man that Democritus of Abdera, who was indeed so convinced that something like that could not happen that, after having locked in a mausoleum, he spent some time there, outside the gates, writing and composing day and night, and some youngsters who wanted to mock him and scare him, disguised as the dead with black suit and skull masks on their heads, surrounding him, danced around him, jumping with rhythmic foot. But he was not afraid of their appearance, not even he raised his eyes to look at them, but, as he wrote, he said: ‘Stop playing the fool’. So much he was convinced that souls are nothing when they are out of the bodies”.

The story, even spurious, illustrates the atomistic view that ghosts do not exist. This question seems to have interested enough the ancient philosophers, hence they imagined some hypotheses³. And, specifically, Leucippus, founder of Atomism, said that a subtle molecular film, copy of the original figure, was stripped of objects, inert or alive, and this was perceived by the eyes and the mind. This theory of vision, applied by Democritus to the phenomenon of sleep, explains the false belief of many men in ghosts, for the mind would capture images of human beings even dead⁴. As a result, these blurry and dreamlike visions would constitute a persuasive argument for the existence of the beyond and they would arouse among the gullible all kinds of fears.

³ We find a paradigmatic text in the letter 7. 27 of Pliny the Younger, where the Roman writer addresses the question of whether ghosts exist, recalling the anecdote that happened to the Stoic philosopher Athenodorus Cananites (74 BC – 7 AD), when renting a supposed haunted house in Athens, Cf. Felton 1999a: 65-66.

⁴ Cf. Felton 1999a: 20.



“Democritus in meditation” (1662. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Accession Number: 2012.136.848) by Salvator Rosa. It dramatizes *Naturalis Historia* 7. 55.

The philosophical doctrines of the Classical Antiquity were based on the study of nature (Physics) and, after establishing some scientific principles, they raised Ethics and Metaphysics. However, prior to the consideration of nature, they fixed the canon or the method of knowledge, called Epistemology. In the case of Leucippus and Democritus, these research criteria are particularly interesting, especially with regard to the feeling and the thought, to assess their opinion about the existence of ghosts. Here are some interesting premises⁵:

In the field of Physics, these philosophers think that the atoms and the vacuum are the principles of all things. Everything else is opinion. Only atoms and vacuum exist in nature [D. A. 1 (D.L. 9. 44-45)]. The universe is infinite and immutable [D. A. 39 (Ps.-Plu. *Strom.* 7)].

With regard to Theology, the universe has been shaped by a god [D. A. 39 (Ps.-Plu. *Strom.* 7)], but it is not governed by any providence [D. A. 22 (Aët. 2. 3. 2)].

As far as Psychology is concerned, the soul is a grouping of spherical atoms, which easily penetrate all things [D. A. 28 (Arist. *de An.* 1. 2. 404a)]. It has two parts: a rational, located in chest, and other irrational, spread throughout the body [D. A. 105 (Aët. 4. 4. 6)]. The soul and intellect are the same thing, since both consist of mobile and small atoms [D. A. 101 (Arist. *de An.* 1. 2. 405a)]. The soul dies with the body [D. A. 109 (Aët. 4. 7. 4)].

In matters of Aesthetics and Epistemology, the feeling and the thought are produced by the introduction of external images into us [D. A. 30 (Aët. 4. 8. 10)]⁶. We can see thanks to the penetration of these images into us [D. A. 1 (D.L. 9. 44) and 29 (Aët. 4. 13. 1)]. Certain images flow from objects, maintaining a similar shape to them. These images enter the eyes and cause vision [D. A. 29 (Alex. *Aphr. in Sens.* 24)]⁷. Dreams occur because images activate them [D. A. 136 (Aët. 5. 2. 1)]. The spirit of the sleeper is moved by external vision [D. A. 137 (Cic. *Div.* 2. 58. 120)]. When images occurs during sleep, they reproduce the lifestyle of whom they were detached [D. A. 77 (Plu. *Quaest. conviv.* 8. 734F)]. Moreover, the air is filled with images of the gods [D. A. 78 and 79 (Hermipp., *de Astrol.* 1. 16, 122 and Clem.Al., *Strom.* 5. 88)]. Some men think that certain images have

⁵ I quote the texts according to the following editions: for the ancient atomistics, Diels (1906) with the abbreviation D. plus A. ("Doctrine") or B. ("Fragments"); for Epicurus, Arrighetti (1973) with the abbreviation Arrigh., and occasionally Usener (1966) with the common abbreviation Us.; for Lucretius, Bailey (1998).

⁶ According to Theophrastus in his *De sensibus* 50-55 (D. A. 135), Democritus wrote a treatise on the forms which some critics, as Alfieri 1936: 144 n. 362, identified with his work on the images. Despite having written this monograph on the subject, Theophrastus says that, although he wanted to explain the phenomenon as best as could, he left many points unresolved.

⁷ Apparently, Empedocles had also argued this explanation [D. B. 84 (Arist. *Sens.* 2. 437b-438a)]. Cf. Cordero *et al.* 2015: 412 n. 238.

something divine, particularly those that are large and utter voices, because, in their opinion, they bring good omens [D. B. 166 (S.E., M. 9. 19)]⁸.

In Ethics, for Democritus happiness or “welfare” consists of the serene and balanced state of the soul, which is not disturbed by anything, not even the fear of the gods [D. A. 1 (D.L. 9. 45)].

THE GHOSTS IN EPICURUS AND LUCRETIUS

It is in the Hellenistic successor of the pre-Socratic Atomism, Epicurus⁹, and, above all, in his apostle, Lucretius, where we find a more complete, further explanation of the denial of the existence of ghosts. This refutation serves as a postulate more to weaken the fear of the gods and death and, therefore, to deny the afterlife. We have selected below some of the Epicurean premises that can clarify our study.

Regarding Physics, Epicurus, as Democritus’ follower, thinks that nothing comes from nothing and disappears into nothing, so the universe (*summmum*) is eternal and unchanging, neither increases nor decreases [2 (38-39) Arrigh. (D.L. 10. 38-39)]. Besides, the ultimate constituents of the universe are atoms and the vacuum. Both are permanent and infinite in extent, and the atoms travel through the vacuum [2 (39-40) Arrigh. (D.L. 10. 39-40)]. About atoms, he also thinks that they are invisible, indivisible, immutable and in constant motion. There is a finite number of atomic forms, but each form has an infinite number of atoms. The bodies, that is, the matter of the universe, or are atoms, its simplest form, or aggregates of atoms [2 (40-43) Arrigh. (D.L. 10. 40-43)].

In the field of the Theology, Epicurus believes that the gods live in the *intermundia* completely happy and unconcerned of the humans [2 (76-77) and 4 (123-24) Arrigh. (D.L. 10. 76-77 and 10. 123-124)]. Admittedly, the gods exist, because our mind captures their *simulacra*, especially during sleep. They go unnoticed to the other five senses because they are made of very faint emanations [4 (123-24) Arrigh. (*Sent.* 1 and D.L. 10. 123-124)].

In relation to Psychology, Epicureans think that the human being as a whole (body and soul) is a congregation of atoms. Its soul is a body mass consisting of subtle and spherical atoms, which is scattered throughout the body. It is a combination of air, heat and a very subtle matter, endowed with extraordinary mobility and very attuned to the body, which causes feelings and thoughts [2 (63) Arrigh. (D.L. 10. 63)]. Furthermore, death is absolute. Soul and body, both matter, die together [Lucr. 3. 445-458 and 2 (63) Arrigh. (D.L. 10. 63)].

⁸ Cf. Cordero *et al.* 2015: 445-447 nn. 264-265.

⁹ In fact, Cicero says in his treatise *On the Nature of the gods* 1. 43. 120 (D. A. 74): *vir magnus* (sc. Democritus) *in primis cuius fontibus Epicurus hortulos suos inrigavit*.

As far as Aesthetics and Epistemology are concerned, for Epicureans the criteria of truth are four: the sensations, the preconceptions, the feelings and the fantasies of understanding.

As all reasoning depends on sensations [1 (31-34) and 2 (38) Arrigh. (D.L. 10. 31-34 and 38)], the sensation is the first criterion of truth. The preconception is the image or mental concept produced by the memory of impressions already received from certain objects. The feeling is the immediate response of the subject with the sensation, usually of pleasure or pain. And, finally, the fantasy is the imaginative capacity of the mind to infer the existence of unperceived objects by the senses.

Consistently, we see and think when something enters us from external objects [2 (49) Arrigh. (D.L. 10. 49)], because very thin films of atoms are continually shed from the bodies, which largely retain their shape, color and other qualities¹⁰. When these simulations play a sensory organ, especially sight, they cause an impression on the mind. But the mind can be touched by these effluvia without sensory organs. The mind works, therefore, as a sensory organ more than anything else [2 (50-53) Arrigh. (D.L. 10. 50-53)].

These impressions of the mind, captured directly or indirectly through the senses, are real, that is, they reflect the truth, because the *simulacra* keep the shape, color, and other qualities of the original objects [2 (50) Arrigh. (D.L. 10. 50)]. However, the imaginative capacity of the mind (fantasy) can add to perceptions errors, when it adds conjectures that are not confirmed or refuted by other sensory testimonies, by trying to explain the original data [2 (50) Arrigh. (D.L. 10. 50)].

Still, the intelligence can reach no sensitive truths, provided that the assumptions made by fantasy can be proved by reasoning, using analogies and significant evidence of the insensible found in the perceptible phenomena [1 (32) Arrigh. (D.L. 10. 32)]. Therefore, the intelligence, thanks to sensory experience, can deduce the existence of atoms and empty, although these are not perceptible by the senses [2 (39) Arrigh. (D.L. 10. 39)].

In regards to Ethics, Epicureans think death must not be feared, because all evil or good reside in sensation and death is, above all, a lack of sensation [4 (124) Arrigh. (*Sent.* 2 and D.L. 10. 124)]. In this sense, the sage must accept his death calmly (*Sent.* 20). Besides, the gods neither punish men [2 (81-82) Arrigh. (D.L. 10. 81-82)] nor they are moved for their sacrifices and prayers (*Sent.* 1; 387 and 388 Us., and *Lucr.* 1. 44-49). As a logical conclusion, there is no afterlife beyond death (*Lucr.* 3. 14-47)¹¹.

¹⁰ Democritus held this same theory, Felton 1999a: 20.

¹¹ On death as annihilation among the Epicureans and Stoics, cf. Laguna Mariscal 1997: 207.

With these postulates, it is clear that both the pre-Socratic atomism and its successor, the Epicurean, denied the existence of ghosts in the traditional religious meaning¹², that is, as proof that there is life in the afterlife, but mediocre and incomplete, and that the souls of the dead, in special circumstances¹³, can communicate with the living and interfere in their lives, for good sometimes, for bad other times.

THE MALICIOUS LIES OF THE ACHERUSIA TEMPLA

It was Lucretius, as we said, who used this denial of ghosts to remove the fear of the gods and death. Consequently, it is he who explains in detail the opinion of the Epicureans and who has the last word of the Atomism around the issue. Indeed, Lucretius articulates all the arguments one way or another to prove the nonexistence of ghosts, hence its relevance at the end of this study.

Certainly, if the peaceful temple of the knowledge is solidly built thanks to the wisdom of Epicurus, the kingdom of Acheron¹⁴ and, by extension, the underworld is the result, on the contrary, of the ignorance. If we meditate on this a little, this infernal world is based on fallacies that are fantasies of the mind, conditioned by the fear of death, which has been shaped by vague and confusing perceptions received especially during sleep (Plut. *Brut.* 37. 1-3 and Lucr. 1. 104-106)¹⁵. Instead of doubting its veracity, the collective imagination (Lucr. 5. 1194-1195) considered all these fantasies valid, creating a parallel world, the underworld, hellish and terrifying, with its rivers and streams, with its rooms, classes, guardians and owners, that Lucretius, faithful to his evangelizing mission, intends to debunk¹⁶. And, first of all, the nature and occupation of the gods must be explained, because, according to traditional religion, they rule as diligent owners the destinies of the men on earth and in hell. Therefore, Lucretius, even before jumping right into their anti-providentialist arguments, says in the preface of the first book the following (1. 44-49):

¹² For a definition of ghost in the ancient world, cf. Felton 1999a: 12.

¹³ Cf. Felton 1999a: 25.

¹⁴ Collison-Morley 1912: 36 says: "We still possess accounts of the working of these oracles of the dead, especially of the one connected with the Lake of Avernus, near Naples. Cicero describes how, from this lake, 'shades, the spirits of the dead, are summoned in the dense gloom of the mouth of Acheron with salt blood'" (Cic. *Tusc.* 1. 36-37).

¹⁵ Some of the most famous ghost stories of Classical Antiquity are actually the result of a dream or nightmare, as Collison-Morley 1912: 14 and Felton 1999a: 62-65 say.

¹⁶ Collison-Morley 1912: 2 recalls how every Roman city had its own entrance to the underworld. It consisted of a ditch where a hole was left that was covered with a stone, the *lapis manalis*. In addition, there were sacred places in different locations of the Ancient World that were considered entrances to Hades. In Heraclea, for example, there was a *psychomanteion*, where the souls of the dead could be summoned and consulted (Collison-Morley 1912: 33-34). About descriptions of the traditional hell in some classical authors, especially Seneca the Philosopher, see cf. Laguna Mariscal 1997: 204 n. 8.

*omnis enim per se divum natura necessest
immortali aevo summa cum pace fruatur
semota ab nostris rebus seiunctaque longe.
nam privata dolore omni, privata periclis,
ipsa suis pollens opibus, nihil indiga nostri,
nec bene promeritis capitur nec tangitur ira.*

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For it is necessary in itself the whole nature of the gods enjoys by absolute peace of the immortality, secluded and separated from our affairs, because, deprived of any pain, deprived of dangers, self-sufficient thanks to its innate wealth, it does not need anything from us, neither it bows to our merits nor it is affected by anger.

With this brief digression, repeated in 2. 646-651, the Roman Epicurus exposes the true nature of the gods (1. 51 *vera ratio*): the gods are not moved by the entreaties nor do they take care of the human affairs, as they entertain time in absolute peace and happiness there in the *intermundia* [Cic. *Div.* 2. 40 and 3 (89) Arrigh. (D.L. 10. 89)]. Yes, they live forever and we know they exist because *simulacra* of them come to us from their quiet headquarters. There is not, therefore, reason to think that they are responsible for managing the wretched existence of the dead, since they are not disturbed by the living.

Given this fact, the work of the priests, their paraphernalia, ritual and sacrifices are not necessary. But in real life this does not happen, on the contrary. Guided by the credulity to the tales of the fantasy and religion, they are fraught with superstitions, frighten men with the future vengeance of the gods and commits crimes allegedly to appease them (Lucr. 1. 82b-83)¹⁷:

*quod contra saepius illa
religio peperit scelerosa atque impia facta.*

On the contrary, the religion often caused criminal and impious acts.

The same idea appears in Lucr. 1. 101-103:

*tantum religio potuit suadere malorum.
tutemet a nobis iam quovis tempore vatum
terrilocus victus dictis desciscere quaeres.*

¹⁷ However, if we remember so common inscriptions as *aeterna pax tecum* (Collison-Morley 1912: 5), it seems that the collective consciousness conceived death as a peaceful sleep, similar to the view in this Epicurean. In short, people had a more benevolent death opinion than the priestly caste's.

So many ills religion could lead! Yourself, overcome by the horrific statements of the priests, will want to get away from us at some point.

This fear of death that religion feeds, thanks to which the priestly caste lives, is founded not only on the belief in providence, but also on the belief that the soul survives beyond death in the cloisters of Acheron. Hence Lucretius has to explain the nature of the soul (1. 112-116):

*ignoratur enim quae sit natura animai,
nata sit an contra nascentibus insinuetur
et simul intereat nobiscum morte dirempta
an tenebras Orci visat vastasque lacunas
an pecudes alias divinitus insinuet se.*

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For it is unknown what is the nature of the soul, if it was born or if it is insinuated into these that are born, or if it dies when we die or if it visits the darkness of Orco and its enormous gaps, or if it introduces in other animals by divine grace.

And it is that these inveterate popular beliefs were defended by some philosophical schools, like the Platonic or Pythagorean. The first defended the theory of the *anamnesis*, according to which the soul kept memories of his previous life¹⁸. Meanwhile, the Pythagoreans believed in the *metempsychosis*, according to which the souls of the living beings passed from one body to another¹⁹. Both theses are refuted by Lucretius in the third book (670-783) since he has argued for the mortality of the soul from many premises, of which I quote the most important below.

First, the materiality of the soul: that is, a being which is composed of spirit or mind (*mens* or *animus*) and soul (*anima*) is pure matter (3. 94-135): *Primum animum dico, mentem quam saepe vocamus, / in quo consilium vitae regimenque locatus est, / esse hominis partem nilo minus ac manus et pes* (3. 94-96). The soul is a part of the body, just like a hand or a foot. And, being an angular issue of the school, there is an appropriate aphorism of Epicurus: ἡ ψυχὴ σώμᾳ ἐστὶ [3 (63) Arrigh. (D.L. 10. 63)]. However, our spirit (*mens* or *animus*) is made up of special particles that give it outstanding agility and dexterity and, in particular, it is equipped with a great subtlety that allows it to empathize without difficulty with the rest of the human organism. Regarding its location as a member, Epicurus, according to Democritus, placed the spirit in the chest. The soul (*anima*),

¹⁸ Cf. Pl. *Phd.* 72e-77a, 77c-d and 91e-92c, as well as *Men.* 85ab. Aristotle, Posidonius and Varro, among others, believed in it cf. Bailey 1998, vol. 2: 1105.

¹⁹ Cf. Stob. 1. 49. 38, cf. Woltjer 1987: 75.

instead, would be disseminated throughout the body, consisting of particles of great subtlety, though not as much as these of the spirit.

Second, it is the superiority of the spirit over the soul (*anima*): *sed caput esse quasi et dominari in corpore toto / consilium quod nos animum mentemque vocamus* (3. 138-139). The soul obeys the orders of the spirit (τὸ ἡγεμονικόν) since it acts more freely. The spirit can enjoy and suffer outside of it, regardless of whether the soul feels pleasure or pain. Instead, the spirit is ever conscious within the mind.

Another important issue is that the particles of the soul are very subtle, round and light (3. 177-322): *principio esse aio persubtilem atque minutis / perquam corporibus factum constare* (3. 179-180). Its size and weight must be, of necessity, minimal since, when a human being dies, the corpse, without feeling and warmth already, shows no signs of loss or size or weight, despite the soul fading away (3. 206-20). Something similar happens when wine loses its aroma. Its smell disappears but a loss of weight is not noticeable (3. 221-227).

And, finally, the assertion that death means the joint dissolution of the soul and the body (3. 526-579). It must, accordingly, be admitted that death, like birth, is jointly for the body and soul. At the critical moment of death, the soul leaves the body causing its dissolution: *resoluto corporis omni / tegmine et eiectis extra vitalibus auris / dissolvi sensus animi fateare necessest* (3. 576-578).

This highlighted the immortality of the soul and, as a result, argued for the most absolute eschatological nihilism. It is also easy, therefore, to remove the afterlife of ghosts.

THE MATERIALIST EXPLANATION OF GHOSTS

Ghosts (*simulacra pallentia*, as Lucretius says in 1. 123) are not illusions, but matter, hence he argues this [Lucr. 4. 42-43 = 2 (46) Arrigh. (D.L. 10. 46)]:

*dico igitur rerum effigias tenuisque figuras
mittier ab rebus summo de corpore eorum*

I say, therefore, that subtle effigies and forms emanate from the surface of things.

Also in Lucr. 4. 216-217:

*Quare etiam atque etiam mitti fateare necessest
corpora quae feriant oculos visumque lacessant.*

Consequently, it is necessary to recognize that bodies emit again and again forms capable of reaching the eyes and impacting the vision.

Thus proved the materiality of the images, we must make some clarifications, particularly on how they are perceived by the organs of the sight and of the

mind. First, these corpuscular effluvia are not captured by the eyes and the mind individually, but in a continuous film succession (Lucr. 4. 87-89, 105-107 and 256-264) that creates an image (*phantasia*). Thus, the mind tries, excited by the images that touch the eye, to determine its nature, though it provided limited information about its color or shape. In this act of cognition, the mind tries to recognize the image by reviewing concepts stored therein (*prolépseis*). If the vision is clear by the closeness, the spirit or mind is able to accurately classify its sense. Now, if the perception is flawed by the remoteness, the mind, unable to assimilate accurately, forms a false opinion (*dóxa*) in many cases, as when we see a tower in the distance without a clear appreciation of its exact contour (4. 353-363). It seems rounded at the ends, as its *simulacra* lose some of their atomic structure in transit through the air, but actually it is square. It is, then, an optical illusion, which shows that the senses are reliable, because the mind is solely responsible for adding to the image a false opinion (4. 462-468). It is, therefore, possible that some ghosts are nothing more than optical illusions.

The mind (*mens* or *animus*), despite being the most accurate sensitive organ of man, also perceives by contact (Lucr. 4. 730-731):

*corporis haec (sc. simulacra) quoniam penetrant per rara cientque
tenuem animi naturam intus sensumque lacessunt.*

Because these *simulacra* penetrate for a few pores of the body and excite the tenuous nature of the mind inside, and hurt its sensitivity.

The other five senses (sight, touch, taste, smell and hearing) are sensory capabilities of the soul. But thought is the quintessential sensation of it. This is produced by images (*eidola*) that contact through the pores of the body with the mind, an organ of thought, as Epicurus said [2 (49) Arrigh. (D.L. 10. 49)]:

Δεῖ δὲ καὶ νομίζειν ἐπεισιόντος τινὸς ἀπὸ τῶν ἕξωθεν τὰς μορφὰς ὄραν ἡμᾶς
καὶ διανοεῖσθαι²⁰.

And we must also recognize that, when entering some external objects, we see their forms and we understand them.

According to Lucretius, the *simulacra* that agitate the mind are so subtle that not even the sight captures them (4. 728-731). Moreover, if sight perceives images only while it is awake, the mind always feels and works, even though the body and the other senses rest. For this reason, dreams are nothing less

²⁰ Democritus had already postulated this sensualist premise: Δημόκριτος γέ φησιν φρόνησιν μὲν τὴν αἴσθησιν, ταύτην δ' εἶναι ἀλλοίωσιν (Arist. *Metaph.* 3. 5. 1009b).

than extraordinary images that the mind perceives when the other senses do not distract it (4. 749-776). Mental perception of impossible realities, such as dead people, can be explained because our capacity for discernment is relaxed during sleep (*epimartyresis*). It is hence at that moment when the mind fables and invents, often stimulated by the obsessions that disturb man during the day.

Lucretius also says that the reveries, as the *simulacra*, are captured during sleep, depending on our offices, needs and passions in waking life, and have nothing prophetic or serve as *medium* between the man and the divinity, as the Stoics assert²¹. And that way many lawyers imagine that they defend their causes during sleep, the circus fans think they see games from the stands and the adolescents are left spellbound by the influx of erotic images to their mind; indeed, even the animals fantasize in the torpor with its daily activities: the domestic dogs, for example, threaten to lift its body as if they saw someone (4. 962-972).

This fantastic capacity of the sleep is largely responsible for the existence of religion and, by extension, of ghosts²². So the Roman poet says in the book 5, explaining the origin of the religious beliefs (5. 1161-1240), within the section of the history of the civilization (5. 1011-1457).

From the earliest dawn of civilization, religion has played a paramount role, because men, while they were asleep, saw in his imagination the spectra of giant gods who moved and seemed to speak to mortals (5. 1169-1174). Then humans, unable to give an explanation to those gestures, ascribed feeling and an appropriate speech to them, more so, when they seemed to enjoy an eternal life by the continuous arrival of their images (5. 1175-1176). They were considered superior beings, firstly, because they enjoyed immortality (a gift denied to mortals); and, secondly, because they were seen to perform miracles without effort in daydreams (5. 1177-1182). To these wonders, their total ignorance of the causes that ruled the sky, the earth and the universe must be added, so they ended up believing that the gods had created the world and, consequently, ruled it (5. 1183-1187). They consider the sky as eternal abode of the gods, as well as the sun, the moon, the stars, the clouds, the thunder, and the lightning: a set of phenomena that exert great influence on the earth (5. 1188-1193). But, by putting the gods in these instances, mortals attribute the lightning to their anger and the eclipses to their desire for destroying the world (5. 1194-1195).

Due to these superstitions, their hearts were filled with both fear and devotion. However, the real devotion does not lie in being a sanctimonious,

²¹ We find in Cicero, *Div.* 1. 63-64, an eloquent example of this view (Godwin 2000: 77). Epicurus repudiated the divination, such as the fr. 395 Us. makes clear: Ξενοφάνης καὶ Ἐπίκουρος ἀναιροῦσι τὴν μαντικὴν. A vivid portrait of the Epicurean contempt for divination is in the story of Lucian *Alexander the False Prophet*.

²² Cf. Bailey 1998, vol. 3: 1296 and Giancotti 1998: 508. On the connection already in Antiquity among sleep, night and ghosts, cf. Felton 1999a: 7.

but in observing the world and in trying to explain it. If gods are believed to be rulers of the world, man lives fearful of their mysterious plans: either he is afraid of their punishments or he falls into devotion for gods whom not even the prayers of the nobles and kings appear to move (5. 1194-1240).

The fragment is the most extensive and eloquent from the Epicurean conception of gods and religion (cf. 2. 646-651, 3. 18-24, 5. 146-155 and 6. 68-78), hence its importance²³.

If this happens due to corpuscular effluvia arrived from the *intermundia*, with greater abundance and recurrence this will happen with the countless *simulacra* from objects and beings that float and roam here on earth, mixing and forming authentic chimeras (4. 724-734).

CONCLUSIONS

Ghosts, therefore, are nothing more than flying images²⁴ or old prints that, as preconceptions, the mind recovers from its memory. They exist because atoms are immortal. If living matter dies, its *simulacra* survive, but this does not mean that such beings live in the hereafter, even though eminent poets like Ennius sing it so (1. 117-126):

*Ennius ut noster cecinit, qui primus amoeno
detulit ex Helicone perenni fronde coronam,
per gentis Italas hominum quae clara clueret;
etsi praeterea tamen esse Acherusia templa* 120
*Ennius aeternis exponit versibus edens,
quo neque permaneant animae neque corpora nostra,
sed quaedam simulacra modis pallentia miris;
unde sibi exortam semper florentis Homeri
commemorat speciem lacrimas effundere salsas* 125
*coepisse et rerum naturam expandere dictis*²⁵.

As our Ennius sings, who first carried down from the pleasurable Helicon the evergreen crown and so he won illustrious fame among the people of Italy. And, still, Ennius states that there are regions of the Acheron, proclaiming it in eternal lines, where neither our souls nor our bodies remain, but some strangely pale *simulacra*; emerged from there, he recalls, the image of the always flourishing Homer began to shed bitter tears and to expose the nature of the universe.

²³ Cf. Bailey 1998, vol. 3: 1507.

²⁴ Cf. Collison-Morley 1912: 14.

²⁵ For more information on this fragment and the allusion to Ennius, cf. Harrison 2000.

This thesis of the spectral emanations had an extraordinary mark on the treatises of *erotodidaxis* during the Renaissance, especially through the *De amore* (1469) of Marsilius Ficinus²⁶. Although Neoplatonism and Christianity were syncretized in these love handbooks, the physiological explanation of the amorous passion (*furor amoris*) given in them owes much to Lucretian atomism, especially in regard to the mechanism by which, either during the wakefulness or sleep, the images of the beloved, alive or dead, touch the feverish mind of the lover, exciting his fantasy. A good example is this sonnet by the Portuguese national poet, Luís Vaz de Camões (1524-1580):

Quando de minhas magôas a comprida
Maginação os olhos me adormece,
Em sonhos aquela alma me aparece
Que pera mim foi sonho nesta vida.

Lá numa saudade, onde estendida 5
A vista pelo campo desfalece,
Corro pera ela; e ela então parece
Que mais de mim se alonga, compelida.

Brado: “Não me fujais, sombra benina!” 10
Ela -os olhos em mim c’um brando pejo,
Como quem diz que já não pode ser-

Torna a fugir-me; e eu gritando: “Dina...”
Antes que diga *mene*, acordo, e vejo
Que nem um breve engano posso ter²⁷.

When the prolific imagination numbs my eyes out my pains, that soul comes to me in dreams that was a dream for me in this life. There, in the nostalgia, where the sight extended across the field falters, I run to her, but it seems she moves further away from me, compelled. I shout: “Do not run from me, benign shadow!”. She looks with some embarrassment as if to say it can no longer be, and she returns to flee; and I, shouting “Dina...”, wake up before saying “mene”, and I realize that not even I can have a brief deception.

²⁶ For its fortune in the Renaissance Italian literature, cf. Prosperi 2004: 158-174. For its projection on European and Spanish literature, cf. Traver Vera 2009: 988-996.

²⁷ I quote according to the edition of Cidade 1962: 236. This poem was freely imitated (*aemulatio*) by the poet Luis Martin de la Plaza (1577-1625), as revealed by his modern editor and critic Morata Pérez (1995), in his sonnet “Cuando a su dulce olvido me convida”.