Lucretius

ON THE NATURE OF THINGS

De rerum natura

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY

Anthony M. Esolen

THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY PRESS

Baltimore and London

INTRODUCTION

Lucretius's Milieu

We know little about Titus Lucretius Carus. He was probably born in the early first century B.C., with 99 and 95 the limits of possibility. The year 55 is usually given for his death. Saint Jerome, following a lost work by the historian Suetonius, relates two tantalizing bits of gossip about Lucretius: that Cicero edited his great poem, and that he was poisoned by a madness-inducing aphrodisiac given him by his wife. As for the first assertion, scholars doubt that Cicero had more than a perfunctory role in assembling Lucretius's pages for publication, if he did even that much. And we have no evidence for the second.

Certain things about Lucretius's life we can infer from the decades he lived through. The Republic was tottering. Soldiers swore loyalty not to Rome but to generals and booty-dealers like Sulla, Pompey, and Caesar. Says William Leonard:

> It was an age when a Verres plundered the province which the Senate had sent him to govern, when a nobleman Clodius got himself adopted into a plebeian family for election to the Tribunate for sinister political ends, when a Catiline (if we may believe Cicero and Sallust) gathered the riffraff of Sulla's army and the reckless gamblers and libertines of old families in order to burn the city and cancel huge debts. An age of desperate and bloody self-seeking on the part of the few; while the populace in the city cried now for one leader and now for another, knowing only that it was hungry; and while the yeoman in the Italian fields was run down by disbanded soldiery or bewildered by ever-diminishing returns from his plowing and sowing a depleted soil which he had neither science nor means to restore. (6)

Cicero prided himself on saving the Republic at its eleventh hour, but he ignored a truth that he recognized elsewhere, namely, that a republican

government requires a republican spirit in the people. But for better and for worse, Roman culture had from the time of the younger Scipio become increasingly Greek: slaves from Athens and not Roman patriarchs taught upper-class children; eastern mystery cults promised salvation for initiates, while Hellenistic philosophy (including Epicureanism) cast doubt upon the nature of the gods. All this could only weaken Roman devotion to its religion of family and state. In Rome as elsewhere, affluence and military success accentuated the differences among social classes while removing any strong incentive for people to join in a common cause. Rome's politics grew individualistic and treacherous, her highlife wanton, her piety introspective and morbid.

Into this world Lucretius is thrust—erudite, aristocratic, old-fashioned in his admiration of stern Roman morality. In his way he is a patriot. He boasts about "our" Ennius, the first great poet of Italy, and he calls himself the first to turn Greek philosophy into "our" Latin. Yet he shows no interest in reforming Rome. Perhaps he gave it up for hopeless. Instead of an aggressive civic life, he offers retreat into a quiet community of wisdom and friendship. The key to this retreat is an understanding of the teachings of Epicurus (341–271) about the way the world works.

The Master

Epicurus was born to Athenian citizens on the island of Samos. Like Lucretius, Epicurus lived through troubled times: the Greek city-states were being swallowed up by the Macedonian king Philip II, whose son Alexander would succeed him and spread despotism from the Adriatic to the Indus River. Men were not citizens but subjects, ruled by bureaucrats who were in turn ruled by a distant monarch. In such a world it was natural that philosophers turned to the strain of thought in Plato and Aristotle which focused not upon political organization but upon the life of the individual.

Epicurus was a loyal son and an irritating student. Fiercely independent, he derided his teachers for their timidity and never acknowledged an intellectual debt. Still, we should note a few philosophical currents that helped form his beliefs. One was the skepticism of Pyrrho. This is surprising at first, since Epicurus based his epistemology upon firm trust in the senses. We can know things for certain, he says, because our senses are never deceived; all deception arises from the false interpretations of the mind. Pyrrho, by contrast, taught that nothing can be known for certain. He preached equanimity (*ataraxia*), insisting, as George Panichas says, that

a wise man should keep aloof from the vain pursuits of others (20). Epicurus adopted Pyrrho's ideal of *ataraxia* while linking it to a materialist epistemology. Yet there are traces of the skeptic in Epicurus's indifferentism. It does not matter, he says, which of many explanations for the motion of the stars is true, so long as they all rule out the intervention of the gods. Epicurus was more moralist than scientist.

Another important influence on Epicurus was the broad Greek tradition of the care of the psyche, a tradition embodied in Socrates. Like most Greeks, Epicurus viewed philosophy as the road to a fully human life. He disagreed with Plato on what that life is—in Epicurus there is no room for the soaring visions of love found in *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*—but the good life was his object nonetheless, and like Plato he sees that "of all the things which wisdom acquires to produce the blessedness of the complete life, far the greatest is the possession of friendship" (*Prin. Doc.* 27).

Atomism, however, was to lend intellectual justification for Epicurus's moral teachings. Epicurus did not invent atomism: Leucippus (fl. 430) and his disciple Democritus (460?–357) have that honor. Democritus in particular was a brilliant polymath, well-versed in physics, mathematics, and aesthetics. (The specifics of atomism are discussed below; Epicurus's most salient contribution was his notorious atomic "swerve," a kind of physical exception which he believed would allow for free will.) From the atomists Epicurus learned that knowledge begins with sense impressions and that supernatural intervention is not needed to explain the phenomena of the world. Atomism confirmed his distrust of dialectic and mathematics; there could be no realm of eternal truth and goodness beyond this world of material objects impinging upon our senses.

With the foregoing in mind, it is easy to see the origin of Epicureanism. Epicurus believed, with the Socratics, that the care of the soul was the philosopher's all-important task. He agreed with Pyrrho that most men are slaves to superstition and custom. The atomists taught him that physical law (inferred from sense impressions) and not the gods ruled the world. Thus it makes sense that Epicurus used atomism to equate good and evil with pleasure and pain and that he valued the pleasures of the mind more than the pleasures of the body—although we must remember that for a materialist these pleasures are not strictly separable. Finally, Epicurus altered Aristotle's definition of man as a political animal. The wise man, reports Epicurus's biographer Diogenes Laertius, "will be fond of his country," but he will shun public life (*Life* 119–20). Neither recluse nor statesman, he is to spend his life in the company of friends.

By 311, Epicurus was ready to start teaching on his own. Driven out of

Mytilene for alleged impiety (Epicurus never got on with other philosophers), he moved from place to place, gathering lifelong friends along the way. In 306 he settled in Athens, where he bought a house with a garden and set up a private school open to men and women. There he and his followers lived in simplicity and peace. As Panichas puts it, "gentleness, persuasion, sympathy, compassion, and complete honesty and firmness" marked the discipline of the school, whereby teachers and students alike were urged to help in the purification of each other. "Epicurean education, in short, sought to bring about the moral perfection of the individual" (23). According to Diogenes, "[Epicurus's] country honored him with bronze statues," and "his friends [were] so numerous that they could not even be reckoned by entire cities" (*Life* 9). That his school survived for centuries after his death testifies to his followers' love for their benevolent teacher.

Epicurus wrote about three hundred treatises, almost all lost. Diogenes has preserved his letters to his disciples Herodotus, Menoeceus, and Pythocles; these discuss the basics of Epicurean physics and morality. He also gives us the forty *Principal Doctrines,* a collection of aphorisms which form the Epicurean creed. There are also the so-called Vatican Collection (eighty-one aphorisms similar to the *Doctrines*) and fragments preserved in Cicero, Plutarch, Sextus Empiricus, Philodemus, Porphyry, and others. Finally there is Lucretius's epic *De rerum natura,* our most spectacular cache of Epicurean thought.

The Usefulness of Rational Inquiry

De rerum natura, then, could never be just a poem about the physical world. Of course, in large part it *is* about that world. Although we cannot expect scientific method, Lucretius was usually a careful observer of nature. His poetry is steeped with an innocent curiosity about how things are put together. The sweep of his observations will still strike a modern reader as remarkable. One thinks of his comparing water to a mound of poppy seeds, evincing a kinetic imagination that a polymer chemist would recognize. Then there are the boys spinning around and making themselves so dizzy they think the roofs are about to tumble upon them; snakeskins dangling from the briars; the yelp of a dog when she licks her puppies, and the different yelp when she slinks away from a beating; the "applause" of a rooster's wings; the shimmering blue and coral plumage that rings the throat of a dove. Lucretius delights in such homely details of things in

plain sight. But one of the tenets of Epicureanism is that, in fact, things in plain sight give us a glimpse of what is too small or too far for our senses to observe. Thus for Lucretius it is a short mental step from the ordinary to the sublime, as when he asks us to look into a puddle in the street where we see, in silent reflection, a spangled universe as deep as the skies above.

His is a poem about the physical universe, and not a page goes by without some artful observation of a curious, usually common, phenomenon. Lucretius is no romantic. He does not allow the world to be absorbed into human symbols, to be posted when the terrain ahead is poetical. Nature, for Lucretius, is what it is—fascinating, purposeless, beautiful, deadly. It may evoke emotion, and Lucretius will, for instance, seize upon the delight of watching a sunrise. But our delight is not a part of that dawn. Epicureans contend that once we see what Nature is and how it works, we will free ourselves from the superstitious fears that it arouses in the ignorant. Lucretius's project, then, is neither to advance our technological dominion over Nature nor to see in Nature an extension of our existential concerns. The former is futile, since our lives inevitably end, as will the world itself. The latter is a pollution, for we must learn to live with Nature as she is: lovely and terrible, creative and destructive. Acting without design, she makes nectar for the bees and carrion for the buzzards. Our duty is to live with her in a way that will make us both as human and as godlike as we can be. Epicurean physics and morality converge. Lucretius's poem is about the universe and how human beings ought to live in it.

Lucretius thus writes under the pressure of a great directive outward: to explore what things are really like and to set forth his findings in irresistible argument and music. His zeal takes him out of the realm of self-reference and self-promotion and leads him to what he feels will be timelessly important for his readers. His motives are religious in the deepest sense. He thinks the tales of the gods are hogwash and denies the public utility of traditional religion; but for those very reasons he is devoted to converting his readers to a healthier way of life. He brings the gospel of Epicurus. There is nothing to hope for in death and nothing to fear, since the soul dies with the body. Atoms create the wheeling stars and the planets; no power above awaits the time to punish. Our miseries are largely self-inflicted; we can shun the trials of ambition, greed, and lust. Reason cannot make us perfect; we will never be sure why the sun and moon make their circuits. But reason can tell us enough about ourselves and the world that despite our flaws we too may, as Epicurus says, "live like a god among men" (*To Menoeceus* 135).

That gospel made big claims. But in the last years of republican Rome, marred by debauches of bloodshed, such lessons may have been like the trickle of a brook calling men away from the dust of the Forum. We must take Lucretius at his word: he really believes that in Epicureanism lies our best hope for happiness, and he very much wants to let us in on the secret, so that we may be as happy as is possible in a world imperfectly suited for our existence. The work is addressed to one Memmius, a young libertine in need of a teaching as severe and clean as Lucretius's. But the poet addresses a wider audience besides. He invites all his readers into the Epicurean universe, and into the Epicurean garden of friendship.

As for that Epicurean universe, it has unhappily been argued that Lucretius was a great poet with a topic ill-suited for great poetry. Such critics like to spot oases of pure poetry in deserts of argument. But this is a bad lapse in sensibility and in the understanding of Lucretius's project. For the argument *is* the poetry, and it has its own vigor. It informs whatever images Lucretius uses that are commonly called poetic, and it gives us lines of brutal simplicity and power and acuity, lines like

> Utter illogic they accept as proof

and

> I have good reason too for doing this

and

> These things, however ingeniously presented,
> True reason must emphatically reject.

Argument has its crescendos and codas, as Lucretius knew.

But beyond that, the charge that the Epicurean universe is unpoetic is absurd. The skeletal tenets of the system do not, at first glance, appear exciting. The universe is made of two things, atoms and empty space, the "void." Atoms are, literally, indivisibles. They are the basic indestructible stuff of all things. They are infinite in number, finite in kind; and the number of each kind of atom is infinite. They have a finite number of shapes; but other than shape, size, and weight, they have no qualities at all. They move constantly. Their natural tendency is to plummet—if "down" can mean anything in an infinite universe—but they also are prone to infinitesimal and unpredictable tilts in motion. Things are brought into being by the chance entangling of atoms. As for the void, it stretches boundless in all directions, untouching, untouchable. Gods there are, but they have no effect on anything that touches us. The soul too is material. Perception occurs when we are struck by a series of singly insensible "simulacra," hulls or films that sheer away from the surfaces of things. Imagination occurs

when these simulacra are so tenuous that they can be perceived only by the soul, which lurks as a kind of organ in the body.

So presented, Epicurean physics and epistemology seem interesting for their dogged materialism and for such insights as the creativity of chance. But what is really exciting about atomism is its insight into a world inaccessible to the senses but accessible to reason. Imagine that beneath the appearances of this world there is another world, one of ceaseless, senseless activity. Streams of atoms flood in upon us from sun, stars, and moon, streaking at incomprehensible speeds, clashing against each other, ramming and ricocheting, hooking up and working their way free, jostling and realigning, never quite stable and yet for all that bound by the physical laws inherent in their constitutions. Endless space yawns round us like a gulf; the earth and sky will crumble to ruin; atoms in themselves invisible and impotent create earth, sun, rivers, pasture, sheep, woodlands, cities, children. True enough, the universe is made up of matter and void. But what glorious matter it is, which, when tossed into the right combinations,

> Became the origin of mighty things.

For Lucretius, possessed of an eye for detail and a relentless imagination, the atomic world becomes *our* world just as our world is, fundamentally, the atomic world. It is one thing to say that the universe consists of atoms and void. It is quite another to allow us to know these atoms intimately by presenting them as just like things we see—things that, after all, are made up of the very atoms of which they are the metaphorical vehicle. So we have squadrons of atoms skirmishing like motes in a sunbeam, and like, in fact, squadrons of human beings observed from a far overlook. Atoms are purposeless; yet Lucretius anthropomorphizes them to show us most vividly how they behave. The atoms meet in congress, swim, swerve, fight, wed, worm their way through tunnels, and elbow through a bottle-necked exit. They are like poppy seeds, or hooks, or thickets. Sometimes Lucretius exaggerates the pathetic fallacy to the point of burlesque, especially when he teaches us that the atoms are *unlike* anything human. For instance, the atoms

> do not hold council, assigning
> Order to each, or flexing their keen minds with
> Questions of place or rank or who goes where.

But they are the vital seeds of all we see, animate and inanimate. Like our subatomic quarks, they are worthy of our curiosity, and even manage to command what can only be called affection. And their simplicity and indi-

visibility lead to all kinds of riddles. Can we use the few tenets of atomism to explain why a ball of lead weighs more than a ball of wool? Why wood burns? Why honey is stickier than water? How we can see images of nonexistent Centaurs and Chimeras, or even of the dead?

The danger of Lucretius's atomism was not that it was arid but that it could become so richly clandestine and phantasmagorical as to leave the world of phenomena far behind. Yet Lucretius always brings us back to the shores of light, to this world we can readily see and know. Other than that Lucretius was a great poet who knew what he was doing, there are, I think, two reasons for this faithful return.

First, Lucretius genuinely likes the world. He likes what those atoms produce and destroy. Renaissance scholars say that Petrarch was the first man to climb a mountain for the sake of climbing it, but Lucretius evidently made an enjoyable habit of mountain walks, and *he* did not then turn around and allegorize all the joy away. Lucretius loves animals—he even projects his imagination into their minds in order to give us perceptions from their points of view. Children, fields of glossy corn, the beauty of a landscape plotted and pieced, awnings flapping at the theater, dancers moving their supple arms, saplings shooting up, the rose of the morning sun—all point to Lucretius's fascination with the energetic world that these restless atoms produce. But of course, since the world is not obligingly made for our enjoyment, and since what the atoms ally to create they will secede to destroy, Lucretius's portrayal of this world is evenhanded. He examines both the ugly and the beautiful because they are both true. Thus he shows us flash floods, epileptics, sick dogs twitching in the streets, the wail of a funeral procession, the swarms of maggots seething like a tide in the guts of a corpse. Things are born and things die, and

> Round the short track all generations change
> Like racers passing on the torch of life.

At such moments the terrible beauty of death merges with Lucretius's ruthless honesty, and we have poetry that even Vergil could only imitate, never surpass.

But again, all this observation of Nature is carried on for a purpose: to convert the reader. The poem's didacticism does not ease. Lucretius cannot abandon himself to speculation about the behavior of atoms, because he has a job to do. Again and again he reminds us why we study the teachings of Epicurus: to free our minds from the crush of superstition. The Christian God of love and consolation was unavailable to Lucretius. Greek and

Roman gods were to be feared, propitiated. The Psalmist may behold the stars and wonder at the smallness of man and the unreasonable love of God, that He should not only give a passing thought to something so trivial but indeed should make man little less than an angel. Lucretius's men look at the stars and are overawed; they cringe and worry that all the power that whirls the stars may be aimed squarely at *them*. Thus, the first purpose of studying atoms is to train the mind to find explanations for what looms above. Any explanation, even the faulty, will do, so long as it shows that the universe can have come about by means of the random collisions of atoms. Before Epicurus, says Lucretius, religion thrust its monstrous head from the sky, grimacing upon us, menacing. Human life was abject. But Epicurus's discovery of rational laws has set our spirits free.

Related to this fear of the gods is fear of death. Religions may work more efficiently when they threaten eternal torment than when they promise eternal bliss; it seems more urgent to avoid the former than to obtain the latter. But if the gods

> Enjoy eternity in highest bliss,
> Withdrawn and far removed from our affairs,

then death cannot frighten us. It is a long sleep, or not even a sleep—it literally has nothing to do with us, since as long as we are, we are alive, but when we are dead, there ceases to be a "we" to care about it. One may complain that Lucretius turns his back on the mystery of death. But Lucretius does not just preach that death is

> nothing to us, no concern,

since he shows, unceasingly, that death is another name for the burgeoning life we now enjoy. Strictly speaking, death is not the end of life but one of the poles of our existence. Life is the tireless shuffling of atoms, like the turmoil-whipped motes in the sunbeam. Death is our means of life, for Nature can only create from atoms, and these atoms must be supplied by sunlight, water, earth, and other living creatures. Nature cannot allow

> a birth, without a corresponding death.

To fear death, then, is to mistake life. It is to fear our own cradles.

What would life be like, if men did not fear death? I suspect that we might give up our strenuous attempts to secure various sorts of surrogate immortality. We might no longer worry so much about devotion to such institutions as clans or nations or churches, which outlast the individual.

We might not pursue fame so doggedly, or the creation of monuments of intelligence and ingenuity. Fear of death can be a great motor for human activity, and without energetic activity there can be no bubbling up of civilization. Unfortunately, human activity has its own atomic randomness; it is seldom directed by any design for the common good. Fearing death, men make their lives lethal by grasping after wealth and power, those delusive stays against insecurity. Since men will not accept that there is a limit to their lives, they believe that their pleasures should be limitless too, and they die like ill-mannered banqueters who resent ever having to leave the table. Not that such lusts bring pleasure to the banqueter, who is so worried about what he thinks he needs that he cannot enjoy what he has.

Thus, for Lucretius, the beginning of folly is the fear of death. If that fear could be eased, men would not fight over territory or wealth. For along with accepting the fact of death, the Epicurean accepts limits to pleasure and pain. Epicurean *ataraxia* is negative: it is peace, the freedom from cares, desires, and fears. It does not offer men spasms of joy. It is calm, wise, benignant, and happy.

If men lived in this Epicurean state, they would enjoy the most Epicurean of delights, friendship. Lucretius contrasts the pomp of opulent clothing and glittering chandeliers and military drills with what we nowadays call a picnic:

> When friends in the long grass will lie at ease,
> In the shade of a tall tree at the riverside,
> Their bodies refreshed and gladdened, at no great cost,
> Most pleasantly when the weather smiles and the season
> Sprinkles the meadow with fresh and lusty flowers.

It seems the poet himself has enjoyed such outings. This is no primitivism or distrust of civilization. Lucretius's point is just that our needs are very few. If we understood this, we could live in friendship, provide for those needs, and still enjoy the horse races, the festivals in town, the "artful polish of sculpture," and

> The honey of music that the nimble fingers
> Fashion and bring to life on the guitar.

If the highest joy of life is friendship, then people must be thought capable of living pleasantly and harmoniously together. So they are, we

find. Lucretius aims much invective at his own Roman world, rife with militaristic pomp, political huckstering, greed, and shameless lusts. Yet he never soured on the human race. If ever a man had reason, in experience and philosophy, for assuming that people are worthless, Lucretius had. When he discusses prepolitical men—a discussion that Hobbes was to adopt for his own pessimistic "state of nature"—he presents them as atoms of rapaciousness in a cruel struggle for survival:

> Every man, learned in staying strong, surviving,
> Kept for himself the spoils that Fortune offered.

And the species is propagated by means of lust, force, or bribery:

> Mutual desire might win a woman over,
> Or the man's violent strength and reckless lust,
> Or a present: wild strawberries, nuts, or the choicest pears.

But that last humorous detail—the object of romance refuses to settle for any old pears, since she's a savage with class—shows where Lucretius parts company with Hobbes. As Wormell suggests, it is not human nature so much as the material conditions of human life which make the savages behave as they do (59). They have not learned any better. Their life is brutish; yet without the discoveries of language and fire leading to the moral discoveries of villages and families, how else could they live? Moreover, for all the brutishness, their life has moments of charm, and the brutes themselves are admirable for their strength and tenacity. Unlike superstitious Romans, these savages are not afraid of ghosts or gods or other bogeymen of the intellectual night. What they fear at night is real: prowling beasts.

Human happiness, then, is ready to be grasped. Human nature does not bar the way, since even the savages are basically amiable. Two conditions must be met. We must have enough material comforts to satisfy our bodies. As Lucretius tells us time and again, that "enough" is little indeed. We must also be socially and spiritually prepared for Epicurean friendship. Again, Lucretius does not require much. On the positive side, we need language, community life, and the social contract not to harm each other. The negative requirements are just those to which Lucretius has dedicated his instructive poetry. We are to give up our fear of the gods, knowing that all events in the world come about by natural causes; we are to accept limits for both life itself and the pleasures of that life.

On that last point Lucretius is vulnerable. Like many of the Greeks, he

accepts the notion that people never knowingly do evil. If we are mired in wickedness, it is because we have not scaled those philosophic heights,

> The temples of truth, the strongholds of the wise.

Unfortunately, history provides little evidence for the hope that people might have the sourness leached out of them by philosophy. Not ignorance but desire fuels our greed—as it fuels many other things too, like romantic love, patriotism, and technological and artistic progress. None of these things does Lucretius accept wholeheartedly, and in particular he is deeply suspicious of romantic love. All things in moderation. The trouble is, the traditional moderator has been religion itself, which in Lucretius's own words clamps its bit in our mouths and reins us in. But if religion does not bridle us, what will? Epicurus's answer is the prospect of a life of calm friendship and sunny confidence in the face of death. It does not matter that few will be wise enough to accept the offer. Epicureans do not presume to save society, just those sociable beings who replace the old fear of the gods with a sane desire to live in peace. Epicureans are optimistic about human nature, holding that all men can, without much effort or cost, live a life worthy of the gods. Such a life, too, is in the highest sense social—its great attraction is friendship. Yet there is a cost. Epicureans must turn away from the deepest desires of their fellow human beings, the most energetic motors of creativity and human power. We cannot live forever, they tell us forthrightly. We can enjoy no union with the gods. Our lives are part of no design. We cannot care about the distant past or the distant future. Our technological advances, after a point soon reached, bring misery. Our dreams of romance are diseases of the mind, to be cured by a cool promiscuity. Whoever is unwilling to give over these desires—several of which, one may note, beat at the heart of the *Divine Comedy* and other religious-romantic myths inaccessible to the Epicurean—is to be pitied and abandoned. Despite Lucretius's disclaimer, there is a smugness in his admission that the trials of others make our own safety more pleasant:

> How sweet, to watch from the shore the wind-whipped ocean
> Toss someone else's ship in a mighty struggle;
> Not that the man's distress is cause for mirth—
> Your freedom from those troubles is what's sweet.

Lucretius does nothing by halves. Although he is loyal to his land, he is really out to subvert some basic Roman ways. Take war, for instance. Roman heroes, other than an occasional Numa who instilled religion in

an ignorant populace, were war heroes, and they earned special names to commemorate their feats: Torquatus, Coriolanus, Africanus. But war is the ultimate betrayal of Epicurean principles, as is even intimated by the Latin words for friendship and enmity: *amicitia* and *inimicitia,* literally "friendship" and "lack of friendship." Where war or its spirit reigns, there can be no Epicurean peace. Thus, in the general proem to *De rerum natura,* the grand hymn to Venus, Lucretius prays that Venus will subdue Mars with the "eternal wound of love." A modicum of peace is necessary if Lucretius is to write his pacifist poem at all. A peace brought by the bursting power of Nature herself, by Venus the legendary mother of Romans, would be a welcome change for the people of Lucretius's day, who surely had more of Mars than they knew what to do with. And it would bring them into accord with the gods themselves, who

> Enjoy eternity in highest peace,
> Withdrawn and far removed from our affairs.

Romans will not be apotheosized for carnage. But if they give up their craving for wealth and power, they may live divinely here and now.

And so Lucretius never mentions courage or heroism when discussing warfare. His war scenes are tableaus of grotesque slaughter: lopped limbs, animals gone mad, dying men dabbling in their own gore. What is surprising is just how often Lucretius turns to war when he needs a metaphor for unremitting, chaotic atomic activity. One senses how pervasive war and its accouterments were in Lucretius's Rome. But something happens to that warfare when Lucretius uses it to describe, for example, the motes in a sunbeam

> realigning their squadrons, never
> Stopping for breath, assailed by alliance, secession.

The maneuvering motes, of course, become all the more dramatic. But the implied soldiers in turn become no more than inoffensive specks of dust. Lucretius uses the similarity of physical behavior to rob war of nobility and purpose. The activity is interesting *as pure activity;* to make any greater claims for it would be pompous. Imagine, secessions of atoms! But isn't that as absurd as squadrons of men fighting for some scrap of land?

A further indignity for militarists, in the same passage, is Lucretius's use of a drill scene to show that despite appearances of stability, atomic turmoil underlies everything. The atoms are so small that, as it were, we observe their action at a great distance, and from that distance their random

movements resolve into stasis. Lucretius begins by comparing the atoms to a flock of sheep on a pleasant hillside. They graze and move lazily about; the lambs "frisk in their merry play," yet from far off the flock appears to be but a white glow on the green countryside. To drive the point home with an example of what looks to be purposive, frenetic activity, Lucretius directs our gaze to the drill field, giving us an engaging synesthetic display of martial razzle-dazzle. But if you observe the men from a distant overlook (surely the overlook of Epicurean wisdom, which we are invited to climb),

> They stand still in the field, one steady glow.

Again, the use of military activity, so apparently grand and purposive, to illuminate atomic activity, so minuscule and purposeless, lends greater interest in the atom while it reduces the military to a case in point, a phenomenon as interesting as a flock of sheep browsing peacefully. As interesting, perhaps, but less instructive morally: for while the sheep feed and play and enjoy the morning sun, the men carry with them their own bad weather, flashing their lightning to the skies and pounding the earth with thunderous hooves. In vain, as Lucretius might say. Wisdom resolves all their action into the manifestation of a simple physical or moral law.

Thus, Lucretius assaults one of the most Roman of Roman values. If war is waged for inane luxuries, how can preparation for war instill virtue? It cannot, he says. Captains and foot soldiers never do give up their fear of death. Only reason, only the Epicurean way, can make a man fearless. It follows that the only true war hero is Epicurus, the man strong enough to conquer with words, not weapons. Epicurus is accorded praise worthy of the noblest Roman (not Greek!) of them all. In the proem to book 1 he leads a mental guerrilla expedition:

> His vigor of mind prevailed, and he strode far
> Beyond the fiery battlements of the world,
> Raiding the fields of the unmeasured All.

and brings back spoils more valuable than gold:

> Our victor returns with knowledge of what can arise,
> What cannot, what law grants each thing its own
> Deep-driven boundary stone and finite scope.

The result is more glorious than mere rule of the known world:

> Religion now lies trampled beneath our feet
> And we are made gods by the victory.

Storm trooper of pacifism, Epicurus is also the *paterfamilias,* the male head of the Roman household. This is important to Lucretius, but not just for selling Epicureanism to Romans. His consigning religion to irrelevance, as well as Epicureanism's attenuation of patriotism and of concern for the past and the future, might loose the ties between generations. The risk is anarchy. To mitigate this risk, Lucretius takes devotion to Roman traditions and transfers it to devotion to Epicurus, who is not just the founder of a philosophical school:

> You, father, are the founder of truth; you confirm us
> With a father's lessons, and from your pages, sir,
> As bees sip all in the brambles decked with flowers,
> So we partake of all your golden words,
> Golden, and worthy of eternal life.

Epicurus himself asked his followers to celebrate his birthday on the twentieth of each month (*Life,* 18); he became the object of their piety, not as a god, but as that one man who taught us how to live.

And so Epicurus is *pater,* as Nature is our *mater.* She does not voluntarily nurture or give birth. But because of the infinitude of atoms and their many shapes and ways, she bursts into production and destruction. The wedlock of father and mother here is the wedlock of Epicurean truth with *Natura rerum*—and its progeny are those who are content with little, who are not afraid of thunder or eclipses, and who recognize that birth and death are part of the ceaseless atomic activity which we know as the world.

Lucretius's Influence

It has been preached to millions of pupils that what Homer was by nature, Vergil was by art; that Vergil altered the Homeric ideal of heroism to suit the Roman ideal of *pietas;* that Aeneas is a pale copy of Odysseus and Achilles, but that Vergil makes up for it with his haunting music. Granted that in a Homeric epic with Homeric characters we ought to expect adaptations of Homeric verse; still, I would argue that the most important intellectual and poetic influence upon Vergil was neither Homer nor Homer's Roman admirer Ennius but Lucretius.

Perhaps influence is the wrong word, suggesting as it does the impact of some outside force, or the contribution of a stream to the broader river. For Vergil was steeped in Lucretius. One critic estimates that every twelfth line of Vergil's is indebted to the Epicurean; in the *Georgics* the ratio seems

so high as to make estimation pointless. There are Vergil's overt tributes to Lucretius and his philosophy, as when he declares,

> felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas
> [Happy the man who knows the causes of things!]

And there are lines that adopt Lucretius's didactic stance and diction for the explaining of nature:

> continuo has leges aeternaque foedera certis
> imposuit natura locis
> [These laws and everlasting pacts has Nature
> Ever imposed on certain regions.]

And catchwords, mannerisms, brush strokes too numerous to mention, from the archaic imperative *contemplator enim,* to the lovely *luminis oras,* "the shores of light."

But the deepest poetic influence is intellectual, not aural. Lucretius excited and disturbed Vergil, as I think he did most of the poets of the early Empire and, much later, the poets of the Renaissance. By Vergil's day it had become impossible for a sophisticated person to believe all of the myths of the Greek and Roman gods; Ovid, for one, subjected them to gleeful burlesque. But Vergil longed for some divinity in things, some plan or fate that men had to obey and that would justify Rome's dominance in the world. Lucretius posed a serious problem for him. On the one hand, he understood both Lucretius's love of nature and his desire to reveal how the universe works. And for both poets this revelation had moral implications for human beings—hence, Vergil's meshing of agriculture and politics in his poems about Earth, the *Georgics.* The long, noble roll of the Lucretian hexameter was a perfect vehicle for the Epicurean's high argument, and Vergil made good use of his predecessor's example. On the other hand, there were strains in Lucretius which stirred Vergil to intellectual struggle: the emphasis on chance, the retreat from the political, the utter disdain for war, the meaninglessness of history.

A trace of this struggle shows when Palinurus, Aeneas's helmsman, asks him to take him along across the Styx, a crossing forbidden for one whose body has not had the due funeral rites. Aeneas's guide, the Sybil, reproaches Palinurus:

> Desine fata deum flecti sperare precando.
> [Stop trying to sway by prayers the gods' decrees.]

That the gods cannot be supplicated is an Epicurean tenet, and this is not the only instance in the *Aeneid* of divine unapproachability. A cynic might wonder what purpose Vergil's gods serve, and ask whether they are just literary ciphers used to slip the poem past a naive populace and to wipe out any residual religion among the literati. Such a reader might translate the line in this way:

> Don't hope to bend the course of fate by prayer,

where fate is the blind falling out of events. But *fata* is a form of the old verb *fare,* "to speak," and so fate may be literally what the gods have spoken. Perhaps, since it has been spoken, it cannot be retracted: it is *meant* to be, whether there is some anthropomorphic divinity behind it or no. Palinurus's prayer is ineffective, not because there is no fate, but because fate has been set, and for a purpose too:

> Cease praying that what must occur can change.

As usual, Vergil leaves us with an ambiguity, born of a powerful and ardent mind whose search for truth has led him to reject his epic master but has not allowed him to settle upon any certainty.

Prolific during the years when Octavian had not yet become Augustus but was still jockeying for power, Cicero is another writer whose debt to Lucretius is huge but underestimated. Cicero mentions Lucretius only once, in an odd postscript in a letter to his brother that Lucretius's poem is brightened by many moments of genius (or ingenuity?), and much art in spite of that (or to boot?). We cannot be sure what Cicero thought of Lucretius, but *that* he thought of him, deeply and with many reservations, is incontestable. During the latter part of his life, after Lucretius had died and *De rerum natura* had become well known in the great city, Cicero turned his talents toward philosophy, writing, among other works, the *De finibus* (On Moral Ends), *De amicitia* (On Friendship), *Academici* and *Lucullus* (epistemological treatises), *De divinatione* (On Prophecy), *De natura deorum* (On the Nature of the Gods), and *Tusculanarum disputationum* (The Tusculan Disputations, on death and immortality). Over and over we find Cicero wrestling with the questions for which Lucretius provided his sect's answers, yet rejecting the notion that the senses are always to be trusted, that chance can have created so orderly a world, that friendship is based on mutual advantage, that the gods are corporeal, that the soul dies with the body.

Often Cicero's rejection of Epicureanism is abrupt and scornful, as in

the Tusculans when he wishes to examine the nature of the soul: "We will not bother to discuss Democritus, a great man surely, but one who made the soul out of light and roly-poly little particles by means of some accidental collision or other" (1.22). But behind that quick dismissal is a mind that takes questions seriously and faults the Epicureans rather for their glibness than for the certain falsity of what they say. Like Vergil, Cicero wished to see divine purpose in the world, and this wish grew all the stronger as he advanced in years, witnessing the waning of republican ideals and suffering the death of his beloved young daughter. Thus, in the Tusculans he argues, as did the Socrates of the *Phaedo,* that death is not to be regarded as an evil, since either it is nothing at all, as the Epicureans say, or it is a chance to be with the likes of Scipio and Fabricius and the Decii, Roman heroes on earth, now immortals in the heavens. The Tusculans are heavily indebted to Lucretius's discussion of the soul, sometimes using Lucretius's own arguments as means to a different end. Lucretius says that the soul's quickness shows that it is made of the subtlest atoms; Cicero counters that atoms so subtle might very well remain intact and rise beyond the atmosphere (1.43). But ultimately Cicero's heart lay with Rome, not with a personal hope for salvation or with a clique of friends retiring from public life. The soul must live, he says, because "without great hope for immortality no one would ever give his life for his country" (1.32).

As for other important writers, Lucretius was admired by most, thought old-fashioned by some, and studied by all. Ovid loved his materialism and his spoofing the gods, and nobly wrote that the song of Lucretius would die only with the dissolution of the world. Horace took a cue from Lucretius's satirical set pieces, and though he could never be magniloquent without smiling at himself, he sometimes reverted to the massive, rough-hewn rhythms of the older poet. Petronius became a kind of black-humored renegade from the Lucretian flock. He took the earnestness out of Epicureanism and celebrated the very debauchery he mocked, yet showed that underneath the festivities all friendships were hollow and the fear of death still gnawed away at men's hearts.

Lucretius continued to be read and quoted through the fall of the empire. For Christians like Lactantius he was the poet they loved to hate; they admired his artistry and ridiculed his ideas. Yet a few enthusiasts, like Arnobius, believed that Christianity could be reconciled with Lucretian atomism. In general, the Greek calm of the Epicurean gods could not appeal to Christian fervor, and Lucretius fell into oblivion for over a thousand years until the recovery of his poem in the fifteenth century. His

influence was felt almost immediately. Often, as it was with Vergil and Cicero, that influence was a spur to reaction, or to adaptation and correction. Such influence is notable in Torquato Tasso, whose *Jerusalem Delivered* is a careful transformation of the materialist's chance into the Catholic's Providence; in Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene,* where the great hymn to Venus is translated entire but with an emphasis on creation, action, and ardent Christian sexuality; and in Salluste du Bartas's *Divine Weeks,* where discussions of celestial phenomena are lifted wholesale from Lucretius's book 6, while Epicureans are attacked for their pernicious atheism. For a subsequent generation of writers, however, Lucretius was the great poet who may have actually found out the truth about the cosmos. These philosophers, scientists, and political thinkers saw in Lucretius what they saw in themselves, a fearless opponent of superstition. Bacon, Montaigne, Gassendi, Hobbes, and Newton come to mind in particular; centuries later, Shelley would continue the fight. Finally, there were writers who responded to the satirical in Lucretius and used him to show the folly of man while reserving theological decisions to themselves; of these we may number Molière, Swift, Dryden, and Byron. And that does not even touch upon Milton, who made his devils materialists, or Tennyson, whose great monologue "Lucretius" is but one more entry in the list of works for which Lucretius is both foe and inspiration.

Note on the Translation

Lucretius's meter is dactylic hexameter, the meter of classical epic. In English, only the blank verse of a Milton captures its inexorable forward roll. The hexameter line includes six feet, each a dactyl (long-short-short, like our word INdigo) or a spondee (long-long, like our STRAIGHT FLUSH). The fifth foot is very rarely spondaic, and the sixth foot contains only two syllables, the second of which may be either long or short. Classical meter is quantitative, not accentual. The "length" of a syllable depends not upon pitch or stress, as in English, but upon how long it takes to be uttered. With some exceptions, a long syllable contains a long vowel or a diphthong, or a short vowel followed by two consonants. Hexameters alternate combinations of spondees and dactyls to produce great rhythmic variety. A line may sweep along with dactyls:

NAM fiERENT iuuENES subit' EX INFANtibu' PARVIS (1.186)
[A little baby is—presto! a young man]

or pound away with spondees:

PAULATIM CRESCUNT, UT PAR EST, SEMINE CERTO (1.189)
[little by little
Things grow, as is proper, from a certain seed]

That is only a hint of the metrical complexity afforded the epic poet. Unfortunately, not even Milton's verse can replicate all of its main features. Hexameters keep regular time while varying the number of syllables; blank verse keeps regular numbers of syllables while varying the speed of the line. In hexameter, a syllable's length may clash or coincide with the accent of the word; in English, an accent is an accent and there is little a poet can do about it. Yet the English poet has great leeway for placing his accented syllables, while the Latin poet must follow a long with a long or with two shorts, and then repeat the process. Just about any word may somehow be shoehorned into blank verse, while there are thousands of words which cannot fit into hexameter—for instance, any word with syllables long-short-long.

And so a translator makes choices, hoping that a gain here will offset a loss there, that if he cannot attain perfect accuracy, rhythm, tone, freshness of imagery, and power, he can at least choose what he wishes to convey at all costs, what he will work hard to convey, what he will convey with fair reliability, and what he will accept as a gift from a sporadic Muse. I have tried to be scrupulously literal in rendering Lucretius's metaphors and puns. If *suppeditat* means "supports, as of a building's foundation," then I translate to preserve that building: "props up." I retain the rhythm of Lucretius's paragraphs, usually translating phrase by phrase and clause by clause, using enjambment and punctuation and odd syntax to stress in my English lines what Lucretius used other methods to stress in his Latin ones. My paragraphs are end-stopped, like Lucretius's; his one-line aphorisms are one-liners for me too; his capping a point with some tersely regular line is for me a return to strict iambic pentameter. My meter is accentual pentameter, with five strong beats and a variable number of short beats (but never three short beats in a row). The normative line, occurring about two-fifths of the time, is iambic pentameter.

I am deeply indebted to the thorough and sensitive notes in the edition by William Ellery Leonard and Stanley Barney Smith, and to H. A. Munro, Rolfe Humphries, and F. A. Copley, my predecessors in translation; David West's *The Imagery and Poetry of Lucretius* has been a delightful source of inspiration. I have always thought that one should gather from a translation as little of the translator as possible. He should be like Lucretius's "oil of the odorless olive," a base for distilling another's perfume. The best a translator can hope for is that he will be read with enjoyment and impatience, after which sales of the original will, here and there, be a little brisker.

BOOK ONE

Mother of Romans, delight of gods and men,
Sweet Venus, who under the wheeling signs of heaven
Rouse the ship-shouldering sea and the fruitful earth
And make them teem—for through you all that breathe
Are begotten, and rise to see the light of the sun;
From you, goddess, the winds flee, from you and your coming
Flee the storms of heaven; for you the artful earth
Sends up sweet flowers, for you the ocean laughs
And the calm skies shimmer in a bath of light.
And now, when the gates are wide for spring and its splendor
And the west wind, fostering life, blows strong and free,
Pricked in their hearts by your power, the birds of the air
Give the first sign, goddess, of you and your entering;
Then through the fertile fields the love-wild beasts
Frolic, and swim the rapids (so seized with your charm
They eagerly follow wherever you may lead);
Yes, across seas and mountains and hungering rivers
And the leaf-springing homes of the birds and the greening fields,
Into all hearts you strike your lure of love
That by desire they propagate their kinds.
And since it is you alone who govern the birth
And growth of things, since nothing without you
Can be glad or lovely or rise to the shores of light,
I ask you to befriend me as I try
To pen these verses *On the Nature of Things*
For my friend Memmius, whom you, goddess, have ever
Caused to excel, accomplished in all things.
All the more, goddess, grant them lasting grace!

behind everything — the desire to propagate

In the meantime let the savage works of war
Rest easy, slumbering over land and sea.
For you alone can bless us mortal men
With quiet peace; Mars, potent of arms, holds sway
In battle, but surrenders at your bosom,
Vanquished by the eternal wound of love.
There, his chiseled neck thrown back, he gapes at you,
Goddess, and feeds his greedy eyes with love;
He reclines; his spirit lingers upon your lips.
Melting about him, goddess, as he rests
On your holy body, pour from your lips sweet nothings,
Seeking, renowned one, quiet peace for Rome.
For I cannot work with a clear mind while my country
Suffers, nor can the illustrious scion of
The Memmian house neglect the common good.

For by necessity the gods above
Enjoy eternity in highest peace,
Withdrawn and far removed from our affairs.
Free of all sorrow, free of peril, the gods
Thrive in their own works and need nothing from us,
Not won with virtuous deeds nor touched by rage.

Then withdraw from cares and apply your cunning mind
To hear the truth of reasoned theory,
That the verses I give you, arranged with diligent love,
You will not scorn before you understand.
I open for you by discussing the ultimate law
Of the gods and sky; I reveal the atoms, whence
Nature creates and feeds and grows all things
And into which she resolves them when they are spent;
"Matter," "engendering bodies," "the seeds of things"
Are other terms for atoms which I use
In setting forth their laws; and "first beginnings"—
For from these elements all the world is formed.

When before our eyes man's life lay groveling, prostrate,
Crushed to the dust under the burden of Religion

(Which thrust its head from heaven, its horrible face
Glowering over mankind born to die),
One man, a Greek, was the first mortal who dared
Oppose his eyes, the first to stand firm in defiance.
Not the fables of gods, nor lightning, nor the menacing
Rumble of heaven could daunt him, but all the more
They whetted his keen mind with longing to be
First to smash open the tight-barred gates of Nature.
His vigor of mind prevailed, and he strode far
Beyond the fiery battlements of the world,
Raiding the fields of the unmeasured All.
Our victor returns with knowledge of what can arise,
What cannot, what law grants each thing its own
Deep-driven boundary stone and finite scope.
Religion now lies trampled beneath our feet,
And we are made gods by the victory.

You hear these things, and I fear you'll think yourself
On the road to evil, learning the fundamentals
Of blasphemy. Not so! Too often Religion
Herself gives birth to evil and blasphemous deeds.
At Aulis, for instance: the pride of the Greek people,
The chosen peers, defiled Diana's altar
With the shameful blood of the virgin Iphigenia.
As soon as they tressed her hair with the ritual fillet,
The tassels spilling neatly upon each cheek,
And she sensed her grieving father beside the altar
With the acolytes nearby, hiding the knife,
And countrymen weeping to look upon her—mute
With fear, she fell to her knees, she groped for the earth.
Poor girl, what good did it do her then, that she
Was the first to give the king the name of "father"?
Up to the altar the men escorted her, trembling;
Not so that when her solemn rites were finished
She might be cheered in the ringing wedding-hymn,
But filthily, at the marrying age, unblemished
Victim, she fell by her father's slaughter-stroke

To shove his fleet off on a *bon voyage!*
Such wickedness Religion can incite!

You too, someday, will try to turn deserter,
Taken by so-called prophets and their ravings.
That's no surprise. What dreams they'll engineer
To overthrow your reasoned way of life
And stir up fear and trouble all your fortune!
They know their trade—for if men could see that hardships
Have their sure end, made strong by reason, they
Might then withstand those superstitious threats.
But now no reason, no force can stand and fight:
We fear perpetual torments after death.
Men don't know what the soul is, don't know whether
It's born or it slips into the child being born,
Whether torn apart by death it perishes with us,
Or views the gloom of Hell and the vast gulfs,
Or slips by miracle into other beasts
As our Ennius sang, the first Latin to seize
The evergreen laurel-crown from the lovely heights
Of Helicon; through our land his fame shines clear.
Yet though his verse is deathless Ennius still
Proclaims that regions of the dead exist,
Where neither the body nor the soul endures
But a sort of shadow or image, strange and pale.
From there, as he tells it, the specter of ever-thriving
Homer arose before him and wept salt tears,
Revealing to him in words the nature of things.
Well then, though we'll need a reasoned way to explain
What happens in the sky, the wandering tracks
Of the sun and moon, and what steers events on earth,
Our reasoning must be keen of scent indeed
To observe the nature of the mind and soul,
To tell us what those visions are which strike
When we're awake and ill, or tombed in sleep,
Terrible visions, as we hear and see
Near us the dead whose bones the earth has clasped.

It does not slip my mind that the Greeks' dark findings
Are hard to illustrate in Latin verse,
Above all when our language lacks the words
And new terms must be found to treat new subjects.
And yet your virtue and the hoped-for pleasure
Of a delightful friendship urge me to
Persevere in my work, to watch through the calm nights,
Seeking choice words, the song by which at last
I can open to your mind such dazzling light
That you may see deep into hidden things.

And so this darkness and terror of the mind
Shall not by the sun's rays, by the bright lances of daylight
Be scattered, but by Nature and her law.
Whose fundamental axiom is this:
Nothing comes supernaturally from nothing.
Fear grips all mortal men precisely because
They see so many events on the earth, in the sky,
Whose rational causes they cannot discern—
So they suppose it's all the will of the gods.
But once we've seen that nothing is made from nothing
We'll find our path and see straight through to what
We search for: we shall know that things can come
To be—and in what manner—without gods.

For if something could spring from nothing, then anything
Could be born from anything, would require no seed.
Men could leap out of the sea, from the earth could arise
The scaly snakes, and birds could hatch from the sky;
Cattle, sheep, horses—wild beasts too—would give
Birth to whatever, dwelling on farms, in forests;
And fruits would not stay faithful to their trees
But they would change: all things would bear all things.
Each thing, then, has its own engendering matter.
If not, how could the *mother* stay the same?
But since all creatures rise from their own seeds
They need a place stocked with their stuff, their atoms,

Waterdrops gouge out stone; the hooked plowshare,
Iron though it is, when worked in the fields, will secretly
Grow thin; we see stone pavement trodden and worn
By the trample of crowds; bronze guardians of the gates
Show right hands thinned away under the touch
Of people greeting them as they stroll by.
And so we see long-handled things diminish,
But if we ask which atoms fall and when,
Envious Nature shuts the door on us.
And all the matter which time and Nature grant us
Little by little, leading to gradual growth,
Must escape the most concentrated sight,
As what is lost in the wasting away of age;
Nor can you watch the weathering of the rocks
That hang over the salt and gnawing sea.
In unseen atoms Nature governs all.

But things aren't crammed together everywhere
With matter: empty space also exists.
This knowledge settles many questions, holds you
To the sure path, lest you should puzzle forever
Over the world and lose faith in our teachings.

So empty space exists, untouched and void.
If it did not, motion would cease to be.
For that which is the function of matter, to
Impede and block, would operate at all times
In everything. Then nothing could advance,
For nothing would in turn begin to yield.
But through the seas and lands and the heights of the sky,
Before our eyes, things move in many ways
And by various means; so if there were no void
Not only would they lack this itching for motion
But they could never have been formed at all,
For bodies, crammed up everywhere, would rest.
Further, no matter how solid a thing may seem,
This shows you that its structure still has gaps:

Water will trickle and seep through rocks and caves
And the walls within weep plenty of big drops;
Food spreads to every part of an animal's body;
Trees grow and in due season pour forth fruit,
As up from the lowest roots through the trunk and branches
Nourishment rises and pours into the whole;
Sounds pass through walls, flutter and fly right into
A shut-up house; cold stiffens to the bone.
But without void for the atoms to pass through,
By no means would you see such things occur.
Then, how can one thing weigh more than another
Although their sizes are identical?
If there's no more matter in a ball of wool
Than in a ball of lead, they should weigh the same,
Since it's the function of bodies to press down
While empty space persists in weightlessness.
So take two things of equal size: the lighter
Proclaims its greater share of void inside,
While the heavier shows for certain that it's got
More matter within, and much less emptiness.
Thus what our keen-scented reason has sought to trace
Exists: the void, mixed into everything.

Here I must hurry to thwart objections, lest
What some pretend should lead you from the truth.
Water, they tell you, will yield to the push of fins,
Opening liquid ways, for the fish relinquish
A space where the yielding waves flow back again;
Likewise, they say, things move among themselves
And change place, though the world is filled with matter.
Utter illogic they accept as proof.
For where are their fish supposed to swim, unless
The water will give them room? And how should the waves
Give way, where will they go, if the fish can't move?
Then either bodies must be stripped of motion
Or we conclude that space is mixed in things,
And from this space things seize the chance to move.

Moreover, if two bodies brought into contact
Rebound from each other, the air must certainly
Take over all the empty space between them.
And though this air can flow together in currents
As swift as you like, it could hardly fill the space
In a single instant—first it must occupy
Each part of the space in turn, then take it all.
Now whoever should suppose, when objects bounce,
That the making-dense of the air allows it to happen,
Goes wrong. He'd empty what was full before
And fill up what had been an emptiness.
Not by such means, then, can the air grow dense—
Or if it could, it would need space, I think,
To draw itself in and contract its parts in one.

And so, though like a lawyer you delay,
You must admit that space exists in things.
Besides, I can present a host of proofs
To scrape up a little faith in what we say.
Though the traces are faint, for the keen of mind they will surely
Suffice, that you yourself may grasp the rest.
As hounds on the chase for beasts that roam the mountains
Sniff out and find their quiet leaf-thatched dens
Soon as they pick up the trail and the sure scent,
So in these matters you will see one hint
Lead to another till you yourself can burrow
Into the coverts and drag out the truth.
But if you lag or shy away a little,
This I can guarantee you, Memmius:
I shall pour out the treasure of my heart,
Deep draughts from springs so mighty, with song so sweet,
That I fear old age will creep its sluggish way
Into our limbs, and unbar the gates of life,
Before I can in verse regale you with
The wealth of proofs for any point you like.

Let me resume to weave my poetry.
The universe is made up of two things
Which exist in themselves: atoms, and void
Where the atoms take position and move and scatter.
That matter exists, the senses we all share
Make clear. And without strong trust first founded on these
We have no grounds, searching for hidden truths,
To affirm the results of inquiry.
Then as for place or space, which we call "void,"
If there weren't any, bodies would have nowhere
Simply to be, or to go their wandering ways—
As I have just now demonstrated to you.

And more: nothing exists which you can call
Free of all matter or sheltered from the void,
As if some third thing helped compose the world.
This Whatever would have to be *something,* after all.
Now if you could touch it no matter how slightly or softly,
You then could add to it greatly or even a little,
So it would have to be counted a bodily thing.
But if it could never be touched, if from any direction
It could not bar a thing from floating through,
Then it must be what we call space or void.
Also, whatever it is would have to act
Or itself be acted on by other things,
Or be the medium for being and action.
But nothing can act or be acted on which lacks
Matter; and only the void provides location.
So no third element can be admitted,
Nothing besides the atoms and the void,
Nothing which falls to the purview of our senses
Or which we grasp from reasoned argument.

Pick anything you like! Of matter and space
It's either a "property" or an "accident."
The first is so conjoint it can never be div-

ided from things without destroying them—
Rocks must be heavy, fire hot, water fluid; all bodies
Touchable, while the void remains untouched.
But slavery, riches, poverty, war and peace,
Freedom, and other such, whose chance arrival
Or chance departure leaves the nature of things
Intact—these we call, justly, accidents.
Even time is accidental; from things themselves
Our sense derives its notion of past action,
Of what is happening now and what will follow.
No one can say he senses time as such,
Apart from the motion or quiet rest of things.
For if they say, "Helen is kidnapped, the Trojan
People are plunged into war," we had better watch out
Lest they make us confess these really *are,*
When the people affected by these accidents
Irrevocable time has swept away.
For whatever happened was an accident
Either of the people or of the place itself.
And if there had been no matter to form things with,
No place or void for things to happen in,
The flame of love, which the beauty of Helen had kindled
And fanned high in the breast of Phrygian Paris,
Would never have set ablaze that savage war,
Nor the wooden horse given birth in the dead of night
To Greeks who burnt the city to the ground—
So you can see that past events do not
Exist all by themselves, as matter does,
Nor likewise can they constitute the void,
But rather you should call them accidents
Of matter and space, in which all things occur.

Now physical things are either first-beginnings
Or what their congresses unite to make.
As for the first-beginnings, the atoms, no force
Can quell them; their tough walls outlast all blows;
Though at first it seems doubtful that in objects

The fundamentally solid can be found.
For the lightning from heaven can fork through the walls of houses,
As can shouting, or talk; iron glows white in the fire,
Scalding liquid will often shatter rock;
Hard gold is rendered limp and soft with heat,
And flames in triumph melt the ice of bronze;
Warmth seeps through silver, as does searching cold:
Soon as we clasp the ceremonial cup
We sense the water poured in from above.
So far it seems there's nothing solid in objects.
But since true reason and the nature of things
Insist, now listen as I unfold in verse
What does exist that is solid, everlasting:
The seeds, the first-beginnings, the atoms we teach of,
Which constitute this whole created world.

First of all, since we've found that nature is twofold,
Made of two far dissimilar things, that is,
Matter and space, in which all things occur,
Each must exist in pure form, by itself.
For wherever space—which we call "void"—lies vacant,
There is no body; wherever body in turn
Holds its place, void cannot exist at all.
So the atoms, "first bodies," exist—solid, no void.
Also, since void is a part of all things born,
Solid must close around it—that is certain.
Nor logically can anything be shown
To hold and hide the void within its mass,
Unless you grant some solid to lock it in.
This solid can be no other than the congress
Of atoms, which can lock the void inside.
Thus matter, made of solid atoms, lasts
Forever; things themselves disintegrate.
Again: if there were nothing to call void,
All would be solid; but if there were no atoms
To fill whatever space they occupy,
All the world would be void and emptiness.

So too it would be proper for grass when pounded
With mortar and pestle to seep a little blood,
And water should yield sweet drops that savor of
Milk from the udder of the woolly ewe;
Never mind! Clods of earth when rubbed and crumbled
Should reveal, hidden inside, in tiny portions,
All sorts of scattered grass and grains and leaves;
And in wood snapped in two we should see cinders
Hiding away, and smoke, and tiny flames.
Since the facts clearly show this to be false,
There can't be bits of objects mixed in things;
Rather, the atom-seeds are hidden, mingled
In many ways, and shared by many things.

"But often," you argue, "high on the mountainsides
The tops of towering trees may rub together
In the mighty force of the east wind, until
The trees flash out in an open flower of flame."
Yes—but that doesn't mean that wood is laced with fire;
The truth is, there are many seeds of heat
Which converge in the rubbing and set the forest blazing.
But if ready-made flames were hidden deep in the wood,
The fires could never hide for very long.
They would level woods far and wide and reduce them to ashes.
Now do you understand what I've been saying,
That much depends on how the atoms are
Arranged to hold together, and with what others,
And how they can move each other or be moved,
So that the same atoms, shifted a little, create
Both fire and wood? Just as these very words
Are made with little changes in the spelling—
As we call "flame" and "elm" by distinct names.
Well, if you can't believe that what you see
Before your eyes can exist, unless you invent
Atoms endowed with the natures of visible objects,
This reasoning puts your elements to death.
Could be, they're struck by something funny, and shake
In a fit of laughter and wet their cheeks with tears!

Now know and hear more clearly what remains.
I admit these are dark and difficult matters, but
A prophet's great hope for praise lashes my heart,
Stinging my breast with the sweet love of the Muses.
Charged with this love, robust of mind, I explore
The trackless haunts of the Pierides,
Untrodden by man. What joy it is to drink
Deep from those pristine fountains! What joy to pluck
New flowers, to weave a garland for my temples
Which the Muses have never veiled anyone with before!
Let the fame be mine, for I teach great things, stride forth
To free the soul from the stranglehold of religion;
Also, I sing dark matters into the light,
Spicing all with the grace of poetry.
I have good reason too for doing this:
When doctors try to coax children to take
Foul wormwood, first they brush the rim of the cups
All around with the sweet and golden juice of honey,
To fool their short-sighted years, fool them all the way
Past the lips, so they drink down those bitter drops
Of wormwood and are tricked but not betrayed,
For all the sooner is their health restored.
So I too, since this doctrine seems so harsh
To many who have never sampled it,
Since the mob shrinks back in horror—I have desired
To reveal our doctrine in sweet-throated song,
Touching it with the honey of the Muses,
That I might hold your mind by this device
To attend to my verse, until you grasp the entire
Nature of things—the structure of the world.

But since I have taught that the atoms, impermeable,
Fly never-vanquished through eternity,
Now is the time to unroll the question of whether
Their number is finite; so too with the void we've found—
The site or space in which all things occur—
Let's now observe whether emptiness too is bounded
Or whether it stretches vast and deep and endless.

Is left but the wastes of space and the blind atoms.
For wherever you first allow the atoms to
Escape, annihilation's door is there,
There will all matter crowd and rush away.

A little work will guide you—you shall know.
One point illuminates the next, nor will
The blind night steal your path, till you have read
Nature's last truths. Knowledge: a torch for knowledge!

BOOK TWO

How sweet, to watch from the shore the wind-whipped ocean
Toss someone else's ship in a mighty struggle;
Not that the man's distress is cause for mirth—
Your freedom from those troubles is what's sweet;
And sweet, to see great lines of soldiers marshaled
In the plains of war, when you are free from peril;
But nothing is sweeter than to dwell in the calm
Temples of truth, the strongholds of the wise.
You can, from there, look down upon others wandering
Randomly, straying, seeking the path of life,
Warring with all their talent, wrestling for rank,
Night and day straining with the utmost toil
To fight their way to the heights of wealth and power.

O heart of man, how pitiful and blind!
In what benightedness with all its perils
Our time, so short, is squandered! And not to see
That our nature yelps after this alone: that the body
Be free of pain, the mind enjoy the sense
Of pleasure, far removed from care or fear!
And so we see what little our bodies need,
Only such things as soothe the pain away.
This little too will spread the table and make
Many delights more welcome—though Nature doesn't
Demand that golden statues of young men
Grasping the fiery torches in their hands
Light up your midnight palace bacchanals,
Or your halls blaze with silver or gleam with gold,

The times of the year so very temperately
For human purposes; create fruit, grain, all
The rest that divine Pleasure, the queen of life,
Our escort, urges mortals to enjoy,
Who teases us with Venus to increase
Our generations, lest man die. Man's welfare
Is why the gods establish all—they dream;
For they have fallen far from truth and reason.
Say I knew nothing of atoms, of what they were,
Still from the very ways of the heavens, from many
Other things I could name, I'd dare to assert
And prove that not for us and not by gods
Was this world made. There's too much wrong with it!
Later I'll make these points clear, Memmius.
Now to untangle the rest of the problems of motion.

Here is the place, I think, to assert for you
The following also: no corporeal thing
Can of its own power rise and ride aloft—
And in this matter don't be fooled by fire.
For the flames are born arising and seize increase,
And the glossy corn and the trees arise and grow,
Yet whatever weight they have presses them down.
Nor should you think, when the housefire leaps to the roof
And quick flames lick the tilework and the timber,
It's doing so all by itself, not forced from below—
Forced, as our blood when shot from the body flashes
In a high fountain-leap and sprays its stream.
Don't you see too how forcibly the water
Will spit back tile and timber? The deeper we plunge them
Straight down, many men pushing with all their might,
The more eagerly it chucks them up and sends them
Leaping well over half into the air.
Yet don't doubt that so far as they have weight
These things are all brought back down through the void.
In the same manner, squirted from below,

Flames can leap up into the air, although
What weight they have struggles to drag them down.
The torches of night that fly through the high heavens—
Don't you see them leading their long trails of fire
In the direction Nature gives them way?
Haven't you seen the stars fall to the earth?
Even the sun from the summit of heaven scatters
Warmth everywhere and sows the fields with light
(So the warmth of the sun will also bend toward earth),
And lightnings flash through stormclouds turned athwart them;
Now here, now there, you see the cloud-torn fires
Skirmish—and often enough they fall to earth.

Another fact I wish to have you know:
When the atoms are carried straight down through the void
By their own weight, at an utterly random time
And a random point in space they swerve a little,
Only enough to call it a tilt in motion.
For if atoms did not tend to lean, they would
Plummet like raindrops through the depts of space,
No first collisions born, no blows created,
So Nature never could have made a thing.

But whoever believes that heavier atoms, carried
All the more swiftly straight down through the void,
Can bump from above the lighter and so beget
Collisions that might give rise to the motions of life,
Falls far out of the way of truth and reason.
For whatever drops through water or the thin air
Hastens its falling by its weight—it must,
Since the water-matter and the light fabric of air
Can hardly stop a falling thing or slow it,
But, routed by the heavier, they give way.
Yet the emptiness of space can't ever stand
Firm against anything from any direction—
In fact, its nature calls on it to yield.

For any one particular form: they must
Hurtle together with somewhat different shapes.

It's simple, too, to figure out why lightning
Can pierce to the quick with such a sharper force
Than can the fire we light in earthly torches.
For you may say that the sky-born flame of lightning
Is subtler, made of tinier atoms which
Allow it to pass through tighter crannies than
This fire of ours can, risen from torch or tinder.
Again, light passes through thin horn, while water
Splashes against it. Why? Why else: light-atoms
Are smaller than those of the clear life-giving water.
And we see wine as readily as you like
Slip through the strainer; but olive oil, thick, sluggish,
Struggles; no wonder: its atoms are bigger, or
More inter-hooked up with themselves and -twined.
So much so, that the atoms can't be swiftly
Sifted, to let each atom squeeze, seep
Through the pores of the strainer, one by one.

Here notice that a sip of milk or honey,
Rolled on the tongue, will lend a pleasant feeling,
While sickening wormwood and harsh centaury
Pucker the mouth with the twists of their foul taste.
Easy for you to see that smooth and rolling
Atoms compose what touches the sense with pleasure,
While what seems harsh, bitter, these things are stitched
And held together in more hooked connections,
Which forces them to wedge and split their way
Into our senses, slashing through the body.

Finally, all that's good and bad to the touch
Battle each other, made of different shapes:
So never think that the nerve-shredding shrill
Rasp of a saw is made of the same smooth atoms
As the honey of music which the nimble fingers

Fashion and bring to life on the guitar;
Nor think that similar atoms penetrate
The nostrils, when we cremate rotting corpses,
As when the stage is sprinkled anew with saffron
And the altar's all a breath of Orient spice.
Nor say that soothing colors which refresh
The hungry eyes are made of the same atoms
As those which stab at the eyes and wring out tears
Or those so ugly and frightful they repel.
For whatever can caress the senses must
Possess a smoothness in its first-foundations.
By contrast, things that offend or chafe or grate
Have in their stuff a certain crudity.
Then there are things which cannot rightly be
Considered smooth, or bent into barbed spikes,
But rather a little angular and projectile,
The sooner to tickle the senses than to bruise them:
For instance, pickling spice or the lees of wine.
Yes—and the fact that fire and the hard frost
Are toothed in different ways to nip the senses,
The touch of each will indicate to us.
For touch it is, by the holy powers! touch,
When we feel an object from outside the body
Work its way in, when an abscess aches, or when
The semen issues forth in the thrill of sex,
Or when from some collision the body's own
Seeds jumble among themselves and jar the senses,
As you yourself can test if you'll just strike
Any part of the body with your fist.
Therefore the shapes of atoms differ far—
They must, to give us various sensations.

And what feels hardened to us, tightly packed,
Must be more deeply interlocked with atoms
Hooked to each other, like a tangled thicket.
Now in the first rank of such substances
Stands adamant, long hardened in contempt

As deep into the bodies they are born with
As it is here for any abundant race.

Grasp this truth, and at once you'll see that Nature
Is free, unfettered from those haughty lords;
Rid of all gods, she works her will herself.
For, by the quiet and holy hearts of the gods,
By their calm lives and everlasting peace,
Who can direct the unmeasured All, or grip
With a firm hand the reins to rule the abyss?
Who can wheel all the starry spheres, and blow
Over all land the fruitful warmth from above,
Be ready in all places at all times,
Gather black clouds and shake the quiet sky
With terrible thunder, to hurl down bolts which often
Rattle his own shrines, to rage in the desert, retreating
For target drill, so that his shafts can pass
The guilty by and slay the innocent?

After the time the world was born, and the first
Day of the sea and the earth and the sun had dawned,
Much matter was added from beyond, seeds added
Around us, which the great All flung into union;
From these the sea and the earth can grow, from these
The heavens extend their demesne and lift still higher
Their lofty towers; from these the winds arise.
For driven from all quarters the atoms are sorted
Each to his own, and settle into kinds:
Water settles with water, from atoms of earth the earth
Grows; fire flints out the fire and air the air;
Until to the utmost limit of growth all things
Are led, made perfect by Creating Nature.
That happens when no more is fed into
Life-giving veins than that which ebbs away.
This is the age at which all things must stand,
When mighty Nature reins in all increase.
For whatever you see grow big with hearty addition,

Mounting the steps to maturity one by one,
Takes on more atoms than it loses while
The veins are freely fed, and their bodies are
Not yet so tattered they lose their atoms and
Expend more than their time of life restores.
You must surrender the point, that atoms flood
Into and ebb from things. But more must enter
Till things have touched their pinnacle of growth.
Then slowly and softly the solid trunk of adulthood
Breaks, and we melt into the lesser age.
And that's no wonder: the fuller and broader a thing
When you exhaust the source of its increase,
The sooner will it scatter and lose its atoms,
Nor will its veins be nourished easily,
Nor is there enough to shore up and restore
The ample exhalations of the old.
By rights they pass away, made thin and porous
In the dwindle of atoms, laid low by blows from without,
When finally in their great age all food fails them
And the outside atoms, hammering, never cease
Till they rule with their rain of pounding and crush the thing.

So also the great battlements of the world,
Besieged and battered, will crumble into ruin.
For food it is that makes things whole and new,
Food shores them up, holds all things in repair—
In vain; enough will not be suffered to enter
The blood; Nature will not supply what's needed.
And now, so crippled is our age, that the earth,
Worn out by labor, scarce makes tiny creatures—
Which once made all, gave birth to giant beasts.
For I find it hard to believe that a golden cord
From heaven let living things down into the fields,
Or they were made by the stone-splashing waves of the sea;
The same earth gendered then that now gives food.
What's more, at first she made, of her own prompting,
The glossy corn and the glad vine for us mortals,

And I shudder with awe; for by your power, Nature's
Veil is stripped free, and all made manifest.

I've taught of the first fabric of all things,
And how of their own the atoms of various shapes
Fly driven along in endless motion, how
All things can be created out of them;
Next, in my verse, it's clear I should shed light
Upon the nature of the mind and soul,
And pitch that fear of the underworld headlong
Which troubles human life from the inmost wells,
Muddying all our affairs with the black of death,
Leaving behind no pleasure pure and clear.

For though men preach that sickness or a life
Of infamous vice ought sooner to be feared
Than the realm of death, and say they know their souls
Are nothing but blood (or air, if the fancy strikes them),
And don't need our philosophy at all,
Turn your thoughts this way and you'll see it's just
Swagger and bluster and not firm belief:
Men driven out of their country and kept far
From human sight, men tarred by crime and scandal,
Wretched in every way, still hang to life,
Pathetic, and invoke ancestral shades,
And slaughter black cattle and send the spirits down
To the gods of the dead. In bitter times
They turn their minds more keenly toward religion.
All the more, in danger and doubt, when things go wrong,
We should keep our eye on the man, see what he is—
For that's the spell that snatches his mask and makes him
Cry out at last from the heart. The truth remains.
And greed and the blind craving for rank, which drive
Pitiful men to overleap the bounds
Of law, drive friends-in-evil and their henchmen
To struggle night and day with the utmost strain

To fight to the heights of wealth—these sores of life
Are fed in no small part by fear of death.
To be despised, to feel the pinch for money
Are ills that seem to linger at Death's door,
Far from the sweetness of a steadfast life.
And so, spurred on by groundless fears, men strive
To escape, to hustle themselves far out of their reach,
And from the blood of countrymen they forge
Riches, and double them, heaping slaughter on slaughter.
With a bloodthirsty glee they bury their own brothers
And hate and fear to eat at a cousin's table.
In the same way, from the same fear, men often
Grow lean with envy. There he is, that powerbroker,
That rising star attracting every gaze
While *they're* bogged down in the mud (they whine) and darkness.
Some waste away for statues and a name.
And often from fear of dying, men will be
Seized with disgust for life, will hate the light,
So with sorrowing hearts they pass their sentence, death,
Forgetting that all their cares spring from this fear—
This puts their shame to rout, this breaks the bonds
Of friendship and subverts all piety.
And men have sold the land that gave them birth,
Sold their dear parents, to shun the underworld.
For as little boys tremble and fear whatever's lurking
In the blind dark, so we in the light of day
Tremble at what is no more terrible than
What little boys dream in the dark and fear will come.
And so this darkness and terror of the mind
Shall not by the sun's rays, by the bright lances of daylight
Be scattered, but by Nature and her law.

First I say that the soul, which we call "mind,"
The site of judgment, governor of life,
Is one more human part no less than hands
And feet and eyes are part of the whole creature . . .

And more: you'll notice the soul, as one with the body,
Is affected the same and shares the body's feeling.
If your life's not dashed by the force of a quivering lance
Thrust home to split the bones and muscles open,
Still languor will follow, and the soothing swoon to the earth,
And as you lie on the ground your mind's a whirl
With willing and not willing to arise.
The soul must therefore be corporeal, since
Corporeal lances jab it and make it stagger.

What sorts of atoms constitute the soul
And where they come from, I'll explain to you.
To start, I say that the soul is super-subtle,
Composed of tiniest particles. Consider,
To prove the truth of my hypothesis,
That nothing we see can happen so swiftly as
The mind imagines and initiates.
Quicker therefore the mind will spur itself
Than anything we see before our eyes.
But since it's so quick to move, it must consist
Of the roundest and tiniest seeds, so that a small
Impulse can drive them forward into motion.
For water will ripple under the littlest impulse,
Made up of tiny and turnable tumbling figures.
By contrast, honey stands thick, sticks, won't budge,
Its juice more sluggish, motion more reluctant.
For all its wealth of atoms clogs and clings
Together; no surprise, as it's not made
Of atoms so smooth or subtle or round and rolling.
And a puff—half-held and light—can send your mound
Of poppyseed spilling and scattering down from the summit;
By contrast, a rock heap or cornstalk rick
Won't. And so the smaller the bodies and smoother,
The more a thing enjoys mobility.
But then whatever you come upon that's heavy,
Rough, sharp—to that extent these things stand stable.
Now, therefore, since we've found the soul to be

Exceedingly mobile, it must then consist
Of atoms awfully tiny and smooth and rolling.
This knowledge, my good reader, you will find
Useful and opportune in many matters.

This too will help establish the soul's nature,
How finely woven it is and what small space
Would hold it, if it could be gathered up:
That as soon as the imperturbable peace of Death
Lays hold of a man, and the mind and soul have departed,
You detect nothing dwindling from the body,
Nothing to see or to weigh. Death guarantees
All, save life-giving sense and the moist warm breath.
Thus all the soul must of necessity
Be made of the tiniest seeds, be interwoven
So fully with veins, flesh, muscle that when it leaves
The body deserted, the outer contour is
Preserved intact and not a jot the lighter.
It's like bouquets of wine that evanesce,
Or the sweet breath of perfume that floats away,
Or savors that abandon any body.
Still to the eyes these things look none the smaller
And not a grain of weight seems drawn away:
No wonder, for many and tiny seeds create
Aroma and savor, diffuse through the whole body.
So again and again I say the mind and spirit
Are made up of the tiniest, tiniest seeds,
For when they flee they steal no weight away.

But don't think that our souls are one and simple.
A sort of light breath leaves us when we die,
Breath mingled with heat, and heat in turn with air;
No warmth at all without a mix of air.
For since warmth's thinly woven, there must be
Many air-atoms moving in and through it.
So then we find three elements in the soul.
Yet, all told, will these three suffice to make

And tender, so their minds are wobbly too;
But when the trunk grows ripe with the strength of adulthood
The mind is better endowed, the reason stronger;
And last, when the might of Age has crushed the body
And the limbs have fallen, strengthless, beaten down,
Then the native talent hobbles, the tongue wanders,
Thoughts lapse—all powers fail at the same time.
It follows then that soul and spirit too
Dissolve like smoke into that sea of air,
For soul is born with the body and grows with it
And, as I've shown, cracks under the weight of age.

Here we should note that as the body itself
Is racked with violent sickness and sharp pain,
So the soul's seized with trouble and fear and sorrow.
It follows that the soul will share in Death.
For when the body is ill the soul will often
Wander; he loses his train of thought, he speaks
Astray, while drowsiness sinks him into a deep
And lasting coma—the head nods, the lids fall.
Where he is, he can hear no voices, recognize
No faces of those who surround him and call him back
To life, dewing their cheeks and lips with tears.
Admit, therefore, the soul dissolves—you must,
When the touch of sickness penetrates so far.
And pain and disease are both Death's artisans,
As we've learned so well from watching many die.
Yes, why is it then, when wine has stung a man
To the quick, his blood aglow with the heat it lends him,
The limbs, as a consequence, grow heavy; tripped, tangled,
Legs stagger, the thick speech lags, the thoughts are soused,
Eyes swim, and roaring and sobbing and brawls break out?
And all the rest of this sort of thing that follows,
Why is it? If not that the thrust and throttle of wine
Makes a habit of whipping the soul—and this, in the body!
But whatever can be throttled or trip-and-tangled,
Shows us that if a little rougher force

Finds a way in, it will die, its future lost.
Why, the sudden power of sickness before our eyes
Will sometimes strike a man like a thunderbolt—
He crumples, froths at the mouth, moans, thrashes, raves,
Stiffens and wrenches his muscles, writhes and gasps
Fitfully, arms and legs flung to exhaustion.
Sure enough: the violent sickness spreads through the body,
Disorders it, drives the soul out, frothing—as waves
Of the salt sea seethe and foam in the battering wind.
Groans are wrung out because the limbs are racked
With pain, but chiefly because the vocal-atoms
Are spit up in a mass on the lips outside,
On the road, you might say, where they're used to go.
The raving comes when the powers of soul and spirit
Are jarred and, as I've shown, wrenched one from the other,
Sundered and torn apart by the same poison.
Then, when the illness has broken, and the black bile
Returns to its dens in the corrupted body,
He staggers to his feet, a little queasy,
Returns to his senses and takes the soul back in.
So if these are thrown for a fall—while in the body—
And torn and bruised so badly by such diseases,
Why then do you think that in open air, alone,
They can survive the battering of the wind?
And since we see that the mind, like a sick body,
Can be brought round by medicine and made whole,
That's our prognosis: souls live but to die.
You've got to add parts or scramble the order around
Or lift a jot directly from the whole
If you would undertake to change the spirit
Or bend the nature of any living thing.
But what's immortal allows no shuffle of parts,
No jot to trickle in or be skimmed away,
For change that leads a thing beyond its limits
Is instant death to the original.
So if the soul falls ill or is brought round
By medicine, those are signs that it must die,

As I've taught. The facts charge on to block the path
Of false reasoning and head off its retreat,
Routing it with a double-pronged rebuttal.

Yes, often we watch a man die by degrees,
Member by member losing the sense of life:
The toes and the toenails first turn black; then the feet,
The legs die; then creeping through all the other limbs
The chilling pace of Death will make its way.
Since the soul is sundered here and doesn't come out
Unscathed or in one piece, it must be mortal.
What if you think the soul can draw itself
In from the limbs, contracting its parts into
One, and there stow away the members' senses?
And yet that place where so much soul's collected
Should be super-sensitive! That never happens;
Don't wonder if, as I've said, the soul is sliced
To ribbons and scattered away. Conclude: it dies.
Even if we concede what is flat wrong
And grant that the soul can shrink into one lump
As the dying, little by little, lose the light,
Still we must then admit the soul shall die;
Let it die scattered to the winds, grow dull, blank,
All its parts clumping up—it doesn't matter,
When the senses fail him everywhere more and more
And less and less of life remains behind.

And since the mind is just one part of a man,
Fixed in its proper place, like eyes and ears
And the other organs of sense that steer our lives,
And just as a hand or an eye or nose if severed
From us, can neither sense nor even be
(Rather resolves directly into rot),
So by itself the soul can't live—it needs
The body, the man who is its vessel, or
Whatever image you can find that joins
More intimately, for the body is bound fast.

Indeed, the living powers of body and soul
Join in their strength, delight in life together.
For without the body, alone, the soul cannot
Make motions that bring forth life; if stripped of soul
The body can't last long or use its senses.
Know then, as an eye that's plucked out roots and all
Sees nothing, torn away from the rest of the body,
So too, alone, the spirit can do nothing.
Of course—for mingled in the veins and flesh,
In bone and muscle, the atoms of soul are held
By the whole body and can't leap free in flight
Over great intervals; shut in, they stir
The sense-bearing motions, but cast by death from the body
Into the winds they cannot make those motions
Because they're not confined in the same way.
A body, a breathing thing—air would be *that*
If it could bind the soul and lock it into
Motions that stirred in the sinews once, in the body.
So again I argue, if the sheltering body
Is undone, and the breath of life is cast away,
The soul and sense—you must admit—dissolve;
Conjunction is the cause of life for both.

Well then, if the body can't outlast the departure
Of soul, but dwindles into the stench of rot,
Why hesitate to say that the soul is gathered
And seeps away like so much smoke spilled out,
That the body, now altered, crumbles into ruin
And falls apart, foundations jolted from
Their proper places, letting the soul seep out
Through all the limbs and winding passageways
And chinks in the wall? So many proofs should show you
That when it leaves the limbs the soul's been split,
Torn into pieces first in the very body
Before it slips out, floating in the wind.
Look, when the bonds of life within are shaken,
Though the body is whole, still something will stagger the spirit

Thus souls do not make bodies for themselves.
And they don't slip into finished bodies either,
For that will not allow the subtlest weave
Of body and soul, the touch that makes sensation.

Yes, why does violence stalk the sullen brood
Of lions? Or fraud, the fox? And the deer's forefathers
Bequeath them their flight and their family limbs that tremble,
And so on and so forth? Why are they all born
With traits and talents proper to each kind,
If not that in accordance with the breed
One sort of soul develops with each body?
But if souls never died and could swap bodies,
All creatures would become a welter of cross-traits:
Noble Hyrcanian hounds would scoot away
From the charge of the antlered stag; trembling in flight
The hawk would flee the swooping of the dove;
Men would be foolish and fierce creatures wise.
It's all illogic when they say the soul
Is deathless, only changed by the change of body.
What alters must dissolve. Conclude: it dies.
Its parts are shuffled, straying out of order;
Hence in the members it must also dwindle
And at last die together with the body.
Now if they say that human souls will always
Pass into human bodies, let me ask:
Why does that wise soul make a foolish boy?
Why isn't the foal as cunning as the stallion?
Sure, they'll wriggle out, "The mind in a weakling body
Becomes a weakling too." Well then, they must
Admit that the soul dies, since it's so changed
It loses all its prior life and sense.
How can the mind along with the body too
Grow firm and attain that longed-for flower, adulthood,
Unless it was its consort from the first?
And why would it want to leave its wasted limbs?
Afraid to be trapped inside a rotting body?

Or its house will cave in, heavy with old age?
These pose no danger—to a deathless thing.

And then, what a laugh! to think that souls stand waiting
When beasts are born or during the rites of Venus,
Innumerable immortals taking numbers
For mortal limbs, crowding, elbowing to see
Who'll be the first to slip himself in or the strongest—
Oh, maybe all the souls are bound by contract:
Whoever swoops in first to be installed
Is first; no scuffling, and no arguments!

There are no trees in the sky, in the ocean plains
No clouds; no fish can live in the fields, no blood
Can dwell in a wooden stock, no sap in stone.
Each thing has one sure place to grow and dwell.
Soul cannot spring alone without the body,
Nor, far away from flesh and blood, survive.
For if it could, far sooner might that soul
Dwell in the head or the shoulders or the heels
And be born into whatever part you like—
So long as it stays in the same man, the same "jar."
But since there's a certain place inside our bodies
For the spirit, set apart, to dwell and grow,
All the more reason why you must deny
That it can be born or endure outside the body.
Admit then, when the body passes, so
The soul must pass, torn up throughout the body.
Really, to yoke what's mortal to the eternal,
Thinking they can agree and work as one,
Is silliness. For what can be reckoned more
Disjoint, discrepant, dissonant, than that
What's mortal, bound with the lasting and immortal,
Should bear up under the storm-whipped surge of life?

More proof: whatever's everlasting must
Either (solid of matter) spit back the punches,

Not suffering anything to pierce and split
Its tight-packed parts within (so durable are
Atoms, whose nature I have shown above),
Or persevere through all eternity
Not struck by a single blow (as empty space
Remains unacting and untouchable),
Or last because no wealth of space surrounds it
Where its loosening parts might break away and scatter
(As the everlasting All-in-All), for there
Is no Beyond to fly to, or atoms which
Could loosen it and destroy it with their pounding.
Should the soul be thought immortal all the more
In that it's fortified by living things,
Because the foes of health never invade it
Or the invaders for some reason yield,
Repulsed before we can feel what harm they'd do . . .

Besides the fact that the soul falls sick with the body,
A thought of things to come will strike the soul
And starve it hollow, harass it with worry and fear,
While the remorse for old sins gnaws away;
Add the mind's own madness and forgetfulness;
Add that it drowns in the black depths of coma.

Death, then, is nothing to us, no concern,
Once we grant that the soul will also die.
Just as we felt no pain in ages past
When the Carthaginians swarmed to the attack
And under the sky's high shores the whole world shook,
Struck by the shocks of war and alarm and riot,
All mankind over land and ocean in
The balance, whether to fall to the rule of either—
So too, when we no longer are, when our
Union of body and soul is put asunder,
Hardly shall anything then, when we are not,
Happen to us at all and stir the senses,
Not if earth were embroiled with the sea and the sea with heaven!

And even if the soul, ripped from the body,
Retained the power to feel, that still would be
Nothing to us, whose beings have been fashioned
By one fit marriage of one body and soul.
And if the Ages should collect our matter
After we die and return our present forms,
Lending us once again the light of life,
Even that won't mean anything to us,
Once our continuation has been snapped.
Who we once were can't touch us now at all;
Nor are we gripped with care for who we'll be.
When you reflect on the unmeasured span
Of ages past, how many and various were
The motions of matter, you may rest assured
That the seeds at times were placed in the same order
As these seeds which compose us now; a fact
That the mind can't retain in memory.
There's been a halt—hiatus—in our lives,
And all the motions of sense have gone astray.
Thus if your future is misery and sickness
You've got to exist in that same future time
For the ill to catch you. But since death clears the deck,
Forbidding that would-be sufferer to exist,
Nothing at all have we to fear from death;
He who cannot exist cannot feel pain,
Or care if he's never born again, once death
That does not die has seized his dying life.

Now if you happen to see someone resent
That after death he'll be put down to stink
Or be picked apart by beasts or burnt on the pyre,
You'll know that he doesn't ring true, that something hidden
Rankles his heart—no matter how often he says
He trusts that there's no feeling after death.
He doesn't grant the premise or conclusion,
Can't pluck himself out of life by the roots and chuck it;
He posits, unknowing, a bit of himself left over.

Complaint is just and her indictment true?
And if some high and mighty older man
Should whimper, poor fellow, too sadly that he must go,
Let her cry the louder and lash out in reproof!
"Get your sobs out of here, scoundrel, and quit your whining!
You mope—though you've rifled all life has to win;
But since you scorn what's here and crave what's not,
Your life—unfinished, thankless—slips away,
And so you're shocked that Death is waiting now
Before you're stuffed and ready to leave the table.
Give it up, old man, it doesn't become your years.
Come, be content! Give way to your heirs! You must."
Just, would her charge be! Just, her rebuke, her outcry!
The old, shoved out, must always cede to the new,
One thing restores another; it must be.
And no one's flung to the pit or the pains of Hell.
We need those atoms for our progeny
Who, though they live life full, shall follow us.
Before you came, men died—and they will die.
One thing gives rise to another, incessantly;
Life's given to no one outright; all must borrow.
Reflect how the span of the endless ancient past
Before our births means nothing at all to us.
Here Nature has provided us a mirror
Of the time to come when we at last have died.
Is there horror in the prospect? Any sorrow?
Isn't it freer from care than the sweetest sleep?

But the things that are said to exist in the depths of Hell
Are all, to no surprise, part of our lives.
No fairy-tale Tantalus, frozen in empty fear,
Pathetically shudders under a teetering stone;
Rather here, in life, an empty fear of the gods
Looms, and it's chance that brings the fall we dread.
No birds delve into a Tityus flat in Hell
Or prick for a morsel left in that huge liver
Throughout time everlasting—really now!

Let him stretch out, if you like, immense in bulk,
His splayed limbs spanning not nine acres merely
But the whole globe; nevertheless, he'd not
Be able to suffer everlasting pain
Or offer the food of his body forever and ever.
Our Tityus is here—a man laid flat by love,
Whom the birds peck apart—that's gnawing worry
Or other cares that tear us with desire.
In life we've Sisyphus too, before our eyes,
Drunk with campaigning for the rods of power,
And always the people send him home to sulk.
To canvass for power—unattainable, useless—
And ever to sweat and suffer hardship for it,
That's to push and push up a mountain a heavily-leaning
Boulder—which tumbles right back down from the summit
Anyhow, bouncing and bounding down to the plain.
Then to feed forever your ingrate heart, to take
Your fill of the good things, stuffed but still not full
(As the returning seasons in their rounds
Bring us fresh life and harvest and delight,
The fruits of life that never seem to fill us)
That's the old tale, I think, of the ripe young virgins
Gathering water in a leaky pot
That couldn't be filled no matter what they did.
And Cerberus and the Furies, see, and the darkness,
Tartarus belching blasts from his horrible maw,
Really, they can't exist and never have!
But in life infamous fear of punishment for
Infamous crimes is how we pay for evil.
Prison, and being flung from the frightful Rock,
Flogging and chopping, racking, tarring, torching,
Take these away—still the man who knows his sin
Anticipates, and whips himself hot with terror,
And never sees where misery can have
Its terminus, and punishments their limit;
He fears they may grow heavier still in death.
This life of fools, then, *this* is the true Hell.

Sometimes you should remind yourself, "For shame!
The good king Ancus lost the light of day
And he was a far better man than you.
And many other kings and potentates
Have fallen, once commanders of great nations.
Even that ruler who over the ocean once
Laid down a road for legions to bridge the deep,
Taught them to go over the salt gulfs on foot,
Who scorned with a trample of hooves the hissing sea,
Robbed of light, from a dying body poured his soul.
And Scipio, the battle-lightning, the terror of Carthage,
Gave his bones to the earth like the meanest slave.
Include discoverers of truth and beauty,
Include the poets—among whom solely-sceptered
Homer sleeps just as soundly as the rest.
And when ripe age had warned Democritus
That the motions of his memory were fading,
He accosted Death and offered his own head.
Even Epicurus died, his light of life
Run to the finish; the mind who bested all,
Who doused their light as the sunrise dims the stars.
Who are *you* to be reluctant about dying?
You with your half-dead life still kicking about!
You fritter most of your last years asleep,
You snore when you're awake, and you're always dreaming,
Carrying around a mind that's touchy, panicky,
But you can't tell what's the everlasting trouble,
You're so groggy and worried and jostled on all sides,
And you wander and drift along you don't know where."

If, when men sense a weight upon their minds,
A trouble deep within that wearies them,
They could but recognize the source, and know
Why such huge misery masses in the heart,
They'd never lead their lives as we see now—
As men who never know what they want, who move
From place to place to lay their burden down.

Out of his mansion he's got to go, that fool,
Home bores him to death, and yet he turns right back,
Finding that things are just as dull outside.
Swift, to the villa he spurs his galloping ponies,
Bringing relief—you'd think—to a house afire.
But soon as he touches the villa door, he yawns,
Tries to forget, falls heavily asleep,
Or hurries out to see the town again.
We flee ourselves, whom we can never flee.
Against our will the self we hate clings tight
For we are sick and do not grasp the cause.
If he could see it, he might leave his worries
And strive to understand the nature of things,
For not an hour but all eternity
Is here at issue: what the state will be
Of the time left for each man after death.

What vicious yearning for life, then, makes us hurry
In such a panic, attacked by doubts and dangers?
This much is sure: the end of life awaits us,
The summons must be answered; we must die.
As it is, we lurch in the same ruts; no new pleasure
Is forged for us from drawing out our lives.
Whatever we lack, we want, we think it excels
All else, but when we've grabbed it something new
We thirst for, always panting after life.
Yet we don't know what fortune the years will bring,
What luck we'll have, and what our end will be.
And long life won't allow us to pluck out
One moment from our span beyond the grave
That we might spend a shorter time in death.
Survive this generation and the next—
Nevertheless eternal death awaits,
Nor will the man who died with the sun today
Be nonexistent for less time than he
Who fell last month—or centuries ago.

BOOK FOUR

The trackless haunts of the Muses I explore,
Where no man's foot has trod. What joy to drink
Deep from those pristine fountains! What joy to pluck
New flowers, to weave a garland for my temples
Which the Muses have never veiled anyone with before!
Let the fame be mine, for I teach great things, stride forth
To free the soul from the stranglehold of religion;
Also, I sing dark matters into the light,
Spicing all with the grace of poetry.
I have good reason too for doing this:
When doctors try to coax children to take
Foul wormwood, first they brush the rim of the cups
All round with the sweet and golden juice of honey,
To fool their short-sighted years, fool them all the way
To the lips, so they drink down those bitter drops
Of wormwood, and are tricked but not betrayed,
For all the sooner is their health restored.
So I now, since this doctrine seems so harsh
To many who have never sampled it,
Since the mob shrinks back in horror—I have desired
To reveal our doctrine in sweet-throated song,
Touching it with the honey of the Muses,
That I might hold your mind by this device
To attend to my verse, until you grasp the entire
Nature of things, and see its usefulness.

Because I've shown you what the soul is like,
What makes it thrive united with the body,

How, torn apart, it melts into first-atoms,
Now I shall show you—and the point is crucial—
That ghosts of things, which we call "semblances,"
Exist, which like light films shucked from a surface
Flutter this way and that through the air. These films will strike
Our minds when we're awake, but in our dreams
They terrify, as we behold the bizarre shapes
And semblances of those who lack the light,
Who rouse us with a shudder when we lie limp
In sleep—so let's not think that shades from Hell
Have flown the coop and flutter among the living,
Or that there's anything left of us after death,
When soul and body are destroyed together,
Sundered, resolved into their first-beginnings.
So, I say, thinnest images and forms
Peel away from the utmost skin of things.
A dullard could understand this from what follows.

Since I've taught of the first fabric of all things,
How of their own the atoms of various shapes
Fly in a whirlwind, whipped by ceaseless motion,
And how all things can be created from them,
Now I shall show you—and the point is crucial—
That what we call the "semblances of things"
Exist; the "films" or "peels," as you might say,
Since all these wandering images still bear
The likeness of the things from which they're shed.

To start, since many bodies in plain sight
Shed substances, some fleeting and diffuse
(As oakwood gives off smoke, or as fires heat),
Some stitched more closely and tightly (as sometimes crickets
Slough off their slender tunics in the summer,
Or calves just coming out of the womb will shed
The cauls that covered them, and the slippery serpent
Strips his skin on the thorns—for we often see
Briars festooned with snake hides dangling there),

And you seem to be looking down on the clouds and sky,
On things in a wondrous heaven below the earth.
When a swift horse halts, balks in the river's current
And we look down on the water rushing away,
The horse—at a standstill—seems to be swept upstream
By some force, seems suddenly thrust against the river,
And if we cast our glance to either bank
Everything seems to sweep along with us.
Although a colonnade is parallel
And stands with columns always of one height,
When the whole long stretch is viewed from the upper end
Little by little it draws into the narrows
Of a cone, joining right with left and roof with floor,
Contracting to the disappearing point.
It looks to sailors at sea that the sun rises
From the waves, and sets in the waves to hide its light.
(So what? There's nothing to see but sky and ocean!
Then don't blithely assume the senses' failure.)
Landlubbers think that a ship in port looks hobbled,
Its stern broken and bucking against the waves.
For the part of an oar above the sea's salt spray
Is straight, and straight too is the helm above;
What's plunged in the water below seems broken backwards,
All switched and shifted belly-up, bent round
And rippling nearly to the water's surface.
When the wind scatters a few far clouds at night
The constellations in their splendor seem
To wheel against them and arise above,
Carried into a distant part of the sky.
Press your hand from below against one eye:
By a quirky sensation it's as if all things
We see, we see them double; double are
The flowering torch-flames in the evening lamps,
Double the furniture twinning down the halls,
The faces of men are two and two their bodies.
When the soothing sway of sleep sets the limbs free
And all the body lies in deepest ease,

Then even so we seem to be awake
And moving, and in the visionless gloom of night
We think we see the daily light of the sun;
Shut in our rooms the sky, seas, rivers, mountains
Melt by, and we think we're crossing fields afoot
And hear a sound—though the night is stern in silence
All round us; we reply, with not a word!
Many such marvelous things we see, which all
Seek, as it were, to stain our faith in the senses—
In vain, for most of these illusions are
Due to the added suppositions of
The mind; we see what we have never seen.
Nothing's as tough as to set things in plain sight,
Apart from the instant errors of the mind.

And whoever thinks that knowledge can't be had
Can't know that either—as he says, he knows nothing!
So against this man I'll cease to plead my case—
Let him stand on his head if that's his wish.
But let's suppose he knows this; still I'll ask,
Seeing that truth could never be found in things,
How he knows what it is to know or not to know,
What gives him a sign of the true and false, what tests
And separates the doubtful from the sure?
You'll find that truth's criterion first proceeds
From the senses—which can never be proved false.
For something more worthy of trust would have to be found
Which of its own subdues the false with truth.
What then should be held more worthy of trust than the senses?
Or can reason arisen from false senses speak
Against them, arisen wholly from those senses?
If they're not true, all reason must be wrong!
Can the ears accuse the eyes? Or can touch blame
The ears? Or a taste in the mouth refute this touch?
Or the nose or the eyes defeat the taste in court?
I think not. For their powers are separate,
Whatever power they have; therefore what's soft

To hold to the traces of the game they've found,
And when they're rousted up they'll often race
After phantoms of deer, as if they'd seen them fleeing—
Till they shake off the error and come to.
And the cuddly lapdogs reared up in the home
Will leap to their feet with a sudden shake, as if
They'd caught sight of some stranger breaking in.
And the fiercer the stock from which a creature springs
The wilder and more savage are its dreams.
But the dappled birds will suddenly take to wing,
Flapping away in the sacred groves at night,
If in their pleasant dreams they see a hawk
Flying in hot pursuit of battle and warfare.
And the minds of men, that do big things in thought,
Will often act out big things in their dreams:
They'll slug it out with kings, be caught, pitch battles,
And holler as if their throats were cut, in bed;
Many lose title bouts and groan in pain,
And as if ripped and champed by a panther's jaws
Or a fierce lion, fill the house with cries;
Many in dreams will speak of grave misdeeds
And often testify against themselves;
Many will die; many, as though they were
Plummeting from sheer mountains to the earth,
Are seized with terror and wake like madmen, hardly
Returning to themselves, in the seethe of the body;
A thirsty man will sit by a pleasant spring
And gulp almost the whole brook down his throat;
Gripped by their dreams, innocents think they're lifting
Their nightshirts at the latrine or on the pot,
Spilling the fluid filtered through the bladder,
Soaking their splendid Persian coverlets.
When the surging channels of youth, when the ripeness of time
Fashion the semen and slip it into the members,
Then, from any body whatever, images strike,
Heralding youth's fresh rose and radiant features.

These things so tickle and rouse the seed-swollen place
That it gushes out—as if the job were done—
In the flow of a mighty stream and soils the linen.

As I have said, the seed's provoked in us
When full-grown age makes the limbs strong and sturdy.
Things stir or set the spurs to different things.
Only human power will urge up human seed.
This seed, as soon as it's cast out from its place,
Passes through members and limbs and the whole body,
Collecting in that knot of muscle, inciting
At once the part of the body that makes life.
The genitals, roused, swell big with seed, long to
Expel it into the place of fierce desire.
The body seeks what wounds the mind with love.
Fighters fall where they are stricken, the blood spurts
In the direction from which we suffer the hit;
In hand-to-hand combat the red gush strafes the enemy.
And so whoever is shot by the arrows of Venus—
Whether pierced by the womanly limbs of a young boy
Or a lady darting love from her whole body—
Strains toward the archer, shudders with joy to come
Close, to shoot into that body his body's juice.
Silent desire gives hints of that wild joy.

Such is our Venus, our love, our "amor" and "umor";
From here those first sweet drops of Venus trickle
Into our hearts. The chilling care comes next.
Your love's not around, for a change? But still her image
Is, and her sweet name echoes in your ears.
But we ought to flee these shadows and scare off
The food of love, and turn our thoughts to another—
Shooting the juice into any available body,
Not holding it all in for a single lover,
Saving up for ourselves sure pain and sorrow.
If you feed the sore it'll put down roots and fester

And blister over and drive you mad with trouble—
Better write off the old wounds with new business,
Stroll after a street-strolling trollop and cure yourself,
Shift your thoughts to another while you still can!

The man who shuns love can enjoy sex still—
More, for the goods come with no penalty.
Certainly, pleasure is purer in the sane
Than in the lovesick. Though they've got each other
The torrid lovers are tossed in a storm of wandering,
Never settling on what first to see or feel.
What they hunger for, they squeeze hard, tight, and cause
Pain, often nipping the lips between their teeth
And inflicting kisses, for the pleasure's not
Pure; there are spurs beneath that prick them on
To hurt whatever it is that makes them rave.
But Venus sweetly allays their pain in love,
And a dash of gentle pleasure soothes the sting,
So they hope that the same body that gave rise
To the heat of love can put the flame out too.
Nature objects—this cannot come to be.
Love is unique; the more of it we have
The hotter our hearts burn with their fierce desire.
Water and bread we take into our bodies—
Once they have occupied the proper places
Our hunger or thirst is easily fulfilled.
But from the lovely and fresh human face
The body feeds on nothing but those slight
Images—poor little hopes that are lost in the wind.
As a thirsty man will dream of drinking, but
No water is there to quench his parching body—
He strives for the shadow of water and struggles for nothing,
Gulping the rush of the river and yet still thirsty,
So lovers are fooled by Venus and her shadows,
Never having their fill of seeing the nude beside them
Nor able to glean the sleekness from its limbs,
Their vague hands roaming wildly over the body.

And now, limbs locked in the embrace, they taste
Life's flower, and the body can feel the joy to come,
And Venus is poised to plow the womanly fields,
And they rush and fasten their bodies and let the spittle
Mingle, and mingle the breath, teeth bruising lips—
In vain, for they can't scrape a thing away
Or penetrate and bury body in body.
That's what they seem to want and fight to do:
So eagerly do they tangle in Venus' snares,
Till delight lets their members melt and fall.
When the massed-up longing at last spurts out of the muscle,
There's a lull in the violent blaze—the briefest lull.
But the same madness returns, and the fury too,
They long to attain they don't know what, and can't
Find any trick to master this disease:
They waver, and pine away from the hidden wound.

Add that they spend their strength to the point of exhaustion,
That they waste their time at another's beck and call!
Their duties fall faint, their fame grows sick and totters,
Their business fails and their wealth is turned into
Ointments from Persia and sweet Sicyonian slippers.
Sure! and great emeralds with their grass-green shine
Are enclosed in gold, and the seaside robe's worn sheer
From the constant rubbing, soaked and stained with sex.
Father's hard-earned estate? Bonnets or scarves
For whores—or long lush robes or lingerie.
Then formal dinners and delicacies and games,
Goblets all round, crowns, garlands, lotions, all
For nothing: from the very fount of pleasure
The bitter will surge and in love's flower beds
Clutch—for regrets bite back at the conscious mind,
To have lost his years to idleness and whoring,
Or maybe the girlfriend's tossed some two-edged word
That sticks in the lover's heart and blooms like fire,
Or her roving gaze has lit on another lover—
He thinks—he sees the traces of her smile.

These evils, though, attend the luckiest, most
Successful love; but for the crossed, or for those
Who come up empty, the evils—and these you can see
With your eyes shut—are countless! As I've shown you,
Better stay awake and watch out for the snare.
For to shun the hunting nets of love is not
So hard as, once being caught, to free yourself
From Venus' mesh and break through her tough knots.
You're bound and tangled? You can still flee the hunter
Unless your stubbornness gets in your way
And you overlook all of the blemishes
Of body and mind in her you crave so much.
For men are blinded by their appetites
And grant their loved ones graces they don't have.
The vile, the crooked—these, we see, are sweethearts
And are honored in the highest by their lovers.
Men laugh at a fellow who's stuck with an ugly girlfriend,
"You better go keep your Venus happy!" Fools!
Their own troubles are worse, and they can't see them.
She's black as soot? "Honey-tan." She never washes?
"Casual!" Cat-eyed? "Like Pallas!" She's knobby and wiry?
"A gazelle." A dwarf's "ma petite," "my little charmer,"
A big bruiser's "one who'll take your breath away";
The stammerer "lisps," the stock-still, she's just "bashful,"
While the spiteful little spitfire's "a real sparkler";
Then it's "svelte" for a woman too withered to keep alive,
And the half-dead hacker's got "a delicate frame,"
But a "diva" she is with the great gargantuan boobs,
And Fat Lip is "one big kiss," Pug Nose "my puppy."
I could go on forever with such stuff.
But all right, all right—she's as gorgeous as you say,
The glory of Venus glowing in every limb—
Hey, there are others; hey, we've lived without her;
And she does (we know it!) just what the homely do,
Douches herself, poor lady, with smelly perfumes
While her maids scurry away and chuckle in secret.
But the weepy locked-out lover buries the steps

Under flowers and wreaths, and oils the snooty posts
With marjoram, planting kisses on the door—
Pathetic. Just let him in and let him take
One awful whiff! He'll look for a decent reason
To get out; the whiny poem he's got by heart
Falls, and he curses himself for being a blockhead,
For granting her more than is just to grant a mortal.
Our goddesses are no fools. No! They themselves
Guard all the secrets of the hoary deep
From those they want to hold in the bonds of love;
In vain, for you can guess and drag it all
Into the light, and ask them what's so funny.
And if she's good-hearted and not shrewish you
Can overlook for that her human failings.

A woman won't always sigh with put-on passion
When she entangles her lover in the tight hug
Of bodies, sucking his lips in with wet kisses.
No, she'll do it with spirit, looking for mutual joy,
Spurring his steed along on the track of love.
What allows the birds and the cattle and wild beasts
And sheep and horses to squat and submit to the male,
Unless their moist parts burn in heat themselves,
And eagerly thrust against the mounting godhead?
Those linked by mutual pleasure—don't you see
How they are tortured in those chains they share?
How dogs in the crossroad, trying to go their ways,
Tugging and straining in opposite directions,
Stay stuck instead in the strong cement of sex!
If it weren't for mutual joy they'd never do it—
A joy that sets the trap to shackle them.
So I say it again: the pleasure goes two ways.

And if by chance in the mingling of the seeds
The female's the victor and masters the male at climax,
Then the mother's seed bear children like the mother
As the father's the father. But those who look like both,

Their faces mingling the features of both parents,
Grow from the father's body and mother's blood,
When mutual heat fanned high and the stings of Venus
Dash all their roused-up seeds against each other,
So neither is the victor nor the vanquished.
And a child at times can look just like his granddad,
Or even recall more distant ancestors,
Since many atoms mixed in many ways
Will lurk within the body of the parent,
Straight from the stock that the fathers pass to the fathers.
At random Venus picks them for our looks.
And they're crucial too for the hair and the voice and the manners,
For these no less than facial features or
Our frames are fashioned from specific seeds.
And the father's seed can give rise to a daughter,
And sons have grown from the seed of the mother's body.
For the baby always comes from the seeds of both,
And will be more than half of whichever parent
He most closely resembles—as you can observe,
Whether the sprout's a boy or a little girl.

The gods don't scare the seed from any man
So that he'll waste his life with a sterile Venus
And never be called "father" by sweet children—
Though many sad people think so and splash the altars
With a lot of blood and set the incense smoking,
So that their wives will come home full of seed.
They pester gods and oracles, in vain.
If a man's sterile his semen is just too thick
Or too thin and runny to be suitable.
If it's runny it can't cling fast to the right organs,
And trickles back out of the womb abortively.
As for the thicker, too-clumped-together semen,
Either it doesn't shoot out far enough,
Or it can't get in or if it does get in
It mingles too feebly with the woman's seed.

For the organs need to be in tune together:
He will fill *her* more readily, and from him
She'll sooner grow heavy and bear the burden of children.
And many a barren and often-wedded woman
Will find the man to enable her at last
To carry the sweet treasure of a child.
And men whose wives, though fertile, could never bear
Children, have found concordant women too
To fortify their age with progeny.
So much it matters that the seeds can fuse
In the fit way to cause conception: thick
Most suitable for the runny and vice versa.
And for that, it matters what you eat to live.
Some foods make semen clump in the members while
Other foods thin it out into decay.
And the methods for transacting your delight,
They've a bit to do with it too. For women, it's thought,
Conceive the sooner from the custom of
Wild beasts or horses; with her breasts beneath
And the buttocks high, the womb can take the seed.
As for pleasant tricks, they're not required for women.
For a wife prevents conception, fights against it,
If she gleefully clamps his god between her hams
And writhes away with all her boneless flesh.
That shoves the plowshare out of the proper field
And furrow—the seeds shoot out and miss their place.
It's how whores move, for their own benefit,
So as not to grow heavy with children all the time,
But to make sex more delightful for the men—
A thing which *our* wives never seem to need!

It's not an act of god or the arrows of Venus
That makes a homely little woman loved.
She brings it about herself by what she does,
By her yielding temper and her clean appearance;
You'll easily learn to spend your life with her.

For habit is the recipe for love.
A thing struck over and over, no matter how lightly,
Will give in at long last and totter and fall.
Notice how water dripping upon a stone
Bores a hole through that stone eventually?

BOOK FIVE

Whose potent mind can build a worthy song
For these discoveries and their majesty?
Who so muscular of words to shape the praise
To match his merits—his, whose mind brought forth
And left for us such a sought-after prize?
No mortal man, I think, could do him justice.
If we must speak as the majesty of nature
Now seen, demands, he was a god, great Memmius,
A god, the founder of that way of life
Called "wisdom" now; our skillful pilot, who
Steers our lives from such dark and tossing storms
To dwell in sunlight and tranquillity.
Bring the old inventions of those other gods!
For Ceres, they say, first brought us grain, and Bacchus
Gave mortal men to drink of the juice of the vine—
And yet life can go on without these things,
As we hear some nations still live nowadays.
Without a clear heart, though, no one lives well.
All the more does he merit from us the name of god
Whose way of life, by now spread worldwide, brings
Sweet soothing solace for the minds of men.
You think the labors of Hercules were greater?
You've drifted even further from the truth.
That big gaping maw of the Nemaean lion,
What's it to us? Or the bristly Arcadian boar?
What harm from the Cretan bull, or that pest of Lerna,
The hydra, fortified with poisonous snakes?
Or the triple power of three-breasted Geryon?

How badly could the Stymphalian swamp birds hurt us,
Or the fire-snorting horses of Thracian Diomedes
Hard by Mount Ismarus in Bistonia?
And the guard of the bright Hesperian golden apples,
The serpent of piercing eye and measureless body
Hugging a tree trunk—what harm could he possibly do,
Way off at the coast of the ruthless Atlantic, where
No Roman goes nor even the natives venture?
And all the other such monsters put to death,
If they'd won and lived, how could they hurt us, really?
Not at all, I think. Even now earth teems to the brim
With wild beasts filling all the woods with terror,
And the high hills and the deep wilderness,
All places we can shun, most of the time.
But if the mind's not cleansed, what dubious battles
Must we then stalk, and enter against our will!
How sharp are the lusts that tear a man in two
And trouble his life! How many fears will follow!
What insolence, filth, and shamelessness! How many
Disasters they deal! What sloth and debauchery!
Who conquered these and drove them out of the heart
With words alone, not weapons, is this man
Not worthy to be numbered with the gods?
Especially as he spoke much—and divinely—
About those same immortal gods; his words
Opened to us the nature of all things.

His is the path, his are the reasonings I
Follow and teach, how all things at their birth
Are treaty-bound and must remain so bound,
Not strong enough to tear the laws of time
(As in particular the soul's been found
To be born and grow and stand fast with the body,
Unable to outlast long time intact,
But it's semblances that fool the mind in dreams,
When we seem to see someone whom life's abandoned).
The train of reasoning leads me now to this,

That I likewise expound the law that all
The universe was born too and will die;
And how the assembly of matter fashioned first
The earth, the heavens, the sea and the stars and sun
And the round moon; what animals then on earth
Sprang up, and what earth never bore; how mankind
First began in their interchanges to
Use language's variety for naming,
And how into our hearts that dread of the gods
Stole its way, with its awe throughout the world
For temples, altars, lakes, groves, holy idols.

Besides that, I'll make plain how the helmsman Nature
Steers the course of the sun and the wanderings of the moon,
Lest we think that, gliding of their own free will
Between earth and heaven, they light their annual way,
Compliantly swelling the grain for living things,
Or that they're turned by any plan of the gods.
Men may learn well that the gods live free of care,
But if they wonder anyway how all things
Can come to happen, especially what they notice
Looming above their heads in the shores of the sky,
They slide back into their old religions, calling
Upon those pitiless masters, whom the poor fools
Believe almighty; they don't know what can be,
What cannot, what law grants each thing its own
Deep-driven boundary stone and finite scope.

Now then—not to waste your time with promises—
Begin by observing the earth and sea and sky!
Whose threefold nature—Memmius, three bodies,
Three forms so far unlike, three sorts of stuff—
Will be put to death in a day; the vast world's structure,
Upheld through many years, will fall to ruin.
And well I know how strange to the mind, unsettling,
It is that heaven and earth will be destroyed.
Hard for my words to overcome that doubt!

Takes joy in a new one; but if nothing irksome
Has ever befallen you down the beautiful ages,
What could enkindle a love for novelty?
Their lives, I suppose, lay sunk in sorrow and darkness
Until there dawned the birthday of the world?
And what did it hurt, that *we* had not been made?
Now whoever's been born, he ought to want to stay
Alive, so long as pleasures keep their charm.
But for him who's never tasted the love of life—
Never been on the roster—what harm, in not being born?
The model, moreover, first planted in their minds
For the very idea of man and the birth of the world,
Where did they get it? How could they see what to make?
How could they ever find out about first-beginnings,
What those might make when you shuffle their order, if
Nature herself had given them no peek?
But many atoms jumbled in many ways,
Spurred on by blows through the endless stretch of time,
Are launched and driven along by their own weight
And come together and try all combinations,
Whatever their assemblies might create;
No wonder then, if into such arrangements
They happen also to fall, the tracks that would
Bring forth and still restore the universe.
But if I knew nothing of atoms, of what they were,
Still from the very ways of the heavens, from many
Other things I could name, I'd dare to assert
And prove that not for us and not by gods
Was this world made. There's too much wrong with it!
To start, what the vast sweep of the sky vaults over,
Mountains take up the lion's share and forests
Full of wild beasts, and sloughs and rocky cliffs
And the sea that holds the headlands far apart.
Worse, torrid heat and the constant fall of snow
Remove from mortals two-thirds of the earth.
And what's left to farm, Nature, through her own force,
Would choke with briars; man's strength must stand against it,

Inured to groan over the iron mattock,
To scratch a life by leaning hard at the plow.
The clods are rich, but the plow must turn them over,
Loosen and work them, prod them to give birth;
Crops won't spring up in the air all by themselves.
And now that our hard work has paid off in crops,
Breaking into leaf and flower over the fields,
The sun in the sky will scorch them in its rage
Or sudden storms will kill, or frost and ice,
Or the blasts of bullying winds will batter them down.
And the wild beasts that set your hairs to bristle,
Hostile to man, on the land, in the sea—why should
Nature create and feed them? Or why should the seasons
Bring pestilence? Why should early Death come stalking?
And then, a baby, tossed up like a mariner by
Fierce waves, lies naked on the beach, dumb, helpless
To save its life, when Nature has spilled it out
Of the clench of its mother's womb to the shores of light,
And fills the place with wailing—as is proper
For one whom so much suffering awaits.
But the various flocks and cattle and beasts grow up
And don't need rattles, or the kindly wet-nurse
Teasing with her sweet broken baby talk;
Don't need to change their clothes for the changing sky;
They need no weapons or high walls to guard
Their own, for the earth herself and artful Nature
Bring forth abundantly for all their needs.

First of all, since the stuff of earth and water,
And the soft breath of the air and the brilliant fire,
The four that make this universe, are all
Composed of bodies that are born and die,
We must conclude the world is born, and dies.

For in fact, whatever we see whose parts and members
Are of a form to suffer birth and death,
Invariably these things must also die

And be born. Then since I see that the world's chief parts
And members are destroyed, and then reborn,
Surely the heavens and earth must also have
A time of origin and time of death.

Don't think that for my own sake in these questions
I've hustled it in as given that earth and fire
Die, and been sure of the death of water and air,
Claiming they'd all be born and grow again.
For starters, a good part of the earth, parched
By the relentless sun, stampeded under,
Is breathed forth in a wraith of floating dust
Which high winds scatter in the atmosphere.
And part of the soil is called to wash away
In storms, and the streams shave close and gnaw the rocks.
Besides, whatever the earth feeds and grows
Is restored to earth. And since she surely is
The womb of all things and their common grave,
Earth must dwindle, you see, and take on growth again.

For the rest, that the sea and springs and streams abound
With ever-new water, flowing throughout the year,
Needs little argument: great rollicking brooks
Make it clear everywhere. And yet the water
Is skimmed away, so the flow won't swell to the brim,
Partly because high winds that sweep the sea
Diminish it, and the shearing rays of the sun;
Partly because it soaks into the earth.
There its brine is filtered out and the sweet water
Seeps upward and at the source of every stream
Collects—then it's fresh assailing over the land,
Feet cutting a watery way for the waves to follow.

Let me now tell of the air, whose transformations
Each hour are total and innumerable.
For all that ever flows from things is carried
Into the sea of air. But if that same matter

Never washed back to restore the things in ebb,
All would by now have melted into air.
It never ceases to rise from things and fall
Back into them, for the world's a tireless flux.

And that brimming fountain of light, the brilliant sun,
Never ceases to flood the sky with its fresh dazzle,
With new supplies in an instant, light for light.
For the first of its flashes dies wherever it falls—
And the following shows you why this must be so.
As soon as the clouds have stolen beneath the sun
And snapped, so to speak, in two the rays of light,
The lower halves die off at once, and the earth
Is cloaked in shade wherever the clouds are riding.
Know then that things will always need fresh light,
For each first sling of the flashing sun shall die;
Nothing at all could be seen in the sun unless
That well of light restored the stream forever.

Why, all of your earthly lights you use at night—
The hanging lamps and the torches rich in smoke,
Oil-sleek and quivering into brilliant light—
Rush as the sunshine rushes, with courier-fire
Supplying fresh light, hurtling on to fork in flame,
On, that no places are left in the dark by the interruption,
so swiftly is light's ruin hidden
By the quick rise of flame from all the fires.
So we conclude that the sun and the moon and the stars
Hurl light from a constant rising and rising of light,
And always lose what fire they had to start.
Don't think they live and thrive inviolable.

Then, don't you notice that stones give way to age,
And high rock-towers crumble into ruin,
And the shrines and the forms of the gods grow weary and crack,
The sacred Will unable to prolong
Their destiny, or buck the laws of Nature?

Don't we see fallen monuments of men
Ask if we don't believe *they* grow old too?
And torn-loose granite tumble from high mountains,
Unable to suffer or outlast the stress
Of a *finite* time? Nor could their fall be sudden
If for an endless age they had held fast
Against time's battering rams, without a crack.

Now look at what above and around us holds
All the earth in embrace. If, as some say,
Out of itself it bears all and takes back
All that have died, it must be born, must die.
For a thing that feeds another from itself
Must dwindle, and be restored by what returns.

And if there's been no first dawn for the world
And the skies above have stretched eternally,
Why did no poets sing of other deeds
Before the Theban war and the death of Troy?
Where have so many brave deeds fallen, not
Grafted to flower in lasting monuments?
The truth, I think: the universe is new,
The weave of nature's not long since begun.
That's why some crafts are just now being polished,
Just now developed; innovations in
The naval art, in melodies that sing;
Even the nature and order of things have been
Recently found, and I myself am first
To turn them into Latin poetry.
Now if you think this all's been here before,
But the human race died out in a scorching fire,
Or their cities fell in some great cataclysm,
Or from relentless rain the hungering rivers
Spread out to bury every little town,
So much the more you're beaten and must confess
That there shall come an end to heaven and earth.
Supposing things were roughed up by such stress,
If a fiercer danger had borne down hard upon them

They would have fallen into utter ruin.
A clear proof of our own mortality
Is that we all fall ill of the same diseases
As those whom Nature has removed from life.

Besides, whatever is everlasting must
Either (solid of matter) spit back the punches,
Not suffering anything to pierce and split
Its tight-packed parts within (so durable are
Atoms, whose nature I have shown above),
Or persevere through all eternity
Not struck by a single blow (as empty space
Remains unacting and untouchable),
Or last because no wealth of space surrounds it
Where its loosening parts might break away and scatter
(As the everlasting All-in-all), for there
Is no Beyond to fly to, or atoms which
Could loosen it and destroy it with their pounding.
But, as I've shown, the world does not consist
Of solid matter—for void's mixed into things;
Nor is it void; and there's no lack of bodies
To rise by chance out of the infinite
And reel annihilation for all things
Or smuggle in some other threat of ruin;
What's more, no place is missing, no deep gulf
For the wreckage of the universe to rain,
Or something else can batter and destroy it.
Death, therefore, has not shut its gates against
Heaven, or sun and earth and the depths of the sea,
But gapes wide open with its empty maw.
And so you must admit, these things were born,
And nothing made of perishable stuff
Could, from the endless stretch of time till now,
Have mocked the vigorous might of the boundless ages.

And then, since the chief elements of the world
Fight with each other, stirred to unholy war,
Intestine strife, don't you see that an end can come

One or the other could have given men fire.
And how to use fire to soften and cook food
They learned from the sun—for they saw fruits in the fields
Grow mellow under hot rays beating down.

Those of a clever and vigorous turn of mind
Soon showed their fellows how to adopt new things—
Like fire—for a new diet and way of life.
Kings founded cities then, and citadels
As garrisons for themselves or hideaways,
And parceled out the cattle and land according
To beauty or intelligence or strength.
(For strength and a lovely face were highly prized.)
Then property was established and gold found,
Stealing the honor from the strong and handsome.
For the mob all flocks to the rich man's following,
Even those blessed with strength and lovely bodies.
But if true reason governs how one lives,
To have great wealth means to live sparingly,
With a clear heart: small wants are always met.
But men were avid for high rank and rule
To set their fortunes on a steadfast basis,
To prosper and to lead their lives in peace—
In vain, for while men battled to the top
They left a road of treachery behind,
Then from off that summit as if thunderstruck
They'd be flung by Envy down to hell in scorn—
For as lightning strikes the summits in most cases,
So envy scorches the most prominent.
Thus it's far more satisfying to serve in quiet
Than to want to rule the world and hold a throne.
Let them weary themselves and sweat their blood for nothing,
Choking their way through the narrows of ambition,
For all they know comes from what others tell them,
They trust in rumor and not in their own senses,
And that's the way it is, and was, and will be.

When the kings were slain, the ancient majesty
Of the proud scepter and throne lay toppled over
And that bright bloody crown of the Lord's head
Mourned its lost honor under the tread of mobs
Who gleefully trampled what they once had feared.
Thus the state returned to the mob and the lowest dregs,
And each man sought supremacy and power.
Then some men showed how to make magistrates
And appoint courts—for they would live by laws.
Weary of living by brute force, exhausted
From lack of friendship, men, of their own will, fell
The sooner under the strict laws and the courts.
Embittered and angry men had sought revenge
Beyond what our fair laws would now concede;
But people grew sick to death of violence.
Then loot was spoiled by the fear of punishment.
The snares of injury snatch their engineer;
Force doubles back upon its origin.
Not easy for one to lead a sweet calm life
Who violates the common bond of peace.
And even if he should fool the gods and men,
Still he can't trust the secret will last forever,
And in fact many, talking in their sleep
Or crazed with disease, are said to have dragged themselves
Out in the open and revealed their crimes.

How the idea of gods spread to all nations,
Stocking their cities with altars and making men tremble
To undertake the solemn rites, which flourish
With all our luxury and magnificence
(Even now sowing in us the seeds of horror,
Urging us on to rear across the world
New shrines to the gods to crowd on festival days),
Is not hard to explain in a few words.
In those days mortal men saw while awake
The excellent countenances of the gods,

Or rather in dreams they gasped at their vast size.
Men lent sensation to these giant forms
For they moved their limbs, it seemed, and spoke proud words
As arrogant as their beauty and great strength.
Eternal life they gave them, for their faces
And their physiques persisted ever-present,
And they thought that beings endowed with such great power
Could never be put to rout by any force.
They thought the gods preeminently blest;
For the fear of death could hardly trouble them;
Also because in dreams they saw them do
Miraculous things, and many, without an effort.
Then too they saw the systems of the sky
Turn in sure order, and the changing seasons,
But could not understand why this occurred.
Their refuge, then: assign to the gods all things,
Have them steer all things with a single nod.
In the heavens they placed the holy haunts of the gods
For through the heavens wheeled the night and the moon,
The moon and the day, the night and night's stark signs,
And night-roaming torches of heaven and gliding flames,
Clouds, sun, storms, snow, high winds and hail and lightning
And the sudden growl and great and menacing rumble.

Unhappy human race—to grant such feats
To gods, and then to add vindictiveness!
What wailing did they bring forth for themselves,
What wounds for us, what tears for our descendants!
It's no piety to be seen at every altar,
To cover your head and turn to the stone idol,
Or to flatten yourself on the ground and lift your palms
To the shrines, or to spray altars with the blood
Of cattle—so much!—or to string vow on vow.
To observe all things with a mind at peace
Is piety. For when we look up to the heavenly
Shrines of this great world, the stars that glitter, the sky
Studded, when we think of the journeying sun and moon,

Then in hearts heavy-laden with other cares
That Trouble is roused to boot, and rears its head—
That the limitless power of gods, the power that wheels
The stars and planets, may be aimed at us.
Then ignorance assails the mind in doubt
About the universe's origin,
About the end, how long the walls of the world
Can suffer the straining of such stir and motion,
Or whether, granted everlasting health
By the gods, they can in endless course disdain
The turning age and the vast strength of time.
And worse, whose soul does not contract in fear
Of the gods, whose limbs don't crawl with terror when
The scorched earth under the terrible lightning bolt
Quakes, and a grumbling rolls through the great sky?
Don't people and nations tremble, and arrogant kings
Cringe, stricken into shock by fear of the gods,
Lest for some foul deed done or proud word said
The heavy time has come to pay the price?
When a high hard gale across the plains of the sea
Rakes a commander and his fleet along
With all his mighty elephants and legions,
Won't he beseech the "Peace of the Gods" in terror
And pray for peaceful breezes and fair winds?
In vain, for the whirlpool's got him anyway
And borne him down unto the shoals of Death.
So thoroughly is human grandeur crushed
By a hidden force; the glorious rods and axes,
Those splendid mockeries, are trampled under.
Well, when the whole earth staggers underfoot
And cities are battered and fall, or threaten to fall,
What wonder if self-loathing seizes men
And they grant wondrous power over all affairs
To gods, to steer and rule the universe?

To the next topic: bronze and gold and iron
And heavy silver too, and good strong lead,