**De Rerum Natura**

Lucretius

Translated by Christopher Kelk

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**CONTENTS**

[BOOK I 2](#_Toc105075845)

[BOOK II 41](#_Toc105075846)

[BOOK III 83](#_Toc105075847)

[BOOK IV 122](#_Toc105075848)

[BOOK V 167](#_Toc105075849)

[BOOK VI 220](#_Toc105075850)

# BOOK I

O mother of Aeneas’ children, who

Delight both men and gods, dear Venus, you

Who fill with fruitfulness the busy sea

And teeming lands beneath the canopy

Of gliding stars, all creatures are created

Through you, through you we are illuminated

By the sun: the winds and clouds all flee away

At your approach, for you a rich display

Throughout the beautiful and chequered earth

Of flowers is seen, the seas betray their mirth, 10

For you the radiant land spreads out its light.

As soon as springtime’s face has come in sight

And procreant gales storm from the West, set free,

Birds forecast your approach ecstatically.

Across the fecund fields the wild herds dance

And swim the rapid streams. With radiance

Possessed, they follow you with fervency

Wherever you lead them. Across each sea,

Each rapid river and each mountain spur,

Birds’ feathery homes and verdant plains, you stir 20

Them all with love that they might propagate

Their kind forever. Since you regulate

Alone the Cosmos and the shores of light

Are empty, and there’s nothing fair or bright

Without you, I am keen that for the verse

About the Cosmos which I now rehearse

And to my dear friend Memmius address

(A friend whom you have always wished, goddess,

To be supreme) you’ll be accessory. 30

So give my words lifelong urbanity.

Across the world bring peace to fierce warfare,

For you alone have mastery to share

Your peace with us, since Mars, who governs all

Affairs of savage war, will often fall

Into your lap, by constant love subdued,

And, gazing on your eyes, enjoys the food

It gives, his eyes and throat both backward cast,

And breathes upon your lips. Then hold him fast,

O holy one, sweet nothings uttering

To garner peace for Rome as there you cling, 40

Because in troubled times I cannot pen

My verse , nor can that most noble of men,

Famed Memmius, neglect the Roman cause.

As for the rest, this too should give us pause –

With ready ears and singleness of mind,

Withdrawn from every care, prepare to find

True judgment, lest these gifts that I’ve laid out

For you with ardent zealousness you flout

Before you understand them. I’ll debate

The heavenly statutes and expatiate 50

On Nature’s primal germs which were created

By Her and fortified and propagated.

I have devised to call them by the name

Of matter, atoms, seeds, for all things came

From them. When humankind by everyone

Was seen to be lamentably undone

By harsh religion, which up in the sky

Showed its fierce face to every mortal eye,

A Grecian first ventured to elevate

Men’s eyes so that they might then tolerate 60

That scourge: no godly fates nor lightning’s flash

Nor threatening thunder ever could abash

That man – they rather chafed his dauntless heart

To be the very first to tear apart

The gates of nature: thus his iron will

And brain prevailed; afar he wandered stlll

Beyond the flaming walls encompassing

The world, through the huge All meandering,

At last arriving hither to relate

To us the things that Nature can create 70

And those it can’t, what law’s prescribed for each,

The boundary-stone that into Time can reach

So far: he thus established mastery

Over religion, and his victory

Exalts in heaven. But maybe I fear

Unholy realms of thought are active here

And you are travelling on a sinful course

Because that same religion is a source

Of evil: witness Agamemnon’s daughter,

The victim, at Diana’s shrine, of slaughter, 80

The shrine the Grecian counsellors debased;

The chaplet, that had been placed on her chaste

Tresses, and fillets fluttering down the side

Of either cheek she felt, and then she spied

Her grieving father and the priests who kept

The knife concealed, as all the people wept

At sight of her. Struck dumb with terror, she

Dropped down upon the ground with sinking knee

(A king’s first-born, and yet it served her nought).

They raised her up and to the altar brought 90

The trembling girl, but not that she should be

A bride with singing and solemnity –

A sinless girl sinfully decimated,

By him who sired her assassinated,

A bloody sacrifice that winds might blow

Auspiciously and let his navy go

To Troy. Such crimes religion leads us to.

And then the time will come when even you,

Forced by bards’ terror-tales, would split away

From us. Even now how many dreams can they 100

Concoct to thwart your visions and distress

All of your fortunes with base fearfulness!

With reason! For if men could only see

A certain ending to their misery,

They would be able, by some reasoning,

To find a way to crush the menacing

Of prophets and religions. For now, though,

No reason or procedure do they know,

Afraid that they’ll bear endless penalties

In death. They do not know the qualities 110

Of souls, whether they’re born or come maybe

Inside us at our own nativity

And die with us or visit Orcus’ land

And his great caves or, by some god’s command,

Brute herds, as has been sung by Ennius,

Who brought from lovely Helicon to us

A wreath of bright perennial greenery,

Renowned forever throughout Italy;

Yet he, whose verse shall last forevermore,

Tells us that those Acheronian vaults don’t store 120

Our souls or bodies, merely strangely grey

Simulacra; Ennius goes on to say

Immortal Homer’s ghost, tears tumbling

Out of his eyes, explained to him the spring

Whence Nature comes and said we must reflect

Upon the heavens and learn the laws’ effect

Upon the sun and moon and scrutinize

What force controls our life beneath the skies,

But in particular, with reasoning,

To scan the mind and soul and whence they spring 130

And what dread things approach our waking eyes

When we’re unhealthy and what terrifies

Us while we’re sleeping until we seem faced

With those who many years have been embraced

By earth’s strong arms, and hear them, too, close by.

I’m quite aware how hard it is to try

To chronicle in Latin poetry

The Greeks’ cryptic disclosures, specially

Because there are new words we must dig out

For many things since we are still without 140

So many terms, the subject being new.

And yet the sweet friendship I find in you,

Your worth, the hoped-for joy, induces me

To bear, night after night, this drudgery,

To find the words, the music that I might

At last disclose to you the glorious light

Wherewith you can behold its very heart.

No flaming spoke of light, no glittering dart

Of dawn can rout the mind’s obscurity,

This scourge, yet Nature’s aspect and decree 150

Instructs us that there’s nothing that’s been bred

From nothing. Every mortal’s ruled by dread

Because he sees above and on the land

Many things whose causes he can’t understand

But thinks the gods control. But once we know

That nothing’s bred of nothing, that will show

More clearly what we seek – those things alone

That caused all things to fill the global zone

Without the aid of gods. If everything

Came out of nothing, every kind would spring 160

From everything, yet lacking any seed.

Men from the sea and from the land a breed

Of scaly things and from the heavens birds

May rise, and hornèd beasts and other herds,

All kinds would roam both tilth and wilderness

With their offspring. The trees would not possess

The same fruits, which would change, and any tree

Would carry any fruit quite randomly.

Where would the procreant atoms be? Indeed

How could a constant mother yield their seed? 170

But since all have fixed seeds, they all are sent

To the shores of light, born from each element

And primal body of its own. Therefore

All cannot come from all, because a store

Of secret strength exists in each. Likewise,

Why does the rose in springtime meet our eyes,

Corn in the summer, vines at autumn’s lure

If not because established seeds are sure

To merge in their own season and we see

Creations newly born accordingly 180

When times are due and when the vigorous earth

With safety brings her tender young to birth

Upon the shores of light? If all things, though,

Came from a void, they suddenly would grow

In alien months and unexpectedly

With no primordial germs and thus would be

From procreation kept in an adverse hour.

There’d be no space for living seeds to flower;

From being tiny babies suddenly

Youths would appear and from the earth a tree 190

Would spring (impossible!): all things indeed

Grow gradually, commensurate with each seed,

Retaining their own kind; thus we may know

That from their own material all things grow.

Without each season’s showers of rain the earth

Cannot to tasty nourishment give birth

And whatsoever lives, if it is barred

From food, cannot prolong its kind and guard

Its life; more easily we may bear in mind

That there are many bodies of like kind 200

In many things (as letters commonly

Occurring in a lot of words we see)

Than anything can have no fountain-head.

And why are there no bulky men who tread

The seas on foot by Nature’s will or rend

Great mountains with their hands or reach no end

Of their life-span unless the reasoning

Is ‘Nothing comes from nothing’, since each thing

Needs seeds wherefrom to grow, we must declare,

And reach out to the gentle fields of air. 210

Since tilled lands top the untilled lands and yield

A more abundant harvest in the field,

There must be pristine things beneath the soil

That we must with our ploughshares and our toil

Raise up; if there were none, then we would see

That they would flourish more spontaneously

Without our work, while Nature liquefies

Each body in itself, and nothing dies.

If anything were mortal, it would die

And perish in the blinking of an eye. 220

There’d be no need of force to bring about

Its dissolution and thus snuff it out.

Since all have ageless seeds, we may not know

The death of anything till, with one blow,

That force cleaves it in two or penetrates

Its inward spaces and annihilates

It all. Moreover, if Time takes away

All things as it consumes them, in what way

May Venus resurrect them, breed by breed?

How may the chequered earth foster and feed 230

Them then? How can the ocean be supplied

By native springs and rivers far and wide?

Whence can the ether feed the stars in the sky?

For endless time and all the days gone by

Would have killed all mortals things. Considering,

However, if this sum of everything

Has been renewed forever, certainly

They’re all immortal. Thus eternally

Nothing returns to nothing. That some might

Could end all things if they were not held tight 240

By timeless matter more or less; a touch

Could have set off destruction: nothing much

More than the slightest force would liquefy

The weft of things where there is no supply

Of timeless stock, but now, because between

Each other all primordial parts have been

Made different and all will yet abide

Unhurt unless some force should get inside

And crush the warp and woof of each. Nothing

Returns to nothing, but, when crumbling, 250

They revert to primal forms. When Jupiter hurls

Rainstorms upon the earth, they die, but pearls

Of shining grain arise and boughs are green

And growing trees, laden with fruit, are seen,

Whence men and beasts are fed, while cities thrive

In joy with boys and girls, the woods alive

With fledglings everywhere; along the leas

The fat and weary cattle take their ease,

White ooze from their full udders trickling,

From which the new-born calves go scampering 260

On awkward legs along the meadowland,

With new milk freshened; what we understand,

Therefore, as mortal isn’t so – each thing

Nature takes from another, suffering

Nothing else to be produced unless it’s due

To something else’s death. Since I taught you

That nought’s derived from nought nor, equally,

Can be recalled, do not discredit me,

Since we cannot see primal forms and so

The bodies that we speak of you must know 270

Cannot be seen. The winds, like lashing whips,

Attack one’s face, deluging massive ships,

Rending the clouds above us, and bestrew

The fields with trees in a frantic hullabaloo

And blast the mountain-tops with gusts that pound

The forests, rushing with a fearful sound

And threatening and stirring up the sea.

Winds, then, are hidden forms undoubtedly,

Whirling the sea, the land, the clouds as well

And sweeping them along as on they swell 280

In aimless ruin, as a river’s mild

And supple bulk may suddenly turn wild

With downpours from the mountains, fracturing

Branches and even trees and toppling

The sturdy bridges, which can’t tolerate

Its sudden force, and at a fearful rate

Beats round the piers and in a trice destroys

Massive stone buildings with a dreadful noise.

Therefore all other blasts of wind as well

Must act the same, as, like a mighty swell 290

Of floods, spread out and, strengthening their force,

Drive everything before them in their course

And sometimes seize their victims and then hurl

Them onward in a meteoric whirl.

Winds are just unseen bodies which we see

Match mighty rivers in their rivalry,

Though these are visible. We are aware

Of smells, but when we breathe them in the air

We never see them: heat we never see,

Nor cold, nor voices, and yet they must be 300

Corporeal, deep down, essentially

Since they attack our responsivity;

The power of touch the body has, alone.

Indeed a piece of clothing that has grown

Moist when it’s hanging on a surf-beat shore

Will, once it that it has been spread out before

The sun, be dried. But no-one’s ever seen

How moisture seeps in nor how heat has been

Dispersed. Therefore in tiny quantities

It happens, and the process no-one sees. 310

A ring upon the finger in that way

Throughout ensuing years will wear away;

The eaves’ damp scoops the stone; insidiously

The ploughshare’s iron hook wastes in the lea;

The rock-paved highways, used by many feet,

Get worn; as passersby will touch and greet

Bronze statues, so these statues’ right hands grow

Leaner. While the effect of this we know,

Nature precludes the vision from our eyes

Of just which particles will vaporize. 320

Lastly, what time and nature gradually

Allow, compelling growth proportionately,

We may not see. Nor may we ever know,

When things with foul deterioration grow

Senile or when the bustling crags up high

Above the ocean are eroded by

The salt, what’s lost in time. And yet creation

Is not ingested with an installation

Of body – there’s a void in things. To know

This fact will serve you anywhere you go, 330

Erasing doubts and keeping you from prying

Into all things and thinking that I’m lying.

Therefore there is an untouched emptiness:

Were this not so, nothing could then progress;

A body’s property is to impede

While ever-present – nothing could impede

Without it, since nothing could yield a place

To start. But now across the open space

And heaven, seas and lands all things we see

Are moving in a great diversity 340

Of ways with many causes: if they were

Deprived of void, they’d have no means to stir

About or even to be born at all,

Since matter everywhere would simply stall.

Moreover, since all things are thought to be

Concrete, we nevertheless are bound to see

They’re actually mixed with void. The moisture seeps

In rocks and caves: in beady drops it weeps.

Food finds a way through every living thing,

And trees increase and in due season bring 350

Their crop to life and from the deepest roots

Through all the trunks and boughs pour out their fruits.

Through walls and doors roam voices in their flight

And through our bones the jaws of iciness bite.

Without a void through which a body may

Travel, we could not see in any way

This taking place. Again, why do we see

Things heavier than others though they be

No larger? Should a ball of wool possess

Within itself the selfsame bulkiness 360

As does a lump of lead, then they would be

The same weight. For a body’s property

Is pushing everything down, though emptiness,

In contrast, manifests its weightlessness.

What’s large but lighter shows infallibly

That it possesses more vacuity;

The heavier shows more bulk and has less space

Inside. That which we wisely try to trace

Exists, mixed in with things, and this we call

The void. Right here I feel I must forestall 370

What some folk think, for this is what they say:

That scaly creatures, as they swim, give way

To waters, and fish leave behind them space

To which the yielding billows swiftly race;

And other things can yet be moved and move,

Though everything is packed. This I disprove,

For it is wholly false. For how, indeed,

Can creatures move unless the waters cede

Their place? How can the fish advance unless

The waters yield if fish are powerless 380

To move? Then either bodies are divested

Of motion or all things have been invested

With void mixed in, whereby each gets its start

To move. When two broad bodies spring apart

After colliding, then the air must press

Into the void between them. Nonetheless,

Though streaming round those bodies rapidly,

The air can’t fill the gap immediately,

For first it must fill one place and then go

Through all the other ones. If someone, though, 390

Thinks that this comes about because the air,

When bodies spring apart, condenses, they’re

Quite wrong, for then a void has been created

Where there had not been one, another sated

Which had been void, while air in such a way

Can’t be condensed. But if it could, I say

Without a void the air could not compress

Itself into one part. Though nonetheless

You dally and refute, you must affirm

That void exists. I also can confirm 400

My words with many an argument that I

Can glean, but these footprints will satisfy

A rational mind. As dogs will sniff around

The forests of a mountain till they’ve found

A wild beast’s lair covered in brush, since they

Have scented certain footsteps on their way,

Thus you yourself can hunt in themes like these

From thought to thought and seek out sanctuaries

And ferret out the truth. But if you’re slow

And deviate from what you seek, although 410

But barely, I can promise, Memmius,

That from my singing tongue such copious

Draughts shall be poured that I’ll feel dread that we

Shall be invaded by senility,

The gates of life within us loosed, before

These verses that I write can cast my store

Of proofs into your ears. Now I shall start

To weave my tale again: in Nature’s heart

Are void and body which move variously.

Body exists – our own capacity 420

Of thinking says it’s so. Unless we’re firm

In our deep faith, we never could confirm

Our thoughts on hidden things. Without what we

Call void, there’s nowhere that a body may be

Arranged or move about, as I just now

Have said, and you cannot say anyhow

That from a body there is anything

That’s been disjointed, thus exhibiting

Nature’s third part. What is an entity

Must be a something, and the same must be 430

Able, if tangible, to add to the sum

Of body, whether the change is minimum

Or large, while it exists; but if you may

Not touch it and it cannot block the way

Of objects passing through it, it must be

What we have called a void. Additionally,

What of itself exists it is a fact

Is forced to be performed upon or act

Or else hold moving things. Body alone

Acts or is acted on. Nothing is known 440

To render room but body, and therefore

Besides body and void there is no more –

No third thing Nature has. No entities

But those enter the thoughts of men or seize

Their senses. For whatever you care to name

Is linked to those two entities or came

From them. No property in any way,

Unless it brings about lethal decay,

Can be split from a thing, as we can see

Weight in a rock, water’s fluidity, 450

Fire’s hotness, every corporal body’s touch

And void’s intangibility. But such

As slavery, riches, insolvency,

Autonomy, warfare and harmony

And all things which, while Nature stays the same,

Arrive and then depart we rightly name

Accidents. Even time does not exist

Of its own self, but we may make a list

In our own minds of what in history

Occurred, the present and what’s yet to be; 460

No man can feel time, it must be confessed,

Loosed as it is from motion and from rest.

When folk say Helen’s rape and Troy’s defeat

Is happening, take care not to repeat

That this is so, for that is history

And all events have been irrevocably

Snatched up by time. All deeds, we may declare,

Are accidents: and therefore if nowhere

Could space and room exist whereby things could

Take place, then Helen’s beauty never would 470

Have glowed in Paris’ breast and set alight

That savage war nor in the dead of night

Would Greeks have poured out from the horse of wood

And put Troy to the flames, and thus you should

Declare these things do not approximate

Body or void, but rather you should state

That they are accidents of body and

The place where things occur. Thus understand

That bodies are things’ rudiments partially,

Though partially as well a unity 480

Of all of them. But nothing can repress

These rudiments, since by their solidness

They conquer, though it’s difficult to see

That anything contains solidity.

For lightning from heaven passes through

The walls of houses – clamouring voices, too,

Iron’s white-hot in the fire, rocks burst asunder

When burned with fierce steam, gold which suffers under

Great heat will totter, icy bronze will turn

To water under flames and silver burn 490

Yet pierce with cold, since we feel each sensation

In both hands when we wait for a libation.

We know, then, nothing has a solid shape.

However, since we never can escape

Nature or reasoning, let me extricate

In some few verses things that you yet wait

To hear – that there are some things that we know,

Firm and eternal, from which other things grow,

Creating all of nature. I have shown

That there’s a dual nature that is known 500

To have two things, body and void, both far

Unlike each other, in which all things are

And act, each of itself and unalloyed,

As it must be. For where there is a void,

There is no body, while similarly

Where there’s no body, void just cannot be.

Primordial bodies lack a void therefore

And have a solid form, and furthermore,

Since in created things a void is found,

There must be solid matter all around 510

The void; and nothing ever can reside,

If we can trust our rationale, inside

A void, unless you grant that what holds it

Is solid. Only matter that is knit

With other matter holds a void. Therefore

All solid matter lasts forevermore

While all else is dissolved. If what we call

A void did not exist, the world would all

Be solid. Everything would be a void

If certain bodies had not been employed 520

To fill the spaces. Both infallibly

Can be distinguished, though alternately,

Since Nature is not wholly full of space

Nor matter. There are bodies, in that case,

That vary both: they can’t be liquefied

By outward blows or severed from inside

By penetration or be overthrown

In any way: these things to you I’ve shown

But recently. And thus, it seems, without

A void nothing is able to be snuffed out, 530

Feel dampness, cold, fire, by which everything

Is crushed. The more a void’s inhabiting

A thing, the more it quakes from an attack.

So if, as I have taught, first bodies lack

A void, being solid, of necessity

They’re timeless, for if in reality

They weren’t, all things would have returned to nought

And all we see from nothing had been wrought.

But since but recently you have been taught

That nothing can be fashioned out of nought 540

And what’s been born cannot be brought again

To nothing, it must stand to reason, then,

That primal germs have immortality

Within their form; bodies must finally

Dissolve so that the world can be renewed.

So they possess a plain simplicitude

Or they could not throughout eternity

Have saved the world. If a capacity

For always being broken had been given

BY Nature, all that matter would be riven 550

Already and at a specific time

Could not endure forever in its prime,

For things can be resolved more rapidly

Than made anew: what the infinity

Of time has ever crushed and liquefied

Cannot in later times be rectified,

But now a time’s been fixed to bring an end

To this destruction and therefore to mend

Each thing, as we may see, that it may grow

According to its kind. I’ll say also 560

That, though all forms are solid, nonetheless

They fashion things that have a flimsiness,

Air, water vapour, earth: we have recourse

To say how this occurs and with what force

They function, for all primal things possess

A void, but if they have a flimsiness

In them, we cannot use our powers of thought

To show how flint and iron can be brought

To life by them, for Nature wouldn’t concede

That there could be within them even a seed 570

For making them. In their simplicity

These germs are strong and are imperviously

Condensed in combinations. Furthermore,

If there were an established limit for

Breaking the elements, from times long past

They still would have survived, able to last

Immune from danger. But since naturally

They’re fragile, that through all infinity

Of time with countless blows they’ve been beset

Would seem far-fetched. Since limits have been set 580

For the growth and conservation of each kind

Within its lifetime, Nature has outlined

Their limitations, and since everything stays

The same so that each different bird displays

Its natural marks, then everything must be

Endowed with an immutability.

For if primordial germs in any way

Could change or be snuffed out, how could we say

What can or can’t be born? What could be known

About its scope and each fixed boundary-stone? 590

Each generation could not frequently

Bring back each time each parent’s property.

First bodies have a limit that we’re banned

From seeing, and it has no sections and

Is minimal indeed and wasn’t ever

A thing apart and in the future never

Shall be, since it’s a part, essentially,

Of something else, and it is clear to see

That other segments lie in rows and fill

The nature of the primal germs, and still, 600

Because they are not self-existent, they

Must cleave to that from which they in no way

Can be divided. So these germs possess

A solid singleness and coalesce,

A close-packed mass of smallest things, combined

Not by a sum of segments but confined

In one strong singleness, for Nature needs

To keep them all that they might serve as seeds

And thus they may not wither or succumb.

Moreover, were there not a minimum, 610

Even the smallest bodies would possess

Infinite parts, thus making one half less –

Half of a half – and nothing would have been

Predestined. What’s the difference between

The most and least? There is none, for although

The sum’s incalculable, even so

Even the smallest things coequally

Have infinite parts. But rationality

Rejects this claim, asserting that we may

Not think it’s true, and so you’re forced to say 620

That there are things which have no parts indeed,

The minimums of Nature, and concede

That they are firm and timeless. Finally,

If Nature could compel all things to be

Resolved into the smallest entities,

She could not remake anything from these

Since things which have no parts do not possess

The power to generate – connectiveness,

Weights, blows, encounters, motions, anything

That leads to any action happening. 630

Of those who think the germ of things is fire,

And only fire, their reasoning is dire.

Their chief was Heraclitus in their battle,

A man who would to silly people prattle,

Famed as he was for mystifying speech,

For he would never undertake to reach

The grave, truth-seeking Greeks; for fools are fond

Of what’s beneath distorted words beyond

All reason, thinking true what tunefully

Rings in their eardrums, worded pleasantly. 640

“How could things be so various if they

Are formed of fire, and fire alone?” I say.

Condensing fire would aid us not a whit

If the same nature synthesized in it

Were held by each of its parts. The heat would be

Keener with parts compressed, though, conversely,

Milder when severed or when strewn about;

And nothing more than this, there is no doubt,

Comes from such causes, nothing, too, much less

Could from a rare and compact fire egress. 650

If you admit a void’s incorporated

In entities, fire can be concentrated

Or else left rarefied, but since they see

That other people think contrarily,

They hate to think an unmixed void’s inside

Those things and therefore fear a bumpy ride

And lose the way of truth, failing to see

That, if one takes away the vacancy,

Thus everything must then be concentrated

And, out of all, one body is created, 660

Which cannot swiftly shoot out anything

The way a fire gives warmth, delivering

Its heat to everyone, that we may see

Its parts are not compact. Alternatively,

If they believe that, should the fire unite

With things in other different ways, it might

Be quenched and change its substance, then they must

Recant, for fire would then turn all to dust,

And out of nought the world would be created,

For when a thing has from its bounds mutated 670

It means swift death from what it was before.

It’s necessary for a thing, therefore,

To last unharmed lest everything should go

Back into nought and then, reborn, should grow

Anew. Since there are things without a doubt

That keep their nature and, when things move out

Or in or change their natural symmetry,

They change their nature and each entity

Transforms: you then may see that they’re not made

From fire. It would not help if some should fade, 680

Leave or be added new and others be

Transformed if they would keep their quality

Of heat, since whatsoever they produced

Would still be fire. This, then, I have adduced:

That there are entities whose combinations,

Movements, positions, shapes and organizations

Make fire and, since they have modified

Their form, they change the nature that’s inside

Themselves, thereafter not resembling

Fire or anything able to bring 690

Particles to our senses, impacting

Upon our sense of touch. To say each thing

Is fire and nothing else exists, as he,

That Heraclitus, thinks, is idiocy.

He fights his senses while he overthrows

That which we all believe and thus he knows,

As he alleges, fire; certainly

The senses can perceive the fire, says he,

But nothing else, although all else is clear

As well. These sentiments of his appear 700

Inept and mad. Where can we make appeal

For proof? Well, when we’re searching for what’s real

And what is false, our faculties must be

The most reliable. And why should we

Remove all other things, acknowledging

Heat only rather than prohibiting

Fire and allowing everything else to be?

For either way it seems insanity.

So those who have decided all things’ birth

Results from fire or air or water or earth 710

Have erred, it seems, from truth considerably.

Others believe that it’s a harmony

Of earth and water, fire and air. As well,

Others believe that things can grow and swell

From fire, earth, breath and rain. Empedocles

Of Acragas was the earliest of these -

From that three-cornered isle of Sicily

Was he, round which flows the Ionian Sea,

Which with its grey-green billows twists and turns

As with its salty foam it shoots and churns. 720

Within its narrow straits the rapid sea

Divides the island’s shores from Sicily.

Here stands the vast Charybdis, threatening

All sailors, here is Etna’s rumbling,

Her fiery force collected to spew high

Her fury from her jaws up to the sky.

Though she’s a wonder to all men, supplied

With such a glorious bounty, fortified

With famous heroes, she was never known

To breed a man whom she could call her own 730

More sanctified or marvellous or dear.

Songs from his godlike breast, so sweet to hear,

Extol hsi famed inventions, so that he

Barely appears part of humanity.

But he and those who are of lesser weight

In many ways, as I have said of late,

Though with prophetic zeal they formulated

Many good things, as if they emanated

From the shrine of their own hearts, more rationally

And holily than any prophecy 740

Out of the tripod and the Delphic bay

In Pythia, all the same have caused decay

In primal matters. Such a great decline

For great men! For to all things they assign

Motion, though driving out vacuity;

But rare and soft things they allow to be,

As air, sun, fire, lands, animals and grain,

But mixing in no void. They don’t ordain

An end to splitting them or hesitate

To break them down, because they clearly state 750

There is no minimum, although we see

The boundary point of any entity

Must be the smallest thing. We must surmise,

Therefore, that things that never meet our eyes

Have boundary points as well and must possess

Minimums. Then these fellows all profess

That primal germs are soft, and thus we see

When they are being born, entirely

Mortal, they must return to nought and then

Develop out of nothing once again 760

And flourish; you know this is very far

From truth. In many ways all these things are,

Each to the other, sour and virulent

Since when they come together they are rent

Apart and die as we in tempests spy

Rains, winds and lightnings all asunder fly.

If everything from four things is created

And into these four things are liquidated,

How are those four things rated primary

Instead of being quite the contrary – 770

The prime material of everything?

They’re made from one another, altering

Their hue and nature immemorially.

Lightning and winds and torrents we can see,

But if you think these four things can convene

And still not change their natures, it is seen

That nothing’s born of them, insentient,

Like trees, or animate. They all present

Their nature, air mixed in with earth, and heat

With dew. But primal germs need to secrete 780

Some trait as they’re creating things in case

Some element should baffle and debase

Their spawn. They start with fires in the sky

And claim fire turns into the winds on high,

Thus making rain, then earth from rain, and then

All things are brought back from the earth again,

First dew, then air, then heat: they don’t refrain

From interchanging, visiting terrain

From heaven, then back again, which in no way

The germs can do, for something has to stay 790

That’s changeless lest to nothing everything

Is taken back, for change in anything

Means death to what it was before. Therefore,

Since those things that I mentioned heretofore

Are changed, they must derive from things that stay

Immutable forever in case they

Cause all to be returned entirely

To nought. Why not suppose that there can be

Things of such nature that, should they create

Fire, they’d have the power to generate 800

The breezes of the air by factoring

Some things into the mix and extracting

Others, both form and nature changed, and so

All things are interchanged? You may say, though,

‘The facts are clear that all things have their birth,

Rising up to the breezes, from the earth.

If rainstorms were not sent propitiously,

Causing a quivering in every tree,

And heat provided by the rays of the sun,

No crop, no tree, no breathing thing – not one – 810

Would grow.’ That’s true – and if we weren’t supplied

With food and moisture, we would soon have died;

For all of us with different things are fed,

Since many germs in different ways are bred

In many things and feed them naturally.

It often matters much how they may be

Conjoined with others and how they are bound

Together and what motions have been found

That they produce and get; for they comprise

The seas, the lands, the streams, the sun, the skies, 820

In different ways, though: in my verse you see

That all the words sound very differently

Depending on the text. By altering

The order alone, they can by just the ring

Of sound do much; but germs can yet apply

A wealth of combinations still, whereby

So many things may grow. Now let’s explore

The *homoiomeria*, the Greek name for

The work of Anaxagoras which we

Can’t name in Latin but can easily 830

Explain. First he affirms that every bone

From the most microscopic bones is grown,

As happens with all flesh, and blood must flow

From many drops of blood and gold must grow

From grains of gold, imagining the same

Occurs with earth, liquidity and flame,

Although dismissing void, allowing no

Limit to cutting matter up. And so,

On both of these accounts he seems to me

To err no less than those named recently. 840

The germs he feigns are too frail furthermore,

If they’re primordial at their very core

And like the things themselves, and toil and die

Along with them, while nothing will deny

Them death. For what, when pressured, can survive

And, in the jaws of death, yet stay alive?

Fire? Moisture? Or the breezes in the skies?

Which one? Blood? Bones? Well, nothing, I surmise,

For all’s as mortal as what we can see

Destroyed by this or that calamity. 850

For by the proofs above I may assert

That nothing can exist and then revert

To nought or grow from nought. And since we grow

Through nourishment, then you should surely know

That veins and blood and bones are all designed

By particles that are not the same kind

As them. But if they say all foods possess

Materialities which coalesce

And hold within themselves some tiny grains

Of nerves and bones and blood, as well as veins, 860

It follows that all foods, whether they be

Solid or moist, are a miscellany

Of foreign particles, a farrago

Of those corporeal parts. If bodies grow

From earth, the earth must be a mingling

Of foreign substances, which bloom and spring

From her. You’ll find these words are still the same

If you transfer this argument: if flame

And smoke and ashes in some wood should hide,

It must have foreign substances inside 870

Which spring from it. An opportunity,

Though slight, remains to shun veracity,

Which Anaxagoras appropriates –

He says that everything incorporates

All things commingled, but the only thing

That comes to view is that embodying

The most, which can be seen closer to hand,

But from our reasoning this has been banned;

For we’d expect, when harvest grains are ground

By heavy stones, some blood might well be found 880

Or something that our bodies yield. Likewise,

When grass is rubbed, you’d think before your eyes

Gore would appear, and water would produce

Droplets similar to a sheep’s sweet juice,

And from a clod of crumbled earth we’d find,

Perhaps, grains, leaves and grass of many a kind

Dispersed minutely, and in wood, maybe,

Smoke and ash and sparks of fire we’d see;

But since this is not true, then you must know

That there are no such things that mingle so, 890

But common seeds, in many ways combined,

Must be concealed there. ‘But we often find,’

You say, ‘that on the mountains tree-tops lean

And rub against each other when they’ve been

Attacked by fierce south winds till they’re aflame

With blazing fire.’ Maybe – but, all the same,

Fire’s not inside the wood, but heat indeed

Contains within its essence many a seed,

Which rub and flow together and begin

A forest fire. If flame, though, lies within 900

The forests, it could not be out of sight

For long but soon would set the woods alight

And cause destruction. As I said of late,

You may observe, what carries quite a weight

Is how and with what things these germs are bound

Together and what motions can be found

Both given and received and, altering

Themselves a little, how they then can bring

Us wood and fire. So words in the same way

Use slight adjustments, although we portray 910

Those things with different names. Now, finally,

If you think that what you see openly

Can’t be, unless you picture things are made

Of a like mature, then these things must fade

While cackling out loud and quivering

With mirth, their salty teardrops covering

Their cheeks and chins. Learn what is left and hear

Attentively! For things are far from clear,

I know; but I’ve great hopes that I’ll be blessed

With fame, and love of the Muses strikes my breast; 920

I wander through the fields with vigorous mind,

Through which no other member of mankind

Has passed. To touch pure fountains gives me pleasure,

To pluck fresh flowers thrills me beyond all measure:

A splendid crown I’ll seek to deck my head,

From where no human has been garlanded

By the Muses, since about great things I teach

And aim to free men’s minds beyond the reach

Of dread religion, since my poetry

Brings clarity from such obscurity 930

And brings the Muses’ charm to everything

(Indeed a reasonable offering,

It seems); but as physicians smear around

The cup some honey-juice when they have found

A young lad needs foul wormwood, whereby he

May drink it down, fooled by this strategy,

And thus recover, I, because the theme

That I’m expounding here will often seem

Bitter to neophytes and backed away

From by the mob, desire in that same way 940

To speak my doctrine in sweet poetry,

Sweet as the produce of the honey-bee,

Muse-sent, if I can hold you with my verse

Till you can comprehend the universe

And how things interweave. But since you know

That bodies, wholly dense, fly to and fro,

Unconquered through all time, let us now see

If there’s a limit to their quantity

Or not, and likewise learn what has been found

As void or room or space, where things abound, 950

And see if it’s finite or stretches out,

A vast continuum. There is no doubt

That there is nothing with a boundary,

For if there were one there would have to be

Something beyond, and there is nothing there,

Unless there were yet something else somewhere

To set that limit so that one could see

Where our own innate senses cannot be

And since beside the sum we now confess

That there is nought, because it’s limitless. 960

It is of no account whatever place

You’re in, since each direction that you face

Displays infinity. Now let’s suppose

That space is finite: well, if someone throws

A spear out past the extreme shores, should we

Believe that it flows on extensively

To whence it came or does something suppress

Its movement, for you will have to profess

One or the other, but whatever way

You choose, you can’t escape, for you must say 970

That all is infinite. For whether there

Is anything that stops it going where

It has been sent, or else relentlessly

It flies straight on, it had no boundary

Where it set out. Wherever you elect

To place the furthest coasts, I’ll interject,

“What happens to the spear?” There will not be

A limit but a multiplicity

Of chances to go further. If the space

Of the totality were fixed in place 980

By certain coasts, then by a solid weight

All matter of the world would gravitate

Down to the bottom, and nothing could be

Beneath the sky, and in reality

There’d be no sky at all and no sunlight,

Since all, heaped up to a considerable height

From immemorial time, would lie. Repose,

However, is not given out to those

Elements since there is no place below,

No fundament to which they’re able to flow 990

For rest. But everything is endlessly

In motion, and it’s by infinity

Swift matter is supplied. Before our eyes

One thing’s made from another – the supplies

Are endless. Air divides the hills; the earth

Creates the sea, and the sea gives birth

To it, and so it goes. The traits of space

Are such that even thunderbolts can’t race

Across the endless tracts of time, nor may

They rest awhile while they go on their way; 1000

There’s such a huge abundance spread around

In all directions: lest a thing is bound

By limits, every body must enclose

Each void, each void each body, and this shows

That both of them possess no boundaries:

Unless it hemmed the other, one of these

Would be extended, stretched immeasurably,

And thus the earth, the bright-blue sky, the sea,

Mankind and the immortals could not stay

An hour in place, for all things, swept away, 1010

Would through the massive void be borne, indeed

Would never have combined to be the seed

Of anything. For prime germs certainly

Did not with any perspicacity

Fashion themselves in order or decide

What movements for each one they should provide,

But, since they’re multitudinous and change

In many ways among the All, they range

Abroad, pushed out and beaten, venturing

All kinds of movement and of coupling 1020

Until they settle down eventually

With those designs through which totality

Is made: for countless years they’ve been protected

Now they acceptably have been projected

Into their proper motions – thus the sea

By all the streams is freshened constantly,

The earth, lapped by the vapours of the sun,

Brings forth new brood, all creatures, every one,

Flourish and all the gliding fires which flow

Above us yet live on. They could not, though, 1030

Have managed this at all had no supply

Of matter risen from the void, whereby

They could repair lost things. With scarcity

Of food beasts waste away, while similarly

All things must fade when matter, blown aside

Somehow, is then unable to provide

Succour, nor from outside can blows maintain

The world’s united sum. For blows can rain

Often and check a part while others come

Along, enabled to fill up the sum; 1040

But meanwhile they are often forced to spring,

Thus to the primal germs contributing

A space and time for flight that they may be

Borne from this union to liberty.

So many things, we’re brought to understand,

Must rise, and yet the blows must be at hand

Always in order that there’ll always be

A force of matter universally.

Don’t listen to those people who profess

That all things inward to the centre press, 1050

Dear Memmius, and that the entire world

Stands firmly while no outward blows are hurled

Against it, since neither their depth nor height

Can be unbound and all things are pressed tight

Into the centre. Therefore, do not think

That heavy weights beneath the earth can shrink

Upon it, having striven from below

To settle upside down, as images show

Upon the ocean. They also propound

That every breathing thing wanders around 1060

And can’t fall up to the sky any more than we

Can reach the heavens by flying; when they see

The sun, the constellations of the night

Are what we view - we thus detach our sight

From theirs, our night coequal to their day.

These dreams have made these people fools since they

Embrace them faultily, for there can’t be

A centre when there is infinity.

And if there is a centre, there’s no thing

Could take its rest there by that reasoning 1070

Any more than it could be thrust far away

By other reasoning. Now, what we say

Is void must yield to weights coequally

Through centre and non-centre, wherever they be

In motion. There’s no place where bodies come

In which they may stand in a vacuum,

Lacking the force of weight; and no void may

Give aid to any, but it must give way,

True to its nature; by this theory,

Therefore, things can’t be held in unity, 1080

Their thirst for centre brought to nothingness.

Besides, since they claim not all bodies press

To centre, rather only those we know

Are of the earth and sea and swells that flow

From mountains, and all things that are contained

In earthen matter, but they have maintained

That the thin air and blazing fire are spread

Out of the centre – thus the sun is fed,

Around it all the ether quivering

With stars, because the hotness, taking wing, 1090

Is gathered there, and tree-tops could not sprout

Their leaves unless their food was given out

From earth, for nature would have, by degrees,

Fed them through all the branches of the trees.

Their reasons are all incorrect, and they

Clash with each other also. I can say

That all is boundless, lest the walls of the world

Would act like winged flames and thus be hurled

Throughout the massive vacuum suddenly

And other things would follow similarly, 1100

And all the innermost regions of the sky

Should fall and under us the earth would fly

Away at once through void till suddenly

There’d be nought left except infinity

And unseen stuff. Wherever you decide

Prime germs are lacking, on that very side

Will be the door of death, and through that door

Out and abroad a throng of matter will pour.

With little trouble you’ll find all things clear

Gradually – the road won’t disappear. 1110

You’ll see all nature, learning them anew

And torches will light other things for you.

# BOOK II

It’s sweet, when mighty waves stir up the sea,

To see a sailor toiling desperately;

Not that we joy in someone else’s plight

But being spared from ills brings us delight.

To view a skirmish on the battleground

Is sweet as well when one is safe and sound.

But there is nothing sweeter than to dwell

In lofty temples that are guarded well

By wise men, when you see folk wandering,

Scattering here and there and essaying 10

To find the road of life: they’re envious

In standing, rivals, too, in genius,

Labouring night and day industriously

To reach the top and capture mastery

Of all the world. What wretched minds, how blind

Your hearts! O the great perils of mankind,

The darkness in a life of brevity!

For nature barks out nothing – don’t you see? –

But a desire to keep away the pain,

Disjointed from our bodies, and maintain 20

A life empty of care and fear. Therefore

Our bodies have a need for little more

Than ousting pain. We can occasionally

Enjoy more pleasures, for no luxury

Does nature need – no statues, made of gold,

Of stripling lads who in their hands may hold

Bright torches requisite for banqueting,

A house with gold and silver glittering

Or harps that make the golden ceilings high

Above resound, because with friends to lie 30

Upon soft grass with no profuse outlay

Beneath a high tree’s branches as they sway

Above can energize one, specially

When all the elements are merrily

Laughing and seasonable flowers grow.

Your burning fevers won’t more quickly go

If you on woven sheets or red robes spread

Your limbs than if upon a pauper’s bed

You lie. So since wealth, high rank and great fame

Are of no use to anybody’s frame, 40

Assume that they do not avail the mind

As well, except when you see legions lined

In rows to mimic war, on either side

With horse and great auxiliaries supplied

And armed ships, gripped with one determination,

For then religion, filled with trepidation

At this, will fly away and leave us free

Of care. But if we think this drollery

And that mankind does not shrink from the din

Of clashing weapons, since they flourish in 50

The company of monarchs of esteem,

Not overawed with gold and robes that gleam

With purple, why, then, doubt that reasoning,

And nothing else, can help with everything

I mentioned, since life labours in the mirk?

As boys are scared of all things that may lurk

In darkness, we fear sometimes in the light

Those things that in no way should ever fright

Anyone more than what boys in darkness dread,

Imaging some monster lies ahead. 60

This terror, then, this dark imagined by

The mind is not by light shafts in the sky

Or morning gleam dispersed but reasoning

And nature’s law. I’ll start untangling

Right now how everything has been created,

Then broken down, and what necessitated

Their motions so that they can travel through

A giant void. Attend, I beg of you!

For matter won’t cohere because we see

That all things are diminished gradually 70

In time and leave our sight when old, although

The sun remains unharmed. When bodies go

From each thing they diminish what they leave,

But what they then arrive at will receive

Increase from them. The former waste away,

The latter bloom; the bodies do not stay,

However. Thus the sum’s renewed, and we

Mortals live on in reciprocity.

Some nations, wax, some wane. In a brief space

The eras alter and, as In a race, 80

The lamp of life’s passed on. But if your view

Is that prime germs can cease and, when they do,

They spawn new motions, from the truth you stray.

For since throughout the void they make their way,

By their, or something else’s, gravity

They must be carried. For when frequently

They clash, they leap apart, because they are

Heavy and firm with nothing there to bar

Their way behind them. So that you may see

These primal germs are darting randomly 90

About, remember that there is no base

In that entire sum – no resting-place –

Since space is boundless, spread on every side.

By motions mixed, when some of them collide,

Some bounce back with large gaps between, although

Some leave but little space, knocked by the blow.

Tangled with various shapes, they constitute

Great bulks of iron and many a rocky root

And others of their kind, while some few stray

Through the vast void: the rest leap far away, 100

Recoiling, leaving massive gaps: thus we

Receive the air and solar radiancy.

Through the huge void go many that are cast

From matter that had linked and clung on fast,

By unions spurned, unable to unite

Their motions with the rest. Within our sight

(As I record) an image will arise,

For when sunlight appears before your eyes

In gloomy halls many particles you’ll see,

Mixed with the light and battling endlessly 110

Meeting and parting, group by group; you may

Assume by this that prime seeds make their way

Through the great vacuum, tossed about, and so

We see, at least, that little things may show

Us copies of great things and give insight

So you should see them tumbling in the light,

For they show motions of prime matter, too,

That lies beneath them, lurking far from view.

You’ll then see many things, with many a blow

From hidden things, change course and backward go, 120

Spreading out far and wide. Thus I suppose

This movement from primeval atoms rose.

Prime seeds move of themselves primarily,

Then bodies closest to the energy

Of primal seeds, by tiny compounds tied,

Are beaten by a wealth of blows that hide

From them, and then they beat the next in size.

Thus from primevals on motions will rise

And reach our senses incrementally,

Until those objects move as well, which we 130

Can see in sunlight, although no-one knows

At all from which direction come the blows.

Now, Memmius, you soon will learn the speed

Of atoms: when Aurora stirs each breed

Of birds by sprinkling light upon the ground

And causes them to flutter all around

The trackless groves and fill with melody

The mellow air. We see how suddenly

The sun arises, spreading out her rays,

And how she clothes the world with her displays 140

Of pomp. The vapour and the light that she

Sends out does not go through a vacancy;

They’re forced to slow down, then, when they divide

The air’s waves, as it were; now, as they glide,

Atoms of heat don’t travel singularly,

Entangled as they are, and each will be

Restrained without by each till they’re compelled

To slow down. Those firm atoms, though, not held

By anything outside them as through space

They go, their parts one unit, to the place 150

They started out for, carried forcefully,

Must travel with a greater velocity

Than sunlight, rushing through a space more vast

Just as around the sky the sun has cast

Its splendour… And the gods do not pursue

Each primal element that they might view

How each thing happens. This some men oppose

And, ignorant of matter, they suppose

Without the force of some divinity

Nature could not, in ways that equally 160

Mirror the needs of mankind, turn about

The seasons of the year and cause to sprout

The grains and everything divine delight,

Life’s guide, persuades us to so that we might

Through love create each age lest all mankind

Should die. But while they hold this in their mind,

They seem to lapse from truth a goodly way.

For even if I could not truly say

What prime germs are, yet I would still declare,

Through studying the matter in the air, 170

And many other things, no god created

The nature of the world – it has been weighted

With countless flaws. Later I’ll make this clear,

Memmius. Now what remains for you to hear

Om motions I’ll explain, for this fact, too,

I think I should now clarify for you:

No bodily thing by its own agency

Can go or be borne upward – do not be

Deceived by flames, for they were formed to go

Upward, and through this increase upward grow 180

Bright grain and trees, and all the weight that lies

Within them bears them down. When fire flies

Up to the rooftops where it laps away

At beam and timber, we suppose that they

Act of heir own accord, no force below

Urging them up. Blood operates just so,

Discharged from bodies, spurting out its gore

And spattering. Have you not seen before

With what great forcefulness will water spew

Out beams and timbers? For the more that you 190

Press deeper down with all your might and main,

The more it heaves and flings them back again

That, more than half their length, they may arise

On rebound. Yet we don’t doubt, I surmise,

Their weight bears downward through the void. Just so

Flames under pressure should rise up, although

Their weight strives hard to draw them down. Tell me,

Have you seen meteors sweep majestically,

Drawing long trails of fire in the air

Wherever Nature grants a thoroughfare 200

And constellations drop down? Even the sun

From heaven sheds its light for everyone,

Sowing the fields, and onto lands, therefore,

As well. Athwart the rainstorms, furthermore,

There’s lightning, where you see the fires clash

Out of the clouds as here and there they dash

And fall to earth. Also, I’d have you know

That atoms, as by their own weight they go

Down through the empty space, quite randomly

And in quite random places, minimally 210

Change course. If they did not, they’d surely drop

Down through the yawning void and cause a stop

To impacts and to blows, developing

From primal elements. Thus not a thing

Would have been made by Nature. If maybe

Someone thinks heavier bodies, rapidly

Carried straight down the void, could strike a blow

Upon the lighter ones that are below

And make them move, he’s wandered far from all

True reasoning. For all those things that fall 220

Through air and water must accelerate

As they descend depending on the weight

Of each, since air and water can’t impede

Things equally, and therefore they must cede

To heavier things; but in no way, no place

Can anything be blocked by empty space,

Which, true to Nature’s law, yields logically.

Thus all things moving, though their weights may be

Unequal, must rush down with equal speed

Through the still void. So heavier things indeed 230

Can’t from above strike lighter ones and thus

Cause them to move in manners various

By Nature’s purpose; atoms, though, must swerve

A little, yet, that we don’t think they curve

(Which every fact refutes), but minimally.

For we see this is plain immediately.

Whatever their weight, they cannot, as they go

Downward, obliquely move – that this is so

We must believe, but who could see at all

That bodies sheer off in their downward fall? 240

If motions all are linked eternally

And new replaces old immutably,

And atoms by their swerving don’t begin

New motion, thereby interfering in

The rules of fate, that everlastingly

Cause does not follow cause, how can there be

Free will in every creature everywhere,

Wrested from fate, through which, wherever we care

To go, we do our will, while similarly

We change our movements, but not fixedly 250

In time or place but rather as our mind

Impels us? For it is not hard to find

That men’s will gives the start, and then, conveyed

Throughout the limbs, mobility is made.

When the gates are open, don’t you see a horse

Can’t move at once, though eager, down the course?

All bodily matter must be stimulated

So that the mind’s desire is activated.

And thus you’ll understand that movements’ start

Is fabricated from a willing heart 260

And then through the entire frame they go.

It’s not the same when we’re struck by a blow,

Delivered by another, for we see

That we are forced to move unwillingly

Until the will controls it. Thus, although

Often some outer force drives many to go

Onward headlong, within our breasts there lies

The strength to fight them. There are great supplies

OF germs, therefore, that sometimes turn aside,

Push forward and then, curbed, again subside. 270

As well as blows and weights, you must agree,

Are other causes of mobility

In seeds whence comes our power, since we must state

That nothing comes from nothing, because weight

Stops blows from causing everything to be

Created. That there’s no necessity,

However, in one’s mind and there’s nothing

To make one suffer, like some conquered thing,

The elements have a tiny inclination

At no fixed time and in no fixed location. 280

Never was stuff so crammed or, by contrast,

Extending over intervals so vast.

Nothing increases, nothing is taken away,

On which account, just as they move today

They moved of old and will henceforth so move,

And what was formed in previous times will prove

To be so formed again and grow in power,

As Nature has decreed for them, and flower.

Their sum can never change; there is no place

To which any kind of material can race 290

Or whence a fresh supply of it can sprout

And change the form of things and turn about

Their motions. Do not be surprised to know

That, though all seeds are always on the go,

The sum seems motionless, excepting when

A thing moves as a whole: beneath the ken

Of our five senses lies the entity

Of these prime germs whereby, though you can’t see,

They must conceal their movements. For indeed

It often happens that things which we heed 300

From afar yet do the same. For happy sheep,

While cropping a hillside’s grass, will often creep

About, freshly bedewed, their lambs replete

And frolicking about as they compete

In locking horns: far off they seem to us

A patch of gleaming white, but nebulous,

Upon green hills. Moreover, we can see

Great troops performing an epitome

Of war upon the plain as on they race

And lustre rises up to meet the face 310

Of heaven and over earth the bronze greaves flash

As warriors’ feet make thunder as they dash

Onward and all the mountains thereabouts

Echo up to the stars their warlike shouts,

When straight across the plain the cavalry

At once comes flying, beating vigorously

The ground beneath them. Nonetheless they seem

From high up on the hills a splendid gleam.

The origins of all things you must know,

Their shapes and all the differences they show. 320

Few have like shapes and not all seem to be

Like to each other: not surprisingly,

Since they embody such a huge supply

Of things that they are limitless, as I

Have shown: they’re not identical, it’s clear,

Not totally alike, yet they appear

To have a similar shape and size. Indeed

The race of men, fish, sheep, cattle that feed

On pastures, wild beasts, birds of every sort,

Which round the banks and springs and lakes cavort 330

And haunt secluded groves and fly around –

Pick any breed of them and they’ll be found

Quite different in shape, each to the other,

And thus the chick will recognize its mother,

And she it, just like all humanity.

Often before a temple you may see

A slaughtered calf on an altar decorated

With incense, warm blood having emanated.

Its mother roams the green fields, dispossessed

Of her young child, and sees its hoofprints pressed 340

Into the ground and with her searching eyes

Checks everywhere and fills the grove with sighs

And visits and revisits constantly

Their stall in longing for her progeny.

Soft willow shoots nor grasses fresh with dew

Nor overflowing streams can nothing do

To bring her comfort or to give her ease

In this fresh pain. When other calves she sees

In joyful fields, she can’t allay her care,

Determinedly searching everywhere 350

For something of her own that she knows well.

The quavering, tender kids can easily tell

Their mothers, and the lambs that frisk and leap

Can recognize the flocks of bleating sheep.

By Nature’s rules, then, each lamb normally

Runs down to drink its mother’s quantity

Of milk. But grains of corn will never show

That they’re so much alike but that we know

They have some difference in their shape. We see

Shells, too, like that, their multiplicity 360

Painting the earth, where on the thirsty sand

The soft sea-waves beat on the curving strand.

I must say yet again that in this way

The prime beginnings of all things, since they

Exist by Nature and are not created

By hand or from one atom formulated,

Must each of them be fashioned differently

As here and there they fly. We easily

Can explicate by human reasoning

Why fire that we see in lightning 370

Produces a more penetrating flow

Than does the fire on torches here below.

The former is more slender and is made

Of smaller shapes and therefore can invade

Openings through which our fires can’t proceed

Because they’re made of wood and are indeed

Mere torches and, besides, light passes through

A horn, but rain does not. How is this true?

Bodies of light have less capacity

Than those that make up water. We may see 380

Wine swiftly straining through a sieve, although,

In contrast, olive oil is very slow

Because its seeds are larger or, maybe,

They are more hooked and meshed more narrowly:

Therefore the atoms cannot separate

So suddenly and singly emanate

Through their own openings. The quality

Of milk and honey’s liquid certainly

Is pleasing to the taste, but hardly good

Is harsh centaury and loathsome wormwood - 390

They twist the mouth; so you can easily

Know that those bodies that give joy to me

Are smooth and round, but quite the opposite

Are harsh and bitter ones that never sit

With pleasure in the mouth, for they are more

Connected by their atoms, and therefore

They tear into our senses, shattering

The texture of the body. Everything

We find it disagreeable to touch

Or not are in conflict, since they have such 400

Dissimilar shapes: no atoms are as slick

In harsh saws as in music one may pick

With nimble fingers, thus awakening

One’s harp, producing shapes with every string;

Prime things of similar shape do not infest

Men’s nostrils when foul corpses, laid to rest,

Are roasting, while the stage is freshly sprayed

With Cilician saffron and the shrine is laid

With Arabian scents; fine hues which greet one’s eye

Do not consist of seeds which make one cry 410

Or tingle, nor those vile and hideous.

For there is not one thing that comforts us

Not first created with some entity

That’s smooth. Nevertheless, contrarily

Vile things have yet been noted to possess

Some roughness. Others which we may assess

As neither smooth nor hooked with points that bend

Have small projecting angles that can send

Us pleasant feelings, not injurious;

Such things of this kind that are used by us 420

Are flavours that are found in elecampane

And burnt tartar that’s found in wine. Again,

Hot fire and cold frost, toothed differently,

Both perforate our bodies. Certainly

Touch is a sense, whether something from outside

Is pierced in us or we are hurt inside

Or through the act of love comes ecstasy

Or else the seeds engender anarchy

And daze the senses, as if you, although

With your own hand, would now inflict a blow. 430

On some part of your frame. We must agree,

Then, that they have a multiplicity

Of shapes, since they produce such various

Sensations. And whatever seems to us

Hard and close-set has, of necessity,

Organs more closely hooked and thoroughly

Combined in branch-like shapes. Among the first

Are diamond stones, which many times have cursed

Blows rained upon them, iron and hard rocks

And bronze which shrieks as it resists its locks. 440

The elements of liquid are more round

And smooth because, as you have surely found,

A poppy seed’s scooped up as easily

As water, since those round grains cannot be

A hindrance to each other, and that seed,

When knocked down, runs downhill with equal speed.

All things that we see suddenly upward go,

Like smoke and clouds and flame, aren’t forced, although

Not made of smooth and round grains totally,

To be entangled inextricably 450

By elements so that they may then sting

The body, piercing rocks but not clinging

Together; what pricks our bodies must possess

Sharp but unclustered grains: you must profess

That there exists a similarity

Between bitter and fluid, as we see

In the sea’s brine, for elements smooth and round

Exist in water: rough things have been found

That cause pain, mingled with them. Nonetheless

They still need not be hooked: you’d rightly guess 460

They’re round because they’re rough that they may go

Forward, inflicting pain. That you may know

More clearly that Neptune’s acerbic sea

Is made by rough and smooth cooperatively,

There is a way to part them, when we find

How the sweet water, once it’s been refined

Often through earth, into a pit then flows

Separately, when all its saltiness goes

Away, because it leaves above the ground

The foul brine’s grains, while the rough ones are bound 470

To stick into the earth more easily.

I’ll try to add another verity

That’s proved by this – prime things do not possess

A multitude of shapes that’s limitless.

For otherwise some seeds would have to be

Of infinite size. For one small entity

Can’t have two different shapes: well then, surmise

Prime germs have three small parts (or aggrandize

That sum to just a few more): side to side

Place them, and top to bottom, having tried 480

All possible patterns and if, after all,

You wish to change the shapes, you must install

More parts; thence it must follow logistically

That others must be added similarly

If you should wish to change the shapes again:

New shapes imply increase in volume, then.

So it’s impossible to think a seed

Has infinite differing shapes, unless some need

To be of boundless size, since recently

I proved to you that this just cannot be. 490

Barbaric clothes and robes dyed from the hue

Of shells from Thessaly, I’m telling you,

And golden peacocks steeped in laughing grace,

Outdone by some fresh hue, would lose their place

Of wonder. Honey’s taste and myrrh would be

Despised; the swan’s and Phoebus’ melody,

The wondrous art of strings, would be oppressed

And silenced. Things more splendid than the rest

Would constantly arise, and possibly

All things might change back for the worse, as we 500

Have said some might improve. For one thing may

Prove more abhorrent, in a backwards way,

Than others to the eyes, ears, mouth and nose.

Buts since this is not so, we must suppose

That since a certain limit was consigned

To things, forcing the sum to be confined

On either side, there has to be a bound

Fixed to the sum of shapes. It has been found

The path from heat to frost is limited

As well, for every step’s distributed 510

Backwards in the same way: it is seen

Heat, cold and middle warmth all lie between

These two extremes, thus filling up the score

Successively. Created things, therefore,

Are different by limited degrees

Since they are marked at both extremities

By two points placed at either end, beset

This side by flame and that by frost. Now let

Me link it to another verity

Which draws its proof from it: all primary 520

Objects of similar shape are limitless.

Since different shapes are finite, one would guess

That similar ones aren’t, or alternatively

We would be forced to say the quantity

Of matter is finite, which is not so,

As I have proved, and in my verse I show

The sum of all things from infinity

Is held in place uninterruptedly,

Though struck by many blows on every side,

By tiny grains of matter. Though you’ve spied 530

Rare creatures that are less prolific than

Other creatures, yet if you began to scan

Some other climates far away, you’d find

That they are filled with many of that kind –

For instance elephants, especially,

Which form a palisade of ivory

In India in thousands to exclude

Strangers: they are such a multitude,

Though here in Italy we see but few.

Nevertheless, that I may grant this, too, 540

Imagine that one thing that’s suffered birth

Stands out unique, like nothing else on earth.

But one may say, unless the matter’s sum

Is infinite, enabling it to come

To life, it won’t be made that it might grow

And be sustained. If I may further go,

Suggesting that the bodies that came out

Of this one thing were finite, tossed about

The world, where, whence, how, with what energy

Will they meet and combine in such a sea 550

Of matter and in such an alien crowd?

I do not think that they could be allowed

To mix; when ships are wrecked, the sea will cast

Asunder many things – rib, transom, mast,

Prow, yard, oar, all floating around,

And the stern ornaments will seem to sound

A warning to avoid the treacherous sea,

Its lures, its violence and its trickery –

So doubt its shifty smile as there it lies

Serene – in this way, if you should surmise 560

That primal things are finite, they will be

Forced to be scattered through eternity

And sundered by their stuff and never flow

By force into each other and not grow

Together. Notwithstanding, both things do

These very things. Therefore it’s obvious, too,

That in prime things there’s an infinity

Of all things that are furnished openly.

Nor can death-dealing movements dominate

Forever or for all time extirpate 570

Life. Having given birth and caused a gain

In growth in things, they yet cannot sustain

Them always Their war, from infinity

Pursued, is waged somewhat debatably.

The vital elements will get the best

Of others here and there yet are suppressed

In the same way. The funeral threnody

And the wail that babies raise when first they see

The light of day are mingled. For no night

That follows day nor any morning light 580

Has never heard those new-born, sickly cries

Attending the laments that symbolize

Black funerals. Lock this in your memory, too:

That of those objects which are in plain view

There’s nothing that possesses just one kind

Of element or does not have, combined

Within it, various seeds: the more one sees

A thing has many powers and faculties,

The plainer it becomes that it confines

Most kinds of atoms and diverse designs. 590

The earth contains first bodies of all things,

Whence, rolling coolness tirelessly, the springs

Renew the boundless sea, because within

Herself the earth contains the origin

Of fire. In many lands below the ground

The earth’s ablaze, and from the depths are found

Etna’s white-hot eruptions. Furthermore

The earth contains within her very core

The means whereby there rise up fruitful trees

And grain to feed all nationalities, 600

Rivers and trees and fruitful fields to feed

The mountain-ranging beasts. And that indeed

Is why all mortals call her Cybele,

The Splendid Mother of each deity

And beasts and mortals. Grecian bards of old

Have often sung about her and have told

That in her chariot she drives a pair

Of lions, teaching that the spacious air

Holds the great universe, and earth can’t lie

On earth. Perhaps you ask the reason why 610

The beasts are yoked? Their young, however wild,

Ought to be calmed and tempered by the mild

Acts of their parents. They have placed around

Her head a mural crown since, hemmed in sound

Positions, she supports our cities: she

Now wears it as she‘s borne horrifically

Across the earth and there is many a nation

That renders ancient ritual adoration

To the Idaean mother as she’s led

By Phrygian troops because, as it is said, 620

It’s from those regions corn was first created

And round the world was then disseminated.

They gave her eunuchs. Why? Because those who

Refused to pay her majesty its due

And to their parents showed no gratitude

Were thought unworthy to create a brood

Of children. The taut tom-toms thundering

Beneath the palms and cymbals echoing,

The raucous horns ring out, awakening fright,

And hollow Phrygian pipes cause much delight; 630

They carry martial arms to signify

Their violent fury and to terrify

The bad and thankless through the majesty

Of the goddess as she goes silently

Along and blesses mortals: then they spray

Copper and silver as she makes her way,

Enriching thus the path on which she rides,

And cast a shower of rose-flowers which hide

Her and her escort. And now in her way

Is an armed squadron with the soubriquet 640

Of Curetes, because they love to sport

Among the Phrygian bands and to cavort

In rhythmic leaps, in bloodshed revelling,

Nodding their heads, their dread crests shivering,

Like the Curetes on Dicte in Crete

Who, it’s reported, managed to secrete

The wailing Jupiter. They dance around

One of their number rapidly, all bound

In armour, bronze upon bronze clamouring,

Lest Saturn eat him, thus delivering 650

An everlasting wound to Cybele.

That’s why she’s guarded by this company,

Or maybe it’s because they signify

That they’re always prepared to fortify

And arm their native land and to defend

With pride their parents. All this is well-penned

Yet far from reason. For divinity

By nature must have immortality

And deepest peace and evermore remain

Apart from us, in safety, free of pain, 660

Not needing us, strong, not propitiated

With services and never aggravated.

The earth always lacks sense: to the sun’s rays

Many things are brought in many different ways

Only because many prime entities

Are given it. If you should call the seas

Neptune and corn Ceres and do the same

By giving to your wine the different name

Of Bacchus, then we all ought to agree

To think of the whole world as Cybele 670

As long as in reality your mind

Is free of base religion. You will find

Sheep, steeds and hornèd cattle pasturing

Together and from one stream swallowing

Its water, though each breed is not the same

And each retains the nature whence it came

And each its shape. A great diversity

Can be perceived in each variety

Of feed and river. Every beast contains

Bones, blood, warmth, sinews, fluid, flesh and veins; 680

They’re all dissimilar, too, for they are blent

With primal germs whose shapes are different.

Whatever has been kindled, furthermore,

And burned, if nothing else, contains a store

Of bodies that enable them to throw

Out fire and shoot up light and make things glow

In embers which they scatter all around.

Pore through the rest likewise and there’ll be found

In them the seeds of many things concealed

With various shapes. Many things will be revealed 690

That have within them colour, smell and flavour,

Chiefly the offerings that beg the favour

Of gods. They must have various shapes – rank smell

Can pierce one’s frame where colour cannot dwell.

In different ways colour and flavour steal

Into our senses and thereby reveal

The prime germs’ different shapes. Unlike shapes meet

In one great lump, and all things are replete

With mingled seeds. Throughout my poetry

Many elements enjoy a harmony 700

With many words, although you must concede

That words and verse are different and indeed

Have different elements. I’d mislead you

If I said common letters were but few

In all my verse or that, if I compare

Two words, there are no elements they share,

But all are not like all. The same we see

Elsewhere, for there’s a similarity

In many primal germs, and yet the sum

Of them will seem quite different when they come 710

Together; thus it can be rightly stated

That man and corn and trees originated

From different germs. Yet it must not be thought

That all things have in every way been brought

Together, since you then would commonly

See every kind of freak monstrosity,

Half-man, half-beast, high branches blossoming

From living beings and the coupling

Of limbs possessed by creatures of the sea

And those of land, Chimaeras noisomely 720

Breathing flame from their throats through lands that grow

All things. But it’s not clear that this is so,

Since all things a specific mother breeds,

Originating from specific seeds,

Conserve their kind while growing. Certainly

This argues a specific strategy,

Because the body of each thing is spread

Throughout its frame by that on which it’s fed,

Which activates the movements fittingly.

But on the other hand we also see 730

Some alien elements which Nature throws

Back on the earth, and many, struck by blows,

Escape with bodies that we cannot see –

They can’t connect with any entity:

The vital motions they do not perceive

Nor imitate. In case you should believe

That only beasts are held by these decrees,

The same precept keeps, by its boundaries,

All things apart. Since all things are created

As different, they must be formulated 740

With different shapes. I don’t say very few

Have the same shape but I am telling you

All’s not like all. And further, since the seeds

Are different from each other they must needs

Differ in gaps, vents, meetings, motions, weights,

Connections, blows, each of which separates

Not only beasts but keeps apart the sea

And earth and keeps the earth from heaven. Now be

Heedful to what I’ve happily toiled to bring

To you, and do not think that each white thing 750

You see comes from white atoms, or likewise

What’s black or any hue before your eyes.

In elements of matter there’s no hue,

Be they alike or unlike. And if you

Believe the mind’s unable to propel

Itself into each these bodies’ natures, well,

You miss the mark. A man who’s lacking sight,

Who never from his birth beheld the light

Of day, can know a body by the way

He touches it, so we can surely say 760

That bodies lacking hue of any kind

Can yet become a concept of the mind.

When we touch something in some pitch-black place,

We feel no colours painted on its face.

I’ve proved this, so I now will spell it out –

Every primordial body is without

A colour. Colours change while changing, too,

Themselves, a thing prime germs must never do;

Something unchangeable must survive, in case

All things go retrograde and have to face 770

Their doom: those things which change their form and go

Beyond their boundaries must die. And so

Don’t colour seeds lest everything go back

To nothing. Furthermore, should prime germs lack

The quality of colour, though endowed

With various shapes which give to them a crowd

Of colours, for it matters much how they

Are linked and what activities they may

Give and receive, at once you’d easily

Explain how something that but recently 780

Was black is now pure white: and it’s just so

With seas, when massive winds begin to blow

And stir them up, thus giving them the sheen

Of hoary waves; for you’d say that what’s been

Black, when its matter’s mixed and the array

Of prime germs changed, with some things moved away

And others added, now seem white. However,

If the sea were formed of blue seeds, it could never

Become white; if you jumble up what’s blue

In any way, it cannot change its hue 790

To white If the different seeds that give the sea

Its perfect brightness had a variety

Of colours, as a square thing is created

To make one shape, yet out of variegated

Figures and shapes, it’s fitting that, as there

Are shapes that are unlike within a square,

We see upon the surface of the sea

Or any bright thing a variety

Of different colours: and there’s not one thing

That keeps these unlike shapes from fashioning 800

It square on the outside. Nevertheless,

That mixture bars a single lustrousness

Within it, and the reason we’ve assigned

Colours to first beginnings you will find

Falters, since white from white can’t be created,

Nor black from black – they come from variegated

Colours. White things can rise with more success,

In fact, from something that is colourless

Than black or any colour, for they fight

Against it. Since colours must not lack light 810

And prime beginnings, on the contrary,

Do not merge from dark, assuredly

By colour they are never overspread.

For how can it be genuinely said

That colour lives in darkness? By the light

Itself it’s changed, according to how bright

Its impact is. A dove’s plumage is seen

Likewise whenever the sun highlights its sheen

About its neck: sometimes it seems to be

As red as bronze but sometimes, when you see 820

It at a different angle, you will view

It as a mix of emerald green and blue.

The peacock’s tail, suffused with plenteous light,

Shows, as it turns about, a different sight;

Since light creates these colours, don’t divine

That they can be produced without the shine

Of light. The eye receives one kind of blow

When it sees white but quite another, though,

When it sees black or any other hue;

As well, the colour of the thing that you 830

Have touched doesn’t matter rather than the way

It’s built: thus first beginnings, we may say,

Do not need hues but give out various

Species of touch with multifarious

Shapes. Since no fixed colour, furthermore,

Is parcelled to each fixed shape, and the store

Of prime germs’ fabric we can ascertain

In any hue, why are things that contain

Those shapes not likewise painted with a dye

Of various colours? Crows should, as they fly, 840

Frequently from white plumes show a white hue,

And swans should be made black from black seeds, too,

Or any other hue, whether it be

Single or mottled. And, additionally,

The more minute the particles when they

Are split up, the more readily we may

See colours slowly fade, as, when you pull

And tear into small parts some purple wool,

Purple and scarlet, brightest of all hues,

Are totally destroyed; thus you may use 850

This fact to learn that particles breathe away

The colours that they have before they stray

Into things’ seeds. And lastly, you can tell

That not all bodies have a sound or smell.

We can’t perceive all things, and thus it’s clear

That some things have no hue, nor can one hear

Them make a sound. The wise perceive both these

And those devoid of other qualities.

But do not think first bodies lack just hue –

They’re devoid of warmth, cold and strong heat, too, 860

Wholly deprived of sound and dry of juice:

And from within themselves they can’t produce

An odour. As when you start to prepare

Sweet marjoram and nard, which through the air

Sends nectar’s breath, and myrrh, first ferret out

A jar of olive oil which is without

Scent that it hardly with its pungency

Destroys the scents in the miscellany

Of foods – it’s by the self-same reasoning

Prime germs must not add smell to anything - 870

Cold, heat, warmth, and all other things: since these

By nature have ephemeral qualities –

Friable, pliant, spongy, rarefied –

They must from primal germs be set aside

To make things permanent lest we should see

All things returning to obscurity.

Now of necessity we must confess

Things that we see have feeling nonetheless

Have senseless primal germs. Facts obvious

To everyone, facts plainly known to us, 880

Don’t contradict this: rather by the hand

They take us, forcing us to understand

That out of first beginning which possess

No feeling beasts are born. Why, from a mess

Of stinking dung, live worms arise, a flood

Fouling the earth and turning it to mud;

All things change likewise: rivers, it is seen,

And foliage and pastures lush and green

Change into beasts and beasts sequentially

Change into us; and from us frequently 890

Strong beasts and birds all grow and multiply.

All foods become live bodies, and thereby

Through nature creatures’ feelings are created

In the same way as sticks are animated,

Producing flames. And therefore don’t you see

The import placed upon the symmetry

Of prime germs and with what they’re coalesced

Thus to engender motions and be blessed

By motions, too? What is it, furthermore,

That strikes the mind, forcing it to explore 900

Feelings, thus stopping you from crediting

The sensible being born from anything

Insensible? It’s surely that the earth

And sticks and stones are mixed and can’t give birth

To vital sense. I am not saying, though,

That all things in our universe can grow

From what makes sensible things. But still, the size

Of what does make them you must realize

Is crucial, and the shape, and, finally,

Each order, angle and activity. 910

In clods and sticks we don’t see them, although

When they are putrefied by air, they grow

Small worms because the bodies are combined

In a position of a different kind

Than formerly so that they may create

Live creatures. Furthermore, those folk who state

That things which feel come from those things which gain

Their sense from other elements maintain

The seeds, being soft, must have mortality.

For all sensation’s a miscellany 920

Of sinews, flesh and veins, and every one

Is soft and thus formed in a union

Of mortal substance. Grant then, anyway,

That they’re eternal: definitely they

Must feel they are a body’s part or be

Believed to have the similarity

Of complete animals. But we must say

They can’t feel separately in any way.

For every body part has a relation

To something else: none can retain sensation 930

Alone. Thus it remains that they should be

Like complete animals, and just as we

Feel things,so should they, too: and thus they can

Feel all sensations that preserve a man.

So how will it be possible to call

Them prime germs and immortal when they all

Are living things, which are one and the same

As mortals? Even supposing that we claim

They could be, yet by link and combination

They merely would produce a congregation 940

Of living things, for men, and creatures too,

Could not by coupling make something new.

But were they to remove their own sensation

And take another one, what implication

In crediting the one they took away

Is there? And furthermore, so that we may

Go back a while – some birds’ eggs we have found

Become live chicks and worms seethe from the ground

After excessive rains have putrefied

The earth, be sure feeling can be supplied 950

By what can’t feel. But if someone should say

That’s true through change or by another way,

Like birth, I’ll prove to him there cannot be

A birth unless a link has formerly

Been made and nought except by combination

Can change. Firstly, there can be no sensation

Before birth since the matter is dispelled

Through rivers, air and earth, where it’s then held;

Still separate, the matter of each thing

Can’t trigger vital moves, thus triggering 960

Those all-perceiving feelings, which then shield

Each living thing, though suddenly these may yield

To some swift blow that Nature cannot bear,

Confusing mind and body everywhere.

Prime germs’ arrangements are disintegrated

And vital motions utterly frustrated

Till matter through the body is dispelled

And vital knots of soul are then expelled

Through all the pores. What else, then, can such blows

Do but break up all things, do you suppose? 970

The vital motions left will frequently

Prevail when they’ve been struck less violently

And calm the blow and call back everything

And shake off death, which then is swaggering,

Rekindling those sensations nearly lost.

How else can those live things that almost crossed

Death’s threshold come back with their minds now whole

Once more rather than continue to that goal

They almost reached and die? And furthermore,

When matter is severely crushed, it’s sore 980

And trembles, but it fells soothing delight

When it moves back to its original site;

Yet you should know that first germs feel no pain

Nor happiness because they don’t contain

Elements, untroubled by the novelty

Of motions, free, too of felicity.

Again, if feeling has to be assigned

To atoms so live things of every kind

May feel as well, what of humanity?

They shake with laughter, laugh outrageously, 990

Of course, and weep so that their tears bedew

Their cheeks and speak of composition, too,

Profoundly, going further to survey

In depth their first beginnings; and since they

Are like whole mortals, they must then be gained

From other elements which were attained

From other elements – thus you’d not dare

To make a stand securely anywhere.

I will go further – everything you attest

Can laugh and hold a conversation, blessed 1000

With wisdom, comes from things which actually

Do all those things. But if we should agree

That all of this is pure delirium

And laughers from non-laughing things can come

And those who have reason and eloquence

Are born of seeds that do not have a sense

Of either thing, why shouldn’t the things that we

Perceive are capable of feeling be

Composed of seeds that aren’t? All of us came

From heavenly seed – our fathers are the same, 1010

Whose water is produced to foster us

On Mother Earth who spawns luxurious

Trees, shining harvests, a miscellany

Of savage beasts and all humanity,

Providing food to give sweet life to us

As we beget our offspring: and it’s thus

That she is called our mother. What evolves

Out of the earth back to earth resolves

And what fell from the regions of the sky

Is brought back to their temples by and by. 1020

Death does not kill things to annihilate

The bodies’ matter but to dissipate

Their links abroad, and once more it combines

Others with others – thus they change their lines

And colours, gaining feeling which they then

At one particular time give back again;

Learn, then, by what and in what kind of array

These germs are linked up and what motions they

Give and receive. Therefore do not profess

That prime germs don’t eternally possess 1030

Things floating on the face of anything,

Sometimes being born and sharply perishing.

Moreover, in what and in what array

Each element’s located I must say

Here in my poem: sky, rivers, earth, sun, sea,

All crops, all animals and every tree

Have the same letters in the words; although

They are not all alike, yet they are so

For the most part; the difference, though, is based

Upon the way each element is placed. 1040

In real things, too, in matter’s combinations,

Their motions, order, structure and locations,

The thing also must change. Now turn your mind

To reason: something of a different kind

Is keen to reach your ears – a very new

Side of creation wants to speak to you.

We may believe some things at first, but then

Others there are which by degrees all men

Begin to doubt. Consider first of all

The clear blue sky and what it holds withal, 1050

The constellations, moon, the dazzling sun –

If they were now revealed to everyone

On earth out of the blue, then they would say

That it is even greater than what they

Had once thought nonpareil. Assuredly,

They would, for such a splendid sight to see

It must then be. But now it is a bore

And everyone is happy to ignore

Those shining temples. Forbear, then, to be

Electrified by simple novelty: 1060

Use your keen judgment, and if things seem fact,

Give up, if false, prepare yourself to act

The soldier. For since space is limitless

Beyond the world that now imprisons us,

The mind desires to understand what lies

Beyond our ken as its projection flies

Free of itself. For firstly, all around,

Above, below, on each side, there’s no bound

Within the universe. As I have taught,

Truth of itself cries out and light is brought 1070

By the nature of the deep. Since every place

In all directions holds a boundless space

And countless seeds fly round eternally,

We cannot say that in reality

More things weren’t made beside the sky and earth,

And Nature’s passive: for Nature gave birth

To the world, and seeds by chance regardlessly

In many ways collide erratically

Till things now linked could be in every case

The start of many mighty things – the race 1080

Of creatures, earth, sea, sky. So I profess

Interminably that you must confess

That other groups of matter live elsewhere,

Like this that’s clasped voraciously by air.

And when abundant matter is in place,

Moreover, and before it all there’s space,

Then things must be achieved assuredly

If nothing hinders them, and, should there be

As many seeds as all of time can tell

Existed and the same nature as well 1090

Abided with its old ability

To throw all seeds together similarly

As they have now been thrown, then you are bound

To say that other worlds may yet be found

With men and creatures of a different kind.

So in that sum there’s nothing you can find

Which is unique. Take creatures – it is so

With them as with the breed of men: also

With fish and birds, and therefore with the sea,

Sky, earth, sun, moon – in actuality 1100

All that exists, and they are not unique

But numberless; their life will reach a peak,

And they’re as mortal as each entity

On earth which holds a multiplicity

Of similar things. Convinced thus, you will find

Nature is free at once, quite unconfined,

Rid of proud masters, of her own accord

Acting alone without one heavenly lord

Assisting her, for to the gods I pray,

Who live in tranquil peace each perfect day. 1110

Who rule the sum of all that has no bound

And at one time turn all the heavens around

And through the fruitful world give warmth to us

With endless fire, ever ubiquitous,

To make the sky obscure with clouds and shake

Their thunder in the heavens and often make

Their shrines with lightning fall and move away

Into the wilds to cast a bolt to slay

The innocent and undeserving, though

They turn a blind eye to the guilty? So, 1120

Ever since the world was first begun,

When first one saw the earth and sea and sun,

Many bodies have been added from without

And many seeds assembled round about,

And all of these were tossed together by

The mighty All that sea and land and sky

Might grow. All bodies are sent out by blows

From everywhere, each to its own, and goes

Back to its kind. Thus liquid must give birth

To liquid, earth engenders yet more earth, 1130

Fires forge out fires, air air, till finally

Nature brings all things with dexterity

To a conclusion: thus the arteries

Of life do not receive more entities

Than flow out and come back. Then life must be

At a standstill, and with her mastery

Nature curbs growth. For those things we behold

Merrily growing as they take a hold

Of the ladder that will take them gradually

Up to the summit of maturity 1140

Take on more bodies than they liberate

As long as they’re able to accommodate

Food through the veins and things that aren’t so spread

As to disperse too much on which they’re fed.

Many elements flow away, we must believe,

And leave, and yet the bodies must receive

More till they’ve reached the pinnacle of growth.

Then by minute degrees age fractures both

Vigour and strength and it is liquefied

Into decay. The more immense and wide 1150

A thing’s become when it has ceased to grow,

The more atoms it scatters and lets go

From every side and food can’t easily

Enter the veins. Since so abundantly

It streams things out, fewer things are supplied,

And that makes sense, for they are rarefied

From all the flowing out once they were dead,

Knocked down, since through old age they’re barely fed.

There’s nought that bodies buffet from without

That they do not as well break up and clout 1160

With fatal blows. The world will crumble, too,

For nourishment must patch up and renew,

Supporting and sustaining – but in vain

Because the bodies’ veins do not contain

Enough – what’s needed Nature won’t allow.

The power of life is broken even now:

The earth, worn out and drained, can scarce beget

Much more than tiny animals, and yet

Large beasts once lived. There was no mortal race,

As I believe, sent down here from the face 1170

Of heaven on some gold chain that they might dwell

Upon the fields. They’re from no sea, no swell

Of crashing waves against the rocks – they came

From earth, where they’re still bred, the very same

That bred them then. Besides, it was for us

She first made grain and vines luxurious

And splendid pasturage, which we can’t see

Will be augmented with our industry.

Our farmers are exhausted, as indeed

Our oxen are, our pastures barely feed 1180

Our families and our ploughshares all are worn.

To stretch our toil, the fields hold back their corn.

And now the ancient farmer frequently

Will shake his head that all his industry

Has come to nothing: seeking to contrast

His present situation with the past,

His father’s fortunes he consistently

Extols; the present age continually

The sower of the shrivelled vine will groan

About and the old world with many a moan 1190

He’ll grumble was so full of piety

And in a small domain would easily

Support his life, although his share of land

Was smaller then; and he can’t understand

That everything in steps breaks and decays,

Surmounted by the ancient lapse of days.

# BOOK III

You, who amid such darkness raised a light

So clear and made the gifts of life so bright,

I follow, glory of the human race,

And on the marks that you have left, I place

My feet, not so much wishing to compete

But, out of love, hankering to repeat

Your thoughts: indeed how could a swallow vie

With swans? How could a young goat even try

With trembling limbs to run against a steed?

Our father, truth-discoverer, you feed 10

Us with your precepts, and from what you wrote,

As bees in every flowery glade will gloat

On honey, we take golden nourishment

Deserving of a life that’s permanent,

Illustrious man. For once your reasoning

Starts to proclaim the nature of everything,

The terrors of the mind all flee away,

The world’s walls open out and an array 20

Of actions in the void I then can see:

The gods appear in all their majesty

As do their peaceful homes unshaken by

The winds and rain-clouds sprinkling from on high,

Unmarred by frost and snow, and ever bright,

The air surrounds them, laughing with delight.

By Nature everything has been endowed

And at no time there’s nothing that will cloud

Their peace of mind. And yet, contrarily,

No Acherousian temples do they see; 30

And yet the earth’s no check to everything

That’s visible, whatever’s happening

Throughout the world beneath us; and when I

Then gaze upon these things, I’m captured by

A sort of holy joy, but also dread

Since Nature manifestly has been spread

By you in every part so openly.

And since I’ve shown the great variety

Of origins of every living thing,

The difference in their shape, how varying 40

They are and how they of their own accord

In everlasting motion fly abroad,

Creating everything, I must make clear

How mind and spirit work and oust the fear

Of Hell, which troubles man with thoughts of death

And darkness, leaving him with not a breath

Of clean and pure delight. When men proclaim

That bodily illness and a life of shame

Frightens men more than Hell and that the mind

Is blood or even air, if they’re inclined 50

That way, and that they have no need to hear

Our reasoning, my words will make it clear

That they are merely supercilious,

Not facing facts. They’re driven far from us,

Disgraced and suffering many miseries,

And yet they still perform their obsequies

To their ancestors, wherever they’ve fled,

And slay black cattle, offering to the dead

Their sacrifices, with more eagerness

Reverting to religion. It’s no less 60

Of use to scrutinize a man attacked

By peril and to comprehend in fact

The kind of man he might turn out to be;

For only then will he speak verity

Elicited from his very heart and soul:

The mask’s torn off, the truth remaining whole.

Greed and ambition, which drive men to spurn

The law and sometimes be prepared to burn

The midnight oil to reach the very height

Of power are instruments which feed their fright 70

Of death. Contempt and need are seen to be

Far from delight and the stability

Of life; before the gates of death they stray,

It seems, whence men desire to flee away:

Spurred by false hope, with civil blood they heap

Up riches after riches as they keep

On slaughtering, rejoicing cruelly

Upon a brother’s death, while enmity

And fear possesses them at the appeal

Of a kinsman who invites them to a meal. 80

They envy him his influence as well

Since everyone perceives him as a swell,

While they themselves complain that they are stuck

With wallowing in obscurity and muck.

Some sweat and toil just for an effigy

And a name. It happens, too, that frequently

That fear of death develops as a hate

Of life and in their grief they fabricate

Their own demise because they don’t recall

That this fear was the origin of all 90

Their miseries, because this fear can make

This man to lose his honour, that to break

His bond and all to topple piety.

For often one betrays his family

Or country while he’s trying to evade

The land below. As children are afraid

Of darkness, sometimes we’re afraid of light

More than those things that children in the night

Fear will appear. And therefore this dark fright

Must be dispersed but not by shafts of light 100

Nor the sun’s rays but by the stern decree

Of Nature. I must say primarily

Intelligence, more normally called the mind,

Where wisdom and control of life you’ll find,

Is no less part of the human frame than eyes

Or hands or feet or other things that comprise

One’s being. But there are some men who say

The feeling of the mind will never stay

In one fixed place but that it’s meant to be

The vital force the Greeks call ‘harmony’ - 110

It gives us sense, though perspicaciousness

Is nowhere to be found, as healthiness,

Though said to be within us, does not dwell

In any part of someone who is well.

But I imagine that in what they say

Of this they wander very far astray.

There’s an unhealthy man before our face,

Though he is happy in some hidden place;

The opposite’s often true, though, when we find

A man whose body’s fit, though not his mind, 120

As when a man whose foot aches feels no pain

Meanwhile within his head. And yet again,

In heavy sleep where there is no sensation

There’s something yet that’s feeling agitation

In joys and empty cares. Our spirit lies

Within our frame, which does not realize

Feeling through harmony - when a great part

Of a body is removed, still at the heart

There’s life; but then again, when just a few

Particles of heat desert the frame and through 130

The mouth the air’s thrust out, immediately

That same life will desert each artery

And bone, and by this you may recognize

Each particle differently fortifies

One’s life, and wind and heat provide the seeds

To cater to it, seeing to its needs.

And it’s the seeds of wind and heat that see

That life still lingers on. Accordingly

They quit the frame at death. Therefore we find

The nature and the spirit of the mind 140

Are part of man, so call them harmony,

Brought down from lofty Helicon to be

Used by musicians, or perhaps they drew

It from another source and gave it to

Something that lacked a name. So anyway,

It’s theirs! Now hear what else I have to say:

I say the mind and spirit are both bound

And interlocked together and compound

One nature, but the head is lord of all

And it is understood that we now call 150

It mind and wit, which in the breast is placed,

Where throbbing terror, fear and joy are based:

There, then, are mind and wit. Dispersed around

The frame, the rest of the spirit may be found,

Obeying both. It has the faculty

Of sense when nothing simultaneously

Affects the frame and soul. As when the head

Or eye is aching, torment is not spread

Elsewhere, sometimes the mind is injured too,

Though glad when the other parts of the spirit do 160

No harm. But when the wit is stirred by dread

We see the total spirit now will spread

Throughout the frame, which turns a pallid grey

And sweats, the voice falters and dies away,

The eyes grow dim, there is a buzzing sound

Inside the ears, the limbs fall to the ground,

And thus the mind and spirit we may see

Are unified, and when the energy

Of mind attacks the spirit, straightaway

It buffets it and sends it on its way 170

Towards the body. Therefore we may see

The nature of both things is bodily:

It drives our limbs, it rouses us from sleep,

It changes our expressions, thus to sweep

Us onward, which cannot occur without

Touching, and furthermore there is no doubt

That touch needs body – thus we must agree

The nature of them both is bodily.

The mind, then, can experience as well

The feelings that within our bodies dwell. 180

If bones and sinews are divided by

A grim sword but the victim does not die,

Languor occurs, and then a blissful swoon,

But then he feels a turmoil very soon

And sometimes an uncertain urge to rise.

Thus by these precepts you must realize

The mind’s corporeal, because it knows

What it must feel when buffeted by blows

And bodily weapons. Now I’ll say what kind

Of body is implanted in the mind 190

And how it’s formed. It is exceedingly

Delicate and made of remarkably

Minute atoms. So try to realize

That nothing that appears before our eyes

Moves faster than the mind. It has been found

Therefore that all its seeds must then be round

And tiny, so that a small energy

May move and touch it. All Liquidity

Is moved thus since it’s made of shapes that flow

And are but tiny. Honey’s nature, though, 200

Is more deep-rooted, flowing tardily

Because its stock cleaves more compressedly,

Its atoms not so smooth or fine or round.

Indeed the gentle breeze, we all have found,

Can blow high heaps of poppy-seed way.

And yet, contrariwise, we cannot say

That stones or wheat-ears can do this at all.

So, insofar as entities are small

And even, so is their mobility;

A thing more rough and heavy proves to be 210

More rigid. Since the nature of the mind

Is movable, it must be confined

To tiny, smooth, round seeds. You, best of friends,

Will find these things will pay you dividends

Elsewhere. It’s delicate and it can place

Itself into a very tiny space

If once compacted. When death’s tranquil peace

Gets hold of man and mind and soul both cease

To be, you’ll see no form or weight remains

Inside the total frame. Everyone gains 220

All things from death excepting warming breath

And vital sense, both carried off by death.

Twined in the vital organs thus the soul

Requires the tiniest seeds. For when the whole

Body is gone, the limbs’ contours must stay

Uninjured and no weight must slip away.

In the same way, when we have lost the scent

Of Bacchus’ gift or some emollient

Has shed its perfume or a savour’s gone

From someone’s body, yet it lingers on 230

Before our eyes, its heaviness intact –

This is no marvel, for the seeds in fact,

So many and minute, produce the smell

And redolence which in the body dwell.

Yet Nature’s not that simple, you must learn –

An aura, mixed with heat, will in its turn

Desert the dying, and the heat will drain

The air away, for heat cannot remain

When lacking air. The nature of heat is rare

And therefore through it many seeds of air 240

Must move. This triple nature of the mind

Cannot engender sense of any kind

Or thoughts or motions. Therefore there must be

An added fourth, which has been totally

Denied a name: nothing’s more animated

Or more impalpable or more created

So even and so rounded and so small:

It gave sense-bearing motions to us all.

Composed of little shapes, it stimulated

The first; the motions were appropriated 250

By heat and wind, then air, and finally

The blood is struck and every entity

Begins to feel and now there is sensation

Within the marrow – joy or irritation.

And pain will not for nothing penetrate

The frame but all will at a certain rate

Begin to be discomfited and flee

The frame hither and yon. But usually

It’s on the skin motions come to an end

And that’s the reason why we can extend 260

Our life. I’m keen to tell you how they’re blent

And with what combinations they are meant

To function, but I lack the words to tell

You this, but I will persevere as well

As I am able briefly. For there’s none

That can be sundered from another one:

They act as one, though many. We know well

All creatures have a savour and a smell

And warmth, but one great bulk is made intact

From these: for wind and warmth and air all act 270

As one to make one nature, and that great

And mobile energy will then create

Sense-bearing motions throughout the insides,

Because this essence in our body hides,

More deeply than all else, soul of the soul

Itself, throughout our members and our whole

Body: the energy of soul and mind

Is mixed and latent, for it is combined

Of bodies small and few and thus created,

By which the body has been dominated. 280

And by this reason wind and heat and air

Must act thus, each one taking on its share

Of rule, and thus one nature has been made

Lest by disseverment the sense should fade

Because of them. The mind will seethe with spleen

When struck by heat, and then the eyes are seen

To flash with fire; cold wind, that friend of dread,

Will through the shaken frame arouse and spread

A shudder, while a gentle air will grace

A breast with peace and make a tranquil face. 290

But those with restive hearts are hotter yet,

Possessing minds of passion quickly set

In rage, of which lions primarily

Are seen, often displaying thunderously

Their fierceness, quite unable to withhold

Their anger, while the mind of stags is cold

And windier – those icy currents make

Their innards cold while all their members quake.

The oxen, though, live by the tranquil air,

Nor does the torch of wrath cause them to flare; 300

Not pierced by icy javelins of fear,

They don’t grow stiff – halfway between the deer

And lions thus they’re placed. Thus, too, the nation

Of men – though they’re refined by education,

Yet it has left those pristine marks behind

That represent the nature of each mind.

And evil can’t be, it must be supposed,

So purged from them that one is not disposed

To tempers, while another easily

Is touched by terror, while a third may be 310

More mild. The traits and natures of mankind

Must differ very much, but I can’t find

A name for the shape of each prime entity

Or whence has come this great variety

Nor treat the hidden causes, but I can

Say this; these marks which show the traits of man,

Which reason won’t take from us, are so small

That nothing can’t prevent a man at all

From living like the gods above. Therefore

This soul is kept within the body’s core 320

As guardian; with common roots they cleave

Together and cannot, unless they leave

This world, be torn apart. One can’t with ease

Tear off the fragrance from small quantities

Of frankincense unless the body dies –

The nature of the mind and soul likewise:

Their seeds have been from birth so intertwined

While with a partner they have been combined;

If it should lack its partner’s faculty,

The other would possess no energy 330

Or feel; our sense, though, is intensified

By mutual motions placed on either side.

Besides, alone the body’s not begotten

Nor grows nor after death is nought but rotten.

Though water sometimes gives off heat whereby

We gain advantage, yet it does not die,

Remaining safe; it is not in this way

Our limbs, deserted quite, can bear, I say,

That they have lost the soul, but they must die,

All mutilated, and then putrefy. 340

From early days, by joint communication,

The soul and body gain an education

In vital motions; even when they’re still

Within the womb, they’ll not, unless by ill

And pestilence, be harmed; so you may see

That, as the source of their security

Is linked, so must its nature be as well.

Moreover, if somebody dared to tell

You that the body does not have sensation,

Opining that the soul, in combination 350

With body, takes on motion which we call

‘Sense’, he is clearly battling with all

The proven facts, for it would be in vain.

For who is there who’s able to explain

The feelings of the body unless he

Has learned what we’ve been told of openly?

“But when the soul has gone, the frame’s bereft

Of sense.” Indeed! For when the soul has left,

It loses what it never owned at all,

And more besides, after soul’s downfall. 360

To say the eyes see nothing and yet through

The same the mind can see is hard to do.

For sense itself forces our eyes to be

Aware of consciousness, especially

When we can’t see things that are very bright

Because our eyes are hampered by the light.

With doors this is not true – with eyes we see,

So doors don’t undertake the drudgery.

If eyes should act as doors, I would declare

That, with our sight removed, our mind would fare 370

Yet better at seeing what they would survey

When even the door-posts had been cleared away.

Don’t take up what the sage Democritus

Has in this discipline laid down for us,

That prime germs of the body and the mind,

Each super-imposed on each, all weave and wind

Our members. For the elements of the soul

Are smaller far than those which form the whole

Outer and inner body. Also they

Are less in number as they sparsely stray 380

Throughout our frame. And so it may be seen

That all the soul’s prime germs maintain between

Themselves large intervals, though in contrast

There are the smallest bodies which are cast

Against us, rousing motions which have sense

That they apply within our bodies. Hence

We sometimes cringe to see the dust alight

On us, or chalk or vapours of the night

Or spiders’ webs which, while we’re travelling,

Drop down, their withered strands entangling 390

About our head or feathers that alight

On us or plant-seeds, which, being so slight,

Seem barely to descend: each crawling thing

We do not feel nor traces settling

Upon us made by midges and their kin.

Thus many prime germs must be stirred within

Ourselves once the soul’s seeds that through our frame

Are mixed begin to realize that those same

Prime germs have been attacked and then pulsate

Between the gaps and clash and integrate, 400

Then leap apart. The mind, though, we may say,

Is keeper of the gates and holds more sway

Over the soul. Sans intellect and mind,

No part of any soul can ever find

Rest in our frame, because it flies away

And thus the icy limbs must ever stay

In death’s cold grip. However, he whose mind

And intellect have both remained behind

Lives on. Although he may be mutilated

And from the limbs the soul’s been extricated, 410

He breathes the life-sustaining air, and when

Most of the soul has vanished, even then

He lingers on, as in an injured eye

The pupil is unharmed and does not die,

The sight still strong: but do not harm the ball

That forms the eye but make incisions all

Around the pupil, leaving it behind,

For vision will be ruined, you will find,

If more is done. But if that tiny piece,

The centre, is destroyed, the eye will cease 420

To function, though elsewhere the ball, you’ll find,

Is clear. And thus it is that soul and mind

Are linked forevermore. Now I shall tell

You that the minds and souls of all that dwell

On earth are born and die, and in my verse,

Written with lyric toil, I will rehearse

My rule of life for you, but I shall frame

The two of them in but one single name;

Thus when I speak of soul while telling you

That it is mortal, think that I speak, too, 430

Of mind, since they’re the same, concatenated

Together. Now I have communicated

To you that soul is subtle, a compound

Of tiny particles, and you have found

Its parts much smaller in capacity

Than water, fog or smoke, mobility

Being therefore more functional by far,

So they’re more prone to move, although they are

Struck by less cause: they’re moved apparently

By images of smoke and fog, as we, 440

When we’re asleep, see shrines exhaling steam

And smoke, for there’s no doubt that as you dream

These images come to you from afar.

Therefore when you discern, when pitchers are

Demolished, all the water flows away:

The fog and smoke will also in this way

Depart – therefore believe the soul also

Is shed abroad and will more quickly go,

Then be destroyed, dissolving once again

Back into its own fundamentals, when 450

It leaves the body; if that body’s split,

Just like the jar I’ve spoken of, and it,

By loss of blood, has now been rarefied

And can no longer hold the soul inside.

How could you think that stuff that is more rare

Than bodies can be held by any air?

Besides, along with body mind we hold

Is born and with it grows up and grows old.

When little children totter all around

With weakling frames, a weaking wisdom’s found 460

Within them: with the years their powers grow

With understanding as they come to know

More things, but then, as they grow old, they find

That with a shattered body they’re defined

By feebleness, the mind itself gives way,

Thought hobbles and the tongue begins to stray;

At the same time one fails and loses all.

It makes sense likewise that the soul will fall

Apart, dissolving high into the air;

And we have seen the body come to fare 470

In the same way. The body, it is plain,

Has dread diseases and appalling pain –

So mind feels grief and fear and bitter care,

Wherefore the mind, as we must be aware,

Will taste of death, for it will frequently

Wander around a body’s malady,

Beside itself, crazily babbling,

And often sinking, eyelids languishing,

Head nodding, till in endless sleep it lies,

Where it’s unable now to recognize 480

Those who stand round about it, cheeks bedight

With tears, and vainly calling it to the light

Once more. That mind dissolves, therefore, we need

To say, since grief and illness both may lead

To death, as we well know. A strong wine’s force

Enters a man and scattered fires course

Around his veins, then comes a lethargy

Within his limbs as he precariously

Staggers about, his mind awash, his speech

Sluggish, and one can hear him brawl and screech, 490

Eyes all aswim and all else that ensues.

Why is this? Well, it happens when strong booze

Perturbs the soul. If a thing more vigorous

Got in, therefore, it would be poisonous

And kill the soul. It happens frequently

That someone has a seizure suddenly,

As from a lightning-bolt, before our eyes –

He falls down, foaming, and, as there he lies,

Groans, shakes, talks nonsense as he twists about,

His gasps in fits and starts, and he wears out 500

His limbs. These ills disturb the soul as well,

As winds disturb the salt sea’s billowing swell.

A groan’s forced out because his misery

Has gripped his limbs: however, generally

The voice’s seeds are driven outwards through

The mouth as they are always wont to do.

He’s made inane, because, as I have shown,

The energy of mind and soul are thrown

Apart by the same pestilence, although

When the cause of the disease turns back to go 510

Into its shadowy lairs, the man will rise,

Though reeling, and will come to recognize

His senses slowly, and his soul he’ll find,

Because within his body soul and mind

Are shaken by diseases and distraught

By labour. Wherefore, then, should it be thought

That in the open air they both can spend

A bodiless life which promises no end,

In battle with the winds? Ans since we see 520

That for the sick mind there is remedy,

As for the body, this must clearly show

Mortality is in the mind also.

For he who aims to modulate the mind

Or change a single thing of any kind

Should add new parts or redress the array

Or from the total take something away;

But what’s immortal does not wish to be

Increased or rearranged, no entity

Removed from it, since change of anything

Beyond its boundaries ends in the sting 530

Of death: therefore, whether the mind is ill

Or else restored by medicine, it still

Gives notice of its own mortality,

As I have taught. Such is veracity,

Opposed to other theories, sheltering

From refuge all those adversaries who bring

Two-edged rebuttals. Someone we may see

Who loses vital senses gradually –

First toes, then nails, then feet, then legs turn blue

And fail, then all his other members, too, 540

Show signs of frigid death, and, since the soul

Is split and can’t at any time be whole

Alone, it must then have mortality.

But if perhaps your rationality

Claims that it can bring all the parts inside

The frame so that sensation can abide

Throughout, where much of the soul exists, it ought

To have more more feeling but, as I have taught,

A place like this does not exist, and thus

The soul is torn apart – that’s obvious. 550

Dispersed outside, it dies. Do not suppose

The soul survives inside the frames of those

Who slowly die – the soul, one has to say,

Is mortal, should it fly, dispersed, away

Or shrink as it becomes stationary –

The more a man lacks sensitivity

The less is life within him. For the mind

Of man is just one part which you may find

In one fixed place, just like the ears and eyes

And other senses, which all supervise 560

Man’s life; as eyes and hands, when cut apart

From us, can’t feel at all or even start

To be but quickly rot, similarly

The mind without the man can never be,

Because the man and body both contain

The mind (or you, perhaps, to make it plain

May use another metaphor), the mind

And body being so closely entwined.

Together they thrive. The mind alone, without

The frame, cannot send vital motions out, 570

Nor can the body, wanting soul, endure

And use the senses. And you may be sure

The eye, uprooted from the face, can’t see

A blessed thing, and so, similarly

The soul and mind, it seems, when they’re alone,

Possess no actual power of their own,

Mixed in with veins, guts, bones and ligaments,

Possessing, too, primordial elements

Which through great spaces cannot leap apart,

One from another, thus able to start 580

Life-motions which, after a body’s dead,

They could not do because they then have sped

Outside the body, thus no longer bound.

For air will be a body, breathing, sound,

If the soul can hold itself within the air,

Enclosing all the motions living there,

Which in the frame itself it used to do.

Once more, therefore, we must say that it’s true

That once the body’s opened and its breath

Spills out, the senses of the mind meet death, 590

The soul as well, since they are spliced together.

And once again, since body cannot weather

The split between them both without decay

And loathsome stench, then we would have to say

That from deep down the soul has been dispersed

Like smoke, the body totally immersed

In dissolution: every deep foundation

Within it has been moved, leaving its station,

The soul through every body’s winding way

And orifice out-filtering away. 600

By many means, then, you are free to know

The nature of the soul – that it must go

In fragments from the body and is rent

In tatters even before it then is sent

To float away into the windy tide.

Often, when life yet lingers on inside

The frame, the souls seems anxious to be free

And quit the body’s confines totally,

By something agitated, and, as though

The soul is close at hand, its features go 610

Inert, the bloodless limbs hang down (the kind

Of case when one says, “He’s out of his mind”

Or “He’s quite gone”, while others stand and quake

With trepidation, anxious now to make

The best of all the days that yet remain

To them before life cuts away her chain).

For then the mind and soul are shaken so

As with the frame itself they, tottering, go,

Near death. Thus, with its wrappings stripped away,

Why would you doubt the soul could ever stay 620

The course, so weakened, for eternity,

More likely to dissolve immediately?

Nobody feels his soul leave, as he dies,

All in one piece, nor does he feel it rise

Up to his throat and jaws, but rather he

Can sense it fail in one locality

That’s fixed, as he is very well aware

That all his other senses founder where

They yet remain. If our souls truly were

Immortal, then they would not so demur, 630

At death, to be dispersed but they would take

Their leaving as release and, like a snake,

Throw off their garb. Again, why is it so

That our intelligence and minds don’t grow

From head or feet or hands but that they cling

To one fixed place, unless for everything

One place has been assigned that it may stay

Unharmed, all limbs set in the same array?

One thing’s born of another – flames, therefore,

Are not created out of streams, nor more 640

Likely comes cold from fire. Plus, if we

Affirm a soul has immortality

And, even when disjointed from our frame,

Able to feel, I fancy we may claim

They have five senses, for there is no way

But this that we may picture that they stray

In Hell. Painters and bards of days gone by

Have seen them thus. No nose or hand or eye

Includes a soul while bodiless: it’s clear

That this is so for any tongue or ear 650

As well. Alone, then, they can’t feel or be.

And since it is a vital sense we see

In the whole body, if a sudden blow

Should strike it with a mighty force and go

Clean through it, then the soul without a doubt

Would be divided , too, and flung far out

Along with body. But whatever’s cleft

In many parts admits that it’s bereft

Of an eternal nature. For they say

Scythe-bearing chariots so swiftly slay 660

The foe that as their limbs lie on the ground,

Dissevered from the trunk, they have been found

To quiver, while their owner feels no pain

Due to the blow’s speed, but he roams the plain

To carry on the slaughter, unaware

His shield and left arm are no longer there,

Snatched by the scythes the steeds have dragged away.

Another struggles to renew the fray,

Blind to his lost right arm. Another tries,

One of his legs now lost, again to rise, 670

While on the dying foot the toes are spread,

Twitching. When lopped away, even the head

Retains a look of life, eyes open wide,

Until the remnants of the soul have died.

If, when a snake lashes its tail and darts

Its tongue, you sever it in many parts,

You’ll see each part begin to writhe around

With its new wound and spatter up the ground

With gore, its fore-part turning back to strain

Its jaws that it might bite away the pain. 680

Does each part hold a soul? But if that’s so,

That self-same reasoning would surely show

Each beast has many souls. There’s one alone,

However, which has now been overthrown

Along with body. So mortality

Belongs to both and each of them can be

Cut into many parts. If one can say

The soul’s immortal as it winds its way

Into a child that’s newly born, then why

Can’t we remember things from days gone by 690

Before our birth? But if the faculty

Of mind has changed so much that memory

Has failed, that’s just like death, I think. Therefore

That death has come to what once lived before

And what is living now has been created

Anew. If, once the frame’s been generated,

The powers of the mind are introduced

Just at the moment when we are produced,

It should not with the limbs and body grow,

Or even in the body’s bloodstream. No, 700

It ought to live alone within a cell

(Yet all the body throngs with sense as well).

Souls must have origins, we must agree,

Nor ever be immune from Death’s decree.

We must not think something’s so closely tied

Up with our frames if it has slipped inside:

The facts we know, though, prove the opposite,

For soul throughout the veins is such a fit,

As well as through the sinews and the skin

And all the bones, that even the teeth share in 710

Sensation as in toothaches we may see

And ice and when one bites down suddenly

On a stone in bread. Since souls are so combined

With all those bodily parts, they cannot find

A means to save themselves and steal away

From nerves and bones and joints. But should you say

A soul enters a body from outside,

It is more prone to die since it’s allied

So closely with the flesh; what usually

Enters dissolves and dies accordingly. 720

It permeates the frame, as nourishment,

Which, once throughout the limbs and frame it’s sent,

Dissolves but yields up something new. And so

The spirit and the mind, although they go

Into a new whole body, even as they

Seep into it, yet are dissolved away.

The particles that make the mind, those same

That exercise dominion in the frame,

Rose up out of the mind that permeated

The flesh and at its time deteriorated 730

And died. Therefore it seems that we may say

That there’s a natal and a funeral day

For the spirit. Are its seeds, then, left behind

Or not? If they are not, we’ll have to find

Them mortal for they are diminished by

The parts they’ve lost: however, if they fly

Away with all their parts completely sound,

Why is that the rotting flesh is found

Disgorging worms, and wherefore do we see

A boneless, bloodless multiplicity 740

Of living things that teem and crawl about

The bloated corpse? But if perhaps you doubt

All this and think that souls can seep inside

Each worm and don’t reflect how such a tide

Of living things assembled in one spot

Whence only one crept out, should you then not

Consider whether souls actually chase

Small worms’ seeds and therefrom erect a place

To make a home or if they rather find

A ready-made home? But why this toil and grind? 750

It’s hard to say. They’re bodiless, and thus

They flutter round, in no way tremulous

Nor pained by hunger, cold or any blight;

But rather it’s the body that must fight

Against these flaws of life, as must the mind

Since with the body It has been combined.

Though it is useful for those souls to make

A bodily home, it’s still a big mistake –

They can’t and therefore don’t. There is no way,

Moreover, that these souls can make their stay 760

In ready-made bodies, for if that were so

They could not forge the subtle to and fro

Of feeling. Why has violence been bred

In brooding lions? Why do deer feel dread,

Subject to flight? And why are foxes sly?

And speaking of all other creatures, why

Are they at birth endowed with qualities

If not since mind, with all its faculties,

Proliferates with its own seed and kind

Along with the whole frame? But were the mind 770

Immortal, able, too, to change around

Its bodies, earthly creatures would be found

Confused in nature – savage hounds would fly

From deer, a hawk would tremble, frightened by

A dove’s approach, wisdom would fail mankind,

Fierce creatures would be wise. If you’d a mind

To think soul, blessed by immortality,

Mutates along with body, you would be

Quite wrong, for what is changed will melt away

And die, since parts are moved and their array 780

Is altered; they must melt away as well

And die with body. There are those who tell

That always will the souls of mankind fly

To human frames to make their homes, but I

Will ask: How can a stupid soul arise

And be created from a soul that’s wise?

Why does a child’s soul have no commonsense?

And why can foals not leap a lofty fence

As sturdy steeds can do? They’ll try to claim

That mind becomes a weakling in a frame 790

That’s weak. That being so, though, nonetheless

It’s necessary, too, that they confess

The soul is mortal, since it thoroughly

Changes and dies, the sense it previously

Possessed now gone. Or how can mind grow strong

And gain the flower of life it craves along

With body unless it had always been

Its consort from the start? What would it mean

To leave on ancient limbs? Did it fear to stay

Inside a putrid corpse or feel dismay 800

His house, exhausted with longevity,

Would tumble down? There is no jeopardy

For what’s immortal. And, as wild beasts mate,

It’s daft to think immortal souls would wait

To see what bodies they might occupy,

A countless number of them, piled up high,

Contending to be first – unless maybe

There is among the souls a strict decree

Allowing just the first to reach its home.

No trees live in the air, and in the foam 810

Of ocean are no clouds, nor in the ground

Can fishes live, while blood cannot be found

In wood, nor sap in stones: each entity

Will grow in its own fixed locality.

Without the body, then, the nature of mind

Can rise alone, nor will we ever find

It far from blood and sinews. If it could,

However, rise alone, you rather should

Find it in heads or shoulders or the base

Of the feet, or born in any other place, 820

Although within the self-same human frame

It yet abides, residing in the same

Vessel. But since within that frame we find

A fixed and separate place wherein the mind

And soul may grow, so all the more we should

Say that outside the frame they never could

Be born and then survive. When the frame dies,

It’s necessary that the soul likewise

Will perish since within it it’s embedded.

For if you claim the mortal has been wedded 830

To the immortal, thinking they agree

Together, that’s a gross absurdity.

For what’s more stupid and incongruous

Than thinking that they are harmonious

As they together weather every squall?

For everything eternal must block all

And every stroke, since they are strong and stout

And must be able also to keep out

Whatever powers that might lacerate

Their well-fixed parts (as I have said of late, 840

Seeds are like that); or through eternity

They’re able to survive since they are free

Of blows, just like the void, which remains sound,

Or else because there is no room around

Them all that they may fly off and disperse,

Just like that sum of sums, the universe:

There is no place beyond whither things might

Asunder fly and nothing that can smite

Them with great blows. But if you should decide

The soul’s immortal, mainly since it’s tied 850

Securely by dynamic forces, never

Assailed by any danger, or, if ever

They were, those dreadful threats would fly away,

Repelled ere we could feel the harm that they

Might do, [it has been found this is not true].

For when the body’s sick, the soul is too,

Often distressed by what’s not happened yet,

Beset by dread and wearying with fret,

And even by transgressions formerly

Committed it is gnawed at bitterly. 860

Add madness, also, and forgetfulness

That drowns in murky waves of sluggishness.

Death’s nothing to us since forevermore

It will be mortal: as in times before

Our birth we felt no ill, when all around

The Carthaginians with their battle-sound

Assailed us, and the whole world trembled so

With war which under heaven’s vaults brought woe

And in the balance stood the victory,

As mankind held its breath on land and sea, 970

When we’re no more and there arrives a breach

Of soul and body, by the work of each

Of which into one state we are combined,

We’ll have no more experiences, blind

To everything, not even if the sea

Mingled with earth and there were unity

In sea and heaven. But if we could say

That, after they had both been stripped away

From body, mind and soul still had sensation,

What would it be for us, a combination 980

Of flesh and soul? Even if after death

We were remade, rewarded with the breath

And light of life, it would mean nought at all

After the interruption of recall.

We’d not be as we were in former days

And feel no more distress. For when you gaze

On all the years gone by and think about

How many motions matter can send out,

You’d well believe the seeds from which we grow

Have the same order just as long ago, 990

Though this we can’t remember, since we’ve found

A break in life’s been made, and all around

Have motions wandered from our faculties.

For if one is expecting maladies,

At the same time he must be present too.

Death won’t allow these ills that may seem due

To fall on him. Thus not in any way

Should we fear death, nor should there be dismay

For him who’s dead, because, once he’s no more,

Why should he care if he was born before? 1000

When you observe a man who is distressed

Because his corpse will rot once laid to rest

Or he will die in flames or in the jaws

Of wild beasts, know that this should give you pause –

The note sounds false, for in his heart there lies

An unseen sting, however he denies

That there’s no feeling after he is dead,

Because he contradicts what he has said:

He won’t uproot himself and cast away

His erstwhile self but thinks something must stay 1010

Within him. Picturing himself deceased,

His body torn by vultures or some beast,

A man weeps for his state, his fantasy

Still substituting for reality.

He grieves that he is mortal, for he spies

No second self that’s placed in his demise

To grieve his own self’s passing now he’s fated

To lie there, burned by flame or lacerated.

But if it’s evil to be mangled by

The jaws of brutal beasts, I don’t see why 1020

It pains you less if flames incinerate

Your body or if you should suffocate

On honey or lie on an icy rock,

Stone-cold, or be the victim of the shock

Of earth piled on you. “Now no loving spouse,”

They say, “shall greet you in your happy house,

No little ones will run to you to snatch

A kiss, a silent happiness to catch

Your heart. No longer will you oversee

Your business or protect your family. 1030

So many joys of life in one vile day

Are taken from you.” But they do not say

As well, “Your yearning for them, too, has fled.”

Had they considered this and further said

Some words on this, you would be free of fear

And anguish. “Even as you’re lying here,

Asleep in death, you also shall be free

Of all your future griefs and misery.

But we have wept insatiably beside

Your ashes: never will our grief subside.” 1040

But we must ask the cause of bitterness

When what is mourned reclines in quietness.

Why grieve forever? Guests will raise a glass,

Their temples wreathed, and say, “How soon they pass –

Those golden days we never can redeem!”

The feelings of those people, it would seem,

Are that in death the greatest ill would be

A ravenous thirst that leads to misery

Or else another craving. For in fact,

When mind and body are at rest, intact, 1050

No-one rues death; indeed this sleep could last

Forever, since we don’t yearn for the past,

For those primordial germs don’t go astray

And from sense-giving motions move away

Too far, since when a man is suddenly

Jolted from sleep, he makes a recovery.

Thus death means much less to us, if that less

Stands for that which we see as nothingness.

For germs diffuse more widely at one’s death,

For none will rise again or take one breath 1060

At life’s chill pause. If Nature suddenly

Upbraided us: “Why this anxiety,

Mortals, these weak complaints? Why do you weep

At death? For if your goods you did not heap

In piles so that they leaked, as in a sieve,

And if before your death you got to live

A pleasant life, why do you not then play

The guest who after dining, goes away

Content, you fool? Go, seek eternal rest!

But if you waste that with which you were blessed 1070

And life offends you, why would you then try

To add more ills than in the days gone by?

No, rather end your life of drudgery!

For nought can I devise of gaiety

For you. For everything is just the same

Forever. Even with your wrinkled frame

And weak limbs nothing changes. Should you go

On to the end of time – yes, even though

You live forever –“ what do we reply?

That Nature keeps the law and does not lie. 1080

But should a man riper in years bewail

His death more than is fit, should she not rail

At him: “Cease weeping, fool, cease whining, too:

You’re wrinkled, but your life has favoured you;

You crave what’s absent, scorning what is present,

So your unfulfilled life’s not been too pleasant.

Now ere you guessed it death stands at your side

Before you can depart quite satisfied.

But what’s unseemly for your greying hair

Cast off! Make room for others? That is fair!”? 1090

That she should reprimand you is her due –

The old concedes when pushed out by the new,

Since one thing heals another, and no-one

Is sent to Tartarus’ dominion:

The future generation needs to grow

With new material; these, too, will go,

Their life completed, even as before

Went others, for eternal is the score

Of generations. One may merely rent

One’s life, not own it. All those lives that went 1100

Before our birth mean nothing to us. Thus

A mirror is by Nature shown to us

Of what lies In the future when we’re dead.

Does any of it fill our hearts with dread?

Is it not more agreeable than sleep?

Indeed, whatever happens in the deep

Of Acheron happens here. No Tantalus

From people’s tales, benumbed and timorous,

Fears the gigantic stone while in the air

He hangs, but here on earth a terror, bare 1110

Of reason, of the gods torments us all,

While we fear anything that could befall

Mankind. No flapping vultures rip apart

Prone Tityus, and when they reach the heart

They find no food to feed them endlessly

Despite his outspread limbs’ immensity

Of not nine acres only – no indeed,

It covers all the world. He’d never feed

Those birds, nor suffer pain, eternally.

But here on earth that Tityus is he 1120

Who’s tortured by Love’s biting or outworn

By anxious agony or ripped and torn

By one thirst or another. Sisyphus

On earth is also something else to us –

He thirsts for fame but in the end is glum,

Retiring to his grave quite overcome,

For seeking after power’s a useless game,

Not given to everyone, an empty name,

A world of toil. That’s what it is to push

A boulder up a hill, which, with a rush, 1130

Rolls back down to the plain, where it will lie

And feed ingrates but never satisfy,

Just as the seasons when they come around

To make the earth with new-grown fruits abound

And other pleasant things. Mortals, however,

Are able to enjoy life’s blessings never,

Just as, I think, those virgins, so they say,

Poured water which would always drain away

Since the urn they poured it in possessed a crack.

Now Cerberus, the Furies and the lack 1140

Of light and Tartarus, belching out a swell

Of heat, do not exist, as they might well

Not do! But in this life we mortals quail

At punishment for evil deeds – the jail,

The Rock, the torturers, the whip, the rack,

Pitch, red-hot plates, the torch; although we lack

Such things, they’re active in the mind: thus dread

Lives in our conscience and it goes ahead

And plies the goads and lashes us nor sees

What is the end of all these miseries, 1150

And we fear that in death they will expand.

Indeed, a fool’s life on this earthly land

Is Acheron! Therefore from time to time

Repeat these words: “Even Ancus the sublime

Has looked his last, who was more virtuous

Than you, you rogue, and there’ve been numerous

Monarchs and potentates who once held sway

Over great nations but have had their day.

The man who built a path across the sea.

Providing passage for his infantry, 1160

Discrediting with his steeds the ocean’s roar,

Poured out his soul and then was seen no more,

His light extinguished. Also Scipio,

War’s thunderbolt, he who brought Carthage low,

Ended beneath the earth where he was then

No better than a slave. Add, too, those men

Who were the pioneers of everything

In arts and science, those accompanying

The Muses, too – Homer was one of those,

The finest bard of all, now in repose 1170

With all the others. When senility

Informed Democritus his memory

Was fading, he committed suicide.

Epicurus would no longer here abide,

His course now run, who bettered everyone,

Just as the stars are smothered by the sun.

Will you carp at your death, who, while you live,

Seem as one dead? To slumbering you give

A great part of your life. You even snore

While you are still awake, and, furthermore, 1180

You never cease to dream. Anxiety,

Though baseless, dogs your mind, and constantly

You spurn the cause, beset by cares, and reel

About in endless doubt. If people feel

That heavy load and then can also find

The reason why such burdens fill their mind

They will not live that way. For we can see

They don’t know what they want, incessantly

Seeking a new home, thinking that they could

Be happier in a different neighbourhood. 1190

A man will leave his splendid mansion, bored,

But comes straight back since elsewhere can’t afford

Him comfort. With his ponies he will speed

Down to his villa, as though in a need

To douse a burning house: as soon as he

Has touched his villa’s threshold, in ennui

He yawns, or else he seeks oblivion

In slumber, or perhaps he hurries on

To town. Each person seeks his self this way

And yet he cannot ever get away: 1200

He cleaves to it in hate against his will,

Not knowing still the reason for his ill

Should he but see that, he would then ignore

Everything else, beginning to explore

The nature of things because he must debate

All time, not just one hour, for Man’s estate

Remains forever in eternity.

What can this evil lust for living be,

Imperilling us like this? We all must die,

We can’t shun Death – we’ll meet him by and by. 1210

We’re busy with the same things day and night

And nothing’s forged to bring some new delight;

We don’t have what we’re longing for and yet

It seems the most important thing to get.

We grab a thing but then want something more:

That equal thirst for life eats at our core.

The future is in doubt, Death’s threatening,

Nor do we have a chance for lengthening

Our life and all the years of imminent death

We cannot shorten. So, though while there’s breath, 1220

Outlive as many people as you may,

Death waits. The man who died but yesterday

Shall have no briefer time in Death’s grim score

Than him who dies so many years before.

# BOOK IV

I roam the haunts of the Pierides,

Not trod before, and feel much joy at these

Pure fountains, while I long to drink them down.

I pluck new flowers and seek a glorious crown

To deck my head, where the Muses never yet

Have on a mortal’s head a garland set;

I teach important things and try to free

Men’s minds from dread religiosity;

On themes so dark I make my verses bright

Throughout the work and all the Nine’s delight. 10

There’s cause, for when a doctor starts to treat

A child with nauseous wormwood, with the sweet

Nectar of honey he will smear the cup

Upon the brim: the duped child laps it up

And thus recovers. Since my doctrine might

Mainly seem bitter to a neophyte

And scary to the rabble, it’s my will

To use sweet words to coat this sour ill.

So in my verse I hope to keep your mind

Upon the things I teach until you find 20

The use of nature. I’ve already shown

The seeds of things and how they on their own

Flit round in everlasting forms, all churned

By endless motion, and from me you’ve learned

How they create all things, but now to you

I’ll speak of something most important too –

That ‘images’ exist which we might call

Membranes or shells of sorts which flutter all

About each thing. They scare us while we lie

Asleep or when we are awake and eye 30

The images of souls lost to the light

And weird shapes that have roused us in the night.

O may we never ever be in doubt

That souls do not leave Hell or fly about

Among the living or that anyone

Is left behind when his last day is done,

Body and mind destroyed, each to its seed

Returning. Images of things, indeed,

And flimsy shapes as well, are sent away

From their insides. And therefore need I say 40

That this is clear to all, however slow

Of wit they are? For firstly we all know

That many things oust matter in plain view,

Loosely diffused, as oak and fire will do

With smoke and heat; and some are more compact

And interwoven, as locusts will act

By casting their smooth tunics to the earth

In summertime and calves will, at their birth,

Drop membranes from their body and a snake

Will cast aside its garments in a brake 50

Of thorns (we often see them fluttering

On briars). If this is so, then from one thing

Or another slender film will fall away:

Why they should not is very hard to say

Since many tiny particles can be cast

From things and keep the shape that in the past

They had, their order too; being few, they’re less

Impeded, giving them more speediness,

Since they are on the surface. We can see

That many bodies are abundantly 60

Cast out by things not only, as I’ve stated,

From deep down but also disseminated

From their outside – their very colours too.

The awnings, saffron, red and dusky blue,

Are commonly in splendid theatres spread,

The poles and cross-beams fluttering overhead;

They shine upon the patrons down below

While forcing every countenance to glow;

The darker are the walls, so everything

Laughs glowingly, the daylight tapering. 70

The hanging curtains, sending out their dyes,

Shine out on everyone, and thus likewise

Must flimsy effigies, since both are thrown

From off the surface. So it is well known

That vestigies of forms will flit around,

Most subtly woven, nor can they be found

By human eyes when they are separated.

Moreover, what can be evaporated,

Such things as odour, heat and smoke, ascend

From deep within the body as they bend 80

Upon their journey and are wholly rent

Because the gateways marking their ascent

Are far from straight, but when the strips of hue

Are shed, there’s nothing anything can do

To rend them since they’re placed on the outside.

Lastly, those images which we have eyed

In mirrors, water or the sort of thing

That has a surface that is glittering,

Since with the self-same look they are supplied,

Have images of objects sent outside. 90

Their shapes and likenesses exist indeed,

But none can notice them as they proceed

Singly, but when they bounce back frantically

From off the mirror’s face, we all may see

Its images. There is no other way

To argue how the mirror can display

Perfection in each one. Come, learn how lean

An image’s nature has always been -

Seeds are beneath our senses, first of all,

Since for our eyes primordials are too small. 100

Briefly I’ll demonstrate their subtlety:

Some creatures are so small that, cut in three,

One can’t see them at all. Therefore surmise

How small their guts are, or their hearts, their eyes,

Their limbs, their joints! Consider, too, the seeds,

Besides, whereby their souls and minds must needs

Be fashioned. They are minuscule as well.

Moreover, what sends out an acrid smell –

Absinthe, panacea, wormwood, centaury –

When you just pinch it lightly, you will see … 110

…But other images, as you should know,

In many manners flitter to and fro.

Invisible and bodiless. Unless

You think they wander through that wilderness

Alone, however, there are some which fly,

Of their accord created, in the sky

Fashioned in countless shapes. The clouds pack tight

While all those images become a blight

Upon the calm world, ruffling the air,

For Giants’ faces often are seen there, 120

Casting long shadows, while across the sun

Mountains and rocks are sometimes seen to run,

A monstrous beast then dragging clouds behind

Becoming shapes of every different kind.

Now learn how easily and swiftly they

Are spawned, flow off from things and pass away…

…For something always streams from the outside

Of things, which they discharge, then they may glide

Through other things, as they would go through glass,

But when through stone and wood it tries to pass. 130

It’s cracked and therefore it’s impossible for it

To send an image back. When a tight-knit

And polished glass, though, or some similar thing,

It meets, that crack would not be happening:

The smoothness rescues it, and it is thus

That all the likenesses flow back to us.

Place something near a mirror suddenly –

Its image will appear: thus you may see

The shapes and textures from a body flow:

Thus many images will swiftly grow 140

From bodies. It is such a speedy birth!

Just as the sun must send down to the earth

A massive host of lights summarily

So that its beams may be perpetually

At work upon the world, in the same way

There must be sent immediately an array

Of images most multifariously

To all parts of the world summarily.

However to a glass we turn a thing,

It shows both form and hue resembling 150

That object. Though a clear sky in a twink

Turns turbid with a face as black as ink

As though the darkness was unleashed from Hell

And filled the heavens’ mighty vaults pell-mell.

And dreadful clouds rise from the darkest night

While up above looms the black face of Fright,

How small the image is no-one can say

Or reason out. Come now, how swiftly they

Are borne up in the air as on they glide,

But one short hour wasted in their ride 160

To any region each one plans to reach.

In verses short and sweet I now will teach

You of them all, because a swan’s brief key

Is sweeter than a crane’s cacophony

Among the South Wind’s clouds. So, first of all,

We often note slight objects made of small

Bodies are swift, as are the heat and light

Of the sun, whose primal elements are slight.

They’re beaten, as it were, and hurried straight

Along the air and do not hesitate, 170

Driven by blows behind them. Light dogs light,

Successively making things yet more bright.

Thus through an unimaginable space

Must images have the ability to race

In seconds: a slight push far at their back

Hurries them forward, keeping them on track:

They’re borne along with such rapidity

As well, their texture of such rarity

That there’s no object which they can’t invade

While oozing, as it were, as they’re conveyed 180

Along the intervening air. Besides,

If bodies send, from deep in their insides,

Small particles just like the heat and light

Of sun, and they are seen in their swift flight

Through heaven in one instant, taking wing

Over the sea and land and showering

The sky, what then of those which stand outside,

Prepared, with nothing, once they have been shied

Away, to check them? Don’t you see how fast

And further they must go through such a vast 190

Expanse just when the sun begins to strew

Its rays? What seems particularly true

In showing how fast images move about

Is, when the skies at night begin to spout

Their bright rain, all the stars immediately

Are reproduced in all their radiancy

In water down on earth. It’s now quite clear

How swiftly from the heavens down to here

On earth images fall. We realize

That there are particles that strike our eyes 200

And make us see, and odours constantly

Oozing from objects, as frigidity

From rivers, heat from sun and ocean’s spray

Of waves which gnaws the harbour walls away.

And various voices constantly resound

All through the air, and sometimes there’ll be found

A salty taste when we stroll on the shore.

When wormwood’s being blended, furthermore,

Its bitter stings us. Thus it’s plain to see

That particles are carried streamingly 210

Through every region with incessant speed,

For we have feelings always and indeed

May smell and hear. Besides, what we can feel

In darkness with our hands light will reveal

To be the same as what we felt. Thus we

May gather that the self-same agency

Produces touch and sight. Thus if we feel

A square in darkness, what does light reveal

Except its image? What, then, causes sight

Is images, without which nothing might 220

Be seen. They’re born and tossed around and spread

Into so many regions, as I’ve said,

But since we can distinguish everything

With eyes alone, wherever we may bring

Our vision, everything affects our sight

With shape and hue; the image brings to light

The gap between our eyes and it. Once cast,

It drives along the air that will have passed

Between them: through our eyes this air then flows

And gently rubs the pupils as it goes, 230

And then it comes about that we may see

How far away each object has to be.

The longer that the breeze against our eyes

Will last, the further from our gaze it lies.

All these events occur so rapidly

That distance and object are instantly

Perceived. It should not come as a surprise

That all the images that strike our eyes

Cannot be singly seen and yet we see

The very things themselves. For thus, when we 240

Are plagued by wind and cold or wintry weather,

We undergo their onsets all together,

Not one by one, and thus we get to know

How we become affected by a blow,

As though there were some outside agency

Attacking us. And, furthermore, if we

Should place a finger-tip upon a stone;

It is the stone’s periphery alone

We feel and not the hue. Come, then, see why

Beyond the glass an image we may spy 250

Deep down within, just like the things outside

In their true shape, as when a door may slide

Open, allowing us to see within,

For there’s a two-fold air, which has a twin,

That forms the sight. The air comes into sight

Inside the posts, then both, at left and right,

Are at the doors, and then a light is there,

Brushing our eyes, and then the other air,

Then outside in their true shape, objects peered

Upon. When the glass’s image has appeared 260

Before our eyes and thrusts along the air

Between it and our eyes, which we see there

Before we’ve seen the glass, but once we’ve seen

That glass, the image that from us has been

Carried reaches the glass and then is cast

Back to our eyes and drives on, rolling fast,

Another air ahead, and this we see

Before itself, and thus it seems to be

Far from the glass… …Each thing, then, comes to pass

By means of those two airs. Now, in the glass 270

The right side of the limbs is seen to be

Upon the left, returning shakily,

Forced backwards in a line that’s not awry,

As one whose plaster mask is not yet dry,

Who hits it on a beam or column where

It keeps its shape as it stays clinging there,

Reversed, and thus the eye upon the right

Seems left, the left seems right. An image might

From glass to glass some few times be passed round,

Because whatever objects can be found 280

Hiding back in the house, though far removed

In twists and turns, yet they can still be proved

Able to be brought forth and seen to be,

Via each glass, in the vicinity.

The image gleams across from glass to glass

Where left is right, though then the left will pass

Back to its proper place. And you should know

The glass’s tiny sides, streamlined to show

*Our* sides, send back the images with right

Now on the right, either because their sight

Is passed from glass to glass, twice struck away,

Back to ourselves or, at the mirror, they 290

Wheel round since by its curvature they’re taught

To turn to us. It well may be your thought

That lockstep with us in close harmony

They move and imitate the way that we

Deport ourselves, chiefly since, once you stray

From one part of the mirror, straightaway

No image is returned, for Nature’s force

Makes everything leap back upon its course

At equal angles, and the sun likewise

Is able to affect our gazing eyes 300

And blind us, for its rays are very strong,

Able to drive the images along

Down through the flawless air, thus injuring

Our eyes. We find a harsh sheen blemishing

Our eyes because the sun holds many a seed

Of fire, which causes injury indeed.

Also, whatever jaundiced people view,

Whose frames are yellow, has a yellow hue

Since from us many yellow seeds exude

To meet the images, with many glued 310

Within the eye, and by contagion dye

It with a yellowness. Again, we spy

From dark recesses objects which appear

In light because when this dark air comes near

And holds our open eyes, the shining air

Follows, disseminating everywhere.

The other air sinceit in nimbleness

And qualities of strength and tininess

Excels the other. Filling our eyes with light,

Which once were blocked by air as black as night, 320

It opens them: then films of things ensue,

Provoking vision – which we cannot do

With objects in the dark, out of the light,

Since dark air follows, blocking out our sight,

Filling each gap so that no film can be

Cast in the eyes to hurt them. When we see

The squared towers of a city far away

They often present a roundness because they

Seem obtuse in each angle or maybe

Aren’t seen at all, because we do not see 330

Their blow, because through countless strokes the air

Makes blunt the angle’s point, which had seemed square.

Each angle thus has shunned the sense, and so

The stones appear spheroidal, just as though

Upon a potter’s wheel, not like things near

And truly round, though: yet they still appear

Vaguely so. Now our shadow, when the day

Is sunny, seems to imitate the way

We move and follows us, if you allow

That air bereft of radiance can somehow 340

Copy our gait. That which we once believed

A shadow is just air which is bereaved

Of light. Indeed the earth occasionally

Is reft of light when, in our wanderings, we

Obscure its path. If there’s a place on earth

That we abandon, we replace its dearth

With light: what was a shadow still will stay

And dog us in the same unswerving way.

Now rays are always flooding in, while rays

Of old disperse, as to a fire’s blaze 350

Wool’s drawn. The earth is spoiled accordingly

Of light with ease and just as easily

Washes away the shadows. We, however,

Don’t say the eyes are cheated, for it’s ever

Their task to note where shadows and where light

Are placed, whether the gleams are just as bright

Always and whether this shadow is the same

As that one and whether the facts we claim

Are really true. The mind must referee

These facts by reasoning. For how can we 360

Determine Nature’s truth with just our eyes?

So, for the fault of minds do not chastise

Our vision. When we sail upon the sea,

Our ship, though borne along, seems stationary.

But when it stands in harbour, we assume

It’s moving. Hills and meadows seem to zoom

As under billowing sails we pass them by.

Within the heavens’ caverns way up high

The stars seem stock-still, though they go about

In constant motion as they’re rising out 370

And dropping though the sky. Similarly

The sun and moon to us seem stationary,

Though clearly they’re In motion, as we’ve seen

Through reasoning. A tract of sea between

Two mountains far away provides egress

For ships, but they appear to coalesce

Into one island. When boys cease their play

Of spinning, halls and columns seem to sway,

Making them think the roofs will tumble down.

When Nature starts to raise the sun’s bright crown 380

And tremulous fires, to top, apparently,

The mountains (for the sun then seems to be

Tingeing them with its fire), in fact they are

Scarcely two thousand arrow-shots afar,

Or scarce five hundred shots of a dart, although

Between the mountains and the sea below

The massive tracts of ether lies the sea

Where dwell profusions of humanity

And savage beasts. Between the stones there lies

A shallow pool that shows to human eyes 390

A view of earth below that’s just as far

As is the view that reaches every star

In heaven; in this way you seem to spy

Both clouds and constellations, lying high

Above, below the earth. As we may course

Across a stream, we find our galloping horse

Sticks fast as down we gaze, but then we find

Some form or other thrusts it from behind,

And so, wherever we may cast our eyes

Across the stream, each object onward flies, 400

It seems, the way we do. A porch will stand,

Well-propped all over, parallel and grand,

On equal columns, and then, when we see

Its whole extent from one extremity,

It joins the ceiling with the floor, the right

Side with left, it reaches an obscure height,

Contracting gradually. To sailors’ eyes

The sun out of the waves appears to rise

And into them be buried, since they view

Nothing but sea and sky. But to those who 410

Don’t know the sea the vessels, when they stay

In port, appear to lean upon the spray

Of water, powerless about the stern.

The portion of the oars that’s raised, we learn,

Above the waves is straight, the rudders too.

But other parts, the parts that sank right through

The water-line seem both broken and bent,

Apparently inclined in an ascent

And turned the other way, seeming to float

Upon the waves. And when the winds we note 420

Scatter the clouds at night, they seem to sail

Among the stars and blaze a different trail

From their intent. But if beneath one eye

We press a hand, the objects which we spy

Seem double, as bright flowers do as well

And as the furniture round which we dwell,

Men’s faces, bodies, and, when in repose

Our slumbering limbs are bound, yet we suppose

We move and are awake: in darkest night

We think we see the sun and bright daylight; 430

Although we’re shut within a room, our eyes

See changes in the rivers, oceans, skies

And hills; we cross the plains on foot and hear

New sounds, although around us night’s austere

Silence abounds and speaks to us though we

Hear nothing. Yet more wonders do we see,

Which try to violate belief – in vain,

Since most of them deceive us, for we feign

To see what’s hidden. Nought’s more arduous

Than separating what is dubious 440

And what’s plain fact. Again, should one suppose

That there is nothing that is known, he knows

Not whether this is known at all, since he

Confesses ignorance. Accordingly,

I won’t contend with him, who’s set his head

Where both his feet should be. I’ll ask, instead,

“What is it to know and not to know in turn?

Are you aware of that? And did you learn

What spawned the truth and what has proved to be

True in differentiating credibility 450

From what is false?” He has not known indeed

Of truth before. You’ll find out that truth’s seed

Is in the senses, which can’t be belied.

For we would have to find a worthier guide

Than them, which through our own authority

Would distance falsehood from veracity.

But there is none. Shall reason, then, hold sway

From some false sense or other and gainsay

Those senses? Reason was spawned, after all,

Out of these senses, and if these should fall 460

From truth, all reason’s false. Should the ears blame

The eyes, touch blame the ears? Should, by the same

Reasoning, flavor blame the mouth, the eyes

And nose doing the same? Do not surmise

That this is so! To everything a role

Has been assigned, dividing from the whole

Each part, and thus we must perceive the cold,

The hot, the soft apart, and we must hold

As separate all colours. Taste as well

Has its own power and every sound and smell. 470

No sense, therefore, can have dominion

Over another, and there is not one

That blames itself, since it must always be

Deemed sure of equal credibility.

So what at any time these senses show

Is always true. And if we cannot know

Why objects close at hand seemed to be square,

Though rounded when afar, we should, though bare

Of reasoning, pretend for every shape

A cause rather than let the obvious things escape 480

And harm our primal faith in senses, lest

We wreck all those foundations on which rest

Our life and safety. Reason then would sink –

Even our very life would in a twink

Collapse unless our credibility

We kept in all our senses, keen to flee

All headlong heights and every dangerous place,

Anxious instead to seek with quickened pace

Their opposites. All words are hollow when

They’re spoken contradicting sense. Again, 3490

If a builder mistakes with his first plumb-line

And if the square he uses won’t align

With all the lines that dovetail perfectly,

Ans should the level sway but minimally,

The whole shebang becomes incongruous,

All back to front and inharmonious,

Some pieces wonky: in fact the whole thing,

Betrayed because of faulty reckoning,

Will soon fall down: our daily living, too,

Will find its calculations gone askew 500

When all our sense is false. Now easily

I’ll show how senses each their assets see.

All sounds are heard, once to the ears conveyed,

And strike the sense with their own body’s aid.

For even sounds and voice, we must confess,

Are earthly since they’re able to impress

Themselves upon the sense. And furthermore,

The voice may scream and make the voice-box sore

With scraping and will loudly exit through

The narrow gap and prime germs will ensue. 510

The opening of the mouth is scraped as well

With air blown outward as the cheeks then swell.

From earthly elements, therefore, it’s plain

The sounds originate, with power to pain.

And you cannot be unaware that they

Are capable of taking much away

From bodies and that much of human strength

Diminishes through talking at great length

From early dawn to dusk, especially

When all the words spill out ear-splittingly. 520

The man who talks a lot loses something

From his own body, so the voice must spring

From earthly elements. And, furthermore,

The roughness of the germs must answer for

The roughness of the voice, just as indeed

A sound that’s smooth’s created from some seed

That’s also smooth. The same form is not found

In trumpets rumbling with a roaring sound

Or a lute’s raucous boom or many a swan

Upon the icy shores of Helicon, 530

Wailing its liquid dirge. Thus when we force

Our voices from our diaphragm, the source

Of sound, our nimble tongue articulates

The sounds, while with the lips it formulates

The words, and when the space is short between

The starting-point from where the sound has been

And where we hear it, we must hear it plain,

Marked clearly, for the voice will then maintain

Its form and keep its shape. But if the space

Is longer than is fitting, in that case 540

The words across a deal of air must spout

And be disordered as they stream about

Across the winds, and so you may discern

A sound, yet what the words mean you can’t learn.

The voice, then, which we hear in some degree

Is hampered, troubled by adversity

And, furthermore, when once a single word

Departs the crier’s mouth, it will be heard

By all, and thus we hear it scattering

Through many voices, thus partitioning 550

Itself for separate ears that they might hear

The form they’ve planted and a tone that’s clear.

But any part that does not strike the ears

Themselves is borne beyond and disappears,

Lost in the winds. A part returns a sound,

From solid porticoes forced to rebound,

And mocks the ear with just a parody

Of words from time to time. Consequently,

When friends have wandered from their chosen track,

You may explain to all how rocks gives back 560

Like words out of the mountains’ wilderness

As we call out to them. I’ve heard no less

Than six or seven voices that were thrown

From certain places when one voice alone

Had been sent out. The mountains would vibrate

Against each other; dwellers nearby state

That nymphs and goat-foot satyrs there abound,

And fauns which with their nightly antic sound

Will often break the silence, while lute-strings

And, from the Pan-pipe, winning murmurings 570

Pour out and all the farmers far and wide

Hear Pan, who shakes his head from side to side

And runs his lips across the reeds, in case

The flute should cease to bless this woodland place

With music. Other prodigies as well

They tell of lest folks fancy that they dwell

In lonely spots, by the divinities

Themselves forsaken. That’s why they tell these

Tall stories. Or some other cause maybe

Encourages them in their avidity 580

To pour into folks’ ears, as do all men,

All kinds of fabrications. Then again,

You need not wonder how it comes about

That through those places where we can’t make out

Clear objects sounds may reach the ears. For we

Have often seen people in colloquy,

Although the doors are closed: through a bent slot

A voice can pass unharmed, but germs cannot

Because they’re ruptured, although they can pass

Through apertures that are straight, like those in glass, 590

Across which images fly. And, furthermore,

A voice is split in avenues galore

Because new voices can be generated,

One from another, once one has created

A second one, just as a spark will spread

And cause a multitude of fires. That said,

Places there are where voices can’t be found,

Hidden behind them, scattered all around.

Alive with noise. And yet likenesses all,

Once sent, move straight, and thus inside a wall 600

One can see nothing, yet can comprehend

The utterances other folk might send

From its far side. The voice itself will sound

Muffled, however, as you wander round

A shut-up house, and strike the ears confused

And, rather than the words that we are used

To hear, we hear just sound. The tongue, whereby

We savour, and the palate will supply

Us with more thoughtful work. At first we feel

A flavour when we’re chewing on our meal, 610

As one would squeeze a sponge: the food then flows

Across the winding pathways as it goes

Along the palate. When the food is sweet

The taste’s delightful, as its elements treat

Each spot as round the tongue they’re trickling.

However, they can cause us pain and sting

Our senses when they’re rough. But next, the pleasure

Stops at the palate, for it has no measure

Once down the throat the food has plunged to scatter

Around the body. And it doesn’t matter 620

What food is fed when you digest it well

And keep the stomach healthy. Now I’ll tell

How some find in some foods a bitter flavour

While others will luxuriate in the savour.

Why is there such a difference between

These people? Well, one kind of food is seen

As poison, as a certain snake will waste

Away when it’s been touched by just a taste

Of human spit and by autophagy

Expires. Poison to humanity, 630

But not to goats and quails, is hellebore –

It fattens *them*! What we have said before

You should recall, that seeds are coalesced

In many ways. All creatures that ingest

Their food are outwardly unlike and show

A multitude of shapes. Since this is so,

The intervals and meshes (which we call

Their apertures) must be diverse in all

Their members, even where the palate lies.

Each of them has to be a different size, 640

Some small, some large, some square and some with three

Corners, though some with more; many must be

Rounded. Depending on the association

Between the shapes of things and their migration,

Each aperture’s own shape must deviate

From others and, as textures will dictate,

The paths must vary. What tastes sugary

To one tastes nonetheless unsavoury

To someone else. Smooth bodies must be sent

Into the former as emollient; 650

Contrariwise, with other folk who find

It bitter rough, hooked elements must wind

Into the gullet. Therefore easily

We may interpret individually

Each case. When fever with a great excess

Of bile should through a person’s frame progress

Or he by some other infirmity

Is struck, the body suffers anarchy,

The germs all turned around; it happens then

That bodies, fir before to cause in men 660

Sensation, can’t do so, for they create

A bitter taste: both tastes coagulate

In honey’s savour – you’ve heard me maintain

This often. Now to you I will explain

How smell impacts the nose. There are indeed

Many things from which torrents of smells proceed,

And we must think they scatter and are sped

In all directions, but all smells are wed

To different creatures, since they deviate

In form. And therefore bees will divagate, 670

Drawn by the scent of honey, through the air,

While vultures will fly off to anywhere,

Drawn by the scent of carrion. A pack

Of hounds will set you on the beaten track

Of savage beasts. The Roman citadel

Was rescued when the white geese caught the smell

Of man. Each creature’s given a different scent,

Therefore, that leads it to its nourishment

And makes it shun foul poison: in this way

Its breed is then preserved for many a day. 680

They differ in how far they are conveyed,

Although there is no smell that can be made

To go as far as sound (I need not write

Of what assails the eyes, affecting sight).

It wanders slowly, gradually to die

Too soon, then is dispersed into the sky –

With difficulty it is sent from well

Within, and, since everything seems to smell

Stronger when broken or when it is ground

Or vanishes in fire, odour is bound 690

To flow out of its depths and be set free;

And smell has larger elements, we see,

Than voice since it’s unable to pass through

Stone walls, as voice and sound commonly do.

And for this reason we can’t easily know

Whare scent is situated, for the blow

Grows cold as through the air its leisurely cruise

It takes and, when it brings to us its news,

Is far from hot. Therefore hounds often err

And cast for scent. This also can occur 700

In aspect whose hues do not always fit

All senses so that people’s eyes aren’t hit

With too much sting. Even lions dare not meet

The cockerel whose custom is to greet

The dawn with flapping wings and voice so clear:

They always think of flight because they fear

Those seeds which stab their eyes and terribly

Inflict great pain despite their bravery;

But either since they do not pierce our eyes

At all or, if they do, they can devise 710

Free exit, they don’t hurt us. Briefly I

Will tell what stirs the mind and teach whereby

It’s stirred. First, many images move around

In many ways, for everywhere they’re found:

They meld with ease in air because they’re thin,

Resembling the web that spiders spin

Or leaves of gold. In truth they are much more

Thin in their textures than those which explore

The eyes and reach the vision since they make

Their entrance through the body and awake 720

The mind’s thin substance and assail thereby

The sense. And thus it is that we espy

The Centaurs, Scyllas, dogs like Cerberus

And images of those from previous

Epochs, whose last remains rest in the ground,

For images of every kind are found

All over – some that rise spontaneously

Into the air while some are randomly

Thrown off from things, while others are combined

With their configurations. You won’t find 730

A living Centaur, since no entity

Like that has ever lived in history.

The images of man and horse, as we

Now recognize, meet accidentally

Because they’re fine and thin in form. The rest

Of images like this have all been blessed

With the same structure. Since they’re borne with speed

And are extremely light, as I indeed

Have said before, then any one of these

Fine images bestirs our mind with ease 740

Because the mind is thin and wonderfully

Easy to move. Now you may easily

Discern from how this happens as I say

That mind and eye must in a similar way

React. I’ve said that lions I’ve perceived

By means of images my eyes received,

So thus we’re sure the mind is equally

Moved by the images of all we see

Except that they are thinner. Nor is there

Another reason why, when daily care 750

Is lulled by sleep, our mind contrarily

Is conscious but that when *we’re* equally

Conscious, the images are the same as when

We slumbered but to such a degree that then

We seem to see a man devoid of breath,

A dead man mastered now by dust and death,

Because our senses are impeded through

The limbs and cannot tell false from what’s true.

Moreover, when asleep, the memory

Lies calm and tranquil and won’t disagree 760

That he the mind has seen alive is not

But long has lain beneath his funeral plot.

That images can move and rhythmically

Wiggle their limbs is no surprise to me –

In sleep they seem to do this. When one dies,

A second image takes its place and lies

In another state, changed by the former one.

This must be thought to be rapidly done.

So great is their velocity and store

Of things, and there are particles galore 770

Of sense at any moment to supply

The images. I must be clear: first, why

Does the mind think of some whim immediately?

Do the images wait and then, as soon as we

Want it, is there a picture they supply,

Be it the earth, the ocean or the sky?

Does Nature at a word prepare them, then –

Processions, battles, feasts, parlays of men?

Meanwhile, though, different thoughts in that same place

Are happening. Moreover, when we face 780

Those images in dreams that gently sway,

Arms matching feet in time, what should we say?

That they’re well-trained in choreography

And through the night make sport in revelry.

Or maybe it’s because, when we have heard

In just a twinkling a single word,

Many times are lurking , which our reason knows

Are there, at any time keen to impose

Their presence in any vicinity.

The images are thin, and so we see 790

The mind cannot exactly recognize

Each one of them unless it really tries

To squint. Except for those for which it’s made

Ready, all of the images must fade

Away. They hope to see what happens when

They’ve made their preparations; indeed then

That follows. Don’t you see that, when the eyes

See something thin, they try to organize

Themselves, without which we can’t clearly see?

But even with what can be visibly 800

Perceived, it will be clear that, if the mind

Neglects to pay attention, you will find

It seems so far removed. Then why should we

Wonder because the mind shows laxity

In all but what it’s keen on? We assume

A lot from little, furthermore, and doom

Ourselves to falsehood. And occasionally

We find the image following to be

A different kind: a woman, then, may change

Into a man, or there may be a range 810

Of different shapes and ages which ensue.

Sleep and oblivion, though, see that we do

Not wonder. Shun this error fearfully:

Don’t think our eyes were made that we might see

The things before us, and do not surmise

That, placed above our feet, our calves and thighs

Enable us to walk, or, furthermore,

The hands, arms and forearms were structured for

Our daily use, because this explanation

Seems such a twisted rationalization. 820

For nothing in the body was assigned

To help us, but what has been born, you’ll find,

Creates the use. There was no sight before

The eyes were born, no speaking, furthermore,

Before the tongue was made, for its foundation

Existed long before articulation,

And ears preceded sound and, as I guess,

All of our limbs predated usefulness

For they would not have grown up otherwise

To be of any use. Contrariwise, . 830

Hand-to-hand combat in bloodthirsty war

And mutilation happened long before

Bright spears went flying; men learned to evade

A wound in war before the shield was made.

To yield to longed-for rest, it must be said,

Goes back much further than a pliant bed.

And thirst preceded cups. Accordingly,

What we learned by familiarity

Was made foe the sake of use, we may suppose.

But of a very different class are those 840

Structured before their use was recognized.

The limbs and senses must be categorized

In this class. So I must repeat once more

That you can’t think that they were structured for

Their use. It should not stretch credulity

That all beasts seek their food spontaneously,

Untaught. For many bodies, as I’ve shown,

Are in so many ways from objects thrown,

But most from living creatures: they progress

Quickly and from their insides many press 850

Through sweat, wearily panting, and are blown

Out of the mouth. Thus Nature’s overthrown,

The body rarefied, and therefore pain

Ensues. Thus food is taken to sustain

The body with nutrition and create

More strength: the lust for food then will abate

Throughout the frame. Moisture goes everywhere

It’s needed. Bodies of heat are gathered there

Where moisture snuffs out all the blazing flame

So that the dry heat may not scorch the frame. 860

And thus our panting thirst is swilled away,

Our craving satisfied. I now will say

How we may walk whenever we have a mind

To do so and with every different kind

Of movement and what caused the urge to do it.

This is what I must tell you – listen to it!

First, images of movement hit the mind,

As I have said before. Not far behind

Comes will, for no-one does a thing until

Intelligence has first foreseen its will, 870

Which is within the mind. Thus when it starts

Its plan to make a move, at once it darts

Upon the mass of spirit that’s consigned

To the whole frame. Since spirit and the mind

Are closely linked, it’s managed easily –

The spirit strikes the frame sequentially,

The whole mass moving piecemeal. Furthermore,

The body then expands its every pore,

And air, so sensitive to movement, goes

In streams straight through the opened porticoes, 880

To even the very smallest entities

Within the body. So it is that these

Carry the body, each in its own way,

Just as the canvas and the wind convey

A ship. That such small things can shake about

So large a frame should not cause us to doubt

The facts. The wind, so gossamer-like, indeed

Can push a mighty galleon with great speed.

One hand and just one rudder can control

How fast it goes and steer to its chosen goal. 890

Machines move many bodies of great weight

While all their powers barely dissipate.

How slumber floods the frame with quietness

And takes stress from the heart I’ll now profess

In brief but honeyed verse, just as the swan

More sweetly trills than honking cranes upon

The passage of the sky. Lend me your ear

And a sagacious mind lest what you hear

You claim’s not possible and then depart

From me, showing a truth-repelling heart. 900

The power of spirit has been drawn away

When sleep appears, while part has gone astray,

Cast out, while another part has vanished deep

Inside, for then the limbs loosen in sleep.

The action of the spirit, there’s no doubt,

Sees to it that this feeling comes about,

And when sleep snuffs it out, why, then, we must

Assume it’s been disordered and then thrust

Abroad – not all, for then, deprived of breath,

The body would repose in endless death; 910

Since no part of the spirit, hidden, stays

Within the limbs, as ashes hide the blaze

Of fire, whence could that feeling be aflame

Once more summarily throughout the frame,

As sparks from hidden fires can arise?

How this can come to pass I’ll analyze,

And how the soul can be in disarray,

The body languid. See that what I say

Won’t scatter in the winds. Primarily,

Since air touches the body, it must be 920

Thumped by its frequent blows; and that is why

The majority of things are shielded by

Skin, shells or bark. As well, this air will thwack

Our insides as we breathe, then is drawn back.

Since we are beaten on both parts, therefore,

And through the tiny vents blows reach our core,

Our limbs start to collapse gradually.

For body and mind’s germs are disorderly.

Part of the mind’s cast out, a part subsides

Into the body’s regions, where it hides, 930

A third, drawn through the frame, cannot array

Itself with other parts in any way.

For Nature shuts off all communication,

All paths; when motions change, therefore, sensation

Hides deep. So, since there’s nothing there to stay

The limbs, the body starts to waste away,

The limbs to languish; arms and eyelids drop,

And, as one starts to lie down, hamstrings flop.

Sleep follows food, acting the same as air

As through the veins it’s doled out everywhere. 940

Indeed by far the greatest drowsiness

Comes when one’s full of food or weariness –

Most elements are then in disarray,

Dulled by long effort, and, in the same way,

At a greater depth part of the soul is cast

Together, and its volume is more vast,

More split up in itself and more dispersed.

Whatever things for which we have a thirst,

Whatever in the past has occupied

Our minds, those interests mainly coincide 950

With what we dream of: counsellors, then, seem

To plead their cause and make laws when they dream,

Generals go to war and sailors try

To battle winds, while with my writing I

Am occupied. Other activities

Often engage men with such fantasies.

Whenever games have held somebody’s mind

For several days on end, we usually find

That, even when these men no longer gaze

At them, there still exist some passageways 960

Within the mind where images can go.

They see all this for many days, and so

When even awake, they see lithe dancers still

And listen to the lyre’s rippling trill

And speaking strings, beholding that same scene

With all the glories that the stage’s sheen

Affords. So great, then, is this will and zeal

Which not just men but all live creatures feel.

In fact horses of mettle you may see

Perspiring In their sleep and constantly 970

Panting, as though with their last strength they vie

To win the palm as from the gates they fly,

While hounds in gentle sleep will often bay

And kick and snuff the air, just as if they

Were chasing a wild beast, then, if brought back

From sleep, they run around as if to track

The image of a stag they see in flight

Until they have recovered and set right

Their error. Pet dogs leap up from the ground,

Shaking themselves from sleep, as if they’ve found 980

An unknown face. The fiercer is the breed,

The greater while it slumbers is the need

To show its fierceness. But birds will take flight,

Disturbing all the holy groves at night,

If, as they’re sleeping, hawks chase them and fly

At them in hostile manner. By and By

The minds of men, which in reality

Accomplish many deeds, similarly

Do so in dreams: for kings win victories,

Are captured and begin hostilities, 990

Cry out as though their throats were, then and there,

Being cut, many struggle hard, groan with despair

And with their howling make the region ring

As if they were attacked by the vicious sting

Of a panther’s or a lion’s jaws. Again,

Many talk of weighty matters, while some men

Perjure themselves, while many folk have died

And many others, too, are terrified

Of falling off a mountain - when they wake,

Like those deprived of senses, how they shake 1000

In turmoil, getting back but narrowly

The feelings that they’d had just formerly!

Some sit beside a stream or pleasant spring,

Thirsty, and end up all but swallowing

It all. And many often think they lie

Beside a piss-pot, and therefore let fly

Their urine, lifting up their clothes, and steep

The splendid coverlets – all in their sleep!

Again, those people who first feel inside

Themselves the semen that the choppy tide 1010

Of youth has placed there sees some element

Flying abroad and seeming to have sent

A lovely face which gnaws the parts which swell

And stain their clothes. As I said formerly,

This seed is stirred up when maturity

Strengthens the body. Different sources lead

To different outcomes. But the human seed

Is drawn forth but by man’s ability.

Once it is brought out from its sanctuary, 1020

It’s taken through the body, gathering

Among parts of the loins and kindling

The genitals. Excited by the seed,

These parts are nourished by an urgent need

To send it whither craving urge has aimed;

The body seeks out what with love has maimed

The mind. We’ve all received a wound, and so

The blood jets from where we’ve received the blow,

And, if he’s still nearby, the enemy

Is inundated with our blood, and he 1030

Who’s suffered Venus’s wounds, be he a lad

With soft limbs or a woman who is mad

For sex, the lover’s adamant to go

Wherever is the well-spring of that blow

The lover targets, yearning to unite,

Body to body, to its mute delight.

This is our Venus: from her comes love’s name;

And from the first her sweetness’ dewdrops came

Into the heart, and then ice-cold distress,

For if your love is absent, nonetheless 1040

Its images are there, and the sweet name

Sounds in your ears. But you should, all the same,

Avoid such images and scare away

Love’s food and turn your mind another way

And cast your gathered liquid anywhere

And not retain it, harbouring your care

For only one, avoiding pain, whose sore

Quickens and will with feeding evermore

Continue, for the madness daily grows,

The grief as well, if you don’t find new blows 1050

And drop the old, eventually remedying

These too when you again go wandering

With Venus or else turn your thoughts elsewhere.

The man avoiding love still has his share

Of Venus, for he takes her gains while he

Avoids the penalty. For certainly

The pleasure’s purer when a man is well

Than when he’s lovesick. There’s a stormy swell

That stirs the act of love, its course unsure,

Ever uncertain as to which allure 1060

It first should savour. Lovers closely press

Together, causing some carnal distress,

Teeth crushing lips with kisses, for the joy

Is not unmixed, while secret stings annoy

The very thing, whatever it may be,

That caused these frenzied germs originally.

But Venus lightly tempers this distress

And curbs the bites with soothing playfulness;

For herein lies the promise that the flame

Will be extinguished even from the frame 1070

Whence first it came, but Nature will profess

This is not so; the more that we possess

In love, the more we burn with the intent

For lust. Our bodies take in nourishment,

And since these have fixed parts, we’re easily

Supplied with bread and water. But we see

In human faces and their lovely glow

Nothing but slender images, although

This wretched hope is often carried off

By winds. In dreams, when someone yearns to quaff 1080

A drink when thirsty, but no drink is there

To quench the burning that he needs must bear,

Within a rushing river, even though

He drinks from it, he still feels thirst: and so

In love games Venus makes a mockery

Of their participants with imagery;

Lovers cannot be sated with a gaze

Nor from their partners’ tender limbs erase

Something while with their hands they aimlessly

Wander about their bodies. Finally, 1090

When clasped together, just about to yield

To youthful climax while the woman’s field

Is being sown by Venus, greedily

They share their mouths’ saliva, heavily

Breathing, teeth pressed to lips – but all in vain:

Nothing can be rubbed off, nor can they gain

Entrance and, thus absorbed, become as one:

For sometimes they desire such union,

It seems. And therefore eagerly they cling,

With slackened limbs, to Venus’ coupling, 1100

Delighting in the power of ecstasy.

Then when the gathered lust has finally

Burst from the loins, a tiny breathing-space

Occurs: the frenzy then recurs apace,

And when what they desire they can’t attain,

They can’t find anything to ease the pain.

The secret wound in such uncertainty

Still plagues them. Think of this additionally:

This labour kills them as they waste away;

As well, they live under another’s sway. 1110

Meanwhile one’s lost most of his property,

Which now consists only of tapestry

From Babylon. His duty languishing,

His reputation’s sick and tottering.

Upon his mistress’ perfumed feet there shimmer

Sicyonian slippers, massive emeralds glimmer,

Their green light set in gold, while constantly

He wears a tunic purple as the sea

Well used to soaking up Queen Venus’ sweat;

A headscarf or perhaps a coronet 1120

Replaced the fortune that his father made,

Or else a cloak or silks that were conveyed

From Ceos or Alinda, while *chez lui*

Feasts are prepared with splendid finery

And food, drapes, garlands, games to entertain

The guests, unguents, great jars of wine – in vain!

For when all this enchantment’s at its height,

A drop of bitterness will come to bite

The wretch amidst the joy. Perhaps a sting

Of conscience will tell him he’s languishing 1140

In sloth or that all his debauchery

Will kill him, or his mistress craftily

Has shot a dubious word at him, now set

Within his yearning heart, the fire yet

Alive, or that too freely she makes eyes

At someone else (or thus he will surmise)

And slyly smile. In love that brings success

These ills appear, and all is happiness.

But with a bootless one, such ills arise

In spades, which, even when you close your eyes, 1150

You see. Be watchful, then, as I have said,

Lest you into the snares of love should tread –

For it is easier to cut straight through

The powerful knots of Venus, although you

May dodge the danger, should you not impede

Your progress and do not observe the need

To check the faults of her you want. For when

They’re blinded by desire, this is what men

Are wont to do – they credit to those who

Are dear to them advantages they do 1160

Not have. The unattractive women they

Will think of as delightful and display

Their favour of them. One lover will tease

Another one and urge him to appease

Venus as one involved in an affair

That’s shameful, while he does not have a care

For his own monstrous faults. A jet-black wench

He calls nut-brown, one lax and with a stench

His sweet disorder; Pallas’ eyes are green

And so a girl who has green eyes is seen 1160

As “little Pallas”, one stringy and dry

Is a gazelle, another, four-foot high,

Is one of the Graces, full of repartee,

A large one stunning with great dignity,

A stutterer’s a lisper, he’ll tell us,

A mute one’s modest, while an odious

Gossip’s a little squib, a girl who might

Be just too thin to live “my spare delight”

Is called, one who’s consumptive willowy;

One with enormous breasts turns out to be 1170

Ceres while suckling Bacchus, one whose nose

Is short is called Silena, while all those

With thick lips are “all kiss” – too long a list

To go through! Let her be the loveliest,

However, and let Venus radiate

From her, but there are others, I can state,

And we have lived so far without that one

Who does what unattractive girls have done –

Disgusting odours she will pour upon

Her body while her slave-girls scurry on 1180

And laugh behind her back – we’re well aware

Of this. But a lover in the cold night air,

Shut out, upon the steps sets a bouquet

And on the haughty doorposts he will spray

Marjoram oil and, weeping, on the door

Press lovesick kisses. But if he should score

A bid to enter, he’d find sickening

That whiff and seek a decent way to sling

His hook, thus ending his long malady,

So deeply felt, and the stupidity 1190

He now condemns, because he since has learned

That there’s no single mortal who has earned

The praise he gave her. Venuses well know

All this, and thus to greater pains they go

To hide such scenes of life from those they aim

To bind in chains of love. But, all the same,

It’s bootless, since you can attempt to see

It all and find the source of all that glee.

And if you find her nice, you can concede

That it’s mere human weakness and find need 1200

To overlook. It’s not always the case

A woman feigns a passionate embrace

With moistened kisses. Often she will act

Straight from the heart, while hankering, in fact,

For mutual pleasure and a love affair

That lasts, or else the creatures of the air,

Sheep, wild beasts, cattle, mares would not submit

To sex if their own ardour did not fit

Their nature when in heat. Do you not see,

When two are bound in mutual ecstasy, 1210

How in their common chains they’re tortured so?

Dogs often at the crossroads, keen to go

Their separate ways, will pull with all their might,

While in love’s fervent couplings they’re held tight.

But they’d not be in this strange situation

Unless they felt that mutual exaltation

That trapped them. Now in the mingling of the seed,

If she should have more power suddenly,

The child will be like her: contrarily 1220

It will resemble him should he eject

A stronger seed. But if in its aspect

It’s like them both, in growing, it possesses

The blood of each of them which coalesces.

For as in ecstasy they breathed together,

Venus stirred up the seeds, not knowing whether

Either holds sway. Sometimes a child will be

Like his grandfather or, quite possibly,

Even his great-grandfather in its mien,

Because its parents oftentimes will screen 1230

The many first-beginnings which are blent

In many ways and passed on, by descent,

Through time. Thus there is a miscellany

Of forms remade – the look, the voice’s key,

The hair, as with our bodies. Girls spring, too,

Out of their father’s seed, while boys ensue

Out of their mother’s seed, for each creates

A birth: the one a child approximates

In looks has more than half. This you may see

In either sex. It’s no divinity 1240

Who drives away a man’s productive force

And sees that he will never be the source

Of darling children, living in the throes

Of barren wedlock, as most men suppose,

Sorrowfully on their altars sprinkling

The blood of many beasts while offering

Their sacrifices that abundantly

They’ll fill their wives with seed: it’s vanity

To weary all the gods, since he must heed

That he’s infertile, for maybe his seed 1250

Is too thick (or too thin). The thin won’t stick

And, unproductive, flows away; the thick,

Too closely clotted, does not reach its mark

Or, if it does, it cannot cause a spark

On women’s seed. For sexual harmony

Seems very varied: some men’s potency

Is great; some women can with ease conceive;

Many in early marriage can’t receive

Productive seeds but can eventually

Be favoured with the gift of progeny, 1260

And many men who had a barren wife

Then find her fruitful – thus domestic life

Is blessed with children, who one day will tend

To his old age. It’s vital that seeds blend

For generation’s sake, the watery

And thick alike. It’s vital, too, that we

Eat well, for some foods cause the seeds to grow

Too thick while with some others it will go

To waste. How we have sex is vital, too –

It’s thought that birth’s more likely to ensue 1270

Through doggy-style, whereby the seeds may dwell

Where they should be. But it is never well

For wives to wiggle about lasciviously,

Thwarting conception as they pleasurably

Jiggle their bums and turn the plough away

From the furrow – thus they make the seeds betray

Their function. Since it is their occupation,

Whores do this to avoid the situation

Of pregnancy and please the men who hire

Their services: this amatory fire 1280

Wives do not seem to want. It happens, too,

Sometimes an ugly woman’s loved, not due

To Venus or some god, for sometimes she

By her own conduct and her decency,

Neatness and cleanliness accustoms you

To live with her. For it is habit, too,

That causes love, because a frequent blow,

However light, will finally bring you low.

A stone, when water, falling constantly,

Hits it will wear away eventually 1290

# BOOK V

Who can create prodigious poetry

On all these findings and the majesty

Of Nature? Who can speak praise that is worth

His intellect and to such gems give birth

And pass them on to us? Well, certainly

No mortal! For as this known majesty

Demands, he was a god, great Memmius –

O yes, a god, the first of all of us

To find the reasoned plan of life we call

Wisdom and out of such tempestuous squall 10

And darkness settled it in light so clear.

Compare discoveries of yesteryear:

Ceres, they say, invented corn, Bacchus

Pioneered the liquor of the vine for us;

And yet without these things we could endure,

As they say others do. But when impure,

A mind can’t live a good life. Therefore we

Can credit this man with divinity

With better reason, for he has supplied

Great states with solace that has mollified 20

Men’s minds. But if you think you can compare

The deeds of Hercules with him, it’s fair

To say you’re wrong. For why would we have cause

To fear the great Nemean lion’s jaws

Or yet the bristling boar of Arcady?

How could the Cretan bull cause misery?

The pest of Lerna? Or what suffering

Can poisonous Hydra cause? What of the king

With triple breasts? What of those birds of prey

That hunted the Strymphian lake? Or, say, 30

The steeds of Diomedes, breathing fire?

The beast of the Hesperides, fierce, dire,

Guarding the golden apples, piercingly

Glaring, coiled tightly round the trunk of a tree –

By the Atlantic shore beside the grim

Regions of ocean, what mischief from him

Can we expect? For nobody goes there,

Neither the Romans nor those from elsewhere.

How can such monsters, now they have been slain,

Cause such distress? They cannot, I maintain - 40

The earth now teems with wild beasts, but our dread

Is mostly of the lands we never tread

Upon, the forests, peaks, woods that lie deep

Below us. If, however, we don’t sweep

The evil from our minds, what feuds shall we

Incite, what menaces, whether it be

Our will or no? Lust brings anxiety

To mortals: great is their timidity.

But what of pride and smut and biliousness?

The pain they cause is so calamitous. 50

Lasciviousness and sloth? The man who’s cast

Them from his mind into the icy blast

Of winds by words, and not by swords – should he

Not be included in the panoply

Of gods? – especially since in godlike fashion

He spoke about the gods themselves with passion

And told us of the cause of everything.

His steps I trace, his doctrines following: 60

How everything abides by the decree

By which they’ re made you’re learning now from me,

And how Time’s solid laws they can’t recall.

The nature of the mind is, first of all,

A body that is born but cannot keep

Intact for long, but images, in sleep,

Alone mislead it when we seem to see

A man who’s died. My reason, finally,

Is that the world, though mortal, also came

To be created, for it’s just the same 70

With earth, sky, sea, stars, sun and moon; I’ll show

What animals arose from earth, although

Some were not born at all; and I will teach

How humans used multiple kinds of speech

By giving names to things, and how the fear

Crept in the hearts of mortals, so that here

On earth their groves and altars we maintain,

Their pools and images; and I’ll explain

How Nature steers the motions of the sun

And moon lest it occur to anyone 80

That they move of their own accord to aid

Increase of crops and beasts or that they’re made

To do their work by some divinity.

If those who have been taught appropriately

That gods are carefree, though they’re mystified

That life goes on, especially since they’ve spied

Celestial incidents, they will return

To ancient fallacies and hope to learn

From harsh taskmasters, thinking wretchedly

That they’re omniscient, though what can be 90

Or what cannot be they themselves don’t know,

In other words how everything can show

Scant strength and a boundary-stone that’s been set deep.

Well then, I’ll make no promises to keep

You longer. Firstly, look at every sea,

The earth and sky. They, Memmius, have three

Masses and three foundations, all discrete,

And yet in just one day they’re bound to meet

Their end: the great, meshed system of the world,

Upheld through many eons, will be hurled 100

To ruin. Yet I find it strange to be

Aware of heaven and earth’s fatality

And how hard it will be by argument

To prove. This happens when your ears are bent

To something you have not heard hitherto

And cannot hold nor bring into your view

(For this you’ll find the truth). Yet I will be

Forthright. The very facts themselves maybe

Will earn belief and shortly there’ll arise

Destructive earthquakes right before your eyes. 110

May fortune spare us this, and may insight,

Not the event, teach us the world just might

Collapse with a dreadful crash. Initially,

Before I start to speak, more solemnly

And with more reasoning than at Delphi

Apollo’s oracle was spoken, I

Will comfort you with perspicuity

Lest, curbed by superstition, you maybe

Think earth, sun, sky, stars, moon and ocean’s tide

Are heavenly bodies and thus must abide 120

Forever and believe a penalty

Should be imposed for their iniquity

(Just like the Giants) since with reasoning

They shook the world to quench the glimmering

Of heaven’s sun, while also bringing low

Immortal things with mortal speech, although

They’re far from holy and don’t rate a place

Among the gods, but rather, in their case,

We should believe that they are motionless,

Possessing not a whit of consciousness. 130

For mind and understanding can’t reside

In everything, just as the ocean’s tide

Contains no clouds, the upper air can’t yield

A single tree, no fish live in a field,

Wood holds no blood, no sap is in a stone:

It’s firmly fixed where each thing must be grown

And live. Without a frame mentality

Cannot arise, nor can it ever be

Far from sinews and blood. But if it could

Perform these things, more easily it would 140

Do so in head, heels, shoulders, anywhere

In the same man, but since within us there

Is seen a hard-and-fast rule and decree

That tells where mind and spirit have to be

To grow apart – thus must it be denied

That it cannot completely live inside

The body’s structure, and it cannot fare

In crumbling clods of earth or in the air

Or water or the fires of the sun.

No god-made feeling, then, in anyone 150

Of them exists, since they aren’t animated.

Another thing must be repudiated –

The gods have no abode in any part

Of the world since their thin nature’s far apart

From all our senses – thus we cannot see

It in our mind; nor can it possibly

Touch what we touch, because it keeps away

From being touched by us, for nothing may

Touch when it can’t be touched itself. And hence

Their homes can’t be like ours, for evidence 160

Shows that they’re thin. I will expatiate

Upon this later on. Further, to state

That for the sake of man the gods devised

The great world and should thus be eulogized

And think that it can live forevermore

And that something established long before

In heaven should not live eternally

To aid mankind and not be radically

Forevermore from top to bottom thrust

And be by argument consigned to dust 170

Is but a foolish act, dear Memmius.

For how could mankind be so generous

As to deserve the gods’ philanthropy?

After they’ve lived long in tranquillity

What novelty entices them to make

A change? For clearly one will have to take

Pleasure in new things once he’s been harassed

By old ones. If, however, in times past

He’s lived a life of pure serenity,

What then could spark a love of novelty? 180

What injury, had we not been created,

Was there for us to suffer? Were we fated

To wallow in our gloomy misery

Till light on our creation shone? For he

Who has been born must have a lasting care

To carry on as long as he’s kept there

By soothing happiness. However, he

Who’s never tasted life would equally

Remain unhurt. Again, whence was the thought

That was the start of all creation brought 190

To the gods, even an idea of mankind

In order that they might bring to their mind

What they should make? How could they ever see

The power of germs? What, through variety,

May they not do if Nature had not made

A model for creation? A parade

Of many first-beginnings, frequently

Smitten and borne by their own energy,

Have moved and met together and combined

In many structures so that they might find 200

Something they could produce. No wonder they

Made such designs, displaying an array

Of movements, as this sum of things now shows

As by eternal scrutiny it grows.

Yet granting that I did not even know

About the first beginnings, I would go

So far as, from the ways of heaven, to state

And, from a mass of facts, elaborate

That the nature of all things has not been made

By godly power, for it has been betrayed 210

By many faults. All that the canopy

Of heaven covers is extensively

Filled up with forests where wild animals roam,

As well as mountains and the sea, whose foam

Parts shores, and rocks and swamps. Two-thirds of these,

Almost, have weather that would make men freeze

To death or die of heatstroke, and therefore

They have been robbed from mortals. Furthermore,

Brambles envelop all the land that’s left,

Though men fight back, wont to apply their heft 220

With mattocks out of sheer necessity.

However, if with all this industry

We could not give them life, no growth could fly

Spontaneously into the lambent sky;

And sometimes, once procured with diligent toil,

When they’re already covering the soil

With leafage, all in bloom, the sun will beat

Upon them with a monumental heat

Or they’re cut off by sudden rain or frost

Or by grim blasts of winds and tempest tossed. 230

And why does Nature feed and help to grow

The frightful tribes of savage beasts although

They’re mankind’s foes across all lands and seas?

And why do certain seasons bring disease?

Why does untimely death stalk us? Besides,

Just like a sailor cast in cruel tides,

A naked child lies speechless on the earth

In need of vital aid since at its birth,

Cast forth to face the regions of daylight,

It fills the air with cries – as well it might 240

Considering the miseries that lie

Ahead. Those flocks and herds, though, multiply,

As do the savage beasts: they don’t possess

The need to hear a nurse’s tenderness

Or baby-talk or rattles, nor do they

Need different clothes depending on the day,

High walls to guard their own or weaponry –

From earth they have a superfluity

Of all that they require, for Nature brings

Her ingenuity to fashion things. 250

Since earth and water and torridity

And wind’s light breezes, which we all may see

Compose this sum of everything, possess

A mortal body, we may also guess

The world is likewise built. For when we see

That beasts have mortal bodies, naturally

They must be mortal too and therefore, when

I see the world consumed and born again,

I may be certain that once in the past

Both heaven and earth were born but will not last

Forever. But you must not have presumed 260

I begged the question there when I assumed

That earth and fire are both subject to death

When I was quick to say in the same breath

That air and water are reborn and start

To grow again; in the first place, a part

Of Earth, much blackened by eternal heat

And trampled by a multitude of feet,

Exhales a cloud of dust and flying spray

Which by strong blasts of wind are blown away. 270

Rains wash away some soil, and rivers gnaw

And nibble at the banks and, furthermore,

What Earth feeds and increases then will be

Returned with due proportionality.

Since Nature is the universal womb,

It’s just as certain that she is the tomb:

You see the earth diminishes therefore,

Expands and grows again and, furthermore,

There is no need to say that rivers, sea

And springs always well up abundantly. 280

But what streams up at first is moved away,

And so the moisture’s volume still will stay

The same, in part because strong winds then hit

The surface of the sea and lessen it

And by the sun’s rays it is decomposed,

In part because deep down it gets disposed

Through all the earth beneath. The pungency

Is strained off and the moisture oozingly

Returns and everything meets at the source

Of every river, whence it may then course 290

Along the paths cut for it. Now to you

I’ll speak about the air which changes through

Its entire body all the time in ways

So different, for everything that strays

From things is borne into that massive tract

Of air; and if this air did not react

And send back particles to them again,

Renewing them as they fly off, well then

All is dissolved in air, which thus must be

Produced from things and fall back constantly 300

Into things. The generous fountain of clear light,

The sun, diligently shines in heaven so bright,

Ever renewing beams which, when they fall,

Are lost. When in between that fiery ball

And mortals clouds appear and in the skies

Break up its rays, you now must realize

Its lower part is gone immediately

And Earth’s blacked out wherever clouds may be:

Things always need new light, as you now know,

And one by one we lose each dazzling glow, 310

And we can’t see things in the sun unless

The source of light gives us a limitless

Supply. Again, you see on earth at night

Light’s sources – hanging lamps, all shining bright

With flickering flashes, thick with smoke and fed

With fire in similar manner, keen to spread

Their light around, unbroken (it would seem)

And not departing, for with each new beam

They stop their own extinction speedily

From all those fires. And so, accordingly, 320

By sun and moon and stars a light’s sent out

That’s always new, and this we must not doubt,

And the first fire is lost once it is sent,

So do not think their force is permanent.

And even stones are conquered gradually,

Towers fall, rocks crumble and eventually

Gods’ temples and their images wear away

And crack so that gods’ powers can’t delay

The fates and strive against the laws decreed

By Nature. We see statues go to seed 330

And lumps of rock roll down a mountainside

Summarily, unable to abide

The finite tides of time while safe and sound.

Do but observe what holds its arms around

The earth: if everything by them is made,

As some folk say, and, once it has decayed,

Is taken back by them, then you may see

That all is subject to mortality;

For what increases with its nourishment

Other things out of itself must then be meant 340

To be diminished and revivified

When it takes back those very things. Beside

All this, if there had been one primal birth

That caused creation of both heaven and earth,

Why have not other poets sung before

Events foreshadowing the Theban War

Or Troy’s destruction? And into what place

Have so many exploits, lacking bardic grace,

Fallen? The world’s young, for not long ago

Was its beginning, I believe. And so 350

Improvement’s being brought to every kind

Of art at different rates; and we may find

That ships are stronger built, while recently

Musicians learned to fashion melody,

While Nature’s system of the world has been

Found recently, and I myself am seen

To be the first who’s able to report

It in our tongue. But if you are the sort

To think that all of this is just the same

And many folk have died in scorching flame 360

Or by some universal tragedy

Cities have fallen or incessantly

Torrents have swept across the earth and brought

Destruction on the towns, your very thought

Betrays you, and you’ll think that earth and sky

Will be destroyed – when they’re bombarded by

Great dangers, if a worse calamity

Then came upon them, there would surely be

Widespread destruction. If someone’s unwell

With just the same infection that befell 370

A man who died of it, we must be known

As mortal. Any body that has shown

Its immortality must be compact,

Thus able to reject each harsh impact,

Keeping its close-joined parts unseparated,

For matter’s particles, as I’ve related,

Are close-joined; maybe it’s because it’s free

Of blows, just as the void is, similarly

Untouched; or maybe it’s because there’s no

Space round it whither entities may go 380

And vanish (since the sum of all of us,

The universe, is ever limitless),

And there’s no place where elements may spring

Apart, no bodies, either, that may fling

Themselves upon it and with one strong blow

Dissolve it. But, as I was keen to show,

The world’s not solid, since the void is blent

With certain things, and yet one can’t assent

That it is like the void; but there is no

Shortage of bodies which may meet and go 390

Beyond the infinite and overcome

With volleys of destructiveness this sum

Of things; moreover, there’s no scarcity

Of space whence it through its profundity

May scatter out the ramparts of the world,

Against which other forces may be hurled.

Death, then, may greet the sun, the earth, the sky,

The sea, for it is ever standing by

With its large, hideous maw: you must confess

They’re mortal, and all those things which possess 400

Mortality cannot feel enmity

For Time’s great strength through all eternity.

Fire, water, air, earth, all of which include

Most of the world, battled feud after feud

In godless war: therefore can you not see

An end may come to their hostility?

Maybe all water by the scorching sun

May be consumed: they try to get this done,

So far without success; the rivers bring

A huge supply while further threatening 410

To flood us all – in vain, it’s found to be,

Because winds sweep the surface of the sea,

Thus loosening the liquid, while on high

The sun unpicks them with its rays; to dry

Them up they hope with confidence, that they

May win before the waters have their way.

Their warlike spirit’s fierce as they collide

In well-matched contest that they may decide

About a mighty cause successfully;

At one time fire had the mastery; 420

At one time, too, water, as people say,

Was king across the fields. Fire held sway

And burned up many things, when, very far

From his own bailiwick, Phaethon’s car,

Pulled by the sun’s strong horses, mightily

Was whirled through sky and earth. But angrily

Great Jove flung down a sudden thunderbolt,

And the ambitious Phaethon with a jolt

Crashed to the earth; the sun then, at his fall,

Took up from him the lamp that lights us all 430

And, bringing back the steeds that trembled so,

Yoked them again (this Greek tale well you know)

And placed them on their proper path. This song,

However, proves to be completely wrong,

Removed from reason – fire can succeed

When, gathered up, its particles exceed

The average number; but it then, somehow

Thrust back, falls down, or else we all would now

Be thoroughly scorched. Once water, as they say,

Gathered up as well and started to hold sway, 440

Whose waves destroyed much of humanity,

But in some way it lost its energy:

The rains stopped and the rivers lost a deal

Of force. But next in order I’ll reveal

How matter forms the earth, the sky, the sea,

The sun, the moon. For there was certainly

No plan that led their first seeds to array

Themselves in order and they had no say

In how each one of them should fabricate

Its movements; but each seed, by its own weight, 450

Is borne forever through eternity

Up to our present time and regularly

Is struck and tries out every combination

Of movement, summoning this explanation:

Once they are brought together suddenly

They often start great things through land and sea

And sky, creating the first generation

Of living creatures. In that situation

One could not see the sun’s wheel soaring high

Nor the great constellations nor the sky 460

Or sea or earth or anything that we

Might know of but an abnormality –

An alien storm, a mass of seeds that wrought

Disharmony among them all and brought

Chaos to intervals, connections, tracks,

As well as meetings, motions and attacks,

Because their shapes and forms differed in kind

And therefore all of them were not combined

For long and could not move appropriately

Together. Parts began subsequently 470

To separate, as like with like would blend,

And parcel out the universe and lend

A shape to things – that is to say, divide

Heaven from Earth and set a place aside

To house the sea alone that it might be

Apart from, in their own locality,

Heavens’ pure fires. The bodies of the earth,

Heavy and meshed, merged and took as their berth

The bottom, and the more that they combined,

The more they squeezed out particles confined 480

Within them so that they could make the sea,

The mighty walls that shield humanity,

The stars, the sun, the moon – their seeds display

More roundness and more smoothness and are way

Smaller than are the earth’s. So as it sped

Through the loose-knit interstices to spread

Out of parts of the earth, the flaming air

Rose up and lightly drew away a fair

Amount of fire. Thus, too, we often view

The radiant sun tinting the morning dew 490

And all the lakes and ever-running streams,

Exuding mist, while Earth occasionally seems

To smoke; and when these join together on high,

Clouds knit a concrete weave beneath the sky.

Thus with coherent body the light air

Bent all around, diffusing everywhere

And fenced in all the rest voraciously.

The sun and moon began sequentially,

Alternatively turning in the air;

But neither Earth nor ether took a share 500

Of them – with insufficient heaviness

They could not sink and settle: nonetheless

They weren’t so lightweight that they could not flow

About the upper air, remaining, though,

Revolving like live bodies In between

Both regions, just as some of us are seen

At rest, some on the move. Accordingly,

When these had been retraced, suddenly

The earth sank down to where the sea spreads wide

And drowned its hollows in the salty tide. 510

And, blow by frequent blow through countless days,

The earth solidified from the sun’s rays

And ether’s tide, retreating to its core,

And so the salt and sweat would all the more,

Squeezed from its body, ooze out to the sea

And lakes, extending their capacity,

And so much more those particles of heat

And air flew off and, high above, would meet

And pack the heaven’s regions, the plateaus

Were settled down, the lofty mountains rose 520

In height, whose rocks lost their ability

To sink, nor could all sides to the same degree

Subside. The heavy earth with compact frame

Solidified, and Earth’s detritus came

To settle in the depths, and then the sea,

Air, ether, made up of liquidity,

Were all left pure, with some of them more light

Than others, although ether reached the height,

Above the rest, in both consistencies,

And hovers far above the airy breeze 530

And does not mingle its consistency

With storms, allowing everything to be

Disturbed by violent tempests and harassed

By wayward squalls while sailing safely past

With its own fires. Indeed the Black Sea shows

Ether with just one current gently flows.

How heavenly bodies move now let me sing:

First, if great heaven’s ever circling,

The air must press the pole at either end

And hold it from without to keep it penned 540

From both directions, while another air

Above moves in the same direction where

The world’s stars shine, or else another flows

Below and lifts the orb so that it goes

The other way, just as the rivers turn

Their wheels and buckets. Also, we may learn

That it is possible the heavens stay

At rest while all the stars go on their way,

Whether because the ether is confined

And, searching for an exit, has to wind 550

Around and roll the fires everywhere

Through the night-thundering regions of the air,

Or else the fires are driven from a place

Outside by air, or, with a stealthy pace,

They creep where food invites them to partake

Of nourishment as through the sky they make

Their way. For it is difficult to say

Which cause prevails for certain: for what may

Be done and is indeed done variously

In various worlds is what you’ll hear from me: 560

More causes I’ll draw up to clarify

The movements of the stars throughout the sky;

One cause, though, must hold true for us also,

Making the movements of the stars, although

A step-by-step approach can’t indicate

Which one. It’s proper that the world’s whole weight,

In order that the earth may occupy

Its very core, should gradually fly

Away, diminishing; and there should be

Beneath the earth another entity, 570

United with it since the very start

Of life, tied also to each airy part.

Thus it’s no burden and does not depress

The airy breezes, as the limbs no less

Aren’t burdensome, and as the human head

Won’t tax the neck: as well, let it be said,

We do not feel the body’s weight to be

A burden on the feet. Contrarily,

All weights that come from outside and are set

On us annoy, often much smaller yet, 580

However. What each thing can do is key

In nature, then. The earth, similarly,

Is not something brought suddenly from elsewhere

And cast upon us in an alien air –

It was created from the very start

Of the whole world and is a rooted part

Of it, just like our limbs are. Furthermore,

Earth, shaken suddenly with a thunderous roar,

Shakes everything above itself, a thing

Which it could never do did it not cling 590

Securely to the airy parts. For they

Have been united since the world’s first day

By common roots. Do you not also see

Our body, in spite of its density,

Is held up by our spirit’s flimsiness,

Only because its parts all coalesce?

Again, what’s able, leaping vigorously,

To raise the body? What else could it be

Except the powerful spirit shepherding

The limbs? Thus something flimsy, mingling 600

With a heavy body, shows how vigorous

It is, as the mind’s strength is joined with us,

And air with Earth? The sun’s heat and its wheel

Can’t be much greater than the heat we feel

And wheel we see. However far from here

Come rays of fiery light to bring us cheer

By warming us, they lessen not a thing

Throughout this span, not ever narrowing

In our perception. Heat and flooding light

We feel and see, the whole world shining bright 610

With all its rays: the sun’s size and its figure

We then can see, no smaller and no bigger.

The moon, whether she makes the world so bright

As on she travels with her bastard light

Or casts her own light, nonetheless her size

Is just the same as that which meets our eyes.

For things we see afar through lots of air

Become dimmed in appearance before they’re

Lessened in size. The moon, whose shape is clear,

Must be perceived on high as we down here 620

Perceive it. All fires that on earth we see,

While they’re quite visible, occasionally

Appear to change but little either way

In size, according to how far away

They are, and so the fires that meet our eyes

Up in the sky must hardly change their size.

Nor should we wonder how the sun, so slight

In size, can radiate sufficient light

To fill the lands, oceans and skies and spread

Its heat upon them all – it can be said 630

That hence there was created one huge spring

To splash its flood on all of us and fling

Its light, since there are elements of heat

That congregate from everywhere and meet,

Having one single source. Do you not see

How sometimes one whole spring will plenteously

Flood fields and meadows? It is true also

That with but little heat the sun may glow

Profoundly, if by chance the air should be

Apt to be struck by a small quantity 640

Of heat, as someone may at times remark

A mighty conflagration from one spark

Destroy some corn and straw. And we may guess

The sun, while shining brightly, may possess

Some hidden heat which makes the sun’s rays swell.

There’s no one explanation that can tell

How from its summer home the sun may go

To Capricorn amid the winter’s snow

And then to Cancer’s solstice, how indeed

The moon is able, with twelve times the speed 650

Of the sun, traverse the same space. As I say,

To solve all this there is no single way.

A likely cause is what Democritus

Has with his splendid wisdom left to us:

While different bodies in the sky progress,

The closer to the earth they are, the less

They’re carried by the whirling of the skies;

The rapid energy of their movement dies

Away, the sun is gradually dropped back,

In rear of all the signs of the zodiac, 660

Because it is much lower than they are;

The moon is lower still and very far

From the sky, closer to earth, and therefore she

Can less vie with the signs: proportionately,

As she is borne with less velocity,

Being lower from the sun, the sooner she

Is outrun by the signs: she seems to go

Back to the signs more rapidly, although

The signs return to her. Quite possibly

From various parts two airs alternately 670

At certain times could flow, one strong enough

That from the signs of summer it could puff

The sun to winter’s solstice and the blast

Of stiffening cold: another one would cast

Him back again to areas replete

With zodiacal signs and burning heat.

With similar reasoning we must resolve

That moon and stars, which constantly revolve

Through countless periods extensively,

Are blown about quite unpredictably. 680

Do you not see that clouds scud, driven by

Opposing winds in layers, low and high?

Could not the constellations equally

Be carried through the air’s trajectory?

But night obscures the earth with murkiness,

Either because the sun in weariness,

At journey’s end, has breathed his fires out,

Or else since he’s been forced to turn about

Beneath the earth by the same force that bore

His orb above the earth the day before. 690

At a fixed time Matuta spreads around

Her rosy dawn to make the world abound

With light, either because the sun on high,

The earth now left behind, reaches the sky

And tries to kindle it, or else maybe

The fires establish a confederacy,

While many seeds of heat are wont to flow

Together at a certain time, and so

A new light from the sun appears each day,

As at sunrise on Ida, so they say, 700

Are scattered fires seen which then cohere

Into one globe and form a single sphere.

No wonder, though, that this is so, for we

Have seen so many things that come to be

At certain times: at certain times the trees

Will bloom, and when the time arrives for these

To shed their flowers, they do so. Years decree

That teeth fall out, and young lads equally

Will be mature in time, and a beard will grow;

At certain seasons lightning, rain, wind, snow 710

Occur. For causes thus have ever been

Since the beginning, and all of us have seen

Things happening in this way, and now in turn

And in established order they return.

Days also may increase and nights may wane.

Or days may lessen while the nights may gain

Increase, either because the sun, which glides

Above and underneath the earth, divides

The sky into unequal arcs, and when

He takes a piece from one part he will then 720

Allot it to the other till he’s got

Up to the heaven’s sign where stands the knot

That matches day with night. For in between

The North Wind and the South heaven is seen

To hold her turning-points with equal space

Between them, corresponding to the place

Where sits the zodiac, where the sun, as he

Creeps through the earth and heaven annually

In sideways mode and shines, as has been stated

By men of science who have formulated 730

The regions of the sky and set in place

The signs; or else because the air in space

Is closer here and there, and thus his light

Can easily pass through and scale the height

Of heaven: thus winter nights are lingering

And long until the gleam of day can bring

Us light; or maybe since for the same reason

There tends to be at every different season

A slower and a quicker fiery pace

To make the sun rise in a certain place. 740

The moon may shine struck by the sun’s bright rays

And through the steady progress of the days

Induce that light piecemeal slowly to veer

Towards us as she quits that solar sphere

Until she faces him with fullest light

And sees him setting as she scales the height:

Then step by step, that light she has to hide,

The nearer to the sun we see her glide

From the opposing reason where exist

The zodiacal signs, as they insist 750

Who claim the moon is round and keeps below

The sun as on she travels. It’s also

Possible she possesses her own light

As she revolves, while variably bright.

Another body, too, may move beside

The moon, in many ways as on they glide,

Obstructing and impeding her, although

It can’t be seen because it has no glow.

It’s possible that like a ball she might

Revolve, one half of her suffused with light, 760

And turn so that her phases are disclosed

In turn in order that we are exposed

To the part endowed with fire, then by degrees

She turns it to her back till no-one sees

That part (a Babylonian theory

With which other astronomers disagree,

As if another’s doctrine can’t be true

Or there’s no decent rationale that you

Should choose this over that). And finally,

The reason a new moon can’t always be 770

Created, shapes and phases newly set

Each day, the old cast off, another yet

Replacing it is hard to prove when we

See many things created fixedly.

The Spring, Venus, and Venus’ harbinger,

Winged Cupid, marching on ahead of her,

Then Zephyr, and then Flora, scattering

The path before them all and covering

It all with brilliant hues and scents, next Heat

And dusty Ceres and the winds that beat 780

From northern lands and Autumn alongside

Bacchus, and then ensues a windy tide

And seasons, first Vertumnus, thundering high,

Then Auster, lord of lightning. By and by

The shortest day brings snows and numbing chill,

Then winter, chattering with cold. It will

Seem less surprising if the moon should be

Born and once more destroyed specifically

At some fixed time because that is the case

With many other things. Now you must face 790

The fact eclipses of the sun also,

And hidings of the moon, can let us know

A number of causes. For why should it be

That Moon can block the luminosity

Of the sun from earth, thrusting her head up high

With her dark orb and yet, as it glides by,

Another body also without light

Is thought incapable of this, too? And might

The sun at some fixed time be able, too,

To get rid of his fires and then renew 800

His light once through the heavens he has crossed

Places that hate his flames and thus has lost

Them for a while? Why can the earth deny

The moon her light while she is passing high

Above the sun, applying all her force

Upon him, while upon her monthly course

Through the clear-cut and conical shadows she

Glides on, while there’s another entity

That cannot pas beneath the moon and stream

Above the sun and interrupt his gleam? 810

But if the moon shines with her own bright face,

Why should she not grow faint in some fixed place

Up in the heavenly skies while passing through

Regions that hate her light? To continue:

How all things might occur in the firmament

I’ve dealt with that we may be competent

In understanding how the sun can be

Moved on its course and though what energy

And cause, and how the moon goes on its course,

And how their light’s obstructed and what force 820

Plunges us all in darkness as they seem

To wink and then with open eye to gleam

Once more, and therefore the world’s infancy

And fields of tender earth again will be

My theme, what was thought fit to be created

In lands of light and to be delegated

To wayward winds. At first the grasses grew

About the hills and plains with their green hue

And all the blooming meadows shone out green,

And in some trees a great contest was seen, 830

As with full speed they raced to reach the air.

As on four-footed creatures feathers, hair

And bristles grow, so then the new-born earth

To undergrowth and herbage first gave birth,

And then, to implement her propagation,

She, generation after generation,

Made many mortal creatures differently

Depending on the breed. For obviously

No animal has fallen from the sky

While land-beasts did not ever occupy 840

Salt pools. It’s right that Earth received the name

Of mother because out of her there came

All creatures. Even in our time the earth

To many living animals gives birth,

Fashioned by rain or warm rays that arise

From the sun. Thus it is less of a surprise

That there more and larger ones which grew

Back in the time when Earth and Air were new.

The winged beasts then hatched their young in spring,

Just as cicadas, hoping thus to bring 850

Life to their brood, in summer presently

Leave their neat husks. The earth, as you may see,

Bred mortals then for fields were very hot

And moist, and when was found a likely spot,

Then, rooted to the earth, many a womb

Would grow, and when in time the young would bloom

And break those roots, the moisture they would flee

And seek the air, and then, quite naturally,

Discharged through all the pores inside the earth,

Came milky liquid as, after a birth, 860

A woman will produce, because the flurry

Of nourishment is always in a hurry

To reach the breasts. The progeny was fed

By Earth, warmth gave them clothes, grass gave a bed,

Downy and soft. The infant world, we know,

Brought no intensive heat nor freezing snow

And there was no excessive windy weather;

For everything gains strength and grows together.

Again, it’s right that Earth received the name

Of mother, for I’ve said all creatures came 870

From her, for every animal everywhere

In the great mountains and birds of the air

At fixed times she produced. But finally,

Worn out with age, she reached the boundary

Of giving birth, for nature’s changed by age,

One stage emerging to another stage.

For nothing stays the same: all things migrate

And are compelled by Nature to mutate.

For one thing rots, becoming powerless

With age, another grows contemptuous. 880

So Earth can’t bear what in the past she bore

But can bear what she could not bear before

And many were the monsters that the earth

Attempted to create, which at their birth

Sprang up prodigiously, and one of these

Had neither male nor female qualities

Completely, some *sans* feet, some handless, some

Produced without a mouth, totally dumb,

Some blind, some with their limbs all tightly stuck

Together, so that they had the ill luck 890

Of being constrained from going anywhere

Or doing anything, quite unaware

Of how to sidestep trouble or partake

Of what they needed. Such a huge mistake

In Nature! For she banned their growth, and so

They could not reach maturity and grow,

Find food or know of sexual intimacy,

For we see that we need society

So that we might together procreate

And future generations fabricate. 900

There must be food, and, next, a way for seeds

To go throughout the frame and serve its needs.

Both male and female must unite so they

May please each other in their sexual play.

So many breeds of animals must have died

Back then because those beasts had been denied

The power to provide posterity

With one more generation: what you see

Feeding upon life’s breath must from the start

Have been protected by some cunning art 910

Or speed or courage. Many still remain

Among us and contribute to our gain

In our protection. Lions primarily

Have been protected by their bravery,

The fox by cunning and the stag by speed.

Those creatures that were sprung, though, from the seed

Of beasts of burden and the clever hound

That’s ever watchful with a heart that’s sound

In duty, sheep and oxen, Memmius,

Have been produced to be preserved by us. 920

For they have fled wild creatures eagerly,

Attaining peace and nourishment which we

Gave them for their responsibilities.

But those possessing no such qualities,

Who cannot live alone by their own will

Nor be of use to us that we might fill

Their bellies, keeping them unthreatened, lay

At the mercy of so many men for prey

And profit, hampered by the chains they wore

Till they became extinct. But no Centaur 930

Ever existed, and there cannot be

At any time among humanity

Two-bodied beasts with limbs that did not fit

Their bodies. Here is proof the dullest wit

May grasp. A horse is strongest when he’s three

Years old; a boy, though, categorically,

Is not, for even then, when he’s at rest

Asleep, he seeks his mother’s milky breast.

But when a horse’s power begins to wane

And life recedes, then boyhood starts to reign 940

And clothes his cheeks with down. So don’t allow

That there were Centaurs that were made somehow

Of seeds of man and horse, or that a swarm

Of ravening hounds of hell could help to form

A half-fish Scylla or monstrosities

That are as incompatible as these;

Nor is it ever at the self-same time

They lose their bodily strength or reach their prime

Or fade with age or burn with ardency

Alike nor in their practices agree. 950

A goat on hemlock may grow fat despite

The fact that it could kill a man outright.

Since fire can scorch a lion and every kind

Of being made from flesh and blood combined,

How could it be that there’s a prodigy

On earth, a triple-framed monstrosity,

A lion In front, a snake behind, a goat

In the middle, breathing fire out of its throat?

So he who thinks that when the sky and earth

Were new such creatures underwent their birth , 960

Depending on that empty ‘novelty’,

Could babble out his nonsense endlessly

With equal reason, saying that long ago

Across the earth gold rivers used to flow

And trees grew jewels and that every man

Had limbs so large that he could easily span

The seas on foot and turn the sky around

With his own hands. Many seeds indeed were found

When beasts were first created on the earth,

But there’s no proof that anything gave birth 970

To creatures of mixed growth, their limbs combined

With limbs of creatures of a different kind.

Although so many plants and grains and trees

Abound, nevertheless not one of these

Is joined to something else, for everything

Evolves in its own way, surrendering

To Nature’s laws. Besides, the race of men

Was so much hardier on the land back then,

Because the hard earth made it; for the race

Had larger and more solid bones to grace 980

The sinews that they might not be oppressed

By heat, cold or strange food or be distressed

By illness. So they passed their lives throughout

Millennia like all wandering beasts. No stout

Ploughman was there, none worked upon the land

Or sowed new seeds or, sickle in one hand,

Lopped branches from tall trees. They were content

With what the sun and showers of rain had sent

And what the earth produced. Primarily

They feasted from the acorn-laden tree; 990

And arbute-cherries, which, when winter’s due,

We now see ripen with a crimson hue,

Were even more abundant than we see

In present times. The flowering infancy

Of the world produced more kinds of nourishment:

Though they were hard to chew, they caused content:

Rivers and springs called out to quench one’s thirst,

Just as today torrents of water burst

Down from great mountains, calling far and wide

To wild beasts that they might be satisfied. 1000

The woodland haunts where the Nymphs were wont to dwell

(Which, in their wanderings, everyone knew well)

They made their home, where rivulets would cross

The wet rocks as they dripped upon the moss

And welled and bubbled through the level land.

Making a fire they did not understand

Nor wearing animal skins, thus to evade

The elements; and mountain-caves they made

Their homes as well and woods; they hid away

In undergrowth to dodge the winds and stay 1010

Untouched by rain. Nor could they mediate

About the common good or regulate

Their intercourse with laws. What fortune brought

Each man would carry off, for he’d been taught

To be strong in himself. And lovers mated

In the woods, either since she was captivated

By joint desire or taken forcefully

With vehement lust or bribed (that bribe could be

Pears, berries or acorns). Supported by

Their powerful physiques, they would let fly 1020

Their stones and clubs at beasts: they overpowered

Many of them, for from but few they cowered

In hideaways. And at the close of day

Like hogs, quite naked, on the ground they lay,

Rolled up in leafage. Nor did they in fright

Cry out in yearning for the morning light

But, wrapped in sleep, they waited silently

Until the rosy face of dawn they’d see –

From childhood they had known that day and night

Take turns and therefore felt no awe or fright 1030

That light would be removed and night would last

Forevermore. No. something else would cast

A pall on them – wild beasts disturbed their rest:

For they would leave their rocky homes, distressed

To see a lion or foaming bear appear

At night, and leave their leaf-strewn beds in fear.

Yet not much more than now did men, with rue,

Depart from life’s sweet light, although it’s true

That one man or another would be trapped

By some wild beast as on his flesh it snapped: 1040

The forests, woods and mountains would resound

With groans as in those vicious jaws he found

A living tomb, while those who got away,

Though mangled, held their hands in their dismay

Over their ghastly wounds and prayed for death

With dreadful cries till they were reft of breath,

Not knowing medicines that could mend

Their wounds. One single day, though, would not send

Thousands of men to die on the battleground

And violent billows didn’t blow around 1050

Vessels and mariners to make them split

Upon the rocks. For back then all of it

Was pointless that such storms rose on the sea,

So all its empty threats it easily

Dismissed, and so nobody met his end

Through witchcraft since the sea was now his friend.

So navigation’s wicked artistry

Lay hidden. In those days the scarcity

Of food caused death. But now its opposite

Is true – we’re dying from excess of it. 1060

Back then men killed themselves unwittingly

With poison, but that poison skilfully

We give to others. Once folk had possessed

Huts, skins and fire and mankind had been blessed

With wedlock and had raised a family,

They fell into a pampered luxury:

Having discovered fire, they complained

About the cold more often; Venus drained

Their strength; the children used cajolery

To coax their parents; and eventually 1070

Neighbours grew friendly in their eagerness

To shun wrongdoing and ferociousness,

Seeking protection for all progeny

And women, signifying haltingly

By word and gesture that it is but fair

To pity fragile people everywhere.

But peace could not be made in every way,

Although a good part (most of it, I’d say)

Remained unblemished, otherwise the earth

Would have been emptied of mankind and birth 1080

Eradicated. Many sounds were brought

To people’s tongues; later convenience wrought

The names of things, as infants’ speechlessness

Makes them rely on gestures to express

Themselves, using a finger possibly

To point out something they’d like one to see

Each in his own way. Calves, before one sees

Their horns stand out upon their heads, with these

Will butt in anger, pushing viciously.

Panthers’ and lions’ young similarly 1090

Will use their feet and teeth when in a fight,

Although they yet can barely kick or bite.

All winged fledglings also we may see

Try out their pinions’ strength unsteadily.

To think that someone gave out names, therefore,

To things and people learned from him, what’s more,

Their first words is but muddle-headedness.

For why should he give tongue to various

Sounds and name everything, while equally

Others could not? While in their colloquy 1100

Folk used these titles, whence did they attain

The knowledge of their use? Whence did they gain

The power to learn their purposes and see

Them all in their mind’s eye? For certainly

He hadn’t got the influence to show

To them that these things they wanted to know.

Nor can one easily teach in any way

To men what should be carried out when they

Won’t hear, unwilling to endure what he

Keeps dinning in their ears continually 1110

To no avail? What’s so amazing, then,

That, having active sounds and tongues, all men

Distinguished everything by varying

Sounds that will suit what they’re experiencing?

For all dumb beasts use different sounds to show

What they are feeling, be it fear or woe

Or joy. Molossian hounds growl angrily,

Teeth bared, when they’re provoked, quite differently

Than when they loudly bark. But when their young

They lick affectionately with their tongue, 1120

Tossing or nipping them, as though intent

On gently swallowing them, their yelps are meant

Quite differently from when they loudly bay

When left alone at home or cringe away

From a blow. A horse is different when he neighs

Amid the mares while in his lusty days,

Struck with the spurs of love and snorting out

Through his wide nostrils just before a bout

Of wantonness, than when senility

Causes a neigh that quivers. Finally, 1130

Ospreys and hawks and divers, every race

Of birds that seek a life above the face

Of salt-sea waves cry in a different way

When, fighting for some food, they find their prey

Fights back, than other times. Their harsh-toned song

Some birds change with the weather, like the throng

Of ancient crows and rooks when, as they say,

They cry for wind or call for rain to spray.

Therefore, if animals, though they are mute,

Are made to give out different cries to suit 1140

Their moods, how much more natural would it be

That they, too, showed each feeling differently

Through sounds! If you should quietly wonder, then,

Lightning was first to send down fire to men,

Whence blazing flames spread out across the world.

For we see flames from high above us hurled,

Igniting many things whenever a blow

From heaven brought them heat. And yet, also,

If a tree with many branches happens to rest

Against another tree, fire is pressed 1150

From it by friction: sometimes there’s a flash

Of burning flame as trunks and branches clash.

Either of these two causes could have brought

Fire to all mankind; the sun then taught

Us how to cook and soften food with flame

Since people saw that many things became

Mellow, defeated by the blazing rays

Of heat amid the fields. Then, as the days

Advanced, wise men taught people how to change

Their style of living and to rearrange 1160

Their ways. Kings founded cities and erected

Towers that their subjects might be protected;

Cattle and lands were, in conformity

With beauty, strength and ingenuity,

Divided up, for strength and beauty then

Were most important. Afterwards, by men

Was gold discovered, and wealth took from these

Strong, handsome folk their decency with ease;

No matter, in that case, how fair and strong

A man may be, a richer man he’ll long 1170

To follow. But to live honourably,

A man possesses great prosperity

If he’s content with little – that indeed

Is never lacking. People, though, felt need

Of fame and power that their fortune could

Be firmly set and being wealthy would

Give them a quiet life – but all in vain,

For in the upward struggle to attain

The peak of honour, they have made their way

A dangerous one, and even after they 1180

Came down, a thunderbolt would sometimes cast

Them into Tartarus and, like that blast,

Envy would scorch the summits frequently

And those above the rest, Accordingly,

It is much better to obey in peace

Than to desire to make your wealth increase

And govern kingdoms. Therefore let them sweat

In blood upon the narrow path to get

Their wealth and struggle wearily in vain,

Since from the lips of others they’ll attain 1190

Their wisdom, chasing things from mere hearsay,

Not what they feel. This folly, though, today

Does not succeed, nor will it ever be

Successful any more than previously.

Kings, then, were slain; the pomp of yesterday

And those proud sceptres in the dust now lay.

Fine crowns beneath the feet of peasants, stained

With blood, now lay and bitterly complained

Of their lost honour: folk were keen to tread

On that for which they used to have such dread, 1200

So all things reached the dregs of disarray

As every man struggled to take away

The prize of high command. Then they were taught

To set up magistrates, and then they brought

In laws. Mankind then, weary of the taint

Of all the violence that they bore, grew faint

With feuding and were ready to agree

To strict statutes. For when men angrily

Set on revenge more keenly than was right

By law, mankind was weary of the sight 1210

Of violence. The fear of penalty

Taints life’s rewards; bloodshed and injury

Ensnare each person and, for the most part,

Recoil upon the one who caused their start.

It is not easy for a man to glide

Straight through a peaceful life when he’s defied

The bonds of common peace. Yet even though

He hides his deeds from all, he cannot know

That they will stay unseen. For it’s been said

That many often, as they lie in bed, 1220

Will speak out loud or else, delirious

With fever, rave, their secret actions thus

Revealed. Now it is easy to explain

Why in great lands the gods have come to reign,

The cities filled with altars while great care

Was taken with the rites which everywhere

Flourish in mighty states, and every man

Feels awe and helps to raise new shrines to span

The world and bring to every celebration

His fellow-Romans. Every generation 1230

Of men in those days saw in their minds’ eye,

And more in sleep, gods made conspicuous by

Their form and beauty. So they had no doubt

That they could feel, seeming to move about

And say fine things in keeping with the way

They looked and showed how strong they were. So they

Gave them eternal life, since they would see

A slew of like-shaped forms, especially,

However, since their power was so great

That they would be too hard to dominate. 1240

They guessed that they were steeped in happiness

Because their thoughts of death brought no distress,

And in their slumbers they would also see

Them doing wondrous things, all scathelessly.

They saw each sequence of the sky appear

And all the various seasons of the year

In strictest order, though they could not see

Their causes. So they found security

In leaving all to the gods. Up in the sky

They placed the gods’ abode because on high 1250

The moon, the sky, the solemn stars, the night,

The torches and the flames, all shining bright,

Clouds, sun, rain, lightnings, hail and winds and snow,

Swift roars and rumbling thunderbolts all go,

Revolving. O unhappy humankind

That to the gods these actions they’ve assigned,

Yet bitter wrath as well! What groans did they

Give out, what wounds they left for us today,

Tears for the future! It’s no piety

To cover up one’s head regularly, 1260

Approach a stone and every shrine, descend

Upon the ground and to the gods extend

One’s palms over an altar or to flood

That altar with the sacrificial blood

Of beasts while linking vow to vow; for he

Is pious who with pure tranquillity

Surveys all things. For when we look up high

Across the shining temples of the sky

And all its stars, when we think of the sun

And moon, and how they move, then every one 1270

Of us, already crushed by misery,

Discovers now one more anxiety

That the gods’ immeasurable strength embraces us,

A strength that moves the stars in various

Motions – the question causes anxious care:

For was the world created? And is there

A limit that will let the world remain

Until it can no longer bear the strain

Of restless motion? Did the gods decree

Its walls, though, should live on eternally, 1280

Despising time’s strong power? Is there a mind

That does not fear the gods in all mankind?

Whose limbs don’t crawl with terror when a bolt

Of thunder shakes the earth with a shocking jolt

And rumblings run across the mighty sky?

Don’t nations tremble, don’t proud monarchs shy

Away in fear of the gods lest through some sin

Or haughty word grave time may usher in

Their punishment? When winds blow violently

And sweep an admiral into the sea, 1290

With troops and elephants, does he not crave

The gods’ concord with vows thereby to save

Himself and pray that all the winds may cease

And favouring breezes bring him back to peace? –

In vain, for often in a furious gale

He gets entangled and is doomed to sail

Into the shoals of death. Humanity

Is ground down by some hidden energy

Which on the rods and axes of success

Appears to trample with derisiveness. 1300

When the whole earth trembles beneath us, when

Cities collapse or barely stand, why then

Men feel self-hate – and this is no surprise –

And leave it to the gods to supervise

All things, acknowledging their potency.

Now I will speak of the discovery

Of silver, copper, gold, iron and lead

When fire from the mountains came and spread

And scorched the forests, whether some lightning flashed

From heaven or else because in war men clashed, 1310

Burning them, thus to full the foe with fear,

Or, since the soil was rich, some wished to clear

The fat fields for their pasture, or that they

Might kill the wild beasts and enjoy their prey;

For there were hunts with springes and with flame

Before men fenced their glades and put up game

With packs of hounds. However that may be,

Whatever, with its grim cacophony,

Had brought about the blazing heat and burned

The forests to their very roots and turned 1320

The land to ash, the hollows of the earth

And her hot veins proceeded to give birth

To those five elements I named before,

Which oozed out and collected from her core.

When people saw their hues, coagulated

And radiating, they were captivated

By their smooth grace and saw they had the same

Contours as did the hollows whence they came,

And then they noted that each element

Could be dissolved by heat and thus be bent 1330

In different shapes and beaten, furthermore,

Into the finest edge and laid in store

As tools that they might cut down trees or hew

Timber or plane planks smooth, or puncture, too.

They tried to make these things initially

Of silver, gold and bronze (which they could see

Was just as tough), but it was all in vain

Because, though strong, they could not take the strain:

They found the work was all too rigorous.

Unlike the bronze, the gold was valueless, 1340

They thought, because its edge was far from keen,

But now bronze is disdained while gold is seen

As quite the best. Things change as seasons glide

On by: what once was prized will be denied

Its worth one day. Something that people flout

Will one day lose that taint and be sought out

As time goes by and, once discovered, thrive

And be extolled by every man alive.

Now you will recognize with little fuss

How iron was discovered, Memmius. 1350

In ancient times the arms with which one fought

Were hands, nails, teeth, stones, branches which were sought

From forest trees and broken off, then flame,

Once it was known. Then iron and bronze both came

Into man’s ken – bronze first, since it was more

Easily worked, comprising a greater store.

Men tilled the earth with bronze, with bronze as well

Stirred up the waves of war and rushed pell-mell,

Inflicting dreadful wounds, and took away

Cattle and lands. Men readily gave way, 1360

When naked and unweaponed, to a foe

Well-armed. The iron sword would slowly grow

In stature, while the scythe of bronze would fill

Mankind with scorn, and they began to till

The earth with iron, and the odds of war

Were equal, as they had not been before.

In ancient times a man would mount his horse

In arms and with the bridle steer his course

And fight from there before he was to face

The hazards of war while his two steeds would race 1370

Before his chariot. There was a stage

Of four-horsed chariots before that age,

And chariots equipped with scythes. And then

Lucanian oxen – elephants – with men

On turrets on their backs, a hideous mob,

With snakes for hands, well taught to do the job

Of hoodwinking the foe while suffering

The wounds of war. Discord kept ushering

In further ills to fright the souls of men

And the terrors of warfare again and again 1380

Would grow. They tried to further their fierce wars

With bulls and beat the foe with vicious boars.

Some let slip lions to the enemy

With men to exercise their mastery

With arms and shackles - but in vain once more,

For, heated with the sight of blood and gore,

They ran amok, confusing everything

On either side, their fierce manes quivering.

The horses at the noise were terrified,

Nor could their riders calm them down or guide 1390

Them at the enemy, while angrily

The lionesses leapt haphazardly,

Attacking anyone they chanced to find

And, turning round, would lash at those behind

And maul them to the ground with their strong jaws

And hold them, weak with wounds, with curving claws.

Bulls tossed and trampled other bulls, and they

Ripped at the horses, for their horns would lay

Them flat, and raked the earth up threateningly.

Boars tore at other boars and furiously 1400

Splashed broken weapons with their blood and wrought

Promiscuous mayhem on whoever fought,

Riders or infantry. The steeds would swerve

Aside to dodge the wildly lunging curve

Of tusks or paw the air, but bootlessly,

For, hamstrung, they’d collapse and heavily

Cover the ground. If men before had thought

The horses amply trained, yet when they fought

They saw them growing heated with the flight,

The terror, tumult, uproar and the blight 1410

Of wounds and could not bring them back, for they

Would scatter far and wide beyond the fray,

Just like the elephants, so lacerated

With weapons after they had mutilated

So many of their kind. But did they do

All this? I barely trust it can be true

That, after such destruction fell on all,

They could not have believed this would befall;

You might maintain this happened, though, elsewhere

In different ways in any place you care 1420

To think of. Yet they didn’t go to war

In hope of conquering but wishing for

A chance to disconcert the enemy,

Though they themselves would die through paucity

Of arms and numbers. Tied clothes people wore

Before knitwear, though iron came before

The latter since they needed it to fit

Upon the loom, and smoothness, lacking it,

Could not have been achieved due to a lack

Of treadles, shuttles, spindles and the clack 1430

Of leash-rods. Men before all womankind

Plied wool (because the male sex leaves behind

The female sex in their ability),

Till dour farmers called indignity

Upon it, and the men let women ply

The wool and turned to toil to fortify

Their bodies. Nature, though, instructed men

In the art of sowing in the fields, for when

Berries and acorns fall, sequentially

A swarm of seedlings lies beneath the tree, 1440

Whence shoots into the boughs were introduced

And in the fields new slips were then produced;

And men received a certain delectation

In finding different ways of cultivation,

Wild fruits becoming pliant when they found

They welcomed friendly tillage in the ground.

As time went by, they made the forests go

Yet higher in the hills, the place below

Left for their tillage, so that there might be

Crops, meadows, pools, streams and a quantity 1450

Of fertile vineyards and that a grey-green

Region of olives burgeoning between

And over every hill and dale and plain,

As now you see upon the whole terrain

A picturesque miscellany laid out

With fruit-trees and plantations set about.

To imitate birds’ trilling notes came long

Before man could delight his ears with song.

Winds whistling through the reeds taught men to blow

Through hemlock-stalks, and slowly they would know 1460

To place their fingers on a pipe they made

From reeds which they’d found in some forest-glade

Where shepherds took their solitary ease

In the open air, and play sweet elegies.

These airs they took delight in when replete

With food, for that is when all things are sweet.

Often with friends on the soft grass hard by

A stream beneath a tall tree they would lie –

A joy with little cost – especially

When the weather smiled and floral greenery 1470

Abounded. Then the order of the day

Was peals of pleasant laughter, chat and play,

For then the rustic muse was vigorous.

Then, prompted by a joyous playfulness,

They’d put on wreaths and march, though raggedly,

And beat the earth, full of hilarity:

All things were thriving, wonderful and new,

And, when they were awake, this was their due

For when thy slept – to warble songs and play

The reed-pipe, whence the watchmen of today 1480

Keep the tradition, and they have been taught

Many tempos, although it has never brought

No more enjoyment to them than was felt

By those who came from Mother Earth and dwelt

In woodlands. For what stares us in the face,

Unless we’ve seen something with greater grace

Before, gives great delight and seems to be

The best, till what seems better usually

Spoils that which modifies our liking for

What’s ancient. Men thought acorns then a bore 1490

And left their old beds, strewn with leaves and grass;

Clothes made of wild beasts’ pelts now did not pass

Muster: great envy all those years before

Provoked, I think, the death of him who wore

It first through treachery and it was torn

Apart so it no longer could be worn.

First pelts, then gold and purple clothes, therefore,

Plagued men and wearied all of them with war.

The blame lies mostly, I believe, in us –

Though earthborn people found it torturous 1500

To wear a pelt in winter, nonetheless

Purple with gold designs brings no distress

While we can use a poor man’s covering.

In vain mankind is ever labouring,

Consumed with empty cares, obviously

Because it does not know the boundary

Of ownership and also does not know

To what extent real happiness can grow.

And by degrees man’s lived upon the seas

And stirred up billows of hostilities. 1510

Those watchful sentinels, the moon and sun,

Who gleam around the heaven’s dominion,

Taught men that all the seasons come around,

All done in order that is fixed and sound.

Now men had citadels, well fortified,

And earth was meted out and classified.

Now sailing-ships were seen upon the seas,

And friends and allies formed confederacies.

Bards glorified great deeds in poetry

(Letters had been devised just recently) 1520

So we cannot look back on yesterday

But that our reasoning will show the way.

Roads, weapons, agriculture, navigation,

Decrees, all kinds of clothes, fortification,

Life’s prizes, luxuries from first to last,

Verse, art, smooth statues dexterously cast –

All these improved as mankind gradually

Progressed through practice and capacity.

Thus by degrees time brought us everything,

Which was revealed to us by reasoning. 1530

By intellect all these things man could see

Until they had attained their apogee.

# BOOK VI

Athens was first to spread abroad her grain

For sick mankind – she gave men life again,

Creating laws and giving consolation,

Spawning a man with crystal penetration,

A wise truth-teller who, though he is dead,

Has had his name for many aeons spread,

Because of his divine discoveries,

To the domain of all divinities.

For when he saw that mankind’s every need

Had now almost been met and that, indeed, 10

As far as possible they were risk-free

And saw men rolling in prosperity,

Honoured and famed, proud fathers, nonetheless,

At home, experiencing uneasiness

And bitterly lamenting, he then saw

That mankind’s vessel was itself the flaw:

For everything that came from the outside

Perverted and tainted what was inside,

However advantageous, partially

Because it leaked and he could clearly see 20

That it could not be filled in any way,

And partially because, as one may say,

With a foul smell it was contaminated,

And so with true words he regenerated

The heart and limited fear and desire

And showed that chief good to which we aspire

And pointed out the narrow path that we

Might take to reach that goal unswervingly

And all the sin that lingers everywhere

And lives among us, flying here and there 30

By chance or force, as nature had designed

And from what ports they might be met. Mankind

Did not have cause to irritate its breast

With waves of misery, he would attest.

For just as little children shake with fright

At all things in the darkness in the night,

So we sometimes quake in the light of day

At what should cause fear no more than what they

Feared in the dark. So this despondency,

This terror of the mind will have to be 40

Dispelled, not by the sun’s bright shafts of day

But nature’s law. So I’ll get under way

And weave the web of my discourse. Since I

Have shown the heavens are mortal and the sky

Has given birth, explaining principally

What has been done there and what needs to be

Accomplished still, to what remains give ear.

Since I am now the Muses’ charioteer,

How winds arise and then are pacified

I will explain and tell what men have spied 50

In earth and heaven and were frequently

Held in suspense with great trepidity,

Abused by fear of the gods, kept crushed below

Upon the earth because they did not know

The cause of things, thus pressured to assign

Events to those they thought of as divine.

If those who are well taught and therefore know

The gods have carefree lives, yet even so

Wonder how things occur, especially

Those things up in the sky that we can see, 60

They fall back on their ancient veneration

And take harsh masters their imagination

Accepts as absolute, since they have got

No knowledge of what can and what cannot

Be done, thus how the power of each thing

Is firmly fixed: so by blind reasoning

They’re led astray. Therefore, unless you spew

This from your mind and throw out far from you

Those thought unworthy of divinity,

Hostile to peace, their holy sanctity 70

Will often do you harm. The gods, however,

Cannot feel such dishonour as to ever

Thirst to inflict on you fierce punishment.

No, you believe that they, in their content

And peaceful lives, are threatening to throw

Waves of great rage that you may never show

Your piety at their shrines or ever be

Able to welcome with tranquillity

Their images. What will from that ensue

Is clear. By reasoning that’s wholly true 80

You must reject a life like that. A deal

Of words I’ve said, but much more I’ll reveal

In polished verse. We must see how the sky

Functions and know the law it’s governed by;

I must sing tempests and bright lightnings, too,

By what cause they are moved and what they do,

Lest you divide the heavens senselessly

In sixteen quarters, trembling to see

From which of them the fire makes its flight

And whether it turns to the left or right, 90

How it pierced walls and exercised its sway

Beyond and then moved out and on its way.

Show me the course, skillful Calliope,

Who give men pleasure and tranquillity,

As to my final goal I run my race,

For it’s marked out for me, and win first place

And gain the splendid crown of victory,

Spurred on by your support. Primarily,

The reason thunder shakes the azure sky

Is that clouds rush together way up high 100

As winds conflict. For where the sky is fair

There’s no sound to be heard, but anywhere

The clouds are dense, the thunder’s often loud.

Besides, there is less density in a cloud

Than in a stone or wood, but then again

More than in mist or flying smoke; for then,

Likes stones, they’d fall due to their gravity

Or else, like smoke, have no ability

To hold together or even contain

Within themselves cold snow or hail or rain. 110

They rumble, too, above us in the sky

As when in a great theatre one may spy

A canvas awning cracking in between

Its poles and beams, and sometimes it is seen,

When ripped, beneath strong winds to fly around,

As paper, when it’s torn, makes that same sound,

Or hung-up clothes or sheets of paper snap

Whenever breezes ruffle them and flap

Them through the air. And clouds on certain days

Can’t meet head-on but, side by side, will graze 120

Each other as they pass and make a din

That’s long and dry, an irritation in

The ears, until each one of them has gone

From its confined abode and carries on.

Thus all things seem to tremble at the sound

Of thunder and the massive walls around

The wide-spread firmament are torn asunder

And leap apart when people hear that thunder;

Strong winds twist through the clouds summarily

And whirl round in that same locality 130

And gradually hither and yon compel

The clouds to form a void with a crusty shell;

Then when the winds lose their ascendancy,

The clouds are torn and terrifyingly

Explode. A tiny vesicle supplied

With air, when perforated on one side,

Can make a noise as loud, therefore no wonder!

There is another time when clouds may thunder –

When winds blow through them. For we often see

That clouds can act like branches variously 140

While looking violent as they sweep about;

Leaves rustle, branches creak, there is no doubt,

When blasts of North-West wind are blazing through

A teeming forest. It can happen, too,

That a fierce wind will rush unswervingly

Into a cloud and break it. We can see

Down here what it can do, for though it’s less

Of a tempestuous nature, nonetheless

It wrenches lofty trees out of the ground.

Among the clouds, as well, waves can be found, 150

Which, as they break, growl out a roaring sound,

Which happens in deep rivers and around

The ocean’s waves. Thunder, too, breaks out loud

When lightning’s burning fire falls from one cloud

To another cloud, which, if, whenever it takes

The fire in, is soaked with water, makes

A dreadful noise, meanwhile immediately

Destroying it, just as similarly

A furnace’s white-hot iron, when it’s downed

In ice-cold water, makes a hissing sound. 160

To take this further, if the cloud were drier

When it received the lightning-stroke, the fire

Will loudly kindle it immediately,

As if the laurelled peaks were mightily

Attacked by wind-blown flames; for it’s a fact

That nothing burns like laurel when it’s cracked

By flame on Phoebus’ altar in Delphi.

Again, a noise in huge clouds up on high

Is made by cracks of ice and hail; for when

The wind packs all of them together, then 170

The clouds are crushed together narrowly

And mixed with hail. Lightning, additionally,

Occurs when clouds clash and send seeds of flame

Abroad, for stones and steel will do the same

And strike out sparks of light. The reason why

The ear hears thunderclaps after the eye

Has seen the lightning is that things take longer

To reach the ear. To make your judgment stronger,

If you see someone cutting down a tree

Far off, before you hear the thud you see 180

The stroke; in the same way, before we hear

The thunder it’s the lightning that is clear

To sight, though both occurred concurrently.

Thus with their rapid light clouds comparably

Tinge places, and hailstorms with a quivering burst

Will flash and dazzle. When a wind has first

Entered a cloud and, moving more and more,

Congealed it, as I have explained before,

It becomes hotter by its very speed,

Like all things else – a bullet will indeed 190

Melt when it’s cast afar – and when it breaks

The black cloud, by its violent force it makes

Its seeds of fire squeeze out, the very same

That caused the winking flickerings of flame;

And then ensues the sound, which strikes the ears

Somewhat more tardily than what appears

Before the eyes. It is a proven fact

That this will take place when the clouds compact,

Piled one upon the other massively;

So do not be deceived because we see 200

From here how wide they are as they extend

Far upwards in the sky. So do but lend

Your eyes to how the clouds can be conveyed

Across the mountains where they are displayed

In heaps, pressed from above and lying still,

The winds wrapped all around them. Then you will

Behold that mass, able to recognize

The stone-built caves which, should a storm arise,

The winds fill up, complaining noisily

That by the clouds they’re kept in custody, 210

Menacing like wild animals. This way

And that they growl there, hoping that they may

Find a way out as through the clouds they churn

The many seeds of fire and finally burn

And shatter them. Another reason why

The golden flowing flame can swiftly fly

To earth is that the clouds have to possess

Many seeds of fire. Thus when they’re moistureless

Their colour mostly flames and shines. Indeed

From the sun’s light they must gain many a seed, 220

Thus blushing red. So when the wind apace

Drives them into a tightly confined space,

They squeeze out seeds and make the flames shine bright.

And also when the clouds grow thin, there’s light.

For when a wind that’s tranquil has broadcast

Them here and there as they go gliding past,

The seeds that make the lightning have to fall,

And then the lightning makes no noise at all

And does not terrify. A thunderbolt

Has marks of heat burnt in and strokes that jolt 230

And dents that breathe foul sulphur; these are all

The marks of fire, not breezes or rainfall.

And often houses’ roofs, additionally,

They set alight, assuming mastery

Over their rooms as well. This most refined

Of all the fires has nature so combined

With elements so rapid and so small

It can’t be blocked by anything at all.

The powerful thunderbolt can pass straight through

A house’s walls, as sounds and voices do, 240

And pierces stone and bronze and instantly

Melts bronze and gold, and by its energy

Wine will evaporate in a heartbeat

Yet keep the vessels safe, because the heat

With ease tempers the earthenware, and so

It makes it pervious and thus will flow

Into the jar itself, then far and near

Dissolves the wine’s first seeds. This, it’s quite clear,

The sun can’t do for ages, even though

Its quivering blaze is powerful: for so w50

Rapid and strong it is. I’ll tell you now

How thunderbolts have been produced and how

They have the energy to split and burn

Down towers with one stroke, to overturn

Houses, rip beams, topple to the ground

Monuments, kill men and animals all around,

And other things, and I will not delay

With promises. We must believe that they

Were first produced from thick clouds piled on high,

Since they were never issued when the sky 260

Is peaceful or when the clouds are lightly packed.

Indeed there is no doubt, for many a fact

Can prove it, since the clouds all mass together

When thunder happens, and we wonder whether

Hell’s empty of all darkness everywhere,

Which now has filled the caverns of the air.

To such a degree beneath the hideous night

Of cloud there hangs the face of horrid fright,

As the tempest starts to forge her bolts. Besides,

Often a black cloud will affect the tides – 270

A pitchy flood, with darkness stuffed on high,

Falls down upon the waters from the sky

And brings with it a jet-black squall which teems

With thunderbolts and storms and winds and streams

Of flame, thus making people here below

Shiver with fear and run for shelter. So

We must believe the tempests have to surge

High over us, for clouds could not submerge

The earth with so much black unless each one

Was piled on many others that the sun 280

Would be blocked out. Nor could cascades of rain

Oppress us so that every stream and plain

Would swim in flood unless the sky were packed

With clouds piled high above us. So, in fact,

In such a case winds blow and fires flare

With rumblings and lightnings everywhere.

I said just now that hollow clouds contain

Many seeds of heat and therefore they must gain

Warmth from rays of the sun. And therefore, when

The wind collects them in one place and then 290

Has pressed out many seeds of torridness

And with that fire begins to coalesce,

The whirlwind goes into that narrow place

And turns itself about inside the space

And hones the thunderbolt. The wind indeed

Is kindled in two ways, first by its speed

And then by contact. The wind’s energy

Heightens its heat and the intensity

Of the fire thrusts in, while the bolt, now fit

For action, as it were, will promptly split 300

The cloud, and then a rapid flame will fly

With flashing lights, and then, up in the sky,

A loud crash follows, and the firmament

Appears to overwhelm it as it’s rent

Apart, then tremors in the sky assail

The earth and in the sky murmurings trail

And almost all the tempest with the jolt

Quivers, and roars come from the thunderbolt.

Then heavy rain ensues, and everywhere

There seems to be but rain throughout the air. 310

The torrent from that cloudburst and the blast

Of wind that it discharges is so vast,

When sound and flames fly forth. Sometimes, also,

A force of wind is stirred up and will blow

And fall upon a cloud that is replete

With a full-formed thunderbolt, whole and complete,

And, once the wind has burst it, instantly

A fiery vortex falls, a thing that we

Call thunderbolt. It can occur elsewhere

According to the force employed. And there 320

Have been times when a wind has been conveyed

*Sans* fire but has ignited as it made

Its lengthy trek through space, and, as it flew,

Lost certain bodies too large to pass through

The air equally well, and from the air

Itself scraped tiny ones which mingled there

With it, producing fire in their flight;

In the same way a bullet will ignite

And cast off many cold bodies in its course.

Fire is created by the very force 330

Of the blow, when cold winds strike. How can this be?

Well, when the wind has smitten violently,

Then from the winds heat elements may flow

As well as from that which received the blow;

When stone is struck by iron, out fire flies,

Where seeds do not the less homogenize

Since iron’s cold. A thing, then, must be hit

And kindled by a thunderbolt if it

Is fit for flames. No wind may totally

Be cold if it’s been sped down forcefully 340

From heaven, but if it’s not first lit by flame

As it goes on its way, yet all the same

It must be warm and mixed with heat when it

Arrives. The swiftness and the heavy hit

Inflicted by the bolt (they usually

With such a fall move expeditiously)

Occurs because among the clouds a force

Is stirred up and embarks upon a course

Of rapid movement: when, subsequently,

The cloud can’t hold back the intensity, 350

The force is pressed out and is therefore flown

Remarkably, like missiles which are thrown

From catapults. The elements are small

And smooth, however, so it’s not at all

An easy task for something to impede

A thing with such a substance since with speed

It penetrates the narrow ways; and thus

It smoothly flies with rapid impetus

While rarely checked. All weights are naturally

Thrust downwards always; a velocity 360

Is added, though, when it inflicts a blow

As well and makes the first momentum grow

In weight, thus with more speed and violently

Disintegrating every entity

It meets that tries to bar it with delay.

And since it rushes from a long, long way,

It must keep getting faster as it grows

In strength by moving, stiffening the blows.

Its seeds are carried thus, as one may say,

Into one place as they roll on their way 370

And from the air itself it possibly

Draws bodies which provoke velocity

With blows. Nor does it cause any distress

To everything it meets in its progress,

Because the fire, being fluid, passes through

Their pores. And many it transfixes, too,

Because its very particles have lighted

Upon the points where everything’s united.

It melts both bronze and gold immediately

Because it’s made of bodies terribly 380

Minute and elements so smooth that they

Can very easily effect a way

Within and, once it’s found its way inside,

Loosen all bonds. It is at autumntide

When all the regions of the firmament,

Set with its shining stars, is usually rent

With shaking all around, as is the earth,

And when the springtime brings its flowers to birth.

For in the cold fires fail, and when it’s hot

The winds are lacking and the clouds are not 390

So dense. So when the temperature’s between

The two, all causes of the bolt are seen

To be combined. For the year’s choppy seas

Mingle together cold and heat – for these

Are both essential for a cloud to bring

A bolt to life – so that in everything

There’s discord, and the wildly billowing air

With fires and winds engages everywhere.

So springtime is when warmth must say adieu

To cold and so a battle must ensue 400

Between those unlike things as they compete

In wild confusion; then when the last heat

Mixed with the early cold has come around,

Which we call autumn time, conflict is found

And bitter winters come into a fight

With summers. That’s the reason why it’s right

That they’re called choppy seas. Thus it’s no wonder

That in that season there is so much thunder,

With turbulent tempests stirred up in the air

Since all’s confusion with well-matched warfare 410

On either side, as flames are coalesced

With winds and water. Thus you may digest

The nature of the thunderbolt and see

The role it plays through its intensity,

Not by unrolling scrolls to find a spell

And vainly search for signals that can tell

The gods’ intent, to learn how fire came

And into which quarter it turned its flame,

And how it has pierced walls and how got back

And what’s the harm inflicted by a crack 420

Of thunder. If the heavens are shaken by

The gods with dreadful noise up in the sky,

Who cast their fire at will, why don’t they see

That when an execrable felony

Has been committed that they ought to clout

The man who did it, making him breathe out

Sulphurous flames, his breast pierced through, to show

A lesson to mankind? Why rather, though,

Should guiltless men in a tornado’s flame

From heaven be burned? Why do they vainly aim 430

At deserts? Is it that they’re practising

For other punishments and strengthening

Their muscles? Why allow a powerful jolt

Against the earth from Jupiter’s thunderbolt?

And why does Jupiter himself not spare

That thunderbolt and cast it from the air

Upon his foes? Why does he never cast

His bolt on earth and sound his thunder-blast

From a clear sky? Does he instead descend

Into the clouds himself once they ascend 440

And only after that, when he’s close by,

Direct his thunderbolt and see it fly?

Why does he strike the sea? And what has he

Against the waves, the vast immensity

Of water and the swimming plains? What’s more,

If for us to be on the lookout for

His bolt is his desire, why does he not

Provide a way to see it when it’s shot?

But if his wish is unexpectedly

To crush us with his fire, why then does he 450

Strike from where we can see it, and thereby

Avoid it, and prepare up in the sky

The dark with rumblings and a dreadful din?

How is it you believe he can shoot in

Many directions at one time? Maybe

You’ll say it’s never done, but actually

It’s often done and must be done indeed

So that, as showers and rain pour down to feed

Many regions of the earth, many bolts will fall

All at the self-same time. Now, last of all, 460

Why does he smash shrines of divinities

And even his own illustrious territories?

Why crush many a fine-wrought effigy

And rob his statues of their majesty,

Inflicting dreadful wounds on them? And why

Is he wont to attack places on high?

Why is most of his fire seen upon

The mountain-tops? Well then, to carry on,

It’s easy from these thoughts to comprehend

How what the Greeks call *presteres* descend 470

Into the ocean. For occasionally

A kind of column drops into the sea,

Surrounding which the strong winds agitate

The waters, which begin to fulminate;

Ships caught in it were perilously cast

About. This happens when the furious blast

Of winds at times can’t burst the cloud it tries

To burst but thrusts it, giving it the guise

Of a column, to the billows of the sea

As though it were, degree by small degree, 480

Thrust by an arm and fist; and when the gust

Of wind tears it asunder, it is thrust

Out of the cloud and down into the sea,

And on the waves it bubbles wondrously.

The whirlwind twists and brings the cloud with it

And when the surface of the sea is hit

By that full cloud, the wind aggressively

Dives through the water, stirring up the sea,

And loudly makes it boil. Its vortex snakes

Into the clouds sometimes, where then it rakes 490

Their seeds together and then imitates

The Greek-named *presteres* as it rotates

Down from the sky. On landing, it’s dispersed

And violently vomits forth a burst

Of storm and whirlwind. But since it is rare

That this occurs, and also , here and there,

Mountains get in the way, more frequently

We see it on the wide and open sea

And there’s nothing above it but the sky.

The clouds amass together up on high 500

When many flying bodies suddenly

Meet up: they’re rougher and, to some degree,

Entangled yet can coalesce. These mould

Small clouds at first and yet they still can hold

Together and by combination grow

And then are borne upon the winds that blow

Until a savage tempest should arise.

The nearer are the mountains to the skies,

The more, through dusty clouds, will every peak

In that high place with dusky blackness reek 510

Since, when the clouds first form, before the eye

Sees them, so thin are they, they’re carried high

By winds up to the peaks. Now they’re amassed

In a much larger pack and can at last

Be seen, appearing simultaneously

To fly into the ether. We can see,

When we ascend a mountain, that the air

Abounds with windy breezes everywhere.

Besides, that many particles appear

Across the entire sea is made quite clear 520

When clothes are hung up on the shore and take

The sticky moisture in and therefore make

It likelier that many bodies may

Surge up together from the salty spray

And swell the clouds above, for we may see

That there exists a consanguinity

Between these moistures. We can see, as well,

From rivers and the earth itself a swell

Of clouds and steam arising, in this way

Exhaled like breath and bringing an array 530

Of darkness as they thus suffuse the sky,

Uniting as they gradually supply

The clouds; for heat drives through the firmament

And thus, packed close, a weave of clouds is blent.

The bodies that create this hullabaloo

Of clouds and flying storms enter the blue

From outside. For their number I have proved

Is infinite and shown how fast they’re moved

In flight and that they instantaneously

Can travel through a space that cannot be 540

Imagined. No surprise, then, if a squall

And murkiness can in no time at all

Cover the sea and land with clouds so great,

Since all the elements can navigate

Their way through all the passages of the air

And through the breathing-channels everywhere

Around us. Listen now as I explain

How in the clouds the moistures of the rain

Increase together and how showers fall,

Sent down upon the earth. So, first of all, 550

There rises from the earth full many a seed

Of water with the clouds, you will concede,

From many things, and they together grow

As blood, sweat and all moisture we must know

Grows with our bodies. Often clouds will pull

Much water from the sea, like strands of wool,

As by the winds they’re carried. In this way

From all the rivers water’s snatched away

Into the clouds. And when from here and there

The seeds and clouds unite, while everywhere 560

They grow, the clouds, now packed together, try

To oust the moisture in two ways: they fly

Together, aided by the breezes’ might,

And when a greater mass of clouds, packed tight,

Than usual is collected, from on high

They downwards press and make the showers fly

Abroad. And if these clouds are rarefied

By breezes or become somewhat untied,

Struck by the sun’s great heat, they then secrete

Their rainy moisture, just as wax will heat 570

And melt above a fire and attain

Liquid. There’s a fierce downpour of rain

When clouds are pressed together violently

Both by the wind and their own energy.

But when the seeds of water move, the rain

Is wont to be persistent and remain

For a long time, and storm-rack on storm-rack

And cloud on cloud from every region stack

While borne along and from above they stream

And everywhere the earth breathes back the steam. 580

When the sun shines amidst the gloomy squall

Against the clouds from which the showers fall,

A rainbow stands amid the murkiness.

There are some other things that coalesce

Inside the clouds and some which live and grow

Above us, winds and hail and frost and snow

And powerful ice which makes the waters freeze

And curb the eager rivers – how all these

Are made and why is easy to find out

And see in your mind’s eye once you’ve no doubt 590

About all of the elements’ qualities.

The reason for earthquakes’ occurrences

Now learn. And, in the first place, you must know

That, as the sky above, the earth below

Is full of windy caverns which possess

Many lakes and pools and a great wilderness

Of rocks and cliffs. And so we must surmise

Beneath the earth’s back many a river lies

Hidden that rolls its waters violently

And moves its rocks; for facts demand that she 600

Be everywhere herself. If this is so

And these things are attached to her below,

And each cavern with age deteriorates,

The upper earth trembles and oscillates

With some disaster; mountains start to fall,

And with the massive shock the tremblings crawl

Both far and wide at once – and well they may

Since buildings by the road tremble and sway

When lightweight wagons pass, which will also,

If a stone should jolt the wheels, as on they go, 610

Jump upwards. And sometimes when from the ground

After some time a giant mass is found

To roll into a lake, the earth also,

Jogged by the water’s waves, moves to and fro,

Just as a vessel sometimes can’t remain

Immobile if the water can’t refrain

From moving too. When winds beneath the ground

Desert one place and vehemently pound

Against the lofty caves, into that course

The headlong wind is making with great force 620

The earth will lean. The buildings, as they rise

In their construction up into the skies,

Incline, beams overhanging and prepared

To go. However, some people are scared

To think that for the great world’s population

A period of total desolation

Is waiting, though a looming mass they see

Over the earth. Yet if increasingly

The winds should blow, no force could hold the world

In limbo, keeping it from being hurled 630

Into perdition. But, because they wane

In turns, gain force, revive and blow again,

The earth makes idle threats more frequently

Than ever she effects calamity.

She makes a forward lean, then with a spring

Moves back again, meanwhile recovering

The equilibrium she had before.

And that’s how buildings totter, the top more

Than the foundation. When a blast of air

Or wind should blow – it doesn’t matter where, 640

Above the earth itself or underground –

And fly into the caves and whirl around

And loudly growl, the force it agitates

And drives it outwards as it lacerates

The earth and formulates a great crevasse.

At Syrian Sidon this once came to pass,

And Aegium, when an earthquake overthrew

Them with that force of air. Many others, too,

Have fallen thus, and many have sunk down

Into the ocean’s depths and caused to drown 650

The populace. But should it not break out,

The air and wind are scattered all about,

Plague-like, through all the openings that lie

Beneath the earth, and tremors start thereby,

Just as we shake with cold unwittingly.

And therefore a two-fold anxiety

Affects the citizens, because they dread

The lofty houses and the caverns spread

Beneath the earth lest nature suddenly

Tears all asunder and confusingly 660

Opens her gaping jaws and tries to fill

The earth with ruin and all kinds of ill.

So let them all think that the earth and sky

Can’t be corrupted and will never die;

Yet sometimes peril adds a goad of fear

That suddenly the earth will disappear

Beneath our feet. Men wonder why the sea

Is not increased in volume naturally,

For many waters flow into the tide

As many rivers run from every side. 670

Add wandering showers, too, and storms that fly

Onto all seas and lands out of the sky,

And all the ocean’s springs: yet if you weigh

The sea with all things else you’ll find that they

Amount to just one drop. Accordingly,

Don’t think it so surprising that the sea

Does not increase. Besides, the sun’s heat draws

A lot away from it – another cause

For doubt. Indeed we see wet garments dried

By the sun, and yet the seas spread far and wide 680

Beneath us, and yet even though the sun

Takes but a sip from it in any one

Location, yet a superfluity

He’ll take away from that expanse of sea.

Much moisture’s swept away from the sea’s face

By winds, since we can often find no trace

Of wet in roads after one night and see

Soft mud massing in crusts. For recently

I’ve shown much moisture’s taken away as well

By clouds descending on the ocean’s swell: 690

Across the world they spray it everywhere

When it is raining and the breezes bear

The clouds along with them. Now finally,

The earth is porous, girdling the sea:

So, since into the sea the waters course,

The salt sea likewise must exude perforce

Onto the land. The pungency is strained,

And water oozes back till it’s attained

Each river’s source, whence in a moving mass

Over the earth once more it then may pass 700

Along its marked-out path. Now in what way

Mt. Etna breathes out fury I will say.

For it was no familiar devastation

Attending that fierce tempest’s domination

In Sicily’s fields, attracting all the eyes

Of neighbouring folk, who saw up in the skies

The regions of the heavens sparkling

And smoking as they stood there quivering

In panic that another tragedy

Was in the plans of nature. You must be 710

Diligent in these matters and survey

All quarters everywhere so that you may

Remember the profundity of all

We see and recognize how very small

A fraction of the world is just one sky –

Less than one man when he is measured by

The whole earth. If you keep this steadily

In mind, discerning it with clarity,

You’ll cease to wonder at a multitude

Of things. For which of us is in the mood 720

For wonder if a fever should assail

Our bodies with its heat or we should ail

With something else? A foot will suddenly

Swell up or we will feel some agony

In teeth or eyes or that accursed thing

Erysipelas, which burns us, slithering

Across our limbs, because assuredly

Seeds do exist in many an entity,

And foul diseases from the earth and air

Are in sufficient numbers that they flare 730

Immeasurably. Therefore there’s a supply

Of everything out of the earth and sky

From infinite space, we must believe, and so

The earth can quiver suddenly to and fro

And over land and sea can whirlwinds rush

And in abundance Etna’s fires can gush

And heavens burst in a blaze, and heavily

Tempests can pour, when incidentally

The waters’ seeds for that effect have massed.

“But much too huge is that tempestuous blast.” 740

Alright, but any river seems to be

The largest to a man who formerly

Has never seen a larger; it’s the same

With trees or men, and everyone may claim

That all things of all kinds that he may see

Are huge because they’re bigger yet than he

Has seen before, though sky and sea and land

Are but a modicum if they are scanned

With all there is. But now I’ll clarify

How Etna’s flames are rouse that they might fly 750

Out of the furnaces. Primarily

The mountain’s hollow, held up principally

By flinty caverns, where there’s wind, which air

Invigorates by flying everywhere.

And when the wind’s grown hot and savagely

Heated the rocks in its vicinity,

The earth as well, it darts without delay

Quick flames, rises and makes its fiery way

Into the mountain’s throat. The fires are,

Along with all their sparks, scattered afar 760

So that their thick, black smoke may emanate

As well as boulders of a wondrous weight.

You may be sure such is the energy

That air possesses. Furthermore, the sea

Around much of the mountain’s roots will break

Its waves and, with a sucking sound, will make

Its surf recede; caves from this sea, below

The earth, into the maw of the mountain go.

Wind mixed with water, then, we must admit,

Enters, the facts of the case compelling it 770

To pierce through from the ocean whence it came

And to extinguish and lift high the flame

And cast up rocks and raise out of the sea

Sand-clouds. Upon the very apogee

Are craters, as they’re called in Sicily

(We call them throats or mouths). Additionally,

There are a lot of things for which we name

Not one but many causes; all the same,

One of them is the true cause: for, let’s say,

You see a man’s corpse lying far away – 780

Perhaps you think you should enumerate

All causes of his death lest you don’t state

The actual one. You could not prove a blade,

The cold, poison or some disease had made

The final blow, but we will surely find

The cause of death was something of this kind.

In many other things like views we state.

The Nile’s the only river in full spate

Near summer. For it irrigates the land

Mid-season since the stream is forced to stand 790

By northerly winds which at the mouth appear

(They’re called Etesian at that time of year):

They blow against it, hold it and impel

The waters to the channel. It is well

Beyond a doubt that those sharp blasts are rolled

From all the polar stars of northern cold

And blow against the current. From that land

Of heat, the Nile flows south where there are tanned

Black tribes baked by the sun. Maybe, as well,

Great mounds of sand pile up against the swell 800

And block the mouth: the winds stir up the sea,

Which drive the sand inward; accordingly

The outlet of the river is more barred:

Thus the descending waters find it hard

To flow. There may be also at its head

More rain then when the Etesian winds have sped

To drive the clouds together there. You may

Be sure, when to the regions of noonday

They’re pushed, the clouds are violently compressed,

At last collected on a mountain crest. 810

Perhaps the river grows straight from the heart

Of Ethiopian peaks, whence clouds depart

Out to the plains through the intensity

Of the sun’s melting rays. Listen to me

As the Avernian regions and their lakes

I tell of. First of all, the region takes

Its name from the fact that it’s a dreadful threat

To birds which, flying over it, forget

How they should use their wings and, slackening

Their sails, fall through the ether, plummeting, 820

Their necks limp, into water or the ground,

As nature wills it. This region is found

Near Cumae, where the mountains up on high

Reek, with rank sulphur filled and shrouded by

Hot springs. In Athens there’s another place,

High on the citadel, where you may face

Tritonian Pallas’ shrine, the fostering

Athene, whither no crow will take wing,

Not even when an offering is there

Upon the altar. They take so much care 830

To flee, not, as the Grecian bards have sung,

Due to their vigil – no, its quality

Itself repels them. Also history

Says such a place in Syria is found –

As soon as beasts set foot upon the ground,

It makes them fall down heavily as though

Slain sacrifices to the gods below.

But these are nature’s work – where they arose

And what produced them everybody knows.

And so the gates of Orcus cannot be 840

Within those regions and no deity

Of Hell can draw souls into the domain

Of Acheron, just as some folk maintain

Swift stags can draw a serpent from its lair

By breathing. Logic, you must be aware,

Proves this is false. I strive to speak what’s true.

First, as I’ve frequently explained to you,

There are so many different entities

Upon the earth, and several of these 850

(Like food) aid life, but many strike us dead

With maladies. As I have also said,

Each animal has a very different need

From others for the life that it must lead,

For every one is structured differently.

A many a pernicious entity

Enters the ears and nose, rough to the touch

And noxious; many, too, are very much

Not to be touched, looked at or tasted. You

May see how many things harm humans, too. 860

First, there is cast a shade so threatening

From certain trees that they can often bring

On headaches should you lie there on the ground.

On Helicon’s mountain- peaks there can be found

A tree whose vile stench kills a fellow flat

If he should smell its flower. You must know that

The earth has many kinds of seeds which she

Keeps hold of and then mingles variously

And passes on. A new-extinguished light

Offends the nose and overpowers quite 870

At once a man who customarily

Foams at the mouth and falls. The heavily-

Scented castor makes a woman fall

Asleep again as she lets go of all

Her dainty work, if she has smelt it when

She had her monthly period. And then,

A lot of things loosen the limbs and shake

The spirit. Once again, if you should take

Too long a hot bath after a full meal

You may, while still immersed, easily keel 880

Over. The heavy fumes of charcoal easily

Can creep into the brain lest formerly

One drinks some water. Should a fever take

Possession of a man, wine’s smell will make

A corpse of him. Do you not see that Earth

Itself has to our sulphur given birth,

And with its filthy odour asphalt grows

In lumps together. Then again, when those

Who mine silver and gold, examining

The earth below us, o how everything 890

Reeks in Scaptensula! Those mines of gold –

What kinds of devilry do they all hold

And breathe out! And the men – what kind of hue

Do they take on! What do they look like! You

Must see and hear how soon their death will be,

Their forces spent, since of necessity

They must keep working. All the streams breathed out

From the earth go forth and wander all about

The open sky. Avernus thus must send

Its deadly power up in the sky to end 900

The lives of birds, contaminating part

Of heaven: thus when birds should chance to dart

Thither, they’re caught by poison they can’t see

And maybe fall straight down unswervingly

To where the breath flew up so that same breath

May make the coup de grâce and clinch their death.

It seems to cause a giddiness at first,

But afterwards, when they have surely burst

Into those poison springs, their life as well

Must be spewed forth, because within that Hell 910

Much evil lurks. Sometimes the power there

That drives that exhalation parts the air

Between the birds and earth so that a space

Is left there. So when they fly to that place,

Their wings lack power and halt immediately

And on both sides they waste their energy.

They can’t count on their wings and so descend

To earth and in near-empty space they send

Their souls to roam abroad through every pore

As there they lie. Well-water, furthermore, 920

Grows colder in the summer, since the ground

Is rarefied by heat and spreads around

Into the air what seeds it might possess.

The more the earth has lost some fieriness,

The colder grows the water that’s concealed

Within the earth. Then when the earth’s congealed

And pulverized by cold and coalesces,

Through that congealing into the walls it presses

What heat it has. There is a spring, they say,

Near Ammon’s shrine that’s cold during the day 930

And hot at night. This spring excessively

Men wonder at; some hold the theory

That the earth boils with the sun’s fieriness

When night with terrifying gloominess

Has spread the earth. But this opinion

Is far from sensible. For, when the sun

Can’t heat up water, though it blazes so,

How is it possible, when it’s below

Earth’s mass, that it can make the water boil,

Soaked with its heat, beneath that compressed soil, 940

Especially since its warmth can’t adequately

Pass through a wall? How, then? Assuredly

Because the ground’s more pervious right there

About the fountain than it is elsewhere.

A lot of seeds of fire are around

The water, so when night has quashed the ground

With dewy waves, the earth will frigid grow

At heart, contracting. In this way, as though

Pressed by a hand, it sends into the spring

What seeds of fire it has, engendering 950

The water’s heat. When the earth is agitated

By the sun’s rays and thus attenuated,

The seeds return to their original source:

Thus through the earth the water’s warmth may course.

And that’s the reason why the spring is cold

In the light of day. Besides, the water’s rolled

About by the rays of the sun, and the tremulous

Heat in daylight makes it pervious,

And that’s the reason why it ousts each seed

Of fire in its store, just as indeed 960

Water sends out the cold that it possesses

From time to time so that it deliquesces

The ice. There is a cold spring which, when tow

Is held above it, frequently will throw

A flame which catches fire instantly;

A torch amid the waters similarly

Sparkles and shines wherever it’s impelled

By winds, since many seeds of fire are held

In water, and from down in the earth below

There must be bodies of fire which rise and go 970

All through the entire spring, into the air

Exhaled, though there are not sufficient there

To heat the spring. Besides, there is a force

That makes them break out suddenly and course

Along the water, later gathering

Above. This is exactly like the spring

Of Aradus in the sea, which splashes out

Sweet water but the brine that flows about

The spring they keep away. Again, the sea

In many others spots treats bounteously 980

Parched sailors, for among the brine they spew

Sweet water. Thus these seeds can burst out through

This spring; and when upon some tow they meet

Together, sticking to the torch’s heat,

They blaze up suddenly because the tow

And floating torches, all of them aglow,

Have seeds of fire, too. Is it not true

That when beside a burning night-light you

Have placed a wick that you have first snuffed out,

The wick is kindled once again without 990

Touching the flame? The torch reacts the same.

And many other things become a flame

Far from the heat, before the fire is there

And drenches them. This, therefore, we must dare

To think that this occurs in that spring, too.

To pass on, then, I will review for you

How there exists a stone that can attract

Iron, established by some natural act

(This stone the Greeks call ‘magnet’, since it came

From the Magnesian region), and its fame 1000

Awes men because a chain quite frequently

Has small rings hanging from it: one may see

Sometimes a few suspended in a string,

Some five or more of them all dangling

And swaying in the breeze, one from another

Hanging beneath, and each learns from its brother

The stone’s attracting force, which through and through

Discharges and prevails. But until you

Account for things of this sort, you must set

A deal of principles before you get 1010

Your answer, and you must in your pursuit

Be patient as you deeply delve to root

It out. Your heedful ears and mind, therefore,

I’m anxious to elicit all the more.

In the first place, from everything we see

There must be bodies flowing constantly,

Discharged and scattered, which assail our eyes,

Exciting vision. Constant odour flies

From things, rivers are cold, the sun has heat,

The sea-waves spray as chillingly they beat 1020

Upon the sea-walls. Through the ear a spate

Of noises ooze, which never will abate.

We have a salty taste when by the sea

We chance to take a walk; similarly

When wormwood and pure water coalesce

Before our eyes we feel a bitterness.

From all things certain qualities emanate

And then in all directions dissipate.

It’s constant, since we feel it constantly,

Since it is always given us to see 1030

All things and smell them, and to hear them, too.

How porous bodies are I’ll tell to you

Once more, which in my first book I made plain.

Although it is important to attain

Knowledge of many subjects, with none more

Important than the one I’ll now explore,

We must accept there’s nothing that we see

But bodies mixed with void. Primarily,

In caves the rocks above with sweat ooze out,

The moisture dripping down with many a gout; 1040

We sweat, too, and our beards grow, and the hair

Appears upon our bodies everywhere.

Food enter all our veins to boost and feed

Our frames, even the extreme parts indeed,

Like nails. Both cold and heat we feel to go

Through bronze: silver and gold we feel also

When we hold teeming cups. Voices flit through

Stone walls, where cold and odour trickle, too,

As well as fire’s heat, which, too, can pierce

Through iron, for its strength is very fierce. 1050

And when heaven’s corselet girds us all around,

The power of diseases has been found,

Which comes in from without; and naturally

Storms rise from earth and sky, subsequently

Withdrawing thither, since it’s very clear

That there is no non-porous texture here

On earth. Moreover, not all bodies hurled

From things have been donated in this world

The same force on the senses, nor are they

Germane to everything in the same way. 1060

Firstly, the sun bakes earth and makes it dry

But melts the ice, compelling up on high

The snow to thaw, and wax it liquefies

And with its burning heat it mollifies

Both bronze and gold, and yet contrarily

It shrivels hides and flesh. Additionally,

Water will harden iron when one takes

It from the fire, but yet again it makes

Soft hides and flesh, once hardened by the heat.

To nanny-goats the olive is as sweet 1070

As if it literally were drizzling

With nectar and ambrosia; and yet no thing

Has bitterer leaves for man. Again, pigs flee

From marjoram oil and each variety

Of unguent, for what they find poisonous

Sometimes appears to give new life to us.

Though mud is hateful to us, nonetheless

They find it pleasurable and obsess

In rolling in it. But there’s something yet

That I think best to say before I set 1080

About my proper theme. Since we can see

Many pores in different things, then they must be

Endowed with their own natures and, as well,

Their own directions, because, truth to tell,

All beasts have different senses - each discerns

The object proper to it, and one learns

That sound and taste and smell can penetrate

With different senses. One can infiltrate

Itself through stone, another one can pass

Through wood, another gold, another glass 1090

Or silver, since through glass images flow,

Through silver warmth, while one thing’s seen to go

More quickly than another, although they

Yet make their journey by the self-same way.

The nature of the paths assuredly

Produces this eventuality,

Because it’s modified in waves galore,

As I have shown a little while before,

Due to each nature and how they’re created.

So when these principles have been instated, 1100

Prepared for us and laid out thoroughly,

What’s left is simple, since we easily

Are able to deduce the explanation

And show the reason for this gravitation.

Firstly, there must be many seeds which flow

Out of this stone, or a current that must blow

And beat away the air which lies between

Iron and stone, and when this space has been

Made empty and there is an ample place

Inside, the iron’s seeds enter this space 1110

And fall together, whose result must be

That the ring pursues them, passing totally

Inside in the same way. There is no one thing

Whose seeds are more connected, gathering

Themselves, than iron which is chill and rough.

What I’ve revealed, therefore, is proof enough

That there are many bodies which exude

From iron which aren’t able to intrude

Into the void unless he ring goes, too:

It does indeed do this and follows through 1120

Until it’s reached the stone where it will cling,

Attached by hidden links. That very thing

Occurs in every part: where there’s a space,

Above or on the side, the bodies race

Into the void; by blows from everywhere

Are they impelled, and up into the air

They cannot rise at will. And, furthermore,

As soon as the air is rarefied before

The ring, it’s driven forward by that air

Behind, which buffets all things everywhere. 1130

It drives the iron then since on one side

There is a space wherein it may abide.

This air I speak of is insidious,

Piercing the iron’s many holes, and thus

Reaches the particles, and then it thrusts

It forward as a ship’s moved by the gusts

Of wind when lacking sails. All things have air

Since they are pervious, and everywhere

It hems and joins them all. The air, therefore,

Hidden inside the iron’s every pore, 1140

With restless movement ever agitated,

Then beats the ring which thus is animated:

It’s carried to where it before had thrown

Itself towards the void. From this same stone

It goes sometimes, because it’s wont to flee

But then to follow, too, alternately.

I’ve seen the Samothracian iron dance,

When all the iron filings madly prance

Within a bronze bowl where the stone was laid

Beneath: so keen the iron was to evade 1150

The stone. And when the bronze has come between,

There’s chaos, since its current’s surely seen

To go ahead and thoroughly obtain

Possession of the iron’s pores. Again,

The current comes and finds the iron replete

And now is quite unable to repeat

Its swim across it. Then accordingly

It must assail the iron: equally

It spews while through the bronze it sets about

Moving throughout the bronze that which without 1160

The bronze it often sucks back. Do not be

Surprised the flow has not the ability

To drive other things: some stand firm by their weight,

Like gold, some are so easy to permeate

That things flow through them unrestrainedly

And cannot be propelled – wood’s seen to be

A substance of that kind. So iron, then,

Stands in between the two of them, and when

Some tiny bodies of bronze should through it go,

The magnet stones propel it by their flow. 1170

These properties, though, are not so discrete

That there aren’t many more I can repeat

To you: for with each other they agree,

But nothing else. To start with, you may see

That only mortar can cement a stone

And wood is joined by glue of bull alone

So that the grain of boards will often gape

Before the glue loosens its hold. The grape

Mingles its juice with water from a spring,

And yet there cannot be such mingling 1180

With pitch or olive-oil. The sea-shell’s hue

Unites with wool and stays thus, even if you

Attempt to renovate it with the sea,

Even if it plies its waves entirely

To wash it out. Just one thing can cement

Two gold things; tin’s the only element

Uniting bronze to bronze. So many more

Examples can be found – and yet wherefore?

You must not use so long and devious

A method, and I myself should not discuss 1190

This theme laboriously. For to embrace

Many things but briefly is the perfect case:

When textures of all entities coincide

That empty places here become allied

With full ones there, and thus contrariwise,

That is the best approach. We may surmise

That certain parts are linked with couplings

As if they had been tied with hooks and rings,

Just like with iron and stone apparently.

Now I’ll explain the cause of malady, 1200

How it amasses and with sudden breath

Assails mankind and beasts and causes death.

First, many seeds, as I have shown before,

Support us, but there must be many more

That fly around and bring death and disease,

And if by chance or misadventure these

Amass and thus the heavens have been cast

Into unrest, the air receives a blast

Of sickness. These diseases bring their scourge

Either from without as down the sky they surge, 1210

Like clouds or mist, or gather frequently

From earth when through the damp it’s come to be

Putrescent, struck by an unseasonable blow

Of sun and rain. Do you not see, also,

That those who travel far from home will be

Affected by the weather’s novelty?

For what a difference must we understand

Between the climate of the British land

And that of Egypt, where the world’s pole’s bent

Somewhat? Cannot we see how different 1220

Is Pontus from Cadiz and from those places

Where tribes of people dwell with blackened faces?

And as we see four climates so diverse,

Four winds, four quarters of the universe,

We find folk vary in their looks and hue,

Subject to different diseases, too.

For instance there’s elephantiasis,

Found by the Nile in middle-Egypt – this

Is not found elsewhere. Attica is found

To have affliction of the feet, while round 1230

Achaea there’s infection of the eyes.

Hence various different maladies arise

In various parts: it’s the variety

Of airs that causes this. Accordingly,

Whenever a sky that’s alien to us all

Begins to move, a dangerous air will crawl

In snail-like fashion, like a cloud or mist,

And brings chaos wherever it may list,

Compelling change; and often, when our sky

It enters, it corrupts it and thereby 1240

It makes it like itself and therefore strange

To us. Thus when this pestilential change

Falls on the waters or upon the fields

Where corn is grown and other produce yields

The nourishment required by beasts and men

Or even hovers in the air, and when

We breathe the air mixed with it, likewise we

Must then absorb it, too. Similarly

The pestilence can give a fatal shock

To cattle and distemper to a flock 1250

Of sluggish sheep. No matter if we take

A trip to places which are apt to make

Us sick or choose a different atmosphere

Elsewhere or if a tainted sky’s brought here

By Nature or she gives us something we

Aren’t used to and has the ability

To harm us! Such a cause of maladies

Occurred once in the principalities

Of Cecrops, poisoning the countryside:

It made the roads a desert as men died 1260

In cities. Starting well within the land

Of Egypt, far across the air it spanned

The swimming plains, at length falling upon

All the inhabitants of Pandion,

Who then were visited by malady

With death assailing them extensively.

They first felt burning heat inside the head

And with that fire the eyes were flaming red.

The throat was black within and it would bleed

While ulcers clogged the passage to impede 1270

The voice; the tongue, interpreter of the head,

Was weak with pain and also freely bled,

Heavy and rough, then, having now possessed

The throat, this dreadful plague filled up the chest,

Flooding the mind, and all life’s bulwarks reeled

Indeed. The patient’s breathing, too, revealed

A foul stench, like the penetrating smell

Of corpses left unburied. Then, as well,

The mind grew faint, being about to go

Across death’s threshold. This oppressive woe 1280

Rubbed shoulders with piercing anxiety

Mingled with howls and grievous threnody.

Often the patient retched through day and night,

The limbs and muscles cramped, making him quite

Past weariness. And yet one could not see

Upon the frame any torridity,

But merely warmth, which showed a vivid red

As though with ulcers, as it may be said,

It burned, as erysipelas can glide

Across the limbs. And yet men blazed inside: 1290

A red-hot flame within the gut would burn,

And nothing light or slender could you turn

To use to help them, only wind and cold.

Some with this plague in cooling rivers rolled.

Many fell into wells, which they struck first

With gaping mouths, all drenched with parching thirst –

A water’s flood seemed but a modicum.

Fatigued, they could not find one thing to numb

The pain. Below her breath, in silent fright,

Medicine muttered, since within her sight 1300

They rolled their staring eyes repeatedly,

Sleepless and cursed by their infirmity.

Many other signs of death I’ll mention here:

A mind unsettled due to grief and fear,

A gloomy brow, a look that’s mad and wild,

Ears that are also troubled and beguiled

By droning, pants emitted frequently

And deep breaths uttered intermittently,

Dank sweat down from their features trickling

And thin, salt, yellow spittle issuing 1310

With effort from the throat. Relentlessly

The hands twitched and the limbs shook; gradually

A bitter cold would creep up from the toes,

The nostrils were compressed, the tip of the nose

Grew sharp, the eyes were sunken in the head,

The temples hollow and, as of one dead,

The hard skin cold, the forehead showing strain,

The mouth agape. Very soon in death’s domain

They lay. Upon the eighth day or, at most,

The ninth, those wretched folks gave up the ghost. 1320

If one of them had happened to evade

Destructive death, yet later they were made

To undergo foul ulcers and to bear

Black discharge from the bowels – waiting there

Was waste and death, or else corrupted blood

Would issue from choked nostrils in a flood

Which pained the head, and through this ran the store

Of human strength and substance. Furthermore,

He who evaded the foul flux of blood

Yet found this plague could cascade in a flood 1330

Into the limbs and sinews, even veer

Into the genitals. Some with a strong fear

Of death would go on living even though

They’d cut their penis off, and some would go

The rest of life without their hands and feet;

Some lost their eyes; their fear was so complete.

And there were some who lost their memory

And did not know their own identity.

Though piles of bodies lay upon the ground

Unburied, tribes of birds and beasts would bound 1340

Away to dodge the stench or, tasting, faint

And die a speedy death due to the taint.

Yet back then no-one hardly saw a bird

And from the forests scarcely came a herd

Of gloomy beasts. Most grew weak with disease

And died. Dogs were among the first of these,

Those faithful beasts, who, scattered all about

Upon the roads, reluctantly let out

Their final breath, their lives twisted away.

And there were struggles when a vast array 1350

Of funerals with no mourners went around

The streets. No solid remedy was found,

For what gave some the strength to breathe the air

And look up at the sky gave dark despair

To others. In predicaments like these,

The worst thing was when one found the disease

Had felled him, knowing death was looming, he

Would lie with saddened heart despondently

And give up his existence then and there.

No-one at any time or anywhere 1360

Cease to pass on this greed plague, as though

They were but sheep and hornèd herds; and so,

Chiefly, the dead were piled up in a heap:

For anyone who made attempts to keep

Watch on the sick, although they had a dread

Of death and love of life, would soon be dead,

Afflicted by a fatal carelessness,

Themselves deserted, plagued by helplessness.

But those who stayed at hand would perish there

From the disease and labour that they’d bear 1370

Through duty and the voice of those who’d plead

As wearily they watched, mingled indeed

With dying wails. It was this kind of death

That noble people at their final breath

Would meet. Now by this time the shepherds all,

The drovers, ploughmen, to, began to fall.

In the back-corners of their huts they’d lie,

Assailed by poverty and doomed to die.

One sometimes saw a total family

Lifeless, the mother, father, progeny. 1380

The countryside, though, had no less despair

Than Rome whither there came from everywhere

A mob of sickly farmers – they would press

In buildings and outside, where death’s distress

Pied up the corpses. Many a sick man went

Out to the highways, by his great thirst sent,

And by the fountains with Silenus’ head

They now, choked with their hankering, lay dead.

And all along those highways one might see

Many a half-dead body raggedly 1390

Abused with negligence, near buried quite

With vile and obscene filth – a dreadful sight!

Wrapped up in rags and well-nigh putrefied,

With nought but skin upon their bones, they died.

The holy temples of the deities

Had Death becrammed with all its carcasses,

Each altar filled with corpses everywhere,

The shrine of which the sacristans took care

And filled with guests. There was no admiration

For worship now, for all the tribulation 1400

Suppressed it. Burial rites, which evermore

Had been observed for many years before,

Was banished. Everyone was filled with dread

And, as he may, would bury his own dead.

For sudden urgency and poverty

Caused awful acts, as people piercingly

Shrieked out as on a stranger’s pyre they lay

Their kin: the torch once placed beneath it, they

Indulged in bloody brawls rather than leave

Their loved one, and then they would weep and grieve 1410

As they went home. A multiplicity

Would take themselves to bed in misery.

And there was nobody whom one would know

Untouched by death and malady and woe.