

Lucretius *De rerum natura*

Translation by William Ellery Leonard (1916)

1. 1.1-25 *Invocation to Venus*

Mother of Rome, delight of Gods and men,  
Dear Venus that beneath the gliding stars  
Makest to teem the many-voyaged main  
And fruitful lands- for all of living things  
Through thee alone are evermore conceived,  
Through thee are risen to visit the great sun-  
Before thee, Goddess, and thy coming on,  
Flee stormy wind and massy cloud away,  
For thee the daedal Earth bears scented flowers,  
For thee waters of the unvexed deep  
Smile, and the hollows of the serene sky  
Glow with diffused radiance for thee!  
For soon as comes the springtime face of day,  
And procreant gales blow from the West unbarred,  
First fowls of air, smit to the heart by thee,  
Foretoken thy approach, O thou Divine,  
And leap the wild herds round the happy fields  
Or swim the bounding torrents. Thus amain,  
Seized with the spell, all creatures follow thee  
Whithersoever thou walkest forth to lead,  
And thence through seas and mountains and swift streams,  
Through leafy homes of birds and greening plains,  
Kindling the lure of love in every breast,  
Thou bringest the eternal generations forth,  
Kind after kind. And since 'tis thou alone  
Guidest the Cosmos, and without thee naught  
Is risen to reach the shining shores of light,  
Nor aught of joyful or of lovely born,  
Thee do I crave co-partner in that verse  
Which I presume on Nature to compose

2. 1.62-79 *Religion overthrown by Philosophy*

... whilst human kind  
Throughout the lands lay miserably crushed  
Before all eyes beneath Religion—who  
Would show her head along the region skies,  
Glowing on mortals with her hideous face-  
A Greek it was who first opposing dared  
Raise mortal eyes that terror to withstand,  
Whom nor the fame of Gods nor lightning's stroke  
Nor threatening thunder of the ominous sky  
Abashed; but rather chafed to angry zest  
His dauntless heart to be the first to rend  
The crossbars at the gates of Nature old.  
And thus his will and hardy wisdom won;  
And forward thus he fared afar, beyond  
The flaming ramparts of the world, until  
He wandered the unmeasurable All.  
Whence he to us, a conqueror, reports  
What things can rise to being, what cannot,  
And by what law to each its scope prescribed,  
Its boundary stone that clings so deep in Time.  
Wherefore Religion now is under foot,  
And us his victory now exalts to heaven.

3. 1.80-101 *Iphigenia at Aulis*

I fear perhaps thou deemest that we fare  
An impious road to realms of thought profane;  
But 'tis that same religion oftener far  
Hath bred the foul impieties of men:  
As once at Aulis, the elected chiefs,  
Foremost of heroes, Danaan counsellors,  
Defiled Diana's altar, virgin queen,  
With Agamemnon's daughter, foully slain.  
She felt the chaplet round her maiden locks  
And fillets, fluttering down on either cheek,  
And at the altar marked her grieving sire,  
The priests beside him who concealed the knife,  
And all the folk in tears at sight of her.  
With a dumb terror and a sinking knee  
She dropped; nor might avail her now that first  
'Twas she who gave the king a father's name.  
They raised her up, they bore the trembling girl  
On to the altar- hither led not now  
With solemn rites and hymeneal choir,  
But sinless woman, sinfully foredone,  
A parent felled her on her bridal day,  
Making his child a sacrificial beast  
To give the ships auspicious winds for Troy:  
Such are the crimes to which Religion leads.

4. 1.146-166 *Nothing can be created out of nothing*

This terror, then, this darkness of the mind,  
Not sunrise with its flaring spokes of light,  
Nor glittering arrows of morning can disperse,  
But only Nature's aspect and her law,  
Which, teaching us, hath this exordium:  
Nothing from nothing ever yet was born.  
Fear holds dominion over mortality  
Only because, seeing in land and sky  
So much the cause whereof no wise they know,  
Men think divinities are working there.  
Meantime, when once we know from nothing still  
Nothing can be create, we shall divine  
More clearly what we seek: those elements  
From which alone all things created are,  
And how accomplished by no tool of Gods.  
Suppose all sprang from all things: any kind  
Might take its origin from anything,  
No fixed seed required. Men from the sea  
Might rise, and from the land the scaly breed,  
And, fowl full-fledged come bursting from the sky;  
The horned cattle, the herds and all the wild  
Would haunt with varying offspring tilth and waste;  
Nor would the same fruits keep their olden trees,  
But each might grow from any stock or limb  
By chance and change.

5. 1.921-950 *The poem's purpose*

Now learn of what remains! More keenly hear!  
And for myself, my mind is not deceived  
How dark it is: But the large hope of praise  
Hath strook with pointed thyrsus through my heart;  
On the same hour hath strook into my breast  
Sweet love of the Muses, wherewith now instinct,  
I wander afield, thriving in sturdy thought,  
Through unpathed haunts of the Pierides,  
Trodden by step of none before. I joy  
To come on undefiled fountains there,  
To drain them deep; I joy to pluck new flowers,  
To seek for this my head a signal crown  
From regions where the Muses never yet  
Have garlanded the temples of a man:  
First, since I teach concerning mighty things,  
And go right on to loose from round the mind  
The tightened coils of dread religion;  
Next, since, concerning themes so dark, I frame  
Songs so pellucid, touching all throughout  
Even with the Muses' charm- which, as 'twould seem,  
Is not without a reasonable ground:  
But as physicians, when they seek to give  
Young boys the nauseous wormwood, first do touch  
The brim around the cup with the sweet juice  
And yellow of the honey, in order that  
The thoughtless age of boyhood be cajoled  
As far as the lips, and meanwhile swallow down  
The wormwood's bitter draught, and, though befooled  
Be yet not merely duped, but rather thus  
Grow strong again with recreated health:  
So now I too (since this my doctrine seems  
In general somewhat woeful unto those  
Who've had it not in hand, and since the crowd  
Starts back from it in horror) have desired  
To expound our doctrine unto thee in song  
Soft-speaking and Pierian, and, as 'twere,  
To touch it with sweet honey of the Muse-  
If by such method haply I might hold  
The mind of thee upon these lines of ours,  
Till thou see through the nature of all things,  
And how exists the interwoven frame.

6. 2.1-33 *The blessedness of Epicurean philosophy*

'Tis sweet, when, down the mighty main, the winds  
Roll up its waste of waters, from the land  
To watch another's labouring anguish far,  
Not that we joyously delight that man  
Should thus be smitten, but because 'tis sweet  
To mark what evils we ourselves be spared;  
'Tis sweet, again, to view the mighty strife  
Of armies embattled yonder o'er the plains,  
Ourselves no sharers in the peril; but naught  
There is more goodly than to hold the high  
Serene plateaus, well fortified by the wise,  
Whence thou mayst look below on other men  
And see them ev'rywhere wand'ring, all dispersed  
In their lone seeking for the road of life;  
Rivals in genius, or emulous in rank,  
Pressing through days and nights with hugest toil  
For summits of power and mastery of the world.  
O wretched minds of men! O blinded hearts!  
In how great perils, in what darks of life  
Are spent the human years, however brief!-  
O not to see that Nature for herself  
Barks after nothing, save that pain keep off,  
Disjoined from the body, and that mind enjoy  
Delightful feeling, far from care and fear!  
Therefore we see that our corporeal life  
Needs little, altogether, and only such  
As takes the pain away, and can besides  
Strew underneath some number of delights.  
More grateful 'tis at times (for Nature craves  
No artifice nor luxury), if forsooth  
There be no golden images of boys  
Along the halls, with right hands holding out  
The lamps ablaze, the lights for evening feasts,  
And if the house doth glitter not with gold  
Nor gleam with silver, and to the lyre resound  
No fretted and gilded ceilings overhead,  
Yet still to lounge with friends in the soft grass  
Beside a river of water, underneath  
A big tree's boughs, and merrily to refresh  
Our frames, with no vast outlay—most of all  
If the weather is laughing and the times of the year  
Besprinkle the green of the grass around with flowers.

7. 2.80-99 *The dance of the atoms*

... but if thou believe  
That the primordial germs of things can stop,  
And in their stopping give new motions birth,  
Afar thou wanderest from the road of truth.  
For since they wander through the void inane,  
All the primordial germs of things must needs  
Be borne along, either by weight their own,  
Or haply by another's blow without.  
For, when, in their incessancy so oft  
They meet and clash, it comes to pass amain  
They leap asunder, face to face: not strange—  
Being most hard, and solid in their weights,  
And naught opposing motion, from behind.  
And that more clearly thou perceive how all  
These mites of matter are darted round about,  
Recall to mind how nowhere in the sum  
Of All exists a bottom—nowhere is  
A realm of rest for primal bodies; since  
(As amply shown and proved by reason sure)  
Space has no bound nor measure, and extends  
Unmetered forth in all directions round.  
Since this stands certain, thus 'tis out of doubt  
No rest is rendered to the primal bodies  
Along the unfathomable inane; but rather,  
Inveterately plied by motions mixed,  
Some, at their jamming, bound aback and leave  
Huge gaps between, and some from off the blow  
Are hurried about with spaces small between.

8. 2.216-224 *The swerve of the atoms*

We wish thee also well aware of this:

The atoms, as their own weight bears them down  
Plumb through the void, at scarce-determined times,  
In scarce-determined places, from their course  
Decline a little—call it, so to speak,  
Mere changed trend. For were it not their wont  
Thuswise to swerve, down would they fall, each one,  
Like drops of rain, through the unbottomed void;  
And then collisions ne'er could be nor blows  
Among the primal elements; and thus  
Nature would never have created aught.



9. 2.581-599 *Nature's variety springs from atomic variety*

This, too, in these affairs  
'Tis fit thou hold well sealed, and keep consigned  
With no forgetting brain: nothing there is  
Whose nature is apparent out of hand  
That of one kind of elements consists-  
Nothing there is that's not of mixed seed.  
And whatsoe'er possesses in itself  
More largely many powers and properties  
Shows thus that here within itself there are  
The largest number of kinds and differing shapes  
Of elements. And, chief of all, the earth  
Hath in herself first bodies whence the springs,  
Rolling chill waters, renew forevermore  
The unmeasured main; hath whence the fires arise-  
For burns in many a spot her flamed crust,  
Whilst the impetuous Aetna raves indeed  
From more profounder fires—and she, again,  
Hath in herself the seed whence she can raise  
The shining grains and gladsome trees for men;  
Whence, also, rivers, fronds, and gladsome pastures  
Can she supply for mountain-roaming beasts.  
Wherefore great mother of gods, and mother of beasts,  
And parent of man hath she alone been named.

10. 2.646-660 *The truth about the gods and nature*

For all the gods must of themselves enjoy  
Immortal aeons and supreme repose,  
Withdrawn from our affairs, detached, afar:  
Immune from peril and immune from pain,  
Themselves abounding in riches of their own,  
Needing not us, they are not touched by wrath,  
They are not taken by service or by gift.  
Truly is earth insensate for all time;  
But, by obtaining germs of many things,  
In many a way she brings the many forth  
Into the light of sun. And here, whoso  
Decides to call the ocean Neptune, or  
The grain-crop Ceres, and prefers to abuse  
The name of Bacchus rather than pronounce  
The liquor's proper designation, him  
Let us permit to go on calling earth  
Mother of Gods, if only he will spare  
To taint his soul with foul religion.

11. 3.1-30 *In praise of Epicurus*

O thou who first uplifted in such dark  
So clear a torch aloft, who first shed light  
Upon the profitable ends of man,  
O thee I follow, glory of the Greeks,  
And set my footsteps squarely planted now  
Even in the impress and the marks of thine-  
Less like one eager to dispute the palm,  
More as one craving out of very love  
That I may copy thee! For how should swallow  
Contend with swans or what compare could be  
In a race between young kids with tumbling legs  
And the strong might of the horse? Our father thou,  
And finder-out of truth, and thou to us  
Suppliest a father's precepts; and from out  
Those scriven leaves of thine, renowned soul  
(Like bees that sip of all in flowery wolds),  
We feed upon thy golden sayings all-  
Golden, and ever worthiest endless life.  
For soon as ever thy planning thought that sprang  
From god-like mind begins its loud proclaim  
Of nature's courses, terrors of the brain  
Asunder flee, the ramparts of the world  
Dispart away, and through the void entire  
I see the movements of the universe.  
Rises to vision the majesty of gods,  
And their abodes of everlasting calm  
Which neither wind may shake nor rain-cloud splash,  
Nor snow, congealed by sharp frosts, may harm  
With its white downfall: ever, unclouded sky  
O'er roofs, and laughs with far-diffused light.  
And nature gives to them their all, nor aught  
May ever pluck their peace of mind away.  
But nowhere to my vision rise no more  
The vaults of Acheron, though the broad earth  
Bars me no more from gazing down o'er all  
Which under our feet is going on below  
Along the void. O, here in these affairs  
Some new divine delight and trembling awe  
Takes hold through me, that thus by power of thine  
Nature, so plain and manifest at last,  
Hath been on every side laid bare to man!