

LUCRETIUS 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Withdrawn from every care, prepare to find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 still
 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
In many things (as letters commonly

200

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 simplicity
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 his 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 *homoioimeria*, 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.

