LUCRETIUS 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
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
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
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,
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
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.
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
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,
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
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,
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
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,
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
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
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
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
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,
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
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
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
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
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
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

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?
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
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
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.
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.
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
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
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
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.
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
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
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
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
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
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
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 -
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
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
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
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
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.
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
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
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
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
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.
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
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
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

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
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,
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
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
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
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
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.
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,
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
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,
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;
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
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
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,
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
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;
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
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
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
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
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
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
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
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
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
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
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
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
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

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
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
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,
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
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,
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 -
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,
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
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
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.
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
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
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
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
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
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?
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
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,
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
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,
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.
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
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.
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,
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:
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

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
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
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
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.
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,
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,
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
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
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
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
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
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
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.