I’ll begin to sing of what keeps the wheat fields happy,
under what stars to plough the earth, and fasten vines to elms,
what care the oxen need, what tending cattle require,
Maecenas, and how much skill’s required for the thrifty bees.
O you brightest lights of the universe
that lead the passing year through the skies,
Bacchus and kindly Ceres, since by your gifts
fat wheat ears replaced Chaonian acorns,
and mixed Achelous’s water with newly-discovered wine,
and you, Fauns, the farmer’s local gods,
(come dance, together, Fauns and Dryad girls!)
your gifts I sing. And you, O Neptune, for whom
earth at the blow of your mighty trident first produced
whinnying horses: and you Aristaeus, planter of the groves,
for whom three hundred snowy cattle graze Cea’s rich thickets:
you, O Tegean Pan, if you care for your own Maenalus,
leaving your native Lycaean woods and glades, guardian
of the flocks, favour us: and Minerva bringer of the olive:
and you Triptolemus, boy who revealed the curving plough,
and Silvanus carrying a tender cypress by the roots:
and all you gods and goddesses, whose care guards our fields,
you who nurture the fresh fruits of the unsown earth,
and you who send plentiful showers down for the crops:
and you too, Caesar, who, in time, will live among a company
of the gods, which one’s unknown, whether you choose
to watch over cities and lands, and the vast world
accepts you as bringer of fruits, and lord of the seasons,
crowning your brows with your mother Venus’s myrtle,
or whether you come as god of the vast sea, and sailors
worship your powers, while furthest Thule serves you,
and Tethys with all her waves wins you as son-in-law,
or whether you add yourself to the slow months as a Sign,
where a space opens between Virgo and the grasping claws,
(Even now fiery Scorpio draws in his pincers for you,
and leaves you more than your fair share of heaven):
whatever you’ll be (since Tartarus has no hope of you as ruler,
and may such fatal desire for power never touch you,
though Greece might marvel at the Elysian fields,
and Proserpine, re-won, might not care to follow her mother),
grant me a fair course, and agree to my bold beginning,
pitying the country folk, with me, who are ignorant of the way:
prepare to start your duties, and even now, hear our prayer.

BkI:43-70 Spring Ploughing
In the early Spring, when icy waters flow from snowy hills,
and the crumbling soil loosens in a westerly breeze,
then I’d first have my oxen groaning over the driven plough,
and the blade gleaming, polished by the furrow.
The field that’s twice felt sun, and twice felt frost,
answers to the eager farmer’s prayer:
from it boundless harvest bursts the barns.
But before our iron ploughshare slices the untried levels,
let’s first know the winds, and the varying mood of the sky,
and note our native fields, and the qualities of the place,
and what each region grows and what it rejects.
Here, wheat, there, vines, flourish more happily:
trees elsewhere, and grasses, shoot up unasked for.
See how Tmolus sends us saffron fragrance,
India, ivory, the gentle Sabeans, their incense,
while the naked Chalybes send iron, Pontus rank
beaver-oil, Epirus the glories of her mares from Elis.
Nature has necessarily imposed these rules, eternal laws,
on certain places, since ancient times, when Deucalion
hurled stones out into the empty world,
from which a tough race of men was born.
Come: and let your strong oxen turn the earth’s rich soil,
right away, in the first months of the year,
and let the clods lie for dusty summer to bake them in full sun:
but if the earth has not been fertile it’s enough to lift it
in shallow furrows, beneath Arcturus: in the first case
so that the weeds don’t harm the rich crops, in the other,
so what little moisture there is doesn’t leave the barren sand.

BkI:71-99 Treatment of the Land

Likewise alternate years let your cut fields lie fallow,
and the idle ground harden with neglect:
or sow yellow corn, under another star, where you
first harvested beans rich in their quivering pods,
or a crop of slender vetch, and the fragile stalks
and rattling stems of bitter lupin. For example
a harvest of flax exhausts the ground, oats exhaust it,
and poppies exhaust it, filled with Lethean sleep:
but by rotation, the labour prospers: don’t be ashamed
to saturate the arid soil with rich dung,
and scatter charred ashes over the weary fields.
So with changes of crop the land can rest,
and then the untilled earth is not ungrateful.
It’s often been beneficial to fire the stubble fields,
and burn the dry stalks in the crackling flames,
whether the earth gains hidden strength and rich food
from it, or every poison is baked out of it by the fire,
and useless moistures sweated from it,
or the heat frees more cracks and hidden pores,
by which strength reaches the fresh shoots, or whether
it hardens the soil more and narrows the open veins,
so the fine rain, or the fiercer power of the blazing sun,
or the north wind’s penetrating cold can’t harm it.
He who breaks the dull clods with a hoe, and drags a harrow
of willow over them, does the fields great good, and
golden Ceres does not view him idly from high Olympus.
And he too who reverses his plough and cuts across the ridges
that he first raised, when he furrowed the levels,
who constantly works the ground, and orders the fields.

**BkI:100-117 Irrigation**

Farmers, pray for moist summers and mild winters:
the crops are glad, the fields are glad of winter dryness:
Then Mysia boasts no finer cultivation,
and even Gargarus marvels at its own harvests.
Need I mention him who, having sown the seed,
follows closely, and flattens the heaps of barren sand,
then diverts the stream and its accompanying brooks to his crops,
and see, when the scorched land burns, the grasses withering,
he draws water, in channels, from the brow of the hill.
Or him who grazes his luxuriant crop in the tender shoot,
as soon as the new corn’s level with the furrow,
lest the stalks bend down with over-heavy ears.
Or him who soaks out a marsh’s gathered water with thirsty sand,
especially in changeable seasons when rivers overflow
and cover everything far and wide with a coat of mud,
so the hollow ditches exude steamy vapours?

BkI:118-159 The Beginnings of Agriculture

Though men and oxen, labouring skilfully, have
turned the land, the wretched geese still cause harm,
and the Strymonian cranes, and the bitter fibred chicory,
and the shade of trees. The great Father himself willed it,
that the ways of farming should not be easy, and first
stirred the fields with skill, rousing men’s minds to care,
not letting his regions drowse in heavy lethargy.
Before Jupiter’s time no farmers worked the land:
it was wrong to even mark the fields or divide them
with boundaries: men foraged in common, and the earth
herself gave everything more freely, unasked.
He added the deadly venom to shadowy snakes,
made the wolves predators, and stirred the seas,
shook honey from the trees, concealed fire,
and curbed the wine that ran everywhere in streams,
so that thoughtful practice might develop various skills,
little by little, and search out shoots of grain in the furrows,
and strike hidden fire from veins of flint.
Then, rivers knew the hollowed alder-boat:
then, sailors told and named the constellations,
the Pleiades, the Hyades, and Lycaon’s gleaming Bears:
then men learned to snare game in nets, deceive
with birdlime, and surround great glades with dogs:
Now one strikes into a broad river, seeking the depths,
while another drags his dripping net through the sea:
then came rigid iron and the melodious saw-blade
(since the first men split the fissile wood with wedges),
then came the various arts. Hard labour conquered all,
and poverty’s oppression in harsh times.
Ceres first taught men to plough the earth with iron,
when the oaks and strawberry-trees of the sacred grove
failed, and Dodona denied them food.
Soon the crops began to suffer and the stalks
were badly blighted, and useless thistles flourish in the fields:
the harvest is lost and a savage growth springs up,
goose-grass and star-thistles, and, amongst the bright corn,
wretched darnel and barren oats proliferate.
So that unless you continually attack weeds with your hoe,
and scare the birds with noise, and cut back the shade
from the dark soil with your knife, and call up rain
with prayers, alas, you’ll view others’ vast hayricks in vain,
and stave off hunger in the woods, shaking the oak-branches.

BkI:160-175 Tools and Tasks

I must tell of the sturdy countryman’s weapons,
without which the crops could not be sown or grown:
first the ploughshare, and the curved plough’s heavy frame,
the slow lumbering wagons of Demeter, the Eleusinian mother,
threshing sledges, drags, and cruelly weighted hoes:
and the ordinary wicker-ware of Celeus, besides,
hurdles of arbutus wood, and Iacchus’s sacred winnowing fans.
You’ll store away all these, you’ve remembered to provide long before,
if the noble glory of the divine countryside is to remain yours.
At the start an elm, in the woods, bent by brute force, is trained
to become a plough-beam, taking the form of the curving stock.
A pole eight feet in length is fitted to the stock,
two earth-boards, and a double-backed share-beam.
A light lime-tree is felled beforehand for the yoke, and a tall beech
for the plough handle, to turn the frame below, from behind,
and smoke from the hearth seasons the hanging wood.
Next I’ll speak about the celestial gift of honey from the air.
Maecenas, give this section too your regard.
I’ll tell you in proper sequence about the greatest spectacle
of the slightest things, and of brave generals,
and a whole nation’s customs and efforts, tribes and battles.
Labour, over little: but no little glory, if favourable powers
allow, and Apollo listens to my prayer.

First look for a site and position for your apiary,
where no wind can enter (since the winds prevent them
carrying home their food) and where no sheep or butting kids
leap about among the flowers, or wandering cattle brush
the dew from the field, and wear away the growing grass.
Let the bright-coloured lizard with scaly back, and the bee-eater
and other birds, and Procne, her breast marked
by her blood-stained hands, keep away from the rich hives:
since they all lay waste on every side, and while the bees are flying, take them in their
beaks, a sweet titbit for their pitiless chicks.
But let there be clear springs nearby, and pools green with moss,
and a little stream sliding through the grass,
and let a palm tree or a large wild-olive shade the entrance,
so that when the new leaders command the early swarms
in their springtime, and the young enjoy freedom from the combs,
a neighbouring bank may tempt them to leave the heat,
and a tree in the way hold them in its sheltering leaves.
Whether the water flows or remains still, throw willows
across the centre, and large stones, so that it’s full
of bridges where they can rest, and spread their wings
to the summer sun, if by chance a swift Easterly
has wet the lingerers or dipped them in the stream.
Let green rosemary, and wild thyme with far-flung fragrance,
and a wealth of strongly-scented savory, flower around them,
and let beds of violets drink from the trickling spring.
Let the hives themselves have narrow entrances,
whether they’re seamed from hollow bark,
or woven from pliant osiers: since winter congeals
the honey with cold, and heat loosens it with melting.
Either problem’s equally to be feared with bees:
it’s not for nothing that they emulate each other in lining
the thin cells of their hives with wax, and filling the crevices
with glue made from the flowers, and keep a store of it
for this use, stickier than bird lime or pitch from Phrygian Ida.
If rumour’s true they also like homes in tunnelled hiding-places
underground, and are often found deep in the hollows
of pumice, and the caverns of decaying trees.
You keep them warm too, with clay smoothed by your fingers round their cracked hives, and a few leaves on top. Don’t let yew too near their homes, or roast blushing crabs on your hearth, or trust a deep marsh or where there’s a strong smell of mud, or where hollow rock rings when struck, and an echoed voice rebounds on impact. As for the rest, when the golden sun has driven winter under the earth, and unlocked the heavens with summer light, from the first they wander through glades and forests, grazing the bright flowers, and sipping the surface of the streams. With this, with a delightful sweetness, they cherish their hive and young: with it, with art, they form fresh wax and produce their sticky honey. So, when you look up at the swarm released from the hive, floating towards the radiant sky through the clear summer air, and marvel at the dark cloud drawn along by the wind, take note: they are continually searching for sweet waters and leafy canopies. Scatter the scents I demanded, bruised balm and corn parsley’s humble herb, and make a tinkling sound, and shake Cybele’s cymbals around: they’ll settle themselves on the soporific rest sites: they’ll bury themselves, as they do, in their deepest cradle.

BkIV:67-102 The Fighting Swarms
But if on the other hand they’ve gone out to fight –
because often discord, with great turmoil, seizes two leaders:
and immediately you may know in advance the will of the masses
and, from far off, how their hearts are stirred by war:
since the martial sound of the harsh brass rebukes the lingerers,
and an intermittent noise is heard, like a trumpet blast –
then they gather together restlessly, and their wings quiver,
and they sharpen their stings with their mouths, and flex their legs.
And they swarm round their leader, and the high command,
in crowds, and call out to the enemy with loud cries:
So, when they’ve found a clear spring day, and an open field,
they burst out of the gates: there’s a clash, the noise rises high
in the air, they’re gathered together, mingled in one great ball,
and fall headlong: hail from the sky’s no thicker,
nor is the rain of acorns from a shaken oak-tree.
The leaders themselves in the middle of their ranks,
conspicuous by their wings, have great hearts in tiny breasts,
determined not to give way until the victor’s might has forced
these here, or those there, to turn their backs in flight.
The tossing of a little dust restrains and calms
these fits of passion and these mighty battles.
When you’ve recalled both generals from the fight,
give death to the one that appears weaker, to avoid waste:
and let the stronger one hold power alone.
That one will shine with rough blotches of gold,
since there are two kinds: the better is distinguished in looks,
and bright with reddish armour: the other’s shaggy from sloth,
and ingloriously drags a swollen belly.

As the features of the leaders are twofold, so their subjects’ bodies.
Since some are ugly and bristling, like a parched traveller who comes out of the deep dust,
and spits the dirt from his dry mouth:
others gleam and sparkle with brightness, their bodies
glowing and specked with regular drops of gold.
These are the stronger offspring: in heaven’s due season,
you’ll take sweet honey from these, and no sweeter than it is clear,
and needed to tame the strong flavour of wine.

BkIV:103-148 The Surrounding Garden

But when the swarms fly aimlessly, and swirl in the air,
neglecting their cells, and leaving the hive cold,
you should prevent their wandering spirits from idle play.
It’s no great effort to stop them: tear the wings
from the leaders: while they linger no one will dare
to fly high or take the standards from the camp.
Let gardens fragrant with saffron flowers tempt them,
and let watchful Priapus, lord of the Hellespont, the guard
against thieves and birds, protect them with his willow hook.
He whose concerns are these, let him bring thyme and wild-bay, himself, from the high hills, and plant them widely round his house:

let him toughen his hands himself with hard labour, let him set
fruitful plants in the ground himself, and sprinkle kind showers.

And for my part, if I were not at the furthest end of my toil,
furling my sails, and hurrying to turn my prow towards shore,
perhaps I too would be singing how careful cultivation ornaments
rich gardens, and of the twice-flowering rose-beds of Paestum,
how the endive delights in the streams it drinks,
and the green banks in parsley, and how the gourd, twisting
over the ground, swells its belly: nor would I be silent about
the late-flowering narcissi, or the curling stem of acanthus,
the pale ivy, and the myrtle that loves the shore.

Since I recall how I saw an old Corycian, under Tarentum’s towers,
where the dark Galaesus waters the yellow fields,
who owned a few acres of abandoned soil,
not fertile enough for bullocks to plough,
not suited to flocks, or fit for the grape harvest:
yet as he planted herbs here and there among the bushes,
and white lilies round them, and vervain, and slender poppies,
it equalled in his opinion the riches of kings, and returning home
late at night it loaded his table with un-bought supplies.

He was the first to gather roses in spring and fruit in autumn:
and when wretched winter was still splitting rocks
with cold, and freezing the water courses with ice,
he was already cutting the sweet hyacinth flowers,
complaining at the slow summer and the late zephyrs.
So was he also first to overflow with young bees,
and a heavy swarm, and collect frothing honey
from the squeezed combs: his limes and wild-bays were the richest,
and as many as the new blossoms that set on his fertile fruit trees
as many were the ones they kept in autumn’s ripeness.
He planted advanced elms in rows as well, hardy pears,
blackthorns bearing sloes, and plane-trees
already offering their shade to drinkers.
But I pass on from this theme, confined within narrow limits,
and leave it for others to speak of after me.

BkIV:149-227 The Nature and Qualities of Bees

Come now and I’ll impart the qualities Jupiter himself
gave bees, for which reward they followed after
the melodious sounds and clashing bronze of the Curetes,
and fed Heaven’s king in the Dictean cave.
They alone hold children in common: own the roofs
of their city as one: and pass their life under the might of the law.
They alone know a country, and a settled home,
and in summer, remembering the winter to come,
undergo labour, storing their gains for all.
For some supervise the gathering of food, and work
in the fields to an agreed rule: some, walled in their homes,
lay the first foundations of the comb, with drops of gum
taken from narcissi, and sticky glue from tree-bark,
then hang the clinging wax: others lead the mature young,
their nation’s hope, others pack purest honey together,
and swell the cells with liquid nectar:
there are those whose lot is to guard the gates,
and in turn they watch out for rain and clouds in the sky,
or accept the incoming loads, or, forming ranks,
they keep the idle crowd of drones away from the hive.
The work glows, and the fragrant honey is sweet with thyme.
And like the Cyclopes when they forge lightning bolts
quickly, from tough ore, and some make the air come and go
with ox-hide bellows, others dip hissing bronze
in the water: Etna groans with the anvils set on her:
and they lift their arms together with great and measured force,
and turn the metal with tenacious tongs:
so, if we may compare small things with great,
an innate love of creation spurs the Attic bees on,
each in its own way. The older ones take care of the hive,
and building the comb, and the cleverly fashioned cells.
But at night the weary young carry back sacs filled with thyme:
they graze far and wide on the blossom of strawberry-trees,
and pale-grey willows, and rosemary and bright saffron,
on rich lime-trees and on purple hyacinths.

All have one rest from work: all have one labour:
they rush from the gates at dawn: no delay: when the evening star
has warned them to leave their grazing in the fields again,
then they seek the hive, then they refresh their bodies:
there’s a buzzing, a hum around the entrances and thresholds.
Then when they’ve settled to rest in their cells, there’s silence
in the night, and sleep seizes their weary limbs.
If rain’s threatening they don’t go far from their hives,
or trust the sky when Easterlies are nearing,
but fetch water from nearby, in the safety of their city wall,
and try brief flights, and often lift little stones,
as unstable ships take up ballast in a choppy sea,
and balance themselves with these in the vaporous clouds.
And you’ll wonder at this habit that pleases the bees,
that they don’t indulge in sexual union, or lazily relax
their bodies in love, or produce young in labour,
but collect their children in their mouths themselves from leaves, and sweet herbs, provide
a new leader and tiny citizens themselves, and remake their palaces and waxen kingdoms.
Often too as they wander among harsh flints they bruise
their wings, and breathe their lives away beneath their burden.
so great is their love of flowers, and glory in creating honey.
And though the end of a brief life awaits the bees themselves
(since it never extends beyond the seventh summer)
the species remains immortal, and the fortune of the hive
is good for many years, and grandfathers’ grandfathers are counted.

Besides, Egypt and mighty Lydia and the Parthian tribes,
and the Median Hydaspes do not pay such homage to their leader.

With the leader safe all are of the same mind:
if the leader’s lost they break faith, and tear down the honey
they’ve made, themselves, and dissolve the latticed combs.

The leader is the guardian of their labours: to the leader
they do reverence, and all sit round the leader in a noisy throng,
and crowd round in large numbers, and often
they lift the leader on their shoulders and expose their bodies
in war, and, among wounds, seek a glorious death.

Noting these tokens and examples some have said
that a share of divine intelligence is in bees,
and a draught of aether: since there is a god in everything,
earth and the expanse of sea and the sky’s depths:
from this source the flocks and herds, men, and every species
of creature, each derive their little life, at birth:
to it surely all then return, and dissolved, are remade,
and there is no room for death, but still living
they fly to the ranks of the stars, and climb the high heavens.

BkIV:281-314 Autogenesis of Bees

But if someone’s whole brood has suddenly failed,
and he has no stock from which to recreate a new line,
then it’s time to reveal the famous invention of Aristaeus,
the Arcadian master, and the method by which in the past
the adulterated blood of dead bullocks has generated bees.
I will tell the whole story in depth, tracing it from its first origins.
Where the fortunate peoples of Pellaean Canopus live
by the overflowing waters of the flooded Nile,
and sail around their fields in painted boats,
where the closeness of the Persian bowmen oppresses them,
and where the river’s flow splits, in seven distinct mouths,
enriching green Egypt with its black silt,
the river that has flowed down from the dark Ethiopians,
all in that country depend on this sure stratagem.
First they choose a narrow place, small enough for this purpose:
they enclose it with a confined roof of tiles, walls close together,
and add four slanting window lights facing the four winds.
Then they search out a bullock, just jutting his horns out
of a two year old’s forehead: the breath from both its nostrils
and its mouth is stifled despite its struggles: it’s beaten to death,
and its flesh pounded to a pulp through the intact hide.
They leave it lying like this in prison, and strew broken branches
under its flanks, thyme and fresh rosemary.
This is done when the Westerlies begin to stir the waves
before the meadows brighten with their new colours,
before the twittering swallow hangs her nest from the eaves.
Meanwhile the moisture, warming in the softened bone, ferments, and creatures, of a type marvellous to see, swarm together, without feet at first, but soon with whirring wings as well, and more and more try the clear air, until they burst out, like rain pouring from summer clouds, or arrows from the twanging bows, whenever the lightly-armed Parthians first join battle.

Of the Nature of Things
by
Titus Lucretius Carus
A metrical translation by William Ellery Leonard

BOOK I
PROEM
Mother of Rome, delight of Gods and men,
Dear Venus that beneath the gliding stars
Makest to teem the many-voyaged main
And fruitful lands — for all of living things
Through thee alone are evermore conceived,
Through thee are risen to visit the great sun —
Before thee, Goddess, and thy coming on,
Flee stormy wind and massy cloud away,
For thee the daedal Earth bears scented flowers,
For thee waters of the unvexed deep
Smile, and the hollows of the serene sky
Glow with diffused radiance for thee!
For soon as comes the springtime face of day,
And procreant gales blow from the West unbarred,
First fowls of air, smit to the heart by thee,
Foretoken thy approach, O thou Divine,
And leap the wild herds round the happy fields
Or swim the bounding torrents. Thus amain,
Seized with the spell, all creatures follow thee
Whithersoever thou walkest forth to lead,
And thence through seas and mountains and swift streams,
Through leafy homes of birds and greening plains,
Kindling the lure of love in every breast,
Thou bringest the eternal generations forth,
Kind after kind. And since ’tis thou alone
Guidest the Cosmos, and without thee naught
Is risen to reach the shining shores of light,
Nor aught of joyful or of lovely born,
Thee do I crave co-partner in that verse
Which I presume on Nature to compose
For Memmius mine, whom thou hast willed to be
Peerless in every grace at every hour—
Wherefore indeed, Divine one, give my words
Immortal charm. Lull to a timely rest
O’er sea and land the savage works of war,
For thou alone hast power with public peace
To aid mortality; since he who rules
The savage works of battle, puissant Mars,
How often to thy bosom flings his strength
O’ermastered by the eternal wound of love—
And there, with eyes and full throat backward thrown,
Gazing, my Goddess, open-mouthed at thee,
Pastures on love his greedy sight, his breath
Hanging upon thy lips. Him thus reclined
Fill with thy holy body, round, above!
Pour from those lips soft syllables to win
Peace for the Romans, glorious Lady, peace!
For in a season troublous to the state
Neither may I attend this task of mine
With thought untroubled, nor mid such events
The illustrious scion of the Memmian house
Neglect the civic cause.

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

I know how hard it is in Latian verse
To tell the dark discoveries of the Greeks,
Chiefly because our pauper-speech must find
Strange terms to fit the strangeness of the thing;
Yet worth of thine and the expected joy
Of thy sweet friendship do persuade me on
To bear all toil and wake the clear nights through,
Seeking with what of words and what of song
I may at last most gloriously uncloud
For thee the light beyond, wherewith to view
The core of being at the centre hid.
And for the rest, summon to judgments true,
Unbusied ears and singleness of mind
Withdrawn from cares; lest these my gifts, arranged
For thee with eager service, thou disdain
Before thou comprehendest: since for thee
I prove the supreme law of Gods and sky,
And the primordial germs of things unfold,
Whence Nature all creates, and multiplies
And fosters all, and whither she resolves
Each in the end when each is overthrown.
This ultimate stock we have devised to name
Procreant atoms, matter, seeds of things,
Or primal bodies, as primal to the world.

I fear perhaps thou deemest that we fare
An impious road to realms of thought profane;
But ’tis that same religion oftener far
Hath bred the foul impieties of men:
As once at Aulis, the elected chiefs,
Foremost of heroes, Danaan counsellors,
Defiled Diana’s altar, virgin queen,
With Agamemnon’s daughter, fouly slain.
She felt the chaplet round her maiden locks
And fillets, fluttering down on either cheek,
And at the altar marked her grieving sire,
The priests beside him who concealed the knife,
And all the folk in tears at sight of her.
With a dumb terror and a sinking knee
She dropped; nor might avail her now that first
’Twas she who gave the king a father’s name.
They raised her up, they bore the trembling girl
On to the altar — hither led not now
With solemn rites and hymeneal choir,
But sinless woman, sinfully foredone,
A parent felled her on her bridal day,
Making his child a sacrificial beast
To give the ships auspicious winds for Troy:
Such are the crimes to which Religion leads.
And there shall come the time when even thou,
Forced by the soothsayer’s terror-tales, shalt seek
To break from us. Ah, many a dream even now
Can they concoct to rout thy plans of life,
And trouble all thy fortunes with base fears.
I own with reason: for, if men but knew
Some fixed end to ills, they would be strong
By some device unconquered to withstand
Religions and the menacings of seers.
But now nor skill nor instrument is theirs,
Since men must dread eternal pains in death.
For what the soul may be they do not know,
Whether ’tis born, or enter in at birth,
And whether, snatched by death, it die with us,
Or visit the shadows and the vasty caves
Of Orcus, or by some divine decree
Enter the brute herds, as our Ennius sang,
Who first from lovely Helicon brought down
A laurel wreath of bright perennial leaves,
Renowned forever among the Italian clans.
Yet Ennius too in everlasting verse
Proclaims those vaults of Acheron to be,
Though thence, he said, nor souls nor bodies fare,
But only phantom figures, strangely wan,
And tells how once from out those regions rose
Old Homer’s ghost to him and shed salt tears
And with his words unfolded Nature’s source.
Then be it ours with steady mind to clasp
The purport of the skies— the law behind
The wandering courses of the sun and moon;
To scan the powers that speed all life below;
But most to see with reasonable eyes
Of what the mind, of what the soul is made,
And what it is so terrible that breaks
On us asleep, or waking in disease,
Until we seem to mark and hear at hand
Dead men whose bones earth bosom’d long ago.
'Tis sweet, when, down the mighty main, the winds
Roll up its waste of waters, from the land
To watch another's labouring anguish far,
Not that we joyously delight that man
Should thus be smitten, but because 'tis sweet
To mark what evils we ourselves be spared;
'Tis sweet, again, to view the mighty strife
Of armies embattled yonder o'er the plains,
Ourselves no sharers in the peril; but naught
There is more goodly than to hold the high
Serene plateaus, well fortressed by the wise,
Whence thou may'st look below on other men
And see them ev'rywhere wand'ring, all dispersed
In their lone seeking for the road of life;
Rivals in genius, or emulous in rank,
Pressing through days and nights with hugest toil
For summits of power and mastery of the world.
O wretched minds of men! O blinded hearts!
In how great perils, in what darks of life
Are spent the human years, however brief!—
O not to see that nature for herself
Barks after nothing, save that pain keep off,
Disjoined from the body, and that mind enjoy
Delightsome feeling, far from care and fear!
Therefore we see that our corporeal life
Needs little, altogether, and only such
As takes the pain away, and can besides
Strew underneath some number of delights.
More grateful 'tis at times (for nature craves
No artifice nor luxury), if forsooth
There be no golden images of boys
Along the halls, with right hands holding out
The lamps ablaze, the lights for evening feasts,
And if the house doth glitter not with gold
Nor gleam with silver, and to the lyre resound
No fretted and gilded ceilings overhead,
Yet still to lounge with friends in the soft grass
Beside a river of water, underneath
A big tree’s boughs, and merrily to refresh
Our frames, with no vast outlay — most of all
If the weather is laughing and the times of the year
Besprinkle the green of the grass around with flowers.
Nor yet the quicker will hot fevers go,
If on a pictured tapestry thou toss,
Or purple robe, than if ’tis thine to lie
Upon the poor man’s bedding. Wherefore, since
Treasure, nor rank, nor glory of a reign
Avail us naught for this our body, thus
Reckon them likewise nothing for the mind:
Save then perchance, when thou beholdest forth
Thy legions swarming round the Field of Mars,
Rousing a mimic warfare — either side
Strengthened with large auxiliaries and horse,
Alike equipped with arms, alike inspired;
Or save when also thou beholdest forth
Thy fleets to swarm, deploying down the sea:
For then, by such bright circumstance abashed,
Religion pales and flees thy mind; O then
The fears of death leave heart so free of care.
But if we note how all this pomp at last
Is but a drollery and a mocking sport,
And of a truth man’s dread, with cares at heels,
Dreads not these sounds of arms, these savage swords
But among kings and lords of all the world
Mingles undaunted, nor is overawed
By gleam of gold nor by the splendour bright
Of purple robe, canst thou then doubt that this
Is aught, but power of thinking? — when, besides
The whole of life but labours in the dark.
For just as children tremble and fear all
In the viewless dark, so even we at times
Dread in the light so many things that be
No whit more fearsome than what children feign,
Shuddering, will be upon them in the dark.
This terror then, this darkness of the mind,
Not sunrise with its flaring spokes of light,
Nor glittering arrows of morning can disperse,
But only nature’s aspect and her law.

BOOK III

PROEM

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

And since I’ve taught already of what sort
The seeds of all things are, and how, distinct
In divers forms, they flit of own accord,
Stirred with a motion everlasting on,
And in what mode things be from them create,
Now, after such matters, should my verse, meseems,
Make clear the nature of the mind and soul,
And drive that dread of Acheron without,
Headlong, which so confounds our human life
Unto its deeps, pouring o’er all that is
The black of death, nor leaves not anything
To prosper — a liquid and unsullied joy.
For as to what men sometimes will affirm:
That more than Tartarus (the realm of death)
They fear diseases and a life of shame,
And know the substance of the soul is blood,
Or rather wind (if haply thus their whim),
And so need naught of this our science, then
Thou well may’st note from what’s to follow now
That more for glory do they braggart forth
Than for belief. For mark these very same:
Exiles from country, fugitives afar
From sight of men, with charges foul attaint,
Abased with every wretchedness, they yet
Live, and where’er the wretches come, they yet
Make the ancestral sacrifices there,
Butcher the black sheep, and to gods below
Offer the honours, and in bitter case
Turn much more keenly to religion.
Wherefore, it’s surer testing of a man
In doubtful perils — mark him as he is
Amid adversities; for then alone
Are the true voices conjured from his breast,
The mask off-stripped, reality behind.
And greed, again, and the blind lust of honours
Which force poor wretches past the bounds of law,
And, oft allies and ministers of crime,
To push through nights and days with hugest toil
To rise untrammelled to the peaks of power —
These wounds of life in no mean part are kept
Festering and open by this fright of death.
For ever we see fierce Want and foul Disgrace
Dislodged afar from secure life and sweet,
Like huddling Shapes before the doors of death.
And whilst, from these, men wish to scape afar,
Driven by false terror, and afar remove,
With civic blood a fortune they amass,
They double their riches, greedy, heapers-up
Of corpse on corpse they have a cruel laugh
For the sad burial of a brother-born,
And hatred and fear of tables of their kin.
Likewise, through this same terror, envy oft
Makes them to peak because before their eyes
That man is lordly, that man gazed upon
Who walks begirt with honour glorious,
Whilst they in filth and darkness roll around;
Some perish away for statues and a name,
And oft to that degree, from fright of death,
Will hate of living and beholding light
Take hold on humankind that they inflict
Their own destruction with a gloomy heart —
Forgetful that this fear is font of cares,
This fear the plague upon their sense of shame,
And this that breaks the ties of comradry
And oversets all reverence and faith,
Mid direst slaughter. For long ere to-day
Often were traitors to country and dear parents
Through quest to shun the realms of Acheron.
For just as children tremble and fear all
In the viewless dark, so even we at times
Dread in the light so many things that be
No whit more fearsome than what children feign,
Shuddering, will be upon them in the dark.
This terror, then, this darkness of the mind,
Not sunrise with its flaring spokes of light,
Nor glittering arrows of morning sun disperse,
But only nature’s aspect and her law.

BOOK IV

PROEM

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

BOOK V

PROEM

O WHO can build with puissant breast a song
Worthy the majesty of these great finds?
Or who in words so strong that he can frame
The fit laudations for deserts of him
Who left us heritors of such vast prizes,
By his own breast discovered and sought out?—
There shall be none, methinks, of mortal stock.
For if must needs be named for him the name
Demanded by the now known majesty
Of these high matters, then a god was he,—
Hear me, illustrious Memmius— a god;
Who first and chief found out that plan of life
Which now is called philosophy, and who
By cunning craft, out of such mighty waves,
Out of such mighty darkness, moored life
In havens so serene, in light so clear.
Compare those old discoveries divine
Of others: lo, according to the tale,
Ceres established for mortality
The grain, and Bacchus juice of vine-born grape,
Though life might yet without these things abide,
Even as report saith now some peoples live.
But man’s well-being was impossible
Without a breast all free. Wherefore the more
That man doth justly seem to us a god,
From whom sweet solaces of life, afar
Distributed o’er populous domains,
Now soothe the minds of men. But if thou thinkest
Labours of Hercules excel the same,
Much farther from true reasoning thou farest.
For what could hurt us now that mighty maw
Of Nemeaean Lion, or what the Boar
Who bristled in Arcadia? Or, again,
O what could Cretan Bull, or Hydra, pest
Of Lerna, fenced with vipers venomous?
Or what the triple-breasted power of her
The three-fold Geryon...
The sojourners in the Stymphalian fens
So dreadfully offend us, or the Steeds
Of Thracian Diomedes breathing fire
From out their nostrils off along the zones
Bistonian and Ismarian? And the Snake,
The dread fierce gazer, guardian of the golden
And gleaming apples of the Hesperides,
Coiled round the tree-trunk with tremendous bulk,
O what, again, could he inflict on us
Along the Atlantic shore and wastes of sea?—
Where neither one of us approacheth nigh
Nor no barbarian ventures. And the rest
Of all those monsters slain, even if alive,
Unconquered still, what injury could they do?
None, as I guess. For so the glutted earth
Swarms even now with savage beasts, even now
Is filled with anxious terrors through the woods
And mighty mountains and the forest deeps—
Quarters ’tis ours in general to avoid.
But lest the breast be purged, what conflicts then,
What perils, must bosom, in our own despite!
O then how great and keen the cares of lust
That split the man distraught! How great the fears!
And lo, the pride, grim greed, and wantonness—
How great the slaughters in their train! and lo,
Debaucherries and every breed of sloth!
Therefore that man who subjugated these,
And from the mind expelled, by words indeed,
Not arms, O shall it not be seemly him
To dignify by ranking with the gods?—
And all the more since he was wont to give,
Concerning the immortal gods themselves,
Many pronouncements with a tongue divine,
And to unfold by his pronouncements all
The nature of the world.

ARGUMENT OF THE BOOK AND NEW PROEM
AGAINST A TELEOLOGICAL CONCEPT

And walking now
In his own footprints, I do follow through
His reasonings, and with pronouncements teach
The covenant whereby all things are framed,
How under that covenant they must abide
Nor ever prevail to abrogate the aeons’
Inexorable decrees,— how (as we’ve found),
In class of mortal objects, o’er all else,
The mind exists of earth-born frame create
And impotent unscathed to abide
Across the mighty aeons, and how come
In sleep those idol-apparitions,
That so befool intelligence when we
Do seem to view a man whom life has left.
Thus far we’ve gone; the order of my plan
Hath brought me now unto the point where I
Must make report how, too, the universe
Consists of mortal body, born in time,
And in what modes that congregated stuff
Established itself as earth and sky,
Ocean, and stars, and sun, and ball of moon;
And then what living creatures rose from out
The old telluric places, and what ones
Were never born at all; and in what mode
The human race began to name its things
And use the varied speech from man to man;
And in what modes hath bosomed in their breasts
That awe of gods, which halloweth in all lands
Fanes, altars, groves, lakes, idols of the gods.
Also I shall untangle by what power
The steersman nature guides the sun’s courses,
And the meanderings of the moon, lest we,
Percase, should fancy that of own free will
They circle their perennial courses round,
Timing their motions for increase of crops
And living creatures, or lest we should think
They roll along by any plan of gods.
For even those men who have learned full well
That godheads lead a long life free of care,
If yet meanwhile they wonder by what plan
Things can go on (and chiefly yon high things
Observed o’erhead on the ethereal coasts),
Again are hurried back unto the fears
Of old religion and adopt again
Harsh masters, deemed almighty, — wretched men,
Unwitting what can be and what cannot,
And by what law to each its scope prescribed,
Its boundary stone that clings so deep in Time.

BOOK VI

PROEM
'Twas Athens first, the glorious in name,  
That whilom gave to hapless sons of men  
The sheaves of harvest, and re-ordered life,  
And decreed laws; and she the first that gave  
Life its sweet solaces, when she begat  
A man of heart so wise, who whilom poured  
All wisdom forth from his truth-speaking mouth;  
The glory of whom, though dead, is yet to-day,  
Because of those discoveries divine  
Renowned of old, exalted to the sky.  
For when saw he that well-nigh everything  
Which needs of man most urgently require  
Was ready to hand for mortals, and that life,  
As far as might be, was established safe,  
That men were lords in riches, honour, praise,  
And eminent in goodly fame of sons,  
And that they yet, O yet, within the home,  
Still had the anxious heart which vexed life  
Unpausingly with torments of the mind,  
And raved perforce with angry plaints, then he,  
Then he, the master, did perceive that ’twas  
The vessel itself which worked the bane, and all,  
However wholesome, which from here or there  
Was gathered into it, was by that bane  
Spoil’d from within,— in part, because he saw  
The vessel so cracked and leaky that nowise  
’T could ever be filled to brim; in part because  
He marked how it polluted with foul taste  
Whate’er it got within itself. So he,  
The master, then by his truth-speaking words,  
Purged the breasts of men, and set the bounds  
Of lust and terror, and exhibited  
The supreme good whither we all endeavour,  
And showed the path whereby we might arrive  
Thereunto by a little cross-cut straight,  
And what of ills in all affairs of mortals  
Upsprang and flitted deviously about  
(Whether by chance or force), since nature thus
Had destined; and from out what gates a man
Should sally to each combat. And he proved
That mostly vainly doth the human race
Roll in its bosom the grim waves of care.
For just as children tremble and fear all
In the viewless dark, so even we at times
Dread in the light so many things that be
No whit more fearsome than what children feign,
Shuddering, will be upon them in the dark.
This terror then, this darkness of the mind,
Not sunrise with its flaring spokes of light,
Nor glittering arrows of morning can disperse,
But only nature’s aspect and her law.
Wherefore the more will I go on to weave
In verses this my undertaken task.

And since I’ve taught thee that the world’s great vaults
Are mortal and that sky is fashioned
Of frame e’en born in time, and whatsoe’er
Therein go on and must perforce go on

......

The most I have unravelled; what remains
Do thou take in, besides; since once for all
To climb into that chariot’ renowned

......

Of winds arise; and they appeased are
So that all things again...

......

Which were, are changed now, with fury stilled;
All other movements through the earth and sky
Which mortals gaze upon (O anxious oft
In quaking thoughts!), and which abase their minds
With dread of deities and press them crushed
Down to the earth, because their ignorance
Of cosmic causes forces them to yield
All things unto the empery of gods
And to concede the kingly rule to them.
For even those men who have learned full well
That godheads lead a long life free of care,
If yet meanwhile they wonder by what plan
Things can go on (and chiefly yon high things
Observed o’erhead on the ethereal coasts),
Again are hurried back unto the fears
Of old religion and adopt again
Harsh masters, deemed almighty, — wretched men,
Unwitting what can be and what cannot,
And by what law to each its scope prescribed,
Its boundary stone that clings so deep in Time.
Wherefore the more are they borne wandering on
By blindfold reason. And, Memmius, unless
From out thy mind thou spuest all of this
And casteth far from thee all thoughts which be
Unworthy gods and alien to their peace,
Then often will the holy majesties
Of the high gods be harmful unto thee,
As by thy thought degraded,— not, indeed,
That essence supreme of gods could be by this
So outraged as in wrath to thirst to seek
Revenges keen; but even because thyself
Thou plaguest with the notion that the gods,
Even they, the Calm Ones in serene repose,
Do roll the mighty waves of wrath on wrath;
Nor wilt thou enter with a serene breast
Shrines of the gods; nor wilt thou able be
In tranquil peace of mind to take and know
Those images which from their holy bodies
Are carried into intellects of men,
As the announcers of their form divine.
What sort of life will follow after this
’Tis thine to see. But that afar from us
Veriest reason may drive such life away,
Much yet remains to be embellished yet
In polished verses, albeit hath issued forth
So much from me already; lo, there is
The law and aspect of the sky to be
By reason grasped; there are the tempest times
And the bright lightnings to be hymned now—
Even what they do and from what cause soe’er
They’re borne along— that thou mayst tremble not,
Marking off regions of prophetic skies
For auguries, O foolishly distraught
Even as to whence the flying flame hath come,
Or to which half of heaven it turns, or how
Through walled places it hath wound its way,
Or, after proving its dominion there,
How it hath speeded forth from thence amain—
Whereof nowise the causes do men know,
And think divinities are working there.
Do thou, Calliope, ingenious Muse,
Solace of mortals and delight of gods,
Point out the course before me, as I race
On to the white line of the utmost goal,
That I may get with signal praise the crown,
With thee my guide!

Ovid: The Metamorphoses

Bk X:1-63 Orpheus and Eurydice

Hymen, called by the voice of Orpheus, departed, and, dressed in his saffron robes, made his way through the vast skies to the Ciconian coast: but in vain. He was present at Orpheus’s marriage, true, but he did not speak the usual words, display a joyful expression, or bring good luck. The torch, too, that he held, sputtered continually, with tear-provoking fumes, and no amount of shaking contrived to light it properly. The result was worse than any omens. While the newly wedded bride, Eurydice, was walking through the grass, with
a crowd of naiads as her companions, she was killed, by a bite on her ankle, from a snake, sheltering there. When Thracian Orpheus, the poet of Rhodope, had mourned for her, greatly, in the upper world, he dared to go down to Styx, through the gate of Taenarus, also, to see if he might not move the dead.

Through the weightless throng, and the ghosts that had received proper burial, he came to Persephone, and the lord of the shadows, he who rules the joyless kingdom. Then striking the lyre-strings to accompany his words, he sang: ‘O gods of this world, placed below the earth, to which all, who are created mortal, descend; if you allow me, and it is lawful, to set aside the fictions of idle tongues and speak the truth, I have not come here to see dark Tartarus, nor to bind Cerberus, Medusa’s child, with his three necks, and snaky hair. My wife is the cause of my journey. A viper she trod on diffused its venom into her body, and robbed her of her best years. I longed to be able to accept it, and I do not say I have not tried: Love won.

He is a god well known in the world above, though I do not know if it is so here: though I do imagine him to be here, as well, and if the story of that rape in ancient times is not a lie, you also were wedded by Amor. I beg you, by these fearful places, by this immense abyss, and the silence of your vast realms, reverse Eurydice’s swift death. All things are destined to be yours, and though we delay a while, sooner or later we hasten home. Here we are all bound, this is our final abode, and you hold the longest reign over the human race. Eurydice, too, will be yours to command, when she has lived out her fair span of years, to maturity. I ask this benefit as a gift; but, if the fates refuse my wife this kindness, I am determined not to return: you can delight in both our deaths.’

The bloodless spirits wept as he spoke, accompanying his words with the music. Tantalus did not reach for the ever-retreating water: Ixion’s wheel was stilled: the vultures did not pluck at Tityus’s liver: the Belides, the daughters of Danaüs, left their water jars: and you, Sisyphus, perched there, on your rock. Then they say, for the first time, the faces of the Furies were wet with tears, won over by his song: the king of the deep, and his royal bride, could not bear to refuse his prayer, and called for Eurydice.

She was among the recent ghosts, and walked haltingly from her wound. The poet of Rhodope received her, and, at the same time, accepted this condition, that he must not turn his eyes behind him, until he emerged from the vale of Avernus, or the gift would be null and void.

They took the upward path, through the still silence, steep and dark, shadowy with dense fog, drawing near to the threshold of the upper world. Afraid she was no longer there, and eager to see her, the lover turned his eyes. In an instant she dropped back, and he, unhappy
man, stretching out his arms to hold her and be held, clutched at nothing but the receding air. Dying a second time, now, there was no complaint to her husband (what, then, could she complain of, except that she had been loved?). She spoke a last ‘farewell’ that, now, scarcely reached his ears, and turned again towards that same place.

Stunned by the double loss of his wife, Orpheus was like that coward who saw Cerberus, the three-headed dog, chained by the central neck, and whose fear vanished with his nature, as stone transformed his body. Or like Olenos, and you, his Lethaea, too proud of your beauty: he wished to be charged with your crime, and seem guilty himself: once wedded hearts, you are now rocks set on moist Mount Ida.

Orpheus wished and prayed, in vain, to cross the Styx again, but the ferryman fended him off. Still, for seven days, he sat there by the shore, neglecting himself and not taking nourishment. Sorrow, troubled thought, and tears were his food. He took himself to lofty Mount Rhodope, and Haemus, swept by the winds, complaining that the gods of Erebus were cruel.

Bk XV:1-59 Myscelus: the founding of Crotona

Meanwhile the Romans looked for a leader, to bear the weight of such responsibility, and follow so great a king: Fame, the true harbinger, determined on the illustrious Numa for the throne. Not content with knowing the rituals of the Sabine people, with his capable mind he conceived a wider project, and delved into the nature of things. His love of these enquiries led him to leave his native Cures, and visit the city of Crotona, to which Hercules was friendly. When Numa asked who was the founder of this Greek city on Italian soil, one of the older inhabitants, not ignorant of the past, replied: ‘They say that Hercules, Jupiter’s son, back from the sea with the rich herds of Spain, happily came to the shore of Lacinium, and while his cattle strayed through the tender grass, he entered the house of the great Croton, a not inhospitable roof, and refreshed himself with rest, after his long labours, and, in leaving, said: ‘At a future time, there will be a city here, of your descendants.’

And the promise proved true, since there was one Myscelus, the son of Alemon of Argos, dearest to the gods of all his generation. Hercules, the club-bearer, leaning over him, spoke
to him as he lay in a deep sleep: ‘Rise now, leave your native country: go, find the pebble-filled waves of Aesar!’ and he threatened him with many and fearful things if he did not obey. Then the god and sleep vanished together. Alemon’s son rose, and, in silence, thought over the vision, fresh in his mind. He struggled in himself for a long time over the decision: the god ordered him to go: the law prohibited his going. Death was the penalty for the man who wished to change his nationality.

Bright Sol had hidden his shining face in Ocean’s stream, and Night had lifted her starriest face: the same god seemed to appear to him, to admonish him in the same way, and warn of worse and greater punishment if he did not obey. He was afraid, and prepared, at once, to transfer the sanctuary of his ancestors to a new place. There was talk in the city, and he was brought to trial, for showing contempt for the law. When the case against him had been presented, and it was evident the charge was proven, without needing witnesses, the wretched defendant, lifting his face and hands to heaven, cried: ‘O you, whose twelve labours gave you the right to heaven, help me, I beg you! Since you are the reason for my crime.’

The ancient custom was to vote using black and white pebbles: the black to condemn: the white to absolve from punishment. Now, also, the harsh verdict was determined in this way, and every pebble dropped into the pitiless urn was black: but when the urn was tipped over and the pebbles poured out for the count, their colour had changed from black to white, and, acquitted through the divine power of Hercules, Alemon’s son was freed.

He first gave thanks to that son of Amphitryon, his patron, and with favouring winds set sail on the Ionian Sea. He sailed by Neretum, of the Sallentines, Sybaris, and the Spartan colony of Tarentum, the bay of Siris, Crimisa, and the Iapygian fields. He had barely passed the lands that overlook those seas, when he came, by destiny, to the mouth of the river Aesar, and near it the tumulus beneath which the earth covered the sacred bones of Croton. He founded the city of Crotona there, in the land commanded by the god, and derived the name of the city from him, whom the tumulus held. Such were the established beginnings, according to reliable tradition, of that place, and the cause of the city’s being sited on Italian soil.

**Bk XV:60-142 Pythagoras’s Teachings: Vegetarianism**
There was a man here, Pythagoras, a Samian by birth, who had fled Samos and its rulers, and, hating their tyranny, was living in voluntary exile. Though the gods were far away, he visited their region of the sky, in his mind, and what nature denied to human vision he enjoyed with his inner eye. When he had considered every subject through concentrated thought, he communicated it widely in public teaching the silent crowds, who listened in wonder to his words, concerning the origin of the vast universe, and of the causes of things; and what the physical world is; what the gods are; where the snows arise; what the origin of lightning is; whether Jupiter, or the storm-winds, thunder from colliding clouds; what shakes the earth; by what laws the stars move; and whatever else is hidden; and he was the first to denounce the serving of animal flesh at table; the first voice, wise but not believed in, to say, for example, in words like these:

‘Human beings, stop desecrating your bodies with impious foodstuffs. There are crops; there are apples weighing down the branches; and ripening grapes on the vines; there are flavoursome herbs; and those that can be rendered mild and gentle over the flames; and you do not lack flowing milk; or honey fragrant from the flowering thyme. The earth, prodigal of its wealth, supplies you with gentle sustenance, and offers you food without killing or shedding blood.

Flesh satisfies the wild beast’s hunger, though not all of them, since horses, sheep and cattle live on grasses, but those that are wild and savage: Armenian tigers, raging lions, and wolves and bears, enjoy food wet with blood. Oh, how wrong it is for flesh to be made from flesh; for a greedy body to fatten, by swallowing another body; for one creature to live by the death of another creature! So amongst such riches, that earth, the greatest of mothers, yields, you are not happy unless you tear, with cruel teeth, at pitiful wounds, recalling Cyclops’s practice, and you cannot satisfy your voracious appetite, and your restless hunger, unless you destroy other life!

But that former age, that we call golden, was happy with the fruit from the trees, and the herbs the earth produced, and did not defile its lips with blood. Then birds winged their way through the air in safety, and hares wandered, unafraid, among the fields, and its own gullibility did not hook the fish: all was free from trickery, and fearless of any guile, and filled with peace. But once someone, whoever he was, the author of something unfitting, envied the lion’s prey, and stuffed his greedy belly with fleshy food, he paved the way for crime. It may be that, from the first, weapons were warm and bloodstained from the killing of wild beasts, but that would have been enough: I admit that creatures that seek our destruction may be killed without it being a sin, but while they may be killed, they still should not be eaten.
From that, the wickedness spread further, and it is thought that the pig was first considered to merit slaughter because it rooted up the seeds with its broad snout, and destroyed all hope of harvest. The goat was led to death, at the avenging altar, for browsing the vines of Bacchus. These two suffered for their crimes! What did you sheep do, tranquil flocks, born to serve man, who bring us sweet milk in full udders, who give us your wool to make soft clothing, who give us more by your life than you grant us by dying? What have the oxen done, without guile or deceit, harmless, simple, born to endure labour?

He is truly thankless, and not worthy of the gift of corn, who could, in a moment, remove the weight of the curved plough, and kill his labourer, striking that work-worn neck with his axe, that has helped turn the hard earth as many times as the earth yielded harvest. It is not enough to have committed such wickedness: they involve the gods in crime, and believe that the gods above delight in the slaughter of suffering oxen! A victim of outstanding beauty, and without blemish (since to be pleasing is harmful), distinguished by sacrificial ribbons and gold, is positioned in front of the altar, and listens, unknowingly, to the prayers, and sees the corn it has laboured to produce, scattered between its horns, and, struck down, stains with blood those knives that it has already caught sight of, perhaps, reflected in the clear water.

Immediately they inspect the lungs, ripped from the still-living chest, and from them find out the will of the gods. On this (so great is man’s hunger for forbidden food) you feed, O human race! Do not, I beg you, and concentrate your minds on my admonitions! When you place the flesh of slaughtered cattle in your mouths, know and feel, that you are devouring your fellow-creature.’

Bk XV:143-175 Pythagoras’s Teachings: Metempsychosis

‘Now, since a god moves my lips, I will follow, with due rite, the god who moves those lips, and reveal my beloved Delphi and the heavens themselves, and unlock the oracles of that sublime mind. I will speak of mighty matters, not fathomed by earlier greatness, things long hidden. I delight in journeying among the distant stars: I delight in leaving earth and its dull spaces, to ride the clouds; to stand on the shoulders of mighty Atlas, looking down from far off on men, wandering here and there, devoid of knowledge, anxious, fearing death; to read the book of fate, and to give them this encouragement!'
O species, stunned by your terror of chill death, why fear the Styx, why fear the ghosts and empty names, the stuff of poets, the spectres of a phantom world? Do not imagine you can suffer any evil, whether your bodies are consumed by the flames of the funeral pyre, or by wasting age! Souls are free from death, and always, when they have left their previous being, they live in new dwelling-places, and inhabit what received them. I myself (for I remember) was Euphorbus, son of Panthoüs, at the time of the Trojan War, in whose chest was pinned the heavy spear of the lesser Atrides, Menelaüs. I recognised the shield I used to carry on my left arm, recently, in the temple of Juno at Argos, city of Abas!

Everything changes, nothing dies: the spirit wanders, arriving here or there, and occupying whatever body it pleases, passing from a wild beast into a human being, from our body into a beast, but is never destroyed. As pliable wax, stamped with new designs, is no longer what it was; does not keep the same form; but is still one and the same; I teach that the soul is always the same, but migrates into different forms. So, I say as a seer, cease to make kindred spirits homeless, by wicked slaughter: do not let blood be nourished by blood!'

Bk XV:176-198 Pythagoras’s Teachings: The Eternal Flux

‘Since I have embarked on the wide ocean, and given full sails to the wind, I say there is nothing in the whole universe that persists. Everything flows, and is formed as a fleeting image. Time itself, also, glides, in its continual motion, no differently than a river. For neither the river, nor the swift hour can stop: but as wave impels wave, and as the prior wave is chased by the coming wave, and chases the one before, so time flees equally, and, equally, follows, and is always new. For what was before is left behind: and what was not comes to be: and each moment is renewed.

You see the nights’ traverses tend towards day, and brilliant light follow the dark of night. The sky has a different colour when all weary things are at rest, at midnight, than when bright Lucifer appears on his white charger, and alters again when Aurora, herald of the dawn, stains the world she bequeaths to Phoebus. The shield of the god himself is red, when it rises from beneath the earth, and still red, when it is hidden below the earth, again: but is white at the zenith, because there the atmosphere is purer, and it escapes far from the contagion of earth. And Diana, the moon, can never have the same or similar form, and is always less today than tomorrow if her orb is waxing, greater if it is waning.’
Bk XV:453-478 Pythagoras’s Teachings: The Sanctity of Life

‘Now (lest I stray too far off course, my horses forgetting to aim towards their goal), the heavens, and whatever is under them, change their form, and the earth, and whatever is within it. We, as well, who are a part of the universe, because we are not merely flesh, but in truth, winged spirits, and can enter into the family of wild creatures, and be imprisoned in the minds of animals.

We should allow those beings to live in safety, and honour, that the spirits of our parents, or brothers, or those joined to us by some other bond, certainly human, might have inhabited: and not fill our bellies as if at a Thyestean feast! What evil they contrive, how impiously they prepare to shed human blood itself, who rip at a calf’s throat with the knife, and listen unmoved to its bleating, or can kill a kid to eat, that cries like a child, or feed on a bird, that they themselves have fed! How far does that fall short of actual murder? Where does the way lead on from there?

Let the ox plough, or owe his death to old age: let the sheep yield wool, to protect against the chill north wind: let the she-goats give you full udders for milking! Have done with nets and traps, snares and the arts of deception! Do not trick the birds with limed twigs, or imprison the deer, scaring them with feathered ropes, or hide barbed hooks in treacherous bait. Kill them, if they harm you, but even then let killing be enough. Let your mouth be free of their blood, enjoy milder food!’

Bk XV:479-546 The transformation of Hippolytus

His mind versed in these and other teachings, it is said that Numa returned to his native country, and took control of Latium, at the people’s request. Blessed with a nymph, Egeria, for wife, and guided by the Muses, he taught the sacred rituals, and educated a savage, warlike, race in the arts of peace.
When, in old age, he relinquished his sceptre, with his life, the women of Latium, the populace, and the senators wept for the dead Numa: but Egeria, his wife, left the city, and lived in retirement, concealed by dense woods, in the valley of Aricia, and her sighs and lamentations prevented the worship of Oresteian Diana. O! How often the nymphs of the lakes and groves admonished her to stop, and spoke words of consolation to her!