

LUCRETIUS
On the Nature of the Universe

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PENGUIN BOOKS

2005

MATTER AND SPACE

10 Mother of Aeneas and his race, delight of men and gods, life-
 giving Venus,¹ it is your doing that under the wheeling constella-
 tions of the sky all nature teems with life, both the sea that
 buoys up our ships and the earth that yields our food. Through
 you all living creatures are conceived and come forth to look
 upon the sunlight. Before you the winds flee, and at your
 coming the clouds forsake the sky. For you the inventive earth
 flings up sweet flowers. For you the ocean levels laugh, the sky
 is calmed and glows with diffused radiance. When first the day
 puts on the aspect of spring, when in all its force the fertilizing
 breath of Zephyr is unleashed,² then, great goddess, the birds
 of air give the first intimation of your entry; for yours is the
 power that has pierced them to the heart. Next the wild beasts
 and farm animals alike run wild, frisk through the lush pastures
 and swim the swift-flowing streams. Spellbound by your charm,
 they follow your lead with fierce desire. So throughout seas
 and uplands, rushing torrents, verdurous meadows and the
 leafy shelters of the birds, into the breasts of one and all you
 instil alluring love, so that with passionate longing they repro-
 20 duce their several breeds.

Since you alone are the guiding power of the universe and
 without you nothing emerges into the shining sunlit world to
 grow in joy and loveliness, yours is the partnership I seek in
 striving to compose these lines *On the Nature of the Universe*³ for
 my noble Memmius.⁴ For him, great goddess, you have willed
 outstanding excellence in every field and everlasting fame. For
 his sake, therefore, endow my verse with everlasting charm.

Meanwhile, grant that this brutal business of war by sea and
 land may everywhere be lulled to rest. For you alone have
 power to bestow on mortals the blessing of quiet peace. In
 your bosom Mars himself, supreme commander in this business
 of brutality, flings himself down at times, laid low by the
 irremediable wound of love. Gazing upward, his neck a pros-

36 trate column, he fixes hungry eyes on you, great goddess, and
 gluts them with love. As he lies outstretched, his breath hangs
 upon your lips. Stoop, then, goddess most glorious, and enfold
 him at rest in your hallowed bosom and whisper with those lips
 sweet words of prayer, beseeching for the people of Rome
 untroubled peace. In this evil hour of my country's history, I
 cannot pursue my task with a mind at ease, as an illustrious
 scion of the house of Memmius cannot at such a crisis⁵ withhold
 41 his service from the common weal. <I beg you for peace> since
 it is essential to the very nature of deity that it should enjoy
 immortal existence in utter tranquillity, aloof and detached
 from our affairs. It is free from all pain and peril, strong in its
 own resources, exempt from any need of us, indifferent to our
 merits and immune from anger.

For what is to follow, my Memmius, lay aside your cares and
 lend undistracted ears and an attentive mind to true reason. Do
 not scornfully reject, before you have understood them, the
 gifts I have marshalled for you with zealous devotion. I will set
 52 out to discourse to you on the ultimate realities of heaven and
 the gods. I will reveal those *atoms* from which nature creates all
 things and increases and feeds them and into which, when they
 perish, nature again resolves them. To these in my discourse I
 commonly give such names as the 'raw material', or 'generative
 bodies', or 'seeds' of things. Or I may call them 'primary
 particles', because they come first and everything else is com-
 posed of them.

62 When human life lay grovelling in all men's sight, crushed to
 the earth under the dead weight of superstition whose grim
 features loomed menacingly upon mortals from the four quarters
 of the sky, a man of Greece⁶ was first to raise mortal eyes in
 defiance, first to stand erect and brave the challenge. Fables of
 the gods did not crush him, nor the lightning flash and the
 growling menace of the sky.⁷ Rather, they quickened the keen
 courage of his heart, so that he, first of all men, longed to
 smash the constraining locks of nature's doors. The vital vigour
 of his mind prevailed. He ventured far out beyond the flaming

74 ramparts of the world and voyaged in mind throughout infinity. Returning victorious, he proclaimed to us what can be and what cannot: how the power of each thing is limited; and its boundary-stone sticks buried deep. Therefore superstition in its turn lies crushed beneath his feet, and we by his triumph are lifted level with the skies.

80 One thing that worries me is the fear that you may fancy yourself embarking on an impious course of philosophy, setting your feet on the path of sin. Far from it. More often it is this very superstition that is the mother of sinful and impious deeds. Remember how at Aulis⁸ the altar of the virgin goddess was foully stained with the blood of Iphigeneia by the leaders of the Greeks, the patterns of chivalry. The headband was bound about her virgin tresses and hung down evenly over both her cheeks. Suddenly she caught sight of her father standing sadly in front of the altar, the attendants beside him hiding the knife and her people bursting into tears when they
91 saw her. Struck dumb with terror, she sank on her knees to the ground. Poor girl, at such a moment it did not help her that she had been first to give the name of father to a king. Raised by the hands of men, she was led trembling to the altar. Not for her the sacrament of marriage and the loud chant of Hymen. It was her fate in the very hour of marriage to fall a sinless victim to a sinful rite, slaughtered to her greater grief by a father's hand, so that a fleet might sail under happy auspices. Such are the heights of wickedness to which men have been driven by superstition.
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You yourself, if you surrender your judgement at any time to the blood-curdling declamations of the prophets, will want to desert our ranks. Only think what phantoms they can conjure up to overturn the tenor of your life and wreck your happiness with fear. And not without cause. For, if men saw that a term was set to their troubles, they would find strength in some way to withstand the hocus-pocus and intimidations of the prophets. As it is, they have no power of resistance, because they are haunted by the fear of eternal punishment after death. They know nothing of the nature of the spirit. Is it born, or is it

113 implanted in us at birth? Does it perish with us, dissolved by death; or does it visit the murky depths and dreary sloughs of the Underworld? Or is it transplanted by divine power into other creatures, as described in the poems of our own Ennius,⁹ who first gathered on the delectable slopes of Helicon¹⁰ an evergreen garland destined to win renown among the nations of Italy? Ennius indeed in his immortal verses proclaims that there is also a Hell, which is peopled not by our actual spirits or bodies but only by shadowy images, ghastly pale. It is from
123 this realm that he pictures the ghost of Homer,¹¹ of unfading memory, as appearing to him, shedding salt tears and revealing the nature of the universe.

I must therefore give an account of celestial phenomena, explaining the movements of sun and moon and also the forces that determine events on earth. Next, and no less important, we must look with keen insight into the make-up of spirit and mind: we must consider those alarming phantasms that strike upon our minds when they are awake but disordered by sick-
133 ness, or when they are buried in slumber, so that we seem to see and hear before us men whose dead bones lie in the embraces of earth.

I am well aware that it is not easy to elucidate in Latin verse the obscure discoveries of the Greeks. The poverty of our language¹² and the novelty of the theme often compel me to coin new words for the purpose. But your merit and the joy I hope to derive from our delightful friendship¹³ encourage me to face any task however hard. This it is that leads me to stay awake through the quiet of the night, studying how by choice of words and the poet's art I can display before your mind a clear
143 light by which you can gaze into the heart of hidden things.

This dread and darkness of the mind cannot be dispelled by the sunbeams, the shining shafts of day, but only by an understanding of the outward form and inner workings of nature. In tackling this theme, our starting-point will be this principle: *Nothing is ever created by divine power out of nothing.* The reason why all mortals are so gripped by fear is that they see all sorts of things happening on the earth and in the sky with no