

## LUCRETIIUS ON WAR.<sup>1</sup>

TRANSLATED BY WILLIAM ELLERY LEONARD.

AND yet in those days not much more than now  
Would generations of mortality  
Leave the sweet light of fading life behind.  
Indeed, in those days here and there a man,  
More oftener snatched upon, and gulped by fangs,  
Afforded the beasts a food that roared alive,  
Echoing through groves and hills and forest trees,  
Even as he saw his living flesh entombed  
Within a living grave; whilst those whom flight  
Had spared (with body eaten into) shrieked  
(Pressing their quivering palms to loathsome sores)  
With horrible voices for eternal death—  
Until, forlorn of help, and witless what  
Might medicine their wounds, the writhing pangs  
Took them from life. But not in those far times  
Would one lone day give over unto doom  
A soldiery in thousands marching on  
Beneath the battle-banners, nor would then  
The ramping breakers of the main seas dash  
Whole argosies and crews upon the rocks.  
But ocean uprisen would often rave in vain,  
Without all end or outcome, and give up  
Its empty menacings as lightly too;  
Nor soft seductions of a serene sea  
Could lure by laughing billows any man  
Out to disaster; for the science bold  
Of ship-sailing lay dark in those far times.  
Again, 'twas *then* that lack of food gave o'er  
Men's fainting limbs to dissolution; *now*

<sup>1</sup> Passages from a forthcoming translation of the entire six books of *De rerum natura*.

'Tis plenty overwhelms. Unwary, they  
 Oft for themselves, themselves would *then* outpour  
 The poison; *now*, with nicer art, themselves  
 They give the drafts to others.

Book V, l. 986 ff. (Guissani's text).

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Now, Memmius,  
 How nature of iron discovered was, thou mayst  
 Of thine own self divine. Man's ancient arms  
 Were hands, and nails and teeth, stones too and boughs—  
 Breakage of forest trees—and flame and fire,  
 As soon as known. Thereafter, force of iron  
 And copper discovered was; and copper's use  
 Was known ere iron's, since more pliable  
 Its nature is and its abundance more.  
 With copper men to work the soil began,  
 With copper to rouse the hurly waves of war,  
 To straw the monstrous wounds, and seize away  
 Another's flocks and fields. For unto them,  
 Thus armèd, all things naked of defense  
 Readily yielded. Then by slow degrees  
 The sword of iron succeeded, and the shape  
 Of brazen sickle into scorn was turned;  
 With iron to cleave the soil of earth they 'gan,  
 And the contentions of uncertain war  
 Were rendered equal.

And, lo, man was wont  
 Armèd to mount upon the ribs of horse  
 And guide him with the rein, and play about  
 With right hand free, of times before he tried  
 Perils of war in yokèd chariot,  
 And yokèd pairs abreast came earlier  
 Than yokes of four, or scythèd chariots  
 Whereinto clomb the men at arms. And next  
 The Punic folk did train the elephants—  
 Those curst Lucanian oxen, hideous,  
 The serpent-handed, with turrets on their bulks—  
 To dure the wounds of war and panic-strike  
 The mighty troops of Mars. Thus Discord sad  
 Begat the one Thing after other, to be  
 The terror of the nations under arms,

And day by day to horrors of old war  
 She added an increase.

Bulls, too, they tried

In wars' grim business; and essayed to send  
 Outrageous boars against the foes. And some  
 Sent on before their ranks puissant lions  
 With armèd trainers and with masters fierce  
 To guide and hold in chains—and yet in vain,  
 Since, fleshed and hot with hurly-burly slaughter,  
 Those beasts would wreck all order in the troops,  
 Shaking the frightful crests upon their heads,  
 Now here, now there. Nor could the horsemen calm  
 Their horses, panic-breasted at the roar,  
 And rein them around to front the foe. With spring  
 The infuriate she lions would upleap  
 Now here, now there; and whoso came apace  
 Against them, these they'd rend across the face;  
 And others unwitting from behind they'd tear  
 Down from their mounts, and, twining round them, bring  
 Tumbling to earth, o'ermastered by the wound,  
 And with those powerful fangs and hookèd claws  
 Fasten upon them. Bulls would toss their friends,  
 And trample under foot, and from beneath  
 Rip flanks and bellies of horses with their horns,  
 And with a threatening forehead jam the sod;  
 And boars would tear their allies with stout tusks,  
 Tingeing in fury with own blood the spears  
 Splintered in their own bodies, and would put  
 To rout and ruin infantry and horse.  
 For there the beasts-of-saddle tried to scape  
 The savage thrusts of tusk, by shying off,  
 Or rearing up with hoofs apaw in air.  
 In vain—since there thou mightest see them sink,  
 Their sinews severed, and with mighty fall  
 Bestrew the ground. And such of these as men  
 Supposed well-trained long ago at home,  
 Were in the thick of action seen to foam  
 In fury, from the wounds, the shrieks, the flight,  
 The panic and the tumult; nor could men  
 Aught of their numbers rally. For each breed  
 And various of the wild beasts fled apart  
 Hither or thither, as often in wars to-day

Flee those Lucanian oxen, by the steel  
Sorely bemangled, after they have wrought  
Upon their friends so many a dreadful doom.  
If 'twas indeed that thus they did at all:  
But scarcely I'll believe that men could not  
With mind foreknow and see, as sure to come,  
Such foul and general disaster. This  
Thou canst maintain as true in the great All,  
In divers molds on divers plans create,  
More certainly than in some namèd land  
Of the earth-sphere. But men chose this to do  
Less in the hope of conquering than to give  
Their enemies a goodly cause of woe,  
(Even though thereby they perishèd themselves),  
When weak in numbers and when wanting arms.

Book V, l. 1279 ff. (Guissani's text).