

*Invocation*

My mind now turns to stories of bodies changed  
 Into new forms. O Gods, inspire my beginnings  
 (For you changed them too) and spin a poem that extends  
 From the world's first origins down to my own time.

*Origin of the World*

Before there was land or sea or overarching sky,  
 Nature's face was one throughout the universe,  
 Chaos as they call it: a crude, unsorted mass,  
 Nothing but an inert lump, the concentrated,  
 Discordant seeds of disconnected entities.  
 No Titan Sun as yet gave light to the world, 10  
 No Phoebe touched up her crescent horns by night,  
 Not yet did Earth hang nested in air, balanced  
 By her own weight, and Amphitrite had not yet  
 Stretched her arms around the world's long shores.  
 Yes, there was land around, and sea and air,  
 But land impossible to walk, unnavigable water,  
 Lightless air; nothing held its shape,  
 And each thing crowded the other out. In one body  
 Cold wrestled with hot, wet with dry,  
 Soft with hard, and weightless with heavy. 20

Some god, or superior nature, settled this conflict,  
 Splitting earth from heaven, sea from earth,  
 And the pure sky from the dense atmosphere.  
 After he carved these out from the murky mass,  
 In peaceful concord he bound each in its place.  
 The fiery, weightless energy of the convex sky  
 Shot to the zenith and made its home there.  
 The air, next in levity, was next in location,  
 Then the denser earth attracted the heavier elements  
 And was pushed down by her own weight. The circling sea 30  
 Settled down at her edges, confining the solid orb.

Then, the god who had sorted out this cosmic heap,  
 Whoever it was, and divided it into parts,  
 First rolled the earth, so it would not appear  
 Asymmetrical, into the shape of a great sphere;  
 And then he ordered the sea to flood and swell  
 Beneath high winds until it lapped the planet's shores.  
 He threw in springs and immense wetlands,  
 Lakes and rivers, which he channeled in sloping banks  
 So some are absorbed by the land itself, while others cascade 40  
 Into the sea, where received at last into open water  
 They beat no longer against banks but shores.  
 He also ordered the prairies to stretch, the valleys to sink,  
 The woods to take leaf, rocky mountains to rise.  
 And as two zones belt the sky on the right,  
 Two on the left, and a fifth burns in the middle,  
 This providential god marked the globe beneath  
 With these same five zones, so that of the earth's regions  
 The middle is too hot for habitation,  
 Deep snow covers two, but the two wedged between 50  
 Have a climate that tempers heat with cold.

Hanging above is the air, as much heavier  
 Than fire as water is lighter than earth.  
 The god ordained mist and clouds to form there,  
 And thunder that would make human minds tremble,  
 And winds too, gusting with thunder and lightning.  
 The World's Fabricator did not allow the winds  
 Free rein in the air. He barely controls them now,  
 When each must blow in his own tract of heaven,  
 Else they would shred the world with their fraternal strife. 60  
 Eurus receded to the East and the Nabataean realms,  
 To Persia and its ridges bathed in morning light.  
 Evening, and the shores warmed by the setting sun,  
 Are nearest to Zephyrus. Bristling Boreas  
 Invaded Scythia and the Arctic stars. The land  
 Due south drips with Auster's constant mist and rain.  
 Above all these he put the liquid, weightless  
 Aether, which has nothing of earthly dregs.

The deity had just finished zoning off everything  
 When the stars, which had long been smothered 70  
 In dark vapor, peeked out and glowed all over the sky.  
 And so that no region would be without living things  
 Of its own, constellations and the forms of gods  
 Possessed heaven's floor; the sea allowed itself  
 To swarm with glistening fish, the land became  
 A wild kingdom, and the air teemed with wings.

Still missing was a creature finer than these,  
 With a greater mind, one who could rule the rest:  
 Man was born, whether fashioned from immortal seed  
 By the Master Artisan who made this better world, 80  
 Or whether Earth, newly parted from Aether above  
 And still bearing some seeds of her cousin Sky,  
 Was mixed with rainwater by Titan Prometheus  
 And molded into the image of the omnipotent gods.  
 And while other animals look on all fours at the ground  
 He gave to humans an upturned face, and told them to lift  
 Their eyes to the stars. And so Earth, just now barren,  
 A wilderness without form, was changed and made over,  
 Dressing herself in the unfamiliar figures of men.

### *The Four Ages*

Golden was the first age, a generation 90  
 That cultivated trust and righteousness  
 All on its own, without any laws, without fear  
 Or punishment. There were no threatening rules  
 Stamped on bronze tablets, no crowds of plaintiffs  
 Cowering before judges: no one needed protection.  
 Not a pine was cut from its native mountain  
 To be launched on a maritime tour of the world;  
 Mortal men knew no shores but their own.  
 Steep trenches around cities were still in the future;  
 There were no bronze bugles, no curved, blaring horns, 100  
 No helmets or swords. Without a military  
 A carefree people enjoyed a life of soft ease.

The inviolate earth, untouched by hoes, still  
 Unwounded by plows, bore fruit all on its own,  
 And content with food unforced by labor  
 Men gathered arbut, mountain strawberries,  
 Wild cherries, blackberries clinging to brambles,  
 And acorns that fell from Jove's spreading oaks.  
 Spring was eternal, and mild westerly breezes  
 Soughed among flowers sown from no seed. 110  
 Even uncultivated the soil soon bore crops  
 And fields unfallowed grew white with deep grain.  
 Rivers flowed with milk, streams ran with nectar,  
 And honey dripped tawny from the green holm oak.

After Saturn was consigned to Tartarus' gloom  
 The world was under Jove, and the Silver race came in,  
 Cheaper than gold but more precious than bronze.  
 Jupiter curtailed the old season of spring  
 And by adding cold and heat and autumn's changes 120  
 To a brief spring, made the year turn through its four seasons.  
 For the first time the air, parched and feverish,  
 Began to burn, and icicles now hung frozen in wind.  
 People now took shelter; their houses were caves,  
 Dense thickets, and branches bound together with bark.  
 Cereal seeds now lay buried, sown in long furrows,  
 And for the first time oxen groaned under the yoke.

The next and third generation was Bronze,  
 Harsher in its genius and more ready to arms,  
 Not wicked however.

The fourth and last is Iron.

Every iniquity burst out in this inferior age. 130  
 Shame and Veracity and Faith took flight,  
 And in their place came Duplicity and Fraud,  
 Treachery and Force, and unholy Greed.  
 They spread sails to the winds still a mystery  
 To sailors, and keels that once stood high in the mountains  
 Now surged and bucked in unfamiliar waves.  
 The cautious surveyor now marks off the fields

Once held in common like the sunlight and air.  
 And the rich earth is not only required to produce  
 Crops and food: now her bowels are tunneled, 140  
 And the ore she'd sequestered in Stygian darkness  
 Is now dug up as wealth that incites men to crime.  
 Iron with its injuries and more injurious gold  
 Now came forth, and War, equipped with both of these metals,  
 Brandishes clashing weapons in bloodstained hands.  
 Plunder sustains life; guest is not safe from host,  
 Or a father safe from his daughter's husband;  
 Gratitude is rare even among brothers. Husbands  
 Can't wait for their wives to die, wives reciprocate,  
 Frightful stepmothers brew their aconite, and sons 150  
 Inquire prematurely into their father's age.  
 Piety lies beaten, and when the other gods are gone,  
 Virgin Astraea abandons the bloodstained earth.

### *The Giants*

And, so the lofty sky would not be safer than earth,  
 They say the Giants went after the kingdom of heaven,  
 Piling up mountains all the way to the stars.  
 Then the Father Almighty shattered Olympus  
 With a well-aimed thunderbolt and blasted away Pelion  
 From Ossa beneath. When the Giants' dread corpses  
 Lay crushed beneath their own bulk, they say Mother Earth, 160  
 Drenched with her sons' blood, reanimated  
 Their steaming gore, and to preserve the memory  
 Of her former brood, gave it a human form.  
 But this incarnation also was contemptuous  
 Of the gods, with a deep instinct for slaughter,  
 And violent. You could tell they were sons of blood.

### *The Council of the Gods*

Jupiter, seeing this from his high throne, groaned.  
 He recalled, too, the sordid dinner parties of Lycaon,  
 Too recent for the story to be well-known, and conceived