

The Teachings of Pythagoras^{*}

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There was a man here, Samian born, but he
Had fled from Samos, for he hated tyrants
And chose, instead, an exile's lot. His thought
Reached far aloft, to the great gods in Heaven,
And his imagination looked on visions
Beyond his mortal sight. All things he studied
With watchful eager mind, and he brought home
What he had learned and sat among the people
Teaching them what was worthy, and they listened
In silence, wondering at the revelations
How the great world began, the primal cause,
The nature of things, what God is, whence the snows
Come down, where lightning breaks from, whether wind
Or Jove speaks in the thunder from the clouds,
The cause of earthquakes, by what law the stars
Wheel in their course, all the secrets hidden
From man's imperfect knowledge. He was first
To say that animal food should not be eaten,
And learned as he was, men did not always
Believe him when he preached "Forbear, O mortals,
To spoil your bodies with such impious food!
There is corn for you, apples, whose weight bears down
The bending branches; there are grapes that swell
On the green vines, and pleasant herbs, and greens
Made mellow and soft with cooking; there is milk
And clover-honey. Earth is generous
With her provision, and her sustenance
Is very kind; she offers, for your tables,
Food that requires no bloodshed and no slaughter.

Meat is for beasts to feed on, yet not all
Are carnivores, for horses, sheep, and cattle
Subsist on grass, but those whose disposition
Is fierce and cruel, tigers, raging lions,
And bears and wolves delight in bloody feasting.
Oh, what a wicked thing it is for flesh
To be the tomb of flesh, for the body's craving
To fatten on the body of another,
For one live creature to continue living
Through one live creature's death. In all the richness
That Earth, the best of mothers, tenders to us,
Does nothing please except to chew and mangle
The flesh of slaughtered animals? The Cyclops
Could do no worse! Must you destroy another
To satiate your greedy-gutted cravings?
There was a time, the Golden Age, we call it,
Happy in fruits and herbs, when no men tainted
Their lips with blood, and birds went flying safely
Through air, and in the fields the rabbits wandered

^{*} Excerpted from *Metamorphoses*, book 15, lines 59-477. Translated by Rolphe Humphries.

Unfrightened, and no little fish was ever
Hooked by its own credulity: all things
Were free from treachery and fear and cunning,
And all was peaceful. But some innovator,
A good-for-nothing, whoever he was, decided,
In envy, that what lions ate was better,
Stuffed meat into his belly like a furnace,
And paved the way for crime. It may have been
That steel was warmed and dyed with blood through killing
Dangerous beasts, and that could be forgiven
On grounds of self-defense; to kill wild beasts
Is lawful, but they never should be eaten.

One crime leads to another: first the swine
Were slaughtered, since they rooted up the seeds
And spoiled the season's crop; then goats were punished
On vengeful altars for nibbling at the grape-vines.
These both deserved their fate, but the poor sheep,
What had they ever done, born for man's service,
But bring us milk, so sweet to drink, and clothe us
With their soft wool, who give us more while living
Than ever they could in death? And what had oxen,
Incapable of fraud or trick or cunning,
Simple and harmless, born to a life of labor,
What had they ever done? None but an ingrate,
Unworthy of the gift of grain, could ever
Take off the weight of the yoke, and with the axe
Strike at the neck that bore it, kill his fellow
Who helped him break the soil and raise the harvest.
It is bad enough to do these things; we make
The gods our partners in the abomination,
Saying they love the blood of bulls in Heaven.
So there he stands, the victim at the altars,
Without a blemish, perfect (and his beauty
Proves his own doom), in sacrificial garlands,
Horns tipped with gold, and hears the priest intoning:
Not knowing what he means, watches the barley
Sprinkled between his horns, the very barley
He helped make grow, and then is struck
And with his blood he stains the knife whose flashing
He may have seen reflected in clear water.
Then they tear out his entrails, peer, examine,
Search for the will of Heaven, seeking omens.
And then, so great man's appetite for food
Forbidden, then, O human race, you feed,
You feast, upon your kill. Do not do this,
I pray you, but remember: when you taste
The flesh of slaughtered cattle, you are eating
Your fellow-workers.

Now, since the god inspires me,
I follow where he leads, to open Delphi,
The very heavens, bring you revelation
Of mysteries, great matters never traced
By any mind before, and matters lost
Or hidden and forgotten, these I sing.

There is no greater wonder than to range
The starry heights, to leave the earth's dull regions,
To ride the clouds, to stand on Atlas' shoulders,
And see, far off, far down, the little figures
Wandering here and there, devoid of reason,
Anxious, in fear of death, and so advise them,
And so make fate an open book.

O mortals,
Dumb in cold fear of death, why do you tremble
At Stygian rivers, shadows, empty names,
The lying stock of poets, and the terrors
Of a false world? I tell you that your bodies
Can never suffer evil, whether fire
Consumes them, or the waste of time. Our souls
Are deathless; always, when they leave our bodies,
They find new dwelling-places. I myself,
I well remember, in the Trojan War
Was Panthous' son, Euphorbus, and my breast
Once knew the heavy spear of Menelaus.
Not long ago, in Argos, Abas' city,
In Juno's temple, I saw the shield I carried
On my left arm. All things are always changing,
But nothing dies. The spirit comes and goes,
Is housed wherever it wills, shifts residence
From beasts to men, from men to beasts, but always
It keeps on living. As the pliant wax
Is stamped with new designs, and is no longer
What once it was, but changes form, and still
Is pliant wax, so do I teach that spirit
Is evermore the same, though passing always
To ever-changing bodies. So I warn you,
Lest appetite murder brotherhood, I warn you
By all the priesthood in me, do not exile
What may be kindred souls by evil slaughter.
Blood should not nourish blood.

Full sail, I voyage
Over the boundless ocean, and I tell you
Nothing is permanent in all the world.
All things are fluid; every image forms,
Wandering through change. Time is itself a river
In constant movement, and the hours flow by
Like water, wave on wave, pursued, pursuing,
Forever fugitive, forever new.
That which has been, is not; that which was not,
Begins to be; motion and moment always
In process of renewal. Look, the night,
Worn out, aims toward the brightness, and sun's glory
Succeeds the dark. The color of the sky
Is different at midnight, when tired things
Lie all at rest, from what it is at morning
When Lucifer rides his snowy horse, before
Aurora paints the sky for Phoebus' coming.
The shield of the god reddens at early morning,
Reddens at evening, but is white at noonday
In purer air, farther from earth's contagion.

And the Moon-goddess changes in the nighttime,
Lesser today than yesterday, if waning,
Greater tomorrow than today, when crescent.

Notice the year's four seasons: they resemble
Our lives. Spring is a nursling, a young child,
Tender and young, and the grass shines and buds
Swell with new life, not yet full-grown nor hardy,
But promising much to husbandmen, with blossom
Bright in the fertile fields. And then comes summer
When the year is a strong young man, no better time
Than this, no richer, no more passionate vigor.
Then comes the prime of Autumn, a little sober,
But ripe and mellow, moderate of mood,
Halfway from youth to age, with just a showing
Of gray around the temples. And then Winter,
Tottering, shivering, bald or gray, and aged.

Our bodies also change. What we have been,
What we now are, we shall not be tomorrow.
There was a time when we were only seed,
Only the hope of men, housed in the womb,
Where Nature shaped us, brought us forth, exposed us
To the void air, and there in light we lay,
Feeble and infant, and were quadrupeds
Before too long, and after a little wobbled
And pulled ourselves upright, holding a chair,
The side of the crib, and strength grew into us,
And swiftness; youth and middle age went swiftly
Down the long hill toward age, and all our vigor
Came to decline, so Milon, the old wrestler,
Weeps when he sees his arms whose bulging muscles
Were once like Hercules', and Helen weeps
To see her wrinkles in the looking glass:
Could this old woman ever have been ravished,
Taken twice over? Time devours all things
With envious Age, together. The slow gnawing
Consumes all things, and very, very slowly.

Not even the so-called elements are constant.
Listen, and I will tell you of their changes.
There are four of them, and two, the earth and water,
Are heavy, and their own weight bears them downward,
And two, the air and fire (and fire is purer
Even than air) are light, rise upward
If nothing holds them down. These elements
Are separate in space, yet all things come
From them and into them, and they can change
Into each other. Earth can be dissolved
To flowing water, water can thin to air,
And air can thin to fire, and fire can thicken
To air again, and air condense to water,
And water be compressed to solid earth.
Nothing remains the same: the great renewer,
Nature, makes form from form, and, oh, believe me

That nothing ever dies. What we call birth
Is the beginning of a difference,
No more than that, and death is only ceasing
Of what had been before. The parts may vary,
Shifting from here to there, hither and yon,
And back again, but the great sum is constant.

Nothing, I am convinced, can be the same
Forever. There was once an Age of God,
Later, an Age of Iron. Every place
Submits to Fortune's wheel. I have seen oceans
That once were solid land, and I have seen
Lands made from ocean. Often sea-shells lie
Far from the beach, and men have found old anchors
On mountain-tops. Plateaus have turned to valleys,
Hills washed away, marshes become dry desert,
Deserts made pools. Here Nature brings forth fountains,
There shuts them in; when the earth quakes, new rivers
Are born and old ones sink and dry and vanish.
Lycus, for instance, swallowed by the earth
Emerges far away, a different stream
And Erasinus disappears, goes under
The ground, and comes to light again in Argos,
And Mysus, so the story goes, was tired
Of his old source and banks and went elsewhere
And now is called Caicus. The Anigrus
Was good to drink from once, but now rolls down
A flood that you had better leave alone,
Unless the poets lie, because the Centaurs
Used it to wash their wounds from Hercules' arrows.
And Hypanis, rising from Scythian mountains,
Once fresh and sweet to the taste, is salty and brackish.
We must not wander far and wide, forgetting
The goal of our discourse. Remember this:
The heavens and all below them, earth and her creatures,
All change, and we, part of creation, also
Must suffer change. We are not bodies only,
But winged spirits, with the power to enter
Animal forms, house in the bodies of cattle.
Therefore, we should respect those dwelling-places
Which may have given shelter to the spirit
Of fathers, brothers, cousins, human beings
At least, and we should never do them damage,
Not stuff ourselves like the cannibal Thyestes.
An evil habit, impious preparation,
Wicked as human bloodshed, to draw the knife
Across the throat of the calf, and hear its anguish
Cry to deaf ears! And who could slay
The little goat whose cry is like a baby's.
Or eat a bird he has himself just fed?
One might as well do murder; he is only
The shortest step away. Let the bull plow
And let him owe his death to length of days;
Let the sheep give you armor for rough weather,
The she-goats bring full udders to the milking.

Have done with nets and traps and snares and springs,
Bird-lime and forest-beaters, lines and fish-hooks.
Kill, if you must, the beasts that do you harm,
But, even so, let killing be enough;
Let appetite refrain from flesh, take only
A gentler nourishment.