

PAUL LAFFOLEY (b. 1940, Cambridge, Massachusetts)

***De Rerum Natura*, 1985**

Oil, acrylic, ink and lettering on canvas
73 1/2 x 73 1/2 in.

Subject:

The Nature of the Universe and the Human Condition

Symbol Evocation:

Venus the Goddess of Creation as Free Will and Chance

Comments:

The details of the life and career of the Roman poet Lucretius (Titus Lucretius Carus, ca. 99-55 BC) are unknown. His famous didactic poem, written in dactylic hexameter, *De Rerum Natura* (On the Nature of Things), presents the world of ontological materialism, a philosophy derived from Democritus (460-370 BC) and his mentor Leucippus (b. 450 BC). Lucretius came to his position on materialism via the ethics of Epicurus (341-270 BC). The resulting way of life that Lucretius preaches is not dissimilar to the contemporary vision of agnostic science.

Although originally written to blunt the fear of death and dispel the superstition of religion, *De Rerum Natura* remains for us a curious precursor of our modern (or should I say post-modern) sensibility of total fanaticism combined with a dynamic indifference toward everything. The *clinamen atomorum*, or the doctrine of chance atomic swerve as the basis of nature and free will, is echoed today by quantum theory which states that nature does not develop smoothly but rather moves by jumps in a milieu of uncertainty. Invoking a complex image of Venus in its six books, the poem states that the universe is composed of three entities: 1) infinite space without form; 2) indestructible atoms, having size, shape, and weight, but no secondary qualities; and 3) the falling of atoms in parallel lines that swerve slightly by chance. These chance swerves form worlds, minds, spirits, and the gods, but when the swerve dissipates all that remains are atoms in the void.