

THE  
SWERVE

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How the World Became Modern

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friends, but neither he nor anyone in his circle had encountered more than a scrap or two of his actual writing, which had, as far as anyone knew, been lost forever.

Poggio may not have had time, in the gathering darkness of the monastic library, and under the wary eyes of the abbot or his librarian, to do more than read the opening lines. But he would have seen immediately that Lucretius' Latin verses were astonishingly beautiful. Ordering his scribe to make a copy, he hurried to liberate it from the monastery. What is not clear is whether he had any intimation at all that he was releasing a book that would help in time to dismantle his entire world.

## IN SEARCH OF LUCRETIOUS

SOME FOURTEEN HUNDRED and fifty years before Poggio set out to see what he could find, Lucretius' contemporaries had read his poem, and it continued to be read for several centuries after its publication. Italian humanists, on the lookout for clues to lost ancient works, would have been alert to even fleeting references in the works of those celebrated authors whose writings had survived in significant quantities. Thus, though he strongly disagreed with its philosophical principles, Cicero—Poggio's favorite Latin writer—conceded the marvelous power of *On the Nature of Things*. "The poetry of Lucretius," he wrote to his brother Quintus on February 11, 54 BCE, "is, as you say in your letter, rich in brilliant genius, yet highly artistic." Cicero's turn of phrase—especially that slightly odd word "yet"—registers his surprise: he was evidently struck by something unusual. He had encountered a poem that conjoined "brilliant genius" in philosophy and science with unusual poetic power. The conjunction was as rare then as it is now.

Cicero and his brother were not alone in grasping that Lucretius had accomplished a near-perfect integration of intellectual distinction and aesthetic mastery. The greatest Roman poet, Virgil, about fifteen years old when Lucretius died, was under the spell of *On the Nature of Things*. "Blessed is he who has

succeeded in finding out the causes of things," Virgil wrote in the *Georgics*, "and has trampled underfoot all fears and inexorable fate and the roar of greedy Acheron." Assuming that this is a subtle allusion to the title of Lucretius' poem, the older poet in this account is a culture hero, someone who has heard the menacing roar of the underworld and triumphed over the superstitious fears that threaten to sap the human spirit. But Virgil did not mention his hero by name, and, though he had certainly read the *Georgics*, Poggio was unlikely to have picked up the allusion before he had actually read Lucretius. Still less would Poggio have been able to grasp the extent to which Virgil's great epic, the *Aeneid*, was a sustained attempt to construct an alternative to *On the Nature of Things*: pious, where Lucretius was skeptical; militantly patriotic, where Lucretius counseled pacifism; soberly renunciatory, where Lucretius embraced the pursuit of pleasure.

What Poggio and other Italian humanists probably did notice, however, were the words of Ovid, words that were enough to send any book hunter scurrying through the catalogs of monastic libraries: "The verses of sublime Lucretius are destined to perish only when a single day will consign the world to destruction."

It is all the more striking then that Lucretius' verses did almost perish—the survival of his work hung by slenderest of threads—and that virtually nothing about his actual identity is reliably known. Many of the major poets and philosophers of ancient Rome had been celebrities in their own time, the objects of gossip which eager book hunters centuries later pored over for clues. But in the case of Lucretius there were almost no biographical traces. The poet must have been a very private person, living his life in the shadows, and he does not seem to have written anything apart from his one great work. That work, difficult and challenging, was hardly the kind of

popular success that got diffused in so many copies that significant fragments of it were assured of surviving into the Middle Ages. Looking back from this distance, with Lucretius' masterpiece securely in hand, modern scholars have been able to identify a network of early medieval signs of the text's existence—a citation here, a catalogue entry there—but most of these would have been invisible to the early fifteenth-century book hunters. They were groping in the dark, sensing perhaps a tiny gossamer filament but unable to track it to its source. And following in their wake, after almost six hundred years of work by classicists, historians, and archaeologists, we know almost nothing more than they did about the identity of the author.

The Lucretii were an old, distinguished Roman clan—as Poggio may have known—but since slaves, when freed, often took the name of the family that had owned them, the author was not necessarily an aristocrat. Still, an aristocratic lineage was plausible, for the simple reason that Lucretius addressed his poem, in terms of easy intimacy, to a nobleman, Gaius Memmius. That name Poggio might have encountered in his wide reading, for Memmius had a relatively successful political career, was a patron of celebrated writers, including the love poet Catullus, and was himself reputed to be a poet (an obscene one, according to Ovid). He was also an orator, as Cicero noted somewhat grudgingly, "of the subtle, ingenious type." But the question remained, who was Lucretius?

The answer, for Poggio and his circle, would have come almost completely from a brief biographical sketch that the great Church Father St. Jerome (c. 340–420 CE) added to an earlier chronicle. In the entry for 94 BCE, Jerome noted that "Titus Lucretius, poet, is born. After a love-philtre had turned him mad, and he had written, in the intervals of his insanity, several books which Cicero revised, he killed himself by his own hand in the forty-fourth year of his age." These lurid details have shaped all subsequent

representations of Lucretius, including a celebrated Victorian poem in which Tennyson imagined the voice of the mad, suicidal philosopher tormented by erotic fantasies.

Modern classical scholarship suggests that every one of Jerome's biographical claims should be taken with a heavy dose of skepticism. They were recorded—or invented—centuries after Lucretius' death by a Christian polemicist who had an interest in telling cautionary tales about pagan philosophers. However, since no good fifteenth-century Christian would have been likely to doubt the saint's account, Poggio must have thought that the poem that he had found and was returning to circulation was tainted by its pagan author's madness and suicide. But the humanist book hunter was part of a generation passionately eager to unearth ancient texts, even by those whose lives epitomized moral confusion and mortal sin. And the thought that Cicero himself had revised the books would have sufficed to quiet any lingering reservations.

In the more than sixteen hundred years that have elapsed since the fourth-century chronicle entry, no further biographical information has turned up, either to confirm or disprove Jerome's story of the love potion and its tragic aftermath. As a person, Lucretius remains almost as little known as he was when Poggio recovered his poem in 1417. Given the extravagance of Ovid's praise of "the verse of sublime Lucretius" and the other signs of the poem's influence, it remains a mystery that so little was said directly about him by his contemporaries and near contemporaries. But archaeological discoveries, made long after Poggio's death, have helped us to get eerily close to the world in which *On the Nature of Things* was first read, and perhaps to the poet himself.

The discoveries were made possible by a famous ancient disaster. On August 24, 79 CE, the massive eruption of Mount Vesuvius completely destroyed not only Pompeii but also the

small seaside resort of Herculaneum on the Bay of Naples. Buried under some sixty-five feet of volcanic debris hardened to the density of concrete, this site, where wealthy Romans had once vacationed in their elegant, colonnaded villas, was forgotten until the early eighteenth century, when workmen, digging a well, uncovered some marble statues. An Austrian officer—for Naples at the time was under the control of Austria—took over, and excavators began digging shafts through the thick crust.

The explorations, which continued when Naples passed into Bourbon hands, were extremely crude, less an archaeological investigation than a prolonged smash-and-grab. The official in charge for more than a decade was a Spanish army engineer, Roque Joaquin de Alcubierre, who seemed to treat the site as an ossified garbage dump in which loot had unaccountably been buried. ("This man," remarked a contemporary, dismayed at the wanton damage, "knew as much of antiquities as the moon does of lobsters.") The diggers burrowed away in search of statues, gems, precious marbles, and other more or less familiar treasures, which they found in abundance and delivered in jumbled heaps to their royal masters.

In 1750, under a new director, the explorers became somewhat more careful about what they were doing. Three years later, tunneling through the remains of one of the villas, they came across something baffling: the ruins of a room graced with a mosaic floor and filled with innumerable objects "about half a palm long, and round," as one of them wrote, "which appeared like roots of wood, all black, and seeming to be only of one piece." At first they thought they had come on a cache of charcoal briquettes, some of which they burned to dissipate the early morning chill. Others thought that the peculiar fragments might have been rolls of burned cloth or fishing nets. Then one of these objects, chancing to fall on the ground, broke open.

The unexpected sight of letters inside what had looked like a charred root made the explorers realize what they were looking at: books. They had stumbled on the remains of a private library.

The volumes that Romans piled up in their libraries were smaller than most modern books: they were for the most part written on scrolls of papyrus. (The word "volume" comes from *volumen*, the Latin word for a thing that is rolled or wound up.) Rolls of papyrus—the plant from which we get our word "paper"—were produced from tall reeds that grew in the marshy delta region of the Nile in Lower Egypt. The reeds were harvested; their stalks cut open and sliced into very thin strips. The strips were laid side by side, slightly overlapping one another; another layer was placed on top, at right angles to the one below; and then the sheet was gently pounded with a mallet. The natural sap that was released allowed the fibers to adhere smoothly to each other, and the individual sheets were then glued into rolls. (The first sheet, on which the contents of the roll could be noted, was called in Greek the *protokolon*, literally, "first glued"—the origin of our word "protocol.") Wooden sticks, attached to one or both of the ends of the roll and slightly projecting from the top and bottom edges, made it easier to scroll through as one read along: to read a book in the ancient world was to unwind it. The Romans called such a stick the *umbilicus*, and to read a book cover-to-cover was "to unroll to the umbilicus."

At first white and flexible, the papyrus would over time gradually get brittle and discolored—nothing lasts forever—but it was lightweight, convenient, relatively inexpensive, and surprisingly durable. Small landowners in Egypt had long realized that they could write their tax receipts on a scrap of papyrus and be reasonably confident that the record would be perfectly legible for years and even generations to come.

Priests could use this medium to record the precise language for supplicating the gods; poets could lay claim to the symbolic immortality they dreamed of in their art; philosophers could convey their thoughts to disciples yet unborn. Romans, like the Greeks before them, easily grasped that this was the best writing material available, and they imported it in bulk from Egypt to meet their growing desire for record keeping, official documents, personal letters, and books. A roll of papyrus might last three hundred years.

The room unearthed in Herculaneum had once been lined with inlaid wooden shelves; at its center were the traces of what had been a large, freestanding, rectangular bookcase. Scattered about were the carbonized remains—so fragile that they fell apart at the touch—of the erasable waxed tablets on which readers once took notes (a bit like the Mystic Writing Pads with which children play today). The shelves had been piled high with papyrus rolls. Some of the rolls, perhaps the more valuable ones, were wrapped about with tree bark and covered with pieces of wood at each end. In another part of the villa, other rolls, now fused into a single mass by the volcanic ash, seemed to have been hastily bundled together in a wooden box, as if someone on the terrible August day had for a brief, wild moment thought to carry some particularly valued books away from the holocaust. Altogether—even with the irrevocable loss of the many that were trashed before it was understood what they were—some eleven hundred books were eventually recovered.

Many of the rolls in what became known as the Villa of the Papyri had been crushed by falling debris and the weight of the heavy mud; all had been carbonized by the volcanic lava, ash, and gas. But what had blackened these books had also preserved them from further decay. For centuries they had in effect been sealed in an airtight container. (Even today only one small seg-

ment of the villa has been exposed to view, and a substantial portion remains unexcavated.) The discoverers, however, were disappointed: they could barely make out anything written on the charcoal-like rolls. And when again and again they tried to unwind them, the rolls inevitably crumbled into fragments.

Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of books were destroyed in these attempts. But eventually a number of the rolls that had been cut open were found to contain near the center some readable portions. At this point—after two years of more or less destructive and fruitless effort—a learned Neapolitan priest who had been working in the Vatican Library in Rome, Father Antonio Piaggio, was called in. Taking issue with the prevailing method of investigation—simply scraping off the charred outer layers of the rolls until some words could be discerned—he invented an ingenious device, a machine that would delicately and slowly unroll the carbonized papyrus scrolls, disclosing much more readable material than anyone had imagined to have survived.

Those who read the recovered texts, carefully flattened and glued onto strips, found that the villa's library (or at least the portion of it that they had found) was a specialized one, many of the rolls being tracts in Greek by a philosopher named Philodemus. The researchers were disappointed—they had been hoping to find lost works by the likes of Sophocles and Virgil—but what they had so implausibly snatched from oblivion has an important bearing on the discovery made centuries earlier by Poggio. For Philodemus, who taught in Rome from about 75 to about 40 BCE, was Lucretius' exact contemporary and a follower of the school of thought most perfectly represented in *On the Nature of Things*.

Why were the works of a minor Greek philosopher in the library of the elegant seaside retreat? And why, for that matter, did a vacation house have an extensive library at all? Philodemus, a pedagogue paid to give lessons and deliver lectures, was certainly not the master of the Villa of the Papyri. But the pres-

ence of a substantial selection of his works probably provides a clue to the owner's interests and illuminates the moment that brought forth Lucretius' poem. That moment was the culmination of a lengthy process that braided together Greek and Roman high culture.

The two cultures had not always been comfortably intertwined. Among the Greeks, Romans had long held the reputation of tough, disciplined people, with a gift for survival and a hunger for conquest. But they were also regarded as barbarians—"refined barbarians," in the moderate view of the Alexandrian scientist Eratosthenes, crude and dangerous barbarians in the view of many others. When their independent city-states were still flourishing, Greek intellectuals collected some arcane lore about the Romans, as they did about the Carthaginians and Indians, but they did not find anything in Roman cultural life worthy of their notice.

The Romans of the early republic might not altogether have disagreed with this assessment. Rome had traditionally been wary of poets and philosophers. It prided itself on being a city of virtue and action, not of flowery words, intellectual speculation, and books. But even as Rome's legions steadily established military dominance over Greece, Greek culture just as steadily began to colonize the minds of the conquerors. Skeptical as ever of effete intellectuals and priding themselves on their practical intelligence, Romans nonetheless acknowledged with growing enthusiasm the achievements of Greek philosophers, scientists, writers, and artists. They made fun of what they took to be the defects of the Greek character, mocking what they saw as its loquaciousness, its taste for philosophizing, and its foppishness. But ambitious Roman families sent their sons to study at the philosophical academies for which Athens was famous, and Greek intellectuals like Philodemus were brought to Rome and paid handsome salaries to teach.

It was never quite respectable for a Roman aristocrat to

admit to a boundlessly ardent Hellenism. Sophisticated Romans found it desirable to downplay a mastery of Greek language and a connoisseur's grasp of Greek art. Yet Roman temples and public spaces were graced with splendid statues stolen from the conquered cities of the Greek mainland and the Peloponnese, while battle-hardened Roman generals adorned their villas with precious Greek vases and sculptures.

The survival of stone and fired clay makes it easy for us to register the pervasive presence in Rome of Greek artifacts, but it was books that carried the full weight of cultural influence. In keeping with the city's martial character, the first great collections were brought there as spoils of war. In 167 BCE the Roman general Aemilius Paulus routed King Perseus of Macedon and put an end to a dynasty that had descended from Alexander the Great and his father Philip. Perseus and his three sons were sent in chains to be paraded through the streets of Rome behind the triumphal chariot. In the tradition of national kleptocracy, Aemilius Paulus shipped back enormous plunder to deposit in the Roman treasury. But for himself and his children the conqueror reserved only a single prize: the captive monarch's library. The gesture was evidence, of course, of the aristocratic general's personal fortune, but it was also a spectacular signal of the value of Greek books and the culture these books embodied.

Others followed in Aemilius Paulus' wake. It became increasingly fashionable for wealthy Romans to amass large private libraries in their town houses and country villas. (There were no bookshops in the early years in Rome, but, in addition to the collections seized as booty, books could be purchased from dealers in southern Italy and Sicily where the Greeks had founded such cities as Naples, Tarentum, and Syracuse.) The grammarian Tyrannion is reputed to have had 30,000 volumes; Serenus Sammonicus, a physician who was an expert on the

use of the magical formula "Abracadabra" to ward off illness, had more than 60,000. Rome had caught the Greek fever for books.

Lucretius lived his life in a culture of wealthy private book collectors, and the society into which he launched his poem was poised to expand the circle of reading to a larger public. In 40 BCE, a decade after Lucretius' death, Rome's first public library was established by a friend of the poet Virgil, Asinius Pollio. The idea seems to have originated with Julius Caesar, who admired the public libraries he had seen in Greece, Asia Minor, and Egypt, and determined to bestow such an institution upon the Roman people. But Caesar was assassinated before he could carry out the plan, and it took Pollio, who had sided with Caesar against Pompey and then with Mark Antony against Brutus, to do so. A skillful military commander, canny (or extremely lucky) in his choice of allies, Pollio was also a man of broad literary interests. Apart from a few fragments of his speeches, all of his writings are now lost, but he composed tragedies—worthy of Sophocles, according to Virgil—histories, and literary criticism, and he was one of the first Roman authors to recite his writings to an audience of his friends.

The library established by Pollio was built on the Aventine Hill and paid for, in the typical Roman way, by wealth seized from the conquered—in this case, from a people on the Adriatic coast who had made the mistake of backing Brutus against Antony. Shortly afterwards, the emperor Augustus founded two more public libraries, and many subsequent emperors followed in his wake. (Altogether, by the fourth century CE, there were twenty-eight public libraries in Rome.) The structures, all of which have been destroyed, evidently followed the same general pattern, one that would be familiar to us. There was a large reading room adjoining smaller rooms in which the collections were stored in numbered bookcases. The reading room,

either rectangular or semicircular in shape and sometimes lit through a circular opening in the roof, was adorned with busts or life-sized statues of celebrated writers: Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, among others. The statues functioned, as they do for us, as an honorific, a gesture toward the canon of writers whom every civilized person should know. But in Rome they may have had an additional significance, akin to the masks of ancestors that Romans traditionally kept in their houses and that they donned on commemorative occasions. That is, they were signs of access to the spirits of the dead, symbols of the spirits that the books enabled readers to conjure up.

Many other cities of the ancient world came to boast public collections, endowed by tax revenues or by the gifts of wealthy, civic-minded donors. Greek libraries had had few amenities, but throughout their territories the Romans designed comfortable chairs and tables where readers could sit and slowly unfold the papyrus, the left hand rolling up each column after it was read. The great architect Vitruvius—one of the ancient writers whose work Poggio recovered—advised that libraries should face toward the east, to catch the morning light and reduce the humidity that might damage books. Excavations at Pompeii and elsewhere have uncovered the plaques honoring the donors, along with statuary, writing tables, shelves to store papyrus rolls, numbered bookcases to hold the bound parchment volumes or codices that gradually began to supplement the rolls, and even graffiti scribbled on the walls. The resemblance to the design of public libraries in our own society is no accident: our sense that a library is a public good and our idea of what such a place should look like derive precisely from a model created in Rome several thousand years ago.

Through the massive extent of the Roman world, whether on the banks of the Rhône in Gaul or near the grove and Temple of Daphne in the province of Syria, on the island of Cos, near Rhodes, or in Dyrhkhion in what is now Albania, the

houses of cultivated men and women had rooms set aside for quiet reading. Papyrus rolls were carefully indexed, labeled (with a protruding tag called in Greek a *sillybos*), and stacked on shelves or stored in leather baskets. Even in the elaborate bath complexes that Romans loved, reading rooms, decorated with busts of Greek and Latin authors, were carefully designed to make it possible for educated Romans to combine care for the body with care for the mind. By the first century CE there were distinctive signs of the emergence of what we think of as a “literary culture.” At the games in the Colosseum one day, the historian Tacitus had a conversation on literature with a perfect stranger who turned out to have read his works. Culture was no longer located in close-knit circles of friends and acquaintances; Tacitus was encountering his “public” in the form of someone who had bought his book at a stall in the Forum or read it in a library. This broad commitment to reading, with its roots in the everyday lives of the Roman elite over many generations, explains why a pleasure palace like the Villa of the Papyri had a well-stocked library.

In the 1980s, modern archaeologists resumed serious work on the buried villa, in the hopes of gaining a better understanding of the whole style of life expressed in its design, a design vividly evoked in the architecture of the Getty Museum in Malibu, California, where some of the statues and other treasures found at Herculaneum now reside. The bulk of the marble and bronze masterpieces—images of gods and goddesses, portrait busts of philosophers, orators, poets, and playwrights; a graceful young athlete; a wild boar in mid-leap; a drunken satyr; a sleeping satyr; and a startlingly obscene Pan and goat in *flagrante delicto*—are now in the National Museum in Naples.

The renewed exploration got off to a slow start: the rich vol-



canic soil covering the site was used to grow carnations, and the owners were understandably reluctant to permit excavators to disrupt their business. But after lengthy negotiations, researchers were permitted to descend the shafts and approach the villa in small gondolalike craft that could glide safely through tunnels that had been bored through the ruins. In these eerie conditions, they succeeded in mapping the villa's layout more accurately than ever before, charting the precise dimensions of the atrium, the square and rectangular peristyles, and other structures, and locating as they did so such features as a large mosaic floor and an unusual double column. Traces of vine shoots and leaves enabled them to determine the precise site of the garden where some two thousand years ago the wealthy proprietor and his cultivated friends once came together.

It is, of course, impossible at this great distance in time to know exactly what these particular people talked about, during the long sunlit afternoons in the colonnaded garden at Herculaneum, but an intriguing further clue turned up, also in the 1980s. Scholars, this time above ground, were at work once again on the blackened papyri that had been discovered by the eighteenth-century treasure hunters. These scrolls, hardened into lumps, had resisted the early attempts to open them and had sat for more than two centuries in the National Library of Naples. In 1987, using new techniques, Tommaso Starace managed to open two badly preserved papyri. He mounted the legible fragments from these books—unread since the ancient volcanic eruption—on Japanese paper, micro-photographed them, and undertook to decipher the contents. Two years later Knut Kleve, a distinguished Norwegian papyrologist (as those who specialize in deciphering papyri are called), made an announcement: "*De rerum natura* has been rediscovered in Herculaneum, 235 years after the papyri were found."

The world at large understandably took this announcement

in stride—that is, ignored it altogether—and even scholars interested in ancient culture may be forgiven for giving the news, buried in volume 19 of the massive Italian *Chronicles of Herculaneum*, little or no attention. What Kleve and his colleagues had found were only sixteen minuscule fragments—little more than words or parts of words—that, under close analysis, could be shown to come from books 1, 3, 4, and 5 of the six-book-long Latin poem. Forlorn pieces from an enormous jigsaw puzzle, the fragments by themselves are virtually meaningless. But their range suggests that the whole of *De rerum natura* was in the library, and the presence of that poem in the Villa of the Papyri is tantalizing.

The discoveries at Herculaneum enable us to glimpse the social circles where the poem that Poggio found in the monastic library had originally circulated. In the monastic library, among the missals, confessional manuals, and theological tomes, Lucretius' work was an uncanny stranger, a relic that had floated ashore from distant shipwreck. In Herculaneum, it was a native. The contents of the surviving rolls suggest that the villa's collection focused precisely on the school of thought of which *De rerum natura* is the most remarkable surviving expression.

Though the identity of the villa's owner during Lucretius' lifetime is unknown, the strongest candidate is Lucius Calpurnius Piso. This powerful politician, who had served for a time as governor of the province of Macedonia and was, among other things, Julius Caesar's father-in-law, had an interest in Greek philosophy. Cicero, a political enemy, pictured Piso singing obscene ditties and lolling naked "amid his tipsy and malodorous Greeks"; but, judging from the contents of the library, the guests during the afternoons in Herculaneum were likely to have been devoted to more refined pursuits.

Piso is known to have had a personal acquaintance with

Philodemus. In an epigram discovered in one of his books in the charred library, the philosopher invites Piso to join him in his own modest home to celebrate a "Twentieth"—a monthly feast observed in honor of Epicurus, born on the twentieth of the Greek month of Gamelion:

Tomorrow, friend Piso, your musical comrade drags you  
to his modest  
digs at three in the afternoon,  
feeding you at your annual visit to the Twentieth. If you  
will miss udders  
and Bromian wine *mis en bouteilles* in Chios,  
yet you will see faithful comrades, yet you will hear  
things far sweeter  
than the land of the Phaeacians.  
And if you ever turn your eye our way too, Piso, instead  
of a modest  
Twentieth we shall lead a richer one.

The closing lines morph into an appeal for money or perhaps express the hope that Philodemus will himself be invited to an afternoon of philosophical conversation and expensive wine at Piso's grand villa. Half-reclining on couches, under the shade of trellised vines and silken canopies, the privileged men and women who were Piso's guests—for it is entirely possible that some women participated in the conversation as well—had much to think about. Rome had been afflicted for years by political and social unrest, culminating in several vicious civil wars, and though the violence had abated, the threats to peace and stability were by no means safely past. Ambitious generals relentlessly jockeyed for position; murmuring troops had to be paid in cash and land; the provinces were restive, and rumors of trouble in Egypt had already caused grain prices to soar.

But cosseted by slaves, in the comfort and security of the elegant villa, the proprietor and his guests had the temporary luxury of regarding these menaces as relatively remote, remote enough at least to allow them to pursue civilized conversations. Staring up idly at nearby Vesuvius, they may well have felt some queasiness about the future, but they were an elite, living at the center of the world's greatest power, and one of their most cherished privileges was the cultivation of the life of the mind.

Romans of the late republic were remarkably tenacious about this privilege, which they clung to in circumstances that would have made others quail and run for cover. For them it seemed to function as a sign that their world was still intact or at least that they were secure in their innermost lives. Like a man who, hearing the distant sound of sirens in the street, sits down at the Bechstein to play a Beethoven sonata, the men and women in the garden affirmed their urbane security by immersing themselves in speculative dialogue.

In the years leading up to the assassination of Julius Caesar, philosophical speculation was hardly the only available response to social stress. Religious cults originating in far-off places like Persia, Syria, and Palestine began to make their way to the capital, where they aroused wild fears and expectations, particularly among the plebs. A handful of the elite—those more insecure or simply curious—may have attended with something other than contempt to the prophecies from the east, prophecies of a saviour born of obscure parentage who would be brought low, suffer terribly, and yet ultimately triumph. But most would have regarded such tales as the overheated fantasies of a sect of stiff-necked Jews.

Those of a pious disposition would far more likely have gone as supplicants to the temples and chapels to the gods that dotted the fertile landscape. It was, in any case, a world in

which nature seemed saturated with the presence of the divine, on mountaintops and springs, in the thermal vents that spewed smoke from a mysterious realm under the earth, in ancient groves of trees on whose branches the faithful hung colorful cloths. But though the villa in Herculaneum was in close proximity to this intense religious life, it is unlikely that many of those with the sophisticated intellectual tastes reflected in the library joined processions of pious supplicants. Judging from the contents of the charred papyrus scrolls, the villa's inhabitants seem to have turned not to ritual but to conversation about the meaning of life.

Ancient Greeks and Romans did not share our idealization of isolated geniuses, working alone to think through the knottiest problems. Such scenes—Descartes in his secret retreat, calling everything into question, or the excommunicated Spinoza quietly reasoning to himself while grinding lenses—would eventually become our dominant emblem of the life of the mind. But this vision of proper intellectual pursuits rested on a profound shift in cultural prestige, one that began with the early Christian hermits who deliberately withdrew from whatever it was that pagans valued: St. Anthony (250–356) in the desert or St. Symeon Stylites (390–459) perched on his column. Such figures, modern scholars have shown, characteristically had in fact bands of followers, and though they lived apart, they often played a significant role in the life of large communities. But the dominant cultural image that they fashioned—or that came to be fashioned around them—was of radical isolation.

Not so the Greeks and Romans. As thinking and writing generally require quiet and a minimum of distraction, their poets and philosophers must have periodically pulled away from the noise and business of the world in order to accomplish what they did. But the image that they projected was social. Poets depicted themselves as shepherds singing to other shep-

herds; philosophers depicted themselves engaged in long conversations, often stretching out over several days. The pulling away from the distractions of the everyday world was figured not as a retreat to the solitary cell but as a quiet exchange of words among friends in a garden.

Humans, Aristotle wrote, are social animals: to realize one's nature as a human then was to participate in a group activity. And the activity of choice, for cultivated Romans, as for the Greeks before them, was discourse. There is, Cicero remarked at the beginning of a typical philosophical work, a wide diversity of opinion about the most important religious questions. "This has often struck me," Cicero wrote,

but it did so with especial force on one occasion, when the topic of the immortal gods was made the subject of a very searching and thorough discussion at the house of my friend Gaius Cotta.

It was the Latin Festival, and I had come at Cotta's express invitation to pay him a visit. I found him sitting in an alcove, engaged in debate with Gaius Velleius, a Member of the Senate, accounted by the Epicureans as their chief Roman adherent at the time. With them was Quintus Lucilius Balbus, who was so accomplished a student of Stoicism as to rank with the leading Greek exponents of that system.

Cicero does not want to present his thoughts to his readers as a tract composed after solitary reflection; he wants to present them as an exchange of views among social and intellectual equals, a conversation in which he himself plays only a small part and in which there will be no clear victor.

The end of this dialogue—a long work that would have filled several sizable papyrus rolls—is characteristically inconclusive:

“Here the conversation ended, and we parted, Velleius thinking Cotta’s discourse to be the truer, while I felt that that of Balbus approximated more nearly to a semblance of the truth.” The inconclusiveness is not intellectual modesty—Cicero was not a modest man—but a strategy of civilized openness among friends. The exchange itself, not its final conclusions, carries much of the meaning. The discussion itself is what most matters, the fact that we can reason together easily, with a blend of wit and seriousness, never descending into gossip or slander and always allowing room for alternative views. “The one who engages in conversation,” Cicero wrote, “should not debar others from participating in it, as if he were entering upon a private monopoly; but, as in other things, so in a general conversation he should think it not unfair for each to have his turn.”

The dialogues Cicero and others wrote were not transcriptions of real exchanges, though the characters in them were real, but they were idealized versions of conversations that undoubtedly occurred in places like the villa in Herculaneum. The conversations in that particular setting, to judge from the topics of the charred books found in the buried library, touched on music, painting, poetry, the art of public speaking, and other subjects of perennial interest to cultivated Greeks and Romans. They are likely to have turned as well to more troubling scientific, ethical, and philosophical questions: What is the cause of thunder or earthquakes or eclipses—are they signs from the gods, as some claim, or do they have an origin in nature? How can we understand the world we inhabit? What goals should we be pursuing in our lives? Does it make sense to devote one’s life to the pursuit of power? How are good and evil to be defined? What happens to us when we die?

That the villa’s powerful owner and his friends took pleasure in grappling with such questions and were willing to devote significant periods of their very busy lives to teasing

out possible answers reflects their conception of an existence appropriate for people of their education, class, and status. It reflects as well something extraordinary about the mental or spiritual world they inhabited, something noted in one of his letters by the French novelist Gustave Flaubert: “Just when the gods had ceased to be, and the Christ had not yet come, there was a unique moment in history, between Cicero and Marcus Aurelius, when man stood alone.” No doubt one could quibble with this claim. For many Romans at least, the gods had not actually ceased to be—even the Epicureans, sometimes reputed to be atheists, thought that gods existed, though at a far remove from the affairs of mortals—and the “unique moment” to which Flaubert gestures, from Cicero (106–43 BCE) to Marcus Aurelius (121–180 CE), may have been longer or shorter than the time frame he suggests. But the core perception is eloquently borne out by Cicero’s dialogues and by the works found in the library of Herculaneum. Many of the early readers of those works evidently lacked a fixed repertory of beliefs and practices reinforced by what was said to be the divine will. They were men and women whose lives were unusually free of the dictates of the gods (or their priests). Standing alone, as Flaubert puts it, they found themselves in the peculiar position of choosing among sharply divergent visions of the nature of things and competing strategies for living.

The charred fragments in the library give us a glimpse of how the villa’s residents made this choice, whom they wished to read, what they are likely to have discussed, whom they might have summoned to enter into the conversation. And here the Norwegian papyrologist’s tiny fragments become deeply resonant. Lucretius was a contemporary of Philodemus and, more important, of Philodemus’ patron, who may, when he invited friends to join him for an afternoon on the verdant slopes of the volcano, have shared with them passages from *On the Nature of*

*Things*. Indeed, the wealthy patron with philosophical interests could have wished to meet the author in person. It would have been a small matter to send a few slaves and a litter to carry Lucretius to Herculaneum to join the guests. And therefore it is even remotely possible that, reclining on a couch, Lucretius himself read aloud from the very manuscript whose fragments survive.

If Lucretius had participated in the conversations at the villa, it is clear enough what he would have said. His own conclusions would not have been inconclusive or tinged with skepticism, in the manner of Cicero. The answers to all of their questions, he passionately argued, were to be found in the work of a man whose portrait bust and writings graced the villa's library, the philosopher Epicurus.

It was only Epicurus, Lucretius wrote, who could cure the miserable condition of the man who, bored to death at home, rushes off frantically to his country villa only to find that he is just as oppressed in spirit. Indeed, in Lucretius' view, Epicurus, who had died more than two centuries earlier, was nothing less than the saviour. When "human life lay groveling ignominiously in the dust, crushed beneath the grinding weight of superstition," Lucretius wrote, one supremely brave man arose and became "the first who ventured to confront it boldly." (1.62ff.) This hero—one strikingly at odds with a Roman culture that traditionally prided itself on toughness, pragmatism, and military virtue—was a Greek who triumphed not through the force of arms but through the power of intellect.

*On the Nature of Things* is the work of a disciple who is transmitting ideas that had been developed centuries earlier. Epicurus, Lucretius' philosophical messiah, was born toward the end of

342 BCE on the Aegean island of Samos where his father, a poor Athenian schoolmaster, had gone as a colonist. Many Greek philosophers, including Plato and Aristotle, came from wealthy families and prided themselves on their distinguished ancestry. Epicurus decidedly had no comparable claims. His philosophical enemies, basking in their social superiority, made much of the modesty of his background. He assisted his father in his school for a pittance, they sneered, and used to go round with his mother to cottages to read charms. One of his brothers, they added, was a pander and lived with a prostitute. This was not a philosopher with whom respectable people should associate themselves.

That Lucretius and many others did more than simply associate themselves with Epicurus—that they celebrated him as godlike in his wisdom and courage—depended not on his social credentials but upon what they took to be the saving power of his vision. The core of this vision may be traced back to a single incandescent idea: that everything that has ever existed and everything that will ever exist is put together out of indestructible building blocks, irreducibly small in size, unimaginably vast in number. The Greeks had a word for these invisible building blocks, things that, as they conceived them, could not be divided any further: atoms.

The notion of atoms, which originated in the fifth century BCE with Leucippus of Abdera and his prize student Democritus, was only a dazzling speculation; there was no way to get any empirical proof and wouldn't be for more than two thousand years. Other philosophers had competing theories: the core matter of the universe, they argued, was fire or water or air or earth, or some combination of these. Others suggested that if you could perceive the smallest particle of a man, you would find an infinitesimally tiny man; and similarly for a horse, a droplet of water, or a blade of grass. Others again proposed that

the intricate order in the universe was evidence of an invisible mind or spirit that carefully put the pieces together according to a preconceived plan. Democritus' conception of an infinite number of atoms that have no qualities except size, figure, and weight—particles then that are not miniature versions of what we see but rather form what we see by combining with each other in an inexhaustible variety of shapes—was a fantastically daring solution to a problem that engaged the great intellects of his world.

It took many generations to think through the implications of this solution. (We have by no means yet thought through them all.) Epicurus began his efforts to do so at the age of twelve, when to his disgust his teachers could not explain to him the meaning of chaos. Democritus' old idea of atoms seemed to him the most promising clue, and he set to work to follow it wherever it would take him. By the age of thirty-two he was ready to found a school. There, in a garden in Athens, Epicurus constructed a whole account of the universe and a philosophy of human life.

In constant motion, atoms collide with each other, Epicurus reasoned, and in certain circumstances, they form larger and larger bodies. The largest observable bodies—the sun and the moon—are made of atoms, just as are human beings and water-fles and grains of sand. There are no supercategories of matter; no hierarchy of elements. Heavenly bodies are not divine beings who shape our destiny for good or ill, nor do they move through the void under the guidance of gods: they are simply part of the natural order, enormous structures of atoms subject to the same principles of creation and destruction that govern everything that exists. And if the natural order is unimaginably vast and complex, it is nonetheless possible to understand something of its basic constitutive elements and its universal laws. Indeed, such understanding is one of human life's deepest pleasures.

This pleasure is perhaps the key to comprehending the powerful impact of Epicurus' philosophy; it was as if he unlocked for his followers an inexhaustible source of gratification hidden within Democritus' atoms. For us, the impact is rather difficult to grasp. For one thing, the pleasure seems too intellectual to reach more than a tiny number of specialists; for another, we have come to associate atoms far more with fear than with gratification. But though ancient philosophy was hardly a mass movement, Epicurus was offering something more than caviar to a handful of particle physicists. Indeed, eschewing the self-enclosed, specialized language of an inner circle of adepts, he insisted on using ordinary language, on addressing the widest circle of listeners, even on proselytizing. And the enlightenment he offered did not require sustained scientific inquiry. You did not need a detailed grasp of the actual laws of the physical universe; you needed only to comprehend that there is a hidden natural explanation for everything that alarms or eludes you. That explanation will inevitably lead you back to atoms. If you can hold on to and repeat to yourself the simplest fact of existence—atoms and void and nothing else, atoms and void and nothing else, atoms and void and nothing else—your life will change. You will no longer fear Jove's wrath, whenever you hear a peal of thunder, or suspect that someone has offended Apollo, whenever there is an outbreak of influenza. And you will be freed from a terrible affliction—what Hamlet, many centuries later, described as “the dread of something after death, / The undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveller returns.”

The affliction—the fear of some horrendous punishment waiting for one in a realm beyond the grave—no longer weighs heavily on most modern men and women, but it evidently did in the ancient Athens of Epicurus and the ancient Rome of Lucretius, and it did as well in the Christian world inhabited by Poggio. Certainly Poggio would have seen images of such

horrors, lovingly carved on the tympanum above the doors to churches or painted on their inner walls. And those horrors were in turn modeled on accounts of the afterlife fashioned in the pagan imagination. To be sure, not everyone in any of these periods, pagan or Christian, believed in such accounts. Aren't you terrified, one of the characters in a dialogue by Cicero asks, by the underworld, with its terrible three-headed dog, its black river, its hideous punishments? "Do you suppose me so crazy as to believe such tales?" his companion replies. Fear of death is not about the fate of Sisyphus and Tantalus: "Where is the crone so silly as to be afraid" of such scare stories? It is about the dread of suffering and the dread of perishing, and it is difficult to understand, Cicero wrote, why the Epicureans think that they are offering any palliative. To be told that one perishes completely and forever, soul as well as body, is hardly a robust consolation.

Followers of Epicurus responded by recalling the last days of the master, dying from an excruciating obstruction of the bladder but achieving serenity of spirit by recalling all of the pleasures he had experienced in his life. It is not clear that this model was easily imitable—"Who can hold a fire in his hand/ By thinking on the frosty Caucasus?" as one of Shakespeare's characters asks—but then it is not clear that any of the available alternatives, in a world without Demerol or morphine, was more successful at dealing with death agonies. What the Greek philosopher offered was not help in dying but help in living. Liberated from superstition, Epicurus taught, you would be free to pursue pleasure.

Epicurus' enemies seized upon his celebration of pleasure and invented malicious stories of his debauchery, stories heightened by his unusual inclusion of women as well as men among his followers. He "vomited twice a day from over-indulgence," went one of these stories, and spent a fortune on his feasting.

In reality, the philosopher seems to have lived a conspicuously simple and frugal life. "Send me a pot of cheese," he wrote once to a friend, "that, when I like, I may fare sumptuously." So much for the alleged abundance of his table. And he urged a comparable frugality on his students. The motto carved over the door to Epicurus' garden urged the stranger to linger, for "here our highest good is pleasure." But according to the philosopher Seneca, who quotes these words in a famous letter that Poggio and his friends knew and admired, the passerby who entered would be served a simple meal of barley gruel and water. "When we say, then, that pleasure is the goal," Epicurus wrote in one of his few surviving letters, "we do not mean the pleasures of the prodigal or the pleasures of sensuality." The feverish attempt to satisfy certain appetites—"an unbroken succession of drinking bouts and of revelry . . . sexual love . . . the enjoyment of the fish and other delicacies of a luxurious table"—cannot lead to the peace of mind that is the key to enduring pleasure.

"Men suffer the worst evils for the sake of the most alien desires," wrote his disciple Philodemus, in one of the books found in the library at Herculaneum, and "they neglect the most necessary appetites as if they were the most alien to nature." What are these necessary appetites that lead to pleasure? It is impossible to live pleasurably, Philodemus continued, "without living prudently and honourably and justly, and also without living courageously and temperately and magnanimously, and without making friends, and without being philanthropic."

This is the voice of an authentic follower of Epicurus, a voice recovered in modern times from a volcano-blackened papyrus roll. But it is hardly the voice that anyone familiar with the term "Epicureanism" would ever expect. In one of his memorable satirical grotesques, Shakespeare's contemporary Ben Jonson perfectly depicted the spirit in which Epicurus' philosophy was for long centuries widely understood. "I'll have all my beds



blown up, not stuffed," Jonson's character declares. "Down is too hard."

My meat shall all come in in Indian shells,  
 Dishes of agate, set in gold, and studded,  
 With emeralds, sapphires, hyacinths, and rubies. . . .  
 My foot-boy shall eat pheasants, calvered salmons,  
 Knots, godwits, lampreys. I myself will have  
 The beards of barbels served instead of salads;  
 Oiled mushrooms; and the swelling unctuous paps  
 Of a fat pregnant sow, newly cut off,  
 Drest with an exquisite and poignant sauce;  
 For which, I'll say unto my cook, "There's gold,  
 Go forth and be a knight."

The name Jonson gave to this mad pleasure seeker is Sir Epicure Mammon.

A philosophical claim that life's ultimate goal is pleasure—even if that pleasure was defined in the most restrained and responsible terms—was a scandal, both for pagans and for their adversaries, the Jews and later the Christians. Pleasure as the highest good? What about worshipping the gods and ancestors? Serving the family, the city, and the state? Scrupulously observing the laws and commandments? Pursuing virtue or a vision of the divine? These competing claims inevitably entailed forms of ascetic self-denial, self-sacrifice, even self-loathing. None was compatible with the pursuit of pleasure as the highest good. Two thousand years after Epicurus lived and taught, the sense of scandal was still felt intensely enough to generate the manic energy in travesties like Jonson's.

Behind such travesties lay a half-hidden fear that to maximize pleasure and to avoid pain were in fact appealing goals and might plausibly serve as the rational organizing principles

of human life. If they succeeded in doing so, a whole set of time-honored alternative principles—sacrifice, ambition, social status, discipline, piety—would be challenged, along with the institutions that such principles served. To push the Epicurean pursuit of pleasure toward grotesque sensual self-indulgence—depicted as the single-minded pursuit of sex or power or money or even (as in Jonson) extravagant, absurdly expensive food—helped to ward off the challenge.

In his secluded garden in Athens, the real Epicurus, dining on cheese, bread, and water, lived a quiet life. Indeed, one of the more legitimate charges against him was that his life was *too* quiet: he counseled his followers against a full, robust engagement in the affairs of the city. "Some men have sought to become famous and renowned," he wrote, "thinking that thus they would make themselves secure against their fellowmen." If security actually came with fame and renown, then the person who sought them attained a "natural good." But if fame actually brought heightened insecurity, as it did in most cases, then such an achievement was not worth pursuing. From this perspective, Epicurus' critics observed, it would be difficult to justify most of the restless striving and risk taking that leads to a city's greatness.

Such a criticism of Epicurean quietism may well have been voiced in the sun-drenched garden of Herculaneum: the guests at the Villa of the Papyri, after all, would probably have included their share of those who sought fame and renown at the center of the greatest city in the Western world. But perhaps Julius Caesar's father-in-law—if Piso was indeed the villa's owner—and some in his circle of friends were drawn to this philosophical school precisely because it offered an alternative to their stressful endeavors. Rome's enemies were falling before the might of its legions, but it did not take prophetic powers to perceive ominous signs for the future of the republic. And even



for those most safely situated, it was difficult to gainsay one of Epicurus' celebrated aphorisms: "Against other things it is possible to obtain security, but when it comes to death we human beings all live in an unwalled city." The key point, as Epicurus' disciple Lucretius wrote in verses of unrivalled beauty, was to abandon the anxious and doomed attempt to build higher and higher walls and to turn instead toward the cultivation of pleasure.

## THE TEETH OF TIME

A PART FROM THE charred papyrus fragments recovered in Herculaneum and another cache of fragments discovered in rubbish mounds in the ancient Egyptian city of Oxyrhynchus, there are no surviving contemporary manuscripts from the ancient Greek and Roman world. Everything that has reached us is a copy, most often very far removed in time, place, and culture from the original. And these copies represent only a small portion of the works even of the most celebrated writers of antiquity. Of Aeschylus' eighty or ninety plays and the roughly one hundred twenty by Sophocles, only seven each have survived; Euripides and Aristophanes did slightly better: eighteen of ninety-two plays by the former have come down to us; eleven of forty-three by the latter.

These are the great success stories. Virtually the entire output of many other writers, famous in antiquity, has disappeared without a trace. Scientists, historians, mathematicians, philosophers, and statesmen have left behind some of their achievements—the invention of trigonometry, for example, or the calculation of position by reference to latitude and longitude, or the rational analysis of political power—but their books are gone. The indefatigable scholar Didymus of Alexandria earned the nickname Bronze-Ass (literally, "Brazen-Bowelled") for having what it took to write more than 3,500 books; apart from