

*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.

Epicurus → Lucretius → us!

*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 waterflies 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

translation known as the Vulgate, was in the sixteenth century declared by the Catholic Church to be "more authentic" than the original.

There is, as Jerome's nightmare suggests, a distinctly destructive element in his piety. Or rather, from the perspective of his piety, his intense pleasure in pagan literature was destroying him. It was not a matter merely of spending more of his time with Christian texts but of giving up the pagan texts altogether. He bound himself with a solemn oath: "O Lord, if ever again I possess worldly books or read them, I have denied thee." This renunciation of the authors he loved was a personal affair: he had in effect to cure himself of a dangerous addiction in order to save his soul. But the addiction—and hence the need for renunciation—was not his alone. What he found so alluring was what kept many others like him in thrall to pagan authors. He therefore had to persuade others to make the sacrifice he had made. "What has Horace to do with the Psalter," he wrote to one of his followers, "Virgil with the Gospels and Cicero with Paul?"

For many generations, learned Christians remained steeped, as Jerome was, in a culture whose values had been shaped by the pagan classics. Platonism contributed to Christianity its model of the soul; Aristotelianism its Prime Mover; Stoicism its model of Providence. All the more reason why those Christians repeated to themselves exemplary stories of renunciation. Through the telling of these stories, they acted out, as in a dream, the abandonment of the rich cultural soil in which they, their parents, and their grandparents were nurtured, until one day they awoke to find that they actually had abandoned it.

The knights of renunciation, as in a popular romance, were almost always glamorous figures who cast off the greatest symbol of their status—their intimate access to an elite education—for the sake of the religion they loved. The moment

of renunciation came after rigorous training in grammar and rhetoric, engagement with the literary masterpieces, immersion in the myths. Only in the sixth century did Christians venture to celebrate as heroes those who dispensed entirely with education, and even then one can observe a certain hesitation or compromise. Here is Gregory the Great's celebration of St. Benedict:

He was born in the district of Norcia of distinguished parents, who sent him to Rome for a liberal education. But when he saw many of his fellow students falling headlong into vice, he stepped back from the threshold of the world in which he had just set foot. For he was afraid that if he acquired any of its learning he, too, would later plunge, body and soul, into the dread abyss. In his desire to please God alone, he turned his back on further studies, gave up home and inheritance and resolved to embrace the religious life. He took this step, well aware of his ignorance, yet wise, uneducated though he was.

What flickers through such moments of abdication is a fear of being laughed at. The threat was not persecution—the official religion of the empire by this time was Christian—but ridicule. A fate no doubt preferable to being thrown to the lions, laughter in the ancient world nonetheless had very sharp teeth. What was ridiculous about Christianity, from the perspective of a cultivated pagan, was not only its language—the crude style of the Gospels' Greek resting on the barbarous otherness of Hebrew and Aramaic—but also its exaltation of divine humiliation and pain conjoined with an arrogant triumphalism.

When Christianity had completely secured its position, it managed to destroy most of the expressions of this hostile

Dr... Christianity vs. threat of non-superstitionism of Epicureanism

laughter. A few traces, however, survive in the quotations and summaries of Christian apologists. Some of the jibes were common to all of Christianity's polemical enemies—Jesus was born in adultery, his father was a nobody, and any claims to divine dignity are manifestly disproved by his poverty and his shameful end—but others bring us closer to the specific strain of mockery that surged up from Epicurean circles, when they encountered the messianic religion from Palestine. That mockery and the particular challenge it posed for early Christians set the stage for the subsequent disappearance of the whole Epicurean school of thought: Plato and Aristotle, pagans who believed in the immortality of the soul, could ultimately be accommodated by a triumphant Christianity; Epicureanism could not.

Epicurus did not deny the existence of gods. Rather, he thought that if the concept of divinity made any sense at all, the gods could not possibly be concerned with anything but their own pleasures. Neither creators of the universe nor its destroyers, utterly indifferent to the doings of any beings other than themselves, they were deaf to our prayers or our rituals. The Incarnation, Epicureans scoffed, was a particularly absurd idea. Why should the humans think of themselves as so superior to bees, elephants, ants, or any of the available species, now or in eons to come, that god should take their form and not another? And why then, among all the varieties of humans, should he have taken the form of a Jew? Why should anyone with any sense credit the idea of Providence, a childish idea contradicted by any rational adult's experience and observation? Christians are like a council of frogs in a pond, croaking at the top of their lungs, "For our sakes was the world created."

Christians could try, of course, to reverse the mockery. If such doctrines as the Incarnation and the resurrection of the body seemed absurd—"figments of diseased imagination," as

one pagan put it, "and the futile fairy-tales invented by poets' fancy"—what about the tales that pagans profess to believe:

Vulcan is lame and crippled; Apollo after years and years still beardless . . . Neptune has sea-green eyes; Minerva grey, like a cat's, Juno those of an ox . . . Janus has two faces, ready to walk backwards; Diana is sometimes short-kilted for the hunt, while at Ephesus she is figured with many breasts and paps.

But there is, of course, something uncomfortable about the "back-to-you" strategy, since the alleged ridiculousness of one set of beliefs hardly shores up the validity of another.

Christians knew, moreover, that many pagans did not believe in the literal truth of their own myths and that there were some—Epicureans prominent among them—who called into question virtually all religious systems and promises. Such enemies of faith found the doctrine of bodily resurrection particularly risible, since it was contradicted both by their scientific theory of atoms and by the evidence of their own senses: the rotting corpses that testified with nauseating eloquence to the dissolution of the flesh.

The early Church Father Tertullian vehemently insisted that, despite all appearances, everything would come back in the afterlife, down to the last details of the mortal body. He knew all too well the responses he would get from the doubters:

What will be the use of the hands themselves and the feet and all the working parts of the body, when even trouble about food will cease? What will be the use of the kidneys . . . and of the other genital organs of both sexes and the dwelling places of the foetus and the streams from the nurse's breasts, when sexual inter-

course and conception and upbringing alike will cease to be? Finally, what use will the whole body be, which will of course have absolutely nothing to do?

“The crowd mocks,” Tertullian wrote, “judging that nothing is left over after death,” but they will not have the last laugh: “I will rather laugh at the crowd at the time when they are cruelly burning up themselves.” On the Day of Judgment, each man will be brought forth before the heavenly tribunal, not a piece of him, not a shadow, not a symbolic token, but rather the whole of him, as he lived on the earth. And that means teeth and intestines and genitals, whether or not their mortal functions have ceased forever. “Yes!” Tertullian addressed his pagan listeners. “We too in our day laughed at this. We are from among yourselves. Christians are made, not born!”

Some critics pointed out with a derisory smile that many features of the Christian vision were stolen from much more ancient pagan stories: a tribunal in which souls are judged, fire used for punishment in an underground prison house, a divinely beautiful paradise reserved for the spirits of the holy. But Christians replied that these ancient beliefs were all distorted reflections of the true Christian mysteries. The eventual success of this argumentative strategy is suggested by the very word we have been using for those who clung to the old polytheistic faith. Believers in Jupiter, Minerva, and Mars did not think of themselves as “pagans”: the word, which appeared in the late fourth century, is etymologically related to the word “peasant.” It is an insult, then, a sign that the laughter at rustic ignorance had decisively reversed direction.

The charge of doctrinal plagiarism was easier for Christians to deal with than the charge of absurdity. Pythagoreans who believed in bodily resurrection had the right general idea; it was simply an idea that needed correction. But Epicureans who said

that the whole idea of resurrection was a grotesque violation of everything that we know about the physical universe could not be so easily corrected. It made some sense to argue with the former, but the latter were best simply silenced.

Though early Christians, Tertullian among them, found certain features in Epicureanism admirable—the celebration of friendship, the emphasis on charity and forgiveness, a suspicion of worldly ambition—by the early fourth century, the task had become clear: the atomists had to disappear. The followers of Epicurus had already aroused considerable enmity outside the Christian community. When the emperor known as Julian the Apostate (c. 331–363), who attempted to revive paganism against the mounting Christian onslaught, drew up a list of works that it was important for pagan priests to read, he also noted some titles that he explicitly wished to exclude: “Let us not,” he wrote, “admit discourses by Epicureans.” Jews, likewise, termed anyone who departed from the rabbinic tradition *apikoros*, an Epicurean.

But Christians particularly found Epicureanism a noxious threat. If you grant Epicurus his claim that the soul is mortal, wrote Tertullian, the whole fabric of Christian morality unravels. For Epicurus, human suffering is always finite: “if it is slight, he [Epicurus] says, you may despise it, if it is great it will not be long.” But to be Christian, Tertullian countered, is to believe that torture and pain last forever: “Epicurus utterly destroys religion,” wrote another Church Father; take Providence away, and “confusion and disorder will overtake life.”

Christian polemicists had to find a way to turn the current of mockery against Epicurus and his followers. Ridiculing the pagan pantheon did not work in this case, since Epicureanism eloquently dismantled the whole sacrificial worship of the gods and dismissed the ancient stories. What had to be done was to refashion the account of the founder Epicurus so that he



appeared no longer as an apostle of moderation in the service of reasonable pleasure but instead as a Falstaffian figure of riotous excess. He was a fool, a pig, a madman. And his principal Roman disciple, Lucretius, had to be comparably made over.

But it was not enough to blacken the reputations of Epicurus and Lucretius, to repeat endlessly that they were stupid, swinishly self-indulgent, insane, and, finally, suicidal. It was not enough even, by this means, to suppress the reading of their works, to humiliate anyone who might express interest in them, to discourage copies from ever being made. Even more than the theory that the world consisted only of atoms and void, the main problem was the core ethical idea: that the highest good is the pursuit of pleasure and the diminution of pain. What had to be undertaken was the difficult project of making what appeared simply sane and natural—the ordinary impulses of all sentient creatures—seem like the enemy of the truth.

Centuries were required to accomplish this grand design, and it was never fully completed. But the grand outlines may be seen in the late third and early fourth century in the works of a North African convert from paganism to Christianity: Lactantius. Appointed tutor to the son of the emperor Constantine, who had established Christianity as the religion of the empire, Lactantius wrote a series of polemics against Epicureanism. That philosophy had, he acknowledges, a substantial following, “not because it brings forward any truth, but because the attractive name of pleasure invites many.” Christians must refuse the invitation and understand that pleasure is a code name for vice.

The task, for Lactantius, was not only to draw believers away from their pursuit of human pleasures; it was also to persuade them that God was not, as Epicureans believed, entirely absorbed within the orbit of divine pleasures and hence indifferent to the fate of humans. Instead, as Lactantius wrote in a

celebrated work written in 313 CE, God cared about humans, just as a father cared about his wayward child. And the sign of that care, he wrote, was anger. God was enraged at man—that was the characteristic manifestation of His love—and wanted to smite him over and over again, with spectacular, unrelenting violence.

A hatred of pleasure-seeking and a vision of God’s providential rage: these were death knells of Epicureanism, henceforward branded by the faithful as “insane.” Lucretius had urged the person who felt the prompting of sexual desire to satisfy it: “a dash of gentle pleasure soothes the sting.” (4.177) Christianity, as a story rehearsed by Gregory demonstrates, pointed in a different direction. The pious Benedict found himself thinking of a woman he had once seen, and, before he knew what was happening, his desires were aroused:

He then noticed a thick patch of nettles and briars next to him. Throwing his garment aside he flung himself into the sharp thorns and stinging nettles. There he rolled and tossed until his whole body was in pain and covered with blood. Yet, once he had conquered pleasure through suffering, his torn and bleeding skin served to drain the poison of temptation from his body. Before long, the pain that was burning his whole body had put out the fires of evil in his heart. It was by exchanging these two fires that he gained the victory over sin.

What worked for the saint in the early sixth century would, as monastic rules made clear, work for others. In one of the great cultural transformations in the history of the West, the pursuit of pain triumphed over the pursuit of pleasure.

The infliction of pain was hardly unknown in the world of Lucretius. The Romans were specialists in it, dedicating vast

still underway!

sums and huge arenas to public spectacles of violence. And it was not only in the Colosseum that Romans could glut themselves on injury, pain, and death. Plays and poems, based on the ancient myths, were often blood-drenched, as were paintings and sculptures. Violence was part of the fabric of everyday life. Schoolmasters and slaveholders were expected to flog their victims, and whipping was a frequent prelude to Roman executions. This is why in the gospel account, prior to his crucifixion, Jesus was tied to a column and scourged.

But for the pagans, in the great majority of these instances, pain was understood not as a positive value, a stepping stone to salvation, as it was by pious Christians intent on whipping themselves, but as an evil, something visited upon rule-breakers, criminals, captives, unfortunate wretches, and—the only category with dignity—soldiers. Romans honored a brave soldier's voluntary acceptance of pain, but that acceptance was far different from the ecstatic embrace celebrated in hundreds of convents and monasteries. The heroes of Roman stories willingly met what they could not, in good conscience, avoid or what they felt they had to endure in order to prove to their enemies their dauntless courage. Outside the orbit of that heroic obligation, there lay the special philosophical discipline that enabled the classical sage to regard inescapable pain—of kidney stones, for example—with equanimity. And for everyone, from the most exalted philosopher to the humblest artisan, there was the natural pursuit of pleasure.

In pagan Rome, the most extravagant version of this pursuit of pleasure came together in the gladiatorial arena with the most extravagant infliction and endurance of pain. If Lucretius offered a moralized and purified version of the Roman pleasure principle, Christianity offered a moralized and purified version of the Roman pain principle. Early Christians, brooding on the sufferings of the Saviour, the sinfulness of mankind, and the

anger of a just Father, found the attempt to cultivate pleasure manifestly absurd and dangerous. At best a trivial distraction, pleasure was at worst a demonic trap, figured in medieval art by those alluring women beneath whose gowns one can glimpse reptilian claws. The only life truly worth imitating—the life of Jesus—bore ample witness to the inescapable presence in mortal existence of sadness and pain, but not of pleasure. The earliest pictorial depictions of Jesus were uniform in their melancholy sobriety. As every pious reader of Luke's Gospel knew, Jesus wept, but there were no verses that described him laughing or smiling, let alone pursuing pleasure.

It was not difficult for Christians of the fifth and sixth centuries to find reasons to weep: the cities were falling apart, the fields were soaked in the blood of dying soldiers, robbery and rape were rampant. There had to be some explanation for the catastrophic behavior of human beings over so many generations, as if they were incapable of learning anything from their historical experience. Theology provided an answer deeper and more fundamental than this or that flawed individual or institution: humans were by nature corrupt. Inheritors of the sin of Adam and Eve, they richly deserved every miserable catastrophe that befell them; they needed to be punished; they had coming to them an endless diet of pain. Indeed, it was only through this pain that a small number could find the narrow gate to salvation.

The most ardent early believers in this doctrine, those fired by an explosive mix of fear, hope, and fierce enthusiasm, were determined to make the pain to which all humankind was condemned their active choice. In doing so, they hoped to pay to an angry God the dues of suffering that He justly and implacably demanded. They possessed something of the martial hardness admired by traditional Roman culture, but, with a few exceptions, the goal was not the achievement of Stoical indifference to

pain. On the contrary. Their whole project depended on experiencing an intense sensitivity to hunger, thirst, and loneliness. And when they whipped themselves with thorny branches or struck themselves with jagged stones, they made no effort to suppress their cries of anguish. Those cries were part of the payment, the atonement that would, if they were successful, enable them to recover in the afterlife the happiness that Adam and Eve had lost.

By the year 600 there were over three hundred monasteries and convents in Italy and Gaul. Many of these were still small—little more than fortified villas, with their outbuildings—but they possessed a spiritual rationale and an institutional coherence that conferred upon them stability in an unstable world. Their inhabitants were drawn from those who felt compelled to transform their lives, to atone for their own sins and for the sins of others, to secure eternal bliss by turning their backs on ordinary pleasures. Over time, their numbers were supplemented by many less fervent souls who had in effect been given to the Church by their parents or guardians.

In monasteries and convents driven by the belief that redemption would only come through abasement, it is not surprising that forms of corporal punishment—*virgarum verbera* (hitting with rods), *corporale supplicium* (bodily punishment), *ictus* (blows), *vapulatio* (cudgeling), *disciplina* (whipping), and *flagellatio*—were routinely inflicted on community members who broke the rules. Disciplinary practices that would, in pagan society, have been disgraces inflicted only on social inferiors were meted out with something like democratic indifference to rank. Typically, the guilty party had to carry the rod that was used for the beating, and then sitting on the ground and constantly repeating the words *Mea culpa*, submit to blows until the abbot or abbess was satisfied.

The insistence that punishment be actively embraced by the

victims—literalized in the kissing of the rod—marked a deliberate Christian trampling on the Epicurean credo of pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain. After all, the experience of pain was not only punishment; it was a form of pious emulation. Christian hermits, brooding on the sufferings of the Saviour, mortified their flesh, in order to experience in their own bodies the torments that Jesus had had to undergo. Though these acts of self-scourging began to be reported in late antiquity—they were novel and strange enough in the beginning to attract widespread attention—it was not until the eleventh century that a monastic reformer, the Italian Benedictine Peter Damian, established voluntary self-flagellation as a central ascetic practice acceptable to the Church.

It had taken a thousand years to win the struggle and secure the triumph of pain seeking. “Did our Redeemer not endure scourging?” Damian asked those critics who called into question the celebration of the whip. Weren’t the apostles and many of the saints and martyrs flogged? What better way to follow in their footsteps, what surer method of imitating Christ, than to suffer the blows that they suffered? To be sure, Damian concedes, in the case of these glorious predecessors, someone else was doing the whipping. But in a world in which Christianity has triumphed, we have to do the whipping for ourselves. Otherwise the whole dream and doctrine of the imitation of Christ would have to be abandoned. “The body has to be shaped like a piece of wood,” explained one of the many texts that followed in Damian’s wake, “with beatings and whippings, with canes, scourges, and discipline. The body has to be tortured and starved, so that it submits to the spirit and takes perfect shape.” In the pursuit of this spiritual goal, all boundaries, restraints, and inhibitions drop away. Shame at appearing naked before the eyes of others has no place, nor does the embarrassment of being seen trembling, howling, or sobbing.

Here is a description of the Dominican nuns of Colmar, penned at the turn of the fourteenth century by a sister named Catherine von Gebersweiler who had lived in the convent since childhood:

At Advent and during the whole of Lent, the sisters would make their way after matins into the main hall or some other place devoted to their purpose. There they abused their bodies in the most acute fashion with all manner of scourging instruments until their blood flowed, so that the sound of the blows of the whip rang through the entire convent and rose more sweetly than any other melody to the ears of the Lord.

This is no mere sadomasochistic fantasy: a vast body of evidence confirms that such theaters of pain, the ritualized heirs to St. Benedict's spontaneous roll in the stinging nettles, were widespread in the late Middle Ages. They were noted again and again as a distinctive mark of holiness. St. Teresa, "although she was slowly wasting away, tormented herself with the most painful whips, frequently rubbed herself with fresh stinging nettles, and even rolled about naked in thorns." St. Clare of Assisi "tore apart the alabaster container of her body with a whip for forty-two years, and from her wounds there arose heavenly odors that filled the church." St. Dominic cut into his flesh every night with a whip affixed with three iron chains. St. Ignatius of Loyola recommended whips with relatively thin straps, "summoning pain into the flesh, but not into the bones." Henry Suso, who carved the name of Jesus on his chest, had an iron cross fixed with nails pressed into his back and whipped himself until the blood flowed. Suso's contemporary, Elsbeth of Oye, a nun from Zurich, whipped herself so energetically that the bystanders in the chapel were spattered with her blood.

The ordinary self-protective, pleasure-seeking impulses of

the lay public could not hold out against the passionate convictions and overwhelming prestige of their spiritual leaders. Beliefs and practices that had been the preserve of religious specialists, men and women set apart from the vulgar, everyday imperatives of the "world," found their way into the mainstream, where they thrived in societies of flagellants and periodic bursts of mass hysteria. What was once in effect a radical counterculture insisted with remarkable success that it represented the core values of all believing Christians.


Of course, people continued to pursue pleasure—the Old Adam could not be so easily eradicated. In peasants' huts and the halls of the great, along country lanes, in prelates' palaces, and behind the high walls of the monasteries, there was drinking, overeating, raucous laughter, merry dancing, and plenty of sex. But virtually no one in moral authority, no one with a public voice, dared speak up to justify any of it. The silence was not, or not only, the consequence of timidity or fear. Pleasure seeking had come to seem philosophically indefensible. Epicurus was dead and buried, almost all of his works destroyed. And after St. Jerome in the fourth century briefly noted that Lucretius had committed suicide, there were no attacks on Epicurus' great Roman disciple. He was forgotten.

The survival of the disciple's once celebrated poem was left to fortune. It was by chance that a copy of *On the Nature of Things* made it into the library of a handful of monasteries, places that had buried, seemingly forever, the Epicurean pursuit of pleasure. It was by chance that a monk laboring in a scriptorium somewhere or other in the ninth century copied the poem before it moldered away forever. And it was by chance that this copy escaped fire and flood and the teeth of time for some five hundred years until, one day in 1417, it came into the hands of the humanist who proudly called himself *Poggius Florentinus*, Poggio the Florentine.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

THE WAY  
THINGS ARE

*On Lucretius' poem - an overview*

 *n the Nature of Things* is not an easy read. Totaling 7,400 lines, it is written in hexameters, the standard unrhymed six-beat lines in which Latin poets like Virgil and Ovid, imitating Homer's Greek, cast their epic poetry. Divided into six untitled books, the poem yokes together moments of intense lyrical beauty, philosophical meditations on religion, pleasure, and death, and complex theories of the physical world, the evolution of human societies, the perils and joys of sex, and the nature of disease. The language is often knotty and difficult, the syntax complex, and the overall intellectual ambition astoundingly high.

The difficulty would not in the least have fazed Poggio and his learned friends. They possessed wonderful Latin, rose eagerly to the challenge of solving textual riddles, and had often wandered with pleasure and interest through the still more impenetrable thickets of patristic theology. A quick glance at the first few pages of the manuscript would have sufficed to convince Poggio that he had discovered something remarkable.

What he could not have grasped, without carefully reading through the work and absorbing its arguments, was that he was unleashing something that threatened his whole mental universe. Had he understood this threat, he might still have

returned the poem to circulation: recovering the lost traces of the ancient world was his highest purpose in life, virtually the only principle uncontaminated by disillusionment and cynical laughter. But, as he did so, he might have uttered the words that Freud reputedly spoke to Jung, as they sailed into New York Harbor to receive the accolades of their American admirers: "Don't they know we are bringing them the plague?"

One simple name for the plague that Lucretius brought—a charge frequently leveled against him, when his poem began once again to be read—is atheism. But Lucretius was not in fact an atheist. He believed that the gods existed. But he also believed that, by virtue of being gods, they could not possibly be concerned with human beings or with anything that we do. Divinity by its very nature, he thought, must enjoy eternal life and peace entirely untouched by any suffering or disturbance and indifferent to human actions.

If it gives you pleasure to call the sea Neptune or to refer to grain and wine as Ceres and Bacchus, Lucretius wrote, you should feel free to do so, just as you can dub the round world the Mother of the Gods. And if, drawn by their solemn beauty, you choose to visit religious shrines, you will be doing yourself no harm, provided that you contemplate the images of the gods "in peace and tranquillity." (6:78) But you should not think for a minute that you can either anger or propitiate any of these deities. The processions, the animal sacrifices, the frenzied dances, the drums and cymbals and pipes, the showers of snowy rose petals, the eunuch priests, the carved images of the infant god: all of these cultic practices, though compelling and impressive in their way, are fundamentally meaningless, since the gods they are meant to reach are entirely removed and separated from our world.

It is possible to argue that, despite his profession of religious belief, Lucretius was some sort of atheist, a particularly sly one

perhaps, since to almost all believers of almost all religious faiths in almost all times it has seemed pointless to worship a god without the hope of appeasing divine wrath or acquiring divine protection and favor. What is the use of a god who is uninterested in punishing or rewarding? Lucretius insisted that such hopes and anxieties are precisely a toxic form of superstition, combining in equal measure absurd arrogance and absurd fear. Imagining that the gods actually care about the fate of humans or about their ritual practices is, he observed, a particularly vulgar insult—as if divine beings depended for their happiness on our mumbled words or good behavior. But that insult is the least of the problems, since the gods quite literally could not care less. Nothing that we can do (or not do) could possibly interest *them*. The serious issue is that false beliefs and observances inevitably lead to human mischief.

These views were certainly contrary to Poggio's own Christian faith and would have led any contemporary who espoused them into the most serious trouble. But by themselves, encountered in a pagan text, they were not likely to trigger great alarm. Poggio could have told himself, as did some later sympathetic readers of *On the Nature of Things*, that the brilliant ancient poet simply intuited the emptiness of pagan beliefs and hence the absurdity of sacrifices to gods who did not in fact exist. Lucretius, after all, had the misfortune of living shortly before the coming of the Messiah. Had he been born a century later, he would have had the opportunity of learning the truth. As it was, he at least grasped that the practices of his own contemporaries were worthless. Hence even many modern translations of Lucretius' poem into English reassuringly have it denounce as "superstition" what the Latin text calls simply *religio*.

But atheism—or, more accurately, the indifference of the gods—was not the only problem posed by Lucretius' poem. Its main concerns lay elsewhere, in the material world we all

inhabit, and it is here that the most disturbing arguments arose, arguments that lured those who were most struck by their formidable power—Machiavelli, Bruno, Galileo, and others—into strange trains of thought. Those trains of thought had once been eagerly explored in the very land to which they now returned, as a result of Poggio's discovery. But a thousand years of virtual silence had rendered them highly dangerous.

By now much of what *On the Nature of Things* claims about the universe seems deeply familiar, at least among the circle of people who are likely to be reading these words. After all, many of the work's core arguments are among the foundations on which modern life has been constructed. But it is worth remembering that some of the arguments remain alien and that others are hotly contested, often by those who gladly avail themselves of the scientific advances they helped to spawn. And to all but a few of Poggio's contemporaries, most of what Lucretius claimed, albeit in a poem of startling, seductive beauty, seemed incomprehensible, unbelievable, or impious.

Here is a brief list, by no means exhaustive, of the elements that constituted the Lucretian challenge:

- **Everything is made of invisible particles.** Lucretius, who disliked technical language, chose not to use the standard Greek philosophical term for these foundational particles, "atoms," i.e., things that cannot be divided. He deployed instead a variety of ordinary Latin words: "first things," "first beginnings," "the bodies of matter," "the seeds of things." Everything is formed of these seeds and, on dissolution, returns to them in the end. Immutable, indivisible, invisible, and infinite in number, they are constantly in motion, clashing with one another, coming together to form new shapes, coming apart, recombining again, enduring.

- The elementary particles of matter—"the seeds of the things"—are eternal. Time is not limited—a discrete substance with a beginning and an end—but infinite. The invisible particles from which the entire universe is made, from the stars to the lowliest insect, are indestructible and immortal, though any particular object in the universe is transitory. That is, all the forms that we observe, even those that seem the most durable, are temporary: the building blocks from which they are composed will sooner or later be redistributed. But those building blocks themselves are permanent, as is the ceaseless process of formation, dissolution, and redistribution.

Neither creation nor destruction ever has the upper hand; the sum total of matter remains the same, and the balance between the living and the dead is always restored:

And so the destructive motions cannot hold sway eternally and bury existence forever; nor again can the motions that cause life and growth preserve created things eternally. Thus, in this war that has been waged from time everlasting, the contest between the elements is an equal one: now here, now there, the vital forces conquer and, in turn, are conquered; with the funeral dirge mingles the wail that babies raise when they reach the shores of light; no night has followed day, and no dawn has followed night, which has not heard mingled with those woeful wails the lamentations that accompany death and the black funeral. (2.569–80)

The Spanish-born Harvard philosopher George Santayana called this idea—the ceaseless mutation of forms composed of indestructible substances—"the greatest thought that mankind has ever hit upon."

- The elementary particles are infinite in number but limited in shape and size. They are like the letters in an alphabet, a discrete set capable of being combined in an infinite number of sentences. (2.688ff.) And, with the seeds of things as with language, the combinations are made according to a code. As not all letters or all words can be coherently combined, so too not all particles can combine with all other particles in every possible manner. Some of the seeds of things routinely and easily hook onto others; some repel and resist one another. Lucretius did not claim to know the hidden code of matter. But, he argued, it is important to grasp that there is a code and that, in principle, it could be investigated and understood by human science.
  - All particles are in motion in an infinite void. Space, like time, is unbounded. There are no fixed points, no beginnings, middles, or ends, and no limits. Matter is not packed together in a solid mass. There is a void in things, allowing the constitutive particles to move, collide, combine, and move apart. Evidence for the void includes not only the restless motion that we observe all around us, but also such phenomena as water oozing through the walls of caves, food dispersed through bodies, sound passing through walls of closed rooms, cold permeating to the bones.
- The universe consists then of matter—the primary particles and all that those particles come together to form—and space, intangible and empty. Nothing else exists.
- The universe has no creator or designer. The particles themselves have not been made and cannot be destroyed. The patterns of order and disorder in the world are not the product of any divine scheme. Providence is a fantasy.
- What exists is not the manifestation of any overarching plan or any intelligent design inherent in matter itself. No

supreme choreographer planned their movements, and the seeds of things did not have a meeting in which they decided what would go where.

But because throughout the universe from time everlasting countless numbers of them, buffeted and impelled by blows, have shifted in countless ways, experimentation with every kind of movement and combination has at last resulted in arrangements such as those that created and compose our world.

(1.1024–28)

There is no end or purpose to existence, only ceaseless creation and destruction, governed entirely by chance.

- **Everything comes into being as a result of a swerve.** If all the individual particles, in their infinite numbers, fell through the void in straight lines, pulled down by their own weight like raindrops, nothing would ever exist. But the particles do not move lockstep in a preordained single direction. Instead, “at absolutely unpredictable times and places they deflect slightly from their straight course, to a degree that could be described as no more than a shift of movement.” (2.218–20) The position of the elementary particles is thus indeterminate.

The swerve—which Lucretius called variously *declinatio*, *inclinatio*, or *clinamen*—is only the most minimal of motions, *nec plus quam minimum*. (2.244) But it is enough to set off a ceaseless chain of collisions. Whatever exists in the universe exists because of these random collisions of minute particles. The endless combinations and recombinations, resulting from the collisions over a limitless span of time, bring it about that “the rivers replenish the insatiable sea with plentiful streams of water, that the earth, warmed by the sun’s fostering heat, renews her produce,

that the family of animals springs up and thrives, and that the gliding ethereal fires have life.” (1.1031–34)

- **The swerve is the source of free will.** In the lives of all sentient creatures, human and animal alike, the random swerve of elementary particles is responsible for the existence of free will. For if all of motion were one long predetermined chain, there would be no possibility of freedom. Cause would follow cause from eternity, as the fates decreed. Instead, we wrest free will from the fates.

But what is the evidence that the will exists? Why should we not simply think that the matter in living creatures moves because of the same blows that propel dust motes? Lucretius’ image is the split second on the race track after the starting gate is opened, before the straining horses, frantically eager to move, can actually propel their bodies forward. That split second is the thrilling spectacle of a mental act bidding a mass of matter into motion. And because this image did not quite answer to his whole purpose—because, after all, race horses are precisely creatures driven to move by the blows of their riders—Lucretius went on to observe that though an outside force may strike against a man, that man may deliberately hold himself back.

- **Nature ceaselessly experiments.** There is no single moment of origin, no mythic scene of creation. All living beings, from plants and insects to the higher mammals and man, have evolved through a long, complex process of trial and error. The process involves many false starts and dead ends, monsters, prodigies, mistakes, creatures that were not endowed with all the features that they needed to compete for resources and to create offspring. Creatures whose combination of organs enables them to adapt and to reproduce will succeed in establishing themselves, until



changing circumstances make it impossible for them any longer to survive.

The successful adaptations, like the failures, are the result of a fantastic number of combinations that are constantly being generated (and reproduced or discarded) over an unlimited expanse of time. It is difficult to grasp this point, Lucretius acknowledged, but “what has been created gives rise to its own function.” (4.835) That is, he explained, “Sight did not exist before the birth of the eyes, nor speech before the creation of the tongue.” (4.836–37) These organs were not created in order to fulfill a purposed end; their usefulness gradually enabled the creatures in whom they emerged to survive and to reproduce their kind.

- **The universe was not created for or about humans.** The earth—with its seas and deserts, harsh climate, wild beasts, diseases—was obviously not purpose-built to make our species feel at home. Unlike many other animals, who are endowed at birth with what they need to survive, human infants are almost completely vulnerable: Consider, Lucretius wrote in a celebrated passage, how a baby, like a shipwrecked sailor flung ashore by fierce waves,

lies on the ground naked, speechless, and utterly helpless as soon as nature has cast it forth with pangs of labor from its mother’s womb into the shores of light. (5.223–25)

The fate of the entire species (let alone that of any individual) is not the pole around which everything revolves. Indeed, there is no reason to believe that human beings as a species will last forever. On the contrary, it is clear that, over the infinite expanses of time, some species grow, others disappear, generated and destroyed in the ceaseless process of change. There were other forms of life before

us, which no longer exist; there will be other forms of life after us, when our kind has vanished.

- **Humans are not unique.** They are part of a much larger material process that links them not only to all other life forms but to inorganic matter as well. The invisible particles out of which living things, including humans, are composed are not sentient nor do they come from some mysterious source. We are made of the same stuff that everything else is made of.

Humans do not occupy the privileged place in existence they imagine for themselves: though they often fail to recognize the fact, they share many of their most cherished qualities with other animals. To be sure, each individual is unique, but, thanks to the abundance of matter, the same is true of virtually all creatures: how else do we imagine that a calf recognizes its dam or the cow her calf? We have only to look attentively at the world around us to grasp that many of the most intense and poignant experiences of our lives are not exclusive to our species.

- **Human society began not in a Golden Age of tranquility and plenty, but in a primitive battle for survival.** There was no original paradisaical time of plenty, as some have dreamed, in which happy, peaceful men and women, living in security and leisure, enjoyed the fruits of nature’s abundance. Early humans, lacking fire, agriculture, and other means to soften a brutally hard existence, struggled to eat and to avoid being eaten.

There may always have been some rudimentary capacity for social cooperation in the interest of survival, but the ability to form bonds and to live in communities governed by settled customs developed slowly. At first there was only random mating—either from mutual desire or from barter or rape—and the hunting and gathering of food. Mortal-

ity rates were extremely high, though not, Lucretius noted wryly, as high as they currently are, inflated by warfare, shipwreck, and overeating.

The idea that language was somehow given to humans, as a miraculous invention, is absurd. Instead, Lucretius wrote, humans, who like other animals used inarticulate cries and gestures in various situations, slowly arrived at shared sounds to designate the same things. So too, long before they were able to join together to sing melodious songs, humans imitated the warbling of birds and the sweet sound of a gentle breeze in the reeds and so gradually developed a capacity to make music.

The arts of civilization—not given to man by some divine lawmaker but painstakingly fashioned by the shared talents and mental power of the species—are accomplishments worth celebrating, but they are not unmixed blessings. They arose in tandem with the fear of the gods, the desire for wealth, the pursuit of fame and power. All of these originated in a craving for security, a craving that reaches back to the earliest experiences of the human species struggling to master its natural enemies. That violent struggle—against the wild beasts that threatened human survival—was largely successful, but the anxious, acquisitive, aggressive impulses have metastasized. In consequence, human beings characteristically develop weapons that turn against themselves.

- **The soul dies.** The human soul is made of the same material as the human body. The fact that we cannot physically locate the soul in a particular organ only means that it is made of exceedingly minute particles interlaced through the veins, flesh, and sinews. Our instruments are not fine enough to weigh the soul: at the moment of death, it dissolves “like the case of a wine whose bouquet has evapo-

rated, or of a perfume whose exquisite scent has dispersed into the air.” (3.221–2) We do not imagine that the wine or perfume contains a mysterious soul; only that the scent consists of very subtle material elements, too small to measure. So too of the human spirit: it consists of tiny elements hidden in body’s most secret recesses. When the body dies—that is, when its matter is dispersed—the soul which is part of the body, dies as well.

- **There is no afterlife.** Humans have both consoled and tormented themselves with the thought that something awaits them after they have died. Either they will gather flowers for eternity in a paradisaal garden where no chill wind ever blows or they will be frog-marched before a harsh judge who will condemn them, for their sins, to unending misery (misery that somewhat mysteriously requires them after dying to have heat-sensitive skin, an aversion to cold, bodily appetite and thirst, and the like). But once you grasp that your soul dies along with your body, you also grasp that there can be no posthumous punishments or rewards. Life on this earth is all that human beings have.
- **Death is nothing to us.** When you are dead—when the particles that have been linked together, to create and sustain you, have come apart—there will be neither pleasure nor pain, longing nor fear. Mourners, Lucretius wrote, always wring their hands in anguish and say, “Never again will your dear children race for the prize of your first kisses and touch your heart with pleasure too profound for words.” (3.895–98) But they do not go on to add, “You will not care, because you will not exist.”
- **All organized religions are superstitious delusions.** The delusions are based on deeply rooted longings, fears, and ignorance. Humans project images of the power and beauty and perfect security that they would like to possess.

Fashioning their gods accordingly, they become enslaved to their own dreams.

Everyone is subject to the feelings that generate such dreams: they wash over you when you look up at the stars and start imagining beings of immeasurable power; or when you wonder if the universe has any limits; or when you marvel at the exquisite order of things; or, less agreeably, when you experience an uncanny string of misfortunes and wonder if you are being punished; or when nature shows its destructive side. There are entirely natural explanations for such phenomena as lightning and earthquakes—Lucretius spells them out—but terrified humans instinctively respond with religious fear and start praying.

- **Religions are invariably cruel.** Religions always promise hope and love, but their deep, underlying structure is cruelty. This is why they are drawn to fantasies of retribution and why they inevitably stir up anxiety among their adherents. The quintessential emblem of religion—and the clearest manifestation of the perversity that lies at its core—is the sacrifice of a child by a parent.

Almost all religious faiths incorporate the myth of such a sacrifice, and some have actually made it real. Lucretius had in mind the sacrifice of Iphigenia by her father Agamemnon, but he may also have been aware of the Jewish story of Abraham and Isaac and other comparable Near Eastern stories for which the Romans of his times had a growing taste. Writing around 50 BCE he could not, of course, have anticipated the great sacrifice myth that would come to dominate the Western world, but he would not have been surprised by it or by the endlessly reiterated, prominently displayed images of the bloody, murdered son.

- **There are no angels, demons, or ghosts.** Immaterial spir-

its of any kind do not exist. The creatures with which the Greek and Roman imagination populated the world—Fates, harpies, daemons, genii, nymphs, satyrs, dryads, celestial messengers, and the spirits of the dead—are entirely unreal. Forget them.

- **The highest goal of human life is the enhancement of pleasure and the reduction of pain.** Life should be organized to serve the pursuit of happiness. There is no ethical purpose higher than facilitating this pursuit for oneself and one's fellow creatures. All the other claims—the service of the state, the glorification of the gods or the ruler, the arduous pursuit of virtue through self-sacrifice—are secondary, misguided, or fraudulent. The militarism and the taste for violent sports that characterized his own culture seemed to Lucretius in the deepest sense perverse and unnatural. Man's natural needs are simple. A failure to recognize the boundaries of these needs leads human beings to a vain and fruitless struggle for more and more.

Most people grasp rationally that the luxuries they crave are, for the most part, pointless and do little or nothing to enhance their well-being: "Fiery fevers quit your body no quicker, if you toss in embroidered attire of blushing crimson, than if you must lie sick in a common garment." (2.34–36) But, as it is difficult to resist fears of the gods and the afterlife, so too it is difficult to resist the compulsive sense that security, for oneself and one's community, can somehow be enhanced through exploits of passionate acquisitiveness and conquest. These exploits, however, only decrease the possibility of happiness and put everyone engaged in them at the risk of shipwreck.

The goal, Lucretius wrote in a celebrated and famously disturbing passage, must be to escape from the whole mad enterprise and observe it from a position of safety:

It is comforting, when winds are whipping up the waters of the vast sea, to watch from land the severe trials of another person: not that anyone's distress is a cause of agreeable pleasure; but it is comforting to see from what troubles you yourself are exempt. It is comforting also to witness mighty clashes of warriors embattled on the plains, when you have no share in the danger. But nothing is more blissful than to occupy the heights effectively fortified by the teaching of the wise, tranquil sanctuaries from which you can look down upon others and see them wandering everywhere in their random search for the way of life, competing for intellectual eminence, disputing about rank, and striving night and day with prodigious effort to scale the summit of wealth and to secure power. (2:1-13)

- **The greatest obstacle to pleasure is not pain; it is delusion.** The principal enemies of human happiness are inordinate desire—the fantasy of attaining something that exceeds what the finite mortal world allows—and gnawing fear. Even the dreaded plague, in Lucretius' account—and his work ends with a graphic account of a catastrophic plague epidemic in Athens—is most horrible not only for the suffering and death that it brings but also and still more for the “perturbation and panic” that it triggers.

It is perfectly reasonable to seek to avoid pain: such avoidance is one of the pillars of his whole ethical system. But how is it possible to keep this natural aversion from turning into panic, panic that only leads to the triumph of suffering? And, more generally, why are humans so unhappy?

The answer, Lucretius thought, had to do with the power of the imagination. Though they are finite and

mortal, humans are gripped by illusions of the infinite— infinite pleasure and infinite pain. The fantasy of infinite pain helps to account for their proneness to religion: in the misguided belief that their souls are immortal and hence potentially subject to an eternity of suffering, humans imagine that they can somehow negotiate with the gods for a better outcome, an eternity of pleasure in paradise. The fantasy of infinite pleasure helps to account for their proneness to romantic love: in the misguided belief that their happiness depends upon the absolute possession of some single object of limitless desire, humans are seized by a feverish, unappeasable hunger and thirst that can only bring anguish instead of happiness.

Once again it is perfectly reasonable to seek sexual pleasure: that is, after all, one of the body's natural joys. The mistake, Lucretius thought, was to confound this joy with a delusion, the frenzied craving to possess—at once to penetrate and to consume—what is in reality a dream. Of course, the absent lover is always only a mental image and in this sense akin to a dream. But Lucretius observed in passages of remarkable frankness that in the very act of sexual consummation lovers remain in the grip of confused longings that they cannot fulfill:

Even in the hour of possession the passion of the lovers fluctuates and wanders in uncertainty: they cannot decide what to enjoy first with their eyes and hands. They tightly squeeze the object of their desire and cause bodily pain, often driving their teeth into one another's lips and crushing mouth against mouth. (4.1076-81)

The point of this passage—part of what W. B. Yeats called “the finest description of sexual intercourse ever written”— is not to urge a more decorous, tepid form of lovemaking.

It is to take note of the element of unsated appetite that haunts even the fulfillment of desire. The insatiability of sexual appetite is, in Lucretius' view, one of Venus' cunning strategies; it helps to account for the fact that, after brief interludes, the same acts of love are performed again and again. And he understood too that these repeated acts are deeply pleasurable. But he remained troubled by the ruse, by the emotional suffering that comes in its wake, by the arousal of aggressive impulses, and, above all, by the sense that even the moment of ecstasy leaves something to be desired. In 1685, the great poet John Dryden brilliantly captured Lucretius' remarkable vision:

. . . when the youthful pair more closely join,  
 When hands in hands they lock, and thighs in thighs  
 they twine;  
 Just in the raging foam of full desire,  
 When both press on, both murmur, both expire,  
 They grip, they squeeze, their humid tongues they  
 dart,  
 As each would force their way to th'others heart.  
 In vain; they only cruise about the coast.  
 For bodies cannot pierce, nor be in bodies lost,  
 As sure they strive to be, when both engage  
 In that tumultuous momentary rage.  
 So tangled in the nets of love they lie,  
 Till man dissolves in that excess of joy.

(4.1105-14)

- **Understanding the nature of things generates deep wonder.** The realization that the universe consists of atoms and void and nothing else, that the world was not made for us by a providential creator, that we are not the center of the universe, that our emotional lives are no more

distinct than our physical lives from those of all other creatures, that our souls are as material and as mortal as our bodies—all these things are not the cause for despair. On the contrary, grasping the way things really are is the crucial step toward the possibility of happiness. Human insignificance—the fact that it is not all about us and our fate—is, Lucretius insisted, the good news.

It is possible for human beings to live happy lives, but not because they think that they are the center of the universe or because they fear the gods or because they nobly sacrifice themselves for values that purport to transcend their mortal existence. Unappeasable desire and the fear of death are the principal obstacles to human happiness, but the obstacles can be surmounted through the exercise of reason.

The exercise of reason is not available only to specialists; it is accessible to everyone. What is needed is to refuse the lies proffered by priests and other fantasymongers and to look squarely and calmly at the true nature of things. All speculation—all science, all morality, all attempts to fashion a life worth living—must start and end with a comprehension of the invisible seeds of things: atoms and the void and nothing else.

It might seem at first that this comprehension would inevitably bring with it a sense of cold emptiness, as if the universe had been robbed of its magic. But being liberated from harmful illusions is not the same as disillusionment. The origin of philosophy, it was often said in the ancient world, was wonder: surprise and bafflement led to a desire to know, and knowledge in turn laid the wonder to rest. But in Lucretius' account the process is something like the reverse: it is knowing the way things are that awakens the deepest wonder.

*On the Nature of Things* is that rarest of accomplishments: a great work of philosophy that is also a great poem. Inevitably, compiling a list of propositions, as I have done, obscures Lucretius' astonishing poetic power, a power he himself downplayed when he compared his verses to honey smeared around the lip of a cup containing medicine that a sick man might otherwise refuse to drink. The downplaying is not altogether surprising: his philosophical master and guide, Epicurus, was suspicious of eloquence and thought that the truth should be uttered in plain, unadorned prose.

But the poetic greatness of Lucretius' work is not incidental to his visionary project, his attempt to wrest the truth away from illusion-mongers. Why should the tellers of fables, he thought, possess a monopoly on the means that humans have invented to express the pleasure and beauty of the world? Without those means, the world we inhabit runs the risk of seeming inhospitable, and for their comfort people will prefer to embrace fantasies, even if those fantasies are destructive. With the aid of poetry, however, the actual nature of things—an infinite number of indestructible particles swerving into one another, hooking together, coming to life, coming apart, reproducing, dying, recreating themselves, forming an astonishing, constantly changing universe—can be depicted in its true splendor.

Human beings, Lucretius thought, must not drink in the poisonous belief that their souls are only part of the world temporarily and that they are heading somewhere else. That belief will only spawn in them a destructive relation to the environment in which they live the only lives that they have. These lives, like all other existing forms in the universe, are contingent and vulnerable; all things, including the earth itself, will eventually disintegrate and return to the constituent atoms from which they were composed and out of which other things

will form in the perpetual dance of matter. But while we are alive, we should be filled with the deepest pleasure, for we are a small part of a vast process of world-making that Lucretius celebrated as essentially erotic.

Hence it is that, as a poet, a maker of metaphors, Lucretius could do something very strange, something that appears to violate his conviction that the gods are deaf to human petitions. *On the Nature of Things* opens with a prayer to Venus. Once again Dryden probably best renders in English the spirit of Lucretius' ardor:

Delight of humankind and gods above,  
Parent of Rome, propitious Queen of Love,  
Whose vital power, air, earth, and sea supplies,  
And breeds whate'er is born beneath the rolling skies;  
For every kind, by thy prolific might,  
Springs and beholds the regions of the light:  
Thee, Goddess, thee, the clouds and tempests fear,  
And at thy pleasing presence disappear;  
For thee the land in fragrant flowers is dressed,  
For thee the ocean smiles and smooths her wavy  
    breast,  
And heaven itself with more serene and purer light is  
    blessed.

(1.1-9)

The hymn pours forth, full of wonder and gratitude, glowing with light. It is as if the ecstatic poet actually beheld the goddess of love, the sky clearing at her radiant presence, the awakening earth showering her with flowers. She is the embodiment of desire, and her return, on the fresh gusts of the west wind, fills all living things with pleasure and passionate sexual longing:

For when the rising spring adorns the mead,  
 And a new scene of nature stands displayed,  
 When teeming buds and cheerful greens appear,  
 And western gales unlock the lazy year,  
 The joyous birds thy welcome first express  
 Whose native songs thy genial fire confess.  
 Then savage beasts bound o'er their slighted food,  
 Struck with thy darts, and tempt the raging flood.  
 All nature is thy gift: earth, air, and sea;  
 Of all that breathes, the various progeny,  
 Stung with delight, is goaded on by thee.  
 O'er barren mountains, o'er the flowery plain,  
 The leafy forest, and the liquid main  
 Extends thy uncontrolled and boundless reign.  
 Through all the living regions dost thou move  
 And scatterest, where thou goest, the kindly seeds of  
 Love.

(1.9–20)

We do not know how the German monks who copied the Latin verses and kept them from destruction responded, nor do we know what Poggio Bracciolini, who must at least have glanced at them as he salvaged the poem from oblivion, thought they meant. Certainly almost every one of the poem's key principles was an abomination to right-thinking Christian orthodoxy. But the poetry was compellingly, seductively beautiful. And we can see with hallucinatory vividness what at least one Italian, later in the fifteenth century, made of them: we have only to look at Botticelli's great painting of Venus, ravishingly beautiful, emerging from the restless matter of the sea.

## THE RETURN

“LUCRETIUS HAS NOT yet come back to me,” Poggio wrote to his Venetian friend, the patrician humanist Francesco Barbaro, “although he has been copied. Evidently, then, Poggio had not been allowed to borrow the ancient manuscript (which he characteristically referred to as if it were the poet himself) and take it back to Constance with him. The monks must have been too wary for that and forced him instead to find someone to make a copy. He did not expect this scribe to deliver the result, important as it was, in person. “The place is rather far away and not many people come from there,” Poggio wrote, “and so I shall wait until some people turn up who will bring him.” How long would he be willing to wait? “If no one comes,” he assured his friend, “I shall not neglect my public duties ahead of private needs.” A very strange remark for what is public here and what is private? Poggio was, perhaps, telling Barbaro not to worry: official duties in Constance (whatever they might be) would not stand in the way of getting his hands on Lucretius.

When the manuscript of *On the Nature of Things* finally did reach him, Poggio evidently sent it off at once to Niccolò Niccoli, in Florence. Either because the scribe's copy was crudely made or simply because he wanted a version for himself, Poggio's friend undertook to transcribe it. This transcription in Niccoli's elegant hand