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ANNALS OF CULTURE

THE ANSWER MAN

An ancient poem was rediscovered—and the world swerved.

BY STEPHEN GREENBLATT

When I was a student, I used to go at the end of the school year to the Yale Co-op to see what I could find to read over the summer. I had very little pocket money, but the bookstore would routinely sell its unwanted titles for ridiculously small sums. They were jumbled together in bins through which I would rummage until something caught my eye. On one of my forays, I was struck by an extremely odd paperback cover, a detail from a painting by the Surrealist Max Ernst. Under a crescent moon, high above the earth, two pairs of legs—the bodies were missing—were engaged in what appeared to be an act of celestial coition. The book, a prose translation of Lucretius' two-thousand-year-old poem "On the Nature of Things" ("De Rerum Natura"), was marked down to ten cents, and I bought it as much for the cover as for the classical account of the material universe.

Ancient physics is not a particularly promising subject for vacation reading, but sometime over the summer I idly picked up the book. The Roman poet begins his work (in Martin Ferguson Smith's careful rendering) with an ardent hymn to Venus:

First, goddess, the birds of the air, pierced to the heart with your powerful shafts, signal your entry. Next wild creatures and cattle bound over rich pastures and swim rushing rivers: so surely are they all captivated by your charm and eagerly follow your lead. Then you inject seductive love into the heart of every creature that lives in the seas and mountains and river torrents and bird-haunted thickets, implanting in it the passionate urge to reproduce its kind.

Startled by the intensity, I continued, past a prayer for peace, a tribute to the wisdom of the philosopher Epicurus, a resolute condemnation of superstitious fears, and into a lengthy exposition of philosophical first principles. I found the book thrilling.

Lucretius, who was born about a century before Christ, was emphatically not our contemporary. He thought that worms were spontaneously generated from wet soil, that earthquakes were the

result of winds caught in underground caverns, that the sun circled the earth. But, at its heart, "On the Nature of Things" persuasively laid out what seemed to be a strikingly modern understanding of the world. Every page reflected a core scientific vision—a vision of atoms randomly moving in an infinite universe—imbued with a poet's sense of wonder. Wonder did not depend on the dream of an afterlife; in Lucretius it welled up out of a recognition that we are made of the same matter as the stars and the oceans and all things else. And this recognition was the basis for the way he thought we should live—not in fear of the gods but in pursuit of pleasure, in avoidance of pain.

As it turned out, there was a line from this work to modernity, though not a direct one: nothing is ever so simple. There were innumerable forgettings, disappearances, recoveries, and dismissals. The poem was lost, apparently irrevocably, and then found. This retrieval, after many centuries, is something one is tempted to call a miracle. But the author of the poem in question did not believe in miracles. He thought that nothing could violate the laws of nature. He posited instead what he called a "swerve"—Lucretius' principal word for it was *clinamen*—an unexpected, unpredictable movement of matter.

The poem's rediscovery prompted such a swerve. The cultural shift of the Renaissance is notoriously difficult to define, but it was characterized, in part, by a decidedly Lucretian pursuit of beauty and pleasure. The pursuit shaped the dress and the etiquette of courtiers, the language of the liturgy, the design and decoration of everyday objects. It suffused Leonardo da Vinci's scientific and technological explorations, Galileo's vivid dialogues on astronomy, Francis Bacon's ambitious research projects, and Richard Hooker's theology. Even works that were seemingly unrelated to any aesthetic ambition—Machiavelli's analysis of political strategy, Walter Raleigh's description of

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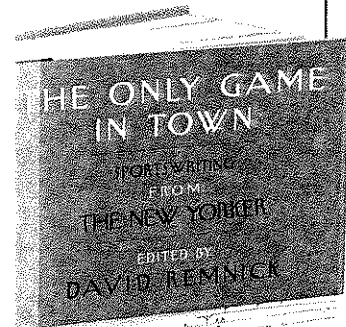
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Guiana, Robert Burton's encyclopedic account of mental illness—were crafted in such a way as to produce pleasure. And this pursuit, with its denial of Christian asceticism, enabled people to turn away from a preoccupation with angels and demons and to focus instead on things in this world: to conduct experiments without worrying about infringing on God's jealously guarded secrets, to question authorities and challenge received doctrines, to contemplate without terror the death of the soul.

The recovery of "On the Nature of Things" is a story of how the world swerved in a new direction. The agent of change was not a revolution, an implacable army at the gates, or landfall on an unknown continent. When it occurred, nearly six hundred years ago, the key event was muffled and almost invisible, tucked away behind walls in a remote place. A short, genial, cannily alert man in his late thirties reached out one day, took a very old manuscript off a shelf, and saw with excitement what he had discovered. That was all; but it was enough.

By that time, Lucretius' ideas had been out of circulation for centuries. In the Roman Empire, the literacy rate was never high, and after the Sack of Rome, in 410 C.E., it began to plummet. It is possible for a whole culture to turn away from reading and writing. As the empire crumbled and Christianity became ascendant, as cities decayed, trade declined, and an anxious populace scanned the horizon for barbarian armies, the ancient system of education fell apart. What began as downsizing went on to wholesale abandonment. Schools closed, libraries and academies shut their doors, professional grammarians and teachers of rhetoric found themselves out of work, scribes were no longer given manuscripts to copy. There were more important things to worry about than the fate of books. Lucretius' poem, so incompatible with any cult of the gods, was attacked, ridiculed, burned, or ignored, and, like Lucretius himself, eventually forgotten.

The idea of pleasure and beauty that the work advanced was forgotten with it. Theology provided an explanation for the chaos of the Dark Ages: human beings were by nature corrupt. Inheritors of the sin of Adam and Eve, they richly deserved every miserable catastrophe that befell them. God cared about human beings, just as a father cared about his wayward children, and the sign of that care was

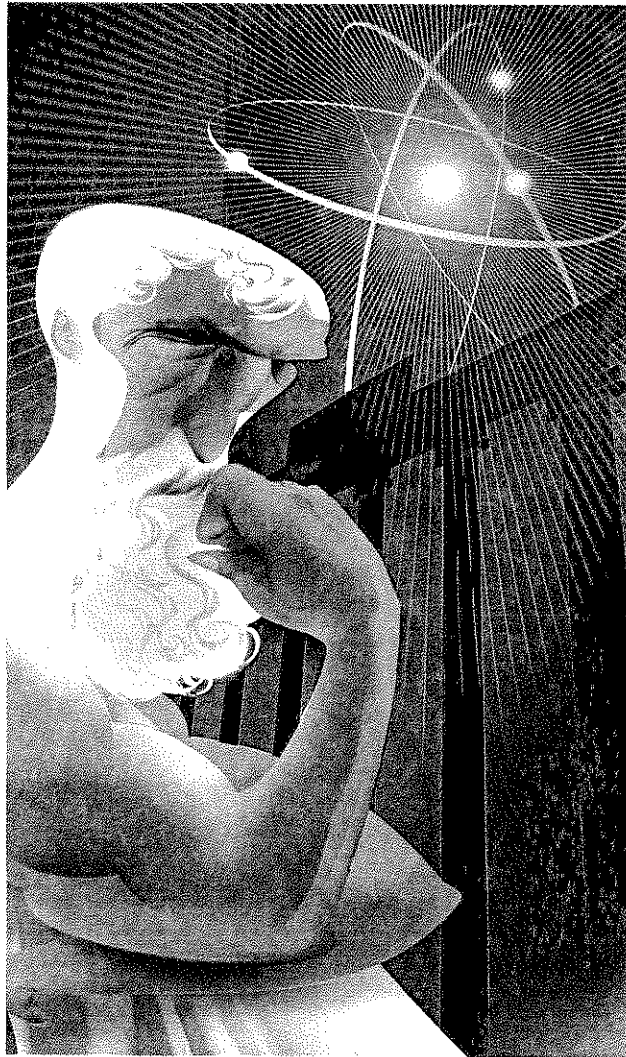
other in the ninth century copied the poem before it moldered away. And, by chance, this copy escaped fire and flood and the teeth of time for some five hundred years until, one day in 1417, it came into the hands of a man who proudly called himself Poggio Florentinus, Poggio the Florentine.

Poggio was, among other things, famous for the elegance of his script and for writing the best-known joke-book of its age, a chronicle of cynical tricksters, bawdy friars, unfaithful wives, and foolish husbands. He had served a succession of Roman Pontiffs as a scribe—that is, a writer of official documents in the Papal bureaucracy—and, through adroitness and cunning, he had risen to the coveted position of Apostolic Secretary. He had access, as the very word "secretary" suggests, to the Pope's secrets. But above all he was a book hunter, perhaps the greatest of his kind.

Italians had been obsessed with book hunting ever since the poet and scholar Petrarch brought glory on himself around 1330 by piecing together Livy's monumental "History of Rome" and finding forgotten masterpieces by Cicero and Propertius. Petrarch's achievement had inspired others to seek out lost classics that had been lying unread, often for centuries. The recovered texts were copied, edited, commented upon, and eagerly exchanged, conferring distinction on those who had found them and forming the basis for what became known as the "study of the humanities."

The "humanists," as those who were devoted to this study were called, knew from carefully poring over the texts that had survived from classical Rome that many once famous books or parts of books were still missing.

As a humanist, Poggio had quite a few accomplishments. He uncovered an epic poem on the struggle between Rome and Carthage; the works of an ancient literary critic who had flourished during Nero's reign and had written notes and glosses on classical authors; another critic who



Lucretius anticipated the core scientific vision of modernity.

anger. It was only through pain and punishment that a small number could find the narrow gate to salvation. A hatred of pleasure-seeking, a vision of God's providential rage, and an obsession with the afterlife: these were death knells of everything Lucretius represented.

By chance, copies of "On the Nature of Things" somehow made it into a few monastery libraries, places that had buried, seemingly forever, the principled pursuit of pleasure. By chance, a monk laboring in a scriptorium somewhere or

quoted extensively from lost epics written in imitation of Homer; a grammarian who wrote a treatise on spelling; a large fragment of a hitherto unknown history of the Roman Empire written by a high-ranking officer in the imperial Army, Ammianus Marcellinus. His salvaging of the complete text of the rhetorician Quintilian changed the curriculum of law schools and universities throughout Europe, and his discovery of Vitruvius' treatise on architecture transformed the way buildings were designed. But it was in January, 1417, when Poggio found himself in a monastery library, that he made his greatest discovery. He put his hands on a long poem whose author he may have recalled seeing mentioned in other ancient works: "T. LUCRETI CARI DE RERUM NATURA."

"On the Nature of Things," by Titus Lucretius Carus, is not an easy read. Totalling seventy-four hundred 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 scientific 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 over-all intellectual ambition astoundingly high.

The stuff of the universe, Lucretius proposed, is an infinite number of atoms moving randomly through space, like dust motes in a sunbeam, colliding, hooking together, forming complex structures, breaking apart again, in a ceaseless process of creation and destruction. There is no escape from this process. When we look up at the night sky and marvel at the numberless stars, we are not seeing the handiwork of the gods or a crystalline sphere. We are seeing the same material world of which we are a part and from whose elements we are made. There is no master plan, no divine architect, no intelligent design. Nature restlessly experiments, and we are simply one among the innumerable results: "We are all sprung from celestial seed; all have that same father, from whom our fostering mother earth receives liquid drops of water, and

then teeming brings forth bright corn and luxuriant trees and the race of mankind, brings forth all the generations of wild beasts, providing food with which all nourish their bodies and lead a sweet life and beget their offspring."

All things, including the species to which we belong, have evolved over vast stretches of time. The evolution is random, though in the case of living organisms it involves a principle of natural selection. That is, species that are suited to survive and to reproduce successfully endure, at least for a time; those which are not so well suited die off quickly. Other species existed and vanished before we came onto the scene; our kind, too, will vanish one day. Nothing—from our own species to the sun—lasts forever. Only the atoms are immortal.

In a universe so constituted, Lucretius argued, it is absurd to think that the earth and its inhabitants occupy a central place, or that the world was purpose-built to accommodate human beings: "The child, like a sailor cast forth by the cruel waves, lies naked upon the ground, speechless, in need of every kind of vital support, as soon as nature has spilt him forth with throes from his mother's womb into the regions of light." There is no reason to set humans apart from other animals, no hope of bribing or appeasing the gods, no place for religious fanaticism, no call for ascetic self-denial, no justification for dreams of limitless power or perfect security, no rationale for wars of conquest or self-aggrandizement, no possibility of triumphing over nature. Instead, he wrote, human beings should conquer their fears, accept the fact that they themselves and all the things they encounter are transitory, and embrace the beauty and the pleasure of the world.

Almost nothing is known about the poem's author, except for a brief biographical sketch by St. Jerome, the great fourth-century Church Father. In the entry for 94 B.C.E., Jerome noted: "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



"I'll be there as soon as I finish with the Internet."

philosopher tormented by erotic fantasies.

Modern scholarship suggests that Jerome's biographical claims, written more than four centuries after the poet's death, should be regarded with skepticism. Lucretius' personal life remains a mystery that no one at this distance is likely to solve. It is possible, however, to know something about his intellectual biography. "On the Nature of Things" is clearly the work of a disciple who is transmitting ideas that had been developed in Greece centuries earlier. Epicurus was Lucretius' philosophical messiah, and his vision may be traced to a single incandescent idea: that everything that has ever existed and everything that will ever exist is put together out of what the Roman poet called "the seeds of things," 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 was only a dazzling speculation; there was no way to get any empirical proof and wouldn't be for more than two thousand years. But Epicurus used this conjecture to argue that there are no supercategories of matter, no hierarchy of elements. Heavenly bodies are not divine beings, nor do they move through the void under the guidance of gods. And, though 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 life's deepest pleasures.

Pleasure is perhaps the key to comprehending the powerful impact of Epicurus' philosophy. Epicurus' enemies—and the Church especially—seized upon his celebration of pleasure and invented malicious stories about his supposed debauchery, taking note of his unusual inclusion of women as well as men among his followers. He "vomited twice a day from overindulgence," in one account, and spent a fortune on feasting. In reality, he seems to have lived a conspicuously simple and frugal life. "Send me a little pot of cheese," he once wrote to a friend, "that, when I like, I may fare sumptuously." It is impossible to live pleasurably, one of his disciples wrote, "without living prudently and honorably and justly, and also without living courageously and temperately and magnanimously, and without making

friends, and without being philanthropic."

This philosophy of pleasure, at once passionate, scientific, and visionary, radiated from almost every line of Lucretius' poetry. Even a quick glance at the first few pages of the manuscript would have convinced Poggio that he had discovered something remarkable. What he could not have grasped, without carefully reading through the work, was that he was unleashing something that threatened the whole structure of his intellectual universe. Had he understood this threat, he might have said, as Freud supposedly said to Jung, when they sailed into New York Harbor, "Don't they know we are bringing them the plague?"

There are moments, rare and powerful, in which a writer, long vanished, seems to stand in your presence and speak to you directly, as if he bore a message meant for you above all others. When I first read "On the Nature of Things," it struck such a chord within me. The core of Lucretius' poem is a profound, therapeutic meditation on the fear of death, and that fear dominated my childhood. It was not fear of my own death that so troubled me; I had the usual child's intimation of immortality. It was, rather, my mother's absolute certainty that she was destined for an early death.

My mother was not afraid of the afterlife: like most Jews, she had only a hazy sense of what might lie beyond the grave, and she gave it very little thought. It was death itself—simply ceasing to be—that terrified her. As far back as I can remember, she brooded obsessively on the imminence of her end, invoking it again and again, especially at moments of parting. My life was full of extended, operatic scenes of farewell. When she went with my father from Boston to New York for the weekend, when I went off to summer camp, and even—when things were especially hard for her—when I simply left the house for school, she clung tightly to me, speaking of her fragility and of the distinct possibility that I would never see her again. If we walked somewhere together, she would frequently come to a halt, as if she were about to keel over. Sometimes she would show me a vein pulsing in her neck and, taking my finger, make me feel it for myself, the sign of her heart dangerously racing.

She must have been in her late thirties

when my own memories of her fears begin, and those fears evidently went back much further in time. They seem to have taken root about a decade before my birth, when her younger sister, only sixteen years old, died of strep throat. This event—one all too familiar before the introduction of penicillin—was still an open wound: my mother spoke of it constantly, weeping quietly, and making me read and reread the poignant letters that her sister had written through the course of her fatal illness.

I understood early on that my mother's "heart"—the palpitations that brought her and everyone around her to a halt—was a life strategy. It was a way to express both anger ("You see how upset you have made me") and love ("You see how I am still doing everything for you, even though my heart is about to break"). It was an acting out, a rehearsal, of the extinction that she feared. It was, above all, a way to compel attention from my father, my brother, and me, and to demand our love. But this understanding did not make its effect upon my childhood significantly less intense: I loved my mother and dreaded losing her. I was hardly equipped to untangle psychological strategy from dangerous symptom. (I don't imagine that she was, either.) And, as a child, I had no means to gauge the weirdness of this constant harping on impending death and this freighting of every farewell with finality.

As it turned out, my mother lived to a month shy of her ninetieth birthday. She was still in her fifties when I encountered "On the Nature of Things." By then my dread of her dying had become entwined with a painful perception that she had blighted much of her life—and cast a shadow on my own—in the service of her obsessive fear. Lucretius' words therefore rang out with a terrible clarity: "Death is nothing to us." His lines (here in a translation by the seventeenth-century poet John Dryden) went right to the heart of her anxiety and my own:

So, when our mortal frame shall be
disjoin'd,
The lifeless lump uncoupled from the mind,
From sense of grief and pain we shall be
free;
We shall not feel, because we shall not be.
Though earth in seas, and seas in heaven
were lost,
We should not move, we only should be
toss'd.
Nay, e'en suppose when we have suffer'd
fate

The soul should feel in her divided state,
 What's that to us? for we are only we,
 While souls and bodies in one frame agree.
 Nay, though our atoms should revolve by
 chance,
 And matter leap into the former dance;
 Though time our life and motion could
 restore,
 And make our bodies what they were
 before,
 What gain to us would all this bustle bring?
 The new-made man would be another
 thing.

To spend your existence in the grip of anxiety about death, Lucretius wrote, is folly. It is a sure way to let your life slip from you incomplete and unenjoyed. And, in so arguing, he gave voice to a thought I had not yet quite allowed myself to articulate: to inflict this anxiety on others is manipulative and cruel.

When Lucretius' poem returned to circulation in 1417, it seems to have struck some early readers with the same personal intensity—the sense of direct address across an abyss—that I experienced. But, of course, the issues were vastly different. To people haunted by images of the bleeding Christ, gripped by a terror of Hell, and obsessed with escaping the purgatorial fires of the afterlife, Lucretius offered a vision of divine indifference. There was no afterlife, no system of rewards and punishments meted out from on high. Gods, by virtue of being gods, could not possibly be concerned with the doings of human beings. One simple name for the plague that Lucretius brought, and a charge frequently levelled against him then and since, is atheism.

Some six or seven decades after Poggio returned the poem to circulation, atomism was viewed as a serious threat to Christianity. Atomist books were burned; the clergy in Florence prohibited the reading of Lucretius in schools. The sense of threat intensified when Protestants mounted their assault on Catholic doctrine. That assault did not depend on atomism—Luther and Zwingli and Calvin were scarcely Epicureans—but for the militant, embattled forces of the Counter-Reformation it was as if the resurgence of ancient materialism had opened a dangerous second front. Indeed, atomism seemed to offer the Reformers access to an intellectual weapon of mass destruction. The Church was fiercely determined not to allow anyone to lay hands on this weapon, and its ideological arm,

the Inquisition, was alerted to detect the telltale signs of proliferation.

Poems are difficult to silence. At the time that the Church was attempting to suppress the text, a young Florentine was copying out for himself the whole of "On the Nature of Things." He was too cunning to mention the work directly in the famous books he went on to write. But the handwriting was conclusively identified in 1961: the copy was made by Niccolò Machiavelli. Thomas More engaged with Epicureanism more openly in his most famous work, "Utopia," in which the inhabitants of his imaginary land are convinced that "either the whole or the most part of human happiness" lies in the pursuit of pleasure. His use of the philosophy for the population of this alien island showed that the ideas recovered by the humanists seemed compellingly vital and at the same time still utterly weird. Rejected into the intellectual bloodstream of Europe after long centuries, they were, in effect, voices from another world, a world as different as Vespucci's Brazil was from England.

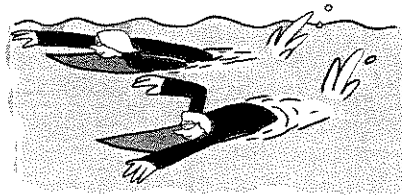
But the poem spread, and, as it did, its ideas filtered into popular culture. On the London stage in the mid-fifteen-nineties, Mercutio teased Romeo with this fantastical description of Queen Mab:

She is the fairies' midwife, and she comes
 In shape no bigger than an agate stone
 On the forefinger of an alderman,
 Drawn with a team of little atomi
 Athwart men's noses as they lie asleep.

"A team of little atomi": Shakespeare expected that his audience would immediately understand what Mercutio was comically conjuring. That is interesting in itself, and still more interesting in the context of a tragedy that broods upon the compulsive power of desire in a world whose main characters conspicuously abjure any prospect of life after death:

Here, here will I remain
 With worms that are thy chambermaids.
 O, here
 Will I set up my everlasting rest.

The author of "Romeo and Juliet"



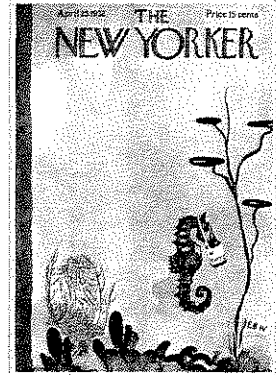
shared his interest in Lucretian materialism with Spenser, Donne, Bacon, and others. He could have discussed it with his fellow-playwright Ben Jonson, whose own signed copy of "On the Nature of Things" has survived and is today in the Houghton Library, at Harvard. And he certainly would have encountered Lucretius in one of his favorite books: Montaigne's "Essays."

The "Essays," first published in 1580, contain almost a hundred direct quotations from "On the Nature of Things." But, beyond any particular passage, there is a profound affinity between Lucretius and Montaigne. Montaigne shared Lucretius' contempt for a morality enforced by nightmares of the afterlife; he clung to the importance of his own senses and the evidence of the material world; he intensely disliked ascetic self-punishment and violence against the flesh; he treasured inward freedom and contentment. In grappling with the fear of death, in particular, he was influenced by Lucretian materialism. He once saw a man die, he recalled, who complained bitterly in his last moments that destiny was preventing him from finishing the book he was writing. The absurdity of the regret, in Montaigne's view, is best conveyed by lines from Lucretius: "But this they fail to add: that after you expire/Not one of all these things will fill you with desire." As for himself, Montaigne wrote, "I want death to find me planting my cabbages, but careless of death, and still more of my unfinished garden."

By the seventeenth century, the lure of the poem was too great to contain. The brilliant French astronomer, philosopher, and priest Pierre Gassendi devoted himself to an ambitious attempt to reconcile Epicureanism and Christianity, and one of his most remarkable students, the playwright Molière, undertook to produce a verse translation of "De Rerum Natura" (which does not, unfortunately, survive). In England, the wealthy diarist John Evelyn translated the first book of Lucretius' poem, and Isaac Newton declared himself an atomist. By the following century, Thomas Jefferson owned at least five Latin editions of "De Rerum Natura," along with translations of the poem into English, Italian, and French. To a correspondent who wanted to know his philosophy of life, Jefferson wrote, "I too am an Epicurean."

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What lay beyond the horizon were the astonishing empirical observations and experimental proofs of the intuitions of ancient atomism. In the nineteenth century, when Charles Darwin set out to solve the mystery of the origin of species, he did not have to draw on Lucretius' vision of an entirely natural, unplanned process of creation and destruction, renewed by sexual reproduction. That vision had directly influenced the evolutionary theories of Darwin's grandfather Erasmus Darwin, but Charles could base his arguments on his own work in the Galápagos and elsewhere. So, too, when Einstein wrote of atoms, his thought rested on experimental and mathematical science, not upon ancient philosophical speculation. But that speculation, as Einstein acknowledged, had led the way to the proofs upon which modern atomism depends. That the ancient poem can now be safely left unread, that the drama of its loss and recovery can fade into oblivion—these are the greatest signs of Lucretius' absorption into modern thought.

The manuscript that Poggio found in 1417 has itself been lost to time—its letters perhaps scraped away and the parchment recycled for a more pious purpose. The crucial conduit through which the ancient poem, all but dormant for a thousand years before the humanist encountered it, returned to circulation was an elegant copy prepared by Poggio's wealthy bibliophile friend Niccolò Niccoli. Niccoli bequeathed his valuable collection to Florence, and today his Lucretius manuscript is preserved in the cool gray-and-white Laurentian Library that Michelangelo designed for the Medici. Labelled "Codex Laurentianus 35.30," it is a modest volume, bound in fading, tattered red leather inlaid with metal, a chain attached to the bottom of the back cover. There is little to distinguish it physically from many other manuscripts in the collection, apart from the fact that a reader is given latex gloves to wear when it is delivered to the desk.

My gloved hands trembled with excitement recently when I held it and looked at its elegant lines. Many years have passed since I picked up the ten-cent paperback from the bin in New Haven. My mother has been gone for more than a decade, cruelly weaned of her fear of death by the slow asphyxiation of conges-

tive heart failure. My father, blessed with a quicker parting, is long dead as well, along with the whole crowded generation of aunts and uncles who seemed at one point to be arrayed as a formidable bulwark against my own extinction. Of necessity, I have taken in the significance of one of the celebrated aphorisms of Lucretius' master, Epicurus: "Against other things it is possible to obtain security, but when it comes to death we human beings all live in an unwall'd city."

I have taken in, as well, much that pulls against Lucretius' account of the nature of things. In a secular, skeptical culture, it is not a sizable consolation to know that there is no afterlife. There may be some reassurance in realizing that the dead cannot possibly miss the living, but, as I've learned, that realization does not free the living from missing the dead. Did the ancient poet not experience this pain or think it worth addressing? Anyone who thought, as Lucretius did, that it was a particular pleasure to gaze from shore at a ship foundering in wild seas or to stand on a height and behold armies clashing on a plain—"not because any man's troubles are a delectable joy, but because to perceive what ills you are free from yourself is pleasant"—is not someone I can find an entirely companionable soul. I am, rather, with Shakespeare's Miranda, who, harrowed by the vision of a shipwreck, cries, "O, I have suffered / With those I saw suffer!" There is something disturbingly cold in Lucretius' account of pleasure, an account that leads him to advise those who are suffering from the pangs of intense love to reduce their anguish by taking many lovers.

All the same, in the great Laurentian Library, surrounded by the achievements of Renaissance Florence, I felt the full force of what this ancient Roman poet had bequeathed to the world, a tortuous trail that led from the celebration of Venus, past broken columns, high-domed churches, and inquisitorial fires, toward Jefferson, Darwin, and Einstein. And I registered, too, what Lucretius had given to me personally: the means to elude the suffocating grasp of my mother's fears and the encouragement to take deep pleasure in my brief time on the shores of light. ♦

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Stephen Greenblatt talks about Lucretius.