

PREFACE

WHEN I WAS a student, I used to go at the end of the school year to the Yale Coop 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 would be jumbled together in bins through which I would rummage, with nothing much in mind, waiting for something to catch 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, I confess, 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 and began to read. I immediately encountered ample justification for the erotic cover. Lucretius begins with an ardent hymn to Venus, the goddess of love, whose coming in the spring has scattered the clouds, flooded the sky with light, and filled the entire world with frenzied sexual desire:

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 of this opening, I continued on, past a vision of Mars asleep on Venus' lap—"vanquished by the never-healing wound of love, throwing back his handsome neck and gazing up at you"; a prayer for peace; a tribute to the wisdom of the philosopher Epicurus; and a resolute condemnation of superstitious fears. When I reached the beginning of a lengthy exposition of philosophical first principles, I fully expected to lose interest: no one had assigned the book to me, my only object was pleasure, and I had already gotten far more than my ten cents' worth. But to my surprise, I continued to find the book thrilling.

It was not Lucretius' exquisite language to which I was responding. Later I worked through *De rerum natura* in its original Latin hexameters, and I came to understand something of its rich verbal texture, its subtle rhythms, and the cunning precision and poignancy of its imagery. But my first encounter was in Martin Ferguson Smith's workmanlike English prose—clear and unfussy, but hardly remarkable. No, it was something else that reached me, something that lived and moved within the sentences for more than 200 densely packed pages. I am committed by trade to urging people to attend carefully to the verbal surfaces of what they read. Much of the pleasure and interest of poetry depends on such attention. But it is nonethe-

less possible to have a powerful experience of a work of art even in a modest translation, let alone a brilliant one. That is, after all, how most of the literate world has encountered Genesis or the *Iliad* or *Hamlet*, and, though it is certainly preferable to read these works in their original languages, it is misguided to insist that there is no real access to them otherwise.

I can, in any case, testify that, even in a prose translation, *On the Nature of Things* struck a very deep chord within me. Its power depended to some extent on personal circumstances—art always penetrates the particular fissures in one's psychic life. The core of Lucretius' poem is a profound, therapeutic meditation on the fear of death, and that fear dominated my entire childhood. It was not fear of my own death that so troubled me; I had the ordinary, healthy 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 vague and 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. For 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, 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 only 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 in the world before the introduction of penicillin—was still for my mother an open wound: she spoke of it constantly, weeping quietly, and making me read and reread the poignant letters that the teenaged girl 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 symbolic means to identify with and mourn her dead sister. 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 and demand love. But this understanding did not make its effect upon my childhood significantly less intense: I loved my mother and dreaded losing her. I had no resources to untangle psychological strategy and dangerous symptom. (I don't imagine that she did 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. Only now that I have raised a family of my own do I understand how dire the compulsion must have been that led a loving parent—and she was loving—to lay such a heavy emotional burden on her children. Every day brought a renewal of the dark certainty that her end was very near.

As it turned out, my mother lived to a month shy of her ninetyeth birthday. She was still only in her fifties when I encountered *On the Nature of Things* for the first time. 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." To spend your existence in the grip of anxiety about death, he wrote, is mere folly. It is a sure way to let your life slip from you incomplete and unenjoyed. He gave voice as well to a thought I had not yet quite allowed myself, even inwardly, to articulate: to inflict this anxiety on others is manipulative and cruel.

Such was, in my case, the poem's personal point of entry, the immediate source of its power over me. But that power was not only a consequence of my peculiar life history. *On the Nature of Things* struck me as an astonishingly convincing account of the way things actually are. To be sure, I easily grasped that many features of this ancient account now seem absurd. What else would we expect? How accurate will our account of the universe seem two thousand years from now? Lucretius believed that the sun circled around the earth, and he argued that the sun's heat and size could hardly be much greater than are perceived by our senses. He thought that worms were spontaneously generated from the wet soil, explained lightning as seeds of fire expelled from hollow clouds, and pictured the earth as a menopausal mother exhausted by the effort of so much breeding. But at the core of the poem lay key principles of a modern understanding of the world.

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 you look up at the night sky and, feeling unaccountably moved, marvel at the numberless stars, you are not seeing the

handiwork of the gods or a crystalline sphere detached from our transient world. You are seeing the same material world of which you are a part and from whose elements you are made. There is no master plan, no divine architect, no intelligent design. All things, including the species to which you 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 that are not so well suited die off quickly. But nothing—from our own species to the planet on which we live to the sun that lights our days—lasts forever. Only the atoms are immortal.

In a universe so constituted, Lucretius argued, there is no reason to think that the earth or its inhabitants occupy a central place, no reason to set humans apart from all 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, no escape from the constant making and unmaking and remaking of forms. On the other side of anger at those who either peddled false visions of security or incited irrational fears of death, Lucretius offered a feeling of liberation and the power to stare down what had once seemed so menacing. What human beings can and should do, he wrote, is to 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.

I marveled—I continue to marvel—that these perceptions were fully articulated in a work written more than two thousand years ago. The line between this work and modernity is not direct: nothing is ever so simple. There were innumerable forgettings, disappearances, recoveries, dismissals, distortions,

challenges, transformations, and renewed forgettings. And yet the vital connection is there. Hidden behind the worldview I recognize as my own is an ancient poem, a poem once lost, apparently irrevocably, and then found.

It is not surprising that the philosophical tradition from which Lucretius' poem derived, so incompatible with the cult of the gods and the cult of the state, struck some, even in the tolerant culture of the classical Mediterranean, as scandalous. The adherents of this tradition were on occasion dismissed as mad or impious or simply stupid. And with the rise of Christianity, their texts were attacked, ridiculed, burned, or—most devastating—ignored and eventually forgotten. What is astonishing is that one magnificent articulation of the whole philosophy—the poem whose recovery is the subject of this book—should have survived. Apart from a few odds and ends and secondhand reports, all that was left of the whole rich tradition was contained in that single work. A random fire, an act of vandalism, a decision to snuff out the last trace of views judged to be heretical, and the course of modernity would have been different.

Of all the ancient masterpieces, this poem is one that should certainly have disappeared, finally and forever, in the company of the lost works that had inspired it. That it did not disappear, that it surfaced after many centuries and began once again to propagate its deeply subversive theses, is something one could be 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 Latin word for it was *clinamen*—an unexpected, unpredictable movement of matter. The reappearance of his poem was such a swerve, an unforeseen deviation from the direct trajectory—in this case, toward oblivion—on which that poem and its philosophy seemed to be traveling.

When it returned to full circulation after a millennium,

much of what the work said about a universe formed out of the clash of atoms in an infinite void seemed absurd. But those very things that first were deemed both impious and nonsensical turned out to be the basis for the contemporary rational understanding of the entire world. What is at stake is not only the startling recognition of key elements of modernity in antiquity, though it is certainly worth reminding ourselves that Greek and Roman classics, largely displaced from our curriculum, have in fact definitively shaped modern consciousness. More surprising, perhaps, is the sense, driven home by every page of *On the Nature of Things*, that the scientific vision of the world—a vision of atoms randomly moving in an infinite universe—was in its origins imbued with a poet's sense of wonder. Wonder did not depend on gods and demons and 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 our lives.

In my view, and by no means mine alone, the culture in the wake of antiquity that best epitomized the Lucretian embrace of beauty and pleasure and propelled it forward as a legitimate and worthy human pursuit was that of the Renaissance. The pursuit was not restricted to the arts. It 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. It was virtually a reflex, so that works that were seemingly far away from any aesthetic ambition at all—Machiavelli's analysis of political strategy, Walter Raleigh's description of Guiana, or Robert Burton's encyclopedic account of mental illness—were crafted in such a way as to produce the most intense pleasure. But the arts

of the Renaissance—painting, sculpture, music, architecture, and literature—were the supreme manifestations of the pursuit of beauty.

My own particular love was and is for Shakespeare, but Shakespeare's achievement seemed to me only one spectacular facet of a larger cultural movement that included Alberti, Michelangelo, and Raphael, Ariosto, Montaigne, and Cervantes, along with dozens of other artists and writers. That movement had many intertwining and often conflicting aspects, but coursing through all of them there was a glorious affirmation of vitality. The affirmation extends even to those many works of Renaissance art in which death seems to triumph. Hence the grave at the close of *Romeo and Juliet* does not so much swallow up the lovers as launch them into the future as the embodiments of love. In the enraptured audiences that have flocked to the play for more than four hundred years, Juliet in effect gets her wish that after death, night should take Romeo

and cut him out in little stars
 And he will make the face of heaven so fine
 That all the world will be in love with night.
 (III.ii.22–24)

A comparably capacious embrace of beauty and pleasure—an embrace that somehow extends to death as well as life, to dissolution as well as creation—characterizes Montaigne's restless reflections on matter in motion, Cervantes's chronicle of his mad knight, Michelangelo's depiction of flayed skin, Leonardo's sketches of whirlpools, Caravaggio's loving attention to the dirty soles of Christ's feet.

Something happened in the Renaissance, something that surged up against the constraints that centuries had constructed around curiosity, desire, individuality, sustained atten-

tion to the material world, the claims of the body. The cultural shift is notoriously difficult to define, and its significance has been fiercely contested. But it can be intuited easily enough when you look in Siena at Duccio's painting of the enthroned Virgin, the *Maestà*, and then in Florence at Botticelli's *Primavera*, a painting that, not coincidentally, was influenced by *On the Nature of Things*. In the principal panel of Duccio's magnificent altarpiece (ca. 1310), the adoration of the angels, saints, and martyrs is focused on a serene center, the heavily robed Mother of God and her child absorbed in solemn contemplation. In the *Primavera* (ca. 1482), the ancient gods of the spring appear together in a verdant wood, all intently engaged in the complex, rhythmic choreography of renewed natural fecundity evoked in Lucretius' poem; "Spring comes and Venus, preceded by Venus' winged harbinger, and mother Flora, following hard on the heels of Zephyr, prepares the way for them, strewing all their path with a profusion of exquisite hues and scents." The key to the shift lies not only in the intense, deeply informed revival of interest in the pagan deities and the rich meanings that once attached to them. It lies also in the whole vision of a world in motion, a world not rendered insignificant but made more beautiful by its transience, its erotic energy, and its ceaseless change.

Though most evident in works of art, the change from one way of perceiving and living in the world to another was not restricted to aesthetics: it helps to account for the intellectual daring of Copernicus and Vesalius, Giordano Bruno and William Harvey, Hobbes and Spinoza. The transformation was not sudden or once-for-all, but it became increasingly possible to turn away from a preoccupation with angels and demons and immaterial causes and to focus instead on things in this world; to understand that humans are made of the same stuff as everything else and are part of the natural order; to conduct

experiments without fearing that one is infringing on God's jealously guarded secrets; to question authorities and challenge received doctrines; to legitimate the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain; to imagine that there are other worlds beside the one that we inhabit; to entertain the thought that the sun is only one star in an infinite universe; to live an ethical life without reference to postmortem rewards and punishments; to contemplate without trembling the death of the soul. In short, it became possible—never easy, but possible—in the poet Auden's phrase to find the mortal world enough.

There is no single explanation for the emergence of the Renaissance and the release of the forces that have shaped our own world. But I have tried in this book to tell a little known but exemplary Renaissance story, the story of Poggio Bracciolini's recovery of *On the Nature of Things*. The recovery has the virtue of being true to the term that we use to gesture toward the cultural shift at the origins of modern life and thought: a re-naissance, a rebirth, of antiquity. One poem by itself was certainly not responsible for an entire intellectual, moral, and social transformation—no single work was, let alone one that for centuries could not without danger be spoken about freely in public. But this particular ancient book, suddenly returning to view, made a difference.

This is a story then 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. For events of this magnitude, historians and artists have given the popular imagination memorable images: the fall of the Bastille, the Sack of Rome, or the moment when the ragged seamen from the Spanish ships planted their flag in the New World. These emblems of world-historic change can be deceptive—the Bastille had almost no prisoners; Attila's army quickly withdrew from the imperial capital; and, in the Americas, the truly

fateful action was not the unfurling of a banner but the first time that an ill and infectious Spanish sailor, surrounded by wondering natives, sneezed or coughed. Still, we can in such cases at least cling to the vivid symbol. But the epochal change with which this book is concerned—though it has affected all of our lives—is not so easily associated with a dramatic image.

When it occurred, nearly six hundred years ago, the key moment was muffled and almost invisible, tucked away behind walls in a remote place. There were no heroic gestures, no observers keenly recording the great event for posterity, no signs in heaven or on earth that everything had changed forever. A short, genial, cannily alert man in his late thirties reached out one day, took a very old manuscript off a library shelf, saw with excitement what he had discovered, and ordered that it be copied. That was all; but it was enough.

The finder of the manuscript could not, of course, have fully grasped the implications of its vision or anticipated its influence, which took centuries to unfold. Indeed, if he had had an intimation of the forces he was unleashing, he might have thought twice about drawing so explosive a work out of the darkness in which it slept. The work that the man held in his hands had been laboriously copied by hand for centuries, but it had long rested uncirculated and perhaps uncomprehended even by the solitary souls who copied it. For many generations, no one spoke of it at all. Between the fourth and the ninth centuries, it was cited fleetingly in lists of grammatical and lexicographical examples, that is, as a quarry of correct Latin usage. In the seventh century Isidore of Seville, compiling a vast encyclopedia, used it as an authority on meteorology. It surfaced again briefly, in the time of Charlemagne, when there was a crucial burst of interest in ancient books and a scholarly Irish monk named Dungal carefully corrected a copy. But, neither debated nor disseminated, after each of these fugitive appear-

ances it seemed to sink again beneath the waves. Then, after lying dormant and forgotten for more than a thousand years, it returned to circulation.

The person responsible for this momentous return, Poggio Bracciolini, was an avid letter writer. He penned an account of the event to a friend back in his native Italy, but the letter has been lost. Still, it is possible, on the basis of other letters, both his own and those of his circle, to reconstruct how it came about. For though this particular manuscript would turn out from our perspective to be his greatest find, it was by no means his only one, and it was no accident. Poggio Bracciolini was a book hunter, perhaps the greatest in an age obsessed with ferreting out and recovering the heritage of the ancient world.

The finding of a lost book does not ordinarily figure as a thrilling event, but behind that one moment was the arrest and imprisonment of a pope, the burning of heretics, and a great culturewide explosion of interest in pagan antiquity. The act of discovery fulfilled the life's passion of a brilliant book hunter. And that book hunter, without ever intending or realizing it, became a midwife to modernity.