

The Swerve Study Guide

The Swerve by Stephen Greenblatt

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Summary

The *Swerve* by Stephen Greenblatt is the story of a dedication that was tantamount to obsession. A highly-placed papal scribe, Poggio Bracciolini, who was secretary to the Pope - in fact, to eight popes over his long career - was also a book hunter. He was dedicated to finding the lost works of scholars, philosophers and scientists from the golden ages of ancient Greece and Rome. Every chance he got, Poggio was on the road pursuing what to him were treasures that he could rediscover in private, public and monastic libraries throughout Europe. Monasteries in Germany and Switzerland proved to be great sources for these books of antiquity.

In 1417, Poggio rode through the German countryside and made his way to the Benedictine Abbey of Fulda. It was in the library at this monastery that Poggio uncovered the long buried and forgotten work of a little-known Roman philosopher who was a student and admirer of the great scholar and philosopher Epicurus. Poggio could not believe his discovery. Just glancing at the Latin writing, he immediately fell in love with the beauty of the words. He would later learn that the work, *On the Nature of Things*, was actually a doctrine that supported atheism. The irony that the papal secretary to the Pope rediscovered this lost doctrine that was anathema to organized religion and faith redounded on more than one level.

After discovering the substance of the lengthy poem, Poggio was still enchanted with its lyrical beauty despite the fact that it stood against everything that he had been taught and upended the world he had lived in if given any credence. Poggio had the chance to put the work back in hibernation to hide it again for perhaps another thousand years and thus protect his religion but he just could not hide it away. He had copies made by junior scribes and copies of it began to show up around Europe. With the advent of the printing press, more copies were made and distributed about.

Not much is known about Lucretius and how he came to the conclusions he did in his masterpiece. He ascribed to Epicureanism which advocated the avoidance of pain and the seeking of pleasure as man's most satisfying goals. However, Lucretius also wrote of the "small particles" which was the basic construction of everything. In 300 to 440 BCE when he lived, Lucretius was speaking of atoms. What led him to his theory of small particles which turned out to be correct remains a mystery that will probably never be solved.

Poggio Bracciolini, a papal scribe, found a remarkable work written some 1,400 years before by a little-known Roman philosopher. Though Poggio remained interested in the literature of antiquity, he retired from his book-hunting soon after this discovery. He undoubtedly concluded that he had found his "Holy Grail" and that he would probably never be able to exceed that achievement.



Chapters 1 and 2

Summary

Poggio Bracciolini rode through the Germany countryside in 1417 heading to a monastery but not in search of holy books; he was on a historic mission. He was looking for antiquated manuscripts, perhaps four or five hundred years old that were still intact. But he was not interested in what was written in the old tomes. He wanted the chance to trace the books written in the Latin language that he so adored back to the Roman Forum and the Senate House.

Had Poggio shared the reason for his quest, some would have thought he was involved in sorcery while others would have questioned his passion. He had served a pope and Roman pontiffs as a scribe tasked with writing official documents for the papacy. He had advanced to the position of apostolic secretary to the Pope. He had access to the Pope's secrets and the Pope had many of them.

The Pope, John XXIII, in 1417 was sitting in a Heidelberg prison. He had been stripped of his title and power and was accused of bringing scandal and disgrace to the Church. Italians had been "book hunters" since the 1330s since Petrarch, who inspired the humanist movement, pieced together the History of Rome from antiquated manuscripts.

Libraries in monasteries throughout Europe held the most promise for finding these prized manuscripts. Since reading was obligatory for monks, books were used over decades and decades and eventually fell apart and new books had to be purchased or acquired. Book workshops were closed down after the Gothic Wars when book production ceased. Books had always been copied over on new papyrus but trade with Egyptian papyrus vendors had ended. Therefore, the monks were forced to learn the papyrus-making process.

The book hunters knew that undiscovered manuscripts existed in the monasteries of Switzerland and Germany. However, the monasteries had purposely been built in remote places that were difficult to reach. Of those who located these monasteries, only a handful were scholars and knew what to look for. The abbots at the monasteries were often reluctant to allow these travelers into the libraries. If a book hunter was allowed in, he was faced with the problem of how to take the knowledge contained in the book or the book itself with him. Some monasteries had placed curses on their manuscripts so that anyone who tried to steal them would suffer. Abbots would increase the prices of books exponentially if a traveler asked to purchase it.

Before the printing press took over the production of books, printers depended on accurate and legible handwriting. After charming his way into the monasteries, Poggio was able to make copies of the books he found. But traveling and getting the help and supplies he needed was an expensive venture. He wrote to wealthy supporters for



financial assistance and apparently got the help he needed because he was able to make other trips in addition to the one in Germany.

Poggio generally did not like monks. He viewed them as lazy leeches and as misfits from regular society. He felt they compensated for their ineptitude and shortcomings through prayer. Scribes were an important part of the Church. The punishment for the murder of a good scribe was equal to that of a bishop or habit. Monastery libraries did not contain huge collections since books were expensive and difficult to come by. There were workshops called scriptoria where monks were trained to copy manuscripts. Some larger monastic libraries had special rooms devoted to the process. The monk in charge of the scriptorium, the librarian, was the contact person for Poggio and other book hunters. Most manuscripts at the time were in the form of scrolls. By the fourth century, Christians preferred the codex format – similar to present-day books. Animal skins were the only material available to use for copying manuscripts. Librarians saw to it that scribes were given optimum working conditions and hours.

The monastic scribes were subservient not only to God but to that which they transcribed. However, Poggio would not be subjugated to his work. He was curious about the subject matter and proud of his work. Since he believed that what he wrote had to make sense, he would sometimes alter the text to make it more coherent something that was taboo if discovered. Between the sixth century and mid-eighth century, Greek and Latin classics were not copied because of their pagan content. It was only in the ancient manuscripts that treasures such as poetry, treaties, and political speeches could be found. There were no “new” copies of such works. In some cases, classic literature was erased and written over.

Many scholars believe that Poggio traveled to the Benedictine Abbey of Fulda after he parted ways with Bartolomeo de Aragazzi, his traveling companion and fellow scribe. Fulda was a wealthy ancient monastery and had a reputation as a center of learning. If Poggio had chosen Fulda for his next book hunt, he would have met the ruler of the abbey, Johann von Merlau. Poggio would have presented a letter of recommendation from a high-profile Roman cardinal to legitimize his visit.

Poggio was excited about the treasures awaiting him at Fulda and their links to the distant past. Though it is not all together clear if Poggio traveled to Fulda, he did find some remarkable books somewhere. He found an epic poem of 14,000 lines by Silius Italicus that told of the wars between Rome and Carthage. He also found another lengthy poem by Manilius on astronomy which was written in the early days of the Roman Empire. He found many other treasures including a manuscript by Lucretius Carus, a Roman poet and philosopher from 50 BCE. He instructed his assistant scribe to begin copying. Unknown to Poggio, the book would play a part in dismantling his world.



Analysis

The author explains who Poggio Bracciolini was and lays out the premise of the story. He speaks of Poggio's passion for hunting down and finding documents from the Ancient Greeks and Romans that were lost over time. Poggio is seeking the works of the scholars, scientists and philosophers of antiquity who lived in an era of incredible intellectual advancement in philosophy, science and the arts.

It was Poggio's great insight which made him understand how beneficial finding documents from that time and from these giants of intellect would mean to mankind. Poggio's passion is stressed because without it, perhaps the startling discovery that he made would have not been accomplished.

Greenblatt describes the chaos that existed in Poggio's time and how the Catholic Church was the most powerful authority in Italy and beyond. That authority, however, was questioned by others who claimed the right to the papal throne. The conflict that existed over religion and related societal matter was an important element of the story and by providing it as the backdrop of Poggio's discovery, the reader has greater understanding of its ultimate impact.

Since manuscripts of antiquity were being pursued, the role that libraries played – private, monastic and public – is another element of the story that is crucial as part of the premise of Poggio's hunt for valuable books that had been lost in time.

Vocabulary

teutonic, courtier, journeymen, tinker, vagabonds, hierarchical, oligarch, pontiff, erstwhile, vituperative, papyrus, monastic, capacious, raconteur, indefatigable, inveigle, vainglory, blandishments, vouchsafe, pedagogical



Chapters 3 and 4

Summary

The poem, *On the Nature of Things*, written by Lucretius Carus that Poggio discovered had been widely read for centuries after it had been written. Some disagreed with its philosophy including Cicero – Poggio's favorite writer – but he recognized its brilliance and perfection. As a teenager, the most highly revered Roman poet, Virgil, had been obsessed with the poem. Unlike many Roman poets and philosophers, nothing much is known about Lucretius.

Lucretius was a contemporary of Philodemus whose words and thoughts were buried in the lava and mud in the library of large villa in Herculaneum that was a victim of the infamous Mt. Vesuvius eruption that obliterated the city of Pompeii. The master of the villa may well have invited Lucretius into his villa on occasion to share passages of his poem with elite intellectuals of the day. Lucretius would have discussed his idol the philosopher Epicurus who he felt had answers to all their questions.

Epicurus was a Greek philosopher who lived 200 years before and relied on the power of the intellect over brute force. He believed that the highest form of human existence was found in pleasure and in seeking pleasure. Epicurus did not believe in Providence and believed that the soul died with the body. Lucretius had been inspired by Epicurean thought to write *On the Nature of Things*, the poem that Poggio discovered. To Lucretius and other followers of Epicurus, the ancient Greek philosopher was godlike and worthy of their devotion.

The fear of punishment in the afterlife was a topic of discussion in Athens at the time of Epicurus, in Rome during the time of Lucretius and later in the Christian world of the book hunter Poggio. Images of human suffering and those bedeviled by evil were represented in carvings and paintings in every church. In one of the books found in the villa, Philodemus who was a devotee of Epicurus wrote that it was impossible to live pleasurably without also living honorably and justly.

The pursuit of pleasure was a scandal to the pagans and Jews and later to the Christians. Serving the family and the state led to the virtues of self-denial, self-sacrifice and self-loathing. If the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain were thought to be appealing goals then the competing principles of sacrifice, discipline and piety would be challenged. Epicurus himself ascribed to the quiet life. He believed that fame and renown could lead to increased insecurities. Perhaps the guests at the villa discussed this Epicurean "quietism." Lucretius wrote, as Epicurus' disciple, that it was important to abandon the tendency to erect barriers in the seeking of pleasure.

In Rome, the Jews and Christians were uncomfortable with the polytheism represented by the museums, library and the Serapeon, an extension of the main library which was the architectural wonder of its times. Religious tensions grew when the emperor



Constantine declared that Christianity would become the official religion of Rome. Those who flirted with paganism in any sense feared ridicule more than punishment. Jesus had been mocked as a nobody born of father who was a nobody. Epicurus was not an atheist; however, he believed that if there were gods they would be concerned only with their own pleasure. He asked why the messianic Jesus had chosen to be a Jew. Epicureans referred to the hubris of Christians who thought the world was created for them. The incarnation and resurrection were absurd fairy-tales.

Christians knew that pagans did not believe all the stories about their gods. Some openly ascribed to atheism or agnosticism and questioned all religious belief. Some believed in reincarnation. Others pointed out that Christian dogmata were retreads of ancient pagan doctrine. Christians of the day would prefer to be seen as absconding pagan beliefs than being seen as absurd. Elements of Epicureanism were appealing to some Christian leaders, including Tertullian. The concepts of friendship, charity and forgiveness were all amenable to Christian precepts. Other Epicurean beliefs were noxious to Christians – including the belief that the soul was mortal.

In order to strengthen their religion, Christian polemicists turned to debasing Epicurus. To accomplish this, they besmirched his image through his own words in his early writings. These Christian zealots were relentless in humiliating anyone who dared read the words of Epicurus or Lucretius, his devotee. Lactantius was the tutor of the son of Constantine who had established Christianity in the Roman Empire. He worked to diminish the importance of personal pleasure in favor of worshipping God.

Early Christians associated martyrdom and pain with devoutness. To pagans, pain was in no way a value or a pathway to salvation. Pain was routinely inflicted upon priests and nuns in monasteries and convents. The gladiator battles in Rome were symbolic of the pagan's belief in pleasure-seeking. To Christians whose God had sacrificed himself and endured pain, the seeking of pleasure was abhorrent. Christians were taught to emulate the life of Jesus and his suffering. There are no mentions in the Gospel of Luke of Jesus laughing or smiling. Christianity provided the answer to anyone who wondered why there were wars and suffering in the world. Through pain, early Christians hoped to shed the guilt and shame they bore for the suffering of Jesus.

By 600 there were more than 300 monasteries and convents throughout Italy and the territory that is modern France. These institutions attracted those who wanted to redeem themselves and atone for their wrongdoing. Forms of physical punishment were part of a sinner's rehabilitation. The Christian embracing of punishment shed a dark light on the Epicurean doctrine of seeking pleasure. Accepting punishment was a way to honor those saints and martyrs who had been flogged before them and was a way to mimic the life of Jesus and bring honor to Him. The body had to be beaten and tortured so that it was in submission. Still there were those Christians who sought pleasure, who drank, ate and were merry. But there was silence about these sinners. Epicurus and his follower Lucretius were long gone and forgotten. It was just by chance that the copy of Lucretius's *On the Nature of Things* had been distributed about and that remnants and pieces of it had been discovered. Copies had been made and one found its way into the buried villa to be discovered by Poggio in 1417.



Analysis

In these chapters, the author gets more deeply into the religious conflicts that were occurring at the time of Poggio's lifetime and specifically during the time he was searching for books from antiquity. The reader becomes aware that swirling around Poggio as he conducts an isolated, tedious and academic process is a world full of challenge, violence, corruption and transformation.

The reader learns about Epicureanism and that it was the ancient philosopher Epicurus who inspired Lucretius the author of the lost treasure that Poggio uncovers in his long quest. Epicurus believed that the ultimate goal of man was the pursuit of pleasure which was anathema to Christianity a belief system that tied devoutness to martyrdom and the pain and suffering that Jesus suffered. Again, the backdrop of religiosity provides the remarkable contrast that existed at the time Poggio unearthed a document that was dedicated to the pleasure of self and that fundamentally made a case for atheism.

There is a deep irony that a papal assistant, the secretary to the Pope himself, was on a quest to find what turned out to be a work that flew in the face of Christianity.

Vocabulary

gossamer, ossified, arcane, loquaciousness, connoisseur, honorific, colonnaded, verdant, empirical, palliative, philanthropic, sequestering, polemical



Chapters 5 and 6

Summary

Poggio's was known for his unique gift – beautiful handwriting. His handwriting reflected an innate creativity. Poggio was bright enough to know that his beautiful handwriting could take him to another level. His pursuit of buried manuscripts that he felt needed to see the light of day was almost an obsession. Poggio and his peers were obsessed with not making any grammatical errors in the Latin they copied. He crafted his script to honor the lost handwriting of those bygone days. As a young man, Poggio earned a living copying books and documents. He used his earnings to take lessons in Latin and for training as a notary.

Petrarch was a renowned poet and scholar who inspired generations to seek knowledge from old and forgotten tomes. Petrarch's work had fostered the study of the humanities and his followers became known as humanists. Poggio arrived in Rome 25 years after the death of Petrarch. Creativity was caving to the spirit of the past which fostered a desire to resolve the connection with the ancient times.

The remains of the lost empire were everywhere – in the bridges and roads and walls and markets. Its demise had been Christianity's victory over paganism. Since "curiosity" had been deemed a pagan desire, Christians were encouraged to honor the cultural achievements of ancient Greek and Rome and remember their importance – not seek pleasure in learning about them. Petrarch had the Latin texts he discovered copied and placed into distribution. It was a judgmental era. Petrarch wrote to Cicero that he had not lived up to his own high values.

The Chancellor of the Florentine Republic was the permanent secretary of state. The Republic was a state in central Italy and was comprised of a wide expanse of land. There were tensions between the Florentine Republic and other Italian states including Venice, Milan and Naples and the papacy in Rome. These rivals needing protection from France, the Holy Roman Empire and Spain called upon foreign powers on the continent for support and aid. These interlopers who were ambitious and ruthless were eager to intervene.

When Poggio arrived in Florence in the 1390s, Coluccio Salutati was the Chancellor of the Republic. He was considered by the Florentines to be adept in political and diplomatic dealings and had a gift for public relations. Salutati who was a devout Christian was also interested in vestiges from the past. His heroes were Virgil and Cicero and though he was not the literary genius that Petrarch was, Salutati was recognized for crafting impressive prose. He felt that reading the works of the masters was inspirational and that their styles should not be copied; rather, each individual should allow his own style to emerge.



While Petrarch was a vagabond without a homeland, Salutati wanted the impact of the ancients to be manifest in Florence the city he loved. His writings in the form of letters and manifestoes were inspirational and were distributed and copied throughout Florence. His words were influential and respected. When Salutati was in his seventies, he needed help in writing and distribution his inspirational pronouncements. He took a group of young men that included Poggio under his wing. Poggio probably admired and modeled himself after an older man in the group named Leonardo Bruni who was bright and articulate. He became long-time friends with another member of the group, Nicolo Niccoli who was also older than Poggio.

Poggio wrote books on a variety of subjects including hypocrisy, avarice and the miseries of man. Niccoli, a gifted writer came from money and while Poggio enjoyed his company, he had to make a living. Poggio taught for a while but he did not find the work compelling. He set off for Rome in 1403 with a letter of recommendation from the Chancellor of the Florentine Republic.

Poggio looked forward to working in Rome, the papal city. He would be living among Roman noblemen and the elite. The bishops and cardinals had small courts where notaries wrote important legal documents. Poggio found a job almost immediately and had plans to advance. With Salutati's influence he became an apostolic scribe for Boniface IX. Although the position was a secular one, Poggio was required to go to mass every day before his workday began.

There was endless work for the large papal staff. Poggio could have had more wealth and power had he entered the church but he was not inclined to do so and felt he wasn't qualified for such a career. He had also observed that many men who entered the church became greedy, lazy and corrupt. Poggio had advanced and established himself as papal secretary. There were more than 100 scribes in the service of the Pope. Of those only six were apostolic scribes and only one was the Pope's private secretary. After ten years in service in the papacy, Poggio was appointed to that coveted position.

Rome was a violent city during that era. Even the curia was not safe. The Pope and other church officials had to at times flee from approaching dangers. As time passed, Poggio grieved over the death of Salutati and other old friends. Poggio found solace and liberation in his books. They released him from his earthly bounds.

The most dangerous position of his entire career was his assignment as the secretary to the newly elected Pope, Baldassare Cossa or Pope John XXIII.

Analysis

In these chapters, the author describes the role that the great Greek scholar and philosopher Epicurus had in the writing of *On the Nature of Things*. The work's author, Lucretius, was a student and devotee of Epicurus whose beliefs about life became known as Epicureanism. He greatly influenced Lucretius and his impact can be seen in



the conclusions that the younger philosopher makes about man and his gods and his place in the world and universe.

The author contrasts the doctrines of Epicureanism and Christianity, two dogmata that are in most ways diametrically in opposition to one another. To Epicurus, man's ultimate state of satisfaction is to seek and find pleasure and avoid pain. To the Catholics, seeking pleasure is a sin while emulating the suffering of Jesus and martyrdom is tantamount to blessedness. The tenets of Epicureanism can be seen throughout *On the Nature of Things*.

The many contrasts between the pagans and Christians and to some extent the Jews are defined in these chapters. The growing tensions between the pagans and the faithful provide the backdrop to the amazing discovery that Poggio made on his book-hunting expedition. Knowing the tensions first-hand because he worked in the papal office, the reader becomes aware the risk that Poggio was taking in having the poem recopied and distributed about. In Poggio's time heresy was a crime worse than murder and if convicted, being burned alive was the usual punishment. *On the Nature of Things* was a work in heresy and ironically was unleashed upon the world by a papal secretary.

Vocabulary

oligarchy, compendia, vaunted, quintessential, charismatic, vagaries, mercenaries, vicissitudes, curia, urbanity, satraps, ostentatious, indefatigable



Chapters 7 and 8

Summary

Although Poggio was only in his early thirties, he had advanced to the prestigious position of secretary to the Pope. Poggio handled the Pope's schedule and filtered the information and material delivered to the pontiff. He was also aware of secret plans and strategies that the Pope was contemplating. There were many political conflicts when Pope John XXIII assumed office. During the transition to the new Pope, Poggio still found time to copy manuscripts. Working with ancient material saddened him because it forced him to compare the glory of those old days with the current days of corruption and decline.

Cossa was elected Pope by the cardinals after Pope Alexander V died suddenly – some suspected that Alexander had been poisoned. The cardinals thought that Cossa with his unique personal skills could resolve the schism in the church created by two other church leaders who each claimed to be Pope. But that wasn't to be the case. The schism had been ongoing for thirty years. No one was willing to give up his power. Cossa was most concerned with retaining the power he had and basically ignored the situation. But when the army of one of the pretenders invaded Rome and the Pope escaped to Florence, Cossa was forced to address the problem and call for a meeting of the ecumenical council in Constance, Germany. Poggio and dozens of other humanists attended the meeting along with officials of each sect and their large entourages. Between 50,000 and 150,000 converged on the city of Constance for the meeting.

The meeting was a disaster for the pope. In the end he felt threatened and fled Constance in disguise and disgrace. He was later captured, arrested and imprisoned. Cossa's aides including Poggio were all dismissed. Poggio stayed in Germany and visited the baths at Baden and was taken with the fun people were having in the baths. It was exemplary of Epicurean thought in that the people seemed free of worry and only sought pleasure. Their behavior was contrary to Church doctrine but he noticed that they did not bicker or argue. He spent some time in Baden looking for ancient manuscripts.

A year later, Poggio was hunting for books again. He wrote that he and two companions had found a fabulous cache of old tomes. One of these books was Quintilian's *Institutes* which was the most important ancient Roman book on language and oratory. Poggio was so taken with the book that he immediately began copying it in his eloquent handwriting. Poggio was short of money during his travels. Returning to Constance, his financial problems deepened. After three years in prison, Cossa was released and made a cardinal in Florence. Poggio left Constance again in pursuit of more undiscovered ancient manuscripts. He headed for Fulda where he found the Lucretius poem, *On the Nature of Things*.



On the Nature of Things is a challenge to read with its 7,400 lines and six-beat unrhymed lines. The poem is divided into six books. The narrative covers a range of topics including religion, pleasure and death and the evolution of society. But Poggio was proficient in Latin and to him reading it was not a particularly daunting task. The poem was to threaten his world view which he, of course, did not know when scanning the first few pages. The basic credo of the poem was an argument for atheism. Lucretius was not an atheist he was a polytheist who believed in gods but did not believe that they cared about humans.

Although Lucretius claimed not to be an atheist, his behavior belied that assertion. Since the gods in Lucretius's view cared nothing about humans, why would anyone pray to them? What is the purpose of a god who has no role in man's life? Therefore a philosophy that lacks a connection between man and god is tantamount to atheism. He referred to religion as a superstitious pursuit. These beliefs were contrary to what Poggio believed and had been taught. They were also words that could send a person to his death in a raging pyre. In defense of Lucretius, friends assured Poggio that had Lucretius been born a hundred years later he would have learned about Jesus and the Truth.

The foundations of modern life are contained in the arguments that Lucretius makes in his poem. Some of the points made remain controversial and even contemptible. What Poggio uncovered was to many incomprehensible and even impious. The main arguments of On the Nature of Things include ideas that were well in advance of the times. Lucretius declared that everything was made of invisible particles and that these elementary particles of matter "the seeds of the things" were eternal. The elementary particles were infinite but differences in their sizes and shapes were few. These particles existed in an infinite void and were in constant motion.

The universe had no designer or creator. Everything existed because of a swerve. This swerve was translated as the basis for free will. Experimentation was a constant in nature. The universe was not made for man. Humans lacked uniqueness and began in a primitive existence and a struggle for survival. The soul did not live on after death. There was no heaven or hell – no afterlife. Death was not painful. Religion was based on delusion and superstition and were cruel lies to those who followed it. Angels, demons and ghosts did not exist. Having pleasure and the avoidance of pain were the highest achievements man. Delusion was the largest barrier to pleasure. Contemplating the nature of existence brought on great wonder and awe.

Analysis

The intrigue surrounding the papacy and the Vatican are showcased in these chapters. The author describes the bitterness that existed among the various Italian states whose leaders all claimed the right to the papal throne. Poggio was right in the middle of this chaos because he was the secretary to the Pope. The situation deteriorated until it forced the current pope, John XIII to disguise himself and flee from a meeting of the



ecumenical council that had had called for to iron out the differences. When he sensed that things weren't getting better and in fact were getting worse for him, he fled.

It was this turn of events that actually led Poggio to find the Lucretius poem. Had the pope not been in danger and fled from the meeting which was held in Constance, Germany, he would have still been employed as the pope's secretary and would have returned to Rome. He would not have ventured on to the Benedictine monastery in Fulda, Germany, where he found *On the Nature of Things*. It was part of the "perfect storm" that led Poggio to his discovery.

Importantly, this chapter describes the major tenets of the Lucretian ideology found in *On the Nature of Things*. The poem had been lost and buried in the library at Fulda. Had Poggio been gainfully employed he would not have journeyed there.

Vocabulary

pontificate, citadel, plenary, jurisprudence, ecumenical, ecclesiastical, vehemently, orthodoxy, indolent



Chapters 9 and 10

Summary

Poggio was not allowed to take the poem with him forcing him to hire a scribe to copy it. He sent the copy off to Niccoli in Florence asking him to make another copy. Initially, fifty copies of the poem were copied over by scribes. After being hidden away for 1,000 years, the poem was being distributed around and read with great interest. Many of those copies have been lost or are greatly fragmented.

There was chaos in Rome after Cossa's arrest and incarceration. The power struggle among those claiming to be head of the church still went on. Due to Poggio's refusal to reject Cossa, he was having difficulty finding suitable work. In 1419, he accepted the position of secretary to Henry Beaufort, the Bishop of Winchester. Although the move to England turned his life upside down, he looked forward to continuing his hunt for books in the English monasteries. He was in England four years and miserable and lonely most of the time. He made very little money and found nothing interesting in the libraries. He lamented that he was unable to spend any time in the study of the Humanities.

Poggio returned to the Vatican in 1422 after securing a secretarial position there. He contacted Niccoli and asked to see the copy of the work he'd sent him eight years before. He tried for three years but had no response from Niccoli who wanted to keep the copy with his collection. After harassing him for a few more years, Niccoli finally sent Poggio the copy. There is no record of Poggio's reaction to the poem but after it had dropped out of circulation when it was in Niccoli's position, the poem was once again being passed about.

Poggio stayed busy with work in the papal office and in the translation of other works. He had 12 sons and two daughters with his mistress Lucia Pannelli. When a cardinal chided him about his irregular personal life, Poggio pointed out that many monks, priests, abbots and bishops were the fathers of illegitimate children. As he aged, Poggio gave up his road trips but never lost interest in the literature of the antiquities. He had accumulated wealth and began investing in artifacts, bought a home in Tuscany and began buying up property around it. When another pontiff, Pope Eugenius IV, was embroiled in scandal, Poggio was arrested and was forced to pay a huge ransom for his release.

In 1436, when Poggio was 56 years old he married aristocrat Vaggia de Gino Buondelmonti who was 18. In his letters to Niccoli, Poggio claimed to be very happy in his marriage. The couple was together for 25 years and had five sons and one daughter who they named Lucretia. Poggio may not have disowned his other children but he had very little to do with them after he married. Poggio remained in his job in the papacy and served Nicholas V after Eugenius died. He had served a total of eight popes over the course of his career.



Poggio, while not directly attacking the poem, accused his rival Lorenzo Valla of adherence to Epicurus, the scholarly intellect who had inspired Lucretius. Some Christian intellectuals laid out the ideology behind *On the Nature of Things* ostensibly to criticize it. But cleverly by disseminating the work its doctrine was exposed to the public. This approach was a fig leaf that protected the author of the critique from shame and punishment while at the same time allowing its doctrine to be available to the people. Very few intellectuals in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries ascribed to all of Lucretius's conclusions. There was a handful of atomists who ascribed to the poem's contention that everything was made of tiny invisible matter.

Not surprisingly, the book was banned from the classroom due to its lascivious and wicked nature. But the genie was out of the bottle and though copies were not allowed to be made in Rome, copies began popping up in other European capitals. Some Catholic intellectuals engaged in debate about Lucretian thought through fables and metaphors and were inspired by Lucretian ideas. Erasmus wrote *The Epicurean* in which a character's goal was to prove that godly Christians were the most Epicurean.

Thomas More who was a devout Christian was deeply engaged in the Greek and Latin texts that Poggio and his peers had uncovered years before. He wrote *Utopia* in 1516 and proclaimed that Christians were Epicurean in that they took pleasure from being punished. More described himself as a Christian humanist. The Utopians in More's book were tolerant and permitted the people to share their beliefs as long as they were calm and rational. One thing that was not tolerated in Utopia was the belief that the soul died when the body did. More believed that human nature would lead man to sin in order to achieve pleasure. Therefore, More agreed with Machiavelli that laws and customs without fear were ineffective. The Utopians could not trust anyone who did not ascribe to the basic Christian belief of an afterlife. Since fear was the driving force for good behavior in Utopia, without the promise of an afterlife man would be sinful and evil because no punishment awaited him.

There were other scientists and intellectuals willing to stick their necks out and disagreed with Christian dogma. Thomas Harriot constructed the largest telescope in England to explore other worlds. Harriot made many discoveries that he was not credited with until after his death. He did not publish his findings because he knew that speaking out against the Church was tantamount to a death sentence. Bruno thought it would be safe to travel to Italy but he was arrested and imprisoned for heresy. His trial lasted eight years during which time he refused to repent. Bruno was defrocked and sent out of town on a donkey. There are accounts that a pin was driven through his cheek and tongue from one side of his face to the other to keep him from talking. He he was set on fire and burned to death.

Analysis

Poggio's loyalty to the deposed Pope cost him employment. But he is portrayed as tenacious and determined and with hubris because he willingly took a position with a bishop although he had worked for popes for several years by this time. The position



was in England where he stayed four years. He was miserable there because it was different from Italy where he had lived all his life. But in the tradition of Christian suffering he served faithfully without complaining and eventually returned to Rome where he rose to the top again, becoming the pope's scribe and secretary.

Poggio's determination is an important element in this story. His tenacity is shown in his quest to find literature from the Hellenistic age and other antiquities. He devoted much time and resources to this pursuit but remained dedicated to his goal. Without that determination, Poggio would have never found the treasure of a lifetime, *On the Nature of Things*.

These chapters also describe the resistance to the poem and how various people tried to deal with it. It was so controversial and such a highly charged topic that it couldn't be ignored. Scholars and Church officials nearly turned themselves into human pretzels trying to explain the poem's ideology, criticize it and find some commonality with it. Many decided to sing the praises of its beautiful language and structure and ignore the concepts laid out in the work.

Vocabulary

modernity, conclave, sojourn, acerbic, aesthetic, misogyny, interlocutor, impetuous, vitriolic, remuneration, emendations, hedonist, anathema



Chapter 11

Summary

Silencing Bruno was achieved but there was no containing the content of Lucretius's *On the Nature of Things* which was gaining interest in Europe. The words of the visionary poet began to impact the works of Renaissance artists and writers. The "thought police" rarely investigated artists for heresy; it was the philosophers and scientists that they focused upon. But just as Lucretius had thought of his ideology as art, so too did the writers of the Renaissance. In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* stage play, Mercutio makes a reference to atoms. Shakespeare would have read Lucretius in a book that was apparently a favorite of his – *Essays* by Montaigne.

Montaigne was contemptuous of forced morality through fear of retribution in the afterlife. He believed in the Epicurean tenet that the highest form of human existence lay in pleasure and in the seeking of pleasure. He believed that it was normal for man to follow his inclinations and that it was the nature of the human swerve – like the atoms that float about randomly either existing calmly or violently depending upon external and internal circumstances. Montaigne found Lucretius's words "so alive, so profound." He felt a connection with him as though the ancient philosopher was talking directly to him.

From the lessons of Lucretius, Montaigne came to understand that death did not care about man, that man was best to work to his end "planting cabbages" and be careless about death. Death was part of the cycle of nature. He was grateful to Lucretius because his words prepared him to meet death with dignity. In a note written by Montaigne years after his passing, he stated his belief that atoms had once come together to create him and that they could come together again in the future to recreate him. He felt that the fear of death was the root of sin. In Spain where the Inquisition was at its most aggressive, the poem was being read and passed about finding its way into France and England. Thomas More had once tried to gather all copies of the Protestant Bible to destroy them but failed miserably. With the advent of the printing press, it was impossible to suppress the dissemination of Lucretius's work, especially its scientific elements that involved physics and astronomy.

The Church did its best to blunt the impact of the Lucretius poem. Young Jesuits at the University of Pisa were required to recite a prayer each day to thwart the growing interest in atomism in support of Church doctrine that taught that the beauty and structure of things were only accomplished by the hand of God. While the concept of atoms had survived Medieval times, Lucretius's poem connected that concept with beliefs that were perceived to be dangerous and that represented evil. Galileo who had supported Copernicus's theory that the earth orbited the sun had to vow to discontinue this claim. Galileo agreed with Lucretian principle that all things were made up of minimal particles. Initially Pope Urban VIII protected Galileo but eventually the pontiff came under fire himself for his liberal views on atomism. Eventually, Galileo was



arrested for heresy after the publication of his book *The Assayer*. He was spared from torture and execution and was sentenced to life in prison.

French astronomer and philosopher Pierre Gassendi was also a priest and tried to reconcile Epicureanism with Christianity. Many copies of the poem were being made available to the general public. Efforts to suppress it failed. After it became clear that the poem would not return to a state of hibernation, some attempted to dilute interest in it by referring to Lucretius as a lunatic and a pagan philosopher who advocated the debauchery of the soul. Evidence is plentiful that the poem caused not only conflict among intellectuals and others but internal conflicts that were manifest in their words versus their deeds. Lucy Hutchinson was a Puritan and wife of Colonel John Hutchinson, a member of Parliament. Lucy openly detested the substance of the poem yet she took pains to prepare a verse translation and paid a professional scribe for a full translation. She attributed her schizophrenic behavior to the curiosity of youth that was transformed by mature reason.

Lucretius asserted that ideas, thoughts and fantasies were inseparably connected to the atomic world. In England there was a growing acknowledgement that atoms were the basic structure of nature and that it was God who created atoms. Isaac Newton declared in his *Principia*, the most influential work on science in history, that he was an atomist but maintained that he believed in a divine creator. When Charles Darwin set out to solve the origin of man, he was already familiar with the substance of Lucretius's claims. Albert Einstein based his theory not on the rhetoric of Lucretius but on experimental evidence in math and science. Modern scientists were putting the poem back in hibernation. Thomas Jefferson owned multiple copies of *On the Nature of Things*. It confirmed his belief that the world was nature and that nature was comprised of matter. He ascribed to Lucretius's assertion that fear and ignorance did not have to be part of mankind's existence.

Lucretius would have been pleased that Thomas Jefferson authored a document establishing a new nation that included the sentiment that "the pursuit of happiness" was a right. When Jefferson and John Adams, both former U.S. presidents, were advanced in age, when Jefferson wrote to Adams that matter and motion formed the fabric of all of man's needs. He wrote that he was an Epicurean.

Analysis

In this last chapter, the author describes the satisfying life that Poggio enjoyed after finding the poem and after retiring from his long years of service at the Vatican. He had found pleasure at the end of his life. The question comes to mind – had Poggio been influenced by *On the Nature of Things* and come to adopt the Epicurean philosophy that part of the work is based on? He would not have spoken out that he espoused any part of the controversial work. It would have been heresy for him to do so; heretics were condemned to death in those days.



It seemed that everyone had a different reaction to the poem. The French philosopher Montaigne found comfort in the poem. It taught him not to be afraid of death and hinted that he might live again. He reasoned that if those tiny particles swerved together to create him at one time, they must just collide with each other again in the future and recreate him. The French astronomer and philosopher Pierre Gassendi tried to find commonality between the Lucretian work and Christianity – seems he couldn't let go of either.

On the Nature of Things enlightened the world about atoms although no one can say with any certainty how that concept occurred to Lucretius. The poem had done its part in advancing intellectual, philosophical and scientific discourse. Isaac Newton declared in the Principia, still deemed the most important book in the history of science, that he was an atomist. By the time Einstein came to prominence the poem was no longer needed for its scientific ideology. Experimentation and advanced math took the place of speculation. The poem came to the New World and influenced one of the U.S. presidents. Thomas Jefferson had multiple copies of the work. He included the phrase that the "pursuit of happiness" was a right. It was an Epicurean way to think and in a letter to John Adams when both were advanced in age, he wrote that he was an Epicurean.

Vocabulary

capacious, eradicate, substrate, aesthetic, debauchery, empirical, anodyne



Important People

Poggio Bracciolini

Poggio Bracciolini was born in 1380 in Terranuova and moved to Florence when he was ten years old. Poggio's family appeared to be what would be considered "middle class" in current terms. His father Buccio was a notary and a druggist. His maternal grandfather, Michaelle Frutti was also a notary. With that background it was natural for Poggio to pursue a career working with documentation. Poggio became a notary in Florence and was elevated to scribe in the Vatican where he was eventually elevated to the pope's secretary. Poggio worked for a total of eight popes during his years of service to the Church.

Poggio had an avocation, or more aptly an obsession, to find ancient manuscripts from the great scholars and philosophers of the Hellenistic era. He was a book hunter and when he had the time and opportunity he would travel to various libraries, mainly monastic libraries, in an effort to find these treasures. Upon finding a book he deemed to be important, he would purchase the book, borrow it to copy or if the monastery refused to release it, hire a scribe to transcribe it in the library. Poggio used the latter method to get a copy of a lengthy work by Roman philosopher Lucretius called *On the Nature of Things*. The work had been buried in a monastic library for 1,000 years before it was uncovered by Poggio.

That find was the ultimate of Poggio's book hunting career. He tapered off his travels after that – how could he top himself after that find?!

Poggio remained a scribe in the papacy for many years. When he was 73, he was offered the position of Chancellor of Florence. He accepted the position for which he was paid well and earned the respect of his subordinates and peers. He resigned the office when after turning 78. He died a year and a half later. The city commissioned a statue of Poggio that was erected in front of Florence's cathedral, Santa Maria del Fiore. Poggio had uncovered a great poem that changed the world.

Lucretius

Not much is known about Lucretius who lived in 300 to 400 BCE and was the author of *On the Nature of Things*. He was mentioned by the Roman rhetorician Quintilian that he was worth reading. It is known that he was a student or follower of the Greek philosopher and scholar Epicurus whose movement ascribed to the belief that pleasure seeking was the natural state of man. Lucretius was inspired to write his celebrated poem from his close association with Epicurus. Some of the works of Lucretius was lost when the papyrus or animal skins were reused and new writing was written over the older works. It was recognized in very early times that the lengthy poem by Lucretius was "dangerously radical."



Poggio who lived almost 1,500 years after Lucretius was obsessed with writings of ancient Greek and Roman scholars and philosophers. He had probably heard of Lucretius although he was more obscure than many of his peers. Lucretius's Latin verses were incredibly beautiful and compelling. The famous Roman poet, Virgil, was a teenager when he read *On the Nature of Things* and was obsessed with the work.

From what little is known about him, Lucretius associated with wealthy private books collectors who helped promote his poem. He was probably associated with the Lucretii, an old and distinguished Roman clan; however, slaves that were freed took the surname of their former masters so there is no proof that Lucretius was a nobleman. He may have begun life as a slave. However, Lucretius did address his poem to a nobleman named Gaius Memmius, a name which Poggio might have encountered in his searches.

There was a brief biographic sketch authored by St. Jerome (c. 340-420 CE). He wrote that Titus Lucretius was a poet and philosopher who went mad after drinking a love potion and committed suicide. But this account should be viewed with some skepticism because it was written centuries after Lucretius lived. Learning about this dark side of Lucretius may have tainted the way Poggio viewed his poem.

Epicurus

Epicurus was a great and renowned Greek scholar and philosopher who lived circa 300 to 400 BCE. He was the leader of a movement that became known as Epicureanism. One of his disciples was a young scholar named Lucretius who was greatly influenced by the ideology of the great philosopher. Epicurus believed that man's ultimate goal in life should be to seek pleasure and avoid pain. It was also his belief that the soul died with the body and did not ascribe to the concept of providence. His ideas and philosophy can be seen throughout *On the Nature of Things*, the epic poem written by Lucretius.

Petrarch

The great scholar, Petrarch, sparked interest in the lost empire and led a movement to seek and imitate the language and works of the ancient past. His work had revealed that there were missing pieces to the manuscripts and therefore missing pieces from history. Devotees of this work were referred to as humanists. They conceded that some of the works of classical Rome had probably been lost forever. However, they suspected that a wealth of old manuscripts lay hidden and undiscovered.

Petrarch felt he was living in a time of sordidness and ignorance. Despite his complaints, he was popular and the more he complained the more admired he was. While there was emphasis on mastering the Greek and Latin languages in his movement, the humanism he advocated was more than academic. Although some of the elite attempted to live in the glory of the past, Petrarch was there to remind them



that the ideology of that world had been shredded to bits and modern mimicry of that time paled in comparison to the original eloquence.

Niccolo Niccoli

Niccoli and his five brothers were wealthier than normal families not among the elite circle. However, by the time Poggio became acquainted with him, the Niccoli brothers had begun losing their fortune. There were internal conflicts in the family and externally, they were suffering from over taxation. Niccoli may have fared better had he pursued a government position or a career as a merchant. However, his passion was not there – it was in antiquity and was obsessed with learning all he could about it. The family was the strength of the Florentine community. If a young man did not enter the church, he was pressured to marry. But Niccoli ignored the hectoring and remained single. A woman, he felt, could distract him from his research.

Niccoli was one of the first European intellectuals to collect artifacts from ancient Greece and Rome. He looked at his art and other objects not as trophies but rather as things of beauty. Word got around and farmers and others who uncovered torsos and heads of broken statues and the like took them to Niccoli who would pay dearly for them. His passion for these symbols of another time inspired Poggio's interest in them. The two devised the humanist script around ancient thought. Niccoli's personal library was renowned throughout the region. He welcomed scholars to visit his library. He left 800 manuscripts behind when he died in 1437. His collection was considered the best and largest private collection in Florence.

The collections of both Petrarch and Boccaccio had not been properly preserved. Niccoli took steps to see that his manuscripts were not lost and destroyed leaving funds for a library to be built on a monastery's grounds that would house them. Niccoli had thus revisited the public library something that had faded with the downfall of the Roman Empire. When Salutati declared that Petrarch was a superior in the composition of prose than Cicero and better poet than Virgil, Niccoli and Poggio found his statement absurd and pressed him to retract his statement. Since ancient times, there had been a corruption of the written word and an abandonment of solid structure and good grammar. Petrarch had insisted that the mastery of the classic styles would not produce literary greatness. Although Niccoli wrote relatively few works himself, he edited and corrected the manuscripts of others.

Coluccio Salutati

Coluccio Salutati was the chancellor of the Florentine Republic and the secretary of state for foreign affairs. Salutati had begun his career as a provincial notary. When Poggio arrived in Florence in the late 1390s, Salutati had been the chancellor for 25 years. A devout Christian, he shared Poggio's passion for finding vestiges from the classical cultures of ancient Rome and Greece. Poggio worked as a notary for Salutati. When Poggio decided to leave for Rome, Salutati gave him a letter of recommendation



that helped him attain a position in the Vatican which launched his career as a papal scribe.

Bartolomeo de Aragazzi

Since there was so much work involved in copying the manuscripts Poggio brought along a companion scribe named Bartolomeo de Aragazzi whose background was similar to that of Poggio. The two scribes were friends but also rivals. They wanted to outdo one another by finding the most valuable books and doing a better and faster job in their transcription. The books that Bartolomeo found were unimportant and not sought-after. They split up for a while and traveled to different monasteries in their treasure hunt. Bartolomeo eventually dropped out of the pursuit for undiscovered manuscripts.

Lucius Calpurnius Piso

Although there is no certainty about the ownership of the posh villa in Herculaneum that was buried in lava and mud after the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, scholars believe that the wealthy owner was more than likely Lucius Calpurnius Piso. He was a powerful and influential politician who was once the governor of Macedonia. He was also reported to be the father-in-law of Julius Caesar. It was in the library of his buried villa that many remnants of writings from the antiquities were found partially preserved in layers of mud and debris.

Rabanus Maurus

Rabanus Maurus served as the abbot of the Benedictine Abbey of Fulda in central Germany where Poggio discovered the lost epic poem *On the Nature of Things*. He was a prolific writer who authored commentary about the Bible, treatises, pedagogical guides as well as a series of beautifully crafted poems. From the time he was a young student Maurus was a collector of important manuscripts and amassed them throughout his life.

Constantine

In the early fourth century the emperor Constantine declared that Christianity would be the official religion of Rome. Although Constantine started the process, it was escalated by his successor Theodosius the Great who forbade public sacrifices and closed sites that were considered to be pagan and anti-Christian. These steps caused a society that was already in conflict to grow more contentious.



Pope John XXIII

Baldassare Cossa was born on the island of Procida near Naples. The island was owned by the Cossa family which was engaged in piracy. Two brothers had been captured and sentenced to death. The family was able to get the sentences commuted. Cossa studied law at the University of Bologna. After graduation, he decided he wanted to be the Pope. He began his career with the Church in the court of Boniface IX. He helped organize the jubilees when pilgrims made periodic treks to Rome. He used his natural marketing skills to make the jubilee a success. He was ultimately appointed governor of Bologna and was a success as a civil and military leader. He was intelligent, bold, ambitious and the ideal Renaissance man. One thing he was missing was a spiritual background.

The council decided to vote by blocs of nations which put Cossa in a weakened, minority position. Cossa was determined to emerge victorious. He vowed to retain his power as the Vicar of Christ. In addition to ending the schism, the council wanted to take steps to reform the ecclesiastical government and repress heresy. One of the main focuses of the latter was Jan Hus, a Czech priest, who openly and passionately criticized Church doctrine and the behavior of Church hierarchy. Hus was invited to speak before the Council in Constance. An understandably controversial figure, Hus was assured of his safe passage in and out of Constance. Despite the invitation and assurances that he was welcome, Hus was not allowed to speak publicly. He was arrested by order of the cardinals and imprisoned.

Cossa himself began to feel outnumbered and unsafe. He wore civilian attire and slipped away from the council meeting. He was indicted by his enemies and hunted down. Poggio and his peers who followed him were in total confusion. He was eventually found and placed under criminal guard. He was indicted on seventy counts. The most egregious charges including rape, incest, torture and murder – were dropped so that the Church wouldn't be embarrassed. He was accused of poisoning Pope Boniface. He was deposed in May 1415 and the title John XXIII was removed from the roster. It was used again more than 500 years later.

Theophilus

Theophilus was the spiritual leader of the Christians in Alexandria when in the early fourth century Constantine had declared that the official religion of the Roman Empire was Christianity. Theophilus was eager to comply with the strict demands of the emperor to rid the city of any sign of paganism or polytheism. He arranged for zealots to walk about in the city hurling insults to pagans. He ordered that a statue found in the ruins be marched through the streets as an object of ridicule. Eventually the so-called pagans responded with anger and violence which intensified the tensions that already existed between the Church and non-Christians.

Hypatia

Hypatia, the beautiful and accomplished daughter of one of Alexandria's museum's mathematical scholars was brutally murdered. The disposition of the library's books was found symbolically in the murder of Hypatia. Her death marked the end of the intellectual culture of Alexandria. At a time of religious tensions in Rome, Hypatia was not the typical Christian woman. She traveled about the city as she desired and spoke her mind. She was accused of heresy and was pulled from her chariot one afternoon and brutally tortured and murdered.

St. Jerome

Saint Jerome noted in a Church chronicle that Lucretius had committed suicide when he was forty years of age. But there are questions whether the statement has any veracity. He admitting to a peer that he suffered an inner conflict in that he wanted to steal away and read Cicero whose writings would have been banned by the Church because the poet was an avowed atheist. He was drawn to the writings of Cicero because of his love for the elegance and beauty of Latin.

Lactantius

Christian devotees devised a plan to turn the masses against Epicurus and Lucretius. Since they could not control the publication and distribution of *On the Nature of Things*, they would besmirch the names of the author and his mentor. Lactantius had converted from paganism to Christianity and was appointed to be the tutor to the emperor's son. His mission was to draw people away from the pursuit of pleasure and convince them that God was not indifferent to them as Epicurus believed.



Objects/Places

Roman Empire

During the days of Poggio the book hunter, the Roman Empire was the seat of power in Italy and was basically the center of the universe. Constantine had declared that Christianity was the religion of the Empire due to the fear that the Protestant Reformation would have on the faithful. Poggio worked in Rome as a papal scribe and as the pope's secretary. Poggio had a passion for ancient literature and art from the Hellenistic Age. He was dismayed when agents of the papacy destroy beautiful statues, artwork and literature from the time of the agents because they were considered to be symbols of paganism.

Herculaneum

Herculaneum was a resort town in Italy and was buried in the lava and debris that resulted in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius that at the same time buried the entire city of Pompeii. Centuries after the tragedy, archeologists drilled holes down into a section of the buried land. The ground that was penetrated had turned into a cement-like substance. Once bursting through the section, a villa located in the seaside resort town of Herculaneum was discovered. And once the area was somewhat cleared it was revealed that the villa contained a personal villa with hundreds of books and scrolls. Charred mud and mire had hardened around these manuscripts and had somewhat preserved them. Researchers were able to open up some of the works to discover the writings of the ancients. It was speculated that Lucretius himself could well have been invited to gatherings at this villa that was the home of a wealthy Roman who, judging from his library and books, would have been interested in holding court with the elites and intellects of the day.

The Noonday Demon

Literacy rates were low among the populace of the Roman Empire which contributed to the collapse of the Empire and creating an opening for barbarians to take advantage of the spoils and conquer the empire. Monks were expected to know how to read even though the invading warlords were completely illiterate. There were rigid requirements in literacy for candidates seeking positions in monasteries. Monks were even monitored to ensure that they were focused on what they were reading.

A monk who seemed distracted from his required reading was referred to as having the disease of "the noonday demon." If this unacceptable behavior continued after counseling, monks would be beaten to convince them that they must absorb what they were reading. The Benedictine Rule called for readings at certain times throughout the day. Monks were not allowed to talk or even whisper during their reading times. A word of caution was included in the reading requirement. The phrase "lest occasion be given"



was interpreted to mean that a reader who was distracted made the monk open to possession by the devil. Discussion about the material matter that was read was limited. Saying too much could result in the punishment of silence or in “fifty blows.”

Scriptorium

The scriptorium was the anteroom in the papacy, monastery or bishopric where scribes and copyists fulfilled their duties and copying and transcription for church officials. Although the scribes had not entered the church, they were generally required to say their daily prayers. However, very good scribes were exempted from collective prayer in order to give them more daylight hours to complete their tasks.

While the monastery was a place of rules and discipline, there were even more stringent regulations in the scriptorium. Access was denied to non-scribes; absolute silence was required; the scribes had to devise a sign language in order to communicate with their peers and librarians. Scribes were protected by the church because their contribution was crucial to the operation of the church. At one point the murderer of a scribe received the same punishment as the murderer of a church official.

Palimpsests

Due to limited writing materials, manuscripts were often reused and the writing of some works disappeared under new writing. Scribes were sometimes required to remove the top layer of a manuscript in an attempt to read had originally been written on the papyrus or animal skin. A unique fourth century copy of Cicero's *On the Republic* could be seen beneath a seventh century copy of St. Augustine's meditation of the Psalms. There were many other examples of important works that still existed under more recent writing. These layered manuscripts were called palimpsests which translates in Greek to 'scraped again.'

Benedictine Abbey of Fulda

When the ecumenical council meeting broke up unexpectedly and Poggio found himself out of a job, he decided to stay in Germany where the meeting took place. He planned to look for work and to take the opportunity to travel about Germany and find monasteries with libraries where he might find ancient manuscripts that he passionately searched for as a book hunter. It was at the Benedictine Abbey of Fulda, Germany, where Poggio discovered the Lucretius poem, *On the Nature of Things* that had been buried there for 1,000 years.

Papyrus

The scribes of the Roman Empire used papyrus for their transcription and copy work. The papyrus came in large rolls and were made from the papyrus plant which is where



the word “paper” originated from. The plants were tall reeds that were found in the delta region of the Nile in Egypt. The reeds were harvested, dried and sliced into thin strips which were laid side by side and made into larger sheets by pounding the edges of the overlapping strips with a mallet. When relations between Rome and Egypt deteriorated, the supply of papyrus was cut off. The scribes had to use animal skins and forced to learn the papyrus-making process to make their own version of papyrus.

Florence, Italy

Today’s Florence, Italy, with its graceful architectural features is nothing like the Florence, Italy, at the beginning of the 15th century. It was a typical walled medieval city. It was a crowded population center with stone buildings and high towers. Poggio was ten years old when he came to Florence in the 1390s. Florence had a population of about 50,000. A small circle of influential citizens ran the city. These wealthy individuals hired accountants, tutors and servants. The market for slaves had increased after the Black Death of 1348. Caution was taken to insure that the slaves were infidels and not Christians. Not surprisingly, Florence was an oligarchy that fundamentally existed for the wealthy and elite.

The archives of a merchant of the day in Florence, Italy, Francesco de Marco Datini, contained 150,000 letters and other business-related documents. There were churches that drew large crowds that listened to long sermons. The main industry of the community was a cloth making factory. There had been labor disputes about pay and working conditions. Nothing challenged the authority of the elites in the oligarchy.

The Bonfire of the Vanities

For several years at the end of the fifteenth century, Florence became a Christian republic. The infamous “Bonfire of the Vanities” occurred during this period when religious zealots collected sinful objects such as mirrors, cosmetics, musical instruments and other evil items and burned them. Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola whose frenetic preaching led to this conservative turn, was hanged a few years later when the populace grew tired of living without sin. When he lived he had devoted many sermons to the evil of the philosophers. He quoted Lucretius’s poem bemoaning the absurdity of believing that the world was made of tiny atoms.

Atoms

The existence of atoms, or as Lucretius called them little particles in *On the Nature of Things*, was just speculation at the time he wrote the controversial poem. There was no way to prove their existence through experimentation and there would not be such methodology for another 2,000 years. It will remain a mystery how Lucretius arrived at his conclusion about the existence of these tiny particles that he claimed comprised everything. What he based his theory on is unknown but was proven to be correct so many years later.

Themes

The Swerve

On the Nature of Things, a poem by Roman philosopher Lucretius, was beautifully written in Latin and in an appealing structure. However, the content in the time when the Church was the most powerful entity in the Roman Empire other than the emperor himself, was difficult to digest since it was a doctrine that was steep in atheism.

The poem had been in hibernation for 1,000 years but rediscovered by a determined book hunter who, ironically, was also a papal scribe. The work was probably controversial in its day and when it was allowed the light of day again was even more controversial. Lucretius asserted his disbelief in miracles and his opinion that nothing could violate the laws of nature. To clarify his thesis, he used the Latin word “clinamen” which translated to English is “swerve.” Lucretius defined the “swerve” as “an unexpected, unpredictable movement of matter.” When On the Nature of Things reemerged, it certainly caused its own unexpected disturbance in the atmosphere – like the Force of Star Wars fame.

One of the tenets in the poem is that, “Everything comes into being as a result of the swerve.” Lucretius theorized that even the slightest movement of the tiny particles that he believed everything was comprised of that the swerve that this movement cause would have an infinite chain reaction. Simply put, everything is created by the swerve, by the motion of the atoms, including man. It was an atheistic claim that rejected the idea that man was created by God. Humanity owes its gratitude to the random motion of atoms and the swerve that results when they collide.

Scribes and Copyists

Before the invention of the printing press, scribes and copyists played a vital role in Roman and Greek society, especially in the offices of the papacy and in bishoprics. Poggio began his career as a scribe and after years of dedication he advanced and ultimately became the secretary to the Pope. Poggio was known for his beautiful handwriting and his knowledge of both written and oral Latin.

It appears that scribes in Athens and other Greek communities were virtually untrained and learned from their master scribes. Scribes were paid for the beauty of their calligraphy or by the number of lines they copied. It is unknown if scribes worked alone, copied from dictation or worked from master copies. Copyists or librari were slaves who worked for booksellers. The scribes were free citizens who secured positions within the government and community or for wealthy citizens. While authors were paid little if anything for their efforts, booksellers made healthy profits. What was once a robust production of books came to a quick end. Scribes had less and less copy work to do.



The weather and worms took out completed works. Poggio and his peers were lucky to find work after this decline.

Scribes were protected by the Church since they were so important to the successful operations of the church. At one time the punishment for the murder of a scribe was equal to the murder of an bishop or cardinal. There was great tension in the papal offices in Rome. The scribes were overworked. There were as many as 2,000 requests that came into the offices each week that were filtered by the scribes and papal secretaries. Many of high ranking officials of the church were corrupt and abusive. Due to their close relationships with Church hierarchy, the scribes were more aware than anyone of the crimes and debauchery that the priests and bishops were guilty of. As a result, there was a loss of regard and respect for these Church officials.

Although an old friend of Poggio, Lapo Mazzei had written a scorching dramatization of the papal office, he sought out Poggio for a position in the papal office. That was not as unusual as it seems because the scribes were cynical and gossiped about everyone's lack of character that even included discussion about the Pope. The scribes would meet on breaks from their work in what was informally referred to as the Lie Factory. After these casual meetings, Poggio would return to his desk and record these conversations. These notes eventually came to be known as Poggio's *Facetiae*. These conversations captured the disrespect and cynicism that the scribes held for the Church officials. The scribes resented them and ridiculed the papacy with dark humor and off-color jokes.

"Hypocrites," another manuscript penned by Poggio also depicted life at in the papal officers. It was not as radical as the works of Lorenzo Valla, his bitter enemy. Poggio concluded his work by exposing the vulnerabilities of the priests in a metaphor in which their protective cloaks were removed. Poggio was an avid letter writer and his frustration and disgust come through in his writing. The ancient Roman temples that were being destroyed symbolized the decline of the papacy. At times Poggio had thoughts of abandoning the life he so despised but he felt he had no options. He hoped to retire early.

Poggio's background with the church gave him an advantage as did his ability as a scribe and expert in Latin, both written and oral. That advantage as a scribe began to fade in the 1430s when Johann Gutenberg invented movable type, an early version of the printing press. By the end of the century, books were being produced in clear and elegant typeface that was based on the writing of scribes like Poggio and other humanists.

Ancient Libraries

There were 184 public libraries in Rome during the early days of the Roman Empire. There was a period during which there was diminishing interest in books and reading as the years passed and eventually that number fell to only 28. There were private libraries in the home of wealthy Romans. When Mt. Vesuvius erupted and buried Pompeii it also buried the seaside resort town of Herculaneum. A large villa located in Herculaneum



was dug out centuries later. The archeologists were astounded to find a private library in the home and scores of charred books. Many of the books and scrolls had strangely been preserved by the debris and mud from the eruption. Scientists were able to open some of these books and scrolls and found fragments of writings and manuscripts from philosophers and scholars of antiquity.

Other than charred remains of books in the library at the villa in Herculaneum no manuscripts remain from the ancient Greek and Roman worlds. What was discovered represents only a tiny portion of the literature and manuscripts that existed in those days. There are some writers, scientists and philosophers of note whose entire catalogue has disappeared. Mathematicians of the era created trigonometry and explained in writing how they developed the discipline but those books are gone forever. Epicurus had been prolific. He and a colleague had authored over a thousand books with only fragments to account for them. Other than what the volcano buried or what floods washed away, most of the works were the victims of pests and harsh climates. The bookworm was a real menace to the artists and scientists and their followers.

The most tragic collapse of a library occurred in Alexandria, Egypt. Alexandria was an advanced and sophisticated capital city which tourists and intellectuals flocked to. At the early date of 300 BCE, the Ptolemaic kings who ruled the city were forward thinking and saw to it that museums and a massive library with purported endless resources were part of the landscape. The culture of the city inspired great minds – Euclid developed the foundations of geometry in Alexandria. Great advances were made in science, medicine and engineering. The library was cosmopolitan in nature and supported no specific ideology or philosophy. It merely accumulated knowledge from around the world no matter what its source.

Scholars were concerned with the quality of copy work done by scribes. They wanted to ensure that the text was translated accurately. At one point the library contained a half-million papyrus scrolls that were sorted and organized by subject matter. The spill-over from the main library was preserved in the Serapeon, the Temple of Jupiter Serapis. The destruction of the library provides clues about why the philosophies of Lucretius recovered in 1417 were the only remains of an entire school of thought that was dominant in those ancient times.

Theophilus who was the spiritual leader of the Christians in Alexandria stirred emotions in the great city and caused a deep schism. He ordered that recently discovered statues of pagan idols be paraded through the streets to shame the polytheists. A vicious riot broke out resulting in the destruction of the museum and its pagan artifacts as well as the library and the Serapeon. Cyril who followed Theophilus in this role escalated the violence and refocused it against the Jews who were ultimately expelled from the city.

Reference to the library diminished over the years and then disappeared. Not only was the Alexandria library decimated, all the libraries listed in Rome in the 4th century – 28 public libraries and many private libraries – underwent first a downgrading of importance and then their demise. Those who came to power gave little attention or care to preserving books and manuscripts. They were more interested in being entertained.



Besides the conquerors were Christian and pagan writing was verboten. But the literature that was so loved did not slip all at once and from everyone's memory. St. Jerome in a letter in 384 described the decline of society. He himself felt guilt and shame and the betrayal of his Lord for even reading pagan writing. Through the repeated telling of Christian stories, their values became steeped in society. Unfortunately, an elite education was connected with paganism. The Christian's romanticized ideal was the knights of renunciation; saviors who would cast aside any association with polytheism to prove their devoutness.

On the Nature of Things

The legacy of Poggio could be summed up in a familiar phrase: be careful what you wish for. Creation and destruction are equals and a balance is always achieved between the two. It was dramatic irony that the scribe who was the Pope's secretary uncovered a poem that was actually a dogmatic declaration in support of atheism. That the seductive beauty of the poem was the apple hanging in the garden that lured Poggio is a striking metaphor that deepens that irony.

On the Nature of Things by Roman philosopher Lucretius had vanished for 1,000 years when Poggio, the papal scribe, uncovered a copy of it in a German monastery. He at first had no idea what he had discovered. The lengthy poem was written in beautiful Latin that espoused the virtues of atheism and lured readers like Poggio who was a devout Catholic. Ironically, what the papal scribe had sought was anathema to the world in which he lived.

The work covers a large variety of topics some of which were the precursors for modern science. Since there is very little known about Lucretius and how he arrived at some of his theories and conclusions remains a mystery. His concept that everything was made up of little particles, i.e. atoms, is astonishing. What did he base such a profound thesis on in 300 or 400 BCE?

Some of the major elements of the Lucretian poem include his assertion that everything was made of invisible particles, or atoms, and that these particles are eternal, infinite and in constant motion. He also proclaimed that there was no creator and that the soul died with the body. The universe was not created for man and the humans are not unique in the universe.

These assertions and many more were shocking for Poggio, who was a scribe for the Catholic Church to read. But Poggio was enchanted with the lyrical beauty of the Latin writing and rather than contain the work, Poggio had copies made and eventually it was distributed all over Italy and throughout Europe.

Reaction to On the Nature of Things

When On the Nature of Things was rediscovered by the book hunter and papal scribe Poggio Bracciolini it is important to understand that the religious atmosphere at the time



was in great conflict and chaos. Christianity had been declared the official religion of Rome and government agents were on the hunt to destroy any signs of paganism which included art and literature. To bring this poem back to life was a risky step to take for Poggio who could have been accused of heresy and burned in the flames of a pyre.

Poggio and other collectors of antiquity justified the reading and distribution of the poem by their decision to compartmentalize or separate the poem into two categories. After discovering the poem that had been lost for 1,000 years, Poggio could have placed it back in hibernation once he discovered that it was a doctrine of atheism. However, he felt that the beautiful language and artistry of the work should be shared with the world. He made the choice to copy and release it and basically “crossed his fingers” that the ideology of the work would be disregarded. Others ascribed to this compartmentalization of the artistry of the poem and its substance. Many decided to “sing the praises of the poem” but remained silent about its concepts.

The Dominican monk Giordano Bruno ascribed to a mix of philosophies one of which was Epicureanism. Lucretius’s poem undoubtedly had a significant impact on him. He wrote a farce in which divine providence was portrayed as absurd. During Thomas More’s regime as English Chancellor he tried but failed to establish an Inquisition. Therefore, Bruno who was in England apparently felt safe to speak out. More and Erasmus tried to integrate elements of Epicureanism with Christianity to blunt the impact of the former.

Like Lucretius, Bruno did not adhere to the notion that a person’s ability to love was focused on a single object of desire. Achieving sexual satisfaction was in no way a search for truth. Bruno apparently grasped Lucretius’s belief that the universe was innately sexual. Bruno admired those who had the courage to stand up for the truth which was why he held Copernicus in high esteem. Copernicus was ridiculed and shamed for holding the theory that the earth was not the center of the universe and that it orbited the sun. Galileo was later imprisoned for advocating the theory.

The general public did not speak out and support the theories espoused in Lucretius’s work. However, they did ascribe to some of his theories. One young Florentine was quietly writing out a copy of the poem for himself – Niccolo Machiavelli. His copy is preserved in the Vatican Library. Another young man, Marsilio Ficino dedicated his life to refuting the poem and called its advocates the “Lucretiani.” Like Poggio, many intellectuals compartmentalized the poem. They admired its beauty and allure yet rejected its ideology - or at least claimed they did.



Styles

Structure

The *Swerve: How the World Became Modern* by Stephen Greenblatt is separated into eleven chapters. The first several chapters describe the travels of and discovery by Poggio, a papal scribe and secretary to the pope, of a book that laid out the tenets of Epicureanism and atheism. The book in question was *On the Nature of Things* by ancient Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius who was very influenced by his mentor and idol, Epicurus.

The narrative then describes the environment at the time of Poggio's discovery. There was great religious contrast between the Christians and pagans as well as internal problems within the Church itself. There was a deep schism between Church leaders. There were several Church officials from outlying Italian states who claimed the pope's throne. The Church had become vigilant in its quest to rid the city of any signs of paganism. Heretics, including corrupt officials of the Church were being arrested, tortured and burned to death. It was in this environment that the poem that espoused the logic and reason of atheism reemerged after 1,000 years.

In the final chapters, the author provides the specific tenets of *On the Nature of Things*. Despite the fact that his work was written between 300 and 400 BCE, Lucretius offers the theory that everything was made up of small particles. Those "small particles" came to be known as "atoms" and how Lucretius came up with this theory remains a mystery.

Perspective

Stephen Greenblatt was inspired by Lucretius' 2,000-year-old poem *On the Nature of Things* when he was a teenager and happened across the work in a bookstore. It was only ten cents so he bought it. He was stunned by the contents and intensity of the ancient poem. He found the book thrilling, fascinating. It was a natural for Greenblatt to write the story of its rediscovery the first time, 1,000 years after it had first been written and then lost for centuries.

Poggio Bracciolini was a book hunter in the fifteenth century who was seeking lost manuscripts from antiquity specifically from the era that saw great advancements in intellect, science, art and philosophy. This story could be compared to the quest for the Holy Grail with one great exception – Poggio wasn't seeking this wondrous masterpiece and encountered it unaware of its content just like Stephen Greenblatt did so many centuries later.

Greenblatt is a Pulitzer Prize winning author and is also a literary critic and scholar. The *Swerve* describes the dawning of the humanist movement that was inspired by the teachings of Epicurus who was a mentor to Lucretius, author of *On the Nature of Things*. This remarkable story is a great fit for Greenblatt since he had been a long-time

fan of the work that was brought out of hibernation more than 500 years ago and because of his professional connection to the field of Humanities.

Tone

Stephen Greenblatt provides a compelling narrative of the story of the rediscovery of a long-lost epic poem by a papal scribe and book hunter. The poem was written between 300 and 400 BCE by a Roman philosopher some 1,500 years before the scribe happened upon the lost work. Greenblatt provides a clear presentation of a difficult subject that involves the mores, religious conflicts, philosophical movements and societal practices of times gone by. His background as a professor of the Humanities and as a Pulitzer Prize winning author give him the ability to add depth, background and dimension to the story and break down the complicated tale into narrative to a level that makes it more understandable to the average reader. Even so, the book is a slow read because of its unfamiliar and complex subject matter.

Greenblatt writes the narrative like a reporter who is merely providing the facts. However, his personal reaction, one of awe and admiration, about the discovery of a long-lost lyrical poem that was beautifully written in Latin shines through his words. The irony of the story is not lost on the author or on the reader. A doctrine that ascribed to atheism was discovered by a papal scribe who could have destroyed it or hidden it away again to protect the church presented him with a difficult decision.

Greenblatt takes the reader through the thought process that the scribe probably engaged in after understanding the impact that the ancient work would have on the Church and society in general. The scribe decided to copy and distribute the poem because he was able to compartmentalize it. He decided that the beauty of the writing needed to be shared and should not be hidden away. The scribe chose to ignore the atheism and the unusual ideology that to this day are still alien to scholars. He decided that the world should have the chance to read the work and hoped that the ideology would be disregarded.



Quotes

Even in the stable and prosperous times of the Roman Empire, literacy rates, by our standards at least, were not high. As the empire crumbled, as cities decayed, trade declined, and the increasingly anxious populace scanned the horizon for barbarian armies, the whole Roman system of elementary and higher education fell apart.”

-- Stephen Greenblatt (chapter 2 paragraph 3)

Importance: This quote describes the circumstances that led to a downfall of civilization when the Roman Empire collapsed making the way for illiterate barbarians to conquer the known world at the time. It is a message for today's world that the lack of education can lead to the rise of violent and savage hordes.

I have all boastful conversation, all flattery, all exaggeration. May I be kept from taking pride in dreams of self-exaltation or vainglory.”

-- Bartolomeo de Aragazzi (chapter 2 paragraph 31)

Importance: Bartolomeo de Aragazzi was a friend and fellow-scribe of Poggio Bracciolini. They traveled together in seeking manuscripts to copy. In addition to being friends, they were rivals and competitors and wanted to have credit for finding the most valuable books to copy. Although he protests in the foregoing quote, he wanted to outdo Poggio in discovering and copying the most sought-after manuscripts.

Staring up idly at the plumes of smoke rising from nearby Vesuvius, they may well have felt some queasiness about the future, but they were an elite, living at the center of the world's greatest power, and one of their most cherished privileges was the cultivation of the life of the mind. Romans of the late republic were remarkably tenacious about this privilege, which they clung to in circumstances that would have made others quail and run for cover.”

-- Stephen Greenblatt (chapter 3 paragraph 35)

Importance: Elite Romans had adapted the love for literature and philosophy from the Greeks. To these Romans advancing the intellect was the most important privilege that these privileged individuals had. The era in question is right before the eruption of the Vesuvius volcano that buried along with Pompeii the bay city of Herculaneum where many intellectuals of the day gathered.

Just when the gods had ceased to be, and the Christ had not yet come, there was a unique moment in history, between Cicero and Marcus Aurelius, when man stood alone.”

-- Gustave Flaubert (chapter 3 paragraph 50)

Importance: French novelist Flaubert is referring to the era of Roman intellectualism that followed the Greek model when atheism had interjected itself into the culture after religion died out and before Christ had come.



Centuries of religious pluralism under paganism – three faiths living side by side in a spirit of mingled rivalry and absorptive tolerance – were coming to an end. In the early fourth century the emperor Constantine began the process whereby Rome's official religion became Christianity.”

-- Stephen Greenblatt (chapter 4 paragraph 21)

Importance: The library in Alexandria was the grandest library in the ancient world. Its resources seemed to be limitless and was dominated by no ideology or philosophy. However, tensions that had been growing for decades between religious sects in the area became a factor in the library's demise. The Jews and Christians were disturbed by the statues and artifacts that adorned the library and the museum in Alexandria and that paid homage to Roman gods that represented polytheism and paganism to the devout monotheists.

The ancient authors, Petrarch wrote to Boccaccio, 'have become absorbed into my being and implanted not only in my memory but in the marrow of my bones, and have become one with my mind so that even if I never read them again in my life, they would inhere in me with their roots sunk in the depths of my soul.”

-- Stephen Greenblatt (chapter 5 paragraph 32)

Importance: Petrarch revered the ancient writings of the Greeks and Romans. His somewhat hyperbolic comment stresses just how deeply he was impressed by the literature of the intellects of ancient times. Once reading these works, they would be embedded in his being and would serve as an inspiration to him forever.

Monasteries, he writes to a friend, are 'not congregations of the faithful or placed of religious men but the workshops of criminals.”

-- Poggio (chapter 6 paragraph 39)

Importance: Poggio was a scribe in the papal office in Rome. He was the secretary to the Pope. However, he was disheartened by the sins and corruption of the bishops and cardinals. One way he vented his dismay was through personal letters he wrote that were discovered centuries later.

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.”

-- Stephen Greenblatt (chapter 8 paragraph 9)

Importance: The author refers to On the Nature of Things the long lost poem of ancient Rome that the scribe Poggio unearthed. Poggio a devoutly religion man was taken aback by the core principle of Lucretius's work that was inspired by the humanist movement of antiquity.

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.”



-- Stephen Greenblatt (chapter 8 paragraph 59)

Importance: It is the epitome of irony that Poggio, who was the Pope's scribe, uncovered a poem that was in contradiction to everything that the Church taught.

For many of the most daring speculative minds of the Renaissance, the ideas that surged up in 1417, with the recovery of Lucretius' poem and the renewed interest in Epicureanism, did not constitute a fully formed philosophical or ideological system. Couched in its beautiful, seductive poetry, the Lucretian vision was a profound intellectual and creative challenge."

-- Stephen Greenblatt (chapter 10 paragraph 15)

Importance: The lost book, missing for 1,000 years, which ultimately fostered the Renaissance and provided the fundamentals of atheism sparked many debates, angry disagreements presented a challenge to the very foundations of Christianity which was the predominant power and authority in the world at the time of its discovery.

There are moments, rare and powerful, in which a writer, long vanished from the face of the earth, seems to stand in your presence and speak to you directly, as if he bore a message meant for you above all others."

-- Stephen Greenblatt (chapter 11 paragraph 23)

Importance: The French philosopher Michel de Montaigne felt the power of Lucretius' poem that had been unearthed 1,000 years after it was written. He was so taken with the Roman's words that he chose not to translate the book into his native French. He savored the perfection of the words and message as they were written.

The atomists had found joy and wonder in the way things are: Lucretius saw the universe as a constant, intensely erotic hymn to Venus. But the obedient young Jesuit was to tell himself every day that the only alternative to the divine order he could see celebrated all around him... was a cold, sterile, chaotic world of meaningless atoms."

-- Stephen Greenblatt (chapter 11 paragraph 32)

Importance: In response to Lucretius's *On the Nature of Things* the University of Pisa required its young Jesuits to recite a prayer every day to fend off the temptation of the ideology contained in the ancient philosopher's poem.



Topics for Discussion

1

Why did the sight of the traveling Poggio Bracciolini appear unusual to the people of the German countryside? Why did he not divulge his purpose for traveling through German towns and villages?

2

What talent did Poggio have? Why was he seeking out old manuscripts that had been lost over the years and where did he hope to find them?

3

What is Epicurean philosophy? Who inspired what became known as the Humanities and what were the tenets of this movement?

4

What tasks were fulfilled by scribes and copyists? Why were scribes needed and what role did they play in the papacy and in society in general?

5

Why did the scribes have to learn the papyrus making process? What other materials did they have at their disposal for their transcription work? Why were some works reused and written over with new writing?

6

What was the impact of the Emperor Constantine's edict about Rome's official religion? What were the views of the Christians and Jews in Rome about the pagans and polytheism? Why were beautiful temples and statuary destroyed and literature from the antiquities destroyed?

7

Why was a meeting of the ecumenical council called by Pope John XIII? How did Poggio find himself unemployed as a result of this gathering? Why was the meeting



which was held in Constance, Germany, an integral part of the discovery of *On the Nature of Things*?

8

What elements of *On the Nature of Things* confirm that it is a doctrine of atheism? What is Epicurean about the poem?

9

What line in a Shakespearean play is evidence that the Bard of the Avon had read *On the Nature of Things*? How did Montaigne react to the book?

10

How did some scholars and officials of the Church try to deal with *On the Nature of Things*? How did Thomas More and Erasmus try to reconcile the controversy that the book created?