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HOW THE WORLD BECAME MODERN

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THE  
SWERVE

How the World Became Modern

STEPHEN  
GREENBLATT



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# PREFACE

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WHEN I WAS a student, I used to go at the end of the school year to the Yale Coop to see what I could find to read over the summer. I had very little pocket money, but the bookstore would routinely sell its unwanted titles for ridiculously small sums. They would be jumbled together in bins through which I would rummage, with nothing much in mind, waiting for something to catch my eye. On one of my forays, I was struck by an extremely odd paperback cover, a detail from a painting by the surrealist Max Ernst. Under a crescent moon, high above the earth, two pairs of legs—the bodies were missing—were engaged in what appeared to be an act of celestial coition. The book—a prose translation of Lucretius’ two-thousand-year-old poem *On the Nature of Things* (*De rerum natura*)—was marked down to ten cents, and I bought it, I confess, as much for the cover as for the classical account of the material universe.

Ancient physics is not a particularly promising subject for vacation reading, but sometime over the summer I idly picked up the book and began to read. I immediately encountered ample justification for the erotic cover. Lucretius begins with an ardent hymn to Venus, the goddess of love, whose coming in the spring has scattered the clouds, flooded the sky with light, and filled the entire world with frenzied sexual desire:

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

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

It was not Lucretius’ exquisite language to which I was responding. Later I worked through *De rerum natura* in its original Latin hexameters, and I came to understand something of its rich verbal texture, its subtle rhythms, and the cunning precision and poignancy of its imagery. But my first encounter was in Martin Ferguson Smith’s workmanlike English prose—clear and unfussy, but hardly remarkable. No, it was something else that reached me, something that lived and moved within the sentences for more than 200 densely packed pages. I am committed by trade to urging people to attend carefully to the verbal surfaces of what they read. Much of the pleasure and interest of poetry depends on such attention. But it is nonetheless possible to have a powerful experience of a work of art even in a modest translation, let alone a brilliant one. That is, after all, how most of the literate world has encountered Genesis or the *Iliad* or *Hamlet*, and, though it is certainly preferable to read these works in their original languages, it is misguided to insist that there is no real access to them otherwise.

I can, in any case, testify that, even in a prose translation, *On the Nature of Things* struck a very deep

chord within me. Its power depended to some extent on personal circumstances—art always penetrates the particular fissures in one's psychic life. The core of Lucretius' poem is a profound, therapeutic meditation on the fear of death, and that fear dominated my entire childhood. It was not fear of my own death that so troubled me; I had the ordinary, healthy child's intimation of immortality. It was rather my mother's absolute certainty that she was destined for an early death.

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

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

I understood early on that my mother's "heart"—the palpitations that brought her and everyone around her to a halt—was a life strategy. It was a symbolic means to identify with and mourn her dead sister. It was a way to express both anger—"you see how upset you have made me"—and love—"you see how I am still doing everything for you, even though my heart is about to break." It was an acting out, a rehearsal, of the extinction that she feared. It was above all a way to compel attention and demand love. But this understanding did not make its effect upon my childhood significantly less intense: I loved my mother and dreaded losing her. I had no resources to untangle psychological strategy and dangerous symptom. (I don't imagine that she did either.) And as a child I had no means to gauge the weirdness of this constant harping on impending death and this freighting of every farewell with finality. Only now that I have raised a family of my own do I understand how dire that compulsion must have been that led a loving parent—and she was loving—to lay such a heavy emotional burden on her children. Every day brought a renewal of the dark certainty that her end was very near.

As it turned out, my mother lived to a month shy of her ninetieth birthday. She was still only in her fifties when I encountered *On the Nature of Things* for the first time. By then my dread of her dying had become entwined with a painful perception that she had blighted much of her life—and cast a shadow on my own—in the service of her obsessive fear. Lucretius' words therefore rang out with terrible clarity: "Death is nothing to us." To spend your existence in the grip of anxiety about death, I wrote, is mere folly. It is a sure way to let your life slip from you incomplete and unenjoyed. He gave voice as well to a thought I had not yet quite allowed myself, even inwardly, to articulate: to inflict this anxiety on others is manipulative and cruel.

Such was, in my case, the poem's personal point of entry, the immediate source of its power over me. But that power was not only a consequence of my peculiar life history. *On the Nature of Things*

struck me as an astonishingly convincing account of the way things actually are. To be sure, I easily grasped that many features of this ancient account now seem absurd. What else would we expect? How accurate will our account of the universe seem two thousand years from now? Lucretius believed that the sun circled around the earth, and he argued that the sun's heat and size could hardly be much greater than are perceived by our senses. He thought that worms were spontaneously generated from the wet soil, explained lightning as seeds of fire expelled from hollow clouds, and pictured the earth as a menopausal mother exhausted by the effort of so much breeding. But at the core of the poem lay key principles of a modern understanding of the world.

The stuff of the universe, Lucretius proposed, is an infinite number of atoms moving randomly through space, like dust motes in a sunbeam, colliding, hooking together, forming complex structures, breaking apart again, in a ceaseless process of creation and destruction. There is no escape from this process. When you look up at the night sky and, feeling unaccountably moved, marvel at the numberless stars, you are not seeing the handiwork of the gods or a crystalline sphere detached from our transient world. You are seeing the same material world of which you are a part and from whose elements you are made. There is no master plan, no divine architect, no intelligent design. All things, including the species to which you belong, have evolved over vast stretches of time. The evolution is random, though in the case of living organisms it involves a principle of natural selection. That is, species that are suited to survive and to reproduce successfully endure, at least for a time; those that are not so well suited die off quickly. But nothing—from our own species to the planet on which we live to the sun that lights our days—lasts forever. Only the atoms are immortal.

In a universe so constituted, Lucretius argued, there is no reason to think that the earth or its inhabitants occupy a central place, no reason to set humans apart from all other animals, no hope of bribing or appeasing the gods, no place for religious fanaticism, no call for ascetic self-denial, no justification for dreams of limitless power or perfect security, no rationale for wars of conquest or self-aggrandizement, no possibility of triumphing over nature, no escape from the constant making and unmaking and remaking of forms. On the other side of anger at those who either peddled false visions of security or incited irrational fears of death, Lucretius offered a feeling of liberation and the power to stare down what had once seemed so menacing. What human beings can and should do, he wrote, is to conquer their fears, accept the fact that they themselves and all the things they encounter are transitory, and embrace the beauty and the pleasure of the world.

I marveled—I continue to marvel—that these perceptions were fully articulated in a work written more than two thousand years ago. The line between this work and modernity is not direct: nothing ever so simple. There were innumerable forgettings, disappearances, recoveries, dismissals, distortions, challenges, transformations, and renewed forgettings. And yet the vital connection was there. Hidden behind the worldview I recognize as my own is an ancient poem, a poem once lost, apparently irrevocably, and then found.

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



course of modernity would have been different.

Of all the ancient masterpieces, this poem is one that should certainly have disappeared, finally and forever, in the company of the lost works that had inspired it. That it did not disappear, that it surfaced after many centuries and began once again to propagate its deeply subversive theses, is something one could be tempted to call a miracle. But the author of the poem in question did not believe in miracles. He thought that nothing could violate the laws of nature. He posited instead what he called “swerve,”—Lucretius’ principal Latin word for it was *clinamen*—an unexpected, unpredictable movement of matter. The reappearance of his poem was such a swerve, an unforeseen deviation from the direct trajectory—in this case, toward oblivion—on which that poem and its philosophy seemed to be traveling.

When it returned to full circulation after a millennium, much of what the work said about a universe formed out of the clash of atoms in an infinite void seemed absurd. But those very things that first were deemed both impious and nonsensical turned out to be the basis for the contemporary rational understanding of the entire world. What is at stake is not only the startling recognition of key elements of modernity in antiquity, though it is certainly worth reminding ourselves that Greek and Roman classics, largely displaced from our curriculum, have in fact definitively shaped modern consciousness. More surprising, perhaps, is the sense, driven home by every page of *On the Nature of Things*, that the scientific vision of the world—a vision of atoms randomly moving in an infinite universe—was in its origins imbued with a poet’s sense of wonder. Wonder did not depend on gods and demons and the dream of an afterlife; in Lucretius it welled up out of a recognition that we are made of the same matter as the stars and the oceans and all things else. And this recognition was the basis for the way he thought we should live our lives.

In my view, and by no means mine alone, the culture in the wake of antiquity that best epitomized the Lucretian embrace of beauty and pleasure and propelled it forward as a legitimate and worthwhile human pursuit was that of the Renaissance. The pursuit was not restricted to the arts. It shaped the dress and the etiquette of courtiers; the language of the liturgy; the design and decoration of everyday objects. It suffused Leonardo da Vinci’s scientific and technological explorations, Galileo’s vivid dialogues on astronomy, Francis Bacon’s ambitious research projects, and Richard Hooker’s theology. It was virtually a reflex, so that works that were seemingly far away from any aesthetic ambition at all—Machiavelli’s analysis of political strategy, Walter Raleigh’s description of Guiana, or Robert Burton’s encyclopedic account of mental illness—were crafted in such a way as to produce the most intense pleasure. But the arts of the Renaissance—painting, sculpture, music, architecture, and literature—were the supreme manifestations of the pursuit of beauty.

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

and cut him out in little stars

And he will make the face of heaven so fine

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

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

Though most evident in works of art, the change from one way of perceiving and living in the world to another was not restricted to aesthetics: it helps to account for the intellectual daring of Copernicus and Vesalius, Giordano Bruno and William Harvey, Hobbes and Spinoza. The transformation was not sudden or once-for-all, but it became increasingly possible to turn away from a preoccupation with angels and demons and immaterial causes and to focus instead on things in this world; to understand that humans are made of the same stuff as everything else and are part of the natural order; to conduct experiments without fearing that one is infringing on God’s jealously guarded secrets; to question authorities and challenge received doctrines; to legitimate the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain; to imagine that there are other worlds beside the one that we inhabit; to entertain the thought that the sun is only one star in an infinite universe; to live an ethical life without reference to postmortem rewards and punishments; to contemplate without trembling the death of the soul. In short, it became possible—never easy, but possible—in the poet Auden’s phrase to find the mortal world enough.

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

This is a story then of how the world swerved in a new direction. The agent of change was not a revolution, an implacable army at the gates, or landfall on an unknown continent. For events of this

magnitude, historians and artists have given the popular imagination memorable images: the fall of the Bastille, the Sack of Rome, or the moment when the ragged seamen from the Spanish ships planted their flag in the New World. These emblems of world-historic change can be deceptive—the Bastille had almost no prisoners; Attila's army quickly withdrew from the imperial capital; and, in the Americas, the truly fateful action was not the unfurling of a banner but the first time that an ill and infectious Spanish sailor, surrounded by wondering natives, sneezed or coughed. Still, we can in such cases at least cling to the vivid symbol. But the epochal change with which this book is concerned—though it has affected all of our lives—is not so easily associated with a dramatic image.

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

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

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

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

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# THE BOOK HUNTER

IN THE WINTER of 1417, Poggio Bracciolini rode through the wooded hills and valleys of southern Germany toward his distant destination, a monastery reputed to have a cache of old manuscripts. *A* must have been immediately apparent to the villagers looking out at him from the doors of their huts: the man was a stranger. [Slight of build](#) and clean-shaven, he would probably have been modestly dressed in a well-made but simple tunic and cloak. That he was not country-bred was clear, and yet he did not resemble any of the city and court dwellers whom the locals would have been accustomed to catch a glimpse from time to time. Unarmed and unprotected by a clanging suit of armor, he was certainly not a Teutonic knight—one stout blow from a raw-boned yokel’s club would have easily felled him. Though he did not seem to be poor, he had none of the familiar signs of wealth and status: he was not a courtier, with gorgeous clothes and perfumed hair worn in long lovelocks, nor was he a nobleman out hunting and hawking. And, as was plain from his clothes and the cut of his hair, he was not a priest or a monk.

Southern Germany at the time was prosperous. The catastrophic Thirty Years’ War that would ravage the countryside and shatter whole cities in the region lay far in the future, as did the horrors of our own time that destroyed much of what had survived from this period. In addition to knights, courtiers, and nobles, other men of substance busily traveled the rutted, hard-packed roads. Ravensburg, near Constance, was involved in the linen trade and had recently begun to produce paper. Ulm, on the left bank of the Danube, was a flourishing center of manufacture and commerce, as were Heidenheim, Aalen, beautiful Rothenburg ob der Tauber, and still more beautiful Würzburg. Burghers, wool brokers, leather and cloth merchants, vintners and brewers, craftsmen and their apprentices, as well as diplomats, bankers, and tax collectors, all were familiar sights. But Poggio still did not fit.

There were less prosperous figures too—journeymen, tinkers, knife-sharpener, and others whose trades kept them on the move; pilgrims on their way to shrines where they could worship in the presence of a fragment of a saint’s bone or a drop of sacred blood; jugglers, fortune-tellers, hawkers, acrobats and mimes traveling from village to village; runaways, vagabonds, and petty thieves. And there were the Jews, with the conical hats and the yellow badges that the Christian authorities forced them to wear, so that they could be easily identified as objects of contempt and hatred. Poggio was certainly none of these.

To those who watched him pass, he must in fact have been a baffling figure. Most people at the time signaled their identities, their place in the hierarchical social system, in visible signs that everyone could read, like the indelible stains on a dyer’s hands. Poggio was barely legible. An isolated individual, considered outside the structures of family and occupation, made very little sense. What mattered was what you belonged to or even whom you belonged to. The little couplet Alexander Pope mockingly wrote in the eighteenth century, to put on one of the queen’s little pugs, could have applied in earnest in the world that Poggio inhabited:

I am his Highness’ dog at Kew;  
Pray tell me, sir, whose dog are you?

The household, the kinship network, the guild, the corporation—these were the building blocks

personhood. Independence and self-reliance had no cultural purchase; indeed, they could scarcely be conceived, let alone prized. Identity came with a precise, well-understood place in a chain of command and obedience.

To attempt to break the chain was folly. An impertinent gesture—a refusal to bow or kneel or to uncover one's head to the appropriate person—could lead to one's nose being slit or one's neck broken. And what, after all, was the point? It was not as if there were any coherent alternative, certainly not one articulated by the Church or the court or the town oligarchs. The best course was humbly to accept the identity to which destiny assigned you: the ploughman needed only to know how to plough, the weaver to weave, the monk to pray. It was possible, of course, to be better or worse at any of these things; the society in which Poggio found himself acknowledged and, to a considerable degree, rewarded unusual skill. But to prize a person for some ineffable individuality or for many-sidedness or for intense curiosity was virtually unheard of. [Indeed, curiosity was said](#) by the Church to be a mortal sin. To indulge it was to risk an eternity in hell.

Who was Poggio, then? Why did he not proclaim his identity on his back, the way decent folks were accustomed to do? He wore no insignia and carried no bundles of merchandise. He had the self-assured air of someone accustomed to the society of the great, but he himself was evidently a figure of no great consequence. Everyone knew what such an important person looked like, for this was a society of retainers and armed guards and liveried servants. The stranger, simply attired, rode in the company of a single companion. When they paused at inns, the companion, who appeared to be an assistant or servant, did the ordering; when the master spoke, it became clear that he knew little or no German and that his native language was Italian.

If he had tried to explain to an inquisitive person what he was up to, the mystery of his identity would only have deepened. In a culture with very limited literacy, to be interested in books was already an oddity. And how could Poggio have accounted for the still odder nature of his particular interests? He was not in search of books of hours or missals or hymnals whose exquisite illumination and splendid bindings made manifest their value even to the illiterate. These books, some of them jewel-encrusted and edged with gold, were often locked in special boxes or chained to lecterns and shelves, so that light-fingered readers could not make off with them. But they held no special appeal for Poggio. Nor was he drawn to the theological, medical, or legal tomes that were the prestigious tools of the professional elites. Such books had a power to impress and intimidate even those who could not read them. They had a social magic, of the kind associated for the most part with unpleasant events: a lawsuit, a painful swelling in the groin, an accusation of witchcraft or heresy. An ordinary person would have grasped that volumes of this kind had teeth and claws and hence have understood why a clever person might hunt them. But here again Poggio's indifference was baffling.

The stranger was going to a monastery, but he was not a priest or a theologian or an inquisitor, and he was not looking for prayer books. He was after old manuscripts, many of them moldy, worm-eaten, and all but indecipherable even to the best-trained readers. If the sheets of parchment on which such books were written were still intact, they had a certain cash value, since they could be carefully scraped clean with knives, smoothed with talcum powder, and written over anew. But Poggio was not in the parchment-buying business, and he actually loathed those who scratched off the old letters. He wanted to see what was written on them, even if the writing was crabbed and difficult, and he was most interested in manuscripts that were four or five hundred years old, going back then to the tenth century or even earlier.

To all but a handful of people in Germany, this quest, had Poggio tried to articulate it, would have seemed weird. And it would have seemed weirder still if Poggio had gone on to explain that he was

not in fact at all interested in what was written four or five hundred years ago. He despised that time and regarded it as a sink of superstition and ignorance. What he really hoped to find were words that had nothing to do with the moment in which they were written down on the old parchment, words that were in the best possible case uncontaminated by the mental universe of the lowly scribe who copied them. That scribe, Poggio hoped, was dutifully and accurately copying a still older parchment, or made by yet another scribe whose humble life was equally of no particular consequence to the book hunter except insofar as it left behind this trace. If the nearly miraculous run of good fortune held, the earlier manuscript, long vanished into dust, was in turn a faithful copy of a more ancient manuscript and that manuscript a copy of yet another. Now at last for Poggio the quarry became exciting, and the hunter's heart in his breast beat faster. The trail was leading him back to Rome, not the contemporary Rome of the corrupt papal court, intrigues, political debility, and periodic outbreaks of bubonic plague, but the Rome of the Forum and the Senate House and a Latin language whose crystalline beauty filled him with wonder and the longing for a lost world.

What could any of this mean to anyone who had his feet on the ground in southern Germany in 1417? Listening to Poggio, a superstitious man might have suspected a particular type of sorcery or bibliomancy; a more sophisticated man might have diagnosed a psychological obsession, bibliomania; a pious man might have wondered why any sound soul would feel a passionate attraction for the time before the Saviour brought the promise of redemption to the benighted pagans. And all would have asked the obvious question: whom does this man serve?

Poggio himself might have been hard-pressed for an answer. He had until recently served the pope as he had served a succession of earlier Roman pontiffs. His occupation was *scriptor*, that is, a skilled writer of official documents in the papal bureaucracy, and, through adroitness and cunning, he had risen to the coveted position of apostolic secretary. He was on hand then to write down the pope's words, record his sovereign decisions, craft in elegant Latin his extensive international correspondence. In a formal court setting, in which physical proximity to the absolute ruler was a key asset, Poggio was a man of importance. He listened while the pope whispered something in his ear; he whispered something back; he knew the meaning of the pope's smiles and frowns. He had access, and the very word "secretary" suggests, to the pope's secrets. And this pope had a great many secrets.

But at the time that Poggio was riding off in search of ancient manuscripts, he was no longer apostolic secretary. He had not displeased his master, the pope, and that master was still alive. But everything had changed. The pope Poggio had served and before whom the faithful (and the less than faithful) had trembled was at that moment in the winter of 1417 sitting in an imperial prison in Heidelberg. Stripped of his title, his name, his power, and his dignity, he had been publicly disgraced and condemned by the princes of his own church. The "holy and infallible" General Council of Constance declared that by [his "detestable and unseemly life"](#) he had brought scandal on the Church and on Christendom, and that he was unfit to remain in his exalted office. Accordingly, the council released all believers from fidelity and obedience to him; indeed, it was now forbidden to call him pope or to obey him. In the long history of the Church, with its impressive share of scandals, little like this had happened before—and nothing like it has happened since.

The deposed pope was not there in person, but Poggio, his erstwhile apostolic secretary, may have been present when the archbishop of Riga handed the papal seal to a goldsmith, who solemnly broke it in pieces, along with the papal arms. All of the ex-pope's servants were formally dismissed, and his correspondence—the correspondence that Poggio had been instrumental in managing—was officially terminated. The pope who had called himself John XXIII no longer existed; the man who had borne that title was now once again what he had been christened, Baldassare Cossa. And Poggio was now

masterless man.

To be masterless in the early fifteenth century was for most men an unenviable, even dangerous state. Villages and towns looked with suspicion on itinerants; vagrants were whipped and branded; and on lonely paths in a largely unpoliced world the unprotected were exceedingly vulnerable. Of course Poggio was hardly a vagrant. Sophisticated and highly skilled, he had long moved in the circles of the great. The armed guards at the Vatican and the Castel St. Angelo let him pass through the gates without a word of inquiry, and important suitors to the papal court tried to catch his eye. He had direct access to an absolute ruler, the wealthy and cunning master of enormous territories, who also claimed to be the spiritual master of all of Western Christendom. In the private chambers of palaces, as in the papal court itself, the apostolic secretary Poggio was a familiar presence, exchanging jokes with bejeweled cardinals, chatting with ambassadors, and drinking fine wine from cups of crystal and gold. In Florence he had been befriended by some of the most powerful figures in the Signoria, the city's ruling body, and he had a distinguished circle of friends.

But Poggio was not in Rome or Florence. He was in Germany, and the pope he had followed to the city of Constance was in prison. The enemies of John XXIII had triumphed and were now in control. Doors that had once been open to Poggio were firmly shut. And suitors eager for a favor—dispensation, a legal ruling, a lucrative position for themselves or their relatives—who had paid court to the secretary as a means to pay court to his master were all looking elsewhere. Poggio's income abruptly ceased.

That income had been considerable. Scribes received no fixed stipend, but they were permitted to charge fees for executing documents and obtaining what were called "concessions of grace," that is, legal favors in matters that required some technical correction or exception granted orally or in writing by the pope. And, of course, there were other, less official fees that would privately flow to someone who had the pope's ear. In the mid-fifteenth century, the income for a secretary was 250 to 300 florins annually, and an entrepreneurial spirit could make much more. At the end of a twelve-year period in this office, Poggio's colleague [George of Trebizond had salted](#) away over 4,000 florins in Roman banks, along with handsome investments in real estate.

In his letters to friends Poggio claimed throughout his life that he was neither ambitious nor greedy. He wrote a celebrated essay attacking avarice as one of the most hateful of human vices, and he excoriated the greed of hypocritical monks, unscrupulous princes, and grasping merchants. It would be foolish, of course, to take such professions at face value: there is ample evidence from later in his career, when he managed to return to the papal court, that Poggio used his office to make money hard over fist. [By the 1450s](#), along with a family *palazzo* and a country estate, he had managed to acquire several farms, nineteen separate pieces of land, and two houses in Florence, and he had also made very large deposits in banking and business houses.

But this prosperity lay decades in the future. An official inventory (called a *catasto*) compiled in 1427 by tax officials indicated that Poggio had fairly modest means. And a decade earlier, at the time that John XXIII was deposed, he almost certainly had far less. Indeed, his later acquisitiveness may have been a reaction to the memory of those long months, stretching into several lean years, when he found himself in a strange land without a position or an income and with very few resources on which to fall back. In the winter of 1417, when he rode through the South German countryside, Poggio had little or no idea where his next florins would come from.

It is all the more striking that [in this difficult period](#) Poggio did not quickly find a new position or make haste to return to Italy. What he did instead was to go book-hunting.

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## THE MOMENT OF DISCOVERY

ITALIANS HAD BEEN book-hunting for the better part of a century, ever since the poet and scholar [Petrarch brought glory](#) on himself in the 1330s by piecing together Livy’s monumental *History of Rome* and finding forgotten masterpieces by Cicero, Propertius, and others. Petrarch’s achievement had inspired others to seek out lost classics that had been lying unread, often for centuries. The recovered texts were copied, edited, commented upon, and eagerly exchanged, conferring distinction on those who had found them and forming the basis for what became known as the “study of the humanities.”

The “humanists,” as those who were devoted to this study were called, knew from carefully poring over the texts that had survived from classical Rome that many once famous books or parts of books were still missing. Occasionally, the ancient authors whom Poggio and his fellow humanists eagerly read gave tantalizing quotations from these books, often accompanying extravagant praise and vituperative attacks. Alongside discussions of Virgil and Ovid, for example, the Roman rhetorician Quintilian remarked that “[Macer and Lucretius are certainly](#) worth reading,” and went on to discuss Varro of Atax, Cornelius Severus, Saleius Bassus, Gaius Rabirius, Albinovanus Pedo, Marcus Furius Bibaculus, Lucius Accius, Marcus Pacuvius, and others whose works he greatly admired. The humanists knew that some of these missing works were likely to have been lost forever—as it turned out, with the exception of Lucretius, all of the authors just mentioned have been lost—but they suspected that others, perhaps many others, were hidden away in dark places, not only in Italy but across the Alps. After all, Petrarch had found the manuscript of Cicero’s *Pro Archia* in Liège, Belgium, and the Propertius manuscript in Paris.

The prime hunting grounds for Poggio and his fellow book hunters were the libraries of monasteries, and for good reason: for long centuries monasteries had been virtually the only institutions that cared about books. 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. What began as downsizing went on to wholesale abandonment. Schools closed, libraries and academies shut their doors, professional grammarians and teachers of rhetoric found themselves out of work. There were more important things to worry about than the fate of books.

But all monks were expected to know how to read. In a world increasingly dominated by illiterate warlords, that expectation, formulated early in the history of monasticism, was of incalculable importance. Here is the Rule from the monasteries established in Egypt and throughout the Middle East by the late fourth-century Coptic saint Pachomius. When a candidate for admission to the monastery presents himself to the elders,

[they shall give him twenty](#) Psalms or two of the Apostles’ epistles or some other part of Scripture. And if he is illiterate he shall go at the first, third and sixth hours to someone who can teach and has been appointed for him. He shall stand before him and learn very studiously and with all gratitude. The fundamentals of a syllable, the verbs and nouns shall be written for him and even if he does not want to, he shall be compelled to read. (Rule 139)



“He shall be compelled to read.” It was this compulsion that, through centuries of chaos, helped salvage the achievements of ancient thought.

Though in the most influential of all the monastic rules, written in the sixth century, St. Benedict did not similarly specify an explicit literacy requirement, he provided the equivalent of one by including a period each day for reading—“prayerful reading,” as he put it—as well as manual labor. “Idleness is the enemy of the soul,” the saint wrote, and he made certain that the hours would be filled up. Monks would be permitted to read at certain other times as well, though such voluntary reading would have to be conducted in strict silence. (In Benedict’s time, as throughout antiquity, reading was ordinarily performed audibly.) But about the prescribed reading times there was nothing voluntary.

The monks were to read, whether they felt like it or not, and the Rule called for careful supervision

[Above all, one or two seniors](#) must surely be deputed to make the rounds of the monastery while the brothers are reading. Their duty is to see that no brother is so *acediosus* as to waste time or engage in idle talk to the neglect of his reading, and so not only harm himself but also distract others. (49:17–18)

*Acediosus*, sometimes translated as “apathetic,” refers to an illness, specific to monastic communities, which had already been brilliantly diagnosed in the late fourth century by the Desert Father John Cassian. The monk in the grip of *acedia* would find it difficult or impossible to read. Looking away from his book, he might try to distract himself with gossip but would more likely glance in disgust at his surroundings and at his fellow monks. He would feel that things were better somewhere else, that he was wasting his life, that everything was stale and pointless, that he was suffocating.

[He looks about anxiously](#) this way and that, and sighs that none of the brethren come to see him, and often goes in and out of his cell, and frequently gazes up at the sun, as if it was too slow in setting, and so a kind of unreasonable confusion of mind takes possession of him like some foul darkness.

Such a monk—and there were evidently many of them—had succumbed to what we would call a clinical state of depression.

Cassian called the disease “the noonday demon,” and the Benedictine Rule set a careful watch, especially at reading times, to detect anyone manifesting its symptoms.

[If such a monk](#) is found—God forbid—he should be reprov'd a first and a second time. If he does not amend, he must be subjected to the punishment of the rule so that the others may have fear.

A refusal to read at the prescribed time—whether because of distraction, boredom, or despair—would thus be visited first by public criticism and then, if the refusal continued, by blows. The symptoms of psychic pain would be driven out by physical pain. And, suitably chastened, the distressed monk would return—in principle at least—to his “prayerful reading.”

There was yet another time in which the Benedictine Rule called for reading: every day at meals one of the brothers was assigned, on a weekly basis, to read aloud. Benedict was well aware that for at least certain of the monks this assignment would occasion pride, and he therefore tried to suppress the sensation as best he could: “Let the incoming reader ask all to pray for him so that God may shield him from [the feeling of elation](#).” He was aware too that for others the readings would be an occasion for mockery or simply for chat, and here too the Rule made careful provision: “[Let there be](#) complete silence. No whispering, no speaking—only the reader’s voice should be heard there.” But, above a

he wanted to prevent these readings from provoking discussion or debate: “[No one should presume](#) ask a question about the reading or about anything else, lest occasion be given.”

“Lest occasion be given”: the phrase, in a text normally quite clear, is oddly vague. Occasion for whom or for what? Modern editors sometimes insert the phrase “to the devil” and that indeed may be what is implied here. But why should the Prince of Darkness be excited by a question about the reading? The answer must be that any question, however innocuous, could raise the prospect of discussion, a discussion that would imply that religious doctrines were open to inquiry and argument.

Benedict did not absolutely prohibit commentary on the sacred texts that were read aloud, but he wanted to restrict its source: “[The superior](#),” the Rule allows, “may wish to say a few words in instruction.” Those words were not to be questioned or contradicted, and indeed all contention was in principle to be suppressed. As the listing of punishments in the influential rule of the Irish monk Columbanus (born in the year Benedict died) makes clear, lively debate, intellectual or otherwise, was forbidden. To the monk who has dared to contradict a fellow monk with such words as “It is not as you say,” there is a heavy penalty: “an imposition of silence or fifty blows.” The high walls that hedged about the mental life of the monks—the imposition of silence, the prohibition of questioning, the punishing of debate with slaps or blows of the whip—were all meant to affirm unambiguously that these pious communities were the opposite of the philosophical academies of Greece or Rome, places that had thrived upon the spirit of contradiction and cultivated a restless, wide-ranging curiosity.

All the same, monastic rules did require reading, and that was enough to set in motion an extraordinary chain of consequences. Reading was not optional or desirable or recommended; in a community that took its obligations with deadly seriousness, reading was obligatory. And reading required books. Books that were opened again and again eventually fell apart, however carefully they were handled. Therefore, almost inadvertently, monastic rules necessitated that monks repeatedly purchase or acquire books. In the course of the vicious Gothic Wars of the mid-sixth century and the still more miserable aftermath, the last commercial workshops of book production folded, and the vestiges of the book market fell apart. Therefore, again almost inadvertently, monastic rules necessitated that monks carefully preserve and copy those books that they already possessed. But a trade with the papyrus makers of Egypt had long vanished, and in the absence of a commercial book market, the commercial industry for converting animal skins to writing surfaces had fallen in abeyance. Therefore, once again almost inadvertently, monastic rules necessitated that monks learn the laborious art of making parchment and salvaging existing parchment. Without wishing to emulate the pagan elites by placing books or writing at the center of society, without affirming the importance of rhetoric or grammar, without prizing either learning or debate, monks nonetheless became the principal readers, librarians, book preservers, and book producers of the Western world.

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Poggio and the other humanists on the trail of lost classics knew all this. Having already sifted through many of the monastic libraries in Italy and having followed Petrarch’s lead in France, they also knew that the great, uncharted territories were Switzerland and Germany. But many of those monasteries were extremely difficult to reach—their founders had built them in deliberately remote places, in order to withdraw from the temptations, distractions, and dangers of the world. And once an eager humanist, having endured the discomforts and risks of travel, managed to reach the distant monasteries, what then? The number of scholars who knew what to look for and who were competent to recognize what they had come to find, if they had the good fortune to stumble across it, was extremely small. There was, moreover, a problem of access: to get through the door a scholar would

have to be able to persuade a skeptical abbot and a still more skeptical monastic librarian that he had legitimate reason to be there. Access to the library was ordinarily denied to any outsider. Petrarch was a cleric; he could at least make his appeal from within the large institutional community of the Church. Many of the humanists by contrast were laymen and would have aroused immediate suspicion.

This daunting list did not exhaust the problems. For if a book hunter reached a monastery, got past the heavily barred door, entered the library, and actually found something interesting, he would still need to do something with the manuscript he had found.

Books were scarce and valuable. They conferred prestige on the monastery that possessed them, and the monks were not inclined to let them out of their sight, particularly if they had any prior experience with light-fingered Italian humanists. On occasion monasteries tried to secure their possession by freighting their precious manuscripts with curses. "[For him that stealeth](#), or borroweth and returneth not, this book from its owner," one of these curses runs,

let it change into a serpent in his hand and rend him. Let him be struck with palsy, and all his members blasted. Let him languish in pain crying aloud for mercy, and let there be no surcease to his agony till he sing in dissolution. Let bookworms gnaw his entrails in token of the Worm that dieth not, and when at last he goeth to his final punishment, let the flames of Hell consume him forever.

Even a worldly skeptic, with a strong craving for what he had in his hands, might have hesitated before slipping such a book into his cloak.

If the monks were poor or perhaps simply venal, they could be offered some money to part with their books, but the very interest showed by a stranger would inevitably make the price soar. It was always possible to ask the abbot to allow a manuscript to be carried off, with a solemn promise that it would be shortly returned. But though exceptionally trusting or naive abbots existed, they were few and far between. There was no way to compel assent, and if the answer was no, the whole venture was a dead loss. As a last resort, one could always defy curses and try theft, of course, but monastic communities were cultures of surveillance. Visitors would be watched particularly carefully, the gates were shut and locked at night, and some of the brothers were stout churls who would not scruple to beat an apprehended thief to within an inch of his life.

Poggio was almost uniquely suited to meet these challenges. He had been exceptionally well trained in the special skills needed to decipher old handwriting. He was a wonderfully gifted Latinist, with particularly acute eye for the telltale diction, rhetorical devices, and grammatical structures of classical Latin. He had read widely and attentively in the literature of antiquity and had committed to his capacious memory the dozens of clues that hinted at the identity of particular authors or works that had been lost. He was not himself a monk or a priest, but his long service in the papal curia or court had given him intimate, inside knowledge of the institutional structures of the Church, as well as personal acquaintance with many of its most powerful clerics, including a succession of popes.

If even these exalted connections should prove insufficient to get him through the locked doors that led to a remote abbey's library, Poggio also possessed considerable personal charm. He was a marvelous raconteur, a sly gossip, and an indefatigable teller of jokes, many of them off-color. He could not, to be sure, converse with the German monks in their native language. Though he had lived for more than three years in a German-speaking city, by his own account he had learned no German. For so gifted a linguist, this ignorance seems to have been willed: German was the language of the barbarians, and Poggio evidently had no interest in acquiring it. In Constance he probably cocooned

himself almost entirely in a Latin- and Italian-speaking social world.

But if a failure to speak German must have been vexing on the road, at inns or other way stations, would not have posed a serious problem once Poggio had arrived at his destination. The abbot, the librarian, and many other members of the monastic community would have spoken Latin. They would not in all likelihood have possessed the elegant classical Latin that Poggio had painstakingly mastered, but rather, to judge from the many vigorous contemporary literary works that survive, a vital, fluent, highly flexible Latin that could swoop effortlessly from the subtlest of scholastic distinctions to the earthiest of obscenities. If Poggio sensed that he could impress his hosts with moral seriousness, he could have discoursed eloquently about the miseries of the human condition; if he thought he could win them over by making them laugh, he could have launched into one of his tales of foolish rustic compliant housewives, and sexually rapacious priests.

Poggio possessed one further gift that set him apart from virtually all the other book-hunting humanists. He was a superbly well-trained scribe, with exceptionally fine handwriting, great powers of concentration, and a high degree of accuracy. It is difficult for us, at this distance, to take in the significance of such qualities: our technologies for producing transcriptions, facsimiles, and copies have almost entirely erased what was once an important personal achievement. That importance began to decline, though not at all precipitously, even in Poggio's own lifetime, for by the 1430s a German entrepreneur, Johann Gutenberg, began experimenting with a new invention, movable type, which would revolutionize the reproduction and transmission of texts. By the century's end printers, especially the great Aldus in Venice, would print Latin texts in a typeface whose clarity and elegance remain unrivalled after five centuries. That typeface was based on [the beautiful handwriting](#) of Poggio and his humanist friends. What Poggio did by hand to produce a single copy would soon be done mechanically to produce hundreds.

But this achievement lay in the future, and, in any case, the printers who set the books in type still depended on accurate, readable, handwritten transcriptions, often of manuscripts that were illegible to all but a few. Poggio's talent as a transcriber struck contemporaries as uncanny, all the more so because he worked so rapidly. What this meant was that he could not only inveigle his way into the monastery and nose out the precious manuscripts of lost works, but also that he could borrow them, copy them quickly, and send the results back to humanists waiting eagerly at home in Italy. If borrowing proved impossible—that is, if the librarian refused to lend a particular manuscript—Poggio could copy it on the spot, or, if necessary, could entrust the task to a scribe whom he had personally trained up to at least a minimal level of competence.

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In 1417, then, Poggio the book hunter had a near-perfect conjunction of time, skills, and desire. All that he lacked was ready money. Traveling, even frugally, was expensive. There were costs for renting a horse; fees for crossing rivers or riding on toll roads; charges, little more than extortion, by surly customs officials and agents of petty lordlings; gratuities to guides through difficult passes; and, of course, bills for food and lodging and stabling at inns. He also needed money to pay an assistant scribe, and to provide, if necessary, the incentive to induce a reluctant monastery to lend its treasure.

Even if he had banked some funds from his years in the papal bureaucracy, Poggio is very unlikely to have been able to pay these costs on his own. In such circumstances, the inveterate letter writer would have had recourse to his pen. It is probable that he wrote to wealthy friends at home who shared his passion and explained to them that circumstances had suddenly given him the opportunity about which they had only dreamed. In good health, untrammelled by work or family, obliged to no one,

liberty to come and go as he chose, he was prepared to embark on a serious search for the lost treasures that meant most to them—the heritage of the ancient world.

Such support, whether it came from a single rich patron or from a group of fellow humanists, helps to account for the fact that in January 1417, Poggio was heading toward the destination where he would make his discovery. The support must have been considerable, for this was not his only book-hunting expedition that winter. It followed directly on another trip, to the venerable monastery of St. Gall, not far from the city of Constance, and that trip was itself a return visit. The preceding year at St. Gall, in the company of two Italian friends, Poggio had made a series of important finds. Thinking that they might have overlooked other treasures, he and one of the friends went back.

Poggio and his companion, Bartolomeo de Aragazzi, had much in common. Both hailed from Tuscany, Poggio from the modest town of Terranuova near Arezzo, Bartolomeo from the beautiful hilltop city of Montepulciano. Both had gone to Rome and had acquired positions as scribes in the papal curia. Both had come to Constance [to serve as apostolic secretaries](#) in the disastrous pontificate of John XXIII and, consequently, both found themselves, in the wake of the pope's downfall, with time on their hands. And both were ardent humanists, eager to use their skills in reading and copying to recover the lost texts of antiquity.

They were close friends, working and traveling together and sharing the same ambition, but they were also rivals, competitors in the pursuit of the fame that came with discovery. "[I hate all boasting conversation](#), all flattery, all exaggeration," Bartolomeo wrote to an important patron in Italy; "May I be kept from taking pride in dreams of self-exaltation or vainglory." The letter, dated January 1, 1417, was written from St. Gall, and it goes on to mention a few of the notable discoveries he had made in what he calls the "prison" in which they were penned. He could not, he added, hope to describe all the volumes he had found, "for a day would hardly be sufficient to list them all." Tellingly, he does not so much as mention the name of his traveling companion, Poggio Bracciolini.

The problem was that Bartolomeo's finds were simply not very thrilling. He had dredged up a copy of a book by Flavius Vegetius Renatus on the ancient Roman army—a book, he wrote implausibly, that will "do us good, if we ever use him sometimes in camp or more gloriously on a crusade"—and a small dictionary or word list by Pompeius Festus. Not only were both books exceedingly minor but also, as Bartolomeo himself must have known, both were already available in Italy, so in fact neither was actually a discovery.

In late January, having failed to lay hands on the great treasures they had hoped to uncover and perhaps feeling the burden of their competitiveness, the friends went their separate ways. Poggio evidently headed north, probably accompanied by a German scribe whom he was training. Bartolomeo seems to have gone off by himself. "[I shall set out](#) for another monastery of the Hermits deep in the Alps," he wrote to his Italian correspondent. He planned then to go on to still more remote monasteries. The places were extremely difficult to reach, especially in winter—"the way is rough and broken, for there is no approach to them except through the precipices of the Alps and through rivers and forests"—but he reminded himself that "the path of virtue is very full of toil and peril." In the monastic libraries, rumors had it, a vast trove of ancient books was buried. "I shall try to urge the poor little body to undertake the effort of rescuing them and not to flinch at the difficulties of the location, at the discomforts and at the increasing cold of the Alps."

It is easy enough to smile at such claims of hardship—trained as a lawyer, Bartolomeo was certainly calculating a rhetorical effect—but in fact he fell ill shortly after he left St. Gall and was forced to return to Constance, where it took him months to recuperate. Poggio, on the road north, would not have known that, since Bartolomeo had dropped out of the hunt, he was now searching alone.

Poggio did not like monks. He knew several impressive ones, men of great moral seriousness and learning. But on the whole he found them superstitious, ignorant, and hopelessly lazy. Monasteries, he thought, were the dumping grounds for those deemed unfit for life in the world. Noblemen fobbed off the sons they judged to be weaklings, misfits, or good-for-nothings; merchants sent their dim-witted or paralytic children there; peasants got rid of extra mouths they could not feed. The hardiest of the inmates could at least do some productive labor in the monastery gardens and the adjacent fields, but monks in earlier, most austere times had done, but for the most part, Poggio thought, they were a pack of idlers. Behind the thick walls of the cloisters, the parasites would mumble their prayers and live off the income generated by those who farmed the monastery's extensive landholdings. The Church was the landlord, wealthier than the greatest nobles in the realm, and it possessed the worldly power to enforce its rents and all its other rights and privileges. When the newly elected bishop of Hildesheim, in the north of Germany, asked to see the diocesan library, [he was brought to the armory](#) and shown the pikes and battleaxes hanging on the walls; these, he was informed, were the books with which the rights of the bishopric had been won and must be defended. The inhabitants of wealthy monasteries might not have to call upon these weapons very frequently, but, as they sat in the dim light and contemplated their revenues, they knew—and their tenants knew—that brute force was available.

With his friends in the curia Poggio shared jokes about the venality, stupidity, and sexual appetite of monks. And their claims to piety left him unimpressed: "[I cannot find that they do anything](#) but sit like grasshoppers," he wrote, "and I cannot help thinking they are too liberally paid for the mere exercise of their lungs." Even the hard work of monastic spiritual discipline seemed paltry to him when set against the real hard work he observed in the fields: "They extol their labors as a kind of Herculean task, because they rise in the night to chant the praises of God. This is no doubt an extraordinary proof of merit, that they sit up to exercise themselves in psalmody. What would they say if they rose to go to the plough, like farmers, exposed to the wind and rain, with bare feet, and with their bodies thinly clad?" Their whole enterprise seemed to him an exercise in hypocrisy.

But, of course, as he approached his targeted monastery, Poggio would have buried these views in his breast. He may have despised monastic life, but he understood it well. He knew precisely where the monastery he needed to go and what ingratiating words he had to speak to gain access to the things he most wanted to see. Above all, he knew exactly how the things he sought had been produced. Though he ridiculed what he regarded as monastic sloth, he knew that whatever he hoped to find existed only because of centuries of institutional commitment and long, painstaking human labor.

The Benedictine Rule had called for manual labor, as well as prayer and reading, and it was always assumed that this labor could include writing. The early founders of monastic orders did not regard copying manuscripts as an exalted activity; on the contrary, as they were highly aware, most of the copying in the ancient world had been done by educated slaves. The task was therefore inherently humiliating as well as tedious, a perfect combination for the ascetic project of disciplining the spirit. Poggio had no sympathy with such spiritual discipline; competitive and ambitious, his spirit longed to shine in the light of the world, not to shrink from its gaze. For him copying manuscripts, which he did with unrivalled skill, was not an ascetic but rather an aesthetic undertaking, one by which he advanced his own personal reputation. But by virtue of that skill he was able to see at a glance—with either admiration or scorn—exactly what effort and ability had gone into the manuscript that lay before him.

Not every monk was equally adept at copying, just as not every monk was equally adept at the hard farm labor on which the survival of the early communities depended. The early regulations already envisaged a division of labor, as in the Rule of St. Ferreol (530–581), a French Benedictine: "He wh

does not turn up the earth with the plough ought to write the parchment with his fingers.” (The reverse, of course, was also true: he who could not write parchment with his fingers was assigned the plough.) Those who wrote unusually well—in fine, clear handwriting that the other monks could easily read and with painstaking accuracy in the transcription—came to be valued. In the “wergild” codes that in Germanic lands and in Ireland specified the payment of reparations for murder—200 shillings for killing a churl, 300 for a low-ranking cleric, 400 if the cleric was saying mass when he was attacked, and so forth—the loss of a scribe by violence was ranked equal to the loss of a bishop or an abbot.

The high price, at a time when life was cheap, suggests both how important and how difficult it was for monasteries to obtain the books that they needed in order to enforce the reading rule. Even the most celebrated monastic libraries of the Middle Ages were tiny in comparison with the libraries of antiquity or those that existed in Baghdad or Cairo. To assemble a modest number of books, in the long centuries before the invention of the printing press forever changed the equation, meant the eventual establishment of what were called *scriptoria*, workshops where monks would be trained to spend for long hours making copies. At first the copying was probably done in an improvised setting in the cloister, where, even if the cold sometimes stiffened the fingers, at least the light would be good. But in time special rooms were designated or built for the purpose. In the greatest monasteries increasingly eager to amass prestigious collections of books, these were large rooms equipped with clear glass windows under which the monks, as many as thirty of them, sat at individual desks, sometimes partitioned off from one another.

In charge of the scriptorium was the person on whom Poggio and the other book hunters would have focused their most seductive blandishments: the monastery’s librarian. This important figure would have been accustomed to extravagant courtship, for he was responsible for providing all of the equipment that was required for the copying of the manuscripts: pens, ink, and penknives whose precise merits or defects would become overwhelmingly obvious to the laboring scribe after a few hours at the day’s task. The librarian could, if he wished, make a scribe’s life miserable or alternatively, provide a favorite with particularly fine tools. Those tools also included rulers, awls (to make tiny holes for ruling the lines evenly), fine-pointed metal pens for drawing the lines, reading frames to hold the book to be copied, weights to keep the pages from turning. For manuscripts that were to be illuminated, there were still other specialized tools and materials.

Most books in the ancient world took the form of scrolls—like the Torah scrolls that Jews use for their services to this day—but by the fourth century Christians had almost completely opted for a different format, the codex, from which our familiar books derive. The codex has the huge advantage of being far easier for readers to find their way about in: the text can be conveniently paginated and indexed, and the pages can be turned quickly to the desired place. Not until the invention of the computer, with its superior search functions, could a serious challenge be mounted to the codex’s magnificently simple and flexible format. Only now have we begun once again to speak of “scrolling” through a text.

Since papyrus was no longer available and paper did not come into general use until the fourteenth century, for more than a thousand years the chief writing material used for books was made from the skins of animals—cows, sheep, goats, and occasionally deer. These surfaces needed to be made smooth, and hence another tool that the monastic librarian distributed was pumice stone, to rub away the remaining animal hair along with any bumps or imperfections. The scribe to whom a poor-quality parchment had been given was in for a very disagreeable task, and in the margins of surviving monastic manuscripts there are occasional outbursts of distress: “[The parchment is hairy](#)” . . . “The

ink, bad parchment, difficult text” . . . “Thank God, it will soon be dark.” “Let the copyist be permitted to put an end to his labor,” a weary monk wrote beneath his name, the date, and the place where he worked; “[Now I've written](#) the whole thing,” wrote another. “For Christ’s sake give me a drink.”

The finest parchment, the one that made life easier for scribes and must have figured in the sweetest dreams, was made of calfskin and called vellum. And the best of the lot was uterine vellum from the skins of aborted calves. Brilliantly white, smooth, and durable, these skins were reserved for the most precious books, ones graced with elaborate, gemlike miniatures and occasionally encased in covers encrusted with actual gems. The libraries of the world still preserve a reasonable number of these remarkable objects, the achievement of scribes who lived seven or eight hundred years ago and labored for untold hours to create something beautiful.

Good scribes were exempted from certain times of collective prayer, in order to maximize the hours of daylight in the scriptorium. And they did not have to work at night: because of an entirely justifiable fear of fire, all candlelight was forbidden. But for the time—about six hours a day—thats they actually spent at their desks, their lives belonged entirely to their books. It was possible, at certain monasteries at least, to hope that monks would understand what they were copying. “[Vouchsafe, O Lord](#), to bless this workroom of Thy servants,” declared the dedication of one scriptorium, “that all which they write therein may be comprehended by their intelligence and realized in their works.” But the actual interest of the scribes in the books they copied (or their distaste for those books) was strictly irrelevant. Indeed, insofar as the copying was a form of discipline—a rigorous exercise in humility and a willing embrace of pain—distaste or simple incomprehension might be preferable to engagement. Curiosity was to be avoided at all costs.

The complete subordination of the monastic scribe to the text—the erasure, in the interest of crushing the monk’s spirit, of his intellect and sensibility—could not have been further from Poggio’s own avid curiosity and egotism. But he understood that his passionate hope of recovering reasonably accurate traces of the ancient past depended heavily on this subordination. An engaged reader, Poggio knew, was prone to alter his text in order to get it to make sense, but such alterations, over centuries inevitably led to wholesale corruptions. It was better that monastic scribes had been forced to copy everything exactly as it appeared before their eyes, even those things that made no sense at all.

A sheet with a cutout window generally covered the page of the manuscript being copied, so that the monk had to focus on one line at a time. And monks were strictly forbidden to change what they thought were mistakes in the texts they were copying. They could correct only their own slips of the pen by carefully scraping off the ink with a razor and repairing the spot with a mixture of milk, cheese, and lime, the medieval version of our own product for whitening mistakes. There was no crumpling up the page and starting afresh. Though the skins of sheep and goats were plentiful, the process of producing parchment from them was laborious. Good parchment was far too valuable and scarce to be discarded. This value helps to account for the fact that monasteries collected ancient manuscripts in the first place and did not consign them to the rubbish.

To be sure, there were a certain number of abbots and of monastic librarians who treasured not only the parchment but also the pagan works written on them. Steeped in classical literature, some believed that they could rifle its treasures without contamination, the way the ancient Hebrews had been permitted by God to steal the riches of the Egyptians. But over the generations, as a substantial body of Christian literature was created, it became less easy to make such an argument. Fewer and fewer monks were inclined, in any case, to make it. Between the sixth century and the middle of the eighth century, Greek and Latin classics virtually ceased to be copied at all. What had begun as an active campaign to forget—a pious attack on pagan ideas—had evolved into actual forgetting. The ancient



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