THE
SWERVE
How the World Became Modern
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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, as monks in earlier, more 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 a 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 sing 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 psalms. 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 in 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 who 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 to 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 sit 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 in 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"... "Thin 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 their sweetest dreams, was made of calf skin 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—that they actually spent at their desks, their lives belonged entirely to their books. It was possible, in 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—an 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 at 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 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 poems, philosophical treatises, and political speeches, at one time so threatening and so alluring, were no longer in anyone’s mind, let alone on anyone’s lips. They had been reduced to the condition of mute things, sheets of parchment, stitched together, covered with unread words.

Only the remarkable durability of the parchment used in these codices kept the ideas of the ancients alive at all, and, as the humanist book hunters knew, even strong material was no guarantee of survival. Working with knives, brushes, and rags, monks often carefully washed away the old writings—Virgil, Ovid, Cicero, Seneca, Lucretius—and wrote in their place the texts that they were instructed by their superiors to copy. The task must have been a tiresome one, and, for the very rare scribe who actually cared about the work he was erasing, an excruciating one.

If the original ink proved tenacious, it could still be possible to make out the traces of the texts that were written over: a unique fourth-century copy of Cicero’s On the Republic remained visible beneath a seventh-century copy of St. Augustine’s meditation on the Psalms; the sole surviving copy of Seneca’s book on friendship was deciphered beneath an Old Testament inscribed in the late sixth century. These strange, layered manuscripts—called palimpsests; from the Greek for “scraped again”—have served as the source of several major works from the ancient past that would not otherwise be known. But no medieval monk would have been encouraged to read, as it were, between the lines.

The monastery was a place of rules, but in the scriptorium there were rules within rules. Access was denied to all nonscribes. Absolute silence reigned. Scribes were not allowed to choose the particular books that they copied or to break the dead silence by requesting aloud from the librarian such books as they might wish to consult in order to complete the task that had been assigned them. An elaborate gestural language was invented in order to facilitate such requests as were permitted. If a scribe wanted to consult a psalter, he made the general sign for a book—extending his hands and turning over imaginary pages—and then, by putting his hands on his head in the shape of a crown, the specific sign for the psalms of King David. If he was asking for a pagan book, he began, after making the general sign, to scratch behind his ear, like a dog scratching his
fleas. And if he wished to have what the Church regarded as a particularly offensive or dangerous pagan book, he could put two fingers into his mouth, as if he were gagging.

Poggio was a layman, part of a very different world. His precise destination in 1417, after he parted ways with Bartolomeo, is not known—perhaps like a prospector hiding the location of his mine, he deliberately withheld its name from his letters. There were dozens of monasteries to which he might have gone in the hope of turning up something remarkable, but many scholars have long thought that the likeliest candidate is the Benedictine Abbey of Fulda. That abbey, in a strategic area of central Germany, between the Rhön and the Vogelsberg Mountains, had the features that most excited the interest of a book hunter: it was ancient, it was rich, it had once possessed a great tradition of learning, and it was now in decline.

If it was Fulda that he approached, Poggio could not afford to seem overbearing. Founded in the eighth century by a disciple of the Apostle of Germany, St. Boniface, the abbey was unusually independent. Its abbot was a prince of the Holy Roman Empire: when he walked in procession, an armor-clad knight carried the imperial banner before him, and he had the privilege of sitting at the left hand of the emperor himself. Many of the monks were German nobles—men who would have had a very clear sense of the respect that was due to them. If the monastery had lost some of the prestige it once enjoyed and had been forced in the not too distant past to part with some of its immense territories, it nonetheless was a force to reckon with. With his modest birth and very limited means, Poggio, the former apostolic secretary of a disgraced and deposed pope, had few cards to play.

Rehearsing in his mind his little speech of introduction, Poggio would have dismounted and walked up the tree-lined avenue toward the abbey's single, heavy gate. From the outside Fulda resembled a fortress; indeed, in the preceding century, in a bitter dispute with the burghers of the adjacent city, it had been violently attacked. Inside, like most monasteries, it was strikingly self-sufficient. By January the extensive vegetable, flower, and botanical gardens were in their winter sleep, but the monks would have carefully harvested what they could store for the long, dark months, taking special care to gather the medicinal herbs that would be used in the infirmary and the communal bath. The granaries at this point in the winter would have still been reasonably full, and there would have been ample straw and oats for the horses and donkeys in the stables. Looking around, Poggio would have taken in the chicken coops, the covered yard for sheep, the cowshed with its smell of manure and fresh milk, and the large pigsties. He might have felt a pang for the olives and the wine of Tuscany, but he knew that he would not go hungry. Past the mills and the oil press, past the great basilica and its adjacent cloister, past the houses for the novices, the dormitory, the servants' quarters, and the pilgrims' hospice where he and his assistant would be lodged, Poggio would have been led to the abbot’s house to meet the ruler of this little kingdom.

In 1417, if Fulda was indeed Poggio’s destination, that ruler was Johann von Merlau. After greeting him humbly, explaining something about himself, and presenting a letter of recommendation from a well-known cardinal, Poggio would almost certainly have begun by expressing his interest in glimpsing the precious relics of St. Boniface and saying a prayer in their holy presence. His life, after all, was full of such observances: bureaucrats in the papal court routinely began and ended their days with prayers. And if nothing in his letters suggests a par-