

## Tiny Irritants

### *Itching Eyes, Stones in Shoes, and Other Annoyances*

*If you think you're too small to make a difference, try sleeping in a closed room with a mosquito.*

—WEST AFRICAN PROVERB

Flies stay on the wall (and in the ointment) as I turn now to a different aspect of small things. Not their doll-like cuteness or their microcosmic potential but their power, often surprisingly strong, to act as irritants. John Mack has this to say in *The Art of Small Things* about idols, fetishes and amulets:<sup>1</sup>

Small things also “get under your skin.” They are potent, irritating, sometimes malevolent.

The ancients, too, knew full well that small things could jab in ways disproportionate to their size—never more than when they came into contact with the skin, that hypersensitive membrane between flesh and world. A Theocritean goat-herd quakes sympathetically at the outsize pain caused by a thorn stuck in his friend's foot: “What a tiny wound to overcome such a mighty man!”<sup>2</sup> We have seen Seneca write about the intensely concentrated pain of a split nail (*unguiculus*).<sup>3</sup> In one of his letters, a medium that shrinks space and time into the compass of a single “thought for the day,” he pours out a memorable slew of “feeling” diminutives to convey the intense discomforts of seasickness: “the slightest little movement [*motiuncula*] disorients you . . . your feet ache, [the ends of] your limbs [*articuli*] feel tiny little prickings [*punctiunculas*].”<sup>4</sup> In another, he exploits diminutives for their tingling specificity: “instruments of torture arrayed for each separate joint of the body [*singulis articulis singula machinamenta quibus extorqueantur aptata*] and all the other innumerable mechanisms for tearing a man apart bit by bit” [*mille alia instrumenta excarnificandi particulatim hominis*].<sup>5</sup>

Sallust's snails have already raised questions about causality, and I leave behind now the notion of tiny things as catalysts for bigger events (along with their

descendants, the proverbial butterfly's wing, and the recycled molecules of Julius Caesar's last breath). Not before mentioning the memorably hyperbolic example produced by John Buchan in a 1929 lecture on "The Causal and the Casual in History," where he traces the defeat of Greece in the Greco-Turkish War of 1919–22 and the consolidation of Kemal Atatürk's authority back to the unlucky death two years before of young King Alexander from the bite of a pet monkey in the palace gardens. "I cannot," says Buchan, "better Mr Churchill's comment: a quarter of a million persons died of that monkey's bite."<sup>6</sup>

For now, my focus is on minor provocations closer to home. Not only do these turn out to infest Roman writers' mental and emotional worlds, both as isolated menaces and in droves and swarms; they also help their victims construct certain identities, both literary and social. Such a claim might seem counterintuitive, to say the least. Surely elite Romans were conditioned to conceal their pettier outbursts and only occasionally succumb to grander ones, the kind we connect with epic, tragedy and political ambition: jealousy, fear, anger, pride, hatred, and love?

Seneca, for example, assures his correspondent Lucilius that he won't stamp his feet or fling his arms around when he expresses his feelings—anything to avoid being melodramatic or inauthentic:

If it were possible, I should prefer to show, rather than speak, my feelings. Even if I were arguing a point, I should not stamp my foot, or toss my arms about, or raise my voice [*nec supplerem pedem nec manum iactarem nec attollerem uocem*]; but I should leave that sort of thing to the orator, and should be content to have conveyed my feelings to you without having either embellished them or lowered their dignity. I should like to convince you entirely of this one fact,—that I feel whatever I say, that I not only feel it, but am wedded to it. (Sen. *Ep.* 75.2; Loeb, trans. Gummere)

In *De ira*, even though his main business is with one devastatingly powerful passion, he makes space for temporary lurches of feeling, too:

All the sensations which take place without our volition are beyond our control and unavoidable, such as shivering when cold water is poured over us, or shrinking when we are touched in certain places. Men's hair rises up at bad news, their faces blush at indecent words, and they go dizzy when looking down a precipice; and as it is not in our power to prevent any of these things, no reasoning can prevent their taking place. (Sen. *De ira* 2.2.1)

Cicero, conversely, while indicating that his stomach heaves at the very thought of Caesar, makes a show of suppressing the urge:

What a shameless thug! What a disgrace is this to the Republic, which scarcely any peace can make up for! But let's stop retching [*sed stomachari desinamus*], let's submit to circumstances, and go to Spain with Pompey. That's the best of a bad situation . . . but so much for this. (Cic. *Att.* 7.18.2)

From this brief survey alone, it is clear enough that minor feelings, such as embarrassment, awkwardness, anxiety, and annoyance, make their presence abundantly felt in first-person Latin literature, to varying degrees and across different kinds of shared performance. But what exactly are they doing there? True, many of the irritants I consider in this chapter transcend historical context, among them pinching shoes, stones in shoes, stubbed toes, minor ailments, the buzz of insects, and the added menace of tiny but excruciating stings. Many, indeed, overlap with the catalysts of sudden death in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* discussed in chapter 1. They belong to the thrilling set of things that bind "us" and "them" together and produce frissons of unexpected familiarity with the distant past.

Shared experience makes it all too easy to sympathize with Horace when he grouches about diarrhea and mosquitoes on his journey to Brundisium, or with Sidonius when he complains of the smoke that gets in his eyes and up his nostrils in the kitchen of a country inn.<sup>7</sup> We can relate to Juvenal's grumbles about Roman traffic (3.254–61) and to Ovid's advice to unhappy lovers in *Remedia amoris* to focus on subtly annoying defects and so speed up the abrupt reversal of attraction now popularly known as the "ick."<sup>8</sup> The impact of such tiny irritations in our own daily lives tends to be cumulative. Or, as Ovid puts it, in an erotic context, they may be small things in themselves but together they add up to a huge heap:

Someone perhaps will call them small (for small they are), but things that are no use on their own help when they are many. The tiny viper's bite slays the vast bull: a boar is often caught by a small hound. Only fight with safety in numbers, and gather my precepts all together: many will make a large heap. (Ov. *Rem. am.* 419–24)

All this strikes a familiar enough chord. Yet the Romans never had to deal with frustrating technology, cold-calling, poor Wi-Fi, or not being able to find the end of the sticky tape. So what did bug them? What pricked or stung them? What made them itch or chafe? These questions reveal my actual focus: less on the tiny irritants themselves than on the language of physical irritation, which in Latin, as in English, so often provides the imagery in which negative mental feelings are expressed.

In *Ugly Feelings* (2005), Sianne Ngai pioneered, to critical acclaim, the topic of minor emotions, specifically envy (as opposed to jealousy), paranoia and anxiety (as opposed to fear), and irritation (rather than indignation or rage). She considers them both in their own right and for what they reveal about their subjects' interior orientation to the exterior world. In her chosen area, twentieth-century literature and film, the representational space progressively conceded to small, humiliating emotions does not, she argues, simply shift literary priorities, in validating the minutest registers of human sensation; it also has a distinct social and cultural purpose. Minor feelings, even though she refers to them (unappetizingly enough) as unsublime, flat, ongoing, and ultimately uncathartic, are perfectly pitched, in

her view, to express the helpless irrelevance of many modernist artists, frustrated by the seemingly unbridgeable gulf between aesthetics and political action.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, Ngai is dealing with a very specific set of external conditions. But in identifying feebler emotions as expressions of social and political powerlessness while at the same time appreciating the relationship between genre and gradations of affect, she helps us to see something similar at work in Latin literature, too. For if minor emotions suit minor or uncanonical literature, they also help to define it. In the case of the Romans, I will be less concerned with the stimulants of disgust (*fastidium*), so expertly dissected by Robert Kaster and others, and more with those smaller irritants that provoke the feeling called *molestia*.<sup>10</sup> Admittedly, there is a sliding scale involved: *fastidium* has come down a peg or two and now indicates *minor* annoyance in some modern European languages—"mi da fastidio" being standard for "it annoys me" in Italian.

#### SLIGHT AND FREQUENT FRICTIONS

Let us start with an anecdote from Plutarch's life of Lucius Aemilius Paulus, the second-century BCE conqueror of Macedon, a man who surprised everyone by suddenly divorcing his first wife. At this juncture in his biography, Plutarch calls up a similar tale that offers limited insight into Paulus's mystifying behaviour:

No documentary grounds for [Paulus's] divorce have come down to us, but there would seem to be some truth in a story told about divorce, which runs as follows. A Roman once divorced his wife, and when his friends admonished him, saying: "Is she not discreet? is she not beautiful? is she not fruitful?" he held out his shoe (the Romans call it "calceus"), saying: "Is this not handsome? is it not new? but not one of you can tell me where it pinches my foot?" For, as a matter of fact, it is great and notorious faults that separate many wives from their husbands; but the slight and frequent frictions arising from some unpleasantness or incongruity of characters, unnoticed as they may be by everybody else, also produce incurable alienations in those whose lives are linked together. (Plut. *Aem.* 5.1–5; Loeb, trans. Perrin)

We are never told who the anonymous Roman was—and it hardly matters, there are so many possible candidates, given the ease of divorce among the elite. But the story went on to have a rich afterlife. It crops up again in Chaucer and Trollope, and even features in the political theory of John Dewey, who used the privately pinching shoe as a homely symbol of misplaced state interference in citizens' personal concerns.<sup>11</sup>

One approach to the anecdote might be to investigate Roman shoes as archaeological objects, to find out how long they took to wear in and whether their wearers often struggled with a bad fit. Roman shoes were not necessarily tailor-made, as we know from Varro's analogy in *On the Latin Language* for masculine nouns that look feminine in form:

Dissimilar things are sometimes given similar forms and similar things different forms, just as we call shoes women's or men's shoes from the similarity of their shape, even though we know that sometimes women wear men's shoes and men wear women's shoes. (Varro, *Ling.* 9.29.40)

Behind Varro's analogy lurks a rich private history of hidden but intense irritation. Did Paulus ("Little") wear the wife's shoes in his marriage?<sup>12</sup> Women's visible behavior was already irritating enough. Plautus can be confident of a laugh when he says all married women talk too much, in and out of the house: let them carry their themes for gossip off home, so as not to be "annoyances" (*molestiae*) to their husbands, in public and in private.<sup>13</sup>

But far more intriguing than the history of Roman footwear, to my mind, anyway, is Plutarch's decision to assimilate mental irritation to "slight and frequent frictions" (*mikra kai pukna prokrousmata*; where *prokrousmata* literally means "obstacles" or "stumbling blocks"). The solid materiality of the concept of friction, the domestic image used to express it, and the contrasts drawn with both "large, glaring faults" and society's wider expectations, are all, I suspect, typical of the written experience of minor emotion: a disclosure of something intimate and personal, often shaming or embarrassing and reluctantly winked out, but one that no less courts a community of fellow feelers.

Where should we look for witnesses to this kind of experience? Catullus, Cicero, Horace, and Seneca come immediately to mind. All these first-person authors work hard at giving us disclosures of their inner selves, capturing what it feels like to be caught between exterior presentation and interior sensation. They talk to each other, too. When Seneca points in *Natural Questions* to the powerful discomfort relative to tsunamis and earthquakes of a hangnail (*unguiculus*), a chill (*pituuta*), or a choking drink that goes the wrong way, he is clearly rereading Horace in *Epistles* 1.1, where finicky Maecenas winces at his gauche, sniveling friend with the flapping shoes and broken nails.

Recent work on the senses in antiquity has helped to approximate some of the lost resonances of sensory experience, both aesthetic and social.<sup>14</sup> In the ancient language of irritation, all five senses—sight, smell, sound, taste, and touch—turn out to intermingle in various synesthetic combinations. Of these, perhaps sound and touch are hardest to separate. The classic recreation of annoyance at background noise is Seneca's letter on living above a bathhouse at Baiae (*Ep.* 56), where the orchestra of sounds evoked (building works mingled with clients' screams, as they are pummeled by masseurs or getting depilated or jumping into cold water) represents a heightened challenge to Stoic peace of mind. More than that, though: Seneca's hypersensitive phrasing is precisely designed to make the skin tingle, in line with the epidermal torments being described.<sup>15</sup> He even provides a painstaking calibration of levels of annoyance—judging, for example (and many would agree), that intermittent noise is more irritating (*molestior*) than continuous noise.<sup>16</sup>

Writing about dissonance as a ubiquitous feature of the Greek soundscape, Sean Gurd confirms this special link between sound and touch, quoting Brian Massumi, who characterizes affect as “embodied in purely autonomic reactions most directly manifested in the skin—at the surface of the body, at its interface with things.”<sup>17</sup> After all, says Gurd, loud noise makes me jump, makes my skin crawl. In *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai attends to what happens when minor emotions, normatively repressed, are brought to the surface, where they are often registered in terms of skin-deep sensation. Synonyms for *irritation* such as *inflammation*, *rawness*, *soreness*, and *chafing* “tend,” she writes, “to apply equally to psychic life *and* life at the level of the body—and particularly to its surfaces or skin.”<sup>18</sup> This is literally and metaphorically the case in the work that is the focus of her study of irritation, Nella Larsen’s novel *Quicksand* (1928), whose heroine feels and expresses racial discomfort via the social exposure of her skin. Ngai concludes: “Irritation’s marginal status thus seems related to the ease with which it always threatens to slip out of the realm of emotional experience altogether, into the realm of physical or epidermal sensations.”<sup>19</sup> It is relevant for her that Frantz Fanon used a cutaneous metaphor, “epidermalization,” to replace “internalization” in his analysis of racism’s psychological effects.<sup>20</sup> As we will see, skin as the interface between body and world plays a large part in feeding the Roman vocabulary of irritation, too.

One writer, it turns out, provides such rich fodder that I will not stray far from him in this brief foray into the Roman world of minor emotions. Marcus Tullius Cicero is hardly a typical Roman subject—or perhaps he is all too typical of a certain successful masculine type. But the sheer range of his writings, combined with a colossal ego that straddled aesthetics and politics, with plenty of frustration involved—documents with exceptional openness how tiny irritations work both to convey a fine sensibility, where needed, and to demarcate parapolitical writing in a minor key. Stanley Hoffer has written brilliantly about the metaphor of *stomachus* in the letters, how Cicero’s performed suppression of his political fury conveys impotent rage, humor, and resignation, all at once.<sup>21</sup> Here, I consider three more clusters of images in Cicero’s writing: annoyingness *per se*; a minor ailment and its miseries; and a single nagging but indefinite sensation.

#### THE TROUBLE WITH *DE ORATORE*

The topic of annoyingness (*molestia*) can be broached via a practical Roman exemplum of how to *avoid* irritation.<sup>22</sup> It is staged in the middle of Cicero’s *De oratore*, a work that would seem to belong to the aesthetic sphere but that equally teaches smoothness in rhetoric as a universal key to frictionless social and political interaction. In the Tusculan garden of the orator L. Licinius Crassus, a discussion of rhetoric has been taking place between various friends and relatives when two late arrivals, Q. Lutatius Catulus and his half-brother C. Julius Caesar Strabo,

gate-crash the party. Catulus apologizes fulsomely on their behalf. Jon Hall summarizes the incident in his study of politeness in Cicero:<sup>23</sup>

Three times in just a few lines (*De or.* 2.13–14) [Catulus and Strabo] acknowledge the potentially bothersome and intrusive consequences of their visit: “and you may well think we are being tactless or troublesome” (*vel tu nos ineptos licet . . . vel molestos putes*); “But on my word I was afraid, even so, that our sudden interruption might annoy you” (*sed mehercule verentem tamen ne molesti vobis interveniremus*); “For our part, we are delighted to be here, provided that our sudden interruption does not happen to be a nuisance.” (*nos quidem, nisi forte molesti intervenimus, venisse delectat*).

In all three cases, the word for “troublesome,” “annoying,” or “a nuisance” is *molestus*, from *moles*, a heavy mass or weight. In two cases, *interuenire* (interrupt, break in) makes social intrusion almost equivalent to epidermal rupture. True, such a tiny breach of etiquette is a far cry from the Virgilian sentiment *tantae molis erat Romanam condere gentem* (“So weighty a task was it to lay the foundations of the Roman race”);<sup>24</sup> indeed, it would seem to sit at the very opposite pole on a scale of relative pressure. Yet the basic idea of a weight that needs lifting is worth keeping in mind.

That is because behind the delicately competitive dance of refinement that marks the dialogue weighs Cicero’s opening disclosure of how he ever came to have so much time on his hands for concerted rumination: he had no choice but to retreat from politics.<sup>25</sup> The dialogue is set imaginatively in 91 BCE, nine days before the death of its host and against a background of civil unrest similar to the atmosphere Cicero found himself in thirty-five years later (*De oratore* appeared in 55 BCE). He opens by introducing himself and pointing to the etymological weight that underpins *molestus* even as he minimizes his suffering and euphemizes his exile:

For the time of life which promised to be fullest of quiet and peace proved to be that during which the greatest volume of vexations and the most turbulent tempests [*maximae moles molestiarum et turbulentissimae tempestates*] arose. (*De or.* 1.2)

Just so, decades of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland are darkly referred to as “The Troubles.” Or is that a false analogy? Should *molestus* rather be understood as an exaggeratedly, humorously *heavy* word for describing minor irritations: not a drag but a juggernaut—catastrophizing, making mountains out of molehills? Cicero seems to oscillate. Later in *De oratore*, his character Antonius will claim that orators, for the sake of their cases, tend to exaggerate “troubles”:

But the orator, by his eloquence, represents all those things which, in the common affairs of life, are considered evil and troublesome, and to be avoided, as heavier and more grievous than they really are. (*De or.* 1.221)

In *De oratore* 2, Antonius will put emotional responses to *molestia*, “annoyance,” at the end of a long list of more obviously major emotions that the orator is trained to stir up in his audience:

the emotions which eloquence has to excite in the minds of the tribunal, or whatever other audience we may be addressing, are most commonly love, hate, wrath, jealousy, compassion, hope, joy, fear or vexation [*molestia*] . . . (*De or.* 2.206)

Antonius cautions in all cases against disproportionate emotion-raking—"these rhetorical fireworks . . . in petty matters" (*paruis in rebus* . . . *hae dicendi faces*); "if we indulge in heroics over trifles" (*si* . . . *tragoedias agamus in nugis*). But he also makes a substantial point: negative emotions like jealousy, anger, and fear are felt more intensely in the context of private, individual injury than when communally experienced. Fear, for example, "is struck from either the perils of individuals or those shared by all: that of private origin goes deeper [*interior est ille proprius*], but universal fear also is to be traced to a similar source."<sup>26</sup> Along with other, stronger emotions, then, annoyance has two faces: one interior and deeply felt; the other externally shared and apparently milder. Away from the courtroom and in the new context of forced *otium*, Cicero will find it easier to restore his identity as a pre-eminent Roman by publicly sharing those little annoyances that affect the proper orator and the elegant man of leisure alike: "*otium tibi molestum est*" (ease has become tiresome for you), we might say echoing Catullus, another restless Roman with time on his hands.

Returning to Catulus and Strabo, Hall gives their mollifying preamble a sociolinguistic label. He calls it a strategy of "redressive politeness"—that is, a disarming preemption of one's potential to give annoyance. Such strategies, he says, "offer compensation for the face-threat (or intrusion) inherent in their arrival. They show respect to Crassus by making clear that his compliance is not taken for granted"; they also "aim to ease the tension provoked by the pair's unexpected gate-crashing."<sup>27</sup> If not being *molestus* is the mark of having arrived (literally and metaphorically) as a gentleman, this suggests another hypothesis: that the continued ability to feel *molestia*, to keep on wincing and squirming at small irritations, while appealing to a community of likeminded sensibilities, not only helps to dilute private sensations (often shamefully intense) but works as a lasting badge of refinement, the mark of a man of feeling. Sianne Ngai offers an apt parallel: "'Irritation' qua 'soreness,'" she writes, also signifies "'hypersensitivity,' 'susceptibility,' and 'tenderness,' words with explicitly affective dimensions easily turned . . . into signifiers of social distinction in the late nineteenth-century discourse of 'nerves.'"<sup>28</sup>

Let us test this hypothesis by going further into *De oratore* 2 and looking at a couple of jokes from the rich collection provided there by gate-crasher number two, C. J. Caesar Strabo, in what Mary Beard has called "the most substantial, sustained, and challenging discussion of laughter . . . to have survived from the ancient world."<sup>29</sup> This is no handbook of jokes, however. While some answer the speakers' criteria of restrained and gentlemanly wit, others infringe it, by being *molestus* in themselves—though, as Beard points out, the criteria are always subjective.



The jokes I single out both concern annoyingness. One of them is about flies, and it is immediately stamped on by Strabo as an example of scurrilous humour (that is, as pertaining to a *scurra*, a shameless entertainer)—a cheap excuse for a laugh. It goes as follows. When a friend of his, Vargula, was hugged in public by a pushy political candidate and his brother (Aulus and Marcus Sempronius), Vargula could not resist responding, “Slave, brush away these flies” (*puer, abige muscas*)—in other words, get rid of these provoking pests.<sup>30</sup> “He just wanted to raise a laugh,” says Strabo, “in my view a very poor reward for talent [*tenuissimus ingeni fructus*].”

This seems harsh, to say the least. What Strabo does not bother to mention, perhaps because it is well known to Cicero’s contemporaries, is the crucial fact that in this case both brothers bore the family cognomen *Musca* (Fly). This would seem to make the joke fair game, if not completely irresistible. Anthony Corbeill concludes that Strabo (subjectively, *mea sententia*, “in my opinion”) must consider it beyond the pale because from an orator’s point of view it is *sine causa* (“gratuitous,” Strabo’s words again) in having no direct applicability, packing no rhetorical punch in a courtroom.<sup>31</sup> Yet Strabo has just distinguished between two kinds of humor, respectively involving things and words, and has defined the verbal kind as being “provoked by a kind of sharp point in a word or expression” (*uerbi aut sententiae quodam acumine mouetur*).<sup>32</sup> The fly joke perfectly combines words and things in its retaliatory strike against a needling intrusion. In short, it is crying out to be made, in a windfall situation where the *Muscae* are invading Vargula’s personal space with their vote-seeking hugs, all too close to the *molestia* associated with the minipests contained in their names. It is just a short hop from the Fly brothers to *Mosca*, the cringing parasite in Ben Jonson’s *Volpone*.

At the same time, to miniaturize the brothers in line with their name and multiply them into a plague of disposable creatures, while giving a lordly wave to some imaginary slave to have them swatted, might be thought offensive to two aristocrats, coming from humble Vargula. I say “humble”; we know nothing about him, except that Strabo has just mentioned him in the company of Granio, another practitioner of scurrilous wit, and Granio was a *praeco* (announcer or auctioneer), an occupation, like that of *scurra*, associated with the upwardly mobile.<sup>33</sup> “What is the difference between Crassus, Catulus and co. and your friend Granio and my friend Vargula?” asks Strabo, admitting conscientiously, “No real distinction occurs to me; no one’s wittier than Granio.”<sup>34</sup> “Still,” he says, “we should not imagine ourselves obliged to come out with a joke whenever the occasion arises.”<sup>35</sup> Strabo flails about like this because the distinction is all too obvious but hard to state outright: he is bowing to a double standard based on class, between aristocratic orators and rank and file humorists. Gentlemanly humor always already belonged to the gentlemen.

It is no surprise, then, to find Strabo being far more indulgent to his host, established orator Crassus, who is credited with my second joke, one that pivots on

the very word *molestus* (annoying). When a man once asked if it would bother him if he called on him before daybreak, Crassus replied politely, “No, you really won’t bother me” (“*tu uero . . . molestus non eris*”). “You mean you’ll get someone to wake you up?” asked the man. To which Crassus replied: “[I said:] you won’t bother me” (*molestus non eris*).<sup>36</sup> That is, he won’t bother with the wake-up call. This time, everyone has to be polite about it because it is Crassus’s joke, a choice example of acceptable wit with an intellectual basis in the duplicitous language of politeness. But the humor is surely reinforced by the larger community’s tacit agreement that the man’s proposal for such an early visit is “bothersome,” that he doesn’t matter enough to be named, and that Crassus’s riposte is funny because it is extremely polite and extremely rude at the same time. As Beard puts it more generally, “Crassus’ showmanship was dangerously marginal.”<sup>37</sup> He gets away with it because he belongs to the rhetorical inner circle, the one from which new man Cicero was so easily excluded as a *consularis scurra*, “a consular comedian.”<sup>38</sup>

Back to Catullus’s opening apologies, and Crassus’s response takes a fascinating turn. He proceeds to claim that minor feelings of annoyance are nothing less than a rich source of cultural capital for the Romans, specifically in relation to the Greeks:

The Greek nation, with all its learning, abounds in this fault, and so, as the Greeks do not perceive the significance of this plague, they have not even bestowed a name upon the fault in question, for, search where you may, you will not find out how the Greeks designate the “tactless” man [*quomodo Graeci ineptum appellant*]. But, of all the countless forms assumed by tactlessness [*omnium autem ineptiarum, quae sunt innumerabiles*], I rather think that the grossest is the Greeks’ habit, in any place and any company they like, of plunging into the most subtle dialectic concerning subjects that present extreme difficulty, or at any rate do not call for discussion. (*De or.* 2.17–18; Loeb, trans. Sutton and Rackham)

How significant it is, says Crassus, that the word *ineptus* (inappropriate or misplaced, which Catullus has just used interchangeably with *molestus*) has no equivalent in Greek: “Search all you like but you’ll never find a Greek word for ‘tactless’ [*ineptus*].”<sup>39</sup> A typical maneuver in this “emphatically ‘Roman’ work,” where even Greek theories of humor are dismissed as laughable in themselves.<sup>40</sup> The reason for the difference, Crassus explains, is that the Greeks of today refuse to observe boundaries: they specialize in doing annoying things (*ineptiae*) and, worse, they are only interested, intellectually, in discussing annoying little things.<sup>41</sup>

This all feels like oversimplification. Of course the Greeks knew tiny irritants and had feelings about them. Theophrastus’s *Characters*, for example, activates the same synesthetic blend of sound and touch interference discussed by Sean Gurd. It can be no coincidence that many of Theophrastus’s wildly annoying antisocial types operate in more than usual proximity to insects and other small pests: the ungenerous man gets up early to deflea his sofas; the chatterer twitters louder than

a swallow; the offensive man has armpits infested by lice; the coward rushes to keep flies off a wounded man in his tent, rather than fight.<sup>42</sup> Isn't this because the "Characters" themselves constitute an album of irritating specimens, all buzzing too loudly, touching too closely, getting under reasonable people's skins?

Insects also feature in Chremylus's assault on Poverty in Aristophanes's *Plutus*: "What benefits can *you* provide, except blisters in the bathhouse and masses of hungry children and old ladies? Not to mention the lice, gnats, and fleas, too numerous to enumerate, that annoy us by buzzing around our heads and waking us up with the warning, 'get up or you'll go hungry!'"<sup>43</sup> The list here is typical of Greek comedy's predilection for weevils, beetles, gnats, fleas, lice, locusts, and other small creatures—swarms of humanoid pests and parasites.<sup>44</sup> Another insect even finds its way, more ominously, into tragedy: the mosquito that wails around insomniac Clytemnestra's head in *Agamemnon*, anticipating Freud's use in *The Interpretation of Dreams* of the fly as metaphor for the nocturnal insistence of thoughts, which must be endlessly thrashed over in our sleep or in our wakeful nights.<sup>45</sup>

For all that, the outrageous claim *De oratore* makes is that sensitivity to minor annoyance is something particularly Roman, is even part of what makes one Roman. The proof: in this case, unusually, it is *Latin* that has the words for it.<sup>46</sup> What do I care, says Horace in *Satires* 1.10, when Maecenas and his cronies have my back, about the peevish attacks of those obscure (mostly Greek-named) literati Pantilius, Demetrius, and Fannius, the first of whom he calls a louse (*cimex*), the second of whom is accused of torturing Horace (*cruciet*) because he plagues (*uellicet*) other people, and the third of whom is just called *ineptus*?<sup>47</sup> Such a swarm of minor irritants must be ritually fumigated to avoid polluting the pure house (*pura domus*) of Maecenas.

The same interaction of individual and community in the performance of irritation attends the thinly disguised self-portrait in Horace's catalogue of antisocial types earlier in *Satires* 1. The poet's sharpened antennae twitch at the thought of his gauche former self (*simplicior quis*) who used to barge in on Maecenas uninvited:

Take someone a bit naïve [*simplicior*], as I have often freely shown myself to you, Maecenas, interrupting you perhaps while reading or thinking with some annoying chatter? [*ut forte legentem aut tacitum impellat quouis sermone molestus*] "He is quite devoid of social tact" [*communi sensu plane caret*], we say. (*Sat.* 1.3.63–66)

Horace swaps subject position from past self to present self, then to the wider community, who are enlisted to mutter that such behavior is unacceptable, lacks all tact, and is characteristic of a *molestus*—before making the case for greater tolerance himself.

*Molestus* is also the punchline of Catullus 10, an anecdote poem that tells of a three-way meeting between Catullus, Varus, his friend, and Varus's girlfriend.<sup>48</sup>

Varvs me meus ad suos amores  
 uisum duxerat e foro otiosum,  
 scortillum, ut mihi tum repente uisumst,  
 non sane illepidum neque inuenustum.  
 huc ut uenimus, incidere nobis  
 sermones uarii; in quibus, quid esset  
 iam Bithynia, quo modo se haberet,  
 ecquonam mihi profuisset aere,  
 respondi, id quod erat, nihil neque ipsis  
 nunc praetoribus esse nec cohorti  
 cur quisquam caput unctius referret,  
 praesertim quibus esset irrumator  
 praetor, nec faceret pili cohortem.  
 “at certe tamen,” inquiunt, “quod illic  
 natum dicitur esse, comparasti  
 ad lecticam homines.” ego, ut puellae  
 unum me facerem beatiorem,  
 “non” inquam “mihi tam fuit maligne,  
 ut, prouincia quod mala incidisset,  
 non possem octo homines parare rectos.”  
 at mi nullus erat nec hic neque illic,  
 fractum qui ueteris pedem grabati  
 in collo sibi collocare posset.  
 hic illa, ut decuit cinaediorum,  
 “quaeso,” inquit mihi “mi Catulle, paulum  
 istos commoda! nam uolo ad Serapim  
 deferri.” “mane,” inquit puellae,  
 “istud quod modo dixeram me habere,  
 fugit me ratio: meus sodalis  
 —Cinnast Gaius—is sibi parauit.  
 uerum, utrum illius an mei, quid ad me?  
 utor tam bene quam mihi paratis.  
 sed tu insulsa male ac molesta uiuis,  
 per quam non licet esse neglegentem.”

My pal Varus had taken me from the  
 Forum, where I was idling, to pay a visit to  
 his mistress, a bit of a slut, as I realized at a  
 glance, and not short on charm or sex  
 appeal. When we got there, we fell to  
 talking of this and that, and among other  
 things, what sort of place Bithynia was now,  
 how things were there, whether I had made  
 any money out of it. I answered (which was  
 true) that these days neither praetors nor

their staff can find any means of coming back more loaded than when they went, especially when they were screwed over by the praetor, a fellow who didn't give a damn about his staff. "At least," they say, "You must have got yourself some litter-bearers. They say that's the place to get them." To make myself look better off than all the rest in the girl's eyes, I say, "Things didn't go so badly with me—even though I got a bad province—that I didn't come away with eight straight-backed men." Truth was, I didn't have a single one, here or there, strong enough to shoulder the broken leg of an old sofa. At this—quite the shameless hussy—she says, "Please, dear Catullus, do lend those slaves of yours for a moment: I want a ride to the temple of Serapis." "Hang on," I said to the girl, "what I said just now about having those slaves, I slipped up; I have a friend—Gaius Cinna—he's the one who bought them. Whoever they belong to, I use them just as if I had bought them myself. But you are really awkward and a piece of work; you never let anyone relax for a minute." (Loeb, trans. Goold, adapted)

The raconteur's first impressions of Varus's new squeeze are favorable, even if coolly registered with familiar Catullan diminutives and double negatives: "a bit of a slut" (*scortillum*) and "not short on charm or sex appeal" (*non illepidum et non inuenustum*). But there is a nasty surprise in store when she calls him out on the brag he invents to impress her (that his unrewarding spell in Bithynia at least scored him a litter with eight bearers) by asking if she can borrow it forthwith. Having in reality not even an old chair leg to stand on, Catullus fumbles for an excuse and ends up taunting her defensively.

Modern readers have recoiled from what appears to be a string of misogynistic insults (*scortillum*, lit. "little whore"; *cinaediorum*, "characteristic of a passive male homosexual"; *insulsa* "tacky"; *molesta* "gauche").<sup>49</sup> The vocabulary is indeed belittling and crudely sexualizing, a form of microaggression that William Fitzgerald rightly aligns with the macroaggressions of Roman imperialism: "The role of Varus' woman in this context is to act as a kind of secondary province."<sup>50</sup> Whatever one thinks, one does not call someone *molestus* to their face (unless this is imagined as a thought bubble coming out of Catullus's head). If one does, it is outrageous enough that the social interaction (and the poem) must end right there.

Or is that right? In the casual world of *neglegentia* Catullus inhabits, a gray area is reserved for plausible deniability. One can be a committophobe in words as in actions (see Catullus 16), because those *au fait* with the rules, people on one's wavelength, will never take them quite at face value. This means that there is a tacit game or test focused on the words *molesta* and *insulsa*: "gauche," "tacky," "a pain," "party pooper" or "piece of work"—and, since *molestus* literally means "heavy" and *insulsus* "unsalty," attendant hints of pedantry and literal-mindedness. The bind is this: only if the girl really is *molesta et insulsa* will she take the insults literally; if she is *neglegens*, she won't. Between the lines, Catullus credits her with being a fellow-*cinaedus*, a shameless opportunist and a wriggler out of tight spots, like himself. In fact, *molesta uiuis* begins to feel like grudging praise, an ironic concession that he has met his match in this person who has called him out—as a glutton for punishment, a sexual and economic loser, and a thorn in other people's sides (whether they are provincial governors or challenging women). Likewise, *insulsa* is not so much a rethink of *non illepidum et non inuenustum* as a reinforcement of the girl's annoyingly good ability to sniff out what is fraudulent.

All of this anticipates a similar episode in Horace's *Satires* 1.9 where the poet is hounded by his nemesis, a pushy stranger, through the streets of Rome. Horace is incapable of being rude except behind people's backs, though he shares with the reader (or rather, whispers to a textual proxy, his slave) irritation so overwhelming that it causes floods of sweat to drip invisibly into his shoes.<sup>51</sup> He cannot vent his feelings without breaking the politeness contract. The fact that the anonymous nuisance is usually known in English as the "Pest" suggests that Horace has succeeded in getting his readers on side. But later he himself will be given the polite slip by a close friend, Aristius Fuscus:<sup>52</sup>

male salsus  
ridens dissimulare (*Sat.* 1.9.65–66)

The sick joker laughed, pretending not to understand

Horace's parting insult to Fuscus—*male salsus*, "sick joker," a variant on Catullus's *insulsa*—is a similarly grudging compliment to someone who manages to evade unwanted social encounters so gracefully.<sup>53</sup> In all these passages, minor annoyance, as opposed to righteous anger, marks the self-mocking, confiding, vulnerable persona of minor poetry.

Occasionally, though, when irritating people are assimilated to tiny pests and obstacles, it takes us to the edge of something more sinister. Consider Erik Gunderson's telling comment on Cicero's use of *humanus* in the letters to Atticus: "human means 'one of us.'"<sup>54</sup> In *De oratore*, Vargula is swatted on the page because he dared to blow off the Fly brothers. An annoying wife is compared to a pinching shoe because all married men know that feeling, even if they cannot know specifically how it feels to be this one's husband. Both cases involve imaginative relegation of the victims to the subhuman sphere. In Aristophanes's *Plutus*, Poverty sweeps beggars and insects alike in her train, but does the same when she turns on the

audience, pitting its overfed, potbellied drones and maggots against its starving wasps. So does Lucian's Gulliver-like Icaromenippus, flying over the nations and seeing them reduced to gnat swarms from above.<sup>55</sup>

As Robert Kaster argues in his discussion of *fastidium* (disgust), conflating human and subhuman was all too quick a Roman reflex in this area. In two passages he considers from Seneca's *De clementia*, treatment of one's fellow humans is sifted into compassionate behavior and the kind of revulsion one feels on touching street people (2.6.2) or insects that are easily crushed and soil one's hands (1.21.4):

In both cases it is equally clear that the object of *fastidium* (disgust) is not a bug or some other sub-human creature: the object is a person who must first be classified—that is, deliberately ranked—as no better than a bug, as a precondition for the response to occur. This is a familiar pattern of prejudice-formation: having ranked X as so far inferior a specimen as to be deemed worthy of aversion, you then feel a visceral and reflexive aversion at the sight, smell, touch, or even thought of X. (Kaster 2001, 179)

Here, the socially excluded are assimilated, conceptually and emotionally, to insects and untouchables. This is the thin end of the wedge. It has been argued that in Nazi Germany it was because Jews had long been classed as vermin, parasites, or even bacteria that it was such a short step to press for their extermination (hence Kafka's cockroach and Art Spiegelman's Maus).<sup>56</sup>

Contempt for another person's body that is not quite detachable from one's own, or even functions as synecdochic extension, emerges from two passages in Plautus, both of which compare a slave's physique not to a prosthetic hand, as often, but to a dripping eye.<sup>57</sup> In *Persa*, Toxilus, a slave, says, "I don't serve voluntarily, nor do I satisfy my master according to his orders, but still he can't keep his hands off me, like an infected eye [*lippo oculo*]: he orders me about, puts me in charge of his business."<sup>58</sup> Meanwhile, in *Bacchides*, it is the lecherous master whose voice we hear: "That servant of mine is like an infected eye [*lippi . . . oculi*]; if you don't have one, you don't want it or miss it; but if you do have one, you can't stop touching it."<sup>59</sup> As Amy Norgard puts it: "The 'slave-as-bleary-eye' metaphor deconstructs a human being to a mere body part, which is lowered even further to an *ailing* body part. Slaves already occupied the lowest position in the Roman social hierarchy, and the association with physical ailment only emphasizes the debasement."<sup>60</sup>

#### SIGHTS FOR SORE EYES

Dripping eyes and proxy selves bring me to my second case-study: Cicero, again—this time in his *Letters to Atticus*.<sup>61</sup> So far, we have considered what sensitivity to social and cultural irritation does for the construction of a cultivated, specifically Roman self, and conversely, how socially objectionable people can be cruelly excluded by being assimilated to tiny irritants. Let us turn now to a different aspect: how sensitivity to *physical* irritation plays out in the long-term maintenance of a

feeling self, a self that tests and records its response to minor sensation—because the alternatives are either excruciating mental pain or deadening numbness.

In her brilliant reading, “Mourning Tulli-a: The Shrine of Letters in *Ad Atticum* 12,” Francesca Martelli interprets Cicero’s obsession with building a monument for his dead daughter as displacement or compensation for the traumas of civil unrest and Cicero’s own political obliteration.<sup>62</sup> Overall, though, across the *Letters to Atticus*, intimate friend and enabler of Cicero’s most intimate and personal self-expression, minor annoyance plays just as big a part as serious grief.<sup>63</sup> The vocabulary of feeling switches dizzyingly between large and small disasters in Cicero’s fraught life, marking out the epistolary form as apparently minor but with half an eye to major events. Torture, anguish, crucifixion, *o uitam miseram maiusque malum* . . . There is no shortage of agonized words and concepts to describe the heavy stuff: Caesar’s rise, the ominous sense of cataclysmic change, fears about individual and family safety.<sup>64</sup> Among these, *molestiae* is the word most often used of political “troubles.”<sup>65</sup> But *molestus* (troublesome), *odiosus* (hateful), and *perturbatus* (stirred up) are applied interchangeably to small griefs, too. Among these, I focus on one minor but chronic physical ailment that plagues Cicero in *Ad Atticum* books 7, 8, and 10: *lippitudo*, usually equated with conjunctivitis but covering a whole range of eye irritations that happen to have the capacity to stimulate physiological tears, ones that might mimic (or cover up) the signs of true emotion.<sup>66</sup>

Erik Gunderson’s more general diagnosis of Cicero’s reports about health and illness in the letters to Terentia and Tiro holds equally for his bulletins about this lesser complaint: “The letters are not so much reporting upon a fact or a relationship as they are negotiating abstract relationships by means of appeals to mundane facts.”<sup>67</sup> Just so, Cicero’s regular logging of his ophthalmic symptoms reads less as a set of medical records than as a marker of neuroses or emotional states of being. Not only does *lippitudo* supply a practical excuse for writing shorter letters—and sending letters that have to be dictated and then read aloud on arrival (an excuse for transforming a *written* correspondence into a livelier exchange of *voices*, albeit the surrogate ones of secretaries and slaves).<sup>68</sup> It is also a manageable substitute for greater but less expressible pains and fears, daily proof that it is still possible to feel, and to comprehend feeling. Cicero uses the mildly humorous *stomachus* and *stomachari* to register and then suppress his gut reaction to Caesar’s rise. Stanley Hoffer therefore concludes as follows: “Someone who says ‘let’s stop this belly-aching’ has already switched from fury to sullen or witty resignation, so the idea of ceasing to be angry is instantiated by the very word *stomachari*.”<sup>69</sup>

Unlike emotional dyspepsia, however, Cicero’s *lippitudo* is both a metaphor and an actual ailment. His concentration on it evokes the French concept of *abcès de fixation*, a medical term for an abscess artificially stoked to localize a more general infection.<sup>70</sup> It is as if the minute clocking of everyday pains could somehow supplant the numbing horror of global “troubles”: “For the troubles have made me



numb" (*nam me hebetem molestiae reddiderunt*), as Cicero writes in one letter, reclaiming *molestus* from the mundane sphere.<sup>71</sup> Elsewhere, he suggests, "I am sure you [Atticus] find daily letters boring [*non dubito quin tibi odiosae sint epistulae cottidianae*], especially as I give you no new information, and indeed cannot think of any new theme to write about."<sup>72</sup> Here, conversely, *odiosus* is wrested away from the sickening loathing felt for more traumatic griefs. Cicero's overall claim is that the correspondence guarantees him regular, long-term healing: it gives him peace (*requiesco*), relieves him (*recreare*), and even "pours a restorative infusion" (*restillare*) into a larger wound.<sup>73</sup>

Cicero is not shy when it comes to talking to Atticus about his eyes. The ailment starts small in book 7, but in book 8 two bulletins about *lippitudo* serve as opening salvos. *Att.* 8.12 starts: "My eyes are even more troublesome [*molestior*] than before," and runs with the whole idea of defective vision, first reflecting on the pessimistic prophecies in yesterday's handwritten letter, then inviting Atticus to act as clairvoyant for a blindfolded friend about what the future holds. *Att.* 8.13 begins: "My secretary's hand will serve as an indication of my eye infection and also as an excuse for brevity, not that there is anything to say now." Here, we start to feel a closer affinity between scratchy eyes and the unstoppable compulsion of letter writing—even when there is nothing to say.<sup>74</sup> Now it is Caesar who is as keen-sighted as a lynx: "how sharp, how vigilant, how ready" (*quam acutum, quam uigilantem, quam paratum*). By contrast, Cicero's helpless, medically enforced wakefulness suggests a minor version of the hero Regulus, tortured by having his eyelids forced open and exposed to blinding light.<sup>75</sup>

In book 10, the ailment is back, and the correspondents trade maladies. In Atticus's case, urinary problems, "a damn nuisance" (*ualde molesta*); for Cicero, another bout of *lippitudo*. The letter in question (*Att.* 10.10) opens with an appropriate metaphor: "I've been blind not to see this till now!" (*Me caecum qui haec ante non uiderim!*). Cicero turns out to be longing for a man called, ominously, Ocella, "Little Eye," to arrive with news: now, *lippitudo* is an excuse not just for reducing letters to a shorter minor corpus but also for Cicero's humiliatingly opaque view of politics. In *Att.* 10.14, though, both men's illnesses are upstaged by external events (this is the letter that opens *o uitam miseram maiusque malum!*). A long-awaited potential ally, Servius Sulpicius, finally shows up as a link to the world's greater terrors, a Homeric ghost from the outside who sheds a whole ocean of tears: "I've never seen a man more churned up [*perturbatiorem*] by fear." Meanwhile, Cicero cannot squeeze out a single drop (*ulla lacrima*), despite his ailment being tedious enough to keep him awake: *odiosa propter uigilias*. In due course, *odiosus* is picked up to describe Servius's minor qualms about his son's military posting: "his son's service at Brundisium is an awkward snag [*odiosus scrupulus*]" (Shackleton Bailey's translation). "Snag" attracts the same hyperbolic adjective in this centripetal thrust from outside woe to finite worries, with their more limited scope for futile, nagging vigilance.<sup>76</sup>

*Lippitudo* appears for the last time in *Att.* 10.17, in the wake of more cheering personal encounters. Cicero underplays his eye pain as something relatively manageable (*per-* and *sub-* prefixes are useful for nuancing the man of feeling's vocabulary, and now there is a new one, *perodiosus*, "super-annoying"): <sup>77</sup>

My ophthalmia often irritates me, not that it is so very annoying, but it's bad enough to interfere with my writing [*Crebro refricat lippitudo, non illa quidem perodiosa sed tamen quae impediatur scriptionem*]. I am glad that your health is re-established, both from your old complaint and your more recent attacks. (*Att.* 10.17.2)

Here, *refricat*, "irritates", conveys the rasping abrasion of the pain and *crebro*, "often", its intermittent stabbing quality. In recognizing the more dramatic shifts of Atticus's symptoms, Cicero pulls back from exaggerating his own. But the eye theme is soon picked up for another check of the barometer: "I wish we had Ocella [the longed-for "Little Eye"] with us, now that things seem to be a little easier [*paulo faciliora*] than I had expected; it's just that the current equinoctial weather is too rough [*perturbatum*] for sailing."

It will be some time before Cicero uses *refricare* again. <sup>78</sup> When it resurfaces in the letters, it is in none other than *Att.* 12.18, where the quest to commemorate Tullia is in full swing. Here, the word underpins the idea that mental pain is best dealt with by being raked over and compressed into another focused abscess. <sup>79</sup> Perhaps, says Cicero, to hallow Tullia with every memorial that Greek and Latin genius can supply will open up my wound again (*quae res forsitan sit refricatura uulnus meum*), stir up grief in order to settle it, and dispel other griefs at the same time. <sup>80</sup> His anguish has reached a new pitch. <sup>81</sup> In 10.17, by contrast, against the backdrop of what is seriously hateful (*perodiosum*) and gravely turbulent (*perturbatum*), yet another exchange of minor aches and weather reports between *amici* scrapes at the pain superficially, returning metaphors that usually govern external troubles—storms, hostility, loathing—to concrete reality and small-scale containability. <sup>82</sup>

If minor ailments are part of what makes Cicero's exchanges with Atticus so compulsive and meaningful, this suggests a more complex function for the correspondence than mere repose or comfort. Could we even see it as a kind of irritant itself, one that demands regular reality checks and stimulates renewed connection with another sentient self—like an eye that goes on being scratched, if only to reassure its owner that sensation, or a response, is still there? <sup>83</sup> In *Att.* 16.6, Cicero assimilates Atticus to his other favorite "eyes," his villas: "Why am I not with you? Why am I not seeing the eyes [we might say "jewels"] of Italy, my pet villas" [*cur ocellos Italiae, uillulas meas, non uideo*]? As Cicero says in the *Tusculan Disputations* of ingrained faults: "A chronic habit [*inueteratio*], as in bodily matters, is harder to get rid of than a sudden mood-change [*perturbatio*], and a sudden swelling in the eye [*repentinus oculorum tumor*] can be cured faster than a chronic eye irritation [*diuturna lippitudo*] can be banished." <sup>84</sup> For better or worse, the correspondence and the ailments are the two things in Cicero's altered life that are still reliably routine. More accurately, they are *imperfectly* reliable, bracingly *irregular*,

a source of chronic disquiet in their own right.<sup>85</sup> That is why he needs to keep on rubbing away at them.<sup>86</sup>

#### THERE'S THE RUB

Staying with rubbing, my final case study involves a different relationship to irritation. The image of the *scrupulus*, literally a small sharp stone (from *scrupus*, a sharp stone or pebble), is often used by Roman writers to suggest privately felt but nagging sensations. We have seen the word used of the “awkward snag,” the *odiosus scrupulus* (a son’s posting to Brundisium) that plagued Servius Sulpicius, matching Cicero’s eye ailment in its minor “hatefulness.” On second thoughts, perhaps “snag” is not quite the right translation when it is not so much the situation that is felt as a little rub as Servius’s inner qualms or unease about it. *Scrupulus* has of course settled into a moral sense these days in the concept of *scruple*, a minor but persistent doubt about a belief, claim, or argument. Intriguingly, the stone metaphor was from the beginning confused with another sense of *scrupulus*, sometimes written *scripulus*: a very small weight or measure.

Either way, whether as annoying things inside shoes or external stumbling blocks, stones stand in the way of smooth progress through the world. As we saw, among Pliny the Elder’s examples of sudden deaths in *Natural History* 7, two Caesars died while putting on their sandals, Q. Aemilius Lepidus after leaving his bedroom and stubbing his big toe on the doorstep and C. Aufidius when he tripped on the floor of the Comitium.<sup>87</sup> This kind of stumbling was normally seen as ominous because it presaged more serious falls. Together with lightning bolts, oracles, and entrails, Pliny includes omens “trivial to mention” (*parua dictu*), like sneezes (*sternumenta*) and toe stubbings (*offensiones pedum*) at the auguries.<sup>88</sup> Not so trivial, though, to the emperor Augustus, who blamed putting on his left shoe before his right in the morning for the eruption of a military conspiracy, narrowly avoided, later the same day.<sup>89</sup>

People could be stumbling blocks, too, like Socrates the awkward customer portrayed by Dio: “Most of the influential people and professional speakers pretended not even to see him; but whoever of that description did approach him, like those who have struck something with their foot got hurt and speedily departed.”<sup>90</sup> Cicero imagines his son-in-law, the Caesarian Dolabella, as an embarrassment, or rather himself as an embarrassment to his own party *because of* Dolabella: *si quid offendimus in genero meo*. “If my son-in-law is a sore point with some,” Shackleton Bailey translates.<sup>91</sup> But the idea is more accurately of Cicero as the surrogate obstacle that trips up his sympathizers.

Such external, visible obstacles as these were occasionally replaced by something invisible but no less palpable to the sufferer: a stone in the shoe. This was a private source of irritation and misgiving, harder to share with others. Revealingly, the word *scrupulus* scores most highly otherwise in Terence (always one for sensitivity to “the interface with people”) and Apuleius (where it spans physical

encounters and moral and philosophical doubts alike). But plenty of *scrupuli* can be found in Cicero—for good reason. A passage in *Pro Roscio Amerino* gives us a useful sense of the metaphorical field of the word, even when it is being used sarcastically. Surely, says Cicero, Chrysogonus, the evil freedman who bought Roscius's *patrimonium* thanks to his friendship with Sulla, cannot sleep at night for gnawing pangs of guilt:

hunc sibi ex animo scrupulum qui se dies noctesque stimulat ac pungit, ut euellatis postulat. (Cic. *Rosc. Am.* 2.6)

He begs that you will take [literally sweep away] from his mind this uneasiness which day and night is pricking and stinging him.

In other words, Chrysogonus has no conscience at all about the misdeeds that Cicero so gleefully exposes. But we get a fine idea of what the stone metaphor brings with it imaginatively: secret guilt, digging edges, and relentless, repetitive stabbing.<sup>92</sup>

The highest concentration of the word in a single Ciceronian text—four instances in all—is, once again, in the *Letters to Atticus*, which suggests that readiness to spill or at least hint at one's *scrupuli* to a fellow human may be a conscious device in Cicero's literary construction of exceptional intimacy.<sup>93</sup> The most illuminating use of the word is at *Ad Atticum* 1.18, the letter where Cicero idealizes his relationship with his friend for all time. Here is his classic outpouring of what Atticus means to him (even if Cicero never meant the same thing to Atticus)—someone he can speak to without secrecy or fakery:

I must tell you that what I most badly need at the present time is a confidant—someone with whom I could share all that gives me any anxiety, a wise, affectionate friend to whom I could talk without pretence or evasion or concealment [*nihil fingam, nihil dissimulem, nihil obtegam*] . . . And you whose talk and advice has so often lightened my worry and vexation of spirit [*curam et angorem animi mei*], the partner in my public life and intimate of all many private concerns, the sharer of all my talk and plans, where are you? (*Att.* 1.18.1; Loeb, trans. Shackleton Bailey)

Cicero goes on to explain that all his other friendships feel like hollow networking compared with his cozy domestic trio of wife, little daughter, and darling son—but even these ties are outweighed by Atticus's virtual but unique role as distant confidant.

After all the fulsome praise comes the stone in the shoe:

Of private worries with all their pricks and pains [literally, thorns and pebbles] I shall say nothing [*Ac domesticarum quidem sollicitudinum aculeos omnis et scrupulos occultabo*]. I won't commit them to this letter and an unknown courier. They are not very distressing (I don't want to upset you), but still they are on my mind, nagging away [*sed tamen insident et urgent*], with no friendly talk and advice to set them at rest. (*Att.* 1.18.2; Loeb, trans. Shackleton Bailey)

What's making Cicero so jittery? Thorns (*aculeos*) and pebbles (*scrupulos*) are downplayed with the usual polite restraint. None of this is hugely annoying, just family stuff, but still worth registering, a heavy enough pressure. The elephant in the room? "Family worries," according to Shackleton Bailey, "perhaps refers to Pomponia." This was Atticus's sister, recently wed to Cicero's brother Quintus in a notoriously unhappy marriage, which would end in divorce some fifteen years later (in 55 BCE) but remained a prolonged and uneasy source of shared suffering for Atticus and Cicero, even a family counterpart to the civil war that threatened to fray their perfect *amicitia*.<sup>94</sup> Cicero both parades his distress and conceals it; even the letters are no safe space, he says, for leaked confidences, either to the mailman or the reader. "Between you and me" (*occultabo*) really does hold here. Cicero *will* keep it all hidden, for posterity, will express it only through nudges and winks. Elsewhere, he refers to the small hint (*significatione parua*) that stands in for what he cannot explain in a letter, and urges Atticus to tell him everything, however small (*sed ne tantulum quidem praeterieris*), to tell him the small stuff as well as the big stuff (*quicquid erit non modo magnum sed etiam paruum scribes*), since for his part he will leave nothing out (*equidem nihil intermittam*).<sup>95</sup>

The story with which we began, from Plutarch's *Life of Aemilius Paulus*, concerned the "pinching shoe" of a husband ready to divorce his wife. It may be coincidence, but in four uses of *scrupulus* in *Ad Atticum* (one is Servius Sulpicius's "awkward snag"; another describes an awkward financial situation, also involving Pomponia),<sup>96</sup> the "uncomfortable shoe" image is twice dropped into the larger context of marital strife. It was really up to Pomponia's husband Quintus Cicero to say, "None of you know where the shoe pinches my foot." But Cicero tends to hijack his little brother's suffering along with responsibility for his other actions.<sup>97</sup> His regular checks of the domestic situation chez Quintus and Pomponia give Atticus a vicarious feel of Quintus's shoes: "You write to me of your sister. She will tell you herself how anxious I have been that my brother Quintus should feel towards her as a husband ought"; "My brother Quintus seems to me to feel towards Pomponia as we wish"—this in a letter that ends pointedly by saying that it is Atticus he really loves *fraterne*, "like a brother."<sup>98</sup>

If *Att.* 1.18 suppresses the details of Quintus and Pomponia's problems, the theme of marital strife explodes in the gossip section of the same letter, which leaks names along with allegorical hints about a current scandal or two back at Rome (*skandalon*, as it happens, being another Greek word for stumbling block):<sup>99</sup>

Now this fine new year is upon us. It has begun with failure to perform the annual rites of the Goddess of Youth, Memmius having initiated M. Lucullus' wife into rites of his own. Menelaus took this hard and divorced the lady—but the shepherd of Ida in olden days only flouted Menelaus, whereas our modern Paris has wiped his boots on Agamemnon as well. (*Att.* 1.18.3; Loeb, trans. Shackleton Bailey)

C. Memmius has run amok, seducing first L. Lucullus's wife, Cato's sister Servilia, later divorced for her "loose behaviour,"<sup>100</sup> and then Lucullus's brother Marcus's wife (also, Shackleton Bailey surmises, subsequently divorced for poor conduct). As Cicero puts it, Paris has cuckolded Agamemnon as well as Menelaus.

This image of two humiliated mythical brothers makes it tempting to read the letter as a double displacement, via Memmius and the Luculli (overt) and Quintus (hinted at), of Cicero's neuroses about his own marriage. True, there are no spoilers yet of the eventual divorce from an increasingly autonomous Terentia, in 47 or 46 BCE.<sup>101</sup> But she has already been put in the shade next to his gushing display of intimacy with Atticus, and Cicero does put it just a little ungenerously when envisaging her in his tableau of hearth and home: "honey son" Cicero junior (*mel-lito Ciceroni*) and "dear little daughter" Tullia (*filiola*)—but just an unembellished "wife" (*uxore*).<sup>102</sup> With Agamemnon in mind, should we even fastforward with some anxiety to one of Cicero's last letters to Terentia, by which time their connection is wearing thin? Bossy and impersonal, it urges her to have a bathtub ready for him when he gets home—so conducive to life and health!<sup>103</sup>

The fourth appearance of *scrupulus* is much briefer, just the vaguest of hints on a longer list. "Back to matters at Rome. First, please, as you're staying in Rome, make sure to build a firmly fortified case for my term of office as governor remaining annual and uninterrupted. And secondly, mind you discharge all my commissions, in particular concerning that domestic worry [*illo domestico scrupulo*], you know what I mean [*quem non ignores*], if anything can be done; and then do something about Caesar."<sup>104</sup> Shackleton Bailey comments shrewdly that *scrupulus* here means "worry," not "hitch"—in other words, that it refers to the internal sensation, not the external source of the rub. He is confident about what lies behind the hint: "C refers to the question of a husband for Tullia (cf. 5.4)." This was another ongoing source of stress, particularly when Tullia and her mother Terentia broke ranks while Cicero was away in Cilicia to engineer a marriage with the pro-Caesarian Dolabella.

That aside, Cicero again embroils Atticus emotionally in his inmost feelings: *quem non ignores* (the point of a stone in one's shoe is that no one else can feel it—unless they are really under one's skin). There are shades here of Emperor Augustus's complaints about disobedient family members (the two Julias and Agrippa Postumus) as his three chronic boils or ulcers: *tris uomicas ac tria carcinomata*.<sup>105</sup> In Cicero's case, this is less a matter of national crisis than an insistent personal or domestic anxiety, which explains why it is woven so meaningfully into the fabric of his epistolary relationship with Atticus, his "second self."

I have only scratched the surface of what minor irritation can bring to the study of Roman emotion and identity—and Cicero, I have conceded, is far from typical. But it can be enlightening to follow one individual so uneasily negotiating the gap between aesthetic and political involvement while so minutely registering

the difficulties of his position in and out of various elite communities and calibrating his sensations to match genre, mood, and audience. Paying attention to the role of small and superficial feelings in the construction of this complex personality can deepen our experience of a man who was perhaps never entirely comfortable in his own skin.<sup>106</sup>