

A key moment in the prehistory of the Enlightenment

By Tom Carter
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The Swerve: How the World Became Modern, Stephen Greenblatt, W.W. Norton, 2011 (US\$16.95)

In his autobiography, Trotsky compares the Protestant Reformation in Europe to the work of men who have broken out of an insane asylum. “To a certain extent, it really was,” he remarks. “European humanity broken out of the medieval monastery.”

The Swerve: How the World Became Modern, a recent bestselling non-fiction book by Harvard academic Stephen Greenblatt, tells the story of how the first cracks began to appear in the medieval monastery walls. It chronicles a little-appreciated but nevertheless significant event in the history of human ideas: the rediscovery of Lucretius’s poem *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*) in the winter of 1417 by former papal secretary and book hunter Poggio Bracciolini. Key philosophical conceptions drawn from this rediscovered poem, Greenblatt argues, formed the foundations for many subsequent developments in modern thought.

Greenblatt’s controversial book won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, and it has also come under attack as an “anti-religious diatribe.” The book has merit and, as a celebration of the very early stages of the intellectual trajectory that would become the Enlightenment, deserves to be defended.

The Swerve paints a truly dark picture of the Middle Ages in Europe. At the dawn of the fifteenth century, society is subordinated to the whims and caprices of a cruel aristocracy of landowners, warlords, and priests. Ignorance and superstition reign, and lists are maintained of banned and heretical books. War, hunger, and disease regularly carry off entire populations. The ruins of ancient Rome are pilfered for bricks and scrap metal, and the literary treasures of antiquity are forgotten. The Catholic Church treats every original thought as a potential threat to its hegemony, and it aggressively tortures dissenters and burns them at the stake. There is not a drop of romance in Greenblatt’s grim account of this period in history.

Even 200 years after the events that are the main focus of the book, at the height of the Renaissance, the Catholic Church continued to use the most barbaric methods against those who would challenge its worldview. Greenblatt gives the following description of the death of the colorful and brilliant philosopher Giordano Bruno, who was murdered by the Inquisition on February 17, 1600:

“He [Bruno] had steadfastly refused to repent during the innumerable hours in which he had been harangued by teams of friars, and he refused to repent or simply to fall silent now at the end. His words are unrecorded, but they must have unnerved the authorities, since they ordered that his tongue be bridled. They meant it literally: according to one account, a pin was driven into his cheek, through his tongue, and out the other side; another pin sealed his lips, forming a

cross. When a crucifix was held up to his face, he turned his head away. The fire was lit and did its work.”

The executions of religious reformers Jan Hus and Jerome of Prague—also by burning at the stake—likely had a particular impact on the protagonist of the story, the early humanist Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459). Poggio witnessed the execution of Jerome, who, according to a contemporary chronicler, “lived much longer in the fire than Hus and shrieked terribly, for he was a stouter, stronger man, with a broad, thick, black beard.”

Poggio, in a letter to a friend, praised the eloquence with which Jerome had made his case before his persecutors, even with his own life in the balance. His friend replied, “I must advise you henceforth to write upon such subjects in a more guarded manner.” The terror of the Inquisition was everywhere.

Under these conditions, the work of the early humanists was driven semi-underground. Their work took the form of searching for and appreciating the works of the classical writers of Greek and Roman antiquity.

To give a sense of how much had been lost, Greenblatt quotes Roman rhetorician Quintilian’s praise for the works of Macer, Lucretius, Varro of Atax, Cornelius Severus, Saleius Bassus, Gaius Rabirius, Albinovanus Pedo, Marcus Furius Bibaculus, Lucius Accius, Marcus Pacuvius, and others. With the exception of Lucretius, Greenblatt writes, *all of the works of all of these authors have been lost.*

The poem of Lucretius, which Poggio rediscovers in 1417, has significant philosophical implications. Little is known about the life of Lucretius (99 BCE–c. 55 BCE), who was a follower of Epicurus. In his masterpiece *De Rerum Natura*, he sought to combine beauty of aesthetic presentation (poetry) with the highest achievements of science and philosophy.

Partway through the book, Greenblatt makes a list of some of the key ideas in Lucretius’s poem: everything is made of invisible particles; these elementary particles are eternal; all particles are in motion in an infinite void; the universe has no creator or designer; nature ceaselessly experiments; human society began not in a Golden Age of tranquility and plenty but in a primitive battle for survival; there is no afterlife; all organized religions are superstitious delusions; religions are invariably cruel; there are no angels, demons, or ghosts; understanding the nature of things generates deep wonder; the highest goal of human life is the enhancement of pleasure and the reduction of pain; and the greatest obstacle to pleasure is not pain but delusion.

According to Lucretius, all phenomena come into being as a result of the unpredictable “swerve” of elementary particles, and this conception is the source of the title of Greenblatt’s book. There is a

curious quasi-materialism in Lucretius that no doubt fascinated his early modern readers: “Sight did not exist before the birth of the eyes, nor speech before the creation of the tongue.”

In addition to its radical philosophical content, Lucretius’s poem is rich in passages of arresting beauty, even now after the passage of so many centuries. Lucretius portrays the world as ever-changing and yet still possessing continuity. Life has meaning, even if an individual’s life does not continue after death, as part of something greater. “Thus the sum of things is ever being renewed, and mortals live dependent one upon another. Some nations increase, others diminish, and in a short space the generations of living creatures are changed and like runners pass on the torch of life.”

The Swerve traces the fascinating impact of the poem and its Epicurean ideas across the subsequent centuries. Botticelli paints scenes from the poem; Shakespeare refers to it in his plays; Montaigne cites it in his essays; and it animates Thomas More’s *Utopia*. Asked to describe his philosophy of life, Thomas Jefferson wrote, “I am an Epicurean.”

Greenblatt does not mention it in *The Swerve*, but Epicurean philosophy had a certain influence on another important figure in modern thought: the very young Karl Marx, who filled seven notebooks with a study of Epicurean philosophy and even wrote his doctoral dissertation on “The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature.”

Some of the value of Greenblatt’s book is reflected in the ferocity of the attacks against it. Hostility to the Enlightenment and all of its accomplishments predominates in ruling circles in America and throughout the world. The epoch of imperialism, Lenin wrote, is “reaction all down the line.” It is no coincidence that, in a country where the Supreme Court recently affirmed the “religious right” of corporations to deny health care to women, a book celebrating secular humanism and the Enlightenment would encounter a chilly reception in certain quarters.

The *Los Angeles Review of Books* published one such attack, entitled “Why Stephen Greenblatt is Wrong—and Why It Matters.” The author of the attack, Jim Hinch, a religion correspondent for California’s *Orange County Register*, takes furious exception to Greenblatt’s narrative “of how modern western secular culture liberated itself from the deadening hand of centuries of medieval religious dogmatism.”

“Greenblatt’s caricatured Middle Ages might have passed muster with Enlightenment-era historians,” Hinch writes (using the word “Enlightenment” as an epithet). *The Swerve*, he continues, is “filled with factual inaccuracies and founded upon a view of history not shared by serious scholars of the periods Greenblatt studies.”

These “factual inaccuracies” are never specified. Meanwhile, it appears that “serious scholars” (whom Hinch does not name) have lately determined that the Dark Ages were not that dark, that there is no such thing as the Renaissance, and that life under the Inquisition was not really that bad!

Replying to a hostile review in a different journal, Greenblatt wrote, “I plead guilty.... That is, I am of the devil’s party that believes that something significant happened in the Renaissance. And I plead guilty as well to the conviction...that atomism—whose principal vehicle was Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*—was crucially important in the intellectual trajectory that led to Jefferson, Marx, Darwin, and Einstein.”

It is a testament to the power of the poem—more than two millennia after it was composed, and nearly 600 years after its rediscovery by

Poggio—that it still evokes such hostility. Indirectly, in a way, the response of people like Hinch confirms Greenblatt’s thesis.

Finally, the description of *The Swerve* as an “anti-religious diatribe” is one of those slanders that depends on the audience not having read the book in question. Greenblatt’s sympathies are clearly with reason, secularism, and the Enlightenment, but the book is not actually concerned with making a case for or against religion.

Greenblatt, in fact, rather objectively relates how the protagonist of the story, Poggio, made his career within the complex institutions of the Catholic Church. Greenblatt also describes medieval religious monasteries as places where books were carefully copied, preserved, and revered (if not always fully appreciated). There is a glimpse here and there, across six centuries, of *how life really was*, with some of its movement and contradiction.

Greenblatt’s book deserves to be defended against right-wing obscurantism, but in the opinion of this reviewer it has other limitations. In an effort to make the book as simple and approachable as possible, the reader sometimes feels that Greenblatt has “dumbed down” the material too much, almost to the point of being condescending. One wants to ask the author to kindly dispense with the “popular” style, and instead to tell us what he knows. Meanwhile, the author returns again and again to certain key philosophical themes for emphasis, but the result is sometimes simply repetitive.

Greenblatt’s suggestion that the rediscovery of Lucretius’s poem actually “caused” the world to “swerve” in a new direction is more than poetic license. It is an outright exaggeration. *De Rerum Natura* is fascinating, and certainly it had broad influence over a long period. But the Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment cannot all be understood as contingent on the rediscovery of this poem.

Material conditions for a major change in consciousness in Europe were in the process of ripening at the time of Poggio’s rediscovery of *De Rerum Natura*. Medieval Church doctrine had served as the dominant ideology throughout a long historical period characterized by feudal relations of production, namely the exploitation of peasants tied to estates owned by the feudal aristocracy. The growth of towns, which featured early capitalist relations and which were increasingly controlled by what would develop into the modern bourgeois class, heralded a shift in ideas.

The old forms of consciousness were being undermined by changing material conditions, and the rediscovery of the poem under such circumstances was a fortuity. In other words, if Lucretius’s poem had not been rediscovered, and instead had been lost forever, then the form of the historical processes that led to the Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment might have been affected, but not the eventual trajectory.

But as a history of how it actually did happen, and as an introduction to a masterpiece of world literature that deserves to be rediscovered again, Greenblatt’s book is worthwhile reading.

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