
Modernity Through a Distorted Lens

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The Swerve: How the World Became Modern, by Stephen Greenblatt. *New York: W. W. Norton, 2011. 365 pp. \$26.95 cloth. \$16.95 paper.*

Stephen Greenblatt's Pulitzer Prize winning *The Swerve: How The World Became Modern* is a narrative in search of a story. The narrative is a simple and familiar one: the world became modern when the forces of reason, enlightenment, and human dignity replaced the benighted and repressive superstitions and hypocritical hierarchies of medieval Christendom. This emancipation allowed humanity to live without illusion, prejudice, or fear and thus enabled the full flourishing of human autonomy.

Greenblatt is John Cogan University Professor of the Humanities at Harvard University. He has won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for his critical works. The *New York Times's* fawning review noted Greenblatt's "enormous erudition" and *The New York*

Review of Books called *The Swerve* "a seductive, beautiful book that will inspire wonder, reflection, and the pursuit of pleasure." In short, Greenblatt touched the right sorts of cultural notes that resonated deeply with his audience.

This should not surprise. Greenblatt is best known as a Shakespeare scholar and a central figure in the literary movement the New Historicism. The essence of the New Historicism is to view expressive acts such as literary products as epiphenomena of the material or social condition of life; in particular as those conditions evolve in relationships of power and contestation. The author thus is part of this power struggle, encoding his messages to his audience, and engaged in a kind of "self-fashioning" wherein his identity is shaped in socially acceptable ways. The self is itself, as it were, a kind of artifact, a mode of social production

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in its own right.

The text's meaning derives from its place within these power relations. But not only the text. The critic as well operates within a social complex, motivated by his or her political and social concerns, but without any access to the "meaning" of a text. The act of interpretation is thus an act of historical positioning by which the anecdotes of the past may inform the author's present in the present's own arena of subversion and contestation. Text, context (for there is no historical continuity), criticism, have all been destabilized as grounds for legitimate interpretation. Instead, the New Historicist is impressed only by historical contingency and the haphazard happenstances of the lives of both the subjects of their studies and the world of the critic. The worlds of both the author and the critic, however, emerge out of the randomness of matter itself. The past has no hold on us except as a kind of narcissistic reflection on our own concerns and desires. But what history can never do is point to anything beyond history itself, for there is no beyond. The latter axiom is, of course, posited as an article of faith.

In order to keep the interpretations from devolving into nonsense the critic may well *posit* a set of "values" or ideas that give the interpretation compelling weight and that resonate with the critic's audience. In Greenblatt's works the two main ideas are "humanism" and "evolutionism." And the critic may also hold the belief that the best we can hope for is consolation in the face

of the radical contingency and essential meaninglessness of existence. Both these Nietzschean strategies are very much in play in *The Swerve*, a book which tells us more about Greenblatt's present than Medieval Europe. Indeed, any critic worth his salt will be attentive to the demands and expectations of the audience, for interpretation, Greenblatt believes, itself can never rise above prejudice. Throughout the book one senses that Greenblatt uses the past to elevate the personal experiences of an academic whose greatest pleasure is discussing ideas in lovely settings with like-minded colleagues. For them, since death itself poses no harm, the greatest threat would be religious zealots who threaten their way of life.

To give the book heft Greenblatt adapts to the story the familiar narrative of evolutionary positivism combined with the self-conscious humanism of modernity. The story he tells, however, is not familiar, nor is its central figure, Poggio Bracciolini, and this itself suggests the tendentious nature of the narrative. Greenblatt employs a very clever scholarly trick to make his case. Begin by picking a maligned period of time different enough from the present and use it as a foil to elevate one particular view of the contemporary world. Find a heretofore unknown or inconsequential figure of that period, and offer that figure as a paradigmatic forward-looking critic against his age. This figure can then serve as a mouthpiece by which one view of the author's present is privi-

leged over all others: in this instance, scientific materialism as opposed to fideistic moralism.

A scholar is not likely to be called to task for such a strategy. Fellow scholars will know little about the figure in question and so can't challenge the interpretation. Instead, they're likely to celebrate the author's creative brilliance for having seized upon something no one has seized upon before, neglecting the possibility that there may have been good cause for such neglect. An absence of information will not daunt you: indeed, Greenblatt elides the poverty of evidence by writing much of the book in the subjunctive, as if interjecting "must have" or "may have" or "likely" or "probably" would not weaken his case.

Central to Greenblatt's story is the account of Poggio Bracciolini's search for ancient texts and how he stumbled upon Lucretius' poem *De Rerum Natura*. Much of Greenblatt's book is taken up with interesting detail concerning libraries and books and the cultural translation of ideas. As interesting as all this is, the merit of the book rests on the accuracy of Greenblatt's reading of the medieval and modern worlds, and his demonstration that Bracciolini's discovery was the key in the transition from one epoch to the other.

Flawed scholarship has the quality, much like Lucretius' poem, of taking a part of reality, or part of a story, and treating it as if it were the whole of it. While Greenblatt's book is clear and well-written and has an intriguing thesis, that thesis is plau-

sible only as long as one is willing to ignore the complexity and fullness of intellectual and social history, which is to say so long as one avoids well-substantiated counter-evidence. Nowhere is this more glaring than in Greenblatt's remarkably one-sided reading of medieval Christianity, both in terms of what he focuses on and what he ignores.

Greenblatt operates with the assumption that all of human life can be distilled to binary calculations of pain and pleasure, so one either zealously pursues pleasure or celebrates pain. Christianity's suppression of Epicurean hedonism, according to Greenblatt, indicates its commitment to the latter. When Christianity became the "official" religion of the Roman Empire, it represented "one of the great cultural transformations of the West" where "the pursuit of pain triumphed over the pursuit of pleasure" (103). What made the rediscovery of Lucretius' poem so significant is that its "moralized and purified version of the Roman *pleasure* principle" brought into relief the sadistic and masochistic cruelty of a Christian faith that offered "a moralized and purified version of the Roman *pain* principle" (104).

By juxtaposing classical Epicureanism with medieval Christianity in this way, Greenblatt demonstrates a willingness to cherry-pick evidence to support his own postmodern views. For example, Greenblatt conveniently ignores what is arguably the most prominent and influential school of Roman thought, the late Stoicism of Cicero, which antedated

Christianity and whose emphasis on duty explicitly rejected Lucretius. On the other side, Greenblatt offers as evidence for his argument against medieval Christianity a small scattering of Christian figures and a fetishistic focusing on Christian flagellants and treats them as if they were the whole story of the faith.

The view Greenblatt argues for has a negative side and an affirmative one. On the negative side is the dismissal of faith. Greenblatt believes faith is nothing but an illusion, a superstition that cruelly plays on an individual's fear of death by constructing an unnatural morality that posits judgment in an afterlife and self-abasement within this one. This serves the interests of an ecclesiastical hierarchy whose sole motivations are power, sex, and money. The Catholic Church is thus nothing but "a world of corruption and greed" (151) marked by rampant hypocrisy, indifferent to human flourishing, beauty, truth, and the lovely pleasures of the flesh all humans seek. Perhaps Greenblatt's own view was best expressed by Poggio upon witnessing the wonderful libertines at the public baths in Baden. Of them he says: "With his contrasting vision of anxious, work-obsessed, overly disciplined Italians and happy-go-lucky, carefree Germans, Poggio believed he had glimpsed for a moment the Epicurean pursuit of pleasure as the highest good."

Greenblatt's complaints about Christianity may be boiled down to three. First, its "arrogant triumphalism" (97) by which it elevated

itself above all other faiths with little more to go upon than wild fables. Second, its claim to exclusivity of truth, so that the "centuries of religious pluralism under paganism" with their "absorptive tolerance" were pushed aside (89), as if there had been no Diocletian persecutions or social unrest prior to Constantine or the birth of Christ. Third, its undertaking of "the difficult project of making what appeared simply sane and natural—the ordinary impulses of all sentient creatures—seem like the enemy of truth" (102). So paganism is tolerant, irenic, reasonable, and pleasurable while Christianity is vicious, destructive of our true selves, bellicose, and cruel.

Greenblatt highlights this contrast by recounting in detail masochistic ascetic practice as well as persecutions. One of the few pictures in the book is the burning of John Hus at the stake, and he belabors the story, even though it has virtually nothing to do with the story of Bracciolini. His telling of the death of Hypatia is woefully misleading, ignoring the partisan politics of fifth century Alexandria as well as that city's range of Christian figures, demonstrating, he seems to believe, that the only cause of public unrest is crazed religious believers going after educated and urbane rational materialists.

The distortions in Greenblatt's narrative may have slipped past the Pulitzer committee, but they won't slip by someone with even a basic knowledge of church history. St Jerome, to be sure, is no inconsequential figure, but Green-

latt focuses most of his attention on Lactantius and Peter Damian. He is more interested in the latter because he reformed the already self-abasing Benedictine order in the eleventh century, making voluntary self-flagellation "a central ascetic practice of the church" and thus accomplishing the thousand year struggle "to secure the triumph of pain seeking" (107). If this is genuinely how Greenblatt understands the significance and nature of the Benedictine order, one can only wonder why Harvard retains him.

Lest this seem an exaggeration, consider what else is missing in Greenblatt's accounting of medieval Christendom. There's no Justin Martyr or Origen or Clement or church figures who embraced what was best in pagan culture. There's no Augustine, whose great learning enabled him to tower over all other intellectual figures not only of his own age but most others as well. Nor does he consider Augustine's sophisticated argument that Rome's fall was not due to Christianity but Rome itself. There are no Cluny or other reforms, by which the Church sought to correct its sins and excesses from within. There are no Franciscans or charitable organizations, a telling omission considering that concern for the poor comes from Christianity and certainly not from Roman philosophy.

The list goes on. There's no Boethius or Anselm, or any other contributors to the great medieval project of reconciling faith to reason. There are no universities of the sort

Greenblatt inhabits, themselves inventions and extensions of Christian reflection. In one telling passage (117), Greenblatt acknowledges that there were "intellectual movements" in the Middle Ages that kept "the intellectual heritage of antiquity alive" against the anti-rational zealotry of religious faith, and credits "scholastic philosophers, reading Aristotle through the lens of brilliant Arabic commentator Averroes" (apparently it's acceptable to praise the virtues of a Muslim), but neglects to mention who these philosophers were or how they lived or thought. This is as close as he comes to mentioning St. Thomas, and the exclusion of that name in this context is telling, for acknowledging Aquinas would require a rethinking of Greenblatt's whole narrative. Or, more to the point, it would require that he read Aquinas with the same sympathy with which he reads Lucretius.

In a perjurious observation, Greenblatt declares that the Church Fathers never wanted to know anything about antiquity, "curiosity [having] long been rigorously condemned as a mortal sin" (118). This woeful misunderstanding of both the Catholic idea of mortal sin and its conception of curiosity would be easily corrected by a cursory reading of Aquinas, whose knowledge of antiquity was extraordinary. These exclusions corrupt the history Greenblatt is trying to tell, for Renaissance humanism makes no sense unless seen in relief against, or in continuity with, medieval scholasticism.

The list of Greenblatt's redactions

seems endless. There are no cathedrals, with their overarching, awe-inducing beauty. There's no medieval polyphony or chant or Palestrina or the fruition in the music of Bach, who signed every manuscript to the Glory of God. There's no Chaucer, no Dante, no Song of Roland. There are no legal or other cultural reforms under Pope Gregory. There's no development of the idea of the person, of the idea of rights, or the robust political philosophy of the age, so essential to forming the liberal order Greenblatt loves. There's no piety, no devotion, no virtue that is not born of bad faith in Greenblatt's narrative. There's no Carolingian Renaissance, a vital and, judging from his bibliography, intentional omission, for our current editions of *De Rerum Natura* date from translations made by Christian clerics during this period.

Judging by the standards of careful scholarship, Greenblatt fails to deliver on the promise of the book: to tell us how the world became modern. Without gainsaying the appeal of the story of Bracciolini, even though by his own telling it is clear that *De Rerum Natura* had never really disappeared, Greenblatt fails to show us how this discovery fundamentally reshaped the course of Western civilization. While other interpreters have focused on the continuity of civilization, perhaps overly so, and recent interpretations have stressed the theological origins of modernity, Greenblatt resurrects older tropes about reason and science triumphing over faith and superstition and atomistic mate-

rialism triumphing over divinatory animism.

Neither engaging other interpretations of modernity nor clearly delineating his own argument, Greenblatt hints at his idea by focusing on corrupt popes, lazy monks, mendacious clerics, and sex-addled laity. Their existence, Greenblatt believes, proves his point: all persons seek always to maximize their pleasure, and the best we can do intellectually is create a system of thought which honestly acknowledges this fact. Modernity, at its apogee, is the resolute reversal, the attempt to reorder social life along Lucretian lines.

The driving force of Greenblatt's argument thus comes from salient features of our contemporary world: the conviction that happiness consists of serene acceptance of life without goal, endurance without meaning, and action without purpose. Somehow, Greenblatt believes, we will live more ethically as a result. Furthermore, it extends the dogmas that only science counts as knowledge, that existence has no origin or goal, all is matter, and we are not even a quintessence of dust.

The title of Greenblatt's book aptly summarizes this view. The Swerve comes from Lucretius' understanding of eternal and ambulant matter colliding in such a way that it moves things unpredictably and unexpectedly. Lucretius' poem was on its way to oblivion until Poggio happened upon it, randomly of course. This explanation, however, seems too thin to explain Poggio himself, his ability to read books, his capacity

to reflect, or his desire to think that there *ought* to be a better way to live, even though according to Greenblatt's own insistence that ought can't refer to anything.

Greenblatt uses Poggio to access Lucretius, and Lucretius as a device to assert the contemporary view that all is matter and its random and pointless collisions. Even if this view seems to fall short of human aspirations, Greenblatt declares it a reasonable price to pay to keep us "from a preoccupation with angels and demons" and to focus on things in this world; it will free us "to construct experiments without fearing that one is infringing on God's jealously guarded secrets" and to engage in inquiry without dogmatic restrictions (11); and to live an ethical life without dread of eternal punishment. It protects us against the dangers and disappointments of longing and love by insisting on Epicurean repose and renunciation. Mostly, it distracts us from considerations of death, the reflection on which and the fear of which makes us do crazy things. Lucretius, Greenblatt believes, frees us from such torment.

Greenblatt is at least fully honest about his own torment on that question. In his telling introduction he recounts his mother's obsession with her own death, and her manipulative use of this fear "to compel attention and demand love" from her sensitive young son. The author would spend his life now trying to free himself from the cruel anxiety that was inflicted upon him, and would come to believe that Lucretian material-

ism would so free him. But one has to read Lucretius dogmatically and tendentiously to conclude that. For example, Greenblatt reads the introductory passage of Lucretius' poem as a "filling of the world with sexual desire," even though Lucretius is clearly beseeching the goddess to act as a muse to give him the words and insight he needs to understand the world rightly and silence his longings.

So scientific and hedonistic materialism is the core of the modern, but we're still left with the question of how the world became that. In vain does one resort to this book for the answer. Greenblatt offers up Thomas More (!), Montaigne, and Giordano Bruno as figures who incorporated Lucretius in their reshaping of civilization. Granted, these are important figures, but with the exception of Bruno, Greenblatt looks only at the skeptical side of these figures and not at what they affirmed. This is a particularly galling error in the case of More, a devout Catholic who martyred himself for his beliefs. Greenblatt offers evidence that they read Lucretius, but no evidence that they themselves became Lucretians and in the process exerted such influence that the edifice of medieval Christendom came crashing down as a result.

Greenblatt concludes the book, tellingly, with Thomas Jefferson, who did in fact identify himself as an Epicurean, and who, Greenblatt believes, courageously shaped the real America as expressed in the Declaration's pursuit of happiness.

He sees Jefferson as taking a stand against fundamentalist theocrats in their manic ravings. Greenblatt's Jefferson protects America from those zealous fideists who would seize the instruments of power for their purposes of destroying science, imposing a sadistic moral system on everyone, persecuting those not of the faith, and destroying our well-being by making us fear death.

This is the America of the secular elite, a term of opprobrium that is no less true because it's a cliché or its political baggage. The book's scholarly slovenliness is accompanied by no small amount of paranoia. As in Rousseau, the paranoia closely relates to a casting of the world where the intellectuals' attempt to remake it runs into dead ends and frustration. The one redoubt in the modern scholar's effort to refashion the world is the academy, where teachers can fashion students along the lines of their anti-morality and anti-scholarship; where hermeneutics can trade in on the implicit nihilism of the surrounding culture; and where they can count on their colleagues who, after all, hold the immediate reins of power, not to hold them accountable; and where they can slowly erode what they regard

as a corrupt civilization—one dominated by capitalism and its toady religion—from the inside out.

And so we are in a new dark age, Greenblatt believes. As in ancient Greece and Rome where those who understood the real truth of human existence pursued pleasure and whiled away their days in blissful conversation with each other, so now it is the modern academic who will preserve learning and culture in the face of religious ignorance and persecution. Like Epicurus, they may require that their students memorize, recite, and unquestioningly repeat their dogmatisms, that they cease to think and only feel, a process of indoctrination the students will gratefully accept because it saves them the trouble of thinking and permits space for a libertine lifestyle. They may have to take liberties with the truth—for what, after all, is truth? They may have to be intellectually dishonest to argue for a vision of the moral life which encourages them to fill their short days with pleasure. But they will bear their endowed chairs, seven-figure incomes, and prestigious awards with the courage, repose, and equanimity always displayed by the persecuted friends of reason.