

The Swerve: How the Renaissance Began

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Author:

Stephen Greenblatt

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John Monfasani

This is an eccentric book. With grace and learning it tells the story of the discovery in Germany in 1417 of the masterpiece of Epicureanism – Lucretius’ poem *De Rerum Natura* of more than 7,000 lines distributed across six books – by the Italian Renaissance humanist Poggio Bracciolini with engrossing excursions into sundry topics here and there for entertainment and instruction. As its subtitle states, it purports to tell us how the Renaissance began. Yet nowhere does it do so. More oddly still, the subject which supplies the very title of the book, the swerve, the physical phenomenon excogitated by Epicurus to explain why atoms act randomly and differently from each other, plays no significant role in the story. As best as I can tell, a dubious premise and an unwarranted assumption underlie Greenblatt’s strange procedure.

The questionable premise is his full-throated Burckhardian, or, perhaps more accurately, Voltairean view of the Renaissance as an outburst of light after a long medieval darkness. This is nicely illustrated *inter alia* by Greenblatt’s description of the medieval mentality on pp. 14–6, ending: ‘Identity came with a precise, well-understood place in a chain of command and obedience’. He thus echoes Burckhardt’s equally sincere caricature of the poor benighted medievals as incapable of conceiving of themselves other than as part of some corporate structure (as opposed to us liberated modern individualists). It has been a while since I have seen a scholar so self-assuredly speak of the Middle Ages as, to put it in Gibbonian terms, the triumph of barbarism and religion (cf. p. 94, where Greenblatt ends his discussion of the murder of Hypatia). So whatever subverts the medieval regime is modern or leads to modernity. The atomism, the hedonism (even when correctly understood), the identification of religion as superstition, and the rejection of purpose and providence in this world of Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura* could all be only profoundly subversive. Consequently, the discovery of the *De Rerum Natura* made Poggio, its discoverer, ‘a midwife to modernity’

(p. 13).

The unwarranted assumption is that once the subversive poem of Lucretius was available it must have worked its magic and contributed in a central way to do the undoing of the medieval worldview and the ushering in of modernity. The problem is that Greenblatt has virtually no evidence to justify this assumption, while a massive amount exists for constructing a different story. Greenblatt acknowledges the paucity of evidence, but this fact seems not to have affected his belief in the amazing influence of Lucretius' poem. Lucretius exercised no demonstrable influence on Poggio nor on Niccolò Niccoli, to whom Poggio had sent his discovery and who seems to have been mainly responsible for the manuscript version that circulated in Italy. Indeed, one is hard put to find significant influence in Quattrocento Italy, no small problem for a poem that is supposed to have started the Renaissance. Worse, we do have 15th-century Epicurean apologists, namely, Cosma Raimondi (whom Greenblatt does not mention) and Lorenzo Valla, both of whom expounded Epicureanism without reference to *De Rerum Natura*. In fact, the main sources for knowledge of classical Epicureanism in the 15th century were Cicero's well-known dialogues *De Finibus* and *De Natura Deorum*, seconded by Lactantius' *Divine Institutes* and a new source, Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of the Philosophers*, translated by the Camaldulensian monk Ambrogio Traversari (d. 1439). From Wolfgang Bernard Fleischmann's article on Lucretius in the *Catalogus Translationum et Commentariorum* (2: 349–65), which is not listed in Greenblatt's bibliography, we know that the first commentary on Lucretius did not appear until 1511 and that up to 1600 28 editions were published in addition to two other commentaries, sure signs of scholarly interest (as are the 50 or so manuscripts), but numbers nonetheless that are totally dwarfed by the manuscripts, editions, and commentaries of other classical authors and texts in the Renaissance and in no way suggest the grand subversive influence posited by Greenblatt.

In this dearth of evidence, Greenblatt grasps at what come close to being straws (as did Alison Brown in her recent small book on Lucretius in Renaissance Florence (1)). A lecture course by the second-rate humanist Marcello Virgilio Adriani in the 1490s, a transcription of the text of Lucretius by Machiavelli (in his student years?) without proof that the text influenced him, and occasional references and allusions by various authors, including the suspected neopagan poet Michael Tarchaniota Marullus (d. 1500), are all interesting, and yet meagre indications for a classical author of such supposed significance as Lucretius if one is trying to build a case for a subversive movement of Lucretian Epicureanism. In a way, things get worse in the 16th century. Not only did the ultra-orthodox Thomas More make his Utopians Epicureans without the least obeisance to Lucretius, but the great Erasmus also added insult to injury by expressing several times his appreciation of Epicureanism while ignoring Lucretius entirely (it is not even clear that he, probably the best read classical scholar of the day, even studied Lucretius, though he surely must have dipped into him). Greenblatt is reduced to making Giordano Bruno, burned at the stake in Rome in 1600, the culminating hero of the tale, even though much of Bruno's physics coheres badly with Epicureanism (e. g., Bruno rejected the Epicurean void for a pervasive ether) and even though we have known since 1942, from the summary of the inquisitional *processo* against Bruno published by Angelo Mercati, that he was executed for his religious heresies and not his scientific ideas.(2) Bruno is a martyr for the freedom of expression, not for science, and certainly not for Epicureanism. It is true that in the case of Galileo there is evidence that at least one inquisitor found his atomism suspicious, but, as Greenblatt himself admits (p. 306 n.), historians of science have not accepted Pietro Redondi's argument that atomism was the cause of Galileo's condemnation; nor was it an original factor in Galileo's break-through theory of inertia.

As already noted, the Epicurean swerve is strangely absent in Greenblatt's narrative other than as a symbol of Epicureanism (exemplified by his chapter ten, entitled 'Swerves', where he talks about Savonarola, Lorenzo Valla, Thomas More, Giordano Bruno, and others, but not *sensu stricto* the swerve). Instead we get engrossing accounts of the horrific burning at the stake of Jerome of Prague at the Council of Constance, of the goings-on of Poggio and his associates in the Papal Curia, and of other topics that add nothing beyond color to the thesis of the book. This is a pity because there is much Greenblatt should have, and could have, talked about which would have significantly enhanced his twin foci, the *fortuna* of Epicureanism in general and of the *De Rerum Natura* in particular, and the breakdown of the medieval worldview by the introduction of subversive classical texts. I shall limit myself to two large omissions.

Nowhere does Greenblatt give us a discussion of classical Platonism and Neoplatonism. This omission ends up distorting his presentation of the declining fortunes of Epicureanism in late antiquity. What should have been noted is that Platonism, or, more properly, Neoplatonism, swept the field in late antiquity. Epicureanism and its texts fell out of favor and, consequently, into extinction, not just because of religious hostility, but as much or more because of the fact that virtually all pagan intellectuals of philosophic bent had become Platonists and, for that reason, detested Epicureanism. These pagan Platonists were hardly friends of Christianity. One of them, Porphyry, wrote what seems to have been a devastatingly effective debunking of Christianity, against which Church Fathers railed and which they eventually successfully suppressed. In 529 the Emperor Justinian the Great closed the Neoplatonic Academy in Athens because of its paganism. St. Augustine (d. 430), himself a leading Christian Neoplatonist, remarked on the virtual death of Epicureanism and Stoicism in his day. In antiquity, texts not read, studied, or re-copied from generation to generation inevitably suffered material death as their ignored exemplars suffered destruction one way or another. Greenblatt implies (pp. 81–2) that at best only a portion of the literary output of the best known authors of antiquity survives. This is not quite true. We seem to have everything that Plato published, as well as everything that the founder of Neoplatonism, Plotinus, published through the editorial work of Porphyry, in addition to an impressive body of late antique Neoplatonic commentaries on Plato and Aristotle. Indeed, Aristotle largely owes his survival to his appropriation by the Neoplatonists in their schools. Alexandria housed one of the greatest schools of the Neoplatonists. It would have helped our historical understanding if, in narrating the murder of Hypatia by a Christian mob, Greenblatt had mentioned that she was a notable member of the Neoplatonic school of Alexandria and therefore, by definition, no friend of Epicureanism. The preferences and prejudices of pagan Neoplatonism played a mighty role in the choices late antiquity made concerning which texts would survive into the Middle Ages. Nor did Christian texts fare much better in the changing tastes of the times. In his well known *Bibliotheca*, the 9th-century *erudit* Photius talks about a great number of texts that he read, many of which have been lost since the 9th century. The majority of these lost texts are Christian rather than pagan.

The other startling omission in Greenblatt's book is any discussion of the Sceptics and scepticism. The Sceptics were one of the three grand philosophic schools of the Hellenistic period. They revelled in destroying the dogmas of the Stoics and Epicureans. They, and not the Epicureans, were the arch-subversives. And if at the end of antiquity Augustine considered the Stoics and Epicureans spent forces, he still felt it worth his while to write a book in refutation of the Sceptics (*Contra Academicos*). In a sense, if Greenblatt wanted to write about the subversion of medieval verities, he picked the wrong horse. He should have written about the recovery of classical sceptical texts and the spread of scepticism in the Renaissance. Fortunately for us, someone has already done that, and brilliantly so, namely, Richard Popkin in his *History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (in the first edition the second part of the title ran: '*from Erasmus to Descartes*').⁽³⁾ Popkin shows how the first enthusiastic students of Sextus Empiricus and his compilations of sceptical arguments were fideistic Italians around the turn of the 16th century, who wanted to confound what they viewed as the neopaganism of contemporary philosophers and scientists, that is, the Aristotelians. The popularity of scepticism really took off with the translation of Sextus into Latin in the second half of the 16th century and his appropriation by the Catholic Counter-Reformation in France in its battle against the Huguenots (classical sceptical arguments easily expose and destroy the subjectivism underpinning Protestantism). But soon enough a weapon used in defence of Catholicism was turned against

Catholicism itself and against pretty much any other form of dogmatic certitude, including science. The popularization of scepticism in the later 16th and 17th centuries was a development in which Michel Montaigne had a large hand because of the great influence of his *Apology for Raymond Sebond* (something unmentioned by Greenblatt when discussing Montaigne and his clear interest in Lucretius). It would lead to the famous *crise pyrrhonienne* in intellectual circles in France and provide the background to Descartes' attempt in mid-century to overcome the sceptical crisis, which is usually taken as the start of modern philosophy. How the story played out after Descartes is not our concern here, but it is worth noting that the Cartesian settlement, as it were, rescued science and left religion dangling, setting up nicely the Enlightenment worldview. In short, in showing how a set of classical texts undermined and transformed traditional educated opinion, Popkin achieved what Greenblatt promises. Popkin wrote a work of serious historical scholarship. In comparison, Greenblatt has penned an entertaining but wrong-headed belletristic tale.

Notes

1. Alison Brown, *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge, 2010). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Of the 30 headings under which he was questioned, only two were strictly scientific. One was on the eternity of the world, an old chestnut from the Church's centuries-old battle with Averroism. The other was on the plurality of worlds, which involved a discussion not only of the eternity of the world again, but also of another traditional issue, the infinity of the world, a notion raised by Aristotle and discussed by his commentators. In the 15th century, the philosopher Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa posited an indefinite universe, as Bruno well knew. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Richard Popkin, *History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (2nd ed., Oxford, 2003) [Back to \(3\)](#)

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Historical Novel Society

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[3] <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-swerve-how-the-renaissance-began-by-stephen-greenblatt-2362956.html>

- [4] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/8765691/The-Swerve-Howthe-Renaissance-Began-by-Stephan-Greenblatt-review.html>
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