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Abstract

In his book, *The Swerve*, on the re-discovery of Lucretius at the very end of the Middle Ages, Stephen Greenblatt wants us to believe that Lucretius's epic poem *De Rerum Natura* initiated the Renaissance and ultimately made the world modern. I agree with very little of his broad-brush history, but to win our assent, he creates a fable of a dark medieval world being enlightened by the genius of a Roman poet far ahead of his own time. Greenblatt wants to re-circulate Lucretius's Epicurean philosophy to a wide modern audience hoping it will enable a widespread epicurean happiness i. e. lessen anxiety and encourage tranquility of mind. But is Greenblatt's version of this ancient philosophy likely to make modern Americans, much less the world, happier?

Introduction

Stephen Greenblatt's *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (2011) has won best-seller acclaim and garnered several prestigious awards: the National Book Award for Non-fiction, the Pulitzer Prize for Non-fiction, and the Modern Language Association's James Russell Lowell Prize. Most of *The Swerve*'s reviews were laudatory. Since then, some articulate critical reviews have appeared, inviting further investigation.

Greenblatt tells two stories: the first, of a 15th-century book hunter who by chance found a manuscript of a 50 BCE epic poem, *De Rerum Natura* (DRN), written by Lucretius, a Roman disciple of Epicurus who lived and wrote his philosophy in Greek more than 200 years earlier. In his second story, Greenblatt claims that Lucretius's majestic epic, which explicated Greek Epicureanism in stunning Latin verse, instigated the Renaissance and, through its influence, made the world modern.

A complex character is developed for Poggio Bracciolini, the scribe, papal secretary, and book finder of Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*, whom Greenblatt presents in thick historical detail along with a small circle of 15th-century contemporaries within the Papal Curia. (Burrow) It is a tribute to Greenblatt's skillful representation of Poggio that virtually all the reviewers I read praised the micro-history of Poggio. Poggio's 15th century life and milieu are foregrounded for about two thirds of *The Swerve*, whereas, the last third of Greenblatt's book more broadly discusses centuries of human history. Greenblatt's critics have unsurprisingly focused on his sweeping macro-history that spans some 16 centuries, swerving from the ancient world to the Middle Ages, then 180 degrees

to the Renaissance and straight on to the Modern era. The *Swerve*'s last chapter of only 20 pages bears the heavy burden of justifying the book's bold subtitle: "How the World Became Modern" (in the UK edition, "How the Renaissance Began"). To accomplish this, Greenblatt punctuates the past six centuries into time-lapse incidents of great men echoing a few Lucretian words, phrases and ideas that suggest Lucretian influence. An obvious problem with Greenblatt's choices to represent those exposed to Lucretius who made the world modern is that they are nearly all westerners and men: Botticelli, Machiavelli, Erasmus, Montaigne, Raphael, Moore, Spenser, Donne, Bruno, Shakespeare, Galileo, Bacon, Boyle, Moliere, Hutchinson, Newton, Jefferson, and Darwin.

I admire Lucretius and his *De Rerum Natura* and have been a student of Epicureanism for several decades. I do agree with Greenblatt that historians have underestimated Epicurean influence. Some individual writers, artists, and thinkers throughout Europe during the medieval period and the Renaissance showed an interest in Epicureanism which grew from individuals and small groups to much larger numbers of people in England and France during the latter half of the 17th and early years of the 18th centuries. However, Epicurean influence was not permanent, as Greenblatt assumes, but waned as the influence of science waxed. I do not agree with Greenblatt about Lucretius causing the Renaissance and making the world modern. When reading Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, I am never reminded of Lucretius, but when I read Enlightenment philosophers, such as Voltaire, their deism echoes Lucretian gods. Their attempts to sweep away superstitions and traditional myths remind me of Lucretius, as does their empiricism, their faith in reason and secular materialism.

Had Greenblatt discussed the Enlightenment, his readers would have realized that Lucretian Epicureanism was far more influential on the Enlightenment than on the Renaissance. And that is why the Enlightenment is excluded from *The Swerve* except for one reference to the skepticism of "Enlightenment figures." (p. 262) I am not suggesting that Epicureanism "caused" the Enlightenment, but that it seems more likely to have influenced that historical period, rather than to have caused the Renaissance. Alexander Pope's "Essay on Man" is more obviously influenced by Lucretius than is anything written by Shakespeare. Indeed, I disagree with Greenblatt's whole thesis. A book by Greenblatt explaining how Lucretius's Epicureanism helped influence the Enlightenment would have interested historians and been much easier to argue. However, such a thesis would have suggested that the majestic Renaissance was not the beginning of the modern era, as Greenblatt has always maintained, but the culmination of the Middle Ages; and that the early modern period began with the Enlightenment.

Most critical reviewers have accused Greenblatt of error without fully considering his purpose in writing *The Swerve*. By contrast, I want to understand why he may have chosen the writing strategies he did and what his choices tell us about his reasons for writing. I do not assume, as some critics suggest, that Greenblatt's choices are inaccuracies, or that he did not know better. I believe that Greenblatt consciously emphasized, de-emphasized, or even ignored not only the Enlightenment, but major events, alternative interpretations, nuances, and complexities. Instead of judging

scholarly or theoretical correctness, or condemning prize committees, I would rather understand why *The Swerve* garnered so much approval.

Totalizing the Middle Ages

Much scholarly work during the past fifty years has expanded our knowledge of the complexity of that millennium referred to as “The Middle Ages.” In contemporary scholarly circles the Middle Ages is no longer totalized as a dull and stagnant transition between the classical world and its rebirth in the Renaissance, a period of religious intolerance and creative constipation that suddenly bloomed into an era of creativity. Today we are more likely to see scholars finding the seeds of Renaissance flowers within the Middle Ages, or arguing that the impetus for the rise of European science, for instance, was to be found in medieval Christianity, as did James Hannam in *God’s Philosophers: How the Medieval World Laid the Foundations of Modern Science* (2009). Yet, as several reviewers complain, Greenblatt represents the Middle Ages in a fashion more common in the 18th and 19th centuries (O’Neill, Hinch, Baerista, Monfasani, Miller), with arresting, highly visual images of heretics burned at the stake and bodies bloody with self-flagellation. Such images intensify with repetition to become symbols of a medieval culture of pain. (Quint)

Critical reviewers have also shown how Greenblatt ignores or de-emphasizes medieval creative writers and artists, as well as the marvelous medieval cathedral architecture (O’Neill) illuminated with stained glass windows. The creators that Greenblatt does emphasize, such as Botticelli and Shakespeare, are the best of the Renaissance, while he de-emphasizes great medieval writers such as Dante and remarkable medieval artists such as Bosch and Giotto. A short discussion of the medieval literature of Chaucer or Boccaccio would have made the representation of a pleasure-hating Middle Ages hard to sustain, which suggests that Greenblatt’s totalizations are purposeful. He intended to darken the Middle Ages and brighten the Renaissance. There was pleasure-seeking in the medieval era that we are not shown: “Where is the rollicking bawdy of the Goliardic poems or riotous carnivals and festivals that marked the medieval cycle of the year? Where is the pageantry of feasting and tournaments? Where is *Le Roman de la Rose* and the whole, vast culture and literature of *amor courtois*?” (O’Neill) *The Swerve* represents the Middle Ages as lacking curiosity. Even the monks copying classical texts supposedly didn’t read or discuss them because Greenblatt seems to assume that the monastic library ban on “curiosity” meant intellectual curiosity, when it more likely meant a ban on gossiping. (O’Neill) As Anthony Grafton wrote in his kind review of Greenblatt, “*The Swerve* is not always as accurate as one would wish.” (Baerista) Why does Greenblatt sometimes allow inaccuracies when he surely knows better? Does he assume most of his readers won’t know better?

I would like to add several examples well enough known for at least the past eight decades to scholars of Dante and the medieval period to suggest how different might have been Greenblatt’s representation of the Middle Ages had they not been excluded from *The Swerve*. Some of the culturally diverse ideas

circulating in Europe during the medieval millennium were introduced from Islamic literature. For example, in *The Divine Comedy* (probably written between 1308 and 1321) Dante's representation of Limbo was new to Christianity because he imported the concept from Muslim literature. Dante's wide learning, directed by his scholarly guardian, teacher, and friend, Brunetto Latini, apparently included familiarity with Islamic legends such as Mohamed's Nocturnal Journeys through hell and purgatory, the Isra, merged with legends from the Miraj about Mohamed's visit to paradise. Dante fused some of these texts with their many variations into his own Christian understanding of the afterlife. There are parallels between Mohamed's and Dante's being lost in a dark wood and being impeded from ascending a mountain by allegorical beasts, and the introduction of a guide on a journey through the Inferno, the Purgatorio, and the Paradiso with Limbo at its border or edge. Limbo contains the righteous souls who died before there was any path to Paradise or as innocent infants. Dante adapts this unique place with its Islamic imagery of seven walls and seven gates into his Christian topography of the after-life. (Assin, pp. 81–84), Dante wove classical literature, the Jewish Old Testament, and Islamic literature together with Christianity into a universal epic of human life after death. His purpose was, apparently, as catholic as it was Catholic. Such creative innovation derived from a cross between Christianity and the literatures of non-Christian, even a non-western culture, should not have happened considering *The Swerve's* representation of the dogmatic and uncurious culture of the Middle Ages.

Islamic literature in Italy was probably emanating from the brilliant Sicilian court of the learned Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II (Emperor from 1220 to 1250), where he welcomed and supported a number of Arabic scholars, who had left the declining Byzantine Empire, to translate important Islamic texts. Frederick was at least as interesting and well educated, he spoke six languages (including Arabic), as any later Renaissance ruler. A literary form, usually associated with the Renaissance – the sonnet – seems to have been invented at Frederick's court in the 13th century. The Middle Ages was a more interesting period than most of us yet know. We hear nothing of Frederick II, nothing of medieval interest in Islamic literature, and little of Dante in *The Swerve*.

Witch hunts and some of the worst of the inquisition took place during the Renaissance rather than the Middle Ages, yet no witch hunts are allowed to take place in *The Swerve's* representation of the supposedly joyous, pleasure-loving Renaissance. Not only is the Renaissance simplified and totalized in *The Swerve*, but the modern world is totalized as well. Greenblatt talks easily about a modern world view as though there were only one, when a moment's thought reminds us that the world is so complex and diverse that many contemporary views exist, globally, and these are, at times, changing. Even, talking of Epicurean influence in Europe as a whole creates problems because different countries, and even city states, had different patterns of Epicurean influence at different times. With his rampant lumping and totalizing, what Greenblatt knows well enough to manipulate brilliantly is that "... notions such as the Middle Ages and the Renaissance are little better than shorthand for arbitrarily bracketed periods of time in which certain changes in the pattern of human life are interpreted as significant and others are not."

(Hinch)

Greenblatt's Other Retro Writing Strategies

Greenblatt's critics have shown how one retro writing strategy – totalizing – has been used in *The Swerve*, and they point out that he employs several more: for instance, presenting historical change as a swift “revolution” or “swerve” from one set of cultural assumptions to its opposite; tracing a march of progress toward our present pinnacle of wisdom; using a single-source cause to produce a marvelous effect; the miraculous discovery in the nick of time; and only a “Great Man” ahead of his time can drive history. (O'Neill) These strategies are traditionally used in writing folk tales or fables.

There is a strident assumption of cultural progress in Greenblatt's historical narrative of the triumph of Lucretian materialist ideas in the Renaissance in contrast to the religious Middle Ages. “Institutional Christianity is the villain of the piece, and it is caricatured, in the book's most outré pages, as a cult of bodily pain – in order to contrast it more starkly with the Epicurean ideal not of pleasure as such, but of absence of pain.” (Quint) *The Swerve* uses progressive history writing with the re-discovery of Lucretius as a single source causing the Renaissance and, subsequently, causing modern science and secular humanism. Such single-source cause and effect progressivism was not a feature of Greenblatt's early work, and it is eschewed by most contemporary scholars and cultural theorists, particularly New Historicists (a group of theorists which Greenblatt is usually credited with founding). Interestingly, the thesis claimed in his title and asserted from the beginning of the book is disclaimed after the assertions and the impression has been firmly implanted. (O'Neill, Kirsch) Here is Greenblatt using the soft pedal: “One poem by itself was certainly not responsible for an entire intellectual, moral and social transformation – no single work was, let alone one that for centuries could not be spoken about freely in public. But this particular ancient book, suddenly returning to view, made a difference.” (Greenblatt, p. 11, O'Neill)

Of course it made a difference; who would deny that? But the impression that DRN caused not only the Renaissance but ultimately the modern world had already been made. It is his many sotto voce disclaimers after the swelling fortissimo of his extravagant assertions and suggestions (O'Neill) that tell us Greenblatt knows better, and that the retro rhetoric which he employs is a deliberate and conscious construction. Why does Greenblatt choose to frame his narrative in this way? One critical reviewer suggests: “*The Swerve* is a story about transformation and triumph. And without a caricatured Middle Ages of self-hating religious dogmatists Greenblatt has no clean-cut transformation and no clean-cut triumph.” (Hinch)

Several of *The Swerve*'s critics point out that there has been not one, but many ‘re-births’ of classical literature, one of which took place in the late eighth and ninth century and is known as the ‘Carolingian Renaissance.’ In a nutshell, the ‘Carolingian Renaissance’ denotes a general revival of intellectual culture in the Frankish empire that had its epicenter in Charlemagne's court in Aachen. Besides giving rise to the direct

forerunner to most Western styles of handwriting, in form of the Carolingian minuscule, this early medieval 'rebirth' of European learning also led to a greatly increased rate of manuscript production and dissemination, which included many important works from classical antiquity. (Baerista) A classical text, possibly once removed, copied at Charlemagne's court sometime in the 9th century was the one discovered in a German monastery in 1417 by Poggio. (Baerista)

Greenblatt finally acknowledges the existence of several 9th-century copies of DRN extant in 1417, after creating the impression that Poggio found the only remaining text of Lucretius, whose DRN would otherwise have been lost to us forever. (O'Neill) This strategy serves not only to render the narrative of Poggio's rediscovery more dramatic and almost miraculous, it also tends to reinforce the cultural "darkness" of the medieval world that Greenblatt is constructing to contrast with the cultural incandescence of the Lucretian swerve to the Renaissance. (Hinch, O'Neill) Why might Greenblatt have chosen to de-emphasize such information? Possibly because dwelling on earlier medieval "Renaissances" might have encouraged readers to question his big swerve from medieval to Lucretian Renaissance. However, before DRN was rediscovered the rebirth of the classics was already in full swing as we can infer from the existence of avid classical book hunters and antiquity collectors (like Niccolo Niccoli) among Poggio's colleagues. This suggests the impetus for the Renaissance must have been in the Middle Ages rather than in Lucretius (Baerista).

Although Lucretius is surely its brightest star, The Swerve is all about Great European Men. Except for Hypatia, Hutchinson, several self-flagellating nuns, Poggio's mistress of many years, and his new 18-year-old wife, we hear little at all about women. Larger, non-great-man forces, such as trade, industry, the growth of cities and more efficient transportation seem to have nothing to do with helping to launch the Renaissance. The only industry we are shown in Greenblatt's transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance and the modern world is the monastery scriptoriums. A critical reviewer suggests that Greenblatt misinterprets them partly because he reads Poggio's letters about the monks literally, without considering that Poggio's view of monks and monastery libraries may have been considerably biased. (O'Neill) Poggio doesn't see (and Greenblatt doesn't want to emphasize) that without those monks, at whose uncurious toil we are invited to sneer, Poggio could never have become the great man book hunter that we admire. A sotto voce admission of this fact appears in The Swerve (Greenblatt, p. 37) after discussing medieval monks' laziness and lack of curiosity.

Ordinary merchants, guilds, money lenders, wool spinners, shepherds, lace makers, and sailors are hardly mentioned, and any part they may have had in building larger cities and the improving economy that helped fund secular portrait painting and musical composition is not considered. Expanding Renaissance economies could support more artists than the Middle Ages could have supported. It is doubtful that writers like Dante, Chaucer, Petrarch, and Boccaccio were less good than Renaissance writers. It may have been that there were simply more artists of all kinds supported by patrons as markets quickened and wealth grew, and that was partly the result of a lot of small improvements

in navigation, wool production, ship building, and quickening trade. In *The Swerve*, Lucretius, alone, seems to have caused the Renaissance.

While Greenblatt is celebrating Poggio's rise to Great Man status, ordinary people such as monks are portrayed as grumbling drones who have no curiosity about the books they are copying. We hear, for instance, that the beautiful handwriting that Poggio masters in order to help make his scribal career possible was a variation of Carolingian minuscule invented by an anonymous scribe or scribes in the 9th century at Charlemagne's court in Aachen. (Greenblatt, pp. 115, 116) But Greenblatt gives all the creative credit to Poggio and his colleagues, such as Niccolli, for developing the script. He includes two beautiful pages of manuscript in Poggio's and Niccolli's hand so we can admire them, yet gives us no information on how or why such a beautiful script had been invented by 9th-century drones in the dark Ages. *The Swerve* characteristically ignores or discounts anything that Great Men don't do. *The Swerve*'s great man window on history certainly narrows its view. However, we need to remember that using a great man strategy may not be a mistake on the part of Greenblatt. Giving many people credit for helping Poggio and Lucretius would burden and slow the narrative. Using a great man writing strategy is shorthand for all the people that have a hand in bringing about historical change. Greenblatt's use of it avoids blurring our focus and diminishing the achievement of Poggio and the power of Lucretius whose elevation seems to be a major purpose underlying the writing of *The Swerve*.

Important ideas that might well have been included in a narrative of the past six centuries of cultural evolution are excluded or soft pedaled by Greenblatt. We are told little about the fact that medieval scholars had never been without knowledge of Epicureanism. (Monfasani) For example, Greenblatt quotes a letter of Poggio's, written a little over half a year before he rediscovers Lucretius, where Poggio characterizes fun-loving, mixed gendered, and nearly naked German bathers at the Baden spa as being "Epicurean." (Greenblatt, p. 176) And Shakespeare and his contemporaries, without ever having read Lucretius, could have known Epicureanism from reading Cicero's and Plutarch's discussions condemning it. (Monfasani) An English grammar school education in the latter half of the 16th century taught enough Latin to read Diogenes Laertius's exposition of Epicurus's philosophy that included his major ideas and several of his original letters. Shakespeare didn't have to read Lucretius to know about "atomies."

Greenblatt barely discusses the very slow understanding and acceptance of some Epicurean ideas and omits from discussion other philosophies including Platonic, neo-Platonic, Stoic, Skeptic, and Aristotelian ideas circulating with Epicureanism in European culture. (Monfasani) All these philosophies, and many more non-western ideas, have influenced modern culture but we hear little or nothing about them in *The Swerve*. For the sake of keeping his narrative uncluttered, I can understand why Greenblatt avoids the complex evolution of Epicureanism in Europe. For example, during and after the English Civil War Epicureanism became politicized with a number of prominent royalists embracing some Epicurean ideas that puritans generally detested. (Smith, pp. 189 ff.). Focusing on Lucretius without discussing other sources of Epicurean philosophy may distort the history of the circulation of Epicureanism during the Middle Ages and

Renaissance but it surely avoids distraction from the dramatic tale of Poggio's miraculous unleashing the power of DRN. Is Greenblatt's narrative more important to him than his history? Indeed, it seems so.

Turning Lucretius into Neo-Lucretius

Critical reviewers have pointed out a number of anomalies in Greenblatt's exposition of Lucretius, Greenblatt excludes some important Epicurean ideas, such as the goal of ataraxia (Meis) and includes a few ideas with which Lucretius would hardly have agreed, such as the joy of erotic love (Quint), and wonder and curiosity about nature and the world. (Meis, Quint) Ataraxia was a mental state of indifference, an attitude past caring about anything in the world, even life or death. It meant living a simple, retiring, almost anaesthetized, life far from ambition, politics, or the madding crowd. "Greenblatt omits to mention the ethical doctrine ataraxia, which was central to Epicureanism and rooted in the lifeworld of the Hellenistic milieu from which it emerged." (Meis) Ataraxia is very far from popular American ideas of the desirability of a competitive career and an actively engaged life. "Live unknown!" taught both Epicurus and Lucretius. Maybe he was a good Epicurean and that is why we know so little about Lucretius, except for DRN, the epic masterpiece he wrote to explain Epicureanism to his friend Ennius that influenced not only Vergil but many other Roman writers.

Greenblatt briefly discusses a famous passage in DRN where Lucretius describes what most of us would think of as a tragic scene of watching a ship offshore in a storm about to sink and drown the unfortunate on board. (Greenblatt, pp. 195 f.) Yet the point of this Lucretian parable is that watching this scene should not be tragic for a good Epicurean, because he or she is past caring about life or death which is but a shifting of atoms. (Meis) "Death is nothing to us," taught Epicurus. Achieving ataraxia seems so strange today that Greenblatt says he is disturbed by this ship-sinking passage yet excludes any explication of ataraxia. Perhaps, in this, as in other anachronisms in Greenblatt's presentation of DRN, he wants to cleanse it of anything that might seem alien to modern culture in order to suggest that Lucretius's ideas were so far ahead of his time that they are almost identical to modern thinking, "Coming back to Lucretius is thus coming back to ourselves." (Meis)

Lucretius offers a jaundiced view of erotic love and romance in DRN because, "love is the source of care, which is what the anaesthetized Epicurean seeks above all to avoid." (Quint) "Greenblatt also insists on an erotic happiness that is hard to find in Lucretius's poem." (Quint) "In spite of its magnificent opening hymn to Venus as the creative principle in nature, *De Rerum Natura* treats sex as a bodily compulsion and does its best to disenchant it, comparing the mutual pleasure of men and women in coitus to dogs unable to uncouple themselves." (Quint) "Romantic love is quite simply madness: the Latin terms Lucretius uses to describe it, *rabies* and *furor*, do not need translation." (Quint)

Clearly, much of Lucretius's Epicurean philosophy does not easily fit modern culture. So Greenblatt has quietly changed Lucretius into neo-Lucretius. "According to Greenblatt, the Renaissance humanists discovered a relentless curiosity about the building blocks of nature in Lucretius's poem, which helped rekindle curiosity about the world at large." (Meis) Were Lucretius's dogmatic assertions about atoms and void the beginning of modern science? Lucretius and Epicurus were not curious about their atoms, whereas scientists were. Greenblatt is suggesting that Lucretius is open-minded and moved by the spirit of scientific wonder and curiosity just as scientists are today. However, he defines Lucretius's word for wonder quite differently from the way in which Lucretius and other Epicureans would have meant it. (Quint, Meis). "Lucretius does speak about wonder, but that wonder is not meant to stimulate further engagement with the world. Instead it is meant to stun us into inactivity, to encourage us to hold ourselves at a distance from the strange and wondrous things that come from the random interactions of atoms in the void." (Meis) Atoms, void, and chance swerves were all that Epicureans needed to know in order to avoid caring any longer about anything happening in nature.

Greenblatt simply invests Lucretius with curiosity without any supporting evidence. Perhaps he does this to suggest that Lucretius was the father of modern science. However, Lucretius, like other Epicureans of his era, was not a curious naturalist but expounding a doctrine, though with a honeyed tongue and for a worthy cause – to impart teachings that would, as Epicureans assumed, free all humans from the burden of a culturally induced fear of death which they taught was the primary cause of evil in the world. Epicurean philosophy was "a therapy for the fear of death." (Kirsch) "The attitude of modern science is utterly foreign to anything argued by Epicurus or Lucretius. The idea that we could "improve" nature and thereby improve the lot of mankind is one they never even consider." (Meis) Nevertheless, Greenblatt consistently uses the words "science" and "physics," to refer to Lucretius's materialist doctrines.

I should like to offer some further thoughts on the difference between early science and Lucretian Epicureanism. Since doctrines do not change easily while scientific concepts can, science continued to evolve and its influence on the modern mind continued to grow while the Lucretian influence had diminished by the end of the 18th century. In other words, the history of the influence of Lucretius on modern science has been transitional and temporal rather than permanent. DRN did include some physical dogmas that early scientists may, or may not, have used as sources of hypotheses which they could test and further question. In this way Epicurean physical doctrines were probably important only in the early phases of several modern sciences, (astronomy, physics, chemistry, and biology). For example, Epicurean influences in England peaked from about 1650 to about 1750. During this period, a number of members of the British Royal Society, for example, had adopted some Epicurean ideas and were difficult to distinguish from members now recognized as early scientists. The brief period during which Epicurean influence was strongest in England, because of its seeming corroboration by scientists such as Kepler, Galileo, Boyle, and Newton, soon ended as science continued to evolve along its own unique path and became more and more influential in European intellectual circles. Among French intellectuals, Epicurean ideas

were an influence in the 17th century until superseded among mathematicians and scientists by the ideas and coordinate mathematics of Descartes.

Some Epicurean ideas lasted longer than others. In England, although his dogmas about atoms and the physical universe had already been outmoded, Lucretius's idea of evolution still remained influential. Darwin's grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, was an amateur botanist who, like Lucretius, wrote his long treatise on evolution in epic verse. His *The Temple of Nature* (1803), originally titled *The Origin of Society*, traced a Lucretian-like concept of evolution from microorganisms to human society. His grandson soon left that relatively sketchy Lucretian idea of evolution far behind in his *Origin of Species* (1859). Charles Darwin's scientific theory of evolution ended further influence of the Lucretian concept. Although, remarkably, Lucretian evolution had held the interest of a number of naturalists nineteen hundred years after it was written, until Darwin published in mid-19th century. *De Rerum Natura* was ingenious and had, indeed, been influential. The big difference was that Darwin's evolution was not an unchanging doctrine but biological science that was meant to be tested, questioned, added to, or amended.

The theory of evolution has continued to evolve by being merged with Mendelian genetics at the beginning of the previous century and later, after the discovery of DNA in mid 20th century, with molecular biology. Although the general theory has stood the test of time, parts continue to be modified today, for instance, biologists Stephen Jay Gould and Niles Eldridge questioned widely accepted neo-Darwinian assumptions that evolution works slowly, one (or few) adaptation at a time, and hypothesized that the evolutionary pattern for many species was lack of any change during huge sweeps of time until very suddenly (in biological time) a new and different biological form was produced. Evolution sometimes could be revolution. The term "punctuated equilibrium" was coined to describe this process of revolutionary evolution. Other biologists soon accepted the idea that punctuated equilibrium did accurately describe the evolution of some species, whereas the slow process of small successive adaptations still adequately described the pattern of evolution of some other species. During the past decade, geneticists studying what they call "epiphenomena," have shown small changes in genes that appear to be modified by use, or another way of looking at this is to say that some species, including humans, have inherited a genetic flexibility that allows some of their inherited genes to undergo modification during their lifetime.

Nowhere in *The Swerve* does Greenblatt explain how Epicurean ideology about the physical world became modern science and technology. He simply elides what he consistently refers to as Lucretian "science" into what we mean today when we refer to science. The problem with this elision is that Epicureans were not open minded, flexible, and curious about the precise workings of nature, they were ideologues who thought they knew enough about random atomic swerves to stop being curious about nature. By the early 17th century, scientists such as Kepler and Galileo had overturned the Aristotelian view of separate kinds of physics: one for the heavens and a different one on earth. Perhaps, unintentionally, their science corroborated Epicurean doctrine in showing that the same forces operated in both outer space and on earth. Boyle was a devout Christian

and hardly an Epicurean yet his atomistic gas pressure laws seemed to corroborate Epicurean atomic doctrine. Boyle may have used ancient assertions of the existence of atoms as a hypothesis that he tested in his lab and developed into scientific laws, but this does not mean that he had become Lucretian or that his scientific gas laws were similar to Epicurean dogma about atoms. Newton's apple falling to earth due to the same force of gravitation that held our moon in orbit around earth, as well as a planet in orbit around the sun, also might have appeared to be corroborating the Epicurean doctrine of the same basic forces operating throughout the universe. Newton may have used the Epicurean universal force dogma in framing his gravitation hypothesis, yet he might just as likely have had in mind the work of Kepler and Galileo who had shown that the same forces that operated on earth could be seen working throughout the solar system. In any case, the sciences of astronomy, chemistry, and physics were growing and changing while the physical doctrines of Epicurus and Lucretius were left behind.

Since the first half of the 18th century, Lucretian Epicureanism has not been nearly as influential in the world as has been modern science and technology. Following Epicurus, Lucretius makes categorical statements about nature, which he insists are universal truths; whereas science eschews categorical or universal assertions so that any of its assertions can be amended and superseded because of new evidence. Greenblatt's view of science as a Lucretian legacy not only distorts Lucretius but masks what is new and unprecedented about modern science: that it can borrow an idea from anywhere so long as it is framed as a hypothesis that is capable of being falsified when it is tested, according to Karl Popper in *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1959). This ongoing modifiability has become a way of accelerating knowledge and innovation, which has not only improved many lives but that, together with its related fields of technology and engineering, has produced more and more economic growth. This ever increasing surplus wealth that the pursuit of science made possible has introduced something new and consequential into the world.

A Fable to Resurrect Lucretius in the Modern World

Why does Greenblatt employ outmoded strategies of writing history and interpret Lucretius by fitting him to the modern world without reference to the ancient context in which he lived and thought? Several critical reviewers sensed that *The Swerve* was a kind of creative fiction rather than history. One reviewer assumed that Greenblatt wrote the book intending to craft a bestseller. (Baerista) Others likened his book to historical fiction novels such as those of Umberto Eco (Dresler), or detective thrillers like those of Dan Brown. (Jackson) Another critic likened the brilliant Renaissance emerging from the dark ages to the kind of myth-making practiced by Kenneth Clark in his very popular TV series on the history of art called "Civilization" in the 1960s. (Miller) Several critics referred to *The Swerve* as a "fable" or "tall tale." (Hinch, O'Neill, Quint)

I would like to pursue these suggestions further. Greenblatt is highly sophisticated about modern cultural theory, so he must have had an over-riding purpose in ignoring some of the most important principles that cultural theorists have learned over the second

half of the 20th century. The retro writing strategies which Greenblatt employs, outmoded as they may seem to a contemporary scholar, are, indeed, used to craft an intense and emotional fable with only some attention to historical accuracy. The pattern of Greenblatt's exclusions and inclusions suggest that he has designed the most powerful and compelling fable possible in order to re-circulate neo-Lucretianism to the largest possible audience of contemporary readers.

Yet, *The Swerve* is a more serious fable than most critics have considered. There is desire and feeling behind Greenblatt's own joy in embracing neo-Lucretianism and altruistically wishing to share with others what he has found so deeply satisfying. He shares with us his memories of his mother, so filled with the fear of death that she could hardly enjoy the ironically long life she led. Lucretius's philosophy might have granted her a more tranquil and perhaps richer life. It also seems to have changed Greenblatt's own life. Repeating his Epicurean mantra of "atoms and void, and nothing else" (Greenblatt, p. 75) may have helped cleanse his life of trivial doubts and pursuits. Greenblatt may, like Lucretius, be engaging his considerable literary talents – his honeyed tongue – in the cause of helping other humans to a better life by re-circulating his neo-Lucretius to a large new audience.

If his book was to be widely read, it had to be made popular and emotionally persuasive. And Greenblatt decided that a book will be more persuasive to a large modern audience if it interprets historical events with the tide of popular habits of interpretation. And he assumes that the interpretive habits of most contemporary readers are: to see the transition from medieval to Renaissance in the same way 19th century Whig historians interpreted it; to view history as linear and progressive; to swallow totalized historical periods; to assume that only a "Great Man" ahead of his time can change history; to interpret an ancient text in terms of contemporary assumptions without considering its original cultural context. And, as bitter a pill as this must be to contemporary scholars, including myself, the acclaim showered on *The Swerve* has proved Greenblatt's assumptions and decisions about modern reading habits quite sound.

Beneath the surface of Greenblatt's writing, some critical reviewers have sensed an ardent desire and striving to share. (Kirsch, Meis) I feel this, too, and it convinces me that Greenblatt is following his better angels in writing this book; that his rhetorically ingenious project to re-circulate Lucretius is both heartfelt and altruistic and deserves my respect. Yes, he has used the rear-view mirror to swerve from much that he has known and taught about cultural theory and historical scholarship. Still, he must believe that the philosophy he is imparting to readers is worth the liberties he is taking. Whether neo-Lucretianism is likely to work as Greenblatt hopes or not, the execution of his purpose has been achieved. As fable, *The Swerve* seems to me a rhetorical triumph, given the purpose for which it was designed. By emphasizing or de-emphasizing, ignoring, or inventing Epicurean principles, he has reshaped Lucretius, and Greenblatt's fabulous rhetoric has re-circulated a neo-Epicurean philosophy among many Americans. But will it work for them?

But Can Lucretian Ideas Bring Happiness to the Modern World?

Modern people have been experiencing many other cultural influences besides that of Lucretius. Also, our influences have not been and are not currently coming exclusively from European culture. The influences are diverse and global, as they seem to have been even in the Middle Ages. During the past few decades, for example, probably more Americans have been influenced by Buddhist rather than Epicurean philosophy. There are also influences, other than ideas, which are subtle but powerful forces, such as economics and politics, which can enhance or destroy the happiness of millions. However, instead of attempting to discuss the modernity of the wide world, I will confine my comments about the efficacy of Epicurean philosophy to contemporary America.

The unspoken irony underlying *The Swerve* is that if what is claimed in the book's title were to be believed, people throughout the world would already have embraced Epicureanism. Instead, most Americans have remained traditionally religious. A recent national poll found that 34% of Americans would prefer living in a theocracy. (Rich) But that is just in the U.S.; whether or not neo-Lucretius is compatible with modern Islamic cultures, or Far Eastern cultures, such as China's, Greenblatt does not explain. Yet the words of his subtitle, "How the World Became Modern," seem to claim an Epicurean basis for a global contemporary view. Only if Lucretius really were the inventor of modern science could the subtitle seem somewhat reasonable. Even so, there are other reasons to doubt Greenblatt's bold claim.

There may, for example, be psychological barriers to an Epicurean solution to contemporary problems. Ernest Becker was a modern psychologist and philosopher who in his *Denial of Death* (1973) would have agreed with Lucretius's condemnation of the fear of death as primarily responsible for most of the follies and evils of society. The big difference is that Becker assumed that the fear of death is not simply inculcated by religions but wired into the human psyche. In that case, the Epicurean effort to alleviate the fear of death by ridding humans of all culturally learned superstitions could not be effective. For Becker, human fear of death is irremediable and hence humanity's tragic flaw. If Becker is right, Epicurean philosophy cannot be the culmination or triumph of cultural evolution allowing humans the freedom to pursue happiness. Perhaps humans are destined never to escape anxiety or achieve tranquility. It would have been interesting to read Greenblatt's discussion of this dilemma.

Many Americans with hard lives and insoluble problems find solace in religious faith. I respect their choice. All thinking humans seek a way to live the best life possible. Religious faith offers consolation and meaning to many, and particularly to the life of grinding poverty and humiliating hardship that many Americans endure. Although there will always be authoritarian and even cruel people in every human organization, it seems that most religions today try to foster a love of some of the good things in life, such as love itself, family, community, human kindness, caring, philanthropy (Hinch), and, perhaps, like the medieval St. Francis of Assisi (1181–1228), a compassion for all creatures on earth.

Since, for Lucretius, the universe is only atoms and void, religions are simply superstitions. And worse, these superstitions have inculcated a fear of death which is the root of social ills, because it drives humans to seek immortality in wars, empire building and ruthless ambition for great wealth and power. For Epicureans, cleansing themselves of religious superstitions seemed reasonable. Whether religions are still responsible for inculcating a fear of death is questionable. But Greenblatt never questions treating religion as a cruel delusion, so anti-religious doctrine assumes a primary role in Greenblatt's neo-Epicureanism.

If Greenblatt's goal is to circulate Epicureanism as widely as possible, hostility to all religions would seem counter-productive. There is a notable historical exception to interpreting Lucretius as anti-religious: that of the French priest Pierre Gassendi in mid-17th century with the publication of his treatise on Epicureanism, *De vita, moribus, et doctrina Epicuri libri octo*. (1647) The very influential Gassendian form of neo-Epicureanism inserted a tolerance of religious faith into the ancient Epicurean package – that God had created atoms and that the atoms of the soul were immortal. Epicureanism, with minimal acceptance of religion attracted many Europeans (and Americans such as Jefferson). There is, also, reason to doubt that modern American religions are the primary source of a fear of death. To believe that all religions are delusional, cruel, and the enemy of happiness is not only to totalize but risks bigotry. Many American religions have changed; the old-time fire and brimstone focus to religion as a means to a more fulfilled life. More than a few contemporary religious people have given up the idea of hell and purgatory together with their frightening punishments after death.

Getting rid of religions would hardly diminish the real difficulty of finding tranquility of mind in modern American culture. I am not religious, but my mother was and I know that her faith helped get her through a very hard life with love and grace. Her religion helped my mother live and die with dignity. My father was a marginally religious businessman. He did not believe in hell or eternal punishment and instead believed that the most important concept in religion was encouragement of positive thinking. He was an ambitious man whose hell on earth was that he had not risen as high and had never become as rich as his ambition demanded. He lived life punishing himself for not attaining more of the American dream. Even the times when he seemed to be doing well were disappointing to him because he was not doing better. The absence of belief in punishment after death could not allow him tranquility of mind because he was suffering from a rather typical American malady: an ardent desire to achieve “success,” a success without any clear definition, so it never feels achieved.

Since Greenblatt's interpretation of Lucretian Epicureanism nowhere cautions against ambition, his philosophy overlooks a deep root of modern unrest. The high value Americans place on ambition makes our culture almost inimical to Epicurean happiness. Ambition and the competitive struggle “to get ahead” are honored as necessary motivators for a successful American life. Competing and “keeping up with the Jones's” seem significant parts of American culture. Few American families would want their daughter marrying a young man who lacked ambition. Yet, in describing the characteristics of Lucretian-Epicurean philosophy, Greenblatt avoids recognizing the

dogmatic Epicurean condemnation of ambition, although he recognizes Lucretian detestation of fame and power. Perhaps, pointing out Epicurean hostility to ambition would have clashed with the idea of Renaissance self-fashioning, and this might have complicated his thesis that Lucretius initiated the Renaissance. As one reviewer explains, "Certainly, his [Lucretius's] conviction that one should "live unknown" is fundamentally at odds with the entire Renaissance." (Dirda) It also clashes with the typically American Horatio Alger myth. And this might have suggested to readers that the western world, in the case of ambition, has evolved away from Epicurean philosophy. Poggio's rise from rags to a comfortable marriage and country villa is not Epicurean (Quint) but more typical of the Renaissance and our contemporary world than it was of the ancient world of Lucretius where most were expected to be what their parents had been and where the ambitious were more at risk of ruin than were those content in the way of life into which they were born. Greenblatt is making the case for a set of Lucretian ideas having caused the Renaissance and so tends to overlook influences on human behavior that have nothing to do with intellectual currents, such as the horrific plagues that wiped out almost a third of the population of late medieval Europe and continued in the Renaissance. Many more position and job vacancies at every level may have provided an unprecedented opportunity from the very beginning of the Renaissance for the ambitious to become upwardly mobile.

A large group of Americans, for whom Epicureanism will probably not work, are business people and professionals from the middle class to the elites who must remain compulsively competitive and ambitious just to maintain careers and influence. There can be little tranquility of mind for them in the present scheme of things, no matter what philosophy they embrace. To understand how many American lives may be improved by embracing neo-Lucretianism we need first to ask how many Americans now possess enough economic stability, are free enough from competitive ambition, and are willing to give up religious values to adopt Greenblatt's neo-Lucretianism. A neo-Lucretian solution might work well only for some of the already wealthy, the retired and about to retire with a secure and adequate pension who will no longer need to compete, it might also work for some retirees in America whose meager pensions enforce a kind of penurious ataraxia upon them. With baby-boomer retirements increasing, perhaps a few more Americans may find that Epicurean philosophy helps. Yet, I doubt that neo-Lucretianism will work for any large number of Americans.

Humanists wishing to believe that poems can create revolutions and mold new cultures (I want to believe that, too) may overlook non-literary agents of change and avoid confronting barriers to change owing to political and economic forces. The great barrier to the pursuit of happiness of almost half the population of the U.S. (and a much larger proportion of the population of many other countries of the world) is poverty and near poverty and the way in which the social contract that maintains this poverty has been framed. Political and economic justice need to be achieved before there can be much hope for the tranquility of mind for many millions of Americans. Millions of poor and near poor, and their families, must fear not just death but job loss, illness, and old age with little or no medical insurance or pension security. Cyclical mass unemployment, and the concomitant loss of medical insurance, every few years has been a constant threat to

labor and the lower half of the middle class. The unemployed must also risk losing their homes and families. The way we choose to divide our increasing wealth keeps them afraid, and anxious for many reasons much of the time. More than 20% of American children are growing up in poverty today, which will extend poverty into the future. There are more effective political and economic ways of helping more Americans achieve tranquility and less anxiety than they are likely to achieve by relying on philosophy alone.

Epicurus built his philosophy for achieving happiness in this world on disciplining the mind to lead what we could describe as a parsimonious retirement growing one's own simple vegetables and preparing bread and cheese. A vast and constantly increasing surplus wealth throughout the world could not even have been imagined in the ancient societies in which Epicurus and Lucretius wrote. However, the innovations of modern science are continuing to provide some nations of the world with a bonus of wealth. This new ability not only to sustain but to increase economic wealth illuminates a clear difference between the ancient world and that of our own, and suggests that a philosophy designed for one may not fit the other.

Scientific inventions, such as new alloys that increase the strength of steel and the efficiency of batteries, solar cells, magnets, and computers, enable modern societies to do more with less resources and this grows wealth. Countries of the West that invested in scientific research have become increasingly wealthy. That lesson has been learned. Throughout the contemporary world the number of scientists has multiplied, and research funding, not only in America but throughout the world, has also increased, accelerating the pace of science and technological advance. As a result, one of the most important modern political problems is deciding what to do with our always increasing wealth. Whereas ancient Epicurean philosophy was designed to make the pursuit of happiness possible without any increase in wealth, governments can now enhance not only physical and mental health and quality of life but the economic security of their citizens, and in this way offer many millions an increased feeling of well-being.

Of course, material wealth does not guarantee happiness but it can promote tranquility and lessen both anxiety and mental depression that is a major burden of an impoverished life. Anxiety can be calmed by knowing you will have unemployment insurance in the event you are laid off, that you and your family will always be provided good medical and mental care; that you will be able to afford a good education for your children; that in old age an adequate pension will be available, if needed. Such social securities can make Epicurean happiness – less anxiety, more tranquility of mind – possible for more people, and they can be more and more affordable in countries whose surplus wealth is always growing.

If Epicurus were alive and writing his philosophy in America at present, he might well see that the increasing wealth generated by the advance of science could be a companion to his philosophy. It would seem only a matter of time before the reality of some economic stability, which can now be widely provided, could become possible for nearly all Americans to enjoy more tranquility and less anxiety. A contemporary

American Epicurus might advocate for an amended social contract with a wiser distribution of surplus wealth because it would be a more likely way to extend the possibility of the pursuit of happiness to more of the population. Instead, for the past three and a half decades economic policy has been set in the opposite direction. Modern societies must decide whether to distribute their surplus wealth to as many citizens as possible, or by policies and taxes to restrict this surplus to the already wealthy elites, while perpetuating the anxiety of existence for almost half its citizens. Democracies need to keep a bit more than half their citizens above the “struggle for existence” level in order to win elections and avert rebellion. The ever-increasing wealth has been enough to satisfy the greed of elites while still allowing a little over half of the population enough economic success to enable some freedom from anxiety, a modest tranquility of mind, and a vote for the status quo. This has been the American political solution for the past several decades. Still the wealth is always increasing, and whether to allow inequality to grow and grow becomes an ever more pressing issue.

Greenblatt’s interpretation of modern secular humanism as almost identical to neo-Lucretianism tends to make us overlook just how ancient Epicureanism might fit into modern society. From what we know of Epicurus, he was a benevolent person who believed that moral virtue was necessary for happiness, but his philosophy doesn’t preclude its employment by sociopaths. What’s the difference between benevolence and selfishness when all is just atoms and void? It would be as easy for neo-Epicureanism to lead to a more extreme Ayn Randism rather than to extend the common good. Medical advances and healthcare are a case in point. As science makes new, more effective, medicines and treatments available, should health insurance be expanded for all humans to enjoy a longer and less painful life? About half of Americans do not like Obamacare, which tries to extend adequate medical care to almost all citizens. We are behind almost every other modern nation in insuring health care to all citizens. It seems clear that American neo-Lucretianism would be secular, but would it necessarily be humanism?

In comparing ancient Lucretianism with our modern society, that those Americans closest to achieving ataraxia (those past caring) are those well off enough to have inured themselves to the suffering of the poor and homeless, who want to take away food stamps and unemployment insurance, reduce old age pensions and resist their need for equal medical care. Some Americans seem to have achieved this modern form of ataxaria – to refuse to care or empathize with the poorest 47% of American society. This modern ataraxia is not a step toward attaining happiness but an attempt to attain a greater share of the growing wealth of the nation: a rationalization for greed without guilt.

It is interesting that a modern religious figure, Pope Francis I, seems to have most presciently grasped the global significance of the question whether to share the growing economic pie more equally, or to make the difference in wealth between rich and poor ever more unequal. The Ayn Randians among us favor almost all the wealth staying with the elite. Randians perceive governments as taking wealth away from its rightful recipients and wasting it trying to improve the lives of those they see as unproductive citizens. But they are forgetting that all Americans have invested and labored to bring about their country’s larger and larger surplus of wealth. Americans, and their parents,

grandparents and, perhaps, even great grandparents, have paid taxes (local, state, and federal) that have increased funding and subsidies for scientific and medical research in Universities and corporations that led to the development of inventions for advancing technology. Many generations of Americans have served in wars to defend the country and economy, and the families of the wounded and dead have born the grave cost, which is yet another kind of investment. In addition, many have contributed their labor as scientists, lab technicians, mechanical, electrical and chemical engineers while others have labored in industries that turn technology into profits, while still others have built and maintained the infrastructure necessary to keep the economy growing. Those who were once slaves, and their families, have invested unpaid labor to help build their country's wealth. Bankers and financial gurus forget that they simply manipulate for their own profit the wealth produced by everyone in the vast scientific, technological, industrial system that has created the science bonus of which all Americans deserve some share as de facto investors. Perhaps a modern Epicurus would initiate a lobby in Congress called American Investors Anonymous (AIA) to push legislation for the common good, such as more affordable educational opportunities and more mental health facilities, which might help remunerate the vast number of American de facto, but anonymous, investors. (Midyette).

So far we have been asking whether adopting the whole Lucretian philosophy will work for modern Americans. However, adapting some Epicurean ideas might be useful to almost all modern people: for instance, you may not be able to control what happens in the universe, but you can discipline yourself in ways that are likely to keep you functioning cheerfully whatever happens. The practice of self-discipline and paring down your desires to what you really need, with perhaps a few luxuries for which you are willing to pay the costs, are features of Epicurean philosophy not discussed by Greenblatt. A discipline practiced by ancient Epicureans was to assess what they called their "calculus of pleasure," which was a sort of cost/benefit analysis of each individual's desires. In this way, Epicureans disciplined themselves to examine and prioritize their needs and desires and made themselves aware of the adverse consequences of some desires. One obvious benefit to a happy life was friendship that costs almost nothing, so that the pleasure of friends sharing simple meals and memories became a notable feature of Epicurean life. Paring desires to a minimum is probably more necessary today than it may have been in Epicurus's or Lucretius's times, Ubiquitous modern advertising is dedicated to expanding and intensifying desires. We need help in limiting and controlling them. Ambition in America needs to be balanced with attention to mental health and psychological well being. The costs in anxiety of some contemporary social myths also need examining, such as racial and gender stereotyping that robs many lives of tranquility. The roots of discontent in modern civilization seem to derive not from religion but from our unexamined value system and from popular social myths that have become superstitions that cripple ours and our neighbors' ability to pursue tranquil happiness.

Another Epicurean practice not mentioned in *The Swerve* that could be useful for moderns is the discipline of each individual remembering the best times of his or her life. Not just remembering but dwelling on and reliving these pleasurable times in such vivid

detail of feelings, sights, sounds, tactile experiences, tastes, aromas that these memories become a potent anodyne in sickness, depressions, and other painful psychological experiences of loneliness and unrest. This unique Epicurean habit of creating a treasure trove of vivid memories can be useful to almost anyone, but especially to writers. It was not by chance that most Roman lyric poets were Epicureans.

Greenblatt's Awards

Epicurean philosophy's influence in Europe from the Middle Ages to the early 18th century culminating in the Enlightenment has never been given the recognition it deserves. If *The Swerve's* Lucretian recirculation helps, even inadvertently, to remedy this neglect, then it merits much praise. Recirculating Epicureanism, together with Greenblatt's brilliant biography of Poggio are causes for celebration. Many of the critical reviewers can't understand how *The Swerve* won prizes when it often runs counter to the latest historical scholarship and cultural theory. To be surprised that Greenblatt's *Swerve* garnered its awards seems somewhat naive about the position of book prizes in the publishing world. Awards are connected more to the advertising and marketing of books than to policing them for scholarly correctness. American publishers of books know that profits derive from the 1% of authors rather than the unknown middlers, no matter the worth of their books. Greenblatt is the ultimate academic one-percenter: John Cogan University Professor of the Humanities at Harvard, renowned Renaissance scholar with a recent book on Shakespeare having been on the bestseller list. Prizes given to the right authors help sell books. It would be much more judicious and profitable to grant an award to a book by someone who has written bestsellers before and with a large enough reputation not to be wasting the awards value as advertising. So, as in other areas of our one-percent economic system, the fame as well as the money go predominantly to the top. A book like *The Swerve* makes everyone in the publishing industry happy.

But more important than economic realism may have been the power of Greenblatt's book to excite our feelings and persuade our hearts. Just as Lucretius may have poor scientific value today, his epic poem is still imaginative enough to compel admiration, so Greenblatt's *Swerve* has won acclaim from a general contemporary readership in spite of, and perhaps more importantly, because of, the fabulous character of its history. *The Swerve* is an exciting narrative by a distinguished scholar whose credentials were won long ago by his first publications. The way prize committees tend to overlook the worthy young and unknowns, Greenblatt probably deserves awards today that he should have received earlier in his career. I think *The Swerve* deserved its awards.

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