

**Stephen Greenblatt (2011). *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company), pp. 356, ISBN 978-0-34340-3**

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**Abstract:** *This book is a study of how Lucretian doctrines emerged during the European Renaissance due to the contingent discovery; and subsequent circulation, by Poggio Bracciolini, of an ancient manuscript on atomic physics by the Roman poet Lucretius titled *On the Nature of Things* in the fifteenth century. This contingent discovery not only reshaped cognitive patterns during the early modern period, but also mediated the ideological conflicts between materialism and spiritualism during the Renaissance. The discovery of this book by Lucretius also became important for the Renaissance because it set out a theory of the swerve that depicts how atoms fall. Lucretius' theory of the subject is modelled on the fall of these atoms which don't just fall, but swerve in their trajectories when they do so. It is this swerve then - within the trajectory of the atom - that makes it possible to envisage the existence of free will since a deterministic model of the world cannot explain all physical and psychological phenomena given that the trajectory of the swerve is not mechanical but probabilistic. The relationship between theories of historical determination and theories of free will in the history of ideas therefore had to be thought through by invoking the notion of the Lucretian swerve. Greenblatt's book however is not reducible to the Lucretian swerve per se, but is also about how the contingent emergence of this idea in Renaissance Europe forces us to rethink the relationship between the realms of what is historically necessary and what is historically contingent; and explains how the contingent then passes into the realm of historical necessity.*

**Keywords:** *Circulation, Lucretius, New Historicism, Renaissance, Representation*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Let me start with a caveat: this book is *not* a treatise on Lucretian ontology or even Lucretian poetry. In fact, the first question that a reader should ask himself on reading this book is the following: Why did Greenblatt write a book on an obscure Renaissance book hunter named Poggio Bracciolini when he could have written a book about a more famous ancient poet named Lucretius? What, if anything, does all this have to do with the world becoming 'modern' anyway? And, finally, what is it that is really in contention in the topology of the 'swerve'? The convergence of these three questions then constitutes the point of entry into this rather unusual book. It is however important to remember the following before we proceed further. While Greenblatt has a huge preoccupation with history, he is not an historian of ideas, or even an historian per se. Greenblatt is mainly associated with a school of literary criticism that is known as the 'new historicism'. One of the methodological postulates amongst new historicists, unlike conventional historians, is to be on the constant lookout for forms of historical causality that are problematic. So, for instance, most historians – irrespective of their object of study – are hung up on the linear unfolding of events in time. Their main goal – even when they seek to go beyond the conventional notion of a chronicle - is to mainly produce an 'over-determined' notion of events unfolding in time on the basis of historical data. The invocation of historical data in literary study, for instance, has always proceeded on the assumption that a historical text can be reduced to historical data. It can then be used to contextualize the plays and poems of William Shakespeare or whoever the author in question might be. So whether or not historians are aware of the textual construction of knowledge; literary critics, for all practical purposes, reduce complex histories to chronicles, and chronicles in turn to simple chronologies, when they read those of Raphael Holinshed for instance in their attempts to situate Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

## II. ON METHODOLOGICAL RECIPROCITY

The main theoretical wager in Greenblatt's notion of historical method, or in his understanding of how 'history' and 'literature' relate to each other as discourses, is to resist precisely this form of reductionism where history serves as nothing more than a convenient 'background' to the literary text that will then hog the limelight in the locus of the 'figure'. Greenblatt's notion of 'representation' – a term that he is heavily 'invested in' – is based on the assumption that history cannot by any means serve as a deterministic background to the study of a literary text since it is itself a literary text. What is really at stake when a literary critic has this insight

is working out its implications for the practice of reading. The opposite of historical determinism or historical reductionism does not have to be historical indeterminacy as a skeptic might argue. It can instead be understood as a chance to invoke the notion of ‘methodological reciprocity’ in both historical and literary studies. Or, to put it more simply: while historical texts cannot explain literary texts in their entirety, they are necessary forms of background documentation. They must however not be construed as sufficient forms of hermeneutic explanation. New historicists are therefore always on the look-out for textual phenomena that are neither reducible to literature nor history; but, in a sense, complicate the relationship between these discourses. It is as important for historians to read literature as it is for literary critics to read history. Stephen Greenblatt himself is an example of somebody who does both. The enormous success of this book is proof for those who are not convinced that it is indeed possible to do both. In answer to the first question that we started out with, we can point out that Greenblatt is preoccupied with Poggio Bracciolini precisely insofar as the availability of Lucretian ideas in the early modern period was a contingent fact of history. It is not Lucretius per se, but the contingent emergence and circulation of Lucretian doctrines that is the object of Greenblatt’s study. So unlike most historians who might be content to mention in passing that Bracciolini played an important role in discovering the manuscript of an ancient author in an ecclesiastical library before passing on to an examination of Lucretian doctrines as an end in itself, Greenblatt’s wager is that what matters is not the Lucretian doctrine per se. After all, Lucretius has been around for quite some time. What really matters for the new historicist is that this event is an interesting case study of a particular form of literary diffusion, dissemination, or ‘circulation’, since it triggered-off totally unintended consequences despite its emergence as a purely contingent fact in the history of reading.

### III. WHEN DID THE RENAISSANCE BEGIN?

The ethic of being a new historicist is quite simply about having not only a high level of tolerance, but indeed a high level of commitment to thinking-through how the contingent passes into the mainstream of historical necessity even though we are able to identify historical necessity only in hindsight (*après coup*). So that is how the world became modern – not because it was destined to become modern, but because contingent facts or factors trigger a fundamental revolution within the forms of agency, subjectivity, and cognition that constitute any given society. The subtitle of this book can also be easily misunderstood since Greenblatt’s use of the term ‘modern’ is different from that of contemporary sociologists who invoke the notion of the modern as synonymous with the process of modernization that are usually opposed to tradition (in their rendition of linear narratives within the space of historical sociology). What Greenblatt is invoking instead is a notion of the modern that preceded the scientific notion of the modern. The main intellectual source of modernity for sociologists is the rise of science and the decline of religion as a source of legitimization in society. What Greenblatt means by the ‘modern’, or the ‘early modern’, is related to the forms of historical periodization that new historicists invoke for the Renaissance. The conflicts in the early modern period were between the doctrines of materialism and the doctrines of spiritualism, and not between science and religion as was the case in the Enlightenment in Europe and elsewhere. The German translation of this book is less misleading because the Germans translate Greenblatt’s subtitle to mean: When did the Renaissance begin? It is therefore important to remember that Greenblatt’s notion of the early modern is linked to the revival of learning in the high European Renaissance, and how the rediscovery of lost manuscripts in monastic and ecclesiastical libraries made the Renaissance historically possible. The emergence of these manuscripts made it necessary for not only monks but Renaissance scholars to decide whether their intellectual loyalties were to be based on pagan literary sources or on those of Christian revelation (i.e. the Holy Scriptures constituting the Bible and the study of the Church fathers). Those who investigate patristic sources for constructing a history of subjectivity, for instance, know that these church fathers felt themselves being tugged constantly between forms of pagan and Christian learning; they even feared that they might be damned for being pagan since the idea that biblical texts can be read as forms of literature was unknown during the Renaissance. It is within this historical context then that we must situate the intellectual adventures of Poggio Bracciolini, a former Papal secretary to Pope John XXIII, as he goes about in search of lost manuscripts from the ancient world. Greenblatt’s main contribution in this book is to demonstrate that our contemporary understanding of diffusion in technology and in the dissemination of ideas could not have been possible if these notions had not been already prefigured in Bracciolini’s forays at ‘circulation’. Those of us who have been dependent on circulating libraries as scholars should not have any difficulty in understanding the excitement that Bracciolini must have experienced when he got hold of Lucretius’ *On the Nature of Things*. This simple act of withdrawing a hitherto lost manuscript and asking that it be copied (i.e. published) is all that it took to change the cognitive orientation of the scholars of the High European Renaissance. Greenblatt’s identification with Poggio could not have been stronger. We can imagine him asking himself: ‘Is this what I myself would have liked to do if I were a Renaissance book hunter?’ Isn’t this in fact what Greenblatt has himself done to Poggio Bracciolini?

#### IV. THE ONTOLOGY OF THE SWERVE

The third and final question pertains to the ontology of the swerve. What is it that swerves, and, with what effect? The swerve, needless to say, is the main ontological trajectory of consequence in the atomic physics of the ancients. It addresses not only the nature of their physical world, but the most important question of human subjectivity insofar as subjectivity can be modeled on the play of atoms and the void. Is human behavior pre-determined? Or is there such a thing as free will? In Lucretian ontology, all that exists are atoms and the void (i.e. empty spaces between the atoms). While these atoms fall, Lucretius believed, they swerve. Free will is possible – and all human behavior is not predetermined - insofar as the swerve introduces an element of uncertainty within the physical world and the psyche. It is like the ancient equivalent of the uncertainty principle. If the notion of the swerve is incorporated into the physics of the ancients, it will imply that the falling motion of atoms is subject to ‘probabilities’ and not certainties. What starts off then as an attempt to make sense of atomic structure, and its differential construction (since the void is as important as the atoms in this model), will develop ethical implications for human behavior. So, for instance, the narrative of the fall in Genesis itself can be understood, as John Milton does in his epic poem, as a swerve. There is no need to be ashamed of falling - provided as a species - or as a Miltonic protagonist - we remember to swerve. This swerve, while falling, is the Bloomian trope of clinamen (Bloom, 1973, 1975). The Lucretian ethic of the swerve then becomes a form of subjective individuation in the history of both poetry and poetics. It becomes almost synonymous with the notion of heroism. The main goal of mankind, it implies, is not to lose oneself in nostalgia for a prelapsarian plenitude in Eden, but to learn to swerve heroically. Once the Lucretian interpretation of Genesis is incorporated within the Western narrative of subjectivity, Lucretius ceases to be a pagan poet since it is Lucretius (and his summation of the ethics of Epicurus in *On the Nature of Things*) that will underwrite the relationship between forms of historical determination and forms of free will in the Western onto-theological tradition, and of which *Paradise Lost* is but one of the better known instances in the history of literature.

#### V. CONCLUSION

What exactly was Lucretius’ contribution to the conflict between the doctrines of materialism and spiritualism? How was this conflict to constitute the Western notion of subjectivity in the early modern period? And what forms of subjectivity would we be subject to if Poggio Bracciolini had not discovered this manuscript in a monastic library by sheer chance? Those who truly understand the sense of ‘resonance and wonder’ inspired by these Greenblattian questions do not need to be convinced of his greatness whether or not they agree with his answers. I will not spoil the reader’s sense of suspense by spelling out Greenblatt’s answers to these questions, but rest content with drawing a connection between the contingent discoveries of the Lucretian manuscript in the early modern period with those forms of subjectivity that we thought were our own. Even our most intimate thought, readers will realize at this point, were structured by the doctrines of a poet who had disappeared for millennia and was re-circulated in the history of reading by sheer chance. The swerve however is not just a Lucretian theme; it is also a form of the Lucretian telos since the sudden re-emergence of this poet’s manuscript that had been lost for millennia is in itself a form of the Lucretian swerve; it is however a swerve back into circulation. The history of this manuscript then, its loss, its re-finding, and its subsequent return to circulation, is, as a literary critic might put it, a performative embodiment of the place it occupies in the history of subjectivity.

#### REFERENCES

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