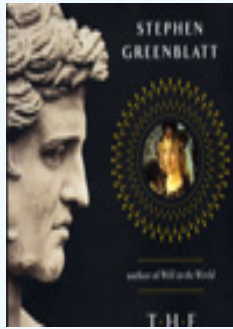


The Swerve
by Stephen Greenblatt
Reviewed by James R. Adair

When the great Italian poet Petrarch coined the term “Dark Ages,” disparagingly referring to the time between the classical period and the new era that was emerging in his own day, he lamented the loss of culture and the beauty of language that his ancestors had allowed to slip away, robbing “posterity of its ancestral heritage.” Living in the first half of the fourteenth century, Petrarch and his contemporaries were introduced to a trove of classical literature that had recently come to the attention of scholars and humanists, having been preserved largely in monastery libraries. Stephen Greenblatt tells the story of the discovery of one such long lost work by a book hunter whose name is little known today, but whose discovery, argues Greenblatt, set the stage for the transformation of the world from medieval to modern.



Poggio Bracciolini was an avid humanist, a scribe with notably beautiful handwriting, and secretary to the Pisan pope John XXIII. After his tenure as papal secretary came to an abrupt end at the Council of Constance—which deposed Pope John and his two rivals, thus ending the Western Schism of the Papacy—Poggio found himself suddenly unemployed. The situation was not a complete disaster, for it gave him the opportunity to do something he loved, search for lost works of antiquity. On one of those trips in 1417, he came to a monastery somewhere in southern Germany, and on the shelves of its library he discovered a copy of *De rerum natura*, *On the Nature of Things*. This work, of which only the title had survived intact into Poggio’s day, contained the teaching of the Roman philosopher Lucretius, the leading first century B.C.E. proponent of the teachings of the Greek philosopher Epicurus, whose works had been almost totally lost—well, suppressed rather than lost.

Epicureanism was one of the leading schools of thought in the Greco-Roman world, but with the advent of Christianity its influence waned, and its representative works were neglected or worse, because they were seen as antithetic to the Christian faith. *On the Nature of Things* presents some of those controversial ideas: all things are made of invisible, indivisible particles (a-tom = un-cuttable); matter is eternal; the universe has no creator or designer; nature ceaselessly experiments; humans are not unique; the soul dies; there is no afterlife; religions are invariably cruel; the highest goal of human life is the enhancement of pleasure and the reduction of pain. One notable aspect of Lucretius’ interpretation of Epicurus involves the notion that the atoms that constitute matter tend to move in predictable ways, but sometimes they “swerve” just slightly from their expected courses, giving rise to variation, collisions, and ultimately free will. Moderns would call this idea “chaos.”

Greenblatt’s discussion of the lives of Poggio and his contemporaries as the struggle to loose the bonds of tradition and rediscover the glories of the past is both informative and entertaining. Particularly interesting is his reconstruction of the influence of *On the Nature of Things* in the decades and centuries after its

discovery, first in Italy, then spreading throughout Europe as far as England, where it appears in the works of Spencer, Donne, Bacon, and Shakespeare. Lucretius eventually crossed the Atlantic and found a proponent in Thomas Jefferson, who counted himself an Epicurean. Certainly the ideas of Lucretius were not accepted by all, but “these subversive, Lucretian thoughts percolated and surfaced wherever the Renaissance imagination was at its most alive and intense” (220).

Because *The Swerve* is the story of the discovery of one particular ancient work, one may forgive Greenblatt if he somewhat exaggerates its role in the creation of the modern world. Surely other discoveries and inventions—the printing press, the Americas, the works of Plato and Homer in Greek—did as much to transform the world as *On the Nature of Things* did. His monochromatic representation of medieval Christianity, in which “the pursuit of pain triumphed over the pursuit of pleasure” (103), is less easy to overlook. That many Christian writers, beginning with Tertullian in the late second century, advocated harsh asceticism is unquestionably true, but the verse “Jesus wept” (from the Gospel of John, not Luke, p. 105) hardly summed up the character of Jesus for ordinary Christians (as opposed to those who abandoned society to live in the desert or sit on pillars), who would also have remembered that Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding festival.

Despite these critiques, however, Greenblatt’s central thesis is sound. The erstwhile papal secretary and part-time book hunter’s discovery on the shelf of a monastic library did send a tremor through the medieval world, a swerve that went to its very foundations. The words of Lucretius and the ideas of Epicurus permeated Renaissance Europe, altering the course of history in a subtle but profound way. The contemporary philosopher George Santayana said that one idea in particular, the concept of the “ceaseless mutation of forms composed of indestructible substances” was “the greatest thought that mankind has ever hit upon” (186; cf. the review of the Darwin exhibit at the Witte Museum on p. 15 of this issue of *Voices*). Greenblatt’s recounting of the discovery of Poggio Bracciolini, better known in his day as the author of a history of Florence than as the man who discovered the lost masterpiece of Lucretius, is both enjoyable and thought-provoking.

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a grave, disturb a mullah addicted to pornography, and all meet up several years later at a class reunion in New York City. Other favorites are “The Blue Window,” a vignette of youthful ruminations about love, and “Playing Chess in the Mosque,” a piece of flash fiction about a boy who takes up soccer in order to play chess.

The Garden of Milk and Wine is suffused with the poetry of Rumi, the worldview of Islam, the modern science of medicine, and the traditions of an ancient country that hearken back to Cyrus the Great, Zoroaster, and the unknown inventor of the game of Shaks, chess. Above all, it is a work of aesthetic delight. As Rumi said, “Judge a moth by the beauty of its candle.” The reader attracted to the flame of this elegant little volume will be amply rewarded.