# The Swerve by Stephen Greenblatt - review

## A flawed but dazzling study of the origins of the renaissance

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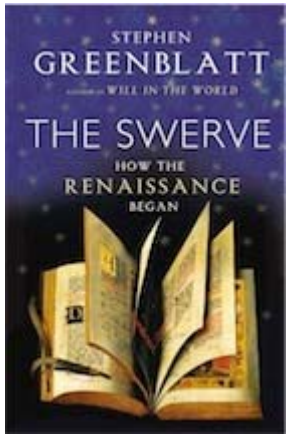
The Guardian, Friday 23 December 2011 22.55 GMT

Searcher for monastic treasures: Poggio Bracciolini. Photograph: Archive Photos/Getty Images

In the winter of 1417 the papal secretary Poggio Bracciolini made a great discovery. In an abbey in Germany he came across a manuscript of a long-lost classical poem,

Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* ("On the Nature of the Universe"). This event is vividly described by the renaissance scholar Stephen Greenblatt in *The Swerve*. He sees it as the origin of the renaissance and, in effect, of modernity.

**The Swerve: How the Renaissance Began**
by Stephen Greenblatt

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What was the poem that Poggio rediscovered? Lucretius was a passionate follower of the Greek philosopher Epicurus. He believed that the gods did not concern themselves with mortal affairs and did not create the universe, which was composed of minuscule particles. These atoms move perpetually and randomly through a void. As they do so they "swerve" from a direct course, and may strike against each other. Life is one result of this swerve, as atoms assemble themselves into forms that enable us to see and breathe. At some point our atoms will break free and move on in their eternal course through the void. That meant there was no afterlife, no eternal reward for virtue, and no perpetual punishment for vice. As a result human beings should not fear death. For the short period in which we live and feel desire, pleasure is the only end we should seek. Nothing else matters.

Lucretius created from these philosophical beliefs a poem in the same league as Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. *De Rerum Natura* contains passionate arguments against the fear of death, as well as some amazing descriptions. Lucretius describes an entirely god-free origin of life, in which living creatures simply heave themselves from the earth, not through the actions of a creator, but as a result of the vital forces of the universe.

It's not hard to imagine why Lucretius was unpopular in the early middle ages. Other pagan philosophers, including Plato and Aristotle, allowed for a creator. Their ethical systems could, with some whittling and squeezing, be fitted to Christian doctrine.

Epicureanism, however, simply would not fit. Although it was in fact an austere philosophy in which "pleasure" meant freedom from pain and fear rather than self-indulgence, epicureanism became identified among most Christian writers with swinish self-indulgence. St Jerome even claimed in the fourth century that Lucretius (about whose life we know almost nothing) went mad with love, and then killed himself. Eventually, but unsurprisingly, the great medieval monasteries that preserved classical texts by patient copying of manuscripts came to neglect him.

Most of *The Swerve* is devoted to this story of loss and retrieval. It begins with a crisis in the Catholic church and in the career of Poggio Bracciolini, who was personal secretary to John XXIII. In the early 15th century there were two popes, one at Rome and the other at Avignon. In 1414 a council was held at Constance in Germany to resolve the dispute. It led to the fall of John XXIII from power. With the end of his master's career, Poggio also lost his job. He set off to scour German monasteries for the classical texts that he was expert at finding and copying. And there he found his Lucretius, which he had copied and sent to his friend Niccolò Niccoli at Florence. Niccoli kept the manuscript for 12 years, and then finally allowed further copies to be produced. From these copies Lucretius found his way into print. With this spread of secularist and atomist thought, Greenblatt argues, the renaissance began.

The story is told with all Greenblatt's style and panache. He brings the silent labours of a medieval scriptorium to life by describing the elaborate sign-language that scribes used to indicate which manuscript they needed to consult: a scribe called for a particularly offensive pagan text such as Lucretius by putting two fingers in his mouth "as if he were gagging". In order to show how the Roman elite valued epicureanism he takes us beneath the ash at Herculaneum into the so-called "House of the Papyri", where fragments of Lucretius and other epicurean writers have been discovered, and uses that setting to evoke the richness of Roman philosophical life. He conveys the passion for texts and for the classical past that drew humanists such as Poggio to scour monastic

libraries because he himself shares their fascination with retrieval and discovery.

But is it right to identify the recovery of Lucretius with the beginning of the renaissance? When Poggio found *De Rerum Natura*, Greenblatt argues, he discovered "a book that would help in time to dismantle his entire world" by bringing a concern for worldly pleasure to the moral life. Greenblatt traces Lucretius's atomism into Galileo's astronomy and Newton's physics. He follows "the swerve" of Lucretius's atoms briefly into the works of Shakespeare and Montaigne. He even sees the focus on pleasure in the *Utopia* of the devout Catholic Sir Thomas More as resulting from Lucretius. Poggio's discovery, he argues, brought about a liberation for scientific and religious thought that spread throughout Europe.

The story told by the book – epicureanism flourished at Rome, was lost, and then was suddenly rediscovered and transformed the world – reflects the historical outlook of the humanists themselves. It was common for 14th and 15th-century scholars to claim that there was a destruction of classical learning in the middle ages, or, as Greenblatt calls it, "a Great Vanishing", and that they were bringing the classical past back to life. As Francesco Barbaro wrote to Poggio: "You have revived so many illustrious men and such wise men, who were dead from eternity."

Was this story really true? It more or less works for *De Rerum Natura*, which was indeed "lost" (or at least not often recopied between the 13th and 15th centuries) and then found on a particular day by an individual humanist. But the story that the renaissance suddenly began with a great rediscovery of the pagan past does not work so well in relation to other classical authors. Virgil, Ovid and Aristotle were more or less continuously read from antiquity until the age of print. In many cases humanists found more reliable manuscripts, and they sometimes discovered whole texts. But they did not simply end the "ignorance" of the dark ages. Indeed they tended to exaggerate that ignorance to emphasise their own novelty.

The reason for this is obvious. To have a "renaissance" or rebirth of classical learning, you have to imagine that it died. As well as sharing the humanists' passion for antiquity, Greenblatt shares their prejudice against medieval Christianity, which he portrays with the vividness but also the crudity of a cartoon. "If Lucretius offered a moralised and purified version of the Roman pleasure principle, Christianity offered a moralised and purified version of the Roman pain principle," Greenblatt declares. His descriptions of medieval monasticism emphasise the strict discipline of monastic orders, the erasure of personal identity among scribes and the mortification of the flesh. Greenblatt's version of the middle ages is more or less exactly that of the humanists, in which characterless monks and self-flagellating nuns rejoice in the savage discipline of the church. From this they needed Lucretius to set them free.

Centuries before the rediscovery of Lucretius many Christians incorporated philosophical accounts of pleasure and love from the classical philosophers into their theology. Aquinas and Dante, who play little part in Greenblatt's description of medieval Christianity, found room for both love and pleasure in their philosophies. Those "classical" currents within Catholic thought are a much more likely source than Lucretius for Thomas More's descriptions of the rational pleasures enjoyed by his Utopians. They are among the many strands of thought that lie behind "renaissance" thinking, and indeed behind humanism too.

Greenblatt's story of the unleashing of the pleasure principle on the European world after the discovery of Lucretius conveys his own passion for discovery, and displays his brilliance as a storyteller. *The Swerve* is, though, a dazzling retelling of the old humanist myth of the heroic liberation of classical learning from centuries of monastic darkness. The light of Rome fades into gloom, sheep graze in the Forum; then the humanists rebel against the orthodoxies of the church, bring about a great recovery of classical texts and generate a new intellectual dawn. This book makes that story into a great read, but it cannot make it entirely true.