

THE LUCRETIUS CODE

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R. V. Young

The Swerve: How the World Became Modern by Stephen Greenblatt (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2011)

Stephen Greenblatt is John Cogan University Professor of Humanities at Harvard University, general editor of both *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* and of *The Norton Shakespeare*, author of numerous highly acclaimed and highly publicized books, including *Will in the World*, a biography of Shakespeare, and the man generally credited with inventing the phrase “the New Historicism” and founding the critical school of that name. His latest book, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern*, has recently been awarded the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction. Professor Greenblatt appears to be without rival as successor to Stanley Fish as America’s most prominent English teacher.

As a writer and speaker, Professor Greenblatt is possessed of many virtues that set him apart from the typical denizen of university English departments. His style is graceful and lucid, his tone genial and often witty. He knows how to tell an engaging story: the anecdote, personal as well as historical, may plausibly be regarded as his signature rhetorical device. The professor is widely read in diverse fields; his books and lectures never fail to provide a comprehensive vision of their subject adorned by an array of fascinating, amusing, and often

obscure details, gleaned from out-of-the-way recesses of literature and history. Many readers will come away from his books with a sense of having enjoyed a feast of profound insight seasoned with piquant observations of particulars.

In spite of all this—or perhaps in part because of it—Stephen Greenblatt’s rise to prominence may justly be accounted a disaster for scholarship in the humanities, for critical understanding of literature and culture, and for the effectiveness and morale of higher education. He substitutes polemic for scholarship and calculated sophistry for disinterested critical reflection: the learning is hollow, the argument partial, and the deft, often witty style is a mask for manipulative rhetoric. *The Swerve*, the culmination of a four-decade academic career, displays all Professor Greenblatt’s characteristic virtues of style and learning and deploys them in the service of a vicious ideology that has infected higher education in the Western world like a virus overwhelming its intellectual immune system. What is left is a simulacrum of scholarship and learning, rather than the real thing.

In broad outline, there is nothing especially novel about the thesis of *The Swerve*: it is the myth of the secular enlightenment according to which the Renaissance represented the emergence of a purely worldly humanism, which, by shattering the mental fetters of superstitious, anti-intellectual medieval Christianity, made possible modern science and technology, political and personal freedom, and all forms of social progress. Stated thus baldly—but not inaccurately—it is astonishing that a presumably intelligent scholar could maintain such a thoroughly discredited thesis or that countless reviewers and the astute judges of the Pulitzer Prize could take it seriously. The credibility of the book is in no way enhanced by Professor

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Greenblatt's original claim: that this secular miracle—this “swerve” away from the tenebrous ignorance of medieval Christendom, bringing about the scientific and political and cultural revolutions that have attained glorious consummation in the contemporary welfare state—all this hinged on the survival of a single manuscript of the Epicurean poem *De rerum natura* by the first-century BC Roman poet Lucretius, and its rediscovery by a Vatican secretary and humanist book hunter, Poggio Bracciolini, early in the fifteenth century. Perhaps the Pulitzer judges simply mistook the category: they thought that Professor Greenblatt was writing fiction. He certainly writes better than Dan Brown, so perhaps we ought to regard his book as a thriller about Catholic conspiracies against intellect and enlightenment and give it a new title, *The Lucretius Code*.

Professor Greenblatt's virulent animus against Christianity in general and the Catholic Church in particular is on display throughout the book. Starting in the fourth century, he maintains, after Christianity emerged from persecution, it became the religion of an “angry God” (285n). Epicurean philosophy along with the entirety of pagan learning and art were annihilated by the Christian “hatred of pleasure-seeking and a vision of God's providential rage” (103). He describes at great length and in gory detail the murder of Hypatia of Alexandria by a Christian mob in AD 415, expatiates upon St. Jerome's renunciation of pagan learning in the famous “you are a Ciceronian, not a Christian” letter, and dwells with affected horror upon St. Benedict's casting himself in the thorn bush to quell the stirrings of lust. The professor scours one thousand years of Christian history to turn up every example he can of fanatical violence, contempt for classical learning, and ascetic denunciation of every earthly pleasure or comfort in favor

of penitential suffering; against this he sets the sophistication of Epicurean philosophy as it is presented in the graceful hexameters of Lucretius's *De rerum natura*.

Now of course this is all true—up to a point. Still, one hardly need condone homicidal violence in fifth-century Alexandria to raise a skeptical eyebrow at the assertion that it brought to an end “centuries of religious pluralism under paganism—three faiths living side by side in a spirit of mingled rivalry and absorptive tolerance” (89). Centuries of persecution under pagan Roman emperors are blithely overlooked in this multicultural fantasy, culminating in the most severe under Diocletian (who is never mentioned in *The Swerve*), who “was apparently won over to assent to the new attack on the Church,” writes Msgr. Philip Hughes, “by a curious coalition of the moral philosophers, the Pagan priesthood, and the crude, old-fashioned, rural Paganism of his army” (*Popular History*, 33). If one is going to mention Jerome's renunciation of classical learning, it would seem only reasonable to concede that it was countered by St. Augustine's contrary view that pagan learning should be assimilated by the Church (*De doctrina Christiana*), and to notice that Benedictine monasticism, while undoubtedly ascetic, also was responsible for advances in agriculture, manufacturing, and education—and was practically the only institution that copied and preserved the manuscripts upon which all our classical texts depend. Indeed, a real scholar might at least acknowledge that the malevolently superstitious Catholic Church, with its grimly mysterious monasteries (the gothic fiction of Anne Radcliffe supplies, perhaps, as much as Dan Brown) was largely responsible for the development of charitable institutions, hospitals, and—most significant for a professor—universities.

If Stephen Greenblatt had been content to

trot out the usual caricature of Christendom, using Lucretius as an example of the superior Epicurean view of reality and way of life, he might be dismissed as merely a literary version of Richard Dawkins. In order to win the Pulitzer Prize, however, a far more extraordinary—and absurd—claim is required: “Hidden behind the worldview I recognize as my own is an ancient poem, a poem once lost, apparently irrevocably, and then found. . . . A random fire, an act of vandalism, a decision to snuff out the last trace of views judged to be heretical, and the course of modernity would have been different” (7). In other words, the scientific revolution and the progressive, secular, enlightened worldview that is its inevitable happy result originated in Poggio Bracciolini’s discovery of a manuscript of Lucretius’s *De rerum natura* in 1417.

This notion is preposterous in many ways, but two points stand out: first, Lucretius simply was not that important in the development of science—indeed, there is no evidence that he was important for science at all. Scholars of an extraordinarily diverse range of perspectives—Alfred North Whitehead, Herbert Butterfield, E. A. Burtt, and Stanley Jaki come immediately to mind—have spent much of the twentieth century demonstrating that medieval Scholasticism contributed far more to the emergence of modern science than Renaissance humanism. Second, the Epicureanism that he espoused, while it had some traction in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is wholly incompatible with contemporary physics. As Professor Greenblatt himself says, according to the physics of Epicurus, “The elementary particles of matter—‘the seeds of the things’—are eternal. Time is not limited—a discrete substance with a beginning and an end—but infinite” (186). Wrong on both counts: neither time nor space is unlimited, and atoms are not, as the name implies, indivisible. In

fact, the great mystery is why a contingent universe exists and follows laws at all.

A further point worth considering is Professor Greenblatt’s heedless assumption that Epicureanism is a philosophy worthy of adherence and beneficial to society and the flourishing of individual human beings. Do we really need to be encouraged to regard pleasure as the ultimate good and pain as the only real evil? No matter how sophisticated the pleasure or how subtle the anguish, preoccupation with these intimately personal experiences will inevitably lead to intense self-absorption. Following Epicurus and Lucretius, Professor Greenblatt tries to convince us that the real problem faced by the human race is an insufficient appreciation of the delights of pleasure. His circle of acquaintance must be far more ascetic than mine.

The most revealing passage in *De rerum natura* comes with the famous opening of the second book:

Suave, mari magno turbantibus
 aequora ventis,
 e terra magnum alterius spectare
 laborem;
 non quia vexari quemquamst
 iucunda voluptas,
 sed quibus ipse malis careas quia
 cernere suave est.
 [Sweet it is, when the waters in the
 great sea are troubled
 by the winds, to observe from land
 another man’s great
 distress; not because anyone’s strife is
 a delightful
 pleasure, but because it is sweet to
 perceive the evils of which oneself
 is free.]

Lucretius’s rationalization for the “sweetness” of this experience is a bit of special pleading, and none of his disciples, including

the distinguished Harvard professor, have bettered it. The lines (and those that follow) capture vividly the smug sense of superiority of the Epicurean coterie of the ancient world, which is matched by the progressive academic elite of ours: it is not a benign attitude.

The title of Professor Greenblatt's book is all too fitting: a prominent professor swerves from accuracy and truth in his account of Western history and dabbles in a field about which he knows nothing. His conclusions, nonetheless, are in accord with fancies of the cultural elite and so he is showered with acclaim and with awards. I had to buy this book because the library copy at North Carolina State was checked out and there was a very long waiting list. How many students are among its readers whose knowledge of literature, science, and religion will be shaped by this clever bit of sophistry? What could be worse for scholarship and education?

SUCCESSFUL HUMANITY

—
R. J. Snell

Up with Authority: Why We Need Authority to Flourish as Human Beings by Victor Lee Austin (New York: T&T Clark, 2010)

One has to imagine his particular brand of insouciance to appreciate fully the statement, but Christopher Hitchens captures our age perfectly when claiming “one of the beginnings of human emancipation

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is the ability to laugh at authority . . . it is an indispensable thing.” We seem to want as little authority as possible, challenging authority to mark our autonomy, while hoping for authority's demise and our full freedom. Authority, at its very best, is temporary, needed only for those immature or incapacitated, but certainly not constitutive of human well-being.

Given these sentiments, Victor Lee Austin, theologian-in-residence and Episcopal priest at Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue in New York City, posits a remarkable thesis, namely, the necessity of authority for human flourishing. Further, authority does not come from some tragic flaw or immaturity but is essential to our nature and freedom.

Austin argues his case in four domains—social, epistemic, political, and religious, although here I do not discuss his claims on religious authority—with an additional chapter devoted to the fallibility of authority. As a theologian he often adverts to religious and Christian understandings; still, his discussions are worth consideration even by those not particularly interested in religion.

According to Austin, the usual model views authority as substitutionary, needed only when things are not going well. In rejecting that model, he argues that authority becomes more necessary as persons become more capable and free. Using the conductor of a symphony as an example, he maintains that authority is needed, not because of any incompetence or ill will of the various musicians, but because decisions need to be made even though many equally plausible or reasonable options exist. While more than one possibility is correct, not all can be chosen, and someone must decide, with the other members accepting the decision or there will be no music played by the group. Of course, each musician could choose to play solo, but they cannot play as an orchestra without the