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Stephen Greenblatt's Swerve

A Harvard professor decides individuals can change history, after all.

One day in 1417, almost 600 years ago, a man named Poggio Bracciolini rode through southern Germany, hunting for books. Poggio had served as the private secretary to Pope John XXIII, until the church had deposed its leader for living a “detestable and unseemly life.” Now, Poggio was a free man, and he had decided to scour Europe, looking for lost texts from antiquity.

On that day in 1417, Poggio discovered just such a book: Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things*, a long Latin poem that had sat unread for nearly 1,000 years. Pulling this forgotten manuscript off a dusty abbey shelf, he started a process that would unleash some radical ideas on Western culture. Lucretius' poem argued that the entire universe was composed of tiny atoms, which came in infinite numbers and ricocheted randomly through space. In the 1400s, this idea held not only scientific meanings, but philosophical and existential ones as well. If the world really worked the way Lucretius said it did, then it worked without order, without afterlives, without a divine plan. This added up to a startling rebuke of medieval views about God and nature. For Lucretius, life followed a set of physical laws; he explained chance events (and free will) through shifts at the atomic level that led to new combinations and recombinations—shifts he called “swerves.”

With Poggio's help, these ideas played a crucial role in igniting the Renaissance and in influencing figures like Machiavelli and Galileo. Now, Lucretius and his poem are back in the cultural spotlight thanks to *The Swerve*, a new book by Harvard English professor Stephen Greenblatt.

Greenblatt is one of America's leading academics and perhaps its foremost authority on Shakespeare. In the last few years, he's used that standing to reach readers outside the university, writing a best-selling biography of Shakespeare and co-writing a play inspired by one of his lost texts. In *The Swerve*, however, Greenblatt leaves Shakespeare—and English literature—behind in favor of a more sweeping historical claim. *The Swerve's* subtitle is *How the World Became Modern*, and Greenblatt argues that the rediscovery of Lucretius was itself one of the swerves the poet had imagined so long before. “One poem by itself was certainly not responsible for an entire intellectual, moral and social transformation,” he writes. “But this particular ancient book, suddenly returning to view, made a difference.”

The Swerve has already received lots of attention for its appealing historical narrative: one nearly lost manuscript that helped launch a revolution in thinking. Followers of Greenblatt's career, though, might notice that this narrative represents a different kind of swerve. Greenblatt's influence as a scholar came from developing an influential—and controversial—school of criticism known as New Historicism, which argued that literary texts matter less as works of original genius than as reflections of their historical environment. Even a genius like

Shakespeare struggled to break free from the culture that produced him. And now, after building his academic reputation by tearing down the claim that one person's ideas can change the world, Greenblatt has written a mass-market book with a more optimistic message: they can.

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It would be difficult to overstate Greenblatt's influence on the world of literary studies. Every English professor and grad student, it seems, knows the closing pages of his *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980) and the opening pages of his *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1989), both of which contain important statements on the power of an author's cultural context.

Those books represented a challenge to the older literary establishment. "I was part of a generational insurgency," he says today, sitting in his office in Harvard's Barker Center. "We thought we could do it better. The room was stuffy."

Greenblatt was born in Boston in 1943 and grew up in Newton. He received his B.A. and Ph.D. from Yale—"Harvard wait-listed me," he says—during a time when universities championed the close reading of literature. To be an English professor, and especially to be a Yale English professor, meant being an appraiser of high literary texts.

But new ideas about literature and history were beginning to circulate. At Cambridge, where he received a master's degree, Greenblatt attended lectures by critic Raymond Williams; at the University of California, Berkeley, where he got his first job, Greenblatt sat in on seminars taught by philosopher Michel Foucault. This blend of Marxist criticism and French theory energized Greenblatt. He began calling on his literary colleagues to study all forms of writing—cookbooks, ballads, political tracts, and more—and to study them, as he wrote in the 1982 essay where he first used the phrase "new historicism," alongside "the complex network of institutions, practices, and beliefs that constitute the culture as a whole."

Greenblatt also gave these ideas a fatalistic twist. In *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, for example, he connected the poetry of Edmund Spenser to England's often brutal colonizing of Ireland, an argument that still occupies specialists who study *The Faerie Queene*. But Greenblatt also made a larger point about his authors' inability to escape their culture and its limits. In the book's closing pages, he reflected on the Renaissance's allowance for human agency: "If there remained traces of free choice, the choice was among possibilities whose range was strictly delineated by the social and ideological system in force."

This way of seeing literature proved to be enormously controversial—and not just to Greenblatt's old professors. George Will wrote a *Newsweek* column accusing scholars of turning Shakespeare's *The Tempest* into a statement on "the imperialist rape of the Third World." Within academia, though, New Historicism proved to be enormously influential. By the early 1990s, English departments were advertising jobs for New Historicist critics, and the *New York Times Magazine* was running a profile on Greenblatt as "one of the truly brilliant literary critics of our time." It wasn't too long before Harvard started trying to lure Greenblatt back to Boston. At one point, Henry Louis Gates sent him a Valentine from the English faculty: "Wish you were here."

In 1997, Greenblatt finally came to Harvard. While he kept writing on a wide range of subjects, he also returned more and more to Shakespeare. Given the Bard's appeal—and his seductively mysterious life—Greenblatt had a subject capable of fascinating a larger audience. In 2004, he wrote a book that seized this opportunity: a sweeping and speculative biography of Shakespeare titled *Will in the World*. The book became a smash hit. Suddenly, Greenblatt was writing *for* the New York Times Magazine, publishing a long excerpt from a book that would become a finalist for both a Pulitzer and a National Book Award.

While *Will in the World* aimed for a popular audience, it also extended Greenblatt's academic theories. He used Shakespeare's culture to fill in gaps in Shakespeare's life. "What I wanted to do was find a way—a more graspable and persuasive way—to do what I've been doing for decades," he says. "And that's to say that works of art aren't autotelic or self-enclosed, but were part of the real world. They were written by real people, like us. Maybe better and smarter than us, but real people all the same."

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Greenblatt says *Will in the World* reinforced another idea for him: "the central importance of actually telling a story." In *The Swerve*, the story starts with Lucretius. *On the Nature of Things*—or *De rerum natura*, in its Latin title—first appeared around 50 BCE. In his thinking about the world, Lucretius borrowed from the atomistic theories of Leucippus and Democritus. But what he lacked in innovation he made up for in poetic expression. "The verses of sublime Lucretius," wrote the Roman poet Ovid, "are destined to perish only when a single day will consign the world to destruction."

In fact, Lucretius' verses came remarkably close to perishing. What Poggio discovered in 1417 was the last copy of Lucretius' last surviving work, and Greenblatt shows how easily medieval manuscripts could be lost, stolen, burned, or scraped and copied over by unwitting scribes. The entire outputs of Leucippus and Democritus did not survive. But *On the Nature of Things* did—and, as Greenblatt details in *The Swerve*, it went on to influence a number of important figures.

Lucretius' poem was not immediately or widely embraced. Indeed, in the sixteenth century the Florentine Synod banned it from the city's schools, calling it "a lascivious and wicked work, in which every effort is used to demonstrate the mortality of the soul." Still, some writers, like Thomas More in his famous *Utopia*, tried to absorb Lucretius' ideas into a quasi-Christian framework. Other writers, like Montaigne, didn't care. Montaigne owned and heavily annotated a copy of *On the Nature of Things*; nearly 100 quotations from the poem show up in his *Essays*.

Just as Montaigne was a careful reader of Lucretius, so Shakespeare was a careful reader of Montaigne. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio describes Queen Mab as being "Drawn with a team of little atomi." Shakespeare was making a joke about preposterously small objects, Greenblatt says, but it was a joke he expected his audience to get. And while religious institutions continued to resist Lucretius—in the seventeenth century, Jesuits at the University of Pisa chanted a daily prayer that began, "Nothing comes from atoms"—his ideas slowly worked their way into the Renaissance mainstream.

And that means they worked their way into our worldview. Lucretius' atomism isn't the same as

our modern physics, but, as Greenblatt writes in *The Swerve*, Lucretius offered more than just rough ideas—he offered those ideas “imbued with a poet’s sense of wonder.” When, in one of the more famous passages in the history of science writing, Isaac Newton aligned himself with atomism, he included a likely allusion to Lucretius’ poem: “Should [particles] wear away, or break in pieces, the Nature of things depending on them, would be changed.”

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Reaching a popular audience has provided Greenblatt with a new, and clearly enjoyable, late-career challenge. Two hallways down from his office, the Barker Center is hosting the English Institute, an annual gathering of elite literary scholars. Greenblatt used to present papers at the Institute. Now he skips it to talk to a reporter about his new book.

“I don’t think of myself as a popularizer,” he says. But he does believe literary scholars have missed a chance to make a difference in an area of culture where they’re uniquely qualified. “We consume stories at a terrifying rate,” Greenblatt says—video games, TV shows, political coverage. But in his profession, he says, “The storytelling impulse got stigmatized.”

Even Greenblatt’s earliest writings contained flashes of storytelling. But in *Will in The World* and now in *The Swerve*, Greenblatt has turned the technique into a form of argument. “It’s a way to grasp huge forces that are otherwise very difficult to get in your head,” he says. “How does a whole civilization slowly shift? How do new ideas come into the world? What are the consequences of those ideas?”

And it’s here, in the realm of ideas and their consequences, that Greenblatt seems to break new ground in *The Swerve*. Where he once stressed the context over the individual, he now seems to embrace the notion that one text and one author could rewrite an entire culture. Greenblatt doesn’t see this as a complete transformation. “At the end of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, I said that, all the same, I wanted to hold on to a sense of my life and my agency,” he says. He also allows that New Historicism’s emphasis on limits stemmed in part from its rebellion against the literary establishment. “We wanted to say, ‘Look, *nothing* is alone in that way.’”

But Greenblatt does acknowledge that he sees things a little differently. “I was always slightly less Foucauldian than I sounded,” he says. “I’m more optimistic now than when I was younger.” In fact, Greenblatt now laments “the relentless sourness of the literary criticism of my generation.” Poggio and Lucretius certainly operated within the confines of larger communities, and Greenblatt devotes large sections of *The Swerve* to those communities. But he also believes that these men personally made a difference—that they weren’t simply reflections of their age, but actors in a story worth telling. “Why would you be interested in the Renaissance,” Greenblatt asks, “if you didn’t have some sense that something happened?”