'The Swerve,' by Stephen Greenblatt: review
Glenn C. Altschuler, Special to The Chronicle
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The swerve
How the world became modern

By stephen greenblatt

(Norton; 356 pages; $26.95)

In January 1417, in a monastery in southern Germany, Poggio Bracciolini, a bibliophile who had until recently been secretary to the pope, stumbled upon "On the Nature of Things," which had been largely forgotten for more than a thousand years.

In 7,400 lines of Latin verse, divided into six untitled books, the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius laid out the radical philosophy of Epicurus: invisible, indestructible "atoms" are the building blocks of the universe; in constant motion, they collide with each other, forming larger and larger bodies, then come apart, and recombine again; there is no purpose to existence, no divine scheme, only creation and destruction, governed by the random "swerves" of particles; therefore, since there is no life after death, the highest goal of human existence should be to enhance pleasure and reduce pain.

As he plucked the poem from oblivion, Bracciolini probably did not have the slightest idea that he might be detonating an intellectual atom bomb, with the capacity to disrupt and even destroy the world in which he lived.


Filled with spicy and surprising stories about the ancient world, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, "The Swerve" is an Epicurean delight. The founders of monastic orders, Greenblatt reveals, regarded copying manuscripts as manual labor, inherently humiliating and tedious, and therefore conductive to discipline, and not as an exalted or important task. Monks were not permitted to choose the manuscripts they copied or break the reign of silence by requesting aloud a volume that would help them complete the task to which they were assigned. If a scribe needed a pagan book, he scratched behind his ear, as if warding off fleas; to call for a volume deemed offensive, he put two fingers in his mouth, as if gagging.
The Catholic Church, Greenblatt informs us, often included men in positions of power who, to put it mildly, "lacked a religious vocation." Secretary to several popes, Bracciolini was at the center of a group he called the "Bugiale," the Lie Factory. In a room at the court, they shared smutty jokes, mingled with "an insider's contempt for yokels, and, on occasion, a distinct anticlerical streak." Back at his desk, Poggio collected the jokes, in "his best Latin," in a book he called the "Facetiae."

Because corruption was rampant in the church in the 15th century, Greenblatt acknowledges that Martin Luther and John Calvin did not need to draw on Lucretius in their calls for reformation. Their "truth," moreover, was distinctly at odds with "atomism." Greenblatt does claim, however, that "On the Nature of Things" did help undermine a key assumption underlying Christian doctrines and practices: For sinful human beings, who richly deserved to be punished, pain (administered through abasement, self-scorching and corporal punishment) was a desirable, even essential steppingstone on the road to salvation.

More generally, although he acknowledges that "one poem, by itself," could not be responsible for the intellectual, moral and social transformation that occurred at this time, Greenblatt insists that when it let the Epicurean genie out of the bottle, "On the Nature of Things" made it increasingly possible for Renaissance humanists and their Enlightenment successors to question civil and ecclesiastical authorities and "turn away from a preoccupation with angels and demons and immaterial causes and focus instead on things in this world."

Before he was burned at the stake for heresy, Greenblatt points out, Giordano Bruno shared his interest in Lucretian materialism with Edmund Spenser, John Donne and Francis Bacon. The Roman poet's fingerprints, he adds, "are all over" the essays of Michel de Montaigne; they can be detected in the writings of Isaac Newton. And Thomas Jefferson, who owned at least five editions of "On the Nature of Things," declared, "I am an Epicurean."

Assessing the impact of a text with precision is difficult. And Greenblatt may well exaggerate the role Lucretius played in the swerve that precipitated a paradigm revolution. Renaissance thinkers, I suspect, used "On the Nature of Things" more for support (and ornamentation) than for illumination. Their ideas would have "surged up" even if Poggio Bracciolini had not made his spectacular find "in the gathering darkness" of a monastic library.

Nonetheless, so many people, across so many centuries, are indebted to him. These days, when the book is an endangered species, readers of "The Swerve" should be grateful as well for Greenblatt's elegant, entertaining and enlightening excursion into worlds we have lost - and an era in which reading really mattered.

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