On Covid19 And Ruthlessly Taking The Measure Of Our Values (New York Times Article by Stephen Greenblatt)

Post by “Cassius” of March 17, 2020 at 1:22 PM

I am going to post a couple of items from the past FB discussion without comment (at the moment) on "The Swerve" so they can be referred to later (if anyone is interested). I have no clue as to how valid any criticisms may be. As I glance at them now I wonder if they might even be motivated by a "marxist" perspective. These were posted on FB by others. I post them here just in case someone were thinking about this topic and wanted to consider whether there might be any criticisms of The Swerve.:

https://armariummagnus.blogspot.com/2013/01/stephe...-how-world.html

TA: Greenblatt's book is a demonstration of how weak a Pulitzer prize for non-fiction can be, notably a Renaiissance Studise professor focusing upon pontificating. The "Swerve" as a concept is derived from Democritus in describing a part of his atomic theory. In effect he is supposing that the west became modern because of an unpredictable deviation of atoms not changes in the cultures in Europe. Also it has no substantial description of how the WEST was able to avoid modernization until a convenient point in a supposed narrative where a version of a cheap detective novel features one lone book hunter. It makes for an entertaining story but it is factually weak in several ways. It fails to encompass Giambattista Vico's substantial contribution to the modernization of "THE WEST" process circa 1725. there is more. In a context which is already starved of information about Epicurus, it will seem like a grand read, though Benjamin Farrington did a better job on the historical contextualization in The Faith of Epicurus and in Science and Politics in the Ancient World.

TA2:

There are several points here that seem odd. The appearance of a historical narrative that is centered also upon "great man" narrative of history, which implicitly diminishes the fundamental communal process. Epicurus's name means Friend, so in a sense he had no name other than his philosophy of friendship, effectively as commoning. Next step is that a large part of the process and philosophy obliges the elimination of conceits. Vico offered a selection of conceits, of nations/nationalists, of the academy/academics. A personality based based narrative of Epicurus and the Epicureans seems at best oddly oblique. Greenblatt uses largely a cheap detective novel plot line, which is contrary to Epicurus/Epicureanism as emblematic of modernity remains muddy. Take also the counter-point. The actual value of Greenblatt is also oblique though useful in opening some practice as likewise an ongoing focus on practice of the On The Nature of Things. The Swerve is a nice introduction at a very superficial level, after that the path gets lost in the implicit conceit based narratives rather than in the reasoning and practice.

Just in case that "Amarium" page goes away I am going to paste the text of that article, as it is very detailed and would be a shame if it were lost, even if it's all wrong. I have no intention of violating their copyrights; please go there to read it, but the detailed info here needs to be preserved.

The Swerve: How the World Became Modern by Stephen Greenblatt

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Stephen Greenblatt, The Swerve: How the World Became Modern
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, (Norton, 2012) 368 pages

Verdict?: *2/5 Never let history get in the way of a good Pulitzer Prize*

Back in 1931 a young Oxford don named Herbert Butterfield published a slim volume on historiography that almost no-one read and which virtually passed without review notice. Butterfield's book, which at a mere 80 or so pages was really more of a longish essay, would probably have vanished without trace if, in 1949, he had not published *Christianity and History*; a book that became a surprise best-seller. His publishers reprinted his earlier book, *The Whig Interpretation of History* in 1950 and it went on to become one of the most read theses on how history is studied of the last century or so.

The "Whig interpretation" of Butterfield's title was summed up in his essay as "studying the past for the sake of the present" as opposed to "trying to understand the past for the sake of

the past" (Butterfield p. 13). Butterfield criticised most of the English historians of the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries for a blatant tendency toward "dividing the world into the friends and enemies of progress". Anything that historians like Macauley and Acton saw as moving toward things of which they approved (liberalism, Protestantism, democracy, industry, "progress") was judged as "good" and written of approvingly. Anything that could be seen or painted as not doing so was judged as "bad" and its agents or proponents became the villains of the historian's story. At the heart of the Whig interpretation was the historiographical fallacy of "Presentism": the idea that what we have now is (mostly) good and wise and intelligent and all of the past has been a stumbling and wandering path progressing towards our wonderful and oooh-so-right present.

This presentist perspective lent itself nicely to some other ideas many Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century historians (and many current popular history writers) rather liked. The idea of history being propelled by a series of "revolutions" and "rebirths", where stagnant or retrograde tendencies are swept aside by a sudden wave of brilliant new developments was one. And the "Great Man" was another - the idea of a single, titanic intellect or personality who, by his sheer brilliance, changes everything largely by being "before his time" and therefore a force dragging the stupid sluggards of the past toward the glorious, sunlit uplands of the present (eg Galileo, Newton, Darwin).

Butterfield elegantly critiqued these ideas, arguing that they don't actually illuminate history but, rather, completely distort it. He wrote:

> *The total result of this method is to impose a certain form upon the whole historical story, and to produce a scheme of general history which is bound to converge beautifully on the present - all demonstrating throughout the ages the workings of an obvious principle of progress, of which the Protestants and whigs have been the perennial allies while Catholics and tories have perpetually formed obstruction. (Butterfield, p. 11)*

It was far better, he argued, to study the past as objectively as possible and to look at it for its own sake and on its own terms, without judging it against a measuring stick of how close it may be to things we happen to like about our present. We should seek to *understand* the past, rather than to judge it. We should try to find out what happened and why, rather than to divide it into good guys and bad guys according to a presentist calculus. Doing so means that, say, the history of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century ceases to be one of the triumph of the good and wise reformers over the corrupt and wicked Catholics and becomes a more nuanced and careful analysis of how such differing views arose within the same social and religious milieu. If we do this, Butterfield argues, "we will see Protestant and Catholic of the sixteenth century more like one another and more unlike ourselves than we have often cared to imagine" (p. 24) And, by looking at them directly rather than through the distorting prism of Whig Fallacy and presentism, we will see them more clearly.

Much of the bad history that I've critiqued on this blog is a product of the Whig Fallacy. Charles Freeman's *The Closing of the Western Mind* is a textbook example of how this old-fashioned, rather school-masterish approach still infests popular history writing and how publishers can be suckers for what is actually very bad history. As the ever-perceptive Butterfield noted, "all history must tend to become more whig in proportion as it becomes abridged" (p. 6), so it's hardly surprising that while most scholarly works of history tend to avoid the Whig Fallacy these days, pop history tends towards it to an ever increasing degree.

MedievalDeath15C.jpg
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"Those Terrible Middle Ages"and the "Glorious Renaissance"

Not surprisingly, the period of history that is a perpetual whipping boy for pop history writers of the Whig Fallacy persuasion is the Medieval Period. For the Whiggish pop historian, the common misconceptions of this period as one of unrelenting barbarism, superstition, technological stagnation, scientific paralysis and religious oppression work superbly as a counterpoint to any parable about the march of progress or shiny narrative about a "Great Man" who, "ahead of his time", brought light to the world after centuries of darkness. There have been recent efforts to try and correct these ideas and bring the results of the last century of scholarship on the Medieval period into the public consciousness. James Hannam's *God's Philosophers: How the Medieval World Laid the Foundations of Science* has done a superb job of correcting ideas about Medieval science and bringing modern scholarshhip to a wider audience, despite wailing and gnashing of teeth from those who would like to cling to the outdated myths (and here we find Charles Freeman, once again). The worthy essays in Grigsby and Harris' *Misconceptions About the Middle Ages*
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are generally very good, but they are aimed mainly at history undergraduates rather than a broader audience. Régine Pernoud's *Those Terrible Middle Ages: Debunking the Myths* is aimed at a popular audience of sorts, though largely a well-educated and very French one and her references to French buildings and history might leave most average Anglophone readers more confused than enlightened.

It's not surprising that when Butterfield chooses an example of a period of history that is least well-served by the Whig interpretation, he picks the Middle Ages:

> *A caricature of [the Whig fallacy's] result is to be seen in a popular view that is still not quite eradicated: the view that the Middle Ages represented a period of darkness when man was kept tongue-tied by authority - a period against which the Renaissance was the reaction and the Reformation the great rebellion. It is*

> *illustrated to perfection in the argument of a man denouncing Roman Catholicism at a street corner, who said "When the Pope ruled England, them was called the Dark Ages!" (Butterfield, pp. 11-12)*

It's interesting but rather sad that, writing in 1931, Butterfield characterised this view as "still not quite eradicated", expressing a hope that soon it would be. But while they may express it more eloquently than Butterfield's cockney street preacher, this view is far from "eradicated". From the works of people like Freeman to those of Hitchens and Dawkins and across a great swathe of mass publication, Whiggish pop histories, this "popular view" is not just alive and well, it's rampant.

The problem with history, of course, is that it's sprawling, complex, messy and often obscure. The historian's task is to try to impose some order on and extract some explanations from this roiling mess of events or, rather, references to them. The danger here lies in doing so in a way that reduces history to a series of oversimplified fables - a danger exemplified by the Whig fallacy. One fable that most of us absorbed, usually in childhood thanks to school teachers, was the pretty fable of "the Renaissance". It tells of how the Greeks and Romans founded western civilisation and invented things which were good, like science and reason and realistic art and nice buildings. But then the Roman Empire collapsed and Europe fell into the "Dark Ages" when everyone was ignorant and stupid and superstitious and dirty and feudal. But luckily along came the glorious Renaissance, where Leonardo invented flying machines and paintings became realistic and therefore good again and everyone became much cleaner and more rational.

Of course, even as a kid, I could see some problems with this story. As someone who was already coming to appreciate abstract expressionism and other non-realistic modern art, I wondered why realistic art was necessarily "good" and why its revival and development was therefore an "advancement". I also knew enough about the Middle Ages to recognise the technical achievement that was Gothic architecture or to know that Medieval scribes were copying and studying Greek and Roman literature, particularly philosophy, centuries before the so-called "revival of ancient learning" in the Renaissance.

It was not until university that I came to understand that while the fable of the "glorious Renaissance" was not total crap, it was a weird distortion of history. In fact, it was a perfect example of the Whig fallacy creating a moral fairy tale out of bits and pieces of historical and pseudo historical ideas. The real eye-opener for me was reading Charles Homer Haskins' 1927 classic study *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*

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and realising that the revival of ancient learning came not in the Sixteenth Century "Renaissance", but four centuries earlier, in the heart of the so-called "Dark Ages". My medieval history lecturer, the inimitable Dr Rod Thomson, always got a chuckle when he dismissed the Sixteenth Century "Renaissance" as "you know - the *other* one; the one with the pretty pictures and the crackpot inventor."

Renaissance_Florence_Italy.jpg
Image result for renaissance florence italy

Greenblatt's Central Thesis

Stephen Greenblatt's book has a 26 page "Selected Bibliography" but, oddly, it doesn't mention Charles Homer Haskins' seminal work on the revival of ancient knowledge in the Middle Ages. Not surprisingly, a general reader could get through the whole of *The Swerve* and have absolutely no idea anyone between the fall of Rome and the "glorious Renaissance" ever rediscovered Greek and Roman learning at all, let alone get any inkling of the amazing story of the riches of philosophical, scientific and technical works that flooded into medieval Europe, revolutionising thinking, invigorating the schools and the new universities and laying the foundations of modern western thought. Greenblatt is the John Cogan Professor of the Humanities at Harvard and his speciality is Renaissance literature. It seems his interest in the Early Modern historical context of that literature has not left him with any time to study the Middle Ages, as that could be the only explanation for his abysmal and comically bad grasp of the earlier period. To be blunt, this Harvard professor's grasp of medieval history is stunted at about high school level. For Greenblatt, the Middle Ages was a period of monks hunched over manuscripts they never read, of Greek and Roman learning ignored or suppressed and, it would seem, a lot of flagellation. Greenblatt seems rather obsessed with medieval flagellation.

The thesis of Greenblatt's book - which won 2012's Pulitzer Prize for Non-fiction it should be remembered - is tenuous to say the least. He claims that the Roman philosopher Lucretius (Titus Lucretius Carus, about whom we know very little) wrote a poem in the mid-First Century BC which was a summary of the cosmos from an Epicurean perspective - *De rerum natura* ("On the Nature of Things"). He claims this work was a brilliant philosophical synopsis that summarised a major and highly influential ancient school of thought - one that was defiantly atheistic and materialist, excluding gods and magic and presenting a very modern-sounding, almost scientific universe of atoms and material structures. He then claims that this poem and its ideas were suppressed by Christianity and that almost all copies of *De natura* were destroyed. He goes on to tell the story of how a Humanist scholar, Poggio Bracciolini, discovered a surviving manuscript of it in Germany in 1417 and how the return of this work to the west revolutionised thinking, inspired some of the greatest minds of the modern age (Leonardo Da Vinci, Galileo Gallilei, Francis Bacon, Thomas Jefferson) and changed the world.

It's a grand and remarkable claim and one that many readers who are reasonably well-informed about these things would justifiably regard with a high degree of scepticism. Since Greenblatt is clearly not an idiot, he is aware of this. Which is why, a mere eleven pages into his book, having laid out these remarkable claims in grandiose style, he quietly undercuts them with this judicious but very meek little paragraph:

> *One poem by itself was certainly not responsible for an entire intellectual, moral and social transformation - no single work was, let alone one that for centuries could not be spoken about freely in public. But this particular ancient book, suddenly returning to view, made a difference.* (Greenblatt, p. 11)

Er, right. It "made a difference". Greenblatt's book is full of this kind of thing. After pages and pages of making a point, often more by broad assertion, generalisation or even insinuation, he will slip in a brief "escape clause" sentence which shows that he knows what he is saying can be challenged or which even undermines what he has just presented completely. But he does so very quietly and many or even most general readers would not notice or understand the import of these asides. Certainly few of his reviewers did so.

It should be noted that I personally love *De rerum natura* and have read it several times. While the Stoics are my favourite ancient school of philosophy, I'd say the Epicureans come a close second and that both are certainly, in many respects, far more accessible in their ideas and sentiments than the Aristotelian and Platonic philosophy that has dominated western thought for most of the last 2400 years. But my appreciation of the philosophical ideas of Epicurus and their eloquent expression in Lucretius' poem does not mean I won't notice when someone is overselling the significance and influence of both in the ancient world.

Reading Greenblatt, the general reader would get the impression that the Epicureanism that Lucretius summarises was a dominant philosophical position in ancient Greece and Rome and that a large number of ancient Greeks and Romans were out and out atheists who denied the gods and saw the universe as nothing more than atoms in motion. Of course, in his characteristic style, having given his impression Greenblatt gives one of his passive corrections. "For many Romans at least, the gods had not ceased to be - even the Epicureans , sometimes reputed to be atheists thought the gods existed, though at a far remove from the affairs of mortals" (p. 71) Exactly; though the word "many" in that sentence should be replaced with "virtually all".

scribe2.jpg
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Monks and Flagellations

Greenblatt's high school level grasp of history tells him that intellectual life in the Middle Ages was all about monks. So he spends a long time early in his book telling us what he knows about medieval monks. Monks, he tells us, did write books. And he assures us (slightly grudgingly)

that this "helped salvage the achievements of ancient thought" (p. 25) But in Greenblatt's Whiggish history medeival scholars are the bad guys who didn't appreciate "ancient thought" and condemned Lucretius' masterpiece to obscurity, so he has to spend some time getting around a problem - how can he condemn the very people who preserved this ancient thought, including Lucretius' book, so that he can contrast them with the good guys in his fable, Poggio and the Renaissance humanists? He does this by depicting monks (and to him all medieval scholars were monks and monks were the only medieval scholars) as unthinking drones who copied ancient works purely because their orders required them to spend part of the day labouring in the scriptorium. But they didn't actually read what they copied and by no means was it ever discussed or debated. Greenblatt assures us that intellectual curiosity was forbidden:

> *But the actual interest of the scribes in the books they copied (or their distaste for those books) was strictly irrelevant. Indeed, insofar as the copying was a form of discipline - an exercise in humility and a willing embrace of pain - distaste or simple incomprehension might be preferable to engagement. Curiosity was to be avoided at all costs*. (Greenblatt, p. 41)

For anyone with more than a high school level grasp of medieval intellectual life, it's hard to know what part of this weird caricature is more ridiculous. If Greenblatt had read anything on medieval thought at all, and to judge by his bibliography he hasn't, he would know that the idea they copied books purely as a physical discipline is ludicrous. These were works of *auctoritas* - "authority" - and that included the works of ancient pagan writers. They were not regarded with "distaste". Even when the scholar may disagree with them, these scholars saw them as the "gold of the Egyptians": wisdom given to them by God since all wisdom, even pagan learning, ultimately came from God. They may have mentally filtered out elements that they saw as contrary to their faith, but they believed, as Clement of Alexandria and Augustine of Hippo had told them, that the Greek and Roman pagan thinkers had been given a special gift for rational analysis and that this was to be respected and studied. Even the most basic undergraduate introduction to medieval thought would have explained all this to Greenblatt. But he seems to have been too interested in presenting his childish cartoon about "monks".

His last point in the quote above is more evidence of his lack of understanding of the period he's working so hard to distort and then condemn. There certainly were regular condemnations of *curiositas* amongst monks. In his ignorance of the period and because of his distorting Whiggish prejudices, Greenblatt has decided this means "intellectual curiosity" and claims this means they may have copied the works he likes so much, but they can't have actually thought about them or discussed them as this was forbidden. In fact, the word refers to curiosity about others, gossip and idle chatter - something probably common in small enclosed communities of celibate men - and had nothing to do with intellectual curiosity. Greenblatt's weird cartoonish picture of the Middle Ages as 1000 years of monks copying works they did not read and could not discuss while occasionally flagellating themselves looks decidedly odd to anyone with a genuine grasp of the period. Where is Aquinas in this odd picture? Where is Albertus Magnus, William of Occam or Roger Bacon? Where are the intricate debates of the medieval

universities? Where is the medieval practice of *quodlibeta*, where medieval students gathered for day-long disputations where anyone could challenge any master on any philosophical subject, however provocative, and where bright students earned their spurs in no-holds-barred intellectual debate? In fact, where the hell are medieval *universities* in Greenblatt's book? They get one mention, in a single paragraph, where they are dismissed as institutions entirely unworthy of his humanist Poggio (p. 134).

What does get a great many mentions, however, is medieval flagellation. If the Epicurianism of *De rerum* was suppressed in the Middle Ages, according to Greenblatt, it's because the Middle Ages despised the pursuit of simple pleasures, as proscribed by Epicurus and his follower Lucretius, but instead embraced discipline through pain. In loving detail he describes Saint Benedict mortifying his flesh by hurling himself into stinging nettles and happily catalogues medieval examples of religious penitential self-discipline:

> *... forms of corporal punishment* - 'virgarum verbera' *(hitting with rods),* 'corporale supplicium' *(bodily punishment),* 'ictus' *(blows),* 'vapulatio' *(cudgeling),* 'disciplina' *(whipping) and* 'flagellatio' - *were routinely inflicted on community members who broke the rules.* (Greenblatt, p. 106)

And they were. But Greenblatt's pages of examples of this facet of medieval life, which seems very odd to us, pretend that this wasn't just a facet but was the whole jewel. A reader with little knowledge of the period would think that this was what the medieval attitude to pleasure and pain was and that the whole of society for the entire period revelled in beatings and flagellations and the occasional roll in the nettles until Greenblatt's Poggio came along, rediscovered Lucretius and allowed us to have fun again.

But where in this caricature is Chaucer and Boccaccio? Where is the rollicking bawdy of the Goliardic poems or riotous carnivals and festivals that marked the medieval cycle of the year? Where is the pageantry of feasting and tournaments? Where is *Le Roman de la Rose* and the whole, vast culture and literature of *amor courtois*? Yes, there was an ascetic tradition. but the whole reason medieval moralists had to keep banging on and on about it and the reason its practitioners had to keep rolling in the nettles is that they were surrounded by a culture that was sensuous, pleasure-seeking and indulging in more than a little rolling in the hay. To paint the ascetics as the whole picture and ignore the world of sensuous pleasure they were retreating from and reacting against is, yet again, a bizarre distortion.

But it's precisely the sort of oversimplification, selective argument and studied ignorance that a Whiggish fable like Greenblatt's necessarily rests on. The real Middle Ages simply do not fit in his story, so he just cuts out some cartoonish pictures from his high school history book and sticks them on a piece of cardboard with some simplistic commentary in coloured ink around them and hands it in to the teacher for a Pulitzer Prize.

Lucretius2.jpg Image not found or type unknown

The Imaginary "Suppression" of Lucretius

The middle of the book is actually a quite interesting account of the life and tumultuous career of Poggio Bracciolini, his rise in the Papal court with all of its intrigues and pitfalls, the fall of his patron Pope John XXIII after the Council of Constance and his subsequent finding of a manuscript of *De rerum*. This part of the book was rather enjoyable and with a bit more work could perhaps have been a book in itself. Maybe this was Greenblatt's original idea and he certainly seems to be on much firmer ground regarding the historical context of this part of the story, since it is not as riddled with howlers, distortions and selective evidence as the rest of his tale.

Unfortunately he is determined to stick to his fable of how Lucretius' poem somehow "changed the world" or explains "how the Renaissance began". He quotes from Poggio uncritically, without thinking for a moment that the humanists of this period may have had some heavy biases of their own. Poggio was scornful of the monasteries in which he and his fellow enthusiasts found manuscripts of the ancient poetry and plays they held in such esteem, as is the uncritical Greenblatt. The oddity here is one that even the most casual reader has to notice - if the medieval Church was so keen to suppress Lucretius and other pagan writers, why were there any manuscripts for Poggio and Co. to find? The manuscript he found in 1417, probably in the great Benedictine library at Fulda, was itself the work of a medieval monk. So if, as Greenblatt regularly asserts (though never with any substantiation) the Church had spent 1000 years trying to "suppress" or even "destroy" Lucretius, why was there a copy in Fulda at all?

As mentioned earlier, very attentive readers will notice Greenblatt slips in brief snippets that indicate, however weakly, that he is not actually telling us the true story. After continually insisting that the Church "suppressed" or actively "destroyed" all copies of this subversive poem, he has to admit that not only was Poggio's copy made by a medieval monk, but there were other copies as well:

> *Looking back from this distance, with Lucretius' masterpiece securely in hand, modern scholars have been able to identify a network of early medieval signs of the text's existence - a citation here, a catalogue entry there ...* (Greenblatt, p. 53)

In other words, we know that there were copies of this supposedly "suppressed" work in circulation. And we also know this because medieval copies have survived, as Greenblatt also has to admit later:

> *Two ninth century manuscripts of* 'On the Nature of Things', *unknown to Poggio or any of his humanist contemporaries, did make it through the almost impenetrable barrier of time.* (Greenblatt, p. 204)

Indeed. In fact we have these two manuscripts - Voss. Lat. F. 30 and Voss. Lat. Q. 94 - as well as two further fragments of other copies. And stemmatic analysis of these four manuscripts shows that they in turn are derived from at least three earlier copies that have not survived. And there were other copies as well. From references to and quotes from the poem we know that there were also copies at the monastery of Reichenau, the library at St. Gall and Rabnanus Maurus also quoted Lucretius from his archbishopric at Mainz. Medieval library catalogues also mention copies at Bobbio in the Ninth Century, Lobbes and Corbie in the Twelfth Century and Sigebert of Gembloux mentions it in a gloss in the Eleventh.*

Given the patchy nature of our evidence for *any* medieval book, we know these references, fragments and handful of copies represent the tip of a largely vanished iceberg - if we have evidence of these copies, there were many other copies that have vanished without trace. What this evidence shows is that Lucretius' work was not "suppressed" and was definitely not actively "destroyed" by the medieval Church. These references and fragments are about typical of the evidence for many ancient Greek and Roman works. This was not a work that greatly interested medieval scholars, but it interested them enough to preserve it about as much as they preserved many such (to them) second tier works. After all, Virgil praised Lucretius and the medieval scholars loved Virgil, so they seem to have figured Lucretius' work was worth copying. And Greenblatt's hero found his poem thanks to their diligence. Even after the poem became more widely known thanks to Poggio and the printing press, the evidence for the supposed "suppression" of this work is rather pathetic. At one point Greenblatt is reduced to noting that *De rerum* was suggested for inclusion on the *Index of Prohibited Books* but ... wasn't.

Over and over again, a reader who ignores Greenblatt's rhetoric, hints, assertions and occasional histrionics and actually pays attention to the details of the *evidence* notices that it does not support what he is trying to claim. He just wants a neat Whiggish fable with a happy ending.

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The Usual Suspects

Greenblatt's happy ending is a bit of a muddle and again, even positive reviewers have noted that he stretches his thesis past breaking point in the final section. The last third of the book is

a rather tenuous attempt at hinting that Lucretius' poem was deeply significant and influential on all kinds of interesting people. Unfortunately this consists of little more than "X read Lucretius and X was great therefore the poem is important". Worse, he often resorts to "Y *may have* read it" or worse still "Z was influenced by the general tenor of the period in which people were reading it". This really is weak stuff.

While meandering from Leonardo (there is no evidence he read it) to Newton (he wrote something that *may* have alluded to it) to Jefferson (he, at least, was influenced by it), we get a roll call of the usual suspects - Hypatia, Bruno and Galileo. The Great Library of Alexandria and the destruction of the Serapeum are mentioned, though Greenblatt is wary enough not to claim the destruction of the latter was somehow the end of the former. "Whether on this occasion the mayhem reached the (Serapeum's) library is unknown" he writes cautiously, ignoring the fact that there is no evidence there still was any library there at all when the derelict temple was destroyed. But this does not matter to him anyway: "libraries, museums and schools are fragile institutions, they cannot long survive violent assaults" (p. 91), he assures us. Then, despite the fact that he has not actually given any examples of any "violent assaults" on any "libraries, museums and schools" in this period whatsoever, he concludes solemnly, "a way of life was dying".

He is less careful when telling the story of Hypatia. Ignoring the fact that no contemporary source makes any mention of her murder being due to her learning, he tells us this was the problem and that she was accused of being "a witch, practicing black magic" - something only added to the story centuries later. Not content with that, he repeats Gibbon's error that she was flayed alive and then declares her death "effectively marked the downfall of Alexandrian intellectual life" (p. 93). I imagine this would have been news to Aedisia, another female, pagan, Neo-Platonic philosopher who flourished in Alexandria a few years after Hypatia. Or to Hierocles, Asclepius of Tralles, Olympiodorus the Younger, Ammonius Hermiae or Hermias; all renowned scholars who worked in the city after Hypatia.* But Greenblatt does not want to let details and facts get in the way of his Whig fable.

So he presents Giordano Bruno as "a brilliant scientific mind", showing that he has never read a word of this kooky mystic's Hermetic nonsense. And his account of Galileo is riddled with errors, including the nonsensical idea that the Jesuits, staunch champions of their famous pupil Galileo, may have actually initiated the move against him. Redondi's debunked claim that the Galileo is affair was "really" over atomism and the doctrine of the Eucharist is also trotted out uncritically (though this is another claim he quietly undercuts in an endnote).

It's one thing that a Harvard professor could have actually written a work of such blatant bunk. What is weird is that even most of the positive reviewers noted that his thesis feels contrived and that the whole work is patchy, disjoined and the ending is weak. And this is from the people who are not clued up enough to know where Greenblatt has fiddled with history to make it fit

his fable. Yet most of these reviews were gushing and this rather crappy book won the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for Non-fiction? I am at a loss to explain this, other than to note that Whiggish fables make for nice, neat stories. But non-fiction is meant to be something else. This book, to be blunt, is smoke and mirrors.

* Many thanks to Baerista, whose excellent review of Greenblatt's book over at Renaissance Mathematicus was published back in May and who made most of the same points as I have. Given the length of time I took writing this review, I used some of his research and am grateful for his summary of the manuscript history of *De rerum* - that saved me some time.

Addenda: As noted in a comment below, Professor John Montfasani has written a highly critical review of Greenblatt's book in *Reviews in History*, with a rather weak and very brief response by Greenblatt. Jim Hinch has gone into much more detail in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* in a long and suitably scathing piece: "Why Stephen Greenblatt is Wrong - And Why it Matters". JJ Cohen on the In the Middle blog notes, rather sadly, that Greenblatt winning the Pulitzer is bad enough, but the MLA has also awarded him the James Russell Lowell Prize for this book. Criticisms lamenting Greenblatt's distortions can also be found on Text Technologies, on Medieval Meets World, on In Romaunce as We Rede and on The Bookfish.