Love for Lucretius: The Perils of Affective Historiography

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The Swerve is a troublesome book. For many readers, it is the only book about pre-modern culture that they know (if we leave aside the popular fiction of Dan Brown) and, validated by the awards it has won as a work of broad appeal (the Pulitzer Prize) and as a work of scholarship (the MLA's James Russell Lowell Prize), *The Swerve* has the cachet of "real" history. It is stocked by neighborhood libraries and consumed avidly by book clubs; sharing a cab with a physical chemist earlier this year, our conversational common ground was a recent book we had both read — *The Swerve*. What accounts for the extraordinary appeal — even, we might say, the *power* — of this book? I would suggest that there are two sources of its appeal: first, the narrative of triumph, in which the overmastering success of the Renaissance is, at the same time, "our" own success in the present moment; and, second, the nature of the author's voice. Much attention has been devoted to the first aspect, especially with regard to the debates concerning medieval-Renaissance periodization that the book has reawakened (with their attendant turf wars),[1] but it is also worth examining the second aspect: that is, the intensely personal yet collective voice that has contributed greatly to the book's impact. It is not my intention to denigrate the broad appeal of *The Swerve*: on the contrary, there is a great value in drawing the attention of a wide range of readers to the fascinating cultural landscape of the pre-modern era, and if even a small percentage of *The Swerve*'s readers are led to explore the period more deeply, a great good will have come of it. But it is worth trying to figure out exactly what qualities have fueled the book's success, and to consider the implications of the fact that contemporary audiences value those qualities so highly.

The narrative of triumph found in *The Swerve* is rooted in its denigration of the medieval. Greenblatt paints a picture of the Middle Ages that is a dreary backwater, filled with self-mortifying flagellants who steadfastly refuse to recognize the pleasures that can be afforded by the flesh and by the intellectual liberty of Epicurean philosophy. The troublesome nature of this book comes from the way in which it attempts to re-inscribe the time period that we used to un-ironically call "the Renaissance" at the center of intellectual inquiry. *The Swerve* does this in a number of ways, not least in the double way in which periodization is implicitly conceived in the two subtitles of the book. Readers in North America read *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern*. Readers in the United Kingdom, however, read *The Swerve: How the Renaissance Began*. This double chronology is not trivial. It places the moment of rupture — the epistemic break — as both a foundational moment (the modern) and an originary moment that is simultaneously a return to a lost golden age (the Renaissance as rebirth of antiquity). In both cases, the subtitle marks a starting point — a

moment of becoming or beginning. The thing that becomes or begins, however, is different: in the UK title, the Renaissance itself is the thing that begins, while in the North American edition, "the world" is what becomes modern. Modernity and Renaissance are thus lined up in a flexible dialectical relationship in which the Renaissance itself produces modernity (thus seamlessly inaugurating the "early modern" period), while the inconvenient gap between ancient Rome and Renaissance Italy, like the tedious moments of resistance to enlightenment that punctuate the period between Poggio Bracchiolini and Thomas Jefferson, are nothing more than the irritating backward tug of the medieval.

I will leave aside the question of whether we can take fifteenth-century Italy as a synecdoche of the whole world, in favor of considering *why* readers embrace that implicit comparison so enthusiastically. One reason for this, I would suggest, is the voice of the author, which at once articulates an individual, even idiosyncratic subjectivity and also serves as the basis for an imagined community that shares in the neo-Renaissance sensibility of this authorial voice. The telling anecdote, a brief moment of personal encounter that anchors the text, is a key element in the affective historiography that is one of the legacies of New Historicism. In Greenblatt's work, the telling anecdote is almost invariably anchored in a more specific, sincere, passionate, even terrifying concern: the fear of death. This is evident in the story of the man on the airplane who wants to practice reading lips as he goes to visit his dying son (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 255); in the story of how the author's own father, who was "obsessed throughout his life with death," brought his own father's body back home on a baggage train surrounded by a crowd of beautiful houris, "bejeweled, bedecked in feather boas," from the Ziegfeld Follies (*Hamlet in Purgatory* 6);[2] and *The Swerve*'s paean to the author's mother and her own "dark certainty that her end was very near" (4). In *The Swerve*, Epicurean philosophy is celebrated as a bulwark against the power of darkness, and Lucretius's great poem appears as a lifeline from the ancient world that is able to save not only the author himself but, perhaps, even civilization as a whole.

Affective historiography — that is, history writing that openly acknowledges the writer's own emotional connections to the topic he or she studies — can be an enormously powerful mode of writing, and its value is especially evident in the heightened persuasive power and appeal of histories that are written for a broader non-scholarly audience.[3] But it is also often the case that such histories open themselves up to criticism by specialists in the field on two counts: first, because the broad brush of the master narrative — essential to any work written for a general audience — necessarily effaces details that provide nuance and reflect the contradictions that are embedded within historical evidence; second, because the affective element in the authorial voice that produces the desired emotional response in the reader also creates trouble. Affective historiography creates trouble both positively, in terms of its creative, productive potential, and negatively, in terms of the inevitable distortion of the mirror of the past that results from the subjective lens. In observing these qualities of affective historiography, I do not intend to undervalue the usefulness of this kind of work. By anchoring the scholarly endeavor in the personal anecdote and, more deeply, acknowledging his or her affective engagement in the topic, the author is

able to introduce explicitly the extent to which individual perspective underlies the investigation.[4] This acknowledgement of affective engagement gives readers a clearer sense of how personal biases, individual orientations, different patterns (or habitus) of thought may have inflected the inquiry itself, as well as the writing process.[5] But is there a dangerously high price to this kind of effort? Does the entry of the personal, of the affective, contaminate as much as it enriches?

It is not possible to give a full account of the affective historiography of *The Swerve* in the space of a short essay, but we can examine one strand of this practice as it is expressed through the language of maternal generation and midwifery. Such language appears from the outset of the book, as Greenblatt alludes to the late fifteenth-century "discovery" of Lucretius by Poggio Bracciolini. Poggio is the "midwife to modernity" (13) who brings an energetic progeny into the world — that is, modernity itself: "Something happened in the Renaissance, something that surged up against the constraints" of the medieval past (9). Yet this "something," this enfant terrible, was not always nurtured with such loving attention, in Greenblatt's tale. Lucy Hutchinson, the late seventeenth-century writer who was the "surprising source" (257) of the first English translation of *De rerum natura*, proves to have been a more reluctant nurse, so benighted by her religious faith that she retreated from her own personal Lucretian enlightenment. Greenblatt's Hutchinson is ambivalent about her translation, having "not initially realized, she confessed, how dangerous Lucretius was" (258). In spite of her ambivalence, however, "Hutchinson found the manuscript strangely difficult to destroy" (259), and "reluctantly sent her translation" to others (260). Greenblatt emphasizes Hutchinson's "fears" that Lucretian philosophy would challenge religious orthodoxy, which were, he says, "well grounded" (261). Thomas Jefferson, by contrast — presented lying on his deathbed, just two pages later — is brave enough to acknowledge openly, "I am . . . an Epicurean" (263). In other words, in this exemplary tale, religion is the dark side of the psyche, which overshadows the bright light of reason as expressed in Epicurean philosophy. Death holds no fear for the true lover of Lucretius.

It is not worth belaboring the point that this story, however engaging, is a caricature of the Middle Ages, which appears as a homogeneous period of repressive religious orthodoxy that abruptly — if by fits and starts — gave way to the first harbingers of modernity with the dawn of the Renaissance. More interesting is the question of *why* this view of the triumph of modernity (as an age of reason) over the medieval (as an age of blind faith) is so compelling to twenty-first-century readers. What makes the medieval such an effective and appealing synonym for religious fundamentalism and, by extension, intellectual benightedness of every kind? In *The Swerve*, religious fundamentalism — then and now — is the eternal enemy, and the power of human reason is the hero that strives to conquer it, in a psychomachia that pits the power of the (printed) book against the stifling pressure of the medieval. The story it tells is a romantic adventure, with repressive monks and daring, puzzle-solving intellectuals, capped with a happy ending as reason ultimately triumphs over her adversaries. No wonder *The Swerve* has drawn a tremendous readership: how could a more nuanced account of the period ever compete?

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Notes

[1] David Wallace's account of these turf wars, written almost a quarter-century ago, is still right on the mark; see "Carving Up Time," esp. 2–8.

[2] For a compelling reading of these moments in Greenblatt's work, see Alan Ackerman, "The Prompter's Box," esp. 225–26.

[3] Wallace makes a powerful argument for the necessity of "the presence and control of a personal voice" (11) in broader historical accounts that sweep across period divides (11–18), with particularly effective examples from the work of Raymond Williams.

[4] For a groundbreaking examination of the investment of the personal subject in literary historical inquiry, see Carolyn Dinshaw, "Chaucer's Queer Touches," as well as her recent deep exploration of "amateur" engagement with the past in *How Soon is Now?* For a profound study of how personal engagement with medieval texts can produce a community of mutual exchange across time, see Nicholas Watson, "Desire for the Past."

[5] On the value of a "personal inventory" and the development of an individual habitus, see Suzanne Akbari, "The Object of Devotion."

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