On the nature of modern thought

Q&A with Stephen Greenblatt

Friday, March 9, 2012

Photos by Stephanie Mitchell/Harvard Staff Photographer

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GAZETTE: Lucretius' poem brought ideas from Epicurus into the Renaissance and spread them all the way out to Darwin and Einstein and Jefferson. How did that happen?

GREENBLATT: Epicurus was extremely skeptical of – even hostile to – poetry, art, and what we would think of today as the humanities. One of the few sayings of his that survives is, "I spit on poetry." He wanted his philosophy to be written in plain, unadorned, prose, and so it's strange that his disciple Lucretius decided to write his philosophical teachings in the form of a poem. Why did he do this?

Lucretius likens his poetry to smearing honey around the lip of a cup so that people can swallow what would otherwise be bitter – the way you might do to give medicine to a child. Students of literature are often slightly uncomfortable about that explanation because you don't want to think of poetry as a kind of adornment, a little sweetener. You want to make a different kind of claim for its power. But in fact in the case of Lucretius it may be that the poetic form actually made the content more palatable and thus helps to answer to the question you ask: How did this thing survive and make it back into circulation after 1417? This poem came back not as a school of philosophy that people were interested in. On the contrary, they thought the ideas were grotesque or weird or simply incomprehensible, but they thought the poetry was beautiful.

GAZETTE: So if it wasn't a powerful poem, the ideas that it transmitted across time may not have survived.

GREENBLATT: If the set of propositions had had no aesthetic form, the history of its reception would have been a different one, though it is difficult to know quite what it would have been. What we do know is that when it came back, it was exciting because the form in which it was written, a beautiful poem in classical Latin hexameters, seemed to people to be powerful and important.

The scholars who began to edit him in the 16th century said, don't worry about the ideas, which are horrible, but just appreciate how great the poem is. They wanted to separate the two things completely to get themselves past prohibitions against even contemplating the idea that the universe had no creator or designer, that there was no overarching purpose to anything, that humans weren't the center of existence, that the universe consisted of infinite numbers of atoms in a void banging together for no purpose. Lucretius' poetic skill enabled readers to grapple with what they might otherwise have simply rejected in disgust. This is one of those great, rare moments that we dream about, a moment in which there's a perfect conjunction of philosophical, scientific power and high art.

GAZETTE: What are some of the specific literary qualities of this poem or this poet?

GREENBLATT: I don't want to pretend to be an expert in classical prosody. (I can stumble along, but there's a whole other life involved in understanding how those hexameters work.) But, even from my somewhat primitive comprehension, Lucretius has a wonderful style. He's a particularly brilliant, elegant fashioner of metaphors, with a delicacy and precision that are unusual. The poem begins with a magnificent, ecstatic hymn to Venus, the goddess of love. That's the hymn that inspired Botticelli. It's a great, erotic celebration of a universe in which everything is conjoining, coming together to reproduce, to thrust forward into the future, to celebrate joy and beauty, to ensure peace over war. That was all a metaphor for Lucretius. He didn't believe Venus existed, at least in the mythological way he represents her. He fashions a metaphor for a universe in which – as he was imagining it – innumerable, invisible atoms were moving, colliding, and connecting. Metaphors in his work turn out to have a kind of richness that they always have in great art. They have a life of their own.

GAZETTE: Let's follow that thought. In your previous book, *Will in the World*, you dwell on Falstaff and you talk about the mysterious inner principle of vitality in that character, which is something that has kept it alive to readers for centuries. How in the craft of writing are some characters or ideas imbued with that vital spark?

GREENBLATT: Shakespeare thought through and about people and narrative. His way of connecting to the world – of conveying what he wanted to convey – was through stories and through the invention of characters who seem as real as anything that's ever existed. That for him is where vitality lay – in personhood. For Lucretius, the vitality doesn't exist in personhood. There are no characters.

There's a person Lucretius is addressing called Memmius, and the poet himself speaks at various moments in the work as "I," but this is not a writer who invents unforgettable people. Instead, he does something that, as the great Harvard philosopher George Santayana observed, has almost never been done before or since. He manages to convey a set of scientific and philosophical ideas with the intensity or force that you associate with literary vitality – with Virgil or with Shakespeare or with Homer. It doesn't work in every line of Lucretius' long poem. But when it works, it works because he somehow is able to give you the sense that the material world that he's fascinated with – the world of atoms and emptiness – is itself surging up and coming alive in the work.

So when he writes that the urgency of sexual desire is like blood spurting from you when you're wounded, or when he describes the weird combination of longing and frustration that comes with actually wanting to penetrate and enter the person whom you desire, you're at a

level of apprehension – vitality, if you want – that is extremely rare. The poet Yeats said that Lucretius wrote the greatest description of sexual intercourse ever written. This achievement has to do not with a merely topographical account of what happens but with a poetic apprehension of what the urgency is – what the experience feels like from the inside. And he does it not only there, in the passages about sex, but even when he is thinking about what appear to be purely theoretical and abstract questions.

Lucretius has an elaborate, quite famous account of how atoms are like letters in an alphabet. By themselves they don't mean anything, but they can go in infinite numbers of combinations and make infinitely different meanings. To think of that connection between letters and atoms and to make good on the connection in poetry is very characteristic of his genius.

GAZETTE: You led the University's Arts Task Force, which advocated for embracing the creative work of the arts as an irreplaceable instrument of knowledge. Is it important, do you think, to be teaching the craft as well as how to analyze these works from the point of view of the humanities?

GREENBLATT: For much of my professional career, I didn't encourage art-making as a cognitive activity. I think it's entirely possible to capture things that are quite important about art, whether literary art or painting or drawing or sculpture, without doing it, just as you can understand aviation without building a plane.

That said, partly as a result of the work for the Arts Task Force, I began to see more and more that I had been missing a dimension in my own teaching, that I could get my students to experience and understand things that were difficult to reach without engaging in the craft. I don't make such assignments in every course I teach, but in lots of the courses I teach I have moved in that direction – to ask my students to do various forms of art as a cognitive exercise.

I think it goes back to the questions that you were asking me about Lucretius. When Lucretius talks about honey smeared around the cup, he makes it sound as if he thought poetry was simply something you added after you concocted the medicine. You open the honey jar and put it around to get people to swallow it. But that's not what happens. What happens is that a whole set of things are articulated and released only in the making of the art.

What was liberating for me about this particular aspect of my teaching is that it enables me to draw on my own experience as a writer in my academic work. I don't know fully what I want to say until I actually write it. Though I'm not completely lost and sitting in front of a blank page, I can only understand what I mean when I'm actually trying to fashion it persuasively in prose.

The writing itself carries a lot of the intellectual weight – figuring out how the sentence could possibly work, how the paragraph could have a form that would make sense, how one page could lead to the next page. These are intellectual enterprises.

GAZETTE: In the public discourse lately, there have been a lot of questions about the value of a college education. It seems easier to quantify the value of the skills a student acquires if he or she is studying in the sciences or some other disciplines. How should we think about the value of the humanities?

GREENBLATT: There's an amazing passage in Darwin's autobiography in which he says that as a young man he used to like to read Shakespeare, but that he tried it recently and just felt nauseated. He asks himself why he felt nauseated and he concluded that he had spent his whole life taking enormous bodies of natural history information and abstracting a set of principles. That enterprise of abstraction or reduction seems to have made him resistant now to literature, poetry, painting, and so forth. Darwin writes that he should have tried to keep the art-loving side of himself up, by giving himself at least a little bit of exposure to art every day. But it is too late now, and he regrets it, since he feels he has lost access to a deep pleasure.

Now, that's partly local to Darwin, but it doesn't concern him alone. There is an interesting tension between the humanities and the procedures of the sciences, the impulses of art and the enormously powerful reductivist impulse of the sciences.

It's the purpose of the sciences to come up with a set of workable, abstract principles, and humanities tend to be more interested in aspects of experience – what it feels like to be X or Y. What if you could divine what it actually feels like to be a dying, old man in the case of King Lear, or to be a late adolescent in the grip of a terrible parental injunction, in the case of Hamlet. You can try to line the two things up — art and science — and we have been talking in the case of Lucretius about a moment at which the literary impulse and the scientific impulse seem surprisingly integrated, but actually lots of times they're not integrated at all.

Most often in fact they're pulling in very, very different directions: In the case of the natural and physical sciences toward increasing abstraction; in the case of the literary toward an experiential record that resists abstraction.

GAZETTE: In many ways, the story of Poggio is a story about the power of the humanities – his discovery of Lucretius' poem inspired some of the most influential figures of the Renaissance, and continued to influence prominent thinkers for centuries.

GREENBLATT: Yes. He himself might have been quite unhappy about this particular swerve. Everything suggests that in many ways he was rather conventional in his beliefs. This is a person who, as a bureaucrat in the Vatican for 50 years, took Communion every day, didn't imagine himself drastically rocking the boat, lived a rather cynical life in the world – 14 illegitimate children, a late marriage with more children on the way, wanting to get some money and buy a fancy house and property in Terranuova. And he lived in a world that would have made Gordon Gekko look like Mother Teresa. These were very rough times that he lived in with very cynical people. The Papacy has always had its moral ups and downs as an institution, but he was at the center of it when it was at its most spectacular nadir in the early 15th century. The person for whom he became apostolic secretary was arguably the worst Pope in the history of the Papacy, which is no small achievement. The cardinals themselves felt eventually they had to throw him into jail. Poggio is a poor guy who wants to make it in a large, very cynical, bureaucratic institution, and he does make it to a very high position. There's no reason to expect anything but that he'll completely go under morally, and he does much of his life spend, as it were, under water holding his breath.

But he has an odd feature to his personality, which is that he's obsessed with finding ancient books. He doesn't have to do this. He's not making his big fortune from it. But he holds onto a desire that is for him what he calls in his work again and again, "freedom."

So he maintains throughout his life this one part of himself – the part that is associated with what we call the humanities – that centers on his interest in the inheritance from the ancient past and what its beauty and force could still be after 1,400 years. I think it keeps him from succumbing to the corrosive acid-bath in which he worked. Most people give up at a certain point. I mean, they get by but they give up most of anything that would actually be worth anything outside the immediate orbit of their well-being and their immediate family's well-being. But Poggio held on to this peculiar thing. It's what kept him going.

There's a moment I write about in my book, to me utterly fascinating, in which Poggio's not only present at but in some sense he's necessarily colluding in the entrapment of John Hus and Hus' assistant, Jerome of Prague. And they're burned at the stake. It's clear from the letters that Poggio's uncomfortable about the situation, where the church leaders promise the heretics safe passage – just a free and frank conversation about their views. But once they get their hands on them, they kill them. And then if you read the account just a few weeks later of what it means for Poggio to find an ancient manuscript, you realize that he's trying to pull himself up out of his mire into something that would seem like it would be worth a human being's effort.

We're the lucky ones because, without exaggerating the virtues of Harvard, and without getting sentimental about universities in general, we know that these are places that are actually genuine goods of our world. We don't have to spend our lives, I think, agonizing about whether the institutions that we're part of are actually fundamentally designed for human well-being and for the good of the world. But most people don't live in such privileged circumstance, and Poggio certainly didn't. He lived in far too cynical and desperate a world, and his peculiar passion for ancient books helped him maintain some moral compass in his life.

GAZETTE: At the end of the book, you note that Thomas Jefferson owned at least eight editions of "On the Nature of Things," and it seems that you're suggesting that the founding of America in the language of the Declaration of Independence was, in a way, an Epicurean endeavor. Is that taking the idea too far?

GREENBLATT: Let us say something happens – no one in Henry VIII's time would have thought that the "pursuit of happiness" was a goal that the state would be interested in for its citizens. First of all, if you're Henry VIII, you think of yourself as dealing not with citizens but with subjects, and your subjects have obligations, as you may have obligations toward them. But in any case, these obligations, insofar as they were registered at all, did not include enabling the pursuit of happiness.

So the question is where does this weird idea – pursuit of happiness – come from? The origins usually are traced to "life, liberty, and property," which is the Lockean formulation that the Virginia constitution had used, but Jefferson, when he is writing the Declaration changes it to this very peculiar phrase – pursuit of happiness. Does he get it directly from Lucretius? No, not really. Lucretius and the Epicureans didn't think that was a likely possibility for the life of a citizen in the Athenian state or in the Roman state. Epicurus said what you should do is withdraw into your garden and think about atoms and emptiness and nothing else. This might lead to philosophical pleasure, but it was a pleasure you could have not in the public arena but in the garden. And Lucretius had a similar response: Let's give up the idea of service to the Roman state, he suggests, along with the greater glory of our armies, and the weird, horrible bloodshed in the Coliseum. Let's withdraw into the philosophical garden — in his case, let's say, these beautiful villas in the Bay of Naples, around Herculaneum or Pompeii.

So they didn't imagine a state that could provide the pleasure that the philosopher seeks. What I'm suggesting at the end of my book is that an amazing thing happens 1,800 years later. Jefferson has the idea that an entire society – through its political community – could be organized not in the service of sacrifice to god, or the imperial power of the state, but its

citizens' pursuit of happiness. That's a fundamentally Epicurean idea but an Epicurean idea that's been magnified now to the goal of an entire society. It is simultaneously indebted to this great philosophical tradition and it's a swerve, as it were, from the tradition itself.

GAZETTE: And in some way, all thanks to one rediscovered poem.

GREENBLATT: Would we have got to this – something like the place we're in now — if the discovery hadn't happened? I don't know. But this is the way it actually took place, with Poggio Bracciolini one day taking a book off a shelf in a monastic library.

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