



AV

Komparatistik

Jahrbuch
der Deutschen Gesellschaft
für Allgemeine und Vergleichende
Literaturwissenschaft

2017

Aus dem Inhalt: Joachim Harst, Christian Moser, Linda Simonis: Languages of Theory. Introduction • Maria Boletsi: Towards a Visual Middle Voice. Crisis, Dispossession, and Spectrality in Spain's Hologram Protest • Peter Brandes: Poetics of the Bed. Narrated Everydayness as Language of Theory • Annette Simonis: Stephen Greenblatt and the Making of a New Philology of Culture • Dagmar Reichardt: Creating Notions of Transculturality. The Work of Fernando Ortiz and his Impact on Europe • Michael Eggers: Topics of Theory and the Rhetoric of Bruno Latour • Nicolas Pethes: Philological Paperwork. The Question of Theory within a Praxeological Perspective on Literary Scholarship • Achim Geisenhanslüke: Philological Understanding in the Era After Theory • Joachim Harst: Borges: Philology as Poetry • Regine Strätling: The ›Love of words‹ and the Anti-Philological Stance in Roland Barthes' »S/Z« • Markus Winkler: Genealogy and Philology • Christian Moser: Language and Liability in Eighteenth-Century Theories of the Origin of Culture and Society (Goguet, Smith, Rousseau) • Linda Simonis: The Language of Commitment. The Oath and its Implications for Literary Theory • Kathrin Schödel: Political Speech Acts? Jacques Rancière's Theories and a Political Philology of Current Discourses of Migration • Helmut Pillau: »Ein großer weltlicher Staatsmann wider alle Wahrscheinlichkeiten.« Gertrud Kolmar und Jean-Clément Martin über Robespierre • Pauline Preisler: Die abstrakte Illustration. Paul Klees »Hoffmanneske Märchenszene« und E.T.A. Hoffmanns »Der Goldene Topf« • Nachruf, Rezensionen.

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von Joachim Harst, Christian Moser und Linda Simonis

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Inhaltsverzeichnis

Joachim Harst / Christian Moser / Linda Simonis Vorwort	9
NACHRUF	
Sandro Moraldo Komparatist mit Leidenschaft – Nachruf auf Remo Ceserani	11
THEMENSCHWERPUNKT: THE LANGUAGES OF THEORY	
Joachim Harst, Christian Moser, Linda Simonis Languages of Theory. Introduction	15
Maria Boletsi Towards a Visual Middle Voice. Crisis, Dispossession, and Spectrality in Spain’s Hologram Protest	19
Peter Brandes Poetics of the Bed. Narrated Everydayness as Language of Theory	37
Annette Simonis Stephen Greenblatt and the Making of a New Philology of Culture	53
Dagmar Reichardt Creating Notions of Transculturality. The Work of Fernando Ortiz and his Impact on Europe	67
Michael Eggers Topics of Theory and the Rhetoric of Bruno Latour	83
Nicolas Pethes Philological Paperwork. The Question of Theory within a Praxeological Perspective on Literary Scholarship	99
Achim Geisenhanslüke Philological Understanding in the Era After Theory	113

Joachim Harst	
Borges: Philology as Poetry	123
Regine Strätling	
The ‘Love of words’ and the Anti-Philological Stance in Roland Barthes’ <i>S/Z</i>	139
Markus Winkler	
Genealogy and Philology	153
Christian Moser	
Language and Liability in Eighteenth-Century Theories of the Origin of Culture and Society (Goguet, Smith, Rousseau)	163
Linda Simonis	
The Language of Commitment. The Oath and its Implications for Literary Theory	185
Kathrin Schödel	
Political Speech Acts? Jacques Rancière’s Theories and a Political Philology of Current Discourses of Migration	201

WEITERE BEITRÄGE

Helmut Pillau	
„Ein großer weltlicher Staatsmann wider alle Wahrscheinlichkeiten.“ Gertrud Kolmar und Jean-Clément Martin über Robespierre	221
Pauline Preisler	
Die abstrakte Illustration. Paul Klees <i>Hoffmanneske Märchenscene</i> und E. T. A. Hoffmanns <i>Der Goldene Topf</i>	245

REZENSIONEN

Markus Schleich, Jonas Nesselhauf. <i>Fernsehserien. Geschichte, Theorie, Narration</i> (Kathrin Ackermann-Pojtinger)	263
<i>Primitivismus intermedial.</i> (von Björn Bertrams)	266
Julia Bohnengel. <i>Das gegessene Herz. Eine europäische Kulturgeschichte vom Mittelalter bis zum 19. Jahrhundert: Herzmärs – Le cœur mangé – Il cuore mangiato – The eaten heart</i> (von Albert Gier)	270

<i>Funktionen der Fantastik. Neue Formen des Weltbezugs von Literatur und Film nach 1945</i> (von Eva Gillhuber)	276
Solvejg Nitzke. <i>Die Produktion der Katastrophe. Das Tunguska-Ereignis und die Programme der Moderne</i> (von Stephanie Heimgartner)	280
Claudia Lillge. <i>Arbeit. Eine Literatur- und Mediengeschichte Großbritanniens</i> (von Julia Hoydis)	282
Paul Strohmaier. <i>Diesseits der Sprache. Immanenz als Paradigma in der Lyrik der Moderne (Valéry, Montale, Pessoa)</i> (von Milan Herold)	285
<i>Neue Realismen in der Gegenwartsliteratur</i> (von Michael Navratil)	288
Steffen Röhrs. <i>Körper als Geschichte(n). Geschichtsreflexionen und Körperdarstellungen in der deutschsprachigen Erzählliteratur (1981-2012)</i> (von Jonas Nesselhauf)	294
<i>Theorie erzählen. Raconter la théorie. Narrating Theory. Fiktionalisierte Literaturtheorie im Roman</i> (von Beatrice Nickel)	296
<i>Extreme Erfahrungen. Grenzen des Erlebens und der Darstellung</i> (von Solvejg Nitzke)	299
<i>Spielräume und Raumspiele in der Literatur</i> (von Eckhard Lobsien)	302
Melanie Rohner. <i>Farbbekennnisse. Postkoloniale Perspektiven auf Max Frischs Stiller und Homo faber</i> (von Iulia-Karin Patrut)	306
Christian Moser/Regine Strätling (Hg.). <i>Sich selbst aufs Spiel setzen. Spiel als Technik und Medium von Subjektivierung</i> (von Laetitia Rimpau)	311
<i>Die Renaissancen des Kitsch</i> (von Franziska Thiel)	318
Reinhard M. Möller. <i>Situationen des Fremden. Ästhetik und Reiseliteratur im späten 18. Jahrhundert</i> (von Sandra Vlasta)	323
Michael Eggers. <i>Vergleichendes Erkennen. Zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte und Epistemologie des Vergleichs und zur Genealogie der Komparatistik</i> (von Carsten Zelle)	327
<i>Nach Szondi. Allgemeine und Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft an der Freien Universität Berlin 1965-2015</i> (von Carsten Zelle)	333
<i>The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of Berlin</i> (von Gianna Zocco)	336

BUCHVORSTELLUNG

Sabine Mainberger/Esther Ramharter (Hg.): <i>Linienwissen und Liniendenken</i>	343
Beiträgerinnen und Beiträger der Ausgabe 2017	346

Annette Simonis

Stephen Greenblatt and the Making of a New Philology of Culture

1. *New Historicism* between Philology and Cultural History

The rise of the New Historicism or Cultural Poetics, as it is also termed, in the nineteen-eighties introduced a new school of cultural theory and inaugurated the end of the so-called New Criticism in English studies at American universities and beyond. As a founding member of the movement Stephen Greenblatt is closely associated with the New Historicism, which emerged in the 1980s, with its intellectual centre at the university of Berkeley, where Michel Foucault had been a visiting professor a few years before the formation of the new current of cultural studies took place.

What, then, are the key terms and principal aims of Greenblatt's innovative approach? The initial motivation of the movement has apparently been the wish or urgent need to provide an alternative to the still dominant practice of New Criticism at American universities in the early 1980s. The contextualization of poetic texts within cultural and political history as well as within an intellectual network of different discourses seemed vital and productive. As Greenblatt recalls, he "was participating in a more general tendency, a shift away from a criticism centered on 'verbal icons' toward a criticism centered on cultural artifacts."¹ Because of its emphasis on cultural frameworks and historical contexts New Historicism has sometimes been misunderstood as a countercurrent to traditional philological scholarship.

Greenblatt's seminal works, however, such as *Renaissance Self-fashioning* (1980)², *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1988)³, *Marvelous Possessions* (1991)⁴, *Learning to curse* (1990)⁵, and *Hamlet in Purgatory* (2001)⁶, offer a more subtle perspective aiming at combining historical insights and an awareness of cultural contexts with a diligent textual analysis in order to achieve a methodological synthesis that enables a fresh approach to literary texts and canonical works of world literature. As Ambreen S. Kharbe has pointed out, "New Historicists

1 Stephen J. Greenblatt. *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1990, p. 3.

2 Stephen J. Greenblatt. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: More to Shakespeare*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

3 Stephen J. Greenblatt. *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*. Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988.

4 Stephen J. Greenblatt. *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

5 Greenblatt. *Learning to Curse* (note 1).

6 Stephen J. Greenblatt. *Hamlet in Purgatory*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001.

operate by fusing two key issues in criticism since the 1960s: the ‘linguistic turn’ of post-structuralist and deconstructive criticism, and a return to historical readings. These two impulses are aptly summarized in Louis Montrose’s often repeated catchphrase: ‘the historicity of texts and the textuality of history.’⁷

Moreover, at a closer look, the leading figure and most renowned representative of New Historicism, Stephen Greenblatt, proves to be very language-oriented in his studies—if not book-centered. Thus, he closely explores the poetical language of Shakespeare’s plays and the stimulating role of Montaigne’s essays in the process of ‘Renaissance self-fashioning’. According to his own remarks Greenblatt had no interest in founding a new school of criticism. On the contrary, the term New Historicism came to his mind more or less spontaneously, as he explains in “Towards a Poetics of Culture,” when he planned to publish “a bunch of essays.”⁸ He presents the coining of the name as a sudden idea which occurred to him “out of a kind of desperation to get the introduction done.”⁹ In his retrospective report Greenblatt tends to consider his seminal impulse no more than an emergency solution: “I wrote that the essays represented something I called a ‘new historicism.’”¹⁰ There can be no doubt that the self-interpretation offered by the author encompasses a deliberate understatement and a camouflage of systematic thought. The choice of the essay and of the anecdote as favorite genres, however, indicates an experimental stance which is indeed inherent in new historical scholarship.

New key words as the “circulation” of “social energy” and the material dimensions of culture became crucial in the approach and the works of New Historicists, and have often been quoted and adapted in literary studies. Most New Historicists focus on a reciprocal relationship between textual traces and cultural history, which has been foregrounded by Greenblatt himself. The assumption of the textuality of cultural history and the historicity of texts is not to be considered as an easy solution but rather as a task to be explored in reference to different fictional and non-fictional texts: it holds certainly true “that new

7 Ambreen Safder Kharbe. *English Language and Literary Criticism*. New Delhi: Discovery, 2009, p. 400. The focus is on textual practice, as Peter Barry elaborates: “A simple definition of the new historicism is that it is a method based on the parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts, usually of the same historical period.” (Peter Barry. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002, p. 172.) Although the notion of the reciprocity between textual and cultural traces has been expressed in many variations, the chiasmus still suggests a playful and somewhat cryptic concept: “As Geertz studies culture as text, New Historicists study texts as culture.” (Gina Hens Piazza. “New Historicism.” *New Meanings for Ancient Texts: Recent Approaches to Biblical Criticisms and Their Applications*. Ed. Steven L. McKenzie and John Kaltner. Westminster: John Knox Press, 2013, pp. 59-76, p. 72.)

8 Stephen Greenblatt. “Towards a Poetics of Culture.” *The New Historicism*. Ed. H. Aram Veaser. New York: Routledge, 1989, pp. 1-14, p. 1.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

historicism is not so much an answer to the difficulties of history writing but the opening of new questions.”¹¹

Furthermore the representatives of New Historicism conceptualize language in its oral and literal manifestations as a key element in the production and continuation of cultures. According to this principle literary texts are entangled with the dynamics of cultural history. In this sense Michael A. Elliott and Claudia Stokes define the relevant insight of New Historicism as “the belief that language both produces and maintains culture, a tenet that has allowed post-structuralist critics to analyze, or ‘read,’ ...” Consistently, they conclude: “The fundamental belief in the entanglement of language with the workings of culture has empowered literary critics to apply their skill of textual interpretation to culture.”¹²

2. *The Swerve*: The Turn Towards Modern Culture or the Materialisation of the Text in Renaissance Manuscripts

In the following, my contribution investigates on which levels and in what different respects Greenblatt focuses on (poetic) language and script as key elements and the foundation stone of modern cultures in his recent book *The Swerve. How the World Became Modern* (2011).¹³ Moreover, it explores in how far Greenblatt, in the wake of a recent material turn in the studies of culture, considers the process of writing itself as a crucial component in the analysis of cultural development, which he therefore closely examines in its particular material and aesthetic dimensions. As will become evident, the author is fascinated by Renaissance book culture serving simultaneously as a vehicle of intellectual ideas and a medium of art.

It seems rewarding in many respects to analyze more closely Greenblatt's recent publication on the Renaissance. On the one hand the work indicates a careful reorientation in new historicist methodology, reflected in the author's attitude towards the texts themselves, which now takes into consideration the material basics and environments of writing as a cultural technique *sui generis*; on the other the book testifies Greenblatt's surprising accomplishments as an essayist and storyteller, as he elegantly moves on the borderline between fiction and non-fiction. Perhaps it was the brilliant and compelling narrative structure of the study which convinced the jury to award the Pulitzer Prize to a scholarly, non-fictional work: “To the great surprise of the author himself, who is Professor

11 Claire Colebrook. *New Literary Histories: New Historicism and Contemporary Criticism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997, pp. vi-viii, p. vi.

12 Michael A. Elliott and Claudia Stokes. “Introduction: What is Method and Why Does it Matter?” *American Literary Studies: A Methodological Reader*. Ed. Michael A. Elliott and Claudia Stokes. New York/London: New York University Press, 2003, pp. 1-16, p. 9.

13 Stephen J. Greenblatt. *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern*. New York/London: Norton, 2011.

at Harvard University, the book was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for general non-fiction in 2012.¹⁴

Greenblatt's essay describes in how far the rediscovery of an ancient Roman poem, namely Lucretius' philosophical poem *De rerum natura*, whose manuscript was found by an Italian humanist more or less by chance in a remote monastery library, helped to pave the way for a modern kind of thought.

In its citation, the Pulitzer board described *The Swerve* as "a provocative book arguing that an obscure work of philosophy, discovered nearly 600 years ago, changed the course of history by anticipating the science and sensibilities of today."¹⁵ Indeed, Greenblatt argues that it was the poem by Lucretius—*De rerum natura / On the Nature of Things*—which after centuries of neglect has initiated the decisive momentum leading to early modern culture. This process is moreover closely linked to the tradition of "epicurean" thought and its complex implications.

The book then recalls in how far Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things* is based on the philosophy of Epicurus and to what extent it has inspired a number of revolutionary ideas—"that the universe functioned without the aid of gods, that religious fear was damaging to human life, and that matter was made up of very small particles in eternal motion, colliding and swerving in new directions."¹⁶

As a nonfictional essay *The Swerve* nonetheless contains a considerable amount of colourful narrative elements and anecdotes. Not only does it recall the author's first encounter with Lucretius' text in the form of a cheap copy acquired from a book store of an antiquarian during his years as a student, the text also sets out to recount the difficult rediscovery of the poem in a moment of transition between late medieval and early Renaissance times. Once thought lost, the poem was found in a monastic library in the winter of 1417 by the Italian Humanist Poggio Bracciolini.

According to Greenblatt, the copying and translation of the book greatly stimulated the Renaissance movement, its inspiring qualities had a lasting influence on artists, philosophers, scientists, and politicians alike, such as Botticelli, Giordano Bruno, Galileo, Darwin, and Freud; its formative and revolutionary presence is said to be evident in the works of Montaigne and Shakespeare and Thomas Jefferson. Greenblatt's book argues that "the influence of Lucretius' work reached modern thought like a tidal wave, anticipating not only social thought, but whole branches of modern science."¹⁷

What the author emphasizes here is not the dependence of literature on cultural and historical phenomena, but quite the other way round: he argues that fictional texts can have an immense revolutionary potential and exert a powerful impact on the course of cultural and political history.

14 Peter Reuell. "Stephen Greenblatt Wins Pulitzer Prize." <<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2012/04/stephen-greenblatt-wins-pulitzer-prize/>> (accessed Nov 9, 2017).

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Reuell. "Greenblatt Wins Pulitzer Prize" (note 14).<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2012/04/stephen-greenblatt-wins-pulitzer-prize/>.



Image 1: Portrait of Poggio Bracciolini from an illuminated manuscript (*De Varietate Fortunae*) in the Vatican Library, Urb. lat. 224, 15th century.¹⁸

As has been mentioned above, the fascinating quality of Greenblatt's essay to a great deal resides in the author's talent of storytelling. The chapters retrace Poggio's successful career as a professional scribe and humanist scholar as well as his journey to Germany in the retinue of the Pope John the twenty-third leading ultimately to the climax of the discovery of long lost manuscripts. The story is thus carefully constructed, brilliantly written and reads like a detective story.

18 https://commons.m.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Poggio_Bracciolini#/media/File%3APoggio_Bracciolini_68_Urb_lat_224.jpg (accessed Nov 9, 2017).



Image 2: Miniature from an illuminated manuscript showing Greenblatt's protagonist Poggio giving a manuscript to the Pope (Pope Niccolò V. receives a book from Poggio Bracciolini) 15th century.¹⁹

Obviously, Greenblatt also reconstructs and expounds a great deal of cultural history. On the scholarly level, however, the historical events and contexts seem far less relevant than on the level of plot structure, since the argument is, as we shall see, mainly based on textual components and on the material constituents of the writing process itself. This is all the more surprising if we take into consideration that Greenblatt in his early essays had launched a polemical attack on the technique of close reading and the philological reverence towards the text in

19 Ernst Walsert. *Poggius Florentinus. Leben und Werke*. Leipzig, Berlin: Teubner, 1914, Tafel II.
 <<http://archive.org/stream/poggiusflorentin00wals#page/n583/mode/2up>>
 (accessed Nov 9, 2017).

New Criticism and Deconstruction alike.²⁰ Before this new focus in Greenblatt's essay will be explored in more details, it proves useful to briefly recall further characteristics of New Historicism and Cultural Poetics. As Michael Delahoyde notes, "New Historicism seeks to find meaning in a text by considering the work within the framework of the prevailing ideas and assumptions of its historical era. New Historicists concern themselves with the political function of literature and with the concept of power, the intricate means by which cultures produce and reproduce themselves. These critics focus on revealing the historically specific model of truth and authority (not a 'truth' but a 'cultural construct') reflected in a given work."²¹

Inspired by an unorthodox Marxist aesthetics, New Historicists also assume a dialectical interplay between the margins and the centre of a given society and explore the tensions between subversion and containment in the evolution of cultures. Further keywords of the new historicist approach are the circulation of social energies and the concept of charisma adopted from Max Weber.

In Greenblatt's recent publications, however, we can observe a gradual shift of focus. As we shall see, the main interest of the author is redirected on the poetic texts, on literature as a vehicle of discourse, and an expression of artistic impulse. It seems symptomatic that *The Swerve* assigns a great impact and cultural significance to a single work of art, i. e. the poem by Lucretius, and considers it no less than the initial moment of a discourse which pervades modern cultures and mentalities. The primary texts themselves seem to have regained a more crucial function in the analysis of New Historicism. Evidence for this can be traced on a semantic as well as on a formal or aesthetic level of the literary works. They are often discussed under a double angle, being simultaneously regarded as works of art and as expressions of a certain intellectual perspective.

Moreover, at a closer look, another significant aspect of Greenblatt's interest in early modern history can be detected. For Greenblatt, the Renaissance, so it seems, does not constitute a distant object of studies, but also provides a mirror for the contemporary researcher and offers to the reader a certain degree of identification with the Italian humanists' passion for books. It seems to invite both, the contemporary author and reader, to commit themselves to a similar book mania and philological mission as the one carried out by the Renaissance humanists in the course of the 15th century.

The central example of Greenblatt's return to philology is constituted by the poem by Lucretius itself which is attributed a key function in the formation of modern culture and mentality. In *The Swerve* the author provides a very detailed description of its contents and its linguistic aspects before he attempts an interpretation of the complex Latin text. While he thus concentrates on the minute peculiarities of the poetical text, he resorts to a close observation of the characteristic features and the rhetorical aspects such as metaphors and comparisons in order to arrive at a very poignant characterization of Lucretius' style.

20 Greenblatt. *Learning to Curse* (note 1), p. 2.

21 Michael Delahoyde. "Introduction to Literature." <<https://public.wsu.edu/~delahoyd/new.hist.html>> (accessed Nov 9, 2017).

Let us have a closer look at a passage from chapter 8 of *The Swerve* which concisely summarizes the overall poetical impression of Lucretius' epic work:²²

On the Nature of Things is not an easy read. Totalling 7,400 lines, it is written in hexameters, the standard unrhymed six-beat lines in which Latin poets like Virgil and Ovid, imitating Homer's Greek, cast their epic poetry. Divided into six untitled books, the poem yokes together moments of intense lyrical beauty, philosophical meditations on religion, pleasure, and death, and complex theories of the physical world, the evolution of human societies, the perils and joys of sex, and the nature of disease. The language is often knotty and difficult, the syntax complex, and the overall intellectual ambition astoundingly high.

The elaborate depiction and analysis of poetic language and style in *The Swerve* has not escaped critical attention. Some critics have noted Greenblatt's sudden preoccupation with poetic language and appreciated the diligence of his reading.²³

Greenblatt does a particularly fine job of explicating Lucretius's *On the Nature of Things*, with sensitivity to its language and poetry as well as its intellectual implications. The poem comes alive in his rendering. And Greenblatt's sensitivity to the text as a text comes through very strongly and indeed mirrors the essential feelings that bookhunters like Poggio had.

Interestingly, Greenblatt makes use of poetical language himself, in so far as his conception of the 'swerve' is highly metaphorical and serves as a link between the level of history and the perspective of the modern observer: on the one hand, it refers to Lucretius' poem which depicts the world "as made up of atoms, small indivisible eternal particles constantly and unpredictably moving in an ongoing act of creation and destruction."²⁴ This "clinamen" (as it is called in the Latin text), or "swerve" (in English), of atoms, according to Lucretius, was the fundamental principle of the universe. For Greenblatt, the term "swerve" is a metaphor with a double meaning, referring both to the effect of Lucretius' ideas on the collective thinking of the Italian Renaissance and to the act of the poem's discovery itself, "which was also quite unpredictable."²⁵

Rhetorical language and metaphors thus form a central part of the objects of analysis, the texts Greenblatt interprets, and of his own discourse and colourful story telling. The author thus concentrates on the stylistic dimension of the texts and provides a close description of their characteristic features and rhetorical aspects such as metaphors and comparisons.

Moreover, in *The Swerve*, Greenblatt is very much preoccupied with the process of writing itself, with the form of the letters, the materials and equipment the

22 Greenblatt. *The Swerve* (note 13), p. 182.

23 William Caferro. "The Swerve: How the World Became Modern. Book Review." *Modern Philology* 111.3 (February 2014), pp. E306-E308, p. E308.

24 Ibid.

25 Cf. *ibid.* See also Greenblatt. *The Swerve* (note 13), p. 7.

Renaissance scribes used to employ. It is Poggio's beautiful handwriting which captures most of his attention and scholarly interest. There are several prominent instances in the book where he foregrounds the skillful and accomplished handwriting of Poggio and Niccolò Niccolini, his close friend and companion. The talent of exceptionally beautiful handwriting is singled out as the key faculty which in Renaissance Italy, especially in Florence, guaranteed success and a scholarly career. The excellence of this skill proved to be Poggio's most admired and most helpful talent, as Greenblatt observes poignantly:²⁶

Fortunately for him, by innate skill and training he possessed one of the few gifts that would enable someone of his modest origins and resources to do so. The key that opened the first door through which he slipped was something that has come to mean next to nothing in the modern world: beautiful handwriting.

The idea of Poggio's outstanding calligraphic talents is mentioned several times: "Poggio possessed one further gift that set him apart from virtually all the other book hunting humanists. He was superbly well trained as a scribe, with exceptionally fine handwriting."²⁷ The fact that Poggio was a highly accomplished and inventive scribe is not a new insight, but has been rather well known among researchers on the field of Early modern culture. In his anthology *The Civilization of the Italian Renaissance: A Sourcebook* Kenneth R. Bartlett mentions the skills of Niccolò Niccoli and Poggio Bracciolini. The latter is singled out for his exceptional accomplishments as a scribe: "His texts were of the most exacting standards of copying, combining excellent exemplars (texts used as models for copying) with beautiful handwriting designed for clarity and elegance."²⁸ And in her study on the early Medici, published in 1936, Lacy Collison-Morley has already underlined the fact that "there was more real creative ability in Poggio Bracciolini, whose beautiful handwriting enabled him to earn a living as a copyist when he first came to Florence with a few pence in his pocket."²⁹

What then is new and original about Greenblatt's insights? And what are the relevant aspects that contribute to the originality of his essay? Firstly, the author insists on the exceptional beauty and clarity of Poggio's and Niccolò's writing with more emphasis than anybody else has done before, and, secondly, he tries to explain the reason for the overwhelming success and immediate acceptance of the invention of a new type of letters by paying attention to its minute characteristics:³⁰

26 Ibid., p. 115. See also p. 32-33.

27 Ibid., p. 32.

28 Kenneth R. Bartlett. *The Civilization of the Italian Renaissance: A Sourcebook*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011, p. 73.

29 Lacy Collison-Morley. *The Early Medici*. New York: Dutton and Company, 1936, p. 44.

30 Greenblatt. *The Swerve* (note 13), p. 115.

Poggio's way of fashioning letters was a move away from the intricately interwoven and angular writing known as Gothic hand. The demand for more open, legible handwriting had already been voiced earlier in the century by Petrarch (1304–1374). Petrarch complained that the writing then in use in most manuscripts often made it extremely difficult to decipher the text, “as though it had been designed,” he noted, “for something other than reading.” To make texts more legible, the individual letters had somehow to be freed from their interlocking patterns, the spaces between the words opened up, the lines spaced further apart, the abbreviations filled out. It was like opening a window and letting air into a tightly closed room.



Image 3: *De varietate fortunae*, Vatican Library, Ms. Urb. lat. 224 (15th century).³¹

31 https://it.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:De_varietate_fortunae.jpg

Thirdly, Greenblatt finds plausible explanations for the question why the new design of letters with its transparent structure could become a symbol of the opening of perspective and the turn to new ideas experienced by the scribe and his contemporaries. The author underlines the surprising quality of Poggio's invention and invests it with a subtle symbolic meaning, as it becomes an emblem of modernity itself:³²

What Poggio accomplished, in collaboration with a few others, remains startling. They took Carolingian minuscule—a scribal innovation of the ninth-century court of Charlemagne—and transformed it into the script they used for copying manuscripts and writing letters. This script in turn served as the basis for the development of italics and of the typeface we call “roman.” They were then in effect the inventors of the script we still think of as at once the clearest, the simplest, and the most elegant written representation of our words.

Greenblatt actually invites the reader to share the humanist admiration for books by an extensive description of the vellum which provided a precious writing surface. The evocation of the material basis of the manuscript stresses the elegance and the refined aesthetic quality of the book:³³

It is difficult to take in the full effect without seeing it for oneself, for example, in the manuscripts preserved in the Laurentian Library in Florence: the smooth bound volumes of vellum, still creamy white after more than five hundred years, contain page after page of perfectly beautiful script, almost magical in its regularity and fineness. There are tiny pinholes on the margins, where the blank sheets must have been fixed to hold them steady, and scarcely visible score marks to form straight lines, twenty-six per page. But these aids cannot begin to explain how the tasks could have been accomplished with such clean elegance.

The meticulous presentation Greenblatt deploys in his analysis of medieval and Renaissance manuscripts and their handmade copies discards any doubts as to their significance and outstanding artistic quality. At the same time he does not hesitate to reveal a further aspect and meaning which is closely related to the level of discourse and the dimension of the history of ideas. According to Greenblatt Poggio's letters represent no less than a creative response to his time and a link to the larger project of the Renaissance, which can be broadly circumscribed as a quest for antiquity and classical culture mingled with the effort to attain originality:³⁴

To have invented a way to design letters immediately recognizable and admired after six centuries is no small achievement. But the way Poggio fashioned his letters showed more than just unusual skill in graphic design; it signaled a creative response to powerful cultural currents stirring in Florence and throughout Italy. Poggio seems to have grasped that the call for a new cursive writing was only a

32 *The Swerve*, p. 115.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 115-116.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 116.

small piece of a much larger project, a project that linked the creation of something new with a search for something ancient. To speak of this search as a project runs the risk of making it sound routine and familiar. In fact it was a shared mania, one whose origin can be traced back to Petrarch, who, a generation before Poggio's birth, had made the recovery of the cultural heritage of classical Rome a collective obsession.

In Greenblatt's book the special handwriting of Poggio Bracciolini with its idiosyncrasies turns out to be the miniature image of the larger humanist mission in search for the intellectual treasures of antiquity—of ancient Rome and Greece. In this overall endeavor the almost obsessive preoccupation with books only forms a small, but significant part.

A further dimension of Greenblatt's interpretation is to be found on the rhetorical level of his essay. The author frequently focuses on the metaphors and comparisons which Poggio resorts to in his letters when describing the manuscripts he has detected in the monasteries. The prevailing metaphor used to evoke the lost book is that of the human body. The anthropomorphic quality of the manuscript is repeatedly underlined by an analogy to the imprisoned human being. Greenblatt's quotations and his sources provide ample evidence that Poggio indeed deployed such a metaphor in his letters. Thus Poggio Bracciolini comments on his retrieval of the lost manuscript by Quintilian in one of his letters in the terms of rescuing a human being from imprisonment, severe punishment and imminent death:³⁵

By good luck—as much ours as his—while we were doing nothing in Constance, an urge came upon us to see the place where [M. Fabius Quintilianus] was being kept prisoner. This is the monastery of St Gall, about twenty miles from Constance. And so several of us went there, to amuse ourselves and also to collect books of which we heard that they had a great many. There amid a tremendous quantity of books which it would take too long to describe, we found Quintilian still safe and sound, though filthy with mould and dust. For these books were not in the library, as befitted their worth, but in a sort of foul and gloomy dungeon at the bottom of one of the towers, where not even men convicted of a capital offence would have been stuck away.

[...] By Heaven, if we had not brought help, he would surely have perished the very next day. There is no question that this glorious man, so elegant, so pure, so full of morals and of wit, could not much longer have endured the filth of that prison, the squalor of the place, and the savage cruelty of his keepers [...].

35 Poggio Bracciolini to Guarino Guarini, trans. P.W.G. Gordan. *Two Renaissance Book Hunters: The Letters of Poggius Bracciolini to Nicolaus de Niccolis*. Translated from the Latin and Annotated by P.W.T. Gordan. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991, pp. 193-195. Quoted in Alison Brown. *The Renaissance*. London/New York: Routledge, 1988, p. 101. Greenblatt quotes from this letter the line "By Heaven [...]" (cf. Greenblatt. *The Swerve* [note 13], p. 179).

The anthropomorphic quality of the manuscripts, which is present in Poggio's letter to Guarino, invests the handwritten page with the dignity of a human being and presents it as a living material embodiment of human thoughts. In this context Greenblatt discusses in how far Poggio's implicit comparison between the book and the human prisoner may have been intentional or subconscious. The important point however seems to be the power and the impact of the latent analogy which endowed the mission of the book hunter with a special dignity. Evidently, it is his task to liberate the hidden book as well as the remarkable insights it transmits. The work of the Renaissance humanist and writer is conceptualized as an agent taking part in an international network of authors who dedicated themselves to modern ideas and to the revival of classical texts.

The ideal Renaissance author thus mysteriously coincides with the key concepts of New Historicism, especially the concept of the circulation of social energy within a network of communication and discourse. Famous humanist authors like Petrarch succeeded in stimulating the circulation of social energy by reintegrating the lost manuscripts into the dynamics of the cultural processing from which they had for a long time been excluded: "Petrarch returned them to circulation by sharing them with a vast network of correspondents to whom, often rising at midnight to sit at his desk, he wrote with manic energy."³⁶

The same holds true for Poggio's mission and his book mania which derives an additional motivation from the analogy between the human character and the evanescent materiality of the manuscript: "Books that had fallen out of circulation and were sitting in German libraries were thus transformed into wise men who had died and whose souls had been imprisoned in the underworld."³⁷

In Greenblatt's vivid account, the framework of crisis and general loss of orientation constitutes a foil which even enhances the existential necessity of recovering the books, when all else seems empty and deprived of meaning: "When he wrote these words, the world around Poggio was falling to pieces, but his response to chaos and fear was always to redouble his immersion in books. In the charmed circle of his bibliomania, he could rescue the imperiled legacy of the glorious past from the barbarians and return it to the rightful heirs."³⁸

Although there may be detected a few ironical hints in the hyperbolic language, the overall perspective and the attitude towards the early Renaissance scholars is a sympathetic one. It is with a certain nostalgia that Greenblatt defends the gesture and the efforts of the Renaissance scholars and book maniacs. Evidently he sympathizes with their total immersion into the texts and the elusive manuscripts they managed to retrieve from their monastic afterlives. Whether or not he regards them as a scholarly model and timeless ideal is a more complex question and remains doubtful.

According to Greenblatt Poggio's discovery of the manuscript in the monastery library in Fulda in the year 1417 inaugurates no less than a new epoch called the Renaissance. This decisive turn in cultural history is closely associated

36 *Ibid.*, p. 119.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 181.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 177.

with secular thought and a philosophical discourse which is no more subjected to the priorities of religion and theology. The evolution of modern thought is thus traced back to a historical moment at the very beginning of the European Renaissance inspired by an ancient Roman poem and its germs of epicurean philosophy.

On the whole, the argument of Greenblatt's book is coherent and consistent, the overall presentation very illuminating and compulsive, yet, from the point of view of the cultural historian, one can easily detect certain weaknesses and neglects. The influence of one single book, i. e. Lucretius' long epic poem, crucial though it may be, is slightly overrated in Greenblatt's study. It is hardly convincing that the impact of a rather esoteric and stylized work of poetry should have produced such astounding effects and revolutionary turns in the history of ideas and of culture. As the result of combined tendencies, however, the basic hypothesis gains much more plausibility. Elisabeth Stein, for instance, mentions the rediscovery of the Ciceronean correspondence with Atticus by Petrarch in 1345 and regards this event as a highly significant achievement which has inspired a new culture of humanist letter writing.³⁹

In his illuminating review Martin Mulso names further Greek and Latin authors such as Plato, Plotinus, Hermes and Copernicus, who had a similar impact on Renaissance mentalities and had certainly contributed to the new, revolutionary perspective which Greenblatt ascribes solely to the Epicurean line of thought.⁴⁰ Thus, while the focus on the media and equipment of the writing process in *The Swerve* accompanies a remarkable material turn, which manifests itself in Greenblatt's recent return to philology, the isolation of Lucretius' poem as *the* initial moment in the evolution of Renaissance and modern mentalities seems a daring assumption, which remains open to further discussion.

39 Elisabeth Stein. "Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Antike. Humanisten als Philologen." *Funktionen des Humanismus: Studien zum Nutzen des Neuen in der humanistischen Kultur*. Ed. Thomas Maissen and Gerrit Walther. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2006, pp. 76-102, p. 78.

40 Cf. Martin Mulso. "Von Abweichungen und einer Epochenwende." *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 08.08.2012.

<<https://www.nzz.ch/von-abweichungen-und-einer-epochenwende-1.17449379>> (accessed Nov 9, 2017). See also Colin Burrow. "The Swerve by Stephen Greenblatt: A Flawed but Dazzling Study of the Origins of the Renaissance." *The Guardian*, 23.12.2011.

<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/dec/23/the-swerve-stephen-greenblatt-review>> (accessed Nov 9, 2017): "The story told by the book—epicureanism flourished at Rome, was lost, and then was suddenly rediscovered and transformed the world—reflects the historical outlook of the humanists themselves. It was common for 14th and 15th-century scholars to claim that there was a destruction of classical learning in the middle ages, or, as Greenblatt calls it, 'a Great Vanishing,' and that they were bringing the classical past back to life [...]. This book makes that story into a great read, but it cannot make it entirely true."