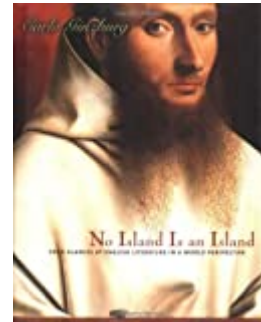
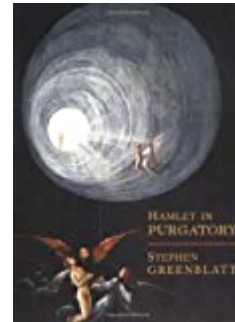


Carlo Ginzburg. *No Island is an Island: Four Glances at English Literature in a World Perspective.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2000. xvi + 121 pp. \$19.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-11628-2.



Stephen Greenblatt. *Hamlet in Purgatory.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001. xii + 322 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-05873-3.



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Exercising the Imagination

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Unlike the other humanities disciplines, History has its own Muse. The ancient Greeks considered it to be one of the arts along with epic, lyric and sacred poetry, tragedy and comedy, music and dance, and astronomy. As a genre it has traditionally been associated with prose narrative and its earliest practitioners were as much writers of imaginative literature as students of past events. The relationship between literary and non-literary texts has always been complex and problematic, and it is not

for nothing that Herodotus (the title of whose researches give the discipline its name) is designated not only as the Father of History, but also as the Father of Lies. The two books under review here, each by a highly influential scholar, give us the opportunity to consider afresh the relationship between history and literature as it has come to be understood in recent times.

Stephen Greenblatt and Carlo Ginzburg hardly need introductions. Over the last twenty years or more, Greenblatt's influential books and essays have inspired

a generation of literary scholars and cultural historians. The “New Historicism,” a term given its contemporary currency by Greenblatt, received its early impetus with the publication of his *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* in 1980 and the subsequent establishment of the journal *Representations*, of whose founding editorial board Greenblatt was one of the two co-chairs.[1] Ginzburg is equally well-known and admired. His account of the mental world of Menocchio in *The Cheese and the Worms*[2] not only introduced many scholars to the rich potential of ecclesiastical and inquisitorial sources for the study of social history, but also provided a frequently emulated model of microhistory for the study of popular culture and *mental-ità*©.

Ginzburg’s most widely read historical works, such as *The Cheese and the Worms* and *The Night Battles*,[3] are studies of the outlooks, practices, habits and activities of the peasantry and other social groups that traditionally had been underrepresented in modern historiography. But from the outset his writings have also attended to the cultural milieu of the elites, not only in discussion of the relations between high and low culture, but also in his commentaries on art historical and literary topics, most notably *The Enigma of Piero*, his richly contextualized interpretation of Piero della Francesca’s puzzling painting, *The Flagellation*. [4] In these latter publications, the focus has been almost exclusively on elite culture. The same is true of *No Island Is an Island*, a series of four brief essays originally presented in 1998 as the Italian Academy Lectures at Columbia University.

The four essays—“glances” or “glimpses” Ginzburg appropriately calls them—comment on Thomas More’s *Utopia*, on sixteenth-century disputes about the virtues and vices of English rhyme, on Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, and on Robert Louis Stevenson’s cunning short story “The Bottle Imp.” Taken together they present what Ginzburg calls “a noninsular vision of English literature” in which “the island, both real and imagined” provides “a common theme” (p. xi). In keeping with the book’s title, he reads the works he discusses in the wider context of world literature, virtually all of it European in origin, sometimes stressing the debts owed by English authors to non-English sources and sometimes emphasizing the ways in which English works have been read or appropriated outside of the British isles. As with much of his earlier work, the approach is dialogical; it focuses on the translations and transformations produced by intellectual or cultural exchange.

All islands are surrounded by water, of course. The

sea can provide the service of a wall, protecting the land and its inhabitants against outsiders, as Shakespeare has John of Gaunt say in *Richard II*. It can equally well offer a ready means of passage to places beyond, as was pointed out by the early fifteenth-century author of *The Libell of English Policy*. The sea’s influence sometimes promotes the development of independent ecological regimes as existed in the Galapagos Islands when Charles Darwin’s visited them; it can also support independent cultural regimes as grew up in the Hawaiian archipelago before Captain Cook’s first encounter there. The English, moreover, have often followed Shakespeare’s John of Gaunt in considering their “scept’rd isle” to be a “little world” of its own, a “fortress built by Nature for herself/Against infection” and “the envy of less happier lands.” However, the sea also promotes communication between the lands and peoples that it divides, and this theme too has had an important place in English self-understanding. For Ginzburg, England’s island history primarily manifests this second paradigm, and his short book might equally have been called “Against English Exceptionalism.”

The island is most obviously present, in an intriguingly double way, in More’s *Utopia*, where the imaginary “*noua insula Utopia*” is implicitly offered as a model against which to measure the life of the sixteenth-century English. For More, this interplay between the imaginary or fictional, where the truth of Plato’s forms might flourish, and the actual or real, where the fact of human sin is daily manifest, provides one of the central themes in his narrative. But Ginzburg gives no attention to these features of the text and to the critical role they play in allowing readers to evaluate whether the so-called Golden Age, to which *Utopia* alludes, indeed was golden, and whether the Utopian way of life truly represents “the best form of a commonwealth.” Instead, he uses his essay on More to explore a somewhat different dichotomy, between the festive and playful on the one hand and the sober and practical on the other.

Seeking to challenge treatments of *Utopia*, most notably Quentin Skinner’s, as a work squarely in the genre of political philosophy[5]—and calling on Dom Vasco de Quiroga, a judge and then a bishop in sixteenth-century New Spain, for support—Ginzburg reminds readers of More’s debt in *Utopia* to Lucian’s writings, especially the cunningly self-reflexive, satiric displays which are their hallmark. But Quiroga’s views and Skinner’s do not represent mutually exclusive accounts of *Utopia*, especially considering that the latter relates More’s book to the literature on “true nobility,” a theme quite vulnerable to Lucian-style satire. There is no need, therefore, to reject

Skinner's argument. There is nothing in the latter's view, moreover, that speaks against Ginzburg's stress on the noninsular character of English experience; Skinner has as much to say about non-English sources as Ginzburg, even if they are different ones. However, even if we conclude that the subject matter of *Utopia* is the best way to live a flourishing life, there is also no doubt that the work is dressed in Lucianic form. As Ginzburg is right to emphasize, Lucian's playfulness partly sweetens and makes more palatable More's serious messages about the current state of society and politics, and partly reinforces the dialogic character of the text and the clash of views offered by its two debating protagonists, the fictional character "Raphael Hythlodæus" and the perhaps equally fictional "Thomas More," Hythlodæus's interlocutor and *alter ego*. Although no strikingly new approaches or interpretations emerge from this account—even the discussion of Lucian and of Quiroga's use of him rest on long-known facts and extensive bodies of existing scholarship—the essay follows More himself in the playful dialogue between wit and learning that it presents.

In the second essay, Ginzburg's treatment of sixteenth-century controversies over the virtues and vices of rhyme provides the basis for an exploration of how the English came to view themselves as a distinct and special nation—an island people set apart from others. Although, as Ginzburg notes, the early modern debate over the true character of English poetry is a subject that received a thorough treatment in complementary terms only a decade ago in Richard Helgerson's *Forms of Nationhood*,^[6] the discussion here focuses on the way in which knowledge of the poetic practices of native peoples in the Americas and the emergence of a theory of historical development derived from ancient historiography helped the English sharpen awareness of their own "otherness" as a people. Somewhat surprisingly, amidst the wide range of works cited, no reference appears to Anthony Pagden's influential *Fall of Natural Man*, which has done so much to make apparent the connections linking ancient views of barbarism and civility, early modern European discoveries of hitherto unknown peoples living in previously unknown places, and modern understandings of the histories of cultures and civilizations.^[7] Ginzburg's treatment adds to Helgerson's in a way that supports Pagden's principle claims of twenty years ago.

Ginzburg's island theme is less apparent in his discussion of *Tristram Shandy*, a fact he acknowledges in his opening paragraph. Although the treatment is "noninsular" in that it compares Sterne's very English novel with Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* (1696),

what it shares with the other chapters is an interest in the relationship between a fictional and a nonfictional text. The central theme is the association of ideas. Rather than seeing Sterne's compulsive digressions in light of Locke's theory in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), a connection suggested, if only digressively, by Sterne himself, Ginzburg draws on a neglected 1974 article by F. Doherty^[8] to read Sterne's novel as "basically a fictionalized response to a set of options provided by" Bayle's *Dictionary* (p. 50). For Ginzburg, the self-reflexive narrative of the novel, twisting and doubling on itself, parallels the regressive and digressive associations of ideas manifested by Bayle in the relation between the entries and their commentaries in his *Dictionary*. Each, moreover, evinces a form of religious and philosophical skepticism that Ginzburg relates to Hume's thought on similar subjects. The world can be known only according to the associations linking idea to idea; their inward or intrinsic connections remain unknown or unknowable mysteries. Although this view of Hume's philosophical skepticism has recently been called into question, the discussion is persuasive in stressing the importance of Bayle not only to Sterne and his novel, but to the culture of the European Enlightenment more generally. Moreover, in keeping with its theme, Ginzburg's essay itself is highly digressive in its own way, as is much else in this volume.

The essay devoted to Stevenson's "The Bottle Imp," which concludes the volume, also offers a suggestive connection to islands. It explores a possible relationship between the *kula* ring, discussed and analyzed by Bronislaw Malinowski in his famous *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), and Stevenson's story. The latter, set in Hawaii and elsewhere, tells of a marvelous bottle that can give its owner his every desire except a longer life, provided that before he dies he sells it at a cost lower than the one he originally paid. Should he fail to do so, he would burn in hell forever. Malinowski, it seems, read, and was quite taken by Stevenson's published letters while he was working on his study of the Trobriand Islands, and although there is no firm evidence anywhere among Malinowski's papers or publications that he also read "The Bottle Imp," Ginzburg speculates that the anthropologist developed his theory of the *kula* ring on its model. "Reading 'The Bottle Imp' afresh or recalling its plot," Ginzburg conjectures, "Malinowski would have been confronted with a fictional representation focusing on monetary, antiprofit exchange ... that allowed the circulation of a highly valued object through a series of islands stretched over a vast expanse of ocean.... Stevenson's short story would have given Malinowski not the

actual content of his discovery of course but the ability to see it, through a leap of imagination, as a whole, as a gestalt, to construct it, as he wrote later, 'very much as a physicist constructs his theory from the experimental data' " (p. 85).

This interconnected series of assumptions, most plausible enough so long as Malinowski was indeed familiar with "The Bottle Imp," turns on the identification of the *kula* ring with the "monetary, antiprofit exchange" represented in Stevenson's story. But the latter takes place in the context of, and in contrast to, the existing practices of a fully-formed market society and culture, while the former developed in the absence of the same. As Malinowski's own account showed, the *kula* is best construed, to coin a term, as a "preprofit" not an antiprofit form of social exchange. Malinowski's Trobrianders, therefore, seem to have something in common with the native peoples in the New World in whose societies early European observers, like those on whom More relied in his *Utopia*, thought they saw evidence of the Golden Age. In contrast, Stevenson's story shares something of the ethical norms and social values advanced by More himself against the moral corruption of his day. If history were otherwise, therefore, and Stevenson had been able to read Malinowski, the knowledge of preprofit ways of life that he might possibly have gained could perhaps have influenced the adoption of the cunning plot device that holds together "The Bottle Imp." In this counterfactual scenario, therefore, Malinowski's book would hold the place for Stevenson that Amerigo Vespucci's published *Letters* and Peter Martyr's *Decades* held for More. To reverse the relationship and see Stevenson as actually influencing Malinowski is more problematic. For Ginzburg's argument to work, Malinowski's "leap of imagination" would have had to traverse a forbiddingly wide gulf, not just between fiction and fact, but between social worlds organized on different principles and operating in different ways. Hence, even assuming that Malinowski knew Stevenson's short story, we would be obliged to demonstrate that he also saw the *kula* ring as the preprofit mirror image of the antiprofit model of exchange imagined in the tale. As attractive as the Ginzburg's hypothesis might be, the arguments for it depend on unsupported suppositions and remain tenuous.

In his introduction, Ginzburg takes pains to describe his practice in this volume. His beginning point in each instance, he says, was "a discovery" by chance of a connection "originating at the fringe of a wholly different investigation" (p. xi). From thence, he worked backwards to a question and explanation. Citing T. W. Adorno's

"The Essay as Form,"[9] he celebrates for its flexibility what he calls "the tortuous, capricious, discontinuous progression of the essay." He also recognizes, here citing Jean Starobinski,[10] that the very openness of the genre demands "verification" of the claims made, but insists that "no verification can be considered definitive" and that in consequence the form is "incompatible with the rigor of the test" (pp. xii-xiii). The essays very much live up to this description. They each are founded on a linkage between seemingly different things—for example the "morphological affinity between *Tristram Shandy* and Bayle's *Dictionnaire*" (p. xi)—typically relating a literary to a non-literary text. And they make their claims, more often than not, by suggestion, analogy, and assumption—by hearing echoes and seeing reflections—and not by direct argument from evidence or what lawyers call "proof." Many of the insights are valuable and seem plausible, but as the book's subtitle tells us we are given only "glances" at them. We are sometimes left wondering whether there is more, or less, in what is laid before us than meets the eye.

There are a number of similarities between Ginzburg's practice as an essayist and the work of New Historicists. For example, the latter ground their discussions on seemingly contingent relationships between literary and non-literary texts that are then used to open up discussion of the discursive field of which the texts are a part. Ginzburg does something similar. New Historicists frequently begin their interpretations with anecdotes, i.e. narrative accounts of small and not-so-small incidents, that in the telling reveal their participation in deeper structures of thought and power. Ginzburg too has an affinity for anecdote, especially those that seem serendipitously to reveal an intertextual connection where none had previously been apparent. But in the essays in *No Island is an Island* he does not explore in depth the discursive frameworks that might show the connections to be more than the products of contingency or of a Tristram Shandy-like association of ideas.

With Greenblatt's *Hamlet in Purgatory* we have a book of a very different kind, one that not only offers a sustained examination of a single, if complex, problem, but also one that tells a single story.[11] Stories, as distinct from simple descriptions, normally speak of change, and Greenblatt's new book is no exception, although the story is itself quite complex. On the one hand, it tells of the medieval development of Purgatory as an imagined place and treats its continued presence in Renaissance literature and culture. On the other, it speaks of the emergence of the theater as a major cultural insti-

tution in Renaissance England. As Greenblatt lays out his case, we are meant to understand that elements from past religious thought and practice became disengaged from their original frameworks, and then were transmitted into quite different, and in some ways quite remote, new and ostensibly non-religious surroundings. In making this case, Greenblatt sees as similar, if not the same, the medieval and Reformation sources from which Shakespeare constructed *Hamlet* and its Ghost and the materials from which the theater was constructed as a distinctive and culturally powerful social form in modern culture.

Taken as a work of historical analysis, which it is only in part of course, the book presents a remarkably imaginative structure. "I believe that nothing comes of nothing," Greenblatt says, "even in Shakespeare. I wanted to know where he got the matter he was working with and what he did with that matter" (p. 4). The first chapter begins with Simon Fish's *A Supplication of the Beggars* (1529), reviews the place in English religious life of some of the institutions associated with Purgatory at the time, and examines the extensive early Reformation critique of the place as a poet's fiction. The latter claim condemns Purgatory as a fraud, damning it to Hell as it were; but in the second chapter Greenblatt undertakes to evaluate in a religiously neutral way what it means to treat Purgatory as "a vast piece of poetry," i.e. as an imagined reality (p. 47). This chapter ranges broadly over medieval literature and art, and considers in depth several literary representations of *Saint Patrick's Purgatory*, a treatise originally dating from the late twelfth century. The sources here are trans-European and, in Ginzburg's sense, "noninsular." But Greenblatt applies this broader approach only to his treatment of medieval materials, not to the Renaissance or early modern ones taken up elsewhere in the book, and one may wonder whether a similarly broad, comparative perspective would have further illuminated issues arising later in the book.

The following chapter, the third, takes up the purgatorial claims of the dead to prayer and remembrance, and closely examines the medieval narrative known in its fourteenth-century Middle English version as *The Gast of Gy*. These claims are treated by Greenblatt as "rights of memory," to quote the chapter's title. The chapter then ends with a detailed reading of Thomas More's *A Supplication of Souls* (1529). In the *Supplication*, More, then Lord Chancellor, mounted his vigorous defense of the intercessory institutions of the Church against Fish and other critics. It is only in the fourth chapter that ghosts finally appear in full Renaissance theatrical garb. Ghosts

"do not altogether vanish in the later sixteenth century," Greenblatt argues, although they are "labeled" by Protestants "as fictions of the mind.... Instead they turn up on-stage" (p. 151). In this fourth chapter we find a wide-ranging overview of the representation of ghosts and spirits in English Renaissance drama, including the corpus of Shakespeare's plays. This discussion then leads in the fifth and final substantive chapter to a brilliant exploration of the way *Hamlet* draws on and builds upon the materials that Greenblatt has so effectively interpreted in the previous chapters.

As the above account might suggest, Greenblatt's treatment in the early chapters necessarily gives greater weight to the views of those who believed in Purgatory and conformed to the institutions and practices associated with it than to those who opposed the intercessory regime with which it was intimately connected. Scant attention is given to the arguments of John Wycliffe, who believed in Purgatory but not in the worldly institutions of relief to which it gave rise, and equally little is said about the views and activities of the Lollards. Although Fish and other Protestants who attacked Purgatory, such as William Tyndale and John Foxe, receive very thorough treatments, they appear effectively as outsiders bringing in new ideas with which to overturn the old. It is assumed, correctly of course, that the Protestantism of these figures accounts for their rejection of the purgatorial regime, but whether they received their Protestantism exclusively as an import or derived it in part from native roots does not engage Greenblatt's discussion. Nor does any attempt to account historically for the great paradigm shift demonstrated by the book. In consequence, the Reformation is treated as a given historical fact and only the responses to it are examined as parts of an ongoing historical development. A more satisfactory approach might have been to treat the Reformation itself as a process in which religious identities were formed, and sometimes performed, in and by the clash of rival positions. Viewed in this manner, the debate about Purgatory would be seen as constitutive of the Reformation's history.

The presence of the Ghost in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*—the presence, that is, of that spectral figure putatively of the Prince of Denmark's father, who appears on stage near the beginning of the play asking his son to "Remember me"—gives this probing and stimulating book its intellectual and critical impetus. As Greenblatt convincingly demonstrates, the Ghost's call upon Hamlet to remember repeats language traditionally associated with the regime of intercessory prayer in Catholic practice. How, then,

should we understand this and other echoes of Purgatory in Shakespeare's play and, more generally, in the beliefs of his contemporaries? The story Greenblatt tells is meant to answer this deep, if simple-sounding question. Its nexus is located in the early moments of the English Reformation, when Fish's attack on the power and greed of the clergy in *A Supplication of the Beggars*, was answered by More's own defense of traditional intercessory institutions and practices in *A Supplication of Souls*. Fish's *Supplication* was written in the voices of the wandering poor, the very same downtrodden beggars and vagabonds to whose plight Thomas More had drawn attention in *Utopia*; More in response presented his *Supplication* in the voices of dead souls pleading for prayers from kin and neighbors. For Greenblatt, the text of *Hamlet*, with its pervasive skepticism about things seen and unseen, its probing of the boundary between the imagined and the real, and its frequent references to memory and remembrance, contains within it something of the same contested territory marked out by this important early Reformation debate.

Much of what Shakespeare says in the play reveals his thorough-going familiarity with the forms and attractions of the Old Religion. This knowledge is not surprising, perhaps, given that the playwright came from a recusant family and early in his career may well have had personal links with Lancashire Catholics. Greenblatt, however, sensibly does not attempt to settle whether "Shakespeare himself was a secret Catholic sympathizer" (p. 254). Although he explores some important religious issues in considerable depth, his goal is "not to understand the theology behind the ghost, still less to determine whether it was 'Catholic' or 'Protestant'" (p. 4). Nor does he enter into current debates among English historians about the pace of the Reformation or the relative strength of Catholicism and Protestantism in the early modern era. He cites some so-called "revisionists," such as Eamon Duffy, Christopher Haigh, and J. J. Scarisbrick, but does not offer a close treatment of their works or discuss Reformation historians who disagree with them.

Greenblatt finds no systematic defense of Catholicism in Shakespeare's play. Nor does he find it a defense of Protestantism, although elements of a Protestant sensibility and of Protestant usage also abound in the play. Too much in its language and plot, most notably the Ghost's bloody demand for revenge, speaks against the play arguing directly in favor of any established religious movement or advocating a single religious stance. Instead, Greenblatt says, it mixes elements derived from the medieval literature of "wonder" and tales of mira-

cles, in which spirits regularly manifest their presence, with those of Senecan revenge tragedy, where we also find ghosts as standard fixtures of the genre. Purgatory, which provides the foundation for the medieval forms, focuses on the cure of souls in the other world of the dead, where the justice of God is tempered with His mercy. It draws attention to what the living might do for the well being of those who have passed from this world, not to how they might avenge in this world wrongs experienced by the departed while still alive. In revenge tragedy, souls cry out for bloody retribution not spiritual redemption. "[W]hile compatible with a Christian (and, specifically, a Catholic) call for remembrance," Greenblatt argues, Purgatory "is utterly incompatible with a Senecan call for vengeance" (p. 237). Nevertheless in Shakespeare's hands, the tension—the seeming contradiction—between remembrance and revenge, which might otherwise have led "to derision," works, Greenblatt suggests, to "intensify the play's uncanny power." It achieves this effect, "by participating in a violent ideological struggle"—not between confessions, but between sensibilities—"that turned negotiations with the dead from an institutional process governed by the church to a poetic process governed by guilt, projection, and imagination" (p. 252).

Although Greenblatt does not emphasize the point, 1529, the year that Fish and More published rival *Supplications*, represents a critical moment in England's political and religious history—the point where, as it were, the needs of the state and the requirements of the conscience converged. By then Henry VIII was firmly committed to ending his marriage with Catherine of Aragon, but had not yet decided on the break from Rome. As More clearly recognized, the future course of events lay in the balance, and the power of words to persuade and condemn was concomitantly great. It was a time when the existence of Purgatory was not only of importance to the soul's welfare, but also to the church's and the state's; it was worth a fight. Whatever else Purgatory did, its putative existence emphasized the central (although, as Greenblatt correctly reminds us, not the exclusive) place of the church as an institution in interceding with God through the saints on behalf of sinful individuals living and dead. If the place was a sham—"a poet's fable" as Tyndale put it, or an idle fantasy just like *Utopia*, as Foxe would later insist—many other claims made by the church and its priests to the possession of spiritual power and to a share of the worldly wealth of its communicants were as well. The highly contested character of this moment comes as no surprise, therefore.

The picture was rather different at the time of the first

performance of *Hamlet* in 1601. By then not only had the official doctrine and liturgy of the Church of England erased the name of Purgatory, but the traditional institutions of intercession—the saints’ cults, monasteries and chantries, and anniversary masses—also had been dismantled. While some Catholics continued to conspire against Protestant rule in England, and representatives of the rival confessions contested for converts and persisted in their vituperative debates, Greenblatt eschews any treatment of these matters. His interest is in the text, and in what Shakespeare, the author, did to make it what it was. To a surprising degree in so carefully contextualized a study, little is said about the play’s first audiences or early readers and what they might have brought with them to their interpretations. The assumption seems to be that they built their views out of the same materials as Shakespeare. *Hamlet*, in Greenblatt’s view, took no sides in the great religious quarrels of the era, but instead incorporated elements from competing outlooks and used them for its literary purposes, inviting the members of its audience to confront if not resolve the deepest contradictions residing within the conventional concepts and practices by which they lived. Many no doubt took the play in this way, but one may well wonder whether a number might have seen more immediate religious conflicts or controversies at stake with some Protestants perhaps hoping that James VI in Scotland (Elizabeth’s likely successor), would follow a more aggressive anti-Catholic stance once installed in England, and some Catholics possibly hoping he would be more tolerant toward them.

Although it is possible to differ over the interpretation of Shakespeare’s aims in *Hamlet*—the play is far too rich to reduce to any single view—Greenblatt surely is correct in concluding that the playwright was not himself seeking to intervene directly in the great confessional disputes of his day. But it is equally true that Greenblatt is not much interested in this study to explore the context within which the playwright’s audience might have viewed the materials presented. It is perhaps worth keeping in mind that for many of them religious controversy remained fully alive at the time the play was first performed, although in retrospect we might agree, as Greenblatt seemingly does, that the institutional and cultural changes wrought by the Reformation had by then given Protestantism a nearly insurmountable dominion over the scene. Even if most contemporaries had faith in the probable victory of Protestantism, it remained uncertain what sort of Protestantism it would be. Moreover, for English men and women living ca. 1601, whether Protestant or Catholic or those yet to be firmly converted to either

camp, the course of Providential history still held out the prospect of a last great battle between the forces of light and of darkness. In 1601, England was still at war with Spain; it had been threatened with the possible return of the Armada as recently as 1599. Whether England or Spain would triumph in the end was not yet certain.

No matter how deep one’s faith, treating historical events as reflecting the will of God meant weighing their providential significance case by case and acting according to what one judged God demanded. But the evidence was never anything but ambiguous. Was victory a sign of one’s rectitude or a temptation to pride? Was defeat a test of one’s faith or a warning of one’s error? In consequence, among seriously committed Protestants and Catholics there was the belief that the religious convictions of the English remained in play. Indeed, as Peter Lake and Michael Questier recently have been arguing, many philosophically deep and politically important issues had been revived in the 1590s in the course of clashes between the so-called Puritans and the Church of England’s hierarchy and their conformist supporters in which the importance of ceremonies and the doctrine of predestination were once again in hotly contested debate. In these circumstances, room was opened anew for Catholic apologists to intervene in behalf of their own views. Protestants feared Catholic resurgence and felt the need to battle against anything that smacked of popery, while Catholics, or some of them, remained ever hopeful of winning back the faithful.[12] Hence, some in *Hamlet*’s first audience might well have seen the play engaged with these living political and ecclesiological issues of the day and not only with the spiritual and psychological ones to which Greenblatt so effectively draws our attention.

Although nothing that Greenblatt says contradicts the above account, it is not his purpose to explore this kind of historical territory. His interests reside elsewhere, namely “in the tragedy’s magical intensity” (p. 4), i.e. its imaginative capacity to call the spirits of its characters vividly into presence. For him, the text in effect engages in an internal dialogue about the boundary between the living and the dead. Is the apparition that Hamlet saw, or thought he saw, truly the living spirit of his dead father or actually the work of the devil tempting the Prince of Denmark to sin? Is the boundary between this life and the next open or closed? How could one decide? In Greenblatt’s treatment, these questions also concern the boundary between material and imagined reality, and therefore between experience and art or culture. Is the boundary impervious or porous? Should it be

one or the other? These deep questions, which connect to but transcend the great debates of the Reformation, were not yet settled and it is one of the many successes of this important book that it treats them as living problems for the English as they confronted and accommodated to the reverberating consequences of the religious revolution through which their kingdom had passed.

For Greenblatt "[p]urgatory exists in the imaginary universe of *Hamlet* only as what the suffering prince, in a different context, calls 'a dream of passion'" (p. 252). It gave "its viewers," he says, "many of the deep imaginative experiences, the tangled longing, guilt, pity, and rage evoked by More." But did this "unforgettably vivid dream," also participate "in a secularization process ... in which the theater offers a disenchanting version of what the cult of Purgatory once offered?" Without rejecting the possibility outright, Greenblatt concludes that "the palpable effect is something like the reverse: *Hamlet* immeasurably intensifies a sense of the weirdness of the theater, its proximity to certain experiences that had been organized and exploited by religious institutions and rituals" (p. 253). A similar point is made in the book's short but apt "Epilogue" which takes us to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. There the playwright famously probed the relationship between dreams and reality, spirits and actors, prayers and applause, the theater and "the great globe itself." Shakespeare seems to be more than playful when he has Prospero say: "As you from crimes would pardoned be, / Let your indulgence set me free." In the face of the desacralization of religious institution that accompanied the Reformation, Greenblatt seems to be suggesting a migration of the holy to other sites, temporal in character with the theater high among them.

Hamlet in Purgatory addresses the history it considers primarily through the close examination of texts, each seen in relation to a fabric of other texts with which it shares subject matter, concepts, and rhetoric, if not genre or form. The readings offered are as illuminating as they are subtle and it is one of the great pleasures of the book to follow along as its author makes the connections among seemingly diverse literary motifs and images and draws out their implications. The book asks hard questions and it presses to answer them. But it is also a deeply humane book. In asking us to consider "the afterlife of Purgatory, the echoes of its dead name" (p. 3), it is calling up us weigh our own encounters with the spirits of the dead in the traditions or conventions that shape our self-understanding and our actions.

Notes

[1]. Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 2-3, 210n. The first numbers of *Representations* appeared in 1983; since his move to Harvard several years ago, Greenblatt has remained a corresponding editor of the journal.

[2]. Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Ann Tedeschi (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980).

[3]. Carlo Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983).

[4]. Carlo Ginzburg, *The Enigma of Piero: Piero della Francesca*, trans. Martin Ryle and Kate Soper, new ed. (London: Verso, 2000).

[5]. Quentin Skinner, "Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* and the Language of Renaissance Humanism," in *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe*, ed. Anthony Pagden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 125-57.

[6]. Richard Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 25-40.

[7]. Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

[8]. F. Doherty, "Bayle and *Tristram Shandy*: 'Stage-loads of chymical nostrums and peripatetic lumber,'" *Neophilologus* 50 (1974), pp. 339-48.

[9]. T. W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form" (1958), *New German Critique* 32 (Spring-Summer, 1984), pp. 151-71.

[10]. Jean Starobinski, "Peut-on d'achever l'essai," in *Jean Starobinski: Cahiers Pour un Temps*, ed. François Azouvi et al. (Paris: Centre George Pompidou, 1985), pp. 185-96.

[11]. I have also discussed Greenblatt's *Hamlet in Purgatory* in somewhat similar terms in "Imagination in History," *Shakespeare Studies* (forthcoming), which also comments on Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000).

[12]. See Peter Lake and Michael Questier, *The An-Port-Reformation England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

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