Stephen Greenblatt's 'The Swerve' and the MLA's James Russell Lowell Prize

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Stephen Greenblatt's The Swerve and the MLA's James Russell Lowell Prize

by J J Cohen

Alongside the lively discussion that recently unfolded over periodization, a related conversation commenced in the same social media about an essay in the LA Review of Books by Jim Hinch on Why Stephen Greenblatt is Wrong — and Why It Matters. Hinch's piece is bracing, and important, but not for its corrective power. Detailing the factual errors and shallow history in Stephen Greenblatt's prizewinning book The Swerve: How the World Became Modern is not new. Kellie Robertson did it before the book was even published (see her excellent essay "Medieval Materialism: A Manifesto" in Exemplaria 22 [2010]). Of Greenblatt's thesis that Lucretius inaugurated modernity after a long period of medieval darkness John Monfasini, for example, observed that "the problem is that Greenblatt has virtually no evidence to justify this assumption, while a massive amount exists for constructing a different story." After pointing out its numerous methodological errors Monfasini concludes that The Swerve is "an entertaining but wrong-headed belletristic tale." Jim Hinch documents several more of these errors but prefaces them with this prescient plea:

as American book lovers gear up for another awards season — the National Book Award this month, followed by the PEN/Faulkner Award in March, then the Pulitzers in April — the acclaim showered on Greenblatt's book about the discovery of an ancient poem raises profound questions about just what these awards really mean. Simply put, The Swerve did not deserve the awards it received because it is filled with factual inaccuracies and founded upon a view of history not shared by serious scholars of the periods Greenblatt studies. That such a book could win two of America's highest literary honors suggests something doesn't work in the awards system itself.

And now comes the news that the MLA, the scholarly organization which represents those of us who teach language and literature at the college level, has awarded Stephen Greenblatt the James Russell Lowell Prize for excellence in literary or linguistic study. This is the third time the MLA has awarded him the same prize (he earned an honorable mention in 1973 then received the prize for Shakespearean Negotiations in 1988).

There’s been much shock expressed on Facebook and Twitter about the award. It’s discouraging. When Greenblatt was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for the book I thought: OK, it’s a general audience, and maybe any attention on the past is good attention. But now that the MLA has given a work so devoid of nuance in its account of a long span of human history — a book that in its relentless reductiveness and lack of complexity (or even humane impulses towards those who find themselves locked in 1000 years of unremitting and untextured darkness) offers a negative example of how to form an ethical relation to history -- well, I just wonder about what the prize really means. Is it OK to compose caricatured history that reaffirms common prejudice and conveys factual errors rather than work that might make the past more unstable, variegated, intricate, alive?

Addendum
Check out Elaine Treharne's smart post, Swerving from the Straight and Narrow: Greenblatt's Fictional Medieval Period

AND

Medieval Meets World (Swerving into the Fray)
In Romaunce as We Rede (Musings of an InterSwervist)
Bookfish (Swervin': Modernity Is Not History)
20 comments:

Rob Barrett said...
If I think of this as the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences awarding Pacino an Oscar for "Scent of a Woman," then it all makes more sense to me. HOO-AH!
1:36 PM

Gilbert Ratchet said...
It's more like the AHA awarding Michael Bellesiles the Bancroft Prize for _Arming America_, i.e. if it's in accord with our prejudices, who cares if it's complete BS?
2:13 PM

Andrew Seal said...
Well, the AHA doesn't hand out the Bancroft, for one thing, and for another the Bancroft Prize was rescinded after the accusations surfaced.
2:34 PM

Ashby Kinch said...
I'd resign my MLA membership in disgust, but I did that already. And I agree, Jeffrey, with what you said on Facebook about the importance of not giving into a facile cynicism here. Bad books get written, but bad books from a respected scholar with this big of a platform—and getting bigger with all of the awards—need a rhetorical counter-weight in the public sphere. I've been asking myself in the last couple of days about the medievalists named in Greenblatt's "Acknowledgments." What role did they play as readers? Like many medievalists, I've been puzzling over this strange fascination that EM scholars have with this rhetorical push-off point for their work for two decades, since early in my serious study of the medieval period. Like a lot of medievalists, I get mad. But lately I've been returning to a psychological reading of it all: isn't it an instance of the "return of the repressed"? Isn't it expressive of an inferiority complex that Renaissance scholars need so desperately to abject the whole medieval period? Sure, the discourse of the "modern"—whether the "modern" of the 12th century or the modernists of the 20th—always needs a past to reject. But why do contemporary American literature professors at Harvard need an abject medieval period? Why does this whole field need this sense of "innovation," especially since the 150 years since Burkhardt's _Civilization of the Renaissance_ have seen massive cultural changes that make the Renaissance look like a minor blip on the human scale? To other early modernists, I say, "Welcome to the pre-modern ghetto! Enjoy your own abjection! And stop trying to be a model minority by beating us up. And try to learn a lesson in humility from the Classicists from whose work you constantly steal. They've been here much longer..."
3:05 PM

Julie Orlemanski said...
I finally had a chance to read Hinch's review and was particularly struck by the passage he singles out for symptomatic reading, as he tries to account for The Swerve's glowing reception & popularity:

"The ordinary self-protective, pleasure-seeking impulses of the lay public could not hold out against the passionate convictions and overwhelming prestige of their spiritual leaders. Beliefs and practices that had been the preserve of religious specialists, men and women set apart from the vulgar, everyday imperatives of the "world," found their way into the mainstream, where they thrived in societies of flagellants and periodic bursts of mass hysteria. What was once in effect a radical counterculture insisted with remarkable success on the human scale? To other early modernists, I say, "Welcome to the pre-modern ghetto! Enjoy your own abjection! And stop trying to be a model minority by beating us up. And try to learn a lesson in humility from the Classicists from whose work you constantly steal. They've been here much longer..."
3:45 PM

Matthew Gabriele said...
I take Julie's point but isn't the move to confine all persons in a group just a simplistic, lazy stock move, not particular to neo-liberalism (or its enemies) but common to both?

That passage reads more like Greenblatt trying to sell more books by invoking the prejudices and preconceptions of his lowest common denominator reading audience.
Sure, Matthew, totalizing is a stock move, but the urgent question to me is why this narrative should be so appealing to readers and prize committees right now; I'm sure its appeal doesn't lie just in its lazy gestures of lumping and totalizing. Rather, (I'm hypothesizing) part of what makes it a satisfying read in the present is its specific account of religious extremism (that is, its implicit sociology of religion), of how "radical" religion finds its way "into the mainstream" and as a result a whole society is impoverished, stupefied, vitiated, and fixated by (I have to quote it again) "hatred of pleasure-seeking, a vision of God's providential rage, and an obsession with the afterlife." I don't think I'm saying anything new, as Holsinger and others have well unpacked the "neomedievalism" in the War on Terror, etc. But I was struck by how eerily close are the two accounts of religious extremism, Greenblatt's and those I've been reading re: Pakistan -- in which (1) religious extremism is given an origin in "religious specialists" and "spiritual leaders," (2) these leaders' authority and influence shape the yielding collective consciousness of the people, (3) this perverts the people into acting against their own "ordinary self-protective, pleasure-seeking impulses," and (4) they then need to be saved from themselves. Something like that is an account of fundamentalism very much in circulation right now and that undergirds a lot of our foreign policy (so it has an evident "world-making" force); I'm suggesting that it makes sense to think about the appeal of Greenblatt's book in light of that.

Unwittingly (that is, before I read about the LA Times piece), I asked undergraduates in Western Civ 1 their view. I have spent a lot of time in lectures noting continuities between before and after 1400-1500. Two essays on the final ask if the medieval and early modern periods are genuinely different (one question on warfare, the other on religion). Shall we see how many of them choose to reject swervitude?

As a lay reader who enjoyed the book, the immense appeal for me had everything to do with the great story of Poggio finding the book and, even more than that, reading and learning about Lucretius was a sublime experience. It's a great story! I read Lucretius after reading the Greenblatt book, so he encouraged at least one person to learn more about an amazing thinker. And that ain't nothin'. Greenblatt has a nice writing style, too. I wish there weren't so many errors. I like reading Big Books by scholars. I guess I'm to believe they are always arguing from authority and I am surprised to hear of this development of problems with Swerve.

Thanks to ITM for the h/t to Kellie Robertson's Exemplaria essay on Lucretius & the Middle Ages. If anyone would like to read it, we've made it available (for FREE!) here: http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/maney/exm/2010/00000022/00000002

Thanks to Jeffrey and everyone at ITM for mentioning of Kellie Robertson's Exemplaria essay (manifesto!) on medieval materialism! It is truly great!

We've made the essay available for free on Ingenta Connect: http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/maney/exm/2010/00000022/00000002

I've been very tied up on a short fellowship leave in Australia [part of the ARC Centre of Excellence on the History of Emotions in Europe, 1100-1800], and it's been difficult to comment much online these past few weeks, but thanks to Jeffrey and others, I have been following with fascination ALL of the online conversations linked to here re: discussions over periodization in general and Greenblatt's book and its [possibly mis-awarded] awards more particularly. Having just spent three days at an intensive and fascinating "collaboratory" at the Univ. of Melbourne [organized by Stephanie Trigg and Stephanie Downes] on "Faces of Emotion: Medieval to Postmodern," which asked its participants and presenters to analyse various expressions and communications of emotion, using the face as a central medium, and to also think about these wider questions:

- historical change: what narratives, patterns, contrasts, or contradictions emerge over time? What mental, social and cultural processes help us order and recognise faces and emotions?
- racial, cultural and linguistic encounters: how do European and Indigenous understandings, representations and definitions of facial emotion compare or conflict?
- textual, performative and visual representations: how might various forms of art, past and present, translate facial emotion? Does formal portraiture hinder or flatten emotion?

Although the collaboratory was dominated by scholars working in literary and historical studies of the Middle
Greenblatt should probably not bother to consider counter-narratives, since, in the end, the currents of history are powerful and difficult to counteract. Maybe we should give him the benefit of the doubt and suggest that as a functional New Historist, since he is a tenured professor at Harvard, he has been afforded oodles of time to catch up on fifty years of scholarship on the subjects he finds compelling (to me at least) to be able to also “hold in play” other concurrent narratives and see what happens.

Jonathan Hsy

9:04 PM

YES to everything Eileen says. And the “Faces of Emotion” collaboratory at Melbourne that you describe sounds fascinating. Both of your comments do signal a more collaborative mode of scholarship that allows for multiple narratives to coexist and interplay. The difficulty is how to manage the concurrent threads of such narratives. “Having a narrative” certainly does serve a purpose, but it’s also important that we can have multiple narratives to coexist and interplay. The difficulty is how to manage the concurrent threads of such narratives. “Having a narrative” certainly does serve a purpose, but it’s also important that we can have one narrative among many.

Jonathan Hsy

9:06 PM

e.g. not all that useful to be telling ourselves the “same” narrative over and over in different ways - more compelling (to me at least) to be able to also “hold in play” other concurrent narratives and see what happens.

Christopher Swift

As a tenured professor at Harvard, Greenblatt has been afforded oodles of time to catch up on fifty years of medieval scholarship that has sunk the boat of the dark “Dark Ages.” How did he miss the sinking boat? Maybe we should give him the benefit of the doubt and suggest that as a functional New Historist, Greenblatt should probably not bother to consider counter-narratives, since, in the end, the currents of history are powerful and difficult to counteract. History-telling will inevitably push us where they will, despite our own best efforts.

10:34 AM
The Swerve: How the World Became Modern (UK title: The Swerve: How the Renaissance Began) is a book by Stephen Greenblatt and winner of the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for General Non-Fiction and 2011 National Book Award for Nonfiction. Greenblatt tells the story of how Poggio Bracciolini, a 15th-century papal emissary and obsessive book hunter, saved the last copy of the Roman poet Lucretius's On the Nature of Things from near-terminal neglect in a German monastery, thus reintroducing important ideas that his honors include the MLA's James Russell Lowell Prize, for both Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England and The Swerve, the Sapegno Prize, the Distinguished Humanist Award from the Mellon Foundation, the Wilbur Cross Medal from the Yale University Graduate School, the William Shakespeare Award for Classical Theatre, the Erasmus Institute Prize, two Guggenheim Fellowships, and the Distinguished Teaching Award from the University of California, Berkeley. He was president of the Modern Language Association of America and is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Greenblatt, Stephen. The Swerve: How the Renaissance Began. London: Bodley Head, 2011. 368 pp. ISBN: 978-0224078788. £20 hardback. [American edition, The Swerve: How the World Became Modern. New York: Norton, 2011.] Award for Non-fiction and the MLA’s James Russell Lowell Prize). Passannante and Greenblatt are interested not just in the early modern reception (and, as Greenblatt sees it, the discovery, or even the unleashing) of Lucretius, but in the causal mechanisms of literary reception: how were classical texts taken up into the early modern textual and philosophical traditions, how did they influence and find their way into the writings of early modern authors, and, how did they make those people think about influence itself?