

# LETTERS

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## Is a New Historicist Free?

To the Editor:

I was—no surprise—quite interested in Paul Cantor's account of my work, "Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicist Vision," in the Fall 1993 issue of *Academic Questions*. Perhaps a bit surprisingly, I rather enjoyed it, and not only because Mr. Cantor managed generously to acknowledge a few virtues among my many defects. But, of course, I do not share his conclusion that I am the enemy of human freedom, and I disagree with his reading of my "Invisible Bullets" essay on which he bases this conclusion. Mr. Cantor anticipates such disagreement and tries in the course of the article to deflect it in advance by excoriating me for slipperiness.

Why, I ask myself, does Mr. Cantor find my modifications and qualifications—my supposed slidings into a "weak" historicism—sneaky rather than responsible? As best I can tell, it is because he begins with an *a priori* assumption that I, as a 32-degree Foucauldian, *must* believe in absolute historical determinism. Nothing will shake him from this assumption, even the host of explicit and implicit statements in my work that I precisely do *not* believe in such determinism. I will not address the question of whether Foucault held such a belief (something rather like a theological conviction, I would think, and a bit unlikely as a characterization of writing that strenuously opposed Marxist determinism), but it is important that the readers of *Academic Questions* understand that for me New Historicism is empowered by a deep skepticism regarding any claims that "such-and-such could not have been thought at a given time." Thought, as Hobbes said, is free, even when speech is not, but Mr. Cantor seems to me altogether too hasty to discount 1) the sig-

nificance of the constraints within which certain things could be expressed; 2) the significance (including, of course, the literary significance) of projection onto others of what was dangerous and transgressive; and 3) the significance of the use of terms like "atheism" as smears. This use, on which I based my reservations about taking literally the contemporary attacks on Raleigh and Harriot as atheists, has been very fully documented by Ernest Strathmann (no wild and irresponsible New Historicist).

Mr. Cantor wants to cast me, for some reason, as the enemy of "the very possibility of human freedom of thought." Not only do I reject the role, but I would not myself be so rash as to link that possibility to the alleged atheism of Raleigh, Harriot, or (God save the mark!) Shakespeare. I recognize myself far more in the attacks by those, and they are legion, who excoriate me for my stubborn humanism and for my consuming, lamentably retro admiration for Shakespeare's art. But I continue to believe that this admiration is better served by historical understanding than by a hierophantic *o altitudo*.

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Professor Cantor Responds:

In my analysis of Stephen Greenblatt's new historicism, I took great pains to quote him extensively and, I hope, accurately. Since he does not claim that I misquoted him, I will stand by my original argument and refer readers to the documentation offered in my article.

Greenblatt is of course correct that he has made many statements that he does not believe in historical determinism. The

problem is that he has also made many statements that suggest and in fact require that he does. The central point of my essay was to show that only what I called the strong form of historicism can serve as a hermeneutic guide; if Greenblatt is to dismiss charges of atheism against men like Harriot before examining them, it can only be on the basis of a claim that atheism was simply not a possibility for a thinker in the Renaissance. I realize that Greenblatt backs off from this claim elsewhere; that is why I characterized his writing as slippery. His rhetoric frequently goes beyond the bounds of ordinary scholarly modifications and qualifications; indeed, as I tried to show, he can reverse himself on a fundamental point within a single paragraph.

As for my claims about Greenblatt and Foucault, they are made *a posteriori*; I read both of them before coming to any conclusions about them. In my analysis of their work, I am trying to show that the logic of their overall position demands a form of determinism, a point which I admit neither of them may have fully thought through. If I have understood Greenblatt's own methods of reading and interpretation, it must be at least possible that he may sincerely believe that he is not a determinist and yet be shown to be one by a critical reading of his writings. It is strangely inconsistent with his own hermeneutics to see him imply in his letter that an author has the final say as to the meaning of his work. I hope I have not been wasting my time these past few years learning from my radical colleagues how to spot the internal contradictions, the ideological fissures, and the political unconscious in the authors I read.

I readily grant Greenblatt's point that terms like "atheism" can be used as smears. But the fact that some people

have been falsely accused of atheism does not mean that all charges of atheism are false. Many people have been falsely accused of murder; yet murderers do exist. Indeed, one might wonder if the accusation of murder would be taken as seriously as it is if there had never been any real murderers. As a New Historicist, Greenblatt is fascinated by the ways in which reality can be socially constructed. Hence for him, atheists in the Renaissance are "projections," mere ideological smoke. I for one am a believer in the principle of "where there's smoke, there's fire," and hence take more seriously contemporaneous claims as to the existence of Renaissance atheists. That is why I believe that my position is actually more grounded in history than Greenblatt's.

I realize that Greenblatt must be feeling beleaguered these days, with attacks on him coming from both radicals and conservatives. It is a sign of how far the literary critical establishment has moved to the left that someone like Greenblatt should now occupy what is taken to be the middle in our profession. I wish to reiterate that the reason I chose to analyze his work is precisely that he does command this central position; in analyzing the New Historicism, I did not want to be accused of dealing with a strawman and hence deliberately focused on the figure I take to be its strongest representative. I was glad to see that Greenblatt appreciated that my critique of his work is coupled with admiration, especially for the clarity of his prose.

Having said that, I must confess myself mystified by the concluding words of his letter. Anyone who is acquainted with me, or who has kept up with my writings, knows that I have never indulged in a "hierophantic *o altitudo*" in my life. Not even a little one.