

Stephen Greenblatt

Between Heaven and Hell



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As my working paper, published elsewhere in the *Jahrbuch*, suggests, I spent much of the year in Purgatory, but I found it a remarkably agreeable place to be. Only a few weeks into my stay at the Kolleg I gave a talk on my research, then in its first stages, and I was in consequence able to take advantage of the questions and comments I received. I had already forged what I believed to be a reasonably tight connection between Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and the early sixteenth-century debate between Catholics and Protestants over the existence of a "middle state" of souls, but the lively and helpful responses of my new colleagues, responses that continued for days after the talk, spurred me to

read more broadly and to think about a range of issues that I had until then deferred or ignored.

With the indefatigable assistance of Gesine Bottomley and her superb library staff, I worked my way through a series of late medieval and early modern accounts of the state of the soul after death, and I began to understand more fully what was at stake for both the Roman Church and the heretics in their fierce and on occasion murderous quarrel. I grasped something at least about the organization and financing of chantries, the laws governing "mortmain," the structure of last wills and testaments, the constitution of charity schools, hospitals, and almshouses designed to provide a steady stream of prayers for the souls of the departed founders. I grasped too quite a bit more about the precise legal and doctrinal mechanisms by which the old system was dismantled during the last years of Henry VIII and the short, more programmatically Protestant reign of Edward VI. In a strikingly short time, the English authorities in the church and state attempted to change the entire relationship between the living and the dead. I became intimately familiar with their justifications for doing so, along with the continuing protests from those loyal to the old order.

In the course of pursuing these issues, my research led me to several related topics. As I had never done before, I read carefully and began to appreciate the magnificence of Dante's *Purgatorio* (previously, my attention had largely been focussed on the *Inferno* and, to a lesser extent, the *Paradiso*). I learned too from reading both older sources and contemporary scholarship something about the history of ghostly apparitions, from 2 Samuel and St. Augustine to early modern figures like Giovanni Morelli and John Bowman. And I spent a great deal of time on the representation of ghosts and the mentions of Purgatory in medieval and Tudor and Stuart English drama. (I wrote, among other things this year, an essay on the ghosts in Shakespeare's *Richard III*.) In this research I was aided a great deal by my access through the World Wide Web to the astonishing, if flawed, Chadwyck-Healey computer database containing a huge body of pre-20th-century English poetry and drama.

One may well ask of me, as of any of the Fellows, what this research had to do with being in Berlin. After all, the point of the database, along with the interlibrary loan system that enabled me to get books from England and elsewhere, was precisely to get around the problem of pursuing these questions so far away from the resources of British Museum or the Widener, Folger, or Huntington Libraries. In part, of course, the answer, and it is by no means a trivial one, is simply that the Wissenschaftskolleg generously provided what Andrew Marvell calls "world enough and time." For this alone I am hugely grateful.

But there was more involved in being here than finding a quiet haven to read, reflect, and write. My presence in this place impelled me to become better acquainted with German scholarship on Shakespeare and early modern culture. Of course, I was aware of the existence of this scholarship — I understood that "Shakespeare" as the embodiment of sublime genius was in a certain sense the invention of Goethe and German Romanticism and that his works had been the subject of sustained, passionate scholarly research in Germany from as early as the first decades of the nineteenth century. But for the first time, I began, despite the severe constraints imposed upon me by my miserable German, to read scholars like Benno Tschischwitz, Eduard Vehse, and Friedrich Gundolf. And I began to read, as well, the works of several figures who were not (or not principally) interested in Shakespeare. Most intensively perhaps I read three quite remarkable books (these, I confess, in English translation) by Carl Schmitt. I found these books often disturbing and even loathsome, but they raised powerful questions for me about the nature of political power and forced me above all to rethink my understanding of Hobbes, whom I was at the same time reading for his trenchant critique of Purgatory and of ghosts.

The mention of Carl Schmitt leads me to a different aspect of the importance of spending the year in Berlin. I had many personal issues in being here, issues that can perhaps be summed up by saying that if in 1943 I had been born in Berlin, and not Boston, I would have been exterminated. I cannot so easily sum up the effects of being here: walking regularly through the long, sinister tunnel at the Grunewald S-Bahnhof, pondering the names and dates on the gravestones in the Weißensee Cemetery, attending religious services at the synagogue on Rykestrasse, looking up at the disquieting memorial signs around the Bayerischer Platz, or simply silently contemplating the old people I would see on the buses or streets. It will, I think, take me years to sort out these effects, if indeed I ever succeed in doing so. But I can say something about an unexpected influence of this experience on my work. When I gave my talk at the beginning of the year, someone in the audience asked me about the span of approximately fifty years between the mid-sixteenth century when, with the abolition of suffrages for souls in Purgatory, the dead were officially killed off, as it were, as an interest group and the early seventeenth century, when Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was first written and performed. Berlin, it turns out, is the perfect place to think about such an interval or, more precisely, to think about the return, after fifty years, of buried memories, even as a new world is being energetically constructed. Anyone who has been at the Wissenschaftskolleg this year with me will immediately understand what I mean, but if this brief

account happens to be read by someone who does not know what was happening in Berlin in 1996-1997, I should mention that the city is currently in the throes of an almost unimaginably massive rebuilding, in the course of which many of the traces of the tortured past are vividly glimpsed even at the moment they are being forever effaced.

I should add that my year's work was not entirely on Purgatory. In the first two months I found myself working, almost all of the time, on completing my tasks as the General Editor of *The Norton Shakespeare*, a huge project which I had mistakenly thought was virtually completed. Much of this work was in fact purgatorial - checking lists of variants, making last-minute changes in glosses, and the like - but I had the more or less celestial pleasure of having the book in hand, all 3420 pages of it, by the time of Shakespeare's birthday in April. I also continued writing, in collaboration with Catherine Gallagher, a history of New Historicism that we hope to have completed before it decisively becomes the Old Historicism.

There were as well, of course, many crucial aspects of the year that had little or nothing to do with work. But apart from the ordinary impulses of privacy, I can be reticent because a glance at any of the year-books from earlier years will sketch, more than adequately, the range of experiences at the Kolleg and in Berlin that have made stays here so compelling for almost all of the Fellows. Suffice it then to say that there was a certain surprising and largely unpredictable conjunction of people from different parts of the globe. Some of us bonded, became friends, and will remain in contact for years to come. But we will never again be all together in this strange, powerful, haunted and haunting city.