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# REVIEWS

Sherry Ortner, ed. *The Fate of Culture: Geertz and Beyond* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1999) 176 pp.

Only two kinds of people don't love the essays of Clifford Geertz, according to Stanford anthropologist Renato I. Rosaldo Jr. There are those who "find them opaque" even though "they make such good sense" that Rosaldo "puzzles that anyone should puzzle over them"—and there are "intolerant positivist polemicists." (30) To question Geertz is, in other words, to be either a fool or a fanatic. Those of sound mind and morals adore him.

This is the impression one gleans from an examination of *The Fate of Culture: Geertz and Beyond*, the new essay collection in which Rosaldo's words appear. Edited by Sherry Ortner, furnished with an opening essay by Stephen Greenblatt, and comprised of contributions by anthropologists, historians, political scientists, and literary scholars, it is a formidable work of academic hagiography. Not a critical word about Clifford Geertz made the editor's cut. The compliments range from the penetrating to the ridiculous.

On the penetrating side stands anthropologist Sherry Ortner's contention that Geertz rescued her discipline from the hungry scientism that, in the fifties and sixties, threatened to consume it. By enjoining his colleagues to view culture as a literary critic might view a text, by referring them to cockfights and court records, rituals and royal progresses while emphasizing the value of interpretation over mere empirical observation, Geertz opened anthropology up to the humanities and the humanities up to anthropology. In fact, he rapidly became a higher prophet in English and history departments than he had ever been in his own land. Among his most vocal and influential admirers was Stephen Greenblatt, who imported his methods and temper into the study of Renaissance literature.

Greenblatt's is another penetrating salute to Geertz in this book. He thanks the anthropologist for having supplied him with what he most missed in his own literary research: not "the touch of the transcendent" but "the touch of the real" (22). Where some earlier scholars sought grand metaphysical explanations in their literary study, Greenblatt sought gritty physical detail. He wanted, as he says elsewhere, to "speak with the dead"—not just to generalize about their fictional representations. By following Geertz's lead and perusing court depositions, diaries, travel logs, medical prescriptions, and other "unliterary" texts together with the canonical writings of his period, Greenblatt felt he could approach this end. This shift in the notion of what constituted a legitimate object of literary study—along with a dash of Foucault and an obsession with power—evolved, of course, into the new historicism.

For every valid tribute to Geertz in this collection, there are, unfortunately, many more specious and silly ones—often by the same people. Ortner takes time out from her saccharine introduction to praise Geertz for being "astonishingly non-sexist as a teacher." (We will soon praise our philosophers for not raping anybody.) The historian William Sewell, in his turn, lauds Geertz's work, bizarrely enough, for showing him just how impotent anthropologists are—thereby allaying his own inferiority complexes as a historian. Where once Sewell suffered from the belief that "anthropologists had a huge advantage over historians when it came to studying people. . . .They could live with them," Geertz showed him that this didn't help their cultural understanding a lick: "Good ethnographic fieldworkers, Geertz told us, do not achieve some miracle of empathy with the people whose lives they briefly and incompletely share." Instead, they are forced to glean their insights from the same old "symbolic forms" that limit historians—texts, images, institutions. Sad? Quite the reverse: "Such a conceptualization of the study of culture is epistemologically empowering to social historians," says Sewell (39).

More tiresome than the rote compliments Geertz's iconic status inspires is the replication of his most questionable practices and prejudices. For Geertz does not just champion cultural texts; he also, and equally importantly, fetishizes "fragmentariness" and "oddity," and denounces the formulation of larger conclusions. Conclusions, he thinks, hardly differ from generalizations, generalizations hardly differ from "systems," and "systems" and "wholes" spell imperialist impertinence and totalitarian apocalypse. His essays, in consequence, go nowhere interestingly. They have quirky topics—cockfights, sheep, thieves—which they engage for several erudite pages before reaching the resounding conclusion that no conclusion can be made. As politically well-intentioned as this may be, it borders on the anti-intellectual. It borders on a rejection of thought—for what is thought, as the now unfashionable Dr. Johnson once said, but generalization?

Stephen Greenblatt demonstrates the limits of the Geertzian method eloquently, if unwittingly, as he models how it functions in Shakespeare studies. Take Hamlet, he says, in his essay; specifically, take the ghost scenes in Hamlet. Then take a sixteenth-century court deposition about a Yorkshire tailor who meets a ghost on a bridge. Greenblatt quotes the deposition, which runs a few sentences and ends with the tailor fainting, reviving, and going on his way.

He launches his analysis of these texts by saying that we'd need a lot more information to "provide a satisfyingly thick description [Geertz's term] of this anecdote." Indeed, it proves "too marginal, fragmentary, and odd to be adduced as a piece of *solid* evidence for anything" (25, my italics). What about as "unsolid" evidence? As occasion for a hypothesis or a suggestion? He ventures neither. Instead, he offers repeated protestations of the tale's strangeness and marginality. Geertz's is a science of exclamation, not explanation.

The words "odd," "curious," "strange," "wonderful," and "fragmentary" appear several times a page in Greenblatt's otherwise articulate essay. The tailor's tale is odd, we are given to understand, ergo it is good. Moreover, Greenblatt tells us, it proves that "ghostly apparitions were not . . . merely 'literary'" in the Renaissance. "And from here," he concludes with a flourish, "we can return with a heightened sense both of the real and of the imaginary, to Hamlet" (28). From here? From where? From the realization that some people in the Renaissance believed in ghosts? This is hardly breaking news for Greenblatt's audience of Shakespeareans.

The banality of the conclusion proceeds inevitably from the Geertzian desire not to have a conclusion. Much could be made by a resourceful critic like Greenblatt of these evocative parallel ghost stories. If he makes no more of them, it is because Geertzian correctness stays his hand—and that is a very sad thing.

Geertz has come to represent a new academic piety, and Ortner's collection of essays embodies it almost perfectly. With the exception of a few isolated critics like Vincent Pecora, Aletta Biersack, and Russell Jacoby, virtually no scholars in the humanities have stepped forward to criticize him. And criticism he needs, for the miniaturism he promotes is anathema to arresting argument and provocative scholarship.

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